

THE HORUS HERESY®

Nick Kyme

SCORCHED EARTH

From the ashes of Isstvan





A bold, stylized handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several overlapping, sweeping strokes that form the letters 'N.K.' followed by a large, expressive flourish.

Nick Kyme

Limited Edition

of 3537







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BLACK LIBRARY

This one is for the Fire-born, everyone who has followed the Salamanders over the years and kept me going with their kind words, encouragement and the supply of Hobnob biscuits. I salute you.

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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 XVIII Legion 'Salamanders'

RA'STAN Legionary

USABIUS Legionary

The X Legion 'Iron Hands'

ERASMUS RUUMAN Ironwrought

ISHMAL SULNAR Commander

TARKAN Legionary sniper

The XIX Legion 'Raven Guard'

MORVAX HAUKSPEER Apothecary

The III Legion 'Emperor's Children'

LORIMARR Legionary

Despair is the moment when all hope dies and the inevitability of ending crashes in like the sword blow aimed squarely at your neck or the hot muzzle of a gun pressed to your temple. If you are fortunate, if mercy is favouring you, then your despair will be quick. But not all of us are fortunate; for some the realisation of despair is a slow creep, an eroding denial like flesh giving way to age or metal to rust. It hollows you out, cuts away everything that you were and replaces it with blackness. This I had heard.

Never in my life had I given in to despair. Even during the trials on my world of fire and ash, when the heat was scalding my back like a blacksmith's tongs or the sahrk were at my heels, eager to taste my flesh, never did I believe I would not succeed. I always had hope.

Back then I was mere flesh and blood, just a man whose bones would not re-knit in minutes, whose blood would not clot in seconds, whose skin was not hard like onyx and coloured the very same. Now I have eyes of fire to match the red world that gave birth to me, once as a mortal then again during my apotheosis as a legionary. I don't remember my name from before. I am called Ra'stan now by my brothers, or captain by my men. That rank holds almost no meaning now because there are no warriors left to refer to me by that nomenclature, so I am just Ra'stan. Not a human, but a super-man; transhuman in every sense with all the advantages my father gave me.

As a man, I had never given in to despair. As a man, I always believed I would succeed. I had hope.

I am a Space Marine of the XVIII Legion Salamanders, one of the Fire-born and true son of Vulkan, and for the first time in my life I know despair.

AN EXPLOSION LIT up the distant ridge line, illuminating a large dark plain. Stark magnesium-white turned our deep green armour into grey monochrome, though our eyes still blazed like forge fires. Usabius and I ducked instinctively and braced for the seismic tremor that followed, even though the ugly flare from incendiaries had become commonplace in the last few days. Or was it weeks, even months? Time had ceased to be relevant when we realised quickly that our sands in the hourglass were borrowed.

Those with a more twisted outlook might say we had been lucky, fortunate to have any time afforded to us at all, but they would be wrong. We live in hell, a hell of black sand where nothing is as it should be and all has come to madness. A warrior, even one as steeled as a Space Marine, could lose his mind in such turpitude. There are many words in many cultures for such a state of being. I have heard sons of Russ call it *Ragnarok*. Others know it as Armageddon. We Salamanders call it the *Tempus Infernus* or Time of Fire, but I suspect many will later just refer to it as heresy.

As of this moment, we knew it as Isstvan.

We set down our burden as we went to ground, scrambling behind rocks and the burned-out wrecks of drop-ships. These military leviathans could carry entire battle companies and their convoys of support vehicles, serfs, Mechanicum adepts and Dreadnoughts. Now they were downed, their guts ripped open to fester in the smoke-thronged air, festooned with bodies, charnel houses in every aspect. The dirty little patch of earth where we squatted was also a wrecker's yard... Land Raiders, Rhino armoured personnel carriers and the skeletal remains of speeders littered our position along with the massive drop-ships like an iron graveyard.

Even with a drop-ship's coal-black fuselage between us and our hunters, the firefight still far off and explosions distant, I did not feel safe. Nowhere was safe and eventually we too would be swept up in the tide of anger that had descended on the Urgall Depression like a cloud in which fratricide on a grand scale was the only constant.

'Keep him still,' I said to Usabius, knowing my brother would not allow our burden to reveal our position.

Even in the wastes, far from the Urgall Hills, there was still a lot of black sand between us and solace.

I glanced back and saw him muttering something reassuring to the half-dead Raven Guard we were carrying. The drop-ship against which we were hiding had belonged to his Legion. Black on black, the scorch marks from the terrible fires that had eventually destroyed it had obliterated the white corvidae device on both the wing and the torn-up hull.

Edging around the nose of the drop-ship, which was half-buried in dark sand, I tried to gauge the level of threat beyond our fragile sanctuary.

I saw a pack of eight warriors in sea-green armour, black trim around the edges of their battle-plate, carrying a mixture of power mauls, glaives and chainblades. The chain weapons were burring noisily, vying with the dark laughter of these killers and the mechanised barking of their beasts.

‘A death-squad,’ I told Usabius, who did not respond. ‘With mastiffs. No blind-hunters.’

I almost felt my brother relax at the last remark.

I felt far from sanguine, but then I could see what was happening beyond the nose of the drop-ship in a shallow, ellipse-shaped gully.

Three other warriors, two in armour of coal-black, a white hand emblazoned on their left pauldrons, and one in darker armour still with his battle-helm torn off to reveal a chalk-white face beneath, were being encircled by the death-squad.

I saw a second group of hunters, six this time. Same damn Legion, bolters loose. One carried a missile tube, the cause of the earlier explosion that had frozen us in place.

After a few seconds of charged silence, Usabius asked, ‘Can we move?’

I shook my head, motioned for him to stay still.

No point in letting Usabius see this. He would want to fight, to try and save the warriors in the hunters’ deadly trap. It was a death sentence and I had not rescued him from mortal peril once only for him to cast away his life meaninglessly. I wanted to save them too, but nailed my resolve through my feet so I would not move.

So, as the jaws of the trap closed and the hunters advanced, I waited and watched. And hated myself for that.

They were badly injured, the three in black. But two attacked anyway, thunder hammers swinging. I flinched involuntarily as the trio of bolt rounds sounded like a parade drum, a staccato one-two one and the Iron Hands jerking to their deadly tattoo.

One fell, chest ruptured, arm severed at the shoulder. I saw sparks, thrashing serpentine wires severed from their connections in a bionic arm. The hand came away at the wrist, sawn off in the kinetic impact of bolter shells.

My muscles felt tight and heavy like slabs of lead. I realised I was tensing them. Blood pounded hard against the inside of my skull, my enhanced metabolism recognising the electrical signals my brain was sending it and preparing for combat. I calmed down, reasserted my order to Usabius to hold after having heard the shots and moving up a fraction.

Be still, I willed him as I saw the second Iron Hand die. He was impaled by a chainblade, then bludgeoned to death. His scream was a mechanised blurt of pseudo-static that chilled my lava-hot blood.

‘Brother...’ Usabius urged from behind me. He spoke the word through clenched teeth and made it sound like an imprecation.

The last slipped the net, afforded an escape route by the sacrifice of the others. I saw him barrel two of his would-be torturers out of the way, spearing the guts from one and slashing off half the face from another with his claws.

Sons of Horns, mewling and cursing as they choked on their own blood... It gave me more satisfaction than it should have, and for a moment I balked at my own transformation.

As the Raven Guard took flight, I dared to hope and wanted to clench my fist in triumph and defiance.

I waited and watched as muzzle flares lit up the darkness, the scurrying and shouting that followed as the hunters tried to reset their trap.

Then came the chill in my blood, renewed by an avian cry of anguish. Someone was dying somewhere ahead of us. A few minutes later, I saw the Raven Guard raised up on an eight-pointed cross, snatches of his crucifixion revealed to me through flashes of incendiary and the dull lambent glow of funerary pyres. On the horizon line, I saw a long chain of those burning hillocks, bodies for fuel; the bodies of my brothers. They were large, some even dwarfed the Urgall Hills. One, I think, was comprised entirely of skulls but I looked away as a strange sense of wrath and sickness came upon me. Somewhere up there was his fortress, where the Emperor’s fallen son had plotted his deception and seen it enacted in full.

I averted my gaze, tried to shut out the sound of the Raven Guard’s torment and saw something crawling towards me. Arachnid, spastic motions made it hard to identify immediately.

I recoiled when I realised it was a hand, the same bionic ripped from one of the dead warriors during his execution. Without thinking I crushed it beneath my boot, horrified at the very sight, and looked up.

The death-squad lingered, their silhouettes bulky and spiked against the roaring pyres behind them, their hounds snarling at the leash. They were torturing, and relishing the act. I knew pain, I had inflicted it upon my enemies,

received it back in turn. I had even visited it upon captured foes in order to learn of their battle plans or ascertain mission objectives when none were obvious. It left a taste like the dust of the Scorian Plain in my mouth, but this was something else. My deeds, however repugnant to me, had purpose. The cruelty the death-squad were subjecting the crucified legionary to was animalistic, debased. I had to fight not to reach for my bolter and put the poor bastard out of his misery. But to do so would reveal our position, then we would be the ones upon the eight-pointed cross.

We would have to stay and listen to them have their sport. I could feel Usabius's anger like an electric tang in the air behind me. I held out my hand in warning. 'Wait.'

'This one might not last,' he snarled, anger bubbling over, referring to our own wounded Raven Guard.

We were hunting too, for survivors, for survival, anything that would fill the glass with more grains and allow us that time to hit back, for revenge, because we would never understand why. For Usabius and me, there was also something else, someone else we were looking for. We had been close when we heard the moaning from inside the drop-ship and found the son of Corax bathed in his own blood. He did not moan any more, but was largely still and quiet. This bothered me more than I let on to Usabius, because to admit that our efforts had been futile in rescuing him would also force us to admit other truths which we were not yet ready to face.

I had not seen Ferrus Manus die.

I think I felt his death through the rage and anguish of his sons. The Iron Hands were normally so stoic, as mechanised with their emotions as they were with the slow metal colonisation of their bodies.

The flesh is weak, so went their Legion mantra.

All of us were weak. Weak when faced with treachery beyond countenance when the guns at our backs that were meant to protect us turned...

I was there on the left flank. An entire Legion arrayed for battle, led ingloriously by our father into a fight we did not want but could not avoid. Death came first, for them and us. Horus had leashed three primarchs to his cause, as well as his own devoted Legion. Perhaps we should have known when his cult of personality overtook him, when the title of Warmaster changed to warmonger and became the right of a disaffected son, not an honour bestowed by a grateful father. He changed their name, no longer content to share the lupine aspect with a more obviously feral and deserving brother Legion, and made them all his sons in identity as well as blood.

Perhaps then we should have known, but even if those signs were there, we

could not have divined what happened next.

We had lost a lot, killed our brothers in what felt like senseless slaughter. It paled to what followed as we were retreating back towards the dropsite, licking our wounds and consolidating our forces so that others could resume the fight in our stead. Banners of the Hydra and the Iron were behind us, ready reinforcements and the very real evidence that Horus had erred. But the unthinkable became reality; seven Legions had defied the Emperor and joined Horus. Our numerical advantage, our tactical superiority, disintegrated like flesh before a nuclear sunrise. Our reinforcements became the hammer against Horus's anvil. And so the guns turned.

Night had fallen upon Isstvan, though that could be the floating ash and vast palls of smoke that had blotted out the sun. It mattered not. Black on top of black again, that was the only time when we could move with any hope of secrecy. There was a distant glow to the north, where our treacherous enemies had cast off their cloaks and revealed themselves. I revised my estimate - night was falling. Warriors, or the semblance of warriors in some instances, were stirring from debauched torpor, roused to ritual and supplication in the name of dark gods.

This was supposed to be an age of enlightenment, where superstition had been banished by the light of empirical truth. Where was that light now, I wondered as I stared into the darkness, recognising the echo of it that had taken root in my soul.

Finished with their sport the death-squad moved on, hooting and grunting in voices barely describable as human any more.

'We go,' I said to Usabius and reached down to hook my arm beneath the Raven Guard.

'Should we mark it?'

As I turned to look at my brother I saw the short metal rod he clutched in his off-hand. It had a small barrel at the end with a number of lightless diodes awaiting activation. Ruuman had given us the seismic mapping staves, said it would help with triangulation. I actually think he was just humouring us with his aid, but Usabius and I were grateful anyway.

'Do it,' I said and watched my brother plant the stave deep, twisting the barrel to begin signal transmission.

They were ostensibly designed for siege warfare, but we had an entirely different purpose in mind for them.

'Secure?' I asked, eager to move.

With the night came relative obscurity, but it also brought horrors that were not present in the sun.

Usabius paused. 'I don't think he's breathing,' he replied. I did not see my brother's face, it was hidden behind the scarred battle-helm he wore, but knew it would be grim.

'Keep moving,' I said, as we emerged from behind the drop-ship, trying to block out the noise of murder while still listening for signs of danger.

We got another eighty metres before Usabius hissed, 'Armour!'

Inwardly, I cursed. We had stayed too long and now our journey back would be long and perilous, if we made it back at all.

A crater, strewn with power armoured corpses, most of their iconography burned away, was our only hope of anonymity.

We plunged down into it, amongst the charred skeletons of warriors we might have known and fought beside. Limbs, torn and limp, slapped against my greaves. A skeletal hand touched its fingers to my face. Another scraped against my shoulder guard and my mind was suddenly filled with images of the dead: putrefied and rotting inside their armour, risen up in damnation and silent accusation at our survival. I banished the thought - it would not serve me here - blaming fatigue and trauma. Cogency was often the first aspect of a warrior's efficacy to be tested during periods of prolonged and extreme mental stress. I cannot think of any ordeal greater than Isstvan in my experience.

Scrambling over the bodies, I slipped and went vambrace-deep into the ragged cavity of an ex-legionary's chest. Unflinching, I yanked my hand out, breaking off a piece of already shattered rib, and tried not to linger on the gore coating my gauntleted fist. No honour, no glory in this pit of the dead. Here was a place that heroes went to die, unremembered and unmourned. We were barrow-worms, crawling amongst them. Dragging the lifeless body of the Raven Guard with us, we kissed the earth and tried to burrow down into it.

Hearts hammering in my chest, I felt the low rumble of the tank company rolling towards us through the trembling earth. Before I shut my eyes, concealing the fire burning vitally within them, I noticed vibrating grains of black sand cascading over the edge of the crater and was put in mind again of the hourglass. Then I surrendered to the dark and hoped it would not be my last sight.

Usabius's prediction about the armoured company's arrival saved us both. Death on Isstvan was swift, usually instantaneous. Whatever order had once held sway in this force was gone as Legion commanders left only their worst, their dogs, behind to hunt and scrape our feeble resistance from this world. Soon the legionary-hounds would retreat too and anything that had escaped their teeth and claws would be atomised from orbit.

I tried to focus, concentrate on the act of subterfuge that was necessary for

my survival, however much it galled me not to take bolter and blade to these traitors. Some had tried. They slept in craters like the one in which we were hiding. Dwelling on the myriad ways I might meet my own demise would only bring it about quicker. So I let my senses bring me back to the present.

It was an unpleasant reunion.

Blood scent, old but still wet, crept into my nostrils. The taste of metal tanged my palate. Decaying flesh was redolent on the hot air coming off the tanks. Visions of the unquiet dead, mouths agape with tongues lolling through nubs of broken, black teeth, returned. I could crush the nightmare in my head, but the stench would not abate so easily. Without the air filters in my battle-helm, I almost gagged.

The hard *chank* of brake blocks, the heady pall of heat from still-cooking engines, announced the tank company's abrupt halt.

'Thought I saw movement this way,' a grating, iron voice said like two rusted girders scraping against one another.

One of Perturabo's sons.

Hate practically emanated off the legionary in waves. I expected to hear the *clank* of booted feet against a tank's hull, the dull resonance as they stomped down the rungs of a ladder attached to its turret and finally the crunch of earth beneath a heavy tread.

Close inspection at the end of a bayonet would undo our efforts. My gladius was within reach and short enough to draw without needing to rise. I resolved not to go down without a fight...

Instead, I heard a metal creak and the low fizz of a lamp burning into life.

Seconds later a cold, harsh light oozed into the crater and I resisted the urge to crawl deeper into the morass of bodies. Even with my eyes closed, I could detect the change in light and hoped the infinitesimal reaction of my eyelids would not give us away. It moved slowly, like a slick, painting my armour with greasy, oleaginous fingers. I remained still, pretending to be dead, unsure for a moment if I was not dead already, and let the searchlight strafe.

I heard the tanks growling nearby, guttural, bestial. The stench of promethium was noxious. Their crews were talking to one another, though I could not discern what was being said over the comm static. It sounded like a question to whoever was on the searchlight in the turret.

The legionary's answer was all too audible.

'Fire's killed most of them. A few are still fresh, though. We could burn it out again.'

I am a Salamander, born from fire, but even my endurance would not allow me to survive a promethium bath.

There was a pause as whoever was inside the tank replied.

‘At your command, sergeant,’ answered the turret-man, and relief washed over me like a balm.

The heat of the searchlight passed, evaporating like a very real weight lifting from my back. I allowed my heart rate to go back to normal just as the Raven Guard began to stir.

Half-delirious with pain, our brother could not have known our predicament, nor the fact that he imperilled us all with his untimely return to consciousness.

Daring to open my eyes a fraction, I saw the Raven Guard trying to move but was too far away to do anything about it. The tanks that had just begun to roll out again seemed to pause. I heard the legionary in the turret, the crackle of his vox as he told the driver to halt.

Usabius was glaring at me through the cracked left lens of his helmet. It was badly split and I could clearly see the fiery glow of his true eye beneath it. In our frantic flight, our wounded companion had ended up right next to him.

Tracks were grinding against earth, against sand, against bone...

The Iron Warriors were turning back!

Usabius did not stop glaring. As first I thought he was trying to prevent our discovery through sheer determination, as if by willing it we would become invisible. It was only as I reached, millimetre by agonising millimetre, for my bolter that I realised he wanted my permission.

If he did this, it would be on us both. He could not carry the burden of it alone.

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, I nodded.

From above, the sound of shifting armour was different - the lead tank was moving alone, returning for a last look with the baleful eye of its searchlight. In the few seconds remaining to us before it reached the edge of the crater and picked out the wounded warrior stirring in its bowels, Usabius reached over with the power fist he wore over his right hand, slowly formed a vice around the Raven Guard’s neck and squeezed.

The struggle was momentary. Usabius had to leave his hand there as the heat of the lamp returned.

No more moaning, no more stirring. Our deception was airtight, our hiding place in plain sight secure...

...our consciences indelibly tainted.

We waited in the dark for several minutes until the light had gone and the sound of grinding tank tracks faded, as the Iron Warriors went to look for more survivors to kill. Yesterday we could have roamed this region of Istvan and

been unlucky to encounter a single living soul, but the status quo was changing. Search cordons were widening and with that our chances of discovery increased. The desire of the death-squads to linger over their prey was the sole reason for our stay of execution, the only thing keeping us from the notice of our enemies.

