

THE EMPEROR'S WILL



AGENTS OF THE IMPERIUM

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ALONG LINE OF ships stretched away into the dark reaches of the outer system. More than sixty vessels in all, among them survey ships and recovery vessels, giant transports and tiny scouts, as well as fearsome vessels of war. Their crusade had lasted fifteen years of their time, as they had entered and re-entered the warp. But on Taran III, the home world of their chapter, their battle-brothers had aged nearly a hundred. The men aboard the ships were tired and the ships themselves seemed wearier still. Most had suffered damage and the warships bore the scars of many battles down their armoured sides.

Yet for all their weariness, they were still proud, and joyful at the prospect of homecoming. Aboard the giant transports were the prizes they had sought for the Emperor who commanded them - ancient artefacts from lost civilisations, treasures from a dozen strange worlds, specimens and recordings and survey results to last a thousand scholars' lifetimes.

They carried people, too - the Emperor's loyal subjects, representatives of the survivors from systems isolated in the great warp storms. Their peoples had long since given up hope that the Imperium would reach out to find its lost children - until the day the great ships of the Storm Warriors' fleet had appeared in the skies over their home-worlds.

And lastly they brought with them memories, of lost comrades, of acts of heroism, of the Battleaxe and the Lionheart and their courageous crews who would never return home, memories that would be recorded in the annals of the chapter upon their return.

But now they had been diverted. Their homecoming was to be delayed as urgent messages summoned them to undertake one final task for their Emperor before He released them for rest and meditation beneath the silver skies of Taran III.

FROM THE VIEWING port of the Sirius, Tesra IV loomed large and forbidding. It was a giant by any standards. Much of its atmosphere was heavily polluted with thick, dark clouds obscuring the surface. Only at its northern pole, where the bitter cold had kept human settlement at bay, was there a clear view of what had once been a stark but beautiful ice planet.

Chaptermaster Calan turned from the viewing port to face the assembled officers in the wardroom.

‘I understand that some among you are impatient for the assault to begin?’

It was framed as a question, but Calan’s stern glare at the Marine officers made it clear that no answer was expected. He turned back to the viewing port. He could just make out the shape of the nearest vessels to the mighty battle-barge.

‘Our forces are still assembling. By tonight the Valiant and her escorts will have joined us. Tomorrow, battle-brothers from the Black Templars will be here, and I expect a mixed force of cruisers and destroyers to arrive from Elara Prime....’ He paused, his voice betraying what might have been uncertainty. ‘And there may be other reinforcements as well.’

‘Sir?’ It was Captain Kortar, commander of the First Company, an officer whose courage verged on recklessness or even insubordination, and who typically failed to maintain the respectful silence of his brother officers in the presence of the Chaptermaster.

Calan’s voice was firmer now as he spoke.

‘Kortar, when the position is clearer, you will be informed. First I need to reflect further on our situation myself. We are assembling an overwhelming force around Tesra IV, and there can be no doubt as to our ultimate victory, nor to the fate of the rebels who have chosen to take the path of treachery. But first we must be certain that we best serve the Emperor’s interests. I do not yet have that certainty. I shall retire to my quarters to meditate. Attend to your duties, gentlemen!’

Calan turned and strode from the room, his scarlet cloak sweeping behind him. The sergeant standing at the wardroom door shouted, ‘Attention on deck!’ and the officers leapt to their feet as their Chaptermaster left them. The sergeant

followed Calan from the room and the officers relaxed. Several of them left to return to duties elsewhere aboard the Sirius, but most remained, confounded and intrigued by their leader's uncharacteristic caution in the face of the rebels on Tesra IV.

Kortar was first to speak. 'Why are we waiting? Why sit here in easy detection range of the enemy, doing nothing? We have five hundred Marines aboard the Sirius, a hundred more aboard Ilyan and Tigris, and enough firepower to tear a hole in their defences.'

