

THE HORUS HERESY®

IRONFIRE

Rob Sanders



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unleash their most deadly siege weapons

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Idriss Krendl wanted to destroy something beautiful.

The Iron Warriors warsmith was ugliness incarnate. He had once been a specimen of genetic perfection, blessed with the grim visage of a conqueror – the face of his father. That had been before Lesser Damantyne, before the Schadenhold.

Before Barabas Dantioch.

Krendl had taunted his brother for being a cripple, an imperfect reflection of their primarch. It seemed that the galaxy was not without cruel irony when Dantioch had sent Krendl back to their father as a broken warrior. By the time Krendl's reinforcements had arrived, Dantioch was long gone. He had left Krendl buried alive, barely breathing, beneath a mountain of rubble. The Schadenhold had fallen and had decimated armies – Space Marines, even the god-machine, *Omnia Victrum*.

But not Idriss Krendl. Shattered and smashed but still alive, the warsmith had been recovered from the remains of the fortress. He had been saved by his gene-engineered gifts, his body entering a state of torpor. But when chemical therapies and auto-suggestion brought him back to the agonies of the present, Krendl found himself to be a monster. A cripple and an affront to the Iron Warriors about him – a son imperfect, whose every breath shamed their father. But the warsmith survived this indignity – for Idriss Krendl would not be destroyed.

'So, that is it?' Victrus Krugeran said as he reached the crest of the dune. The siege-captain wore the tattered livery of the Dodektheon: the Brethren of Stone, those who knew what it was to create and destroy. As one of Perturabo's favoured, Krugeran had been placed in possession of two of the Legion's most powerful siege guns, *Eradicant* and *Obliteratus*. This honour had been tarnished

somewhat by the fact that Krugeran had been placed in Idriss Krendl's charge.

'That is your target, siege-captain,' Krendl told him.

The two Iron Warriors stood unmoving, wind-blown sand grains collecting in the crooks and ridges of their dun battleplate. While Krugeran's suit was silver trimmed with chevrons and greening gold, Krendl wore armour of sullied chrome.

It was more than just armour. Like some ancient torture device, the suit was shot through with metal rods and skeletal screws that held his broken bones in place. The plate was covered in rivets and bolts, large and small, that gave it a studded or spiked appearance. The brute bionics of his limbs sighed and vented steam, while his head was encased in a cubed, wire cage threaded through his shattered skull. The full half of his face had not been saved, and the patchwork of stapled flesh gave way to a grisly crater.

Over his plate Krendl wore the ragged mail cloak of a warsmith – a rank he now held in name only. The 14th Grand Company had been wiped out on Lesser Damantyne and his flagship stolen by the traitor Barabas Dantioch. He had commanded one thousand Iron Warriors intended for the primarch's glorious march on the Throneworld. Now he had but a handful of battle-brothers attached to Krugeran's battery section and its associated divisions.

'It's huge,' the captain admitted, looking at the colossal structure that dominated the northern horizon. 'I've never seen anything like it.'

'Then you've never been to Terra,' Krendl said. 'The architecture, the flourishes and ornamental towers. Size. Defensive capabilities. Walls. The layout of the structures within. These are all comparable.'

'Comparable to what?'

'To the Imperial Palace, to the decadent pile of rubble Dorn and his mongrels work to fortify. To the tomb into which the Emperor has already crawled.'

'That's impossible.'

'I ran the calculations myself,' Krendl said, handing Krugeran a scuffed data-slate. 'I've compared thousands of known fortifications on just as many different worlds. This is as close a match as Perturabo or the Warmaster could hope for.'

'These figures are correct?' Krugeran asked, scanning the stream of data.

'They're correct,' Krendl hissed. 'We are to become part of Imperial history, siege-captain. It starts with us. The first preparations for an attack on the Palace. The first real-world siege simulations. Here we shall discover how to crack the defences of such a fortification.'

'What is this place?' Krugeran asked.

‘It’s all in the files,’ Krendl said, lost in imagined visions of decimation and destruction.

The planet’s name was Euphoros. It had been designated One-Forty-One Nineteen and received back into the Imperium of Man after a swift and bloodless compliance action years before. Classified as a garden world by attending adepts of the Administratum, it was appreciated as a place of incredible, almost hypnotic beauty, even by the battle-hungry warriors of the Legiones Astartes who had quietly conquered it. Polychromatic deserts dominated the pleasant poles. The equatorial regions, meanwhile, were a scattered landscape of deltas, floodplains and crystal-clear waterways. There a belt of lush vegetation grew, visible from orbit. The perfume of the mangroves carried on winds that sculpted the southern dunes. Oasis-townships, orbital ports and hinterfields of desert fruits and optimised grain crops punctuated the stunning desolation of the north. The architecture of towering citadels and regional alcazars was an exquisite union of defensive function and elegant artistry, finding an apex of expression in the great polar palaces.

The paradise was inhabited by a technologically advanced civilisation who had called themselves the Euphantine before compliance. Over thousands of years in isolation, they discovered such hedonistic wonders upon their home world, expanded their technological reach, fought off the pirates and marauders of local systems and mined the mineral rich moon of Phibea, leaving but a hollowed husk in the Euphorosian sky. From the bedrock of Phibea, the Euphantine created a sprawling, fortified palace at the northern pole that housed much of the planet’s population. Called the Great Selenic, it was a grand fortification of kilometre-high concentric walls, domes, hanging gardens and towers that rivalled even the Imperial Palace of Ancient Terra.

