

THE HORUS HERESY®

David Annandale

THE UNBURDENED

Betrayal at Calth



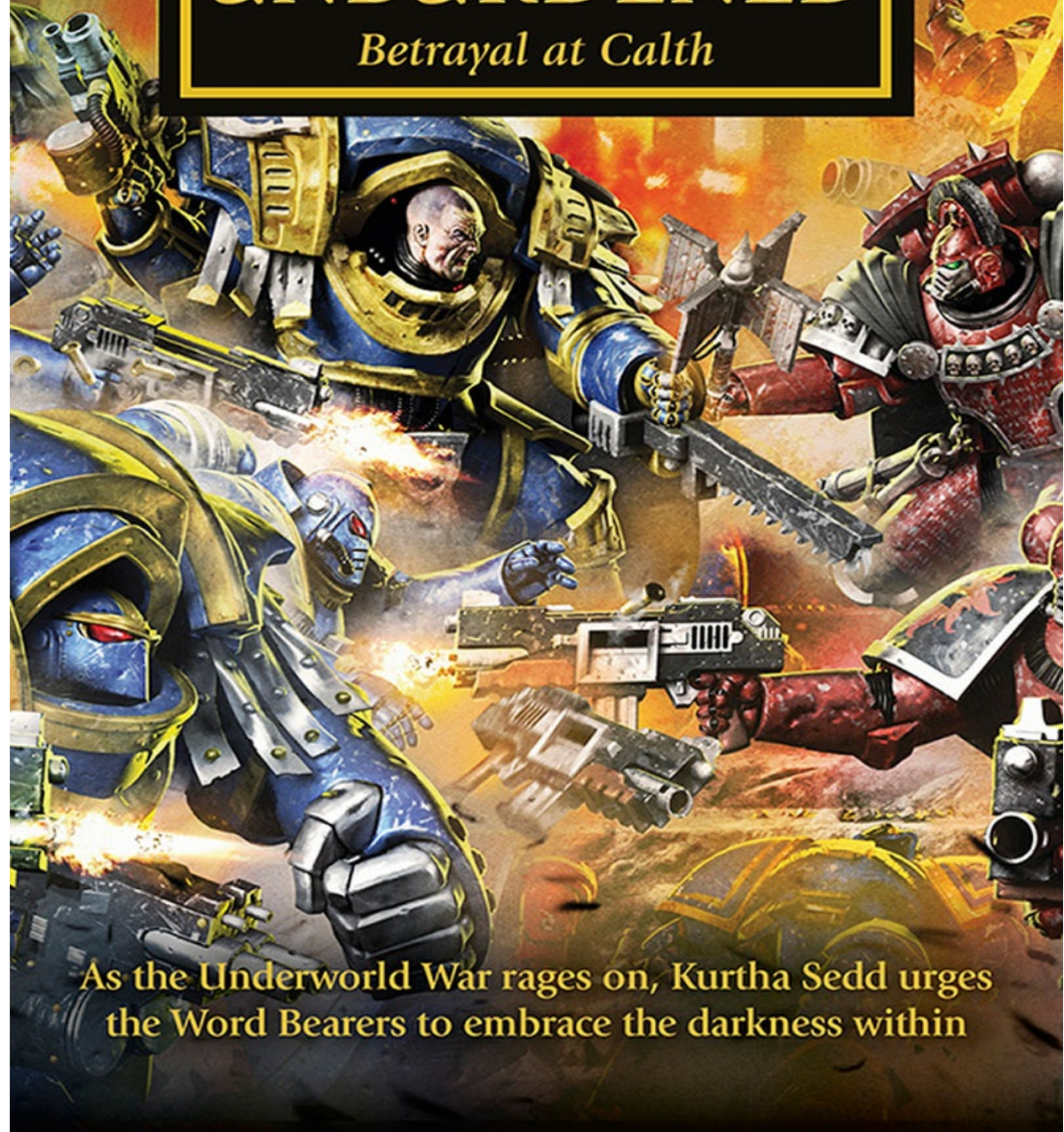
As the Underworld War rages on, Kurtha Sedd urges the Word Bearers to embrace the darkness within

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THE UNBURDENED

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THE HORUS HERESY®

It is a time of legend.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The age of knowledge and enlightenment has ended.

The Age of Darkness has begun.

~ DRAMATIS PERSONAE ~

The False Imperium

THE EMPEROR OF MANKIND, The Reluctant God, and unworthy Master of Mankind

MALCADOR THE SIGILLITE, First Lord of Terra, simpering lackey to the Throne

The XIII Legion 'Ultramarines'

ROBOUTE GUILLIMAN, Primarch, the thrice-accursed Lord of Ultramar

STELOC AETHON, Captain, 'The Honoured 19th' Company

DARDANUS

ENVIXUS

TIBOR

The XVII Legion 'Word Bearers'

LORGAR AURELIAN, Primarch, the Urizen, the Bearer of the Word

KOR PHAERON, First Captain, the Black Cardinal, architect of Calth's doom

EREBUS, The Dark Apostle, First Chaplain

KURTHA SEDD, Chaplain-Apostle, Chapter of the Third Hand

TERGOTHAR, Captain, Fifth Assault Company

SOR GHARAX, 'The Bull', Contemptor Dreadnought

GHULUN VAAD, Sergeant, Ulughar Squad

TOC DERENOTH

KAELOQ

KHUZHUN

RETHAZ QANN

VOR RAENNAG, Sergeant, Gurthuz Squad

ARATHRAX

VARNAK GATH

QARTHON, Veteran sergeant, Rhaalahn Squad

GHERAK HAXX, Hurundath Squad, Seventh Company

VERSITHIS, Tenth Company

RUATH DHUR, Tenth Company

Cultists of Chaos

KHROTHIS

And Aethon falls.

See that plunge, that final plunge. See the darkness of the abyss rise to claim his body. To accept him as sacrifice. To devour him.

Do you know what you have done?

Yes.

Do you understand what you have done?

Yes.

Do you feel what you have done? Do you feel what you are doing?

Yes. The weight of the tumbling body. The weight of the act. Hurling into the dark, given to the truth. So much torn away, falling, vanishing. So much of identity and soul burned and severed.

So many beliefs, ties, loyalties. So many crimes and betrayals.

Burdens. Their masses like boulders, like mountain chains. Shaping, constraining, crushing, yet to release them is an amputation. A mutilation.

All the burdens, falling with Aethon into the dark.

The rising dark.

PART ONE

THE BURDEN
OF THE PAST

ONE

The taste of dust
Blindness
Faith and weakness

‘We will have the answers we seek before the day is done.’

Kurtha Sedd, Chaplain of the Fifth Assault Company, Chapter of the Third Hand, stood on the blasted plain that was the corpse and the grave of Monarchia. He repeated the words under his breath. No one else heard. He had removed his helm, and the sentence was swept away by the doleful wind. He repeated it again, with the doleful rhythm of a mourning bell. He was not the only one of his brothers whose spirit was held captive by that sentence. He heard others speak it, both nearby and over the vox. But the refrains he heard were at least as angry and determined as they were bewildered.

Was he the only one who regarded the promise of answers with sick dread?

The words were Lorgar’s words, the last full sentence he had spoken to his sons before his vox-transmission to the fleet had been cut off and Guilliman had ordered the XVII Legion planetside.

Guilliman ordered. And we obeyed.

He forced that thought – and its attendant question *why?* – aside. There were other, much larger questions. Much worse ones. And the answers, he was sure, would be worse yet.

We will have the answers we seek before the day is done.

The words of the primarch were reality itself. It was not that Lorgar shaped reality with his speech. He was the son of a god, not a god himself. But in

Lorgar's words, both written and voiced, Kurtha Sedd saw the total apprehension of the truth. Such was the depth of Lorgar's understanding. He had prophesied the coming of the Emperor to Colchis, and so the Emperor had come, as if summoned by the call of his son and the need of the world. Lorgar had brought the XVII Legion to the knowledge of the Emperor's godhood. Lorgar's words, truth, the real: there was no space between the concepts. This certainty was the bedrock of Kurtha Sedd's faith.

If Lorgar said answers would come, they would.

Kurtha Sedd did not want them to come. He could not imagine any answer that would not strike with the force of a cyclonic torpedo.

He took a deep breath. Unfiltered by his helm, the ruined air of Monarchia scraped into his throat and lungs. His mouth filled with the taste of betrayal. It was dust, it was ash, and it was the lingering heat of annihilation. His neuroglottis parsed the smell, telling what had burned. Stone and metal, wood and cloth. And yes, human flesh. Beyond what had been the outer walls of the perfect city was a displaced population of millions. The people wandered and mourned and tore their hair. They wept for their homes, they wept in incomprehension, and they wept for loved ones. There had been massacres here. People had resisted. People had chosen not to flee. They had died for their fidelity to the Emperor.

Kurtha Sedd tasted their martyrdom. He felt sick. *Blood demands blood*. Lorgar had said that too, when confronted by the scars on Khur, the evidence of the Ultramarines' crime. *Blood demands blood*. Perhaps. But that was a response, not an answer.

And the response had not come. What had happened to Monarchia defied all comprehension, and instead of attacking, the Word Bearers had obeyed the Ultramarines and descended to the site of destruction.

Kurtha Sedd turned around slowly, blinking away the grit that gathered on his eyelashes. Every direction was the same: the blackened ground, the great absence of the perfection that had stood here, and the gathering of his brothers. Thunderhawks stirred up billows of dust with their engines as they came in to land. As Word Bearers wandered over the fused, melted, pulverised remnants of Monarchia, the ash blew in swirls from their armour. Grey motes flew from grey masses, as if the armour itself were disintegrating.

We are eroding, Kurtha Sedd thought. A killing wind was blowing through the Legion. It was bad enough now. What would it be when the answers came?

'Chaplain?'

He blinked. Toc Derenoth stood before him. ‘What is it, brother?’ he asked the other legionary.

‘We are gathering.’ He pointed to Kurtha Sedd’s left.

‘Yes.’ The Chaplain didn’t look. He was gripped by a vision triggered by the close sight of the swirling ash and Toc Derenoth’s power armour. It was a vision of erosion, yes, but of a particular kind. On the Word Bearer’s right pauldron, the sunburst design and sinuous rune of the Third Hand were as bright and strong as ever. The parchments of devotion to the Emperor were turning grey in the air, darkening with filth, becoming illegible. The script on his armour, the indelible truths of the Imperium, appeared to be flaking off into the wind.

What am I seeing? Kurtha Sedd wondered.

The answer came between the beats of his hearts: truth crumbling. Truth that was eternal, that was the light for the entire galaxy. Breaking down, eaten by the wind, obscured by dust and flying away with ash.

Kurtha Sedd’s instinct was to turn from the vision. He should shut his eyes to this blasphemy. But the discipline and duty of a Chaplain sustained him. His duty was to look deeper. His discipline gave him the tools to reach understanding.

The Imperial Truth vanishes. The Third Hand remains.

The core is freed of the distorting encrustation.

He grunted. The idea struck him to the core, a gladius sinking deep between his ribs. He hurled it away, but the wound remained. He could already feel it fester, as if he had been struck by something with the potency of actual insight.

Of truth.

Another deep breath. Another lungful of ruin. Then: ‘Yes,’ he said, again. He nodded to Toc Derenoth. He observed the current of movement, the Legion forming up and advancing to a centre that no longer existed. He began to march. Around him, the Fifth Assault Company assumed formation and purpose.

Legionary Kaeloq approached from his left. Kurtha Sedd had spoken with him and Toc Derenoth often over the years. Both warriors had deep, laudable hungers for understanding, and a talent for exegesis. But where Toc Derenoth’s study of the Word and the Truth led him from one question to another, Kaeloq’s quest was for answers. He was devoted to the hierarchy of spiritual leadership in descent from the Emperor to the primarch, from the primarch to the Chaplains.

‘Are we at war, Chaplain?’ Kaeloq asked.

‘What do you think, brother?’ Kurtha Sedd made it a practice to redirect Kaeloq’s questions back at him. The easily gained answer, even though true,

would lack the proper strength of revelation. But this time, there was nothing rhetorical or instructive about his response. His question was genuine.

‘It’s an attack, but it makes no tactical sense,’ Kaeloq said, struggling as they all were with the inexplicable. ‘And we were not fired upon when we arrived.’

‘And why would we be at war with a brother Legion?’ said Toc Derenoth.

The Chaplain didn’t answer. The vox crackled with silence. Even though Toc Derenoth had phrased his question as a denial, rejecting the idea even as he gave it form, just saying the words was to give voice to something monstrous.

Legion against Legion. Such unimaginable fratricide would crack the materium in half. There was no other way reality could respond to that impossibility.

And yet Monarchia was ash.

And the air was filled with the taste of a truth that could not be spoken.

‘*Surely some revelation is at hand,*’ Kurtha Sedd muttered.

‘What do you mean, Chaplain?’ Toc Derenoth asked.

Kurtha Sedd shook his head. ‘Nothing. Something. I don’t know, brother. I was quoting an ancient remembrancer of Terra. Yaitz. The fragments of his work that have come down to us have been interpreted as prophesying the coming of the Emperor.’

Surely some revelation is at hand.

We will have the answers we seek.

His life as Chaplain had been devoted to the Truth, and to its discovery, its praise, and its propagation. And now, how he dreaded its coming. He would hold it back if he could. And yet, he refused to don his helm. He refused to filter the murdered air of Monarchia. He was taking truth on board with every breath, and with every breath something fractured a bit more, something more than vital, something that should never break.

He walked through the cinders. His steps kicked up small clouds of particulate. A weight pressed down on his shoulders, growing more massive as the time for answers drew near.

The Word Bearers assembled for their answers. Rank upon rank of warriors in grey. As Toc Derenoth and Kaeloq fell back, rejoining their squad, Kurtha Sedd advanced with the other Chaplains and the captains. He opened a vox-channel to the full company. ‘The Word is our burden,’ he said. ‘Nothing can surpass its holy weight. Whatever this day brings, brothers of the Seventeenth Legion, know that we will shoulder it.’

Clicks and mutters of assent answered him. Then he broke the connection. He didn’t trust himself to speak without doubt working its way into his voice.

He didn't even trust the sound of his breathing.

When, after the wounds of the day had scabbed over sufficiently for them to be discussed at all, Kurtha Sedd found, as he had suspected, that he was one of the first to feel the greater betrayals. Before the Rebuke, before the primarch confronted his father, even before Guilliman and the Sigillite appeared, Kurtha Sedd was staggered by the sight of the Ultramarines banners. A hundred warriors in blue descended the ramps of their Thunderhawks, and a white horse on an azure field shone with pride through the haze.

The 19th Company.

Aethon, Kurtha Sedd thought. He managed to remain upright.

He realised that, until this moment, he had nurtured an unconscious hope: that Aethon did not know about, or at the very least did not condone, the crime perpetrated on Khur. The idea of the Ultramarines turning on another Legion was mad, but the madness did not bear the face of a friend. He needed to hang on to something. There must be stability somewhere. The entire universe could not have fallen to madness. But there was Aethon at the head of his company. He not only knew, he had participated in the destruction.

The ground beneath Kurtha Sedd's feet was thin as ice, changeable as sand.

Why? Kurtha Sedd wanted to reach across the space between the Word Bearers and Ultramarines, across the emptiness that had once been the Inaga Sector, and shake the warrior at whose side he had fought so many campaigns. *Why?* he wanted to cry to his friend. The legionary whose life he had saved on Melior-Tertia, the brother with whom he had celebrated victories, with whom he had debated the finer points of the Imperial Truth.

His trust in Aethon was adamant. Every joint campaign between the Word Bearers and the Ultramarines had cemented the bond forged during the vanquishing of the orks.

Trust. Loyalty. Brotherhood. The belief in these concepts and the need for their reality were chains, wrapped so tight around his chest and throat that he could not breathe. They trapped him. They pushed down on his soul, crushing instead of freeing.

Aethon was here. Aethon knew. There was the first answer. If the first was so terrible, how much worse would the others be?

He tried to brace himself.

The effort was futile. The hammer blows began.

How much worse?

They would be enough to force him to his knees.

The answers came, one after another. Their impact was cumulative. The ends of Kurtha Sedd's fingers buzzed. A sensation both numbing and agonising crawled up his limbs as all that was real crumbled, and the impossible rioted. His vision was blasted by the sight of everything he knew to be, ground into the ashes of Monarchia.

He saw Lorgar and Guilliman, the demi-god brothers, at odds. He saw Lorgar strike Malcador the Sigillite and, though the mortal fell like a bundle of brittle sticks, it was Lorgar who seemed impotent, his violence the futile striking-out of the vanquished. Impossible, of course.

And then the worst thing of all. Kurtha Sedd beheld the divine. He beheld the God-Emperor. His eyes burned. He thought he would go blind, yet he could no more avert his gaze than take to the air. He was forced to watch, even as his consciousness fragmented.

He saw his primarch plead with the greatest Father.

He saw a god reject worship and turn in anger on his most faithful children.

And worst of all, he heard the Emperor speak to him. To every Word Bearer. There were many words, but it was the first that was the most important. The most fatal. The one that brought the weight of all existence down on Kurtha Sedd's shoulders, and shattered the foundation of his strength.

So much from a single word.

+Kneel.+

In the days that followed, Kurtha Sedd would know all the events of the Rebuke with perfect clarity. He would know every detail of the humiliation, and every syllable uttered. But he would know these things as if they had been reported to him. Their coherence was at a distance. His own experience of them was a raw, burning, slashing, bleeding maelstrom of injury and howling memory. In his lived experience, in the visceral, in the roar of his soul, there was no coherence.

Nor should there be. The Emperor forced the Word Bearers to their knees. What logic could exist after that?

The hours after the Rebuke were lost to him. They existed as fragments. There were impressions of ordered movement – his battle-brothers marching again, humiliation and lost purpose in their gait. There were the engine gales of one Thunderhawk after another taking off. No memory was complete. They were a blur of grey. Armour and ash and dust and faith all one, all vanishing. Only one fragment was vivid. It was of Sor Gharax.

Kurtha Sedd heard the Contemptor Dreadnought raging. That was not new. Sor Gharax had been descending into darker and darker fugues of anger and bitterness since his entombment in the war-shell. His injuries during the campaign to bring Seventeen-Seventeen into compliance had been more than physical. Now, though, his ranting was more venomous than ever. It was barely coherent. Kurtha Sedd made out only a few of the phrases. One cycle ago, he would have considered what he heard blasphemous. They were repetitions of the Emperor's own words, but the hate in the echo was monstrous. The Word Bearers close to Sor Gharax turned their heads from him, as if to deny the echoing howls of the venerable warrior.

Of course Sor Gharax howled. Existence itself should have been destroyed by the Emperor's act. But it was not. There was still earth beneath Kurtha Sedd's boots when he became aware of his surroundings again.

It was night. He was no longer in the grave of Monarchia. The stench of the destruction was still in his nostrils, and the ash still turned the air grey, but the land he walked was not cinder and glass. In the distance, to his left, he heard the clamour and lamentation from one of the vast refugee camps that had sprung up outside the city's former boundaries. Millions upon millions of civilians had been displaced. The people had nowhere to go. Monarchia and fifteen other great cities were gone. None of Khur's remaining centres had the means to absorb influxes many times larger than their current populations. And the nearest city of any size was hundreds of kilometres from Monarchia.

'Is this reason?' Kurtha Sedd rasped, and for the first time in his life, he questioned the Emperor. 'Is this truth? Is this justice? We brought this population into compliance for you. We taught them to worship you. They were guilty of nothing except absolute fidelity to your name. And so they must be punished in order to make an example of *us*. Are their lives meaningless, then? Their catastrophe unimportant except as a means to an end? You needed a Legion to kneel in dust, but first you needed the dust.'

'*Chaplain Kurtha Sedd, to whom are you speaking?*' The voice on the vox came from a huge distance. Too far to be of any importance. But it kept calling his name, an insistent insect. '*Chaplain, respond.*' The voice belonged to Tergothar, the captain of the Fifth Assault Company.

Kurtha Sedd hadn't realised he had left his vox open. His words would have been transmitted to the entire company.

Good. He surprised himself with the thought.

He clicked in answer to Tergothar, but said nothing.

‘Brother-Chaplain, we are leaving Khur. The order has been given for immediate embarkation. We must—’

Kurtha Sedd broke the connection and silenced the vox. He looked over, back in the direction of Monarchia. Thunderhawks rose on trails of fire through the smoke. They clawed their way towards the clouds. The Word Bearers were departing the scene of their humiliation.

He could not. Not yet. The wound was too deep and too fresh.

He marched on. He felt as if he were stumbling, but his boots hit the ground with each step as if they would crush the bedrock itself. The wind picked up. Dust ticked against his armour. It stung his flesh. It caked his nostrils, numbing his sense of smell. The cries of the Khur cocooned him. He retreated into his pain. The shriek of the wind was the sound of meaninglessness. He began to run. He did not know whether he was retreating from the pyre of faith or charging towards the void of hope.

There was a weight in his right hand. It dragged at him. He lifted the object. He held it before him as he ran. It was his *crozius arcanum*. The weapon was his staff of office. It was the symbol of his purpose. But his god had declared his purpose a lie. He held a symbol with no referent. His *occulobe* magnified the weak light of Khur’s moon shining through the cloud cover, and before his eyes the ornamentations of the metal appeared to writhe. They were seeking a new configuration, a new purpose.

He ran. Through dust and night, through nothing and towards nothing, holding a thing of metal and power, a weapon as dead and as hungry, as searching and as agonised as he was. He saw nothing except the *crozius*. He shut out the world. The wind and the dust were the static of reality, idiot sensation and noise, symptoms of a universal disease.

There was no time in the void through which he moved. He was suspended in a limbo of spiritual laceration. He would have run through the night, but a noise reached his consciousness. It drew him back to the world. He turned with a snarl in the direction of the sound. He froze when he recognised it: voices raised in prayer.

He was standing near the intersection of eight highways. Dust blew in serpentine twists over the rockcrete. The roads met in a traffic circle around a low elevation of granite. Eight staircases rose up to a house of worship that seemed to grow out of the rock itself. Kurtha Sedd stared, at first unable to understand where the chapel had come from. It was no cathedral, but it was large enough, its cluster of spires and gold-rimmed vaulted doorways imposing in

isolation. There were no other buildings in the vicinity. There was no settlement within kilometres of his position. Then he remembered that this was precisely the point: he was looking at a wayfarers' chapel. They dotted Khur, having sprung up in locations far from the major centres, but on the principal routes between them. Here the people could stop in their travels, rest and meditate, and express their love for the God-Emperor. The god who rejected their love.

Kurtha Sedd walked towards the chapel. There were numerous vehicles pulled off on the verges. Most were on the road from Monarchia. More refugees, fleeing the terror of the Ultramarines. They had not heard the news of the day. They still lived in a galaxy where the worship of the Emperor was the most natural and needful thing.

He donned his helm. He looked at the world with the eyes of a hunter. This was what he was, after all.

Wage war as you were created to do. The Emperor's words. The Emperor's command. Do not worship. Spread nothing but conquest.

Kurtha Sedd pushed the doors open. He walked into a scene of untroubled faith. The pews were full. There were more than a thousand people present. They were dirty from travelling. The aisles were clogged with bundles of hastily assembled possessions. Many of the worshippers were weeping, but their voices were strong in their pleas for help and their praise of the god. Their homes had been destroyed, but they had hope. They had their belief. It was adamantine. It would support them.

The doors shut behind Kurtha Sedd with a dull clang. He stood in the chapel, the sole being deprived of succour. He was the Chaplain of an apostate god.

The people turned to look at him. A collective sigh of joy rose to the chapel vaults. Then came a babble of voices, and from it emerged variations of the same words: *angel... true angel... grey angel...*

The nearest celebrants, still on their knees, reached out to touch his cloak. They cried out their thanks. *Saved*, they said, again and again.

Kurtha Sedd slowly turned his head back and forth, taking in every detail of the scene, every soul present, hearing the joy in the voices, seeing the faith in the eyes. Hearing the lie. Seeing the lie.

The wounds of the Rebuke stabbed deeper and deeper. The universe was devoid of anything except grief and rage and betrayal. He had devoted his life to the truth, and now the font of truth had denied itself. In this moment, when he needed to feel the strength of truth more than at any other time in his existence, he did not know if there was any truth at all beyond the lack of all meaning.

Rage in his bones. Hate in his limbs. His fist tightened on the haft of the crozius. The symbol in search of meaning. The weapon in search of blood.

‘You believe the Emperor has heard your prayers,’ he said. His helm speakers amplified his voice. The growl bounced off the walls. It filled the space with the iron of his pain. ‘You are correct. He has heard them. *And he has come in anger. There will be no prayer. Obey him and turn from him!*’

There was a confused silence. He could see the ripple of bafflement move over the crowd. Then the silence turned into shouts, and they were still confused, but there was also refusal. It emerged from the roar of questions and shouts, clear and strong and fanatical. What he had said was not true. What he had said was nonsensical. What he had said could not be accepted.

The people were right. But the Emperor had said otherwise. And so what was right was wrong.

Grief and betrayal and rage. Growing and festering with the beats of his hearts, merging into a single passion, one with no name and no expression except violence. A haze descended over his sight. He saw black and red and truth and lies and there was no distinguishing between them.

‘*You will not worship!*’ he roared. *Our god commands it*, he thought.

But the people shouted louder and louder, calling on the Emperor and his angels. Their praise grew more desperate. With panicked fidelity, the handful of worshippers clutching at his cloak held it now as if to hold him in their world. Their desperation overwhelmed the awe that would have held them back from daring to touch his being.

‘*Silence!*’ he shouted, and his agony was such that it should have torn the chapel asunder. Why did the air not bleed? Why did the stars not bleed?

And there was no silence. Only an ever-greater cacophony of prayer and plea and song.

And the haze. Darker. Deeper. Flashing with the nova intensity of despair.

Kurtha Sedd tilted his head back. ‘*This is your will!*’ he said in defiance and obedience to the god whose back had turned. ‘*This is your command!*’ he said in hate and love, faith and disbelief. He raised the crozius. It was suddenly filled with a purpose he could not name. ‘*Release me!*’ he said, but though he looked down, he was not speaking to the people gathered at his feet. Nor did he give them time to obey. He swung the crozius. With a single sweep of his arm, he smashed four heads to spray and flying bone. The bodies fell away from him. The hands let go of his cloak. Though the tugging had been weak, as he smashed the mortal burdens he felt a monstrous liberation.

He swung the crozius again. Blood splashed over his helm. His eyes saw red through red. The crack of bone and the tearing of muscle was the smashing of fetters. The shouts became screams. They were not loud enough. He could barely hear them through the roaring of his voice, the roaring in his head, and the roaring of the universe. So he struck again, and again, faster, striding through the aisles, pulling out his plasma pistol as the crowd surged for the exits, summoning more fear, more death, more shrieks, and still the screams were not loud enough. With his right hand, he battered the worshippers to shapeless pulp. With his left, he brought fire from the heart of a sun to each doorway.

With each blow, with each pull of the trigger, something broke inside. A part of him was wailing in horror, but he drowned that part in blood. Every death was another drop into the abyss, and the plunge was exhilarating. There was no difference between self-loathing and freedom. He was destroying everything he had been, but everything he had stood for had already been taken from him.

The fall accelerated. He killed faster and faster, and he roared without words, shouting nothing at nothing, voiding his soul. With fire and iron he transformed the outer world into the mirror of his slaughtered faith. He destroyed order. He destroyed sense. He destroyed truth.

Red of blood. Red of flame. Red of screams.

Red of ending.

He waded through bodies. Then there were so many dead that he was climbing over the mounds of his butchery. He needed more screams. He needed more blood as he fulfilled the Emperor's decree to its most obscene limit. He could not kill fast enough. He fired the plasma pistol without pause, pushing it past its critical point.

The weapon overheated. The venting of the cooling ducts could not keep up with the rate of fire. The gun preserved its integrity with an emergency release. A cloud of superheated gas burst from the barrel. It enveloped Kurtha Sedd. It flashed through the entire space of the chapel, an expanding bubble of wrath itself. The readouts of his auto-senses screamed red, and were lost in the crimson sea of his frenzy. The outer layers of his armour flash-boiled. The flesh of the congregation vaporised. The heat reached through his armour, through the grille of his rebreather. His lungs took in the wrath, and they withered. He staggered, and his arms dropped to his side.

The incinerating gas cloud dissipated, leaving scorched walls and wet bones contorted in the instant of excruciating death. The red haze faded. He smelled blood and burned bodies. His auto-senses still flashed damage alerts. He blinked

them off. He stood in the centre of the chapel, surrounded by his works, listening to the sound of his breathing, to his pulse, and to the thickening silence.

What have you done?

The hundreds of worshippers were mounds of blackened meat and broken shapes.

What have you done?

As rationality returned, a vertigo of disassociation took him. Who had committed this crime? He must have witnessed it from a distance, but he could not be responsible. The denial collapsed almost as soon as it took form. In its wake came a dread from the depths of his soul.

He knows what you have done.

There was a memory that had been the source of his greatest pride and the spur to his calling as Chaplain. It was a memory that had shaped him and his actions. It was the memory of Lorgar's words to him, at the dawn of his existence as a Space Marine: 'The Emperor is watching you.'

The Emperor was a god, and so the words were a literal truth. He had crusaded under that omniscient gaze. He had devoted his life to proving himself worthy of its favour.

He knows what you have done.

The Emperor had denied his divinity, but he had done so with divine power. He had judged the Word Bearers. He had made them kneel. A hundred thousand of them. With a single thought.

He knows what you have done.

Judgement must surely come.

Kurtha Sedd stood, and he waited. The silence grew heavy. It pressed on him as if he were at the bottom of an ocean. The ache in his chest was deep, hollow, filled with the swirl of dust.

An hour or an age passed. He heard a door open at his back. He did not turn. He heard the tread of ceramite boots on the stone floor. They stopped just inside the entrance.

Judgement has come.

Instead, a familiar voice said, 'Chaplain, what has happened?'

Now he turned around. Toc Derenoth stood as motionless as he himself had been moments before. Behind the legionary came Kaeloq, then Captain Tergothar. Each appeared to take root as he encountered the abattoir.

Tergothar acted first. 'Wait outside,' he commanded unseen battle-brothers. Then he closed the door. 'Chaplain?' he said.

Kurtha Sedd made no answer. *Where is judgement?* he wondered.

‘Can you hear me?’ said Tergothar.

Kurtha Sedd could. He turned his vox back on, but he was listening to the greater silence beyond. He was listening to an emptiness that could not be.

‘Take him outside,’ said the captain.

Toc Derenoth and Kaeloq walked to Kurtha Sedd’s position in the transept. Bodies crunched beneath their steps. Some broke into powder. The two Word Bearers moved to either side of him. Toc Derenoth placed his hand on Kurtha Sedd’s right shoulder. ‘Come with us, Chaplain,’ he said.

Kurtha Sedd let himself be guided forwards. He started walking. His legs moved. His feet trod the floor of the chapel. He saw his actions but did not feel them. He was numb. The dread of judgement was giving way to the worse experience of absence.

‘Where is he?’ Kurtha Sedd whispered.

‘Who?’ Kaeloq asked.

‘Exactly.’ A breath wheezed from Kurtha Sedd’s lungs. It was the bitter laugh of absolute despair. ‘Exactly so. Who is he?’

Is he a god? Where is his judgement? Is he right to deny his divinity? Is Lorgar wrong? Did Lorgar lie?

The numbing limbo was inviting. If he submerged himself in it, perhaps the questions would not pursue him. The very articulation of those questions was a torture and an obscenity. Their answers could only be worse. The contradictions were beyond resolving. The truth, whatever form it took, could not be borne.

He did not succumb. The questions were too strong, and he was no coward. He had always fought for the truth, or at least what he had believed it to be. When at last it revealed itself to him, he would not turn from it. But for now, there were only the questions, and the incomprehension, and the horror, and the blood on his hands.

So much blood. Even though the vitae had been burned away along with the layers of his armour, he thought he could still see it. Instead of grey, he was crimson. Word and act and blood and being were all one now.

He exited the chapel. Toc Derenoth and Kaeloq walked with him down the steps to the dust-blown roads. Brothers from the Fifth waited outside the doors, lined the stairs, and gathered on the rockcrete. Four Thunderhawks rested on the roads. Tergothar had brought a large force in search of him. Kurtha Sedd wondered why. The captain could hardly have thought he had been captured. They were not at war, after all. The humiliation had been delivered, and the

Ultramarines had departed. They were mere messengers, blindly following orders, and their work was done.

Perhaps Tergothar had expected something extreme on Kurtha Sedd's part. He had a reputation for recklessness on the battlefield. He took the mad risks, sustained by the confidence of his faith.

And now? he thought. *What have you done now?*

He had no answer. There were no words. There was no Word. It had been broken by the Emperor.

There was a scratching at his ear. It cut through the limbo, irritating, drawing his attention. It was Tergothar's voice on the vox. *'Burn everything,'* Tergothar said. *'Bring the chapel down. Leave no trace.'*

Toc Derenoth and Kaeloq guided Kurtha Sedd towards a Thunderhawk. He stopped short of the loading ramp. He turned to watch Tergothar's orders carried out. Word Bearers entered the chapel. After a few moments, flames erupted from the doorways and broken windows. As the legionaries exited, the other three gunships took off. They flew in a circle formation over the chapel. Their cannons poured shells into the structure. The foundations erupted. The walls collapsed in on each other. Fragments of spire cartwheeled skywards, a last gesture of prayer, then fell down into the holocaust. Fire, smoke and dust rose higher and spread outwards. They consumed. They obscured.

