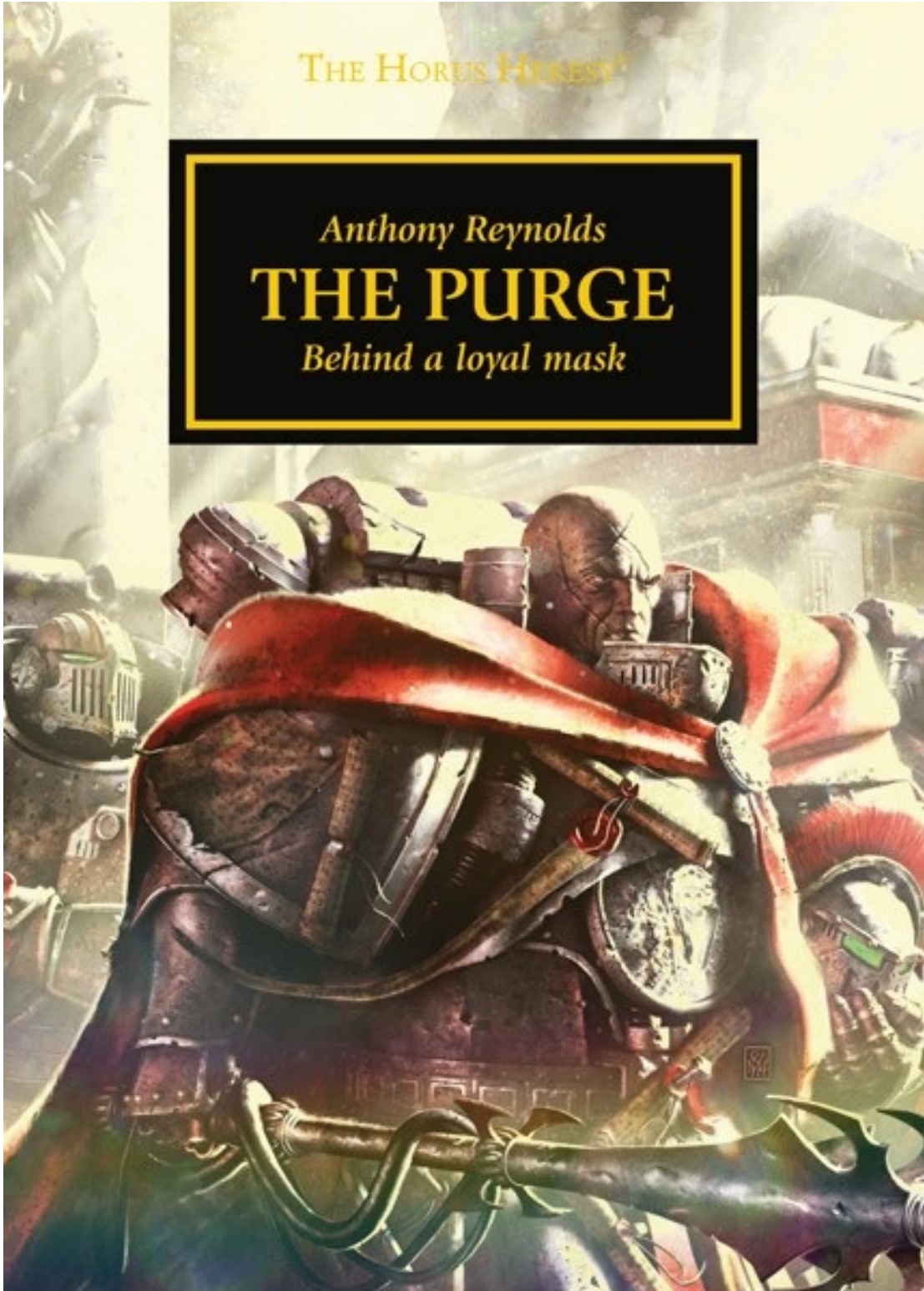


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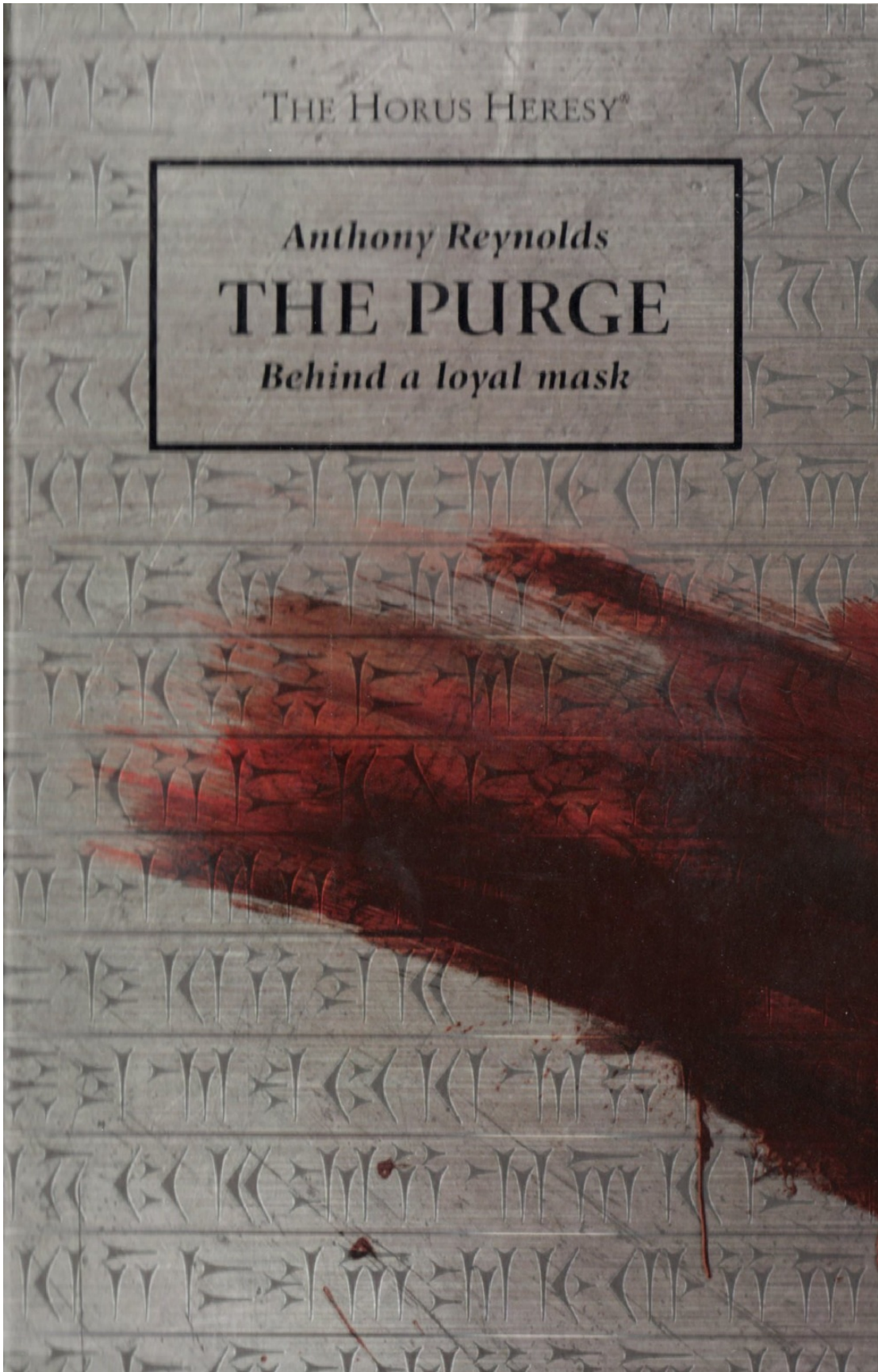


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~ DRAMATIS PERSONAE ~

The XVII Legion 'Word Bearers'

SOR TALGRON Captain of the 34th Company, and representative of Lorgar on Terra

JARULEK Chaplain and later Dark Apostle

AHRANETH 34th Company standard bearer

DAL AHK Master of Signal

LOTH Reconnaissance sergeant

TELAKHAS Line-breaker sergeant

URHLAN Apothecary

VOLKHAR WRETH Predicant, serving in the Crusader Host

The XII Legion 'Ultramarines'

AECUS DECIMUS Chapter Master, 17th Chapter

CONNOR Sergeant, 170th Company

NAXOR Techmarine, 170th Company

TILLUS VICTORIUS 171st Company champion

VAUL AGREGHUS Veteran battle-brother, 171st Company

FREIA SOLONTINE Admiral, commander of the *Righteous Fury*

ROMUS Veteran battle-brother, 170th Company [marked]

PAULUS Sky Hunter, 172nd Company [marked]

XION OCTAVION Battle-brother, 174th Company [marked]

SIO Battle-brother, 175th Company [marked]

KOROLOS Former captain, 178th Company [marked]

The Defenders of Terra

ROGAL DORN Primarch of the Imperial Fists, and the Emperor's Praetorian

ARCHAMUS Master of Dorn's huscarls

TIBER ACANTHUS Custodian Guard

NATHANIEL GARRO Former battle-captain of the Death Guard

'Violence does, in truth, recoil upon the violent, and the schemer falls into the pit which he digs for another.'

— attributed to the pre-Unity prophet Dhoyalle

PROLOGUE

456008.M31 — Percepton System, Ultramar

THE LEGIONARY WRITHED on the apothecarion's slab. Skinless, raw and bleeding, he more closely resembled one of the Dwellers Beyond than anything of human birth.

His flesh had run like wax, giving it a wet, glossy-slick appearance. His features had melted and blurred together, making it look as though he wore a grotesque cult mask. His eye sockets were tortured red pits, burned tear trails all that remained of his liquefied eyeballs, and what was left of his mouth opened and closed in agony. Strings of melted flesh linked his lips - or at least where his lips had been.

Servo-cutters, diamond-tipped drills and mono-saws cut away the smoking sections of his ruined Mark [11 plate. Each piece fell with a resounding crash, splattering blood and oil across the pristine white floor. The legionary's flesh had fused with his armour, and he thrashed and mewled as it was shorn away - peeled from him like the exoskeleton of a beetle, exposing yet more mutilation beneath. Hot vapours rose from the exposed, bloody ruin, stinking of acidic chemical fire and cooked meat.

He was not alone; every slab within the apothecarion was occupied, and scores of legionaries had been dumped wherever space allowed it. The groans and roars of the dying and wounded blended with the background noise of frantic orders, bone saws, life support systems, hypo-injectors and synth-skin applicators.

Needles, feeder cables and stims were rammed into his veins and spinal column and a re-breather tube shoved down his throat. He went into convulsions,

his blood pressure dropped markedly, and alarms began to whine.

With a burst of fevered strength, he tore free of the restraints holding him down. As medicae attendants rushed forward, he yanked the re-breather tube from his throat and clutched at the nearest Apothecary with a waxen claw-like hand, pulling him close. The abused muscles of his neck bulged like wet cables as he strained forward.

He gargled something indecipherable, splattering blood across the Apothecary's faceplate.

The attendants struggled to hold him down. Liven wounded as he was, they were as children against his augmented strength. His grip was like iron.

'Urhlan,' he snarled, eyeless sockets boring into the Apothecary.

'Do... not...*inter* me.'

In answer, Apothecary Urhlan pressed his wrist-mounted narthecium to the patient's neck, injecting more doses of powerful narcotics into his bloodstream. The legionary's grip went slack, fingers twitching.

Apothecary Urhlan stepped back and the medicae attendants finally managed to secure their charge with new restraints. Blood coated his arms and chest - not all of it was his patient's. His white armour was acid-scarred and malfunctioning, sparks leaping from damaged joints and servos, and he moved with a pronounced limp. He had barely made it off-world himself, and he'd already been aboard his evacuation shuttle when everything had gone wrong.

'Will he live?'

Urhlan glanced back to the one who had spoken; the Dark Apostle, Jarulek. He stood with arms crossed over his chest. There were a handful of other officers and legionaries clustered around the slab. All of them bore evidence of battle, and most sported wounds of varying severity.

'I am surprised he is even alive now,' Urhlan said, making a vain attempt to wipe the blood from his helmet's visor lenses. 'I was surprised that he was alive when he got here.'

'But can you save him?'

Urhlan looked down at his patient, writhing on the slab before him.

'No,' he said.

'When his fate is in the gods' hands,' said Jarulek.

Urhlan turned back towards the now comatose, twitching mass of chem-melted flesh on the slab before him. It was hard to believe that this was his captain.

'Get out,' he said over his shoulder. 'Let me work. I will do what I can.'

ONE

454008.M31 - Percepton System, Ultramar

THE WAR HAD, been won in twenty-seven minutes, though the battle still raged on one hundred and sixty—three days later.

Twenty-seven minutes. That had been how long it had taken for his ships to cripple the Ultramarines fleet above Percepton Primus. The enemy had not yet heard about Calth, nor of Armatura, Talassar, or any of the countless other warzones targeted as part of the Shadow Crusade.

The chronometer had clicked over, and he had given the order.

The Word Bearers struck. Over half the enemy flotilla was lost in the opening salvos, the rest in the hours and days after. The wreckage now orbited the capital planet, the heart of this system.

Thus, the war for Percepton was won in twenty-seven minutes. In the months that followed, all that remained was to complete the cull.

One hundred and sixty-four days after that initial strike, the world of Percepton Primus ended.

132006.M31 — Terra

From orbit it was possible to see the coastlines that once delineated the

continents of old Terra. The vast ocean tracts that covered the globe were gone, vaporised during the long internecine nuke-wars that almost obliterated humanity in bygone ages, but the original shapes could still be vaguely discerned, like ghosts of the past — though most clearly in darkness.

It was the lights that revealed them. While the entire planet shone like a beacon in the void, lit by the glow of the hives, megacities and highways, those lights were brightest upon the old continents, and the darker tracts of land marked where the seas had once been — or along the straight, unnaturally angular coastlines of the newer, artificial oceans.

Ethereal green aurorae shimmered over the southern horizon, while great chem-storms shrouded the rad-scarred lands to the north, flickering with an almost constant strobe of lightning. It was not in those directions that the lander was headed, however. As its golden-sheathed wings unfolded and the glow of re-entry faded from its thermal shields, it angled its descent towards the very roof of the world.

Within the enclosed cabin, Sor Talgron sat alone, looking out of the viewport. One immense grey-gauntleted hand shielded his view from the shuttle's interior illumination.

'Refreshment, captain?'

Sor Talgron glanced away from the port. The interior of the shuttle was all gently curved surfaces, subtle lighting and neutral tones. His synth-leather seat was large enough to accommodate his oversized bulk in considerable comfort. The remaining eleven passenger seats were unoccupied, though there were others on board. Even though he could not currently see them, he could taste their gene-forged scent in the recycled air — at once familiar and ye! strange — as well as sense the faint hum of their armour.

The attendant who had spoken was unnaturally tall and willowy, and her large, oval eyes were milky orbs, bereft of pupils. Gene-manipulation had given her this form, though for what purpose he could not fathom. Perhaps humans found her appearance pleasing to the eye. Perhaps they tampered with her genes simply because they could.

'Sweet nectar? Amasec?' she said, gesturing languidly at the refrigerated cart that hovered before her. 'Something else?'

He shook his head and turned back towards the viewport. He saw his own reflection there, frowning back at him. While he was not sure what a human would find appealing in the soft, pale features of the shuttle attendant, he knew what they would find unattractive about his own.

His face was square and hard. Brutish. It was not the face of a scholar or a statesman. A lifetime of battle had flattened his features, and ugly scarring criss-crossed his face and scalp. His own role in the universe could not be mistaken. He was a warrior, a soldier, a killer. It was what he had been made for, a role he had been genetically altered to perform, and it was what he was good at. It was his purpose.

Servo-motors in the joints of his armour whined as he leaned in close to the glass once more, blotting out the glare and his own grim reflection. His eyes scanned the world below as the shuttle's descent levelled. He saw the burning thrusters of golden interceptor escorts flying off the wing tip, guiding them in.

Sor Talgron stared unblinking, absorbing all that he saw. It was still some time before he would arrive at his destination, flying over the single largest man-made structure the universe had ever seen. Even so, on the very outskirts of that immense continent-spanning mega-structure, it was apparent to Sor Talgron that it was being fundamentally altered.

When he had Terra the structure below had been a palace. He returned to find it well on the way to being transformed into a fortress.



SOR TALGRON WALKED through fire, flanked by Ahraneth, his standard bearer, and Dal Ahk, master of signal. All three wore dark crimson armour, the colour of pooled blood. The heavy war-plate had received the new Legion colours while en route to Ultramar, but it did not sit well with him. It felt like a betrayal of the Legion's past.

Around them, centuries of learning and wisdom were being destroyed, filling the scorched air with ash and the fluttering pages of burning books. Thousands of texts and codices were forever lost as librarium data banks were put to the torch, circuitry and silicon-based memory cores melting and crackling in the flames.

Sor Talgron did not mourn this loss.

The great chamber was filled with dust. Clearly, it had been abandoned after the Nikaea edict came into effect. It was highly probable that none had walked its halls since that time.

Until today, when it had become a battleground.

Flames licked at his pauldrons as he strode through the aftermath of the battle, coloured glass crunching underfoot. The immense glassaic windows that had looked down upon the cavernous Librarius atrium would have been an early casualty in the battle for the city of Massilea.

Bodies turned to ragged meal by bolter fire lay splattered across the floor and against the walls. Four Word Bearers were dead, dropped by kill-shots. Several others were down, being attended by the Legion's Apothecaries. bore fatal injuries and were given release, their prayers dying upon their lips. The gene-seed of the dead was extracted, reductors whirring, spitting bone and blood.

A number of the fallen Ultramarines were not yet gone, but there were no XIII Legion Apothecaries to come to their aid, nor any living battle-brothers to drag them to safety. In another battalion, perhaps, their lives would have ended in torment after countless hours of agony and ritual debasement — but Sor Talgron would have none of that, and they were dispatched without ceremony.

They were the enemy, and he would do everything in his power to see them defeated, utterly and completely. But he could not hate them, and he would not see them tortured needlessly.

There was much to admire about the XIII Legion. Their cohesion and discipline in battle was enviable, their execution beyond compare. They were without a doubt the most effective fighting force that Sor Talgron had ever faced, and he respected them greatly.

'It is Erebus's wish that every enemy taken alive be sacrificed to feed the Ruinstorm,' Jarulek had stated at the outset of the system war. *'This is to be done across all the Five Hundred Worlds.'*

'Erebus be damned,' had been Sor Talgron's response. *'The snake does not command me. My orders are to kill this world. I will do in my way.'*

He walked From the atrium, past soaring white marble pillars peeked and cratered by bolter fire. Beyond was a broad semi-circular terrace, bordered by natural stone and immaculately maintained foliage now churned to ruin. A waterfall fell into a pool in the rock, where bodies floated face down. Sweeping marble stairs descended down to lower levels of the concourse.

Sor Talgron walked past a towering white statue depicting a robed figure in a thoughtful, seated pose.

An Ultramarines legionary lay on the ground. He had been cut in half by gunfire; his lower torso and legs were nearby. Blood had pooled beneath him, and his insides were spilled out onto the terrace, but he was alive. Legionaries

did not die easily.

Ahraneth levelled his bolt pistol at him.

'No,' said Sor Talgron, and his standard bearer lowered his weapon.

The Ultramarine was of a centurion's rank — a fellow captain, as indicated by the insignia on his shoulder plates. He was claspng his innards with one hand, trying vainly to hold them in, while with his other he was dragging himself along the ground. A volkite serpena pistol lay nearby. He fumbled for it. Even in death, he sought a weapon to use against his enemies.

Sor Talgron's boot crunched down on his wrist, and he stooped to pick up the serpenta himself. He turned it over in his hands.

'This is a good weapon,' he said.

The Ultramarine looked up at him. His helmet was in place. A Mark IV variant, some Ultramar-localised pattern. Its once-pristine cobalt-blue surface and gold-rimmed edges were splattered with blood, rich and bright. A golden wreath had been painted around the temples, some battle honour that Sor Talgron did not recognise.

'Why?' asked the legionary. His voice was crackling and bled with static.

Sor Talgron placed the barrel of the volkite pistol to the Ultramarine's visor lens, aiming it squarely into his left eye. 'Why what?'

'Why do you do this?'

Sor Talgron squeezed the trigger. The back of the Ultramarine's helmet exploded, and the floor beneath lit up in flame.

'Because I am ordered to,' he said.

TWO

CHAPTER MASTER AECUS DECIMUS of the Ultramarines Legion, 17th Chapter, planted one heavy boot upon the traitor's chest and wrenched his blade free. The short sword slid from the fallen enemy's vox-grille with a wet scrape, and the red-armoured legionary collapsed, joining the blanket of others upon the blood-churned earth.