‘Admitted,’ Victrus Krugeran said. ‘It is a wonder.’

‘And we’re going to destroy that wonder,’ Krendl said.

‘However... warsmith,’ Krugeran said, hesitating to use the title. ‘You seem to be forgetting something.’

Krendl let the slur wash over him. He knew what Iron Warriors like Krugeran thought of him – of his failure at Lesser Damantyne and the cripple he had become.

‘Enlighten me, siege-captain. If you can.’

‘The Imperial Palace – when we get there, primarch willing – is defended by the Imperial Army, the Legio Custodes and Dorn’s dogs of the Seventh Legion. How are you going to simulate that, *warsmith*?’

‘I will improvise, Krendl shrugged. ‘I will give our father and the Warmaster what they truly desire: data, tactical simulations tested in shot and shell, strategems whose success has already been written in blood.’

‘The subjugated population that resides behind these walls, even in their millions, are no match for the sons of Perturabo.’

‘And we would hope to command many more siege guns alongside the paltry two with which your battalion has been entrusted,’ Krendl said. He did not allow Krugeran any retort. ‘You are right, of course. For a true simulation, even one calibrated to the meagre forces at our disposal, we shall need legionaries. We need to see how our own kind might respond to an attack on such a fortress, so that we can factor their presence into our future battle plans.’

‘And how are you going to do that?’ Krugeran demanded.

‘One-Forty-One Nineteen was brought to compliance by the Third Legion.’

‘The Emperor’s Children?’

‘Aye,’ Krendl said. ‘Fulgrim’s deviants took to the worthless beauty of this world and the myriad pleasures of its people. And now, they have an entire civilisation to use and abuse within the mighty palace walls. Lord Commander Lelanthius should have regrouped at his primarch’s command, but he dallied and sent half of his force on to Fulgrim at Hydra Cordatus, remaining here with one hundred of his brothers.’

‘A hundred legionaries garrison that place?’ Krugeran asked.

‘In truth I have no idea what depraved things Lelanthius and his warriors do behind those walls. But I know what they are going to do when we attack.’

‘We cannot attack the sons of Fulgrim!’ Krugeran protested. ‘The primarchs are allies. They fight side by side for Horus.’

‘As this war rolls on, siege-captain,’ Krendl said, ‘you are going to have to develop a stomach for such necessities. Our only allegiance is to victory and those standing next to us upon its achievement. All else is ash on the wind, collateral damage in the service of greater death still to come. Remember, I have spilled the blood of our own brothers. Necessity demanded such a sacrifice. Perturabo and the Warmaster too, though they did not know it at the time. You think I care more for warriors of the Third Legion than I do our own primarch’s flesh and blood?’

‘When Fulgrim hears of this, he will believe the order came from Perturabo. Horus will punish them both. Your sufferings have driven the sense from you, Krendl. What you propose is madness.’

Krendl took the data-slate back. ‘Before we entered orbit, I sent a message to

Lord Commander Lelanthius. I told him that we had sighted an Imperial Fists flotilla two systems away. There was, of course, no flotilla. He despatched his only strike cruiser – the *Rapture* – to investigate the threat. When Fulgrim finally discovers that his wayward sons have been wiped off the face of this planet, the *Rapture*'s own logs will tell him all he needs to know: that the ship searched for an enemy contingent that had meanwhile launched an attack on Euphoros. Only Perturabo shall learn of the truth, and only when the invaluable data our simulations have provided are in his hand. When our father offers the Warmaster the tactical keys to the Imperial Palace, do you think that Horus will care about the loss of a few Third Legion deviants?’

Victrus Krugeran gave the warsmith a hard glare. ‘I don't know that such a plan convinces me of your sanity.’

‘You are not here to be convinced,’ Krendl told him. ‘You are here to rain destruction down upon that fortress. Bring forth your gunners.’

Krugeran's hateful gaze lingered on the monstrous warsmith before he motioned for a pair of Iron Warriors to join them, and Krendl turned his back on the palace that shimmered through the heat of the immaculate desert.

Before him was *Eradicant*, the mountainous centrepiece of the Iron Warrior encampment. Stolen from the Mechanicum on Diamat by the First Legion, the gargantuan mobile artillery piece had subsequently been entrusted to Perturabo before the Dropsite Massacre. *Eradicant* was as long as a Titan was tall, the tracks of its individual drive units sitting in the Euphorosian sands. In the bright light of day, the enormous barrel of a macrocannon gaped darkness and death at them from where its great system of pulleys and derricks allowed it to rest. The massive machine bristled with automated emplacements – quad-lasers, flak batteries and mega-bolters silent and ready to roar to the siege gun's defence. Fat, tracked ordnance compartments two storeys high stretched for hundreds of meters, trailing the main gun carriage like the segmentations of a death world decamillipede.

Trudging through the polychromatic sands, a pair of Techmarines presented themselves to Krendl and their siege-captain.

‘Brothers Arkasi Achorax,’ Krugeran said, ‘and Mordan Vhosk. Overseers and senior gunners of *Eradicant* and *Obliteratus* respectively. They are Dodekatheon. The best artillerists I have.’

‘They had better be, siege-captain,’ the warsmith muttered. ‘They need to be, for what I have planned. Brothers Achorax and Vhosk, I have heard much about your mighty siege guns. Captured Mechanicum monstrosities, given as a gift

from one primarch to another, the pride-foolish Lion El'Jonson thinking to buy the loyalties of our father. El'Jonson shall pay – like those who stand with him – for his lack of foresight. He will know its price, brothers, when your guns bring down the walls of his master's great palace. Then the Dark Angels will come to know *true* darkness.'

