

THE HORUS HERESY

Chris Wraight

BROTHERHOOD OF THE STORM

The Khan rides to war

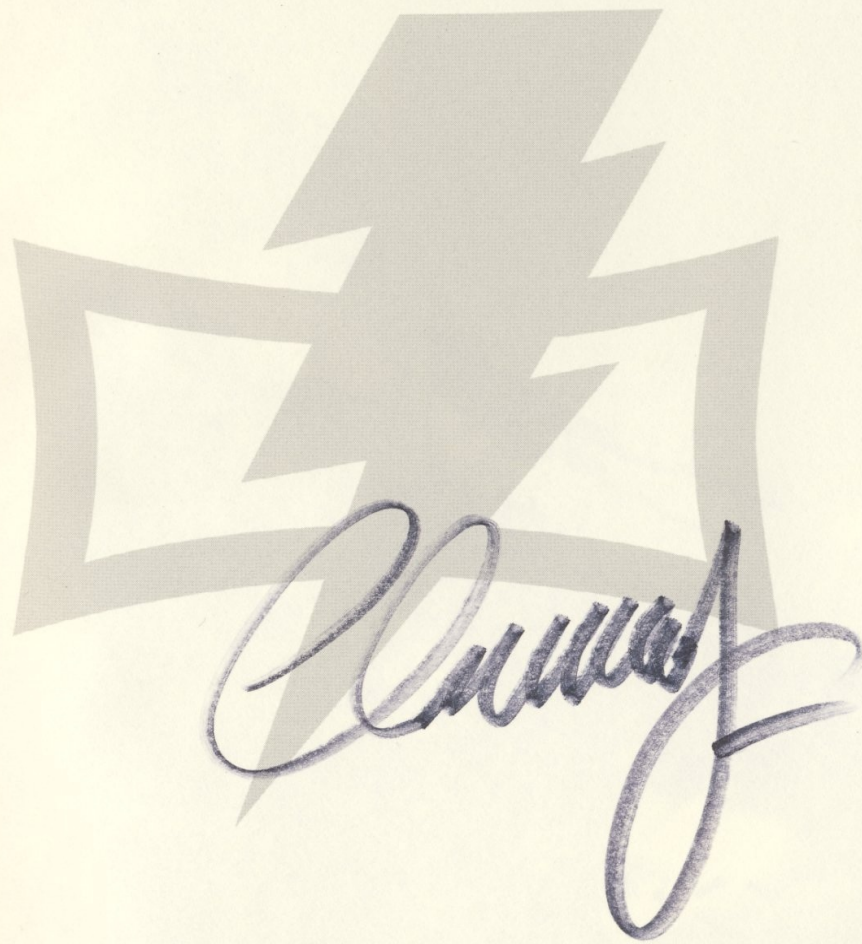


THE HORUS HERESY

Chris Wraight

**BROTHERHOOD
OF THE STORM**

The Khan rides to war



Chris Wraight

Limited Edition

of 5764



THE HORUS HERESY

Novels

Book 1 - HORUS RISING
(Also available as an abridged audiobook)
Dan Abnett

Book 2 - FALSE GODS
(Also available as an abridged audiobook)
Graham McNeill

Book 3 - GALAXY IN FLAMES
(Also available as an abridged audiobook)
Ben Counter

Book 4 - THE FLIGHT OF THE EISENSTEIN
James Swallow

Book 5 - FULGRIM
Graham McNeill

Book 6 - DESCENT OF ANGELS
Mitchel Scanlon

Book 7 - LEGION
Dan Abnett

Book 8 - BATTLE FOR THE ABYSS
Ben Counter

Book 9 - MECHANICUM
Graham McNeill

Book 10 - TALES OF HERESY
edited by Nick Kyme and Lindsey Priestley

Book 11 - FALLEN ANGELS
Mike Lee

Book 12 - A THOUSAND SONS
(Also available as an unabridged audiobook)
Graham McNeill

Book 13 - NEMESIS
James Swallow

Book 14 - THE FIRST HERETIC
Aaron Dembski-Bowden

Book 15 - PROSPERO BURNS
(Also available as an unabridged audiobook)
Dan Abnett

Book 16 - AGE OF DARKNESS
(Also available as an unabridged audiobook)
edited by Christian Dunn

Book 17 - THE OUTCAST DEAD
(Also available as an unabridged audiobook)
Graham McNeill

Book 18 - DELIVERANCE LOST
(Also available as an unabridged audiobook)
Gav Thorpe

Book 19 - KNOW NO FEAR
(Also available as an unabridged audiobook)
Dan Abnett

Book 20 - THE PRIMARCHS
(Also available as an unabridged audiobook)
edited by Christian Dunn

Book 21 - FEAR TO TREAD
(Also available as an unabridged audiobook)
James Swallow

Book 22 - SHADOWS OF TREACHERY
edited by Christian Dunn and Nick Kyme

Book 23 - ANGEL EXTERMINATUS
(Also available as an unabridged audiobook)
Graham McNeill

Book 24 - BETRAYER
(Also available as an unabridged audiobook)
Aaron Dembski-Bowden [*Coming 2013*]

Order the full range of Horus Heresy novels and audiobooks from www.blacklibrary.com

Audio Dramas

THE DARK KING AND THE LIGHTNING TOWER
Graham McNeill and Dan Abnett

RAVEN'S FLIGHT
Gav Thorpe

GARRO: OATH OF MOMENT
James Swallow

GARRO: LEGION OF ONE
James Swallow

BUTCHER'S NAILS
Aaron Dembski-Bowden

GARRO: SWORD OF TRUTH
James Swallow

GREY ANGEL
John French

GARRO: BURDEN OF DUTY
James Swallow

Download the full range of Horus Heresy audio dramas from www.blacklibrary.com

THE HORUS HERESY™

Chris Wraight

**BROTHERHOOD
OF THE STORM**

The Khan rides to war



BLACK LIBRARY

To Hannah, as always, with love.

BLACK LIBRARY

A BLACK LIBRARY PUBLICATION
First published in Great Britain in 2012 by
Black Library,
Games Workshop Ltd.,
Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Cover by Neil Roberts.

Internal art by Sam Lamont, Rhys Pugh and Neil Roberts.

© Games Workshop Limited 2012. All rights reserved.

Black Library, the Black Library logo, The Horus Heresy, The Horus Heresy logo, The Horus Heresy eye device, Space Marine Battles, the Space Marine Battles logo, Warhammer 40,000, the Warhammer 40,000 logo, Games Workshop, the Games Workshop logo and all associated brands, names, characters, illustrations and images from the Warhammer 40,000 universe are either ® and/or © Games Workshop Ltd 2000-2012, variably registered in the UK and other countries around the world. All rights reserved.

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN13: 978 1 84970 267 6

Product code: 60040181035

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publishers.

This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to real people or incidents is purely coincidental.

See Black Library on the internet at

www.blacklibrary.com

Find out more about Games Workshop
and the world of Warhammer 40,000 at

www.games-workshop.com

Printed and bound in the UK.

THE HORUS HERESY

It is a time of legend.

*MIGHTY HEROES BATTLE for the right to rule the galaxy.
The vast armies of the Emperor of Earth have conquered
the galaxy in a Great Crusade - the myriad alien races have
been smashed by the Emperor's elite warriors and wiped from the face of history.*

The dawn of a new age of supremacy for humanity beckons.

*Gleaming citadels of marble and gold celebrate the many
victories of the Emperor. Triumphs are raised on a million
worlds to record the epic deeds of his most powerful
and deadly warriors.*

First and foremost amongst these are the primarchs, superheroic beings who have led the Emperor's armies of Space Marines in victory after victory. They are unstoppable and magnificent, the pinnacle of the Emperor's genetic experimentation. The Space Marines are the mightiest human warriors the galaxy has ever known, each capable of besting a hundred normal men or more in combat.

*Organised into vast armies of tens of thousands called Legions,
the Space Marines and their primarch leaders
conquer the galaxy in the name of the Emperor.*

CHIEF AMONGST THE PRIMARCHS IS HORUS, CALLED THE
GLORIOUS,
THE BRIGHTEST STAR, FAVOURITE OF THE EMPEROR,
AND LIKE A SON
UNTO HIM. HE IS THE WARMASTER, THE COMMANDER-
IN-CHIEF
OF THE EMPEROR'S MILITARY MIGHT, SUBJUGATOR OF A
THOUSAND
THOUSAND WORLDS AND CONQUEROR OF THE GALAXY.
HE IS A
WARRIOR WITHOUT PEER, A DIPLOMAT SUPREME.

*As the flames of war spread through the Imperium,
mankind's champions will all be put to the ultimate test.*

~ *DRAMATIS PERSONAE* ~

The Primarchs

JAGHATAI KHAN Primarch of the White Scars
HORUS LUPERCAL Primarch of the Luna Wolves

The V Legion 'White Scars'

SHIBAN KHAN Brotherhood of the Storm
TORGHUN KHAN Brotherhood of the Moon
TARGUTAI YESUGEI Stormseer

Imperial Personae

ILYA RAVALLION Departmento Munitorum
HERIOL MIERT Departmento Munitorum

I. SHIBAN

I REMEMBER MUCH of what he said even now, but we all learned quicker from example than words. That was the way we were made - we watched, and we acted.

We took delight in the speed we travelled. Perhaps we went too far, too fast, though I regret nothing. We were true to our nature, and in the final test that was what saved us.

I do remember much about him from that time, back when our instincts were simpler. Some examples, some choice lessons, stay with me even now, and I am better for it.

Of all the things he said, or was supposed to have said, only one truly struck at my heart. He said: 'Laugh when you are killing.'

If we had needed an epigram, if anyone had ever asked what made us what we were, then I would have told them that.

No one ever asked. By the time anyone cared enough about us to seek us out, everything had already changed. We were suddenly needed, but there was no time to think about why.

I followed his recommendation: when I killed, I laughed. I let the ice-wind pull my hair free, and I felt hot blood against my skin. I ran far and strongly, daring my brothers to keep pace. I was like the *herkut*, the hunting eagle, free of the jesses, out on the rising air, high up on the horizon.

That was what we were back then; that was what we all were *Minghan Kasurga* - the Brotherhood of the Storm.

That was our ranking name, the one we used to differentiate ourselves.

In private, we were the laughing killers.

To the rest of the galaxy, we were still unknown.

I LIKED CHONDAX. The planet that had given its name to the whole stellar cluster suited our style of war, unlike magma-crustled Phemus or jungle-choked Epihelikon. It had big, high skies, unbroken by cloud and pale green like *rejke* grass. We burned across it in waves, up from the southern landing sites and out into the equatorial zone. Unlike any world I had known then or have known

since, it never changed - just a wasteland of white earth in every direction, glistening under the soft light of three distant suns. You could push your hand into that earth and it would break open, crystalline like salt.

Nothing grew on Chondax. We lifted supplies down from orbit in bulk landers. When they were gone, when we were gone again, the earth closed over the scorch-marks, smoothing them white.

It healed itself. Our presence there was light - we hunted, we killed, and then nothing remained. Even the prey - the greenskins, which we call the *hain*, others the ork, or kine, or krork - failed to leave a mark. We had no idea how they supplied themselves. We had destroyed the last of their crude space-vessels months earlier, stranding them on the surface. Every time we cleared them out of their squalid nests, torching them and turning the earth to glass, the white dust came back.

I once led a squadron a long way south, covering three hundred kilometres before each major sunset, back to where we had fought them in a brutal melee that had lasted seven days and stained the ground black with blood and carbon.

Nothing remained as we passed over the site, nothing but white.

I checked my armour's locators. Jochi did not believe me; he said we had gone wrong. He was grinning, disappointed to find nothing, hoping some of them might have survived and holed up again, ready for another fight.

I knew we were in the right place. I saw then that we were on a world that could not be harmed, a world that shrugged off our bloodstains and our fury and made itself whole when we passed on.

That observation was the root of my liking for Chondax. I explained it to my brothers later as we sat under the stars, warming our hands indulgently by firelight like our fathers had done on Chogoris. They agreed that Chondax was a good world, a world on which good warfare could be conducted.

Jochi smiled tolerantly as I spoke, and Batu shook his scarred head, but I did not mind that. My brothers knew they had a poetical character for a khan, but such things were not disdained by Chogorians as I had been told they were in other Legions.

Yesugei once told me that only poets could be true warriors. I did not know what he meant by that then. He might have been referring to me particularly or he might not; one does not ask a *zadyin arga* to explain himself.

But I knew that when we were gone, our souls made hot and pure by killing, Chondax would not remember us. The fire we warmed ourselves by, its fuel brought down by lifter like everything else, which in the old fashion we would

not extinguish with water nor kick over when dawn came, would leave no stain.
I found that reassuring.

* * *

WE WENT NORTH again. Always moving, always seeking. That was how we liked it; we would have quickly withered had we been forced to stay locked down in the same place for long.

I took my brotherhood over the plains; five hundred of us pristine in our crimson-rimmed ivory armour. Our jetbikes cut swathes in the earth beneath us, churning it up and throwing out furrows behind. We rode them flamboyantly, knowing that none could master their thunderous power like we could. When the third sun rose, making the empty sky glow, our inscribed pennants flashed and our weapons glittered. We hurtled like earth-tied comets, strung out across the flat land in an arrowhead of silver, whooping our joy and our glory and our purpose.

When the third sun rose on Chondax, there were no shadows. Everything came to our eyes in razor-edged blocks of colour. We looked at one another and saw details we had never seen before. We saw the bloom in our leather-brown faces, and realised how old we were, and how long we had been on campaign, and marvelled that we felt more savage and vivacious than we had as children.

On the seventh day when the suns were at their apex we saw orks on the horizon. They were heading north too, driving in long columns of battered, clumsy armoured vehicles that sent goutts of soot into the air and gave away their position.

As soon as I saw them, my heart leapt. My muscles tensed, my eyes narrowed, my pulse quickened. I felt my fingers itch for the feel of my *guan dao* glaive. The blessed weapon - two-metre metal shaft, single curved blade, a work of close combat genius - had not drunk blood for many days; its spirit longed for the taste again, and I did not intend to disappoint it.

'Prey!' I roared, feeling the tight, cold air buffet my exposed face. I rose up in the saddle, letting my bike sway beneath peering into the sun-glare of the horizon.

The greenskins did not turn to fight. They kept going, ploughing on in their smoke-choked convoy as fast as they could.

When he had first led us to Chondax, they they would have fought us. They would have rushed at us, mob-handed, bellowing and stampeding with spittle

flying from their ragged mouths.

But no longer. We had broken their spirit. We had chased them across the face of the world, rooting them out, beating them back, cutting them down. We knew that they were mustering somewhere, trying to summon up some kind of defence in numbers, but even they must have sensed that the end was coming.

I did not hate them. In those days I did not know what it was to hate an enemy. I knew how strong, how clever, how resourceful they were, and I respected that. In the earliest days they had killed many of my brothers. We had learned together, the two of us, learning where our weaknesses lay, learning how to fight on a world that gave us nothing and was uncaring of our feuding presence. They could travel fast when they wished to. Not as fast as us - nothing in creation was as fast as us - but they were wily, creative, brave and fierce.

It may have been sentiment operating, but I do not believe they hated us either. They hated losing, and that gnawed at their spirit and took the bite out of their blades, but they did not hate *us*.

Years earlier, on Ullanor, it had been different. We had nearly been undone by them. They had come at us in an endless, formless green tide, overrunning everything, drunk on strength, unbounded in their magnificent, beautiful way of war. In the end it was Horus who had turned them back. Horus and he had both fought there - I saw it myself, if only from a distance. That was where things had finally turned, where the back of the beast had been broken. All that remained on Chondax were the dregs, the last gritty remnants of an empire that had dared to challenge ours and had almost prevailed.

So I did not hate those that remained. I sometimes imagined how I would feel if we ever came up against a foe we could not defeat, where nothing remained but to fall back, again and again weakening further with every encounter, watching the lifeblood slowly drain out of those around us as the noose tightened

I hoped and believed that I would do as they did, and keep fighting.

I DID NOT need to give my brothers orders - we had done the same thing many times. We powered to full speed, sweeping up on either flank of the convoy in split formation.

It was a sight to make the blood race and the heart sing: five hundred gleaming jetbikes, thundering in arrowhead squadrons of twenty, their engines deafening, their riders whooping. We spread out across the dazzling sand, superb in our livery of white, gold and red, throwing up a storm of eddying dust in our

wake.

Until then we had been cruising, letting our bikes sweep us into range. Now we were racing, our long hair snapping around our shoulder guards, our blades flashing in the light of suns.

We homed in on the enemy vehicles - big, bulky carriers on half-tracks or mismatched wheel - swaying and rocking as the greenskins pushed the wheezing engines hard. Streams of smoke roiled out of gaps in the armour plating. I saw individual orks perched in gun-positions, swinging round to aim at us with patched-up rocket launchers and muzzle-blackened beam-weapons.

I saw their tusked mouths open - they were shouting something at us. All I heard was the rattling roar of the jetbikes, the blast of the wind, the throaty growl of the xenos engines.

Our jetbikes had spinal-mounted heavy bolters, but we kept them quiet. None of us fired - we swept in close, swerving away just before we came within range of the enemy guns, making our observations and plotting out our individual runs. We were searching for the weak links, the places we would start.

Erdini got his angles wrong and shot in too close. I turned in the saddle to see him take a rocket right in the chest, burning out from a greenskin half-track and corkscrewing wildly before hitting him. He was hurled out of his saddle by the explosion. Before I surged out of range, I saw him crash into the ground, rebounding and rolling as his heavy armour dragged him along.

I made a note then that, if he lived, Erdeni would pay penance.

Then we got to work.

Our bikes pounced, kicking in close, weaving and rolling through the hurricane of incoming fire. We opened up with our heavy bolters, a fractured, explosive roar that briefly drowned the thunder of the engines. We cut into the convoy, searing past tottering half-tracks, kindling devastation in our wake.

I was at the head of the arrow, gunning my mount hard, yelling out my savage battle-fury, diving clear of energy bolts and rockets, feeling the percussive judder of my bolter laying waste to all before me.

I was lost in the vitality of it. The suns were up, we were in close-packed, furious combat and the ice-clear air was racing over our armour plate. I have never wanted more than that.

The convoy broke. Slower vehicles had their armour penetrated first, and they rocked and bucked with explosions. Monstrous engines took shots to tractor units and crashed, nose-first, into the earth. Trailers swung upwards, tumbling and rolling. Scrap fragments spun high with the force of internal explosions.

Jetbikes streaked past, scything like thrown spears through the carnage.

I closed on my chosen prey, standing in the saddle, guiding my speeding mount with my legs and pulling my glaive from its back strapping.

My nineteen brothers of the *minghan-keshig* came in close alongside me, committed to the same trajectory. We spun and raced through the dense hail of bursting energy weapons and solid rounds. Jochi was there, as were Batu and Jamyang and the others, all crouched over the plunging chassis of their bikes with their blood up and rapture in their eyes.

My prey was at the centre of the convoy - a huge eight-wheel crowned with an unruly spine of guns and swivelling grenade launchers. A platform had been mounted high on a shaky looking suspension array, around which hung thick plates of looted armour painted in splashes of red and green. Many dozens of orks jostled for position up there: some armed, some operating the vehicle's mounted weapons. Two massive smokestacks vomited fumes at the rear as the whole structure bounced and tilted, crashing along with the rest of the collapsing convoy.

They were not stupid, nor were they slow. A storm of spitting beams streaked out at us, burning past our ears and ploughing up the earth beneath. I took a hit on my pauldron and slewed hard to my left; behind me another bike was downed in a careening, plummeting orgy of blurred flame and wreckage.

At the last moment I jumped, propelled high by my power armour and thrown clear onto the platform itself. I crashed through the barrier and on to the tilting surface, swinging my *guan dao* round in a bloody arc as I landed. The disruptor blazed, leaving streaks of shimmering silver in the air as the blade whipped across.

I gloried in the use of the glaive. It danced in my fists, spinning and punching, hurling ork bodies clear from the platform. I ploughed through them, breaking bone and shattering armour. Orks reeled away from me, staggering and yowling.

I *roared* with pleasure, my limbs burning, my shoulders wreathed in a fountain of sun-glittered blood. My hearts pumped, my fists flew, my spirit soared.

A big one got close, its left arm mangled by a bolt-detonation- It came right at me, head low, claws grasping. It carried a rusty cleaver; the blade swung round.

