

THE HORUS HERESY®

Nick Kyme

SONS OF THE FORGE

Unscarred, unbroken



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THE HORUS HERESY

It is a time of legend.

Mighty heroes battle for the right to rule the galaxy. The vast armies of the Emperor of Earth have conquered the galaxy in a Great Crusade – the myriad alien races have been smashed by the Emperor’s elite warriors and wiped from the face of history.

The dawn of a new age of supremacy for humanity beckons.

Gleaming citadels of marble and gold celebrate the many victories of the Emperor. Triumphs are raised on a million worlds to record the epic deeds of his most powerful and deadly warriors.

First and foremost amongst these are the primarchs, superheroic beings who have led the Emperor’s armies of Space Marines in victory after victory. They are unstoppable and magnificent, the pinnacle of the Emperor’s genetic experimentation. The Space Marines are the mightiest human warriors the galaxy has ever known, each capable of besting a hundred normal men or more in combat.

Organised into vast armies of tens of thousands called Legions, the Space Marines and their primarch leaders conquer the galaxy in the name of the Emperor.

Chief amongst the primarchs is Horus, called the Glorious, the Brightest Star, favourite of the Emperor, and like a son unto him. He is the Warmaster, the commander-in-chief of the Emperor’s military might, subjugator of a thousand thousand worlds and conqueror of the galaxy. He is a warrior without peer, a diplomat supreme.

As the flames of war spread through the Imperium, mankind’s champions will all be put to the ultimate test.

~ DRAMATIS PERSONAE ~

The XVIII Legion 'Salamanders'

VULKAN, The Lord of Drakes, Primarch of the Salamanders

T'KELL, Forgemaster, now named Forgefather of Nocturne

ZAU'ULL, 'Firefather', Igniax Chaplain

RAHZ OBEK, 'Firebearer', Firedrakes captain

ZANDU, 'Firefist', Firedrakes sergeant

AK'NUN XEN, 'Flamesmote', Firedrake

GOR'OG KRASK, 'Wyvern', Firedrake

ZEB'DU VARR, 'Pyrus', Firedrake

ASHAX, Firedrakes sergeant

PHOKAN, Firedrake

GAIRON, Firedrake

RAIOS, Firedrake

BA'DURAK, Firedrake

RATH, Firedrake

VOTAN, Firedrake

FAI'SHO, Firedrake, Apothecary

REYNE, Shipmaster of the *Chalice of Fire*

The Shattered Legions

KASTIGAN ULOK, Iron Father of the X Legion, commander of the *Obstinate*

AHREM GALLIKUS AZOTH, Medusan Immortal

SAURIAN, Apothecary of the XVIII Legion

MORIKAN, 'The Silent', warrior of the XIX Legion

The XVI Legion 'Sons of Horus'

VOSTO KURNAN, Captain

RAYKO SOLOMUS, Legionary torturer

MENATUS

NEVOK

UZIEL

HAJUK

MORVEK

EZRIAH

KREDE

EZREMAS

GHODAK

HARKUS

RENK, Apothecary

The Dark Mechanicum

REGULUS, Adept, appointed envoy to the Warmaster

KRONUS VI, Castellax battle automata

THE VOW

'What is the meaning of the sacrifice?'

Firefather's words echoed around a hollow chamber, the deep bass of his voice rebounding off the walls of dark obsidian.

'To live when others died,' his supplicants replied as one. Solemnly, speaking with reverence... and anger. 'To never know the pain of our greatest betrayal. To never feel the bite of our reflected shame in the traitor's knife. To have never bled upon the black sands of Isstvan Five.'

Silence fell as their voices faded into a dull murmur of half-echoes.

'What is our purpose?' Firefather gripped the haft of a weapon and watched his brothers do the same.

'To remain stoic and eschew all pride. To be the wardens and protectors.'

Firefather stood. His armoured form was reflected in obsidian and his kneeling brothers mirrored him also.

'And what is our curse?' he put to them, his voice rising as the mace head of his crozius burst into flame. Fifty warriors stood coldly in its burning aura, their drake scale seemingly alive in the snapping flames.

'To never know glory. To be denied vengeance.'

Firefather held his burning crozius aloft before plunging it into an iron cradle of oil. Ignition was instant and violent. It sent shuddering firelight throughout the chamber, revealing the statues of fallen heroes, carved from onyx and silently judging.

'And who are we?' he asked, bellowing.

'We are the Unscarred!' they declared in a roar. 'Sons of Nocturne. Salamanders and Firedrakes. Vulkan's blood, and we shall never fail in our

duty!

An iron lid was closed over the cradle and the flame doused, so too the crozius in Firefather's hand.

Darkness returned and the mood became sombre again.

'That is the meaning of sacrifice...' uttered Firefather quietly, turning as he left the chamber through its only archway. 'Dismissed.'

PROLOGUE

An artefact

They called him an artisan, though Vulkan knew the truth of it. He was a warsmith, no different to his brothers Ferrus and Perturabo. Inside the vault, he had wrought terrible wonders all in the name of that calling, wonders which he now wanted T'kell to destroy.

'You are the first and only one of my sons to see this vault,' Vulkan said to his Forgemaster. 'Held safe within its walls is every artefact I have ever forged.'

Muttering the name of the first drake, Vulkan lit the torches around the chamber, and between the shadows the miracles he had created were revealed in wan light. Despite the darkness, his eyes saw everything, every weapon he had ever made.

He alone knew all of their names, for he had chosen each one.

Song of Entropy.

Igneous Hammer.

Anvil of Desolation.

Poetic, perhaps. Indulgent, certainly. Names had power, Vulkan knew. To name a thing was to give it identity, resonance. To name a thing was to make it real, tangible and to breathe life into the lifeless. No mere things of steel or adamantium these – they were Vulkan's legacy to his sons and more revealing of his character than any tome or memoir.

And even if he should return from Isstvan V, they all had to be destroyed. The galaxy had changed. It was no longer a safe place for miracles, for evil had a way of twisting the miraculous into something terrible.

‘Such wonders...’ breathed T’kell, and Vulkan saw a kind of fear in his son’s eyes as well as awe.

Vulkan was going to war, for he too was an instrument of destruction, only one that had been forged by his father’s hammer upon an anvil of science and apotheosis. He wondered then if the Emperor ever had the same doubts about His creations. If He were to be given a choice, would He too destroy what He had created? Vulkan supposed it was too late for that now, or perhaps that was what he, Ferrus, Corax, Perturabo and the others were doing by bringing Horus to heel? How Konrad must be laughing now...

Vulkan had not realised his thoughts had made him pause, his gauntleted fingers poised to touch the haft of his spear, until T’kell spoke again.

‘I hope your indecision represents a change of heart, primarch,’ said the Forgemaster.

If only he knew the primarch’s inner turmoil in that moment; but then, Vulkan supposed, it was better that he did not.

‘It does not. The artefacts must be destroyed. I am bound for Isstvan, so cannot do it myself, which is why you must, T’kell.’

‘Then what *is* wrong, primarch?’

Instead of the truth, Vulkan settled on a lie. He did not like lying to his sons, but it was small compared to the lies that had begun to unfold across the nascent Imperium, lies of false gods and brothers killing brothers. Surely these were greater lies, for to consider them anything else was beyond countenance.

‘I believed I had chosen poorly, although this feels right,’ he said, gripping the hammer *Dawnbringer*. ‘Fitting. Perhaps its epithet will see my brother illuminated after all.’

It felt like a hollow thing to say. Ever since his last meeting with Horus, Vulkan knew deep down that another encounter between them would end in blood. The greater lies, he reminded himself, within which were woven a thread of truth.

‘Primarch, I beseech you,’ said T’kell, with something like desperation in his voice as he bowed on one knee. ‘Please do not ask me to do this. At least save *something*.’

Vulkan would have remonstrated with his Forgemaster for such weakness had he not seen T’kell’s actions for what they truly were: hope. He still believed that his father’s creations could be used for good, to end war.

‘There are weapons here that can destroy worlds, my son,’ he said, regarding the inside of the vault.

‘Or save them from destruction,’ T’kell replied, ‘in the *right* hands.’

‘Mine?’ asked Vulkan, looking down to meet T’kell’s gaze. He saw the plea in his eyes, but also the pride. It gave Vulkan hope.

‘Yes! Or Lord Dorn, or Guilliman. Even Russ!’

‘Rise, Forgemaster. I would not have one of my sons beg me on his knees,’ said Vulkan, and had to fight down his anger at seeing a Salamanders legionary so humbled. I am a teacher, he thought to himself, not a king to be paid fealty to. Leave that pomposity to Guilliman – I’ll have none of it.

‘I am driven to it, primarch,’ T’kell replied, but was back on his feet again.

Yes, thought Vulkan, T’kell is the right choice. If there is even a chance that my craft can be put to good use in spite of what is to come, then T’kell is a worthy custodian of that charge.

‘Very well.’

‘My lord?’

Vulkan faced him.

‘I said, very well. Something should remain. If I destroy everything, then I have given up on hope and on seeing loyalty and honour endure in my brothers. I won’t do that.’

T’kell looked relieved, but Vulkan knew his mood would change as soon as he gave his next order.

‘You are to remain here, T’kell. You won’t come to the Isstvan System – your place is now on Nocturne and Prometheus.’

‘But, primarch–’

‘Do not defy me a second time,’ Vulkan warned. ‘I am not *that* tolerant.’ T’kell bowed his head.

He had planned on taking the Forgemaster with him, but he was glad now that he had an excuse not to. Vulkan felt the task his father had appointed them on Isstvan ill-omened. It was not because Horus was an excellent military leader, or a greater warrior – there were both better leaders and greater warriors amongst his brothers – it was the change in the Warmaster’s spirit that bothered Vulkan the most, and all that it portended. If he could change, if the Crusade could alter his perception...

Vulkan banished these thoughts. Nothing would change what was to come, but this – what he was about to ask T’kell to do – this he could still influence.

‘You shall become Forgefather, and keeper of the artefacts in this vault.’

‘Forgefather?’ said T’kell, confusion written upon his face. ‘Am I not your Forgemaster, my lord?’

‘Of course. A legionary can be more than one thing, T’kell. I am entrusting you

with this duty, just as I entrusted you with the vault.’

‘What duty, primarch? Name it, and it shall be done.’

‘To act as custodian. To swear you will protect these artefacts and should anything happen to me, ensure they are well hidden, far from those who would seek to use them poorly.’

Again, Vulkan saw the pride in his son’s eyes, but also the pain. He had no desire to leave his primarch’s side, but would do it anyway. That’s how Vulkan knew he had chosen well.

T’kell saluted fervently. ‘I swear it, Lord Vulkan.’

‘Good. Choose seven to remain, and only seven. One for each of our realms on Nocturne.’

‘There are thousands in here, primarch. How can I possibly—’

‘Indeed there are,’ said Vulkan. As he armoured himself for war, Vulkan found his mind drifting back to his last meeting with Horus. He would need to have words with Ferrus before this was begun. The Gorgon had a temper not unlike the volcanic peaks of Medusa, but he would need to channel that before entering into a confrontation with Horus and the other renegades. In his abstraction, he had almost forgotten T’kell, but as he was leaving, he reminded him again of what he would allow.

‘Seven, Forgefather, that is what your primarch decrees. I go to join with Ferrus’ fleet.’ He felt a deep sense of foreboding that he kept from his son, that this would be the last time he would see T’kell or the vault. ‘See it is done before I return.’

ONE

Mustering the garrison

A conflagration raged across the dark landscape of the ship's furnace. Thrust up from the ground the twisted silhouettes of the artefacts reminded T'kell of broken fingers. Tendrils of flame roamed the armourglass chamber like hungry scavengers, devouring everything and spitting forth smoke to obscure this grim vista of uncreation. It tasted acrid and bitter, rising up in all consuming fumes. Through the gaps in the smoke, snatches of structure and form were revealed. A blade blackened by fire, melting. A hull twisted by the immense temperature of the furnace.

Everything burned, and he was the architect of it.

From an observation platform, T'kell looked down upon the destruction he had wrought and wept.

Heat prickled his skin, even through the armourglass.

'I preside over a massacre...' he murmured, gripping the haft of his thunder hammer for reassurance. 'Such glory and beauty rendered moot by my unmaking of it.'

T'kell had little poetry in his soul – logic made no room for it – but felt it seize him roughly in that moment of abject annihilation.

Few warlords could claim such a feat of desolation, and yet he, a Forgemaster, a servant of craft and restoration, had done this.

T'kell smiled bitterly at the irony.

Forgefather, he reminded himself.

'This grief...' he uttered to the shadows, 'it is as if you have died again.'

Though he had not borne witness to the primarch's passing, T'kell knew in his heart that his father was gone.

It was said that their voice, the voice of the recently deceased, was the first thing to fade from memory. For T'kell it would never fade, even at the end. His father's last words to him were ingrained as indelibly as the honour scars carved into his onyx-black flesh.

The unthinkable had come to pass. Ash was all that remained.

'Is nothing to be spared, brother?'

He recognised the voice as belonging to Rahz Obek.

In his reverie, T'kell had almost forgotten the Firebearer was also present at the burning of Vulkan's artefacts, both of them standing in what amounted to little more than a corridor from which to witness the destruction.

His armour was scalloped green ceramite, furnished with a cloak of red, leathery drake hide. A helmet hung from his belt by a strap, a dark fin of metal cutting it into two equal hemispheres. A shorter version, also deep ocean green, divided his scalp, but was made of shorn hair, not metal. As ever, he appeared stern. Rahz Obek was stoic as granite, a trait that extended to his emotions as well as his deeds. His question was asked not as a plea, nor affected by grief, but as an enquiry of fact.

'This ship in which we stand, the weapon it carries on its hull,' said T'kell, looking to the upper vaults and the flickering shadows that haunted them. His bionic eye auto-focused as it chased details in the darkness above. 'And five other artefacts. Seven in all, one for each of the realms.'

Obek took a step towards the armourglass; it was all that stood between them and the furnace. His red eyes narrowed as he sought the shapes of the things T'kell had been charged to destroy. He had never seen the wonders of Vulkan's creation – even the ship was new to him – and T'kell assumed curiosity drove his brother-captain.

An inferno raged inside the great heart-forge of the *Chalice of Fire*, as red as the Forgemaster's armour. Nothing ever made could withstand its heat. And there was nothing but blackened metal and a growing field of ash for Obek to see.

'A pity to see father's work undone, but better that it should not fall into a traitor's hands.'

'He said much the same to me,' uttered T'kell. 'No wonder he chose you to lead the garrison.'

Captain Obek stiffened at the remark, confirming what T'kell had always

suspected – Obek thought he was being punished. Prometheus, the moon of Nocturne, its space port and barracks, was not a noble fortress to protect with his life; it was his prison to be incarcerated in until his death.

‘Though,’ said T’kell when no reply was forthcoming, ‘I understand you have a different name for yourselves.’

Obek half turned, and his draconic war-plate caught the firelight in such a way as to give an even more feral aspect.

‘There is only one name that matters,’ he said at last.

At this, T’kell nodded. ‘Yes.’

The inferno had died to a flickering flame, the roar becoming a dulcet crackling. Smoke had blackened the armourglass as if hiding the shame of what had been done. Or rather *undone*.

‘You said you needed my help, Forgefather?’ asked Obek.

‘It was his last order to me before he went to Isstvan Five.’

Again, Obek reacted, this time a hardening of the jaw.

‘And what would *you* have me do?’

‘What you have never done,’ said T’kell. ‘Leave Prometheus.’

Zandu saw the burning man in his dreams. The figure had no face, no markings on his armour from which to discern his Legion or rank, but he burned. Eternally.

He could not remember how long he had been seeing the burning man, or even the triggering event for the vision manifesting in the first place, only that it was ever-present, gnawing at the edge of his conscious mind and waiting for Zandu to let down his guard so that the apparition could be born again as a nightmare rendered in flame.

At first, Zandu thought *he* might be the burning man, and that he was looking into a dream-mirror that portended his own death. The sense of imminent mortality remained whenever the burning man came to visit, but after several such meetings Zandu came to realise that the apparition was someone else, *something* else, an anachronism or a future echo.

When asked, Chaplain Zau’ull had suggested it could be a metaphor for penance, that the burning man might represent one of the fiery dooms that awaited the wicked and the cruel.

Not since Nikaea had Librarians walked amongst their number, and Zandu did not believe he was such an individual, latent or otherwise. He only knew that every time he closed his eyes, the burning man would come to him, his body

coursing in perpetual flame. A legionary forever damned.

As he woke, Zandu became aware of a feverish sweat lathering his body. A spume of breath ghosted in the air despite the stultifying heat of the chamber. It, like his dream, was a phantom, inexplicable, impossible to grasp.

‘Merciful Vulkan,’ he gasped, the burden of the memory still heavy. His hearts raced and he willed them to slow down.

Breathe, breathe...

Naked, he stepped from a dais through a ring of shimmering haze and padded across a carpet of burning coals. The chamber was dark, but Zandu saw well enough without the light. He had missed something though and, as he reached for his armour and the sheathed blade upon the nearby rack, a voice intruded on the quietude.

‘Dark dreams, Brother Zandu?’

Zandu turned. ‘Obek.’

‘They haven’t addled your reflexes, Firefist.’ The brother-captain nodded at the blade in Zandu’s hand, which he had drawn on instinct.

‘They do little for my peace of mind,’ he admitted, lowering the short sword. Zandu smiled, and wasn’t surprised to see it go unreciprocated.

‘Perhaps a change of scenery will help.’

Zandu’s brow furrowed, but Obek had already turned. ‘Don your armour and then come and find me.’

The blade slid through the servitor’s guard, piercing its power core and abruptly ending the duel inside the battle cage. Blood and oil stained the floor.

Ak’nun Xen left the sword impaled, still trembling from the strength of his blow, as he went to the weapons rack and took up a spear. Admiring the sharpness of the tip in the sodium half-light, he banged the ferrule hard on the floor of the battle cage to begin the next bout.

A lumbering hulk of a servitor came for him on reverse-jointed limbs. From its left appendage an electro-flail rapidly unspooled and then crackled as it activated. A studded glove encased its right arm, exuding an energy hum.

Xen tossed the spear up, caught it in a reverse grip and threw it. The servitor advanced two more steps before the spear took out its vital organs, again ending the duel. Next came a hammer and a fresh opponent, then a glaive and after that three variations of chain weapon. Xen had reached his ninth bout when he felt a presence behind him that made him stop. He was wearing loose-fitting training fatigues and sat down crossed-legged easily, his back away from the door to the

battle cage as he addressed the newcomer.

‘Have you come to fight me, brother-captain?’ he asked. ‘Am I to be instructed, or have I already learned all I must?’

Xen thought he heard of snort of derision, but saw it for what it was. Caution.

As he waited for an answer, Xen felt the scars on his back itch as he flexed his shoulder blades and stretched to keep stiffness at bay whilst he rested.

A litany of honours cut curves and whorls into his skin in the sigil-dialect of Nocturne. Symbolism mattered to the people of the volcanic world and so it mattered to its transhuman sons too. Xen had won almost every honour possible for him to obtain. Few warriors in the Legion, alive or dead, were so decorated. But a mark had eluded him and now would forever do so: the rising flame, sigil of Vulkan’s Pyre Guard.

Memory of it, or rather lack of it, caused a mote of anger to rise in Xen’s heart. He knew it was unworthy but had no means of shackling the emotion. Rahz’s voice brought him back round.

‘How many more of those things do you intend to kill, Flamesmote?’

Cybernetic bodies and parts littered the battle cage. Oil painted it in arterial sprays like a pugilist’s canvas. Eighteen more servitor drones stood in their ready stations, inert, eyes dull and absent of motility.

‘All of them.’

Rahz came forwards, encroaching into Xen’s peripheral vision. The brother-captain had his armour on. He was also armed, a bolter-flamer strapped to his back. Kneeling down, he picked up the hammer Xen had used to stave in a servitor’s metal skull.

‘Is there something you need, brother-captain?’ Xen asked, unable to keep the impatience out of his voice, after a brief silence.

Rahz set down the hammer and stood up.

‘I may have a better use for your sword arm.’

Far from instilling him with a sense of righteous purpose, the Vow had left Zau’ull enervated. Even in the Reclusiam, he could find no succour. As the serfs bathed and cleansed his armour with unguents, he reflected on the bitterness he felt and how it had come to pass.

Even gripping his rosarius and reciting the canticles of faith and endurance brought him no comfort. He called to mind the lectures of Nomus Rhy’tan on self-sacrifice and the garnering of strength through suffering, but still clarity would not come and the heady fug of despair weighing him down refused to lift.

‘Vulkan is dead,’ he murmured, causing the serfs to stir and glance, afraid, at the Chaplain’s dark mood. His war-plate felt heavy as if the power feeding it had bled dry, and his limbs ached. A stifling air seemed to fill his war-helm and he reached for the skeletal faceplate with a trembling, gauntleted hand.

Is this grief? he wondered. Or the absence of faith? How can I minister to these warriors if my own spirit is broken?

Zau’ull stared until his eyes met the tattooed face of Gor’og Krask.

‘Brother-Chaplain...?’

It took Zau’ull a few seconds to realise Krask had addressed him. Krask awaited an answer, except Zau’ull had no memory of the question, only that he had been asked. The reveries were happening all too often.

‘I came here, to the Reclusium,’ offered Krask, his drake-scaled plate a thing of terrible beauty and palpable violence, ‘for sanctification. You said you would perform the rites over my armour.’

Zau’ull nodded, still weary but remembering. ‘Yes... yes, of course. Step forwards, brother.’

Seemingly at ease again, Krask obeyed and bowed his head before the Chaplain. Krask cut a huge figure in his armour and Zau’ull had to look up at the Firedrake.

Banishing the serfs, glad to be rid of their cloying presence, Zau’ull uttered the rites, but the benediction felt hollow.

It was.

He spoke of Vulkan, of his return to the mountain and presence beyond death.

‘Is he with us, Brother-Chaplain?’ asked Krask, his tone hopeful and devout.

‘Yes.’

‘You are of the Igniax?’

‘I am, brother.’

‘And can you see the primarch still?’

Zau’ull paused, recognising that the sons who remained needed hope, something to shore up their spiritual wounds. Zau’ull had heard talk of resurrection. One of the legionaries who had brought Vulkan back, one of the Pyre Guard no less. It had been a miracle, having crossed the storm and returned home. Rhy’tan had told him right before the attack – ‘Artellus Numeon claims that Vulkan isn’t dead’. The miraculous was not fated to last. Vulkan had stayed dead, his body now ash and all hope of his revivification ash along with it.

A bitter blow, the latest in many that had led to this moment and Zau’ull’s crisis.

He said none of this to Krask, and answered him instead, saying, ‘I can still see the primarch. He is with us always.’

Krask raised his head as the rites concluded. Nodding to Zau’ull, he noticed the Chaplain staring into a shadowy alcove.

‘Is he here now?’

‘Yes.’

‘Vulkan lives,’ Krask murmured. Since Isstvan, this phrase had become a defiant battle cry and statement of belief that had reached as far as Nocturne. Over the last few days – or for some, months – it had become an acknowledgement of the opposite and a wilting reassurance that the primarch lived on in his sons of the forge.

‘Yes,’ Zau’ull replied softly, ‘Vulkan lives,’ but as Krask left the Reclusiam and the Chaplain to his thoughts, Zau’ull saw nothing in the alcove but darkness.

Alone, finally, he removed his helm to take a shuddering breath, then snarled as one of the serfs returned. The lowly female recoiled and shrank before the Chaplain, who felt immediately contrite. Zau’ull reached out to apologise, but stopped when he saw the proffered scroll in the serf’s tiny hands.

‘What is this?’

‘L-Lord Obek sent it.’

The brother-captain did not approve of formality.

Zau’ull barely noticed the serf retreat back into the shadows as he read what was inked upon the scroll. His eyes narrowed as he reached the end.

‘What are you up to, Obek?’

Zeb’du Varr watched as Nocturne burned.

He liked it.

On the moon of Prometheus, the Vigil Hall offered an unparalleled vista of the world below. Hewn from obsidian armourglass, it could withstand a broadside from a cruiser or even a star fort. Resilient though it certainly was, it made for a much better watchtower than a battlement. From this vantage in the bastion orbiting high above Nocturne, Varr saw everything in wondrous slowness.

It was the Time of Trial, when the world voiced its anger and its people suffered or died, and yet survived...

Swathes of pyroclastic cloud rolled like tsunamis across the surface, and the gouts of fire spewing from its volcanoes were distant blooms of flaring light. Each fresh eruption expelled a huge trunk of smoke, billowing upwards into a pearlescent white dome framed by a ragged grey crown of smoke and cinder.

As he keenly observed the detonating caldera, Varr had to imagine the thunder because the almost balletic display played out in silence. He imagined the fire too, the endless swathes of it... the scent of smoke, the acrid taste in his mouth, the near-suffocating heat. Varr had to resist the urge to ignite a fire of his own as he watched the trauma of the pyroclasm unfold. Others in the Legion shared his love of fire, but none possessed a mania quite as pronounced as Varr.

‘Beautiful...’ he whispered, edging closer, and caught sight of his reflection in the glass.

Eyes the colour of hot coals glared hungrily from a face ravaged by knots of scar tissue. His skin looked leathern and cratered from countless burns. His lips had almost fused to his flesh, and were nearly indiscernible from the rest of his face. Nearly hairless, his scalp had sprouted wiry tufts between canyons of self-inflicted burn wounds.

Varr knew he appeared monstrous, but accepted it as a burden of his calling. His only regret in that moment was the absence of his flamers, and he clenched and unclenched his gauntleted fists as if enacting a kinetic memory.

‘I see you,’ he uttered to the fiery hell below. ‘I see you, father.’

Brother-Captain Obek was waiting, but Varr had needed to experience this first, to *watch* Nocturne burn as he always did during the Time of Trial, even though it never left him sated.

TWO

All the honour that remains

Fifty-one legionaries had gathered in the vault.

All Firedrakes bar one, though only Krask and his warriors wore Tartaros-pattern Terminator armour. The others wore Mark IV and V power armour, painted green as befitted their Legion and each with a mantle of salamander hide. Zau'ull had black armour to signify his position amongst the Chaplaincy, and one other amongst the throng wore the red associated with Mars. The Terminators had attached their salamander hides to their shoulder guards, whilst the rest had cloaks of scale hanging down their backs. In spite of the apparent differences between the two grades of armour, all had a draconic aspect in common. Edges of individual plates were scalloped, echoing the scaled texture of their cloaks or shoulder mantles; and the legionaries' war-helms, although different in form, all had toothed mouth-grilles or in some instances had been fashioned to resemble a drake head. Again, Zau'ull was the exception. His war-helm resembled an avatar of death, a fleshless skull.

Even made diminutive by the sheer size of the vault, the Salamanders looked formidable and ready for war. Many *ached* for it and felt that the need for the garrison had robbed them of deserved glory. Certainly, their surroundings were glorious enough.

Prometheus had several artefact chambers, but this was the largest. The Igneous Vault. It had also once belonged to Vulkan. The footfalls of the warriors who congregated there echoed loudly from its ornate walls despite the ash underfoot. Craft and artistry were evident in the vault's aesthetic. Statuary had been carved

into long metal ribs that arced all the way to a filigreed ceiling, where the wingless serpents of ancient Nocturne swam and fought in a sea of fire. An obsidian veneer gave the scene lustre and caught snatches of reflected light from a thousand guttering auto-sconces.

The sculpted deep drakes cavorting in the heart-blood of the world had once looked down upon a sprawling portrait of tribesmen abroad on the Scorian Plain, wrought into the metal of the vault. Both were stirring examples of the primarch's peerless gift of creation.

Ak'nun Xen spoke first, to a figure standing apart from the others. The one who was clad in red.

'Forgefather, why have you summoned us here?' he asked, his voice echoing for a few seconds before fading into silence. Xen favoured blades over the traditional concussion weapons of his Legion and had a habit of holding the pommel of each of his two swords whenever they were sheathed. It gave him a predatory air, of one who is always eager for battle. He was also one of the garrison's standard bearers and as such was expected to carry the company's banner into war. Xen could not remember a time when he had unfurled it.

Waiting patiently at the head of the cadre, Rahz Obek scowled. Several others gave disapproving glances too, especially Krask and his warriors.

'Do you know what we are standing in, Ak'nun Xen?' asked T'kell.

'Ash, brother. An ocean of it.'

'Fool!' hissed Zau'ull. 'It is more than that.'

Xen gave him a sideways look, but did nothing more.

All of the Salamanders legionaries carried their helmets – either mag-locked to their armour or simply held in their arms – out of respect for their surroundings and the Forgefather. Zau'ull did not deign to look back at Xen. Instead, he met the fervent gaze of Zeb'du Varr. Since their apotheosis to legionaries, they had adopted different names, but a biological bond existed between them that went deeper than mere sword brother.

Zeb'du bowed his head to his brother, eyes alive with vigour as if he saw something in the vault beyond the ken of the others.

You know, don't you? You see.

'It is the legacy of our primarch,' T'kell explained to Xen. His voice coaxed Zau'ull from his thoughts. 'It is the ashes of his great works. This vault used to be full, a cache of wonders like no other in the known galaxy, all wrought by our father's hammer. Upon his death, he charged me with ensuring none of it fell into the wrong hands.'

Some shook their heads, appalled at what their Forgefather had been ordered to do. Others, like Krask, kneeled, *actually* kneeled down, in spite of the difficulty of doing it wearing Terminator armour, to touch and hold what remained.

Even Xen appeared disquieted, though he did his best to mask it.

‘How did we not know of this?’ Zandu asked.

‘Father kept much to himself, it would seem. I only know what little he saw fit to tell me.’ T’kell spread his hands, one of which ended in five digit-sized mehadendrites, ‘Such as this vault, its contents and its purpose.’

Zandu shook his head; the primarch’s wisdom eluded him. ‘We could have used these weapons to kill Horus and end the war.’

‘I think that’s what he was worried about. He didn’t want to kill his brothers, least of all Horus.’

‘They had no such qualms,’ Xen chimed in.

‘Traitors are ever quick to resort to murder,’ Zau’ull said sadly.

Silence fell as Zandu’s question remained unresolved, and they all stared at the wreckage of Vulkan’s legacy as if they’d had to endure his death a second time.

T’kell observed them all keenly.

Only Rahz Obek remained unmoved. His eyes narrowed though, as he watched T’kell, knowing the Forgemaster must have had the ash removed from the *Chalice of Fire* and brought here.

You thought they might refuse, didn’t you?

‘We have suffered,’ said T’kell. ‘*You* have suffered. Much about these times makes little sense. I am a creature of reason and logic, but I find nothing reasonable or logical about the situation in which we find ourselves, or the decisions we must make for the sake of duty. But make them we must, for to do anything other would be to cast in our lot with those we profess to despise and pit ourselves against.’ He looked around at the fifty legionaries standing before him, as if measuring the honour and duty that he had just spoken of in each of them. ‘Bound to Prometheus, standing as its garrison, it is no place for such warriors. When the world burned below, what did you do?’

‘We watched,’ said Krask, the bitterness in his voice resonating with every other Salamanders legionary in the Igneous Vault. He rose to his feet with a churn of agitated servos.

‘Aye,’ uttered Zandu, ‘we watched whilst the Death Guard rained hell upon our earth.’

‘Held fast by duty,’ added Obek, and clasped forearms with the hulking Zandu.

‘You are not the garrison,’ said T’kell, slowly shaking his head. ‘That is not

what you call yourselves.’

‘We are the Unscarred,’ answered Zau’ull, and saw his brother nod again.

‘Denied glory,’ said Xen.

‘Denied death,’ Zandu corrected him with stern disapproval. ‘And I note you still wear your honour markings, brother.’

Xen scowled as the fires of his anger were stoked. ‘They are mine by right of deed.’

‘You are entirely too vainglorious, Ak’nun Xen.’ All turned to Zeb’du Varr. For a moment, it was as if the primarch had returned and this legionary was his avatar. Varr smiled then, dispelling the illusion as he revealed the mania in his eyes, but Xen made no riposte. T’kell continued.

‘Vulkan gave me a sacred duty,’ he said, regaining the attention of those present. ‘It was to be his last before he went to Isstvan V. He foresaw this war and he feared it. Not for his soul or his body, or even his sons, but for the harm it would cause mankind. And he feared the evil that could be done with the wonders he had made, a legacy meant to ensure the success of the Great Crusade, not weapons of destruction to be used against fellow legionaries in an internecine war.

‘He bade me destroy them, but I am not the primarch and I do not have his resolve or strength of will. I pleaded with him not to unmake everything. Our father heeded me.’

‘So, this is not all of it, then?’ asked Zau’ull, gesturing to the sea of ash underfoot. ‘Some of his works still endure?’

T’kell nodded solemnly, as if the existence of these artefacts were a great burden to him.

Xen gave a curt laugh. It was mirthless and derisory. ‘This theatre,’ he said, ‘what was it meant to achieve, to have us stand here in this tomb of ash whilst you tell us of your duty?’

‘I needed to convince you.’

‘Convince us of what?’

Obek had seen and heard enough. He stepped forwards.

‘Enough, Forgefather. Tell them what it is you wish of us.’

T’kell smiled thinly. ‘I need your help, to fulfill Vulkan’s last command to me.’

‘Then ask it,’ said Zandu, his mind apparently already made up.

‘Seven artefacts are left, but they must be taken far from Prometheus and hidden so that no one will ever find them.’

‘If they are so dangerous, Forgefather, then why not destroy them too?’ asked

Xen.

‘Because when this war is over, the galaxy and our Legion, should it survive, shall have need of them. And because I could not destroy them all, and begged for the primarch to allow me to spare these few.

‘I need brothers in arms,’ T’kell told him. ‘And you need a different purpose, to be unscarred no more and once again feel worthy of your warrior names. This is all the honour that remains.’

None argued.

‘I could speak for the company,’ said Obek, ‘and say we do this, for Vulkan and the Legion, although I admit I’m reticent to leave Prometheus’ defences weakened, but it has to be each warrior’s right to choose.’

‘Justly spoken, brother,’ said Zandu.

T’kell nodded to Obek, he who but for a quirk of fate would have served the Legion on Isstvan V and met his doom and glory there.

‘Well then,’ T’kell said, ‘by an unsheathing of blades, who will take up this trial with me?’

It took but a moment as the vault resounded to the din of scraping metal, and fifty hammers, swords and chainblades were held aloft as one.

THREE

These deeds we have wrought

The Chalice of *Fire* rode the empyrean tides like a behemoth of the deep pitted against a turbulent sea. Mercifully, the cadre of the Unscarred and the several thousand crew and servitors it took to get the forge ship under way had sailed away from the Ruinstorm, following a route known only to T'kell and the ship's Navigator.

After several months of warp-transit, they neared a Mandeville point of a small star system called Boron XIII that had no recorded life and whose contact with the Imperium had ceased over a century ago. It possessed four planets, orbiting around a star whose solar mass could support human habitation on one of the worlds without burning out or evaporating its natural water supplies.

As the *Chalice of Fire* emerged into real space, trailing ethereal corpusant in its wake, the frigidity that came with deep warp-space travel began to recede and the various ship systems hummed back into activation. The bridge became alive with industry as the captain hustled his crew and began to make preparations for approach according to T'kell's instructions.

'So then,' said Rahz Obek, standing alongside his Forgefather and looking out from a large observation blister, 'what awaits us down there?'

His gaze travelled through the darkness of space to the world slowly turning below them. The ship was still several hours out and Obek could discern nothing beyond the blue-grey hue of the planet and heavy banks of yellowish cloud that wreathed it.

'Honestly, brother,' T'kell said, 'I do not know. Beyond this point, I am as in

the dark as you.'

'Did Vulkan tell you nothing else?'

'He gave me its location and a name. The Wrought. A weapons cache to contain the artefacts.'

'Which must be huge if it is to house this ship.'

T'kell nodded.

'I searched some of the ship's archives concerning the Great Crusade,' Obek went on. 'They were surprisingly comprehensive. This system was mentioned but all detail of what transpired was redacted, if it ever existed in the first instance.'

'I know Vulkan came here alone, that of the entire Legion only he actually stepped onto the earth of this world.'

'And yet he did not name it. That surprises me. Remember Caldera?'

'Not personally, but I know of it.'

'When you said Vulkan had another cache, a second vault,' Obek said, 'I admit, I expected it to be there.'

'Perhaps that's why it isn't,' suggested T'kell. 'Perhaps Vulkan had other plans for Caldera.'

'We will never know...'

Obek trailed off into silence and they were faced with their inevitable grief once more. It had a habit of finding them when least expected, a knife of shadow that cut all the way to the bone.

Neither Salamanders legionary spoke for a while after that. They remained in each other's company, standing in companionable silence and deep in thought.

'The artefacts must stay aboard the *Chalice of Fire* when we make landfall,' T'kell said.

Obek nodded, the thought having already occurred to him. 'Krask and his men will stand guard. Zau'ull will want to remain behind too.'

'You have spoken with him recently?'

'No, but Krask has. Our Brother-Chaplain claims Vulkan is with us, in spirit if nothing else.'

'And your thoughts?'

Reflected in the armourglass, Obek's face darkened. 'I know when he is lying.'

'He suffers.'

'As do we all, brother.'

'Him more than most.'

'You know, Forgefather, you are remarkably empathic for a Techmarine.'

T'kell smiled, though given the cybernetics on his face it turned into more of a grimace. 'I am my father's son.'

Obek replied with the equivalent of a facial shrug, as they lapsed back into silence.

Through the viewing portal, the clouded world edged closer and their answers with it.

A pair of Thunderhawks speared through the void, engine burn flaring coldly in the darkness. They flew in formation, staying close as they hit the upper atmosphere and took the brunt of re-entry. The gunships bucked but held their line even as their prows glowed hot and red.

Then they were through, leaving the chill of the void behind and the gargantuan presence of the *Chalice of Fire* now anchored in low orbit above, with its precious cargo still aboard. As they entered a bank of cloud, the pilots of both Thunderhawks eased back and let the turbines take up the slack.

As they levelled off into a horizontal approach vector, a request from both ships crackled across the vox.

'Destination coordinates, Forgemaster?'

'What do you see, pilot?'

'We have entered a fog bank. I'll need to descend.'

'Do so.'

A few seconds lapsed, and a brief roar of engine noise interrupted the dulcet reverberation of the ship's hull as the Thunderhawk dipped sharply to clear the fog bank.

'Picking up residuals on the sensors,' the pilot said as he returned on the vox.