'Perhaps, now we are so close to home, he is minded to lose as few of our brothers as possible.' The officer speaking was a young lieutenant named Marek, a promising warrior building a reputation for fighting carefully planned actions with few casualties, unlike Kortar, whose victories - impressive though they were - had often been won at great cost to the chapter. 'Intelligence suggests that the conspirators are few in number, but that the governor is among them and has persuaded the garrison that we are the enemy and that we are serving the Dark Forces. If they carry that off, then we may end up destroying loyal servants of the Emperor while the rebel scum look on and laugh.'

'What of it?' replied Kortar angrily. 'The invasion is inevitable. We are merely wasting time here.'

'You may both be right,' came a calmer, more thoughtful voice. Chaplain Dusal was standing by the viewing port. 'If we must fight, then let us do so when we have truly overwhelming force. We were nine hundred strong when we left Taran III. Three hundred of our battle-brothers will never see those silver skies again. Perhaps that's enough. Perhaps the Emperor honoured us with this task precisely because we have suffered and we are tired and we will not rush thoughtlessly in. The rebels aren't going anywhere. And there's always a chance that they'll surrender themselves to the Emperor's mercy when they see we mean business.'

Several others murmured in agreement and the gathering dispersed, with some officers returning to their quarters and others going to brief their men. Kortar cursed and kicked over a chair as he left to begin his daily ritual of close combat training. At least that should allow him to let off steam.

SEVERAL DECKS BELOW, kneeling in darkness in his quarters, Calan prayed to the Emperor for guidance.

JUST BEFORE MIDNIGHT, warning lights went on in the Operations Room. Klaxons blared and Calan was called to the bridge. The officers on duty might have noticed that he looked tired when he arrived, but they were too discreet to remark upon it.

‘Status?’ he asked as he seated himself in the captain’s chair.

‘The Valiant has been sighted, sir - approaching on vector four-zero-nine.’

Calan looked at the central viewing screen.

‘Maximum magnification!’

At first she seemed like a tiny speck in the distance, then around her six other specks appeared and slowly the mighty battleship and her six escorts began to take shape. The Valiant had been scheduled to meet the returning Storm Warriors in the Magellan Sector, to take charge of the transports and other Imperial vessels and escort them to the bases where they would be received and their cargoes and survey records examined. Now both found themselves diverted to Tesra IV.

‘Sirius to Valiant. This is Calan, Chaptermaster of the Emperor’s Storm Warriors and commander of the battlebarge Sirius and its accompanying task force. Welcome. Assume position in the vanguard of the fleet. Sirius out.’

He watched as the enormous battleship slowly passed the Sirius, great scars disfiguring her armoured sides. Her escorts followed smoothly behind.

The duty officer moved to the communicator to close the comm-link to the Valiant, but as he did so he paused and looked closely at a monitor. ‘Sir - we have another contact coming from the same bearing as the Valiant. A small craft, could be an Imperial shuttle. Scanning now.’

At last, thought Calan, now I shall have clarity.

‘Sir - the shuttle is hailing us. He doesn’t appear to have visual, but I’m putting him on loudspeaker.’

Calan sat back in his command chair and waited while the hiss of static faded

and he could make out the words coming from the loudspeaker.

‘This is Imperial shuttle Aurora, hailing Imperial task force. We request permission to dock with your flagship. We have one passenger aboard. Code Indigo.’

Code Indigo, thought Calan, ignoring the startled faces on the bridge, an Inquisitor. Now things truly will become clearer. He looked towards the duty officer. ‘Signal them to come aboard. I will receive our visitor in my quarters.’ He stood and had turned to leave the bridge when behind him a voice shouted, ‘They’ve fired something! The shuttle’s fired something!’ A klaxon sounded and warning lights started flashing.

‘Identify that missile!’ shouted Calan. ‘Who are they firing at?’

The duty officer was leaning over the shoulder of a young crewman at another monitor. ‘Sir - it’s not a missile at all. It appears to be a drop pod. We detect one life form aboard. It’s heading for the planet’s surface, moving very fast.’ He turned and looked at Calan. ‘Sir - they’ve got fighters down there, and a lot of firepower. Whoever he is, I don’t give much for his chances.’

Neither do I, thought Calan, whoever he is, he must be very brave or very stupid.