The *guan dao* lashed out, taking the monster's arm off at the wrist. Then it switched back, so fast the blade-edge seemed to cut the air itself in a smear of crackling energy, bursting its head open in a cloud of blood and bone.

Before the body had crashed to the deck I was moving again, cutting,

whirling, leaping, swaying. My brothers joined me, throwing themselves from their bikes and onto the platform. There was barely room for us all; we had to kill quickly.

Jochi took out one of the gun operators, driving his blade into the creature's spine and ripping out the chain of bones with a flourish. Batu got into trouble taking on two at once, and was punched heavily in the face for his error. His bloodied chin snapped back, and he staggered to the edge of the platform. Projectiles hammered into his breastplate, but they failed to knock him off.

I didn't see how his fight ended - by then I was closing in on the warlord. It lumbered towards me, shoving its own kind out of the way in its eagerness to get into combat. I laughed to see that; not from mockery, but from approval and delight.

Its skin was dark and puckered with greying scars. It swung a huge, iron-headed hammer in two hands, and the weapon growled with moving blades.

I swerved away, missing the grinding teeth by a finger's width. Then I span back in close, my *guan dao* shivering with angry energy as it worked. I hit it twice, taking chunks of its heavy plate armour, but it didn't fall.

It swung again, hurling the hammerhead in a bludgeoning arc. I ducked sharply using the pitch of the Platform, veering away and down, with the back-sweep of the glaive to balance me. We were like dancers at a death ceremony, weaving back and forth, our movements fast, close, heavy.

It lashed out again, its face contorted with frothy rage, piling its immense strength into a shuddering, whistling transverse sweep. If that strike had connected I would have died on Chondax, thrown from the moving platform and driven into the dust with my back snapped and my armour shattered.

But I had seen it coming. That was the way of war for us - to feint, to entice, to enrage, to provoke the slip that left the defence open. When the hammer moved, I knew where it was going and just how long I had to get around it.

I leapt. The glaive glittered as it cartwheeled, the blade turning in my hands and around my twisting body. I soared over the ork's clumsy lunge, up-ending the shaft of the *guan dao* and pointing it down, seizing it two-handed.

The beast looked up groggily, just in time to see my sun-flashed blade plunge through its skull. I felt the carve and slap of its flesh and skull giving way, gouged into a bloody foam by the plummeting energy field.

I clanged back to the deck, wrenching the glaive free and swinging it around me in a gore-flinging flourish. The ravaged remains of the warlord slumped before me. I stood over it for a single heartbeat, the *guan dao* humming in my

hand. All around me I could hear the battle-cries of my brothers and the agony of our prey.

The air was filled with screams, with roaring, with the grind and crack of weapons, with the swelling clouds of ignited promethium, with the hard burn of jetbike thrusters.

I knew the end would come quickly. I didn't want it to end. I wanted to keep fighting, to feel the power of my primarch burn through my muscles.

'For the Great Khan!' I thundered, breaking back into movement, shaking the blood from my weapon and searching for more. 'For the Khagan!'

And all around me, my brothers, my beloved brothers of the *minghan*, echoed the call, lost in their pristinely savage world of rage and joy and speed.

* * *

WE DID NOT move on until all of them were dead. When the last of the fighting was over, we stalked through the wreckage with short blades in our hands, finishing off any xenos who still breathed. When that was done, we doused the vehicles in their own fuel and set them alight. When that fire died down, we went back over the remnants with flamers of our own and plasma weapons, atomising anything bigger than a man's fist.

You could not be too careful. They were good at coming back, the greenskins, even after you thought you had killed them about as completely as you imagined possible.

Sometimes, in the past, we had not been careful. Being careful was not in our blood, and it had cost us. We had tried to learn, to better ourselves, to remember that warfare was not always a matter of glorious pursuits.

By the time we left, heading back north, the mounds of charred metal were already being eroded and smothered by wind-carried earth. Nothing remained, nothing endured. It was like a dream. Or perhaps we were the dreams, sliding across the blank surface of an indifferent world.

We left four brothers of the *minghan* behind us, including Erdeni, who had escaped penance by having his chest knocked inside out. We did not burn them. Sangjai, our *emchi*, extracted their seed and stripped the armour from their bodies. Then he laid them out, their bare skin open to the suns and the wind, and we took their bikes and equipment with us.

On Chogoris we had observed such customs so that the beasts of the Altak had something to feed on when the moons were up. We had never been a wasteful

people. No beasts lived on Chondax save us and the *hain*, but the custom had followed us out into the stars and we had never changed it.

We had tried to learn, to better ourselves, but we did not change everything. The core of us, the things that set us apart and made us proud, those were the things we had carried from the home world and kept safe, guarded like a candle-flame cupped in a palm. I thought then that all of us in the Legion felt the same way about such things. Back then, though, I was blind to many truths.

A DAY LATER, and we reached our resupply coordinates.

Yes, we saw the bulk lifters from a long way out, descending and ascending in columns. They were huge: each one carried hundreds of tonnes of rations, ammunition, machine parts, medicae supplies; everything needed to sustain a mobile army in the hunt. In the years that the Chondax campaign had been fully underway they had been in ceaseless demand, plying their routes between the carriers hanging in orbit and the forward stations on the ground.

'We will have no use for them soon,' I observed to Jochi as we passed a lifter coming down - a bulbous leviathan buoyed by shimmering heat-wash from its landing thrusters.

'There will be other battlefields,' he said.

'Not forever,' I replied.

We swept past the landing sites. By the time we reached the main garrison complex only one sun still remained above the horizon, burning orange in a deep green sky. Shadows barred our path, warm against the pale earth.

The supply station had always been temporary, built from prefabricated components that would be lifted back up to the fleet when no longer needed on Chondax. Only its defence towers, looming up from the outer walls and bursting with weaponry, looked like they would take any time at all to dismantle when the time came. White dust ran up against the walls in smooth dunes, wearing at the rockcrete and the metal. The planet hated the things we had built upon it. It eroded them, gnawed at them, trying to shake off the specks of permanence we had hammered into its perpetually shifting hide.

Once the jetbikes were in the armoury hangars, I gave the order for my brothers to go to the garrison's hab units and make the most of their short rest period. They looked happy enough to do so; their endurance was immense but it was not infinite, and we had been on the hunt for a long time.

I headed off to find the garrison commander. Even as night fell the dusty

streets of the temporary settlement were thronged with activity - loaders moving between warehouses stacked with munitions and supply crates, servitors scuttling from workshops over to armoury bays, auxiliary troops in V Legion colours bowing respectfully as I passed them.

I found the commander in a rockcrete bunker at the heart of the garrison complex. Like all the other mortals he wore protective clothing and a rebreather - Chondax's atmosphere was too thin and too cold for ordinary humans; only we and the orks tolerated it unaided.

'Commander,' I said, ducking under the doorway as I entered his private chamber.

He rose from his desk, bowing clumsily, hampered by his environment suit.

'Khan,' he replied, speaking thickly through his helmet's mouthpiece.

'New orders?' I asked.

'Yes, lord,' he said, reaching for a data-slate and handing it to me. 'Assault plans have been accelerated.'

I glanced at the data-slate he gave me. Text glowed on the screen, laid over a map of the warzone. The symbols indicating enemy formations had shrunk together, falling back toward a single point toward the north-east. Locator symbols of V Legion brotherhoods followed them, coming from all directions. I was pleased to see that my *minghan* was at the forefront of the encirclement.

'Will he participate?' I asked.

'Lord?'

I gave the commander a hard look.

'Ah,' he said, realising to whom I was referring. 'I don't know. I have no data on his whereabouts. The *keshig* keep it to themselves.'

I nodded. That was to be expected. Only my burning desire see him in battle again - this time at close quarters - had made me ask.

'We will leave as soon as we can,' I told him, affecting a smile in case my manner with him had been excessively brusque. 'Perhaps, if we make good progress, we will be the first at his side'

'Perhaps you will,' he said. 'But not alone. You are to combine with another brotherhood.'

I raised an eyebrow. For the whole length of time we had been on Chondax, we had operated on our own. Sometimes we had gone without resupply or redirection for months at a time, out on the endless flats with nothing but our own resources to draw on. I had enjoyed that freedom; we all had.

'You have full orders waiting for you, security-sealed,' said the commander.

'Many brotherhoods are being combined for the final attack runs.'

'So who are we joining?' I asked.

'I do not have that information. I have location coordinates. Forgive me; we have much to process, and some data from fleet command has been... lacking in detail.'

I could believe that, and so did not blame the man before me. I must have let my smile broaden wryly, for he seemed to relax a little.

We were not a careful people. We were bad with the details.

'Then I hope their khan knows how to ride,' was all I said. He will have to, to keep up with us.'

* * *

IT WAS NOT long before we met.

My refitted brotherhood powered smoothly north-east. Many of jetbikes had been replaced or repaired by the armoury servitors and the sound of their engines was cleaner than it had been. We had always taken pride in our appearance, but the short break in operations had allowed some of the grime to be scrubbed from our armour plates, making them dazzle under the triple sun.

I knew my brothers were restless. As the long kilometres passed in a glare of white sand and pale emerald sky they became ever more impatient, ever more anxious to see signs of prey on the empty horizon.

'What will we do when we have killed them all?' asked Jochi as we sped along. He was powering his jetbike casually, letting it slew and buck in the headwind as if it were a living thing. 'What is next?'

I shrugged. For some reason, I was not much in the mood to talk about it.

'We will never kill them all,' said Batu, his face still purple with bruising from his fight on the platform. 'If they run out, I will breed more myself.'

Jochi laughed, but the sound had a faint edge to it, a faint note of trying too hard.

They were skirting around the issue, but we all knew it was there, sliding under the surface of our jokes and speculations. We did not know what lay ahead for us once the Crusade was over.

He had never told us what he had planned; perhaps, when alone with his own counsel, he shared the same quiet misgivings, though I found it hard to imagine

him having misgivings, though I found it hard to imagine anything approaching uncertainty in his mind. Whatever the future held for us when the fighting was done, I knew he would find a place for us within it, just as he had always done.

Perhaps Chondax had got under our skin. It made us feel ephemeral and fleeting sometimes. It made us feel like we had no roots anymore, and that the old certainties had become strangely unreliable. ^^

'I see it!' shouted Hasi, riding out ahead. He stood up in the saddle, his long hair streaming out behind him. 'There!'

I saw it then myself - a puff of white against the sky, indicating vehicles travelling at speed. The trail was nothing like that produced by the greenskins - it was too clean, too clear, and moving too fast.

I felt a tremor of unease, and quickly quelled it. I knew what drove it - pride, an unwillingness to share command, resentment that I was being ordered to.

'Let us see who they are, then,' I said, adjusting course and making for the plume of dust ahead. I could see them slowing up, wheeling around to meet us. 'This brotherhood with no name.'

I DISMOUNTED TO greet my opposite number. He did the same. Our warriors waited some distance behind us, facing one another, still perched on their idling mounts. His force looked to be the same size; five-hundred mounts, give or take.

He was taller than me by a hand's width. The skin of his bare head was pale, his chin angular and his neck thickly corded. He wore his hair short, cropped close to the scalp. The long ritual scar across his left cheek was raised and vivid, indicating that the incision had been made in early adulthood. His features were blunt, not the sharp, dark ones I was used to.

He was Terran, then. Most of us from Chogoris shared similar attributes: brown skin, oil-black hair worn long, wiry frames that bunched with muscle even before implantation boosted it further. That uniformity, so we had discovered, came from our lost origins as colonisers. The Terrans of the Legion, drawn from the cradle of our species long before the Crusade had come to us, were more diverse: some had flesh the colour of charred firewood, for others it was as pale as our armour.

'Khan,' he said, bowing.

'Khan,' I replied.

'I am Torghun,' he said, speaking in Khorchin. That did not surprise me; it had been the language of the Legion for the hundred and twenty years since the

Master of Mankind had made himself known to us. The Terrans had always adopted it quickly, eager to take on the trappings of their newfound primarch. They found it easier to speak our language than we did theirs. I do not know why that was.

'I am Shibana,' I said, 'of the Brotherhood of the Storm. By what are you known?'

Torghun hesitated for a moment, as if I had asked him something impolite or strange.

'Of the Moon,' he said.

'Which moon?' I asked, since the Khorchin term he used did not specify.

'Terra only has one moon,' he said.

Of course, I thought, chiding myself. I bowed again, anxious to ensure that a state of courtesy existed between us, whatever else might differ.

'Then I am honoured to fight with you, Torghun Khan,' I said.

'The honour is mine, Shibana Khan,' he said.

IT WAS NOT long before we were moving again. Our brotherhoods travelled alongside one another, staying in the formations each of us had adopted prior to being brought together. My warriors adopted their arrowheads, his grouped into loose ranks. Other than that, there was not much to differentiate us.

I like to think that I noticed some minor disparities from the start - some subtle way in which they handled their bikes or carried themselves in the saddle - but in truth I am not sure I did. They were as competent as we were, and looked likely to be as deadly.

I and my *minghan-keshig* rode intermingled with Torghun and his, at my suggestion. I was determined that we should come to know a little of one another before we were thrown into action. We spoke to one another as we rode, shouting over the thudding of the jetbike engines, leaving the voxes off and enjoying the power of our natural voices. That came naturally to me, but Torghun initially seemed awkward with it.

As the plains roared away beneath us, blasted into clouds of white dust by the powerful backdraft of our machines, our conversation opened up a little.

'Were you on Ullanor?' I asked.

Torghun gave a dry smile, and shook his head. Ullanor had by then already become a badge of honour for the Legions involved; if you had not been a part of it, you needed a reason why.

'On Khella, bringing it to compliance,' he said. 'Before that, though, we'd been on secondment with the Luna Wolves, so I've seen them fight.'

'The Luna Wolves,' I said, nodding with appreciation. 'Fine warriors.'

'We learned a lot from them,' said Torghun. They have interesting ideas on warfare, things we'd do well to study. I've become a believer in the secondment system - the Legions have grown too far apart. Ours in particular.'

I was surprised to hear him talking like that, but tried not to show it. As I saw matters, he had it backwards - if there was fault on anyone's part for the V Legion's isolation then it lay with those who overlooked us and pushed us to the margins. Why else were we on Chondax, chasing down the remnants of an empire that had long since ceased to be a threat to the Crusade? Would the Luna Wolves have taken on that work, or the Ultramarines, or the Blood Angels?

But I did not say any of that.

'I am sure you are right,' I said.

Torghun drew close alongside me then, narrowing the gap between our moving bikes to less than a metre.

'Earlier, when you asked me what our designation was, I hesitated,' he said.

'I did not notice,' I said.

'I'm sorry for that. It was discourteous. It's just... it has been a long time since we used those names. You know how it's been - we've each of us been on our own for a long time.'

I held his gaze uneasily, not really understanding his intent.

'There was no discourtesy.'

'My men rarely call me khan. Most prefer "captain". We've got used to being the 64th Company, the White Scars. It helps, to use those terms - the other Legions, for the most part, use them too. For a moment, I forgot the old designation. That's all.'

I did not know whether I believed him.

'Why the 64th?' I asked.

'It's what we were given.'

I did not ask any more than that. I did not ask who had made that choice, or why. Perhaps I should have done then, but such things had never really interested me. The practicalities of war had always consumed me, the demands of the immediate, of the matter-at-hand.

'Call yourself what you want,' I said, smiling, 'as long as you kill *hain*. That is all he will care about.'

Torghun looked relieved when I said that, as if something he'd worried about

divulging had turned out, in the end, to be a minor matter.

'So will he be there with us?' he asked. 'At the end?'

I looked away from Torghun and out to the horizon ahead. It was empty - an unbroken line of bright, cold nothingness. Somewhere, though, they were gathering to face us, to force the final battle for a world they had already lost.

'I hope so,' I said, earnestly. 'I hope he is there.'

Then I stole a quick glance at Torghun, suddenly concerned that he would look down on that sentiment, that he would see it as somehow laughable.

'But you can never tell,' I said, as lightly as I could. 'He is elusive. They all say that about him.'

I smiled again, to myself that time.

'Elusive. Like a *berkut*. That is what they all say.'

II. ILYA RAVALLION

I SAW ULLANOR for the first time from the crew deck of the fleet lander *Elective XII*. The fighting had only been over for three standard months by then and local space was still crawling with warships. We dropped rapidly through the midst of those huge, hanging giants, and the dark sweep of the planet's surface rose up to fill the realview portals.

It was odd, to see it with my own eyes at last. For so long, Ullanor had dominated my every waking thought. I could reel off statistics - how many billion men had been transported on how many million troop carriers, how many crates of raw supplies had been lifted down from how many cargo conveyers, how many casualties we'd taken (actual) and how many xenos we'd killed (estimate). I knew facts that almost no other person in the Army knew, perfectly useless ones, like the grade of plasteel used standard ration boxes, and absolutely essential ones, like the time it took those boxes to move to the front line.

Some of those statistics would never leave me. Other people, I imagined, regretted not being able to retain information; I regretted never being able to lose it.

As a young woman I had thought of my eidetic habits as a curse. As it turned out, the Imperial Army valued my aptitudes. I'd made it all the way to general with them, and so had become one of those many greying, anonymous, unsung members of the war machine. We didn't get much praise once the fighting was over, and we got plenty of abuse from stressed field commanders while it was underway, but if we hadn't existed then there would have been no victories to celebrate. War didn't just happen on the whim of warriors - it was planned, orchestrated, fed by supplies and enabled by transportation.

We had been the Corps Logisticae for a while, then a division within the naval administration, then - briefly - overseen by Malcador's people. Only shortly prior to the Warmaster's appointment had we been hived off into a full *Departemento*, with all the bureaucratic advantages that brought us.

Departemento Munitorum. A dour name for a necessary job.

Mistakes had been made, certainly. Confusion over planetary coordinates, non-standard equipment reaching the Legions. For a while we even had two expeditionary fleets operating under the same numerical designation at opposite

sides of the galaxy.

I tried to relax in my cramped seat, feeling the buffeting movement of atmospheric entry. I wasn't looking forward to what was to come once we made planetfall, so worked to take my mind off it by looking at the view.

The world's surface looked ravaged. Dark clouds raced across its surface, broken and straggling like snarls of wire wool. The land beneath was a puckered mass of ravines and defiles, worming through continents like masses of tiny cranial folds.

Only on one zone of Ullanor had that disorder been tamed. Before setting off I'd heard stories from Mechanicus contacts about what had been done to the remnants of Urllak's fortress, and back then I hadn't quite believed them - they liked to boast about what they could do to worlds once they got their augmetic hands on them.

As I gazed out of the portal and down on to what they had done, I believed them. I saw the route of the victory procession, a scar of rockcrete hundreds of kilometres long. I tried to estimate how wide the ceremonial plaza I was looking at could have been - two hundred square kilometres? Twice that? It glistened under the broken cover of clouds like polished ebony, a colossal plain of stone smoothed out for the sole purpose of giving the Emperor a suitable site for his triumph.

What a piece of work is mankind, I thought then. What infinite faculties we have given ourselves.

The shuttle plunged down towards the cloud cover. I began to feel nauseous, and looked away.

I knew that the Emperor had long gone; returned, so they said, to Terra. I also knew that the Warmaster - as we then had to think of him - was still aboard his flagship, but I didn't know how long he planned to linger. It would have been helpful to know that so we could start to think about resupply for the 63rd Expedition, but there was no sense in trying to pin a primarch down to specifics, especially not *that* primarch.

In any case, my mission did not concern the Warmaster. It concerned one of his brothers, one about whom I knew very little, even from hearsay, and who had a reputation for being - among other things - hard to track down.

I didn't like the sound of that. I didn't like the thought of spending weeks waiting for an audience, and I liked the thought of being granted one even less.

I closed my eyes, feeling the structure of the lander begin to shake.

The things we do for the Emperor, I thought.

* * *

HERIOL MIERT LOOKED tired, like he hadn't slept for days. His dark green uniform was creased and the lines under his eyes were deep, like they'd been etched in ink.

He welcomed me into his makeshift headquarters with the shuffling, slightly glassy look of a man who really needed to see a bed soon.

'First time on Ullanor, general?' he asked as we walked up the stairway to his private office.

'It is,' I said. 'And I missed all the action.'

Miert laughed - a weary chuckle.

'We all did,' he said. 'We're the ones still standing.'

We entered his room: a modest steel-frame box perched atop a column of prefabricated admin units (Terran origin, I guessed, from the frame press-marks). We were a long way from where the Warmaster's investiture ceremony had taken place, but through the windows I could just make out the grandiose towers on the horizon. A few lonely Titans still walked out across the huge expanse of stone, their immense outlines hazy in drifting cloud.

