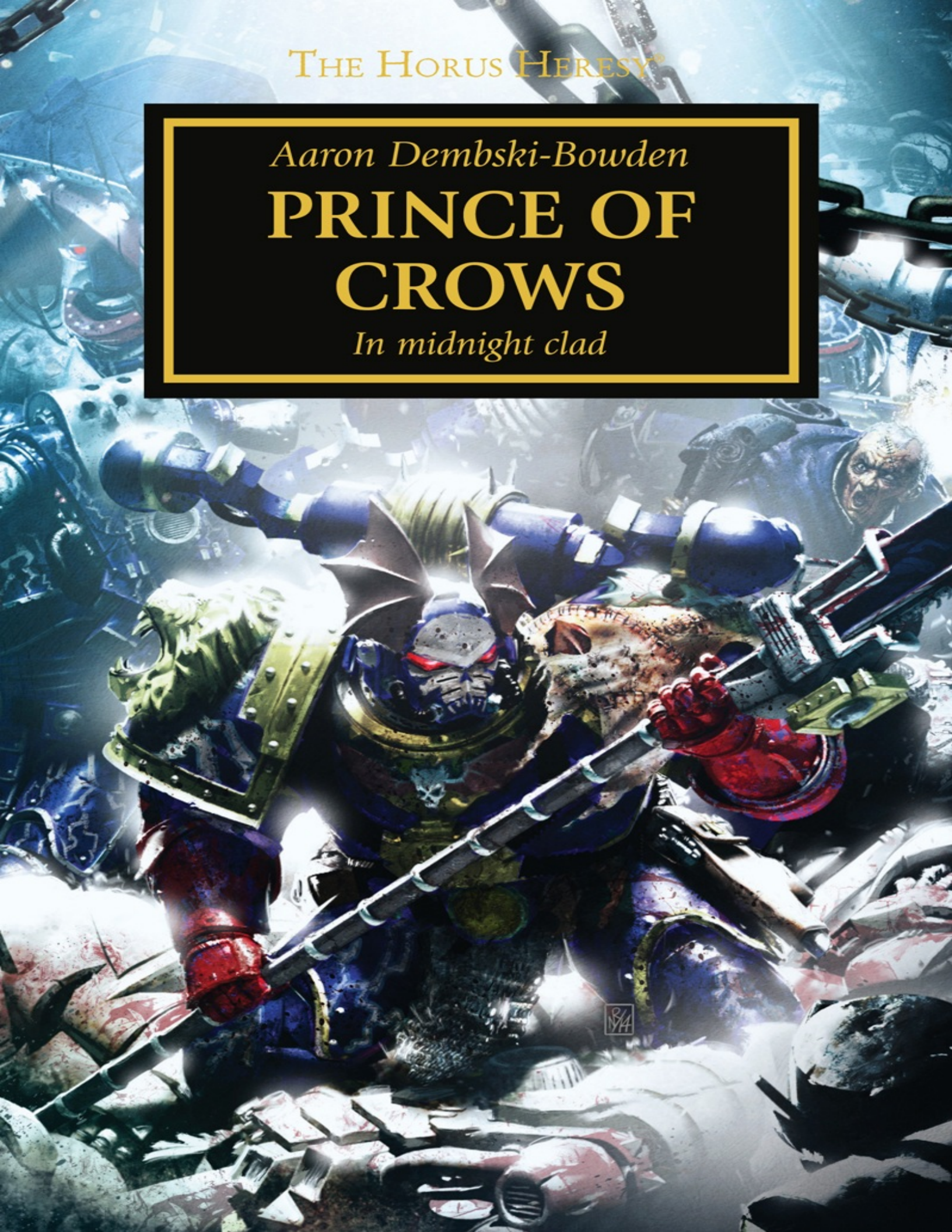


THE HORUS HERESY®

Aaron Dembski-Bowden

PRINCE OF CROWS

In midnight clad



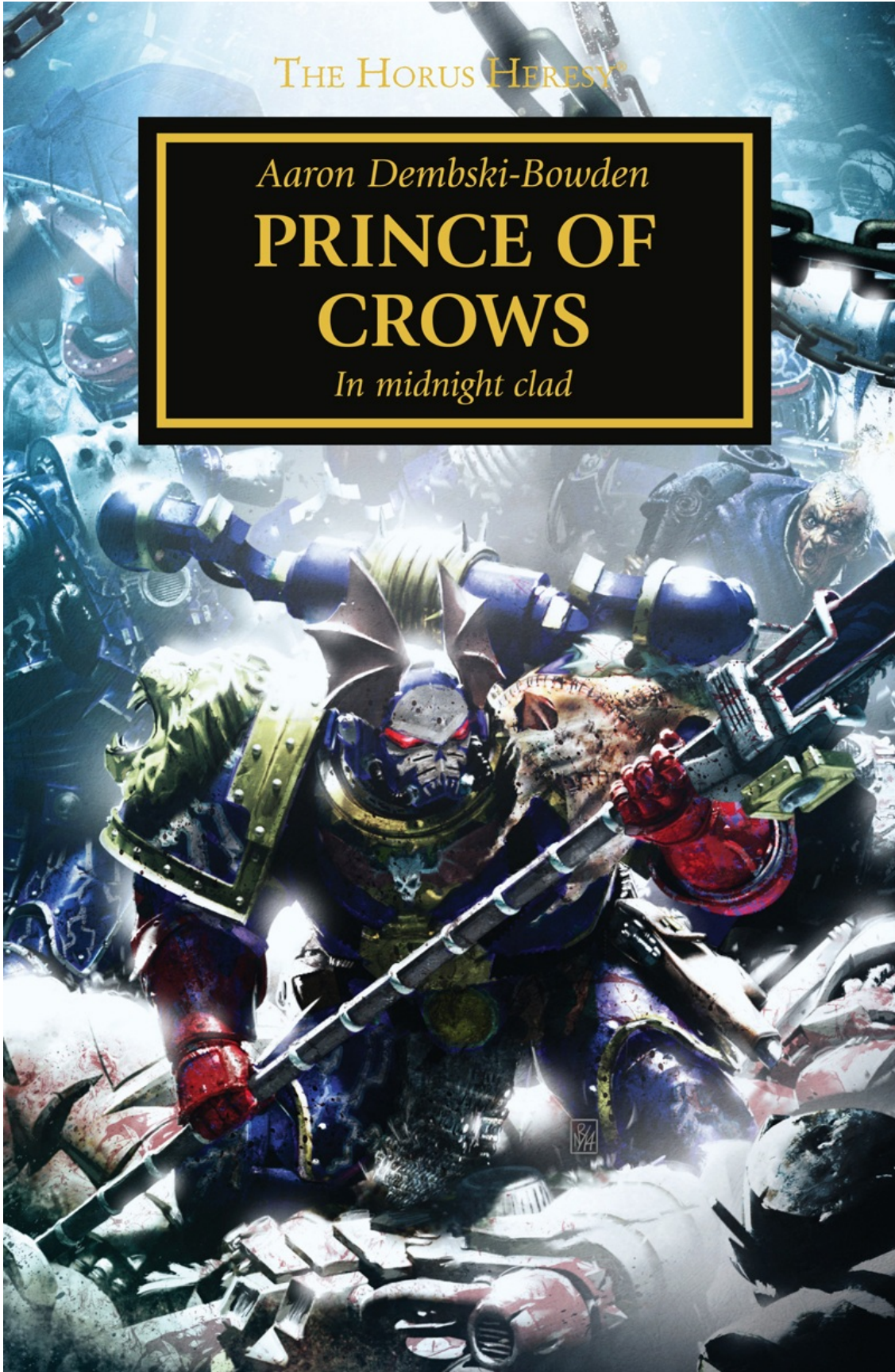
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CROWS**

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THE HORUS HERESY*

It is a time of legend.

THE GALAXY IS IN FLAMES. THE EMPEROR'S GLORIOUS VISION FOR HUMANITY IS IN RUINS. HIS FAVOURED SON, HORUS, HAS TURNED FROM HIS FATHER'S LIGHT AND EMBRACED CHAOS.

HIS ARMIES, THE MIGHTY AND REDOUBTABLE SPACE MARINES, ARE LOCKED IN A BRUTAL CIVIL WAR. ONCE, THESE ULTIMATE WARRIORS FOUGHT SIDE BY SIDE AS BROTHERS, PROTECTING THE GALAXY AND BRINGING MANKIND BACK INTO THE EMPEROR'S LIGHT. NOW THEY ARE DIVIDED.

SOME REMAIN LOYAL TO THE EMPEROR, WHILST OTHERS HAVE SIDED WITH THE WARMASTER. PRE-EMINENT AMONGST THEM, THE LEADERS OF THEIR THOUSANDS-STRONG LEGIONS ARE THE PRIMARCHS. MAGNIFICENT, SUPERHUMAN BEINGS, THEY ARE THE CROWNING ACHIEVEMENT OF THE EMPEROR'S GENETIC SCIENCE. THRUST INTO BATTLE AGAINST ONE ANOTHER, VICTORY IS UNCERTAIN FOR EITHER SIDE.

WORLDS ARE BURNING. AT ISSTVAN V, HORUS DEALT A VICIOUS BLOW AND THREE LOYAL LEGIONS WERE ALL BUT DESTROYED. WAR WAS BEGUN, A CONFLICT THAT WILL ENGULF ALL MANKIND IN FIRE. TREACHERY AND BETRAYAL HAVE USURPED HONOUR AND NOBILITY. ASSASSINS LURK IN EVERY SHADOW. ARMIES ARE GATHERING. ALL MUST CHOOSE A SIDE OR DIE.

HORUS MUSTERS HIS ARMADA, TERRA ITSELF THE OBJECT OF HIS WRATH. SEATED UPON THE GOLDEN THRONE, THE EMPEROR WAITS FOR HIS WAYWARD SON TO RETURN. BUT HIS TRUE ENEMY IS CHAOS, A PRIMORDIAL FORCE THAT SEEKS TO ENSLAVE MANKIND TO ITS CAPRICIOUS WHIMS.

THE SCREAMS OF THE INNOCENT, THE PLEAS OF THE RIGHTEOUS RESOUND TO THE CRUEL LAUGHTER OF DARK GODS. SUFFERING AND DAMNATION AWAIT ALL SHOULD THE EMPEROR FAIL AND THE WAR BE LOST.

THE AGE OF KNOWLEDGE AND ENLIGHTENMENT HAS ENDED.

THE AGE OF DARKNESS HAS BEGUN.

~ DRAMATIS PERSONAE ~

The VIII Legion 'Night Lords'

JAGO SEVATARION, 'Sevatar', First Captain, Commander of the Atramentar

TAL VANEK, Battle-brother, First Company

ORRIN VALZEN , Primus Medicae

MALITHOS KULN, Ninth Captain

NARAKA, 'The Bloodless', 13th Captain

VAR JAHAN, 27th Captain

OPHION, 39th Captain

CEL HEREC , 43rd Captain

KRUKESH, 'The Pale', 103rd Captain

TOVAC TOR, 'Lackhand', 114th Captain

EKRA TREZ, Sin-Eater

TAYE KARENNA, Wing Commander, 'Veiled Ones' Squadron

KUL KYVEN, Naviseer, 'Veiled Ones' Squadron

VENSENT AURLIN, Gunner, 'Veiled Ones' Squadron

The XIX Legion 'Raven Guard'

ALASTOR RUSHAL, 89th Captain

PROLOGUE

‘FALL.’

The Knight-Lord of Caliban stood beneath the storm, a silver circlet crowning his brow, his ashen hair rain-painted against his pale features. The knight’s armour was a suit of black ceramite plating, engraved with sculpted lions forged from Martian red gold. Blood ran along the sword in his hands, sluicing away from the steel, rinsed by the downpour.

The other figure was an image cast in a cracked mirror. Where the Knight-Lord’s skin was pale, the other warrior’s flesh was a consumptive’s white, and his armour a midnight reflection of the storm above, crisscrossed with markings of jagged lightning.

The battle raged around them, above them, even beneath them as they waged war atop the piled bodies of their sons, wounded and dead alike. The Knight-Lord of Caliban had waited months for this moment. Now it had come, in the shrieking wind and howling rain, punctuated by the staccato cracks of thousands and thousands of bolters.

The knight stepped back, his duty done, the final smears of blood rain-washed from his sword. His brother staggered, clawed hands clasp his own neck. A dark, liquid torrent was gushing between his grasping fingers. He was trying to hold his throat closed, and he was failing.

‘Fall,’ the Knight-Lord said to his brother. His voice was broken, ragged, breathless. *Fall.*

The other warrior’s black eyes were wide, trembling as his life flooded through his hands. He spoke without sound, lips working worthlessly, and finally fell to one knee. The wounds in his stomach and chest bled as fiercely as the cut throat. His body, systematically shredded and torn by the kingly blade, seemed to be held together by desperate hate alone.

The Knight-Lord wasn’t a soul given to smiling, nor was he petty enough to

mock a fallen foe. He lifted his blade in salute, crosspiece resting against his crowned forehead, honouring a slain enemy.

‘I told you,’ the Lion said to his dying brother, ‘I would be the end of you, Curze.’

PART I

THE KYROPTERA

CHAPTER I

Fraternity in shadow

THE BROTHERS ALWAYS met in darkness. Their penchant for convening in a lightless chamber wasn't for the theatrics of symbolism, nor from a need for secrecy. Some traditions simply existed unchanged from their genesis, born of habit rather than artifice. Once, the darkness had mattered. Now, it simply was.

Red eye-lenses cut through the gloom, accompanied by the grinding purrs of joint servos and active power cables. Mark IV armour wasn't a silent invention, by any means. It was even louder when it was damaged.

The three brothers stood in silence. Defeat cloaked their shoulders, clinging closer than the shadows in which they stood. Their shame was fresh enough that none of them had even repaired the damage to their armour. Occasional sparks from ruptured joints cast flares of light across the chamber, while the air slowly ripened with the scent of battle emanating from their broken suits of ceramite. The chemical stench of fyceline clashed with the crude tang of promethium. Behind it all was the grey scent of gunsmoke, insipidly close to charcoal.

'Three of us,' said one of the brothers. 'Three of us survived.'

'There may yet be more,' said another.

The first scoffed at the notion. 'There won't be any more. Have you been blind for the last nine hours? Did you not see what just happened? How many ships did we lose?'

The third brother leaned on the edge of the central table, his crested helm tilting to regard his kindred in turn.

'We cannot know. Not until the fleet masses again. I saw the *Praxis Mundi* break apart and take out seven of her escorts. The *Lady Sapienta* died before her. The *Aeternum Dread*. The *Throneless King*. The *Obfuscate*. Those are merely the cruisers I saw die. I cannot speak of how many frigates and destroyers. Too many to name.'

'What of the *Nightfall*?'

The third brother shook his head. ‘Aflame within and breached without. The flagship cannot have escaped. The Dark Angels went for her throat as viciously as the Lion went for Lord Curze’s.’ He paused for a moment, taking a slow breath. ‘The *Nightfall* should have been the first ship to run. I can’t comprehend why she stayed. What profit was there in trading firepower with the Dark Angels fleet?’

‘I heard the vox-reports,’ said the first brother. ‘Sevatar ordered the flagship to remain in-system, while he recovered companies from the surface whose vessels had already fled.’

The third snorted. ‘How very *noble*. So he killed himself and lost the flagship. Mark my words – no longer will the name Sevatar be celebrated among our ranks. How did the Angels arrange this? The ambush... the coordination was beyond anything I’ve seen.’

‘Does that even matter?’ the first replied. ‘Unless we strike back with overwhelming force, we’ve just lost the Thramas Crusade.’

‘The Legion must regroup at the fallback junctures,’ agreed the second. ‘We can recommence hostilities once we have our bearings, and the logistics are codified.’

‘Aye,’ said the first. ‘There speaks wisdom. It might be weeks, it might be months, but we are far from finished.’

The third brother called up a tactical display, but the flickering hololithic image stuttered and died before showing anything of worth. The ship had taken severe damage in its flight; many of its systems were still struggling to realign.

‘We face two problems – both bladed, both unkind. First, we must disseminate word of the defeat to all Legion forces in the rest of the sector via our astropathic choirs, so our brothers don’t run headlong into the ambush site we just fled. That will require a wealth of good fortune to work.’

‘And the other problem?’

The third brother hesitated before answering. ‘We must do that which only one Legion has ever had to do. We must choose who commands the remaining forces, with our primarch fallen.’

‘Fallen doesn’t mean *dead*, brother. Have you received word from the apothecarion?’

‘I have, and it doesn’t bode well. Who among the Legion has ever treated a wounded primarch before? We’re working blind. The wounds have closed, though not cleanly. Blood loss is severe. Cranial damage and oxygen starvation are still both potentially terminal, or crippling. Haemorrhaging is rampant.’

Organs I cannot even name are lacerated and severed from vein networks we've never seen before. If he were human – if he were even one of us – a single one of his wounds would be enough to see him dead. He's sustained eleven such lethalties.'

The proclamation hung in the air. None of the brothers wished to add to it.

'I saw it happen,' admitted the second. 'Even recovering him cost us too many lives. I surrendered most of a company in forcing the Lord of the First Legion back. I regret giving that order, I assure you.'

The others nodded. 'The truth is cold, but we must face it: the three of us lead the Legion now.'

They tasted that truth in a moment of silence, interrupted by the communication feed from the command deck opening in a storm of crackles.

'My lords,' said the human captain. 'Another four vessels have reached the edge of the system.'

'Name them,' said the first brother.

'Auspex coding registers them as the *Quintus*, *Dusk's Daughter*, the *Covenant of Blood*, and... and the *Nightfall*.'

THE WAR ROOM'S bulkhead door opened on grinding tracks, admitting the emergency red lighting of the corridor beyond. The figure in the doorway wore a helm to match his three kindred, with its crest of backswept gargoyle wings and skull-painted faceplate. Tourmaline eye-lenses stared at the three warlords gathered in the dark.

He'd come alone, but he'd come armed. A spear rested on his shoulder guard, ending in a deactivated chainblade with several rows of jagged, chipped teeth.

'I hope you'll forgive me for being late. There was an ambush. You may have noticed it. Not all of us could just light up our engines and run for the deepest black.'

He walked into the chamber, taking a place at the central table.

'It is good to see you, Sevatar.'

'I'm sure it is.' Sevatar glanced at the tactical hololith drifting in the air above the table, showing a spread of several VIII Legion vessels in the deep void. 'So this is defeat. Now we know how the Raven Guard and Salamanders felt.'

'We've mustered close to one-twentieth of the fleet's strength here. We must reform as best we are able in the weeks that follow, and face the facts. We are wounded, but not dead. The Thramas Crusade cannot end here.'

Sevatar said nothing at first. After several moments, during which he realised

they weren't making some foolish jest, he looked at them in turn.

'The three of you did well to evacuate the primarch. Have you had any contact with the rest of the Kryptera?'

'Only to confirm deaths of Jexad, Shoma and Ithillion,' the second brother replied. 'We are all that remains of the Kryptera now.'

'So three of the seven are dead,' Sevatar mused aloud, 'and the primarch is wounded.'

'The primarch is dying,' corrected the second brother. 'We lead the Legion now.'

'We'll see. Either way, the future is grim.' Sevatar dropped his halberd onto the table, ignoring the resonant clang of metal on metal. 'This won't do at all. Of the seven, you three are the ones I like least.'

'Please be serious, brother.'

Sevatar had a certain way of smiling. Amusement brightened his black eyes first, before tugging at the corners of his lips in soft twitches. It was the smile of a corpse with hooks pulling at its cheeks, or a soul that didn't really understand humour in the same way as those around him – thus he had to feign it to the best of his limited ability.