Choking smoke clouded his vision, the chemicals and blinding micro-particles within it making his eyes sting and his throat burn. Visibility had been reduced to a matter of metres. Augury scanners were rendered useless by the shrouding fog. He had no notion of where the battle lines lay, but it hardly mattered. The engagement had completely lost its shape. The time for strategy had passed.

Another enemy was upon him. He batted aside the legionary's screaming chainsword and pressed the barrel of his bolt pistol to the Word Bearer's chest. The force of the detonation hurled the traitor backwards, and he ended up on the ground four metres back, a deep crater in his ruptured gorget. Decimus's second shot ended him, taking him between helm and breastplate. The detonation almost tore his head from his body.

The neck seal was one of the few locations in the newer marks of armour where bolt weaponry could achieve a clean kill from a distance. He had never seen the effects of bolt weaponry upon legionary power armour prior to this campaign - as far as he knew, no one within the XIII Legion had even considered such an eventuality. The mere thought would have been abhorrent. Now that legionary-legionary engagement was a practical, they had been forced to revise their tactics.

Future marks of power armour would likely be designed to cover such deficiencies, the Techmarine Naxor had predicted. High gorgets, like those of the Cataphractii, would likely be integrated into line plate, he had said, just moments before he was dismembered by a Word Bearer's legionary draped in human flesh. That these treacherous savages had ever been called their kin made him want to retch.

The battle had devolved into a savage melee. All around him, legionaries in the crimson of the reborn Word Bearers and the noble blue of the Ultramarines were dying. The scale of the slaughter was galling. There would be no retreat, not from this battle. They would fight and die to the last. All that mattered now was to hold the enemy here long enough. What had started as long-ranged tank battles and lightning-swift assaults had been reduced to slogging through the mud and hacking at the enemy with blunted swords and toothless chainswords. He saw one of his veterans - Vaul Agregius, the Victor of Staxus — gun down a Word Bearer mouthing vile curses, silencing the wounded traitor with a final bolt to the head. Another veteran punched a XVII legionary into the smoking carcass of a desecrated Land Raider, pulping him beneath his energy-encased power fist.

An Ultramarine nearby was dragged down into the mud, his attacker repeatedly stabbing a jagged-bladed knife into his throat until he was still. That Word Bearer was in turn ripped apart by heavy bolter fire, but there were always more, marching out of the fog and intoning their mournful chants.

Evil had rooted itself within the psyche of the XVII Legion. It was the only explanation that Decimus had for what they had become.

The silent company champion Tillus Victorius fought like he did in the duelling cages, favouring a small combat shield and gladius opposite his power sword. He was masterful to watch. He took a blow upon his buckler and spun, cutting a Word Bearer down at the knees before despatching him with a cross-bladed decapitating strike.

The champion had never been beaten blade-to-blade, but as he turned to find a new foe, a stray bolt from out of the smoke took him in the eye. It punched through his left visor lens and detonated in his brain pan. He fell without a sound, blades slipping into the mud from his lifeless fingers. The warrior had been almost obsessive in his training. That had counted for nothing at the last. It was an ignoble end.

Decimus stared down at the Champion's corpse, and hatred coursed through him. He had never known such depth of feeling. He had never hated any of the xenos that he'd fought during the Great Crusade, nor even the recalcitrant humans of those worlds that defied the Emperor's dominion. He had felt pity for some of these misguided civilisations, disgust or apathy for others, but never *hate*.

His heavily artificed armour was barely functional. It was running an auxiliary power, and little of its surface still bore the proud cobalt-blue of his Legion, so scorched, dented and cratered were its plates. His left shoulder was a mangled

ruin, spilling angry sparks and internal servos grinding incessantly. He could feel bone grinding on bone in the joint. He wore no helm - he had torn it loose after it had borne the brunt of a power maul swing earlier in the battle - and the left side of his face was crusted with congealed blood.

The Chapter Master was bone tired. It had been more than a week since he'd had any rest. For a second there were no enemies running at him, and he wanted nothing more than to drop to his haunches and lean back up against the dead Word Bearers Land Raider... but no. Even now, even as the end closed in with the inevitability of the setting suns, he needed to be seen, defiant and bellicose until the last.

He checked his ammunition. Four bolts. He slammed the clip back into his pistol. He would make each one count.

The ground shook with explosions, the grind of heavy tracks and what felt like an earthquake, but which he knew to be the thunderous footfall of Titans. He could hear them calling to each other with deafening blares of their warhorns drowning out the pounding of artillery, the chatter of gunfire, the screams of the dying and the clash of blades. The eardrum-shattering roar of their weapons sounded intermittently, and when they did he felt sick thinking of the noble sons of Ultramar being cut down in swathes, like wheat before the reaper.

Communications were down, even the closed Ultramarine vox channels now infected with insidious whispers, screams and hellish warpsound. But he knew that his captains would be doing him proud, punishing the Word Bearers in this, the last XIII push of the war.

A shout from the rear drew his attention. Squinting into the smoke, he saw enemy figures emerging from the fog behind them. They had been flanked. His captains barked orders, but little could be done as Ultramarines were cut down, already caught in the savage crossfire.

A diminished heavy support squad turned to face this new threat, swinging their autocannons around and planting their feet wide. Even as two of their number were dropped, they unleashed their fury into the enemy, tearing through their ranks and buying time for other squads to get into cover. The barrels of their guns were soon glowing red-hot. Still they pounded the enemy, forcing them down into the mud.

An armoured figure crashed down through the smoke from above, bright flames gushing from his overworked jump pack. The Word Bearer landed in a crouch behind the heavy support squad, one knee and one hand planted to the ground for stability. More of them slammed down around the first, smoke

venting from their jump pack stacks. The first gunner sensed the enemy behind him and made to turn, but he was too slow. The Word Bearer was rising, chainaxe screaming.

Chapter Master Aecus Decimus was already up and running, his command squad one step behind. His shot hit the first enemy legionary in the side of the head. It deflected off before detonating, knocking him off-balance. Then Decimus was upon him, tackling him into the mud as he recovered. The Word Bearer's chainaxe went flying.

They rolled, slipping and sliding down a muddy incline. Decimus lost his pistol but still had hold of his powerblade. As they came to rest at the bottom of the slope, in a ditch filled with armoured corpses, Decimus was on top. He tried to go for the killing blow, but his enemy's hand was clasped around his vambrace, holding the blade at bay. The Word Bearer slammed his armoured fist into Decimus's jaw, dislocating it and fracturing bone.

He was momentarily dazed, and the Word Bearer pressed that advantage. He rolled atop Decimus, pinning him face down in the mud and gripping the back of his head. The Chapter Master tried to free himself, losing his grasp on his blade in the process, but he could not dislodge the traitor. His face was slammed into the ground, again and again. Mud and blood filled his eyes.

'Now you die,' snarled the Word Bearer. His voice was so twisted that he sounded more like a beast than anything that had ever been human.

Then, in the thunder of close-range autocannon fire, his head disappeared in a red mist.

Decimus wiped mud and blood from his eyes as he rose, scrabbling back up the slope to his frantic command squad under covering fire from the last remaining heavy weapon-toting legionaries.

He threw a glance skyward. He could see nothing, but he knew it must be approaching the appointed time. His adjutant saw his glance.

'Are you sure about this, my lord?' he said.

'I am,' said Decimus. 'May the Emperor forgive me.'

They escorted him off the shuttle like a prisoner, two in front, two behind. They were nestled in the high foothills of Terra's most dominant peaks, though he could not see them now; the articulated docking clamps attached to the shuttle's hull had no windows.

He was unarmed, as per their order. It had been phrased as a request, but it had been an order nonetheless. He stared resolutely forward as he was marched from the shuttle. Flexible jointed walls gave way to an armoured corridor as he entered the palace.

His slate-grey war-plate was unadorned. Only the deep-red crest of his helm, tucked under one arm, gave any indication of his senior Legion rank. His armour was old and well-worn, the plates thick and heavy. It was the armour of a soldier, practical and utilitarian, and its surface revealed evidence of frequent repair. He bore those marks like battle scars. Each scratch and dent had a story.

In contrast, the four members of the Legio Custodes escorting him into the palace wore highly ornate armour of burnished gold, replete with decorative lightning bolts and eagles. Long fur-lined cloaks hung from their gilded shoulders, and their features were hidden behind tall, conical helms. Their armour was more finely artificed than Sor Talgron's humble plate, but it was not parade armour. This was the most highly advanced battle armour that the most skilled tech-priests of Mars had been able to devise — light, strong and nigh impervious to conventional firearms, and allowing greater freedom of movement than Legion plate.

Each bore a guardian spear, the signature weapon of their order. Gilded halberds with inbuilt firearms, they were curious and exotic weapons. They would have been unwieldy in untrained hands, but even at rest, he could see that they were almost extensions of the Custodians' bodies. They would be wielded with consummate skill, and while Sor Talgron had only seen them used in training, he judged that the key to fighting the Legio Custodes would be for an enemy to get inside their effective range.

He felt no particular bonds of kinship with the Legio Custodes. They were as different from him as unaugmented humans, for all their shared similarities in gene-heritage. The divisions between the two strands of transhumanity were stark, even if an outsider might have been blind to them — in the main it was not a physical difference, even though the Custodians might seem uniformly taller in stature. They were simply a breed apart.

The true strength of the Legiones Astartes was their unity of purpose, and the bonds of brotherhood they shared. Perhaps that was why they had insisted that Sor Talgron travel to the surface alone, the rest of his company ship-bound at high anchor. The Custodians may be individual warriors par excellence, but their mindset was fundamentally different to those gene-born into the Legions. They had been created for a different task, one that they were perfectly adapted

to, and one that required a certain level of individualism and self-reliance that was at odds with the gene-ingrained pack mentality of the Space Marines.

It would be an interesting thing, to pit the Legio Custodes against the Legiones Astartes. One on one, he suspected that the gold-armoured Custodians would have the edge, but the larger the battle got, the more he felt that his fellow legionaries would dominate.

The Legio Custodes were not soldiers, but Sor Talgron was a soldier to the core.

They halted before a third set of reinforced blast doors, flanked by slaved sentry cannons. Scans, identity confirmations, gene-key sequencing. Security was tighter than it had been when last Sor Talgron had walked the palace halls, back when his presence had felt far more welcome.

The occluded portals snapped open. A Custodian officer stood beyond, resplendent in his gold plate. Sor Talgron's gaze flicked left and right. Had he been wearing his helmet, threat glyphs would have been blinking before his eyes. The officer was accompanied by a squad of yellow-armoured Space Marines, bolters held across their chests.

That was unexpected, but he let no hint of surprise cross his face.

The visor of the officer slid back in a series of smoothly overlapping plates, revealing a face that Sor Talgron knew. It was hawkish and strong; unscarred, but Sor Talgron knew that meant nothing, not amongst the Legio Custodes. Had he been of the Legions, Sor Talgron would know that the warrior was either untested, or unfathomably good - the Custodians, however, were not built for a life of constant warfare on the front lines. That did not mean they lacked battle hardening. Far from it. Only a fool would underestimate them.

A ridge of short-cropped hair extended down the centre of the officer's shaved head, a crest that mirrored Sor Talgron's helmet. Whether it denoted rank or was merely an aesthetic choice, Sor Talgron did not know. Their kind had a strong, individualistic streak bred into them, so the latter was highly probable. Nevertheless, he found it somewhat ironic that this choice aped the appearance of the Captain-General, Constantin Valdor. So much for individualism.

'I apologise for the manner of your reception,' said the officer. His courtly accent was still strange in Sor Talgron's ear, accustomed as he was to more guttural Colchisian speech. 'The universe has changed since you last stood on Terra.'

His name was Tiber Acanthus, and Sor Talgron had spent time in his company on his previous visits to Terra. The sentinel had never offered his other one

hundred and thirty-seven names, nor did Sor Talgron have any desire to know them.

They greeted each other as warriors, wrist to wrist, clasping each other's forearm. It was rare for the Word Bearer to look up at anyone, but the Custodian stood half a head taller than Sor Talgron.

'What's happened?' he said as they broke apart. 'It looks as though Terra is preparing for a siege.'

'War is coming,' said Acanthus.

Sor Talgron frowned. 'War is nothing unusual,' he said. 'We've been fighting wars since the start of the Great Crusade. It is what we were made for.'

'This war will be different.'

'Why? Whatever new enemy the Crusade has uncovered, there is surely no threat to Terra itself' said Sor Talgron.

Tiber Acanthus did not answer, and Sor Talgron's expression darkened.

'Tell me,' he said, his voice grim.

'It is not my place,' said the Custodian. 'But I will make you to one who will. Come. Lord Dorn is expecting you.'

FIVE WARRIORS WATCHED as their brothers fought and died on the plains below. From their vantage, the battle was not unlike one of the simulation tables within the collegia, though here the death was very real. They stood in silence, each Ultramarine lost in his own prison of anger, remorse, defiance and grief.

They were not a tightly bonded unit, these five. They had not forged bonds of steel in the crucible of war. None of them had spoken before they had been brought together for this final task, this mission that could exonerate them and clean the slate of their past misdeeds.

They came from different companies, different squads, different backgrounds. One was a Sky Hunter, and one was drawn From the Assault ranks. Two had been drawn from Tactical units, though one of those had once wielded *other* powers before that path was closed to him, and now he was no different from any other ranked legionary. The last of their number was a disgraced hero of the past.

Their skills and expertise were as disparate as their service records. It was only their shame that unified them.

Each of them wore a helmet painted red. Each of them bore the mark of

censure.

They had all stood before their Chapter Master when they were briefed for this duty. None of them wanted it, but none of them had refused it. This was a way for them to clear their names, he had said. An honour.

It did not feel like an honour to Octavion. To him, it felt like the cruellest of punishments. Even so, he did not complain, and he did not begrudge Chapter Master Aecus Decimus for giving him this task. It had to fall to someone, and it might as well be those that had disgraced themselves in the eyes of their commanders.

He could feel the conflicted emotions of those around him as they watched the enemy forces encircling the Ultramarines on the plains far below. Every one of them wanted to be down there, doing their part, fighting - and dying - with the brothers they had trained and fought alongside for so long.

'There,' said one of their number, the Sky Hunter Paulus. He need not have bothered. They all saw it. Perhaps he needed to speak it aloud, Octavion thought. Perhaps in doing so, it was made real, more *practical*.

To the north, a dust cloud announced the approach of another Word Bearers division. They were coming from the city of Massilea, that once-proud city that was the heart and soul of this world.

Octavion had heard word that it had fallen earlier in the day. For all he knew, all of his battle-brothers were dead. Octavion's 174th Company had held that city longer than expected, inflicting a heavy toll on the traitors, but now it was gone.

He regarded Massilea as much a home as anywhere in the galaxy. It had been there that he had received the majority of his training, what seemed like an age ago.

'And there,' said Paulus, gesturing to the south.

Dark shapes were moving on the horizon: Thunderhawks, Stormbirds and attack craft. Another battle force moving in. They wanted to end this war quickly, Octavion saw. They did not want to be here any longer than necessary.

'It's time,' he said, voicing the truth that he knew was in all of their minds, hanging over them like a guillotine.

'Reinforcements from Ultramar could be inbound,' said the youngest of their number, Sio, only recently elevated from the Scout ranks. 'Could we not wait a little longer?'

Octavion was not aware what infraction had seen Sio forced to wear the red. None of them volunteered explanations for their own censure and none of them asked it of the others. It was not something that any of them were comfortable

discussing.

"That no reinforcements have arrived tells us that this is no isolated incident. War has engulfed Ultramar's Five Hundred,' said the brooding veteran Romus. 'We have our orders.' His voice was empty. Hollow. He was already resigned to die, Octavion realised.

'And what if those orders are wrong?' asked Sio.

'It does not matter,' growled Romus. 'Our names are already tarnished. I will not even consider compounding my dishonour by disobeying the final directive of our Chapter Master.'

There were murmurs of agreement from the others, but Octavion could feel the distress of the youngest battle-brother. It was coming off him in waves. It was there in them all, of course — none of them wanted this hateful, thankless task. The others were just better at repressing it.

'No one is coming,' said Octavion, his voice little more than a whisper.

'How can you be sure?' said Sio.

What could he say to soothe the young warrior's despair? Nothing. Besides, he had his own doubts to overcome. His own daemons.

'No one is coming,' boomed the fifth of their number, the massive once—champion, Korolos. That ended the matter.

'Let us go,' said Octavion, turning away from the battlefield, away from his dying Chapter and towards the waiting shuttle. A score of Imperial Army veterans waited there, standing to attention. Did they realise they were as doomed as the rest of them?

It wasn't just Sio that had hoped, if not believed, that they would not be required to enact the duty they had been tasked with.

Now they all were faced with the fact that such a slender hope was gone. It was not to be.

Now, indeed, they faced the death of hope itself.

THREE

SOR TALGRON FOUND it wryly amusing that the Emperor's decree had neutered the Imperium's most potent weapon against the warp, at a time when it most needed it. He had no love of psykers, believing that it would be in humanity's best interests to eradicate them all, but he was a deeply pragmatic soul, and the Librarians were a weapon that the XVII sorely needed. Having seen the powers that were being unleashed against his armies and worlds by the Warmaster's allies, if the Emperor did not overturn his folly soon then he was a prideful fool indeed.

The city was spread before him like a map rendered in three dimensions. Thick black smoke obscured entire sectors. The librarium was built upon a rocky outcrop in the northern sector of Massilea, the highest point in a broad valley delta. It had been a site of pilgrimage long before the Ultramarines had made it a centre of training for those within its ranks exhibiting psychic talents.

It had been a rich and populous centre, Massilea - built of marble, gold and glass — before it had been bombarded into ruin. Broken colonnades and fragments of statues lined broad streets that had become battlegrounds, littered with rubble, burned out shells of vehicles and the innumerable dead. A few triumphal arches remained, flying frayed and burned pennants, towering over parade grounds and squares turned to graveyards. Trees and green spaces had been integrated into the city's design, though they were now blackened tracts of scorched earth. Two bridges crossing the river wending through the city remained intact, the water below choked with corpses.

Thunderhawks and Stormbirds bearing the new Legion colours screamed overhead, churning the smoke and ash hanging over the city.

From his vantage, Sor Talgron could see the armoured elements of his assigned battalions moving through the secured sectors of the city. Rhinos, Land Raiders and Vindicators traversed the rubble strewn streets, leading the way out of the city before the heavier assets grinding along in their wake - the Fellblades and Typhons that had been so instrumental in the earlier action.

The crackle of gunfire and the deeper thuds of shells and mortars still echoed out sporadically. Several of the eastern quadrants of the city were still not completely pacified. The fighting was brutal and taxing, as each building needed to be cleared floor by floor.

Booms like thunder rolling in from the west could be heard when the sound of localised artillery and gunfire abated. A battle was still under way out there on the plains beyond the valley, fifty kilometres away. He had already directed half his force to head there, to outflank the enemy assault. That battle would see the last real strength of the Ultramarines on this world shattered. That battle would be the last of it. Once it was done, the process of extraction would begin. All resistance within the system would be spent, and the final cull of the defiant human populations would be enacted. If any XIII Legion support ever arrived, they would find the entire system reduced to a graveyard.

The crackling reports of his officers came through on Dal Ahk's nuncio-vox. All was proceeding as expected.

There was a flash on the periphery of Sor Talgron's vision. He reacted instantly, shouting a warning and dropping into cover. Too slow.

Hot blood spurted across his faceplate. Chunks of it dripped down his visor. Ahraneth was down, his brains blown out through a gaping fist-sized hole in the left side of his helmet. The company banner was on the ground.

Sor Talgron seethed as he crouched with his back planted squarely against the marble balustrade. He stared at his dead standard bearer, at the blood soaking the banner. Dal Ahk was in cover beside him, relaying orders and coordinates of the sniper's location. There was anger in his voice.

The area had been declared clear. Sor Talgron said nothing, letting his officers deal with it. He heard the clipped orders as legionaries closed in on the sniper's location. He heard the squad sergeant take responsibility for the mistake. There would be repercussions.

They sat there, listening to the vox reports of various elements of the Chapter spread across the city, waiting for confirmation that the sniper had been neutralised. The pool of blood from Ahraneth's head was getting ever closer.

He found himself thinking of his old mentor, Volkhar Wreth. The thought was not a comforting one.

'He was a good warrior,' said Dal Ahk.

'What?' said Sor Talgron.

'Ahraneth,' said the master of signal, nodding towards the corpse sprawled before them. 'He was a good warrior. I saw him rip a greenskin's head clear off

once, and he claimed a kill tally of seventeen eldar at Hallanax. He will be missed. His soul is one with the empyrean now.'

Sor Talgron grunted. 'You sound like a priest.'

'The teachings of-' Dal Ahk began, before he was interrupted by the tell-tale click of incoming vox-traffic.

