

Ravenlord

Gav Thorpe



calibre 0.9.19

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RAVENLORD

Freedom bought with blood

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Vengeance Forces

CORVUS CORAX Primarch of the XIX Legion "Raven Guard"

GHERITH ARENDI Former commander of the Shadow Wardens

SOUKHOUNOU Commander of the Hawks

ALONI TEV Commander of the Falcons

AGAPITO NEV Commander of the Talons

BRANNE NEV Commander of the Raptors

NAVAR HEF Lieutenant, Raptors

DEVOR Raptor

NEROKA Raptor

SHAAK Lieutenant, Falcons

BALSAR KURTHURI Restored Librarian

CHAMELL Shade-sergeant, Mor Deythan

SENDERWAT Mor Deythan

FASUR Mor Deythan

KORIN Mor Deythan

STRANG Mor Deythan

ARCATUS VINDIX CENIURIO Legio Custodes

ANNOVULDI Warsmith, IV Legion "Iron Warriors"

NORIZ Captain, VII legion "Imperial Fists"

KASATI NUON VIII Legion "Night Lords"

KASDAR X legion "Iron Hands"

DAMASTOR KYIL X Legion "Iron Hands"

NASTURI EPHRENIA Strategium controller of the battle-barge Avenger

NAIMA STAROTHRENDAR Baroness of Scarato

On Carandiru

NATHIAN Planetary commandant

NAPENNA Tech marine, XIX Legion "Raven Guard"

IAENTO IX Legion "Blood Angels"

FAJALLO Carandiru cell leader

PROLOGUE

Carandiru [Day of Vengeance - DV]

‘YOU THINK ONE legionary can take back a world?’

A burst of bolter fire accompanied the question from the Emperors Children warrior, ripping through the plas-board wall that separated the main floor of the auditorium from the holo-projection chamber.

Soukhounou kept perfectly still, crouched behind the bulk of the projector itself.

‘You chose the wrong allegiance,’ the traitor continued.

The Raven Guard commander listened to the tread of boots ascending bare stone steps between the rows of chairs. He tensed as they came closer. Servos wheezed as the renegade stopped just outside the door. Another burst of fire shredded a row of metal cabinets just to Soukhounou’s right. He edged to the left, moving around the projector plinth.

‘You cannot turn back the tide.’

Soukhounou was not listening to the words. As the traitor finished speaking the Raven Guard heard the distinctive click of a magazine being ejected.

He was up and out of his hiding place in an instant, sprinting towards the wall. His pistol spat a hail of bolts, adding to the fist-sized holes already breaking the plas-board. Hitting the separating wall at full speed, he crashed through, slamming into the side of the purple-clad traitor legionary.

The Raven Guard’s impetus sent them both toppling, spinning and crashing back down the steps of the auditorium. Reaching the main floor both warriors rolled to their feet, still locked together. Soukhounou had the advantage, the fibre bundles in his armour churning with power as he drove the renegade backwards, sending both of them crashing out through high glass doors onto a broad balcony. The two Space Marines thudded against the balustrade, looking down at the square. A black banner emblazoned with the Eye of Horus hung below.

The plaza seethed with people - ordinary men and women surging across the cobbles, seemingly oblivious to the bolter and heavy weapons fire from the citadel garrison. Sporadic las-fire flashed up from the crowd but it was their

numbers that were their greatest weapon. Thousands, maybe tens of thousands, thronged the streets, converging on the traitor enclave. Beyond, darkness was spreading across the city, block after block engulfed in creeping shadow.

‘Not just one legionary,’ snarled Soukhounou. He freed his left hand, fist glowing as a powered blade slid from the back of his gauntlet. ‘A symbol. A message.’

He slammed the punch-dagger up into the throat of the traitor. The crowd below roared as Soukhounou tossed the corpse of the Emperor’s Children legionary over the balcony. He lifted his hand in salute. The liberation of Carandiru had begun.

SEVEN MORE LEGIONARIES blocked Corax’s path. Five were clad in warplate painted in the livery of the Emperor’s Children; another sported deep red armour marked by the sigils of the Word Bearers; the last wore the colours of the Sons of Horus. Corax wondered what slight or crime the legionaries had committed to have been allocated such onerous duty. No warrior of the Legiones Astartes would volunteer to garrison a prison world when there was glory in battle to be won elsewhere. They did not look injured or otherwise infirm, which might have explained the need for a non-battlefield role. It was a mystery the primarch was prepared to live with. His anger was up and he was in no mood for taking prisoners.

Three of the Emperor’s Children opened fire with their bolters, sparking rounds from Corax’s armour as he advanced into the vestibule outside the central strategium. The other two had pistols and chain swords at the ready but made no move to meet the primarch. The legionary from the Sons of Horus drew paired diamond-edged blades, but he also stayed back. The Word Bearer, helmetless, grinned fangs as he raised a plasma gun.

Corax jumped as the legionary opened fire, the blast of plasma screaming beneath the primarch as he twisted on black wings, jump pack flaring, he covered the intervening distance in a moment, the fingers of his left hand outstretched. His gauntleted fist punched through the traitor’s chest as Corax landed, ripping through ceramite and carving open fused bone. A bolt-round snapped from the side of his helmet, and more detonated across his back and shoulder; he turned to the others, and with a flick of the wrist he threw the dead Word Bearer into one of the Emperor’s Children, knocking the Space Marine to the ground.

A wingtip lashed out, slicing through the blades of the Sons of Horus

legionary and decapitating him. Spinning with the attack, Corax smashed the heel of his boot into the head of the downed warrior of the III Legion, crushing helm and skull into the floor.

The remaining Emperor's Children turned and ran, sprinting towards the open doorway behind them. The primarch lifted his right hand and his combi-weapon spat fire, sending a flurry of bolts after the fleeing Space Marines. Detonations sparked from armour and one of the renegades went down, head turned to bony shrapnel that embedded into the ceramite of his companions. The others reached a bulkhead, the last of them slowing to stretch a hand towards a keypad on the wall. A shaped charge from the other barrel of Corax's combi-weapon smashed into the renegade's back, splitting armour in an instant before ejecting its melta core through his spine.

The last two survivors fled down the corridor, not looking back. Corax dashed after them, long strides assisted by half-opened wings so that he seemed to glide between every step. Reaching his prey, he drove his armoured hands through their backpacks, shattering vertebrae, and lifted them both from the ground. Their panicked flailing caused him no difficulty.

Another door opened to his left as he tossed their twitching bodies aside. He turned to see several Raven Guard, weapons at the ready, with Arendi at their head.

'Follow me,' said the primarch. He turned his back on the new arrivals to head down the corridor towards the main chamber of the keep.

'PRESS ON! FIGHT harder! The primarch's life depends on it!'

Branne's bellow rang out over the din of gunfire as he fired his combi-bolter in a long burst, mowing down a handful of the turncoat prison guards. Men and women in scarlet and black uniforms pitched to the floor, bodies rent by bolt detonations. Lifting his power sword, he waved the others forward.

Around the Raven Guard commander, his Raptors stormed along the ramp leading up to the central courtyard. Some were cleanlimbed, wearing the distinctively snouted helms of Mark VI armour. They laid down a curtain of fire with bolters and heavy weapons, pinning back the crush of humanity standing between them and the huge exit gates.

Around them, the other Raptors boiled forwards.

These were the warriors suffering geneseed mutation. Some could still wear armour, or pieces of it; others were dressed in padded coveralls furnished with

dense mesh and artisan-fashioned plate. The Tech marines had done their best to provide their twisted battle-brothers with the same protection as those free from the gene-taint. Bestial roars and screeches took the place of proud battlecries as they lumbered, skittered and ran towards the enemy. Many carried weapons - bolt pistols, power axes, chainswords - but some sported claws and bony protrusions that served just as well.

Between them, the two Raptor-kin cleaved into hundreds of renegade soldiers that had poured down into the lower cells to stem the jailbreak, little knowing they faced a battle-group of Legiones Astartes. Some tried to retreat, blocking the entry of others, while bolts, las-blasts and bullets whined, cracked and zipped through the close confines of the subterranean complex.

Branne glanced at the chronometer in his helm display. Lord Corax would be making his final move for the commandant's keep. The dampening field of the cell block, powered by a sub-generator to prevent teleportation and communications, was still blocking all signals.

The Raven Guard commander had to get to the surface, still an agonising three hundred metres away.

He had to warn his primarch about the traitor.

I

The battle-barge Avenger [DV -128 days, Terran adjusted standard]

CORAX SUMMONED HIS commanders to him, with Arcatus of the Legio Custodes and Captain Noriz of the Imperial Fists, so that all factions of his force were represented. They had come from afar, brought together by the call of the Raven Guard primarch.

Scattered across dozens of systems, the Raven Guard had been waging their guerrilla war against the forces of Horus and the other traitors. Reinforcements ambushed en route to the battlefields creeping closer to Terra; supplies intercepted and taken by the Raven Guard, turned on those that sought to benefit from the shipments of arms and armour coming out of traitor-held forge worlds; scouting fleets destroyed.

In the years since Corax had made the Avenger his flagship much had changed. Once Commander Branne's chambers, now the rooms of the primarch had been extended, refitted and turned into a sub-strategium. The main room was still plainly decorated, plasteel walls a muted blue. A carved relief of the Raven Guard's device - a heraldic bird with wings and claws stretched, surrounded by a coiled chain marked the wooden boards of the floor. The table that had once stood upon the symbol was now relegated to a side chamber, for when aboard ship Corax preferred to conduct his councils and briefings standing, to give urgency and movement to the thoughts of his commanders.

Around the walls were the blank screens of monitoring and communications stations, keyboards and runepads neatly stowed, stools tucked under the counters. For the past several days the primarch had waited here listening to the incoming reports from returning ships and flotillas, but all ancillary staff had been dismissed. He wanted his subordinates and the others to speak their minds freely without fear of showing dissent or hesitation in front of lesser ranks.

Corax waited for the last attendee to settle himself - Noriz, in his ochre battleplate. As Corax's gaze fell upon him the captain stood sharply to attention, his crested helm under one arm. He had recently arrived from Deliverance, where his Legion's particular skills had been put to good use; the home-moon of the Raven Guard and the forge world it orbited would be far more secure after a year of defensive improvements by the Imperial Fists. He was the youngest,

head sporting a crop of blond curls, bright blue eyes that never rested.

At the opposite end of the scale, the eldest was Aloni, with Asiatic complexion and a naturally bald scalp riveted with many gilded service studs. The leader of the assault companies of the Falcons, his armour showed the most recent repairs and maintenance, sporting fresh-bonded rivets and plates yet to be adorned with the ceremonial black paint. Despite his ragtag appearance, his wargear was in good order, metal oiled and gleaming, pouches and mag-packs on thighs and greaves filled with ammunition and grenades.

Agapito and Aloni stood to Noriz's right, Branne and Soukhounou to the left, all clad in the midnight hue of the Raven Guard. As brothers, Branne and Agapito were not quite identical, but both had square jaws, heavy brows and flat cheeks. There was a sallow cast to their skin from being born and raised under the artificial lights of Lycaeus, which even the augmentations of the Legiones Astartes could not remove. Agapito was marked out by a weathered scar on his face.

Soukhounou was the darkest of them all, a testament to his gene-heritage amongst the Sahelian league on Terra. He had short-cropped, curled black hair and a beard of the same furred his chin and cheeks; he had arrived only the day before and was yet to shave off the growth of the last patrol. His dark flesh was cut by pale scars and tribal tattoos from his childhood, where he had been raised as a praise-singer before being taken by the Emperor's newly raised Legions.

All were large men, boosted by their Space Marine genes, but they were slightly shorter than Arcatus, who was not only physically larger - though not as big as Corax - but held himself straight, with easy poise and grace. A thin face, sharp nose and swept-back blond hair had earned him a nickname amongst the Raven Guard: the Emperor's Eagle.

Corax nodded a greeting to each of them and then started to speak, eyes moving from one to the other and back, gauging their reactions without accusation.

'We have fought hard since the disaster at Ravendelve curtailed any hope that we might return the Legion to some semblance of its former strength. In the way only the Raven Guard know best we have struck at Horus time and again, sapping his strength, drawing his ire away from other forces.' Corax sighed. 'It is not enough. The Warmaster's armies and fleets still constrict like a noose upon Terra.'

'Are you suggesting we return to the Throneworld?' said Noriz, with hope in

his voice. 'Are we going to join the defence?'

'I would rather lay down my life amongst the stars than cower behind a wall,' said Agapito.

'Cower?' Noriz bridled at the comment. 'You think Lord Dorn a coward?'

'Your pardon, I did not mean any such thing,' said Agapito, raising a hand in apology. He looked at the primarch. 'We fought to be free of imprisonment, my lord. To incarcerate ourselves within walls once more would make a mockery of everything we believe.'

'What more can we do?' asked Soukhounou. 'We only have so many men, so many ships. As skilled as we are in such conditions, we cannot conjure warriors from nothing.'

'From nothing?' Corax shook his head, eyes closed. 'I tried that, and it has caused us great pain.'

His mind was swept back to the events at Ravendelve some years earlier.

Fear and desperation. Not in the eyes of the men he had turned into beasts, but hiding in his own heart. Having faced death twice, almost succumbing to the despair, it had been a different sort of fear that had propelled him into such recklessness - the fear of being wrong.

Hundreds of Deliverance's brightest had paid the price of Corax's desperation and were paying it still. Every passing month took more of a toll on their mutated physiques and he had to watch them being slowly crippled by the blight he had loosed into their bodies. The war allowed no time for pity no time to go back to his research to look for a cure; the data itself had been too dangerous to keep and what remained of the psychic knowledge implanted into his memory by the Master of Mankind had all but faded.

If he could win the war he could deliver up the broken Raptors to his grandfather for a cure. If there was any hope for them being returned to normal, it would be in the hands of the Emperor.

But the war had to be won first.

He opened his eyes.

'No, we do not seek to conjure warriors from nothing. There are other fighters to be found, though. We hear word of them, catching their transmissions - the messages of their astropaths. Remnants, companies, squads of Legions

broken by war, distant expeditions now returning, garrisons half-forgotten since the crusade began, survivors of offensives and counterattacks that have broken apart from the Imperium. They are scattered out here with us, fighting as best they can. I will bring them together and we will train them in our way of fighting. That is how we will grow strong again.'

'It would take forever to round up every waif and stray legionary, even just those within a few thousand light years,' said Arcatus.

'We will not go to them, they will come to us. A single, simple message to pierce the roiling warp storms. A clarion call for those without a leader to come together. We will issue the cry to muster and we will strike back with more ferocity than before. We will make Horus rue the day he underestimated us! If the Warmaster wants the galaxy to burn, we will see him consumed by its flames.'

'If loyalist factions hear this summoning, will not also our enemies?' Noriz said quietly.

'Undoubtedly,' said Corax. He shrugged away the captain's concerns and looked at Arcatus. 'If you intercepted an enemy message openly broadcast, calling forces to a particular place, what would you make of it?'

'I would suspect it to be a trap,' said the Custodian. 'It would seem like the perfect opportunity for an ambush.'

'But won't our allies think it also?' said Soukhounou. 'A rebel ruse to bring them to one place?'

'Perhaps, but lone ships, small flotillas have more chance of eluding such a trap than a massed fleet. And they will want to believe it is true, whereas our enemy will be guided by caution. When they begin to arrive we can have them send their own messages, so that by word of their own more will be brought to us.'

The Custodian looked unconvinced, and rubbed his chin in thought.

'By whose authority would you command these forces? You assume much if you think that warriors from many Legions will follow you. The last person to be granted such power was the Warmaster

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'I need no greater authority than I was given by the Emperor on the day he made me commander of the Nineteenth legion,' Corax replied. 'I am a primarch

of the Legiones Astartes, and though that title has been sullied these past years, it still means something to me, and to others. I will restore the honour of that role and prove that loyalty remains a virtue in these dark times.'

'And where would we muster this army?' asked Arcatus.

Corax turned to the controls on the wall and activated a hololithic map, projected from lenses installed in the high ceiling. He manipulated the dials and pad until the view zoomed in to an isolated star system a few dozen light years away.

'Here,' said the primarch. 'A system we liberated only fifty days ago - Scarato.'

II

Scarato [DV -91 days]

‘IN THE YEARS of the Great Crusade the conclaves of Legions were magnificent affairs filled with celebration, ceremony and grandeur.’ Aloni was wistful, staring into the flames in the immense fireplace that illuminated the great hall. The fire glinted from the dozen golden service studs that pierced his brow and scalp. ‘This feels more like a council of thieves.’

The immense hall was used to far grander occasions, like those that Aloni now remembered. Nearly two hundred metres long and forty metres high, its huge vaulted ceiling was held aloft by pillars like the legs of Titans. The grand fireplace was large enough that a Rhino could have been driven into it, and the heat from the gas-fired blaze was easily felt although the Space Marine was several dozen metres away. Hidden in the chimney was a heat-reclamation system that powered the enormous chandeliers hanging like constellations above.

It was the only chamber in which his primarch felt comfortable, it seemed; the other rooms of the palaces were too small to contain his energy, the corridors too tight, even for one who had been raised in the cells of Lycaeus. Since his declaration and their arrival at Scarato he had been full of movement, barely able to hold in check the desire for action.

He sat in a custom-made throne behind a large desk that had been brought down from the stateroom of the Avenger. Combined with the gilded decor and bright frescoes of the hall it made for a grandiose office more suited to gala balls than councils of war.

‘Circumstances dictate,’ replied the primarch. ‘What is the latest tally?’

‘Three hundred and twelve legionaries,’ said Aloni, not needing to check the data-slate in his hands. ‘A small cargo lighter, retro-fitted with warp engines and Geller fields, just arrived with seven Iron Hands on board. They’d been holding out in the Aquinia system.’

‘I told Arcatus they would come if we called,’ said Corax. He leaned forward, pushing aside the piles of reports on the desk. He was about to speak, but looked away at the sound of the doors opening. Aloni turned his head to see

Baroness Naima Starothrendar enter. Short, middle-aged, with a distinct limp and a freshly healing cut across her left cheek, she was physically underwhelming. But on Scarato it had been her refusal to give in to the Sons of Horus, her tenacity to keep alive some of the old ruling class and muster a resistance movement, which had paved the way for the rebellion instigated by Aloni's secret insertion less than a hundred days earlier.

She approached the primarch, forcing Aloni to step aside so that she could stand by the desk; not for a moment had she doubted the Space Marine would give way. Her expression was stern, but when she spoke her words were soft.

'A few rebel elements - those that openly collaborated with the Sons of Horus - are still holding out in a few of their boltholes,' the de facto world ruler told them. 'I have set in motion legal procedure to set up tribunals but I fear the people are too hot-blooded and angry to wait for due process.'

'Understandable, but intolerable,' said Corax, equally quietly spoken. He regarded Naima for a few moments, rubbing his chin with a long finger. 'I sense you have a further proposal to stave off mob justice.'

'We need to issue a joint statement,' said Naima, folding her arms.

'A call from both of us together, asking for calm, should assuage the worst anguish. You are well-known as a liberator and a warrior of justice. If you add your word to mine, if you guarantee that those who turned on their own people will face punishment, the people of Scarato will believe us.'

'I cannot make such a promise,' said Corax. He shrugged. 'I have every faith that you will keep your word, but I will not be here to ensure adherence to Imperial law.'

'Some warriors will remain, surely?' Naima tensed, eyes flickering to Aloni. 'You must maintain some kind of presence here after the tumult you have unleashed. A dozen ships in as many days, and what of those that arrive after you have left? Or if the Sons of Horus return to reclaim what you have taken from them?'