‘Sir - Ilyan’s hailing us. Captain Sovak requests permission to talk to you.’

‘Put him on.’

This time there was visual, and Calan looked into the steely blue eyes of the officer commanding the strike cruiser, a man who might one day succeed him as Chaptermaster.

‘Sir - you will have seen that the shuttle has launched a drop pod towards Tesra IV. I don’t know if he’s friend or foe - he could be trying to reach the rebels to assist them, or he may be on the Emperor’s business. Do you want me to blow him out of the sky, or clear a path for him through the enemy defences?’

Once again Calan understood why he felt such confidence for the future of the Chapter. With such men - clear thinking, bold, decisive - the Emperor’s foes had good reason to fear. Calan closed his eyes for a second to think. Help him, serve the Emperor and let the Emperor’s will be done. Calan started. It was as if

someone was talking inside his head. 'Help him! Clear his path! Ensure that he reaches the planet at all costs. Other vessels stand aside, Ilyan and Tigris, you have weapons free - fire at will. May the Emperor's will be done!'

HUNDREDS OF MILES below the task force, swarms of fighters were emerging on the edge of the atmosphere, racing to intercept the drop pod. As they approached the tiny pod it seemed to accelerate and started to dodge and weave. The fighters closed in, mirroring its movements and firing lancelike bursts of laser cannon at it. The fate of the tiny craft looked inevitable, until suddenly an enormous laser bolt from the Ilyan ripped through the fighter formation, incinerating many of them, and the strike cruiser and her sister vessel surged forward into their midst. Several of the fighters were too slow to dodge the oncoming cruisers and were smashed in fiery explosions by the accurate fire as the ships raced towards the outer atmosphere of the planet, covering the descent of the tiny drop pod.

On the bridge of the Sirius, Calan shook his head in wonder as his cruiser captains threw their ships around space like fighter jets. ‘They’re following the pod right down into the atmosphere!’ shouted one of the crewmen on the bridge.

They watched in awe as the cruisers descended behind the tiny drop pod. Every weapon on the cruisers seemed to be firing, blasting at the rebel fighters like giants troubled by gnats. As they entered the atmosphere their hulls glowed and seemed to be ablaze, and the fighters peeled off as their heat shields threatened to overload. The pod itself only accelerated further, glowing like a shooting star and then turning off rapidly towards the frozen north and disappearing to land somewhere in the arctic wastes. Ilyan and Tigris turned off in the opposite direction, racing through the skies of the polluted planet, leaving multiple sonic booms and hurricane-like tail winds in their wake.

‘Unsubtle, I think you’ll agree, but effective. If the rebels were in any doubt about our presence here before, they’re certainly under no illusions now.’

Calan span at the unfamiliar voice.

‘Forgive me, Chaptermaster. My shuttle docked while you were otherwise distracted. I am Inquisitor Andrijssen. I am here by order of the Inquisition to assist and advise you in this grave matter. With your permission, I would welcome the opportunity to talk further with you about the situation on Tesra IV.’

Calan looked at the tall, stooped figure swathed in a dark cloak, his face and head concealed by a hood. ‘Of course, my lord Inquisitor. It is an honour to

welcome you aboard the Sirius. Shall we retire to my quarters?’

THE FLEET HAD been in orbit around Tesra IV for eleven days. A company of Black Templars arrived on the second day and further reinforcements continued to assemble. The captain commanding the Templars made clear his frustration at the delay. His men were renowned for their close combat skills and their great physical strength, even by the standards of the Adeptus Astartes, and they wanted to fight. By contrast he found the Storm Warriors' chaptermaster a strange character, his destiny lying in the far reaches of deep space far from the planet he calls home, braving the warp with its dangers and its unpredictability on his chapter's great crusades. Their commander seemed to have a different perspective on the timing of human affairs, returning home after a century-long crusade, but the Templar longed for the simple, straightforward virtue of a short, sharp fight. The motto of the Black Templars was No pity! No remorse! No fear!, and he yearned to swing the thunder-hammer of his forces and bring forth righteous redemption upon the traitors down below.

