

THE HORUS HERESY

John French

THE CRIMSON FIST

Stone and iron

The Iron Warriors launch their attack on the
Imperial Fists fleet at Phall



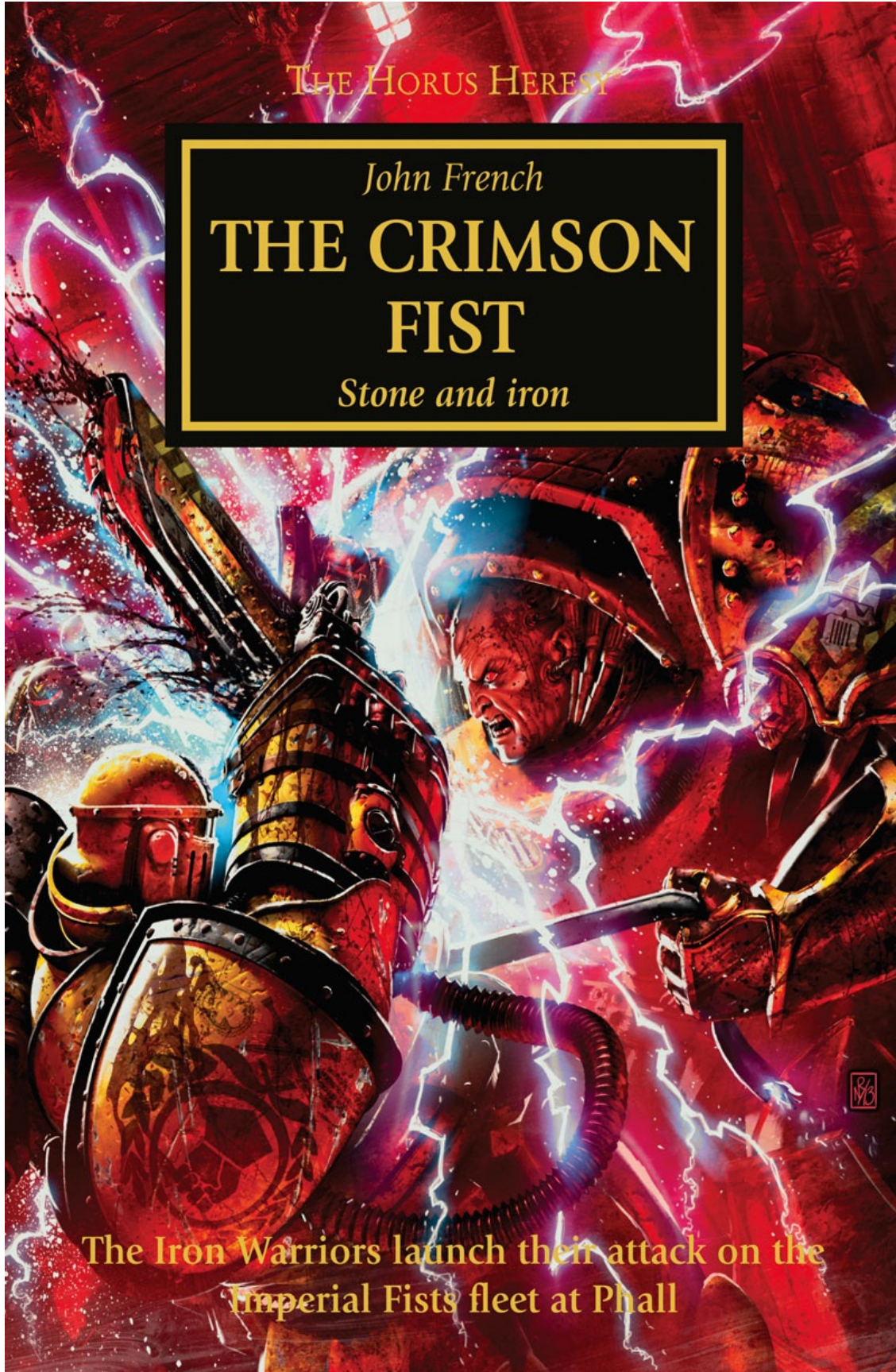
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THE HORUS HERESY*

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 Primarchs

ROGAL DORN, Primarch of the Imperial Fists, and Praetorian of Terra
PERTURABO, Primarch of the Iron Warriors

The VII Legion 'Imperial Fists'

SIGISMUND, First Captain
AMANDUS TYR, Captain, Sixth Company, Commander of the Halcyon
PERTINAX, Captain, 14th Company, Commander of the Hammer of Terra
ALEXIS POLUX, Captain, 405th Company, Master of the Retribution Fleet
RALN, Sergeant, 1st Squad, 405th Company

The IV Legion 'Iron Warriors'

BEROSSUS, Captain, Second Company
GOLG, Captain, 11th Company, Commander of the Contrador

Imperial Personae

ARMINA FEL, Senior Astropath
CALIO LEZZEK, The Retribution Fleet's Master of Astropaths
HALM BASUS, Primus of the Tribune

'True strength is born in pain.'

– Ancient Terran proverb

*'All time is unredeemable.
What might have been is an abstraction
Remaining a perpetual possibility
Only in a world of speculation.
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.
Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened'*

– from burnt fragments recovered from the Alba archives,
attributed to the ancient poet Elliot

*'We are future memories. When our flesh is dust and our dreams faded
we will be ghosts living in a land of legends, made real only by the
memories of others. What we take with us into that realm of the dead,
what we are remembered for, that will be the truth of our lives.'*

– Solomon Voss, from *The Edge of Illumination*

PROLOGUE

The Nightside of Inwit

Can I bear this?

My world has become a shrinking sphere of cold darkness. Within there is only pain, beyond it there is nothing but hungering night. I cannot see. Ice has pooled in my eye sockets, my tears frozen against my skin. I try to breathe but each sip of air draws razor edges through my lungs. I cannot feel my hands. Numbness is spreading through me. I think I am on the ground, curled on the ice, my limbs shaking more slowly with every fading heartbeat.

*The beast must be close. It won't have given up and it has my blood to follow.
My blood.*

I must still be bleeding. It is not a large wound, a clean puncture through my calf, but it will kill me all the same. I have trailed red across the ice-dunes, trying to shut out the pain, trying to ignore the numbness, trying to keep moving. I have failed. The cold is taking me and the beast will have what is left.

I cannot bear this.

I was never going to succeed. I am not strong enough.

The world is turning dark, the pain fading.

There is a voice shouting out of the black distance. I try to hear what the voice is saying but it is too far away.

Hands grip my face. Pain shoots through my head. I scream. Fingers peel back my eyelids.

'Alexis, you must move.' I see a face, surrounded by rime-caked fur. The eyes are blue, the blue of glacial ice. Helias. It is Helias, my brother. He is still with me. Behind his face a blizzard fills the starlit sky with spiralling shards of white.

'You must move now.'

I feel him grip my arms and yank me to my feet. Bright pain flares through my

body, jagged-edged, slicing and grinding with every movement. I scream again.

'The pain is how you know you are still alive,' shouts Helias over the wind. I blink, trying to focus. The numbness recedes; I can feel my limbs again. There is no comfort in the returning sensations. Part of me wants to be numb again, to lie down and let my blood freeze.

We stand on a narrow flat ridge, crevasses opening to either side, its top sculpted into undulations of white powder. Around us the fractured pinnacles of ice rise above the blur of the snowstorm like shards of flawed glass, dark blue in the starlight. The false radiance of the fortress moons shines down on us from beyond curtains of emerald aurora light. These are the Splintered Lands, the night-soaked side of Inwit which has never seen the sun. The cold is as constant as the night. The warriors of the ice caste only venture here in metal-plated environmental suits, but those who wish to join the Legion must cross this desolate place in rotting pelts and rags. It is a test, a journey through a midnight realm of agony. I have chosen that journey, but I will not see its end.

There is blood on the ice, frozen hard, trailing away into the distance.

'Where is it?' I ask, looking at Helias. He shakes his head. Strips of rag hide his face, and the snow-caked furs magnify his bulk so that he looks more like a tundra-ox than a man.

'I don't know, but it is close,' he says, his voice muffled but still strong. I know that his hands are swollen and black with frozen blood, but the pain does not even reach his eyes. As I fade, he is unbowed. He is my brother, my twin in all ways except one. He is stronger than me, he always has been. I would not have made it as far as this without him, and now I have failed him. He should leave me here; I am weak and I will kill us both.

He looks at me, as if he heard my thoughts.

'Don't even think it, Alexis. I am not leaving you.'

I open my mouth, but the reply dies in my throat. Over the snow-laden wind I hear it again, a low animal sound, like a breath released with a smile of anticipation. Helias has gone utterly still.

There is a growl from behind me, a crackling purr that floods my veins with warm fear. The beast has found us. It wants me, I know; I am weak and bleeding

and it has already tasted my blood. There is another growl, closer, longer. I can imagine it slinking across the ice behind me, its muscles moving with delicate slowness, its colourless eyes on my back. It is waiting to see what I will do, judging its attack for the moment when it is certain. And while it prepares it wants its prey to know fear.

The growl comes again, nearer, and I can hear the soft noise as the beast slides its furred body across the ice. I try to make myself calm, to ready my failing muscles for movement. Helias keeps his eyes steady on mine. He knows what I intend; it is what he would have done. I nod once, very slowly.

I hear the beast's claws scratch over the ice. In my mind I can almost see its muscles bunching under its ice-dusted pelt.

The beast roars as it leaps towards my back, the sound rising over the blizzard. I dive to the side, my muscles on fire. I am too slow. The beast's jaws close on my trailing left arm. It turns as it lands, dragging me across the ice. Teeth tear through my flesh. I can smell the rank meat stink of its mouth, the animal reek of its body. It flicks its head, my arm still between its teeth. I hear joints pop and agony flashes across my eyes. I do not even feel it as I slam back to the ground. It releases my arm, and places a clawed paw on my chest. Ribs crack, and needle-sharp claws touch my skin.

There is a yell and suddenly the pressure on my chest is gone. I scramble to pull myself away, and look up. Helias is standing with his back to a crevasse, his body poised, arms spread like a wrestler. Between us the beast coils on its six legs. Pale fur covers its long body from the snout of its shovel-shaped head to the end of its twitching tail. It pauses, assessing the new prey that has drawn its attention away from the easier kill. It tenses. I cannot see my brother's face but I know that under the rag mask he is smiling.

The beast pounces. Helias is still. The beast's jaws are wide, its glassy teeth like knife blades. My brother moves at the last instant, pivoting as his arms come up to grip the beast's neck. He turns and the beast's momentum spins it through the air towards the waiting crevasse. It is almost perfect. Almost.

I start running, pain and injury falling away... The beast twists as it flies through the air, its forelimb raking flesh. The long hooked claws fasten on

Helias's leg. The beast howls as both tumble together into the crevasse.

I reach the edge in time to grab my brother as he falls. His weight pulls me off my feet. The beast's claws come free and it vanishes into the crevasse, drops of blood following its panicked snarls into the darkness below.

Helias is hanging from my hand. I am on my front, my right hand gripping a ridge in the ice, my head and left arm extended over the crevasse's edge. My brother is spinning at the end of my grasp, his hand locked around mine. My arm is a lacerated ruin, the flesh punctured and chewed in the beast's jaws, and Helias's weight is pulling the wounds into broad and bloody smiles. The pain is like nothing I have ever felt. Blood is running over our hands. My hold is slipping. Pain and fear have become one inside me. I will not let this happen. I am strong enough, I must be strong enough. I try to pull him up and my grunt of effort becomes a scream. I cannot lift him. My right hand holding the ice ridge slips. I jerk forwards, sliding further over the edge.

'Alexis.' My brother's voice is so low that it is almost lost on the wind. I look down at Helias. His eyes flick to our hands, the frostbitten flesh slick with blood that looks black in the starlight. I see what he already knows; my grip has already broken. It is his hand locked around mine that is holding him from the black void below.

He was always stronger than me. I look back into his eyes.

'No!' I shout.

He opens his hand.

ONE HUNDRED AND FORTY-ONE DAYS BEFORE THE BATTLE OF PHALL

The Phall System

My scream woke me from the dream.

My eyes snapped open. For a moment I thought I was blind, that I was still on Inwit and that the cold had stolen my sight. Then the chill touch of my armour cut the long-distant past from the present. I was not blind, and my brother had fallen from my hand long ago. I felt cold, as if the dream had reached into reality to wrap me in a memory of Inwit's chill. Ice covered my helmet's eye lenses, turning the view into a frosted haze of slowly shifting light. The ice was pink, the colour of snow melted to slush by blood. Warning runes pulsed at the corner of my eyes, slow, dim red.

Hard vacuum warning...

Armour integrity warning...

Gravity condition zero...

Injury assessment...

Armour power low...

I could not remember where I had been, or how I had come to be freezing while my armour died around me. I blinked, tried to focus my thoughts. Sensations began to creep across my body: a numbed echo of pain from my right leg, a black absence of all feeling from my left hand, a metallic taste on my tongue. *I am alive*, I thought, *and that is enough for now*. I tried to move my right arm, but the armour resisted no matter how hard I strained. I tried to close my left hand. Nothing. I could not even feel my fingers.

I looked back to the weakening pulse of the warning runes. The armour had cycled down to minimum power, turning it into little more than a lifeless shell of metal. It was keeping me alive, but it must have taken severe damage.

I closed my eyes, steadied my pulse. I knew where I was. I was floating free in the vacuum of space. The armour was keeping my body warm, but it was failing. Its power would fade, and I would begin to bleed more heat into the void. My

enhanced flesh would last for longer than that of an ordinary human, but the cold would eventually reach my hearts and still their twin beats to silence. It was only a matter of time.

For a second my control almost broke. I wanted to scream, to thrash against the iron embrace of the armour. It was the instinct of a creature trapped beneath the water, its last breath burning in its lungs, the blackness of inevitability closing around its life. I let out a slow breath, forcing the instinct to stillness. I was alive, and while I lived I had a choice.

‘Re-power all systems,’ I said. A pulse of electric sensation ran through my body as the armour obeyed.

Almost as soon as the armour powered up it began to scream. Sympathetic pain stabbed into my spine. Overlapping warning chimes filled my ears. Angry runes pulsed across my helmet display. I blinked the warnings away and the chimes faded. There were at most a few minutes of power left before the armour became a tomb. I brought my right hand up and scraped the melting ice from the helmet lenses.

Light poured into my eyes, raw and white-edged. I was floating in a vast chamber lit by sunlight that came from a source somewhere behind me. A layer of pink frost covered everything, glittering in the stark light like a sugar glaze on a sweet cake. Small crystals floated all around me, turning slowly with the last of their fading momentum. Irregular shapes coated in rose-coloured rime hung in mid-air across the chamber.

I blink-clicked a faint marker on my helmet display. The vox system activated with a moan of static. I set it to a full spectrum broadcast.

‘This is Alexis Polux of the Seventh Legion.’ My voice sounded hollow inside my helmet, and only more static answered me. I set the broadcast to a looped cycle that would last until the power faded. *Perhaps someone will hear. Perhaps there is someone that can hear.*

Something bumped against my shoulder and spun lazily into view: a frozen lump a little wider than my hand. It spun lazily end-over-end. I reached out to knock it away, and it turned over and looked at me with lifeless eyes.

Memory flashed through me: *the hull splitting with an iron roar as the ship spilled from the warp storm’s grasp, blood arcing across the deck as debris sliced through the air; a human officer shouting, his eyes wide with terror.* I had been on a ship. I remembered the deck shaking under my feet and the screams of the storm outside the hull.

I jerked my hand back from the severed head, and the sudden movement sent me spinning through the frozen blood spray. The chamber rotated around me. I saw the ice-clogged servitor niches, and mangled banks of instruments. A tiered auspex dais pointed down at me from the floor, its screens and holo-projectors looking like the branches of a tree under winter snow. I tried to steady my momentum but I just continued spinning. Warnings began to shriek in my ears.

Power failing...

Power failing...

Power failing...

Sights flicked past me, suffused in the warning rune's ruddy light. There were bodies fused to the walls by layers of blood ice. Sections of splintered yellow armour drifted amongst limbs and shattered bone. Severed bundles of cabling hung from the walls like strings of intestine. Streamers of data-parchment floated beside the foetal shapes of frozen servitors. I spun on and saw the source of the light: a bright white sun shining through a wide tear in the hull. I could see the glittering blue sphere of a planet hanging against the star-dotted darkness. Between me and that starlight was a sight that made me stare as my view turned over.

Dead warships lay spread across the void. There were hundreds of them, their golden hulls chewed and split like worried carcasses. Vast strips of armour had peeled back from cold metal guts to show the lattice of chambers and passages within. Mountain-sized hulls had been portioned into ragged chunks. It was like looking at the jumbled remains of a slaughterhouse.

All my brothers are gone, I thought, and felt colder than I had for decades. I remembered Helias, my true brother, my twin, falling into darkness from the end of my fingertips.

Power failing... the warning runes chimed.

Final memories clicked into place. I knew where we had been going: where all of us had been going. I stared at the graveyard and knew one more thing with certainty.

Power failing...

'We have failed,' I said to the silence.

'...respond...' The mechanical voice filled my helmet, broken and raw with static. It took me a heartbeat to reply.

'This is Captain Polux of the Seventh Legion,' I said as my helmet display dimmed. Bursts of static filled my ears. I could feel the armour stiffening around

me, its power finally drained. A quiet numbness began to spread across my body. The helmet display faded to black. I felt something bump into my chest and then fasten around me with a grind of metal. In the prison of my dying armour I could feel myself falling into darkness, falling beyond sight and pain, falling like my brothers. *I am alone in the darkness and cold, and I always will be.*

'*We have you, brother,*' said a voice that was a machine whisper. It seemed to carry out of a night filled with dreams of the ice and dead ships glittering in starlight.

I knew it would fall to me. I knew the protocol of our Legion as well as any other, but that did not stop me wishing it was otherwise. The remembrancers and iterators speak of the Legioneres Astartes and say that we are without fear, that nothing fills our hearts and minds but resolve and fury. Of the Imperial Fists they say more: that we have souls of stone, that emotion is silent inside our flesh. The truth, as ever, is something that words cannot touch. If we felt nothing we would have failed in the thousands of wars we have fought on the Emperor's behalf. Without doubt to temper boldness our enemies would have slaughtered us many times over. Without rage we would have never have reached the heights of glory. I do not feel fear, but inside me something of it remains, mutilated and withered, its strings tuned to different notes. Where a human would feel fear I feel the tug of another emotion, one layered and spliced into my psyche by the process that made me. Sometimes it is rage, caution, or cool calculation. And sometimes it is dread, a ragged echo of fear that is lost to me. And it was dread that I felt as the leadership of the fleet gathered on the *Tribune*.