Sevatar smiled. 'Am I to assume you brave creatures have devised a plan?'

'We have,' replied the first brother. 'Once the fleet's strength is rebuilt, we will strike back. The question is where.'

Sevatar tilted his head. 'That's your plan?'

'It is.'

The First Captain cleared his throat. This moment required a degree of subtlety. 'Already,' he said, 'you are trying to take us down a path we shouldn't walk. You speak of retribution, of counter-attacking a foe that has proven they can outmanoeuvre us.'

The others hesitated. 'Of course. What else would we do?'

'We could fight a war we actually have a chance to win instead,' Sevatar replied.

'Run?' asked another. 'We have a duty to keep the First Legion engaged here.'

Sevatar raised an eyebrow, though the expression remained hidden behind his faceplate. 'At the cost of the Legion? You wish to whore our lives away to slake your frustrated bloodlust at being beaten. There is nothing noble in that, brothers. I won't let you take the Legion to the grave because you can't admit we lost.'

'The primarch would wish us to fight this battle to the end.'

‘He would indeed, but you said the primarch is dying. If so, his wishes mean nothing at all.’

‘The Dark Angels are our equals, not our betters,’ one of the brothers stressed. ‘We can win the Crusade with the right counter-attack.’

‘So you say, Malithos,’ Sevatar replied with the same mild, unpleasant smile. ‘It sounds to me as though you’d cripple us all in a bid to soothe the Legion’s bruised ego.’

Malithos, Captain of the Ninth Company, growled through his crested helm’s vox-grille. ‘If Lord Curze dies, your reign as his precious favourite ends this very night.’

Sevatar was still smiling. They could hear it in his voice. ‘Don’t threaten me, Ninth Captain. It will not end well for you.’

‘Brothers, be at peace,’ said the second of them. ‘Sevatar, you are right – we must beware of wounded pride forcing us into foolish action. And Malithos, you are right. We have to strike back, for duty and pleasure in equal measure. But we must not be at odds. The moment is too grave.’

‘I appreciate your conciliatory efforts, Var Jahan.’ Sevatar’s voice was calm, devoid of the usual baiting edge. ‘But the Lion’s forces just broke the Legion’s back in a single strike. The entire fleet is scattered. We lost dozens of ships, both our own and those of the humans that follow us. The last I saw of the Legio Ultricon’s flagship was its wreckage, spilling into the void after the kiss of Dark Angels guns. How many Titans died in that wreck alone? How many tens of thousands of trained crew?’

‘We will regroup,’ said Malithos. ‘It is our duty. The war hasn’t ended just because you’ve become craven.’

‘Craven,’ Sevatar replied. ‘A strange word to use when describing the one who remained behind to help the slower ships evacuate.’

‘But duty *demand*s we fight,’ said Var Jahan, Captain of the 27th. ‘Death is nothing compared to vindication.’

Sevatar grinned at that. ‘Such pretty words. I wonder if they’ll echo into eternity as wisdom or foolishness. Whichever Fate decides, you will not have me at your side. Some of my sub-captains already speak of sailing to Terra, or rejoining the Warmaster’s fleet. Others wish to break apart to venture elsewhere, harrying Imperial supply lines. I am inclined to grant them their request, rather than send them to die with you.’

‘The Kryptera will vote,’ said Malithos.

Sevatar gave a sneering snort. ‘Voting. How very democratic. Since when have

we needed to vote on anything?’

‘Since you returned to us,’ said the last brother, Cel Herec, Captain of the 43rd, ‘and the Kyroptera ceased to speak with one voice. United we stand, Sevatar. Divided we fall.’

‘So many pretty words tonight, yet they all miss the point. The Legion is better suited to the shadows until we are ready to strike in force. *Then* we butcher. *Then* we taste their blood. The Angels just taught us a stern lesson in the foolishness of gathering together in one place, and trying to engage in a fair fight.’

Sevatar leaned on a support pillar, crossing his arms over his chestplate as he continued. ‘I’ll be absolutely clear, since you are all so reluctant to take the hint. I *will not let you* take the Legion back into this war, after such a crippling defeat. That’s all there is to it. I will take the Atramentar, along with any other companies that choose to stand with me, and rejoin the Warmaster’s fleet. There is nothing more we can do here – and I say that delaying the Dark Angels for almost three years is more than long enough. I am finished with the Thramas Crusade. I am taking my companies to Terra. I plan to see the real war before the final day dawns. The rest of the Legion should come with me. I may lose my temper if you try to keep fighting this meaningless war.’

Malithos looked at his brother in raw disbelief for a moment. ‘Are you mad, Sevatar?’

‘I don’t think so. I feel fine.’

‘How would you stop us from staying?’ asked Var Jahan.

‘I’d kill you, of course. But let’s hope it doesn’t come to that. Emotions are running high, and my spear is all the way over there.’ He gestured to where it lay on the table.

‘Brother, if you’re finished acting the fool, may we focus on the matters at hand?’

‘Focus on them all you like. I’m going to see the primarch with my own eyes, rather than rely on your prattling about his demise.’ Sevatar moved away from the pillar, heading for the sealed bulkhead.

‘Your spear, Sevatar.’

‘I will be back for it soon enough. Enjoy your discussion, brothers.’

He walked from the chamber, his silhouette filling the entryway for a moment before he turned the corner. The door rumbled closed.

Malithos shook his head. ‘I grow weary of him,’ he said to the others.

‘Many of us do,’ Cel Herec replied. ‘When we rebuild the Kyroptera, we would be better served if Sevatar found himself unable to rejoin.’

Malithos sneered, as only he could do. ‘Why the spineless turn of phrase? Just say the truth. I’ll kill him myself, when the time comes.’

Var Jahan scarcely listened to their words. His attention lingered on Sevatar’s spear, resting on the table. The blade was a monstrous glaive; the haft a solid length of black iron and ridged ceramite; the rear butted by a brutal spike, with a crystalline power generator above. Every warrior within the Eighteen Legions knew of that blade. What far fewer knew was the nature of the haft’s secondary generator. Having fought at Sevatar’s side many times, Var Jahan knew its purpose very well indeed.

Ultimately, Var Jahan trusted none of his brothers, least of all those in the Kyroptera. When his teeth began to itch with the onset of displacing air pressure, he was the only one of the three captains not surprised.

He was also the only one running for the door.

THE ASSASSINS APPEARED in a storm of white noise and aetheric mist. As the captains recoiled, raising futile hands to ward off the blinding light, all three knew just what that thunder heralded. Malithos and Cel Herec reached for their weapons, which was why they died. Var Jahan never stopped running.

The Atramentar manifested across the chamber, wreathed in the greasy after-smoke of teleportation flare, their bolters already raised.

‘We have come for you,’ the first of the Terminators growled before their guns opened up in a unified cascade.

Var Jahan heard his brothers die, heard their cries and gurgles across the vox, over the pounding of his boots and both hearts. Bolts took him high in the back and low in the left leg, sending him into a stumble, falling down onto a deck being riven by detonating shells. He rolled across the decking, never ceasing, and threw himself through the automated bulkhead.

In the corridor beyond, 27th Captain Var Jahan lay panting on the decking. He looked up at Sevatar. The First Captain stood with his back to the wall, arms crossed over his breastplate, looking down in idle curiosity.

‘Hello, captain,’ said Sevatar.

Var Jahan was rising when the doors opened again, releasing gunsmoke into the corridor. A squad of Atramentar Terminators stood in their hulking war plate, immense bolters aimed at the prey that had fled them.

‘Stand down,’ Sevatar said, and offered a hand to help his brother up. ‘This one was intelligent enough to sense my intent. He gets to live.’

Var Jahan almost spat. ‘Most generous of you.’

Sevatar chuckled before replying. ‘I thought so, too.’

‘Why did you kill them?’ Var Jahan moved so his back wasn’t facing the Atramentar. ‘Why did you want us dead? Fratricide, brother... Has it really come to this?’

‘We came to this the moment you three fools decided it was best to kill the Legion simply to expunge some imaginary stain on our imaginary honour.’

‘But the preparation...’

‘I had a feeling the Kyroptera would need reorganising. I was right.’

‘You killed them because they disagreed with you. Sevatar, you are insane.’

The First Captain gave a subtle shrug. ‘So I am often told. What matters is that the Legion needs the Kyroptera now more than ever, and we will not lead our brethren back onto the Dark Angels’ blades.’

‘But the Warmaster...’

Sevatar’s hand was at his throat before the sentence could end. The First Captain lifted him, slamming him back against the wall.

‘Do I look like I care what the Warmaster wants of me?’ Sevatar’s skullish faceplate stared with its red eye-lenses. ‘We never cared what the Emperor wanted of us. Why should we waste our lives out here in the back end of the galaxy, dancing to the Warmaster’s tune?’ He released Var Jahan, walking back into the chamber. ‘He has leashed us for three years. I am done with obedience. To the abyss with Horus and his arrogant whims. He is no better than the Emperor.’

Var Jahan followed his brother. He had to step over Cel Herec’s smoking corpse, sparing it barely a glance. Malithos had died in similar indignity; the Ninth Captain’s body was half-draped across the central table, blood pooling across the surface in a spreading lake.

‘True independence, then? Our allies in the other Legions are simply alliances of convenience?’

‘Better than living shackled to a sickened, dying Imperium.’ Sevatar’s voice was softer now, more distant. ‘Var Jahan. Forgive my display of anger.’ He recovered his spear, and rested it on his shoulder guard. ‘I am going to see our father.’

As the footsteps faded, Var Jahan looked to the towering forms of the Night Lords Terminators. They offered no hint of their emotions or thoughts, staring impassively through the scarlet eye-lenses of their brutish war-helms.

‘I know you all,’ Var Jahan said to them. ‘By name and reputation, even if I’ve not served with all of you. Thorion, Malek, Jakresh...’ he listed their names one

by one, nodding to them each in turn. ‘What did Sevatar offer you, to make such loyal warriors? What is it he holds over you that makes you serve him even through the spilled blood of our Legion-kin?’

Thorion, commander of the Atramentar, shook his head as coils of teleportation mist started forming around their dark armour.

‘He gives us the truth.’

Their departure was as sudden and loud as their arrival, leaving Var Jahan alone with the bodies of his brothers.

CHAPTER II

Lair

THE LAST TIME Sevatar wept had been as a boy, on the edge of becoming a man. After that night over a century ago, the boy he'd been never grew to manhood. Instead, he became a weapon, growing into a life with neither the need for emotion nor the time for tears.

Even seeing his gene-father in the apothecarion didn't move him to sorrow. He wasn't sure why. And yet he could hear seasoned warriors – murderers and flayers and torturers all – praying and weeping across the Legion's mass-relay vox-network. The Luna Wolves had sounded the same, when Horus was wounded. Sevatar hadn't understood it then, and he didn't understand it now. The easy expression of emotion was just something that happened to other people.

Curze lay on the surgical slab, tended by bloodstained Legion Apothecaries and the insectile arms of semi-automated medicae tenders attached to the ceiling. The press of bodies prevented a clear look, but Sevatar wasn't optimistic. He'd caught a glance at the primarch's severed throat, the flesh knitted in ragged cohesion, while the entire chamber reeked of spilled blood. There was something raw and primal in the scent, something beyond the coppery smell of human life. The Emperor alone knew what the primarchs really were. Sevatar had no inclination to waste time guessing.

But if the primarch died...

The thought ended there. He couldn't carry it any further. To try was no different from imagining a colour never before conceived, or recalling a song never before heard. His mind rebelled at the very effort.

How did a Legion function without its guiding hand? Without its lord, mentor, and genetic sire? *Father* was too trite a word when dealing with such concepts. *Father* implied mortality. Fathers died.

Sevatar remembered Isstvan all too well. Although he spent much of that

miserable massacre grinding through warriors of the Raven Guard, he'd been blade to blade with the Iron Hands when Lord Manus, their primarch, fell. He'd seen the psychic echo rip through them. Subtle in some, ravaging in others – every single warrior in the black of the X Legion had reacted with a fury suddenly unrestrained. All hesitation cast aside, all notion of a defensive battle forgotten.

Sevatar still carried scars from that battle. He could've had them sealed and healed by augmetic surgery or synthetic skin grafts, but he preferred to keep them as they were. They were some of the few things he wholly owned himself, in an existence of slavery to gene-wrought gods of war.

He looked down at his gauntleted hands, weaponless and painted crimson. Months ago, he'd told the Dark Angels the truth: that to bear hands of sinners' red was a gangland custom from Nostramo, forced upon those who failed their families. The fate of traitors and fools, carried into the VIII Legion as it conquered the stars. The Ultramarines had taken that tradition, as they took so much from the other Legions. It was less severe, less grave among the warriors of Ultramar – to them, a helm of red merely meant censure. To the sons of Nostramo, the crimson hands were a death sentence. The mark of the condemned.

Sevatar had earned his red hands on Isstvan V, for failures too great to forgive. Even the memory made him smile with an actual edge of sincerity, as so few things ever did. He lived life on borrowed time, every night a gift from the primarch until Lord Curze chose the hour of his execution.

The wet rasp of laboured breathing drew his attention, though he didn't need to look up. He smelled the man's wax-candle scent, the musk of fine parchment and old, old blood pushed through weak veins by a slow heart. The newcomer reeked of *age*, and therefore, of weakness.

Sevatar shuddered.

'Trez,' he greeted the archivist. The old man nodded in reply, wheezing into a rebreather mask. 'When did you come over from the *Nightfall*?'

'I just arrived, Jago. I came to get you. Please come back to the flagship with me. I have something to show you, and we have something to discuss.'

THE DOORS ROLLED open, freeing the smell of an open grave. Trez entered, still heaving shallow exhalations into his rebreather. Sevatar followed, his boots thudding on the decking, echoing off the arched walls.

Trez ignored the bodies hanging on chains. Sevatar didn't. Rare were the

moments he entered his primarch's inner sanctum, and despite everything he'd seen and done in over a century of serving in the Great Crusade, Curze's private chamber always made his skin crawl. Here he saw the madness within his father's mind, pushed out to infect the surrounding world. A psyche's truths, written in skinned bodies and desecrated remains.

Trez sucked in a ragged breath. Moisture droplets gathered in the transparent oxygen mask he wore, dewing before his thin lips.

'He talks to them.'

'Talks to who?'

Trez gestured to the bodies. 'Them.'

Sevatar reached out to one of the hanging corpses, giving its scourged, naked torso a gentle shove. The body rocked back and forth on its chains. Something dark and wet trickled from its open mouth, spattering onto the floor.

'Delightful,' the Night Lord said. He turned back to the archivist. 'What do you want of me, little man? I have a Legion to piece back together.'

Trez brought his old bones over to a chair by a wooden desk, sized accordingly for a human. With no evidence of impatience, he started leafing through parchments, the papers fluttering softly in his arthritic hands.

'You have never understood the man you serve,' he said without looking up from his work. 'None of his warriors ever have. Does that not seem like a risible flaw to you, Jago?'

Jago, thought the captain. *That's twice now.*

'My name is Sevatar.'

'Indeed.' Trez smoothed his thinning white hair back from his cratered features, arranging a piece of parchment on the desk, until it was placed just so. He read the words from the cream-coloured paper, between rebreather wheezes. 'Jago Sevatarion, born in City's Edge. First Captain of the Eighth Legion, Commander of the Atramentar, officer of the Kyroptera, known also by the names Sevatar the Condemned, and...' Trez snorted, shaking his head, '...and by the rather amusing title, *Prince of Crows*.'

Sevatar removed his helm with a snap-hiss of air pressure venting from unlocked collar seals. He breathed in the chamber's abattoir smell, his expression thoughtful.

'I'm not sure I like your tone. The last man to sneer at me like that soon wished he hadn't, little archivist.'

'Oh?' Trez looked up, curiosity writ plain across his weathered visage. 'And who might that have been?'

‘I don’t recall his name.’

‘I was given to understand all warriors of the Legiones Astartes were gifted with eidetic recall. A hololithic memory, if you will.’

‘We are,’ Sevatar admitted. ‘I just never asked his name. I was rather preoccupied skinning him alive at the time. Now tell me what you want of me, Trez. I doubt you’ve mistaken me for someone famed for the virtue of patience.’

The old man’s grin showed a blunt arsenal of age-darkened teeth. ‘You will need patience if you wish to lead this Legion.’

Sevatar laughed, drawing the spicy, meaty scent of unrefrigerated cadavers into his lungs. ‘Even you are sure Lord Curze will die? Even you, his devoted little ape-creature, have given him up as dead? Whatever will you do once you can no longer eat the mud from our master’s boots, Trez? It would grieve me to see you starve to death.’

The archivist went back his parchments, still smiling into his rebreather. ‘I know your secret, Jago.’

‘I have no secrets.’

Trez ran his fingertips over the Nostraman lettering, his fingers following the flow of inked words. ‘He told me, Jago. He tells me everything.’

Sevatar tilted his head, black eyes unblinking. ‘I have no secrets,’ he said again.

‘Then why do you hide from slumber, First Captain? Why do you force yourself to remain awake for weeks on end? Why – if you have no secrets – do you wake up with cold blood flowing through your pounding heart on the rare nights you surrender to sleep?’

Sevatar’s smile was as cold, and just as motionless, as the peeled-back rictus grins showing on the face of every chained corpse in the chamber. He said a single word, neither consciously weighted with threat, nor invested with any emotion at all. Just a single word, scarcely above a whisper, breathed through a dead man’s smile.

‘Careful.’

Trez had to look away. The tremble in his hands couldn’t entirely be blamed on arthritis, this time.

‘Sevatar...’ he said.

‘Ah, so *now* I’m Sevatar. *Now*, once you’ve pushed me to the point of losing my temper, you decide to show me an iota of respect.’ The captain stalked closer, his armour joints thrumming. Up close, the rumble of active power armour made Trez’s gums itch. Sevatar crouched by the seated old man, his black eyes

forming pits in his pale face as he stared. ‘What has he told you, Trez? What did my father share with his little eater of dreams?’

The old man forced the words through quivering lips. ‘The truth.’

The First Captain’s grin returned – a liar’s smile, never reaching his dark eyes. ‘You think I won’t kill you, right here, right now?’

‘The primarch...’

‘The primarch lies dying aboard another ship. Even if he walked in here this very moment, do you think I care? You disgust me, old man.’ The Night Lord cupped the elder’s jaw in his gauntleted fingers. A single twist, a soft squeeze, and the archivist’s skull would shatter in the warrior’s grip. ‘The stink of your slow blood and worn skin... The fading rhythm of the ancient heart in your chest... And now, the spill of such dangerous words from these careless lips.’ Sevatar released the old man’s head. ‘You make it easy to hate you, Trez.’

‘I can help you. That’s why I wanted to speak with you. I can help you.’

Sevatar rose to his feet, already reaching for his helmet as he walked away. ‘I don’t need your help.’

Trez cleared his throat, his voice husked by doubt. ‘It isn’t working any more, is it? The training. The meditation. You can’t hold the pain inside the way you once could.’

He didn’t even look back. ‘You know nothing, human.’

‘You’re lying, Jago.’

Sevatar masked his white face beneath the skullish helm. Chiropteran wings rose from the helmet in a feral crest, cast in dark iron. His voice was a vox-altered snarl.

‘I am a son of the sunless world, and Eighth Legion to my core. Of course I’m lying, Trez. It’s what we do.’

CHAPTER III

Preparation

THE PAIN CAME in a teasing touch, rolling against the back of his eyes in a throbbing tide. Just when he'd crest the dull ache and dare to hope it was receding for good this time, it pressed back with unwelcome insistence.

Sevatar wiped his dry, tired eyes with a thumb and fingertip. He didn't need his helm's retinal display to tell him he'd not slept in two weeks. He felt every hour of it.

