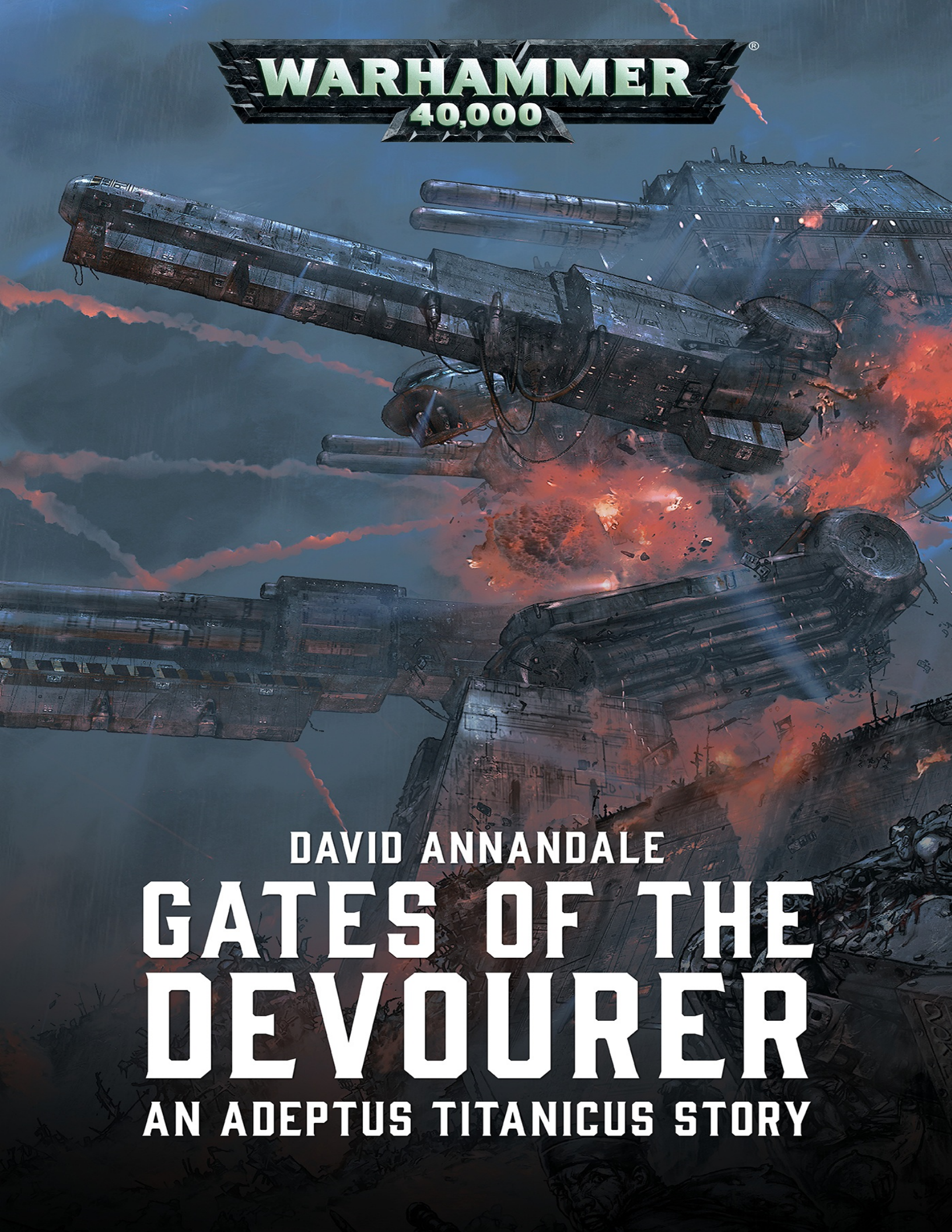




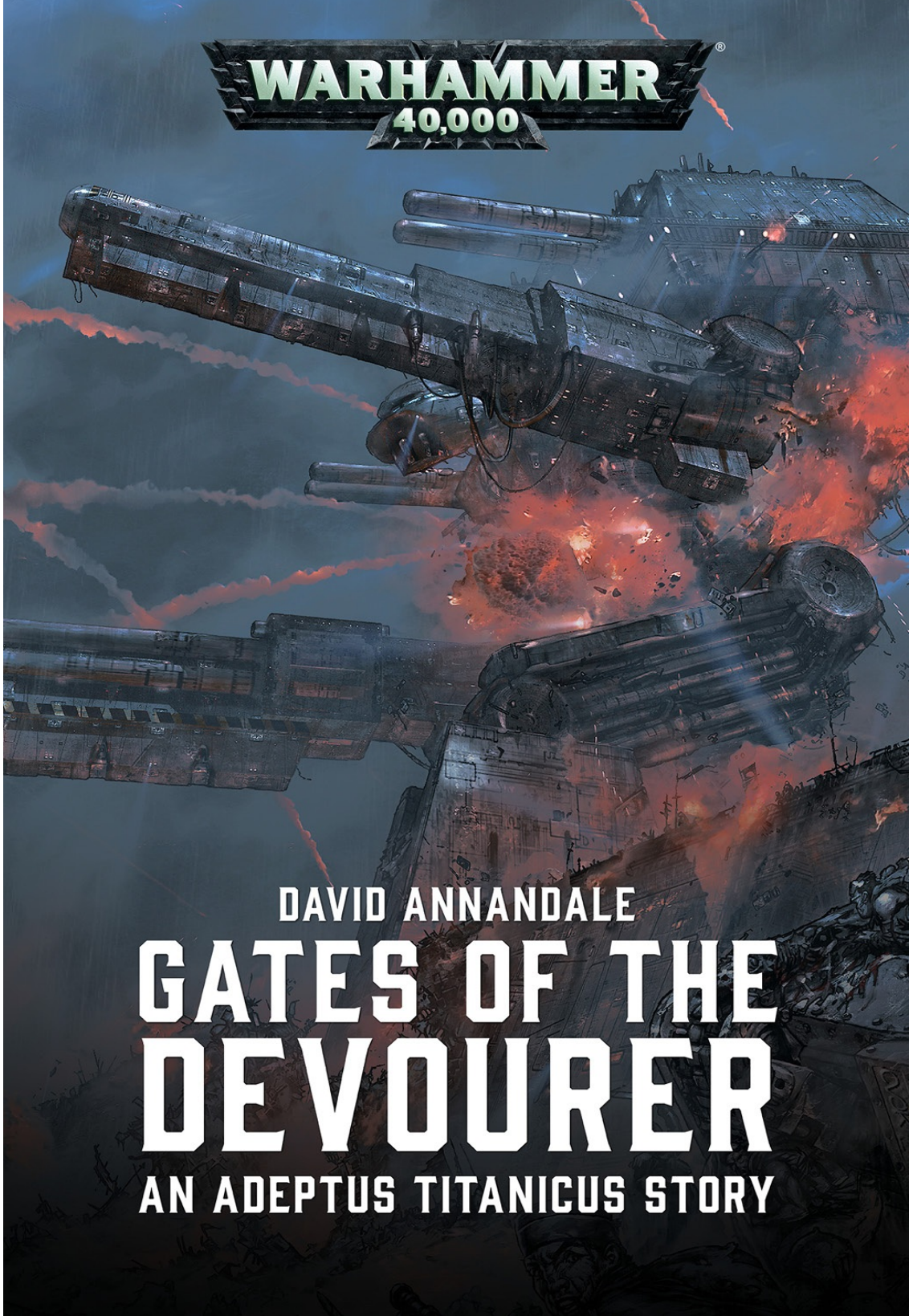
WARHAMMER
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DAVID ANNANDALE
**GATES OF THE
DEVOURER**
AN ADEPTUS TITANICUS STORY



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GATES OF THE DEVOURER

David Annandale

There was no peace in sleep. Instead, there were the memories and the rehearsals of war. Her dreams shook with the thunder of her footsteps. At the gesture of an arm, firestorms swept the world. The landscapes were far beneath her gaze of judgement. There was no order to the dreams. They were all her wars and none of them. Their only constant, their only truth, was her towering being.

In the dreams, her identity was whole.

But there would never be peace.

She woke, and felt diminished.

