

THE HORUS HERESY

Graham McNeill

THE SEVENTH SERPENT

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To Adam Hall, for his insight into what makes a novella work.

THE HORUS HERESY

It is a time of legend.

The galaxy is in flames. The Emperor's glorious vision for humanity is in ruins. His favoured son, Horus, has turned from his father's light and embraced Chaos.

His armies, the mighty and redoubtable Space Marines, are locked in a brutal civil war. Once, these ultimate warriors fought side by side as brothers, protecting the galaxy and bringing mankind back into the Emperor's light. Now they are divided.

Some remain loyal to the Emperor, whilst others have sided with the Warmaster. Pre-eminent amongst them, the leaders of their thousands-strong Legions, are the primarchs. Magnificent, superhuman beings, they are the crowning achievement of the Emperor's genetic science. Thrust into battle against one another, victory is uncertain for either side.

Worlds are burning. At Istvan V, Horus dealt a vicious blow and three loyal Legions were all but destroyed. War was begun, a conflict that will engulf all mankind in fire. Treachery and betrayal have usurped honour and nobility. Assassins lurk in every shadow. Armies are gathering. All must choose a side or die.

Horus musters his armada, Terra itself the object of his wrath. Seated upon the Golden Throne, the Emperor waits for his wayward son to return. But his true enemy is Chaos, a primordial force that seeks to enslave mankind to its capricious whims.

The screams of the innocent, the pleas of the righteous resound to the cruel laughter of Dark Gods. Suffering and damnation await all should the Emperor fail and the war be lost.

The age of knowledge and enlightenment has ended. The Age of Darkness has begun.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

The Sisypheum

ULRACH BRANTHAN, Captain, Iron Hands 65th Clan-Company

CADMUS TYRO, Equerry to Captain Branthan

FRATER THAMATICA, Ironwrought, Avemii veteran

VERMANA CYBUS, Avernii veteran

SEPTUS THOIC, Avernii veteran

IGNATIUS NUMEN, Battle-brother

SABIK WAYLAND, Iron Father

NYKONA SHARROWKYN, Raven Guard Legion, 66th Company

ATESH TARSA, Apothecary, Salamanders Legion, 24th Company

The Iron Heart

SHADRAK MEDUSON, Captain, Tenth Clan-Company

GASKON MALTHACE, Equerry to Shadrak Meduson

ASHUR MAESAN, Sergeant, Tenth Clan-Company

The XX Legion "Alpha Legion"

ALPHARIUS, Primarch of the Alpha Legion

CHAITIN, Legate

SEYHAN, Infiltrator

"Youth is easily deceived because it is quick to hope."

- attributed to Arystotle of Stagira

***'Unless a serpent devours a serpent,
it will not become a dragon.***

***Unless one power absorbs another,
it will not become great.'***

- proverb, circa MI

ONE

The Bird Thamatica For the Emperor

ULRACH BRANTHAN HAD called his cyber-eagle Garuda. The name was that of a mythical devourer of the silver serpents said to dwell in the Land of Shadow - a noble hunter whose birth fires consumed the ancient gods of Medusa.

The Iron Hands aboard the *Sisyphium* knew it simply as "the Bird" and, since its resurrection, hope had spread that their fallen captain might also rise from his icy sepulchre.

The eagle's golden body was wrought from exquisite clockwork mechanisms and lost ingenuity, more a work of art than engineering. One wing was gold, the other silver, and where one leg was articulated ivory and brass, the other was pressed steel and polycarbonate resin.

A scar-faced bladesman of the Emperor's Children had shot Garuda from the air on Iydris, but Sabik Wayland and Frater Thamatica had worked on the cyber-eagle with all the care and attention an Apothecary would bestow upon a wounded Iron Lord.

They had restored its broken wing and twisted leg, somehow managing to restart the arcane mechanism within its heart - though neither could quite settle on *how* they had done it.

Thamatica claimed Garuda was an artefact crafted by the first settlers of Medusa, but Wayland disagreed, believing the avian automaton to be a relic from an even earlier epoch. Long would they debate the provenance of their fallen lord's golden eagle.

While Ulrich Branthan hovered near death in his frosted casket, Cadmus Tyro was Garuda's current master, and he cared nothing for its origins.

All he cared about was killing traitors.

GARUDA FLEW THROUGH the ruin of the strike cruiser's starboard embarkation deck, alighting on the wreckage of a blazing Stormbird. Warning lumens painted bulkheads crimson. Klaxons filled the air with mechanised screeching. Violated integrity fields sought to keep out the frozen vacuum of space.

The *Zeta Morgeld* howled in fury at its attackers.

They marched from the belly of a screaming Thunderhawk, shields locked and weapons blazing, thirty giants in black battleplate. They pushed into the smoke of their explosive entry like obsidian ghosts, ice-white gauntlets glittering on every shoulder guard.

Ship-to-ship boarding actions. Brutal, bloody affairs. Merciless killing in confined spaces. Firefights waged at arm's length. No room to manoeuvre. Hammering shields, barging body work.

Fighting that only the Legiones Astartes could endure.

The kind of fighting at which the Iron Hands excelled.

Bearing a heavy shield and clad in void-hardened plate of scarred black, Cadmus Tyro was first onto the deck of the enemy ship - a pitiless veteran of the infamy at Isstvan with a flint-hard soul.

His warriors followed him onto the stricken *Morgeld*.

They slammed into the deck's defenders - ravager packs of weaponised servitors armed with energised piston-hammers and hook-halberds. Behind these monstrosities, dark-robed adepts fled for transit arches leading into the heart of the ship.

The combatants slammed together with a thunderous clamour of metal on metal. Shields bludgeoned, blades stabbed. Explosive shells punched into flesh and armour at point-blank range. The Iron Hands leaned into the advance, pushing the foe back with inexorable force.

Bolters fired with metronomic regularity. Legion swords cut like the threshing blades of an industrial harvester. Tyro shot a pallid-fleshed combat-servitor in the throat then barged it to the deck with a blow from his shield.

Septus Thoic had refused a boarding shield in favour of a heavy bolter. The veteran braced himself at the head of the Thunderhawk's assault ramp and swept the deck with heavy-calibre mass-reactives. Combat-servitors were pitched back, reduced to scraps of meat and reinforced bone.

Beside Thoic, Ignatius Numen hefted the volkite he had acquired on Iydris and leaping beams of searing heat cut down the fleeing adepts with cold efficiency.

'Secure those transit arches,' said Tyro, and the column of Iron Hands split to capture the flanking routes.

Speed was paramount in a boarding action.

Secure a bridgehead, push out and keep moving. Always moving.

Tyro's bolter slammed hard against his grip with each squeeze of the trigger. Each shot fired in time with his relentless lockstep. His shield took the battering impact of three explosive shells.

'Bolter fire,' he said, recognising the power of heavier shells. He turned in time

to see a warrior launch himself through the smoke. Rich indigo-blue armour edged in silver. A hydra-glyph on the left shoulder guard.

Alpha Legion.

A gladius thrust for his gorget.

Tyro gave a quarter turn and pistoned his shield forwards. The incoming blade shattered. He snapped his bolter from the firing slot and rammed it through the faceplate of the traitor's helm. No need to pull the trigger, but he did anyway.

'Reckless fool,' said Tyro, stamping over the headless corpse.

Hardened blast shutters were coming down in the transit arches, but ground to a halt less than halfway into their descent.

Tyro grunted with grim amusement.

'Well done, Thamatica, well done indeed,' he said.

From its perch atop the burning Stormbird, Garuda watched the killing impassively. The flames of war reflected from its compound eyes, chips of sapphire limned with hazy winter's light.

THAT SAME LIGHT shimmered beneath Frater Thamatica's eyelids as he sat in a specially constructed vault deep in the *Sisyphium*. His eyes darted back and forth as he watched the fighting on the enemy ship's embarkation deck via an MIU cable slotted into the socket drilled at the nape of his neck.

The Bird sat on the remains of a Stormbird that Tyro's Thunderhawk had gutted with its dorsal battle cannon upon breaching the embarkation deck's integrity field. Then the Bird cocked its head to the side, and Thamatica fought the urge to alter his own posture. It was no proxy cyber-creature, and Wayland was not in control of this experience.

'Hold still, you wretched thing,' said Thamatica, but the Bird paid him no mind. It did what it wanted, lending - as far as Wayland had been concerned - further credence to his belief in its pre-Medusan origins.

Through its eyes, Thamatica watched Cadmus Tyro's warriors eliminate the defenders of the embarkation deck and push deeper into the *Morgeld*. He blinked his visual feed over to the link with the *Sisyphium*'s main cogitator engine. The view through the Bird's eyes vanished, replaced by a glowing schematic of the *Morgeld*'s interior structure. Obsessive attention to detail, an eidetic memory and the decades he'd spent training on Mars had allowed Thamatica to stock the *Sisyphium*'s cogitators with accurate schematics of every currently listed traitor vessel.

According to Martian launch docket, the *Zeta Morgeld* departed Mars twelve years ago, making it one of the newest ships in the Imperial fleet registry.

The Iron Hands aboard the vessel were picked out with golden skulls enclosed

in toothed cogs. Where their positions were known, Alpha Legionnaires were hydran green.

Cadmus Tyro was advancing deep into the guts of the *Morgeld* from the starboard embarkation deck, a knife thrust to capture the bridge. To keep the Alpha Legion from escaping, Vermana Cybus fought his way towards the engine spaces.

'Captain Tyro,' said Thamatica. 'A choke point approaches fifty metres to your fore. Advise you take the lateral companionway ten metres perpendicular to the axis of your advance to reach an upper transit.'

'Understood,' came Tyro's clipped response. He was a man of few words, and even more so in a combat situation. Bolter fire echoed over the vox together with the clanging impacts of mass-reactives on boarding shields. The Alpha Legion fought hard to defend their vessel with a ferocity that surprised Thamatica.

It shouldn't have, of course.

With their love of indirect means of war, it was all too easy to forget that the sons of Alpharius were still a Legion of transhuman fighters.

Thamatica monitored the battle through the feeds of Iron Hands' strike teams and remote telemetry from the Bird. It kept pace with Cadmus Tyro, affording Thamatica a scouting view ahead of the boarders. He issued real-time warnings of Alpha Legion counter-attacks and alternate routes to target.

As the attack progressed, the engine spaces fell swiftly and Tyro's warriors swept up the vessel towards the bridge. With the fall of the main axial route a sharp screech, like a nail down a slate, dragged Thamatica from his battle-management.

Veils of informational light fell away from his sight and the stolid weight of the chamber re-established itself around him. Fresh-cut walls of bare iron, newly built and many-layered.

Banks of humming machinery surrounded the Ironwrought, and a host of heavily insulated cables were connected to the room's only other occupant.

It - Thamatica couldn't bring himself to think of it as a *he* - sat opposite him, bound to a bare iron throne with fetters of adamantium at its wrists and ankles.

Thamatica knew there was little need. The Kryptos wasn't going anywhere, but ever since Sabik Wayland and Nykona Sharrowkyn had captured the code-breaking cypher creature on Cavor Sarta, Cadmus Tyro had insisted it be kept immobile.

The flesh of its horrific face was corpse-pale, its jaw an obscene arrangement of articulated parts, augmitters, vox-grilles and sound-producing elements that made a mockery of anatomy. The creature's skull was a grotesque amalgam of a cogitator's punch-interface and biological specimen jar: a brass-and-flesh

arrangement of xenos-formed anatomy suspended within a crackling glass compartment.

Its eyes were unblinking orbs - dull and insensate for the most part, but now filled with desperate need and pain. A wet stream of garbled machine noise brayed from the clicking, chewing, spitting mouth, meaningless to anyone without the correct augments or a form of wetware that violently resisted any attempt to duplicate it.

Thamatica glanced at the data-slate implanted on a lectern bolted to the floor in front of the Kryptos. Streams of information cascaded across it.

Gibberish and nonsense code for now.

'Wayland,' said Thamatica.

'I see it, Frater,' said Sabik Wayland from somewhere aboard the *Morgeld*. *'An encrypted transmission.'*

'You are closer to the source, can you jam it?'

'I already am,' said Wayland. *'I wasn't made Iron Father yesterday, you know.'*

'Ah, but when measured next to my experience, you might as well have been,' said Thamatica, as the enemy transmission washed through the blasphemous mechanisms engineered and gene-spliced into the Kryptos.

'Have no fear,' said Wayland. *'Their cry for help has been strangled at birth.'*

'Good work, lad...' said Thamatica, his words trailing off as he read the words on the data-slate.

'Frater? What is it?'

Thamatica shut off the link to Wayland, calling up the glowing schematic of the *Morgeld's* interior.

'Cadmus!' he said, fighting to keep the excitement from his voice. 'You need to get onto the bridge and seize it right now! Do whatever it takes, but get in there.'

'What in the name of Ferrus do you think I'm doing, Frater?' snapped Tyro.

'Whatever it is, do it faster,' said Thamatica. 'They'll be trying to delete the log and astrogation data.'

'So? Why do I care where this ship has been?'

'You don't understand, young Tyro, it's where it's *going* that matters,' said Thamatica. 'By the looks of it, the *Morgeld* is en route to rendezvous with Alpharius himself!'

ACCESS TO THE bridge of a warship was intentionally difficult, and the *Zeta Morgeld* was no exception, a long and narrow approach that began at a cramped Y-junction.

'No projecting stanchions, bulkheads or places to hide,' said Cadmus Tyro, ducking back as a hail of autocannon fire from the emplaced door turrets filled

the approach with searing tracers of shells.

'You expected any different?' grunted Septus Thaic from the opposite side of the junction.

'I hoped different,' he shrugged. 'It's Alpha Legion.'

'Going to have to run the full gauntlet,' shouted Ignatius Numen, finally reading Tyro's words on his helm visor. 'Shields locked tight, shoulders down and take the pain.'

A plasma grenade on Isstvan had given Numen an artificial sheen to his skin and taken his eyes. It had also partially deafened him, a wounding that one of Fulgrim's debased followers had finished.

Tyro nodded. No time to do this any way other than directly.

'Only wide enough for three abreast,' said Thaic.

'Then you and Numen are with me,' said Tyro, bringing his shield about. He mag-locked his bolter to his thigh. He'd need both arms to keep the shield steady. 'Ready? Upon the anvil.'

'And by the Iron,' finished Thaic. Numen nodded a second later. Both had handed off their heavy weapons and hefted borrowed shields - monstrous sheets of Avernii blacksteel emblazoned with the argent gauntlet of the Legion.

Tyro moved first, stepping brazenly from cover and planting his shield down hard on the deck. Shellfire from the twin turrets immediately slammed into the metal, percussive impacts like hammerblows an inch from his visor. Thaic and Numen took station either side an instant later, shields vibrating with clangs of detonation.

'Go!' shouted Tyro, and the three of them pushed into the hurricane of fire.

He gritted his teeth as the relentless impacts numbed his arm in seconds. Step by step they pushed down the approach, the noise deafening. Heads and shoulders down, legs braced and wide, bodies angled towards the streams of fire.

'Like walking into the teeth of a Medusan ash storm,' roared Numen as though he were enjoying the experience.

'Keep going, don't slacken the pace!' yelled Tyro. 'Momentum is everything.'

Thaic stumbled as a ricochet clipped the side of his helm. A gap opened. Tyro grunted as sudden fire roared up his arm. A hit. He ground his teeth, blocking the pain.

No weakness, not now.

Thaic hauled himself upright with a bellow of self-reproach. He thrust his shield back into line, pushing even harder. Tyro saw a gouge just to the right of Thaic's eye lens. A millimetre to the left and his helm would be a sloshing vault of bone and pulped brain matter.

A booming impact behind him made Tyro turn.

A heavy blast shield, like something he'd expect to see on a gunnery deck, now filled the corridor, cutting them off from the rest of the assault force.

And that wasn't the only unwelcome surprise.

Portions of the coffered wall panels were moving on either side of the corridor, veils of gunsmoke drawn towards areas of negative pressure. Gaping voids instead of pressed and riveted steel. A pair of indigo-armoured warriors stepped into view with heavy, thudding footfalls.

Vast, vaguely humanoid shapes that filled the passageway.

Tyro's heart sank as he recognised the deadly silhouettes.

'Terminators!' he shouted. 'Plant your shields! Turn and engage.'

All three slammed their shields down again as Tyro freed his arm. He spun and dropped to his haunches, his own shield locking tight to his back as he thrust his arms to the side. He gripped the handles of his brothers' shields in support as repeated impacts forced him down. Heat enveloped his shoulders as the armour's servo muscles fought against the storm of shells.

Thoic and Numen snapped their bolters free and opened fire on the Terminators, full auto. Shells blazed down the corridor, detonating against their impossibly thick armour.

It didn't even slow the titanic killers.

They might as well have been shooting a Land Raider.

The jade hydra icons glittered in the half-light of the corridor, the ruby eyes of their serpentine heads alive with wicked intent. Each warrior's helm was grotesquely horned, their shoulder guards mockingly draped with scraps of war-banners torn from the standards of their former kinsmen.

'For the Emperor,' the Terminators said in unison, and their combi-bolters filled the corridor with mass-reactive shells.

TWO

Shadow and Iron

Spoils

The sepulchre

THOIC AND NUMEN pressed themselves hard against the walls, but there was no escaping the fusillade of mass-reactives. Two shells struck Thoic's gorget and visor, spinning him into the path of two more. He dropped to the deck with blood arcing from his ruptured plates.

Numen bent low into the storm, taking the brunt of the fire on his shoulder guards. Miraculously, every shell ricocheted from the curved plates without detonating. With a roar of hatred, Numen threw himself at the nearest Terminator.

A clubbing fist of elephantine proportions picked Numen up and slammed him hard against the bulkhead. Numen's strangled cry over the vox was grating with shattered bone and wet with blood.

The Terminators stepped forwards together.

'Captain Tyro,' said a voice that seemed to whisper over the vox. *'Drop to the deck. And hold on to something.'*

Tyro knew that voice and knew better than to argue. He released the shields and dropped his exhausted arms, throwing himself flat on the deck Plates.

The fire from the turrets pummelled the Terminators, halting their advance. Tactical Dreadnought armour was proof against most things, but even it had its limits. A combi-bolter exploded as its magazine took a hit and the Alpha Legionnaire staggered as his arm disappeared below the elbow.

The second Alpha Legion Terminator bent low and lumbered towards Tyro. High-calibre shells exploded against his armour, cracking the plates and drawing blood. Not enough to stop him, but he was hurting.

The turrets' targeting augurs abruptly disengaged upon registering friendlies. Tyro looked up to see the second Terminator poised to crush him beneath its giant boot.

Above the emerald hydra symbol, a fulminate-bright halo of light appeared on the ceiling. Tyro knew of only one weapon that could cause that effect.

Lascutter.

He gripped the mesh decking hard enough to bend the steel.

The Terminator looked up in time to see a three-metre section of the ceiling blow out in a rush of detonation. Hurricane-force wind rammed up through the ceiling, and Tyro saw a series of concentric holes above it, leading all the way to the void of space.

Not even the immense mass of a Terminator could compete with the force of explosive decompression. The Alpha Legionnaire flew up through the ceiling, like a bullet shot from a gun as he was hurled out into space.

Tyro was lifted into the air and spun around by the decompressive storm. His boots slammed into the wall and he activated the magnetic clamps. He saw Numen and Thoic farther down the corridor, also mag-locked against the bulkhead.

The wounded Terminator had been too far from the hole to be dragged into the void. He too was mag-locked. The sudden drop in pressure abruptly equalised, the hull breach sealed somewhere above.

He fell to the deck as a dark shape dropped through the hole in the ceiling. A warrior, armoured in black plate, but a black that seemed utterly non-reflective and which actively repelled light. His bulk marked him a legionary, but one who moved like no other warrior Tyro knew.

The warrior vaulted towards the Terminator, kicking off the wall and triggering a compact jump pack. Blue-hot jets carried him over the Terminator's shoulder in a graceful parabola.

A black-bladed gladius that reflected no light plunged down into the Terminator's weakest point, the sliver of flex-seal between his gorget and the base of his helm. A squirting geyser of blood fountained from the traitor's neck as the obsidian-edged gladius severed his carotid artery.

It kept pumping even as the Terminator halted, the warrior within dead, but kept upright by his armour's weight.

Nykona Sharrowkyn of the Raven Guard landed lightly behind his victim as another figure dropped through the hole in the ceiling. He landed hard, cratering the deck plates, and Tyro saw he bore a pair of heavy breaching charges under each arm. Diffuse light from an energy field above limned his armour in pellucid blue illumination.

This warrior was also armoured in black, but his was the black of the Iron Hands, and bore the mailed gauntlet.

'Wayland?' said Tyro.

Sabik Wayland didn't answer and moved past him to affix the breaching charges to the blast shutters securing the bridge. He slammed his palms on the activation triggers and ran back to Tyro.

He picked up Ignatius Numen's shield and hunkered down behind it. 'Right

now would be a good time to lift that shield again, Captain Tyro.'

WITH THE FALL of the bridge, the battle was won and the stripping operation on the *Zeta Morgeld* went into full effect. Weapons, ammunition, spare parts, fuel, tools and raw materials, even a pair of Stormbirds on the port-side launch rails. Nothing would be wasted. The thrall crew of the *Sisyphium* would leave this ship a gutted hulk before casting it and its dead crew into the nuclear heart of a star.

The detritus of battle had been cleared from the embarkation deck and cargo haulers from the *Sisyphium* were being loaded by bulk-servitors that had once served the Alpha Legion.

Cadmus Tyro walked slowly along the line of bodies dumped at the edge of the embarkation deck. Stripped of their armour, the Alpha Legion corpses were a stark reminder of how thoroughly hate could dismantle flesh - even that of a transhuman.

'Mass-reactives account for less than half of these kills,' said Tyro, pointing out the wound patterns and apocalyptic damage wrought on the bronzed, knotted flesh of the dead. 'The majority are pure close-quarter kills.'

'It s visceral,' said Vermana Cybus, spitting caustic saliva at each corpse as they passed. 'Cathartic. Personal. No one else has more reason than us to hate these turncoat bastards.'

Tyro couldn't argue with that.

Ferrus Manus, the Gorgon, their gene-sire, was dead. Murdered on Isstvan by a brother in a moment of unimaginable betrayal.

And in his death were the seeds of madness sown.

The primarch's end had been so terrible, so shocking, it had carved an abyssal void in the Iron Tenth's psyche that might never heal.

Grief had almost ended their defiance in the weeks since the bloody black sands of the Urgall Depression, but that grief had long-since curdled into hate.

And hate was the twisted cousin of bloody retribution.

'And we're sure this is all of them?' asked Tyro.

'Aye,' said Cybus. 'I've been through every hidden corner and secret passage of the ship myself. Twenty legionaries, all told.'

'There's only fifteen here.'

'Tarsa's taken five back to the *Sisyphium* to cut up.'

'What for?'

'How should I know? I'm not an Apothecary.'

'Fair enough, but twenty warriors isn't many for a strike cruiser.'

Cybus shrugged, and his bare metal limbs clattered against his armour. None

of the *Sisyphium*'s crew could match Cybus in zeal for chimeric augmentation. Even before the atrocity on Isstvan, Cybus had embraced the nascent creed of self-mortification with the fervency of a zealot.

'Probably someone hit them in the years since Isstvan,' said Cybus. 'We're not alone fighting them out here in the dark.'

'Perhaps, but this didn't feel like a ship operating below strength,' said Tyro, pausing as the Alpha Legion's operational methodology struck a disquietingly familiar note.

'It's a strike-cell,' he said. 'A single ship with a small crew, flying off-grid. It's what we're doing.'

Cybus nodded, accepting Tyro's logic.

'You really think they were en route to Alpharius?'

Tyro sighed. 'We'll know for sure once the Kryptos finishes with the logs Wayland exloaded.'

'But can we trust anything it might tell us?'

'I don't know, Vermana,' said Tyro. 'But if it's true... the chance to strike back at the traitors in such a meaningful way, to hurt them as we were hurt. We *need* this, Vermana.'

'Aye, captain, we do, but that's for Captain Branthan to decide.'

Tyro nodded stiffly. Cybus was right. Despite resting in an ice-locked stasis casket, Ulrich Branthan was still the captain of the *Sisyphium*'s warriors.

'Have you—'

'No,' said Tyro, already regretting having told Cybus what he'd seen - or what he *thought* he'd seen - in Branthan's cryo-chamber. 'The captain remains as he always has.'

'And Tarsa? What does he say?'

'Nothing,' snapped Tyro. 'What do you expect him to say? The captain is locked in frozen stasis. Wounds do not *heal* within a stasis field. No one miraculously heals mortal wounds. No one rises from death, no matter how much we would wish it.'

WITH THE WOUNDED stabilised in the apothecarion, Atesh Tarsa bore the honoured dead down into the frozen sepulchres of the *Sisyphium*. His reductor gauntlet weighed heavy with the genetic legacy of six brothers of the Iron Hands, six heroes who would no longer stand against the arch-traitor.

The passageways this deep were crusted frost-white, like a cave system within an ancient glacier. It made sound and light behave strangely. Echoes of Tarsa's footsteps travelled ahead of him and his fractured reflection writhed in the ice. Easy to understand how rumours of spectral apparitions and phantom voices in

the depths had spread through the crew, Space Marine and Legion serf alike.