'I have prised the grip of Horus from Scarato, but it is up to the people of your world to prevent it tightening again. We will leave a few ships that you can crew, but my legionaries will be needed elsewhere, freeing other planets and systems.'

Naima sagged, but Corax smiled and stood up, extending a hand to the woman. The primarch looked right at her, black eyes glinting in the light of the

fire, skin like chalk.

‘When the Sons of Horus came here before they were at the height of their power, in great numbers. It is my aim that they will not come back, and certainly not with such force, but to achieve this I must wage war in other places. If I remain, if I turn Scarato into a base for operations, you can be certain that the traitors will return - in numbers such as I cannot protect against.’

‘Lord Corax, I know that you have matters far grander than the fate of Scarato to trouble your thoughts, but for us, for me, the safety of this world and its people is the extent of our concerns. You tell us that to support Horus would be bad for Scarato and I believe you, I really do. The Sons of Horus were not benevolent masters, we know that from recent experience.’ Naima waved a hand towards the doors of the hall. ‘But my people are afraid. Better, they might say, to have a bad master but live than resist and be slain.’

‘You cannot concede to counsel of despair,’ said Aloni, agitated by this attitude. ‘Scarato has passed a handful of years under the yoke of a tyrant. Our world - Lycaeus, the world where I was raised - knew tyranny for countless generations. I was a child, born into a prison, judged guilty simply because I was conceived by a woman who had tried to organise a petition against an overseer who would not allow her to take rest breaks due to the pains of her pregnancy. I never knew that there could be a life other than imprisonment and toil, from my first memories until I was big enough to lift a las-pick. There were those whose only crimes were to have descended from ancestors seven, eight generations back that had displeased the despots of Kiavahr.’

The thought of it riled Aloni even after so long, his stare intent upon the Scaratoan leader. Fists formed at his sides as he grimaced at the recollection.

‘If you capitulate to the threat of Horus it would be to condemn your people to share that fate,’ Aloni continued. ‘I know it is hard, but Lord Corax showed us that one does not have to simply accept the choice between slavery and death. Perhaps for ourselves we must offer up our lives, but such sacrifice can bring freedom to others.’

Naima was taken aback by the vehemence of Aloni’s argument. When he had arrived at Scarato he had found a resistance movement thriving, building for an appointed rebellion. There had been no need for rhetoric and argument; all that had been required was the assurance that if the resistance moved, the Raven Guard would answer. His presence alone had sparked hope. Naima looked at the commander for some time, a slight frown creasing the tanned skin of her

forehead. He wondered if she was troubled by his words, or was trying to work out if he was simple. She scratched at an earlobe, a sign of deep thought that Aloni had noticed before.

‘There are no guarantees,’ said Corax, sitting down, hands clasping the arms of his throne. His expression hardened. ‘Only choices.’

‘I understand,’ Naima said slowly. She looked at Aloni and there was a hint of pity in her eyes.

The Space Marine chose to make no remark. He would never be a victim again, thanks to Corax and the Emperor.

Naima assumed a more upright stance and tugged at the hem of her jacket to straighten it. When she next spoke her tone was more businesslike. ‘Thank you for having faith in the people of Scarato, Lord Corax. I hope that you find everything to your satisfaction.’

‘Exemplary,’ said the primarch. ‘Your people’s hospitality is matched by their efficiency.’

‘I wonder if I could trouble you for one more piece of advice,’ Naima said. Corax nodded. ‘I am sure that there are those who will attempt to make a push for power when you have departed. Factions that have benefited from the occupation will seek to restore some of what they have lost. Like you, I have no desire for pogroms and persecution and I must be able to trust those I appoint to positions of power. How can you be sure of their motives? How can you lead them without trusting them?’

‘It was an issue I first encountered when I was planning the uprising on Lycaeus,’ said the primarch. ‘All endeavour is only as certain as the weakest will. There were prisoners that would have been all too willing to betray my cause in return for privileges from the guards. My people knew who they were for the most part, but as the movement grew I could not personally vet every fighter pledged to the cause.’

‘During the preparations, I created task forces who knew little of each other, so that no single part of the movement could bring down the whole effort. However, this was not enough to guarantee our security. When the time came for open fighting, I reorganised the cells, swapping leaders and personnel between them, so that had any conspiracy arisen, it would then be broken apart. Momentum and action are the guard against corruption. When power is taken for granted idleness follows and after that

Well, none of us need any further lessons in the price of corruption.'

'We will do the same with the warriors from other Legions that answer our call,' added Aloni when Corax fell silent. 'Existing formations are being broken up, commanders and sergeants moved from one to another. Former placements and allegiances are no longer relevant. If a group of traitors has arrived, masquerading their intent, then their ability to perform treachery is much impaired by being separated. In our experience it will not take long for each of the new formations to determine the true loyalties of those that make up their number.'

'A root and branch reorganisation?' said Naima. 'I am not sure my fellow nobles will be so pleased to hear that.'

'It is the only way to break power blocs and ensure mutual interest,' said Corax. 'You will have to give up your own position in time, in order that the people can see you are not invested in maintaining your own power indefinitely.'

'Is that your intent, Lord Corax?' asked Naima. 'Would you be ready to hand over command of your Legion to another, to avoid similar accusations of self-aggrandisement?'

Aloni noticed her sharp look directed at the primarch. It was the first time the commander had heard any suggestion that his leader might contemplate stepping aside. Questions sprang to mind, dozens of them, but the Raven Guard kept his silence and waited for the primarch's reply.

Corax did not answer for some time. When he did, he glanced at Aloni and then met Naima's stare with his own.

'Yes. I have always desired to stand aside for others in due course. There will come a time when my continued presence causes more harm than good. I had thought that moment approaching, but Horus made other plans. He most certainly was not ready to relinquish power.'

'And you think that you are the best person to decide when that moment will come again?' said Naima, doubt in her voice. Aloni wondered if the doubt was for herself or directed at Corax. 'Are you so self-aware and strong-willed?'

'I do not know.' A crooked smile twisted the primarch's lips. 'If there comes a moment when I am utterly convinced I will know when the time is right, that will be when I must step aside.'

III

Scarato [DV -90 days]

LISTENING TO THE transmission from the Avenger, Soukhounou's eyes widened with surprise. He had been expecting a quiet few hours on watch. The command chamber they had established adjoining the ancient palace of the planetary overlord was little more than a communications relay station, hooked into the sensors and vox-suites aboard the Avenger in orbit; the battle-barge's systems were more powerful than anything they had access to on the surface.

'Does the primarch know of this?' the commander replied over the comm system.

'I informed him just before I sent you word, commander,' said controller Ephrenia. Her ageing face was stern on the flickering display. 'He informed me that as officer of the watch you would deal with the matter appropriately.'

Soukhounou was not sure if that was praise or a test. 'And this signal originated from a scow breaking warp two days ago?'

'As I reported, commander,' Ephrenia said patiently. 'Crypto-detection matrices confirm that it is one of the old Legion ciphers.'

This in itself meant nothing; the enemy would have had plenty of time to break an opposing legion's security protocol. What confused Soukhounou was why anyone would think broadcasting an outdated Raven Guard code would forestall suspicion.

'Any other identifiers?' he asked.

'Nothing else, but the ship is too far out for meaningful vox-traffic, commander,' said the controller. 'Any message would still not arrive for several more hours.'

'Despatch Fearless to investigate. The ship is to be treated as hostile until proven otherwise.'

'I understand, commander. Full fleet security measures have been implemented.' Ephrenia leaned closer to the vid-capture, her voice dropping to a whisper. 'Do you really think it could be more survivors from Isstvan? It seems unlikely.'

‘I don’t know,’ admitted Soukhounou. He shook his head. ‘The sheer implausibility makes it a poor subterfuge. I cannot imagine what a force of traitors would think they could achieve with outdated transmissions and a half-crippled scow.’

‘My thoughts too, commander. The code is a personal signal for Gherith Arendi.’

‘Arendi?’ Soukhounou had thought his surprise at the day’s events could not have increased, but this revelation sparked even more confusion. ‘He led the primarch’s guard. The Shadow Wardens.’

‘I know, commander. Gherith was never more than arm’s reach from Lord Corax if possible. If anyone would fight their way across half the galaxy to rejoin the primarch it would be him.’

‘That was before Isstvan. A lot has changed since then.’

Corax’s command had almost been a roar, ordering the Shadow Wardens away. Aloni watched from the back of his jetbike as Arendi flinched from his master. Corax left them then, his flight pack taking him into the blood-red clouds above the Urgall Depression, seeking the traitor Lorgar, whose warriors were cleaving into the Raven Guard flank, attacking, getting pushed back and then attacking again with brutal purpose, like a warped blade repeatedly hacking into flesh.

Arendi had tried to follow Corax, leading his men forward with bounds of their jump packs, but the Ravenlord’s wings swept him out of reach and the twisted monsters of the Word Bearers intervened. Aloni was too occupied with the breakout to keep track of the Shadow Wardens. He was needed elsewhere and only returned with his squadron nearly twenty minutes later, having cut a breach through the Iron Warriors cannons and tanks up on the ridge. Of the three hundred Raven Guard Aloni had led up the hill, twenty-two remained.

The Shadow Wardens had fared even worse.

The fighting moved on, leaving piles of dismembered and wounded legionaries in its wake.

Aloni looked at the carnage and knew, logically, that some of the warriors lying there in mangled warplate might still be alive. In his heart he did not believe it was true. Lieutenant Carakon was requesting urgent reinforcements at the lead-point of the sector four breakout; Corax was withdrawing in a Thunderhawk, and it was up to every company and squad to see to their own

exit.

Others would have died if Aloni had tarried. He had given the dead not a second glance as he angled his jetbike away and soared back up the ridge.

‘Could he really still be alive after all of this time?’ asked Ephrenia.

‘Possibly. But after what happened at Ravendelve I do not think it wise to accept anything as it first appears. I am glad it will be Lord Corax and not I that must try to see the truth of it.’

IV

Scarato [DV -81 days]

‘ARE YOU SURE it is really Gherith?’

Corax looked at the Space Marine on the flickering vid-screen, trying to decide for himself. The new arrival certainly looked like the warrior who had been appointed by Corax to the command of his ceremonial guard. Not only his face, but his build, the way he carried himself, were the same as those etched into the primarch’s memory. He didn’t need the voice-match analysis for confirmation either; his superhuman hearing was as accurate as any machine.

Arendi - or the man claiming to be him - was alone in the room, sitting on a bare bench, arms folded. Now and then he would glance up at the vid-transmitter with a sour look. He wore a thick sarong-like belt of coarse material, having been divested of his armour on arrival. That plate was undergoing examination by the armoury, who looked for any kind of transmitting or tracking devices that might lead them to Arendi’s true masters. Corax had given it a cursory look, impressed by the modifications and field repairs that had kept it functioning; Arendi’s time in the machine shops of the Lycaeus prison had left an aptitude for such things, though his calling had not taken him to the ranks of the Techmarines. The former commander of the Shadow Wardens was Lycaeus-bred, his muscled body leaner than many legionaries, cheeks and eye sockets hollow. He had always been as such, but the years following the Dropsite Massacre had not been kind; bolt scars pocked his massive frame, blade cuts marked his back and shoulders and from his left hip to right pectoral was the swirl of a plasma splash. In places, the flesh had been burned so deeply that it revealed the dark shadow of his black carapace beneath puckered flesh. Such wounds meant nothing, as easily inflicted by weapons carried by loyalists as traitors.

There was one mark, however, that Corax could decipher easily. It was three lacerations from left ear to shoulder. Someone that had not been fighting in the Urgall Depression might have thought the wound caused by an animal attack, but the primarch knew better.

Some maniacal traitor beast had tried to rip out Arendi’s throat.

And all of the evidence meant nothing since the incident at Ravendelve,

when Alpha Legion infiltrators wearing false faces and faked battleplate had been uncovered amongst the Raven Guard ranks.

‘Gene-testing will take several more hours, Lord Corax,’ said Soukhounou, who had been placed in charge of the new arrivals simply by dint of being on watch when they had first arrived. ‘I have sent for the Librarian, Balsar Kurthuri.’

Soukhounou turned his back on the display to face Corax, troubled.

‘He has been asking for you constantly, lord. Over and over. The others keep telling us that you must speak with Arendi too.’

‘Sounds suspicious,’ said Corax. He peered at the small screen. ‘Why would they not pass any information to you?’

‘That’s what I thought as well, lord. I asked Arendi that question myself.’ The commander glanced at the monochrome image. ‘He claims he has news of an important target, in some system called Carandiru. He said he needed to speak to you first, before word spreads to the others. I don’t know what he means by that.’

‘I cannot see how he poses any physical threat to me, so if he is a traitor I think we can assume it is not an assassination attempt.’ Corax scratched his chin in thought. ‘Very well. I will talk to him.’

THE FORMER BODYGUARD was in a chamber nearby. Corax glanced at Soukhounou, who had followed him to the entrance. The Raven Guard met the look with a grim expression, and opened the door.

Arendi jumped to his feet, fist to his chest as Corax ducked through. The sound of the latch rang loudly as the door closed behind the primarch. The room seemed suddenly small, filled with Corax’s presence.

‘My lord!’ Arendi’s eyes glittered with moisture. ‘It is good to see you alive!’

Corax did not return the sentiment. He glared at the Space Marine, fingers knotted behind his back.

‘Why are you here?’ the primarch demanded.

‘We received the call, my lord,’ Arendi said, confused. He looked around the room. It was not a purpose-built cell, but had been cleared of all furnishings except for the bench. ‘In truth, I did not expect to be made a prisoner again.’

‘Trust is a scarce resource in this age,’ the primarch replied, regretting the truth of the statement. ‘Not all are as they appear to be.’

‘A truth I know well, my lord.’ Arendi relaxed a little, hands falling to his sides. He grinned suddenly. ‘Really, it is such a relief to see that you are alive and well. We thought

Well, with the Gorgon and the Lord of Drakes dead

It was anarchy, but we always hoped that you had gotten away. If anyone could, we said, it would be the Ravenlord.’

‘We will have time to reminisce later. What is it that you say only I can hear?’

‘Apologies, lord Corax, but it is a matter that might spread discontent should it fall upon the wrong ears,’ said Arendi. He started to gesticulate as he spoke, reminding Corax of his old expressiveness. ‘There is another prison, my lord. A whole world, it is said, where the rebels have incarcerated millions. Some legionaries amongst them, but many Imperial Army and most of them civilians. Bad stories, my lord. Very bad.’

The thought caused Corax some consternation, and memories of Lycaeus were quick to surface. The primarch pushed them aside to concentrate on the present matter. ‘Why would such news be so dangerous?’ he muttered. ‘It is no surprise. The traitors have been enslaving whole worlds across the galaxy.’

Corax growled as he dwelt on the notion, bringing his gauntlets up to form fists. Arendi held up a hand, as though he thought the primarch might attack him.

‘It is only rumour, my lord,’ warned the legionary. ‘A tale passed from one to another along an uncertain chain. It might even be a trap, intended to ensnare you.’

‘Now I understand your reluctance,’ said Corax. Some of his commanders, and the lower ranks too, might jump at any chance to exonerate themselves, regardless of the consequences. Yet Arendi was quick to point out the flaws in his own story. ‘You were right to remain silent until now. The Carandiru system is some distance away. It would be no small endeavour to investigate these rumours.’

‘Yes, several thousand light years, lord. Perhaps it is of no consequence. We came to serve, whatever your orders. We had hoped

That is, when the nights were long and the weather at its most bleak, we had believed nonetheless that the Legion had survived. It was difficult.’ Arendi’s voice trailed away and he looked earnestly at the primarch. ‘We heard other rumours. Wild stories. Legions destroyed, primarchs slain. Those that hunted us, when we caught them, taunted us with tales of the Raven Guard’s destruction. It was hard not to believe, but we held true. We knew they were lying.’

‘Not quite,’ Corax said with a sigh. ‘We are not the force that existed before Isstvan. Less than four thousand of the old Legion remain.’

Arendi stared at the primarch, brow knotting, his expression pained. ‘I suppose it was too much to hope. We should have known. It was hard enough for us to escape. Why did we expect it would be any different for the rest of the Legion?’

‘How exactly did you leave Isstvan?’ Corax asked quietly, his dark gaze intent on the Space Marine.

‘Luck as much as judgement,’ confessed Arendi. ‘The traitors were so intent on killing they did not inspect the dead for some time. I survived until the night came and then slipped away. I knew it was too risk to broadcast on the usual Legion frequencies, but there were others who escaped, alone and in small groups. Not just Raven Guard but Iron Hands and Salamanders too. The renegades tried to hunt us down, and a few fell or gave up, but we kept on the move. Eventually we stumbled across the cargo lighters of a transport dropping supplies to one of the watchposts. We managed to take the lifter and then seized the ship in orbit.’

Arendi scratched at his brow, skin flaking away. Corax looked at the legionary properly and could see the fatigue in his eyes. Nutrient-and sleep-deprived, his skin was dry and mottled like a pale lizard, eyes bloodshot and dark-rimmed.

‘How long ago?’

Arendi shrugged.

‘Hard to say for sure. We were on Isstvan for six hundred and thirty days, give or take a few. After that, the rapid warp jumps made chronology difficult to fix. We’ve been bouncing from system to system just looking for allies or enemies, trying to do what we could to hurt the traitors.’

‘Six hundred and thirty days?’ It was Corax’s turn to be shocked, but as his surprise subsided a small measure of pride swelled up within him. ‘A remarkable

achievement. What of the others, the Salamanders and Iron Hands?’

Arendi looked away suddenly and clasped his hands together, fingers knotting and fidgeting.

‘Captured, or dead, most likely.’

Corax looked at Arendi for some time, trying to reach several conclusions. He was almost certain that this was the veteran of Lycaeus that had ascended the ranks of the Raven Guard to become one of the primarch’s most trusted commanders. Everything about Arendi was authentic, from the way he talked to his scent and mannerisms. The story seemed not only plausible but unfortunate, and there was genuine hurt in the Space Marine’s eyes; hurt Corax had seen a thousand times over in the gazes of those that had departed Isstvan with him, thinking on the brothers that had been left behind.

‘It was my decision not to return to Isstvan,’ the primarch said quietly.

It was the first time that he had made such a confession out loud, though similar thoughts had been voiced by others; not out of accusation but lament.

He met the legionary’s anguished look. ‘I knew there would be other survivors, but there was a greater threat. Stopping Horus was more important.’

Arendi’s gaze hardened and his jaw tightened, but the Space Marine nodded.

‘Of course, my lord. I understand. It probably wasn’t the easiest decision.’

‘It was,’ Corax said firmly. ‘One of the simplest I have ever taken. I have never thought of any warrior as expendable - and I still do not - but I have never regretted or doubted my decision. The scales were tipped so far that there was no other choice.’

Taking in a deep breath, Arendi straightened and stood to attention.

‘And what of the prisoners at Carandiru?’

‘Do you think we should rescue them?’ Corax asked, stepping towards the door.

‘Aye, my lord, I do.’

Corax directed an inquisitive look at the legionary, so Arendi offered explanation.

‘You taught us that war is not won simply by force of arms. Some foes must be utterly annihilated, but many can be defeated in their minds long before they

are broken militarily.’

‘And what bearing does that have on this mission?’

‘The converse, my lord. Even if a mission is not obviously of military benefit, it has value. If we are willing to let millions suffer torment and degradation for who can say how many years, I am not all that sure we deserve to win this war.’

It was a remarkable statement, made all the more stunning for the bluntness of its delivery. Corax had not heard the like from his warriors, and for a moment he considered admonishing Arendi for such seditious talk.