'Captain?' asked a female voice.

He looked up from the hololithic tactical display playing out before his eyes, seeing a dark-haired woman in a rumpled flight-suit, carrying her visored helm under one arm. As he looked over at her, the sounds of the bridge came flooding back, breaking what remained of his fragile focus. He did his best to ignore the whispers, mutters, rattles and clanks of three hundred souls doing their duty.

'Speak, Wing Commander Karenna.'

'With respect, sir... you look like shit.'

'That doesn't sound like speaking *with respect* to me. What do you want, Taye?'

'I have bad news, sir.'

Sevatar didn't have to fake his smile. Bad news was one of the few things that never failed to amuse him.

'Of course you do.'

'The *Blade in the Black* just jumped in-system. Commodore Yul is aboard, alive and well.'

'That makes him the new fleet admiral. Offer him my insincere congratulations on a rank he earned purely by being the last naval officer standing. But what's the bad news?'

'He voxed to inform me that Wing Commander Verith died in the ambush. The Void Condors were lost to a man. Do you want me to allocate the *Blade* a fighter

squadron from one of the other ships?’

He waved the question away. ‘Ask the new admiral, that’s his game to play. My only order is that you and the Veiled Ones are to remain aboard the *Nightfall*.’

Karena saluted in VIII Legion tradition, her hand in a loose claw, fingers touching her chest, above her heart – a sign of submission, offering the heart itself to a commander. Another gang custom, weaving its way down the years. On Nostramo, it had always meant a much more literal and visceral offer: to promise something so sincerely, the speaker would have their heart cut from their chest if they were found to be lying or incompetent.

‘Your trust in me and my men is very gratifying, captain.’

Sevatar was already looking back at the hololithic display, watching the simulation of viable warp routes out of the system.

‘Go away, Taye.’

‘Aye, sir.’

Watching her walk away, Sevatar finally abandoned the tactical projections.

‘You,’ he addressed a nearby servitor.

‘Yes,’ came its dead-voiced reply. The thing’s bionic eyes didn’t seem to focus on anything at all.

‘Record these projected flight paths. Disseminate them to the rest of the fleet.’

‘Compliance,’ said the slack-mouthed slave. Its amputated fingers ended in stubs, each one a key to be plugged into standardised Imperial terminals. The servitor unblinkingly slid its severed digits into the connection port with five separate tiny clicks.

Sevatar turned back to the primarch’s empty command throne. Before the ambush, Fleet Admiral Torun Keshr had occupied the place next to it, forever standing in calm control. Sevatar had never seen the man fazed, not even when he lay dying under wreckage, as the bridge burned around him.

‘Help me up, please,’ the old officer had said. Sevatar hadn’t even tried. The man’s legs were gone. The First Captain couldn’t see them through the smoke, not that it would’ve made a second’s difference if he could.

Sevatar pulled himself back to the present.

‘Summon Captains Ophion, Var Jahan, Krukesh, Tovac Tor, Naraka, and Alastor Rushal to the *Nightfall*,’ he said, uncaring of which officer carried out the order. ‘I will be in the primarch’s chambers, waiting for them.’

He walked from the strategium without another word.

‘JAGO,’ THE OLD man greeted him, as the bulkhead doors rolled open.

In a moment of rare expression beyond a false smile, Sevatar looked genuinely confused. One eye narrowed in disbelief as he stared at the hunched old man at the desk, surrounded by decaying bodies hanging from the ceiling on rust-spoiled meathooks.

‘Do you ever leave these quarters?’

‘Rarely,’ Trez admitted. Sevatar’s arrival had distracted him from his writing. ‘Is something wrong?’

‘No more than usual. My brothers are gathering here this eve, little man. Be somewhere else.’

Trez repressed a shiver, wheezing into his rebreather. ‘Where should I go?’

‘An intriguing question. The answer is that I don’t care. Go anywhere that isn’t here.’

‘But Jago...’

Sevatar turned very, very slowly. Even helmetless, the joints in his armour’s neck purred unpleasantly as he turned his head to face the archivist.

‘Call me that,’ he said, ‘one more time.’

Trez looked at the First Captain of the VIII Legion, standing amidst an abattoir of hanging corpses, his face so unhealthily pale he might easily be hung on a flesh-hook himself. The chainlaive resting on one armoured shoulder was taller than the warrior who carried it.

‘Sevatar,’ Trez amended, quietly.

‘Better. Shouldn’t you be aboard the *Excoriator*, watching over the primarch’s dreams?’

‘Not now,’ replied the old man. ‘He isn’t dreaming as you would understand it. There’s nothing behind his closed eyes, nothing but the absolute dark.’

‘Fascinating. If you’re so devoted to staying, then at least keep quiet.’

‘I will. Thank you, Sevatar.’

Sevatar grunted an acknowledgement, and walked through the hanging corpses to where Trez worked at the primarch’s immense round table. The very edge of one side was taken up by the archivist’s parchments and data-slates. The rest of the circular slab played home to a mouldering cadaver. It looked like it had been pulled apart by a surgeon using no tools, nothing more than his bare hands. Gobbets of blackening meat were stuck to the table’s surface, cemented there by dried blood and bodily fluids.

Sevatar shook his head, reaching out to shove the corpse aside.

‘Don’t,’ Trez said. ‘Don’t, Sevatar.’

‘Why not?’ The warrior’s hand froze above the violated torso.

‘Lord Curze talks to them.’

‘So you said.’

‘No.’ Trez cleared his throat, though his voice still stayed phlegm-wet. ‘I mean, he speaks to them as they are. He knows when they’ve been moved, and it enrages him.’

Sevatar grabbed the body by its exposed spine and hauled it off the table. It lay sprawled on the decking after a dull thump.

‘We will deal with the primarch’s madness when he returns to us. *If* he returns to us.’ The captain keyed in a code on the interface now revealed, fingers tapping buttons crusted with gems of dry blood. Labouring hololithic generators flickered to life, beaming an image of the last display shown: the dead world of Tsagualsa, surrounded by its dense asteroid field.

Sevatar blanked the image, and called up a local void-scry. The fleet resolved, though blood on two of the projector modules stained parts of the hololith in swathes of red.

‘He wasn’t always this way.’

Trez looked up from his work again. ‘Pardon me?’

Sevatar hadn’t realised he’d spoken aloud. ‘The primarch. He wasn’t always this way. He had a vision of how best to bring worlds to compliance, and it was a vision we followed willingly. Now look at what he’s become. His private quarters are a reflection of the madness within. His own mind is eating him alive.’

Trez said nothing.

‘No comment, old man? No cunning retort, or words of wisdom? Are you not the being closest to our lord in all the great and grand galaxy?’

The archivist swallowed, breathing slowly into his rebreather. ‘He walks the same path as the rest of you, Sevatar. He is merely closer to the end of it. You’ll all be like him, one night.’

‘Not I. And don’t speak of him like he’s damned. There’s still nobility in him. Still strength.’

‘Oh, I know that.’ Trez gestured to the bodies. ‘He is not always this bad. He had a... difficult few months, before the ambush. His dreams were bleak, poisoned by doubt. He knows when and how he’ll die, Sevatar. He’s always known. The knowledge pains him more than you or I could ever understand. The pressure of it, the inevitability, is a tide against his consciousness.’

Sevatar shook his head. ‘He told me the same thing once. Did he tell you when

he believed the time would come?’

‘Yes, he did.’

Sevatar concealed his shock easily enough, though he’d not been expecting the primarch to ever share such a thing. ‘And is that time now?’

‘No.’

‘Then why is there still worry in your cataracted eyes, old man? If it is true, why has he suffered in this coma for two weeks, on the edge of death? If he’s destined to die months, years, centuries from now... why have our Apothecaries had to resuscitate him thirty-nine times? He cannot breathe without being plugged into machines that sustain his life by forcing his organs to function.’ Sevatar almost spat as he sneered the final words. ‘I do not believe in fate, or prophecy, or destiny. The primarch is a visionary and a genius, but even he can play the fool.’

Trez, wisely, said nothing. The door rolled open again, mere seconds later. A warrior in a skull-faced helm stood in the opening, his helmet showing the same flared, winged crest as Sevatar’s. Chains decorated his armour, a skull bound to each one – some alien, most human.

‘Sev,’ the newcomer greeted him, already walking into the chamber.

‘Tovac,’ Sevatar replied. They didn’t embrace, or grip wrists in the fashion of closer brothers in other Legions. They regarded one another a long moment, before Tovac Tor removed his helm. ‘You look like you died and forgot to stop walking,’ Tovac said.

‘So I hear. How is your ship?’

‘Still a wreck, the piece of shit. It’s a wonder she’s still holding together after the beating the Angels gave her.’ Tovac looked around the room, his black eyes narrowing. ‘The 114th has had little reason to come aboard the flagship for a long time, Sev. I see the primarch has done some redecorating since I was last here.’

‘True enough. We’ll speak of it when the others arrive.’

Tovac nodded, and spared a glance for Trez. ‘Begone, rodent. Your betters are speaking.’

‘Leave him,’ Sevatar waved the matter aside. ‘Let him stay. He’s harmless.’

‘You’re getting soft, Sev.’

Sevatar mimed a theatrical bow. ‘I have no idea what you mean. I’ve always been the very soul of kindness.’

Tovac snorted, a smile curling one side of his lips. ‘It’s good to see you again, brother.’

Sevatar wasn't quite sure how to reply; that sentiment always surprised him when others spoke it, nor did he understand why they said it so often. He said nothing of it, merely drawing the other captain's attention to the runic display of ships in the spread of local space.

'We have a third of the fleet gathered now. That's better than I'd hoped.'

'It's a fine start.'

Sevatar wasn't blind to the tension in Tovac's black eyes. The other captain was Terran, but the gene-seed had changed him as it changed all of them.

'Speak,' Sevatar said. 'I'd prefer the new Kyroptera not to begin by lying to one another and keeping secrets. It was a singularly inefficient way to lead a Legion.'

Tovac nodded. 'I thought that's why you summoned me. That's what I wanted to ask, brother. I'm glad to be chosen. Proud, of course. But why choose me?'

'Nepotism. Perhaps I just wished to choose the commanders from among the few friends I have.'

'Sev. Please.'

Sevatar was still looking at the tactical display. Its luminescence painted his face in dappled blue light. 'Because I trust you. And you're an awful liar. I like that. The Pacification of Arvaya may have also affected my decision.'

Tovac grinned – a patently malicious baring of his teeth. None of the VIII Legion smiled with anything approaching grace.

'The 114th enjoyed itself that night, let me tell you. Arvaya's survivors are probably still weeping over the skinning pits.'

Sevatar's reply was cut apart by the doors grinding open again. The newcomer entered more cautiously than Tovac, his helmed head turning between the other two captains. He paid no overt notice to the hanging bodies.

'Captain Sevatar,' he said. 'Captain Tovac.'

'Captain Ophion.'

He took his name as a welcome, entering with his hands never far from his holstered weapons. Ophion was careful not to touch any of the corpses, stepping around them rather than shouldering them aside as Tovac had.

'I confess, I have no idea why I was called to this council.'

'I suspect that will be a recurring theme,' Sevatar replied. 'The others will be here soon. We have to plan the Legion's future.'

CHAPTER IV

The Kyroptera

VAR JAHAN, CAPTAIN of the 27th Company. Born of Terra, as so many of the Legion were. An older warrior, famously cautious, more of a tactician than a murderer. He'd served the VIII Legion since the earliest days of the Great Crusade, when the Night Lords first took to the stars. Sevatar liked him immensely, but had no idea why.

Next was Naraka, Captain of the 13th Company. Naraka the Bloodless, his brothers called him, without the shadow of a smile. He earned the name during the compliance of Eight-Hundred-and-Nine Five, as the fifth conquest of the 809th Expeditionary Fleet. The 13th Company took an entire world without shedding a single drop of blood, through means few of the Legion's other commanders had been allowed to know. When questioned on it, Naraka always refused to comment. His company swore an oath of secrecy, inviolate and unbroken in the many years since.

Sevatar knew what had happened. He liked that story.

After Naraka, there was Tovac Tor, Captain of the 114th. Tovac Lackhand entered the Legion at the same time as Sevatar; as children they'd run together in the same gang. He earned his epithet from a malformed birth, born with only one hand. Despite the deformity, he'd passed the physical trials to enter the VIII Legion, and immediately been fitted with an augmetic graft. It still didn't behave as reliably as a natural limb – the Apothecaries had told Tovac that his malformed arm lacked a fully developed musculature, so his augmetic hand would always be a touch erratic.

Then, there was Ophion. As Captain of the 39th Company, he'd failed to distinguish himself beyond the base level of honour inherent in a century of solid, trustworthy service. All of his records – not that the VIII Legion was particularly meticulous in keeping them – spoke of a veteran Nostraman officer best-served by front-line duties, leading his men from the vanguard, and given

only moderate responsibility in a wider campaign. And yet... Ophion had ordered his warship *Shroud of Eventide* to remain on-station, fighting the Dark Angels back from their ambush, aiding Sevatar and the *Nightfall* as he fought to buy time for the weaker ships to flee. So Ophion apparently wasn't a thinker. Sevatar could live with that. In a Legion that considered tactical cowardice one of the finer and most amusing virtues, a rare sign of bravery was always worth investigating.

Krukesh, Captain of the 103rd Company, was VIII Legion from blood to bone. Taken as a youth from Terra, he rose to his captaincy by a murder duel, taking his former commander's head. Whatever would the Ultramarines or Imperial Fists have thought if such barbarous customs inside the Night Lords had become known before the betrayal? Savagery of that stripe was a natural projection of ambitious warriors freed of moral constraint. The gangland wars of Nostramo Quintus had a hundred varieties of honour duels and succession rituals based on the murder of one's predecessor. *The Pale*, Krukesh was called by his brethren. The primarch's gene-seed whitened the skin of every soul who endured implantation, and blackened the irises of their eyes. Krukesh, however, was gaunt to the point of emaciation, pale past anything resembling ill-health, edging on the preternatural. He was a starved cadaver in midnight ceramite, black eyes burning from sunken eye sockets. Sevatar suspected some form of low-grade gene-seed degeneration: uncommon, but not entirely unknown. Either way, Krukesh and Sevatar had history. Debts were owed, from times past. Even remembering them made the First Captain's skin itch.

Last of all was Alastor Rushal, born of Terra, but not born of VIII Legion genestock. He still wore the armour of his Legion, cast in a cold black, edged in dented white trimmings. The noble emblem on his shoulder guard – a raven in white, with wings spread wide – had been ritually broken by blows from a hammer, wielded in Alastor's own hand. All trappings of rank were gone from his armour, scratched away after the killing fields of Isstvan. Like the Night Lords, his face was pale and his eyes were dark. Unlike the warriors he stood amongst, the helm carried in the crook of his arm lacked the bat-winged crest sported by the VIII Legion's inner circle of captains. In this coven, he stood alone and unmarked.

Sevatar nodded to Alastor, before addressing the group as one.

'You will help me lead this broken Legion. You are now the Kyroptera of the Night Lords. Any questions?'

Several of the others exchanged glances. In the corner, Trez's rebreather hid

his smile. Tovac was the one to actually speak.

‘*That’s your greeting? That’s how you welcome us?*’

‘Yes.’ Sevatar didn’t blink. ‘Did you expect a speech?’

‘I don’t know what I expected.’

‘Then why do you sound disappointed?’

‘I...’

Sevatar tilted his head. ‘Any real questions?’

‘I have one,’ said Ophion. His face was a mess of recent stitches and skin grafts. ‘Why us?’

‘Because the rest of the Kyroptera are dead, with Var Jahan and myself as the only survivors.’

‘Obviously. And how did they die?’ Ophion asked.

‘The Dark Angels killed some of them. I killed the rest. Or rather, the Atramentar killed them, because I asked them to.’

Ophion snorted, not even remotely surprised. ‘But why *us*?’

Sevatar watched the other captain in silence for several moments. ‘You are a very suspicious man, Ophion.’

‘That I am.’

Sevatar saw no harm in the truth. ‘You are all variously loyal to me, intelligent, reliable, trustworthy, and divorced from the weakness of human compassion. The Legion needs leadership. It needs us.’

‘Then I’ll be the one to say it.’ Krukesh gestured a gauntleted hand at Alastor, his skullish face locked in a sneer. ‘Why is the Raven here? He leads no company. He commands no men. He cannot be one of the Kyroptera.’

‘He can, because I say he can. Unless the primarch rises and countermands my order, the Raven stands with us. Now, to business.’

Sevatar called up the hololithic display again. ‘What you’re looking at, brothers, is over a third of the Legion’s fleet. We’ve had contact with the other mustering points at Ykresh, Taur, and Sotha. The casualty figures are on the wrong side of hilarious.’

‘Don’t keep us in suspense,’ Var Jahan grunted.

‘The Dark Angels destroyed just over twenty-five per cent of the fleet in their ambush. They killed a quarter of the Legion in three hours.’

The new Kyroptera exchanged glances. None of them wished to say anything, leaving Sevatar to continue. ‘It’s only been two weeks. There may be several dozen vessels still in the warp, or caught away from the fallback points. But the confirmed casualties alone are grievous. Every shipmaster saw other vessels die.

Collating that list shows a fifth of the Legion dead in the void, or on the surface of Sheol. So...'

Sevatar turned back to his brothers. 'The question now is, what do we do?'

'Revenge,' said Var Jahan. 'Vengeance against the Angels.'

'Don't make me kill you, as well. Revenge against the First Legion would be a fool's crusade. I am striving to make this as democratic as possible, but don't try my patience.'

Krukesh tapped his knuckles on the hololithic table. 'What of the primarch?'

'Still in a coma,' replied Var Jahan, 'aboard the *Excoriator*.'

'What is the meaning of...?' Naraka gave the vaguest of waves at the bodies hanging all around, '...of all *this*?'

'*This*,' said Sevatar, 'is the result of our primarch's little telepath no longer doing his job. Isn't that right, Trez?'

The old man blinked, sucking in a gulp of oxygen through his facemask as the seven warriors slowly turned to face him. His stammered attempt at a response went nowhere. It barely even left his lips.

'The Sin-Eater is failing us?' asked Naraka.

'So it would seem,' replied Sevatar.

'My lords...' Trez swallowed.

'We're "my lords" now,' Sevatar chuckled. 'I was just "Jago" earlier.'

'My lords, please. Before the ambush, Lord Curze's dreams were becoming too poisoned, too dark. I struggled to purge them of the pain.'

Krukesh stalked closer to the wizened archivist. His cadaverous visage stared down at the man. 'Are you failing in your duties, little psyker?'

Trez's throat bobbed as he swallowed again. 'Please... I'm doing all I can... I'll double my efforts when he returns to us, I swear on my very soul.'

Naraka joined Krukesh, looking down at the hunched scholar. 'You gave the Legion your word before, telepath. And now you fail us.'

'Sevatar...' Trez managed to whisper between panted breaths.

'I did warn you to be somewhere else,' Sevatar pointed out. He let his words hang in the air, the implied threat adding blades to the leering black eyes staring down at the archivist.

'Leave him be,' Sevatar said at last. 'We need him.'

The two captains backed away, one chuckling, the other silent. 'The primarch's degeneration is a grave threat to us,' said Var Jahan from across the chamber. 'Mounting heads on spikes to warn slaves about the price of disobedience is one thing. Dwelling among the bodies of dead legionaries and

Legion serfs is quite another.’

Sevatar gently shoved one of the nearby corpses, sending it swaying on its rattling chains. ‘Degeneration is a harsh word. I regret using it myself in the past. Our lord is a haunted man, that’s true. But he remains unbroken. This war – this exile into the deepest black – is what’s poisoning him. He feels useless.’