Nonsense, of course, but even brains as augmented and disciplined as a legionary's were prone to pareidolia.

The sterile air glittered with white flakes, and gleaming icicles hung from structural beams like glassy daggers. Tarsa passed the sepulchre where the shattered Dreadnought frame of Brother Bombastus lay interred. He paused and pressed a gauntlet against the cold metal.

He moved on, deeper into the cold heart of the ship. Tarsa's deep-green armour bled hot vapour, inuring him to the cold, yet he shivered as the airlock sealing the last cryo-vault slid aside.

Sub-zero air sighed out like breath.

Tarsa chided himself for employing such metaphors, but he was a native of Nocturne, raised in a culture of legends passed down from father to son around the hearthfire. Tales of war, tales of helldrakes, and tales of the undying fire-souls beneath the world.

Such ingrained habits were hard to break.

Ulrach Branthan's vault was a tomb in all but name, an icy cave of airless chill and hissing, wheezing machinery. Thermal tarpaulins covered the most sensitive mechanisms, and insulated cables pulsed on the deck plates like dormant serpents.

At the centre of the chamber sat the glass-topped casket in which lay the mortally wounded captain of the *Sisyphium*. Its surface was all but obscured by layers of blue-white frost that scattered winking reflections in the half-light. As had become his habit of late, Tarsa reached out to touch the glass, wiping away the frost over Ulrach Branthan's recumbent form. Familiarity had not dulled Tarsa to the horror of the man's wounds.

Missing limbs, fist-deep craters torn by mass-reactives, dreadful canyons of chainblade impacts and hideous phosphex burns.

Enough to kill a man thrice over, yet Branthan endured.

In most other Legions, such wounds would have seen him allowed to die or be interred within a Dreadnought. But the time Tarsa had spent aboard the *Sisyphium* had taught him that the Iron Hands were not *most other Legions*.

The Heart of Iron still squatted on his chest like a parasite, a vaguely arachnoid machine of brass and silver that was simultaneously healing and consuming Branthan. Thread-fine tendrils extruded from its segmented body to penetrate Branthan's flesh. Where they were going or what they were doing within his body was a mystery. None of Tarsa's equipment could map the paths they took.

In the brief moments where they risked rousing Branthan to seek his counsel,

it appeared the archeotech device was remaking his catastrophically damaged organs. But only at the cost of the captain's, for want of a better term, *life-force*.

Tarsa leaned close to the casket, the coal-dark skin and red eyes of his proud Noctumian heritage reflected in the frosted glass.

'You cling to life with a determination that goes beyond all reason,' he said, his voice little more than a whisper. 'The sons of Vulkan are proud and courageous, but we know when to advance and when to retreat. It is time to let go, Ulrich.'

Cadmus Tyro would kill him for such words. The acting captain of the *Sisyphium* believed Branthan could be made whole again, but Tarsa's efforts were only prolonging Branthan's suffering.

Decades spent training in the apothecarion told him Branthan could not possibly hear his words within a stasis field, but the part of his soul that wanted to believe in miracles wished he could.

He turned from the casket and took a deep breath, his eyes widening as blast-chilled air filled his lungs. So different from the volcanic home world he never expected to see again.

Turning from Branthan's casket, Tarsa busied himself with the safe interment of the progenoids he had extracted from the fallen warriors. Each loss was a grievous blow to the *Sisyphium*. They had not the numbers to suffer such losses easily.

Years spent fighting on the ragged edges of this war had taken its toll on the already diminished crew of the strike cruiser. The expedition into the warp tempest in pursuit of the Phoenician and the Lord of Iron had cost them dearly.

As had their escape.

With a mere forty-two warriors and a fast-diminishing stock of supplies, the time was approaching when their continued presence in the wilds of space would become unsustainable. Soon, Tarsa knew, someone was going to have to convince Cadmus Tyro it was time to return to the Imperium.

He sighed, knowing that duty would fall to him. Sharrowkyn was Raven Guard to the core and relished this form of war. He would never suggest it. And none in the Iron Tenth would shame themselves by admitting they could no longer continue this campaign of guerrilla war.

'I have seen the same behaviour in pyrogharials,' said Tarsa to the silent casket as he sterilised the interior of the reductor and sealed its cylindrical sample-chambers.

'They're fiercely territorial lava-swimming lizards that dwell in the caldera of Nocturne's volcanoes,' he said by way of explanation.

Tarsa stepped over the hissing cables on the deck to sit next to Branthan's casket. He rested a hand on the glass as he continued. 'When an earthquake or

the lava flow from a fresh eruption brings two lizards into competition for burrows, they will not stop until the fighting is done and one of them is dead.'

He sighed.

'From an evolutionary standpoint it is self-defeating behaviour that appears to serve no purpose, yet still they do it as though it is hardwired into their reptile brains, leaving them incapable of change. I remember climbing into the fires of Mount Kagutsuchi on the eve of my ascension to the Legion and seeing two such beasts in battle. It was an incredible sight, Ulrich - two basalt-scaled monsters tearing at each other for the sake of a lava pool barely large enough to hold either one of them. Yet fight for it they did.

But as I watched them battle, a great sorrow filled me at such senseless waste. What need had they to fight for this particular pool when there were many others within easy reach? Yet the beasts knew no different, so what else could they do? In the end, the bloodied victor did not enjoy his spoils for long. A third beast came down from a magma vent higher up the caldera and devoured him. If there's a lesson to be learned it is the clumsy, wasteful, blundering, low, and horribly cruel works of nature that govern all living things.'

Tarsa's head sank to his chest and he said, 'Ah, forgive me, Captain Branthan. Memories of Nocturne are making me melancholy. I miss the russet skies of my birth world and the fiery winds that sweep its blackened mountains.'

He looked into the shimmering ice coating the casket, and it seemed he saw a reflection of himself. He blinked. The Salamanders legionary in the ice sat before a casket of gold, at the head of which burned a solitary memorial flame.

Tarsa stood suddenly, his heart thudding in his chest.

He looked around the sepulchre.

He was alone.

'Just a distorted reflection,' he said. 'That's all it was.'

Yet, just for an instant, Tarsa thought he'd heard the faint sound of a distant heartbeat.

He put a hand on the ice-covered glass of Branthan's casket as sudden certainty filled him.

'Vulkan lives,' he said.

THREE

Not alone
Crossfire
Son of Medusa

ONLY THE FAINTEST glimmer of starlight illuminated the bloodstained deck of the *Zeta Morgeld's* bridge, reminding Frater Thamatica just how far out they were. At the edge of the system, light reflecting from the dead surface of its outermost planet was the merest haze. And beyond the smear of the Oort cloud, distant light from far-off systems was already tens of thousands of years old.

He sat at the helmsman's station in a faint pool of radiance given off by a slowly rotating holographic subsector map. Septus Thoic was down on the engineering deck, stripping out the last of the *Morgeld's* fuel and capacitors, so power cables ran from the rear of Thamatica's servo-harness to an open panel beneath the avionics cogitator.

The Alpha Legion vessel had been reduced to little more than a vast slab of cold metal adrift in the void.

Soon it wouldn't even be that much.

The map's ghostly light threw Thamatica's craggy, age-worn features into stark relief as his agile eyes darted over the three-dimensional geometry of its celestial notations.

'Frater,' came the voice of Cadmus Tyro over his helm vox. *'Are you and Thoic done yet?'*

Thamatica leaned back into the helmsman's seat, the articulated arms of his servo-harness wheezing as they moved to accommodate his movement. His red cloak billowed in a gust of exhaled gases.

'You do realise, captain, that plotting a course to ensure the Morgeld bums up in the system's star is akin to threading a needle.'

'Just point it in the right direction and fire the damn engines'

'Ah, if only it were that simple, Captain Tyro,' said Thamatica. *'The dance of intersecting planetary orbits, asteroid belts and rogue celestial bodies makes plotting such a course a fascinating exercise in complex fourdimensional mathematics.'*

'Just get a move on, Frater,' said Tyro. *'I want that ship scuttled and us on our way as soon as possible.'*

'Then allow us to get on with our work,' said Thamatica, shutting off the vox.

He'd overstated the complexity of the task, of course. The entirely predictable motion of this system's planets made plotting the *Morgeld's* last voyage simplicity itself.

A single burst of power to the engines, then time and momentum would do the rest.

But like any savant of the Machine, he hated to destroy technology. Like a remembrancer forced to discard the written word or an artist painting over an old canvas, Thamatica felt such acts were somehow profane.

What might the generations to come say of such wilful destruction? Would they look back at him as at the book-burners of Narthan Dume, destroying in blind ignorance that which might empower the future?

But what other choice was there?

Barely enough Iron Hands were left to crew the *Sisypheum*, let alone a second vessel. Thamatica had explained how infinitesimally small were the chances of anyone ever finding the *Zeta Morgeld* in the emptiness of wilderness space, but Cadmus Tyro wasn't about to take the chance it might one day be salvaged by the traitors.

With deft keystrokes across the helmsman's slate, Thamatica laid in the course for the *Morgeld's* last voyage. A journey of two months to the system star.

A soft chime from the adjacent auspex panel made him frown.

He waited. It didn't come again.

'Power bleed,' surmised Thamatica, but just to be sure, he routed power from avionics into the surveyor array. The console flickered to life as data from the passive surveyor arrays in the *Morgeld's* prow filled its slates.

There. A return.

So faint that on any other ship Thamatica might have dismissed it as a ghost reading.

Yet the *Morgeld* had recognised it.

'Asirnoth's blood...' he cursed, now seeing the ghost reading for what it was.

He reopened the vox to the *Sisypheum*.

'Captain Tyro!' he shouted. '*Sisypheum* to battle stations, immediately!'

'What is it, Frater?'

'There's another Alpha Legion ship out there,' said Thamatica, 'and it's right on top of us!'

A CRITICAL OBJECTIVE in any sphere of battle was to detect the enemy while avoiding detection in return. And never more so than in void war. Naval commanders throughout the Imperium, from primarchs to lord commanders,

agreed that, as in all forms of warfare, the element of surprise was paramount.

The Alpha Legion ship was named the *Theta Malquiant*, launched less than a year after the *Morgeld*. Tyro saw its service record was patchy, its honour roll of victories thin. Even a quick scan of its registry revealed a ship dogged by ill-fortune.

Was this the turn of its luck?

Beyond surprise, three things mattered in void engagements between gross-displacement vessels: position, conservation of momentum and a well-trained gunnery crew.

From Tyro's vantage point on the *Sisyphium's* command throne, the *Malquiant* had the advantage in all three arenas. The Alpha Legion vessel had unmasked high in their starboard rear quarter, moving abeam at a stately pace and with its broadside gun decks already launching.

Red light bathed the *Sisyphium's* command bridge as its deck crew of human thralls and Space Marines fought to make the strike cruiser battle-ready. Tyro was not a natural shipmaster, and had delegated helm control to Sabik Wayland, but even against an ill-starred vessel the odds were stacked against them. Once the initiative passed to a competent enemy, it was next to impossible to regain.

But the *Sisyphium* was a tough ship. It had rammed *Andronius* to destruction. It had survived an attack from the Lord of Iron himself and endured all that the warp could throw at it in the seething tempests that engulfed Iydris.

It would survive this.

'How in the name of Medusa did it get so close?' asked Vermana Cybus, struggling to bring the weapons systems online.

At the combined helm/engineering station, Sabik Wayland said, 'A question probably best saved for *after* we fight clear of this ambush?'

He hauled back heavy levers and spun brass dials on the panel before him, distributing the available power to those systems that needed it most. The deck tilted under his feet as he threw the ship into a hard turn.

'Ambush?' said Tyro. 'This vessel was here all along?'

'No,' said Sharrowkyn, stepping from the shadows behind Tyro. 'It was not.'

Tyro swallowed his irritation at Sharrowkyn's unannounced presence on the bridge. For all that the Raven Guard warrior had proven himself time and time again, he wasn't Iron Tenth.

'How can you know that?' demanded Tyro.

'Because it would have fought when we attacked the *Morgeld*. The *Malquiant* is here to rendezvous with its sister vessel.'

'Incoming ordnance,' said Wayland.

'Void shields?' said Tyro.

'Ignition sequence under way.'

'Will they light in time to stop this volley?'

'Omnissiah willing...'

'Then give me power to the weapons!' demanded Cybus.

'Weapons can wait,' said Wayland without looking up. 'Engines and shields first. If we survive the next few minutes, we'll see about fighting back.'

The ship groaned in protest as its keel was stressed to the limits of its design parameters. In tandem with a surge to the main drives, the manoeuvring jets were also firing - portside aft and starboard prow - pushing the ship around its central axis and presenting its rear quarter to the incoming ordnance.

'Blood of Medusa!' Tyro cursed. 'What are you doing, Wayland?'

'Keeping us alive long enough to fight back!'

Tyro watched the rapidly elongating parabolas of incoming ordnance on the main viewer and knew there was no way the *Sisyphium* could avoid a punishing series of strikes.

'Brace for impact!' he shouted.

'Belay that!' countered Wayland with an upraised fist.

'You're going to kill us all, Wayland!'

Sabik Wayland shook his head. 'The art of void-gunnery is in unleashing fire where a vessel *will* be in the time it takes ordnance to travel to its target,' he said. 'Their Master of Weapons is trying to anticipate our evasive momentum even as I attempt to confound that anticipation.'

'Then let's hope your art is superior,' said Tyro.

This time Wayland deigned to look up and Tyro saw he was grinning. 'Did you ever doubt it?'

Tyro was unsure of the Iron Father's meaning until he looked back at the rapidly unfolding tracks of the engagement. He now saw what Wayland intended and drew in a hissing breath at the colossal risk he was taking.

'Dorsal voids igniting,' said Cybus.

Collimated blinks of ablating lasers played over the shields like flashing strobes. The sheer weight of fire stripped them back and blew out a dozen ignition vanes. Blossoming explosions enveloped the vessel's topside, turning metres-thick plates of armour to bleeding streamers of molten metal.

Superficial damage. The *Sisyphium* had survived worse.

The hundreds of hyper-velocity shells following hard on the heels of the lasers were the real ship-killers.

But Wayland's ultra-rapid manoeuvre had turned the *Sisyphium's* blazing engines into the face of the incoming bombardment. The strike cruiser's plasma-wake raised the temperature differential of the void immediately behind the

Sisyphium by thousands of degrees. That heat bled off rapidly, but was still searing enough to cook off every warhead a safe distance from the strike cruiser.

A cascade of silent detonations painted the void in a pyrotechnic blaze.

'Bones of the Averni,' said Tyro. 'You took a big risk there, Wayland.'

'A calculated risk,' countered Wayland, driving the vessel towards the *Morgeld*. 'One that has bought us a chance to counter-attack.'

'They're coming about again,' snarled Vermana Cybus. 'Get me into a firing position and I'll blow them to the warp and back.'

'All in good time,' said Wayland, burning the engines hard and throwing the ship into another violent turn. Strike cruisers were fast and manoeuvrable, but they weren't designed for the kinds of vector changes normally seen in a sub-atmospheric dogfight.

'Incoming,' said Cybus, reading his threat board's assessment of this latest attack. 'Prow bombards - macro-cannons, mass-drivers and hyper-grasers.'

Travelling at the speed of light, the grasers danced over the *Sisyphium's* flanks and Tyro felt the vessel shudder as portside compartments blew out into space. A score of damage sigils scrolled across his slate.

'Hard to port!' shouted Wayland. 'Full burn on ventral thrusters!'

Once again the *Sisyphium* groaned in protest, a wounded beast desperately trying to outrun a faster predator with sharper claws. Conduits split in the vaulted space above Tyro and a series of alarm klaxons brayed. Thralls ran to shut down damaged systems.

Wayland silenced the alarms and kept on driving the vessel hard.

Tyro swore as yet more tracks of incoming ordnance slid across the display towards them. The movement on the slate was almost sedate, though the lethal shells were slashing through space at hundreds of kilometres every second.

He gripped the armrests of the command throne as the *Sisyphium's* violent turn continued and the main engines flared. The *Malquiant* was coming about, turning rapidly in order to keep its guns on target.

Then the display lit up with multiple impacts, electromagnetic pulses and the nuclear violence of detonating ordnance - enough to level a city from orbit.

'What just happened?' said Tyro. 'Were we hit?'

'No,' said Cybus, looking over in grudging admiration at Sabik Wayland. 'They hit the *Morgeld*. Wayland put it between us and the *Malquiant's* guns.'

The image on the main viewer dissolved and changed to show the stripped Alpha Legion ship. Ablaze from end to end, plumes of crystallising oxygen burned fiercely. Explosions marched along the length of its hull as over-pressured compartments blew out one after the other.

Its death was swift as the overwhelming power of the *Theta Malquiant's*

barrage tore it apart. Its keel split as a final detonation ripped through the heart of the vessel and turned it into a seething corona of expanding debris.

Sharrowkyn leaned forwards and gripped the brass rail behind Tyro's throne. His alabaster features were set in an expression of tight anger.

'Aren't you forgetting something, Wayland?' he snapped.

'What?' asked Wayland.

'Septus Thoic and Frater Thamatica are still aboard the *Morgeld*.'

TWISTED SPARS OF heat-softened hull ribs, glowing red from graser impacts, blocked the *Zeta Morgeld's* main arterial. Fire filled its radial corridors, rapidly reducing the number of possible routes to an embarkation deck.

The ship shook like an ocean-going vessel in a storm. Septus Thoic staggered through the flames and collapsing corridors of the *Morgeld*. He slammed into walls as the superstructure heaved and bucked with yet more shells blasting through its hull.

Atmosphere was non-existent, the first thing vented into space. The satisfying corollary of that was the extinguishing of the vast majority of fires burning along the vessel's length.

'*Septus!*' said Thamatica. '*Methinks it is high time we got off this ship. I'm at the torpedo rails. Looks like that's the only way off this wreck. How close are you?*'

'Lower gunnery deck,' said Thoic. 'I'll take the main transitway and use the—'

'No, *the transitway is ablaze,*' warned Thamatica. '*A plasma storm burst up from the reactor deck. You'll need to reroute.*'

'Hellfires,' said Thoic. 'So the only blaze that won't die is the one blocking the route I need to take.'

'*Indeed, it is most perturbing. One might almost be tempted to think this ship is taking its revenge against us.*'

'Can you find me another route?'

'*Route to starboard deck blocked. Options limited. Ah, there... that's it.*'

'Got it,' said Thoic, as an escape route flashed up onto his helm's visor. He turned and ran for a smoke-filled companionway. According to Thamatica's schematics, it led down to a munitions sub-deck with a maintenance duct that ran parallel to the main transit. Its lateral access points should still be useable.

And from there it was a short sprint to where Thamatica waited at the ventral launch tubes. A boarding torpedo wasn't the usual way to depart a dying vessel, but Thoic would take what he could get.

He reached the companionway just as a pair of shells from a battery of macro-cannons struck the *Morgeld's* hull less than thirty metres aft of him.

Metres-thick armour plating peeled back like the foil on a ration pack. Thoic had a fraction of a second to see the atomic hellstorm raging beyond the breach. Then he was gone, wrenched out into the fire-filled void.

BROADSIDE TO BROADSIDE, the two vessels squared off against one another. The *Sisyphium* had been hurt and was cornered, but it still had teeth. If the *Malquiant* wanted this Imperial scalp, it was going to have to earn it in blood.

'Gun decks firing,' shouted Cybus. 'Target lock holding.'

Space was awash with electromagnetic flares from the burning corpse of the *Morgeld*. They fouled the targeting mechanisms of the weapons and threw phantom images of duplicate starships across every slate.

Wayland applied every filter he knew to keep the enemy ship solidly within the auspex sights. The *Malquiant* was arcing over the topside of its burning sister ship, rolling on its long axis to present its starboard batteries.

Even in the midst of combat, Wayland had to admire its helmsman's nerve in flying so close to a dying vessel that might go critical at any moment.

Yet, even in his admiration, he saw the enemy make their first mistake. The *Malquiant's* arc was going over too high and too fast, carrying it beyond the trajectory of its broadside guns.

It was a basic helm error, surely too basic for any Legion commander to have made, but Wayland wasn't about to squander the opportunity.

'Hard to starboard, full burn,' ordered Wayland. 'We'll cross the topside and Cybus can rake them from stem to stern.'

Before the deck crew could enact his order, the filters Wayland had set to wash out the ghost images on the auspex slate finally completed their cycle. Half a dozen false returns vanished, leaving only the *Theta Malquiant* on the screen.

And one other vessel.

Plunging straight through the blazing firestorm engulfing the *Morgeld*. Striking into the heart of the battle like an assassin's blade.

'Gorgon's blood, no...' he whispered.

The electromagnetic backwash from the *Zeta Morgeld's* destruction made identification of the ship impossible. It knifed into range, powering through the space between the *Sisyphium* and the *Malquiant*.

'What in the name of Ferrus...' began Tyro, rising from his chair as he too saw the image on the auspex for what it was. 'Another warship?'

'It's firing!' shouted Cybus.

'At who?' demanded Tyro.

That question was answered definitively when the *Malquiant's* flanks erupted in a sequential cascade of explosions. Glassy rods of las-fire tore its shields away

like tissue and point-blank barrages from multiple gun decks disembowelled the Alpha Legion vessel with the thoroughness of a butcher's hook.

The new arrival matched speed with the *Malquiant* and thunderous broadsides punished the traitor ship over and over, an overwhelming weight of fire that crushed the helpless vessel in moments. A final spread of torpedoes finished the job, leaving the *Theta Malquiant* nothing more than an expanding cloud of radioactive debris.

Wayland had never seen a starship die with such speed and efficiency.

'Whoever commands that vessel is a master of the void kill,' said Cybus, in awe of the vessel's brutal slaying.

'Who the hell is it?' asked Tyro. 'Wayland? What Legion flag does it fly?'

'Sending a hail now,' said Wayland, cocking his head to the side as a static-washed response came through the vox-bead in his ear.

At first he thought that he had misheard. Perhaps electromagnetic distortions were twisting the words of the ship's commander, or interference was making him hear what he *wanted* to hear.

'Sabik,' said Sharrowkyn. 'What is it?'

Wayland looked up in amazement.

'It's Meduson,' he said. 'It's Shadrak *bloody* Meduson...'

FOUR

We stand alone
Treachery in the blood
Back from the dead

STUNNED SILENCE GREETED Wayland's pronouncement. Shadrak Meduson of the Sorrgol. Warleader and Bringer of the Clans. Fragments of rumour reaching the *Sisyphium* claimed that the will behind a series of retributive hammerblows against enemy forces throughout the Oqueth, Instar and Momed sectors had been Meduson's.

But Dwell was the beginning of the end.

The cornerstone of Meduson's line, its loss had broken his self-perpetuated myth of invincibility. The shadow network linking the shattered Legion forces told conflicting tales of Meduson: that he had died on Dwell, that he still fought the traitors, that the Sons of Horus had cut his heart out...

Now this.

'Meduson,' breathed Tyro, almost unwilling to believe it. 'Are you sure?'

'The orbicular structures of the vox encryption match exactly,' said Wayland, reading fresh information from the ship's auspex. 'It's the *Iron Heart*. It's him, it *has* to be.'

Tyro heard the need in Wayland's voice. It matched his own.

The years since Isstvan had been harder than any he had known, the hardest that *any* of the Iron Tenth had known. The death of Ferrus Manus had stripped them of every certainty, and this new form of war denied them the greatest strength their gene-sire had wrought in them: brotherhood.

'They're requesting permission to come aboard,' said Wayland. 'A single Thunderhawk.'

Nykona Sharrowkyn stepped down to the deck.

'Deny them,' he told Wayland. 'Shut off the vox.'

'What? Why?'

'Shut it off and get us out of here.'

Tyro rose from the command throne and said, 'This is an Iron Hands vessel, Sharrowkyn. You have no voice here.'

The Raven Guard turned to fix Tyro with his oil-dark eyes.

'We don't know who that is,' said Sharrowkyn, jabbing a finger towards the

fuzzed outline of the *Iron Heart* on the main viewer. 'Yes, it could be Shadrak Meduson or it could be an enemy vessel looking to draw us into a trap.'

'The codes check out,' said Wayland. 'They couldn't be faked. Only a true son of Medusa would know them.'

'Have you forgotten everything we've done, Sabik?' said Sharrowkyn. 'We have the Kryptos and can break the traitor's encryption. Who's to say the enemy haven't done the same?'

Tyro knew Sharrowkyn was right, but the void within every heart of the Iron Tenth cried out for the Legion to be reforged.

'You could be right, Sharrowkyn,' he said, 'but if there is even the smallest chance that this is truly Shadrak Meduson, we have to be sure.'

Sharrowkyn shook his head. 'No. We stand alone, we fight alone. That's how this form of warfare works. That's the *only way it works.*'

'This isn't the mines of Lycaeus, Nykona,' said Wayland.

'You're right,' said Sharrowkyn. 'It's not. It's worse. Back in the darkness of Lycaeus it was easy to know who you had to kill. Out here, how can we be sure?'

'Enough, Sharrowkyn,' said Tyro. 'Hold your tongue.'

'Branthan would never allow this,' said Sharrowkyn.

'*Captain* Branthan isn't here,' snapped Tyro. 'I am. The *Sisyphium* isn't a democracy and I will not have you second-guessing my orders. Wayland, send word to the *Iron Heart*, we will receive them in the fore embarkation deck.'