The primarch stopped himself, thinking about the traumas that Arendi must have undergone. It was no excuse for poor behaviour, but it gave the former commander an almost unique perspective. If anyone knew about the value of hope, sometimes blind hope, then it would be those men and women like Arendi who had striven in the face of hopelessness and utter defeat.

Corax laid a hand on the legionary’s shoulder, bending low to be eye to eye with him.

‘There is much to be done, so I do not promise that we will liberate Carandiru. I will, however, take heed of what you have said and bring all thought to bear on the matter.’

Arendi nodded in thanks and Corax moved away. As he reached the door, he glanced back.

‘I want to believe you, Gherith.’

‘I know,’ said the Space Marine. ‘That is why you can’t.’

‘A day, maybe less, and you will be reunited with the rest of the legion. We are not so numerous that we need another commander, but your insight into the traitors’ workings will be much valued.’

Arendi said nothing and Corax felt his eyes on him as he left. Soukhounou was outside, obviously agitated and out of patience.

‘Is it him?’ asked the commander. ‘Can he be trusted?’

Corax did not reply immediately. It was not a simple question to answer. He thought about everything that had happened in the last few years - the treachery of Horus and others of his brothers, the Alpha Legion and their machinations, the schism of the Mechanicum - and he knew that though his instinct told him

that the man in the chamber was Gherith Arendi, and that he was still loyal to the Raven Guard, such instinct and judgement could not be considered infallible.

‘Not yet,’ he said eventually, gesturing for Soukhounou to accompany him back up the corridor to the monitoring chamber. ‘But I feel he will prove true.’

‘Looks likely that we’ll know soon enough,’ said Soukhounou, as they entered the monitoring station and found Brother-Librarian Kurthuri waiting for them.

The psyker greeted the primarch with a nod and a salute, shoulders hanging heavily, his eyes weary. He had seen much employment in the past few days, probing into the minds of each new group of arrivals.

‘How goes it?’ asked Soukhounou while Corax bent to the vid-screen and watched Arendi.

‘The others are who they say they are, and they believe that the warrior who led them off Isstvan is Gherith Arendi.’ The Librarian glanced at the monitor, brow creasing. ‘There is something they are holding back, though - a secret they are reticent to share.’

‘Could you delve deeper and find it out?’ asked Corax, not looking up.

‘No, my lord, not without some preparation and even then with some risk to the subject and myself. I am not as gifted as some among the Librarians were - breaking the subconscious of a legionary requires a great deal of my willpower.’

‘Very well,’ said Corax, thinking on what Arendi had told him of the prison world. ‘I think I already know this secret. If you are able, I would appreciate it if you could test the identity of Arendi right away. I know that you must be exhausted but he is the last for now.’

‘Of course, my lord.’ Kurthuri drew in a deep breath and wiped a hand across his waxen face. With a nod to Soukhounou he left the room.

Corax adjusted the viewscreen display, turning on the audio feed. They heard Kurthuri approaching and then the clank of the lock and the quiet creak of the opening door.

‘I know you,’ said Arendi, eyes narrowed as he stood up and looked at Kurthuri. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘I am here to make sure you are what you say you are, brother,’ Kurthuri said gently. ‘This should not take long and will not hurt if you do not offer

resistance’.

‘You were in the Librarius! If you think you’re going to sink your teeth into my mind, you’re badly mistaken.’

Corax pressed a stud on the monitor controls, activating the speaker inside the other room.

‘Arendi, this is Lord Corax. Brother-Librarian Kurthuri is there following my orders. You will comply with every instruction he gives you.’

‘A psyker?’ Arendi looked appalled. More than that, he looked fearful. ‘I would rather not, my lord. Do you know what these psykers are capable of?’

‘They can tell me the truth,’ Corax said sharply. ‘I have had enough of your objections. If you refuse to submit to examination I will have you locked in the deepest cell on the planet.’

‘They

they hunted us with these witch-bastards, my lord! They taunted us with visions of what they had done, at the massacre, to the prisoners they took, tried to bait us out of hiding. We had to think of nothing, emptying our minds to stop them picking up the slightest echo. They turned us into mindless prey, my lord! They enjoyed it!’

Corax grimaced, but he could not relent.

‘We have a rule now, Gherith. All of those that come in must undergo psychic examination. One rule for all.’

Arendi hung his head, hands twitching. When he raised his eyes he stared at Kurthuri with surprising intensity.

‘All right, do it!’

‘Relax, brother.’ Kurthuri gestured for Arendi to sit down. The Librarian followed him to the bench and sat next to him. ‘This will be easier if there is physical contact,’ he said, his voice quiet and calm. He reached out a hand. ‘Do you mind?’

Arendi shook his head after a moment and they clasped each other’s arms, wrist to wrist. Kurthuri closed his eyes but Arendi’s were wide open, staring at the psyker.

There were no pyrotechnics, no moans or drama. Corax watched the display without wavering, even as Arendi started to tremble. He could see the

legionary's eyes beginning to glisten, on the brink of tears.

Eventually, Kurthuri opened his eyes and released him, but it was several seconds before Arendi was able to relinquish his grasp, leaving red marks in the flesh of the Librarian where his fingers had dug in.

‘Happy now?’ Arendi demanded, standing up.

Kurthuri said nothing as he left, the clang of the door signalling his exit. Corax turned his eye towards the door of the monitoring station until the Librarian entered. A raised eyebrow was all the question the primarch needed to ask.

‘He is Gherith Arendi,’ said Kurthuri. ‘His memories, his sense of self, they cannot be replicated or faked.’

Corax exhaled, realising he had been holding his breath since the Librarian had begun his test.

‘Good news, my lord,’ said Soukhounou. He looked at Kurthuri. ‘You seem unhappy about something.’

The Librarian shook his head and cast a meaningful glance at Corax and then to the commander.

‘Give us a moment,’ said the primarch, nodding towards the door. ‘Please.’

Soukhounou left them without comment.

‘He is hiding something,’ Kurthuri quietly confided when the door was closed. ‘A secret, deep where I can’t see it.’

‘Like the others?’

‘Possibly. Each is individual - there is nothing I can do to ascertain the nature of what they wish to keep from me.’

‘But are they loyal?’

‘I cannot give you a guarantee, but none of them are disloyal.’

‘What does that mean?’ Corax demanded, frowning. ‘If they are not disloyal then they must be loyal, yes?’

‘I’m sorry, but they are all harbouring a secret, my lord. A shared secret, I would guess, considering that all of them arrived together. While that remains, I cannot be one hundred per cent certain of their motives. But, for what it is worth, I detect no animosity towards us, and when I probe with images of the traitors it

provokes a profound hate-response.'

'I understand,' said Corax. He saw that Kurthuri was almost dead on his feet. 'Go and sleep - four full hours. If anyone disturbs you then they will answer to me.'

'Thank you, lord Corax.'

'Send Soukhounou back to me when you leave.'

Kurthuri saluted and departed. A few seconds later, the commander returned.

'So do we trust him?' he asked.

Corax looked at the vid-screen again and knew that the decision was his alone.

'Yes,' he said. 'Division, distrust and doubt - the three greatest plagues Horus has unleashed upon the galaxy. We could destroy the enemy overnight to the last man and still die from these wounds ten thousand years later.'

'How can we heal the whole galaxy?' asked Soukounou. 'We have not yet even won the war.'

'Perhaps the two things are one and the same,' Corax said, almost lost in the thought. He revived his focus and looked sharply at the leader of the Falcons. 'Find me the ranking members of the arriving groups and have them attend council in the morning. If Arendi has been passed as fit in the meantime, have him come as well.'

'You have a plan?' Soukhounou grinned at the thought and his enthusiasm touched Corax, who smiled back.

'It is time to stem some of the bleeding caused by Horus.' The primarch's smile faded and his eyes narrowed. 'And time to inflict some wounds of our own.'

V

Scarato [DV -80 days]

THE LEADERS OF the Legion remnants assembled by Corax were a mix of line officers and sergeants for the most part, the odd lieutenant amongst them - warriors of higher rank tended to have been closer to their primarchs at the outset of the civil war. Seated around a long table brought into the grand hall for the assembly, they looked at the primarch with a mixture of hope, wariness and awe.

He did not stand up, preferring not to overwhelm the delegates with his physical presence. For the same reason, he had not donned his armour but was dressed in a simple bodysuit of light grey beneath a long charcoal-coloured coat. Like the throne upon which he sat, the clothes had been made for him as a token of favour of Naima by Scaratoan craftsmen and women.

It had been a long time, over two years Terran-standard, since he had worn much else other than his armour. He had wondered what it would be like, fearing that perhaps he would feel underdressed, but in fact it allowed him to think more like a civil leader than a general.

‘Rank is irrelevant,’ Corax began. ‘The hierarchies of old, the titles of centurion and warsmith, adjutatorius and lieutenant-armourer are meaningless. For all of you, structure is a thing of memory, and tables of organisation a topic of nostalgia. The Raven Guard know this as well as you, though you are sundered from your primarchs and the upper echelons of the Legions whose liveries you bear.’

Corax gestured towards his commanders, sitting to his right.

‘This is the entirety of my command staff. Captains of the Falcons, Talons, Hawks and Raptors. My Legion numbers a few thousand warriors. A handful of companies by the old determining of strength. Many of you lead squads, and some less than that. For years now you have fought simply to survive. Some of you have tried to reach Terra or sought to reunite with your Legions but for most of us that is not an option.’ He looked pointedly at Warsmith Annovuldi of the Iron Warriors, and then to Kasati Nuon of the Night Lords and the few others representing warriors whose primarchs had sided with Horus. ‘And there are those of you that know you can never return to your Legions even when we are

victorious. You have, I think, suffered the greatest betrayal of all, and I have nothing but admiration for your courage, loyalty and determination despite the direst circumstances into which you have been plunged.'

Corax looked at his hands, laid on the polished wood of the table, pale against the dark grain. It helped to steady his thoughts. In many ways the gathering was very different from those early councils on Lycaeus, which had been held in abandoned sub-ducts and conducted in whispers. But though the environment had changed the aim was the same and he thought back to the first days of the resistance. His first task had been morale; to convince others that it was not only possible for them to overthrow their captors but to persuade them it was inevitable. He faced that same task with these broken forces. They had proven willing to fight, but he had to give them a vision of what they were fighting for, and he had to instil in them the belief that not only could they win but that their victory was assured. To do so, he drew on every fibre of his primarch being to speak with absolute authority.

'From today a new phase of war begins. Our numbers are few compared to the might of those that oppose us, but we have weapons with a power Horus could only dream of wielding. We serve the Emperor, not ourselves, and that will give us a strength that outmatches anything the craven traitors possess. That strength will bring us allies, by the thousands, the millions, the billions. Mankind does not desire a tyrant to rule over them and - despite the efforts of the Word Bearers who proselytise his elevation as a new Emperor - the Arch-Traitor cannot hide his true nature. His followers are beasts and degenerates, pillaging and enslaving those weaker than themselves.'

Corax looked at Branne, Agapito and Arendi.

'What is weakness?'

'An illusion,' said Branne, who smiled in recollection, using the primarch's words spoken during the early days of the Lycaeus uprising. 'It is a label oppressors use as a whip to belittle their victims. Only those that believe the lies, who refuse to see their own strengths, are truly weak.'

'And what is strength?'

'True strength comes from knowing one's own value is dependent upon the value of others,' said Arendi. It had been only a short time since he and the other survivors of the primarch's guard had arrived, but already he showed signs of returning health. His face was filling out, eyes brighter, skin smoother. 'It is recognising the bond between us all and acting together for the cause of all.'

Nodding, Corax turned his attention back to the others around the table. Many seemed unconvinced, but that was to be expected.

‘You doubt that we can achieve much in our broken state,’ the primarch said, speaking softly. He picked out one of the Iron Hands, whose arms and upper body had been replaced by augmetics and bionics. ‘Kasdar, you are the product of many hands, yes?’

‘Countless are the labourers at the forges who smelted the metal for my prosthetics, and countless more toiled with solder and pin to create the complex weave of nerve and circuit that interfaces with my mind.’ The legionary extended a clawed hand and formed a fist with artificial fingers, tiny cogs spinning in the joints of his hand. ‘But it is all guided by my will.’

‘A thousand disparate pieces, each of purpose and value, brought together under the control of a single mind,’ said Corax. ‘We shall be the same. A machine, an organism. Of many parts working separately, but invisibly, silently bound by common purpose and thought. I do not ask you to swear loyalty to me, for there is no greater oath you have sworn than by your deeds in the name of the Emperor. I do not ask you to become Raven Guard, for the blood of other fathers and the customs of other worlds have shaped you. You are each what you are, individual - but together, indivisible, we will be even greater.’

Damastor Kyil, another Iron Hand, stood up and looked to Corax for permission to speak. He received it with a nod.

‘I admire your courage, lord Corax, as much as anyone here.’ Kyil’s face was for the most part made of metal and ceramic, glinting in the light of the hall. Only one eye and ear were left of the flesh that he had been born with. ‘I answered your astropathic call to stand amongst brothers again, and I am proud of those that sit around this table with me, and those in the dorms and ships elsewhere. Pride, though, and determination are not enough to win battles. You admit that the Raven Guard are but a few thousand. Perhaps another few hundred of us you have dredged together from surrounding systems and sectors. Even if we had warships, weapons, ammunition, battle tanks and the full stores of our armouries, there are not enough warriors to face the smallest of the traitor flotillas heading for Terra. Our only hope must be to join the defence before Horus’s forces have the Sol system besieged.’

Sitting down, Kyil received nods and approving looks from many of the others. Branne looked to stand to voice a rebuttal but Corax stayed him with a raised hand. He gestured to Captain Noriz.

‘Your wall-brothers await you at the Imperial Palace, captain. Is it your desire to return to Lord Dorn and await the attack of Horus’s forces?’

The captain seemed hesitant to reply. He rubbed his fingers through his close-cropped hair and stood, hands clasped together. He looked first at Corax, then Kyil, and then back to the primarch.

‘Yes,’ he said with an apologetic nod. ‘With all my heart I would desire to stand with the Emperor’s finest upon the walls of the greatest fortress in the galaxy.’

‘Thank you, captain.’

Corax turned to his left, where Arcatus had been sitting in silence, listening intently to everything that had been said.

‘As representative of the Custodians, whose duties should place you at the Emperor’s side, what do you say? Do we return to Terra?’

‘By the will of the Emperor and Malcador I left Terra at your side. Lord Corax. I was doubtful of what could be accomplished by so few warriors but I have been proven wrong. Out here our fight still serves to defend Terra.’

‘Where there is oppression there is always resentment, no matter how cowed a populace might be,’ said Corax. ‘The Legiones Astartes have never been kindly, not to many that were forced to compliance by the edge of a sword. But we were never tyrants, not even the worst of us, not before Horus turned his back on the oaths we had all sworn. I did not bring you to Scarato on a whim. Here is a lesson not just in guerrilla fighting but in winning wars against a far superior foe using hearts and minds as weapons. Any world where the traitors maintain their authority with threat of blade and gun is ripe for targeting. A few warriors, even a single legionary, can ignite a rebellion that can waylay or draw in hundreds of traitors.’

‘Perhaps for the Raven Guard,’ said Damastor Kyil, an artificial lung wheezing as he drew in a breath. ‘Not all of us grew up in a prison, nor spent years fighting far from the command of our primarchs. You take that culture for granted, Lord Corax.’

‘I do not,’ the primarch replied. ‘You will soon each have firsthand experience of the fighting I describe. And you will have close acquaintance with those that have been terrorised into submission. I demand no promise or oath beyond that you accompany us on our next attack and learn from the Raven Guard how to wage the war we must now fight. After that, you are free to go

your own ways, to attempt to return to Terra or other home worlds as you choose, or to remain under my command.'

'This next attack, where will it be?' asked Kasati Nuon, fingers flexing as though they were constricting around the throat of some poor victim.

'A world imprisoned by Horus's followers, in the Carandiru system. We will liberate it.'

'I know this system,' Captain Noriz said sharply. All eyes turned to him. 'The Two-Hundred and Fourteenth Expedition led by Lord Dorn himself razed the capital and then built the Winter City on the ruins. If it has been turned into a prison

The walls of the Imperial Fists do not easily fall, Lord Corax.'

'Indeed, and it is to such walls the Emperor is trusting the future of the Imperium,' said Corax. 'But countless are the fortifications that have been overcome, thought impregnable by those behind them. Tell me, Captain Noriz, you spent much time fortifying Deliverance and Kiavahr, and your Legion is expert at both assault and defence of siegeworks. What would be your strategy for overcoming the defences of the Winter City?'

'Given our present company, that is an easy answer.' The Imperial Fist looked at the others around the table and smiled. 'It is the best way to take any fortress. From the inside.'

VI

Scarato [DV -80 days]

AFTER CORAX ENDED the council, Soukhounou met with his fellow commanders in a chamber adjoining the hall. The room was ostentatious, filled with gilded furniture, the high ceiling decorated with floral plaster reliefs. On the walls were scenes of nobles at leisure - hunting along a steep canyon atop the backs of hunched lizards, riding slender solar-sailed barges over a majestic waterfall, or banqueting at night beneath a firework-lit sky.

‘Our brother-in-arms is returned to us!’ Branne’s exclamation caused Soukhounou to turn as the commander greeted Arendi wrist to wrist in the warrior’s fashion, pounding the other Space Marine on the shoulder. Agapito lifted a fist to his chest in a more reserved welcome.

‘A day I often thought might never come to pass,’ said Arendi. His expression brightened as Branne stepped back. ‘Long anticipated, and heartily welcome. I wish it had been sooner.’

‘We cannot change the past’ said Agapito. ‘Fortunately we can still change the future.’

‘Yes, that is true.’ Arendi looked at Soukhounou as though noticing him for the first time. ‘Lieutenant Soukhounou, isn’t it?’

‘Commander now,’ he replied. It had been an unexpected development, but rapid promotion was one of the unavoidable aspects of the legion since the massacre. First Solaro had been outed as a traitor, and then Nuran Tesk had died in the assault on the Perfect Fortress just weeks after being placed in command. Soukhounou was not a superstitious man but he tried not to think about the fates of his predecessors too often.

‘You are Terran, yes? We’ve fought together, haven’t we?’

‘Not side by side,’ admitted Soukhounou. ‘There was little occasion until Isstvan for me to share air with the primarchs guard. And yes, I hail from Terra originally.’

‘Then that explains why my brothers greet me with smiles yet a cell is the welcome I received from you.’

‘Forgive me, but the circumstances that led to my promotion make me wary of those that claim loyalty with false guise. You were treated no differently from any other that responded to the primarchs call.’

‘False guise?’ Arendi looked confused and turned to Branne and Agapito. ‘What false guise?’

‘A long story, Gherith,’ said Branne. ‘One that will live long in infamy and shame. It can wait. Soukhounou, be assured that this is Commander Arendi. You must trust to the judgement of the primarch, and those that shared air with him since we were children. This distrust will be our undoing - an injury inflicted by the traitors that continues to nag at us.’

Taking a deep breath, Soukhounou acquiesced with a nod.

‘You are right,’ he said, raising a fist of brotherhood to Arendi. ‘It was wrong of me to be so suspicious. However, I would urge caution still when dealing with the other legionaries not of Deliverance. Nothing can be guaranteed in these trying times.’

They stood for a moment in silence, each taken by his own thoughts.

‘A slightly disturbing thought, isn’t it?’ said Arendi, breaking the quiet. He looked past Soukhounou at the murals.

‘What is?’ Soukhounou asked. ‘Painting on walls?’

‘The elite of this world, living like kings,’ said Arendi. ‘I fear that you have displaced the Sons of Horus only to make room for more veiled dictators.’ The others looked at the pictures, trying to understand what the former commander meant.