T'kell maintained the dialogue as the others sat silently in their launch cages. Two squads, Varr and Zandu. 'Clarify.'

'Low levels of radiation, but rising.'

'Any structures?'

'Only ruins.'

T'kell exchanged a glance with Obek. *Was this what Vulkan had intended? Were they even in the right place?*

'Wait... Something on the horizon. Moving fast...'

A blurt of static broke off the feed for a few seconds.

'Contact!'

'Identify, pilot,' said Obek, taking over as military commander of the mission.

'Sixteenth Legion, brother-captain.' He sounded strained. A second later, the

passengers in the hold knew why, as the gunship banked sharply and an alert siren began to howl.

A muted explosion peppered the hull with shrapnel, then came the denser impacts of shells, most likely from a heavy bolter. The hold shuddered. A savage jerk felt like a hammer blow. Smoke began to issue through the internal vision slits.

‘Taking fire...’

In the circumstances, the pilot’s report was superfluous.

Preceded by a high-pitched whine that went from distant to acute in an eye-blink, a second hit ripped open part of the fuselage. Zandu carried the brunt of it, the sudden fire and intensifying noise all but smothering his pained shout.

Varr had him, but other than some scorching of his armour, Zandu looked none the worse for wear.

The pilot was oblivious, but knew they had been hit. He snarled, angry, *‘Engaging.’*

A blurt of muffled but staccato heavy bolter fire sounded through the hull. Most of the Salamanders legionaries made ready for combat, but there was nothing they could do whilst the Thunderhawk rocketed through the sky. They were in the hands of the pilots now.

Another jerk buffeted the hull, harder than wind shear, which had become a nerve-shredding screech, but not as punishing as the first or second blow.

A glancing hit, T’kell realised as he got back on the vox.

‘What are they flying, pilot?’

There was a short pause as another evasive manoeuvre sent them banking in the opposite direction. Judging by the ambient sound, T’kell imagined the paired Thunderhawks weaving around each other’s slipstreams as they sought to outwit their attackers.

‘Land Speeders, heavily armed,’ the pilot replied at last. *‘One is down and on fire. Two have disengaged. Should we pursue?’*

‘Immediately, and jam their comms,’ T’kell said. *‘It’s possible we were unlucky and this is a patrol. No one else must know we’re here or why.’*

The pilot relayed an affirmative and the gunships gave chase.

‘Sons of Horus,’ Obek had to shout, and the speaking of that name caused every pair of coal-red eyes in the hold to fall upon him. *‘What are they doing here?’*

T’kell shook his head almost without realising he had done it.

‘Hunt them down, pilot,’ he said into the vox, and then to Obek, *‘Let’s find out.’*

A short-lived chase followed, but the Land Speeders were no match for the faster and more heavily armed Thunderhawks. As the engine roar diminished and the gunship gently circled around, T’kell knew the threat was neutralised.

Obek was already on the vox.

‘Conduct an aerial sweep. Make sure they’re alone, and then take us in for a closer look.’

It took a few minutes to sweep and secure the area, during which no further Speeders or reinforcements could be found, suggesting the ones that came across the Salamanders had done so by chance and were a single patrol.

As one of the Thunderhawks flew skywards, monitoring with sensors and concealed by the cloud layer, the second briefly touched down to disgorge six legionaries in power armour. The ramp was already closing and the gunship rising as T’kell led the small squad in the direction of a downed Land Speeder. They kept low and dispersed, using the ruins to cover their approach.

An electrical storm cracked the sky with jolts of violet lightning and a heavy gale rolled off the dirt plain, kicking up squalls of dust and small pieces of debris. Zandu felt them rattle against his armour, but kept his eyes on the unmoving forms slung across the Speeder as he approached it.

Sons of Horus. The rank markings and colour of their armour were clear. Zandu didn’t believe in chance or providence or coincidence. He believed in what he saw and experienced. Nothing more. This encounter warned him to be wary.

‘Brother-sergeant,’ T’kell said, ‘are your injuries not severe?’

Zandu had felt it at the time, but shook his head. He gestured for the four legionaries of his squad to advance ahead. They did so as one, bolters held up to their shoulders, right retinal lenses aimed down the stocks. Zandu had a bolter too, Phobos-pattern with a drake-toothed bayonet attached to the stock and an underslung volkite.

‘Armour took the worst of it,’ said Zandu, slapping the side of his helm as the integrity read-out flashed red for a moment before turning back to green. ‘Just needed to stretch my legs, Forgefather.’

T’kell nodded, his attention only half on Zandu as he scrolled through his internal data-feed. Zandu could hear it processing and saw the blank-eyed expression of the Techmarine as he interfaced with it.

‘Radiation levels are increasing,’ T’kell said after a few more seconds. ‘I am having difficulty pinpointing a nexus for it. Readings suggest it’s latent. Possibly atomics – the air is saturated with it. How are your armour seals, brother-

sergeant?’

‘Functioning, Forgemaster.’

T’kell didn’t respond. They had arrived at their destination.

As the squad reached the downed Speeder they fanned out and each took up a sentry position, eyes on the wreck and on the immediate area beyond it. The other two transports had been annihilated and had ditched much farther out. T’kell was content to examine this one.

Upon close inspection, though, it became obvious that both crew were dead. The pilot’s chest had been blown out, probably by a shell detonation. His rib carapace had split down the middle and any internal organs that remained inside were pulped. The gunner had been scythed in half and his lower body had landed several metres from the crash site, whilst his clenched fists ensured his upper half remained locked to the multi-melta that sagged on its pintle mounting.

Knowing how resilient his former brothers-in-arms could be, Zandu made sure neither legionary still clung to life.

‘Both dead,’ he said, beckoning T’kell forwards, who had waited for the confirmation. ‘What do you hope to find?’ he asked, as the Forgemaster used his mechadendrites to interface with the Land Speeder’s control console. The steering column had been wrecked and the sensor display spat sparks through a broken screen of dark glass.

‘It is what I hope *not* to find,’ T’kell replied and blanked out again as he roamed for data in what was left of the Land Speeder’s rudimentary cogitator.

As the Forgemaster worked, Zandu could properly survey the landscape. He surmised a city had once stood where the Speeder had come down, before being flattened into oblivion. Vines encroached upon this suburban shell. Moss and lichen shawled its broken ramparts, and colonies of insects had made nests of its stony hollows. Edges of the ruins suggested a district; structures delineated where roads might have been. Tufts of coarse grass intruded through cracks in the sundered highway, and more than once Zandu caught a glimpse of some timid prey-creature skittering through the city. It was as if nature, not man, had risen up and overtaken this place. Grimly, he realised the loose rock underfoot was actually bone, half buried under dirt and wind-borne debris. Femurs, teeth, even the odd partial skull lay scattered across the plain like some horrific mass grave.

Zandu was a warrior. He knew war. These people had been destroyed... or destroyed themselves. And long ago. His attention was drawn to a line of graffiti scrawled across one of the few walls still standing but begrimed by age. In Low

Gothic, it read: *These deeds we have wrought.*

It looked like it had been carved into the rock with a knife or some other blade. Scraps of uniform clung to some of the bones, and he could swear that some of them didn't look Imperial. Was this what Vulkan had been so afraid of, mankind's capacity to destroy itself? What beautiful and terrible wonders had he fashioned?

'Primarch have mercy,' he whispered.

T'kell slammed his fist against the Speeder's console, breaking into Zandu's thoughts.

'Nothing,' he muttered.

'And yet you still seemed troubled.'

'I am. I found nothing to data-sift. The cogitator is dead. I cannot exload, so a warning could have been sent but there is no way to be sure.'

Zandu looked to the horizon. He could hear the distant passage of the gunship prowling above.

'Skies are clear, except for us. If contact *was* made, we would have seen something by now.'

T'kell remained pensive, but he was considering something else. Zandu could guess what.

'You didn't expect anyone else to be here, did you?'

'No. This place was supposed to be barren, of no strategic or military significance.'

T'kell recalled the gunship, instructing it to land a few hundred metres outside of the crash site. Once the squad was back aboard, Obek met them with news.

'There's an outpost about twenty kilometres north of this position.'

'In use?'

'Unknown. It came up on the long-range augurs, so it must be large. The Wrought?'

'Perhaps. Thus far, nothing has been as I expected. We should keep the artefacts on board the *Chalice of Fire* for now, possibly indefinitely if this location has been compromised.'

'Agreed,' said Obek, relaying the order to the pilot and not bothering to ask where that left them if the Wrought were no longer viable. He scowled. 'It feels as if we have an armed vortex grenade in our hands, ready to detonate.'

'That is not so far from the truth, brother-captain,' T'kell said. 'Our father created much with his hammer, miracles of science and invention. I know, I have seen them. Peerless in their capacity to do great good, but also great ill. They are

weapons, brother-captain.'

'Weapons have capacity for neither good nor ill. Only their wielders have that.'

'Precisely, brother.'

FOUR

Our father's legacy

Zau'ull pressed his gauntleted hand against the side of the Armarium in the hopes of feeling closer to Vulkan. T'kell had forged the repository for the sole purpose of transporting the artefacts to the Wrought. Zau'ull had thought he was alone in the *Chalice of Fire's* lower depths until Krask came to join him.

'I envy you, Firefather.'

'Why is that, brother?' Zau'ull asked, abruptly self-conscious as he let his hand fall away. It lingered, suspended a few inches from the metal before it came back to his side and he turned to face the Wyvern. This was Krask's war-name, self-bestowed in the belief he embodied the fearsome prowess of its namesake. His men carried similar names, wearing them as if they were masks.

'I envy your closeness to our father, his...' and he struggled for a moment to think of the word, '*...presence* that you alone can feel.'

It fell just short of suggesting the idea that Vulkan's spirit, his soul, lived on in some fashion. Such notions, even in an enlightened galaxy rapidly collapsing back into superstition, were still unfavourable.

'Yes, his presence,' Zau'ull said distantly.

'It is a great honour to stand sentinel at the gate to our father's legacy.'

Zau'ull smiled. 'You have a poetic disposition, brother.'

Krask blinked once as if he didn't understand the Chaplain's meaning. His gaze strayed to the Armarium. It was large, the design nondescript despite what it contained. Five wonders, five miracles of Vulkan's creation. T'kell had secured them within and only he, Obek and Zau'ull could open the repository's gene-

coded door without using force.

‘Beyond his personal war apparel, I have never seen our father’s works. I imagine they are something to behold.’

‘This very ship is amongst them, brother,’ Zau’ull said. ‘As is the weapon mounted upon its hull.’

The air felt stifling and made the chamber seem close despite its size. The metal of the deck beneath and the walls surrounding them were black. Soot and cinder bled unceasingly through the vents, filling the corridors of the vessel with an acerbic odour redolent of the hundreds of forges and foundries below. The *Chalice of Fire* was no warship; it did not possess the weapons of a battle-barge, but it could create them.

‘It is a forge ship like no other,’ said Zau’ull.

‘The likes of which will never be seen again,’ uttered Krask, and the wonder in his eyes faded as quickly as it had been born.

Zau’ull felt it too. ‘No. It will not.’

‘And we shall die with it.’

‘Yes, we shall.’

Heavy footfalls echoed down a long corridor of a different ship, announcing the presence of the Salamanders legionary not affiliated with the Unscarred. His name was Saurian, and he wore a suit of draconic war-plate, Mark IV with a torn hide of lizard scale and tusked shoulder guards. A snarling helmet sat in the crook of his left arm, whilst his right was by his side, one hand on the clawed pommel of his sword.

As he breached the threshold of a large room, passing through a wide metal archway, he was struck by the scent of machine oil and lapping powder. It was dark within, and the shadows cast by the low-burning lume-globes suggested vastness. They danced across the legionary sitting in a seat of iron. Not a throne, it was not grand enough to be considered such, but a place to brood and seethe in embittered silence. This was the Iron Father, and though he took no throne, he was king in this place.

Lost to grim thoughts, the Iron Father only looked up when the Salamanders legionary had stopped a few strides from his seat. A whirring of gears and servos accompanied the gesture, emanating like a growl of displeasure from the black-armoured warrior.

‘What scraps do you bring me this time, Saurian?’

The Salamanders legionary bowed and took a knee.

‘We have found him, Iron Father.’

The Iron Father shifted, lifting his head from where it had been resting against his clenched fist. The dark flashed with a pinprick of blood-red light from his right eye. To Saurian, it looked eager and homicidal. The Iron Father smiled, the scars stitching the flesh half of his face to the metal half pulling so taut they looked as if they might break and tear his imperious visage apart.

‘Have Brother Gallikus rouse Azoth and the other Revenants.’

Saurian was about to reply when he realised the Iron Father wasn’t talking to him. A spectre emerged from the shadowy penumbra at the edge of the room, invisible until the moment he had been called upon. The Silent nodded, his avian war-helm dipping like the head of a black crow.

The Iron Father’s voice cut through Saurian’s thoughts.

‘Our quarry won’t escape us this time. Horus’ lapdog will lead us to our enemy and then burn for what he has done.’

Dismissed, Saurian stood, turned on his heel and walked away. Only when he was sure he was out of earshot and the Iron Father had returned to his machinations did he speak low into his gorget-vox.

‘Ahrem, iron-brother, the Raven is on his way.’ Saurian didn’t wait for an answer – he just kept walking, trying to remember how they had come to this.

He could not.

Ahrem Gallikus closed off the vox and gave a voiceless debt of gratitude to the Salamanders legionary. His breath ghosted in the chill air of the barracks. He and some of the other, *normal*, legionaries aboard the *Obstinate* had taken to calling it the ‘mausoleum’. It seemed perversely fitting.

‘This is where I leave you, brother,’ he said to the hulking figure inside the stasis-casket. Most of his body was obscured by the frost against the glass and the internal cryo-mist, but Gallikus could still see Azoth’s face. He had to crane his neck – each casket was set upon a raised dais that provided power – but he could see it well enough. It looked as cold, dead and gelid as when Azoth had been interred into the wretched thing.

‘But you’re not dead, are you...’

As an Iron Hands legionary, Gallikus knew machines. He knew how to tend and repair them and how to sabotage them, even how to affix a bionic, but he was no Ironwrought or Techmarine – the Iron Father’s iron-craft was beyond him. For the moment.

The Raven would be here soon, and his approach would be undetected.

Gallikus needed to return to his quarters. For some reason, the Revenants responded to him better than anyone else aboard ship. Gallikus hoped some old memory prompted it, but in his bones he knew it was just a quirk.

As he backed away from Azoth, the half-light from the lumens revealed a host of stasis-caskets.

No, coffins, thought Gallikus, meant for the dead. Our father's legacy.

‘Only, you don’t know you’re dead,’ he muttered aloud. ‘Not yet.’

He sealed the door behind him and made for his quarters to await the Silent.

FIVE

Ave Mechanicum

The Unscarred reached the edge of the outpost on foot, the gunships having landed far enough away so as not to appear on augur or be spotted by a watch station, not that they had seen any other signs of life on this desolated world. The ruins of the city had masked their approach but meant the Salamanders legionaries were spread out, hunkered down behind walls or the shells of half-destroyed buildings. In the darkness, staying out of the lightning flashes of the storm, the Salamanders legionaries could observe the Mechanicum cohorts without fear of detection. It had proved an unnecessary precaution, as the occupants of the outpost appeared oblivious to anything but their labours, the purpose of which remained unclear.

The scale of their endeavours was not.

A red-robed army had descended on this place and were erecting a prefabricated structure of high-sided walls and towers, something more akin to a fortress than a temporary station, the one detected by the gunship's long-range augur. Menials and bulk-servitors toiled to lift wire-threaded power coils and huge cargo crates, whilst tracked automata wheeled in long tracts of piping. Silos and cogitators warred for space as it was slowly colonised by mechanised beings and their trappings. Red-robed overseers ran the operation, consulting data-slates, making computations and analysing data.

Zandu observed everything through the green haze of the scopes, his view lit by occasional bright flashes. Deep night had set in, along with the storm that persisted on the horizon but now was closing in.

‘Single point of ingress,’ he said, handing the scopes to Obek.

‘A gate to a fortress. What are the Mechanicum even doing here? Are there any forge worlds nearby? How did they get here?’

T’kell shook his head. He was watching too, but with his bionic eye he didn’t need the augmentation of the magnoculars.

‘Is it possible the Mechanicum knew about this place?’ asked Obek. ‘About the Wrought?’

A dread thought occurred to T’kell in that moment, his jaw abruptly clenching as if to try to deny it. ‘Horus may have done. Vulkan confided much in him during the early days of the Crusade.’

‘And the Mechanicum? What is their role in this?’

‘The Legiones Astartes and the priesthood have fought side by side on many occasions. It’s possible they are still allies of the Warmaster.’

‘Mars and Terra are allies, Forgemaster,’ said Obek, setting down the scopes. ‘After the betrayals... surely the Red Planet would have rescinded their support?’

T’kell’s silence spoke for him.

The three legionaries lay on their fronts, just behind the cusp of a low rise of earth. They had much to question. No one on Nocturne had heard from Mars, or any of their emissaries, for many months.

‘Their presence is unusual, and entirely too coincidental,’ T’kell said at last, considering a less abhorrent question than the previous one. ‘I can draw only one conclusion from it.’

Zandu didn’t need to be a Techmarine to know what that was.

‘They know it’s here and are looking for it.’

‘Yes, brother-sergeant,’ T’kell replied. ‘The Wrought is a weapons cache. Vulkan had several, established during the Great Crusade in case the Legion was ever in need of rapid resupply whilst on campaign.’

Obek grimaced ruefully. ‘The kind of secret he would share with his Warmaster.’

‘The Mechanicum are not here alone,’ said Zandu.

Obek sighed ‘The renegades we burned... But we do not know for sure they are allied together.’ He swore under his breath. ‘Vulkan’s blood.’

‘It might not be of their own volition,’ suggested T’kell, ‘but either way, we must know.’ He started to rise. ‘We need to get closer.’

Zandu turned to look back down the rise to where three squads of Salamanders legionaries were waiting in dispersed formations, weapons primed. A curt battle-

sign from the sergeant saw them advance up the hill.

‘How close?’ asked Obek.

‘Close enough that I can infiltrate one of their data-feeds. Fifty feet, give or take.’

SIX

False memories of the massacre

T'kell had gone alone, it being easier for a single legionary in power armour to remain hidden in close proximity to the walls than thirty. Obek kept his eye on the Forgemaster, though, hunkering down inside a crater just large enough to conceal his presence from the sentries on the walls. Mercifully, though the labour crews inside the complex were numerous, the sentries were few, and just lightly armed skitarii.

Zandu had gone back to the squads who had dug in farther up the hill behind the legionaries, so Obek was now alone in protecting the Forgemaster.

Forgefather, he reminded himself as he watched the Techmarine.

T'kell had taken another crater, staying low as he tried to get close to a servitor or augmented menial. The Mechanicum labourers were rad-shielded within hermetically sealed suits, not that it would make any difference to T'kell.

Obek knew little about the Mechancium or their ways. He had not been inducted into the Martian ranks like T'kell, but knew their machine language was called 'binaric' and that T'kell would 'cant' an interrogative into the nearest non-biological mind and then siphon off whatever secrets it harboured in its deep programming. He would not even need to touch it.

Obek observed from the crater. No outward sign of the Techmarine's success or failure presented itself, and the sense of impotence at having to watch and wait sat poorly with the brother-captain, but he would not risk an interruption.

'I do not like this waiting, brother-captain,' Zandu said over the vox.

'A Salamander is patient, brother-sergeant,' Obek replied, but inwardly

empathised. ‘He tempers his mood as he tempers metal.’

‘You sound like Zau’ull.’

The tremor of a smile crept onto Obek’s face.

‘I’ll consider that a compliment. Any unusual movement?’

Obek had instructed Zandu to maintain close overwatch on the outpost. From his higher vantage point, the sergeant had a much better view. Obek could see little more than the sloping walls and the gap between them through which the workers passed back and forth. Should any sign, however ostensibly innocuous, suggest they had been discovered, they were to engage immediately.

‘The machines still toil,’ Zandu replied. ‘I have sighted several combat-units but only lightly armed and remaining on station.’

That coincided with what Obek had seen too.

‘If needed, we will storm this place and lay waste to any who ally themselves with the renegades.’

‘Understood, Firebearer.’

Obek cut the feed; something was happening below.

‘Forgefather?’ he asked, and could just make out T’kell, whose entire body had gone into spasm, a single violent jolt that put him onto his back.

‘Forgefather?’ Obek asked again when he got no answer. He brought up his bolt pistol, glancing at the outpost but seeing nothing unusual.

A crackle of static infected the vox, a blurt of binaric cant that came from T’kell. He quickly reverted to Gothic, but haltingly. *‘I found... some... ing.’*

‘Are you injured, Forgefather?’

‘Mechanicum... know... they know.’

‘About the Wrought?’ Obek glanced over again, but nothing had changed. He considered voxing Zandu but wanted to know what T’kell had discovered.

‘Us...’ said T’kell, and began to thrash. *‘They know we are here.’*

‘What?’

An explosion lit up the hillside, sending bone scraps flying and chunks of rubble with it. The skitarii had unleashed a heavy cannon.

Obek roared down the vox. ‘Salamanders, engage!’

Zandu was already moving, steadily advancing down the hillside as he led the attack.

‘I’ll secure the Forgemaster,’ said Obek, rushing down towards where T’kell lay eerily still in his crater. He reached him just as the bolters started up and the hillside erupted in muzzle flare.

The shell storm hit the side of the outpost, tearing across its ramparts and

howling through its open ingress. There was no gate, just an opening. Servitors and menials alike were shredded, including the combat-unit that had fired the incendiary. Explosive fury ripped through the encampment, and as the bipedal battle-automata responded, their non-martial equivalents continued to labour without pause.

A phalanx of shield-bearers erected a mobile barricade at the opening, but Zandu quickly put a hole through it with his volkite. A cluster of grenades followed and the makeshift barrier was blown apart and skywards in a series of fiery detonations. The legionaries did not slow, but drove implacably into the outpost itself, targeting sentry points and gun towers with lethal precision.

This was the Legion at war, the Emperor's Angels unleashed, and the Salamanders revelled in it.

The rest disappeared behind smoke, hinted at through half-heard carnage and the throaty retort of Space Marine weaponry, as Obek finally got to T'kell.

'Forgefather?' he asked tentatively. 'Brother?' He was reaching to check T'kell's vital signs when the Techmarine's eye opened. He appeared weak, but lucid.

'What happened?' Obek asked.

'Malicious code,' T'kell replied. 'Something designed to discourage infiltration. As my mechanical implants came under attack, my biological body suffered a seizure.'

Obek offered his arm. 'Can you stand?'

'Unsure.' T'kell managed to look down at his legs, but they stayed inert. 'No. Still non-functional. Need to purge the code.'

'Then do it quickly. The Mechanicum have turned their guns on us,' said Obek, looking over to the outpost and imagining the battle within. Obek knew war, though he had not tasted it since the end of the Crusade. He knew weapons too, so he recognised the timbre of the Phobos-pattern boltguns his warriors used. He discerned their other patterns as well, the almost rhythmic staccato of suppressing and supporting fire. As he listened, absorbing everything in just a few seconds, something incongruous amid the battle din made him frown...

T'kell seized his arm, but only to get his attention. 'Not only the Mechanicum,' he said.

That sound Obek now heard... also bolter fire, but not from his warriors' assault – it *answered* it. A counter-assault. An ambush.

'Sons of Horus,' Obek breathed and raised the pilots, but it was too late.

Breaching the defensive cordon, Zandu pushed forwards. Through the heat of a las-beam fusillade, he quickly appraised the battlefield.

Four watchtowers stood sentry at the cardinal points of the outpost, which was encircled by a defensive wall arranged in a horseshoe with a single open entry point. Crates, pipes, industrial-grade coils of wire and other materials cluttered around a main assembly area where the non-combatants had begun construction of a machine Zandu did not recognise. Some kind of seismic drill, perhaps? There were signs of excavation around the site. Defensive forces were spread out with lighter patrols scattered on the ramparts to the walls but the heaviest concentrations of resistance focused around the watchtowers.

The Salamanders legionaries targeted these first.

Zandu rushed the nearest tower, flanking left with his men. A cohort of mechanised thralls swung a mounted cannon into position, but the angle slowed them down and half of Zandu's squad strafed the gunners from existence.

Another thrall cohort began to close as the second half of the squad hurled krak grenades at the tower's support struts, before reforming again and laying down suppressing fire. A split-second later, a detonation shook the ground and the tower collapsed with all the grace of a felled man. It crashed down onto a group of labour-servitors too slow to move out of the way, or too oblivious to the danger. When the tower then struck a fuel silo, it provoked a firestorm that raged through the encampment, leaving blasted tech-thralls and flesh-stripped menials in its wake. The resulting explosion shook the walls. Some of the menials continued to toil, though their scraps of hair were on fire and their augmetics shone cleanly through the gaps in their melted prosthetic flesh.

Zandu's warriors gunned them down, clearing their sight lines to the robed skitarii in their rad-masks struggling through the fiery wreckage. Returning from the right flank where a second demolished watchtower lay burning, Sergeant Ashax brought up his warriors in support and the two squads formed a phalanx. Against the massed bolter fire, the skitarii had to fall back or face annihilation.

Scattered survivors from the tech-thralls and heavier battle-servitors tried to consolidate and outflank, but Varr's squad laid down a swathe of blazing promethium that cooked them in their metal suits or fused their tracks solid. The Firedrakes advanced as they burned, hosing ramparts, smothering stragglers and otherwise devastating the Mechanicum's ranks.

Such is the fate of all renegades, thought Zandu as the warrior-spirit within all legionaries rejoiced. It had been too long since he had seen battle, too long as a watchman on Prometheus. It had been an honourable duty, but ultimately all

Space Marines yearned for the crucible of battle. This was scarcely war, and it felt different to the way the Legion fought. Thirty men, bolters and flammers, it was far removed from the continent-spanning wars of the Crusade, but he could not deny it felt satisfying. Even though their helms hid their expressions, Zandu knew his brothers felt the same as he.

Ashax even raised his chainsword in triumph as the remnants of the enemy were slowly crushed. Zandu raised his fist too. They had fought together at Antaem and driven back the alien scourge of the orks. A decade older than he, Ashax had taught Zandu what it meant to be a Firedrake and his example had inspired the other sergeant to better serve his primarch and his Legion. As sons of the forge, that bond of brotherhood and shared battle history was all that remained to the Salamanders. Here, a small moment of glory had been gratefully snatched, a rare victory after what felt like many recent defeats. Ashax turned, his triumphant mood infectious, poised to bellow a war cry, jerking instead as the bolt shell struck his gorget and took off his head.

Zandu's body reacted faster than his mind, even as he fought back the horror of seeing the fount of blood erupting from Ashax's neck stump. The others were turning too, but their bolters felt slow to track with him, as if caught by some temporal anchor.

Ashax's corpse collapsed to its knees and fell forwards, but Zandu had confined this grim image to his peripheral vision as he focused on the threat in front of him.

Shadows advanced through the murk, heavy armoured and definitely legionary. A stark zigzagging arc of lightning lit their forms in iridescent violet monochrome. They filled the breach in the horseshoe. Zandu mouthed a warning, motion and recognition happening in nanoseconds of enhanced cognition, as a firing line of bolters opened up.

Any hope of slipping their notice evaporated when Obek saw the three legionaries coming for him and T'kell. The Forgemaster still lay prone, nearly paralysed and vulnerable.

'You are my only defence, Obek...' he murmured, and managed to clench his fist though his voice tripped like a badly synched audio feed.

'Hold fast, brother,' Obek said, resting a hand on the Techmarine's chest before drawing his blade. 'I shall not fail you.'

The three legionaries had slowed, raising their boltguns to their shoulders to fire.

Obek offered them his sword, gently, reverently laying his bolt pistol down but never breaking eye contact with his enemy.

‘You surrender?’ one of them laughed, incredulous.

Obek shook his head. ‘I want to see if the Sons of Horus have any honour left.’

The three legionaries looked at one another and, to Obek’s surprise, lowered their bolters and drew their own blades. They were notched and the metal dark, unlike the captain’s blade, which shimmered like flawless obsidian.

They encircled him, those notched blades reaching out to Obek like claws. Obek moved forwards into the cordon the Sons of Horus had created. It put the fight farther from T’kell and, hopefully, a swift execution from the minds of the renegades who were now focused on the Salamanders legionary who could still walk and fight.

Obek didn’t know why they had accepted his challenge. Boredom, perhaps, or possibly a desire to kill a legionary captain at close quarters. Win or lose, he resolved in that moment before the first blow came that he would not allow them to take him alive. Torture would follow if he did, and Obek would not suffer that indignity. By leaving his bolt pistol at T’kell’s feet, he had left the Forgemaster with a way to avoid such a fate, but could not worry about that now as his assailants closed on him.

‘Any last words, *kinsman*?’ asked one of the renegades as the ring of green and black tightened like a noose.

Obek was about to decline when he gave a different answer. ‘Vulkan lives.’

A thrust came in at his midriff, which he turned aside from to parry a second blow aimed at the join between gorget and helmet. He elbowed the renegade who had thrust, striking a point between forearm and upper arm. The legionary grunted in pain and was turning to stab again when Obek parried the third assailant, breaking his guard to spear his blade into the warrior’s throat. The third legionary gurgled, coughing blood up against his mouth-grille. The second, the one who had tried to cut Obek’s head off, shoved his brother out of the way so he could die somewhere else, and launched a feral attack.

He snarled, spitting incoherent curses with every cleave and thrust. Such was the ferocity of the attack that Obek struggled to defend against it. He also had the other Sons of Horus legionary to worry about. A lance of white heat impaled his side as one of the cuts penetrated his guard, tearing ceramite, adamantium and the mesh beneath until it met flesh. Blood poured from the wound, but clotted fast. It needed to. Obek took a second hit to his left temple, just a glancing blow or the fight would have ended there and then, but it rattled his senses.

Fighting three opponents was hard, but two was harder. A third assailant would often get in the way of the other two, interrupting their natural balance. As one attacks, the other could seek out a weakness in defence and exploit it. If three attack simultaneously, they would become entangled and inhibit their ability to bring superior numbers to bear. So, Obek knew it would get tougher before he was done. He had to move quickly and anticipate the renegades' attacks, which left few chances to counter.

A blow struck his shoulder guard, so hard that it jarred the bone but also snagged the blade. Obek turned sharply, exposing his flank to a vicious thrust from the legionary who was still armed, which sank deep into the meat of his body but wrenched the weapon from the other's grasp. He shoulder-barged the still-armed renegade, forcing him back, affording himself time to marshal his pain whilst the disarmed renegade made the mistake of reaching for the protruding hilt of his sword.

Obek stabbed sideways into his armpit, then pushed the blade down at an angle into the renegade's heart before stepping to the side so the warrior's body was between him and the survivor. The frenzied hack into his brother's clavicle would have cleaved Obek's chest open, armoured or not. Instead, it ended in frustration for the Sons of Horus legionary and left them one against one.

The renegade's blade tore up blood and meat as the last remaining warrior wrenched loose. Another notch had been added to the legacy of betrayals, albeit this last one unintended. Unsheathing his own sword from the dead legionary's armpit, Obek let the corpse fall. He held his side, a gauntlet pressed to the grievous wounds that had opened him up and splattered his blood across the ground.

'Would you like a rest...?' he asked, but his voice was strained and ragged with effort.

He expected the renegade to lunge, but instead the warrior dropped his blade and brought up the boltgun that was slung across his back. Dulled by his beating, Obek reacted a fraction too slowly to the altered rules of engagement. He heard the muffled boom of a bolter fired at close range as he reached the last legionary. The shell impact sent spikes of agony across his rib plate and he felt a lung collapse from the kinetic hammer blow against his chest. Mercifully, the shell did not embed or it would have blown out half of his torso. Instead, it caromed off his side and exploded outside of his armour. Heat and shrapnel spoiled his vision, and he tasted blood in his mouth so great in volume he had to spit it out. Half dazed, badly injured, he glared into the retinal lenses of the Sons of Horus

legionary, so close now that they almost embraced, and expected the second shell to finish it. Only when he saw the hatred seep away, replaced by a cold vacuous stare, did he realise the renegade was dead. An obsidian blade had scythed through his gut, so deep and impelled with such violence that it had almost cut the warrior in half. An instinctive blow.

Obek had strength enough to wrench his blade free, before he staggered and almost fell.

‘Brother-captain...’ T’kell was rising from the crater at last.

‘Need a moment,’ Obek hissed between clenched teeth, fighting the pain and urging his biology to knit his skin faster.

It took several seconds for Obek’s vision to clear and for the blood rushing inside his skull to recede to a dull roar. He leaned hard on his bloody sword, using it like a crutch, but when he finally arose, he looked to the outpost and the breach in the outer wall now closed by ranks of green and black.

As the Forgemaster limped up beside him, Obek rasped breathlessly, ‘We need to fight.’

Xen craved glory.

His desire for it was the reason he had never been accepted into the primarch’s inner circle of warriors. Numeon had seen it immediately, and remarked as much to Vulkan. To be of the Pyre Guard, of the Seven, required a selflessness Xen did not possess. Pride undid him, but his sword arm? Numeon had told his father he had never seen another in the Legion who equalled it.

Vulkan had given Xen a standard to bear, in the hope the burden of it, both physical and symbolic, would temper his pride. Then the war came and hope died with it.

Xen failed to heed his father’s lesson. Consumed by grief, he embraced his natural talents instead. They had served him well. They would need to do so again.

A bolter storm raged across the outpost, so fierce it pushed the Salamanders legionaries behind the wreckage of their assault and made makeshift barricades of the fallen watchtowers. A deadly laager of renegades had formed around them, weapons turned inwards. A diminishing knot of drake-scale war-plate, hunkered shoulder to shoulder, fought desperately at the eye of the storm.

Ashax lay headless, but his warriors had dragged his body into the protective cordon the Salamanders legionaries had erected so it would not be defiled further. Xen only caught glimpses of them through the hail of shells, spitting war

oaths as he returned fire into the lightning-streaked darkness.

A second storm had already taken hold, a natural one that threaded the night sky with violet wounds. The fury of the battle was revealed in it, captured by each iridescent flash. A Sons of Horus legionary died in one of those flashes, shot through the neck to be trampled by his brothers still eager for the slaughter. Xen had no time to shout in triumph and no desire. He had looked up to the XVI Legion once, in awe of their prowess and envious of their laurels. Now he despised them.

His bolt pistol spoke for him, its roar joining that of his brothers' and swelling into a blazing bow wave of defiance. The air hazed with the intensity of the fire exchange, but the Salamanders were losing.

'We cannot hold here!' Even across the vox, Xen had to shout.

It took Zandu a few seconds to reply. 'Agreed. We have to break out of this cordon.'

A shell pranged off Xen's shoulder guard as another Salamanders legionary fell, witnessed in his peripheral vision.

Varr's flamers were largely keeping the Mechanicum at bay, but the Sons of Horus were the threat, and they had numbers and an embedded formation.

'Bring Varr up,' said Xen. 'Douse these betrayers with Vulkan's flame and as they're burning, we'll hit them.'

'There'll be nothing to stop the Mechanicum overwhelming our barricade. Our brothers will—'

'Die? They're already dying,' said Xen, but something in Zandu's voice gave him pause. Not fear, but something akin to it. The Vexillary risked a glance at the sergeant, who had stopped and was inexplicably staring at nothing.

The flames from the promethium explosion had crept into the outpost and flickering orange tendrils had begun to consume the renegades who fought on, nearly inviolate inside their armour.

'Brother-sergeant!' Xen snapped down the vox.

But Zandu was already gone, lost in his own darkness.

The burning man stood before Zandu, his armour ablaze, and his eyes pits of infernal flame.

Zandu tried to speak but his throat became so parched that only a rasp escaped his lips. Here was death; here was judgement, a final reckoning. Zandu reached out to him, to the burning man, resigned to meet his fate. Yet as they closed, another hand reached out to seize Zandu's outstretched gauntlet and a tide of

flame engulfed the burning man until he was lost amidst its roaring depths.

‘The fire...’ Zandu breathed, his wide eyes absorbing the terrifying spectacle of his vision.

‘Yes,’ Zeb’du Varr replied, ebullient as he spewed gouts of promethium into the traitors. ‘You see him, don’t you, brother?’

Zandu blinked, as if he had woken from a dream. The flamers had come forwards, just as Xen described, and were unleashing hell into the Sons of Horus ranks.

‘See whom?’ Zandu asked, as his senses returned and he resumed the fight. *Did Varr see the burning man too?*

Varr laughed, and it was a wicked sound, uttered by a devil.

‘See Vulkan!’ he cried aloud. ‘Ablaze and alive in the fires of battle!’

Fire wreathed all. It consumed. It undulated. It *breathed*.

Whenever Varr saw the flame, he knew, *Vulkan is with us*.

The renegades burned. At first they resisted but slowly their forms shrank before the inevitable conflagration, sagging and capitulating as they cooked in their armour. A rank of heavy flamers stood stoic before them with Varr at their head.

Bolt shells hammered off the Salamanders’ war-plate and one Drake staggered, his jet of flame spewing wide and setting fire to the ground. Another fell, his faceplate cracked apart and a great torrent of promethium rising volcanically like an eruption before he died.

Varr was oblivious. He saw fire and knew it saw him.

‘Vulkan...’ he murmured, and heard the war cry of his primarch in the billow of the flames.

Another voice intruded on his reverie. It was the blademaster, Xen.

An imperative, his duty, cleared Varr’s senses and he ordered his flamers to part like the waves of a lava sea.

‘Pyrus, hit them now!’ Xen bellowed Varr’s war-name. ‘Make way...’

The armoured backs of the heavy flamer bearers moved apart to form a breach, through which Xen led the others.

Only a short distance separated the two forces of legionaries now, the Sons of Horus having advanced as they felt a sure victory was in their grasp. Both his swords drawn, the banner of the Unscarred unfurled from a standard pole fixed to his power pack, Xen closed the gap.

Momentary disbelief robbed the renegades of a few precious seconds, as the

insane charge of the Salamanders legionaries rushed out to meet them. The renegades were burning too, and the shock and disorder threw the aim of some. Bolt shells clattered uselessly against drake-scale armour, and the speartip of the Salamanders' thrust struck.

The clash was intense, and so loud it deafened. Xen split the first renegade from clavicle to groin with a brutal crosswise slash. His falchion had an energised blade; even power armour was no proof against it. He killed two more before his next foe had recovered from the collective battle-shock afflicting the Sons of Horus and could mount some kind of defence.