I began mentally cataloguing their types - Warlord, Reaver, Nemesis - and had to stop myself.

'So how are you, colonel?' I asked, sitting down on a metal chair and crossing my legs.

Miert sat opposite me, and shrugged.

'Things are easing off now,' he said. 'I think we can be proud, all things considered.'

'I agree,' I told him. 'What's your next assignment?'

Miert smiled.

'Retirement,' he said. 'Honourable discharge, then home to Targea.'

'Congratulations. You've earned it.'

Thank you, general.'

I envied Miert a little. He'd done his duty and had got out while the going was good. At that stage, still several years away from my own retirement, I had very little idea what role lay ahead for me. The gossip running through the Army hierarchy was about large-scale demobilisation. We were running out of planets to conquer, after all.

Not that retirement didn't appeal. Others had done it, and I'd seen what kind of

life could be lived after the fighting was over. I didn't want to slog over the figures forever; the idea of going on indefinitely, of one's service ending only in death, that struck me as almost uniquely depressing.

'So you wish to know about the White Scars,' Miert said, sitting back in his chair.

'I was told you know as much as anyone here.'

Miert laughed again, cynically.

'Possibly so. Don't assume that amounts to much.'

Tell me what you know,' I said. 'It'll all be helpful.'

Miert crossed his arms.

'Liaising with them has been a nightmare,' he said. 'A nightmare. It's mostly been Luna Wolves here, and they're a dream: they do what they say they're going to do. They keep us informed, they make sensible requisitions. The Scars - well, I never know where they are or what they want. When they finally turn up they're very, very good - but what use is that to me? By then I have reserve battalions running out of food and unused kit sitting in warehouses halfway across the sector.'

He shook his head.

They're frustrating. They don't listen, they don't consult. We've lost men over it, I'm sure.'

Miert gave me a sidelong look then.

Is that what you're here for?' he asked. 'Is that why you want to see him?'

I smiled tolerantly.

'Just the facts, please,' I said.

'Sorry. From what I hear, they have no close links with the other Legions. They're not hostile exactly, just... not close. They've retained too many habits from Mundus Planus.'

'Chogoris.'

'Whatever. In any case, it's a strange place. They don't use standard rank designations. They don't even use ordered companies - it's all "of the hawk" this and "of the spear" that. You can imagine how hard that makes it to coordinate with anyone else.'

'What of the primarch?' I asked.

'I know nothing. As in, literally, I know nothing. The other ones call him the Khan, but all White Scar captains are called khan, so that doesn't help. I don't even know where he was fighting at the end. He was seen, so I'm told, on the primarchs' balcony when the Emperor was here, but it's hard to get any reliable

accounts of what happened before that.'

Miert smiled to himself - the look a man gives when he's spent too long grappling with impossible tasks but will soon be free of them.

'And they're obsessed with courtesy,' he said. 'Courtesy! When you meet them, be sure to learn their titles and use them correctly. They will know all of yours. If you carry ceremonial weaponry, anything of value, they'll want to know about that too.'

I didn't carry anything of value. My life was too organised, too exact, to bother with antique swords. I wondered if I should try to source something.

'What of the Stormseers?' I asked.

'They have a role,' said Miert. We just don't know what it is. There are different theories: that they're just like Librarians; that they're entirely different. There's a rumour Magnus the Red thinks highly of them. Or maybe not.'

He spread his hands, admitting defeat.

'You see?' he said. 'It's hopeless.'

This Stormseer, the one you've arranged for me to meet,' I said. 'Is he senior? Does he have the ear of the Khan?'

'I hope so,' said Miert. 'He was hard enough to find, and I had to call in a few favours. Don't blame me if he's not, though - we honestly did what we could.'

I didn't feel like I was learning very much.

'I'm sure you did, colonel,' I said. 'We will have to make do and hope for the best. Unless there was anything else?'

Miert gave me a slightly impish look.

'You may have noticed a superficial likeness to the Sixth Legion, the wolves of Fenris,' Miert said. You know, the whole barbarian thing.'

He rolled his eyes.

'Don't bring it up,' he warned. We've been burned by that before. It makes them very annoyed.'

'Why?'

'I don't know. Envy? But, seriously, leave it alone.'

'Then I will, colonel,' I said, feeling more pessimistic about the upcoming meeting with every equivocal morsel of information that emerged. I needed more. I needed details. Those were the things that made me function. Thank you. You've been helpful.'

I TOOK A crawler - an Augean RT-56, Enyiad variant by its track-pattern - out

from the triumph plain and into the badlands beyond. It was uncomfortable and hot. The air tasted of grit, and it was impossible not to imagine the stench of ork spoor lurking under it all.

He didn't make himself easy to find, just as Miert had warned. I never got the impression that he was deliberately being difficult, just that he had absolutely no concern whether I stumbled across him or not. His locator beacon flickered in and out of existence as we travelled, blocked by the dense ranks of undulating rock around us. When I finally homed in on it, we had been travelling for over four and three-quarter hours.

I did what I could to make myself look presentable before disembarking - smoothing down my greying hair and adjusting the creases of my dress uniform. Perhaps I should have made more effort. Physical appearance had always been the least of my concerns, a trait that age had only accelerated.

Too late now. I took a swig of warm water from my canteen and dabbed some on my sweating forehead.

He must have seen us coming. Even then he made no effort to come to us, remaining high up on a long ridge that was too steep for the crawler to negotiate. I left it at the base, stepping out on the dusty surface - the true surface - of Ullanor for the first time since making planetfall.

'Stay here,' I told the crawler's crew, including the security detail Miert had sent out with me. I had little concern for my own safety, but I did worry about somehow offending him by going up mob-handed.

Then I started to climb. I was not in the greatest shape - years of filing reports in Administratum vaults had not given me a battle-hardened body and I'd never bothered much with juvenat treatments.

I wondered what he would make of me when he saw me - a slight, hard-faced woman in a general's uniform. I felt my skin grow sweaty again as I laboured, and the creases I'd smoothed in my uniform crumpled. I would look frail to him, possibly ludicrous.

I stumbled as I reached the top. My foot slipped on loose scree, and I staggered against the rock. I reached out with my right hand, hoping to catch hold of the lip of the ridge. Instead of stone, my fingers clamped on to an armoured hand. It held me firmly.

I looked up, startled, to find myself staring into two golden eyes set in a leather-brown face.

'General Ilya Ravallion, Departmento Munitorum,' said the owner of the face, inclining his head politely. 'Be careful.'

I swallowed, holding onto his gauntlet tightly.
'Thank you,' I said. 'I will.'

HIS NAME WAS Targutai Yesugei. He told me that as soon as I'd dusted myself down and recovered my breath. We stood, the two of us, on the ridge. The dry gullies and defiles of Ullanor ran away from us in every direction, a maze of charred debris and gravel. Above us, dark clouds drifted.

'Not much of a world,' he said.

'Not any more,' I agreed.

His voice was like the voice of every Space Marine I had ever encountered - low, resonant, held quiet, echoing up from his barrel chest like crude oil slapping at the sides of a deep well. If he ever chose to raise it, I knew it could be terrifyingly loud. Back then, though, it was a curiously calming sound to hear, out there in the aftermath of devastation.

He wasn't as tall as some I'd met. Even clad in his armour plate, I had the impression of a certain wiriness; a compact, lean frame under sun-hardened flesh. His bald head was crowned with a long scalp-lock that snaked down around his neck. Tattoos had been inked into the skin on his temples. I couldn't make out what they signified - they looked like the letters of a language I didn't understand. He carried a skull-topped staff, and wore a glistening crystalline hood over the shoulders of his armour.

Amid a lattice of other ritual scarring, he had a broad, jagged mark running down his left cheek, from just under the eye socket almost to the chin. I knew what that was. For a long time that custom had been the only thing I'd known about them. They did it themselves once they'd been inducted - they made the scars that gave the Legion its name.

His eyes seemed golden. His irises were almost bronze, and the whites were a pale yellow. I hadn't expected that. I didn't know then whether all of them were like that, or whether it was just him.

'You fight on this world, Ilya Ravallion?' he asked.

He spoke Gothic awkwardly, with a thick, guttural accent. I hadn't expected that either.

'I did not,' I said.

'What are you doing here?'

'I was sent to seek an audience with the Khan.'

'Know how many he grants?'

'I do not.'

'Not many,' he said.

A half-smile played over his brown lips as he spoke. His skin creased with every smile, wrinkling at the eyes. He looked like he smiled often and easily.

In those early exchanges, I could not decide whether he was toying with me or whether he was serious. His clipped delivery made it hard to divine his meaning.

'I was hoping, lord,' I said, 'that you might assist me.'

'So you do not wish to speak to me,' he said. 'You use me to get to him.'

I decided to stick to the truth.

'That is correct,' I said.

Yesugei chuckled. It was a tight, hard, wind-dried sound, though not without humour.

'Good,' he said. 'I am... intermediary. That is what we do, the *zadyin arga*; we speak from one, to the other. Worlds, universes, souls - is much the same.'

I was still tense. I couldn't tell whether things were going well. A great deal rested on the meeting I had been sent to arrange, and it would be hard to go back having achieved nothing. At the very least, though, Yesugei was still talking, which I took as a good sign.

All the while I took in details, storing them away, my mind working automatically. I couldn't help myself.

His armour is Mark II. Indicates conservatism? The skull on his staff is unidentifiable; Chogorian fauna, no doubt. Equine? Check with Miert later.

'If you had your audience,' he asked, 'what would you say?'

I had dreaded that particular question, though it had been bound to come up.

'Forgive me, lord, it is for his ears only. It concerns business between the Fifth Legion and the Administratum.'

Yesugei gave me a shrewd look.

'And what would you say if I reached into your mind, right now, and took the answer? Do not think you are shielded from me.'

I stiffened. As soon as he made the suggestion, I knew he could do it.

'I would prevent you, if I could,' I said.

He nodded again.

'Good,' he said. 'Though, in case you are worried, I would not do it.'

He smiled at me again. Against all expectation, I found myself beginning to relax. That was strange, standing as I was next to a towering, armoured, genhanced, psychically-charged killing machine.

Spoken Gothic surprisingly poor. A reason for unsatisfactory communication

with centre? Had assumed linguistic aptitude; may have to revise.

'I admire perseverance, General Ravallion,' Yesugei said. 'You work hard to find me here. You always work hard, ever since you start.'

What did that mean? I hadn't expected him to have researched me. As soon as I thought that, though, I admonished myself - what did I think, that they were *really* savages?

'We know you,' he went on. 'We like what we see. I wonder, though, how much you know us? You know what you let yourself in for, dealing with White Scars?'

For the first time, his smile ghosted with something like menace.

'I don't,' I said. 'But I can learn.'

'Maybe,' he said.

He turned away from me, looking back out over the smoulder-dark landscape. He didn't say anything. I hardly dared to breathe. We stood next to one another as the clouds scudded overhead, both of us locked in silence.

After a long time like that, Yesugei spoke again.

'Some problems are complex; most are not,' he said. 'The Khan does not grant many audiences. Why? Not many people ask.'

He turned back to me.

'I see what I can do,' he said. 'Do not leave Ullanor. If news is good, I will find way to contact you.'

I struggled to hide my relief.

'Thank you,' I said.

He gave me an almost indulgent look.

'Do not thank me yet,' he said. 'I only say I will try.'

A deep, raw humour danced in those golden eyes as he looked at me.

'They say he is elusive,' he said. 'You will hear that a lot. But listen: he is not elusive; he is at the centre. Wherever he is, that is the centre. He will seem to have broken the circle, drifted to the edge, right until the end, and then you will see that the world has come to him, and he has been waiting for it all along. Do you understand?'

I looked him in the eye.

'I don't, Khan Targutai Yesugei of the *zadyin arga*,' I said, sticking to my policy of honesty and hoping I'd got the titles right. 'But I can learn.'

III. TARGUTAI YESUGEI

I WAS SIXTEEN years old. Those were the years of Chogoris, though, which are short. If I had been born on Terra, I would have been twelve.

I sometimes think our world forced us to grow up quickly - the seasons pass in rapid succession, and we learn the skills of survival very soon. Out on the high Altak, the weather can change so suddenly, from frost to baking sun, that you need to be nimble on your feet. You have to learn how to hunt, to feed yourself, to make or find shelter, to understand the tortuous, swaying politics of our many clans and peoples.

But perhaps we did not grow up quickly enough. In the days after the Master of Mankind came to us, we found that our warrior ways - our speed, our prowess - made us strong. We did not pause to reflect on what our weaknesses were. It was left to others to show us those, by which time it was too late to change them.

Before He came I did not know that there were other worlds, Populated by other men with other ways of being. I only knew of one sky and one earth, and they seemed both infinite and eternal. Now that I have seen other earths and marched to war under their strange skies, I find my mind returning to Chogoris often. It is diminished in my imagination, but also more precious. I would go back if I could. I do not know if that will ever be possible.

More than a century has passed since I was a child. I ought to be wiser, and I ought to have left my memories behind me, but we never leave our childhood behind us: we carry it with us, and it whispers to us, reminding us of the paths we could have taken.

I ought to be wiser, and not listen, but I do. Who does not listen to the voice of their memories?

I WAS ALONE then. I had gone into the mountains of the Ulaav, walking the high ways. Those mountains are not tall, not like those of Fenris or Qavalon. They are not as majestic as the mighty Khum Karta, where our fortress-monastery was raised, many years later. The Ulaav are ancient mountains, worn down by millennia of winds from across the Altak. In summer a rider can crest the summits and never leave the saddle; in winter only *berkut* and ghosts can

endure the cold.

I had been sent there by the khan. Those were the days when we were always at war, whether it was with one another or against the forces of the Khitan, and a boy with golden eyes was a prize worth much to all sides.

Later, I read accounts of those wars written by Imperial remembrancers. I struggled to do this as, to my shame, I never learned their language as well as I should have. Many of us in the Legion had such struggles. Perhaps Khorchin and Gothic were too far removed from one another for easy comprehension. Perhaps that was why we and the Imperium were always at cross purposes, even in the beginning.

In any case, those remembrancers referred to places I have never heard of and men who never lived, like the Palatine of Mundus Planus. I do not know where they got those names from. When we were fighting the Khitan we called their emperor by his title – Khagan, a khan of khans. We had no idea what his family name was though I found it out later. He was called Ketugu Suogo. Since we keep so few records of our own, this knowledge is scarce. I am possibly one of the few left who knows it, and when I am gone, his name will be gone too.

Does that matter? Does it matter that we were fighting a man who never lived on a world that I have never heard of? I think it does. Names are important; history is important.

Symbols are important.

I WAS ALONE because I had to be. The khan would not have sent such a precious commodity into the mountains if he could have helped it; by choice, he would have surrounded me with men of his *keshig*, sworn to protect me should the enemy get wind of my vulnerability and seek to snatch me away.

Unfortunately for him, the test of heaven only worked on a single mind. We had strange and bashful gods on Chogoris; they only showed themselves to lone souls, and only where the land rose to meet the infinite sky and the veil between realms was thin and perilous.

So, even knowing what danger waited for me, the khan's warriors left me at the foot of the mountains, and I made my way up into the heights alone. Once I started walking I did not look back. The air was already biting, whistling under my rough kaftan and chafing against my flesh. I shivered, huddling my arms to my chest and keeping my head down.

The valleys of the Ulaav mountains were famously beautiful. Meltwater

created lakes of cobalt in the shadowed laps of the Peaks. Pine forests ran down sheer rock-shoulders in cloaks of dark green, dense and glossy like lacquered armour. The sky above the summits was glass-clear, so intensely blue it hurt the eyes to look at. Everything there was hard, stern, clean. Even in my half-chilled state, I was moved by it. I understood, as I neared the high places, why the gods lingered there.

Aside from that, I felt nothing - no visions, no magical powers, no bursts of supernatural strength. The only mark of my uniqueness was my eyes, and they had done nothing thus far but bring me trouble. If it had not been for the khan I would likely long since have been killed, but he recognised my potential before I did. He was a far-sighted man, with a vision for Chogoris that I was too young to understand. He also knew how useful I could be to him if he was right.

I climbed higher, following tracks that were seldom trodden and which were little more than pale impressions on loose stone. By the time I stopped, my head light from the thin air, I was high up on the eastern scarps and could see how far I had come.

Both of Chogoris's moons were up, even though the sun had not yet set in the north. I was looking out across the vast expanse of the eastern Altak - the endless plain of scrub-grass that ran away further than anyone had ever travelled. From my vantage, I could see tiny sparks of camp fires out in the wilds, separated by huge, empty distances and overlooked by the lowering sky.

Those lands were the khan's, though in those days they were still contested by other tribes and clans. Beyond them, over the eastern horizon, lay the realms of the Khitan.

I had never seen so far. I sat down, leaning against a shelf of bare rock, gazing out across the vista before me. Night-birds wheeled high above, and saw the first stars come out in the frost-blue sky.

I do not know how long I sat there, a single soul exposed on the flanks of the Ulaav, shivering as night fell across the world.

I should have made a fire. I should have begun the work of making a shelter. For some reason, I did nothing. Maybe I was fatigued from the climb, or dizzy from the sparse air, but I stayed where I was, cross-legged, gazing out across the darkening Altak, mesmerised by the tiny golden lights glowing out on the plain, held in thrall by their silver counterparts in the arch of heaven above.

I felt that I was in the right place then. I did not need to do anything, or change anything, or move anything.

If something was going to happen, it would happen to me there. I would wait

for it, as patient as an *aduu* under halter.

It could find me. I had done enough travelling.

I WOKE SUDDENLY.

It must have been much later - the sky was velvet dark, pocked with a glittering cloak of stars. Distant campfires still twinkled out on the plain, now sunk into deep, deep blue. It was bitterly cold, and the wind rustled the dry branches around me.

One by one, I saw the fires across the Altak die. They winked out of existence, leaving the plain even emptier - just a void, broken by nothing.

I tried to move. I found that I could glide upwards, swimming through the air as if it were water. I looked down at myself and saw a sleek, feather-lined body. I rose quickly, circling higher, feeling the breeze lift my trembling wings.

The mountains fell away below me. The curve of the world's horizon dropped. In the east, over where the lands of the Khitan lay, I saw more lights going out. The whole world, all of it, was sliding into darkness.

I hovered, tilting a little in the high winds. I called out, and heard the *crii* of a night-bird. It felt like I was the only living thing in creation.

Soon I was alone with the stars. They continued to burn silver in the space above me. I flew ever higher, beating my wings against thinning air.

I came amongst them. I saw lights burning in the vaults of heaven. I saw fires raging and curls of flame flickering in the darkness. I saw things I did not recognise, mighty iron-clad things with prows like ploughshares, torn apart and reduced to drifting pieces. Forces too immense for me to comprehend were fighting across the trackless void.

So these are the gods, I thought.

I passed among the wreckage of those things, marvelling at the shapes and symbols carved on shards of spinning metal. I saw a many-headed snake-creature embossed upon one fragment; the head of a wolf on another. Then I saw a sign I recognised - a lightning strike in gold and red, the eternal mark of the khans.

Part of me knew those things were visions, and that my body remained where I had left it on the slopes of the Ulaav. Another part of me, perhaps the wiser, recognised that I was seeing something real, something more than real, something that underpinned reality like the poles of a *ger* underpin the fabric.

Then, like the fires on the Altak, the fires in the stars faded away. Everything

went dark. I knew, though, that I was not falling asleep again. I knew that something else was coming for me.

I WAS OUT on the plain. It was noon, and the sun burned white in the empty sky. The wind came down from the mountains, rustling the scrub-grass and tugging at my kaftan.

I looked down and saw a cup in my left hand. It was earthenware, like all the cups of the *ordu*. Blood-red liquid filled it nearly to the brim.

I looked up again, shading my eyes against the piercing sun, and saw four figures standing before me. Their outlines were shaky, as if broken by heat-haze, except that it wasn't hot.

All of them had the bodies of men and the heads of animals. One had the head of a blue-feathered bird with amber eyes;

One had the head of a serpent; one had the head of a red-eyed bull; one had the decaying head of a fish, already yellowed with putrescence.

All of them looked at me, shimmering in the direct light. They lifted their arms and pointed.

None of them spoke. They did not have human lips to speak with. For all that, I knew what they wanted me to do. Somehow their thoughts took shape in my own mind, as clear and distinct as if I had summoned them up myself.

Drink, they told me.