Principes Captain Ferantha Krezoc of the Legio Pallidus Mor, commander of the Warlord *Gloria Vastator*, rose from her cot and stood on the cold flagstones of her quarters. She felt the texture of the stone beneath her feet. She breathed as a mere human. She forced herself to see and acknowledge the facts of the chamber – the iron of her chair and desk, the Legio banner hanging from the vaulted ceiling, the gear wheel and skull of the shrine to the Omnisiah that dominated the wall opposite the door. The process was necessary. As incomplete as she was at this moment, she had to accept her reality. She had to retain the clear sense of Ferantha Krezoc, always, or she would vanish into the Manifold of the *Vastator*, and so fail in her duty as principes.

She acknowledged the pain of not being joined to the Warlord. That was her reality too, and to deny it would be a fracture of mental discipline.

But the illusion of completion in her dreams... Ah, that was a form of truth too. The reality of the illusion could not be ignored. It was the constant of her periods of unconsciousness (she could not call them *rest*). It was the pull of the *Gloria Vastator* reaching into her soul. The dreams, Krezoc thought, were gateways to the God-Machine. Through them, she and the great engine's machine-spirit

spoke to each other. They were not truly one in the dreams. That was the lie. But the lie was the representation of the great truth. The truth of the bond. Waking brought the pain of disconnection, and the anxiety, tamped down from desperation only through force of will, to re-establish the link. To feel once more feel the mechadendrites of the Mind Impulse Unit jacking into the ports on her spine and at the base of her skull.

The phantom-limb ache was familiar. The pain greeted her at every waking. She would not be without the illusion in the dreams, though. It was a promise. It was the hope she would soon pass through the gate between human and machine once more.

Today there was a difference in her coming to consciousness. She felt an intuitive certainty. She and the Titan were about to be called upon to march.

Something was coming. War was coming. A new tide of fire and blood was drawing nigh.

Lord Governor Albrecht Feisler of Khania also woke from troubled dreams. His dreams were nightmares, scrabbling, swarming, writhing visions where he sank beneath an ocean of clacking, ripping claws. He woke himself with a moaning shriek. He was entangled in the bedclothes so tightly he could barely move. His right arm was immobilised by a grave-swaddling of sweat-soaked sheets. He fought free, his breath becoming a whine of distress. He stumbled away from the bed. His legs were weak. The carpets of his bedchamber felt like a rough crust over the ocean that had been swallowing him. He did not trust it. He moved warily across the floor until he reached the balcony windows, then flung them open and ran to the parapet.

A warm, foetid east wind blew into his face. It carried the blended stench of Hive Gelon's manufactoria and of the swampland beyond the city's walls. Hive Gelon was an industrial heap of smokestacks and cathedral spires. The military output of the forge world was vital to the campaigns in the subsector, and Gelon's Taurox and artillery plants never ceased their activity. The habs for the vast majority of the hive's citizens were little more than immense dormitoria attached to the manufactoria. Life in the hives of Khania was a state of eternal urgency. Production could never keep up with the off-world demand, so the people worked harder, faster, and the elites of Khania grew richer. The Administratum lords and the barons of industry inhabited the towers that rose through, but rarely pierced, the clouds of brown and grey and dirty yellow. Even Feisler's chambers, in the highest tower, were shrouded by the smog.

In the predawn gloom, the smoke was lit by the orange flames of burn-off. The wind was strong enough to tear rents in the stinking clouds. The privilege of Feisler's position was not the panorama of Gelon: the hive's vistas were grey rockcrete, grey metal and grey streets. The land beyond was grey too, a darker grey of slag heaps, lakes of toxic sludge, and the beginning of the swamp. There was life beyond the city's walls. The life that thrived on the leavings of Gelon's industry was as grim as the hive itself – an explosion of tumorous growths, sluggish reptiles and swarms of insects as dense as torrential rain.

No, the privilege of Feisler's position was not the view of Gelon. It was the sight of the stars. He could not see them every night; the wind had to be strong enough. He saw them now, through the streamers of smoke. He gazed at them, drawing on their silver light for strength, using them to banish the dreams. So it was Feisler, alone among the people of Khania, who witnessed the fall of the stars.

There were so many. They came as red filaments, drawing a scarlet veil over the sky. Then the darkness came, worse than any dream, and Feisler ran from the balcony, his world's desperate cry for help already resounding in his soul.

Khania shrieked, but no one heard. The shadow in the warp had come to the planet ahead of the first spores. From the perspective of neighbouring systems, Khania had fallen silent. Feisler and his subjects did not know they were already under attack before the crimson dawn. They were ignorant of the threat, except perhaps in the torment of their dreams.

But the silence itself was noted. It was monstrous in its significance. Khania screamed in the silence, and the Imperium answered.

The nearest system was Sevasmos. On Katara, the sole inhabited world, the Astra Militarum regiment of the 66th Kataran Spears embarked for Khania. The mobilisation was total. Every soldier in the Spears knew what the silence meant. The Devourer had come, and if Khania fell, Katara would be next.

Captain Harth Deyers paused on the ramp of the heavy lifter. His company of Leman Russ tanks was aboard, ready to be transported to the cruiser *Admiral Dammann* waiting at low anchor. These were his last moments on Katara. He hoped to return. He did not expect to. He was going into battle against the tyranids. The only honest hope he could cling to was victory, not survival. Could he think of a better end to his decades of service than to die for the salvation of Katara itself? No, he could not.

As long as salvation was achieved.

‘Captain?’

He glanced over his shoulder. Lehanna Platen, his gunner on the Lemna Russ *Bastion of Faith*, was descending the ramp. Deyers and Platen had served together for more than fifty years in the *Bastion*. Platen was a sniper with the cannon. Deyers was not surprised she had caught his hesitations. ‘Just having a last look, Platen,’ he said. Beyond the spaceport, the lights of Chreontiades illuminated the falling evening. The city was the magnificent jewel of Katara. Crystal towers bounced the light between them. The elevations of the city flashed and twinkled. The walls of the towers were treated armouress. They were as strong as they were inspiring, but at night it was easy to perceive the city as being as insubstantial as light itself.

This was a sight worth preserving. A city worth dying to protect.

Platen joined Deyers. Standing beside him, she barely reached his shoulder. She was a short, hard, barrel of a trooper, destined from birth, it seemed, to live in the confined spaces of the gun controls. She folded her arms and nodded at the lights of Chreontiades. ‘How do you like our odds?’ she said.

‘Of winning or surviving?’

Platen snorted at the mention of survival. ‘Winning,’ she said.

‘They’re good,’ said Deyers. ‘We won’t be fighting alone.’

‘Is the Adeptus Astartes coming?’

‘No, but two Legios of the Adeptus Titanicus are. So is the Navy.’ Deyers spoke for his own benefit more than for Platen’s. She entered combat phlegmatically. That she was even asking these questions showed how seriously she took the coming war. ‘The Navy will destroy the hive ships. The Legios will obliterate the tyrannid ground forces. Our role will be a supporting one.’

‘A sound strategy,’ Platen said. ‘Very nice.’ Her tone was hard and knowing, shaped by too much experience. ‘So there is nothing to go wrong, is there?’

The wreckage of ships filled the vicinity of the Khania system’s Mandeville point. Krezoc arrived on the bridge of the Pallidus Mor’s transport *Nuntius Mortis* as the ship translated from the immaterium. Collision warnings sounded. Hololithic screens to either side of the oculus were dense with red runes as cogitators fought to keep up with the trajectories of the larger fragments.

‘Ahead slow,’ Shipmaster Belletow called. There was no question of evasion for a vessel as ponderous as the *Nuntius*. It would have to rely on its bulk and shielding to pass through the debris field intact.

As she made her way to the forward area of the bridge, Krezoc felt the

vibrations in the deck from the first impacts. In the oculus, the darkness flashed with the discharges of straining void shields. A huge chunk of a hull rumbled up through the oculus' field of vision. Exterior statuary and banks of silent guns were still intact too. Krezoc slowed, bracing. The wreckage slammed into the superstructure of the *Nuntius*. The bridge shook as if worried in the jaws of a giant grox. More klaxons sounded. Krezoc kept her balance. She moved on, to where Marshal Eras Balzhan stood before the oculus. To her left, she saw the other two senior princeps arriving. Each commanded a maniple of Titans. The demi-legio dispatched to Khania consisted of four maniples altogether. A strong showing, Krezoc thought, regardless of the size of the force being sent by the Imperial Hunters. There had been no communication yet from the other Legio.