They passed me as they filed into the granite and bronze chamber. A hundred war leaders arrayed for battle. Intricate silver patterns wove across the golden yellow surface of each suit of armour, and the emblem of the clenched fist worked in jet gleamed from chests and pauldrons. Some were old, their faces lined and scarred; others seemed young, though they were not. There was Pertinax, watching me with green machine eyes. Beside him walked Cazzimus, who had held the towers of Velga for six months. There Iago, who had fought in the first pacification of Luna. Beside them were marshals, siegemasters and Legion seneschals. Between them they carried almost ten thousand years' experience of waging war.

Once they had all passed I followed, walking down to the centre of the chamber. The machine adepts were repairing my armour so I wore a saffron robe

knotted at the waist with a blood-red cord. I stand taller than all my brothers, and even without my armour I still dwarfed every warrior in the room. The chamber was silent and my steps echoed as I limped between my peers. I could feel their eyes on me, watching, waiting. My left arm was stiff at my side, the old scars of teeth and the newer wounds hidden by my robe's wide sleeve. The healing flesh shot traces of pain up my nerves. None of it showed on my face.

The chamber was deep in the hull of the *Tribune*, now the flagship of the Retribution Fleet, or what was left of it. Polished bronze lined the walls and its floor descended in tiers of black granite. Firelight from braziers filled the chamber with a red glow, and a ghost-green projection of a star and planets revolved above the open space at its centre.

Tyr had told me what must happen. He had come to see me as I recovered under the eyes of the Apothecaries.

'It falls to you, Polux,' he had said, looking down at me, his eyes dark in his axe-sharp face. The medical servitors had been bonding flesh to the left side of my body or I would have risen to reply. As it was I had to remain on the steel slab as the razor lasers and cauterising torches worked to rebuild my mashed and frozen muscle.

'There are others more worthy,' I had said, without breaking his stare. The edge of a sneer twitched at the edge of Tyr's mouth. Control is one of the first qualities required of an Imperial Fist, and I had no doubt that Tyr's hint of derision was no slip. Maybe he thought my words a sign of weakness, a betrayal of a flaw not yet discovered in my decades of service. Perhaps he simply did not like me. We are brothers, bonded together by oaths and the blood of our primarch, but brotherhood does not require friendship. In truth I do not know what he thought. I have always been apart, unable to read the signs of my Legion brothers' thoughts. They are blank to me, and perhaps me to them.

Tyr had shaken his head, the hunched shoulders of his Terminator armour shifting with the small movement.

'No, brother. You are Yonnad's pupil, the heir to this command. The primarch and Sigismund passed it to him. Now it is yours, but it is not yours to refuse.'

I had looked into Tyr's eyes that were so like our primarch's. I had not spoken from false modesty; there *were* others more worthy to lead a force that was still a fifth of our Legion's full strength. Better men had survived the wreck of the fleet: commanders with more campaign experience, higher in the rolls of honour, and more skilled at arms. Tyr was one such leader.

I am no hero, no champion of the Legion. I know how to defend and attack,

how to stand and not to yield. I have nothing else. It is all I have. But we are Imperial Fists and form and order is not something we set aside easily. Yonnad had designated me as his successor. That command might fall to me so soon was a possibility I doubt he contemplated. But they had pulled me alive from a frozen wreck, and the storm had taken my mentor. Tyr was right; I could not refuse. It was my duty, and that duty led me in limping steps to the centre of a circle of my peers.

I stopped at the chamber's centre, under the turning display, and looked up at the faces lining the raked tiers. A hundred pairs of eyes glittered at me from the shadows. I felt deeply honoured and completely alone. The truth was that I did not fear the command. Yonnad was the Legion's finest fleet master and I was his best pupil; I had commanded expeditionary fleets and campaigns of conquest. With Yonnad dead in the storm I was his heir. It was an honour the Legion had tutored and trained me for, but it was an honour I did not want.

Our fleet was the primarch's first answer to his brother's treachery. Five hundred and sixty-one ships and three hundred companies had left the *Phalanx*. First Captain Sigismund had been given command but the primarch had taken him back to Terra, and so we had jumped towards Isstvan under Yonnad's command. The storm had seized us as we entered the warp and it had not let go. The Navigators could not find the beacon light of the Astronomican, and every course took us deeper into the tempest. We were lost, drifting on the currents of a malign sea. After what seemed like many weeks the Navigators perceived a break in the storms, a single point of stillness. We had fled towards it, and the storm's fury had followed.

The fleet had translated into reality on the edge of a star system. The power of the storm in those last moments was like nothing I had ever felt. Geller fields failed, hulls sheared into fragments and burned in the fires of their own reactors. Some ships had reached safety, but many had died, their corpses spat out of the warp to freeze in the void. Two hundred warships lost, their remains left spinning in the light of a forgotten star. They had found me in the remains of one of those broken wrecks. I was one of the few.

Ten thousand Imperial Fists gone. I could not grasp that loss.

Three hundred and sixty-three warships remained. The fates of over twenty thousand of my brother Imperial Fists were now in my hands. It was a weight that I had never carried before. *I must*, I thought. *Even if it is more than I can bear, I must.*

I nodded once to the assembled chamber.

Silence. Then a hundred fists slammed into chest plates in unison.

I gestured across the slowly rotating projection of the system we found ourselves in. Its name was Phall, a system so minor and un-noted that it existed only as an obscure footnote in navigational records. The projection spun, the orbiting planets disappearing as a section of the image grew to show the surviving Imperial Fists vessels. I let it rotate for a moment. There was a question that all those present needed to consider.

‘Five hundred vessels aimed at the heart of the greatest betrayal ever committed. Two hundred lost as they fled to the one point of calm amidst the storm. Two planets, once inhabited, now empty.’ I looked at where shifting purple clouds represented the relative warp conditions around the system. ‘Here we sit, surrounded by the storms that drove us here. Cut off from communication. Contained. Trapped.’ I looked up at the watching faces; some were nodding as if seeing where I was going. Perhaps they had already seen the same elements of our situation and made the same judgement. I knew how to construct a trap, had used them in dozens of wars, and I knew what it was to kill a weakened and surprised enemy. Looking at the projection of our fleet floating in the Phall system I saw a trap. How anything could create such a thing was beyond me, but I knew what every instinct was telling me.

‘And if we have been trapped here,’ I said, and my voice carried through the silent chamber, ‘who is coming for us?’

The Imperial Palace, Terra

His father waited for him at the summit of the oldest stronghold on the Throneworld. The Bhab Bastion was an irregular cylinder of rock that rose to the roof of the world like a finger pointing to the heavens. In the long millennia of Old Night warlords, kings and tyrants had made it their refuge, and even they had called it old. Now it was an ugly relic surviving amongst the growing sprawl of the Imperial Palace, a blunt reminder of barbarity fused into a monument to illumination and unity. Sigismund wondered whether now the barbarity of the old fastness would triumph over the palace that had tried to tame it. *The old ways and necessities are come again, he thought, as they always do.* War had been the only constant of existence since mankind first walked under the rays of this sun, and it would last long after that same sun burnt to a cold ember. Of that he was certain.

The wind that blew across the bastion top was cold and scented by spices carried from the work camp on the distant mountain slopes. Above him clouds scudded through a brightening blue sky and a chill dawn light fell across the bare skin of his face. It might once have been handsome, but war and genecraft had carved it to a different end. Noble features were spread across a blunt visage, the skin pitted and the flesh under the right eye chewed by a scar that ran down the cheek to the jaw. But it was the eyes most people noted: bright sapphire-blue and lit by hard intensity. Clad in burnished gold battle plate, swathed in a white surcoat crossed in black, he bore the marks and honours of a hundred wars like a second skin. In battles across the stars he had never been defeated. From the gladiatorial pits of the World Eaters to the conquest of star clusters he had demonstrated what it was to be a warrior of the Imperium. In another time he would have been the greatest warrior of his age, but in these times he was merely the strongest son of the being who waited for him by the tower's parapet.

Rogal Dorn glimmered in the brightening light. Standing head and shoulders taller than Sigismund, the primarch of the Imperial Fists was a demigod clad in adamantine and gold. Beside Dorn stood an astropath, a hunger-thin woman whose bent spine showed clearly under the green silk of her robe. Neither said anything but Sigismund could feel that a conversation had just ended, the severed tension still hanging in the air. He knelt, the wind stirring his tabard

against his armour.

‘My thanks, mistress.’ Dorn nodded to the withered astropath, who bowed and walked away. ‘Rise, my son,’ he added.

Sigismund rose slowly and looked up at his father. Dark eyes glittered at him from a face of hard lines and unreadable stillness. Dorn smiled grimly. Sigismund knew what that meant; it meant the same as it had every day since they had returned to Terra.

‘There is no word, my lord?’ asked Sigismund.

‘None.’

‘The warp storms occluding the—’

‘Would make communication unlikely, yes.’ Dorn turned away. Out beyond the battlement an eagle turned against the cold blue sky, skimming the edge of a plume of drifting smoke. Dorn’s eyes followed it, tracing the spiral of its flight as it rose on a column of warm air.

It had been many weeks since Dorn had heard and seen the evidence of his brother’s treachery. Sigismund remembered the rage in his father’s eyes. It was still there, he knew, wrapped in will and buried beneath layers of control. He knew it because it burned in him, a bright echo of his father’s cold fury. Dorn had wanted to go and confront Horus himself, to hear the traitor’s confession and bring retribution with his own hands. But duty had held him back: duty to the Emperor and the Imperium that Horus now sought to destroy. They had returned to Terra, but Dorn had sent his sons as emissaries of his anger. He had named it a Retribution Fleet. Thirty thousand Imperial Fists and over five hundred warships had struck out towards Isstvan, a force great enough to subdue a hundred worlds, bearing a brother’s wrath. Now a second force from many Legions gathered to strike at Isstvan, but no word had come from the Retribution Fleet.

‘Word will come, my lord. The galaxy does not simply swallow a third of a Legion.’

‘Does it not?’ Dorn turned his dark eyes on Sigismund. ‘War amongst the Legions. Horus a traitor. The ground under our feet becomes the sky. Can we be sure that we know anything for certain?’

‘You have been listening too much to the worries of the council, my lord,’ said Sigismund in a level voice. *Fear surrounds us*, he thought. It ran through the halls of Terra like a cold wind. It ran through the hive sumps of Nord Merica, and through the whisper colonnades of Europa. It spread in glances, rumour and in the silence of fears left unsaid. It was everywhere and it was growing. Horus’s treachery had shaken all assumptions of loyalty and truth in the Imperium. In a

single moment everything had become unsure. Who else had sided with Horus? Who could be trusted? What would happen? The questions went on without answer. As he looked into his father's eyes Sigismund reflected that knowing some of the answers gave little comfort.

'The fleet will arrive at Isstvan, and whatever happens to them they will endure. They are your sons.'

'Do you now regret returning here?' asked Dorn.

'No. My place is here,' he said, looking back into his father's face. Command of the Imperial Fists sent to Isstvan had been Sigismund's, but it was a duty that he had not taken. He had asked instead to return to Terra. Dorn had trusted his son and acceded to his plea without question.

He had kept the real reason to himself, sensing that his father would not understand. Sigismund barely understood it himself, but he had made his decision. That deception had weighed on Sigismund like penitent chains ever since.

Dorn smiled.

'So certain, so little doubt,' he said.

'Doubt is the greatest weakness.' Sigismund frowned.

Dorn raised an eyebrow. 'Quoting my own words is unsubtle flattery, or a very subtle rebuke.'

'The truth is a many-edged blade,' quoted Sigismund in a flat voice. Dorn's laughter blew across the platform like brief thunder.

'Now you really are trying to provoke me,' growled Dorn, but the words still held a note of laughter. He gripped Sigismund's shoulder. 'Thank you, my son,' he said, his voice grave again. 'I am glad you are here.' For a moment Sigismund thought of telling him the truth, of telling him why he had returned to Terra. Then his father looked away and the feeling passed.

'And there is more for you here than keeping me from melancholy.' Dorn's eyes had gone to the stars glittering on the horizon's edge, his gaze fixed on where a red spark flickered like a cooling cinder. 'It has reached us,' he said. 'The treachery is at our threshold.'

'The reports are true, then? Mars is falling?'

'Yes.'

Sigismund felt anger coil through him at the thought of an enemy so close to the heart of the Imperium. The hate built within him, running through his limbs in a hot wave, feeding on lesser emotions until it was a focused line of barely shackled fire. It was this inner fire that had made him a warrior without peer

beneath the Emperor and the primarch whose flesh he shared. For a moment he felt as he had before the encounter on the *Phalanx*, before everything had changed.

He let out a long breath. 'I will grind the Martian traitors to dust.'

Dorn shook his head. 'There is no time. For now we must secure what we need for the defence of Terra – the armour from Mondus Occulum and Mondus Gamma.' Sigismund nodded. If they had no allies remaining amongst the Martian adepts it would be a punishing task; punishing, but straightforward.

'My resources?'

'You have four companies, and Camba-Diaz will go with you.'

'To shackle my temper,' snarled Sigismund, seeing the wisdom in his father's order even as it pulled at his pride.

'All of us need others to balance us.' Dorn inclined his head slightly. 'Is that not so, my son?' Sigismund thought of the flicker of uncertainty he had seen in his father's eyes and of the real reason he had asked to return to Terra. *He stands at the centre of a storm of fear and betrayal*, he thought, *and I must stand with him no matter what is to come.*

'It will be done, my lord,' he said, and knelt at his father's feet.

'Of that I am certain,' said Rogal Dorn.

EIGHTY-EIGHT DAYS BEFORE THE BATTLE OF PHALL

The Phall System

The fire from the fleet's engines blotted out the stars. Beyond the *Tribune's* viewports hundreds of warships slid across the darkness in an interlacing web of plasma trails. Each was moving on a precise arc around its fellows, forming a shifting lattice like an ever-changing orrery. Some were so close that I could see the augur spines projecting from their backs and bellies. It was an arrangement I had created, placing each element and setting their trajectories in motion. Every ship was in a constant state of readiness, their shields raised, and their weapons ready. At another time such a creation might have pleased me, but it only served to fill my mind with half-formed worries. It had been weeks and nothing had happened.

I flicked my eyes back to the battlegroup commanders that stood in a circle around me. My first sergeant, Raln, stood a little behind me, his helmet in his hand, his face devoid of its normal crooked grin. We stood at the centre of a spit of white marble that ran down the centre of the *Tribune's* bridge. Black stone walls curved above our heads to a vaulted roof. Round viewports ran the length of the bridge, their armoured eyelids open to the void beyond. In the clefts to either side of us rows of servitors sat bound to machines by thick creepers of cable. The smell of warm wiring and the sound of clicking cogitators filled the air. Human officers paced the long rows, followed by hovering servo-spheres that projected transparent curtains of data in front of their faces. Beneath my feet images of mythical beasts inlaid in gold and bloodstone writhed across the marble. The *Tribune* was the product of the Inwit shipyards, and like all ships birthed above that world of night and ice its master commanded on his feet. Those that came into his presence stood with him, equal in respect if not rank. It was a principle that appealed to me, but after dozens of councils I sometimes felt that the Inwit shipwrights had been kinder to the commanded than the commander.

Pertinax completed his report. I nodded thanks and then looked around the

circle. Each of those assembled commanded one of the fleet's two-dozen battlegroups. Most of those in attendance were projections, their translucent images rendered in flickering light. Only Tyr, Raln and the spindle-limbed Master of Astropaths Calio Lezzek were physically present. The council had been like all those that had preceded it; all was quiet. As it had been for weeks. I caught Tyr's eye and saw the old argument growing in the glance. I looked away to the only person yet to give their report.

'Master Lezzek.' The old man raised his head at the sound of his name, and cocked his head as if to listen. 'Is there word from Terra?'

'No, captain,' wheezed Lezzek, the loose skin of his face quivering above his silk-shrouded shoulders. 'There has been no word from Terra, or anyone else.' The answer was as expected; we were as deaf and mute as we had been when the storm first spat us out.

'Thank you,' I said, and was about to dismiss the gathering when Lezzek took a gulp of air and continued.

'We lost another two astropaths in our last attempt to send a message through the storms.' The old man paused, breathing hard. I could see the fatigue running through his body. His skin had a fever sheen to it, and a drop of blood formed at the corner of his mouth as he spoke. 'Fleet master, we have lost half the remaining astropaths in the fleet trying to get word to Terra. We cannot continue like this. The storms beat on our minds even when we sleep. It's like they are alive. Like they—'

'You will keep trying,' I said, a hard edge to my voice. Lezzek opened his mouth to speak but I did not give him a chance. 'There is nothing more important. Nothing.' Lezzek was silent for a moment and then nodded.

It was a death order, I knew. I was ordering his astropaths to give their lives whether they wished to or not. But there was no choice, and we had all suffered losses in this endeavour. Doing one's duty while bearing loss is the essence of loyalty. Still I felt the blind man's empty eyes boring into my back as I turned to the other commanders.

'Until next division,' I said, and brought my closed right fist to my chest. All of the Imperial Fists returned the salute. Lezzek simply bowed and shuffled away, looking as if he might fall over at any moment. One by one the projected images blinked out, until only Tyr remained. A frown creased his sharp face as he stared at the back of the departing astropath. A sensation of restlessness hung around Tyr even when still, a restrained energy like a predator looking out from the inside of a cage. He was honourable and true but he bowed in respect to no

one other than Sigismund and Dorn himself. He was my brother by virtue of the alterations to our flesh and the oaths we had made, but he would never be a friend.

‘If you have something on your mind you should have voiced it, brother.’

Tyr gave me an accusing look. I braced myself for renewed debate. Behind me Raln moved discreetly away from us both, his constant enigmatic grin back in place.

‘He has a point, brother,’ said Tyr, looking at where Lezzek had stood. ‘We cannot continue like this.’

‘We must establish communications with Terra,’ I said, my voice flat and steady. Tyr nodded, still looking at the spot vacated by the astropath.

‘That is true, but that is not what I meant.’ He frowned, the scars across his face becoming jagged fissures. ‘The primarch ordered us to Isstvan. Word from Terra is vital but so is the mission.’

‘Ten ships, captain,’ I said quietly. Tyr winced. Since I had assumed command he had been arguing that the whole fleet should be trying to find a way through the storms. In his eyes staying in place and preparing our defences was a waste of time. After our first conversation I had agreed that we needed to try to break through the storms. I had given Tyr the responsibility of probing into the warp to try and find a safe passage. Ten ships had been lost over the last weeks, and twice as many had taken damage. The storms had not abated; if anything they seemed to have increased in ferocity.

‘If the whole fleet sought a way out—’

‘We would lose more, and we would not be able to maintain our readiness.’

‘Is that our duty?’ growled Tyr. ‘To stay here and wait for an enemy that may never come? Command did not fall to you to delay here while our enemy waits for us beyond the storms.’ He gestured at the viewports but kept his gaze on me. I saw something dangerous in the deep centre of his eyes.