It would not last, and I felt that a few more days, maybe less, remained to us.

Horus was coming, or at least his mad dogs.

More and more, we were being forced to head deeper, farther from the ship and closer to the Urgall Depression where so much blood had already been shed. Time was the only thing we had left, and a slim hope that we would find what we so desperately sought. What then if we did? Nocturnean pragmatism told me we would determine that when it was prudent to do so.

Only once I was certain the Iron Warriors had gone, I rolled onto my back and had to grind my teeth to stop from shouting out.

I met Usabius's gaze, still staring at me across the pile of corpses, and recognised his anguish as the mirror of my own. We had just added another to its grim tally.

'I want to kill...' he murmured, '...all of them.'

'Let's just get back to the *Purgatory*'. Feeling the weight anew, I struggled to my feet and went to help Usabius, who refused.

'Come on,' I said, hooking my arm underneath the Raven Guard's instead.

'He's dead.' Never had a more obvious fact been pointed out to me.

'Haukspeer can remove his gene-seed,' I replied.

If Usabius thought anything about that, he kept it to himself and grabbed the dead warrior's other arm.

As we hauled him from the pit, our armour smeared with the blood and ash that had once been our brothers, I grimaced.

'Your leg?' asked Usabius.

My hand went down almost involuntarily to the crude armature encasing my left leg.

'Ruuman does exceptional work but even his skills are being tested in this hellhole,' I said.

My leg was broken in three places. Haukspeer's diagnosis was four radial fractures of the femur with the fibula and tibia badly splintered. I often pictured the bone jutting from my skin under my armour. Pain suppressors in my system, augmented by what our Apothecary had scavenged, kept me conscious; Ruuman's metal leg brace allowed me to walk, but pain and dysfunction were hampering locomotion.

Billowing smoke clogged the air in the distance, exhaust fumes from the

tank company. Other shadows were moving in the gloom too, some in our direction. More death-squads, I reasoned. Something larger too, shambling awkwardly on long, stalk-like legs. I caught the red flash of its receptor-pits before my brother's voice recalled me.

'It would be easier without the body.' Usabius's implication was almost telegraphed, but echoed what I had been thinking.

My response was unintentionally glib. 'It would be easier if none of this insanity had ever happened.'

Self-indulgent fatalism was pointless. I had already seen several Iron Hands succumb to it, only to die in needless acts of suicidal heroism. Sulnar would have come close were it not for Haukspeer dragging him aboard our drop-ship. I do not think the Medusan really forgave him for that. He had wanted to die with honour, but now he could not even do that. I supposed the death of a parent would do that to a son, drive him to insane acts, then tried not to wonder at the fate of my own father.

'I can make it,' I said, climbing fully from the crater and knowing we needed to bring something back with us.

'Even if we have to avoid them?' Usabius replied, jabbing a finger in the direction of two walkers that slewed around towards us without warning.

We sank down as one, only crouching this time as the misshapen walkers quickly turned their crimson attentions elsewhere. We heard them 'speak' to one another in half machine-code, half animalistic bark, and I struggled again to reconcile these abominations with the other creations of the Mechanicum. Even the death-squads and the butchering cyber-mastiffs were cowed by the blind-hunters. The other shadows scurried away from them or simply stepped out of the walkers' path if they were bold enough, allowing them to do their grisly work unimpeded. I had not seen the blind-hunters during the initial assault and suspected they had been brought in later to cleanse and burn.

Scorch the earth, then salt it.

I gestured east. It would take us longer that way, which was fraught with its own dangers, but at least we would be getting farther and not closer to the blind-hunters. There were no crashed drop-ships this way, either, save for our own. Most of the vessels and what was left of their defenders were west.

Usabius agreed, so we took my heading and trudged off wearily across the black sand.

It would be quieter along these trackless plains, where the death-squads had yet to venture. After fifteen minutes, although I had not trusted my internal chrono for a while now, the flat desert gave way to rocky crags, then cliffs. Mountains we had dubbed the Blackfangs shouldered into view.

Almost an hour later, creeping through the narrow passes, gorges and defiles, we reached the *Purgatory*.

Shawled in drifting grey and white, it was just another lumpen rock amongst many others, the Salamanders green well obscured. Its wings were long broken, having cascaded into the deep ravines below. Once it was a Stormbird, designation Warhawk VI, but its days of soaring the skies and bearing angels of death were over. Even if they were still intact, the drop-ship's engines were fully burned out, black beyond redemption. Across its crumpled nose cone and prow, the glaciis had completely blown out. Only a few jags of armourglass remained, like fangs in the mouth of a beaten beast. I caught the glimpse of a lone warrior standing in a cockpit denuded of anything of use. Tarkan raised an iron hand in greeting to us, a long-barrelled sniper rifle resting peacefully across his lap. Then he was gone again, blending into the shadows, ever vigilant. Our patient watchman had taken this eyrie as his post ever since some semblance of order had been established after the crash.

It was he, in a moment of sardonic humour, who had named our ship and sanctuary *Purgatory*.

No one gainsaid him. Haukspeer had even given an ironic thump of applause.

Our dead passenger growing colder by the moment, Usabius and I passed under an arch of rock that joined the two peaks between which our ship was firmly wedged. From here, the tail end and cargo bay door abutted a broad causeway of rock that wended through the mountain. Like a fortress from ancient, simpler times our metal fastness looked down onto the earth below and our distant enemies gathering slowly, unwittingly to besiege it.

Usabius lifted his hand to the sky.

'Snow?' he said, regarding the white flakes dappling his armour. 'Perhaps the season is changing.'

'No, brother,' I corrected him. 'It's just ash. They are burning again, more pyres in the hills.'

Usabius did not reply.

A cold wind was rising and it blew the ash high into the peaks.

Our heads were bowed as we walked the last few metres to *Purgatory's* gate. Even in the relative solitude of the mountains, far from the Urgall Depression, the screams of the dead and dying still followed us.

THE CARGO DOOR of the drop-ship squealed open on neglected gears,

admitting the two of us into a broad bay thronged with warriors.

I nodded to Vogarr and E'nesh, both Iron Hand and Salamander returning my greeting even as they aimed bolters at the void beyond the lowered ramp. Once the entrance to the drop-ship was sealed, announced by the pressure-hiss exhalation of pneumatics, they relaxed.

Both legionary watchmen were battered, their armour held together by rapid re-soldering and hope. Each carried a bandolier of grenades too, a single pin pull required to ignite the entire cache and bring the cargo door, as well as much of the ceiling, down on top of anyone attempting ingress that should not be.

Flickering lumen-strips overhead were hardly inviting but, as Vogarr waved us through, Usabius and I stomped noisily into the light, our heavy footfalls ringing against the metal deck underfoot.

We were greeted by Haukspeer, who approached us down an avenue of gurneys and thrown-together bunks and looked down coldly at the corpse we had brought with us.

'You do realise he is dead?' the Apothecary asked, wiping the beaded sweat from his alabaster brow. In the grim lighting of the cargo hold, his chalk-white complexion took on a visceral cast. His eyes, like chips of jet, revealed nothing.

Carefully, we set the wounded warrior down, allowing the other son of Corax to examine him. There were flecks of crimson on the Apothecary's face; behind him, a blood trail left from where a terminal patient had been dragged away was being mopped up.

With a flick of his wrist, Haukspeer engaged the spear-like syringe of his reductor. As he went down onto his haunches, he asked, 'Could you unclasp the breastplate, please?'

Haukspeer had lost an arm. It ended in a cauterised stump just above where his elbow used to be. It did not seem to inhibit his proficiency as an Apothecary. No less than seventeen battle-brothers had been brought back from the brink by his skills. Many more continued to live because of his continued ministrations, the sixty or so that surrounded us now on the makeshift beds. This was Haukspeer's infirmary, and it was full to capacity. Several of the wounded had lost limbs or suffered from grievous bums. Others were blind or paralysed. Haukspeer kept them alive, though most were beyond the ability to fight. It was no army; it was a morgue in waiting. And Haukspeer knew it. I could see it in his eyes, the weary resignation growing with each hollow day that passed. This was not resistance, it was existence. The few Imperial Army troopers we had rescued died quickly and those that lived did so in a catatonic state of fear and denial. Some were used as orderlies, fetching and carrying, wiping up the blood, but that was where their usefulness ended.

The Raven Guard Usabius and I had brought back was beyond even the Apothecary's ability to heal.

I removed the breastplate, and Haukspeer retrieved the gene-seed. Once it was safely secured in one of the tubes attached to his gauntlet, he lingered over his battle-brother's grievous neck injury. Glancing at Usabius's power fist, reading the rigidity in my brother's body language, I knew he had made the connection, and thought Haukspeer was going to say something.

He did, but not what I was expecting.

'Ruuman is waiting for you in the armoury,' he said, turning his back on us, reabsorbed into his work.

We walked away from Haukspeer, through the ranks of bunks, towards the back of the cargo hold and the armoury beyond.

'He knows,' hissed Usabius when we had parted the Apothecary's company.

I nodded. Through my complicity and sanction, I felt as bad as Usabius looked but spoke no further on it. None of that really mattered now. I was not even sure why we had bothered to drag the poor dead Raven Guard across the sands of Isstvan, our insult only adding to his injury.

I was startled as a legionary thrust out his hand to me, seizing my wrist.

I did not recognise him but knew he was of my Legion. One eye was missing, crudely gouged out, and his right leg was severed near to the abdomen. A regimen of drugs hard-lined into his arm kept him conscious but barely lucid. It was much the same story throughout the cargo bay that now served as an infirmary.

'You are Lord Ra'stan,' he said in a cracked whisper.

'I am no lord,' I told him. 'Just Ra'stan now.' I put my hand on his chest to calm him. 'Rest easy, brother.'

'I served in your company,' he wheezed, and tried to slam his fist against his broken plastron until I stopped him.

My eyes narrowed as I sought the name. 'Ik'rad,' I said. He nodded. Smiled. Such a small thing that meant so much.

'Did you find...' he asked, 'did you find *him*?'

Something cold reached up from my gut and squeezed my heart. I was surprised how choked my voice was when it finally came out.

'No.' Then foolishly I added, 'Not yet.'

I had just made a false promise to a dying man.

'Find him,' the wounded legionary breathed, strength fading as he released me and sank back onto his gurney.

'I will try.'

The Salamander had let me go, but my hand was still firmly wrapped

around his forearm when I felt Usabius's grip upon my shoulder.

'Ruuman awaits,' he uttered softly.

Letting my dying brother go, I nodded slowly and together we walked on without incident. I kept my eyes in front of me all the way to the back of the cargo bay, not wanting another encounter like the one with Brother Ik'rad.

Arriving at the rear of the hold, where the ranks of bunks and slumped warriors finally ended, we were confronted by a pressure panel set into the wall. It was a simple enough metal plate next to another, smaller, door.

I punched it.

Grinding metal assaulted our ears as the armoury opened up to us, but only partially. The door halted halfway, shrieking on protesting servos that were long past misuse. Through the gap I could see a deeper shadow, illuminated even more poorly than the infirmary, and a lone figure toiling within his workshop.

'Enter,' said the figure in a hollow, resonating voice that had more in common with steel and gears than flesh and blood. But then Erasmus Ruuman was more machine than man.

I smacked the pressure panel again, this time with greater force. A low, mechanical churning followed but the door opened.

We went inside.

'It's seizing again.'

'It is, Ironwrought,' I answered.

'You mistake a statement for a question, Brother Ra'stan.' Ruuman paused in his labours. He was stripping and fixing a cache of weapons. I saw six bolters and the partially dismantled remains of a Rapier mount, but it was a broken conversion beamer that had the Ironwrought's attention. 'A patrol found it,' he explained, 'I am confident it can be repaired to sixty-three per cent effectiveness. You are having trouble with the brace,' he added, leaving the beamer and facing us.

The entire lower half of Ruuman's face was bionic, so too much of his torso. It was blended expertly with his armour and gave the Ironwrought a formidable, unbreakable appearance.

I nodded. 'Another statement, Ironwrought?'

'Yes.' He knelt down to inspect my leg brace. Ruuman delved into a tool kit mag-locked to his belt and went to work, selecting the instruments he needed by touch and memory, not looking once. There was a brief but manageable flare of pain as he tweaked the armature he had fashioned.

After a few minutes he asked, 'Does that improve its efficiency?'

I tested it. Smiled.

'Much better.'

‘I gauge an eighteen per cent improvement, but its maximum efficacy as a substitute limb will cap at sixty-seven per cent. Miracles, unfortunately,’ he added, ‘are beyond me.’

I put my hand on his shoulder. ‘At any rate, thank you, brother.’

He rose without acknowledging my gratitude.

Erasmus Ruuman was not an Iron Father and he did not possess the technical ability of that august council, but he knew weapons and had applied that knowledge to the other machines in need of repair. As well as my leg, he had kept the drop-ship going and maintained the majority of its damaged systems, including light, heat and oxygen-scrubbing, despite the catastrophic damage it had suffered when we crashed in the mountains. The only thing he could not do was make it fly again.

THE DEATHBLOW HAD been delivered by one of our own. When the attack at the dropsite came, we had been brutally unprepared. In what felt like seconds, Ferrus Manus was slain, his vaunted Avernii clan all but wiped out and the Raven Guard and Salamanders crippled without knowledge of whether their liege lords were alive or dead.

We still did not know.

I remember the explosion of noise across the vox when it happened. At first I had thought it was static, caused by some kind of electromagnetism, but now I know it was screaming. A thousand different orders broke all at once. The result was utter chaos. Consolidation and retaliation was our first response. The earth became muddy with our spilled blood soon after, so retreat was the only viable contingency left to us when that happened. I remember falling back to the drop-site, streamers of missiles and bursts of tracer fire spitting overhead, but have no memory of getting into a ship. Yet somehow we all did; a few survivors who made it through the gauntlet and escaped the first wave of culling. Thrown together by chaos, Salamander, Iron Hand and Raven Guard scrambled for life. Order was abandoned. No fighting retreat, but a rout, a massacre.

We got into the air, thrusters boosting, flames washing our hull and wings, prow nosing through banks of smoke. A few seconds later and something hit us. I felt it through the cargo bay where I hunkered down with forty-three of my brothers and several more who were not of my Legion. A couple of Rhinos we had in reserve slid from their moorings and across the deck. Two legionaries were crushed as the vehicles scraped the cargo bay wall. Gravity dragged them out through the gaping ramp, sweeping another half-dozen warriors with them

into the hell outside. Some scrambled but we did not have time to reach the ventral corridor and our cages in the troop hold, so I just held on.

The deck... rippled - I can still see the mark where Ruuman stitched it back together with solder and industrial staples - and began to come apart. Through a ragged gash in our fuselage, through the sparking wires and venting pipes built into the drop-ship's armour, I saw Isstvan.

It was like a dark ocean, studded with islands of fire and undulating with thousands of warriors trying to kill one another. Entire armoured companies went up in chained explosions as the weapons of Titans were unleashed, phalanxes of legionaries were wiped out, heavy incendiaries tore wounds in the very earth itself. My mind could scarcely comprehend the horror I was bearing witness to.

My gaze went skywards as the shadow of another drop-ship crept across my flame-seared face. Looming over me it was massive, blotting out the sun we had striven so hard to reach above the belt of cloud. We sustained a glancing hit, I think - its prow raked our flank, but it was enough to put us down. The other drop-ship was a ball of fire. I saw bodies wreathed in flame, hazed by the heat, trapped in its confines. Some jumped, even though the drop was fatal. A few legionaries had jump packs. Most went up in secondary explosions as their overheated turbines cooked off. Ravens went down, feathers aflame. Iron plummeted from the sky. Drakes burned. The rest were cut apart by streamers of flak from the entrenched cannons below, sawn in half before they had even gotten clear of the destruction.

I saw a group, a mix of Salamanders and Raven Guard, setting up line launchers as they readied to evacuate across to our ship. I could not hear them through the roar of bloody salvos and the detonation of explosions, but their urgency was clear enough, as were their gestures to us.

The plan was stillborn, however. A fusillade of missiles from some unseen battery below tore up their lander amidships, pushing a firestorm through its belly that blew the would-be commandos from the hold and into oblivion.

I turned, tried to drag one of my brothers with me, but the conflagration gushed out of the dying ship faster than I realised, burning me in my armour and incinerating my slower brother. He was gone when I looked back, the claw marks of his fingertips etched into steel the only evidence of his fate.

We lurched. The hull groaned and split again, micro-fractures webbing the metal.

I grabbed a bulkhead and held on, feeling gravity leave me for a moment as a perverted sense of tranquillity took over.

Like a comet, our Stormbird fell from the sky but dropped well wide of the

Urgall Depression. Gravity violently reasserted itself, slamming my body hard into the deck and shattering my leg. We struck the mountain, rupturing entire cliffs and sending them into the abyssal chasm below us. Our structural integrity held and we lay there, a wounded predator ready to be put out of its misery.

Almost ready, but not quite.

‘HOW MANY STAVES did you plant this time?’ Ruuman asked, bringing my mind back to the present.

‘Six,’ Usabius replied.

The Ironwrought nodded, and almost looked impressed.

‘That was a great risk to do that.’

‘Let us hope a fruitful one then,’ I interjected. ‘For we would risk everything for this.’

‘We?’ asked the Ironwrought. ‘Your Legion?’

Although I knew I was vehement, I’m not sure I conveyed the ardency of my belief to Ruuman, but the Ironwrought was largely divorced from emotion.

‘Yes,’ I answered, ‘all of us who are still alive.’

Ruuman held my gaze for a moment, then, showing us his back, he switched on a small scanner sitting on a bench behind him and squared away from the weapons. It was a cluttered space with room enough for three, but only three. As the pict screen came to life in an ugly flare of green neon, a voice from behind us said, ‘You’re late.’

Ishmal Sulnar waited in the doorway to the armoury, arms folded. The Iron Hand was a brute and filled the width of the space easily with his imposing silhouette, but not its height. Sulnar’s head barely came two-thirds up the door frame. For the proud Iron Hand was enthroned in a makeshift wheelchair, part gun carriage, part gurney, with wheels stripped from the broken chassis of an ammo hopper.

Pieces of his armour had been destroyed during the fighting and the crash. He only wore a single pauldron, his left, and both his arms were bare of vambrace or gauntlet. The right arm was entirely bionic, as were his left hand and his right eye. The red retina flickered, on account of its damaged focusing rings. It made Sulnar squint and sometimes pulled up one side of his mouth in a disapproving scowl.

Much of his armoured greaves were missing from just above the knee, so too were his legs.

‘What happened out there?’ he asked.

Usabius failed to rein in his anger.

‘Carnage happened, Sulnar!’

‘Brother turned on brother and thousands died. We lived through that, if you remember it.’

Perhaps it was guilt talking. We never got a chance to discuss it later.

Sulnar unfolded his arms and I tensed for a fraction of a second as I thought he might strike my brother, though he kept his eyes on me. Perhaps he could not meet Usabius’s gaze for fear of what he might do if he did. The Iron Hand might no longer walk but his fists had lost none of their potency.