They erased.

Kurtha Sedd saw all trace of his crime expunged. The cannon barrage continued, battering even the rocky elevation to powder. Soon there would be nothing but a crater. The knowledge of what had happened would be buried deep within the Legion.

Kurtha Sedd had no doubt the massacre would be concealed. The knowledge filled him with wracking grief. The Emperor did not watch him. Lorgar had lied. The universe was empty of anything except betrayal. There was no room for faith.

But guilt, the corpse of faith, would not lie still. It thrashed back and forth in his chest. *Where is the judgement?* it asked, over and over, obsessed, unable to accept *nowhere* as an answer.

Where is the judgement? Where is the judgement?

He had sinned. He must answer. He could not shed the burden of this truth.

Where is the judgement?

It will come.

When?

When?
When?

TWO

Lanshear Static Shelter

He never stopped expecting judgement. Even when fidelity turned into a greater hate. Even when he followed the new teachings of Lorgar and turned, at last, to the old gods of Colchis. He had found a new truth, and he had found divinities worthy of worship. But still, at the back of his mind, gnawing at his soul, as he waded through new oceans of innocent blood, the belief never left him. It weighed him down. Decades passed.

Forty-four years after the Rebuke, an impossible flash made him think the judgement had come.

The Fifth Assault Company was moving up to assist Hol Beloth's force in Lanshear. Tergothar's Word Bearers entered the city in the south. They came up the Nacona Axis, driving hard with Thunderhawk and Rhino to bite into the flank of the Ultramarines reinforcements reported to have broken through from the east. Other arms of the XVII Legion were closing from other directions. Hol Beloth was closing a huge fist around the Ultramarines. Their breakthrough was a mere prolonging of their agony. They would hold their position at the guildhall a few minutes longer at the cost of even greater loss.

Then the sky erupted. Burning light too sudden and too intense, the shutters coming down over Kurtha Sedd's lenses too late to save him from the glare-blindness. Pillars of fire struck Word Bearers positions with the perfect accuracy of divine verdicts. The vox-traffic became a storm of static and desperate,

suddenly silenced shouts. The precision of the hits was sublime. They were the work of an omniscient intelligence that saw all and struck where it willed. A few seconds elapsed between the first hits, taking out the main concentration of Hol Beloth's strength, and a meson beam blasting the Fifth's position. Kurtha Sedd had time during those seconds to experience awe and numinous dread. A hand was reaching out across the decades to visit retribution on him.

Then Tergothar was on the vox. *'They've regained control of the defence grid! Pull—'*

The beam silenced him. Brilliant death took out the street. The gunships and tanks were leading the charge. They evaporated. Hundreds of legionaries perished in a second. The blast collapsed façades on either side of the boulevard. Tonnes of rockcrete and plex-glass fell into the crater and beyond, crushing still more of the advance.

Tergothar had been riding in the front Land Raider. He was gone. His last words freed Kurtha Sedd from his delusion. He gave the first order in the wake of the beam. *'Scatter!'* he yelled. He broke right and ran towards the nearest intact entrance. *'Spread wide,'* he said. *'No concentrations. Deprive the foe of a target.'*

He smashed through iron doors. He pounded down the marble hall of a luxury hab. Moments later, the meson beam hit again. He was a dozen metres in, moving at as close to a sprint as was possible in power armour. The walls of the building provided just enough shelter. They collapsed behind him. Wind and heat shoved him forwards. He almost fell. The fall of the building accelerated as floors pancaked. The hallway compressed. Powder filled the air. The rumble of falling marble and rockcrete and iron was a physical force, shaking the cracking floor beneath his feet. He stayed just ahead of the avalanche. The hab-block extended for half a kilometre. He reached the other end as the tower leaned towards its demolished face, parting from its foundations. It fell, and he was moving through a storm of thunder and dust.

He angled across the street. It was narrower than the Nacona Axis, but wide enough. While he was in the open, the sky was a single enormous weapon. Judgement could pierce the clouds at any second. He dismissed the thought with a growl. There was no judgement here, only a military reversal, one the true gods would not let stand.

One block to his right, on the other side of the road, was the large, arched entrance to a maglev station. A curved mosaic of stone depicted Guilliman – hand outstretched, pointing the way forward, inspiring transportation and

industry. Kurtha Sedd chose the station over nearer shelter. Symbolism was important for brothers and for enemies. This location would serve.

The vox-chatter was disordered with unanswered calls and reports of massive casualties. Most of the traffic was coming from other companies elsewhere in Lanshear, also caught by the celestial fire. As Kurtha Sedd reached the station, he heard Kaeloq's voice.

'Chaplain,' he began, *'what are—'*

'Maintain vox-silence,' Kurtha Sedd ordered. *'Find cover and remain there. We must deprive the enemy of a target. Let their attention move on. Let them believe their work is done.'*

It very nearly is, he thought. He doubted the Fifth had any vehicles left. He had no idea how many of his brothers had survived the bombardment.

The concourse of the maglev station was shadowed and empty. The line, extending north towards the guildhall zone, had been cut by the fighting. There were no civilian refugees in sight, which struck Kurtha Sedd. The station was silent. Its stillness was complete. There was no power to the lumen globes, no thrum of activity from lower levels. If the local population had fled to shelter, it had done so somewhere else. He filed the thought away for the moment. It had potential.

He stood in the dark of the concourse, waiting. Clouds of dust billowed past the opening. Rain began to dampen them. The searing shriek of particle beams and lance strikes continued, but further away. There were no more impacts in the immediate vicinity. Kurtha Sedd waited a full minute, then called to Fifth Company. *'To me, brothers,'* he said. *'The Savo maglev station.'* He called up the tactical display of his auto-senses, pinpointing his precise location in Lanshear. He looked for opportunity, and for inspiration. He could make no decision yet, though. There were too many variables. He wanted to believe the situation was not as bad as he felt it might be. He had faith that it was worse.

He was right. Three minutes after the orbital strikes, the city's sirens wailed. The voice of Remus Ventanus resounded from vox-speakers on rooftops and walls. The Ultramarines captain was speaking to the planetary population. *'The surface of Calth is no longer a safe environment,'* he warned. *'The local star is suffering a flare trauma, and will shortly irradiate Calth to human-lethal levels.'* Run for the arcologies, he urged the citizens. *'In the name of the Imperium, make haste.'*

Our great work is coming to kill us, Kurtha Sedd thought.

Less than half the company made it to his rallying point. And by then, rumour

was infecting his brothers. He had heard the messages bouncing through the fragments of vox-traffic from the other smashed regiments in Lanshear. There had been no communication established with the fleet in orbit. Therefore, the *Infidus Imperator* had fled the system. Or the battle-barge was destroyed. Or the entire fleet had burned.

His brothers surrounded him, waiting for his orders. With the captain dead, the command was his. The spiritual and the tactical had been one in this campaign. With Kor Phaeron and Erebus setting the example, Kurtha Sedd had had almost as much control over the Fifth's direction in the war as Tergothar. Now he was the only leader.

‘What has happened to the fleet, Chaplain?’ Toc Derenoth asked.

‘It has fallen silent,’ said Kurtha Sedd. ‘And I will not speculate on strategy.’ But he did speculate. He distrusted the silence. But then, he trusted nothing.

He looked at the grey daylight outside the station entrance. It was benign, mundane. There was no hint of what was coming. ‘What is true, though,’ he continued, ‘is that we must assume there will be no evacuation for the time being.’

The company stirred. Every battle-brother present knew what that meant.

‘And Veridia...’ Toc Derenoth began, giving voice to the question they all had.

‘The Ultramarines’ warning is correct. The work has been completed. The storm approaches.’

‘We are abandoned?’

Abandoned was not the word that Kurtha Sedd had been working to keep from his consciousness. That word was *betrayed*. ‘No,’ he said, to himself and to Toc Derenoth. ‘We fight alone for now. That is all. The advantage the Ultramarines have regained will be taken from them in minutes. Our brothers will return for us.’

‘And where do we fight?’ Kaeloq asked.

‘Below. In the arcologies. We will find shelter from the solar storm and an enemy to humble. In the depths there is darkness, and in the darkness there is truth. We fight with the strength of the Word, brothers. We will not fall.’

‘Where is the nearest entrance?’ Sergeant Vor Raennag asked. He had turned his head towards the daylight too, as if expecting to see the fire arrive.

Kurtha Sedd checked the tactical display again, weighing possibilities. Then the emptiness of the station hit home, and gave him his inspiration. The closest was to the north, closer to the heart of the now-ended battle. It would also be a strongpoint. If the Ultramarines were not already there, they would be soon. The

Word Bearers would have to fight their way in. Kurtha Sedd entertained a vision of a pyrrhic destruction of the shelter, then dismissed it. His war was far from over. Forty-four years ago, he had lost his purpose. Since then, he had come to a new faith. But he was still searching for his role, for his reason to exist. Since landfall on Calth, he had felt a pull at the edge of his soul. There was something on this planet, something important to him. He did not know what he was looking for. The instinct was too vague. But it was also real, and insistent. It had not grown any stronger during the day of the campaign, but now the thought of descending below the surface of the planet filled him with eagerness.

There was another entrance to the west. A bit further. With the flare on its way, the company only had minutes to reach it. It would be close. The Word Bearers would have a slightly wider margin if they headed for the northern access point, and maybe they would have the force necessary to overwhelm the defenders.

But the alternative position had other enticements.

‘This is our best option,’ he said, blinking at the western arcology entrance on his display and relaying it to the rest of the company. He had not answered Vor Raennag’s question directly, and the choice he was making was putting many of his brothers at risk. No matter. He had more important concerns, and he would be at the head of the charge. He would reach the entrance. He would make the descent.

The Word Bearers left the station and headed west. The route took them back through the devastation wrought by the meson beams. They charged through craters, battering their way through incinerated stone. They moved through a landscape dead as a meteor-blasted planetoid. Rain fell, and on all sides buildings still stood tall. The skyline of Lanshear was defiant, as if the city had been cauterised of its foes, and had a future ahead of it. *Take full advantage of your future*, Kurtha Sedd thought. *It is measured in minutes.*

They were two-thirds of the way to the destination. The day still gave no sign of the coming wrath. Without knowing exactly when Veridia had reached the critical stage, there was no way to tell how much time he had. Kurtha Sedd chose to believe he had enough. There was a path he must follow, and he would find it.

At the edge of the path of destruction carved by the defence grid beams, a spur of rubble reached outwards. Walls had been blasted by shells. It looked like a skirmish had been fought, but there had been no Ultramarines in this area. Beyond a final heap, Kurtha Sedd saw what had caused the damage. Sor Gharax had fallen there. The Dreadnought must have been clipped by the blast and had

managed to stagger this far. He was roaring with the anger of a hundred wounded predators. His howls were shaped into syllables, but they were not words. He was consumed by insane, incoherent rage. There was limited movement in his upper limbs. His legs were motionless. The war-priest of old had fallen to this state: a helpless, mad machine.

Kurtha Sedd stopped running. He stared at Sor Gharax for a precious second. Then another. In the third second, he recalled the Bull's wrath on Monarchia, and the words that had seemed blasphemous, but now were revealed as prophetic.

The Bull was important.

'Bring him,' Kurtha Sedd ordered.

His brothers obeyed. A squad's worth of legionaries moved to either side of the Dreadnought and began to drag him forwards. Sor Gharax snarled at them. His right arm fired at the sky, but he could no longer swivel the gun. His brothers were able to stay out of the path of his shells. After a few metres, he stopped shooting. His inarticulate curses continued, but the electronic grind of his voice was weaker. There was little more than a spark of life still left in his scorched shell.

Kurtha Sedd led the way once more, back on a street now, the Gades Boulevard. Half a minute later, the goal came into view on the south side: the huge repository of the Gades Archives. This was the bureaucratic memory of Lanshear and the surrounding regions of Calth more than it was a cultural one. It was a monumental structure, squat in appearance even though it was a hundred metres high, sitting in the centre of its own square. Its marble walls, smooth, their surface uninterrupted by windows, were so polished they gleamed even in the grey light of the city's last day. Four columns the size of Titan legs flanked twin entrances in the north face. Both portals were open. Enormous blast doors were raised above each.

The Word Bearers had not come across any civilians until now – those unfortunate enough to have still been near their initial advance had been eradicated by the beams. Now Kurtha Sedd beheld many, streaming in from the east down the Gades Boulevard. Thousands of them, heeding the words of Ventanus and the whoop and wail of the tocsins. Fleeing their own sun. They were crowding into the left-hand doorway. The right, which opened onto a staircase leading upwards, was ignored.

There were some Imperial troops with the refugees. Kurtha Sedd spotted a single squad of Ultramarines, one that had perhaps been split off from the main force during the fighting. The enemy presence he saw was insignificant, and the

civilian numbers were what he had hoped to find.

‘Bearers of the Word,’ he called, pulling out his plasma pistol and raising his crozius high, ‘bless these vermin with the truth.’

The Imperials spotted Fifth Company at the same moment, and opened fire. They were hampered by the number of refugees. Whether they tried to avoid killing their own people or not, the civilians were in the way. They absorbed some of the rounds meant for the Word Bearers.

Even at half strength, Kurtha Sedd’s assault company was overwhelmingly stronger than what the Imperials could muster. Its barrage of bolter shells and plasma scythed through civilians and defenders. The Word Bearers pounded the handful of Ultramarines. Their skill and their armour counted for little. The sheer physics of being hit by hundreds of mass-reactive shells defeated them. Even so, they tried to vanquish the impossible. They dropped three Word Bearers before the charge reached them. Kurtha Sedd rammed through civilians, shattering their bodies with momentum and mass, and closed with the Ultramarines sergeant.

The loyalist trained his bolter on Kurtha Sedd. Two shells slammed into the Chaplain’s cuirass. Ceramite cracked. The blows were massive in their impact and their outrage. He swung his crozius and smashed the barrel of the bolter down. He collided with the Ultramarine. His momentum knocked the warrior back, throwing him off-balance for a second. Long enough for Kurtha Sedd to strike again with his crozius. His staff of office had found new meaning since Monarchia. The engravings had purpose. What they had lacked before was their proper shape. The aquila was a distortion, a forcing of lines into a lie. Now the head was an eight-pointed star, and it crashed down on the Ultramarine’s helm with the force of truth. Its energy field disrupted the internal gravity of the armour’s matter. The helm shattered. The black points of the star embedded themselves in the loyalist’s skull. Kurtha Sedd yanked the crozius out with a backward sweep of his arm. Bone splinters and cerebral cortex spread out in an arc. The Ultramarine toppled forwards.

The loyalist legionaries died. The Word Bearers cut through the mortal resistance without slowing. Kurtha Sedd ran through bodies no more substantial before his wrath than phantoms. They broke and bled beneath his boots. He passed through the left doorway into a vast antechamber. At its centre, a marble staircase thirty metres wide descended into the archive’s arcology. There were further thousands of civilians here, packing tight on the stairway and on the floor leading to it. The Word Bearers burned and shot their way in, carving space for themselves through murder and fear. Screams filled the antechamber. Their

echoes rose to the frieze-adorned ceiling. Heroically proportioned administrators of Calth looked down with imperturbable, quiet pride as vengeful giants in crimson massacred the people of Lanshear.

Sor Gharax's escort dragged him through the doorway. His snarls, amplified by the marble walls, were louder than the screams. Outside, the crowd panicked. Torn between the need to escape the coming solar event and the terror of the Word Bearers, its movements became confused. As the rest of the company entered the antechamber, Kurtha Sedd moved to the doorway to watch. He saw a populace abandon hope and become a collective manifestation of chaos.

Then, almost simultaneously, two mechanical rumbles began. Above his head, the blast doors began their slow descent. And approaching from a nearby road, still hidden but drawing closer, came the sound of massive engines.

Transports. Possibly tanks. The real force of Ultramarines heading for this shelter.

THREE

Antechamber Cultural memory Anointed

‘Hold fire!’ Kurtha Sedd voxed to the company. He ordered a retrieval party to haul the Ultramarines’ corpses into the archive, and he ordered the civilians spared for the moment. He gambled against the ticking seconds. He saw the opportunity and risks of the Word Bearers’ position with the perfection of revelation. The doors were coming down with the gradual, majestic certainty of glaciers. It would take them at least another minute to close. There was that long for action, and less than that to prepare the trap.

The bodies were within metres of the doorway. It took seconds only to get them out of sight. With the killing stopped, those same seconds were all that was needed for the refugees to begin rushing inside again. The grinding descent of the doors overcame their fear of the Word Bearers. The shrinking of the entrance was the sign of the end of the world. That was the greatest terror. It spurred the populace on.

The people were a river. Their numbers concealed the traces of the battle outside. In the archive, they flowed around the immovable stones of the Word Bearers. The company lined up on either side of the entrance, a few metres back from the doorway, invisible from the exterior. Kurtha Sedd stood on the right, at the furthest end of the ambush. From here, he had a view of the Ultramarines’ arrival.

Three Rhinos and a Land Raider drove into the Gades Archives square. They

were accompanied by two more squads on foot.

‘They outnumber and outgun us,’ Toc Derenoth voxed. He stood in the line opposite Kurtha Sedd.

‘They won’t be bringing those vehicles in with them,’ said Kaeloq.

‘And they’re out of time.’ Kurtha Sedd smiled.

The doors were less than five metres from the floor.

The loading ramps of the transports dropped open. The Ultramarines rushed for the entrance. They held their weapons at the ready against their chests, barrels pointing up. They urged the civilians forwards, but took care not to trample them. They cost themselves precious seconds.

Four metres. The shadows in the antechamber deepened as daylight was shut out of the Gades Archives.

The first of the Ultramarines crossed the threshold. They came two abreast. Hundreds of civilians crowded in on either side of their phalanx. The refugees were animals, lowing with panic. They were a perfect cover.

Two more seconds. Three metres. Kurtha Sedd mentally recited the names of the Old Gods. Then he said, ‘Now.’

There were a dozen Ultramarines in the antechamber. They towered over the civilians. They presented clear, easy targets. The Word Bearers’ enfilading fire caught them at neck level. They had no opportunity to respond. The kill-zone of the ambush was a maelstrom of shells and flame. In such close quarters, the impact blasts of the bolter rounds were so great the civilians died by the score from the splash damage alone. The Ultramarines had no chance. Even so, they fought back. Their return volley was a ferocious burst of desperate anger. They had too many targets and too little time.

Kurtha Sedd was pleased by the enemy’s action. It was strong, and it was futile, and in its futile strength made their humiliation even more satisfying. *You watched us kneel*, he thought. *We will see you lower yet. Already, we are burying you.*

The Ultramarines beyond the entrance began to shoot. The storm of ammunition illuminated the interior, but the bodies of civilians and stricken battle-brothers before them deprived them of a clear field of fire. The doors were now two metres from closing. They were down to seconds to fight or to race for shelter. They tried to do both.

The Word Bearers shifted their aim towards the entrance. The Ultramarines had to duck to get inside. They were funnelling themselves into a choke point. Their numbers meant nothing now. All they were was fuel. A sacrifice. Kurtha Sedd

had a reason beyond the tactical to be where he was, and the blood of the XIII Legion was his offering as he began the next stage of his journey.

Nearest the entrance, two more Word Bearers fell. *Let their blood be a further gift*, Kurtha Sedd thought.

Outside, some of the Ultramarines had returned to their transports. Heavy guns began to cycle up. Their shells slammed against the blast doors, and now Kurtha Sedd laughed. The desperation of the enemy was delicious. They were attempting to destroy their own defences. If they succeeded, where would they find shelter? Or were Guilliman's sons, who invariably chose obedience over thought, even capable of thinking past the immediate moment?

A metre remained. The blast doors held strong against the Rhinos and the Land Raider. Ultramarines dived under the doors, bolters blazing. They came in fast, rolling to the sides to make room for their brothers. They shot the nearer ends of the Word Bearers columns ragged. Kurtha Sedd's formations moved back. They kept their fire steady, unceasing. There was no shelter for the enemy. The Ultramarines had no defence except speed and the fading possibility of coming in faster than the Word Bearers could kill them.

As the doors dropped, the antechamber fell into a grey twilight. The lumen globes on its periphery illuminated the ceiling frieze more than the floor below. But now a second day broke. Kurtha Sedd winced as the light from the exterior became blinding. The heat inside the Gades Archives skyrocketed.

Veridia's agony had reached Calth.

Kurtha Sedd's auto-senses struggled to compensate as the light grew brighter yet. He could see the enemy only in silhouette. The Ultramarines' movements beyond the door became faster yet, and jagged. The pounding of the cannons against the door ceased. One of the vehicles exploded. The blast pushed air into the antechamber with the force of a gale. Flames licked the edges of the doors. The heat of Veridia's greater fire reached inside. The air filtered by Kurtha Sedd's respirator grille was the breath from the heart of a furnace. It desiccated. It withered. The civilians still on the surface level of the archives began to collapse. Flesh smoked.

A more deadly killer came with the heat. Kurtha Sedd blinked off the radiation warnings. They had become a strident shriek of pulsing red, even with the blast doors almost closed. It was time to retreat. Power armour could not protect for long against the star's siege of Calth. The Word Bearers needed to be deeper underground, with tonnes of bedrock between them and the inferno.

The Ultramarines made a desperate charge at the disappearing gap. A few more

lunged inside. Their fight lasted a few more seconds after that. They bellowed their hatred and defiance, and they did not go down easily. But they did go down. The discipline of Fifth Company was unbreakable. Kurtha Sedd's brothers directed their hail of shells from target to target, smashing armour apart with hundreds of bolter rounds. The Ultramarines' determination was irrelevant. Their will counted for nothing against the mass-reactive fury that battered them against the door.

And then, with the boom of a huge, terminal bell, the blast doors slammed shut. The searing light of Calth's new day vanished. Its heat lingered. So did its danger.

'We must descend, brothers,' said Kurtha Sedd. Beyond the doors, in the burning death of Lanshear, he could still hear the sound of struggle. He pictured the situation of the Ultramarines. They had no choices, no time, no hope. All they could do was die struggling to achieve the impossible. He smiled, giving himself the luxury of a few seconds to savour the idea of the foe's despair.

Do you see it now? he wondered. Do you see the futility? Do you see the lie? Or do you cling to your illusions to the end? Do they give you comfort as you burn? I don't think they do. You are fools, but you are not ignorant. Your world is dying with you. You can see it. You can feel it. The truth is burning the flesh from your bones.

He was about to lead the way towards the stairs when he saw Kaeloq bending over the bodies of the Ultramarines. 'What are you doing?' he asked.

Kaeloq jerked an arm. Blood pooled on the floor. 'Silencing them,' he said.

Kurtha Sedd walked forwards, mindful of the damage he was experiencing. Kaeloq was tearing the tongues out of the dead. The legionary picked up a head that had been severed by bolter fire. He threw the helm away, reached his fingers between the jaws and ripped. He dropped the tongue onto the growing heap at his feet. 'I've had enough of their lies,' Kaeloq said.

Kurtha Sedd laughed. Kaeloq's act was delicious in its barbarism. It visited mutilation atop humiliation, and it was precisely the sort of excess the XIII Legion deserved. 'And who will see this justice? We must leave this place.'

'I will know it. I will carry it with me. The gods will know it.'

Kurtha Sedd clapped Kaeloq on the pauldron. 'Well spoken, brother.' He looked around at the rest of the waiting company. 'Carry a few of these bodies down with us,' he ordered. 'We might find a more visible use for them yet. But take their supplies first.' He still had not received any communications from the Legion's off-planet forces. He did not know how long they would be fighting

underground. Best to start thinking like a scavenger now.

The company stripped the Ultramarines of ammunition and grenades. Dragging a handful of corpses with them, and still burdened with Sor Gharax, howling with impotence inside his giant coffin, the Word Bearers made for the stairs. The steps descended for hundreds of metres, directions switching back and forth at each landing. The only civilians Kurtha Sedd saw now were dead. The last to have begun the long journey down had been overcome by the limited touch of the solar storm.

After an hour, the radiation levels and the heat dropping, the stairs ended at a long, vaulted corridor. The lumen globes illuminated more art celebrating the virtues and the heroic contributions of the administrative arms of Calth. The corridor travelled another hundred metres before it reached closed iron doors. They were not sealed. Kurtha Sedd battered them open with a single blow from both fists. They swung wide with a clang.

On the other side of the doorway was the principal underground repository of the Gades Archives. The hall was huge, twice the size of the antechamber. It was terraced, its levels laid out in concentric rings radiating out and up from the two floor entrances. The other exit was directly across from Kurtha Sedd. Its doors were open, and through it were branching tunnels.

The terraces were packed with refugees. There were tens of thousands of mortals in the hall. It seemed they had made it this far underground, to a space that must have been familiar to at least some of them, and then stopped. They were waiting for leadership. The cataclysm that had struck Calth was too huge for them to process. They could not be trusted to find their own salvation. They clustered around the huge document vaults. Each was the size of a Rhino, and was a monumental block of iron. Each side of the vaults was covered by rows of drawers, and the vaults themselves doubled as plinths. Straddling pairs of vaults were colossal statues of Guilliman. His image was repeated dozens of times. Guilliman with arms folded, looking upon his realm with stolid satisfaction. Guilliman pointing the way forward. Guilliman in a fighting stance. The variations of the basic poses were so minimal that when Kurtha Sedd swept his eyes around the space, he had the impression of movement. The painted dome portrayed Guilliman yet again, illuminated by the orb of Veridia.

Crouching at the base of the vaults or clutching at the stone boots of Guilliman, the people looked at the Word Bearers with a terrified curiosity. Having made it this far to safety, they were grasping at the belief that the worst was over.

‘No one leaves,’ Kurtha Sedd commanded.

Vor Raennag strode to the other exit. A single legionary was all that was needed to forbid egress to the unarmed mortals.

The Word Bearers stood around the periphery of the great hall's floor. The civilians looked down at them with bovine anxiety. Kurtha Sedd felt contempt for their immobility. And anger. Though there was nothing they could do to save themselves, they did not even try. They stood and crouched and trembled and waited. They were terrified, yet in their helpless passivity he thought he detected hope. There was no worship of the Emperor on Calth. But there might as well have been. These people hoped for rescue when none could come, such was their trust in Guilliman and his father. Kurtha Sedd saw in them the same weakness that had first moved him to slaughter on Khur. It was faith by any other name. There was room for faith in the galaxy, but not of this kind. Kurtha Sedd had no intention of teaching these vermin the truth. But he would show them the consequences of their error.

Then there were the vaults. The Gades Archives were a very different institution from the Holophusikon. They were not repositories of art. Nor were they one of the great libraries of Calth. But they were still an important component of its cultural memory. The character of the planet and of its society was shaped by the processes and decisions that were recorded here. This was why he had chosen to make for the Archives. He had guessed Fifth Company would find large numbers of undefended civilians. Just as important was the memory he was about to destroy. He was going to annihilate a portion of Calth's identity.

'Burn everything,' he said. 'Nothing survives. Choke this hall with blood and ash. And mark it. Claim it.'

He fired once with his plasma pistol at the right leg of the nearest statue. The shot melted the top of the vault, igniting its contents. Refugees died, and the burned survivors at the edge of the blast howled. Their screams spread through the chamber like a plague. The figure of Guilliman toppled sideways and crashed against another statue, smashing it down too, then fell and crushed a score of mortals beneath its stone bulk. The other Word Bearers followed his example and loosed a single round each. The barrage was enough to butcher over a hundred of the nearest civilians. The panic began. People stampeded up the terraces of the hall, trampling each other as they raced for egress that did not exist. The Word Bearers followed with blade and ceramite fist.

There was no hurry. No need to expend ammunition grown precious. The citizens of Lanshear had no defence, no recourse, no hope. They killed many of

their own as they fled to nowhere. Kurtha Sedd led the slaughter in perfect silence. The victims had no right to a truth they would not accept. Perhaps they sensed it as their calls for help went unanswered and their blood flowed over the terraces and the air filled with burning fragments of scrolls. Kurtha Sedd did not care. What mattered was that they died. They were a burnt offering. The destruction of the vaults was a strike against the Ultramarines. The killing of the people was a gift to the gods of Chaos. They were a gesture of thanks and a prayer for guidance.

Kurtha Sedd climbed upwards, striking with his crozius left and right. He moved his arm with the steady regularity of a metronome. He walked slowly, crushing limbs and heads beneath his tread. Every gesture was an act of violence. He performed the killing with all the care ritual demanded. The arc of the crozius resembled a benediction. Forty-four years ago, it would have been. Now, instead of blessing the worshippers of the God-Emperor, the same motion destroyed the unthinking servants of the false idol. His armour was coated in vitae. Bits of flesh and bone clung to its surface. He was anointed with murder, and so were his brothers.

The slaughter took less than ten minutes. At the end of that period, no mortals drew breath. Flames burned across the length of every terrace. The vaults were gutted. The archive had become a huge bonfire. Black smoke rose to the dome, obscuring the painting. Veridia and the primarch were eclipsed. Kurtha Sedd approved of the symbolism. And on the walls were more symbols: the runes of the gods of Chaos daubed in blood. The people had died for a lie, and in their deaths had been turned into the words of truth.

He was standing on the uppermost terrace, looking over the panorama of carnage, when Vor Raennag approached him.

‘Chaplain,’ the sergeant said, ‘I managed to make contact with the *Infidus Imperator*.’

‘And?’

‘The communication was very brief. The solar event has made vox-traffic almost completely inoperative. But I heard enough. The fleet’s losses are severe. All surviving ships are leaving the system.’

‘I see.’

Vor Raennag’s face, a patchwork of combat and runic scars, was expressionless. His silence, though, was expressive.

‘Speak freely, brother-sergeant,’ Kurtha Sedd told him.

‘What is our situation, Chaplain?’

‘It has not changed,’ he lied. The prospect of extraction had gone from indefinite to remote at best. Kurtha Sedd swallowed his confusion, keeping it from his eyes and voice. The word *betrayed* bubbled to the surface of his mind once more. Yet he knew he was following his destined path by descending below the surface. There was a reason for him to be here.

There were too many unknowns. Too many truths still concealed from his gaze. Very well. His struggle would be one of revelation.

‘No change?’ Vor Raennag said. ‘With respect, Brother-Chaplain, we are stuck on the enemy’s world.’

‘So is the enemy,’ Kurtha Sedd replied. ‘Come with me.’

He descended the terraces. His nostrils filled with the thick stench of blood and burned flesh. The smell was a good one. It was the aroma of things broken, of a foe made abject. Ash fell on the shoulders of his armour, sticking to the vitae, darkening his crimson towards black. But not grey. He would never be clad in grey again.

The company gathered in the centre of the hall. Kurtha Sedd stopped on the first terrace. His brothers looked up at him. They looked to him. He saw their need. Command had come to him when Tergothar fell, but it did not supplant his role as Chaplain. He was both the tactical and the spiritual leader now. The burden of command settled onto his shoulders. It was not unwelcome. It was also not enough. The weight felt transitional to him, as if his role were still not fully defined.

He said, ‘We have news of the fleet. It is departing the Veridia system.’

‘What of us?’ Kaeloq asked.

‘We have not received any new orders. Therefore our mission has not changed, only the means of its accomplishment. We fight on. Here. Below ground. Calth belonged to the Ultramarines, but we have made it their foe now. And now we will bury them.’

There were growls of assent. There was also an uncertain silence from some of the legionaries, Toc Derenoth among them. Kurtha Sedd could see the questions in the tilt of his head. He nodded to him. ‘Speak, brother,’ he said.

‘We have lost much of our strength. We don’t know how many of our fellows might also have survived, or where they might be, or how we might find them. And we know very little about the layout of the arcologies. This is still the Thirteenth Legion’s home territory.’

‘It is,’ Kurtha Sedd agreed. ‘So we will take it from them, as we took the surface away.’ He spread his arms to take in the ruined hall. ‘This architecture

belongs to the Ultramarines. Its construction was devoted to the honour of Guilliman. Does this hall belong to them now?’

‘No!’ came the response from all throats.

Ruins. Smoke. Guttering flame. The toppled statues. And triumphant, on the walls, the words. Their truth was evident in their power. Kurtha Sedd had studied the ancient tongue intently ever since his conversion. And even now, those runes – those shapes he had made himself time and again – twisted at the corner of his eyes. At the edge of human senses, the hall writhed. It would never belong to Guilliman again. The Word Bearers had given it to higher powers. The new, whispering ownership had begun. The archive was a beachhead of Chaos. It would harm any mortal who set foot in here again.

‘No,’ Kurtha Sedd repeated. He lowered his arms. He regarded his brothers. He wondered how much more to tell them. He believed what he had just said, but it was a partial truth. If the fleet did not return, then Fifth Company really had been abandoned. If they were never to leave, how could their war be anything other than a delaying tactic?

He refused to consider that possibility. His destiny could not be such a dead end. There was meaning in his presence here. There was necessity. Yet he was reluctant to share this knowledge. It was too vague. He had not found the direction he should take. And there was a desire to clutch his secret close, to keep it for himself and not dilute the gift of the gods by revealing it to ears less worthy than his.