Two blades of monomolecular steel met each other and began to grind.

His momentum arrested, Xen was forced to stand and actually fight rather than just batter and butcher. Break through the cordon and the Salamanders legionaries lived. Fail to do so and they died. More Sons of Horus were coming and though most had now drawn close-combat weapons, the sheer press of their numbers and skilled aggression would quickly overwhelm the Drakes if they became pinned.

Attrition suited the XVIII Legion, but not against such odds.

Xen turned the warrior's blade to break the deadlock and used his second sword, a serrated spatha, to hack off the renegade's hand at the wrist. A sharp thrust to the chest ended it, and he pushed forwards into the maddening swell of bodies.

Zandu was near. Xen could hear him fighting, but saw little except the fountaining of blood and the heady blur of close-quarter combat. It became ugly very fast, and blade skill meant little, as the fight became a scrum of stabbing and bludgeoning.

It made no difference to Xen. He knew every way there was to fight, and to kill. He thrust and cleaved and hacked, leaving some injured, killing others but always pressing deeper, striving to breach the back of the enemy's ranks and seize the chance at survival that success promised.

'Vulkan!' he roared, and heard the fervent antiphony of his kin.

Xen felt the killing heat. It hazed the air and turned it bloody and thick.

'Vulkan!' he roared again, and felt a primal anger rise within. The flamers were with them now, Varr pushing his warriors hard so they didn't remain caught in the trap.

'*So many, brother...*' uttered Zandu, his voice strained by battle across the vox. At least he was cogent again, it seemed. Xen still couldn't lay eyes on him – too many legionaries in green and black were trying to kill him. He could answer

though.

‘Ever has our Legion defied the odds... Vulkan!’

An echoing cry rang out, but from fewer voices. Xen’s muscles ached and his hearts thundered in his chest, but the momentum of the charge had almost gone and the aperture of hope he had driven towards slid inexorably closed.

‘Vulkan!’ he raged, not in triumph or defiance, but desperation.

He hoped the dead could hear his plea. He hoped the dead could deliver them.

A gunship swept in low, heavy bolters strafing the renegades’ ranks.

It ripped up the rearmost echelons of the Sons of Horus forces, chewing up bodies and sending them spiralling skywards. It moved swiftly, turbines screaming, as a swarm of missiles chased it into the clouds.

The renegades were struggling to counter the sudden aerial assault, hastily turning their heavy weapons on the Thunderhawk that had lined up for another run. They scattered, but the damage to the Sons of Horus ranks was already severe.

Obek rushed into the wake of the gunship’s carnage, dispatching the wounded with cold lethality. How quickly fortune could change. T’kell had recovered enough to fight, and did so with a fury at odds with the coldness of his Martian training. Wrath had overtaken them both as they advanced steadily through the dead and the dying. All too soon they were no longer culling the injured and came upon able-bodied enemies, but when the blow came that felled Obek, he never saw it coming.

Xen knew he would die in this misbegotten hole. An irradiated wasteland was no place for a warrior to meet his end, and he railed at the injustice of it. The knot of renegades grew tighter, a hangman readying the condemned before the inevitable drop. He caught the edge of a chainblade against his pauldron, so hard it jerked his shoulder and his guard slipped...

This is it. Damn you, Zandu. For your weakness, for your—

Muzzle flare suddenly lit up the darkness, spearing through the storm. It scythed into the backs of the renegades, hurling bodies and chewing up the earth. A tremor ran through the enemy warriors, the instinctive reaction of a creature wounded and seeking to retaliate.

The knot had loosened; Xen could see light through it. Cutting down the nearest Sons of Horus legionary, he broke the noose and took his brothers with him. Against such ferocity, the renegades fell back. The gunship returned, as did its twin, and hit the scattered Sons of Horus hard.

Xen kept fighting. He severed the arm of one traitor, then impaled another. He left them grievously wounded, before pressing on. The kill didn't matter, only survival.

We have been surviving ever since this war began.

Zandu reached him as a small cordon of respite grew around the remnants of the Drakes. His outstretched finger stabbed towards the gunships.

'Signal the retreat. We'll make egress via the Thunderhawks.'

Xen bit his tongue, and did as ordered.

Varr anchored the fallback, unleashing a wall of flame to keep the renegades disorganised.

As they reached the gunships, which were already taking fire, Xen saw Zandu had gone back for someone. It was T'kell, unconscious and dragged by his ankle as his rescuer shot indiscriminately behind him. As the Forgemaster was flung aboard, Xen asked, 'Firebearer?'

Zandu shook his head.

'Slain?' Xen could scarcely believe it.

'I don't know.'

It was the truth. As they had made their retreat, Zandu had seen T'kell but not Brother-Captain Obek.

Standing in the lee of the Thunderhawk's open troop hatch, Xen made to go back but Zandu stopped him.

'He's gone, brother. We go back, we die.'

'Then we die. He is our captain.'

Xen looked down at where Zandu's hand was pressed against his breastplate, then back at the brother-sergeant.

'He is our captain,' he said slowly, his voice level.

'Enough have died already.'

Xen backed down, and Zandu released him.

Varr and his squad had almost reached the gunships. Dwindling spurts of promethium from their flamers signalled their tanks were almost empty. Of the ten legionaries in the squad, only six remained. Two of those grabbed a third, still spitting fire as they dragged their wounded brother into the hold.

Zandu gave the order and the gunships began to rise. As the troop hatch closed, and the shadows closed with it, Xen spoke to the blank, unfeeling wall of the hold.

'If he lives, we're going back for him.'

Zandu nodded. His hands were clenched, out of anger and impotence. He tasted blood in his mouth and he thought he might have bitten his tongue during the battle. Then he felt a trickle seep from his nose, marring the faceplate of his helm, and knew he hadn't.

His retinal lenses crackled with static. They had been doing it throughout the battle, and before. The integrity warning flashed green to red, then stayed on red.

SEVEN

The adept

Obek awoke. In the darkness of his confines, he tried to discern as much as he could. The room he was in was small. Certainly, he was underground, for the light was artificial and the air was bad. The walls were bare and nondescript metal. Out of instinct, he reached up for the helm that was no longer there.

‘Don’t concern yourself,’ said a voice from the shadows. The speaker came forwards, also without a helm, and a grizzled face inked with Cthonian tattoos was revealed in the half-light of an overhead lumen-strip. ‘This room is rad-scrubbed. You don’t need your armour.’

His war-plate was etched with scarification, not the ritual kind the Salamanders usually wore on their flesh, but rather the scars earned from battle. Sharp, silver flecks marred already-dirty green-and-black Legion colours. Kill markings proclaimed a legacy of war and death.

‘How many of those were my brothers?’ Obek asked, suddenly aware of the fact that he was bound and seated.

The Sons of Horus legionary regarded the markings that had drawn the Drake’s eye.

‘A fair few.’ His answer showed no malice or sadism; it sounded almost regretful. The blade in the legionary’s hand suggested he wasn’t about to see the error of his ways and surrender, though.

‘How many shot or stabbed in the back?’

He met the Salamander’s gaze, and there was a coldness in his eyes that told Obek this legionary had long since transcended pride or remorse. He could not

be goaded.

‘Fewer.’

‘What do you want of me? Why am I here?’

The Son of Horus looked down on his prey.

‘Not to kill you,’ he replied, then regarded the knife. The blade was notched and the metal stained dark. ‘All evidence to the contrary. I’ve been asked *not* to kill you. Not yet, anyway.’

‘Who are you, legionary? Do you know you address a brother-captain?’

‘I am Rayko Solomus, and I do, which is why I won’t dishonour you by asking what you are doing on this world now. Once we begin,’ he said, ‘you will try very hard not to scream, but I want you to know there is no shame in it, not here in the pit. No one of your Legion can hear you. No one of your Legion is coming to save you.’

Obek smiled, despite the pain of his battle injuries.

‘It won’t matter. I won’t talk and you will have changed nothing. The fight will continue without me.’

And then Solomus said something that quelled the fire in Obek’s blood, turning it to ice in his veins.

‘The war is over, brother. Terra has fallen. Horus has already won.’

The cold, mechanical eyes of the adept regarded the prisoner and his warder. It had been several hours since interrogation had begun in the pit and Regulus had shut off the audio inside the small observation chamber. Solomus had been right – the Salamanders legionary *had* tried not to scream. More impressively, though, he had succeeded. Whatever physical pain his torturer could bring to bear, this Rahz Obek had an answer to it.

‘I have always admired the tenacity of the Eighteenth Legion,’ said Regulus, his mechanical voice issuing from the cowl of his black robes. So deep was the hood that it betrayed no sense of his face and his robes were voluminous enough to suggest only the vaguest, humanoid form.

Regulus, though, had transcended human form and humanity itself long ago. If nothing else, the mechadendrite arms that came through a gap in his robes and folded across his back were testament to that.

‘It is a risk to let them live,’ said Vosto Kurnan, his war-plate and Sons of Horus livery battle-worn. He had a sharply trimmed beard and cleanly shorn scalp. The Eye of Horus had been shaved into his left temple and the only gang tattoo he had was one of a writhing serpent over his left eye.

Regulus smiled beneath his hood, his shiny metal digits clicking against the ivory staff he clutched in his right appendage.

‘Great reward comes at great risk, legionary captain.’ He had said that before, to the Fabricator General of Mars himself, to Kelbor Hal. It was as true then as it was now, and the memory of it and what transpired soon after sent a frisson of pleasure through his electrical field. ‘Like the Vaults of Moravec, the Lord Drake’s arsenal will harbour many secrets.’

‘Save your aphorisms. I will only be sanguine once we are into the vault and have plundered it.’

Regulus ceased his tapping, and heard Kurnan unclench his teeth a little.

‘You sound sceptical...’

‘We should hunt them down.’

‘A wounded prey is a dangerous one?’ Regulus scrutinised the Salamanders legionary through the blacked-out armourglass.

‘Precisely.’

‘And how wounded are you, legionary captain?’

Kurnan scowled. ‘What?’ His hand went instinctively to the gladius sheathed at his hip.

‘That is to say,’ Regulus elaborated, ‘how many men did you lose when the Salamanders escaped? Tell me something, is it harder to fight an enemy whose back is not turned to you and whom you only slightly, instead of outrageously, outnumber?’

‘You dare...!’ Kurnan snarled.

‘Chemicals are flooding your bloodstream,’ said Regulus, ‘as your keenly honed biology reacts to your anger. The gladius you wear is four finger-widths out of its sheath, but you will not act.’

‘How can you be sure?’

‘Because I have all the power here, and I wanted you to be reminded of this fact.’

The shadows of the observation chamber turned red at the adept’s words and the growl of servos from a mechanised presence sounded behind them.

Kurnan slipped the gladius back, but the anger was slow to subside. Regulus read it in the sudden increase in testosterone in the air. Heartbeat, temperature, surface perspiration, the adept had constructed a complete biological map of Kurnan’s emotional state in nanoseconds. He knew what the legionary was about to do before the legionary did.

‘Watch your tongue, adept,’ Kurnan said, turning to leave the room. He eyed

the giant Castellax battle-automata Regulus was using as an enforcer, but the cold steel construct gave no response save the unwavering glare of the red optics in the servo-skull recessed below its dome-shaped head and the nascent threat of its formidable armaments. A factorum marking had been steam-seared into its carapace in Low Gothic. It read: *Kronus VI*.

A sound very much like laughter issued from Regulus' voice modulator at Kurnan's threat.

'It's a figure of speech,' he said, putting on his war-helm.

'Indeed.'

As Kurnan left, Regulus turned his attention back to the Salamanders legionary under the tender mercies of Rayko Solomus.

'I think you've suffered enough,' he murmured to himself, the Castellax behind him standing cold and impassive. 'Let's see what knowledge Solomus has bled out of you.'

Obek knew pain. He knew it like the feel of his sword's grip or the heft of his bolt pistol. So the pain of a hot blade in his flesh or a fracture in his bones held little concern for him.

Still, he barely registered the stranger admitted into the chamber.

An adept of the Mechanicum, swathed in darker robes and carrying a skull-topped ivory staff. His fingers, if they could be called such, were more like spindly arachnoid limbs than anything remotely human. Even his voice was a facsimile.

'You can stop now, legionary,' he said in a calm but mechanised cadence.

Solomus looked up at the interruption, paused, then meticulously began to gather up his several knives. There were flecks of Obek's blood spattered over his armour, evidence of a task diligently performed, if unsuccessfully.

'Who are you,' Obek growled, through bloody lips, 'the one who promises he can end the pain if I reveal what I know?' He laughed. It hurt to do so. 'What I know can't help you,' he said, sparing a glance for Solomus, who had stood aside for the dark-robed adept. 'You had us surrounded, outnumbered and you still failed to kill us. What makes you think you'll do any better when we know you're coming?'

The legionary's face remained impassive, but Obek saw the tremor of irritation in his jaw and silently celebrated this small victory.

'So, you might as well kill me now.'

The adept drew closer, almost scuttling instead of walking, though Obek could

see no obvious sign of locomotion because of the long robes. His face was similarly obscured by a heavy cowl, though something glimmered in the deep shadows beneath it that could have been the adept's eyes.

'What did he ask of you?' he asked simply.

When Obek frowned, creasing the blood on his face, the adept asked again.

'What questions were put to you? I would like to know.'

Obek grimaced, then gestured to the blank pane which he knew his captors lurked behind. 'Weren't you listening?'

'I prefer to observe without audio.'

Obek sneered, his predicament loosening up his usually stoic demeanour. 'You cannot find it distasteful?'

'I neither *find* it one way or another. My preference is based on the most efficient method of gathering data. What remains unsaid or unexpressed can often be more telling than that which is revealed under torture.'

'Fascinating.'

'Your sarcasm is noted.'

'Good.'

A thin mechadendrite blade snapped out from beneath the adept's robes. 'To answer your first question, I am Regulus, Martian emissary to the Warmaster, amongst other things. I do have a promise, also, or rather, to be precise, a proposition. But first, answer *my* question – what did he ask of you?'

Obek leaned back in his seat. The bonds around his wrists and ankles were strained, but still held. 'Nothing.'

'Indeed. You were right again, legionary. There is no knowledge you possess that can help us. I merely wanted Solomus to hurt you. To see you hurt. I am gathering data on pain, especially that experienced by transhumans. I want you to know that you were invaluable to my research, but that is not the sole purpose of your continued survival.'

'Should I be relieved?'

More sarcasm. Obek had decided torture had that effect on him. Xen would be proud, if he lived.

The adept didn't respond. Instead, he turned to Rayko Solomus.

'Can he walk?'

'Not immediately. Given time, he will heal.'

Regulus nodded. 'No matter. Kronus will carry him.'

'Are we going somewhere?' Obek asked.

'I said I had a proposition for you,' the adept replied, and there was a brief flare

of light in the optics Obek now saw under the black hood. He knew nothing about Mechanicum emotional impulses, if they even possessed any, but he swore it felt to him like amusement.

Kronus dragged rather than carried Obek from the cell. His armoured feet dug furrows in the dirt at first and then scraped against metal as the terrain changed. He had been half-conscious throughout, the pain of his injuries finally telling after he'd resisted it to show no weakness before his interrogators.

As he blinked awake again, Obek realised the air had changed. No longer the stale, subterranean odour he had experienced in the cell, but the smell of oil and machinery. He felt a thrum through the metal floor under his feet, heard it buzzing in the walls and knew they were still underground.

Every few metres, he managed a step, trying to gauge the strength in his legs and how fast his enhanced physiology was healing. Too slow to mount any kind of escape. He was alone with the cybernetic and its master, who scuttled out ahead of them, but he was still vastly outmatched. He had seen Castellax battle-automata in action, during the Great Crusade, before the war. This one had been slightly modified from the versions he had seen previously. It had a left-arm power glove with minutely articulated digits, seemingly as dextrous as any human hand. The right arm ended in a circular saw appended to its main reactor core. A twin-barrelled heavy bolter jutted out from a mount on its right shoulder. Against something like that, unarmed, he might as well have taken his sidearm, if he knew where it was, pressed it to his temple and pulled the trigger.

Obek embodied Salamanders pragmatism as much as any legionary of the XVIII, and right now it was telling him to be dragged and see what the maniac in the black robes wanted to show him.

It wasn't long before he found out what.

The adept issued a blurt of machine noise, and the Castellax came to a halt at the exact same moment as its master.

Despite the ambient noise and the ever-present throb through the metal, it was abjectly dark and Obek felt almost too weak to raise his head anyway. All he could see was metal and the blood trail he had left behind him.

At another binaric command, the Castellax seized Obek around the jaw.

'Decided to kill me after all,' he snarled, bunching his muscles as he prepared to die fighting.

'No,' uttered Regulus. 'I ordered Kronus to lift your head. Stop struggling. Look.'

Obek did as asked. Though the darkness made it hard to discern exactly where, he realised they had come to the threshold of somewhere different entirely.

Whirring, clicking mechadendrites broke the silence as Regulus interfaced with a control console in one of the walls. A harsh light filled the chamber soon after as phosphor-globes flared to life with an angry fizz of ignition.

Blinking back the painful after-image seared against his retinas, Obek finally saw what it was the adept had wanted to show him.

A gate, an immense impregnable gate that had to have been fashioned by the hand of a primarch, such was its artistry. *His* primarch. The icon of the Lord of Drakes and his Legion was emblazoned upon it, sunken into the metal. Austere, formidable. Through the fanged maw Obek saw a void, a mechanism, esoteric in design.

‘My proposition is thus,’ said the adept. ‘Open this door and I’ll let the others live.’

It was here. The Mechanicum had found it. They just couldn’t access it.

The Wrought, Obek realised.

EIGHT

Retreat into the dust

Thick smoke was drooling from the engines of the lead gunship. It bled behind it, caught up in the backwash and streaked across the second Thunderhawk in a murky pall.

Zandu tried not to think about how long they might stay aloft. During the evacuation, they had taken damage from the renegades. Every aberrant shriek of the turbines brought a fresh presentiment of a violent and fiery crash landing. He was staring out of one of the side viewing blocks, searching for a place for them to put down before they crashed down.

‘There,’ he voxed the pilot, indicating a raised plateau of land around which the remains of the dead city had eroded.

Squalling red dust announced the gunships’ arrival. In the midst of its reconstruction, whatever atomic calamity had befallen this world had demolished the partial efforts of its native labourers and left behind a skeletal ruin, overgrown with indigenous plant life. Creepers swathed much of the ferrocrete shell and a shallow quarry harboured crates of munitions. Most were either empty or blasted apart. The scorched edges of a hangar-sized bunker delineated a zone of shattered aviation parts, and there were towers, silos and rusted machines. It had been a manufactory, a large one, devoted to the mass production of materiel.

This world had gone to war with itself, independent of the greater struggle for the galaxy.

Radiation saturated the air, so when the Salamanders legionaries disembarked

they did so wearing helmets, protected in their hermetically sealed armour and by its atmosphere filtration systems.

Varr had begun to set up sentries as Zandu and Xen met in the middle of the plateau, just beyond the landing zone. In the background, the Techmarine pilots began the arduous process of repairing the gunships. Both were badly damaged, their armoured flanks breached by shell blasts and studded with shrapnel. Even if they wanted to, the Salamanders could not make atmospheric flight, so they did what they could to disguise the Thunderhawks' presence with whatever flora was to hand. For now at least, the *Chalice of Fire* was out of reach. Worse still, T'kell remained unconscious and had been left in the hold of one of the gunships with two of Zandu's squad to watch over him.

Zandu paced to the edge of the rise and stared, as if he would find the answers to their current trials somewhere along the horizon. All he saw were lightning-cast shadows and the silhouette of a dead land beyond restoration.

'We need Krask,' he said, his impatience as obvious as his anger.

Zandu nodded. 'Vox is down. Even if we could reach the *Chalice of Fire*, it will be several hours before they make planetfall. We use the time to regroup and consolidate our forces. If we are reckless then our survival will have been for nothing.'

'And if we stand still, they'll come and kill us in this ruin.'

'Either way, we aren't going anywhere yet. We hunker down, watch the approaches and only engage if necessary.'

The accusation suggested earlier by Xen's tone went unsaid until it couldn't be ignored any longer.

'What happened in the encampment? You were... disabled. I can think of no other word to describe what I witnessed. A mistake that—'

Zandu clenched his fist with a growl of servos, but his frustration was focused inwards. 'I saw it again,' he whispered, as if to speak of it aloud would somehow make the apparition of his dreams manifest. 'The burning man. Ever since Vulkan, ever since...'

Xen drew up alongside him. 'All of us have been touched by his death, brother. But you almost killed us. If we had stayed there—'

'I know what I did.'

'The burning man is... It's not real, Zandu. It is a figment of your mind.'

The sergeant half turned. 'You knew I had seen it?'

'I heard you. During the battle.'

'Merciful Vulkan...'

‘Were you a psyker, before Nikaea? I didn’t know.’

Zandu shook his head. ‘It feels more like a premonition.’

‘Of death?’

‘Of something I cannot escape.’

‘Embrace it! You cannot indulge doubt. Those renegades will be coming for us,’ Xen said. ‘We must be ready.’

‘Perhaps. We hurt them, though. *Varr* hurt them.’

‘Your premonition, is it the same as with that pyromaniac?’

Zandu spared a glance towards *Varr*. He had siphoned the remaining promethium they had left into four canisters and had begun to test the igniters to see which of the flamers possessed the greatest efficacy. His eyes lit up, even behind the sheath of his retinal lenses, as he watched the small blue flame.

‘What do you think *he* sees?’

‘He says it’s Vulkan.’

‘Zau’ull sees Vulkan, he is Igniax. I think *Varr* is insane.’

‘He is one of us.’

‘I didn’t say we weren’t insane.’

Xen laughed, but levity felt wrong in the circumstances and his humour quickly died in the face of cold necessity.

‘What about the Wrought? It’s likely defensible and as one of the primarch’s caches there will be weapons, ammunition. It is better by degrees than this ruined shell.’

‘It’s not a bad plan,’ Zandu said to the darkness, ‘but how would we find it?’

‘We revive T’kell.’

‘I am not sure how to do that either. He was unconscious the last time I checked. Even if we could, I won’t lead the Sons of Horus or the Mechanicum to the Wrought. That must be why they are here. They would have no reason not to kill Brother-Captain Obek, if he is still alive.’

‘He lives.’

Both turned at the mechanised voice of T’kell.

‘His suit’s biological interface is still running. If it had been removed, it would not be. If he were dead, it would not be. It is running. He is still alive.’

Zandu inclined his head. ‘Forgefather...’

Xen bowed too. ‘Thank Vulkan you are awake.’

‘As much as I would like to account my revival to the will of our departed father, I was attacked by a screed of malicious machine code. I needed time to excise it.’

Zandu clasped the Techmarine's forearm. 'Your coming back to us *is* the will of Vulkan, brother,' but T'kell was slow to grip Zandu's arm in return.

'Are you all right?' Zandu asked.

'Weary, but I will be fine.'

'If Obek lives then there is no other choice,' said Xen. 'We must attack.'

Zandu let T'kell go but clapped his shoulder guard.

'Is there something else?'

The Techmarine slowly nodded.

'The renegades have the Wrought. It is below their camp.'

Zandu frowned. 'You knew this?'

'I knew it was near, if not the exact site. As soon as I drew close to the encampment, I could sense it. This burden has been mine to bear since before Isstvan. I hoped it would never come to pass. I hoped Vulkan would return and change his mind. I hoped...'

He breathed deeply, his humanity evidently still a part of him. 'I hoped for much that has come to nothing.'

'If it is here, then we take it from them,' said Xen.

T'kell disengaged himself from Zandu's grip. 'We cannot use the Wrought now,' he replied. 'Even if we killed every traitor on this world, it is no longer safe. We have to destroy it, or at least destroy whatever is left inside.'

'Then we have a different mission,' said Zandu. 'We extract Captain Obek, kill as many as we can and leave.'

'Agreed,' said Xen. 'But we still need Krask. Hurt or not, the Sons of Horus would rather die than concede defeat.'

'Vox is still down,' said Zandu.

'I will fix it and request reinforcement,' said T'kell. 'Both Thunderhawks are also still in need of repair if they are to breach the upper atmosphere. I'll need time. I suggest you keep a watch, Brother-Sergeant Zandu.'

T'kell left to join the pilots, who had already begun the arduous but essential task of patching and sealing the Thunderhawks' armour.

As soon as the Techmarine was out of earshot, Zandu spoke across Xen's personal vox-channel.

'Did he seem strange to you?'

'No more than any son of Mars.'

'He is a son of Vulkan first and foremost.'

'Whatever his closest allegiance, he is still cold as a nuclear winter.' As Xen was walking away, Zandu reached out and gripped his arm.

'Watch him, brother.'

Xen looked at Zandu, then to T'kell and back again. Understanding, he nodded.

Restlessness had ever found its way into Xen's blood.

He had kept an eye on T'kell as bidden, but when it became apparent no ill was going to befall the Forgefather or his brothers, Xen sought other distractions. So, whilst the others stood sentry, assisted with repairs or maintained their weapons, he found a quiet place amongst the ruins to practise his blade-work.

He had already cleansed both of his swords and during his vigil sharpened them, so when Xen drew both weapons from the sheath they shimmered like polished drake scale and vibrant flame, the metal stained jade and amber respectively.

'Drakos, Ignus.'

He named them aloud, all a part of his ritual.

Xen knew how to wield. He didn't limit the expression to one weapon, for his proficiency was with *all* weapons. A blade, a spear, an axe... In his hand they felt more natural than a gauntlet, more familiar than the touch of his own face. But *Drakos* and *Ignus*... they were swords almost without equal. Forged by his own hand, the serrated spatha was *Drakos* and the falchion power sword was *Ignus*.

Tempered monomolecular steel, Nocturne-wrought and quenched in the ice floes of the Dragonspire mountains, neither blade had ever failed him. In some ways he felt closer to them than he did his brothers, but then Xen's heart was solitary by its nature. Even so, a slight pang of guilt fell upon him as he began to slowly circle with the swords. Xen knew Zandu had misgivings about T'kell, but the Forgefather had more Martian blood in him than most cared to concede. His behaviour *was* strange, but Xen had never met a Techmarine who wasn't.

'I am no watchdog,' he murmured, putting more effort into each blade rotation, increasing speed and complexity of motion. It was harder wearing full war-plate. It was the first thing of true consequence he remembered learning upon his apotheosis. To fight in Mark IV battle armour a warrior needed to dispense with certain misconceptions. Ease of movement, for instance. Despite its concomitant back-mounted generator, power armour was heavy and cumbersome but its bulk rewarded strength and raw aggression. Precision, efficiency, lethality – if a blow could be struck, make it a critical one or, better still, a killing one. Leave the exhibitions to the cages, the practice bouts and, if indulged on the field of battle, the dead men.

Xen, in spite of his warrior's creed, believed that he fought with a finesse and

ruthlessness unmatched within his Legion. It genuinely baffled him, then, that he had never been given the honour of becoming a Pyre Guard.

Artellus Numeon himself had seen him fight, and knew of his Crusade victories. No glory serving at Vulkan's right hand for Xen. Instead he had been given a standard, an icon to tether him.

'You show disrespect,' Varr called from a gantry suspended above the barren assembly yard where Xen had come to wield his blades.

As if he can hear my damn thoughts...

'What do you want, legionary?'

'Your scars. They are disrespectful.'

'They are also underneath my armour. What offence could I have caused?'

Varr slammed his fist against his pectoral armour. 'Unscarred,' he said, nodding. He had his gladius already drawn and pointed it at Xen. 'Scarred.'

Xen kept wielding, the blades flashing past one another: green, red, green, red... *Drakos* and *Ignus* in perfect harmony.

'You come and speak with me,' said Varr, slipping into the shadows, 'if you find your shame and realise how you dishonour us. I can baptise your flesh anew.'

Both blades came to an abrupt halt with a shriek of angry metal. Varr had gone, so Xen's caustic invective went unheard.

'These scars are earned,' he said to the darkness. 'Mine by right. *My* honour. Why should I be a pariah?'

But when his indignation faded and the echoes of his declaration died with it, Xen sheathed his swords and went back to his brothers.

NINE

Noble sacrilege

Zau'ull knew he had transgressed. Alone in the deeps of the *Chalice of Fire*, he had besmirched the covenant of guardian and opened the repository's seal.

The Armarium was so large that he could walk inside, and as he did so, passing through the pressure cloud vented by the door release, he found himself within a chamber unlike any other.

Here was the legacy of Vulkan. His *last*. Though he did not like to admit it, this place felt like a tomb and had an air about it redolent of finality and fatalism. Zau'ull had heard stories. He knew about the death of the Gorgon. When Numeon and his men had returned, having made an impossible journey through the Ruinstorm, they had brought grim tidings with them. The Iron Hands had fractured – some had broken completely – and now sought only death and vengeance. Vulkan's death had affected all of his sons whether they knew or not, but Zau'ull hoped their father's absence would not lead to despair.

'It cannot,' he whispered to the darkness, and allowed himself a little light. The cold illumination of internal lumens described five caskets fashioned of dark glass and adamantium. An exhibition of his father's craft, he supposed. Though Vulkan had seen fit to give them each an appellation, Zau'ull did not know their names. He wondered if even T'kell did. Perhaps they would only be given them when it was earned.

But he *felt* something. The hand of the primarch had been upon these weapons of war. Some were small, even innocuous in their cradles and behind glass, whereas others had the shape of war engines.

It wasn't to bask in his father's reflected triumphs; that was not the reason for Zau'ull's sacrilege. He did it in the vain hope that it would restore his broken faith.

'Are you here, father?' he asked softly of the shadows, standing in the middle of the false chamber.

Its walls were graven with images of the drake, of the fearsome beasts that dwelled beneath Nocturne and gave the Salamanders one of their cognomens. Each one glared without pity, without empathy at the fallen Chaplain desperate for some spiritual succour.

You are unworthy, they said.

'I am Firefather!' Zau'ull yelled and heard his voice echoed back. It rang hollow. 'Vulkan... please...'

No answer came, save for the dull throb of the ship resonating through the walls. Even the phosphor-globes appeared to dim as if turning their light from him.

Zau'ull had sunk to his knees without realising, his outstretched hand touching a pane of dark glass mere inches from the artefact within.

Dark times had befallen them, and his brothers needed him, needed his faith and spiritual strength to uplift them.

'How can I do that, father? How can I minister to them if I cannot minister to myself?'

He bowed his head, grief and anger turning his thoughts into a maelstrom. His hand against the glass became a fist, the metal of his gauntlet scraping against it as his fingers clenched together.

'Father... answer me,' he willed. 'Answer me. Vulkan... heed your son. Heed me!' he roared, wrenching back his fist to strike, when the crackle of the vox cut through the red fog that had fallen across his sight.

'Firefather.' It was Krask, hailing him over the vox. *'You are needed.'*

It felt like providence.

'Speak, brother,' he said, being careful to mask any residual emotion from his outburst.

'Word has come from below, from the Forgefather. Renegades, Lord Chaplain, they have taken the Wrought.'

Feeling strength of purpose returning and a focus upon which to displace his wrath, Zau'ull stood up and raised his chin.

'Muster your men,' he said to Krask, 'and have Shipmaster Reyne ready our drop pods.' A forge ship it might be, but the *Chalice of Fire* still had some

martial trappings. 'Too long have we laboured under this curse! Too long have we been Unscarred. It's time we bled again.'

Krask signed off with a rousing confirmation of his orders before Zau'll severed the link.

'Too long have I suffered...' he whispered, reaching for the glass and hoping it was Vulkan's hand that guided him as he took what was imprisoned behind it.

TEN

The Drakes hunt

The gunship came in low, using the ruined city to mask its approach and taking care to stay out of augur range. Once it had reached the very edge of the point where it could be detected, the Thunderhawk slowed and banked before coming to a halt. It hovered a few feet above the ground, spilling eddies of dust away from the downdraught of the humming turbines keeping it aloft. A side hatch opened, and five figures stepped out, dropping to the ground before disappearing into the ruins.

Then the gunship climbed, the turbines spinning faster until it had cleared any obstacles. The thrusters kicked in and it joined the second Thunderhawk as they sped for the encampment not far off on the horizon.

‘How long until Krask and his Terminators make planetfall?’ Zandu asked, shouting into the vox as he vied against the engine noise whipping through the hold.

‘*Via drop pod insertion, it will be fast,*’ T’kell replied, his voice a crackling machine-like echo in Zandu’s ear. ‘*Their landing is timed to coincide with our assault.*’

‘We are less than twenty minutes out.’

‘*Then you have your answer.*’

Zandu nodded then switched channels.

‘Xen.’

‘*We are close,*’ the legionary replied. ‘*Make sure you ram it down their throats.*’

‘You have eighteen minutes.’

‘*Understood.*’

The link went dead and Zandu sagged, a little grateful for the guide rail as he held on. He was out of his harness, standing with boots mag-locked to the deck. They all were. The rad-counter of his retinal lens display had reached several thousand rads. Enough to kill a mortal man within hours.

Vulkan had no Destroyers amongst his ranks; he had forbidden them because of the sheer ruination such warriors caused, but, during the Crusade, Zandu had seen them. Radiation weapons were only one of the means used to end the enemies of the Imperium. Back then it had almost felt necessary, but now it was horrific. He remembered an Iron Warrior who had just returned from the front, having unleashed phosphex and intense radiation bombing as part of his unit. The legionary looked grim enough in his war-torn armour, streaked in dirt and blackened by fire. The Salamanders were a relieving force, intended to lift the burden of the war for a while so the Iron Warriors could refit and resupply for battles elsewhere. Their association had been fleeting, but it stuck with Zandu because of what he saw when the Iron Warrior removed his helm.

It had been hot in the warzone, and the last stretch of it was a dense tranche of jungle, hence the Salamanders and their Pyroclasts. Zandu knew back then it had to have been stifling in that legionary’s armour. So, when they were returning from the front and realised that relief had arrived, the Iron Warrior took off his helm in spite of the biting flies and the heat that trembled in the air that stank of sweat and blood. He drank it in, through a mouth with six teeth. The others had fallen out, like much of his hair. His eyes were sunken, his flesh too, and it carried an almost waxy sheen that glowed faintly in certain light.

He had smiled when he had noticed Zandu looking at him, an ugly gesture yet still worthy of pity.

‘Welcome to the war,’ he had said in the death rattle of a condemned man.

Bone, flesh, hair, every cell of this legionary had been irradiated and it was to be his doom. A Space Marine was hardy but he was not invincible. Most would die anyway, in battle, but this one was not so far from duty’s end and he was returning victorious. He had smiled again to Zandu when no reply was forthcoming from the Salamanders legionary, ironically perhaps, but the image of his grim and skeletal visage had been forever seared onto his memory. He recalled it again now, as he tasted the blood in his mouth and smelt it in his nostrils. Wet metal, like old copper, filling his every sense and dispelling the myth of immortality.

Apothecary Fai'sho from Zandu's squad looked over at him, questioning even through his retinal lenses.

'Brother-sergeant?'

Zandu made an effort to stand straight and appear strong.

'I am fine. Hold to your purpose, brother. War will be upon us all soon.'

Fai'sho nodded and looked away, but Zandu kept his eyes on the rad counter and his armour's insistent integrity warnings.

Red. Red. Red.

Xen stalked through the ruins of the dead city. He passed through domiciles and commercial districts, through narrow streets and wide plazas. The people were all dead, but the corpse of their city lingered, reluctant to expire except perhaps towards entropy.

Four others followed in his wake, moving fast and keeping low in their bulky war-plate. The Mark IV variant was hardly made for stealth – that was the province of the lighter protection worn by reconnaissance Vigilators – but Xen moved with a grace that belied the weight and heft of his armour. His brothers emulated him, matching his movements expertly.

The south facing of the encampment was damaged. Unless the Mechanicum had already effected repairs, the section of wall opposite the entry gate would be festooned with wreckage and structurally unstable defences. The exploding promethium tanks cooked off by Varr had seen to it, at the time both a distraction and a punitive move to reduce the enemy's combat efficacy. Now, it yielded further benefit... *if* Xen and his squad could move unseen and breach the wall's cordon undetected.

Zandu would have to play his part, and Krask.

He paused and looked skywards. The storm continued to boil, and the night was shot through with iridescent purple and red. Soon it would burn with the contrails of drop pods and then the Wrought would be theirs.

Emerging through the dense ruins of a collapsed habitation block, Xen sighted the encampment. It loomed above most of the dilapidated structures left standing in the city, the slab of dark grey metal walls declaring its dominion. A crack zigzagged from its base to its apex. Shrapnel from the explosion choked the battlements under a swathe of debris and no watchtower overlooked it.

Xen battle-signed for a halt, and then opened up the vox.

'Two hundred feet out.'

'Confirmed.'

‘Advancing to final position.’

‘*Await signal.*’

Xen cut the link.

Three legionaries in drake-green war-plate silently awaited his next command, but Xen’s attention lingered on a fourth armoured in red.

‘Are you prepared for this, Forgefather?’

‘I have been prepared since the moment I donned this mantle,’ T’kell replied, clutching a fistful of the drake hide cloaking his shoulders and brandishing it at Xen.

‘I only meant as a Techmarine, you might not—’

‘Are you prepared, Vexillary?’

Xen nodded. ‘I suppose all of us are having to adapt now.’

‘Zandu asked you to watch me, didn’t he?’

Xen glanced at his comrades, who tried not to react. Then he nodded for a second time in as many minutes.

‘You do not need to,’ said T’kell. ‘Watch them.’ He gestured to the walls and the renegades the Salamanders legionaries knew awaited them within.

They moved out.

ELEVEN

Wolves no longer

Rayko Solomus had left the pit and was sitting on an ammo crate looking out from the battlements on the north wall. He saw the city ruins and the decaying horizon, and found himself unmoved. As he only half heard the menials toiling somewhere below and behind him, Solomus wondered how long he had been this way. Dead inside, bereft of feeling. Only when he held the torturer's knife did a mote of true emotion return, and even that had been denied to him. The Mechanicum emissary had the Drake now.

'He did not scream?' asked Nevok, stopping to regard Solomus as he loaded a fresh shell into his weapon's clip. 'They certainly can take pain.'

Nevok stood sentry, waiting for the Salamanders to come. Sons of Horus stood at arms now, bolters at the ready, a squad of heavy weapons with their sights trained on the skies. Their subterfuge no longer any use to them, they would fight the Salamanders in open battle. They *were* bloodied, though. A row of dead lay in a makeshift apothecarion, waiting for Renk to remove their progenoids. Even the survivors had burns and scorched armour.

