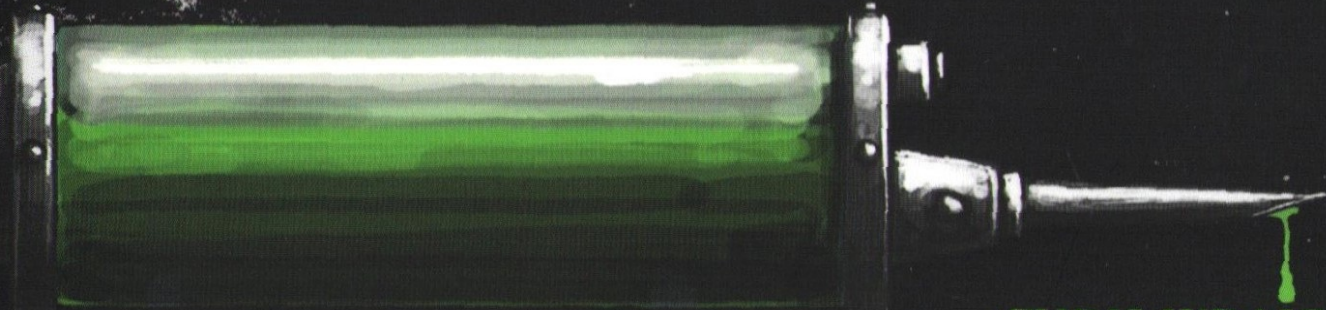


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40,000

JOSH REYNOLDS

A **MEMORY**  
OF THARSIS



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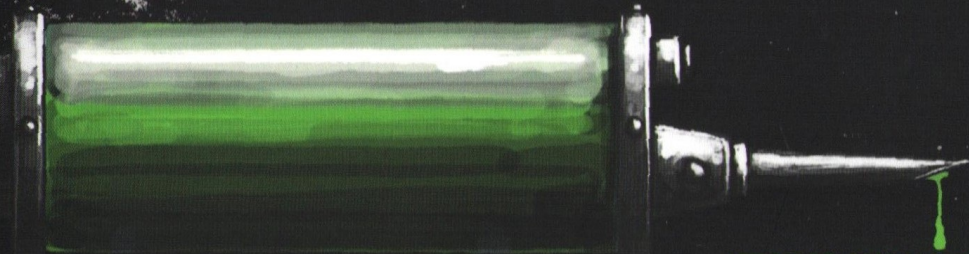
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# **A MEMORY OF THARSIS**

**JOSH REYNOLDS**

# **ARGENT**

**CHRIS WRAIGHT**

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## **WARHAMMER 40,000**

**It is the 41st millennium. For more than a hundred centuries the Emperor has sat immobile on the Golden Throne of Earth. He is the master of mankind by the will of the gods, and master of a million worlds by the might of his inexhaustible armies. He is a rotting carcass writhing invisibly with power from the Dark Age of Technology. He is the Carrion Lord of the Imperium for whom a thousand souls are sacrificed every day, so that he may never truly die.**

**Yet even in his deathless state, the Emperor continues his eternal vigilance. Mighty battlefleets cross the daemon-infested miasma of the warp, the only route between distant stars, their way lit by the Astronomican, the psychic manifestation of the Emperor's will. Vast armies give battle in his name on uncounted worlds. Greatest amongst His soldiers are the Adeptus Astartes, the Space Marines, bio-engineered super-warriors. Their comrades in arms are legion: the Astra Militarum and countless planetary defence forces, the ever-vigilant Inquisition and the tech-priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus to name only a few. But for all their multitudes, they are barely enough to hold off the ever-present threat from aliens, heretics, mutants – and worse.**

**To be a man in such times is to be one amongst untold billions. It is to live in the cruellest and most bloody regime imaginable. These are the tales of those times. Forget the power of technology and science, for so much has been forgotten, never to be re-learned. Forget the promise of progress and understanding, for in the grim dark future there is only war. There is no peace amongst the stars, only an eternity of carnage and slaughter, and the laughter of thirsting gods.**

# A MEMORY OF THARSIS

*Josh Reynolds*

The black mills of Quir never slept.

Volcanic furnaces constantly vomited clouds of grey ash up through sky-scraping chimneys. The thunder of mining equipment echoed forever up from abyssal quarries. Everywhere was the cacophony of industry run wild. It echoed even unto the uppermost reaches of the stratosphere, and the half-finished orbital docking ring that girdled Quir like a halo of metal. But it wasn't merely that hellish clamour which caused Fabius Bile to wince in discomfort as he descended the ramp to the landing platform.

Rather, it was the sound of raw voices, raised in song. The atonal din caused the thin air to reverberate, and made Bile's remaining teeth itch down to their cancerous roots. His fingers clenched about the skull of brass that topped the sceptre he leaned on. It glowed faintly with an unnatural sheen. Power thrummed through it, menacing and covetous. There was an intelligence there, if rudimentary, and it desired to be put to use. The sceptre was an amplifier, and its slightest touch could elicit a raging torrent of agony in even the strongest subject. He'd named it Torment, in a fit of whimsy.

Bile had no doubt that a similar compulsion had motivated this unwelcome display. Hunched, malformed shapes clad in the ragged remnants of ancestral hazard suits stood on the rust-riddled landing platform before him. No two of the factory workers were alike. Some were mostly human, save for an unsightly deformity, while others were barely bipedal. A few sported feathers or scales. Many had coiling, cephalopod-like tentacles rather than hands. One lumbering brute bore a rack of antlers that would have put a Fenrisian elk to shame. They were arrayed in two rows to either side of the disembarkation ramp, like soldiers awaiting the arrival of a visiting dignitary.

The mutants swayed in time to the orchestral piece echoing down from the gargoyle-shaped vox-casters mounted high above the landing platform. The bursts of music drew forth a crude hymn from the ravaged throats of the gathered workers. Cybernetic cherubs swooped overhead, brass-and-steel wings hissing. The tiny creatures shrilled at one another in corrupted binary as they swept incense-spewing censers back and forth above the gathering, further adding to the baroque ridiculousness of it all.

Bile stood for a moment, taking it all in. Hololithic readouts shimmered into view before his eyes as his power armour's sensors scanned his immediate surroundings. Familiar genetic patterns sprawled lazily across the data, each one marked with the telltale spiral of his signature. His lips stretched in a thin smile.

These creatures were his children, in all the ways that mattered. He had grown their ancestors in vats, pulled them screaming from the darkness and delivered them up to their destiny. To see their descendants now evoked in him a rare flicker of pity, if only for the squandered potential. And yet, they thrived. They were strong, in their way. Durable. Adaptable, if lacking in the ability to carry a tune. Fit for purpose. That was all the Lady Spohr, Magos-Queen of Quir, asked of them.

Spohr was a strange one, even by the standards of renegade Mechanicus adepts. Like all queens, she demanded fitting tribute from her supplicants. If she was displeased with her gift, things could get out of hand very quickly. The rotting remains of those who'd disappointed her hung from the chimneys of her factories. No one lived to repeat such foolishness.

Each time he came to Quir looking for repairs to his ancient and dilapidated medicae equipment, he had to bring something new and utterly unique. Things that no other supplicant could offer her. It was almost a game. He had crafted her workers, woven a flesh-weave, even cloned her original organic form, for purposes she had not divulged. But she had been growing bored with his arts even then. Still, he would persevere. He had a responsibility.

That was his work. To improve upon the flawed designs of those who had come before, and seed the stars with a New Man - one adapted to the grim darkness of the current millennium. The weight of such a destiny threatened to crush him, at times. But he would press on, whatever the cost. The task must be completed.

He sighed and started down the ramp. The ancient servos in his armour whined in protest, and the stretched faces of his skin-coat moaned softly. Securing Spohr's services was imperative. And for that, he needed to keep her engaged. Once she had her tribute, she would inevitably lose interest. During their

previous interactions, it was only by holding her attention, by engaging her organic half, that he had been able to ensure that he got what he needed, afterwards. Like the queens of old, Spohr had little interest in fair bargains.

An honour guard of cybernetic soldiers waited at the foot of the ramp. They were clad in shell-like ceramite beneath thick coats and cowls, and clutched antique radium carbines. Strange sigils had been carved into the ceramite, and their coats, like his own, were made from a patchwork of stolen flesh. Some wore grotesque masks beneath their cowls, while others had exposed faces that were more metal than meat. They watched his approach warily, targeting lenses whirring as they took stock of him. His own targeting systems returned the favour, intercepting and meshing with the foreign systems, albeit briefly. His armour, like many things exposed to the persistent environmental uncertainties of warp space, had developed something akin to a rudimentary sentience. Its curiosity, like his own, was insatiable.

For an instant, he saw himself through the artificial optics of the cybernetic warriors. A helmet, pockmarked by impact craters, its colouring scraped away to reveal bare grey ceramite in places. Metallic arachnid limbs, topped by blades, saws and glistening syringes, rose over his bent frame, twitching in time to some faint, internal modulation. Like his armour and Torment, the surgeon had a mind of its own. Bile smiled. At times, he fancied that he wasn't so much a singular being as a colony of like-minded symbiotes - each of them feeding off and being fed on in turn by the others. They were as much a part of him as the blight that gnawed at his vitals like an all-consuming fire. He grimaced. Thinking of it made the pain worse. The blight was eating him hollow. Soon, he would be gone entirely.

The surgeon hissed, and a syringe jabbed his neck. A cool flush filled his system, burying the pain beneath a chemical balm. There were more important matters to attend to than his own inevitable slide into dissolution. Only his work mattered. Work that would stutter to a halt unless he secured the services of his hostess.

An enclosed mechanised palanquin wheezed its way across the loading platform on six pneumatic limbs. It was an ornate monstrosity, dripping with unnecessary gilt and machine-carved grotesquery. Its curtains were made from a chromatic fleshweave of his own design, which shifted hues with every step of its heavy, clawed feet. It was one of his more recent gifts to the mistress of this world, and one he took no little pride in. Though he often preferred to err on the side of function over form, it was nonetheless a rare pleasure in these fraught

times to indulge his creativity.

More of the cybernetic soldiers followed the palanquin at a disciplined lope, their radium carbines held at the ready. These were more heavily armoured than the others, less meat and more machine, sealed in crustacean-like shells of almost organic-looking metal. They wore masks that had been wrought in the shape of daemonic faces, and their coats were branded with the runes of the four Ruinous Powers. They steamed with unnatural heat in the open air, as if whatever passed for their blood was on the cusp of boiling over.

Bile could feel a familiar quiver in the air that had nothing to do with the off-key singing of the assembled workers. The warriors were conversing with one another, and with their mistress, through a neural node-link. He smiled politely, awaiting her arrival. The palanquin slowed as it approached, and its limbs bent with a querulous groan. It lowered itself to the ground. The curtains curled aside with a somnolent murmur as the Magos-Queen of Quir rose and stepped down onto the platform.

The Lady Spohr was a work of art destined never to be completed. She was tall and heavy, built for war rather than idle contemplation. Thick robes, intricately woven with scenes from Martian legend, hid her lower half, and her upper was encased in a heavy golden cuirass bulging with bundles of cables, pumps, hoses and sensory nodes. Smoke issued from vents on her armour, filling the air around her with a cloying miasma.

Thin sensor-filaments extended outwards from her chest and shoulders, their tips pulsing in time to a silent rhythm. Her arms were folded before her, loose sleeves dangling. Her cowl was thrown back, revealing a skull of gold, etched in binary, and a profusion of isolated power cables, which spilled across her shoulders like the mane of some veldt-born felinoid. She wore a loose belt of silver-plated skulls about the swell where her hips might once have been. Each of the silver skulls was marked with a different cog-wheel rune.

Her eyes clicked, focusing on him. She moved forwards smoothly, with artificial grace. Bile bowed as low as he was able, and said, 'You are truly a most welcome sight for this weary traveller, my lady. A beacon in the eternal night of our exile.'

Spohr paused. 'Flattery. A sure sign you have come to bargain, Fabius.' Her voice was not the rasp one might expect. Instead, her words clicked like well-oiled gears. 'I hope you have brought a suitable tribute.' She glanced up at the gunship. 'A sensor sweep of your vessel revealed nothing of interest.' There was a warning note in her voice. 'I considered destroying you as you descended, as a

warning to others. It is not wise to come here empty-handed.'

It was Bile's turn to hesitate. This was always the most dangerous part of the negotiations. She might decide to kill him out of hand, if he didn't prick her curiosity. He made a show of glancing around, and gestured to the singing workers with Torment.

'Was this gathering your idea?'

'They sing your praises. A hymn to Pater Mutatis, Changemaster of the Sixfold Helix. Your creations love you, even when they belong to another.' Her tone told him nothing of how she might feel about that. Nor, in truth, did he particularly care. That his creations were designed to venerate him seemed only sensible. A tool that could turn on its creator was of little use, and love was a stronger chain than fear.

But these were not his creations, only their descendants. Like the fleshweave curtains of her palanquin, the ancestors of her workers had been a gift. They had been designed to her specifications, and grown in his few remaining flesh-vats, in the aftermath of his expulsion from Canticle City and the destruction of his facilities there. An expenditure of dwindling resources, in those days. That they had survived at all was impressive. That they had bred true was nothing short of a miracle. Bile looked at Spohr.

'A fine gift, their ancestors. Don't you agree?'

Spohr turned. 'Come.'