'What is it?' Sor Talgron demanded.

'Third echelon,' reported Dal Ahk. 'They have identified the location of... wait... repeat. Is that confirmed?'

In the distance behind them they heard the sharp crack of grenade detonations, followed by the bark of bolter fire in several controlled bursts. Two hundred and thirty metres off, Sor Talgron estimated from the sound. The sniper was gone.

'Captain, third echelon have sighted Ultramarines docking at a concealed location, suspected communications outpost,' said Dal Ahk.

'Where?'

'Three hundred kilometres to the west. Shall I have the location targeted from orbit?'

'No,' said Sor Talgron. 'Send for my drop-ship.'

'Captain?'

'The enemy have conducted the defence of this world with considerable acumen and tenacity. I will not have the last of them obliterated from orbit. They will die as they lived - with honour.'

'Would they afford us the same respect if our situations were reversed, captain?' said Dal Ahk. 'Why does it matter how they die?'

He thought of his old mentor again, and the fate that had befallen him.

'It matters to me,' he said.

The giant leaned on the table with massive bronze-encased fists.

He was immense. All of the primarchs were, but Sor Talgron had only ever stood in close proximity to one — Lorgar Aurelian, the gene-father of the Word Bearers.

Rogal Dorn was much bigger.

Had it not been a secular age, the primarch of the Imperial Fists would surely have been worshipped as a demigod. No mortal could stand in his presence and not be cowed.

His face was as unforgiving as stone. His hair was snow-white and cropped short. His eyes were as hard and cold as diamonds and exuded a fierce, cold intelligence.

And anger. A deep, unforgiving abyss of anger that was palpable in his every movement and expression.

The table before him was huge, carved from the dark wood of a tree long extinct on Terra. It was covered with plans, communiques, orbital scans and data-slates. The wealth of information was overwhelming, yet there was order to it — nothing was out of place or unnecessary.

The chamber itself was cavernous, austere and sparsely furnished. There were no seats. One side of its length was dominated by floor to ceiling arched windows. From the view it was clear that the room was positioned high upon the Himalazian flanks, above the cloud line, and while the sky outside was black and pinpricked with stars, harsh industrial light from below flooded through those thick reinforced panes.

A meeting had been under way when Tiber Acanthus announced him. Bureaucrats, politicians, guilders, Administratum — Dorn dismissed them with a word. Few of them deigned even to look upon Sor Talgron as they filed out. These were the architects of the new Imperium. These were those with true power, and Sor Talgron loathed them. They had no concept of the blood, death and horrors that those that had carved out the Imperium had known. None of them had ever likely stepped off-world at all. One, elongated and thin and clutching construction plans and dataslates, had looked down at him, his pinched face disdainful. Sor Talgron had stared at him as he left, hating him and all his weak-blooded kind. These were the ones that they had been fighting for? It made him sick.

Tiber Acanthus had departed, pulling the huge wooden doors closed behind him. Two individuals remained with Dorn. Neither were introduced.

One he knew from the time he had spent on Terra — Archamus, master of Dorn's huscarl retinue. A stern, proud individual, his gene-heritage was clear; his features were strongly reminiscent of his primarch's.

The other was no Imperial Fist. His armour was plainly coloured and trimmed with a worn olive green. An officer of the Death Guard.

He was completely bald, this captain, and a stylised eagle taking flight bedecked his cuirass and gorget. His eyes were stern and unflinching. He looked solid, in Sor Talgron's estimation. Dependable. Stoic. Who he was, Sor Talgron did not know, but he instinctively liked him. This was a soldier he could respect.

The mystery of this warrior's identity had been forgotten as soon as Dorn began to speak. Now that he was done, the silence was heavy.

For a long moment, Sor Talgron stared at the Death Guard captain, his brow

furrowed. Then his gaze returned to Dorn.

'It is...' he said, at last. 'It is difficult to comprehend.'

'Believe it,' said Rogal Dorn, his voice like roiling thunder.

'Isstvan Three will be forever damned in the annals of history,' added Archamus. Sor Talgron narrowed his eyes at him — there was too much pride in the huscarl's bearing.

'Four Legions turning against their own. Turning against the Emperor,' said Sor Talgron, shaking his head 'It is madness.'

'Madness, aye,' said Dorn. 'Madness of the worst kind.'

The primarch pushed off the table, fists clenched. It looked like he wanted to hit something. If he put the full force of his fury behind it, Sor Talgron doubted any living being would have survived such a blow.

The giant moved across the chamber, his advance implacable, each step echoing heavily and accompanied by the mechanical hum and grind of his armour. He halted before the windows, staring down the range's flank. A multitude of floodlights bathed the mountainside, throwing the vast construction work below into stark relief. The harsh white glow underlit his features, emphasising the deep fines and contours of his face. He could have been carved from granite, so hard and immobile was he.

He remained there, staring out into the distance for a time. The silence was oppressive. Both Archamus and the unidentified Death Guard captain stared at Sor Talgron, unblinking.

'How did you learn of this atrocity?' said Sor Talgron finally, breaking the silence. 'My augurs and astropaths have heard nothing from beyond the borders of the segmentum for months, blinded by warp storms.'

The primarch fumed and stalked back towards the heavy dark wood table, his expression grim. It took considerable force of will for Sor Talgron not to back away a step at his approach. It would be a terrifying vision to see in battle, this giant encased in gold coming at you with the intent to kill. No mortal being would last more than a heartbeat.

'The astropathic choir has been silent,' growled Dorn. 'We have heard nothing from the Isstvan System since the start of this.'

Sor Talgron frowned, but said nothing.

'Rather, I heard it from one who was there,' said Dorn, answering his unspoken question.

Dorn inclined his head, and Sor Talgron's gaze was drawn to the Death Guard captain standing silently to attention.

'This is Battle-Captain Nathaniel Garro, formerly of the Fourteenth Legion,' said the primarch.

Garro saluted, striking his chest with his fist in the old Terran tradition. Sor Talgron returned the gesture.

'It surprises me to see one of the Death Guard standing here, having just heard the tale of your Legion's betrayal,' he said.

'It is no tale,' snapped Archamus. 'It is the truth.'

Sor Talgron glanced at him. 'A figure of speech,' he said, before returning his attention to Garro.

'It surprises and saddens me to stand here and speak of such events,' said the Death Guard captain. 'My ties to my Legion died along with my true brothers, who were butchered on Isstvan Three for the crime of their loyalty.'

'You are a legionary without a Legion, then.'

'So it would seem.'

'Garro was witness to the Warmaster's betrayal. He saw my... brother,' said Dorn, almost spitting the word, 'turn against the imperium. Horus attacked Isstvan Three with virus bombs, killing untold thousands of legionaries loyal to the Emperor, and millions of citizens. In the face of this atrocity, Garro took his ship — the Eisenstein — and fought his way clear to bring word to Terra.'

'It seems that the Imperium owes you a debt of gratitude,' said Sor Talgron, bowing his head towards Garro.

'I merely did what I felt was my duty,' said Garro, a little stiffly.

'Had the Eisenstein not broken through the blockade and brought word of the betrayal, we would not have known of this atrocity until it was too late,' said Archamus.

'Throne,' said Sor Talgron. 'The Warmaster might have taken Terra virtually unchallenged.'

'He could have,' said Dorn. 'But his ploy failed.'

'The Legions killing their own, civil war, a plot to dethrone the Emperor?' said Sor Talgron with a shake of the head. 'How did it come to this?'

'Through the actions of one man — Horus Lupercal,' said Dorn. 'Horus was the best of us. If he could fall, anyone could fall. Which brings me to you and your battle-brothers, captain.'

FOUR

SOR TALGRON HATED the zealotry. He hated the metaphysical need that seemed gene-coded into his battle-brothers — there was a new and desperate hunger in the Legion to believe in something more than the struggle and pain and torment that was mortal existence. But that was what life was, one bloody task after another until death finally came to claim you. Why did there need to be anything more to it than that?

Why this insatiable need for meaning? For *faith*?

It was a weakness, he believed. A failing. Something the Legion had inherited from Lorgar Aurelian, and Sor Talgron almost hated his primarch for that. He was awed by him, and would not hesitate to sacrifice his life for him, of course, but he almost hated him nonetheless. He did not know why he did not have the same ingrained compulsion as his brothers. Perhaps the failing was *his*?

If he had spoken of this to anyone, even his subordinates, they would not understand. They would have despised him. No doubt an athame would have come for him soon after. Just another purge.

He had felt something like a kinship with the Custodian sentinel Tiber Acanthus, more perhaps than he had with his closes battle-brothers, and that relationship had been built upon lies. What did that make him?

The Stormbird rose from below and hovered before him, powerful down-thrusters screaming and blowing up dust. It rotated, its assault ramp lowering. He held the Legion standard now, and the heavy, blood-soaked cloth whipped like a sail in the assault craft's jets. He stepped up onto the terrace's marble balustrade and into the assault craft's interior, ignoring the forty-metre drop that would have claimed him had the pilots been unable to hold it steady. Dal Ahk and two squads of legionaries stepped over the gap behind him, boots mag-locking onto the assault ramp with barely conscious thought impulses.

Some legionaries hated those moments of being packed into a Stormbird, or a drop pod or Caestus ram, being hurtled into the thick of the fighting, relinquishing control over their fate to the pilots, the driver, or to pure luck. Sor

Talgron was not one of them. If they were shot down or obliterated before they reached their target, then such was the way of it. That made him feel calm. If something were to happen, he had no control over it. Let what will happen, happen.

Today, however, he did not feel comfortable within the confines of the Stormbird. The walls seemed to close in upon him, like an oubliette.

He moved through the ship, past the banks of assault harnesses and weapons caches, moving into the cockpit. The two flight officers, sitting back to back, acknowledged his presence with restrained nods. The two pilot servitors seated to the front had drool hanging from their blue lips, like white gruel. Their pallid flesh twitched.

Beyond the cockpit, the city of Massilea was tinged grey-green by the lighting and tinted filters of the curved armourglass shell. Hologrammatic overlays projected before the lead pilot, delivering the flight officers a wealth of data, while detailed topographical maps rendered in three dimensions hovered before the co-pilot. The green lines of the overlays looked warped and strange from Sor Talgron's angle. A wealth of additional information would be there too, he knew, visible to the flight officers alone. He braced himself, holding on to overhead railings.

To aft, the assault ramp sealed and the Stormbird lifted, banking sharply towards the west, wing tips pointing towards the heavens and the ground as it turned. Sor Talgron remained rooted in place, mag-locks keeping his boots clamped to the deck. They swung over the librarius jutting up from the rock below, all flames, smoke and dirty white marble. Then they were hurtling over the city, the ruins whipping by below them.

They dropped altitude as they exited the city, pulling in low over the turquoise river, kicking up twin walls of spray in their wake. They ate up the kilometres, following the twisting cliffs lining the river.

They crossed deep azure waters as the river fed into a lake that could have been mistaken for a sea. From there they veered over the land, screaming over the detritus of a battlefield recently won. The Legion was gone, moving from their war from to the nearest of the drop zones. The time to leave this world was nearing and Sor Talgron had already given the word for unengaged elements of the 34th Company to head for the muster points, ready for extraction.

Burning pyres had been left in the Legion's wake, piled high with the dead, but what arrested Sor Talgron's attention were the immense armoured shells that lay scattered across the blackened earth. The field was a graveyard for loyalist

Titans. Most had been taken down with little loss to XVII forces - once the battle in the void above had been won, the Titans were easy prey for the orbital weaponry. Unsupported Titans were little more than walking death traps, and repeated lance strikes had ripped through the void shields of these enticing targets before smashing them to the ground. Only the Warhounds had been swift enough to evade the devastating salvos, and from the reports that had come in they had carved a bloody toll through the invading ground forces before they too had finally been brought low.

The downed forms of half a dozen colossal mechanical giants swarmed with Mechanicum adepts and servitors. These were sects of the Martian priesthood that had thrown their weight in with the Legion and Horus's cause, and they picked over the Reaver, Warhound and Nemesis-class engines like maggots feeding upon rotting carcasses.

They passed over a tract of strangely untouched wilderness, an island of green fir trees in an ocean of fire-blackened earth, and scattered a herd of multi-antlered quadrupeds below. Some life still flourished, it seemed, away from the main engagements.

They approached one of the Legion's muster zones. Bulk landers hung low and expectant overhead, readying to pick up the heavier ground elements. Already Word Bearers Rhinos and Land Raiders were snaking in through the rocky canyons for extraction. The Stormbird dipped its wings in salute to the warriors below, and Sor Talgron saw a lone tank commander, standing in the open cupola of a Proteus, raise a hand in return.

They continued on to the east, sweeping up blasted hills and over smoking outlying estates and an ancient forest that had been reduced to char and embers. They passed a trio of Deathdealer Night Gaunts striding back along a ridge of blasted scree towards the muster point and the waiting mass lifters. The Titans were hung with kill banners and pennants. More kills would be emblazoned upon them after they were secured aboard the ugly Mechanicum ships in orbit above; Legio Mordaxis had proved its worth on the battlefield once again. The swiftly striding god-machines, hunched and beetle-backed as they were, each bore ordnance capable of laying waste to entire companies.

The lead Titan, its black carapace edged in yellow, swung its heavy head towards the Stormbird passing a hundred metres to its flank and let out a world-shuddering blast of its warhorn. A greeting? A challenge? Sor Talgron did not know. The other two war machines let out their own ululating, booming cries, and then they were past them, angling towards the ice-capped mountain range

looming on the horizon, reminiscent of the towering peaks of the Imperial Palace on Terra. Sor Talgron forcibly pushed the comparison from his mind.

Initial surveys of the region had revealed no enemy presence, but that had clearly been incorrect. Some form of shielding concealed the outpost still, perhaps, for Dal Ahk had reported that fleet imaging and drone scans had come back with nothing. It refused to appear on any augury scan or sweep. They were going in blind.

They soared through the icy peaks, locked to the blinking beacon planted by the recon squads.

'I see it,' said the ranking flight officer. Sor Talgron leant forwards, squinting past the blinking red target-marker hovering in the air. He was unable to see anything until they were right in front of it, so well concealed was the structure from the air.

'By the blood of the Urizen,' said Sor Talgron. 'How did Loth find it?'

'I don't know, captain,' said the officer. 'Shuttles and gunships scoured this region and came up with nothing. Perhaps he got lucky.'

'He gets lucky a lot, then,' said Sor Talgron, knowing that luck had nothing to do with it. Loth was the best reconnaissance operative in the company, perhaps the whole Legion. He had proved himself time and time again, across a dozen campaigns and systems.

A landing pad had been built into the mountainside, tucked beneath a deep overhang. The Stormbird came in under the protruding stone shelf. A XVII Legion lander was already there, and legionaries stood awaiting his arrival. The shuttle in the blue of the XIII was tucked further back.

Sor Talgron's vox clicked. Closed channel. Dal Ahk.

'Captain, why would the enemy come here?' asked Dal Ahk. 'Battle is still ongoing on several fronts. Ultramarines still live and breathe on this world. They have lost the war, and have no hope of extraction. Even if this is a communication hub, why come here? There is no fleet within the system to communicate with.'

'The enemy are nothing if not rational. There's clearly a reason that we are not seeing,' replied Sor Talgron. 'I want to know what it is.'

Silence, then a click as Dal Ahk's vox-link closed.

The master of signal was uneasy at Sor Talgron's decision, he knew. He had not said as much, but it was obvious nonetheless. Sor Talgron understood. Coming here in person was unnecessary. More than this, it was out of character.

The Stormbird's wings adjusted as the thrusters brought it in onto the landing

pad. Taloned claws clacked as they were lowered down.

His unadorned, standard-issue Umbra pattern bolter was locked to his thigh, and the familiar weight of his flanged mace hung on his left hip. His newly acquired volkite pistol was holstered on his right side.

Cold mountain air rushed into the Stormbird as the assault ramp opened once more. Without a word, Sor Talgron turned and strode down the length of the gunship's interior and out into the sun.

Sor Talgron's expression hardened at Dorn's words.

'The loyalty of the Seventeenth has never been questioned,' he said, not even attempting to keep the anger out of his voice. 'We have been accused of being overzealous in our... adoration of the Emperor in the past, but never has anyone doubted our loyalty or our devotion to the Imperium.'

Archamus lifted a slate, scrolling through a swathe of data with a gesture.

'You've been very active since your posting here,' he said. 'Patrolling the length and breadth of the Solar System, regulated inspections to Mars and the shipyards of Jupiter and Luna, maintaining a presence within the Imperial Pal-'

'Such is my duty!' said Sor Talgron, interrupting. His expression was thunderous. 'If you have something you wish to accuse me of, then just come out and say it. Stop dancing around the issue.'

Archamus put the data-slate down on the table.

'Where have you been these last two months?' he said.

'This is an interrogation now, my lord?' said Sor Talgron, pointedly looking away Archamus to address Rogal Dorn.

The primarch's expression was unreadable, and he said nothing.

'Not unless you have something you wish to conceal,' said Archamus.

A dangerous stillness had settled over Rogal Dorn like a mantle. Sor Talgron felt his diamond-hard eyes boring into him.

'Battle-Captain Garro,' said the primarch, finally. 'I know you have important matters to attend to. I thank you for your time. You may leave us.'

Garro slammed his fist into his chest once more, and bowed to Lord Dorn. Casting a last glance towards Sor Talgron, he walked from the room. The door clicked shut behind him. Rogal Dorn continued to stare at Sor Talgron.

'Where were you?' he said.

'I journeyed to the Shrine of Unity, as I am sure you are already aware,' Sor Talgron growled. He raised his eyebrows at Archamus. 'Satisfied?'

'The comet?' said the master of huscarls. 'For what purpose?'

Sor Talgron looked him squarely in the eyes. 'I went there to set things right,' he said.

'Explain,' said Dorn.

Sor Talgron's reluctance to do so was clear. The shrine was a potent symbol of Imperial strength and unified purpose. It had been carved into an immense comet that routinely swung back into the Solar System several times every thousand years, tracking an irregular elliptical route around the sun. In millennia past, when its trajectory was stable and more accurately predicted, it had worn a different name, but what it was had been lost in the murky fog of time. The comet had been seen in the heavens when the Emperor had won the Unification Wars on Terra, and it was for his victory that the shrine had been created.

Sor Talgron was unwilling to speak before outsiders, but Dorn's expression was unforgiving and demanded an answer.

'In the past the Seventeenth Legion has exhibited traits that some decreed as... at odds with the secular nature of the Imperium,' said Sor Talgron.

He lowered his eyes as he recalled the rebuke that his Legion had suffered at Monarchia. The pain of it still festered within him, though he had never been a devout soul by any regards. That he did not want to speak these words aloud was plain, as plain as his anger at being forced to recount his Legion's shame.

'The Legion has since seen the error of its ways,' he said.

'And the comet?'

'The comet's orbit will see it return through the Solar System in a matter of years. I was ordered to remove certain edifications that had been erected upon the comet before it did so.'

The primarch snorted. 'My little brother can be such a fool,' he said.

'Lorgar built a temple deifying the Emperor on the Shrine of Unity, didn't he?' said Archamus, catching up a moment later. 'Before Monarchia. You were there to tear it down, before anyone found out.'

Anger surged through Sor Talgron at the casual mention of his primarch's name and the disdain in the Imperial Fist's tone, and it took all his will to hold it in check. Rogal Dorn still watched him, unblinking.

'As I said,' said Sor Talgron, meeting Dorn's gaze. 'The Seventeenth has since seen the error of its ways. Already we have been shamed before all the Legions. The Urizen did not wish any further embarrassment.'

Sor Talgron looked at Archamus.

'Satisfied? We are not traitors. I am no traitor.'

'None of us believed the Warmaster was capable of betrayal,' said Archamus. Sor Talgron's hands clenched into fists, and he was about to speak, but Dorn held up his hand to silence him.

'Enough,' he said, an iron finality in his voice. 'And Archamus, you are wrong — Horus was always capable of these actions. I've never met a man more capable, I just did not expect him to take this path. I thought even his arrogance had a limit, but it would seem I was mistaken.' His expression was uncompromising. Anger simmered just below the surface. *'I am not often mistaken.'*

Archamus was glaring at Sor Talgron, as if he was responsible for his rebuke.

'Lorgar is subtle,' said Dorn. 'He chose well in posting you here.'

'My lord?' said Sor Talgron.

'In order to assure the Emperor that his very public rebuke was understood, he sent you to Terra,' said Dorn. 'He chose well.'

'I was sent here to bolster the Legion presence...'

'But why you, of all his vaunted captains?'

'I do not know, my lord,' Sor Talgron replied. 'Perhaps Lord Aurelian was displeased with me.'

'It chafes you that you are not on the front lines, fighting with your brothers. I can understand that better than most,' said Dorn, bitterness ringing his words.

'But that is not why Lorgar sent you here. This is not a punishment.'