'They truly are wonders,' Krugeran told the warsmith. 'They are bigger than anything fielded by my brother-captains in the Dodekatheon, or present in the experimental arsenal of the Stor-Bezashk.'

'Tell me of their wonders,' Krendl said.

'Fully armoured and protected by void shield generators, warsmith,' Achorax said, 'their weaponry can level a small fortress with ease from miles away.'

'And what if it is my wish to strategically demolish sections of a much larger fortification – say, the Selenic behind me?' Krendl put to them.

'Each weapon boasts an MIU interface chamber,' Vhosk told him.

'For which we have embraced certain adaptations,' Arkasi Achorax added.

'A neural link between weapon and gunner results in unparalleled accuracy, data-streaming, response-calibration and rate of fire,' Vhosk said. 'Not unlike that expected of a Titan's gunnery moderati.'

'To be one with the weapon,' Krendl said. 'An intriguing notion. That truly is excellent, brothers. Your siege guns are everything your captain promised. It is just as well, for Captain Krugeran and myself will be putting our lives in your hands.'

Krugeran frowned. 'My lord? This is the first I have heard of this. It is traditional for brethren officers to oversee the prosecution of the siege barrage from a command vehicle.'

He pointed down at the four Spartan assault tanks that flanked *Eradicant* as an armoured escort. His own, named *Escutcheon*, mounted a lodge banner of the Dodekatheon that turned and twisted in the desert wind.

'And that is where we shall be overseeing the barrage,' Krendl told him. 'Only the command vehicle will be at the heart of our direct assault on the palace.'

Again, Krugeran's face changed at the warsmith's apparent insanity. He went to snarl some rebuke but caught himself. He would not question Krendl in front of Brothers Achorax and Vhosk.

'Just to clarify,' the siege-captain hissed through his teeth. 'You wish to lead a direct assault on *that* fortress?'

'Yes.'

'With my Iron Warriors?'

‘With every Iron Warrior under your command,’ Idriss Krendl said. ‘Though I admit you do not have many, being that of a battery section. It is no grand company, but the primarch has seen fit to grant me a little, with which I shall achieve much.’

‘What of the guns themselves?’ Krugeran asked, hoping to find a weakness in the unassailable optimism of the warsmith’s insane plan.

‘As you said yourself, the guns are well protected and can defend themselves if need be. Achorax and Vhosk will command each mobile artillery piece, aided by the servitors and bondsmen assigned to the ordnance sections.’

‘Once more – you want to attack the palace, while the siege guns are firing upon it?’

‘It really is something,’ Krendl said, lifting the bionics of his replacement arm, ‘to be at the heart of the battle, rather than monitoring distant destruction from a horizon away. To feel the fires of destruction raging, while the fortress to which you lay siege crumbles about you. It is a feeling I would not deny you, captain. Following my last siege I had a great deal of time to think. While the body heals, it is important to keep the mind active. I worked on new siege tactics and approaches – strategies we can use to defeat the most determined of defences. As I relived the fall of the Schadenhold, billions of tonnes of rock and metal raining down, it came to me. As my bones and my mind broke, the very tenets of my training broke with it. Legion convention suggests that you bombard an enemy position – you break their defences and then you lead assault forces inside. But what if both could be achieved at the same time?’

‘You are talking about shelling your own forces,’ Krugeran said, shaking his head in disbelief. ‘*My* forces.’

‘If I can survive the unsurvivable,’ Krendl continued, ‘then perhaps my brothers can too. Perhaps besiegers can attack a fortification *during* a full-scale bombardment rather than following it. Perhaps a redoubtable force, using the eye of the storm as their protection, could strike at the strategic heart of an enemy exposed, an enemy in confusion, while all else about them turns to ash and screams. Who better than the Iron Warriors to put such a strategy to the test?’

‘We would be obliterated...’ Krugeran murmured, but he could see that his words were lost on the warsmith.

‘Not with these new siege guns,’ Krendl said. ‘Not with the precision advantages mind-linked artillery can bring. Brothers Achorax and Vhosk here – by your own admission, your two best gunners – can monitor our position from the signatures of our suits, and time the impact of their artillery to clear a path

before us of walls, structures, emplacements and enemy forces. It will be a feat of transhuman timing and calculation.'

'I implore you, warsmith...'

Krendl did not listen, but turned to the two Iron Warriors before him. They both wore cruel smiles of expectation and bellicose glee. 'Brother Achorax?'

'Let us make history,' the Iron Warrior returned.

'Vhosk?'

'Do you have a name for this stratagem, warsmith?' Vhosk asked.

'I do, brother,' Krendl said. 'I call it Ironfire.'

Eight Spartan assault tanks, all in the tarnished silver of the Iron Warriors, tore across the desert flats. Out in front, trailing the whipping Dodekatheon banner, was *Escutcheon*, carrying Siege-Captain Krugeran, Idriss Krendl and ten Iron Warriors in augmented plate, each carrying a boltgun and boarding shield. The squad stood in silence, riding out the bumps and rolls of a high-speed insertion. The drive system roared its automotive fury and the tracks tore through sand as *Escutcheon* led the train of tanks in.