Her manner was as terse as ever. He took no offence. Spohr's mind was a vast web, stretched between every node and cogitator on the forge world. Her attentions were split between a thousand different tasks. The sheer amount of raw data would drive a lesser mind insane. Bile had often thought that his own work would be easier if he could approach it from multiple angles simultaneously. Perhaps one day such a thing might be possible. Until then, he would have to settle for his own two hands, and the aid of his surgeon.

He walked with her across the platform, followed at a discreet distance by her maniple of guards. An itch at the nape of his neck told him that there were others he couldn't see, watching him through targeting scopes. It was to be expected. Anything less, and he might have been insulted.

'It has been seventy-five point eight rotations of the seasonal cycle since your last visit. On average, your visits occur every one hundred rotations. You are early.' She paused, listening to something only she could hear. Her attentions snapped back into focus a moment later. 'Explain.'

'Perhaps I missed you.'

Spohr looked at him. 'Your attempts at humour have not improved in the intervening rotations.' Cylindrical gibbet cages hung here and there from the uppermost reaches of the facility, to dangle over the platform. Inside several of them, mutants crouched, groaning. As Spohr led him past several cages, one of the prisoners reached through the bars towards Bile, slurring a plea for mercy.

He batted its groping claw aside and laughed as the cage spun in a lazy circle. 'It has never been a strength of mine, I admit.'

'Prevarication. Why are you early?'

'Necessity.' Bile coughed. He felt the surgeon tense, pulling tight against his spine, and internal readouts flashed across the inside of his helmet. He dismissed them. 'My requirements are simple, but urgent. I am at a... delicate stage in my work. I cannot afford any delay.'

They left the cages behind and continued on to the edge of the platform. A heavy rail, decorated with machine-precise carvings of an obscene nature, separated them from the smog-choked skies. Bile looked out over the horizon, bracing himself against the high winds that tore at the edges of the platform. Below, a massive ore-hauler, its hull dotted with tumorous malformations, surfaced from the smog-bank with a rumble of engines and rose towards the ring of atmospheric processing centres. It was accompanied in its flight by a flock of smaller bat-like shapes, which shrieked and spun almost playfully through the air. The strange flock dispersed and swept back down into the smog as the ore-hauler gained altitude.

The processed and refined ore it carried would be transported out of the upper atmosphere and to the ever-growing circumference of the orbital docking ring. Quir, like its mistress, was a work in progress.

That urge to tinker was a familiar one. He felt it himself, whenever he considered his own physiology. Unlike Spohr, however, his efforts yielded precious few improvements. At best, they held things in stasis. For now, that would have to do. His obsolescence could not be avoided, but his work would live on. That was all that mattered.

'Your heart rate has elevated by a percentile of point nine nine nine. Are you ill?'

Bile coughed into his fist. Blood speckled his gauntlet. He could feel his hearts straining in their traces, and the weight of something cancerous growing in his abdomen. 'No more so than usual,' he said. He peered at her. 'Do you ever wonder what might have been?'

'I endeavour to weigh all potentialities microsecond to microsecond.' She

paused, head cocked. He felt an itch in his cortex, and knew she was initiating a neural congress with a node somewhere on the planet below. A hiss of binary slipped from behind the golden rictus, pattering across his ears like the whisper of rain. The moment passed as swiftly as it had come. 'That which cannot be calculated is irrelevant. That which cannot aid in calculation is also irrelevant.'

'And are those the same calculations that led you to abandon Mars all those long centuries ago?' A careful question, designed to prick her curiosity. He turned, watching something that might have been a shadow stagger-dance across the platform. More of the shadow-things whirled and twitched in the comers or among the gathered mutants. He'd seen such things before, in transit through the warp. Echoes of the dead, flickering across the perceptions of the living. The flotsam and jetsam of the great Sea of Souls.

Spohr glanced at him as his words registered. An inadvertent, almost human, gesture. She hesitated. It was a small thing. A twitch of lenses, a brief series of clicks, but Bile saw it and congratulated himself. She was intrigued.

'I do not remember Mars,' she said, finally. 'Memories serve no useful purpose. They are—'

'Irrelevant, yes,' he said, pretending to watch the shadows creep and dance. 'You know, from orbit, the landmass your facilities inhabit quite resembles those on the slopes of Tharsis Tholus. I thought you'd chosen it knowingly.'

Another hesitation. So brief as to be unnoticed save by one alert for it. 'The resemblance is irrelevant. I chose it because it best serves my needs.'

Bile turned away from the shadows. Below, a flock of the flapping, bat-like things took flight from beneath the platform. They spiraled up into the air, shrieking a strange, sad song. He watched them for a moment, before replying.

'I noted sings of ongoing terraforming efforts as I entered orbit. Almost as if someone were attempting to incite the formation and eruption of volcanic activity Tharsis Tholus was built into a volcano, was it not?'

'It is for thermal harvesting purposes. I grow weary of this discussion. Where is my tribute?' The question was delivered sharply. Her optics clicked in irritation. He had her. Anger was one of the few emotions left to her.

Bile smiled and pressed his advantage. 'Still, it was beautiful, in its way.'

'Beauty is irrelevant. Irrelevancies are purged from the dataflow. Mars - Tharsis - was - is - irrelevant to current operating parameters. Quir is my home, now.' There was a certain finality to that statement. An irrevocable implication. Nonetheless, he continued.

'Irrelevance is a matter of perception, I suppose. What is a person but the sum

of their experiences, good and bad? All things contribute to the whole, even the most insignificant of occurrences. Weigh them, pare them away, and soon you will be left with nothing.'

'Not nothing. Something better.'

Bile shrugged. 'There are too many fools in Eyespace who seek to divest themselves of past failures. They yearn to rewrite history, as if by doing so they might erase the sins of history. What is done is done. One must build on a foundation of regrets, mistakes and frustrations if one is to ascend properly. One must always look forward, not backward.'

'Nothing of value can be built on weakness.'

'Weakness is the soil in which the seeds of future strength are sown.' He gestured to himself. 'Weakness of flesh, of body and mind, compels me to heights undreamt of by my former peers. I have remade demigods in my image, and drawn from the wellspring of life itself. If I were certain in my strength, pure of function, I would not have achieved half of those deeds which see my signature writ in the blood and marrow of innumerable peoples.'

Spohr studied him. 'By my estimates, your biological functions will cease in—'

Bile gestured sharply. 'Spare me, I beg you. I have my own hourglass, and enough sand to fill it.'

'Elevated pulse. You are frightened. Have you forgotten my tribute, Fabius? Is that why we are discussing irrelevant things?'

'Annoyed, not frightened,' he corrected, ignoring her question.

'Death comes for all things, in one way or another. Ships rust, planetary cores collapse, suns go cold and even demigods die. My only fear is that I will pass on unfulfilled, and my work uncompleted.' He looked at her. 'Hence, I come to you. I am in need of some equipment.'

Spohr waited, in silence. Bile gestured airily. 'Specialised equipment. I have designs. I lack the ability to make those designs a reality.'

'Admittance of weakness. Unexpected.'

'There inevitably comes a point when aid is required, regardless of one's wishes,' Bile said, leaning on Torment. 'I am no engineer. Machinery is as alien to me as the inner workings of the limbic system are to you.'

'I am well aware of the purpose of that biological network.'

'Of course, forgive me.' Bile smiled thinly 'I should have guessed that one who has shed so much of it would understand its intricacies.'

For a moment, the only sound was the whirr-click of Spohr's internal augurs. Then, 'Condescension. You are being tedious, Fabius.'

He laughed. 'Yes. Again, my apologies. One does grow used to being the most adept mind in the room.' He bowed, slightly. 'But your cognitive processes were legend among the servants of the Omnissiah, even before it all went wrong.'

She looked at him. 'It did not go wrong. The plan was flawed from conception.'

'Then why follow it - follow us - into damnation? Why abandon Tharsis for this smog-laced hell, at the behest of the Warmaster?'

Spohr was silent. He could hear the machinery within her chugging along, like a cogitator long past its prime. Calculating.

'The reason is irrelevant,' she said. 'It was done. That is all that matters.'

Bile looked away. 'As you say. Only one question remains - will you do as I ask?'

'Others have enquired much the same, of late,' Spohr said. The wind whipped at her robes, momentarily revealing the anarchic configuration beneath. Neither legs nor serpentine coils, but some juddering mixture of both. 'They say to me - do this thing, and we shall repay you tenfold. Do this thing, and our lord will be grateful.'

Bile frowned, suddenly wary. 'And what thing was this, that they wished of you, dear lady?' he asked, carefully.

Spohr laughed. An artificial, staccato sound, the approximation of humour by one who had forgotten what it means. 'They wish me to cage you, Fabius. To seal you in iron, until such time as they require your services. You are a tool which has exceeded its function, and that cannot be borne.'

'The same might be said of you.' An unexpected - and unwelcome - development. This was no longer the old, familiar game. He had many enemies. He wondered which of them were responsible for this, out of those who considered him to be too useful to dispose of. Lorgar's sons had tried more than once to bind him, as if he were one of their wretched daemons. Even his own Legion had sought to enslave him, in a way.

'No,' Spohr said. 'I perform my function. I mine ore. I smelt metal. I construct engines of war. As has always been my task.'

'But no longer in the service of the Red Planet. No longer for the glory of Tharsis Tholus, with its great dome of ochre and crimson.' He glanced around. Was this nothing more than a distraction? He ground his teeth, frustrated. He was close to a breakthrough. He needed the equipment Spohr could provide. He had no time for this.

'Irrelevant. I perform my function. I do not exceed it. All is in balance.' She turned, power cables rustling like agitated serpents. 'You are not. You exceed

your parameters. You distort your purpose. You must be stripped from the mechanism, so that it runs smoothly.'

'So it has been said.' Bile stepped back. His augurs were being jammed. Hololithic overlays showed only static. It might simply be atmospheric interference, but he doubted it. This was a trap. And he had walked right into it, blindly. He bared rotten teeth in a grimace. It wasn't the first time, and it certainly wouldn't be the last. It was becoming clear to him that someone wanted to stop him. To stop his work, to prevent him from achieving his destiny. This was simply the latest in a string of attempts.

'That has always been the difference between us, my lady,' he said. 'I have chosen my function, and it is to ensure my obsolescence, while you - and those you speak of - seek only to preserve your antiquated purpose in the crumbling husk of the universal machine.' He shook his head. 'Strip me out? There is no need. I have removed myself.'

'And yet your function impedes the whole.' The accusation was delivered with mild force. Her mind was elsewhere again, racing along strands of caged lightning. He was unimportant, in the greater scheme of things. An item to be crossed off a list of duties. He admired her efficiency. 'You must cease.'

'On whose authority?' Bile looked around. 'I see no familiar faces save your own. My enemies leave the burden to you. Why is that, I wonder?'

Spohr gestured.

There was a blurt of static, as if in response. The proximity augurs of Bile's armour spat a warning and he turned, eyes narrowing in consternation. A telltale flicker alerted him a half-second before the blow landed. Combat stimulants automatically flooded his system. He ducked aside, avoiding a blow that would have flattened him, if not snapped his spine. His hand dropped to the Xyclos needler holstered on his hip. He drew it smoothly and fired. Even the smallest scratch from one of the needler's thin darts could induce madness or death.

Providing that the target was organic, of course.

This one unfortunately, was not.

Colours ran like condensation, revealing the hulking form of what had once been a Kastelan robot. The machine was almost three times his size. Its oil-black carapace was draped in a shroud of writhing fleshweave, which had camouflaged the machine. Bile frowned, annoyed at himself. Spohr had reverse-engineered his gift, making it over into something more useful.

'Ingenious,' he muttered, lowering his needler. It would do him no good against a foe such as this. Between the omnipresent din and the fleshweave, he'd been

blind to its presence.

Nerve-like tendril webs had spread and become bloated, bursting through the armour plating like roots through stone. Steaming runes marked its chassis, and clusters of tiny, inhuman faces sprouted like barnacles from the seals of its joints. The ancient war machine panted like a hungry beast as it paced towards him, powerful claws flexing. Its dome-like cranium was twisted, the metal reshaped into an approximation of a bestial leer. The steaming barrel of the combustor weapon mounted on its carapace swung towards him, the air wavering from the heat.

He stepped back, and the weapon tracked him. He glanced towards her. 'They have offered you nothing for your efforts, my lady.'

'As you offer me nothing. Where is my tribute, Fabius? You come empty-handed to my world, and try to bargain with me? Insult. Condescension. Arrogance.' The power cables about her golden skull sparked with sudden life, and the lenses of her eyes flashed. 'They are right. You must be chained. This is my world, and I will not be insulted.'

Bile twisted aside as the Kastelan's claw sprang towards him. It clanked shut, shearing off a piece of his coat. Bile swung Torment towards the back of its knee, hoping to slow it down. The sceptre screamed in frustration as it struck the unfeeling metal. There were no nerves to enflame. The robot's arm swept backwards, nearly taking Bile's head off.

A glancing blow caught the machine on one of the root-like tendril webs. It retreated with a growl of static. Bile smiled. It did have nerves of a sort, after all. That was promising. He backed away, thawing it after him. The combustor mounted on its shoulder spat molten death, and he ducked away. The heat of it blackened the skin on his cheek, but there was no pain. Not yet. Later, if he survived.

A half-step took him inside its reach, and he slammed Torment against the largest fibrous bundle of quasi-flesh. The Kastelan reacted with alacrity, emitting a screech of binary. It swung wildly and its combustor vomited heat. The stimulants in Bile's system carried him swiftly around the frenzied machine. He leapt for its back, hooking his fingers into a buckled plate. He nearly lost his grip as the robot turned, still shrieking an inarticulate stream of zeroes and ones, but managed to haul himself up. His power armour's ancient servos groaned from the strain as he perched on the war machine's shoulder and smashed the combustor from its housing.