'YOU'RE SURE THEY'RE dead?' boomed Ignatius Numen, hefting another corpse into the airlock. 'Maybe I should cut their heads off just to be sure.'

Tarsa wasn't sure whether the Iron Hand was joking or not. A safe assumption that he wasn't, but the veteran's flash-burned skin and red targeting optics made knowing for sure difficult. Numen was one of the few who had actually witnessed the death of Ferrus Manus, and his armour was etched with the names of his fallen battle-brothers.

Isstvan had robbed the Emperor's sons of any desire to smile - the Iron Tenth most of all. At least Tarsa now had hope he might yet live to see Vulkan again. He had no basis in logic for this, save that no one had *seen* his primarch fall.

That, and the vision of a brother Salamander...

Precious little hope, but still precious.

'Well?' said Numen, his combat blade half drawn.

Tarsa shook his head. 'I assure you, Brother Numen, they are quite dead. An autopsy tends to have that side-effect. But I agree, even in death, their skin retains a ruddy bronze hue.'

Numen read Tarsa's words on his optics and grunted in acceptance. He nodded

and sheathed his blade. He gripped another body in one iron-sheened arm and dragged it towards the airlock.

'Tell me something, Apothecary,' said Numen. 'Do the Alpha Legion come from a volcanic world like yours?'

'Nocturne is a hot world, yes,' said Tarsa, kneeling beside one of the dead legionaries to examine his blandly nondescript face. 'But that is not the cause of my colouration.'

'It's not?'

'No,' said Tarsa. 'The particular background radiation of Nocturne reacts vigorously with the melanochrome zygote of our primarch's gene-structure to radically alter the skin pigmentation of his sons.'

'Even recruits from Terra?' asked Numen.

'Every Salamanders legionary, whether he is from Terra or Nocturne, will have skin like mine,' said Tarsa, blinking and making his eyes shine crimson. 'And he will have furnace eyes like mine.'

Numen considered this.

'You didn't answer my question,' he said at last.

'I cannot answer it, for in truth, I know nothing of the Alpha Legion's home world,' said Tarsa.

'Nor I, is that strange?'

'Strange how?'

'I know of Fenris, of Nocturne and Cthonia,' said Numen. 'But I know nothing of the world that shaped the Twentieth.'

'Why is that important?' asked Tarsa.

'Each Legion makes its culture part of its war-making, and knowing where a warrior is from helps you fight him,' said Numen. 'I have tasted the ice of Fenris, so I know the wild heart of Russ and his *Rout*. Macragge taught me of Primarch Guilliman's practical warriors. But of Alpharius and his sons... I know nothing.'

'I think the Alpha Legion carefully cultivate that mystery,' said Tarsa. 'The only ones I met were maddeningly ambiguous. Every answer they gave spawned two more questions.'

'Is that why you had these ones brought on board?' asked Numen.

'Yes,' said Tarsa, standing to wipe his fingers on the plates of his armour. 'Studying what *literally* made them, might teach us something of what drives the Alpha Legion.'

'You think treachery was in their blood?'

'I wouldn't put it as ritualistically as that,' said Tarsa. 'But, yes, perhaps there is something in their genetic structure that made them more predisposed to betrayal.'

Numen shook his head. 'It was not blood that damned the Alpha Legion, but actions. Their treachery was inevitable.'

'What makes you say that?'

Numen paused in his work and stood straight. 'For nearly two centuries we cleansed the stars of enemies, but in all that time did you ever learn what the Twentieth were doing?'

'Every war has shadows and those that must fight in them.'

'Aye, there's truth in that, Atesh,' agreed Numen, tossing yet another body into the airlock. 'But foul things hide in shadows, and I do not fully trust any warrior who goes in so deep that he loses sight of his illumination.'

Numen slammed his palm on the lock mechanism and the reinforced door slammed down as amber light flashed above it. He turned and knelt by the body Tarsa had just examined.

'You don't want this one in there too?' asked Numen.

Tarsa shook his head. 'I think we ought to take this one back to the apothecarion.'

'Why? Will his blood not tell you all you need to know?'

'Not everything maybe nothing,' said Tarsa. 'Something in his bone structure now strikes me as unusual.'

Numen grunted and returned to the airlock, disengaging the safety protocols and twisting the venting mechanism. Warning sigils flashed and moments later a short-lived hurricane ripped the airlock's contents into space.

Tarsa watched through the armourglass port in the inner door as the bodies tumbled away from the *Sisyphium*. He watched them until the outer door sealed shut. It made no sound, but he felt the vibration of the heavy portal.

Tarsa considered Numen's cold words about those who made war in the shadows. 'Do you trust Brother Sharrowkyn?'

Numen hesitated before answering.

'Trust is in short supply, Brother Tarsa.'

'That's not an answer.'

'It's the only one I'll give that won't make me a liar.'

'Brother Sharrowkyn has fought and bled alongside us all.'

'As I say, those that work in the shadows sometimes grow to love the darkness more than the light,' said Numen, hefting the last Alpha Legion corpse onto his shoulder. 'He put a bullet in that bastard Fulgrim's head, so I'll call him brother, aye, but he is not Tenth. He has not suffered as we have suffered.'

'Nor am I Tenth,' said Tarsa. 'Do I enjoy your trust?'

Numen slapped a heavy palm on Tarsa's shoulder guard.

'You come from a land of fire, brother,' he said, turning and all but marching

him from the airlock. 'You lived in the light of burning mountains. Aye, you I trust.'

Tarsa nodded, but remembered a world very different to the one Numen imagined. Skies darkened by ash, scorched plains swept by cinder-storms and a life lived in the shadows of pyroclastic clouds.

Nocturne was a world of shadow as deep as any.

THE WALLS OF the embarkation deck still bore the scars of the traitors' combined attack before Iydris. Bolter impacts and deep gouges from the monsters the Phoenician's Legion had unleashed were a reminder of just how hard the crew of the *Sisyphium* had fought to save their ship.

Cadmus Tyro had chosen this particular deck for its symbolism as much as its scale. The captain was toweringly clad in a suit of Terminator battle-plate hung with a cloak of silver steel links. He carried his helm in the crook of his iron-gauntleted arm and his combi-bolter hung in a plated sheath locked to his thigh. Wayland couldn't help but notice that the weapon's arming switch was locked in the firing position.

Wayland, too, had come in the full panoply of his position, with a blood-red mantle and the articulated arms of his servo-harness folded around his midriff. Thamatica wore the white cloak of mourning, in honour of the lost Septus Thoic. He'd had wrecked the aft embarkation deck by flying a defective boarding torpedo straight into the *Sisyphium* in a bravura display that had earned Tyro's anger and admiration in one fell swoop.

Vermana Cybus stood at the head of fifteen veterans, every one of whom was armed as though mustered to repel boarders.

If Sharrowkyn was right, perhaps they might have to.

The Raven Guard warrior did not stand with them, but was surely here somewhere. Wayland scanned the darkest portions of the deck's vaulted roof, but saw nothing. Nor had he expected to. Nykona Sharrowkyn had been trained by the legendary Shadowmasters of the Ravenspire. If he chose not to be seen then he was, to all intents and purposes, invisible.

'Here they come,' said Cybus.

Wayland looked out through the integrity field, seeing a spot of light moving against the backdrop of stars. He followed its trajectory as it resolved into the angular, threatening profile of a Thunderhawk.

'Meduson,' said Tyro, his excitement palpable.

That same sense of anticipation filled the deck, a potent sense of longing which Wayland fought to contain. Someone had to remain objective, for there was merit in Sharrowkyn's belief they should remain isolated.

Isolation kept them safe, but Wayland knew the Iron Hands aboard the *Sisyphium* were slowly going mad. Grief at the loss of Ferrus Manus was turning inwards. More and more of the ship's crew were self-mortifying and embracing ever more extreme modifications to their flesh.

The crew of the *Sisyphium* needed this. They needed to know they were not locked in a slow spiral to extinction, punctuated only by brief bouts of excoriating vengeance.

The Thunderhawk grew larger until it passed through the integrity field. Wayland felt the momentary breath of equalising air pressures as the permeable barrier re-established its seal.

Heat bled from the gunship's engines and ice dripped from its frozen surfaces. Wayland ran an appraising eye over the craft, surprised to find that it was one he recognised.

Malleus Ferrum.

He'd last seen this vessel on One-Five-Four Four.

Its scarred hull was pitted with impacts and the iron gauntlet on its forwards glacis was blast-scored. The time since the war against the eldar had not been kind.

The assault ramp lowered and the Iron Hands of the *Sisyphium* took a collective intake of breath. Vapour condensed from the gunship's interior as a single warrior limped down the ramp.

Thamatica took a step forwards in shock.

'Gorgon's Oath!' he cried. 'Septus?'

'Bet you thought you'd seen the last of me, eh?' said Septus Thaic, his voice hoarse and dry.

Wayland's surprise was total. Thaic's armour was burned back to bare iron and scorched metal.

'How... ?' began Wayland, but before Thaic could answer, another figure emerged from the gunship. He stopped at the end of the ramp and swept his gaze over the warriors facing him.

His build seemed enormous, though in truth he was only slightly taller than average, and wore only standard-issue power armour - black in the main, but scored silver by multiple impacts from solid slugs, mass-reactives and toothed blades. One shoulder guard bore personal heraldry of a coiled silver wyrm devouring its own tail, the other the proud fist of the X Legion. A long, twin-bladed snake-spear with leaf-shaped blades of porcelain white was slung at his shoulder.

The warrior reached up and removed his helmet.

The face beneath was a mask of hideous burn scars and augmetics. One eye

was red with blood-trauma, the other a shimmering blue bionic. He was a warrior ravaged by war and tempered by loss. Yet there was strength in that blood-filled eye, a power and charisma no defeat could crush and no loss diminish.

This was the face of a warrior who had tasted bitter defeat, but refused to let it break him. He was every inch an Iron Hand, and all who looked upon him knew it.

'Permission to come aboard?' asked Shadrak Meduson.

FIVE

The mission Awakening Orders

AS WAS CUSTOMARY when two clans met to draw up plans of war, they shared *dzira*, a fiery spirit that served many purposes between the tribesmen of Medusa. It was drunk when old grudges needed settling, when war was afoot or upon the death of a firstborn son.

Vermana Cybus sourced a *piyala* bowl, and they drank to this meeting of brothers. With the emptied bowl making its way back around to Cadmus Tyro, they drank again, this time to Septus Thoic's incredible survival.

Cast from the wreck of the *Zeta Morgeld*, Thoic's battleplate withstood the worst of the barrage-storm and sealed itself tighter than a Dreadnought's sarcophagus. Its saviour beacon had been picked up by the *Iron Heart* and *Malleus Ferrum* had retrieved him en route to the *Sisypheum*.

Thoic flatly refused any notion of treatment in the apothecarion, claiming that any Avernii veteran who couldn't take the pain of a few radiation burns wasn't worthy of the rank.

At Meduson's suggestion, the Iron Hands withdrew to the training chambers adjacent to the embarkation deck. Rather than enter the ship proper, he would speak to the *Sisypheum*'s master in the shadow of its arming chambers and sparring cages.

'Trust me, I understand the need to compartmentalise battle-cells more than most,' he said, tapping the corrugated burn scars covering his left cheek. 'A Sons of Horus warleader named Tybalt Marr and a burning flagship reminded me of that.'

'Then why are you here?' said Sharrowkyn, who had been waiting for them in the gloom of the chamber. 'Your presence here endangers us all.'

Ashur Maesan bristled at Sharrowkyn's lack of respect. His hand slid onto the wire-wound hilt of his scabbarded *hiebmesser* until Meduson raised an open hand.

'Easy, Sergeant Maesan,' said Meduson. 'The Ravenlord's son asks a fair question.'

Cadmus Tyro had granted Meduson permission to bring an honour guard

aboard the *Sisyphium*. The first was Ashur Maesan, a squad sergeant whose taut posture reminded Tyro of the scarred warriors he'd seen in the XII Legion's fighting pits. A threaded ring of rusted service studs hung from the pommel of his *hiebmesser*, a disembowelling knife more often favoured by Scouts of the Night Lords.

Meduson named the second warrior as Gaskon Malthace, his equerry. Tyro liked the look of Malthace immediately. His left fist was an iron gauntlet with an implanted flail and chain of cold iron. He never strayed more than a metre from his clan-leader.

'I don't know you, raven,' said Meduson. 'Brother...?'

Sharrowkyn didn't reply and the silence between the two warriors hung heavy until Tyro answered.

'His name is Nykona Sharrowkyn of the Nineteenth Legion,' he said, unaccountably feeling the need to rise to Sharrowkyn's defence. 'A fellow veteran of the black sands of Isstvan. But not one that yet has a voice aboard this vessel.'

The Raven Guard warrior shot Tyro a hostile look as Meduson nodded and said, 'Tell me, Brother Sharrowkyn. How do you think the *Iron Heart* was close enough to fight alongside the *Sisyphium*?'

'You were hunting the Alpha Legion,' said Sharrowkyn.

'Following them,' corrected Meduson.

'Why?'

'Let me ask another question in return. Do you know the hardest part of cryptography? It's not breaking a code, it's using what you learn in a way that doesn't let the enemy *know* you understand their communiques. But sometimes what you learn gives rise to a mission that makes such a risk worthwhile.'

'What mission?' asked Tyro.

Meduson grinned, but puckered scar tissue around his ravaged cheek and lips turned it into the death mask of a corpse.

'Killing Alpharius.'

No one said anything, too stunned at the prospect of what Meduson suggested. Killing a primarch? Horror had taught Tyro such a thing was entirely possible, but for so few of them? Even led by one as mighty as Shadrak Meduson?

'Just us?' said Tyro at last. 'Alone, without calling in any support?'

'Yes.'

'Kill Alpharius? *Primarch* Alpharius?' said Tyro.

Meduson nodded and said, 'The one and only.'

'How could you know for sure that these ships would lead you to him?' asked Sharrowkyn. 'We only learned of the *Morgeld*'s destination in the course of our

attack.'

'Careful, little raven,' said Meduson, leaning forwards. 'You are a survivor of Isstvan, so you have my respect, but not my leave to offer insults. Maesan and Malthace take a very dim view of such things.'

'Brother Sharrowkyn means no disrespect,' said Tyro. 'But his question is valid.'

Meduson paused and Tyro saw him look over at Malthace, who gave an almost imperceptible nod.

'My apologies, Brother Sharrowkyn,' Meduson sighed. 'You are right to ask. Past losses have made me wary of those whose worth I do not yet know.'

Sharrowkyn nodded, accepting the apology, and Tyro saw the bone-deep weariness behind Meduson's disfigurement. This was a man with only this one last throw of the dice left, one chance to avenge all those he had lost. As though coming to a decision within himself, Meduson nodded.

'You are not the only ship with access to a Kryptos,' he said, and once again the crew of the *Sisyphium* were stunned to silence. Meduson filled that silence with a grating sound that might once have been laughter, but was now a bitter emphysemic rattle.

'You honestly believe I'd come this far out and risk so much for the head of anyone less than a primarch?'

'You have a Kryptos on the *Iron Heart*?' asked Wayland.

'We did,' said Meduson with a wheezing sigh. 'An unknown pyro-necrotic self-destruct genome that escaped our Iron Father's augurs burned it alive from the inside out four months ago. But not before decrypting some high-level vox trace we managed to intercept. Couched in riddles and argot, of course, but it all pointed to an imminent conclave of senior Alpha Legion commanders. It seems they were heading for a prearranged rally point to receive orders in person from their primarch. The *Morgeld* was en route to rendezvous with the *Malquiant* before travelling to this conclave, but—'

'We killed it,' finished Tyro.

'You killed it,' agreed Meduson. 'And our best chance at making these traitors suffer as we have suffered is gone.'

'Not necessarily,' said Cybus, and Tyro cursed him for his loose tongue. 'Sabik Wayland was able to exload the *Morgeld*'s avionics logister before the crew could destroy it.'

'Truly, Brother Wayland?' said Meduson, slamming a fist into his palm as he circled the nearest of the sparring cages. His blood-red eye flared, reminding Tyro of Atesh Tarsa. The clan-captain's excitement filled the training hall.

Wayland nodded. 'I haven't been able to unlock it entirely, but I know the *Zeta*

Morgeld's next waypoint was this system's third planet.'

'Then the prey's still in the crosshairs,' said Meduson, gripping the reinforced steel bars of the cage. The iron of his gauntlet creaked with pressure as he bent the bars back on themselves.

'We must fight alongside Meduson and his warriors, Cadmus,' demanded Cybus. 'The primarch taught us to alloy our power to augment our strength. What better way of striking back is there than killing the Warmaster's brother?'

Tyro saw the sense in this, but his anger at the presumption Cybus had shown held him back from agreeing immediately. He *wanted* to fight with his brothers, of that there was no doubt. His heart cried out for this vengeance.

Shadrak *bloody* Meduson himself was offering a chance to slake his thirst for traitor deaths.

Meduson saw his hesitation and released the twisted bars of the sparring cage. 'Know that I would welcome the strength of your warriors, Brother Tyro, but there is more you must hear before making any decision. I plan to go up against a primarch. The runt of the litter, it's said, aye - but a primarch nevertheless.'

'What must I hear?'

Meduson tapped a finger against his chin. 'Tell me, have you heard the term *doppelganger*?'

'No.'

'I have,' said Sharrowkyn. 'It's a Teuton word from Old Earth. It means "twin walker". A double. We used doppelgangers when we wanted to deceive the overseers' kill-teams in the mines. It made it impossible for them to know for sure which one was Primarch Corax's main attack.'

'Exactly,' said Meduson, snapping his iron fingers so hard that they cast sparks. He arrived at a rack of wire-suspended combat-servitors, lifeless flesh-mannequins equipped with a mix of blades and close-quarters blastguns. He pulled one along the rails as he completed his circle of the sparring cage. He held the part-organic, part-machine thing out before him like a prop.

'One of the last things we learned from the Kryptos before it selfcombusted was that Alpharius has taken to using doppelgangers to throw hunters like us from his scent,' said Meduson. 'He seeks to weave a web of obfuscation around him like a shroud of invisibility.'

Meduson gave another of his death-rattle laughs.

'They say that not even his own Legion know where he walks now.'

Tyro could feel the weight of expectation pressing in on him from those Iron Hands standing in the training chamber. They wanted this. They *needed* this.

Meduson tapped an oath-seal on his shoulder guard, and Tyro saw the icon of a hydra pressed into the wax - a hydra with its many heads severed.

'I am oath-sworn to the mission,' said Meduson, 'but there is no shame in you and your warriors continuing to fight as you are.'

Tyro saw the truth in that, but what better chance would there be to hurt the traitors? Yet even as he formed the words to bind his fate to Meduson's, Sharrowkyn's caution lodged like a stubborn shard of hot metal in his hammer hand.

No, this was a decision requiring wiser counsel than any here gathered could offer.

'I will take your mission to Captain Branthan,' he said.

'WE DON'T NEED to do this,' said Cybus as they approached the captain's cryosepulchre. 'It's clear what we have to do. You know I'm right. Tell him, Thamatica.'

The Ironwrought looked up at the mention of his name.

He nodded and Tyro saw Thoic and Numen were also in agreement with Cybus.

'Most likely you are, Vermana,' replied Thamatica, 'but Ulrach Branthan is still captain of this vessel. He needs to know what is at stake.'

'You know what he'll say.'

'Aye, I believe I do,' said Tyro. 'And I would hear it from his lips, not yours.'

Cybus fell into a brooding silence as the blast-shielded door opened at their approach. Garuda, who'd been following them down through the ship, flew in as a wall of icy mist rolled out.

Tyro followed the Bird inside, and cold hit him like a blow.

He imagined this was what Fenris was like. Medusa knew ice, but nothing like that which the Sons of Russ boasted of their home world.

Truth be told, the frozen air no longer bothered Tyro. He had little enough flesh left on his frame for it to affect. The numerous chimeric augmentations he and Vermana had undergone over the decades rendered them immune to most weaknesses of flesh.

But not even centuries of training, discipline and bio-conditioning could entirely remove weakness of spirit.

Garuda perched on icicle-hung ductwork near the ceiling looking down at Tarsa, who was bent double over an opened panel on the side of Branthan's frost-limned casket. A host of blinking lights and stripped wires were bound together with saw-toothed clips.

'Is there a problem?' asked Tyro.

Tarsa looked up from his ministrations as the Iron Hands entered, and shrugged.

'No more than usual,' he said, dragging numerous heavy cables from the machinery beneath the casket. 'Fluid reservoirs need to be filled, capacitors recharged and burned-out wires replaced. It takes a great deal of effort and resources to keep the captain alive.'

'Whatever it takes,' said Tyro.

The Apothecary nodded and plugged the cables into devices whose function Tyro could not even begin to imagine. It seemed the humming pitch of the casket changed, but it was impossible to be certain.

Once, in a rare moment of introspection, Tyro had confessed his doubts to Branthan's unmoving body. He had spoken of how he was unworthy to lead the crew of the *Sisyphium*. That conversation haunted him still, and every moment since had been spent trying to prove those self-pitying words wrong.

Septus Thaic moved past Tyro to stand at the end of Branthan's icy prison. He stared down at the captain, his features raw and gleaming from radiation exposure. The scars the III Legion swordsman had given Thaic still looked painful. He bore his hurts stoically, but his strained features and bloodshot eyes told a more honest tale of his suffering.

'You should let me examine you, Septus,' said Tarsa.

Thaic coughed and shook his head as though dizzy. 'There's no need, Apothecary,' he said, straightening and waving Tarsa away. 'I am fit enough to perform my duties.'

'Leave him be,' said Cybus. 'We've more important matters to discuss than Thaic's burns.'

Vermana Cybus was a warrior of great skill and courage, who excelled in battle, but lacked for any trace of empathy in the times between war-making.

But in this case, Cybus was entirely correct.

'How much time will we have, Apothecary Tarsa?' he asked.

'Two minutes,' said the Salamander. 'Give or take.'

'That's longer than normal.'

'Against all reason, every reading says Captain Branthan's injuries are lessened,' said Tarsa. 'He now seems to be winning the fight for life.'

'The Heart of Iron?' said Tyro.

'Perhaps.'

Tyro looked through the web of hoarfrost coating the curved glass. Ulrich Branthan's features were frozen in the last instant of consciousness he'd known. Like a waxen effigy or a servitor with the data-wafer yanked suddenly from its skull, his features were bereft of anything suggesting life.

'I thought you said it was killing him?'

'It was. Or at least I believed it was.'

'Don't you know?' said Cybus. 'You're the damn Apothecary.'

For a warrior whose heart pumped the molten blood of Nocturne, Atesh Tarsa remained calm in the face of hostility. He met the veteran's gaze with his own blood-red stare, and it was Cybus who looked away first.

'The Heart of Iron predates the Imperium by thousands of years,' said Tarsa. 'How it interacts with Legion anatomy is a mystery only the Emperor, beloved by all, could fathom.'

Cybus wasn't about to let the uncertainty of the captain's fate lie. 'What about you, Thamatica?' he said, waving a hand at the cyber-eagle. 'You've dealt with artefacts from the Land of Shadows before.'

Thamatica stared at the Bird before returning his scrutiny to Branthan. His lips pursed as he tapped his chin thoughtfully.

'I have, it's true,' he said. 'But this is beyond even my experience.'

Thamatica turned his attention to Tarsa and said, 'Perhaps, if the captain is indeed healing, it might be possible to remove the device for examination.'

'Remove it? Impossible. You'll kill him.'

Thamatica shrugged. 'Then I can offer no explanation.'

'Never mind explanations,' said Tyro. 'We're here to speak to the captain. Bring him up.'

Tarsa bent back to the casket and slotted home an activation key from his narthecium gauntlet. A panel slid out from the side of the cryo-tube with a number of ivory sliders and cog-rimmed dials of black plastek.

'Disengaging stasis field,' he said, turning the leftmost dial down to zero.

The field keeping Ulrich Branthan trapped in a sealed pocket of time was invisible, but Tyro knew the instant that the power was cut. Air from the past was released, frozen and stagnant and freighted with the reek of putrefaction. For all Tarsa's talk of healing, the mass of the captain's body was still hideously broken.

'Raising core body temperature.'

Frost melted on the captain's skin, running down his cheeks like tears. His features softened and gained a measure of colour as blood began flowing around his body. That same blood leaked in glutinous, oozing clots from the wounds on his chest and the ragged stumps of his thighs.

Branthan's eyes moved beneath their lids. His lips parted and a rancid exhalation misted the air before him.

'Brain activity increasing,' said Tarsa, reading the cascade of information on the slates inset on the casket's steel-panelled flank. 'Alpha wave amplitude nominal. Theta wave activity increasing. Neural oscillation building rapidly. You can speak to him now, he'll hear you.'

'Ulrich,' said Tyro. 'Something's happ—'

'We failed.'

As always, Ulrich Branthan's filtered voice sent a shiver of dread down Tyro's spine. It came from a place of unimaginable pain, where that pain was all-encompassing and sealed inside him for what would feel like an eternity. It spoke of tortures that no man should endure.

Past experience had taught Tyro that Branthan's first moments of wakefulness were often difficult as his mind reassembled its disordered fragments, fighting through the agonies clouding his thoughts. All he could do was press on.