The *Nuntius* shook again. Screeches of binaric cant flew between the tech-priests on the bridge. Krezoc wondered how close the void shields were to collapse. There would have to be contact with the Imperial Hunters now. The campaign was already going awry.

As they do, Krezoc thought calmly. *As they always do*.

There should have been a large squadron of Imperial Navy ships on station. Instead, there was only the debris field, pulsing with the afterglow of cataclysmic explosions. The prow of a cruiser glided over the *Nuntius*, its severed end still blazing with ignited plasma. The transport moved through clouds of frozen human corpses. Scattered through the Imperial ruins were chunks of organic, honeycombed structures. They left a comet trail of organic soup as they spun end over end through the void.

Krezoc crossed the open space of the bridge to join Balzhan. 'Do we know what happened?' she asked.

'We know enough,' the old man said. The set of his jaw was grim. The marshal was squat, built heavily about the shoulders. Where Krezoc was wiry and taller than most of the other princeps in the Pallidus Mor, Balzhan's build seemed well-suited to brawling in a *Militarum* commissary. His skull, clean-shaven like hers, was encased in a metal brace, bolted into the bone as if holding his head together. The cross-sections of the brace were further mechadendrite ports. Both his eyes were augmetics, dark jewels shimmering darkly in his sockets when light caught their facets. 'It seems the Navy arrived at the same time as the Kataran 66th,' Balzhan said.

'Unfortunate,' said Krezoc. The intent of the campaign had been for the Imperial Navy to strike first, taking out the bio-ships and clearing the way for the Spears and the Legios. Simultaneous translation from the warp might have

split the attention of the Navy, especially if the Spears' vessel had stuck to its mission and made straight to send the troops planetside.

'Unfortunate,' Balzhan agreed, 'but not the determining factor.' He swept an arm at the careening ruins. 'The Navy did not send enough. Their vessels were overwhelmed by the enemy.' He paused. 'They managed to destroy one of the bio-ships, at least.'

The two officers marked the Navy's loss in silence. For a moment, Krezoc allowed herself to see more than the tactical disaster. She saw the specks of human debris for what they were – tens of thousands of lives ended in a lost struggle.

The Pallidus Mor had the reputation of icy indifference to death. The reputation was false. The gulf between indifference and the necessary acceptance of realities of war was a vast one. The other princeps now reached them. 'Did the Spears make planetfall?' Merys Drahn asked.

'We don't know yet,' Balzhan told her.

Krezoc hoped they had. The Pallidus Mor had fought by the sides of the 66th before. The campaign on Thoryvos had cemented a bond of shared sacrifice between the forces.

'And the enemy's position?' said Toven Rehliax

Another impact, a hard one. Rehliax staggered. Balzhan was immobile, as if welded to the deck. He shrugged.

'Auspex!' Belletow shouted. 'It would be nice to know where we stand!'

'Readings coming through now, shipmaster,' Tech-Priest Thassanis announced.

'Port display,' Belletow said.

The collision trajectories vanished. They were replaced by a hololithic map of Khania's sphere. The tyrannid bio-ship appeared, a foul parasite even in schematic form, over the central landmass.

'The enemy is in geo-synchronous orbit over the region of Hive Gelon,' the Mechanicus adept continued, his voice flat and electronically grating.

'How many ships?' Balzhan asked.

'One. The Navy destroyed the other. We are also receiving the transponder signal from the Imperial Hunter transport *Currus Venatores*. There are no other Imperial vessels in the system.'

Balzhan grunted. Krezoc winced as the shape of the conflict took form. The critical first stage of the campaign had failed. The tyrannids may have been wounded, but even with a single ship, they held the advantage.

'Analysing vox traffic from the surface,' Thassanis said. A few moments

passed, during which the transport emerged from the worst of the debris field. Belletow ordered the klaxons silenced. ‘Combat vox activity from the Kataran 66th confirmed,’ said Thassanis.

‘Their situation?’ Balzhan asked.

‘Sub-optimal.’

Dire, Krezoc thought.

‘The *Currus* is hailing us,’ Thassanis continued.

‘Open the channel,’ Belletow said. ‘Bridge vox-casters.’

Thassanis complied.

‘*This is Marshal Syagrius of the Imperial Hunters,*’ a voice boomed. Even with the vox distortion, the tones were deep, the voice cultured. ‘*I would speak with the commanding officer of the Pallidus Mor.*’

Balzhan moved to the work stations. A junior officer approached with a hand unit. ‘This is Marshal Balzhan,’ he said. ‘I am glad to hear from you, Marshal Syagrius.’

‘*Quite,*’ said Syagrius. ‘*I am not glad of the battlefield conditions.*’

‘They are not what we had hoped,’ Balzhan agreed. He sounded less aggrieved than Syagrius. In the culture of the Pallidus Mor, hope was an abstraction, a concept that was understood, but foreign. Victory was a duty, not an expectation. What was expected were the vicious contingencies of war. The situation over Khania was just another of those.

‘*You will agree that direct engagement with the surviving bio-ship is out of the question,*’ Syagrius said.

Krezoc bristled at the Imperial Hunter’s condescending tone. His words were more like an order than an observation.

If Balzhan was offended, he showed no sign. ‘I do agree,’ he said.

The transports were heavily shielded, but did not have the armaments to take on the tyranids. At least three Imperial Navy cruisers had been shattered. The transports would be taken apart in short order.

‘*We have little choice,*’ Syagrius went on. ‘*We cannot land in the near vicinity of the combat without being exposed to the bio-ship’s weapons.*’

‘You propose coming down at a point below the enemy’s horizon,’ said Balzhan.

Drahn whistled. ‘A long march,’ she said. The maniples would have to cross hundreds of miles back towards the besieged hive. Gelon and the Spears might well fall long before they could be reinforced.

‘No choice,’ said Krezoc. Just as there was no choice to fight until the unknown

moment when further Imperial Navy forces would arrive.

‘*We have chosen a suitable landing site,*’ Syagrius said. ‘*I will have the coordinates sent to you.*’

There was a snap from the speakers. The Imperial Hunter had ended the transmission.

The three princeps exchanged looks. *Arrogant bastard*, Krezoc thought, and saw her sentiment reflected in the faces of the others. Battle coordination with the other Legio was not going to be easy.

This is just another vicissitude of combat, Krezoc told herself. *We will march through it as well.*

‘Princeps of the Pallidus Mor,’ Balzhan called, his ancient croak strong and echoing across the bridge. ‘Assemble your maniples. Prepare for war.’

After the xenos rain, an Imperial hail descended on Khania. It came down far to the east of Hive Gelon, on a hard, cracked plain of thorny scrub. Immense coffin shapes burned the sky with their contrails. Tectonic thunder boomed across the land as they slammed into the earth. Huge clouds of dust billowed high into the air. For a short while they reduced visibility on the ground to zero, blinding the Secutarii troops unloading from lifters. As high as the dust went, it did not reach the tops of the colossal monoliths. Now their hatches dropped to the ground, with more thunder, and more dust. The God-Machines strode out from within their coffins, taking their first shattering steps on the surface of Khania.

The late afternoon light penetrated the command chamber in the head of the *Gloria Vastator*. Krezoc saw it with her eyes, and with the sensors of the Warlord. She was whole once again, linked to the machine-spirit, fused with it in the Manifold. And in the magnificent wholeness, she was also split. She held the power to annihilate armies in her immense arms, and she was the small human in the head of the monster. She surveyed the landscape with the senses of the *Vastator*, and she looked upon them with her own. She revelled in the fusion. Taking the machine-spirit’s will in hers, she was suffused with transcendent power. Even so, she maintained a strong awareness of her physical body and her human identity. The split consciousness assured the safe function of the fusion with the God-Machine. Krezoc must remain Krezoc, or be devoured by the *Vastator*.

Below her throne, on her right and her left, were the four positions of the moderati. Their wills were the extensions of her own, controlling the weapon systems of the Titan. The weapons existed for her as clusters of power on her

shoulders and arms. Her left shoulder: the carapace-mounted Apocalypse missile launcher. Her right shoulder: the Vulcan mega-bolster. Her left arm: the Volcano cannon. Her right arm: the Quake cannon.