Sulnar kept his composure, and held up a placating hand.

‘I remember it,’ he answered quietly. ‘We have all lost, brother. Our fathers are missing and we are besieged by enemies we once called allies... even friends.’

‘Your father is-’

I warned Usabius off with a look. Sulnar had deluded himself into believing that Ferrus Manus was not dead. None of us had seen the Gorgon fall, but the reports we had heard left little doubt. Even still, there was nothing to gain in arguing about it.

‘Nothing,’ Usabius relented. ‘I am sorry, brother. My temperance is being sorely tested this night.’

‘You take on too much,’ said Sulnar. He bowed his head fractionally, but I detected the tremor of involuntary motion in his bionic eye and realised he was hanging by a tender thread. He bore the chair stoically, but it was demeaning. Any contribution he could make now would be minimal and not in the front line of a last stand, as I suspect he would have preferred. We were, all of us, warriors. And as such we would not get to choose the manner in which we died. Cut apart by a dozen blades, beheaded by a sworn friend turned enemy, crushed beneath the treads of a heavy battle engine - during the drop-site massacre I had witnessed all of these deaths and many others. I believe, deep down, that Sulnar would have accepted any of them above the fate that awaited him. He waved my brothers contrition away.

‘And no apology is needed,’ he added. ‘These are trying times for all of us. Impossible, even. I ask again then, what happened?’

I told him, leaving out the part where Usabius crushed the Raven Guard’s neck to maintain our concealment. Sulnar seemed particularly interested in the enemy patrols and their dispositions.

‘Did you encounter any other resistance groups? Any other ships, either grounded or lying in low anchor that we can join up with?’

‘There are none, brother,’ I answered.

Sulnar looked down, thinking. 'We will try again tomorrow. Only by forging some kind of battle order can we hope to strike back at the traitors. If we could make contact with one of the primarchs...'

Usabius lost his temper again, the objects on Ruuman's workbench trembling with psycho-kinetic anger. 'Are you blind in both eyes, Sulnar? There is no resistance. We are not fighting a guerrilla war. This is survival for as long as we can hold out, no more than that.'

Except, he and I knew that was not entirely true. We had not been running the gauntlet with Ruuman's staves these last days for something to occupy our minds. Our purpose was much greater than that.

Usabius stalked out of the armoury, moving past Sulnar who seemed not to notice or care, and carried on as if nothing had happened.

'Were you followed?' he asked.

I shook my head. 'Though their patrols are widening by the hour. It won't be long before they decide to venture into the mountains and after that... Well, we all know what happens after that. There is a bottom line to all of this,' I added.

Sulnar's studied silence bade me continue.

'Our time is almost up. We can't stay here any more. If we do, they will find us and destroy us. We have to move on.'

Sulnar was emphatically blunt. 'We cannot.' He rolled back on his wheels so he could gesture to the infirmary behind him. There is no moving on. Most of these legionaries won't make the journey.' In a quieter voice, he added, 'I won't make the journey. This is it for most of these warriors, Ra'stan. Our crusade ends on the black sands of Isstvan, curtailed by treachery and deceit I do not think it is fitting, but I am pragmatic enough to realise it is irrefutable as our fate.'

'And the fate of Lord Manus? Why do you refute that?'

Sulnar looked down. 'Because I have to believe in something. I am half the legionary I was. I cannot be rebuilt, not in these conditions with these resources, so I must sit when I would rather stand. I must wait when I would rather forge out with you. These things I cannot deny, and their weight upon me is a heavy one. The death of my father? *That* I can deny. Until I see it with my own eyes, until I see his headless corpse and not in my nightmares, I choose hope over despair. You have, why not I?'

It was hard to argue, and I could not bring myself to do so anyway. But it did not change some universal truths.

'They *are* coming,' I reasserted. 'It will be soon. You need to be ready.'

'Make no mistake,' Sulnar declared, leaning forwards in his chair to emphasise his words, 'we will all meet these traitorous bastards on our feet,

Ra'stan, one way or another. We *are* ready because there is nothing left to us but retribution.'

I was about to continue, but realised it was futile to argue further. Sulnar would stay, so would the others, and in so doing meet their deaths as heroes. What right did I have to deny them that? I nodded.

Sulnar reciprocated the gesture and after a few moments went back to his debrief. 'Did you penetrate any farther into enemy-held territory?'

'We made significant inroads towards the Urgall Depression. Most of the enemy's forces are still concentrated there but beginning to branch. There will be gaps in their pickets that a small commando force could exploit.' I licked my lips, mouth suddenly dry. 'I also think we got close to his ship. Another deep infiltration and I believe we will find it.'

Sulnar rolled forwards on his wheels so he could put his hand on my forearm. 'You don't have to do this, Ra'stan.'

But of course I did.

'I would rather die out there, in search of hope, than trapped in here with our despair and fatalism as my companions.'

I looked at Ruuman, who was busily recording the seismic data from our staves and mapping out the region beyond it.

'The sensors have a five-kilometre range in all directions,' he explained to the screen where a rough topography of Istvan was slowly being sketched out. Data was streaming along one side of the image, too rapidly for my eye to follow but not for the Ironwrought.

A second later and the image collapsed, the screen blanking out into a flat field of green neon. 'What happened?' I asked.

'Signal interrupt.'

One or more of the staves had been destroyed.

'Did you get anything?' I sounded more urgent than I intended.

'Yes,' Ruuman replied. He appeared almost reluctant to continue.

My tone was deliberately impatient. 'Well?'

'It is his drop-ship, yes.'

My heart leapt, but I held it fast in a fist of my own pragmatism.

'Intact?'

'It crashed several kilometres from the Urgall Depression, north of your last recorded position, Brother Ra'stan.'

I struggled to maintain my composure, masking my hope with sudden, direct action.

'I must go at once,' I said.

Usabius would want to hear this news.

‘This matter should be discussed first,’ said Sulnar as I pushed past him. ‘Strategy will be needed. Equipment gathered. Even a legionary does not wander into territory overrun by this kind of enemy without first pausing to consider tactics. We must plan our next move.’

I regarded him incredulously. ‘Our next move?’ I said, pausing in front of his hulking plastron but looking down on the crippled warrior. ‘There is but one course. We go and find the primarch. We rescue Vulkan.’

I TRIED HARD not to hope. On Isstvan it was a cruel, capricious thing. It crept into the heart, the soul, expanding silently but filling the body with warmth and vigour. But it was not real. What the hopeful did not realise was that hope was a flame that burned you from within, turning your spirit and your will to ash so that when it inevitably faded there was nothing left behind but a hollow shell.

If Vulkan was dead like Ferrus Manus, I vowed I would not submit to the same denial as Sulnar. I would bear it; do so stoically as every Fire-born son of Nocturne had been taught to shoulder adversity.

If my father was slain, I would mourn, expressing my grief in a final, violent, red act against my enemies.

But if he lived...

Hope was kindled and then I knew I was its willing slave.

I found Usabius up at the prow. He was not difficult to track down. Drop-ships are sizeable craft but most of ours was uninhabitable. Aside from Haukspeer’s infirmary, the armoury and the ‘strategium’, as Sulnar mistakenly referred to it, there was only one place left to go.

It was ripped out and ragged, the roof long gone and now part of the battle debris littering Isstvan. The drop-ship had a long neck to the cockpit and I walked the entire length like it was some bleak processional. Either side were the twin troop holds, their cages wrecked and torn out. When I was about halfway down, I saw the sniper. Armoured in iron-black, the white hand emblazoned proudly, the son of Medusa looked strangely at ease with his posting.

Tarkan bowed his head to me as I walked along the grey-swathed corridor to the cockpit. He was kneeling down, etching something into the metal walls of the ship with his combat knife, and stood up just as I approached. I paused when I remembered something about his eyrie, but Tarkan had already deactivated the proximity mines before I even reached the section of the prow that was rent open to the elements. After that I felt his gunsights on me until I emerged fully into the half-light.

It was not the first time I had come up here. Usually, I came alone and Tarkan seemed content to let me be so with my thoughts and concerns. He had never once asked me why I was here or tried to engage in conversation.

A red moon waxed overhead. It was like an iris of blood, its large black pupil created by palls of drifting smoke. Ash smothered the shattered mechanisms and exposed workings of the drop-ship in grey-white. Pipes choked with it, cogitators and display screens suffocated. It was as if fire had decided to reclaim our ship, drag it back down into a sea of dust where it would be silent forever. Perhaps we were being dragged down with it, only the dust was moving too slowly for us to realise our peril and it would therefore be too late to do anything about it when we did.

As Tarkan left us to return to the shadows, as he often did, I walked up beside Usabius and followed his gaze across the mountains and to Istvan beyond.

Another range of mountains, the mirror to our own Black-fangs, stretched away to the south. Behind it was a vast and empty salt plain, as desolate as my mood. The pyres were still burning, higher and more ferociously than ever. They reminded me of furnaces in some infernal machine, fuelled by treachery and betrayal. It was hard to fight down my anger at the sight of them, so I looked away.

‘One more mission, my friend,’ I said.

Usabius half-turned in profile. ‘Ruuman found something?’

My brother too, then, had been harbouring hope.

‘The primarch’s drop-ship. It is confirmed.’

I was smiling as Usabius faced me. Even through his battle-helm his eyes lit up like beacons.

‘Vulkan lives?’ he said, disbelieving at first but then with greater confidence. ‘Vulkan lives!’

He clapped my shoulders, his voice quailing with emotion.

I counselled caution, even though my own fell hopes were beginning to run away with me.

‘It is just a Stormbird, brother.’

‘How close to the enemy?’

‘Too close, but potentially far enough away that it may have escaped undetected.’

‘This is a sign, brother. I can feel it.’ Usabius clenched a fist and there was a flicker of cerulean blue within the embers of his irises. ‘We must leave immediately.’

I put a hand on his arm. Firmly.

‘No. The Depression will be crawling with traitors by now. Our best chance is to wait until just before nightfall again.’

Usabius was adamant. ‘It might be too late by then!’

I held his arm fast. ‘He has survived this long, brother. If we fail now then we won’t get another chance. If either we or the primarch are discovered through our lack of preparation and caution then we all die.’

Usabius relented, and I let him go.

‘How is it to be done, then?’

‘Sulnar wants to discuss it in the strategium.’

‘The cripple has lost his mind, Ra’stan. He still thinks Ferrus Manus is alive and not slai-’ Usabius stopped, remembering Tarkan. He lowered his voice. ‘He decides this mission?’

‘He is the ranking officer.’

‘And half a lieutenant, does that equal a fully battle-worthy captain?’

‘Calm down. You’re letting your emotions overwhelm you.’

Letting me go, Usabius turned away.

‘I won’t be attending his meeting,’ he said flatly. ‘I’ll wait for you at the cargo ramp, ready to depart.’

I bowed my head. ‘If that is your wish.’

‘It is.’

I allowed a pause between us and let the magnitude of our discovery sink in. The primarch.

Vulkan.

‘I had begun to despair, brother,’ I confessed.

‘As had I,’ Usabius replied, his voice barely louder than a whisper. ‘If only I could use my gifts...’

The Nikaeen Edict had seen Usabius reduced to a trooper of the line, a warrior who became one of my charges when before he had been my equal. He shouldered the burden with good grace and was an exemplary trooper. But it was not adherence to an outmoded oath that held his powers in check - since the betrayal many of the old Librarius had been ready to unleash their abilities again - it was fear.

Not emotional fear, not fear of reprisal or sanction, but rather an unwillingness to open himself to the myriad torment and anguish. All that pain, all that death distilled into a single blow of psychological force. Any attempt to *find* our father that way would likely have killed him and all those nearby to him in a backwash of psychic energy.

At the very least, it would have driven Usabius mad. I was surprised he had not cracked already.

‘We will find him, brother,’ I muttered softly.

‘At the cargo bay ramp,’ he said. ‘I’ll be waiting for you.’

I nodded, leaving Usabius to his thoughts. Tarkan stopped me as I was walking past him back down the ventral corridor. He put his hand against my shoulder, but did not look me in the eye.

‘Did you find what you needed out there?’ he asked, his voice deep and grating. I stared, nonplussed. ‘My brother will join me later,’ I replied. He looked as if he were about to say something else when he simply patted my pauldron and let me go.

I looked down at where he had been scoring the walls of the drop-ship.

‘What is that?’ I asked, seeing letters worked into the metal. I read some of them: *Desaan, Vutlich, Konn’ador, Tarsa, Igararon, Mendenach*. The names were many but not ordered by Legion or company, rather by remembrance. I knew then the answer to my own question. It was a memorial.

‘The wind here is harsh,’ Tarkan explained. ‘It erodes the marks. The ash covers it too. I am ensuring they are not forgotten.’

I knew there was a shrine to the dead on the *Purgatory*,’ I said. But had no idea it was here and you were its curator.’

‘Not all of them are dead,’ Tarkan replied. ‘Some are just missing. He brushed away a swath of ash, revealing two names I was painfully familiar with.

Corax.

Vulkan.

Both missing, presumed alive or dead depending upon whom you talked to.

‘I think we all need closure before we meet our last battle,’ said Tarkan. ‘I hope you get yours. I hope it can heal you, brother.’

Not really knowing what he meant, I thanked him and walked away.

‘Emperor walk with you,’ I heard him call as I was leaving the eyrie.

‘And you, Tarkan.’

USABIUS WAS AS good as his word.

After our discussion in the ship’s prow, I had not seen him for the rest of that night and all of the following day until that moment. He was waiting by the cargo bay ramp, a bolter slung on its strap over one shoulder, power fist encasing his right hand and arm. He had also scavenged some grenades from somewhere and they sat snug in his webbing. A bolt pistol was holstered at his right hip and there were a few extra clips in his weapons belt. The battered helmet with its cracked retinal lens and scorch marks still covered his face.

He nodded as he saw me.

As I returned the gesture, Vogarr and E'nesh nodded to me too.

The watchmen had not left their post. Only death would see it prised from their control. Much like Sulnar, they had accepted their fate and would wait here until the end.

I was about to speak when Usabius inclined his head and I saw a third legionary join our party.

‘What are you doing here, Apothecary?’ I asked.

Haukspeer had emerged out of the shadows, armed and armoured for war. Casting off his reductor, he had replaced it with a lightning claw and the battle-helm he wore was beaked like a bird’s head and black as coal.

‘Isn’t it obvious?’ he said, speaking through the vox-grille of his avian helmet.

‘I see a legionary who has abandoned his oath to heal and adopted the posture of a warrior.’

‘Nothing nearly so poetic, Ra’stan,’ Haukspeer replied, seemingly unfazed by my unintentional barb. ‘I want to die fighting with my wings spread wide and a war shriek on my lips, not caged in here with the injured and the dead.’ He waved his lightning claw, encompassing the entire hold. ‘My usefulness as a healer has ended. If what you say is true about the enemy advancing then I have done everything I can for these legionaries. To preserve them like this, to keep them alive only for them to be slaughtered later, is not why I was called to the Apothecarion. So if I cannot mend, then let me *break*. I would kill the enemies of my Legion and the enemies of the Emperor one last time before I surrender to the long dark and fly no more.’ He clenched his fist and a shock of energy sparked down his claws. Even if those enemies are my erstwhile cousins.’

I looked sidelong at Usabius, who gave the slightest inclination of his head.

I was glad, for I too wanted the Raven Guard as part of our mission.

‘Besides,’ Haukspeer added, ‘alone, you will only get yourself killed:

The sound of Sulnar’s wheelchair approaching us interrupted my reply, and I turned to face our crippled commander.

‘The plan is set,’ he said, ‘I come to wish you good hunting.’

I bowed to the Iron Hand, who gave a mirthless half-smile in response.

‘We will draw and keep them here,’ he went on. ‘But our sacrifice must be worth something.’

‘If Vulkan is alive, we will find him,’ I said. I stared at Sulnar for a moment, at his staunch refusal to give up, his noble bearing despite his injuries, and his misplaced pride. ‘Are you sure you won’t come with us? Leave here and find another sanctuary. Keep moving and live, Sulnar.’

‘Just as you must go, Ra’stan, some of us must stay behind. If the traitors are amassing here then your route will be less perilous because of it. Let me give you that. Let *us* give you that.’

I clasped his forearm in the warrior’s grip. To Ruuman behind him, I nodded.

‘Make the scum beyond these mountains work for every drop of your blood,’ I told him.

‘I swear it on the life of Ferrus Manus.’

Unfortunately, Sulnar’s oath was not a reassuring one.

And then the gate to the *Purgatory* opened, letting us back out into hell.

I RECALLED THE mission briefing. Sulnar had looked long and hard at the hololith projection of the dropsite. Compared to the sheer size of the forces that had landed on it and the range of mountains where we had made our lair, the Urgall Depression was a modest area some twenty kilometres across.

A single beacon, put there by Ruuman, had winked enthusiastically on the intermittent display. This was the crash site of Vulkan’s drop-ship as divined by the seismic mapping staves before they had been destroyed. The distance from the *Purgatory* to the drop-ship was not inconsiderable. Several routes were plotted, flashing up as broken green lines barely visible through machine static. Those that would have brought us too close to the known enemy dispositions and the Urgall Depression itself, where the majority of traitor encampments could be found, were discounted. These lines had winked red, the path too dangerous to cross.

I spoke little during the briefing, my eagerness to move out clouding my thoughts. I felt the eyes of the others upon me throughout, weighing and measuring as if to determine my suitability for the task. As one of the Fire-born, how could I be *more* suitable? Perhaps Usabius had been right to abstain, but then one of us needed to represent the Legion.

Vulkan was *our* primarch. If he lived we would find him, and bring him back.

By the time we concluded, Sulnar had seemed satisfied with that but would commit no additional resources to our cause. Going out in force would only attract unwanted attention to us and jeopardise the mission. Haukspeer’s appearance at the ramp was therefore doubly surprising.

So there we stood, four legionaries around a flickering hololith looking on at a broken green light as if its colour could make it any safer or guarantee

success.

* * *

OUR CHOSEN ROUTE was not without peril. We left the mountains, two warriors cloaked in the shadows, one a part of the darkness, and went south. Our trail took us through the wrecker's yards, the fields of broken and gutted vehicles, crashed ships and the sundered forms of dead battle tanks. The debris was dense here, the cargo holds and crew compartments picked clean of life and therefore sparse when it came to our enemies.

Only a few sporadic packs of hunters slowed us down, World Eaters death-squads that brought out a rush of anger in Haukspeer that he quickly marshalled before exposing our position. They had come to the Isstvan system before, the Raven Guard, touched down on the third planet in the Redarth Valley to rejoice in another world compliant and illuminated by the Imperial Truth. That light had flecks of shadow in it now, tainted like an old lumen-strip, brown at the edges and flickering close to expiration.

World Eaters, no longer the War Hounds, opposed them on their return. I knew because I had been privy to the tactical briefings, looking on in solemn silence like many of my fellow brother-captains, as it was described how we would fight and kill our former brothers. I also knew, because Haukspeer had described the attack to me, the sheer ferocity of Angron's Legion and then the perfidy that followed when the Night Lords revealed their true allegiance.