'Captain, we've linked with Meduson of the Sorrgol Clan,' said Tyro. 'He has a mission and needs our help.'

Branthan's head rocked back and forth on the bloodstained mat beneath him. The flow of blood from his ruined extremities waxed strong. *'We failed. We failed at Isstvan, and we failed at Iydris.'*

'No, we were betrayed,' said Tyro, gripping the edge of the casket. The heat from his iron fist melted deep grooves in the ice. 'The Warmaster betrayed us all.'

'We are no longer worthy. The Angel Exterminatus was born and generations uncounted will curse our names for eternity.'

Tyro and Cybus exchanged glances. Of all the things they expected from their captain, self-recrimination wasn't one of them. Rage and a thirst for vengeance, yes, not ominously prophetic words.

'Meduson believes we should join forces,' said Tyro. 'I would hear your counsel.'

Branthan turned his head towards Tyro.

'Join forces? Why?'

'He believes we can kill Alpharius.'

'Kill Alpharius?'

'Yes.'

'Kill a primarch...'

'We will have revenge,' said Cybus, joining Tyro at the side of the casket and pouring all his hatred and grief into every syllable. 'Not on the Phoenician, but his time will come.'

Branthan's eyes opened: sunken milky orbs, veined red with dead blood and yellowed with necrosis. Tyro recoiled from the madness he saw there. A riot of insanity made sport behind those hollowed orbs. *'Revenge... Aye, revenge. Salvation in blood.'*

'Thirty seconds,' said Tarsa.

Tyro rallied his thoughts in the face of Branthan's pain and desperate hunger for atonement. He wanted no counsel from a mind torn to pieces by pain and an

eternity of recrimination.

He felt Tarsa's gaze upon him and saw the Apothecary was just as horrified by the toxic rage in Branthan's eyes.

Silent understanding passed between them.

The tears on Branthan's cheeks froze instantly, but he had one last order to give before icy eternity swallowed him.

'Do it. Kill Alpharius, and purge our weakness of failure.'

▪

SIX

Purpose Digging Wraith-slip

HEAT AND SPARKS filled the air of the forge - one hazing it, the other lighting it with fat orange fireflies. Furnaces burned with infernal light as steel stripped from the *Zeta Morgeld* was rendered useable.

Rivers of molten metal flowed into weapon moulds and Iron Hands stripped to the waist beat at fire-blackened anvils with shaping hammers. Hissing smoke arose from water that was too old for tempering, and seasoned smiths spoke of weakness being blended into the metal.

Soot-stained banners swayed in rising thermals, each one emblazoned with the sigil of a master armourer. The coffered walls of the forge had once been hung with the great works of those masters, warriors who had toiled in its blistering heat to work wonders with metal. Booming songs, destined to become part of every masterpiece, had once echoed from its walls.

Now none remained to shake the soot from the banners, the songs were stilled and few wonders remained.

Beyond the muttering smiths, two figures worked at an anvil in a halo of ruddy light. Like the Iron Hands, both were stripped to the waist, but there the similarity ended.

Nykona Sharrowkyn had skin of alabaster white, an albino but for the shock of glossy black hair in a short scalp-lock. Angular eyes set in an aquiline profile were pools that reflected little of the furnace light or flaring sparks.

Atesh Tarsa was his opposite in every way, dark of skin and red of eye, with a shaven skull like an orb of black obsidian. Much more than Sharrowkyn, the son of Nocturne looked perfectly at home.

Two days still remained until the ships of the Iron Hands would reach the waypoint that Sabik Wayland had identified from the *Morgeld's* avionics. Sharrowkyn and Tarsa had spent the time since the union of the *Iron Heart* and the *Sisyphium* training, sparring and, now, forging.

Tarsa held a glowing orange sword blade upon the anvil as Sharrowkyn worked a hammer along its length.

'Careful,' warned Tarsa. 'You will fold the metal at the edges. You've taken two

days to harden and straighten the steel already. It would be a shame to break it now.'

'How is it that an Apothecary knows the secrets of steel as well as those of flesh?' asked Sharrowkyn.

'All Nocturne's sons have an affinity with smiting. I have only a passing skill.'

Even Sharrowkyn's limited understanding of a forge told him that Tarsa was being modest. He knew better than to press the issue. The Salamander was a humble warrior, one who was quietly content to let his skills speak for themselves.

'It's more than I have.'

'This anvil has more skill than you,' said Tarsa, though there was no malice in his words. He shook his head. 'And to think you were born in a mine.'

'I was a salt boy,' said Sharrowkyn, his jaw hardening and the hammer speaking to his deep-rooted anger. 'As soon as I could walk, I was sent to the tidal pools of Lycaeus's deepest caves. Along with a hundred other children I spent my time scraping crystals from the rocks with a blunted mattock. The tool-making factories used it to salt their tempering water.'

Tarsa nodded as he turned the blade. 'Salt water conducts heat more efficiently and makes harder steel than pure water. Though in truth there's few tools need to be that hard. Dangerous work, I imagine.'

'It was,' said Sharrowkyn. 'Children drowned all the time. A surge tide could pour back into a cave without warning. There was a saying that the best salts came from the bones of the dead.'

'Enough hammering,' said Tarsa, moving the blade away from Sharrowkyn's blows. 'Any more will turn the edge against you.'

The Salamander lifted the sword by the point of its tang and sighted down the bevels. 'The symmetry is not perfect, but there is no warp or screw.'

'Will it do?'

Tarsa nodded and handed the blade to Sharrowkyn, who wiped it clean before working it smooth with fine-grained pumice.

'Next polish the blade until it gleams the blue of a summer's gloaming.'

'I never saw the sun until my thirteenth year,' said Sharrowkyn.

'Then think of the blue of Eighth Legion plate.'

'I'd rather imagine it red with their blood.'

'That will be when you quench it.'

Sharrowkyn nodded and put the blade upon the anvil. 'Quenched in a killing thrust. I like that.'

'If you like, I will fit a grip for you.'

'I would be honoured, Atesh,' said Sharrowkyn.

'The honour is mine, Nykona,' said Tarsa.

'Something simple, mind. I'm not given to gaudy weaponry.'

'Two palm plates of lacquered ebony?'

'Perfect,' said Sharrowkyn. 'Apologies, my heart is not in the craft this day.'

'The mission still bothers you?'

Sharrowkyn looked over his shoulder at the toiling Iron Hands. Wreathed in the steam of their labours and the fire of the furnaces, they were grotesque silhouettes, ogres of the deeps toiling at their forges.

'Yes, the mission still bothers me.'

'You don't think it's a good one?' asked Tarsa, taking up the pumice and giving the blade an even keener edge.

'That's the trouble, it's almost *too* good,' said Sharrowkyn.

'An eye for an eye as a principle of justice is as old as time itself,' said Tarsa. 'And you must agree it has a certain *operatic* quality to it.'

'Operatic?' said Sharrowkyn with a raised eyebrow.

'The One Hundred and Fifty-fourth Expeditionary Fleet had its share of playwrights and composers of verse among its remembrancers. I was privileged to hear a performance of *The Symphony of Banished Night*. The scene where Cardinal Tang is imprisoned within Nusa Kambagan and his former victims murder him is one many believe to be a cornerstone of early Imperial policy.'

'Regardless of your appreciation for opera, it's still feeding into what the Iron Hands *want* to be doing,' said Sharrowkyn. 'And killing Alpharius? Unless I get Fulgrim in my crosshairs again, there's unlikely to be a more perfect mission for the Tenth.'

'It has given our kinsmen purpose,' pointed out Tarsa. 'And a warrior without purpose is a dangerous thing. Violent impulses must be given an outlet, or men bred to kill turn them on themselves. And there are few as prone to violent self-mutilation than the sons of Ferrus Manus.'

'We *had* a purpose,' said Sharrowkyn. 'We *have* a purpose. Don't underestimate the damage we and others like us are doing. Those who fight for Meduson are far more than the sum of their individual efforts.'

'How can you know that?'

'Because it's how we won the war against the Overseers. The rats claw and bite the monster's heels until it can't keep going forwards. Eventually it has to turn, and *that* is when the real killing blow falls.'

'Surely joining our forces with Meduson makes us stronger?'

'No. Gathering our strength when our numbers are so few doesn't make us strong, it makes us vulnerable.'

'So what are you suggesting?'

Sharrowkyn wiped a hand across his brow and rolled his shoulders.
'I'm going to see for myself.'
'See what?'
Sharrowkyn grinned.

THE SYSTEM'S THIRD planet was unlisted in Imperial cartographae, which didn't surprise Sabik Wayland. Typical of the Alpha Legion to choose waypoints so far off the beaten track they hadn't even been named.

The *Sisyphium* and the *Iron Heart* orbited the third planet while Wayland sought to break the fiendish encryptions securing the *Morgeld's* astronavigation data.

The two innermost planets danced an elliptical path around their star that periodically brought them dangerously close to collision and left them monstrously geologically unstable. All were too hot to support life, though that had nothing to do with their stellar proximity. Corrosive atmospherics had boiled the worlds to death beneath poisoned skies over thousands of years.

Had there been life there once? Impossible to know for certain. Perhaps, in another future, one not hijacked by the Warmaster's treachery, worlds like these might have been explored and their mysteries revealed.

Such a future seemed all but impossible now. What hope was there for exploration for its own sake when the drums of war beat at an ever-increasing tempo? Everything he had learned on Mars told Wayland that the cost of victory over Horus would not be measured in what was won, but in what had been lost.

Wayland sighed, rubbing the heels of his palms over his eyes and blinking away the afterimages of scrolling alphanumeric. He'd spent the last thirty-six hours locked in this cell with the Kryptos.

The cunning of the Alpha Legion did not surprise him. He'd long known that the XX Legion were not to be underestimated. The bloody fight to capture the *Zeta Morgeld* had reminded them all that this Legion of vipers did not rely solely upon subtle venoms.

Frater Thamatica had made no offer to assist his code-breaking efforts. True, it had been Wayland's void-tactics that almost killed Thamatica, but his continued absence seemed needlessly petty.

Locked into its throne and linked to Wayland's cogitators by invasive neural pick-ups, the Kryptos churned through billions of code permutations with a stream of burbling static. Grating at the best of times, Wayland's nerves were now stretched to breaking point.

A concealing hood was drawn up over the creature's gnarled skull. Wayland couldn't see its face, only glistening hints of the raw lesions on its neck. Tarsa

had examined the creature's grotesquely hybridised xenobiology, but could find no cause for the lesions. Were they precursors to the fate that had overtaken Meduson's own Kryptos?

Wayland turned away, disgusted by its very existence. There was something disturbingly unwholesome in the animalistic noises it made, something grotesquely and profoundly *wrong* in the arrangements of its maxillofacial anatomy. No sane force of evolution could have shaped such a creature. This was an abomination birthed in a chaos of desire and madness.

None would gainsay him were he to put a mass-reactive through its skull. He would have done so already, but for the fact that it was useful to them. Even Cybus, who could be counted upon to kill anything that didn't fit his rigid idea of the Imperial Truth, had seen sense in keeping the Kryptos alive.

Wayland estimated another three hours would see the Kryptos complete its decryption cycle, revealing the *Morgeld's* ultimate destination.

While it did so, Wayland turned his attention to the void-log of the battle against the *Morgeld* and the *Malquiant*. He'd already used the Kryptos to pull Alpha Legion challenge codes from the vox passing between the two vessels, but something unusual had caught his eye.

'Now what are you?' he murmured, studying the battle's electromagnetic fallout.

A trace in a lower spectroscopic bandwidth he would expect to see. Nothing unusual on its own, and probably part and parcel of the violent outpourings of electromagnetism unleashed in a void engagement. But the constancy of the trace was uncommon enough to pique his interest and suggested something other than weapons discharge.

He scrolled back through the battle to find the first incidence of the emission. But with atomic detonations surrounding the warring vessels and bursts of macro-lasers spiking the readings every other microsecond, it was going to take time. He assigned a backscatter subroutine to sift through the radiation spectra as his throat-vox chirped with an incoming communication.

'This is Wayland.'

'*Can you talk?*'

'Nykona?'

'Yes.'

Sharrowkyn's conspiratorial tone spoke volumes and Wayland immediately switched to a more secure channel.

Dreading the answer, he asked, 'Where are you?'

SHARROWKYN EASED HIMSELF deeper into the shadows of the tertiary axial

transit. He let the air of the *Iron Heart* fill him, gauging whether it would work with him or against him.

Hot oils, lubricant and the breath of toiling machinery. This was a vessel of war. It seethed with bellicose intent.

Sharrowkyn felt fury vibrating in its bones.

Every vessel had its own unique character and the defining one of the *Iron Heart* was, unsurprisingly, anger.

Anger and darkness.

Power came at a premium on a warship. Where to distribute that power was crucially important. Clearly Shadrak Meduson valued other systems over ship-wide illumination, which suited Sharrowkyn perfectly.

He had reached the *Iron Heart* by secreting himself atop a Thunderhawk transporter on a supply run between the two vessels, sealing his warplate against the vacuum and deep cold of the void. In the instant before the craft entered the *Iron Heart's* supply deck, he launched himself from its back and used micro-bursts from his modified jump pack to guide his trajectory towards a ventral battery.

From there, it was a simple matter to locate one of the louvred vents used to expel the corrosive residue of weapons fire from the gun decks.

Simple for one trained by the Shadowmasters.

It didn't hurt that, like the *Sisyphium*, the *Iron Heart* was woefully undercrewed. He'd encountered only a few legionaries, and only a handful of grey-skinned thralls who might as well have been sleepwalking for all the attention they paid him. None of them looked up or even suspected that one of the shadows gliding through the sepulchral iron corridors didn't belong there.

Though the two strike cruisers were superficially similar, the internal structure of Meduson's vessel was markedly different. Sharrowkyn had explored every hidden corner of the *Sisyphium*, but that proved no help in his exploration of the *Iron Heart*. Constructed to ancient plans, each ship was unique and every Legion stamped their own traits onto those that bore their colours. But so profound a difference? That raised the hackles of his suspicions.

Sharrowkyn slipped onwards through the darkness. Sometimes he used the floor, sometimes the roof spaces. The interior of the *Iron Heart* was a twisting labyrinth, a mass of intertwined blind alleys and passageways that spiralled back upon themselves. Every wall was seamed with weld-scars and fusion-arc stitching.

The overall impression was of a starship that had been completely rebuilt from the inside out. Nothing in Sharrowkyn's experience was of any help in navigating its interior. Every time he divined one route's solution, two more

conundrums presented themselves. He paused in his exploration, and opened a secure vox channel, one he'd established before leaving the *Sisyphium*. A quick-burst transmission with an encryption key he'd copied from the Kryptos.

'Sabik?'

He received an answer with a fractional delay.

'This is Wayland.'

'Can you talk?'

'Nykona?'

'Yes.'

'Where are you?'

'Aboard the Iron Heart.'

Sharrowkyn heard Wayland sigh. *'Of course you are. Where else would you be?'*

'You have the structural plans of the *Iron Heart*,' said Sharrowkyn, not posing it as a question. 'Updates and refit history.'

'I do,' said Wayland. *'Everything up to Isstvan Five.'*

Sharrowkyn pictured Wayland surrounded by blooming entoptics of the vessel's interior.

'Link with my armour,' said Sharrowkyn. 'See what I see.'

He heard the clicking interface with Wayland's visor.

'Done,' said Wayland. *'But break connection before you wraith-slip again. Experiencing that over a link almost blinded me last time.'*

'Understood. What do you have on the *Iron Heart*?'

'Commissioned in 808.M30, the tenth year of the Great Crusade, as reckoned from Terran sidereal time,' said Wayland. *'Keel laid down in the tenth month of the tenth year.'*

'Appropriate.'

'Some called it a good omen,' said Wayland.

'I'd be inclined to agree if I believed in things like that, but I was hoping for more immediately useful information.'

Wayland wasn't to be discouraged. *'Void-trials began six years after the keel's sounding. Entered operational service nine months later. Two centuries of the highest honours, including trophies taken at Gardinaal, and also during the Compliance of One-Five-Four Four and the Diasporex Scattering. Listed in Tenth Legion fleet registry as occupying a vanguard position in the Gorgon's retribution fleet en route to Isstvan Five. No record of the Iron Heart exists subsequent to Isstvan.'*

'Hardly surprising.'

'Agreed,' said Wayland. *'What are you hoping to find?'*

'I'm not sure,' said Sharrowkyn, hearing the *Iron Heart's* plasmic heartbeat, but little else. The sense of abandonment was palpable. 'This ship is like an ore-mine of Lycaeus when its seam was played out.'

'And where is everyone?' whispered Wayland in his helm.

'Just what I was wondering,' said Sharrowkyn, moving deeper into the vessel.

Wayland offered commentary on the ship as he saw through the Raven Guard's helm. Sharrowkyn didn't answer, keeping his mind fixed on the artes taught to him in the darkest spaces of the Ravenspire.

'You should be approaching the main axial now.'

Sharrowkyn nodded as the passageway before him widened, becoming a vaulted narthex with ironwork mesh flooring and panelled walls worked in beaten metal. The external bulkhead was entirely new, a curving arc of fresh-welded steel that ran from beneath the level of the floor to a point near the apex of the chamber.

'Are you seeing this?'

'I am,' confirmed Wayland. *'Blast damage from battery fire. And look at the other walls. Mass-reactive craters.'*

'Broadside at close range, and then they were boarded.'

'A common enough fate at Isstvan.'

Sharrowkyn nodded. Few enough vessels had escaped the traitor's trap, and even those that broke through the blockades and escaped pursuit were often little more than barely functioning wrecks.

'A tough fight, judging by the number of impacts,' he said.

'Meduson said his flagship took a beating from the Sons of Horus,' said Wayland. *'Looks like he undersold how much of a beating.'*

'They were lucky to survive.'

'Luck has nothing to do with Iron Hands surviving,' said Wayland.

Sharrowkyn grinned, but it fell from his face as he sensed the presence of others. He vaulted onto the wall and sprang up towards the ductwork overhead, rolling over onto a perforated conduit run.

'What is it?' Wayland asked.

Sharrowkyn looked back down the corridor as three warriors appeared, dark shapes against the bare steelwork of the restored bulkhead. Their battleplate grated and hissed, but they walked with the sure swagger of warriors confident in their invincibility.

One carried a meltagun, another a volkite charger. The third carried a weapon that Sharrowkyn didn't recognise - a tubular construction with multiple glass-tube barrels that crackled with cerulean fire. They paused in the narthex as though looking for something, and Sharrowkyn had the powerful sense they

knew he was there.

'*How coul—*' began Wayland, but Sharrowkyn cut the link.

The shadows around him expanded, becoming darker than the blackest night, seeming to flow around him, welcoming him into its fuliginous embrace. Sharrowkyn knew that was how it would appear to anyone who might actually see him anyway.

To wraith-slip was to become one with the darkness, to own the black and let it enfold you. Its embrace was cold and solitary, for it came from a time when there *was* no light. Years of training in the deepest mines of his birthrock had given Sharrowkyn an affinity with darkness that few beyond his Legion could match. To live sightless in the depths, with the black, slithering *things* closing in at every turn, soon taught a warrior how to hide.

He became a ghost, a rumour of movement and a whisper of belief. One of the Iron Hands glanced up, but looked away just as quickly, convinced by his hind brain as much as his eyes that he had seen nothing out of place.

Sharrowkyn soon left the three warriors behind, and felt the darkness melt away as he eased himself into a side passage. He was alone, and rolled from the conduit, swinging down to the deck and landing with a barely audible thud of boots on metal.

'You're good, I'll give you that,' said a voice at the end of the corridor.

Sharrowkyn spun around, dropping to a crouch and automatically reaching for his pistol. He halted his hand a hair's breadth from the grip as he saw the broad-shouldered silhouette.

'My ship fought tooth and nail to stay alive after Isstvan, Brother Sharrowkyn,' said Shadrak Meduson. 'Did you really think I *wouldn't* know when there's an intruder aboard?'

SEVEN

Empty threats
False flags
The best at what I do

'I SHOULD THROW you both in the brig,' snapped Cadmus Tyro, pacing the metalled floor of the embarkation deck. Wayland at least had the good grace to look guilty, but Nykona Sharrowkyn managed to impart an unrepentant insouciance to his stance.

'Him I can understand,' said Tyro, 'but you, Sabik? What do you have to say for yourself?'

'I would say that Brother Sharrowkyn's actions should be classed as due diligence,' said Wayland.

'What?'

'He was simply ensuring that what Captain Meduson told us was true.'

Tyro looked over at Shadrak Meduson, who'd brought the trespassing Raven Guard back aboard the *Malleus Ferrum*. The captain of the Sorrgol Clan was impassive, his scarred face giving nothing away as to his humours. Was he enraged at this impugning of his honesty or might he see this as Wayland did?

'You doubted the word of a fellow Iron Hand?'

'Didn't you?' countered Wayland. 'Just because you *want* to believe Captain Meduson is our ally doesn't make it so.'

Tyro expected an outburst from Meduson at this insult to his honour, but the scarred warrior said nothing.

'And did he find anything?' demanded Tyro, not even bothering to address the question to Sharrowkyn.

Wayland glanced at the Raven Guard, who kept his eyes fixed forwards.

'No,' said Wayland.

'I should strip you of rank and position, break you back down to the ranks.'

'I heard Iron Hands didn't make empty threats,' said Sharrowkyn.

Tyro struggled to keep his temper. He'd faced down the worst horrors the galaxy had to throw at a man, but Sharrowkyn didn't blink. The Raven Guard's ebon eyes stared back, and Tyro saw the mirror of his own unflinching nature.

'What did you say?'

'You shouldn't make threats you're not going to carry out.'

'You think I won't?' said Tyro.

'I know you won't.'

'And why not?'

'You need me,' said Sharrowkyn. 'I'm the best at what I do, and you don't have anyone aboard like me.'

'I *need* someone who can't obey orders? I *need* a warrior who sets his own rules of engagement and conduct?'

'Yes,' said Sharrowkyn. 'That's exactly what you need.'

'He's right, Cadmus,' said Shadrak Meduson. 'And, were our circumstances reversed, I'd have done the same.'

'So why didn't you?' asked Sharrowkyn.

Meduson grinned his burn-skewed grin.

'Who says I haven't?'

'You think I wouldn't know?'

'So sure of yourself, little raven,' said Meduson, closing the distance between him and Sharrowkyn. Though there was little difference in their height, Meduson somehow managed to tower over the Raven Guard. 'You've spent a few years aboard an Iron Hands vessel and you think you know all there is to know about us? You're good, Brother Sharrowkyn, *very* good, and the shadows bend to your will like no one I've seen before, but these are vessels of steel and stone, the twin flesh of Medusa. And none know that flesh better than the sons of Ferrus Manus.'

'I'd have known,' repeated Sharrowkyn.

'Really? Then how is it that Ashur Maesan was able to gain entry to your vessel and see your Kryptos beast for himself? Quite a setup you have down there, Wayland. Tell me, is it really necessary to bind the thing with fetters?'

Not even Sharrowkyn's inscrutable features could hide his shock at Meduson's words.

Tyro was just as shocked.

'You put a man on my ship?'

'I did,' said Meduson. 'And while I regret such a gross breach of trust was necessary, we both know trust is in short supply in such times as we find ourselves.'

Meduson's words stoked Tyro's already well-banked anger, but this wasn't a discussion to be had before his crew.

He shot a glance at Sharrowkyn and Wayland, saying, 'You're dismissed.'

They turned to go, both vindicated and chastised.

'Wayland,' said Tyro. 'How long until the Kryptos finishes decrypting the *Morgeld's* avionics log?'

'Any minute now,' said Wayland.

'Then get me a heading before next watch bell.'

Wayland nodded, and he and Sharrowkyn marched from the deck. Tyro didn't give them a second glance.

'I'm not happy you put a man on my ship,' he told Meduson when they were gone.

'I could say the same thing.'

'Sharrowkyn acted without my authority.'

'You should have *given* him authority,' said Meduson. 'I'm just surprised it took him this long to board my ship. I think he waited out of respect for you, hoping you would give him that order. Does the *Sisyphium's* crew lack resolve, Cadmus?'

Tyro was stung by the rebuke, just as much from the fact that it had been given as he was in knowing it was entirely justified.

'No, it does not,' he said.

'Good,' said Meduson. 'This coming fight will test us all, and only men of resolve will survive it.'

'You'll not find us wanting,' promised Tyro.

'See that I don't.'

FIFTEEN DAYS LATER and three isolated star systems over, the *Iron Heart* and the *Sisyphium* drifted silently towards a world the astronavigation charts named Eirene Septimus. A scaled orb of jade and umber, everything about it told Wayland that it was plunging towards a slow and inevitable doom.

Its image sat in the centre of the *Sisyphium's* main viewer, wreathed in banded layers of corrosive atmospherics. Inset at each corner of the screen was a slowly degrading pict from the servitor drones launched thirty minutes previously.

Each revealed planetary topography that would soon be submerged beneath acidic oceans as torrential chemical rains spilled in an unending deluge from the impenetrable clouds.

'*A death world if ever I saw one,*' said Shadrak Meduson.

A holographic representation of the *Iron Heart's* master stood at Cadmus Tyro's right hand, arms folded across his broad chest. Though Tyro sat in the captain's throne, the dynamic of who exactly was in command was hard to fix.

'Deadlier than most,' agreed Wayland. 'But it's those clouds that make Eirene Septimus valuable.'

