THE LAST DAYS OF ECTOR

GUY HALEY

WARHAMMER 40,000

AN APOCALYPSE NOVELLA

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A WARHAMMER 40,000 APOCALYPSE NOVELLA

THE LAST DAYS OF ECTOR

GUY HALEY

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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.

CHAPTER ONE

The Choosing

Stubber fire raked the metal plating of Euphoria sublevel 18. Kal Groston ducked behind a pillar of rusting steel as sparks ran in quick lines towards him, nearly tripping backwards over Tunny. His own gun was heavy in his sweat-slick hands. He never sweated, not like this, but this was no territory grab or revenge raid. Today they were being watched. Today was a day for great deeds. Kal scanned the ruined walls of the chasm, looking for signs of movement. They had to be watching, didn't they? He couldn't see anything. Maybe this was all for nothing. He took his irritation out on Tunny.

'Stop slinking down there. Get some covering fire out.' Kal nodded to a broken machine twenty metres ahead. 'I'm going for that.'

'Are you broken? They got a big barker up there. Foundry Boys'm crash you down for sure.' Tunny peeked out from behind the pillar to look up at the fort. He pulled his head back in quickly when a bullet buzzed past his ear. The Foundry Boys' heavy stubber rat-a-tat-tatted.

'I sabby I be head-broke, but we're double-crashed if we're on the skulk. Face forward, Tunny.'

'Where're our blockies?'

'How the depths should I know? Point that piece like you do so well and give it hard snap when I say. Ready?'

Tunny swallowed and blinked. Kal took that for a yes.

'Now!'

Kal burst from cover. Bullets raced after him in a deadly game of tag. The Foundry Boys had the better weapons, but they lacked a certain finesse. Tunny's gun rattled away. Tunny was a bundle of nerves, but always a good shot, even

when you thought he was about to soil himself. There was a squawk from the fort, and incoming fire slackened. Kal grinned.

A bullet spanged from the dead machine's housing as he threw himself behind it. Looked like one of the Foundry Boys was a bit brighter than the others.

The fort was thirty metres away, that was all: a ragged, two-storey construction of plates stolen from the hive walls. Not that anyone cared about these levels; they hadn't for hundreds of years.

The fort perched on the crumbling lip of the Basement Gap, the yawning chasm at the base of the hive. Rainbow Falls thundered off somewhere deep, deep down. Far upaways, the planetary transit tube buzzed with never-ending traffic.

Deadaways down here, nothing but juveniles and no-marries living off the scraps. Kal had a dim awareness all this had been built, but what the Gap was for he had not a clue, and he cared even less. Prime territory, usually. But he had bigger things on his mind than prising good scrounging grounds out of the hands of the Foundry Boys.

A low whistle came from his right. Marny was there, with Jimmo and Haradd. No bullets went their way, so the Foundry Boys hadn't seen them yet. Kal leaned right back so he was sure the Foundry Boys couldn't get a bead on him, and frowned a question at Marny. He held up his fingers, eight. She shook her head. Held up three, drew a finger across her throat.

Pondo, Moop and Darl – dead. Their bad, Kal thought. He dragged his filthy sleeve across his nose. Bump and bump my damn hands, he thought, suddenly angry. Sweaty sweaty.

He passed his gun from hand to hand as he wiped them down his trousers. Home-made, cobbled together from cast-offs, like all their weapons. Most of them didn't even shoot straight.

His did.

Marny scowled at him pointedly, thrusting her head forwards. Impatient bitch.

He nodded, set his gun on his thigh to take the weight while he signalled with his free hand. He gestured that Marny split her team: she to go with Jimmo, Haradd to break right for a pile of debris. Marny's frown deepened. She'd be annoyed with him that he wasn't sending her out on her own. She was as good a fighter as any of them, so why wasn't he? He pushed the reason why aside. She was a girl. That was all.

He looked back. Tunny was peering round the pillar. He was clever too, Tunny. Hadn't looked at Marny's blockies the once.

Kal gestured to him that he should break left. Jimmo was going to get in there, Marny behind him. There was a lot of sparky flak coming from the fort, but Kal was pretty sure they were down to three. They'd killed six of them at least, and two more had run off screaming. Emperor bless Tunny and his pipe bombs! He reckoned one was wounded, perhaps badly. That left just the two. Only that heavy stubber was their equaliser. Far as he could see it was bolted in place. If his blockies got in there under it and through the door, the Foundry Boys'd not be able to spin it round and they'd fold quicker than quick.

He held up his hand, three fingers. He counted them down. Three, two, one. He clenched his fist.

He stuck his head out, drawing immediate fire. He shot back wildly, spraying bullets with no thought. Tunny took his opportunity, as did Marny, Haradd and Jimmo. The stubber on the roof swung to catch some of them. A sweep of bullets sprayed across the machine cave, rattling hard on broken engines. Haradd swore loudly, but he ran on, head down.

Haradd and Marny kicked hard and were through the ramshackle door to the fort. Kal and Jimmo covered the Foundry Boys' supposedly hidden escape hole, a flap-hatch behind a spur of the fort's rusty wall. Shouting came from inside. The shooting stopped. The hatch flipped open. A surprised, grubby face came level with Kal's gun.

'Don't you twitch, little rat,' Kal said.

The Foundry Boy cursed and slammed a fist down on the buckled plating of the floor. As per the rules, he put his hands on his head. He wasn't happy.