Where once we had rivalries and allies to measure against, to aspire to and jockey with, now we had nemeses, every bloodied one of us. I thought of Curze's sons as ours in many respects, because of what happened before during the early years of the Crusade. I had heard about it, rather than seen it unfold, but knew it had left an indelible mark upon us and our relationship with the midnight clad VIII Legion.

We left the wrecker's yard with night falling and the howls of the maddened throng chasing us into the darkness. Going west, we skirted the fringe of the Urgall Hills, entering more rugged terrain where the volcanic sand lapped at the edge of a barren steppe like the waves of a black and lonely ocean.

Up another rise, the steppe giving way to much craggier, hilly environs, we crested a long dark ridge and looked down a wide valley of even deeper shadow.

'I remember this place,' said Haukspeer with just enough breath to be heard. The Apothecary had been part of a survey team that had made landfall on Isstvan V, but they had found only ash and nothing of Isstvan III's original bucolic

beauty.

The cliff that dropped away a few metres in front of us was almost sheer but not impossible to traverse. Though he had advanced ahead of Usabius and me for a better look into the valley, I noticed he took great pains not to disturb any scree at the summit of the ridge. Tiny cascading stones might seem innocuous enough but we did not yet know what lurked in the valley darkness, if it slumbered or was waiting for prey.

Though we did our best to grind it down with our arrival, there was life here once,' said the Raven Guard. 'Green and Purple heather, lichen of a deep cobalt blue that clung tenaciously to the pale rock. Dark, loamy soil was ripe for growth. We wounded it, but this... now...'

It was a wasteland that stretched before us: bare rock, hard sand, dead earth. Nothing would live here ever again.

'That was Redarth Valley,' I asserted. 'On Isstvan Three, brother. Not here. Not this world.'

'Of course...' Haukspeer stumbled. The long nights had taken a toll on us all, challenged our sense of reality. 'You're right. This isn't Redarth.'

He nodded solemnly, too moved to speak further at first.

'Wait here while I scout the way ahead,' he said at last. Then he was gone, a wraith blending back into the shadows and becoming a concomitant part of them.

Only when the Raven Guard had been gone for several minutes did Usabius speak up.

'It's a miracle we have reached this far, brother.'

'And yet, here we stand. Sulnar was adamant their sacrifice would open the gate into the traitors' territory to us. It seems he was right.' I looked out to the north behind us and then the west towards the Urgall Depression. The fires were brighter and higher than ever, burning the sky with their hot talons. Death-squads were on the move, I heard their loud, discordant horns blaring into the night. A call to arms, to murder or the simple announcement of survivors found and drawn into the hunt?

Usabius's voice brought me back from my morbidity. 'On the other side of this valley lies our father's ship. Vulkan may be within our grasp.'

'Have you thought what we will do if we find him?' I turned to regard my brother, emphasising the pointedness of my question.

'When we find him, you mean.'

'No, if.'

Usabius muttered something. For a moment I thought his anger and indignation would flare again, just as it had earlier aboard the *Purgatory*, but it

faded.

Capitulating, his shoulders sagged a fraction.

‘I had hoped the primarch would know what to do.’

‘We are, more than ever, in need of his guidance.’ I hesitated to speak aloud what I was thinking next, but avoiding it was not addressing it. ‘And if we find his body, if he *is* dead, what then, Usabius?’

My brother sighed, a long, deep exhalation that carried with it all of his anxiety and uncertainty. ‘Then we will go on for as long as we can, honouring Vulkan’s memory and burning our enemies to ash.’

It was a good answer.

‘Unto the anvil, brother,’ I said, brimming with the fire of affirmation.

‘Unto the anvil,’ echoed Usabius.

A second later, I noticed Haukspeer returning from his reconnoitre. After giving me a curious look, head cocked slightly to one side like a bird, he said, ‘Far as I can tell, the way is clear for the first few kilometres at least. But there is something in the air of this place...’ He paused, and I heard the disquiet he felt in his voice when he continued. ‘Staying overlong in this valley would not be wise, I think. All my instincts are screaming at me to avoid it.’

‘Like an ambush?’ I asked.

Haukspeer said. ‘Something else, something I can’t quite identify.’

‘We could go wide of the valley, risk the fringes of the Urgall Hills?’

Haukspeer shook his head, already turning to make his descent a second time. ‘Too dangerous,’ he said. ‘We head down, eyes and ears open.’ He looked over his shoulder, over the silent power generator that fed his armour. ‘I will lead.’

Usabius shrugged to me, and we followed the Raven Guard into the shadows.

WE LOST SIGHT of Haukspeer almost immediately after we reached the foot of the valley. It was a deep basin, angular and narrow like a jagged blade but more than wide enough to accommodate three legionary warriors.

Within minutes I felt the same intangible sensation that had unsettled Haukspeer. With less than a hundred metres in my wake, a strange harrowing feeling stole over me. Like razors in my mouth, though there was no blood, or grit beneath my fingernails despite the fact that my hands were encased in ceramite. An *itch* was the only way I could think to describe it, like a gunsight at the back of my head or knife a hair’s-breadth from my exposed throat.

‘Do you feel that?’ I asked Usabius in a whisper.

‘Like chewing on rusty nails or walking on glass.’

‘Yes,’ I said, realising that we had stopped. I checked the retinal display in my battle-helm. The distance reading since we had set foot in the valley was eighty-eight point eight eight metres.

Precisely.

‘Strange...’ I muttered.

The vox crackled in my ear.

‘*I’ve found something.*’ Haukspeer’s voice sounded strained.

‘Are you all right, brother? You don’t sound your-’

‘*Come quickly, and quietly. Follow the route to my ident-icon exactly, no deviations,*’ he said, adding, ‘*I can’t believe I didn’t see this before,*’ then cut the link.

Haukspeer was not far. He crouched down by a mound of stones, examining each one with the tips of his lightning claw.

As soon as we reached his position I checked my retinal display: five hundred and twelve metres. Again, it was an exact reading, the dial ending on zero the moment I had stopped moving.

‘Eight times eight times eight...’ I breathed.

Haukspeer turned sharply. ‘What did you say?’

‘I don’t know why I said that.’ I gestured to the mound. ‘What are you looking at?’

It was twice the height of a legionary, with a wide base that tapered up to a point. Veiled in the black volcanic dust and ash of Isstvan, it was hard to make out what it was.

Tentatively, Haukspeer brushed away the worst of the dust and I saw a skull underneath.

My heart lurched as I fought down the bile rising in my stomach, doused the hot rage warming my face and body.

‘Are they who I think they are?’

Haukspeer could only nod. He clenched his fist, releasing an energy flurry across his talons.

Usabius was similarly dumbstruck at first.

It was a mound of skulls, the heads of our Legion brothers. I balked at just how many.

‘There will be vengeance for this,’ Usabius hissed.

‘Look around us,’ said Haukspeer, lost in a pit of his own private despair.

I did.

Unnoticed until that moment, we were surrounded by pillars of skulls like

the skeletal remains of some vast and ancient ruin. Cloaked in volcanic black, they varied in size and form. Some were columnar, others were flat plains of bone or winding ossuary roads fashioned from the deaths of our brothers.

Underfoot, the ground crunched like shale or the shelled bank of some beachhead. It was neither; we walked upon the skeletons of our slain kin, grinding them down to dust with every booted step.

Wrath, inchoate but rising, filled me. Like someone had turned a switch in my mind, I was suddenly possessed of the urge to kill the ones responsible for this. Hateful red hazed my vision, and I welcomed it. I heard the beat of my own angry hearts in my head - after a while it sounded like a chant.

No, wait... It *was* a chant.

'Do you hear that too?' I asked, speaking through clenched teeth. My jaw was wired so tight, I thought it would snap. Usabius nodded.

'I hear it,' Haukspeer gurgled through saliva foaming at the corners of his mouth.

It foamed at mine too, and tasted like blood.

'That way,' said Usabius, and I followed his outstretched, trembling finger.

'It's coming from this direction,' said Haukspeer. Through the drumming of the blood in his head, I wondered if he had heard my brother.

We would never find out. When he set off after the chanting sound, we followed.

BLADE WOUNDS, BOTH old and raw, crosshatched the stooping warrior's skin, which was also pockmarked with scabbed-over bullet holes. Patches of what looked like entire continents of bruising fashioned a map of scarification that stretches across his broad back. He was over-muscled, even for a legionary, bulked obscenely, sunk to his haunches and scratching incessantly at the cloven skull gripped by his meaty fingers. A great mane of black, wiry hair crawled from beneath his battle-helm and ran down his spine to the top of his greaves. Chains wrapped his wrists in place of vambraces and though he worked at the skull with a slaughterman's fervour, he also possessed a butcher's skill.

We had descended into the dark valley where once Haukspeer had set foot during better times. How they had changes that this brute overseer was now the valley's only occupant. And he *was* a brute. I knew the World Eaters were rabid dogs, but Angron's Legion had fallen far indeed if they were flensing the flesh of their brothers and displaying their efforts as macabre trophies.

An axe was planted in the earth nearby, its blade stained rust-red. Next to it

was a pile of bodies, stripped clean of armour and trappings, naked for the butcher's block. On the World Eater's opposite side was his incarnadine harvest, bones ready for the fresh mound he was building.

It was ritual, any casual observer could see that, and it turned my very stomach to witness it. Revulsion quickly gave way to wrath, as I felt my blood stir in bizarre empathy with the red deeds before me.

Haukspeer was already up from where we had hidden, igniting his lightning claw in a burst of azure energy.

Sniffing, seemingly scenting the sudden wash of ozone, the World Eater arose. He was a head taller than me, which put him head and shoulders above Haukspeer and just above Usabius. The skull he had been working was discarded, clattering to the ground like forgotten offal, and the World Eater seized his ruddy axe instead. In the other hand, he still clutched his fat-bladed flensing knife.

So fevered had the butcher been in his labours that his naked torso was painted red, so too his horned war-helm, the familiar white and blue legionary colours almost obliterated by blood. I saw marks etched on it, an eightfold tally on either temple and a strange device emblazoned upon the forehead. It was tribal, old beyond reckoning - a snarling, angular face.

The bestial World Eater echoed the mark in his expression. He had ripped off the mouthpiece of his helm and I could see his sharpened teeth as they spread in a feral smile.

It was uncharacteristic of Haukspeer to attack so brazenly, it went against the tactics of his Legion, but then nothing about this encounter was typical. Even as I embraced my own anger, I could not shake the sensation that we were being manipulated by something in this valley, something that had been bubbling beneath the surface and that was now awakened thanks to our presence. I did not know how I was aware of this, nor why my companions seemed ignorant of the fact, but I could not deny the nagging feeling.

It did not matter. I just wanted to kill.

Haukspeer attacked like a madman, springing at the World Eater with an avian curse screeching from his lips.

The World Eater parried the lightning claw, an all-or-nothing strike that sheared the warrior's axe in two but left him unscathed. He replied with a heavy punch to Haukspeer's gut that doubled the Raven Guard over as it cracked his plastron, lifting him a few centimetres off the ground. He staggered back, gasping noisily through his beak-like mouth-grille.

Stunned and winded, Haukspeer grunted and flew at the World Eater again but the heavy warrior moved with surprising speed, ducking the hasty blow and

smashing his thick forearm across the Raven Guard's throat, flattening him.

Before the World Eater could claim his kill, I leapt to aid Haukspeer, who had stayed prone and was fighting for breath.

Close up, the World Eater stank. Blood, sweat, metal - it was a heady odour that sent black sparks spitting through my brain. Heat haze shimmered at the edge of my sight, red-hued and angry. I swung, making contact with the warrior's shoulder even as I felt the bite of his flensing knife under my ribs. He grunted as his clavicle collapsed beneath my attack, and I felt his left arm go limp. The right, in which he held the knife, sawed. The knife chewed through battle-plate, the burring teeth of the savage blade as hungry as the warrior wielding it.

I struck again, hammering the World Eater with my fist, the blow hard enough to crush bone and split several fused ribs.

Still the World Eater sawed and I could smell my meat cooking with the frenzied action of his knife.

'Usabius!' I cried out, not knowing what had happened to my brother but catching a glimpse in my peripheral vision of the Salamander on his knees, holding on to his head and screaming.

That confirmed it - something dark had a hold of us here in this valley and we needed to get away from it as soon as possible.

I rained blow after blow against the World Eater, pummelling his body, mashing his torso to paste. At last the pressure eased, the knife stopped churning and I was able to sag down to my knees, my enemy lying dead before me.

No, not just dead... *Destroyed*.

So much blood, the World Eater was barely humanoid any more. His face and upper body were gone, reduced to fragments of gore-spattered bone. I had killed many times, sometimes brutally, but never like this. I scarcely recognised the damage inflicted as caused by my own hand and looked down at my bloodied fingers in sheer disbelief.

'He's de-' I began to say when Haukspeer smashed me off my feet.

Snarling incoherently, the Raven Guard bore me down. Even one-handed, he was ferocious and I felt the sting of his lightning claw as it caressed my right flank. I twisted as we fell, using my superior weight to turn us and throw Haukspeer clear as we landed.

He scrambled to his feet first. I had barely got to one knee, his claw casting lightning arcs as it flailed.

'Desist!' I shouted at him, barely dodging a thrust and only able to because the Raven Guard's usual finesse had been usurped by frenzy. That, and he was also still dazed from the World Eaters savage assault. He seemed to want to

continue the brawl but with me as his opponent.

And for a few seconds, I wanted that too. I wanted to gut the Raven Guard, to snap his fragile wings and feed them to him, to crush his bird-like skull in my fist, to pulp his limbs, to-

I shook it off. Literally, *shook* it off. The angry haze did not dissipate, but it lessened so I could see without looking through a red-rimmed lens.

‘You are not yourself!’ I cried, adopting a defensive stance and trying to find Usabius.

Haukspeer screamed, crafting a wild swing with the intention of removing my head.

I countered, pushed into the blow and used my arm to break the attack. With my off-hand, I cuffed him, denting one side of his battle-helm and smacking him sideways across the ground.

‘Haukspeer,’ I bellowed, ‘you are fighting an ally. It is me. It is Ra’stan,’ I pleaded. Not because I was afraid he would kill me, but because I did not want to kill him.

But the Raven Guard was not listening. He tore off his damaged helm, optics fizzing and useless on the right side, to reveal mask of pure anger over his alabaster face.

‘*Merciful Vulkan...*’ I breathed as he came at me. If I could not bring him back from this rage, I would have to kill him.

This time he jabbed, using his claw like a quartet of gladius blades. I shifted my weight, stepping aside at the last moment, taking a flesh wound because of how late I left it to move, and smashed my elbow into his exposed back. The power generator crumpled. With a second blow I ripped away some of its housing, and took a clump of cables with it. The effect was instantaneous, as Haukspeer’s armour was no longer buoyed up by this external power source. The sudden mass dragged him down, slowed him down, as it exerted pressure and hard gravity.

I used my weight to bring him to the ground, used my knee to hold down his claw arm, my forearm across his throat.

‘Usabius!’ I cried out again, calling for help but also wary that my brother might have succumbed to a similar violent affliction. There was no answer and I could not see him, nor look around properly to find out what had happened to him either.

Now incapacitated, Haukspeer was calming. With the end of battle, his biology was slowing again, returning him to the ‘ready position’ all us legionaries remain poised at when not in combat.

‘Cease,’ I said, trying to soothe with my tone and cadence.

His chest was not heaving so rapidly any more, the spittle on his mouth was draining away, his eyes were not so wide and narrowed by the second.

‘Cease,’ I repeated, easing up a fraction to gauge whether Haukspeer could be trusted.

Breathing slowly, he gave a small nod, licked his dry lips and swallowed back a mouthful of saliva to moisten his razor-raw throat.

‘I’m all right,’ he rasped. ‘Let me up.’

I needed to be sure.

‘Who is your primarch?’ I asked, maintaining pressure.

‘Corax.’

‘And where is your home world?’

‘Deliverance.’

‘And who are you?’

‘Morvax Haukspeer, Apothecary, Eighteenth Company Raven Guard.’

‘Good enough.’

I let him up, Haukspeer refusing my proffered hand out of pride. He struggled with his malfunctioning power generator. It sputtered, a vibrating hum clearly audible where once it was cloaked and silent. I had robbed him of that, taken away his advantage.

‘I’m sorry, brother.’

‘You had no choice,’ the Raven Guard replied, but I could tell he was bitter at the loss of his stealth and saw how he grimaced when he tried to move in his armour. ‘Feels like lead,’ he muttered, grunting with effort.

I caught a glimpse of Usabius in my eyeline, also recovered, when Haukspeer asked, ‘Help me remove some of this. It’s just dead weight now.’

Malfunctioning generator, vambrace and pauldron were all removed. He did not go back for his helmet either, content to take a fistful of the dark earth and rub it into his pale features to obscure them.

After it was done, I watched Haukspeer test his new range of motion and encumbrance. Incredibly, he was still swift and as quiet as the grave.

‘You have a gift,’ I told him, meeting Usabius’s gaze as approached from behind the Raven Guard. My brother gave me a look that said all was well, but that the experience had drained him. I decided that my questions could wait.

‘Then let’s not waste it,’ Haukspeer replied.

Before we pressed on, knowing we could not linger, I stooped to regard the skull that the World Eater had been inscribing. I did not pick it up or touch it - some innate sense of self-preservation, some primal warning instinct stopped me - but I saw the mark scrimshawed into the bone. It was the same one the dead traitor wore upon his helm: that angular, snarling face.

‘Destroy it,’ Usabius hissed in my ear.

I stood up and brought my boot down, rendering the skull into fragments.

Nascent rage dogged my thoughts and demeanour. Even this act of simple, emotionless destruction brought with it a burgeoning desire to do more harm.

‘We should leave,’ said Usabius.

‘Yes, let’s be gone from this place,’ I replied.

Haukspeer nodded. ‘I never want to see it again.’

There was only death here now, seeped into the earth; death and hate and rage.

Gratefully, hastily, we left the valley of bones behind.

* * *

I CROUCHED ATOP a pillar of rock, watching Haukspeer approach the edge of the crash site in the distance. From my vantage, I had an excellent view of the Urgall region including its hills, volcanic ash plains and the Depression itself.

I could also see the warbands to the west, for I can think of no other way to describe them; of traitors migrating outwards in a horde. Something had roused their interest and when they appeared to be headed north, I wondered if Sulnar had put his sacrificial plan into action.

‘Our encounters on this journey have been mercifully light, brother,’ said Usabius, sitting on his haunches next to me. It was as if he could read my thoughts, and I nodded at his remark.

‘But at what cost? How many legionary lives will be lost to this cause?’

Across the plains, like ants forming a colony, the traitors began to converge. Some strode silently, purposefully; others chanted or rode on the backs of armoured columns. It was a massive force, one brutally capable of destroying any lingering loyalist resistance hiding out in the mountains. Mercifully the *Dies Irae* had long since quit the planet, doubtless slaved to another of the Warmaster’s fell causes, but the Titan’s absence would provide no stay of execution for our brothers.