'Sometimes it feels like it, my lord,' said Sor Tolgron.

'You are a different breed from the rest of the Seventeenth Legion. You are practical and pragmatic, where your brothers are overzealous. You are a soldier, with no pretences of being otherwise. Most of your bloodline spoke like priests. It is distasteful. This is why Lorgar sent you here.'

'My lord, the Seventeenth was rebuked for venerating the Emperor too deeply,' said Sor Talgron. 'The Legion has changed.'

'Did you ever venerate the Emperor, captain?' said Dorn.

'My lord, I... Forgive me. I am not comfortable speaking of such things.'

'I do not believe that you did,' Dorn continued. 'Your faith is in strategy and tactics, boots on the ground and armour upon your back. Your faith lies in bolters and blood, logistics and battlefield commands. Tell me I am wrong.'

Sor Talgron said nothing.

'In truth, I'm jealous that the Seventeenth got to you first,' said Dorn.

'You would have made a fine Imperial Fist.'

Sor Talgron was silent, unsure how to respond. 'Thank you, my lord,' he

murmured at last.

'Indeed, you are the perfect captain for Lorgar to send to Terra to reassure the Emperor that all is well within the Seventeenth.'

'All is well within the Seventeenth,' said Sor Talgron.

'The question of your loyalty is not the reason I have brought you here, captain,' said Dorn. 'Let me clarify my position. There is no reason for me to regard the Seventeenth as anything but a Legion loyal to the Emperor. As you say — if anything, your Legion has proven itself perhaps too loyal in the past. I do not believe you or your Legion are traitors. That is not the reason why I locked down your fleet in the Luna shipyards. It is not the reason I allowed you alone to cross the palace's threshold. It is not the reason why your garrisoned warriors here have been placed under guard.'

'Why then?'

'I have to be seen to treat all the Legions the same. To do otherwise would be to risk accusations of favouritism and cause more rifts between my brothers. Your warriors are not the only ones within the Imperial Palace that I have imprisoned.'

Sor Talgron frowned. 'What others?'

'The Crusader Host,' replied Rogal Dorn, cracking his immense knuckles one by one.

'You've imprisoned them? All of them?'

'All of them,' said Dorn.

'Even those of Legions you know to be loyal?'

'Who can say how deep this rot goes?'

'The Legions will not like it,' said Sor Talgron, folding his arms across his chest. 'Some less than others.'

'I do not care,' said Dorn. 'I am trying to ensure the Imperium does not fall down around us. I will do anything to ensure that it does not. Anything.'

'You've imprisoned the Imperial Fists who stand as part of the Crusader Host, then?' said Sor Talgron.

'No. The Imperial Fists are no longer a crusading Legion, therefore our representatives within the Preceptory have been withdrawn. We have been named the Emperor's praetorians. It is difficult to guard the palace if we are under lock and key.'

'I do not disagree, though that may be seen differently by others,' said Sor Talgron. 'It sounds like there is one rule for your Fists, and one for everyone else.'

'It is what it is,' said Dorn.

'And what of the Sixth Legion's watch-pack stationed with you?' asked Sor Talgron. 'What of those sons of Russ? You have imprisoned them as well, then?'

Dorn's face was stony. 'No. They operate under orders from the Sigillite. They are exempt.'

'Pardon my bluntness, my lord, but does that not reek of hypocrisy?'

'This is the way it must be.'

Sor Talgron looked away, gathering his thoughts. 'This is all just politics, isn't it?' he said.

'At a time when it has been proven that any Legion could turn against the Imperium, at least theoretically, I must be seen to be proactively ensuring Terra's security while also walking a fine line to keep the loyal Legions together,' said Dorn. 'Yes, this is a political decision.'

The primarch gave him a moment to let that all sink in.

'You are angry,' he said, finally. 'I understand that. You return to Terra to find your legionaries imprisoned. Any leader would be angry.'

'As you say,' said Sor Talgron.

'In a perfect universe I would have no need to lock up loyal legionaries that could be of use garrisoning the palace should the worst possibility eventuate,' said Dorn. 'This is not a perfect universe.'

'So what happens next?' asked Sor Talgron.

'Your garrison will be released and transported back to your fleet. The locks on your ships will be lifted. You will join them in orbit, and then you will leave. By the time tomorrow dawns, there will be no member of the Word Bearers Legion within the Solar System. Your time here has come to an end.'

'My lord?'

'Seven other Legions will join my retribution fleet in mustering upon the Isstvan System,' said Dorn. 'You will be there too, and will take the fight to the Warmaster.'

The primogenitor of the Imperial Fists was not known to be as unpredictable as some of his brothers, but he was undoubtedly one of the most powerful beings in creation, and Sor was not familiar with his disposition and humours. He chose his words carefully.

'With respect, my lord, my orders were to maintain a Seventeenth Legion presence in the Solar System,' said Sor Talgron, weighing his words. 'They came from Lord Aurelian himself. I cannot disobey his command.'

'Consider Lorgar's orders overruled,' said Dorn. 'This is an honour, captain.'

You will be a part of the battle that will set things right.'

'No, it is merely politically convenient to send me away,' Sor Talgron countered. 'If I take the Thirty-Fourth to join the muster, will that not leave Terra more vulnerable?'

'The Imperial Fists have been named as the Emperor's praetorians,' said Archamus. 'It is our duty to protect Terra.'

'An invasion could be on its way here now,' said Sor Talgron. 'If that is the case, you will have need of my legionaries.'

'Our duty, not yours,' Archamus repeated. Sor Talgron met the Imperial Fist's glare with one of his own.

'You would let your own pride put Terra in jeopardy?' he said.

Archamus's blade was half out of its scabbard when Dorn slammed his fist down into the centre of the table. He pulled the blow; if he hadn't, the table would have been nothing but splinters scattered across the length of the chamber.

'Enough,' he said. He did not raise his voice; he did not have to. Archamus sheathed his sword, though his face remained murderous.

'This will end where it began,' said Dorn. 'At Isstvan.'

'If I was a traitor, you'd be sending me into the hands of your enemy, unharmed,' said Sor Talgron.

'I have enough legionaries incarcerated here as it is.'

'With all respect, my lord, I believe this is a mistake.'

'Your protestations are noted, captain,' said Rogal Dorn. 'Noted, and ignored. You are leaving Terra. But there is one last matter for us to discuss — the Seventeenth's representative within the Crusader Host.'

'Volkhar Wreth,' said Sor Talgron. 'Surely you cannot doubt where his loyalties lie?'

'No, he is perhaps the only other member of the Crusader Host that I do not doubt. It is one of the reasons why I am releasing him into your custody. One more loyal legionary to join the muster.'

'And one less to guard here within the walls of the palace,' said Sor Talgron. 'One less potential enemy within.'

'That too,' said Dorn, steepling his fingers before him.

'He will be appreciative, my lord,' said Sor Talgron, bowing his head. 'A legionary should face his fate on the battlefield, not linger in a prison cell.'

The primarch nodded. 'He will be isolated from the others. They cannot know that he is being released. I will arrange for him to be transferred to a different

holding location. Less security. You'll be granted clearance. Would that I could be rid of them all as easily.'

FIVE

'THE SHAFT GOES deep into the heart of the mountain,' said Reconnaissance Sergeant Loth. He spat on the landing pad deck. The acidic transhuman saliva sizzled as it ate into the metalwork. 'Three hundred metres, straight down.'

Loth had taken off his helm, augmented with non-standard sensor arrays and targeters, to give his report to Sor Talgron. One of his eyes had been replaced with a bionic, the lens whirring faintly as it focused. His one remaining organic eye was cold and utterly soulless. The captain noted the twelve-toothed cog symbol branded into his forehead, marking him as having received training on Mars.

Such a mark was highly unusual outside of techmarine covenants. He had been groomed for that path, but had neither the temperament nor the inclination to succeed upon in. He had been reassigned to the recon ranks, where his fierce independence, resourcefulness and insubordination were a more comfortable fit. Those same traits that had made him such a bad line soldier proved to be an asset, and his Martian training made him invaluable when working behind enemy lines as a saboteur.

Indeed, that talent had been well used on Terra.

He cradled a long rifle wrapped in camo-netting in the crook of one arm. A ragged cameleoline shadowcloak hung over his stripped down armour, the heavy material bending light around him. Beneath the dust and mud, that armour retained the slate grey of the Legion's original colours.

He had cursed, using low-caste Colchisian gutter-slang, when Chaplain Jarulek had questioned his choice not to consecrate his armour in the colours of the Legion reborn.

'*You try remaining unseen garbed in red, priest,*' he had snarled. Jarulek had sought Sor Talgron, requesting that the captain overrule the insubordinate recon sergeant. But he had not disagreed with Loth's reasoning, and had let the protest stand.

It had been Loth and his understrength squad that had spied the stealth-

shrouded enemy craft flying low through the valleys of the mountains. They had been returning from a scouting kill-mission, and while the enemy craft had not appeared on the squad's signum, they had locked onto its heat signature and tracked it as it came in to land. It had been Loth's locator beacon that had guided Sor Talgron's ship here.

The XVII legionaries were working to gain entry to the shaft via the sealed, heavy reinforced blast portal that appeared to be the only entrance. Las-cutters spat and whined as they worked.

'There's a conveyor, currently at the base of the shaft,' said Loth. 'It's been deactivated, and will be rigged if they have any sense. It's what I'd do.'

'Can you bring it back online?' said Sor Talgron.

'It shouldn't be difficult.'

'Good,' said Sor Talgron. 'Once that door is free, want you and your squad down that shaft. Bring the conveyor up. Try not to get yourselves blown up.'

Loth nodded vaguely and moved to brief his squad, spitting again as he walked away.

'Low-caste dog,' said Dal Ahk, watching Loth squat and begin outlying his orders to the group crouched around him.

'I was low-caste as well, remember,' growled Sor Talgron.

'I'm sorry, my lord. I spoke out of turn.'

'Put your prejudice aside, If he wasn't any good, he'd be dead by now.'

'They'll be waiting for us down there. We'll be walking straight into their guns.'

'I am aware of that,' said Sor Talgron.

'I don't understand, captain. Why are we bothering with them? The war is won. The world is taken.'

'I do not intend to leave this sector while a single Ultramarine still breathes within it,' said Sor Talgron. 'We could pound this mountain for weeks from orbit and they'd still be down there. They'd barely even notice. Are we walking into an ambush? Yes. Is there any alternative? No.'

'Why retreat here?'

'Ah, now that is the better question.'

'And the answer?'

Sor Talgron turned to look at his master of signal. 'I have no idea,' he said.

'Pistols and blades,' Loth announced, standing. His legionaries unburdened themselves of extraneous encumbrance: ammunition, power-packs, communications equipment and their bulkier weapons. They stripped off their refractive shadowcloaks. Lastly, Loth leaned his long rifle amidst the pile of

gear, parting with it only reluctantly.

'Nobody touch that,' he snarled before slipping on his modified helm. His lenses did not light up — they were non-reflective and muted, as flat and dead as his single organic eye.

The doors were cracked, and the secure portals were wrenched open. Loth directed a lazy salute at Sor Talgron and Dal Ahk before turning and leading his squad on the descent. One by one, they slipped over the lip of the conveyor shaft, as soundless as shadows.

'Insubordinate bastard,' said Dal Ahk after he had gone, moving amongst the stacked gear and pointedly kicking Loth's rifle. Sor Talgron shook his head.

While they waited, another shuttle arrived, brought in at Sor Talgron's order. A heavily armoured siege squad disembarked, clumping onto the landing pad. They were armoured in Mark III Iron armour, heavily modified for frontal assaults, and each carried a bulky siege shield. They were amongst the most battle-hardened legionaries within the Chapter, often forming the vanguard against armoured Fortifications and enemy ships, and while the rate of attrition within their ranks was notoriously high, that was also a mark of honour amongst them. These tough veterans were some of Sor Talgron's premier line-breakers.

'At your command,' said Telakhas, the squad's sergeant. A massive thunder hammer was mag-locked across his back.

The Apostle Jarulek also accompanied the breaker squad. The legionaries bowed their heads as he walked through their ranks, offering him a level of deference that Sor Talgron found distasteful.

Still, he could not dispute the effect the preacher's presence had on his men. Their resolve was visibly bolstered wherever he fought in the battle line, and there had been more than one engagement where the success of the 34th had hinged on his ability to inspire a fanatical zealotry among the legionaries. Sor Talgron mistrusted the way he manipulated the emotions of those who followed him, but he was not fool enough to be blind to the fact the priest served a purpose, and served it well.

Perhaps what rankled most was that while Jarulek would never have the strategic acumen that Sor Talgron commanded, he instinctively knew how to get the best out of the men on the ground — better than Sor Talgron himself. The priest knew the power of well chosen words, and when his fiery rhetoric should be punctuated with action. He *inspired* them. Sor Talgron was deeply respected by all, but he was not one for speeches or fancy words. He was built for direct action, and while he had a deep-seated aversion to the power of anything as

ephemeral as mere words, he knew that this was more of a weakness on his part than a reflection of their lack of worth.

Not that Jarulek was a poor soldier - the opposite, in fact. If he had not been claimed early in his tenure, plucked from the ranks of neophytes and chosen for a Chaplain's ministry, Sor Talgron would have had him commanding a battalion of his own by now. His instincts were good, and they had been further honed in the time that he had spent seconded to Kor Phaeron, acting as one of his war consuls.

Jarulek knew of his misgivings.

'You do not require the rhetoric of faith in order to fight your best,' Jarulek had said to him on the fields of Nalahsa. That day the Dark Apostle had led a savage counter-attack against the greenskins, driving a wedge into the heart of the enemy formations to slay their warlord. That action had won them that war. Both of them had been covered in sticky, foul-smelling greenskin gore. *'That is not your way — and meaning no disrespect, my lord, it is both a strength and weakness. But these warriors,'* he had said, gesturing to the victorious legionaries around them, *'they do not have your... singularity of focus. Your resolve. Your pragmatism. They need something more. They need faith and guidance. They fight all the better for it, and without it they would be lost.'*

It grated on Sor Talgron that he knew the preacher was right.

He inclined his head to Jarulek now as the preacher made his rounds, stopping to speak in quiet tones to individual warriors, laying a hand upon the shoulder of others. Jarulek bowed to him, lowering his eyes in deference. Sor Talgron turned away.

He commandeered a boarding shield from the newcomers' weapon cache. It was heavy, with an inbuilt refractor field, and it covered a legionary from head to knee. Its surface was black, and it bore evidence of las-scoring and plasma-burns. There were other, newer shields that he could have chosen, but he had an aversion to weapons that had not yet been tempered in battle.

Dal Ahk had remarked, once, that it was just superstition. And he knew that the captain hated anything as pointless as superstition.

Sor Talgron had not deigned to reply. *'You really are a humourless bastard, you know,'* Dal Ahk had said. *That* had got a smile out of him.

There was no hint of levity in the master of signal now, though. He could practically see the scowl on his face for all that he was his battle helm.

'You are going in yourself, then' said Dal Ahk. Any belligerence or disapproval in his tone was rendered indiscernible by his helm's augmitters. *Everything* was

transformed into an angry growl by Legion helms, such that all subtlety in tone and intonation was lost. It was perhaps one of the reasons why Space Marines were so poor at reading irony and sarcasm in unaugmented humans, he thought.

'I am,' said Sor Talgron. 'You are not.' The master of signal said nothing. He didn't need to. 'I need you up here. Keep the communication lines open.'

Dal Ahk saluted and walked away without a word. His disapproval radiated off him like a heat haze.

Sor Talgron locked the boarding shield to his left arm. He felt the humming vibration as the refractor field powered up.

He moved to the edge of the landing platform. In the far distance, the bulk landers hung like vast swollen insects. He stood alone.

'You are a different breed from the rest of the Seventeenth Legion. You are practical and pragmatic, where you brothers are overzealous.'

Dorn's words grated on him. Maybe he *had* been the right choice to act as the enemy within, but he had loathed every moment of it. He had hated the deception, stealth and falseness that had been demanded of him, and he hated himself for having performed that role so well. He had despised it, but a soldier follows orders. Perhaps Lorgar *had* chosen well.

There were others within the Legion that hungered for power and would have revelled in the betrayal — Erebus for one. Few saw him for the conniving manipulator that he was. That said, Dorn wouldn't have been taken in by him, of that he was sure.

Sor Talgron had always been surprised that others did not see through the poisonous Chaplain. He had too much influence over the Legion, and his corruption was contagious. Sor Talgron prayed that the snake would not survive Calth.

Prayed. A poor choice of words on his part. He had never prayed a day in his life, not even as a child on Colchis. He was not planning on starting now.

He had seen the same cancer that festered in Erebus within some members of the Chapter. It was not to the same degree as in the other Chapters of the Legion, but it was there, much to his chagrin. It was worse among the newer recruits - those more recently indoctrinated into the XVII seemed more corruptible, more drawn to immersing themselves in the new faith and the lust for power. It did not bode well for the future and he had grave concerns for the Legion. Would it even be recognisable in a decade, or a hundred years hence?

He had done what he could to keep the ranks of the 34th as clean as possible — those he'd judged most inclined to fall to Erebus's corrupting influence had

been sent on to Calth. He would not be displeased if none of them came back. It was another purge of the Legion's ranks, in a sense. Not of the scale of the one that had come before, but an important one nonetheless. He did not care if martyrs were made. Cut out the corruption and the whole may be diminished, but the Legion would be the stronger for it in the long run.

He was not normally one to dwell on introspection — at least he had not been before Forty-Seven Sixteen — and he had a task at hand. Less than fifteen minutes had passed when word came from the scouts.

'Four explosive devices disengaged, and the beacon is set,' came Loth's cold whisper in Sor Talgron's ear, breaking his self-imposed vox-silence. *'Power has been restored to the conveyer. On the way topside.'*

Moments later, the grinding of mechanical gears announced the carriage beginning its ascent.

'There are enemies back down there,' added Loth. *'Legionaries and Imperial Army.'*

'Numbers?'

'Difficult to say, our scanners were being blocked. Not many, but dug in and waiting.'

'Master of Signal,' said Sor Talgron, cutting off his vox-link. 'Does the fleet have a lock on the beacon?'

'They do, captain,' said Dal Ahk. 'They are calibrating now.'

'How long?'

'They will be ready to sequence in seven minutes.'

'What are your orders, my lord?' asked Jarulek, joining them. 'How are you going to play this?'

'We go down there. We kill everything we find,' he said.

'Good plan,' said Jarulek, with a smile. That smile never touched his eyes, Sor Talgron noted. In his eyes lurked only darkness.



PRAECEPTORIA

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I	GALIEL	XII	ASUBHA
I	JEHOEL	XIII	REGULON
III	KIRON	XIII	CASSIUS
IV	CAYNE	XIII	AGGRIPPO
V	BAATAN	XIII	QUINTUS
VI	TORVENDR	XIII	BLASIO
VI	REK	XIV	GYTHUA
VII	AHRED	XV	ATHARVA
VII	DANMAR	XVI	SEVERIAN
VIII	TARKH	XVII	WRETH
IX	MARCUS	XVIII	VOR'SHAR
IX	ZEPHON	XIX	REVE
X	CRJUS	XIX	TALLOR
XII	TAGORE	XX	RAULUS
XII	SUBHA	XX	ROND

- IN HOC OFFICIO GLORIAM -

THE PERPETUAL SPIRAL

TACTICA: STRATEGIC GARRISON AND HONOUR GUARD DUTIES



With a proud and illustrious history dating back to the time of the Imperial Heralds, the Perpetual Spiral Chapter distinguished itself early in the Great Crusade after bringing the worlds of Thoth to compliance, then successfully defending them against the retribution of the neighbouring Anhur System, which rejected the Imperium's right to rule. Vastly outnumbered by Anhur's deviant, xenos-influenced and technologically superior forces, the Perpetual Spiral nevertheless held all five planets, with the resolute Chapter Master Balas Silak

organising a brutal defence that saw the invasion blunted. The subsequent counter-attack left the hive-orbitals of Anhur in ruins, their culture eradicated.

Garrisoning worlds brought to compliance by the Legion became the primary function of the Perpetual Spiral, though this was said to have displeased Silak, who saw such a task as lacking in martial honour. Nevertheless, it was a role at which they excelled, and the Chapter was praised by the primarch Lorgar Aurelian on many occasions.

The Chapter was later attached to the 47th Expedition, during which time it led the final assault upon the world designated Forty-Seven Sixteen. It was after this compliance action that the primarch took a special interest in Captain Sor Talgron, regularly summoning him to the *Fidelitas Lex* in the weeks and months that followed. Sor Talgron, a resolutely pragmatic centurion, already had a strained relationship with his more zealous Chapter Master, and this new perceived favouritism allowed resentment to fester.