Kal had been wrong. There were four Foundry Boys in the fort, including the rat. But they'd won, so what did missing one matter? They sat on the Gap, catching their breath before they began the long climb upaways. The thought of it made Kal more nervous than the trial had; none of them had ever been up the stair so high.

'How deep is it?' asked Tunny.

Kal spat over the edge, and watched his glob of phlegm plummet downwards, glinting in stray light before being swallowed by the dark.

'Deep. They say it goes down, right down to the rock. Ocean of muck down there, all off of Rainbow Falls, or so they say. Listen and you can hear it rumble.'

'I don't gunny it.'

'Me either, not all. I seen the pretty river, but the rest? Load of old sparl. Get

down that far mutants'll have you, or worse. You never see no rock, there or not.'

'Are they on the eyes out, Kal? You codging they see what we did?'

Kal looked up into the void. The far side was several hundred metres away, a wall of dark, broken windows and fallen bridges. He still did not see movement. He covered his worry with bravado.

'Oh, they're watching all right. I codge that certain. Even if they ain't, we take these flags back, right as right. They see we're the winners. Jimmo, you carry their flag. Haradd, you still got ours?'

'Yeah, Kal, I got it.'

'Eyes out, Haradd. See nothing happens to it, you sabby?'

'Yeah, Kal, I'm grabbing it. Eyes out.'

'Marny, sharp there on the prisoners.'

'Don't see why I should do the do,' said Marny sullenly. 'They won't take me, no matter. I'm not going stairways.'

'It's a team effort,' said Kal.

'Yeah, and what for me when my "team" gets the off and off? Rot here like eff spill, stinking in the dark, that's what.' She was rarely emotional, but today Marny was close to tears. 'Bump and bump you, Kal.'

Kal scowled at her. 'You're always squeezing the joy. We won!'

'Ain't no victory for me,' she said. 'Ain't no victory at all.'

Upon the Landing of the XIV Ascension, the Space Marines of the Crimson Castellans Chapter waited. Chaplain Gorth had chosen the place of selection. It was most fitting, he thought. What else would the successful aspirants do but ascend? Despite its apposite name and vast size, the Landing of the XIV Ascension's glory days were past. This was poor man's territory at the heart of the industrial middle hive. The ancient artwork adorning the walls was obscured by cascading pipework, or had been carelessly bored through to make way for vents and waste conduits. Soot furred the statuary clinging to the sides of the shaft. The poorly filtered air was soupy with the scent of others' breath.

Gorth was a grim character, short-tempered and dour, but possessed of a hidden love of coincidence and portent that could, on occasion, verge on the ironic. For those who knew him well, and they were few, his humour was on display in his selection of this landing.

At Governor Hiro Hoyel's order an ostentatious dais had been erected there, heavy with bas relief and swags of bright cloth. Set far back from the single

approaching staircase, it sat at the centre of the space between the two stairways sweeping up from the left and right sides of the landing. These twinned stairs took many quarter turns before they opened onto the next landing, some six hundred metres above. In this way – a landing approached by two stairways and then a landing approached by one – did the Infinite Stair crawl doggedly up the central shaft, from the very lowest level to the very highest.

The shaft itself, built to carry the great tubes bringing warmth from beneath the planet's crust, tapered gradually from base to top, making the hive a hollow needle. Here it was four hundred metres across. Here, as elsewhere, the Stair occupied much of it, the single flights two hundred metres wide, the double pairs seventy-eight apiece. The geothermal pipes were the only thing besides the Stair that went the height of Luggenhard, from sump to spire. In the fog of popular consciousness, the Stair had become the more important. In reality, the pipes were vital, the stairway only symbolic.

The Stair was referenced so often by the priests as a metaphor for the Emperor's ascension that their parables had taken on the mantle of fact. A man might set out from the bottom of the shaft and never reach the top, whether from meeting a violent death, or merely owing to the myriad distractions that greeted him at every landing. Not that many ever saw the extreme ends. The top was accessible only to the most privileged, the bottom was a myth. No man could live long enough for his feet to touch every step, it was said. A few had tried, none succeeded. To walk even a quarter of it was a great feat of devotion. In the Imperium the simplest truths were often obscure. Such were the stairs of Luggenhard.

The traffic that crowded the steps had, for three hours only, been halted. Planetary defence troopers formed human cordons, keeping the central hundred metres of the steps clear. Enforcers kept a careful watch on the hivers from justice stations. The Castellans own hundred men-at-arms guarded the approach to the landing in both directions, their crimson uniforms forming a wall of simple colour that held back the garish crowd.

All were silent as the Crimson Castellans demanded; no congratulation or cheer would be offered until the final selection was made, on pain of death. The people of Luggenhard waited breathlessly, their eyes flicking back and forth between the living gods upon the Stair and the viewscreen picts of those who sought to join them.

With Gorth upon the dais were Brother-Sergeant Yoth, commander of the Crimson Castle of Ector, and Brother-Captain Raankin, Master of Recruits,

Captain of the Tenth Company and Holder of the Key of the Ebon Tower. Of them all, Raankin bore the most responsibility for the choosing. He ceaselessly watched the screens hanging from brackets around the Stair and puttering jerkily overhead; not even now, with all the drama over and the aspirants making a slow ascent, did he take his stern eyes from them.

Five of the Space Marines of the garrison stood behind the three officers, the much-decorated Veteran Senior Brother Karsikon at their head. Fourteen more lined the landing. The twentieth of the standing garrison, Brother-Sergeant Philodon, stood at the top of the approaching stairs bearing the garrison banner. Unlike his brethren, his crimson armour was mostly hidden beneath a white and gold surplice and hood. Tradition demanded it be so, and so it was.