Usabius took on a conciliatory tone, as if he could sense the guilt and anguish I felt at leaving our allies to their deaths. ‘Those lives were already lost, Ra’stan. They were lost the moment the traitors turned their guns on us and started shooting.’

I knew Usabius was right but it did not make the sight of my brothers’ gleeful killers any easier to take.

Averting my gaze, I concentrated back on the crash site.

Without his armour, the Raven Guard was not quite the wraith he used to be but he still moved with incredible stealth, and I lost track of him on several occasions as he picked his way through the wreckage.

‘Like a ghost,’ I said to the air.

‘Isn’t that almost literally what they’ve become, what all the shattered Legions have become?’ said Usabius.

‘Except the Raven Guard have the skill and stealth to turn that into an asset.’

Haukspeer had kept his lightning claw; of all his trappings it still functioned and it was a formidable weapon. He kept it low and by his side, ready to silence any sentries. During my military career I had not had many occasions to witness the XIX Legion in combat, but if this was the lethal efficacy of their Apothecaries, I shuddered to think what their assault troops were capable of.

‘Walking amongst the shadows as if he’s part of them,’ Usabius added.

‘Fortunate, then, that we have him as our scout,’ I said, casting a sideways glance at the Urgall Hills to our right and the sounds of ritualistic chanting now echoing loudly through them. The warbands were closing. ‘What happened?’ I asked.

‘A dark seed was sown within them, brother,’ Usabius answered. ‘It took root in both their minds and bodies, and this is the manifestation of it. This *evil!*’

I briefly met my brother’s gaze. ‘You experienced the sheer pervasive force in the valley. Haukspeer almost killed me because of it.’

‘Yet we did not succumb to its effects, nor were we suborned by our own naturally violent instincts. If this is something that can be fought, then we did that. It is why our brothers hold true to their loyal oaths, I think.’

My eyes narrowed as I sought a truth that Usabius was skirting. ‘So you do not think this to be simple rebellion?’

‘Was what happened in that valley of skulls *natural?*’

‘No,’ I said, remembering the madness of it. Now I thought back, it was as though something had taken me over, or at least was appealing to my baser instincts. Perhaps it was not something foreign after all, but rather a fundamental part of my psyche that I kept hidden or shackled. Alien mind control was something the Legiones Astartes had encountered before, but it could be explained after a fashion. It was exactly that, *alien*, but the experience in the valley was different. It felt more like expression, like a pre-existing part of me had been unleashed and allowed its rein. Oddly, the realisation of that disturbed me more now that I thought I understood it.

I wondered whether Usabius had considered the same thing and I asked,

‘What did you feel in the valley, when the rage enfolded us?’

Usabius slipped from my gaze as if shamed that he did not, or could not, come to my aid.

‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘It was red and wet. And heat... So much heat, like it was cooking my brain inside my skull. A drone in my ears, a thousand times a thousand war shouts all at once devolving into a single unified note of pure violence.’

‘A thousand times a thousand?’

Usabius paused, as if not understanding my meaning, before he answered, ‘No. Eight times eight times eight times eight... Over and over and over. What does it mean?’

‘I don’t know, brother.’

Below my vantage point, Haukspeer signalled the all clear and we moved out.

THE CRASH SITE below us was not as deep as the valley of skulls. The bulk of the damaged drop-ship’s fuselage was on the top of a flat ridge of dark stone, the lesser wreckage and debris strewn around it. I counted bodies amongst it, some Raven Guard and Iron Hands but mainly Salamanders. They were broken, burned things, scarcely recognisable as the proud Legion warriors they once were. Space Marines were peerless fighters, tough enough to take on and kill any enemy, any foe regardless of race or military strength. But that invulnerability had never been tested against itself, nor had it stood up to the rigours of a devastating crash from the edge of the atmosphere.

The evidence of just how vulnerable we all really were was stark, littered before me like an abject lesson in humility and the importance of the dangers of hubris.

All of the injured in the *Purgatory*’s infirmary were hard enough to bear, but this was an entirely tougher prospect to come to terms with.

Usabius knelt down by one of our fallen brothers, and tried to raise his head to see if he was still alive. When the neck lolled awkwardly and loosely to one side, I knew he was not.

‘I see no survivors,’ I whispered.

‘I found none,’ Haukspeer replied, seeming to materialise behind me as he made his presence felt.

I tried not to act startled. ‘You must teach me that one day,’ I told him, joking.

Surrounded by the dead, the Raven Guard did not see the humour. 'We don't have one day. Our life is measured in hours, even minutes now. We should look inside,' he said, and started walking towards the open cargo hold.

Usabius and I followed, my brother giving me a dark look suggesting that our travelling companion was not quite as composed as we both thought he was. Haukspeer *had* briefly lost his mind in the bone valley and there might be some semblance of that still resonating within him. Without knowing what it was that assailed us, I could not be sure. Even as an Apothecary, he would not be spared the terrible psychological damage we had all suffered as a result of surviving the massacre. To experience death on such a scale would test even a Space Marine's mental fortitude.

Early on, in those first days when we were still scrambling for order and searching futilely for meaning, I had heard stories of legionaries even taking their own lives because the weight of anguish was too much to bear. Never with a pistol to the mouth or temple, or a blade to the torso as it was in the days of the ancient Romanii Empire, but rather by simply venturing out at night on their own and seeking out the enemy. I could think of no other word to describe it than suicidal. Those not broken in the body like Sulnar harboured other wounds, ones of the mind instead.

I watched the Raven Guard keenly as he entered through the open ramp into a realm of shadows beyond. As I followed, I exchanged a quick glance with Usabius telling him to watch the right flank as I concentrated on the left. There could be anything inside the drop-ship, anything. My eagerness to find my father, Vulkan, was almost overwhelming but I did not allow it to cloud my sense of caution. Slow, precise, methodical: that was how the primarch had taught us; that was how it would be.

From the outside the drop-ship looked perpetually, blindingly dark but once we were inside it was a different story. Lumen-strips set into the ceiling still functioned. At least some did. They flickered intermittently, reminding me of the *Purgatory's* cargo bay, describing a scene of utter devastation. Broken pipes, exposed wires, crushed bulkheads, split doors and shattered mag-harnesses - it was like the intestines of some metal behemoth, wrecked and ruined by a massive and sudden trauma.

The impact of the crash had pushed the ventral corridor backwards, presumably when the Stormbird's nose struck the earth. The cockpit had crumpled, split apart entirely, and the pressure of that destruction had pressed the neck back, forcing most of the troop cages into the cargo bay.

Stepping over a strut of metal spearing out from the deck where half the plating had been burned away, revealing a bent and ravaged grille beneath, I saw

my first corpse.

It was another Salamander, and for a moment I fought down a fist of panic as it lodged in my throat at the thought that this might be Vulkan. It was not, and I cursed myself for the relief I felt at that.

The deeper we progressed, through snaking, spitting wires and spastic lighting, the more bodies we saw. A Raven Guard, back broken and twisted over a fallen beam; an Iron Hand crushed beneath a section of collapsed ceiling where the upper deck had come down; a Salamander, barely visible through the cloud of vapour spewing from a broken coolant pipe, half-frozen by liquid nitrogen but his true death revealed upon closer inspection as impalement by a trio of iron rebars.

For a moment I considered the reason why we did not find as many bodies at the entrance was because some predator, indigenous or otherwise, had crept in and dragged away the easy meat, unwilling to venture further for fear of what the darkness harboured. I banished the thought quickly, treating it as dangerous.

Death was multitudinous and varied. Some legionaries bore no evidence of how they had died at all, still strapped in their cages, upright but certainly dead. Carnage was everywhere. And that revelation terrified me beyond the limits of what I had been conditioned to feel.

If there were this many slain and no survivors then that could surely mean only one thing...

'Keep going.' Usabius was right behind me, stopped dead, and I realised belatedly that I too was not moving.

'So much death..,' I whispered, garnering an approbative glance from Haukspeer who went ahead of us.

Scarcely a hundred metres long and it had taken us almost a half-hour just to reach this point in the cargo bay.

Usabius merely patted my shoulder. 'It does not mean he is slain too. It's possible that-'

Haukspeer held up his lightning claw, indicating he had found something. I drew in close to him.

'Movement,' he hissed, staying as low as his damaged armour would allow before breaking off into the shadows and disappearing a moment later.

In the quietude, I heard venting pipes, the crackle of electricity and the groan of slowly shifting, cooling metal. All sounds I would expect in an empty drop-ship denuded of life. But then another sound encroached, a distant moaning. It echoed, resonating off the tight, contracted confines of the vessel, wending through corridors and spilling out into the cargo bay, barely audible until we had got close enough to hear it.

Someone injured. Alive.

I started to rush, but Usabius drew me back.

‘Be calm, brother. We do not know what we face yet.’

‘It could be Vulkan.’ I practically gasped the words, almost breathless with hope.

‘Be calm.’

Part of the ceiling had crashed in on the cargo bay, bringing slabs of metal, columns and chunks of the drop-ship’s superstructure with it. It created a sort of ragged bulkhead, a considerable blind spot that we were perched at the corner of.

A corridor of bodies, entangled in wreckage, made progress through this part of the ship difficult. We had to carefully pick our way through it, pausing every few seconds to make sure the sound was still there and our father yet lived.

I told myself it was Vulkan. I *willed* it to be so. To countenance anything else would be to give in to despair, to give up completely, and I had come too far and endured too much for that.

The route through the drop-ship became narrower still, harder to traverse. A sideways impact had crushed a section of the collapsed troop hold in the Stormbird’s flank. Through a charnel house of broken bodies and wreckage I saw the booted feet of a warrior half-obsured by a fallen beam. Haukspeer was a spectre hovering ahead of me, appearing and disappearing like a broken pict capture as the single lumen flickering overhead swung its light back and forth across the corridor. His claw was up, the signal to wait.

It took every mote of my resolve to do so, especially when I saw those booted feet move. It was a small motion, easy to miss, but we were standing so still, listening and looking so intently. In my mind’s eye, I saw the scalloped greaves of my father, the deep sea green of his armour, his cloak of cascading emerald, the fanged maw of his fearsome battle-helm, those red lenses radiating power and compassion...

Vulkan...

Enveloped in darkness, these details were impossible to discern but I heard the figure moan, and then another sound that came from above us.

The Raven Guard looked up.

I noticed that the lumen-strip was shaking more vigorously as the vibrations from something moving above fed down to it through the drop-ship’s hull.

‘Haukspeer, we must go to him now!’

I exchanged a glance with Usabius. We would move on Vulkan in the next few seconds.

‘Wait...’ hissed the Raven Guard. ‘Something is not-’

The screech of rending metal cut apart the silence, as harsh artificial light

strafed in from the ceiling where the drop-ship's hull had just been ripped away. Magnesium-white turned ruby-red as the blind-hunter leaned into view, squatting over the tear it had created in the roof. A discordant hoot of alarm and excitement burst from its harrowing-horn with the sudden discovery of prey.

Us.

'Kill it!' I roared, and unleashed my bolter.

Explosive shell impacts rippled across the blind-hunter's nose cone, staggering it and forcing its flaring nasal pits to contract. It reeled as I fed it another burst, rocking back on its haunches like a punch-drunk pugilist until it moved out of sight.

During the short respite, I seized Usabius by the arm.

'Go to Vulkan!' I told him urgently, 'Protect him, get him out if you can. Haukspeer and I will draw this thing off.'

There was no argument. Usabius did as I asked and ran down the shattered corridor, passing under the gaping hole in the roof, and kept on going.

'Haukspeer!' I yelled, but the Raven Guard was already coming towards me.

'We run,' he said.

'Agreed. We must draw it off, so that-'

'Just tell me this, Salamander,' he snapped, interrupting me. 'Are you my ally still? Can you do this?'

I was not sure what Haukspeer meant. Perhaps he had experienced too much in his makeshift apothecarion, seen iron-hard warriors break like brittle, rusted metal and it had shaken his faith in any soldier under pressure.

'You can count on me, brother,' I assured him, just as the red lamps of the blind-hunter returned. 'To the end.'

Haukspeer cast a quick glance over his shoulder and gestured to a tightly packed corridor that broke off from the cargo bay. 'This way.'

I went after him, the angry bleat of the harrowing-horn resounding in my ears.

Heat pressed against my back in a sudden, prickling pressure wave. As well as their claws, the Dark Mechanicum had fashioned the blind-hunters many weapons. An underslung flame unit was tailored for cleansing, and I thought I had seen the glint of two shoulder mounts in the glimpse I caught of the monster in the muzzle flare of my bolter.

Could be autocannons; possibly something else, something worse. I knew some of the walkers carried webbers, filled with scything monofilament; others, more debilitating radiation weaponry. Hard-armoured, ceramite over-carapace concealing some unknown biological horror beneath, the blind-hunters were part

organic, part machine and almost invulnerable to conventional weapons. As Haukspeer and I rushed through the cluttered cargo bay, tripping over bodies, snagging and scraping our armour on the half-destroyed ship, I wished dearly that I had something more potent than a boltgun.

After the gout of flame failed to kill us, the blind-hunter did not pursue. It could not, the confines of the crashed Stormbird were too tight. Instead, it scurried across the roof. I heard its talons raking gouges in the hull as it tracked us with its sensors. Named blind-hunters, the walkers were actually far from sightless. Through painful and often fatal experience, we had learned the search lamps they used contained some kind of bio-sweep and heat-tracking wave. I did not know why the beams switched from white to red, but I suspected it was some genetic quirk from the walkers' organic component. None of it mattered now. The only significant fact was that no legionary on foot had ever outrun one and encounters with the hunters could only end in death for the walker or its prey. To my knowledge, the former had yet to come to pass. Our odds of survival then, were extremely narrow.

I felt the last dark grains in my hourglass slipping towards the neck. Soon they would be spent, so I vowed that I would give Usabius enough time to get Vulkan out and to safety. If my life meant nothing else, it would at least mean that.

Haukspeer halted at the edge of the corridor, and was looking up.

'What are you doing?' I asked. 'We need to get it to follow us. If we allow it to catch-'

'Too late. Listen,' he said, pointing to the ceiling with one of his talons.

I frowned. 'I can't hear anything.'

'That's the point,' replied the Raven Guard. 'It's stopped.'

Following his gaze, I whispered, 'Above us?'

Haukspeer nodded slowly, stepping back as I raised my bolter.

The likelihood of my shots penetrating through the ragged shreds of the ceiling was extremely small but I was not trying to hit it, I was trying to goad it.

In my peripheral vision, I saw Haukspeer unclip a frag grenade from his belt.

'Ready.' I did not wait for an answer and squeezed the trigger.

Mass-reactives pummelled the ceiling, taking out sections of shattered metal and exposing the numerous fractures in the hull. A huge chunk of pipes, the remains of the upper deck and scorched armour-plating crashed down in a deluge. The blind-hunter fell with it, surprised when its footing suddenly gave way beneath it. Half-collapsed on one reverse-jointed knee, it leered over at me with its crimson search lamps. I allowed a bellow from its harrowing-horn

before I fired another burst. This time I raked its underslung arsenal, puncturing the flamer's tank and sending roaring promethium over its lozenge-shaped body in an incendiary wave.

Some of the conflagration struck me too, my armour's internal temperature gauge spiking then red-lining on my retinal tens display. I ignored it. To let up now, to hesitate or falter for an instant, was to die.

'Pour it on!' I cried, hoping Haukspeer had heard me.

A deafening boom followed by a dense pressure burst confirmed he had. The ground fell away beneath me, or rather I was lifted above it as the grenade blast took me off my feet and smashed me into a broken troop cage. Fighting my way free from a pile of bodies, I fired off a snap shot. One-handed, my aim was poor but in the resulting flash I saw Haukspeer facing off against the monster, his lightning claw flaring like a defiant torch against the darkness.

The blind-hunter was wreathed in fire that was slowly dying out. It had a dent in its carapace and several pieces of shrapnel embedded in it went deep. Wounded but far from immobilised, the flame unit wrecked but its remaining arsenal intact, the walker had lost little battle efficacy. As Haukspeer threw himself at it, one of the blind-hunter's shoulder mounts hummed into life.

I was wrong. They were not autocannons. Solid-shot would have been merciful compared to what happened next. A heat-hazing melta beam stabbed from the blind-hunter's left shoulder, the wide dispersal making it tough to dodge. Haukspeer tried but the edge of the pulsing microwaves hit him on his right side, cruel given that his left was already a ruin. His lightning claw withered and sloughed away, taking most of his remaining arm with it. The attack faltered in a scream of the Raven Guard's agony. He fell, rolled, tumbled until he slumped in a throbbing heap. As he raised his head, still trying to fight, the blind-hunter's second weapon cycled into action.

A gobbet of monofilament spat from the fluted muzzle of a webber, expanding into a net of lethal, glistening crystal. Instinct, flaring hot nerve endings, made Haukspeer struggle as he was pinned by the web. Any infinitesimal movement breathing, a muscle spasm, even blinking, would make the web contract. Suffocation through extreme pressure on the lungs and larynx would usually kill the victim, but Haukspeer was a legionary and his fortitude transcended that of a mortal man. His fate was the razor edges of the net, its savage teeth so sharp, so narrow that they were invisible to the naked eye, even if their effects were not.

I averted my gaze as the Raven Guard was denatured in his armour, only dimly aware I was still firing and my bolter had just *chanked* empty. Its abrupt silence was filled instantly with the last of Haukspeer's screaming. I thought I

heard defiance and rage in his last cry, and took a measure of selfish pride in that.

Tossing my useless bolter aside, I drew my chainblade. ‘Come here, you bastard...’

Turning slowly, framed in the ambient light from the gaping hole in the roof, the blind-hunter fixed its red lamps on me. Twin battle-claws extended from beneath its torso, unfolding with a strange, syncopated motion. It snapped each of its pincers once, racking its shoulder mounts back to a dormant position as it recognised an easy kill.

I had never seen malice expressed by a machine before. Not until that moment.

The short bleat from its harrowing-horn purred almost like a sadistic laugh.

‘Vulkan’s fire beats in my breast...’ I began, preparing to make my stand as the last of the dark sand ran out.

A sharp whine from above made me squint, hurting my ears even inside the relative protection of my helmet. There was a brief flash, like a nova flare, before a beam of coruscating energy lanced the blind-hunter square in the torso. Light pierced metal, terrible and penetrating. Unstoppable.

The purr became a hacking, vibrating cough as the hunter twisted against the beam’s impact. Shoulder mounts swung desperately into position, darting back and forth in search of an aggressor, but it was too late. The blind-hunter’s organic components were dead, or close to death. Its legs buckled, torso smouldering from the wound.

I heard a low hum of a capacitor building back up to power before a second beam strafed the shadows, clipping the hunter’s nose cone and burning off its nasal pits. I located the firer; a legionary silhouette, legs braced with a shoulder-slung cannon. The beam came from the weapon he carried, and though it flickered with intermittent energy it was potent. Armour that had defied my bolter shells capitulated against the conversion beamer, and in that moment of revelation I knew the identity of my saviour.