I stepped closer to Tyr, a poised stillness suddenly running through my body. My armour was void-hardened battle plate, less massively plated than Terminator armour, but I still looked down on Tyr. ‘I have listened to you.’ My voice was low and level. ‘I agreed to let you seek a way out. But mastery of the fleet is mine.’ Tyr looked about to say something, but I shook my head slowly. ‘You could have had command. You are more honoured. Sigismund holds you in high regard, as does the primarch. The decisions I make could have been yours. But they are not. You and the others placed this duty in my hands.’ Unconsciously I found I had clenched my hand, the scarred fingers hidden by the

enfolding bulk of my power fist. ‘You may continue to seek a passage out, but I will not risk more of the fleet, or our deployment. That is my command, captain.’

Tyr blinked once and then bowed his head, but when he looked up again I could still see fire in his eyes. I felt something kindle at the base of my neck, a hot acid sensation that spread through my head and chest. I recognised the feeling: anger. Not the focused rage of battle, but the low human sensation.

I opened my mouth, but never spoke the words that had formed there. At that moment, the *Tribune* screamed.

We are told that pride is a virtue, but only when bound to humility. I had been ready for an attack. Through the long weeks of watching, drilling and planning I had waited for the enemy to show his face. I had expected silent ships drifting on momentum from the system edge, or a blunt mass assault from behind the system’s sun. Our disposition accounted for this, as it did for any number of other preludes to attack.

My plan, though thorough, had not anticipated the unimaginable. Of the many mistakes I made it is perhaps the easiest to understand but the most difficult to forgive.

It began with the servitors. There were hundreds of them, bound into the ship by interface trunks, and locked in cable cradles and machine niches. As one they howled. Some vomited data code as if trying to purge themselves. Others babbled half-formed words. Those without mouths thrashed in silence.

I tried to understand what was happening. Then the psychic wave hit me and pitched me over into a sea of fragmented sensation. I heard crying, jabbering, and pleading in a hundred desperate voices. I staggered, my vision swimming with luminous streaks of light and colour. I was falling and the sounds I heard were shards of memory and suffering that were not mine. I was drowning, stinking fluid filling my lungs. I was floating in the void knowing that I was about to die. I was screaming as an iron-faced figure walked towards me, bladed arms extending. I was shouting into the winds of a storm.

‘Brother.’

The word seemed to come from far away. I opened my eyes. A fever blur edged my vision and the screams echoed in my ears. There was a face looking at me, the pain on its features an echo of my own. For an instant I saw a ghost, a half-dream of the past meshed with the present. Then I felt a blow jolt my

shoulder, hard enough to shake me inside my armour. My senses snapped back into sharp clarity. Tyr was looking at me, a snarl of suppressed pain twisting his thin face. Sweat beaded his skin. Behind him I could see human officers slumped over sensor daises, or twitching on the floor amongst pooled vomit and excreta. Blood dribbled from their eyes and ears, running over static-filled data screens. I could tell by their stillness that some were dead. There was a taste of dry ash and grave rot in my mouth.

‘Look,’ shouted Tyr, and pointed to where the holo-projection of the Phall system turned in the air above us.

I looked, and was shouting for full battle readiness even as my mind processed what I saw.

A thousand energy signatures flared and blinked out in front of my eyes. Sensor bursts and auspex sweeps bombarded us, hundreds of them exploding from sources that came to life and then vanished. Clustered spikes of data and auspex readouts bloomed and died across display screens on the bridge. It was like watching a phosphor shell scatter sparks across the night sky. The cogitators snarled as they tried to process and assess the sudden squall of data. And all the while the nightmares and visions churned through our minds in a swelling tide.

Then it was over. The last energy signals vanished from the holo-projection. The machines went quiet, the servitors slumped at their stations, and the fevered sensations faded from my mind.

TWENTY-EIGHT DAYS BEFORE THE BATTLE OF PHALL

The Phall System

They took our fear but not our doubts. Am I right? Have I misjudged? What will happen? The questions hammered on me and I bore them in silence. That is the necessity of command: that you hold doubt within. You cannot look to others for assurance, because you are their surety. You cannot share your misgivings, lest they spread like a withering disease through muscle. You are alone. Sometimes I wonder if the primarchs feel this; if decisions eat at their thoughts as they do mine.

I had been drilling with my company for hours. Normally I find calm in the repetition of such practice, but the questions repeated in my mind. *What if the storms did not abate? Should I change my plan? What would Sigismund have done?*

The training chamber ran along the flank of the *Tribune* for half a kilometre. Blast doors closed tank-wide holes in one wall, shutting out the void beyond. The floor was a tangle of barricades and fire-scorched debris. Weapon servitors hung from the ceiling, sliding along gantries to rain fire from the different angles required by the training scenario.

As I glanced up I saw that the barrels of the servitors' cannons were glowing red. The guns increased their rate of fire. Sparks danced across the rim of my boarding shield. Lines of tracer fire scored the air above my head. My shield arm was vibrating with the impact of hard rounds. A line of tracer hit the crown of my helm, and I felt muscles tear in my neck. To either side of me two of my first squad stood with their shields braced across the left of their body, their legs set.

Each shield was a thick plate of plasteel two-thirds our height. The snouts of bolters jutted from the vertical slot cut into the right-hand side of each shield. Standing shoulder to shoulder, we created a wall of metal. In battles fought in the guts of starships this is what keeps you alive and allows you to win. Fighting this way is blunt and ugly; it is killing with discipline and workmanlike routine. It is perhaps the method of war I come closest to enjoying.

‘Advance, with fire,’ I roared. Our targets were servo-rigged automata that moved to preset patterns to mimic the response of a determined enemy. Only when we had closed the distance would real opponents replace machines and servitors. We began to step forwards and every step was a volley of bolter fire, repeated with lethal rhythm.

Questions rang in my head in time with our tread. *Was Tyr right? Should we try and break through the storms?* After the sensory and psychic onslaught we had come to full alert, and waited for an enemy to show their face. They had not come. And the weeks had passed, and the drumbeat of questions grew in my head.

‘Enemy, ten metres, front, closing fast,’ shouted Raln, from my right. I could not see the enemy without looking over my shield, but I did not need to; Raln had seen and I trusted his judgement.

Was the Phall system really a trap? The populations of its planets were missing and we had seemed to come under a form of psychic attack. But we had not found the cause of the onslaught. There could be other factors at work. Our being here could simply be coincidence.

‘Open ranks,’ called Raln. Our shield wall opened, peeling back just before the enemy hit. Five Imperial Fists in a tight wedge, hammers and chainswords ready. Skill at war is a blade edge made sharp only by harsh practice, and so I had picked the best of the company as our close-quarter opponents. They came at us as I intended: as if they wanted to kill us. The five came through the gap in our shield wall and spilled into the space behind. ‘Close,’ shouted Raln. Our ranks closed, enveloping the mock enemies within in a tight ring of shields.

Can I do this? A fifth of a Legion on full alert, drilling for an attack that I believed was coming... What if I am wrong?

A hammer blow hit my shield with a sound like a gong. An instant later one of the five enemy warriors had rammed his shoulder into the point where mine and Raln’s shields touched. It was Settor, sergeant of the sixth squad, an old warrior seasoned by the conquest of worlds. He was also lethally fast. In the instant that a gap opened between our shields he had stepped forwards, forcing it wider and bringing his hammer down on my head. My vision swam. I blinked and in that second Settor was through our shield wall. He kicked Raln’s legs out from under him and suddenly there was a wide hole in the circle of our shields. Above us the gun servitors rose on their hoists and bullets began to fall on our heads like rain.

I raised my shield high, covering my head. Settor’s hammer head hit me in the

gut. I staggered and a second blow crashed into my face plate. The eye lenses of my helm shattered, red fragments spilling down my front like drops of blood. I was dead, or would have been in a true fight.

‘End,’ I called over the vox. A second later the gunfire slackened as the servitors hanging from the weapon gantries cycled their slug cannons to silence. I pulled my helmet off. Pieces of red glass ringed the eye sockets like shattered teeth. Around me my company lowered their weapons. Sulphurous weapon smoke fogged the air. Countless chips and gouges had stripped everyone’s armour back to the dull metal beneath. Flattened slugs smeared the fronts of our boarding shields.

‘There was an opening, fleet master,’ said Settor, bowing his head as he spoke. ‘A momentary gap in your guard. I used it to break the shield wall.’ I nodded. It is the duty of all Imperial Fists to recognise weakness. Settor was right – my thoughts and focus had drifted. In a real fight it could have led to slaughter and failure.

‘Thank you, brother,’ I said with a nod. Settor moved away, his hammer hanging loose from his fists. I looked at the battered helm in my hand. Anger buzzed behind my eyes. I had allowed my doubts to make me weak. If I could not find the strength to bear my duty then I would kill us all.

There may be no enemy coming for you, whispered a craven voice at the back of my thoughts. *Tyr may be right and your duty might lie down another path.* I thought of Sigismund, our first captain. This was to have been his duty to bear, but he had returned to Terra with the primarch. I thought of the steps of mischance that meant that his duty now rested in my hands. Would it have been as heavy in his?

‘Not bad.’ Raln’s voice cut through my thoughts. He had come to stand at my shoulder; blade cuts and gunfire had pitted and gouged his armour. He pulled his own helmet off, and took a deep breath as if savouring the thick smells of battle training.

‘The wall broke,’ I growled.

‘For the first time in four hours.’

‘It still broke.’

‘Response and cohesion have increased.’

‘Another four hours,’ I said. Raln held up his helmet as if in surrender and I saw the hint of a smile on his scarred lump of a face. I have no idea why he smiles.

‘The artificers will not thank you.’

‘Another four hours.’ I hefted my shield, feeling its reassuring weight.

Raln raised an eyebrow, but nodded and began to shout orders. The company started to reform. Overhead the gun gantries repositioned into a different configuration. I did not care if the artificers had to rebuild every suit of armour in the fleet; when an enemy came we needed to be ready. The opinions of others, whether they agreed or not, were of no matter. Strength requires obedience, not thought.

I clamped my eyeless helm over my head. I would be without the information fed to me through the helmet’s eye lenses, but I would continue anyway. In war you cannot rely on anything except your brothers. To do otherwise is weakness.

‘Begin,’ I called and the hammer chime of gunfire filled my ears.

‘*Fleet master?*’ The helm officer’s voice cut through the noise as I was about to give the first order. It was Cartris – a human veteran of fifty years in service to the Imperial Fists, and the man I had trusted with coordinating the sweep of the system’s planets, moons and asteroid belts. He was not the type to be easily shaken, but I could hear the tension in his voice.

Was it an attack? Alarms would have rung through the ship. No, it was something else, important enough to alert me immediately but not enough to raise a general alarm.

‘I hear you, Cartris.’

‘*We have received a signal from our search units.*’ Cartris paused. I could hear the chatter of signal readouts and vox distortion in the background. ‘*They have found something.*’

Tyr came with me. Perhaps I wanted him to see it and so answer his own questions. But perhaps there was another, less worthy motivation.

Our steps clanged dully as we approached the dead machine at the centre of the gloom-filled chamber. I glanced at Tyr, but his eyes stayed fixed on the isolated circle of bright light. The chamber had been an ordnance magazine. Its walls were three metres thick, and its triple-layered blast doors sealed by stratified layers of cipher codes. The machine sat alone under a buzzing stasis field, a specimen pinned out for display and then locked away from sight. Automated gun turrets twitched at our approach, and then cycled to stillness. It was as if we had passed into a shadow world that had formed like a cyst around a secret.

We stopped and looked at what the search teams had pulled from the ocean of

Phall II. The machine glistened under the stab lights, water beading its bare metal body, the stasis field tinting the drops to sapphires. It had suffered severe damage, but its form was still clear: a blunt-edged cube of metal, studded with thruster vents and ugly protrusions. Its shell had been cracked open, first by jagged wounds that to my eyes looked like impact hits, and then by the smooth cuts of a melta torch. The tech-priests had dissected it and left it with its innards exposed. I could see a jumble of cables and clusters of glass blisters like lidless eyes. Dribbles of yellow fluid hung unmoving from severed tubes. Shattered crystals had spilled over the stained floor. At its heart was something grey and soft, like a corpse bloated in lightless water. I could see a spine under pale skin, and above that a nest of cables haloing a head, its eyes and mouth stapled shut. There were no arms or legs, just stumps. A thick smell of ionised air filled my nose, and my teeth ached in time with the field's hum.

I had seen countless servitors created by the Mechanicum, and had waded knee-deep through mutilated bodies, but there was something about the machine and the amputated torso that was utterly repellent. I had examined it before, when the search teams first brought it aboard, but without the crowding tech-priests and labour servitors it felt different. It felt like going to a grave's edge to look down at the remains of a secret atrocity.

Tyr let out a carefully controlled breath beside me. 'What is it?' he said, his voice echoing in the empty chamber.

'We don't know, at least not with certainty,' I said. Tyr was moving around the edge of the stasis dome. 'The search units I sent to Phall II found it floating in the oceans, but it has clearly been exposed to the void. The adepts tell me that the machine components have several purposes.' Tyr gave a small nod, but was silent as I pointed to different portions of the wreckage. 'Most of it is made up of high-gain augur arrays and broad-spectrum sensors effective over a relatively short range. Then there is the human component. Apparently it would have been in a state of hibernation, kept alive with minimal power usage. Their assessment is that it was in orbit around Phall II, suffered damage and fell to the planet's surface.' Tyr was still staring at the grey remains of the human in the machine. I glanced at it then away; it made me want to shiver.

'Some form of servitor-controlled sensor vehicle? An asteroid survey unit, perhaps?'

'The adepts think it unlikely. In addition to the sensor equipment some of the systems seem to be a form of psy-amplifier.'

Tyr looked up. 'This created the psy-attack?'

‘This and others like them. There were hundreds of energy signatures detected. There are most likely many more.’

‘We need to find and destroy them; they could trigger again at any moment.’

‘This one fell through the ocean planet’s atmosphere as its orbit decayed. Our search teams would never have found it without the flare light of its re-entry.’ I looked back at the broken machine and its pitiful occupant. ‘It sustained damage but the adepts say that most of its system had already burnt out. Its occupant was already dead.’

Tyr shook his head, his face taut with an emotion I could not read. ‘They were killed once they had been activated,’ he breathed. There was a note of disbelief and rage in his voice. ‘Objects this size, now dead and without power; we could sift this system for a decade and find nothing. With no population on the planets there is no way of knowing who put them here or why they attacked us.’

‘You are correct, but it was no attack.’

‘You say that now?’ I could see the months of dispute and controlled animosity straining at his will. After the psychic attack Tyr had not dropped his calls for the fleet to try and break the storms. If anything his attitude became more unyielding. As had mine. I had hoped that he would have seen the full implication of the recovered machine, and that my decisions had been correct. It was a weakness, and like everything built on weakness it was doomed.

‘Look at it, brother.’ Tyr’s eyes flicked back to the machine, skimming over its broken form. ‘The sensors, the augur and communication sifters. The psychic screams we all felt were not attacks. They were a message.’ He looked up at me and I saw that he understood at last. ‘It was no attack, brother. It was a prelude to one.’

The Imperial Palace, Terra

Silence followed the messenger. The click of her staff echoed through the corridors as she approached the planning chamber. Figures pulled back before her, their eyes following her steps, their whispered conversations stalling as if they could sense the weight of the news she carried. Four gold-plated Custodians flanked her and black sentinels followed in her wake like armoured mourners.

Within the planning chamber Sigismund caught the movement from beyond the chamber's open door and looked up. He saw the approaching messenger and the look on the astropath's withered and blind face. Something cold ran over his flesh at the sight. He knew the astropath: her name was Armina Fel. She had served the Imperium for three decades. That service had bent her spine and turned her hair to the white of raw cotton. She had brought countless messages to Dorn. Most of the news was bad, some frustrating, but none of it had required an escort. It was almost as if what she brought needed to be guarded like a prisoner in case it slipped its bindings and ran free.

Sigismund turned to look at his father, but if Rogal Dorn had seen the approaching procession he gave no sign. Vadok Singh was outlining his proposed fortification of the Imperial Palace. The war mason paced amongst the broad pillars, perfumed smoke puffing from his mouth as he sucked on his long-stemmed pipe. Dorn stayed in the centre of the room, frowning down at the plans spread across the table at the room's centre. Brass projection apparatus hung from the ceiling, scattering images of Singh's plans across the chamber's sandstone walls. The room seemed almost peaceful, but Sigismund knew that this short moment of calm was a lie. He had returned from Mars to find the atmosphere of uncertainty and fear growing stronger with every day. It was as if the whole of Terra was holding its breath and waiting to see where the next blow would fall.

'The Dhawalagiri Elevation?' said Dorn, scowling at the sprawling schematics. 'You think that necessary?'

'Not *necessary*,' purred Singh. 'A *necessity*, Rogal.' The war mason flicked a skeletal finger at one of his silk-robed slaves and the man changed the focus on one of the projection lenses. 'Look at the inherent weakness in the alignment of the outer elements. You of all people must see that if this section of the palace is

to hold we must remake it, and remake it now.’ Normally the war mason’s familiarity would have angered Sigismund, but he barely heard the words.

The procession was at the chamber’s open doorway. Behind Sigismund, Dorn gave a low snort.

‘Necessity is a word that makes me suspicious, old friend,’ said Dorn.

Sigismund watched Armina Fel and her escort pause on the threshold. The astropath brought her hand up to the empty pits that were her eyes. Pearls of moisture glittered on her cheeks. *She is crying*, he realised. Beside her one of the Custodians brought the butt of his spear down three times on the stone floor. The sound of the blows rippled through the pillared chamber.

Dorn raised his head slowly.

‘There is news,’ he said in a flat voice, and looked at Armina Fel. For a moment Sigismund thought he saw an unreadable expression flicker across his father’s face. ‘It is all right, mistress. Please tell us what you must.’

The woman’s lips were trembling.

‘There is word from Isstvan, my lord.’ She took a ragged breath. Dorn stepped forwards, his black robes falling back from his arms as he reached out. He gently raised her face until her empty eyes looked up at him.

‘Mistress,’ he said softly. ‘What has happened?’

Armina shook herself, poise and strength returning to her features, as if some of Dorn’s stillness and strength had flowed into her. She began to speak, her voice the monotone drone of precise recall.

‘Imperial counter-strike massacred on Isstvan Five. Vulkan and Corax missing. Ferrus Manus dead. Night Lords, Iron Warriors, Alpha Legion and Word Bearers are with Horus Lupercal.’

Nothing moved in the chamber. The black sentinels and Custodians stood like statues of jet and gold. Vadok Singh simply stared at Armina, the ember in the bowl of his pipe cooling to grey ash. For a moment Sigismund felt nothing, as if what he had heard had stripped all sensation away. A primarch dead. Two lost. Three Legions gone, and four gone from friend to enemy in the space of a handful of words.