Krugeran was wearing his helmet but Krendl could tell that the battery officer's face was contorted with frustration beneath it. Krugeran was no cowardly soul – the warsmith understood that. He simply hadn't expected to die under the fire of his own guns.

Krendl left him with his silent warriors and hauled himself up front. The assault tank's driver, Brother Gholic, was strapped into his elevated seat, working the vehicle's nest of throttles, levers and pedals. With the optics of his studded helm almost up to the armourglass of the narrow viewport, Gholic gunned the Spartan across the desert sands.

'As you were, brother,' Krendl said as Gholic went to acknowledge him. The warsmith leaned in and peered through the auxiliary port. *Escutcheon* was riding through the thick sands almost like a ship in the ocean, ploughing through the polychromatic desert, the tank's tracks throwing up a haze of colour and beauty. Before them, the mighty walls of the Great Selenic reached for the deep Euphorosian skies. Krendl felt the sights of emplacement guns upon him, the reach of augurs and the eyes of a thousand sentries.

All of them were watching, but none of them knew what to make of the unannounced approach.

'Why aren't they firing?' Gholic asked, his voice a grille-modulated hiss against the rhythmic rattle and bounce of the tank.

‘This world was conquered by the Emperor’s Children,’ Krendl said, ‘if you call what Fulgrim’s deviants did here “conquering”. They arrived as heralds of a new age but stayed on to become tyrants. The people of this planet know little of the wider conflict. They will not fire on a legionary. Not yet.’

‘What if a member of the Third Legion is up on those walls?’ Gholic pressed.

‘Lelanthius and his warriors will be otherwise occupied, I suspect,’ the warsmith said. ‘And even if they are up there, what of it? They know our vessel is in the area. We could be carrying messages from Perturabo or Fulgrim at Hydra Cordatus, or even from the Warmaster himself. We are brothers, united by our treachery. Don’t worry – first blood will go to us.’

Krendl opened a channel to the other tanks in the column. ‘Armour, call in.’

‘Truculent, *ready*.’

‘Iron Tyrant, *ready*.’

‘Ferrico, *standing by*.’

‘Incaladion Irae, *right behind you*, Escutcheon.’

‘Unbreakable Litany, *awaiting your orders*.’

‘Ictus *is ready*, warsmith.’

‘*Eradicant, Obliteratus* – report in,’ Krendl voxed.

‘*Siege gun Eradicant, ready to commence firing*,’ Arkadi Achorax reported.

‘*Obliteratus tracking your progress and awaiting first target*,’ came Mordan Vhosk’s voice a moment later.

Krendl turned and nodded his caged features at Siege-Captain Krugeran.

‘Ready your weapons,’ Krugeran said, prompting a synchronous clunk of boltgun priming mechanisms from the siege squad beyond. Smacking their boarding shields down twice on the compartment floor, the Iron Warriors indicated their readiness. About him, Krendl heard *Escutcheon*’s belligerent machine-spirit powering up the assault tank’s flank-mounted lascannon quads and cycle belt-ammunition from trough-feeds into the forward heavy bolter. The gunners were ready too.

‘*Eradicant, Obliteratus*,’ the warsmith voxed, looking down at the data-slate in his gauntlet. ‘You are cleared to fire. Initiate Ironfire, I repeat – Ironfire protocols initiated. Acknowledge.’

‘*Ironfire a go*.’

‘*Ironfire, go*, Escutcheon.’

Krendl looked from a chronometer on his slate, back to the dirty port window. His broken mind swam with seconds, metres and angles. His mangled lips wrapped themselves silently around a countdown.

‘*Eradicant* – this is a call for fire. Grid IF 3-61 72-09.

‘*Grid IF 3-61 72-09, confirmed.*’

‘Confirm. Target – curtain wall. Ordnance adjust,’ Idriss Krendl voxed back.

The warsmith waited. From kilometres away he heard the thunder of the monstrous siege gun. He waited. And waited. With the armoured column ripping through the multi-coloured sands. Krendl could hear the faint whine of inevitable destruction overhead as he counted down under his breath.

‘...three... two... one.’

One moment there was a formidable expanse of wall. Moon rock. Architectural flourishes. The smooth line of crenellations. Emplacements of exotic weaponry.

The next there was obliteration: flame, storm, darkness, thunder.

Krendl watched as the curtain wall became a swirling maelstrom of fire and debris, as the Iron Warriors ordnance smeared the structure into shades of destruction. Blasted sand swirled outwards in a blinding storm of grit, and glass streaked with the darkness of soot and ash. Flames tore through this polychromatic assault on the senses, washing off *Escutcheon*’s armoured hull with a hail of masonry fragments that pranged off the thick plate.

‘Maintain speed and direction,’ Krendl ordered as he felt Gholic ease off the drive. With the thunder of detonation all about the assault tank, and rubble cascading down from the towering wall section, Krendl understood the legionary’s concern. ‘This is Ironfire!’ he roared through the insanity of destruction. ‘Embrace it. Become one with the storm. Ride its eye through the obliteration of your enemies!’

Escutcheon plunged through the swirling devastation, its tracks thrashing against the small mountain of rubble that had crashed down in the lee of the demolished wall section. Thrashing the treads against the rocky incline, Gholic kept the Spartan assault tank bouncing and shredding its indomitable path into the Selenic palace.

‘Column, stay with us,’ Krendl warned the other drivers over the vox. ‘Maintain position on our augur signature.’