'They are born unto it,' said Solomus, 'unto fire and death.'

Nevok nodded as he slipped in another bolt shell. 'Have you seen their bodies? His scars had scars.'

Solomus drew his knife, admiring the sharpness of the blade. 'He killed Hajuk, Morvek and Ezremas,' he said, counting the legionaries off one at a time on his gauntleted fingers. 'At the *same* time. He fought them, three against one.'

Nevok laughed as he slammed the clip back into his boltgun. 'I seriously doubt

that. The Drake was a fighter – anyone who is Legion could see that – but all three...’ He shook his head and scoffed, ‘Ezremas alone would have gutted him. These Drakes are warm-blooded, but they are not like us. They are weak.’

‘He did it,’ said a voice from behind them. Vosto Kurnan made his way up to the battlements via a metal stair that creaked under his armoured weight. ‘I saw him,’ he added matter-of-factly, coming to stand beside the other two legionaries.

‘Then why did you not intervene?’

‘They had done themselves enough dishonour without my defeat of the Drake making it worse,’ he said. ‘Besides, I hated Hajuk, Morvek and Ezremas.’

‘You hate everyone, brother.’

‘True,’ Kurnan said lightly, and looked askance at Nevok, ‘but I reserve an especial hatred for some. And they aren’t weak,’ he added. ‘You never served at Isstvan Five, you never saw them *fight*.’

Nevok looked at them both, nonplussed. ‘What? That was butchery, not service.’

Kurnan drew close. Nevok had his bolter by his side and fully loaded.

‘We *had* them, brother. The Ravens were abroad, guerrilla fighting even then. The Gorgon and his warriors... well, they were hell-bent on Fulgrim. But we had the Drakes, surrounded, outnumbered, at the mercy of the high ground and our entrenched artillery. You should have seen the Iron Warriors pummel them...’ He shook his head as if remembering the events he was describing in vivid detail. ‘Any other foe would have died and died fast, and they did,’ he said, and his voice grew low and more menacing, ‘but those Drakes refused to yield. They fought even as the bombs rained and their brethren fell in droves. Even when the Gorgon died and the Lord of Drakes fell soon after, and when the Raven fled... they kept on. And on. Some had lost limbs, others were impaled or blind, wounded beyond any reasonable capacity to function, even for legionaries.’

Kurnan backed off, but his eyes still burned into Nevok’s through his retinal lenses.

‘I have heard it said that when you kill one of Guilliman’s sons, you make sure he is dead. Vulkan’s sons... well, they just don’t die at all.’

‘Have no fear, Vosto,’ uttered Solomus, rising from the ammo crate, ‘I will kill any that you can’t.’

Kurnan glared.

‘I respect them, Solomus, as you would do well to.’

‘While you are affording them the necessary respect, I shall be gutting them, brother.’ Solomus held up his knife. ‘With this.’

Kurnan scoffed, unimpressed. 'I hope you fight better than you interrogate,' he said.

'Ah, well,' Solomus replied and the smile between clenched teeth could be heard in his tone, 'as you say, they are resilient.'

'Yes, and they are coming. Here. Soon.' Kurnan looked to the distant horizon, as if expecting to see them there.

'Regulus is counting on it,' said Nevok.

'He needs them inside,' Kurnan told him.

'I cannot promise to be genial as I leave open the door, brother,' said Solomus.

Kurnan faced him again. 'You can rest assured they won't hold back with us. They hate us.'

'Betrayal has its cost, I suppose.'

'Indeed.'

'We should have hunted them down,' said Solomus to Kurnan as he began to walk away.

'Yes, we should, and now we'll reap the profits of that arrogance.'

Kurnan descended from the rampart, leaving his brothers to their duty.

'I expect it to be a bitter harvest,' said Solomus.

He laughed, humming to himself as he toured the rest of the battlements.

TWELVE

As we have burned

Xen heard rather than saw Zandu's signal. A gunship on a strafing run screamed out of the darkness and blew a section of wall apart with the last of its missile payload. The explosion turned the night fiery red as the contrails of rockets chased it away.

A second detonation erupted moments after the first, smaller and concealed in the slow-receding wake of the missile attack. Three krak grenades affixed to the south wall went off simultaneously and tore a fissure in the defences wide enough for a legionary to pass through.

Xen went first, climbing over the v-shaped breach and into the encampment. Smoke and the wreckage accrued from the first battle provided thick cover and the squad was able to advance unseen. After they had progressed only a few feet beyond the threshold, Xen ordered a halt.

'Why do we linger, brother?' asked Phokan, a legionary from Zandu's depleted squad.

Ahead, at the entrance to the horseshoe-walled encampment, Zandu and the others fought ferociously. Bolters sang a deadly chorus, but the power armour worn by the Legions was made to be hardy and bore the brunt of fire from either side.

A brutal, attritional stalemate was unfolding. Xen knew it would not last.

'No sense in running off,' Xen told the legionary, but then looked at T'kell. 'This is why you are here, Forgefather. Where is Obek?'

'His armour signature is coming from below us. We have to find a shaft or

passage that leads down, something dug by their machines.'

'There!' A legionary named Gairon, who fought with a curved sarissa attached to his vambrace, gestured to where a squad of skitarii were standing guard. 'Under attack and they hold their position,' he said. 'They must be protecting something.'

Xen clapped his shoulder. 'Not enough protection. Not from us.'

By now the renegades had been fully engaged, focused on the threat at their gate that they saw rather than the one they didn't in their midst.

Xen and the squad stalked through the debris, using the darkness and the distraction of the storm raging above. As they moved, they went fast but took care to stay out of the reflective glow of explosions or the frenzied muzzle flare of bolters.

Eventually, they reached the guard squad. Xen killed them quickly, dispatching all five of the skitarii before they could raise an interrogative.

'It's red work,' muttered Gairon in appreciation of the Vigilator's skill.

'Not really,' Xen replied, showing him the oil-black stain on *Drakos Ignus* was much the same, and he wiped them on a dead skitarii's robes.

'Here,' said Phokan, standing by the edge of a large hexagonal shaft and using his bolter to gesture down. It was an access chute to the subterranean part of the installation, easily wide enough to accommodate someone wearing power armour. An armoured lip delineated it, designed to fold down and form a slope, but the Salamanders legionaries could cross it easily enough. The shaft itself had rungs wrought into two of the facing walls, which allowed a steady if slow descent.

Raios stood sentry as the others began to make entry. He was not long a Firedrake and as Xen studied the legionary, he wondered if it had been out of necessity more than worthiness that Nomus Rhy'tan had advanced him to such an august rank.

'If they come, I will kill them here,' Raio's promised Xen, reading the Vexillary's body language.

Xen nodded to Raio's, and considered that their Lord Chaplain on Nocturne knew his business after all.

'Hold as long as you can,' Xen told him, 'but do not throw your life away needlessly. You have photon flares?'

'I do, brother.'

'Drop one in the shaft if you are forced to retreat.'

'What if the *vengu* dies?' asked Gairon, using an old Themian word for

‘hatchling’ or ‘youth’.

‘Then I shall drop two,’ answered Raios, ‘so you know the threat is dire.’

Gairon laughed, but Raios kept lookout.

Well chosen, indeed, thought Xen.

‘You first, brother,’ Xen told Gairon, who nodded before he climbed into the shaft.

‘You next, Forgefather,’ Xen said to T’kell.

He nodded, climbing in after Gairon.

Xen went next, honouring his promise to Zandu, and Phokan brought up the rear.

‘Must be over five hundred feet,’ uttered Gairon, farthest down, his voice echoing up to the others as they followed.

‘Four hundred and eighty-seven, brother,’ T’kell informed him.

‘Bio-scanner?’ asked Xen, keeping the pace steady.

Below, T’kell shook his head. ‘Nothing.’

‘And your other augurs?’

Again, the Techmarine shook his head. ‘Negative.’

‘Then let us hope our good fortune lasts a while longer,’ said Xen as the bottom of the shaft grew closer with every rung.

Zandu crashed down behind an arching wall buttress and waited a few seconds for the fusillade hammering it to ebb.

Fai’sho was right behind him, and fired off a snap-shot with his bolter before hunkering down too.

‘I’d say we are holding their attention, brother-sergeant.’

Zandu nodded curtly. ‘Then let’s keep it that way. Xen needs as much time as we can give him.’ He fired back, the burst of muzzle flame shining in the chips of bare metal across his armour.

Fewer than thirty legionaries remained of the forty who had made planetfall, and they congregated around the entrance to the encampment. Varr held the right flank, having scoured the upper rampart of enemies. Zandu had the left, with the remnants of Obek’s squad providing reinforcement to either side. Inroads were slow, foot by bloody foot, but the Salamanders legionaries weren’t trying to storm the castle; they just needed to hold long enough for Krask to make planetfall from the *Chalice of Fire*. So far, they had succeeded in pushing the Sons of Horus into a grim stalemate, as both sides exchanged fire from behind cover.

‘Are you ready, brothers?’ Zandu asked down the vox, and was greeted by a string of affirmatives. ‘Then give these traitors death!’

As one, the Salamanders legionaries broke cover to unleash a combined salvo that forced the renegades back through sheer fury.

‘Advance! Now! Go!’ Zandu roared, charging across the threshold and behind a second tranche of heavy cover.

Foot by bloody foot...

Hunkering down again at the inevitable return fire, Zandu arched his neck to look up, hoping to see the drop pods, hoping to see the sky burn...

The Chalice of *Fire* was burning. Another vessel in orbit around the planet had attacked them. Long range, a lance volley. The barrage exploded amidships, directly hitting the launch bays. A calculated blow from an unknown aggressor that had struck the *Chalice of Fire* unseen, undetected and unprovoked. Emergency crews hurried throughout the deck trying to douse the flames roaring across the launch bays and haul away the bodies where they could.

Krask and his Terminators were watching, unable to make their assault from orbit as planned.

They had already cleared away as much of the wreckage caused by the explosion as they were able, their armour now scorched by more than ritual fire. Thanks to their efforts, men and women who might have otherwise lost their lives were still breathing.

The apothecarion, however, had quickly reached capacity.

Krask turned off the vox, having just been in conference with Shipmaster Reyne.

‘It wasn’t Sons of Horus,’ he said aloud to his brothers, his gaze still on the devastation.

‘Then who?’ asked Zau’ull. The Chaplain looked up at Krask from a kneeling position where he granted peace to one of the injured deck crew caught in the blast. ‘Mechanicum?’

‘Reyne doesn’t know, only that the ship does not match any renegade vessel we have in our archives.’

‘But we *were* attacked?’

Krask nodded slowly, his fist clenching in its power glove.

‘This is a mess.’

Zau’ull cast his eyes across the dead. Most were servitors, at least. ‘Mercifully, you had not embarked, or the death count would be much higher and you,

Wyvern, might well have been amongst them. Be thankful to Vulkan for that.'

Krask murmured a 'Vulkan lives', briefly bowing his head and shutting his eyes before focusing back on the disaster.

'However long it will take to make it right,' he said to Legionary Rath, who was returning from speaking with the Techmarines, 'this delay has already cost us dear. Well?'

'They are almost ready, brother-sergeant. Two launch bays have been cleared. They await only your command.'

'I give it,' snarled Krask, seemingly heavier and deadlier in his war-plate as he stamped over to where deck crew were prepping the launch bay. The dead and injured had been removed, along with the wreckage, so the drop pod could be embarked, but the bloodstains remained.

Krask could not help but look at them as he entered the teardrop-shaped vessel that would convey him and his brothers to the surface. A second drop pod was being readied alongside for Zau'ull and a retinue of Terminators.

'Whoever is responsible,' he promised to Zau'ull, one foot inside the drop pod but yet to enter his harness, 'they will burn for this, as we have burned.'

'Vulkan's retribution will find them, Krask,' the Chaplain replied. A case, large enough to hold a sword, was mag-locked to his belt. His gauntleted fingers brushed against the metal as he stood at the threshold of the drop pod. They trembled slightly but Krask did not notice. 'It will find them,' Zau'ull told the shadows, but did not see Vulkan waiting for him.

Instead, he heard the alert siren scream loudly and saw the blistering fire of the second lance blast as the deck was blown half apart.

THIRTEEN

Our former glory

Vosto Kurnan heard the battle raging above. It sat poorly with him to lurk here like assassins in the shadows, waiting, but then he supposed that is what they were.

It is what we have been reduced to.

The underground complex had been carved out by the Mechanicum using their menials and machines. It had alcoves and chambers; the corridors had deck plating underfoot. Every effort had been made to map the extent of Vulkan's armoury, to find any entry point and probe for any possible weakness in its outer shell. Judging by what Regulus had revealed to him, it was large enough to harbour a battle-barge.

The adept had found the Drake Lord's old sunken cache quickly. Seismic stakes of Regulus' own design were launched from orbit and had been driven deep into the planet's crust. Using the resulting geological mapping made possible by the stakes, Regulus had detected an immense structure deep below the surface.

Entry had proven more difficult.

Acoustics in the subterranean levels cored out by the adept's machines and menials were good – Kurnan and his warriors could hear every war cry, every dying scream.

'I believe that was Nevok,' whispered Rayko Solomus casually. His head was cocked to one side as if trying to discern the cadence of specific legionaries as they died or fought.

'Those are your brothers,' spat Kurnan with no shortage of bile.

‘I have no doubt they’ll fight like the dirty Cthonian scum they truly are.’

A few of the others looked around at that, the growls of their power armour acting as a metaphor for their thoughts.

Solomus held up his hands. ‘I meant it honourably,’ he said. ‘Besides, aren’t we waiting here in the dark to stab some of our warrior-cousins in the back?’ He shrugged, as much as was possible wearing war-plate. ‘That feels... *quite* underhand.’

‘What we do, we do for the Warmaster,’ snapped Krede. The legionary’s gauntlet creaked metallically as he tightened a fist around the haft of his sheathed chainblade. The other arm ended at the elbow in a stump of fused bone and cauterised flesh, a fact that made him no less deadly.

Again, Solomus feigned contrition. ‘Hail Horus,’ he said.

‘You had best hold your tongue now, legionary,’ Kurnan muttered to him under his breath, so only Solomus could hear, ‘else you’ll be the one that finds a knife in his back.’

Solomus nodded. ‘I’ll keep that in mind.’

‘What is wrong with you, brother?’ Kurnan asked, keeping his voice low. ‘Do you hate your Legion? Or should you have died on Isstvan Three with the other traitors?’

‘I hear they call us that. It’s a matter of perspective, I suppose.’

‘I need an answer, Solomus,’ said Kurnan. He had drawn his blade without the other legionary noticing, but showed its edge to him now.

Solomus gave a mirthless laugh, more like a choke of breath. ‘No need to ruddy your blade, and I killed my share of dissenters on Isstvan Three.’ Kurnan could hear the amusement in his voice. ‘More than my share. Our father has no more dutiful a son than I, and the Legion no more willing a soldier, but this, serving these cold-hearted, bloodless machines... It makes me want to kill *everyone*.’

Kurnan could not disagree with that. He sheathed his knife.

There were five legionaries in the chamber, all that Kurnan could spare from the forces he had left above. His was a second force, a flanking force that would ensnare the Salamanders and push them into doing something desperate. Kurnan had argued with the Mechanicum emissary about the plan, that digging out an entrenched cohort of Vulkan’s sons would be both lengthy and costly, but Regulus had seemed unconcerned.

‘You’ll get your chance,’ said Kurnan, returning to the matter at hand. ‘We all will.’

Solomus nodded.

‘Even them?’

Behind them, waiting in the dark, arrayed in dormant ranks were scores of battle-servitors. Eyes as dull as stone glared coldly into the shadows, but at a command from the adept would rouse into violent animation. It was, Kurnan thought, an unsubtle reminder of Regulus’ power.

‘I doubt they would even feel it.’

‘Are we lackeys now, brother?’ asked Solomus.

Kurnan scowled, but did not answer.

Obek was on his knees, the hulking presence of Kronus looming behind him.

Despite the pain, the Salamanders legionary managed to lift his chin to look at the adept.

‘How do you even know I can open it?’

‘I do not,’ Regulus replied, scrutinising Obek through the optic implants hidden in the shadows of his cowl. ‘I have a hypothesis, but I need your compliance to test it.’

Obek bared his bloody teeth in a half smile, half snarl. ‘You aren’t considering all the variables, master adept...’

The chittering refrain of Regulus’ steps echoed in the cavern as he came forwards, within reach of the Salamanders legionary. Obek whispered.

‘I would rather die than help you.’

Obek sprang up from his kneeling position to seize the adept around where his throat should be. He grabbed something corded and unyielding, cold like metal but throbbing in some horrific parody of life. The hood fell back and the illusion of humanity shattered.

The optics that served as the adept’s eyes flared once, brightly, painfully. Two arachnoid limbs darted from behind his back, through slips in his robes and speared Obek through the left and right pectoral muscles.

Obek cried out in sudden agony, staring at where two blades had pierced his armour.

‘Now you see,’ said Regulus, his voice even more human in that terrifying moment of revelation. He forced Obek back down to his knees and broke the hold the Salamanders legionary had on his ‘throat’.

‘I do not appreciate being touched,’ the adept said. ‘I find it human and distasteful. I theorised your humanity and pragmatism might provoke a desirable reaction, that you would choose to sacrifice yourself to ensure the survival of your brothers.’ He retracted the blades, releasing two twin spurts of blood from

Obek's body. Two further limbs then returned the cowl as Regulus retreated beyond the Salamanders legionary's reach.

'I conclude that I have made an error.'

'It won't be your last,' said Obek, growling against the pain.

'Experimentation is trial and error. I have erred with you, legionary.' He looked up and his eyes flared again, this time issuing a command instead of countermanding a pre-programmed one.

'Wha—' Obek began before Kronos seized his neck in one mechanised fist and turned him. The buzzsaw blade affixed to the Castellax's other arm glowed hot and began to turn. Then it slashed down and took off Obek's arm at the elbow.

He screamed, loud enough to echo down the corridor, and clutched the stump of his right arm. Sheer, agonising heat cauterised the wound in the instant of severance. Obek clamped his teeth shut so hard he thought they might crack.

'Solomus failed, but I suspected I could make you scream,' the adept said.

'I'll kill you for this,' Obek growled through the pain.

'Statistically, that is unlikely given your current predicament.' He looked down at Obek's severed arm. Kronos still held on to the Salamander, so Regulus retrieved the limb himself. Then he carried it over to the door where the sigil of the Lord of Drakes glared coldly. 'I believe this mechanism is of Mechanicum manufacture. I assume it was gifted to your dead primarch as part of the accord and unity that has long existed between Mars and Nocturne. Do you know how it works?'

Obek slowly shook his head, his teeth still gritted in agony, and his face beaded with sweat.

'It is sealed with Vulkan's own genetic markers. Literally, his blood is keeping me out.'

Obek gave an angry nod. 'Even in death he defies traitors and renegades.'

'Does that give you comfort, Salamander?'

'You know it does.'

'Curious... But this is not pertinent to why we are here. Vulkan lives in you, legionary.'

'What?' Obek frowned, as the word nearly caught in his mouth.

'Not in some spiritual sense that would act as some temporary and self-deluding salve to your obvious grief. I mean *actually* in you. Your blood, your genetic heritage. It holds the key.'

He regarded the limb once more.

'Alive or dead, we shall have our answer.'

Then he thrust the arm into the gaping mouth of the sigil.

Nothing happened. No sound of gear moving emanated from within, and there was no trembling of the earth as the Wrought finally gave up its secret. There was only silence, followed by a frustrated blurt of binaric from Regulus.

Obek laughed. He laughed so loudly and so hard that he felt fresh pain from his wounds.

‘You erred again,’ he said.

Regulus turned swiftly, his optics picking out the arm that was still attached to his prisoner.

‘An experiment. I could have forced your arm into the lock, but I wanted to see if I needed to. Trial and error,’ the adept reminded him, and looked up to his hulking mechanised companion. ‘Kronus—’

The Castellax had barely engaged its rudimentary cognitive processor when a shell struck its shoulder and tore the arm free in a welter of sparks. Fluid spurted from the thrashing hydraulic cables that had connected torso to limb, but the construct was already turning and priming weapons as the second shell struck its centre mass and exploded.

This blow was less effective. The impact dispersed across its heavily armoured shell as smoke plumed around its body, barely impeding the Castellax as it put itself between harm’s way and its master.

Obek tried to rise, but stumbled and could only look back.

Figures in power armour advanced towards him through the shadows. Three bolters flared as one but Obek’s vision had blurred and he couldn’t see his rescuers clearly. He knew they were Salamanders though.

He barely had time to shout, ‘Vulkan lives!’ before Kronus’ shoulder-mounted cannon started up with a roar.

Light, heat and noise filled the crowded corridor and one of the charging Salamanders legionaries went down hard. He struck the wall as the shells detonated, bounced off metal siding and kept running a few more feet before the heavy bolter put a hole in his torso.

The others kept coming, shooting and advancing.

A stray round struck Regulus, who emitted a panicked blurt of cant that made Kronus half turn. A plasma bolt screamed out of the chaos and destroyed the Castellax’s cannon, as a second bored a hole through its reactor. The air filled with an actinic stench and the ear-shredding whine of a reactor overload before a plosive detonation rocked the corridor. Dust and grit streamed from the ceiling as Kronus VI exploded loudly and violently. Thrown onto his back, agony

surged anew through Obek's already tortured body.

Regulus had fared much worse. He staggered, using his servo limbs to try to steady himself. A piece of shrapnel jutting from his body was impairing the adept's motor function. An amalgam of blood and machine oil was dripping from somewhere beneath his robes.

The other Salamanders legionaries had been thrown too and were getting up at the same time Obek was dragging himself to his feet. He eyed the adept keenly, nodding to him as he reached down for a length of armoured piping spat from somewhere amidst Kronus' inner workings.

It wasn't a bolter or a chainblade, but it would do.

'Didn't I say it would not be your last error...'

Regulus gave a blurt of binaric as whatever passed for his lifeblood pooled on the ground around him.

Obek grimaced, and tried not to enjoy his retribution too much.

'There's not enough left of that thing to save you any more.'

'Not...' said the adept, his voice modulation fluctuating wildly, '...for... Kronus...'

A third plasma bolt vaporised him before he could say anything else, and Obek turned around to see who had denied him vengeance.

His annoyance immediately abated when he recognised who it was.

'Forgefather?'

'I live, Firebearer,' T'kell said, and gestured to Obek's arm, 'but you look barely alive yourself.'

'Half,' Obek said, and looked down at his severed arm. Regulus had dropped it when he had been impaled. 'He said the door was sealed and only the primarch's genetic markers could unlock it.'

Xen's arrival prevented any further discussion. He was bloodied and had come from farther down the corridor.

'A second force is pushing this way,' he told them, then remembered to salute his captain.

Obek looked down the corridor but could see only darkness. He did hear the distant sound of combat, though, and said, 'Speak, Xen.'

'Battle-servitors, with renegades leading them. I heard it from Zandu.'

'Where is he?' asked T'kell. 'And what of Krask and our egress?'

Xen shook his head, just as the vox crackled to life.

'This is Sergeant Zandu, respond.'

'You are speaking to Obek, brother-sergeant. What is your position? Where is

Krask?’

‘*Captain, praise Vulkan you are alive!*’ said Zandu, but his joy was short-lived. ‘*Krask... I don’t know. Something has gone wrong. We were overwhelmed and surrounded.*’

‘Where are you now, sergeant?’

‘*Closing on your position, but we are embattled by a second force.*’

‘Can you hold them until we arrive?’

‘*Negative, brother-captain. Varr has cleansed and burned behind us, but the flames will only keep them at bay for so long. Our lead was scant to begin with and is being eroded. We are falling back.*’

‘Understood. In your opinion, can we effect a breach in their lines given our current strength?’

‘*Unless you are several full strength battle squads, brother-captain... again, negative.*’

Obek arched his neck and exhaled loudly. Hyper-aggressive endorphins in his blood had dulled his pain to a throbbing ache, but could do nothing for his frustration.

‘How long?’

The distant sounds of gunfire intensified, growing louder by the second.

‘*Imminently, brother-captain.*’

Obek looked to Xen.

‘Can we hold them here?’

There was little cover, save for the shallow alcoves running down the walls.

‘If even a tenth of the force Zandu says is coming for us is behind him then, no, we cannot.’ He stripped out his bolt pistol and gave it to Obek, who nodded in thanks, checked the clip and sight, then slipped it into the holster where his own sidearm had been.

Then he turned to T’kell.

‘You should not have come back for me. It was reckless.’

Xen stepped in to answer. ‘Would you have left one of us, brother-captain?’

Obek could hardly argue with that. He gripped Xen’s pauldron, then turned back to T’kell.

‘I am sorry, Forgefather. The Unscarred have failed you, we have failed the primarch, but we shall at least die with honour.’

‘We are not dead yet,’ T’kell replied. He had his back to Obek and was regarding the door to the Wrought.

It was large, far larger than any of the Salamanders legionaries, and ornate, the

metal carved with intricate care and an artisan's skill, but with an impenetrability to rival any bastion gate. No locks were in evidence, no bars or visible defences of any kind, just the sigil and the mechanism with the drake's fanged maw. Blood shone on the teeth, not fresh, not Obek's. His wounds had been cauterised on impact.

'It did not work?' T'kell asked, as the sound of battle came increasingly closer. They could even make out Zandu's bellowed imprecations to Vulkan and the wild laughter of Zeb'du Varr.

'Forgefather?'

Xen and the others had assumed firing positions, kneeling to make for smaller targets or pressed into the alcoves.

'The door,' said T'kell. 'Your blood. It is sealed still. Did it not work, whatever the adept was attempting?'

'He tried and failed.'

T'kell lifted his arm to the light as if to examine it...

'Part of *me* is still flesh and blood. I have to believe Vulkan bestowed this burden upon me for a reason. I think the door was gene-coded to me alone.'

...and thrust his hand into the mouth of the drake sigil.

FOURTEEN

The last legacy of Vulkan

Kurnan heard it in the deeps. A low churning of earth, a dulled echo of metal striking metal, mechanisms sliding into place and the awakening of the machine. The door...

Vulkan's armoury, at last laid open for them to pillage.

Ahead of him, the corridor was burning and the flames were kicking out heat intense enough to melt plastek and warp metal. The battle-servitors suffered greatly. Their dead, gelid flesh curled and then blackened before finally sloughing away. Some collapsed amidst the firestorm; others, those possessing a modicum of remembered self-preservation, did pause.

Kurnan crouched behind one of the dull-eyed servitors, using it as a meat shield as he cycled through the vision filters of his retinal lenses. Thick, oily smoke was spilling off the blaze in a pall but Kurnan found his enemies through the miasma and bellowed orders at his warriors to return fire. The Salamanders had fallen back in good order, but they had to know their plight was a hopeless one.

Always outnumbered, thought Kurnan, *destined to die*.

One firestorm met another, and then a third as both sides exchanged fusillades of hard shells and las-bolts.

'Fire...' he grumbled to Solomus, who fell in beside him. 'Why is it always fire with these legionaries?'

The servitor meat shields jerked and thrashed as the bolter shells hit them.

'Weren't they born in it, or some such myth?'

'They'll die in it this day,' chimed Krede. One-handed, he could only wield a

bolt pistol and as he stretched out his arm to shoot, a round clipped him and blew apart his chin and most of the left side of his face. In agony, clutching at his ruined face with his one good hand, Krede crashed forwards into the fire and the upper half of his body ignited.

Kurnan looked on aggrieved, but Solomus merely shrugged. ‘Never have I met an unluckier soul than Krede, but I echo his sentiment,’ he said. The other two Sons of Horus legionaries, Menatus and Ghodak, went to drag the body out of the flames, but Kurnan waved them back.

‘He’s dead. Stay down.’

The fires were dying out – the servitors had absorbed much of their wrath and it had told on their numbers. They advanced now, those that still burned and those that followed in their wake, implacable and relentless. In their shadow, Solomus began to rise. ‘Let’s just kill these sons of the Drake.’

The rest of the Sons were coming. Kurnan had heard them over the vox. He and Solomus were but the vanguard.

Kurnan followed him into the storm, into the fury. So did Menatus and Ghodak. Harkus, who had fought in the battle above, was not far behind with Ezriah and Uziel, and with them came reinforcements of a different calibre to Mechanicum drones.

Plunging into smoke, Kurnan felt his hatred rise anew. For the servitors and their slacked-jawed obeisance, for the adept and his arrogance, for Solomus’ impudence and the Salamanders legionaries’ refusal to just die. A barbed thing had grown within him ever since Isstvan III, violently flourishing with every betrayal and act of dishonour that came afterwards. But the deepest barb he reserved for an especial hatred – the deepest he left for himself.

The doors to the Wrought ground open with a sound like tortured metal and for a moment the Salamanders legionaries stared, beholding a gateway to a mythical ark to which, after much struggle, they had finally gained admittance.

Darkness beckoned, and the flickering glow of auto-sconces.

Zandu had reached the infiltration squad by now, Varr too, though the number of Salamanders legionaries in their force was painfully low. They came past Xen’s sentries, battered and war weary, stopping at the threshold of Vulkan’s legendary armoury.

‘I smell cinder and ash,’ murmured Obek and fought the urge to bow his head.

‘We have no time for observance,’ said T’kell. His voice sounded strained, causing Obek to look over to him, but the Techmarine waved off his concern.

‘We have this chance now, only this. Into the Wrought!’

Obek led them in, his borrowed bolt pistol held out before him. He went fast, his strength returning, las and shell fire chasing him into the shadows, with Zandu and the others closing protectively around their wounded captain.

Xen and the rest still held the corridor as the renegades came through the conflagration laid down by Varr. Having joined up with Zandu, Raios now took up position with the infiltration squad and together they maintained a suppressing fire.

T’kell lingered by the door, and shouted to the Vexillary now.

‘Xen... Flamesmote! We fall back now.’

‘To never know glory,’ said Xen, shouting above the roar of the bolters, ‘to be denied vengeance...’

‘Dying here in this place is not glorious—’ T’kell faltered, clutching his forehead, but Xen was preoccupied with the firefight and barely noticed. ‘Nor will it bring us vengeance.’

Xen kept up his rate of fire but what came back in return outweighed it more than tenfold. Phokan was hit, a solid impact in the chest that his armour bore the brunt of. Then Gairon, spitting a cry of pain as his knee was blown apart.

‘Can you close it?’ Xen yelled, covering Raios as he went to grab Gairon and drag him back against the wall.

‘Now who’s the *vengu*,’ he heard Raios mutter to the veteran, earning a grunted invective in reply.

‘I can,’ said T’kell. ‘This door between them and us. No way in. An armoury at our disposal. We can prevail, brother.’

Xen relented and gave the order for the squad to fall back.

Once they were through the door, T’kell engaged the mechanism, this time to close the vault behind them. It did so quickly, the inviolable slab of primarch-wrought metal coming down like the lid to a tomb as the last futile shots from farther down the corridor slipped through but missed their targets, and as the door struck the ground it echoed with a resounding clang.

‘We are here then, at last...’ T’kell’s voice echoed off glinting obsidian as he addressed the last of the Unscarred. Hunched silhouettes of deep drakes regarded them from the shadows as if in silent appraisal. It was a mere entrance chamber, though vast in and of itself. Several others fed off from it into the seemingly infinite shadows.

‘The Wrought,’ he said, the others turning to face him. ‘The last legacy of Vulkan.’

Kurnan reached the door long after it had already closed.

Tentatively, his gauntleted fingers quested around the drake sigil and the mechanism he understood was located somewhere in its mouth. He considered trying it when he remembered what had happened to Krede and slowly drew away his hand.

His gorge rose as he sensed the presence of Rayko Solomus nearby.

‘Master Regulus is dead.’

So matter-of-fact, so dismissive. Kurnan had to resist the urge to kill him almost every time they exchanged words.

‘And his beast.’

‘It was a Castellax. An advanced war machine.’

Solomus laughed. ‘*We* are advanced, brother.’ He rolled over a shredded piece of robot carapace. ‘Not this thing. Not *them*.’

Kurnan glanced over Solomus’ shoulder at the battle-servitors standing in ragged ranks, awaiting instruction. They stared ahead with dead eyes, only moving when Harkus and the others shouldered past them.

‘How do we breach it?’ asked the legionary tersely. Harkus looked battle ready with his chainsword still bared and his armour flecked with blood. Some said his zealotry in killing the internecine traitors at Isstvan III had bordered on the obscene, but far from a kindred spirit, Kurnan saw only a maniac before him. Some of the XVI had never truly left Cthonia, and so it was said of Harkus.

‘Charges. Incendiaries. Everything we have got,’ Kurnan told him. ‘Muster the labour servitors down here too, those with drills and cutters. No door is unbreakable, not even one fashioned by a primarch.’

Harkus gave a curt, dissatisfied grunt but went about his orders.

‘The emissary reckoned this metal could not be pierced by charges,’ said Menatus, he and Ghodak joining the two legionaries at the door. ‘I heard him say even meltas would not cut it.’

‘It’s why we had to keep that Drake, and not kill him,’ added Ghodak.

‘We still have his arm,’ offered Solomus, gesturing to the Salamanders legionary’s severed limb on the ground.

Kurnan removed his helm so he could wipe some of the sweat from his scalp, using the opportunity to eye Solomus sternly. ‘I can never tell if you are serious, sarcastic or just psychotic.’

Solomus had taken off his helm too, the rad-scrubbed air making it possible to do so without risk, and made a facial shrug.

‘Me neither,’ he said.

Kurnan scowled, and tried not to think about how much he wanted to bury his combat knife in Solomus' grinning face. 'The limb is useless. We won't unlock it from this side. We have to use force.'

'That,' uttered one of the servitors in a mechanised monotone, causing the legionaries to turn with weapons drawn, 'is unnecessary, and extremely unwise,' and it turned its dead eyes on Kurnan.

FIFTEEN

Besieged

Obek paced the large, dark atrium in the shadow of drakes. The ebon statues looked down at him from their stone plinths, as if measuring his every deed.

‘Was there no word? Nothing?’

Zandu shook his head, weary. He sat on a metal crate, one of hundreds in the entrance chamber. A cursory recon had revealed the first twenty or so armouries were well stocked, but to search every single room would have taken days, perhaps weeks, so the Salamanders had stayed near the entrance and secured the immediate area. The Wrought was meant to have room enough for the *Chalice of Fire*, so somewhere in its vastness was a hangar, but it was beyond the Salamanders legionaries’ reach. At least for now. Small parties of legionaries had been sent farther afield than the initial chambers, to gather supplies, weapons and ammunition.

Mercifully, given the grim state of their number, materiel was in abundance.

Apothecary Fai’sho was standing between his captain and the sergeant. As soon as the briefing was over, he would return to tending to Obek’s wounds and then the rest of the injured. Obek had insisted they take stock first and formulate a plan. Part of that plan should have involved Krask and Zau’ull.

‘We must assume they either made planetfall and were neutralised,’ Obek said, not wishing to dwell on that particular possibility, ‘or they were irrevocably delayed. Either way, we are facing this enemy without them.’

None spoke of what that might mean for the *Chalice of Fire* or the artefacts of Vulkan the Unscarred had been charged with delivering. This place was meant to

be a safehold, the end of their mission. Instead, it had turned into a fight for survival. T’kell had said nothing of the artefacts or what they should do with them now, and was not present for the briefing either.

‘We have to force a breach,’ said Zandu. ‘And must act quickly. How many other entry points does this place have? If we wait too long, we increase the chance of an assault on a second front. There are weapons here that can help us.’ He had removed his helm, as most of the legionaries had, and his face looked waxy and drained. Fai’sho had questioned it, but Zandu had told him he was fine. After the Apothecary had pressed further, Zandu showed him why Themians had such a fierce reputation, and that was the end to it.

Obek nodded, absent-mindedly rubbing the stump of his arm. It was hard not to imagine it itching or being able to grip with it, but he supposed he would adjust. He turned to the last of the gathered officers.

‘Varr, what say you? You’re quiet, Pyrus. I don’t like it.’

Varr had been looking off into the distance, as if seeing something none of the others could perceive. Most thought him slightly mad, some saying he had stared into the heart of Deathfire too long and been afflicted by it. Certainly, he was strange, but Obek had always thought Varr possessed a sort of shamanic wisdom that reminded him of tales of the earth-shamans of old Nocturne. Then again, perhaps Varr was just insane.

He turned to Obek with a look of utter certitude on his scarred face.

‘Someone else is in here with us.’

Perhaps Zandu’s notion about an assault on a second front had already become reality.

‘What?’

There was a pause, as if everyone were gauging the veracity of what Varr had just said.

‘Where?’ asked Obek, trusting Varr’s instincts and pulling out his borrowed pistol.

The other legionaries reached for their weapons.

‘Fai’sho, make sure the door is secure. Find T’kell,’ said Obek, and the Apothecary nodded before heading off.

A shouted warning came a moment later from somewhere deeper in the Wrought. It was Xen.

‘Zandu, Varr,’ he told the others, ‘you are with me.’

They found Xen outside one of the arming chambers. He had Raios and Phokan

with him.

The Wrought was truly vast and comprised dozens, maybe even hundreds of weapon chambers, ammunition vaults, armouries and even hangars. In the short time they had been cloistered inside, the Salamanders had scarcely scratched the edge of what it harboured.

‘Hold here,’ Xen said as Obek approached. Phokan and Raios had formed a perimeter at either end of an arch that led into the room, guns trained inwards.

‘Be careful with those,’ said Obek to the legionaries.

Given the sheer amount of stockpiled war materiel, any stray shell could instigate a devastating chain reaction that would tear the Wrought apart and them with it.

Obek drew in close to the vexillary.

‘Show me...’

‘At first I mistook it for an empty suit of Mark Four.’ Xen gestured with his blade and Obek followed where it pointed in the darkness to a room filled with dusty war-plate. It was ranked up and arrayed in files that went at least six deep.

‘Phokan found it. He thought we could use the war-plate to patch up our own. And you need a fresh helm, brother-captain.’

Something was moving; Obek saw it now. In the darkness, in the sheer vastness, it had been hard to discern, but a figure went slowly from one suit of power armour to the next. It was bulky, easily the size of a legionary.

‘Have you hailed it?’ asked Obek.

‘It could not have failed to hear my warning, but gave no reaction. I would dearly like to shoot it.’

‘Not until we know who or what it is. Are all our legionaries accounted for?’

Xen nodded, then cursed. ‘This place is a damn labyrinth, impossible to recon from the inside. There could be an army in here and we would never know.’

