

# NOVELLA SERIES 1

THE HORUS HERESY®

*David Annandale*

## SPEAR OF ULTRAMAR



*A prequel to the Siege of Terra*

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*David Annandale*  
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ULTRAMAR**



*A prequel to the Siege of Terra*

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**Book 1 – HORUS RISING**

**Book 2 – FALSE GODS**

**Book 3 – GALAXY IN FLAMES**

**Book 4 – THE FLIGHT OF THE EISENSTEIN**

**Book 5 – FULGRIM**

**Book 6 – DESCENT OF ANGELS**

**Book 7 – LEGION**

**Book 8 – BATTLE FOR THE ABYSS**

**Book 9 – MECHANICUM**

**Book 10 – TALES OF HERESY**

**Book 11 – FALLEN ANGELS**

**Book 12 – A THOUSAND SONS**

**Book 13 – NEMESIS**

**Book 14 – THE FIRST HERETIC**

**Book 15 – PROSPERO BURNS**

**Book 16 – AGE OF DARKNESS**

**Book 17 – THE OUTCAST DEAD**

**Book 18 – DELIVERANCE LOST**

**Book 19 – KNOW NO FEAR**

**Book 20 – THE PRIMARCHS**

**Book 21 – FEAR TO TREAD**

**Book 22 – SHADOWS OF TREACHERY**

**Book 23 – ANGEL EXTERMINATUS**

**Book 24 – BETRAYER**

**Book 25 – MARK OF CALTH**

**Book 26 – VULKAN LIVES**

**Book 27 – THE UNREMEMBERED EMPIRE**

**Book 28 – SCARS**

**Book 29 – VENGEFUL SPIRIT**

**Book 30 – THE DAMNATION OF PYTHOS**

**Book 31 – LEGACIES OF BETRAYAL**

**Book 32 – DEATHFIRE**

**Book 33 – WAR WITHOUT END**

**Book 34 – PHAROS**

**Book 35 – EYE OF TERRA**

**Book 36 – THE PATH OF HEAVEN**

**Book 37 – THE SILENT WAR**

**Book 38 – ANGELS OF CALIBAN**

**Book 39 – PRAETORIAN OF DORN**

**Book 40 – CORAX**

**Book 41 – THE MASTER OF MANKIND**

**Book 42 – GARRO**

**Book 43 – SHATTERED LEGIONS**

**Book 44 – THE CRIMSON KING**

**Book 45 – TALLARN**

**Book 46 – RUINSTORM**

**Book 47 – OLD EARTH**

**Book 48 – THE BURDEN OF LOYALTY**

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# CONTENTS

Cover  
Backlist  
Title Page  
The Horus Heresy  
Dramatis Personae  
Prologue  
One  
Two  
Three  
Four  
Five  
Six  
Epilogue  
About the Author  
An Extract from 'Dreadwing'  
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*David Annandale*

SPEAR OF  
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## **THE HORUS HERESY**

*It is a time of legend.*

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## ~ DRAMATIS PERSONAE ~

### *Ultramarines*

ROBOUTE GUILLIMAN, Primarch

TITUS PRAYTO, Librarian

DRAKUS GOROD, Commander, Invictarus Suzerain Bodyguard

IASUS, Chapter Master of the 22nd

HIERAX, Captain of the Second Destroyers

ANTALCIDAS, Dreadnought, Second Destroyers

KLETOS, Legionary, Second Destroyers

APHOVOS, Librarian, Second Destroyers

GORTHIA, Sergeant, Third Squad, Second Destroyers

LANATUS, Pilot, Second Destroyers

LUCRETIOUS CORVO, Captain, 90th Company, Ninth Chapter

ANCEVAN, Sergeant, 90th Company, Ninth Chapter

TULIAN AQUILA, Captain, 77th Company, Seventh Chapter

VASCAS, Sergeant

MAESA, Navigator, *Ultimus Mundi*

BETHRA KALLAN, Auspex officer, *Ultimus Mundi*

TAIUS NETERTIAN, Shipmaster, *Ultimus Mundi*

### *Iron Warriors*

KHROSSUS, Warsmith, 134th Grand Company

DARHUG, Captain

VÛRTAQ, Captain

NAVGHAR, Sergeant

SAVARRAN, Legionary

*Word Bearers*

KER VANTHAX, High Chaplain

*Mechanicum*

RISSIN, Magos Dominus

# PROLOGUE

## Contingency

The Throneworld waits for the sky to fall. The swarming millions in the hab slums beneath the manufactoria await the impact, and above them, the forges operate at a fever pitch of desperate war production. On the ramparts of fortifications tall as mountain chains, armoured giants march among the massed regiments of mortal soldiers, and all their thoughts and all their guns are aimed skywards. In the high towers, and in the rockcrete canyons of the Imperial Palace, the sentinels of humanity wait for the coming of the Traitors.

The preparations have been made. The fortifications are strong. The architects of the defence of Terra have drawn their plans and issued their commands. There are no further measures to be taken.

*Except...*

‘If you know the truth of your walls,’ Rogal Dorn once said, ‘then there can be reversals in a siege, but there cannot truly be surprises.’

The words haunt him now. He has acted in accordance with this principle. He has done everything in his power to excise any possibility of surprise. There have already been too many surprises in this war, and the greatest has been the war itself.

The Grand Borealis Strategium is an enormous, domed chamber inside the massive, forbidding block of the Bhab Bastion. It is laid out in concentric rings descending from the central platform. Each ring is dedicated to another layer of defence. Pict screens and tacticarium tables line each circumference. Robed serfs

angle the screens to follow Dorn's movements, so they face him wherever he is in the strategium. From the centre, he can see, in summary form, the entirety of Terra's defences. Hololithic displays of the quadrants of the Imperial Palace rotate for his inspection. The chamber is silent except for the occasional burst of vox traffic, providing updates of the current dispositions.

There are no windows in the strategium. The walls of the dome are maps of the local Terran space, and hololithic projectors display the orbital defences in real time.

Dorn stands with Malcador on the central platform. He has, for all practical purposes, the authority of a god in this space. Any change he commands in this chamber will be reflected almost immediately in the world outside its walls. He has surveyed, near and far, every detail of the defences for several hours now, and he has made no changes. He sees no improvements to be made on his work.

Yet he keeps looking.

'You are not satisfied,' Malcador says, reading Dorn's expression.

'Are you?'

The gaunt figure of the Sigillite, robed in shadow, tapped a pale finger against his staff of office. 'I cannot conceive of any satisfaction until after this war is finished. If then. But what is it that troubles you, Rogal?'

'What always has. There are too many variables, too many unknowns. And what we do know...' Dorn grimaces. 'I would change the odds, if I could, but they are what they are.'

'We need Guilliman to change them,' says Malcador.

Dorn nods. 'I know the spear has been thrown from Ultramar. It could pin Horus against our shields. But I don't know how fast the spear is coming, or when it might strike, or if there will still be shields when it arrives. And yet every calculus of victory depends on that arrival.' He gazes at rows of displays, envisaging each position of strength, and what it would take to overcome them.

*Nothing is indestructible, he thinks. Anyone who believes otherwise is already halfway to being defeated.*

'Is there any news?' he asks Malcador.

'Fragments from the astropathic choirs,' says the Sigillite. 'Some of them suggestive, none of them definitive. Guilliman advances from the galactic south, but how fast, or how near he might be, we know no more than we did yesterday.'

Dorn turns to the taticarium table on the platform. Dark red runes, representing the enemy fleets, close in on the hololith of Terra. The monstrous fist that is Horus' combined fleets is triggering a psychic displacement wave so vast that it

has proven fatal to the weaker astropaths. What is coming is so big, it cannot hide. Dorn can anticipate the arrival of the enemy. What he cannot do is factor in, or exclude, reinforcements.

‘It would almost be preferable to know Guilliman was too far,’ says Dorn. ‘If we knew that Horus would have a free hand for any length of time, then we could set aside any unrealistic, damaging hope.’

‘Your estimations are that bleak, then,’ says Malcador.

‘Without Guilliman? What do you think?’

‘I think the same,’ Malcador admits.

Dorn walks slowly around the edge of the platform, taking in the expanse of the strategium, looking again at the totality of his work. ‘I know our strengths. I know many of the enemy’s. I know enough that I cannot calculate the outcome. If Guilliman arrives, the balance shifts. If he does not...’

Malcador nods, but says nothing.

Dorn listens to the thickening silence. He can almost hear the cracks of the fault lines opening in the heavens as the sky prepares to fall. He wills his brother to find greater speed. He wills the Avenging Son to descend with fire upon the betrayers of their father.

In spite of how much he knows, Dorn begins to succumb to the lure of hope.

It feels like more than a temptation. As the shattering of the sky approaches, it feels like a necessity.

# ONE

## **Spear and Hammer**

The frame of the sandglass is wrought iron, and unadorned. It holds the crystal bulbs in a stern grip, as unyielding and blank to entreaty as time. It once belonged to Guilliman's adoptive father, Konor. It has been in his private senate chambers in Macragge Civitas, and by chance and strength, it has survived the blows and tumults of war. The crystal is scarred, the iron scorched with burns, but the sandglass has travelled from Macragge to the battleship *Ultimus Mundi*. It was ancient when it belonged to Konor. It is too imprecise for practical use, but as a personal goad it serves well. Over a foot high, it stands on a corner of Guilliman's desk. He began to use it shortly after the engagement with the World Eaters in the Diavanos system. It is not the approximate hour that the sandglass marks that is important to him. It is the sight of the falling grains, and the slipping away of time they represent.

Guilliman turned the sandglass over for the first time and let the sands fall when he saw the signs that the nature of his role in the war had changed. Horus had hurled a gauntlet to keep Sanguinius and the Blood Angels from reaching Terra. Guilliman countered by forcing the larger portions of the enemy forces to deal with him and his larger fleet, opening the way for Sanguinius.

Recently, the enemy's tactics have altered. And now, what the Ultramarines have found, or more particularly have *not* found since arriving in the Apamea system, is confirmation that the war has entered another phase.

Titus Prayto and Drakus Gorod enter Guilliman's study. The Librarian of the

Ultramarines and the commander of the Invictarus Suzerain Bodyguard both have expressions suggesting a cautious, guarded, puzzled optimism. Prayto has the features proper to a warrior-scholar, sharp and thoughtful, his gaze always observing, and guarded against easy conclusions. Gorod, in contrast, is massive even by the standards of Legiones Astartes, his hulking shape belying his nobility and intelligence.

‘It is as the initial scans suggested,’ Prayto says. ‘The enemy has abandoned Apamea.’

Guilliman nods. On a monumental, circular, oaken table in the centre of the study is a vellum map of the galactic south. On it, Guilliman has laid obsidian icons representing the Ultramarines fleet and the traitor forces. The positions are speculative. He moves them around a lot. He takes into account what little concrete information has come his way, but the map is a vast theoretical. He uses it to play out scenarios, to pace through one narrative after another of the progress of the war, to find the most likely, and use that to guide his own actions. He has left an enemy icon over Apamea. Now he removes it and holds it, pensively working through where he should place it next.

‘Where are they?’ Gorod asks. ‘This system is a great prize to give up without a fight.’ Apamea has two forge worlds. It is still far enough from Terra that its position is not strategic, but if Guilliman can use it to resupply his forces, so can Horus. What Horus cannot do, and Guilliman will, is gather more willing, loyal armies to bolster his strength further. Even if blocking the Blood Angels is no longer a priority, Apamea is worth holding under most military considerations. Only a very select set of circumstances would dictate abandoning it.

‘There is no sign of a conflict?’ Guilliman asks.

‘Very little,’ says Gorod. ‘Some signs of conquest, yes, when the traitors took the system. But nothing recent.’

‘They pulled out,’ Prayto says. ‘They were not driven out.’

‘So where did they go?’ Gorod wonders.

‘Here,’ says Guilliman. He places the icon next to the largest mass of enemy fleets, in the broad vicinity of Terra. There is no doubt about the pattern he is seeing now. The Ultramarines have encountered at most token garrisons in the last few systems. And now nothing. ‘Horus is feeling pressed,’ says Guilliman. ‘If he is abandoning what he has held, then his goal is more urgent, and more critical, than stopping Sanguinius.’

‘We can theorise the Blood Angels have reached Terra, then,’ says Prayto.

‘I believe so. There are two things that would force his hand. That is one of

them. The other is the pressure we are exerting. Theoretical – the Blood Angels are on Terra, and Horus feels he must lay siege to, and break, Terra before our arrival, or he will lose what advantage he has. And there is Beta-Garmon.’ He points to the system on the map. ‘It is the gateway to Terra. We are reaching the point in this war where speculation will vanish. We will know what Horus must do, and he will know the same of us. And in the end, this is the essential truth. If he is to have a chance of taking Terra, it must be soon.’

‘This is if he means to conquer the Throneworld,’ says Gorod. ‘And not simply destroy it.’

‘He won’t,’ Guilliman says. ‘I thought I knew my brother, and I was wrong, on many levels. But I can still recognise Horus, even through the atrocities he has committed. And I recognise his approach to war. Destroying Terra will not satisfy him. He will not be satisfied unless he feels he has defeated our father. He will not rest until he has proven his superiority. That need is a flaw. It buys us time.’

‘Enough time?’ Prayto asks.

Guilliman glances at the grains draining into the bottom bulb of the sandglass. ‘That is our duty now. To ensure the time we have is enough.’

‘Guilliman will come to Carchera,’ Warsmith Khrossus says. ‘That is not in question.’

‘His arrival is not the question that concerns me,’ says Vûrtaq.

‘I don’t think there are any questions left at all,’ Darhug says.

Khrossus is silent for a moment, regarding his captains. They are both right, he thinks. And he is sure they both know it.

Like him, the captains’ faces are scarred with the decades of battle. Lank, black hair hangs over Darhug’s heavy brow. His eyes, sunken and shadowed, are bitter coal; Darhug buried his last ideas of hope long ago. The fire in his gaze is the smouldering, eternal burn of an underground seam.

The flames in Vûrtaq’s eyes are brighter, more feverish. His scars stand out an angry red against his pale skin, and his jaw works convulsively when he isn’t speaking, as if he were grinding hate between his teeth. He is more reckless than Darhug, though Khrossus has never had cause to fault his discipline when it comes to obeying orders and following the battle plan. Strategically, if Darhug is steady as an artillery barrage, Vûrtaq is the torpedo. Khrossus needs their complementary strengths for the campaign he is mounting.

Khrossus’ flesh is a grey of scabbed wounds and the angry pink of burn scars.

He has been battered and burnished by war into an ingot of human iron. He knows what he looks like, and what he looks like is war, savage and ugly. This is as it should be. He bears the face of truth, and he is proud to do so.

The three Iron Warriors are standing at the exit of the pass leading to the industrial hive of Siderius. The rockcrete of the road is pitted and uneven, broken up by the weight of the countless transports that carried the output of Siderius to the outlying cities. The mountains press close around the forge city. Peaks are high and jagged, and cliff faces sheer granite, as if hacked by a god's cleaver. Siderius is in a narrow bowl of a valley, its existence due to the immense riches of the region's ore deposits, and the insatiable need to extract them.

In the depths of the valley the air is still, but above the mountains the winds blow with perpetual hurricane violence. Siderius has no space port. There is not enough level space to accommodate one, and the winds are a threat to any aircraft that might try to take off from the city.

The structures of the hive are cramped, built one on top of the other until the city resembles a frozen geyser of metal. The air in its valley is black and almost thick enough to drink. The smoke from thousands of chimneys wreathes Siderius in the ghosts of industry, the thick shroud streaked by the flames of burn-off and the glow of forges.

Khrossus recognised Siderius' potential value as a fortress the moment he laid eyes on it, when the Iron Warriors took the Carchera system. Using the hive as a central keep, it would be possible to hold Carchera against a superior force for some time. Only it isn't merely a superior force that is heading for the system. And holding the planet is not the primary mission.

*You will block him, Perturabo told Khrossus. You will block Guilliman and you will bloody him, for as long as possible.*

'If Horus wants the Ultramarines stopped,' says Darhug, 'it will take more than us to do it.'

'He doesn't need them stopped,' says Khrossus. 'He wants Terra, and to get Terra, he needs Guilliman slowed and damaged. So we make his fleet bleed and we kill his momentum.'

'For how long?' asks Vûrtaq.

'Until the last man standing.'

'How will we know that will be enough?' asks Darhug.

'We will make it be enough.'

Darhug snorts. 'I'm sure Horus will remember us in fine speeches once he is Emperor.'

‘When have we ever been thanked?’ says Khrossus.

‘I do wonder,’ Darhug says, ‘what we gained in trading one master for another.’

‘Meaning,’ says Khrossus. ‘We gained meaning.’ He thinks of the years of the Great Crusade, of the grinding marches and endless, debilitating sieges. The Iron Warriors did not ask for glory. They did not expect it, and they did not care for it. Khrossus mistrusts any legionary who celebrates battle. Any soldier who exults in war does not truly understand what it means. What Khrossus does ask for is purpose. He asks that his suffering and that of his brothers has a point. There was no purpose in serving the Emperor. Khrossus came to realise that. The Great Crusade had been constructed around a facade of purpose, when the reality was simply the destruction of one set of cultures in order to replace them with another. Khrossus has long since failed to see how one lie is better than another.

*Iron within, iron without.* That is the only truth he acknowledges, and it is the one constant that has never abandoned him. It sustained him during the darkest moments of the Meratara Cluster campaign.

Where is truth? Where is purpose? They lie in discipline, and in the full understanding of war. War is pain and death and destruction, and that is all that it is. There is no glorious dream at the end of it. War cannot bring about utopia. That is the great lie, and Perturabo has broken his Legion free of it.

War is not a means. It is an end. Khrossus will never again be fooled by the illusion that it can be anything else. And since it is for war that he has been fashioned, then war is his end. If that end is coming for him now, that is cause for regret only if he allows himself to believe the lies.

Perturabo has given him a battle that he cannot survive, but that he can win, and for this he is grateful.

‘Our lives for Horus’ glory, then,’ says Darhug.

‘No,’ Khrossus tells him. ‘We do not fight for Horus. We fight for Perturabo. We fight for the truth, and the truth is iron. That is what we will teach Guilliman.’

His officers nod, grimly eager to teach the lesson. Then Vúrtaq looks over Khrossus’ shoulder. ‘The sorcerers are coming,’ he says.

Khrossus looks back towards the gates of Siderius. Five Word Bearers have left the city and are walking up the pitted road towards the Iron Warriors. All five are apostles, and wear robes over their armour, embroidered in the crimson sigils of their faith.

‘I almost envy them their truth,’ says Darhug.

‘I don’t,’ Khrossus says.

‘We’ve seen evidence that they might be right,’ Vûrtaq points out.

‘And?’ says Khrossus. ‘What of it? If there are gods, does that mean I should worship them? I do not see that one means the other. Iron, brothers. There is no higher truth than iron.’

‘Iron within, iron without,’ Darhug mutters, and Vûrtaq echoes him.

‘Anything else is superfluous,’ says Khrossus. ‘For us,’ he adds. He watches the Word Bearers approach. ‘But their truth gives them their own strength, and it has its use.’ He is going to shape the battlefield of the Carchera system into a worthy slaughterhouse, and the Word Bearers will help him do so. Khrossus knows that hope is an illusion, and he is going to strip that illusion away from Guilliman.

‘What were they doing?’ Darhug asks about the Word Bearers.

‘Inspecting their sanctuary,’ says Vûrtaq. ‘Deep in the hive. Well out of the way of the front lines.’

‘The battlefield will reach them, too, in the end,’ Khrossus says. ‘They know that as well as we do. They know how this struggle will end for all of us. They have their contribution to make, and to do it they need the isolation. They need the sanctuary.’

The Word Bearers arrive. Their leader, High Chaplain Ker Vanthax, nods solemnly to Khrossus. His brow is so heavy, his eyes glitter within shadows even under full sunlight. His skin is taut, and marked by a complex series of runes. His cheekbones are high, aristocratic, but his nose is missing. He is commanding, and he is grotesque. ‘We have made our preparations, warsmith,’ he says.

‘Then it can be done?’

‘Yes. The Ruinstorm is still strong in the vicinity of Carchera, and with it the influence of the warp on the materium. This system is ideal. We can do what you ask of us.’

‘Good.’ Khrossus turns to his captains. ‘Are we ready?’

‘Yes,’ says Darhug. ‘The final platform was being moved into position at last update.’

‘The *Warforged* awaits its orders,’ Vûrtaq says. He will take a strike cruiser against a fleet.

An echoing series of booms comes from inside the pass, followed by the long, rumbling roar of falling rock. The sealing of the pass has begun.

‘Let him come, then,’ says Khrossus. ‘Let him come.’

‘It is a strange irony,’ Ker Vanthax says, ‘that a portion of the Fourth Legion must be on the defensive end of a siege in order for a larger siege to begin.’

‘There is no such irony,’ Khrossus replies. ‘You do not understand what our strategies will mean for Guilliman. There is only the surface appearance of a siege here, and even that appearance is a trap. We are not fighting to hold Carchera. Siderius is not a citadel. It is an engine, and it is us who will be laying siege to Guilliman.’

‘That will surprise him,’ says Vûrtaq.

‘No,’ says Khrossus. ‘We will not surprise him. He will see the trap coming. But we will hit him so hard, his foresight won’t matter.’

The hololithic transmission plate of the *Ultimus Mundi* is on a dais towards the front of the bridge. Guilliman stands on it, speaking with the hololithic spectres of his officers on the other ships of the fleet.

‘Navigator Maesa has news for us,’ says Guilliman. He points, and the vid-feed lenses of the transmitter turn in the direction of Maesa. The images of the Ultramarines officers adjust controls invisible to Guilliman. Now they will see the bridge of the *Ultimus Mundi* before them, the projection of it solid enough that they can focus on it and filter out the background awareness of their own bridges.

‘Go ahead,’ Guilliman tells Maesa. ‘Describe what lies before us.’

‘The conditions of our next jump concern me,’ Maesa says. The navigator is a daughter of the House Pytheas, one of the magisterial houses of the Navis Nobilite. She is centuries old. Wisps of white hair, so fine they float at her slightest movement, shroud her skull. She is supported by an iron framework, but her presence commands the respect of deep experience. ‘The clear passage through the Ruinstorm narrows ahead,’ she explains. ‘It passes directly through the Carchera system. Given the length of jumps we are able to take while still being assured of remaining on course for Terra, our next passage through the warp will take us to the Mandeville point that lies within the system, at the narrowest point of our route.’

‘By your evaluation, Carchera is a choke point, then,’ says Guilliman.

‘I fear it is, lord primarch.’

‘An ideal place for an ambush,’ says Iasus, Chapter Master of the 22nd. Iasus’ noble profile bears the scars of these terrible years of war.

‘An inevitable one,’ says Guilliman.

‘You think the withdrawal we have seen does not extend to Carchera?’ Verus Caspean, Chapter Master of the First, is the only other officer physically present with Guilliman. He stands on a secondary transmission dais a few metres to

Guilliman's right.

'If Horus is pressed,' says Guilliman, 'then he will have no choice but to seize any chance at all that might gain him more time. It would be strategic madness to pass up this choke point. A relatively small force could make a considerable difference.'

'The mission would be a suicidal one,' says Lucretious Corvo, captain of the *Glorious Nova*. The taciturn officer is learned, and Guilliman values his thoughts on strategy.