A score of crimson servo-skulls tracked the aspirants. Via the skull feeds projected onto the screens, Yoth watched the youths climb through the silent crowds. They had ascended three kilometres, far from their home. The gangers looked at the gaudy crowds of richer folk nervously.

Yoth had come to know the world well over the six years of his garrison duty. Probably none of the gangers had ever had the cause, or the nerve, to climb the Stair this far, excepting perhaps their leader. Kal Groston was his name. His swagger was either the result of experience, or a clever play. If the latter, he was a good actor. His gang, dirty urchins all, eyed their surroundings with suspicion, looking upon each crumbling frieze and statue as if it might suddenly spring to life.

The youths' eyes grew wider when they laid sight upon the Crimson Castellans. Yoth's mind went back to his own trial, seventy years gone on a very different world. The expression on his face was probably the same when he saw the Angels of Death for the first time, when he had come to stand in front of them. A moment that, for its wonder, he had wished would never end. He was terrified that he would be rejected at that last hurdle.

He had not been rejected. It had not been the last hurdle.

Many more trials had to be passed before his acceptance into full brotherhood. All but one of the six aspirants who joined with him had died or failed on the way – Perelith during the second implantation, Jothel during psych-screening, Matherath during the third implantation, and two more in battle as Scouts. For a select few of these Ectorian youths, similar fates awaited.

The Crimson Castellans were recruited from many different worlds, ever since the Grey Phage had laid waste to their home world of Vorl Secunda and forced the Chapter into space. Each bore the look of his planet, but each was also in

likeness to his brothers: tall and powerful, a giant among ordinary men. But it was in the eyes that their kinship was most apparent. These brothers born of a dozen systems had eyes that were all the same: yellow, the colour of morning sunlight streaming through good, pale wine.

Gorth, bald-headed and grey-skinned, forehead adorned with seven service studs. Captain Raankin, nut-brown and craggy with age, yet ageless as an oak, his hair a single grey strip across his head. Pale-skinned Yoth with light hair. Yoth doubted the Ectorians noticed these differences. The eyes were what people remembered of the Crimson Castellans.

The gangs clumped naturally into their opposing camps, both groups glancing with open hostility at their rivals. Brothers Meklenholm and Bost left their station to make sure the candidates were in their correct places. Philodon turned to present the garrison banner to the dais and the garrison stamped their feet and tilted their boltguns upwards to rest. The noise sent murmurs through the crowd. Gorth stared around sternly until the whispers died. Then he began.

'Aspirants to the battleplate of the Crimson Castellans, you have done well. Seven gangs were chosen. Only two remain. As is our custom, I, Chaplain Gorth, will pronounce the selection made by Brother-Captain Raankin of those who will join us in servitude among the stars.

'Our way is thus. Not for our Chapter the picking of an individual here, another there. We consider the quality of brotherhood above all others, and look for it among our chosen. He who stops to save a comrade is serving himself. Men who fight as one so that none fall serve all. We prize loyalty and solidarity above all other qualities.

'You have fought alongside your comrades, you have accomplished the task we demanded of you. You have made the journey here bearing your prizes.' He paused, looked at each of them in turn. They stared defiantly back – underhivers were not easily cowed. 'And now we will make our choices from amongst the gang we deem to have functioned optimally.

'Iron Rats, you vanquished your foe. You took their flag and kept your own. But you have not been selected. There is a lack of coordination in your group, pronounced rivalries that, carried over into our Chapter, may prove toxic. You must return whence you came. Carry the honour that you came this far with you for the remainder of your lives. It is no small thing that you have done.'

The four surviving Iron Rats shrank in on themselves. The youngest was on the verge of tears. The two oldest glared blame at one another when, Yoth thought, they should blame only themselves. Here was evidence of their disunity

for all to see.

The other gang puffed up with pride in direct proportion to the other's misery. Their eyes gleamed. They grinned foolishly at one another. Boys still with boyish ways. They would learn quickly to forget them.

'Spire Hounds, step forward.'

They came to the foot of the dais, and Gorth addressed them.

'You worked together well, a functioning unit where your peers were in disarray. You are all bold, and I see signs of intelligence in you. We asked you to defend and attack fortresses, for we are the Crimson Castellans. Our skill is in garrisoning, defending, and in the toppling of enemy strongholds. I see the beginnings of such expertise.' Gorth turned his attention first to Tunny. 'You are small and mocked for your cowardice. You have none. You are merely cautious, and a fine shot. You have been selected.'

Brother Osko came to the boy and led him away to the side, where he was draped in the crimson robes of the accepted aspirant. Brother Kervony shouldered his bolter, and placed both hands on the youth's shoulders, pulling him in close. 'Welcome, novitiate,' he said.

'The boy known as Jimmo, step forward.'

Jimmo smiled at his friends. They smiled back.

'You obeyed orders from your leader even when unsure. You showed no hesitation when afraid. From these characteristics unshakable courage will grow. You have been chosen.'

Jimmo was taken aside, and welcomed as Tunny had been. They grinned stupidly. If only they knew what awaited them, thought Yoth, they would not smile so.

'The girl named Marny,' said Gorth. Marny stepped up, expression sullen. 'I have watched you. You are valiant and have the makings of a fine warrior. But we are the sons of the Emperor's sons. There are no women among us. There are those who deem themselves daughters of the Lord of Men, but they are not present here.' For a moment, Gorth's manner softened. 'I am sorry.'