I looked down at the cup in my left hand. The liquid within was hot. Froth had collected around the rim. I felt a sudden thirst break out. I lifted the cup halfway to my mouth, and my hand trembled as I did so.

I knew something important was in there, but I held back. My instincts warred within me.

Drink, they told me.

The tone of their command gave me pause. I did not know why they wanted me to do it.

It was then that I saw Him. He came from the opposite direction. He had the shape of a man too, but the halo of light around Him made it hard to make much more out than that. I could not see His face. He was coming toward me, and I knew, without knowing how, that He had travelled from a long, long way away.

He gave me no command. Other than that, He was like the four beast-figures. There was some relationship between them, something I could sense but did not understand. The Four were scared of Him. I knew then that if I drank from the

cup, then I would be defying Him - if I did not drink, I would be defying them.

We all remained like that for the space of many thoughts. The Four pointed at me. The man wreathed in light walked toward me, never seeming to come any closer.

Drink, they told me.

I lifted the cup to my lips. I took a sip. The liquid had a complex taste: sweet to begin with, then bitter. I felt it flow down my throat, hot and vital. As soon as I had started, I felt an urge to keep drinking. I wanted nothing more than to swallow it all down, to drain it to the dregs.

Drink, they told me.

After that one sip, I put the cup down, crouching carefully and resting it on the earth before me. For all my care, it spilled a little, staining my fingers. Then I took a step away from it.

I bowed to the Four, not wishing to give offence. I spoke, not really knowing where my words came from.

'It is courteous to take a small amount,' I said. 'That is enough for us.'

The Four lowered their arms. They did not command me again. The man stopped walking, still just where He had been when I had first seen Him.

I felt that I had disappointed all of them. Perhaps, though, I had disappointed Him less than I had them.

The vision began to fade. I could feel the hardness of the real world reasserting itself. The sunlit plain before me rippled like water, and I saw gaps of darkness under it.

I wanted to stay. I knew that my return to the world of the senses would be painful.

I looked again at the man, hoping to make out something of His face before the dreaming ended.

I saw nothing but light, flickering and wheeling around a core of brightness. There was no warmth in that light; just brilliance. He was like a cold sun.

When His light was taken away, though, I felt the loss of it.

* * *

I WOKE, FOR real that time, shuddering from the chill. My limbs ached, and were as red as raw meat. I tried to move and felt spikes of agony in my joints. Everything hurt - I felt flayed.

It was dawn. Below me the plains were milky with mist. I saw an arrowhead

of birds scud across them, moving just like our formations of mounted warriors did. Pale lines of smoke rose up through the mist, the last remnants of the fires that had burned through the night.

I forced myself to move. After a while, the worst of the pain began to ebb. I jogged and waved my arms, unstiffening my knees and my elbows. Blood started to flow around my body again. I was still very cold, but movement helped.

I could still remember my visions. I knew what they were. Uig, the khan's old *zadyin arga* had told me to expect them. That was the test of heaven - once the visions came, they would never leave.

I didn't know how to feel about that. On the one hand, it was confirmation of what I had always believed about myself. On the other, it presaged a life of loneliness.

A *zadyin arga* was not a warrior. He did not travel the plains in lacquer armour fighting for his khan: his life was a solitary one, shackled to the *gers*, protected at all times and forced to root through entrails and scry the stars. The position was one of honour, but not of the highest honour. Like all the boys of the tribe, I had dreamed of riding the steppes, taking war to the enemies of my brothers and of my khan.

As I stood, shivering upon the slopes of the Ulaav, watching the mist boil away from the plains, I contemplated telling them that the test had failed; that my golden eyes were nothing more than a strange, harmless affliction.

I even began to wonder whether the things I had seen had been nothing more than dreams, the kind that everybody has. I tried to make myself believe that.

Then I looked down at my hands. The ends of my fingers were still stained red.

I stuffed those hands into the sleeves of my clothes, unwilling to look at them. Slowly, I started to walk back the way I had come.

I had passed from one way of being into another during that night. The change was profound, and over the wearing years I would gradually learn just *how* profound - back then, though, it felt like almost nothing had changed. I was still a child, and I knew nothing of what powers had been stirred into life within me.

Even now, more than a century later, I am still a child in that respect. We all are, those of us with power: we know so little, we see so imperfectly.

And that is both a great curse and a great blessing, for if we knew more and saw more perfectly then we would surely go mad.

IT TOOK ME longer to travel down from the heights than it had taken me to climb them. I stumbled often, slipping down loose banks of scree with my numb limbs. When the sun came up fully my pace improved. I stopped only as I neared the level of the plains, back at the head of the valley I had walked up the previous day.

I saw what remained of my escort's camp from a distance, and immediately knew that something was wrong. I crouched down beside the trunk of a tree and screwed my eyes up, peering down a long, meandering river-course to where the khan's warriors had left me.

The *aduun* were gone. I saw bodies on the ground in awkward poses. I felt my heartbeat quicken. Twelve warriors had come with me into the mountains; twelve bodies lay on the ground around the remains of the fire.

I moved closer to the trunk. I had no idea what to do. I knew that I needed to get back to the khan's side, but also that I was now dangerously exposed. The plains were no place to travel alone - there were no hiding places out on the Altak.

I would have waited there longer had I not heard them coming for me. From somewhere higher up, I heard the snap of branches and the loud, careless voices of soldiers singing in a language I didn't know.

A single word flashed through my mind, chilling my blood.

Khitan.

Somehow I had passed them on the way down - they must have been hunting for me up in the highlands, and only dumb luck had carried me past them undetected.

They were close, rooting through the undergrowth. For all I knew there were more of them, crawling across the Ulaav like ants out of a kicked nest.

I didn't stop to think. I ran, darting out of the cover of the trees and tearing down to where the khan's men had been killed. Even as I skidded and slipped down the steep path I could hear the cries of the Khitan as they caught sight of me and lumbered into pursuit.

I ran as hard as I could, feeling my lungs burn as my breathing became heavy. I ran like an animal runs, fuelled by fear. I didn't look back.

My only thought was to get clear of the hunters, to get out into open ground, to find the khan. He led the mightiest warband on the Altak, one that grew every day. He would be able to protect me even if the Khitan who chased me numbered in hundreds.

But I had to find him. Somehow, I had to stay alive long enough to find him.

I knew his reputation. I knew that he moved around without warning, shifting from place to place to keep his enemies guessing. Even Uig, who could see all paths, had called him the *berkut* - the hunting eagle, the far-ranger, the elusive.

Such thoughts did not help. I forced my mind to remain fixed on the task. I kept running, leaping over briars and swerving around boulders. The voices of my hunters followed me, and I heard their boots thud against the earth.

I had no more choices to make. All the ways of the future had narrowed down to a single course, and I could do nothing but follow it.

I ran down from the mountains and out into the plains-grass beyond. I had no plan, no allies, and little hope. All I had was my life, newly enriched with visions of another world. I intended to fight for it, but did not yet know how.

IV. SHIBAN

WE KNEW THEY would make a fight of it in the end. Once there was nowhere left for them to run, they turned and faced us.

They had chosen a good place to make their stand. High in Chondax's northern hemisphere, the endless white plains eventually crumpled into a maze of ravines and jagged peaks, a scar on the open face of the world that was visible from space. We had never penetrated far into that region, opting to clear the orks from the plains first. It was natural defensive terrain - hard to enter, easy to hide in.

When our auspex operators had seen it from orbit, they had called it *teghazi*: the Grinder. I think that was their idea of a joke.

I stood in the saddle, looking out at the first of the many cliffs rising up against the northern horizon. I could see long trails of smoke rising from the heart of the rock cluster.

I raised magnoculars to my eyes and zoomed in. Metal artefacts had been placed amid the stone, glinting in the bright sunlight. The orks had built walls across narrow ravine entrances, using material stripped from their own vehicles. Knowing that they would not need them again, they had turned their only means of movement into their only means of defence.

I approved of that.

'They are well positioned,' I said scanning across the fortifications.

'They are,' said Torghun, standing beside me and also using magnoculars. Our two brotherhoods spread out behind us in their assault formations, waiting for the order to advance. 'I see fixed weapons. They've got numbers.'

I swept my view across to the nearest of the ravine mouths facing us. Walls were clearly visible, placed further back between the jaws of the ravine and strung across the gully floor in a line of metal panels and bolted struts. I could see orks patrolling along the top of them. As Torghun had noted, there were weapon towers lodged higher up the ravine slopes.

'This will be difficult,' I said.

Torghun laughed.

'It will, Shibana.'

In the days since we had joined forces, I had not found it easy to understand Torghun. Sometimes he would laugh and I would not know why. Sometimes I

would laugh and he would look at me strangely.

He was a good warrior, and I think we both respected one another when it came to blades. We had destroyed two more convoys before we had arrived at the Grinder, and I had seen at first-hand how his brotherhood fought.

They were more structured than we were. I rarely gave my brothers orders once an engagement started: I trusted them to look after themselves. Torghun gave his warriors orders all the time, and they followed them instantly. They used speed, just as we did, but were quicker to adopt fire positions when the combat became more static.

Some tactics I never saw them adopt. They never pulled back, feigning retreat in order to draw out the enemy.

'We don't retreat,' he had said.

'It is effective,' I had replied.

'More effective to let them know you'll never do it,' he had said, smiling- 'When the Luna Wolves go to war, the enemy knows they'll never stop coming forward, all the time, wave after wave, until it's over. It's a powerful reputation to have.'

I could hardly argue against the record of the Warmaster's Legion. I had seen them fight. They were impressive.

So, as I scanned the greenskins' defences, I had little idea what Torghun would propose. I feared that he would advocate waiting until other *minghan* reached our position, and I did not relish disputing with him. I wished to maintain our momentum, since I knew that other brotherhoods would already be entering combat on the far sides of the huge ravine complex. If we were to gain the honour of fighting alongside the Khagan - who would surely be at the heart of the action - then we would have to remain at the forefront of the closing circle.

'I do not wish to wait,' I said firmly, putting my magnoculars down and looking at Torghun. 'We can break them.'

Torghun did not reply immediately. He continued looking out at the distant cliff-faces, scanning for weaknesses. Eventually he stopped and looked at me.

He grinned. I had seen that grin before; it was one of the few gestures we shared. He grinned before he entered battle, just as I did.

'I think you're right, brother,' he said.

WE CAME IN hard over on the left flank of our target, building quickly to attack speed, burning across the plains in close-packed squadrons. I crouched low in

the saddle, gripping the controls of my mount, feeling the animal grind of the engines, the hard vibrations of the blazing thrusters, the violent urgings of the caged machine-spirit. My brothers spread out on either side of me, speeding across the white earth in perfect formation.

The ravine entrance we had chosen was narrow - two hundred metres across, as the auspex read it - and clogged with defenders. We skirted wide, using the cliffs jutting out on either side of its jaws to mask our approach. I felt my braided hair whip against my shoulder guards. We ate up the ground, devouring it, tearing it up in a blaze of furious motion.

We had timed our run to coincide with the rising of the third sun. As it emerged behind us, flaring silver, blinding the defenders to our advance, I cried out to greet it.

'For the Khagan!' I roared.

For the Khagan! came the thunderous, rapturous response.

I relished that: five hundred of us on the charge, thundering into range at searing velocity, wreathed in a dazzling corona of silver and gold, our jetbikes bucking and swerving. I saw Jochi alongside me, hurling out battle-cries in Korchin, his eyes alive with bloodlust. Batu, Hasi, the rest of my *minghan-keshig*, they all hunkered forward, all straining at the leash.

The first volleys of defensive fire snapped and bounced around us, a motley rain of solid rounds and crude energy bolts. We weaved amongst them, goading our jetbikes ever faster, glorying in their superb poise, rush and tilt.

The jutting cliffs zoomed up to meet us. We came around, leaning heavily, scraping the ground before racing into the mouth of the valley beyond.

We cleared the cover of the cliffs, and our senses were overrun by a crashing, coruscating storm of incoming fire. A hurricane of projectiles spiralled out of the walls ahead of us, blowing up in our faces and hurling bikes end-over-end.

A rider close to me took a direct hit. His mount disintegrated, ripped apart in a shower of metal and promethium, flying crazily across the ravine and slamming into the ground in a smear of flame and debris. Warriors were hurled from their saddles, had holes punched through their armour, were sent careering into the rock walls where they exploded in massive, blooming fireballs.

None of us slowed. We hurtled down the ravine, maintaining attack speed, ducking and swaying around the lines of fire, rising above it to widen the field before plunging back down to ground level and letting it streak over our heads.

I poured on more power, feeling my bike shudder with the strain. The land around was a mess of streaked, blurred white - only the metal walls ahead

remained in focus. I felt shots graze against my bike's forward armour, nearly throwing me out of line. More of my brothers went down as the torrent of flak and shrapnel took them.

The walls screamed closer. I saw orks leaping about on top of them, waving their weapons and roaring challenges. Gun towers zeroed in on us, swivelling to let loose before we hit them.

We opened up. A pounding cacophony of heavy bolter fire snarled out, filling the ravine with a ragged hail of ruinous, withering destruction. The walls disappeared behind bursting clouds of explosive devastation. Metal plates snapped and dented, blowing apart in a hail of splinters. I saw greenskins thrown high into the air, their bodies shredded open by the flood of shells.

Just then, as he had promised they would, Torghun's heavy support opened fire. His auxiliary squads had broken off, making the most of the screen of our frontal assault and securing high ground on either side of the ravine. They possessed tools of devastation that we didn't carry: lascannons, missile launchers, barrel-cycling autocannons, even an esoteric beam-weapon they called a 'volkite culverin', something I had never seen before.

Their barrage was devastating, igniting the air around it, cracking into the barrier ahead of us and dousing it in a cataract of raging, swimming energy. Huge rents were blown open. Panels struts and spars went spinning, tearing through the curtains of flame. Missiles streaked in, angling through the storm of destruction, whistling past us and crashing into the burning ork lines beyond. Neon-bright spears of energy snapped and fizzed, sending lurid glows racing along the rock walls.

I picked my target, aiming for a fire-rimed breach in the walls. I hurtled through the inferno towards it, feeling sheets of flame sweep and shimmer across me. I swung over almost to the horizontal, letting an ork missile whine past. Then I rocked back upright, kicked in a final boost and shot clean through the ragged gap in the walls.

Something must have hit me as I burst through the defences. I felt a thud somewhere under the bike's undercarriage, and it spun away hard right. I grappled with the controls, barely arresting a fatal spin.

The world slurred around me, rocking and spiralling. I could hear other jetbikes streak through the gouges in the walls and turn their heavy bolters upon the defenders. I had a brief glimpse of the ravine on the far side - studded with ramshackle barricades and choke-points, crawling with whole gangs of orks, all of them teeming with brutish fury. Gunfire, thick and incessant, criss-crossed the

narrow defile, broken by airborne bursts and flak clouds.

I swung around, diving under a flurry of incoming rounds before gunning my faltering drive unit again. Trailing smoke, my bike lurched and bucked before it gave out completely, throwing me into a sharp dive.

The rocky ground rushed toward me in a sickening plummet. I leapt, hurling myself from the saddle. I hit the ground hard and rolled away, hearing the sharp crack of my bike impacting on the ravine floor, followed by the whoosh and bang of its fuel tanks going up.

I jumped to my feet as wreckage rained down around me, my glaive already poised. I'd come about two hundred metres beyond the walls. I could see the barrier from the other side - the scaffolding collapsing, the ammo-lifters going up like torches, the shuddering impacts from Torghun's punishing long-range fire. Bodies were everywhere, falling from the tottering parapets, swarming over the rock. The air was dense with an incredible fog of noise - screams, bellows, jetbike engines throttling up, cannons discharging.

Greenskins were already homing in, knots of them, firing at me from makeshift carbines and pistols and lumbering to the charge. I felt the ping and crack of the solid rounds as they ricocheted from my armour. I heard their bestial, throaty war-challenges. I smelled the stench of their anger.

I flicked the *guan dao's* energy field on, feeling the shaft tremble as it powered up.

By the time they closed on me, I was more than ready.

I whipped my upper body around, punching out with the *guan dao*. The crackling edge dug deep into the leading ork's face, slicing open its flesh and sending the creature staggering backwards in a bloody, flailing froth.

Another threw a wild hack with a cleaver, biting into my pauldron but failing to penetrate the ceramite. I plunged my glaive into its stomach, twisting it round, liquefying the hard flesh. More piled in, and I tore through them, spinning and stabbing. The *guan dao* sang in my hands, spiralling around me in a glistening net of sparkling power. Greenskins were thrown clear, their armour cracked, their bodies broken.

I barely heard the thunder and rush of the battle around me.

My mind drilled down to the core of combat, and I lost myself in it, unaware of the flaming sky above me, unaware of the scores of jetbikes tearing past with their weapons blazing.

I rotated, swiping a greenskin's head clean off, then darted back, cracking the heel of the *guan dao* into the skull of another. I eviscerated, gouged, ripped,

snapped and blinded, boosted by my armour, my strength, my vicious artistry.

One of them, a huge tusked monster with rusty iron pauldrons, threw itself bodily at me, somehow evading my blade and getting under my guard. We collided with a jarring thud and both sprawled to the ground. The creature landed on top of me, and the stink of it clogged in my nostrils. It butted my face, and the force of the blow cracked my head back. My vision swam, and I saw blood wash across my eyes.

I was pinned. I tried to bring the glaive, still clutched in my left hand, around to dig into the monster's back. It saw the movement and twisted to block it with its own weapon - a spiked maul already covered in a slick of blood. The *guan dao's* energy field detonated on contact, shattering the maul-head in a shower of metal fragments, lacerating both of us.

The greenskin jerked back up, loosening its grip, clawing at its eyes and bellowing with pain. With a huge heave, I pushed it clear and swung the glaive round in a whip-lash figure, aiming for the stomach. The blade cut deep, driving between armour-plates and severing the ork down to the spine. I wrenched the shaft back out, hauling hard with both hands. The monster bisected, its torso disintegrating in a sucking swamp of ripped muscle, blood and bone.

I heard another movement from behind me and whirled around, primed to swing again.

Jochi stood there, his armour streaked with red, his bolter in hand, surrounded by heaps of ork corpses. Behind him I could see the ramshackle barrier coming down, slowly toppling as the fires ripped through it. My brothers were everywhere, harrying, pursuing, slaying, tearing like vengeful ghosts through the teeming hordes.

'This is good hunting, my khan!' Jochi observed, laughing heartily.

I joined him in his mirth, feeling the cuts across my face open up.

'And not done yet!' I shouted, shaking the blood from my blade, turning to find more prey. Jetbikes shot overhead, powered onwards by whooping, shrieking riders.

Under their wheeling shadows, we launched back into the fight.

THE BATTLE IN the ravine did not let up once the walls had been broken. More barriers had been strung across the winding gorges ahead, clogging the routes leading deeper into the interior of the Grinder. Greenskins had dug themselves in wherever they could. They poured out of their refuges, lurching at us in waves,

scrambling over the rocky ravine-floor in their haste to blood us. We were dragged deep into melee combat, assailed from all sides as we cut our way down the long defiles and gulches.

Many of my brothers remained mounted, sweeping up and down the long valley and taking out enemy fire positions with a speed the defenders could not match. Others advanced on foot, as I did, racing to bring combat to the greenskins.

When we got in close we smelled the blood and sweat on our prey. We heard their broken roars and felt the tremors of their Massed tread. Even as we cut them down we relished their skill and their savage bravery, appreciating what superlative creatures we were purging from existence.

Jochi had been right. When the last greenskin was gone, it would be a sad day.

My only concern was Torghun's slow advance. We surged onwards, punching our way far up the gorge, torching every barricade we came across and slaying freely. I had expected Torghun's brotherhood to be close behind us. We would have welcomed the cover of their heavy-weapons squads.

We began to lose them. They needed to be quicker.

After fighting our way to the first intersection in the twisting ravine system, I withdrew from the combat, letting my warriors take the fight to the enemy.

'My brother!' I shouted into the vox, using the channel that Torghun and I had designated for private messages between us. 'What keeps you? Are you sleeping? We have them on the run!'

I had intended my speech to be light, just as I always spoke when in the midst of battle. Perhaps I might even have laughed a little.

Torghun's reply startled me.

'What are you doing?' he responded. Even over the comm-link, I could hear the anger in his voice. 'Consolidate your position, captain. You are getting strung out. I will *not* match this pace. We have not secured our entry points.'