'Do you have any doubt that Horus would hesitate to make that sacrifice? Particularly if he assigned it to another primarch's Legion?'

'No,' Corvo admits.

Guilliman eyes the navigation map that Maesa has put up. The invitation to ambush is too perfect. 'This is not a probability we are looking at,' he says. 'It is a certainty. We have moved beyond the theoretical and into the factual. Our practical must be based on this reality.'

'If they hold the Mandeville point, they have the advantage of surprise,' says Corvo. 'They know where we must translate, and can prepare accordingly.'

'Then we will remove that advantage,' Guilliman says. 'We know they will be waiting for us. There will be no surprise on either side. All ships will be on full alert. We will be going straight into battle when we translate into Carchera. We know the enemy will be there. We know he will attack. So will we. I want all weapons primed before we exit the warp. The entire fleet will fire a salvo at the moment we translate. We will make the ambush ours. Horus cannot spare a fleet, and even if he could, there is not a single fleet that can challenge ours. We have the overwhelming force. Our task is to render the ambush futile. If the enemy is concentrated at the Mandeville point, we will make him regret that decision.'

Guilliman's officers acknowledge the order, and he ends the transmission. He walks over to where Maesa waits. 'You have done well,' he tells her, his eyes still on the map. 'I might wish that your calculations were wrong, but I am grateful that they are not.'

'I do only my duty, lord primarch.'

Prayto has been observing the conference with the officers from one side, and now he joins Guilliman before the hololithic display. Guilliman frowns at the tight convergence of vectors.

'You don't like where this is heading,' Prayto observes.

'I don't like inevitability. I don't like having my hand forced.'

'The enemy's hand is forced, too.'

‘Precisely. Everything here is inevitable. This war wants to destroy our belief in free will, Titus. It wants to make us believe we have to throw ourselves on the mercy of fate.’ Guilliman shook his head. ‘I will not capitulate. We will smash our way through, Titus. We will smash our way through, and we will steal the time Horus hopes to gain. We have to. Terra is waiting for us.’

Aboard the strike cruiser *Cavascor*, Iasus emerges from the hololithic communications centre, located just aft of the bridge. The sealed chamber makes better use of the ship’s energy. Big as the *Cavascor* is, it does not have the power of a battleship the size of the *Ultimus Mundi*. Captain Hierax of the Second Destroyers has been waiting outside for his Chapter Master, and the look on Iasus’ stern face confirms a great deal of what he already suspects.

‘The primarch suspects an ambush, then,’ Hierax says.

Iasus nods. ‘He is certain of it.’

The two Ultramarines fall into step beside each other.

‘How did he seem?’

‘Focused.’

‘As he ever is.’

‘Beneath that focus, he is bringing fury to Carchera.’

‘He is angry, then,’ says Hierax.

‘Who can blame him?’

The trust between captain and Chapter Master runs deep. It was not always so. Before the war, before Horus’ betrayal, Guilliman made Iasus Chapter Master of the 22nd, bringing in an outsider, passing over Hierax, who was senior captain. Iasus was not Terran. More crucially, he did not share the culture of the Destroyers. Time and battle have proven Guilliman correct in his choice. The two officers value each other’s skills, and in particular recognise the importance of their different temperaments. Iasus checks the more destructive impulses of the 22nd. He is more than a guarantor of discipline, because discipline is not something that any company or Chapter of the Ultramarines lacks. But under him, the Destroyers are the shaped charge they need to be. And when he must, Iasus knows when to rein them in.

In matters of strategy, Iasus will consult Hierax and listen to his recommendations. And once he has made a determination, Hierax has absolute faith that the Chapter Master’s decision is the correct one. Between the two of them, they have honed the blade that is the Destroyers. They are still the weapon that the rest of the Legion regards with some caution, and Guilliman never

unleashes them without careful thought given to the consequences. He has, though, been sending them into the battle far more often since Calth. They are the embodiment of the primarch's anger, for he is the *Avenging* Son. Though Guilliman is, above all, the consummate strategist, and though he is the great rationalist in a galaxy tipped into a madness of gods and daemons, he too has rage within him, and he knows how to use it.

'He will want us in battle, then,' says Hierax. He passes a hand over his forehead and scalp, the thick layers of scar tissue hard as gravel. Hierax has been disfigured by the wounds and burns of years of battle.

'I think he will,' says Iasus. 'Have your company ready.'

Hierax does not know what action to prepare for. There is no way to know whether the Destroyers will be boarding enemy ships or making planetfall. But their force of brutal, ugly annihilation will be called upon.

Hierax is glad of it. Iasus will direct the brutality, and Hierax will take it to the enemy.

Khrossus does not have the ships and he does not have the men to take on the Ultramarines fleet directly. To hurt Guilliman, to accomplish what he must, he has to turn the entire system into a weapon.

He speaks to Darhug and Vûrtaq over the vox as they leave Carchera to take up their positions closer to the Mandeville point. 'They are not besieging us,' he says. 'We are besieging them.'

'*And do you think the Ultramarines will understand the distinction?*' Darhug asks.

'*Does it matter if they do?*' says Vûrtaq.

'*Easy for you to say.*'

It is. Of the three prongs of Khrossus' strategy, Vûrtaq's is the most aggressive. He is not the one who might feel besieged.

'It does *not* matter,' Khrossus emphasises, 'but they will think they are the ones besieging. Make good use of that error.'

'*I will,*' says Darhug. '*Be certain of that, warsmith.*'

'Iron without,' says Khrossus, 'and then iron within. That is the shape of our attack. And we will eviscerate the Ultramarines.'

Khrossus has ordered that all signals from Siderius' communications tower be relayed to his command centre closer to the base of the hive. The tower is too far from where battle will come. Khrossus needs to be at the front lines. The chamber he has chosen is a mere cell, with just enough space for the vox

equipment and a table with a map of the Carchera system. He does not need much more. The complexities of the campaign and its planning are in the past. Darhug and Vûrtaq have their orders. He trusts their judgement, and their ability to adapt to the shifting conditions of the struggle. He will do the same in Siderius.

Khrossus leaves the cell and takes a grav lift down to the underhive. He moves down through the endless clamour of the city's industry. Though the Iron Warriors have conquered Carchera, the gigantic production machine that is Siderius grinds on, only now everything has been turned to the needs of the IV Legion. Huge new trenches are being dug, mine shafts are opening up to become gaping abysses and gigantic reservoirs are filling with molten ore. The millions of citizens of Siderius are governed by a single purpose. They wish to live, and so they slave to fulfil the will of the warsmith.

The grav lift deposits Khrossus beside a cavern where excavators the size of hab blocks dig their immense shovels into the earth, breaking apart tunnels below, working to create a moat hundreds of metres deep.

Past the excavation site, Khrossus enters a tunnel. It bores through rock and is lined with metal plates. It drops down a steep slope, and brings him at last to the chapel of the Word Bearers.

All traces of the chamber's original purpose are gone. The Word Bearers have had it scraped clean. The walls have been altered, the angles between them deepened and the sides worked until they are perfectly sheer. The cavern now has eight identical sides. The star of Chaos is carved into the floor. Runes have been painted in blood between each of the arms of the star. The shapes of the symbols hurt Khrossus' eyes, and they writhe in his peripheral vision. Ker Vanthax stands in the centre of the star, surrounded by his acolytes. 'This is a worthy place,' the High Chaplain says to Khrossus. 'There is much blood in the stone. Many died in this spot when the mines were first being dug. Lines of energy pass through here. Lines of Chaos.' He nods, satisfied. 'Carchera will fight for us. Have you examined the planet's historical records?'

'I have been otherwise occupied.'

'Of course. Of course. I think they would be instructive. I can feel the blood that was spilled here. Though its citizens may not know it, this world owes allegiance to the gods. It is not a coincidence that the warp is strong in this system. Carchera's allegiance is why we will be able to do what we must. The hand of fate is at work here.'

'I have been working harder here than fate,' says Khrossus.

Ker Vanthax smiles. 'You are its instrument. The will of Chaos works through you.'

Khrossus grunts, noncommittal.

'Have you come to tell us it is time?' Ker Vanthax asks.

'We cannot know exactly when the Ultramarines will arrive...'

'...but they are getting close,' the High Chaplain says. 'Yes, we can sense that. We can feel their travel through the immaterium.'

'We should begin,' says Khrossus. 'We should prepare our welcome.'

'So we shall.' Ker Vanthax nods to his brothers, and they take up positions surrounding him, standing on the points of the star that indicate the cardinal directions. One of the Word Bearers leaves the chamber for a moment and returns with an amphora. It is full of thick, rich blood. The Word Bearer pours it onto the floor, linking all the arms of the star, and daubs the armour of the other apostles. Then he resumes his place in the circle and joins in as the High Chaplain leads the chanting.

Khrossus backs away. The air turns cold, and his breath mists almost as soon as the chanting begins. The eight-pointed star seems to twist. Voices creep in around the edges of Khrossus' hearing, voices whose mouths are shaped for more than one tongue, tongues shaped to pronounce impossible words.

Khrossus turns and makes his way back up the tunnel. What he has told his captains is true. He does not need to share the full truth of the Word Bearers to see, and believe in, the full effect it can have. Already, he feels ancient power gathering in the chamber and rising up from Carchera, into the void, reaching out to seize the enemies from Ultramar.

Before he heads to the bridge, Guilliman turns the sandglass over again. He watches the grains drop for a few moments. He will not lie to himself, and pretend that the falling grains are marking the time to the Ultramarines' arrival in the Carchera system. They are marking the time he has to reach Terra, and they are too few, and they are slipping away.

He must pass through this system quickly.

On the bridge, as translation from the empyrean approaches, Guilliman mounts the pulpit. Shutters cover the windows of the *Ultimus Mundi*, keeping out the madness of the warp. From her navigation cell, where she lies on a bed suspended in a pool of nutrient fluids, Maesa voxes that the critical seconds are approaching. On the bridge, it is the weapons officers who hold the greater part of Guilliman's attention.

‘Nova cannon ready to fire,’ one calls.

‘Broadsides standing by,’ says another.

The reports come in from the rest of the fleet. Every ship is prepared to open fire on targets they will not see until after the guns have opened up.

‘A salvo over a wide area, with no aim possible,’ Gorod comments. He and Prayto flank Guilliman beside the elevated pulpit.

‘No aim is necessary,’ Guilliman says. ‘We will have the luxury of precision once we have engaged the enemy. Consider this our pre-emptive counter-attack. We know where and when we will be struck, so I will strike first.’

A servitor begins the countdown to translation. Guilliman waits in silence for the fleet to drop out of the warp. He has already given his commands. All the captains know their duty, and every ship is charging to war. Guilliman does not need to give a new order to fire. He has set out his will, and his Legion is about to carry it out.

‘Translation,’ the servitor says, its voice dull, the announcement too flat for the holocaust it signals.

The *Ultimus Mundi* shakes three times. The first blow is the shock of the return to the materium. The second comes with the deep-throated thrum of the Nova cannon firing and the unleashing of every other gun in a massive choir of destruction.

The battleship shakes for the third time just after the shutters pull back to reveal the Carchera system, and the cataclysm rushes in on the fleet.

# TWO

## Aflame

The near space of the Mandeville point is filled with wreckage. The Ultramarines' salvo of arrival has disintegrated more than a dozen ships. The void pulses with the flames of dissipating gases. Fragments of attackers bounce harmlessly off void shields. The XIII Legion has created a graveyard around its vessels.

The barrage has barely cut into the vast number of attackers.

'Firing solutions,' Guilliman orders. 'Priority on close-proximity targets. Engines full ahead. Take us through.'

A fleet is closing in on the Ultramarines, and it is not one to be fought, only destroyed. It is a cloud of freighters of varying size. There are some Navy vessels among them, battered frigates and escorts, and a single cruiser. Its superstructure has collapsed, and its hull is cratered. It is a ship that was killed, then resurrected for a final act of destruction.

'Fire ships,' Gorod snarls. 'A cowardly attack.'

'A brilliant one,' Guilliman corrects.

There are smaller objects swarming in with the ships. The Mandeville point has been mined. There are thousands of the explosives, inside the ring of fire ships. The sudden influx of mass summons them. They arrive like flies to batten on the blood of the fleet. Behind them come the suicide ships.

Guilliman's focus is on the mines and the fire ships, on the damage done by his fleet's barrage, and on the paths the Ultramarines must take. There is just enough

room at the edges of his concentration for a spare thought, compartmentalised where it cannot interfere with the tactical needs of the moment, and with the process of commanding a war. This thought is a consideration of the nature of the fire ships and the fact that they must be crewed by slaves. The thought, sealed away, becomes an articulation of regret, an enunciation of sorrow, and a spur to greater anger against the enemy.

Guilliman knows there is nothing that can be done for the crews. Their fates were sealed the moment they were placed on those ships. Guilliman cannot save them. He cannot consider the burning horror of their deaths. His duty lies on Terra, and the grains of sand are flowing away. He must take his Legion through. He must break the barrier before him.

But first the fleet must survive.

The second Nova cannon shot cuts a swath through the minefield before the prow of the *Ultimus Mundi*. The monstrous kinetic energy of the shell is too great for the mines to trigger its explosion. It goes by too quickly to be caught, but its passage triggers the mines. The space ahead of the battleship lights up with a plague of minor explosions. Beyond them is a freighter. Its trajectory is taking it head-on towards the *Ultimus Mundi*. It has barely begun to move when the shell cuts through it. The freighter has been loaded with explosives, its warp drive fractured. The only purpose of its altered form is to die, and so it dies, a plasma eruption tearing the void apart with the scream of a sun. The freighter is a fraction of the size of the *Mundi*, but its death is vast, and had it succeeded in ramming the battleship before it exploded, the damage would have been catastrophic.

The combined blast of the freighter and the Nova shell smashes another cargo ship, cracking it like an egg and triggering its ferocious death cry. Before Guilliman's eyes, the chain reaction of explosions turns the void into a cauldron of fire. The *Ultimus Mundi* seems to be plunging into the heart of a star.

The natural instinct would be to evade the conflagration, to raise the bow of the ship and seek to ride over the colossal fireball. But Guilliman knows that instinct is mistaken. 'Full ahead,' he says again. 'Take us through the heart of the flames.'

That which would destroy the *Ultimus Mundi* in this direction has itself been destroyed. The explosions are, for the moment, the closest thing there is to safe passage.

'Fire again,' Guilliman orders. 'Concentrate the barrage forward.'

The *Ultimus Mundi* rushes into the holocaust. Ignited plasma washes over the

battleship, an embrace of fury. The ship groans, the void shields strain, and then the *Ultimus Mundi* comes through to the darkness beyond, still firing, but now its scans and its servitors and its weapons officers look for specific targets.

Other ships are not as fortunate.

The frigate *Golden Triumph* takes out the mines nearest its hull, but the enemy-ravaged cruiser *Resplendent* comes at it vertically to the plane of the ecliptic. The few shots that hit the *Resplendent* are not enough either to deflect it from its path, or to trigger its explosives early. The bow of the *Resplendent* strikes the *Golden Triumph* amidships. The void shields flare and collapse from the impact of so great a mass. The *Resplendent* hits like a spear of fire. It explodes on impact, and the upper hull of the *Triumph* erupts with the force of a volcano. Plasma ignites plasma, and the ships vanish in the terrible rupture of their engines.

A cluster of mines shoots past the broadsides of the escort *Pride of Talasa* and clings to its hull before spreading a breaching necklace of fire along its length. The *Talasa* staggers forward, still firing, its guns still active, but atmosphere and crew and legionaries spill out of its shredded starboard.

The cruiser *Parmenio Sentinel* is caught between two fire ships. The double explosion shears its forward third away. Engines running, guns firing erratically, the *Sentinel* moves on, its decks exposed, its new prow a molten wreck. Its sudden, frantic bursts of vox traffic fade into the dark.

The discipline of the fleet holds. Every ship obeys Guilliman's commands, and the fleet is enveloped by the halo of its fire, clearing the mines. If the fleet had not translated with a full, massive barrage lashing out on all sides, the fire-ship attack would have ripped out its heart. Though this wave of fire ships hammers at the fleet, its formation remains strong. The Legion pushes the fire ships back, destroying most before they can strike their targets, and detonating thousands of mines before hitting them. And the fleet moves forward.

So the first minutes of the battle go. But only the first minutes.

Before the *Ultimus Mundi* has fully cleared the destruction of the *Golden Triumph*, more klaxons sound on the bridge.

'Heavy enemy fire to port and off the bow,' the auspex officer calls. 'Cannons and torpedoes.' And a moment later she says, 'Warp storm forming ahead.'

Guilliman can feel the sands in the glass running, running. He can follow each grain that falls, and in the space of a single grain's descent from one reservoir to another, there is space to think, to analyse and to decide. Guilliman heeds the warning, he hears the klaxons and he sees the pict screens light up with the

trajectories of missiles and shells. He sees, through the great viewport of the *Ultimus Mundi*, off the starboard edge of the bow, the void begin to churn. Vortices form, wrinkling the black, twisting it, staining it with the violet of bruise and rot. Then other colours spread into the materium, colours with no names, unless those names are *insanity* and *murder* and *corruption*.

All this in the fall of one grain.

To act before the next grain lands would be to act on impulse, not reason, and Guilliman refuses to fall into the traps that have been set for him and his Legion.

‘Forward shields on full,’ he says. The *Ultimus Mundi* is the tip of the fleet’s spear, and it will take the brunt of the oncoming torpedoes. ‘Maintain course. Auspex, give me a deep system scan. Tell me where the enemies are.’

The Nova cannon fires a third time, scything its way through more minefields, destroying some of the torpedoes in its passage, and then the shot vanishes into the void. There are no fire ships before the *Mundi* now, but somewhere out there is the true foe. The enemy has declared himself by launching this barrage.

‘Enemy ships to port,’ says the auspex officer. ‘Beyond the fire ships.’

‘How many?’ Guilliman asks.

Another slow fall of a grain while the data accumulates. Then the officer says, ‘A single strike cruiser, broadside to us.’

A thin force, Guilliman thinks. One that cannot meet his fleet head-on, but with the help of the fire ships, there is much it can do.

‘Cluster of contacts dead ahead,’ the officer continues. ‘Further off.’ Bethra Kallan hesitates. ‘They’re not moving.’

‘An enemy squadron?’

‘I don’t think so, lord primarch. The contacts are too close together to be ships.’ The screen above her station lights up, pinging, as another wave of torpedoes and cannon shells streak towards the Ultramarines. ‘Too much firepower in too concentrated a region,’ Kallan says.

‘Orbital defence platforms?’ Gorod wonders.

‘Around what?’ says Prayto. ‘There are no planets in that direction.’

‘There don’t have to be,’ says Guilliman. ‘Our enemy is not on the defensive. He is on the attack. If he does not need the platforms to defend a planet, he can repurpose them into a new means of assault.’

‘More scans are coming through,’ says Kallan. ‘There is a very large central mass, consistent with a space station.’

Guilliman nods, and he begins to see the contours of what must be done to neutralise this threat.

Visible through the viewport, the warp storm spreads like an oil slick over the void, churning and grinding reality to shreds. It is rapidly growing in size and strength. It is hungry for the fleet, and it is also reaching behind, flanking the Legion to starboard.

‘The warp storm is closing in on the Mandeville point,’ says Kallan.

Another grain of sand falls, and Guilliman has what he needs. The picture is not complete, but he has enough data to form a theory, one that explains what he sees, describes the means by which a small force can be brutally effective against a much larger one, and gives him the foundation for a counter-attack.

The sand grains are slipping away, no matter how quickly he thinks. The foe does not want to face Guilliman’s full strength, so he will force the issue. He will attack to overwhelm the enemy’s fleet, and he will neutralise the tactics that amplify the foe’s power.

There is one more thing he must know. ‘Vox,’ he says, ‘is there any traffic from Carchera?’

The system is a small one. There are only two worlds. The outer one, Himera, is lifeless rock. Only Carchera is inhabited. The vast numbers of fire ships already point strongly towards one conclusion about the planet’s status, but Guilliman needs confirmation before he commits his Legion to a specific strategy.

The first wave of torpedoes and cannon fire arrives. The *Ultimus Mundi*’s countermeasures destroy many of the torpedoes before they hit. The shells are too many and too small to be shot away. They push the shields hard, and a few torpedoes do get through. The battleship shudders with the impact. The pain of the void shields sears the dark beyond the viewport. But the ship is strong. It weathers the storm and pushes forward.

‘No vox traffic at all from Carchera,’ says the officer. ‘Though we are getting some interference.’

‘What kind?’

‘The readings are nonsensical.’

‘Warp energy,’ says Prayto.

‘Can you locate the source?’ Guilliman asks the Librarian.

‘Yes,’ says Prayto. He does not hesitate, though Guilliman recognises how deeply Prayto will have to expose himself to the warp to pinpoint a location.

‘Good,’ says Guilliman. ‘Find the source, and we will destroy it.’

Beyond the decision he has taken, Guilliman has his confirmation about what is happening in this system. The pieces fall into place. The enemy holds Carchera,

and the warp storm is being directed by human will. It is nothing compared to the scale of the Ruinstorm, but the principle is the same, and the intelligence controlling the storm is on Carchera.

The enemy has three points of attack, all reinforcing each other. So Guilliman will hit all three at once. Maybe this will be fast enough. Maybe the Ultramarines will leave the system before all the sand grains run out. The need is clear, the positions clear, and now so is the strategy he will use.

Mere minutes have passed since the fleet translated into the materium.

‘Fleet-wide vox transmission,’ Guilliman orders. ‘All ships, except for two squadrons, are to follow the lead of Captain Corvo and the *Glorious Nova*. Captain, take the *Nova* and the fleet after the enemy vessel. Burn it.’ This is the strike to overwhelm. The enemy is forcing Guilliman to divide his forces, but Guilliman decides the nature of the division. The enemy has hit hard, and amplified his strength, but cannot hide his weakness. That strike cruiser is all the foe has. Horus cannot afford to leave any more behind, not if he wishes to take Terra and do it quickly. The sandglass is running for the Traitor, too.

‘Captain Tulian Aquila will make for the space station with the strike cruiser *Alalia* and escorts,’ Guilliman continues. Aquila has only recently been promoted to Captain of the 77th Company, but his heroism on Calth more than justifies the faith Guilliman places in him now. ‘He is to board the station and render it inoperative, by any means necessary. The third squadron is with me. The *Cavascor* and the *Honour Bound* will join the *Ultimus Mundi*. We make for Carchera.’

‘A single company to take out a space station?’ Gorod asks.

‘A heavy engagement with ships would be too costly. It is what the enemy wants.’ Throwing ships at a space station is to wage war on the station’s terms, and the mistake Guilliman will not make. ‘The fight must be inside the fort, on its decks, not against its shields and its guns.’

The commands are given. The fleet responds. The fire ships keep coming, and the mines swarm in, and the salvos from the enemy ships and the other, more distant targets hammer at the XIII Legion vessels. But the fleet responds to the will of its primarch. It maintains a constant, overlapping barrage, an expanding halo of fire that immolates suicide ships and mines. The fleet moves through waves of destruction, riding through fury, taking wounds. More ships are lost, but only a few. More still are damaged, but they remain in the fight, and through burning corridors, shattered decks and breached hulls, their crews keep them going, answering the call of the Avenging Son, no matter how long the lists of

casualties become. Guilliman knows his duty, so do his sons, and so does every officer and crew member and serf in the fleet. They will give their lives in service, and do so willingly, out of loyalty to the primarch and everything he embodies. They understand what is at stake. Though they do not sense time broken down to the individual grains of sand, they grasp the urgency of the conflict. They know the fleet must reach Terra, and every command that comes from Guilliman will, if they carry it out, bring the fleet that much closer to the defence of the Emperor. So they do their duty. And the fleet responds.