This is it, thought Sigismund. *As she showed me. This is the true beginning of the end. If four more Legions can turn against us, then why not more still? They shall come here, and here we must stand, and stand alone.* He realised that he was shaking, taut muscles vibrating under scarred skin. For a second he wondered if it was fear, if that long-dead emotion had returned to him after so

long. Then he recognised the sensation: it was hate. Hate so bright and focused that he could almost see it. *Let them come. Here my father stands, and I will stand with him.*

Dorn's hands fell from Armina's face. His eyes were black holes in a facade of stone. Hard control radiated from him like cold from glacial ice. He looked at Sigismund. For an instant Sigismund thought he saw a reflection of his own anger in his father's eyes, a flash of rage, quickly hidden.

'Find any remnants of the new betrayers that remain in the system.' Dorn's voice was a hoarse growl. 'Use whatever and whoever you need. Take them or destroy them as you must. Do it now, my son.'

Sigismund began to kneel, but Dorn was already turning back to Armina.

'Get a message to the Retribution Fleet. They must return here immediately.'

Armina swayed as if the words were a storm wind. 'Lord Dorn, we have heard nothing from them.' She swallowed. 'They may have reached Isstvan Five before the massacre. They may...' Her voice trailed away as Dorn took a step closer.

'If you have to burn through a thousand astropaths you will reach them.' Dorn's voice was low but it seemed to fill the room. 'Bring my sons back to Terra.'

The Isstvan System

‘This information is accurate?’ Golg’s question broke the silence, but the tension remained. The only sound was the hum of armour and the dull rumble of the *Iron Blood’s* reactors. Golg shifted, his hunched augmetics hissing nervously. The other Iron Warriors captains kept their eyes on the luminous surface of the holo-table, their shapes casting bloated shadows onto the walls. They were the senior commanders of their Legion, those that had the primarch’s countenance. Forrix, his gaunt face framed by a hood of vulcanised rubber. Berossus, his pale eyes glittering above a sneering half-smile. Harkor, in Terminator armour still black with soot from the slaughter on Isstvan V. Dargron, hidden behind a slot-eyed face plate. Varrek, his face so twisted by scar tissue that it looked like chewed meat. None of them looked at Golg. They were waiting to see how Perturabo would respond. They had all known others who had presumed the Lord of Iron’s favour and paid for their mistake.

Golg raised his eyes from the luminous columns of data. Perturabo was watching him, his gaze unmoving. Golg felt the danger in that glittering gaze, the force of destruction behind the oil-black eyes. A hammer, as tall as the Iron Warrior himself, rested head down under Perturabo’s hand. The black iron head gleamed in the ember light that lit the chamber. Perturabo made the smallest of movements towards the illuminated table.

‘It comes from the Warmaster,’ said Perturabo, his eyes moving from Golg to the other captains. None met his gaze.

Golg ran his eyes down the glowing data runes. What it represented left his mouth dry. Over three hundred warships caught in a backwater system like fish in a whirlpool. A fleet of ships pinned in place and waiting for extermination, and here were all of those ships’ dispositions and characteristics, listed and laid out in cold light. It was too perfect, too neat. How could even the Warmaster achieve such a thing? It was daunting in its implication. There was possibility here, though, the possibility to rise high in the sight of the primarch. Golg knew that the other captains would be thinking the same. They would be judging how much power they could gain, and how high were the risks. Golg opened his mouth to ask another question but Forrix spoke before him.

‘This information was gathered first-hand?’

Perturabo nodded once.

‘By scout elements in the system.’

Golg managed to hide his surprise at Perturabo’s words.

So this was no random event, he thought. This was planned before we came to kill the weakling Legions on Isstvan. But then what else would he expect from the Warmaster and the Lord of Iron? He thought of the massacre they had just committed, of the Legions they had butchered. They were weak and destroying them had been nothing more than another task to be completed. But the Imperial Fists were rivals of old, arrogant pretenders to honours and reputations they had bought with lies. Golg felt himself smile. The possibility of breaking Dorn’s sons was a prospect so rich he could almost taste it. *Was this part of the price of our allegiance to Horus, he wondered? The chance to break one enemy bought by the deaths of others?*

‘What of the storms?’ asked Harkor, eyes hooded by a frown. ‘If they cannot penetrate them, how will we?’

‘Our passage will be possible. The Warmaster guarantees it,’ said Perturabo. That anyone could make such a guarantee staggered Golg. He caught Forrix’s eye as he glanced up, held the first captain’s cold gaze for a second and then looked down again.

‘If they suspect the possibility of an attack they will be prepared,’ said Forrix, extending an armoured hand to the table surface to flick between details of ships.

Berossus shook his head at Forrix, his lip curling. ‘If it is Sigismund who commands them, he will not sit patiently in his cage. He will make attempts to break through the storms. That will make them less prepared, and more vulnerable.’

Perturabo turned his head slowly to stare at Berossus. The commander of the Second Grand Company seemed to shrink in spite of the size of his reinforced armour.

‘Sigismund has command,’ growled Perturabo, his voice heavy with disgust. ‘My brother will not have trusted this fleet to another.’

Berossus straightened, eagerness clear in his face. ‘Lord, with an equal number of ships I will break them with the first attack. I will—’

‘No.’ The word hung in the air. Perturabo stepped forwards until he was looking down at the glowing lines of data frozen on the surface of the holo-table. Golg could see the cold blue glow glittering in the primarch’s eyes, like starlight on a blade’s edge. ‘No. They must not simply be broken. They must be ground to

nothing. Dorn does not deign to come himself, but his favoured pup will bleed for him. All of the ships currently under your command will go.' He looked up, his gaze moving between them as he spoke. 'And I will command the attack myself.'

THE EVE OF THE BATTLE OF PHALL

The Imperial Palace, Terra

Dusk shadows filled the Investitory, pooling at the base of the amphitheatre's wall and spreading from the statues ringing its centre. A sky of fading blue crossed by thin cirrus clouds domed the quiet space. Cooling air, tinged with the smell of evening dew on stone, licked Sigismund's skin as he stepped from one of the wide doors at the amphitheatre's edge. Lumen globes were kindling atop wrought-iron posts, but the open space was still a place of half-light, on the boundary between day and night. The Great Crusade had scattered to the stars from that spot, forged by the oaths sworn there.

So many of those oaths now broken, thought Sigismund. He looked up at a figure towering against the sky, its white marble features caught somewhere between nobility and determination. *Guilliman. Still with us for certain*, he frowned. *As far as we know, as far as anything can be certain*. There had been twenty, twenty replicas of the primarchs carved from white marble by the last of the Pendelikon artisans. Two were gone, their outslite plinths empty, and their Legions consigned to oblivion. Nine hid beneath pale fabric, their faces swathed as if to conceal the shame of their treachery. In the distance he could see a golden figure standing still at the base of a statue. Something about the figure seemed to draw the eye, as if it held a greater scale than could ever be captured by chisel and hammer. He began to walk towards the distant Rogal Dorn.

Sigismund had seen something change in Dorn since news of the Istvan V massacre, as if internal structures of will and strength were realigning within the primarch. Dorn moved from briefing to briefing, watching as the labour armies began to tear down and remake the palace, pressing the astropaths for news and connection with the worlds beyond the solar system, consulting with Valdor and the Sigillite in sealed chambers. In the brief moments in between Dorn had taken to walking the parapets and silent places of the palace. Sigismund did not know what weighed on his father's mind, but he did know that what he had to tell him would only increase the burden.

He wondered again why he had decided to tell his father the whole truth. Guilt? Yes, guilt was part of it. Guilt at having deceived him, at having relied on his trust while knowing he would not understand the truth. *I am sorry, father, but you must know. I cannot keep it from you. You must see.* He thought of one of the basic laws of strategy, a dry line of insight that now seemed charged with new significance: *The first axiom of defence is to understand what you defend against.*

Dorn was staring up at one of the hidden statues as Sigismund approached.

‘Yes, my son?’ said Dorn, without turning.

Sigismund looked up at the covered stone. There were still recognisable features under the wind-rippled fabric: the hint of a predatory stance, the projecting shape of a clawed hand pressed against the covering as if about to rip through. *Curze*, he realised, the brother who had tried to kill Dorn. *Was that a sign of what was to come? Should we have seen these darker days in that moment of near murder?*

‘They should be torn down,’ said Sigismund. ‘All of the traitors. They should not stand beside those who keep their oaths.’

Dorn gave a low chuckle and turned to look at Sigismund. ‘Would you like to do it yourself?’

‘Give me the word, lord, and I will do it with my own hands.’

Dorn gave a brief smile and shook his head.

‘Not yet. We are not at such a point yet.’

‘Are we not?’ asked Sigismund, his face still, eyes unblinking. Dorn did not answer but looked back up at the statue of *Curze* that stood covered behind Sigismund.

‘No,’ growled Dorn. ‘The Imperium endures and will outlast this treachery.’ Sigismund thought that Dorn looked as if he were speaking to *Curze*’s statue as much as him. ‘There is still honour, there is still loyalty.’ Dorn dropped his gaze, frowning. ‘I do not know how this war will unfold, my son. I do not know what it will demand of us, but I know that eventually it will end, and for that day we must be ready.’

Sigismund echoed Dorn’s frown. ‘Horus has the initiative, we are the ones mired in confusion. He could cut us apart piece by piece, wait until we are so weak that there is no resistance left.’

Dorn looked sharply at Sigismund, but he could tell that his father had considered the same possibility.

‘If it was Curze or Alpharius then perhaps, but they are not at the heart of this.’ Dorn looked to where the moon was rising at the darkening edges of the sky. It was red, stained by the dust and smoke rising from the palace as it settled into night. ‘He will come here,’ said Dorn softly. ‘He will not stay out amongst the stars and bleed us to nothing. No, he is still Horus. The single spear thrust to the throat, the final killing blow. He will come here to finish this. One night we shall look up and see the heavens burning.’

He sees it already, thought Sigismund. At least in part. He shall see that I was right, that my choice was right.

‘Father.’ Dorn looked at him. Sigismund could feel the primarch’s eyes playing over his face, assessing, judging.

‘Something troubles you?’

‘I must speak with you about why I requested to return here, about why I did not take command of the Retribution Fleet.’

‘We have talked of this before. I saw no reason to question your judgement then and I see none now.’

Sigismund swallowed, his throat suddenly dry.

‘I had another reason.’ Sigismund felt the words hang in the air. *I am committed now, he thought. There is no turning back.*

‘Speak,’ said Rogal Dorn. The primarch had become still, his gaze fixed, as if his entire being focused on Sigismund. A dust-scented wind stirred his white-edged cloak, lifting it against the growing gloom.

Sigismund looked away, his mind weighing how to begin.

‘It was on the *Phalanx*,’ he said, after a moment. ‘The fleet was being broken up, preparing to follow back to Terra or strike towards Isstvan.’ He thought back to that narrow sliver of time, remembered the tension that ran through every Imperial Fists ship after Garro’s revelation. Some thought it could not be true but those who had seen the evidence had no such comfort. While the truth soaked in, the Imperial Fists had made ready for war. ‘I was walking the lower habitation decks. I am not sure why, I do not think that I had a reason besides perhaps seeking peace.’

‘You lacked clarity?’ said Dorn, his blank voice as unreadable as his face. Sigismund shook his head.

‘I knew what you required of me.’ He glanced away to where the shadows of night gathered at the margins of the amphitheatre. ‘Perhaps I was looking for purpose.’

‘Purpose?’ said Dorn. ‘You knew what was required but you sought purpose?’ Sigismund nodded, and let out a long breath.

‘I knew my orders, but I was missing something.’ Sigismund blinked, paused. He remembered those days on the *Phalanx* more clearly than he had lived them. He had felt diminished, as if Garro’s words had taken something vital from him. ‘For so long I took each step of the crusade without doubt. Each campaign, each battle, each blow had purity. That was my strength, had always been my strength.’

Dorn lowered his chin and his eyes seemed to darken. ‘Your thoughts seem far from clear, *captain*.’

‘Perhaps, lord,’ nodded Sigismund.

‘So you refused the command because of this? Because your purity of purpose was disturbed?’ There was anger in Dorn’s voice, controlled, held back but still there.

‘No, lord. I would have done your will without question.’

‘But you did not.’ Sigismund felt ice in the words, the judgement forming in them. *I must tell it all*, he thought, but did not meet his father’s eye as he continued.

‘I was on the deck where Garro’s civilians were quartered. It was deserted and I thought I was alone.’ It had been quiet, he remembered. The whole fleet had bustled with preparation and tension but at that moment the decks he walked had been silent. Afterwards it had struck him as strange, as if he had walked along a corridor of stillness between moments of activity. ‘It was only when she spoke to me that I realised I was not alone. “First captain,” she said. I drew my sword and turned.’ Sigismund frowned at where his hand rested on the pommel of his sheathed sword. ‘She stood only five paces behind me. I had not even heard her approach.’

‘Who?’ asked Dorn. Sigismund looked up, his eyes unfocused.

‘The remembrancer,’ he said, the memory suddenly more vivid than the present: a human girl in a pale robe. ‘Keeler,’ said Sigismund. ‘The one that spoke to you before we—’

‘I remember her,’ Dorn snapped. Superstition clustered around Euphrati Keeler. Sigismund knew that some form of cult had sprung up around the girl. It was dangerous, a breach of the Imperial truth. Some said she was a witch, others a saint. She had an undeniable confidence and poise, but then so had history’s many false prophets. Sigismund knew this to be true, but somehow that truth seemed dimmer as he remembered Keeler standing in the memory of a stone-

lined corridor.

‘She was just there, looking at me as if she had been waiting, as if she knew I would come.’ She had smiled, he remembered. A smile of understanding in a fragile face too young to show such calm. She had nodded as if answering a question he had not asked. *You have questions*, she had said.

‘What did she say?’ said Dorn, and the memory dissolved back into the reality of the Investitory and his father’s voice.

‘Enough that I came to you and asked to return here, my lord,’ said Sigismund.

‘And what could ever have been enough for that?’

The question echoed in Sigismund’s ears. The moment extended, filling him with vivid sensations: the perfect texture of the ouslite plinth ten paces behind his father’s back, the rustle of fabric shifting in the breeze around the statues. He could detect a dozen spices in the wind, traces of smoke, dust and coming rain. He suddenly realised it was the smell of a half-forgotten life, of a brief childhood lived in the drift camps on the Ionus Plateau. It was the smell of a lost home. He had not thought of that half-remembered scrap of time for decades. He wondered why it had returned to him now.

He looked into Rogal Dorn’s eyes.

‘It was not just what she told me. It was what she made me see.’ Sigismund paused, remembering Keeler’s face. *You must decide*, she had said, and there had been sorrow in her voice. ‘The war will come to Terra,’ said Sigismund.

‘A possibility that you did not need a remembrancer to reveal to you,’ said Dorn as he raised a hand to point at Sigismund’s chest. The threat in the gesture was like the muzzle of a gun pointing at his heart. ‘Was it not you that said Horus could try and defeat us without coming here? Now you say back to me a judgement that I have reached myself and call it revelation.’

‘I hoped that you might disagree, my lord. That there might be another possibility.’ He shook his head sadly. ‘There is not. I cannot doubt your judgement that Horus will bring the war to Terra. It does not refute my choice, it validates it.’ Dorn looked away, his face suddenly half-hidden in the gathering night. ‘It is not the fact that the traitors will come here, it is how,’ said Sigismund, and remembered.

‘You must choose,’ she had said. He had been about to tell her to return to her quarters, to keep her falsehoods to herself. ‘You must choose your future and the future of your Legion, Sigismund, First Captain of the Imperial Fists.’ Her words had held him in place. Fear filled him, forgotten and alien in its raw intensity.

'You must choose where to stand. By the words of your duty, or by your father's side at the end.'

'The end of what?' he had managed to say.

'The end of everything that has been,' she had replied.

Sigismund kept his eyes fixed on his father, trying to read the effect of his words as he spoke. 'She spoke and I seemed to see what she spoke of.' Her words had unfolded in his mind in blurred reality, like snatches of dreams, like flowering nightmares. 'I could see it. It was real.'

So many ships that the sky was iron. Fire falling like monsoon rain. Armoured bodies heaped as high as the Titans that strode amongst them. Hundreds of thousands of enemies, millions, an uncountable horde surging through the broken walls. An angel, its wings red in the pyre light of a burning palace.

'They will come here, their numbers will blot out the sun and cover the ground, and we will be few, father.'

'Few or many, let them come,' growled Dorn.

'We will be few and they, they will be far more than we can defeat. That is the point when we will face the end.'

Imperial Fists tumbling from blackened walls, falling like water, broken, bloody. Columns of smoke so tall that they touch the armoured sky. And still they come. Ships blasting dead wrecks aside to scatter more troops to the surface.

'You must understand what it will come to,' she had said. As she spoke he had known it was true. The universe was war without end. The Imperium had turned on itself and so it was only a matter of time before everything rested on a single battle, on a sword's edge.

'It will come to that, father,' he said quietly. 'It will come to the last breath in the body of the Imperium. I saw it, and understood that it was true, and that I had to choose.' Another image opened in his mind's eye: his own corpse, drifting lifeless and frozen on the edge of a forgotten star system in a future he would not see. 'I chose to return here with you.' It had taken him days to decide, to sift through his instincts and reasoned arguments. He had tried to forget what she had told him, what her words had made him see. But the possibility had eaten at his mind. In a galaxy where Horus turned on the Imperium, what other outcome could there be?

'What is the other path?' he had asked. She had shaken her head.

‘Death, Sigismund. Death and sacrifice far away, under the light of an unknown star. Alone and unremembered.’

She had gone, leaving him alone in a silent corridor.

‘That is why I returned to Terra. I said that I was needed here, and I spoke truly.’ Dorn was still not looking at Sigismund. ‘Let them come. I will be here to stand with you, father.’

Dorn was silent, his face an unmoving echo of the stone statue that looked down at the Investitory floor. He stared at Sigismund, his eyes seeming to pierce the fading light. Sigismund could not look away.

I have chosen, thought Sigismund. I have chosen to be here at this moment.

Dorn breathed in the twilight air. He flexed his left hand and watched the movement of his metal-clad fingers. He looked up. Sigismund saw the coldness in his father’s eyes, the icy glitter. He felt the instinct to fall to his knees, to speak again, to say something, to claw back the past. Dorn opened his mouth, his lips moving slowly. When his voice came it was like the whisper of an oncoming storm.

‘You have betrayed me,’ said Rogal Dorn.

Sigismund staggered. He felt as if the words had flayed away all his conditioning and control. If Dorn noticed the effect of his words he did not pause.

‘We are made to serve. That is our purpose.’ Dorn’s voice echoed off the raked stone tiers of the amphitheatre. He was shaking as if huge forces were straining inside him. It was the most terrifying thing Sigismund had ever seen. ‘Every primarch, every son of a primarch exists to serve the Imperium. Our existence has no other meaning.’ Dorn took a step forwards, his presence seeming to tower taller than the statues of his brothers. ‘Our choices are not our own, our fate is not ours to choose. Your will is mine, and through me the Emperor’s. I trusted you and you squandered that trust on pride and superstition.’