He decided on a balance of revelation, and spoke again. ‘The material of the underworld is the enemy’s,’ he said. ‘If the tunnels we must fight in are veins, they are owned by the foe. But the blood that runs through them is ours.’ He pointed to the doorway leading deeper into the network. Its illumination was feeble, and the smoke dropped the tunnel into the deep of night. ‘The darkness is ours,’ said Kurtha Sedd. ‘It is everywhere, and it is what the Ultramarines have always resisted. They are beings of the light, and light has abandoned them. It burns their world. They have come to the darkness. We will teach them to fear it.’ He paused. He lowered his voice. ‘And there is more. We are alive and we are in this location for a reason. There is truth in the darkness below, brothers. We will meet it. We will use it.’

The Word Bearers turned as one. The maw of the doorway waited.

‘Follow me, brothers,’ said Kurtha Sedd. ‘Follow me to the truth and the dark, and the destruction of the Ultramarines.’

He stepped down from the terrace and headed for the doorway. His brothers

followed, chanting prayers. Their voices were strong.
Their voices were hungry.

FOUR

Strategy

Nexus

Flood

The Word Bearers moved quickly into the network of tunnels. Their first moves were random, putting distance and branching paths between themselves and the entrance to the arcology. But always heading deeper. That was not random. That much of Kurtha Sedd's purpose was clear to him. The depths called. He would answer.

The slaughter in the archive had been a luxury and a risk. Kurtha Sedd knew this. He did not expect he was the only one who did. He was not surprised when Toc Derenoth was the one to question the decision. They were marching through a long corridor that connected larger zones of the system when the legionary moved up to the front of the phalanx to speak with him. Toc Derenoth was a spiritual warrior. His devotion to the truth was beyond question. He was also a pragmatist.

The passageway's lumen globes were a weak amber, and flickering. As far underground as they were, the arcologies had suffered significant damage from the huge impacts at the surface. Collapsed tunnels had already forced the company to change direction several times.

Toc Derenoth opened a private vox-channel. 'Brother-Chaplain,' he said, 'we remained in place for several minutes in the archive.'

'We did.'

'Was that wise? If the Ultramarines had arrived in force, they would have

trapped us.'

'They did not.'

'Yes, but—'

'Are you questioning my decision, brother? Or is it the consecration of the hall that you consider unnecessary?'

'Neither.'

'Good. Then let me reassure you. I was aware of the risks. I weighed my decision carefully.'

Toc Derenoth nodded. 'I believe in what we are doing and in you, Chaplain.'

'I'm glad to hear it. But that is not what you want to speak of, I think.'

'No. I was thinking of our tactical position.'

If we had one, Kurtha Sedd thought. Despite what he had said in the archive hall, he had no illusions about their situation. The concerns Toc Derenoth had raised were valid. The Word Bearers had had the initiative since entering the arcology because he had deliberately avoided Ultramarines strongpoints. 'Go on,' he said.

Toc Derenoth pointed to the conduits running high on the wall on the right-hand side. 'I have been observing these. Their concentration in a given passageway varies. We have passed some branches where it was greater, but there has been a general increase.'

'And you conclude?'

'The arcologies will have nerve centres. It must be possible to command them. Guilliman worships order and regimentation. He would never allow a haphazard organisation below ground.'

'You think we are close to such a command nexus?'

'I think I know how to find one.'

'And? We are not here to govern, brother.'

'No, but the enemy is.'

'You want to destroy the nexus.'

'I do,' said Toc Derenoth.

That kind of loss would hurt the Ultramarines badly. Establishing control over the underworld zones would be precisely their goal.

They would also be ferocious in their fight to preserve those centres. It was the kind of fight that could hammer the Word Bearers to little purpose. Kurtha Sedd needed to follow the call of the depths. There was no other priority. There was no other consideration. Any sacrifice to that end was acceptable.

If Toc Derenoth's plan was successful, it could buy valuable time. Even if it

failed, it would tie up the Ultramarines.

‘I am convinced, brother. But we cannot afford to divert our entire strength to this endeavour.’

‘Three squads,’ said Toc Derenoth. ‘Veteran Sergeant Qarthon agrees with my assessment. He will lead, if you give us leave.’

‘Why three squads?’

‘A compromise between speed, stealth and strength.’

‘Go then, brother,’ said Kurtha Sedd. ‘Bring them disorder. Bring them truth.’

‘He agreed easily,’ Qarthon commented.

The three squads had split off from the rest of Fifth Company at a juncture of multiple corridors. One passageway headed right, with cables and pipes on both sides of the walls. Another descended a steep flight of stairs. ‘When you are done, head downwards,’ Kurtha Sedd had instructed. ‘Always down.’

Toc Derenoth’s squad was the Ulughar Tactical, led by Sergeant Ghulun Vaad, and was marching abreast with Qarthon’s Rhaalahn Tactical veterans. The corridor had crossed a threshold and widened considerably. There was still no sign of civilians or Ultramarines, but there was a hum in the walls now. They were heading for a power source.

‘The Chaplain saw the value in the operation,’ Toc Derenoth told Qarthon. ‘Why does this surprise you?’

‘Because...’ Qarthon hesitated, as if searching for the right words. ‘Because his first commitment is to the spiritual rather than the strategic.’

Toc Derenoth grunted. This was a fact he did not like to articulate, even to himself. That did not change its validity. He trusted Kurtha Sedd’s religious guidance. He did not exactly doubt his military leadership. He did, though, find himself evaluating the Chaplain’s strategy, alert for the possibility of error. His caution had been cemented by the massacre on Khur. Kurtha Sedd’s actions had anticipated the truth the entire Legion would finally discover, yet he had not been thinking, had not been rational, had not been mindful of consequences.

The hum stuttered. Heavy, staccato beats rattled ahead. The Word Bearers were approaching a battlezone. The squads tightened their formations.

The corridor crossed a threshold and opened into a large space, a towering cylindrical edifice at its centre. It was heavily damaged. The ceiling bowed inwards at several points, and there were a few complete collapses. In those areas, broken conduits sparked and steamed. Water ran down the slopes of broken stone. Many more cables and pipes were still intact and converged on the

other side of the cavern.

Robed statues had fallen from their pedestals. Arms that had been outstretched in victory or benediction now appeared to be reaching out in entreaty from shattered torsos. There had been grandeur here. Now light and magnificence had been brought low.

At the far end of the chamber a cluster of ramps led to a large doorway. Arched glassaic windows flanked it on either side. They glowed. The interior's illumination pulsed with the rise and fall of energy.

Here was the command nexus. And the battle for its control had already been joined. Small groups of Ultramarines and Word Bearers were trading fire across the cavern. Toc Derenoth saw little organisation on either side. He had the impression that several running skirmishes had found their way into the chamber. Simple struggles for survival now had an objective.

A handful of Ultramarines had the high ground of the ramps, but Word Bearers fire had them pinned. More of Guilliman's sons were moving forwards to shore up their position and give them the chance to break away and reach the door to the nexus. Further out from the ramps, warriors from both Legions in twos and threes clashed, and the conflict lost shape. Muzzle flashes lit up the cavern. Shell and grenade blasts brought more chunks of the ceiling crashing down.

In the diffuse confusion of the battle, the three squads from Fifth Company were a massive, coherent force.

Qarthon led the charge, taking as direct a line towards the command nexus as the mounds of rubble permitted. The squads formed a wedge, and they drove it through the cavern, smashing the balance of the fight. They didn't look for shelter. They used speed, numbers, and relentless momentum. The Ultramarines who turned their fire on the wedge came under renewed attack from the other Word Bearers.

The advance could not be stopped.

Bolter shells streaked out of the strobe-lit dimness to Toc Derenoth's left. One slammed into his flank. The others blew stone to dust. He shot back, seeing silhouettes duck behind mounds of rubble. Hard to tell how many brothers and enemies there were out there. Even the full dimensions of the cavern were obscure. As he advanced, he felt the currents of war coalesce around Fifth Company. The squads became the focus.

Movement in the corner of his eye. A shadow made bulky by the weapon it carried. 'Rocket!' Toc Derenoth warned at the same instant as the launch.

Too late.

A shriek of flame across the cavern. The roar of the flight, the roar of the impact. The missile hit near the front of the Word Bearers advance. In the fireball, armoured silhouettes came apart. The ceiling was low, buckled. The confined space gave the blast even more force. Slabs of stone fell, smothering flame and crushing legionary.

Toc Derenoth fired as he yelled. He sent a storm of shells into the helm of the Ultramarine. The shadow's head exploded. The body fell. Ahead, Qarthon had survived. He veered right, taking the phalanx around the new wreckage. But momentum bled away. The suppressive fire from the Ultramarines grew stronger. They accepted their own sacrifices as the cost of stopping Fifth Company and giving their brothers the chance to take the command nexus.

Enemy legionaries rushed in from both sides. Some were brought down. The others converged on the weakened point of the advance, tearing into Qarthon's diminished force with rifle and chainblade. The other two squads waded in. On the right, Vek Torrag and Nethen Suul unleashed their flamers on the attackers. Toc Derenoth pressed forwards for blood. An Ultramarine swung a chainsword in at Ghulun Vaad while he grappled with another. The blade chewed through the sergeant's armour and into his leg. Toc Derenoth fired at Ghulun Vaad's first attacker while he revved his own chainsword and brought it down on the second's arms. For a moment he, the Ultramarine and the sergeant were motionless, locked into a chain of butchery. Then Toc Derenoth's sword severed the Ultramarine's arms. The loyalist stumbled forwards. His stumps moved as if he would strike with them. His body blocked Toc Derenoth's shots. They punched through his armour and through his neck. As he dropped, Ghulun Vaad and the other Ultramarine riddled each other's helms with simultaneous mass-reactive volleys. The shells went wild as both warriors died.

Toc Derenoth stepped over the body of his dead sergeant. He held his chainsword high and fired his bolter in a sweep to his left. 'Forward!' he shouted. The order itself was unnecessary. His voice was important. He was the most senior battle-brother of the squad. The chain of command was preserved.

The squads closed in on the ramps. There were only two Ultramarines still fighting above. They had cover from a rock fall two-thirds of the way up the central access. It had sheltered them this long, but it wasn't enough. One rained covering fire on the Word Bearers. The other broke over and ran, up towards the rock platform running the length of the command nexus's outer face. Bolter shells stitched craters in the stone as they sought him. Glassaic exploded. The remaining loyalists did what they could to suppress his attackers.

The closer Fifth Company came to the ramps, the more defined the struggle became.

Toc Derenoth closed his senses to everything but the need to bring the running Ultramarine down. But shells hit him, and hammered at his armour's integrity, and one struck his arm, throwing his aim. Even so, he saw some of his shots fly to their mark. The Ultramarine staggered. He took shots enough to bring him down, but desperation held him up. Somehow still on his feet, he reached the entrance to the nexus.

No matter, Toc Derenoth thought. The loyalist's achievement would be short and meaningless. The Ultramarines could not hold the centre with a single legionary.

Forward. The wedge of squads was smaller, but strong again. The ramps were only a few metres away. The Ultramarines' fire was lessening. The cavern would soon belong to the Word Bearers. Already, the surviving battle-brothers from the other companies were moving to link up with the formation.

This close, Toc Derenoth saw that the ramps crossed a deep fissure. On either side of each slope was the darkness of a long fall.

Deep pain ran up and down his left side. His body was working hard to stanch the bleeding. His leg dragged. Muscles were torn and bones were broken. His breath turned into a snarl as he marched through his wounds. He refused to grant them a victory. He funnelled his agony into his consciousness of the rounds flying from his bolter. They were his anger. He saw another enemy fall. Then the Ultramarines' fire stopped all at once.

The movement of the enemy changed. There was a different kind of coherence. The Ultramarines were moving back.

'They're retreating,' Qarthon announced.

'Why?' Toc Derenoth asked. Whatever he thought of the loyalists, they were not weak, and they were not cowards. They fought to the end.

A rumble began. It grew louder, drowning out the hum of the command nexus.

Rhaalahn Squad rushed the ramps. Ulughar was just behind. Toc Derenoth set foot on the slope at the same moment the bolter fire burst from the row of windows.

Another Ultramarines force had entered the command nexus from a different approach. Toc Derenoth felt a wave of frustration so intense it bordered on vertigo. He saw now the kind of war he and his brothers were fighting. The tangle of caves was not only too massive to control, it was too complex to learn. Communications were too fragmented. Perhaps the Ultramarines were faring

better, but at this stage it was impossible to know how many Word Bearers had reached the arcologies, or where they were. Toc Derenoth had a vision of disconnected skirmishes playing out within the networks, victories and defeats meaningless beyond their participants, and any connections formed only by chance.

Except the Ultramarines knew this territory. They would be able to link up. To coordinate. They already had.

The destruction of the command nexus was more urgent than ever.

The barrage caught the Word Bearers in the open. It drove them back a full step before they could return fire. The Ultramarines had the heights now, and there were no good positions in the room. The only defence was a concerted offence: a push to the windows.

Shell and flame in both directions along the ramps. Frag grenades detonated in the midst of the squads and inside the nexus. Rock shrapnel filled the air. Just in front of Toc Derenoth, a blast lifted Dar Hathuun into the air and hurled him off the side of the ramp. The Word Bearer disappeared into the dark gulf below with a snarl of hatred. The curses faded as he fell, but Toc Derenoth did not hear him hit the bottom.

Retaliatory explosions shook the wall of the centre. The interior lights flickered, then steadied. The Ultramarines' fire paused at one window. The pause was brief.

The rumble became deafening. The stones of the cavern were filled with thunder. On the far right of the chamber was a valve three metres in diameter. It flew open with a bang. Silver liquid burst from the maw, and from a dozen other conduits around the chamber. And still the rumble grew, as of some enormous cataract coming, about to crash down on the cavern.

The air around the silver froth froze into crystals. *Hypercoolant*, Toc Derenoth realised. The sudden river raced along the platform and down the ramps. It was already over a metre deep. The wave hit the front of the Word Bearers advance. Qarthon stopped marching. He jerked, held in place. He roared in pain. He tried to take a step, and his legs shattered. He fell into the stream. The rest of Rhaalahn Squad was swept down too, overcome in an instant.

The other Word Bearers retreated. The hypercoolant was an enemy that could not be fought. They scrambled for the high ground of the rubble. The hypercoolant poured off the edges of the ramps into the depths, and it spread itself out on the main floor. Toc Derenoth only had time to climb atop a waist-high slab before the lethal silver rushed past him. He saw the flow from the

valve diminish. He started to look for a route back towards the command nexus.

But the thunder still raged. Louder and louder, filling the cavern with smothering noise. And now the flood arrived. The hypercoolant roared into the cave from every entrance. The river had been a mere prologue. Now the sea had come. The waves were as high as the ceiling. In an instant, the atmosphere of the cavern turned to brittle ice. Everything turned white. Toc Derenoth's rebreather struggled to draw oxygen. Cold sharp as the void stabbed his lungs.

The waves raced towards the centre of the chamber. There was no exit, and only seconds before the cave became a new hypercoolant reservoir. He leapt from the slab and ran back towards the ramps. He splashed through pools of hypercoolant. The ceramite of his boots cracked. He took three steps up, and there was another rush of liquid from the main valve. He was trapped. He stopped. The wall of hypercoolant filling the chamber pushed the air ahead of it, and a hurricane of ice pummelled him from all sides. The vox filled with the end of his brothers. Their agony was brief, and it was savage. They were frozen and smashed, drowned and crushed. They disappeared forever beneath the waves.

No recourse. No choices. But he fought all the same. Toc Derenoth ran to meet the hypercoolant flowing down the ramp. Just before it reached him, he jumped sideways. The edges of the stone bridge were uneven. He punched his fist through the rock and dangled over the abyss. The silver spilled over the edge and rained onto him. His armour's servo-motors stuttered. His coordination faltered. His right hand twitched and tried to release its grip on the ramp. A scythe of cold cut into him. His senses shut down in an effort to protect his consciousness. And still the scythe cut deep. He was not submerged in the flood, yet existence shrank to pain and silver.

The vox was silent. His brothers were dead.

His grip was slipping. Toc Derenoth looked down. The darkness below was more than a relief from the silver. It was a welcome. It was home. The hypercoolant was the tool of the Ultramarines, and the silver was the false illumination of bad faith and blind obedience. The darkness reached for him. It was as real a presence as the hypercoolant. As he hung from the final threads of awareness, the dark appeared to rise towards him. It unfurled tendrils, enraged by the fall of the silver. He saw how right Kurtha Sedd was to guide Fifth Company downwards, to take them towards the dark. Their weapon was down there.

The roar of the hypercoolant flood continued. The greater cataract plunged over the edge of the floor between the ramps. The rain on Toc Derenoth diminished,

the flow from the valve cutting off. It had done its work, though. He was sliding towards a sus-an membrane coma. If the rain came again, it would kill him.

He would not grant the Ultramarines that victory. He would risk the fall into the darkness. If he died, it would be in the embrace of the truth. He whispered a prayer to the gods, and let go.

A powerful grip seized his wrists, arresting his fall. He looked up, squinting through anger and pain. A shape in blue armour held him. It was flanked by other figures. The Ultramarine hauled him up, away from the darkness, into the light and shame of capture.

FIVE

Acceptable losses

Aethon

Disgrace

The traces of the battle for the command nexus reached Kurtha Sedd. The further down he led the rest of Fifth Company, the more broken the vox-transmissions became. He heard enough to guess at its progress. Explosions, muted by distance, followed the Word Bearers down the shafts and tunnels.

Then came an echo that did not fade. It built and built. It was a pursuit. Less than a minute after it began, all vox-traffic from Rhaalahn, Ulughar and Thulain squads ceased. The last voices he heard were unable to form words.

Kurtha Sedd looked back up. The company was in another access shaft that passed between major levels of the arcology network. It was a dim cylinder stretching overhead for more than a hundred metres, and there was at least that far to go before reaching its landing. The iron staircase that spiralled along the shaft vibrated with approaching thunder. Dust fell from the walls.

Kurtha Sedd cursed the prospect of delay. He scanned the shaft. A few metres further down, a grille covered the access to a ventilation network. It was wide enough for a legionary to enter, and just barely for Sor Gharax to be dragged inside. He ran down the steps and tore the grille away. No command was needed. Every warrior present knew catastrophe breathed down their necks. He stood aside as his brothers struggled to get the crippled Dreadnought into the conduit. Kurtha Sedd was the last to take shelter. He gazed upwards, challenging the fates. Would judgement find him here, in so meaningless a moment? It would

not. It could not.

As the last of the Word Bearers entered the conduit, the hypercoolant burst into the shaft from the uppermost entrance. Silver cold filled space. It fell, roaring and hissing. Kurtha Sedd glared at it, then followed his brothers into the shelter. He stayed as close to the mouth of the passage as he dared. As the hypercoolant thundered past, the cold was a solid wall. It slammed through his armour's insulation. His flesh experienced a form of pain it had not known in decades.

'Brothers,' he shouted over the roar, 'that cold is the touch of a dead faith. The loyalists reach for us, and we elude their grasp. They strike and miss. We will strike and kill.'

The hypercoolant fell for several minutes more. It turned the iron of the staircase brittle, then carried all the steps away with a resounding crash. At last, the cataract tapered. Kurtha Sedd advanced to the lip of the conduit and looked down. He gazed at the final streams of deathly silver. The lumen globes in the shaft had been destroyed, and the only illumination now leaked in from access points that had escaped the flood. 'Look,' Kurtha Sedd ordered. 'The darkness is stronger. That is the achievement of the enemy. He turns more and more of his world over to us.'

It did seem that the darkness had devoured the silver. A blow had passed, and fallen into the void.

Kaeloq was crouched beside him, looking where he pointed. Crystals fell past them, circling and twinkling feebly before vanishing into the rising dark.

'We can't get down this way,' Kaeloq said.

He was right. With the stairs gone, the shaft was smooth. Kurtha Sedd grunted. 'There,' he said, 'is the extent of the Ultramarines' victory. A delay.'

After a hesitation, Kaeloq asked, 'With respect, Chaplain, is that the full extent?'

Kurtha Sedd turned around, blocking the exit to the shaft, forcing Kaeloq to step back. The other legionaries watched. 'Justify your question,' he said. He placed his hand on the hilt of his crozius. He was putting Kaeloq on notice. The path before them was a clear one. To question him was to question the destiny determined by the gods themselves. From the moment of the defeat on the surface of Calth, the way forward had been revealed to him. It was necessary that his brothers understand his words were to be taken as absolute. All his brothers' doubts should have been answered when he spoke to them in the ruins of the archive.

Kaeloq crouched a bit lower. He spread his hands. He was not challenging his

Chaplain. He still asked his question. ‘We have lost contact with our brothers. It is hard not to assume the worst.’

‘They have failed,’ said Kurtha Sedd. ‘That is clear. And they have paid the price of failure. Their losses are not our defeat.’

‘Don’t the Ultramarines now control a command nexus?’ Vor Raennag asked.

Kurtha Sedd shrugged. ‘Perhaps. For all the good it will do them in the long run. They took it, and what did they do? Flood their vaults with hypercoolant. The damage that has caused will not be limited to our brothers and a staircase. They are destroying their own territory to reach us. And meanwhile, we have gained time. We have descended further. They are standing still. We are advancing.’

‘You knew our squads were going to their doom?’ Kaeloq sounded more awed than accusatory.

‘I did not know. It was a distinct possibility. Whether the Ultramarines would have looked for us or not, they were occupied in that battle. That is what matters: to find what waits for us, and us alone, in the depths. To that end, no sacrifice is too much. Nothing is excessive. Whatever is asked of us is nothing less than necessary.’

He turned away once more. He had said his piece, and it fell to the company to obey. He looked down. The pull of the dark was strong, and growing stronger. The nature of his goal was as obscure as ever, but his certainty that he was following a divinely ordained trajectory was adamant. The fall before him was inviting. It would be easy to step forwards and fly towards his destiny. He could almost believe he would survive the landing, borne up by the inevitability of fate.

He resisted the urge. His duty was to find the way, and a suicidal leap was not the way. He resented the detour he now faced. The company would have to find a new route down. So be it. He would do what must be done.

He rested for a moment in the certitude of his goal and his course of action, holding the other doubts at bay. The gods were speaking to him directly, and he had trust in the gods. It was their other intermediaries he doubted. Lorgar had told him the Emperor watched him. That had been a lie. Kor Phaeron and Erebus had said nothing of this path. When he had a chance, he would perform the ritual and speak to his superiors. Kaeloq had turned to him for answers, and he had given them. He wanted answers in his turn.

He wanted to dispel thoughts of abandonment. Of betrayal. But after that first and greatest betrayal in Monarchia, none were impossible.

Only the dark was true. And as he gazed into it, regretful that he could not fly to it, it seemed to rise to him. He frowned. The dark below was growing thicker. It was closer to him, in spirit and in space. It was a promise, a reality and an inspiration. It had swallowed the silver, taken the light.

‘The Ultramarines think they have drowned us,’ he said. He was thinking aloud, but the inspiration was so strong, he shared it with the company. ‘I believe they will try to pursue their advantage. I believe we should meet them. I believe our darkness should swallow their light.’

He walked back to his brothers, energised. They must still go down, but if the gods had decreed a pause, then he would pause, and the Fifth Assault Company would wait with open jaws for what enemy might come. He would not wait long. Just long enough to bite hard, and bleed the XIII Legion just a little bit more.

He was sure the shadows were flowing, darkness streaming upwards in answer to the cold silver’s descent.

His captors had taken his weapons, chained his arms and hung him from the cavern ceiling. They wrapped more chains around his legs, holding them together and weighing him down even further. He was weak from his wounds. Toc Derenoth could do nothing. His sole victory was remaining conscious.

They had taken him into the command nexus. This cave was empty of equipment beyond a few steel canisters and a cache of construction and repair gear, from which the Ultramarines had taken the chains. Three other Word Bearers had survived the hypercoolant flood and were chained as Toc Derenoth was. Two were from Ulughar Squad: Khuzhun and Rethaz Qann. The armour markings of the third identified him as a brother of Hurundath Squad, Seventh Assault Company, also of the Chapter of the Third Hand. His name was Gherak Haxx. They were all badly wounded. Their armour was deeply scored, and in patches had shattered completely. Khuzhun had lost his helm. They were conscious. Their heads turned to follow the movements of their captors.

The Ultramarines said nothing. When they had finished binding the prisoners, two of them moved back a few steps. They surrounded the captives and trained their bolters on them. The others stood near the entrance in the far wall. There they waited.

A few minutes later, an Ultramarines captain strode into the cavern. His shorn skull was scarred. He glared with the intensity of death incarnate. He faced the prisoners, then turned on his men with a barely diminished fury. ‘What do you think you’re doing?’ he demanded.

‘Taking prisoners,’ one answered. ‘These were the only survivors.’

‘Taking prisoners to what end? What were you going to do? Ask them why they betrayed us and the Imperium? Get them to beg forgiveness?’

There was no answer.

The captain marched over to the prisoners. He raised his bolt pistol to Toc Derenoth’s head. ‘What will we learn from them? Nothing. Will they speak? Of course not.’ He snorted. ‘And that’s assuming they know anything. I’d be surprised if they even know the locations of their other units.’ He turned to Toc Derenoth. ‘Isn’t that right, traitor?’

Toc Derenoth wished they had removed his helm. Then he would have the satisfaction of spitting in the Ultramarine’s face. He contented himself with a promise. Mentally, he prayed to the gods, offering them a final act of loyalty. He thought of the waiting dark, and how it had begun to move in the depths of the chasm between the ramps. He gave thanks for the vision of his Chaplain leading Fifth Company to a destiny inconceivable to these pathetic slaves of the Emperor. He said, ‘What I know is beyond your understanding. What Kurtha Sedd will visit upon you will be beyond your comprehension.’

The Ultramarines captain was motionless. His eyes widened when Toc Derenoth spoke the Chaplain’s name. Seconds passed. The execution Toc Derenoth expected did not occur. At last, the captain said, ‘Kurtha Sedd. You belong to the same company as Kurtha Sedd?’

‘I do.’

The captain muttered a curse. He lowered the pistol, though he did not mag-lock it. He whirled away from Toc Derenoth. He stalked back and forth across the width of the chamber. His legionaries stirred, obviously puzzled. After crossing the cavern several times, he stopped before the right-hand wall. He paused, then slammed his gauntleted fist into the stone, punching a small crater into the wall. ‘Take them down,’ he said.

‘Brother-captain?’ one of the guards asked.

‘I said take them down. Unchain them.’

He came back to Toc Derenoth. ‘I once owed a great debt to Kurtha Sedd. What happened on Calth these last days has cancelled it. But...’ He grimaced. ‘But I believe in honour, even if the Seventeenth Legion has abandoned all notion of it. You will return to Kurtha Sedd. Tell him you carry a message from Steloc Aethon. Tell him he has a choice. Tell him if he and the men under his command surrender, they will be granted a swift, honourable execution. That is far more than any of you deserve, but I will do in this in memory of the brotherhood we

once shared.'

'Captain...' a sergeant in Terminator plate began.

Aethon walked away from the prisoners. The guards moved forwards uncertainly. 'What?' Aethon snapped.

'Are you serious?'

'I am.' He glanced back at the guards. 'Do as I said,' he told them.

'Honour does not require you to do this,' the sergeant insisted.

'Perhaps not. But the decision is mine.'

'It is a decision that affects all of us.'

'And what will be the consequences of sending these four wretches back to Kurtha Sedd?' Aethon demanded. 'What vital information about us do they possess? How will they shift the balance of power? How will they harm our position?'

'They are four warriors we will have to fight again.'

Aethon brushed off the objection. 'A risk we can take.'

'But why take it?' another of the Ultramarines burst out. 'I don't understand.'

Pain flashed across the anger in Aethon's face. 'It may be more than he would offer me now, but I will give Kurtha Sedd this chance. There is too much in our past for me to ignore, Envixus. If he will choose this way to end the war, I will let him. I hope he will.'

'You can't *believe* he will.'

'I don't know.' Aethon's voice dropped with the exhaustion of despair. But when he spoke again, the determination and the wrath were strong once more. 'Whatever fate he chooses, I want Kurtha Sedd to know I am here.' He pointed at Toc Derenth. 'Speak my name. If you do nothing else in your miserable existence, do this thing. Tell him I am here. Tell him I am looking for him.' To Envixus he said, 'He won't be able to ignore me any more than I can him. We will draw him out.'

Envixus shook his head. 'Theoretical – these are personal decisions, not tactical ones.'

'Practical – the enemy will be forced to respond. The initiative is ours. Now send them on their way.' Aethon left the cavern before Envixus could speak again.

The sergeant grimaced, but nodded to the guards.

The chains came off.

They were taken downwards through the tunnels by a squad of Ultramarines.

Five of the enemy, headed by an acting sergeant named Dardanus. As they descended, the darkness grew stronger. Toc Derenoth had the impression of a living thing pooling at his feet.

The enemy saw it too. 'What bewitchment is this?' Dardanus demanded.

With half an ear, Toc Derenoth listened to the Ultramarines try to divine the meaning of the rising tide of shadows. They tried and failed to rationalise it. Khuzhun, walking ahead under the guard of the legionary called Envixus, laughed at them. Dardanus halted. He closed with Khuzhun. 'You have something to say, Colchisian?'

And Khuzhun did. He called the Ultramarines frightened children. He boasted of the power of the Word. But he didn't know what was happening. Not really. None of them did. Toc Derenoth felt the touch of the sacred dark that had looked at him when he dangled over the abyss. Something of what had stirred below had risen. It exhilarated the Word Bearers as much as it disturbed the Ultramarines.

The further down they went, the deeper the dark became. It did not fill the tunnels, not yet, but Toc Derenoth sensed the promise of a great power. One that would answer the call of a prophet.

His faith in Kurtha Sedd soared.

The column came to another sudden halt. The Ultramarines were on high alert. They were expecting an attack. They must have detected movement. Toc Derenoth's lips pulled back in a grin. His brothers were near. They had not been abandoned by Kurtha Sedd.

'In here.' The loyalist Tibor shoved Gherak Haxx into a narrow cavern. The rest of the squad followed. The Ultramarines bracketed the entrance with their guns. The legionary with the heavy bolter stood at the rear.

Khuzhun murmured, 'I can smell your fear...' He whispered more taunts until Dardanus hammered Khuzhun unconscious with the grip of his bolt pistol.

Toc Derenoth barely noticed. He was seized by an even greater consciousness of the darkness. It suffused the cavern, as if it had been flowing to this destination above all others. Shadows deeper than the absence of light coated his armour. They were strong. They concealed whispers and the laughter of the void.

Beyond the cavern entrance came the sound of marching boots. Toc Derenoth's brothers were passing by in strength. He could call out. The loyalists would kill him, but they would be annihilated. But he felt no need to sacrifice himself. He felt no frustration, but anticipation. The other prisoners must have felt the same. They too were silent.

The darkness rippled, and what it concealed moved. Word Bearers stepped forwards in silence from the rear of the cavern. Toc Derenoth saw them. The Ultramarines did not. They surrounded the loyalists. They struck with blades. Toc Derenoth shook with silent, ecstatic laughter. He beheld art. He saw knives slide through the seams of armour as though the ceramite had no more substance than a mirage. And because art must have an audience, Dardanus realised what was happening at precisely the moment it was too late for him to act.

Blood everywhere, crimson in the dark. Throats slashed. Skulls pierced from side to side. The Word Bearers cut the squad down in seconds. Dardanus fired, and Toc Derenoth snarled as he saw two of the assassins killed. He charged forwards with the rest to tear the sergeant apart.

But then the Chaplain's voice filled the dark. 'Alive,' he said. 'I want the last of them alive.'

The darkness receded. It had answered his call, but Kurtha Sedd had not been its master, at least not at a conscious level. There was a mystery and a promise here to be pursued. But first there was the prisoner. Dardanus, he learned. An acting sergeant. Kurtha Sedd looked at him, still defiant though surrounded by the corpses of his squad. Of course he was defiant. A simple-minded reaction typical of a Legion that could not think for itself.

Kurtha Sedd was disappointed the Ultramarines had sent so few of their warriors to the slaughter. But perhaps this too was fate. The gods keeping the delay brief before the continued descent.

And what if they had come in force? he thought. *We must keep moving. We must answer the call of the depths.*

Toc Derenoth was speaking. 'They are led by a captain. He gave his name as Steloc Aethon.'

Aethon.

Kurtha Sedd grunted from the blow. He forced the sound into a chuckle. 'The Honoured, of course. Aethon, my old friend.' He made himself sound eager and amused. 'It is I who am honoured. Honoured to have lost so many of my kindred – not to any warrior of Ultramar, but to Steloc Aethon – the noble son of a doomed world. A world with an ignoble end.' He kept speaking, gloating, teaching. He spoke for the benefit of his brothers, and for the despair of Dardanus. And he spoke to get ahead of his own thoughts.

Toc Derenoth delivered Aethon's message.

The message full of sanctimony and delusions of honour.

A tremor rumbled in the depths. The laughter of the gods at the absurdity of Aethon's request.