The robot groped blindly for him, its claws snapping at his legs. He rose to a

crouch and lifted Torment over his head, the skull-top facing down. He drove it downwards with piston-like force, crumpling the black metal and releasing a storm of sparks.

The Kastelan staggered and its shrieks sputtered into silence. A second blow sent it to one knee. A third obliterated the bestial leer. Smoke spewed upwards, enveloping Bile as the robot toppled forwards. He slid off the robot's chassis a moment before impact and crouched on one knee, hearts thundering.

Beneath the balm of stimulants, he could feel his overtaxed systems attempting to compensate for his efforts. He coughed, and blood speckled his chin. Spohr's cybernetic guards paced towards him out of the smoke, radium carbines at the ready. Balancing himself with Torment, he drew his needler.

'For shame, my lady.' He tracked the stalking shapes as targeting overlays filled his vision. They would be more vulnerable to his concoctions than the robot, but not by much. 'What offence have I given, that warrants such treatment? Will you turn a friend over to his enemies without a second thought?'

'You have no friends. You demand, without giving.' Spohr raised her claw. 'You bring no tribute. Therefore, I will make one of you.'

'No tribute? I never said that.' He laughed. 'Indeed, had you given me the chance, I would have offered it up to you.'

Spohr studied him for a moment. Calculating. He felt a tremor in the air, and her warriors lowered their weapons. They sank to their haunches, weapons braced across their knees, and fixed him with a communal watchfulness.

'What can you offer me that is more precious than the satisfaction of your imprisonment?' she asked.

A hidden slot opened on his gauntlet, revealing an innocuous data-spike. He extracted it and extended it to her. 'Judge for yourself.'

Spohr took the spike and examined it. 'Explain.'

'It is a data-spike. Rather self-explanatory, don't you agree?'

'I have data-spikes.'

Bile peered at her. 'Humour?'

'An observation. What is on it?'

Bile's thin features split in a wide smile. 'Why, a memory, my lady.'

Spohr hesitated. 'A memory?'

'A single moment in time, dredged from the consciousness of an unfortunate archmagos and preserved in electronic amber.'

'What time? What memory?'

Bile gestured. 'See for yourself.'

Still, the hesitation. She was wary. Ready for treachery, though he had never dealt any less than fairly with her. Spohr had not become queen by being trusting of strange men bearing gifts. She inserted the data-spike into a port on her cuirass. The lenses of her eyes clicked. A soft hum filled the air as it shimmered and turned red. Hololithic images hazed into being, springing from in-built emitters.

'Oh,' Spohr said, softly.

Bile rose to his feet, his coat rippling in the memory of a Martian wind. They stood in the shadow of Tharsis, lit by the setting sun.

The air was the colour of rust, and filled with loose sand. Ancient structures dotted the slope of an immense volcano, and bipedal machines bounded across the plains below, their riders bearing the pale colours of Tharsis Tholus. The memory was strong. Bile could almost smell the acrid Martian air, almost feel the grit on his face.

Fine work, even if he did say so himself. He looked at Spohr.

'Mars. As it was before the Schism.'

Spohr stood silent and unmoving. Basking in the glow of better days.

Bile continued. 'A weakness. A bit of grit, stuck in the cogs of calculation'

Spohr reached up, towards the red sun, as it slipped behind the dome of the volcano. 'I forgot the way the light caught the thermal resonators,' she said. 'And the sound of the pyroclastic sifters, as the temperatures dropped...' Her hand fell. She looked at him.

'Irrelevant,' Bile said again.

'Humour,' she said.

He smiled. 'An observation. Is it acceptable?'

Spohr turned away. 'Yes. I will consider your request.' She paused. 'And I will tell you the names of your enemies, if you wish. Your tribute is worth that much, at least.'

Bile considered her offer, but only for a moment. He waved a hand. 'No their identities are irrelevant.'

His enemies were legion. The galaxy was in flames, and crowded with pyromaniacs, eager to claim possession of the ashes. Bile had no interest in the conflagration, its cause or its celebrants. Only in what came after. Let the galaxy burn. From its ashes would rise a new future.

One created by him.

# ARGENT

*Chris Wraight*

I come round, and the pain begins again. It is severe but manageable, so I do not request control measures. I look down and see my arms stripped of their armour, and that momentarily alarms me because I have been armoured for a very long time. I flex my fingers and the pain flares. Both my forearms are encased in flexplast netting, wound tight, and there are spots of blood on the synthetic fabric. For a moment I look at the dark fluid as it spreads in spidery, blotted lines. My wounds will take a long time to heal even with the assistance of the medicae staff, and that is frustrating.

I realise that the drugs I was given have dulled my senses, and blink hard and flex my leg muscles and perform mental exercises to restore mental agility.

I take in my surroundings. I am in a cell made of metal floors and metal walls, perhaps five metres by six. A single lumen gives off a weak light illuminating a narrow desk and an even narrower cot, on which I'm lying. The blankets are damp with sweat and tight to my body. I guess that I am back in the ordo command post beyond the Dravaganda ridgeline. I consider whether I am strong enough to move, and place my hands on the twin edges of my cot. Pushing against the metal tells me that I am not - the bones are still broken and incapable of supporting my weight. I could perhaps swing my legs around and stand, though. I would prefer to keep moving, to get my blood flowing again. I am not a child to be protected - I am a grown woman, an interrogator of the Ordo Hereticus, a warrior.

But I do not move, for the door slides open and my master enters. I can tell it is him even before the steel panel shifts, for his armour hums at a pitch I recognise. I believe that he could have chosen to have the telltale audex volume reduced, but he sees no use for stealth and sees many uses for a recognisable signature. To

know that he approaches is a cause for dread, and I have witnessed the effect often during actions on terrified subjects.

A part of me dreads his coming too, even now, after I have been a member of his retinue for over a year and served on numerous missions. Inquisitor Joffen Tur cultivates fear as another man might cultivate an appreciation of scholarship or the contents of a hydroponic chamber, and I am not yet entirely immune to his practised aura.

He enters, ducking under the door's lintel. He is in full armour - dark red lacquer, trimmed with bronze. The breastplate is an aquila, chipped with battle damage. His exposed head is clean-shaven with a bull neck and a solid chin. His eyes do not make a connection with me - as ever, he does not focus, as his thoughts are at least partly elsewhere. A man like Tur is always giving consideration to the unseen. *m*

'Awake, then, Spinoza,' he grunts, standing before me. *i*

I attempt to salute, and the pain makes me wince. *j*

'Don't bother,' he says. 'You'll be useless to me for another week. Just tell me what happened.'

'On Forfoda?' I ask, and immediately regret it. My wits are still slow.

'Of course on bloody Forfoda,' Tur growls. 'You're in bed, both your arms are broken, you're a mess. Tell me how you got that way.' I take a deep breath, and try to remember.

First, though, I must go back further. I must recall the briefing on the bridge of the *Leopax*, Tur's hunter-killer. This is only one of the vessels under his command, and not the largest. By choosing it he is sending a signal to the other Imperial forces mustering at Forfoda - this world is not the greatest of priorities for him, he has other burdens to attend to, but he deigns to participate in order to reflect the Emperor's glory more perfectly and with greater speed.

Tur does not place great store on courtesy, and I admire him for this. He knows his position in the hierarchy of Imperial servants, and it is near the top. One day I aspire to command the same level of self-belief, but know that I have some way to go before I do so.

We assemble under the shadow of his great ouslite command throne - myself, the assassin Kled, the captain of stormtroopers Brannad, the savant Yx and the hierophant Werefol. In the observation dome above us we can see Forfoda's red atmosphere looming, and it is easy to imagine it burning.

Tur himself remains seated as we bow, one by one. He does not acknowledge

us, but rubs his ill-shaven chin as flickering lithocasts scroll through the air before him.

'They're torching everything,' he says in due course. 'Damned tanimals.'

I stiffen a little. He is not referring to the cultists who have brought this world to the brink of ruin, but to the Angels of Death who are now hauling it back to heel. I do not find it easy to hear those blessed warriors described in such terms, as used as I am to Tur's generally brusque manner. When I first heard that we would be in theatre with the Imperial Fists, I gave fervent thanks to Him on Terra, for it had long been a dear wish of mine to witness them fight.

But my master is correct in this, of course - if we do not extract the leaders of the insurrection for scrutiny then we miss the chance to learn what caused it.

'I'll take the primus complex,' Tur says, squinting at a succession of tactical overlays. 'We need to hit that in the next hour or it'll be rubble. Brannad, you'll come too, and a Purgation squad.'

I am surprised by that. Tur has been insistent for months that I develop more experience in conventional combat, and I had expected to make planetfall with him. He is concerned that my reactions are not quite where they should be, and that I am at risk of serious injury, and so I have pursued my training in this area with zeal.

He turns to me.

'You'll take the secondary spire. They're scheduled to hit the command blister in three hours. Go with them. See they do not kill the target before you can get to her.'

I do not hide my surprise well. 'By your will,' I say, but my concern must have been obvious, for Tur scowls at me.

'Yes, you'll be alone with them,' he says. 'Is that a problem? Do you wish for a chaperone?'

I am stung, and suspect that I blush. 'No problem,' I say. 'You honour me.'

'Damn right,' he says. 'So don't foul it up.'

The target is the governor's adjutant Naiiao Servia, whom our intelligence places within the secondary spire complex. Her master is holed up somewhere in the central hub, defended well, and thus Tur is correct to devote the majority of his resources there. I cannot help but think that my assignment is more about testing me than utilising our expertise optimally. That is his right, of course. He wishes me to become a weapon after his own design, and in the longer run that goal honours the Emperor more than the fate of a single battlefield.

So I ought to be thankful, and I attempt to remember this as I take my lander down through Forfoda's red methane atmosphere towards my rendezvous coordinates. I do not know how Tur arranged it - he tells me only what I need to know - but he has persuaded the warriors of the Adeptus Astartes to let me accompany them, and that is testament to the heft his word carries here.

'Accompany', though, is a misleading word. I am to serve my master's will in all things, and his will is that Servia is taken alive.

I do not yet know how the Imperial Fists will react to this, and on the journey over I catalogue the many factors weighing on an unfavourable outcome.

I am a mortal. Worse, I am a woman. Worse still, I am a mere interrogator. None of these things are destined to make my task with these particular subjects easy, which is no doubt what Tur intended.

We make planetfall and boost across the world's cracked plains towards the forward positions. In order to divert my mind from unhelpful speculation, I look out of the viewports. I see palls of burning promethium rising into the ruddy clouds above. I see the hulks tanks smouldering in the rad-wastes between spires. I see the northern horizon burning, and feel the impact of shells from the Astra Militarum batteries. This front is heavily populated by both sides - there must be many hundreds of thousands of soldiers dug in. A full advance would be ruinous in both human and equipment terms, so I am sure the commanders back in the orbital station would prefer to avoid it.

My transport touches down on a makeshift rockcrete plate set out in the open ten kilometres behind the first of our offensive lines. I check my armour seal before disembarking. Yx told me with some relish that I would last approximately ten seconds if I were to breathe Fofronda's atmosphere unfiltered. Only in the enclosed hives can the citizens exist without rebreathers, and our artillery barrages have compromised even that fragile shell of immunity.

I give my pilot the order to return to the *Leopax* and make my way towards a low command bunker. On presentation of my rosette I am waved inside by a mortal trooper in an atmosphere suit. His armour's trim is gold, and he bears the clenched fist symbol of the Chapter on his chest. Just catching sight of it gives me a twinge of expectation.

I am shown inside by more armoured menials, and taken to a chamber deep underground. I enter a crowded room, dominated by six warriors in full Adeptus Astartes battleplate. They are as enormous as I expected them to be. Their armour is pitted and worn, betraying long periods of active service, and it growls with every movement - a low, almost sub-aural hum of tethered machine-spirits.

Intelligence has already given me their names and designations. Four are Space Marines of a Codex-standard Assault squad - battle-brothers Travix, Movren, Pelleas and Alentar. The fifth is a sergeant, Cranach. The sixth is far more senior, a Chaplain named Erastus, and I immediately sense the distinction between them. It is not just the difference in livery - the Chaplain is arrayed in black against the others' gold - but the manner between them. They are creatures of rigid hierarchy, just as you would expect, and their deference to Erastus is evident.

As I enter, they have already turned to regard me, and I look up at their weather-hammered, scarred faces. The Chaplain's is the most severe, his flesh pulled back from a hard bone structure and his bald head studded with iron service indicators.

'Luce Spinoza,' Erastus says, his voice a snarl of iron over steel. 'Be welcome, acolyte.'

'Interrogator,' I say. It is important to insist on what rank I do have.

Cranach, the sergeant, looks at me evenly. I sense little outright hostility from the others - irritation, perhaps, and some impatience to be moving. fl

'Your master cares little for his servants,' Erastus says, 'to place them in harm's way so lightly.'

'We are all in harm's way,' I say. 'Emperor be praised.'

Cranach looks at Erastus, and raises a black eyebrow. One of the others - Travix, perhaps - smiles.

Erastus activates a hololith column. 'This is the target,' he says. 'The summit of the upper spire thrust. Here is the command nexus - too far to hit from our forward artillery positions, and shielded from atmospheric assault, so we will destroy it at close range. Once the target is eliminated, we will move on, and the Militarum can handle the rest.'