Sigismund found his voice.

‘I stand with you.’ His voice was raw and unfamiliar, a stranger’s words coming from his mouth. ‘I will stand against the enemies of the Imperium until I die.’

‘You believed the lies of a charlatan, a demagogue who pretends to powers we fought to free humanity from. I gave you a duty and you turned away from it. Your duty is not here; it was out amongst the stars.’

‘Even if this war will be decided here, my lord?’ Sigismund could not believe

that he was speaking, but the words came out of him. 'I saw it. I know it will happen.'

'So certain, so little doubt,' said Dorn, his voice low. Sigismund could feel the danger in that soft tone. 'You murder the future. You condemn it with your pessimism and arrogance.'

'I sought only to serve,' said Sigismund desperately.

'You presume to feel the hand of destiny on your heart. You believe that you see more clearly than I do, than the Emperor does.' Sigismund heard the judgement in the words, and thought of Horus, of the unknowable reason he had turned against the Imperium, of the other statues that stood above them with hidden faces. Dorn nodded as if seeing the realisation form in Sigismund's mind. 'Those are the virtues of a traitor.'

'I am no traitor,' said Sigismund; the words sounded fragile in his ears, as if they reached him from far away. He was not looking at Dorn, he could not.

'No?' said Dorn. 'I say that your duty was to obey, not deceive. I say that the future you think inevitable is a lie. I say all this and yet you do not accept it. Arrogance.' Dorn spat the word and looked towards the plinth of Horus's statue. 'Our purpose was defined for us. We are not humans that have the luxury of choice. We are the Emperor's warriors. We exist to serve, not to rule our own destinies. Turn away from that truth and we corrupt the illumination we were made to spread. It is not just on which side you fight, it is why.'

Horus, thought Sigismund. He speaks of Horus but condemns me with the same words. Suddenly he felt he saw the architecture of his father's thoughts, the calculated judgements balanced by beliefs as immovable as mountains. He saw the irreversible logic. There is no way back, no other way for him to judge me. What have I done?

'I serve the Imperium,' he said, and his voice was shaking.

'You serve your own pride,' spat Dorn. Sigismund swayed but caught himself. He felt hollow, his mind empty of all of the surety and fire that had defined him. *Keeler was wrong, he thought. This was the choice of death alone and unremembered. There is only one path open to me now.*

'My lord,' Sigismund began to kneel.

'You will stand,' roared Dorn. 'You have no right to kneel before me.'

Sigismund drew his sword, its gleaming length coal-black in the failing light.

'My life is yours, my lord,' he said, and turned the sword hilt to Dorn, and bowed his head, the flesh of his neck exposed above the collar of his armour.

‘Take it.’ Dorn reached out and took the sword. His eyes glinted down its length, hard, dangerous, the eyes of death itself.

Dorn spun the blade, a movement so fast that Sigismund saw it only as a blur. He had an instant to think, to remember the smells of a lost home carried on a dry wind. His father brought the sword down.

The tip of the sword punched through smooth marble and buried itself a foot deep in stone. Dorn took his hand from the hilt, leaving the blade quivering in front of Sigismund.

‘No,’ said Dorn, a low growl. ‘No. The Imperium will endure. But you, you have made your decision. There will be no easy end for you. None will ever know of what you have done. I will not allow your fear and pride to sow doubt in our ranks. Your shame will be yours to bear alone.’

Sigismund felt as if the Investiarey’s vast circumference had closed to a tight circle around him. His body felt distant, the touch of his armour uncomfortable against his skin.

‘You will continue in rank and position as you have, and you will never speak to any other of this. The Legion and the Imperium will not know of my judgement. Your duty will be to never let your weakness taint those who have more strength and honour than you.’

Sigismund felt his hearts beating. His mouth was dust dry.

‘As you will, father.’

‘I am not your father,’ roared Dorn, his anger suddenly filling the air and echoing from the amphitheatre walls. Sigismund fell to the floor. He could feel nothing. A ringing filled his head. It was a scream, he realised. A forgotten scream of loss and pain, mute inside his soul that was no longer human. Dorn looked down at him, his face swallowed by dusk shadows. ‘You are not my son,’ he said quietly. ‘And no matter what your future holds, you never will be.’ Dorn turned and walked away.

Sigismund watched Rogal Dorn until his outline vanished into the gloom. Alone he knelt, gripping the hilt of the sword with both hands. He breathed slowly, resting his forehead on his gauntlets. The darkness of the Investiarey surrounded him. His pulse slowed. He thought of all the battles he had fought, all the enemies cut down by the sword he knelt before. The restless ferocity, the focus of complete certainty guiding his every blow; all gone, all wiped away by his choice on the *Phalanx*.

‘You have questions,’ she had said. She had just been standing there, quiet, still.

'No,' he had said. She had smiled. He had been going to order her back to her quarters but the thought seemed to fade in his mind, to be replaced by... questions. 'How will this end?' he had asked. He did not know where the question had come from, or why it had come to his lips now. But as he said it he knew that it was the reason he had wandered the decks of the Phalanx while his father brooded and raged.

'As it must,' she had said.

The sword felt unfamiliar in his grip, as if the weapon that he had borne for decades was his no longer.

You are not my son.

'You will be needed before the end,' she had said. 'Your father will need you.'

He raised his head. Above him the stars were crystal fragments against sable.

'You must bear whatever will come,' she had said.

I am still alive, he thought, and I still serve.

He stood, pulling the sword from the stone floor; its edges glittered like sharpened obsidian.

'I will not fail,' he said. In the quiet of Terran night the words sounded like a vow.

Above him, Sigismund could hear the shrouds of traitors flapping in the wind.

THE DAY OF THE BATTLE OF PHALL

The Phall System

I was with Calio Lezzek when it began. The old astropath had been teetering on the edge of death ever since the psychic onslaught had washed through the Phall System. Barely conscious, he could do little more than mutter a few words of greeting. Each day that I visited him he was weaker, a step closer to death and further away from life. He often slept, his acolytes wiping mucus from his lips as he twitched in the grip of dreams. I am not sure why I visited. Perhaps it was guilt, or maybe because he was the only person on the Tribune who did not look to me for purpose and strength.

On that day Lezzek had not woken, and I had been about to go when his hand gripped my arm. I looked at him. His mouth was moving, cracked lips trying to form words. I leant forwards, dipping my ear close to the old astropath's mouth. His lips moved but I could hear nothing. I leant closer. Lezzek took a breath that rocked his entire body but when he spoke it was in a whisper that only I heard.

‘They are coming.’

He went still and collapsed back onto his pallet. I straightened. I knew what it meant. The bow wave of ships approaching through the warp presses on the minds of psykers. They can feel a large ship or fleet draw close, like lightning rods sparking before a storm breaks. A dead ice feeling had numbed my body. My thoughts felt sluggish as I turned to the door. I had taken no more than one step when the sirens began to call.

She is a good ship, thought Pertinax. Only three decades had passed since the *Hammer of Terra*'s burnished hull had slipped the docks of Mars. Some amongst the Legion said that these Martian craft had a more aggressive temperament than those of Inwit, as if their character mirrored the more impatient age into which they were born. Pertinax never thought of his ship in such terms. To him she was as she was, and he knew her every quirk and strength.

The bridge below him moved with order and precision. Servitors whispered to

cogitators in clicking whispers. Human officers exchanged spoken orders, data-slates and spools of parchment. Tech-priests crouched in their bronze niches, silent until the machine heartbeat of the ship required their attention. The bridge was the mind of a warship, and the vessel it controlled was a battle-barge. Eight kilometres long, crewed by thousands of serfs and servitors, its weapons could pound civilisations to dust. She carried three hundred Imperial Fists, a might almost equal to that of her guns. *Hammer of Terra* was her given name, and like all of her kind she had a single purpose: to dominate war amongst the stars. A warship was made as much of flesh and discipline as it was of metal. That truth pleased Pertinax. It was an appreciation he knew he shared with Fleet Master Polux.

Though a few amongst the senior captains and battlegroup commanders might chafe at Polux's orders, Pertinax could not fault the fleet master. The fleet was vulnerable, and an attack was likely. In such a position one needed to create a solid defence and conserve fighting strength. Polux's deployment addressed all of these needs with a direct elegance. Pertinax had even favoured the younger fleet master with a nod of approval when he had seen the plans. The Retribution Fleet formed a sphere close to the ocean world of Phall II. Each commander in the fleet led a battlegroup of smaller vessels. Every battlegroup moved on a precise looped course. Together the whole resembled a cage spun from the tails of comets. The *Hammer of Terra* and its battlegroup of twelve lighter ships were on the outer surface of the sphere formation, close to the system's edge.

Close to the *Hammer of Terra*, the black sheet of stars bulged. Lilac and green light spread across the swelling distortion, as cracks spread across the void.

On the bridge of the *Hammer of Terra* officers began to call alerts; a second later alarms sounded from multiple areas. Pertinax took in the flow of information rolling across his augmented eyes and weighed the possibilities. Something was punching into reality from the warp. It could be an enemy, a friend or something unknown. Until they knew which it was all would receive the same greeting. He nodded once to himself and gave the order the ship had been waiting to hear.

‘Battle readiness.’

The *Hammer of Terra* shuddered in sympathy with the words. As he felt the ship wake to full life, Pertinax could almost see the plasma flushing into the exchange ventricles deep in the battle-barge's hull. The green glow of holo-screens and red of alert lights filled the bridge as metre-thick shields descended

over the viewports. Pertinax knew his ship would be at full readiness in less than ten seconds. Ready statuses were already coming in from the dozen strike cruisers, destroyers and frigates in his battlegroup.

He looked towards a pict-feed of the system's edge in time to see the stars fracture. A hole opened in space. Ringed with lightning, its centre a sickening swirl of colour, it widened like a mouth opening to vomit. A vast iron arrowhead stabbed from the opening, dragging a vast crenellated hull behind it as it split the wound wider. It was a battle-barge, slab-hulled and dull-armoured. Weapon batteries lined its sides and serrated its spine. Pertinax recognised the emerging ship: her name was the *Contrador*. She was a capital ship of the Iron Warriors Legion. For a second his thoughts spun with confusion, his clarity failing at the sight of an old rival and ally.

The *Contrador* fired. Detonations spread across the *Hammer of Terra*'s bow. Its void shields held, energy coiling across their surface in oily ropes. On the bridge Pertinax's voice was shaking with rage as he gave the order to return fire. The *Hammer of Terra* began to bring its own guns to bear.

Around the *Contrador* space bubbled like boiling tar as ship after ship burst into reality at the same moment. The first hundred Iron Warriors ships fired as one and the *Hammer of Terra* became a brief smeared sun.

When I reached the bridge the *Hammer of Terra* was already a spreading globe of gas and glowing debris. The warship's death filled the pict-screens, burning in silence above the hundreds of servitors and crew that filled the cavernous space. The sight of it made me freeze for a second, my eyes locked on the image. I thought of Pertinax, captain of the *Hammer of Terra*, a warrior who had already fought in a hundred campaigns by the time I became part of the Legion. I remembered his green augmetic eyes watching me steadily, and the soft accent of Europa that had never left his voice.

I shook my head, and the noise of the bridge washed over me. Officers were shouting at each other as servitors and machines spat out reams of data. Raln was at my side, already calling orders to the serfs. I needed to get hold of the battle before it spun further beyond my grasp, but there was one fact missing I needed to know.

'Who is the enemy?' I asked. Raln half turned to me, the red lenses of his helmet briefly meeting my gaze as he spoke.

'The Iron Warriors,' he said and turned back to issue a stream of rapid orders

to the bridge officers. For a second I stood still, like a man with a bullet hole through him yet to fall. Then I nodded and snapped my helmet over my head.

The holo-projection above spun, showing me battlegroup and enemy positions, auspex readings and tactical data in growing clusters of glowing runes. Screeds of data from my helmet display overlaid the projection: inter-ship communication, links to the battlegroup commanders, the Legion-contingent details from each ship. To a Space Marine not conditioned to process such levels of information it would have been bewildering. To a normal human it would have been overwhelming. I took a deep breath, felt the focused calm enforce itself through my body and mind. Training and conditioning blanked out every other instinct. I was the centre of a storm, a clear point of will and strength.

‘Bring us above the plane of attack,’ I called to Raln. I felt the ship judder. The holographic projection blurred and flickered for a second. I glanced back to the raw data of the battle that floated in front of me. Four minutes had passed since the *Hammer of Terra* had died. We had lost ten ships; thirty were crippled, forty-six had suffered severe damage. Ordnance had degraded to sixty-two per cent across the fleet. We were close to disaster.

The *Tribune* was taking fire. I could read it in the flow of activity on the bridge as if it were the movements of my own body. Shields were down across the forward batteries. Power had been diverted to bring them back up. Plasma reactors were straining to maintain output.

Inbound enemy bombers.

Batteries firing.

Dorsal line accelerators approaching optimal fire angle.

Turn at thirty per cent.

Course correction...

I let out a slow breath, and blanked out the details of the *Tribune*’s situation. I was the fleet master. The *Tribune* was under Raln’s hand, and was only one part of the battle. I focused on the information in front of me; the hololithic projection was a tangle of trajectories and amber engagement makers.

The position was clear and chilling. The enemy fleet had penetrated a third of the way into our lines. Their formation resembled a jagged cone, the largest vessels set back from screens of escorts and heavy-hulled strike cruisers. It had punched into our fleet and was moving towards the centre of our spherical formation. To my eyes it looked like a fanged worm eating to the core of a ripe fruit. It was methodically brutal in its ugly efficiency. So typical of the Iron

Warriors.

The Iron Warriors. Our enemies are the Iron Warriors.

The thought was like a sliver of ice thrust into my guts, as if that fact had only just registered in my mind. They had scrambled their communications but I recognised their ships. These were vessels we had fought beside, crewed by warriors I had bled with and called brothers. *If the Iron Warriors were with Horus, then how many others might be as well?* Could more have turned on the Imperium? Terra might have already fallen. The Imperium might already be no more. Our fleet might be the last fragment of loyalty surviving. The possibilities made my head swim, as if my mind was screaming after the dead Imperium as it vanished into an abyss. For a moment I felt the old crack in my strength, the weakness that had nearly made me curl up and accept death on the ice of Inwit.

I cannot fail now, I will not fail. My eyes flicked across the projected sphere showing the battle, green and blue smeared with red like leaking blood. The contingency plans I had made over the long months surfaced in my mind, aligned with the possibilities of the present. I could see it, a way not only of recovering but fighting back. *If we bleed, I thought, so will they.*

Thirty-six companies of Imperial Fists died in those first moments without seeing their enemy or firing a shot. They died running for assault boats, locked in the cockpits of Stormbirds and on the command decks of ships. They died without knowing the hand that killed them.

Within seconds of the death of the *Hammer of Terra* twelve of its sisters followed, consumed by nova-shell explosions and torpedo spreads. The grand cruiser *Sulla* fired a single salvo before macro-shell fire stripped its shields and its hull became molten slag. The six destroyers clustered around it ended in the explosion of its plasma reactor. The *Crusader* and *Legate* lasted scant seconds longer. They and their escorts took a trio of vortex warheads and vanished into the hungering dark.

Twenty-four grand cruisers and battle-barges made up the tip of the Iron Warriors fleet. In close formation around the *Contrador* they moved as one. They rammed through the debris of their kills, fire and molten metal smearing their prows. Turbolasers, macro cannon and plasma annihilators scoured the void around them. Bombers and assault craft swarmed through the void behind the warships, killing crippled craft with thousands of small explosions.

Seen from a distance the opening minutes of the battle would have been a scattering of bright flashes against blackness. Closer in, so that the planets of Phall loomed large, the view would have been of hundreds of gleaming shards moving in patterns and groups like swarming fireflies. It would still have been impossible to tell the difference between Iron Warriors and Imperial Fists, but after watching for a few minutes patterns would have emerged. The first pattern was an empty sphere, spun from the curving paths of golden ships. The second was a tapered wedge that grew longer and thicker as more ships pulled themselves from the warp. Where the two formations met explosions flared brighter than the distant stars.

The Imperial Fists fleet fragmented under the attack. Flame-wreathed battle-barges pulled back, trying to outpace the guns of the Iron Warriors. Heavy cruisers staggered their flight, first one taking fire then the next, while faster strike cruisers tried to cover the heavier warships as they pulled away. As the golden fleet broke into pieces the Iron Warriors continued to press forwards. Smaller ships crippled targets, and then larger ships delivered the killing blows. It was methodical and merciless, like a siege drill eating through rock.

Directly in the path of the Iron Warriors a lone battleship turned to meet its enemy. Forgotten hands had made the *Oath of Stone* under the light of a sun far from Terra. It had been old before it served the Imperium, and it had aged in scars and honours since. Its guns blazed, filling the closing space between it and the enemy with fire.

Its target was a grand cruiser that bore the name *Stheno*. The Iron Warriors ship faltered, its void envelope peeling back as it pushed forwards through the storm of fire. Lance beams spat from the *Oath of Stone* and suddenly the *Stheno* was burning, a glowing gouge running from its spade-shaped prow to its fins. The *Oath of Stone* surged forwards to finish its kill, but the *Stheno* was only one ship amongst a closing fist of iron.

Three heavy cruisers fired. Energy crackled across the *Oath of Stone*'s void shields as they burst like oily bubbles. Shells and missiles hammered into the old ship. Its armour cracked and glowed. Crenellated gun towers sheared off, scattering clouds of stone and metal in their wake. Hundred-metre armour plates flaked off its hull. Deep inside the ship fire ran between compartments, suffocating those it did not burn.

Trailing wreckage, the *Oath of Stone* continued to close and fire on the *Stheno*.

For a moment it seemed as if it would face down the might of an entire fleet and survive. Then a line of turbolaser fire cut its engines in two. Building-sized thrusters fell away as explosions kindled in the wound.

On its bridge a human officer stood. Blood covered his face and chest. He looked at the armoured corpse of the ship's master: the Imperial Fist had died with his hands still gripping the arms of the command throne. The man nodded as if to someone who was not there, and gave a single order to the surviving crew.

With the last of its momentum and guttering engines' power the *Oath of Stone* rammed the *Stheno*. It hit the grand cruiser in the belly, its prow ramming through the iron ship's spine. The *Stheno* shuddered, transfixed like a fish on a rod. Gas and fluid sprayed from its hull. For a moment the two spun on, locked together in death. Then the *Oath of Stone*'s prow ripped free of the *Stheno*'s hull, and pulled the guts of the grand cruiser with it. Discarded and dying the *Stheno* drifted on, turning end over end, like a broken spear thrown at the night sky.

The rest of the Iron Warriors fleet did not even slow down.