As the hunter finally slumped into a ruin of sundered metal and scorched organic matter, the legionary put up his cannon and called down to me. His voice resonated around the debris-strewn chamber, and was made colder, more mechanistic for that.

‘Are you injured, brother?’

‘No, Ironwrought,’ I replied to Erasmus Ruuman, ‘but Haukspeer is dead.’

Ruuman paused as if weighing up the appropriate response.

In the end his choice was fitting.

‘That is a great loss to his Legion.’

‘He died with honour,’ I said, but deliberately did not look at the remains of Haukspeer’s corpse. By now the razor web would have made a mess of him. There would be little to see and I had no desire to remember a noble warrior and friend that way.

‘Don’t come down here,’ I warned Ruuman. ‘Footing is treacherous. Many of the slain died poor deaths in here, brother.’

‘I have bio-scanned the ship,’ the Ironwrought replied, ‘and detected a single additional life sign, but it’s weak.’

‘As did we. I’m going to him now.’

Very well. I’ll cross via the roof,’ said Ruuman. ‘Meet me at the exit to the troop hold.’

‘What exit?’ Since being in the drop-ship I had yet to see one.

‘It’s a gaping tear in the hull. You’ll know it when you see it.’

I was about to head out, back into the dark where I hoped Usabius and my primarch were waiting, when I glanced up.

‘Ruuman, I don’t know how and why you got here but I am in your debt for saving my life.’

‘I’ll explain on the other side of the ship,’ the Ironwrought replied, and then he was gone from my sight.

Heart pounding, as much from anticipation as adrenaline, I rushed back through the ship to the corridor where we had found the survivor.

‘I hope you are soaring free now, my friend,’ I muttered to the shadows as I left.

Usabius was not there. He had moved off somewhere else, and was no longer waiting. The booted feet of the survivor were, but my battle-brother was absent. For a moment I considered the worst had happened, that Usabius was dead and the survivor as well. A brief vision filled my mind of the blind-hunter killing them first before it caught up to us. Not that it had had enough time to do that, but my senses were not entirely reliable of late. Perhaps it was longer than I had originally thought. Panic overtaking my limbs, filling them with nervous energy, I ran.

Only when I closed on the survivor did I check myself, slow and finally stop.

It was not Vulkan. It was not even a Salamander.

Armoured in magenta with a broken aquila adorning his breastplate, the survivor was not even an ally.

Slumped against the half-crushed confines of a detention cell wall, flecked with his own blood, was one of Fulgrim’s sons. Emperors Children. A prisoner. My enemy.

Usabius must have seen him too, and hope kindled that he still lived.

My enemy groaned. His booted feet were moving but only attached to his torso by the scantest of threads. Most of his left side was crushed too, the armour dented and split. Fulgrim's warriors were slaves to perfection, and as I listened to the one before me groan I wondered if it was not pain but the fact that he was in such poor condition that ailed him.

'Who are you?' I demanded, approaching slowly with my chainblade out in front.

An eye opened. Just one; the other was bruised shut. The Emperor's Children legionary turned his head, an agonising motion I assumed but he appeared to revel in it.

'Salamander...?' he rasped, smiling through red-rimmed teeth. 'Is your kind still alive?' He found that amusing until I crouched down to his level and smashed my fist into his plastron. It was a light blow, I did not want to kill him yet, but fresh cracks still webbed the mocking eagle device he wore.

'Answer the question, traitor,' I growled, trying to remain calm.

Spitting up a gobbet of blood, the warrior drew in enough breath to speak.

'Lorimarr.'

He attempted to laugh but pulled up short as a hacking cough took over. Blood spittle flecked the ruins of his plastron but could barely be discerned amongst the rest of the damage.

'Where is Usabius?' I asked, stepping closer, acutely aware of Ruuman's heavy footfalls on the roof overhead.

'Who?' Lorimarr asked. 'You are the first soul I have seen.'

'Don't lie to me.' I wanted to give him a taste of my blade but saw the futility of torture at once. This cur would only enjoy it. 'The warrior I came into this ship with, another Salamander like me. Where is he?'

There was no one else before you.'

'Liar!' I brandished my blade, let him see the chained teeth and imagine them ripping into his flesh. If it would yield the truth, I would maim the traitor just as he had maimed countless numbers of my battle-brothers.

Lorimarr forced a chuckle, undermining my menace. 'What can you do except kill me?' he said. 'No blade will loosen my tongue. There is nothing left to threaten me with. Besides,' he added, growing serious, 'I am not lying. You are the first soul I've seen,' he repeated, a slight smile tugging at the corners of his mouth, 'but not that I've heard. They died slow, your kin... crying out for their father.'

My patience at its limit, I was about to strike him and end his miserable life when a voice said, 'Brother...'

I turned and at the end of the corridor I saw Usabius shrouded in shadow.

‘I thought you were de-’

‘This way,’ he said sombrely and walked off as if to lead me.

Lorimarr followed my gaze into the darkness and when he looked back at me started to laugh uncontrollably.

‘Delicious,’ he wheezed through his tears, his pain and his pleasure. ‘Exquisite.’ His mania was killing him, but I doubted that he cared.

I ignored the wretch, and went after Usabius.

Ruuman was right about the exit to the troop hold, but when I passed through the ragged portal he was not there to meet me. Instead I saw Usabius, waiting less than fifty metres from the drop-ship.

He was standing stock still with his back to me, and looking at something lodged in the dark sand.

As I approached him, I tried to block out the insane laughter echoing from inside the drop-ship, willing Lorimarr to die at the same time.

‘I wanted to kill him too,’ Usabius told me, the edges of something in front of him just coming into view over his shoulder.

‘Why didn’t you?’ I asked, realising I was looking at a battle-helm partially buried in the Isstvan earth.

‘Because I found this.’

Ornate beyond reckoning, so finely and perfectly crafted it brought tears to my eyes just to see it, I realised what it was that had enraptured my brother.

Before us lay the battle-helm of a primarch, the battle-helm of Vulkan.

For a brief, macabre moment I hoped there would not be a head inside it, but as I stooped to retrieve it, I realised there was no blood, no evidence of injury of any kind or even a struggle.

It was just a beautiful battle-helm, lying incongruously, discarded in the dirt.

My fingers trembled as I went to touch it, and I could almost feel the resonance of my father emanating from its very fire-tempered metal. Vulkan’s hands had crafted this piece of armour and a measure of his presence and power still imbued it. I saw a face in its fearsomely wrought visage, in the gem-like retinal lenses, the gilded maw, the flat snout. It was Vulkan’s, the face I had seen him wear on the battlefield time and again, his war face, and it chilled me to look upon it now, empty of life. Though it must have been lying in the sand for many hours, even days, the helmet was still warm as if it had just been fresh-forged. Even through the ceramite of my gauntlet, I felt its heat. It banished the cold and I took strength from it.

Mild despair followed in the wake of my initial elation. As I carefully mag-locked Vulkan’s war-helm to my belt, I realised why Usabius had not picked it

up.

Rising, I said, 'Our primarch would not have left his battle-helm here willingly. And if his body is not here, and there is no evidence of his death then...' I turned.

'Then he has been captured by the enemy, and is somewhere else,' Usabius concluded.

'How will we find him?'

The slow shake of Usabius's head only increased my sense of defeat.

'I don't know, Ra'stan. The drop-ship was our compass. Without it, we have no bearing, nothing to guide us. Without it, we are...'

'Lost, brother,' I told him.

Ruuman announced his presence with the *clank* of his heavy footfalls on the roof of the drop-ship. The Ironwrought had taken his time. When I saw the magnoculars in his hand, I realised why.

'Traitors are moving,' he said, his iron voice ringing across the space between us. '*Purgatory* is destroyed.'

My jaw stiffened as I clenched my teeth.

What was left to us now except for petty retribution?

'We have one of them inside the ship,' I said, my meaning obvious.

Ruuman's gaze shifted down a fraction as he saw the battle-helm clamped to my belt.

'I think vengeance would be understandable.' The Ironwrought nodded, as if in approval of what I had decided to do. 'Be quick with it,' he added, turning away. 'I will keep a watch.'

With Usabius behind me, I stalked back to the ship.

Lorimarr was waiting for us. He rested his head against the back of his broken cell, pieces of his shattered plastron rising and falling with the legionary's shallow breathing.

'I am dead anyway,' he hissed to the darkness, not bothering to open his eye this time. Blood was eking from the left corner of his mouth, so too from his nose and ear.

I wanted to destroy him, to exact some measure of pain from this traitor as if it would account for all the death and agony he and his kind had inflicted upon us. Perhaps if we had still been in the valley of bones, I would have, but the killing rage was gone and only pity and self-pity remained.

'But you are in far greater agony than me,' said Lorimarr, opening his eye to stare at me and then the battle-helm I carried, 'aren't you, Salamander?'

I wanted to smack the supercilious smile off his face.

'Kill him,' said Usabius.

‘In cold blood?’ I replied, my wrath ebbing. ‘We would be no better than them.’

Lorimarr laughed again.

‘You really are broken, aren’t you?’ he said to me.

I glared down at him disdainfully, ‘I think you are the one smashed up, absent your legs, *brother*.’

Snorting derisively, Lorimarr replied, ‘I know.’

‘What?’

The traitor’s eye narrowed. ‘I know,’ he repeated.

‘Speak plainly,’ I warned him.

‘What you seek,’ he said.

‘Kill him, right now!’ Usabius snarled.

I turned to him, ‘Wait! Just wait...’ before looking back at our Prisoner. I showed him the battle-helm. ‘This? Is this what you mean?’

Lorimarr inclined his head, ever so slowly.

I sneered, fighting down hope and revulsion in the same ambivalent emotional cocktail.

‘Why would you help us?’

‘He’s lying,’ Usabius insisted and took a forward step when I put up my arm to stop him advancing further.

‘Wait.’

I turned my attention back to Lorimarr, crouching down at his eye level.

‘No,’ I said, reading the cruelty there, ‘he isn’t. You *want* us to go after him. You want to give us hope.’

‘It is false, brother!’

I shrugged off Usabius’s hand on my shoulder, watching Lorimarr’s eye flick back and forth between us, his smile broadening as it did so.

‘Tell me,’ I demanded. ‘I’ll make it quick.’

‘You have nothing to offer me, Salamander. But I will give *you* a gift...’ He grunted, leaning forward and reaching out with his hand.

I flinched, suspecting an attack, but saw that the Emperor’s Children warrior was unarmed and missing two fingers. He stretched towards me with the remaining digits as if about to perform some kind of benediction.

‘Don’t let him touch you!’ Usabius snapped, but I was already leaning in, closing my eyes...

Too late, I realised the danger I was in.

Lorimarr was a psyker and I a slave to his malicious will.

As his fingers touched my battle-helm, just the lightest caress of metal against metal, I was bombarded with a host of painful images.

Fire... An endless conflagration and the destruction of a hundred battle tanks.

A roar of anger, a curse spat from a primarch's lips in accusation of a brother.

Pain and light, so hot it seared the very flesh off my skeleton and turned my bones to ash.

I pulled away from Lorimarr's touch, my ears ringing and a trickle of blood seeping from the corner of my mouth. I wiped it away, about to kill the traitor when I saw that the Emperors Children legionary's eye was open and unblinking. In his last act of attempted murder, he had ended himself.

'Ra'stan...'

The voice sounded dim, the edges of my sight still hazed, and odd after-images related to my earlier visions assailed me like pieces of a broken kaleidoscope.

'Ra'stan, are you hurt?'

Usabius was holding me up. Without his intervention I would have fallen, such was the intensity of Lorimarr's psychic assault.

I nodded, my senses returning.

'He tried to kill you,' he added, letting me go so I could support myself.

'A Librarian...'

'More like a sorcerer, I think, but yes.'

'I should not have survived that attack,' I said, facing my brother. 'How could I?'

'I don't know, but you did. Vulkan protects even his wayward sons.'

'So we might carry on with our mission?'

I did not believe that, but decided not to question the distant providence that had kept me alive. For now, it was enough to know that Lorimarr had been thwarted and he was left for whatever carrion feeders haunted the skies of this place.

'I saw something,' I told Usabius as the two of us stood before the slumped body of the traitor. 'I suspect it was a fragment of what this legionary knew.'

'Beware such falsehoods, Ra'stan, especially when given by a deceitful messenger.'

'It did not feel false. I don't think he meant for me to see it. I think he was telling the truth.'

Ruuman's booted feet hammering on the roof above us returned, cutting our debate short.

Usabius gave me a warning look, but I was convinced.

'I know, brother,' I whispered, as if to speak it louder would make the

visions disappear, their lodestar blink out.

With the *clank* of his heavy armour, the Ironwrought jumped down from the roof of the drop-ship and landed with his back to me. He arose swiftly, bionics whirring, and fixed me with a hard glare as he turned.

‘We’re out of time. The war party is coming back, sky-hunters leading the vanguard.’

Jetbikes, incredibly swift and deadly to a small party like ours. I had seen them operating in packs out on the plains, using their superior speed to encircle and then execute isolated groups of survivors. At Ruuman’s mention of them, a bleak memory resurfaced of one of my brothers being dragged to his death, chains hooked to his flesh on the back of a jetbike while its rider laughed at the grim spectacle.

Some rode solo too, and these scouts could be just as deadly. If spotted by one it would be almost impossible to silence the outrider without drawing unwelcome attention. If that happened then the vultures would flock to the feast with us as their carrion meat.

The appearance of the sky-hunters was therefore problematic.

The Ironwrought asked, ‘Did you get what you needed?’

‘Yes. A map of sorts,’ I said, tapping my battle-helm with my finger.

Ruuman stared, waiting for more.

So I gave him it. ‘I know,’ I said, ‘I know where they took Vulkan.’

DECIPHERING A CLEAR image from the painful mental assault Lorimarr had inflicted on me was not easy. Through the fire, and the agony and the light, I saw a cave. On the surface, it was a fairly nondescript - even ubiquitous - landmark on the Isstvan plains where there were many crevices and chasms. However, this one carried a mark. It was a star with eight points and to see it, even in my mind’s eye, made my stomach tighten and my tongue itch. The sensation was akin to that which we had felt in the valley of bones, so I knew it must be significant.

The suggestion of a craven altar, a ritual knife with the infernal power to cut through reality itself forced its way into my consciousness and I suddenly dreaded what had become of my father. It had been prepared for him this place, this cave; that much I *knew*.

And from our vantage point, standing as we had in Tarkan’s eyrie on the *Purgatory*, I had seen it. Then it had just been a shape, another lumpen blister in a black desert studded with gibbets, pyres and death-pits. Now it was a beacon,

calling me to him.

From the details of the hololithic map I studied during Sulnar's briefing, I remembered the relative position of the cave to the *Purgatory* and by extrapolation the position of Vulkan's crashed drop-ship.

I found the cave and led us to it, that part was easy. Getting to it across an encampment thronged with Iron Warriors was not.

Ruuman lowered the scopes and scowled. The bionics in his face growled with the effort.

'I can see no route through them.'

A hot wind was blowing in from the north, disturbing squalls of ash that painted our armour in murky grey. I imagined the heat was coming off the *Purgatory* and the bones of the poor souls we had left there to burn. Ruuman had not said much about why he had left. Apparently, Sulnar had sent him. Perhaps Tarkan had seen what was coming and the imminent threat had made the lieutenant commander send reinforcements? Perhaps the Ironwrought had simply decided it was time to leave? Either way, he had reached us somehow and now here we were, contemplating another desperate act.

We had taken up a position sheltering behind a cluster of rocks, slightly elevated above the desert floor on a shelf of obsidian and surveying the majority of the encampment.

Warriors encircled small fires, talking, cleaning their weapons, sharpening knives. Some sat alone, staring catatonically into the darkness. Others sat on the hulls of their battle tanks, hunched over with their weapons held casually at ease. The vehicles formed a loose laager within which the Iron Warriors had pitched tents and made their fires. I suspected they did so to keep whatever dogs were also prowling the night at bay. Of all the murderous thugs left behind to cleanse Isstvan V, only the sons of Perturabo acted as if they were not also part of the Warmaster's chaff. Primarchs had left behind the very worst and most volatile of their warriors, mad dogs in every sense, for this dirty job. The IV Legion had never done anything *but* the dirty jobs and so there was no distinction to make. It also meant they were more ordered and less unpredictable than their wilder brethren. If they had dug in, it was likely they would not strike camp until ordered to by Perturabo, and that would only happen when we were all dead.

Some of the sand had been restored to the hourglass, but it was dwindling perilously close to expiry again.

'Must be over fifty warriors,' breathed Usabius.

'I count almost a hundred,' I replied.

Ruuman nodded. 'We must thin their ranks,' he said, 'stretch them so we can slip through their pickets without detection.'

I took a long hard look at the encampment, the relative position of the warriors, the scouts, watch points, concentrations of armour and men. And then I looked at the cave and how it was almost surrounded, although the troops there did not act like guards or as if they were even aware of its significance. We had just been unlucky.

‘Impossible,’ I said, and sank back down behind cover.

Ruuman followed me.

‘Chances of operational success are slim,’ he admitted. ‘I might be able to punch a hole through their armour with this.’ He patted the conversion beamer that was slung over his shoulder.

I shook my head. ‘They would strafe this ridge with every heavy cannon they had. We would be dust within seconds, another violent memory just like the rest of our kin.’

‘There must be a gap in their patrols, a weakness in the net we can exploit. Perhaps if we just wait...’ said Usabius.

‘We cannot wait.’ I gestured to the night skyline as it purpled and reddened on the distant horizon. ‘Dawn is not far off and in the open as we are, we will be seen.’

As if to emphasise the danger, the low drone of a sky-hunter cut into our discussion, zipping by our position at speed.

‘How long do you think it will be before one of those jetbikers catches us in these rocks?’ I asked.

‘Doing nothing is certain death,’ Ruuman answered.

‘Stepping out now yields the same results, Ironwrought,’ said Usabius.

Ruuman seemed not to hear him; his gaze was on the enemy.

After a few seconds when he still did not speak, I asked, ‘What is it?’

‘They are striking camp.’

I rushed to peek over the edge of the rocks. Even without the scopes, I could tell that the Ironwrought was right.

Fires were being doused, tents collapsed and packed away. Officers barked orders and tank crews leapt off the hulls of their vehicles and began making ready. The Iron Warriors were preparing to mobilise again.

‘Orders?’

‘Perhaps,’ said Ruuman, ‘something has come down the chain of command. Reacting to another threat?’ he wondered out loud.

‘Does it matter?’

He turned to face me. ‘Only if we are that threat.’

But it did not appear that way.

On the horizon a red line flashed across the landscape, heralding another

fiery sunrise. As I watched, the shadows began to creep away from the encroaching light, the darkness releasing us from its grasp and thrusting us screaming into the day.

‘How long before the dawn?’ I asked, my gaze alternating between the rising sun and the dissipating encampment of our enemies.

‘Minutes,’ Ruuman calculated.

‘And the camp?’ I already knew the answer - minutes, just the same.