I looked around me. The battle was chaotic and free-flowing, as battles always were. The horde of orks swelled down the ravine floor, huge and sprawling, met by a thin line of White Scars warriors, tearing at them with furious energy. We had already been slowed. We had to break them quickly, to rush at them before they could gain momentum, to hurl them back, again and again.

The task was urgent, and could not wait. The Khagan would be advancing quickly toward the heart of the Grinder. Other brotherhoods would be racing to meet up with him. I dreaded being left behind.

'We are advancing,' I said. I reported this as a matter of fact, and no longer

smiled as I spoke. 'We must advance. We are breaking them.'

'You cannot. Hold your position. Do you hear me? Hold your position.'

The tone of command astonished me. For a moment, I struggled to find the words to respond.

'We are advancing,' I repeated.

There was no alternative. He had to understand that.

Torghun didn't reply. I heard him curse at the other end of the link, and just made out the muffled crack of munitions going off in the background.

Then he terminated the connection.

Jochi, who had been fighting close by, came up to me, looking quizzical.

'A problem, my khan?' he asked.

I did not reply immediately. I was troubled. I considered ordering my warriors to pull back, to consolidate our position and wait for the Terrans to reach us. That would have maintained the harmony between us, which I was loath to break.

We were brothers, he and I. The thought of strife between brothers was repellent.

Then I looked out across the ravine, and saw the carnage we were creating. I saw my *minghan* in the full splendour of their unrivalled ferocity. I saw my warriors fighting as they had been created to fight - with passion, with freedom.

'There is no problem,' I said, marching past Jochi and back towards combat. 'We break them.'

WE FOUGHT ON. As the suns began to sink, we fought. Once the light failed, turning the ravines into pools of oily darkness, we fought. We donned our helms and used our night-vision prey-sight to hunt them down, always advancing, always rushing them.

They resisted ferociously. Not since Ullanor had I seen them fight a battle like it. They staged rallies, orchestrated ambushes, hurled suicide fighters right into our midst. Every barricade cost us, every gun-pit took lives before we could clear it out. We maintained the punishing pace, never letting them regroup never letting ourselves slow. Our blood mingled with theirs. The ravines sloped with it, turning the pale dust a deep red.

In the cold hour before dawn when all three suns were still below the horizon, I ordered my brothers to halt at last. We were deep into the Grinder by then, surrounded by jumbled, overhanging terrain of ever deeper gorges and rising

shelves of white rock. Curtains of fire streamed at us from all directions. Groups of greenskins had looped round, stealing back through the treacherous country and spilling into territory we had already won. They bellowed at us from the shadows. Cries echoed from the surrounding cliffs, amplifying and distorting. It sounded like the land itself was goading us.

I remembered Torghun's admonishment. I considered the possibility that he had been right, and that my eagerness to advance had compromised us. His brotherhood was still a long way from our position, making steady but measured progress towards us. I could not shake the suspicion that he was moving deliberately slowly.

'We will hold here,' I ordered, conveying the command to Jochi and Batu to relay to the others. 'At first light, we renew the attack.'

THE SITE I chose was the closest thing in the vicinity to a defensive bastion. A wide plateau of rock rose up from the tumbled, broken landscape, offering a commanding position over the terrain around it. Its sides were sheer on three sides, while the fourth dissolved into a shattered slope of cracked rock and scree. It was not perfect - we were still overlooked by peaks on the far side of the ravine, and there was precious little cover on the plateau itself.

Still, it gave us the chance to stem our growing losses, to bring some shape back into the battle. We fought our way to the plateau, scrambling up plunging rents in the rock, slipping and sliding on the loose stone. Once we had seized it we dug ourselves in along the edges, giving us firing angles into the gorges below. I sent our surviving squadrons of jetbikes after the main static firebases, but did not permit them to go further once they had destroyed their targets.

As I had known they would, the greenskins saw our halt as weakness. They poured toward us, bursting out from hidden caches and up from tunnels we had not properly destroyed. They surged up the steep sides of the plateau, clambering over one another in their eagerness to get at us. They were like an army of ghouls, their skin almost black in the gloom, their eyes burning red.

From then on, we were hard-pressed. Hemmed in, we fought like they did - ferociously, artlessly, brutally. They clambered up, we hewed them down. They clawed at us, dragging any warriors who broke formation into their pits of roaring horror. We shot and stabbed at them, sending their flailing bodies cartwheeling away into the darkness. We hurled grenades into their splayed maws, recoiling as their torsos blew open in shreds of flying sinew. They

surrounded us, turning the plateau into a lone island of sanity amidst a heaving storm-swell of xenos blood-mania.

I remained at the forefront, where the combat was heaviest, wielding my *guan dao* two-handed, carving through greenskin flesh as if it were a single, vast, amorphous organism. I felt my hearts pumping hard, my arm muscles searing with pain. Sweat slicked my face under my helm, trickling down the underside of my gorget. They ran at our blades, using their bodies to wear us out, to slow us down, to punch gaps for others to crash through. Their bravery was phenomenal. Their strength was immense. Their commitment was total.

We were surrounded, we were outnumbered. Such a thing was rare for us - we did not let ourselves get pinned down often. Our Legion had never been chosen for missions where objectives had to be held for extended periods, not like the dour Iron Warriors or the pious, golden Imperial Fists. We had always looked down on such garrison work and pitied those who were condemned to it. I could not imagine us ever distinguishing ourselves in warfare of that sort - under siege, fighting with our backs to the wall as the skies burned above us.

For all that, we were Legiones Astartes. We fought with the precision and resolve of our long conditioning. We never yielded. We paid for that bastion on Chondax with our blood, gripping on tight to the handhold, gritting our teeth and digging in deep. When one of us fell, we exacted a toll of vengeance, closing ranks and ratcheting the already staggering violence up a further notch.

I believe we could have held out there indefinitely, letting the greenskin waves crash against us until they were exhausted and we could move on again. As it was, that supposition was not tested. I saw the streaks of missiles spin out of the night, slamming into the rear flanks of the enemy and breaking the momentum of their advance. I saw the bloated beams of lascannons snap out in massed volleys, silently reaping their dreadful toll. I heard the low growl of heavy bolters and autocannons, loosed in rolling, dense barrages.

I looked up, out across the seething mass of alien bodies, and saw glints of white and gold moving up the ravine from the south. Gunfire flashed, jetbike thrusters roared into life.

I regarded the development with mixed emotions: relief, certainly, but also annoyance.

Torghun had reached our position at last.

BY THE TIME the first shafts of dawn-light filtered down the ravines, the

greenskins were dead or fleeing. For the first time, we let the survivors go. We had enough on our hands - equipment to salvage, armour to repair, the wounded to get back into fighting shape. The plateau looked desolate in the growing sun's light; a hazy landscape of corpses and smouldering jetbike carcasses.

I did not see Torghun for a while, even after his brotherhood had joined us there. I had much to detain me, and I was not eager to speak to him. I busied myself with my own warriors, working hard to get them ready for war again. Despite everything, I was keen to keep advancing. I could see grey columns of smoke rising up ahead of us, and knew that the circle around the orks was closing fast.

I was still looking north, trying to gauge the best route for the advance, when Torghun finally came to me. I turned, sensing his presence before I saw him.

He was wearing his helm, so I could not read his expression. I assumed he was angry - when he spoke, his voice was tight, but resigned.

'I don't want to fight with you, Shiban,' he said, wearily.

'Nor I with you,' I said.

'You should have listened.'

I found the questioning of my tactics a novel experience. Torghun was within his rights to do so, of course, but it wore at my pride as khan, and I could not think of an adequate response.

'Just tell me this,' he said. 'Why does it matter to you so much?'

'Why does what matter?' I asked.

'To reach the Khagan. Why are you determined to do this, Putting our formations, our warriors, in jeopardy? We don't even know he' s on the planet. Tell me. Help me understand.'

His words surprised me. I knew that Torghun was more cautious than I was; that his way of war was different. It had not occurred to me that he did not place importance on fighting alongside the greatest of us.

'How can you not wish for it?' I asked.

I actually felt sorry for Torghun then. I assumed that he must have missed something in his ascension, or perhaps forgotten it. He called himself a White Scar; I wondered if the name meant any more to him than his Legion designation. For me, for my brotherhood, it was everything.

I felt I had to try to explain, even if my hopes of making myself clear were not high.

'War is not a tool, my brother,' I said. 'War is life. We have been elevated into it, we have become it. When the galaxy is finally cleansed of danger, our time

will have ended. A brief time, a speck of gold on the face of the universe. We must cherish what we have. We must fight in the way we were born to fight, to make art of it, to celebrate the nature given to us.'

I spoke fervently. I believed those things. I still do.

'I saw him fight, once, from a distance,' I said. 'I have never forgotten it. Even from that one glimpse, I saw a possibility of perfection. Each of us has a part of that perfection within us. I long to witness it again, to see it close at hand, to learn from it, to become it.'

Torghun's blood-stained helm gazed back at me blankly.

'What else is there for us, brother?' I asked. 'We are not building a future for ourselves; we are creating an empire for others. These warlike things, these grand, terrible inspirations, they are all that we have.'

Still, Torghun said nothing.

'The future will be otherwise,' I said. 'For now, though, for us, there is only war. We must live it.'

Torghun shook his head in disbelief. 'I see they breed poets on Chogoris as well as warriors,' he said.

I could not tell whether he was mocking me.

'We do not distinguish between them,' I said.

Another strange habit,' he said.

Then he reached up and unfastened the seals on his helm. I heard the locks hiss as they were undone. He twisted the helm off and mag-locked it to his armour.

Once we were looking with our own eyes it was easier to understand one another. I do not think my words had done much to convince him.

'I do not fight in the way you do, Shiban,' he said. 'Perhaps I do not even fight for the same things that you do. But we are both of the Fifth Legion. We must look for common ground.'

Torghun looked up, past me and into the north.

That was where *he* was. That was where he was fighting.

'We must be at the forefront of the assault, even now,' Torghun said. 'How soon can your brothers be made ready?'

'They already are,' I said.

'Then we travel together,' said Torghun, his expression sombre. 'In unison, but I will not slow you.'

In the morning light, lit only by one sun, his skin looked darker than before, almost like one of us. He had conceded a lot already. I could appreciate that.

'We will find him, brother,' he said. 'If he is there to be found, then we will find him.'

V. TARGUTAI YESUGEI

TO FLEE ONTO the Altak, that had been a bad decision. Had I stayed in the mountains, I might have had some chance of evading my pursuers. Out on the plains, it was impossible.

I sometimes reflect on why I made the choice that I did. I was a child, of course, but I was not a stupid one - I would have known that the wooded valleys gave me a better chance to escape from the Khitan, even if the prospect still remained slim.

Perhaps I was fated to make the choice I did. I dislike the idea of *fate*, though. I dislike the idea that the things we do are ordained for us by higher powers; that our actions are like shadow-plays Performed for their amusement. Most of all, I dislike the idea that the future is set, running away from us in clear lines that we are compelled to follow, with only the illusion of a sovereign will to comfort us on the journey.

Nothing I have learned since my ascension has convinced me that I am wrong to think those things. I have learned of the deep metaphysics of the universe, and the long, tired games of the immortals, but I retain faith in our ability to choose.

We are the authors of our actions. When the test comes, we can go in either direction: we can triumph, or we can fail, and the universe cares not which.

I do not think it was fate that carried me out of the Ulaav and into the empty spaces of the Altak. I think I made a poor decision, born from fear.

I do not blame myself for that. All of us, even the mightiest, even the most exalted, may make such mistakes.

FOR A WHILE, I was faster. The Khitan in the mountains were armoured and wore curved steel plates over leather jerkins. I could hear the clatter of their jointed arm-guards even as I sprinted, and knew that they would tire quicker than I would.

I headed south, running hard out of the shadow of the highlands and down across the open plains. The earth was firm and dry beneath my feet. The wind was dawn-fresh, cold and spare.

Ahead of me was nothing. The Altak undulated gently, like an ocean of green,

but there were no deep valleys for me to hide away in. A man or beast could be spied for kilometres on the plains. That was my hope - that I would see the Great Khan's entourage from a distance and be able to get to it in time.

I felt my breathing grow ragged and my feet, bound in soft leather, ache. I had not eaten since the day before, though for some reason that didn't affect my stamina. I remembered my vision of the four figures and the drink they had given me, and wondered how close to reality that vision had been. I could still taste something at the back of my throat - a bitterness, like spoiled milk.

For all their armour-encumbered clumsiness, I worried that I could not pull away from the pursuing Khitan. The noises of their footfalls, their heavy breathing, their clinking weapons, all of it followed me out across the plains. I turned my head as I ran, expecting to see them close behind me.

They were not. I had far outpaced them, and they laboured in my wake, running on foot like I did. My hearing seemed to be sharper, as did my eyesight. As I watched twelve of them come after me, puffing and swearing, I felt that I could see right into them. I saw the flame of their souls burning within their chests.

That startled me. My perception had been changed. Everything - the world around me, my pursuers - was more vivid than it had been.

I found that terrifying, even more so than the prospect of being killed. New sensations boiled within me, bubbling up under my skin and making my cheeks flush and my palms hot.

I felt powerful, but also powerless. I knew enough of the ways of the seers to know that whatever had been birthed in me on the mountain needed tutoring.

I turned away from the Khitan, and ran harder. The physical exertion helped a little. I felt the grass flatten under my feet, and the curses of the soldiers recede as they lost ground.

I scoured the horizon ahead, desperate for some sign of the Khan. I cursed his evasiveness then.

I saw nothing - just sky and earth and haze between them.

I KNEW THAT the foot soldiers would not be the only ones. No one travelled far on the Altak without steeds, and the lands of the Khitan were far away.

Once the soldiers realised that I would outpace them, they began to blow split-bone horns. The sound of their warnings rang out across the open spaces, travelling far on the gusting wind. Then they fell back, panting, content to let me

race away from them and knowing I would not get far.

I kept going. I felt like I could run forever. My light kaftan, which had failed to keep me warm in the high places, let my legs stride out. As the sun rose higher into the sky, my muscles warmed up properly. I could feel the heat on my clean, brown limbs, and it spurred me on further.

Then I heard the noise of the *aduun*. I heard their hooves drum on the packed earth, and without looking back I knew there were many of them. I kept my head down, and scoured the way ahead, fruitlessly, for any kind of break in the featureless landscape.

They caught up with me quickly. An *aduu* can outpace a man many times over and gallop tirelessly. Those of the Altak are fine beasts, with dark hides and powerful limbs. I heard their throaty breathing and the slap of their long tails.

I cast a despairing glance at the horizon a final time. The Khan was nowhere to be seen. I had placed all my hopes in finding him, and I had failed.

As the hoof-beats rang in my ears, I stopped running and turned to face my killers. Of all the crimes of our people, none was worse than showing fear to an enemy, and I resolved to make my death a good one.

I saw a line of mounted troops come at me, racing across the plain with poise and skill. They wore plate armour, overlapping and glinting in the sunlight. One of the riders carried a long spear with a tail of thick hair pinned just below the blade. Pennants streamed out behind them, brightly coloured and cracking in the wind.

One of them rode out ahead of the others, bearing down on me quickly. I saw a steel helm crowned with a spike, bronze-lined armour pieces, churning hooves, a loop of rope whirling out at me.

The lasso slipped over my shoulders and pulled tight around my waist. The rider hurtled past, yanking me after him. As the lasso closed, I was jerked off my feet and hurled to the ground. I hit the earth face-down.

For a moment I thought he intended to drag me along, but the pressure slackened immediately. I pushed myself back up to my knees, the rope knotted around my midriff and blood running down my chin.

The rider brought his steed around and dismounted, clasping the other end of the rope all the while. He walked up to me and grinned, tugging at the rope like I was a beast on a leash.

'You run fast, little one,' he said. 'But not fast enough.'

His tone made me angry. My arms were still free, and though I didn't have a weapon, I could still fight.

I launched myself at him, pushing up from the ground. I had no plan of attack, no thought about how I would grapple with a man nearly twice my weight and wearing full armour.

And it happened then.

The path of my life turned, slipping from one course to another. It was so sudden, when it finally came. Perhaps my visions on the Ulaav had been nothing more than delirium, or perhaps they had given me a true glimpse of some deeper, darker reality. It matters not. Something had awakened within me, and it chose that instant to make itself manifest.

When I look back, thinking of Chogoris, the lost world I loved, that is the moment I see, etched forever in my mind like acid-washed steel. That was the moment that sundered us, turning my destiny away from the plains and into the stars, out into the void where both horror and wonder waited for me in the immortal darkness.

I did not know it then. I did not know it for many years afterwards. None of that alters the truth.

It happened then.

I lunged out, stretching both fists in front of me like a wrestler going for a hold. Piercing, blinding light burst from my hands, tackling and spitting like splinters of lightning.

It was painful. I cried out in agony. Coruscation swarmed all over me, swimming across my flesh in a haze of heat and scouring energy. The world exploded in a hail of silver and gold, spiralling and thrashing, blazing madly, roaring in my ears and burning in my nostrils. It suffocated me - I could feel my lungs blistering, I lost my feet. I lost everything.

I saw the broken outline of the soldier reel away from me. I heard his cries of shock and pain. I saw him scratch at his eyes. The rope that had bound me exploded in a cloud of sparks. I staggered backwards, my fists clenched, still surging with goutts of hard, clear incandescence. Raw elemental power, the stuff of the other universe, thundered out of me, bleeding me, hollowing me.

I have no idea how long I was lost in that state, blazing like a pearlescent firebrand, reeling across the plains and vomiting destruction. It might have been seconds, it might have been far longer. I remember the vague impression of riders circling me, their outlines broken amid the torrent of white fire, unwilling to come close in case they were burned. I remember the faces of the four man-beasts swaying before my mind's eye, pointing at me with their hooked, cruel fingers.

Drink, they told me.

I fell to my knees. The inferno raged, burning my flesh but not consuming it. My whole body locked rigid, clenched in spasms, convulsing.

The first I saw of him was a dark shape against the fire. He walked through it, pushing the curtains of energy back like they were sheets of rain. It didn't hurt him.

He knelt over me. He seemed gigantic - far taller and broader than any living man should be. I looked into his eyes, blinking away tears as fire spilled from my own, and saw something familiar in them.

I remembered the light-wreathed figure of my vision. For a moment, I thought the man before me was the same person. Soon I realised that he wasn't, but felt sure that there was some link between them.

Then I felt the crushing weight of his authority sink down upon me. The flames around me guttered out, flickering into nothing and rippling into the wind. Like a man casually snuffing a candle, he stanchd the torrent of bleeding madness. Even then, locked in bewilderment and pain, my mind numbed, part of me knew how astonishing that was.

He remained stooped over me. His helm was spiked, like those of his men. His armour was elaborate and finely-made, with gold and red beading arranged around a breastplate of white bone panels. I saw a long scar running down his left cheek, as I had been told the Talskar people wore. His eyes were deep-set and intense. I had never seen such eyes.

Perhaps I had been wrong about my hunters. Perhaps they were not Khitan.

Panting, shivering, I still clung on to the hope of a noble death. I tried to hold his gaze, sure that he had come to kill me.

I could not do it. Something about that giant overwhelmed me. I saw his face swim before my eyes, breaking up like a reflection in water. He seemed to be peering into my soul, shriving it, flaying it. I felt myself losing consciousness.

'Be careful,' he said.

Then I passed out, and the rising darkness was as welcome to me as sleep.

SIX DAYS LATER, I awoke.

I learned, long afterwards, how dangerous that time had been for me. My inner eyes had been opened in the Ulaav, but I had not been shown how to use them. I could have died. I could have suffered worse than death, as could all those around me.

He had prevented that. Even then, long before the Master of Mankind had shown us the path to the stars, he had known how to control the fires that raged within the minds of the gifted.

He did not have the gift himself, as far as I know. I never saw him summon fire, nor bring the storm to bear on his enemies. He used his warrior's body - that magnificent, enhanced body - in the cause of war and nothing else. I cannot believe, however, that he did not have some innate knowledge of the paths of heaven. He was made to be a player in the other universe, to contest those who remained on the far side of the veil, and so he must, like his brothers, have had some understanding of the hidden deepness of things.

Back then, though, all I knew was that he had captured me, and that, under the laws of the Altak, I was his slave. Having been denied an honourable death, I resigned myself to a life of drudgery. The khan - *my* khan, the one I had served until then - would not be able to rescue me. I had seen the nature of my new gaoler, and knew that he far surpassed any other warrior of the plains, including my kin-lord.