'You hear that, Ultramarine?' Kurtha Sedd snarled. 'That is the sound of your world – your very existence – collapsing about you.' But he felt a collapse too. He raged ahead of it, held aloft by words of fury. He would not, though, be able to hold his thoughts at bay much longer.

And then he was plunging his knife into the Ultramarine's stomach. Deep, all the way to the spine, and then a savage, gutting rip. 'Bring your captain to me, Dardanus,' he hissed. 'Bring me Steloc Aethon of the Honoured Nineteenth.'

Words that he both meant and denied, his soul divided. He kept the division from the enemy and from his men. He left Dardanus at the edge of death and stormed out of the cavern. He had to go deeper. Where the darkness would give him the strength to confront his thoughts. And the means to prepare for the enemy he had summoned.

Down. They found a new route. It was a fissure that descended through a gorge formed from a series of caverns that had fallen in on each other. The descent was difficult. Manoeuvring Sor Gharax down it was painful, but possible. That possibility alone was confirmation of the truth of this path. The drop had been within the limits of what an armoured, genhanced body could take. Just. That perfection was another sign: speeding the Word Bearers towards the truth, while still keeping them alive.

So many signs. So many omens. Aethon was one of them. Staring into the darkness as the company worked its way further down the gorge, Kurtha Sedd faced the patterns that were forming. And he faced his soul. Aethon. There could be no coincidences of this sort. Certainty and doubt in equal measure collided. Fate required that Aethon be his opponent.

So the past kept coming for him. No matter how much he destroyed of all the lies that had warped the true path of the Word Bearers, he still could not shed its burden. He should rejoice that Aethon was here. After the Emperor's betrayal, after the revelation that Lorgar's words to him had not been true, it was Aethon's role in Monarchia that had stabbed most deeply. Aethon had taken part in the censure without question. He had turned his back on comradeship forged in the fires of the Great Crusade. He had turned his back on the memory of Melior-Tertia.

Kurtha Sedd remembered. He remembered the ice world overrun by orks. He remembered Aethon, wounded and dazed by a tremendous blast, floundering

through suddenly boiling water. He remembered a greenskin chieftain, so heavily armoured it was a walking hill of metal and killsaws, closing with Aethon and raising its blades for the death blow. And he remembered hurling himself between the greenskin and his friend. He didn't know if there were other Ultramarines within range to help. All he saw was a brother brought low. He smashed the killsaws aside with his crozius. And when Aethon's brother legionary Urcus arrived to knock the greenskin down, Kurtha Sedd killed it. While Urcus saw to Aethon, Kurtha Sedd stood over them, defying the closing ranks of orks. His subsequent memories were of struggle, of fire, of violence and of blood. And of a victory against all odds made possible by the collective will of comradeship. At the end, standing in the midst of ork bodies beyond counting, barely keeping upright from the wounds, he and Aethon had laughed together. There had been losses that day, but it had also been a good one.

A good day for memory.

And Aethon had forgotten. He had revealed himself to be a tool of the lie. A willing one? An unthinking one? Kurtha Sedd hadn't known until now. He had not spoken to the Ultramarine since Monarchia. But Aethon's offered terms were telling. Aethon was willing *and* unthinking. He no doubt believed himself to be doing the honourable thing. He was blind, and complacent in his blindness.

And so now, after forty-four years, it was time for Kurtha Sedd to avenge the personal betrayal, and doing so was also his duty to the Legion. Here in the depths of Calth, a great revelation called to him, and he was enjoined to destroy the enemy whose fall would have more meaning for him than for any other Word Bearer. The symmetry had a sublime perfection. In the discovery of a new truth, he would erase the day of the worst lie.

There could be no greater proof of the hand of the gods in his fate. Yet he did not rejoice. He could not, because there were still doubts. Lorgar had said the Emperor watched him, and the Emperor did not. That falsehood ate at the roots of his faith. He believed in the gods of Chaos. He had seen their handiwork again and again. Yet despite what he had preached to his battle-brothers, he was not sure he believed in his own worthiness. He did not doubt the gods. He doubted himself.

He did not want to kill Aethon.

The burdens pressed down harder. They were enveloping cloaks of lead, and they smothered. They were the weight of the millions of tonnes of rock between his head and the surface, and they crushed. He thought he had shed the past, but it had returned in fury. He thought he had cut away the hold of old friendships,

of an old life.

He was wrong.

He thought, *I am my past. I am the shape it has moulded.*

With that admission, he realised what he must do. So he prayed to the darkness.
He prayed for the strength to face the burdens.

To turn to what defined him, to what most pained him, and to burn it away.

Just beyond reach, in the shadows his imagination could not give form, a dream was born. A dream of incendiary liberation.

PART TWO

THE BURDEN
OF LOYALTY

SIX

Erosion Song Revival

They saw the scouting party before they could pull back. The Word Bearers pursued.

‘Silence them!’ Kurtha Sedd shouted. They might have already sent the alert. He hoped the Ultramarines vox was as unreliable as Fifth Company’s.

The Ultramarines retreated, laying down heavy covering fire. A good sign, Kurtha Sedd thought. It was important to them to escape and report. He jinked left and right, making himself a difficult target. A shell careened off the side of his helm. The shriek of the impact was deafening. He snarled and fired back.

The tunnel curved sharply to the left. The foes lost sight of each other.

‘Cease fire,’ Kurtha Sedd ordered. ‘Conserve your ammunition.’

The Ultramarines kept shooting, their bolter rounds now pounding craters into the left-hand wall. Kurtha Sedd slowed his pursuit just enough to avoid running back into the barrage, waiting for the tunnel to straighten again.

At the end of the curve, he found a vast cavern. It was a dining hall. Rows of long tables stretched across its width. Thousands of mortals could have fed here, though the space had not been used in a long time. The pillars were cracked. The tables were covered with dust that had fallen from the fissured ceiling. This far down in the arcologies, the Word Bearers were reaching zones that had seen little activity in centuries or more. The walls and periphery of the ceiling were covered by massive crystal formations. They reflected and refracted the few

utility lumen globes, helm lights and muzzle flashes. The room coruscated with the glare of war.

The exit at the far end was blocked by rubble. The corridor beyond was gone. The Ultramarines were trapped. They used pillars as cover and poured their fire into the entrance.

Kurtha Sedd roared and plunged through the fire. A hard blow tried to stop him. It failed. Behind him, his brothers spread out into the room. In the tunnel, there had been space for only two legionaries to move abreast. There were only five Ultramarines, but the Word Bearers had been unable to use their greater numbers. Now they could. The company formed a line of death almost as wide as the room.

The line advanced. The targets were clear. Bolt-shells punched into the pillars. The Ultramarines had marked their positions while they were trapped in the doorway. Now it was the Word Bearers who had precise locations to shoot at, while the enemy had too many targets.

The Ultramarines used the seconds they had left to concentrate their assault on Kurtha Sedd. He allowed his brothers to move ahead of him. He had led the charge here. There was nothing to be gained by inviting his destruction. He had duties that transcended the events in this hall.

He stepped back behind Var Rhuthag. Shells pummelled the legionary. He walked four more paces, returning fire all the while, and then he fell, blood spraying from the fist-sized holes in his helm. He was avenged in the next seconds. A pillar on the right disintegrated, and dozens of bolt-shells found the Ultramarine behind it. On the left, two frag grenades landed together behind another pillar. They blasted a son of Guilliman out from his cover. One of his legs dragged. He stumbled towards the next pillar, spraying his bolter in a wide arc. He wasn't permitted to cross more than a few metres. He collapsed with a crash, smashing through the surface of one of the tables.

Chanting their praise of the dark, the Word Bearers marched across the hall. The Ultramarines were dead before Fifth Company had reached the halfway mark. They had lost three of their own number.

The echoes of the battle faded. The sounds of gunfire, though, continued. They were sporadic, short bursts. While the bodies were stripped of supplies, Kurtha Sedd went to the blocked doorway. Kaeloq and Toc Derenoth accompanied him. They crunched over a litter of crystal fragments. Light in the hall was now a sprinkle of jagged points. Toc Derenoth still moved with difficulty, but his body had made some progress in healing over the course of the last few days. He had

been working even harder to redeem himself. Kurtha Sedd did not discourage his attempts. His willingness to sacrifice himself for the Chaplain might be needed.

Kurtha Sedd punched the rubble. 'Get us through this,' he said. The shots were coming from the other side.

Kaeloq prepared another demolition charge. A single blast was all it took. The collapse was a small one. Kurtha Sedd led the way through. The tunnel beyond was wide and sloped down sharply. Twenty metres down, another group of Ultramarines had assembled a barricade of storage units. There were three of them. They exchanged fire with two Word Bearers further down the slope, who had no shelter and were attempting to charge the uphill position. Two bodies in crimson armour lay on the corridor floor.

Rations spilled out of the ruptured containers. Cowering behind the Ultramarines were twenty civilians. They screamed when they saw Kurtha Sedd's legionaries. The Ultramarines whirled, reversing fire. The Word Bearers crashed into them with the force of a battering ram. Kurtha Sedd slammed his crozius against the side of one warrior's head and fired his plasma pistol into the enemy's flank, melting away armour and muscle and bone. The kill was not a clean one. It was dragged out. Which was what he wanted.

The Ultramarine lost the use of his right side. He lurched at Kurtha Sedd, agony hissing from his helm grille. Kurtha Sedd brought the crozius in from his left and drove it through the Ultramarine's exposed ribcage, crushing the hearts. The enemy fell at his feet. Blood coated the head of the crozius and ran down the shaft.

When the other two Ultramarines had been overwhelmed, the Word Bearers butchered the civilians. They struck with a sadism born of frustration. The air was filled with a miasma of anger. The slaughter did little to dispel it. Nor did the arrival of the two new legionaries.

They were from the Third Hand's Tenth Company. As far as they knew, they were all that remained of it. Their armour was heavily scarred. They had entered the arcologies at close to squad strength, but one skirmish after another had chipped away at them.

'Where were you heading?' Kurtha Sedd asked them.

'Nowhere,' the one called Versithis answered. 'We've been fighting the forces we could, retreating from the ones we could not. Battle chose our route.'

'Have you seen other brothers of our Legion?'

'A few,' said Ruath Dhur. 'They're dead now.' His voice was filled with resentment. He had removed his helm, and his face was raw and shining from

severe burns. The resentment was in his eyes too when he looked at Kurtha Sedd.

‘Everything has collapsed,’ Versithis said. He sounded more exhausted than angry, more hopeless than challenging. ‘We’re scattered remains running through a maze, and our battles are about nothing except survival.’ He sighed. ‘We’re still fighting, but the war has ended.’

‘Be careful, brother,’ Kurtha Sedd warned.

‘Where is our purpose?’ Versithis sounded as if he wanted an answer, but did not believe he would receive one. ‘We may have taken the surface away from the Thirteenth Legion, but we’ve been thrown away underground.’

‘We have much to do yet,’ said Kurtha Sedd. ‘I intend to complete our mission before the fleet returns.’

Instead of asking what that mission was, as Kurtha Sedd had intended, Ruath Dhur said, ‘It isn’t coming back.’

‘The Legion did what it could here,’ said Versithis. ‘There is no reason to return.’

‘Not for us,’ Ruath Dhur muttered.

‘Is that the extent of your faith?’ said Kurtha Sedd. ‘We are here for a reason. And it will be glorious.’

‘What reason, Chaplain?’ Gherak Haxx said. He was standing just to Kurtha Sedd’s right. ‘You have promised us a great discovery, but when? Where? There has been no sign of it.’

Kurtha Sedd thought about executing Gherak Haxx. He decided not to. A show of patience now would be more useful than what might be perceived as frustrated violence. Gherak Haxx was not the only legionary to hold such views. The fabric of Kurtha Sedd’s company was fraying. The descent was starting to resemble Versithis and Ruath Dhur’s pointless journey. Aethon was searching for them, and with the capture of the command nexus, he had established at least rudimentary control of the regions higher up. The struggle had become death by slow attrition. Every so often, as now, Fifth Company found other Word Bearers to swell the ranks. But the losses were more frequent. If the situation continued, Kurtha Sedd’s force would eventually be reduced to nothing.

He was not alone in foreseeing the end. The discontent was growing stronger. He would not give it a chance to result in rebellion. But only a few days ago, he would not have had to prepare for such an eventuality.

‘We will receive a sign,’ he told Gherak Haxx, raising his voice so the entire company heard. ‘We will receive a sign,’ he repeated. ‘We are simply not deep

enough yet.’ He looked at the pile of butchered human refugees. ‘We have not done enough.’

Still they went deeper. More and more of the caves were undeveloped. The routes became more difficult, and they had to turn away from some promisingly direct descents because of the burden of Sor Gharax. The Dreadnought was a source of increasing resentment, though no one yet suggested abandoning him.

Distorted by the twists of rock, the sound reached Kurtha Sedd’s ears first as a sibilant rustle. He thought he might be hearing an underground stream. After a few minutes, the hiss resolved itself into syllables.

Chanting.

‘Would that be our sign, Brother-Chaplain?’ Kaeloq asked.

No, Kurtha Sedd almost said. He was looking for something beyond the human, and those were mortal tongues he heard. But the sinuosity of the chant called him, and gave him hope.

The company moved through a long tunnel that doubled back on itself with a perversity that felt like a ritual. Only helm lights pierced the darkness. Then a glow appeared. It wavered and flickered. It seemed to dance. It seemed to whisper.

The cave the cultists were gathered in was so low, the plume of Kurtha Sedd’s helm brushed against the ceiling. There were close to a hundred humans here. The Chaplain was astounded to see so many, this far down. They were standing in a circle. Their clothes, a mix of robes and patchy leather-and-steel armour, were ragged. Many were injured, though some of the fresh wounds were self-inflicted runes carved into forehead, cheek, arm and chest. In the centre of the floor, an eight-pointed star had been painted in blood. Torches made from cloth wrapped around human bone stood at each point.

The bodies of civilians had been torn apart and spread around the periphery of the star. The air was thick with the stench of human tallow and spilled vitae. Some of the bodies looked as if they had been devoured, and many of the cultists had blood around their mouths. They swayed as they chanted, and the words seemed to sway as well, entwining and disappearing into each other. Meaning without language emerged from sound, and then shaped sound. The noise was guttural, fluid and clawed. It was the song of reality unravelling, peeling back to reveal the slaving hunger in the heart of the universe.

The cultists stopped chanting when Kurtha Sedd entered the cavern, but the song took a second too long to fade away. The people turned to look at him. As

one, they fell to their knees. They abased their foreheads against the floor. They shouted a cacophony of prayers of thanks. A woman whose head was so carved with runes that her skull showed through in patches crawled towards Kurtha Sedd. She reached up to touch the bloody head of his crozius.

‘Lord Chaplain,’ she said. Her voice was a dusty, greasy croak. ‘You have heard us. You have come to lead us.’

The surprise of finding the congregation took Kurtha Sedd back to Khur. The memory of his first true slaughter, the act that still awaited judgement, was never far from the surface of his mind. He had found a scene of worship on a day when all such things must end. Now he found one where no such thing could be. As the cultists raised their heads to gaze upon him as they would a divine emissary, he felt a spasm of disgust. These people were vermin. Their loyalty to the old gods had nothing to do with a fidelity to truth. There was no philosophy here, only blind obedience. They were meat that walked. Nothing more.

Their turn to him repulsed him and made him uneasy. The will of the gods remained elusive to him. The dark and the depths pulled him with ever more strength, but the goal was unknown, elusive, frustrating. And he had taken no concrete steps to kill Aethon. He told himself he needed to reach the secret in the dark first, to have the means of regaining the initiative in the upper levels of the arcologies. But he doubted his motivations and his decisions.

He recoiled from the cultists’ worship. He had an impulse, born of doubt and old pain, to kill everyone in the room. He resisted. The cultists were loyal, their faith real. If they wanted to be led, he would lead them. They would have their use. Marching ahead of Fifth Company, they could absorb enemy fire.

At the thought, a cold finger touched his heart. Were the cultists the secret he had come to find? Were they his weapon to turn against Aethon? There would be a dark symmetry to his life if that were the case.

But no, he thought. His destiny would not rest on such sad irony. The pull was still strong. The secret, the gift, was deeper yet.

‘Yes,’ he said to the woman. ‘Yes,’ he repeated to all the cultists. ‘You have prayed and we have answered. We will lead you on a journey commanded by the gods.’ Even though what he said was true, it felt like a lie. He was not worthy. His faith in the gods was not enough. There were too many doubts, too many burdens holding him down.

His voice was strong, though. It was sure. And the cultists rejoiced.

When the tumult died again, Sor Gharax’s incoherent raving became louder for a moment. The woman looked past Kurtha Sedd at the company behind him. Her

eyes widened. ‘One of the Annunake travels with you.’ She used the Colchisian word. *Judge of Hell*.

Kurtha Sedd nodded. ‘We travel with him,’ he corrected. ‘He has sustained severe damage.’

‘We can revive him.’

Kurtha Sedd looked down at her. ‘What did you say?’

The woman’s name was Khrothis. She and several other cultists had served on the *Infidus Imperator* as part of the maintenance and repair brigades. They had all had experience with the Contemptor Dreadnoughts. She assured Kurtha Sedd they had the skills to make Sor Gharax combat-ready again.

‘And what of the equipment?’ he asked.

‘We have that too.’

The cavern where Fifth Company had found the cultists turned out to be one of several in close proximity to each other that they had taken over. Two were part of the arcology network, so far down that they had become permanent habitations, housing workers whose duties were the maintenance of the otherwise empty zone of developed caverns. Those residents had barely been aware of the war on the surface of Calth until it had come to them. The cultists had massacred them and then, having come this far, ceased their travels.

‘We must have sensed that you were coming,’ Khrothis said as she guided the Word Bearers through passageways slick with blood. Lumen globes pulsed, casting a shifting, uneasy light over the runes painted in vitae on the walls. ‘We felt that we must tarry here.’

‘Have you seen any of the loyalists?’

‘The sounds of battles have travelled to us. But we have seen none.’

Good. Aethon’s search parties would find Fifth Company again soon enough, or perhaps it would be a splinter of Ultramarines still adrift in the endless web of caves. But there might be time enough to get the Bull on his feet once more. With Sor Gharax in the fight, new possibilities would open for Kurtha Sedd. Nothing would change his first duty, but an idea was taking shape, one still too amorphous to articulate, that would help him with a more tormenting task.

Khrothis brought them to a cave where the cultists had stored their equipment. It appeared to have been a warehouse, though it had been emptied of almost all the workers’ supplies. The cultists had managed to salvage a surprising number of their tools, and they had scavenged quite a bit from the residents as well.

‘We can tap into the arcology’s power network,’ Khrothis said. ‘And we have

what we need. Venerable Sor Gharax will walk again.’ She looked up at Kurtha Sedd, her eyes alight with purpose and fanaticism. ‘How glorious,’ she said, ‘to feel the hands of the gods so directly. We were brought here to wait for you, and now our purpose is clear.’

‘Indeed.’ She might well be correct. What mattered was that she and her comrades serve Kurtha Sedd’s purpose.

The Word Bearers set up as close to a defensive perimeter as the immediate geography permitted. They guarded the cave where the attempted resurrection would occur. They blocked the tunnels leading to it. Lines of sight were bad, but they would hear anyone approaching.

The ritual took hours. The cultists swarmed over the Dreadnought. Sor Gharax was placed in a standing position in the warehouse, at the centre of another star. More civilian corpses were used to paint the symbol, but two cultists also presented themselves as sacrifices. While their fellows turned plasma cutters to the damaged armour and set about re-soldering ruptured circuitry, repairing the physical damage, the volunteers were bled out on the star rune. Their screams were agonised, and they were ecstatic. They gave themselves freely in the belief that their pain would fuel the spirit of the Bull, and give it the strength to move the gargantuan body once more.

Kurtha Sedd watched the process from the entrance to the chamber. The fusion of the religious and the practical became a violent dance of jerking shadow and searing light. Dozens of cultists gathered around Sor Gharax. The hissing of their chanting was indistinguishable from the sounds of the tools. Kurtha Sedd knew the ritual was superfluous. Prayer had no bearing on the very material damage that needed repair. But his knowledge of the mechanism that gave the Dreadnoughts their immortality was limited. And here, the people who possessed that knowledge were also committed to the spiritual component to the point of giving up their lives.

And was he not meant to be the speaker for the gods to Fifth Company? Why should he question the workings of the miraculous?

The work on Sor Gharax’s looming bulk became more frantic. The shadows of the workers jerked and twitched like black flame. The chanting grew in power, drowning out the shrieks of the dying, mutilated sacrifices. The lumen globes hanging from the cavern ceiling dimmed amber, then grey. The darkness was called, and the darkness answered. The ceremony mesmerised Kurtha Sedd. He absorbed the lesson. He learned. He hoped.

The rhythms built. The cultists chanted faster. The lights flashed brighter, only

to be swallowed by a dark so thick it had fangs. The sound was a pulsing hiss, reaching out of the cave to bring its truth to the world. Beneath the hiss, moving around and above the beats of the leprous song, came the voice of Sor Gharax. The rage, the pain and the madness were undiminished. They became elemental in their force. They could reshape reality. They were the voice of the insanity of war.

Kurtha Sedd felt the stirrings of awe. His lips pulled back into the semblance of a smile. He felt as if he were standing against a psychic wind, one that was coming to break all the bonds of spirit and flesh and stone.

With a final twitch, the sacrifices died at last. Something flashed. Kurtha Sedd could not tell if it was light or something merely pretending to be light. Then Sor Gharax roared. There were no words now, only the alchemical fusion of all his tortured thoughts and words into total fury.

He moved. He took a step forwards and crushed a cutter-operator beneath his tread, smashing the man's midsection to a stew of viscera. His left arm swung out, assault cannon blazing. The shells turned cultists to mist, blasting through their bodies to trace a line of explosions on the far wall. The fingers of the Bull's power fist twitched. He reached up and grabbed the human on his left shoulder. The fingers tightened, turning the cultist's head to paste.

Then the slaughter began in earnest. Sor Gharax strode forwards, raging, full of murder. The cultists ran to him, surrounding him, dancing with joy at their great work. He tore them apart, he crushed them, and he blasted them into nothing. He filled the cave with fire and blood. Bodies flew in pieces, nothing but torn wet meat. The cultists rejoiced as they died. More pushed their way past Kurtha Sedd into the room. 'Annunake!' they cried as they raced to their end. 'Annunake!' Their joy met rage and they died ecstatic in their good work.

Kurtha Sedd watched Sor Gharax lurch towards him. The Dreadnought was a giant of agonised destruction. His hatred was bright enough to turn the galaxy to ash. He was unstoppable, and in these tunnels, he moved with the majesty of an Emperor Titan. His voice was the thunder of the end of lies. It was the terrible blast of truth, and the truth was madness and hate. There was no doubt in Sor Gharax. The Bull was certainty incarnate, and as he walked forwards enveloped by flame and blood, Kurtha Sedd exulted.

And there was more. As the cultists chanted and danced and died, as Sor Gharax annihilated the willing, praying victims, something gathered. The darkness again, the physical darkness. It oozed up from the floor, called up from the greater depths. It moved independently of any of the movements in the ritual

of carnage. It was muscular, serpentine, and cold. It spread its tendrils across the floor as if it would grip the entire cavern. Where it moved, it scraped the very air. Scales dropped to the ground, flickered black and lustrous, then vanished. The dark's existence was a wound to the real. It undulated around the pulverising steps of the Dreadnought. It reached out for the Chaplain.

It looped around his legs, breaking up and reforming, fragile as fog, defined as insects. There were things within the dark, things he could not see because they could not exist yet. But they wanted to. They hungered to experience the real, and to drink its blood. They called out to Kurtha Sedd.

Make us real, they cried.

Unfetter us.

Unburden all.

The dark had been summoned by the ritual, and now it summoned Kurtha Sedd. It had risen so he must descend.

And now it made of him its master.

He saw the dark. He heard the dark. He looked up into the approaching, blood-drenched monstrosity of Sor Gharax. He stared into the glory and promise of revelation, and in this moment, and for this moment, when he thought he could submerge himself forever in the exaltation of horror, his doubts vanished.

His chest swelled with a thing of gnarled sinew and venomous claws.

It was hope.

SEVEN

**The rage contained
The Great Descent
The rage unleashed**

The spike of agony frozen into eternity. His body a bag of torture, a vestigial organ stabbing his being. The moment of the Titan exploding on Seventeen-Seventeen preserved forever. The revelation in the burn renewed with every second.

He was a Word Bearer, and there must be a word for the pain. The pain was all there truly was. All else was delusion. All else was lies.

Smash the lies.

Drown worlds, drown stars, drown the galaxy in their blood.

Find the word. Bring all of reality into the experience of his agony.

Roaring, howling, tearing all language apart in search of the word.

Failing. Syllables without form, words without sense, sentences that were violence alone.

Make the word flesh. Conjure it with action.

Become murder.

Suddenly in possession of his true body again, the giant form of war. Moving again. Killing again. The thunder of his gun, the detonations of his wrath. Evangelism by shell.

The heavy beat, beat, beat of his tread, bones cracking beneath each step.

Fill the air with blood. Fill the void with blood.

Make the words with blood.

Then a voice speaking his name.

‘Sor Gharax.’

Snarling at the interruption, swinging his assault cannon forwards.

‘Judge of Hell, stop and listen.’

The shape before him: crimson, but not flesh. Bearing the words of truth in the jagged, writhing script of Colchis.

He stopped. Darkness in the air, darkness that was the source of the truth, curling around the armour of the speaker.

‘You know me, Annunake Sor Gharax.’

And through the pain, he shaped a name. ‘Chaplain Kurtha Sedd.’

The Dreadnought knew who he was. The Bull paused in his march. The assault gun lowered and did not fire.

‘Your lesson is wasted here,’ said Kurtha Sedd. He spoke with respect, but with command. Sor Gharax was on the edge of total, unthinking slaughter and he had to be held back. He could not be restrained physically. A squad’s strength of Word Bearers stood behind Kurtha Sedd, weapons ready. If Sor Gharax would not stop willingly, the only recourse would be destruction, and many legionaries would be lost in that catastrophe.

Kurtha Sedd did not believe that tragedy would occur. The Word Bearers had not transported Sor Gharax all this distance for nothing. The gods had spared the Bull, and given Fifth Company the chance to use his strength. And so they would. ‘We are in the underworld,’ the Chaplain said. ‘The enemy awaits your judgement.’

Sor Gharax made no answer. Though his body no longer drew oxygen as it had before his entombment, his low growls had the rhythm of pained breaths.

‘I do not ask for your patience,’ said Kurtha Sedd. ‘I ask you to wait. Prepare your wrath. You will have your foe. You will preach to the Ultramarines.’

‘When?’ The single word was a strangled rasp emerging from the Dreadnought’s vox-speakers.

The effort to achieve even that level of coherence must have been monstrous. Kurtha Sedd took it as a victory. He would be able to channel Sor Gharax’s wrath. ‘Very soon,’ he said. He realised now a turning point had been reached. The ritual he had just witnessed had done more than resurrect the Bull. The moment was a critical one. It remained to him to seize it.

Not all the cultists participating in the ceremony had been killed. Khrothis was among the survivors. She rose from where she had fallen, covered in the gore of

her comrades. Her eyes shone with fervour. She ran forwards, heedless of the Dreadnought's guns. She clasped her hands before Kurtha Sedd. 'You saw, lord?' she asked. 'You saw the dark?'

'I did.' The tendrils of shadow had receded, but their meaning hovered in the air, and he could almost reach out and touch the possibility of their return.

'Brother-Chaplain,' said Kaeloq, his voice awed, 'we all did.'

Kurtha Sedd risked taking his eyes from the Bull to look back at his brothers. Their weapons were still up, but their heads were all turned his way, and they were nodding. Gherak Haxx was among them, and he said, 'You must minister to us.' He sounded awed.

The moment became even more important. The fraying fabric of the company was healing itself. Kurtha Sedd could make it strong again. All he had to do was fulfil his allotted role.

He stood for a few moments in silence. He closed his eyes and let himself trace the threads and contours of possibilities before him. The need to descend was still strong. He had not reached his destination. It was closer than ever. It had chains around his soul. Its weight was so great, it should pull him down through the cavern floors. He had to go down.

But the descent would be difficult. The Word Bearers had already dropped below all but the deepest positions of the arcologies. They had penetrated a few caverns below the ones they currently held. Those caves appeared to have been unexplored by Calth's inhabitants, and they were dead ends. There must be a way down. He would find it if he had to blast his way through rock, one metre at a time.

Right now, though, this moment, so critical, so rich in potential, pointed elsewhere. The Bull's rage would serve no purpose in a search through empty tunnels. It had to be directed back upwards. Sor Gharax needed Ultramarines to kill.

And the dark. The dark called him down, but it had also risen. It had answered the call of simple mortals, cultists who had no concrete experience of eternity and the sublime. He could feel the dark waiting for him. Waiting for his command.

But he was not Erebus. He did not have the First Chaplain's power or training. The doubts, banished at the peak of the ritual, returned. If he reached out to the darkness, he would prove himself worthy, and he would lose the bonds of uncertainty.

The physical descent was stymied for now. But the spiritual one knew no such

limits.

Kurtha Sedd looked into the blood-drenched chamber. 'We will need more offerings,' he said.

'Our lives are yours to command, lord Chaplain,' said Khrothis.

That would be a start. But much more would be needed. Kurtha Sedd spoke to Sor Gharax. 'I see the path to your vengeance, Annunake.'

In order to descend, they must go up.

Kurtha Sedd sent scouting parties ahead. They branched out in groups of five legionaries, seeking hunting grounds for the company and for the Bull. Kurtha Sedd loosed Sor Gharax. The Dreadnought thundered up the widest, most direct passages. He might well draw the enemy to him. If he found targets on his own, well and good. If he did not, one of the reconnaissance missions would, and give him the guidance.

Toc Derenoth led a full squad in the footsteps of Sor Gharax. His mission was more than one of reinforcement. It was a journey of redemption.

Kurtha Sedd remained behind, but only as a start. Word would come of a fertile terrain, and he would rush to that location. He would begin his important work in the tainted storage cavern. The space was thick with recent death. It thrummed with hunger.

And so he fed it.

He led twenty legionaries in worship. Twenty-four cultists stepped forwards to feed the dark. The eight-pointed star had been defaced by the heavy steps of the Bull and the generalised spilling of blood. The cultists recreated it, larger than before, the lines reaching almost to the walls of the chamber. They drew it with the ash of bone. Then they took up their positions: one human at each point, one where each line crossed the two concentric circles of the design.

Kurtha Sedd began the prayers. The words were Colchisian. Their guttural contours forced his tongue and throat into the contortions of ceremony. He uttered the lines of worship and madness, and his brothers joined him. Their amplified voices clawed at the stone of the walls. The cultists joined in the praise, and they knelt. They raised the blades they carried. They began to cut. They started with their arms, drawing slashes from shoulder to palm. They anointed their corners of the star.

The words of the prayers began to transmute into something more and less than language. They lost any meaning of human speech. They became acts. They became the opening of ways.

Driven by the prayers, the cultists found the will and strength to perfect their sacrifice. The knives sought the deeper flesh. They cut tendons and released viscera. They cut for prolongation of pain and the inevitability of death. The air became moist. The chamber filled with agonised worship. The human shape mutilated itself. Praise and prey were one.

Kurtha Sedd's hymn took possession of his body. He could not have ceased chanting if he had wanted to. And now his mind rode the contorting waves of the prayer. He reached the limits of the materium with effortless desire. The veil between the real and the darkness was close, and it was weak. Out beyond the Veridia System, the Ruinstorm was rending the galaxy. For the first time, Kurtha Sedd felt the distant touch of an event too vast for comprehension. *We have done this*, he thought. Violent pride swelled.

In the recesses of his soul, he still dreaded the light of judgement scouring Calth. It was looking for him. He would be held to account. Here, though, here in the depths, the dark was more fearsome than the light, and it welcomed him. It did not absolve his crimes. It exalted them. It pulsed and snarled on the other side of the veil, and Kurtha Sedd answered its desire with his own.

He parted the veil. He called the dark.

It answered, and it slavered. It rose again. It rose from the lower depths of Calth, and it rose from the wounds in the real. The lines of the star, ash sticky with blood, turned black. They undulated. They thickened, spread and joined. They covered the bodies of the sacrifices. They became a single mass of darkness. It was a tide, rising, whispering, a hungry thing with concealed teeth. It filled the chamber. It rolled over the Word Bearers, gathering its flock. As it submerged him, Kurtha Sedd was exhilarated.

He had done this thing.

He was worthy.

But there is more. He was unsure if he had thought the words or if the darkness had spoken. No matter. This was just a beginning. There was much more power within and beyond the dark. He could not unleash that potential yet. He did not have the strength. Perhaps he would find it down below, where his journey must still take him.

And will you dare? This time, the thought was his. He pushed it away, along with the need to answer. It was enough for now to give himself over to the wonder of the spreading darkness.

It enveloped him, and all light died, yet his sight was untroubled. He could see the chamber, the runes, the cultists and his brothers as easily as if a dozen lumen

globes illuminated the scene. He saw everything and he saw the dark. There was no contradiction between blindness and perfect clarity. He saw with the illumination of faith.