His master was staring at the lights of battle as Berossus approached. The *Iron Blood* had no viewports. There was no need for them, or so Berossus had heard Perturabo say. Why would you need to look at the void? War in space was a matter of calculation, sensors and firepower. That or hacking your enemy apart in spaces so small you could smell their blood. Windows onto the void were a weakness indulged for vanity. In spite of this sentiment Berossus found his master on the deck of a launch bay, its blast doors open to the vacuum. A thin layer of frost covered the deck and walls and had crept up Perturabo's armour.

Berossus knelt, his breath loud inside his helm. He was aware that being adjutant to the primarch for this battle held danger as well as honour. He would never claim to understand the Lord of Iron, but he wondered if at that moment his master needed to see the reality of his fleet hammering the longed-for rebuke into the flesh of Dorn's sons. It was a triumph, but Berossus knew that his master had never been more dangerous than at that moment; he could feel it like a razor lying on his skin.

'Is the fleet fully deployed?' Vox-static laced Perturabo's voice.

'Forrix says that full deployment will be complete in twenty-seven minutes.'

Perturabo turned to look at Berossus, the green slot eyes of his helm glowing above the plough-shaped snout. Berossus swallowed, even though he knew that

the estimate was precisely in line with Forrix's previous calculations.

Around the *Iron Blood* hundreds of warships followed in close formation. Behind them hundreds more pulled themselves from the warp to add to the Iron Warriors fleet. Months ago scout units had captured details of the Imperial Fists fleet, each capturing a single snapshot of data and pushing it into the mind of the astropath slaved to each machine. The psykers' death screams had cut through the storms, carrying dream images of the Imperial Fists fleet. They had used that data to plan, and that plan was a timetable for obliteration. Berossus knew that the battle was progressing as intended, but under his master's gaze he wondered whether that was enough.

Perturabo turned his back to the view. At a gesture, the blast doors began to shut over the fire-spattered vacuum.

'Tell Golg to push the vanguard harder. The rest of the fleet can finish what he leaves.'

Berossus averted his gaze and knelt even lower as Perturabo spoke. 'Yes, master.'

'Scour the Imperial Fists signals. Find where Sigismund lurks.' Perturabo pulled his helmet off as the blast doors sealed and atmosphere hissed into the hold. Berossus glanced up and wished he had not.

'Yes, master,' said Berossus, his gaze again on the frost-sheened deck.

'He is to be found, not killed,' rasped Perturabo. 'His death is mine.'

The killing continued with murderous rhythm. The ships at the front of the Iron Warriors fleet had begun to split into groups to hunt smaller Imperial Fists ships. Behind them fresh arrivals advanced in a tight block. These were the macro-vessels, vast cliff-sided ships filled with battalions of Iron Warriors and thousands of slave troops. Beside them lurked the hell burners. Old system ships, orbital haulers and tugs, they had ridden through the warp on tethers behind the macro-ships. Unstable plasma fuel and munitions filled each of the ramshackle craft. Their slave crews, lobotomised into blind obedience, drove the hell burners into the throats of the Imperial Fists guns. Many detonated before they reached their victims, but more did not. Chains of explosions formed glowing nebulae that hung in the void like lava clotting in water.

The Imperial Fists ships that emerged from these infernos were half dead, their armour peeling from their superstructure, their weapons blind. The macro-vessels poured boarding craft onto the crippled ships as they limped from the firestorm. The Imperial Fists crews did not die swiftly. Swamped by thousands

of slaves, they held until the Iron Warriors came to finish them in person. Dozens of ships died this way, gutted from within and left to drift, their insides filled with the dead of both sides. To the Iron Warriors the process of victory had begun and the only question was how long it would take to complete.

The first sign that all was not as it seemed was a bright explosion on the trailing edge of the Iron Warriors fleet.

The Imperial Fists cruiser *Veritas* and a destroyer wing cut towards their prey. Their target was a grand cruiser, a hulking brute named *Calibos*. The destroyers released a spread of fast-running torpedoes towards the Iron Warriors ship as they closed. It tried to evade but turned too slowly. Blisters of fire opened along its dark metal back. The destroyers accelerated past the injured ship. The *Calibos* listed drunkenly, its course veering as the rest of the fleet pulled away.

The *Veritas* struck an instant later, its dorsal cannons crumpling the *Calibos*'s shields and punching through its carapace. Half dead, it tried to turn its prow towards its attacker. The *Veritas* raced past, broadsides raking the Iron Warriors ship. The grand cruiser exploded in a shockwave of energy and atomised matter. As the Iron Warriors fleet responded the *Veritas* and its strike group was beyond its reach and turning for its next attack run.

It was the first blow of many.

It is a truth that to stand at the heart of a battle is to see it only through a narrow slit. You see the gross shift and swell of destruction, and the tide of battle submerges all the small moments of death and heroism. The deaths of thousands become only texture to a greater picture, details that you cannot look at because if your attention slips it might mean total defeat. Command breeds callousness. To say otherwise is ignorance.

For me the battle was a blur of decisions, of losses and victories rendered in impersonal information and abstract projections. I existed above the fray, a set of eyes that saw and a hand that remade what was seen. And what I saw was that we were winning. For a moment the information almost overwhelmed me as my mind turned representation into raw reality.

Silent flame stained the black void. Armoured ships raked at each other with hot yellow claws. Void shields shimmered and burst. Nova cannon shells exploded like newborn stars. Attack craft spun and slid amongst the greater vessels like silver fish through black water. Iron and gold hulls glowed under

converging lattices of energy: melted, split. Dead ships drifted, breaking apart into crumbs of flame-licked metal.

Another ship exploded. Plasma expanded to a bright white sphere. Golden armour turned to liquid.

A frigate spun like an injured bird, trailing flame. Lines of hot yellow fire found it and split it into glowing chunks.

Gull-winged bombers converged on a storm-grey cruiser, warheads sliding from under their wings. Pinprick detonations flared across the cruiser's spine, carving off augur and sensor arrays. Blinded, it began to list.

A strike cruiser roared towards a wide-nosed battleship, its shields slick with deflected fire. The battleship turned its flank to the strike cruiser. The cruiser rolled, curved under the battleship's belly and fired. Macro-shells tore open layers of metal, spilling burning gas into cold space.

A slab ship tried to turn its battered prow away from its attackers. A spread of graviton torpedoes hit it in its flank, burrowed deep and detonated. The ship shivered as competing forces pulled at its structure, breaking armour, cracking bulkheads. For a second it drifted on, quivering as its bones splintered and distorted. Then its spine broke and it crumpled as if crushed in an invisible fist.

It was what the months of planning had been for, the hundreds of hours of training. We were ready to resist an attack, but we were facing an enemy far greater than I had ever planned for.

The Iron Warriors had taken losses, but their strength remained. If we had broken in the first moments we would have died. If we tried to fight the Iron Warriors head on they would have slaughtered us. They knew our weaknesses, we theirs. They had hoped to find us unprepared, but we had not cracked after the first attack. Our defence had snapped back into place like the cogs of a clockwork mechanism. It was an unfixed fortress made of moving strike groups, fading resistance and punishing counter-attacks. Slower battleships drew fire, pulling Iron Warriors ships out of formation, while on the edge of the battle sphere fast strike groups looped around and through the margins of the Iron Warriors fleet. They struck again and again, crippling, destroying, trimming ships from the edge of the enemy fleet like fat carved from meat. As I saw our retribution unfold I think I may have allowed myself a grim smile.

The *Halcyon* dived through the battle storm. Its leaf-blade hull glowed with reflected light from explosions and weapons fire. The void was thick with debris and plasma clouds, tumbling together like blood and entrails sinking through water. The *Halcyon* fired as it dived, prow and dorsal weapons thrusting ahead of its path. Behind it two of its sister ships followed: *Unity* and *Truth*. They were smaller, knife blades to the *Halcyon's* spear tip. They spun, their flank batteries spiralling a bright helix around them as they sliced through the Iron Warriors fleet. This near to the core of the Iron Warriors formation, the hulls of enemy ships were so close that the gunners could aim by sight.

On the *Halcyon's* bridge Tyr watched as his target grew in size on the pict-screen. He preferred to view void war this way, enhanced and filtered so that he could see how enemies moved, fought, and died. It made it real, as if projections and the cold clarity of tactical data robbed it of its visceral truth. His target was an Iron Warriors battle cruiser, its hull studded with lance turrets, its prow an ugly wedge of scored metal. He knew its name: *Dominator*. Once, decades before, he had seen it break the xenos lines above Calyx. Now he watched its shields flicker and vanish under his guns. The *Halcyon's* rage hammered into the *Dominator's* back. The *Dominator* turned and rolled, like a sea leviathan trying to shake free a harpoon.

'Increase firepower,' said Tyr.

This is what the abstract projections lack, he thought. They miss the connection with the enemy, the personal. They miss the point where you look into the eye of an old ally and ram the blade into their heart. The deck lurched under his feet. Red light washed his face as warning lights filled the bridge. They were taking fire. There were a dozen Iron Warriors ships so close he felt he could reach out and touch them. The *Halcyon* and its escorts were relying on raw speed and aggression to keep them alive. *That and more than a little luck.*

He smiled grimly to himself. Polux had ordered Tyr and his battle group to strike into the centre of the Iron Warriors fleet. They had lost two ships in three passes but killed four times as many. *A fair exchange,* thought Tyr as he flicked his gaze to pict-views of his two flanking strike cruisers. They looked like fire arrows falling through a forest, kindling an inferno as they flew.

Proximity sirens began to blare. Tyr turned back to the image of the *Dominator*. It filled the screen at minimum magnification. He waited until the proximity alert was a desperate shrill and then nodded to the helmsman. The

Halcyon rotated on its axis, swooping under the *Dominator*, its flank batteries firing. The belly of the Iron Warriors ship split open in a string of explosions. The *Unity* and *Truth* followed close behind the *Halcyon*, hammering into the gaping gut wound in the *Dominator*'s hull. It disintegrated, plasma from its ruptured heart burning it from within. The *Halcyon* arced away from its kill, engines clawing for speed as it aimed for the edge of the battle sphere.

The Iron Warriors battle-barge came out of the surrounding swirl of battle. It fired as it came. Tyr felt the explosion shake the hull of the *Halcyon*. Clouds of flare static filled the pict-screens. The *Unity* vanished in a spread of detonations. Tyr could see a shape, a huge shape slowly resolving like a cliff coalescing from mist. Fifteen kilometres of cold iron and battle-blackened adamantium. Cooling trails of debris spilled from her flanks to drag in her wake. Her spine was a mountain range of gun fortresses and macro-batteries. Tyr felt his skin go cold. He knew her, had seen her once long ago, when she had been an ally. She was the oldest daughter of the ship forges of Olympia, a breaker of fleets and planets. Her name was *Iron Blood*, and only one being had ever been her master.

The *Iron Blood* fired again and the *Truth* followed its sister to fiery death. Static blinded Tyr's view. He was shouting for full speed before the pict-screens cleared. Explosions chased their flight, shaking the *Halcyon* even as it outran the *Iron Blood*'s fury.

'Get a signal to Fleet Master Polux,' shouted Tyr over the shrieking sirens. 'Tell him the *Iron Blood* is amongst the enemy. Tell him Perturabo is here.'

For a moment I could not believe the words I had spoken. The battle projections and floods of information faded. I do not know whether I felt awe, or anger, or elation at what I had decided. Then Tyr's voice reached me through a fog of static and distortion.

'*Brother?*' he said, and I could hear his shock through the obscuring white noise.

I refocused, the nearby battle data snapping back into my awareness. Two more runes marking enemy ships vanished in front of my eyes. The Iron Warriors fleet was pulling itself apart as it tried to engage us, and it bled at every turn. But that was not enough. Not enough for me, not enough for my lost brothers, not enough of a blood price for betrayal.

'Yes, Captain Tyr,' I said, my words reaching across the void on broken signal

waves. ‘My orders stand. I put fifty ships under your command.’ A wash of white noise filled the pause. Tyr was thinking, judging whether to question or embrace my order. When he told me that Perturabo’s flagship led the enemy fleet I do not think he expected such a response. He was my brother, but he never truly knew me.

‘As you command, fleet master.’

I nodded once as if he could see me, as if he stood next to me rather than on the bridge of the *Halcyon*.

‘For Dorn and the Imperium, brother. Your objective is the *Iron Blood*. Execute Perturabo.’

Grinding silence and gloom filled the throne room. Harsh, electrical light shone across the face of the Iron Warriors primarch. Across an oil-black screen the battle played out in bare numbers and raw tactical code. His face was unmoving, impassive, but his eyes held a spark of emotion that made Berossus wary as he approached his master. As the primarch’s adjutant he had an unrivalled view of unfolding events. The insight was not heartening. The Imperial Fists had rallied and were inflicting casualties. Significant casualties. The Iron Warriors still had greater numbers, but that margin was diminishing. Berossus would have said that the Imperial Fists might even have the upper hand. He kept the thought to himself; the news he bore was worrying enough.

‘Master,’ said Berossus and knelt on the bare metal deck. Perturabo turned his head slowly, his dark eyes fastening on Berossus’s bowed head.

‘Speak,’ he said, his voice a low rumble. Berossus continued to kneel, his helm held under his arm, his silent chainsword placed carefully on the deck beside him. He swallowed.

‘Master, we have identified the flagship of the enemy fleet.’ He paused and ran his grey tongue across his lips. ‘We have also identified the master of their fleet.’ He chanced a look up, met the primarch’s obsidian gaze and looked back to the floor. ‘It is a captain of the lower orders. Alexis Polux is his name. Sigismund does not command the fleet. As far as we can tell he is not amongst them.’ Berossus could hear only the rhythmic hiss of atmosphere exchangers and the rising beat of his twin hearts.

The first blow hit Berossus in the chest. Armour plate and bone shattered. One of his hearts burst. The second blow hit him as he spun through the air. He hit the wall with crushing force, slid down, blood oozing out of cracked ceramite.

His body flooded with pain suppressors, but he could feel his splintered bones cut into his flesh. Blood filled his lungs and throat. He tried to breathe. Red foam drooled from his mouth and over his broken jaw. He was a bag of mashed meat held into the shape of a man by ruined armour.

Perturabo stood motionless at the foot of his throne, flecks of Berossus's blood bright on his gauntlets.

'Tell Golg to find this lesser captain that stands against us,' said Perturabo. 'Execute him and throw his corpse to the void.' At the edges of the room ears heard and carried the order away. Perturabo turned and walked back to his iron throne. On the floor Berossus's life seeped out of him into a slowly growing pool.

They assembled in the teleport chamber. Static electricity ran over Tyr's Terminator armour, sparking between him and the metal skin of his brothers. Machines surrounded them, thrumming with restrained power. He could see tech-priests moving amongst them, muttering their clicking language as they made adjustments. Parchment tapers fluttered in the charged atmosphere. Focusing dishes, capacitor towers and arrays of arcane instruments all pointed in at Tyr and the squad that ringed him. They all wore Terminator armour, their bodies bloated by thick plates of plasteel, fibre-bundle muscles, and adamantium exoskeletons. Out beyond the ring of machines other squads clustered on teleporter plates that spread through the chamber in concentric rings. Terminator armour was rare; the product of high artifice in a few Mechanicum forges. Amongst the Retribution Fleet there were enough suits to clad fifty-three brothers; all of them stood in teleport chambers waiting for Tyr's word.

Beside Tyr, Sergeant Timor brought his thunder hammer to rest against the snout of his helm. Oath parchments feathered the hammer's haft. Tyr knew that Timor was speaking his oath of moment again. He felt a surge of pride. They were waiting to go into battle against another Legion, against a primarch. It was a battle none of them had ever thought they would fight, but there was no doubt or hesitancy amongst them. Polux had ordered this strike against Perturabo. That had surprised Tyr; he had thought that his brother lacked the boldness for such a gambit. That this mission might be his last did not matter. That was the nature of war, and the Imperial Fists knew that death was often the price of victory. The Emperor had created them to embrace that truth.

'Sixty seconds, captain,' said a voice in Tyr's ear. Tyr recognised the tones of one of the human bridge officers. The man's voice had a clipped edge. *An*

indication of focus and strain, thought Tyr. It was to be expected. Outside the hull of the *Halcyon* the inferno-kissed void fled past them. Flanked by a dozen strike cruisers they were plunging into the heart of the battle sphere. In front of them frigates and destroyers converged on target vessels close to the centre of the Iron Warriors fleet. By now they would already be engaging the enemy, wounding with nova strikes, spreading drifts of torpedoes to find what targets they could. Tyr had little doubt that the destroyers would not survive; he had said as much to their commanders when he outlined the plan. None had questioned their orders; they all knew the value of what they attempted. If they could inflict enough damage they would draw the *Iron Blood* into the engagement. After that the second element would strike from below the axis of battle. Fifteen warships would attack the *Iron Blood's* escorts, killing where they could, and drawing fire where they could not. Its attention engaged and its escorts crippled, the *Iron Blood* would be open for the *Halcyon* and its strike group. They would deliver the true payload: thirteen hundred Imperial Fists loaded into boarding torpedoes and Stormbirds and waiting in teleport chambers.

It was wasteful and brutal but it had a chance of succeeding. *It must have worked so far*, thought Tyr.

‘Thirty seconds,’ said the voice again. Tyr blink-clicked an acknowledgement and opened a general communication channel to the rest of the strike force.

‘Brothers,’ he said. Across the chamber all movement ceased. His words would take longer to reach the squads on the other ships, but when they did hush and stillness would spread through launch bays and crew compartments. He had not considered what he would say. All his life had been war. Every moment since he had left the hive sumps of Nord Merica had been training, fighting, and pushing forward the bounds of the Imperium step by bloody step. He was not a man made to craft words, but they came to him then, as if something long wasted within him stirred to life.

‘We are fighting a war. Not a war of conquest, not the war we were made to fight, but a war for the oaths we made and the blood we shed to make the Imperium. We will never see the end of this war, but if by our deeds we can bring that end a step closer, if our deaths cost the enemy a hundredfold, then the future will remember us.’ He paused, felt the electric charge thickening against his skin. The machines were keening. Arcs of garish light played over the platform. Tyr brought his bronze-headed mace up to his face plate and closed his eyes.

‘To the glory of the primarch and the Emperor,’ said Tyr. The machines howled. A rolling flash of sickly light filled his vision and oblivion took him.

The cry made me turn. Calio Lezzek lay on the white marble of the command platform in a pool of his green robes. The last time I had seen him he had seemed on the edge of death, but somehow he had managed to walk to the bridge. I moved towards him, the projection of Tyr’s attack on the *Iron Blood* momentarily forgotten behind me.

The old man was shaking. Fresh blood ran from his eye sockets, repainting over brown stains. His lips were bright wet red in a parchment-pale face. His silver-tipped cane rattled on the smooth marble as he tried to stand. He slipped and started to fall again, and I caught his arm as he fell.

Lezzek was feather-light but I nearly dropped him as I touched him. It felt as if I had plunged my hand into hot acid. I blanked the feeling out and lifted him slowly to his feet. Deck officers and attendants were clustering around now. Behind me the battle spun on, forgotten and unattended.