'Valuable to who?' said Tyro, looking like he was imagining how it would be possible to fight within such a biosphere.

'To anyone who knows its truth,' said Wayland. 'Eirene Septimus was entered

into the Carta Imperialis by the Twentieth, yet the aestimare describes it as a dead world of no value.'

'*Keeping it for themselves,*' sneered Meduson, his image wavering with static.

'So how exactly is it valuable?' asked Tyro.

'The atmosphere is incredibly dense and seeded with crystalline deposits of promethium from some earlier epoch of geological upheaval.'

'Useable promethium?' asked Thamatica.

'Only in the last decade,' said Wayland as a fresh graph appeared on the screen. 'Over millions of years, as the seventh planet's orbit carried it fractionally closer to the star, its atmosphere has now absorbed enough heat for those suspended promethium crystals to melt. Hence the planetary deluge.'

'How would you harness that resource?' asked Tyro.

'Like this,' said Wayland, and the display changed to reveal an airborne colossus sitting at the very upper limits of the breathable atmosphere, like one of the great orbital plates of Terra. Its size was difficult to judge, but it resembled the industrial powerhouse of Rodinia and possessed the monumental scale of Vaalbara.

The first metaphor the mind conjured was of a vast jellyfish or flattened octopus drifting serenely across a fiery ocean of blazing clouds. Its underside was hazed by immense repulsors between which thousands of flexible siphon tentacles plunged deep into the promethium-rich soup below.

The platform's upper surface was wreathed by an umbra of tar-black exhaust gases and lit by the hellish glare of flame-belching vent towers.

Beneath this sullen shroud, its deck was encrusted with titanic refineries, thundering pump structures and vast silo towers. The spaces separating these structures were tangled lattices of iron spars, air processors and thousands of kilometres of pipework that leaked toxic exhalations.

Even through the sickly fog it was possible to make out the hydra-headed icons atop the platform's many towers.

'As best I can make out from its *very* few emissions, its designation is Lerna Two-Twelve,' said Wayland.

'Throne of Terra...'
breathed Tyro at the sight of this nightmarish vision of industrial madness.

'It's an all-but-limitless supply of ship-grade promethium, and processing manufactories capable of refining engine-ready plasma,' said Wayland. 'A coaling-station, as such places were once known.'

'*Messy,*' said Meduson. '*Inefficient. Primarch Guilliman would not approve.*'

'So a sizeable Mechanicum presence, yes?' said Tyro.

'An estimated thousand priests and servitors,' agreed Wayland. 'But most of

the facility will be self-regulating. If it were ours, I'd set it to harvest enough promethium to fill the silos and then shut down. Which would explain why no one has seen it before now. When it goes dark, it's next to invisible in the atmosphere.'

'*Is that a ship?*' said Meduson, bending to study his own vessel's surveyor input.

'Good eyes, Captain Meduson,' said Wayland, and moments later, another image appeared on the main viewer. A ripple of unease spread around the bridge as the clouds parted and the prow of a warship bearing the hydra of the Alpha Legion became momentarily visible.

'Yes,' said Wayland. 'A rapid strike cruiser, designation, as you'd expect, unknown. It's taking on fuel and looks like it's being kept synchronous with Lerna Two-Twelve by a number of very precise e-mag tethers.'

The picter moved in, and the shadow of hose-lines could be seen through the vapour clouds: huge semi-rigid pipes transporting megalitres of fuel to the vessel's cavernous tanks every minute.

'We can see it,' said Cybus. 'Can it see us?'

'No.'

'How can you be certain?'

'Do you think I would be getting this close if I wasn't certain?' said Wayland. 'If that ship knew we were here it would be blasting its fuel lines clear and the e-mag tethers would already be disengaged.'

Tyro rose from his seat and bent over the guard-rail.

'And the rest of the Alpha Legion ships?'

The *Sisyphium* and the *Iron Heart* had traced separate, spiralling routes to the seventh planet of the Eirene System, seeding their wake with passive surveyor drones. The idea had been Wayland's, and was already bearing fruit.

'All three emissions from the Mandeville circumference are moving inwards on steady bearings,' said Thamatica. 'At least three ships, maybe four. Impossible to be certain.'

'*What is ever certain with the Twentieth?*' replied Meduson. '*Displacement?*'

'All at least cruisers, with one capital ship.'

'*Designation?*'

'Unknown, but I'm guessing it's the *Alpha* or *Beta*.'

'Are the astropaths hearing anything?' asked Tyro.

'They concur with the long-range passives'

'How long until they get here?' asked Cybus.

'Current estimates put them over Lerna Two-Twelve no later than fifteen hours from now,' said Thamatica.

'Then we need to move fast,' said Cybus. 'What do we know of any Alpha Legion presence down there?'

'Nothing with any certainty,' said Wayland.

'So you keep saying. Just give me a damn estimate I can work with.'

'Vessels like that don't normally carry Legion forces as standard,' said Wayland, 'but we have to assume this one does. Given its limited crew spaces, its complement would be perhaps two or three squads. Thirty warriors at most.'

'Too many to take face to face with certainty,' said Tyro.

'But we don't need to take them face to face,' said Meduson, his image sharpening as if by the force of his will.

'What do you mean?' said Tyro, not liking the sickly grin on Meduson's ravaged features.

'It's time to play the Alpha Legion at their own game.'

DESCENDING THROUGH THE planet's upper atmospheric layer was easy until the Storm Eagle hit the tropopause. This was one of the roughest descents Tyro had ever known, and he had made more combat drops than most.

Heat blooms from the platform below were mixing with the colder air above in roiling storms. Squalling temperature differentials slammed the gunship in all directions. For once, the grav-harnesses securing the legionaries were entirely necessary.

'No use in chastising the pilot, I suppose,' grunted Vermana Cybus as his head slammed into the crossbar of his restraints.

'Sabik Wayland has picked up some bad habits from Sharrowkyn, but he's still the best pilot we have,' said Tyro.

Cybus leaned forwards as much as he was able, hands clasped before him as though in prayer.

Tyro knew what was coming next.

'You should be leading us,' said Cybus.

'We went over this, Vermana,' replied Tyro. 'I can't wear the armour convincingly, not with my cybernetic bodyplan. You need to lead. I will go in with the second wave alongside Meduson and his warriors'

Cybus glanced down the length of the gunship with distaste. 'This isn't the kind of war I was built to fight.'

'Nor was I, but it is the kind of war we face. We either fight it or get out.'

Cybus recoiled as though Tyro had struck him.

'The Iron Tenth end wars, we don't leave them unfinished.'

Tyro nodded and held out his fist. 'Upon the anvil.'

'And by the Iron,' finished Cybus, looking down the fuselage and at his own

armour. 'But I still don't like... *this*'.

Tyro let his eyes roam across Cybus's armour and was forced to agree. Fourteen other warriors of the Iron Hands sat locked into drop-harnesses, but instead of black they wore the salvaged indigo and silver of the XX Legion.

'Using the armour of the enemy,' said Cybus, staring at his armour in disgust and spitting on the deck as though to cleanse his mouth of the idea.

'Unpalatable, I agree,' said Frater Thamatica, making his way down the swaying crew compartment and using the arms of his servo-harness to stay balanced, 'but total surprise is our best chance of capturing the platform intact.'

'But to have our warriors bear the colours of another Legion sits ill with me,' said Tyro.

Thamatica said, 'As it should, but the rigours of war make such demands on those that fight on its ragged edge. At least the extent of your augmentations spares you that burden.'

The Ironwrought moved on with a rolling gait that matched the lurching motion of the gunship. He reached the rear assault ramp, where Nykona Sharrowkyn crouched like the shadow of a gargoyle. The Raven Guard warrior needed no restraints and no harness, keeping his balance with the poise of a warrior in perfect harmony with his body.

Thamatica's servo-harness unfolded and slotted home into the mechanism at the side of the ramp. No sooner had it done so than a trio of bulbs on the panel changed from red to amber.

Sabik Wayland's voice came over the helm-vox.

'Landing zone approaching. Claws down in ninety seconds.'

Tyro, Cybus and the rest of the Iron Hands lifted their stolen helmets and fitted them to their gorgets. Tyro's vision swam for a brief second as his senses meshed with those of his armour. Targeting reticules, functionality icons, waypoint markers and objective icons surrounded him as the visor filled with inputs.

'One pass, low and slow,' said Thamatica. 'Then we land.'

The grav-harnesses securing the disguised Iron Hands lifted from their locking bolts as the rear ramp descended. Searing black fumes rammed into the gunship with hurricane force.

'At least they're not shooting at us,' shouted Thamatica over the din, leaning into the tarry clouds. Vortices of particulate-rich air ripped through the compartment.

'I'd almost prefer it if they were!' replied Tyro, rising to his feet with the rest of the Iron Hands.

Shadrak Meduson's Stormbird followed them, barely visible through the dark umbra of smoke. Without the benefits of Wayland and Thamatica's modifications

it was having a rougher time in the turbulence.

'Sixty seconds.'

Tyro and his Iron Hands turned to face the open ramp.

'I might not be in with the first wave, but I'll damn sure be the first to put boots on the ground,' said Tyro.

'Where's Sharrowkyn?' asked Cybus.

VISIBILITY WAS NIL, but Sharrowkyn knifed through the obscuring pall of cindered darkness like a turbo-penetrator through bare flesh. With arms tucked in tight to his sides, legs straight, he angled his course as a red-orange fireball bloomed below him.

He passed through its outer edges, tasting the promethium-fyceline mix. The ground was near, his every sense told him so, even if his armour didn't. Too much metal, too many emissions confusing its machine senses.

Another gout of fire reluctantly lit the surfaces of his armour and the matt-black needle carbine strapped across his back. This time he saw its source, a flared tower of chained girders. Its heat washed over him, the anchored base out of sight.

He was at terminal velocity now, clouds rushing past him.

They thinned, and he saw the colossal floating structure of Lerna Two-Twelve below, spreading out in all directions like a melted hive. Stalactites of steel rose from a vaporous gruel of toxins and ash: refineries and ore silos, pump towers and vent mouths like vast sinkholes.

Two hundred metres.

Sharrowkyn saw moving things: lumbering giants he recognised as Mechanicum battle engines retrofitted with engineering claws, fuel pumps and lifter rigs. Battalions of masked servitors and automated machines attended upon them like devotees. Tracked fuel-bowsers the size of leviathans traversed vast highways of steel.

His hunter's eye quartered the ground, then quartered it again, looking for real targets.

One hundred metres.

There. Over by the edge of the platform, where the fog glittered with electrostatic discharge in the repulsor field.

Two warriors with transhuman bulk moving along a suspended walkway. Alpha Legion colours. They marched from an outflung fantail platform upon which rested a battered looking Fire Raptor. Caustic rains had taken most of its paintwork, but the hydra sigil remained inviolate.

Fifty metres.

He rolled in midair, bringing his legs around to angle his descent. This close to solid ground, rogue thermals competed to tear him this way and that. Microbursts from his jump pack kept him on course.

Ten metres.

One target looked up. Red eye lenses flared in alarm.

'Too late,' said Sharrowkyn, drawing his black-bladed swords with a near-silent whisper.

Five metres.

They separated, but Sharrowkyn wasn't aiming for both of them. Snapshot mass-reactives punched the air. None close.

His boots smashed down on a helmet that broke apart like glass. He triggered his jump pack again - not enough to get him airborne, just enough to survive the impact. He rammed down through the collapsing body, buckled the decking and rolled.

He was up a second later. A bolt shell slashed past him with a flat bang of displacing air. Sharrowkyn slipped, using the shock of his arrival to confound the senses of his target. It was harder now that the legionary was aware of Sharrowkyn, but not impossible. He spun low and reversed the grip on his left-hand sword, stabbing it hard into the flex-seal joint at the back of the traitor's knee.

Even a legionary had to respect a wound like that.

The warrior dropped as his leg gave out. His arm swung around, looking to draw a bead with his bolter, but Sharrowkyn cut it off at the wrist. The weapon and its attached hand flew free of their owner, but still the legionary fought. He reached for his combat blade, but the fight was already over.

Sharrowkyn rammed his sword into the base of the legionary's neck, twisting its edge and severing the spine. The warrior fell forwards without a sound. Sharrowkyn retrieved his second blade from the corpse's leg. He checked for any sign an alarm had gone out - a braying siren, or a host of weaponised servitors converging on his position.

Nothing.

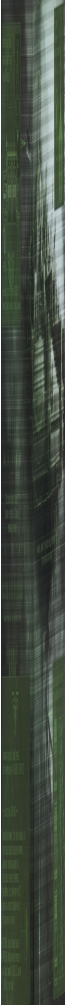
Sharrowkyn tipped both bodies over the edge of the walkway, watching them fall long enough to see them convulsing as the repulsor field caught them and ripped them apart.

Their remains vanished into the corrosive fog, and Sharrowkyn set off at a run, following his instincts as much as the overlaid schematic on his visor.

Lerna Two-Twelve's control hub was five kilometres away.

He kept his swords bared.

He would kill again before reaching his raven's perch.



THE KRYPTOS

The constructs known as Unlingual Cipher Hosts (or 'Kryptos') are an artificially-engineered, hybridised life form. With a language set of their own and a method of articulation that can only ever be interpreted by another of their own kind, they are the perfect code carriers.

This living specimen was captured on the fallen forge world of Cavor Sarta by Nykona Sharrowkyn and Sabik Wayland, and later pressed into service on the *Sisyphium*.





XX Legion battleplate (salvaged mostly intact from the wreck of the *Zeta Morgeld*).

Mark II 'Crusade' pattern, though manufactory serial numbers do not correspond to any known forge worlds supplying the Legiones Astartes before or after the Isstvan V incident. The original legionary's identity is similarly unknown, although the suit was repurposed for use in the Lerna Two-Twelve mission and worn by Brother Dubric of the Iron Hands.

EIGHT

Heads held high

Kill gauntlet

Revival

BARELY HAD THE gunships touched down on the platforms than their jets were screaming to be airborne again. Iron Hands debarked from the assault ramps. As soon as they were clear, the aircraft surged into the fog.

Tyro, Cybus and Meduson met in the eye of the hurricane their ascent left behind. Clad in black war-plate and with his helm locked tight to a wide gorget, Meduson seemed more vital, more energised than before. The prospect of bloodshed and what might be won was invigorating them all.

What had seemed a flight of fancy, a mere dream of vengeance, was now within their grasp, so close Tyro felt he could reach out and pull it tight to his breast.

'Sharrowkyn's already down,' he said.

'I know, I saw him drop.'

'Then you've good eyes,' remarked Cybus.

'The best,' said Meduson. 'Or one, at least.'

The circle of clear air blasted by the Storm Eagles shrank to nothing around the gathered Iron Hands: forty from the *Iron Heart* and twenty-one from the *Sisyphium*, fifteen of whom were clad as Alpha Legion. They spread out across the platform, weapons extended, though there was no sign their rapid insertion had been detected or observed.

Gaskon Malthace emerged from the toxic fog to stand by his captain. His implanted flail described a tight circle on its chain of cold iron. Ashur Maesan let the ring of rusted service studs clink against his metalled forearm as he dragged his *hiebmesser's* edge along the vambrace.

The gesture irritated Tyro, but this was not the time to chide another captain's chosen man. Septus Thoic and Vermana Cybus were unconsciously mirroring the positioning of the two warriors, but where Meduson's honour guard proudly wore the black of the X Legion, Tyro's men were clad as the enemy.

Affixed to the edge of their metal-rimmed shoulder guards were crimson oath-seals, a throwback to a time when going into battle with a shared oath actually meant something. The wax paper fluttered in the strong wind.

'Everyone filter in non-visible spectra,' said Thamatica. 'You should see the icons in the millihertz range.'

Tyro blinked in a filter over his visor rendering the seals as shimmering blobs of mercurial silver. Thamatica had fashioned the icons to differentiate between these faux Alpha Legionnaires and the true traitors. The Iron Hands would see them, but the traitors would not.

'Ready?' Tyro asked Cybus.

'I am, brother-captain,' said Cybus, slamming a fist to his chest in the old Unity salute.

Septus Thoiic repeated the gesture a second later, adding, 'Today, a primarch falls!'

To hear a warrior clad as a betrayer say that gave Tyro the strangest sensation. Warriors clad as Alpha Legionnaires talking of killing their own gene-sire. That a schism existed between the Legions was bad enough, but the idea of it *within* a Legion - even an enemy one - sent a chill down Tyro's spine.

Thamatica pointed along the suspended walkway leading from the platform with his servo-arms. The blurred outline of an enormous promethium silo was just visible, vast as a hab-stack and just as volatile.

Pluming vent fires belched from its summit. Lightning drizzled its flanks.

'Follow that line of silos for three kilometres until you reach an eightfold nexus of pipes and cables. Take the northern route onwards that will lead to a pumping station after another kilometre. That's where you'll find the control hub, on the coreward side of a refinery built in the form of a stepped ziggurat.'

'Like a temple?' asked Cybus.

'Yes, I suppose you could argue that it has something of the fane about it,' said Thamatica. 'Strange how often that happens.'

Cybus nodded and clenched a fist above his shoulder. Tyro extended his hand and they gripped arms as warriors of the X Legion had for two centuries. Wrist to wrist, iron to iron. It felt strange not to actually feel the touch of an iron gauntlet, but even that had to be concealed.

'We'll follow you,' said Tyro. 'Five hundred metres.'

Cybus nodded and said, 'Do you remember what I said on Iydris after we'd faced the Lord of Iron?'

'I do,' said Tyro, taking the veteran's hand. 'That after facing a primarch any other death would feel small. And do you remember what I said to you?'

'Don't die. Live forever,' said Cybus. 'Was good advice.'

The Avernii champion turned and led the warriors of the *Sisyphium* into the chemical-rich fog.

'March with your heads held high,' Meduson shouted after them. 'Here you are

Alpha Legion. Let the enemy see that and this will work.'

The disguised Iron Hands vanished into the fog.

'You heard, Thoic,' said Tyro. 'Today, a primarch falls!'

DESPITE BEING CLAD in full armour - something his cybernetics barely permitted - Vermana Cybus had never felt more exposed. Only now, denied the black of the Iron Hands, did he truly understand how much of his identity was bound up in circuits and gears, oil and electromotive power.

This armour felt *wrong*. On every level.

It moved differently and the invasive link-cables burned in his sockets where they entered his flesh. The visor display glitched with static, as though it knew Cybus were not its rightful wearer.

That he was an imposter.

He and his warriors followed the metalled roadway that Thamatica had indicated, moving through writhing fogbanks that made their footfalls echo strangely. Shadows twisted in the heavy smoke. Mechanicum adepts and packs of roving servitors moved through the mist, but upon seeing his armour, they turned away.

The route took them between vast, cyclopean structures that throbbed with mechanised heartbeats, and gigantic columns of iron that exhaled noxious fumes. Hissing pipes threaded overhead and vulcanised cables transmitted vast quantities of power throughout the platform.

A fuel-leviathan rumbled on a parallel course, two hundred metres in height and a hundred wide. Its cliff-like flanks were layered with a patina of rust and corrosion, its interior spaces filled with an ocean of promethium.

Cybus tried to imagine the scale of the blast were a high-explosive round to penetrate its armour.

'Up ahead,' said Thoic.

Cybus dismissed thoughts of the leviathan's destruction and fixed his gaze forwards once more. Ahead, the roadway approached the eightfold confluence Frater Thamatica had told them to look for.

It wasn't empty.

Two Mechanicum adepts were held aloft on an ornate palanquin of ivory and jet by six servitors in full rebreather-kit. Both worked on a pared back cable-run as thick as a Vindicator's cannon with hooded plasma cutters that wreathed the assembly in a spectral blue light. Crackling brass wires linked them to a hunched brute of a masked servitor overburdened with boxy generator apparatus.

Neither adept appeared to be armed with anything ranged, but with most of their hybrid anatomy concealed beneath ragged black robes it was hard to be

certain.

'Work detail?' he said.

'Looks like it,' replied Thoic. 'Do we kill them?'

'Much as I'd like to, not unless there's no choice.'

One adept looked up, and Cybus saw the red gleam of multiple optics. A bark of static screeched from under its hood. Could its auspex see beneath his stolen armour? His visor tried and failed to translate the scrappy binary. Meaningless symbols scrolled across the display.

Were they already undone?

His hand slid towards his bolter.

The second adept raised a skeletal arm of bare bronze and jade ceramic. It too gave an unintelligible bark of static.

'For the Emperor!' said the first adept in grating, artificial tones. 'Alpharius!'

'For the Emperor!' repeated Thoic, punching the air with his bolter. 'For the Emperor!'

Both adepts bowed and returned to their work on the opened cable-run, and Cybus gritted his teeth as he copied Thoic's gesture of camaraderie.

'This way,' he said, marching from the nexus of cables via its northern exit. His soul felt sullied by allowing the traitorous adepts to believe he shared their loyalty. Every fibre of his being wanted to kill them, to make them suffer, but his orders were unambiguous.

They soon left the adepts behind, worming their way deeper into the maze of slab-sided edifices and intestinal loops of pipework. Thus far, every structure Cybus had seen on Lerna Two-Twelve was of stolid Mechanicum character, blocky and purely functional. Closer to its centre, he saw buildings whose form seemed to have no function.

In an octagonal plaza, a pyramid of mirrored glass stood at the centre of a golden circle of inscribed alchemical symbols. Nebulous congeries of light twisted at the pyramid's centre like a miniature galaxy. From somewhere nearby Cybus heard a strangely musical sound, and for the briefest instant he thought he saw a host of unblinking eyes at the centre of the galaxy.

He caught a glimpse of himself in the glass. The indigo blue of his armour disgusted him, and his iron heart rebelled at the treachery of his appearance.

'Why do they say it?' he asked.

'Say what?' said Septus Thoic.

'For the Emperor. Why that? They've betrayed him, so why retain their battle cry?'

Thoic considered the question.

'It mocks the loyal Legions,' he said. 'It tells us that no heart is unsullied. It

reminds us of who they once were - our kin. They're saying that, for the right reasons, any one of us might have chosen their path.'

Cybus stared at his reflection as he considered Thoic's words.

'No, *not* any one of us,' he said at last. 'We all had a choice, Septus. No one forced the Alpha Legion to betray the Emperor, no one put a gun to their head and said they had to do what they've done. I don't know why, but they *chose* betrayal over loyalty.'

'There's the rub,' said Thoic. 'You don't know. Maybe it's best you don't know.'

Cybus nodded and turned from his treasonous reflection.

'Medusa's blood,' he swore.

Floating on cushions of repulsor energy, ten metres apart, were a pair of armoured speeders with forwards gun-mounts bearing heavy bolters. Their frontal plates were dented and dripped with condensed promethium residue. Dust devils danced in the vortices of their intersecting drive wakes.

Two Alpha Legionnaires sat in the bucket seats of each speeder, one at the controls and the other with his hands on the firing grip of the heavy bolter.

'Brothers,' said Septus Thoic, holding up a hand.

Cybus read their hostility. These warriors didn't know them, and a raised hand alone wasn't likely to win them over.

'Spread out,' he whispered, letting his hand drop to his side. Thoic guessed his intent.

'You can't draw and shoot before those gunners press the triggers,' said Thoic. 'Remember what Meduson said. March with our heads held high. Here we're Alpha Legion, brothers all.'

Cybus forced his fingers to open.

He took a breath and swallowed, walking towards the nearest speeder with what he hoped was the confident stride of someone who had every right. One speeder slipped laterally through the air, putting another five metres between the two vehicles.

'*Sethar muttax, vetheen ranko?*' said the gunner.

The words were gibberish, an unintelligible argot. Cybus had no idea what the warrior had just asked him. He slowly raised his left hand, tapping it on the side of his helmet.

'Bad vox,' he said. 'I can't hear you, brother.'

Cybus kept walking, closing the distance.

'*Sethar muttax, vetheen ranko?*' repeated the gunner.

Cybus shook his head and tapped his helmet again, glancing over at the flanking speeder. Its guns were aimed at his warriors. If he acted now, men would die and the mission would be compromised.

'Shoot when I shoot,' said a voice in his helmet.

Cybus paused. He knew that voice.

The gunner on the flanking speeder jerked to the side as the eye lenses of his helmet imploded. His driver's throat blew out in two silent impacts. Blood sheeted his chestplate in red and the speeder turned a slow spiral as he slumped over its controls.

Cybus didn't have time to rationalise what had just happened. He had a fraction of a second before the crew of the speeder in front of him recovered.

A fraction of a second was all Vermana Cybus needed.

His first shot exploded within the chest cavity of the gunner. He took a step to the side and put a mass-reactive through the driver's helmet.

His warriors spread out to secure the speeders and make sure their crew were dead. Cybus knew for certain they were.

'Sharrowkyn?' he said. 'Where are you?'

'Somewhere I can see what a bad Alpha Legionnaire you make,' said the Raven Guard. *'Throne, you're a terrible liar.'*

'I'll take that as a compliment,' said Cybus, turning a slow circle and scanning the surrounding towers and rooftops for any sign of Nykona Sharrowkyn.

'Please, Cybus. You really think you're going to find me?'

'No. By the way, good shooting.'

'They made it easy for me. Now get the bodies and speeders out of sight,' said Sharrowkyn. *'They'll be missed soon enough, but no sense in pre-empting an alarm.'*

The Iron Hands dragged the dead Alpha Legionnaires from their vehicles, dropping them into the smoking vent stacks.