In her will: the power to melt a world.

Her adamantium body took a ponderous step. Then another. She commanded her arms of annihilation to rise, and they did. The beast that was the machine-spirit obeyed her. She completed its being just as it did hers. They were a unity of war. Each had felt the pain of the other's absence. Now they were complete. Now they wished for the fulfilment of purpose. They needed an enemy to exterminate.

'Systems report,' Krezoc said. She knew the answers she would receive. She would know if the great body were in pain. But the details of its state were the duties of others to monitor and to experience. Speaking to the moderati and to the rest of the crew served another purpose, as well. The act of moving her lips helped maintain her consciousness of the flesh. It kept Krezoc the human whole.

Divisions that preserved totalities. This was the paradox of princephood.

One after another, the voices sounded in her ears, electronic transmissions from the reaches of the God Machine's body.

'*Volcano cannon, status optimal.*'

'*Apocalypse missiles, status optimal.*'

'*Power plant, status optimal.*'

'*Void shields, status optimal.*'

Near or far, in the command chamber or deep in the core of the torso, they were all transformed into the same register. Human beings spoke the words, but the words became impulses sent to Krezoc by the vast being of the Warlord. They were components of the greater consciousness.

The Titanic paradox again: the voices were the confirmation of what Krezoc already knew, and they were the expressions of the crew's personal realities.

The *Gloria Vastator* moved away from its coffin ship, away from the landing site and into the wider plain. Krezoc directed it to an open position and then held there, waiting for the rest of her maniple to form up around the Warlord.

The *Vastator's* smaller brethren arrived. Each a colossus, but each overshadowed by the Warlord's bulk. The Reaver *Tempestas Deorem*, and the Warhounds *Canis Ignem*, *Canis Vindictae* and *Fidelis Venator* shook the ground with their steps. A gathering of might, the maniple a great fist of unimaginable force, itself part of the larger assembly of the demi-legio. A few hundred yards ahead of Krezoc's position, Balzhan's command maniple was forming up around

his Warlord, the *Ferrum Salvator*.

As the dust clouds settled, the Secutarii, the augmented infantry of the Legios, moved in to take up their stations near the feet of the Titans. The Pallidus Mor had come to Khania, and would soon be ready to march.

Another Legio had come, too, though. The Imperial Hunters were already assembled. To the west, the ground rose gradually for a few miles. The God-Machines of the Hunters were silhouetted against the sky, bestriding the ridge. The pale green and white of their armour was resplendent, even in the overcast day. The bone-ivory and night-black of the Pallidus Mor was funereal in contrast. The wind snapped the banners flying above the shoulders of the Hunters' Titans. The symbol of the Imperial Hunters was unfurled over the planet they had come to take back from the xenos. Black geometric shapes against a yellow backdrop formed a stylized torch – three small triangles radiating from the top of a circle, one large triangle pointing downwards. At the centre of the formation towered Syagrius' Warlord, the *Augustus Secutor*.

The Imperial Hunters sounded their battle horns in unison, as if declaring the campaign begun while the forces of the Pallidus Mor were still forming up. The hail of coffin ships had not yet ended.

The voice of Syagrius came across an open channel. '*Welcome to Khania, Pallidus Mor,*' he said.

That five words could be so laden with arrogance astounded Krezoc. Syagrius spoke with the presumption of command. With aristocratic condescension, he was addressing subordinates. The pretence of welcome was intended to put the warriors of the Pallidus Mor in their place.

Krezoc's lips curled in anger. The *Vastator* took half a step, her frustration manifesting in the displacement of tons of metal.

'*Thank you, Marshal Syagrius,*' Balzhan answered. '*My compliments on your choice of staging ground.*' He was calm. There was no resentment in his voice, as if he had not noticed the insult, thus rendering it ineffective.

'*We have far to walk and little time,*' Syagrius said. '*Coordination is imperative.*'

'*Agreed.*'

'*Then you will also agree to the seniority of the Imperial Hunters in this joint mission.*'

Krezoc hissed. In the mindscape of the Manifold, the machine-spirit reacted to her anger. It growled. It strained against her grip. Its pride was injured. It sought satisfaction.

Balzhan was silent.

'I speak with all due respect to your rank, Marshal Balzhan,' Syagrius continued, making it clear that he felt there was no respect due at all. 'Urgency and practicality force our hand. The Imperial Hunters are ready now. You are not. We have fielded five maniples to your four.'

'As you say,' Balzhan said after a moment. 'The situation is very clear to me, marshal. I will signal you when we are ready to proceed.'

'Very well.'

Balzhan could have switched the exchange to a private channel between the commanders as soon as it had begun. He had not, and so every member of the demi-legio had heard. Krezoc felt more than her personal anger reverberating through the being of the Warlord. The machine-spirit reacted to the injured pride of the entire crew. It chafed at the reins of her will. She held it and her temper back and opened a private vox channel to Balzhan.

'I know what you are going to say,' he said before she could speak.

'Good. But I wanted you to know I was going to say it.'

'Marshal Syagrius' manner is high-handed, but his rationale is correct.'

'His rationale is blinkered. Relying on numbers and who got here first ignores the question of fitness to command.'

'We have never fought by the side of the Imperial Hunters before. What evidence do you have that I am more fit to lead this campaign than Marshal Syagrius?'

'The fact that he used such shallow justifications to assert his authority,' Krezoc said.

Balzhan was silent for a moment. Then he said, *'What is true is that we have no time for leadership disputes. The situation is what it is, and we can best serve our mission by making it work. That is our duty now.'*

He was right, and Krezoc had known the answers to her anger before she had begun the conversation. Balzhan was following the tradition of the Pallidus Mor, one that had been established over the course of millennia of grinding campaigns. The ideal was never present. The worst almost certainly was. Dismay and frustration were the roads to paralysis and defeat. There was reality and there was the mission. Duty lay in the recognition of one and the completion of the other by whatever means necessary.

Even so, there were things that needed to be voiced. Krezoc looked beyond her pride. Her concern was for the mission. Disaster had already struck. It would again, because such was the inexorable way of fate. But some disasters could be

foreseen.

'He is a marshal,' Balzhan reminded her, as if reading her thoughts. *'He will not have arrived at his position through incompetence. His judgement regarding the landing was sound.'*

'Yes,' Krezoc admitted, unconvinced. It wasn't Syagrius' skills or intelligence she doubted. It was his manifest assurance in his superiority that troubled her. Arrogance was a small step away from a belief in infallibility. And that was a gateway to catastrophe.

'Then we march with clear eyes,' Balzhan said.

'We march,' Krezoc repeated. *With wary eyes,* she thought.

The long walk to Gelon began. Syagrius set a fast pace. Detachments of Warhounds raced ahead of the main body of the demi-legio, scouting for the first presence of the enemy. After the ridge, the terrain began a long, gradual slope downwards. Streams ran in jagged gullets, draining water towards the distant swamp. Here there was little moisture in the land itself, and only struggling life. Compared to the swamplands, it was a poor target for the tyranids. The invaders had come down instead on a huge concentration of biomass. And right beside the marshes, Gelon was another vast reservoir of prey.

The light faded from the first day of the march. Night fell, and there was still no sign of the foe. In the dark, lit by the glow from the command chambers like the eyes of furious gods, the Titans resembled a mountain chain moving across the plain. They were hulking shadows, their forms revealed in flashes when the arc lights of other engines, trained on the ground, happened to pass over them. The strides of the Warlords were ponderous and vast, covering huge areas with every step. The beat of the Reavers' and Warhounds' gait was faster. The *Gloria Vastator's* sensors picked up the complex battle rhythm.

The drumming ran through Krezoc's blood. It fed the machine-spirit's hunger for prey. Her need to strike, to tear the enemy apart, became more urgent. She felt the slipping away of the hours, and knew they marked the coming end of Hive Gelon and the Kataran 66th. At the same time, she perceived the rush of the forced march. She disapproved. Moving this quickly in the dark could propel the demi-legios by their own momentum into the jaws of an enemy trap.

The warning came from three Warhounds at once. Two of them were Imperial Hunters. The third was one of the Pallidus Mor that Balzhan had ordered forward to keep pace with the Hunters.