‘There is no evidence that the planetary aristocracy mistreated any of their subjects prior to the arrival of the traitors,’ Agapito said. ‘Scarato came to compliance peacefully.’

‘You don’t see a life of privilege as evidence of excess?’ Arendi looked at Soukhounou and then to Branne. ‘The benefit of a youth not spent as a cell-brother, I’d say.’

‘If you have an accusation, make it plain,’ said Soukhounou. ‘Do you think any of us less dedicated to the cause? I’d say your time away has clouded your memory, or your judgement.’

‘No accusation, I assure you. It is simply a matter of fact that those who have

not felt the touch of the lash can never imagine its sting. Oppression comes in many forms. Not all tyrants are immediately obvious. By subtle word, by application of quiet threat and bribe they coerce and cajole. Righteousness requires terrible effort.'

'It is as if you speak with the voice of your father, old Requai,' said Branne, forcing a laugh. 'Political discussions must wait on more pressing matters. We need to devise dispositions and arrangements for the forthcoming campaign for presentation to Lord Corax. He made it plain that he seeks to leave within days.'

'We need to pick task force leaders and assign commands to the other legionaries,' added Agapito.

'And I will leave you to it,' said Arendi, with a curt nod.

'You should stay,' said Agapito.

'Yes,' said Soukhounou in a gesture of conciliation. Though he did not care for Arendi's attitude since returning, he was influential amongst the Deliverance-born legionaries. His return would be taken as a good sign by many in the Raven Guard. 'You have an insight that will prove valuable. A perspective none of us can imagine. And even if the current situation sees you without rank, you were once commander.'

Arendi looked at Soukhounou, perhaps trying to judge if there was any further meaning behind his words. His brow creased slightly and his lips thinned.

'I hold no command now,' he said. 'If Lord Corax sees fit to restore me, then I will join your deliberations. Until then I must see to the welfare of the warriors that came with me.'

Stalling further protest, Arendi turned and left without another word. Branne shook his head and glared at Soukhounou.

'I thought you would offer more welcome to a long-lost son of Deliverance. Think on what we suffered on the fields of Isstvan and then think on the hardships he and the others must have endured in the years afterwards. Arendi is an example to us all, and you should not be so dismissive of him.'

'Does it not make you think, brothers?' said Soukhounou, looking at the door as if Arendi was still there. 'Who of us has not been changed by these past years? There is something in Gherith that I do not think I like.'

'The primarch speaks for him,' said Agapito, though he looked uncertain. 'We should not second-guess Lord Corax.'

‘We should set aside such thoughts of division,’ said Branne. ‘Why can’t you be glad that our own have survived and been returned to us?’

The question was left hanging in silence as Agapito and Soukhonou exchanged a look. Soukhonou decided that this was no time to voice any argument against Arendi’s loyalties or agenda. It was obvious that the bonds of history were far stronger than that of Legion alone. The Raven Guard were all fiercely loyal to Corax, but a doctrine that promoted independent thought and self-sufficiency was also prone to creating moments of fracture as personal identity surpassed group allegiance.

‘With Corax’s command that the other newcomers are to be spread amongst the Raven Guard companies there will be rivalries and division enough without resurrecting old suspicions between Terrans and the Deliverance-born,’ he said.

‘I concede to your superior knowledge on the subject, brothers.’ Branne raised his hands in appeasement. ‘We must bury our differences, or be sure that Lord Corax will bury them for us, and our rank. This is no time to let small gaps become gaping chasms.’

‘Of course,’ said Agapito. ‘We have all been put out of sorts by Arendi’s return. In a few days’ time we will be more settled and the matter nothing more than memory.’

Soukhonou hoped what his fellow commander said would hold true but could not help but worry that Arendi’s return signified something far more damaging.

VII

Kapel-5642A [DV -67 days]

RED LITTERED THE corridor: the red of Mechanicum robes and the blood of those wearing them. Here and there steel and silver and brass stood out in the bright flare of Corax's lightning claws. The darker shadows of power armour provided a softer contrast - a handful of Sons of Horus that had been overseeing the shipyard. 'Branne, move forward and trigger targeting.'

The primarch stopped, standing over the crumpled ruin of a traitor with the markings of a sergeant. Looking down at the renegade, Corax did not feel anger or hatred. Disappointment, perhaps. There were those that he had learned had refused to follow the Warmaster into rebellion, but the Sons of Horus could not be blamed for following their primarch. He wondered if the dead sergeant had required persuading or if a last small step to turn against the Emperor had been easy to take, the culmination of a longer process.

'One hundred and eighty seconds. Orbital defences are responding.' Nearly a kilometre away, on the other side of the orbital facility, Branne and his Raptors had breached the main transmitter array for the star base. It would be a simple enough task to set up a comm-link between the Avenger and the berth monitoring systems that policed the space traffic around five massive starship hulls being assembled above the asteroid-base of Kapel-5642A.

Corax had ordered the strike just in time. One of the new battleships was almost operational, the others nearing completion within weeks. Not the Mechanicum's finest work, Corax assumed, but speedily built in relation to the decades-long construction normally required. The primarch knew firsthand the efficiencies of forced labour and interned workers, and Horus's allies in the Mechanicum had been replicating such methods across dozens of forge worlds and shipyards like Kapel.

'Sixty seconds,' Corax told his warriors as he pulled back down the corridor towards the entry point blasted by his Stormbird. 'Avenger, do you have the berth grid matrix?'

'Affirmative, Lord Corax,' Ephrenia replied. 'Programming torpedo firing solutions now.'

Clad in golden armour, Arcatus Vindix Centurio of the Custodian Guard burst into the corridor from a junction ahead, accompanied by another six of the superhuman warriors; survivors of many battles since they had departed Terra to guard the gene-formulas gifted to Corax by the Emperor. They cut down augmented soldiers and semi-mechanical servitors amidst the flare of the powered blades and boltgun flash of their Guardian Spears. The Custodian cleaved a hulking praetorian servitor in two with a sweep of his halberd, shattering gears and bones with equal ease. Stepping astride the remnants, he raised his weapon in salute to the approaching primarch.

‘I am beginning to see the merit in taking the fight to the enemy,’ said Arcatus. ‘There is more than one way to protect the Emperor. Sometimes a solid offensive is the best defence.’

‘If Horus cannot reach Terra, the Emperor is safe,’ replied Corax. The two of them fell into step together, picking their way past the steaming, smoking, bleeding remnants of the Mechanicum warriors that clogged the passage. ‘This is a war we simply cannot afford to lose.’

Arcatus nodded. He paused to drive the tip of his glaive into the squirming body of a serpentine machine-beast jittering under the toppled corpse of a combat-servitor. ‘A handful of years ago, when Horus turned at Isstvan, it was a shock to everybody,’ he said. ‘We of the Legiones Custodes had to believe that the worst might come, but in the back of their minds many thought it impossible that the renegade Warmaster could actually take on the might of the Imperium.’

‘I never doubted it,’ said Corax.

‘You must understand how powerful denial can be. Yes, Horus had destroyed three Legions, or close enough, and as his schemes unfolded the Dark Angels and Ultramarines were removed from the main theatre of war. But even then there were those that could not envisage a galaxy where the traitor forces held the balance of power.’

There had been some amongst the Raven Guard upper echelons who had thought the same. Corax had allowed them to give voice to their concerns, but he had never harboured any doubts about Horus’s abilities as a war leader.

‘What is impossible, to my mind,’ Arcatus continued, ‘is the notion that Horus would even embark on such a cataclysmic course of action without being absolutely certain he would win. Throughout the Great Crusade, Horus proved time and time again that he was capable of tremendous victories, conquering swathes of the galaxy through planning, charisma and sheer bloody-

mindedness.'

'He is also adept at utilising the strengths of his brothers to his best advantage,' added Corax, somewhat bitterly. 'Always ready to ask his brothers to sacrifice their Legions in the shadows, away from the annals and pictis of the remembrancers; always arriving in time to deliver the final blow. I struck Horus once for usurping the victories of the Raven Guard for his own glory, a moment that no doubt festers in the Warmaster's thoughts. I aim to repeat the insult, whenever I can.'

'He has done the same with his rebellion, blunting the counterattack of the loyalist forces with the likes of the Emperor's Children, the Iron Warriors and Word Bearers. Month by month, year by year the Warmaster has consolidated his position, readying for the strike that is sure to come - an assault on Terra.'

They turned into the corridor leading back to the entry blasted into the station by the Stormbirds and Thunderhawks.

'And there are those only too willing to favour the side that appears to be in the ascendancy,' said Corax with a sad shake of the head. 'They judge their futures more secure with the rising star than the old elite. Rebellion is in vogue across the Imperium, whether for the traitors or simply against the Emperor.'

'Dorn was adamant that Horus could not win without toppling the Imperial capital, and I agreed. Where we differ is in the manner in which that can be stopped. The Fist of the Emperor is determined to make a stand at the walls of the Palace itself, but it is defeatist to assume that the traitors will reach the Sol system regardless of the efforts of loyal warriors.'

The primarch of the Raven Guard believed - had to believe - that history would prove him right. Horus was no fool, but he had planned for the Raven Guard to be wiped out on the blackened fields of Isstvan. Their continued existence, and the attacks launched by Corax and his followers, delayed the last assault, demonstrating the lie that a battle for Terra was inevitable.

'Thirty seconds,' Corax announced, needing no chronometer to keep track of time - his inner sense was as accurate as any conventional timepiece.

He bounded up the ramp of the dropship - the selfsame dropship that had lifted him from Isstvan, he noted - and waited at the top for the withdrawing Custodians and Raven Guard with him to file past.

'Breaking a few warships will not swing the course of the war,' said Arcatus, stopping beside Corax.

‘No, but their absence will be felt. One lost convoy will not break the rebellion either, you are right,’ replied the primarch. ‘A freed world will not stem the tide on its own. Yet they come from the same source, and victory is simply the accumulation of countless unimportant events and decisions in your favour. Every defeat Horus suffers brings time for Dorn to build his defences. Every shipyard destroyed or taken back limits the traitors’ reach. Every world kept in the Imperial fold or delivered from the traitors stretches Horus’s resources. Every gun and suit of warplate withheld from the renegades adds up and in time they will be the measure of our enemies’ defeat.’

Corax waved Arcatus into the depths of the dropship.

‘We swiftly approach the tipping point,’ the primarch said. ‘The Sons of Horus are on the offensive, hounds of war finally unleashed by their lord after the others have weakened us. The Warmaster desires a great battle to end all battles, one final confrontation to prove himself superior.’

‘We will not give him that. Lycaeus was not seized overnight. It was taken by meticulous preparation and a thousand tiny victories. The Warmaster will not be stopped by a single battle. On a dozen worlds, a hundred worlds, a thousand worlds, the Emperor’s loyal servants will resist, each taking their toll, bleeding dry a rebellion held together only by ego and desperation.’

‘You think you can wage that war?’

‘The greatest enemy is the one you cannot see, and so cannot fight. That is the essence of the Raven Guard.’

With a roar of thrusters, the dropship lifted up from the orbital facility. The ramp closed; Corax’s last view was of immense torpedoes cruising past only a few kilometres away, heading unerringly towards their targets. In the distance orbital stations and monitor vessels were just starting to detect the threat in their midst.

They would be too late. The Avenger was already turning away, ready to sweep up its assault craft and activate the reflex shields. Within three minutes the newly commissioned ships would be nothing more than molten metal and wreckage. In five minutes the Avenger would be heading out-system cloaked from detection, ready for the rendezvous with the rest of Corax’s forces.

The primarch smiled.

‘Horus will not lose the war at the walls of the Imperial Palace, but out here in the forgotten places between the stars, in the darkness beyond the light of his

presence. This is where the Raven Guard thrive. This is where Horus will fail.'

VIII

The Cretherach Reach [DV -22 days]

ON THE STRATEGIUM of the Steadfast, nothing stirred. Commander Aloni stood alone among muted servitors, casting an eye across the scanning arrays and communications feeds. His attention was fixed on two displays in particular: the internal energy readout and the passive defraction antenna.

The first monitored how much sound and radiation was emanating from the huge starship: a curiously antique-looking dial - an illuminated display would itself contribute to light and energy pollution - with a red line that indicated the maximum threshold of the reflex shields. The needle wavered at the three-quarter mark, easily within tolerable limits, and the shields themselves were not running at full yield. Fully crewed and with its full complement of two hundred legionaries, the Steadfast would struggle to conceal its whereabouts under such conditions; but with barely a skeleton attendance and only fifty Space Marines on board it was running with higher scanning and manoeuvring capacity than usual.

Which was essential, because the defraction antenna was fixed on the plasma discharge of thirty-four more starship engines.

One was the Wrathful Vanguard, a strike cruiser of the Imperial Fists Legion. Captain Noriz and his small company were heading towards the other signals: traitor supply ships. Seven of the auspex contacts were convoy escorts - a pair of light cruisers, a grand cruiser and a handful of destroyers and frigates.

The traitors were cautious, one of the light cruisers moving towards the approaching VII Legion vessel, with smaller escorts heading out to cut off the strike cruiser's retreat; the transports stayed close to the guns of the remaining cruisers in case the Wrathful Vanguard was a decoy.

They were not wrong, but the traitors did not understand the nature of the other hunters waiting amongst the gas clouds of the Cretherach Reach. Warning data scrolled across several screens as the renegade ships scoured the surrounding void with deep-search surveyors, seeking the other ships they knew had to be waiting amongst the stellar debris. Their sensors were turned towards the scattered dust and asteroid pockets - ideal concealment for conventional ships.

They were looking in the wrong place.

The Steadfast drifted closer to the convoy from the opposite direction, while the Shadowsirike approached at a perpendicular angle. The one cruiser showed nothing on the sensor displays - as was intended - leaving Aloni to trust that the other Raven Guard ship was in the right position.

For that matter, it had taken some effort to persuade Noriz to allow his vessel to be used as bait. The Imperial Fists captain was risking a lot, that much was true. If the reflex-shielded ships were detected too early then the whole plan would fail and the Imperial Fists would face the worst of the backlash.

All seemed to be going well, though. Aloni monitored the Steadfast's progress, making minute adjustments with single attitude thrusters, nudging the starship onto a better heading as a machinist might trim away nanometres of a complex component on a las-lathe. As long as the traitors made no major course corrections the cruiser would intersect perfectly with the gaggle of lightly armed and poorly armoured freight-carriers.

The transports had mustered from the traitor-dominated forge world at Antasic IX and the manufactory of Kapel-5642A, en route to take their payloads of weapons to Carandiru. The Sons of Horus had been stretched thin over a dozen sectors by Raven Guard raids, as well as the massed assault of the Therion Cohort and their Titan Legion allies through the Euesa region, forcing the convoys to rendezvous in wilderness space like the Cretherach Reach. The beacon at Cretherach was the perfect point to bring together so many ships, and that was why the Steadfast and the other two ships had been lying in wait for nearly forty days.

As ship after ship had arrived, Aloni and the others had watched with growing amazement. They had hoped for a few vessels but the merchant fleet that had gathered suggested a sizeable reinforcement of Carandiru was being planned. It was a happy coincidence for the loyalists, and though the enemy were too numerous for a head-on assault it was a situation that could not be ignored.

Aloni frowned. The traitor light cruiser commander was being very bold, heading straight for the Wrathful Vanguard at full speed. Evidently the enemy captain was determined to spring the trap as quickly as possible, or perhaps believed he could defeat the strike cruiser without the aid of the other escorts. Noriz had to hold his nerve and get the frigates and destroyers as far away from the main convoy as possible; the grand cruiser would be too laborious to counter

the Raven Guard attack and the remaining light cruiser was out of position performing scanner sweeps of the stellar debris fields.

Noriz also had to hold light on another matter. A single communication, even a narrow-beam transmission, could give away the presence of the other two ships. Had the decoy ship been a Raven Guard vessel Aloni would not be stalking the displays so assiduously, but the Imperial Fists were an unknown quantity in these circumstances. Fine fighters, Aloni knew firsthand, but not as subtle as a warrior created under the Axioms of Corax.

Gaze fixed on the scanner returns, Aloni watched the Wrathful Vanguard closely, seeking some sign of what Noriz might do. It looked as though the Imperial Fists commander was going to meet the incoming light cruiser head-on, perhaps trying to force the traitor officers to commit to an attack without assistance.

It was a foolhardy move by both the Imperial Fists and the Sons of Horus; a mutual match of daring and show of ferocity to scare off the other, like two hounds baring their fangs at one another.

Aloni sighed. Years of war between the Legiones Astartes and there were still those who had learned nothing. For many foes of the Emperor the display of strength would have been enough, but this was legionaries fighting legionaries. Neither side would back down. Both ships' captains were incapable of fear and would see their threats through to actual battle.

He considered whether he was being inconsiderate of Noriz's expertise, and underestimating the poise of the Sons of Horus commander. Both having embarked upon a course of direct confrontation it was necessary to see through their actions to their consequence, knowing that to blink, to show a moment of weakness could spell disaster. They were locked on a collision course, maybe literally.

The commander of the Falcons, the corps comprised of the Raven Guard's remaining assault companies, thought of a third option as he watched the two opposing vessels powering towards each other, determined to end each other in a short-ranged conflagration. The Imperial Fists had been known to engage heavily in honour-duelling, and the Sons of Horus were equally famed for their skill and dedication to single combat. It was entirely possible that the two commanders had, by virtue of common custom, a tacitly issued and accepted challenge between them. They would duel with starships and to the victor would go the spoils.

A flare of energy on the scanner indicated a sudden burst of thruster power. It came from the Wrathful Vanguard. Noriz's ship burned its retros hard, swinging away from the light cruiser and flanking escorts. At first it looked as though the Imperial Fists commander had balked at the attack, but Aloni knew better.

'Praise to you, captain,' whispered Aloni as he watched the Imperial Fists turn and draw the smaller enemy ships further from the convoy.

Long-range lance fire scattered returns across the display as the Sons of Horus moved into the pursuit, the spray of particles from activated void shields demonstrating that the officers of the Wrathful Vanguard had left it to the last moment before countering, ensuring the enemy would be committed.

Checking the Steadfast's location, Aloni confirmed that his ship was almost in position. The next few minutes passed slowly as he watched his Imperial Fists allies dragging the enemy ships out of the battle sphere. Noriz could have easily ordered the reactors to overpower and burned away at full speed but instead he was staying just outside optimal range of the pursuing cruiser, trusting to the void shields to withstand the sporadic laser fire directed at them. It was canny fighting by both commanders. The Sons of Horus could not accelerate past battle speed without risking the Wrathful Vanguard turning and giving them a full broadside whilst they were vulnerable, but on the other hand Noriz was making sure he kept the enemy hopeful.

Moving to the engineering console, Aloni activated the internal communications.

'Power up, full battle readiness.'

There was no need for spoken confirmation. Almost immediately the lights flickered to full power and displays and indicators blazed into life all across the strategium. The spread of multi-coloured glows reminded Aloni of the Deliverance Day celebrations across Kiavahr, when the tech-priests allowed the people of the forge world to commemorate those that had fallen to rescue the world from the tech-guilds. "Allowed" was perhaps not the right term; the day of memory was enshrined in law by edict of Lord Corax as part of the agreement that had seen the Mechanicum take control of the planet.

Horus's rebellion had ended that. No more Deliverance Day parades. No more celebrations of the ending of Old Night. Darkness had been brought back to the galaxy.

A single whoop of a siren signalled the move to attack stance. As well as this

audio warning, a recovery' rune flashed across the comms of every legionary aboard. Like statues coming to life, the bridge officers waiting dormant around the edges of the strategium powered up their suits. Eyes of yellow and red blazed into life as their auto-senses activated. Black-armoured giants stepped out of the diminishing gloom.