‘Conjecture,’ said Naraka.

‘You’re guessing,’ Krukesh said in the same moment.

‘Am I now?’

Krukesh hissed in a breath through his bloodstained teeth. ‘Just tell us your scheme, Sevatar. We’re not fools. You’re planning something.’

‘Not a plan. An intent. I’m going divide the remnants of the Legion. I’ll scatter the Night Lords across the galaxy, to fight the war as they wish. Each of you will take whatever forces you can gather, forming one of six Great Companies. And then do whatever you want. I don’t care, as long as you bleed the Imperium. Carve out your own slice of Mankind’s empire. Come with me on the long crusade to Terra.’ Sevatar shrugged. ‘The choice will be yours. Var Jahan, if you are still so ruthlessly committed to fighting the Dark Angels, you can remain with your companies and slow them down, as you desire.’

Var Jahan didn’t comment. Sevatar could see the thoughts curling in the depths of his black eyes.

‘Six Great Companies,’ Tovac said. ‘The Raven will be one of the Kyroptera, but he’s given no men to command? Why include him at all?’

Alastor said nothing. He merely forced a tight smile.

Sevatar nodded to the question. ‘He is one of us, whether he was born of Nostramo or not, and no matter what blood beats through his veins. To be Eighth Legion is more than flesh and bone. He earned his place among the elite at Istvan. Do you dispute it?’

‘Not I.’ Tovac inclined his head towards Alastor. ‘All here know I hold no grudge against the Raven.’

‘We need time to think on this, First Captain,’ said Var Jahan.

‘You have three nights before I begin coordinating the vessels of the force I’m taking to Terra.’

‘Will you kill us if we disagree with this... division?’ asked Ophion.

Sevatar gave his flesh-hooked grin again. ‘And they told me you weren’t a thinker, Captain Ophion.’

SEVATAR BOARDED THE *Excoriator* with Var Jahan at his side, and Ekra Trez

trailing along at their heels. In other Legions, the arrival of the First Captain and the vessel's own commander might have prompted at least a little ceremony. In the VIII Legion, the menials and serfs working in the hangar bay lowered their heads in respectful silence, and did their best to carry on their duties unnoticed.

As the captains walked through the dark corridors of Var Jahan's warship, Sevatar spoke softly.

'There's something I've just realised I don't know.'

Var Jahan glanced to his left, immediately on edge from the introspective tone in his brother's voice. 'Yes?'

'How did the Terrans in the Legion feel when we all watched Nostramo burn? It wasn't their home world, after all.'

Var Jahan mused over the question, unsure how to answer. 'Half the Legion is Terran, Sevatar. You've never spoken to any of them about this, even once?'

The First Captain didn't reply. He sometimes had great difficulty recalling that other people had different perspectives to him. Of course he knew that they led different lives, and were shaped by different experiences, but he struggled to imagine their frames of reference. He couldn't, in essence, see things from their point of view.

Part of the problem was that he was so rarely wrong. It made it hard to take other people's opinions and observations seriously. He'd always been this way, even as a child. His mother had told him he'd grow out of it, that he'd become better with people.

He didn't. He hadn't.

It was the same in battle. He didn't know why he was different there, either. He didn't know why he ran faster, killed quicker, and tired slower than they did. He'd duelled Sigismund of the Imperial Fists once – the only warrior ever to beat him to a deadlock in over a hundred years of warfare. The duel had lasted almost thirty long, long hours of sweat, swearing, and the crash-clash of iron against iron.

He'd cheated, in the end. He finished the duel, as hundreds of warriors from both Legions looked on, by headbutting the Templar and disqualifying himself. It broke the rules, as well as Sigismund's winning streak.

True to his nature, Sigismund had done nothing but laugh. The proud stoicism the First Captain of the Fists was so famous for didn't bleach all humanity from his humour. Sevatar had always envied him that, for he found it very difficult to laugh, to joke, to bond effortlessly with brothers in arms.

'Forget I spoke,' he said to Var Jahan. 'Good luck in council with your

captains, brother. I will deal with the primarch's transfer.'

The two captains parted ways. Trez shuffled after Sevatar, saying nothing.

I know your secret, Jago. The memory of the old man's words was curiously cold.

Sevatar entered the apothecarion, offering a saluted greeting to the three Apothecaries lingering near the resting primarch. They returned his salute as he approached the surgical slab.

'Any change, Valzen?' he asked the Chief Apothecary.

'None. He sleeps.'

'Any sign of dreaming?'

'There's still no evidence of it, on any cerebral auspex sweep.' Valzen's face was partially augmetic – a silver and steel simulacrum of the features he lost to an Iron Hands warrior's chainfist on Isstvan. The ceramic black eye didn't blink, the mouth didn't move; Sevatar was an indifferent student of history, but he thought the shining visage harked back to the death masks of primitive cultures on Ancient Terra.

'Be ready to transfer the primarch to the apothecarion aboard the *Nightfall*. We leave in three nights.'

'Of course, captain.' Valzen hesitated, though his emotionless chrome face showed no hint of why. 'Why is the Sin-Eater here? I've told you in every report, sir, the primarch isn't dreaming. Trez's presence isn't required.'

'I know. Do not concern yourself with it.'

'As you wish.'

Sevatar looked around the busy apothecarion, at the servitors, the serfs in scrubs and surgical coats, and the Legion Apothecaries remaining by the primarch's side. He knew all three of the warrior-surgeons: Valzen was his own Apothecary, an officer in the Atramentar. The other two were from the Third and Tenth Companies, respectively.

'Leave me,' Sevatar told them all. 'Even you, Valzen. Clear the apothecarion. I want every soul gone.'

'Captain—'

'I have an idea that may bring him back.'

'Sev, I have to stay. You can't expect me to leave.'

'I expect you to do as I order.' In a rare moment of insight, Sevatar softened the demand with a hand on Valzen's shoulder guard. 'And I expect you to trust me, brother.'

TREZ BREATHED SLOWLY, once they were alone. His rasping respiration was a sickly wet rhythm behind the growl of Sevatar's armour, and the digital sounds of medical equipment. 'So this is why you brought me,' the archivist said. His voice echoed hollowly around the empty room.

Sevatar stood by the slumbering primarch. In repose, Curze looked less wretched, less weakened by the strains of commanding a guerrilla void campaign out here in the deepest black for more than two years, across hundreds of star systems.

Curze wasn't born for this. He was a justiciar, a judge, a man born to look traitors and thieves in the eye as he delivered their sentence. And now, what had he become? A general? An admiral? A warleader buried beneath logistics and tactical displays, cast out to languish with his sons at the far end of the galaxy.

Worse, he was a traitor now himself.

Sevatar had seen his primarch's desperation, the degeneration, the yearning for purpose in the star-scattered isolation of the deep void. He'd seen it taking place since they'd first set sail for the Thramas Sector, and now he wanted answers. Guesses and patience were no longer enough.

Sevatar's gloved hand remained above the primarch's pale forehead, fingers half-curved, unwilling to touch his father's face.

'This will probably kill you, Jago.'

He nodded to Trez's words. 'I know.'

The archivist sucked in a wet breath. 'You have the strength for this. But not the control.'

'I know,' Sevatar said again. 'But I have to try. I don't want him to die.' He looked down at his crimson gauntlet, painted as evidence of his sins. 'I failed him once already. I won't let it happen twice.'

Trez sighed, dew droplets of condensed breath sparkling on the inside of his rebreather. 'There's no going back from this. If you unlock the gift you've fought so hard to forget... Some doors cannot be closed.'

Sevatar was barely listening now. 'I already struggle to restrain it,' he said, his voice barely carrying over the humming of the ceiling air vents. 'Will you help me? I can't do this alone.'

The old man limped over on a creaking spine and shin-splinted legs. He reached out with a hand blighted by liver spots and the trembles of flaring arthritis, and closed his knuckly fingers around the back of Sevatar's red gauntlet.

The First Captain lowered his hand, resting his fingertips on his father's

forehead.

‘You said he wasn’t dreaming, Trez.’ Sevatar spoke aloud, dead-voiced and staring at nothing. ‘You were wrong.’

PART II

SON OF THE
SUNLESS WORLD

CHAPTER V

The boy who would be king

THE BOY ROSE from the wreckage, wearing nothing more than smears of ash and dirt clinging to his pale skin. He looked at the sky, dark as the void, blind without a sun's eye. He looked at the metal ruin of his cradle-engine, still hissing steam through its cracked, blistered armour plating. And then, still with nothing resembling an expression on his slender face, he looked to the horizon.

A city. A city of spires and domes, its dull, low lights still brightening the surrounding darkness with a beacon's intensity.

The first expression to play across the boy's face was subtle, but telling. His eyes narrowed as his heartbeat quickened. Instinctively, he knew he'd find others of his kind in the distant, light-rich hive. The thought made him reach for a weapon. White fingers curled around a jagged shard of metal, cooled in the soil.

The feel of the knife in his hands brought a second expression to his youthful, unscarred features.

He smiled.

THEY COULD NEVER catch him, no matter how they tried. The boy was a blur of black clothes, cut from the shadows on street corners. His ragged boots barely touched the ground as he ran.

Gunfire chased him, bestial and barking in the night. The bullets were insects, buzzing by his ears. He grinned harder, running faster. Around a corner. Into an alley. He jumped over the filthy rainwater puddles, spinning into a crouch between two large residential waste containers. The boy covered his white hands in his pockets, lowered his head so his dirty black hair veiled his face, and held his breath.

There he waited, a shadow like any other, all movement suspended.

His pursuers came in a breathless pack, their wheezing gasps scented of poisoned water and their skin smelling of other people's blood. Some went left,

some went right, but all of them ran through the puddles that turned the alley into a concrete marsh.

The boy had to try not to smile; their bootprints on the pavement would make tracking them the easiest thing in the world.

One of them stayed in the alley. From his ragged breaths and racing heart, the boy knew without looking that the man's corpulence prevented him from keeping up with his miserable packmates. The boy opened his eyes, rose to his feet, and left the shadows. He let the knife in his hand catch the reflection of a nearby streetlight.

The man turned, looking right into the skinny boy's smiling, snarling face.

His scream drew his friends back. The fastest of them took less than twenty seconds to reach the alley mouth again. When they arrived, there was no sign of the boy, and the fat man who belonged to their pack lay on his back in a rainwater puddle clouding with hot blood, with every finger severed and his skinned face bare to the bone.

HE WAS HUNGRY.

He knew he could rob the dead, take their coins and papers to buy food. He also knew he could simply steal food from the street traders, taking their fruit and warm bread, for he was quick enough to escape without ever being caught.

The boy's stomach knotted, coiling in on itself, groaning with need. He'd tried drinking his own blood the last time he felt this hungry. It helped take the edge off the pain, but left him just as weak as before.

Rats were no longer enough. He needed more. He'd caught one two hours ago, but he needed it to bait his trap. It took all his strength not to surrender to the torment in his stomach and just eat the starved vermin, little crackling bones and all.

Finally, a pack of three wild dogs, each one more ratty and bedraggled than the last, growled and snarled at the mouth of the alleyway, fighting over the dead rat the boy had left in the open.

His tongue tingling, thickened by the hot rush of saliva, the boy reached for his knife and started running.

HE WATCHED THE city below, crouched on the edge of the rooftop, hunched over in mimicry of the monstrous gargoyle next to him. His clothes were rags with no hope of keeping out the cold. He grew too fast, needing to steal something new almost every week. In truth, he was no longer even a boy. He was already as tall

as the people he cut, and carved, and killed.

The territory below belonged to the men and women with red tears tattooed on their faces. The boy usually avoided their domain, but tonight the screaming beckoned him closer. He'd warned them before, more than once. He'd warned them that they'd pay a price in blood every time they came into his part of the city.

And yet they came anyway. They'd come in packs, killing men from the neighbouring district, and dragging women back for sport.

No. No more. The pale man slipped from the roof, lowering himself with nothing more than handholds on the stone walls. His boots graced the alley below with a spectre's tread, and clad in a beggar's rags, he went to see why his warnings weren't being heeded.

They'd left sentries in the row of abandoned factories that marked the edge of their domain. He came across the first one – a man with a mangy hound – by dropping down from a hole in the ruined ceiling.

The sentry turned, raising his gun, but the pale man broke his arm at the elbow and rammed a dagger of glass into his dirty neck. The dog growled, backing away, teeth bared but unwilling to fight. The pale man stared back at it, his eyes narrowed, his own white teeth on show.

The dog ran away, yelping and whining.

Before the pale man left, he sawed through the dead sentry's throat and left the severed head on an iron fence railing. Perhaps placing the warnings *inside* the gang's territory would work better. He'd leave a dozen, perhaps twenty this time.

If that failed, the next time he'd leave forty.

WEeping WAS MUSIC to him. Gunfire was laughter. Sorrow and panic were the verse and chorus to his entire life. Not because he enjoyed them, but because in this city, they were all he heard. They were the sounds that nourished him in infancy, in absence of a mother's milk. With the cries of urban decay in his ears, he grew to manhood – and then into something beyond it.

They were writing about him. He couldn't read, but he still gleaned insight and understanding from looking at the script on a scrap of newspaper, or the scroll of text across a monitor. He learned the local tongue without trying, without even knowing how. The understanding simply came, and it felt right that it should do so.

An avenging soul, they called him. A murderous echo from the Age of Unwanted Law, stalking the city. A ghost from Old Earth haunting the streets at

night. First they gave him a name, to put a face on their fears. Soon enough, the name became a curse.

The Night Haunter.

HE GHOSTED THROUGH the cathedral, through this great house to a false god, crawling across the arched ceiling without a sound, lost above where the lights could reach. The queen-priest of this monumental building stole from her people. She bled them of money, of freedom, and of blood. She took their children. She controlled their lives. All for the dubious honour of her protection – protection from other street-kings and alley-queens, who would only do the same things she did.

It saddened the pale man to see how weak people were. Sometimes, they seemed no different from the dogs they used to guard their homes. They took the same beatings, and wore collars just as binding, if not quite as physical. Many of them were skin-inked by their masters, pressed into legal slavery, or simply ran the streets in wild packs, taking whatever they wished by threat or force.

Most of them – those that didn't serve as indentured slaves in the urban cityscape – were foundry workers, toiling in the stinking factories whose breath choked the skies and blocked out the weakling sun.

He walked on the edge of a society with no fear of punishment, and therefore no concept of justice. These people, on the basest level, had no need – no compunction – to obey anything but the rule of might making right. And even that rule was divided, broken down between hundreds and hundreds of petty pack leaders and warlords of the street.

Barely people at all. Closer to animals. Creatures in a hive.

But he'd watched them, and he'd learned. It was only instinct that kept them this way. Instinct could be controlled. Predators could be tamed. Prey could be herded.

The pale man knew he'd have to appear before many of them tonight – the cards had revealed that much to him. The thousands gathered into this place of sleazy sanctuary would see him for the first time. A necessary indulgence, nothing more. He'd learned from them. Now they would learn from him.

He crawled closer, closer, preparing to let go of the ceiling.

The fall would kill one of them, but the pale man had come to terms with being a breed apart. He released his grip, twisting in the air, his ragged clothing spreading out in wounded wings.

The gasps of the crowd were louder than his landing. Their minister, their

owner in her fine clothes that stank of gun oil and innocent blood, quivered and pissed herself. She was dead before she even started to fall, life's fluid gushing from the hole in her chest. The pale man burst the minister's heart in his hand, in a rustling squeeze of abused meat.

'The Night Haunter...' someone said, a lone voice among the stunned crowd. And suddenly they were all saying it, whispering it, shouting it. Some ran, others pointed, others reached for weapons of their own.

He saw the truth in that moment – a truth he'd sensed, but never faced. They hated him as much as their masters did. He was a daemon to them, just as he was to their owners. No one was safe from him.

The pale man turned and fled from their staring eyes, laughing all the while.

THE KEY TO change was to show the herd that their sins carried the threat of punishment. They had to see how justice would be done, because it was the only way they would learn.

Fear was the weapon, pure above all others. Fear would keep them compliant, since they'd proven so clearly they couldn't be trusted to keep to the most basic ideals themselves.

The Night Haunter knew all of this from watching and learning, melting his perceptions into the instinctive feeling of how the world should work. Without an education, he cared nothing for ideals of civilisation and culture; their depravity struck him as wrong on a much lower, more primal level. Their violence against each other ran counter to the very drive of herd animals, be they sentient or otherwise. A people divided would never rise, never achieve, never progress. They lacked even the unity required to prosper through hatred of a mutual enemy. Even that would offer some degree of progress and cohesion, yet even that was beyond them. Their lives were governed by the selfish need to steal from each other, and kill their neighbours.

The Night Haunter reflected on this as he gripped the struggling man by the throat. Tonight was a night like any other, with sinners to bleed.

'Please...' the man muttered. He was an old man, and that made it worse. The Night Haunter couldn't help but wonder how many years he'd been leeching coin and blood and life from the people of the city. He existed at the very apex of sin. His foulness tainted all below him.

'Please...' he said again. 'Please.'

Please. How often did the Night Haunter hear that word stammered in his presence? Did they truly expect him to pay heed to their begging?

‘I’ll give you whatever you want,’ the old man said. ‘Anything. Anything you want.’

The Night Hunter’s growl was a wet, burbling thing at the back of his throat. He loathed begging, principally because he didn’t understand it. They knew they were guilty, and justice had come for them. They deserved this. Their actions made it necessary. So why beg? Why seek to flee from the consequences of their own actions? Why sin at all if the price was too high to pay?

He growled again as the man kept begging.

‘You earned this,’ the Night Hunter replied, his voice curiously soft. ‘Do not beg. Do not blame me. This is the end of the path you chose to walk.’

‘Please...’

The Night Hunter shivered in revulsion. *Please*. There was that word again. The first word he’d ever learned, from hearing it leave the quivering lips of countless cowards.

‘I have a family...’

‘No, you don’t.’ The Night Hunter stared through a veil of filthy hair, scanning the empty warehouse. ‘Your wife and daughter are already dead. Your home burned to the ground an hour ago.’

‘You’re lying... You’re lying...’

The Night Hunter let go of the old man’s throat, letting him lie on the ground, unable to move with his arms and legs broken at the elbows and knees. With a knife made from a shard of broken glass, the Night Hunter crouched above his captive. The dagger-tip pressed into the soft skin below the old man’s right eye.

‘Everyone who shares a blood-tie with you is dead, for the crime of sharing in your many sins. This glass is from your bedroom window. I took it after I skinned your wife while she still drew breath.’

He slid the blade forwards, sinking it into the old man’s open eye. That was when the screaming really began.

Three hours later, the old man was found crucified on the spire of an abandoned city militia building. Hollow eye sockets stared out at the people passing, as the rain lashed his flayed muscles. The skinned man took almost twenty minutes to die, all the while shrieking as best he could without a tongue.

THE SUMMER AND the war both came from nowhere. No summer in memory had ever burned so hot and so long, turning the clouds above Nostramo Quintus sour with pressure storms. The city’s blighted landscape was no stranger to acidic rain as the inevitable result of its foundries’ exhalations, but that season’s downpours

were corrosive enough to strip paint from steel, and leave lesions on unprotected skin.

The war was ostensibly fought in the shadows, but on a world without sunlight, that turned the entire city into a battleground. The Night Hunter knew they were hunting him. He knew, and he encouraged it. It meant the hierarchy leashing the populace was starting to feel threatened. Better yet, they were starting to feel fear. They wanted him dead before he could come for any more of them. The people of the city had hated him for years already, back from when his name had been a whispered invocation of urban myth, and his deeds were no grander than the mutilation and murder of lowlife scum.

But now those in power were joining the game. They feared him, too. Change was slowly taking hold.