‘Master Lezzek,’ I said. He did not reply. His body was shaking, fingers opening and closing. A thick red trickle ran down his chin. His lips were moving and a wheezing sound was coming from his mouth. ‘Master Lezzek,’ I tried again, but he did not seem to know that I was there. ‘Calio,’ I said, and his head turned.

‘I can feel it reaching towards us,’ he gasped. ‘I can see it, coming through the storm. Terra, it is burning.’ He moaned and shivered. ‘How can such...’ but the question died in his throat. His head arched back. I heard a crunch of bone. His mouth opened as if he were screaming but he made no sound. White-hot pain filled my hand where I held his arm.

He lifted off the floor, his flesh glowing from within as if his blood was on fire. He looked like a carcass suspended on a hook, arms and legs still twitching as they dangled. My grip broke, and the palm of my gauntlet was dark red with heat where I had held him. Ash fell from the old man, hair and silk charring and flaking from skin. A roaring sound spilled out of Lezzek’s mouth, like air sucking through a furnace grate. A booming, hollow voice came from the burning man, speaking the message that was killing him.

‘Sons of Dorn, return to Terra. Return immediately. This is the will of Rogal Dorn, Praetorian of Terra.’ Lezzek’s floating body shimmered as if I was seeing it through a heat haze. His head snapped up, his empty eyes fixed on me. For a second I thought that he was trying to tell me something, that he was

trying to give me another message in that blind look. Then he spoke again.

‘Return to Terra. This is the will of Rogal Dorn.’

His lips blackened, and bright yellow flames poured out of his mouth and wreathed his head. His thin flesh blistered and boiled. For a second he was a black silhouette of a man at the centre of an inferno. Then the shape collapsed into a heap of embers and the flames vanished.

My mouth was dry.

Return to Terra. This is the will of Rogal Dorn.

The words felt leaden, like chains fastening around my hands. I half heard the shouts of bridge officers, and the mechanical sound of servitors moving to douse the remains of Calio Lezzek that still smouldered at my feet.

Word from Terra. Astropathic messages require careful interpretation to sift meaning from the mystery of their dreamlike content. It can take days and even then not be clear. For a message to imprint so clearly and directly onto Lezzek’s mind it must have held staggering power. We had waited months for a message, for any message. Now we had it and it felt like a judgement of execution. I glanced back to the holo-projection where our fleet and the Iron Warriors met in battle. *We were winning, I thought. We could deal a wound to the enemy so severe that the Iron Warriors might never recover.*

This is the will of Rogal Dorn.

Withdrawal. Flight. The price would be terrible and even then those that did survive would be running to find a storm’s grave in the warp.

A human serf officer moved towards me, saluted. It was one of the communication officers. Interface cables ran from the base of his skull to a sliding track on the roof above. His eyes were green slit augmetics. I nodded an acknowledgement.

‘My lord,’ he said, and I could hear the edge of fear in his voice. ‘Reports from all fleet elements. Most of the astropaths are dead, a few live... barely. They all spoke the same message before they died.’

I looked down at the scorched patch of marble. ‘Yes, we received the same message.’ To punch through the warp storms and kill a fleet’s worth of astropaths the message must have been less a sending, more a tidal surge of psychic energy. No matter how it had reached us, the message was undeniable, its meaning not open to doubt.

Has the war reached Terra already? The possibility filled my mind. What if the Iron Warriors were not the only new allies of Horus? What if Terra is falling

and we are being called back as a last defence?

I thought of Tyr, of the force I had committed to a bold strike, and the hundred carefully balanced engagements spread across the battle sphere. The message was a blow more fatal, more carefully timed than any ambush. This battle would not end quickly; we could not continue and obey the urgency of the order. There was no neat way to unpick an engagement on such a scale. Withdrawal meant sacrifice.

I remembered a hand locked around mine, blood coating both. Helias's eyes looked back into mine out of the ice cold of the distant past.

'Navigator Primus Basus reports that a passage seems to have opened in the storms, though he is not sure it will last.' The words chilled me. If we were to obey we had to go while there was a chance of making it through the storms. I saw the abyss opening below my brother, waiting, silent, and eternal.

This is the will of Rogal Dorn.

I had a choice between loyalty and victory. Withdraw and I committed us to a loss greater than anything our Legion had suffered.

The will of Rogal Dorn.

'Alexis,' my brother had said in a voice so low that it was almost lost on the wind. He was always stronger than me. His hand opened in my memory and the darkness reached up to swallow him.

'Signal all fleet elements to withdraw and jump to the warp.' I closed my eyes. *The pain is how you know you are still alive.* 'We are returning to Terra.'

Tyr swept his mace down. The Iron Warrior managed to move at the last moment, and the blow hammered into his pauldron with a metallic thunderclap. Tyr could hear his own panting breath as he dropped his shoulder and rammed his weight forwards. The Iron Warrior stumbled. Tyr hit down, and felt the shock of impact through his armour. He could smell his own sweat, a thick and heavy stink inside his sealed battle plate. He hit twice more, heavy bludgeoning blows that left the Iron Warrior a bloody mound on the deck.

Beside him Timor slammed his storm shield forwards into the gap. Explosive rounds burst against its surface. Tyr brought his bolter up and fired into the space he had opened. They were in a corridor of dull metal barely wide enough for two of the Terminators to stand side by side. They had been fighting ever since they had materialised inside the *Iron Blood* – heaving, grinding warfare, fought with point-blank shots and grunting melees. The Iron Warriors gave no ground. The

Imperial Fists had the advantage of numbers, but they were broken into a hundred small forces. As Tyr had expected, the inside of the ship was a labyrinth of defences: sentry guns, kill zones, and barricades manned by Iron Warriors who fought with brutal skill. Tyr had intermittent contact with the rest of the Imperial Fists on the *Iron Blood*, but he estimated that he had lost half already. Despite these losses they pressed forwards.

‘Fire wasp!’ shouted Timor. A bulky shape moved into view in front of them. Its curved armour plates were black with soot and striped with yellow chevrons. Blue pilot flames hissed at the tips of its weapon pods. A threat rune latched onto the machine, painting it angry red in Tyr’s eye. The fire wasp made a sound like an animal hiss and washed the corridor with liquid flame. Tyr’s helmet display dimmed, reducing his view to sun-bright patches of light and black silhouettes. Targeting runes hazed and pulsed in his sight as the heat baffled his armour’s sensors.

‘Navarra, clear the tunnel,’ shouted Tyr. Navarra came forwards, the barrels of his weapon already spinning to life. It was a new pattern of weapon, retrofitted to a few Terminator suits from the larger type fitted to Dreadnoughts.

Assault cannon. The designation was not new, but never before had a weapon owned the title so completely. Navarra moved past Tyr, fixed his stance, and levelled his weapon. The barrels keened as they rotated to a blur. The fire wasp came forwards, spraying flame. Navarra fired.

The torrent of glowing rounds hit the fire wasp head on. Its armour distorted under the deluge, buckling and cracking like paper in rain. A round hit a fuel tank and the corridor vanished in a fireball. Navarra kept the trigger depressed, panning the weapon across the burning corridor. Shell casings piled at his feet.

A sudden blast of static and garbled speech filled Tyr’s helmet. Someone was trying to signal them from outside the *Iron Blood*. He tried to latch on to the signal but could hear only static. *No matter*, he thought. *There is only one way for us to go.*

Navarra’s assault cannon spun to silence, its barrels glowing red. The corridor in front of them was clear.

‘Forward,’ said Tyr; and they marched forward, towards the *Iron Blood*’s heart and towards Perturabo.

When it came, the order to withdraw spread like poison through the Imperial Fists fleet. The first to run were the smaller craft, the frigates, gunboats and

strike cruisers. Alone or in small squadrons, a hundred and thirty of the proudest warships of the Imperium fled the sphere of battle. Every Imperial Fist on every ship knew what the fleet master was doing, and why; it was a judgement of who was most likely to survive. It was also a death sentence for those who remained.

Behind the fleeing ships their heavier cousins fired on the enemy with renewed fury. Rolling fire hit every Iron Warriors ship within range, clouding their sensors with a haze of energy as munitions detonated against void shields. It worked for a while, until the first of the Imperial Fists dropped into the warp. For a moment nothing changed. Then more of the fleeing ships vanished, and the Iron Warriors realised what was happening. They fell upon the breaking Imperial Fists like starved jackals on wounded lions.

A second wave of Imperial Fists craft began to run for the system's edge and the warp's embrace. The *Lacedaemon*, the ship that had carried the first Imperial Fists beyond the Solar System, was the first to break away. Its captain, the obedient Iago, pushed his ship until its engines bled raw plasma. Twelve Iron Warriors ships ran him down, raking the *Lacedaemon* with constant fire. Its hull blasted to a twisted ruin, the *Lacedaemon* fired back on its killers until the last inch of its hull integrity gave out. Of the rest of the second wave of retreat, a handful made it to clear space and jumped to the warp. Most followed the *Lacedaemon* into death.

The *Veritas* began to fall. Scything blasts of fire cut its golden hull, slitting its skin open, spilling its guts into the planet's atmosphere. Its remaining engines fired, trying to pull it from the planet's grasp. Its killers fired again, shearing its engines from its body. It tumbled end over end as it surrendered to gravity, burning and shedding debris as it fell through the atmosphere.

It hit the ocean of Phall II like a hot iron plunged into a pool. Steam spewed into the air, spreading into a white anvil head. It took three seconds for the seawater to reach the plasma reactor. The wreck exploded, and a wave of glowing energy chased the tsunami already ripping out from the impact. White steam and black smoke bloomed out, mingled, clouding the atmosphere of the world like a cataract forming over a blue eye.

On the *Contrador*, Gulg hissed as he watched the image of the *Veritas*'s death. Its end was a fitting one for the sons of Rogal Dorn. But it was only a brief diversion, a kill of opportunity as he searched for his true target. He did not have to look far. There it was, standing defiant amidst a scattering of ships. *Tribune*: a

name that carried so much of the arrogance and pretension of the Imperial Fists. His master had ordered him to kill the upstart commander of that ship who dared to stand against the Lord of Iron. He would do it, but there would be little satisfaction in the deed.

The battle had become a slaughter. The Imperial Fists were running. Squadrons of ships tried to keep the Iron Warriors at bay while the others made for clear space and the possibility of escape. Freed of the pressure of attacks, the Iron Warriors fell upon them. Every passing instant saw another ship die under Iron Warriors guns. They simply hammered them into twisted metal and cooling slag. There was an abandon to it, a wasteful brutality that required no skill. But the Imperial Fists died just the same.

Golg felt nothing, no victory of superiority, just the bitter taste of blood from an enemy that had let himself die. This was supposed to be more than a massacre; it was supposed to be vindication, a proof of the lie of old pretensions and rivalry. Instead it had become simple butchery. Golg wondered if the primarch saw it in the same way, if his bitter anger was as terrible as Golg suspected.

Golg's eyes narrowed on the *Tribune*. This kill would be terrifyingly easy, but he had to be sure that he completed his task, or risk his master's anger.

'Close on the target,' he whispered. Officers and servitors moved to obey. 'Cripple it and prepare for boarding.' He had three hundred Iron Warriors on the *Contrador* alone, more than enough to bring Perturabo his prize.

I have killed us all. It was all I could think. The dying moments of thousands of my brothers clogged the holo-projection with blood-red light. I had tried to pick the battle apart, pulling elements back one at a time, diverting, covering, protecting. The Iron Warriors had felt the weakness and pressed their attack. The withdrawal had become an ugly brawling battle, then a rout, then a slaughter.

The enemy had hit the *Tribune* twice since the withdrawal had begun. Both had been substantial impacts. The bridge was a ruin. Half the human officers were dead. Fused cogitator units sparked and bled smoke. Air hissed from ragged punctures in the armoured shutters. Servitors hung from the cables linking them to their stations. Oil and blood poured from them onto the deck.

'Three close proximity targets,' shouted Raln. He was gripping the main ordnance dais, the body of its dead officer slumped at its side.

'Fire on all targets,' I said, my helmet amplifying my words over the sound of

a dozen overlapping alarms. The ship shook and shook again as we fired. I had given the order to withdraw but I would not run until the last moment. The *Tribune* lay across the path of the onrushing Iron Warriors fleet. Beside us were two grand cruisers, a trio of battle cruisers, and twenty strike vessels. A substantial force, but it was a paper fortress in the path of a storm.

‘Two targets hit,’ says Raln, his voice loud but calm. ‘Two more targets reaching close range. One reads as being of battle-barge displacement.’

‘Fire on damaged targets.’ I turned back to the projection of the battle. Blurring interference washed through it. I watched as some of our ships reached clear space and vanished into the warp. *Too few, far too few.* Even as I watched a mass of Iron Warriors ships broke three of ours into glowing debris. A fourth turned to fight and died even as it fired. I looked to the bloated threat marker of the *Iron Blood*.

‘Try and reach Captain Tyr again.’ There had been no word from Tyr since he launched his assault on the *Iron Blood*. The green-eyed signal officer was bleeding, half his face glossed in fresh blood, but he nodded and moved his fingers over his lectern.

‘Target hit,’ called Raln. ‘Fire inbound.’ The ship shook again. ‘Shields gone.’

‘We have a signal, lord.’ The signals officer was speaking into my ear via my helmet vox. A distortion-wracked voice filled my ears.

‘*Fleet master,*’ Tyr was shouting. I could hear a grating sound, like hail on a metal roof. It was the sound of gunfire ringing on his armour.

‘There is word from Terra. We are to return immediately.’ I heard a chop of static and a sound like a hammer striking a cracked bell. ‘I have given the order to withdraw. Pull your forces back and—’

‘*To where? Pull back to where?*’ Laughter edged Tyr’s voice. I looked at the battle projection, at the rune representing *Halcyon* trying to get clear of the centre of the Iron Warriors fleet. ‘*I am not retreating, brother. I am going forwards. I am going to kill our enemy.*’ He had always been headstrong, reckless even, and he had never liked me. I smiled at that moment.

‘Good luck, my friend,’ I said. For a second the only answer was the rain-patter ringing of Tyr’s armour.

‘*And you, Alexis,*’ he said and cut the link. I blinked, for a moment looking into the memory of Helias’s eyes as he prepared to let the abyss take him.

The impact shook the *Tribune* and threw me to the floor. The armoured

shutters blew in. Glass and metal spun through the bridge. Air howled from jagged holes in the hull. There were suddenly dead men and women everywhere, in pieces, bleeding in floods, gasping for vanishing air. My armour began to chime with atmosphere and pressure warnings.

‘Multiple hits,’ shouted Raln, still somehow at his dais. ‘Primary engines failing. Enemy battle-barge on boarding trajectory.’

‘Turn us to show our port flank to the enemy,’ I said as I got to my feet. ‘Order Imperial Fists elements into Stormbirds and transport craft. Get them outside of the ship on the protected flank.’

‘And you, lord?’ said Raln.

‘Tell the engineers that we are coming to the machine decks.’

The *Contrador* and the *Tribune* met in an embrace of fire and punctured metal. The *Tribune* fired every remaining weapon at the closing Iron Warriors ship. Macro-shells, lance beams and plasma jets flicked across the narrowing distance and broke over the *Contrador*’s shields. The return fire blew out the *Tribune*’s gun decks and gouged a long wound in its side. The *Contrador* closed until it was drifting alongside the *Tribune*’s wounded flank. Assault pods and boarding torpedoes slid across the gap. A weak flurry of turret fire reached out to meet the swarm of assault craft and hammered a handful into wreckage. The rest came on, unconcerned and undeterred. They hit in a wave, punching through gold-plated armour and disgorging their cargo into the guts of the *Tribune*.

I saw none of this but I felt each part in the dying trembles of my ship. The Iron Warriors were aboard the *Tribune*, hacking and bludgeoning their way deeper and deeper inside. The resistance was scattered but determined. Weapon servitors stood at junctions, filling the space in front of them with streams of bolter shells. Our human crew stood their ground with shot cannons and lasguns. Amongst them a handful of my brother Imperial Fists moved between the fiercest battles. That had been the hardest part, speaking to those who had to remain. All understood, both human and Imperial Fist alike; the Iron Warriors had to think we were resisting and that they were crushing us to nothing. The *Tribune* was dead, but I was going to claim its death price.

‘Ready?’ I said. Beside me Raln hefted a tall shield of scarred plasteel and glanced around at the remaining brothers of my company.

‘Ready,’ he said. I nodded and looked to the red-swathed figures of the

Tribune's engineers. They bowed their hooded heads in a synchronised gesture of assent. 'Thank you,' I said, feeling the inadequacy of the words. The engineers made no sign of having heard me. I nodded, locked my plough-fronted iron helm in place, and opened a communication channel. What remained of the *Tribune*'s signal arrays would transmit my words to any of the fleet that still remained and could hear them.

'This is the fleet master.' My voice sounded flat inside my helmet. 'The *Tribune* is lost, remaining units withdraw and jump to Terra as ordered.' I paused, wanting to say more but not knowing what to say. 'Endure, my brothers. No matter what, endure.'

I cut the fleet broadcast, and let silence hold for a second before I spoke my last order to the *Tribune*'s crew.

'Now,' I said.

On the external hull of the *Tribune* a hundred assault craft boosted into the void like a cloud of fireflies; the *Tribune*'s contingent of Imperial Fists leaving their fortress for the last time. The thirty members of my strike force were still beside me, waiting. I nodded to the engineers. There was a flash of light and the *Tribune*'s teleport chamber vanished from around us. Precisely five seconds later the engineers performed their last duty. They never questioned my order, never showed the slightest doubt or emotion at what I asked of them. I think I have never had more admiration for a human than I have for them.

The *Tribune*'s plasma reactors overloaded. I never saw my ship die but in my mind I still see it, as though the event burnt itself onto the retina of my dreams.

For a second the *Tribune* held its form, a golden fortress floating in black night. Then it detonated. The Imperial Fists still on board were vaporised and their Iron Warriors enemies with them. Tongues of plasma licked out from the sun-hot core. Vast lumps of armour plating rode on the growing sphere of hot gases. The blast wave hit the *Contrador*, and broke fields and burnt out its sensors and range finders. Our attack craft descended on it a moment later like the vengeful spirits of the dead.

The Dreadnoughts were made of dull metal, their curved torso plates marked by burnished iron skulls. Black and yellow chevrons slashed across their greaves, and amber light burnt in their eyes. They stood to either side of iron doors whose surfaces were mottled and pitted as if their slab faces had been hung while still

hot from the furnace. Broken corpses and shell cases lay in heaps before them. This far into the *Iron Blood* the resistance was not just punishing, it was crippling. Of the thirteen hundred Tyr had brought, just over forty stood with him now. A few still fought in the rest of the vast ship, buying Tyr's force time. The rest were dead, their armour split, crushed or burned, their blood mingling with that of their enemies on the bare metal decks. But they were close, very close.