'And, Cybus?' said Sharrowkyn. *'Hurry, the Alpha Legion ships are here.'*

Cybus looked at the speeders.

'Hurry, you say?'

WORKING IN THE apothecarion, Atesh Tarsa was never alone. The insistent hum of Ulrich Branthan's casket in the adjacent chamber was a constant reminder of another life. His other companion was the Bird. It sat on a cabinet of empty oxygen-cylinders, silent save for the occasional metallic clatter as it rearranged its wings.

'So why didn't you go planetside with Cadmus and Vermana?' Tarsa asked the Bird. It didn't answer, of course, and he shook his head. *'I don't blame you. Cybus is a man whose company is more endured than enjoyed.'*

Tarsa worked in an antechamber just off the main vault where Ulrich Branthan lay in repose. The naked body on the slab before him possessed the

same transhuman bulk, but was of a different stripe altogether.

Bronzed skin marked him as Alpha Legion, though in truth there was little else to differentiate his outward appearance from that of any other legionary. One arm was a painfully crude augmetic, and his right eye was similarly bionic. The disconnected arm sat beside its stump of a forearm, the eye pried loose and hanging over one cheek.

The traitor had died painfully, that much was obvious.

Mass-reactives had taken his right leg, but the real killing blow had been a chainsword rammed up and under the plastron to tear through his heart and lungs.

Humming genetic sequencers processed blood and tissue samples, marrow cores and brain matter. Initial blood testing had detected curious anomalies in the warrior's neural structure as well as elevated quantities of neurotransmitters. Tarsa would have a full neuro-genetic workup for the dead warrior in a few hours, but in the meantime, he'd got his hands bloody.

Numerous disembodied organs surrounded him: the biscopea, the surviving heart, a shredded scrap of lung and other esoteric biological hardware. He'd examined them all with scalpels and microscopes, but so far all he had found was exactly what he'd hoped *not* to find.

That this Alpha Legionnaire was anatomically identical to him and the rest of the *Sisyphium's* crew. He turned to face the Bird.

'Not one deviant trace within his internal structure,' said Tarsa, lifting the glossy mass of an oolitic kidney from a blood-spattered bowl. Ruddy and smooth, it was an organ of engineered perfection compared to what evolution wrought through trial and error. 'I thought, no, I *hoped* I might find some physiological marker to explain why he turned traitor. Some clue that he was different on some fundamental level.'

The bird cawed, a grating bark. Thamatica and Wayland had fixed its body, but it seemed they'd forgotten to upgrade its augmitters.

'Not in this particular organ, of course,' said Tarsa, returning the glutinous mass of the kidney to its bowl. 'A trace or mutation that might make sense of this madness.'

He sat back as the Bird flew from its perch behind him and disappeared into Ulrich Branthan's chamber. It cawed again, sounding somehow admonishing.

'Yes, I know,' said Tarsa, hearing the Bird's metal beak tapping on Branthan's casket. 'Given the last command Tyro issued before boarding the Storm Eagle, I ought to be on the bridge, but even the least among the Iron Hands knows more about commanding a starship than I do.'

Cadmus Tyro had assigned temporary command of the *Sisyphium* to the

astonished Tarsa. Technically, Ulrich Branthan still commanded the vessel, but necessity forced Tyro to cede a degree of control to someone not of the X Legion. Foolish, and an obvious move to justify his and Cybus's simultaneous absence from the ship.

He sighed and let his gaze travel the length of the dead Alpha Legionnaire. Leaving aside the ruination of his chest, the warrior looked almost peaceful. Tarsa recalled something Ignatius Numen had said, questioning if the dead of the *Zeta Morgeld* were truly dead.

The warrior's skin was still bronzed, the pallor of the grave not yet draining him of colour. The melanochrome regulated a Space Marine's pigmentation, but like all living organs, it would cease function when its host was killed.

'Even my skin will pale when I die,' said Tarsa, bending over the corpse and running his gaze from head to toe. 'So why hasn't yours?'

He paused as his gaze lingered over where the warrior's arm had been severed just below the elbow. A temporary piece - that was how Thamatica had described the augmetic. Something wrought in haste and without care that it would bond to its bearer.

'Then why is the amputation scar much older and much cleaner?' said Tarsa, teasing the flesh open with a fine-bladed scalpel extruded from his narthecium.

Tarsa considered possible explanations for this, but before he could reach a conclusion, the Bird cawed again. He ignored it, but it kept squawking. Again and again, it filled the apothecarion with its strident cries.

'What is it?' demanded Tarsa, pushing away from the dead body and marching into Branthan's sepulchre. 'What do you want? I have better things to do than...'

The words died in his throat.

The stasis field sealing Branthan within his casket had disengaged. Temperature readings were spiking across the board. Every single data-slate was in the red, all of them vibrating with silenced alarms. Tarsa stared at the cyber-eagle, its sapphire eyes inscrutable as it perched atop the casket's control mechanisms.

'What did you do?' cried Tarsa. 'Throne, what did you do?'

NINE

Decapitation

Execution

He's coming down

THE ZIGGURAT WAS just where Thamatica said it would be - vast and monolithic, with spired towers that burned the fog rising from its corners. Caustic rain streamed down its bronzed metal facades. It squatted like a sacrificial fane at the edge of an open platform upon which stood two gargantuan figures.

'Titans,' said Thoic.

Cybus felt his chest tighten.

But these engines were adapted for labour and engineering purposes, not war. Instead of carapace-mounted missile launchers, they bore lifter rigs. Fuel connector and grappling limbs took the place of plasma annihilators and gatling cannons.

Sharrowkyn was probably already here, but Cybus didn't bother to try and guess where the Raven Guard might be hidden.

The bulk of the central platform housed the refuelling column, a conflation of monstrously thick cylinders of flexsteel that speared into the clouds like the corded trunk of the mightiest tree imaginable. Vapour-tugs that were little more than colossally powerful engines with a pilot's cab bolted on top, kept tight to the column, ready to begin the refuelling operation. Cybus couldn't see the Alpha Legion ships yet, but they were on their way. Already the sky was raging with atmospheric tempests caused by the inhuman bulk of the descending vessels.

A thousands-strong host of dark-robed Mechanicum adepts, servitors and loaders stood in ordered ranks. Wind and rain lashed them, but they didn't move so much as a muscle.

Cybus ignored them. They weren't his objective.

'Up there,' he said, pointing to a cantilevered control hub jutting from the ziggurat's upper reaches. 'That's where we need to be.'

Thoic nodded.

'We don't have much time,' he said, looking over at a stepped switchback climbing the ziggurat's rain-slick flanks. 'And that's a long way up.'

Cybus looked back at the two captured speeders.

'Sharrowkyn did say to hurry,' said Cybus. 'But first I need you to do

something, Septus.'

'What's that?'

'I need you to shoot me.'

CYBUS SLAMMED INTO the armoured bulkhead, leaving a trail of blood down the metal. Blood poured from a shallow gash where a bolt shell had creased his arm. Behind him, warriors in torn and battered armour crowded the gantry, firing bolters down the switchback. He hammered a fist on the bulkhead.

'Open up!' yelled Cybus. 'They're right behind us.'

Mass-reactives exploded against the bulkhead. Cybus ducked and fired a three-round burst from the hip. A grenade detonated somewhere below. A legionary bellowed in mock pain.

'Sethar muttax!' he roared. 'Sethar *bloody* muttax!'

He had no real idea what the words meant, only that it was some kind of code phrase. He just hoped it wasn't one that would get him killed.

More warriors backed onto the gantry before the bulkhead. Like Cybus, their armour bore blast scars, tears from chain weapons and was smeared with blood. All self-inflicted, but the effect was strikingly convincing.

'Come on, come on,' muttered Cybus, dropping to one knee and firing over the heads of his men.

Magnetic locks disengaged within the ziggurat, and the metres-thick bulkhead split at its middle. Hot air, thick with incense and oily sweat, gusted out on a wind of positive pressure.

Cybus rose to his feet and backed into the control hub, yelling at his warriors. He turned as soon as he was in, a mental map of the hub's interior imprinting on his mind. Angles of attack, threat vectors.

Two Alpha Legionnaires flanked the opening door, another in each corner, two more in the centre of a semicircular arc of cogitators. A high bank of air-traffic control terminals ran the length of the glass-fronted facade.

Eight warriors.

'Get in!' he shouted back to his warriors. 'Before they rush the damn gate!'

More of his warriors ran in through the opened bulkhead.

Cybus counted them in as an Alpha Legionnaire hammered a fist against his shoulder guard. It took every fragment of willpower Cybus possessed not to immediately rip the bastard's head off.

'Who's out there?' demanded the warrior.

'The Nineteenth,' gasped Cybus.

'Raven Guard?' said the warrior with grating disbelief. 'Impossible.'

Cybus heard an edge of doubt. He could practically see the legionary's thought

processes. If any Legion *could* have infiltrated the platform secretly, it would be the XIX.

The warrior came to a decision.

'How many of them?'

Cybus grinned within his helmet as the bulkhead closed behind the last of his warriors.

'And Sharrowkyn said I was a terrible liar.'

'Who?'

'The man who's hopefully about to kill you.'

SHARROWKYN OBLIGED AND put a cluster of crystalline slugs through the Alpha Legionnaire's skull. The warrior standing over Cybus fell and Sharrowkyn immediately switched targets. The mercury-bright icons worn by Cybus's men made picking kills simplicity itself. Almost too easy.

Sharrowkyn shot the two warriors in the centre of the hub, one through an eye lens, the other in the throat. A classic side-by-side kill. The Alpha Legionnaires in the corners of the hub dropped and found cover, moving beyond his sight.

Fine. He'd done what he could from here.

The rest was up to Tyro and Meduson.

Tempting to remain *in situ*. Targets of opportunity would likely present themselves.

He shook his head. That kind of thinking got a sniper killed. Time to displace. Find another shooting location.

Kill more traitors.

* * *

CYBUS ROLLED INTO cover as mass-reactives ploughed the deck. He rose to his knees and ripped a burst of shells over to where the shots had come from. Detonations glanced from the metal walls and banks of machinery. Slates exploded in storms of smoky shards.

The weakened armourglass window blew out and petrochemical winds ripped into the hub. A blizzard of loose ticker-tape streams and dust filled the air.

Thralls and implanted servitors sat oblivious or uncaring at the slaughter going on around them. Most died at their stations. Those with autonomy of thought and movement tried to run. They didn't get more than a few steps before being torn apart in the crossfire.

Horizontal streams of gunfire ripped back and forth across the hub. Two of his warriors were down, proving that even with the element of surprise, nothing was

certain. Cybus still had enough warriors left to finish the job. He crawled to the edge of his cover, a shattered bank of logic engines.

Thamatica would likely berate him for the destruction he'd caused, but let him take this place without a shot! Cybus let a rare grin rest on his lips.

Most warriors hated fighting in confined spaces, but these were the kinds of fight the Iron Tenth relished. With a boarding shield, he'd be in among the Alpha Legion right now, elbow deep in entrails and bloodied to the waist.

Cybus gripped the dead Alpha Legionnaire, the one he'd spoken to, and hauled him upright with a grunt of effort. A transhuman warrior in full armour was still heavy, even to another genhanced physique. He lifted the body over the edge of the console and a burst of shells punched through the corpse's chest with cracks of shattered ceramite and bone.

Cybus released the body and surged to his feet.

Alpha Legionnaire, to the left.

He squeezed the trigger, and the enemy warrior fell with most of his shoulder and half his skull missing.

Four down, four left alive.

With more men, the advantage lay with Cybus, and the enemy knew it. He could have killed them all by now, and laughed as he imagined their confusion. He let them call for aid. He was counting on it.

'Septus!' he yelled. 'Go low around the right flank. They'll be keeping clear of that window, so drive them hard against the far wall. Then keep down for the hammer strike.'

Thoic nodded and moved off, drawing three more Iron Hands to him. Cybus waved his remaining warriors over as relentless volleys of suppressive fire punished the Alpha Legion. With nowhere else to go, they fought with their backs to the wall.

One of Thoic's men fell, his helmet a bloody bowl of sopping matter. Cybus felt his rage coalesce into something primal.

'The ingot is upon the anvil!' he roared. 'Now let the hammer fall!'

On his last word, every one of the Iron Hands dropped to the floor.

A hurricane of impacts blew the back wall of the hub inwards. Heavy calibre mass-reactives sawed through the steelwork behind the Alpha Legion. Shredded metal flew like bronzed decoy chaff and the light from the storm-wracked sky poured inside.

The enemy legionaries were ripped apart by the blitzkrieg of explosive shells. Armour and flesh were obliterated as thoroughly as any abattoir's thresher blades could manage.

Cybus saw the two captured speeders through the ripped steel wall strafing left

and right, booming muzzle flares and high-velocity explosive rounds chugging from their heavy bolters.

'Stand down,' ordered Cybus. 'They're dead.'

The heavy bolters ceased fire, and Thoic rose from cover an instant later to make sure of that. He went from body to body, systematically putting a bolt round through the skull of every fallen Alpha Legionnaire. Somewhere in the fighting, Thoic had removed his helmet, and Cybus saw the hate in his eyes, a well that seemed utterly depthless. Ferrus Manus was dead, and for many of his proud sons only hate remained.

Yet beyond that hate, Cybus saw regret. It surprised him, because he had not thought Septus Thoic capable of regret. But wasn't that the truest expression of this war? Regret for what the Warmaster had driven them to, and all that would be lost by its ending.

'Clear,' said Thoic, and Cybus nodded, his moment of introspection already forgotten.

He bent to wrench a fallen Alpha Legionnaire's ruined helm from his head. Frantic tinny vox-chatter echoed from within, rapid-fire questions in the enemy's rancid, serpent tongue. Cybus couldn't understand the words, but the meaning was obvious.

He switched frequency.

'This is Cybus. We have the hub,' he said. 'Enemy inbound.'

A KEY OBJECTIVE in any ambush was to get as many of the enemy as possible within the kill-box before opening fire. Another principle of ambush was to render what appeared to be the most promising escape route a death trap.

In both respects, the Iron Hands ambush was textbook.

Two demi-squads of Alpha Legion, approaching from the east and south, moved onto the platform. They converged on the ziggurat refinery with all the caution, skill and aggression to be expected from Legion warriors. Flashes of sheet lightning burst within the tortured clouds. Rolling peals of thunder echoed from the cliff-sided silos.

Sharrowkyn took the first kill as a crack of thunder slammed over Lerna Two-Twelve. Headshot. A lieutenant, by the rank markings. The headless corpse keeled over as his warriors broke for the switchback to the control hub.

Bolter fire chased them to where the warriors of Cadmus Tyro and Shadrak Meduson were waiting, and no bastion of the Imperial Fists ever had a more complete system of enfilades. Interlocking fields of fire allowed even relatively unskilled gunners to lay down killing volumes of firepower and shred an enemy advance.

When the gunners were as skilled and vengeful as the Iron Tenth, there could be no escape.

The enemy warriors died in seconds, swiftly bracketed and pummelled by explosive rounds. With the first volley, they knew they were dead, but fought back anyway. The Alpha Legion were traitors, but they were still armoured transhumans and died as hard as any.

In minutes, all but one Alpha Legionnaire was dead. The last enemy warrior had survived four mass-reactives that blasted most of his torso clear. His left arm was missing from the shoulder, yet still he fought. He killed two of Meduson's men before Cadmus Tyro finally put him down with a shot to the side of the head.

Vermana Cybus appeared at the top of the switchback, the jade hydra on his shoulder guard now defaced with a bloody X.

He pointed skywards, where the vast, lightning-wreathed belly of a starship parted the yellowed clouds like a ploughshare through poisoned soil. The void made it difficult to grasp the inhuman scale of the strike cruiser, but Lerna Two-Twelve's towering silos made it all too clear. Plated in stained indigo, the warship's bulk was awe-inspiring, its very simplicity speaking of the grand complexity within.

'He's here,' said Meduson.

THE RAIN WAS unending, all but drowning the refinery in an instant deluge. It poured in waterfalls from the silos and sent foaming rivers of pollution gurgling in the spaces between the platform's metallic structures.

Two more warships now held station over Lerna Two-Twelve alongside the strike cruiser, their reflections wavering in the rainbow-streaked mirror of the platform below. Smaller vessels, to be sure, but each with firepower enough to send the platform crashing into the planet's growing acid oceans.

Circling Fire Raptor gunships kept on station with their carriers, ready to pounce on anything that dared approach in a way they didn't like.

'Throne, Vermana, did you have to destroy so much of this place?' snapped Thamatica as he fought to restore more than one bank of cogitators. 'There's barely enough functionality to keep a pretence that Lerna Two-Twelve is still operational.'

The Ironwrought's servo arms worked furiously at his back, like the legs of a spider furiously weaving its web.

'Did you think the Alpha Legion were just going to surrender once I got in, Frater?' answered Cybus. 'I had to kill them, and killing legionaries in a confined space is messy.'

'Yes, but speeders? Was that *really* necessary?'

'It got the job done,' said Cybus.

'Not exactly subtle, though, was it?' said Thamatica through what sounded like gritted teeth.

'You should know by now that subtle isn't part of Cybus's tactical lexicon, Frater,' said Ignatius Numen with a booming laugh that rivalled the thunder.

Picking his way through the ruins of the control hub, Tyro was forced to agree. Cybus never did anything by half, but this felt extreme even for him. On the opposite side of the smashed hub, Meduson stood over a dead Alpha Legionnaire.

'That it should come to this,' he said with real regret.

'What's that?' asked Tyro.

Meduson shook his head. 'Brothers killing brothers.'

Tyro had no answer. Brothers had been killing brothers for years since Isstvan. Had its absurdity and horror only now struck home with Meduson?

Gaskon Malthace shadowed his war-leader, but Ashur Maesan made his own way through the hub. He knelt beside each corpse, and his *hiebmesser* carved the service studs from its brow in quick, bloody strokes. Tyro was not above taking war-trophies, but mutilating the dead left a bad taste in his mouth.

'Is that really necessary?' Tyro asked.

Meduson looked over to his sergeant's gruesome labours and shrugged. 'We all have our ways of dealing with betrayal. Maesan has his, you have yours and I have mine. I'll not stand between a man and the means he chooses to slake his vengeance.'

Tyro turned away from his fellow captain's indifference to Maesan's acts and returned to Thamatica's side.

Cybus and the Frater were still remonstrating against one another.

'Subtle doesn't get the job done quickly,' said Cybus.

'But it would have made *this* much easier,' grumbled Thamatica as a last parting shot.

'Enough,' said Tyro. 'We're still on mission.'

This was Thamatica issuing commands to the servitor-crewed Titans on the platform and vectoring the dozens of vapour-tugs lifting enormous fuel pipes to the vessels above. Ignited contrails, plasma-bright and falling like droplets of phosphor, painted the clouds over Lerna Two-Twelve with arcing lines of fire.

The strike cruiser had accepted the challenge codes Wayland had lifted from the *Zeta Morgeld's* log and, as far as anyone on the ships above was aware, nothing was awry.

'Any word yet from Wayland?' asked Tyro.

'Nothing yet. The Kryptos is still parsing the vox traffic passing between the ships,' said Thamatica, his face lined with concentration. 'I would surmise that it should be easy enough to deduce which ship the primarch is on.'

'If he's even on one of them,' pointed out Cybus.

'The nature of the vox traffic should tell us that too.'

'And once we know?' said Cybus.

Thamatica pointed to the throbbing fuel lines arcing up to the strike cruiser.

'What's going up those pipes is a highly volatile fuel-air mix, together with a timed chemical detonator,' he said with more than a hint of pride. 'When that ship triggers its main drive unit, a virtually instantaneous chemical cascade will begin within its fuel tanks that will blow it to its component atoms.'

'Why not just do that to them all?'

'Because we will learn of the success or otherwise of this mission by their reaction,' said Meduson, picking over the debris to look up through the shattered window at the front of the hub.

'Meduson,' said Tyro. 'Get back. If any of those Fire Raptors see you...'

'If they look that closely, it won't matter,' said Meduson. 'They'll see the broken window and the shot-up walls.'

Before Tyro could say anything more, the panel beside Thamatica lit up with incoming vox. The speaker grille was smashed, so Frater routed it directly to his helm. He listened closely and nodded, before finally transmitting a binaric reply.

'What was that?' asked Tyro. 'Trouble?'

'Cybus, you need to get down to the platform right now,' said Thamatica. 'And this time you *have* to be subtle.'

'Why?' asked Cybus. 'What's happening?'

'He is coming down,' said Thamatica.

'Who?'

'Who do you *think*?'

THE UNWAVERING DOT at the centre of Sharrowkyn's crosshairs followed Cybus and Thoic as they led their combat squad through the hundreds of labouring Mechanicum adepts and servitors. Half a kilometre from the central fuelling rig, a cruciform pattern of blinking lights was guiding a Thunderhawk through the downpour.

He watched from the shadows of a vent tower three hundred metres up from the deck of the platform. With good fields of fire all around and a view of both the landing platform and the control hub, it was a perfect sniper's nest.

Sharrowkyn eased the rifle back, spotting the two covering squads of Meduson's Iron Hands moving across the platform in support. They were good,

Sharrowkyn had to give them their due. Each man moved swiftly and silently, keeping Cybus and his warriors in sight while keeping clear of the hundreds of milling tech-priests and vassal-thralls.

The roar of the gunship's engines was loud enough to hear over the thunder and Sharrowkyn eased his eye from the rifle's sight to look up.

An anonymous aircraft. Unremarkable, but that was only to be expected. Not for Alpharius the vanity or ostentation of a signature aircraft, just whichever flyer happened to be next on the rotation. Sharrowkyn admired the sentiment.

Of all the men Tyro could have sent to meet an enemy primarch, Cybus was least suited to acts of guile. As direct a man as it was possible to be, yet here he was marching to meet a master of deception and misdirection.

Sharrowkyn let his crosshairs drift over the five warriors accompanying Cybus. He knew them all - years spent confined aboard the same starship left no other choice - but he knew them beyond just their names and shared history.

He'd trained with these men and fought alongside them. He knew how they moved, where their skills lay and to which of them he might teach his own skills. He'd learned their strengths, their weaknesses and their individual pathologies; the ones prone to despair, those who turned their grief inwards and those who expressed it as pure hate. In this respect he knew them better than they knew themselves.

Even in their Alpha Legion plate and without knowing which warrior wore which suit, Sharrowkyn could identify each man by the way he carried himself, the way he walked or the tilt of his head. Cybus marched chest first, thrusting himself at the world, and Septus Thoic had a bullish aggression that practically dared those around him to test his strength.

Brother Gavril favoured his left side, his hips fractionally out of balance. Vedran carried himself loosely, both shoulders always in motion, ready to fight. Radek had taken a mass reactive to the spine on Isstvan and now walked with a barely perceptible limp. Olek's left hand was locked in a fist after an electromagnetic pulse fused the mechanisms of his bionic, and he'd refused to let Thamatica or Wayland replace it.

Sharrowkyn's crosshairs returned to Thoic and Cybus. The instincts that had brought him to the attention of the Shadowmasters told him something was awry with what he was seeing. His instincts were almost never wrong and his finger curled around the trigger of his needle carbine.

What was he seeing?

The rain had washed the blood from their armour, but it was clear they had both been wounded in the fight to take the hub.

Was that all it was? That they were bearing wounds?

The Thunderhawk rolled in on a fast combat drop and the howling jet-wash wreathed both Iron Hands in sheets of vapour. The gunship's wings flared and its landing claws hit hard enough to drive it into a short skid. The assault ramp dropped a moment later and ten legionaries emerged at speed. Guns tight to their shoulders, scanning all around for threats. Just the kind of behaviour Sharrowkyn would expect if Corax were about to set foot from a gunship.

Not that the Ravenlord would ever be so obvious.

Behind them came a warrior in the same unadorned plate as the combat squad. Lustrous indigo, gleaming in the rainwater streaming from its curved surfaces.

Alpharius.

Taller than his warriors, but not so much as to render him godlike. He reached up to remove his helmet and Sharrowkyn's finger tightened on the trigger. Enough to slip a needle cluster into the breech of his carbine, but not enough to activate the laser designator.

Sharrowkyn eased his finger from the trigger guard.

He had put a round into Fulgrim's skull on Hydra Cordatus, but the Phoenician yet lived and had become something beyond mortal understanding. No, this was Cybus's moment.

TEN

On station
Adrift
Fratricide

WAYLAND PUT THE Storm Eagle into a slow leftwards bank, keeping a constant thousand metres between him and Lerna Two-Twelve. Meduson's Stormbird copied his turn, holding to his right wing on his rear quarter.

He kept his altitude lower than the platform, knowing the distortion effects of the platform's vast banks of repulsors would keep both gunships from the prying auspex aboard the Alpha Legion ships.

The slate on the avionics panel was awash with data inloads: a mixture of vox traffic analysis by the Kryptos, the electromagnetic emissions surrounding Lerna Two-Twelve and his own backscatter subroutine and inloaded surveyor sweeps from the *Sisyphium*. His divided consciousness processed them all.

The Alpha Legion strike cruiser had recently launched a gunship, and transmissions passing between the vessels overhead had just spiked with activity. Half a dozen Fire Raptors were detaching from their normal combat patrols to escort the gunship to Lerna Two-Twelve.