He was at my side when I awoke. I lay on a bed of furs within a large *ger*. A fire burned in the central pit, and the air was red and smoke-filled. I could hear voices murmuring in the shadows. I heard the sound of sword-edges being filed, arrows being fletched.

He looked at me, and I looked at him.

He was massive. I had never seen a man so domineering, so nakedly potent, so replete with coiled power. His big, lean face flickered in the shadow and flame.

'What is your name?' he asked.

His voice was low. It thrummed deeply in the murmuring space.

'Shinaz,' I said. My mouth was dry.

'No longer,' he said. 'You shall be Targutai Yesugei, the child who ran and the man who fought. You shall be a *zadyin arga* of my household.'

His words were not presumptive. By the custom of the Altak he owned my life, at least until such time as another warlord could take me from him by force or I could somehow escape. I doubted that either thing were possible.

'You come to me at the beginning, Yesugei,' he said. 'I am the Khan of many khans. You are joining the *ordu* of Jaghatai, the tide that shall sweep across the world and make it anew. Be thankful that I took you before you returned to your old khan. If I had faced you in battle, you would have died.'

I said nothing. I was still groggy from sleep and sickness. I could not see his face clearly, and his voice had a strange, unsettling quality. I lay back on the furs,

feeling my breast rise and fall gingerly.

'You shall be trained, like the others,' he said. 'You shall learn to use what you have been given. You shall learn when to use it, and when not to use it. In all these things, you will follow my word of command. No other man shall ever tell you how to use your gifts.'

I watched his lips move in the lambent darkness. As he spoke, I saw fleeting remnants of the visions I had seen from the mountain. I saw those broken vessels, burning amid the stars. As he talked of conquest, I remembered the insignia on those pieces of charred metal.

A wolf. A many-headed snake. A lightning strike.

'I have brought a new way of war to the world,' he said. 'To move fast, to remain strong, never to rest. When the Altak is ours, We shall take this war to the Khitan. After that, we shall take it to every empire between earth and sky. They shall all fall, for they are sick, and we are healthy.'

My heart beat shallowly in my breast. I could feel the heat of fever in my cheeks. His words were like the words of a dream.

'All empires fall,' he said. 'All empires sicken. This is the lesson we have learned. This is the lesson that you shall learn.'

I saw the scar move on his face as he spoke. In the blood-red light, it looked alive, like a pale snake clamped to his skin.

'We will not serve empires,' he said. 'We will remain in motion We will not have a centre. Wherever we are, that is the centre.'

I knew he was telling me something important, but I was too young and too sick to understand it. Only later, much later, was I able to look back on those words and recognise the truth of what I was being told.

'Will you serve me, Targutai Yesugei?' he asked.

Back then, I assumed the question was rhetorical. I was a child. I had no idea how long it was possible for a human to live, what it was possible for a human to become. I thought that only trivial things were at stake: my life, the feuds between clans, the old cycle of war on the Altak.

Now, knowing what I know, I am not so sure. Perhaps, even then, I had a choice to make.

'Yes, my khan,' I said.

He looked at me for a long time, his eyes shining in the blood-light.

'Then you are Talskar now,' he said. 'You will be marked, like we are. You will bear the white scar on your face, and all will learn to fear you.'

Firelight rippled across his bone armour-plates.

'For now, we are unknown,' he said. 'It will not always be so. A day will come when we will be revealed, fighting in the way that I will teach you.'

His eyes were like jewels in the night, burning with hungry' boundless ambition.

'And when that day comes,' he said, 'when we are revealed at last, I tell you truly, *zadyin arga* - the gods themselves will cower before us.'

VI. ILYA RAVALLION

HE CAME FOR me five days later, just as he'd said he would. I'd been kicking my heels in the wastes of Ullanor all that time, trying to find something useful to do. I hadn't been very successful - the fleets in orbit were beginning to break up. The war was over, and already new battles had been identified.

I catalogued things. I submitted reports to my superiors. I read the notes I'd made after meeting the Stormseer.

The summons came with no warning. I was in Miert's complex looking over some of his shoddily-done datawork when my secure comm-bead pulsed.

'You have your audience, General Ravallion,' came the message. 'Be ready in an hour. I send a lander to your location.'

I had no idea how Yesugei had obtained access to the Departamento's grid. My immediate reaction was to feel a swell of nerves bloom in the pit of my stomach. I had served in many warzones and argued my corner with many powerful military commanders, so did not consider myself easily overawed, but this...

This was a *primarch*, one of the Emperor's own sons.

I tried to imagine what he would be like. I had heard different things about them: that they were constantly engulfed in light, that their armour shone like the sun, that they could kill with a word or a gesture and their gaze alone could flay skin and crack bone.

I had plenty of time to speculate. Typically for the White Scars, the lander arrived late. It eventually came down in a flurry of dust just north of the complex's perimeter. From my window I saw its white flanks and its gold-and-red lightning-strike sigil, and felt a fresh twinge of nervousness.

'Control yourself,' I said out loud, adjusting my newly-acquired weapon belt a final time before leaving for the lander. 'He is just a man. No, more than a man. What, then? Flesh and blood. Human. One of us.'

But I didn't know if even that were true. I was faced with a problem of categorisation, something that I'd always found difficult.

'On our side,' I settled on, feeling sick with anticipation.

THE LIFTER WAS a Legiones Astartes variant Horta RV local-space shuttle - a

late issue pattern. I knew everything about it. Fixing on the details helped my mood.

Yesugei was waiting for me in the crew-bay. He was wearing his ivory armour, and looked enormous in the confined space. He bowed to me as I climbed up the ramp to join him.

'Are you well, General Ravallion?' he asked.

I bowed in turn, trying to hide my anxiety with, I suspect, little success.

'Very well, Yesugei,' I said. I had learned by then, after much research, that Stormseers did not take the title 'khan'. They didn't take any kind of title at all; their name, and their calling, seemed to be enough. 'My thanks again, for arranging this.'

The boarding ramp to the lander closed behind me with a whine of servos. I heard airlocks clunk closed, and the craft's engines begin to power up.

'Pleasure,' he said, sitting back against the metal walls.

The dimensions of the lander fitted Space Marine physiology; everything, even the benches and the restraint harnesses, was far too big for me. I sat opposite Yesugei and fiddled with the straps, my feet barely touching the floor. He didn't bother using a harness, and sat serenely, his gauntlets resting on his knees.

'May I ask, general,' he said, 'you have met primarch before?'

The engines continued to power up, and I saw dust billowing up on the far side of the tiny viewports.

'No,' I said.

'Ah,' said Yesugei.

With a muffled roar, the lander took off, hovering over the apron for a few moments before generating lift. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the dry valleys of Ullanor begin to fall away.

'In that case, may I offer advice?' he asked.

I smiled grimly. I could already feel uncomfortable waves of vibrations running through my body, and the walls of the crew bay shook like a drum skin. We were climbing very fast. I wondered if the pilots made any allowances for the nature of their passengers.

'Please do,' I said. 'No one else has been able to.'

'Address him as Khan,' said Yesugei. 'That is not what we call him, but it is proper address for you. Look him in the eye when speaking, even if you find difficult. The shock of first meeting can be... bad. It will pass. He will not try to intimidate. Remember what he was created for.'

I nodded. The lander's violent ascent made me feel nauseous. I pressed my hands firmly against the rim of my seat and felt moisture on the inside of my gloves.

'I am told, by those who know, he is not like his brothers,' said Yesugei. 'He can be hard to read, even for us. On Chogoris we use hunting raptors. We call them *berkut*. His soul is one of theirs: far-ranging, restless. He may say things that seem strange. You may think he mocks you.'

I saw the sky in the viewports fade into black, and the tiny points of stars emerge. We had broken into the upper atmosphere incredibly quickly. I tried to concentrate on what Yesugei was telling me.

'Remember only this,' he said. 'A *berkut* never forget the shape of the hunt. In the end it always comes back to the hand that loosed it.'

I nodded, feeling light-headed.

'I will remember,' I said.

I caught my first glimpse of our destination in the far distance: a warship, vast and battle-scarred, its curved prow painted white and its marker lights blinking in the void.

I knew its name from the records: the *Swordstorm*.

Capital-class. Huge. Retro-fitted for speed - those engines are enormous. Was that sanctioned by Mars?

I knew he was in there. That was where he was waiting.

'Try to understand him,' said Yesugei calmly. 'He may even like you. I have seen stranger things.'

WE TOUCHED DOWN in one of the *Swordstorm's* hangers, and then things moved quickly. Yesugei escorted me down long corridors, up elevator-shafts, across huge halls thronged with menials and servitors. I heard singing in a language I didn't understand, and laughter echoing along service corridors. The entire ship had an air of furious, good-natured, slightly chaotic energy. It smelled cleaner than the Army cruisers I was used to, with an underlying aroma of something like incense rising from the polished floors. Everything was brightly lit and copiously decorated with the colours of the Legion - white, gold and red.

By the time we reached the Khan's chambers I had no idea how far we'd come - such enormous battleships were more like cities than vessels of war. We eventually stopped before a pair of ivory-inlaid doors flanked by two enormous guards in ceremonial armour. I recognised the cumbersome outline of antique

Thunder Armour, heavily altered and edged with gold. Unlike Yesugei, the guards wore their helms, which were slit-visored and gilded, and topped with horsehair plumes.

As the Stormseer approached them, they bowed, then grasped two heavy bronze handles set into the doors.

'Prepared?' asked Yesugei.

I could feel my heart hammering. Light was bleeding out of the cracks under the doors.

'No,' I said.

The doors opened.

FOR A SPLIT second, I saw absolutely nothing. I had the blurred impression of a corona of light, dancing in front of me as if reflected from water. I could sense enormous energy, enormous power burning away, thundering within its bonds like the caged heart of a reactor.

At the time I was unsure if I was sensing him as he truly was, my unpractised gaze piercing some carefully constructed veil of artifice and into his true nature beneath, or whether the sickness of the ascent from Ullanor had simply addled my senses.

I only knew one thing: that I had to keep my feet, to keep my eyes open. Yesugei had said it would pass.

'General Ilya Ravallion of the Departamento Munitorum.'

As soon as he spoke, the details of the room sank into focus, like an old physical pictograph being developed in a bath of chemicals. The chamber was large, with grand, high windows that flooded it with filtered light from Ullanor's sun.

I bowed my head clumsily.

'Khan,' I replied, disliking the thin sound of my voice in contrast to the richness of his.

'Sit, general,' he said. 'There is a chair here for you.'

I walked towards it. As I did so, I began to take in my surroundings. The walls were panelled with dark, sleek wood, like Terran mahogany. A thick rug lay under my feet, woven coarsely with images of arid plains and spear-carrying riders leaning in the saddle. I saw an antique bookcase lined with old leather-bound books. There were weapons hung against the walls - swords, bows, flintlocks, armour from other ages and other worlds. Smells of earth and metal

rose up to meet me, acrid with the tang of buckskin, burned charcoal and burnishing oils.

I sat in the seat that had been prepared for me. I heard the gentle ticking of an old clock on a stone mantelpiece and the very faint, very distant hum of starship engines.

Only then did I have the courage to look at him.

His face was the same leather-brown as Yesugei's. It was a lean face, noble and fiercely intelligent, and proud. His scalp was bald save for a long top-knot of ink-black hair bound with rings of gold. An aquiline nose ran down a wind-toughened, moustached face. His eyes were sunk deep under bony brows, and they glittered like pearls set in bronze.

He sat at ease, his immense body stretched back in his own chair, which was twice the size of mine. One gloved hand rested on an ivory arm, the other hung casually over the edge. I had the image of an apex-feline lounging in the dappled shade, resting its tremendous strength for a moment between hunts.

I could barely move. My heart was thudding.

'So,' said the Khan. He spoke in a cultured, patrician drawl. 'What did you wish to speak to me about?'

I looked into his glittering eyes to reply. It was then that I realised, with a lurch of horror, that I couldn't remember.

YESUGEI JOINED US then, standing at his primarch's shoulder and calmly explaining the circumstances of our meeting on Ullanor. I learned later that he'd been at my side the whole time, staying close in case I'd been overwhelmed. That was a kindness I have never forgotten.

As he spoke, and as the Khan responded, I recovered myself. I sat up straight in my chair, recalling my mission in all its detail. Even then I was struck by the irony of the situation - the one thing I had always been able to rely on, my memory, undone in an instant by the figure before me.

'So what more do they want of us?' asked the Khan drily, still speaking to Yesugei. 'More conquests? Faster?'

His tone was that of a weary patriarch, indulging the paltry concerns of subjects far below him in stature and nobility. Unlike Yesugei, his spoken Gothic was perfect, albeit with the same dense accent as his Stormseer.

'Lord,' I said, hoping my voice didn't shake as I spoke, 'the Departmento has no complaint about the speed of the Fifth Legion's progress.'

Both the Khan and Yesugei turned to look at me.

I swallowed, and felt the dryness at the back of my throat.

'The matter is rather different,' I went on, holding the primarch's gaze with difficulty. 'Senior strategos have found it challenging to retain an adequate picture of your movements. This has consequences. We cannot keep you resupplied as we would like. We cannot arrange coordination with your accompanying Army regiments. You are due to rendezvous with the 915th Expeditionary Fleet, but we still do not have confirmation of your onward destination.'

The Khan's face was like a mask. His expression didn't alter, although I could sense his disappointment.

I felt ludicrous. He was a total warrior, a machine bred by the Emperor to destroy worlds. He didn't want to discuss supply chains.

'Do you think, general,' he asked, 'that you are the first to complain of this to me?'

His tone - casual, courteous, disinterested - was crushing. I doubt he meant it to be, but it was all the same.

They can kill with a word.

'No, lord,' I said, trying to hold my nerve, determined to keep to my mission. 'I am aware that seventeen Legion-level communications have been made from Terra to your command staff.'

'Seventeen, is it?' he said, his lids heavy. 'I lose count. And what do you hope to add to them?'

'Those delegations did not have the honour of speaking to you in person, lord,' I said. 'I had hoped that, if I could explain the situation clearly, then we might be able to determine a revised framework for logistics liaison. It is something the Departmento would dearly like to negotiate.'

As soon as I used the words 'revised framework for logistics liaison', I knew I'd lost him. He looked at me directly, half-bemused, half-irritated. He shifted in his chair, and even in that miniscule movement I sensed something of the futility of what I was trying to do.

He hated being seated. He hated talking. He hated being cooped up inside the walls of his battleship. He wanted to be on campaign, lost in the pursuit, deploying his phenomenal strength in the eternal chase.

He never forgets the shape of the hunt.

'Are you Terran?' he asked.

The question came from nowhere, but I remembered Yesugei's words and

didn't blink.

'I am, lord.'

'I thought so,' said the Khan. You think like a Terran. I have warriors in my Legion who are Terrans, and they think like you too.'

He sat forward a little in his chair, clasping his gloved hands together in front of him.

'This is what you want,' he said. 'You want to see the Legions march out from Terra in ordered lines, plodding like *aduun*, each one leaving a trail behind it leading back to the home world along which you can plot your convoys of arms and rations. You think like this because your world is one of complexity - of cities, of settled nations - and such a world needs tethering.'

He was right. That was what I wanted.

'That is not what we want,' said the Khan. 'On Chogoris we learned to fight without a centre. We took our arms and our mounts with us. We moved as the pattern of war dictated. We did not tie ourselves down. We have never done that.'

His deep-set eyes held me as he spoke. His voice was never raised. He was not angry with me; he spoke calmly, like an austere parent patiently explaining a simple matter to a child.

'The armies we fought were bigger than ours,' he said. 'Our movement was our advantage. They could not strike at our centre, because we had no centre. We have never forgotten that lesson.'

I understood then why all our delegations had failed to make an impression on him. The White Scars were not hard to organise because of carelessness - it was a point of principle for them, a doctrine of war.

Perhaps I should have said nothing then and accepted the failure of my mission, but I was unwilling to let the matter lie. Fighting on Chogoris on horseback was one thing; a Crusade of trillions across the galaxy was another.

'But lord,' I said, 'after Ullanor, there *are* no bigger armies. We are advancing, not defending, and such work requires coordination. And, forgive me, but surely you agree that there are no threats to Terra. Nothing remains that could harm us.'

The Khan looked at me in his frosty, jaded way. My words had not impressed him. I felt the full weight of his disappointment, and that alone was hard to bear.

'*Nothing remains that could harm us,*' he repeated softly. 'I wonder, Yesugei, how many times, and in how many forgotten empires, those words have been spoken.'

He was no longer addressing me. He had moved on, discussing the paths of history with his own kind. I had been cast aside, just like all the others who had

attempted to drag him back into the rigid structures of the Imperium. I was nothing to him; the work of the Departamento was nothing. The months of travel, of research, of preparation, they had all been for nothing.

I was furious with myself, and burned with frustration. At that point I assumed that I sat face-to-face with the greatest and most powerful warrior I would ever meet, and that I had squandered the opportunity to influence him.

I was wrong about that, as it turned out, on both counts.

HE BURST IN with no warning, no prior announcement. The doors thudded back on their hinges, startling me.

He swept into the room, clad in a thick wolf-pelt mantle that swayed with his resounding strides. His armour was white gold, swirled and rich like mother-of-pearl, rimmed with hammered bronze and with a lustrous, garnet-red eye emblazoned across the breastplate. He radiated enormity - of body, of mind, of spirit. He moved with a generous vigour, with confidence, with a soldier's swagger.

I had seen pict's of him, of course. We all had. I had never expected to witness him up close, to be in the presence of such a figure of legend and whispered rumour.

I shrank back in my chair, clutching the arms of it tight, fearful that I would pass out or do something stupid.

The Khan leapt to his feet, hurrying to greet him with a smile breaking out across his face. I was instantly forgotten; a mundane smudge against the splendour of reunited gods.

'My brother,' said the Khan, embracing him.

'Jaghatai,' said Horus Lupercal.

My heart was thudding in my chest. I became terrified that one of them would turn on me and ask me what I was still doing there. I wanted to leave, but I wouldn't have dared to move, not without being given permission, so I stayed where I was, wishing the chair would fold up over me.

I should have been filled with awe and joy at the sight of the Warmaster. I should have felt my heart bloom with pride and gratitude that I, one mortal among trillions, had been placed in the presence of the Emperor's chosen. For whatever reason, the only thing I felt was fear. I saw my knuckles turn white. I said nothing. It felt as if a cold wind had raced through the chamber, chilling it and making my soul shiver.

Yesugei was introduced to him, and the Stormseer took it in his stride, as calm and phlegmatic as ever. Then Horus's gaze - his terrible, searching gaze - moved beyond his brother and settled on me.

My heart seemed to stop. I was powerless to react, or even to look away. It was a pure, primal terror; that of prey that knows it cannot escape.

'And who is she?' Horus asked.

The Khan placed his hand on his brother's arm.

'One of the Sigillite's bureaucrats.' He glanced briefly in my direction. 'She has my countenance.'

When they turned away, falling into conversation with one another once more, I felt as if an iron vice had been loosed from around my heart.

Where the Khan had been hard to deal with, Horus was overwhelming. The two primarchs were of similar build - the Khan might even have been slightly taller - but it was obvious to me why Horus had been chosen to be the Emperor's instrument; the dynamism of his gestures, the openness in his face, the sense of effortless power that cascaded from his ornate armour and spilled out across the room. Even amidst the inexplicable dread that reached up to choke me, I understood why men worshipped him.

I struggled to reconcile what I saw with what I felt. The Khan and Horus were obviously brothers. They talked and goaded one another like brothers, speaking of galaxy-spanning matters that I could not understand as if they were pieces of trivia to toy with and argue over. For all that, they were not equals. The Khan was dominating, brooding, austere, magnificent.

Horus was... *something else*.

The encounter between them was a brief one. By the time I dared to listen, it was almost over.

'For all that, believe me, I am shamed by this, brother,' said Horus, looking apologetic.

'You should not be,' said the Khan.

'If there had been any other choice...'

'You do not have to explain. In any case, I have already given you my word.'

Horus looked at the Khan gratefully.

'I know,' said the Warmaster. 'Your word means a great deal. To our Father, too, I am sure.'

The Khan raised an eyebrow, and Horus laughed. Laughing freed up his features. The Warmaster's habitual demeanour was one of raw, passionate exuberance, as if some reflected glory or perfection of the Emperor's will

lingered in the cut of his martial features.

'It isn't all bad,' Horus said. 'Chondax is barren, suited to your Legion's strengths. You'll enjoy the hunting.'