So did his brothers and the cultists. Khrothis and the others present at the ritual but not sacrificed to it had turned to him in wonder. They appeared before him as beings painted in crystalline black and grey. Their eyes shone like obsidian. The Word Bearers were not in grey. That colour had been rejected long ago, and the shadows magnified the crimson of their armour. The blood on the floor, still pouring from the martyrs, was red too. Kurtha Sedd was in a world of visible darkness splashed and honoured with red.

It was magnificent.

He turned towards the exit. The darkness flowed before him, filling the corridors. As he walked, he was embraced by shadows, and he was their conjurer. They were not his to control, but he had opened the path. He no more governed them than he could a flood. Yet the action was his.

He was pulling the entire arcology network down into the dark ocean.

The hunt began. Until now, the war had been a series of chance encounters and evasions. The descent had, at times, felt like flight. Now, for the moment, the direction reversed. The Word Bearers headed back uphill, moving through the spreading dark.

The hungry dark.

It needed to be fed.

It was Kurtha Sedd's squad, trailed by the cultists, which found the first source of food. The civilian enclave was reached by a tributary tunnel, running for some distance off a major artery. Instinct made Kurtha Sedd choose this turn. He sensed eagerness in the flow of the dark. He followed the course. A blast door sealed the end of the corridor. It was not in the same league as the barriers that protected the underworld of Calth from the death searing the surface. Two melta bombs were enough to breach it. Beyond was a small, self-contained worker colony. A large central cavern served as gathering place, mess hall and dormitorium. The high walls were pockmarked with alcoves holding cots. The civilians were here, and they were armed, warned by the sound of the bombs, terrified by the dimming of their lumen globes and the arrival of darkness that knew no barriers.

There was no Ultramarines presence. They were spread thin. Millions of inhabitants of Calth had flooded the arcologies. No small number had been

present before the war had begun. The XIII Legion could not be everywhere. It could not protect everyone.

Kurtha Sedd was disappointed not to find the enemy here. He was gratified by the size of the population. There were thousands of souls to feed to the dark.

‘Disarm them,’ he ordered. ‘But minimise the combat.’

The fight was brief. The civilians’ lasrifles did nothing against the legionaries. The Word Bearers walked into the hall, ignoring the opposing fire. They barely used their bolters, taking a few shots only to take down gunmen who had climbed to the higher alcoves. Gherak Haxx guarded the entrance. He was enough to stop any mortal from escaping. The rest of the Word Bearers moved through the room, grabbing weapons and breaking arms. The skirmish was over in minutes.

After the first few seconds, most of the mortals ceased trying to fight and sought escape. The dark trapped them. They couldn’t see what they were shooting at, and they couldn’t see where to run. Kurtha Sedd watched panic, true blind panic, spread through the assembly. A froth of vermin shrieked and clawed at each other. The darkness fed on the fear. It grew stronger even without a ritual.

With the ritual, however...

The Word Bearers moved to each exit. They and the cultists herded the civilians to the centre of the hall. The killings began in earnest. They were unhurried acts of cruelty committed solely with blade and hand. They were creative. Bodies were joined together with chains of muscle while still alive. Kurtha Sedd led the chants, and he directed the painting of the words. Blood beyond measure spilled, and the Word Bearers marked the walls and the floor with truth. They carved flesh into gospel. The words of the gods took shape, and they shouted the joy of the dark. The blackness boiled out of the air. Kurtha Sedd felt it surge outwards and upwards. The flood had come, and the entire underworld felt the touch of the ceremony in this hall.

Bearing his wrath through the tunnels. He had come down these paths as a helpless thing, a motionless mass barely able to whisper his curses. But now, oh now, *now* returning with thunder, *now* filling these caverns with his power, sending the boom of his great voice ahead.

Let the enemies of the truth hear. Let them take warning. Let them flee. He would catch them. He would kill them all.

The darkness everywhere, racing ahead and carrying him forwards. A wind of black, the extinction of hope made manifest. Voices in the black, whispers and

shouts that he heard even over his own snarls. Voices of the Word.

His march unstoppable, his rage uncontainable, unleashed at long last. Hungry for the crack of bone, the hissing spray of blood, the gurgle of death.

A marching wall of war. Howling juggernaut.

And then, at last, the first of the prey. A squad of little soldiers in blue armour. The believers in the lie. The puppets of the liar.

Uncertainty in their movements. The dark blinding them. Their fire at the sound of his approach. Bolter shells striking him. Little flames, little bursts, little meaning.

Give them illumination. His assault cannon blazing with killing light. Massive impacts smashing the small shapes to the ground. His fury in their midst, roaring, bringing his hell to the universe of lies. Reaching out with his power fist. Grasping the nearest creature in blue. Squeeze it. Crush it. Feel the contraction. The body giving way beneath the compacting ceramite. Bones to powder. Organs to liquid.

And there, the shout of agony. The shout of truth.

Blood running down his fist in tribute.

Do they see the truth? Do they yet?

No. Even if they think they do.

The Bull charged onwards.

The rage of the darkness came for the Ultramarines.

EIGHT

**Voices through the dark
Between the lines
Let the Bull lead**

The vox was useless over any distance. They worked by relay, one group of Word Bearers communicating with the nearest, which linked to another, and so on until news reached Kurtha Sedd. The system was imperfect and ungainly. He heard reports after frustrating delays. The jumble of redundant, conflicting and fragmented transmissions made effective coordination almost impossible.

At least the Ultramarines would be facing the same limitations beyond the reach of the command nexus. And they were blind. Word of encounters with the enemy arrived. Kurtha Sedd heard tales of vengeance. He was glad. At the news of each successful attack, he asked the same question.

‘Was Aethon among them?’

No. He was not. The dictates of fate would not be thwarted. Even so, Kurtha Sedd hoped.

He travelled upwards through the layers of tunnels and caverns. The direction of his journey was maddening, as it dragged him further and further away from his true goal. He accepted its necessity. He rose with the tide of darkness. And he circled closer and closer to the battle he would have given much to avoid.

His route was circuitous. The hungry dark kept leading him to more pockets of civilians. He obeyed the shadows and fed them. He fed them with slaughter and the inspiration of atrocity. His brothers climbed the heights of cruelty.

They found another large refuge. It was a medicae centre. Its patients had been

injured by the collapses more than by the war itself. There was a single Ultramarines legionary here. He was wounded. Kurtha Sedd guessed he had not been posted here, but had stumbled upon the centre by chance too. He was blind. He raged and fired as Kurtha Sedd came for him, but he responded to more than the sounds of the Chaplain's boots on stone. The whispers assailed him. Kurtha Sedd heard them too, but they were his allies. They were the disembodied jaws of truth, though the Ultramarine would have called them lies. Voices cried out to the legionary, and they taunted him. At Kurtha Sedd's shoulders, they snickered.

A gibbering choir laughed as he sank his crozius into the wounded Ultramarine's thigh. The armour was already broken there, and Kurtha Sedd shattered the leg in two. He brought the crozius down again, in a succession of blows, this time on the enemy's arms. The Ultramarine cursed him.

'I bring you illumination,' Kurtha Sedd intoned as he immobilised the legionary. Then he began the real work of pain.

The cultists and his squad rampaged through the connected caverns. None of the deaths were hurried. The tortures were strategic. The most vulnerable suffered the worst horrors. The Word Bearers destroyed the medicae tables. In their place, they constructed altars. The building materials were bone and shattered bodies.

The altars were still breathing when they were completed. From the mouths of the bent, twisted, agonised bodies, new rivers of darkness flowed.

The dark was stronger, and not just because of the work of Kurtha Sedd. He sensed it feeding elsewhere. The confusion and fear it summoned when it descended on the civilian populations was its fuel. It was self-sustaining now. He could return his attention to the military side of the campaign.

He *must* do so.

He sent his orders out on the imperfect relay. 'Brothers,' he said, 'we must seize this chance. Destroy the command nexus. Kill Aethon. Clear the way for our greater task.' He listened through static to his words being repeated.

Screams followed his squad into the tunnels as he headed upwards once more. He steeled himself for the conflict he did not desire, but could not avoid.

The Bull left a wake of blood. Moving up behind the Dreadnought, Toc Derenoth found little to mop up. Sor Gharax destroyed any enemy force he encountered, and did not move on until every living thing in his range was blasted to unrecognisable pulp. Sometimes, a few Ultramarines managed to slip behind the Bull. They were caught between the Word Bearers squad and the

raging wall of Sor Gharax.

The struggles were fierce, but brief.

Toc Derenoth pulled his chainsaw out of an Ultramarine's chest. Sor Gharax was ten metres ahead, about to disappear around a bend in the tunnel. The walls were slick with blood. The air smelled of fyceline and burned flesh. The darkness trembled with joy. The voices laughed.

As he moved to catch up, Kurtha Sedd's orders reached him.

Marching beside him, Khuzhun said, 'Given our position, that falls to us.'

'Agreed.' This was why he had wanted to follow Sor Gharax. The Dreadnought would have to travel the larger arteries. Toc Derenoth counted on that path leading back to the site of his humiliation. Kurtha Sedd had granted him absolution. Toc Derenoth had not given it to himself. And though he believed in the Chaplain's quest, he had not turned from the importance of tactical victories against the Ultramarines. He sought renewal, and the squad had reached the level of the command nexus. Sor Gharax's headlong rush up the main corridors had returned them to within striking distance of the Ultramarines stronghold.

The passageways bore the scars of the hypercoolant flood. The sea had drained away, leaving scoured and cracked stone in its wake, further weakening many of the caverns. The geography of the arcology network had changed. Toc Derenoth looked for a way of turning the alterations to the Word Bearers' advantage. There was more than pragmatism in his search. He wanted to turn the cause of the Ultramarines' victory into the means of their defeat. He was leading Ulughar Squad now. With Sergeant Ghulun Vaad dead, he was the senior legionary, and the squad had been reconstituted with some of the other survivors. Fifth Company had picked up on its journey.

'We need to get closer,' Khuzhun said.

'I know, but not head on.' He had found nothing yet. They hadn't encountered the enemy's main line of defence, but that wouldn't be long in coming. Sor Gharax would hit it eventually as he barrelled on. Powerful as the Bull was, Toc Derenoth did not want him slamming into a strongpoint. That would be granting the Ultramarines every advantage.

They hurried to catch up with the Bull. They rounded the bend with the rest of the squad, and saw Sor Gharax approaching a large junction. Toc Derenoth recognised it from the bas-relief on the archway. The flood had defaced it badly, but the design was still just visible. Guilliman's strength, embodied in rays, reached to the sky and descended to the underworld.

Your strength has been blocked, Toc Derenoth thought. The darkness had killed

Guilliman's light.

He sped up. 'We have to get past the Bull,' he said. 'If he turns right and keeps going, he'll be heading for the same approach we took before.'

'How do you propose to stop him?' Khuzhun asked.

'I don't. We have to try to direct him. Take him in the way we left.' The Ultramarines had released them into a smaller tunnel on the side of the command nexus, to the right of the great hall and its abyssal moat. The corridor had been higher than the hypercoolant. Though narrow, it was still wide enough for Sor Gharax, and too narrow for the Ultramarines to bring large numbers to bear against the Dreadnought.

'And how do we get there? You don't think they've locked down that access point?'

The small tunnel gave on to a much larger one that appeared to circumnavigate the nexus. The enemy could respond in force there.

'We have to find a way,' Toc Derenoth said. That was not a real answer. It was also the truth.

Ulughar Squad caught up to Sor Gharax as he reached the junction. He turned right, as Toc Derenoth had thought. The tunnel ahead was empty. The next intersection, a few hundred twisting metres ahead, would lead to the hall. It would be a miracle if they did not run into an Ultramarines patrol before that. Toc Derenoth ran faster yet, putting a space between himself and the Bull, grabbing a few extra seconds.

This tunnel was even more heavily damaged. The lumen orbs were all gone, and the night would have been complete even without the tide of darkness. The clarity in black that was the gift to the Word Bearers outlined the passageway for Toc Derenoth. He saw the buckling roof. He saw the walls slumping towards the centre of the tunnel floor. Rubble everywhere, an ambush possibility every few metres. Toc Derenoth did not slow. There was no time for caution. He would find an alternative route or encounter another failure. The dark was an advantage. It was not a promise of victory.

There. On the right. Outlined in the shimmering black: a huge split in the wall. Toc Derenoth stopped and looked down its length. It stretched many metres through the rock before it twisted out of sight. There was no promise here, either. No promise that the other end of the cleft opened onto the perimeter tunnel. No promise there was another opening.

No promises at all. But great promise all the same.

'Here,' he told the squad, and he rushed back to Sor Gharax. As he did so, he

contacted Vor Raennag. The sergeant's Gurthuz Squad was the nearest to his own, and just within vox-range. 'I have to speak with the Chaplain,' he said. 'Quickly. Sor Gharax must be made to wait.' The connection was rough, but Vor Raennag appeared to understand.

Toc Derenoth stopped a few paces ahead of the Bull. He walked backwards and he tried to reach any trace at all of the rational in Sor Gharax's mind while he waited for an answer. 'Annunake,' he said, 'please stop. You were patient when the Chaplain called on you before. You must be so again.'

The Bull pounded on, his speed constant.

'A short delay, Sor Gharax,' Toc Derenoth said. 'I do not ask this of you. Kurtha Sedd does.' A lie, which he expected to become a truth at any moment.

The Dreadnought advanced. They were very close to the split in the wall.

Vor Raennag came back on the vox. '*No guarantees, brother,*' he said. And he passed on what Kurtha Sedd had said.

'The Chaplain speaks for the gods,' Toc Derenoth said, repeating the truths the sergeant had conveyed to him. 'You will wait, and in waiting, you will drown the Ultramarines in blood. Your wrath will have a victory.'

Toc Derenoth was shouting, but the Bull's roar was louder. He didn't know if Sor Gharax could even hear him, much less understand and obey.

The Dreadnought rumbled past the split. Toc Derenoth cursed. But then Sor Gharax paused. He turned his monstrous bulk around. His madness glared through the emerald lenses of the sarcophagus's skull. He looked past Toc Derenoth into the depths of the wall. Perhaps he did understand. His bellows diminished to rhythmic snarls that took the place of his breath.

'Thank you, Annunake,' Toc Derenoth said.

Vor Raennag spoke to him again. '*Have you succeeded?*'

'I think so. For the moment.'

'The Chaplain wants your report. What have you found?'

Kurtha Sedd commanded a forced march to rejoin Ulughar Squad. Fifth Company was to converge on Toc Derenoth's position with all haste. It would take time for his orders to reach all the Word Bearers units under his control, and more time yet for them to reach the designated point. Even moving at this pace, he would be among the last.

He was frustrated, hopeful and relieved in equal, conflicting measures.

He was frustrated because of the time it would take to reinforce Toc Derenoth. Too long a delay would cost the Word Bearers this chance. Toc Derenoth and his

squad would not be able to hold Sor Gharax for long. ‘Ulughar Squad,’ he sent out to the vox-chain. ‘Begin your attack as soon as the first of our squads arrives. To whoever reaches Ulughar first, draw the Ultramarines with a frontal assault.’

He was hopeful for victory. The chance was a good one. The elements were aligning on the side of the Word Bearers. Aethon’s strongpoint would go down.

He was relieved because his squad was the furthest from Ulughar’s position. He was sure the most critical point of the battle would have been decided by the time he arrived. Aethon must die, but he would not be the one to do the killing.

Even giving the order pained him. ‘To all of Fifth Company – find the Ultramarines captain and kill him. Decapitate the leadership.’

The jolt he felt was of an old chain yanking itself free of his soul.

It was not enough. He ran faster in defiance of the burdens of old friendship. He strained against his bonds, racing towards the duty that felt like a crime.

NINE

Blindness and insight Rejoice in violence Offering

Vor Raennag arrived. He took his squad forwards, making for the main entrance to the command nexus. The Bull's growls were turning into frustrated howls. He was still waiting, but wouldn't for much longer. Toc Derenoth told him, 'Let me find the way.' Without waiting to see if Sor Gharax had understood or not, he entered the wall.

The split narrowed in several places as it wound. To eyes unopened by faith, unaided by the flow of the gods' darkness, it would have appeared blocked. Toc Derenoth squeezed through the pinched sections. He glanced up at the ceiling. It was still high enough for the Dreadnought, and he would be able to punch through the restricting rock. It was mostly rubble, and the obstacles were quick to get by.

The huge crack through the rock jinked left and right several times. Smaller fissures led off it, going nowhere. It came to an end as Toc Derenoth had hoped, opening onto the passage that ran around three sides of the command nexus. The fissure narrowed again at its terminus, but not enough to stop what was coming.

From behind, Toc Derenoth heard the sounds of a heavy tread, splintering stone and rock scraping against metal. Sor Gharax was no longer waiting. His bellow echoed through the dark.

Toc Derenoth looked out of the fissure. The entrance to the passageway he sought was less than ten metres to the left. There was an Ultramarines guard post

there, and a patrol had just passed his position. The Word Bearers would emerge between the two enemy forces. The risk was manageable. The critical moment was now. If the Ultramarines detected the Word Bearers' approach, they could shut the assault down while Ulughar Squad was still in the fissure.

The Bull's charge was loud. Rock smashed. The roar filled the tunnels. And the dark echoed it. The Ultramarines' movements were uncertain. Waves of dark descended on them, thick with blindness, smothering helm lights. Voices rattled along the passageway. They snarled, they laughed, they taunted, they cried out. Many of the voices wore human disguises, like flesh draped over xenos skeletons. They were disguises known to the Ultramarines. Toc Derenoth saw the enemy warriors jerk in response to shouts for help.

'That was Nicander,' one said.

'No,' said another. 'I saw him fall.'

'You did not see him dead.'

The patrol had stopped in its tracks. Bolters turned one way, then another, searching for targets in the blackness.

The voices picked up Sor Gharax's roar. They echoed and redoubled it. It became the boom of an avalanche. There was no way to tell its direction, no way to determine if its origin was sentient or the thunder of collapsing caverns.

The Ultramarines were drowning in darkness and auditory overload. Sor Gharax was only a few metres behind Toc Derenoth.

Vor Raennag voxed, *'In position.'*

Now, Toc Derenoth thought. 'Now,' he said to his squad and to Vor Raennag. He burst out of the fissure and charged to the left. A moment later, the Bull exploded through the wall. His wrath, held back by a supreme, agonised effort, erupted. The Ultramarines at both positions opened fire at the mass of wrathful darkness. The assault cannon blazed, its muzzle flare illuminating flashes of the armour's crimson.

Ulughar Squad spilled out of the tunnel in the wake of the Dreadnought. Toc Derenoth's brothers caught up with him as he stormed the guard post. The Ultramarines were firing over their heads, aiming for the colossal threat filling the tunnel. Toc Derenoth laughed. In the beautiful dark, he beheld a doomed enemy unable to see the most immediate threat.

He held his fire until the squad was almost at the fortified position. Then he led a barrage that slammed through Ultramarines at near-point-blank range. Then the charge hit, and the Word Bearers were a battering ram striking out of the darkness. Toc Derenoth's chainsword cut through an Ultramarine's gorget and

neck before the first legionary he'd shot hit the ground. Surprise was total. Ulughar Squad tore the guards apart.

Left again, into the smaller tunnel, towards the blast door that guarded the enemy's territory. And the Bull was on the squad's heels. He had smashed the patrol, and needed murder on a grander scale.

Toc Derenoth stood aside for the monster. Sor Gharax barrelled ahead, shaking floor and walls. He raised his power fist and battered the blast door. With each blow the door withstood, the rage of the Dreadnought mounted. The roars were so loud, Toc Derenoth felt their vibrations through his armour.

He waited for the barrier to fall. Redemption was seconds away.

Gurthuz Tactical Squad raced across the site of the Word Bearers' defeat. The Ultramarines had left the hall empty after the hypercoolant had drained into the abyss. Most of the support pillars had fallen in the flood, bringing the ceiling down with them. The hall was less than a quarter of its original size, a compressed chaos of rubble. Its defence was neither practical nor needed. Only one of the ramps still existed. From the windows of the command nexus, the Ultramarines could sweep away any enemy who dared to attempt a crossing.

But only if they could see him.

Gurthuz Squad's role was a diversion, but when he saw the terrain, Vor Raennag decided to make a play for greater impact. 'No weapons fire until we know they've heard us,' he ordered.

The enemy started shooting as he climbed the ramp. The Ultramarines were blind, but adapting. The bolter storm was withering, albeit without precision. Vor Raennag lost two men, and then they were on the ledge outside the nexus.

'Explosives!' Arathrax called. The Ultramarines had mined the ramp.

'Neutralise them!' Vor Raennag shouted. He hurled frag grenades through the window over his head and followed them up with a bolter spray. He took out the nearest turret and its gunner.

He led the squad along the platform to the entrance. The Word Bearers raked the interior with shells, giving Arathrax the cover to kill the explosives. If the ramp went, they would be cut off from reinforcements.

Through the windows, he saw a control room. The Ultramarines were scrambling to respond, but they were a beat behind as they tracked sound, deprived of sight. Two of them turned their guns on the doorway, anticipating foes. Vor Raennag ducked low and rolled through the door, under the fire. He came up on one knee and sent a stream of bolter shells through the chest of the

nearest foe.

The darkness had pooled in the confined quarters of the room. It clutched at the enemy with tendrils thick as coiling tree limbs. The flashes of guns and grenades were failed illumination. Vor Raennag's world was black and grey, as if etched in the ink from the Book of Lorgar itself. He saw his foes strike out with blind fury. Serpentine black, thicker yet than the deep pitch in the room, wrapped itself around the eyes of the enemy.

The departure of the Word Bearers fleet had been a blow for the sergeant. He had found it hard to believe Kurtha Sedd's promise of their brothers' return. At this moment, his doubts vanished. The Chaplain's work was turning the tide. What he saw was the Ultramarines being overwhelmed by the blindness of the lies they followed, and he rejoiced.

He rejoiced with violence.

Gurthuz Squad poured shells into one enemy, then another. The Ultramarines had no clear target before them and their response was diffuse. As they dropped, Vor Raennag directed fire into the banks of control surfaces. Klaxons sounded, then died. Electricity arced across the chamber. Vor Raennag thought he could feel power and communications dying across the territory the Ultramarines had seized.

The control room blazed with billowing flames of grey. A chain reaction of destruction took hold of it. Exposed cables ignited ruptured pipes of coolant and promethium. He ran through a firestorm towards the rear doors.

His vox sprang to life. More squads of Words Bearers had arrived. He called to them in triumph and welcome as he kicked the plasteel doors off their frame.

Coordinated fire drove him back. He threw himself back and to the side. Varnak Gath was too slow, and was riddled by shells. The stream was relentless, blasting his armour and body apart where he stood.

The Ultramarines held the cavern beyond in force, and they had adapted to the darkness. The darkness had less of a grip beyond, as if diluted by the space, or repelled by the determination of the enemy. Beyond them was another bunker. Vor Raennag cursed. The command nexus was broken down into strongpoints. The fall of one was not the destruction of all.

The reinforcements arrived. The Word Bearers responded with heavy fire of their own. They could not break out. The cave was a large one. The Ultramarines had the shelter of pillars and freedom of movement. The Word Bearers had the limited angle of fire created by the need to stay out of the bolter hail.

'We need to get through,' Arathrax cursed.

‘Wait,’ Vor Raennag told him. ‘We have the enemy’s attention. That was our goal. Give Ulughar a chance to reach theirs.’

He finished speaking, and the booming report of a great fist against steel began.

And to the left, a sudden barrage hitting the Ultramarines. Derzhahn Squad had found an access point through the ventilation system.

Two angles of attack, and the Bull was about to make his entrance.

His fist crashing against the blast door. Mass and energy field united in rage. His howls a promise of truth and atrocity.

The door buckling. Its lies crushed.

One more blow, and the door shattering. Metal exploding outwards like glass.

Charging into the hall beyond. Ultramarines everywhere, taking fire from Word Bearers to Sor Gharax’s left and from the other side of the hall. Holding their own, using pillars as cover and moving forwards to push the Word Bearers back. The Ultramarines captain wounded, leaning against a column.

Roaring, wrath in the darkness, assault cannon sweeping the hall, shattering pillars and legionaries.

His fist reaching for the first victim.

A rocket streaking through the dark. Hitting hard. Fuelling his rage.

The dark stained red with blood. With the fire of his truth.

Toc Derenoth came in shooting behind the Bull. He saw redemption blossom before his eyes. Moment by moment, with every pull of the trigger, with every flash and detonation, he felt the burden of shame slip from his shoulders. The Ultramarines had greater numbers to start with, but more and more of Fifth Company were arriving on the battlefield. The cavern was big, but the scale of the conflict shrank it down. Enemies unleashed sustained barrages at point-blank range. Columns fell. A wall frieze of the Ullanor Triumph circled the entire hall. It was vanishing, shattered by bolter shell and scorched by flame. Stray shots had punched through conduits in the ceiling. Promethium cascaded to the ground in a rain of liquid fire. Toc Derenoth moved through a maelstrom of destruction. It was magnificent.

He was moved to prayer. So were his brothers. Their chanting joined the choir of the voices in the darkness. They provided the counterpoint to Sor Gharax’s roars. The Ultramarines shouted and fought, but they were being overwhelmed. The Triumph of Ullanor crumbled beneath the triumph of Chaos.

Sor Gharax had scythed his way through the Ultramarines nearest the blast door. Toc Derenoth turned his attention to those on the Bull’s right flank.

Ulughar Squad engaged them before they could coordinate a counter-attack on the Dreadnought. The Word Bearers moved on a diagonal to the right. Toc Derenoth led them at a run, leaping over fallen columns, trusting in the darkness to give sufficient cover. Bolter shells cut into the Ultramarines. Some fired in response, while the others kept up their attack on Sor Gharax. The Dreadnought was taking fire on all sides. He did not even acknowledge it, but he was not indestructible.

Sor Gharax was huge and slow. Even in the dark, the Ultramarines could not miss him. Ulughar Squad was fast. Chanting the praise of the gods, his tongue forming the syllables of the abyss, Toc Derenoth hurled himself at the enemy. Most of the shells coming at him missed. Some did not. He grunted when an impact punched through his pauldron and exploded against his right shoulder. He kept his bolter up and transmuted the pain into wrath.

He hit the Ultramarines' position. He brought his chainsword down on the legionary who had shot him. The loyalist blocked with his chainsword. The weapons whined. Mechanised teeth ground at each other. Seconds of stalemate dragged on. Helms of blue and crimson faced each other, unchanging, impassive, yet hatred as clear as if the two warriors could see each other's faces. Toc Derenoth leaned into his sword, then stepped back suddenly. The Ultramarine swung his chainsword in towards Toc Derenoth's neck. The Word Bearer took another step back and pummelled his foe with bolter shells. The Ultramarine walked into the fire. He sagged, but swung his sword again. His movements were sluggish. Toc Derenoth knocked his blade aside and drove his sword up through the warrior's gorget. The teeth sawed the Ultramarine's chin in half. Toc Derenoth shoved upwards until the loyalist's skull split in two.

As Ulughar Squad brought the rest of the foe at this position down, Kurtha Sedd's voice boomed from the vox. *'I am with you, brothers!'* the Chaplain cried. *'The truth is with us!'*

The darkness rolled in again, growing stronger. The Ultramarines pulled back. The blast doors at the rear of the hall ratcheted up. On the other side, Toc Derenoth saw an even larger hall, filled with cowering mortals. The call to atrocity was immense, and he headed for the exits as if there were no enemies between him and the burnt offerings.

The glimpse was a brief one. The Ultramarines retreated, leaving dozens of their brothers lying dead on the cavern floor. The doors started coming down again before they were all through.

'Kill them all!' Kurtha Sedd commanded.

Sor Gharax's assault cannons never stopped. They blew apart more enemies. Toc Derenoth glanced back and saw the Chaplain crush a loyalist sergeant's skull with his crozius. Toc Derenoth went after the departing foe, pursuing with shells and fury, and with the exaltation of the end of shame.

The doors came down. They would not hold, but they would buy the loyalists some time.

Kurtha Sedd's roar of anger over the vox was as loud as the Bull's.

They punched through the doors. Sor Gharax's power fist and a melta bomb made short work of the barriers. But short was not enough. The Word Bearers found straggling civilians in the vast cavern beyond. They found more in the corridors. But then those corridors collapsed. The Ultramarines detonated enough explosives to seal off the path of their retreat forever.

Kurtha Sedd stood before the smoking ruins of the Ullanor frieze. In the distance, he could hear Sor Gharax smashing at the cave-ins. The Dreadnought was trying to batter his way through a mountain. It was futile. The Ultramarines had saved tens of thousands of civilians and the integrity of their fighting force.

And Aethon had survived.

Kurtha Sedd punched the frieze. The image of the Emperor, already decapitated by a shell hole, fell about his fist in shards.

He had been a fool to think he could leave his duty to the Bull. Aethon must die by his hand. No other resolution was permissible. He must shatter every bond, call down the judgement he no longer believed in, yet still expected.

And then?

He didn't know.

Would the key below finally be his?

His way down blocked. The victory over the Ultramarines here barely more than a half-measure. He was being directed yet stymied at every turn.

He left the frieze and entered the great cavern. Its original purpose was unclear. What he saw suggested a holding pen for the civilians, though he knew the Ultramarines would not have conceived of it in those terms. It contained a huge jumble of supplies now. Crates were stacked high and deep along the walls. The cultists had caught up to Fifth Company, and they tore open the crates. They scavenged food and ammunition and explosives.

There was much more that was not of military significance. This was the repository of the traces of Calth's culture its inhabitants had been able to rescue in their flight from the surface. The civilian crates were filled with jumbles of

scrolls and art. There were masterpieces of sculpture and painting, and there were artisanal objects of merely personal worth. Kurtha Sedd gazed at a different sort of archive. It was curated by the masses in flight. What did the people think they would do with these treasures? Did they think they would ever see them again? Packed together with no organisation, thousands of items crowded together, destined to be neglected in favour of the necessary weapons.

Perhaps the mortals knew this. Perhaps it was enough for them to know objects had been saved. Each one was a concrete memory. Hastily assembled, chosen in the heat of desperation, these were the memories chosen to survive the end of the world. And so they had, but not for long. Kurtha Sedd had put Lanshear's official memory to flame. Now he would do the same to the traces of its character.

Physical, intellectual, spiritual – every aspect of Calth's civilisation would burn. 'This ground belongs to the gods!' Kurtha Sedd shouted. 'Mark it! Claim it! Then send it to the depths!'

His anger tore his throat. Aethon had escaped. The burdens on his soul were intractable. They gripped him with chains and claws. His appointed task still waited, and the shedding of the burden was a burden in itself. He raged against the paradoxes and the contradictions tearing at him. He raged against the obstacles in his path.

There was meaning in the desecration and destruction he had commanded. But there was not enough.

The Word Bearers and cultists roamed through the caverns and tunnels captured from the Ultramarines. They took Lanshear's artefacts, and they took the civilians who had not escaped, and they built altars once again. Sculpture and bone, canvas and flesh, memories and blood, all became the raw material of the tributes to pain and madness. Kurtha Sedd moved from location to location, watching as the walls were covered in runes of blood, watching as arms reached, spasming, from the centre of the altar pieces formed from spines and desecrated tomes. Ornate flourishes were shaped from mutilations. The work was quick, but it was skilled. The altars screamed. The voices in the dark answered back with sibilant laughter.

Kurtha Sedd answered the screams with snarls. He paced, waiting for the squads he had dispatched to the lower levels to complete their work. There had been a considerable quantity of explosive stored in the crates. Some of it was military, and some of it was industrial, used for the construction of further tunnels and expansion of caverns.

‘Use it all,’ Kurtha Sedd had instructed.

The work was progressing beneath his feet. The honeycomb of the arcologies was being undermined.

Darkness has risen, he thought. *Now this world must descend into the darkness.*

Descent. All must descend. He must too. His journey must resume.

But the dictates of fate were becoming confusing.

The vox broke into his thoughts. Toc Derenoth said, ‘*The charges are ready, Chaplain.*’

‘Good. Withdraw to a safe location. Wait for my signal.’

He made a final tour of the captured territory. He ordered the evacuation of each cavern and tunnel. He was the last to leave each space. He gazed upon good work. There was nothing here for the Ultramarines. These spaces, in their final minutes, had become the realm of Chaos. The darkness pulsed and gibbered. The walls writhed. The shrieks of the altars grew louder. The mortals were dying, but could not die. Their suffering was extended with their lives. The dark kept them alive and fed longer.

Kurtha Sedd walked through the smoking ruins of the command nexus. Halfway down the ramp he paused. He looked down into the abyss. The tug was so strong, he had to fight the urge to leap. *I seek to do your bidding*, he thought. *Why do you frustrate my attempts? What must I do to prove myself worthy?*

He crossed the gap. He walked into the rubble of the collapsed hall, and stopped again before the face of the nexus vanished behind fallen stone. He faced the way he had come. The rest of the company had pulled back further. He felt no need. He knew his journey did not end here.

‘Do it now,’ he said.