Under heavy attack, fighting to break out of a narrow region of the void, the fleet advances, and it does as Guilliman ordered. The formation begins to break into the three prongs. The XIII Legion moves to take the offensive.

The war is less than an hour old.

The space station *Barbican* is a pyramidal structure atop a colossal platform whose guns sweep all quadrants of the void. The bridge is in the peak of the pyramid. Viewports on all sides provide Darhug with a full, panoramic view of everything above the plane of the platform. Vid screens in an inner ring show the approaches of the underbelly of the station. There are no blind spots.

Darhug sits on a throne on a high column in the centre of the circular chamber of the bridge. Below him, officers, technicians and servitors are at their work stations, ready to enact his will. At his command, the power to devastate fleets is unleashed. As formidable as the station is, he has, as directed by Khrossus, multiplied its power. The *Barbican* is surrounded by four orbital weapons platforms. They were previously positioned over Carchera, but Khrossus has declared the planet's ground-based defences to be sufficient. *We are not defending the system*, he reminded Darhug. *We are turning it into a weapon*. Now the platforms are slaved to the *Barbican*, extensions of its destructive reach. Any vessel coming within range will be torn apart by a murderous web of fire created by the orbital platforms' laser batteries and the guns of the station.

*Come and get us*, Darhug thinks. *Do the very thing I know you will avoid*. He has too much faith in the Ultramarines' tactical skill to believe they will make this mistake. But he wishes they would. He would like to teach them something of the pain that has been the Iron Warriors' lot for so long. He has already hurt them, but not enough. The runes pict screen next to the throne summarises the effects of his opening salvos against the XIII Legion's fleet. He is not satisfied. It would be easy to fault the actions of the Carcherans who are operating the fort and its weapons systems. They are slaves, chosen for their skills and knowledge,

but they are still slaves. They are the conquered. It would, then, be easy to blame them, to declare that they had not tried hard enough. But Darhug is tired of illusions. He has had his fill of lies, and if there is something about this struggle in the Carchera system for which he is grateful, it is that it means an end to lies. He expects no more than this. The warsmith still believes that what happens today will have meaning. Darhug just wants the lies to end.

Every slave on the *Barbican* has family kept hostage in Siderius. The mortals know the price of betrayal. They know what will happen if they show the slightest hesitation to obey a single one of his commands. Darhug has all the personnel required to attack the Ultramarines. It is when the Ultramarines attack him, and he knows they will, that his forces will be found lacking.

*'The fleet bleeds and burns, brother,'* says Vûrtaq. From his position closer to the battle, his scans give him a more detailed picture of what is happening.

*'I am pleased to hear it,'* says Darhug. *'Have we stopped the Ultramarines?'*

*'No.'* Either Vûrtaq does not hear Darhug's sarcasm, or he chooses to ignore it. *'But it is a good start.'*

*'Better than the end.'*

*'I like to think the end will be something other than what you think.'*

*'You mean other than what I know,'* says Darhug. *'We are a single company against a Legion. The outcome is not in doubt.'*

*'We will see,'* Vûrtaq says. *'The odds have been against us before.'*

*Not on this scale,* Darhug thinks, but Vûrtaq knows this very well. He simply looks to the future differently than Darhug does. The truth is that Darhug feels no grief about what he knows is coming. He has no regret that this is his last day. The bitterness he feels is not about his approaching death. If anything, he suspects it is Vûrtaq who feels greater resentment about the odds, despite his indomitability.

*'The fleet is splitting up,'* says Vûrtaq, and a few moments later, Darhug sees the same information appear on the *Barbican's* screens.

*'You have captured their attention,'* Darhug says. Most of the enemy vessels are changing their headings. They are going to pursue the Iron Warriors ship.

*'As the warsmith predicted. And I see you will not be lonely either.'*

Three ships have detached themselves from the main fleet and are making for the space station.

*'Lay siege to them without mercy, brother,'* says Vûrtaq. *'I shall see you again, when our war is done.'*

*'Farewell, brother.'* It is as close as Darhug comes to contradicting the other

captain. He knows Vûrtaq is angry, though in this moment, he is channelling his anger at Horus into an unbreakable determination. He has faith in Khrossus' plan. So does Darhug. He simply believes the success of the campaign will be measured by something other than survival.

'All weapons, continuous fire on the approaching vessels,' Darhug orders. He will hit the Ultramarines at a distance as best he can. They will not advance until they are cut to pieces, though. Their attack will take a different form.

Legionary Savarran stops beside the throne's column. His right arm is a crude bionic, the fist opening and closing constantly like a hungry maw. 'Only three ships,' he says. 'They can't think to take us on like that.'

'They don't.' Darhug thinks about how he would capture the *Barbican*. Despite Khrossus' larger strategy, Darhug is about to be on the defensive, and he resents the role. 'They plan to board us,' he says.

'Let them try.'

'On the contrary. I have no intention of letting them try.' Only he knows his intentions will not change the facts of the war. He will fight to stop the Ultramarines, but if he were the one to lay siege to the station, he would break through any defence. So will they.

Darhug is no defeatist. He is a realist. He thinks through the battle to come, and to its probable outcomes. He has, in the end, a single, overriding task. He must kill as many Ultramarines as possible.

He sees what to do. It does not matter that inevitability is on the side of the Ultramarines. He will negate that advantage. He and his legionaries will bleed the foe, and when the sons of Guilliman believe they finally have the day, Darhug will unleash a reckoning. He permits himself a grim smile. Perhaps Vûrtaq is not so wrong to believe in victory. Darhug looks forward to turning the enemy's triumph to ash.

He begins his preparations.

Flight is inimical to Vûrtaq. To flee is to go against his every instinct. In war, if there is one thing he believes in, it is the eternal advance. To spit in the face of everything an enemy can throw at him and march forward, always forward, until he grinds the foe beneath his boots, that is his credo. Even a tactical retreat is beyond shameful.

In the command throne of the strike cruiser *Warforged*, Vûrtaq finds the order he must give now sticks in his throat. The Ultramarines are coming for him and his ship. The spear of the XIII Legion's fleet thrusts through the fire ships and

the minefields. The Iron Warriors took every ship, civilian and military, that remained in the Carchera system, turning them into bombs. There were hundreds of vessels. To look at their initial disposition, at the sphere of death they formed around the Mandeville point, would be to think that nothing could get through them.

But the warsmith was right. The Ultramarines expected the trap and countered it as soon as they translated into the materium. Vûrtaq would, if he could choose, aim his ship at the XIII Legion, a gladius strike into the heart of the foe's massive power. But Warsmith Khrossus' plan is a good one, and Vûrtaq will not undermine it by going against orders.

The order tastes bitter, but Vûrtaq only hesitates for a second, and he gives it. 'Defensive fire only,' he says. 'We make for Himera at full speed.'

Beside the command throne, Sergeant Navghar gives voice to Vûrtaq's displeasure. 'Do we want them to think we are turning tail and running? Because that is what it looks like to me.' His wounded larynx makes his voice sound like claws scraping against glass.

'It doesn't matter what they think,' Vûrtaq snaps back. 'What matters is that they follow. And they will.'

'This is not our way of war.'

'Then we will make it into our way,' says Vûrtaq. In speaking these words, he echoes Khrossus. Realising this a moment later, Vûrtaq feels some satisfaction. This knowledge does not reconcile him to the nature of the conflict, but it does give him hope, again, for what it might become.

'Is this what the Warmaster thinks of us?' Navghar asks.

'What if it is? That is as nothing compared to what I think of him.'

The sergeant joins Vûrtaq in a burst of angry laughter.

Khrossus has made abundantly clear the fate that awaits the Grand Company. There will be no return from the Carchera system. Perturabo gave the 134th this mission, but Vûrtaq does not blame his primarch for sacrificing them. Nor is he reluctant to be sacrificed. Bloody, thankless victories verging on the pyrrhic have always been the lot of the Iron Warriors. They are all Vûrtaq has ever known in the service of the Emperor. He is hardly surprised to find that nothing has changed under Horus. The Grand Company will be destroyed while fighting in the name of Horus' glory, or so the orders would suggest. But Perturabo has chosen the 134th for a reason, and Khrossus, along with his captains, has little faith in Horus' promises. To fight with Horus is to shatter the greater lies of the Emperor, and on this day the warsmith has devised a plan that will humble the

Emperor's prideful sons. What Vûrtaq has already seen delights him, and the thought of what is to come soothes the anger that comes from even the appearance of a retreat.

Vûrtaq believes in more. 'We will show Horus that he is as mistaken as the False Emperor,' he says. 'We have always done the impossible. We will do it again. Horus believes that the impossible is that we survive this day. Well, then. Let us fight today, and we shall fight again tomorrow. Iron within!'

'Iron without!' cries Navghar.

*Within and without, we are unbreakable, Vûrtaq thinks. And we will break you, Guilliman.*

# THREE

## Final Approach

‘We have an approximate region of the warp interference,’ says Prayto. The Librarian has been working closely with the auspex officers and technicians. In the strategium above the bridge, he touches the controls of the pict screen beside the command pulpit. On the planetary map of Carchera, a targeting rune appears over Hive Siderius.

‘A geological fortress,’ Guilliman observes, eyeing the terrain. Then he orders the ships to make for a point that would place them at high anchor above Siderius.

The *Ultimus Mundi*, the *Cavascor* and the frigate *Honour Bound* are nearing their goal when the planet attacks them. The grey-brown, turbulent atmosphere flashes, pulsing with four searing red beams. The clouds reflect the muzzle flares of monstrous orbital guns, and the defence lasers reach for the squadron.

The beams, powered by plasma reservoirs that could light up a city, rip through the cloud cover. The barrage is a concentrated one, suggesting the guns are close together, and the shots come within seconds of each other. One laser misses its targets completely, its blinding light cutting deep into the night of the void. One hits the *Ultimus Mundi* just beneath the prow. The void shields save the hull, but the blast overloads them in that quadrant of the ship, and forces their momentary collapse. Another beam strikes the *Cavascor* a glancing blow on the port side, the worst of the explosion absorbed by the defences. The ship rolls in the shock wave, but stays true to its course as its evasion begins to pick up speed.

The fourth laser hits the *Honour Bound* in the lower hull, a short distance to the fore of the engines. Guilliman sees the flash through the viewport of the *Ultimus Mundi*. He sees the heaving movement of the ship, as if it is suddenly caught in a rising tide, and he knows the shot has struck home.

‘*Honour Bound*, report,’ he commands.

‘*Lower hull breached, lord primarch,*’ Shipmaster Hestaian voxes after a few moments. ‘*We have fires on three decks. But we still have power and guidance.*’

All three ships begin evasive manoeuvres, but the change in their trajectories in these crucial moments is, at first, invisible to the mortal eye. The vessels are behemoths of war. Their turns are full of grace and majesty, but they are not agile. The *Ultimus Mundi* and the *Cavascor* can take a second hit, though the strike cruiser will be sorely tested. The *Honour Bound* cannot afford to be hit again.

The ships move away from the planet, and gradually accelerate away from the region of Siderius, putting it over the horizon. The crews on all three work in the anticipation of sudden, searing destruction. Their salvation is the time it takes for the orbital guns to charge up their titanic energy again. The second salvo does come, but the squadron has won the race. The lasers miss, but not by much. The enemy does not have a third chance. The Siderius region is beyond the curvature of Carchera before the guns can recharge.

Though the atmosphere of Carchera is opaque, the topographical scans have revealed the face of the planet, and the shipmasters take their vessels east, over the ocean. Here there is no settlement, and little chance of more defence lasers.

Guilliman has remained quiet during the manoeuvres. His officers know what must be accomplished. The ships must be preserved, and the squadron must also remain in the near orbit of Carchera. There can be no retreat.

Guilliman steps back from the pulpit, deeper into the strategium, to speak with Prayto and Gorod.

‘This has the earmarks of stalemate,’ says Prayto.

‘Which we cannot afford,’ Guilliman says. ‘There is no stalemate in this struggle. Stalemate is victory for the enemy.’

Gorod winces, uneasy with what he is about to say. ‘We do have the means of breaking the stalemate quickly. We have cyclonic torpedoes.’

Guilliman’s instinct is to reject Gorod’s suggestion out of hand, but he can see what it has cost the Invictarus commander to raise the idea of such drastic action. Guilliman would be doing him an injustice if he responded in anger, and without thinking through what Gorod has said.

‘Carchera is loyalist,’ Prayto says, horrified. ‘You are talking about destroying an Imperial world.’

‘Loyalist, but captured,’ says Gorod. He pauses. ‘I agree with you, Titus. I despise what I am saying. But there it is. Do we have to sacrifice one world in order to save Terra, and thus countless others?’

‘It is never only one world,’ says Guilliman. ‘It is never only one sacrifice. If we embark down that path, there will always be justification to go further yet, forever in the name of expediency and of the greater good. Drakus, you were right to ask, but no, we cannot do this. We would be turning into what we are fighting. Carchera is loyal. It awaits liberation, not Exterminatus. And its industrial production is valuable.’

‘What value is its liberation if we lose Terra?’ Gorod asks. ‘Do we have time to take it back?’

*We have so little time*, Guilliman thinks. Less, he suspects, than any of them can know. But there are principles at stake too, and he stands by them. ‘The question we are asking is the wrong one,’ he declares. ‘The problem is not whether Carchera must be sacrificed for Terra. The problem is how we liberate Carchera, and how to do it quickly. Even if we annihilated this world, and so we cleared the Mandeville point of the warp storm, the space station and the enemy fleet still have to be defeated. All three enemy forces must be defeated for us to have a clear run at leaving the system. So Carchera *will* be liberated.’

‘To approach Siderius, we need to take out the defence lasers,’ says Prayto.

‘We will. One company, brought in on Stormbirds from our current position.’

Gorod nods. ‘They can fly in low enough that the lasers won’t be able to touch them.’

‘Precisely,’ says Guilliman. ‘The company destroys the gun emplacements, then moves in on Siderius.’

Gorod looks hugely relieved that the proposal he felt duty-bound to raise will not be a reality. Guilliman feels some concern. There is the possibility that Gorod was right, that there is no way of saving both Carchera and Terra. But Guilliman is acting within the logic of the conflict, and the timing that has presented itself. He is also acting within the morality the Imperium seeks to preserve.

‘Which company?’ Prayto asks.

‘I will speak with Iasus,’ says Guilliman.

‘The Destroyers,’ Gorod says. ‘You foresaw this possibility, then, when you had the *Cavascor* join our squadron.’

‘I anticipated the potential need for unusually violent action.’ Guilliman sighs. He feels limited satisfaction in being correct.

‘How wide will their remit be?’ Prayto asks.

‘Wider than it’s been,’ says Guilliman. He gives the Librarian a significant look.

A few hours later, Captain Hierax and the Second Destroyers are completing final preparations. The Stormbirds in the huge launch bay of the *Cavascor* have their loading ramps down. Their powerful engines are idling, filling the cavernous space with the background of a dull, echoing roar. The air stings to breathe, fouled by the fumes from the engines of the tanks rumbling up the ramps into the heavy gunships.

Iasus approaches Hierax at the base of the landing struts of the Stormbird *Retaliator*, which will lead the assault. Hierax turns to greet the Chapter Master. There is another legionary with him. It is one of Hierax’s sergeants, and the captain is interested to see the change in the Destroyer’s armour. He is not wearing a helmet. Instead, his head is surrounded by a psychic hood.

‘Brother-Sergeant Aphovos,’ says Hierax. ‘It has been some years since I have seen you don that equipment.’

‘I have finally retrained enough to use it once more.’ Since Guilliman broke with the Edict of Nikaea after Calth, it has been an ongoing process to reintroduce psykers across the entire Legion.

‘Then I will have you in my squad, *Librarian* Aphovos, and by my side.’

‘You honour me, brother-captain.’

‘We have received instructions from the primarch,’ Iasus says. ‘We will use *every* means against the enemy. Your discretion with regards to armaments is unrestricted.’

‘I see,’ says Hierax. ‘Good.’ The traitors have rained horror down on the Emperor’s dream for the galaxy. So Hierax will rain horror on them. ‘*Good.*’

Two Warhawk-class Stormbirds fly low over the water. The *Retaliator*, in the lead, carries the full complement of the legionaries of the Second Destroyers. Close behind, the *Unbroken Vigil* transports the company’s heavy armour. The gales from the gunship’s engines cut furrows through the waves. The mountain chains that enclose Siderius rise to meet the Destroyers, breakers smashing into foam against the sheer faces that jut into the ocean. The Stormbirds bank south and fly parallel with the mountains. Then the shore opens up, becoming a region of rock-covered plains.

The target comes into view. Four linked defence lasers aim their cannons to the sky. One gun is mounted on a turret that domes the centre of a squat, broad-shouldered keep. It has a greater range of movement than the other three, able to turn 360 degrees, and shoot lower towards the horizon. The rest of the guns have been fixed to the outside of the keep. Gigantic frameworks support them, and nests of immense conduits link them to the building and the power source within. They have some movement on the vertical axis, but that is all.

Hierax rides in the cockpit of the *Retaliator* with the pilot, Lanatus. He is a good fighter on land, and a fearsome one in the air. His hands move over the controls of the gunship as if they had their own consciousness, freeing Lanatus to look for targets.

‘What do you make of that construction?’ Hierax asks.

‘It looks recent. Those three outer cannons are not original to the keep.’

‘Perhaps brought in from other cities. Siderius may be the only one the enemy cares to defend.’

‘How long would it take to attach the guns and make all four operational?’ Lanatus wonders.

‘There aren’t many forces that would have the skill to do this at all,’ Hierax answers. ‘But those who do, if they have the means, could do it quickly.’

The super-heavy gunships close in on the gun emplacement. A few kilometres out, the anti-air fire of Whirlwind tanks opens up near the base of the keep. The Stormbirds return fire with lascannons and Dreadstrike missiles. A direct hit destroys the reinforced position of one of the Whirlwinds. As they drop even lower, making ready to land, Hierax sees the markings on the enemy tanks, and at last he knows his foe.

‘Iron Warriors,’ he says. ‘Let the primarch know who has challenged us, and take us in. Landing pattern Eridani.’

Behind the *Retaliator*, the *Vigil* climbs higher, unleashing a rain of las and missiles at the Iron Warriors’ positions, covering the landing of its sister ship. As the fireballs bloom, *Retaliator* makes the landing, the ramp dropping open before the Stormbird’s struts have touched the ground. These are the moments of vulnerability, but the Destroyers are swift, and the disembarkation is complete before the *Unbroken Vigil*’s barrage has faded. Then the *Retaliator* takes off, and hammers the enemy while the other gunship lands and unloads the tanks.

Hierax is already leading the march forward before both gunships are in the air again. Mortars are landing in the vicinity of the company. The Destroyers do not fire back just yet, leaving the Stormbirds to deal the punishment until the

legionaries get within range.

The ground is rocky and uneven, but there is no cover. Speed is the Destroyers' defence. Hierax is not displeased that the only strategy open to him is the direct attack. It suits him well.

Overhead, the Stormbirds fly strafing raids back and forth over the Iron Warriors. They launch more missiles, and the walls of the keep tremble, but do not fall. One of the exterior guns takes a direct hit. Its towering barrel falls, broken in two. Plasma flares around the wreckage of the gun, ruptured conduits lashing back and forth.

And now the Destroyers can begin their attack.

'A small force,' says Legionary Kletos, keeping pace with his captain as their squad thunders forward in the lead.

'Either they did not expect us, or they are foolishly arrogant,' Hierax says. Kletos is right. The orbital guns are not defended as they should be. Apart from the second Whirlwind, already gutted by the Stormbirds, there is a single Predator tank, and maybe twenty Iron Warriors. They have built a makeshift wall using the rocks from the plain, but they treat its shelter with disdain, moving forward to intercept the Ultramarines. Their wall has helped against the aerial attacks, and that, it seems, is enough. The Destroyers are too close now for heavy fire from the gunships to continue.

Iron Warriors and Ultramarines send streams of bolter fire at each other. Hierax charges with his rifle on full burst. Mortar fire explodes a few metres from him, but his armour absorbs the blast and he keeps running, the line of his attack unwavering. He places a cluster of bolt shells through the skull of an Iron Warrior.

The Predator surges forward, and the legionaries of the IV run with it. They are not behaving as a defensive force. They are on the offence, hurling themselves forward, a sword point to drive through the centre of the Destroyers' columns. The Predator's autocannon rounds pulverise the front ranks of the Ultramarines, and Hierax narrowly misses taking a direct hit. The Iron Warriors charge into the infantry fire of the Destroyers, and some fall, but they are relentless. Nothing but annihilation will halt their advance.

The madness of the attack startles Hierax for a moment. Then he sees that there is a strategy here. It is as Guilliman has said. The Iron Warriors are not here to hold the ground. They are here to stymie the Ultramarines. This contingent is too small to protect the guns for any length of time. Their defensive positions would be overrun almost immediately by the Destroyers, who outnumber the Iron

Warriors five to one. But now the Iron Warriors attack. They know they are doomed, and so they are fixed upon bringing as many of their enemy down with them as they can.

‘Make way,’ Hierax voxes his company. ‘Give them space. Let them charge.’

The Destroyers pull and split, the company parting to give the Iron Warriors an unimpeded path down the middle of the column.

‘I will not waste any time with you,’ Hierax mutters.

Perhaps with a conventionally armed force, the Iron Warriors’ strategy could have succeeded. But these are the Destroyers, and there are no civilian populations here to be preserved. Only an enemy to be eradicated with maximum efficiency.

‘Phosphex launchers,’ Hierax orders. ‘Hit them and finish them.’

The Iron Warriors pause as they reach the centre of the column. The Second Destroyers are still pulling back. In a tight formation, the enemy turns north to pursue one arm of the retreating Ultramarines. Only the Destroyers are not retreating. They are pulling back to strike all the harder.

Phosphex rockets slam into the Iron Warriors. The liquid green fog clings to them like a hungry animal. It burns through armour. It burns through flesh. It grips its prey and never lets go until everything is consumed. It is a weapon as foul as it is powerful. The Ultramarines are striking back at last in the Carchera system, and they are rewarded with the screams of the dying.

The Predator accelerates, streaming the green fire of phosphex, its lascannon firing continuously, its crew determined to slaughter whom they can before they die. Their moments are few. Three Ultramarines Predators catch the enemy tank in a crossfire. Simultaneous hits tear its armour apart and reduce it to a flaming wreck.

‘That was quick work,’ says Kletos as Hierax leads the way forward to the keep.

‘A quick victory is the only victory we can have in this war,’ Hierax tells him. Iasus has been very clear about the stakes.

The Destroyers reach the base of the keep. There are no further defenders. Hierax sends demolition teams to take out the other two externally mounted guns. He and the other squads head through the main entrance. The iron doors are sealed, but helpless against melta bombs, and the Ultramarines are inside.