It was at least four hundred metres from our position to the threshold of the cave. There was some natural cover, scattered rocks, minor defiles, the remnants of whatever the Iron Warriors left behind.

The dawn was coming... Too fast.

‘We have to go now,’ I said urgently.

Usabius was up on his feet, head above the rocks, ready to move too.

Ruuman clutched my shoulder, forced me down.

‘You’ll be seen. Wait a little longer.’

Through the blood pounding in my ears, I heard the low drone of the circling sky-hunter again, whipping by us, still ignorant of our presence.

The dawn faded, the harsh light dissolving back into blackness and leaving an eldritch gloaming in its wake.

I turned, confused, heart drumming.

‘Not the dawn...’ gasped Usabius, sinking down again, mercifully unseen by the scouts and sentries.

The Iron Warriors were still rolling out, slow and methodically, easing into column with heavy tanks to the front and rear, bracketing the march.

I realised why they had been ordered to move and what I had seen in place of a true dawn.

‘Nuclear sunrise,’ said Ruuman, echoing my thoughts. ‘The traitors have deployed atomics of some minor magnitude. The wind will bring the fallout this way.’

‘They’re moving because of the radiation?’

‘Yes.’

‘Which means...’

‘It will be flooding this region, with us still in it.’

I shook my head, unwilling to be dissuaded by such a minor threat.

‘It won’t kill us,’ I said.

‘Not immediately, no.’

Below us, the Iron Warriors were shackling heavy gun carriages to their Rhinos and Spartans. I saw Rapiers, mole-mortars, several autocannons. It would take time to move all of that arms and armour. The laager was breaking apart

slowly. Mounted, they could ride ahead of the storm of fallout. We could not.

‘If Vulkan is down there, we must rescue him,’ I said adamantly.

‘If?’ Ruuman posited. ‘So you admit he might not be in that cave?’

‘I...’ I looked to Usabius, but his attention was fixated on the encampment.

‘Nothing is certain, Ruuman. But if there is even a chance that-’

‘Have you considered not going down there?’

I glared at the Ironwrought, suppressing an instinctive violent urge to do him harm for what he was suggesting.

‘Abandon him? Forswear everything we have pledged?’

‘We have pledged?’ Ruuman challenged. ‘Do you speak for your Legion now, Ra’stan of the Salamanders?’

‘Us,’ I snapped, gesturing to Usabius.

Ruuman looked over to him and then looked back.

‘Sulnar did not send me to reinforce you,’ he said. ‘I was meant to dissuade you, to bring you back. It never sat well with the lieutenant commander that you and Haukspeer left on this foolhardy mission.’

‘A fool’s hope is better than no hope,’ I hissed, keeping my voice down though the Iron Warriors could not have heard us above the growl of their tanks manoeuvring and grinding into Position. Vulkan lives! He lives, and we have a chance to help him.’ I breathed deep, marshalling my anger and my resolve, until I found a measure of calm. ‘*Help us,*’ I pleaded. ‘There is nothing left to go back to now. If you could have spared Lord Manus his fate, you would have. If you were gifted a chance to save his life-’

‘I would have taken it,’ said Ruuman with cold, iron-hard pragmatism. ‘But my primarch is dead, and you have the means now of knowing the fate of yours.’ He nodded to the battle-helm mag-locked to my belt. Vulkan’s helm, its empty retinal lenses staring blankly.

The primarch was physically larger than any of his legionaries but not so massive that I could not interface with whatever systems still functioned in this piece of armour I bore like a sacred relic.

Our battle-helms contained a visual feed. It recorded what we saw, allowing us to utilise the data strategically for later debrief, or immediately for tactical adaptation and deployment. The feed could be relayed to other battle-brothers, between company officers or even battalions. It was useful, and provided a shared visual experience, crucial for training or the dissemination of vital military intelligence.

I had never considered what a primarch’s visual feed might reveal. I almost dared not look through Vulkan’s eyes for fear of what I might see. For what was seen could never be *unseen*.

‘I wish this burden had not fallen to me,’ I said to Usabius, but knew deep down that I had to be the one to do this.

A shameful part of me willed the battle-helm to be broken, for the link to malfunction and an empty glassy vista to greet me.

Disengaging the locking clamps, I removed my own helm and set it down on a nearby rock. My fingers were trembling. I looked to Usabius, to try and gauge his mood, but he had not moved from staring at the tanks.

Vulkan’s battle-helm came free with a low hum of magnetism and the light *chink* of metal touching metal. I raised it up, like it was a crown and I its unworthy incumbent. It was heavy, heavier than I realised, heavier than it had been when I had first retrieved it from the sand. I knew it was the weight of imminent revelation, the gravity of a hard and uncomfortable truth that encumbered me.

‘Will this even work?’ I breathed. It was significantly larger than my own battle-helm, and I could only rest it over my head whilst holding it aloft and in place. ‘Feels like a trespass...’

‘I can help make the interface,’ Ruuman replied, ‘strip some of the cabling out, hard-wire the connections. If it still functions, you’ll be able to access the visual feed.’

‘This is a relic, I shouldn’t be doing this.’

‘It’s only a relic if Vulkan is already dead and this the last physical part of him.’

I tried not to countenance that possibility and donned the primarch’s battle-helm, bracing myself for his last sights before he and it were separated.

Ruuman was working with his tools. It was hard not to think of his modifications as sacrilegious, but we lived in an age of enlightenment, where faith and religion were deemed heretical. I tried not to dwell too long on the irony of that. Much of my established worldview had been shaken through the ordeal of Istvan. Lesser men would have crumbled in the face of such utter horror, as their concept of reality was brutally unpinned and wrenched cruelly apart.

But we were not lesser men; we were legionaries. So we endured.

‘Nothing, I can see nothing,’ I said, ashamed at the sound of relief in my voice. ‘It’s just darkness in here. The systems are not working.’

‘A moment,’ muttered Ruuman. I could hear the sky-hunter whir past us again and the rumble of armour farther away as the encampment disassembled.

Why did I need proof of Vulkan’s fate? Why could I not just trust in belief, the faith that he lived and was waiting for our aid?

I wanted to throw off the battle-helm, to defy Ruuman’s logic, to storm into

the encampment and rescue my father. In my dreams, this was how it played out. All the doubt, all the madness and uncertainty burned away in his refulgent presence. Vulkan was glorious, and he would smite these traitors from the face of this black world before returning to the stars, and with his brothers by his side smash the Warmaster from his usurper's throne and-

A dull glow suffused the interior of the battle-helm, revealing small details of its inner surface in crimson monochrome. In my peripheral vision I could see where Ruuman had snaked wires and hard connection points to the interfaces of my own armour's gorget. Aligning my eyes as best I could with the retinal lenses, I blink-clicked to activate the visual feed.

Static reigned at first, a red, crackling haze that made me think the lenses were damaged and any image capture unreadable. It only lasted for a few moments before an all too familiar scene resolved...

Walking up a dark ridge of black, volcanic sand. The air is blistered by bolter fire, a vast crescendo of unending muzzle flares. Larger explosions flash in the distance, pluming smoke and fire. A wash of earth and blood sprays across his eye line.

There was no audio. Evidently, that facility had been damaged. But I could see well enough... and imagine the noise.

Through the smoke, the snow that has begun inexplicably to fall, a phalanx of iron-armoured legionaries is revealed. Their blank and faceless war-helms show no pity, no sign of reluctance. They are ranked up in a firing line, intent on killing us. Behind them loom the larger forms of tanks...

Vulkan raises his gauntlet and a spit of flame drives the traitors back up the hill. They collide with the advancing armour, crushed under the relentless tracks of their own tanks. Those that stand their ground are engulfed in a conflagration so intense that their power armour is no defence against it. Slowly collapsing silhouettes, brown and hazed in the heat, wither before his drake fire. Flesh and bone become ash, blown from scorched armour by the wind.

Any lingering bond of fraternity he might feel does not show. He is running, the Pyre Guard just behind him, eating up the metres of the hillside until he crests the summit. Hard shells ricochet off his armour, gnat-bites trying to breach a fortress wall. A rocket tube's explosive payload throws off light and kinetic force but he is unbowed and stalwart.

A clutch of desperate warriors hurl themselves at him, chain-glaives burring. Dawnbringer slips into his grasp and he swings. Once. Four Iron Warriors are launched skywards, their bodies broken. Insanely courageous or blatantly stupid, three more wade in despite the ruin they had just seen made of their comrades.

Like the hammer of a god, Vulkan smites them. A breastplate is split in two, the chest caved, ribs and innards exposed. A shoulder is battered, the guard giving way with the same resistance as parchment. A battle-helm is crushed, the head within pulped by a giant, gauntleted fist.

Undaunted, the Iron Warriors maintain their dogged but failing defence. It is as if they don't know the meaning of surrender or defeat.

Neither does Vulkan, and the killing continues until the Pyre Guard catch up and vanquish the rest, clearing a path to the armour...

Vulkan reaches the first of the battle tanks, a Demolisher that the primarch lifts with his bare hands and turns over. Dawnbringer is back in his mailed fist a moment later and he uses it to punch a hole through the hull of a second vehicle. Tearing open the front armour with his fingers he wrenches out the crew within as they pepper him with ineffectual pistol fire.

He tosses them out like they are refuse, limbs flailing, and lets his inner circle warriors put them to the blade before they fill the tank with grenades.

Vulkan is already moving, the back of the Demolisher he's just left behind blowing out in a plume of fire, smoke and shrapnel. Green-armoured Salamanders advance with him on either side of the primarch. The battle is a mess of close-quarters combat and snap-fire.

A figure becomes visible in the distance, across a battle line of Earthshakers. Vulkan is fixated on him, his gaze unwavering like a homing missile. His iron brother is laughing, beckoning him on. A tank rolls into Vulkan's path and he heaves it aside with his shoulder. Another he seizes by its crude dozer blade, upends it in his rage. He shakes, roaring an accusation at the Lord of Iron who is still too far away to strike...

...then looks up at a stream of missiles bursting from their batteries on contrails of nova-bright fire. It takes a few seconds for the barrage to hit. Vulkan doesn't stop shouting until the flash of magnesium-white fills his vision and his world goes dark.

Crackling white noise returned, the end of the feed. I stared into it, dumbstruck, unable to process the fact I had very probably just witnessed my primarch's demise.

'Brother...?' Barely louder than a whisper, Usabius's voice brought me around. 'What did you see?'

'Death,' I uttered, trying to lift the battle-helm but finding it snagged by the cables coupling it to my armour. 'Get it off,' I snapped. 'Get it off!'

'Hold on,' said Ruuman, and I was vaguely aware of him disconnecting the makeshift interface. When he was done, I wrenched the helmet free and set it down as if scalded by its touch and wary of its presence.

I did not need to tell Ruuman what I had seen. He could tell by the look on my face.

‘It is over then?’ he asked.

Vulkan lives...’ I gasped, desperately, defiantly, deluded. ‘He must.’

Usabius was still at the edge of the rocks, keeping watch on the encampment, and offered no support.

The droning sky-hunter made its fourth pass.

‘It’s getting closer,’ said Ruuman. ‘The rider suspects he has found something in the rocks but has yet to actually locate it.’

‘A vanguard has arrived to lead the column out,’ uttered Usabius. I followed his pointing finger, still reeling from what I had just witnessed, and saw two sky-hunters accelerate into the rapidly diminishing encampment and take up point positions at the head of the Iron Warriors. The riders were half-armoured and went without helms or vambraces. They wore visors instead, gauntlets torquing the horned handlebars of their mounts. Fumes and smoke belched from thick exhaust ports. Low-riding, leaning back, they laughed and bellowed at one another. Perhaps the sons of Perturabo had some madmen in their ranks after all.

At last they were leaving. I fought hard to make that fact matter, to not have the victory of it obliterated by the stark evidence of what I had seen through Vulkan’s eyes.

Ruuman was watching the Iron Warriors too.

‘Two sky-hunters means a third is missing. Our creeping shadow, I would reckon.’

‘He lives,’ I told the Ironwrought, my gaze panning across the struck camp to the cave mouth. ‘Vulkan lives.’

‘You said yourself, Salamander, that he does not.’

‘The helm was not where he fell,’ I said, seizing on an unlikely truth. ‘It means he could have survived, picked it up.’

‘There was nothing left of that feed,’ asserted Ruuman. ‘He’s dead, Ra’stan. Accept it, so that we might leave here and live a little longer.’

‘No.’

A true dawn was rising, the sun of Isstvan breaching the hills and banishing the shadows. It could not disperse the radiation storm bearing down on us from the north, but that hardly mattered now.

I rose to my feet, joining Usabius at the edge of the rocks.

Below us, the armoured column was rolling out.

‘We have to go now, for certain this time,’ I said, and Usabius nodded.

‘That way lies death,’ said Ruuman, also rising but heading in the opposite direction.

‘Then we choose death!’ I snarled. ‘For what else is there on this cursed world for any of us?’

‘I cannot follow you that way, son of Vulkan,’ the Ironwrought replied. He urged me to go with him. ‘Don’t sacrifice yourself on such a foolish errand. Live and make them work for the scalp. I will. While we live there is hope. Please, come with me, Ra’stan.’

I shook my head, slowly, lowering my gaze. My path was set before me, there would be no deviation from it. When I looked up again Ruuman was gone, having disappeared over the rocks on the other side.

‘Don’t worry, brother,’ Usabius told me, affecting an air of mild fatalism, ‘it is Salamander business we go to now. Better that it’s just us.’

‘Aye... Just us.’

To the east, the sun was rising above the lip of the horizon, painting the volcanic plains in red.

I looked to the gauntlet laid out before us and our ignorant huntsmen that were still too close for us to avoid completely. Even making it across the camp was far from certain, let alone surviving what we might encounter in the cave itself.

‘We skirt the edges of the camp,’ I said, gesturing to a ragged chain of fang-like rocks. I met Usabius’s gaze. It was burning, full of conviction. ‘Stay low and move fast,’ I told him.

‘Vulkan lives,’ he said to me.

‘Vulkan lives,’ I replied, then we leapt over the barrier of rock together and ran like the hell-drakes of Nocturne were behind us.

We had barely reached halfway when a shout rang out, more deafening than a gunshot.

Ruuman had been right. The Iron Warriors had seen us.

I risked a glance and saw the armoured column was still moving but the two sky-hunters had peeled off and were roaring towards us. Slab-nosed and bulky, the jetbikes bullied their way through the lifting gloom before the dawn. Angular fairings at the prow gave them a hard and unyielding appearance. Close up, their riders were wild, whirling spiked chains around their heads and hooting in anticipation of the kill. The rest of the Iron Warriors seemed satisfied to let them have our blood and drove away from the advancing storm.

Judging by their hellish speed, I reckoned we could get another thirty metres before they were upon us. The underslung cannons glaring from beneath each sky-hunter’s nose could shred us before we got another three, but the riders appeared to be intent on close-quarters.

Also, both had directed their mounts at me.

‘Get to the cave. Go!’ I bellowed.

Usabius ran on ahead, as I slowed and drew my chainsword.

Two warriors mounted on jetbikes against one on foot. The odds were not in my favour.

I had left my battle-helm up on the rocky shelf next to Vulkan’s. In my haste and lingering trauma, I had forgotten both. The acrid tang of their exhaust fumes reached me before they did. Black sand whipped up in their wake and stung my eyes. I tasted the petro-chemical stink of their engines, felt them vibrate through the earth despite the fact they rode just above it on anti-gravitic repulsion plates.

‘Vulkan lives!’ I roared, touching the chainsword to my forehead in a final warrior’s salute. When I brought it back and settled into a fighting stance, its teeth were already blurring.

As the sky-hunters came to within twenty metres, they began to part.

Encircled, I would be forced to choose one combatant or the other. It was no choice, really, not one that mattered at least. Pick one and my back would be exposed to the other. I could almost feel their heavy blades piercing my armour and flesh...

‘*Vulkan lives...*’ I whispered one last time, sparing Usabius and the cave mouth a sideways glance. I could not see him, and hoped that meant he had made it.

A keening blast of noise erupted from my right side, a staccato four-round burst that spat out a lethal welter of dark-red beams. An actinic charge filled the air at the same time, shimmered on it. A second later and the riders were screaming as the death ray chewed up their bikes and turned their flesh to dust, abruptly cutting them off.

Two sky-hunters crashed into the earth, wrecked and ablaze. Chunks of Iron Warriors battle-plate joined them - an empty cuirass, greaves, boots and gauntlets, nothing inside them but ash.

I knew the devastating effects of volkite weaponry. The Martians had made it particularly potent against biological matter. Ruuman rode the third jetbike, a flaring culverin sitting under his prow. As the beam weapon powered down, he engaged the mount’s reserve arsenal. Paired bolters sunk into its fairings chugged to life, twin muzzle flares cutting star flashes in the half-light.

I do not know if he had been planning this. Perhaps it was a contingency that he switched to when he realised that he had become one. The conversion beamer was absent, too hefty and impractical to carry on a jetbike, likely spent on executing the vehicle’s previous rider.

‘Emperor praise you, you courageous fool,’ I muttered as he sped past me, engines screaming and pouring his fire into the ablative armour of a Rhino.

Strafing the vehicle's flank, he caught the fuel tanks and the Rhino went up in a ball of promethium fire.

Head down, the Ironwrought rode on, chased by the pintle-mounts of the battle tanks. Shellfire stitched his wake, throwing up clods of volcanic sand, but I was running now and could not wait to see if my saviour escaped or not.

Iron Warriors were coming after him, I heard their distant cries and promises of revenge. They were coming after me too. With the sky-hunters destroyed, I was in the wind and it was a matter of honour that this not be allowed to stand. But tanks are not nearly as swift or agile as jetbikes. I was close enough to the cave that I could get inside before they caught me.

After that... I had not thought any further ahead.

The same sickening sensation I had felt when I had seen the threshold of the cave through Lorimarr's mind's eye returned, only this time it was much more acute due to its actuality and proximity. The eight-pointed star drew my eye, compelling me, sickening me, but I fought its lure and breached the cave mouth gasping for breath.

Once inside, the effects lessened and I wondered if the mark was some kind of ward, a piece of Mechanicum technology made to appear as if it were arcane and esoteric. I had broken through, charged down its web of influence, and had begun to recover.

I looked around.

Darkness seemed thicker in the cave, unnaturally so. Though the air was cool against my face, it prickled my skin and resisted my passage through it as if it were sticking mud and not air at all.

It was deep, far deeper than it appeared from the outside, and spilled away into a narrow corridor of rock. As I could not see Usabius - I assumed he had penetrated farther. I followed the only route, hoping I would meet my brother at the end of it. I wanted to call out to him, to let him know I was coming and not likely to be alone, but I stopped short realising that I did not know what else lurked within. Furthermore, the acoustics would broadcast my exact position to anyone following behind.

Time was the only advantage I possessed; I had no desire to relinquish it.

After what felt like several kilometres, the tight confines of the cave expanded into a much wider and higher cavern. Though it was hard to tell with any certainty, I thought I must have travelled down into the subterranean tunnels of Isstvan, because the ceiling of this new chamber was vaulted and fanged with stalactites.