Perhaps foreseeing some petty retribution against Sor Talgron, Lorgar decreed that the captain would lead almost half of the Perpetual Spiral back to the Solar System, ostensibly taking his 34th Company to garrison Terra in the name of the XVII Legion. More astute Imperial remembrancers noted that the move was likely to be politically motivated – Sor Talgron, already noted for his disregard of the Legion's excessive reverence of the Emperor, was living proof that the Word Bearers had taken to heart the concerns expressed so forcefully at Monarchia.

Chapter Master Silak himself fell during the hateful fighting of the Dropsite Massacre on Isstvan V. Some suggest that it was Lorgar who had orchestrated the Chapter Master's demise, ordering his forces to where the casualty figures were likely to be highest, but such is mere conjecture. For his part, Silak saw only that his Chapter was finally gifted the singular honour of being present in the first wave of attack.



SIX

KOROLOS KNEW THAT true death was coming down the conveyor shaft, and he welcomed it like a Friend he thought had long abandoned him.

There was nothing to be feared in death; only failure in life was to be feared. This he had learnt by bitter experience.

Once, his helm had borne the transverse centurion crest of an officer, but no more. He had been marked for greatness, serving first as the champion of the 178th Company, then rising through the officer ranks. Pride had been his downfall. Now, his helm was red with the mark of censure, the mark of his shame. He had woken after Senosia IV to find it had been removed, a cobalt—blue helm fixed in its place, but he had been insistent.

'Your time of penance is passed, old friend,' Chapter Master Levianus had said — this was before young Aecus Decimus had risen to the post. *'You carried that burden long enough. Too long. That fault is mine, and for that I am sorry. You've suffered enough.'*

He would have none of it. His honour was forever stained, he said — he could not let it go. The red helm ensured that his dishonour was externalised, plain for all to see, and he would not hear of putting it aside while he still felt the burning shame that ate away at him. That could only be achieved in death.

In the end, they had relented.

He had yearned for this release for more than a century. He could never right the wrongs that he had wrought — he could never bring back the lives of battle-brothers lost through his arrogance and hubris - but perhaps in death he could go some way towards atoning for those mistakes.

All his friends and comrades were dead. All those proud Ultramarines that he had trained with in the academies of Armatura. All those who had been at his side as the Great Crusade pushed out beyond the edges of the map, expanding the domain of the Imperium. All his closest brothers, those he had laughed with, bled with and killed with, all of them were as dust - gone but not forgotten. At least not by him. Even the tough old war-dog, Chapter Master Levianus, was dead and gone, his ashes entombed in the halls of Macragge, placed within a

bronze urn at the feet of a seated statue of his likeness.

Only he was left.

He was not alone, not in a literal sense; the handful of legionaries around him, waiting with weapons trained upon the conveyor carriage doors bore the same Chapter livery that bedecked his own armoured form, but he felt little true kinship with them. He had been old by the time they were inducted into the XIII Legion. A relic of the Terran past. They paid him considerable respect — they knew of his battles and triumphs, though he never spoke of them — and they bowed their heads when he walked the decks of the Legion's warships. But that only served to emphasise the gulf that existed between them. They revered him, but in doing so elevated him beyond themselves. There was no true brotherhood between them. How could there be? They could not relate to him any more than he could to them.

The carriage reached the bottom of the shaft, and he clenched his immense powered fists, the servos and gears growling. A sheen of energy flickered over his colossal armoured knuckles, and electricity danced between his tapering fingers. He crouched, ready to attack.

Pistons groaned. Gears turned. Locking devices lifted.

It was time to kill. And then, finally, it would be time to die.

THE CONVEYOR DOORS opened.

Smoke filled the interior of the carriage, concealing the Word Bearers from sight. Sor Talgron heard the metallic clink of grenades as they were hurled into the enclosed space, just as he had expected.

'Lock!' he roared, and the siege squad responded instantly. As one, moving in perfectly drilled unison, they dropped to one knee, planting their shields in front of them. They were in close formation, their shields locked, forming a solid barrier. Those in the second rank lifted their shields high, protecting from above, and those on the flanks turned their shields outwards. They butted up against the back of the conveyor carriage, using the reinforced plasteel wall to protect their rear, forming a nigh-on impenetrable shell. On ancient Terra that formation had been utilised by warriors armed only with spear and blade, but it proved equally effective here.

The grenades exploded, filling the space with fire and shrapnel, but the armoured shell held, protecting the legionaries within.

'Shroud!' ordered Sor Talgron, and every second shield in the front line was lifted long enough for blind grenades to be rolled out beneath them, bouncing

and skittering into the chamber beyond. Then the shields slammed down again, echoing loudly.

The first bursts of gunfire cut through the smoke, impacting on the inside of the carriage and striking the reinforced shieldwall. Las-fire for the most part. A few bolters.

A smattering of solid, high-velocity shells struck SorTalgron's own shield, battering against it like a jackhammer, and he was pushed back a step even as he braced against it, feet sliding beneath him. The shield held, and he edged back into line, keeping the wall unbroken.

'Forward!!' he barked, and the formation began to advance.

They moved slowly, one crunching step at a time, and they began to return fire, bolters resting on the edge of the gun ports cut into their upper rims. They directed their shots where tracer-fire gave away the enemies' positions. While they were firing blind, the choking smoke obscuring their vision as much as their foes', their fire was not intended to kill, rather to suppress.

The Word Bearer to Sor Talgron's right went down, a lucky shot taking him in the head, but the gap was filled instantly, another legionary stepping forward to take his place. The captain felt a precision round scream overhead, coming from behind him, and one of the enemy warriors fell dead — Loth and his recon squad had joined the fray. They had ridden down atop the conveyor, slipping through the top hatch only once the siege squad had pushed out into the chamber beyond.

The smoke was beginning to clear. Unaugmented humans — around a score of them - garbed in black and wearing full-faced rebreathers could be vaguely discerned in front and to either side, kneeling behind hastily reinforced barricades.

Sor Talgron's auto-senses locked onto three enemy legionaries amongst them. These three wore red helms rather than the usual cobalt-blue. An honour rank, most likely, denoting them as veterans or perhaps a bodyguard unit.

Of more concern were a pair of servitor-controlled turrets rotating towards them, power couplings humming and shuddering with energy as they came online.

'Loth,' said Sor Talgron.

'I see them,' replied the recon sergeant, and the skull of one of the hard-wired servitor controllers disappeared, exploding into wet fragments.

The other locked onto the advancing legionaries, however, and armoured plates like the petals of a flower unfurled around the servitor. Its turret barrels lit up and fired as one.

There was a blinding flash and a roar of superheated air, and four incandescent beams tore through the dissipating smoke. Three Word Bearers were bisected; the refractor fields in their shields were useless against such energy. One of Loth's squad fell too, his left leg neatly severed below the hip as the beams passed right through the shieldwall.

Another two Word Bearers were cut down by combined bolter and las-fire before the gaps in the shieldwall were closed. They were only halfway across the hazy kill-zone, and the sentry laser array was humming loudly as it powered up to fire again. Sor Talgron was about to call for the formation to advance double-pace, taking them into blade-range, when a huge shape loomed out of the smoke, coming at them at a run.

'For Ultramar,' it bellowed. The sound of its pounding footfalls made the entire metal concourse shudder.

'Break!' roared Sor Talgron. 'Break!'

SEVEN

KOROLOS'S MEMORIES OF the early days of the Great Crusade were stark. Those dawning years had been proud, filled with hope and certainty. The doubts had come later.

He remembered it so clearly. He could see the eldar bladesman before him, taunting him, drawing him on. The xenos commander was a blur of movement, cutting through the Harkon Geno troops like chaff. They were chaff, just augmented humans of the Imperial Army. So intent on killing the alien fiend had he been, so intent on claiming that honour, that he'd become isolated from the main vanguard. He had two hundred Ultramarines with him, cut off from the rest of the company - just as the enemy had intended.

The keening screams of the xenos haunted him, even now. The eldar had fallen upon them from all sides, cutting them down with their exotic, deadly weapons, tearing through the ranks on scything jetbike attack runs, their screaming witches somersaulting through whole squads, leaving severed limbs and shattered dreams in their wake.

He had lost more than just the one hundred and seventy-four loyal sons of Ultramar that day, more than the additional three hundred and eighteen that had died coming to his aid. He had lost more than just his captaincy.

He had lost the respect of his Legion. He had lost respect for himself. Worst of all, he had seen disappointment in the eyes of his primarch. That disapproval had cut him to the core, and it was a wound that would never heal.

For seventeen years he wore his shame outwardly, fighting as a common legionary with his helm painted red, seeking an honourable death in battle. Finally, it had come for him. On Senosia IV he had collapsed, surrounded by a circle of slain foes, blood spilling from his lips. At last he would have peace.

But even then, his trial was not yet done. The oblivion he craved was not to be his fate.

He had fallen as Brother Aventine Koriol, but he had awoken again in an armoured shell, that he might live on. He bore his new name, Korolos, engraved upon his chestplate, yet his shame was not lessened in this new incarnation. His

pain was as strong as ever. He had not yet done enough to atone for his misdeeds to be allowed the peace of oblivion. How could he *ever* atone?

He saw the Word Bearers before him now as grey, pixelated blurs. Blinking target locks identified them, and he processed the abundance of information delivered directly into his cortex in a nanosecond — the power levels of their armour, their heart-rates, the clipped commands being streamed back and forth across their vox-network, the mark and place of manufacture of their armour plate, the model and threat-level of their weaponry.

Within the stinking amniotic fluid of his cramped sarcophagus, his atrophied claw-like hands twitched, and the immense power-mitts of his newer, mechanical flesh clenched into fists. He vocalised his anger, shame and frustration as he thundered towards them. While a few errant bubbles did escape his withered organic throat, the roar that blared from the vox-emitters on his carapace was the bellow of a beast of iron and rage.

Sor Talgron walked beneath the mountain, his steps echoing in the empty silence. The halls were narrow but tall, their upper reaches brightly lit in sterile white light. There were no shadows in the prison complex known as the Vault. There was nowhere to hide.

His path was circuitous and winding, but he did not hesitate. The data-upload of the complex's layout guided him on. The doors, elevators and corridors that he passed were heavily reinforced, security locked and encoded, but those before him opened willingly, ushering him deeper into the belly of the mountain. Everything had been organised. His way had been cleared. He would encounter no resistance and no difficulties.

He had not seen a soul since disembarking from the black ornithopter that had brought him here to Khangba Marwu, far beneath the icy peak of Rakaposhi. Stepping onto the landing pad, sunk hundreds of metres below the mountain's surface, there had been no welcoming party, no armed guards, no security detail. Sentry cannons sat idle, their barrels turned passively aside. The entrance into the vast prison complex lay open before him, the adamantium-reinforced portal gaping, beckoning him in.

The complex was one of the most highly secure locations on Terra, yet Sor Talgron walked straight into it without any challenge. A hint of a smile touched his lips, though none would have seen it, hidden beneath the barbarous scowl of his battle helm, even if there had been anyone nearby.

Ceiling-mounted pict-recorders turned aside at his approach. There would be

no record of his passing in the data archives.

A green, blinking icon in the corner of his eye indicated that he was approaching his destination. He tapped a long-digit code into a keypad, which retracted sharply into its console, and a wall panel slid aside to reveal a black screen. Sor Talgron removed his helm and stared into its depths as a retinal scan was conducted. The bulk of the Vault's security protocols had been overridden, but a few of these last measures were not so simply bypassed. Nevertheless, his biometrics had been inputted into the system and marked with the highest clearance - at least in this one small sub-section of the gaol.

The door's interlocking mesh-fingers released their grip, and the two halves of the portal slid aside. Sor Talgron stepped through into a small holding area similar to an airlock on a void-capable ship. He saw himself reflected in the mirrored windows on either side of the cell — a hulking, grey warrior in functional, brutish Iron armour. The lenses of his helmet glowed like burning embers. His worn battleplate looked out of context in these clinical, harshly lit surrounds. He was an anomaly here.

His suit's internal systems told him that he was being scanned, checking him against the data that had been logged into the system at Dorn's order. He resisted the urge to clench his fists.

A moment later, whatever security protocols were in play were met and the last door retracted before him, allowing Sor Talgron access to the prisoner beyond.

The room was circular and expansive, and targeting icons instantly flashed up on his helm's visor display, latching onto the autocannon-slaved servitor turrets hanging from the ceiling. They were surgically grafted into articulated cupolas at various points around the room, hard-wired to their mono-task. He watched them cautiously, but they panned by, not appearing to register his presence. Sor Talgron blink-scrolled the icons away and stepped across the threshold.

In the centre of the room was a fully enclosed circular cell. The curved walls were made of thick armourglass, revealing the occupant within — a figure with the build of one of the Legiones Astartes, kneeling as if in meditation, or perhaps even prayer. Sor Talgron walked closer, studying him.

He was clad in a yellow prison bodyglove which did nothing to hide his immense physique, and he sat motionless with his hands upon his thighs, legs folded underneath him and eyes closed. His eyelids were tattooed -- as was the entire left half of his face - with Colchisian cuneiform. His hair was black gone to grey and shoulder-length, and he wore it braided at his temples in the manner of an acolyte in the Colchisian custom. He had bone and iron earrings hanging

from his lobes, another concession to the customs of the homeworld of the Urizen. His skin was the colour of rich teak, and deeply lined.

Sor Talgron hit the simple, coded door release and stepped inside. The walls within were frosted and impermeable — one-way glass. Sor Talgron removed his helmet, and the other Word Bearer opened his eyes, slowly, as though waking from a deep sleep.

'I knew you were coming,' said the prisoner. 'I foresaw it.'

He stood, hefting himself to his feet. He was big, almost as tall as Sor Talgron in his armour. His eyes were dark and severe, with flecks of gold swimming in their depths.

'Predicant Volkhar Wreth,' said Sor Talgron, bowing in respect. 'It has been a long time.'

The prisoner smiled, exposing dark metal teeth.

'I have not heard that title in many years,' he said. 'It's good to see you, lad.'

'Put this on,' said Sor Talgron, tossing a plain robe to him. 'It's time you left this place.'

They encountered no one on their way out. Everything had gone as planned. There had been no unexpected complications.

Sor Talgron and Volkhar Wreth boarded the ornithopter, the latter cloaked and hooded, his features hidden from those who might casually recognise him.

The light craft's gull-wing doors sealed, muting the ascending whine of its pinion engines and cutting them off from the icy low-oxygenated air outside. The ornithopter rose up the volcanized vertical shaft, blast-shutters capable of withstanding orbital bombardment opening above to allow them through.

'The rumours are true, then,' said Volkhar Wreth.

'They are,' said Sor Talgron. With his helm back on, his voice was transformed into its usual mechanical growl.

'Tell me everything,' said Wreth.

IT WAS A Contemptor, a hulking machine of adamantium and ceramite, and it smashed into the Word Bearers with the force of an assault ram.

Easily as tall as three legionaries, it covered the ground in swift, thunderous steps and smashed four of them aside with the first sweep of an arm. Shields crumpled and bones were shattered as the legionaries were sent flying, crashing against the wall five metres away. Another was crunched beneath its heavy tread, and three more smashed aside, limbs flailing as they were hurled through the air

by its next blow.

The shieldwall shattered.

Bolts and goutts of plasma did nothing to slow the beast as the Word Bearers backed away, firing into its armoured chassis. It grabbed one around the torso, massive fingers circling his body, and unleashed the fury of the meltagun implanted into its palm. A searing hole was scorched through the legionary, and it tossed the dead warrior aside.

The Ultramarines and Imperial Army soldiers around the perimeter had risen from cover, the bolters and lasguns in their hands barking and snapping as they fired upon the disarrayed Word Bearers. One of the XIII legionaries vaulted a barricade and buried a sparking power axe in the head of a Word Bearer. In answer, Sor Talgron stepped forwards and slammed his boarding shield into the Ultramarine, sending him reeling, then levelled his bolter to finish him off. Before he could pull the trigger, an overcharged las-blast glanced off his shoulder pad, knocking him off balance and sending his kill-shot wide. He stepped back to join his legionaries, bolter barking in his hand.

Another Ultramarine, armed with a modified long-barrelled bolter, snapped off two quick shots, taking out two more of Sor Talgron's warriors, his shots shearing through the armour of their helms like nails driven through eggshells. Specialist ammunition, Sor Talgron registered, more from the sound of the projectiles than their effect.

Kraken bolts.

From the corner of his eye he saw Jarulek roll under the Contemptor's arm as the dreadnought swung at him. The Apostle came smoothly to his feet and brained a black-armoured enemy soldier, his crozius hissing and spitting with energy.

The servitor-driven laser destroyer whined as it reached full power once more, and Sor Talgron saw the ident-runes of two more of his legionaries fade into darkness in the corner of his display, slain as the laser destroyer fired.

Sor Talgron moved away from the murderous juggernaut that was the Contemptor, his measured fire taking out one of the Ultramarines — a plainly armoured legionary yet to earn any adornments of rank or honour. He ran dry and mag-locked his bolter at his hip, drawing his newly acquired volkite pistol smoothly. His first shot blew out the chest of a soldier. Flames jetted from the dying man's back, incinerating another.

'Spread out!' he ordered. 'Dal Ahk,' he said, activating his vox-link. 'How long?'

'Inbound,' came Dal Ahk's reply. *'Thirty seconds.'*

The Contemptor turned its massive, red helm, its murderous gaze locking onto Sor Talgron. It had heard his orders, he realised. It recognised him as a ranking officer. It came around, lurching in his direction with a grind of gears and servos. It raised one of its huge, simian arms as it charged, and flames gushed from the palm of its taloned hand.

Sor Talgron lifted his boarding shield to bear the brunt of the burning promethium. He backed away, his shield arm on fire, and fired his pistol, aiming at the Contemptor's head. His shots left scorched craters in its visor, but did not slow it, and Sor Talgron hurled himself to the side as it swung for him. It caught him a glancing blow, buckling his shield and staggering him into a plasteel pillar. The Contemptor stalked towards him, the light of its eye lenses glowing balefully.

A heavy blow to its mechanised knee knocked it off balance, and it staggered, crashing to one knee and steadying itself with a hand on the ground. Sergeant Telakhas brought his thunder hammer around for another strike, aimed at the same joint — it was easily capable of damaging even such a machine as a Contemptor. If the blow connected, it would have crippled the massive beast.

The blow did not connect.

The Contemptor caught the swing in its free fist. Its massive fingers closed around the siege sergeant's forearms, crumpling his vambraces like tin and snapping both wrists. Helpless, the struggling legionary was lifted off the ground - the Contemptor brought its other fist up, splaying its fingers to reveal its palm-mounted flamer, the pilot light glowing blue. Telakhas roared as he was bathed in burning promethium. His roar became a scream as his armour blackened and cracked, and his flesh began to cook. The Dreadnought ended his agonised cries, snatching up his flailing legs and ripping him apart in one violent motion. It hurled his remains in different directions, and swung back towards Sor Talgron.

Nevertheless Telakhas's death had bought them much needed time. The countdown on Sor Talgron's visor display blinked to zero.

There was a blinding flash and a sharp bang of displacing air. Five figures appeared where there had been none before, standing in a protective cordon around the captain. Shimmering light coalesced across the massive curved plates of their Cataphractii-armoured forms.

'Take it down,' ordered Sor Talgron.

EIGHT

OCTAVION WATCHED ON a small, crackling, monochrome pict-feed set into the communications bank as the battle swung in favour of the Word Bearers.

On another screen, a number was blinking. One minute and thirty-five seconds. Thirty-four. Thirty-three. *Too long*, he thought.

Since the start of the conflict, the XVII Legion forces had controlled the flow of communications. Some viral, invasive scrapcode had been unleashed on the defenders, rendering the vast majority of their vox-transmissions indecipherable and garbled. Worse, sometimes the comms appeared to work clearly, but the orders transmitted were false, the original message twisted and reworked, resulting in several decisive losses until Chapter Master Decimus had ordered them disabled completely, relying only on short-ranged closed-transmissions.

Only two communications arrays on the planet had remained immune to the viral scrapcode. One of those had been in the city of Massilea, situated at the heart of the planet's single continent. The second was the long-ranged transmitter hub in which he now stood, the command centre lying deep beneath the mountains. Now, it was the only way that they could communicate with anything in orbit or beyond.

Thirty-six hours earlier, Decimus had settled on one desperate last throw of the dice.

The enemy had thought that the entire fleet had been destroyed. They were wrong.

One vessel remained - the immense *Righteous Fury*, pride of the sector. It had been crippled in the devastating void battle, but it was not yet done. Lifeless and without engine power, it was orbiting the planet along with the wreckage and detritus of the fleet. The Word Bearers had been thorough in their executions, but not thorough enough in checking if any of the corpses still had a pulse.

Spinning slowly, and orbiting the planet once every eight and a half hours, it had merely been arithmetic to determine the precise moment when the ship would be in the right position.