The floor shook. The explosions were a long series of muffled blasts, a deep, chest-rattling thunder of *krump-kr-krump-kr-kr-kr-krumpkrumpkrump*. The shaking increased. Fissures spread over the face of the command bunker’s walls. Then everything fell. Kurtha Sedd beheld a great movement, a colossal shift downwards as the tunnels and halls collapsed at once, plunging into the levels below, and taking them further yet. The roof over the sacrificed caverns remained intact, and so at his feet a huge pit formed. The crevasse became a canyon. Ruins and desecration fell into the dark, and it seemed to him the stone itself cried out in pain.

The shadows accepted the sacrifice. They swallowed the dust. When the rumble of disintegration finally ended, Kurtha Sedd was staring into a gaping void. Beyond the reach of his eyes, he sensed movement. Beyond the range of his

hearing, there were deeper mutterings, the voices of forces far greater than the mocking things that tormented the enemy.

A great descent. A great offering.

‘Is this enough?’ Kurtha Sedd called. ‘Is this sufficient? Am I worthy now? Will you show me the way?’

There was no answer.

TEN

Choices Warp-flask Two truths

In the corridors beyond the great pit, the Bull raged back and forth, and the company waited. No one said anything when Kurtha Sedd arrived. He felt their questions, though. ‘A great victory, brothers,’ he said. ‘The loyalists are bleeding from their enlightenment.’ He gestured with a magnanimity he did not feel. Certainty and uncertainty warred inside him. But he must lead, and he must be known to lead.

‘What now, Chaplain?’ Kaeloq asked.

‘Surely we pursue the enemy?’ Toc Derenoth said.

‘Do we?’ There was a hard note of scepticism in Vor Raennag’s tone. ‘We have lost momentum. They were prepared for this eventuality, and will have reinforced their next lines of defence. We—’

A rumbling crack cut him off. The tunnel shook. Dust fell from the ceiling. A web of cracks spread down its length. Kurtha Sedd wondered if this was an aftershock of the immense cave-in. But the muttering of stone continued, and it ran deep and wide, as if the entire planet groaned. This was caused by something more powerful than any number of demolition charges.

After a minute, the volume of the rumble diminished, and the shaking eased. It did not stop altogether. New cracks continued to appear in the tunnel.

Vor Raennag resumed. ‘Strategically,’ he said, ‘we are no better off.’ He glanced at the walls and ceiling, as if implying he had chosen not to say more.

‘Are you saying the Ultramarines are?’ Kaeloq demanded. He was being very close to insubordinate, going beyond the freedom of questioning Kurtha Sedd had granted. ‘We hit them hard. We butchered them. We took much they had gained.’

‘This is still their world,’ Vor Raennag said quietly.

‘Is it?’ Kurtha Sedd asked him. He gestured, and the dark seemed to eddy around his gauntlet. Beyond the curve of the tunnel, something whispered, the words intense and destructive to understanding. ‘I don’t believe it is their world any more, brother-sergeant. There is more darkness than light in these tunnels, wouldn’t you say?’

Before Vor Raennag could answer, the deep rumble passed through the rock again, an invisible wave disturbing the underworld.

‘I don’t know that I would say this is our world, Chaplain,’ Vor Raennag said.

‘We will pursue, though, won’t we?’ Toc Derenoth insisted.

‘Our duty is the destruction of the loyalists,’ said Kurtha Sedd. ‘The question is the path assigned to us for that end. We were called to the depths, and from them we brought the darkness of the gods. We are still called below, brothers. We have not finished our descent.’ He paused. ‘Rest, and pray. Let me do the same. Our choice will become clear.’

And once more, he was speaking with more assurance than he possessed. The destruction Fifth Company had wreaked had allowed him to mask his frustration. He needed some time now to find the way forward. Time to force the doubts down.

He left his brothers. He ducked back through the entrance to what had been the command nexus’s access hall. The ceiling was cracked and sagging, but still holding. He walked back towards the pit. He would seek answers from the abyss.

Footsteps behind him. He waited, not turning around. He already knew who this would be. ‘What is it, sergeant?’ he said.

‘Something is destabilising the network.’

‘So it would appear.’

‘If the tremors become severe enough, we might lose everything.’

‘That is possible. I do not think it will happen.’

‘Are you certain?’

‘Yes,’ he said, and found he spoke a lie and the truth simultaneously. He could not promise the survival of the rest of the company. He remained convinced of his own.

‘I don’t think you can be,’ Vor Raennag said. ‘I don’t believe you are.’

‘I see. And so? What is your purpose here?’

Vor Raennag sighed. ‘There is still no word from our fleet.’

‘And? We couldn’t hear from them even if they were in orbit. The vox is barely functional.’

‘I know you have other means, Chaplain.’

Kurtha Sedd looked at Vor Raennag. He said nothing. While he waited for the other to speak again, he wondered whether he would have to kill the sergeant. He surprised himself by taking the idea seriously. The question was real. And was this not the lesson he was learning? That the burden of loyalty was a hindrance to the fulfilment of his task and his destiny?

‘In the archive,’ Vor Raennag said, ‘you told us the fleet’s departure was temporary. You said our brothers would return for us. I chose to believe you.’

Kurtha Sedd leaned towards the sergeant. ‘Have I given you cause to doubt me?’ It was difficult to speak through the growl of rage rising from his chest. ‘After this victory? After the darkness answered my call?’

‘I do not doubt the gods. My faith is adamant. Chaplain, I am uncertain about you, because I can see your own uncertainty.’

Kurtha Sedd’s vision swam red with rage. His fingers itched to grab his crozius and beat Vor Raennag’s head to pulp. He held back. Perhaps he would kill Vor Raennag. But not now. The sergeant would be useful. He could not be the only member of the company to have these doubts. Toc Derenoth’s questions suggested he might be wavering too. If Kurtha Sedd secured Vor Raennag’s faith, he would kill any chance of a schism in the company.

Instead of striking, he swallowed his anger so hard he hurt his throat. He said, ‘Our correct path requires my attention.’

‘So does our extraction.’

Kurtha Sedd’s breath hissed from his lungs. ‘I will find out what I can.’

Vor Raennag nodded. ‘Thank you,’ he said.

Kurtha Sedd grunted and walked away. ‘Guard the entrance to this hall,’ he called over his shoulder. ‘If anyone disturbs me in the next few minutes, that individual will die.’

Vor Raennag’s boots crunched on broken stone as he made his way back to the entrance. Kurtha Sedd approached the lip of the huge pit. He waited until he was sure the sergeant was gone. Then he knelt. He drew an octagram in the dust on the floor.

Uncertainty. *Uncertainty!* How dare his followers give voice to such things.

They would not deny him his destiny.

‘I refuse it,’ he snarled. ‘All that I have striven for – it cannot end in confusion and dirt.’

The chamber shook while he worked. The rain of dust was constant. He could hear it sifting and drifting across the rubble, an endless sigh. There were peaks and valleys in the intensity of the vibrations in the floor, but they did not end. The deeper, heavier groans of stone at war with itself multiplied. They seemed to Kurtha Sedd to be reaching across vast distances, as if the entire arcology network were crying out.

Vor Raennag was right. The instability might become catastrophic. Doubt gnawed at the heart of Kurtha Sedd’s faith. How could he believe in the inevitability of his destiny when everything seemed about to end?

He took out his warp-flask and placed it in the centre of the octagram. He removed the stopper. Inside the wire-and-glass vessel, something grey waited, inert but filled with hungry potential.

Kurtha Sedd hesitated. He had resisted taking this measure until now. He had not wanted to show weakness. He had also, he admitted to himself, been unwilling to learn a truth he had been actively suppressing. But he had a victory now. He could demonstrate the worth of his command. And he needed guidance. The fork in his path involved two equally uncertain choices, as frustrating as they were promising.

And the caves themselves were shaking. A turning point had been reached.

He pulled off his left gauntlet. He took a dagger from his belt. Its blade was dark, twisting. The engravings appeared to move. He stretched his arm out and cut deeply into his wrist. His blood poured onto the octagram and into the warp-flask. Vitae ran down the channels in the dust. The octagram glistened with red. The warp-flask filled, and the thing in its depths wriggled. It coiled and uncoiled, feeding on the blood, gathering an existence that injured reality.

Kurtha Sedd put aside the dagger and pulled his gauntlet back on. He knelt before the octagram and the flask. The air before him rippled. It roiled. Reality thinned, its coherence devoured by the thing in the flask. The immaterium spread exploratory tendrils into the space. Kurtha Sedd chanted, and the air writhed, tortured by the words. Time and distance withered in a cone of dark possibility.

The whispers of the dark gathered around the octagram. They echoed the chant. Once more, Kurtha Sedd felt how thin the veil was in Calth’s underworld. He felt he could rip it wide. He believed he could turn the ritual of communication into a chain reaction. He resisted the temptation. He would not be able to control the forces he would unleash. He had enough experience to know the limits of his

skill.

He focused on the task. He focused on a name. Shapes formed in the air, awaiting form and identity. ‘Kor Phaeron,’ he chanted, ‘answer my call. Kor Phaeron, hear my voice. Speak to me. I have need of your guidance, Master of the Faith.’

The air shimmered. Shapes twisted. Crimson and grey coils merged, then came apart, forming ghostly shadows of other XVII legionaries stationed at each point of the octagram. Their dead eyes glowed faintly in the gloom.

But the First Captain of the Word Bearers did not appear.

‘Kor Phaeron,’ Kurtha Sedd called again.

He repeated the name with growing urgency. The air convulsed with greater and greater force. But the answer did not come.

‘I beseech thee. Guide my path. Will you not speak to me?’ he pleaded. ‘Kor Phaeron! You sent us here! Will you forsake us in our—’

The answer came.

Reality tore, shattering the flask and ripping up to the ceiling. The voices of the darkness cried in unison, a choral *ahhhhhhhh* of wonder. The tortured space took form all at once. It exploded with golden light. Not the false gold of the Emperor – this was the gold of terminal knowledge. The gold of frozen tombs. The gold of the visage that gazed at Kurtha Sedd.

From deep recesses beneath a heavy brow, eyes blazed with dark wisdom. Over the bald skull and across the face were the words of faith and truth. Here was the ultimate bearer of the word.

Kurtha Sedd gasped. He rocked back. *Aurelian.*

He could barely shape the words. He abased himself. ‘My lord Lorgar.’

+Kor Phaeron is gone, my child,+ Lorgar said. The primarch’s voice was rich, calm, sonorous. It was the sound of truth itself. **+He will not answer. The fleet is gone. He has fled into the void. There will be no reinforcements.+**

And yet...

+The Emperor is watching you.+

But he is not.

The tortured thoughts vanished as Lorgar’s words sank in and Kurtha Sedd dared to look up at the primarch. ‘I know the fleet was forced to leave the system, Lord Aurelian, but—’

+It will not return,+ said Lorgar.

A void opened up in Kurtha Sedd’s chest. In its abyssal depths, something stirred that he dared not name. He hung his head.

‘Then we too are betrayed. The Legion is abandoning the campaign on Calth.’

+**Are you still fighting?**+ There was no anger in the primarch’s tone. His calm was heavy as marble.

‘My lord, we are.’

+**Then the campaign is not abandoned. Your forces *are* that campaign, even as I bring war to the rest of Ultramar.**+

The cavern shook with enough force to dislodge large fragments of the ceiling. The Veridian star still raged, unseen, above.

‘The surface of Calth is lethal,’ said Kurtha Sedd, frustration and anger rising in him. ‘The underworld is unstable. Without reinforcements, how are we to bring the loyalists low, my lord primarch? How do you see Calth won?’

+**No reinforcements?**+ Lorgar’s lips twitched in the trace of a smile. +**What is that darkness that you call upon, Chaplain?**+

‘But if the tunnels collapse...’

+**Ah, yes. Destruction. Havoc. Chaos. Are you so blinkered, Kurtha Sedd?**+
‘Chaos.’

+**Can you really believe it is coincidental that this instability follows your actions? Look to the darkness. See how it gnaws the sinew of the materium. You have summoned destruction itself, my son. Use it well. You are not abandoned. You are chosen.**+

‘Chosen...’ Kurtha Sedd repeated.

Lorgar inclined his head, smiling. +**You do not need guidance, Chaplain. Only faith.**+

‘My lord—’

+**Chaos is all around you, Kurtha Sedd. Harness it.**+

A golden implosion, the shriek of a second wound to reality, and Lorgar was gone. The cone of unreality dissipated. The air whirled dust through the space before Kurtha Sedd’s dazzled gaze. Smoke rose from his blood.

He fell forwards. On all fours now, he gasped. Each breath was ragged, and sucked into the void in his chest. His thoughts were disordered, shattered fragments that shook with every earth tremor. He exulted to know that the tremors were a consequence of his actions. They were a proof of his power.

I have done this.

He also despaired to realise that this destruction was inevitable. A catastrophe was coming, and even if Fifth Company weathered it, what then? The Word Bearers did not have the means to triumph in a war of attrition.

These two realities clashed in his soul, but he could not think of them in a

coherent fashion. Instead, they took the shape of their emotions. Exaltation and despair stormed.

He breathed darkness and dust.

A refrain took shape. It consisted of two repeating words. They were conflicting states of being. They held out opposing fates. Yet they were both true.

Chosen.

Abandoned.

Chosen.

Abandoned.

He was humbled. He was honoured. Lorgar had appeared to him. The primarch had charged him with leading this Underworld War. How could he say he was abandoned when such glory was his?

He raged. He was betrayed. There would be no extraction, no reinforcements. The Legion had thrown him away.

Chosen.

Abandoned.

Chosen.

Abandoned.

Round and round, the refrain becoming a firestorm in his mind and his soul. There could be no solution. The two truths would destroy each other, and he would burn with them. Lorgar had revealed both truths. They could not be falsified. And they could not be reconciled.

Unless...

He caught his breath.

'The Emperor is watching you.'

But he does not. Lorgar does not speak the truth.

The revelation had come for him on Khur, but he had refused it then. Even now, part of him resisted. Part of him still awaited the Emperor's judgement. Would he ever excise this cancer from his soul? Would he never shed that burden of guilt, that last, festering link of old loyalty? He must, for the lie was manifest. There would be no judgement.

Lorgar does not speak the truth.

Kurtha Sedd groaned in pain, and the walls of the cavern groaned with him. He tried to hold the revelation back, but it was too strong. It battered through his defences. When it did, it brought resolution. The two truths were reconciled. He was abandoned, and he was chosen.

He was abandoned by the Legion.

He was chosen by the gods.

The reconciliation brought no peace. His breathing became easier, but only so rage could build in his frame. His thoughts became clearer. So did his doubts. So did his pain. His filled his lungs, and he roared. His wrath hurled itself against the walls of the cave. He raised a fist and brought it down again and again on the shattered remains of the warp-flask. Glass powdered. Wire bent. The squirming thing within it was dead. Blood flowed into the lines of the octagram. The rune retained its shape. Drawn in dust, it was as untouched by his blows as if it had been carved into the rock itself. It glowed with crimson fire, giving him his answer.

Kurtha Sedd rose to his feet. He stood tall in pride and anger.

He would die on Calth.

But not yet.

He had been abandoned. But he was strong.

Oblivion would not take him easily. He would end his days in the performance of a great task. He would accomplish his work, if it meant descending to the molten core of the planet itself.

He took a step back from the edge of the abyss. The octagram shone, but all trace of the warp-flask was hidden by the falling dust. Those who had abandoned him had freed him of the bonds of loyalty. The burden slipped from his shoulders. He breathed with a new freedom. The other chains were still there. They would not release him without a struggle. They clung to him through his doubts. He would have to shatter them through terrible action.

He made his way back towards the tunnel where Fifth Company waited for him. His soul bled. Pain, pride, anger, doubt, honour, determination – they all clawed at him. The shedding of one burden seemed to have increased the weight of the others.

The ground trembled beneath his tread. *I have caused this*, he thought. *I have shaken this world.*

It was time to do far worse.

ELEVEN

Foresight Pipeline These are my works

The tremors were constant. The spikes of intensity were becoming more frequent and more severe. Weakened passageways were collapsing. The cracks spread everywhere. Walls and floors and ceilings developed larger, deeper fissures. The network of caverns was evolving. Cave-ins blocked old routes. New paths through the underworld opened up. Routes through the arcologies were even more unpredictable than they had been before. The labyrinth was changing.

Kurtha Sedd's path was clearer than it had been since before the rise of the darkness. Descent or pursuit? The answer was not in the choice.

Lorgar had told him to harness Chaos. Yes, he would. From the maelstrom he would create, his road forward would appear.

He marched with Fifth Company on a route that circumnavigated the great pit. 'Brothers,' he said, 'we have driven the loyalists back. Now we will bury them.'

Vor Raennag walked beside him. 'We know little of their defences,' the sergeant said quietly.

'I know where they are.'

Vor Raennag paused before responding. 'How is that possible?'

'It was revealed to me.' He had communed with the darkness while the cultists chanted. The clarity of perception had extended beyond the material world before him. He had been able to picture the entire region of the arcology perfectly. He knew where the pipeline chamber was. He knew the Ultramarines

were there. The darkness had touched them, and so had his spirit. He could not tell their numbers. But the dark had coiled around their presence, and spoken to him.

‘I would feel better,’ the sergeant said, ‘if—’

‘If your faith were stronger,’ Kurtha Sedd snarled. ‘The enemy’s location was revealed to me. Do not question this.’ Ropes of darkness slithered around his shoulders. They reared at Vor Raennag. They hissed.

The sergeant took a step away. ‘I do not question the truth, Chaplain,’ he said.

Kurtha Sedd narrowed his eyes at the equivocation. He let it pass. Vor Raennag would be enlightened soon enough. He would witness the truth.

‘And their strength?’ Vor Raennag asked, not finished. ‘Do you know that?’

A hard tremor hit. The ceiling split. Conduits running inside the rock burst. Electricity sparked. Promethium ignited. Fire rained on the Word Bearers.

Kurtha Sedd laughed. He extended a gauntlet to catch the drops of flame. ‘And what of the strength of our offence, brother-sergeant?’ he asked. He switched the vox to the company channel. ‘Have faith, brothers, and we shall destroy the loyalists with their own walls.’

He was answered by vocal professions of devotion. The cultists chanted as they milled around the company. They rushed ahead, willing sacrifices if the enemy should be around the next bend. They crowded around the crushing feet of the Bull, and their prayers seemed to grant the mad warrior a degree of focus, if not relief. He marched towards the promise of more slaughter.

Many of the Word Bearers joined in the chanting. Kaeloq was among the most fervent. Kurtha Sedd heard his voice rising above the others, ecstatic in his praise of the gods of Chaos. The legionary’s faith was pure and savage. He followed the Chaplain’s leadership without question. His discipleship was as absolute as the cultists’, and he was not alone.

Kurtha Sedd envied Kaeloq as much as he resented Vor Raennag. The sergeant’s doubts were not his own, but by voicing them, Vor Raennag made Kurtha Sedd’s uncertainties stab more deeply. His faith in the gods was complete. So was his belief in the revelations he had received. His doubts were about his own worthiness. He understood now that he had been struggling to be worthy of his charge in his own eyes. He had yet to succeed. Until he did, his faith was impure. He could not be the agent the gods demanded if he still awaited punishment for his crimes. He could not wage the war required of him if he distrusted his abilities.

The darkness and voices invited him forwards. They enticed him to reach into

the immaterium. Much more waited to be unleashed. All he had to do was follow the path before him.

Grasp the veil. Feel how fragile it is. Tear it. Open the way.

He knew the dangers in the warp. Only a fool believed that worship granted immunity. He was no fool.

The tunnel shook again, hard enough to knock cultists off their feet. *Call out, the darkness whispered. Let us shatter the foundations of this world.*

The promise of power was overwhelming. He felt as if his simple touch would split Calth in half. But the destruction was coming with or without his aid. He had contributed, but so had the war on the surface, and the scouring blasts of Veridia. If he did as the darkness bade him, he would be dwarfed by what was unleashed. He would not control it.

Yet there was no choice. His heart clenched in horror at his unworthiness even as it rejoiced in the madness to come. He almost laughed at Vor Raennag's reservations. Of course they had no intelligence about the Ultramarines dispositions. Of course the charge he was leading was a strategic folly. The plan of attack was crude, and its goals were vague: *Smash the defences by drowning them in burning fuel. Draw Aethon out.*

And then what? If Aethon came, would he find the will to do what he must? That question mattered, not the weakness of the plan. He was committed to the action. He dreaded his failure. He hungered for the deaths to come. Word Bearers or Ultramarines, every drop of blood would be an act of obeisance to the gods. His duty went beyond loyalty to the Legion now. It had abandoned him. The gods had not.

The warband moved through a chain of ruin. There was no life in this region. This close to the concentration of Aethon's forces, the civilians had been corralled behind the Ultramarines lines. These caverns had been deserted, stripped of all useful supplies. There were occasional bodies under fallen pillars: refugees who had been caught by earlier collapses. The caves nearer the pit that had swallowed the command nexus were most heavily damaged. More and more crevasses were opening with each tremor, though. The arcologies were falling to oblivion, and they were falling faster by the hour.

Kurtha Sedd wondered if they would find their target already destroyed.

The pipeline chamber was well beyond the fallen command nexus. It was also far enough removed from the larger living areas that it would be on the edges of a defensible perimeter. The Ultramarines would want to hold it, but they could not make it the centre of held territory without sacrificing everything else that

made a region worth protecting in the first place. The Word Bearers closed in on the chamber from one level below. As they climbed a stone spiral staircase towards the tunnels that marked the final approach, the interior of Calth screamed and began to shake itself to death.

At the top of the stairs, Kurtha Sedd stumbled through the archway into the corridor. The ground tilted and dropped, throwing him against the opposite wall. Chunks of the ceiling rained down, a thudding of fists large enough to crush mortals. The howl of the quake grew. The rest of the company followed him out of the staircase. As Sor Gharax emerged, there was a roar from below and a huge billow of dust. The stairs fell into the depths, taking with them a score of cultists.

'Forward!' Kurtha Sedd cried. 'Forward to annihilation!'

The floor heaved. The tunnel twisted. The Word Bearers charged through the hammering fall of rock. The fissures in the rock above split wide and rose higher. New levels of tunnels appeared through the gaps. And now the walls above fell away from each other, as if the earth were being ripped apart by giant hands.

The darkness roiled. The voices rejoiced with feral snarls.

The world before Kurtha Sedd's eyes was still bathed in the clarity of night. But as it shook and transformed, as it tried to hurl him into the air or plunge him down the spreading crevasses in the floor, coherence broke down. He was no longer running through linked caverns. He was struggling through a maelstrom of stone.

Chaos. Harness it well.

The cultists never stopped chanting. Even the dying shouted their praise as they were left behind. Kurtha Sedd led the hymns of cancerous words, and he dared to reach out to the darkness.

The entrance to the pipeline chamber waited around the next bend to the right. Kurtha Sedd prepared for the Ultramarines defences. The darkness was with him and of him. He felt the fragility of the veil beneath the talons of his will. It tore. The darkness lashed out. There was a sudden flood. The night of the underworld became a battering wave. It was huge, and how could he be worthy, in his impurity, of something of this vastness? Kurtha Sedd pulled his will back. He released the veil.

But the dark did not release him. It never would, and nor did he wish it to. It sped him on. He was its fist and its acolyte. It was the end of reason, the end of stability.

It ate into the reality of the caverns. The tunnel shook itself into a blur. The

ceiling before the bend fell in, blocking the way with tonnes of rubble. On the right, a massive crevasse opened up. It ran roughly parallel to the tunnel. With the crack and thunder of parting rock, it widened like a stretching maw. It swallowed the wall. Huge slabs tumbled into a void, vanishing into the greater, coiling darkness of the depths.

Kurtha Sedd stopped. He was at the edge of the drop. The deep called to him, and when he gazed down, he saw that the darkness in the tunnels was a mere echo of what waited below. The greater power was hungry. He would feed it. He would free it, if only he were worthy to do so. But for now it lashed out at the integrity of the caverns, and it opened the way. It opened many ways.

It opened the way to the pipeline chamber.

The walls were gone between the Word Bearers and their goal. The cavern was on the other side of the groaning crevasse. It was huge. The ceiling was fifty metres high. It was supported by pillars thick as Rhinos. Stalactites hung like gigantic chandeliers. The far wall was dominated by a huge mosaic depicting the construction of the arcologies. Guilliman's vision was joined to the industry of the masses.

In the centre of the chamber were the pipelines. Each had the same huge diameter as the pillars. They were monsters of blackened iron. There were six of them, assembled in a tight parallel. On the left, they plunged downwards, towards the great promethium reserves deep within the planet. On the right, they branched into smaller lines that flowed in all directions back into the stone, taking the fuel across this region of the arcologies.

The Ultramarines had set up defences within the chamber, controlling the exits. But the one to the left was blocked, destroyed by the cave-in. Now there was a new entrance, and it was the entire side of the chamber.

The world trembled and roared. The crevasse widened. In a few more seconds, it would be too big to cross. *'Repent of your lies!'* Kurtha Sedd shouted at the Ultramarines. *'Enlightenment has come!'*

Crozius raised high, he leapt. The dark reached up for him. It seemed to add force to his flight. He landed on the other side. His brothers were close behind him. The crevasse was wider yet when the last few made the jump. Cultists fell. So did two Word Bearers. Kurtha Sedd blinked away the flashing runes in his tactical display. Their names did not matter. They did not matter now, except as food for the hunger below.

Sor Gharax remained on the other side. Howling with frustration, he blanketed the rightward Ultramarines position with cannon shells. That end of the chamber

disappeared in a riot of explosions.

Kurtha Sedd led Fifth Company in a solid mass along the side of the pipelines. The shelf of rock between the fuel conduits and the crevasse was less than five metres wide. Narrow, a good corridor for enemy fire. But the Bull kept hitting the Ultramarines, and the cavern shook like a Chimera in the hand of a Titan. Footing was treacherous. Aiming with any precision was impossible. And so the two forces moved towards direct engagement.

Stalactites dropped, spears of stone a metre wide. They crushed mortals and impaled Space Marines. Large chunks of the ceiling broke away, coming down like meteors on the combatants. Some punched through the pipelines. Promethium fountained out of the rents. It poured to the floor of the chamber, eager for flame.

Sor Gharax's barrage ignited the fuel as giants in crimson and blue clashed. The two forces collided beneath the branching pipelines. The melee spilled wide across the bucking cavern floor. Kurtha Sedd grappled with a loyalist. He battered a chainsword away with his crozius and slammed his full weight against the enemy. Then everything was flame, an unending explosion. His armour's sensors warned him of intense heat and rising damage. He ignored them, lost in the struggle and the ecstasy of total destruction.

These are my deeds, he thought as he knocked the Ultramarine back. *This is my Chaos*. The legionary raised a bolter. Kurtha Sedd smashed his right arm, breaking armour and bone. The Ultramarine shifted the weapon to his left hand. Kurtha Sedd dodged right, firing with his plasma pistol. He melted away his enemy's flank. The Ultramarine sagged but stumbled forwards, enraged with pain. A huge fall of flaming promethium came down on him, enveloping, drowning, burning. The Ultramarine collapsed. Kurtha Sedd turned around and bolter shells burst against his chest.

The blows cracked his amour and sent him sprawling. The world disappeared as he dropped below the surface of the liquid flame. He stood up, roaring defiance and faith. Fire ran down his length. He was a walking torch. The pain was an insult he turned into the enemy's blood, shooting in reply and racing forwards, bringing the crozius down on a sergeant's skull, seeing the burst of deep red against the shrieking blue of the promethium's flame.

Chaos. Storm. Madness. The struggling figures were shadows in the fire. The battle had no cohesion. There was just the desperation of slaughter, a striking-out against vague, contorted shapes. Enemies and brothers burst from the maelstrom and then sank back in. Kurtha Sedd lunged at the shadows. Proximity turned

them into enemies, and he brought them down, smashing again and again with the crozius, smashing again and again with the force of truth.

The world shook harder, and harder yet. It upended. Kurtha Sedd tumbled through a battering of stone and flailing metal. The grind of rock drowned out the flame and the pounding of the assault cannon. The floor dropped, rose and shuddered from side to side. It cracked wide open. The deeper night appeared in a jagged slash beneath the incandescent blue. A second jaw opened, greater and wider than the first crevasse.

And the tearing, grinding shrieking of the underworld went on, louder and louder. It was everywhere, an immensity of shattering. Then light, a light as terrible as the darkness, the light of a great and final fire, came slashing in from above. It struck with the force of a beam weapon. Kurtha Sedd could not ignore it. He winced. His auto-senses shuttered themselves against the light of a sun come to burn its own children. He staggered. There was nowhere to turn. The quake had torn open the surface of Calth. The wrath of Veridia stabbed into the heart of the arcologies.

Judgement.

No. No, he rejected the dread. The light was destroying Ultramarines and Word Bearers alike. Destruction had come for all.

These are my works.

He overrode the auto-sense. He opened the shutters. He must see to move. He must bear witness. Light slashed his vision, but he saw the sublimity of annihilation. The earth parted and fell. Pillars tumbled, their huge masses destroying pipelines and erasing the struggling warriors beneath them. The ceiling had vanished, yet boulders cascaded down in the jaws of the quake. Ruins of the natural and the constructed plummeted and were thrown upwards. There was nothing but destruction, nothing but the storm, yet the war went on, beyond sense, beyond hope.

These are my works.

The floor vanished as the most violent tremor of all threw Kurtha Sedd into the air. Stone and fire, darkness and light, pain and fury, they were all one. There was nothing but the maelstrom. He was suspended. In this moment, he had nothing but faith.

In this moment, and for just this moment, the burdens released him.

He had no expectation except death.

But even now, as the end came for him, there was no peace. He had not completed his duty. The darkness still called.

Death would be failure, and he cried out, '*My work is not done!*'
The moment ended. He fell through the light, and into the dark.

PART THREE

THE BURDEN
OF FLESH

TWELVE

**To the bone
Octed
The Great Task**

He was alone in the holy dark. He was walking. He did not know how long he had been conscious. He did not remember the end of his fall, or how he had woken. He did not know how far he had dropped. The servo-motors of his armour whined. Its plate was cracked and scarred, the words of the Book of Lorgar scraped and distorted. Some of the damage had created new words. He knew this, though he could not read them.

His body was heavy with pain. His armour dragged at some gestures and pulled others forwards with too much energy. His movements were a succession of rapid jerks. His muscles began to compensate immediately, smoothing out his gait, but the effort remained. With every action, he was reminded of the limitations and the inescapable reality of the flesh.

The quake had stopped. The ground was solid, still as death. He moved through the blackness of the corpse of Calth. He had been walking before his awareness had returned. So he kept walking. He had no destination. He had no location. He walked without purpose. The darkness was the most profound he had experienced. It did not grace him with the clarity of vision he had experienced earlier. His helm light showed no more than his next step. He cycled through ultraviolet and infrared ranges. The darkness was unchanged. It did not wish him to see.

He accepted its judgement. Grief weighed him down still further. He had failed.

He was unworthy.

But as he walked, step by step over uneven stone, the grief slipped away. His task was not complete, and if he lived, then the duty was still his to fulfil. Step by step, learning the new motion of his body, step by step, and his mind cleared. Surrounded by a scaled night, blind except for the next step, and the next step, he began to understand. He began to truly see.

His last memory before the oblivion of the fall: the liberation from all burdens. A moment of divine grace in the midst of absolute chaos. Perfection within perfection. The two states coincided not by chance, but by necessity. One led to the other.

He would murder the galaxy to shed the burdens once more.

He walked faster, his steps more urgent and reckless. He marched to find that liberation. He would achieve it through the performance of his duty, through a supreme act of faith. He would find the truth of his duty somewhere in the dark ahead.

Something crunched beneath his tread. He stopped and looked down. It was a shard of crimson armour. He moved on, and saw more ceramite fragments, both blue and red. Perhaps he was truly alone. Perhaps the crevasse had swallowed all, and he was the only survivor of the XVII and XIII Legions on Calth. The civilians would be dead too. He could be the only living thing on the planet, a lone maggot moving through the rotting carcass of the world.

The thought had appeal. There was a kind of victory in that. The possibility that his brother Word Bearers were dead did not bother him. All lives were expendable in the service of the gods. If their destiny had been to perish in the great convulsion, so be it. Kurtha Sedd was of the Legion, but his first duty was to the gods. The Legion had abandoned him. It had misled him. Its fate could not concern him. He was a Word Bearer in the most profound sense. He would bear the words of truth more faithfully for his lack of concern about his lesser brothers.

Bear it where? Bear witness to whom?

No answer. But he walked faster, gaining strength and mastery over his movements. Faster, until he was running.

The call had him. Its source was close. He had not realised at first that it was still pulling him because he was so completely immersed in its power. But now he was aware of it, and he answered with the full consciousness of what he was doing. He plunged forwards through the perfect darkness, heedless of drops and barriers. His chest expanded with exultation. His lips pulled back in a snarl of

worship, his prayer so full of praise and violence that it could not be articulated. He had followed the assigned path, and he was triumphant. He had gone uphill in order to descend, and the glorious fall had taken him. He had broken through to the greatest depths.

He thanked the gods. His thanks took the form of a raging hiss. He ran faster, racing over the final metres between himself and his invisible destiny. He was of the darkness, and he flowed with it. He felt the weight of his armour and the pain throughout his body. At the same time, he was not of the flesh. It seemed to slip away from him again, to become a thing of the background, a minor concern he had transcended.

This moment is important. Mark it.