It was colder here. Ice rimed the cavern's edges, and a light hoarfrost sparkled underfoot. Icicles dripped down from above, frozen in long, gnarled

fingers.

I blinked. The drops of ice were held in place, hovering stilly in the air. At first I thought it must be an optical illusion but as I got closer I saw it was not. Time had ceased to beat in this place. It was held fast, as if caught in amber.

I blinked again.

Usabius was standing in the middle of the chamber, looking up at one of the chrono-frozen drops.

‘I see it but I don’t believe it,’ he said. I assumed he was speaking to me.

‘Nothing feels right about this place, brother,’ I replied.

He turned, staring at me through his cracked retinal lens.

‘Where is your power fist?’ I asked, as I noticed the weapon was missing.

‘I see it but I don’t believe it,’ he repeated.

As I came closer to him, I noticed other subtle details of his appearance had changed too. His armour was more battered; black and burned extensively in some places as if he had been caught in a terrible fire.

I frowned, not understanding. ‘Usabius, what happened to you?’

‘See it but don’t believe it,’ he said, lifting up his hands to grip either side of his battle-helm.

‘Where is Vulkan?’ I asked, a profound nausea creeping up from my gut. I swallowed back the bile in my throat. ‘Brother, I...’

Usabius... *flickered*. Like a mirage, he was there and then he was not. I had seen pict-casts do something similar. It was called ‘ghosting’.

‘I...’ My legs gave way and I put out my hands to stop from falling.

Braced, but far from steady, my hearts thudded in my chest. It was so hard I expected to see them burst through my ribcage, rip open my plastron and flop onto the ground in front of me. The reality of my world as I thought I knew it was unravelling. Usabius was not as I remembered him, and through the flickering resolution of his seemingly temporal existence I perceived a half-truth beneath the image I had attempted to obscure him with.

During the last years of the Great Crusade, when the remembrancers still attended our fleets, when there was still something worth remembering, I heard an imagist speak of *pentimento*. The word derived from the ancient Romanii of old Terra, and meant ‘repent’. It referred to the act, by an artisan, of painting over an error. With patience, skill and the correct materials, such earlier drafts could be revealed beneath the layer that hid them. With savage clarity, I realised that I had painted over Usabius. This was my repentance for some misdeed. By now, my mind was reeling and despite my superior cognitive faculties, processing everything I was seeing was not easy. I knew, however, that in some as of yet undefined way, I had failed my brother.

Stark and harrowing as all of this was, a greater revelation yet awaited.

As I sagged with the weight of my guilt, my eyes strayed to the ground where I saw a mark burned into the earth. Fixated on the ceiling and its strange, time-defying properties, I had not noticed it until I was on top of it. A ring of black was burned indelibly into the ground, spikes interrupting its perfect circumference as if from some pulsing kinetic reaction.

I had seen such effects before, they usually came after teleportation, and were the residue from the extreme energy exchange that took place during spatial translation.

At first, I did not know what it meant, but then I saw the second mark sat within the first, encircled by the ring. It was difficult to discern. Wide shoulders, a broad back, kneeling down with its head bowed.

A figure, clearly. An individual primed for teleportation.

‘What does it mean?’ I asked, looking up from a half-prone position. Anger was rising in my gorge, getting the better of my other humours. Something else too, an emotion entirely foreign but familiar at the same time. Panic. Anxiety.

They shall know no fear...

It was our mantra, it was the way the Emperor had made us, distilled from the vital essence of his sons, our fathers. Genetic engineering, legacy, primacy: it was all undone in that moment.

Usabius stared, his hands still locked to his battle-helm as if, like the ice droplets, he too was frozen in time.

‘Answer me!’

The burning light of my brothers eye flared again and with a hiss of escaping pressure, he slowly removed his battle-helm. Beneath was a face I barely recognised. It was burned, ravaged by hell’s fire. Salamanders are resilient to heat, but we are not impervious.

Though I tried to prevent it, though I had shored up my mental bulwarks with falsehood to protect me, the dam was now broken and veracity rushed over me in a flood.

Usabius had lost his identity to a firestorm, one that had billowed from the guts of a dying drop-ship and spilled out into his own. I had tried to warn him, to save his life, but I was too late. I let him go, and by the time I looked back only his clawed finger marks remained, dug into the metal.

‘You died,’ I uttered, almost in a rasp.

Reality seized me fully then, took hold like a docking clamp against the hull of a starship.

I remembered the pit of the dead, the Raven Guard as he stirred from unconsciousness about to give away my position. I was alone, having dragged

him halfway across Isstvan, when the search lamps began to strafe. I could not risk his waking dooming us both, so I leaned over and crushed him with my power fist.

In the cave, I looked down at my right arm and saw the glove encasing it.

Aboard the *Purgatory*, an argument between myself and Sulnar had ended in a strained accord. I had believed my words to him of the carnage out on the plains, of the suffering and the pain expressed through the lips of another, through Usabius, but it was me. I said those words. The lieutenant commander had not moved when Usabius barged past him, because no one had barged past him. No one else had been there.

In the wreckage of the drop-ship, searching desperately for Vulkan. Even the traitor, Lorimarr, could perceive the truth and it amused him greatly to witness the mania to which I had succumbed. How could I have survived his psychic attack? Only another psyker could have done that.

Even my rank was a lie. The dying legionary Ik'rad had called me *lord*. He had once known me as an Epistolary. Only Usabius had ever called me captain. It was his rank, not mine. After his death, after the crash and the torment in my shackled psyker's mind, I had become him or part of him and the projection I had fashioned was part of me, the part I could not fully reconcile.

I am Usabius, the half-remembered memory of a corpse conflated with my own self-identity.

We live in hell, a hell of black sand where nothing is as it should be and all has come to madness. A warrior, even one as steeled as a Space Marine, could lose his mind in such turpitude.

My thoughts returned, strangely apt in the circumstances.

'You died, brother,' I said, addressing the manifestation of my mind that wore the corpse-form of Usabius.

It nodded.

'I am sorry for that.'

It made no response, and only kept staring.

'Is any of this real? The cave, the Iron Warriors, the survivors?'

Like some spectre of ancient Terran myth, Usabius extended a jagged-looking finger to point at the scorched earth surrounding me.

Here was truth. Much like a drowning man whose senses are dulled by the water, I surfaced from a dark dream into an even darker reality.

As I contemplated the meaning of the mark, I heard the rush of booted feet coming up the corridor from behind me. The Iron Warriors were almost here, as real as the sweat on my brow or the earth beneath me.

'It won't be long-' I said, but stopped short.

Usabius was gone, and I was alone just like I always had been.

Haukspeer had given his life following a madman out into the night; Ruuman too, probably. They must have known. On some small level, I think I did too but kept it hidden away in a locked part of my mind where I could keep it shut down.

I pushed myself up, gripping my chainsword in my off-hand as I rose. I would meet these bastards on my feet.

Broken or not, I was still a warrior of the Legiones Astartes, I was still a Salamander.

One revelation remained, still denied to me by the mystery of the cave.

The ring of scorched earth held the secret, I had but to unlock it to know the truth. The question was obvious.

What is Vulkan's fate?

I had a gift, one I had forgotten and projected onto another. With it I could scour the ends of this earth in search of the bright and shining beacon that was my father. So much grief, so much death. I tapped the latent air around me, still redolent with the psychic screams of my brothers. Cerulean fire flared in my eyes, I felt it burning, saw it spilling beyond the cavern to reveal the shadows of my murderers as they crept closer.

Any attempt to find my father, if I opened my mind fully to the horrors of Isstvan, would likely kill me and everything around me in a psychic storm...

An Iron Warrior emerged from the darkness into the azure light. I saw him balk in the few seconds I had left. Throwing back my head, I unshackled my mind, let it roam and see all and everything. It unlocked the ring of scorched earth; it showed me the last truth that still eluded me.

White light, heat and the disorientation of translocation.

He was gone. Vulkan was gone.

A conflagration was blazing through my body and I lowered my eyes to watch my enemies flee in vain. I would give them a truth, just before we all died, before the cavern and the tunnel and several kilometres of the Isstvan plain were reduced to a blackened crater in the outpouring of my psychic anguish.

I did not regret my death, just as I did not regret my life. I wished I had met my father one last time, but that was not the future we had made for ourselves.

It is a grim, dark horizon we are travelling towards. In it the galaxy burns.

But there is still hope...

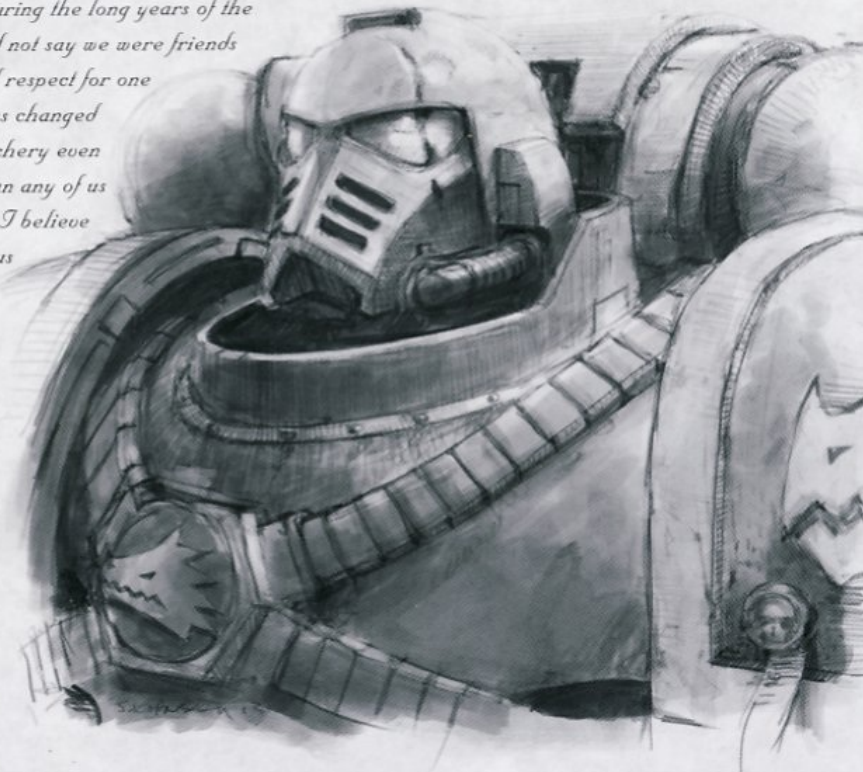
'There is still hope,' I said aloud, my voice rising to a scream.

The Iron Warrior slowed and turned. As he looked into my eyes, I think he realised that he was doomed.

Here was the truth; this was what I told him.

‘Vulkan lives!’

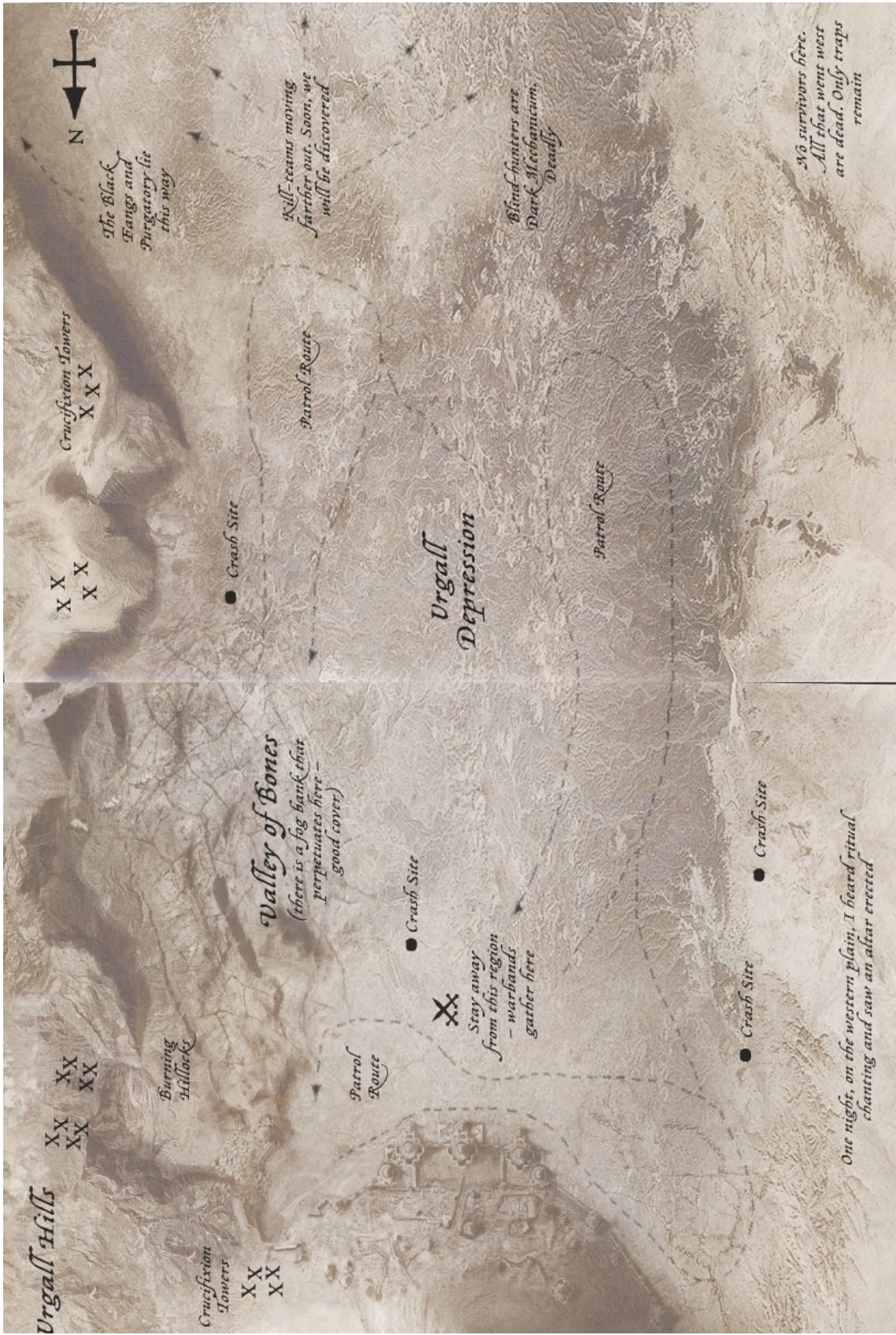
I fought with Usabius during the long years of the Great Crusade. I would not say we were friends but we did share a mutual respect for one another. This conflict has changed us all, this particular treachery even more so and far deeper than any of us could have imagined, but I believe it has brought the two of us closer as brothers. How I wish it could have been during more glorious times than these.



The Raven Guard I find to be of sour mood. I suspect it is a defence mechanism of sorts. One such as he, a member of the Apothecarion, has seen death both on and off the battlefield, but not like this. The scale of murder and injury on Isstoan must be testing even Morvax's formidable limits. I see him sometimes, as he's wiping down the blood, staring into darkness. I often wonder what he sees there and if it's the same as what I see.



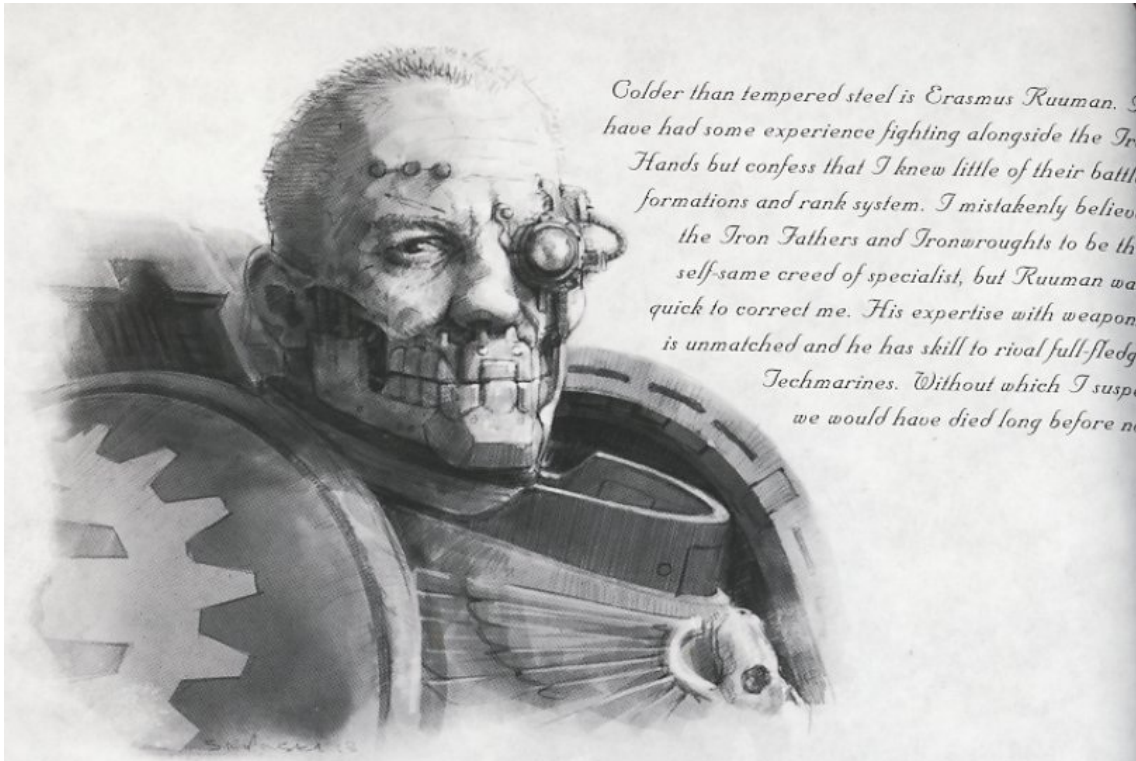












Colder than tempered steel is Erasmus Ruuman. I have had some experience fighting alongside the Iron Hands but confess that I knew little of their battle formations and rank system. I mistakenly believed the Iron Fathers and Ironwroughts to be the self-same creed of specialist, but Ruuman was quick to correct me. His expertise with weapons is unmatched and he has skill to rival full-fledged Techmarines. Without which I suspect we would have died long before now.



Ishmal is broken. I can see it in his eyes, in his mangled body that he's forced to roll around on a makeshift wheeled chair. He clings to command, but it's all he has left to hold on to. He is also deluding himself if he thinks Lord Manus survived. I wonder if he truly believes this or if it is merely a facade to prevent some danger wrought by the Iron Hands from reaching the Iron Hands.

...some deeper mental trauma than the one he is already suffering from overtaking him.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nick Kyme is the author of the Tome of Fire trilogy featuring the Salamanders. He has also written for the Horus Heresy, Space Marine Battles and Time of Legends series with the novels *Vulkan Lives*, *Fall of Damnos* and *The Great Betrayal*. In addition, he has penned a host of short stories and several novellas, including 'Feat of Iron' which was a *New York Times* bestseller in the Horus Heresy collection *The Primarchs*. He lives and works in Nottingham.