Aboard the Sirius even the normally calm Chaplain Dusal was heard to mutter about time wasting. Kortar was beside himself. He had put three of the chapter's close combat instructors in the sick bay as he worked out his frustrations in the training chamber. From the Valiant came courteous but increasingly impatient enquiries as to Calan's intentions. Lord Admiral Dacius, commanding the Valiant, was technically in command of the fleet in space, but was required to defer to Calan in respect of the planetary assault. His own officers had even suggested that the Valiant launch its own assault, bombarding the planet and then landing invasion parties selected from their own highly-trained boarding crews. Dacius had quashed the idea, standing firm against the unrest amongst his officers but still he could not hide his own frustration.

Finally on the tenth day the captains of Ilyan and Tigris had defied convention and joined with several of the escort commanders and the Black Templars' captain in coming aboard for "consultations" with Calan. Calan listened to their requests for clarification and then sent them away, retiring to his quarters to meditate and pray with the mysterious Inquisitor.

FAR BELOW ON the planet's surface, the winds howled around the Winter Palace of His Most Glorious Excellency Ignatius the Third, governor of Tesra IV by Imperial command. The Winter Palace was Ignatius's favourite retreat, a haven of tranquillity on an over-developed industrial planet, much of which had slowly turned into a single giant city. He had once heard it called a hive-world, and that was increasingly what it was, with its forty billion inhabitants, its vast underground factories and dormitories, and the mining operations that penetrated almost to the planet's core.

It was a world of enormous wealth, yet it was also a desolate place whose atmosphere had been poisoned by industrial pollution. Only in the arctic north could a man walk freely on the planet's surface and breathe the air without the help of apparatus. Few people ventured there however because of the ferocious arctic climate with its bitter winds, icy temperatures and sudden storms. It was about as brutal a place as a man could imagine, thought Ignatius as he walked from his well-heated private chambers towards the gate that led outside to the spectacular ice gardens with their centuries old frozen sculptures. Whenever he stayed at the Winter Palace he spent fifteen or twenty minutes at the start of each day in the ice gardens. He enjoyed the sense of privacy and seclusion in them and liked to look up at the mighty Mount Okram, the tallest mountain on the planet, in whose shadow the Winter Palace had been built a thousand years before.

Mount Okram occupied a special place in the consciousness of all native-born Tesrans. In primitive times young men had attempted to climb it for the honour of their peoples and as a test of manhood. The lucky ones turned back while they could. There was no known account of an unaided climber reaching the summit and returning alive. In more recent times attempts had been made to land on the summit from the air, but even large craft could not manoeuvre safely in the storms that constantly swept the summit. Teleport tests had been tried with volunteers, but the metallic ores at the heart of the mountain upset the delicate positioning apparatus with catastrophic - and fatal - consequences. The result of all this was that Mount Okram remained unconquered, nature's last bastion in a world devastated by mankind. Ignatius found it fitting that the mountain should provide the backdrop to the palace. He was surrounded on three sides by the walls and fortifications of the palace grounds with their heavy weapons emplacements and reinforced bunkers, while to his rear an impregnable force of nature protected him.

Today Ignatius had a concern of a different type. He had received a message from the Imperial task force circling the planet. He was to receive a visit from the Chaptermaster of the Storm Warriors, no less, to “conduct enquiries on behalf of the Emperor”. He was surprised that the Imperial forces were taking such a delicate approach. By this time he would have expected them to have charged in with a full-scale planetary assault, which would have suited him perfectly. Then they would have discovered - to their cost - that the armouries of Tesra IV that had equipped the Imperial Navy so magnificently over the centuries could also produce land-based weapons. Ignatius had personally overseen the secret installation of concealed batteries of nova cannons, missile silos and other defences. When the Imperium attacked they would be blasted to atoms. With the Emperor’s forces destroyed, he, Ignatius the Third, would control not just Tesra IV, but the entire Sector. It was risky, of course, but he had friends that even his closest accomplices knew nothing about. His periods of unexplained absence over the past three years had in fact been well spent securing new allies, allies who understood and appreciated him, who would support him and his rule, powerful, ruthless allies who would make the Imperium think twice before attempting to re-take this Sector.