The ground floor feels like a frozen storm. Cables and power conduits snake everywhere, overlapping and tangling with each other, running from the colossal generator in the centre of the huge space. Its multiple coils are tall as ancient

trees. They glow a sullen blue and hum with murderous power. The python mass of conduits leads from the generator to the rear of the keep. There, taking up more than half of the building, is the plasma reservoir.

The generators have been reworked, their outputs straining the limits of their architecture as they are pushed to provide the energy needed to fuel the four guns.

Everywhere, Hierax sees signs of recent work on the generators and the feeds to the reservoir, and in the reinforcements of the walls of the keep. The enemy has been industrious.

‘There is too much here for the Iron Warriors to have constructed on their own, and so fast,’ Hierax voxes his company. ‘Too much mechanical and technological expertise. Expect to find another enemy inside these walls.’

The chamber that occupies most of the inner keep is empty, but in the north-west corner, a spiral, wrought-iron staircase leads to another floor. Hierax mounts the stairs, bolter at the ready, his squad at his heels. He pauses below the top of the stairs. The chamber above is dimly lit, its gloom pulsing with the flickering glow of pict screens. It is the control centre for the defence lasers. Hierax takes the last few stairs three at a time and leaps into the control centre, sweeping his bolter in a wide burst of fire. Screens explode, filling the air with a blizzard of shards. Electrical arcs flare from smashed work stations. And a thing that was once human emits a stuttering, grinding squeal of binaric as bolt shells cut through its thorax.

The Mechanicum adept falls to the floor, mechadendrites and jointed metal limbs flailing uncontrollably. A plasma pistol drops from twitching fingers. Hierax marches over to the robed figure. There is no flesh visible at all. The metal limbs appear to have grown *spines*. Hierax cannot imagine what use they might have. They look like sheer excess, a physical symptom of a corruption that is moral and machinic at the same time. Hierax’s lip curls in disgust and he fires into the adept’s skull, scattering metal and blood across the floor.

Librarian Aphovos joins him. ‘Just the one?’ he says.

Hierax nods. ‘Enough to command the guns in this control centre.’

‘But this thing did not attach the extra ones to the keep walls on its own.’

‘No. There are more somewhere.’

If there are more adepts of the Mechanicum, they are not in the keep. The reports come in from the other squads as they complete their sweeps of the defence-laser emplacement. The enemy is dead. The Ultramarines have taken the target.

Hierax orders the total destruction of the keep, then heads outside. After contacting the *Ultimus Mundi* with the news that the Iron Warriors have Mechanicum allies on the planet, he looks north, towards the mountains that conceal Siderius. ‘Lanatus,’ he voxes, ‘what news?’ Since the taking of the guns, the Stormbirds have been flying reconnaissance over the mountains, seeking the way to reach the hive.

‘*There is a pass,*’ says Lanatus.

‘I can see it.’ There is a road leading from the defence lasers to a narrow cleft in the mountains. The peaks are brutal and jagged. They thrust upwards from the plain like fortress walls. Hierax is impressed by the will of the Carcherans, who sought to create a settlement inside such a formidable barrier. It must have been a heroic task.

‘*The enemy has been at work on the pass,*’ says Lanatus. ‘*There are numerous rockfalls blocking the road.*’

‘Is there any chance of getting our tanks through?’

‘*None. Not without spending days clearing the rubble. But infantry should be able to climb the obstacles.*’

Hierax does not like the journey this information portends. ‘Is there any other way overland?’

‘*No. This way, at least, there is a partial road.*’

‘And an airlift to Siderius?’

‘*This is Rennias, brother-captain,*’ the pilot of the other Stormbird breaks in. ‘*I just attempted an overflight of the city. There are numerous anti-air guns on the spires, wind shear conditions are extreme, and there is no room to stage a landing.*’

Hierax’s jaw tightens. He has the unpleasant sensation of a noose drawing around his company, and there is nothing he can do about it. ‘Understood,’ he tells the pilots. ‘Give us the air support you can.’ He switches to the company vox channel. ‘Sergeant Gorthia, your squad will hold this position. All other legionaries, we make for the pass. We must leave the tanks and advance on foot.’

Khrossus stands at the threshold of the Word Bearers chapel, waiting for Ker Vanthax to become aware of his presence. The warsmith quells his impatience, and the urge to call to the chaplain and so break his concentration.

The chanting of the Word Bearers swirls around the walls of the chapel. It laps at Khrossus, a foul, maddening tide. The sound has become a visible thing. It flows over the floor of the chamber. It is fluid and mist, and it trembles like

flesh, and it has the strength of stone. Colours whisper of dreams, of madness, of burning worlds. The dome of the chamber is blurry. Khrossus looks once, and feels as if he might fall up and through the ceiling, plunging all the way through the Carchera system, and then onwards, out of the materium altogether.

He looks away quickly. He has no doubt that what Ker Vanthax said was true. This is a bloody world. And whether its history has brought it close to the warp, or whether the thinness of the veil between the materium and the immaterium is what controlled the history, dark powers are close to the surface here.

Ker Vanthax weaves in and out of the chanting trance. His face is obscured by the shadows and colours, but now and then his features become clear, and his gaze leaves the infinite, as if he is conscious once more of himself and is thinking rationally of strategy and tactical needs, rather than communing with forces beyond reason.

One such moment happens now. Ker Vanthax stops chanting. The sorcerous mist drops away from him, pooling at his feet, and he sees Khrossus. Without leaving his position in the centre of the star, Ker Vanthax says, 'You may speak with me, warsmith.'

The other Word Bearers do not react. They are too deeply entranced. They continue to chant, and Khrossus must raise his voice to be heard.

'The Ultramarines have taken the defence lasers,' he says. 'They will be making their way here. I need them desperate, more likely to make a mistake.'

'Does Guilliman make mistakes?'

'He trusted you at Calth.'

Ker Vanthax smiles. 'What do you want of us?' he asks.

'One way or another, they are approaching. We will hold them off for as long as we can.'

'But that will not be forever.'

'No. So we hit them as hard as we can for as long as we can. We need more than your storm as it is now, chaplain. We need a maelstrom.'

'Our sacrifice will truly begin, then.'

'Ours will not tarry long behind,' says Khrossus.

'No,' the chaplain agrees. 'And it will be a small price to pay to behold such glory.'

'Farewell.'

'Farewell, warsmith.'

Khrossus lingers as Ker Vanthax immerses himself once more in his trance, chanting words fit to make stone scream. The colours intensify. The snickering

mist spins more violently around the Word Bearers. It thickens, too. The edges of their cloaks seem ragged, as if they are dissolving into the mist. Above, the dome twists. Khrossus dares one more glance upwards, and it is as if he is looking through the eye of a cyclone. The power of the Word Bearers' summoning grows, and it demands much of them. They will never leave this circle alive, but what they have called upon will be monstrous.

Word comes that the defence lasers have been taken, and Guilliman orders the *Ultimus Mundi* and its escorts to head back to position themselves above Siderius. The ships have not even begun to move when Prayto staggers. He grips the railing of the strategium hard enough to crack the brass. He winces in pain, and blood trickles from his ear.

'A pulse of warp energy,' Prayto gasps. 'The warp activity is massive.' He is struggling to form words. 'The storm...'

'Auspex,' Guilliman calls. 'System sweep. What is happening out there?'

He barely needs to ask. Something rises from over the horizon of Carchera, in the direction of Siderius, and shoots into the void. It is a braided geyser of non-light, and the materium cracks around it. Tendrils of warp insanity spread out from the cracks, spectral fingers reaching around the planet, exploring and tasting reality, and eroding it.

The ships are halfway back over the ocean to the land when the scans are completed. 'The warp storm is spreading,' says Kallan. 'It has extended far beyond the Mandeville point. Its speed...' She shakes her head.

'Is impossible,' Guilliman finishes.

'It is spreading around the system.'

'The enemy seeks to plunge the entire system into the warp,' says Prayto. He straightens, recovering his strength.

'How much time before that happens?' Guilliman asks.

'Two days,' Prayto answers. 'Perhaps less.'

'Long enough,' says Guilliman, though he feels the grains drop through the sandglass with dizzying velocity. If the fleet is still in the system two days from now, that will be a most terrible defeat. It will not take two days for Aquila to take the space station, and it will not take Corvo two days to defeat the Iron Warriors fleet. The situation on Carchera is more uncertain, but the Destroyers will do what they must.

As if reading his thoughts, Prayto says, 'And if Hierax cannot reach his target in time?'

‘He will,’ Guilliman says. He will not give voice to the darker eventuality just yet, though he will be bringing the squadron into position to carry out their worst. He would not sacrifice Carchera, but now he must face the possibility of a lesser price, but one that would still be a stain upon his conscience.

The orbital bombardment of Siderius looms in his future.

The Destroyers make good progress at first. The road is still intact for several kilometres. The first rockfall would have blocked all vehicular passage. The legionaries, however, climb over it almost as fast as they march. The first legionaries to reach the top of the barricade provide cover for their battle-brothers coming up behind them. There is no attack, and the company moves deeper into the pass.

The latest vox message from Iasus weighs on Hierax’s mind, and urges him forward. The system is falling to madness, and the rapid capture of the keep feels less and less like a victory, and more like a pointless delay on the way to Siderius. He is determined to reach the hive and defeat the enemy. He can extrapolate the fate that might befall the city if he fails, and he will not have that happen. The tactics of his company are the most brutal in the Legion, but only and always directed at the enemy. They destroy in order to save, and they will save Siderius.

And Carchera.

And Terra.

But then, suddenly, to the rear, comes the rumble of mechanical thunder. The sound is immense. A great machine has come to life, and though kilometres distant, it is so deep and vast it is as if the jaws of the planet itself are grinding open. At the same moment comes a string of explosions, and then the booms of the very mountains crumbling. In the distance, towards the entrance to the pass, a huge dust cloud rises, and Hierax knows the way back is closed.

As the tumult of rockfall fades away, Hierax makes out a new sound. Echoing through the pass comes the marching of metal feet and the crunching of treads over stone.

The second enemy, the one Hierax had sought but did not find, is coming for him.

# FOUR

## Closing Jaws

‘Incoming torpedoes,’ one of the enslaved officers aboard the *Barbican* reports.

Darhug watches the salvo define itself on the pict screens. It is wide and heavy. The squadron must have fired from every tube. The torpedoes are staggered. Some come in clusters, and others are isolated. And there are so many. If the las-fire he has directed at the distant squadron has caused any damage, it has done nothing to affect the vessels’ power to strike.

Savarran is defiant and confident. ‘They’ll have to do more than that to cripple this station.’ The legionary’s sneer is the surface expression of a hatred so deep Darhug can almost hear it thrum. It is as if Savarran seeks victory through sheer force of anger, an anger caused by the certainty of defeat and the refusal to countenance that end. Darhug will use that anger. He will use whatever he can to destroy the hope of the Ultramarines.

‘Some of those are boarding torpedoes,’ says Darhug. ‘They are the true purpose of this attack. We don’t know which ones hold the enemy, and they know we can’t destroy every target in a barrage this big.’ He thinks for a moment, then orders, ‘Hit the clusters fast. Kill as many torpedoes in those groups as possible, then focus on the lone targets. Priority to the left and right flanks.’ The stragglers, he thinks – the individual threats that can be ignored, versus the clusters that must be dealt with if the station is to avoid major damage – those are the targets that might hold the Ultramarines.

The station’s batteries redirect their aim away from the vessels and towards the

torpedoes. The targets are small and moving quickly. They challenge the auto-targeting sensors and the skill of the crew. There is a distant flash, a faint boiling of gases as the lascannons hit the clusters. Then the defensive fire turns to the missiles on the edges of the salvo, the ones that would appear to be trying to arrive unnoticed.

The boarding torpedo is at the rear of the cluster, and the chain of explosions buffets it, sweeps over it, and then it flies on towards the space station.

‘We are doing well,’ says Legionary Vascas, who is piloting the torpedo. He is a compact figure for a Space Marine, strong as a clenched fist, but precise as a dagger.

‘To come this far, yes,’ Aquila agrees. ‘But this accomplishment will be meaningless if we do not reach the target.’ *And how many of us will make it there?* he thinks. He has no way of knowing how many other boarding torpedoes still survive. He has ordered complete vox silence during the run. There must be no way for the Iron Warriors to determine which torpedoes are the real threat until it is too late.

‘They are no longer firing on us,’ says Vascas. ‘They are doing what you predicted, captain.’

‘What I hoped,’ Aquila corrects. His practical is based on as reasonable a theoretical as he has been able to form, but too much of what will happen in the next few minutes relies on chance. His gamble is that the Iron Warriors will seek the torpedoes that are harder to find, harder to see, and view them as the danger. So all the boarding ships are part of the clustered shots, trailing the other torpedoes by just enough distance that they will not be destroyed in a chain reaction.

Chance governs the flight of the torpedo, and governs its success. Aquila has done what he can. His cold blue eyes have seen more than their share of the vagaries of chance as its currents run for the Ultramarines, and then against them. Guilliman has taught the Legion never to disregard chance in the construction of practicals. To dismiss it is to court disaster, yet it escapes the grasp of the most rigorous analysis. It is the variable that is always there, always beyond control. Aquila feels the strength of chance now. He feels *its* control, *its* grasp. It holds his boarding torpedo and those of the rest of his company. Perhaps it holds the fate of the Legion once more.

Through the viewing blocks of the torpedo’s pilot compartment, he sees the web of Iron Warriors’ fire cut the void to ribbons. The torpedo is getting closer to

the *Barbican*, and from this distance, still it appears that there can be no possible approach. The concentration of las from the station and the orbital platforms looks too intense for anything to get through. And in the near space of the gigantic weapons network, it seems like nothing does.

Explosions flare, a constellation of splashes of light in the void. A random streak of las sears past the bow of the torpedo.

‘Maintain course,’ Aquila tells Vascas. Any deviation in the torpedo’s straight line would give away its nature.

‘Not much point in evasive manoeuvres, is there?’ says the pilot.

‘There is not,’ Aquila agrees. Coming in straight, they are subject to no more than the general defensive fire of the station. Should they attempt to change course, they will draw a concerted attack.

The boarding torpedo passes into the space between the weapons platforms and the space station. The *Barbican* looms ahead. It is massively defended, but it is not impregnable. And the Ultramarines torpedoes are aimed at the bridge.

Darhug’s lips pull back in a silent snarl. The lascannons have taken out many of the torpedoes, but some are getting closer. The hits against the station are about to begin.

Noticing his expression, Savarran says, ‘We have destroyed most of the targets.’

‘Anything less than all is not enough,’ Darhug snaps. ‘The odds are high that any of the torpedoes that reach us will be filled with Ultramarines.’ Darhug has little respect for chance, but he does have a grim, spiteful belief in fate. Though he knows what his will be on this day, he will fight against it until he draws his final breath.

‘Impact, starboard flank,’ one of the crew warns.

This is the first torpedo to slip through the fire. It hits and explodes. The void shields shimmer, absorbing the blast. A few moments later, a second torpedo hits close to the same spot. It overloads the void shield and punches into the armour plating of the *Barbican*. The damage reports come in moments later. The torpedoes have done little, but Darhug already felt a kind of relief when he heard the explosions. He has no fear of this kind of missile.

The turrets of the *Barbican* rotate back and forth, sweeping across the firmament, setting it ablaze. The big clusters of torpedoes are all destroyed. Most of the flanking weapons are too. Darhug knows the station will take more strikes, but now, in disbelief, he wonders if just maybe the las barrage has

succeeded in destroying the boarding torpedoes.

Then an officer cries, 'Convergence!'

The moment is a brief, cruel answer to Darhug's reluctant flare of hope. A group of torpedoes, leftovers of clusters all coming in at different angles, are streaking towards the same point. Darhug realises these are what he has been seeking. Only they are inside the station's arc of fire. He sees them coming. He has known all along they were coming. But he sees them too late.

'All weapons focus on the convergence,' he orders, for all the good it will do. He looks at where these torpedoes will hit, and he turns to leave the bridge, Savarran at his heels. 'The enemy is boarding,' he voxes his legionaries. Behind him, the viewing port is filled with a sudden bright glow. One of the torpedoes has died just short of its goal.

When Darhug reaches the hall, he feels thudding vibrations come through the decks, and the grinding of the torpedoes' heads cutting through the hull.

The Ultramarines have arrived.

'This is not a retreat,' Vûrtaq mutters. 'It is an attack.' He has been whispering this mantra to himself since the fleet of the XIII Legion began its pursuit of his squadron. 'Not a retreat. An attack.' His knowledge of Khrossus' strategy has not helped. All that he has felt is a visceral sensation, the shame of fleeing.

Until now.

The Iron Warriors ships are closing in on Himera. The rocky planet looms large in the viewport of the *Warforged*. Now the warsmith's battle plan seems less abstract.

'Make for the far side of Himera,' Vûrtaq orders. 'Lowest possible anchor.'

As the planet draws nearer, Vûrtaq's hatred for the Ultramarines does not subside, but it is joined by a resurgent determination. Today will not mark the end of his company. Not after the blow he is about to strike.

The shame of retreat evaporates. The true attack is about to begin.

On the bridge of the *Glorious Nova*, Lucretious Corvo eyes the hololithic projections displaying the relative positions of the fleet and the squadron.

'It feels wrong,' says Corvo.

'What does?' Sergeant Ancevan asks.

'This chase. Everything about it. Iron Warriors do not retreat.'

'What could one squadron do against a fleet?' says Ancevan.

'Nothing,' Corvo admits.

'Anything other than a retreat would be suicide.'

‘You underestimate the indomitability of the Iron Warriors. When they set their minds to confront an enemy, they will do so until nothing is left of one side or the other. Yes, retreat is the only rational course of action here, but why put themselves in this position in the first place? Sending a single squadron against an entire fleet?’ Corvo shakes his head. ‘A hit and run? That kind of tactic is foreign to Perturabo and his sons.’

‘Perhaps they expected the fleet to be caught by surprise and much diminished by the ambush.’

‘Maybe,’ Corvo concedes reluctantly. The hypothesis does not sit well with him. The actions of the Iron Warriors are both logical and nonsensical. Flight is their only option. The situation, though, is out of keeping with the IV Legion’s philosophy of war.

‘This could go on for a long time,’ says Ancevan. The distance between the fleet and the squadron has been shrinking very slowly.

‘The chase will not last forever. Our more powerful ships are gaining on them.’ Corvo has been sending a steady stream of las and cannon shells and torpedoes at the strike cruiser. It will not be long now before the Iron Warriors vessel comes within effective targeting range and is destroyed. ‘They will have to do something.’ If there is one thing Corvo cannot believe, it is that the Iron Warriors will simply flee until caught.

‘Perhaps they’re drawing us away?’

‘From Carchera? Possibly.’

The spreading warp storm is disrupting communications, but not entirely. The vox officers are kept very busy, every message to and from the other arms of the Ultramarines fleet requiring multiple attempts. Even so, enough is getting through to give Corvo a sense of the broader battlefield, including what is happening on Carchera. Diverting the rest of the fleet from Carchera is a plausible explanation, but Corvo is unsatisfied. From what he knows of the situation on the ground, the presence of the entire fleet would make little difference. The only new option would be a massive land invasion, exactly the kind of tactic that would take too much time to stage. Ancevan’s suggestion is a workable hypothesis. It does explain the actions of the Iron Warriors, but the explanation is a weak one, and does not truly fit the character of the IV Legion as Corvo has come to know it.

The gap narrows further, but not quickly enough for Corvo to prevent the squadron from disappearing around the far side of Himera. Runes surround hololiths of the squadron on the tactical screens, warning of the speculative

nature of the indicated position. A few minutes later, the Iron Warriors disappear from the screens. All that remains is a single rune of uncertainty, blinking on the far side of the schematic of the planet.

‘Auspex?’ Corvo asks.

‘No sign,’ says the officer. ‘The enemy has not moved off. The ships would appear to be in low orbit.’

*But where and why?* Corvo wonders.

‘Detailed scan of Himera completed, captain,’ the auspex officer says, anticipating his next order.

Corvo and Ancevan turn to the tactarium table. A magnified hololith of Himera floats above it. Data streams down the table’s screens, providing a detailed portrait of the world. Less than three thousand kilometres in diameter, Himera is airless, the system’s sun little more than a bright blue point. Himera is a dead world. It was never colonised, though mining stations dot its surface. The extraction of ore is a difficult, painful process here, one that would be abandoned if not for the commanding need of resources by Carchera and the wider Imperium.

The mining stations are dark, barely registering on the scans, radiating nothing but residual energy. Either the miners have fled Himera, or they are all dead.

‘Using the planet as a shield?’ Ancevan muses.

Corvo drums his fingers on the table. ‘A defensive game isn’t in the character of the Iron Warriors either,’ he says. ‘At least they’re not running any more.’

‘How long do they think they can hide from us?’

‘They’re wrong if they think they can hide at all.’

Corvo moves to the pulpit. ‘Orders to the fleet,’ he says. ‘We encircle the planet. Attack pattern Delphi.’

He will not allow the Iron Warriors to hide, and he will not give them time to prepare an attack. The fleet will spread out like the claws of a grasping hand, sweep around Himera from all directions, and there will be nowhere to run. A single, swift, devastating blow and Corvo will erase the IV Legion’s ships from the system.

As the fleet closes in on Himera, the hand opens. The *Glorious Nova*’s course will take it over the north pole of the planet. Corvo knows the manoeuvre is the correct tactical move. It is what Guilliman needs Corvo to do – a quick, definitive end to the threat.

But it feels wrong.

It all feels wrong.

The earth trembles under Sergeant Gorthia's feet, and he knows the jaws of a trap are snapping shut. Third Squad and the tanks of the Destroyers are just outside the mouth of the pass. The shaking is everywhere. Rocks break loose and cascade down the mountainsides. And this is no earthquake. It goes on too long, is too steady, too mechanical.

Gorthia turns to look in the direction of the keep, and he sees that he was wrong. The trap's jaws are not closing. They are opening.

The plain between Third Squad and the keep vibrates. The rocks that cover it jump up and down as a vast area of the plain begins to rise. The stones have camouflaged an immense trap door, which lifts now, powered by enormous pistons, big as manufactorum smokestacks. The hatch, a hundred metres on a side, rises higher and higher, dirt and stone raining down from the edges, and it reveals one more orbital gun. The cannon is massive. Its barrel is as wide as the other four guns combined. Its monstrous shadow extends across the land, but its menace reaches for the sky.

Gorthia does not have to give the order to send an alert. He hears Legionary Crethus shouting on the vox, warning the squadron in orbit to stay away. Gorthia knows the call comes too late. Everything is too late. The layers of the enemy's deception peel away. He sees how deep they went, and how brutal an attack they concealed.

Castellan battle-automata march out from underground.

The force that assembles to defend the gun and advance on his position would not be able to take on the full company in open combat. But it will be more than enough to destroy his squad.

'The Mechanicum is here in force,' Crethus voxes, and Gorthia hopes that the words reach the *Ultimus Mundi*, because Guilliman will understand what this means for Hierax and the company.

The tanks, the very weapons that could smash this enemy apart, are inert, vulnerable, their crews adding their numbers to the company in the pass. A storm of enemy fire falls upon the vehicles, melting armour, blowing up fuel tanks, igniting ammunition. Gorthia leaps into the nearest Predator, Crethus a moment behind him. Gorthia mans the cannon while Crethus fires up the engine. His squad of ten could, with enough time, get as many as five tanks moving against the enemy. That might be enough to make a difference. It might be enough to help. Only there is no time.