The Khan nodded readily enough, though, to me, it looked like the gesture of one who knows that the best is being made of a poor situation. 'We are not hungry for glory,' he said. 'Running down Urrlak's dregs needs to be done, and we are equipped to do it. But what then? That is what concerns me.'

Horus clapped his gauntlet on to the Khan's shoulder. Even that simple movement - the faint shift of posture, the upward sweep of his arm - gave away the primarch's warrior-balance. Every gesture was so painfully elegant, so beautifully efficient, so tightly packed with self-assured, superabundant power. They were both creatures of a more exalted plane, shackled only loosely to the stuff of mortal existence.

'Then we should fight together again, you and I,' Horus said. 'It has been too long, and I miss your presence. Things are uncomplicated with you. I wish you would not hide yourself away.'

'I can usually be found, in the end.'

Horus shot him a wry look.

'In the end,' he said. Then his expression became serious. 'The galaxy is changing. There is much I do not understand about it, and much I do not like. Warriors should remain close. I hope that I can call upon you, if the time comes.'

The two primarchs looked one another in the eye. I could imagine them fighting together, and I shuddered a little at the prospect. Such an alliance would make the foundations of the galaxy tremble.

'You know you can, brother,' said the Khan. 'That is always how it has been between us. You call, I answer.'

I could hear the sincerity in his voice; he meant it. I could hear the admiration, too, and the warmth. They were hewn from the same stone.

I held my breath. For whatever reason, I felt that something significant, something irrevocable, had taken place.

You call, I answer.

After that they left the room together, marching in step, locked in conversation. Yesugei went with them.

The chamber fell still. I could hear the ticks of the clock, as loud in my ears as my own heartbeat. For a long time, I couldn't move. My cloying sense of dread faded slowly. When I finally unclenched my fingers from the arm of the chair, I was still trembling. Thoughts and images raced through my mind, jostling in a

mad rush of dazzling impressions.

Only slowly did it dawn on me that I had been abandoned in the heart of a Legion battleship with no obvious means of finding my way out. I guessed that my rank would count for little in such a place.

That wasn't the worst of it. I had seen - just briefly - the way in which the Great Crusade was really ordered, and it made my tiny role seem even more insignificant than I had thought. We were nothing to them, those armour-bound gods.

As I reflected on that, the idea of trying to debate war policy with a primarch felt less like vainglory and more like insanity.

Still, I had seen them. I had witnessed what countless career soldiers would have happily died to witness. Despite my failure, that was worth something.

I got up from the chair shakily, steeling myself to go back into the corridor outside. I didn't relish the prospect of meeting those guards again.

As it turned out, I didn't have to. Yesugei returned, slipping silently back through the doors and giving me a conspiratorial smile.

'Well,' he said. 'That was unexpected.'

'It was,' I replied. My voice was still weak.

'Primarch and Warmaster,' said Yesugei. 'You did well.'

I laughed, more for the release of tension than anything else.

'I did?' I said. 'I almost lost consciousness.'

'It happens,' he said. 'How you feel?'

I rolled my eyes.

'I made a fool of myself,' I said. 'This was a waste of time - of your time. I'm sorry.'

Yesugei shrugged. 'Do not apologise,' he said. 'The Khan does nothing wastefully.'

He looked at me carefully.

'We leave for Chondax soon,' he said. 'We have orks to hunt. The Khan knows the task ahead. He listened to you. He asked me to tell you, if you wish, you may join us. Our *kurultai* needs counsellor, one with experience, one not afraid to speak truths we do not wish to hear.'

Yesugei smiled again.

'We know our weakness,' he said. 'All things change. We must change. What do you think?'

For a moment, I could hardly believe it. I thought he might be joking, but I guessed that he didn't joke much.

'Are *you* going to Chondax?' I asked.

'I do not know,' he said. 'Maybe not yet. Joining us - it will not be easy. We have ways strange to outsiders. Perhaps you would be happier in your Departmento. If so, we understand.'

As Yesugei spoke, I made up my mind.

It was a thrilling feeling, a leap into the unknown, something that was as out of character as my temporary forgetfulness had been earlier. Given the events of the past few hours, it was not hard for me to believe that fate had offered me a chance to make something of myself, to become more than an unnamed cog in an infinite machine. I was near the end of my active service; such a chance would never come again.

'You are right that I do not understand you,' I said. 'I barely know anything about you.'

I tried to keep my voice steady, to sound more certain than I really was. I felt like laughing, half from excitement, half from fear.

'But I can learn,' I added.

VII. SHIBAN

IT TOOK TWO more days before we reached the centre. Torghun and I fought together in that time, blending our different skills. We made an effort not to countermand one another. On occasion, I would be hungry to push on, and he would not protest; on others, I would accede to his desire to secure an area before we left it.

It was not always easy. My warriors did not operate readily with his. We did not mingle much; I met only one of his lieutenants, a dour warrior named Hakeem, and even then barely exchanged two words. For all that, we learned from one another. I came to see that Torghun's way of war had things to recommend it. I hoped that he felt the same way about ours.

By the time we broke into the core of the Grinder we had taken more casualties than we had during years of prior campaigning. My own brotherhood was ravaged, down to barely two-thirds of its original strength. I did not regret that. None of us did. We had always known that the greenskins would fight hard for their final foothold, and those who had died had died like warriors.

If there had been more time, though, I would have mourned Batu, who had always been close to me. I would also have mourned Hasi, who had been a cheerful soul and who would have achieved great things had he survived.

Sangjai retrieved their immortal elements, and so a portion of them was destined to live on in the actions of others. As ever, we preserved their armour and their weapons, and left their mortal bodies to return to the earth and sky of Chondax. Even in the ravines, sheltered from the worst of the wind, we could see them begin to wear away to nothing. I knew that the plateau, the place we had fought so hard for and with so much bloodshed, would now be blasted clean again - bone-white, empty, echoing.

I had seen the monuments raised to the Imperium on Ullanor, and had marvelled at them. They would last for millennia. Nothing like that would remain to mark our presence on Chondax. We were like ghosts there, flitting across the wastes, killing briefly before our presence was scrubbed from existence.

But the combat was real enough. The ruthless, ceaseless, brutal combat - that was real. By the time we reached the core we were weary, driven into fatigue by

the unflagging resistance of the orks. My armour was dirty-brown from bloodstains. My breastplate was chipped and dented, my helm scored by blade marks. My muscles, hardened to a life of constant warfare by habit and genetic proving, never lost their dull ache. I had not slept for days.

But when we crested the last rise, coming to a halt along the lip of a long cliff-edge and gazing out into the object of our exertions, our spirits lifted.

We saw the final mountain, the rusting fortress of the enemy, and we smiled.

* * *

IT WAS A broad, circular bowl, carved out of the broken landscape like the gigantic scoop of a spoon. We stood on the southern edge of it, looking north into its centre. We could just make out cliffs on the far side, half-lost in dust and distance. The floor of the depression was smooth and empty, a barren expanse of naked rock that gleamed in the light of the suns. The land ran away from us in a shallow curve, sweeping down nearly two hundred metres before levelling out.

In the centre of the bowl stood the citadel - a spike of rock, jagged and cracked by time, hurled upward from the bare stone like a hunting lance piercing a carcass. It rose up over two hundred metres, breaking into a series of slender pinnacles that glistened like splintered bone in the sunlight.

The orks had had a long time to work on it. They had looped walls around it, and towers across it, and twisting stairways slung between the slender rock turrets. The flanks of the citadel bristled with guns, and columns of soot-black smoke belched from its base. Enormous machines growled away within - engines, generators, forges. I guessed that those things had been taken from one of their cavernous space-going hulks, perhaps one that had crashed into the world a long time ago and had been slowly turned into the heart of their last redoubt.

The citadel had many gates, each with heavy lintels of rust-crusted iron. Thousands of greenskins milled about on the ramparts above, bellowing their challenges into the clear air. Many thousands more, I guessed, sheltered further within, waiting for the attack they knew was coming.

Near the top of the haphazard pile of interlocking structures, lodged among a cluster of lopsided walls and precarious weapons platforms, was a mass of bolted metal sheets in the rough image of a giant greenskin head. I saw ten-metre long tusks and flaming eye sockets, each the size of a man. Slaps of red and yellow paint had been thrown across its angular skull. Slivers of lime-green light

danced across the surface, indicating the presence of rudimentary shielding.

The structure might have been some quasi-religious artefact, or perhaps a den for the shaman-caste, or an elaborate garrison for their elite warriors. Perhaps their leader resided in there, squatting like a bloated insect in the dark while its minions died around it.

That level of artifice surprised me. We had never seen orks build such structures, even during the slaughter of Ullanor.

As I gazed at it, I guessed the truth. The greenskins learned fast. We had always known that about them. If they were not utterly exterminated by the forces ranged against them, they would eventually turn any weapon back against its bearer. Even here, hammered into submission and bereft of hope, they were still working on new tools of destruction.

They had seen what weapons we had used to lay them low, and the inspiration had lodged deep in their brutish minds. Somehow, driven by some astonishing capacity for replication, they were still labouring.

They were building a Titan.

I noted the routes up to that grotesque head - the tottering gantries, the rough-cut stairs, the clattering elevator-shafts. I memorised them quickly, knowing that once we were inside the citadel I would have no time to orientate myself.

By then I could hear distance-echoed reports of gunfire from the far side of the wide depression. My helm-display showed the signals of other brotherhoods closing from the north, east and west. Already some squads had broken out of cover and were streaking down the long slopes of the bowl toward the citadel. The guns on the walls opened up, hurling their shells in long arcs at the incoming jetbike squadrons.

I turned to Torghun, who, as ever, stood at my side.

'Ready, brother?' I asked.

'Ready, brother,' he said.

I held my gauntlet up, open-handed, in the Chogorian way. He clasped it. If we had been warriors of the Altak, we would have cut our palms, allowing the blood to mingle.

'The Emperor be with you, Shiban Khan,' he said.

'And with you, Torghun Khan,' I replied.

Then we activated our blades, gunned our engines, and broke into the charge.

AS KHAN, I could have taken one of my brotherhood's remaining bikes from its

owner, but chose not to. I saw no reason to deprive any of my warriors of their mount just because I had lost mine.

So I ran, just like the others around me whose jetbikes had been downed. We surged down the slope, crying out and letting our blade-edges hiss with energy. Over a hundred of us sprinted alongside one another, whooping and roaring, swinging our glaives and tulwars around our heads. The remaining jetbikes thundered overhead, laying down a crashing layer of heavy bolter fire and screaming ahead to the walls.

I watched them soar with envy and with joy. I saw the superb control of their riders, the way they banked and thrust in the sparkling sunlight. They were so natural, so effortlessly deadly. I wished to be among them.

Deprived of that raw power, I ran hard, using my own native speed and my armour's peerless machine-boost. I felt my muscles work, shot-through with hyper-adrenaline and combat-stimms. My brothers charged with me, kicking up dust from their pumping limbs.

At the edge of vision I could see other warriors spill into the depression. Dozens crested the rise, then hundreds. Entire brotherhoods broke from cover, streaking into the open. I did not wait to count, but before I reached the walls there must have been thousands of us in the attack. I had not seen such White Scars numbers since making planetfall. We were together again, reunited in the splendour of our full, dreadful potential. The noise of it - the voxed battle-cries, the massed drum of boot-falls, the percussive clamour of the jetbikes - it thrilled me to my core.

The entire bowl filled with the whoosh and crack of incoming fire. Primitive flak-bursts studded the air, downing several bikes even before they had come within bolter-range of the walls. Artillery crashed out at us, ploughing up the wind-worn rock and scattering whole squads of charging warriors. Massive, snub-barrelled guns opened up, lobbing shells into our path and ripping up the terrain.

I felt my secondary heart kick in, and relished the blood pumping through my veins. My long hair whipped in the racing wind. My *guan dao* trembled from its death-hungry disruptor field, eager to bite into flesh again.

I leapt over smoking craters and swerved round heaps of blazing wreckage, building up speed with every stride. We were like a bursting tide of ivory, spilling into the depression from all directions and racing toward the flaming pinnacle at its centre. Everything moved, everything hurtled, everything streaked and blazed in a smear of white, gold and blood-red. Shadows of jet- bikes raced

across us as they wheeled into their searing attack runs. The walls ahead were already burning, cracked open and leaking acrid columns of smoke.

We gained one of the many gates, freshly devastated by volleys of heavy bolter strikes and missile-fire. Orks rushed out to meet us, slavering with rage. They were bigger than any I had seen on Chondax, almost as big as some of the monsters we'd seen on Ullanor. They lumbered right at us, stumbling over their own clawed feet just to get into blade-range. We crunched back into them, bursting through what remained of the gates, spinning, hacking, blasting, punching, gouging. Two hordes - one blinding white, one sickly green - crashed together in a morass of blades, bullets and flailing limbs.

I surged up a tangled slope of rubble, my glaive flying around me. Orks lurched down, shoving aside debris and kicking up dust. I thundered into them, dragging my *guan dao* in whirling arcs. Its edge sliced clean through iron plate, skin and bone, flinging scraps around it as it flickered back and forth. I cut them down before they knew I was even within range. Every stroke whistled cleanly, delivering crushing levels of force before springing away again and moving on to the next target. Throughout it all, my brothers' gunfire roared away, blasting exposed armour-pieces into shrapnel and shredding flesh into chunks of bloody meat.

In those moments, tearing into battle under the incandescent light of three suns, we had become the storm. We were irresistible: too savage, too skilled, too swift.

I tore on upward, fighting past the ruined gates and into the tottering maze of the ramshackle citadel beyond, flanked by Jochi and others of my *minghan-keshig*. More orks threw themselves at us, swinging down from corrugated roofs and burning webs of scaffolding. I punched one full in the face with my ceramite gauntlet, splintering its skull into bloody shards, before spinning away to crunch my boot into the stomach of another. My glaive threw gore around in swathes, streaking my armour and spraying my helm lenses.

'Onward!' I roared, pumped with aggression and energy. '*Onward!*'

My brothers swept along with me, racing up ladders to reach greenskins on platforms and charging up stairwells to purge them from the ramparts. When one of us was thrown down, another took his place. We gave them no room to breathe, to think, to react. We used our speed and our power in turn, swivelling away from danger only to surge back in with our power-weapons spitting. The citadel became clogged with bodies - thousands of them - all locked in close combat amidst the burning towers, slaying and being slain in great, bloody

droves. The deafening noise of it, amplified and distorted in the claustrophobic narrows, made the towers tremble and shake down sheets of dust.

As I fought my way up, I lost sight of Torghun. Only my own brothers, those whom I had led across the Crusade for a hundred years of warfare, kept up with me. We raced together, blasting aside all who came before us, shouting and laughing for the sheer exuberance of it. My armour clanged from repeated solid-round impacts, but I never slowed. The blades of the enemy came at me in clumsy swipes, but I thrust them aside and slew their owners. I heard the screams and bellows of greenskins ringing in my ears, and it only fuelled my drive to kill. I inhaled the stench of ork bodies and ork filth and ork blood, a hot musk of alien excreta. Everywhere, every stinking corner of that shoddy place, rang with the clash of weaponry; every rusty facet flashed with the reflected burn of gunfire.

That made me feel alive. I felt unstoppable. I felt *immortal*.

'For the Khagan!' I cried, my chest burning and my eyes blazing as I powered upward, ever upward.

I knew he would be there, somewhere. I would kill and kill, slaying with abandon, purging every last one of them, driving my body beyond all limits of endurance, just for the chance to see it.

Whatever Torghun thought, I had faith. I would see him fight again.

And after that, everything that had happened on Chondax, all the long, long years of hunting, it would all be vindicated.

I knew he would be there.

As we sprinted, I caught glimpses of the combat raging down in the lower flanks of the citadel. Pitched battles raged across every surface. Gun platforms and defence towers were snarled up with overflowing scrums of close combat, pitting whole gangs of greenskins against tight knots of embattled White Scars. Raging fires broke out everywhere, fed by burst fuel-dumps in the bowels of the structure. Thousands of warriors were still streaming across the depression to join the fight, tearing across the plains and into combat. Thousands of defenders rose to meet them, staggering out of their smouldering dens and bunkers with fierce, violent desperation lit up in their twisted faces.

As for us, we'd burned faster and higher than any others. We broke out of a shattered and burning elevator-shaft, clinging to the yawing metal struts before flinging ourselves clear. We burst out onto a wide, flat metal platform strung up amid the fingerlike pinnacles of stone. Jochi was with me, as were dozens of my brothers, their armour charred, cracked and glistening with gore.

At the far end of the platform hung the lower jaws of the huge ork-head I had seen from the cliffs. It was even bigger than I had guessed - twenty metres tall and wide, a bulbous mass of riveted scrap and rust-crusting wreckage, suspended amid a sclerotic tangle of walkways and buttresses like some giant iron dirigible.

I started to give the assault order, but the words died on my lips. The structure issued a low, grinding bellow that made the rickety gantries around us shake and tremble. I struggled to keep my feet as the flimsy platform beneath me swayed wildly.

A heavy metal panel detached from the base of the grotesque artificial head, peeling away and clanging against the far end of the platform. Then another fell, revealing a glowing, smoke-filled void on the inside. I heard the sound of pistons withdrawing, and the hiss of heavy lifting gear wheezing into action. Earth-brown smoke belched out of the gap and rolled across the platform toward us.

'Kill it,' I ordered, bracing myself against the juddering metal, taking my *guan dao* one-handed and drawing my bolt pistol.

I fired, joining the torrent of bolter-rounds thundering out from my brothers. The barrage lanced into the ragged opening at the base of the head structure. I heard echoing explosions from within as the rounds went off, and muffled wails of rage. Something had been hit. Something was in pain.

Only then, roaring and slurring, did it emerge.

It burst out of the base of the head, crashing through the remaining walls with a drunken, lurching gait and throwing the remnants aside in a shower of smoking metal. A huge, muscle-bunched arm shot out, then another, hauling a vast and swollen body after it. A grossly distended head emerged, hung with low-slung jaws and drooling lips, clustered with weeping sores and marked with festering scarification.

I saw two yellow, watery eyes sunk deep below a low, knobbly brow. I saw tusks grind against one another as the creature roared again, and gobbets of thick spittle flying from its gaping maw. When it moved, its obese frame shuddered, shaking the bones and armour-fragments that clung to it like barnacles around the yawing hull of a ship.

I had never seen one so big. When it moved onto the platform, the bracings below it twisted under the weight. Its arms were encased in cages of metal, from which tubes ran directly into its flesh and sinew. Iron gauntlets encased its fists, each one of them bigger than my torso. Ripples of green energy sluiced across it, spitting and fizzing where they met the creature's skin.

It *stank* - a pungent mixture of bestial musk, engine oil and the sulphurous

discharge of shield generators.

I had seen chieftains of their kind before of course; giant bulls that had roared their defiance to the heavens and charged into battle with reckless abandon. Those monsters were driven by savage lusts of battle, the burning desire to crush, to slay, to destroy and to feed.

This one was different. It was fused with clanking technology, bolted into its armour like one of our lobotomised weapon servitors. Had they learned that from us too?

And its anger was different. The noises it made, the way it moved, the swimming lack of focus in its animal eyes; all of that was different. I knew then that I was seeing what happened to the greenskin when nothing remained but defeat. They did not keep blindly raging, nor did they plead for mercy, nor did they learn at last how to fear their enemy.

They went mad.

'Bring it down!' I roared, aiming for its head.

We opened up with everything we had left. We fired rounds directly at it and watched them explode across its shielding. I saw Jochi launch himself into a charge, ducking and wheeling under the fire-lines to bring his blade in close. He was swatted clear with a vicious backhand and sent cartwheeling over the edge of the platform, his breastplate crushed. I saw others try the same, all of them moving with their habitual speed and prowess. None of them even got close - they were crunched aside by those iron gauntlets, knocked to the ground as if they were children. The monster waded forward, flailing with cybernetic arms, vast and monstrous and slobbering with febrile madness.

I holstered my pistol and grasped my *guan dao* two-handed, already breaking into the charge that would carry me into range. It saw me coming and lurched to meet me, swinging its huge arms in clumsy, devastating sweeps. I dived under one of the gauntlets and twisted around, aiming my glaive into the creature's wrist.

The biting edges ground up against the shield in a shower of sparks. A sharp bang was followed by a stink of cordite, and the shimmering barrier over the creature's forearms flickered out.

Before I could take advantage, the beast swung back at me, keeping its other fist low. I tried to scabble away, but its gauntlet slammed heavily into my side.