'Movement,' one of the Hunters' scouts voxed on all channels. *'Enemy activity*

approaching from the west.'

'It's a swarming attack,' the Pallidus Mor princeps warned. *'The front line is miles across.'*

'What bio-forms?' Syagrius asked.

'Small ones. 'Gaunts,' the second Hunter replied.

'How deep?' Balzhan wanted to know.

'Very,' the Pallidus Mor Warhound answered.

'Ground infantry only?' said Syagrius.

'Affirmative, though we cannot see—'

Syagrius cut him off. *'This is an attack designed to slow, not destroy. The xenos cannot muster the strength needed. Do not slow. Do not be distracted by the false threat. Full ahead.'*

Krezoc flipped to a command channel, narrowing it to Balzhan's and Syagrius' signals. *'With respect, Marshal Syagrius,'* she said, *'if we do not take some defensive measures, we leave ourselves vulnerable.'*

'To what?' Syagrius said. *'Burn through the foe and advance. Speed is our priority and our weapon.'* He snapped the channel closed.

'Do what you can,' Balzhan said. *'But maintain the pace. A gap in the forces will be worse.'*

'Understood.'

The *Gloria Vastator* was advancing with the *Tempestas Deorem*. The Warhounds of the maniple were ranging ahead, though not as far as the Hunters' scouts. Krezoc's maniple was on the northern flank of the Titans' formation. She had deployed the Warhounds to watch for a tyranid approach from that side. Now she called them back. They knew what was coming. What mattered now was to get through it.

The xenos wave arrived as the Warhounds rejoined the maniple. The Titans' arc lights caught movement on the ground. The terrain undulated with a carpet of clawed monstrosities. From the height of the command chamber, the attack resembled a mass of insects flowing over the plain. There was no distinguishing individual tyranids. This perspective, Krezoc thought, showed her the truth of the enemy. The xenos beasts were not individuals. They were so many extensions of the Great Devourer's will, no more a separate whole than the claws of a hand.

Or the cannon of the limb she now trained on the horde.

'Pallidus Mor,' Balzhan called to all the demi-legio's God-Machines. *'Exterminate the foe.'*

The Titans of Krezoc's maniple fired as one. The end times rained down on the tyranids as all five Titans turned Vulcan mega-bolters on the nearest fringes of the swarm. The *Tempestatas* and the *Vastator* followed up a few moments later with barrages from their Apocalypse missile launchers. With a rapid, deep, throbbing rhythm, the mega-bolters scythed through the xenos horde, mass-reactive shells almost a foot long blasting them to mulch. The missiles hit in a staggered wave, fireballs marching through the tyranids, high explosives sending up wide clouds of dust and fragments of chitin. When the flames died, for a moment there was only scorched earth before the maniple.

The Titans marched forward into the breach, and as the xenos tide flowed in towards the gap, the Vulcans forced them back again.

'Maintain cohesion of the maniple,' Krezoc voxed. 'Warhounds, we'll have no need of scouting at this time.' If she sent the Warhounds out ahead now, into the middle of the xenos ocean, she ran the real risk of losing them. 'Concentrate your fire on the near enemy,' she continued. 'Thin their ranks for the Secutarii. *Tempestatas Deorem*, you have the middle ground. We will strike deeper.'

The maniple responded at once. Three levels of destruction hit the 'gaunts. The Titans advanced slowly but steadily, the holocaust of mega-blaster and missile flights holding back the tyranids. Smaller numbers of the predators made it through to attempt to scale the legs of the God-Machines, but the Secutarii were holding their own against them.

Explosions lit the night as the two demi-legios blasted the swarm. A solid wall of fire extended before the maniples of the Pallidus Mor, turning the landscape into a vision of burning fury.

Beyond the barrier, silhouetted by their own blasts, the God Machines of the Imperial Hunters strode over the battlefield, wading deeper into the boiling mass of the tyranids. They were moving fast, opening up a space many miles wide between their ranks and those of the Pallidus Mor.

'Marshal Balzhan,' Krezoc voxed.

'*I see the problem, princeps,*' he responded. '*Marshal Syagrius,*' he signalled, keeping Krezoc in the channel. '*You will outpace us very quickly.*'

'*It is rather your maniples that are falling behind. Gelon has need of us, Marshal Balzhan. We must be bold.*'

'But we must not be reckless,' Krezoc put in. She did not care if she gave offence. 'You are leaving your Secutarii behind.'

'*They will what they must,*' Syagrius said. '*As should all of us.*' His implication was clear. His offence was deliberate. '*These bio-forms do not present a risk to*

the Titans. We must advance quickly while we have the opportunity.'

'The risks—' Balzhan began.

'Are less than the consequence of being too slow. I'm surprised I have to point this out.'

Syagrius severed the link.

'Marshal?' Krezoc asked.

'Continue as you are,' Balzhan said. *'Your example will be followed.'* He switched to the Legio-wide channel, then said, *'Command to all maniples. Extend your long-range fire to cover the Imperial Hunters.'*

Krezoc obeyed. She kept the *Vastator's* secondary weapons fire close to the region just beyond the Reaver's field of destruction, but now she raised the Warlord's right arm. Her will blended with that of Moderati Grevereign. They were two individuals, and they were one, and they were a whole with the *Gloria Vastator*. The Titan's monstrous weapon limb reacted as if Krezoc were moving her own arm. Colossal energies and mechanisms were the blood circulation and contracting muscles of the Warlord. The charge built. Grevereign's focus oversaw the preparation of the weapon; Krezoc's selected the target.

A division of labour with the end goal of perfect synchronisation.

Always the paradox.

Ready, Grevereign signalled, and Krezoc felt the information as instinctively as if it had originated from her own nervous system.

The cannon fired. Concentrated through the weapon's crystal, raw energy became a beam of cataclysmic intensity that seared a trench through the 'gaunts rushing at the feet of the Imperial Hunters. The rocky surface of the plain turned molten. The trench glowed red. Scores of 'gaunts were vaporised on contact. Still more fell into the sudden flow of lava.

The hit was good, Krezoc thought, eyeing the long band of angry red in the distant dark. And it was still like trying to carve a path through the sea. If the Imperial Hunters pulled too far ahead, it would become impossible to provide them with adequate covering fire. Krezoc foresaw a decision looming for Balzhan. He would have to choose between preserving the combat effectiveness of the Pallidus Mor and embracing the impetuous charge of the Hunters.

Syagrius had not called back his scouts. The Warhounds continued to range ahead. Their reports came back over the vox at regular intervals, broadcast to the combined demi-legios. *Updates about nothing,* Krezoc thought, fuming at the pointless risk. The deeper into the waves of 'gaunts the Warhounds went, the faster they had to go, just to keep the tyranids from swarming up their legs. The

Imperial Hunters were using their long-range weapons to give the Warhounds cover, but Syagrius was urging them to go further and faster yet.

What warning do you seek? Krezoc wondered. *The enemy is here. Now. It is not a threat to dismiss.* All she saw was a vainglorious race.

'Light at the horizon,' one of the Warhound princeps voxed. *'Multiple launches. They—'*

'Exocrines!' another shouted, just before their voices disappeared in prolonged bursts of static.

Krezoc saw the attack unfold at the edge of her visual range. She hadn't realised how far Syagrius had sent the scouts. Arcing streaks of burning plasma tore the darkness. They were the distinctive marks of the tyranid long-range bio-artillery. Somewhere beyond Krezoc's sight, the ponderous beasts with living cannons growing out of their backs had taken aim at the Warhounds. The attacks were coordinated, several plasma blasts coming down on a single target. The explosions were immense, turning the distance a blinding white. The static on the vox went on and on. Krezoc heard the fragments of a shout, and then there was silence.

The fusillade of the Hunters' heavy weapons suddenly intensified. They were reaching further, seeking to strike back at the still-invisible beasts that had drawn the first Imperial blood.

'Marshal Syagrius,' said Balzhan. *'What are your losses?'*

'Two Warhounds.' Syagrius cursed, then continued: *'We're pulling the others back but accelerating our overall pace. Direct your long-range fire to the incoming coordinates.'*

Krezoc tensed at the peremptoriness of the order. Balzhan answered before any princeps of the Pallidus Mor could respond to the insult. *'Have you considered the possibility that these actions are precisely what the enemy desires?'* he said.