The thought rang with the force of a great bell. It was spoken by a powerful voice. He did not know if it was his. No matter. It was a truth. He honoured it.

Faster. *Faster*. Through agony and against stone, with the dark and in it, blind to direction. There were no surroundings. There was only the black and the call.

Only sanctity and truth.

And then he halted. The stop was sudden, unwilling on his part, as hard as if his flight had been arrested by a divine hand. He stood still, gasping for breath, feeling for the first time his ribs working to knit themselves back together. He did not know why he had stopped. His body refused to take another step.

His vision slowly changed. His eyes adjusted to the dark. No, no, that was wrong. It was the dark that was shifting. It was withdrawing some of its strength, pulling back from omnipresence. It no longer filled the cavern. It receded like a tide, leaving the natural dark in its wake. Kurtha Sedd's photolenses worked again. He distinguished between the two kinds of dark. He saw tendrils of the night of the warp draining along the floor of the cavern, and then falling into a wonder.

There was another descent before him. The greatest of them all.

He stood at the edge of the true abyss. The subterranean gorge was deep and wide. It was at least a hundred metres across, and the far side was a sheer wall dropping straight down from the ceiling, itself barely visible in its height. There were more stalactites here. They were grey claws in the gloom, reaching towards the gorge, stone seeking to answer the powerful call.

The depths of the abyss were invisible. They were not infinite, though. The greatness of the descent had nothing to do with its dimensions. The greatness came from what lay at the bottom.

Kurtha Sedd's breath became a sob of awe.

He gazed into the dark, and the dark was not empty. A vision waited. He could almost see it. There was no light. The vision was a thing of darkness so profound that though it could not be seen, it was so visible it would brand sight.

It had a form, but Kurtha Sedd could not discern it. It was too vast. Its contours were beyond his perception. Yet it was his duty to witness it. It was his duty to...

To...

To do what?

He swayed. He teetered on the edge of the fall. He reached out as if his hands could grasp his mission. The full revelation was just beyond his fingers. It brushed the edge of his soul.

'Help me,' he pleaded. 'Urizen,' he said. 'Hear me, Urizen. Guide me, Urizen. I am chosen. I embrace this truth. Show me the way. Show me what I am called upon to do. Urizen, teach me.'

Urizen. He called upon Lorgar's title. The primarch's name did not cross his lips. He did not picture the face he had looked upon only hours before. *Urizen.* Not Lorgar himself, but what Lorgar should be. The voice of truth, unalterable. Infallible. In Kurtha Sedd's mind, Lorgar and the Urizen were overlapping outlines, almost perfectly congruent, but only almost. Lorgar could be wrong. The Urizen was infallible.

Kurtha Sedd had been chosen. So the Urizen declared. It was the Urizen who could grant him the vision to see his full truth at last.

Reaching out, leaning to the edge of equilibrium, balancing over the void.

'Guide me.' A whisper falling into the dark.

It would take so little to fall with his words.

So little for the chains to loose forever, for the end of all burdens.

Once more, his flesh became a thing of unimportance, a great distance away. His soul was free, suspended in the black. But the soul too, was a burden. It was the source of burdens, the curse that willingly wrapped itself in chains.

To be free of all burdens was to be free of his soul.

And now he saw. Now he saw the shape of the vision.

He saw the Octed.

There, in the furthest depths of Calth's network of caverns, meaning had been carved through the rock. The lines and curves of the tunnels, their intersections and the extrusion of caverns, they all came together to form the symbol. Kilometres long, the eight-fold rune waited to be unleashed. It was incomplete. Passageways had collapsed. Others were fragmentary, reaching towards each other and fulfilment but stopping short. The Octed intruded into existence, and it

writhed in the limbo of potential.

A great task.

Kurtha Sedd saw what was there, he saw what might be, and he saw what he must do.

And then, though its being was partial, its full power a revelation to come, the Octed unveiled a great truth. It took the pain of Kurtha Sedd's life. It took the burdens. It took the contradictions and lies and the betrayals and the blood, and it gave them meaning. As the tunnels formed its contours, it took the lineaments of his torment, and showed their form. Their shape. The rune they made, and the words they bore. His life had come to this point so that he could understand the revelation. He needed to be conscious of the burdens of existence, to feel all their dagger points, to know the nuances of their mass, so that he might grasp the awaiting transcendence.

All burdens must be shed.

The past, the present, the material body itself.

And then the flesh shall be fused with the warp.

A great task.

He was weightless. Unburdened, he began to step forwards.

A hand grasped his arm.

Toc Derenoth caught Kurtha Sedd as he was about to walk into the abyss. The Chaplain's pleas for guidance had echoed through the caverns and off the walls of the crevasse in which Toc Derenoth and some of his battle-brothers had fallen. Toc Derenoth had followed the sound and the withdrawing darkness to here. A second later and the Chaplain would have been gone.

Toc Derenoth pulled Kurtha Sedd's right arm, bringing him back from the void and turning him around. 'Chaplain,' he said. 'Can you understand me? Are you well?' He dreaded to learn that Kurtha Sedd was mad. The loss of the company's leader in addition to the newest casualties would hurt. The divide between the more pragmatic and more spiritual Word Bearers would grow worse. With no clear mission, the injury caused by the Legion's abandonment of Calth would fester.

Kurtha Sedd faced him in silence for a moment. Then he shook his arm free of Toc Derenoth's grasp and removed his helm. Toc Derenoth took a step back. The Chaplain's eyes blazed. They were wide with revelation, shining with the reflected glory of black flame. Toc Derenoth had rarely seen Kurtha Sedd's face in the decades since Monarchia. It was a gaunt, wretched death's head, the skin

mortified again and again by an overlapping patchwork of runic scars. The rituals embedded in his flesh were deep wounds. They were self-inflicted assaults, as if the pain of the flesh would distract from the pain of the soul. They were bleeding anew, all of them, whether recent or more than forty years old. Kurtha Sedd's skull was covered in a thick film of blood, and the eyes looked out from their hollows with terrifying joy. The Chaplain was as changed as he had been by the events on Khur. The bitterness and the tortured rage that had defined him since then were now overlaid by a ferocity of faith, a determination that could shatter worlds.

Toc Derenoth felt Kurtha Sedd's gaze pierce his being, seeing not who he was but what he must become. After a few seconds, they focused on him and the present.

'Brother,' said Kurtha Sedd. His voice was strong with barely contained urgency. 'You live. Are you alone?'

'No. There are others. I'm not sure how many. We were scattered by the fall.'

'Find them. Gather them. Bring them here.' He gestured at the pit behind him. 'We have work to do. The gods await us. There are miracles to come.' He pushed Toc Derenoth back. 'Find them,' he said. *'Find them!'*

Toc Derenoth had never disobeyed the Chaplain. Now, though, he was staggered by the force of the command. Nothing could disobey Kurtha Sedd now. The very stone would march at his command. Toc Derenoth turned and ran back into the gloom, calling to his brothers on the vox. Kurtha Sedd's voice travelled before him. He was not pleading now. He was preaching.

'Brothers!' Kurtha Sedd shouted. *'The end is before us! The end of the enemy! The end of his hope! The end of all lies! Transcendence is here! THE FLESH OF VICTORY WILL BE OURS!'*

With a voice as loud as the quake, he was shaping the destiny of all Fifth Company.

He was roaring truth.

THIRTEEN

Unfinished duty Absolute Rise

The vision was leaking away from Kurtha Sedd's mind. He was having more and more trouble keeping the contours of the Octed before his eyes. The means of transcendence became vague. He knew he could reach into the warp. But he was no longer sure he knew how. The perfect clarity that had come when he was suspended over the void was no longer his. He raged with prayers and sermons as his brothers gathered before him. He shared the truth. He shared the wonder of the Octed. It was as if imparting the revelation diluted it.

But that could not be so. His duty was to spread the Word. That was the meaning of his role as Chaplain. The gods could not have shown him the truth only to decree he should be unable to turn reality to their service. But though his conviction was strong, and sacred fanaticism spread before him, ignited by his voice, his confidence in his skills, and in his ability to complete the appointed task, diminished.

The burdens were wrapping their chains around him once more. Something was dragging him back from the edge of the transcendent. Something was trapping him in the old pains.

It could not be his brothers.

Aethon, he realised.

That task remained undone. He had not killed that echo of his past. The reminder of old friendship, the old *friend*, still lived. No matter how far the

devastation of the quake had spread, Kurtha Sedd knew Aethon had survived. Fate would not be cheated. The test Kurtha Sedd most dreaded was for that very reason the most vital. He had not proved his faith. He had not smashed the chains of that burden.

He paused in his sermon. He faced the truth. He let it sink in.

Until he killed Aethon, Kurtha Sedd's work would be incomplete. *He* would be incomplete.

Blood still coated his scalp and face. He wiped it from his eyes and replaced his helm. He looked at his congregation. Word Bearers and cultists were arranged in a semicircle before him. The mortals were torn bags of flesh. Bones stuck out of arms and shoulders. Some had dragged themselves here, unable to walk on shattered legs. Kurtha Sedd knew better now than to be surprised that any had survived the fall. They were useful tools of the gods, and their faith impregnable. It was as invincible as the faith of the worshippers on Khur. Theirs had been misplaced, through no fault of their own, and he had been able to destroy it only by destroying them. He had been right to do so. Unbending faith was a power, even when it was faith in lies.

But faith in the truth. Ah, that is a greater power yet.

The cultists served the gods. They served the truth. They would serve until there was nothing left of their flesh.

That time is coming.

It would come when he killed Aethon. Not before.

He drew his crozius. Blood coursed down his face and pooled around the interior of his gorget. 'War and revelation await us,' he announced. He turned his back on the congregation and walked to the edge of the abyss. He spread his arms. 'We have work to do.'

So did he.

He had to stanch the injury to his great vision.

'The Chaplain has much to say about the flesh,' Vor Raennag said.

'Yes,' Toc Derenoth said. He kept his voice neutral. He wanted to see where the sergeant was going with his thoughts.

They were standing near the edge of the drop, on the left side of the cavern. Kurtha Sedd had ceased his preaching for the moment. He was giving orders for the formation of work parties and the disposition of defences.

'Do you know what he means?' Vor Raennag asked.

'No.'

Vor Raennag frowned. ‘You are being very cautious with your responses, brother.’

‘Perhaps.’

‘What do you think of Kurtha Sedd’s words?’

‘What is there to think? I cannot doubt his truth.’ Nor did he. But he was evading Vor Raennag’s question. The sermon was making him think. It fired his faith. It also made him uneasy.

‘I do not understand what the transcendence of the flesh will be,’ Vor Raennag said.

‘We will soon enough.’

‘Will we?’

Toc Derenoth said nothing.

Vor Raennag sighed. ‘Don’t misunderstand me, brother. I don’t question the Chaplain’s faith or that he has been chosen by the gods themselves. I believe they speak to him.’

‘You wonder if he interprets their words correctly,’ Toc Derenoth said.

‘Faith is not enough. Training and experience matter. There is a hierarchy in the Chaplaincy for a reason.’

‘Kurtha Sedd is no novice.’

‘No. But he is not Erebus.’ Vor Raennag glanced down into the darkness. ‘What Kurtha Sedd says lies below must be incredibly powerful. It would dwarf the forces already unleashed. They have hurt us as well as the enemy. Now we are to descend and begin a massive excavation. Our position is vulnerable.’

‘You’re worried about the strategy.’

‘Aren’t you? You lead your squad now, brother. Is this the moment to begin such a project? Should we be dividing our forces?’

‘How do you know we are?’ Kaeloq had come up behind them and spoken before Toc Derenoth could answer. His tone, even through the distortion of the vox-grille, was sneering. It was also angry.

Vor Raennag looked at him. ‘You have something to say, legionary?’

‘That your faith is dangerously lacking, *sergeant*.’

Vor Raennag took a step towards him.

‘And,’ Kaeloq continued, ‘Kurtha Sedd calls for you.’

Vor Raennag grunted. He flexed unclenched the fist he had formed and stalked towards the Chaplain.

‘You as well, brother,’ Kaeloq said.

Toc Derenoth nodded. Kaeloq fell in with him as he followed Vor Raennag.

‘How can he have doubts?’ Kaeloq demanded.

Toc Derenoth said, ‘They are concerns about strategy. That’s all.’

‘Oh? He is ready to embrace the transcendence of the flesh?’

‘Are you?’

‘Oh yes,’ Kaeloq answered, hissing with religious ecstasy. ‘I hunger for it.’

But what is it? Toc Derenoth wondered.

Ahead of them, Vor Raennag had reached Kurtha Sedd and begun to speak to him. ‘Chaplain, I do not question the importance of the Octed. But should we be dividing our forces before we—’

Kurtha Sedd struck him with the crozius. The blow was sudden, crashing against Vor Raennag’s right shoulder. The spikes of the eight-pointed star slashed the side of his face open to the bone. Vor Raennag staggered. He slipped over the edge of the gorge. He dropped, grabbing at the ground. He held on to the stone, and started to pull himself back up. Kurtha Sedd kicked his skull. ‘Be still,’ he snarled.

Toc Derenoth stiffened as if the command had been directed at him. So did Kaeloq. Throughout the cavern, no one moved.

Vor Raennag sagged. His grip slipped. Only his head remained above the drop now.

‘Am I a fool?’ Kurtha Sedd asked. ‘Do you think I do not value the military victory?’ He leaned over Vor Raennag. ‘It is your understanding that is deficient, sergeant,’ he said. ‘The tactical and the spiritual are the same. I should not need to explain that to any Word Bearer.’ He straightened. He spread his arms in worship towards the abyss. ‘We shall labour for the gods. We will undertake a task whose completion will steal the planet from the Ultramarines more utterly than any invasion. Calth itself will turn on them. It will be one with Chaos. As we shall be. We shall be without burden. Ours will be the flesh of the warp.’

He lowered his arms. He turned to face the Word Bearers again. ‘But we have another task first. We must welcome our enemy to his doom.’

Then he whispered. He spoke to Vor Raennag without looking at him. The whisper lashed across the cave. Toc Derenoth winced. ‘There will be no more questions now. We have found the truth. The time for doubt has ended. He who doubts is without faith. You will have no other warning, sergeant. Next time, you fall.’

He marched away from the sergeant. Word Bearers and cultists followed him. Toc Derenoth watched Vor Raennag lift himself up. He walked away with Kaeloq. There was no choice.

There could be no more questions. Even so, they remained. *The flesh of the warp*. He wondered about that. The meaning of the phrase was obscure. It made him uneasy.

He would do as the Chaplain commanded. But he would watch.

He could not shake the impression that his claim on his very being had become tenuous.

The anointing of Sor Gharax began.

The Bull stood in the centre of the cavern. The cultists held his attention with their chants. They gave offerings to his rage, and he accepted them, crushing the bodies with his power fist. Kurtha Sedd was satisfied the Dreadnought would contain his fury until it was called for. Until then, the cultists prepared Sor Gharax for holy war. Khrothis, a broken arm twisted behind her back, led the ritual. The mortals took splinters of bone from the sacrifices, dipped them in the blood, and marked the sarcophagus with the runes of worship. Signs of excess, of plague, of war and of transformation spread over Sor Gharax. Rather than cover the engraved words, the blood appeared to entwine with them. With ropes woven of hair and cloth, the cultists hung limbs and skulls from his arms.

Kurtha Sedd watched the transformation and approved. He did not think Sor Gharax would be subject to the fusion to come. Even so, the Bull was becoming a thing with purloined flesh. This was fitting.

Kurtha Sedd walked the perimeter of the cave. The Word Bearers followed. Where he pointed, they took up positions. There were two tunnels that fed into the cave on the side opposite the great rift. The entrances were too large. To defend them properly, most of the remaining company would have to be assigned to that mission.

Pointless. The goal was not to keep the Ultramarines out. The goal was their destruction. The goal was the death of Aethon.

An ambush, though. A kill-zone for the enemy to pass through. Something to slow the Ultramarines down. He might need a bit more time. 'Set up a crossfire,' he said. 'Include both entrances in a single ambush.' He raised a hand to forestall objections none would dare voice. 'This is not ideal, I know. But we will bite into their flanks. That will be sufficient. And there is cover.' Huge pillars rose to the ceiling throughout the cavern. They were so old they were encrusted with limestone formations. Kurtha Sedd wondered if the Ultramarines even remembered this region of the caverns existed. The columns were of human construction, but they were touched by age and the malevolence of the force

below. They were tactically useful. They would help disrupt the coherence of a charge.

‘Will they come, Chaplain?’ Kaeloq asked.

Kurtha Sedd nodded. This sort of question, worshipful and awed, was acceptable. Kaeloq was not challenging him. He was seeking enlightenment. ‘They will come. They will leave their hiding places. We’ll see to that.’

He would leave the Ultramarines no choice. The terms of the war were about to change. The Word Bearers had been throwing themselves against the XIII Legion’s strongpoints and navigating territory that Aethon knew well. No longer. This cavern and the depths it revealed belonged to the Word Bearers. This time, there would be no searching for the Ultramarines. They would be the ones to seek, and they would find their doom waiting.

So Kurtha Sedd preached. So he must believe.

Am I Aethon’s doom? It is my task. It is my fate.

Yes.

The questions kept coming back at him. His answer never changed. Nor did his doubts.

When the dispositions were complete, he returned to the lip of the abyss. He stood beside a pillar whose base extended over the void. Two half-circles of Word Bearers and cultists defended his position. The rest of Fifth Company waited near the entrances and behind the stalagmites. They were ready.

He was ready.

‘Brothers,’ he called, filling the cavern with his voice, ‘our true work begins now.’

He began to chant. He spoke words given shape by the Octed. Their sounds were cancerous, a corrosion of the real. His spirit reached out to the depths of the abyss. He called to the darkness. He touched the veil. He called to the beings beyond it.

Though he did not stop chanting, he paused before he exercised his will and tore the veil. Was he truly worthy? The absolute clarity of his vision was lost to him. He knew what he must do, but not how to do it. The warp and the flesh must be one. He knew this. But a shadow of ignorance fell between his task and his action.

Aethon was not dead. When that task was complete, he hoped the clarity would return. But to complete the task, he needed first to tear the veil.

It was so easy to tear. Tortured by the Octed, the veil was so thin, it took the slightest tug of his will to create a rift in the real. He widened it, opening the

way. The cavern rang with the cry of a wind from the other side. The sound was hollow, rusted, pained by blades and teeth. It was a storm made of nightmares.

Now the real test of Kurtha Sedd's skill began. The doubts surged. He defied them. He spoke new words, ones that would do more than tear at the real. They were words of summoning.

The darkness responded first. It rose as before, a spread of grasping tendrils racing through the cavern, over floor and walls and ceiling. The tendrils thickened as they pulled the greater mass of the dark behind them. The clutching hand became a tide, and the tide became a flood. The night of madness filled the cavern. It gibbered and wailed. Its voices were much louder than before. Stronger. They were hungry. They were eager to take possession of the world.

They were not enough. In his mind's eye, Kurtha Sedd stood before the rift. There were things on the other side. He could see them moving with slow, constrictor rhythms and electrical jerks. He could not make out the shapes. They seemed to flow and shift just beyond the limits of his vision. He bade them come. He pulled the rift even wider.

'Enter,' he said. 'Enter and feast.'

Something reached across the barrier. It began to take shape.

Kurtha Sedd's perspective shifted. He was looking through his physical eyes again. He stared down from the edge of the floor. The dark beneath him twisted, forming whorls and knots of tension. It rippled and bulged. The bulges tore open. Things emerged from the bubbles of the night's flesh. They began to crawl up the cliff.

The cries, the whispers and the laughter grew more intense. The voices circled him, then chased the others of their kind around the cavern. They celebrated. They threatened.

Things climbed. Kurtha Sedd saw the walls of the gorge in every detail. The higher the beings climbed, the more clearly he could see them. Yet their features refused to define themselves. Their shapes remained fluid. They were masses of shifting flesh. Colours pulsed, mixed, changed. Flesh was the pink of exposed muscle, then the blue of decay, the green of disease, the red of wrath. Scales became hair, hair became claws, claws became eyes. Jagged limbs punched into stone and hauled bodies higher, only to merge with the greater mass as tentacles sprouted with a viscous sound to corrode the rock and grip again. Things reached for each other and merged into a larger horror. Kurtha Sedd saw a monster form. For several seconds, there was the outline of a great mass. The horns on its head were as big as a man. Its jaws widened, revealing teeth curving and twisting in

all directions. In the throat, an eye with twin white pupils stared unblinkingly at Kurtha Sedd.

The jaw opened wider and wider. The angle passed one hundred and eighty degrees. The head tore. The rip extended down the throat, through the chest. The creature split in half. Its mass dissolved into a tangle of fleshy strands of night. Then it was gone.

Kurtha Sedd growled in frustration. The pattern repeated again and again. Things climbed, merged, grew, disintegrated. The dark of the gorge boiled with incomplete creation. Bubbles of potential expanded and burst. Flesh and smoke and magma, the squalling, struggling mass rose higher and higher, but it also slowed. The surface of the daemonic ocean was still many metres from the top of the rift. Nothing coherent formed.

Hundreds of limbs reached up to Kurtha Sedd, pleading. Maws gaped. They cried his name for they had none of their own. They were unable to be.

Kurtha Sedd shouted the prayers. He called on the gods. 'Urizen!' he howled. 'Guide my efforts!' It was not enough to open the way. The things that crossed over needed to feed on the materium. They needed to mould reality into its antithesis. The Chaplain was the conduit. Through his sorcery, the coming-to-being would be complete. It depended on his strength and skill.

He was failing.

The multitude he had summoned could not retain its hold on the materium. It scabbled up the cliff of existence only to fall away.

'*Rise!*' Kurtha Sedd commanded. '*Rise! Take the world as your prey!*'

Monstrosity heaved upwards and dropped back.

He was not strong enough.

'Annunake!' Kurtha Sedd called. 'You are needed!'

Sor Gharax lurched towards the edge of the cliff. The Bull was mad, but the Bull was wise. He had been living the endless death of the flesh for decade after decade. His insanity was the acute stab of the truth of things. Now, graced by blood and runes, he was destruction made manifest, and he was an altar that walked. A warrior priest immured in his temple. Kurtha Sedd gazed upon the reified prayers that dripped and squirmed across the ceramite. He raised his arms in praise. He focused on the concrete incarnation of Chaos at war. The being of Sor Gharax was indestructible. Kurtha Sedd used it to channel his strength. He took the monstrous image of the Dreadnought. He fixed it as a model and called upon the potential below to take shape.

Claws and horns and serpentine twists boiled upwards. Bodies defined

themselves. They remained stable. They laughed. They climbed.

And then they fell back again to dissolve into the frothing dark.

Not enough. Not enough. His voice was hoarse with his chants. The words of truth cut his throat and cut the real. The wounds on his skull bled freely. Inside his helm there was nothing but the smell and taste of blood. Vitae rained from nowhere onto the shifting horror. Lips metres wide formed to drink it. A skein of rippling muscle the width and breadth of the gorge climbed until Kurtha Sedd could touch it. All he had to do was kneel and reach out. He did. His fingers brushed the flesh. He felt foetid warmth and liquid through his gauntlet. Muscle went from taut to deliquescent and clung to his hand.

The flesh shall be fused with the warp.

The mass trembled. It coalesced into hundreds of thrashing, struggling bodies. They were distinct. They were real. And then they dissolved again. The dark howled in frustration, cracking the ceiling with its rage. Stalactites fell into the gorge. The warp mass swallowed them.

The flesh shall be fused with the warp.

The refrain of truth beat through his mind. The vital sliver of the vision that still remained to him was the key to the full manifestation of the servants of the gods. To summon was a beginning. Fruition would come through fusion.

But he did not know how.

Frustration and despair pressed down on his shoulders with the weight of the rock above. He could not stop. Through will and faith alone he would complete his task. He would bring forth the army that would devastate the loyalists.

But the old burdens were still there, sapping his strength, eroding certainty.

Kurtha Sedd roared, and the maws of the half-formed and the half-real roared back. He called to them, and they called to him, and his chains held him back.

The rattling thunder of bolter fire broke through his concentration.

No, he thought. Not now. Not yet.

The test had come. And he was not ready.

FOURTEEN

Unworthy The last charge Unburdened

I am not worthy.

The truth was a blow as lethal as an athame. It was the truth long suspected, long evaded, now hitting home.

Kurtha Sedd turned around. Though he chanted, though he called to the gods of Chaos, his prayers lost the force of his concentration. He saw fate come for him, and with it the terrible suspicion that he had been wrong. Though Kurtha Sedd could not see him, he knew his nemesis was here.

Aethon was here. So Kurtha Sedd had declared. His new surge of doubt was over the outcome of the encounter.

The two rings of Word Bearers protecting his position opened fire on the advancing phalanxes of Ultramarines. The loyalists came in two large formations from both entrances. They turned on the ambush lines to the left and right and overwhelmed them with a barrage of shells and flammers. Midway between one entrance and the defensive position, a portion of their crude outer barricade collapsed. There was another passageway on the other side. Aethon burst from it, leading another squad.

The loyalists took damage from the ambush. Some of them fell, but their two phalanxes prevented enfilading fire. They outnumbered the ambushers and finished them off. The Word Bearers struck from the shelter of the pillars, but there weren't enough to hold the advance back. The Ultramarines were closing

in three formations on the principal position around Kurtha Sedd. They raked the cavern ahead of them with a hail of shells. They would not be stopped.

Isn't this what you wanted? Kurtha Sedd thought. Isn't this what is destined?

It was. But the sight of Aethon was a goad to the doubts. Kurtha Sedd had not seen him since Monarchia, not knowingly at least. In a moment, he was overwhelmed by all the anger and grief of betrayal. The wars fought in a common cause. The life he had saved was one he must now take, and he did not know if he could. If one of his own brothers disobeyed him, Kurtha Sedd would kill that Word Bearer without regret or hesitation. He had spared Vor Raennag only in the service of a final warning. But Aethon was the embodiment of all the burdens of his past. Everything Kurtha Sedd had once believed, everything he had once conquered worlds for, had not slipped from him without trace after Monarchia. The lingering expectation of judgement was their symptom.

I am not worthy, he thought again.

Behind him, the immanent flesh sighed and fell away, leaving only the darkness of the void.

In the centre of the cavern, Sor Gharax bellowed his challenge to the Ultramarines.

The liars come to their execution at his hands.

Charging forwards, the ground shaking beneath his tread.

Cultists on both sides, worshipful vermin racing with him, their hymns resonating through his sarcophagus.

Hammering the enemy phalanxes with the cannon, then pounding into the formation. His power fist slamming left and right, crunching the enemy to blood.

A blaze of light and heat from three Ultramarines with rocket launchers. Massive impact on the right of his front armour, stopping him cold.

Turning in wrath, annihilation blazing from his cannon arm. The first of his attackers exploding as a dozen shells hit him in the space of seconds.

Terminators. Swing, punch. Blood crackling on his iron fist.

One more Terminator. A captain.

His cannon arm is knocked wide. Staggering. Stumbling.

The enemy are all around him now.

Two *clunks* on his flanks, reaching through the haze of anger. Mag-locks to the sarcophagus.

Melta bombs.

Swinging his fist to the right, breaking an Ultramarine, but too late, too late.

Detonation. The heat of suns turning his armour to liquid. Sensors wailing, then dying. A new pain hitting the ruin of his body, scraping his senses to blinding white. Overload of information, cascading systems failure, the sarcophagus breaking down. Two bodies dying at once.

Encroaching dark.

Move. Hurt them. Take them into the black. Take them into the truth.

Lurching around, left leg much slower than the right, arms flailing, power fist opening and closing in spasms. The assault cannon firing wide and wild. Pain in his heart, like a fistful of razorblades.

Moving towards the abyss. Enveloped in smoke and flame.

The Bull at bay, a meteor of blood.

Unstoppable.

Thunder of footsteps and cannon fire, the crunch and cry of trampled enemies and brothers and mortals. Blasting and burning a swath of absolute death.

Left leg locking. Falling forwards. The dark within reach.

Impact. Still moving. The vague perception of bodies beneath him.

Then weightless.

A fall.

And even then, a new pain.

Sor Gharax smashed through the Ultramarines surrounding him. His final stagger scraped the battlefield as if he were the siege shield of a Vindicator. Ultramarines, Word Bearers and cultists were swept up in the charge. He demolished the lines of attackers and defenders. He crashed through a column, bringing down rolling monoliths of stone. He was a monster of tortured metal. It was a dark wonder that he managed to walk at all. Kurtha Sedd saw the will of the gods in the Bull's terrible charge.

His fall to the ground shook the cavern. The grind of his forward slide over stone was a sepulchral shriek. Then the Dreadnought went over the edge, carrying struggling legionaries before him.

In the wake of the Bull's plunge, the battle organisation broke down. Ultramarines and Word Bearers formations were shattered. Traces of strategy worked their way through to Kurtha Sedd's awareness. His brothers were attempting to maintain a cordon around his position. The Ultramarines were trying to salvage the three prongs of their attack. But the centre of the cavern was now a cauldron. Bodies in blue and crimson armour were spread across the floor, some burned, some shot, some crushed beyond recognition. Combatants

shot at point-blank range. Melee weapons clashed. Cover was a shifting illusion. Word Bearers fired from behind one pillar at a group of Ultramarines. The loyalists of another formation outflanked them and took the position. Word Bearers coming up from behind them doused the area in flame and Krak grenades. A sudden flare of blue heralded the teleport translation of battle-fresh Ultramarines Terminators in lumbering Cataphractii plate.

The vox was a storm. Shouts of command, grunts of pain, and bursts of static from communications cut off by violence filled Kurtha Sedd's hearing. His attention was split. He saw the full picture of the struggle, yet it registered in fragments. He did not govern it. Vor Raennag and Toc Derenoth were making the battlefield decisions. He still chanted, trying desperately to recapture his grip on the immaterium. The tide was running against the Word Bearers. The forces of Chaos were receding further and further from existence. And Aethon was there, working his way forwards.

Fate was closing in. The judgements of gods both false and real were upon him.

An Ultramarines fusillade punched through the cordon. The impact of the shells knocked two brothers back. They plunged into the abyss. Up and down the edge of the cliff, Word Bearers and Ultramarines came to grips. Giants of ceramite collided. They ripped into each other with hate's savagery. The darkness resounded with the explosions of combat and the snarls of beings once men, now colossal embodiments of war. Chaos surrounded Kurtha Sedd, but he could not harness it.

He stopped chanting.

Aethon smashed Kaeloq aside with a blow from his chainfist. The Word Bearer fell to his hands and knees, his helm shattered. Aethon closed with Kurtha Sedd. The captain's face was distorted with hate. Kurtha Sedd barely recognised him. The rage was all-consuming, and Kurtha Sedd felt a perverse surge of hope. If Aethon could disappear so completely into wrath, was he really that far from the truth? Could the power of the empyrean, this close, shake the Ultramarine from his father's dogmatic mindset?

'Steloc, the truth of Chaos is all around us,' Kurtha Sedd shouted. 'Surrender to it!'

Aethon continued forwards. The Chaplain flexed his shoulders and took a step back.

'The Octed is strong here. The flames of darkness shall consume you all.'

The Ultramarine's hatred boiled over. 'Shut up, traitor!' he bellowed, hurling himself forwards.

The hope was born of Kurtha Sedd's past. It was a burden, though he had realised it too late. It slowed his reflexes down – hope, regret, and doubt pulling on his arm. He raised his plasma pistol in his left hand and fired. Aethon had all the time he needed to duck to the Chaplain's right, and the shot went wide.

'There will be no surrender for either of us,' the Ultramarine growled. 'You had your chance for an honourable death.' His chainfist exploded through the pillar. Dust and stone fragments billowed into Kurtha Sedd's face, blinding him. He rocked back, avoiding a blow he could not see. He swung the crozius to his left. The impact shuddered up his arm as he smashed his opponent's combi-weapon to pieces.

He had the captain on the back foot and pressed the advantage, firing another shot at close range. The rock crumbled beneath Aethon's boots as he evaded it, renewing his own assault. The abyss reached for them both.

The teeth of Aethon's chainfist snagged Kurtha Sedd's plasma pistol before he could fire it again, yanking the weapon from his grip. For a moment, the two warriors grappled back and forth on the edge of the precipice. All Kurtha Sedd had to do was lean forwards, and they would both go over. Oblivion tempted him with an end to all burdens...

No. Not this way.

He grounded himself and drew the crozius back, steadying his hand for the blow. Aethon struck first, slamming the chainfist against Kurtha Sedd's outstretched arm with enough force to jar loose his grip on the crozius's haft, then hitting him again in the chest. The blade cut through the Chaplain's armour. Ceramite splinters flew, then blood. He felt the adamantium teeth sink into his carapace. Aethon held his left arm up and out, denying him leverage. The crozius dangled in his gauntlet.

Kurtha Sedd's death was a perfect certainty. He was almost calm in his despair. He had failed in his duty, and was unworthy of the destiny.

In desperation, he pulled away and struck at Aethon's pauldron as hard as he could.

The power of the blow caused the Ultramarine to stagger, the rock crumbling beneath his feet and tumbling down into the darkness.