Gorthia fires the Predator's autocannon. The shells strike the Castellan in its mid-section, severing the legs from the upper body.

Then the entire world thrums. The noise is physical. It deafens Gorthia. Even inside his armour, the hair on his arms stands on end in answer to the cataclysmic discharge of energy that has occurred. The great gun has fired.

A massive barrage rips open the tank, the disintegrating beams slicing through to take Gorthia too, because everything is too late.

Carchera lashes out in anger. Its fury is a searing blaze of light. Guilliman squints against the monstrous flare that pierces the void. Its brilliance is divine, but it brings only destruction. The *Honour Bound* takes the hit. The las annihilates the void shields. It is as though they did not exist. It strikes the frigate to the fore of the engines and stabs right through the superstructure and the bridge, and spears infinitely into the night. A ball of expanding plasma bursts through the hull of the *Honour Bound*. The superstructure tears away, adamantium shredded like ribbon, an eruption of fragments sailing off on the path of the beam.

'*Honour Bound*,' the vox officer begins to call on instinct, then stops. There is no one to answer.

The forward section of the frigate stays on course. It is not quite dark. Fires spread and lick out into the void from the shattered hull. The dead vessel continues its last voyage, heading for the position over Siderius. Even its corpse is forbidden from reaching that point, and a second shot comes, far sooner than Guilliman would have thought possible. The beam rips down the centre of the *Honour Bound*'s carcass. Once again, terrible, stabbing light fills the viewport of the *Ultimus Mundi*. When it fades, the frigate has disintegrated. Larger pieces of the wreckage fall into the atmosphere, glowing red as they burn up. A fragment that still has the rough shape of the hull moves off into the void. The fires are extinguished. It is nothing but cold, splintered bone, a broken monument to war.

Shipmaster Taius Netertian gives the order to retreat. The crew has anticipated the order. Everyone on the bridge knows too well what must be done in these critical moments. Guilliman does not interfere. It is his task to look further ahead, and to counter the enemy's move.

'That second shot was too fast,' says Prayto.

'The Mechanicum has had time to prepare,' says Guilliman. 'They must have built up an enormous reservoir of plasma.'

'Even so,' Gorod says, 'how many times can a gun of that power fire in such quick succession?'

'Before running out of energy or before destroying itself?' Prayto asks.

‘It will fire enough times,’ Guilliman answers. ‘Just enough.’ Whether the lethal shots destroy ships or not, the cannon eats away at time, and the grains are streaming through the sandglass.

The *Ultimus Mundi* is into its turn when the next shot comes. The las strikes the battleship just aft of the bow. The void shields, far more powerful than those of the *Honour Bound*, resist better, absorbing more of the annihilating energy of the blast. Then they too collapse, and the entire leviathan of war shakes. Netertian jerks in his throne, straining against the mechadendrites that link him to the *Ultimus Mundi*’s machine-spirit.

Guilliman feels the strength of the blow in the heaving motion of the huge ship. Even before the klaxons sound, he knows that the las has struck like a dagger plunging into flesh. The hull is breached. Fires sweep the decks. Bulkhead doors slam down, sealing off the area, dooming the crew members who have not already been burned or sucked into the void. A screen a short distance to the left of the command pulpit lights up with long columns of red. Guilliman ignores the damage reports for now. What matters is that the ship is still mobile, and can still manoeuvre. If it cannot move beyond the gun’s horizon before it is hit again, then the information on that screen is irrelevant.

The next shot misses, and the *Ultimus Mundi* has completed its turn, its engines straining to build momentum, a glacier attempting to sprint. After too short a reprieve, the beam lances from the planet, and hits the *Cavascor*. Flames envelop the middle of its starboard flank, but the cruiser survives. A brief message from its bridge signals that its race is not done yet.

The cannon fires at a forbidding rate, but the monster must draw a breath between its flames, and the ships move out of its range. Even before they do, Guilliman has left the command pulpit and is in the strategium, considering the three arms of his attack. He has hurled a trident at the heart of the foe, but he has not struck home yet. And this move, the one he *had* to make, is seeming more and more like the one the Iron Warriors wanted him to make all along.

The warp storm is still getting worse. Communications across the fleet are ragged, but enough are getting through for Guilliman to have a broad sense of the battle. He knows that Aquila has boarded the station, and he knows that Corvo is closing with the Iron Warriors squadron. But he is not on the station with Aquila, and he is not on the bridge with Corvo. Down on Carchera, though, Hierax is inside a trap. The Destroyers have the Mechanicum at their back, and the Iron Warriors before them, and are caught in a narrow pass.

Guilliman’s options are few, but they are greater than none. ‘We are going

planetside,' he says to Gorod and Prayto. Doing so will narrow his focus to one portion of the battle. Keeping hold of the broader strategic picture will be more difficult. Yet this is what must be done. 'We strike with speed and fury.'

The grains are running, faster and faster.

# FIVE

## Triggers

The Destroyers have advanced against the Iron Warriors' artillery. It could not target the company directly, and Hierax has led his legionaries in short, rapid charges through the chaos of explosions and triggered rock slides. Hierax has been fighting desperately to keep up the speed of the advance.

'They cannot stop us,' he voxed to the company. 'But they think they can slow us. Defeat them twice over!'

And so the Destroyers have closed in on the last kilometre that separates them from Siderius, keeping ahead of the Mechanicum forces behind them, though the distance has been diminishing. The approach of the Mechanicum was preceded by a sustained series of explosions to the rear. Hierax was puzzled at first, but then the thick clouds of dust and the distant rumble of heavy armour gave him his answer. The barriers he and his men climbed over were a double trap. They slowed the Destroyers and forced them to leave their tanks. But all this time, they had been mined, ready to be blown away when it was time for the Mechanicum to close in. And now the company is struggling against artillery fire from two directions.

The pass has narrowed dramatically. The cliff faces have been shattered, filling the pass with rubble. There is virtually no room to manoeuvre, and the Destroyers must clamber over endless barricades of jagged granite, and they have now reached a position where the Iron Warriors can attack them directly. The traitors have placed their armour in fixed positions, and the Predators

unleash an impenetrable curtain of las.

The advance has stalled. Hierax crouches against a hill of tumbled rock. Concentrated artillery fire pummels the ground just beyond the rise, and a crossfire of las stitches across the peak. The barrage has driven the Ultramarines back. The Predators were a surprise, and casualties are high. The tanks are in sheltered positions, high up on the cliffs on either side. They might as well be in reinforced bunkers.

Hunkered down beside Hierax, Aphovos says, 'I am feeling the absence of our tanks.' He has to shout to make himself heard.

'A well-engineered absence,' Hierax growls. 'The traitors have drawn us where they knew we could not bring them, but they had time to instal their own.'

'If they keep us pinned down here much longer, the Mechanicum will be upon us.'

'We need a hole in the Iron Warriors barrage,' Hierax says. *And quickly*, he thinks. Aphovos is right. If the Mechanicum catch the Destroyers here, being pinned down indefinitely is not the worst that might happen, and that would be bad enough.

Peering through the smoke and dust kicked up by the bombardment, Hierax surveys the mountain faces on both sides. The pass is so choked and narrow, it is hardly more than a crevasse between walls hundreds of metres high. On the right-hand side, where the cliff has fallen to create the barrier, the slope of the rubble against the rock wall is not as steep as to Hierax's left.

'Brother Antalcidas,' Hierax voxes the Destroyer Dreadnought, 'we have need of you on the front lines.'

'What are you thinking?' Aphovos asks.

Hierax points to the right. He traces the line of the rubble along its rise from the jumbled floor of the pass, and up the mountain to one of the Iron Warriors' tank positions. 'The enemy can be reached along this path,' he says. 'A sudden, massive attack should be able to take out the heavy armour there. That might give us the hole we need in the barrage.'

'That ridge is very narrow,' the Librarian says. 'We would have to go single file. They could pick us off easily long before we got to them.'

'Which is why we will not take that route.'

Antalcidas clanks over to Hierax's position. The Dreadnought marches heavily over the broken terrain, his massive piston legs crushing rock beneath each deliberate tread. Antalcidas' progress through the pass has been the most slowed by the rockfalls, but he has kept up a steady pace, blowing up what he could not

climb.

‘Brother-captain,’ Antalcidas says, his voice ancient and metallic through the vox-caster of his sarcophagus.

Hierax tells the Dreadnought what he has in mind. ‘If you take the southern slope, do you think you can reach the tanks’ positions?’

‘I can,’ says Antalcidas.

‘Good. Scour them from existence. We will move up directly from this position and draw their fire.’

Hierax voxes his sergeants. ‘Prepare your squads for a massed charge.’

Antalcidas turns and makes his way back towards the beginning of the rubble’s southern rise. As soon as he begins his ascent, Hierax signals the beginning of the attack. The Destroyers rush the mountain face. The squads of ten move in tight formations, sending up blistering waves of fire before them. The rock face bursts from the impact of bolter shells. The dust in the pass grows thick as night, adding to the Ultramarines’ cover.

The Iron Warriors respond with fury. Tank las and autocannon shells cut through the dust clouds, blowing up the slope, destroying cover, sending up shrapnel of stone, of ceramite and of bone into the air.

Hierax seeks no shelter. There is none to be had. He leads his squad in sharp jerks to the left and the right. He knows the Destroyers cannot reach the tanks. The climb will soon be too steep, and the Ultramarines will become slow-moving, helpless targets, exposed to the enemy’s guns.

*They seek to delay us, Hierax thinks. Now we will delay them. Delay them from looking where they should.*

He climbs higher, leaning in to the steepening slope, surrounded by the pounding chaos of explosions. The world is a dark, smothering cloud cut through by lascannon beams. If he is almost blind, so are the Iron Warriors, and the traitors are marking their own positions with muzzle flashes. The smoke and dust are so thick that Hierax cannot see Antalcidas, and the obscurity gives him hope for the Dreadnought’s success. He does not break vox silence, but trusts in the indomitability of the ancient warrior.

The Destroyers force their way higher yet, a disciplined mass of death moving closer to its target, as if it might truly scrape the Iron Warriors from the mountainside. Then more enemy fire strikes the Ultramarines, slamming into their right flank. The Mechanicum forces are near, in range now for direct fire. From above and to the side, a storm catches the Destroyers in a vice.

The Iron Warriors retreat at speed down the *Barbican*'s corridor, back towards the centre of the station. The impulse is to pursue them. Aquila's body reacts to that impulse, and his squad is with him. But instinct does not govern him. Reason is his watchword, and reason recognises the sudden retreat of the Iron Warriors for the anomaly it is.

'*Back!*' Aquila shouts, just in time. The Ultramarines retreat in their turn, and moments later, explosives detonate the length of the hall, along the walls, floor and ceiling. The next deck up collapses, and the floor opens up to the levels below. Thousands of tonnes of metal compact onto one another. A portion of the space station closes in on itself, tight as a fist. Aquila and his squad scramble back from the crushing walls.

'Find us another route,' says Aquila.

Legionary Vascas calls up a schematic of the *Barbican* on a data-slate. 'If we return to the last intersection and go up three levels,' he says, 'we can go around this collapse. It will be a bit slower.'

Aquila nods, and voxes Tarius, who leads the other contingent of Ultramarines. The complements of the boarding torpedoes have succeeded in forming up into two groups, and they have done so quickly, though Aquila wishes they had done so even faster. He updates the sergeant of his squad's position and destination.

'*They've blocked us here too,*' says Tarius, '*but we have a way forward to your alternative junction.*'

'Then we will see you there,' Aquila says.

'The enemy's tactics are futile,' says Vascas. 'They can't block every route to the bridge without rendering the station useless to them.'

'I don't think they could even if they wanted to,' Aquila tells him. 'They don't have the numbers. How many Iron Warriors have we seen?'

'Two,' says Vascas.

Aquila voxes Tarius again. 'Have you been able to estimate the traitor's strength?'

'*Not with any confidence, but we've only seen three.*'

Is it possible, Aquila wonders, that the Iron Warriors only have a single squad on the station? 'It's a delaying tactic. Everything is a delaying tactic. How many entrances are there to the bridge?'

'One,' Vascas says.

Many routes to the bridge, but only one door. 'These are nuisance tactics,' says Aquila. 'The traitors will make their stand at the bridge.'

Aquila tried to avoid the main routes to the bridge. The most direct path would

have been down the access corridors that have collapsed. The Iron Warriors anticipated his move. Now the route that Vascas has designated will take the company through the space station's major arteries. 'Expect our route to be barred again,' Aquila says to Vascas. 'Make sure we have plenty of alternatives. We may have to choose them quickly.' He wonders how many demolition charges the traitors have, how much damage they can really do to the great station.

Following Vascas' guidance, Aquila takes the squads up three levels to one of the primary junctions of the *Barbican's* network of corridors, where they meet with Tarius. The Ultramarines company re-forms in a grand hall whose walls and ceiling are clad in obsidian. Inlays of gold and diamond depict the ever-expanding reach of the Imperium. Worlds are linked to worlds, and systems to systems. In each system is a glittering cluster of diamonds, forming the icons of the space stations holding guard. The rays of their might extend out from their systems to meet, and join, the lines radiating from other systems. Thus are formed the unbreakable links of the Imperium's might. The art travels the length of the walls and over the vaulted ceiling. The inlays are a representation of might, a delicate but unbreakable tracery sunk into a canvas of brute strength.

They are, to Aquila's eyes, a bitter irony.

The Ultramarines charge down the hall, making for the centre of the station. Aquila's expectations are fulfilled when the next junction is blocked by more rubble. This destruction has not just taken place. The Iron Warriors expected the station to be boarded, and took precautions early. Vascas is correct, though. They have not blocked every possible route. Another detour presents itself. This one requires the Ultramarines to follow a perimeter route around almost a quarter of the station before heading towards the centre again. As he pounds along the marble flagstones of the deck, Aquila comes to see, in the gold lines of the walls, a mockery of the zigzagging route the Iron Warriors are forcing him to take.

'These delays are the work of cowards,' says Vascas.

'They are the work of strategy. Their hope is to defeat us with delay.' *And they are winning*, he thinks. He has no choice but to take the circuitous path. Trying to blast through the walls to reach the bridge would take even more time. Vascas does well in finding the most efficient approaches possible. Even so, Aquila feels time slipping away from him.

*A single squad*, he thinks. He is more and more convinced of the truth of this supposition. A single squad is waging a powerful battle against him, and the Iron Warriors have yet to commit to face-to-face combat.

‘We’re almost there,’ says Vascas, consulting his data-slate again. ‘There is a staircase around the next bend. If it is intact, it will take us to the bridge.’

The staircase is battered but intact. It is built of marble, a monumental ornament. It is a high, wide descent intended for processions. The *Barbican* is a symbol as much as it is a fortress. It is a symbol of Carchera’s loyalty to the Imperium, and of the Imperium’s commitment to the defence of its citizens. No war has come to the system since its Compliance in the early years of the Great Crusade. No war until now, and the Iron Warriors have scarred the grand staircase with fallen decking and smashed stone from the high ceiling. Golden statues of the Emperor and his primarchs lie across the span, toppled from the pedestals that line both sides of the steps. Aquila observes that the IV Legion’s anger has struck loyalists and traitors alike. Only Perturabo’s grim figure still stands, gazing impassively at his shattered brothers.

‘The wrath of the abandoned,’ Aquila mutters.

The staircase descends the equivalent of three decks and ends at the wide archway to the bridge. The doors are shut, and before them are massive heaps of wreckage. The Iron Warriors have brought down the pillars supporting the vaults of the great hall. They have created a formidable barricade, one with only a narrow gap, barely wide enough for a single Space Marine to pass. The Iron Warriors are hidden.

‘An invitation to suicide,’ says Vascas.

‘Declined,’ says Aquila. ‘We do not accept the battlefield they offer.’ He voxed the entire company. ‘Brothers, let us destroy this insult. Sergeants, wall formation.’

The Ultramarines descend the stairs like a relentless machine. Each of the squads forms up as a line across the steps, one behind the other, with Aquila’s in the lead. Before the captain is a third of the way down, the barricade is exposed to the fire of the entire company. The Ultramarines march in lockstep, an iron unity of discipline and skill. They are a collective entity of war, a single will of violence, perfected. Bolt shells strike the barricade with a simultaneity so powerful, it is as if they had become the power fist of an invisible Titan. A storm of pulverised metal and stone fills the great hall. Rockets slam into the gap in the barrier, filling it with fire. In that confined space, the explosions are infernos beyond ferocity. Other rockets hit the bridge doors, terrible battering rams. They are the hammering of justice itself, demanding entry, demanding an accounting.

The Ultramarines are halfway down the stairs, and there is no return fire. Two-thirds of the way down, and the barricade is crumbling, a broken shell. When

Aquila reaches the floor of the great hall, there is nothing before him but fire and dust. Broken spears of metal glow molten in the vortex. Aquila blinks through the filters of his auto-lenses until he can make out the cooler shape of the entrance to the bridge beyond the bombardment of his company. There are no heat signatures of anything living on this side of the doors.

The battle of the station is a game of move and countermove, many of them occurring before a single round has been fired. Surrounded by the storm, Aquila takes the evidence before him and tracks the moves back. He is more convinced than ever that the actual strength of the Iron Warriors is a single squad. So small a force must avoid open battle with his company for as long as possible, and their victory is measured by the stealing of time from the Ultramarines.

Thus far, Aquila counts the contest aboard the *Barbican* as a victory for the IV Legion. But now the Iron Warriors are at bay. They can only play for mere moments. Still, their skill at siege warfare has served them. They have lured the Ultramarines into the systematic destruction of nothing at all.

The bridge lies open. Aquila sees a second invitation, so he does not order the fire to cease. The walls of the station are thick, and though the Ultramarines have reduced the doors to molten slag, they cannot punch their way through the walls themselves. Not without wasting still more time.

The doorway is wide, but a single squad, well-positioned, could still do considerable damage to warriors trying to cross the threshold.

Aquila's choices are limited. He will still use what he can. From cover, inside the bridge, the Iron Warriors must believe themselves to be immune to surprise. They would have no reason to believe otherwise. He will give them a reason.

'Maintain fire,' he voxes the company. 'On my signal, create a gap leading to the bridge entrance. Keep covering fire just above our heads.'

The orders are acknowledged. The signal is given. The charge is staggered, but it is as precise as the descent, and as unstoppable. A devastating gale of bolter shells screaming over his head, Aquila runs for the entrance, Vascas and the squad at his heels, Legionary Berricus at his shoulder. Berricus carries a flamer, and he sends the burning promethium jetting through the entrance as they approach. At the threshold, Aquila and Berricus veer around the walls, blasting and burning the dark to either side. The rest of the squad comes in behind them, and the Ultramarines fire spreads to cover one hundred and eighty degrees.

The Iron Warriors are attacking at last. They opened up as Aquila entered, and he keeps moving, refining his aim to target the muzzle flashes in the smoky gloom. Shells smack into his chest and shoulders, the impact almost spinning

him around. He pushes on, racing towards the centre of the bridge, and as more and more of the company forces its way in, some of the traitors choose other targets.

There are civilians here, cowering on the floor. They are screaming in fear, their cries inaudible in the fury of battle. Aquila pities them, but all he can do for them is end this war as fast as possible.

He counts flashes from nine muzzles. He was right, then, only a squad. Ten seconds after he and Berricus cross the threshold, there are seven. There are six when the entire company has entered the vastness of the bridge, and the six are working hard to make their shots count. A crossfire catches Sergeant Galvius, and his helmet and skull explode. A dozen shells strike Legionary Nervix in the chest, shattering his armour and bone, turning his internal organs to mist.

But then there are five muzzle flashes. And now four.

*But why nine?* Aquila thinks. He has moved far onto the floor of the bridge. He is surrounded by work stations and cogitator banks. Servitors are writhing torches, and the bridge is a chaos of flame and smoke and shrapnel. The space is vast, and it is hard to see clearly for more than a few metres. Aquila tracks the flash of the enemy guns and trains his bolter on their shifting positions, but though the battle is turning against the Iron Warriors, as it must, he is uneasy. 'Why nine?' he says aloud.

'Captain?' Vascas is at his back, firing in the opposite direction.

'There should have been ten traitors. We have only seen nine. Not one of them an officer.' Aquila cannot believe that chance would have seen him killed by the torpedo barrage. The station did not suffer serious damage before the Ultramarines boarded. 'Where is their commander?'

The missing enemy amplifies a worry that has been growing at the back of Aquila's mind. He wonders if it is really possible that the Iron Warriors will be satisfied with a victory that is only delay. So little, for a Legion that lives by the great bitterness of pride.

Something else is happening.

Aquila scans the battle, trying to pierce the roaring madness, the billowing smoke, the searing blooms of electrical fires. If the tenth Iron Warrior is hidden, then Aquila must seek an absence.

He finds it. On the far side of the bridge from the entrance, there is a silence. The traitors' positions are all far from this point. The battle rages along lines that cut perpendicularly across the entrance. No one is fighting at the other end of the bridge. Nothing burns there. Nothing is happening there. It is a patch of deeper

dark, unlit by fire, concealed by smoke.

That portion of the bridge can still function.

Aquila hurls himself through the smoke towards the dark patch. As he does, the enemy guns suddenly concentrate on him. His squad runs interference, giving him covering fire. The smoke clears before him, and he sees the tenth Iron Warrior. The enemy is a captain, his armour marked by the scars of uncounted battles. He is still, unmoved by the combat on the bridge, an engine of war that has yet to engage. He stands at a bank of controls. They are operated by a pair of weeping mortals. The traitor has prepared for an interruption, and the instant that Aquila has the group in sight, a *krak* grenade lands at his feet. The explosion throws him to the right. He lands heavily, stunned, shrapnel embedded in the cracks in his armour.

The Iron Warrior presses his advantage, training his bolter on Aquila. Shells punch a hole in his armour's left flank. He rolls away, leaving a trail of blood, feeling things break and rupture inside his torso. He scrambles behind the wreckage of a control station, the traitor's shells following him. The Iron Warrior's attack is furious, a fight to protect the work in which the mortals are engaged, and so it is as vital for Aquila to stop this work.

He realises what the mortals are doing a few moments later, when the entire station shakes and murderous light flashes outside the bridge's viewports.

The defence platforms are turning their laser batteries on the *Barbican*.

The *Warforged* waits in low orbit, auspex arrays scanning for the approach of the Ultramarines fleet.

'We will have to leave this position soon,' says Navghar.

'Soon,' says Vûrtaq. 'Not *now*. If we want to see an armada die, we have to wait a little longer. That is a sight worth waiting for, don't you think? That is a deed worth doing, don't you think?' Vûrtaq smiles, already enjoying the bloody taste of triumph. Khrossus has shaped the battlefield of the Carchera system, and he has given this region of the war to Vûrtaq. Every detail of this attack has been prepared, from the precise position over Himerá at which to wait, to the *Warforged's* capacity for acceleration. It falls to Vûrtaq to enact Khrossus' plan and to savour the victory.

Only a few moments more now.

Vûrtaq takes a breath and prepares to give the order to destroy an armada.

The *Glorious Nova* is about to pass over Himerá's north pole.

'The enemy still has not moved,' comes the auspex report.

Corvo frowns. 'This isn't right,' he says.

'It is suicide for them to stay there,' says the officer. 'They have to know they can't hide, and what we're about to do.'