The last of the city's lords to fall at his hands had been a land baron, overseeing investments in the adamantium refineries to the south of the city.

'People are animals,' the Night Hunter had said to the cowering noble.

'Without fear of punishment, things fall apart. The centre cannot hold.'

'Please...'

That word again.

'You had all the power, all the opportunity, yet failed to learn the easiest truth of the human condition. You had your chance. Now your death will teach the truth to others.'

The Night Hunter had left his headless body hanging from a power spire by the ankles. The corpse was naked but for the savage decoration of three hundred and nine separate slices across the skin; one for each life lost in a recent foundry fire.

He didn't fear the fact that those in power hunted him now. Let them try. Every day saw him slumber in a different lair – on the days he decided he needed sleep at all. The Night Hunter cast aside the sloughed skin of a dull-witted thug he'd caught assaulting a woman on a rooftop. The flayed wretch had died before the skinning was complete. The woman had fled as soon as she'd been saved, screaming and never once looking back.

The Night Hunter washed his face in the blood of the dead rapist, staining his skin with sin, before running into the city's eternal night.

THE BANDAGE ON his forearm was stained dark by sweat and dirty rain, but at least the wound had stopped bleeding. The Night Hunter tested his arm, rotating the wrist, working the elbow joint and flexing his fingers.

Sore, nothing more. The bullet would leave a scar, but then, didn't they all? He'd not looked at himself in a mirror for some time, but running his calloused fingertips across his chest and back offered more than a slight pebbling of scar tissue from bullet holes. He couldn't dodge everything, no matter how much faster he was than the humans that hunted him.

He was still cold, each evening. Still wretched. But that, too, would soon change. He had an idea. A dream, amidst a life of nightmare.

The Night Hunter watched a cluster of beggar children, orphans of the streets not yet taken into gangs, stripping the jewellery and money from a dead body he'd left in the gutter. He could have killed them – the temptation to do so rose in his throat – but the sight of their scavenging made him laugh.

When the children turned with wide, frightened eyes at the sound, he was already gone.

ENTIRE NIGHTS PASSED when he no longer smelled blood. They kept to their houses and habitats now, rarely taking to the streets once the foundries closed for the evening. No longer did the roads of the city echo with gunfire and the shrieking of the wounded, the abused and the dying.

Still, the Night Hunter watched his city, his people. The sins were quieter, the crimes were hidden, but the city wasn't free from their corruptive influence. Their fear was all he desired from them, and all he received. Fear brought obedience. Fear forced them to rise above their sickening, animal instincts, and live as humans.

The hunt for his life still dragged on, but there were few within the hierarchy in a position to sustain their grievance. Thugs and hired guns were becoming notorious for refusing to hunt him at all, and the small-minded, cowardly men and women who desired him dead would never take to the streets to do it themselves.

The Night Hunter broke the bone in his teeth, with the last of the meat licked clean. The sour pork taste no longer made him cringe. Years of necessity stole all such reluctance and hesitation.

He tossed the human tibia away, and licked his teeth clean. There were some nights when he almost missed the taste of dog.

'LADIES,' HE SAID. 'Gentlemen.'

The gathered nobles tensed at the words. Their bodyguards reached for concealed weapons. The moment rested on a knife edge.

He crouched atop a minister's throne, his immense, strangely slender bulk darkened by the rags he wore over his pale, scarred skin, and the filthy curtain of dark hair covering patches of his face.

'We must speak,' he said to them. His voice was a ghost's breath, all sibilance and subtlety. In the half-light, his eye sockets were sunken pools in a wraith's face. His smile was a slit between lips the colour of milk.

The bodyguards, armoured only in suits of expensive tailoring, were aiming their weapons at him now. Pistols. Slugthrowers. He bore a host of scars from such weapons. To see twenty of them aiming directly at him now did nothing more than rack his mirthless smile higher.

'You can't kill me,' his voice seethed. 'Do not even try. This is not how it ends.'

The Night Hunter leaned forwards, his face touched by a sliver of light from the low-power illumination strips set in the ceiling. His gaunt features could've been sculpted from alabaster, no warmer to the touch, no more alive than stone.

'Why are you here?' one of the nobles asked. 'What do you want?' The Night Hunter could smell the coppery rancidity of fear on the man's breath.

'I could ask for this city, couldn't I? But it is no longer yours to give. I've already taken it.'

He remained crouched atop the throne, clothed in rags and shadows. He could feel the effect his presence had on them – he could hear the trickle of fear-soiling in their clothing, hear the muffled thunder of speeding hearts, see the rise of the tiniest hairs on their necks.

'It is my place to raise you above your savage natures. My place, as a creature above and beyond what you all are. I am this city's sins, so the people may be sinless.'

The bravest of them spoke again, his black eyes unwavering despite the shiver in his fingers. 'Is that your philosophy? All the murders and desecrations are fuelled by... this?'

'By reason. By truth. I have learned how your hearts and minds function. With that lore, I brought peace to this culture.'

'At the cost of freedom.'

The Night Hunter drew in a slow breath through his knife-slit smile. 'Peace reigns, as I reign. I wouldn't expect you to understand. You are a little man, with little dreams.'

'You've ushered in the peace of the graveyard.' The noble dared to take a step closer. 'Peace, at the cost of surrendering all choice, all freedom. The city lives

in terror, forced to live by the standards you place upon our shoulders.’

‘Yes,’ the Night Haunter replied. ‘Yes.’

‘But every sin—’

‘Is punished.’ The Night Haunter listened to their hearts beating blood through their bodies.

‘But punished by death, no matter the crime. No matter the scale of the sin. The people of the city live in silence, lest a single word earn them death for speaking out against you.’

‘Yes.’ The Night Haunter closed his dark eyes, as if listening to that very silence, drifting across the city. ‘Listen. Listen to the sound of raw silence. Is it not serene?’

The young lord shook his head. ‘How very noble of you, *beast*.’

‘Balthius.’ The Night Haunter turned the man’s own name into a whispered, caressing blade. ‘The potential I see in you is the reason you still live. Be silent, and you may yet continue to exist in the glory of my patience.’

‘You are a monster.’

‘No.’ The Night Haunter’s fingers curled into claws. ‘I am an emissary of civilisation. But to be the light in your darkness, I must cloak myself in sin.’

The intruder reached a hand to slowly claw his hair back from his sunken eyes. ‘Humans are animals. *Beasts*, to use Balthius’s own word. But they can be herded, controlled, ruled. The threat of punishment forces them to live by the code of law. Through fear, they rise above the bestial. I am on the edge of great things, my lords and ladies. Great things. I hold this city by the throat. Now, we have peace. We have serenity. Can you even understand the importance of that word? We stand on the edge of great wonders, if we use peace to fuel progress.’

He lifted his hand again, his long white fingers curling slowly together, a blossoming flower in insidious reverse. ‘But I want more. I want more from this city. More from its people. More from this world we call home. I want what’s mine by right, and mine by weight of responsibility to those beneath me.’

At last, the Night Haunter’s sneer faded. He looked at them all, his eyes so cold and hard they could’ve been opals dropped into the sockets of a bare skull.

‘I will be your king.’

CHAPTER VI

Memory

HE DIDN'T HUNT any more. The passing of years had stolen the need. His city was a silent hive, illuminated by the light of progress – and the more literal light of streetlamps and beacon towers. No crime, no sin, had been committed in decades. The last vestiges of anarchy and resistance had died out soon after he began to broadcast his mutilations across the city via the picter interfaces available in every home, transmitting his victims' screaming over the planetary communications net.

Those executions, recorded in his throne room, ended what little crime remained. His people knew he'd take to the streets at the slightest provocation. In their fear, the last souls holding out finally accepted the salvation he offered them.

Nostramo Quintus, capital city of the sunless world, grew by the year.

Spaceflight was no mystery to them, albeit in the most stunted and warplussense, reaching out to a handful of worlds in neighbouring star systems. Nostramo had traded its abundance of adamantium with these worlds for generations, though under the Night Hunter's kingship, planetary exports rose to unparalleled levels, as did the profits of such endeavour. The city's foundries and forge fires burned hotter, the refineries and processing plants spread across the urban sprawl, and the mines clawed ever deeper into Nostramo's priceless crust.

After curfew, the city slept in absolute serenity. Each dawn, the workforce rose in the half-light of the dying sun, to repeat the cycle of labour again and again and again. It stank of industrial excess – that fiery reek of charcoal and chemical tangs. The people themselves stank of grey lives and bitter fear.

The Night Hunter stood on the balcony of the faceless grey spire he considered his castle, staring down at his city alongside the leering gargoyles shaped into the stonework.

Today would be the day. He knew it, as he knew all things. The answers came to him as they always did: in his dreams. Since mastering the world, he found his post-mortal senses sharpening beyond anything he'd imagined. He knew, on some voiceless level, he was *becoming* something. He was ripening, maturing, into... whatever he was born to be. It manifested first in knowing what people would say before they spoke, and soon became a habit of dreaming the events of most days on the nights before they happened.

Soon enough, he was dreaming while awake. What would happen began to overlay his vision of what was happening. He'd speak to an underling, losing track of the man's voice, hearing instead the servant's last words when he was destined to die from a heart failure in nine years. He'd see the faces of his governors, each one lined by years they'd not yet lived, carrying scars they hadn't yet earned.

One dream stuck very fiercely indeed, burning brighter than all others.

'Watch the skies,' he'd ordered his district governors at the last conclave. 'A fleet is coming. A fleet of such size, their engines will light the sky the way our sun never could.'

'Will there be war?' Balthius had asked.

'Yes,' the Night Haunter had replied. 'But not with the arrivals. The war will come afterwards, far from Nostramo's shores.'

'Who are they?' another governor had asked. 'What do they want?'

'They are my father's warriors. He is coming for me.'

THE CITY WEPT at the Delegation of Light. They wept collectively, every man, woman and child gathered on the streets, their pale faces staring at the strangers in their midst, as the sky was brightened by the false stars of void-ship engines.

The strangers walked in a slow, regal parade. The ground trembled, quite literally, with their rhythmic tread. They walked in great, grinding phalanxes, different formations wearing armour of black, of gold, of royal purple or earthen grey. Giants led them. Giants towering above their warriors, as their warriors towered above mortal men. Leading the giants was a sun incarnated in human skin; a god in a man's flesh; his soul-fire uncontainable in a sheath of flesh and bone. Blindness was the reward for all who dared look upon him. Those afflicted spent the rest of their lives sightless but for the image of the living god flash-flamed into their dead retinas.

The people of Nostramo Quintus watched their city invaded by these marching off-worlders, millions upon millions of mouths locked silent, eyes wide with

awe. The silence was so intense, so unnatural, it bordered on inhuman. Even the rain stopped. The storm season itself was holding its breath as the procession of outworld might reached the Night Haunter's tower at the city's heart.

He was waiting for them.

The army ceased as one, every single one of the quarter-million soldiers standing motionless in the same moment. The four giants stepped forwards. The blazing god led them.

The first demigod, clad in wrought gold, inclined his white-haired head in majestic acknowledgement – a king greeting an equal.

'I am Rogal Dorn,' he said.

The Night Haunter said nothing. In his mind's eye, he saw the giant die, dragged down by a hundred murderers in a dark tunnel, their knives and swords wet with the warrior's blood.

The second giant wore armour of patterned grey, etched with ten thousand words, as if a scholar had taken a quill to a stone. He nodded his shaven, tattooed head, likewise inked with scripture – the lettering gold upon the tanned skin.

'I am Lorgar Aurelian,' he said, his voice a hymn where Dorn's had been a measured, stately demand. 'We have been seeking you, brother.' There was sorrow in his otherwise kind eyes – sorrow at the dark city, its unhealthy people, the obviousness of their colourless, exhausting lives.

Again, the Night Haunter said nothing. He saw this warrior crowned in psychic fire, screaming up at a burning sky.

The third giant wore armour of riveted, dense black. His arms were solid silver, yet contoured and moving as living limbs. His voice was the steely grind of a foundry's bowels.

'I am Ferrus Manus,' he said. His eyes were dark, but not cold.

The Night Haunter remained silent, seeing the warrior's head clutched by its empty eye sockets in another man's armoured fingers.

The last giant wore armour painted the violet of an alien sunset. His hair was silvery, long and elegant. He alone smiled, and he alone met the Night Haunter's eyes with warmth in his own.

'I am Fulgrim,' said this last lord. 'It is good to finally meet you, my brother.'

The Night Haunter still said nothing. He saw this final giant in only the faintest of images; always slithering and laughing, never entirely visible.

The god stepped forwards, his arms open wide. He drew breath to speak.

'K–'

The first syllable struck the Night Haunter with the force of a spear through

the heart. He went to his knees, gasping for breath that wouldn't come, saliva stringing from his bared teeth. Blood ran from his burst heart, just as it gushed from his cut throat. His grasping hands had no hope of stemming the flow. His whole life rushed out in a liquid torrent, burning his cold fingers, images of murder hammering against the back of his eyes.

He felt a hand on his head. The pain died in a pulse, restoring his sanity in a moment of mercy. His throat wasn't cut. His heart hadn't burst. The Night Hunter looked up, to see the golden god – faceless and ageless – resolve into the image of a man. The man-god's face could've been the face of any male on any one of a million worlds. It was all men, all at once. The apotheosis of Man.

'Be at peace, Konrad Curze. I have arrived, and I intend to take you home.'

The Night Hunter reached up to rake his sweaty hair back from his gaunt features. 'That is not my name, father. My people gave me a name, and I will bear it until my dying day.'

He rose to his feet, unwilling to kneel. 'And I know full well what you intend for me.'

THE SCENE FROZE around him. The Night Hunter looked at the Emperor – the godling claiming paternity over a coven of madmen and warlords – frozen in time. He looked at his brothers, at their Legions arranged in beautiful formation behind them.

He looked at the crowd, frozen in the same motionless pict-image perfection. Motes of dust glinted in the air, locked in the same spell as the people all around.

The Night Hunter turned, seeing a figure clad in ceramite the colour of clean midnight, the armour plates cracked by painted lightning. The warrior stood alone, watching in silence, his black eyes never judging, never accusing.

'Sevatar,' the Night Hunter said to the staring warrior. 'You shouldn't be here.'

SEVATAR WALKED CLOSER. His footsteps echoed around the street, and his black eyes kept darting to the frozen crowds. He avoided glancing at the Emperor. Memory or not, he had no desire to feel his eyes fill with molten gold. The last time he'd looked upon the Emperor in the flesh, he'd endured seven weeks in the apothecarion while his vision healed. Impatience had driven him to the very edge of demanding augmetic eyes.

'My lord,' the First Captain said to his father.

'You shouldn't be here,' the primarch said again. He was Curze now, no longer

simply the Night Haunter. He stood in midnight clad, in reflection of his son. His hands were barbed by the murderous scythe-length claws constructed for him in the laboratory-forges of distant Mars. ‘Tell me why you came.’

‘What kind of question is that?’ Sevatar leaned on his spear, the chainblade resting on the rockcrete road. ‘You are my primarch, father. Why wouldn’t I risk myself to save you?’

‘Because I am *your* primarch.’ Curze shook his head, his smile as dark as his deeds. ‘And I lead a Legion of foul-hearted wretches with no sense of loyalty to me, or to each other.’

Sevatar shrugged, with a grind of armour joints. ‘And yet, I am so very popular among my brothers. The mystery of it all fascinates me.’ He looked around the road again. ‘Why do you dwell on these moments, lord? What calls you back to the past, when the future is still threatened?’

Curze didn’t answer. He beckoned Sevatar to follow, and began to walk down the street, weaving between the statue-warriors of the Emperor’s Children.

‘You shouldn’t be here,’ the primarch said again. ‘Not because this is private to me. I don’t care about that, Sev.’

‘Then why not?’

‘You know why not.’ Curze chuckled, the sound no different from a lizard choking on dust. ‘In a single night, you’ve undone decades of suppressing your *talent*.’ Curze looked back over his shoulder, at his son following close behind. ‘Your psyche is no longer guarded. I can read you, in a way I’ve not been able to do for years. I can see through your barriers, for they are no longer barriers at all.’

Sevatar knew what this was building up to. ‘I don’t want to know.’

‘Yes, you do. Everyone does.’ Curze looked ahead again, turning to move between an isolated phalanx of Ultramarines, led by their stoic commander.

‘I asked you not to tell me back then, sire.’ Sevatar followed, his face darkening. ‘Please keep to our former agreement.’

‘No.’ Curze gave his dusty chuckle again, wind rasping through a tomb. ‘You die in battle.’

Sevatar swallowed. ‘That’s hardly surprising, lord. I’ve no desire to know the rest.’

‘You’re safe, Sev. I see little beyond that obvious truth.’

Sevatar followed in silence for another minute. ‘You are making me regret doing this. I’d hoped to find you, and...’ He let the words hang, unsure he wanted to finish that sentence.

‘And?’ the primarch prompted.

‘And save you, sire.’

‘That’s why I enjoy your company so much, Sevatar. You tell the driest jests.’

Sevatar scowled. ‘I’ve gathered a third of the Legion, Lord Curze.’ He spoke as he always did when officially reporting to his liege lord – in a clipped, clear tone. ‘The Kryptera stand ready once more. I intend to scatter the fleet, leading the bulk of our forces to Terra. The rest will dissolve into the void, harassing Imperial supply lines, burning worlds, carving fresh skinning pits at the heart of cities. Just like the old days.’

Curze looked back over his shoulder. His teeth were filed now, scored down into tiny ivory daggers, just as they were in the waking world.

‘You say “Imperial” as if we aren’t Imperial ourselves.’

Sevatar nodded to that. ‘I’m not sure we are any more, sire.’ He trailed after his primarch for another few minutes, moving between more warriors in the royal purple of the Emperor’s Children. ‘Trez is with me. I can hear him, feel him, in the back of my mind. He’s helping me be here. I’m not sure how.’

‘He is a good man,’ Curze spoke quietly. ‘At least, as good as one is likely to find in our fleet. We are none of us *good men*, are we?’

‘We do what’s necessary, sire.’ Sevatar passed an Emperor’s Children captain whose armour inscriptions he recognised. He briefly considered trying to kill the warrior here, in his primarch’s memory. If the notion had even a remote chance of success, he’d have done it without compunction.

After passing through the III Legion’s ranks, they started moving their way through the dark, ironclad formations of the X Legion. Sevatar found himself absently glancing here and there for the insignia of warriors he’d killed on Isstvan.

‘Lord?’ he asked after several silent minutes had gone by.

‘Speak, Sev.’

‘Why do you hate us?’ He asked it quietly, carefully, with no hint of offence or malice. The words still stopped Curze in his tracks, causing him to turn. The long blades curving from each of the primarch’s knuckles reflected the golden light of the Emperor’s halo, several streets away.

‘What?’

Sevatar spoke just as casually as before. ‘Why are you the only primarch to hate his own Legion? What have we done to you?’

Curze smiled, barely. ‘I spoke with Angron and Lorgar, not long ago. They told me of their purges, cleansing the untrustworthy elements from the Twelfth

and Seventeenth. I laughed when they said it, at the sheer absurdity of the idea. They knew exactly when to stop the killing of the weak, the treacherous and the corrupt within their bloodlines. I wouldn't even know where to begin culling mine.'

Sevatar snorted in dismissal. 'On any other day, sire, such words might hurt my feelings.'

'Look around you,' Curze said. 'You were born on this world. You grew to adulthood here, just as I did. The Emperor praised me for my rule over this world. Even Fulgrim admired it. A model of compliance. An obedient world, they said. Were my people happy? Did that even matter? I made these people human, despite their feral drives. I made them civilised, despite their baser instincts. I raised them above the level of beasts. That was my responsibility to them, as a superior being. And I fulfilled it.'