‘There is definitely an army out there, brother, one that’s intent on killing us,’ said Obek. ‘I’ll take our chances in here.’

‘I could draw it out, brother-captain,’ offered Raios, ‘confront it. See what we’re up against.’

‘Ever eager, *vengu*,’ muttered Phokan, earning a scowl from the other Drake.

Obek ignored them, instead turning to Xen, who nodded again.

‘Do it,’ Obek said to Raios, who gave an ardent salute before breaking off from his brothers. ‘The rest of you make ready.’

Fai’sho found T’kell. He was standing before the door to the Wrought, muttering

to himself.

‘Forgefather?’ Fai’sho ventured.

T’kell barely moved. Apart from Fai’sho, he was alone and had his back to the Apothecary. He took a step towards the door.

‘Brother, what are you doing?’ asked Fai’sho.

‘I cannot...’

As Fai’sho reached him, T’kell turned around. His plasma pistol glinted in the torchlight and drew the Apothecary’s eye.

‘Wha-?’

‘I cannot... stop it!’

T’kell fired.

Raios had crossed into the arming chamber, his bolter nestled in the crook of his arm and against his chin as he closed on the figure.

‘Turn,’ he warned, ‘turn and identify yourself. Do it-’

‘I pose no threat to you, legionary.’

It stepped into the light, revealing a Mechanicum adept in red robes. It looked human enough, but most of its body, all that Raivos could see at least, was cybernetic.

‘Who are you?’

Obek and the others had followed, leaving Phokan behind as rearguard.

The adept turned his gaze upon the Salamanders captain.

‘An archivist, left here by my Martian masters. Did you think your Lord Vulkan built this place alone? I am tasked with its upkeep, its cataloguing.’

‘Its protection?’ asked Xen, not yet having let down his guard.

The archivist addressed him. ‘I have no combat faculties at all, though I do possess extensive knowledge of this armoury and the war materiel confined within. For instance, I know there is a hangar at the core of the Wrought large enough for a forge ship. I also know Vulkan intended for this place to harbour his greatest creations.’

Zandu turned to Obek, and murmured, ‘Perhaps we can use him?’

‘This place can no longer be a safehold for the artefacts,’ Obek mused aloud. ‘But his knowledge could prove useful.’ He addressed the archivist. ‘Do you know where the larger weapons are kept? The sentry guns, rapiers, tarantulas?’

The archivist nodded.

‘I have extensive knowledge of this armoury, as I have already said.’

‘He is as irritating as most Martians,’ uttered Xen, lowering his aim.

‘But first, an interrogative,’ said the archivist.

Obek frowned, confused at the sudden turn of events, but the adept was unarmed and had his hands by his sides. His robes betrayed no weapons, nor did his posture suggest a threat, and yet...

‘Do you have the primarch’s artefacts with you now?’ asked the archivist. ‘Are they located somewhere on this world?’

Scowling, Obek raised his bolt pistol again.

‘Who are you? Really? What is your business here?’

‘You know who I am,’ the archivist told him, but did not make any gesture, threatening or otherwise. His voice emanated from a vocal emitter buried somewhere in his robes and behind his hood.

Eyes widening, Obek realised the truth. ‘The adept...’

Again, the archivist nodded, but a puppet on another’s binaric strings.

‘How?’ asked Xen. ‘He was dead.’

‘I was. I am,’ said Regulus in the voice of the archivist. ‘I am not. All of these states of being, however contradictory they must seem, are true. You are welcome to consider the implications, but I theorise understanding *my* nature will be of secondary importance to you.’

Xen raised his bolter. They all did.

‘It will not matter,’ Regulus told them. ‘Have you not worked it out yet?’

‘Kill it,’ said Obek.

The Salamanders legionaries fired and the archivist was destroyed, but in the dying roar of the muzzle flare they heard another sound echoing through the armoury.

Xen turned to the others.

‘The door...’

It was opening.

Fai’sho was almost certainly dead. Lying face down, a smouldering hole had been cored through the Apothecary’s torso and came out through his ruptured power pack. The absence of much blood suggested a plasma wound.

His killer was standing before them and all ember-red eyes were drawn to him.

‘T’kell...’

Obek was first to speak, but had yet to lower his weapon.

‘What are you doing?’

The mechanism for the door had been engaged and a wafer-thin crack appeared at its base as it began to rise.

‘I am... not in control,’ T’kell sputtered, his mechanised voice pained with all-too-human agony.

‘Captain!’ Xen stepped in front of Obek, readying to fire. ‘He is armed.’

T’kell had his plasma pistol in his hand, held at waist height but not yet primed to fire.

‘Halt the mechanism,’ Obek told him, urging Xen aside. ‘Do it, Forgefather.’

‘I want to... I...’ He tapped his forehead. ‘He’s in here... The scrapcode, it infected me. I thought I had... purged it. I was wrong.’

The plasma pistol seemed to rise of its own volition, and Xen and the others were about to fire when Obek shouted, ‘Wait!’

The door was rising, and T’kell could not or would not stop it. He had a gun to them, one he had already used to take out Fai’sho.

‘Muster whoever’s left,’ Obek said to Xen. ‘Bring up anything we’ve already found and set up a fire cordon. We have no time to argue, brother.’

Xen did as commanded, first backing off and then running deeper into the Wrought, shouting orders down the vox. He took Raios and Phokan with him. Zandu stayed by his captain’s side.

‘You too, sergeant.’

‘Negative, brother-captain.’

Obek looked at him ruefully, but conceded.

‘It was you, wasn’t it,’ he asked T’kell, ‘who struck me from behind at the encampment? Even then, he had you in his thrall.’

T’kell nodded. The plasma pistol rose further. He had almost pressed it to his temple...

‘I can stop it.’

Obek shook his head. ‘Not that way, Forgefather. You are needed. Vulkan gave you a sacred charge, one which you asked me to help you fulfil.’

‘I can stop it.’

T’kell fired.

Obek shouted out, ‘No!’ He reached out for him, but it was too late.

And the door kept on rising.

Kurnan had marshalled his forces outside the door. The corridor was wide enough for a large fire team to rank up ten abreast, so he had the servitors form their vanguard.

His fellow Sons of Horus would advance as a second wave, using the Mechanicum troops as ablative armour.

‘It rises, brother,’ said Ghodak, staring through the massing cyber-organic bodies.

Kurnan nodded, his eyes also on the crack at the base of the door.

‘They will walk into certain destruction without hesitation?’ He asked the only servitor to have broken ranks and joined the legionaries.

‘They neither know nor feel any fear, or sense of self-preservation, captain,’ said the drone in its monotone voice, but with the unmistakable arrogance of Regulus.

‘You are sure, adept? By now, the Salamanders will have had time to make preparations.’

‘Be assured, they will not falter.’

Several hundred had ranked up before the doors, what remained of the skitarii inserted amongst them.

Kurnan’s own forces were less numerous. He reckoned they must be close to whatever the sons of Vulkan still possessed.

‘I want the Techmarine alive, though,’ said the servitor, and there was something sinister about the way it uttered the words so coldly. ‘I have use for him yet. He has knowledge I would possess for my—’

He paused, like an interrupted vox-cast. Dead air reigned for a few seconds.

‘That was unexpected.’

Kurnan scowled. ‘You are lying to me, emissary. And when this is over I will have the truth of what you are doing here.’

The servitor did not answer. Its dead gaze was fixed upon the door that was slowly rising.

Watching and waiting. As soon as it reached halfway and was high enough to pass through, the firefight began.

As Xen activated the sentry guns, Obek and Zandu dragged T’kell behind the firing line.

Arranged in a sickle-shaped ring, facing the doorway from every aspect with enfilading firing solutions, the claw-mounted rapiers and tarantulas roared to life the moment they detected movement.

‘Here they come!’ Xen had to shout to be heard above the thunderous report of the guns. His armour lit up with the muzzle flare, casting it in pale monochrome.

His brothers were lit the same, the warriors of the Unscarred aligned in a shooting formation of their own several feet back from the automated cannons.

A blistering salvo of return fire met them, las-beams and solid shot meeting in a

deathly storm. Three of the sentry guns went down quickly, torn apart from the combined fusillade of a slow-moving but relentless Mechanicum battle cohort.

Despite the toll meted upon them, the servitors kept coming. Some stumbled, trammelled by the bodies of the fallen, only to be crushed by the shambling ranks that followed in their wake.

‘Sons of Vulkan,’ declared Obek, taking up position in the firing line, his bolt pistol held out in front of him, as potent a symbol as any banner or icon, ‘here we stand in the halls of our father’s last legacy. We are all that remains here to defend it.’

He looked to T’kell, his half-blasted skull fused with blood and oil, then Zandu, who looked close to death, and Xen, who had unfurled the banner he so vehemently wanted to discard in favour of a more glorious calling, and knew he would gladly die with these men, these brothers of Nocturne. Even Varr, who could not hide the mania in his eyes, the scar he bore, the scars they all carried...

‘What is the meaning of the sacrifice?’

The door kept rising. The servitors kept coming. The sentry guns steadily fell silent.

An endless horde against a ragged band of sons of the forge...

‘To live when others died,’ the others answered in unison. ‘To never know the pain of our greatest betrayal. To never feel the bite of our reflected shame in the traitor’s knife,’ they cried, voices rising in a crescendo of defiance. ‘To have never bled upon the black sands of Isstvan.’

The horde still came, implacable despite horrific losses, and amidst their ranks was the glint of the war-plate of a Legion turned renegade.

‘I give you your purpose,’ bellowed Obek, gesturing to the traitors, ‘and name us Unscarred no longer! To know glory. To find vengeance. For Vulkan!’

‘For Vulkan!’ came the answering thunder.

The sentry guns had almost fallen. When they did, the Salamanders would finally meet their enemy.

SIXTEEN

Shadow of the black sands

No one could have accused them of not being brave. Courage was not their failing. Not knowing when to give in, not knowing when they were already dead was what undid the sons of Vulkan.

‘Selfless martyrs in a war they will never understand,’ muttered Kurnan. ‘Poor, deluded fools.’

As he advanced behind the vanguard of servitors, little better than meat shields, he snatched glimpses of the Salamanders legionaries through the gaps in the bodies.

Ragged, battle-worn, he knew the Drakes would not go down easily.

What is it they say? Eye to eye, tooth to tooth?

It would be bloody.

‘We should have done this hours ago,’ Solomus said across the vox. He was close, and turned to Kurnan, who could imagine the grin behind the legionary’s faceplate. It disgusted him, but Rayko was right. Hunting the Salamanders down would have gone better than a head-on assault into their guns, meat shield or no.

‘You’ll get to killing soon enough,’ said Kurnan, and cut the feed.

The servitors had taken a beating, their ranks decimated by the auto-defences employed by Kurnan’s black-skinned cousins. Soon enough they would reach the Salamanders legionaries and then the grim toil with blades would begin.

Before the last sentry gun went down, Obek signalled the attack.

Xen led them in at the point of the spear, the others to either flank and behind

him. Raios and Phokan were close. He heard their wordless war cries as they fought with the tenacity expected of Firedrakes. Xen took a servitor in the throat with his first thrust, the reverse blow severing its head, but he didn't pause. Raios had moved ahead a step, splitting a skitarii down the clavicle and tearing off its arm. Phokan took it down, hammering it with his shoulder guard as it flailed for its firearm and stomping into the chest cavity once it was on its back.

Drakos flashed as Xen swung it overhead, taking the lead again as he hacked into the chest of a second automaton. *Ignus* cleaved in from the side and the two swords met with a clash of metal and bisected the servitor.

Again he pressed on into the horde, blood and oil sluicing off his blades as he wrenched them loose, Raios and Phokan in his peripheral vision and matching him step for step.

'To never know glory,' he roared.

'To be denied vengeance,' shouted Raios and Phokan together.

Several servitors were dead, even more were critically wounded and a small cordon had opened up around Xen, affording him enough time to sheathe *Ignus* and clutch a fistful of the banner he had draped over his shoulders like a mantle. It was already drenched in gore but as he raised it aloft, the Unscarred declared their fury.

A second line of skitarii entered the fray, firing their carbines and culverins with frenetic abandon. The urgency was akin to fear, a manifestation of the transhuman dread experienced by all who fought against Space Marines and were not transhuman themselves. Even the servitors, those that had some mote of consciousness remaining, appeared reluctant to engage when faced with the Drakes' ferocity.

The Salamanders legionaries used that to their advantage.

As Xen carved a furrow into the heart of the Mechanicum troops, Zandu and Varr anchored either flank with the remnants of their squads.

Zandu had neither the skill nor finesse of Xen, but he traded it for brute aggression. His chainsword reaped a red tally, spattering him with blood and oil. Hacking down one servitor, pushing the burring teeth into its gelid flesh until the blade bit deep, he stamped on the skull of another that had been trying to rise. A third he seized around the throat, his other hand still wrapped around the hilt of his chainsword, and squeezed until his gauntleted fingers met and the servitor's head came off in his hand.

No less relentless, Varr wielded a thunder hammer, his wild laughter at odds with his apparent metronomic efficiency. *Smiter*, as he unsubtly named it, was

usually slung across his back, stowed away whilst his flamer took preference, but this was close work, too close for fire and so he bore the hammer.

‘Vulkan!’ he roared, every stroke of *Smiter* punctuated by the crack of yielding metal or bone.

If he saw Vulkan in those moments of fury, he did not say, but he fought like a legionary beneath the judgement of his primarch.

They all did, or so it felt.

It wasn’t some cold armoury the Salamanders defended. It was *his* body, *his* flesh. It was all that remained of the Lord of Drakes.

It might as well be his tomb, thought Obek as he watched Xen dismember and dismantle with an executioner’s precision.

The captain followed in the wake of the vanguard, but stayed close on Xen’s heels. Despite their eagerness, Phokan and Raios kept dropping back so Obek had protection on either flank. It galled him to be considered in need of these outriders but down to one arm, he was not the warrior he used to be. Still, his bolt pistol never fell silent in his grasp, roaring in single and three-round bursts to conserve the clip. A reload at this point would be difficult. As soon as it clanked dry, the hard dull echo of an empty chamber, he would leave it and draw the combat blade sheathed at his hip.

Through the brutal melee the servitors struggled to weather, Obek saw a skitarii bear down on Raios. He shot it through its glowering optics, violently detonating the cranium a moment later.

Raios flashed a surprised but relieved glance in Obek’s direction.

‘You can thank me later, *vengu*,’ said the captain, earning a curt nod from the other Drake.

As Raios felled another drone, Obek shot one that had managed to circle around and attack from his blind side almost point-blank.

‘Xen,’ he said across the vox, ‘ease up. They are getting around us.’

A compliance icon flashed up on Obek’s left retinal lens but a cursory appraisal of the battle suggested they would be surrounded anyway.

He thought about signalling a retreat. They could fall back, deeper into the armoury and make the renegades fight room by room, but he almost immediately dismissed this idea. Obek knew they didn’t have the numbers. It was why they hadn’t done it in the first place.

And it dawned upon him then, as he saw two Drakes fall to an onslaught of mechanised blades and watched Gairon speared through the chest and his left pauldron hacked apart, that this had never been about survival or escape.

This is our Dropsite Massacre. This is our Isstvan V. This is where we die.

Gairon struck down his attacker, but bled profusely from the gaps in his war-plate.

Obek hailed Votan.

A Drake had to stay behind and protect T'kell and Fai'sho, a precaution that hardly seemed to matter now.

'Kill as many as you can, Votan, but do not let either of our stricken brothers fall into their hands.'

'Understood, brother-captain.'

'Vulkan lives, Votan.'

'We honour him with our sacrifice.'

Bitterness caused Obek's gorge to rise, like acid in his mouth. He ended the feed.

More Salamanders legionaries were dying and as a hand recoils when struck, the sons of Vulkan pulled into a tight formation. It was almost inviolable, but then many last stands were.

Not until the Sons of Horus entered the carnage did Obek truly see the end approaching.

Kurnan saw their captain, and knew this was the one he needed to kill.

His honour demanded nothing less.

True, the Drake had lost an arm, but he had still killed three of Kurnan's brother legionaries and even now, debilitated as he was, fought ferociously.

He broke through the withering ranks of the Mechanicum cohorts and came blade to blade with a Salamanders legionary. No accusation, no tirade of any kind passed the warrior's lips, just a fierce intensity born of the knowledge of a forlorn hope.

Kurnan's men and the remnants of Regulus' hordes surrounded them. Every second saw the knot tighten, the dreaded noose that all heroes secretly feared, transhuman or not. It was the death of honour, the end to glory. Ignominy.

The stain of that word felt thick on Kurnan's war-plate, even as he duelled with the Drake, brackish memories of Isstvan V fomenting in his conscious mind.

Backstabber. Treacherous dog... Traitor.

Kurnan disarmed his opponent and rammed his combat blade into the warrior's pectoral as far as the hilt. He heard a spray of something hitting the inside of the other legionary's faceplate. Then came a gurgle, and finally choking.

'I've pierced your lungs,' he whispered, dragging the Drake close so he could

use the body as a shield. ‘You are drowning in your own blood.’

The warrior jerked, trying to fight the inevitable.

‘It won’t matter,’ said Kurnan, twisting the blade and then forcing it upwards. He pushed so hard it lifted the legionary off his feet. ‘You can’t fight this. Not this.’ The light died in the legionary’s eyes. Kurnan saw it through the red retinal lenses, like a fire suddenly doused.

Retaliation came swiftly, and Kurnan turned the dead Drake’s body just before a chainblade hit. Blood and metal shards cascaded outwards from the wound, the squeal of chain teeth chewing up ceramite merging with the enraged grief of a legionary cutting into his fellow legionary.

Still clutching his meat shield, Kurnan yanked out the blade in a welter of blood. Then he heaved back on the body, trapping the other Drake’s sword, which was jammed in the dead warrior’s war-plate. As the Drake desperately tried to free his weapon, Kurnan leaned in and stabbed him in the neck, in the gap between helmet and gorget.

He did it three more times in quick succession and then parried another blade aimed at his neck, before denting the side of his assailant’s war-helm with his gauntleted fist. Reeling, the legionary fell back into the bodies of his brothers. The Salamanders had closed ranks. A retreat was in effect.

An ever-widening gap emerged between Kurnan and his enemies.

He raised his fist and all battle ceased. The servitors were dead; only the skitarii remained and even they respected the stand-off between old comrades.

‘What are you doing?’ the sibilant voice of Solomus came through on the vox. *‘Let’s finish them.’*

‘This isn’t Isstvan. I won’t do that again,’ Kurnan said, and in a lower voice added, ‘We’re warriors, not assassins.’

‘We are whatever Horus needs us to be,’ hissed Solomus. He prowled the edge of the fight like a creature of the Legion’s old namesake, stepping over the bodies already added to his butcher’s tally. His cold eyes searched for who next would bloody his sword. Kurnan wanted only one and, ignoring Solomus’ impudence, found the warrior in the middle of a dwindling shield wall of drake-green power armour.

There is at least some honour left in this galaxy.

He raised his sword, the chain teeth still wet and glistening. The stink of it, the blood and the sweat, almost overwhelmed the heady scent of ash and cinder. It was choking, and Kurnan decided he wanted to be rid of this place in short order.

‘You...’ he uttered, raising his voice so it carried above the drone of many

chainblades burring in discordant union. ‘Captain to captain.’

It was over. Obek knew it. He had known it before they had even entered the Wrought, but denial was a powerful emotion in Nocturnean culture. Some called it defiance.

He felt the huddle of armoured bodies around him, heard their breath sawing through their faceplates and smelt their blood and the blood of the renegades on their war-plate. Stained, scarred, but far from glorious and with only a shred of vengeance to show for all the death.

Is this what Isstvan V was like?

No black sand underfoot, just black obsidian, their blood and that of their enemies almost invisible upon it.

Obek met the gaze of the other captain and shouldered his way forwards.

Xen tried to step in. ‘Brother-captain—’

‘Don’t try to stop me.’ Raios was bleeding all over the floor, stabbed in the neck. Gairon was lying nearby, a jagged cleft in his chest that tore all the way up to his throat. They were not alone. Not nearly.

Xen held out a sword, a serrated spatha of rare craft. ‘This is *Drakos*. Its edge has never failed me.’

Obek thought about refusing, but could not dishonour the gift. Instead he nodded, sheathing his ruddy combat blade to take up the green-tinged spatha.

‘A fine companion for an honour duel.’

‘There is nothing honourable in this,’ said Xen, his eyes on the renegade captain. ‘He will not be, and you only have one hand, my captain.’

Obek smiled, and it felt like a lifetime since he had done so and meant it. He supposed it was not joy or gladness he felt, but something more like relief.

‘I need only one,’ he said, and his mood abruptly darkened, ‘to kill this dog at least. When it is done—’

‘We will not be taken alive.’

Eye to eye, they locked forearms, although Xen gripped a cauterised stump. ‘I have shamed us. I see that now.’

‘Atone by avenging my death,’ laughed Obek. He thought of T’kell and the pledge he made to him, which he would fail, and all those who had come to the Wrought in search of purpose and honour, but found only death. It made finding the resolve to do what he had to do next easier.

‘Come then,’ Obek told the captain, ‘if you are so willing to die.’

They exchanged a curt salute. Obek knew the odds favoured his opponent, but

he had killed three of theirs in single combat and that counted for something.

‘In Vulk—’ he began, but stopped short. A blade was sunk several inches into his chest, and he staggered before he saw the renegade with his hand outstretched and realised he had thrown it.

‘Damn it, Solomus!’ the renegade captain roared, before chaos erupted anew.

Xen rushed the blade thrower, this Solomus, as Zandu and Phokan hauled Obek to his feet. One of the renegades peeled off from the half-circle of warriors to intercept, but Xen cut him down with *Ignus* before he could even utter a war cry. He kicked the corpse aside, his stride barely interrupted and met the hastily drawn blade of Rayko Solomus.

The other Salamanders were fighting too, a rush of blades and armour too swift and varied to truly account for as they engaged enemies. Xen’s attention was fixed on one.

Solomus was fast, his gladius a blur, which, unlike Xen’s sword, was an ugly thing, just a tool for killing with all the brutality that required. His skills were anything but, and Xen almost immediately went onto the defensive.

The Son of Horus fought with a raw aggression and intensity Xen had rarely come up against. He had been in battle before, mainly during the Crusade, and that kind of instinct never left, but the edge... that could be blunted by time.

Xen parried, but could find no opening. He wished he had *Drakos* too; the other blade would have given a sorely needed advantage. He caught sight of Obek, getting to his feet, yanking out the thrown blade. Phokan and Zandu were in front of him, fending off the renegades, but they were getting pinned down.

‘You’ll die just like your brothers died, bleeding and without hope,’ said Solomus.

Xen took a glancing blow against his forearm. It bit deep, through ceramite and adamantium, into flesh. It hurt but he smiled anyway as his thrust took the renegade in his right pectoral. The armour absorbed much of the impact but Solomus grunted in pain. A second blow, an overhead, met the edge of the renegade’s steel and drew sparks. Xen swiped at his flank, but found this parried too. A second thrust... Solomus smacked it aside with his palm so swiftly that Xen could scarcely believe he had done it. The momentary delay was telling.

A punch to his solar plexus sent Xen reeling. Just a step or two, but it was enough to put him off balance. Solomus drew a second blade, third if counting the one he had thrown into Obek. Ugly as the others, it had a hooked tip and a dark sheen.

The thrust came at Xen so fast he nearly missed it. He parried the blade but not the one with the hook that followed and bit in the place between his shoulder guard and his neck. He felt a lurch as Solomus dragged him forwards, pulling his right shoulder to the left and turning him savagely. He missed the jab that cut into his side and the blow across his cheek that exploded white fire into his right eye.

Xen staggered and experienced something he had not felt before.

Defeat.

His vision fogging, he felt something slide into his chest and down. Hot at first, but then cold, even as his blood gushed across his armour. Now he fell, to one knee and then the other in close succession. *Ignus* glinted just beyond his reach. He could not remember dropping it.

Solomus loomed above him. ‘Bleeding and without hope...’

He raised both blades. It was hard not to think of them as a guillotine.

‘Vulkan lives...’ said Xen, and prepared to meet his fate – until sound and fury tore the chamber apart.

Solomus half turned to meet a billowing explosion. It threw him off his feet before seizing Xen too and a host of others. Salamanders and Sons of Horus were tossed aside like ash in the wind.

A thought imposed itself in Xen’s few remaining moments of consciousness.

Krask.

SEVENTEEN

The Raven and the Gorgon

Phokan and Zandu were dragging Obek back to where T'kell and Fai'sho were lying when he heard the faint clink of grenades hitting the ground and shouted a rasped warning.

'Down!'

He saw Phokan and Zandu brace as a thunderous roar shook the chamber, filling it with smoke and fire. Moments later there came the stolid drumming of bolters. Zandu's hand on his shoulder kept him down and Phokan had interposed his body also, obscuring the view, but Obek saw the warriors moving through the slowly dissipating pall of smoke.

A bolt shell struck one of the renegades, twisting him around with the impact before two more put him down. Several muzzle flashes lit up the gloom at once as a steady fusillade struck out at the Sons of Horus, who reacted with return fire of their own.

Obek's first thought was Zau'ull and the Wyvern, but the legionary who emerged first out of the smoke had black armour and a Corvus-pattern helm, and was not a Chaplain. He carried a long sword with a crackling energy blade. Dust motes burst into flame as they touched the weapon's power field.

Obek had thought they were all dead or scattered to the galactic winds.

The son of Corax wasn't with his brothers, but he also wasn't alone. Black-armoured warriors came in his wake, a white gauntlet emblazoned on their shoulder guards. The Iron Tenth, the Gorgon's sons.

'Iron Hands...'

Led by one of the XIX, these warriors were known to Obek. He didn't know what business the so-called Shattered Legions had with the Wrought. That would come later, if he survived.

A shadow scythed a path through the Sons of Horus.

As Xen's body fought to stabilise in the wake of his critical injuries, he realised what he was looking at. It was one of the sons of Corax. As many had, he had assumed they were all dead or scattered beyond recall. The Raven Guard in his midst reflected no light, yet simultaneously drew in the illumination cast by the auto-sconces. He *was* shadow, the two a conjoined entity.

The Raven Guard met Solomus just inside the threshold of the vault. The battle had yet to progress past it, with the Salamanders still clinging on. Out of some ingrained martial instinct, Xen tried to rise, and grabbed his sword. The grip felt unfamiliar in his numbed fingers and he barely held on to it. He managed a half step before collapsing. A slick of blood had pooled beneath him, leaking from his armour where Solomus had driven in his blade.

Kill him... Xen willed, powerless to do anything but watch, but determined to stay conscious long enough to see the outcome.

As the Raven Guard came at him, Solomus attacked with both blades, high and low, feint and thrust. They met nothing but shadow as plasteel struck air. The blood in Xen's eyes made him blink. It was inside his helm, trickling down his face. In the second it took for Xen's eyelid to close and reopen, the Raven Guard... *shifted*. He could think of no other way to describe it. He was smoke caught on the wind, slipping away from harm and coalescing at the traitor's unprotected flank.

Xen watched Solomus grunt, then jerk in pain as several feet of XIX Legion steel impaled his body. He turned his neck, just enough so his maddened gaze fell on his killer for a final look, a last curse, before the Raven Guard wrenched free his sword and cleaved Solomus in half.

After that, Xen slumped and let swift oblivion take him.

The Drakes still fought doggedly as the Raven Guard legionary swept through the Wrought, cutting down renegades who had been caught the worst by the explosion but who were still alive. The Iron Hands came in his wake, cold and implacable, and Obek ordered his warriors to cease fire for fear of hitting their allies.

The Salamanders gathered shoulder to shoulder and rallied around their captain, who had regained his feet.

It took less than a minute after the initial incursion for the Shattered Legions to secure the Wrought and execute all but a few of the traitors who had fought their way out and fled. In the aftermath of the battle, the two forces stood and regarded one another, but it was a stand-off born of curiosity and uncertainty, not a preface to violence.

‘They are Shattered Legions,’ muttered Zandu, having heard about them from the survivors of the Ruinstorm.

Obek nodded, but his eyes were on the Raven Guard, who had stopped to clean his sword. The Iron Hands had stopped too, but they remained stock still, boltguns lowered but still readied. Although he wanted to, Obek did not feel relief. Neither did his brothers, judging by the weapons that remained unsheathed and unholstered in their hands.

‘We are indebted to you,’ he said, and then after a short pause ‘Brothers.’

Obek came forwards past his men.

No reaction came from the Iron Hands, who remained still, except for one. A shield-bearer – he turned his head away from the Salamanders legionaries whilst the others stared coldly through their retinal lenses. The Raven Guard came forwards, though. He had taken something from a pouch on his belt and presented it to the captain.

A hololithic emitter. Obek immediately recognised it. A grainy image issued from the holo-lens a moment later, another Iron Hands legionary, if his bionics and the metal clad to half of his face was any gauge. He looked old and scarred, and had a sharp beard that resembled a piece of shrapnel.

‘I am Kastigan Ulok, Iron Father,’ he uttered in a hollow, metallic voice. *‘Know that you are saved, Salamanders. Know that you are now guests of the Shattered Legions.’*

Obek nodded solemnly, and ordered the others to stow their weapons.

‘Morikan will take you to my ship, the Obstinate. There is much for us to discuss, son of the Drake. Much indeed.’

The Raven Guard, evidently Morikan, closed his hand to end the transmission. He beckoned once and then turned.

‘Have you encountered our ship?’ Obek asked, calling out to him, but the son of Corax didn’t react. ‘We have injured here, we need–’

The shield-bearer interrupted. His voice was deep and cold, but carried some compassion. ‘Your needs will be met,’ he said, and took off his helm. A severe-looking warrior with pale skin and coal-dark hair closely cropped to his scalp stared back at Obek. ‘I am Ahrem Gallikus, of Clan Gaarsak.’ He extended a

hand and Obek took it. ‘Saurian will look to your wounded.’ Gallikus regarded Obek’s severed arm. ‘And I believe I can take care of that.’

Obek’s eyes narrowed. ‘Saurian? Is he...’

‘A Salamander, yes. He has been with the *Obstinate* since the beginning.’

‘I should like to speak with him once we are aboard.’

‘And he you,’ Gallikus replied, giving a half-glance at the other Iron Hands legionaries now filing out of the chamber, ‘but Ulok will want to talk to you first.’

‘And the Wrought?’ asked Obek, gesturing to the weapons vault.

‘Ah,’ Gallikus replied, ‘is that what you call it? Ulok will want access to it and everything within it.’

Zandu scowled. ‘What?’

Obek raised his hand to placate him, but said to Gallikus, ‘This is Vulkan’s hold and thus ours by right.’

Gallikus returned his helm, suggesting the conversation was at an end. ‘I understand, but this materiel is needed. For the mission.’

‘What mission?’

Gallikus turned to follow the others. ‘To find and kill him, of course.’

Servitors and menials carrying the stamp of Iron Hands had begun to flood the approach corridor, here to denude the vault, Obek had no doubt.

‘Kill whom?’ he asked, and Gallikus paused to answer before carrying on his way.

‘The Warmaster Horus.’

EIGHTEEN

Obstinace

The Unscarred were ferried to the *Obstinate* aboard a pair of Iron Hands Thunderhawks. So few Salamanders legionaries were left from the original landing party that they could have fitted aboard a single gunship, but the one they knew as Morikan ‘the Silent’ had ensured their diminished number was divided across two. So it was in silence that Obek made the journey to the battle-barge waiting above, unable to say for certain that their situation had improved since being rescued by the Shattered Legions.

Once docked, the Unscarred disembarked into an assembly deck of dark iron populated by servitors and other mechanised serfs. Shadows and the clouds of venting pressure could not hide the other vessels already in dock upon their arrival, Thunderhawks and Caestus assault boats in varying states of readiness and disrepair. Two Stormbirds loomed over the mismatched fleet – one had been stripped for parts that were being used to restore the other.

Industry ran deep within the Iron Tenth and here the machines toiled unceasingly.

‘Not much flesh amongst these Iron Hands,’ remarked Zandu quietly as he crossed the short distance between the two gunships.

Obek clasped his forearm as the two were reunited, nodding to Varr and Phokan but casting a concerned glance at T’kell and Xen.

‘Have you not heard, brother?’ he replied, returning his attention to Zandu. ‘Our saviours think it weak.’

Zandu laughed, precipitating a bout of coughing that left red flecks on the back

of his gauntlet. Sobering, he replied, 'Perhaps they are right.'

'Are you injured?'

'No more than anyone here.'

'Report to the Apothecary once we're done.'

'Done with what, Firebearer?'

Obek's gaze was drawn to the vaults of the immense assembly deck as a great gate began to open that led deeper into the ship. A gauntleted fist had been emblazoned upon it, a terse and functional piece of artifice that nonetheless suggested who dominated aboard the *Obstinate*.

'With whatever awaits us beyond those gates.'

The injured were immediately taken away, presumably to the apothecarion. It left only a small cadre of able-bodied Salamanders legionaries who were quickly escorted under guard to a receiving hall.

More dark iron greeted them as they were ushered firmly into a large, austere chamber that had little by way of ornamentation, save the square columns that ran around its periphery and the starkly appointed throne sitting at the far end of the room.

Obek recognised the legionary occupying it from his facial augmetics and spiked beard.

'Ulok.'

Morikan the Silent stood at his side, almost disappearing into the shadows.

'Yes,' said Ahrem Gallikus softly, 'but he's going to address his men before he talks to you. I'd advise silence,' he added, and went to take up a place farther into the chamber, in front of the Salamanders legionaries.

Obek grasped his arm as he passed.

'Is this it?' he asked. The chamber had fewer than sixty warriors in it, including the remnants of the Unscarred. 'Where are the rest of the legionaries who I saw take the Wrought?'

Gallikus looked down at the gauntleted hand on his arm and Obek removed it.

'At rest,' he said, before taking up position with the others. He looked askance at Obek, speaking in hushed tones to the legionary alongside him before turning to the one on the throne.

Ulok rose to his feet before he began, holding out his hands to quiet the hubbub of subdued voices.

'A great victory,' he said, nodding as he slowly brought his hands together again, 'and a firm step towards our father's retribution. For though it was the Phoenician who struck him down, we know whose hand wrought the deed and

whose hand must be severed in reply.’ At this remark he held up his own bionic hand, the symbol of his Legion, and clenched it into a fist. ‘He has many names, but we shall know him only as traitor.’

Zandu leaned in to Obek, and whispered, ‘Is this a briefing or a sermon?’

‘Neither,’ Obek replied, his attention on Ulok.

‘His legionaries have been put to flight,’ Ulok continued, ‘relinquishing a great armoury that we shall use to replenish our own war materiel.’ He nodded again, lowering his gaze to his iron hand, and uttered in a quieter voice that still carried, ‘It is much needed.’

Zandu was about to protest, but Obek laid a hand upon his shoulder to stop him. Something about this Ulok suggested it would be unwise to interrupt, even if he had just sanctioned the plundering of Vulkan’s weapons cache.

Ulok raised his eyes again. ‘The Mechanicum adept is within our grasp,’ he declared to the assembly. ‘We have but to—’ He stopped short, having now turned to face Obek and his men. ‘Who are these legionaries in our midst, Gallikus?’ he asked.

Ahrem Gallikus went on bended knee and bowed before answering. ‘Salamanders, Iron Father,’ he replied, ‘or so they claim.’

Zandu exchanged a concerned glance with Obek.

Ulok frowned; at least, the side of his face that was flesh and blood did. ‘I thought they were all dead... apart from Saurian.’

‘We live on,’ said Obek, and stepped forwards, ‘the evidence is before you. I am Captain Rahz Obek of the Unscarred, also called Firebearer.’

Ulok gave a look of indifference. ‘I have met Salamanders before, aboard this very ship. They came seeking an alliance, speaking of the resurrection of their primarch, a claim I *knew* to be false, and tried to kill us. How do I know you are what you say?’

Obek took another step, prompting the Iron Hands legionaries to reach for their weapons. Only Morikan the Silent did not move but he sensed the Raven Guard’s eyes upon him through the lenses of his corvus helm.

‘*See!*’ said Obek, and gestured to his onyx-dark skin and red eyes, ‘the traits of Nocturne.’

‘Those who came aboard this ship looked the same. Behind the subterfuge of their flesh I found a different mark, a serpent beneath, one that had three heads.’ Ulok’s eye narrowed as the focusing rings on his bionic eye adjusted at the same time. ‘What were you doing in the armoury? Where is your ship? Were you stationed there, a garrison?’

‘No,’ said Obek, shaking his head. ‘We had hoped to use the Wrought as a safehold...’ He paused, realising he had divulged too much.

‘For what? Is it in there now?’

‘No, it is still aboard our ship, which we have lost contact with. We are grateful for your help, but need only to be—’

‘What is on your ship?’ Ulok asked coldly. ‘I will not ask again.’

Obek shook his head dismissively. ‘Relics. Artefacts of cultural significance from Nocturne.’

‘What manner of... *relics*?’

‘It is of no concern of yours.’

Ulok smiled. ‘I see,’ he said, and gestured to his warriors. ‘Take them.’

A ring of stout boarding shields with boltguns locked in their firing nooks surrounded the Salamanders, who had barely reached for their weapons.

‘Don’t,’ Gallikus warned them. ‘These legionaries are Medusan Immortals. If you resist, they will kill you.’

‘You should listen to Legionary Gallikus,’ Ulok told Obek and his men.

‘What do we do?’ hissed Zandu.

‘Submit,’ Obek replied, and raised his hands. ‘We can hardly fight them. Even if we survived, it would only confirm what we are not.’ He met Ulok’s gaze but found no malice or self-satisfaction, only the conviction to do what must be done to protect his men and his ship.

‘How long do you intend to hold us?’ asked Obek.

‘Until your true nature can be determined,’ Ulok replied.

‘Find our ship, and you’ll see that for yourself.’

‘I intend to, Captain Obek. I intend to.’

NINETEEN

Ties that bind

He had not always been 'Saurian'. It was an honorific, although one he had done little to earn, save living when so many others had not. In this way, he had failed in his calling as an Apothecary. On the fields of Isstvan V, his reductor had remained empty, the gene-seed of his brothers left to rot instead of being harvested.

Recruitment to Ulok's cause had given Saurian purpose, but of late his sense of fulfilment had waned. At first he had been necessary, but now, what with the Revenants... there was precious little use for a field medic.