'What do I do?' said Marny in a small voice.

Gorth was momentarily surprised she addressed him at all. Kindness fled his voice as he answered. 'You must remain.'

Yoth watched the leader, saw his face colour. Don't do it, boy, he thought. Don't throw it all away.

It came out anyway. 'You can't do this!' blurted Kal. The outburst surprised the boy as much as it affronted Gorth, for he stopped with a sudden look of

horror. Gorth glared at him. Committed, the boy continued. ‘She’s the best shot among us,’ he said more quietly. ‘She’s better even than Tunny, and four times as brave.’

‘The process that makes us what we are would destroy her, should we be cruel enough to begin it. It is the way of things. She must serve the Emperor another way, if she serves at all.’

‘You have servants, serfs, yeah, uh, lord? Can’t she be one of those?’

‘There are no women among us,’ repeated Gorth.

‘That’s just not fair,’ said Kal. Yoth admired his persistence, if not his wisdom.

‘Fairness is not a criterion for selection. Utility is.’ Gorth stared the boy down. ‘I will not approve Raankin’s selection of you,’ said Gorth, gesturing at the boy. ‘Signs of insubordination at this early stage are prime markers for rejection of psycho-conditioning. Your loyalty to your companion is commendable, but displays signs of attachment. You cannot be husband to one, you must be brother to all. Remain here and get children by her. This is what you wish.’

Kal’s face went white as he realised what he had done. ‘But…’

Gorth stared at him. Kal’s mouth shut with a click. Then he looked at Marny and flushed bright red again.

‘Aspirant Haradd, step forward…’

Another welcome. The final acceptance was voiced by Gorth, a brief speech, to the point as was his way. The crowd was permitted to cheer.

Somewhere above, a band struck up.

CHAPTER TWO

Hive Fleet Leviathan

On every world the Crimson Castellans deigned to garrison there was a Crimson Castle. For long stretches of years the castles were mostly empty, as the Crimson Castellans were wont to spread their brothers and their men-at-arms across the worlds they protected. On Ector, Yoth dwelled in the castle alone with his servants. Tonight there was an air of sombre conviviality. The twenty garrison members were together to honour their visiting superiors. They sat to meat in the great hall, which for once did not seem so lonely. Higher ranking serfs ate with the brethren, at the same table, for such was the way of the Chapter. All endured simple fare as the rule of the Crimson Castellans demanded, protein-laced mulch of high nutritious value and little taste. Their singular luxury was their wine, which they
drank from plain granite goblets. Many Chapters sought perfection outside of war in one art or another; however, the Crimson Castellans
chose to be vintners, viticulturists and oenologists. They did little else.

‘A fine vintage, Brother Yoth,’ said Chaplain Gorth.

‘This world is cold, but its soil is rich. The sacred vine fares well here.’

‘It is sweet. Pleasantly so.’

‘The grapes are exposed to the cold to freeze, my Lord Chaplain. It intensifies the sugars.’

Gorth made appreciative noises and signalled to a serf for more.

Yoth saw his chance. ‘Three candidates,’ he said cautiously. ‘It is not many. Fifty years ago we took a dozen from this hive alone.’

Gorth ate another spoonful of mush and swilled it down with Yoth’s wine. ‘The selection gets harder every visit,’ replied Gorth. ‘We can only accept those

suitable. Another Chapter may be happy with lesser candidates, but not the Crimson Castellans.'

'Ector is getting too civilised, lord,' said Yoth. 'Governor Hoyel is a good man. I would say unusually efficient. Perhaps we should move on to less peaceful pastures and do our hunting there in future?'

Gorth stared at the rim of his goblet, and Yoth knew then that he had overstepped the mark.

'Garrison duty is no shameful thing, Brother-Sergeant Yoth,' said Gorth. 'Your desire for action is a discredit to your oaths. This world is strategically vital to our efforts in this sector, and your station here a personal favour from Chapter Master Caroman to Governor Hoyel, a man you profess to admire.'

'You misunderstand my intent…' began Yoth.

'This world has proved, and still proves, to be a ground of good recruitment. Tradition and obligation demand we continue our five decennial selections. If we fail to find what we require here, we shall move on to the next world, and then the next, until we have sufficient aspirants, but only when I or Brother-Captain Raankin decree,' said Gorth tersely. 'Your motives are suspect, brother. Do you seek personal satisfaction at the expense of your brothers?'

Yoth became deferential. 'I mean no offence, Lord Chaplain. I simply seek to make conversation. This is a matter that concerns us all. My brothers and I have had little news from the Chapter these last six years.'

'Idle chatter is the enemy of diligence, Brother-Sergeant Yoth. Your record is exemplary. I am disappointed by your frivolity.'

The castle chamberlain, Meretricion, a young serf of good repute, inclined his head.

'My lords, I beg your forgiveness but invoke the right of all to speak, full brother or not. I say, let us keep the peace at this time of celebration. Surely now is the time to feast together in gladness?'

Gorth looked at him appraisingly. 'Perhaps, chamberlain. You do not misspeak, but nor do I.' He drained his goblet again. 'Brother-Sergeant Yoth, loose talk is the key by which many a fortress gate is opened. You risk handing entrance freely to the enemy by questioning the wisdom of your superiors. Taciturn and vigilant upon the wall, that is the way of the Crimson Castellans, not this chatter. I will consult with your captain upon my return to the fleet. Perhaps you have remained too long amid others, and it is time for you to go home and reacquaint yourself with our ways.'