The sound of the desperate battle beyond the sealed pneumatic doors was

muted, but Octavion felt every death like a lance through his soul. The floor shuddered each time the Contemptor stepped. It would not be long before it fell. Korolos deserved that peace, but Octavion hoped more than anything that he could hold out just a little longer.

Forty-five seconds. Forty-four. Forty-three.

It had been a shock to realise that they had been followed. A sense of frustration had beset the shamed Ultramarines when they had realised that the Word Bearers had found them, and that they may yet fail in this last, redemptive task. That could not be allowed. They had been relieved when Octavion had volunteered to be the one to stay in here in the command centre, to give the fatal order, while the others would go and stall the enemy as long as they were able. It was not a role that he relished, but it was necessary.

Twenty seconds.

He glanced at the small screen. Word Bearers were scattered across the floor out there, but it was not enough. The black-armoured Imperial Army veterans were all slain, as were his other censured Legion brothers. Korolos stood alone.

The Contemptor had killed several of the newly arrived Cataphractii, but they had surrounded him now like hounds around a bear. One of the Dreadnought's arms was hanging useless, and it was limping markedly. Its armour plates were hanging off in ragged sheafs where the Terminators hacked at it with power blades and chainfists, from all sides. It would not be long.

Four seconds. Three. Two.

Octavion tapped a sequence on the keypad of the antiquated control panel, establishing a direct link with the *Righteous Fury*.

The main screen remained blank.

'Come on,' he breathed. 'Come on!'

He tapped another series of keys, and the screen refreshed. A grainy image of a woman's face appeared - her eyes were hollow, and there was a hastily stitched wound on her brow. Ash, or perhaps blood, was smeared across her face. Her epaulets marked her as an admiral. Behind her, the bridge of the once-hallowed ship was dark. He knew her, though he had never spoken to her himself.

'-there?' came her static-infused voice.

'Repeat, Admiral Solontine,' said Octavion. 'Can you hear me?'

'*There is some interference, but yes,*' said the woman on the screen. The sound was not in synch with the image, making it oddly disjointed. '*Who are you? I was expecting Decimus.*'

'I am Brother Xion Octavian. Chapter Master Decimus entrusted me with the

responsibility of giving the order.'

'You have the authorisation override?'

'I do.'

'Key it in now.'

Each of the legionaries assigned to this task had memorised the authorisation code. Octavion keyed in the seventeen-digit number.

'Authorisation override accepted,' said Admiral Solontine. She rubbed a hand across her face. *'This is the end, then. I had prayed it would not come to this.'*

She knew as well as he did that as soon as she gave the order, she was committing herself and her ship to death. Octavion glanced over at the pict-feed from beyond the sealed doors behind him.

'Uploading targeting coordinates,' he said.

'Upload connected and processing. All arming decks are ready to fire.'

'It needs to be done, now.'

'We are not yet in position, Legionary Octavion.'

'What?'

'A minor complication,' said Solontine. *'A collision. Space debris. Part of the Fist of Ultramar nudged us. Nothing too bad, but it has slowed the momentum of our turn.'*

'Will you still be able to complete this mission?'

'Yes,' she said. *'We will be in position in less than seven minutes.'*

'Seven minutes,' said Octavion. He cursed. 'We do not have seven minutes.'

'Is there a problem, legionary?'

'Yes, there is a problem. Can't you bring your ship around faster?'

'We are dead in the water,' said the admiral. *'We have no engine power, and even if we did, the enemy fleet would detect us as soon as we engaged the drive motors. Seven minutes. Keep the upload feed running.'*

'If I destroy these consoles...'

'Then you destroy all hope,' snapped Solontine. *'I have no targeting guidance. All my systems are down. I need this line to stay open. With that frame of reference, I can bring the guns to bear manually. Do not let the enemy get into that room.'*

Octavion stared at the consoles in helpless desperation. Was this how it was going to end? In failure?

'I will hold them,' he said. 'You will have the time you need.'

The hall was empty. Scaffolding was set against the walls, but it sat half-

finished and unused, as if the workers had abandoned their work before it was done. Dust, masonry and dried paint flecks covered the floor. It was not difficult to imagine that these halls had been empty for months, perhaps years.

The curved ceiling was emblazoned with a faded fresco, the plasterwork beneath it crumbling and flaking. In its prime, the artwork would have been glorious: in its centre was a heroic portrayal of the Emperor, wreathed in golden light and flame, and around him were gathered stylised figures representing the Legiones Astartes. All the colours of the Legions were there. Orbiting around the Emperor were the planets of the Solar System, and beyond them, the constellations. Imperial ships filled the void, spreading out towards every corner of the fresco's edges. Work had commenced on its restoration - and the repainting of a handful of warriors in new Legion colours. The most skilled artisans would have been brought in to duplicate the masterwork of the original and bring it back to its former glory, before their efforts had been abandoned.

The stonework here had also been undergoing repairs. Tools lay scattered across the floor, and half-carved statuary stood unfinished. Huge blocks of unworked stone were trussed up with canvas and rope, and machinery lay half-hidden beneath tarpaulins, debris and dust.

Perhaps the restoration had been deemed surplus to requirements and the crews reassigned elsewhere when Dorn had begun the process of fortifying the palace, or perhaps it had been abandoned decades earlier and forgotten amidst the bureaucracy of the Council. Either way, what was important was that it was an unused, old section of the palace, a lower wing that had been discarded and overlooked. It served Sor Talgron's purpose, and that was all that mattered.

'This is not the way to the shuttle decks, Sor Talgron,' Volkhar Wreth said.

'There is one last task that must be performed before we leave Terra, honoured predicant,' Sor Talgron replied. 'Something Lord Aurelian asked of me in person.'

'He asked you himself? Your star must be in the ascendant within the Legion,' said Wreth.

'As you predicted when I was an aspirant,' said Sor Talgron. 'I am captain of the Thirty-Fourth now.'

'You have done well,' said Predicant Wreth.

'You taught me well.'

Sor Talgron picked his way through the debris, plaster chips crunching beneath his armoured boots. Wreth ghosted him, stepping more lightly. The captain pulled aside a heavy canvas drop sheet, throwing up a cloud of dust.

Behind it, obscured by more collapsed scaffolding and other junk, was a set of stairs. The steps were worn by time - once, they must have been frequently used. Sor Talgron descended into the gloom, and his Legion-brother followed.

Sound was muffled down in the low-ceilinged darkness. The buzzing of Sor Talgron's armour sounded like a swarm of angry insects. Arched passages led off in different directions, but Sor Talgron walked straight. A flickering orange light in the distance drew him on.

They passed carved niches and hollows, all of them blockaded by chained iron gates and ferrocrete. Volkhar Wreth paused beside one of them, brushing his fingertips across its seal - an eagle's head atop crossed thunderbolts.

'Pre-Unity,' he breathed.

'This whole section of the Imperial Palace is old,' said Sor Talgron, looking back at him. In the darkness, his lenses gleamed like the reflective eyes of a predator.

'Very old.'

'And abandoned,' agreed Sor Talgron, turning away.

'There were those amongst the Crusader Host who felt they were abandoned,' said Wreth. 'Stuck here on Terra while their Legions were out there among the stars, doing what we were made to do.'

'And you? Did you feel that way?' said Sor Talgron over his shoulder.

'Never,' said Wreth. 'My faith in the God-Emperor carried me through. As I said, I knew you were coming.'

'I have never held much stock in visions and prophecies,' said Sor Talgron.

'That doesn't mean they are not real.'

Sor Talgron did not answer. He simply walked on, drawn to the flickering light ahead of them. It was clear now that it was a candle.

At the end of the passage, one of the sealed archways had been opened. Lengths of chain lay spread upon the stone floor. A single wick burned within, sitting in a pool of melted red wax atop a stone block carved with intricate figures and dense lettering. The block had been pushed up against the far wall, revealing a gaping square hole where several more had been removed. Dozens of stones of all sizes were stacked low around the walls. Eight carved burial niches lined the walls.

Several sets of human remains, long dead, lay upon the floor; they had clearly been dragged from the burial niches. Some had tumbled face down on the floor, while others were just pushed roughly aside, snapping their bones like twigs in the process. Those that were still recognisable as bodies were skeletal and

ancient, with yellowed, dried—paper skin and clumps of hair clinging to desiccated flesh. They were bedecked in ancient armour that nevertheless bore some similarity to the plate worn by the Legionones Astartes.

There were eight bodies in all, one for each of the arched niches. In their place, eight curved caskets had been placed.

'Welcome, brothers,' said a voice in the darkness.

NINE

ALL RESISTANCE IN the room was neutralised. The only living enemy remaining was the Contemptor, if you could call it living. Sor Talgron did not. Trapped in darkness, confined in a box. That was no life.

Three of the Cataphractii had been slain before it had fallen. Not even their vaunted armour was protection against its fists.

It was laid low, a battered heap of metal and ceramite, yet still it struggled to fight and kill. One of its arms was gone, and its lower half was malfunctioning. It lay on the ground, struggling to push itself upright. Its chest had been breached, and sickly, foul-smelling fluid was leaking from within.

The surviving Word Bearers circled the downed behemoth, respecting its power even in death. Sor Talgron was holding the dead sergeant's thunder hammer. Uncoupled from its power source, it did not have the same kick, but it would do the job.

He smashed the hammer into the Contemptor's oversized red helm. The Dreadnought reached for him, but it was a clumsy attempt and easily avoided — there was no strength left in the beast. Another three strikes knocked the helmet loose, rendering the Dreadnought blind.

'Take off its arm,' he ordered.

The two Cataphractii stepped in. One of them pinned the giant's limb down, testimony to how weak the Contemptor was — minutes earlier, it would have crumpled the Terminator in one fist had he dared come so close.

A chainfist shrieked. Oil spurted and sparks filled the air. Then it was done.

With both arms amputated, and its legs twitching spasmodically, the machine was helpless. It lay on its back, jerking.

'*Kill. .. me...*' it drawled.

Sor Talgron nodded to the Cataphractii. They wrenched the Dreadnought's ruptured breastplate apart, widening the breach. Sickly fluid gushed forth.

Within, suspended in a web of cables, tubes and pipes was a wretched, wasted corpse — some XIII Legion hero of ages past. Was this his reward for his years of service, Sor Talgron wondered? It was a cruel fate, if so.

It twitched, and a croak escaped its rotten lips. It was piteous. It repulsed him. The hammer ended its torment. Sor Talgron tossed the weapon away in disgust, and turned towards the sealed door. He was about to order it smashed down, but it opened of its own accord.

A lone Ultramarine walked out to meet them. He was unarmed, and perhaps that was what stayed Sor Talgron's hand, stopping him from having the fool gunned down immediately.

Like the Dreadnought, the Ultramarine had a red helm, though his was hung at his waist, leaving his head bare. He was looking down, hair hanging over his face.

Sor Talgron felt an uncomfortable buzzing against the inside of his skull. It felt as though something was trying to scratch its way out. He shook his head to rid himself of the sensation.

The Ultramarine looked up.

White flames spilled from his eyes.

Sor Talgron stepped into the dark chamber, noting the sudden drop in air temperature.

'Enough of the theatrics, Jarulek,' said Sor Talgron, the grilled vocalizer in his helmet rendering his words into an inhuman, crackling snarl. 'We do not have much time.'

'Everything is in readiness,' said the Apostle, rising from the shadows. He was garbed from head to toe in a heavy, dark robe, his face hidden to the naked eye. Sor Talgron had seen him instantly, his helmet stripping away the shadow of his cow! and the thermal image glowing hot against the stone. But to Volkhar Wreth he must have appeared like a wraith, rising from the dead. The predicant's eyes were wide.

'Any problems?' said Sor Talgron, glancing back the way that they had come. He knelt and picked up a length of chain from the floor.

'No one's been down here,' said Jamlek, pulling back his hood. His head was shaved to the scalp, like an ascetic, and his skin was pulled taut across his skull. His eye sockets were sunken and dark.

'What is this?' hissed Wreth. 'Why do we delay here?'

'Predicant Volkhar Wreth,' said Jarulek, bowing his head. 'It is an honour.'

Wreth nodded vaguely in return. He brushed past the Apostle, picking his way amongst the ancient dead to halt before the nearest casket. Green lights blinked from the panel on its side. He wiped a hand across the curved surface of its lid,

brushing aside a coating of frost. On the other side of the crystal, a face was revealed.

'Life signs?' said Sor Talgron, wrapping the length of chain around his hand.

'All strong, captain,' said Jarulek.

'You are certain this will work?'

'It will work.'

'What is this?' said Wreth once again. The figure within the casket wore a close-fitting metal cap studded with crystals, diodes and wires. There were markings upon his naked flesh, and Wreth leaned in to see more clearly. His breath misted the air before him. 'Who are they?'

'A battery,' said Jarulek. 'A very powerful battery.'

'To power what?'

'They are psykers taken from the Hollow Mountain,' said Sor Talgron. 'All within that hated fastness are those the Imperium deems too uncontrollable, too weak or too old to be of use. They were doomed to die.'

'For the good of the Imperium,' said Jarulek, his voice thick with venom. 'These ones will still die,' Sor Talgron went on. 'Only now they will die for a more noble purpose.'

'They've been...mutilated,' said Wreth, his face close to the casket's lid. The dormant psyker within had runes and markings cut into his flesh. The wounds were red-rimmed and septic.

'You wear Colchisian writing, but you're Terran-born, aren't you?' said Jarulek, coming closer.

'What of it? I have the primarch's blood in me, as do you?'" Wreth snapped.

'There are. .. markedly fewer Terrans within the Legion of late,' said Sor Talgron. Volkhar Wreth looked at him, his brow furrowed, not understanding what was being said.

'Tell me, predicant,' said Jarulek. 'What would you be willing to give up, if Lorgar himself asked it?'

'Anything,' replied Wreth instantly. 'You would surrender your life?'

'Of course.'

'Excellent.'

Predicant Wreth looked around sharply as he heard the murderous intent in Jarulek's voice, turning his back on Sor Talgron. Before he could react, Sor Talgron looped a length of chain around the predicant's neck, like a garrotte. He yanked it tight, cutting off his airway and pulling him off-balance. Wreth's hand went instantly to the choking chain, struggling to breathe. Using his colossal,

armour-enhanced strength, Sor Talgron hauled Volkhar Wreth around to face Jarulek.

The Apostle threw off his robe. Beneath it he was unarmoured and stripped to the waist, his tattooed torso exposed. The candlelight rippled across his skin, making the symbols and intricate Colchisian cuneiform emblazoned upon him dance.

'I too bear the word of our lord upon my flesh,' he said. 'The message has changed somewhat in recent times, however.'

He had a knife in his hand, and he stepped in to drive it into the predicant's body.

'This is the will of Lorgar,' he snarled.

Holding onto the chain with both hands, Volkhar Wreth lifted himself and slammed both feet squarely into Jarulek's chest. The force of the blow knocked Jarulek back, and drove Sor Talgron into one of the stasis caskets, sliding it half a metre to the side with a screech of metal. The captain's helmet crunched into the low arch above, and his grip on the chain loosened.

Wreth tore himself free and rose to his feet as Jarulek lunged at him. He grabbed Jarulek's wrist as the Apostle's knife flashed in the gloom, guiding it past him and twisting sharply, overextending the joint. With his other hand he grabbed Jarulek's shoulder and, using his momentum against him, drove the Apostle's face onto the edge of the stone plinth.

He tore the knife from Jarulek's hand and spun, coming to face Sor Talgron. The Word Bearers captain was blocking his way out.

'What in the Emperor's name is going on?' he hissed.

'The Urizen has had a change of heart regarding the Emperor,' said Jarulek, as he made to rise, blood dripping from his face.

'This is insane,' said Wreth. 'The Seventeenth would never turn.'

'There were those who were resistant,' said Sor Talgron.

'That knife in your hand has spilled plenty of Legion blood,' added Jarulek.

'You are the last of your kind, old friend,' said Sor Talgron. 'The last Terran-born Word Bearer who has not embraced the new path. The purge is almost complete.'

'New path?' said Wreth. 'What madness is this?'

'At Monarchia, the Emperor rebuked us for worshipping him as a god,' said Jarulek. He shrugged. 'We found new ones. Well, old ones...'

'You've been away from the Legion too long,' said Sor Talgron.

'You haven't got a religious bone in your body, lad,' spat Wreth. 'This is not

some holy endeavour. You've become traitors, nothing more.'

'No,' said Jarulek. 'We've become enlightened.'

'Why did you release me? Why didn't you just let me rot with the others of the Crusader Host?'

'You'd only have been executed, in time,' said Sor Talgron. 'The truth will out. Always, the truth will out. You think Dorn would let you live once he knew that the Seventeenth had pledged for Horus? This way, you may still serve the Legion. This way, your death has a meaning. A purpose.'

'What have you become, Sor Talgron?' said Wreth. 'You are not the warrior that I knew. He would never have betrayed the Imperium. Never in a thousand years. Something has happened to you, some corruption has eroded your soul.'

'I am exactly the man that you knew,' snarled Sor Talgron. 'The Legion is my life. It has always been so. Would it have been better to have betrayed the Seventeenth? Is that what the man you knew would have done? Would he have betrayed Lord Aurelian?'

'The one I knew understood the difference between right and wrong.'

'What's right and what's wrong is determined by the victor,' said Sor Talgron. 'I am a soldier, just as I always was. I do as I am ordered. Nothing has changed.'

'Then damn you, and damn the Legion,' said Volkhar Wreth, stepping towards him, clutching Jarulek's knife.



'KILL HIM!' SOR Talgron shouted, too late.

The Ultramarine swept his arm in front of him, from left to right, in the manner of one clearing a table in a pique of rage. Every Word Bearer was hurled backwards by a colossal barrage of unseen force.

They were slammed against the far wall, which bent and buckled beneath them. The unseen force did not relent, either. It continued to press upon the Word Bearers, pinning them in place. It was as though the axis of reality in the room had suddenly changed, making the back wall *down*, and the gravity increased ten-fold.

The Ultramarine had risen off the floor, his feet hovering just above it. His arms were outspread, palms up, and white flames were rising from his hands as well as spilling from his eyes. His teeth were bared in a vicious snarl.

The force pressing upon Sor Talgron made it feel like the weight of a battle tank on his chest, making breathing difficult. His arms and legs were pinned against the wall, and in spite of all his strength, enhanced by the fibre-bundles and servos of his armour, he could not pull himself free, nor even raise a weapon against his enemy.

Yet, despite the tonnage of force pressing against him, a bark of laughter escaped his lips.

The Ultramarine turned his gaze upon Sor Talgron.

'You find your end amusing, traitor?' he said. His voice sounded like a dozen voices blurred together.

'You are as much a traitor as I,' said Sor Talgron. 'You go against the Emperor's decree.'

'You have no moral right to condemn me,' said the Ultramarine, multiple voices overlapping.

Sor Talgron laughed again, with considerable difficulty. 'I do not need to condemn you. Your actions do that for me.'

'You speak poison, traitor,' said the Ultramarine. 'My infraction is as nothing next to the scale of your treachery.'

'Such is how all treachery is born - by small degrees,' said Sor Talgron. He strained to lift his weapon again, but he could not. He might as well try to lift a mountain, so strong was the force ranged against him. 'But there is no grey area here. There is only obeying, and disobeying. You've turned against the word of the Emperor. In his eyes, you are no different from any of us. He ordered the death of one of his own sons for it - why do you think he would forgive you?'

The Ultramarine pressed his arms outwards, as if pushing on a heavy weight. The force holding the Word Bearers intensified. Sor Talgron's armour groaned. It could not take much more than this.

'You... are... as... damned... as... *us*...' he snarled.

'Enough,' yelled the Ultramarine, thrusting a hand towards Sor Talgron, fingers tightening like he was gripping something. Sor Talgron's throat was constricted suddenly, closing off his windpipe. 'This world is going to burn, and you and all your traitorous Legion will burn with it.'

With one hand extended, holding the Word Bearers in place, the damned Librarian drew a plasma pistol. He aimed, taking his time, and fired. There was a searing flash of heat and light, and one of Sor Talgron's legionaries was slain, cored through his midsection. The air filled with the stink of melting flesh and acrid plasma discharge.

The Word Bearers strained against the psychic pressure pinning them in place, but it was no good. None of them could move. The Librarian's pistol was venting super-heated vapour from its power coils. He lowered its barrel at his next target — Sor Talgron. The captain's face was purple, the invisible grip of iron still clamped around his throat.

Jarulek spoke then. His words made the scratching inside Sor Talgron's mind intensify sharply, and he might have cried out had he been able to breathe. It felt as though some taloned thing inside his skull was straining desperately to get out. He felt a trickle of blood run from his nose.

The Apostle's words were guttura] and harsh, and not in any way human in origin. They were an aberration, the sounds not ones that any being born of the material realm had any right to utter. It was a calling, a summoning of beings beyond the veil of reality.