As *Escutcheon* thundered down the rubble slope on the other side, the smoke and dust began to clear. The warsmith could see the labyrinthine settlements and hab-shacks that dominated the municipal plazas beyond – a small city of brightly-coloured tents, stilt-shacks and sand-glass architecture.

‘Hit it,’ he commanded.

Gholic took the assault tank straight into the buildings, the people and the confusion. Men, women and children of the slums screamed and ran for their

lives. Native livestock trumpeted calls of alarm and broke free from their rickety enclosures. *Escutcheon*'s armoured form ploughed through hovels of coloured glass, stilts, steps of second-storey shacks and trailed the coloured materials of market stall awnings. Sand imps were smashed from their cages and flapped through the destruction. The mist-eyed, swarthy citizens of the Great Selenic went down under the tank's thrashing tracks and bounced with bone-breaking regularity off the Spartan's armoured hull. Exotic beasts of burden were broken across the tank's riveted assault prow. Mechanised wagons of wares and spidery walking limbs were smashed aside and aged repulsor-bikes exploded, dousing *Escutcheon* in fresh flame.

'*Obliteratus,*' Krendl said into the vox. 'Grid IF 4-61 68-07.'

'*Grid IF 4-61 68-07, aye,*' Vhosk returned from the interface chamber of his mighty siege gun.

'Confirm. Concentric wall section. You are cleared to fire... now.'

The Selenic palace had hundreds of kilometres of walls. With the few Iron Warriors at his disposal, the warsmith could not hope to take the fortifications in a traditional siege. But he didn't need to if he used his Ironfire protocols. A small force, shielded from a colossal defending force by surgical ordnance strikes could punch their way through the polar city-palace. Like the Imperial Palace on Terra, the people of Euphoros and their overlords hid behind walls, behind which lay more walls still.

Like the outer curtain, the concentric inner wall vanished in a cacophony of flame and tumbling masonry. Bodies and shattered structures rained down through the billowing, choking dust as *Escutcheon* led the way once more up the mound of rubble that marked the gap.

What the Spartan failed to crush in its track-thrashing path, the seven assault tanks behind pulverised into the ground. Euphorosian homes. Livestock. The bones of palace citizens. As death rained down from *Eradicant* onto the third wall, Krendl kept the stream of strike coordinates coming; his confidence in his strategy and siege guns increased as more Techmarines manned them.

For Siege-Captain Krugeran and his Iron Warriors, the experience was one of noise and motion. The assault tank shuddered as it bulldozed through buildings and bucked as it mounted piles of cascading rubble. The Spartan's roof rang with impacts as small boulders and shards of masonry rained down from the never-ending succession of detonations. Krendl fed Achorax and Vhosk targets with increasing speed and fury. *Escutcheon* led the way through the hellish beauty of annihilation: an entrancing, multicoloured miasma of dust, ash, soot and sand.

It was twenty-two minutes into the assault before Krendl detected any evidence of resistance, which surprised even him. There were a number of reasons why, and it behove the warsmith to catalogue them in the interests of comparison and strategy development. Krendl had to accept the possibility that the princely overlords cared little for their people – at least the minions who inhabited the slums and city-districts between the five concentric palace walls.

The local guard, conversely, had been sluggish to respond to the encroaching legionary threat as siege guns continually brought down the walls, fortifications and weapon emplacements set inside. As the tank column thundered on, leaving a dust-swirling path of destruction in their wake, Krendl took the precaution of having *Obliteratus* cover their rear. Krendl did not want regrouping palace soldiers or scrambled vehicles working their way behind the column. As *Eradicant* blasted walls, toppled towers and collapsed archways from the path of their advance, the warsmith had *Obliteratus* turn its attentions upon the catastrophic trail they had left behind. The craters and demolished wasteland of dumbstruck, wounded Euphorosians, shell-shocked palace guards and wrecked repulsor-drive vehicles were turned to vaulting infernos of rock and flame, just as those victims began to celebrate their unlikely survival.

Smashing through ornamental gardens and plazas, the column of IV Legion armour took to the broad, elevated avenues and grand, arched thoroughfares of the inner palace. The Euphorosian guard there had established a gauntlet for the oncoming tanks. Krendl could not use *Eradicant* to decimate the road ahead, for such a barrage would destroy the columned avenues they were traversing.

Up until now, the Spartans had weathered the disorganised small arms fire of palace guardsmen stumbling from demolished buildings. They had withstood the gunfire of the half-smashed emplacements that soldiers had managed to jury-rig and establish across the tank column's path.

Through the blood-splattered viewport, Krendl could see the palace soldiers in reflective scale-mail plate, cloaks and the baggy silk of their uniforms swarming the thoroughfare ahead. Some sat astride repulsor-bikes or in tent-topped personnel carriers. Dish emplacements of sonic weaponry were manoeuvred into position, ready to blast the tanks back.

'We stop for nothing,' he told Gholic and the other Iron Warrior drivers across the vox. 'We are iron. We are fire. We ride the storm. Authorise your vehicles to engage the enemy as we pass. Fire all weapons!'

The barrels of twin-linked heavy bolters barked to furious life. *Escutcheon's* armour sang under the enemy's return fire, the command tank bucking and

bouncing as it forced its way on. The Spartan's thick tracks chewed up the avenue, but blast after sonic blast from the dish emplacements hammered the vehicle and slowed its advance. The tank's lascannon gunners fired, blazing the mobile emplacements to scrap. The palace guards' scale armour was principally designed to deflect low-level energy weapons and offered little protection against the storm that was now directed towards them.