'Thank you, my Lord Chaplain.'

‘It is no boon I give you. Your weakness, not your desire, informs my decision.’

Gorth called to the astropath attached to the Tenth Company, an ancient man who sat some way down the trestle. ‘Hostor Mazurn, astropath prime.’

‘Yes, my lord?’

‘Finish your meal, then be away to inform the *Redoubt* that we have made our selection. The number of aspirants is eleven in total. We leave tomorrow.’

‘Eleven, my lord?’

‘Eleven. Now be about your duties, astropath prime.’

‘As you wish, Lord Chaplain.’

‘Now, let us heed the words of our wise chamberlain and eat and drink with gladness. The aspirants have spent six hours in meditation. Let us bring them in and allow them their first taste of the grapes of the sacred vine. Their barrel is prepared. Let the initiation begin!’

The Crimson Castellans, dour as they were, cheered and drank another draught.

Hostor Mazurn left the great hall as the ritual got under way. The vile food of the Chapter had been cleared. The aspirants would be fed gallons of wine laced with pseudo-hormones that would initialise their transformation into Space Marines. As a younger man, Mazurn would have regretted missing the celebration, but he was old now, and neither his head nor his stomach – or his bladder, for that matter – were as strong as they used to be.

With relief, then, he headed out from the Crimson Castle and through Hive Luggenhard. Here, the mass of humanity, in such close proximity, made telepathic communication over interstellar ranges nigh on impossible. The density of habitation on all hive worlds necessitated that astropathic stations be isolated as much as possible from the populace, and the regulations of the Adeptus Astra Telepathica stipulated this be so. But the regulations were not always obeyed, and even when they were, the shielding employed was often inadequate. A muddying of message content, and a headache for Mazurn, was the usual outcome. Ector’s planetary governor was diligent in all matters though, and his astropaths had access to several dozen stations of the highest specification. Mazurn set out to the nearest.

The Crimson Castellans were honoured guests, and so Mazurn’s route took him through the loftier parts of the hive. In these places the richer Ectorians lived, although not the richest. Still crammed cheek by jowl, the inhabitants of

the upper levels were sleek and well fed, their concerns far removed from mere survival. The hour was late, but hives were round-the-clock societies, and Ector was no different. The snatches of thoughts Mazurn caught as he walked were of conspiracy and intrigue, revolving around the acquisition and display of wealth. He was tired. Being on such a densely populated world was wearing. It had not always been so for him, but age weakened his power even as his skill in using it became more refined.

He felt many fearful eyes on him as he passed. Now and then he sensed the unfocused thoughts of a latent psyker, one not so latent; the fear of discovery was uppermost in their minds. They need not have been afraid, for Mazurn's gifts did not lie in that direction. He was no sniffer dog for the Inquisition. It was difficult for him to tease the glowing strands of a psyker's mind from the undifferentiated mess of human souls around him. The crowds parted for him. Not only was he an astropath – and interference with such brought swift death – but he was also a servant of the Space Marines, and so doubly interdicted. A man would have to be insane to harry him.

Mazurn left the core of the hive, where habitats crowded around the geothermal conduits like undersea creatures around volcanic vents, and passed into its middling parts. Here service modules and servants' quarters were crammed one against the other, oftentimes indistinguishable. The temperature dropped as he went further out. By the time he reached the outer edge of the hive and neared the entrance to the Bridge of Sighs, the air was chill in his lungs, and his flesh goose-bumped.

Two soldiers in gilded armour stood watch either side of the doorway to the bridge. The doors were embossed deeply with the serene face of an astropath, rendered in the geometric styling of the world.

Mazurn was blind, as most astropaths were. He saw none of this directly. He perceived the world through his own precognitive visions, seeing where he would be, rather than seeing where he was. To a lesser degree he could see through the eyes of others. On the one hand, his vision was that of memory, on the other, it was distorted by subjectivity. The picture that came to him was fragmentary at best, but a lifetime's experience enabled him to stitch together an impression of his surroundings, at once more revealing and yet more dreamlike than true sight.

The guards snapped to attention, laser pikes clicking as they were set upright. Mazurn dipped his head to them. A third man appeared from a hidden closet, although not so hidden to Mazurn's mind's eye. With a fur coat draped over his

arm, he helped the astropath prime into it, placed a breathing mask over his face and withdrew with a bow.

Mazurn passed into an airlock. When the outer door opened, a cold wind whistled in on whisper-thin air. Mazurn pulled the neck of his robe tight.

A slender pier arched gracefully from the edge of Luggenhard to the station, suspended two hundred metres from the hive's skin, four thousand metres in the air. At this altitude, Mazurn was high enough to avoid the broil of hydrocarbons that clung to the planet's equatorial regions. The temperature was astonishing after the warm fug of the hive interior. Ector was a tundra world, on the edge of Valedan's habitable zone. Even this far south it was cold all year round at ground level, and up this high the thin air was forty below. The coat, issued to him by the Crimson Castellans quartermasters in expectation of such extremity, was extremely warm. Nevertheless, his exposed face chilled rapidly, and he hurried on to the astropathic station as fast as he dared, panting pressurised air through his mask.