And in defiance of all rational logic, that call was answered.

The buzzing in Sor Talgron's head could have been the sound of a faulty vox picking up nothing but static, or the incessant burr of a million insects. Behind the crackling noise he could hear the chittering of inhuman voices and the cutting cry of newborns. It was an uneasy, disconcerting sound, and it was getting steadily louder.

Every lumen strip in the room exploded, scattering shards of broken glass in all directions. Darkness descended like a veil and the chittering voices were suddenly in the room with them. The only light was the dull electronic glow of a data-screen coming from the chamber beyond. The electric buzz in the air reached a painful resonance.

With a sound like paper ripping, a pair of shadows detached themselves from the surrounding darkness. They descended upon the Librarian, drifting towards him like moths to a candle, like leeches to blood. Each of the incorporeal shapes manifested a pair of long, spindly arms made of nothing more solid than darkness, the limbs extending from vaguely humanoid, skeletal torsos that tapered into nothingness below the waist.

They grappled with the Ultramarine, clawing his weapon arm with insubstantial talons, and his shot went wild, searing through the metal wall half a metre above Sor Talgron's head. He felt the pressure against him lessen, and he sucked in a breath, gasping for air. Fighting against the pressing psychic power, he managed to shift his arm fractionally. His fingertips touched the grip of the volkite pistol holstered at his chest.

The shades surrounded the Librarian, coiling around him like serpents. One of

them still held his weapon arm, fighting against him, while the other was scrabbling wildly for his throat. The Ultramarine fought them off, struggling to shove them away, but it was like clutching at smoke.

A third spectral shape materialised, emerging from the darkness and rearing up behind him. It grabbed the Ultramarine's head in its shadow-talons, and the Librarian roared as cold fingers pressed into his mind. The incorporeal being shuddered, dark un-light pulsing along its arms and into its being, and its presence grew more substantial. It was feeding on him, Sor Talgron realised. A mouth split open in its otherwise blank face, revealing rows of tiny, barbed teeth, and it breathed out a cloud of buzzing flies, accompanied by a stench like rotting flesh.

The other two spirits renewed their efforts. It was abundantly clear that the Librarian was about to be overcome.

With a roar, he threw a hand towards the wreckage of the Contemptor, lying lifeless on the floor. It was lifted into the air, and with a wild motion of the Ultramarine's arm, it was sent slamming into Jarulek.

The shades began to fade as the Apostle's voice was silenced. They fought to remain in the material realm, clawing frantically for a foothold in real space, but they were drawn slowly back into shadow. They screamed and writhed, but then they were gone. The Librarian stood alone, breathing hard.

A single shot rang out, echoing loudly, and a hole was punched through the Ultramarine's chest. He collapsed backwards, following the trajectory of the high-velocity sniper round.

The weight pressing Sor Talgron to the wall fell away, and he pushed himself to his feet. He glanced back towards the conveyor. Loth was down on one knee, smoke drifting from the barrel of his long rifle.

'Good shot,' he growled. The recon sergeant shrugged.

Sor Talgron stalked over to the Librarian. The Ultramarine was slumped on the floor, blood pooling beneath him. Sor Talgron didn't need to be an Apothecary to see that the legionary would not survive.

'Desperation makes fools of us all,' he said. 'You didn't need to break the Nikaea edict. Now, you die a traitor.'

'Perhaps,' breathed the Ultramarine. 'But you'll... die... with...'

His voice trailed off as his life left him.

Sor Talgron frowned and turned away. The buzzing in his mind had finally gone, though it had left a pounding headache in his temples. Surprisingly, the flies that the shadow-daemon had breathed forth were all still there, lying dead

on their backs with legs folded. They crunched beneath his boots.

Daemons. These were the new allies of the XVII Legion. Had he not been wearing his helmet he would have spat in disgust.

He saw two of his legionaries haul aside the wreckage of the Contemptor and help Apostle Jarulek to his feet.

'You're alive, then,' Sor Talgron commented, feeling nothing either way.

'Captain, you need to see this,' said Loth.

Sor Talgron followed the recon sergeant's voice, and entered the small communications command centre. It was dominated by sensor arrays and data-screens awash with information.

'What am I seeing?' he said. He stabbed a finger at one of the screens. 'Is that what I think it is?'

'Yes,' said Loth. 'There's an active Ultramarines ship up there in orbit.'

'Give me audio on that screen there,' said Sor Talgron, gesturing to where the image of a woman could be seen speaking.

'-on third bombardment deck,' the woman was saying as the audio connected to the visual feed. *'Target solution is a lock. On my mark.'*

'It's preparing to fire,' said Loth. 'They're using this connection to sequence its guidance systems.'

'Kill the connection!' barked Sor Talgron.

'I'm trying,' said Loth, punching in keys on the command Console. 'It's locked me out.'

The woman on the screen turned to look at the Word Bearers. She was a fleet admiral, Sor Talgron saw by the pins on her lapel. An unappealing smile touched her thin lips.

'I take it, then, that Legionary Xion Octavian is dead,' she said. *'He died a hero. Whatever he did bought the time I needed. You traitors are all going to burn.'*

Sor Talgron cursed and drew his volkite pistol, aiming it squarely in the centre of the command module. Loth stood and backed away, knocking his chair over in his haste.

The captain fired, emptying the weapon's charge into the console. The whole thing went up in sparks and flame, and the data-screens exploded.

Jarulek stood in the doorway, leaning on the supporting arm of a legionary. 'What can one crippled ship do?'

'There are still Ultramarines forces on this continent,' said Sor Talgron. 'They won't target the battles for fear of killing their own legionaries. They wouldn't

sanction that. It is not in their nature. They'll be targeting one of the muster points.'

Loth spat. In the silence that followed, Dal Ahk's voice crackled through on the vox.

'Captain! Enemy planet-strike ordnance inbound!' he said. 'Multiple targets!'

TEN

DECIMUS WAS BLEEDING from a dozen wounds, and he clutched a chainaxe in blood-slick hands. He had lost his own weapons - and a number of those scrounged from fallen friends and foes - earlier in the battle. His muscles were burning, and his armour was hanging off him in ragged pieces. One of his lungs was deflated, and his secondary heart was pounding, picking up the slack from his primary heart, which had been pierced by shrapnel. He was aware of more than a dozen internal injuries that required immediate medicae attention.

He smashed the skull of a traitor beneath the butt of his axe, grimacing in pain as he struck. He tossed the chainaxe aside - it was missing so many teeth that it was little more than a bludgeon. He picked up the crude knife that the enemy legionary had been clutching. It was hot to the touch, and made his hand tingle strangely. Bile rose in his throat. He hurled the cursed blade away.

'Here, my lord,' said a wounded Ultramarines sergeant, proffering his power sword. The warrior was so drenched in blood that he could have been mistaken for a Word Bearer.

'My thanks, Sergeant Connor,' he said, and took the blade. He thumbed its activation rune and energy coalesced down its length. 'Macraggean?'

The sergeant nodded wearily. 'From the Crown Mountains themselves.'

The scream of an incoming artillery shell sent Ultramarines scrambling for cover. Decimus didn't bother. He could tell from the sound that it was a way off to his left. A hot wind tore across the corpse strewn plain, and the choking clouds parted momentarily in the backwash of an unseen blast.

The enemy was coming for them once again, lines of legionaries and Dreadnoughts advancing alongside Vindicators and Predators. There were still thousands of them.

'My lord,' came a shout. He was too weary even to register who it was that had spoken. 'My lord, look!'

Lifting his gaze skyward, Aecus Decimus saw dozens of burning shapes falling through the upper atmosphere. Each was trailing a line of fire. He stood there in the mud and the blood, breathing hard. It was done.

'Reinforcements?' said one his legionaries, and Decimus felt a pang of shame. He had told no one but his most senior captains and the cadre of censured legionaries of his final order. It was better that way, he had decided.

There was a ragged cheer from a few of the men, thinking that their Chapter Master had confirmed the arrival of reinforcements. Others knew better, however.

'Those are not drop pods,' said Sergeant Connor in a low voice that only Decimus heard. 'Reinforcements are not coming, are they.'

It was not a question.

'No,' he said. 'This planet is lost, and so are we. But we'll take all these heathen traitor bastards with us.'

With the sergeant's aid, he climbed wearily to stand atop the ruined hulk of a Rhino, and he raised the power sword high for all to see. There were pitifully few of them left, but he saw pride burning in their eyes. Pride, and anger.

The first of the orbital strikes hit to the north. There was a blinding flash, and rising green flame mushroomed into the air beyond the horizon. The sound would not hit them for almost a minute, the Chapter Master judged. Others were coming down overhead, closer than the first.

History would not judge him harshly for this, but only because none of the XIII Legion would be left alive here once this was over, none to speak of what he had set in motion. No one would ever question *which* side had unleashed this horror upon a loyal world of the Five Hundred. The time for doubt was past.

'One last charge, sons of Ultramar,' he roared. 'One last charge, in the name of Guilliman and the Emperor.' He dropped off the Rhino, sinking half to his knees in the clinging mire. 'Come, my brothers. Honour and glory!'

'Honour and glory!' they answered as one.

The struggle did not last long. No contest between an armoured and unarmoured legionary would.

Sor Talgron caught Volkhar Wreth's hand in his fist as he stabbed at him. Bones crunched and the knife clattered to the floor. The predicant slammed his fist into the side of Sor Talgron's helmet, cracking a lens and denting the ceramite.

'That is all you get,' said Sor Talgron, the light of his cracked lens flickering.

He grabbed Wreth by the neck and slammed him bodily into a wall, once, twice, using all his servo—assisted strength. Bricks crumbled around Wreth, and he slumped to his knees. Stepping in close, Sor Talgron slammed a heavy

backhand blow into the side of his head, felling him instantly.

Sor Talgron knelt over him, a knee in the centre of his back pinning him to the ground, and one hand pressing down upon the back of his head. He scooped up Jarulek's blade with his other hand. The hilt of the athame felt warm to the touch, even through his gauntlet.

'This is my mentor and a mentor who in his day was worthy even of the primarch's respect,' growled Sor Talgron. He had the blade of the athame pressed to the back of Volkhar Wreth's neck. 'I would not have him suffer needlessly.'

'It will work, captain,' Jarulek assured him.

'If it does not, I will cut your throat. I promise you that.'

Then he pushed the knife between Wreth's vertebrae, cutting into the spinal column.

THE DOORS WERE already being eaten away before they arrived at the surface. The temperature in the conveyor had dropped markedly, and a harsh, alchemical stink was seeping through the vents. The lift cable overhead groaned. Sor Talgron wasn't sure they would make it to the top at all.

For the enemy to unleash world-killers was a stunning development. It was not a strategic possibility that he had even considered the XIII Legion undertaking.

'This world is going to die, along with countless thousands of the Seventeenth, yet you seem impressed,' said Jarulek.

'I am,' said Sor Talgron. 'I didn't think they had it in them.'

He had ordered the evacuation, but there was little chance that more than a fraction of his legionaries had made it off-world before the bombs had struck. Now, the vox was awash with static.

'We should have stayed down there,' said Jarulek.

'Be silent, priest,' snapped Sor Talgron. 'To stay there was a death sentence. We have to get off-world.'

'Look at what they have unleashed!' snarled Jarulek. A chemical mist was seeping into the carriage, coming in through the vents and the cracks in the door. Tongues of pale flame licked up from where that mist touched bare metal. They reached for Jarulek, drawn to his gesture. 'You thought it beyond them? This world is going to *burn*.'

Sor Talgron turned and shoved Jarulek up against the back wall, hand locked around his throat. 'Your gods did not foresee this either, priest,' he said. 'It seems that we all misjudged just how much the Thirteenth hate us... How far they

would go to see us bleed.'

He gave Jarulek a final shove, and turned away in disgust. It was not only disgust at the Dark Apostle, but everything - what the Legion had become, the weakness inherent in his genes, and his own actions on Terra, to name but a few.

'To step out there is to die,' said Jarulek. "There are other ways, other paths that can be walked. If one knows how.'

Cold fury rose within Sor Talgron.

'I will not flee like a worm into a hole, leaving my legionaries to die,' he said, casting a withering glare at Jarulek for a moment before turning his back on him.

'So be it,' breathed Jarulek.

The temperature inside the carriage dropped markedly, hoarfrost creeping up the walls. A host of shadows and whispers swirled around the Word Bearers.

When Sor Talgron looked back, Jarulek was gone.

The conveyor came to a groaning halt. Already the metal was starting to buckle and collapse, being eaten away by the caustic chemical mist.

The doors opened. Beyond, the world burned.

ELEVEN

PHOSPHEX, ROBOUTE GUILLIMAN would later write, was *'without a doubt singularly the most deplorable man-manufactured weapon that humanity has ever, to its shame, unleashed upon a living world'*.

An incendiary of the most volatile nature, it had the capacity to burn without oxygen and with next to no fuel source. It was capable of burning underwater - in fact, it set the water itself alight - and would burn through solid rock, through the most fire-hardened ceramite and adamantium, absolutely devastating any carbon-based life that it touched.

Known variously as the 'living fire', 'crawling death' and 'ice-fire' due to its attraction to movement and sub-zero burning temperature, once unleashed it expanded exponentially, burning everything in its path. It was designed for one purpose - the absolute eradication of life on a world. The taint of its residue was far more enduring even than the most deadly radiation from nuclear fallout and plasma-core exposure, rendering any lands exposed to its touch uninhabitable.

Not even the Death Guard favoured its use in any but the most extreme circumstances, and even then only on the order of a Legion's most senior echelons of command. The use of phosphex had only twice been sanctioned for use by the primarch of the XIII Legion, and then only upon isolated regions, but a small number of its most powerful warships held the munitions in their armouries still, for use in extremis.

Percepton Primus, Chapter Master Decimus had decreed, was such a case.

A single, man-portable phosphex bomb had the capacity to contaminate the air and soil where it was detonated for a thousand years. Never in Legion history had an entire payload of phosphex warheads been unleashed in one bombardment. In theoretical simulations, a world that suffered such an attack would never recover.

In all, twenty-four Modalis-class atmospheric missiles were launched from the *Righteous Fury* at the surface of Percepton Primus. All of them struck the planet's singular super-continent, spread across a dispersal zone ten thousand kilometres wide. Each targeted a key strategic location, the coordinates of which

had been uploaded from the communications sub-base within the mountains - Word Bearers extraction points, the city of Massilea, the field of war where the Chapter Master had drawn the enemy legionaries in strength.

The *Righteous Fury* was destroyed with all hands three minutes and twenty-seven seconds after the first payload was launched. The XVII Legion cruiser *Sanctified* claimed the kill.

By then, the surface of Percepton Primus was already burning.

It was harder to remove a legionary's primary heart than one might expect, even one not wearing his armoured plate.

First there was the black carapace, the tough under-skin membrane that was as hard as guard-issued flak armour and tough enough to stop a solid slug. Once through that, cutting too high would hit the fused ribcage. Trying to hack through that was futile unless you were well-equipped; a Space Marine's bones were like iron, and their chest was one solid mass.

The key, Sor Talgron knew, was to come in under the ribcage. A deep, vertical slit just below the breastbone.

'It is a shame that Dorn is sending us away,' said Jarulek as he cut through flesh and sinew. 'All the guns of our fleet, sitting up there in the shipyards around Luna, waiting to be unleashed at the most opportune moment. That would have been... delightful.'

'Dorn is no fool,' said Sor Talgron. 'We knew this was a possibility, which is why we have our contingencies - the comet, the shipyards, our allies on Mars and such. The charges remain primed, yes?'

'They do,' said Jarulek. 'Loth did his job well. When they blow, they'll think the psychic levees simply overloaded. There will be mayhem. Panic. More importantly; they'll be blinded - it could take months before they are able to send or receive any astropathic missives beyond the Solar System.'

'Good,' said Sor Talgron.

'Lord Aurelian will not be pleased that we are being shunted off Terra. If we were still garrisoned here when the final push came...'

'This was always a possibility,' said Sor Talgron. 'Our primarch knew that. We have done what we can in preparation. We have used our time here well. And now for our last surprise...'

Volkhar Wreth lay paralysed and close to death on his back on the floor, atop a heavy canvas drop sheet stained dark with blood. They had stripped him of the robe he'd been wearing, and his yellow bodyglove had been cut away, baring his

heavily muscled body. His skin was slick with gore. He gave a muted groan, his head twitching in agony as Jarulek pushed his hand into the cut in his abdomen, pressing into his body cavity, groping upwards.

His tongue was gone, torn from his mouth at its root. It lay on the floor, discarded. A length of chain was between his teeth, wrapped around the back of his neck like a gag. Bleeding ruinous symbols were sliced into the meat of his chest, thighs, shoulders and neck; Jarulek had made his flesh a bloody parchment for his work. An eight-pointed octed had been carved into his forehead, deep enough to score it upon his skull.

'Was it wise to tell Dorn you were on the comet?' said Jarulek.

'The best lies have an element of truth to them,' said Sor Talgron. 'He would have known if I had spoken false.'

'Was the task complete?'

'No,' said Sor Talgron, bitterness tinging his words. 'With Dorn's return, I had to leave it unfinished. I left a contingent behind with Ibarix to complete the task.' Jarulek paused in his bloody work, glancing up at his captain.

'That is a death sentence,' he said.

'Ibarix volunteered. He will do the Legion proud, when their time comes. Now get on with it. We have been too long already.'

Jarulek nodded sagely, and focused back on the task at hand.

'I take no pleasure in this defilement,' Sor Talgron said to Volkhar Wreth. He was standing back, away from the bloody work, arms folded across his chest. 'This is just a means to an end. You are just another tool in my arsenal, a weapon to be unleashed. The war will come to Terra, and the palace will fall. You'll be a part of that.'

The Apostle pulled his bloody arm from within Wreth's torso. He held the tortured Word Bearer's primary heart in his hand. It was still pumping, the severed arteries and veins gushing blood with each labouring convulsion. The predicant's eyes were wide as he stared up at his own still-bearing heart. His breathing was coming in short, sharp gasps. His secondary heart would have kicked in by now - a legionary could live, for a time, like this.

'The flask,' said Jarulek.

There were two glass vessels that Jarulek had set aside before he had begun his work. One had something oily and writhing within it. The other was empty but for a measure of inky fluid. Sor Talgron unstopped the lid of this second flask and held it out, and Jarulek slid Wreth's heart into it before sealing it shut.

'The other one,' said Jarulek, gesturing. 'Give it to me. Quickly!'

'I will not touch it,' said Sor Talgron, holding up the vessel containing Wreth's heart before him. It had stopped beating.

With a hiss, Jarulek stood and retrieved the flask himself before kneeling once more before Volkhar Wreth. The legionary's face was pallid and his eyes were unfocused. His breathing had shallowed. His body was shutting down, putting him into hibernation.

Jarulek muttered a string of un-words that made his mouth bleed and the candlelight flicker. He slammed the flask in his hand into the stone floor, and a spiderweb of cracks crazed its glass surface. Dark liquid seeped from the cracks, oily and steaming, and a stench like spoiled meat filled the air. The wriggling thing inside went wild, thrashing and undulating, pressing against its fractured prison. Jarulek still held it in his hand as pieces of glass began to fall away and worm-like appendages the colour of a bruise probed their way free.

Volkhar Wreth had now faded out of consciousness, his breathing slowing until it was barely perceptible. Jarulek leant over him, still speaking in the tongue of the daemon, blood dripping from his lips. Tainted glass fell from the shattered flask as the thing held within struggled to emerge. Sor Talgron could feel its presence, clawing at the edges of his mind like nails on a chalkboard as it strained to haul itself into reality. The squirming thing in the flask was but a tiny part of the creature the rest dwelt in the roiling chaos of the warp.

'If I can feel that, others may,' he snarled. 'Control it.'

'This room is shielded,' said Jarulek. 'No one will pick up anything.'

'Just be quick about it.'

Jarulek thrust the broken flask into the gash he had carved in Volkhar Wreth's body, and pushed it up into the void where his heart had been. He pulled his hand out, and wiped away the oily residue.

Volkhar Wreth shuddered, his body convulsing. His eyes shot open, a look of unutterable horror ingrained within them. He moaned, shaking his head from side to side. He looked up at Sor Talgron, pleadingly. He was managing to gasp, though the muscles of his neck were bulging, the veins in his temple straining fit to burst. He tried to scream, to beg, to curse them, but he could not.

Sor Talgron felt a shudder in the flask in his hand. He lifted it, wonder and disgust warring for his attention. The predicant's heart within had started beating once more.

'It's working,' said Sor Talgron.

'It is bonding with him,' said Jarulek. He was stitching up Wreth's midsection, pulling the skin tight and sewing it shut with thick thread and a jagged hook. It

was crude work, and hurried, but it would suffice.