Without stopping, the armoured column punched through the gauntlet, smashing aside derelict weaponry and antique vehicles. Drove of palace soldiers went down before the fury of heavy bolter fire, their cloaked and lightly armoured bodies torn apart.

The monstrous artillery fire of *Obliteratus* and *Eradicant* continued around them. The warsmith directed Achorax and Vhosk to drop cataclysmic barrages on guardhouses, landing pads and arterial avenues sighted from his position; feeding the Techmarines an almost constant stream of coordinates, Krendl increased the siege guns' rate of fire but left the elevated avenue intact.

Suddenly, he heard a blast over the vox channel, and the roars of dying Iron Warriors.

'*Ferrico?*' the warsmith said. '*Ferrico*, call in.'

'*Ferrico has been knocked out by enemy gunships,*' the commander of *Truculent* reported.

The unfortunate Spartan had been hit by a sonic cannon that had smashed in its side and knocked it into a skidding roll off the side of the elevated avenue. Plummeting down through the arches and towers, *Ferrico* hit the dome of a citadel before its engine exploded. Elegant gunships swooped in on the rest of the tanks, keeping pace with the racing column.

'Engage enemy aircraft with rockets,' Krendl ordered. He nodded to Siege-Captain Krugeran, who sent an Iron Warrior from his squad up through the hatch to man the multi-launcher. As the Spartans surged on through colossal archways, Iron Warriors blasted the gunships, so elegant in flight, from the sky like wounded birds.

Krendl felt a shudder work its way through the battered superstructure of *Escutcheon*.

'What was that? All tanks call in,' the warsmith ordered.

'We just lost *Unbreakable Litany*,' the Iron Warrior manning the launcher reported as he climbed back down into the troop compartment and secured the hatch. 'Ordnance knocked down a tower across the avenue. It took out *Litany* and smashed through the thoroughfare, trapping *Ictus* behind it.'

‘Warsmith?’ said Gholic. ‘Should we slow for them?’

‘We stop for nothing,’ Krendl snarled.

‘Then at least call off the ordnance,’ Siege-Captain Krugeran implored him.

‘No. Ironfire will intensify.’

‘That’s insane—’

‘It’s necessary!’ Krendl roared back. ‘This is a live simulation. The real siege will change the galaxy as we know it. There is no going back – not for the primarch, not for Horus and not for us.’ He pointed at the viewport. ‘The enemy cowers in the inner palace, and we almost have them. Increase our speed. Step up the bombardment. We shall ride this storm right into the Third Legion’s nest of decadent deviance. Do you understand?’

Krugeran gave him the blankness of his helm lenses. He turned and retook his position with the siege squad. Krendl eyed him warily.

‘Brother Gholic, have the squad aboard *Ictus* disembark and follow us on foot into the inner palace.’

‘Yes, warsmith.’

As the armoured column left the elevated avenue, Krendl gave *Eradicant* coordinates for a colossal gated archway that delineated the interior of the Great Selenic.

‘What is that I hear?’ he asked across the vox. ‘It sounds like defensive fire.’

‘*Limited enemy forces have left the palace and engaged us, warsmith,*’ Mordan Vhosk reported.

‘Legionaries?’

‘*No, warsmith. Palace soldiers and some light vehicles. The flak batteries and mega-bolters are taking care of them now.*’

As the archway was replaced with the fury and flame of a renewed bombardment, *Escutcheon* plunged into the inferno, followed by the remaining Spartans. The compartment ceiling thundered with the crash of masonry, and fiery destruction scorched their reinforced plating. *Escutcheon* bounced on its tracks through the wreckage, before punching out the other side.

The architecture of the inner Selenic was grand and beautiful. Krendl had his siege guns destroy it all. Palatial pyramids and statues raged up into the skies in colossal fountains of rock and flame.

Lascannon quads cut through the columns of smaller structures, bringing down the roofs of temples, sanctuaries and arenas on palace guardsmen that took cover in the buildings. Heavy bolters chuntered through the Euphorosians, their rag-doll bodies blasted this way and that by the flesh-shredding assault.

Shattering their way across statue-lined plazas and along balcony platforms, the armoured column worked its way towards the colossal domed structure that crowned the Great Selenic. Taking his tanks up flights of carved steps and through the interior of ornamental vaulted halls, Krendl had the Spartans smash their way through.

‘*Obliteratus*,’ Krendl voxed finally. ‘Grid IF 2-54 69-00.’

‘*Grid IF 2-54 69-00, confirmed*,’ Vhosk answered.

‘Confirm. Target – the palace dome. Ordnance adjust,’ Krendl said.

‘*Escutcheon* out.’

The sky flashed white.

The blaze of the artillery detonation faded to reveal a fireball of blast-shattered masonry rocketing skyward. The domed roof was gone. All that remained was the smoke-streaming foundations of the ornate building. Billowing clouds of dust and pulverised stone choked the air.

Escutcheon’s tracks reached over the lip of the devastated palace before bouncing into the cratered, derelict remains. The great support columns of the dome were now stubby, soot-stained remnants sticking out of the shattered structure. The crowning glory of Euphorus had been huge and built to last for all eternity. It had not, however, been built to withstand a direct hit from one of the Iron Warriors’ mighty siege guns.