Only one conclusion presented itself.

Alpharius was inbound.

The corollary of that extra volume of transmission was an increase in baseline encryption. Sure enough, the Kryptos now had enough comparative data-sets to interpolate the strike cruiser's designation.

'The *Sigma*,' said Wayland in surprise.

He scanned back through the archives of his eidetic memory of ship rosters and fleet registries.

'Keel laid in the Bakkan graving docks,' said Wayland. 'Part of the 455th Expeditionary Fleet under the nominal command of Shipmaster Solveig. Fleet affiliation revoked several years ago on the orders of Legate Chaitin of the Twentieth Legion, just prior to the Isstvan atrocity. No extant records since then.'

The avionics panel chimed a proximity alarm. Wayland ignored it as he had ignored it every few minutes over the past few hours. Without the particular modifications he and Thamatica had made to the Storm Eagle, Meduson's pilot was finding it difficult to keep a precise distance.

Now that his attention was fixed on the avionics panel, Wayland saw his backscatter subroutine had completed its analysis of the battle between the *Sisyphium* and the *Zeta Malquiant*.

He called the data to the front of the slate, angling his turn in towards Lerna Two-Twelve as the Storm Eagle registered the ghost of an auspex pass.

The spectroscopic analysis of the anomalous electromagnetic trace he'd detected during the battle was a stepped signal that was too regular and too persistent to be anything other than something deliberately generated.

'A highly individual signature,' said Wayland, thinking aloud. 'Something proprietary and tailored for a specific Legion or auxiliary force, perhaps?'

Only when his gaze strayed onto the upper reaches of the panel did he understand its true purpose. Partially hidden by the data-pane was the passive inload of electromagnetic emissions filling the air above Lerna Two-Twelve.

The signal was an exact match for the energies keeping the Alpha Legion ships secured in perfect geosynchrony.

'It was a bloody e-mag tether,' he said, and the only logical conclusion was suddenly and horrifyingly clear.

The avionics panel chimed again.

CYBUS HAD SEEN primarchs before and knew what it was to be face to face with a god-like being. Ferrus Manus had been the lord of stone and metal: a master of industrial labours, not a soot-smearred smiter. Primarch Guilliman was a hero of ancient times, carved from ivory and wrought in golden light.

Even Fulgrim, before his treachery, had been mighty.

Alpharius was, by contrast, something of a disappointment.

Yes, he was taller, broader and obviously more powerful than Cybus, but in a way that suggested it would still be worth a wager on the outcome of any bout between them. Beyond the negligible height difference, any one of his warriors could claim to be Alpharius and Cybus would be none the wiser.

The primarch carried his helm in the crook of his elbow, and his exposed features were ruddy and bronzed with health. Dark hair, hooded eyes, full lips curled in wry amusement. A coiled serpent tattoo around his left eye, and, barely visible above the line of his gorget, a scar in the shape of a reversed Ultima.

And yet there was *something* about him, a radiance that came from the eyes. A charisma that made Cybus want to stand taller and kneel in the same instant. He fought the latter urge until he realised he was *already* kneeling.

'My lord,' he said. 'Welcome to Lerna Two-Twelve.'

'Get up,' said Alpharius.

Cybus did so, skin reddening at how easily he had been made Alpharius's dog

and not even known it.

'Who else is here?' asked Alpharius, his hand resting on the leather-wound grip of a plainly formed line gladius.

'My lord?' said Cybus.

'Don't be coy, Sergeant Daraka,' said Alpharius, his fingers tightening on the grip of his sword. 'I know there are two vessels hidden in orbit with Eirene Septimus. Tell me, which of them is it?'

The name Alpharius had used for Cybus confused him until he realised the primarch had read the visual tagging of his armour.

'Which of who?' he asked.

Alpharius looked over his shoulder at Thoic and smiled.

'You know, don't you?'

'Aye, my lord,' said Thoic. 'I know.'

BRANTHAN WAS STILL alive, but that was about all Tarsa would venture. Slathered in gore to the waist, his arms and face were thick with the captain's blood. The last two hours had drained him to the point of exhaustion.

His every instinct had been to let Branthan die, to allow this great warrior the dignity of oblivion and let the Bird's inexplicable actions mark an end to his suffering.

But Ulrich Branthan wasn't about to give up on life.

He fought for it as any Iron Hand would.

He clawed for it, refusing to be drawn into death's final embrace. Tarsa's oaths as an Apothecary forbade him to be a bystander in such a battle, and the captain's will to endure had, against his better judgement, left him no choice but to fight alongside him.

Whatever the Bird had done to the casket could not be undone, and Tarsa fought with every scrap of knowledge gained on the Imperium's battlefields to keep the captain alive.

From the outset he'd known it was a fight he couldn't win.

The captain's wounds were too deep, too mortal and too many. The stasis field refused to re-engage, and the temperature within the cryo-casket rose steadily with every passing minute. Garuda had been thorough in its dismantling of the apparatus keeping Branthan alive.

In all but one respect.

The Heart of Iron remained clamped to the captain's chest, its monofilament wires now girdling his entire torso. The mass-reactive wounds on Branthan's chest were entirely submerged beneath a weave of fine silver mesh.

His lifeblood seeped at an ever-increasing pace from his ruptured limbs. His

heart rate was spiking on the cusp of colossal rupture and his blood pressure plunged to the nadir of survivability.

And he *still* refused to die.

Tarsa eventually stopped the bleeding and brought the captain's vitals back to a level that wasn't immediately fatal. Even as he'd pulled the captain back from death, he'd known that, without something more permanent, it was a temporary respite at best.

Sooner or later, Branthan's ruined flesh would succumb.

That had left him with only one choice.

He still wasn't sure he'd made the right one.

Tarsa withdrew to the adjacent antechamber, leaving the *Sisyphium's* three part-functional medicae servitors to work alongside the dozen others he'd summoned from Frater Thamatica's workshop. Their labours were not quiet and nor were they subtle, but they offered the best chance of survival for Captain Branthan. Pneuma-hammers beat metal and crackling arc-welders seamed massive plates of adamantium together.

His medical expertise and familiarity with the mysteries of steel would be needed soon enough, but for the moment he had time to reflect on what he'd done and its repercussions.

Tarsa washed the blood from his forearms at the deep basin normally used for surgical preparation. Boiling water washed clots of gelatinous Larraman-clogged blood from his ebony skin. The pain of it was tremendous, and Tarsa gripped the basin's edge, hard enough to buckle the metal as he let out a shuddering breath.

Garuda flew in on clattering wings of gold and silver. It landed on its usual perch of the empty oxygen-cylinders and let out another grating, metallic caw. In reproach or approbation, Tarsa couldn't tell.

'Shut up, damn you!' he yelled, curling his hands into fists.

The Bird cawed again and Tarsa wanted to smash it to fragments, to rip the wings from its body and stamp its ancient mechanisms beneath his boot.

He quelled his hate with the mantras of smiting taught to every son of Nocturne, letting their repetitive, soothing cadences smooth the jagged edges that threatened to overturn his reason.

Tarsa's time with the Iron Hands had taught him that hatred's pull was stronger than almost any other emotion, and only by virtue of his Nocturnean stoicism did he turn from it.

'Revenge is a poison, not a balm,' said Tarsa, letting out a shuddering breath that tasted of his birthrock's volcanic air.

Tarsa ignored the Bird and returned to the mortuary slab that still bore the corpse of the Alpha Legionnaire killed aboard the *Morgeld*.

The machinery he'd set in motion had finished long ago, winking green lights attesting to his preoccupation. In lieu of anything else to do, Tarsa flipped the switch on the inset data-slate and studied the results of the genetic sequencers.

With every line of scrolling text, Tarsa's horror mounted as the truth of the dead body became numbingly apparent.

'Throne, no, it's impossible,' he said, pushing himself away from the slab as though distance would make the findings of the machines less repugnant. 'It's impossible.'

Tarsa gripped the edge of the slab, now seeing the truth of the warrior's severed arm.

'You didn't *lose* it,' he said. 'You surrendered it willingly.'

His breath felt trapped in his lungs, his physiology as strained as Branthan's had been in his last moments.

'I need to run the tests again,' he said, already knowing such tests would just confirm what they had already revealed. There must have been some specimen contamination. Yes, that must be it. It *has* to be. 'I need to know this isn't true...'

But genetic data did not lie. Every test confirmed the same thing independently of one another.

The warrior on the slab was not an Alpha Legionnaire.

He was an Iron Hand.

WAYLAND PUT THE Storm Eagle into a screaming climb. It shuddered as he drove it through the squalling geomagnetic fields of Lerna Two-Twelve's repulsor field. A risky manoeuvre, but this couldn't wait.

'Tyro, this is Wayland,' he yelled into the vox. 'Can you hear me?'

The speaker burred with static, thick with distortion.

'Come on, come on,' he hissed at the vox, willing Tyro to answer swiftly.

'*This is Tyro, what is it, Frater?*'

'You have to get out of there, Cadmus,' said Wayland. 'It's a trap!'

'*What? Say again.*'

'The *Malquiant*, it was on an e-mag tether,' said Wayland, the words pouring out of him in a rush. 'Someone else was remote piloting it. That's why it flew over too fast and high.'

'*What are you talking about, Wayland?*'

'The electromagnetic distortion being thrown out by the *Morgeld's* destruction broke the tether between the *Malquiant* and whoever was controlling it!'

He heard only silence in response, and hoped that meant Cadmus Tyro was simply digesting what he'd told him. The other option was too terrible to contemplate.

'Who?' asked Tyro.

'The *Iron Heart*,' said Wayland. 'They were the only vessel close enough. That's why Meduson intervened when he did, to blow *Malquiant* to atoms so we wouldn't board it and see it didn't have a crew.'

Again the maddening pause before Tyro answered.

'Meduson? Why would he do such a thing?'

'So we would trust him. To make us believe he was on our side. He put us in his debt by telling us that we'd ruined his plans and then told us what we wanted to hear. A mission we couldn't refuse.'

He let the inescapable truth of that sink in before continuing. 'This whole endeavour, it's a lie. They used us to find this place, to bring them here.'

'Why would Meduson lie to us?'

Before Wayland could answer, the Storm Eagle's avionics panel lit up with threat warnings. Blood-red icons illuminated and a screeching wail of a combat alarm blared.

'Missile lock! Missile lock!'

* * *

THOIC STEPPED PAST Cybus and addressed his words to Alpharius.

'Who do you *think* is waiting for you?' asked Thaic.

Alpharius narrowed his eyes, as though he might be able to see through Thaic's helm to the burn-scarred face of the warrior beneath.

'You're not Skolova,' said Alpharius.

'No,' agreed Thaic. 'I'm not.'

'You're one of *his*, aren't you? Seyhan?'

Thaic gave a short bow. 'At your service, Legate Chaitin.'

Cybus gripped Thaic's shoulder guard.

'What is he talking about?' he demanded. 'What are *you* talking about?'

'I'm talking about a betrayal of trust,' said Thaic, with a nod towards Alpharius. 'His mainly. But also mine.'

Thaic spun on his heel and his gladius was a blur of Medusan steel. It opened Cybus's throat back to the spine.

SHARROWKYN WATCHED CYBUS die through the scope of his rifle.

He saw the catastrophic blood spray, watched the warrior of the Avernii fall with his hands at his neck, but still couldn't believe it. Thaic followed up his murderous betrayal by leaping to attack Alpharius. Gunfire erupted as the new arrivals and the disguised Iron Hands opened fire.

Mass-reactives at close range were messy. With no time to arm, each round became a subsonic bludgeon. The arithmetic of a firefight was brutally direct, and the outcome of this one was entirely predictable.

Gavril's shock at what Thoic had done cost him his life. He fell in a lake of his own blood as three rounds tore away his right arm, ribcage and pelvis. Radek killed two Alpha Legionnaires then died in a storm of impacts, his armour cracked open and hydraulic shock dragging the blood from his heart in a scarlet deluge. Olek had his pistol out and fired three shots before he was gunned down. Two of his targets died with him.

Vedran threw himself into the midst of the duel.

He thrust at Thoic, but it was a clumsy, rage-fuelled blow and lacked precision. Thoic trapped the blade against his side and hammered a fist into Vedran's helmet. His former comrade-in-arms reeled from the blow. Thoic spun behind him and drove his blade up through the back of his neck and into his skull.

Alpharius took a step back and fired a volley of mass-reactives that blasted Vedran apart. Thoic dropped the ruptured mass of his human shield and threw himself at Alpharius before he could shoot again.

Sharrokyn watched their blades clash in glittering arcs. Both warriors were skilled and as Sharrokyn watched Thoic fight, he understood the source of his earlier disquiet.

The warrior fighting Alpharius wasn't Septus Thoic.

He was faster than Thoic ever was, and Thoic was one of the *Sisyphium's* best with a blade. Meduson claimed to have infiltrated Tyro's ship, but only now did Sharrokyn realise just how literally he'd meant.

Septus Thoic had died aboard the *Zeta Morgeld*.

And the warrior Meduson had returned to the *Sisyphium* was an imposter. One who wore Thoic's face and possessed his memories.

Knowing how such a feat could be achieved sent a wave of nausea through Sharrokyn.

'Damn it, Tyro, I *told* you not to do this,' he whispered, watching the two fighting warriors through his scope. 'Similar fighting styles, fundamentals you both learned from the same master. Which makes you both viable targets.'

He centred his sights on Alpharius, slowing his breathing and letting his instincts follow the ebb and flow of combat. Every duel was a lethal dance that moved to a particular rhythm. Chaotic and unpredictable to be sure, but if a shooter understood its grammar, then a shot into a furious combat was entirely possible.

Sharrokyn waited, his finger loose on the trigger. External sensory input fell

away until all he saw and felt were the targets before him. He understood the rhythm of this combat and let his target come to him.

A head drifted into his sights and he squeezed the trigger.

And a tripartite cluster of razor-edged needle shards punched through the orbit of Alpharius's right eye. They shattered on impact, hundreds of fragments ripping through the skull's vault in an expanding cone that pulped brain tissue to grey-pink gruel.

Alpharius collapsed instantly and Thoic dived for cover as the surviving Alpha Legionnaires ran to their fallen leader. Meduson's warriors appeared at the edge of the platform, flensing the landing platform with murderously accurate bolter fire. Sharrowkyn switched his aim to Thoic, but in that instant of disconnect between shots he heard the roar of incoming jets.

His position was compromised. Two Fire Raptors were racing to his position. No time to wonder how they'd found him.

Sharrowkyn sprang to his feet and slung the needle rifle over his shoulder. He blinked away the disorientating shift in perspective from gunsight to normal vision.

At fifty metres out, the gunships' centreline avenger cannons spooled up to fire. Sharrowkyn sprinted to the edge of the vent tower.

Twin hurricanes of fire brayed from the gunships' dipped prows. Hellstrikes streaked from their wing pylons. Sharrowkyn leapt from the tower as its summit vanished in a sheeting blaze of explosive fire.

ELEVEN

Wheels within wheels
That's all you get
Kill them

TYRO GRIPPED THE edge of the panel, his mind racing to process Wayland's desperate vox. The transmission had been abruptly cut off, but Tyro had heard the screeching wail of a missile lock.

'You know, then,' said Shadrak Meduson.

It wasn't a question.

'I know,' said Tyro, glancing first at Thamatica and then through the shattered window.

A moment of perfect understanding passed between them.

Tyro turned slowly, his heart colder and harder than Medusan ice-diamonds. His hand slid towards the bolter mag-locked to his thigh.

'I'd keep my hand from that weapon if I were you,' said Meduson. 'Sergeant Maesan favours his *hiebmesser*, but he's the best I've seen with a bolt pistol.'

Tyro spread his fingers as he completed his turn.

Twelve warriors clad in the black of the Iron Tenth stood with Meduson in the ruin of the control hub. Each had their weapons raised. Ashur Maesan stropped his gutting knife along his silvered arm, an arm Tyro now knew to be a lie. The spiked ball of Gaskon Malthace's flail described a tight arc beside his knee.

With Cybus, Thoic and the others gone to meet the arrivals on the platform, only Thamatica, Ignatius Numen and Sulgan, Dubric and Cynan, of the *Sisyphium*, stood with him. The odds weren't good, but the Iron Hands had never been ones to let impossible odds stand in their way.

'What in the name of the Gorgon is going on?' bellowed Ignatius Numen.

'Meduson has betrayed us,' said Tyro.

He didn't need to see Numen's face to know how ridiculous that sounded. That one Iron Hand would ever betray another was utterly preposterous, a lunatic fever dream. So impossible was it that only one other possibility presented itself.

'You're not Shadrak Meduson,' said Tyro.

'No, Cadmus, I'm not.'

'Then who are you?'

'Now you're just stalling,' said Meduson, reaching up to remove his helmet.

'You already know, don't you?'

The face beneath was just as Tyro remembered it when Meduson had first set foot upon the *Sisyphium's* deck. He regarded Tyro with a mixture of amusement and regret.

His blood-filled eye blinked, and all traces of the trauma vanished. In its place was an eye the colour of honeyed milk. Meduson took hold of the crude mask of cybernetic augmentations covering the side of his head and tore it free, taking the layer of burn scars with it.

'That was real skin, you know.'

The revealed face was handsome, with a smooth complexion of beaten bronze. A strong jawline, wide cheekbones and the merest hint of a sardonic grin lurking on the lips. It was the face of one who could command loyalty with a glance, devotion with a word.

The face of a primarch.

'Alpharius,' said Tyro.

'The one and only.'

Meduson had always possessed a dynamic physical presence, but revealed as Alpharius, Tyro saw the true power lay behind his eyes. Behind them turned schemes within schemes, wheels upon wheels. The primarch's thoughts slipped effortlessly in dimensions Tyro couldn't even begin to fathom. Inside the mind of Alpharius, the galaxy turned ten thousand times a day.

'Why?' said Tyro. 'What was this for?'

Alpharius stepped towards him, supremely confident that Tyro couldn't harm him. It would take only a fraction of a second to draw and shoot, but Tyro knew he would be dead before the weapon was even half raised.

Alpharius turned to him and said, 'I envy you, Cadmus. You know *with utter and absolute certainty* you can trust those who bear the black and silver. I am not so fortunate. When I made my choice, not all my sons agreed to trust my revelations.'

'Revelations?' said Tyro, keeping himself between the enemy primarch and Thematica.

Alpharius waved away his question. 'It would take too long to explain, and I'm not sure your all-too-literal mind would be capable of understanding anyway.'

'Is that why you turned traitor?' asked Tyro. 'Because of your... *revelations*? Is that why you betrayed your father?'

Alpharius laughed and raised an admonishing finger. 'Do you really think you can get under my skin with such obvious barbs, Cadmus? What is it you think, that I'll get angry and make some kind of mistake you can exploit to save the day? No, there's nothing left for you to say.'

'So who came down on that Thunderhawk?' said Tyro. 'One of your captains who refused to follow you into treachery?'

Alpharius said, 'Legate Chaitin. A good man in his own way. Honourable to a fault and possessed of a great deal of sensitive information, which is why I needed to find him before he reached the Imperium. Thank you for helping me with that, by the way.'

'You needed our Kryptos to find him,' said Tyro.

'I'd have caught him eventually,' replied Alpharius, folding his arms across his chest. 'But, yes, the Kryptos definitely made things easier.'

'So the Alpha Legionnaires aboard these moored ships? Their crews still hold true to the Emperor?'

Alpharius rapped his knuckles on the console behind him and said, 'They do, yes, but if Frater Thamatica has done his job well, as I'm sure he has, then Chaitin's ship is already a floating time bomb. It's just going to go off a little earlier than planned.'

Tyro looked for an angle he could use, a chink in the primarch's aloof armour, but he had nothing. Tyro was a warrior, pure and simple; he was ill-equipped for a battle of wits against a primarch.

That wasn't a battle he could win, but as he heard Thamatica's servo arm tap thrice against the deck plates, he knew he wouldn't have to.

Alpharius saw the change in his body language.

'What is it, Cadmus?' he said with a grin. 'Do you think you have hope? Have you conceived a scheme to thwart me?'

'Not me,' said Tyro, nodding to Thamatica. 'Him.'

Tyro threw himself to the floor as the wrecking-ball fist of a Titan smashed through the control hub.

THE FIST WAS a manipulator claw, which was just as well, as a true Battle Titan weapon would have killed everyone in the control hub instantly. Detonating metal and machinery slammed into Tyro. His armour cracked open in a dozen places.

The deck fell away as the hub's cantilevered supports were torn apart by the rampage Thamatica had set the Mechanicum engine upon. The world turned upside down as he fell from the ziggurat. He smashed into a lower level, rolled and kept going on a downward trajectory, slammed all the way by the tsunami of debris falling from above.

Bodies flashed through his vision, too fast to see who they were. Hammering impacts smashed him in the chest, driving the breath from him. A spar of something sharp gashed his head. All sense of up and down was instantly lost.

Even his Lyman's Ear was incapable of processing the sheer speed and ferocity of his descent.

The avalanche carried him onwards in a river of shattered steelwork that threatened to crush him at any moment. Tyro felt every impact, most violent enough to break bones. His femur shattered like broken ceramic. The ossified bone sheath protecting his chest split down its centre and his collarbone snapped in three places.

The pain was excruciating, but he pushed it down as his enhanced senses at last began to impose some kind of order upon his surroundings.

He'd stopped moving.

The wrecked side of the ziggurat reared up before him, the Titan still pummeling its sides with its clawed hands as if seeking to gouge some treasure from within. A near-constant rain of shattered plasteel and bronzed plating fell from its onslaught. Tyro fought to draw a breath, watching as a blooming explosion wreathed the structure's pinnacle in fire.

Blazing plumes of phosphor-bright promethium arced downwards like pyroclastic fireballs. Secondary blasts rocked the platform wherever they struck something volatile.

On Lerna Two-Twelve that was more or less everything.

Magma-red light bathed the platform in diabolical radiance, like the hell fires of primitive underworlds loosed upon the world. Smoke boiled from ruptured silos, flames roared to the sky from spewing pipes.

Tyro was reminded of the eternal fires of Mount Karaashi, the glowering stratovolcano where the primarch had come to Medusa. Brother Bombastus had been named for that violent peak, even before he'd been interred within his Dreadnought sarcophagus.

A sheet of steel, heat-warped like plastic, pinned him to the ground. Tyro pushed against it, but the weight of debris on top was too much for him.

His armour was inert: plates of buckled, scorched ceramite without power. His generator pack had been torn from his back sometime during his pinwheeling fall.

'I won't die here,' he grunted through the red mist of pain.

'Then shut up and help me lift,' said Thamatica, scrambling through the smoke and cindered rain. He'd had lost all but one of his servo arms, and his craggy features were a mask of clotted blood and oils.

Tyro nodded and forced his arms under the steel, squeezing his eyes shut and gritting his teeth against the pain. Tyro roared as he and Thamatica lifted together. It still wasn't enough.

Then Ignatius Numen was there, adding his vast strength to their effort.

Tyro felt the steel lift a fraction. Enough to scramble his way to freedom.

'Get out,' gasped Numen. 'Now.'

Thamatica and Numen let the sheet fall as Tyro pushed himself onto one knee. His broken leg was a fiery mass of grinding pain, but it would support his weight if he worked with it and not against it.

'Our men?' he said between sucking breaths that told him at least one of his primary lungs had collapsed.

'Cynan's dead,' said Thamatica grimly. 'Sulgan and Dubric are here.'

'Alpharius?'

'No idea,' said Thamatica. 'Hopefully dead.'

'We couldn't be that lucky,' said Tyro, shaking his head.

The motion set off a dozen explosions of pain inside his skull. At least one fracture, maybe more. He'd lost his helmet in the fall and hadn't noticed until now.

'No, you couldn't,' said Alpharius, emerging from the burning rain like a fiend newly risen from the pit. 'But that was a good effort, Frater.'

The primarch's bronzed features were no longer handsome, cut and bloodied in his tumultuous descent, yet he stood unbroken where lesser men had died. The fall had abraded most of the black from his armour, leaving him a giant in bare metal plate.

Matchless anger smouldered in those ever-turning eyes.

Ashur Maesan and Gaskon Malthace stood with their master. Unbelievably, Maesen appeared to have come through the fall virtually unscathed, but Malthace held his right arm across his chest. A knot of splintered bone jutted from the shattered elbow.

'A good effort,' repeated Alpharius. 'But that's all you get.'

The primarch lifted his bolter and put four mass-reactives through Tyro's chest.

IGNATIUS NUMEN DID not consider himself a man of much imagination, but the silent sight of Alpharius gunning down Cadmus Tyro stirred long-forgotten memories of his boyhood on Medusa. It took him back to moonless nights when he thrilled to tales of daemons wrought in silver rising from the planet's spiteful heart.

Daemons, aye, and the heroes that slew them.

Tyro fell, a fountaining arc of blood following him to the ground, and the moment passed. Once again Alpharius was simply an enemy to be killed. A faithless traitor who deserved no such grand mythologising.

Alpharius said something, but Numen's visor was cracked and no words

appeared there. Instead, he read them from the primarch's lips.

Kill them.

Ashur Maesan went for Sulgan and Dubric, seeing the iron studs affixed to their helmets. Gaskon Malthace took slow steps towards Numen, swinging the tarnished steel ball on its chain in a rigidly controlled spiral.