The wind buffeted at him. Emptiness surrounded him. The railing and its skull-topped posts were an insubstantial blur in his mind, all that stood between him and certain death. The lack of true sight was something of an advantage here, for he could not see the drop, but a dangerous disadvantage also. His feet slipped every other step. The placing of his staff brought the crunch of ice as much as the dull ring of metal. His ancient joints ached with the cold. The bridge reached its peak, and swept down. Here it passed through the centre of circular psychic baffles arrayed in sequence. The constant pressure of one hundred million people's thoughts lessened. When he passed through the fourteenth baffle, it cut out altogether.

Two burly men flanked the entrance to the station, clad in cold-weather gear. Their psychic presence was minimal, both having been selected precisely for their lack of talent. By the time the door had responded to Mazurn's psychic impulse and opened, his lips were blue and he was shivering hard.

It was warm within, the wind's keening muted but not entirely absent. Occasional stronger gusts shook the station upon its mounts, metal thrumming with the strain.

Mazurn shuddered violently as his coat slipped from his shoulders into the hands of an attentive servant. He ignored the man and stamped his feet, sighing in vibrato as the warmth reclaimed his extremities.

Eager to be about his task and thence to bed, he mounted the stairs to the sending chamber.

There were five couches in the chamber. One was occupied. The astropath mind-sent a short greeting that was barely cordial, Mazurn's superiority of rank notwithstanding. This other's business was only beginning, and he left in mind soon after Mazurn had taken his place on a couch.

Mazurn lay back gratefully. Not all sending stations were so comfortable, physically or psychically. He chuckled to himself. When he was undergoing the agony of soul binding, his eyes scorched from his head by the terrifying might of the Emperor, growing old had been the last thing on his mind.

'And yet here I am,' he muttered to himself. 'Here I am.' He half expected every message he sent to be his last, that his frail body would give out under the demands placed upon it. This conviction grew stronger every day. 'I have my duty,' he said. 'Soon may it be over.'

His private grumble done, he focused, diverting his mind in upon itself. The infinity of worlds that were within every man opened before his eyes.

Mazurn had constructed the bulk of the message on the way. He put his finishing touches to it as he lay upon the couch.

His senses expanded exponentially, rushing out from icy Ector and its Girdle of Steel. The sensation was a close-knit blending of ecstasy and pain, an echo of his long-ago soul binding on Holy Terra. He had learned to bear it. His soul's own feeble powers shone with greater light thanks to the Lord Emperor, a proud privilege. He absorbed fleeting impressions of the cosmos, chance message fragments coming into the world from other astropaths, the burning tear that was the Vortex of Despair at the edge of the Valedan system, beautiful and deadly, and the echoes of the past and future that issued from it. The raiment of heaven unrolled for him and he thought, for the thousandth time in his long life, that this was a gift worth paying his sight for.

The message bloomed, the mind-sequence he had made. He held in the gaze of his third eye a chequered board of steel and stone, life-size statues carved from red granite upon it. Chaplain Gorth, Master of Recruits Raankin and the twenty Space Marines of the Crimson Castellans garrison ranged behind. In front of them were eleven pawns: identical, faceless boys peeking over the ramparts of miniature castles. Snow drifted onto the metal game board, his own modestly poetic imagining for Ector. His mind played the message, pushing the pieces one at a time away from the board into a metal box cast in the likeness of the *Redoubt.* The board faded to black, leaving the box to become a living image of the ship, hanging against the steady stars.

He set the message free. He relived being a young boy releasing a bird into the

air, this being his message-sending trigger. He watched it go. Satisfied, he began to bring himself from his trance.

Something gave him pause; what exactly, he struggled to define in later years. The rational side of him suggested the highly tuned senses of his subconscious picked up what the upper layers of his mind did not perceive. The mystic in Mazurn, the greater part, perhaps, held that the Emperor Himself worked through him that day – an opinion Chaplain Gorth favoured.

He halted his withdrawal and cast his mind to below the galactic plane. Here, out in the southern reaches of the galaxy, the depth of the galaxy's wheel was lesser. It was a hard thing for him to see the galaxy as a three-dimensional object; most messages traversed the long laterals across the Imperium. Of course, there was no such thing as direction in the empyrean, where all his messages were cast, but his mind imposed such order. No man can escape his own mind.

The number of messages coming from below the plane and that part of the galaxy referred to as the 'south' by men was necessarily fewer than those coming from elsewhere. They were a long way from Terra, but messages there should be. And yet he sensed none.

Mazurn looked further out, grasping for any notice of communication. What he found instead – indeed, what he half suspected he would find – was a great, black wall. Through it he could sense neither the empyrean nor the firefly souls of his fellow psykers shouting their missives into the night. The burning glare of the Astronomican, into which he ordinarily dared not look, was a fitful glow, a fearsome sun with a shroud cast over it.

With a growing sense of dread, Mazurn looked into the dark.

Terror wracked him, an alien horror that tore at the fabric of his being. Mazurn was not to be deterred. He was of a high grade, optimo astropath prime, selected to serve the Adeptus Astartes in the direst of passes. Here was one now.

Defiantly, he dared the horror as long as he could.

Beyond the black wall was something immense and ancient, an out-thrusting of a vast being greater in scope than time itself. It clove the warp as a giant ship cleaves the swell of a sea, imperturbable and sure upon its course. All psychic emanations, of whatever source, were shattered to glints upon its bow wave. A terrible, alien voice smote the heavens, piercing to the core of Mazurn's psyche. He cast up his mightiest psychic shields, but they were as sandcastles in the tempest.

Before he was overwhelmed, Mazurn's only instinct was to flee.

And then the wall smothered him, and for a time all was black.