Aloni rattled off a string of commands as his lieutenants strode to their stations and servitors burbled into consciousness. His next act was to send a communication to Captain Noriz.

'Gratitude, captain. I did not know the Imperial Fists were so adept at playing the part of bait.' It took a few moments for the reply to crackle back.

'We are the Sons of Dorn, the wall-brothers,' Noriz replied. 'We are used to letting the foe throw themselves at us. It is nice to actually withdraw once we have their attention.'

'I suggest you do that, captain. I will see you when we rendezvous with the fleet.'

'Good hunting, Commander Aloni.'

While the Wrathful Vanguard moved up to full power, opening the distance from the pursuing Sons of Horus as the Imperial Fists raced to get enough separation for a warp translation, the Steadfast arrowed into the heart of the enemy convoy. The power from the reflex shields diverted back into the void shield generators as the cruiser slid into range. Even now, fully revealed, it took a couple of minutes for the enemy sensors to detect the approaching ship.

As the Steadfast dived down into the midst of the convoy the Shadowstrike dropped its reflex shields and appeared about thirty thousand kilometres to port, on a crossing course.

'All batteries, open fire!' snapped Aloni as the main guns came into range. 'Targets free!'

The Sons of Horus grand cruiser was turning ponderously towards the suddenly revealed Raven Guard ships, too far away to prevent the pair of void-predators slicing into the transports. Missiles, plasma and shells ripped into the virtually unprotected freighters while sporadic, ineffectual fire from enemy defence turrets splashed harmlessly against the warships' fully active shields.

Blossom after blossom of exploding gas and plasma charted the course of the

two hunters, one cutting down through the mass of cargo-haulers, the other moving along the length of the convoy. The enemy light cruiser turned sharply about but, with the other escorts so out of position, its commander was reluctant to face a pair of enemy vessels single-handed. The Sons of Horus could do nothing as the Raven Guard turned together, broadsides and dorsal weapons still blazing, and blasted a path back out of the fleet.

For some it might have been difficult to withdraw from the battle without once laying a shot upon the warships of the traitor Legion, but Aloni was well-versed in the Axioms of his primarch. There was nothing to be gained and everything to be risked by direct confrontation. The greater prize had been seized.

Twelve freighters destroyed, and another seven crippled, in a single attack run.

‘Losses not easily replaced,’ said Lieutenant Shaak, standing by the sensor array, sensing Aloni’s mood. ‘Legionaries without ammunition cannot storm Terra.’

‘True,’ said Aloni. He stared at the dispersing clouds that were all that remained of the obliterated transports. ‘Nor can they supply Carandiru. It would have been good to capture one or two, though. We’re not without our own supply issues, but that will have to wait for another day.’

‘Just as well we’re used to fighting with fists and sticks, eh?’ said Shaak. His tone turned grim. ‘Give me a company of real warriors over the gang-brats of Cthonia. Thought they could take us out and flit off to Terra in glory, did they? We’ll make these bastards regret not finishing the job on Isstvan.’

‘We certainly will, lieutenant. We certainly will.’

IX

Carandiru [DV -30 minutes, adjusted Terran standard]

THE GOLDEN FLASH of the Stormbird a few kilometres to the west drew Sergeant Chamell's eye for a moment. It did the same for the crew's manning the anti-air turrets around the target zone, drawing their attention away from the lone Whispercutter gliding silently towards the power station concealed by the moonless night. Flak erupted across the clouds into which the dropship had disappeared, followed by traces of las-fire seeking the Stormbird in the gloom.

Clinging to the side of the anti-grav drop-craft, loosed twenty minutes earlier by the same Stormbird, Chamell looked down at the energy plant. Searchlights played across the night clouds, seeking signs of the gunship, never once moving towards the east where the Mor Deythan were approaching. Men lined the outer walls and filled the guard towers; defences erected to guard against an uprising by the planet's prisoner population that would, in a few minutes, be proved totally worthless.

It amused Chamell to think that "heightened security" often had the opposite consequence. The Raven Guard attack had brought guards spilling out of their barracks, heading to their embedded guns and defence positions, staring out at the burgeoning night full of fear and trepidation. Cannon turrets and energy fences had sprung into life, ready to ward away an offensive on the ground.

Patrols were doing their rounds along some of the alleys and streets between distribution hubs and barracks, turbine halls and wind farms. The complex was easily seven or eight square kilometres in size and the men guarding it woefully few for such a task. As more soldiers in red-and-black fatigues spilled up from an underground bunker towards the wall, Chamell smiled.

So busy, yet so ineffective.

It was good for the Mor Deythan. The more the enemy looked outwards and hurried about, the more they emptied the heart of their defence. Already overstretched - who would waste resources on guards for a power station that was all but impregnable to the locals? - the garrison made up in haste and bluster what they lacked in diligence and discipline.

They had small reason to be fearful of airborne attack. The outlying defence

cannons certainly put up an impressive amount of firepower, enough to dissuade anything but an orbital approach. And that would prove troublesome thanks to the ring of defences arranged around the central complexes of the prison itself a few kilometres away; guns and missiles capable of firing into orbit, powered by the stations the Mor Deythan were looking to eliminate. Huge turbine stacks and overhead cables sloping up to towering pylons that led out into the wilderness made landing difficult.

Difficult but not impossible.

Senderwat was one of the best pilots in the Shadowmasters and he guided the long, slender form of the Whispercutter along the line of pylons and cable, never more than a few metres above one hundred thousand volts of electricity. The electromagnetic output of the energy network provided further insurance against the tracking devices of the power plant's scanners. It was the Raven Guard way of war, to turn a hostile environment and the enemy's own defences into an advantage.

'Hot zone in thirty seconds,' Senderwat warned. He spoke through his armour's external vocalisers, avoiding any vox-signal that might be detected.

Banking to the right, the Whispercutter moved out from the covering aura of the power lines, circling towards one of the central control buildings, away from the generators and curtain wall.

It would have been a relatively simple task to annihilate the station with an orbital blast, even with the defence lasers close by - reflex shields were better than void shields in such a situation - but there were several power plants supplying the main guard complexes and each would have to be taken out in turn. Instead, a well-planned legionary strike against one station would provide the means to overcome the whole prison's power structure.

The Whispercutter levelled, just a few hundred metres from its destination. Immense cooling towers surrounded the five-storey central control building, itself a target no more than a dozen metres square. Narrow walkways and roads sprawled beneath the descending Raven Guard, far too small for the craft - or a confident jump pack landing. Jump packs would also restrict them once they were inside the station control tower.

Senderwat guided the silent craft unerringly between the rising edifices around them, broad wingtips skimming centimetres away from disaster. Not once did Chamell entertain the thought that they might crash. Senderwat pulled the Whispercutter to a sharp stop above the control terminus. The gleam from

windows splashed across bare ferrocrete and metal just a few metres below them. Chamell could see patches of shadow as people moved around inside.

‘Power up,’ he ordered. His display sprang into life as the other legionaries allowed power to flood through their battleplate. ‘Drop!’

The five Mor Deythan - Chamell, Fasur, Senderwat, Korin and Strang - let go of the Whispercutter and fell to the roof, landings cushioned by their specially augmented armour; as well as the normal fibre bundles inside the suits, additional calliper bracings and microservos boosted the joints, allowing for smoother, quieter movement.

Above them the Whispercutter’s auto-guidance systems lifted it away, heading after the departing Stormbird.

Chamell motioned towards an access door off to the left in the corner of the building. Fasur led the way across the flat roof, pistol loaded with silent gas-powered bolts in one hand, combat knife in the other. For this mission the Shadowmasters had left behind their heavier weapons to maximise stealth and speed. The mission would be decided at close quarters.

Fasur stopped beside a numeral keypad on a pedestal a short distance from the door. He looked back at Chamell, who shook his head and made a cutting motion across his throat. Fasur nodded and waved Strang to the door.

Strang’s slender power fist shone only a little more than the lenses of his helm as he found the plated hinges of the door and pushed, separating each quietly from the frame. He lifted the door away carefully and placed it against the wall.

Stairs led down into the control complex.

Chamell took the lead, descending to a hallway at the bottom of the steps. There was no glass panel in the door, so he checked the auspex display on his wrist. No life signs within five metres on this level.

He eased open the door onto a landing with more steps and an elevator, as well as a passageway leading onto the rest of the floor. Energy signals indicated a swathe of network and power lines - unoccupied maintenance and database chambers. The sergeant signalled for the others to follow and headed down the stairs again, moving slowly and quietly.

Detailing Senderwat, Strang and Korin to secure the lower levels and the ground floor entrance, Chamell moved out into the corridor on the fourth floor

with Fasur at his side. Bare windowless wall stretched along the right; two sealed doors, a branching passage and an open door to the left. The corridor continued for the length of the building, turning left at the far end.

Pistol ready, Chamell advanced to the first door. Fasur continued past to the next, and stopped.

The tiniest of vibrations from the wrist-mounted monitor alerted Chamell to an approaching signal. He glanced down to see two returns on the display, about to turn into the corridor at the far end.

Chamell moved across to the other side of the passageway so that he could see past his fellow Shadowmaster. Tasur had noticed the approaching threat too and stood stock still against the door, pistol raised.

Chamell froze, allowing himself to become one with his surroundings. He sensed the flicker of the glow strips along the ceiling, the tiniest dimming and brightening. He felt the moments of dimness and latched onto them, feeling them stretch out, pulling them into an eternity.

There was no real shadow in the corridor but the two warriors of the Mor Deythan did not need to remain hidden for long. In the few moments their extraordinary powers granted them, two uniformed human soldiers had rounded the corner, utterly oblivious to the two massive warriors ahead.

Fasur fired, his pistol coughing gently as a gas-propelled round sped towards the guard on the right. Her eyes were just beginning to widen with surprise as her brain registered the two intruders, a moment before the bolt took her in the throat. It detonated quietly, ripping out windpipe and spine, and almost severing her head.

The other had half a second to move the muzzle of his autogun a few centimetres before Chamell's silenced bolt pierced his upper chest, punching through breastplate and flesh. It exploded, buried inside lungs and heart, shredding both with a fountain of blood.

Both soldiers collapsed, guns clattering to the floor.

Chamell crossed back to the door and eased it open, finding himself in a small storage lockup. Coming back out he saw Fasur exiting the room ahead. The legionary looked back at his leader and shook his head.

The two of them moved on. Fasur held position at the corridor, currently empty, while Chamell investigated a signal in the last room coming off the

passageway.

Augmented hearing and suit auto-senses picked up heavy breathing as the sergeant stopped beside the open door. He rounded the frame with pistol ready, but held his fire. Chair tipped back against a file-laden set of shelves, a guard lay asleep, the peak of his cap drawn over his eyes, feet up on the monitor desk. Two vid-screens showed static-broken images that flicked through various pict-feeds on rotation.

Sheathing his knife, Chamell grabbed the man by the throat, gauntlet encompassing his whole neck. A simple twist detached the man's vertebrae before he was even fully awake. Chamell left the corpse to sag, easing the chair back onto four legs. He checked the vid-monitors but there did not seem to be anything to indicate that there was another security station. This was, after all, just a power station - not the prison itself, or the commandant's keep.

He rejoined Fasur and they followed the short corridor across the middle of the storey, which had a door to either side, facing each other, and a heavier portal at the end. Chamell motioned for his partner to go left while he headed for the right-hand door.

The augur showed multiple signals behind both doors. Fasur looked to the sergeant for instructions and received a series of gestures indicating that they would go in hard and fast. Fasur nodded and braced himself next to the door.

From his belt Chamell palmed two small, disc-like detonators. One was an electromagnetic pulse grenade, the other a blind-screen device. He primed both with his thumb and slammed into the door, smashing it open.

The two discs left his hand at the same moment. He stepped out for an instant while the two grenades detonated. Electricity sparked and blackness shrouded the air.

Into this whirling gloom stepped the sergeant, pistol moving from one target to the next, imprinted into the memory-coils of the auspex moments before and now displayed through his auto-senses. He fired twice at each glowing apparition, moving blindly through the darkness but placing two rounds into every enemy with unwavering accuracy. He could see and hear nothing for several seconds, pacing to the right to fire two bolts into the last of the sensor-targets writ in glowing yellow in his vision.

The blind field collapsed, allowing sight and sound to return with a snap. Auto-senses dimmed the bright lights to a dusky glow to protect Chamell's eyes

against the sudden change. He quickly surveyed the room. Eight technicians and guards littered the floor, each with two gaping wounds in their torso. All were dead.

The pulse grenade had been set to its weakest level; just enough to interfere with any automated systems and prevent an alarm signal. As it was, the banks of dials and readouts displaying the feed-through energy of the station were already flickering back into life.

‘Entrance secured,’ reported Senderwat. Strang and Korin followed with news that the lower floors had been cleared of the few men and women on duty.

Fasur joined Chamell.

‘Main controls are in here,’ said the Shadowmaster. ‘The other chamber is secondary cooling systems for the reactors. All of the grid data comes through these consoles.’

‘I want every spark of power unleashed across the grid. Overload it,’ said Chamell. ‘Let there be night.’

X

Carandiru [Day of Vengeance]

CROUCHED ON THE ramp of the descending Stormbird, Corax had a perfect view of the unfolding battle for the main city of Carandiru. With the exception of a few buildings containing isolated emergency generators, the city was swathed in darkness. Fiery meteors carved trails against a violet sunset as the remnants of crashing orbital cannons and missile platforms burned up; weapons that had, until the Raven Guard strike, been pointed at the surface rather than into space.

Across the city below, encircled by its kilometre-high wall, las-fire sparkled across streets and rooftops. From several kilometres up it looked like glitter thrown onto a dark pool. Here and there fires raged from more substantial weapons. Soukhounou had done his job well though and such outbreaks were contained; a fire raging through the confines of the prison-city could kill thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands. It was impossible to protect everybody and many would die in the uprising, but they were not here to liberate charred corpses.

Around the Stormbird the dark shapes of Whispercutter and Shadowhawk carrying more of Corax's Mor Deythan cut through the darkening sky. The Shadowmasters were splitting up, dropping towards selected targets throughout the conurbation. Further up, Thunderhawks and Stonnbirds ploughed down, heading towards outlying work settlements and smaller security facilities - mineheads and mills surrounded by kilometres of razor wire, minefields and defence turrets. Columns of smoke rose from anti-air silos, removed by pinpoint strikes from the Raven Guard fleet in orbit over Carandiru.

There were other groups attacking across the world, targeting supply depots and military barracks, led by Raven Guard veterans but made up from warriors drawn from across the other Legion groups. It was the perfect training ground to teach the Raven Guard method of war. Small attack groups numbering only a few dozen warriors linked up with resistance cells rapidly raised by Soukhounou and existing dissidents.

Two kilometres up, it was time for Corax and the main attack to go their separate ways. The primarch glanced back at Arendi in the Stormbird

compartment. The bodyguard lifted a fist in acknowledgement, the gesture duplicated by the legionaries around him.

‘Remember, I want the wall guns silenced and secured,’ the primarch said over the vox. The reminder was probably unnecessary but as with so many Raven Guard operations timing was paramount. ‘Rendezvous in three hours.’

‘Good hunting,’ Arendi replied.

Unfurling his flight pack wings, Corax jumped off the ramp, a combi-weapon gripped tightly in his right hand.

A thermal immediately caught the primarch, lifting him above the plunging dropship. He angled left and down, diving towards the wider streets and squares towards the centre of the city. Even from this height he could see the people thronging the streets, a mass of humanity converging on the fortress-palace that covered a hill in the northern reaches of the city.

There would be casualties. Few worthwhile endeavours could be accomplished without sacrifice, but it was not Corax’s desire to see the blood of the oppressed shed needlessly. He would not incite rebellion and then leave others to face the bloody consequences. Taking the city would not be a straightforward task and the people of Carandiru would need help whilst the Raven Guard established control. Corax had assigned himself the duty of staving off the first counterattacks against the people while the rest of his force secured vital defence points.

Corax had wondered whether the Sons of Horus and other Space Marines would try to quench the uprising with the blood of the non-Legion soldiers acting as guards, but the legionaries left as garrison were responding strongly. Until now the Raven Guard presence had been hidden and the traitors looked as though they were seeking to quell the rebellion before it had established itself, not understanding the full extent of the forces now ranged against them. It made them vulnerable, as the primarch had planned.

Circling a kilometre up, Corax saw a Mastodon troop carrier leaving one of the depots close to the main watch keep. It appeared to be heading for the central plaza. The Mastodon was capable of carrying forty Space Marines within its hull, slow but well armed and armoured. As a mobile command point it would be ideal for coordinating the suppression of the uprising and, if fortune favoured the primarch, a high-level officer or perhaps even the facility commandant himself might be found within.

The primarch furled his wings and dropped, arrowing towards the city like a black meteor. A few hundred metres up he started to angle towards the Mastodon, opening his wings a little to slow his descent as he soared over the rooftops. Ahead scattered marksmen had taken up positions in garrets and walkways overlooking the advance of the surging populace. The cold-hearted killers were sniping at will, gunning down unarmed civilians in the streets below. Corax adjusted his flight path, curving to the left and right, a flicked wingtip or fist decapitating and disembowelling the exposed guards as he swept past.

The Mastodon's size limited it to the main thoroughfares, making its course easy to predict. Gaining a little more height, Corax turned and came at the armoured carrier from the front, dropping almost to street level.

Small-arms fire sprayed at the primarch as he sped between the buildings towards the slab-sided transport, but approaching from directly in front kept him out of the arc of the main sponson weapons on the Mastodon's flanks.

Through the slit of the driver's position in the jutting front cab, Corax could see eyes widen with surprise as he powered towards the vehicle, seemingly intent on a collision. At the last moment Corax flipped a wing and rolled to his left, passing along the side of the carrier. He fired the melta part of his combi-weapon, ripping through the gun blister of the sponson.

Using his wings as an airbrake, he drove his fingertips between ruptured plates of ceramite and used his momentum to swing up to the top of the vehicle. Wings snapping out of the way, Corax strode to the nearest cupola, manned by a mortal guard in a black-visored helm. Hooking his combi-weapon to his belt, Corax grabbed the man's head and wrenched him from his position. He threw the soldier over the side of the Mastodon, where he crumpled on the rockcrete a few metres below.

Another gunner swung a twin-barrelled heavy bolter in Corax's direction. The primarch dodged left and then right, eluding the salvo of explosive-tipped rounds. A kick flattened the armour plate protecting the gunner, trapping his arms beneath the bent metal. With an open-handed chop, Corax decapitated the man and then with a return blow severed the arms so that the headless corpse dropped down into the body of the vehicle.

With a hiss of pneumatics, a hatch opened behind Corax. He ripped the twisted metal shield free from the broken cupola weapon and pulled a heavy bolter off its mount, hefting it easily. Three rounds met the first man scrambling out of the hatch, each detonation tearing a chunk out of guts and chest. The

second clambered into view, clearly forced out by someone below. Two more heavy bolter shots obliterated his head.

The Mastodon stopped. Corax heard the clang of the assault ramp at the front and moved to stand behind the driver's compartment. A stream of red-uniformed soldiers spilled out of the carrier's innards. He cut them down with bursts from the heavy bolter as they emerged, leaving not one enough time to raise a weapon.

The belt feed of the heavy bolter was almost finished. Corax swung down to the front of the carrier, hanging on with one hand as he fired the remaining three bolts through the driver's slit, rewarded by the wet crump of exploding flesh and a shriek of pain cut short.

Throwing the spent weapon aside, the primarch let himself drop onto the assault ramp, landing directly onto another guard, pulverising her into the metal mesh. A mixture of visored faces and fear-filled eyes met Corax as he stepped up to the entrance hatch of the carrier.