Corvo looks at the dead world below, its hemisphere filling the bottom half of the viewport. *They have to know*, he thinks. The words sound like a warning. *They have to know*.

Understanding dawns. Why would a single ship wait in low orbit for a fleet to close in around it? When it is vital to draw the fleet into low orbit too. Horror chills his blood. 'They *want* us to do it!' he shouts. 'All ships, break orbit, maximum acceleration! *Now!*'

At the same moment comes the call that the enemy is moving. Corvo feels the jaws of the trap slamming shut on his neck.

As Stormbirds drop two companies of Ultramarines on the plains leading to the monstrous defence laser, Guilliman feels the fraying of the campaign. He catches only short, confused bursts of vox traffic before he lands. They are partial, frustrating glimpses of the larger picture of the war, the picture from which he has, of necessity, turned his gaze. They tell him little except sudden urgency in the fleet, and of alarm from the squadron dispatched to the *Barbican*.

There has been a sudden, vicious turn of the tide. Rip currents threaten to steal more than time from him.

The collective roar of the tanks' engines is a fanfare of thunder, a clarion call of warning that a reckoning is coming to the foes of the Emperor. Guilliman climbs atop the Land Raider *Flame of Illyrium*. It is his mobile command centre and will be the lead vehicle, and he will be the figure of vengeance for the enemy to see and fear.

Prayto, standing next to the *Flame*, says, 'They will certainly know of our coming.'

Guilliman sees the value in that fact. 'Yes,' he says. 'Let them. Sound the war horns!' he commands the companies. 'Fire the guns! We will announce our coming.' To Prayto he says, 'We'll make them react to us before we are there.' Anything, he thinks, that might relieve the pressure on Hierax.

With a blast of war horns, the charge begins. Though the enemy is beyond the horizon, far out of range, the cannons fire, and Guilliman's thunder tears across the hard ground of Carchera. The sound is overwhelming and defiant. Standing astride the hatch of the *Flame of Illyrium*, Guilliman leans into the wind, tortured by the knowledge that he has attacked on three fronts, and triggered three traps.

# SIX

## The Final Grains

The sound comes to Khrossus over the mountains and through the pass. It is a sudden wave, a new surge of the tide. It threads its way through the clamour of battle and he can hear the distant drums of other cannons and great horns.

The sound is a herald of the end. It is the first real sign of the approaching inevitable. What remains to him to do now is try to hold it off a little bit longer.

All this crosses his mind before Magos Dominus Rissin voxes him. Khrossus barely needs to know the details of the threat.

*‘Two companies of Ultramarines are coming for the orbital cannon,’* says Rissin.

‘How far are they?’ Khrossus asks.

*‘Far enough. If we withdraw our forces from the pass, they will reach us in time to reinforce our defence.’*

‘How long will you be able to hold?’

There is a chattering squeal of binaric code. *‘The estimation is difficult.’* Though her voice is without emotion, her words convey her frustration. *‘We are subject to an unacceptable number of variables. We speculate an order of magnitude greater than is possible without the full complement of our forces.’*

The Whirlwind beside Khrossus sends up another volley of rockets. The rain of explosives comes down on the Ultramarines trying to climb the slope towards the tank emplacement. Khrossus’ legionaries are in staggered lines below him, and, under the direction of Sergeant Zennek present a solid wall of fire at the exit

from the pass.

‘*What do you propose, warsmith?*’ asks Rissin.

Khrossus considers his choice. With the Mechanicum contingent attacking the rear flank of the Ultramarines, the Iron Warriors could block the pass for some time yet. It is a question of which delay is the better. And the decision is clear. ‘We must hold the gun as long as we can,’ Khrossus says. ‘Without it, we cannot hold their ships at bay.’

There was another screech of binaric. ‘*Question – do you expect the Thirteenth Legion to bombard Siderius from orbit? The resultant civilian loss would be a deviation from Ultramarines norm.*’

‘It would be,’ says Khrossus. ‘But the Ultramarines are not the Salamanders. Guilliman is logical. He may decide that civilian deaths here will be counterbalanced by a much greater number saved on Terra.’ Khrossus is not certain Guilliman’s blood is cold enough to make that choice. He has heard Guilliman called ‘the human cogitator’. But he knows the Ultramarines primarch is not that cold. Perturabo would not hesitate. Just as he did not hesitate to sacrifice Khrossus’ company. The warsmith believes there is enough sentimentality in Guilliman that he will try to save everyone. What he is not sure of is how long Guilliman will be pushed before he decides he *cannot* save everyone. Given the stakes, this could well be that point. It is possible that victory or defeat will come down to a matter of minutes, so Khrossus must steal every moment he can. ‘Take your forces back and hold the gun,’ he says to Rissin. ‘We will do the same at Siderius.’

Thanks to the constricted pass and the placement of the tanks, the Iron Warriors are holding strong against the Destroyers. The defensive positions have almost evened the odds between the two Legions. Khrossus’ company is a depleted one, but it is eroding the strength of the Destroyers. What he does not understand is why the Ultramarines are trying to take the eastern cliff face. The slope is too steep. The attack makes no sense, yet somehow it must. The clouds of dust and smoke conceal much of the action from Khrossus, and he knows there is something in the Ultramarines’ actions that he does not see. This troubles him.

Khrossus believed he had reached a state of perfect fatalism. To his shame, he finds that he has not. It would seem he has a taste of Vûrtaq’s delusions. It is his duty to fight as if he could win. It is a weakness in this war to really believe that he can. Yet, knowing everything he does, the thought that he has overlooked something, that he has made a mistake that could lead to defeat, still eats at him like a canker.

Antalcidas ascends the rockfall, staying as close to the cliff face as he can. He must move around the larger boulders instead of destroying them, and this slows him down, but the frenzy of the battle on the slopes ahead and below him conceals his approach. In response to his situation, a flicker of emotion passes through Antalcidas' consciousness. Though his focus on the mission is unwavering, he experiences something that approaches grim amusement. Before his entombment in this sarcophagus of war, long before the XIII Legion was united with its primarch, he was a warrior of the relentless charge. His path was always from the front, a spear through the heart of the foe. Since the destruction of his flesh, trapped beneath the burning wreckage of a Rhino, and his rebirth as a Dreadnought, he has become the purest essence of his being, no longer a spear but a battering ram, pure destruction forged for the single purpose of being unleashed in the name of the Avenging Son.

And now the battering ram approaches in stealth.

The conditions on the battlefield abruptly change. The Mechanicum fire that has been cutting into the Destroyers stops. Free of that attack, the company strikes upwards with all the more ferocity. Antalcidas wills himself to march faster. His brothers are buying him this opportunity at the cost of their lives. The price they have paid is enough. *Not one more*, he thinks.

'Not one more,' the voice growls out of his vox-casters.

He rounds a corner of the cliff, and ahead of him is the fortified position. There are two Predators and a squad of traitors. They will see him now, so let them see him well.

'*NOT ONE MORE*,' he roars.

Let them hear him well. Let them fear him well. And let them die.

On this day, Antalcidas' armament is as terrible as it has ever been. He has become a weapon that most of the XIII Legion would prefer to see forbidden from the battlefield. He would not disagree. This kind of ammunition is barbaric. The Destroyers are the shadow cast by the light of the Ultramarines. If Guilliman has become more willing to set the Destroyers loose upon the foes of the Emperor, he does so with caution. Against some enemies, though, on some battlefields, the barbaric weapon is nothing less than justice.

Antalcidas' arms are two cannons. One launches the atrocity of phosphex. Its shells land amidst the Iron Warriors, and the devouring sea of green bursts into being. The other shells are rad munitions. They hammer into the armour on the sides of the Predators. The plating is too thick to be more than dented by the explosions, but it is insufficient protection against the radiological horror of the

shells. Radiation slashes through the tanks, through the armour of the men inside, burning flesh and liquefying organs. Phosphex is an exaltation of monstrosity, a spectacle of pain, the colour of life itself turned into the most savage corrosion. The rad explosives are the bringers of invisible death. But they are no less painful, no less horrific, no less lingering. Where Antalcidas fights today, nothing can live for centuries to come.

Antalcidas marches forward, his guns relentless in their drumbeat. More than ever before, he is the walking death. The legionaries before him were once brothers to his Legion. For the crime of treachery, they deserve atrocity. He descends upon them like wrath itself, but the Iron Warriors outnumber him, and the Predators are more powerful than he is.

Retaliatory fire hits Antalcidas. Bolter shells do little against his armour, but a rocket slams into his left leg. Antalcidas cannot feel pain in his machinic limbs, but the leg no longer responds properly to his will. It drags along the ground.

There is no cover. There is no retreat. There is only the march forward and the retribution he brings. With a blare of his war horn, Antalcidas closes in, enveloping the Iron Warriors in a storm of liquefying agony.

The Predators have been slow to respond. Antalcidas pictures the pain of their crews, so crippling it delays the reactions of even the Legiones Astartes. But now they fire. Autocannon shells and las explode against Antalcidas, cratering and melting the armour of his sarcophagus. Energy blasts outwards and arcs in again. The machine of war and the withered flesh it contains convulse. Antalcidas is losing his perceptions of the outside world. He holds on to his duty and to the last thing he must do, which is advance and fire. Always advance and fire.

He grinds forward another few steps, and the tank cannons hit him again. He halts now. He can no longer move his arms, but he can still fire. Though the world is fading faster, he can tell that the bolters have fallen silent, and there are no more screams. One of the tanks is inert too. There is only the one left. Perhaps there is only the gunner.

The cannon fires. So does Antalcidas. Two warriors hurl destruction at one another from within their tombs.

Now comes the greater silence, and the final dark. Antalcidas can at last release his hold on necessary barbarism. He embraces the last sleep, and the end of atrocities.

There is a sudden, sustained burst of fire from the Iron Warriors' position above

the Ultramarines. Khrossus sees flame, the flash of las, and the telltale green of phosphex tinge the smoke that shrouds the cliff face. Then there is silence. The tanks on the west side of the pass continue to bombard the enemy, but the withdrawal of the Mechanicum and now the absence of half his heavy armour has changed the battlefield. The smoke begins to thin and Khrossus can make out the Destroyers more clearly. In their black armour, with only the pauldrons in blue, they are a dark movement in the murk, a disciplined mass, and they turn as one to charge north up the final barrier that chokes the pass. They march through autocannon and bolter shells, taking casualties, yet too great a force for the Iron Warriors' remaining guns to stop.

For all their losses, they outnumber Khrossus' legionaries by better than three to one.

Reading the battlefield, and thus reading his warsmith's thoughts, Sergeant Zennek says, 'We can hold them off a bit longer.'

'Not long enough.' What resistance they can still muster at this position will end in rapid annihilation. 'Legionaries,' Khrossus voxes, 'pull back. Make for the redoubt.' The word is ironic. Every battle-brother knows the truth.

'We are at the endgame, then?' says Zennek.

'So are they,' Khrossus promises.

The first blasts from the defence platforms hit the *Barbican*. They are the torches igniting Darhug's funeral pyre, and he has lit them himself. Vûrtaq can dream of victory because he might survive his part of the campaign. Death on the space station, however, is always how things were going to end for Darhug. To choose that moment and, in dying, take an entire company of Ultramarines with him, is a prospect that does not displease him.

The mortals controlling the firing resolutions of the defence platforms are sobbing in terror as the strikes begin. They have family in Siderius and are willing to give up their lives for even the mirage that their loved ones might see another dawn.

The las of the defence platforms is ferocious. It is intended to destroy ships. But the *Barbican* is designed to *withstand*. It is resisting. Its void shields are powerful, its armour many metres thick. In the end, though, it cannot stand up to the combined barrage indefinitely.

The Ultramarines captain has disappeared behind the remains of a work station. Darhug searches for him in the smoke, strafing the area with bolt shells. His auto-senses show him the positions of his surviving brothers. The last of these

runes are dimming from red to black. In a few moments, he will be a lone Iron Warrior confronting a full company. This, too, does not displease him.

The captain's squad will soon be upon him. There is no more time, then. Darhug feels no grief or regret. He has done what he needs to do.

The station shudders again and again. The las is breaking through. Explosions rock the decks. Fires spread. The destruction of the *Barbican* has begun in earnest.

'Your task is accomplished,' Darhug tells the mortals. He aims the barrel of his bolt rifle at them and at the control surfaces. He squeezes the trigger that will seal the fate of every being aboard the space station.

He squeezes, but the rounds go wide. The blast of a frag grenade throws him aside. The mortals and the control banks are unharmed. The grenade, thrown with the accursed precision of the Ultramarines, turns him from the mortals' assassin into their shield as his body takes the blast.

The Ultramarines captain has managed to circle around in the smoke with a speed belying his injuries, and he lunges into sight, leaps at Darhug and collides with him, grappling with his bolter. Darhug lets go of his weapon with one hand and snatches his gladius from his belt. He stabs at the Ultramarine's gorget. The loyalist anticipated his move, and blocks Darhug's blade with his own.

There is a stalemate, each legionary holding onto the bolter with one hand, their blades sawing against each other.

Darhug recognises the epaulettes of his enemy. 'Aquila,' he says. They fought side by side once, against the Haartak Triumvirate. 'Good of you to join me in this sacrifice.'

'There will be no sacrifice today,' Aquila growls.

Defence platform las strike home. A giant fist shakes the *Barbican*. The two Space Marines stagger. Aquila's wounds take their toll, and one knee buckles.

'This station is my funeral pyre, and so it is yours too,' says Darhug. With a sharp yank, he pulls the bolter free from Aquila's grip. He takes a step back and swings the barrel at the captain. Aquila ducks low, beneath the burst of fire, and with a snarl of pain, he leaps up, his right hand a blur as he grabs an object from his belt and slams it into Darhug's face, fastening it to his helmet.

The thing covers Darhug's eyes. He stumbles away. He clutches at the object. His fingers recognise the shape of a melta bomb.

'I see,' says Darhug. He gives a short bark of bitter laughter. He appreciates the black humour of his fate. Then, with pain of blinding white, he has his funeral pyre.

Aquila turns from the molten remains of Darhug. The *Barbican* heaves again. The battle is over, the Iron Warriors are dead, but the bridge is filling with fresh smoke. The orbital defence platforms are still firing, Darhug's spite reaching from beyond the grave.

'Stop the bombardment,' Aquila commands the mortals.

They have been standing motionless, paralysed by fear. The struggle of the giants has broken their ability to think for themselves. As the interior blasts multiply across the station, Aquila knows they are living in the *Barbican's* turning point, if it is not already too late.

The mortals snap back into motion. 'Yes, lord,' they answer, and they operate the controls with a determination greater than panic. At last, they have been given an order that makes sense.

The void burns once, twice, thrice more while the two men work. The *Barbican* groans, a beast feeling its last breath approach. Then the killing light ends. The void is dark. Secondary blasts rock the halls of the *Barbican*. The beast cries out at its wounds, but it is not dead yet.

'*Alalia*,' Aquila voxes the strike cruiser. 'We have taken the objective. Approach to begin our extraction.'

The work on Himera was the first task of the great campaign to be undertaken. The Iron Warriors buried cyclonic torpedoes deep in the mine shafts of the small planet. The weapons were fixed with detonators set to be triggered remotely and simultaneously by a signal sent by the *Warforged*. Vûrtaq's task has the same principle as those that Khrossus and Darhug have undertaken. His purpose is to cause great harm to the enemy with a small force. But the warsmith and the other captain are using infantry and heavy armour, and fighting individual companies. Vûrtaq has the strike cruiser. He is attacking an entire fleet.

There is, in his mission, something so rarely tasted by the Iron Warriors that at first Vûrtaq did not recognise it for what it was. The symptoms are heightened heart rates, a barely suppressible impulse to grin ferociously and a sense of standing taller, filled with enormous power. When the last of the cyclonic torpedoes was put in place, shortly before the arrival of the Ultramarines to the Carchera system, Vûrtaq finally identified his symptoms.

Glory. He was tasting glory.

With it, too, was the hint of something just as rare for the IV Legion.

Hope.

Vûrtaq does not think that Khrossus shares the hope. He knows that Darhug

does not. Given what Darhug must do, the self-immolation that is, in the end, the inevitable conclusion of his battle, Vûrtaq does not blame him for keeping to his perfect fatalism. Maybe there is little that Khrossus can do, as well. But Vûrtaq can see past this mission. He can see past this campaign. He can see the consequences of his attack, and the opportunities they present.

On the eve of battle, with the *Warforged* about to leave the orbit of Carchera, Vûrtaq took Khrossus aside before the warsmith departed for the planet's surface and the fate that awaited him there.

'I don't think the story of our company needs to end here,' Vûrtaq said.

Khrossus frowned. The hard, scarred planes of his face could only express emotion in the most jagged way. He had been wounded so many times, and his injuries treated so quickly, that his face looked like stone that had been hacked into shape with the angry blows of a hatchet. 'The only way I can see a different ending is if we do not obey our orders, and instead leave Carchera to the Ultramarines. In which case we would end shortly thereafter, in dishonour. Though I know that is not what you mean, captain.'

'That's right,' said Vûrtaq. 'You *know* that is not what I mean.' He was amazed that Khrossus, with his deep understanding of battlefields, whether they be in the void or planetside, could not see this chance. 'Think what will happen when we destroy Himera. Even if some of the Ultramarines ships survive, it is unlikely they will be in a good position to give chase, and we will already be under way. We can do this and survive.'

Khrossus shrugged. He looked more bored than excited by Vûrtaq's explanation. 'Then do so, captain,' he said. 'Destroy the fleet of the Thirteenth Legion and survive.'

'I will,' Vûrtaq mutters now.

'Captain,' says the auspex officer of the *Warforged*. 'Readings from the enemy. Ships are pulling away from Himera.'

'How many?' Perhaps they are manoeuvring with the plan of being better able to surround him.

'Everything we can detect is departing,' says the officer. 'It looks like the entire fleet.'

*No*, Vûrtaq thinks. The Ultramarines can't have realised what is awaiting them, but they are behaving as if they have. Cursing, he orders, 'Detonate.'

'We are not at a confirmed safe distance,' the officer says.

'You think I don't know that? If we aren't, neither are they. Detonate.'

Vûrtaq looks at the large pict screen display above the auspex officer's station.

It is counting down the distance to presumed safety, to the degree that any distance can be safe when a planet dies. The *Warforged*'s race was always going to be tight. It is still better than suicide, and Vûrtaq sees that his decision is the correct one. If the Ultramarines have understood the danger and started to pull away before the *Warforged* came into their sights, then the cruiser is one of the last ships to be sitting above a world-bomb.

The cyclonic torpedoes explode. The view through the primary oculus shifts from bow to stern. Vûrtaq sees Himera shudder. The surface ripples outwards from four epicentres on the hemisphere. Crevasses race across the globe, glowing molten, until the planet resembles a cracked mosaic. Then everything erupts, a fist suddenly opening, releasing a storm of asteroids streaking out from the blinding core. The disintegrating planet becomes an expanding sphere of rock. Trailing flames like comets, hunks of the crust hurtle towards the ships. The *Warforged*'s engines are straining to the limit to reach the vessel's maximum velocity.

If the cruiser had been any closer, there would have been no chance of avoiding a collision. At this distance, there is enough space between the careening mountains that there is the hope of survival. There is no evasion to attempt. The *Warforged* is far too massive a craft. Its only defences are speed and shielding.

Not all the Ultramarines vessels pulled away fast enough. There are great light-bursts in the void as the fragments of Himera shatter loyalist ships, breaking them in half, rupturing their plasma drives, crushing them between colliding land masses. Vûrtaq counts four scattered explosions, four sudden breaks of day in eternal night to show that vessels have died.

That is all. Just four. A heavy cost for a single cruiser to inflict upon an enemy. Nowhere near enough. Not when so much of the fleet remains.

The broken bones of Himera fly past the *Warforged*. A rock the size of a hab block glances against the ship's void shields and bounces away. The warning klaxons sound, though the damage is minor.

'Shut them off,' Vûrtaq commands. 'Shipmaster,' he says, 'maintain speed. Alter course to loop around and make for the Mandeville point.' Even as he gives the order, he knows it is a futile one. The Ultramarines have evaded the trap, and they have not forgotten their prey. The wide formation of ships that splayed outwards to escape Himera now begins to close in again. Hundreds of gun barrels are pointed Vûrtaq's way. He no longer feels the temptation to grin. Darhug was right. Khrossus was right. All they could hope to do was damage the fleet and slow it enough to make a difference.

Vûrtaq sees the immense power of the Ultramarines fleet heading towards him, and he feels he has done nothing. His lips draw back in a tight snarl. 'Belay that order,' he says. There will be no Mandeville point, no survival. 'Turn us back.' There is no glory today. There is no hope, except, perhaps, the hope of honour.

'All guns, continuous fire,' Vûrtaq says.

The Ultramarines barrage arrives as the *Warforged* is partway through its turn. The strike cruiser's guns open up, aiming at what looks, in the oculus, like an infinite sea of ships. The *Warforged*'s anger is as pointless as it is defiant.

Las and cannon shells blast the strike cruiser's void shields out of existence and sunder its hull. Vûrtaq says, 'I made you use your entire fleet against me.' And he clutches that shred of glory as the flames come for him.

The region around the defence laser is a cauldron of cannon fire. The Land Raiders of the Mechanicum arrived shortly after the Ultramarines. The cannon is protected by a void shield, and is impervious to the guns of the Predators. Now the Ultramarines tanks face towards the pass, pounding the traitors of Mars. The Land Raiders retaliate with lascannon and graviton guns as they disgorge squads of skitarii. Marching ahead of the armoured carriers are Castellan battle-automata. The hulking figures are faster than the tanks, and move into the lines of the XIII Legion's heavy armour. Legionaries rush to counter them, and a ring forms with the defence laser at its centre. The ring is a maelstrom of explosions, blood, smouldering machinery and the smell of burning promethium.

The towering cannon is an exceptional strong point. The Iron Warriors and the Mechanicum intend this weapon to last until the bitter end. It is the primary defence of Siderius. As long as it stands, Guilliman's faster but more drastic options are closed to him.

The gun's controls are in a reinforced underground bunker. A rockcrete ramp descends to its iron doors. Guilliman, Prayto, Gorod and the Invictarus Suzerain squad are punching their way through the Mechanicum defenders. The enemy is able to concentrate forces into the narrow point of the ramp. Skitarii and Castellan automata bar the way. The skitarii are so augmented they are barely human, and they fight with emotionless precision. Yet as Guilliman falls upon them, he sees the micro-tremors of uncertainty take them. They are fighting a primarch, and there can be no preparation adequate to such a battle.

Prayto unleashes his psychic strength. Warp fire streams from his hands to consume the enemy. As he scythes through the warriors, his face is grimacing and troubled.

‘You doubt yourself,’ says Guilliman. He pauses beside the Librarian to fire three quick shots with the Arbitrator, the combi-bolter that serves as his pistol. Three skitarii fall, smoke erupting from the stumps of their necks.

‘I must,’ Prayto answers. ‘If I ever stop, never trust me again.’

Two battle-automata advance in lockstep to the top of the ramp. Their bolt cannons attempt to track targets. One of the Suzerain dies, his body reduced to ash and blood. The other machine tries to finish Guilliman, but he veers around it more quickly than it can track, and slams his power gauntlet, the Hand of Dominion, into its flank. The gauntlet smashes through the armour, and its power surge fuses the mechanism inside. The automaton freezes, crumpling on its left side, then topples.