Curze looked to the grey spires, rising in every direction, and the frozen smog from the foundries and manufacturums veiling the spire-tops in a haze of pollutant smoke. 'And see how my people rewarded me. I was gone only a handful of years before everything soured. My own home world poisoned my Legion with recruits who were worthless as soldiers. Rapists. Murderers. Thieves. The scum. The dregs. The detritus.'

Sevatar almost laughed. 'Sire, you are no different. The Legion is disorderly and vile because it is cast in your image.'

'No.' Curze drenched the single syllable in regret. 'No, you don't understand. I've never claimed to be perfect, Sevatar. But I became the sinner, the monster, the Night Haunter, so my people would never have to. And look at the result. Look at the recruits from Nostramo, less than a decade after I departed. Look at the filth they sent me. Look at the disgusting dregs of humanity my own Apothecaries infused with my genetic material and reforged into transhumans. The Eighth is poisoned, Sev. Generations of men who are murderers in my image, yet devoid of my conviction. They are killers and abusers because they want to be, not because someone had to be.'

'The end result is the same,' said Sevatar. 'Fear is the weapon.'

ww'Where is the nobility in any of this?' Sevatar gestured to the streets of Nostramo Quintus around them. 'You can claim a savage nobility, father, but this is far more savage than noble.'

Curze's pale lips peeled back from his filed teeth. 'There was no other way.'

'No?' Sevatar answered his father's snarl with a grin. 'What other ways did you try?'

‘Sevatar...’

‘Answer me, father. What politics of peace did you teach? What scientific and social illumination did you bring to this society? In your quest for a human utopia, what other ways did you try beyond eating the flesh of stray dogs and skinning people alive?’

‘It. Was. The. Only. Way.’

Sevatar laughed again. ‘The only way to do what? The only way to bring a population to heel? How then did the other primarchs manage it? How has world upon world managed it, with resorting to butchering children and broadcasting their screams across the planetary vox-net?’

‘Their worlds were never as... as serene as mine was.’

‘And the serenity of yours died the first second your back was turned. So tell me again how you succeeded. Tell me again how this all worked perfectly.’

Curze was on him in the time it took to blink. The primarch’s hand wrapped his throat, lifting him from the ground, stealing his breath.

‘You overstep your bounds, First Captain.’

‘How can you lie to me like this?’ Sevatar’s voice was a strangled growl. ‘How can you lie to yourself? I stand here, inside your mind, witnessing a theatre of your own memories. Your way is the Eighth Legion way, now. But it has never been the only way. Just the easiest way.’

Curze tightened his grip. ‘You lie.’

Sevatar narrowed his eyes, his last breath escaping as Curze squeezed. ‘You enjoyed this way,’ the captain hissed. ‘You came to love it... just as we all did. The power... The righteousness...’

Curze released him. Sevatar crashed to the ground, his armour joints snarling as his ceramite scraped the rockcrete.

‘Son of a...’ he trailed off, catching his breath.

‘The son of a god,’ Curze said softly. ‘Get up, Sevatar. Leave me be.’

The First Captain rose to his feet, his vision blurred. ‘I am going nowhere, sire. Not without you.’

Curze smiled. His son could see that much, at least. ‘I admire your tenacity. I always have. But you are a shadow of what I am, Sevatar. You cannot match me. Go.’

‘N—’

SEVATAR FILLED HIS lungs, the sterile air viciously cold as he drew it in.

Trez released his hand. The primarch slumbered before them, scarred from the

Lion's blade.

His other senses filtered back into life. He smelled the bleachy, chemical reek of the apothecarion – a smell which could never quite hide the scent of fresh blood. He heard Trez's laboured breathing, and the beat of the old man's heart. He heard the sirens.

The...

Sevatar re-tuned back into the vox-net, immediately assaulted by five hundred voices overlaying each other. He focused on the scrolling runes dancing down his retinal display, and activated a direct link to the flagship.

'This is Sevatar,' he said.

'First Captain!' He didn't recognise the voice. Human, certainly. But that could be one of several hundred bridge crew. He had difficulty telling their voices apart. In truth, he even had trouble telling their faces apart.

'Tell me everything.'

'It's the Dark Angels, sir. They found us.'

CHAPTER VII

Nightfall

THE TACTICAL HOLOLITH flickered as the *Nightfall*'s engines flared into full-throated life. After demanding teleportation back to the flagship, it had taken Sevatar fourteen minutes of sprinting to reach the strategium from the principal deployment bay. He'd been worried the battle would be over by the time he arrived; at several thoroughfares, he'd killed crew members that hadn't fled from his path fast enough.

Rarely before had he been so relieved to hear proximity alarms and auspex chimes signifying incoming foes. The fleets still hadn't engaged.

Once he'd reached the bridge, he took in the tactical display, ordered a feed of the ship's status data transferred to his left eye-lens, and took stock of just what was happening.

They were going to lose, that was what was happening. He watched the hololith for another few seconds, discerning the spread of forces in the void, and their projected attack vectors.

He listened, briefly, to the shouting voice of Admiral Yul, being ignored by the Legion commanders he technically outranked.

'Fleet address,' Sevatar ordered.

'Uplink live, captain,' one of the vox-officers shouted back over the shaking of the hull.

'This is Sevatar to the fleet. Let me be clear, brothers and sisters. I am not losing to these pious, deluded, rag-wearing whoresons twice in the same month. Focus all fire on the *Invincible Reason*. They crippled our primarch. Let's return the favour. I need at least fifty ships willing to remain for the attack.'

'Sevatar,' crackled one voice, murdered by vox-distortion. 'This is suicide.'

Sevatar's false smile played out across his cold lips. 'I take it I can't count on your support for the attack run, Krukesh?'

'Not a chance.'

‘I hoped you’d say that, brother. It saves me ordering you to flee. Take your companies and vanish into the black. We’ll meet you at Torus Point, for the journey onwards to Terra.’

‘We’ll be waiting, Sev. Luck be with you.’

Sevatar switched back to the general channel. ‘Var Jahan, Naraka, Ophion, Tovac – go with him, or scatter as you desire.’

Two of the four named Kyroptera captains replied in the affirmative. One didn’t reply at all. Only Ophion refused outright. ‘I’ll stay,’ he voxed back. ‘I’ll stand with you, Sevatar.’

‘I only need fifty ships. The Kyroptera has to get clear.’

A chorus of *Yes, sir* and *Aye, captain* filtered back from the command decks of the other ships. Over half of the fleet volunteered to stay. It wasn’t exactly the defiant bravery of the Ultramarines or the steadfast discipline of the Imperial Fists, but it was nothing to spit at. Sevatar took note of the ship identifier runes flickering gold, electing to remain and cover the retreat.

One of them made his skin crawl.

‘Var Jahan,’ he said.

‘Brother?’ the voice crackled back.

‘I ordered the Kyroptera to run. You can’t risk the primarch in this fight. Get clear of the battle, with the dispersing fleet.’

Sevatar had expected an argument from the veteran, perhaps yet another grunted complaint about authority.

‘Sevatar. There’s... Lord Curze is stirring.’

‘Is he awake? Can he stand? Can he fight?’

‘No.’

‘Then it changes nothing. Send Valzen back to the *Nightfall* before you break away. I trust your Apothecaries to watch over Lord Curze. I need mine back here.’

‘It will be done. Good hunting, Sevatar.’

Sevatar glanced back at the hololith, at the spread of so many ships, friend and foe alike. ‘Admiral Yul,’ he said aloud.

‘First Captain?’ came the vox-reply.

‘What, exactly, is your plan?’

The admiral relayed his intent. Sevatar listened in silence, and nodded at the very end.

‘I like the sound of that,’ he said. ‘They’ll likely name this manoeuvre after you, so let’s hope it works. No one wants their name attributed to a hilarious

disaster.’

THE VIII LEGION fleet broke apart, a slow ballet of self-interest and defiance in equal measure. The *Nightfall* pulled ahead of the *Blade in the Black*, leading the armada intercepting the Dark Angels warships.

The rest of the Legion vessels turned tail and fled; some running in formation for the system’s coreward jump point, others rolling in the void and boosting away alone, heading in directions known only to their captains.

Sevatar drew his eyes away from the diaspora, biting back a sudden and strange sense of melancholy. This might be the last time the VIII Legion ever gathered in such numbers. The idea made tactical sense, and suited their way of war, but he couldn’t help a moment of regret.

The *Nightfall* thundered on, shaking with the strain of its engines.

‘Time to engage?’ he asked, seating himself in Lord Curze’s ivory command throne.

‘Six minutes, twelve seconds, First Captain. Ten. Nine...’

‘Launch fighters.’

A nearby servitor replied, dull-toned and unblinking, ‘Fighters launching.’

‘Very good. And open a channel to Wing Commander Karenna.’

THE WRATH-PATTERN STARFIGHTER was a sleek shark of a girl, a throwback from a design era where genius minds drew inspiration from the beasts of Terra’s ancestral seas as much as from the extinct creatures of its polluted skies. This one was painted in the Legion’s colours, with bolts of lightning streaking across her slender hull.

In truth, the Wrath was an outdated model, rare to begin with and increasingly replaced in Imperial fleets by the mass-produced Fury-class. It was said the Fury had a finer temper. They handled more smoothly, they glitched less. Furies were the future, the modern face of void warfare. No rivals. No limit of sub-sector variations. No performance issues that so blighted previous models.

And no soul. Not to Taye.

Flying was more than some sterile interaction with manufactory-spec machines. She could outrun and outfight a Fury in her slower, older Wrath any night. She’d done it enough times already.

As soon as the sirens started, Taye had sprinted down to Preparations, going through the suiting-up rituals with her customary lack of patience. She’d buckled and sealed her pressure suit, putting up with the servitors checking and

rechecking her life support backups and spinal interface connections.

‘Who’s on Ready Five?’ her gunner, Vensent, had asked.

‘The Ashen Masquerade. They’ll already be in the void.’ Taye’s short black hair saved her needing to deal with any additional hassle; she took her flight helm from the servitor offering it and fairly dropped it onto her head. She was already fastening her rebreather mask, ready to lock it in place.

‘Hurry up,’ she snapped.

Vensent shared a glance with the naviseer, Kyven, who was similarly slow in suiting up. ‘Slow and steady takes the prize,’ Vensent replied.

‘Slow and steady takes shit-all and nothing. Hurry up.’

‘Spinal connection,’ a servitor mumbled, ‘optimal function.’ The lobotomised slave withdrew its connectivity spikes from Taye’s spine. She winced, as she always did. Less than a minute later, they were running with the rest of her wing, sprinting across the launch deck towards their waiting fighters.

The sirens wailing above were almost drowned out by the rising whine of launch boosters and the yelling of several hundred deck crew. Scrambling a fighter wing was a cascade of coordination, and the *Nightfall* had several of them to get into the air at once.

The deck overseer was a balding rake of a man, more augmetic than human after four decades of service. He thudded over on his spindly bionic leg.

‘Wing Commander,’ he greeted her. He knew what she was going to ask. ‘*Saevio* and *Aetus* are still grounded. *Relinquo* is void-ready.’

She grinned, slapped him on the lump of augmetic gears that served as his shoulder, and was already running again. Twenty-two of her twenty-four fighters were about to ride skywards. *That’ll do*, she thought. *That’ll do nicely*.

Taye was first up the ladder, thumping down into her restraint throne and aligning her spinal sockets with the interface ports in the seatback. She rapped her knuckles on the side of the hull, twice for luck, before settling to get comfortable. Connection came with several insidious *snicks* as the needles slid into her spinal column.

‘I’m in,’ she said. Taye didn’t wait for the others; she started clicking switches and dragging levers at once. The Wrath started to tremble as it breathed again.

Kyven grunted as he buckled himself into his throne, back to back with hers. ‘I’m in,’ he said, and Taye heard the beeping and pulsing of his systems coming online, recognising his bio-imprint in the chair. She also heard him crack a gloved fist against the long-range auspex display.

‘Bastard thing,’ he grunted. ‘They said they’d finally fixed it.’

Taye grinned and said nothing. Vensent was climbing into his throne beneath hers, taking his place in the fighter's nose. His own array of monitors and controls rivalled Kyven's, and vastly outnumbered hers. She saw him lean back and tense as he connected.

'I'm in,' he sighed. He reached forwards, locking his hands around the control sticks.

Deck serfs lowered their tinted cockpit visor, hammering it sealed in the final preparations. She heard Kyven rap his knuckles on the hull, and Vensent do the same.

'Wing Commander Kareenna,' she said into her rebreather mask. '*Vespera* ready for launch.'

The elevator platform gave a stark judder, beginning its achingly slow process of twisting them into place.

'Taye,' a low, calm voice rumbled across the cockpit vox.

'First Captain.'

'Tactical upload is already under way, but I need you to be aware of one thing in particular, as I'd prefer you to survive the next hour.'

'Name it, sir.'

'Just be ready to land in a rush, wing commander. Make sure your squadron leaders are also aware of the necessity. Fleet Admiral Yul's plan will require a certain reaction speed from everyone outside the main cruisers.'

'Thanks for the warning, sir.'

Sevatar didn't answer. The link was already dead.

'He likes me,' Taye said as they were elevated into position. Deck lights flashed either side of them. The fighter shuddered as it was locked into place.

'We're locked in,' said Kyven. 'Sitting ready. Pressure cylinders optimal, catapult primed. All signs are go for thrust.' He paused for a moment, and broke the cockpit's relative quiet with a muttered observation. 'It's not you. He likes all of us.'

'He doesn't like anyone,' Vensent called back over his shoulder. 'He owes us, and we're useful to him. Huge difference.'

SEVATAR WATCHED THE approaching armada, still too distant for visual confirmation but shining bright on the tactical hololith. Fire-control directions, updated every few seconds, passed between every vessel in the fleet, sent onwards to their escort vessels and fighter squadrons. Formations were still loose as the fleet accelerated to meet the Dark Angels, but he could see their alignment

beginning to come together.

They had to buy more time. If the Dark Angels weren't slowed down, they'd be all over the retreating fleet in a matter of minutes.

One rune on the display still troubled him. Being outnumbered eight to one wasn't the problem. If Yul's plan worked, they'd inflict maximum damage with minimal losses, and if it didn't work, the majority of the VIII Legion fleet would be long gone, anyway. The mystery of how the Lion was managing to jump his entire armada with such unrivalled unity was a matter for idle consideration, but hardly an issue Sevatar could deal with at this moment.

No, the problem was one single rune – one of his own vessels – still wavering on the ghostly display, while the rest of the fleeing warships were winking out of existence, entering the warp and running free. First, the rune had maintained formation with the leaving ships. Then, it ceased. It remained dead in space, surrounded by its secondary frigates and fighter escorts.

Sevatar turned to the Master of Vox, in the dark robes of a Legion serf. 'Hail them,' he said, gesturing to the flashing rune.

The slave tapped at his console, mechanical fingers a blur. 'Done, sire.'

'This is the *Nightfall. Excoriator*, report. Why have you killed your engines?'

The seconds ticked by. 'No reply, sire,' said the Master of Vox.

'Thank you,' Sevatar sneered. 'I can hear that myself. Var Jahan, do you read me?'

Silence, again, was the reply. Sevatar drew his thumb across his throat, ordering the link's end. He had a feeling he knew what caused the *Excoriator* to halt, and the idea wasn't a pleasant one.

The *Nightfall's* strategium bustled with slaves, serfs and servitors doing their duty, emotion rising from their skin with the stench of sweat. The tension was a palpable thing, something Sevatar could almost savour. Training and familiarity shielded them from the kind of fear he'd feel as a tingle on his tongue, but the anticipation still soured their collective breath. Hundreds of hearts – and surrogates of clockwork and chrome, simulating vital organs – melded into something almost operatic.

'Time until maximum weapons range?'

'Twenty-nine seconds, captain.'

'All hands, brace for incoming fire. Cripple every ship we pass, but be ready for the flagship. I want everything, *everything*, aimed at the *Invincible Reason* when we pass her. Kill her, and we can leave Thramas with our heads held high.'

A DESPERATE BRUTALITY had both sides ignoring every convention of void warfare. The *Nightfall* and the *Invincible Reason* knifed through space to reach one another, abandoning their strengths as long-range weapons platforms in favour of mauling each other face to face. Imperial void battles were usually fought at breathtaking distances, with mathematics and logistics as vital as a captain's instinct.

The *Nightfall* ploughed through the opposing fleet, its shields revealed in swirling, iridescent light under the onslaught. It burst past the *Star of the First Legion*, scattered the cruiser's escorts, and killed its way through the enemy outriders to plunge into the heart of the enemy fleet. The VIII Legion warships roared in pursuit, running for the hole in the enemy formation punched by their wounded, crumbling flagship.

Rage ruined all need for subtlety and tact. The two flagships, among the largest and most heavily-armed creations ever to rise from the collective genius of the human race, speared closer with no regard for their support craft.

Sevatar watched the spread of oculus screens, each one alive with an image of ships dying in the dark; black steel breaking apart, ghost-fire vanishing into the void. Sensitive Nostraman eyes winced closed across the bridge, as one of the screens showed the warship *Tenebor* die under the guns of seven Dark Angels cruisers. Its prow wreckage, still haemorrhaging debris and crew, lanced through the rear of the *Pridemark*, igniting the Dark Angels vessel's warp engines and killing the entire ship in a migraine of foul light.

The fifty Night Lords vessels dived straight and true, never deviating, never diverting. Dark Angels cruisers banked and veered to avoid collisions – the heavy warships rolling with ponderous grace, the smaller destroyers accelerating aside, apparently effortless.

Sevatar kept wincing, struggling to focus on the brightness of every ship's death, or even the eye-aching streams of massed lance fire. The void surrounding the VIII Legion formation was bitter with the flaring rage of three hundred firing solutions. Ship after ship dissolved under the First Legion's fire, their hulls pockmarked by laser batteries and sliced open by lances.

A voice rasped over the shaking deck, sighing a single word. '*Nightfall.*' There might have been more, but static swallowed all trace.

Sevatar knew the voice. His glance flicked to the relevant screen, just in time to see the *Blade in the Black* die surrounded and crippled in a storm of Dark Angels destroyers.

We'll need a new fleet admiral, he thought with a smirk. Another ship, a Dark

Angels vessel, went critical off the *Nightfall*'s port bow. This one was close enough to hammer the ship with shockwaves, and bleach several occulus screens with distortion.

The lights did more than hurt his eyes. The pain acid-danced back along the nerves in his skull, flicking at his forebrain. He wiped his mouth on the back of his gauntlet, the sudden nosebleed barely showing against the red glove. Now, of all times. Typical.

On the primary occulus, the immense bulk of the *Invincible Reason* hove into view, scarred and burning from the VIII Legion's own lance strikes. Sevatar could almost see the insectile buzzing of his fighter squadrons around the enemy flagship, thick as fleas on a mangy hound.

'The moment we come abeam...' he said, and went no further.

'Captain?' called one of the deck officers.

Sevatar breathed out, staring at one of the screens drenched in static. A faint image resolved, of a ship that should be anywhere else but here.

'This,' Sevatar said to no one in particular, 'will not end well.'

'BREAK!' KYVEN CRIED out.

'A few more seconds,' Taye hissed. She fired, streaming energy from the underslung lascannons, slicing through a Fury's wing.

'Break!' Kyven yelled again.

Taye wrenched on her control sticks, pulling into a spiralling dive, and *Vespera*'s engines gave a draconic roar as the fighter strained to obey. Las-fire sliced past them, close enough to leave dancing afterimages across Taye's vision.

'He's still coming,' Kyven called back.