Mazurn came to an hour later. Sticky blood from his nose coated his lips. His head throbbed. With sudden urgency, he pulled himself upright and vomited upon the floor. He gasped as he fought to bring his stomach back under control. At the sound of his retching, the servants came heavy-footed up the stairs. Their exclamations of shock alerted him to the death of the other astropath; he was lolling from the couch, his face contorted with horror.

'How many adepts in the Chamber of Receiving?' asked one. Mazurn could not tell the servants apart – his third eye was dazzled. Their identities ran into one another like spilled paints.

'I… I…' said a second. Even in his fuddled state, the man's fear was clear enough to Mazurn.

'How many?' shouted the first.

'Two, two, master,' said the second. 'Adepts Fidelius and Tastrac.'

'What are you waiting for? Check it. Check the Chamber of Receiving now!'

'Yes, sir, sorry, master.' Footsteps receded at speed.

Hands took Mazurn's arms, a soft cloth was pressed to his mouth, wiping his lips, cleaning the blood from his face. The first voice spoke to him softly. 'Adept? Adept, are you well?'

'I live, that is enough,' he managed.

'What happened, my lord?'

Mazurn ignored the question. 'Give me a vox,' he croaked, then, with as much force as he could muster, 'Give me a vox!'

A heavy handset was pressed into his grasp. With palsied hands Mazurn keyed it on. He accessed the Crimson Castellans more public channels.

'Lord Chaplain,' he requested.

Shortly, Gorth responded.

'Astropath prime? You have sent the message?'

'Lord…'

'Have you done your duty?' Gorth was, as ever, short with him.

'Of course, my lord. The *Redoubt* should be en route as we speak. But there is something else we must discuss. There are… complications of a most disturbing nature.'

Gorth caught the tone of Mazurn's voice. 'You have company?'

'Yes, my lord.'

'Come to me.'

‘My lord, I cannot. Do not command me, I beg of you. I am afflicted.’

There came a pause.

‘You are in an astropathic station?’

‘Station Five, my lord, the closest to our last meeting. I made all haste to deliver your message.’

‘Wait there.’

Gorth’s voice cut out. Spent, Mazurn lay back and allowed the servants to fuss over him. His strength gradually returned, but his soul remained chilled with fear.

CHAPTER THREE

Council of War

Governor Hoyel's audience chamber occupied the very tip of Hive Luggenhard. Beyond its point was nothing but the wisps of Ector's upper atmosphere. His throne was in the centre of the single vast room, under the highest part of the conical ceiling. This pinnacle soared two hundred metres above the floor, every inch of its metal incised with intricate designs. Its magnificence was mirrored in the floor, where interlocking wheels of exotic alloys, each sporting time-worn friezes round their rims, spread as wide as fields from wall to wall. At the edges, statues of past governors stared sternly with blank marble eyes. Great windows between them gave view to the skyscapes of Ector. The governor's own guard stood at attention in alcoves set into the window's grand mullions: a thousand of them, garbed in purple cloaks and gleaming golden armour.

The filth of the lower levels was absent. All was light, gleaming metal, brilliant blue skies and white clouds. Yoth felt as if he had stepped through a portal and fetched up on some other world entirely, far from the hellish mountain-cities. It was as if he had chanced upon the realm of the god-saints of his childhood. He had to remind himself that beneath his feet, stretching down for kilometres, was layer after layer of humanity, pressed one atop the other in various degrees of desperation.

Hoyel sat in full pomp, robed priests in files either side of him singing of his Emperor-sanctioned right to rule. Servo-skulls and cyber organisms buzzed overhead. Counsellors stood silent by him: Lord Seneschal Hobin Majar, General Rovor of the Ector militia, Astropath Primary Annelia Battrell, Episcopant Myrrdin of the Adeptus Ministorum, Lord Kyrax of the Adeptus Administratum and others of similarly high rank. Besides these worthies, the

entire court was there – perhaps two hundred nobles and innumerable flunkies.

Hoyel wore his robes of office, a stiff, high-necked military uniform of dark purple, decorated with medals that Yoth had heard he had actually earned in his younger days. A feathered cloak, pinned with a giant brooch, hung from his shoulders and pooled upon the steps to his throne.

Hiro Hoyel and his spire-dwelling elite were not of the same stock as the rest of the hive population. That they had bred true for so long spoke of deep-rooted sociological divisions upon Ector. The causes of this unusual layering of ethnicity were lost to the mists of time, but however it had come about, Gorth approved.

'Such stratification is a living reminder of the divisions within the Imperium, such as those of rank and merit within our own Chapter, that allow the realm of the Emperor to function,' he had told Yoth not long after the recruiting mission had arrived. 'Divide and rule. Imperfect and inhumane it might be, but these are imperfect years.'

'Lords of the Adeptus Astartes, I bid thee welcome,' said Hoyel.

Gorth, Raankin and Yoth stepped before him and bowed their heads briefly. They did not kneel as others did. Stars do not defer to planets.

'Your choosing goes well? I trust you have found boys of sufficient talent to join your ranks?'

'Yes, lord governor,' said Gorth. 'Eleven. Three from this hive in our final choosing today.'

'Eleven from billions,' the governor said. 'That you have found so many of exceptional quality gladdens me.'

'They will strengthen us. We thank you again for the service they will provide.'

'It is gladly given, Lord Chaplain, a source of pride to this world.'

'There is another matter. One of grave import. We are sorry to impose upon you in this manner, Lord Governor Hoyel,' said Raankin.