'The adjutant Servia, present in that location, must be preserved,' I say. Best to get it out in the open as soon as possible, for I do not know how far Tur has already briefed them.

'Not a priority,' Erastus says.

'It is the highest priority.'

He does not get angry. I judge he only gets angry with obstacles of importance, and I hardly qualify as that.

'This is why we have been saddled with you, then,' Erastus says.

'Fought before, acolyte?' Cranach asks, doubtfully. He looks at my battle armour - which I am fiercely proud of - with some scepticism.

'Many limes, Throne be praised,' I say, looking him in the eye. 'I will not get in your way.'

'You already are,' Erastus tells me.

'The Holy Orders of the Inquisition have placed an interdict on Servia,' I tell him. 'She will be preserved.' I turn to Cranach.

'Do not call me acolyte again, brother-sergeant. My rank is interrogator, earned by my blood and by the blood of the heretics I have ended.'

Cranach rises his eyebrow again. Perhaps that is his affectation, a curiously human gesture for something so gene-conditioned for killing.

'As you will It, interrogator,' he says, bowing.

So that is my first victory - minor, though, I judge, significant.

'Study the approach patterns,' Erastus tells me. 'If you come with us, you will have to be useful.'

'I pray I will be so, Brother-Chaplain,' I say.

'Why did you say that?' Tur asked.

'Say what?'

*'I pray I will be so.* That was weak. These are the sons of Dorn. They only respect resolve.'

'I did not consider my words.'

'No, you bloody didn't.'

Something in my master's tone strikes me as unusual then. Is his speech a little... petulant? I have spent some time with the Adeptus Astartes now, and the contrast cannot help but be drawn.

But that is unworthy. Tur is a lord of the Ordo Hereticus, a witch-finder of galactic renown, and on a hundred worlds his name is whispered by priests with a cross between reverence and fear. He speaks as he chooses to speak, and there is no requirement of an inquisitor to be decorous, especially to the members of his own retinue.

'Did you understand the attack plan?' he asks.

'It was a simple operation, suited to their skills,' I say. 'We were to approach the spire using an atmospheric transport, breaking in three levels below the command dome where the shielding gave out. From there to the dome was only a short distance. They would seize it, kill the occupants, set charges to destroy the structure, then break out again to the same transport.' M

'And you ensured they knew what I demanded?'

'A number of times. They were in no doubt.'

'Did they know the manner of corruption in the spires?'

'No. Neither did I. As I recall, at that stage none of us did.'

Tur grunts. He has a surly look about him, perhaps due to fatigue.

He has been fighting for a long time, I guess, and there must be many actions still to conduct.

'Go on, then,' he says. /What happened next?'

I strap myself into my restraint harness within the gunship's hold. Set beside the Space Marines I feel ludicrously small, even though my armour is the equal of any in the Ordo Hereticus and has performed with distinction in a hundred armed engagements on a dozen worlds.

We are transported in a mid-range assault gunship - an Imperial Fists Storm Eagle. The entire squad is assembled within its hold, and the craft is piloted by two of their battle-brothers whose names I am never given. The Space Marines do not volunteer much information, which suits me, as I am used to that.

We take off amid a cacophony of engine noise, and the entire craft shakes atop its thrusters' downdraught. The machine is heavily built, a mass of ablative plates and weapon housings, and so enormous power is required to lift it. Once moving, however, the speed is remarkable, and we are soon shooting across the battlefields. I patch in xternal visual feed from the craft's auspex array, and see the war-blackened spires rush towards us. The plains below are scarred by mortar impacts, their rock plates burned and broken. Our target becomes visible - a slender outcrop of burning metal, jutting high above the rad-wastes like some sentinel monument.

I turn my attention to my companions. Erastus is silent, his skull-face helm glinting darkly under the glimmer of strip lumens. He holds his power maul two-handed, its heel on the deck. My eyes drawn towards it. It is a magnificent piece, far too heavy for a mortal to lift, let alone use. It has a bone casing, scrimshawed with almost tribal savagery, and its disruptor unit is charred black.

Cranach is reciting some oath of the Chapter, and I do not understand the words - I assume he uses the vernacular of his own world. Movren has taken a combat blade and is turning it under the lumens, checking for any hint of a flaw. They are reverent, these warriors, and I find their sparse dedication moving. In my vocation I am frequently presented with sham piety or outright heresy, and it is good for the soul to see unfeigned devotion.

'*Vector laid in,*' comes a voice from the cockpit, and I know then that the assault will begin imminently. '*Prepare to disembark.*'

I tense, placing my gauntlet over my laspistol's holster. It is a good weapon from a fine house of weaponsmiths, monogrammed with the sigils of the ordo and fashioned according to the Accatran pattern, and yet it looks painfully small set against the bolt pistols and chainswords of my companions.

The Storm Eagle picks up altitude, still travelling fast, and we are rocked by incoming fire. The lumens are killed, and the hold glows a womb-like red. I begin to wonder at what point our suicidal velocity will begin to ebb, and only slowly realise that it will not be until the very point of ejection. The pilot slams on airbrakes hard, jamming me tight against my restraints.

The Space Marines are already moving. They break free and charge across the bucking deck-plates with astonishing poise, given their immense weight. I join them just as the forward doors cantilever open and the flame-torn atmosphere howls in.

The gunship is hovering just metres away from a vast hole torn into the edge of the spire, and lasfire surrounds us in a coronet of static. Erastus is first across the gap, leaping on power armour servos and landing heavily amongst broken metal structures. The rest of the squad jumps across, until only I remain, poised on the of the swaying gunship's gaping innards.

I look down, and see a yawning pit beneath me, falling and falling, streaked with flame and racing gas plumes. That is a mistake, and my heart hammers hard. I curse the error, brace myself and leap, flying out over the gap and feeling the wind tug at me. I land awkwardly, dropping to all fours amid the tangle of blown rockcrete and metal bars. By the time I right myself, the Imperial Fists have already lumbered further in, their bolt pistols drawn and their chainswords revving. The gunship pulls away, strafed with lines of lasfire, and the backwash from its engines nearly rips me clear from the spire's edge.

I run hard, leaping over the debris. My breath echoes in my helm, hot and rapid. I have to sprint just to keep up with the Assault squad, who are moving far faster than I would have guessed possible. They are smashing their way inside, breaking through the walls themselves when they have to, making the corridors and chambers boom and echo with the industrial clamour of their discharging weapons.

By the time I get close again I can see their formation. The four battle-brothers are firing almost continuously, punching bloody holes through an oncoming tide of Forfodan troopers. Cranach carries a combat shield, and uses that in conjunction with a power fist to bludgeon aside any of them that get in close. But it is Erastus who captivates me. He is roaring now, and his voice is truly

deafening, even with my helm's aural protection. His movements are spectacular, almost frenzied, and he is hurling himself at the enemy with an abandon that shocks me. His power maul is a close-combat weapon, and it blazes with golden energies, making the crumpled spire interior seem to catch fire.

I'm firing myself now, adding my las-bolts to the crashing thunder of bolt-rounds. I do some small good, hitting enemy troops as they attempt to form up before the onslaught, but in truth I do not augment the assault too greatly, for its force is entirely unstoppable, a juggernaut of power armour that jolts and horrifies in its speed and overwhelming violence. It is all I can do to keep up, and I struggle to do that, but at least I do not slow them. By the time we have cut and blasted our way to the target location, I am still with them. It is another small victory to add to the tally, though I can take little pleasure in it.

I see the approach to the command dome beckon, a long flight of white stone steps, over-arched with gold. I hear more gunfire, and glimpse movement from within - many bodies, racing to meet the challenge. At that stage all I think is that the defenders' bravery borders on madness, whatever foul creed they have adopted, for they are surely doomed to die quickly.

I do not know what we will meet inside, though. We have not got that far yet.

'You did not contribute much,' Tur says.

'I did my best.'

'Did they wait for you to catch up?'

'No.'

My master looks down at my broken arms, my blood-mottled bandages, and the heavy shadow of disappointment settles on his unforgiving face. I

'It might have done you some good,' he says, 'just to witness them.'

'It did,' I say.

'They're crude things, the Adeptus Astartes,' Tur says. 'Don't believe the filth preached by the Ministorum - they're not angels. They're hammers. They crush things, and so we use them as such - never forget that.'

'I will not.'

And yet, I find his words lacking again. The warriors had not been crude, at least not in the way he meant. They were direct, to be sure, but there was an intelligence to their brutality that could be detected up close. They were incredibly destructive, but only as far as was required by the task. I almost tell Tur then what I thought I had gleaned from that episode - that their viewpoint may have been narrow, targeted solely on a limited set of military objectives, but

within that ambit they were more impressive than any breed of warrior I had ever served with.

Since entering the ordo I have willingly embraced the diversity of our calling - its dark compromises and the necessity of working within flawed and labyrinthine political structures. I have accepted this, and learned to use the knowledge to my advantage and to the advantage of the Throne, but, for all that, when I saw the Angels of Death in action, and observed the purity of purpose they embodied, and reflected that the Emperor Himself had created them for this reason and no other, a faint shadow of jealousy had imprinted itself on me.

I am not proud of this. My vow is to eradicate it, lest it divert from the tasks I will have after Forfoda, but I cannot deny that it is there, and that it must demonstrate some kind of moral truth.

'You entered the command dome with them?' Tur presses.

'I did. I was with them at the end.'

He looks down at my shattered limbs, then up at my face again.

'Go on, then,' he says.

Erastuss is the first one into the command dome. He is still roaring – in High Gothic now, so I understand fully what he is saying.

'For the glory of the primarch-progenitor!' he cries. 'For the glory of Him on Earth!'

In isolation, those battle-shouts may seem bereft of much purpose, a mere expression of aggression that any thug from an underhive gang could match, but that is to misunderstand them. The volume generated by his augmitters is crushing, and it makes masonry crack and the air throb. The echoing, overlapping wall of sound is almost enough by itself to grind the will of our enemies into dust. The effect on his battle brothers is just as profound, though opposite – they are roused by their Chaplain's exhortations to further feats of arms, such that they fight on through an aegis of audio-shock, a rolling tide of sensory destruction. I am caught up in it myself, despite my status as an outsider. I find myself crying out along with the Chaplain, repeating the words that I recognise from the catechism where they occur.

'For the Emperor!' I shout as I fight. 'For the Throne!'

And yet I am still appalled at what I witness. We have been misled, all of us, and did not understand the degradation that had been visited on Forfoda. Until then, we had been fighting human-normal troops, carrying standard weaponry, and our intelligence had told us the insurrection was of a political nature. I now

see that this is a front, and that extreme corruption has come to this world. Among the standard troops there are now bloated and diseased things, their organs spilling from their flesh, their weapons fused to their limbs in webs of glistening cables.

I wish to gag, but I am surrounded by those who will not hesitate, who have made themselves impervious to horror. They tear into these new enemies, and I see their churning blades bite into unnatural flesh. That fortifies me, and I fight on, taking aim at creatures with lone baleful eyes and swollen, sore-cruste'd stomachs.

For the first time, we are tested. The command dome is crowded with these nightmare creations, and they come at us without fear. The air tastes like suppuration, and there are so many to slay. I stay close to Erastus, whose fortitude is undimmed. My laspistol is close to overheating now, and I reach for my combat knife, though I do not think it will serve well against these things.

The situation blinds me to the objective, and for a moment I am fighting merely to avoid annihilation, but then I see her for the first time - Naiiao Servia, recognisable from Tur's vid-picts, cowering among the capering fiends she has unleashed. She is obese, her lips cracked, her cheeks flabby with sickness, so I see that she has reaped the rewards of her betrayal. Lines of black blood trace a pattern down her neck, and I do not wish to speculate where it has come from.

Cranach is fighting hard, using his shield and power fist to great effect. His squad members work for one another, covering any momentary weakness of their brothers, carving into the horde of decay as a seamless unit. I see Pelleas go down, dragged into a morass of fluids by three pus-green mutants, and the others respond instantly, hacking their way to his side. They are selfless, a band of soul-brothers, trained from boyhood to keep one another on their feet and fighting.

It is then that I know they will prevail, for the enemy has none of this. These opponents are perversions, individually formidable but without cohesion. I keep firing, giving my laspistol a few more shots before it overloads, aiding the progress of Erastus towards Servia's unnatural bulk.

The adjutant has become huge, far beyond mortal bounds, a slobbering mountain of rotting flesh. Her tongue, slick as oil, lashes from a slash-mouth filled with hooked teeth. Her body spills from the ruins of her old uniform, and tentacles lash out at the Chaplain.

He leaps up at her, swinging with his crozius, and drives a gouge through her swelling stomach. She screams at him, vomiting steaming bile, and he fights through it, his injunctions never ceasing.

I move closer, aiming at the creature's head, trying to blind her, narrowly missing. Then one of her tentacles connects, wrapping around the haft of the Chaplain's power maul, grabbing it and wrenching it from his grip. The weapon flies free, burning through the corrupted blubber and making the fat boil.

Without it, the Chaplain is diminished. He fights on, tearing at the monster with his clenched fists. His brothers are fully occupied and do not see his peril. Only I witness the maul land, skidding across fluid-slick floor and coming to rest amid a slough of fizzling plasma.

Servia can overwhelm her prey then, pushing him back. Bereft of his weapon, Erastus will be overcome. I feel my laspistol reach limit. I look over at the maul, crackling still in a corona of energy, and know what I must do.