As he thought of his powerful friends, he reached inside his robe and gently rubbed the dark, ornate medallion that hung around his neck. Even to wear such an object was punishable by death, but it amused Ignatius to feel it around his neck at meetings of the planetary council. Soon there would be no planetary council - he looked forward to personally ending the lives of some of its more troublesome members in the most barbaric fashion. But first he needed a victory, a decisive victory over the Imperial fleet circling overhead to show them all that they could not resist his power.

He had been tempted to fire the nova cannons almost two weeks ago when a bizarre incident had occurred. A drop pod was launched from the Imperial fleet, his fighters moved to intercept it, and two strike cruisers intervened, chasing away his fighters and risking their own destruction by entering the planet’s atmosphere. His advisors still had not determined if they were pursuing or protecting the drop pod, since the pod had veered off and crashed on the other side of Mount Okram. His forces had found it burnt beyond recognition in the arctic wastes. Whatever its secrets might have been, they had gone to the grave with its unknown pilot.

Ignatius opened the door to the ice garden. A bitter gust of wind blew in a flurry

of snow. He shivered. It was an unusually cold day. Or perhaps he was uncharacteristically nervous. Today he would meet a Chaptermaster for the first time. It should be entertaining, he thought to himself, looking up at the mountain towering above him. I've never killed a Marine before.

HIGH UP ON THE mountainside, overlooking the Winter Palace far below, part of the rock face appeared to move and take on human form. Slowly a figure became apparent, gliding smoothly across the rocks in a snake-like movement, and barely visible beneath a camouflage cloak. The icy wind howled across the slope, blowing flurries of snow and ice before it. The slowly moving figure was the only living thing in sight. Everywhere was desolation and bitter, icy cold. The figure stopped at a gentle rise in the slope and moved into position behind it. It had been a long trek from the carefully incinerated drop pod, and an even tougher ascent. Now he would have to wait, possibly for many days, and it would be brutally uncomfortable. But the waiting figure was capable of great patience and had endurance beyond the capacity of normal men. If he had to wait, then wait he would, for he was in the service of the Emperor and he would do his duty.

‘ARE YOU SURE you want to do this alone?’ Chaplain Dusal looked at Calan as he walked slowly across the main deck of the Sirius’s dock towards his shuttle, struggling to contain his objections.

Calan paused. ‘You know that there is no other way. It is the Emperor’s will.’

‘It’s also very foolhardy. He may kill you out of hand.’

‘No. An older, wiser servant of the Emperor than I once said, “Know your enemy”. Ignatius is a vain, conceited man. He will want to toy with his prey.’

Dusal nodded towards the Inquisitor who had followed them to the dock, but now stood apart from them, shrouded in his dark cloak, his face hidden beneath his hood.

‘You’re taking a lot on trust. I’d feel happier if you’d at least allow us to teleport some Terminators in behind you. Kortar would kill to lead them.’

Calan laughed. ‘I believe he would. But my decision is made.’

Dusal smiled and shrugged. ‘I’ve served you long enough to know that no purpose is served by arguing with you. Very well - good luck!’ Calan held out his hand. The chaplain clasped it firmly, wondering if it was the last time.

Calan turned and entered the shuttle, the hydraulics whined as the hatch shut behind him and then the engines roared powerfully as they ignited. Dusal stepped back. ‘May the faith of the Emperor and his strong right arm guard you and guide you.’ He turned and headed back to the bridge.

THE ROARING SOUND of powerful thrusters interrupted the moaning of the wind around the Winter Palace. Ignatius looked up from his desk and stared out through the sixteen inch armoured glass window at the landing pad. An Imperial shuttle was landing in the grounds, painted in the distinctive scarlet and gold livery of the Storm Warriors.

A strange chapter, thought Ignatius, and one for which my friends have a particular loathing. They will be pleased with me for this. He turned to his aide standing beside the head of his personal bodyguard, an ogryn accustomed to killing on command for his master. 'Our guest has arrived. I trust that all the arrangements are in place to take care of him?' It was the third time that morning that he had asked the question. Both men knew that Ignatius's attempt at grim humour concealed his fraying nerves.