'Have you considered the consequences of delay?' Syagrius retorted. His channel went dead.

A few moments later, a stream of binaric reached Krezoc in the Manifold. It became the targeting coordinates. In concert with Vansaak and Grevereign, she raised the Quake and Volcano cannon arms.

Across the lines of the Pallidus Mor and the Imperial Hunters, flame arced through the night. A barrage to shatter cities reached out to unseen prey.

The Titans advanced through the thickening xenos tide, and Krezoc saw in the burning sky a grand illusion. It was the spectacle of folly.

Feisler paced his chambers. At the entrance, his honour guard stood by. They were frustrated because he refused either to accompany them to a bunker deep in the core of the hive or to consent to being airlifted away from Gelon entirely.

‘To where?’ he had demanded. ‘What location do you think is safe if Gelon falls?’

And he would not go to the bunker. There was no safety there either. There was only delay, at best. And a coward’s death.

Feisler shared the guards’ frustration, though. Like them, he felt that he was doing nothing. As the Devourer came for his city, how could he act to defend it? Gelon’s militia had been destroyed, barely holding out long enough to protect the hive until the Kataran 66th had landed. Now the defence of the hive and of Khania was entirely in the hands of the Spears and the Adeptus Titanicus. All he could do was bear witness.

So he made that his task. He would see the war until it ended or he was killed. It was the most honour he could salvage, little as it was. He had ordered vox units and tactarium displays to be brought into the main chamber. Now the vid screens changed every few moments, updating the configurations of the battle lines. The data was incomplete. Blanks opened up in the hololithic diagrams. Sometimes they filled in, showing the Spears still holding at those points. Sometimes they stayed blank, hinting at disaster. A cacophony of orders and shouts and screams came from the vox. Feisler tried to concentrate on the voices and the displays and form an accurate sense of the progress of the war. It was impossible. The balcony called to him: the vista of his world’s death was too horrifically compelling. That was what he had to watch. He moved back and forth between chamber and balcony, trying to make greater sense of what he saw, and hauled back by the scale of the horror.

Smoke from the fires of war thickened the clouds, but the wind was still strong, blowing clearings in them. The walls of Gelon stood for now; the battle was concentrated in the industrial dead lands between the walls and the marshes. The Kataran Spears were using the trenches of effluent and slag heaps for cover, while their armour fought in the more open spaces. They had made the wastes the true gates to Gelon. Larger and larger bio-forms were moving against the regiment. It was as if the swamp had risen up and was marching on the hive. In glimpses, Feisler saw a great heaving on the ground, the movements spreading wider and becoming more pronounced all the time. Doom fell from the red skies in an unending rain. The distance was lit by the flashes of cannon muzzles and the blasts of shells, but also by the explosions of destroyed tanks. The Spears

were holding out longer than the militia had. They could not win, though.

And there was no sign of the Titans' arrival.

New clouds appeared in the upper air. They were darker and denser than the others. They dropped towards the ground, moving against the wind. Standing at the threshold between the chamber and the balcony, Feisler saw they were composed of individual motes, swarming together, flying with purpose. Closer yet, and he saw the wings.

'Emperor save us,' he moaned.

At his cry, the honour guard rushed forward and began to form a protective cordon around him. Feisler waved them away. 'This is pointless,' he said. So were all the measures to protect the hive. Anti-air turrets on the walls and spires of Gelon opened up. Feisler knew how much use they would be against a foe this numerous and agile. There were no barriers to the flying Devourer. There were horrors of every size in the swarms. At their core were shapes so massive, Feisler expected them to carry off spires in their talons.

But the winged monsters did not descend on Gelon. They flew east, across the swamp, heading for a destination beyond Feisler's sight.

'Where are they going?' the captain of the guard wondered.

Feisler smiled, knowing hope at last. 'To attack a greater threat to them.'

The hope, so long absent he had to suppress hysterical laughter, vanished in the next instant. Something else was dropping from the clouds. Something colossal.

A hurricane of leather wings descended on the Legios at dawn. The swarms blotted out the light. They attacked the Titans' heads, a storm of monstrous bodies and wings cutting off Krezoc's sight of even the nearest of the God-Machines of her maniple. They shrouded the Warlord's command chamber, and though they could not pierce the armourglass, Krezoc could feel the clawing, snapping xenos hunger.

'Up Vulcan,' she said. In the maniple, the fusion of Krezoc and the *Gloria Vastator* lashed out in anger. The Warlord turned its mega-bolter on the flying horde. Exploding bodies filled Krezoc's view. The swarm around the *Vastator* thinned. Krezoc could make out individual enemies now, and the silhouettes of the Reaver and Warhounds taking down their assailants. The smallest of the threats were tyranid gargoyles. They were man-sized bipeds, a winged infantry. Their bio-weapons flashed harmlessly against the void shields. They disintegrated when struck by the Vulcan's huge shells.

'*They are wasting their strength against us with these insects,*' voxed Toven

Rehliax, princeps of the *Tempesta Deorem*.

‘They have achieved their purpose,’ Krezoc answered. ‘They have drawn our fire and bogged us down.’

The march had slowed to a crawl. The ’gaunts on the ground were able to push the Secutarii harder, and the Titans could not move forward in zero visibility. Each step was hard won.

‘*Auspex readings of larger bio-forms inside the swarms,*’ warned Gregor Narvathis of the *Fidelis Venator*.

The reptilian monsters swooped out of the gargoyle clouds. From beneath their huge wings, tentacled creatures streaked like missiles towards the Titans.

‘Priority fire on the hive crones,’ Krezoc ordered. There were many of the bio-forms, at least one attacking each of the Titans in sight.

The bio-missiles struck the *Vastator*’s shields. Energy flashed. Krezoc felt the attack reverberate through the maniple. Her heartbeat lurched with the strain that surged through the Warlord’s systems.

The shield flickered but held. The hive crone wheeled away to circle in for a second attack.

‘Two missiles,’ Krezoc said.

‘Targeting,’ said Grevereign. The Titan’s *auspex* array fed data to the moderati. He would see the flight of the tyranid overlaid with vector and speed calculations. ‘Now,’ Grevereign said.

Krezoc launched the Apocalypse rockets a half-second apart. They streaked to their target. The hive crone accelerated into its turn, evading the first missile, and flew straight into the second Grevereign had aimed ahead of its path. The explosion swallowed the monster. Its wings crumpled. Smouldering, it fell to earth.

The air around the Titans of both Legios was filled with mega-bolter fire, missile arcs and las bursts. Tyranids dropped, but two Warhounds had been immobilised by the bio-missiles’ electromagnetic pulses. Krezoc’s maniple was intact. It cleared the air enough to advance again. Ahead, the Imperial Hunters had concentrated their fire on the flyers closest to the *Augustus Secutor*. Half a mile from the *Secutor*’s right flank, a terrible brilliance ripped apart the dawn; the light bathed the battlefield in the glare of loss. The *Gloria Vastator* was in a direct line with the blast, and the shockwave lashed Krezoc’s maniple. The *Vastator*’s void shields howled violet and went down. The wind that followed shredded the tyranid swarms. Winged horrors exploded into scraps of flesh. Xenos ash danced for a moment in the air and then vanished. A fireball reached

for the sky, and when it failed, a mushroom cloud rose in its stead, towering over the plain with dark majesty, a billowing monument to the death of a God-Machine.

‘*Marshal Syagrius,*’ Balzhan voxed.

Syagrius did not answer. Whatever Titan the Imperial Hunters had lost, he refused to mark its death with the Pallidus Mor. They marked it instead with the greater strides of the *Secutor*. Balzhan’s Warlord lurched ahead of all the maniples. It strode into the blast zone of the destroyed Titan. Its way was clear, and it remained clear. The bulk of the swarms concentrated on the rest of the Hunters and Pallidus Mor. A single advancing enemy was less of a threat.

‘Is he mad?’ Vansaak asked.

‘Glory calls to him,’ Krezoc said. She tasted bile. Syagrius’ gambit might work. The *Augustus Secutor* had broken free of the great crush of the enemy. As long as an even greater concentration of tyranids did not wait between here and the few dozen kilometres that remained before Gelon, he might well arrive first to begin the assault on the enemy’s front lines.