When he was done, he wiped blood from his mouth with the back of his hand.

'These wards will contain it,' he said, gesturing vaguely to the symbols carved in Wreth's flesh. 'Until the time is right.'

'And then the minds of these frozen psykers will power its release,' said Sor Talgron.

'Correct,' said Jarulek.

'As I said - if it doesn't work, I will cut your throat.'

'It will likely be some years before we know.'

'I can wait,' said Sor Talgron. He placed a hand upon Volkhar Wreth's bloody brow. 'I'm sorry, old friend,' he said.

ALMOST WILFULLY, A burning white-green mist fell upon one of the siege squad legionaries as the doors slid open. He staggered, steam rising from his armour, which instantly began to hiss, its surface dissolving as the phosphex began to work.

Sor Talgron and one of the other Word Bearers hauled the stricken legionary back, but the damage was done. They dumped him on the floor as his heavy plate began to blister and crack. It was his rubberised armour seals that were compromised first, but he roared as his flesh began to sizzle and burn inside his plate. The floor beneath him began to hiss as the corrosive chemical mist began to eat away at it.

Burning vapours crawled across the landing pad. The mountains were on the very edge of one of the detonations, yet even so, the carnage was devastating. Everything touched by it was being voraciously devoured. Metal dissolved as though bathed in acid, and the bare rock blazed with green fire. Even the air itself was being consumed in the choking, metallic clouds.

'Gods,' swore Loth. 'The ships.'

The Word Bearers craft were gone. The XIII Legion lighter craft was there, but a glance assured Sor Talgron that it was not taking them anywhere - the cockpit canopy sagged inwards, liquefied by corrosive alchemical poisons, and its metal fuselage was dissolving before his eyes.

There was no way off the platform.

The fallen legionary was sinking into the floor as it sagged and melted beneath him. His screams were almost pitiful, so Sor Talgron ended him quickly with his combat blade. The flooring gave way, and the body of the Word Bearer dropped into the conveyor shaft.

The corrosion in the floor was spreading.

'Out,' he ordered.

The platform was burning, but the corrosive mist had not yet consumed it. There were still pockets of safety. In the distance, alchemical flames were engulfing the mountains, flowing over them like an avalanche. They were lucky, here, he realised. The other mountains must have acted as a buffer, an aegis protecting them from the worst of the phosphex fallout, but the rising mist was coming for them at high speed. They had a matter of minutes at best.

'Dal Ahk,' snarled Sor Talgron, scanning the skies.

'The vox is still out,' said Loth.

'Get a flare up,' ordered Sor Talgron. Before the recon sergeant could comply with his captain's orders, however, they caught sight of a final missile screaming down through the upper atmosphere. It disappeared beyond the mountains, but it wasn't hard to judge that it would fall closer to them than any other had.

They didn't feel the impact underfoot - not right away. The shock wave would take some time to reach them, but when it did, it would be devastating. Nor did they hear anything at first.

There was a retina-burning flash, however. It blanketed the sky. The optic dampeners of Sor Talgron's helmet cancelled out the searing blast, saving his eyes and turning everything dark as they compensated.

In the wake of the detonation, a giant cloud of roiling dust, smoke and pale flame rose into the air, its momentum building even as it soared into the stratosphere. The fallout of that detonation roared over the tops of the mountains in a searing, burning shock wave, hurtling towards them in a wall over a dozen kilometres high. That wall obliterated the peaks from view, one after another, coming at them at colossal speed.

There was no way to outrun it. There was nothing to do but stand and watch as it howled towards them, consuming everything in its wake. It was death, and it was coming for them.

There was no way anyone would believe that one of Guilliman's sons would sanction the use of phosphex on such a scale, particularly against one of their own worlds. Sor Talgron knew that his own Legion would be blamed for this atrocity.

'Perhaps this is what we deserve,' he muttered.

TWELVE

THE WALL OF roiling, pale green alchemical fire crashed over them, lifting them from their feet and hurling them back.

Sor Talgron bellowed as he was smashed against the mountain with bone-shattering force. His cries were lost in the deafening roar of the poisonous inferno. He could see little, the white mist and pale flames surrounding him, though he caught glimpses of legionaries being tossed around like the playthings of cruel gods. It was like being in the grip of a fiery cyclone, though the winds were made up of the strongest corrosive chemicals ever devised by man.

Loth and his recon squad were the first to perish, their stripped down armour the least able to resist the toxic winds. Their plate dissolved upon their flesh, consumed by a fierce, burning coldness. Skin and muscle tissue turned molten, and bones burned as meat slipped from them. Helm lenses shattered, and eyes and brains were liquefied, burned out within their skulls in an instant.

Sor Talgron felt the acidic burn as his armour seals gave way. The agony was excruciating, worse than anything he had ever experienced. His face already bore evidence of rad-scarring and nuclear burns, but the pain of those injuries was as nothing next to the horrific sensation of the phosphex melting into his flesh.

The blast wave was past them, leaving Sor Talgron and his warriors reeling, stumbling around on the melting platform, their bodies awash with choking, corrosive fire. None of them had escaped its rage. Half the legionaries were dead already, their bodies burning fiercely on the deck. Sor Talgron's flesh was aflame, and he dropped to his knees, as the tendons, ligaments and muscles in his ankles and knees were consumed, his integrity seals finally giving way completely.

His entire body was awash with burning agony, without and within. His muscles turned to fire. Both hearts began to blaze.

His helm's grille dissolved inwards and he inhaled the burning, acidic mist, breathing it into his lungs. His visor lenses had been eaten away and his eyes melted, running down his searing cheeks.

He fell, writhing, agony searing through every nerve ending. His flesh was being broken down, eaten off his bones, flickering with pale flame. His armour was alight, being stripped back to its base constituents and devoured. The very air he breathed was poisoned fire.

He struggled to push himself upright, but it was a battle that he could not win. His will alone was not enough. He fell again, and this time he did not rise.

In his last moments, he thought of Volkhar Wreth. Better to die than to suffer that fate.

Sor Talgron and his companion, cloaked in a dark crimson robe and the hood drawn low over his face, strode down the umbilical corridor towards the waiting drop shuttle. A voice, authoritative and altered by a high-end vocabulator called after them.

'Halt!'

The two Word Bearers slowed, and turned towards the voice.

'Problem?' breathed Jarulek from the concealing shadow of his hood. Sor Talgron knew that he would be clutching his athame beneath his robe, ready to strike. Against those that approached, it would do little.

'Maybe,' he said.

A trio of Custodians strode towards them, artery-red capes and plumes flowing out in their wake. They came to a halt before the pair of legionaries, the bases of their guardian spears ringing sharply on the deck.

'Yes?' said Sor Talgron. His hand itched for a weapon.

The faceplate of the lead Custodian slid back, revealing the stern features of Tiber Acanthus.

'You are leaving us, then,' he said.

'We are,' said Sor Talgran. 'Dorn has ordered all legionaries of the Seventeenth within the Solar System to Isstvan. We go to join the muster.'

Tiber Acanthus nodded. 'You had some delays getting here? Servitor pilot failure?'

'On the ornithopter, yes. A slight delay. An inconvenience, but nothing more.'

The Custodian's gaze lingered on the hooded and cowed figure of Jarulek.

'Was there something else that you wanted, sentinel?' said Sor Talgron, and Tiber Acanthus's attention turned back to him. His expression was severe for a moment, then broke into something only a little warmer.

'Merely to wish you well,' he said. 'It has been an honour to know you during the years you've served within the Solar System.'

Sor Talgron removed his helm to look the Custodian in the eye. The respect he felt for the sentinel was genuine. He extended his hand, and they shook in the old warrior manner.

'Fight well,' said Acanthus. 'May we meet again.'

'I feel certain that we will,' said Sor Talgron.



THE STORMBIRD DESCENDED, buffeted by the roiling eddies left in the wake of the cyclopean detonation. It came in hard, and the writhing, cloying mists clinging to the mountains rose to meet it, reaching out with tendrils of flame.

Jet turbines rotated downwards, and the gunship roared in under the deep overhang of the landing platform. Its clawed landing gear was not extended - the platform was no longer solid - but its assault ramp lowered, opening to the roiling tumult beyond. It hovered unsteadily in the air, shuddering and reeling as the white flames licked across its chassis and began to burn.

Two figures bedecked in flaming Cataphractii armour stood awaiting it, a charred figure held between them. Half crawling, half limping, they staggered towards the gaping ramp, dragging the lifeless warrior. It was too much for the first of them - even the immense void-hardened Cataphractii suits were not able to maintain their integrity against the ravages of phosphex. He collapsed, and the last standing legionary on Percepton Primus hauled the charred body up onto the ramp alone, pushing it in before clambering up and collapsing inside.

The Stormbird's vectored engines roared. Its hull was being eaten away now where the gelid, living flames had licked at it. It pulled away, its engines rotating, turning down towards the blanket of white-green death that was consuming the land below from horizon to horizon, and it rocketed skywards, screaming back into the upper atmosphere.

Only once it reached the void was it given a reprieve from the phosphex. Extended to a cold vacuum was the only way to put out those flames once they had taken hold.

In the Stormbird's troop bay, the Terminator-armoured legionary held the burned husk of his commander as all the air within was vented into the void. Then he collapsed, finally succumbing.

'Infidus Diabolus, this is Stormbird AT-394, inbound on aft launch deck

fourteen,' said Dal Ahk from the cockpit of the gunship. 'I need an emergency medicae crew prepped and waiting. Ready the apothecarion to treat extreme phosphex and void-sustained injuries. Priority primus.'

'There are no free medicae units, Stormbird AT-394,' came the static-infused response. *'The Apothecarion is already overrun with the influx of casualties.'*

'I am bringing in Captain Sor Talgron,' Dal Ahk said, simply. There was a momentary pause, then the connection clicked to another channel. A new voice spoke then.

'Understood, Stormbird AT-394. A medicae team will be ready and waiting.'

THIRTEEN

'WILL HE LIVE?'

Urhlán glanced back to the one who had spoken; the Dark Apostle, Jarulek. He stood with arms crossed over his chest. There were a handful of other officers and legionaries clustered around the slab. All of them bore evidence of battle, and most sported wounds of varying severity.

'I am surprised he is even alive now,' Urhlán said, making a vain attempt to wipe the blood from his helmet's visor lenses. 'I was surprised that he was alive when he got here.'

'But can you save him?'

Urhlán looked down at his patient, writhing on the slab before him.

'No,' he said.

'Then his fate is in the gods' hands,' said Jarulek.

Urhlán turned back towards the now comatose, twitching mass of chem-melted flesh on the slab before him. It was hard to believe that this was his captain.

'Get out,' he said over his shoulder. 'Let me work. I will do what I can.'

He was in the hole with Volkhar Wreth.

The predicant's chest was closed, the shattered warp-flask sealed within him. They had dropped him into the oubliette that Jarulek had prepared, and he'd hit bottom of the shaft hard - his useless, paralysed legs folding beneath him. The tight confines had pressed in around him, keeping him partially upright, but he was a sorry sight, crumpled into an awkward foetal position at the bottom of the hole. Jarulek had stitched his eyes open before they'd thrown him in. It was a spiteful act, and one that Sor Talgron regretted not halting.

They had then wedged flagstones and rock down into the oubliette on top of him, the first pieces lowered carefully, the remainder hurled in haste. Many of the pieces were large, the gaps between them substantial; he wouldn't run out of air for a while, at least. Finally, they had dragged the heavy stone altar back over the hole and locked the tomb, sealing it with chains and heaped rubble.

Wreth had been awake when they had dropped him in and he lived still. The things that had replaced his heart kept him awake and compos mentis, his sus-an membrane suppressed. How many years could a mind remain crumpled in darkness, conscious but unable to move, before he went mad?

Sor talgron would find out, now.

He was in the hole with Volkhar Wreth.

They were pressed together. The darkness was complete, but he was able to see. He didn't question why. Wreth's breathing was coming in short, sharp gasps, and it became more rapid as he saw that Sor Talgron was so close by.

His skin was an unhealthy shade of grey, and thick purple-black veins throbbed within the meat of his body. Things were moving within his flesh; things that writhed and pulsed. He was an incubator, a host, and what was contained within wanted to come out. Sor Talgron could hear its whispering, maddening voices in his mind. It wanted to emerge through Wreth's corporeal form, to enter this realm of existence using his flesh as a gateway.

It was not yet time, though. Not yet.

What dwelt within Volkhar Wreth's flesh was but a tiny portion of its whole - the rest resided in the railing depths of the warp, waiting, impatient and full of hatred. It did not feel strange to know this.

'I'm sorry,' said Sor Talgron. 'This was not the way I had hoped it would be. But it is necessary. When the time comes, the palace must be breached. Anything to further that goal must be done.'

He could see Wreth's wide, blood-infused eyes. He was staring back at him, eyelids crudely stitched open. Tears of blood and hissing ichor ran down his cheeks. There was horror writ in his gaze - he knew that something was being birthed within his flesh. He knew that his flesh was no longer his own.

'I'm dead,' said Sor Talgron. 'That's why I am here. This is my punishment.'

He reached out a hand, noting in passing that the flesh of his arm was blistered and smoking, and pressed his fingers to the roughly sutured wound on Predicant Wreth's sternum. The skin had not healed, and he pushed his hand within.

Things squirmed in the darkness. He felt them probing at his hand and arm. Then they began to burrow into his flesh. It was not an uncomfortable sensation. The worm-like tendrils squirmed up from his forearm, up into his bicep. They made his hideously burned flesh ripple and flex.

They wriggled and burrowed further in, up through his shoulder and then deeper into his body, digging around in his organs. One pressed itself up through

his neck, making his throat bulge. It pressed up through the base of his skull, and burrowed into his brain. He felt the pressure of it pressing against his mind. He smiled and a chuckle escaped his lips at the strange sensation. He saw fear and loathing in Wreth's unblinking eyes.

Then the tendrils began to retract, and Sor Talgron's smile was replaced with sudden panic. The daemonic protuberances had rooted themselves in his flesh, hooking into him, and they would not release their hold.

He fought against them, but he could not escape their grip. They had bonded with him, and were as much a part of him as his bones and muscles now. They retracted back within their host - it was not its time to emerge, not yet and Sor Talgron was dragged with them. He roared and screamed and shouted, fighting them the whole way, but was pulled inexorably in.

His hand was still within Volkhar Wreth's body. It was impossible now to pull it free. In the space of a breath, he was pulled in up to his shoulder. He could do nothing to forestall it. Logically, it made no sense, but then the predicant's mortal shell being host to a daemon, the majority of which dwelt beyond the veil, was not logical either.

He felt the knives and bonesaws cutting into his tortured flesh, true, but it was a distant thing, as though it might be happening to someone else. He saw what was left of his arms and legs hacked from his torso, his limbs having suffered too much trauma and damage from the phosphex flames. There was nothing left to salvage.

His hearts were melted, useless things, and they were replaced with synthetic modules that whirred and clicked. His lungs were gone. A humming machine was doing his breathing for him.

'Brain activity is spiking,' he heard a voice say. It was muffled, like he was underwater. 'We're losing him again!'

Sor Talgron strained against the force pulling him into the body of Volkhar Wreth, but it was too strong. His world disappeared as his whole body was pulled within that infested torso. They dragged him in deep. He was hauled down and down and down, into the deeper darkness that lurked below.

He was dragged down still further, and the darkness gave way to a liquid, milky red. He was gone from the material plane and out into the roiling nightmare of the warp, and he felt monstrous eyes turn towards him, felt the pressing intellect of unattainable sentience there, felt the presence of the gods and daemons that he had always denied; beings that had been old long before man had come down from the trees and turned into the petty creatures that they

had become. He was being strangled in the bosom of hell, engulfed by the tentacles of beings the mortal mind was unable to truly fathom. He felt the crushing weight of their attention upon him and he screamed, his lungs filling with liquid fire.

He struggled to free himself, to swim clear of this sickening, maddening morass of hatred and fury and rage, but he could not. This was his prison and his damnation, and what was worse was that it was one he felt he deserved.

Darkness closed around him. It was all but complete, when a golden radiance appeared before him. He looked up into the face of a demigod hovering before him, and he felt the strangling tentacles fall away.

My son.

It extended a hand out towards him, light spilling from every pore. He reached up and took the mighty being's golden hand. The demigod's fingers closed around his own and golden light infused everything.

'That's it,' said a voice. 'It's over. He's gone.'

THE BLOODY, LIMBLESS thing on the table that had once been Sor Talgron was dead. It was actually the eighth time that he had died on the slab, but this time they had been unable to revive him.

Apothecary Urhlan stepped away, unplugging the machines that had been straining to keep the captain alive. Their beeps and whirrs became a single, uninterrupted whine. He was covered in blood. It dripped off his arms and chest in thick rivulets.

'It was always unlikely that he'd survive,' he said. He glanced nearby, where another legionary lay unconscious, his flesh pierced by dozens of cables and tubes. 'That one is doing better, though. The one who brought him in. Who is he?'

'Cataphractii Sergeant Kol Badar,' said Dal Ahk in a hollow voice. He was staring dead-eyed at the fleshy ruin that had been Sor Talgron. 'I thought I'd saved him.'

The master of signal turned and walked away, head down.

One by one, the other legionaries drifted away until Jarulek was alone. The Dark Apostle stepped in close, staring down at Sor Talgron's melted face. He saw something twitch.

He blinked, thinking he'd imagined it, but then he saw it again. An exposed ligament twitched in the right side of Sor Talgron's face. Looking closer, he thought he saw something moving within the captain's ravaged flesh, just for a

fraction of a second...

He felt the touch of the warp, then. It was seeping off the corpse of Sor Talgron like an odour, and his eyes widened in wonder. Sor Talgron twisted on the slab, and his jaw opened, working silently. A beatific smile broke across his lipless mouth.

'Apothecary!' Jarulek shouted. 'He's alive!'

Sor Talgron turned his mutilated face towards Jarulek, his empty, bloodied eye sockets locking unerringly onto him.

'The Urizen,' Sor Talgron croaked.

Jarulek dropped to his knees. 'Lorgar Aurelian? What of him, brother?'

'He... He lifted me from the darkness.'

'Apothecary!' Jarulek shouted over his shoulder again.

'I saw them, Jarulek,' Sor Talgron whispered.

'Saw who, my lord?'

'The gods...' he breathed.

EPILOGUE

THE ANGLED PROW of the ship cleaved through the living anti-matter of the hellscape visible beyond the oculus portal. Beings of raw emotion, manifested in forms drawn from the nightmares and horror-bred psyches of mortals, scratched upon the ship's Geller field, straining to breach it.

Sor Talgron stood upon the bridge of his hulking capital ship, staring out into the churning madness of the warp.

They had not interred him within the sarcophagus of a Dreadnought after the shocking injuries he had sustained on Percepton Primus. No, instead they built a new body for him - one of bionics, pistons, gears and synthetic organs. Almost nothing remained of his former self.

His face was a tortured horror of mutilated flesh and malformed scar tissue. They wanted to gift him a new one. Vat-grown synthcultured muscle tissue and harvested living bone. He had laughed at the suggestion.

His eyes had been replaced, however, and he stared out into the empyrean with a pair of black orbs, eyes manufactured by adepts of the Mechanicum and enhanced by his own prayers, exhortations and dark blessings. Attuned to the warp and its variances, they gave him a unique perspective that he found pleasing.

He was taller than he had been in the first incarnation of his life, that empty existence he'd experienced before he had come to his faith. There was no way of separating where his armour and flesh became one.

The Book of Lorgar was affixed to his breastplate, open to display litanies and catechisms of defilement. At his hip hung his helmet, newly fashioned in the likeness of a leering skull.

He had been reborn anew upon the apothecarion deck of the *Infidus Diabolus*. A new purpose drove him, a new conviction. A new path had opened before him. A new way.

The staff of his newly attained office hung across his back. It was a potent weapon as well as his staff of office: a giant crozius, tempered in the blood of martyrs.

He had lost fully two-thirds of the 34th Company on Percepton Primus when the Ultramarines purged the world. It was a staggering final act by a beaten foe. Percepton Primus was forever tainted, but that, Sor Talgron judged, was a small loss for the toll the Ultramarines had inflicted.

He had lost much on Percepton Primus. But he had gained much, as well.

Clarity. Purpose. Belief. Faith.

At his hip, a warp flask throbbed. A heart beat within it - the heart of Volkhar Wreth.

'Soon, my old friend,' he said.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anthony Reynolds's work for Black Library includes the Word Bearers trilogy, the Knights of Bretonnia series and the Horus Heresy short stories *Scions of the Storm* and *Dark Heart*. Originally from Australia, Anthony moved to the UK where he worked within Games Workshop for many years before returning to his homeland. He is currently touring the world, taking inspiration from natural wonders that he can twist into devious monstrosities to populate the 41st millennium.