Kurtha Sedd did not wait for his foe to recover. His right hand reached to his belt. The movement was quick, smooth, unthought. It was as free as the pistol shot had been sluggish. He grasped his ritual dagger. He brought the point up beneath Aethon's arm as the great warrior turned, pulling him close.

It struck the seam of the armour. Plates parted. The blade plunged through

carapace, muscle and ribs.

And deeper.

Aethon's arm went slack. Lethal shock flashed through his eyes. He sagged. Dark blood ran from the corner of his mouth.

A long stillness. The war fell into silence. Vague shapes moved with glacial slowness at the edge of Kurtha Sedd's vision. Stars were born and died, and he finally understood what he had done.

For the first time since Monarchia, and for the last time in his life, Kurtha Sedd experienced horror.

'Aethon,' he said. 'Forgive me.'

Surely judgement must come now. If it did not, it never would. He had murdered the past. There were no more new crimes left to him. He begged forgiveness in the name of the legionary he had once been, in the voice of the last spark of the beliefs for which he had once been willing to die, the beliefs that had refused to free him of their persistent grasp.

He begged forgiveness, and before the answer came, the change had come upon him. He no longer needed an answer. The final traces of the old Kurtha Sedd died before Aethon could even have spoken.

And Aethon did not speak.

Kurtha Sedd drove the dagger home through the primary heart. The Ultramarine's eyes dimmed. Kurtha Sedd pushed.

Aethon fell.

Kurtha Sedd watched.

Do you know what you have done?

Yes.

Aethon's head struck a protrusion. His body tumbled. It took a long time to disappear. It diminished in Kurtha Sedd's sight. It shrank to insignificance, just another spinning piece of debris.

Aethon fell.

And with him went Kurtha Sedd's chains.

FIFTEEN

**The freedom of damnation
Warp-flesh
To look upon these works**

Kurtha Sedd shed his burdens. He sloughed them off like a dead, ill-fitting skin. He spread his arms in welcome. He delighted in the fullness of damnation. All was gone now. All his past, all his bonds. He was free. He felt no regret. With this great severing, there was nothing left to regret.

Clarity returned. He saw the Octed's shape once more. He saw the road ahead, and the tasks to come. Unburdened, all became possible to him.

And the flesh? What of the burden of the flesh?

He still had need of his. For now. But there was a moment coming, advancing with predatory intent, when that burden too would be shed. If not by him, then by others.

The flesh shall be fused with the warp.

He would know how. Of this he was certain.

He had no more doubts. The last had fallen with Aethon. New ones were impossible.

The dark accepted the sacrifice. It rose towards him. He accepted its obedience as his due.

Kurtha Sedd turned from the abyss and faced the battlefield once more. His gaze swept over the struggling figures. He looked upon Word Bearers, Ultramarines and cultists with the perspective of a god. The war was of interest to him. The combatants were useful. They were different shades of sacrifice.

They were willing and unwilling. There were crude offerings and grand ones, and there were the useful tools. The raw material for transformation.

An Ultramarines sergeant in damaged Cataphractii plate dragged himself to his feet nearby, grief and anger driving his pained movements. 'There isn't anywhere you can go on this planet where we won't find you, traitor,' he spat, bringing his lightning claws up.

Kurtha Sedd paused. The warrior's ignorance was almost painful to behold.

'There isn't anywhere on this planet *to* go,' he replied, grinning beatifically behind his visor as he turned away. 'Only deeper into the underworld...'

He saw more Word Bearers die. Enraged by the death of their captain, the Ultramarines threw themselves against Fifth Company with redoubled wrath. They wanted vengeance, and they were finding it. The tide rose higher against Kurtha Sedd's brothers.

He was not troubled. He had the darkness at his back, and he slipped into it as easily as stepping behind a curtain.

The twisted words of the old tongue of Colchis had new meaning and new power. He had called upon potential in the dark. He tore the veil wide. Beneath the rattling drum of battle, he heard the scrabbling of claws on the walls of the gorge. The sound was steady. It did not dissolve into the bubbling of flesh. It drew closer.

Kurtha Sedd hefted the crozius Arcanum, and lifted it high. The war demanded he react as another vengeful Ultramarine broke through and charged him, bolter blazing. Kurtha Sedd slipped again into the flow of the dark. The Ultramarine appeared to slow, as if moving deep underwater. Kurtha Sedd let the speed of the dark's current carry him. He was beside the loyalist before the other had registered the shift in his position. He brought the crozius down on the back of the Ultramarine's neck. At impact, the dark released him. The Ultramarine's helm and spine shattered as Kurtha Sedd returned to the time of the materium. The loyalist fell. Kurtha Sedd kicked his body into the abyss.

The scratching of claws sounded like a hailstorm. So many. And now there were voices, laughing and gurgling and whispering obscene hungers.

Kurtha Sedd shouted, '*Welcome!*'

A wave of abominations broke over the lip of the gorge. There were hundreds.

'Daemons,' Kurtha Sedd whispered. He savoured the word. 'Daemons,' he said again, louder. The negations of all the Emperor's teachings fell upon the Ultramarines, and they had come at his bidding. 'Daemons!' Kurtha Sedd howled. The word was reality, and the reality was triumph.

The forms of the daemons were rough-hewn. They were still incomplete, though they had coherence of a kind. There were heaving masses of sores. There were crimson things stalking forwards on hooved legs. The upper halves of their bodies were amorphous collections of limbs and horns. Other monsters were both flesh and flame. There were clawed, elongated shapes that writhed with an insectoid sensuality. And there were creatures of no true shape at all, gibbering accumulations of tentacles, maws, eyes and blades that slithered and hopped and slouched towards their prey.

The horde of ruinous flesh spilled over and through the combatants. The struggle changed in an instant. The daemons swarmed over the Ultramarines, pushing them back in the cavern. They sought to smother the loyalists, to drown them in a suppurating mass. Claws like swords stabbed at armour, seeking weak points.

The daemons were not strong. Bolter shells made short work of their forms. Strong blows burst their bodies. They exploded into mists of flesh. Single daemons were little threat to a legionary. The multitude was lethal.

‘Destroy the betrayers of the Word!’ Kurtha Sedd commanded. He ran into the fray, leading with the crozius, and the daemons flowed on either side, his infinite army to command.

So he thought at first.

Then he saw the daemons leaping on Word Bearers too, prying at armour, howling with need. One caught Vor Raennag by surprise. The sergeant drove his chainsword through the gorget and throat of an Ultramarine, decapitating him. As he pulled the blade away from the corpse, a mottled pink and blue abomination leapt onto his head. It pushed his head back and plunged limbs like stingers into his mouth and his eyes. He flailed with the chainsword. Before he could strike the daemon, it appeared to implode, its body sucking itself down the stingers and into Vor Raennag’s skull.

The sergeant staggered. He clawed at his face. He shouted Kurtha Sedd’s name, pleading and cursing. He stiffened. His skull pulsed. So did his armour. He cried out, his voice suddenly a chorus of two. Armour, bone and flesh melded together and mutated. He twisted around and around himself, and then his body exploded outwards. He became a confusion of limbs and wings. Kurtha Sedd saw a suggestion of something greater, a shadow of a warrior from beyond the veil, but then all shapes ended. Vor Raennag disappeared into a swamp of being, the organic and inorganic turned into an indistinguishable sludge.

Vor Raennag’s end had been a promise and failure. And now Kurtha Sedd knew

he had overreached.

The cavern was a maelstrom of death. Word Bearers and Ultramarines still fought each other. There was no distance between the forces, no order, no strategy, just a roil of close combat, chain weapons shrieking teeth against each other, bolters discharged within arm's reach of the target. The daemons were everywhere, and more still were climbing from the pit. They concentrated on the Ultramarines, attacking with the ferocity reserved for a hated enemy. They leapt upon the Word Bearers with the clutch of ownership. Grenades and flamers devastated flesh of all kinds, mortal, genhanced, warp-spun. A storm of flame and muscle and teeth and armour.

The battle had turned into its own monster, beyond the control of either Legion. Kurtha Sedd raged with wounded pride. He had summoned the beings of the warp, and they were weak and beyond his control. This was not as it should be. This was not his destiny.

There was a lesson in what he had seen happen to Vor Raennag. But there was no time to learn it.

The daemons had been sweeping past Kurtha Sedd, drawn by the wealth of prey beyond him. Now one turned on him. It was long and angular. Its narrow head had the suggestion of a beak. Feathered, useless wings spread from its shoulders. It lunged at him, reaching with arms as long as its body. Talons seized his shoulders. He brought up the crozius and blocked the snapping beak. Thoughts, insidious as worms, reached into his mind.

Let me in. Become me.

The thoughts were strong with desire. Kurtha Sedd's will was strong too. *No*, he thought and hurled the daemon back with the force of destiny.

Not yet.

The abomination hissed at him. Its eyes glinted slyly. Then it turned and rushed, squawking, into the fray.

Kurtha Sedd followed. He fell upon an Ultramarine struggling with three daemons. He fired his plasma pistol into the loyalist's power pack. It erupted in blinding flame. The Ultramarine fell. The daemons pulled off his head and fell upon the remains.

He waded deeper into the chaos of the battle. He hurled himself from foe to foe, striking with growing anger as everything disintegrated around him. The Ultramarines were falling now, overwhelmed, but what then? Drowning in a sea of the half-formed and the uncontrollable? His service to the gods must be grander than this. The Octed must be completed. Calth must be given to Chaos.

But this, was this victory?

Is this destiny?

The answer came with a blast of rockets. A concentration of daemons erupted in a fountain of limbs and body parts that dissolved a moment later. From the main entrances to the cave came a constant, disciplined fusillade. Daemons burst into mist. Word Bearers fell, their armour holed by dozens of bolter shells.

No, Kurtha Sedd thought.

The Ultramarines reinforcements marched forwards, methodical, relentless. They reclaimed the cavern metre by metre. They brought order with them. They drove Chaos back, tearing its fabric apart, dispersing the being of daemons. Wounded, the darkness began to withdraw.

NO.

The vox became a chorus of defeat. ‘*Pull back!*’ asked one voice. ‘*Where?*’ was its answer.

Rethaz Qann stumbled to Kurtha Sedd’s left side. His armour was torn open by shell hits and claw gouges. ‘Chaplain,’ he said. ‘We must—’

Grenades vaporised the daemons in front of them before Rethaz Qann could finish. A squad of Ultramarines had them in their sights. Kurtha Sedd maglocked his pistol to his side and grabbed Rethaz Qann by the shoulder. He dragged the other Word Bearer before him. The loyalists fired. Rethaz Qann convulsed as he took the full brunt of the fusillade. ‘There will be no *must* from you,’ Kurtha Sedd snarled to the dying legionary. He backed up, keeping him as a shield. Daemons flowed into the space between him and the Ultramarines.

More time, Kurtha Sedd thought. He pulled an explosive from his belt. It was a rad grenade. He threw it over the daemons, into the midst of the Ultramarines. The *krump* of its blast was followed by a strangled gargle. As Kurtha Sedd retreated, he caught glimpses of the ferocious radiation’s effects. The daemons in the vicinity were losing shape as their material flesh attacked itself. An Ultramarines sergeant was on his knees. His face was a cankered mass slipping from his skull.

The Ultramarines launched more rockets, this time at the side entrance where Aethon had broken through the barricade. They brought down tonnes of rock over the opening. There was no way out of the cavern. Nowhere to go except the abyss.

No!

Kurtha Sedd retreated with the dark. The daemons had stopped coming out of the pit. They kept attacking the Ultramarines, but the loyalists had their measure.

The incessant barrage destroyed the abominations at a distance. Those who drew near were incinerated by flamers. The wall of blue advanced, unstoppable as fate.

No. Not my fate. Not with so much incomplete.

Kurtha Sedd reached the gorge. He looked down. The warp-dark still filled the emptiness, and within it, all was clear. Partway to the wall on his left and about four metres down was a ledge. It was just wide enough to stand on. The middle of the ledge ran past a gap in the cliff face.

A way out.

His path still stretched before him.

‘With me, brothers!’ Kurtha Sedd called.

Toc Derenoth started to turn, and shells stitched a line across his chest-plate. They broke through his armour. Others followed, their mass-reactive blasts going off in his ribcage. The impacts threw Toc Derenoth several metres back. He fell. His ribs moved freely. He tried to move. His body was slow to respond. It was trying to stop the bleeding. It was trying to keep from dying. It had no strength for his limbs.

Then a huge weight on his chest.

Let me in.

A mind with teeth gnawed at his consciousness.

Let me in.

The daemon crouched on him. Its features were vague, but it had a smile as wide as his arm was long. The face began to rearrange itself. It began to look like his own.

Never. He would fight as himself, not as a puppet to another being.

Toc Derenoth heaved himself up to a sitting position, knocking the daemon away. It clutched at him. Its will squeezed his once more. He struck it with his chainsword. His blade cut through a shower of filth.

He could not stand. His legs would not respond. He turned over and saw Kurtha Sedd drop below the edge of the pit. Kaeloq was just behind him. Other Word Bearers were retreating towards the same point. So few of them, the ragged remnants of Fifth Company.

Toc Derenoth dragged himself forwards. He crawled through blood and dissipating mires of warp-flesh and mutilated corpses. He retreated from the cries and the explosions, and the marching, systematic destruction of Chaos.

As he reached the pit, he thought of the moment he had hung from the ramp

before the command nexus, and he wondered if there truly was anything worth the sacrifice he had been willing to make.

There was nowhere to go but forwards.

He pulled himself over, and dropped to the ledge below. He could not control his landing. The interior of his chest crunched. He began to slip off the ledge. Khuzhun came down beside him and pulled him into the narrow tunnel in the cliff.

Toc Derenoth slipped in and out of consciousness as Khuzhun hauled him through the passageway. Voices like old bones whispered in his ear, demanding entrance. He refused, and refused, and refused.

The movement stopped. His pain stabilised, and his vision cleared. He and his surviving brothers were in a small cave. Khuzhun had left him propped against a wall. The company was small, battered, bleeding. There were a few cultists too. Khrothis was among them. She was barely recognisable as human. She appeared to revel in her wounds. Her eyes shone. There was no defeat in her.

In the centre of the chamber, Kurtha Sedd was standing over a crouching Kaeloq. The legionary was growling. The sound was both liquid and metallic, as if the snarl were coming from two throats at once.

The voice at his ear and at his mind. *Let me in.*

‘No,’ Toc Derenoth whispered.

Kurtha Sedd turned to look at him.

‘Yes,’ he said.

The daemon flesh had failed. It was gone, but the darkness remained in the gorge, concealing the Word Bearers’ retreat from the Ultramarines. Kurtha Sedd had the time he needed. And he had learned the lesson taught by Vor Raennag’s death.

The flesh shall be fused with the warp.

Kaeloq had become disoriented during the retreat, and he was the final key. Unburdened at every level but the flesh, Kurtha Sedd had no hesitation in sacrificing other Word Bearers.

Kaeloq was in the midst of accepting that gift. His faith was absolute. His obedience was pure. He welcomed his ascension.

‘You hear the command, brother, don’t you?’ the Chaplain said to Toc Derenoth.

‘Yes.’

‘Chaos has chosen you, brother. As I have been chosen to lead us, you have

been chosen to transcend before me. My time is not yet.'

'Transcend...' Toc Derenoth repeated, his voice weak with wounds, bitter with resistance.

Khrothis began to draw a circle around Toc Derenoth using her own blood.

'Do you have faith in the gods and in the Word?' Kurtha Sedd asked.

'I do,' said Toc Derenoth.

'Then obey. This is not surrender, brother. This is victory. You are to be Unburdened. You shall be one of the vessels of our victory. Through the Unburdened, Calth will be sanctified to Chaos.'

'I-' Toc Derenoth began.

Kurtha Sedd plunged his fist into the legionary's massive chest wound. Toc Derenoth gasped. His body went rigid. 'Release your burdens,' Kurtha Sedd ordered. '*Ascend!*'

Toc Derenoth's will collapsed, and the ascension began. His body trembled, then lurched upright. His scream became a double-voiced snarl of triumph.

Kurtha Sedd stood back. The cultists shrieked delight. The legionaries of the Fifth Company of the Third Hand kneeled before the wonder. Toc Derenoth and Kaeloq grew, their armour twisting and merging with sinew. Horns and spines sprouted from their backs and limbs. Helm and skull became one. Ceramite cracked and flowed, then gaped to reveal slavering jaws.

The Unburdened howled. Now Chaos had its form, and the form was strong. The howls were hunger and threat and triumph, and the underworld of Calth shook with the venom of that triumph.

Kurtha Sedd looked upon the wonder before him, and he claimed ownership of his work. His lips curled back at the thought of the tasks of blood ahead, of his own ultimate ascension, and of the cataclysm that would come when the Octed was complete. When it, too, was unburdened of all concealment.

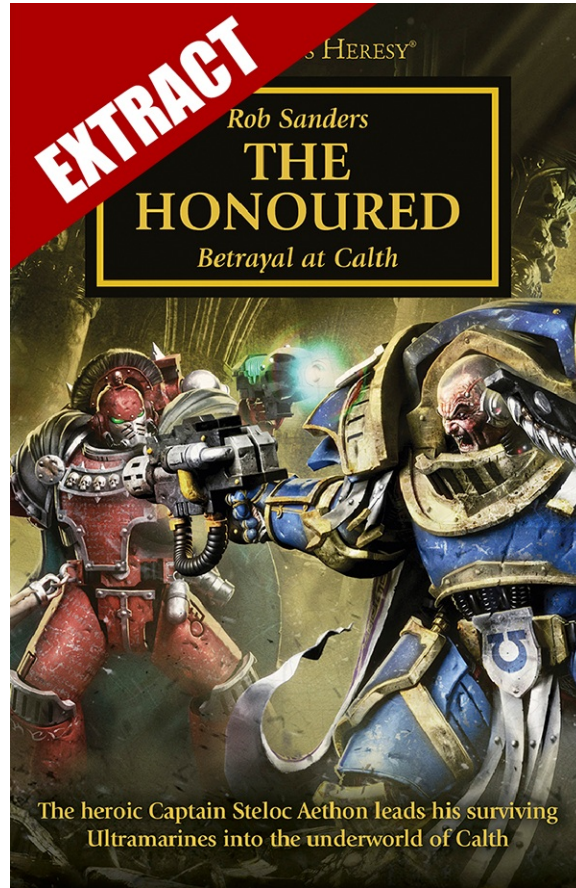
Kurtha Sedd thought about judgement, and he laughed. There was no dread now. There was eagerness.

Judgement would be his to bring.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Annandale is the author of The Horus Heresy novel *The Damnation of Pythos*. He also writes the Yarrick series, consisting of the novella *Chains of Golgotha* and the novels *Imperial Creed* and *The Pyres of Armageddon*. For Space Marine Battles he has written *The Death of Antagonis* and *Overfiend*. He is a prolific writer of short fiction, including the novella *Mephiston: Lord of Death* and numerous short stories set in The Horus Heresy and Warhammer 40,000 universes. David lectures at a Canadian university, on subjects ranging from English literature to horror films and video games.

*An extract from **The Honoured.***



[mark: 23.46.32]

When is a lie not merely a lie, Aethon wonders? When do such words fail to capture the enormity of untruths so thunderous in their announcement that, like a black hole, they exert a gravity of their own, causing the light of truth to bend about them?

Steloc Aethon, captain of the 19th Company, 'The Honoured'.

He is an Ultramarine, a son of Guilliman. He is a son of Calth.

The havoc of Lanshear roars about him. Gunfire. Murder. Desperation. Armoured Word Bearers, their suits the colour of dried blood. Ultramarines, their immaculate plate besmirched with ash and gore. Aethon hears the muted screams of the traitors along with the death cries of his own men, harsh and horrified across the vox. Punctuated by the drum of boltguns, it is a cacophonous symphony of betrayal and despair.

Are the Ultramarines not the light that bends? The Emperor's light, illuminating the far reaches of his empire, contorted about falsehoods terrible and true. Are the sons of Guilliman forever changed by the wretched unfolding of these great events? Will we stand, like shadows of our former selves, in the brilliance of realisation – as we stand now before the wrath of Veridia?

Within the ceramite confines of his Tactical Dreadnought armour the battle seems removed, even with death but a moment away. The treachery of men Aethon once called kin plays out before him like an impossible dream – his own actions, a whirlwind of murderous necessity, similarly so. The tactical display, targeting reticules and the overlapping vox-streams reporting the carnage beyond seem removed further still. Calth is a world betrayed. A planet brought to its knees. Within hours the bounteous sustenance of agricultural toil has been transformed into a nightmare of disbelief, smoke-shrouded battlefields and global slaughter.

Orders proceed, almost unconsciously, from the captain's drawn lips. The enhanced muscle of his transhuman body works the massive Terminator suit around. His gauntlets yank back on the trigger of his combi-weapon and gun his chainfist to shrieking annihilation. Aethon's mind is elsewhere, however. He kills without thinking. His commands are the living, breathing legacy of a lifetime at war.

In such a lifetime, Aethon has experienced his share of shocks and surprises. The Corona Chasmi, the dread wonders of Twelve One-Forty-Two. The greenskins of the Gantessa Deeps...

The orks of that pocket empire had grown huge in their isolation. As the warp storms around it had cleared, the xenos abominations had reached out from the Deeps to claim the Mechanicum-held worlds of the Melior Corpus.

Aethon would have lost his life to one such giant, but for a Word Bearers Chaplain named Kurtha Sedd. It had been on the frozen forge world of Melior-Tertia, sixty-one years before, that the Ultramarines and the Word Bearers had fought side by side. With the XIII and XVII Legions gathered at Calth to take the fight to another encroaching greenskin empire, Aethon had been looking forward to seeing his friend once more. To perhaps repaying the blood debt he owes the Chaplain.

He will not get the chance now.

The atrocities committed on Calth and the unthinkable treachery hiding in the hearts of the Word Bearers is shock and horror enough to make the Corona Chasmi and Twelve One-Forty-Two fade to forgetfulness. The sons of Guilliman will never allow themselves to forget the pain of this betrayal.

Within the soothing darkness of his plate, the captain is a raw wound. With the stunned taking of every Word Bearer's life, that wound is sprinkled with the salt of unnecessary loss. With every Ultramarine butchered, their failing life signs cascading down his optic overlays like a sizzling memorial, Aethon feels that salt rubbed into his very soul. He aches for the loss of every fallen Ultramarine, as well as the lost legionaries that stand in victory over them. The Legions have become entangled in one another's tragedy and despite the confusion, the hatred and fury of the battlefield, they are both the victims of some greater catastrophe.

The Ultramarines, even with their drill, their theory and simulation, had been blind to this darkest of possibilities. Something, however, has opened the Word Bearers' eyes to that which they should not have seen, and Lorgar and his sons have given themselves to the horror of tomorrow, to a vision of fraternal destruction and blood betrayed. Aethon and his Ultramarines now find

themselves in such a vision, fighting for their lives.

The captain wants to roar, to curse and grieve. To shake the shock of this atrocity from his being and feel whole once more. But he cannot. While he hurts for the Emperor's flesh desecrated and his home world betrayed, he cannot allow such weakness to show. His brothers – both Word Bearers and Ultramarines – will hear the adamantine edge of Guilliman's voice in his own. They will feel the Emperor's wrath in the thunder of his shot and shell. They will know the certainty of war everlasting.

Aethon feels his hearts slow. Battle and bloodshed seem to ebb about him, as though Calth itself has ceased to turn. Light fades all around. The Veridian star dims and then grows in eye-searing intensity. Like a waxing and waning eclipse, the sun appears to be suffering some cataclysmic event. With its momentary fading, Lanshear is plunged into the twilight of an unexpected dusk. Seconds later, the sky seems on fire with the sickly brilliance of a false dawn. On the horizon, cutting silhouettes through the smoke, wreckage and clashing legionaries, the rays of Veridia feel their sickly way across the battlefield.

I wish the sun unrisen, the mark turned back, the brotherhood unbroken.

Something precious has been lost. The galaxy was to be ours. Humanity was to bring the light of civilisation to benighted worlds and cleanse the stars of races unworthy. A glorious union of worlds won by those who carried the bloodline of the Emperor – a bloodline now tainted by treachery. Must we be reminded of truths long forgotten and measures unbecoming? Must we become the Angels of Death to our own once more? Much I fear of this new dawn untrue, for it brings with it more than a new world. It brings a galaxy redefined, a crusade stalled and a kindred foe.

Aethon leans into a murderous turn. He wills the bulk of his Terminator suit around, feeling the fibre bundles contract and servos following his movements. The helm's internal display highlights the blue outlines of Ultramarines lost in a sea of crimson plate and darkness. The battlefield is awash with traitor legionaries, their leering helms coalescing from the murk. Green eye-lenses stare hatefully down the length of boltguns. Chainblades chug, then thrash for the strike.

Aethon does not wish to kill any of them. He has only his primarch's orders, the dire necessity of defence. Thousands of Ultramarines have been slain, but every avenging death takes the Legiones Astartes further from their former union. Aethon does not delude himself with fantasies of control. He has none. Havoc reigns. Death will be the only victor.

As his former allies are redesignated enemy targets, the captain senses a millisecond delay in his combi-weapon, *Moricorpus*. With bolter and melta barrels gaping at oncoming Word Bearers, the weapon's spirit registers confusion.

You give me no choice. Do not test my loyalty.

A Word Bearer dies, then another, and another. Aethon's heart feels numb. His cries of battle are hollow with regret and hoarse with rage. For the first time in his life, the captain feels unsure. It is a seed of doubt, taken root in the pit of his stomach. The Word Bearers seem as sure as madmen can be, throwing themselves at him like deranged beasts. Aethon can't take solace in insanity. All he has are orders, his primarch's orders: *'Defend yourselves by all means at your disposal.'*

So defend himself he does.

Steloc Aethon of the 19th turns his weapon on a crimson-armoured killer. He allows *Moricorpus* its protest before an insistent tug of the trigger punches several rounds into the warrior's chest. As the legionary crashes to the ground, the captain fells two more. Bolt-rounds spark off his reinforced armour like falling meteorites. Aethon will not find his end in the sights of a traitor. His noble plate will not permit it.

More Word Bearers come at him, shouldering through the dimness and the confusion. The ornate decoration of his rank and the bulk of his suit prove an irresistible attraction to his foes.

'Protect the captain!' Aethon hears across the vox-channel, before a volley of bolt-rounds cuts his assailants down from behind. It is an ignominious end for a legionary, but the Word Bearers give them no choice.

Aethon feels the approach of an enemy through his sensors. Turning, he guns the blade of his chainfist. An assault company Word Bearer tries to bury his chainsword in Aethon's shoulder, and the captain smashes it away. The sword sparks and bounces off Aethon's heavier weapon, throwing the traitor back. Bringing the chainfist down with a powerful swing, Aethon cleaves the Word Bearer's hands off at the wrists. As his armoured gauntlets fall to the ground, still clutching the raging chainsword, blood fountains from armoured stumps.

Kicking the Word Bearer back, Aethon returns his grievously injured foe to the throng of advancing traitors. Another chainsword bites into the double-bonded ceramite of his pauldron, and the captain cannot turn fast enough to avoid it. As the blade grinds across his armoured back, Aethon repeats his manoeuvre, striking the sword away with his chainfist before plunging his hand through his

enemy's chest-plate.

As the weapon chews through the screaming Word Bearer's torso, Aethon heaves the traitor up before him. Using his foe as a living shield, Aethon soaks up a stream of bolter fire. Turning back on the oncoming Word Bearers, he tosses the corpse free and thrusts the barrels of his combi-weapon at his attackers. Plugging bolt-holes through the throats of two Word Bearers, Aethon takes the head clean off the last with a roaring blast of heat from the melta.

The captain hears the battle cry of a deranged Word Bearers sergeant as the traitor runs up the mound of corpses Aethon has created. Jumping at him, the sergeant swings a jammed chainsword above his head. The buckled weapon bounces off Aethon's plate, but connects with enough force to make him stumble back. Bringing *Moricorpus* up, Aethon fires, taking the chainsword from the sergeant's grip and prompting him to draw a bolt pistol. Again, in a shower of sparks, Aethon takes the weapon – and several armoured fingers – from the sergeant's hand. Bringing the combi-weapon level with his enemy's head, Aethon watches as the Word Bearer stumbles back over a compatriot's corpse, finding himself on the ground.

Aethon strides forwards, stamping down on the bolt pistol before the sergeant can reach for it with his other hand. Stepping across the Word Bearer's body, the captain crushes his gauntlet beneath his heel then brings his boot down on the sergeant's faceplate, crushing the Mark IV helm into the dust.

Abruptly Aethon's vision flashes green as blasts of raging plasma smack into his Terminator armour. The captain stumbles back in his scorched suit, the photonic blaze crackling and melting the ceramite, leaving smoking craters in his pauldron and breastplate. Aethon bellows in agony as another shot seethes through the heavy-duty cabling of his plackart. The plasma bubbles through his side with the heat of a star and the captain staggers and howls into the vox.

His warriors smash through their foes with renewed urgency, making to support Aethon. Releasing the trigger of the chainfist mounted on his arm, the captain holds up a gauntlet to his men. He screws up his face and, with teeth gritted, blinks the worst of the pain away.

My body – like my home world – is afflicted. Pain. I embrace it, as Calth must do also. I make it my own. Only the living are privy to the agonies of existence. The failing of the flesh, the spirit ready to break. The searing ache of hearts that beat betrayed. I suffer as Calth suffers. We live still, and that is no small miracle.

As he opens his eyes Aethon finds his optic reticules tracking movement in the fray. With the sickly rays of the sun intensifying once more about them, casting

the battlefield in a shadow-cleft haze, the Word Bearers are disengaging from combat. They retreat, spraying bolter fire in their wake, and Aethon assumes that some local victory has been achieved by the Ultramarines fighting across the Lanshear Belt.

As the light grows with an unnatural brilliance, the captain begins to realise that he could not be more wrong.

‘Permission to pursue, captain?’ an Ultramarines veteran sergeant calls, but Aethon barely hears him.

Through the criss-crossing of shadows, Aethon makes out the outline of a lone Word Bearer. Unlike his treacherous brethren, he is a motionless silhouette. Green eye-lenses shine ghoulishly from a crested helm, rivalling the luminescence of his plasma pistol’s fusion core. The pistol’s fat muzzle still smokes with the trailing afterglow of agitated hydrogen. While a cloak marks the Word Bearer out as a centurion of some significance, it is the head of his mighty crozius maul that identifies him as a Chaplain. Having fought side by side with the Word Bearers, Aethon knows that the XVII Legion favour many such spiritual leaders among their ranks.

As he wills *Moricorpus* up, the blazing agony in his side making the manoeuvre a trial, the Chaplain stares back. Through the bolt-streaked murk and the withdrawing shapes of his brethren, he sights along the length of his arm and the plasma pistol fixed on the captain.

The Word Bearer tilts his helm in curious recognition.

Aethon’s eyes widen. *Kurtha Sedd?*

Perhaps it is him. Perhaps it isn’t. Through the eye-scalding radiance that reaches through the battlefield haze Aethon can barely tell his men from the enemy, let alone Word Bearer from Word Bearer. But the possibility alone stokes the fires of fury in the captain’s chest. Targeting reticules converge on the Chaplain as his overlaid outline flashes before Aethon’s eyes. His helm display confirms for a second time that the target has been acquired and that the Chaplain is in his weapon’s sights.

Aethon holds him there a second longer. A second too late.

With a glowing green wash of highlighted inscriptions rippling across the Chaplain’s plate and a throng of retreating Word Bearers backing through Aethon’s line of sight, the figure is gone.

‘Permission to pur–’ the sergeant beside him calls again, the last of his words lost to a blast of bolt-fire that follows their enemies into the ghostly distance.

Aethon is about to answer when his vox-link changes channel to receive a

priority communication.

'This is Ventanus, Captain, Fourth,' the vox-stream crackles.

'Yes, captain,' Aethon replies, but as Remus Ventanus's words run on and echo about his helm he comes to understand that all of the Ultramarines are receiving the message simultaneously.

'I am making an emergency broadcast on the global vox-cast setting. The surface of Calth is no longer a safe environment. The local star is suffering a flare trauma, and will shortly irradiate Calth to human-lethal levels. It is no longer possible to evacuate the planet. Therefore, if you are a citizen, a member of the Imperial Army, a legionary of the Thirteenth, or any other loyal servant of the Imperium, move with all haste to the arcology or arcology system closest to you. The arcologies may offer sufficient protection to allow us to survive this solar event. We will shelter there until further notice. Do not hesitate. Move directly to the nearest arcology. Arcology location and access information will be appended to this repeat broadcast as a code file. In the name of the Imperium, make haste. Message ends.'

'Captain?' the sergeant asks. Like the rest of the Ultramarines standing about him on the battlefield, he looks to Aethon. The captain's plate dribbles sparks from where it has been breached. He turns to take in the Veridian sun as he has done a thousand times before.

Today will be different. Everything the light touches will perish.

You mongrels. You aberrant wretches, unworthy of the Emperor's blood.

You've slaughtered my brothers, and killed my world...

'You heard Captain Ventanus,' Aethon says across the vox. 'We seek shelter underground from the wrath of the star. Duty awaits us in the darkness. We shall drive the enemy back into the light and scorch his treachery from the surface of Calth. Go now, for I fear we shall not be the only warriors to dare the depths.'

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