But he was dividing the forces even further. He had crossed a dangerous threshold.

‘*Krezoc,*’ Balzhan called her, ‘*what is your status?*’

She understood at once what he was about to say. ‘Our way forward is clear for the moment, marshal,’ she said. *No, she thought. No. Do not ask this of me.* Already, though, she recognised its necessity. The fate and the resolution of the Pallidus Mor were before her, and she would not turn from them.

‘*Follow the Augustus Secutor,*’ Balzhan said. ‘*The rest of the Imperial Hunters are as bogged down as the rest of us.*’

She refrained from casting blame. Syagrius had seized an advantage, no matter how it had come about. He was shaping the war in accordance with his philosophy, and she must adapt accordingly, pass through the same gates as Syagrius.

More tyranid flyers were on the way. They sailed over the receding shape of the *Secutor* and closed in on the demi-legios. ‘Maniple,’ she voxed to her princeps, ‘I have my orders. You have yours. Remain here. Advance with the main force.’

The *Gloria Vastator* lurched forward. Its full strides ate up the ground. It moved into the scorched earth and through the slowly dissipating cloud. Beyond it, in the gathering strength of the dawn, the towers of Gelon appeared above the horizon.

Riding in the roof hatch of the *Bastion of Faith*, Deyers was caught in the open with the bulk of the armour. The Kataran 66th had managed to push into the tyrannid mass, holding the tide at the edge of the marshlands. Then the monster had come, and it smashed tanks like eggs.

‘*What is it?*’ Platen shouted.

The same cry came to Deyers over the vox from every position. ‘*What is it? What is it? What is it?*’ The voices were those of good soldiers, warriors tested and true, loyal and strong, filled with the pride of their home world and unyielding faith in the God-Emperor. But the horror that came for them now was nothing any of them had ever experienced. It was beyond whispers and nightmares. Deyers had seen briefings on this monster, though. He had read about it on a data-slate as he had prepared for the mission. It had been included as a warning, but in the hope that it would not appear. He had absorbed its characteristics. He realized now that he had not begun to understand the reality of the beast. The reality of the hierophant.

The creature was insectile, if insects could be mountains. Its long, spiny, curved body was supported by four limbs ending in spear-like claws. A leg came down less than fifty yards from the *Bastion of Faith*. A bladed tower plunged into the ground and sent tremors through the Leman Russ’s hull. Far above, two bio-cannon forelimbs angled down at the field. Deyers stared directly into their huge maws.

‘Break right!’ he yelled at the tank’s driver.

Tracks spun. Mud sprayed. The *Bastion* slewed to the side. Electrical currents sparked down the length of the forelimbs. The Leman Russ picked up speed. A Chimera followed hard behind.

The cannons fired two blasts of seething organisms. One barrage hit the Chimera. The shape of the vehicle melted before Deyers’ eyes. His ears were filled with a deafening, liquid hiss. Where the Chimera had been, there was only bubbling slag.

The other strike hit an infantry platoon retreating for the wastes. The troopers were too far away for their screams to reach Deyers, and they dissolved in a terrible silence, their deaths a monstrous pantomime. Deyers grunted with the pain of holding back his cry of horror.

‘Concentrate fire on the head,’ he voxed to his tank commanders. The order felt pointless, but it was an action to take, and his sanity needed even that attempt.

Platen and three other gunners fired within seconds of each other. The shells hit in a close cluster beneath the monster’s jaw. The chitinous armour shattered.

Viscous, shining fluid poured out of the wound and sealed it. The armour reformed, and the hierophant stabbed the *General Vascano* with one of the immense, barbed spear-tips of its legs. It hurled the tank high. The *Vascano* sailed over the wasteland and smashed against the high defensive wall of Gelon.

The hierophant changed direction, and the *Bastion of Faith* was suddenly driving across its path, beneath the barrels of the bio-cannons. The hierophant's jaws gaped wide enough to crush a Taurox.

Platen got off another shot with the cannon. The shell hit the lower jaw. The explosion made the monster look down, nothing more. It snarled at the *Bastion*, the sound huge like the crack of an earthquake, yet high-pitched as the most inhuman shriek of madness. Deyers braced himself for the end.

The hierophant turned without attacking. It wheeled towards the east, moving quickly for the first time. Deyers did not question their luck. 'Pull back!' he yelled at his driver. 'Get us into the waste heaps.' They were poor shelter, but they were better than the open. The *Leman Russ* veered west. It crushed lesser bio-forms beneath its treads as it retreated. Deyers looked back to see what had made the hierophant turn. He knew what he hoped to see.

There was a shadow at first, an ill-defined massiveness in the smoke. Then, its battle-horn sounding over the approach to Gelon, the Warlord marched into clear view, black and yellow banners flying proudly, an immensity of war and divinity. Deyers' heart leapt at the display of the Imperium's glory and the certainty of the enemy's destruction. A shout rose from the retreating Katarans, but its triumph turned to fear when the barrage of missiles erupted from the God-Machine's shoulder at the same moment that an immense plasma cannon fired a miniature sun at the hierophant. The attack would have reduced Gelon's walls to rubble. There was no place for mortals in the clash of deities.

The hierophant was fast. Its speed was impossible. It lunged to the right just as the Titan's weapons finished powering up. The plasma destructor's shot went wide. Some of the missiles found their targets. They blew spines off the massively armoured back of the hierophant. The monster did not slow or react to the wound. It charged the Titan.

Too fast, Deyers thought in horror. *It's too fast*. With despair crushing his infant hope, he wondered why there was only one Titan.

The swampland before Gelon was a holocaust as the *Gloria Vastator* closed in on the battle. The tyranids had devoured vast quantities of the region's biomass. What was left was dead. The *Augustus Secutor*'s attacks had ignited the

desiccated remains. Flames raced over the marsh, consuming tyrannids and vegetation alike. Above the fire, the *Secutor* and the hierophant fought, god and behemoth laying waste to the landscape as they sought to destroy each other. The Warlord's void shields flared and crackled. There were cracks in the *Secutor*'s defences: smoke streamed from the knee joint of its left leg and midway up its back. Even in a Titan she did not know, Krezoc could see the effects of the damage. The God-Machine was slowing. Its huge mass sunk its legs into the marsh, and there were moments of hesitation as it turned and aimed its weapons at the hierophant. The pauses were erratic, small, barely perceptible except to Krezoc's experienced eye, but they were telling. The hierophant circled its prey, bio-cannons unleashing torrents of acid against flanks, sometimes rearing up and lunging forward, striking with the huge spears of its limbs. It had the Warlord on the defensive. The Titan's mega-bolter had better luck tracking the tyrannid's movements. It hammered the upper carapace. Xenos blood fountained briefly from the wounds, but it was not enough.

'If we fire, we may hit the *Secutor*,' Vansaak said.

'Agreed,' said Krezoc. As the *Vastator* entered the burning marsh, she looked beyond the duel to the wasteland before the wall. 'The hierophant's upper carapace is too thick,' she said. 'We need to hit the underbelly.'

'And how do we do that?' Grevereign asked.

Krezoc looked at the battered regiment of the Kataran 66th gathered in the southern reach of the wastes, fighting hard against the artillery and infantry bio-forms of the tyrannids. There was nothing she could use there. Further to the north, there were hills of rusting, discarded metal and lakes of effluent.

Maybe, she thought. 'We go around,' she told her moderati. 'Marshal Syagrius,' she voxed, 'we will be drawing off the foe shortly.'

Her answer was a single word: '*Acknowledged.*' There was strain in the voice, but even more frustration and wounded pride. She heard no thanks in Syagrius' tone. She did hear resentment.

You are a dangerous fool, she thought. She wondered what contortions of the Imperial Hunters' culture had raised this man to his position of authority.

The *Gloria Vastator* circled the duel. Krezoc held back on the primary weapons. The *Vastator*'s machine-spirit resisted, enraged that it was not allowed to engage the enormous foe. She trained the Vulcan on the ground. Foetid water fountained up, mixed with the shattered debris of 'gaunts. That was enough, with the draw of the Kataran 66th, to clear the path of the *Vastator*. Most of the tyrannid forces were attacking the Spears while they gave the hierophant the

space for its fight. Soon the Warlord had put the battle behind it. ‘Magus Thezerin,’ she voxed the tech-priest who governed the operations in the *Vastator*’s core, ‘I want a close auspex monitoring of the hierophant’s movements. If there is any suggestion it is breaking off its attack on the *Augustus Secutor*, I need to know.’