'I will make this quick,' Corax promised them, pulling his gun free.

And he did.

When he was done, disappointed that he had not encountered a single legionary, Corax moved to the command console on the upper level of the transport, punching his way through the upper deck to force entry. There was one survivor remaining, gabbling over the vox-link, requesting immediate assistance. Corax lanced a fist through the man's spine, severing it between the shoulders. A flick of the wrist ended the paralysed man's brief horror, tearing out heart and lungs.

Stooping over the comm-net panel, Corax looked for the epicentre of the command channel traffic. There were two locations on the grid - the main citadel and a complex of guard towers and bunkers just outside the south wall. Soukhounou was already in the keep and would soon be supported by the arrival of Arendi and his warriors. The whole insurrection was focused on storming the keep and there was little point in Corax adding his might to that battle. The secondary station intrigued him; it was the centre of a large amount of the strategic data criss-crossing the city and the outer guard stations.

Corax knew that if he was the ruler of a prison world, he would not place his strength in an easily identified city fortress. The compound outside the city seemed the most likely location to find the commandant.

There were no other assets free to storm the compound and Corax was determined that whoever was responsible for running this despicable world would be brought to account. Already the arrival of the Raven Guard would be causing the commandant serious doubts and Corax wanted him captured before he could disappear into the wilderness or perhaps escape into orbit. He had no desire for an extended hunt - his mantra was to attack fast and leave quickly - so the only option appeared to be personal intervention.

‘This is Corax to all forces. Secondary facilities detected outside the complex. I am investigating. Expect low resistance. Continue with current objectives, no reinforcement needed.’

Exiting the Mastodon, Corax spread his wings and soared into the sky.

XI

Carandiru [DV +1 hour]

‘SOMETIMES,’ BRANNE TURNED to address the Raptors around him, ‘sneaking about isn’t going to help. Sometimes you just have to destroy everything in your way.’

Lieutenant Navar Hef followed his commander off the ramp of the Stormbird, accompanied by the other members of the command squad. More warriors, both twisted and unchanged, ran out of the dropships around them, moving into the waist-high grass that covered the wildlands around the fort.

While the much of the Legion was tackling the central citadel complex with typical Raven Guard stealth and misdirection, the Raptors were tasked with eliminating a secondary garrison three hundred kilometres away. With the fall of the capital it was likely that any continued resistance or counterattack would emanate from the bunkers and forts here at Nadrezes.

It was also the site of the high security detainees, according to intelligence from Commander Soukhounou’s sources. Nobody was quite sure who was being held inside Nadrezes, but unlike the rest of the Carandiru population they were under constant guard, held behind lock and bars. And that meant Corax was very keen to see them released.

Thunderhawks were still spitting lascannon blasts, battle cannon shells and missiles at the outer ring of fortifications while Stormbirds disgorged nearly five hundred legionaries, accompanied by tanks, transpors, fast-attack vehicles and heavy guns. On the flanks of the hills overlooking Nadrezes to the south-east drop pods were falling, bringing another two hundred Raptors right on top of depots and storehouses identified by last-minute orbital scans before the fleet had unleashed its payload of deadly warriors.

Around the Thunderhawks, smaller Storm Eagle gunships laid down curtains of fire with ripples of rocket launches, bombarding pillboxes and hardpoints that punctuated the defensive line. Heavier transport craft lowered what assault vehicles still remained in the Raven Guard armouries, while batteries of Hydra anti-air guns watched the skies and self-propelled cannons moved into position to pound any forces that dared to sally forth. Bunker-busting Vindicator tanks rolled forwards at the head of the assault, the massive barrels of their guns

belching fire and destruction.

‘Curious thing,’ said Branne as he clambered into the compartment of a waiting Land Raider, Hef close on his heel. ‘Nearly all the emplacements around the fort are facing inwards. What do you make of that?’

‘They are afraid of whoever is inside, and want to keep them there,’ replied Hef. He spoke slowly and surely, negotiating the words with thick tongue and bulging fangs. It had been a while since he could wear a helm, though the armoury had done a fine job of modifying parts from old Mark II and III warplate to fashion a suit of armour to fit the lieutenant’s hugely muscled form and bent spine. ‘And so we should help them get out.’

‘Just so,’ said Branne. He spoke to the driver over the internal vox and the assault tank lurched into motion, ploughing across the wildlands towards the outer perimeter of Nadrezes. Around them the column formed - more Land Raiders and Ulysses-class ram vehicles, Predator tanks and Rhino troop carriers ready to smash through into the heart of the enemy positions.

‘Lock up!’ Branne snapped.

With the others, Nef backed into his holding space and activated the impact suppression systems. Locking bolts dropped down, intersecting with his backpack, while a grip rod descended in front of him. He curled clawed fingers around the bar.

‘Fifty seconds to breach.’ The commander looked around to check everybody was secure before fixing himself into the forward support harness.

Hef looked at his fellow Raptors, eight of them. Some were deformed like him, three of them untouched by the mutagenic corruption that had bedevilled the company’s first and last raising. The Land Raider hit a slope and he felt the vehicle rising for a moment before crashing down, jarring them in their harnesses.

‘Trenchline crossed,’ Branne told them, head turned towards the strategic display.

Hef looked at Devor across the compartment from him. Friends since being taken as novitiates, he now barely recognised his comrade. Devor’s skin had slowly sloughed away, leaving bared fat and muscle. It did not hurt, apparently, but through the red meat and tracery of veins jutted contorted bone - three tusks either side of the jaw. The Apothecarion removed them but fresh ones kept growing. He was due for more surgery soon. Unlike Hef, Devor’s body was not

too bad, save for growths on his elbows that he had to file down every few days with a las-rasp.

Neroka, another lifelong friend, was completely different, untouched. He wore the Mark VI that had become the hallmark of the original Raptors, boltgun held across his chest, standing straight and proud in the embrace of the suppression bars. The Raptor caught Hef looking at him.

‘Time for some righteous violence, lieutenant. There are plenty of traitors need killing.’

‘Certainly are,’ replied Hef. He flicked a look at Branne, who was talking curtly over the vox-link, still monitoring the ongoing attack. ‘Time to show our worth again.’

‘You can count on it.’ Hef could hear the smile in Neroka’s words. ‘There’s nothing that can stop us.’

‘Breach in ten

nine

eight

‘

Hef tried to stay relaxed as Branne continued the countdown, he could hear the boom of gunship strikes through the hull, very close. They were tearing a path through the defences for the assault column to follow, the Land Raiders at the head of the attack.

The assault tank came to a sudden halt, hull reverberating with an impact. The harnesses were firing back into the hull even as the ramp dropped. Hef was the first out, closest to the exit. He pulled free a chainsword with his right hand and started the motor, razor-sharp teeth spinning with a roar. His other hand readied a frag grenade - fingers too thick and clumsy now to operate the trigger of a bolter or pistol.

The Land Raider had crashed through the wall of an outbuilding, almost flattening the entire structure. Hef sprinted down the ramp and tossed the grenade ahead, the blast filling the room with smoke and shrapnel. Something moved towards him through the dust and he struck out, slamming the whirring teeth of the chainsword into the side of a man’s head as he stumbled out of the gloom. The chainsword bit through the helm and sheared off the top of his would-be attacker’s skull in one swipe.

The crack of bolts and flare of propellant accompanied Hef as he pushed on. He had no helm display but he knew that his battle-brothers were with him, to each side, the smell of their armour and the whine of servos as clear to his augmented senses of smell and hearing as any transponder return.

More guards waited, wearing a hexagonal mesh like ancient chainmail over black bodysuits. They were armed with rapid-firing autoguns, spewing bullets at the incoming legionaries without much discipline or accuracy. Hef felt something graze the side of his head as he charged. Bolts sparked past him into the defenders, tearing away chunks of flesh and sending glittering, broken scales showering into the air.

Up close the garrison soldiers stood no chance. Hef ripped the face from one with his claws. His chainsword took the leg from another a moment later. A woman with a power sword lunged at him, some kind of squad leader - he saw the glowing blade spearing towards his chest and stepped aside. He snatched hold of the woman's wrist, splintering fragile bones inside her heavy glove; a twist broke more and dislocated the limb. Shrieking she pulled up her pistol to jam it into Hef's face. He lashed out with the chainsword, and both pistol and hand clattered to the floor.

Alarms blared and red lights flashed overhead as Hef drove the tip of the chainsword up through the woman's abdomen and into her ribcage. Shredded gore splashed from the wound as he ripped the weapon free to let the twitching corpse drop from his grasp.

The fighting was dying down; only two or three of the guards were left, the other Raptors taking them out with knife and bolter in short order. Hef looked around for Branne and spied the commander bending over a low console of viewscreens and controls.

'Gate access,' said Branne, punching a series of buttons. 'Everything has been opened. That should make progress swifter.'

Branne led the squad out onto the flat ferrocrete apron of the main complex. The sun was bright in the mid-morning, barely a cloud in the air except for the smoke streaming from fires started by the attack. The sky had a turquoise cast to it, criss-crossed by the contrails of circling aircraft and the haze of plasma exhaust.

'Main complex is open, commander,' said Neroka, pointing to a pair of Predators that had forged past the Land Raiders. They were still blasting away at a gatehouse that led down into levels below the ground.

‘Force One, converge on my position for assault. Force Two to maintain perimeter. Force Three, break into squads and start clearing the rest of the complex.’ Branne broke into a trot as he headed towards the smashed remains of the gatehouse. ‘Time to find out who they’ve been hiding.’

XII

Carandiru [DV +90 minutes]

The Legiones Astartes had conquered the galaxy. It was an irrefutable fact. During the Great Crusade countless worlds had been brought to compliance in the name of the Emperor by the Legions. Looking down at the teeming horde of poorly-armed prisoners hurling themselves at the gates and windows of the inner citadel, Soukhounou considered the oft-quoted codicil to this statement. The Legiones Astartes had conquered the galaxy but it was the unnumbered millions of the Imperial Army and the adepts of Terra coming in their wake that had kept it.

A noise in the auditorium caused him to turn. It was Fajallo, one of the cell leaders, who had been a servant in the citadel and provider of most of Soukhounou's intelligence. The lad was only seventeen years Terran-standard but had sharp eyes and sharper wits. It was a shame that he was just a little too old for geneseed implantation by the Legion's new, more rigorous standards. He was lithe and strong and, providing there were no hidden genetic abnormalities, would have made a fine legionary. As it was, he was a fine commando leader instead.

'The gate is not open yet,' Soukhounou said, gesturing for the youth to join him on the balcony. 'Dozens are dying needlessly.'

'Not a problem,' said Fajallo, confident but not cocky. 'It took a few minutes longer than we planned to get into the basement weapon lockers. Kasslar and his team have the guards pinned down in the forum. Castellin is at the gate mechanism now.'

Soukhounou accepted this with a nod. He studied the boy and wondered what Branne, Agapito and the others had been like during the liberation of Deliverance. It was an experience he could never share with them, but he did not feel any less a Raven Guard because of it; no more than they felt inferior because they had not taken part in the Great Crusade campaigns before the rediscovery of the primarch.

'I'm amazed that you managed to pull all of this together in twenty days,' said Fajallo, looking over the parapet. He glanced back at Soukhounou with awe. 'I thought it impossible.'

‘I disagree,’ the Space Marine replied. ‘If you had thought it impossible you would not have listened to me. You thought it improbable.’

‘Same difference,’ Fajallo said with a shrug. A bruise was darkening on his cheek, obscuring the freckles. ‘I was desperate, nothing else.’

‘The desperate have nothing else but hope.’ Soukhounou waved a hand at the trammelled masses now venting their rage against their former captors. ‘It is said that when one has reached the bottom the only way to continue is up. In my experience it often needs someone else to show that it is possible to climb.’

‘What I don’t understand is why you didn’t just come in and attack straight away,’ said the youth. He looked up, as if to see the battle-barges, cruisers and destroyers of the fleet in orbit. ‘Just blast everything to pieces with your starships and then drop onto the survivors. Why just send in a lone legionary? I mean, no offence or anything.’

‘A reasonable question, and no offence taken. What happens here is a message. A message to those that turned against the Emperor. They do not have the support of mankind. Such allies as they have are bartered with threats and bribery, not fashioned out of true loyalty to their cause. If a single legionary can raise rebellion here, it can happen anywhere. A single legionary can conquer a world, just as a relative handful - perhaps a hundred, maybe a hundred and fifty - kept Carandiru under the boot of oppression, just as hope is my weapon, the hope of victory and freedom, so fear can cow an entire population. Fear of reprisal against self and family. Fear of failure, to lose even more. The tyrant will persuade the slave that they have even more to lose when they have nothing but dirt and rags, persuading them that dirt and rags are something worth protecting.

‘And they divide the people, turning them against each other. A hundred and fifty legionaries is a potent force, but not on any world could they physically suppress a billion people. No, it took others to do that, willing to trade their own kind for the smallest privilege, to be free of lash and drudgery themselves. That is how the dictator grasps an entire world, a whole star system. He takes it in his fist and crushes it for everything it is worth. Offer rewards to the few, empower them, and they will destroy the will of the many.’

The thought was making Soukhounou angry. Though he had not been born on Deliverance, had not fought against the tyrannical tech-guilds of Kiavahr, he had still accepted wholeheartedly the axioms and philosophy of Corax. If it had not been the purpose of the Legiones Astartes to bring freedom to the galaxy, if war and butchery on an unimaginable scale had no greater cause than

domination, then everything he had fought for was pointless.

‘It does not even have to be a legionary. It requires one man or woman, nothing more. The first to risk everything for an ideal. They put their life on the line, their whole future for a cause in the hope of being an example. And then there is someone even braver. The person that chooses to step up next to them. One man or woman is an individual, fighting for themselves. Two is a cause.’

‘That makes me braver than you, doesn’t it?’ Fajallo said with a grin. ‘If you were the first and it’s braver to be second.’

‘Technically, I had recruited several hundred followers before I approached you,’ said the Space Marine. He saw the youth’s expression turn crestfallen, and laid a hand on Fajallo’s shoulder. ‘But you did not know that at the time. From your perspective you were the first - or the second I suppose - and yes, what you did took more bravery and was harder than anything I have ever done in my long life.’

A loud detonation rang out across the square as an explosion tore out pan of the wall above the gates. The crowd surged away as metal and stone showered down onto the plaza. From windows below, rebel fighters bellowed to the people that the gates were unbarred. Cheers and fierce cries greeted the announcement and the downtrodden of Carandiru came on again with renewed vigour.

‘You need to start the next phase,’ Soukhounou told his companion. ‘Time to get to those charges we rigged under the secondary wall.’

Fajallo swiped a casual salute and darted off, leaving Soukhounou to scour the skies above the square for a sign of a Stormbird - Arendi and his small group were supposed to be supporting the battle for the citadel.

But there was no sign of them, and even with the advantage of numbers it was not certain that the inmates of Carandiru would overpower their foes.

Disappointed, Soukhounou moved off the balcony and started back to the stairwell. He would have to trust to Fajallo to lead the attack through the breach of the secondary wall so that the commander could lend his might to the battle raging a few storeys below. He was only one legionary and more would die because of Arendi’s absence.

He would have words for the former commander when the two of them next met.

XIII

Carandiru [DV +2 hours]

THE RAPTORS ADVANCED with purpose along the broad tunnel, alert for any danger. Hef marched alongside his commander, amazed and horrified by what they found. The underground chambers they passed were fronted by flickering power fields and beyond the force walls lurked all manner of creatures.

The rooms were decked out like cells, with bunks and ablution facilities, but most looked more like animal lairs, containing piles of shredded blankets and soiled sheets. The inhabitants capered and slithered and stalked around their cages, some throwing themselves at the energy barriers as the Space Marines passed, each attempt met with a crack and a blast of purplish light.

No sound passed the power fields, leaving Hef to wonder what howls, yammers and screeches resounded beyond them. Many of the inmates were obviously furious, some sobbing. A few approached the legionaries with suspicious or hopeful eyes, all too human amongst distorted, canine faces and scaled skin.

It was soon obvious why the main controls had not operated the wards in this part of the prison. Some of the creatures they passed were hulking beasts as large as Dreadnoughts, twisted with outlandish muscle and sprouting tendons and veins. They hunched in their cells with horns and tusks and sword-like claws. Furrows carved into the walls and ceilings stood testament to long frustration. Some of the mutants picked up the remnants of their furnishings and hurled them at the barriers as the legionaries passed; beat fists on their chests like base primates or put back their heads and let loose silenced howls.

Each new apparition made Hef shudder with recognition, as though he was looking at the chambers beneath Ravendelve where he and the Raptors had been kept until the Horus sympathisers had attacked. He tried so hard to push the memories back, to focus on the mission at hand, but as each new leering monstrosity and anguished wretch was revealed he could not think of anything else.

‘We will avenge them,’ Branne said, sensing the unease of his warriors.

It seemed an odd thing to say, given the nature of many of the warriors that accompanied the commander. Other than armaments, battleplate and livery, the only difference between some of the Raptors and the prisoners was which side of the force wall they were on. If these poor unfortunates had to be avenged, what did that mean for the Raptors?

A burst of gunfire from ahead brought welcome distraction from the unsettling train of thought. Hef bounded forwards as a squad of Raptors broke through into another part of the complex with melta bombs, and met by a storm of bullets and heavier weapons fire.

Racing along the freshly opened tunnel, Hef glimpsed fur and horns and scaly skin, but paid each new horror no heed, and with the others he burst from the front line of Raven Guard. His arms had grown longer in the last months, part of the continuing process that had stretched bones and cartilage and bolstered muscle and organs, and he almost raced on all fours in his desire to get at the foe.

He bounded past bodies of the guards, some of them oddly mangled, twisted and broken like dolls where they had been discarded. He noticed in passing no bolter wounds or blade cuts on the bodies; they had all been butchered by hand.

A missile detonated just ahead, smashing a Raptor from his feet in the blast, ripping another in half. The fire coming from up ahead was more accurate than before, shots pounding into the chests of the power-armoured legionaries while las-bolts flickered from the doorways with surprising vehemence.

Turning a corner, Hef came face to face with a giant of a man, as tall as a Space Marine and just as broad. He was half-naked, chest bulging with scarred muscle. Hef struck with his chainsword out of instinct, but the warrior moved just as quickly, ducking the blow and driving a fist into the lieutenant's gut. Another punch crashed into Hef's jaw, sending him reeling backwards. A bolt-round slammed into his attacker's shoulder, tearing out a fist-sized chunk of flesh. It did little to stop the man as he lunged after Hef, who was retreating back to the corner of the passageway while more of his kin advanced in support of the attack.

'Cease firing!' Branne's bellow rang along the metal-lined corridor. 'Fall back! Cease fire!'

Hef could not understand why they would not press the advantage but he followed orders without hesitation, stumbling away from his adversary as the man stooped to pick up the chainsword knocked from Hef's grasp. The Raven

Guard could not even remember dropping the weapon, and shame burned as he retreated.

Sporadic fire covered the Raven Guard retreat as the Raptors regrouped in a central passageway.

‘What is the First Axiom of Victory?’ Branne shouted, standing at the junction.

Hef was starting to recover his senses from the bloodlust and confusion. The Raptors formed up around their commander to either side of the side-tunnel. Branne stood with his back to the wall.

‘Be where the enemy desires you not to be,’ a reply echoed back.

‘This is Commander Branne of the Raven Guard, identify yourselves!’

‘Branne?’ There was distant muttering that Hef could not quite make out. ‘Show yourself!’

The commander glanced at Hef and the others. He considered the demand for a few seconds, frowning with indecision. Eventually he poked his head around the corner as the warriors on the other side of the corridor eased their weapons into firing positions.