So when the injured had been brought aboard the *Obstinate* and into his apothecarion, and kindred legionaries also, Saurian had rejoiced and a small part of him had remembered his old name, his old purpose.

'Hold him...' he murmured, prompting a medicae-servitor to lock the two cybernetic clamps it had instead of hands over the forearms of the struggling Salamanders legionary.

The warrior had lost both legs, and was badly burned. Pain jerked his body, making treatment difficult. Saurian's narthecium had seldom seen such use, but it was put to work now as the Apothecary administered a powerful nerve suppressant.

In a few seconds, the struggles ceased as the legionary fell into a sus-an coma. Six of the twelve inductees had already slipped into suspended animation. Saurian would not be surprised if there were more.

One, however, was awake. Unlike the others Saurian had seen, this legionary

still had his honour scars. A great many of them, in fact. It was curious. The legionary jerked his head to beckon the Apothecary over.

Leaving the medicae-servitor to its duties, Saurian went to the stricken legionary.

‘Are you in pain, brother? I can ease your suffering if you are.’ He had not meant it to sound like a threat. Perhaps he had been around Ulok too long? No, he had *definitely* been around Ulok too long, but there was nothing to be done about that now. Oaths were sworn, ties that bound him to the *Obstinate*. Saurian was many things, but oathbreaker was not amongst them.

‘I did not mean—’

‘Will he live?’ asked the legionary, croaking each word. He clutched at his throat. ‘What is this? I don’t...’ He trailed off, struggling to speak.

‘You have been unconscious for several weeks, brother.’

The legionary’s eyes widened, his focus suddenly on his surroundings instead of the unarmoured Techmarine lying on the slab across from him with half his head missing, and next to him a body swathed in a mourning shroud, a darkening blood stain around the hole where his chest used to be.

‘Where... am... I?’ Every utterance was a struggle, but delivered with an urgency that took Saurian aback.

‘Do not try to speak, everything will be explained in—’

The legionary gripped the side of the slab and tried to rise. Saurian put a gauntleted hand on his chest to keep him down. ‘Veteran, you are wounded. Stay down.’

He moved fast, even for a warrior of the Legiones Astartes, seizing the Apothecary around the throat.

‘Where am I?’ he asked again, shouting, ‘Tell me!’

Saurian’s gorget protected him, but he felt the grip of those fingers regardless, and heard the slow buckling of metal as it gave against the legionary’s feverish strength. Saurian turned his wrist so he could lean in with his forearm and use the enhanced strength from his war-plate to instantly break the deadlock.

‘Cease your struggling,’ he told the legionary, who still fought. A punch cracked Saurian’s left retinal lens. A table of surgical instruments was upturned as the legionary kicked it.

‘Tell me!’ he roared, his voice a knife-edged rasp.

Saurian hit him hard with a tranquiliser from his narthecium, and the legionary relaxed.

‘A sedative. Mild enough so we can still talk, but so you can’t fight,’ Saurian

told him, ignoring the anger in the legionary's eyes. 'You are aboard the *Obstinate*, an Iron Hands battle-barge, now in the arsenal of the Shattered Legions and Iron Father Ulok. Look around...' Saurian gestured to the row of slabs, the two medicae-servitors who had remained intent on their protocols during the entire fracas, the banks of monitors, vials of replacement tissue and organs, the racks of surgical tools and stimulant injectors.

'You are wounded, brother. This is the ship's apothecarion.'

The legionary glared, but appeared to relax. He was struggling to speak again, the sedative having impaired his capacity to do so.

Saurian leaned closer, confident of there being no further attacks. The words were faint, but he heard them well enough, not needing to catch the movement of the legionary's eyes as they identified the subject of his question.

'Will he live?'

Saurian stepped back.

The Techmarine on the slab across from the other legionary was T'kell. He was Vulkan's Forgemaster. Everyone in the Legion knew of him.

Even estranged from his brothers, Saurian felt a deep kinship for these warriors, so it was with some bitterness that he could not answer in the affirmative.

'His injuries are severe, worse even than yours.'

The legionary gave a near imperceptible nod of understanding.

'This...' he gestured to an honour scar on his arm, 'and this...' and then another on his shoulder. 'All of it.'

Saurian frowned, and considered his charge might be delirious from pain. 'I do not understand.'

'Unscarred...' said the legionary, gesturing again. 'Unscarred. To honour their... sacrifice.'

'These are your deeds, brother. Why would you—'

The legionary was shaking his head. 'Can't undo what has been done. Just symbolic. I need a different symbol. Brotherhood. Unscarred.'

Saurian nodded slowly. 'As you wish.' The only way to remove an honour scar was to burn it and obscure the carved or seared flesh. As Saurian reach for his tools, the legionary clenched his arm and he realised the administered sedative had been too mild. He was about to increase the dose when the legionary spoke.

'Where are the rest of my brothers?'

Obek sat in darkness, trying to appreciate the solitude. That had proven difficult over the last few days, surrounded as he was by his brothers.

Ulok had sealed them in one of the *Obstinate*'s barrack halls, which appeared curiously sparse considering the size of the ship and the legionary cohort he had seen force the Sons of Horus into a retreat. He had not seen the renegade captain amongst the dead, alongside his torturer, so had to assume that he had escaped and lived. Of the magos, Obek knew nothing. Ulok had referred to a magos that must surely have been Regulus, but he had seen the creature destroyed.

As well as meditation rooms, the barrack hall also had ablution chambers and a modest training area. Not that many observed their weapon drills, for Ulok had seen them all disarmed of any serious weapons before admittance and subsequent incarceration. A few Drakes practised their pugilism or duelled with the gladius, but most sat in silence and contemplated the failure of their mission.

The *Chalice of Fire* was lost, its artefacts, as well as the battle-brothers aboard, amongst its casualties.

'Vulkan,' Obek whispered to the darkness, nursing a phantom pain from his missing forearm, 'through adversity, grant us forbearance and the will to fight on.'

They had lost much already, and the Unscarred's fresh purpose had been subverted by circumstance. Obek began to wonder if they were cursed.

The door to the barracks opened with the grinding of some unseen mechanism and through the brief gout of hydraulic pressure release, a squad of shield-bearing Immortals trooped inside. Ahrem Gallikus was at their head and went unhelmed so he could easily be identified.

He saluted. 'Captain Obek, I would see to that arm now.'

Obek rose to his feet and Phokan stepped forwards, intending to join him when Obek stopped him.

'See to it that order is maintained in my absence.'

Phokan nodded, but spared a scything glance for Gallikus.

'I do not believe your warriors like us very much,' said the Iron Hands legionary as Obek approached.

Obek laughed mirthlessly.

'Shall we get this over with?'

As soon as they reached the workshop, Gallikus dismissed his entourage.

'The Iron Father would prefer you attended to at all times when abroad on the *Obstinate*.'

Obek gave a wry snort. 'Has your Iron Father always been this paranoid?'

Gallikus didn't answer. Instead he gestured to a metal cradle in the middle of

the chamber, around which were arrayed tools and parts for bionics.

‘It’s more commonly used for servitor repairs, but will serve us equally well in this case.’

Hesitating only briefly, Obek climbed into the cradle. He lay supine, his legs and arms supported by a stout metal frame shaped to his body. Flecks of blood and oil dotted the bare metal and a lumen overhead blazed with a fiery intensity in the otherwise gloomy space.

‘Isn’t this usually the province of an Apothecary?’ asked Obek, as Gallikus removed his shoulder guard, greave and the mesh layer beneath his armour.

‘Not for Iron Hands,’ he replied, subconsciously flexing augmented fingers as he scraped a cleansing unguent across the part of Obek’s severed arm that still remained.

‘Ah, of course. You are supplementing flesh for metal to garner strength... at the loss of the soul.’

Gallikus had brought a radial arm saw into position, poised at the join between Obek’s upper arm and his shoulder.

‘I am no stranger to pain, Gorgon’s son,’ said Obek, ‘but are the nerves not usually numbed before the cut is made?’

‘Apologies, brother. I am used to doing this on servitors.’ He paused, then turned to meet Obek’s gaze. ‘You believe we have no soul?’

‘Your humanity, perhaps. That *is* your creed if taken to the extreme.’

Gallikus stared, for so long that Obek wondered if the Iron Hands legionary had experienced some kind of mental break, before at last he looked away and spoke.

‘Of late, I have considered the meaning of that creed and the nature of our humanity, our souls.’

‘I am no Chaplain, Gallikus,’ said Obek, recognising the turmoil in this legionary but surprised at the sudden candour, ‘but I will listen if you need me to.’

‘Ever humane, the Eighteenth.’

‘I hope to demonstrate we are not the serpents your Iron Father fears we are.’

Gallikus looked back, as if trying to gauge something that Obek could not discern. He suddenly suspected that Saurian could have replaced his severed arm, and that there was more to this meeting than the grafting of a bionic.

‘Ulok will not release your injured, not those who are severely wounded.’

Obek began to rise, anger bunching his fists but Gallikus put his mechanised hand against his chest.

‘I shift this saw and you are carved in half,’ he warned.

Obek snarled, 'Why am I here? What is the purpose of all this?'

'To replace your arm.'

'And the rest?'

Gallikus looked stern but conflicted. His face saddened, rueful as he finally came to a decision.

'There is no rest. None at all.'

Zandu basked in the heat of the ablution chamber. He let the scalding water hammer his body until it felt like knives hitting his skin. Despite the pain, he stood inside the cleansing block for almost an hour, but found no solace or invigoration. As the skull-headed founts died off to a miserable trickle, steam rising about him in a heady, vaporous cloud, Zandu felt the same as he had done every moment since coming aboard this ship.

Worn. Tired.

Swathes of heat coming off his onyx skin, he reached into his mouth and pulled out a bloody tooth.

That makes four.

When his hair had begun to fall out, he had shaved his scalp to a glabrous sheen with his combat knife. And when Zandu closed his eyes, the burning man returned, as if spurred on by his imminent demise.

'Leave me...' he whispered, but to no avail.

He had heard of Destroyers succumbing to the radiation poisoning of their weaponry, but this had been an intense bombardment of his cells over a prolonged period. His malfunctioning power armour, its hermetic seals broken, had effectively determined his fate.

Ignominious death, and the dread that even those who knew no fear could experience. Perhaps it was as the burning man foretold, a slow wasting, but by fire within even as the fire without raged against it.

Zandu released a long, pained breath and left the cleansing block. Serfs afforded to the Drakes by Ulok stood ready to receive and armour him, their eyes lowered in deference. He let them work, lost in his thoughts as they went about their solemn labours.

He knew he must finally speak with Captain Obek. Several weeks had passed aboard the *Obstinate* with still no sign of the *Chalice of Fire*. At first, he refused to believe that Zau'ull, Krask and the others had perished, that the relics of the primarch had been lost with the ship, but days on end without news had begun to grind him down. And this sickness... it only prolonged the slow agony.

They had to get off this ship, escape and seek out the *Chalice of Fire* for themselves, or die in the attempt. He supposed that was selfish, given his probable fate, but rather death in the service of duty and honour than waste away like a shadow before the onset of the sun.

‘You’re dying,’ said Varr.

Zandu, now armoured but not having heard the intrusion, looked askance at the other legionary as he emerged into the light of an auto-sconce.

‘What did you say to me, Drake?’ He had not meant to vent his anger, but the nerve was yet raw.

‘I said *dying*, not deaf,’ Varr replied.

He too wore his war-plate. Zandu saw the scorched metal had seams of soot like black veins tarnishing the green, and would never be wholly cleansed again. The imagery felt apt as he considered the plight of the Unscarred and his own inevitable demise.

‘I suppose Vulkan calls me to the mountain, does he?’ said Zandu, his voice sour and with a bitter edge. He had meant his remarks to be caustic.

‘No,’ said Varr, with a smile that twisted the map of scar tissue colonising his face, ‘the one our father called has already answered.’

Zandu frowned but before he could ask what Varr meant, Obek appeared in the arched entranceway to the ablution chamber. He had Phokan with him, who acted as equerry in Xen’s absence.

‘I need you two with me,’ said Obek. He seemed troubled. Serious. More than usual.

‘Your arm, brother-captain,’ Zandu said, gesturing to the bionic, ‘it looks well—’

‘Ulok has found the ship,’ said Obek, interrupting. ‘The *Chalice* is ours again.’

‘What of our brothers aboard?’

‘Unknown, but apparently contact has been made.’

Zandu had cause to frown again. ‘And yet you still seem uneasy, captain.’

‘I am. The *Obstinate*’s weapon holds are brimming with materiel taken from the Wrought. What do you think the Iron Father will do if he finds what’s aboard the *Chalice of Fire*? You both saw his reaction when we first came aboard this ship. He has incarcerated us for weeks on end with no other pretence than our provenance was believed to be in question. I have severe misgivings about his intent, but with the *Chalice*, Zau’ull and Krask’s Wyverns, our position has improved.’

‘Our position?’ Zandu queried.

‘Firebearer means for us to bloody our blades on the Gorgon’s sons,’ murmured

Varr.

‘Only if strictly necessary,’ Obek warned. ‘But I won’t let them keep us from our ship or our mission. The relics are to be found secure harbour, if not in the Wrought then somewhere else. Geryon Deep, perhaps? Ulok is a warmonger and we have no way of knowing what Vulkan’s arsenal can do if it is unleashed. Our ties are bound to this now. I swore an oath – we all did. To T’kell.’

‘If he lives,’ said Zandu.

‘Live or die,’ said Obek, ‘we hold to it. Nothing else matters.’

Varr smiled, though his eyes had a manic faraway look to them. ‘Endurance, the hard path, self-sacrifice... Our father is justly proud.’

The others had no chance to question him. Voices emanated from the main barrack hall.

The Iron Hands had come to escort them to their fate.

TWENTY

For those who are dead

Zau'ull stood before the emitter, Gor'og Krask and one of his Terminators flanking him on either side. The armour of the Terminators was badly scorched and carried several fresh gouges but it had been the difference between life and death as the launch bays were blasted apart.

A retreat had been the appropriate response from Shipmaster Reyne, even if it did rankle with Zau'ull. No legionary would ever run from a fight, especially one recruited to the XVIII, but Reyne had been protecting the *Chalice of Fire* and Zau'ull could not deny the sagacity of that. A short warp jump had taken them to the edge of the system, a chance to lick their wounds and make necessary repairs. The return had been cautious, via the slow burn of plasma engines. The fact that they had encountered an Iron Hands ship had been unexpected.

Zau'ull nodded for the emitter to be engaged and a beam of grainy grey light filtered from the receiver array, in turn projecting the image of a severe-looking veteran with a face half of iron and a glinting bionic in place of one eye. His beard resembled a piece of angular shrapnel and when he spoke his voice resonated with the inhumanity of a machine.

It felt cold on the bridge when compared to the heat of the forges far below but as Zau'ull listened to the words of the holo-cast veteran, who explained how he had taken a band of Salamanders into his custody until the veracity of their identities could be established, the Chaplain found the fire of his anger burning the chill away.

‘A transport is inbound,’ he told the veteran, ‘to escort our brothers back to their Legion.’

He severed the emitter feed as the veteran gave a solemn nod of acquiescence but could not shake his fury or the disquiet he felt.

‘Is that it?’ asked Krask as the light from the emitter faded and the shadows of the bridge reasserted themselves around its command dais. The crew, as well as Shipmaster Reyne, who had listened to the exchange in silence aboard his throne, faded too as the near darkness swallowed them.

Zau’ull’s eyes glowed against the blackness. ‘For now. I will speak with Obek before acting further.’ He called out to Reyne. ‘Shipmaster?’

The answer came swiftly. ‘I cannot be certain, Chaplain.’

Zau’ull still had the case clasped to his belt and his gauntleted fingers glanced against the metal as he reached for spiritual reassurance. ‘It could not be,’ he whispered and left the bridge with Krask, bound for the secondary embarkation deck.

Ulok had consented to the return of their weapons, so a fully armed cadre of Salamanders made ready in one of the *Obstinate*’s arming chambers. Only Obek had been summoned to the assembly hall before both parties would part ways.

The Iron Father was already waiting for him.

‘I offer my sincerest regret at having taken you under guard, but during such fell times as these it is hard to tell friends from enemies.’

Obek nodded, expecting to be met by a cohort of Medusan Immortals but finding the Iron Father alone, though he felt certain that Morikan was lurking somewhere in the shadows.

‘I do not disagree.’

‘Your injured are still in the apothecarion,’ offered Ulok, ‘and you are at liberty to see them, but Saurian has advised against their removal from his ministrations. Unless you have an Apothecary amongst your ranks?’

‘We did. His name was Fai’sho,’ Obek replied, grimly, ‘but he is amongst the dead.’

Ulok nodded, sympathetic. ‘And not the only one, I’m afraid. Not all survived. I am sorry, brother-captain. You have suffered much.’

‘No more than your Legion.’

A dark cast came over the Iron Father’s face, his mouth tightening into a grim line.

‘Though, I would see my stricken brothers,’ said Obek.

‘It shall be done,’ Ulok replied, bowing as if in concession. When he raised his head again, a question lingered in his eye. ‘I have one further ask of you, brother-captain, if you will hear of it?’

‘Very well.’

‘The renegades who attacked you, they are led by an adept of the Mechanicum.’

‘*Led*? I saw a captain amongst their ranks.’

‘Nonetheless, the adept leads them. He goes by the name Regulus, though he has a longer binaric designation you would not understand.’

Obek gritted his teeth, but Ulok seemed not to notice. ‘I encountered him. His bodyguard did this,’ he said, and gestured with the bionic that stood in place of flesh and blood.

‘Regulus is within the Warmaster’s inner circle, and occupies a position of influence aboard his flagship. As a fount of knowledge, he is almost unparalleled, a veritable oracle. I want to extract that knowledge and with it find a way to kill Horus.’

‘One of the renegades, Rayko Solomus, said Horus had already won, that Terra had fallen.’

‘A lie. He was taunting you. The war isn’t over, Obek, but kill the Warmaster and it will be.’

Obek waited for Ulok to laugh, to reveal a further facet of his madness and confess how his words were meant in jest.

‘You are serious,’ he said, eyes wider.

‘Horus is not a god. He can be killed.’

‘Isn’t he? His followers think he does the will of gods. He is still a primarch, the Emperor’s chosen son, by the Throne.’

‘Not any more. I have been hunting Regulus for a long time,’ Ulok told him. ‘It was how we came to that world in the first place. We have been following his trail. Estranged from the Warmaster’s side, from his main fleet, I knew I would get no better chance to capture him.’

Obek frowned. ‘And yet you didn’t. I admit, I thought he was dead. I saw him destroyed.’

‘A version only. He has many, to widen his reach and confuse his foes, but close by there will be a *prime*, his primogenitor vessel. The other renegades will take us to it. Our long-range augurs have been monitoring the planet and detected a ship inbound. The Regulus-prime will be aboard that ship.’

‘If each incarnation is a version of this adept then why not simply take the one

at the Wrought? Or send forces to capture it now?’

‘It must be the prime. A facsimile can be abandoned, but if we have the prime there will be nowhere for Regulus to escape to.’

‘And if there is more than one prime, have you considered that?’

‘There is one, and one alone.’

‘This is reckless, Ulok.’

‘No, it is *logical*. It is the only action that makes any sense.’

Obek considered it, wondering if he truly had a choice. Ulok made trusting him very difficult, but Obek could not in good conscience simply deny his request.

‘What is it you ask of us?’

Ulok’s eye narrowed. ‘Your fury, and will to fight until the bitter end, captain. I plan to attack the renegade vessel but need a second force to infiltrate its heart as a larger major assault is taking place.’

‘I have my own mission.’

‘To escort your relics,’ Ulok nodded. ‘The armoury is no longer viable. It has been denuded of worth, a cache I fully intend to share with its rightful Legion, but my warhost also has need of it. Where will you take your relics now?’

Obek had to concede that was a salient question, *the* salient question.

‘There are other Salamanders strongholds, like Geryon Deep, other places the relics can be kept safe.’

‘And are these strongholds nearby? Can you reach them alone in your ship?’ asked Ulok, opening his hands in an expressive gesture. ‘Or would an outrider, a warship with a heavy garrison aboard, enhance your chances of reaching your safehold? I can offer you that.’

‘And compromise your proposed attack on Horus. Geryon Deep is far from Terra.’

‘Join us, Obek. Become a part of the Shattered Legions. You are alone in the void and in need of allies. Join with me, fight for us, and your concerns shall become my concerns and together we will see them done. None could be greater than removing the head of the serpent himself.’ He held out his bionic hand. ‘Join us. At least in the attack on the renegades. Take your vengeance for all you have suffered at their hands, and I shall see your sacred mission fulfilled and the relics you carry escorted to their rightful place. This oath I swear to you.’

A brief silence fell between them as Obek considered his decision. Ulok seemed part logistician, part zealot. It made him unpredictable. His plan to kill Horus was insane. No assassins could get close, no Throne-allied Legion fleet would even dare. Obek could think of only one primarch volatile enough and

still allied to the Throne who would be willing to do it, and he was dead. To attempt such a thing, even with the supposed knowledge that Regulus possessed, was suicide, but then he suspected Ulok and his Shattered Legion brothers had embraced and accepted that fatalistic notion long ago.

But Obek *did* want vengeance and his oath-bound duty was to kill the enemies of the Imperium, and there were none greater than Horus' own Legion.

He firmly clasped the Iron Father's arm in the warrior's grip. Ulok reciprocated and the bond was made.

'We'll help you take the ship and capture the adept. Then I shall hold you to your word about escorting us. I will not agree to the attack on Horus. I cannot. I am still Eighteenth Legion and after my mission is done I plan to return to Nocturne and Prometheus. We can agree on what you need from the Wrought later.'

Ulok nodded agreement. His grip was firm, unyielding, and as he released Obek again, his lips parted in a thin smile.

'Your wounded.'

Obek started, about to pull away, but Ulok held firm for a moment longer.

'I will have a servo-skull direct you to the apothecarion,' said Ulok. 'You still wish to see them, I take it? I won't deny you.'

Ulok released him, and Obek nodded.

He thought of T'kell and of the mission, his brothers aboard the *Chalice of Fire*. Refusing Ulok's request had felt unwise. Honour bound him to the Shattered Legions now, regardless of where it might lead.

'Yes,' he said, and sensed his grip loosening on his own fate and those of his brothers.

Since their meeting in the workshop, Obek had not seen Ahrem Gallikus again. In fact, as he followed a servo-skull to the apothecarion, he did not see another Medusan Immortal or any Iron Hands legionary at all. Regardless, he felt eyes upon him and not from the mechanised drone.

Morikan.

He wants me to know he sees me, thought Obek, but his mind swiftly wandered to Gallikus' cryptic behaviour.

No rest. None at all.

Obek could not discern its meaning and the Medusan had not elaborated further as he affixed the bionic the Salamanders captain now wore in place of his severed arm.

He reached the apothecarion, the servo-skull hovering noisily above the entrance, and he consigned his thoughts on the matter to later consideration. The apothecarion door slid open with a faint hiss of pressure. Several Drakes awaited him. Not all were alive.

One of the living Drakes stood before him now, his white armour bearing a single shoulder guard but unmistakably draconic in aspect.

‘You are Saurian.’

The apothecary gave the slightest incline of his head.

‘Brother-captain. It is my honour,’ he said. ‘It has been a long time since I met another of my Legion, before...’ he gestured sadly to the fallen Salamanders.

Fai’sho lay beneath a veil, his blood staining the gossamer-like material. He had been stripped of his armour, as had all of the Salamanders legionaries. He was not the only fatality, either. Obek murmured oaths for them all. The rest were unconscious, deep in suspended animation comas and would not soon be roused, but it appeared they would live.

T’kell’s fate was much more uncertain and Obek came to his side last of all.

‘Forgefather...’ he murmured, his gauntleted fingers poised above the wound in the Techmarine’s skull. Now he saw it, Obek realised what T’kell had done, what he had to do. ‘You were purging the infection, ridding yourself of the adept’s influence.’ He gently closed his hand and withdrew it. ‘At such cost...’

Saurian spoke up, intruding on Obek’s reverie.

‘After Isstvan, I had begun to lose hope that I would ever see my Legion again.’

‘None?’ asked Obek, fighting down the pang of regret at the mention of the Dropsite Massacre. ‘Not amongst your Shattered Legions?’

‘We were scattered after the attack. I fled aboard the *Obstinate*, some of my brothers also, but none survived,’ he said, his mood darkening. ‘Since then, we have remained isolated, fighting against the rebels where we can. To gather together... it would only ensure our swift destruction.’

‘I have met others like you, Saurian. Those who had joined the Shattered Legions. A few returned to Nocturne, their tidings grave, I’m afraid.’

‘Of Vulkan?’ Saurian asked, though his tone suggested he knew the answer.

Obek nodded. ‘His body. It has since been returned to Deathfire.’

Saurian looked grave, but he swiftly marshalled his grief.

‘Is that how you also came back to Nocturne? Were you amongst the Isstvan survivors?’

Obek found he could not meet the Apothecary’s gaze. ‘No, that was not our fate. We have been garrisoned at Prometheus, standing watch.’

‘And the burden of that has lain heavy upon you.’

‘It has.’ Obek regarded the prone form of T’kell. ‘It still does.’

‘Rest assured, brother,’ said Saurian softly. ‘They will be well tended to.’

‘I can attest to that.’ Xen emerged into the apothecarion from a meditation cell, still fatigued but greatly recovered. He stood without his armour and his skin glistened like oil, his wounds like tears in the black. But Obek was not looking at his battle wounds.

‘Your honour brands, brother... They are removed.’

Xen bowed his head, but Obek looked to Saurian.

‘At his request.’

‘Unscarred at last,’ said Obek, returning his attention to his vexillary.

‘I am unworthy of them.’

‘You are worthy of my respect,’ Obek replied, clapping Xen on the shoulder. He drew a sword from his scabbard, a green spatha with a serrated blade. ‘And worthier of this than I.’

Xen took the proffered hilt reverently.

‘I am eager to rejoin my brothers, captain, as *Drakos* is to rejoin his.’

‘And you shall, vexillary. They have need of you. Saurian...’ He turned to the Apothecary.

‘The servo-skull that brought you here will take you to an arming chamber. The vexillary’s weapons and repaired war-plate will be there.’

Obek nodded in gratitude. He had judged these legionaries falsely. They were a beaten blade, battered, hard to trust but still true for all of that. He could not explain the shield-bearer’s behaviour, but then there was much about the warriors of the *Obstinate* that was more unconventional than Ahrem Gallikus.

‘We have a... saying,’ he said to the Apothecary. ‘You will not have heard it.’ Obek hoped the words would bring him solace. ‘Vulkan lives.’

Ahrem Gallikus sat alone in the darkness of the reliquary.

It had been a long time since any legionary had been inducted here and those interred had been reduced to wasted flesh on bone, their augmetics removed and repurposed. Amongst the honoured dead, Gallikus found a measure of peace and used the solitude to meditate.

He had almost been too rash in trusting the Drake. He barely knew him, or his warriors, but a faint hope still burned within. He counselled himself caution, knowing the Silent was ever watchful.

His shield stood before him like an unwelcome guest, a symbol of his shame

and failure.

Gallikus remembered the *Retiarius* and the World Eaters. He remembered Azoth as he was, a Frater Ferrum who had been reduced to a shield-bearer like him.

Neither of them could have known there was greater dishonour to come.

‘I will end this,’ he whispered to the darkness and to Azoth, his cold bones and those of his brother Revenants by now held in cryostasis until the call to war sounded again.

Ulok had created the chamber aboard the ship. He had unlocked an avenue of proscribed research and turned the Keys of Hel. Few knew the inner workings of the ‘mausoleum’, but Ulok had been forced to confide in a small cadre of iron-brothers to perpetuate its continued function.

It could not simply be deactivated. Numerous safeguards had been put in place to prevent this. Similarly, it had its own power source separate from that of the ship. Gallikus knew of only two ways to effectively sabotage the cryo-vault – destroy the ship or find a servant of the Omnissiah greater than Ulok.

A betrayal. Did its end justify its means, he wondered? Had Horus faced a similar dilemma?

Rising to his feet, Gallikus gripped the breacher shield and slung it onto his arm.

He knew he had no choice.

‘I will end this.’

TWENTY-ONE

The returned

Zandu saw the burning man, and knew it was a portent of his doom. It had come to him invisibly through a broken seal in his armour, not via some spectre or apparition. He had taken to wearing his helm as much as possible, not wishing to alert his brothers to his condition, but as he stood mag-locked to the deck of the Thunderhawk, its presence became stifling.

They were still on the embarkation deck of the *Obstinate*, awaiting sanction to depart. The engines burred hungrily, eager to be unleashed, and sent vibrations through the fuselage that made Zandu's bones ache. They had taken the dead with them to burn in the pyreums of the *Chalice of Fire* and the caskets lay in rows in the hold, a potent reminder of Zandu's fate.

Through the fog of his weakening senses, he had heard Obek speak to Phokan about the Sons of Horus. Zandu knew some of the renegades had escaped the Wrought during the assault by the Iron Hands and assumed they had been found.

His fingers clenched reflexively at the thought of potential vengeance, and for a brief moment the dull throb in his skull ebbed. He shut his eyes, trying to ward off the pain and fatigue but saw the burning man appear from his subconscious. Emitting a shallow gasp, he opened his eyes again and hoped none had heard him. Weakness would prevent him from joining whatever mission Obek had committed them to and end any chance Zandu might still have of a meaningful death.

Zandu looked up from his thoughts and saw Xen looking back.

He and the vexillary had seldom seen an accord, their philosophies of war too

divergent. But the proud swordsman seemed different and nodded to Zandu from across the hold.

He laughed to himself. *Even my mind betrays me...*

‘You cannot fight this,’ uttered a low voice beside him, the sound of it deadened as if submerged.

‘What?’ he slurred, and saw Zeb’du Varr.

He too wore his helm, but to hide the scars of his own fiery obsession. It was blackened by fire like the rest of his armour.

‘Your fate. You cannot fight it.’

Zandu’s skull felt like it was under orbital bombardment. His mind swam and he struggled to focus on what Varr was saying.

‘You are mistaken, brother.’ Even his voice sounded different now, filtered through the fog of agony. Zandu fumbled at his helmet clasp in an attempt to remove it and alleviate the heat prickling his face.

‘It won’t help,’ said Varr, the thrumming engine noise masking their conversation from the other Salamanders legionaries in the hold.

‘I am not dying.’

‘All of us are dying, Firefist. Only you have seen the manner of yours.’

Zandu turned, his eyes glowing fiercely as they fell upon Varr. He felt his body tremble, but not from anger.

‘Do not concern yourself,’ Zandu rasped, flecking the inside of his helm with spittle and filling it with the scent of copper.

‘Remember him,’ answered Varr, ‘the burning man.’

Zandu shook his head. It would pass, the pain, the fatigue. It came and went. He tried to fool himself that it was fading now. It wasn’t.

‘No more riddles...’

Varr had lost his mind. He had seen too much, endured too much. Even without being part of the Isstvan massacre, it had stained them all the same.

Unscarred.

Zandu found that wryly amusing.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

And then darkness took him.

Zau’ull stood on the secondary embarkation deck of the *Chalice of Fire* with Krask and his entire squad of Terminators in two ranks behind him. They had been waiting for some time before the klaxons began to sound, signalling the arrival of the ship he had sent for his errant brothers.

Menials and servitors from amongst the reduced deck crews made ready, their vacuum suits proof against the cold void as the embarkation gate levered open to admit the long dark and expose this part of the deck.

Zau'ull looked on through the retinal lenses of his helm, feeling neither the chill of the void nor the drag of venting pressure, as the gunship alighted on a docking station and the embarkation gate slowly closed behind it.

Once the repressurisation indicators turned from crimson to green, the deck crews unhitched the harnesses that had kept them from being swept into the void and rushed to the ship to attend to it.

The rear landing ramp opened amidst this sudden flurry of activity and a solemn procession of Salamanders legionaries filed out, flanking the caskets of the dead.

Zau'ull had his arms crossed over his chest and his crozius mace clutched in his right hand. When he saw Obek, he nodded and the captain's voice crackled over his private vox-feed.

'Firefather, it is good to see you again but we have urgent matters to discuss. My quarters.'

The Iron Hands had done little to soften Obek's demeanour, it seemed. It was only as he noticed the absence of T'kell and Zandu that he realised why.

Zau'ull blink-clicked a vox acknowledgement and dismissed the Terminators.

'Is he dead?' asked the Chaplain.

'He lives,' uttered Obek, his back to Zau'ull as he regarded the gilded drake icon carved into the facing wall of his quarters. The chamber was sparse, with little to distinguish it save for a meditation dais, armoury and the crackle of embers from the firepits delineating the back half of the room.

'Barely,' added the captain, turning to face his Chaplain, who had removed his skull-helm and held it in the crook of his left arm. 'Zandu too. That's why we were late. Rad-poisoning. They are aboard the *Obstinate*.'

'The Iron Hands ship?'

Obek nodded.

'I see. Their Iron Father said they had taken you prisoner?'

'They did, convinced we might be traitors.' Obek shook his head at the thought.

'I swear to you, Zau'ull, I have never seen such desperation and mistrust.'

'These grim, dark times are ripe with it.'

Obek nodded, his thoughts distant for a moment as he looked away.

Zau'ull asked, 'The Wrought. What happened?'

‘It is overrun, brother. We cannot use it now. That door is closed to us.’

‘And the artefacts?’

‘Without T’kell, I am without guidance. Vulkan’s bidding was to take them to the Wrought and secure them there, but he could not have foreseen this.’

‘Perhaps he did,’ Zau’ull replied softly. ‘Another trial, a means of testing our faith and endurance.’ He still had the relic he had taken from the vault clasped to his belt but he had moved it so the case was hidden by his drake mantle.

‘Then we are failing it,’ Obek replied, looking back to the Chaplain. ‘I have considered Geryon Deep.’

‘At Taras?’ Although he tried, Zau’ull could not keep the look of incredulity off his face.

‘I know, it’s far and the empyrean tides are turbulent.’

‘I would say worse than that, brother-captain.’

Obek pursed his lips, knowing to try for Geryon was a risk.

‘The Iron Father has vouched for our safe passage.’

‘And you trust him?’

‘No, but I am between hammer and anvil, and I would rather have his allegiance than his wrath.’

Zau’ull frowned. ‘Do you believe his intentions to be potentially hostile?’

‘I think he has seen too much war, Firefather. His ship, his warriors... The one who did this,’ Obek brandished the bionic in place of his arm, ‘he said something to me, or it felt like he *wanted* to say something. He said Ulok would not release our wounded, but his final words were the most cryptic. He said “No rest. None at all.” I think he was referring to the legionaries aboard the ship.’

‘What of them? I don’t understand, Firebearer.’

‘Cold, Zau’ull, as cold as the metal clad around their bodies. The sons of the Gorgon are stoic, but they have passion. These warriors were like... automata.’

‘This one who confided in you...’

‘Ahrem Gallikus.’

‘Yes, he was not this way?’

Obek shook his head. ‘No, he seemed different. Human. Alive.’

‘Nothing you have said is particularly reassuring, brother,’ Zau’ull admitted.

‘I know. I think he wanted my help.’

‘With what?’

‘I think he intends to betray his Iron Father.’

‘He’s a traitor?’ said Zau’ull, alarmed.

‘No, I believe him to be loyal. Something is wrong on the *Obstinate* and he

wants an end to it.'

Zau'ull's brow furrowed as he weighed everything Obek had just told him.

'I cannot see the right path in this, Firebearer.'

'I have forged one anyway.'

Zau'ull's eyes narrowed. 'And before I have heard what it is, I am already thinking it is less than favourable.'

'It is. I have made an alliance and oathed myself to the Iron Father.'

Zau'ull's silence bade him continue.

Obek told him everything.

TWENTY-TWO

The Son of Victory

Although he had been his legionary brother, Vosto Kurnan did not mourn for Rayko Solomus. He hated the torturer, as he hated almost all things, and found himself grinning at the memory of Solomus' demise.

The dead eyes of the servitor reminded him of it, of the Raven slitting Solomus apart, all his arrogance and impudence spilling out red onto the ground at Kurnan's feet. Some of the blood still stained Kurnan's armour and he found the sight of it pleasing.

Let it remind me of the peril of hubris, he thought, and raised his eyes to the figure skulking in darkness at the back of the room. The Mechanicum emissary shrugged on a robe of sable, but before the material slid over his body and gathered like folds of skin upon the floor of the sanctum, something of his true form was revealed, something metal and arachnoid.

Kurnan felt his hatred rekindled. The servitor lying on the ground had been the only one to escape the wrath of the Gorgon's sons. As the remnants of Kurnan's legionaries had taken to the irradiated plains of the nameless world aboard Rhinos and Land Speeders, he had been faced with the ignominy of defeat and considered death in battle preferable to a fighting withdrawal.

But the adept had needed safe passage across the ruined city and as Lupercal's emissary he would not be denied, even by a legionary captain of the Sons of Horus. The ship, *Son of Victory*, a nimble Sword-class frigate that had fought during the Gorro Hollowing as escort for one of the larger warships, had returned in response to a long-range vox hail from the adept's servitor form and

confirmed to Kurnan in whom the true power resided.

Though diminutive in size compared to the greater ships of the line in the Warmaster's fleet, the *Son* had been fashioned with resilience in mind, both to external attack and internal incursion. Of its twenty-six thousand crew, several hundred were mortal auxiliaries charged with the ship's defence. Moreover, it carried a modest garrison of legionaries, which Kurnan would have dearly liked to have had at his disposal when the Iron Hands were slaughtering his men.

'I have limited understanding of human emotion, Kurnan,' uttered a mechanised voice from the shadows of the sanctum, 'but even I can tell you are harbouring some anger.'

'My men are dead, and you had this ship and its warriors waiting in high orbit.'

'The purpose of my mission was not to preserve the fighting strength of your legionaries, captain. The *Son of Victory* was a contingency, in case of the need for rapid extraction. Its garrison is charged with my defence. They will be needed. Soon.'

Regulus emerged into the wan light of the lumens. He carried his skull-headed staff and only the faintest glow of the adept's optics penetrated the shadows of his hood. He almost appeared to glide across the floor of the sanctum, the lie only exposed by the faintest scuttling of his many limbs rattling against it.

Kurnan nodded, and smiled ruefully. 'A ship has appeared on our augur. A battle-barge, no less. We are dead anyway.'

'I know.'

Kurnan was taken aback. 'And yet you seem unconcerned.'

'You will die, captain, but I shall endure. Now I am back aboard the *Son of Victory* and in this body, the machine is infinite. And I am the machine.'