The assault tanks crunched through the palace foundations, while fiery rubble rained down about them. Slowing *Escutcheon* to a gritty crawl, Gholic negotiated the stubby columns that sat like the stumps of felled titanwoods.

‘All stop,’ Idriss Krendl announced to the compartment and the open vox-channel.

The warsmith thumped the battered compartment controls and the reinforced door fell to form a disembarkation ramp – the warriors within were treated to the utter devastation that the siege guns had created.

Krendl smiled. It was an ugly sight.

‘Brothers, we have won. Ironfire *works*. You proved that. We rode the storm and were one with obliteration, instead of being distant observers. Now we must finish the task and destroy the enemy command structure still present within these ruins.’

‘How could anyone survive... *this*?’ Siege-Captain Krugeran muttered.

‘The Phoenician’s sons are weak of will and deviant of flesh, but they are not stupid. They sent their playthings to meet us in battle and die by the fire of our iron. The Emperor’s Children wait for us here. I know it. Just like Dorn’s dogs

will wait for us on Terra, they will be skilled and they will be deadly. For the purposes of our simulation and the integrity of the data we bequeath our primarch, and him to his Warmaster – I would not have it any other way. But we shall prevail, brothers. There are legionaries here who still proclaim themselves sons of the Emperor, in name if not in deed. Find them and kill them.’

‘You heard the warsmith,’ Siege-Captain Krugeran said, stomping down the ramp. ‘The entire palace is coming down on us. We must be swift and resolute. All Iron Warriors disembark. Pattern Obduros – disperse and search by demi-squad. Shields and boltguns.’

Iron Warriors filed out from the battle-scarred vehicles, their studded and riveted plate held in close behind their shields. Resting the snub muzzles of their boltguns in the firing slots, the legionaries advanced.

Standing on the ramp of *Escutcheon*, Idriss Krendl clutched his data-slate. He narrowed his remaining eye, peering through his wire face-cage at the blasted palace foundations. Unlike the Iron Warriors filing down the smashed grand staircases and the smoking scree slopes leading into the structures below, Krendl was a broken warrior. His bones were held together by the iron rods shot through his body and the bolts and screw heads that covered his plate. It wouldn’t take much to demolish him once again.

Slipping a fat bolt pistol from his belt holster and with his ragged mail cloak clinking in the breeze, Krendl followed the legionaries, carefully negotiating a demolished staircase that descended into the lower levels of the foundation. Even a fall might be fatal for him here.

He picked out four Iron Warriors and a sergeant that he had met before – an officer named Torrez. Suit lamps cut through the murk of shadow, soot and dust. The Iron Warriors moved expertly from corner to corner, covering one another and protecting themselves from potential attack with their presented boarding shields. They moved with belligerent purpose, eager to be done with the search and get into battle – a state of being for which they had been specifically designed and trained.

Down in the bowels of the palace principal, the artful design and craftsmanship was gone. Here the corners were pleasantly angular and the walls unadorned. As the light from his own suit lamps stuttered between thick metal bars, Krendl realised that they were in a dungeon. He could hear the rattle of war-plate as Iron Warriors tensed behind their weapons.

There was movement here in the darkness.

Hundreds of wretched, drug-addled Euphorosians, who had been obscenely

mistreated by the sons of Fulgrim.

Every pleasure, amusement and satisfaction had been taken out upon the prisoners. From the appearance of their clothing they had been selected on rancid whim from the rich and poor, the young and old – and relatively recently. It seemed that prisoners did not last long in pleasing the Emperor's Children. With a planet of deviant pleasures to enjoy and a small civilisation upon which to visit the horror of their desires, it was all too apparent to see why Lord Commander Lelanthius and his legionaries had lingered on the paradise world instead of following their primarch to the meeting with Lord Perturabo.

'Siege-captain, what do you have?' Krendl voxed.

'A dungeon for prisoners, warsmith,' Krugeran confirmed, having moved with squads deeper into the bowels of the palace. 'They look to be in a sorry state.'

Krendl slowed. He peered through the bars of the communal cells. The filthy enclosures were full of the used and abused, all huddled like livestock. Their faces were afflicted with a haunted look of dread, but still they moved forward as a wretched collective to clap their misty eyes on the Iron Warriors.

Something wasn't right. Krendl could feel it in the dull agony of his shattered bones.

'*Eradicant*,' he said, '*Obliteratus*. Same grid reference. Sheltering targets. Ordnance adjust. Stand by.'

Seconds passed. The prisoners drifted forward until their foreheads touched the bars and their clouded eyes squirmed about in their skulls. Krendl's gaze travelled down the bars. In front of him, some mess of a woman had slammed her body into the cell door, rattling it back and forth.

It was open.

'The Emperor's Children are hiding behind the prisoners,' Krendl voxed across the open channel, his tone flat and emotionless. 'They're in the cells. Open fire.'

Every Iron Warrior had heard the order. With transhuman reflexes, they moved to obey.

However, the Iron Warriors were not the only ones in the dungeon with transhuman reflexes.

The ragged prisoners were torn apart by gunfire from behind them. With boltgun muzzles pressed against their spines and the backs of their skulls, the Emperor's Children blasted straight through the Euphorosians.

The dungeon became a scene of even greater horror as the Iron Warriors returned fire. Rounds sparked off bars and shields as the Emperor's Children and the Iron Warriors fought to annihilate one another.