The ramp is empty. The doors are clear. Guilliman takes a step down the slope, then pauses, arm raised in warning. The rockcrete vibrates from the huge footsteps of something beyond the door. The Invictarii raise their shields and point their pistols at the doors, the acts so precise and synchronised it is as if they are a single entity. Guilliman aims the Arbitrator, bracing his stance.

The doors grind open, and a Domitar battle-automaton strides out from the gloom within. Rockets scream from the launcher hood above the war behemoth’s head. The range is short, almost point-blank, and the explosions turn the narrow confines of the ramp into an inferno. Flames wash over the shields of the front rank of the Invictarii, but missiles land behind them too, in their midst, and the blasts smash them against the walls. The Domitar strides into the fireball and smashes at the Ultramarines with its twin graviton hammers. The blows punch craters in the walls and ground. Guilliman fires the Arbitrator into the thorax of the monster and jumps back from a swinging fist. The arm hammer clips him. The mass of his armour and his body is turned against him, and it is as if a meteor has struck him. He flies backwards through the fire, and hits the wall hard enough to embed himself in it.

Guilliman pulls free, pain cracking through his frame. The Domitar is upon the squad, and one of the Invictarii has taken a direct hit from the graviton weapons. It is Vilmius, who has stood strong by Guilliman’s side since the days of the unification of Macragge. Hero of song, though he has always turned away in embarrassment when overhearing his deeds turned into legend, he has been reduced to a sludge of blood and pulverised organs oozing from a flattened ruin of ceramite. A few jagged shards pointing upwards from the wreck, a trace of pauldron with markings still visible, are the only things that identify him.

The Domitar fires the missiles again, slightly higher up the ramp, barely

keeping out of reach of its own destructive fire, and swings at the squad again. Gorod clutches his side, but he still holds his bolter and is trying to draw the automaton towards him, away from his brothers. But the shells barely damage the monster's armour.

The flames rise higher, and come together, taking on coherent form as they intensify. They are under the command of Prayto. He, too, is injured, his armour scorched and split, one of his legs dragging as he moves against the rockcrete wall. His avatar of flame advances on the automaton, enveloping it for a moment, but then rushes on, past the machine and down into the darkness beyond the door. A terrible sound emerges, the shriek of machinery in human form, a scream without emotion or pain, the death cry of ancient circuits misfiring energy. A magos dominus staggers over the threshold, engulfed in unnatural fire. The controller loses his grip on the battle-automaton. The machine hesitates, and Guilliman seizes his chance.

The primarch rushes the Domitar, charging the Hand of Dominion to the full. The automaton turns, sluggish compared to how it had been moments earlier, though its war programming reacts to the approach of a threat and demands a response. A graviton hammer plunges towards Guilliman. He meets the blow with the closed fist of the Hand of Dominion. Power gauntlet and automaton fist collide. The world flashes burning silver. A cataclysm of forces hurls Guilliman backwards. He lands on his feet and drives his heel into the ramp, killing the backward momentum, ready to attack again even before his eyes clear.

The automaton is rocking back and forth, wracked by internal destruction. Its weapon was no match for the force unleashed by the power gauntlet. The monstrous energy of the Hand of Dominion turned the graviton current back against its source. The backfire has blown the arm wide open, splaying metal like ribbons of straw. Smoke pours from the ruptured torso. Electrical discharges ladder up and down the hulk, and then it falls inert.

Guilliman advances through the doorway, followed by the surviving Invictarii. Prayto and Gorod help each other forward to keep up with the Avenging Son. Inside the control centre is a handful of tech-adepts. His lip curled in distaste, Guilliman exterminates the remaining traitors with quick bursts of the Arbitrator.

Outside the bunker, the battle rages, but not for much longer. The conflict is decided.

With the defence laser neutralised, Guilliman contacts Shipmaster Netertian on the *Ultimus Mundi*. The poor quality of the vox tells him that the warp storm is as ferocious as ever. 'Has there been any report from Captain Hierax?' Guilliman

asks.

*‘Not for some time, lord primarch. The last message received seemed to indicate his company was moving on Siderius, but it was fragmentary.’*

That is close to good news. Siderius is the origin of the warp disturbance. It is not surprising that the Destroyers should fall silent as they close in on the epicentre.

A hopeful sign, though, is not a victory.

‘Take the squadron into position over Siderius,’ Guilliman says. ‘Send word when you arrive, and I will have new orders for you.’

As Guilliman marches back up to the surface, he feels Prayto’s eyes on him. ‘The decision and its cost will rest on me,’ he says.

Prayto nods, solemn.

A city sacrificed to save a world, and perhaps save the Throneworld. It is not a decision Guilliman wishes to make. He will soon have to. He has done what he can on the ground. There is no time to send his companies through the pass as reinforcements. If Hierax has not taken Siderius by the time the squadron is in place for a possible bombardment, the prospect of unacceptable sacrifice will loom.

*End the storm, Hierax, Guilliman thinks. Do what I know you can. Do not let the traitors have this triumph.*

When the Iron Warriors fell back, the collapse was fast. Hierax took his Destroyers in pursuit from the pass, and his legionaries roared with the promise of retribution as they were freed at last from the crush of the mountains, and the hive was open before them. The Iron Warriors’ retreat was organised, but rapid. Though they maintained defensive fire, they seemed more concerned with speed.

‘This is more than a retreat,’ Aphovos said when the Destroyers pounded through the city gates the enemy had no time to close. ‘This is flight.’

*Flight.* The word has nagged Hierax through the rest of the pursuit, as the Destroyers have followed the Iron Warriors into the depths of the underhive and to the mines below. Flight is out of character. The Iron Warriors do not *flee*. And these traitors are doing everything in their power to stay ahead of the Destroyers. Some of the corridors and passageways down which the company races are mined, but the traps are improvised, easily overcome, and they delay the Ultramarines very little.

‘Like they want us to follow,’ Hierax says. The Ultramarines have come down a long way. They are deep in mining tunnels, in a wide passage running past

abandoned equipment and smaller branching routes. Work was progressing here until recently, and the dim, orange glow strips line the stone walls.

‘Perhaps they’re leading us away,’ says Kletos, one step behind the captain.

Hierax looks at Aphovos, who is keeping pace beside him. The Librarian shakes his head. ‘We are getting closer to the warp disturbance. Our target is down this way.’

‘They know that,’ Hierax mutters. Perhaps they also know that any attempt to misdirect the Ultramarines would be futile. *So what do they intend?*

Hierax runs faster yet. The beat of ceramite boots picks up too. The stamping rhythm is a continuous rumble of thunder. ‘Theoretical,’ he says. ‘The appearance of flight is a lie. It is a prelude to another attack. Practical – catch them before they can trigger it.’

The tunnel curves to the left, turns down, and then opens up into an enormous chamber. It is as big as an open air mine, a cave more than a kilometre wide and long, its ceiling thirty metres high. The air is close. The temperatures have been climbing steadily, and despite its size the cave is stifling. The Iron Warriors are two-thirds of the way across. Now in the open, Hierax sees their full complement for the first time. *So few*, he thinks. This small force has held an entire Legion at bay. Amidst his anger, and his desperation to bring the war to a rapid close, he feels a grudging respect for the accomplishment.

‘There,’ Aphovos says. He points to a tunnel leading away on the other side of the cave. Though it appears to be descending further, its entrance is from a ledge three metres above the floor of the cave.

The ledge runs the entire length of the far wall. A place of refuge, Hierax thinks, and he sees the trap. He slams to a halt. ‘Back,’ he orders. ‘Back to the tunnel. We want high ground.’ He scans the ground, and thinks how it might become deadly.

The Iron Warriors are still on the floor of the cavern. They cannot trigger the trap yet.

‘Not this time,’ Hierax mutters. He has seen the danger, and has a small window in which to act. ‘The floor is mined,’ he says to Aphovos as they reach the mouth of the tunnel. ‘One way or another, we cannot cross it.’

Aphovos’ gaze loses focus. He is looking at something beyond the cavern, beyond reality. When he turns to Hierax again, his face is troubled, but determined. ‘I can still reach the other tunnel.’

‘Just you?’

Aphovos nods. ‘There is a high concentration of warp energy here, and it is

unstable. I can reach what I must, but alone. And the consequences...'

'They will be what they must be,' says Hierax. He extends a hand, and he and Aphovos clasp forearms. They can both sense the approach of fate.

'Rockets,' Hierax orders on the company vox. 'Target the floor where it reaches the wall. Fire ahead of the enemy.' To Aphovos he says, 'When it begins, do what you must.'

From command to execution is a matter of moments. Aphovos stands to the left of the tunnel entrance, facing his goal on the other side of the cavern. His hands are raised and motionless, as if frozen in the act of shaping the air. A vibrating halo surrounds him, reality becoming uncertain.

The Destroyers launch a score of rockets. They streak to all sides of the cave. Half of them fly towards the wall ahead of the Iron Warriors.

Aphovos vanishes the moment the explosions begin.

Khrossus hears the scream of rockets. With a snarl, he turns on his heel. *Well done*, he thinks. His legionaries turn with him to face the end.

The end is brilliant and molten. It begins at the edges of the cavern, as Khrossus had always planned. Only it comes too soon.

So be it. And the Ultramarines are mistaken if they think the end has arrived only for the Iron Warriors.

Aphovos falls through a different tunnel, one that burrows through the materium. Time and space are torn by madness. A darkness with volition claws at his skull. The shades of madness and power seek to embrace him, and he holds them off, barely. His power, long suppressed, unpractised, comes back at him, and begins to rend his being.

And then he is through. He returns to the materium, staggering away from the rift of his creation, leaving too much of himself behind. His limbs feel distant, responding clumsily to his commands. He feels hollow. He carries a rift within him that gapes deep in his being. He has attempted too much too soon.

No matter. He is where he must be. He has transported himself to a point partway down the tunnel he sought. From behind, in a great cave, comes an unending chain of explosions. Heat roars over him, the breath of a volcano.

Ahead, he feels rather than hears chanting. He stumbles forward, gathering his strength for one more attack. There will be no going back, and that is for the best. He does not trust what is trying to take root in his chest. He will defy it, and use the power that put it there against itself. Fire has come in the cavern behind him, and he brings a different fire before him.

He moves more quickly, called by the horror of the chanting. He felt it first, and now he hears it too. Despite the roar of apocalypse in the cave, the monstrous syllables that have conjured and are fuelling the warp storm fill the tunnel, writhing in spirals from floor to walls to ceiling.

Aphovos follows the call. His surroundings are a blur. He is consumed by the attack he is gathering, and by the abomination waiting ahead.

He reaches the chapel of the Word Bearers, and though he is tearing himself asunder, though acting as a psyker again is killing him, he is consumed by the necessity of what he is and what he is doing. There must be weapons like him to combat the likes of what he sees.

The Word Bearers are a multiplicity and a unity at the same time. Four legionaries surround a fifth at their centre. They stand on a rune that appears to be an eight-pointed star one moment, and a swirling mass of snarling jaws the next. Aphovos sees each individual Word Bearer, yet he cannot mark the division between one traitor and the next. Light and reality curve around them, eroding being. Arms appear to stretch too far, the limbs of one Word Bearer merging with those of the next. All their voices are one, and that one voice is a conduit for the infinite inhuman voices beyond. Above them, a vortex spins, dissolving the difference between the underground chamber and the entirety of the Carchera system.

The Word Bearers become aware of Aphovos. As one, they turn their heads to face him. He is insignificant before the power they have summoned.

He is also faster.

Aphovos unleashes the power he has gathered. He tears open the air above the Word Bearers, between them and the mouth of the vortex. A rift cuts across a rift, and the chant is broken. Coherence is lost, and the fury of the warp explodes in the chapel, uncontrolled, uncontrollable. Dissolution and madness fill the space and lash out through the tunnel, a massive blast of energy that dies as it is freed, devouring the beings whose incantations it needs to exist.

The fury takes Aphovos too. Disintegration is agony, and it is horror.

It is also victory.

The rockets trigger the mines. A chain reaction of explosions races around the circumference of the cavern, and across the floor in a dozen diagonals. The floor of the cavern is a thin layer of rock covering an iron disc rigged to self-destruct. Hierax applauds the efficiency of the trap. The surface erupts, cracks and collapses in seconds. There is no chance for anyone standing on the floor of the

cavern to escape.

The surface plunges into the molten hell below and the reason for the great heat of the cave is revealed. The space below is a series of parallel channels filled with molten ore. They are separated by narrow walls, barely a metre wide. The Iron Warriors have undermined a system already strained by having all the channels filled at once, and the barriers between the channels are crumbling. Stone and metal fall into blinding, incandescent red and white, and are dissolved. The traitors fall too.

The rumbling blasts continue, shaking the walls of the tunnel, the explosions carrying on far beyond the cavern itself, and Hierax understands the full extent of the trap. From somewhere back in the tunnel comes the crumbling roar of a wall giving way, and the tearing of metal. The heat in the tunnel, already searing, becomes lethal. Another reservoir, this one higher up, has broken, and is pouring its liquid iron into the tunnel. The darkness to the rear lights up with a crimson glow, and then it comes, a wave of molten metal five metres high.

There is no time to react, and there is nowhere to go. The incinerating deluge sweeps over the Destroyers. It swallows and burns and melts. It makes a hollow roar as it scours the tunnel, and the legionaries roar back, defiant to the last, brief second.

Hierax is at one side of the mouth of the tunnel when the wave hits, the sheer force of the flood knocking him sideways. He falls through the heat of a blast furnace, reaches out on instinct and catches a rough edge of rockcrete. Dripping ore, his limbs jerking as his power pack overheats and the servo-motors of his armour misfire, he hauls himself onto the narrow causeway between channels.

At first he thinks he is alone. His men are dead, and so are the Iron Warriors. Then he sees a figure on the other end of the wall. It is the captain of the traitors.

Hierax stumbles along the stone, leaping clumsily over the gaps that open as the barrier crumbles. The level of the ore is rising as the new river pours in from the tunnel behind him. The explosions continue. More floods are coming.

Hierax has lost his rifle. No matter. He will kill the last traitor with his hands. The Iron Warrior is limping towards Hierax, dragging a useless right leg. The distance between them seems endless, and they are still fifty metres from each other when waves of ore crash against the barriers, now almost at the top.

‘And is this worth it?’ Hierax shouts at the traitor. ‘You have not stopped us. You have lost everything. Have you accomplished anything on this day?’

The Iron Warrior’s laugh is long and bitter. ‘I don’t know,’ he answers. ‘Have you?’

Compelled by the other's confession, Hierax says, 'I don't know either.'  
They are still five metres apart when the ore washes them off the wall.

# EPILOGUE

## Prelude and Postlude

In the Grand Borealis Strategium, Malcador asks, 'Is there anything more to be gained here?'

'No,' Dorn admits.

As the time runs out before the coming of Horus, Dorn has found, to his dismay, that he has more time than he would like for speculation. He has done all that he can do to prepare for the coming storm. As for the XIII Legion, he will try not to torture himself with thoughts, alternating between hopeful and hopeless, about whether Guilliman's spear will arrive in time..

The Praetorian and the Sigillite leave the Strategium. They leave the Bhab Bastion. It seems impossible that anything could breach its monolithic walls of undressed stone. But Dorn knows even this strength could be broken.

'Of late,' says Malcador, 'I have felt as if, had I enough will, I could see far enough to know whether he will arrive.'

'You too, then.'

'Of course.'

Dorn gives in to the temptation and looks up.

The sky is thick with smog. There is nothing to see except blackness.

There will be nothing to see until the sky begins to fall.

A fragment of verse echoes through Guilliman's head as he makes his way from the bridge of the *Ultimus Mundi* to his quarters. It is the work of Tseliot, a

remembrancer from Age of Terra. The poem Guilliman read, years ago, was incomplete, and he did not think it had stuck with him. Yet the lines have resurfaced in his memory, taunting him.

*Would it have been worthwhile,  
To have bitten off the matter with a smile,  
To have squeezed the universe into a ball  
To roll it towards some overwhelming question*

Guilliman cannot remember the rest. Only a sense of the speaker's agony, asking again and again, '*Would it have been worthwhile?*', tormented by the shadow of the answer, *No*.

The question taunts Guilliman. Everything that has been done in the Carchera system, and everything that has been lost, will have meaning only if he can reach Terra before Horus has conquered it. The warp storm is over, and the fleet is under way once more. The question is whether that matters. He will not know if Hierax and his Destroyers' deaths have meaning until his fleet arrives over the Throneworld. At this moment, he feels as if he would welcome the precognition that curses Sanguinius and Curze.

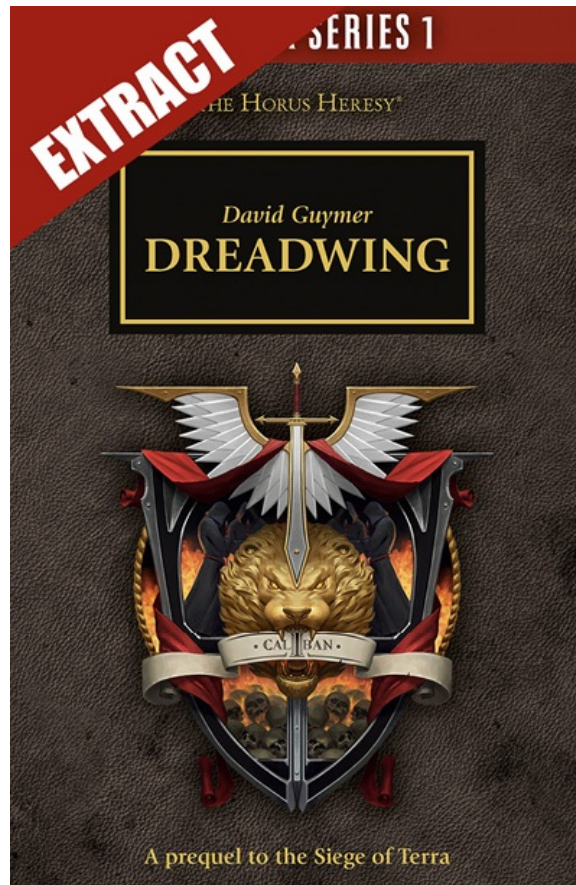
Guilliman opens the door to his quarters. He stops on the threshold, his eyes riveted to his desk. The damage the *Ultimus Mundi* suffered from the defence laser has reached into his sanctum. The chamber looks as if an earth tremor had passed through it. Books have fallen from the shelves. Chairs are overturned.

On the desk, the sandglass lies on its side, smashed, its grains scattered.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**David Annandale** is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Ruinstorm* and *The Damnation of Pythos*, and the Primarchs novels *Roboute Guilliman: Lord of Ultramar* and *Vulkan: Lord of Drakes*. For Warhammer 40,000 he has written *Warlord: Fury of the God-Machine*, the Yarrick series, several stories involving the Grey Knights, including *Warden of the Blade* and *Castellan*, as well as titles for The Beast Arises and the Space Marine Battles series. For Warhammer Age of Sigmar he has written *Neferata: Mortarch of Blood*. David lectures at a Canadian university, on subjects ranging from English literature to horror films and video games.

An extract from *Dreadwing*.



## I

Darkness grew from the ironwork bocage of the partition bulkheads. It gathered in corners, watchful as crows. It filtered through the bowing of the ceiling. Starlight entered through tall, armoured casemates, vast windows glazed with diamantite and durifrost. The dim shadows it cast shrank and lengthened, tracing over forest scenes depicted in friezes and murals with the giant vessel's inertial drift. The occasional ceiling-mounted banner – thick white drapes that served doubly as portieres between cloisters – stirred in the stilted breezes of the air cyclers and the occasional tremor from the dorsal gunnery decks.

This was the *Invincible Reason*, and nothing happened here.

## II

The voted-lieutenant pressed a gauntleted hand to the fascia display and identified himself.

‘Holguin.’

A watery green light dappled his massive suit of artificer war-plate as scanning lasers slid across the glossy black plate, drawing out the red Martian gold worked into the finish, as though he had stepped into a column of infrared that illuminated his veins. The electronics trilled with sequential ident confirmations. Suit transponder. Vox print. Height-weight indices. All tallied with who he claimed to be.

‘*Holguin. Recognised.*’

The synthesised vox-blurt sounded cacophonous.

Most of the sections that the Lion had ordered sealed during his and Curze's long hunt were still deserted. The ship had scraped by without them. Now they lacked the crew to fill them properly. This had been one of those sections,

though, like so much else, it had been something grander once.

‘Restore lighting to this section.’

‘*Cannot comply. Vermillion authorisation required.*’

‘Who besides the primarch has vermillion-level authorisation?’

‘*Cannot comply. Vermillion authorisation required.*’

‘Does Captain Stenius?’

‘*Cannot comply. Vermillion—*’

Holguin withdrew his gauntlet from the panel, silencing the voice and killing the light. He frowned into the darkness.

‘You always had such a way with cogitators,’ said Samariel from behind him. The veteran legionary’s broad, bearded face creased into an unsteady grin. It did nothing to lighten Holguin’s mood, and something in his lieutenant’s expression wiped Samariel’s smile away.

‘Give me a lock with a key, brother. Or a guard with a secret word.’

‘That’s progress for you.’

Holguin’s eyebrow lifted. *Progress*. It was what the union with Terra, the industrialisation of Caliban and the Great Crusade itself had all been for. He was not sure what the word meant anymore, nor whether it made him want to laugh out loud or draw his sword.

For here they all were, back in the dark where they had begun.

Hunting monsters.

‘Progress,’ he muttered.

‘Your moods are black of late, brother,’ said Samariel.

‘The galaxy is black. My mood but bears its reflection.’

Samariel had little to offer but a nod.

Valiel and Breunor advanced cautiously past them, into the cloister. Though they moved with exaggerated caution, every step they took was accompanied by an over-loud sound. The light from Brother-Paladin Kastaal’s power sword conferred a weak, ambient gloam to a distance of about three metres.

‘Still dark,’ muttered Holguin.

Samariel slid on his helmet. There was a click, the lenses flickering red as his various systems auto-engaged.

‘Then we hunt in the dark,’ he said.

### III

Farith Redloss felt the tremor through the skeleton of the ship, in the tinkling of

the armour displays on their pedestals. The void battle was almost over, but not quite. A human, even an experienced naval officer, might have dismissed the vibrations as aftershocks from the gunnery decks, or the mild inertial stresses of a course correction, but Redloss had a fine-honed understanding of weaponry at every scale. That had been a hull impact. He looked up. This part of the suite of chambers was striped with armoured skylights. Unblinking stars filled the view. The vast gulfs of space swallowed all sign of the apocalyptic level of hell being unleashed upon the wider system.

That told him one important thing.

It was not nearly apocalyptic enough.

‘That was a shield impact,’ Gawain observed.

The young legionary, one of the last to have joined the primarch’s battlegroup since contact with Caliban had been severed, followed his lieutenant’s example and looked up. The shafting skylight rendered his pale Calibanite features ephemeral. The skull-in-hourglass symbol of the Dreadwing shone eerily against the darkened ceramite of his pauldron. Myriad tokens of allegiance and initiation, esoteric markers to secret hierarchies that even Redloss could never be fully privy to, adorned the worn plate further still.

‘No,’ said Redloss.

‘What makes you say that?’