'Yes, master, we are ready to take care of him as soon as you give the signal.'

'Good, then we had better meet him. Is he alone?'

'Just the pilot, master. He won't be a problem.'

'Very well, let us receive him in the ice garden.'

THE TALL, POWERFUL figure of the Chaptermaster walked slowly amongst the giant ice sculptures, his scarlet cloak flapping around his ancient ceremonial armour. Unusually for someone of his calling, he appeared to be unarmed, save for an ornate ceremonial dagger at his waist. He paused from time to time to gaze appreciatively at some particularly fine work.

‘Greetings, my honoured guest!’ cried Ignatius as he approached, followed by his retinue of servants and bodyguards.

‘Greetings, governor. It seems you are a fortunate man, blessed with many fine things.’

Ignatius bowed, ‘It is the Emperor’s will. All good things flow from Him. To what do we owe the unexpected honour of your visit?’

‘To the Emperor’s work. Reports have reached us, troubling reports my lord, of treachery planned but not yet executed, of petty gods secretly worshipped by those who feign loyalty to the Imperium. That is what brings me to Tesra IV!’

‘By my honour, I swear that I will do my utmost to rid this planet of any who plan treachery against the Emperor!’ Ignatius was red in the face, sweating slightly despite the cold. But he took comfort from his surroundings, from the visible trappings of power around him, his bodyguards, the Palace’s defences, and the towering presence of Mount Okram in the background.

To Ignatius, Calan seemed typical of the brutish force that constituted the Adeptus Astartes. He had cropped grey hair and a granite face with piercing grey eyes. One half of his face was hideously scarred. His very calmness exuded menace and Ignatius’ servants stepped back while his guards nervously fingered their weapons.

‘Oh, but you will, governor, you most certainly will do your utmost. I have here a list of those who are guilty of these crimes - a list that includes many of your closest friends and associates, your own family, and of course at the head of the list yourself, Ignatius the Third, governor by Imperial command.’ Calan held out a small scroll that bore the seal of the Inquisition. ‘You will order the arrest of all those on the list, and ensure that they receive the full force and benefit of the Emperor’s justice. You will do this immediately. And then, my lord governor, you will continue to rule Tesra IV in the Emperor’s name - except that this time

you'll mean it. In future you will truly be the most diligent and loyal of the Emperor's servants.'

Ignatius gasped as he took the list and stepped back out of reach to break the seal and scrutinise it. To his astonishment, he saw dozens of names listed, along with the posts held by the plotters. Most astonishingly of all, Ignatius's own name was at the top. This was extraordinary - his entire plot had become known. For a moment he almost panicked. And then he focussed once more on the solitary figure before him. This arrogant brute stood before him now, alone and unsupported, challenging him without benefit of weapons or allies.

Ignatius stepped forward. 'How dare you challenge me?' he roared. 'In your arrogance you have come to my world, to my palace, where I rule! You will never leave here alive. Beg me now for mercy and I may grant you a quick death.'

Calan stepped forward and stood close to Ignatius so that their breath mingled in the cold air. He looked mournfully into the governor's eyes, the edge of hardness tempered by what seemed to be a profound sorrow and weariness.

'You disappoint me, governor, but you do not surprise me.' He turned and stared towards the summit of Mount Okram, looking for something that could not be seen with the naked eye.

MANY THOUSANDS OF feet above the men in the ice garden, the assassin crouched unmoving, oblivious to the cold, staring through the sniper-scope at the scene below, awaiting the signal from the Chaptermaster. When it came he spoke aloud for the first time, though only the wind and the snow could hear, 'Divine Emperor, Protector and Benefactor of mankind, guide this Thy weapon on its path of righteousness!' When he squeezed the trigger there was an almost inaudible phuuut and then he relaxed, no longer conscious of the scene below him, and started thinking about the long climb back down the mountain.