It was brief and bloody, with legionaries of the III and IV falling to the cacophony of point-blank fire exchanged through the bars of the dungeon. Iron Warriors were thrown back against the wall, bolts plucking at their helmets and heads. As the remaining huddles of screaming prisoners fell like a curtain, bolts that had thudded through their flesh found purple-plated deviants hiding in the shadows.

In some cells, the Iron Warriors managed to maintain their shieldwall, hammering the trapped sons of Fulgrim back into the darkness. Elsewhere, the surprise attack had decimated the siege squads with peerless accuracy and broke the line. Within moments, the Emperor's Children were out of the cells and working their way up the passageways, forcing Krendl's legionaries back. When bolters ran dry, sabres flashed and sparked off ceramite. In return, the Iron Warriors hammered their enemies with the unforgiving surface of their boarding shields.

As fresh shots blazed up the passageway behind Krendl, the warsmith clutched his data-slate to his chest and stepped back behind a corner. Bolts sparked off the brute-simplicity of the stonework, and he chanced a few more shots in return before his pistol also clunked empty.

'*Warsmith,*' Victrus Krugeran said across the vox, '*we should withdraw to the Spartans.*'

'Withdraw?' Krendl replied. He could hear the captain's exertions as he fought enemy legionaries almost faceplate to faceplate, but he was unimpressed. 'Do you think Perturabo will withdraw, standing in the rubble of the Imperial Palace? Do you think Horus will withdraw, moments from a hard-fought victory? We stand, we fight and we win!'

In the gloom and strobing light of gunfire, a singular warrior swept out to strike the head from an Iron Warrior trying to reload his weapon. He wore the cape and ornamental battleplate of a III Legion officer – a lord commander, no less. He was helmless and looked at Krendl through the long, straight, white hair that framed his burning gaze. Even blood-splattered and murderous, Lelanthius wore his sharp, youthful looks like a planetary prince. But like the Euphorosians, his eyes were misted by some foul local narcotic.

Lelanthius's face contorted around a noble snarl at the death of so many of his legionaries, then softened to the dreamy daze of a fantasy-addicted lunatic. He ejected the empty clip from his own pistol before dropping the weapon as well. In his other gauntlet he held a long blade that glinted in the gloom and dripped with Iron Warriors blood.

‘Are you out of your mind, turn-key?’ the lord commander said, spitting his words with aristocratic venom. ‘We have greater matters to contend with in this war.’

‘Yet here I find you, deviant,’ Krendl spat, ‘looking to your prisoners. You will no longer find Iron Warriors garrisoning the galaxy for you. Perturabo has let his sons off the leash.’

‘Our primarchs are allies,’ Lelanthius seethed before his anger softened once more to hallucinogenic hilarity. ‘Our Legions are brothers in service to Warmaster Horus. Who do you think you are, to spill the precious blood of Fulgrim that flows through the veins of every warrior of the Emperor’s Children?’

‘It seems something else entirely is flowing through your veins right now, lord commander...’

Lelanthius brought up the razor-sharp edge of his sabre. ‘You should look to what is flowing through your own, Iron Warrior,’ he warned Krendl, ‘for you shall soon see it all over my dungeon floor.’

‘Stop.’

The word was spoken with searing belief and confidence. Krendl had commanded, and incredibly the lord commander obeyed. The two officers stared at one another as their warriors murdered one another in the darkness around them.

‘Eradicant? Obliteratus?’

‘Standing by, warsmith.’

‘You might have a blade as well as the will and ability to kill me, swordsman,’ Krendl told Lelanthius. ‘But one word from me and my siege guns will fire once more on this position. I’m ready to return to the iron and the fire. How about you, lord commander?’

Lelanthius’s face twisted with doubt. ‘I don’t believe you,’ he spat.

A bolt pistol swung out from the cover of an adjoining passage, and pressed to the lord commander’s temple. Lelanthius froze, his eyes darting to the side.

‘Trust me,’ Siege-Captain Krugeran said, ‘he would have done it.’

The bolt pistol barked, blasting the deviant legionary’s brains all over the wall. Krugeran limped around the corner. He had taken a bolt-round to the stomach and his helm had been cleaved open by a blade. Idriss Krendl nodded his appreciation, and the two officers waited amidst the smoke and stench of death as the last clashes of brutal fratricide played out in the dungeon gloom. In the end, only Iron Warriors limped from the darkness to present themselves to their

siege-captain and warsmith.

Thousands of palace guards were flooding the avenues, stairways and thoroughfares, intent on surrounding the invading Iron Warriors. Victrus Krugeran joined Krendl once more as they made for the Spartans.

‘You can send for the Thunderhawks to evacuate your warriors,’ Krendl said. ‘Orbital lifters too, for the siege guns.’

‘The live simulation is over?’ Krugeran asked.

‘It’s over. Ironfire was a success. Our father, perhaps even the Warmaster too, might learn something from it. Perhaps, siege-captain, you and I might do this again on distant Terra.’

‘Primarch-willing,’ Krugeran murmured, but he didn’t sound as though he meant it.

‘Meanwhile, I have other duties for you,’ the Warsmith said, looking down at Krugeran’s wounds. ‘During your restoration.’

‘Yes, warsmith?’

Krendl handed the siege-captain the data-slate. ‘Take this to Lord Perturabo. Appraise the primarch personally of Ironfire’s success. Tell him this stratagem is a gift to atone for my past failures.’

‘Would you rather not go yourself?’

‘No,’ Idriss Krendl said, eyeing the siege-captain’s injuries. ‘As you well know, our father abhors a cripple.’

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