‘Branne! By the pits of Kiavahr, it bloody well is!’ came the other voice.

The commander stepped out into the open, lowering his weapons.

‘Napenna? I’ll be a tech-priest’s mother! What

How

‘

Hef saw now that his foe was not one of the guards but actually another Space Marine, as were the handful of others that had defended the side corridor. Two were lying dead on the ground, another one nursing a badly bleeding arm. There were two unmoving Raptors amongst them.

The one called Napenna slapped a hand to Branne’s chest. A strand of long blond hair stuck to his sweaty face but Hef could see a tattoo on the warrior’s cheek, of the Legion’s raven emblem gripping the cog of the Mechanicum.

A Tech marine.

Napenna stepped back, brow furrowing as he looked at the gathering Raptors. His men closed in, captured lasguns and autoguns looking small in their

giant fists. All were dressed only in loose leggings, barefoot and bare chested.

‘It seems I am not the only one with an explanation to give,’ said the prisoner. ‘How long have you been here? Why did you not release us sooner?’

‘I am not sure I get your meaning, friend,’ said Branne.

‘You released and armed the subs before you found us?’ Napenna waved a hand at Hef and a few of the other mutated warriors. ‘When did you arrive?’

‘Not more than thirty minutes ago.’ Branne glanced at his companions. ‘These are my Raptors, Napenna. From the Legion.’

‘They look just like the subs,’ said one of the other prisoners.

‘Subs?’ asked Hef. ‘What are subs?’

The other legionary looked uneasy for a moment.

‘It’s what we call the ones that have been experimented on,’ he explained. ‘The ones they turned into

‘

‘Subs? Subhumans?’ Hef felt like he had been struck, a knot of pain in his chest. Anger flared at the insult but he fought back the urge to lash out. He was not a beast, he told himself, but he could not imagine what the Raptors must look like to an outsider. Mustering what dignity he could, Hef brought his fist up to his chest in salute. ‘I am Lieutenant Navar Hef of the Raven Guard. You are?’

‘Iaento, Blood Angels,’ said the other warrior. He did not return the salute, but looked at Napenna. ‘You never mentioned these warriors before.’

‘Never seen them,’ said Napenna. He looked at the commander and Raptors with suspicion.

‘A lot has changed,’ said Branne. ‘Why did you attack us?’

‘When the cells were opened I figured out that there was an attack and mustered the few of us left,’ said Napenna. ‘I thought the commandant had sent in a squad of some of his experiments to kill us before we could be freed.’

‘Could you not see we were Raven Guard?’ asked Branne. There were mutters from a couple of the other legionaries and a harsh bark of a laugh from Iaento. ‘What? What is it?’

‘Your colours are not the badge of loyalty they once were,’ said the Blood Angel. He looked at Hef and then at the chainsword he had taken. With a shrug of apology Iaento handed back the weapon. ‘I think this is yours.’

‘If the Legion is here, where is Lord Corax?’ Napenna said with some urgency.

‘He is going to take down the planetary commandant,’ replied Branne. ‘Why?’

‘I think Lord Corax is heading right into a trap.’ Napenna looked pained. ‘The commandant was one of us, until Isstvan. A Raven Guard.’

XIV

Carandiru [DV +2 hours]

The COMMANDANT'S COMPOUND was not without serious defences. A flurry of ground-fired missiles greeted Corax a few kilometres out. He saw them coming and destroyed most with bursts of long-range bolter fire as he closed on his objective. The last came at him from below and detonated on proximity, sending shrapnel into the primarch's armour but causing no serious harm.

From the obscuring cloud above the expanse of armoured towers and turret-protected bulwark two interceptors descended to meet the incoming primarch. Corax could not match the jets for sheer speed or firepower and his armour wailed a cacophony of warnings as missile locks and targeting arrays latched onto his presence.

The flare of missile launches forced the primarch to descend, watching the contrails of two incoming projectiles. He had only a few seconds to react, plummeting as fast as he could towards ground level where the augurs of the fighters might lose him against the backwash of signal from the surface. The missiles jinked with him, steering with long vanes, but though he could not outpace them Corax was not without his own advantages.

He almost stopped in mid-air with a thrust from his flight pack, dipping a shoulder to drop like a stone, swiftly enough that the first missile passed over him without detonating. He could only spare a glance as it raced on, faster than the speed of sound; the other missile was still heading in his direction. He tried ascending, boosting himself up under gravity pressures that would have broken even a Space Marine, but it was too late.

The missile detonated about ten metres to Corax's left, showering high explosive and shards over the primarch. The worst pattered off his armour but the complex metal primaries of his flight pack suffered damage, causing him to shed slender shining feather-blades in his wake.

The interceptors were closing still as more anti-air fire from the ground sprang up from defence turrets, lancing around the primarch with blasts of deadly las and explosive shells. Even if he could land in the teeth of the turrets' fire, he would be an easy target for the ordnance of the jet fighters. Corax had to destroy them before he could take the fight to the ground. The primarch boosted

himself towards the oncoming aircraft, accelerating hard, almost breaching the sound barrier himself, his armour vibrating all over as he pushed his battleplate to its limits.

Arms back, wings rigid, head set, he powered up to meet the aircraft as two more missiles detached and raced towards him. There was nothing to do but weather their bursts, making minute adjustments of position to bank away at the last moment so that the greater part of the blasts erupted against chest and shoulder rather than flight pack.

The pilots switched to the rotary cannons within the blunt noses of their planes, slowing to draw jagged lines of tracer fire across the primarch's path. Armour-piercing rounds slammed into the ceramite and plasteel encasing him, sending shards of broken material shimmering into the air. He could feel wounds along his left arm and leg like pinpricks - stinging but not threatening.

The pilot of the closest interceptor tried to pull up, realising the primarch's intent, but the plane was not as manoeuvrable as Corax's flight pack - he thrust a fist in front of him as he slammed through the port wing. Fuel tanks erupted as he burst out above the plane.

The pilot's face beneath his goggles was a mask of horror as he looked back at the ascending primarch while his craft stalled into a terminal spin.

The other fighter came past on a raking run, cannon spewing shells, the salvo flying wide of the mark. Killing the power to his pack for a moment, Corax turned sharply, firing the gravitic repulsors again to turn the climb into a dive, streaking after the second aircraft.

The pilot had lost sight of his target and was turning hard, brakes flaring along the wings as he tried to bring his craft around to find his prey. Corax judged his swooping pass perfectly, outstretched fingers ripping open the cockpit canopy and tearing through harness and flight suit.

The man simply fell out of the banking interceptor, his screams lost on the wind.

With the two aircraft destroyed, the ground fire returned with a vengeance, blanketing the sky with airbursts and flashes of laser. Corax jinked and wove his way between them but the weight of fire was too much to avoid entirely. Fragments ricocheting from armour plate scorched by the zip of energy beams.

Corax slowed a fraction to assess the target. The greatest concentration of communications aerals and sensor dishes was on a multi-building structure at

the heart of the compound. He steered towards this, deducing it to be the nerve centre of the complex.

If the commandant was anywhere, it would be there.

Quad-cannons boomed out a welcome as he descended, forcing Corax to take a wider route to his target. He landed atop one of the outer defence emplacements, crashing through the ferrocrete roof, crushing men and gun breech alike in the collapsing debris. On the ground, he broke into a run, sprinting across to the next emplacement even as its heavy cannon moved in his direction on a whining turntable. Two blasts from his melta turned the breech to slag. An explosive bolt slammed the gunner, now missing an arm, out of his seat beside the cannon.

Corax sprinted on, heedless of the pistol and rifle fire from other guards pinging from his backpack. The headquarters building consisted of a central tower a few storeys in height, joined by thick-armoured walkways to four outlying bunkers. Razor wire and metal stakes proved no obstacle as the primarch leapt over the intervening barrier with long strides, not even needing the assistance of his flight pack.

A segmented gate like that of an armoury garage started to roll open on the bunker to his left, revealing blocky, armoured figures. At first he thought they were warriors in Terminator armour, but they were bigger still. Dreadnoughts was his second guess, but the trio of warriors that emerged were hulking brutes in plates of armour rather than full war machines.

Plasma erupted from the guns of the closest, searing past Corax's face. Turning to face the oncoming warriors he heard another of the bunkers opening and glanced back, to see two more of the gigantic soldiers coming at him from the opposite direction.

Rather than be surrounded, he bounded towards the group of three. Secondary' guns - bolter systems operated by their own cogitators, he assumed - spat rounds at him while the brutes lifted their arms, bearing whirling blades, crackling fists and guns of unconventional design.

They reminded him of the Chaos walkers on Iapetus, but these suits bore none of the arcane runework that had marked the bodies of the half-daemon machines created by Azor and Delver. They were clearly battleplate rather than automated machines - he could see muscle moving beneath meshwork linking segmented ceramite and adamantium plates. Rage-filled eyes glared at him behind smoky-grey visors as the traitor creatures broke into lumbering runs to

meet his charge.

A fork of lightning erupted from the golden tip of one gun, catching Corax's left arm. The energy crawled up the limb, seemingly growing in strength, feeding off the power circuits of the primarch's armour. His arm became leaden as internal systems shut down. It felt as though heavy weights had suddenly been strapped to his side, causing him to stumble. With some effort he ran on, left arm hanging uselessly at his side, the combi-weapon in his right hand.

He fired. The flurry of bolts sparked from the armour of the closest enemy, cracking ceramite but having little effect on the creature within. The primarch was still out of effective range with the melta and he increased his speed, pounding across the dirt-spattered rockcrete.

A boom and a whine alerted him to a shot from behind; a moment later his right leg buckled as a flickering shell slammed into the back of his thigh, punching neatly through armour and into flesh. He toppled, hand outstretched to prevent himself falling face first into the rockcrete as another boom and crack heralded a second shot. Splinters of flight pack vanes sailed over his shoulder from the impact.

He looked down at his leg, bemused that any weapon could hit so hard. In the past his warplate had been proof against missiles, lascannons, autocannons and even plasma. Unnatural energy wreathed the small hole, glowing with dark fire.

Sorcery!

He heaved himself up, noting that some sensation was starting to return to his left arm as systems recovered from the shock of the lightning hit. The warrior's weapon was almost recharged though; Corax could see arcs of energy coiling around the jutting fins that surrounded the main body of the gun.

A burst of plasma splashed over his left shoulder, showering molten droplets of metal and ceramite across his helm. Corax heard the crack of the sorcerous rifle from behind him, and gritted his teeth as he expected another piercing blow.

But the shell whined past overhead.

With a wordless shout, fuelled by genuine concern giving rise to a boiling anger, Corax hurled himself at the trio of warriors in front of him. He fired the melta into the chest of the plasma-armed warrior, slamming the traitor to the ground.

Before he could finish off his downed adversary, a chainblade skittered across the primarch's left arm, carving ragged grooves with whirring teeth. Corax flailed, slashing his fingers towards his attacker's face. The blow went wide and the chain-weapon screeched down again, striking sparks from the seal of his outstretched elbow.

Corax hooked his gun and smashed a fist down into the fallen traitor. As he pulled his hand free, a thick oil-like gunge oozed from the wound but no blood. He did not have time to consider the implications of this as a third traitor joined the fight, bodily slamming into the primarch, a clawed power fist grabbing hold of his chest plastron as they skidded a dozen metres across the hard ground.

Corax rolled as they slowed amidst a pile of rocky debris, twisting to slam the traitor into the rucked ground. Armour cracked under an impact that would have shattered natural bones and pulverised the internal organs of a mortal man. The augmented traitor glared at him through his visor, demented rage in his eyes. The warrior jabbed a short-hand punch into the side of Corax's helm, slamming his head sideways. Another ringing blow from the other traitor's chain-weapon sent shards of cracking ceramite spraying from the primarch's shoulder guard. The primarch was surprised that his other attacker had been able to follow him so swiftly.

Corax lashed out wildly, throwing back the traitor with the chainblade. Rising to his feet, he stomped on the helm of the power fist armed warrior, crushing his head to a pulp of blood and flattened metal. The body twitched twice and then fell still. The traitor who had been punched in the chest was slowly pushing himself to his feet. Taking a step towards him, shaking his head with amazement, Corax drew up his gun and levelled the melta for a shot.

The other warrior fired his lightning gun again, sending black energy coruscating up Corax's chest. He fell backwards, all but paralysed between neck and waist. His hearts hammered in his chest, overloaded with energy, but the systems of his plate were going haywire, sending erratic signals to arms and legs, causing spasms that fought against the primarch's muscles rather than boosted them.

The boom of the heavy rifle caused Corax to wince in the moment before another projectile slammed into the gap between left pauldron and neck, tearing into the muscle of his shoulder. For the first time since Istvan Corax let out a shout of pain, wrenched from him as the sorcerous fire of the shell burnt into his flesh, seeping its warp taint into blood and tissue.

Something heavy pinned down his left arm and he looked up to see the chainblade-warrior with a massive boot on the primarch's wrist. Normally he would have been able to cast the traitor aside with little effort, as large as he was, but his armour was not responding. There was triumph in the brute's eyes as he pointed the crackling muzzle of his lightning gun at Corax's face.

The others gathered around him, the one with the rifle also sporting a barbed powerblade that glittered with sparks of silver energy. The last warrior had no ranged weapon that Corax could see except for a pivoting set of twin bolters mounted on his shoulder; both arms ended in spiked hammerheads surrounded by a pulsating dark aura.

Silhouetted against the sky, the four massive warriors loomed over Corax, weapons at the ready. It seemed impossible. He had been ready to face his death at the beast Angron's hands in the mountains of Isstvan V, but to die like this? It seemed ludicrous. He did not even know the manner of soldiers that had defeated him.

It had not been difficult and Corax felt the failure like a gash in his gut.

Another point-blank blast from the lightning gun sent shocks pulsing through his armour systems, keeping the primarch immobile. One of the soldiers stood aside, allowing Corax to see a group of figures gathering on a rampart atop the bunker ahead. There were four more individuals there, garbed in Legiones Astartes armour, two with the markings of the Emperor's Children, another in Sons of Horus livery.

The fourth stepped out from the others and stood looking down over the wall edging the fortification. His warplate was black, and on the shoulder was the unmistakable sigil of a white raven. He wore no helm, pale hair hanging lankly across his features.

A warrior of the Raven Guard.

'You made it too easy!' the warrior called down and immediately Corax recognised the voice along with the face.

'Nathian.'

Corvus was half as tall again as the youths around him, and broader by far, but of all those who had met the guerrilla leader Nathian showed almost no fear. The prisoner's stare matched Corax's in its intensity.

'That's the boon I bring, ain't it?' said Nathian. 'They think I can be trusted. I

run the largest smuggling ring on the wing. A few bribes and words here and there will make it a lot easier for you to be moving stuff around, I'd warrant. And I'm no shirker in a fight. I'm dishonest, but I give you my word, for what it's worth. I want out of this stinking hole as much as any of this lot.'

'He knows too much already - a curse on him and his pryin,' said Agapito. 'Let's be rid of him. We'll put the body in the incinerators next shift.'

Nathian sneered, but did not look afraid.

'No,' said Corvus. He looked at Nathian closely, and saw the feral danger behind his eyes. A multiple-killer, aged only thirteen. It was not pleasant, but what Corvus had planned would sometimes need men of cold disposition, not just courage. 'I can use him. Yes, Nathian - I accept your oath. And make no mistake, I will hold you to it.'

'WELL MET LORD Corax,' the former Raven Guard sneered. The wind tousled white hair across his thin face. 'You forgot the First Axiom of Stealth, brave leader. You came to me, exactly where I thought you would be.'

Corax tried to sit up. A sparking hammer smashed into his face, knocking him back. The lightning cannon crackled just a few metres away, ready to paralyse his armour with another blast the moment he tried to get free. There was satisfaction and monstrous intent in the eyes of the warrior holding it.

'Of course, getting you here was the easy part, I suppose,' Nathian continued. His voice was rasping, filled with bitterness. He glanced at the Emperor's Children legionary. 'Using some of the superior gene-serums from

Well, I won't bore you with the details. These are the 'New Men', as Fabius called them. He's an Apothecary, you know. Very clever.' He waved a hand towards the hulking warriors. 'I think the name's a little understated, though. The aborted failures in the cells aside, they are far more than men now, aren't they? We all are. 'Legiones Superior', maybe? I don't know, I was never the best with words. I left that sort of thing to Agapito. He has the poet's soul. Anyway, they don't really have a name yet, so I'm afraid you'll die in ignorance.'

Nathian walked away. Corax noticed a slight limp as the traitor Raven Guard disappeared back into the bunker. Around the primarch, the so-called New Men stepped forwards, raising their weapons.

'Time to find out how well the Emperor really made you,' said one of them, his bass voice modulated by the augmitter systems of his armour.

He fired a shot through Corax's left forearm. The primarch gritted his teeth, not permitting himself even a snarl; the traitors would be granted no additional pleasure by his cries of pain.

'Perhaps he needed to make you a little tougher,' the warrior sneered.

Corax surged up, leaping towards him. He was a step away from grabbing the traitor around the throat when searing pain crashed through his skull. As agony flared along his neural pathways and down his spine he realised that a fresh lightning blast had struck him in the head.

His nervous system failed him, plunging him face first into the gravel-strewn rockcrete. It took all of his effort to raise himself up, pushing with his left arm, ignoring the ache that throbbed down to his wrist.

A plasma blast smashed into his back, flattening the primarch with its detonation, melting the carefully forged feathers of his wings. Feedback from his armour blared warnings as coolants raced through the systems to stop the heat spreading further.

He was almost blind with the shock of the electrical hit and burning pain, barely able to focus on the ground just in front of him. Corax took in a shuddering breath, determined he would die on his feet, not on his face.

Another round smashed into his knee, cracking cartilage. He could not stop the cry that escaped from his lips. With a herculean effort he managed to flop over onto his back, wings closing beneath him.

He wasn't sure what happened next. One moment the warrior with the lightning cannon was stepping forward, chainblade raised with teeth whirring. An instant later he became a ball of fire and metal splinters, hurled bodily away by the explosion, an arm spinning off across the ground.

The roar of jets dragged Corax's eyes skyward and he looked up to see five black shapes plunging down from above, jump packs flaring.

The New Men reacted fast, turning their weapons on the incoming legionaries. A plasma bolt seared wide of its target but the traitor with the anti-tank gun found his mark, putting a round through the head of an incoming Raven Guard, turning helm and skull to a trailing mess of bone and blood.

The lead warrior landed on the hammer-handed soldier, plasma pistol vaporising the creature's face a second before the Raven Guard crashed feet first into its chest, cracking open armour and sending both spilling to the ground.

The other New Men rushed to the attack as more shapes with jump packs landed, the headless corpse of the last crashing to the ferrocrete a few metres away. Missiles and battle cannon fire from their wheeling dropship pounded the bunkers, secondary weapons stitching smaller detonations across the armour of the New Men while fire from the encircling emplacements tore past and crashed against the Stormbird's armoured fuselage.

The shock of the lightning blast was wearing off. Corax could feel sensation returning to his hands and feet. The Raven Guard fell as a pack onto their next target, hacking with power axes and blades, blasting with their pistols to drive the soldier away from their primarch.

Corax saw the plasma gunner turning his weapon on the black-armoured legionaries, recognising the glow of a fully charged weapon. With a snarl he forced himself from the ground and took a running leap, damaged flight pack flaring, slamming awkwardly shoulder first into the giant warrior. The plasma blast rocketed into the sky and the primarch followed it, his wings snapping out to carry them both up past the Stormbird, which was turning its weapons to the perimeter defences.

The comm crackled in Corax's ear.

'Lord Corax! This is Branne. The commandant's compound is a trap!'