I race towards it, discarding my laspistol, and reach for the crack-ling weapon. Lifting it nearly breaks my ribs - it is as heavy as a man, and my power armour strains to compensate. Disruptor charge snakes and lashes about me, and the thing shudders in my grip as if alive. I can barely hold on to it, let alone use it, but Erastus is now in mortal danger.

'For the Emperor!' I cry, mimicking his strident roars, and throw myself at the creature.

I swing the maul at its spine, two-handed, putting all my weight into the blow. This betrays my ignorance - the weight and power of it is far too much, and as it connects I realise my error. My arms are smashed even through my armour, and the wave of pain makes me scream out loud. The released disruptor charge explodes, throwing me clear of the impact and cracking open ceramite plate. I cannot release the maul - it remains in my grip, locked by ruined gauntlets amid gouts of flame.

But the blow is enough. The creature reels, its back broken, and Erastus surges towards it, ripping the tentacles free of its twisted body. His battle-brothers fight through the remains of the throng, subduing the attendant horrors to bring their fire to bear on the leader.

I am in agony. I can feel my bones jutting through my flesh, my blood sloshing inside my armour, and I am lightheaded and nauseous. It takes all my strength merely to lift my head and stay conscious.

I see Erastus punching out, driving Servia back. I see the rest of the squad level their bolt pistols, ready to destroy it.

'No!' I cry, raising a trembling, ruined arm. 'Preserve her!'

Erastus halts. He looks at me, then at the trembling mass of blubber before him. Cranach is poised to wade in closer, to rip its heart from its diseased chest. His

battle-brothers make no move to comply. Soon they will kill it.

'Hold,' the Chaplain commands, and they instantly freeze. Servia shrinks back, crippled but alive.

Cranach moves to protest. 'It cannot be suffered to—' he begins.

Erastus cuts him dead. He nods in my direction.

I try to keep myself together, and know that I will fail. I see them looking at me, bristling with barely contained battle-fury. They want to kill it. They live to kill it.

'*Preserve her*,' I tell them, down on my knees in puddles of blood.

Cranach looks at the Chaplain.

'She has the crozius, sergeant,' Erastus tells him.

That is the last thing I remember.

Tur does not say anything for a while.

'When they brought you back here—' he begins.

'I remember none of it.'

He nods, thinking. 'They didn't tell me everything.'

'I do not think they speak of their battles,' I say.

'No, maybe not.' He is struggling for words now. I do not know if he is proud to learn what happened, or maybe disappointed. Tur has always found castigation easy - it is his profession - but praise comes less naturally.

'You did well, then,' he says eventually. 'The subject is on the *Leopax*, and I'll speak to her soon. She'll regret being alive. I'm not in the mood to be gentle.'

When is Tur ever in that mood? I might smile, but the pain is still prohibitive.

'And you are recovering, then?' he asks, awkwardly.

'Yes, lord,' I say.

He nods again. 'Weapons training,' he says. 'When this is over, you need more of it. Perhaps this is an aptitude I have overlooked.' I do not say anything. I do not think it will be necessary, for reasons I will not disclose to him.

Do not misunderstand me. I remain loyal to my master. He is a great man in many ways, and I aspire to learn from him. One day, in the far future, my ambition is to be as devoted a servant of Terra as he has been, and to have a reputation half as formidable. I cannot imagine serving under another as dedicated to the Throne. Indeed, I find it hard to imagine serving under anyone else at all.

But I have learned much on Forfoda, and some lessons are still to come.

'As you will, lord,' I say, hoping he will leave soon.

It takes three weeks to subdue the remains of the insurrection. The Imperial Fists linger in theatre longer than originally intended once the scale of corruption is revealed. Many of the spires are destroyed wholesale, and many millions of survivors are deported in void-haulers, ready either for slaughter or mind-wiping. Our strategos estimate it will take months to purge the world, and that the Ministorum will be required to maintain scrutiny for decades after that, but it has been retained, and its forges and its manufactoria remain ready for use by the Holy Imperium of Man.

I take much satisfaction in that. Once my arms heal, I begin the process of regaining strength. I take up my duties as fast as I am able. Tur does not visit me again, for he is detained with many cares. Yx tells me that Servia's testimony was instrumental in the recapture of the industrial zones north of the spires, and that gladdens my soul.

Near the end, I have the visitor I have been expecting. He also does not have much time, so his presence here honours me. When Erastus walks into the training chambers in the Dravaganda command post he seems even more gigantic than before. His armour is a little more worn, his angular face carrying an extra scar, but the energy in his movements is undiminished.

'Interrogator,' he says, bowing. 'I would have come sooner, but there were many calls on us.'

I bow in return. 'It is good to see you, lord Chaplain,' I say.

I notice then that he carries his power maul, the thing he called a crozius. It looks different to me - smaller, as if cut down somehow. Perhaps I damaged it. I know how much the warriors of the Adeptus Astartes venerate their weapons, and so the thought troubles me.

'This is Argent,' Erastus says, hefting the heavy piece as if it weighs nothing. 'It has been in the Chapter for a thousand years. For an outsider to handle it, even to touch it, earns the wrath of us all.'

He is still severe. Perhaps he knows no other way to be.

'I did not know,' I say, wondering why he has come here to tell me this.

'We protect that which is precious to us,' he says. 'But we also understand what is truly significant. Take it, and observe what has changed.'

I receive the maul again, and then see truly that it has been heavily adapted. It is shorter, lighter, its power unit truncated and the bone casing modified. Even then I struggle to hold it steady, and my armour-encased arms ache.

'Why have you done this?' I ask.

'Because it is yours now,' he says.

I cannot believe it. I move to give the weapon back, unable to accept such a gift.

'If you spurn the offer,' Erastus warns me, 'it will be a second insult, one I will not overlook.'

I look down at the crozius. The detail on its shaft is incredible. It is a thing of beauty as well as power. The gesture overwhelms me, and I do not have the words for it.

'You do me too much honour,' I say at last, and it seems like a weak response.

'I have only just started,' he says, standing back and regarding me critically. 'You hold it as if it were a snake. Grip the handle loosely. I will show you how to bear it without breaking your bones.'

It is then that I know why he has come. He will instruct me in how to wield it, and I understand then that it will henceforth become my own weapon, the one I shall carry in preference to all others.

It will hurt. I will damage the healing process by doing this. Tur will be angry, for he desires me back in service within days.

None of that matters. I do as I am bid, then look to the Chaplain. I do not know if such a thing has ever been done before. My soul fills with joy, and I determine to make myself equal to the gesture. Perhaps that will be my purpose now - to live up to this deed, to ensure that Argent is used as it ought to be used, for the glory of Him on Earth.

That would be a fine ambition, I think, one worthy of my high calling.

'Show me,' I say then, hungry for the knowledge.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Josh Reynolds** is the author of the Blood Angels novel *Deathstorm* and the Warhammer 40,000 novellas *Hunter's Snare* and *Dante's Canyon*, along with the audio drama *Master of the Hunt*, all three featuring the White Scars. In the Warhammer World, he has written the End Times novels *The Return of Nagash* and *The Lord of the End Times*, and for Age of Sigmar he has written the Legends of the Age of Sigmar novels *Pestilens* and *Black Rift*, the Realmgate Wars novel *Fury of Gork* and several audio dramas including *The Lords of Helstone*. He lives and works in Northampton.

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An extract from [\*The Red Path\*](#).



‘Who would you have me slay?’

Talomar Locq’s words were spoken with the confidence of a warrior who had proven himself in battle a hundred times over. His eyes burned with the same intensity as the myriad fires licking at the smashed remains of the Imperial citadel in which he stood, their whites shining brightly against the dried blood and filth encrusting his face. He stood before the Warmaster as a devoted servant, his chainsword still dripping with the blood of the enemy and his power armour freshly scarred from recent combat. Locq had, of course, been in the presence of Abaddon many times before and had even fought directly beside him on more than one occasion. But from today, this glorious day, he could speak of the time he was summoned by Abaddon the Despoiler to be tasked with the most glorious of missions and have his invaluable service to the Warmaster finally recognised. He would finally lead his warband as one of Abaddon’s chosen few, fighting by his side in the service of the Blood God. It was an honour he felt was not only deserved, but long overdue.

The call had come as he had led an execution squad to cleanse the last of the loyalist survivors. Between cries for mercy from wounded Guardsmen and the inevitable reply to their pleas from a bolt pistol, he had seen the looks exchanged between his warriors as the message had come through. Locq knew of many who had been summoned to the Warmaster’s presence and never seen again, but they had been foolish enough to make a mistake on the field of battle or displease him in some other way. He had done neither, and as he stood before the mighty form of his leader, he felt his time had truly come. His rewards for long and devoted service were mere seconds away.

The hulking form of Abaddon strode towards Locq, the sneer on his face thrown into dancing shadow by the fires surrounding him. It looked to Locq as if he was being given all the respect due to an irritating insect, and he fought to maintain his outward calm. The Warmaster’s eyes flicked over to Urkanthos and his face twisted into a scowl. Locq tried to think of what he and his commander might have done to merit such a greeting, and turned to look over to the Chaos

Lord. He was surprised to see Urkanthos was looking down at the shattered ground, revealing the line of brass studs hammered into his exposed skull. The Lord Purgator was not usually one to hold his tongue, but something had silenced him. He was the commander of the Chaos fleets, feared and respected nearly as much as his Warmaster, but here he was clearly avoiding Abaddon's burning gaze.

'I would have you slay no one, Locq. And if you speak without permission again, I will kill you.'

Abaddon's sonorous voice rumbled into the darkening sky, the texture of his words as ominous as their content. Locq immediately understood the scale of his mistake, and hid the realisation by biting down hard with his back teeth and clenching his hand around his bolter's stock. Locq could feel Abaddon's eyes boring into him, yet he dared not turn his head. Eventually, Urkanthos looked up. It was difficult to read his skeletal features at the best of times, but there was no support or encouragement to be found in the depths of his cadaverous eye sockets. Words began to form in Locq's throat but before he could speak, Abaddon turned his back on him and moved away, crunching through the smoking debris that had been an Imperial stronghold only hours before. As the Warmaster barged his way past a broken plascrete column, Urkanthos moved after him, giving the merest flick of his hand to indicate Locq should follow. Without a word, Locq tucked his helmet under his arm and did as he was told.

Abaddon moved fast, and it took several seconds for Locq and Urkanthos to catch up with their Warmaster. By then he had exited the ruins of the hilltop palace and was striding down to the sprawling courtyard that had once housed gleaming marble monuments to the Emperor. Nothing now remained but chunks of rubble, and the fine mosaic floor was covered in a film of blood and oil. A ragged line of Black Legion drop-ships and transports squatted impatiently in the middle of the vast square, lines of slaves driven into some, tight formations of Chaos Space Marines and other forces trooping into others. Locq recognised Abaddon's personal transport some five hundred yards distant, and calculated that the journey to its ramp was exactly as much time as he had left to make amends for his mistake. How he was going to do that without speaking eluded him.

Urkanthos strode forwards to Abaddon's flank, leaving Locq to pick up the pace in order to hear what might be said. The Lord Purgator bowed his head as he spoke in a low, respectful tone, forcing Locq to strain his superhuman hearing.

‘Forgive Locq, my liege. He is an excellent soldier and has proven himself reliable over many campaigns. His impertinence comes from an eagerness to serve. It will not go unpunished.’

Abaddon stopped walking, and Locq stepped back to maintain a respectful distance. The Despoiler’s topknot swayed slightly, betraying the fact he was deigning to acknowledge one of his favoured commanders. Locq was surprised the Chaos Lord had intervened on his behalf, but was in no doubt there would be a price to pay. Nevertheless, he was relieved no one other than Urkanthos had witnessed his humiliation before the Warmaster. Even rumours of such an affront to Abaddon would be enough for members of his warband to challenge his right to lead them. He had fought plenty in the past to achieve and maintain his position, but he knew of several Hounds that would see any error he might commit as a sign of weakness and use it to their advantage.

Up ahead, two Thunderhawks roared into the purple-red sky, vortices of thick black smoke whirling in circles around their wing-tips from the fires raging on the ground. For the briefest of instants, he wondered if he was already condemned to die on this smashed planet. Abaddon strode over to the charred remains of a Leman Russ tank, its main turret missing and sponson cannons torn away. For long seconds the Warmaster looked around, breathing in the choking fumes and revelling in the scene of destruction laid out before him. Urkanthos waited patiently. Locq stayed exactly where he was.

‘Locq!’

The captain straightened to attention, bringing his bolter up across his chest and taking a step forward as Abaddon turned to face him. This time, the captain did not make so much as eye contact but instead stared straight ahead, fixing his gaze on the blood-encrusted brass skull centrepiece below Abaddon’s exposed head. In the gloom of his peripheral vision, Locq could see Urkanthos stiffen. Was an attack coming? He could not hope to win against Abaddon, but every instinct in his enhanced body readied him for combat. Fighting against the urge to strike, he concentrated on remaining absolutely still. The merest indication of defence would mean his destruction.

‘Is my Lord Purgator correct? Will you serve me in any way I see fit?’

Locq did not answer straight away. Instead he raised his chin slightly to expose his neck in a sign of contrition.

‘My skull is yours to take, Warmaster.’

The air was filled with the screaming of engines as several drop-ships hurtled overhead, fighting their way up towards the barely visible stars. Abaddon

regarded him coolly, his left hand grasping and then releasing the grip of the daemon sword Drach'nyen, the tip of its vicious blade balancing on the decorative floor.

'You will find the World Eater known as Khâr'n the Betrayer and bring him before me. Whether it is through persuasion or force, I care not how you accomplish it.'