There was supposed to be a second wave. A battalion of Imperial Fists, Dreadnoughts and Legio Cybernetica maniples. It should have lent strength to the final attack on Perturabo's inner sanctum. That second wave would never arrive. Tyr knew that Polux would have withdrawn the ships carrying his reinforcements. Perhaps those ships would survive, but Tyr had his doubts. Withdrawal in the middle of a battle like this meant only one thing: a massacre. He understood Polux's decision, but the cost... the cost was beyond imagining.

Tyr was running, his mace held above his head. The first Dreadnought fired when Tyr was fifty paces from the door. The cylinder of glowing energy missed Tyr by inches and hit Timor in mid-stride. There was a high-pitched whine and the sergeant dissolved into an outline of bright light. The energy beam hit another Imperial Fist and reduced him to dust. Tyr's helmet display blanked out completely. He could hear the shriek growing louder and louder.

His display cut back in. The Dreadnought was still firing, the conversion beamer's coils pulsing and sparking. Tyr focused on the Dreadnought and selected his first strike.

The second Dreadnought raised one of its two hands and opened its palm. The graviton gun pulse hit Tyr and he slammed into the floor. He could feel metal distorting, servos and joints shearing under pressure as his armour crushed him. The Dreadnought with the conversion beamer kept firing while its brother moved forwards, its fingers flexing.

A spray of glowing rounds hit it from the side. Tyr could hear the sound of Navarra's assault cannon even over the scream of the conversion beamer. Gouged pits spread across the Dreadnought's sarcophagus. It turned into the deluge of fire, moving like a man leaning into a gale. Its face plate buckled, the metal glowing hot under the impacts. The armour cracked and suddenly the machine giant was leaking blood. Chunks of pulped meat showered from the Dreadnought as it split open. The graviton hold on Tyr ended a second before the Dreadnought hit the floor.

Tyr was off the floor, running, his crushed muscles screaming, his armour

grinding. The Dreadnought with the conversion beamer turned to meet his charge. He brought the mace down on the barrel. The ribbed focusing plates shattered. Arcs of energy cracked through the air. Tyr's second blow crashed into its right leg behind the knee joint. The Dreadnought brought its fist around as it fell, clenched iron knuckles swinging at Tyr's head. He buried the head of the mace in the Dreadnought's face. It collapsed with a sound of ringing steel and unwinding gears.

Tyr stood, breathing hard. He looked up at the waiting doors. They looked as if they could survive a kick from a Titan. He turned to the remainder of his cadre. There were fourteen brothers in Terminator armour, another thirty in void-hardened Iron Armour. *Too few*, he thought. *Far too few*. But was any number going to be enough to kill a primarch?

'Melta charges,' he called. Men began to run forwards, unfastening charges as they moved.

The first one was level with Tyr when the doors began to open. Tyr turned, his eyes locked on the widening split in the rough iron. The doors peeled back into the walls with a sound like the inhalation of a metal god. He could feel the hairs rise on his neck. Something buried deep under his gene-forging and training told him to step back from the dark opening, to run. Behind him the rest of the Imperial Fists had gone still. He could see inside now. He saw the figure clad in dulled battleplate seated upon the sharp-angled iron throne, hand resting on the pommel of a hammer.

Tyr could feel the black eyes of the enthroned figure looking back at him. He raised his mace. Behind him his brothers began to move. Bright lines of tracer fire split the gloom. Tyr began to charge as Perturabo rose from his throne to meet him. Chains spilled from the primarch's layered war plate as he stood. Rounds sparked from the rivet-covered armour. His face was bare, his eyes oil-black. His hammer came up with him. Its haft was as tall as Tyr and its black head crawled with power at its master's touch.

Tyr was five paces away. He could feel his muscles bunching, his heartbeat slowing to a low focused rhythm. Behind Tyr his brothers followed, firing as they came, lighting his path, caging Perturabo in fire. Tyr gripped his mace with both hands as he swung it up above his head.

'For Dorn!' The shout began as the coiled power of Tyr's strike unwound. The primarch stood still, clad in iron, and cloaked in detonations. Tyr met the black eyes and saw something move in their depths, like a lightning flash seen on a distant night horizon.

Perturabo spun the head of the hammer low and brought it up in a curved arc. The blow hit Tyr as his last step fell. The hammer crumpled his armour and crushed it into the pulped remains of his flesh.

Reality snapped into place around us with a roar of gunfire. We stood at the centre of a wide chamber lined with dull metal and lit by unshielded stab lamps. The residue of teleportation rose from our armour in gauzy coils of ghost vapour and steam. Our target was good: we were in a primary chamber close to the *Contrador*'s bridge and main command sections. I had expected resistance but had hoped that most of the Iron Warriors would have joined the assault on the *Tribune*. Its death should have claimed them all, leaving their own ship open to our counter-assault.

Like so many battles in so many ages, it was assumption that almost destroyed us.

Fire hit us from all sides. I heard the rolling explosion of bolt-rounds impacting against armour. Three of my men died as shots found eye lenses and punched through helmet speaker grilles.

'Shields,' I shouted into the vox. My men brought their boarding shields together, their edges touching those of the men next to them. Together we formed an unbroken circular wall of plasteel. Volley fire, disciplined and relentless, lashed against the shield wall. I switched to the optical feed from the front of my shield and saw the muzzle flare of bolters firing from loopholes in sloped metal barricades. Iron Warriors, dug in and waiting. Not all of them had gone to attack the *Tribune*. Even with the scent of the kill so close the Iron Warriors were suspicious, methodical fighters and had held some strength back.

I looked to my left. Raln stood close in to my shoulder, firing his bolter through the gun slot in his shield. He paused and turned his helmet to look at me.

'This is not going to be easy,' he said. I almost smiled.

'We need to move,' I said. The enemy did not intend to kill us with this fire, they intended to pin us in place. If we stayed where we were the Iron Warriors would wear us down and then bring up weapons that could break our shield wall. It was inevitable. It was what I would have done if I had been in their place. Raln glanced through his gun slot.

'Enemy barricades on this side are three metres high with firing points every two metres. Crossfire will not diminish on approach.' He looked back at me.

'Advance on one barricade, remove it and work sideways along the lines from

there.’ It was a simple plan and under the circumstances the only one open to us.

‘They will be prepared for it,’ I said. Raln shrugged, a gesture that said everything about what we could do about that certainty. For a second I thought of what must be happening in the rest of the Iron Warriors ship. Our assault craft wave must have hit by now, and our brothers would be fighting for beachheads inside the ship’s outer hull. I opened a channel to the rest of my personal strike force. ‘Close formation, advance to starboard barricade.’ They needed no other instruction.

Our formation reformed as we charged, shields rising and overlapping to form an armoured wedge that moved as a single body. The enemy fire intensified so that we were pushing against a wall of explosions, muscles and discipline straining for every step. We slowed, our synchronised paces becoming driving steps. I was grunting with the effort of holding my shield up against the hammering impacts of bolt-rounds. Fire washed us, billowing through the chinks in our shield wall; I felt a stab of pain as the flames found the elbow joint of my shield arm. I discarded the sensation, and forced my legs to push forwards. I could see the barricade only three paces away.

‘Meltas,’ called Raln. I heard the shrieking whine as air super-heated along the path of the melta beams. Two ragged, glowing wounds opened in the Iron Warriors barricade. The incoming fire slackened. This was the most dangerous moment, the moment when victory or slaughter was decided as much by luck as discipline. We charged, reforming into two spear-shaped packs that drove at the gaps in the barricades. I was at the tip of one, shield raised, my power fist sweating arcs of lightning.

An Iron Warrior met me as I stepped into the glowing breach. He was fast and skilled. His hand gripped the top of my shield, and yanked it downwards as he stabbed at my face with his chainblade. I rammed my weight forwards. He stumbled, the teeth of his chainblade biting across the armour above my left eye. I moved the shield to the side and punched into the gap. The Iron Warrior’s chest plate shattered. He started to fall but I had already hit him twice more, crushing and pulping his face and gut. I stepped over his body. Behind me my brothers came through the breach firing to either side, spreading down the line like water pouring through a broken dam. I turned, looking for the knots of resistance. That small movement, the slight turn and drop of my head, saved my life.

The teeth of the chainfist carved across the top of my shield in a streak of red sparks. I started to turn, caught a glimpse of a shape, its bare metal armour bloated by augmetics. A kick stamped into my shield. The impact shot up my

arm. I felt muscles tear in my shoulder. I was still staggering when the chainfist carved my shield and arm in two.

I felt no pain, just a sensation of draining to the floor as shock flooded through me. Bright supernovas of light blossomed in front of my eyes. A tremble ran through me as my gene-forged physiology fought against the trauma. My vision swam. Something moved close to me, a simian shape of oiled metal that moved with a splutter of pneumatic hisses. I could hear a shriek of revving chain-teeth. The shape lunged. Hit the field of my power fist. I did not even realise I had blocked the blow. My vision snapped into focus.

The clang of arms and the roar of bolter fire filled the space behind the barricade. Around me my brothers surged against figures in armour the colour of bare steel. Bolters fired at point-blank range. Shields battered into limbs and helmets. A dark gloss layer of blood covered the deck.

The turning chain-teeth were inches from my face. My muscles and armour fought to hold it back. My enemy pressed the chainfist forwards. He was strong, monstrously strong. I could see the grey, pale skin of his face sunken into the collar of his armour. Pistons and cables bulged from his joints and dirty fumes coughed from the vents on his back. His eyes were pale, the pupils black pinpricks in irisless whites. A fragment of memory gave me his name: Golg.

He had ordered the murder of my ship but had stayed on his own, not even coming to finish the deed himself.

He raked his chainfist back and I hammered forwards with a backhanded blow. He took a half-step back, the delicacy of the movement at odds with his bulk. The blow passed a hand's width from his face, and as my momentum sent my arm wide he brought his chainfist across my chest. Thick blood and yellow armour fragments sprayed from the teeth. I felt their hooked points part the metal of my breastplate and open my flesh to the bone. Blood washed down my chest; I could taste it in my mouth. My breath bubbled thick in my throat.

Golg gave a smile of relish. I stumbled back a step. Blood still flowed from the chewed stump of my left arm. I could feel the double beat of my hearts booming in my chest. A high-pitched ringing filled my ears. Strength was draining from me.

My vision was a frosted blur, as if ice covered my eyes.

The world turned dark and warm.

The pain faded.

The pain is how you know you are still alive.

I grasped the pain and it pulled me back into the moment with a silent howl.

Agony ran through my nerves, fresh, bright, *alive*. I could see.

Golg was looking at me with emptiness in his pale eyes. The chainfist descended towards me, its blood-wetted teeth a pink metal blur. I brought my power fist up, palm and fingers open.

I caught the chainfist and closed my hand with a crack of thunder. Shattered metal teeth spun through the air. I wrenched my fist back, pulling Golg forwards. His face met my helmet with a wet crack of bone. I let go of his ruined chainfist and pistoned my fist into his head. His skull vanished in a spray of red pulp. He collapsed to the ground, and lay still.

My knees hit the deck but I did not feel it. Around me my brothers were pressing forwards, clearing the barricade spaces. Blood pulsed slowly from my chest and the severed meat of my left arm. There was a warm copper taste in my mouth. For a moment I knelt, a crimson warrior coated in my own blood and that of my enemies. Then the pain faded and the waiting abyss opened beneath me.

The killing began to slow. The Retribution Fleet was no more; only the crippled and dead remained. The Iron Warriors ships had stopped firing on their victims, as if the overwhelming firepower of the earlier battle had left them spent. Surrounded Imperial Fists remnants fired all they had into the face of their enemies. Some managed to strip the void shields off an Iron Warriors ship; some even put wounds into their hulls. But the Iron Warriors came on, shrugging off damage like a bull grox trampling a dog into the dirt. They swarmed their remaining enemies, their boarding pods clustering on golden hulls like ticks feeding on cattle. Their boarding parties struck plasma reactors, shutting them down and letting the ships choke to death without power. Life support systems, artificial gravity and weapon systems went silent. Then the Iron Warriors left and the cold of the void reached into the lightless hulls to do its slow and silent work.

A few Imperial Fists ships remained, fighting to the last, a shrinking cluster of resistance that became smaller by the second. They fought to the death, firing on enemies with undimmed fury, covering limping comrades even as the Iron Warriors brought them down. When the *Tribune* exploded amongst the last Imperial Fists ships, few of the Iron Warriors took note. Golg and the *Contrador* had their kill, and the primarch had the head of the Imperial Fist who had dared to stand against him. That the *Contrador* lingered at the site of its victory drew no suspicion.

In the navigation cupola of the *Contrador*, Navigator Primus Basus shifted against the unfamiliar hardness of the bare metal chair. The Imperial Fists had locked the previous Navigator of the *Contrador* in the deep holds of the battle- barge, but he could still feel her presence on the unadorned and functional equipment. Behind him his two secondaries fidgeted in their seats. The journey from the *Tribune* had done nothing to settle their nerves, and they knew what awaited them once they were in the warp. A storm navigation was a terrifying thing. Even if the clear passage were still visible they would have to rotate through shifts to avoid gaze fatigue, or worse. Basus flicked a switch on the console and spoke to the air.

‘Sergeant Raln?’ There was a pause, a clicking whir of white noise.

‘Yes, Navigator.’ The sergeant’s voice held none of its usual dry humour.

‘We are ready.’ He paused, sucked air through his teeth. ‘Our destination is still the same?’

‘Yes. Captain Polux’s orders still stand.’

Basus nodded to himself, closed his human eyes and ran his hand over the aperture on his forehead.

‘Very well, sergeant.’ He cut the vox, and turned to his secondaries. Their green-flecked amber eyes were a mirror of his own. ‘We make course for Terra,’ he said.

The *Contrador*’s engines fired to full life and it moved away from the debris of its battle with the *Tribune*. It bled as it moved, its wounds trailing gas and ribbons of burning plasma. Damaged inside and out, half its crew dead, and its command seized by its enemies, it was a crippled warrior picking itself up from the battlefield. But it could still run.

By the time the rest of the Iron Warriors fleet realised something was wrong the *Contrador* was already beyond their range. Its engines breathed comet trails as it made for the edge of the Phall system, deaf to the signals that followed its flight. The Iron Warriors pursued until the *Contrador* ripped a glowing hole in the starfield and dived into the storms beyond.

Perturabo watched the calculations of slaughter play across the screen. His gaze held no sign of pleasure or satisfaction. Nothing else moved in the throne room or the long chamber beyond the doors. The blood had already clotted to a sticky dark film on his armour. The broken bodies of Imperial Fists lay on the floor

around him, their yellow armour so crushed and distorted that they looked like chewed lumps of metal and offal.

The Imperial Fists fleet was gone. Some had managed to flee and jump to the warp, but most now drifted in the void, shattered and blackened. The force that had boarded the *Iron Blood* was dead to a man. There was no enemy left to fight. The battle data scrolling past Perturabo's eyes told of a sudden and total victory. It also spoke of the likely outcome before the Imperial Fists' suicidal withdrawal. Perturabo let the truth cycle past his eyes once more.

The hammer blow reduced the screens to sparking wreckage, and the Lord of Iron stalked from the chamber in silence.

In a corner, Navarra's mangled body lay in a fold of shadow. His armour had mashed into his flesh, and his legs were gone below the knee joint. Inside the ruin of his helmet, Navarra's eyelids trembled and snapped open.

EPILOGUE

[time/location unclear]

We have been falling for an eternity, falling into icy darkness, blood and the shouts of despair following us into oblivion. Perhaps it has only been hours, perhaps years. I cannot tell.

The storm cradles us, its frustrated fury raging at the hull of the Contrador. Some of the human crew have died. There has been violence. Some still hold loyalty to their Iron Warriors masters. It is to be expected. Others seem to have died of hunger, their bodies withering away to nothing. Perhaps it has been years. Perhaps we will fall through the storm forever.

'Captain Polux?' It is Basus. The Navigator looks even more thin and pale than normal. Sweat beads his grey skin and red sores rim his true eyes. I look little better. The wounds are healing, but they still weep pus. Tubes attach me to a mass of machines and fluid-filled vials that follow me on suspensors. I wear a red robe darkened in places by blooms of dried blood. They had to cut me from my armour.

'Yes, Navigator?' My voice is cracked and dry. A thick tube sucks yellow liquid from my chest as I breathe.

'I have seen it.' His voice shakes as he speaks. 'It is there, just visible, faint but steady.' I think that I know what he means, but I will not hope. I flex the fingers of my left hand as I listen, then I realise that my hand is gone and that I am clasping a phantom memory.

'What have you seen?' I say.

'The light of Terra,' he says. 'The Astronomican. The storms are still strong but we can steer a course.' I hear the hope in his voice alongside the fatigue. He and his secondaries have been steering us through the storm currents for as long as we have been here within the warp. Hope, though, is a fragile skin over the

truth of pain and sacrifice.

'Do it. Take us home.'

I stay awake until we complete the course. A command throne of dark metal dominates the Contrador's bridge. It remains empty; I stand as I did on the bridge of the Tribune.

The crew move around me. Time passes, perhaps hours, perhaps months, perhaps years. My lost hand glows with ghost pain. The Apothecaries tell me they can modify the doses of nerve suppressors to remove the pain until I heal. I told them not to. The pain is reassuring, a rock to cling to as we fall.

At last the journey is over. Raln stands with me as we prepare to see the lights of Terra again. I nod slowly, and Raln gives the order. Our stolen ship shivers as the curtain of the warp parts before it and we slide out into the light of a bright sun.

The screens suspended across the bridge flicker to life, showing us the world that has waited for our return.

I frown. Beside me Raln makes a sound like a snarl.

The planets turn under the light of their sun, half wrapped in darkness, half in stark light. Weapon platforms and void stations ring them in heavy chains. Ships move through the void. Some turn towards us even as we look at them. I feel shock and awe. The forces gathered here are the greatest I have ever seen. It is a star system made into a fortress, a seat of power and unbending might. It is a place I have seen before, long ago. Now it is changed. It has become something more, something that I do not understand.

I look away from the screen.

'This is not Terra,' I say.

Somewhere within me I see Helias fall again from my hand into the night, and hear my scream lost on the ice wind.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JOHN FRENCH has written several Horus Heresy stories including the novellas *Tallarn: Executioner* and *The Crimson Fist*, and the audio dramas *Templar* and *Warmaster*. He is the author of the Ahriman series, which includes the novels *Ahriman: Exile* and *Ahriman: Sorcerer*, plus the short story 'Hand of Dust':
Additionally for the Warhammer 40,000 universe he has written the Space Marine Battles novella 'Fateweaver', plus a number of short stories. He lives and works in Nottingham, UK.

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First published in Great Britain in *Shadows of Treachery* in 2012.

This ebook edition published in 2014 by Black Library, Games Workshop Ltd., Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

Cover illustration by Neil Roberts.

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ISBN 978-1-78251-613-2

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