It had been a challenge, but it was not the greatest that he had faced in the Emperor's service, nor would it be the last. Like all members of the Officio Assassinorum he knew that one day he would face a situation for which his skill would be insufficient, where the odds were too great and his luck would finally run out.

But not today, he thought as he started to disassemble the rifle.

IGNATIUS FELT SOMETHING sting his neck, and touched it gingerly as if expecting an insect bite - except that there were no insects at the Winter Palace. His hand came away with a smear of blood on it. He looked up at the mountainside, visibly shocked, his hands and knees starting to tremble. 'What... what have you done to me?'

'The Emperor's will, governor. The Emperor's servants are everywhere. There can be no escape, no hiding from his divine retribution. Your days of treachery are over. Running in your veins is a poison. It was made according to a formula so ancient that its origins are no longer recorded. It is untraceable and incurable. It will kill you, slowly and painfully, in less than twenty-four hours...'

Ignatius gasped and staggered as if about to faint.

'Unless you take this.' Calan held out a small glass phial containing a clear liquid. 'This is not a cure, it merely delays, by twenty-four hours, what would otherwise be an agonising death. You will not be able to replicate it. Its secrets are known only to the Officio Assassinorum. But as a loyal servant of the Emperor you will be sent regular supplies. Because you are His loyal servant, aren't you, Ignatius?'

Calan's eyes were suddenly empty, devoid of feeling or compassion. Ignatius felt as if he was staring at Death itself.

'Treachery!' he screamed. At this, with a screaming whine of overloaded hydraulics and the thumping and crashing of heavy metal feet, a dozen Sentinels rose from behind the furthest line of sculptures and smashed through the ancient artwork to form a circle around the Chaptermaster. Ignatius's retinue scattered, save for his bodyguards, who dropped to their knees with sidearms in the firing position.

Calan looked around calmly, taking in the weapons trained on him from the Sentinels and the nervous, frightened eyes of the rebels manning them. 'It is time, governor, for you to make a decision.' His voice was icy calm, at the same time menacing and yet offering the prospect of reassurance, of salvation. 'It will not be the most difficult decision that you take in the coming weeks, but it is the most important.'

Ignatius could already feel that something was happening inside him. He was

starting to sweat profusely, his hands were shaking and he found it hard to gather his thoughts. His mouth was dry and he started to sway. Deep inside he felt only darkness, anguish and utter despair. He looked around at the guards manning the Sentinels. They were waiting for the order to fire. His bodyguards were waiting too, their weapons trained on the unprotected head of the Chaptermaster. He thought of his allies in their hidden chambers deep beneath the planet's surface, waiting for his signal to strike. And he realised that all of it was useless. He was doomed and he had no choice. Tears filled his eyes and he choked back a sob.

'Of course, my lord,' he wailed. 'The Emperor's loyal servant will do his bidding at all times!' His legs shook and tears ran down his face as he fell to his knees.

'Come, come, Ignatius, let us not forget our dignity,' soothed Calan. 'You are governor by Imperial command. You should not show such emotion in public. There is much work to be done - there are arrests to be ordered, there is treachery to be punished, terminations and interrogations to be carried out. Shall we start with one or two members of your own family, perhaps as a way of demonstrating the strength of your devotion to the Emperor?'

'Yes, my lord,' wailed the broken, defeated man. 'By the Emperor's command, His will shall be done!'

ON THE BRIDGE of the Sirius, the duty officer called down to Calan's quarters. 'Sir, something extraordinary is happening on Tesra IV.'

When he entered the bridge, Calan stared in wonder at the giant viewing screen. At more than a dozen points on the planet's surface, huge explosions were erupting, sending flames tens of thousands of feet into the atmosphere.

'Sensors indicate nova cannons, sir. They must have been concealed on the planet's surface. They started detonating about ten minutes ago. It looks as if they're destroying their own defences.'

'Sir!' A crewman called over to Calan. 'Sir - planetary defence forces are airborne. I'm detecting nearly a thousand short-range orbital launches. Probably fighters but could include some bombers and assault craft. It looks like they're launching everything they've got, and they're heading this way.'