Locq stared at Abaddon, astonished at his words. *This* was the great role he was to be entrusted with? A messenger? A tide of disappointment surged through him. The captain pursed his lips closed and gripped his bolter tightly. He did not know what to say or where to look, lest the anger rising in his breast betray him. Fixing his gaze on Abaddon's daemon blade, he could see it shimmer to display skulls and faces twisted in perpetual agony. It was a deliberate and powerful reminder of the fate that would befall anyone who did not fulfil their duties, but such was the frustration Locq was feeling, the warning hardly touched him. His business concluded, Abaddon turned and began to walk away from Locq. Urkanthos stepped after the Warmaster and called after him, frustration and contempt colouring his words.

'Warmaster, surely it would be better to send a message rather than forces required for the Crusade? We have no need of this so-called Chosen of Khorne. Our own—'

Urkanthos stopped talking a split second after Abaddon came to an abrupt halt. The Warmaster did not turn to look around. He did not need to.

'You dare to question my orders?'

The Chaos Lord did not move. Slowly, Abaddon turned and stared down at Urkanthos, his eyes burning with undisguised disdain.

'Be mindful – the favours I bestow upon my chosen, I can also take away.'

Urkanthos bowed his head, and while he had no features to reveal such an emotion, Locq could tell he was seething with anger. Casting his own eyes down, Locq could still see Abaddon's hand tighten on the grip of his legendary sword. It pleased him that Urkanthos was taking the force of Abaddon's fury rather than him. Locq could still not quite believe the way in which his Warmaster had treated him.

The Lord Purgator kept his head bowed. Locq felt his reply was delivered with considerable delicacy.

'I... do not seek to question my liege. Your orders will be obeyed.'

Locq chanced an upward glance towards Abaddon to observe his reaction. Could Urkanthos' clumsiness present a new opportunity for him? With the Lord

Purgator gone, Locq could take his place as one of the Warmaster's favourites – particularly if he succeeded in this honourless mission. Abaddon kept his eyes fixed on Urkanthos for a few threatening seconds longer, then turned and strode off towards the remaining drop-ships without another word. Locq waited until Abaddon had reached his transport and the ramp had closed before approaching Urkanthos, giving the Lord Purgator enough time to recover his composure. Only when Abaddon was airborne did they speak.

'The Warmaster insults me with such a task.'

Urkanthos spat the words and Locq grunted in agreement. They had both been humiliated and reprimanded in equal measure, and the nature of the mission burned both of their Chaos-warped senses of honour and pride. Locq's anger boiled inside him and he turned to Urkanthos. After all, it was not the Chaos Lord who had been given the mission to undertake.

'Insults *us*, Lord Urkanthos. I am the one who is given the role of lackey, not you.'

Locq felt suddenly encouraged now that Abaddon had departed. Urkanthos stared into the broiling sky, and Locq's gaze fell to his hand, which rested on his chainsword in exactly the same fashion as Abaddon's had done earlier. Urkanthos was displeased. Perhaps he had said too much – again.

'There will be good reason for him wanting Khârn. It is not our place to question why. We just do.'

Locq's gaze followed Abaddon's drop-ship skywards until it disappeared into a huge grey-brown cloud. He felt his old confidence surging through him, and rage burned within his chest. Perhaps it was time he showed the Lord Purgator that Talomar Locq had become a force to be reckoned with and was not frightened by his threatening tone.

'But what of the glories I will miss while playing this childish game? This so-called mission is an insult. I have fought for this position, my lord, and I will have no one take it from me in my absence.'

The Chaos Lord moved quickly, wheeling around and activating his chainsword before Locq could react. The weapon growled menacingly in front of Locq's exposed face, and Urkanthos' words bit as deep as might the teeth of his weapon.

'Remember it is I whom you serve first, Locq. You will not fail me.'

Locq looked into the expressionless face of the Chaos Lord for a long moment. No, the time was not yet right for him to make his move. He needed to reinforce his position, to build his warband and make Abaddon realise he was a great warrior and true follower of the Blood God. In that way, he could not fail to be

chosen. Locq relaxed his grip on his bolter and nodded. The chainsword receded from his face, and Urkanthos withdrew a couple of paces.

‘Assemble your cohort. And make sure you pick them with care – regardless of what you might have heard about Khârn and his berzerkers being an undisciplined rabble, they are not to be underestimated.’

Urkanthos kept the weapon drawn for another heartbeat, then powered it down. As the Lord Purgator turned towards the final remaining drop-ship, Locq swallowed down his fury and called after him.

‘My lord, where will I find Khârn?’

Urkanthos’ voice boomed from the deep shadows consuming the surface of the ruined planet.

‘Look for the bloodiest trail of destruction in the sector. Then follow it.’

Despite the eye lenses of his helmet shading him from the worst effects, Khârn still found himself squinting against the brilliant reflections from Haeleon’s glass-smooth surface. Of all the unforgiving balls of rock on which he had fought for the glory of the Blood God, this had to be one of the most forbidding. Its three suns ensured nothing could survive long on the lifeless shell without protection, and he could feel the searing heat on his exposed left arm as he hefted Gorechild in readiness for the approaching battle. Khârn had very little regard for most of the loyalist forces – or for any other – but during the days of Horus he had seen the White Scars’ prowess as hunters and masters of the lightning attack. The vast expanses of perfectly flat, baked ground would lend themselves well to the Chogorians’ way of fast, mobile warfare. They must have thought it a gift from their Emperor when Khârn had made planetfall here and their ship had miraculously managed to ‘evade’ Shipmaster Roderbar’s scanners to allow their attack.

However, Haeleon hid a secret that could not be detected on scanners. Its outer crust was extremely fragile, and many of the plains had collapsed in on themselves to create elaborate networks of slick-walled chasms and translucent valleys. Some ran for hundreds of miles, others for barely a few yards, and it was into such a web that Khârn would draw the foe. While it was against his very nature to wait in ambush like a cowering animal, today the tactic would serve his purpose and that of the Blood God well. All he had to do was get their attention, and as he watched the line of glinting vehicles speeding towards him in the far distance, he raised Gorechild into the air and roared at the top of his voice.

A few hundred yards ahead of his position, the smooth rock erupted in a hail of

bolter fire. The destruction swept towards him in a broad wave, carving deep gouges and spinning dagger-sharp shards of silica into the air. Further out still, a hazy line of mounted White Scars roared towards him, sustaining a murderous barrage. His blood raged through his veins and it took all of his considerable willpower to remain static and not charge towards the enemy. The sheet of destruction narrowed as they sped towards him, and daggers of glass showered his body. Most of it rained onto his armour and broke apart, but some pieces sliced viciously into his exposed arm. The pain meant nothing in comparison to the murderous heat of the three suns. If anything, it helped him concentrate.

From the second the fifty-strong formation of gleaming bikes had broken over the far horizon, Khârn had been counting down in his head, adjusting calculations of speed and trajectory as the White Scars had accelerated towards their prey. With no landmarks or features to work from, the task of assessing exactly when to open fire was made all the more difficult. Snapping his plasma pistol straight in front of him, he began to blast indiscriminately at the bikes roaring line-abreast towards him. As he did so, Khârn strode backwards, not as fast as the speeding bikes but quick enough to buy himself the extra three seconds he needed.

While the White Scars' auspexes would be next to useless due to the planet's unusual geology, Khârn knew that their visual scans and augmented eyesight would have spotted the network of valleys towards which they roared. Khârn understood the Chogorians to be bold, but they were not stupid. However, in the same way Khârn wanted their skulls for the Blood God, he was counting on their desire to take him as a trophy. He needed them to keep charging at him until the very last second, so he gave them an easy target to aim for. Larger splinters of rock bounced and clanged off his power armour and cut deeper into his bare arm. The wave of decimation was intensifying around him. If it engulfed him fully, even with the protection of his armour he would not be able to withstand the combined fire from fifty twin bolters. Taking a few more steps backwards, Khârn raised Gorechild over his head and bellowed at the White Scars in defiance just as the maelstrom reached its apex.

Stormseer Yaghterai knew of Khârn's reputation as a berzerker, but he had no idea he was quite so suicidal. One minute he was standing a few hundred yards away from them, his malevolent scarlet figure blurred by the cloud of debris thrown up by their lethal bolter fire, and the next he was gone, having thrown himself into the closest of the chasms that snaked out for countless miles in all

directions. Directly in front of him, Xin-Myang Khan reacted to Khâm's disappearance with a raised chainsword, ordering the riders to cease fire and slow down. The parched-dry air was filled with the squealing of brakes and scudding of over-sized tyres on Haeleon's surface, and Yaghterai noted with irritation that some of the bikes pitched sideways, their over-zealous riders having to slam a leg down and force their mounts into a controlled power slide. Yaghterai had expected something unusual to happen, and now it had. This, however, was only the beginning – and he did not like it one bit.

The Stormseer had been trying to counsel caution since they had first detected Khâm's ship, but he might as well have shouted to the howling winds of the Chogorian plains. Of course he shared the burning desire to avenge the Brotherhood of Khajog Khan, slain at the hands of Abaddon the Despoiler, but his own brothers had been consumed by what they had seen as great fortune to detect the traitor vessel *Sku Iltaker* in the first place. It was an opportunity too good to miss; they would have the honour of exacting revenge on the forces of Chaos in a daring attack against superior forces. Songs would be sung of them long into the cold Chogorian nights.

Yaghterai's had been a lone voice questioning what the berzerkers might want on such a barren rock as Haeleon, and his khan had dismissed it as irrelevant. Shipmaster Adarek had carefully sailed their strike cruiser *Wings of the Eagle* out and around Haeleon to avoid detection, using the impenetrable structure of the planet to mask their approach and landing from the larger, more powerful enemy vessel. And now they were here, facing an enemy that was no longer in sight. Yaghterai readied his force staff and decelerated carefully, his greater experience showing in the deft control of his steed. Xin-Myang braked late as they rumbled ever closer to the network of jagged cracks in the ground, allowing himself to be absorbed into the line of bikes. Opening his vox, he called his riders to readiness and they came to a full stop twenty yards from the nearest gorge, engines close to overheating, weapons drawn. Watching him, the Stormseer took in a deep breath of hot, stale air. He wanted to insist they undertake a full reconnaissance of the area, to try and at least map the territory into which they were heading and to judge its suitability for their bikes. He wanted to, but knew it would be a waste of his breath. On a planet such as this, it was easy to be blinded.

Khâm shifted his weight slightly, trying his best not to cast a shadow into the wide, flat-bottomed valley to his right and below him. There was absolutely no

indication the White Scars had followed him down as he had hoped they would. Frustration boiled in his veins. Hiding in wait was as alien to him as it was the rest of his warband. Jumping down onto the glass-smooth floor with a crunch, he looked up into the bleached sky to see if there was any movement along the ledge of the chasm. There was none, and Khârn muttered an oath to the Blood God. His body felt as if it was going to explode with the anticipation of combat. Movement caught his eye, and he saw a number of red-clad figures squirming inside narrow fissures to his left and right. It was clear several of them were in peril of losing the fight against their bloodlust – particularly Samzar. Immediately identifiable from the broken horn on his berzerker helmet, he was physically shaking with the effort of self-control. As if sensing his gaze, Samzar looked over and gave Khârn an imperceptible nod, then forced himself back impatiently into the narrow crevasse that would hide him from the bikes' approach. If the enemy did not present themselves soon, the warband would likely turn on each other.

That was of no consequence. All that mattered to Khorne was that the blood flowed.

A flicker of darkness flashed across Haeleon's highest sun directly above. A second later, the walls of the gorge exploded all around. Something crashed to the ground yards away, and the roar of bolters echoed from the high, sheer walls. Khârn spun around to see a White Scars bike bearing down on him, its tyres screeching in protest on the smooth surface and its front end juddering uncontrollably. Its bolts exploded wide, and Khârn seized the opportunity to dodge the fire. Running further into the valley, he ducked around a sharp turn as more fire streaked past him. Realising the bike would be on him in seconds, Khârn jumped up into a crack a couple of yards off the ground and waited for it to slow as it navigated the corner. Ignoring the chattering of its guns, he swung Gorechild horizontally, taking the head from the White Scar in a single clean blow. The bike continued onwards down the valley without a rider, jamming between the rapidly narrowing walls.

More shadows flitted overhead. Khârn looked back to see a dozen more bikes plunging from the sky, dropping thirty feet from the plateau above to land in the natural passageway. Khârn roared at the riders, who immediately spotted him and accelerated, firing wildly. Two of the lead bikes crashed into each other as the valley narrowed, and the bikers behind had to brake heavily to avoid collision with their brothers. With a roar that impressed even Khârn, berzerkers emerged from their hiding places, throwing themselves at the slowing machines.

For a few seconds it looked to Khârn as if the battle would be over quickly, but then fire erupted from the other end of the valley. More bikes emerged around the tight corner, their riders using their hand weapons for fear of hitting their battle-brothers caught in the ambush. Khârn ducked back, but several berzerkers crashed to the ground, dead before they hit the floor under a withering salvo of close-range bolter fire.

Khârn threw himself at the lead bike, jumping up on its front wheel and bringing Gorechild down into the helmet of its rider. The White Scar behind him opened fire immediately, but Khârn grabbed hold of the now-lifeless Chogorian and threw him at the bikes trapped before him. Khârn heard a cry from above and looked up to see a White Scar dropping towards him. The Space Marine crashed into Khârn and sent him tumbling off the top of the bike, the two of them rolling to the side as the other bikes roared past. Khârn was up first. Drawing his plasma pistol, he aimed it at the head of his attacker and discharged it into the White Scar's helmet, evaporating its contents. The skull of such a feeble opponent was not a suitable offering for the Blood God. Khârn pursued the line of bikes, hoping to find a more worthy adversary.