Redloss could have spoken of the pitch and duration of the vibration, of metal tolerances and void shield disphasement patterns, but he did not. He glanced to Danaeus, his voted-second, who dipped his head slightly, his white face otherwise inscrutable.

‘One day, brother,’ Redloss said, taking Gawain by the shoulder. ‘When you have progressed further along the Spiral path, you will have proven yourself ready for such knowledge.’

Gawain bowed his head. ‘I understand.’

Redloss’ gaze returned to the skylights. ‘It was a hull impact.’

‘The shields are down?’ hissed Werrin.

The helmeted legionary held the point position of the five-man squad of Destroyers, covering the quiet, empty hall with a volkite serpenta aimed from the shoulder. If he was experiencing any hesitation about entering these chambers so armed, and in such company, then he masked it with the skill of the First. Horus’ war had pitted brother against brother, father against son. This intrusion felt like a small betrayal in the grand scheme of things.

Most betrayals probably did, at the outset.

‘Not necessarily, brother,’ said Redloss. ‘Most likely Stenius has sailed us into a piece of debris.’

Gawain snorted.

‘Or a boarding torpedo,’ said Danaeus.

Gawain, Werrin and Melwen tightened their grips on their weaponry. Redloss frowned at their over-reaction. He had trained them better than that.

‘The last gasp of a rotten corpse,’ he said. ‘There is nothing that this system can throw at the *Invincible Reason* that Brother Stenius cannot contend with. We are the Dark Angels, brothers, we are death, and we have a quarry of our own to concern ourselves with here.’

That had the desired effect of focusing their minds.

This was not the first time that the sons of Caliban had hunted a primarch through their own ship.

Redloss had not yet been aboard at that time. But he had been there in Illyrium, when the Lion had finally put a sword through Konrad Curze.

‘What is it, brother?’ he asked, noticing Werrin’s continued distraction.

The older warriors, former Knights of the old Order of Caliban, liked to remember themselves as great hunters. Caliban had tested them, they would say, and they had survived. They had endured its plagues, faced its beasts and its benighted forests, where every tree was poisonous and every creature, however small, was hungry, and they had survived. They had bested it at arms, honour and courage intact, and, with the coming of the Emperor, they could even claim to have been the generation that broke it. But Redloss knew that those older warriors, those former Knights, were wrong. *In Articulo Mortis*. Mankind had evolved as hunters and scavengers of the open plains. The forest was its primordial nightmare. The Knights of Caliban had not been hunters. They had been the hunted. They had been the mammal whose armour and claws had allowed it to fend off the Great Beasts for another day, who found dark and hidden places to endure and lit no fires for fear of the night.

Their instinct for hidden perils far surpassed that of those other self-professed ‘hunters’ of the V and VI. Their predisposition to darkness was rivalled only by that of the XIX.

Werrin nodded down the tapestry-lined hall and pointed with his serpenta.

‘I heard something.’

## IV

Holguin pulled aside the hanging, revealing the Reclusiam alcove beyond. His shoulders sagged, the servos in his armour giving a dispirited whine. Empty. The partition walls were wood-panelled and scented, carved with the muses and satyrs of Calibanite forestlore. None of it was exactly faithful to the spirit of the Imperial Truth, but it was a lucky iterator indeed that was admitted this far into the heart of the *Invincible Reason*, and a brave one who would challenge Lion El'Jonson on the decor of his private chambers. If there were any iterators still abroad in the Imperium, then Holguin supposed they had larger fires to put out now.

'Clear,' he grunted, backing out, tagging the Reclusiam on the squad auspex.

'I wonder if Jonson still holds the Night Haunter down here,' Kastael whispered.

Seeing the Deathwing paladin nervous was like watching a stone sweat, but not all things of the Emperor's design were created equal.

If the Night Lords had been the living incarnation of every evil in the human psyche, then Curze was its half-mad god of depravity and murder. He was terror weaponised, an atrocity of war simply by existing, and even the winnowed psychology of a Space Marine was not wholly proof against it. Indeed, if Holguin were to point at the one thing that had shaken his faith in the Emperor of Mankind then it would not be his disregard for the powers of the warp, nor would it be his elevation of Horus to the position of Warmaster over the Lion.

It would be that the creation of a ghoulish horror like Konrad Curze had ever been considered just.

After a cat-and-mouse pursuit that had left the Thramas sector terrorised and aflame and whole sections of the *Invincible Reason* itself consigned to darkness, the Lion had finally forced a confrontation beneath the ruins of Illyrium. Jonson was the keenest hunter and most complete swordsman that Holguin had ever seen. Having spent months in Macragge Civitas in the proximity of Guilliman and Sanguinius, none amongst the Dark Angels could make such a claim and be immune to accusations of boastfulness. And yet even *he* had chosen not to go up against the Night Haunter alone.

'I didn't ask,' Holguin replied at last.

'You're not curious?' said Kastael.

'Of course I'm curious.'

But Holguin had given up on any expectation of receiving answers from the Lion. Curze was not the only dark thing that the Lion had hidden aboard the *Invincible Reason*. His thoughts drifted to Perditus, and he shuddered in his

armour.

‘I heard that Sanguinius threw him into space,’ said Samariel with some relish.

‘The Angel and the Lion may well be brothers, but they are little alike. The Lion is a being of the physical. Like you and I, only more so. Sanguinius is something other. To be in his presence is like standing before a doorway to a room so bright that you cannot see inside. He is numinous, as if his appearance before you is a gift, freely given, but one that can be easily withdrawn should his favour turn. He is more akin to the Emperor in that respect.’ He sighed. There was an emptiness inside him and it seemed to be growing larger as he spoke. ‘I cannot imagine him doing such a thing.’

‘Azkaellon told me,’ said Samariel.

‘Azkaellon himself?’

Samariel nodded.

The commander of the Sanguinary Guard – perhaps then that rumour carried some truth with it. It would be the first.

‘Hold,’ came Kastael’s warning baritone. ‘Do you hear that?’

‘Hear what?’

Holguin looked up, even as a slow bleed of illumination turned the black walls a dark greenish-brown. The colossally thick crystal of the viewing portals shuddered as a dying ship sailed within a few hundred metres, the dorsal point defences of the *Invincible Reason* chewing on its misshapen carcass. In cosmic terms, the two vessels were practically cheek to cheek, but proximity on its own counted for little in the void. The vibrations in the windows were due to the surface-of-the-sun temperatures of its burning drive stacks and the explosions ripping across its underbelly as it crossed from fire-arc to fire-arc across the battle-barge’s batteries. Space conferred no objective sense of scale, but Holguin’s genhanced mental processes quickly established the other vessel as a Triton-class aegis cruiser. The size of its drives. Its armament. The dimensions of the lascannon clusters along its spine. A second-rate. Three hundred metres from bow to stern. Despite its identifying features, the vessel appeared to have been aggressively remodelled and up-armoured in the centuries since the original template had slipped the void-docks of its parent forge world, most of the work carried out using terrestrial-grade steels or even raw, corrugated iron.

If Holguin had not known it for a human ship, he might have assumed he was looking at the product of greenskin labour.

The sound of flapping feet from within the corridor drew his attention from the portals towards the ranks of armour that stood against the inner bulkhead. A

shadow slipped behind the nearest. Holguin felt his mind buzz as he looked at it.

The armour was the dark, brutal green of Caliban's forests, the plates fashioned with great care and cunning so as to give the appearance of their wearer's limbs and torso being enfolded by rolled leaves. The suit was a relic, from before the Lion's unification of the martial orders of Caliban. Holguin could not name the order to which it had once belonged. It had been years before his time, and records of the period were surprisingly thin on the ground.

Ice crept over the curve of the plates, although his auspex alerted him to no sudden drop in temperature.

Without thinking about it, he reached for his pistol.

'Go back,' the voice behind the armour said.

## V

The Destroyers all recognised that sound. The percussive *bang-bang* caused by the firing of an Umbra-pattern bolt pistol, followed in split-second succession by the self-ignition of the shell's rocket propellant. Redloss waited for the third explosion. It thundered out of the gloom half a second after the initial blasts.

'Gunfire,' announced Gawain.

'You think?' said Melwen.

'Boarders,' said Danaeus with grim satisfaction.

Redloss shook his head. If it was a hostile boarding party, then why just one shot? A single squeeze on the trigger of an Umbra could deliver four in under a second, and unless ammunition was low, even against an unarmoured baseline human target a warrior would want to be sure. Redloss would have been sure. He offered up no answers, however. It was not his place to provide them.

He was already running towards the sound.

## VI

The Calibanite relic plate exploded.

From the original entry wound in the middle of the plastron, the ornate cuirass petalled outwards, the rerebrace and cuisse that had been fixed in position with pins and wire blowing out towards the four corners of the hall. The last piece to land was the helmet. It struck the ceiling, denting the elaborate bowing, and then came back down, clattering and rolling before bumping to a stop against an oak pilaster.

Holguin lowered his pistol.

He was breathing as though he had just fought a close duel and lost. His secondary heart hammered against his breast.

‘As the forests are green,’ he murmured.

The veteran warriors regarded him, aghast.

‘The Lion will be furious,’ said Samariel flatly, looking at the ruined armour.

Holguin, however, was not looking at the armour.

With the slow departure of the light cast by the burning voidwreck, the shadows cast by the armour displays, the tapestries and the Dark Angels themselves stretched, wheeling across the far wall. All except one. It was small, no larger than a mortal child, swaddled in blackness in the same way that an aspirant to the Legion wore his robes. Holguin knew – without knowing how – that it stared right back at him. He had a sense of rustling leaves, creaking bowers, the rumble of something malignant stalking between the tall, crowding trunks of shadow, and again Holguin felt a chill that his armour’s systems gave no credence to. The dissonance made him shiver.

It looked like...

But it couldn’t be. They had never appeared to him before. And what would they be doing here?

‘Sir?’

‘Watcher...’ he murmured.

‘Are you alright, sir?’

‘I thought... I thought I saw...’

Samariel took him firmly by the pauldron. ‘There have been no reports of boarders anywhere near this section.’

‘What did you see?’ said Valiel.

Holguin blinked. He shook his head to stop it ringing. His armoured boot crunched on a pin. ‘It was nothing, brother,’ he managed to say.

‘But–’

‘The voted-lieutenant has told you that it was nothing,’ grunted Kastael. The paladin gave no indication that he had personally seen or sensed anything untoward. He spoke in defence of his voted-lieutenant simply out of habitual reticence.

‘I am wound up tight, that is all,’ Holguin elaborated. ‘My humours are unbalanced. It is no secret that this is not the war I would have us fighting, but I would still rather be on the bridge or in a boarding tube *fighting it* than down here. I allowed the shadows to trick me into a glimpse of an enemy. That is all.’

‘Tricked by the shadows,’ Samariel echoed slowly, releasing him. ‘Yes, sir.’

It did not matter whether they believed the lie or not, only that they accepted it as though it were the truth.

‘Eyes open.’ Holguin took a deep breath, injecting his voice with vigour and firmness. ‘We have half the deck to search yet.’

‘Sir.’ Somehow, Samariel managed to freight a simple confirmation with a whole train of anxieties and doubts. ‘If he didn’t know we were here before, then as sure as beasts lurk in the woods he knows now. I don’t think we’re going to find him if he chooses to be hidden.’

‘I will make that decision, brother. I will make it *after* we have searched.’

Samariel dipped his helmeted head. His mouth grille made a rough noise, as though he had been about to add something but thought better of it, when a heraldic portiere on the far side of the hall was ripped aside.

The Deathwing reacted with speed powered by extreme tension.

Actuated servos whined, boltguns and pistols rattling as Samariel, Valiel, Breunor and Holguin brought weapons to bear. Kastael drew his sword into a ‘fool’ guard, lowering the humming point to the ground and dragging one foot back.

Farith Redloss raised his hands to the array of I Legion guns.

*‘Lion’s teeth, brother.’*

## VII

‘I think we want to take him alive, brother, don’t you?’ Redloss stepped through the portiere, hand still up, toeing aside the ornate Order helmet that lay on the deck as his own Knights followed through and fanned out behind him.

Nobody on either side seemed immediately inclined towards lowering their weapons.

‘Kastael,’ greeted Danaeus, his paired bolt pistols aimed at the paladin’s chest.

‘Danaeus.’ The old paladin offered a slight dip of the head, as though welcoming a promising squire to the tourney.

‘Is that your ugly face under that helmet, Samariel?’ said Gawain.

‘I earned this ugliness in service to the Emperor,’ Samariel retorted cheerfully, belying the deep, grinding modulation of his helm’s augmitter.

‘With weapons drawn,’ said Redloss. ‘In the primarch’s own sanctum, no less.’

‘Pistols and swords,’ Holguin snapped. His words, usually so measured, were unexpectedly short. There was hoarseness to their delivery as well, as though he had been shriving himself, depriving his body even of water. ‘We are in the

middle of a void battle, as you should well know. This is precautionary.’ He nodded towards the Dreadwing Destroyers. ‘You look as though you are out to subjugate a small world.’

‘We are hunting a primarch, brother. I would counter that this is what precautionary looks like.’

‘He has not been the same since Chemos,’ muttered Gawain.

‘Since Davin,’ Danaeus corrected him.

‘We all heard what happened to Brother-Redemptor Nemiel,’ Redloss added. ‘For the crime of possessing principles and standing to them, the primarch took his head. I would not want to come across him in such a mood unprepared.’

Holguin laughed. ‘I see now.’ Redloss sensed a kind of despairing mania in him, as if he might almost welcome his brothers’ fire. Holding one hand up, he carefully lowered the other to holster his pistol. ‘Were you hoping to press your case with him alone? Did you fear that he would react poorly to your arguments?’

‘I did not come here to argue anything,’ said Redloss, lowering his voice, speaking as one would to a spooked hound or a madman with a gun. He glanced pointedly to Danaeus and Werrin, and the legionaries reluctantly lowered their weapons. Kastael and Samariel lowered theirs in turn. ‘The primarch and I are in accord. As *you* should well know. I came only to fetch him for the strategium council, as did you.’

‘Opinions can change when circumstances force change on them,’ Holguin hissed. ‘They must.’

‘I think I understand,’ said Redloss.

‘Speak your meaning plainly, brother. If you have one.’

‘You would ask that of me with a gun aimed at my chest?’

Holguin looked at the Umbra-pattern bolt pistol in his hand as though surprised by it. He transferred it to his left hand and then presented the grip to Samariel. The veteran took it. ‘Speak, then.’

‘The Lion has chosen a course other than Terra,’ said Redloss. ‘It is time for you to accept it.’

Holguin was silent a moment.

‘Honour demands that I cannot,’ he said finally.

‘Will you tell me, then, that you are not here to do exactly as you would accuse me of attempting? You spent too many weeks on Macragge, brother. So noble of theoretical. So clandestine of practical. The Avenging Son would have been proud to call you one of his own.’

‘Insult me thus again,’ Holguin warned. His hand rested upon the grip of the giant executioner’s broadsword that was sheathed across his shoulders. ‘Only do it with the weapon of a Knight in your hands.’

‘It is no insult I give you. It is a reminder of your duty.’

‘I will hear no more. Samariel!’

‘Sir?’

The enormous length of forest-green steel emerged from its sheath on Holguin’s back with a long, drawn-out scrape that was almost a challenge in and of itself. ‘You will be my second. Watch these curs for perfidy as I give my brother a lesson in *honour*.’

‘In the Emperor’s name,’ swore Danaeus, stepping between the two voted-lieutenants. ‘The wrecks in the void are not yet cold and you would draw steel on Farith, here?’ As if to make his point, another light shield strike to the forward voids – if Redloss judged correctly – caused the chamber’s armour displays to tinkle on their podia. The voted-second glanced pointedly over the shattered pieces of armour that lay strewn across the floor. ‘Must I be the one to ask instead what happened here?’

Holguin’s body language turned suddenly cold, as if a sheet of armourglass had just gone up. He sheathed his sword. Behind him, the legionaries of the Deathwing closed ranks.

‘Nothing happened here.’

## VIII

Stenius was in a good mood, not that it showed. The smoked silver of his augmented optics roiled like a storm cloud, returning the flashes and booms as they appeared in the *Invincible Reason*’s colossal oculus screen. The cortex region that still controlled his smile reflex sent a thin trickle of drool running down his chin.

Grey-brown hunks of planet tumbled and crashed through space.

The debris still occupied a basically spheroid shape, but that was slowly being dispersed, mountainous slabs of crust slamming together, crumbling apart, more massive pieces already feeling the drag of the system star on their orbits. The caustic atmosphere that had once made this world notorious was now the seeding element of a very small, very temporaneous gas cloud, one that Stenius looked forward to watching dissipate at his leisure as the world’s gravitational pull became increasingly fragmented over the next few hours. Naval duels continued

to flicker and flare as I Legion attack frigates and fighter-bombers hunted down the clapped-out Skylance gunships and refurbished Destroyers that the Dark Angels had not already obliterated, but next to the act of cosmic annihilation that was their backdrop, every trifling explosion was an inconsequential, almost petty act.

Weird radiative effects – electromagnetic leftovers from the cyclonic warhead that had cracked the planet’s solid core – flickered through the cloud. Coruscating gyres of plasma. Ambient pulses of exoplanetary lightning. Out of a kind of morbid interest, Stenius had ordered ship vox to be opened to all incoming frequencies, and the shrieks and whines of the planet’s final emissions squealed through the bridge’s augmitter systems like steel claws running down the oculus screen. On the fore-station deck beneath him, the bridge crew plugged into their various stations worked in clenched-jawed silence.

‘Barbarus,’ he announced, with just the faint hint of a lisp. ‘You die well for a traitor world.’

Raising a trembling finger, muscle-embedded motor assists growling, he pointed towards a glacially spinning fragment that still bore a resemblance to one of the more recognisable continental plates. It had been described fairly prominently in the records that Stenius had dug out of the archives for analysis over the course of the long voyage from Luth Tyre. It had been, to all obvious intents, the only location of note on the feral world. The site of the Wall of Memory, where the name of every Death Guard slain during the Great Crusade had been carved *in memoriam*. Stenius felt gratified to have been allowed to see it for himself, if only to make his next task easier. Cued to his every gesture, the viewer placed a hovering green bracket exactly where Stenius had been pointing, isolating the immense fragment and dragging it onto a subscreen. The viewer systems enlarged the object, and Stenius could almost visualise the buildings still dotting the pulverised vista. Villages. Fortresses. Even a road.

‘Gunnery.’

‘Yes, captain.’

‘Anything above a million cubic metres is to be made into rubble. “No stone left standing atop another”,’ he finished, quoting back the Lion’s last command. ‘That piece must be twenty times that.’

‘Confirmed, captain. Targeting.’

‘Coordinate with your counterparts aboard the *Silent Kill*, the *Lady Densenoor* and the *Last Beast*.’

‘Yes, captain. Firing now.’

Stenius watched with something more than professional satisfaction as the intersecting tracers of macro-fire slowly smashed the stubborn planetoid to pieces. It still massed several thousand times the tonnage of the *Invincible Reason*, but it was eggshell brittle, its cohesion stressed beyond all natural endurance by the cyclonic forces unleashed against its mantle and core, and conventional ordnance was more than adequate to the task now. It was ready to die.

The rock shattered, filling its sub-display with blizzarding pieces of siliceous crust and navigational hazard markers.

‘Hah!’

Stenius brought his hands together in a single, dully metallic clap that had the ratings in the crew pit immediately below the command dais looking up over the rail in surprise.

Unexpected outbursts of joy were hardly what he was best known for.

But he was in a good mood.

This made what they had done to the Shield Worlds look like a slap on the wrist. He wiped the thread of drool from his chin on his finger, remembering the moment, years past, when an exploding console and a freak nerve injury had ended his crusade. The Gordian League had declared for Horus almost as soon as the Dark Angels ships had broken orbit of their worlds. Stenius did not blame them for that. He would have spat on the turned backs of his conquerors in exactly the same way in their place. But that understanding did not equate to forgiveness.

If the Lion sought further targets before turning his great fleet towards Colchis or Cthonia or even the Throneworld itself, then Stenius could oblige him.

He would say this for the Dark Angels – they remembered.

With a magnetic whine the polarity clamps on the bridge doors behind him disengaged. Stenius turned with difficulty, the monolithic blast doors still sliding into the receiving blocks as Redloss, Holguin and two squads of armoured legionary warriors strode through, staggering the plate-wire of the ascent ramp with their tread.

At first glance, the two groups of warriors were similarly outfitted and attired. The complicated hierarchy of symbols on their armour, with obtuse and often contingent meanings that could be interpreted only by the initiated, made actual squad designations difficult to define. Even for an officer of Stenius’ powers of observation and experience – most of that admittedly as an officer of a pre-Calibanite Legion – the best marker of differentiation was the weapons at their

hips. Those trailing Holguin came with an assortment of pistols and knives. Those strung out behind Redloss boasted more of an arsenal: volkite and flamer weaponry, and even a missile launcher (strapped across the back of young Gawain), on naked display. Stenius gave the inappropriate weapon a hard frown, but Redloss and Gawain simply strode past him as though he were part of the furniture of the bridge, deck plates and weaponry rattling as the rest of the squad followed their lead.

No. Forget that. The best marker of differentiation was the obvious antagonism they shared.

There was something feral about the Destroyers of the Dark Angels. With their helmets off, they looked drawn, almost animalistic, like something that had pulled itself upright and walked out of the Death World forests they called home before anyone had had the chance to interrogate them too closely. Not that they would ever hear such an opinion advanced by Captain Stenius. Holguin's Knights, on the other hand, thick of muscle and grey of beard, were almost as old as Stenius, a striking contrast in martial bearing and pride.

Not that *they* would ever hear such an opinion advanced by Captain Stenius either.

'You made no mention of the fact that Redloss was hunting the Lion as well, brother,' Holguin murmured, drawing up onto the dais to watch the Dreadbringer depart.

Redloss was already halfway towards the strategium suite that annexed the bridge's medial tier on its starboard side. Its reinforced hatches were nothing like as tough as the main bridge doors, but they were still as thick as the glacis plate of a Predator tank, enough to take a hit from a multi-melta and still function afterwards. To the credit of the bridge crew, most of them Stenius' own hand picks, no one looked up as the lieutenant and his entourage stomped along the servitor aisles between them. Transhuman dread, the awe felt by the unaugmented human psyche at the presence of something indefinably altered and *other*, was a very real physiological phenomenon, one that the Legion's Apothecaries had gone to great lengths to understand, and one that Stenius had gone to equal extremes to root out of his senior officers.

He looked up to Holguin.

The Deathwing lieutenant was huge. Encased in his artificed war-plate, he stood half a metre taller than Stenius and considerably broader. His face was pale. His eyes were haunted. His bare head stood out of all proportion to his enormously armoured body, as though it had been placed on top of too massive a

frame. Garbed only in dark green carapace and a white surplice, a ceremonial carryover from the old Calibanite orders, Stenius could have been forgiven for experiencing a little transhuman dread himself.

He wiped another line of drool from his chin.

‘I didn’t tell him that you were looking either, brother.’

Holguin grunted. He looked distant.

‘Is there something else?’ said Stenius.

The muscles around the Deathbringer’s jaw tightened. Everyone had secrets, but nobody kept them like a Dark Angel. Regardless of how heavy they grew.

‘One of these days you will have to pick a side,’ Holguin said, moving after Redloss. ‘Everyone else has.’

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