I was hurled clear, clattering across the platform, my blade still clutched in my hand. The world spun around me, and I had a brief glimpse of the fortress's topmost pinnacle above me swinging across the sky.

I skidded to a halt, knowing that the monster would be right behind me. I leapt to my feet and angled my blade back. I connected again, severing one of the cables that looped from its shoulders. Fluid cascaded over me, hot and stinking. As my blade's disruptor slashed through, it ignited, dousing us both in flaring green flames.

I pressed the attack, zigzagging the *guan dao* in a blur of speed, going for the active shielding.

I had no chance. For all its huge bulk, it was fast. An iron-clad fist shot out, catching me below the throat and crashing into me with the force of a skidding Rhino. I was sent sprawling for the second time, nearly blacked-out from the impact and hurled hard over to the far side of the platform. I saw the fire-tattered edge coming and blurrily tried to grab on to something. My gauntlet almost closed on a splintered stump of wreckage, but the corroded metal collapsed under my grasp.

I clattered over the edge, my armour gouging sparking trails in the steel. I looked down and saw the sheer sides of the citadel drop away below me, two hundred metres of empty air before the mass of burning structures near ground level.

In that split second, suspended over collapsing shards of rust and about to plummet, I saw death coming for me.

Then a hand grasped my wrist. I was hauled back, away from the crumbling edge, my armour-clad bulk heaved back onto the platform as if I weighed nothing.

As I was dragged back up, I stared - disorientated and fog-visioned - into a pair of glittering eyes set deep in a scarred, brown face. For a split second I gazed into those eyes, rigid with shock.

Then a huge body swept up and over me, followed by the rush of a fur-lined cloak and the sound of boots striding purposefully into combat.

Even then, my mind did not process what had happened. For a moment I did not know what I was seeing.

Then the fog cleared. My senses returned. I looked up, daring to believe, and saw at last who had saved me.

I do not know how he had made it up to the platform undetected. I do not know how long he had been fighting to get there. Perhaps his approach had been masked by the noise and violence of the melee, or perhaps he had been able to conceal his presence somehow.

Nobody was ever able to tell me where he had been while the assault was

underway, nor how he had managed to enter combat at just that moment, without warning, without announcement.

I do not know whether he did such things deliberately, to add uncertainty to the shape of the battle, or whether it was just how matters were fated.

None of that mattered. The Khagan, the Great Khan, the complete warrior, the primarch of the V Legion, had unveiled himself at last.

He was there, right before my eyes, on Chondax.

He was there.

MY FIRST INSTINCT was to rush into battle at his side, to pick myself up and add my blade to his.

I immediately saw how pointless that would be. He had come with his *keshig*, a whole phalanx of giants in bone-white Terminator plate, and even they did not come between the Khan and his prey. They hung back around the platform edges, silent and massive, ensuring that nothing - greenskin or White Scar - intervened. Below us, the battle continued unabated, but up on the platform, under the shadow of that massive, ruined alien head, only two warriors fought.

He was tall, lean even in his ivory armour. A heavy crimson cloak hung from his shoulders, lined with mottled *irmyet* fur and covering the fine gilt curves of the ceramite plates beneath. He carried a *dao* sabre with a glass-polished blade that flashed in the sun. His shoulder guards were gold, engraved with flowing Khorchin characters and the lightning-strike sigil. Two Chogorian flintlocks nestled at his belt, ancient and opulent, studded with pearls and bearing the guild marks of their long-dead makers.

On Ullanor I had seen him fight from a distance, marvelling at the tremendous destruction he wrought amidst the congested fields of total war. On Chondax I saw him fight at close quarters, and it took my breath away.

I have never, before or since, seen swordsmanship like it. I have never seen such balance, such contained savagery, such unrelenting, remorseless artistry. As he whirled the blade around, sunlight shone from his gilded armour like a halo. There was a cruelty to it, a razor-edged note of aristocratic disdain, but there was also splendour. He handled his blade as though it were a living thing, a spirit he had tamed and now forced to dance.

Yesugei had said that only poets could be true warriors. I understood then what he meant: the Great Khan distilled the sprawling language of combat to its core of dreadful, merciless purity. Nothing was extravagant, nothing was

wasteful - every stroke carried the full measure of murder within it, just enough and nothing more.

He hammered the maddened beast back, step by step, forcing it toward the far end of the platform. It raged at him, bellowing in a burbling frenzy of fury and misery. It swung its gauntlets wildly in massive, bone-breaking arcs, hoping to swipe him from the platform as it had done with us.

The Khan stayed close to it, his cloak swirling as he worked back and forth, sending his blade darting out and cutting back, using the long curved edge to carve through the creature's shambolic armour and bite deep into the addled flesh beneath. Whole sections of shielding were shattered, overloading the generators on the creature's back and making the tangled wiring burst and pop.

It tried to smash him to the floor with a wild haymaker, and he spun out of the challenge, plunging the edge of the sabre down hard as he moved. The ork's severed gauntlet-clad fist clanged to the metal, taken cleanly at the wrist and doused in a spray of steaming blood.

The monster raged on, its eyes wild and froth bubbling from its open maw. Its other fist swung round, as fast as the blow that had felled me. By then the Khan had already moved, pivoting on one foot and angling his blade back to meet the incoming sweep.

The gauntlet crashed against the *dao*, and I felt the platform shudder from the impact. The Khan held his ground, bracing his sabre two-handed, and the creature's iron fist cracked open, exposing a bloody, pulpy claw within, striated with cabling and corroded piston-sleeves.

The greenskin was weaponless then. It reeled away from the onslaught, and its roars became weaker and more desperate.

The Khan went after it, maintaining the icy, austere ferocity of his attack. His blade flashed out, slicing a weeping chunk of blubber from the creature's torso; then it switched back, cutting a long gash across its chest. Armour-pieces shattered and fell like rain from its heaving shoulders, mingling with the slurry of blood that pooled and bubbled at its feet.

When the end came, it was quick. The beast rocked back onto its haunches, its stomach streaming blood and its jaws hanging limp. It stared up at its killer, its tiny eyes swimming with fluid and its chest trembling.

The Khan raised the *dao* high, holding it in both hands, his feet planted firmly.

The greenskin made no move to protect itself. Its damaged face was a piteous, weeping mess, marked by abject wretchedness and bewilderment. It knew what was being destroyed. It knew what had been lost.

I did not like to see that face. It was an ignoble end for something that had fought so hard and for so long.

Then the sword whistled down, trailing lines of gore as it plunged. The beast's head fell to the platform with a dull, booming thud.

The Khan withdrew his blade with a cold flourish. For a moment he stood over the vanquished warlord, gazing imperiously down at it, his long cloak lifting in the smoke-drifted air.

Then he stooped to retrieve the beast's head. He swivelled smoothly, holding the agonised skull high above him in one hand. Blood streamed from the beast's fleshy neck cavity, slapping against the metal floor in thick slops.

'For the Emperor!' roared the Khan, and his voice rang out across the bowl and high into the sky.

From below us, from the levels where the fighting still burned, a massed shout of acclimation rose up, overmastering the animal howls of the surviving orks and the crackle and rush of the flames.

I heard them answer him, hurling the same word up into the air, over and over.

Khagan! Khagan! Khagan!

That was the moment when I knew we had won at last. Years of ceaseless campaigning had finally come to an end.

The war on Chondax had ended in the only way it could have ended: with our primarch holding the head of the defeated enemy in his fist, and with the voices of his Legion, the *ordu* of Chogoris, rising in savage joy toward the vaults of heaven.

I joined them. I cried out his name, my fists clenched with euphoria.

I was glad we had won. I was glad that the white world was cleansed at last, and that the Crusade would grind onward, taking another step on the road toward galactic hegemony.

But that was not the main source of my fervour. I had seen the terrible power of the Great Khan unleashed - the spectacle I had coveted for so long.

It was not a disappointment.

I had seen perfection. I had seen the poetry of destruction. I had seen the paragon of our warrior breed in the full flood of his matchless glory.

My joy was complete.

I MET TORGHUN one more time on Chondax.

It took many hours to subdue the citadel entirely. The green- skins, true to

their nature, never stopped fighting. By the time the last of them was hunted down and killed, the fortress had begun to disintegrate around us, consumed by explosions from below and raging fires from above, and we had to withdraw.

I led what remained of my brotherhood out on to the plain at the base of the depression. Many tasks remained for us: we needed to make a tally of the slain, to direct Sangjai to those wounded who might live, to recover what we could of our fleet of damaged mounts for onward transport.

I remember only fleeting impressions from that time. My head was filled with visions of the Khan, and it made me distracted.

Even as I worked, I could not shake the images of him in action. I rehearsed the blade-manoeuvres he had made, over and again, running through them in my mind and resolving to adopt those that I could once back in the practice cages.

Amidst all the devastation, with the fortress before us blazing and smoking in its ruin, all I saw was his curved *dao* flashing in sunlight, his gilded armour moving smoothly under the cloak, his jewel-like eyes that had looked, briefly, into mine.

I would never forget it. One does not forget the fury of living gods.

Other brotherhoods, nearly a dozen of them, had done the same thing as we had and were reordering themselves in the aftermath of the battle. Once the bulk of my brotherhood had been extracted and had regrouped, I went to find Torghun. I guessed that the *minghan* would disperse quickly, and I did not wish to leave without making the appropriate courtesies.

When I found him, I saw that his brotherhood had fared better than mine. I learned later that they had fought with honour, seizing many of the gun mounts on the walls and destroying them. Their actions had allowed many other squads to break through the perimeter without enduring the losses that we had taken.

He had done well, and had enhanced his reputation for solid, competent command. For all that, though, I could not help but pity him a little. He had not seen the things that I had seen. He would leave Chondax with only a glimpse of glory from afar.

'Did he speak to you?' Torghun asked me, showing more interest than I had expected.

He had taken his helm off - the lenses were cracked and useless - but otherwise he looked almost unscathed.

'He did,' I said.

I was in much worse shape. My battle-plate was riddled with dents, breaks and gouges. My gorget was shattered from where the beast's gauntlet had hit me and

much of my suit's sensory array was inoperative. The fleet's armoury would be busy with us for months before we would be ready to deploy again.

'What did he say?' Torghun asked, pressing me for answers.

I remembered every word.

'He commended us on our speed,' I said. 'He said that he had not expected to be beaten to the summit. He said that we were a credit to the Legion.'

I remembered the way he had walked up to me after the beast was dead, watching tolerantly as I had struggled to bow before him. His armour had been pristine - the creature had not so much as scratched it.

'He told me that speed was not the only thing, though,' I said. 'He said that we were not berserkers like the wolves of Fenris, that we could not forget that we had responsibilities other than breaking things.'

Torghun laughed. The sound was infectious, and I chuckled at the memory.

'So his advice was similar to yours, in the end,' I said.

'I'm glad to hear it,' Torghun said.

I looked out across the wide depression, over to where orbital landers had already come down from the fleet, ready to begin the long process of resupply and refit. Mortal auxiliaries were beginning to make planetfall, shuffling out in their awkward environment suits to liaise with the warriors of the Legion.

I saw a woman walking among them, a grey-haired official wearing a transparent dome-helmet over her suit. It seemed to me that she was in charge of the others, though she didn't look Chogorian - she looked Terran. I wondered what she was doing there.

'So what now for you?' asked Torghun.

I shrugged, turning back to him.

'I do not know,' I said. 'We await orders. And you?'

Torghun looked at me strangely then, as if trying to decide whether to tell me something important. I remembered how he had looked during our first conversation, when he had struggled to explain his brotherhood's name and customs. It was much the same then.

'I can't say,' was all he told me.

It was an unusual reply, but I did not press him. I thought little of it, for mission orders were often restricted and he was entitled to keep his brotherhood's business to himself.

In any case, I had secrets of my own. I did not tell Torghun what else I had seen the Khan do. I did not tell him that he had turned away from me quickly after our brief meeting, distracted by an approach from one of his *keshig*.

I could recall every word of that exchange too, every gesture.

'A message, Khagan,' his Terminator-armoured bodyguard had said.

'From the Warmaster?'

The *keshig* had shaken his head.

'Not from him. About him.'

'What does it say?'

There had been an awkward pause.

'I think, my lord, that you might wish to take this on the flagship.'

After that, I had seen an expression on the Khan's face that I had never expected to see there. Amidst all the pride, all the assurance, all the martial majesty, I had seen a terrible shadow of doubt ripple across those haughty features. For a moment, only a moment, I had seen uncertainty, as if some long-buried nightmare had rushed back, inconceivably, into waking thought.

I will never forget that look, imprinted for the briefest of seconds on his warrior's face. One does not forget the doubts of gods.

Then he had gone, striding away to whatever tidings they were that demanded his attention. I had been left on the platform, surrounded by those of my brotherhood who had survived the final assault, wondering what news could have prompted such a rapid departure.

At the time, the episode had troubled me. Facing Torghun, however, with the fortress of our enemies in ruins and the strength of the Legion gathering around me again, I found it hard to reconstruct that emotion.

We had triumphed, just as we had always triumphed. I had no reason to suppose that it would not always be so.

'You were right,' I said. 'Earlier, you were right.'

Torghun looked amused.

'What do you mean?'

'We should learn from the others,' I said. 'I could learn from you. This war is changing, and we need to respond. I did not defend well, back in the gorges. A day will come when we will need to master these things, not just the hunt.'

I am not sure why I said all that. Perhaps the lingering memory of the Khan's unexpected anxiety had dented my confidence.

Torghun laughed. He was not laughing at me that time; I think we had both come to understand one another too well for that.

'No, I don't think you should change, Shiban Khan,' he said. 'I think you should remain as you are. I think you should stay reckless and disorganised.'

He smiled.

'I think that you should laugh when you are killing.'

I FOLLOWED HIS recommendation: when I killed, I laughed. I let the ice-wind pull my hair free, and I felt hot blood against my skin. I ran far and strongly, daring my brothers to keep pace. I was like the *berkut*, the hunting eagle, free of the jesses, out on the rising air, high up on the horizon.

That was what we were back then; that was what we all were. *Minghan kasurga* - the Brotherhood of the Storm.

That was our ranking name, the one we used to differentiate ourselves.

In private, we were the laughing killers.

To the rest of the galaxy, we were still unknown.

THAT WOULD CHANGE. Soon after Chondax we would be dragged headlong into the affairs of the Imperium, hauled into a war whose origins we had missed and of whose causes we knew nothing. Powers that had barely registered our existence would suddenly remember us, and our allegiance would become a matter of import for both gods and mortals.

The story of that war has yet to be written. As I stand now, gazing at the stars and preparing for the fires we shall unleash upon them, I do not know where the fates will lead us. Perhaps this will be the mightiest of our many endeavours, the final examination of our species before its ascendance into mastery.

If I am truthful to myself, I find it hard to believe that. I find it more tempting to think that something terrible has gone awry, that the policies and strategems of ancient minds have faltered, and that our dreams hang over the abyss by a thread of silk.

If that is so, then we will fight to the last, putting our mettle to the test, doing what we were bred to do. I take no joy in that. I will not laugh as I kill those whom I have always loved as brothers. This war will be different. It will change us, perhaps in ways we do not even begin to guess.

In the face of that, I take some comfort in the past. I remember the way we used to fight: without care, with vigour, with abandon. Of all the worlds where we laboured, I will remember Chondax with the most fondness. I could never

hate that world, no matter the cost in blood to us of its taking. It was the last time that I hunted in the way I was born to - untrammelled, as free as a falcon on the steep dive.

Above all, nothing will rival the memory of that final duel. If I live to see the ruin of everything, if I live to see the walls of the Imperial Palace broken and the plains of Chogoris consumed by flame, I will still remember the way he fought then. That perfection is fixed in time, and no force of malignity can ever extinguish what was done, there, before my eyes, atop the last spire of the white world.

If Yesugei were here with me, he would find the right words. I am no longer confident that I have the gift for it. But were I forced, I would say this.

There was a time, a brief time, when men dared to challenge the heavens and take on the mantle of gods. Perhaps we went too far, too fast, and our hubris may yet doom us all. But we dared it. We saw the prize, and we reached out to grasp it. In fleeting moments, just fractures of time amidst the vastness of eternity, we caught glimpses of what we could become. I saw one such moment.

So we were right to try. We were right to attempt it. He showed us that, less by what he said than by what he did, what he *was*.

It is for that reason that I will never regret our choices. When the time comes, I will stand against the darkening heavens, keeping his example fixed before my eyes, drawing strength from it, using it to make me as lethal and imperious as he. And when death finally comes for me, as it will, I will meet it in the proper way: with my blade held loose, my eyes narrow, and warriors' words on my lips.

For the Emperor, I shall say, beckoning fate. *For the Khan*.



Explorator file notes
#456-F (5432.001)

ref.000203030607080(a)



Scarification practices, Mundus Planus

Observations: Facial markings widespread among tribal/plains groups, less so among settled populations (Khitan, Huanjan etc).

Talskar nation given to extensive modifications, reflective of warrior prowess, achievement, ritual events, etc. Talskar pattern now endemic and much emulated by other nations (esp. Haelun, Szechjiak, Uigh-Zar etc) since the conquests of Jaghatai.

Not all glyphs fully categorised (request submitted 134/5 for additional funds and lexicographic field staff; reply pending).

Typical patterns reminiscent of hunting fauna, in particular native apex raptors (berkut). Permanent resin-based dyes added to prominent figures, producing hybrid scar/tattoo forms. Vivid results noted; chemical composition not yet understood.

Note: Distinctive local variation of left cheek zig-zag scar pattern. Made with ritual daggers under supervision of tribal zadyin arga (tr. 'seer' of storms'). Scars run from under left eye socket to chin. Ash used to raise tissue and whiten residual ridge (hence, 'white scar').

Additional: Terran members of V Legion now undergoing similar procedures. Results less pronounced. Supposition: technique most efficacious on the young, prior to Legiones Astartes dermatological resistance/healing.

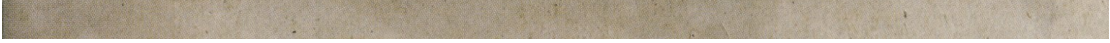
Aside/quotation: 'They are our brothers from the arch of heaven. We love them, and they fight for us, but they will never truly be Talskar. Not like we are Talskar. Observe the scar. It knows which flesh is of Chogoris.' (origin: zadyin arga Kadja Beijin)



Kaneshi, rider of the Talskar and a skilled warrior of Chogoris. Died during the early stages of Legiones Astartes geneseed implantation in 916. M30.



Ilmar Khan, of the Desert Fire Brotherhood. A master of armoured warfare tactics, and commander of the infamous 'Razorbacks' tank hunter squadron.





Janoir. Originally a huntsman of the plains, now serving in one of the Legion's many lightly armed frontline reconnaissance squads.



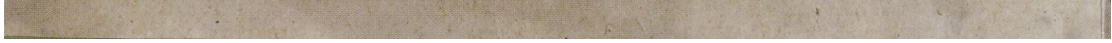
Jochi, decorated Sky Hunter from the Brotherhood of the Storm. His jewellery marks him out as having been the son of a minor tribal chieftain.



Zensu, Terran-born battle-brother of the 64th Company. His appearance typifies the adoption of Chogorian traditions by non-native legionaries.



Jubal Khan. Hastily designated as 'First Captain' of the V Legion by Imperial authorities at the Tannhäuser muster, he has carried the title with some amusement ever since.



Mark XV 'Bullock' - pattern jetbike

Main propulsion exhaust

Armoured Imperial Eagle fairing (removable)



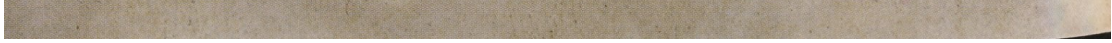
Secondary thruster arrays

Gravitic repulsion plates

Centre-line heavy bolter mounting



Chogorian power glaive



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

With thanks to the Horus Heresy authors, in particular to Dan Ahnett for the invaluable brainstorming on the White Scars, and to Graham McNeill for graciously letting me use one of his characters. Also thanks to Laurie Goulding and the rest of the Black Library team for their sterling editorial and production work.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chris Wraight is the author of the Space Wolves novel *Battle of the Fang*. He has also written *Schwarzhelm & Helborg: Swords of the Emperor* and *Luthor Huss* in the Warhammer Fantasy universe. He doesn't own a cat, dog, or augmented hamster (which technically disqualifies him from writing for Black Library), but would quite like to own a tortoise one day. He's based in a leafy bit of south-west England, and when not struggling to meet deadlines enjoys running through scenic parts of it.