The ground shook behind Khârn as another bike landed heavily, and the surface gave way beneath his feet. Bouncing and skidding, the machine roared past him, its thick front tyre narrowly missing his head. Khârn threw Gorechild at the back of the rider, but the axe's chains were swept up by the rear tyre and jammed into the wheel housing, dragging Khârn for several yards until the wheel locked up and the machine careened into the wall, crushing its rider as it flipped to one side. Khârn felt as if his left arm had been torn from its socket, and hauled himself to his feet by the chains. Pulling on them, he realised the chainaxe was stuck fast. Holstering his overheated pistol, he ran over to free his favoured weapon. White-armoured figures dropped around him from above, some of them landing well. Three made directly for Khârn and he dropped the chains, readying himself for the attack. From nowhere, Samzar and his comrade Lukosz charged the attacking Chogorians. Khârn picked up the chains again and strained at the crippled bike. This time Gorechild came free, and Khârn sank it deep into white ceramite. Having despatched the three White Scars, Lukosz and Samzar moved away in search of more skull trophies.

Khârn knew they would expect no acknowledgement from him, nor would they get any.

He headed back towards the widest part of the chasm. Its centre was crowded with at least twenty abandoned bikes at various angles, their riders having left

them in favour of close-quarters combat. The entire valley was filled with the flash of bolter fire and the whirr of chainswords, the sound of power-armoured warriors smashing into each other in a symphony of carnage. In the blink of an eye, a veteran Chogorian was vaulting over a burning attack bike towards him. Khârn did not have time to activate Gorechild before his adversary was upon him, chainsword in one hand and curved duelling tulwar in the other. Khârn laughed with the pleasure of the attack. This White Scar was no fool like the previous assailant. He twisted and rolled out of the way of Gorechild, stabbing and slicing at Khârn's left arm with his short blade. Khârn ignored the pain and used the apparent weakness of his exposed arm to lure the Space Marine off balance. By the time the veteran had realised his mistake, Gorechild had smashed through his helmet and into his screaming face. The Chogorian staggered back, dropping his chainsword and trying to get some purchase on the massive handle, but Khârn yanked hard on the chain, pulling the weapon out and allowing the White Scar's blood to spurt freely through his ruined vox grille. In one elegant, seamless movement, Khârn activated Gorechild, took a step forwards and slashed diagonally down, sawing the veteran from neck to armpit. As he peeled apart, blood and organs washed onto the glassy surface, sizzling like meat on a hot plate. Khârn bellowed to the skies. The blood was well and truly flowing now, and he wanted Khorne to witness his harvest.

Something hit Khârn on his right pauldron, the force spinning him off balance and crashing him into the splintered glass wall of the gorge. Instinct told him it was not a conventional weapon, so he fell to one knee, using the milling, clashing bodies of berzerkers and White Scars as cover. A ball of energy hurtled overhead and down the valley. This assault had not issued from a gun; it bore all the hallmarks of the warp. When another crackling discharge streaked past, Khârn jumped to his feet and ran with his head down, slamming into the bodies of friend and foe alike. Barging them away, he used the open space to build up speed and launched himself from one of the burning White Scars bikes, Gorechild raised high and ready. Sailing over a line of white and red power-armoured figures, he landed awkwardly, the planet's granite-slick surface smashing underfoot and throwing him to one side. A bolt hit him square in the back, but Khârn's armour absorbed the attack. Rolling to his feet, he advanced on the White Scars psyker, Gorechild's teeth already rattling at full speed.

The Stormseer took a step forwards and aimed his staff directly at Khârn's head. There was a brilliant flash and Khârn's vision blurred, but he shook off the assault and pressed on. A second discharge came, hitting his breastplate, but the

energy quickly dissipated. Looking down at the fading blue-white light, he laughed at the efforts of the Stormseer.

‘Fool. Your parlour tricks cannot break the Blood God’s grip on me.’

Raising his axe into the air, the Chosen of Khorne swung down, smashing the animal-horned tip of the Stormseer’s staff into splinters and slicing away the ceremonial braids of hair. The White Scar looked down to the shaft, now cleaved in two and useless, and immediately reached for his chainsword. Khâm heard a muttered incantation beneath the Stormseer’s helmet, likely an appeal to the powers of nature the Chogorians so fervently believed in, and moved in with Gorechild to claim his skull. However, the speed with which the White Scar moved was incredible; blocking his attack, the Stormseer pushed back and, to his surprise and delight, Khâm realised that the White Scar had summoned extra power and speed from some unknown spirit. This promised to be a worthy opponent after all.

The Stormseer raised his chainsword with a roar and threw himself at Khâm, who found himself having to parry the ferocious onslaught. The two sets of teeth ripped at each other in a screech of metal. Grabbing hold of his free arm, the White Scar attempted to spin Khâm off balance but instead they fell back onto a nearby bike, crashing to the unforgiving ground. Khâm recovered first, reactivating Gorechild and bringing it down on the Stormseer’s helmet. Galvanised by his incantations, the Chogorian bobbed his head out of the way. He was not fast enough to prevent the top of his helm being sheared away, along with a good slice of scalp from his scarred, bald head. Swinging outwards with Gorechild, Khâm had to step back from the Stormseer’s counter-attack. Rolling back onto his feet, the psyker again threw himself at the Betrayer with a guttural roar, slicing and carving a path with his chainsword towards him. Khâm found himself relishing the fight.

‘You have found your strength, Stormseer! Be fast. Be strong. Your battle-brothers have been nothing but disappointing cowards. Prove to me that you are a worthy adversary!’

Khâm wanted his words to goad the Stormseer and as the psyker thrust his chainsword towards him with a howl of fury, he knew that it had worked. However, the attack lacked the ferocity of the previous few blows. With disappointment, Khâm realised the White Scar’s power was deserting him. They both knew it. Yet still, the Chogorian pressed on his assault, snarling as he did so.

‘What do you know of worth? You are an abomination, as is your god. I do not

need the powers of the warp to kill you. There are plenty of other ways you can die at my hands.'

As if to punctuate the point, the Stormseer sliced through one of the chains attached to Gorechild, releasing the skulls that had been threaded along its length. They clattered to the ground and rolled away. Furious at losing his trophies, Khârn swept outwards with the rear of his chainaxe, hitting the Stormseer squarely in the chest and throwing him backwards. Khârn's patience was wearing thin.

'I care not whether I take your soul or your skull, Chogorian. Either way, the Blood God will have you for his own.'

The White Scar stood before Khârn for a moment, clearly considering his words. Slowly, he reached up and removed his ruined helmet, revealing a face soaked in blood and eyes white with hatred. Khârn was unimpressed with his defiance. The mica-dragon teeth on Gorechild became a blur, and Khârn swung the chainaxe two-handed. The Stormseer moved fast enough for his chainsword to take the whole force of the attack, but Gorechild carved it in two. Its chain split and lashed backwards with lethal speed, fracturing the Chogorian's skull and tearing out his right eye. Khârn stepped back and watched as the White Scar clutched at his ruined face, blood pumping through the fingers of his gauntlet. Still, he would not give up. He drew a ceremonial dagger from an animal-hide sheath and pointed it towards Khârn, raging at him in fury.

'How can you not understand, berzerker? Even if you kill us all today, we will not stop. We shall avenge the Brotherhood of Khajog Khan and destroy Abaddon the Despoiler. We will hunt you and your kind to *extinction*.'

Khârn stopped dead in his tracks, Gorechild spinning down to an idle chunter. He regarded the swaying form of the Stormseer, the warrior still determined to finish his hunt. It was not the admission the White Scars were on a mission of vengeance that surprised him, nor the pointless bravado of the Stormseer in the face of the Blood God's might. It was something far more personal that ignited a rage within him.

'Abaddon? I serve no one but Khorne.'

Exposed as he was to the furnace heat of Haeleon, the unfiltered tone of the traitor's voice sent a chill through Yaghterai's body. His vision swayed in and out of focus through his remaining eye, and he was unsure whether Khârn's removal of his elaborate red helmet was real or an illusion. As the scarlet figure moved towards him, however, the look of absolute loathing in his stare brought

the Stormseer crashing back to reality. The rest of Khârn's scarred face was impassive, caring nothing for the life about to end before him. Yaghterai wondered if those malevolent, feral eyes had witnessed Jaghatai Khan himself on the battlefield. Had they seen Terra burn?

Yaghterai felt tired. He knew he was finished; his mind was slipping away, robbing him of his connection to the aether. And yet, it had been words that had hurt his opponent more than anything. He still had a weapon he could wield.

'There is no distinction I can see. World Eaters, Black Legion... you are all the same. Had Abaddon not crawled from that plague pit you call home, you would not have had the will or the courage to venture forth on your own. He has led you to this place, whether you like it or not. And he will lead you to your annihilation.'

Yaghterai felt his legs buckle and he fell to his hands and knees at the feet of Khârn. There was a high-pitched sound in the air, strangely familiar, getting closer. It filled his heart with yearning. Straining his head upwards, he could see Khârn towering over him, his huge axe purring, ready and waiting. His face was shaking with rage; he was impassive no longer. Good.

'What became of the Twelfth Legion, Khârn? Let me tell you.'

The Stormseer shook his head to clear it. He wanted his final words to be as cutting as a finely honed tulwar.

'They bowed to the Despoiler, Khârn. The War Hounds turned into lapdogs.'

Yaghterai dropped his head in exhaustion. He could see red and clear liquid running in thick lines onto the smooth, hard ground, steam escaping as it splashed before him. The sound came again, louder now. Was it the whine of a chainaxe? No. It was changing, transforming into something else. Yes, the screech of a Chogorian eagle. It was calling him home, and as all went black he opened his soul to welcome its cry.

The battle was not yet won, but Lukosz could see from his vantage point the berzerkers were on their way to victory. Some yards distant he spotted Samzar hurling the front wheel of a White Scars bike at two opponents, smashing one to the ground and forcing the other to fire wide of his position. All the better, because the shot would have dropped him where he stood. The Nails were making him increasingly reckless, and Lukosz knew Samzar's uncontrolled rage would soon lead to his demise. As if realising his lucky escape, Samzar charged forwards. Emptying his own weapon into the chest of the upright White Scar, Samzar turned his attention to the prone Chogorian half buried beneath the tyre

of his own steed.

Flicking the rapidly drying gore from his chainsword, Lukosz scanned down the valley to target the khan of the White Scars. Some within the warband might argue there was no great urgency to finish the enemy off, but he had fought the Chogorians before and knew just how quickly they could reassemble, mobilise and launch a counter-strike. The berzerkers had used the planet to its best effect; in that, they had served Khârn well. But now the initial density of bodies had thinned and despite the abandoned machines in the confined space, it would be easier to manoeuvre around them. If only a handful of riders retrieved their mounts, the warband could be cut to ribbons.

Instead of seeing the White Scars' leader, he found his own. Khârn was swinging Gorechild down onto an unseen opponent in a frenzy, his bare arm glistening and bulging with the effort. Why he had removed his helmet, Lukosz could only guess. Khârn enjoyed the smell of death, and there was plenty of it hanging in the fire-hot air of Haeleon. Unfortunately, this meant he would not be able to hear his vox broadcast. Lukosz would have to navigate his way over there instead.

Berzerkers would fight independently until they were slain or all their foes lay in a pile before them, but now was the time for reason. Like Samzar, Lukosz had relinquished his captain's rank when the Legion had fallen apart. The title had become as meaningless as his own existence. He still possessed the keen tactical mind that had marked him for leadership all those years ago. Whether it would eventually abandon him as he had witnessed in his fellow World Eaters, he was unsure. However, one thing was for certain: he was the only thing keeping this disparate faction of berzerkers alive. Khârn cared nothing for leadership. He was an indifferent force of nature who lived to shed blood and go where it pleased him or, to be more accurate, where the Red Path took him. If some chose to follow, as long as they did not get in Khârn's way, then all was well and good. If they proved useful, as he and Samzar had, all the better. Following the Chosen of Khorne was the closest thing Lukosz would ever find to the old ways and, for that reason, it was worth fighting for.

Spotting four White Scars moving in unison towards their steeds, Lukosz realised it was time to act. Bounding over to Khârn, he beheld a scene that choked the warning in his throat. It was difficult to make out exactly what the Chosen of Khorne was attacking, because it had no discernible shape. Here and there, pieces of shattered plate stuck up out of the glistening pulp. The frenzied attack showed no signs of abating, with Khârn screaming the same thing

repeatedly as he swung down into the spattered mass of tissue, flinging ropes of gore in random arcs around the site of obliteration.

‘I follow the Red Path! I follow the Blood God!’

Lukosz had rarely seen Khârn in a greater fury. The air around him seemed to boil. Somewhere behind him, he heard an engine choke into life, and a large shadow passed overhead, throwing the valley into shadow.

*‘Lord Lukosz, this is Roderbar. A White Scars Thunderhawk is on its way down. I could not—’*

The ground erupted in heavy bolter fire just as the *Skulltaker*’s warning came through. Lukosz flattened himself against the gorge’s wall and heard the roar of engines pass overhead. The White Scars were attempting extraction, and in their present location any ship would be able to shoot the warband like fish in a barrel. Barking orders to return fire, Lukosz turned to Khârn who, mercifully, had been distracted by the assault. Looking down to the mess, Lukosz realised just about the only part of the body that had not been pulped was the head. Khârn looked up to him then, eyes wild, breathing heavily.