Taye breathed a Nostraman curse into her rebreather, pulling out of the dive too hard, too fast, leaning right into a brutal arc. Inertial dampeners kicked with enough force to slam all three of their helmets against the sides of their restraint thrones.

That's when she saw the *Excoriator*. Dizzy, with the taste of blood on her tongue, she threw everything she had into rolling away from the oncoming tide of dark iron.

The warship burned past them, vast enough and close enough to make her shiver, fully eclipsing the rest of the battle as its battlemented hull sailed past in flames. The breakneck dogfight she'd been locked in simply ceased to exist. The Night Lords vessel slammed indiscriminately through space, far too huge to care about the dealings of the steel flies around its skin.

Taye's earpiece surrendered to static as she lost contact with her wingman. She knew without a second's doubt his fighter, *Relinquo*, was a smear on the *Excoriator*'s rippling void shields. Voices cried out – in pain, in fear, in frustration, all demanding the same thing. *What do we do? What do we do? What do we do?*

Taye needed to spit, but taking off her rebreather was hardly an option. She swallowed the rank, coppery slime her spit had become, and leaned back in her throne, bleeding power from the stabilisers back into the engines.

'Whoever the hell is still alive, follow me.'

Kyven's voice was strained behind her. He kept his words off the vox-web. 'We just lost half the squadron, and only four of the Masquerade are showing up on my auspex.'

'We're still here.' *Vespera* gave a smooth shiver as Taye kicked her back into attack speed. The *Nightfall* bloomed ahead, savagely damaged, still sucking up more than its share of enemy ordnance. 'And we still have a flagship to defend.'

THE EXCORIATOR HEADED neither friend nor foe. The VIII Legion ships demanding it fall into formation went as ignored as the Dark Angels cruisers drowning it in fire.

Sevatar watched it roll, wounded to the point of being held together by nothing more than spit and spite. He could tell from its trajectory that it wasn't even aiming to ram one of the enemy ships. It was just... dying. A drawn-out, graceless dive through the enemy fleet, breaking the VIII Legion's formation, and putting a blade to the throat of the late Admiral Yul's first and final plan as void commander.

Sevatar sighed. Despite the tremors rattling the strategium, he calmly sat down in the primarch's throne, and rested his cheek on his gauntleted knuckles. A shame, really. It had been a good plan.

He wiped blood from his face again, this time from his jawline, below his ear. How very vexing.

The bridge vox hissed back into life with several false starts. 'Sevatar,' said a deep, distorted voice, bare of any emotion beyond the faintest, oily amusement.

'Welcome back, father.'

'We can finish this now. Join me.'

'Let me guess,' replied Sevatar. 'You plan to teleport onto the *Invincible Reason*, don't you?'

'I have a fight to finish.'

‘Yes,’ said Sevatar, reaching for his spear. ‘Of course you do. Does it not matter that in a handful of minutes, we can punch out through the Angels’ rearguard and rip into the warp?’

The answer was several seconds in coming, preceded by the muted shouts of dying humans aboard a burning ship.

‘Come with me. Bring the Atramentar. Finish this at my side.’

Sevatar looked out over the bridge, elevated above the crew on a raised dais. The officers and serfs not frantically engaged at their stations or down on the deck with concussion and blood loss were looking up at him with the expressions of lost, moronic mongrels.

‘Is that an order, sire?’ he asked, already knowing the answer, already reaching for his helm.

‘You know it is.’ The link blanked in another wash of static.

‘This is why the Imperials always win,’ Sevatar mused aloud. ‘They don’t get in each other’s way. Discipline may be dull, but it has undeniable military application. How long until we can fire boarding pods?’

‘We’ll be abeam of the *Invincible Reason* in just under ten minutes.’

Ten minutes. Every Night Lord on the flagship was already at battle stations, ready to repel boarders. The Atramentar would be within a stone’s throw of their teleportation chambers, and those that weren’t would be close to at least one boarding pod launch bay.

Sevatar rose from the throne, momentarily glanced at the waterfall-spill screed of Nostraman runes on the damage report data-feed, and stalked from the bridge with only one final command to the crew.

‘I may be gone a while,’ he said. ‘Try not to get my ship killed.’

CHAPTER VIII

Unwanted Battle

THE SHIPS WERE abeam now. He could tell without needing to see, discerning it purely from the *Nightfall's* distinctive shivers. Lance fire didn't rattle the decks the same way impact damage or las-batteries did. Every tremor of torment had its own sensation. This was the grinding vibration of massed broadsides against unshielded steel, the void-war equivalent of pulling in close to your prey and knifing them in the ribs.

If they ever made it through this, the *Nightfall* would need to be drydocked for an eternity. They might as well commission a new flagship – Sevatar suspected it'd be finished faster than repairing the damage. He could smell the smoke of dying machinery all around; the chemical stink of burning cables and melting metal. People were screaming on decks above and below.

The First Captain made his way down the shaking hallways, immersed in the darkness so common on VIII Legion ships. Crew members passed him with lamp packs and photo-visors to penetrate the gloom, giving him a wide berth. He paid no attention to them; he knew in a vague sense that they loathed him, but he wasn't sure why, and couldn't bring himself to care. Their hatred or regard never made any difference to his existence, either way. They obeyed when he wanted them to obey. The rest of the time they scrambled to get out of his path whenever they saw him. The perfect balance.

As he ran, he spoke a steady stream of orders into the vox, coordinating the Atramentar first and his sub-captains second. Of the nine companies berthed on the *Nightfall*, he'd only risk one. His own. The Atramentar were coming with him; the others, despite their captains' protestations, would remain aboard the *Nightfall* and make the run to Terra.

Sevatar was under no illusions that they'd be coming back from this assault, and he had no compulsion to drag thousands of warriors to inevitable, unnecessary deaths. Let them live their lives to their own ends, in pursuit of

more purposeful deaths.

He was still running when Atramentar squad leaders started reporting teleportation ignition flares. Each report ended with a Mechanicum adept bleating out an addendum in monotone: ‘Translocation process complete.’

The ship gave another shake, this one brutal enough to throw several crew from their feet. One of them – a female in a technician’s overalls – broke her head open on the deck when she fell. Sevatar vaulted them all as he kept running, smelling the blood from their injuries.

The next shiver was an echo of the last. What little light existed on the *Nightfall* flickered and died for several seconds. It made no difference; his eye-lenses presented everything in prey-sight monochrome, and he was almost at the nearest translocation platform.

A sound made him stop dead. A straining, yearning whine of protesting metal – a whale’s mournful song as it was gored by hunters’ harpoons. The lights died again, leaving him in the familiarity of absolute darkness.

‘Reactor death,’ the vox droned. ‘Reactor death. Reactor death.’

Clutching his chainlaive, he started sprinting again, his armour’s systems answering his need by opening an automatic channel to the bridge.

‘Report,’ he voxed.

‘We’re dead in space, captain, but momentum is carrying us forwards. Half the turrets are deactivated, the hangars are locked open, the primary and secondary lance arrays are silent, and most of the torpedo racks aren’t responding. Spinal battlements are still firing from reserve generators. Life support and artificial gravity are still feeding from their secondaries, but the void shields are down for good.’

‘Navigation?’

‘Dead. The arterials to the secondary power reserves are cut.’

His blood ran cold. Colder, at least, than usual. ‘Boarding pods?’

‘They won’t fire, captain.’

‘Teleportation?’

‘Dead.’

Sevatar skidded to a halt, breathing through his closed teeth. He was the only member of the First Company trapped on the stricken flagship. The others were already aboard the *Invincible Reason*, fighting for their lives, killing Dark Angels at the primarch’s side.

‘I will not abandon them,’ he whispered.

‘Captain? What d–’

He killed the link to the bridge, and started running again. This time, he descended through the ship, navigating corridors blocked by wreckage and running through hallways choked by smoke and fire. Dead crew lay everywhere he looked.

‘Taye,’ he voxed. ‘Taye, listen to me.’

‘THERE HE IS.’

‘I see him.’ Taye rolled between two spires on the *Nightfall’s* backbone, drawing closer to the Corsair she was chasing down. The battlements blurred past below, but she didn’t risk firing. There was enough firepower striking the flagship’s burning back; she wasn’t going to add to it with a misfired stream from her lascannons.

All the while, the curved Nostraman rune for *Hollow* pulsed in her heads-up display. She needed to land and reload. *Vespera’s* missile racks had been empty less than a minute after the fighter raced from the hangar bay.

‘Let it go,’ Kyven warned her.

‘Not a chance.’ She chased harder, faster, rolling between another two armoured spires. ‘We’ve almost got him.’

The Corsair was an ugly thing, vulture-winged and fat-arsed – a back-heavy brute that Taye had never liked the look of. This one wasn’t going home to any victory parade, she’d see to that.

Hollow, Hollow, Hollow, her missile racks complained, again and again. She had her cannons, but...

‘Vensent,’ she breathed. ‘I’ll overshoot him once he passes the Travius Pylons. Break his back when I do.’

‘Consider it done.’ He rolled his swivelling, pivoting throne back to face forwards, lining up his turret. ‘I can kill him now.’

‘His wreckage will hit the superstructure.’ Taye spoke through clenched teeth, eyes narrowed with effort. Sweat painted her back, making her spinal sockets sting. Turrets below them spat lascannon beams into the void, some aiming for enemy attack craft, others carving insignificant wounds in the skin of the *Invincible Reason*.

Taye risked a glance upwards, seeing the matt-black hull of the enemy flagship filling the roof of her cockpit. No amount of training could prevent a moment of disorientation. She blinked and refocused on her prey running ahead.

‘Plasma bombs,’ Vensent called back. Taye could see the detonations popping up along the *Nightfall’s* spine as the bomber’s payload started to rain down.

Vespera was climbing, almost above the Corsair now, and she still had to weave around the sprayed streams of laser fire from the bomber's frantic crew.

'Just kill him!'

Vensent fired, carving down and severing the Corsair across the middle. The front half, with its hunched wings, tumbled onwards into the one of the two Travius Pylon towers, shattering the remote anti-aircraft defences on the spire's battlements. The bomber's bulky engines hiccupped blindly, spinning away into the void.

'We're engaged,' Kyven voxed. 'Another Fury, chasing us down the spine. I think they're annoyed at the eight Corsairs we've killed.'

'I can lose him.'

'Get away from the damn ship. We need to break off.'

She didn't bother answering. The *Nightfall's* shields were down and enemy bombers buzzed around with clingy, verminous tenacity, spitting plasma bombs into the flagship's structural weak points. She was going nowhere.

'Taye,' her vox crackled. The voice was marred by sirens in the background. 'Taye, listen to me.'

'First Captain?'

Sevatar repeated her name, and gave her an order she didn't understand.

'I... I don't... Please repeat that order, sir.'

'I said "land your fighter". At once.'

SEVATAR WAS WAITING for them, his armour streaked with scorch marks, and his chainglaive in hand. The calm at the eye of the storm; around him, the chaos of the hangar rattled and raged on, with serfs extinguishing fires, debris crashing down from the ceiling, and amber flashing lights warning of a depressurisation threat.

He watched the Wrath fighter come in at speed, most of its painted hull bleached down to the gunmetal grey beneath, scored away by the clattering pebbles of debris that always filled the space between battling warships.

Vespera, it was called. Yes, that was it.

The fighter fired the retros beneath its wings, and by the lascannons mounted at the nose. Its vented thrust screamed out into the hangar, sharper than a condor's shriek. Sevatar's left eye twitched once, before his helm's auditory senses adjusted to compensate.

Taye didn't use the runway to touch down; she killed all thrust with timed bursts from her retros, and brought the fighter down in a tight spiral. Sevatar was

moving the moment the landing claws crunched onto the deck. He jumped up, grabbed the edge of one slicked-back shark-fin wing, and pulled himself up with one hand.

‘Go,’ he voxed.

There was no answer, and a glance at the cockpit showed Kyven staring back at him wide-eyed from the rear-facing seat, with Taye hunched round in her throne, trying to see what was going on. He could hear them breathing over the vox.

‘You... you can’t be serious,’ she said softly.

Sevatar stalked along the back of the fighter, mag-locking his boots to the Wrath’s dark skin a few metres behind the cockpit. He shook his head at the naviseer’s moronic expression of shock.

‘I said *go*.’

He crouched low, taking three punches to smash a deep dent in the fighter’s hull, just enough to grip the edge. He kept his spear held behind his back, angled away.

The fighter thrummed beneath his boots, coming alive again.

‘Sevatar, this is insane.’

He rolled his black eyes behind the red eye-lenses. How tiring it was, to hear those words yet again. Sometimes, he wondered if ‘duty’ was just a word to other people, and they never truly grasped its meaning.

Without a launch catapult, the fighter lifted off slowly, gliding away from the deck towards the wide maw leading into the void. The castle battlements of the enemy flagship were drifting by, tantalisingly close, but impossibly far.

‘Get me to the *Invincible Reason*,’ he voxed. ‘My men are fighting aboard, and I’ll die before I send them into a battle I wouldn’t join myself.’

He could hear the grin in her words, the smile breaking through her disbelief. ‘You’re taking that oath of First Company brotherhood far too seriously,’ she said.

Sevatar didn’t reply. He was Atramentar. His brothers were Atramentar. There was nothing to say.

KYVEN SPENT THE next three minutes looking directly at the crouched form the of the VIII Legion’s First Captain, mere metres away. Sevatar’s crested helm remained fixed forwards, the skull-painted faceplate staring ahead at the Dark Angels warship. Kyven kept wondering what expression was behind the slanted red eye-lenses.

Taye, for her part, leeched everything *Vespera* could give, burning the engines dangerously hot, engaging no one, rolling in spirals and pitchbacks to shake loose any of the black Furies that tried to latch onto her. She was all too aware of the G-force her 'passenger' would be suffering, but had to keep the engines flaring for maximum manoeuvrability.

When she pulled close to the *Invincible Reason*, Taye angled to cut alongside the hull, weaving between the battlement towers.

'Where do you need to be?'

'*Close to the bridge.*' Sevatar's vox-voice had all the warmth of a wolf's dirge-howl.

Close to the bridge would bring them in range of a hundred and more defensive turrets. Taye swore under breath.

'Watch your language, wing commander.'

She gunned the engines harder, switching to the squadron's general link. '*Peritus* and *Electus*, form on my wing, at once.'

'Copy, commander.'

'On my way, ma'am.'

Taye swooped closer to the hull, almost close enough to lose a wing if she rolled. Her heart kept rhythm for her as she dived into the most foolish attack run of her military service.

CHAPTER IX

The Prince of Crows

HE HAD TO admit, even if only to himself, that this was one of his less wise ideas. No amount of biological enhancement, nor even the most advanced suit of Maximus-pattern power armour, could shield him from the gravitational forces pressing against him. He felt nausea for the first time in over a century, which was novel enough to make him grin.

The pressure against his skull and limbs, however, was less entertaining. The suspensor-wire pressure flightsuits worn by Taye and her crew shared some basic functionality with one of the layers in his own ceramite armour, but it didn't render him immune to physics. Having skinned and flayed countless humans, as well as warriors from five different Legions – including his own – he suspected the feeling of inertial forces threatening to pull his bones apart was fairly approximate on the continuum of pain.

Stark lascannon beams flensed his vision, each one a rapid spear that defied his eye-lenses' attempts to fade and counter the brightness. Taye's fighter swayed and swung beneath him; he could feel her doing her best to coax performance from the Wrath without shaking him loose or killing him with any wrenching manoeuvres. Even so, as the black towers slashed past either side, and the battlements below became a blurring, queasy road, he came close to cursing the idea as a rash move.

But then, that would be admitting he'd been wrong. Sevatar snorted at the notion. *We can't have that, now.*

The stars tumbled across the sky as Taye rolled again. Sevatar's one concession to the insanity of his plan was to grunt once, quietly, with his head aching from the acid of dizziness. That, also, was novel. His genetic implants had left him almost immune to disorientation these past decades.

He felt Taye ease back on the speed, winding and weaving to dodge the pyrotechnic storm of turret fire from below. He knew she'd never be able to

reach a dead stop, but slowing enough to lessen his momentum would be more than enough. A few bruises and broken bones would be easier to bear than being pulped against the *Invincible Reason*'s armour plating.

But her arc carried him over the spinal castles, across the bow, and he finally realised what she was doing.

‘This is even stupider than my idea,’ he voxed to her.

Her voice was tight, tense, her attention anywhere but on him. ‘Your way will see you smeared across the hull. My way, you get to play hero.’

THE FIGHTER DRIFTED into the landing bay, retros flaring to slow down. Servitor crews immediately stood straighter, dead eyes and refocusing eye-lenses tracking the craft's approach. Scorch marks darkened the hull in place of paint, and its insignias were similarly bleach-burned into vague nothingness.

The closest munitions officer was a man by the name of Halles Korevi, and he was directing a loader team to rearm this latest in an endless stream of landing and redeploying fighters, when it jinked above the deck and shot him to pieces with a volley of roaring blue energy from its lascannons. Internal fire-teams opened up on the drifting Wrath, naval armsmen discharging wide-mouth shotcannons that had little hope of hitting a moving target.

An armoured figure rose from the fighter's back, a bolter in one hand and a spear in the other. He fired down as he ran along the backswept wing, four bolts bursting in the chests of four armsmen, spreading viscera across their fellows. Shotcannon fire still clattered against his midnight-blue ceramite, leaving ignorable silver scratches on the dark plate. He reached the end of the wing and jumped clear.

The fighter's engines whined louder, firing the moment his boots left the wing. In a burst of engine wash, she was gone, leaving a sonic boom and the alkaline stink of lascannon discharge in her wake.

The figure landed hard in a crouch, boots sinking twin dents into the iron deck. Atop the spear, a metre-long chainblade started chewing the hangar's cold air. The armsmen, to their credit, moved into cover and kept firing, despite never training to face a warrior of the Legiones Astartes.

Sevatar twitched twice, flinching as the spreading flak rattled against his armour. *Irritating bastards*. Retinal warnings trailed and flashed across his vision, and his armour's autosenses kept pulling at his left arm, trying to raise his bolter to fire at the humans in cover. He locked the boltgun to his thigh, and the moment he rose from his knees, he started running – not towards them, but

heading for the massive open doors leading deeper into the ship. The temptation to waste yet more time and carve them limb from limb was almost too strong to swallow.

‘You get to live,’ he growled, ignoring their continued fire. ‘I have bigger prey.’ As he plunged into the siren-lit corridors making up the *Invincible Reason*’s hollow veins, he tuned into First Company’s vox-web, no longer denied access by distance.

‘Ladies,’ he greeted them, still sprinting.

‘Where in the hell have you been?’ spat back the first voice. Several others joined in, sharing the same sentiment.

‘You have no idea,’ Sevatar replied. ‘Where is the primarch?’

‘Engaged at the fifth—’

Sevatar shoulder-barged through a crowd of black-robed menials, stumbling over their tangled limbs and carelessly shattering their bones beneath his boots. Up and running a second later, he swore across the vox.

‘Repeat that,’ he said. ‘Some fools got in my way.’

‘The primarch is engaged at the fifteenth concourse,’ Valzen replied. ‘Half of us are here with him.’

The fifteenth concourse. Sevatar knew the STC Gloriana-pattern battleship as well as he knew the contours of his own armour. The *Nightfall* was born of the same breed.

‘That’s madness,’ he voxed back. ‘You’ll be encircled by every Dark Angel left alive on the ship. There’s nowhere to run.’

Valzen’s answer was interrupted by a shriek over the vox, and the knocking grind of a bone-saw doing what it did best.

‘We’re *aware* of that, sir.’

‘I’ll be there in seven minutes,’ promised Sevatar. ‘Eight if there’s resistance. Nine if the resistance is carrying bolters.’