Kurnan drew his sword. 'I should end you here, where we stand.'

'I doubt I could stop you, captain. I will be sure to inform the Warmaster of your treachery, though. You value your honour – I have seen you demonstrate this fact many times. I suspect it is why you hated Solomus so much and despised acting as henchman for me. I do not think you would sully it by killing me.'

Kurnan roared in frustration, slamming his blade back into its sheath. 'We cannot outrun them, we are martially outclassed...'

'Let them come. They will try to *take* the ship and that is when we shall make them pay for every yard. I will retreat to my inner sanctum. They are coming for me, for the knowledge I possess. Hold them off, as long you can.'

'To what end?' growled Kurnan.

‘We cannot prevail here, captain, but I can ensure what I know does not fall into their hands.’

‘I could kill you still and deny them anything.’

‘If I could feel amusement, captain, I suspect I would do so now. My biology, my *life* and its perpetuity have no bearing whatsoever on the data I hold within my core. It endures after death as I endure. It must be purged.’

‘How?’

Regulus returned to the shadows as a small aperture at the back of the sanctum opened, allowing him into its heart. As it closed behind him, the adept gave Kurnan a final imperative.

‘That is my concern, captain. You have but to seek a worthy death.’

TWENTY-THREE

The burning men

Obek had returned to the *Obstinate* and stood in the darkness of the ship's teleportarium.

Corposant trailed across three metal limbs that arched over the expansive dais of the teleportation array and cast flickering illumination into the large chamber. As well as Obek and his honour guard, it revealed Ulok and a cohort of Medusan Immortals. At the chamber's periphery stood Ahrem Gallikus. He looked on pensively, not a part of Ulok's breacher squad, and at a signal from the Iron Father did not linger.

'Second Revenant cohort,' said Ulok without bothering to look behind him.

Gallikus nodded, and left the chamber.

Morikan the Silent was apparently absent too, but then he might still have been watching unseen. Obek had seldom seen the Iron Father without his 'shadow'.

The rest of the Shattered Legions were engaged in a direct assault on the *Son of Victory*.

Twelve Caestus assault rams had deployed in a wide dispersal across the length of the frigate, the Iron Hands legionaries on board targeting the ship's bridge, weapon decks and other strategically valuable locations. They would maintain pressure on the *Son's* defenders whilst a smaller cadre, consisting of Gor'og Krask's Terminators, would seek out the adept. Ulok had theorised that Regulus would have embedded his sanctum deep in the heart of the vessel and on one of the lower decks near the enginarium. A drop pod assault against this area of the ship had commenced after the main assault was under way.

A continuous situational report broadcast over the vox, unheeded by the servitors and menials busying themselves with the array's preparation and function, but listened to intently by Obek and Ulok. Its crackling refrain echoed in the large chamber and brought news that Krask had gained the lower enginarium deck.

'Encountering resistance,' Krask's voice reverberated over the vox. The crack of weapons discharge undercut it. To Obek's ears, it sounded like las and solid shot. Armsmen.

A roar of bolter fire overwhelmed the vox, so intense it cut out. It returned a few seconds later with only Krask's voice and the droning undercurrent of the ship's engines on the feed.

'Neutralised.'

A ship schematic displayed via hololith provided positional data on the Firedrakes. Krask and his squad were making steady progress from their original point of ingress and navigating across the enginarium deck to a major nexus that hopefully led to the inner core of the ship.

'The sanctum will be near,' said Ulok, coldly regarding the schematic and the flashing icon that represented the Salamanders. *'Engage the homer as soon as you are across its threshold.'*

'Affirmative... Engaging.'

Another slew of bolter fire sounded across the vox, a cacophony of muzzle flare and muffled detonations so loud it bordered on white noise. An answering salvo came in its wake.

'Renegades sighted! Sons of Horus!'

Obek gripped the haft of his sheathed gladius all the tighter, reacting to Krask's warning.

'Taking heavy fire.'

The vox cut out again, unable to cope with the intense auditory returns. It took longer to re-establish this time. After a tense interruption of almost a minute, the vox came back in screaming fury. A deadly firefight had erupted as entrenched renegade defenders took on Krask's Terminators. No sterner protection existed for a Zone Mortalis engagement than Tactical Dreadnought Armour. In the grim confines of a shipboard assault, its heavy plating and potent weapon systems could tear apart bulkheads and defences, whilst weathering almost anything levelled against it.

Yet it was not inviolable.

The defenders of the *Son of Victory* hunkered behind raised automated barricades as a pair of rapier destroyers enfiladed down the corridor. Krask reflected that the renegades must have purposefully deployed at a cross-junction with a sealed bulkhead at their backs, seemingly confident in their ability to hold this crucial nexus of interlinking corridors. Steam flooded the narrow space from ruptured heating vents and the smoke from over a dozen deck fires funnelled down to it through atmospheric turbines. Again, this was by design and intended to foul auto-senses.

Krask fought through a miasma, braced behind a dragonscale storm shield in the Firedrake vanguard as the Sons of Horus unleashed their heavy weapons. It was like advancing into a hurricane, hammered by las-beams and staggered by incendiaries. A wash of flame spewed into his midst, surging hungrily around the Drakes, intended to blind and disorientate.

Krask held fast behind his shield, roaring down the vox at his brothers to do the same. The first five legionaries in the ranks were shield-bearers, their blunt assault designed to stun an enemy formation and leave it crippled and reeling, for the second half to finish off with combi-bolters and chainfists. Its configuration was versatile and powerful, and more than enough to overwhelm whatever came the Firedrakes' way. It was not infallible, though.

Rath stumbled, losing his bearings for an instant before a rapier's lascannon cored through his exposed chest. The beam struck him high, shearing through hardened adamantium and ceramite. It broke the aegis of Rath's armour, severing through the mesh and fibre bundles in his arm, and then took off the limb at the shoulder in a welter of sparks and blood. Rath's storm shield struck the deck with a barely audible but ominous resonation. A second beam hit his solar plexus, cutting his bellow of defiance short and burning a crater through his torso that speared all the way through his back.

'Forward!' roared Krask. The lascannons would be charging for another salvo. 'We are the favoured of Vulkan!'

Ba'durak took Rath's place in the vanguard, locking shields with Krask, who had resumed a dogged advance into the teeth of the guns. Together, they marched in lockstep, yard by bitter yard and slowly, inexorably increased their pace. The rank of shields behind them did the same until the Drakes had overcome the considerable inertia exerted by their armour and charged.

'Slay them!' roared Krask, as he bulled through a barricade, smashing it apart with his hammer, *Cragfell*. It had been master-crafted by his own hand, an artisan weapon with a heavier head than an ordinary thunder hammer and a

longer haft. Only Krask could wield it with a storm shield. He battered one renegade, smashing the shoulder and hearing bone crack. A second he rammed in the throat with the shield's scalloped edge, cutting off the legionary's head. It made enough room to swing *Cragfell*, which tore the defenders off their feet as it obliterated power armour.

Ba'durak and the other two shield-bearers laid in with their own hammers, the energy discharge from every blow lighting up the gloom in destructive monochrome.

As they bludgeoned the defenders, Krask signalled for the second half of his squad to move in.

'Take the bulkhead,' he ordered calmly as he speared a prone legionary through the chest with *Cragfell*'s fang-pommel.

As his brothers' chainfists began to tear up the solid bulkhead, a second tranche of defenders entered from the left-facing corridor. Krask and his men were standing in the cross-junction. Three legionaries with combi-bolters prepared to lay down covering fire as a welter of bolt shells careened off the armour and shields of the exposed Firedrakes, but never even acquired targets as a wall section farther down the corridor blew in, bringing smoke, fire and a storm of plascrete.

Through the ragged breach came a squad of Medusan Immortals.

'Hold fire,' Krask warned, not wishing to hit the Iron Hands legionaries. They needed to push on; the bulkhead was about to yield, but the Firedrake Master could only watch in rapt fascination as the Immortals went about their gory task in utter silence.

No war cries escaped their lips, no shouts or roars of pain or anger. They appeared implacable, redoubtable, but without true animus. The Sons of Horus had quickly regrouped and retaliated hard. A spear of burning promethium struck the Iron Hands legionaries, breaking against their shields and taking hold of their armour. The flamer-bearer maintained the pressure, and soon the entire first rank of Immortals was utterly consumed.

Tanks spent, the flamer-bearer stepped back, but as the fire died down, Krask saw the Immortals still advancing with their bodies ablaze. No screams, just a cold determination to kill their enemies. A close range volkite burst seared off an Immortal's arm and half of his face, but he did not cry out and kept on coming. A second was impaled on a power sword, the crackling blade thrust two-handed by its wielder as one of his battle-brothers rammed a chainsword downwards into the Immortal's chest. It did not yield and no sound betrayed its certain

agony.

Methodically, inexorably, the Immortals took the renegades apart. As the bulkhead preventing further encroachment into the ship finally came down, Krask was left with the image of the Iron Hands legionaries bludgeoning the last of the renegades with mauls and the stocks of their bolters.

He felt no aggression from them as he departed, no emotion at all, just a host of burning men putting others to the sword without vengeance and bereft of satisfaction of any kind.

‘Brothers, well met!’ he cried to them, raising his thunder hammer in salute.

None replied; none even acknowledged the gesture. They simply turned their backs and walked on.

‘Master Krask...’ It was Ba’durak, come to summon his leader.

Krask’s war-helm hid his disquiet, and he gave a shallow nod.

‘Onward,’ he uttered, his voice betraying his feelings. ‘Into the breach and off this ship as soon as we are able.’ As he pushed through to the vanguard, he raised his hammer again. ‘Favoured of Vulkan!’

His brothers echoed him, but the sound of their affirmation did not allay the unease he had felt.

Kurnan knew it would end soon. He had sharpened his blade and cleansed it of grime. He left Solomus’ blood on his armour as a grim reminder of fate. Vox reports from throughout the ship filtered through to his war-helm. Almost every deck was overrun. The bridge had fallen. Every weapon the *Son of Victory* had in its modest arsenal had been silenced.

Nine legionaries, chosen by Kurnan, stood with him. Each was a veteran and their blades crackled as they were drawn, much like Kurnan’s. Each had removed their weapons belts and left them discarded in one corner of the outer sanctum.

Here is honour, thought Kurnan. Cthonia had a barbaric culture, but amidst its slums the ganglords knew what honour meant, even if the form they knew was vicious and cruel.

The door to the outer sanctum remained closed, but Kurnan had not sealed it. He was not hiding nor trying to prolong his life. He merely waited for his death to come and find him.

I am here, he said to himself, and found the hatred that had lain so heavy upon his shoulders begin to ease.

The adept had told him to seek out a worthy death, and only as the sanctum

door began to rise did he learn *how* worthy.

As the aperture widened and his foes became known, Kurnan smiled and knew it would be most worthy.

A few minutes dwelling in the darkness of the mausoleum and Gallikus' armour had already gained a rime of frost. As he pressed deeper into the chamber, the thin white veneer of it fractured and came apart. The air ghosted around the heat sinks of his generator and respirator grille.

He found Azoth still in his casket, not amongst those chosen to assault the renegade ship, although a great many of the cryo-stasis vaults were empty and thickened the already nitrogen-rich air with the overbleed from their disengaged immersion pipes.

'Brother...' He uttered the word solemnly, sadly, as he placed a gauntleted hand upon the obscured glass of Azoth's casket. A bio-scanner betrayed the life signs of the ostensible corpse within, but it was not true anima. It had not been Azoth for a long time, not since the *Retiarius*.

'You died there,' whispered Gallikus, and bowed his head in shame. 'I will help you die again. I vow this. My oath.'

Some of the frost had retreated against the heat of Gallikus' gauntlet, and as he raised his eyes again he saw the face of his former brother through the narrow aperture he had just created.

Though his was fraught with emotion behind the faceplate of his war-helm, Azoth wore a different mask. It spoke of endless winters and grey, chill earth. A tomb-like silence descended, undercut by the dulcet thrum of the active cryo-stasis vaults.

Gallikus said nothing, and only turned and left the mausoleum behind.

As he was leaving the chamber, he activated his helmet vox.

'Saurian,' he uttered, 'this ends. Now.'

He found the Apothecary waiting for him, unarmed and submissive.

The badly injured Salamanders legionaries were still prone upon their medislabs, though Gallikus saw one was absent.

'Who did you send?'

'The rad victim. Ulok wanted to see the effects of the process on him.'

'With Morikan?'

'Yes, he took the Salamander with him.'

Gallikus muttered, 'Of course he did.'

'The others are to be awakened soon,' the Apothecary said, hesitating,

‘including Azoth.’

Gallikus shook his head. ‘How many of us are left, Saurian? How many true legionaries? No more than a handful. Ulok prefers slaves to brothers.’

Saurian bowed his head sadly and was about to return to his work when Gallikus’ voice stopped him.

‘No,’ he said calmly.

Saurian frowned. ‘It is our duty.’

‘No.’

‘We cannot—’

Since visiting the mausoleum, Gallikus had removed his helm and it hung from his belt, so when he snarled and advanced upon him, Saurian could see his fury.

‘No more!’ he said, seizing the Apothecary by the throat. ‘This wretchedness ends.’

Saurian allowed Gallikus’ wrath, not struggling, and after a few moments was released.

‘Morikan is not here to see *his* will done any more,’ murmured Gallikus as he regarded the bio-signs of the wounded.

Saurian grimaced, rubbing his injured throat.

‘It is betrayal, iron-brother.’

Gallikus turned and said in a soft voice, ‘And what we have allowed already is not?’

The Apothecary’s silence told him there was no argument.

‘Beyond waking the Revenants—’

Gallikus’ attention had returned to the wounded but he warned, ‘Do not sully them with that name.’

Saurian nodded. ‘Beyond waking our fallen brothers, to do anything more... Only the Iron Father can use the vault.’

‘That has been so,’ agreed Gallikus, as he approached one medi-slab in particular, ‘until now. I spoke to their captain. I trust the Drakes. I trust *him*.’

The Techmarine still slept in suspended animation, but his bio-signs appeared stable and the burn damage that had melted the augmetic part of his cranium had begun to heal.

‘That is Forgemaster T’kell,’ uttered Saurian, ‘I cannot just—’

‘Wake him, brother.’

‘His injuries, he may not yet—’

Gallikus was about to take a step towards the Apothecary when he felt something seize his wrist and looked down to see a hand.

‘Where is Obek?’ T’kell demanded. ‘Where are my legionary brothers?’

TWENTY-FOUR

Will of iron

Krask's voice came over the teleportarium vox, thready and breathless.

'We have gained the sanctum...'

Ulok mounted one hemisphere of the dais with his Immortals. Obek, Xen and a veteran honour guard from the Unscarred took the other.

A last broadcast emanated from the vox.

'Teleport homer engaged,' said Krask.

Ulok gave the signal, and a storm lit up the chamber.

The war party emerged in a maelstrom of light and aetheric wind. As the actinic glare faded, a host of warriors appeared in its wake, trailing corpusant from their armour. They were standing on the deck of a warship, amidst the aftermath of a fierce battle. The overhead lume-strips flickered, most having been torn down from their housings, giving the scene an eerie sense of desolation. Bodies lay slumped against the walls. Some had died face down, their blood seeping through the mesh beneath. One appeared to have died on his feet, impaled by a broken power sword that transfixed him to a wall.

One side stood battered but defiant. They wore green, though their Terminator armour was war-torn and scratched to bare gunmetal in places.

'You look bloodied, Wyvern,' said Obek, his gaze straying to the dead renegades but lingering on the two Firedrake bodies beside them.

'We have been, and sustained losses, but fared better than the traitors.' Krask had deep gouges in his war-plate, and parts of it were seared black from the

touch of a power blade.

‘Hard fought, brother,’ said Xen, and nodded to the giant Terminator.

Beyond the chamber where Krask and his men were standing, there was another, smaller room.

Ulok had advanced to this inner sanctum and as Obek caught up to him, he saw the Iron Father facing the Mechanicum adept. Regulus looked much as he had in the tunnels, but appeared to offer no resistance. He merely stood and awaited his fate.

‘Has your search proven costly, Iron Father?’ asked the adept, his voice as metallic as Ulok’s face. ‘Am I to render my secrets to you now?’

Ulok drew a plasma pistol. In the other hand, he carried a cog-toothed axe of gunmetal black. The clenched gauntlet of his Legion had been emblazoned on the blade in raised relief.

‘I am not an emotional being,’ he said, ‘but know this will bring me great satisfaction.’

He fired the plasma pistol, the weapon emitting a shriek of energy discharge as it cored through the adept’s torso, setting his robes alight. Ulok let him burn for a few seconds before firing again.

After the fourth shot almost nothing remained of Regulus, save a few scraps of burned sable and the twisted metal leavings that had been his body. Coldly, Ulok approached what was left of the adept’s head, crushing the malformed skull and bionic, and the little organic matter he had still possessed, into sticky remains.

‘Iron Father...’ Obek ventured at the threshold of the inner sanctum and watched in stunned fascination. Xen had half drawn *Ignus* but Obek gestured for calm. ‘You said you wanted to capture him.’

‘I did, *once*,’ Ulok replied. His back was to them, but his cohort of Immortals faced the Salamanders legionaries and had drawn up around the Iron Father.

‘Something changed?’ asked Obek, aware of his honour guard closing around him and Krask’s presence nearby, but also of a large body of warriors coming towards them. He doubted they were renegades.

Ulok turned, his eyes dark as knapped flint. Even his bionic had dimmed to a glowering ember in its mechanical socket.

‘Do you know how those versed in the ways of the Omnissiah communicate?’

‘What is this, Ulok?’ Obek would have reached for his pistol but for the firing squad of bolters arrayed before him.

‘An answer, Drake?’

Krask and his Firedrakes had advanced so they were behind the captain and his

honour guard. Obek could hear the humming disruption fields of their wargear. He also heard the tramp of many booted feet closing, so chose to answer.

‘Binaric.’

Ulok gave a humourless smile, and nodded. ‘Data *flows*. It is lighter than an atmosphere and even the hull of a warship is no impediment to its passage. I *learned* something from the traitor’s data-screed. A mote of knowledge, just a mote, and it confirmed all of my suspicions about you. Your vessel, what is its cargo?’

A deep pit opened in Obek’s gut and his bionic arm suddenly felt like a foreign invader. The grip of his flesh-and-blood hand tightened around the haft of his sword. Xen, Phokan and the honour guard tensed but gave way to the Firedrakes as they edged in front of them and to their captain’s side.

‘Relics, Iron Father.’

‘I believe you. Forged by Vulkan’s hand, yes? *Weapons*. Peerless weapons,’ said Ulok and his eyes flashed hungrily. ‘I have need of them. This crusade has need of them.’

‘What crusade?’ said Obek, as his lip curled in distaste. ‘The Crusade has ended.’

‘The crusade of vengeance,’ Ulok said as if this were obvious. ‘For the Gorgon. He decrees it. Your arsenal was gratefully received, but I shall have more.’

Obek slowly shook his head. ‘I won’t yield the *Chalice of Fire* to you, Ulok. That is what my father decrees. Those weapons are not yours or mine to wield.’

‘Forged by a primarch’s hand, how can we not? It is our duty.’ His teeth clenched at this impassioned outpouring. ‘Does vengeance not call to you Drakes as it does to us? We Iron Hands are cold,’ he nodded, ‘and driven by a vein of logic, but we are angered by the traitor’s deceit and all it has cost us. You are fireborn – how is it you can temper your wrath? When you saw your father slain on the black sand, did you not yearn for retribution?’

Obek felt the shame and regret of his retinue in every clenched fist and tightened jaw.

‘We did not fight at Isstvan.’

The coldness in Ulok returned in both his eyes and his manner. ‘No, you did not. You did not bleed as we bled, or as your braver kin bled.’

Xen cursed. Obek heard it from somewhere behind him and willed his vexillary not to act rashly.

‘Whatever you are contemplating, Ulok, do not do it,’ said Obek.

‘Are you threatening me, Salamander? Are you willing to turn your guns on

your allies but not unleash the war forge of your primarch on the enemy?’

‘I am *pleading*, Ulok. Do. Not. Do. This.’

Ulok whispered, ‘*Morikan...* It is already done. Remember,’ he warned, ‘you wrought this upon yourselves.’

The Immortals stepped forwards to fire as Krask and Ba’durak moved up with their storm shields to protect Obek. As the hail of shell impacted explosively against augmented dragonscale, the other Firedrakes unleashed a salvo from their combi-bolters, felling two of the Immortals before the door to the inner sanctum slammed shut to divide them.

‘Firebearer, are you injured?’ asked Krask, eyes front, looking over the edge of his shield, but the door to the inner sanctum stayed sealed.

‘No more than I already was,’ Obek replied. ‘Our Chaplain awaits us on the *Chalice of Fire*. He will have need of us.’

Krask nodded, lowering his guard. ‘The ship’s teleportarium is close.’

TWENTY-FIVE

Faith in fire

A deep wound had been torn in the *Chalice of Fire* and though it had been sealed off and the deck made safe, it remained a chink in a flank of otherwise sturdy armour.

It had not been Ulok's intent to make such a breach when he unleashed the *Obstinate's* guns; he had wanted Regulus to himself and would countenance no others reaching the adept and either capturing or killing him. All of this was now immaterial as a new obsession had usurped the old, and violent providence had provided a way to realise it.

A solitary gunship ghosted in through the ragged aperture, its lamps dulled, its engine near silent and every inch of it undetectable by augur or sensorium of any kind. Stealth had ever been the most formidable weapon of the XIX. It had not availed them on Isstvan V, for there can be no subtlety in a massacre, but the Raven Guard well knew its value all the same and had honed it to the fine edge of an assassin's knife after their near annihilation.

Since then the art of the unseen had come to represent something else, something more instinctual. Survival.

The lone son of Corax aboard knew about survival, for he had attended the massacre which had claimed not only his voice but so many of his brothers and their allies. What had begun as a righteous endeavour to bring an errant primarch to heel, *the* primarch, had turned into something much uglier and more desperate. As the first barrage of bombs came hurtling down, many had believed it to be a mistake, even though such errors amongst the Legionis Astartes were

inconceivable. Even with bodies flying through the smoke-choked air, their limbs and heads missing, some still clung to the lie that it had been unintended. When the legionaries who were meant to reinforce the Raven Guard and their allies turned their guns, then everyone knew the truth.

Some railed, shouting their defiance. They died quickly and unheroically, blown apart or hacked down with their curses left unspoken. Others attempted to fight back, as if they still had a chance of victory. These were the Drakes. They lasted longer, but died all the same. The Gorgon's sons fought for vengeance, with indignation in their hearts. They fell alongside the headless corpse of their father as another lie was exposed with the mortality of primarchs. Most fled, realising the cause lost and their oaths from others betrayed. The son of Corax had been such a legionary.

Not out of fear, for such concerns were beyond him, but from the very instinct he had clung to ever since. Survival. To live and take revenge.

An incendiary had killed his captain. It tore up his body and left transhuman offal in its wake. It killed a great many of his brothers too, making a mockery of armour and physiologies designed to withstand war. The second explosion, when it came, detonated so close that he was ripped bodily into the air, and so loud that it robbed his dying brothers of their voices. Their screams became noiseless, their shouts angry, silent imprecations.

He had become silent then. If his defiance could not be heard, then he would not voice it. No sound of agony would pass his lips either, a small thing that he could deny his erstwhile allies.

And in his flight, clambering through wreckage and across burning and dismembered bodies, inured to the horror of it all, a paradigm began to form. Gone was brotherhood and fraternity. Survival and fatalism replaced it. To live and take revenge.

Only this and nothing more.

The gunship touched down amidst a clutter of wreckage in the night-black landing bay. Most of the detritus from the attack that had ripped out much of the embarkation deck had either been removed or wrenched into the void, but some still drifted languidly in the airless space.

A ramp opened silently at the front of the ship and the Raven Guard stepped out, again silent. Like the cavernous chamber, he too was night-black and blended so seamlessly as to be almost invisible. Only the faintest glow of his retinal lenses as he analysed the atmospheric conditions of the embarkation deck betrayed his position.

The son of Corax drew his sword. It had a sickle edge, a falchion, and had been forged of monomolecular plasteel. When activated, the sword would vibrate so rapidly and infinitesimally as for the motion to be nearly imperceptible. Its blade reflected no light, and in the shadows it appeared as if it were an extension of his body.

A sealed access hatch, small and nondescript, used for maintenance, led out of the damaged embarkation deck and into a conduit that would allow further ingress into the ship.

As the Raven Guard headed towards it, he listened keenly over the vox for a command. His name.

And soon enough, he heard it.

‘Morikan.’

Zau’ull knelt in solemn reverie by the vault. It had been left in the secured dock since their departure from Prometheus and though the room was sealed at either end behind a reinforced adamantium gate, exhaust vents from the forges below bled in heat and the tang of cinder. Smoke clouded the air, but only thinly. The heady atmosphere bordered on volcanic, nothing less than a balm to a warrior of Nocturne.

And for a time, Zau’ull basked in it.

Obek had asked him to remain on board the *Chalice of Fire* to protect the artefacts. A pity, the Chaplain reflected, that he had not been asked to wait alone.

‘I am damaged, Firefather,’ a voice said from behind him, and Zau’ull sighed as he opened his eyes.

‘No more than any of us,’ he lied.

Zeb’du Varr may have been referring to his burns and the scarification that ravaged his body, or his mind. Before T’kell had rallied the Unscarred to fulfill his last mission for Vulkan, Varr had sought out the reliquary often. He spoke of how his waking dreams were consumed by fire, that his every thought was obsessed by it. Pyromania, Zau’ull knew, but a profound version of it in which Varr believed he witnessed something in the flames.

‘I have seen things,’ he murmured. ‘In the fire.’

‘Vulkan, yes, you have said before.’

‘You sound as if you do not believe, Chaplain.’

Zau’ull could not be sure that Varr’s reply wasn’t directed at him in a more general way.

‘I believe *you* believe,’ he said, opting for diplomacy.

‘And you do not?’

Zau’ull felt no barb in the question, but the sting of it was acute nonetheless.

‘I do not see what you see, brother.’

‘I see much...’

Zau’ull knew he could regret it, but it was his duty to minister to these warriors and so asked, ‘What have you seen, brother?’

‘I will die here. On this ship.’

‘Our fate was never to survive.’

‘It will be soon...’

His reverie clearly ended, Zau’ull got up and turned to Varr.

‘None of us can know when we will die, brother,’ he said.

‘Zandu sees the burning man.’

Zau’ull nodded, remembering his conversations with Zandu about it. ‘A dream, nothing more. How can you be so certain of your own fate?’

Varr’s smile pulled at the ravaged canvas of his flesh. He was not alone; the last of his warriors were with him but did not trouble the Chaplain as their sergeant did.

‘I see it in the fire,’ said Varr. ‘A trail of smoke moving against the flame.’

Zau’ull had often wondered if a touch of the wyrd did not resonate within Zeb’du Varr. He had never had any Librarius training, as far as Zau’ull knew, and most attributed his odd behaviour to his pyromania. Some, those who knew the old ways of Nocturne, the ones who still knew where to find the nomadic earth-shamans and who had sought their counsel, believed the flame to be alive and that some of its vigour and fury were passed on to those who venerated it.

Though there had not been a fire cult on Nocturne since before Vulkan’s reunion with his father, the beliefs that had once perpetuated them still remained in part. Zau’ull considered Varr might have found such an earth-shaman and looked into the fire too long.

Of course, he could just be insane.

Zau’ull rested his hand upon Varr’s shoulder guard.

‘No fireborn son should fear smoke from any flame, least of all you, Varr.’

The sound of the gate to the secured dock opening made Zau’ull turn. He thought he saw a shadow move against the wall but attributed it to the flicker of an internal lumen.

‘Not a flame,’ uttered Varr, ‘a shadow...’

As the gate began to split along its diagonal, its venting pneumatics clouded the air around it. Zau’ull gripped his crozius mace, but it could be Obek returning.

When he saw drake-green armour slowly emerging through the dissipating gas cloud, he frowned.

‘Firefist?’

Zandu had come back to the *Chalice of Fire*. Alone. As he walked towards them, he showed no sign of having heard or understood Zau’ull, his gaunt and ashen face as expressionless as the dead. Zau’ull went over to him and was about to hail Zandu again, when he realised what Varr had just said. It echoed a word Obek had used before he had left for the *Obstinate*.

He’s called the Silent, one of the Raven Guard. He fights like a shadow...

‘A shadow—?’ he began, remembering the flickering lumen as three feet of monomolecular plasteel impaled his abdomen. The blade came from behind, piercing up through Zau’ull’s back and out again, its end a ruby-red speartip.

As the blade was withdrawn, Zau’ull fell forwards onto his hands and knees. Spewing up a gout of blood, he tried to draw his crozius but felt himself impaled a second time.

Zau’ull heard Varr shouting and felt a surge of heat across his face as the shadows retreated into the periphery. His body fought to keep him functioning. His vision blurred but then began to focus again. He got back up. The wound was agony, but kept him conscious. Staggering, he almost fell but struck the side of the vault and stayed upright.

Varr’s flamer lay in ruins as he and his warriors fought against the shadow. Morikan the Silent moved so quickly that Zau’ull thought his eyes were fogging again until he realised only the one in black was indistinct.

A Drake fell, slit from groin to sternum, all his insides fleeing his body in a wash of crimson. A second saw his combat blade parried and a length of dark plasteel penetrating his gorget and throat.

Varr and two others remained. As Zandu reached them, Zau’ull held on to a slim hope that he would intervene but he seemed oblivious. Instead, he advanced on the vault and Zau’ull regained his feet to bar the Drake’s way.

‘Hold,’ he warned, aware that he held his crozius in one hand and staunched the wound in his abdomen with the other.

Zandu drew his gladius. It was almost mechanistic, the way he moved, with a coldness that looked alien in a son of Vulkan.

Zau’ull fed a surge of energy through the crozius that crackled along its length. ‘You forget yourself, brother. But I will kill you if you step any further.’

Zandu kept going.

A few feet away from him and Zau’ull saw the bionics. Part of Zandu’s wrist,

one side of his neck. The armour hid the rest.

‘You should be dead, brother,’ he murmured, and saw Varr in the background, alone and reaching for the ruin of his flamer. Zandu lunged, carving a furrow in Zau’ull’s shoulder and tearing up the joint between it and the torso. Blood gushed from the wound, slicking Zandu’s sword but the blow left him exposed to Zau’ull’s counter, which struck his plastron and cracked it open.

Zandu staggered, not in pain, if his face was any way to judge, but simply from impact. His chestplate had split, exposing burned and ragged mesh. The flesh beneath had been replaced with metal.

Zau’ull struck again, a laboured and half-parried swing that caved Zandu’s left pauldron before he threw the Chaplain aside.

Bones cracked as Zau’ull hit the wall, dropping his crozius. He slumped, his body failing him as he realised he had been stabbed again. He reached for his fallen crozius but his fingers touched the casket mag-locked to his leg instead as Zandu’s shadow fell across him.

His hand closing around the casket, Zau’ull knew it would be too late, but before the death blow fell an explosion lit up the dock, erupting into conflagration. The blast threw Zandu against the vault.

Heat prickled the side of Zau’ull’s face and a tremor ran through his armour that sent daggers of agony into his raw wounds. He turned, staring into the haze.

Varr lay on his back, burning. The Raven Guard burned too, his armour blasted by Varr’s improvised incendiary but holding.

He was laughing, the Drake, and as he died in flames, declared, ‘Behold! Behold the burning man!’

Zandu stopped. He had recovered his feet and his gladius scraped the edge of Zau’ull’s gorget... Zandu saw the flame. He saw the burning man. The fire had not reached as far as the Armarium but as the flames flickered in his glassy eyes, Zau’ull saw a brief moment of recognition.

Giving a tortured shout, Zandu flung himself at Morikan. Still ablaze, the Silent turned and thrust his sword all the way through Zandu’s body until it came out of his back. Thick smoke enveloped them as the fire took hold of both, as two darkened silhouettes of legionaries grappled for supremacy.

Zau’ull broke apart the casket and took out the artefact that had been within.

It resembled a highly ornate stave with a clawed draconic ferule and a drake-skull head, which hid a small emitter in its maw. Energy discharge akin to a disruption field thrummed through its haft from some concomitant power source. It looked ancient, though the design was unmistakably Vulkan’s.

Zau'ull grasped it in both hands, for it was a little longer than a gladius and his strength was failing. Zandu had his hands around the Raven Guard's throat, slowing crushing it, but had sunk to his knees, his armour burning down to bare metal, his blood hissing wildly in the flames. Morikan fought frenziedly, having let go of his sword and now stabbing into Zandu's flank with a shorter blade.

As the horrendous wounding took its toll, Zandu's grip loosened, enabling the Raven Guard to free himself. He staggered to his feet, burning brightly and dropping the short blade so he could yank out the falchion from Zandu's chest and end the fight.

When his eyes met Zau'ull's and he saw the weapon the Chaplain wielded, Morikan knew it was over.

'Nothing more...' he rasped, the first words he had uttered since Isstvan and the last words he would ever speak.

A beam of crimson energy shrieked from the maw of the stave, a song of deep drakes mourning the sundering of the world. Morikan's already misshapen armour buckled and fragmented before it, cracking and breaking away, first into slivers, then flakes and finally dust. Then came flesh and bone, as centuries of entropy were visited upon him in seconds. The maw widened and so too the beam. It had cored through Morikan's chest and now it bled across his entire body. Zau'ull clung on, the stave shaking in his grasp as he fought its volatile spirit.

The Raven was no more; only a shadow lingered where once there had been a legionary and so he returned from whence he came.

With great effort, Zau'ull deactivated the stave, understanding now the burden it represented and the reason it must be kept safe. As he sagged back against the wall, the edges of his vision crowded with blackness and he saw Zandu bloodied but at peace and Varr, a rictus grin forever seared upon his dead face.

Before oblivion took him, Zau'ull's gorget vox crackled to life.

'Firefather...'

It was Obek. His words were urgent, warning about Morikan and filled with determination. Zau'ull let him speak for he had not the strength to interrupt. Instead, when Obek was done and had made his oaths to return with all haste to the *Chalice of Fire*, Zau'ull gave a shuddering breath and just before he passed out, he uttered, 'Our legacy is safe...'

TWENTY-SIX

Immortals

T'kell looked upon the frozen legionaries and despaired.

‘This is an abomination,’ he said, both to himself and to Gallikus, his breath pluming in the chilling expanse of the cryo-stasis chamber.

After he had woken, and once Gallikus had told him all that had happened during his suspended animation, T'kell had learned of the vault and the reign of Kastigan Ulok. He knew the Iron Fathers, and had trusted comrades within their ranks. He respected their skill and dedication to the Omnissiah, but what he saw in the so-called ‘mausoleum’ was aberrant in the extreme and a dangerous deviation from the machine creed of Mars.

‘I have seen first hand what lies in the abyss of proscribed mechanistic endeavour.’ He touched his ragged scalp and the metallic part of his cranium blackened by plasma burn. ‘I turned a weapon on myself when I felt my free will slip from my grasp. I purged the ills of malicious code in my system, but this... how can this be purged? How is this any different to what became of me?’

‘It cannot be allowed to endure,’ said Gallikus, his voice solemn.

T'kell turned on him sharply. ‘And yet you have let it.’

The Iron Hands legionary’s gaze fell upon one cryo-casket in particular. ‘To my shame.’

Saurian had stayed behind to minister to the wounded in the apothecarion and prepare them for transport back to the *Chalice of Fire*. Ulok would soon return, his cohorts with him and possibly even the Raven. The madness had to end, and it would cease only one way.

‘You could have destroyed it,’ said T’kell, once again gazing upon the ranks of slumbering warriors.

‘You think I did not consider it,’ answered Gallikus, chagrined, ‘but to breach the armourglass, to even crack it... An incendiary that powerful,’ he shook his head, ‘it would endanger the ship, and I will not raise arms against Ulok. He is wrong but he is still my Iron Father. I won’t betray him further than I must. It has to be done from within by one of your kind.’

‘A Drake?’

‘A Techmarine. I have not the skill,’ admitted Gallikus. He took a knee, head bowed as he leaned upon his shield like a knight of old Terra. ‘Allow my brothers this final dignity, Forgefather. They have served the Throne well beyond their due.’

T’kell nodded, for he could do nothing else but accede to the Iron Hands legionary’s request, and Gallikus arose again.

The ship vox crackled overhead. It was the Apothecary, Saurian.

His words were brief, but fell heavy upon Gallikus as he listened in silence.

‘Iron-brother... he is back.’

Gallikus’ face was grim as he cut the vox-feed.

‘Stay here, Forgefather,’ he said, hefting his breacher shield, ‘and bring my brothers peace at last.’ He looked as if he were headed for the gallows, but T’kell now realised he faced a darker fate than even that. Now the Iron Father had returned, Gallikus would have to face him.

‘I need time to deactivate the machine,’ he told the Iron Hands legionary.

‘I shall give you every second my will can afford you.’

He saluted T’kell and donned his war-helm.

‘Immortals no more,’ he muttered softly, casting a final glance at the same cryo-casket before he left the chamber behind.

An infernal heart lay somewhere amidst this place; T’kell could feel the steady pulse of its machine anima and like a Thunder Warrior of old about to raze a temple to forbidden gods, he strode purposefully towards it.

Gallikus met Saurian on his way back from the launch bay.

‘Is it done?’ he asked.

The Salamanders legionary nodded. ‘Released via saviour pod. Every one of them.’ He was armed, a chainaxe and a hand flamer.

‘Are you going to war, drake-brother?’

‘Yes, iron-brother. Alongside you.’

‘Ulok won’t be alone. The Revenants will protect him.’

‘Yes, I expect they will.’

‘And we will likely die.’

‘Then at least I shall die alongside my brother.’

Gallikus nodded, and the two clasped forearms in the warrior’s way before breaking apart again.

‘I will meet him outside the embarkation deck conduit. It’s narrow. I can hold him there a while.’

Saurian donned his helm, a savage piece he seldom wore any more which had a draconic aspect. ‘It felt right once,’ he said, through the fanged respirator grille.

‘A purpose to cling to.’

‘It has run its course, brother. Now you and I must end it.’

‘To see my Legion again, if not whole, but surviving. I am glad of that.’

Gallikus gave no reply. He could claim no such closure. He hefted his shield, turned and headed for the embarkation deck conduit.