‘Blood for the Blood God, Lukosz. He demands more trophies. *Now.*’

The air was filled with the chatter of concentrated bolter fire and Lukosz looked up to see the Thunderhawk land heavily around a mile in the distance. Behind him, packs of berzerkers were heaving themselves over the ledge of the chasm in pursuit. Several White Scars were running towards a solitary figure waving a long, curved blade in the air between Lukosz’s position and the now-open drop-ship door. It had to be their khan, orchestrating the retreat. On his right, Lukosz spotted the unmistakable figure of Khârn running towards the Chogorian, completely oblivious to the volley of suppressing fire the rapidly retreating White Scars were laying down to protect their leader. The khan represented a trophy that could not be missed.

Realising Khârn’s intention, Lukosz ran after him, doing his best to draw fire away and provide cover. Samzar joined his comrade on the opposite flank seconds later, but with nothing to hide behind it was a matter of firing and dodging as best they could. With every one of the khan’s remaining battle-brothers now closing on him and heading for the drop-ship, Lukosz saw their leader begin his own retreat. Three White Scars moved forwards from the foot of the loading ramp to join him, attempting to create a distraction in much the same way Lukosz and Samzar had done for Khârn earlier in the battle. Lukosz could see that, despite the speed and fury of Khârn’s charge, he would not reach the

leader of the White Scars before his protectors did.

Lukosz roared at Samzar and the other berzerkers to target the drop-ship. Bolt pistol fire tore through the air, catching the White Scars leader, his guard and Khârn in a deadly crossfire. Khârn kept on weaving and ducking, clearly intent on claiming the khan's head no matter what the cost. Without warning, his intended victim spun to the ground, hit in his shoulder by a stray shot. The White Scars did not hesitate to open up on the exposed berzerker with a volley that sent Khârn himself to the broken ground. The three White Scars guards wasted no time in grabbing their khan. Shielding him with their own bodies from the fire Lukosz and the berzerkers were laying down, they kept low and headed towards the drop-ship. As Khârn jumped to his feet, the drop-ship's pilot opened fire, blowing a huge hole in the ground and sending him spinning into the air.

Lukosz heard Samzar's howl of fury, and saw him charge towards the drop-ship with several berzerkers flanking him. The khan and his guard had missed their chance to reach the Thunderhawk alive. Moving as one, the four White Scars changed direction towards a handful of bikes whose riders had been cut down by the berzerkers' pistols, firing constantly as they ran while the Thunderhawk's engines began to power up in the background. Lukosz saw movement, and was relieved to see Khârn back on his feet, running to intercept the fleeing White Scars.

'Keep that drop-ship on the ground!'

Lukosz ran towards Samzar, who had wrestled a heavy bolter from one of the attack bikes and was emptying the magazine into the starboard engine of the Thunderhawk. Lukosz fired at the same spot, and as he reached Samzar they both watched as a blossom of yellow and red erupted from the ship's cowling. Pitching violently downwards, the pilot realised retreat was the only option and coaxed the vessel into the air, a plume of dense smoke streaming from the back of the burning starboard exhaust as the berzerkers continued their fire.

Lukosz looked back over to the fleeing White Scars. Khârn was within yards of the leader when one of his guards threw himself at the berzerker. Lukosz and Samzar sprinted forwards, firing past Khârn who was fighting hand-to-hand with the Chogorian veteran. By the time they reached Khârn, his opponent was dead, but the Chogorian leader had escaped with his outriders. Lukosz stood back from Khârn with a wary eye and watched him closely as the two bikes disappeared into the distance. Lukosz could see Khârn's knuckles white with the intensity of his grasp on Gorechild. Lukosz readied himself for a potential attack. He knew Khârn too well to trust he would not turn on him and the rest of the warband to

vent his frustration.

After an uneasy few seconds, Lukosz ordered the *Skulltaker* to destroy the Thunderhawk and the White Scars vessel, but received a garbled reply that sounded as if they were already engaged with the enemy somewhere in high orbit. Watching the smoke trail disappear into the upper atmosphere, Lukosz was satisfied they had done enough damage to the Thunderhawk to prevent its return and removed his helmet in unison with his comrade. Both winced from the tremendous heat as it hit their naked faces, with Lukosz running a hand over the bristles stubbornly prickling from his shaven head and meeting the nubs of his Butcher's Nails at the base of his neck. Their scream was fading. It was then he noticed the blood running freely down Khârn's left arm. In time the flow would be staunch, but he could see the wounds were deep and would need attention regardless of Khârn's legendary powers of recovery.

'The battle is won. All praise to the Blood God!'

Samzar's voice was hoarse from the oaths he had been swearing throughout the battle. Lukosz muttered his agreement, then looked behind him to see the thirty or so surviving berzerkers raise their weapons in acknowledgement. Hells, thought Lukosz. They had lost nearly half their number. The warriors began rifling through the bodies of the fallen White Scars and inspecting what was left of their bikes and equipment. Whatever weapons they could salvage would be welcome, but they would be no substitute for the fallen. The fact so much loyalist gene-seed would be denied to the Emperor was a victory of sorts, but Lukosz was increasingly concerned it would not be enough for this warband. Khârn's next words did nothing to alleviate his fears.

'The battle is not won while a single enemy still breathes, Samzar. And do not invite the attention of Khorne. He will not be content with our work today.'

Looking to a cluster of abandoned bikes, Khârn threw Gorechild onto his back and strode over to the machines. Lukosz could see most were clearly beyond use, while a couple of others seemed to be intact. It came as no surprise to him when Khârn mounted one and rode away in the direction of the fleeing White Scars. As the sound from his engine drifted into the distance, both captains turned to see that every berzerker had stopped what they were doing. Lukosz felt the tension rising in the burning air, and barked the order to continue their salvage into the valley complex below. Most obeyed immediately. Half a dozen looked to each other before they, too, returned to their grisly work.

'Do we follow him?'

Lukosz turned to Samzar, who was squinting at the exhaust trail drifting into

the distance. The harsh light emphasised the deep gashes and scars across his face, his right cheekbone sunken to almost cadaverous effect from a blow he had received centuries before. Lukosz remembered the attack well; had it not been for his intervention, Samzar would have been killed. In those days, Samzar had been as sharp a soldier as he both on and off the battlefield, sharper even. But now there was a dull, sullen quality to the World Eater, a sure indication the Nails were eroding every aspect of his being. In combat he was still brutally efficient, but in the quieter times... there was something slipping away, and Lukosz missed it.

‘I do not think Khâr would thank us for it. You know him as well as I, Samzar. He will have his trophy for the Blood God.’

‘And what is the reward for the rest of us, Lukosz?’

Whirling around, Lukosz saw six berzerkers standing abreast before him, and immediately recognised from their armour that they were the ones that had exchanged glances with each other a few minutes before. Five of them kept their helmets on, but the one who spoke for them had removed his. Across the battlefield, the rest of the warband had stopped again, warily observing a situation that Lukosz could feel was rapidly deteriorating. Samzar took a step forward to the side of Lukosz. A head taller than them all, he regarded the six with a look of bemusement.

‘Is your thirst for blood not sated, Moreenna? Has Khâr not led you to glorious victory once again?’

Lukosz could see fingers begin to twitch amongst the group. Their weapons were holstered, a couple of the bolt pistols still ticking away as they cooled in the ferocious heat of the planet, but they were easily accessible. He and Samzar were completely out-gunned, and he could feel his Nails whispering a need for readiness. Lukosz could see that Samzar already had his hand on a newly acquired White Scars chainsword.

‘What of it, Samzar? Where is our prize from the Blood God? Khâr goes off once again to claim the greatest trophy for himself. What kind of “leader” is that? Where is our glory?’

The other berzerkers began to walk towards the confrontation. Lukosz knew this had been coming for some time now. The six standing before him knew the glory days of the Legion were long gone. Some of them had not even been there back then, and only joined the berzerker warbands after forsaking sacred vows and giving in to their insatiable bloodlust. The nihilism that was eating through their ranks was as deep as it was dangerous. The warband were made up from so

many different contingents but, like the World Eaters he had once proudly served, they were united in losing so much more than their belief in the Emperor or their Primarch. But they had gained new purpose – to serve the Blood God – and it was undeniable Khârn had given them ample opportunity to do that.

Samzar took a step forward, clearly ready to take on the entire group single-handedly. As the group's eyes flicked to his chainsword, so too did their hands move towards their own weapons. Morena matched Samzar's move, his broken and deformed chin thrust forwards.

'Khârn forgets we are all in the service of the Blood God. The Red Path is nothing more than a fantasy of his own creating. The Chosen of Khorne is following an illusion. Perhaps it is time we had a leader who will bring glory to us all.'

Lukosz saw Morena's free hand slam down on Samzar's, pushing his gauntlet onto the reclaimed White Scars chainsword. Samzar was shaking with fury from head to foot, his eyes bugging wildly. Morena tried to smirk, but with most of his lower jaw missing it was difficult to judge what expression he was attempting. No one moved to stop him.

Lukosz caught a glimpse of sun on metal. Samzar continued to stare at Morena, but the expression on his old comrade's face had changed. It had a look bordering on amusement. Morena's eyes showed confusion. Behind him, Lukosz watched his five-strong cohort shift uneasily on the diamond-hard ground, and they began to back away from him, hands moving from weapons. Morena tried to turn his head to bark an order, but Lukosz could see he was unable to move. When he tried to speak, what came out of his mouth was a gurgle of red and purple froth. It drooled in a thick line down the remnants of his jaw onto his breastplate.

Lukosz spotted why Morena could not speak at exactly the same point the berserker dropped his weapon. Eyes wide in surprise, Morena reached up with his left hand to investigate the object sticking out of the side of his neck. Lukosz looked back over to Samzar, who had not blinked. His eyes bored into Morena's with a dark intensity, and Lukosz saw the telltale twitching of pleasure from his comrade's mouth. Morena traced his fingers over the hilt of the White Scars duelling tulwar sticking out into the arid air from the side of his neck, and Samzar smiled. It was clear to everyone watching that the chainsword had not been the only weapon Samzar had taken for himself after the battle.

Samzar reached forwards and withdrew the ritual weapon, twisting it as he did so. Blood fountained from both sides of Morena's neck, spraying over his

pauldrons in a gaudy display. Lukosz could see the satisfied look on Samzar's face as Morena stared ahead, eyes glazing over. Lukosz went to his own weapon as Samzar turned his attention to the five would-be supporters of the new regime, their spokesman choking on his own blood at the raging champion's feet.

'Who else seeks to challenge the Chosen of Khorne?'

Samzar swept his chainsword slowly from left to right, in turn pointing it at every berzerker assembled before him. Lukosz drew his weapon now, expecting a second challenge to come – from more than one of them this time.

'A challenge to Khâr is a challenge to me!'

Samzar's voice was near hysterical. He was not finished with killing yet. Lukosz made the decision to stop this before it escalated even more, and stepped forward over the twitching body of Morena.

'Return to your duties and this mutinous action will be forgotten – for now. Khâr will be back with a trophy for us all to share, and a path for us all to follow. Blood for the Blood God!'

The berzerkers did not move. Lukosz shouted again.

'Blood for the Blood God!'

Oaths and curses floated on the air.

'Blood for the Blood God!'

Lukosz screamed the words, and this time, the warband chorused back. Everyone present knew the moment had passed, that an uneasy truce had once again been reached. Two of the five supporters stepped forward to retrieve Morena's body, but Samzar blocked their way. While he had managed to regain a semblance of control over the Nails, his words were laboured and slurred.

'I will be taking his skull, and I will wear it as a reminder to you all.'

The berzerker closest to Samzar readied a response, but thought better than to deliver it. Turning away from the seething champion, the other four fell in and followed him back to the spoils of the battle, accompanied by the unmistakable clicks of internal vox chatter. Lukosz waited for them to get well out of range before he spoke to his old comrade.

'The challenges become ever greater, Samzar.'

Samzar knelt to the unmoving form of Morena and inspected his disfigured skull.

'Challenges are inevitable, Lukosz. We both know that. I welcome them all, as does Khâr. Let them step forward to die at my hands or their own. It matters not to Khorne where the blood comes from, only that it comes.'

If Lukosz was bitter at the actions of Moreenna and his band, Samzar's reply only made him slip deeper into melancholy. They all lived to serve the Blood God, of that there was no argument. But the lack of a common goal had destroyed the World Eaters, and now, faced with the considerable forces of the Emperor as they marauded ever further away from the Eye of Terror, the last thing the warband needed was to find themselves fighting on two fronts – from within, and without.

Samzar's reason had just about deserted him. Stooping to retrieve his helmet for respite from the furnace heat of Haeleon, Lukosz watched his brother-in-arms of so many conflicts struggle for self-control. After all the years they had shared on the battlefield and off, he could read his subtlest of gestures. It pained Lukosz to admit there was no subtlety left within Samzar; the champion was muttering darkly to himself, glaring at the five who had stood by Moreenna and clearly trying to decide if he should kill them now and be done with it. How the rest of the warband would react to these events in the absence of Khârn was impossible to judge, and anger flared in Lukosz's chest. Moreenna was right; Khârn did indeed live to serve himself. As yet another honour duel broke out amongst the scavenging berzerkers, he wondered just how much longer he could keep the warband and Samzar under control – or whether he even wanted to any more.

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