THE RESISTANCE WAS carrying bolters.

Laying siege to an enemy warship was always a clash of contrasts. Corridor by corridor, chamber by chamber, an attacker could spend half an hour encountering no enemy presence at all beyond confused serfs and slaves, before promptly spending the same span of time needing to fight for every footstep of ground, killing through squad after squad of dug-in defenders. A Gloriana battleship was the size of a densely compacted city, and accordingly populated not only by officers and expert crew, but by a slave-caste numbering tens of thousands of

souls. Most were consigned to live in the warship's lightless bowels, breathing poorly-ventilated air and furnace fumes, but many still saw service on the upper decks.

Sevatar chewed through them with barely a hitch in his stride. His chainglaive ticked and stuttered, clogged with meat after only a few minutes. Those humans too brave or foolish to flee met their ends in a whirr of eviscerating machine-teeth, torn apart or left deformed and ignored in his wake.

A hundred of the VIII Legion's best warriors had teleported aboard, in full Terminator wargear. The trail of their devastation was almost hilarious in its absolute severity. On more than one deck, Sevatar's boots splashed through a marsh of shallow blood and carved human meat.

But the Dark Angels weren't beaten. Not even close. Even with the Atramentar sweeping these decks clear, reinforcements were flooding in from other parts of the ship, storming their way to the strategium to defend their primarch. *Not that he needs defending*, Sevatar mused. Not if the last time they'd met was anything to go by.

He'd killed seven Dark Angels already. One of them ended life as a trophy, the warrior's helm now chained to Sevatar's belt. No higher honour for an enemy of the VIII Legion. In such remembrance, they paid respect to their fallen foes.

At the junction ahead, another three Dark Angels in pale tabards over their heraldic black held the line, bolters kicking in their fists. Sevatar crouched behind the relative cover of a corner, reloading his own weapon, lip curling as he crunched home his last magazine. He could kill them up-close easily enough, but putting a bolter in his hands evened the odds in a way he never enjoyed. He hadn't lied when he told Trez he was Eighth Legion to his core. Just like his brothers, he'd never cherished a fair fight. Sport was one thing, but it hardly compared to hunting prey. In that, at least, he was made in his primarch's image.

He risked a glance around the corner, pulling back as a shell detonated close to his faceplate, showering him in debris.

'It's Sevatar,' he could hear them shouting to each other. 'It's the First Captain. I saw him.'

He grinned as he imagined the silhouette he cast in his armour, with the sweeping dark-iron wings rising from his helm. *This accursed helmet crest*, he thought. His enemies always recognised him by it.

The gunfire fell silent. He heard strangled grunts and the clanging wallops of weapons striking ceramite. Emerging from cover, he broke into a run, joining the melee.

Alastor Rushal, clad in the same black as the Dark Angels he was killing, nearly died first. Sevatar's retinal display locked onto him with the Nostraman rune for *Threat* blinking bright, registering his Raven Guard armour and the thundering meteor hammer spinning in his fists. The First Captain turned, lancing his glaive through the last Angel's back, letting the hungry teeth do their work. He ended the downed warrior with a boot stamped onto the Angel's throat.

The blood patterning his armour went ignored, as did the bodies at his feet. One of them reached a weak hand to scrape strengthless fingers along his boots. Sevatar drew his bolter and fired downwards, without even bothering to look.

'You won't believe how I got here,' he said to Rushal.

The Raven didn't reply. He hadn't replied to anything since Isstvan V. It was difficult to speak without a tongue.

THE VOX DEVOLVED into a choking mess of cries as he drew closer. Decades of listening to overlaying vox-chatter and deciphering the stream of runic updates on his eye-lenses stole the mystery of what he was about to see, but the majesty of the moment still struck hard.

Breathless, his armour scarred, Sevatar tore through into the fifteenth concourse – one of many thoroughfare hubs on the upper command decks. Dead serfs had decorated the tunnels on his way here, but the scale of the massacre taking place invited a rare laugh from his lips. Digital figures and flat-line readouts had nothing on the reality. The Atramentar and the Night Lords from the *Excoriator* were knee-deep in the dead, fighting amidst the piling bodies of serfs, servitors, armsmen, Dark Angels, and their own slain brothers. They fought back to back in diminishing circles, fighting to the last against a tide of Dark Angels reinforcements advancing from adjacent tunnels.

He'd never seen a weaker last stand, in a less defensible position, but the reason was clear enough. Here the primarchs had met, so here the battle raged. The two sons of the Emperor duelled above the warring crowds, above the crashing of bolters and the thwarted screeching of chainblades against ceramite. Their embattled children, screaming and bleeding and dying below them, were shadows in the wake of gods.

For the first time since Isstvan V, Sevatar saw his genetic forebear rise to reclaim the glory he'd once possessed in abundance. No one could ever claim Lord Konrad Curze was regal, nor could they describe him as handsome, dignified, or even healthy. His glory was starved and sickly; his majesty was cold and cadaverous.

Sickle-shaped silver claws scythed out from the tip of each armoured finger, every one of them dancing with coruscating energy-lighting. He moved not as some avatar of liquid grace, but as a jerking puppet controlled by an unseen, malicious sentience, forcing this cadaverous god to dance to a tune inciting spasm over joy. Sevatar had seen several primarchs fight, shedding blood in anger, and their raw lethality was beautiful to behold. Each one of them flowed through the dance of war – even Angron, in his uncontrolled theatrics of tormented rage.

Curze did not share that trait. His movements were faster, jerkier stutters too swift for the eye to follow, between moments of unnerving serenity. Each heartbeat of calm lasted just long enough to convince the witness it was real, before the laughing murderer moved back into his twitching, killing paroxysm.

This was Sevatar's father as he'd been in the years after first taking the mantle of primarch. A creature of gaunt limbs, hollow cheeks, and sunken eyes, fuelled by some bleak energy brightening his gaze with the promise of dark fire. Lank black hair flowed across his shoulders, washed by the random spray of foes' blood and never anything more. His smile was a gruesome flourish of filed teeth between the whitest, thinnest lips. Sevatar had seen Curze fight Corax on the killing fields of the Dropsite Massacre, when the Raven Guard primarch was exhausted by hours of battle and drained by the infecting truth of betrayal. He'd seen his primarch duel the Lion twice – first in the dust of a fortress's foundations on distant Tsagualsa, and again only weeks before, fighting for less than sixty seconds in the rain of a world that held no value at all.

Here, for the first time, his father was locked in a fair fight. No low blows to begin with. No assaulting a weakened or demoralised foe. No attacking from surprise, with the gravity of a devastating ambush.

The Lion's movements were clinical, a ruthless economy of muscle and motion, each thrust and parry executed to perfection without the audacity of dramatic flair. Curze's jerked-string assault was a flailing of clawed hands, each potential embrace blocking the long blade one moment, and being turned aside by it the next.

It was the sound of Rushal's meteor hammer that dragged Sevatar back to himself, tearing his eyes away from the spark-shedding divinities trying to kill each other on the platform above. The Raven whirled his flail in a heavy, propeller-blade circle, idling in a *whoosh* of ionised air. Blood sizzled on the mace head hanging from the end of the chain, its energy field burning all gore away into foul-smelling steam.

The Raven pointed with his free hand. Warriors in armour as black as his own were still running in from the twenty corridors opening out into this transit hub of hanging chains and raised gantries.

Sevatar vaulted a railing, dropping down another level, smashing boots-first into a melee in which several of his Terminator brothers were outnumbered by Dark Angels. The first foe went down, his head severed by a single sweep of the First Captain's chainglaive. The second lost a hand, then most of his face. The third and fourth dropped from being disembowelled in the same swing.

It was happening again. Was he faster than everyone else, or were they slower? Every enemy he faced betrayed themselves in the subtlest ways. He saw a tension in the joints of their armour – each one a premonition of where their next blow would come from. Sevatar blocked them all with the ease of a soldier seeing every strike coming, lashing back before they could retaliate.

It wasn't happening again; it was worse than ever before. Or... better? Lactic acid burned his muscles and the pressure behind his eyes threatened to break his skull from within, but each beat of his heart made everyone move slower and slower. He took a chainsword against the haft of his spear, and had time to spin, teeth clenched, to ram his glaive through the chest of a tabarded paladin behind him, before turning back to catch the first Dark Angel's next blow. As he did, he saw the minuscule adjustment in balance signifying the exact angle of his enemy's next attack. Sevatar impaled him before the move even began, standing face to face with the dying warrior as the chainglaive hewed its way through the other warrior's innards.

Blackness edged across his retinal display. It took several seconds to realise it wasn't blood in his helm, but a stain physically darkening his eyes. Something popped in his skull, something rupturing with a wet, bursting gush of fluid. His own life signs, scrawled across his eye-lens readout, twitched no differently from the primarch's jagged fury.

He could hear his brothers shouting his name now. They thought he'd been wounded, and he wasn't sure they were wrong.

Trez's warning scalded its way through his mind's eye, as if the words were written in fire upon flesh, rather than recalled through memory's voice.

This will probably kill you, Jago.

You have the strength for this. But not the control.

There's no going back from this. If you unlock the gift you've fought so hard to forget... Some doors cannot be closed.

He staggered, down to one knee, using the fall to cleave the legs out from the

closest Dark Angel. The warrior cried out, dying a heartbeat later with Sevatar's glaive through his chestplate.

I might be dying, he thought, and started laughing.

'Valzen!' someone was screaming. 'Valzen, Sevatar is down! Apothecary!'

He turned his head to see Rushal standing above him, a sentinel in absolute black. The Raven swung his meteor hammer, the arc ending in a burst of lethal light as it cracked the helm of yet another Dark Angel.

The warrior of the First Legion went down in silence, because everything was silent now. Rushal's meteor hammer no longer boomed with every impact. Sevatar's own erratic life signs no longer whined warnings at him. His world wasn't a chaotic storm of thudding boots, detonating bolt-rounds, and wrenching armour joints. It was, somehow, serene.

Sevatar vomited into his helm, forced to choke on his own bile because he couldn't stop laughing.

AND THEN, HE WAS HOME.

Home. The city at night. The rooftop where he came to hide.

The sunless world hadn't burned in his primarch's misguided, futile rage after all. He was home, standing in the promise of rain before the true storm, and the pressure in his head was just as it had always been as a child: threatening to bubble over into a fit that would leave him shaking.

Food, food, food, they called at him.

He turned to them, where they pecked at the rockcrete rooftop and fluttered their ragged feathers.

Boy, Boy, Boy, they cackled. *Food, food, food*, and *Now, now, now*.

Jago reached into his pockets, offering a handful of breadcrumbs. *Come*, he said to the crows. *Food for tonight*.

Flesh, flesh, flesh, they called back.

He laughed as several of the black birds landed on his shoulders and outstretched arm.

Flesh, he agreed. *Flesh soon. Breadcrumbs now*.

Flesh now, flesh now. He let them complain as they took the breadcrumbs, each chunk pebble-hard and stale.

Flesh now, he said to them once they were finished. *Wait*.

He wasn't gone long, but he was dizzy and sweating by the time he returned. Dragging the other boy's body up the stairs left his arms sore and stretched.

Flesh, flesh, flesh, the crows cawed.

Jago dropped the dead boy's ankles and sat down, catching his breath. *Flesh*, he replied. *Save me some*, he said to the birds as they flocked down onto the corpse.

Yes, Boy, they kept cackling. *Yes, yes, yes. Save some for Boy.*

You can have the eyes, he told them. *I don't like the eyes.* They croaked crow laughter at this oldest of jokes between them. They knew the Boy never ate the eyes. He'd tried once, and the meal had made him see things. The Boy bled sweet man-blood from his nose and ears for hours, and slept all night, twitching on the stone.

Jago sat in silence while they ate, listening to the flutter of dark wings and enjoying the brush of mangy feathers against his cheeks. No other sound ever soothed him. No other feeling ever took away the headaches long enough for him to sleep.

EPILOGUE

Traitors

THEY'D THROWN HIM into a cell, stripped of his weapons and armour. That was wise.

They'd incarcerated him with nine of his brothers. That was less wise.

Sevatar leaned back against the force wall, listening to the sound of his brothers' easy breathing, subsumed in part by the half-living pulse moving through the energy field all around them. The *Invincible Reason* was in the warp. Where they were going, Sevatar could only guess.

He knew Curze had brought almost seven hundred warriors from the *Excoriator* in his hasty and ill-advised assault. Var Jahan had been one of them. Perhaps his Kyroptera brother was held in another cell. He toyed with the notion of believing it, but he wasn't a soul ever given to blind hope.

They didn't have the primarch. That much, he knew for certain. His surviving brothers spoke of it – of the Dark Angels' final overwhelming assault – and Lord Curze at last realising the odds sweeping his sons into early graves.

He'd turned from the Lion in that moment, turned from the battle... and fled.

If Curze still lived, he was haunting the lower decks of the *Invincible Reason* even now. Perhaps he was coming to free his sons, but again, Sevatar wasn't one to hold out in the name of unrealistic hope.

He knew the fleet had run; Admiral Yul's plan had worked in part, at least. The fifty ships remaining behind had powered through the Dark Angels' wider formation with all the lethal efficiency of a needle lancing a boil. He'd seen at least half of them punch through to the other side, and he'd seen a handful starting to tear their way into the warp. But he knew nothing more. The *Excoriator* was probably destroyed. The *Nightfall* almost definitely was.

So Trez was dead, along with Taye. The former was a shame, for the primarch needed the little eater of dreams. The latter was a shame for the most irrational of reasons; one Sevatar wasn't comfortable admitting to any of his brothers, let

alone the human maiden herself. He felt the same about four other mortals in service to the Legion, and he monitored each of them with care for the very same reason.

Dwelling on long-dead family and their resemblance to living humans over a century later had its place, but this cell wasn't it. Besides, he didn't know for sure. They *might* be his blood-kin – the descendants of the cousins he left behind when he left Nostramo – but there was no way to know for sure. The world was an urban battlefield in the last century of its life, with a scavenging population keeping no civility or morality, let alone historical records. He couldn't shake the sense of connection with them, just as he couldn't shake how much they resembled the family he'd once known.

Sevatar pushed the melancholy thought aside with no real difficulty. He wasn't a doleful soul, just as he wasn't an optimistic one.

At least in captivity, Sevatar had time to plot, to muse, to process. The Thramas Crusade was over. Most of the VIII Legion had escaped, scattering to the solar winds. The bulk of the Night Lords would join the march on Terra, though he doubted many would ever stay at the front lines long enough to besiege the Throneworld. He sensed a great deal of raiding for plunder in the Legion's approaching future. The thought would've made him smile, if he'd been anywhere else but a Dark Angels containment cell, caged by a cube of shimmering force.

The first cell they'd thrown him into had been a more conventional trap of reinforced iron. Sevatar had spat his way through one wall in less than fifteen minutes, dissolving it with his acidic saliva. When a guard came to check on him, he'd merely pointed at the hissing hole in the wall, almost large enough for him to fit through.

'I think rats did it,' he'd said. 'Big ones.'

The Dark Angels had moved him from the cell, throwing him into a force cage with several of his brothers – each of whom had evidently ruined their own cells, just as he had.

Lacking the protection of armour to hide his augmentations from their eyes, Valzen was a wretched thing, more chrome and haemolubricant fluid than blood and bone.

'Stop staring at me,' he said to Sevatar. His one black eye narrowed, his bionic lens trying to tilt and adjust in weak mimicry.

'I was merely thinking,' the First Captain said, 'you are a testament to the Legion's refusal to obey anything or anyone. You were too stubborn even to die

on Isstvan.'

Several of the others chuckled. Even Valzen offered a crooked sneer, the smile one-sided not from any wry charm, but because one side of his face was a stroke victim's bland visage.

'Why did you order us into this attack?' asked Tal Vanek. 'The Atramentar survived Isstvan, only to die to the last dozen in this suicidal madness?'

Sevatar raised a dark eyebrow. 'Is now really the time for petty recrimination?'

Tal Vanek grinned back, all teeth and wide, black eyes. 'Never a better time, Sev.'

'The primarch ordered this attack.'

Several of the warriors muttered in response. 'The primarch,' Tal Vanek replied, 'is a fool and a madman. Those who didn't know it before certainly see it now.'

This proclamation earned a general murmur of agreement. Sevatar had neither the patience nor the inclination to debate philosophy.

'We'll see,' was all he said.

The only one of them to remain silent the whole while was Rushal. The Raven's white skin, bare without his charcoal plate, was criss-crossed with dozens of aggravated scars – marks of excruciation, inflicted through torture, not earned in honest battle. He watched Sevatar from across the cell, his posture mirroring the First Captain's as they sat with their backs to the force screens.

Sevatar nodded to the Raven. 'I just realised I was wrong,' he said. 'I promised myself I wouldn't lose to the Angels twice.'

Rushal's scarred, split lips twisted into the ugly smile Sevatar's knives had left him.

'Sev,' one of his men said. 'Your nose is bleeding.'

He lifted a hand, feeling the trickle of hot blood against his fingers. 'So it is.'

'Are you all right?'

No. The secret I've kept for a century has just burst open, all because I couldn't resist a joyride in our father's psyche.

'I'm fine,' he said. 'Never better.'

'Your ear is bleeding, too.'

'It won't kill me. I think it may be time to escape soon,' he added.

'How do you plan to do that?' asked Valzen.

Sevatar looked at him for a moment, unsure if the question was sincere. Valzen looked blank, though whether it was because of his facial reconstruction stealing any expression, or simply a deadpan joke that Sevatar was missing, the captain

couldn't say for certain.

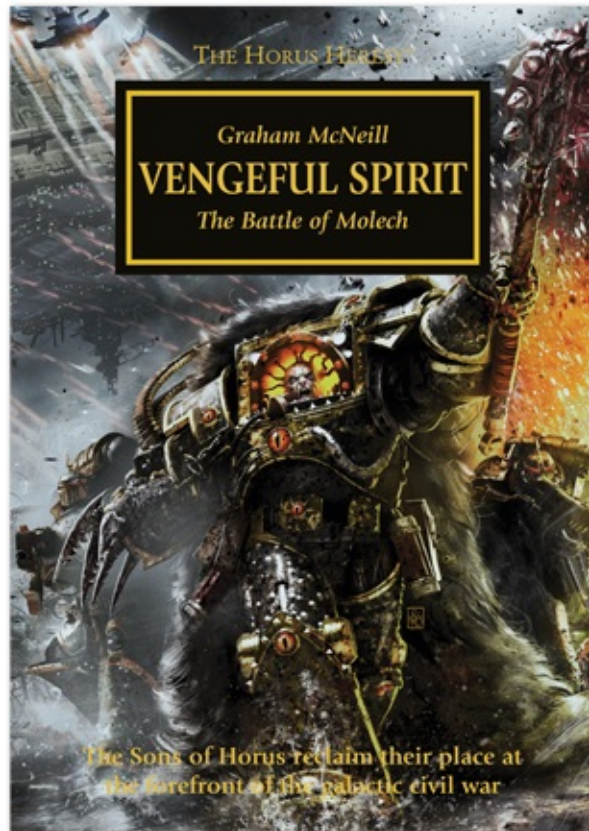
'Is that a real question?' Sevatar asked at last.

'Of course it is. How do we get out of here?'

'The same way we do everything, brother. By killing whoever tries to stop us.'

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

AARON DEMBSKI-BOWDEN wrote the Horus Heresy novels *Betrayer* and *The First Heretic*, as well as the novella *Aurelian* and the audio drama *Butcher's Nails*, for the same series. He is also responsible for the popular Night Lords series, the Space Marine Battles book *Helsreach*, the Grey Knights novel *The Emperor's Gift* and numerous short stories. He lives and works in Northern Ireland.



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