'Thank you for the warning, commander,' Corax replied through gritted teeth.

The New Man had a grip on one of Corax's wings but the primarch extended both arms, prising away his enemy's grasp. Inverting quickly, he threw the mutated warrior groundwards and pitched after him. The New Man's impact threw up a cloud of dust and grit into which Corax dived without hesitation, slamming fist first into the brute, the blow carving through plate and into bone, splitting the augmented soldier from shoulder to gut.

'Shall I send reinforcements, my lord?' Branne sounded desperately worried.

'No,' Corax replied. He looked around. Two of the New Men were still alive, battling with the Raven Guard. The primarch ran towards the melee. 'Maintain current missions.'

The New Man with the sorcerous rifle heard the incoming primarch and turned, raising his weapon. Now fully focused Corax saw the flash of the muzzle and the dark blur of the armour-piercing round coming towards him. Still accelerating, he swayed to his left, letting the projectile pass harmlessly over his

right shoulder.

The traitor took a step back and hurriedly worked the breech mechanism of the heavy rifle. He chambered another round and lifted the weapon to his shoulder just as Corax reached him.

The primarch's uppercut caught the New Man square under the helm, lifting him from his feet as his head snapped back, dark filth erupting as Corax's fist parted metal and bone like air. He shouldered aside the flailing body as momentum carried the primarch into the last attacker.

The final New Man had the helm of one of the Raven Guard in an iron grip, ceramite cracking crazily and reinforced plate buckling under the pressure. The legionaries blazed with bolt pistols and hacked with their chainswords, futilely battering at the armoured behemoth.

Corax turned and landed feet first, snapping through both arms with mighty blows from his gauntlets, leaving the Raven Guard to topple backwards as the New Man stumbled away. A bestial half-roar, half-scream bellowed from the mutilated warrior's vocalisers as he waved the stumps of his limbs helplessly, black gore splashing to the ground.

Another kick sent him reeling back still further. Corax boosted his next step, leaping up half a dozen metres before crashing down upon the inhuman warrior. Fuelled by the realisation of how close he had come to dying, Corax let his emotions flow, tearing and shredding, fists a blur as he reduced armour to fragments, skin to strips and flesh to tatters.

When he was done he stepped back. The New Man had been turned into a ruin of congealing black fluid and severed limbs, scattered about with pieces of ceramite and plasteel.

Breathing heavily, Corax turned to his warriors, who were now exchanging fire with human soldiers racing out onto the top of the bunkers.

The legionaries' leader dragged off his dented helm and took in a ragged breath.

It was Arendi.

'Gherith? Why are you here?' The primarch glanced up as the Stormbird's engines changed in pitch, taking the gunship towards the outer defences. It was pocked with return fire but its cannons were still laying down a curtain of blasts along the emplacements. He returned his attention to Arendi. 'You were

supposed to be supporting Commander Soukhounou.'

The former bodyguard commander doubled over, coughing and retching. When he looked up at his primarch, Corax saw that Arendi's face was covered with the spreading darkness of massive bruises. He grinned and then winced at the pain this caused.

'Sometimes you're an idiot. Corvus,' said Arendi, using the name that few had since the coming of the Emperor. The primarch bridled at the comment but did not have time to reply before the legionary continued. 'The others told me what you said. 'Do you really think I need a bodyguard?' That was it, correct?'

Corax recalled saying those words on Istvan V, after the Thunderhawk carrying them all had been downed.

'Something like that,' the primarch answered, feeling suddenly foolish for such bravado. 'How did you know about

about all of this? Did you know about Nathian?'

'Not as such, no,' said Arendi. The Space Marine tossed away his deformed helmet. 'There were rumours - some of the Legion sided with the traitors after the massacre at the Urgall Depression. There was some connection to this place but nothing solid. We were preparing to link up with Soukhounou when we caught a flash of open-band traffic. Something about a target approaching the commandant's compound. I just figured that, as usual, you would get yourself into more trouble than you were worth. Branne filled us in. Sorry we did not get here sooner.'

The primarch looked away, taking in his surroundings. They were still out in the open and vulnerable to attack. The Raven Guard had despatched the first wave of soldiers from the roofs but more would be on their way.

'Probably best that we move inside,' he told the others, stepping towards the nearest bunker door. 'Follow me. Clear the complex.'

'And if we find that ill-spawned bastard Nathian?' asked one of the legionaries.

'Mine,' Corax snapped in reply. He flexed his fingers in anticipation of them closing on the turncoat Raven Guard. 'Another traitor that needs to be taught the folly of not finishing the task at hand.'

XV

Carandiru [DV +2.5 hours]

The LAST TWO survivors fled down the corridor, not looking back. Corax dashed after them, long strides assisted by half-opened wings so that he seemed to glide between every step. Reaching his prey, he drove his armoured hands through their backpacks, shattering vertebrae, and lifted them both from the ground. Their panicked flailing caused him no difficulty.

Another door opened to his left as he tossed their twitching bodies aside. He turned to see several Raven Guard, weapons at the ready, with Arendi at their head.

‘Follow me,’ said the primarch. He turned his back on the new arrivals to head down the corridor towards the main chamber of the keep.

A cold rage burned through the primarch at the thought of Nathian’s betrayal. It was not the notion that a Raven Guard might side with Horus that drew his ire; intellectually Corax understood there would be warriors from his Legion who had fallen to the temptations of rebellion. With Nathian the treachery seemed personal. Corax had favoured Nathian over doubts keenly expressed by others, taking him in to the inner circle of the rebellion on Lycaeus and later, bringing him into the Raven Guard against the objections of others.

Perhaps that was what angered Corax: that he should have known better. Nathian’s betrayal was the primarch’s pride staring back at him, an embodiment of Corax’s refusal to back down, so often a boon but on occasion a terrible vice.

With these thoughts burning through him the leader of the Raven Guard cut and smashed his way through the scarlet-uniformed soldiers he found in his path, barely giving them a second thought. He gave more mind to the cracks and holes and burns of his armour and the soreness of the wounds within; reminders of how close Nathian had come to killing his former master.

The inner sanctum was located underground, reached by several sloping corridors. Corax stopped to despatch Arendi and the remaining bodyguards to cut off escape, but the primarch knew that Nathian would be waiting for retribution. There had always been a nihilistic streak in the traitor, which Corax had hoped loyalty and dedication to new duty would erase.

Now that he was unfettered by oath or fraternity, Nathian's less favourable tendencies had come to the fore.

Corax descended to the next level and then paused. Nathian had boasted that Corax had been easy to predict. Did the renegade have some other welcome planned for the primarch in his headquarters? It seemed very likely, but unless Nathian had created a whole brigade of New Men to wait in ambush with a forge world's worth of experimental weapons - and evidence suggested that was not the case - Corax could not foresee what threat the former legionary posed.

The hydraulics of the door rumbled open at Corax's approach.

Through the doorway the primarch could see Nathian, his back turned, hunched in front of a bank of screens. Lights glimmered from his black armour and his face was lit by the images on the displays. Corax saw that they were vid-feeds from across Carandiru - scenes of battle around the various installations and monitors showing the populace overthrowing their guards in the internment settlements.

The door opposite hissed open to reveal Arendi's stealthy warriors. Corax held up a hand and waved them back, preferring to enter the traitor's lair alone. He was impervious to all but the most powerful weapons, but his legionaries were not.

Nathian turned as Corax crossed the threshold. He smiled, thin lipped, eyes filled with madness.

'Nice of you to come after me,' said the renegade. 'Welcome to my abode.'

Corax glanced around the chamber. It was about twenty metres across, on two levels, with a broad walkway around the walls alongside consoles of comms equipment and scanning arrays, and a lower circular sub-floor in the middle furnished with chairs, tables and cabinets.

'Messy,' Corax said, curling a lip at the detritus piled on the floor and furnishings. Most seemed to be empty bottles. The primarch cocked a curious eye towards his foe. 'Drinking? Really?'

Nathian shrugged.

'Fraid so, my lord. But have no fear, I'm perfectly sober at the moment. Do you know how hard it is to get drunk when you have all these special extra organs processing toxins out of your bloodstream?' Nathian gestured towards his torso. 'Another fine gift of the Emperor. A man who, if ever I've met one, needs

to enjoy a good drink now and then.'

'I am going to kill you,' said Corax.

'Of course you are,' said Nathian.

'But first you are going to answer my questions.'

'If you like.' Nathian said, stepping down into the sub-level. He slumped into an oversized chair, armour wheezing, the metal of the seat protesting under his weight. 'Make yourself comfortable.'

'What happened to you on Isstvan? I thought you were dead,' said Corax, ignoring the traitor's taunts. 'Why turn on me now?'

'You abandoned me first!' snarled Nathian with real passion in his voice and eyes. He stood up and jabbed an accusing finger at the primarch. 'Buried beneath a pile of Word Bearers I slew with my own bolter and blade, you left me and dozens of others.'

'I never left you. I was wounded. Your loyal brothers took me away.'

'Before that,' said Nathian, waving away Corax's reasons. 'When you quit the fight with the Night Haunter and Lorgar. You ran. You left us to die!'

Corax said nothing, jaw tightening at the memory.

'I see you know what I'm talking about. I gave you everything - soul and body, life and death. I believed in you, in the Emperor and his damned crusade. That's what you did to me, Corvus. You made me believe in something, made me proud.' Nathian sighed and turned away, fists clenched. 'And then you left me, proving the lie of everything that had come before.'

'It was not a lie. The treachery of Horus w'

'Horus? You blame Horus?' The traitor whirled back, eyes bright and wide with rage, blood flushing his pale cheeks. 'Horus was not there on the battlefields of Isstvan. You were!' His voice dropped. 'And Lorgar was there. He found me, and some of the others, hurt and discarded. And when he spoke the fog was lifted from my eyes - fog you have spun around me with your posturing and lies!'

'Lorgar cares nothing for you.'

'He spoke and we listened and it made sense, proper sense, for the first time in decades. The nature of the universe, the things you wouldn't tell us for fear we would see that we no longer needed you. And his love

He loved us and told us so, and we felt the truth of it. And so the love we gave you that was never returned we gave to him instead.'

'Pathetic,' snapped Corax. 'Absolutely pathetic.' He turned slowly, gesturing at everything around them. 'Self-indulgent, pathetic and weak. Everything I would expect of a traitor. You learned nothing from me. You grew up in a prison and now you become the jailer? You want to torture and maim those weaker than you? What vileness did Lorgar and the others pour into you? For the architect of these 'New Men', you're nothing but an insane egotist.'

'Really?' Nathian's voice rose in pitch and broke. 'I found a use here. You had a use for me once.' He laughed, baring yellowing teeth. 'And besides, you call me insane?'

He bounded up to the outer walkway and stabbed at controls, bringing up a pict-feed on one of the larger screens. Corax felt a knot in his stomach and his mouth dried as he watched a squad of Branne's Raptors breaking into a cell wing - warriors that his gene-manipulations had tainted.

'That's different,' he said before Nathian could voice his accusation, but the words sounded weak, a flimsy excuse, and the traitor knew it.

'So different, my lord. So very different.' Nathian bared his teeth, brow furrowed with rage. 'The difference is that I am honest about what I have done here. You will never stand in judgement of me again, Corvus. None of you!'

He took in a shuddering breath and turned back to the console. His hands activated several controls and then he whirled back to confront Corax. Now there was real madness in his gaze, a mania that made Corax shudder.

'You don't rule my fate. Nobody does!'

Corax's eyes moved to a small screen with a flickering message on the display.

REACTOR SAFEGUARDS DISABLED.

'That is your grand plan?' said Corax. 'Self-destruction? You know I will kill you.'

He saw that Nathian had a bolt pistol in his hand. 'No. No, you will not.'

'That is not going to do me much harm, is it?' said Corax.

'Oh, this is going to hurt you for a long time to come, Corvus. Maybe the rest of your immortal life.'

And with that, Nathian pressed the muzzle of the bolt pistol under his own chin and pulled the trigger.

The bolt cut up through his mouth. A millisecond later, the top of Nathian's head disappeared in a fountain of blood, bone and brains, and he collapsed back onto the console.

Corax's face was spattered red. Jaw clenched, he wiped the gore from his features, unable to tear his gaze from the ruin that he had once called comrade, disturbed in a way that he had not been since he had looked into the eyes of the Night Hunter and seen a dark reflection of himself. Were death and despair the only gifts he had to offer?

Then his eyes flickered to the reactor display. It was at eighty per cent of critical function and had been building for some time - ever since the New Men had been killed, Corax assumed. Nathian's tirade had been nothing but a play for time.

The other door hissed open and Arendi dashed in. His puffy eyes searched the room for threat before they settled on Nathian's corpse. They then moved to the countdown display and widened.

'I heard a shot.'

'The traitor has set the plasma reactor to overload,' Corax confirmed as he crossed the chamber.

'I always thought he was a spiteful bastard.' There was understandable concern in Arendi's voice. 'How long do we have? Should we evacuate?'

'I shouldn't think so,' said Corax. He carefully punched in a command, bringing up a code-protected access display. The primarch's fingers tapped out numbers on the runepad and then the screen went blank. A few seconds later an acknowledgement scrolled into view.

RFACOR SAFEGUARDS ENABLED. SAFE OPERATIONAL MODE RESTORED.

'You already knew the code?' Arendi stared at Corax with awe, mouth open.

'No,' replied the primarch. 'Nathian was never an original thinker. The pass-code was his prisoner number from Lycaeus. Lucky first guess.'

'I

'Arendi shook his head, confused and then waved away his concerns. 'Well,

it is good that we're in no immediate danger. I wouldn't have believed even Nathian could turn on you, if I hadn't seen some of the things I've seen these last few years. It looks like he couldn't handle it, even then, whatever his justifications were.'

'He was weak,' said Corax. 'I knew it, and I should never have ignored it.'

'Seems to me he had a moment of weakness, you're right. But you're an idiot if you think it was easy for him. Anyone that's survived until this point, on either side, has shown a strength of sorts, be it for good or bad.'

'That's the second time you've called me an idiot, Gherith,' Corax said quietly. 'Nathian made the mistake of underestimating me as well.'

'You think

'Arendi looked at the headless body. 'You think I'm like him?'

'I am detecting a fair amount of insubordination in you,' the primarch said.

Arendi looked wounded at his words. 'I know things have changed a lot, but I never knew you would put yourself above criticism, Corvus. If I speak out of turn, it's because I've learnt that softening words is a waste of time. Mean what you say, as the saying goes. If you want prim and proper Ultramarines doing as they're told, or zealous Word Bearers hanging off your every word, you shouldn't have tried so bloody hard to make us rely on ourselves. If you want Raven Guard, you have to take the rough with the smooth. I remember when you weren't so keen on formality.'

The former commander seemed to be testing Corax. He had called him "Corvus", just like Nathian, harking back to those older times.

Why was he goading his primarch? Maybe there was something else happening here

'It was you that told me about this place,' said Corax.

'It was.' Arendi looked around at the screens and nodded. 'Good thing I did. These 'New Men' freaks could have been a big problem, if the traitors had perfected the gene-techniques.'

'And so it was coincidence that Nathian was here, waiting to trap me?'

'I wouldn't call it coincidence, but I don't know what you're implying.'

The primarch gestured to the walls around them. 'A facility dedicated to manipulating and mutating the Legiones Astartes geneseed? And of all those that

might discover it, it falls to me, the one primarch that has learnt more about the origins of our kind than anyone else? That stretches credulity. I think that whoever created this place knew I had access to secret knowledge. How else would they get me here, except through one of my own?’

‘Why are you looking at me like that, Corvus? I brought you here to end this.’

‘Find what? My fight? The resistance to Horus? It’s too neat. Victories do not come this easily anymore.’

‘I should warn you - I’m about to use that word a third time, Corvus,’ Arendi muttered, backing away. ‘And some others you might not like.’

Corax stepped closer, looming over the Space Marine, his voice dropping to a whisper. ‘How did you get off Isstvan, Gherith? What happened to the others? Where are they now?’

‘I don’t understand you, lord.’ Arendi took another step back, retreating into a console.

‘This place was not the secret you were keeping from me. The librarian saw it, in your head. Something you were not telling me. Nathian has made me think about it again. We were lucky to get away from Isstvan with our lives. Nathian did a deal with Lorgar in return for his. How did you get away, Arendi, when so many didn’t?’

‘I can’t believe

‘Arendi slumped, jaw trembling, eyes downcast.

‘How?’ Corax was implacable, barely keeping his anger in check.

‘We used them!’ Arendi blurted. ‘We - myself and the other Raven Guard - were meant to take the lighter and wait for the others. They were attacking the main facility, a feint while we slipped unseen into position. We used the Salamanders and Iron Hands as a distraction and made our escape.’

He stepped back from Corax, his shoulders hunched, his head bowed.

‘You sacrificed them?’ Corax said, shocked.

It was not the answer he had been expecting, but it was small comfort. The truth was almost as harsh as the primarch’s fear had been. Yet for all that, Corax could hear the hurt, the honest guilt, in Arendi’s words.

‘There were more traitors at the landing field station than we had thought.’

Arendi turned haunted, imploring eyes to the primarch. 'We had to leave. Had to. If we had waited, nobody would have escaped.'

The primarch looked at the headless corpse and considered two different fates. Arendi, who had continued to hope, and Nathian, who had given in to despair. 'I understand,' he said. 'It was a difficult choice for you.'

Arendi took a breath and straightened, still not meeting the primarch's eye.

It was a worry. Perhaps Arendi had not betrayed his primarch or the Raven Guard, but there were oaths of brotherhood that he had broken. The trust of comrades that he had betrayed. If Lorgar had spun his golden words to Arendi, would he have fared any better than Nathian?

Could any of them ever truly be trusted?

So said the cautious part of him, at least, but Corax knew that in treacherous times it was easy to see traitors everywhere. Could he trust Arendi? No, but then he no longer truly trusted himself. Risks had been taken and confidences had to be earned. If Arendi had wanted Corax dead or in Nathian's clutches, then he could have simply left him to be bested by the New Men.

The only reason to let Corax survive as it had transpired would be to get another traitor close to the primarch. Could such a convoluted suspicion be true?

Caution and paranoia, a grey area easily crossed. No, Corax had no reason not to trust Arendi, and the damage done by the knowledge of Nathian's treachery becoming known could be offset by the example set by Arendi and his companions.

Hope was too valuable an asset to sacrifice it to paranoia.

'One other thing, Gherith.'

'Lord Corax?'

The primarch did not have to trust Arendi, but he could choose to. For the moment, at least.

'Thank you. For keeping faith with me.'

EPILOGUE

Carandiru [DV +2 days]

‘I’m NOT SURE this is right,’ said Branne. The words were spoken quietly but the weight of his disagreement spoke at far greater volume.

Corax looked down at the commander and then across to the squads of Raptors forming up on the ramps leading to the underground complex where the failed New Men were still imprisoned.

‘We cannot leave them alive,’ Corax said heavily.

‘No, lord, but

‘ Branne waved a hand at the Raptors. ‘Why them?’

The primarch studied the groups of misshapen warriors gathering around their squad leaders. Nearby their cleanlimbed brother-Raptors watched in silence, standing guard over files of enemy soldiers being led out of the compound.

‘This was your assigned battlezone, commander,’ said Corax. He kept his voice quiet and calm, but he was not immune to Branne’s misgivings. ‘I know it seems cruel but it has to be this way. No special treatment. That’s what we said.’

‘Monsters to kill monsters,’ whispered Branne. ‘Is this what we’ve become?’

Corax did not share his thoughts as he watched the first of the squads descending into the complex, bestial and deformed. He replayed Nathian’s final act of spite in his memory. Perhaps, he thought, this was what we have always been.