TWENTY-SEVEN

A final reckoning

Obek ran all the way from the *Chalice of Fire*'s teleportarium to the secure dock where he knew Zau'ull would be. Only a matter of two decks, it still felt like an age.

He found the Chaplain amidst smoke and still-burning bodies, slumped against the wall. A battle had been fought around the Armarium, a costly one. The dead lay strewn about, all of them Salamanders. Krask and his warriors waited at the entrance, their guard still up.

'Firefather...' uttered Obek.

As he rushed over to Zau'ull, Obek could discern no life signs from him and began to fear the worst. Blood caked the Chaplain's black armour and half of his face had been seared by the heat of the now dying flames.

Obek had seen Zandu, Varr and the last of Varr's squad on the way in, and knew they were all dead. He could not find their killer, though, the Silent Morikan.

Zau'ull's eyes opened a crack and Obek exhaled his relief.

'The Raven, is he here?' Obek had one hand on his sidearm, but Zau'ull shook his head.

It was only then that Obek noticed the drake-head stave still clutched in the Chaplain's grasp.

'Is that...?' he asked, crouching over the Chaplain to check his vitals.

'I am sorry... brother-captain,' said Zau'ull, his voice ragged and failing, 'but I found my faith again. I see Vulkan... not in the flames...' he reached up and

held the side of Obek's face, 'but in you.' His eyes, now flickering open and shut, went to Krask who stood solemnly nearby and then to Xen, who looked on stoically. 'In all of us.'

'Don't speak,' Obek told him. 'The Apothecary, he may yet help us.'

Struggling to breathe as his lungs collapsed, Zau'ull shook his head sadly and smiled.

'Our fate was never... to survive.'

His hand fell from Obek's face, and then he was still.

Head bowed, Obek reached up and shut the Chaplain's eyes. Such a cost, he could never have imagined how severe when they had all sworn their allegiance to the mission in the Igneous Vault back on Prometheus.

'Firebearer,' ventured Krask after a few moments of silence. His warriors stood behind him, respectfully observant. 'What now?'

Obek secured the drake-stave to his own armour; he would return the artefact to the Armarium later, but for now... 'T'kell is still aboard that ship. We damn well get him back.'

'The embarkation decks are in ruins, and I doubt the *Obstinate*'s teleportarium will receive us.'

Krask was right, but Obek had another method of incursion in mind. He raised the shipmaster on his vox.

'Master Reyne.'

'Aye, my lord,' came the voice of the old wayfarer across the feed. Reyne was of Nocturne and all his years in the Navy could not drum his thick tribal accent from him. 'What is your bidding?'

'Bring the *Chalice* in close to the *Obstinate*, within direct boarding action distance.'

Reyne cleared his throat, suddenly anxious. 'That close. Their weapons, they will tear us open, lord.'

Obek smiled grimly. 'Ulok won't fire on us. He still believes he has the upper hand and wants what's on this ship. Bring us close, just short of ramming them.'

Reyne gave a wary affirmative but went about his duty. In moments the boosted plasma engines of the *Chalice of Fire* could be felt thrumming through the lower decks.

'We'll cross the void in our power armour, through the tear in the hull,' Obek declared to the others.

No one gainsaid him.

Krask grinned ferally. 'Eye to eye,' he said.

‘As near as Reyne dares,’ Obek confirmed, and was heading from the secure dock, intent on the mission, when he found Xen in his path.

‘You are wounded, brother-captain. I can see it in the way you move... or don’t move.’

‘So are you, Vexillary.’

Xen sharply drew both swords. *Ignus* and *Drakos* were either side of Obek’s neck before he had a hand on his blade’s hilt.

‘Not as badly as you. Besides,’ he said, politely sheathing his swords, ‘someone must remain behind if this fails. If T’kell does not return, you are custodian of the artefacts.’ And he looked down reverently at the drake-headed stave, a sense of wonderment in his eyes. ‘We should not abandon our mission.’

‘And here I was believing you in search of glory again,’ Obek replied, wryly.

Xen smiled, ‘Who says I am not?’

‘I for one,’ said Obek, and laid a hand on his shoulder. ‘Bring back our Forgefather,’ he told him.

‘Vulkan lives,’ said Xen, as he, Krask and the Terminators moved out.

‘Vulkan lives,’ Obek replied as he watched them go.

The blast doors parted, emitting clouds of white gas and the flashing spectrum of the *Obstinate*’s embarkation deck’s warning lamps. Through them stepped Ulok, who looked incredulously at the Immortal standing fifty feet away at the end of the access conduit. The lumens were dimmed and the Iron Father’s bionic eye shone almost malevolently in the darkness.

Only when Ahrem Gallikus raised his power maul in salute did Ulok realise what was actually happening.

Ulok’s face fell, as stern and cold as the metal that had colonised his body.

‘Flesh is weak,’ he said, disappointed, and ordered the Revenants to attack.

The engine at the heart of the cryo-stasis vault was beyond byzantine. Constructed around a hexagonal core as large as a Contemptor, its cables and pipes extended throughout the hectare-sized chamber to feed every casket. Embedded deep and shrouded in cryogenic mist, it could not be seen from the threshold. Up close it took on a sinister aspect, like a metallic leviathan, its tentacles stretching off into the gloom.

The sheer ranks of frozen legionaries standing in rows was staggering. Though the mist from the cryo-freezing process obscured much, it was obvious to T’kell that there must be hundreds, possibly more. An army, linked by tubes and pipes, their faces locked behind panes of ice. It was cold, and it was metal throughout,

a laboratory and not a barracks. A keen mind, but one afflicted by hubris and driven by obsession had created this place. In its raising, T'kell saw everything his Martian masters had warned him about. He saw madness.

Vulkan had taught his sons many things: metal forging, self-sacrifice and nobility. He had wrenched himself from the very brink of self-annihilation. He had also espoused his theology of the Circle of Fire, and though the primarch was now gone, it was this belief that brought hope to many and which T'kell now saw had been thoughtlessly subverted by Iron Father Ulok.

'That which ends, ends, and so returns to the earth,' he intoned, using his plasma cutter to shear open the outer housing of the engine. It took a few minutes, for its carapace was thick, but once through T'kell found the inload ports where he would gain access to the leviathan's core.

'To be born again in the Circle of Fire,' he said, releasing his haptic mehadendrites. 'To be renewed.'

This was not renewal or rebirth; it was stagnation, a cruel and slow decay to oblivion. He could think of no worse fate.

Bracing himself, T'kell used his mehadendrites to interface with the machine. Lancing pain filled his body at the moment of connection, demonstrating how weak he still was. Ulok had prepared defences to his beloved, horrific creation. Paranoid as he obviously was, he had considered another Techmarine or even an adept of the Mechanicum might attempt to destroy the leviathan from within.

Ostensibly it was servos, circuits, processors, but what lay beyond those cold engineered components was something darker. As T'kell engaged with the machine, he encountered complex neuromorphic subroutines embedded within the leviathan's standard operating protocols, placed there to resist his efforts to incite a catastrophic shutdown. An almost abominable intelligence possessed the machine, intent on the foreign invader's expulsion and destruction.

A slabbed road stretched before him, a part of the technoscape, but as real as stone or metal underfoot. He heard his boots echo as he traversed what he knew to be the datastream. The sound resonated, but oddly, hollowly, betraying the fact it was not sound at all but merely code his brain had begun to datasift as one footstep followed another.

At the end of the road lay a gate, as tall as Olympus Mons and rendered in iridescent crystal. And beyond the gate, was the storm.

T'kell could feel it repelling him with its hate and anger. He had breached its cordon and it would kill him for this transgression. As he closed on the gate, T'kell realised he was no longer clad in power armour, but in an archaic suit of

tempered drake hide like a dragonknight of ages past. In his hand, he clutched a lance, seemingly plucked from the air that was not air.

Two columns held the gate in place, and though there was no wall, no barrier either side, T'kell knew he must pass through this portal to confront the machine at the eye of the storm. He broke into a run, his lance held aloft and pointed forwards in the manner of a throwing spear, but as he closed on the gate itself the columns began to turn.

On the sides that had faced directly away from T'kell were carved statues, on each a cyclops wrenched from the days of Terran myth. In a moment of terrifying synchronicity, both creatures opened their eye to behold the interloper.

With a bellow, they stepped forward, leaving the columns behind and shaking the ground with the sheer weight of their tread.

T'kell held firm, undaunted as he charged and felt the lance-tip pierce flesh...

The cyclops roared, its muscular flank impaled by three feet of steel. It bucked and thrashed in its agony, shaking T'kell violently, but he clung on to the haft of his weapon. The second creature tried to grasp him in its meaty hands but, still hanging on to the lance one-handed in mid-air, T'kell drew a sword out of the datastream, its blade blazing with light.

One stroke and the sword parted the cyclops' hand from its wrist. Dark ooze flowed from the stump with a sound like machine static. Shrinking, it sank to its knees and T'kell released his grip on the lance still transfixed in the first creature. As he fell, he gripped his sword two-handed and struck off the head of the diminutive cyclops.

As he turned, the first cyclops freed itself. It snapped the lance in two, and it disincorporated into fragments of shattered code. But T'kell didn't need it. He had the blade, and as the creature came for him, its eye alive with vengeance, the sword grew brighter still...

It burned the creature, blinding it before searing the skin from its bones, and soon all that remained was a wire frame that capitulated under the weight of its own broken logic.

The dust of the cyclops' banishment lingered for a few seconds before being swept away, consumed by the voracious datastream feeding the storm.

The gate yawned open as T'kell stood before it.

All that remained was the storm and as he closed upon the threshold, he felt the presence of the machine and saw a lumbering shadow only partially concealed by the tempest.

He stepped forwards and the storm took him.

He saw the beast, the many-tentacled leviathan, and from its chasmal maw it spat lightning...

Assailed by a barrage of power surges that sought to burn out his nervous system, T'kell held on. Amongst a screech of hostile scrapcode, he searched for the leviathan's cortex and found a determined and hostile defender, a hunter-killer in all but name.

He engaged it. The stench of his burning flesh was repellant, the pain almost unbearable but he held on. Even when his haptic implants fused to the inload ports, he held on.

And when it became too much, he roared.

'Vulkan!'

Smoke was rising from his armour. Heat had seared the joints, but he held on.

The storm beat against him and the lightning hammered his drake-hide armour until it was nothing but a sheath of blackened flesh. T'kell held the blade aloft, its light flickering against the darkness of the leviathan's encroaching tentacles as it sought to smother him.

He cried out, 'Vulkan!' but the word was emitted as a screech of code that fed the flame within the sword and saw it rekindled.

The light grew, as bright as a sun and burning. It earthed the lightning, and took the storm's power and fury for its own. The beast was close – it was all that T'kell could see. A single, glassy eye reared up before him and T'kell saw his fire-ravaged face reflected in it. It was abyssal, abominable, and now it must die.

He forged the blade in his hand into a screech of purifying code and as he roared his defiance at the blackness of the abyss, he thrust...

Gallikus backed up. He was bleeding. One of his retinal lenses had burst and a blood-shot eye stared out through the shattered aperture to regard his enemies.

Enemies... I once called them brothers.

Six of the Revenants were down. They needed to return to cryo-stasis. They needed the machine.

'They're getting slower...' said Gallikus, slurring his words.

Ulok did not answer. He watched from a short distance away, letting his deathless cohorts do the fighting.

Gallikus smiled bitterly as he raised his battered shield. Four more Revenants came at him.

Behind them, Ulok waited.

T'kell fell to his knees. Thin wisps of vapour trailed upwards from the armour

now fused to his stricken body where the heat had begun to melt and evaporate the layer of hoarfrost encasing him.

The leviathan was dead. He had slain it.

Managing to raise his head, T'kell looked upon the caskets and saw that it was done.

The cold, dead eyes staring blankly through rimes of rapidly diminishing frost showed no awareness of their fate, or gratitude at their release, at least not those that T'kell could see.

'That which ends, ends,' he said, his voice no louder than a croak, and would have fallen but for the arm around his chest.

'Brother Drake,' said Saurian. 'It seems my arrival is timely. We must get you off this ship.'

With effort, the Apothecary managed to steady T'kell so he would not fall and then told him to turn aside as he severed the mechadendrites linking the Techmarine to the machine. A last stab of agony flared and then dulled as T'kell was released.

'You have my gratitude...' he said, breathless.

'Don't thank me until you are off the ship. And to that end, I'll need to give you something so you can walk. The pain will only be momentary.'

Saurian took a vial from his narthecium kit and injected T'kell in the neck. As he was helped to his feet, T'kell found his pain greatly lessened and the fog of his injuries clearing.

'Stimulant,' Saurian explained. 'It will only last for a while. Come.'

He led the Techmarine from the silent cryo-chamber, not sparing so much as a glance at the entombed legionaries, and brought him to an access hatch that was barely large enough to accommodate his armoured bulk.

'I should let Gallikus know,' said T'kell.

'He'll know,' said Saurian, and gestured to the access hatch. 'That conduit will take you all the way down to the launch bays. A ship is already prepared for you. It was done at the same time I sent your brothers.'

T'kell nodded. 'They are your brothers too, Saurian.'

'No. I think not. The Legion died on Isstvan V. I saw it perish. I am a ghost, no different to the thawing bodies in that mausoleum we just left.'

'Then well met, brother,' T'kell replied. 'If we make it back to Nocturne, I will see your name is remembered.'

'I had a name once. I no longer carry it. I am content to be Saurian.'

'So be it.' T'kell and Saurian clasped forearms, before he entered the hatch and

left the enigmatic Apothecary behind.

The last of the Revenants fell. Gallikus wept with every blow, for it was with both grief and vindication that he ended their suffering.

His shield hung from his arm in pieces and he shrugged it off. His power maul had become little more than a bludgeon.

‘Come then, Iron Father,’ he beckoned, drawing his gladius and extending it wearily in Ulok’s direction, ‘and let my betrayal be done.’

Ulok regarded the defeated warrior and unslung his cog-toothed axe. An energy surge crackled cerulean along the blade’s edge.

‘You will make a worthy Revenant, Ahrem,’ he said coldly. ‘I have always thought so.’

‘Only if you take me alive, Iron Father.’

‘You will live,’ Ulok replied. ‘You will become your namesake and join the immortal ranks. You should feel honoured.’

A host of silent warriors stood in ranks behind him, and Gallikus knew Ulok would not order them to attack. The Iron Father only needed for Gallikus to be worn down, not dead, before he committed him to an existence of eternal servitude.

‘And if there is no casket for me,’ said Gallikus, his feet unsteady, ‘what then?’

Ulok’s eye narrowed, as he realised he had been deceived.

‘What have you done, brother?’

‘It’s not what *I* have done,’ Gallikus replied, before Ulok charged and struck him down.

T’kell emerged onto one of the *Obstinate*’s embarkation decks. Relatively small for such a large vessel, the deck had launch bays and maintenance pits for six gunships, all but one of which were empty. A reserve launch bay for use in extremis, he reasoned.

A lone vessel rested on its landing stanchions, facing one of the aft launch bays. The gate was closed but not sealed. A skeleton deck crew was in attendance, engaged in maintenance. Shrouded lumens gave off little light and T’kell kept to the shadows as he crossed the threshold, but the crewmen paid him no heed and he realised they were all servitors.

Saurian had been as good as his word, and despite his injuries T’kell began to move confidently towards his salvation.

Halfway to the waiting gunship the launch gate icon went from green to red. A door from an upper deck opened and a cohort of twenty Iron Hands legionaries

stepped out from a conveyer with bolters trained on the Techmarine.

T'kell stopped, and heard the crackle of the ship's vox emitting from somewhere in the vaults of the hangar.

A voice he did not recognise echoed mechanically.

'Forgemaster T'kell... They have orders to kill you if you attempt to escape,' it said. *'I am Iron Father Ulok and the Obstinate is my ship. Legionary Gallikus is dead. I assume it was he that asked you to sabotage the cryo-genesis chamber. I did not wish to kill him, but he left me no choice.'* The voice paused, as if debating the next words. *'I am honoured to have you aboard, but I will kill you too if you force my hand.'*

The Iron Hands legionaries advanced in lockstep, and T'kell knew by the way they moved that they were Ulok's creatures, just like those he had seen frozen and entombed.

'Am I to be your prisoner?' T'kell asked.

A moment of silence lapsed that seemed to stretch.

'Yes. You will assist me in repairing the machine you tried to destroy.'

'I cannot,' said T'kell. 'I will not.'

'You say that,' said Ulok, *'as if you think you have a choice.'*

The vox-feed cut off abruptly and T'kell was left alone facing the Iron Hands. They weren't here to kill him. They would have done so already. Ulok had lied about that. They were here to apprehend him. A cryo-chamber must have survived, kept somewhere else aboard the ship and known only to the Iron Father. It was the only reason Ulok would need him to repair the machine.

The vox crackled again, and for a moment T'kell thought Ulok had returned to gloat, but the feed emanated from his gorget.

'Forgefather...'

It was Ak'nun Xen. He was running. In the background, T'kell heard the sound of a blast door being released and the slow churn of its mechanism.

'Vexillary.'

Still T'kell did not move, still the Iron Hands legionaries advanced. They would be upon him soon.

'We are coming for you, we—'

'No.'

'T'kell we are about to—'

'No, brother. It's too late. Tell Obek to fire upon this ship. I have disengaged its shields but I don't know for how long.'

'We are at the launch bay now.'

‘It’s too late, Xen. Destroy the ship.’

A few moments passed. Xen would be raising Obek or conferring with Krask, if he yet lived. The Iron Hands legionaries reached him now and T’kell sank to his knees before them, head bowed in submission.

The urgency in Xen’s voice had faded when he replied, turned to resignation. ‘*Forgefather, I...*’

‘Vulkan lives, brother,’ said T’kell, severing the feed.

A gauntleted hand grasped his shoulder, and he closed his eyes.

He was dragged to his feet and marched from the embarkation deck into the conveyor. A few seconds into their ascent, the deck erupted in fire.

T’kell smiled as the flames consumed him, as the Iron Hands burned and the *Obstinate* broke apart.

The Eye of *Vulkan* had torn a mortal wound that without its shields the *Obstinate* was unable to survive.

Shipmaster Reyne, having drawn up alongside the gargantuan vessel, had no time to withdraw when the immense defence laser had fired. The explosion had gored the *Chalice of Fire* all across its port flank, overwhelming the void shields almost instantaneously and savaging the armour beneath with a storm of debris, but the ship was spared any further collateral damage.

It had near-crippled the vessel, which could only limp away from the site of the *Obstinate*’s destruction under failing reserve power. It had taken days, not hours to get away. They had survived only to be doomed themselves.

The Salamanders had returned to one of the *Chalice*’s forge halls. A solemn brotherhood had gathered there, surrounded by eddies of smoke and tendrils of flame.

T’kell was dead, so too Zau’ull, Zandu, Varr and many more amongst the Unscarred.

The wounded had been saved, those sent by Saurian in the saviour pods, but it was bitter compensation.

Obek stood at the head of the throng. All was darkness and flickering shadow in the obsidian chamber. Gor’og Krask and the Terminators kneeled closest, Xen alongside them, the banner clutched in his left hand. Phokan knelt in front of those Firedrakes in the rear rank.

Fewer than half of those who had begun the mission remained.

Obek had sealed the artefacts, including the one taken by Zau’ull, in the deepest and hottest vault of the ship. It seemed fitting to keep them close to the heart of

the forges.

He donned his war-helm and heard the last reports of Shipmaster Reyne as he counted down the seconds of power left in the engines. After that, they would drift with only the fathomless void before them.

‘It is ended,’ he told the Drakes, unscarred no more. ‘And we have found the final rest of our father’s legacy. It is here, with us.’

Though they kneeled, every Salamanders legionary met their captain’s gaze with fiery and stalwart determination. With their dying breaths they would protect the artefacts of Vulkan. They would hold the ship.

Obek looked to Xen, raising his sword. It gleamed in the firelight, polished to a mirror sheen.

‘What is the meaning of sacrifice?’ he asked.

‘To live when others died,’ Xen replied.

‘And what is our purpose?’

‘To be the wardens and protectors,’ answered the throng.

‘And who are we?’

‘Vulkan’s chosen,’ they said as one. ‘Custodians of his legacy.’

The vow had changed, Obek reflected, but their duty had not.

‘Vulkan’s chosen!’ he roared, and the hall shook to the echoes of impassioned affirmation.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Stasis

Obek woke, wiping away the void-frost on his retinal lenses.

He had no idea how long he had been out. His feet were still mag-locked to the floor of the relic hall, his bolter and blade to either thigh.

Disengaging the armour lock, he felt a sudden lightness as the zero gravity leavened his mass. Motes of void-matter floated in the air, shimmering like languid stars in the light of his suit lamps. Bodies floated too, frozen in their death throes.

All was still. His brothers were beside him. He tried to check the status of Zau'ull's casket but the ship's cogitators were offline. Life support, weapons, shields, engines – all had redlined. The navigation cogitator still functioned. Obek accessed it through his helm and brought up their location on his retinal lens.

UNKNOWN...

The data scrolled across his vision in an endless stream of red.

UNKNOWN...

UNKNOWN...

UNKNOWN...

UNKNOWN...

UNKNOWN...

UNKNOWN...

UNKNOWN...

UNKNOWN...

He blinked to shut down the feed.

His internal chrono told him he had been in stasis for over a year. Longer than the last time. His suit systems were almost depleted, despite their low power setting. Partial sus-an meditation for so long had left him groggy, but something had woken him.

The others were waking too, alerted by the same instinct. Obek watched the dull flare of their retinal lenses as their power armour reactivated.

Then he felt it. A dull scratching against the hull. Distant. It must be inside the outer armour but close enough that the resonance of it had been picked up by his auto-senses.

Something was inside, and trying to reach further into the ship, slowly worming its way towards the core.

Obek had his back to the door of a second chamber, an inner sanctum close to the cold forges of the ship.

He reached for his weapons, shattering the void-frost encasing his armour in a slow cascade of ice crystals. His voice was no louder than a croak, but the warning still carried weight.

‘More are coming.’

THE BROKEN CHALICE

The squad moved slowly through the silent ship, their armour sealed against the vacuum and the slow return of their rebreathers audible in their helms.

Brother-Sergeant Ko'tan had been dispatched when Adeptus Mechanicus Explorators had found the stricken vessel drifting amidst a debris field of other broken starships. A degrading gravity well exerted by one of the moons on the Fringe, too weak to draw the ships down but strong enough to hold them in state for a while, had captured it, and upon discovering the vessel's provenance, the magos in charge of the mission had immediately sent a message to Prometheus.

Ko'tan and his brothers had arrived a few weeks later, translating out of warp at the nearest Mandeville point and reaching the debris field a few days after that.

'Evidence of prior incursion,' Voskar's voice hissed with static as it came across the feed.

A beacon signature, faint but readable was emanating from somewhere deep within the ship.

'I have desiccated corpses here,' answered Ko'tan as he entered a barrack hall, the tread of his Terminator armour strangely light in the zero-gravity conditions as he briefly released the mag-lock securing him to the deck.

'Origin?'

'Xenos. Eldar and greenskin.'

'Genestealer?'

'Negative.'

'Be wary, brother. This is their habitat.'

Ko'tan sent an affirmative and moved on.

He passed through another corridor, partly laid open to the void. Parts of the ship were in dire need of repair but the superstructure was intact. All its systems were dead, and looked to have failed several years ago, but any accurate reading on that was impossible.

One of his squad from further back in the ship requested an interrogative. As he passed through the corridor and into a relic hall, Ko'tan panned his storm bolter across the darkness and blink-clicked an affirmative.

'Metallurgy samples secured, brother-sergeant.'

Ko'tan paused in front of a great glyph of a drake that was staring down at him from the end of a vast hall. He knew the ship was old, but Ubon would know more.

'Your findings, Techmarine?'

'Cursory analysis puts the ship at almost ten thousand years old,' Ubon replied.

Ko'tan's breath caught for a moment, and he dared to hope. It was ornate, and unlike any vessel he had ever seen – and not on account of its age.

Something up ahead got his attention. Another door, immense and inscribed with the same drake sigil. It towered above Ko'tan, and he was still fifty feet away from it. They were deep in the bowels of the vessel now, near the extinct forges revealed in the initial scan before incursion.

A figure stood before the door.

As he drew closer, almost hypnotised by each fresh discovery, Ko'tan saw the door had been breached.

'Squad Ko'tan converge on vanguard.'

More corpses littered the hall, a great many congregating outside the door in spite of the zero gravity. They floated in a strange swarm, a host of alien dead, but it wasn't this which had drawn Ko'tan's eye. Through the frozen bodies, their armour and void-suits torn open and gouged, he saw fireborn.

Their armour was old, far older than any he had ever seen. Even the captain's artificer armour only dated back to the Arising. These suits were archaic.

They would need to reach the bridge and access the data-log to be certain, but as he gazed upon his long-dead brothers from another era, frozen solid in their armour, their defence having failed only when they had, he began to believe.

Ko'tan opened up the vox again.

'Lord Vulkan...' he intoned.

'Speak.'

Dir'san's icon put him in close proximity to the bridge.

‘I have found them, Forgefather.’

‘*Hold position. I am coming to you.*’

‘The second vault?’

‘*Empty.*’

‘This is the ship, Vulkan Dir’san,’ said Ko’tan. ‘It must be.’

‘Yes,’ said the Forgefather. ‘*The Chalice of Fire and Eye of Vulkan are here. We have but seven more to find.*’

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nick Kyme is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Deathfire* and *Vulkan Lives*, the novellas *Promethean Sun* and *Scorched Earth*, and the audio drama *Censure*. His novella *Feat of Iron* was a *New York Times* bestseller in the Horus Heresy collection, *The Primarchs*. Nick is well known for his popular Salamanders novels, including *Rebirth*, the Space Marine Battles novel *Damnus*, and numerous short stories. He has also written fiction set in the world of Warhammer, most notably the Time of Legends novel *The Great Betrayal*. He lives and works in Nottingham, and has a rabbit.

An extract from [*Rebirth*](#).



Three contrails from a trio of gunships scored through the dark sky over Canticus.

The city was burning. Ash and smoke from the fires had brought on premature night. War had transformed this place. In the grubby brown half-light, once regal statuary writhed in imagined torment, proud temples hung open like cracked corpses and the gilded streets turned black with spilled blood. It was, in every respect, a haunted landscape. Death stalked the streets, death and the nightmares that brought death with them – a legion in black, a legacy most foul and one that still yearned for some scrap of its former power and prestige.

The Thunderhawks wove through the chaos, banking and turning to keep the buildings between them and the torrent of flak fire spitting from the gun emplacements entrenched somewhere below. They were snub-nosed, boxy-looking vessels, their Salamanders green begrimed by the war. And they were not alone. The polluted sky over Canticus was choked by more than smoke alone – a battle equal in ferocity to that being fought on the ground was being contested in the air. Stormtalon interceptors engaged in sporadic dogfights with the draconic, winged daemon-engines of the Archenemy, as they tried to shepherd the larger landers. The enemy vessels were more like beasts of ancient myth, steel and dark anima combined. Their name ‘Heldrake’ was well earned.

The Thunderhawks lost their last outrider when the Stormtalon was set upon from above, a daemon-engine seizing the interceptor in its claws and bearing it down into smoke and oblivion below.

Boosting their engines, the gunships increased speed, risking a more direct approach through the latticing flak fire to put some distance between them and the Heldrake. Wing-mounted bolters flaring, they strafed a landing zone ahead, committing to a rapid deployment dive.

From the roof of an old preceptory, an armour-clad warrior watched the gunships make their cargo drops into the heart of one of the city’s war zones.

Seven identical drops had taken place in the last hour. More would follow. Each transporter went in hot. The first carried a single war machine – a hulking Redeemer-class Land Raider, named for devastating heavy flamers – for only in fire could true repentance be found. The others had two battle tanks apiece, Predators. Ubiquitous amongst the Adeptus Astartes' armoury, these two were the less common Annihilators, armed with lascannons. In short, they were tank-killers.

The tracks of the five vehicles were already rolling at combat speed before touching down, weapon-targeting systems active and tracking movement. They hit the ground running with no break between landing and combat, before the Thunderhawks pulled away sharply, banking around with throaty pulses from their engines and disappearing intermittently behind great plumes of smoke.

Of the Heldrake, there was no sign. Perhaps it had been destroyed in the crash, or perhaps it had simply found other prey.

Drakgaard's focus was elsewhere, on the tanks and their mission. It had been a sacrifice to redeploy the armour. They would pay for that, and lose some of the bitter ground they had gained with blood and sweat. Canticus, even the world of Heletine itself, was demanding like that. She was a warren, a dark labyrinth. Little was taken for granted in such theatres of war, save for the vastness of the death toll.

Despite the massive destruction already wreaked against it, a proud and pious city stretched out in front of Drakgaard. Temples stood silhouetted against the gloom, and beneath their columnar and statued glory lurked a sprawl of streets and avenues. If the monolithic temples and shrineholds were the flesh, then the streets were its veins and arteries. Though those arteries were shedding freely and spilling lagoons of blood, there was still artistry to the city's claustrophobic design.

Possessed of a grim mien, the brother-captain seldom found much to enjoy in beauty. Some in the Chapter had whispered an iron hand would suit him better than a drake-scale mantle, but Drakgaard was Salamander from skin through to marrow. Yet, in spite of his quiet detractors, Drakgaard did wonder at what Canticus would have looked like before war had engulfed it.

With the fires that had broken out, very little remained of the city's geography that wasn't contested. Much of it was now in ruins, partly from brutal urban engagements and partly from the preliminary bombardment that had lasted four days and yielded little in the way of tactical traction for the allied Imperial commander.

Drakgaard looked upon his works from his vantage on the roof and saw only a long war of attrition ahead.

He had committed almost all of their strength to the taking of Canticus and the driving out of an entrenched enemy. Sixth Company's entire complement as well as assault elements from Fourth made up the Salamanders infantry and Sergeant Zantho had assembled a sizeable division of battle tanks to neutralise the heretics' heavy armour. Yet despite all of this formidable strength, the war was still a bitter grind.

It suited Drakgaard, it suited the Chapter. Meet them eye to eye and burn them out of their holes. The Salamanders had waged this way of war for centuries. None were as tenacious or as committed as the sons of Vulkan. He had been at Badab and Armageddon, Drakgaard knew the full meaning of 'attrition' – his body bore the scars in testament to the fact.

Were he able, Drakgaard would have smiled at the thought of past glories but his face was drawn up into a permanent snarl because of old injuries. He had several, and wore them proudly, more proudly than the many honours he had received in a long and distinguished career. A warrior was measured by his scars not his medals, or so the captain of Sixth believed. It was a trite belief, but one he clung to when the ache of old wounds became pronounced. Much like this day.

A three-dimensional representation of Canticus projected from a hololithic device revolved in front of Drakgaard. The transmission was poor, which made the image grainy and prone to breaks in resolution, but the story it told was clear.

Five major war zones across the world of Heletine, all being fought with fang and claw. To the equatorial south a predominantly Cadian force fought a guerrilla war for dominance of the Centari Mountains. Drakgaard had lent the Astra Militarum forces several squadrons of Stormtalons to lighten their war burden. Judging by the skies over Canticus, he might need to recall them soon. In the east, at Veloth, Sergeant V'reth of Third Squad held the fringe of the barren desert region and its few remote temples, supported by some minor Cadian armour and Sentinel squadrons. The city of Solist was all but destroyed, and only a token force skirmished over its remains now. Escadan was firmly in Imperial control and served as a muster point for the other major cities. An industrial region in the main, the heretics had paid it no mind, presumably deeming it of little tactical significance.

The rest had come to Canticus. It was here, Drakgaard was convinced, that the deadlock would finally break. He had but to find a way. He accessed a

dispositional feed from his battle-helm prompting force organisational data to scroll down his left retinal lens.

The Cadian 81st were almost down to bare bones after being first responders to the crisis and bearing the brunt of the heretics' wrath and martial strength. The local defence forces were all but depleted or had defected. Drakgaard had witnessed sixteen separate firing squads that morning as the dogmatic Cadians sought to excise further traitors from the allied ranks. A thankless task, but one that fortunately did not burden the brother-captain.

The Salamanders held firm. They did so with honour, and according to the Promethean Creed. As commanding officer, it was Drakgaard's opportunity to expunge the stain on the Chapter's glory brought about by the troubled Third. Agatone had not taken kindly to his warriors being taken off the frontline. It had been five years since Nocturne, five years since a Lexicanium named Hazon Dak'ir had nearly destroyed them all. After the deaths of two captains and a verified record of renegade defections coming from within the ranks of the company, Drakgaard was not surprised when Chapter Master Tu'Shan had demanded a period of investigation and spiritual restoration.

It was the fire-born way, and now Drakgaard's star was in the ascendancy. He resolved to conduct himself with honour, and bring glory back to the Salamanders. First, he had to win the war on Heletine.

His thoughts were disturbed by the sound of heavy boots tramping up the stairwell behind him.

'Chaplain,' said Drakgaard, recognising his visitor without needing to see him.

Elysius acknowledged the greeting with a nod. The black-armoured Chaplain stood a little taller than the captain, but not as wide, though the presence of a power fist served to bulk out his frame. Unlike Drakgaard, he wasn't wearing his helmet and had it mag-locked to his belt instead. His head was cleanly shorn, all the way down to the scalp. It shone like a smooth nub of onyx.

'I can't recall the last time I saw your face, brother-captain.'

Drakgaard didn't even spare Elysius a sideways glance. 'We are at war. Such things as helms are necessary when bad men are trying to kill you.'

'You know what I mean. Much is revealed by the face, the eyes in particular.'

'You of all of us should know something of the desire to hide one's face.'

'I did it out of shame and respect,' Elysius replied. 'What's your excuse?'

'Very well...'

With a hiss of escaping pressure, Drakgaard unlocked his helm from his gorget and lifted it off. Then he faced the Chaplain. He was a mess of scars and exposed

muscle, only partially healed. In his left cheek, his molars were visible through the sizeable gouge in his skin.

‘What do you see?’ Drakgaard asked.

Elysius’s expression softened marginally.

‘Pain, a legacy of it.’

Drakgaard snorted, unimpressed with Elysius’s attempts at camaraderie. He returned his helmet to its proper place.

‘Is that all? By your sermonising tone I was expecting you to reveal some revelation of my character.’

‘I need only hear your voice for that.’

Drakgaard didn’t answer.

Since they had been talking, vox reports had been feeding in to Drakgaard’s comm from the various battlefronts. None were directed at him personally, he just liked to keep abreast of developments. What he was hearing far from satisfied the captain. Despite their difficult relationship, he allowed himself to vent in front of the Chaplain.

‘They are a horde, Elysius,’ said Drakgaard, gesturing to the amorphous enemy below. There was little to see, even from the roof. The cultists and their dark masters had become little more than a homogenous mass. Now day was finally turning to night, vision was further impaired. Though, with all the smoke, the transition was difficult to appreciate. ‘We should have broken them by now, and restored this world to the grace of the Throne.’

‘Quite the pious sentiment, brother.’

‘I am not without faith,’ Drakgaard quickly replied, as if his pride had been wounded.

‘Indeed, I apologise. Dug in, with knowledge of the terrain... They are more than just a horde, brother. Black Legion is a formidable enemy. They were like us once.’

‘No longer,’ Drakgaard scowled, unhappy with the direction the conversation was taking. ‘And I have seen precious few actual Renegade Space Marines amongst the heretics to warrant considering them our main enemy here.’

‘Rest assured, they are here and have been brutalising Cadians and turning what’s left of the Heletine militia against us.’

‘I am far from assured.’ Drakgaard folded his arms. ‘How easily some can fall to ruin...’

A strained silence fell between them that lasted a few seconds before Elysius replied.

‘Have you set yourself in judgement too? Did your eyes see more than my own during Dak’ir’s trial?’

‘I have great respect for you, Elysius. Your record is beyond reproach but Third Company was ill-fated ever since the day it lost Ko’tan Kadai. Some believe that curse spread to all associated with it.’ Drakgaard turned, his helmet’s faceplate ever-snarling as if echoing his mood. ‘I am no gifted dissembler—’

‘Nor am I, brother. What are you insinuating?’

Drakgaard raised a placatory hand. ‘Nothing. I merely speak and see plainly. There was something cankerous at the heart of the Third, and you were closer to it than most. Perhaps Agatone can reforge what has been broken, perhaps not...’

‘And if not, then who? You, Ur’zan Drakgaard?’

Whatever Drakgaard felt at Elysius’s intentional snipe was left unsaid as the low thrum of thrusters interrupted them.

Their attention was drawn skyward to another vessel. Not a gunship this time, but a lander.

Elysius narrowed his eyes.

‘You recognise that vessel,’ said Drakgaard.

‘I do. I’ve fought alongside their kind before. Although not this particular order.’

Like the Chaplain’s armour, the ship was also black but that was where any affiliation ended. Through occluding smoke, the icon of a chalice became visible. The stylised cup dominated the underside of the lander and was depicted holding a stark white flame like a brazier.

‘What was your appraisal?’

Stabiliser jets flared as the main engines died off and all forward momentum slackened to nothing. Eddies of dust and swirling smoke spun away as if retreating from the vessel as it hovered into a slow descent. Below, Imperial engineers and labourers scattered as a Salamanders command squad approached the landing zone with weapons at ease but ready.

‘You have not fought with the Adepta Sororitas before, then, brother-captain?’ asked Elysius.

‘You mean beside.’

Elysius looked confused.

‘Beside, not with.’

‘I know what I meant.’

Drakgaard shook his head.

‘They are good fighters,’ Elysius continued. ‘Not Adeptus Astartes, but

resolute, determined.’

‘That all?’

As the ship emerged through the smoke, so did several others, all armoured in black with the sigil of a chalice on their flanks and underside. Some were smaller with the aspect and armament of gunships.

‘No. They’re fanatics. Only their brand of fanaticism is sanctioned.’

‘Brand? Is that supposed to be humorous, Brother-Chaplain?’

The ships touched down on the landing field, a host of ground crew hustling back and forth in the resultant dust storm kicked up by a host of descent thrusters. Whilst the ground crews coughed behind their sleeves, trying to keep the grit from their eyes and waving to their comrades in an attempt to exert some order on the unexpected arrivals, Drakgaard’s warriors stood and watched. To the practised military eye, they had formed a defensive perimeter.

‘Believe me, brother, there is nothing amusing about the Order of the Ebon Chalice,’ Elysus concluded.

Then they descended the stairs from the preceptory, and went to meet the Sisters of Battle. Paste your extract text here. (Do not delete the chapter drop above)

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