‘*So ordered, princeps.*’

The world shook and burned behind the *Vastator*. Krezoc directed the Titan’s steady, monolithic stride towards the toxic lake on the right. Its surface swam with the multicoloured sheen of promethium. It was bracketed by scrapheaps so high there was enough ruined metal and fragmented rockcrete to build an entire manufactorium. The *Vastator* splashed through the lake. Viscous waves washed up the lower part of its legs. Krezoc looked down, to the left and right, at the waste hills the Warlord passed between. Huge conduits from Gelon poured rivers and cataracts of chemicals into the lake. At the far end, the God-Machine moved into a space of more scattered debris. Metal collapsed beneath the enormous mass of its footsteps. Krezoc turned the *Vastator* around to face the battle. In the Manifold, her will worked with those of the moderati to coordinate the firing of all the weapons systems at staggered moments and different targets.

‘Marshal Syagrius,’ she voxed. ‘Disengage from the fight if you can.’

Now, she thought. ‘*Now*,’ she said. And the *Vastator*’s battle horn sounded, shattering the air of Gelon with its challenge.

NOW.

A full barrage from the Apocalypse launcher began the assault. They locked onto the hierophant. It sensed the danger at the last moment and tried to evade. It failed. The arch of its body erupted in flame. As the rockets hit, the Vulcan mega-bolter opened fire at the base of the slag hills. Krezoc ran the line of shells along both sides of the lake.

The primary weapons powered up, but did not fire. The *Vastator*’s anger built, strained at Krezoc’s control, and was barely held by the promise of what was to come.

Black smoke roiled from the *Augustus Secutor*. The Imperial Hunters Titan was wreathed in the choking clouds of its wounds. It took a step back from the hierophant. The tyranid turned from its injured prey to confront the new threat. It stalked over the marsh and into the wasteland, a being whose motion was scuttling, though it made the ground thunder with every impact of its limbs.

The hills of jagged metal collapsed, slumping into the lake. Tons of wreckage fell into the sludge. It filled the lake, angular metal stabbing up like grey

icebergs.

The weapons charged, ready to fire, waiting.

The hierophant scrambled over the chaotic jumble the lake had become. Its advance slowed. Its limbs stabbed through the wreckage and tangled in it. Its maw gaped wide and it uttered a raging, soul-shredding shriek. The sound reached into the command chamber of the *Vastator*. It tried to overload Krezoc's receptors and tear her from the union with the Titan. She held tight to her focus.

The hierophant was halfway across the lake. Its bio-cannons fired.

'Now,' Krezoc said again.

Now.

The *Gloria Vastator* fired the Volcano cannon into the lake.

Water evaporated instantly before the heat of the immense laser. The volatile mixture of chemicals and promethium erupted. Krezoc stared into an explosion bright as the heart of the sun. The metal debris ran molten. The eruption swallowed the hierophant. It burned away the blasts of the bio-cannons. A mountain disappeared in its funeral pyre. For several seconds, the tyrannid was invisible.

Then it screamed again. The shriek was worse, a thing of rage and mortal pain. The hierophant burst out of the heart of the conflagration. It was covered in liquid fire. Huge shards of pylons and girders impaled its underside. One of its bio-cannon arms hung shattered. Streams of molten metal covered its form. It leapt at the *Vastator*, huge scythe limbs wide and angled to crush its foe in a piercing grip.

And once more: 'Now.'

Now.

The Warlord fired its Quake cannon. The colossal shell, imbued with the matter of dead worlds, struck the belly of the hierophant with the power of a meteor impact. Defence tentacles vanished. The armour shattered. The entire thorax rippled from the blast. Dark fluids gushed from the interior of the monster. Once more the scream came, ragged now as a trauma too great to heal ripped through the system.

But it completed its leap.

It slammed against the *Vastator*. Its limbs clamped against the God-Machine's flanks. They had their own terrible impact. They and the mass of the hierophant overloaded the void shields. The spear-tips of the legs struck through the adamantine hull. The slavering, agonized maw of the tyrannid gaped before the command chamber. The remaining bio-cannon fired. Acid coated the frontal

armour. Metal corroded and ran. The stricken monster tightened its grip.

The machine-spirit cried out, its rage and pain echoing the hierophant's. Krezoc gasped. The Warlord's pain slashed through the Manifold, and through her receptors. In her throne, she arched her back in pain.

The mega-bolter hammered against the smouldering body of the dying monster. Nothing else could fire at point-blank range without disaster. The hierophant's claws gouged deeper into the Warlord's flanks. They severed power conduits. Fires broke out in the access corridors of the Titan. The hierophant's death was not close enough.

Searing brilliance lit the day again. The blast area was smaller, but more concentrated. The movements of the hierophant ceased. Its jaw froze open. Its limbs pulled out of the *Vastator's* flanks and it fell back into the burning lake.

On the far shore, the muzzle of the *Augustus Secatur's* muzzle still glowed.

The sky burned again in the hours after the full strength of the Pallidus Mor and the Imperial Hunters arrived at Gelon. This was a different fire. A purer one. A bright, purging aurora. The Imperial Navy's reinforcements had come too. Three grand cruisers and their escorts turned the single tyrannid hive ship into burning plasma.

'*The war is ours,*' Syagrius voxed to the Legios. '*The enemy is in retreat.*'

'He is quick to proclaim victories,' Grevereign muttered. The marshal had claimed the hierophant kill as his, too.

'Then we will answer with caution,' Krezoc told him.

With a strong cordon established around Gelon, repairs to the damaged Titans were possible, and in the short term, Syagrius' triumphalism was understandable. The tyrannids had lost what appeared to be their greatest weapon. No further infections would come from orbit.

For now.

At the end of the next day, when Krezoc stood at the foot of the *Vastator*, looking up at the rents in the armour, Syagrius joined her. The two God-Machines were side by side inside the walls of Gelon. 'I hope the repairs will be complete before the campaign is over,' Syagrius said.

Krezoc eyed him coldly. 'I'm sure they will.'

Syagrius frowned at her sarcasm. 'You have too little faith, Princeps Krezoc.'

'It is placed differently from yours, marshal,' she said. 'Tell me, does it not trouble you that there were only two bio-ships here? Would you not expect more to come?'

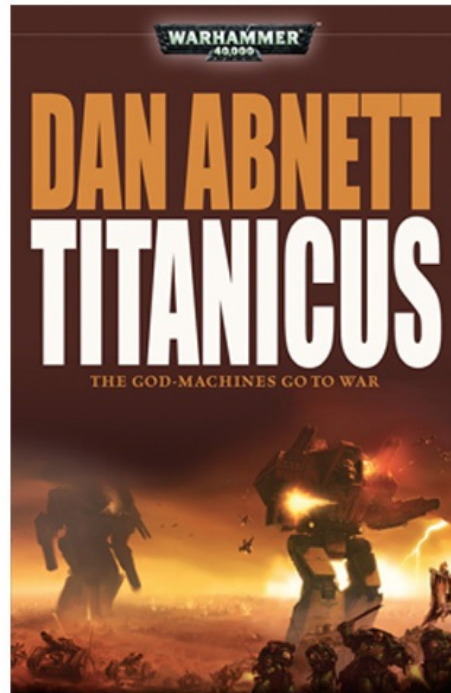
Two days later, the shadow in the warp came for Gelon again.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Annandale is the author of the Horus Heresy novel *The Damnation of Pythos* and the Primarchs novel *Roboute Guilliman: Lord of Ultramar*.

He has also written the Yarrick series, several stories involving the Grey Knights, and *The Last Wall*, *The Hunt for Vulkan* and *Watchers in Death* for *The Beast Arises*. For Space Marine Battles he has written *The Death of Antagonis* and *Overfiend*. He is a prolific writer of short fiction, including the novella *Mephiston: Lord of Death* and numerous short stories set in The Horus Heresy, Warhammer 40,000 and Age of Sigmar universes. David lectures at a Canadian university, on subjects ranging from English literature to horror films and video games.

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