Calan relaxed into the command chair and allowed himself a gentle smile. 'Advise the fleet to go to action stations, but do not fire except at my command.'

'Sir - they're hailing us. The Tesran pilots are hailing us.'

The bridge crew were staring at Calan, as puzzled by his relaxed demeanour now as at any time since the shuttle had returned him safely to the Sirius just eight hours ago.

'Put it on the loudspeaker.'

The words as they came through were crackly at first, but the meaning soon became clear.

'...welcome Imperial forces... invite you to land on Tesra IV.. escort you safely to landing zones...'

Word quickly spread through the ship. For a moment Calan was puzzled as he tried to identify a strange roaring sound, like the noise of some great machine - and then he realised it was the sound of thousands of cheering voices echoing around the corridors, as Space Marines and crewmen gathered at monitors and viewing ports to watch the spectacle unfolding around them.

The bridge door opened and Kortar came storming in.

‘Don’t say they’re surrendering! The filthy yellow scum! We should request powers of exterminatus to cleanse this filth.’

‘No, Kortar.’ Calan looked at the angry younger man. ‘They are not surrendering. We are their allies and they are welcoming us as allies should. The evil on this planet has already been cleansed, by subtler, more precise methods than you and I are accustomed to. The Emperor’s will has been done, and we shall all live to celebrate our homecoming.’

Kortar stared at Calan, for once lost for words, his face looking fit to burst. And then he too laughed out loud and let out a great whoop of joy. The crusade was finally over, and the Emperor’s will had indeed been done. From the decks of the Sirius thousands of voices broke into song, as marines and chapter-serfs, naval crewmen and Imperial officers sang the chapter’s anthem, “We Praise Thee, Emperor”, and the thoughts of the Marines and their chapter-serfs turned again to homecoming and the silver skies of Taran III.

‘Sir - we have messages of congratulations coming in from Ilyan and Tigris and from the Black Templars. And Lord Admiral Dacius wishes to speak to you.’

‘Put him on,’ ordered Calan, feeling suddenly weary with the exertions of the past few days.

The images of the planet’s surface disappeared from the main viewing screen and were replaced by the impeccable admiral, seated in his finest Imperial Navy drill uniform on the bridge of the Valiant.

‘My Lord Calan, for five hundred years the Valiant has fought the foes of the Imperium, and twenty-seven admirals raised their flags aboard her before I was granted that great honour. But I would happily wager that none has seen a finer day than this. I have fought alongside many fine comrades from the Astartes, and together we have conquered and crushed the foes of the Imperium, often at great cost. But never have I found myself saying that it was a privilege not to fight alongside a brave comrade. Please accept my congratulations, my compliments and my gratitude. With your permission, my lord, the Imperial Navy will take control of the situation on Tesra IV, leaving you free to resume your journey.’

Calan sighed. 'The privilege was mine, Lord Admiral, and I happily release Tesra IV to your command.'

The image on the screen faded and Calan turned to Kortar. 'Kortar!' he snapped, making the burly captain leap to attention. 'Sir!' he bellowed, standing rigidly at his formidable best.

'Kortar,' said Calan more softly, 'We're going home. Signal farewell and Emperor's speed to the Imperial vessels that accompanied us and order all chapter vessels to form line astern, Ilyan and Tigris to bring up the rear.'

'Yes, sir!' shouted Kortar, eagerly rushing to the comm-set. He looked up happily as the signals went out, and was puzzled to see Calan slumped exhausted in his chair. In his mind's eye Kortar was already home beneath the silver skies and was rushing headlong into the warm, golden waters that lapped against the shore of the Great Ocean.

But Calan was elsewhere, somewhere out in the warp, remembering lost comrades, recalling the glorious sacrifice of the Lionheart and the Battleaxe, and reflecting on the tasks yet to come, as the chapter healed its wounds and prepared itself once again to journey out into the warp on its next crusade.

But we'll be wiser now, thought Kortar, you've taught us wisdom and patience, and that we must not let our strength blind us to the needs of true victory. Next time we shall be more formidable than ever before. This will be your gift to the chapter, my Lord Calan. May the Emperor's will be done!