Alpharius faced Thamatica, and words passed between them. Numen didn't bother to lip-read. He needed all his focus for his own fight. Peripheral vision registered movement, but Numen blocked it out. At times like this, when total focus was required, his deafness was a boon.

Malthace didn't say anything, and Numen was grateful. They were going to fight and one of them was going to die. What use were words at a time like this?

They circled in the chemical rain like predators sizing up a rival alpha. Malthace kept his flail in motion, the killing head fist-sized and welded with bluntly lethal pyramidal spikes. Numen ignored it and kept his battered chainsword, a weapon that had served him faithfully for thirty-seven years, held wide in a loose, right-handed grip.

Malthace feinted left, stepped right and struck for Numen's knee with shocking speed. He expertly maintained the tension in the chain, keeping the thrust of the haft perfectly in sync with the arc of the spiked head.

Numen spun away, avoiding the spiked mace-head by a fraction. Malthace jerked his arm, whipping it back and sending the ball slamming into Numen's plastron. The force was enormous, and Numen grunted as he felt flesh rupture beneath his armour.

Another blow arced inwards on another crippling parabola.

Numen managed to get his sword up, but the mace-head shattered the blade like porcelain. Serrated teeth flew from the broken sword and Numen roared as one lodged in his left eye lens. The visor fogged with distortion. He stepped away from his opponent as Malthace whipped the killing head of the mace around again.

This time he aimed for Numen's head. The blow was expertly judged, perfectly timed and, against any other warrior than one of the Iron Tenth, would have ended the fight there and then.

Numen reacted the only way he could. He raised his arm and caught the mace-head in the centre of his palm. He gripped it tightly before Malthace could withdraw it.

'Something to be said for having an iron hand,' he said.

Numen shifted his weight and lunged, the iron ball cocked to the hollow of his neck. With his entire mass and momentum behind it, Numen hammered the mace-head through Malthace's faceplate. It tore through his helm and into flesh

and bone. The impact shivered up Numen's arm.

Malthace gave a gurgling cry and stumbled back as far as the taut chain links would allow. Ceramite fell from his shattered helmet, and the scale of his wounding was terrible to behold.

The iron ball had caved in the left side of the equerry's face from jawbone to brow. One eye was entirely gone, the other pressed from its orbit by the pressure. Gory runnels ploughed his skin and muscle into trenches. Broken, bloody teeth gaped through rents the spikes had torn.

'On your knees, dog!' bellowed Numen, yanking the chain like a master calling a whipped cur to heel. Malthace mewled in agony and fell to the ground before him, one arm upraised where Numen held the chain and mace-head.

With his free hand, Numen drew his bolt pistol and pressed its muzzle through the gaping hole ripped in Malthace's cheekbone.

Numen pulled the trigger just as the photonic edge of Ashur Maesan's *hiebmesser* plunged in under his ribs on an upward trajectory towards his heart.

THAMATICA WAS HOPELESSLY outclassed and knew it. That he was still alive only confirmed that Alpharius hadn't yet decided to kill him. Such behaviour flew in the face of logic and reason, but perhaps the primarch had passed beyond such things. Alpharius was cutting his armour apart piece by piece.

Sulgan and Dubric were dead, their chests and necks carved apart by Ashur Maesan in half a dozen strokes of his *hiebmesser*. Numen was on his knees over the headless body of Gaskon Malthace, struggling with Maesan who was attempting to drive a blade towards his heart.

Alpharius trapped Thamatica's arm with a twist of his blade and spun him around. The primarch twisted Thamatica's shoulder hard enough to crack bone and wrenched his head towards the storm-wracked sky.

'Do you see, Frater?' said Alpharius. 'Let justice be done as the heavens fall!'

Upon the last word, the ventral plating of the strike cruiser bulged outwards. Moments later, blazing plumes exploded from its flanks, blowing outwards in a percussive cascade of titanic detonations as the lethally volatile fuel-air mix blasted through the vessel's internal compartments.

A vast groaning of metal on metal rolled over Lerna Two-Twelve, like the lowing of a vast plains-dwelling leviathan being brought down by hunters. The prow of the strike cruiser nosed over as explosions pounded through its drive section and drove its stern into the clouds.

The massive fuel lines tore loose, spewing thousands of megalitres of promethium over the stricken vessel. It ignited a microsecond later and flashed back down the pipes to the vast fuelling tower at the centre of the platform.

Emergency shutdowns and flow cut-offs engaged, but against such calamitous speed they had no hope of sealing in time. The central tower exploded, and the entire mass of the platform shook with the power of the blast.

The heat of its detonation washed over Thamatica in a searing wave. He gritted his teeth against the pain, feeling the point of Alpharius's sword press against the underside of his jaw. Blood welled around its tip.

'Fine work, Frater,' said Alpharius. 'Look.'

The strike cruiser was falling, its wedge-shaped prow aimed squarely at Lerna Two-Twelve. It fell slowly, fighting its inevitable demise with dignity. The vessel bore the colours of the enemy, but Thamatica mourned its passing.

'An unworthy end for such a magnificent ship,' he said.

He had no wish to watch so lofty and ingenious a work of man's artifice die, and closed his eyes, knowing his own death would not be long in coming.

'You should watch it die,' said Alpharius, as though reading his thoughts. 'This isn't the kind of thing you'll ever see again.'

Thamatica didn't reply, but set his eye upon a lone spot of darkness within the vast swathes of neon-bright firestorms.

Alpharius followed his gaze, peering into the roiling skies and white-hot plasma hurricanes raging over the ruin of the central fuelling tower.

'What is it, Frater?' said Alpharius. 'What do *you* see when you look into the fire?'

Thamatica grinned.

'Deliverance,' he said.

SHARROWKYN'S BOOTS SLAMMED into Ashur Maesan's shoulder guard, sending him sprawling over Malthace's corpse. He rolled as he landed, drawing his twin, black-bladed swords as he sprang to his feet.

Maesan was already up and thrust his *hiebmesser* at Sharrowkyn's throat. He parried with one blade, blocked with the other, surprised and not a little impressed at the sergeant's speed.

He blasted away from the murderous Alpha Legionnaire with a quick burst from his jump pack. Burning debris fell around them and the ground shook with the deep vibrations of platform-wide explosions.

'You're a fast one, little raven,' said Maesan, bobbing his head like a snake as he weaved towards Sharrowkyn with his knife passing from hand to hand. 'But you'll find old Maesan's faster - oh yes, faster by far. I've already claimed four scalps, but yours will be today's crowning achievement. Come closer and let me clip your wings.'

Sharrowkyn took the measure of the man. He knew nothing of the Alpha

Legion's roots, where they came from, the culture that birthed them or the hardships that shaped them. Maesan's skill was great, but Sharrowkyn couldn't pinpoint its nuances. That he was fast, agile and ruthless was beyond question, but Sharrowkyn saw a well of lunacy, deep as an ocean in his eyes.

'You're insane,' said Sharrowkyn.

'Makes two of us then, little raven,' said Maesan.

They flew at one another and their blades tore like talons.

Maesan swayed aside from each killing thrust, the *hiebmesser* blocking Sharrowkyn's blows with extraordinary speed. Sharrowkyn had seldom fought faster. Only the laughing swordsman with the mask of scars he'd killed on Iydris came close.

He found himself bleeding from his hip and neck without even realising he'd been struck. Maesan's every blow was masked by a feint, every seeming killing thrust a subterfuge for a deeper wound.

Maesan danced back, his blade orange with the flames of the platform's destruction and wet with Raven Guard blood. He wiped it on his vambrace.

'Not used to being cut, are you, little raven?' Maesan said.

Sharrowkyn took a faltering step back, letting his blades sag. Maesan grinned, thinking him already defeated.

The Alpha Legionnaire rushed him, and Sharrowkyn let one blade fall as he bent his knee like a runner at the blocks. He triggered his jump pack and launched himself at Maesan. The move caught the traitor by surprise, but he recovered with blinding speed, ducking from the path of the powered lunge.

As Sharrowkyn had known he would.

Gripping the warrior's lowered shoulder guard like a pivot, Sharrowkyn arced over Maesan like the sweeping hand of a clock. Vertical, he aimed his remaining sword and triggered the jump pack once more.

Sharrowkyn's black blade plunged into the trove of vital organs and blood vessels behind Maesan's collarbone. He twisted around to straddle Maesan as speed and mass drove his opponent to his knees.

With his sword buried hilt-deep, Sharrowkyn churned the blade like a lever. Arteries blew apart, hearts ruptured and lungs collapsed. Hot, blood-frothed breath blasted from Maesan's opened mouth. He spasmed in shock and pain, still trying to throw Sharrowkyn off. But the strength was leaving him with every passing second and every mouthful of blood clogging his throat.

Sharrowkyn kept the blade moving until he was certain no life remained.

He looked up in time to see the warrior with Shadrak Meduson's body and a primarch's face walking slowly towards him. He held Frater Thamatica in one hand as though he weighed nothing at all.

'You're Alpharius, aren't you?' said Sharrowkyn. 'The real one, I mean, not a *doppelganger* or some homunculus?'

'I'm as real as I need to be right now,' said Alpharius, tossing Frater Thamatica to land alongside Cadmus Tyro.

Sharrowkyn rose from Maesan's corpse and circled slowly towards the fallen Iron Hands. He bent to retrieve the sword he'd dropped. Somewhere nearby, a refinery exploded. A blazing cloud of white flame mushroomed skywards.

'You're good, I'll give you that,' said Alpharius, with an appreciative nod as he mirrored Sharrowkyn's movements, 'I was sure Maesan would kill you.'

'We Raven Guard are hard to kill. Isstvan should have taught you that,' said Sharrowkyn, dropping into a fighting stance and readying his swords. Petrochemical droplets slid down each blade, cutting through their coatings of ash.

'Clearly you haven't heard what's been happening on Deliverance,' grinned Alpharius, bending to retrieve Ashur Maesan's *hiebmesser*.

Sharrowkyn tensed, expecting an attack.

'Put your blades away, Nykona,' said Alpharius, sheathing the butcher's knife. 'I said you were good, but that shadow-slipping trick my brother taught you won't work on me.'

'We'll see,' said Sharrowkyn, angling his sword blades, one low, one high.

'No, we won't,' said Alpharius, turning to walk away.

'You're not going to fight me?'

'As much as I want to, I'm not going to kill you, Nykona. At least, not today,' said Alpharius. 'Magnus asked me not to.'

'Good to know,' said Sharrowkyn, sheathing his swords.

Alpharius laughed. 'I like you, Nykona. You're a man who'll saddle a gift horse rather than look it in the mouth.'

Sharrowkyn knew good counsel when he heard it, but couldn't help himself from asking. 'Then what was all this for? Why all the secrets and lies? Why entangle us in this?'

Alpharius looked up into the firestorm engulfing Lerna Two-Twelve. 'Ask Tyro to tell you, if he survives.'

Sharrowkyn said, 'I will,' and bent to check on Thamatica and Tyro. He wasn't sure he believed Alpharius wouldn't kill them all, and kept a wary eye on the primarch. Thamatica was already stirring, the flex-seal at his neck crumpled by intense crushing pressure.

Thamatica groaned and said, 'Cadmus...' his voice little more than a shattered, wet wheeze.

Cadmus Tyro was bleeding out, four mass-reactives making his chest look like

the leavings of a greenskin feast.

His eyes were wide with pain, his skin paler than Sharrowkyn's alabaster complexion. That he was alive at all was a miracle, but he expected nothing less from a captain of the Iron Tenth.

Alpharius was now just a shadow, a blurred outline in the smoke. Blazing promethium billowed and seethed around him, but did not touch him. Other shapes moved in the smoke wreathing the primarch, warriors in the dark plate of the Iron Hands, though none were as they seemed.

'I said *I* wouldn't kill you,' said Alpharius, backing away into the flames and smoke with every word. 'But I think *that* might.'

Sharrowkyn looked up.

The dozer-blade prow of the wrecked strike cruiser sliced from the tempests wracking the sky, plunging towards Lerna Two-Twelve and its doom.

'Thamatica,' said Sharrowkyn. 'Help me with Tyro.'

TWELVE

Always somewhere to go

Punch it

Equals

THOUGH THEY BOTH knew there was no escape, Sharrowkyn and Thamatica dragged Cadmus Tyro from the wreckage. Ignatius Numen followed, limping and with a metal hand pressed to his side where Maesan's blade had sought to gut him.

They managed to reach the edge of the ziggurat refinery before the prow of the strike cruiser slammed into Lerna Two-Twelve. Its descent had seemed ponderous, almost leisurely, but its mass and momentum were devastating.

All four warriors were thrown to the deck as it lurched upwards like a tectonic shift. The noise was deafening, a roaring, grinding, crashing thunder without end. The shriek of tortured, buckling metal was the platform's death scream and a bellow of hatred all in one.

Sharrowkyn's stomach lurched as he felt Lerna Two-Twelve being dragged downwards by the unstoppable force of the strike cruiser's impact. Its repulsor banks fought to keep the platform in the sky, but that was a hopeless battle.

More explosions painted the sky and blooming clouds of ignited gases rippled outwards to the horizon like an oncoming thunderhead. Sharrowkyn had seen mine fires like that, a cascade of ignition that only ever ended badly.

Thamatica saw it too. The crystallised promethium in the atmosphere has reached its flashpoint.

Sharrowkyn sprang to his feet as a towering wall of flame rose up behind them from the ruptured refuelling tower. Billions of cubic litres of promethium blasted their confining silos to vapour in an instant, and uncapped geysers of volatile explosive material added to the mix. A tsunami of white-hot liquid flame raced towards them, blinding in its intensity and throwing their shadows out behind them.

'Come on, help me,' said Sharrowkyn.

Thamatica nodded and helped the Raven Guard warrior lift Tyro's near-lifeless body. The air began to spark all around them, as if they'd blundered into a thousand swarms of fireflies.

The chemical-rich atmosphere was starting to ignite.

'There's nowhere to go,' said Thamatica, but despite his words, he kept going.

'There's always somewhere to go,' snapped Sharrowkyn.

'Where?' grunted Thamatica, risking a glance over his shoulder. 'There's a tidal wave of molten promethium racing towards us, the very air is about to combust and this entire platform is moments away from falling into an acid ocean. I'll keep going to the very end, Brother Sharrowkyn, have no fear of that, but tell me, *where* can we go?'

'Wayland!' shouted Numen.

Thamatica shook his head. 'Sabik was shot down, Ignatius, we heard it on the vox,' he said. 'Medus... that is, Alpharius's Stormbird blew him out of the sky.'

'Wayland!' repeated Numen, pushing past Thamatica.

Sharrowkyn turned and there it was, perforated by gunfire and holed by missile detonations, but still airborne.

One of its engines was on fire, but Sabik Wayland's Storm Eagle was as much X Legion as its warriors, and it never gave up, never quit fighting and never left a man behind.

'There's always somewhere to go,' said Sharrowkyn.

LEAVING TYRO IN the care of Numen and Thamatica, Sharrowkyn fought his way through the steeply canted crew compartment of the Storm Eagle. Its hull was shaking as though ready to come apart at the seams and the scream of its tortured engines was that of a man wounded beyond any tolerance of pain.

He hauled himself upwards, using hanging stowage straps and buckled stanchions to reach the cockpit. Sabik Wayland wrestled with the controls, fighting the searing thermals trying to swat them from the sky.

Sharrowkyn threw himself into the co-pilot's seat. He strapped himself in and did his best not to distract Wayland as he threaded a needle path through the destruction of Lerna Two-Twelve. The Storm Eagle juddered, and Sharrowkyn felt sure he heard something tear loose from the hull's exterior.

The temperature within the cockpit was phenomenal and still rising. It felt like the interior of a blast oven or the heart of a rust desert. The promethium tsunami was almost upon them.

'Got to break atmosphere, Sabik,' he said. 'Quickly.'

'We can. We will,' said Wayland, the latter as much a request of the aircraft as it was an answer. 'But don't speak to me until we do.'

The gunship banked and swooped and dived, its flight path a spiralling, looping nightmare as Wayland fought to anticipate volcanic eruptions of promethium, collapsing silo towers and blizzards of steelwork caught in fire-tornadoes.

It felt like the gunship was under fire above a dropzone, but this was worse than any flak-storm Sharrowkyn had endured. Flames roared over the armourglass canopy, and he gripped the edges of the seat as the view beyond was entirely obscured.

'Throne!' cried Sharrowkyn.

'I said don't talk!'

Sharrowkyn bit back an angry response, and forced himself to watch the lunatic path Wayland was flying. He saw a gap ahead, a break in the unending torrent of debris and flames filling the sky.

He shouted and pointed, but Wayland had already seen it.

Wayland threw the Storm Eagle into a bellowing climb, and Sharrowkyn felt sure the aircraft was going to shake itself apart. Screens shattered on the avionics panel, the armourglass cracked. Heat spiked.

Sharrowkyn hammered his fist against his chest in a last gesture of defiance in the face of death.

He kept hammering until Wayland said, 'We're clear.'

Sharrowkyn opened his eyes and found himself staring into the blackness of the exosphere. The void was above, and the heat within the cockpit began dropping off rapidly. The Storm Eagle ceased its attempts to shake itself into a mass of components.

'We're clear,' repeated Wayland, and Sharrowkyn let out a long stream of breath.

'Throne, that was incredible flying.'

Wayland shrugged and said, 'Who's back there? I couldn't see clear enough against the glare.'

'Too few,' said Sharrowkyn. 'Thamatica and Numen are tending to Cadmus. He's hurt. Badly. He might not make it back to the *Sisyphium*.'

Wayland pushed out the engines.

'He's Iron Tenth,' said Wayland, as if that explained everything, and Sharrowkyn supposed it did. 'He'll make it.'

SHARROWKYN LEFT THE flying to Wayland and went aft to check in with Thamatica and Numen. The gunship's interior felt horribly empty now. The warriors who'd begun this mission with the prospect of revenge filling their bellies were now ash.

Names flashed through Sharrowkyn's mind, faces. He had lost so many brothers in the XIX Legion, and the brothers of the *Sisyphium* were no less his kin for having a different gene-sire.

Numen sat propped up in his grav-harness, and only the fractional rise and fall

of his chest told Sharrowkyn he wasn't dead. He put a hand on Numen's brow, the skin oily and hot as his body diverted its energies to healing the grievous hurt done by Maesan's churning blade.

Sharrowkyn knelt beside the mortally wounded clan-captain. Thamatica had stripped the few remaining portions of Tyro's shattered plate. From the gory horror of what the mass-reactives had done to him, Sharrowkyn suspected another name would soon be added to the *Sisyphium's* wall of the fallen.

'He lives?'

The Ironwrought looked up and said, 'Death's got his claws in deep, aye, but Cadmus won't go without a fight.'

'Can I do anything?'

'No, and though it galls me to say it, neither can I. To live or to die will be the captain's choice.'

'Then he'll live forever,' said Sharrowkyn.

'Your words give me hope, Son of Corax,' said Thamatica, rocking back onto his haunches. 'You would have made a fine Iron Hands legionary if only you'd had the fortune to be born on Medusa.'

Sharrowkyn took the compliment as it was intended, leaving unsaid the fact that he would sooner have let Alpharius kill him than not be Raven Guard.

He pushed himself to his feet and took a seat against the cold metal of the fuselage.

'So what now for the *Sisyphium*?' he asked.

'What do you mean?'

'Look how many we lost down there. With all we have left we can just about fly the ship, but can it fight?'

'So long as the *Sisyphium* has a crew it can fight,' said Cadmus Tyro, coughing a wad of bloody phlegm. 'You hear me, Sharrowkyn?'

'Don't talk, Cadmus,' said Thamatica. 'Save your strength.'

'I hear you,' said Sharrowkyn.

'I should have heard *you*,' said Tyro. 'You warned us of this.'

Sharrowkyn didn't answer. Recriminations would achieve nothing, save to tear Tyro's wounds wider.

'You now have a voice aboard my ship,' said Tyro. 'Use it when you must. As an equal. The *Sisyphium* is no longer an Iron Hands vessel. It's a ship of warriors, and every voice matters.'

'I'll use my voice, Cadmus, count on it,' Sharrowkyn promised.

Tyro turned his head, and Sharrowkyn felt the heat of the clan-captain's gaze. It bored into him like a lascutter, demanding truth to be the next thing passing his lips.

'What did Alpharius mean?' said Tyro.

'About what?'

'You know what,' grunted Tyro. 'Why does Magnus the Red want you alive?'

'I don't know,' said Sharrowkyn. 'I never served alongside the Fifteenth, let alone met the Crimson King.'

'Should I believe that?'

'Why would you not?' countered Sharrowkyn. 'Alpharius is a master manipulator - a purveyor of lies, untruths and misinformation. Nothing he says can be believed.'

Tyro nodded and his eyes squeezed shut as wracking pain convulsed him. Thamatica held his shoulders as the wave subsided.

'There's truth in that,' agreed Tyro. 'Let me cling to that on this day of lies.'

'What did he mean about Deliverance?' asked Sharrowkyn.

THE SISYPHEUM HUNG in the void like a beaten ingot fresh from the fire. Its hull was gnarled and pocked with recent impacts, its blunt, pugnacious prow still crumpled from the impact with the *Andronius*.

Wayland guided the Storm Eagle towards it with gentle manoeuvres, fearful the gunship might fall to pieces were he to move too suddenly. Even a glance told him the *Sisyphium* had been in a desperate fight since he had last laid eyes upon her.

'What happened?' said Sharrowkyn, his humours black since his return from the crew compartment.

'That,' said Wayland, pointing to where the gutted wreck of the *Iron Heart* smouldered just beyond the *Sisyphium's* quarterdeck. Even from here it was clear to see the two ships had been tearing at one another like rabid dogs in a cage.

That the *Iron Heart* should have come after the *Sisyphium* was no surprise, but that the outcome appeared to have been so one-sided was. The *Iron Heart* had been pummelled mercilessly, disembowelled by weapons fire and emptied of life with repeated broadsides.

'Throne, I never knew that Tarsa had the heart of a void warrior,' said Sharrowkyn.

'Vulkan's sons are full of surprises,' said Wayland, guiding the Storm Eagle towards the forwards embarkation deck. The same deck upon which they had welcomed the false Shadrak Meduson. That an enemy primarch had trod the halls of the *Sisyphium* sent a horror of violation through Wayland.

The chamfered opening to the embarkation deck grew steadily in the cracked glass of the cockpit. Wayland nudged the controls, angling the gunship to pass

seamlessly through the centre of the integrity field.

He felt the lurch of ship gravity and gently set the Storm Eagle down on the nearest launch rail. He let out a breath it felt like he'd been holding since realising the truth of the betrayal visited upon them. Just being back on the *Sisyphium* renewed Wayland, gave him hope that something good might be salvaged from this disastrous mission.

If not even the trap of a primarch could lay low the crew of the *Sisyphium*, then perhaps they *would* live forever.

Then he remembered Ferrus Manus and his hope was crushed.

He followed Sharrowkyn back into the crew compartment. Atesh Tarsa was already on the gunship, as were a gaggle of medicae servitors slathered in dark fluids. They lifted Cadmus onto a suspensor stretcher as Tarsa set up numerous drips and applied pressure bandages.

The Apothecary's dark skin was bathed in sweat, but after a void fight like the one that had ended the *Iron Heart*, Wayland wasn't surprised.

Tarsa glanced up, and Wayland saw wariness in his crimson eyes, quickly masked. Then the Apothecary hurried from the gunship with Cadmus Tyro upon the stretcher. Garuda perched on its edge, but flew off as soon as it began to move.

Thamatica, Wayland, Sharrowkyn and Numen followed him from the Storm Eagle, and Numen fell to his knees as soon as he set foot on the deck.

The Avemii veteran bent to kiss the deck like a superstitious feral-worlder.

Wayland called after Tarsa, 'You fought well, Apothecary,' said Wayland. Tarsa shook his head and gestured to a presence just out of sight behind the Storm Eagle's smoking engine.

Something massive took a heavy step around the gunship, and Wayland retreated before the towering, armoured machine that came into view.

It was Brother Bombastus.

Who had last walked as a Dreadnought.

But this was no Dreadnought, and Bombastus was dead. This was a nightmarish fusion of technology and biology and mechanical necromancy. The towering construct had no sarcophagus, merely a cable-wound cocoon of raw sutures and bare flesh.

At its heart, bound into its workings by crude biomechanical interfaces, were the ruined scraps of meat and bone and hate that once commanded the *Sisyphium*.

'Tarsa didn't kill the *Iron Heart*,' said Ulrich Branthan. 'I did.'

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Graham McNeill has written more Horus Heresy novels than any other Black Library author! His canon of work includes *Vengeful Spirit* and his *New York Times* bestsellers *A Thousand Sons* and the novella *The Reflection Crack'd*, which featured in *The Primarchs* anthology. Graham's Ultramarines series, featuring Captain Uriel Ventris, is now six novels long, and has close links to his Iron Warriors stories, the novel *Storm of Iron* being a perennial favourite with Black Library fans. He has also written a Mars trilogy, featuring the Adeptus Mechanicus. For Warhammer, he has written the Time of Legends trilogy *The Legend of Sigmar*, the second volume of which won the 2010 *David Gemmell Legend Award*, and the anthology *Elves*. Originally hailing from Scotland, Graham now lives and works in Nottingham.