Hoyel leaned forwards. 'When the Adeptus Astartes request an audience with any man, that man would be a fool to decline, no matter his rank. Your sergeant, Yoth, has provided good service to me. Whatever you wish, you have but to ask.'

'Then we ask that we speak with you alone,' said Gorth.

The court was scandalised into action. Heavy robes rustled as whispers were exchanged behind hands.

'There is reason for this?'

'Just reason, my lord,' said Yoth.

Hoyel nodded equanimously. ‘Very well.’

The guards stepped forth from their alcoves.

‘Wait!’ Hoyel held up his hand. ‘General Rovor, Seneschal Majar, Astropath Primary Annelia Battrell and Lord Kyrax of the Adeptus Administratum will remain,’ he said. ‘I trust these are military matters you come to me with, yours being a military order. If so, you will not begrudge me my military advisors.’

‘No, my lord, of course not,’ said Raankin.

The rest were ushered from the hall, including the protesting Episcopant Myrrdin. ‘Military matters,’ was Hoyel’s response, and the ecclesiarch was shut out with all the rest.

When the gargantuan doors to the chamber were closed, and the Great Brass Elevator of Audience was squealing its way down from the tip of the spire, Hoyel stood, shucked off his cloak and walked down from his throne. He groaned with pleasure and rotated his shoulders.

‘The cloak drags at me so, but one must stand on ceremony,’ he said.

Close up, Hoyel appeared surprisingly young. He was a slight man with a carefully trimmed goatee and soulful brown eyes. He had the paleness of any hiver, but there was a yellowish cast to his skin that spoke of his highborn ancestry, as the Ectorians reckoned it.

‘You may speak when you will, my lords. Do not wait on my account.’ Hoyel walked around, stretching his legs.

‘It is simply this,’ said Raankin. ‘A tyranid hive fleet is en route to the Valedan system. We suspect it to be a branching of Leviathan. It will enter the system periphery within a week. We have plotted its course as best we can, and believe it will fall first upon Daea, then Megus, Valedor and then upon your world, my lord.’

Hoyel stopped his perambulation and came swiftly around to the Space Marine’s front. He waved his counsellors to silence, for they had all begun to talk one over the other. ‘You are sure of this? I have heard nothing.’

‘The hive fleet travels rapidly through the void, my lord. It moves upon a narrow front. Any shipping it encounters will have been destroyed. Our astropath prime felt the presence of its shadow upon the warp. Without that, we would have no warning at all. Messages sent by the Adeptus Astra Telepathica are blocked by it.’

‘Annelia?’ asked Hoyel.

‘It could be the truth, my lord. I have not detected anything,’ the astropath said.

‘I regret to inform you that one of your own astropaths was caught and slain by its psychic roar, my lady,’ said Raankin.

‘I have heard nothing of this!’ Battrell said.

‘Our men-at-arms guard those who know. We thought it prudent to keep the matter secret until we had spoken with Lord Governor Hoyel. News of Leviathan’s coming will encourage mass panic. It is best to be prepared.’

‘Quite right, quite right,’ said Hoyel. His face had become paler, but Yoth thought he was taking the news remarkably well. ‘Can we stop them?’

‘Regrettably, no. We cannot hope to hold them in space. There are too few warships in this system to mount a workable counter-offensive. They will be here within two weeks,’ said Raankin. ‘No time to gather sufficient reinforcements to repel them.’

‘Can we not hope to blunt the attack, to give our men time on the ground to drive them off?’ said Rovor. ‘We have succeeded in driving xenos off in the past. This system is attacked frequently.’

‘To do so would achieve little. The tyranids are not like any other xenos you have faced,’ said Gorth. ‘They cannot be discouraged. They have no morale to break, their numbers an infinitude. As long as the fleet remains intact, the tyranids are capable of raining an endless tide of monsters down upon your world. To defeat this foe, their fleets must be crushed in orbit. Only then is there any chance of destroying their ground forces and saving the planet. So it was in Ultramar, and at Piscina IV. All else serves to delay the inevitable.’

‘The inevitable being?’ asked Hoyel.

‘The destruction of all life and consumption of the planet’s biomass.’

‘Surely not?’ said Rovor. ‘This world is well fortified. We are close to the Vortex of Despair, we are no strangers to war. Your Chapter has some renown at siegecraft. Together we can stand!’

‘No, my lord,’ said Raankin. ‘Not even we, the Crimson Castellans, can hope to hold this tide. Not if all our brothers were gathered here together and stood shoulder to shoulder could we do this. Too many of our brother Chapters have been destroyed in attempting to contain an entire hive fleet alone. Even the mighty Ultramarines were sorely taxed by Behemoth, and they had all of Ultramar to support them.’

‘Destruction? You speak of the Scythes of the Emperor?’ said Annelia.

‘Among others, my lady. This foe is beyond us.’

‘Ultramar, you say?’ Rovor pointed a finger at Raankin. ‘This is a densely populated system. We have four million men under arms on this world alone.

Valedor three and a half. There are twelve regiments of Imperial Guard stationed upon Megus. Not to mention the multitude of hands into which weapons might be pressed. We can stand, I am sure of it,' he said.

'It will not be enough,' said Raankin. 'Perhaps with half a segmentum warfleet the system could be saved, but we have no such support, and we Crimson Castellans are only twenty-two in number. Send out messages for reinforcement or aid. None will come in time, even were it permitted. The strategic index of this system is insufficient to guarantee its saving. I am most sorry to bring you this news, lord governor, but this world is lost. All the worlds of this system are lost.'

'There is nothing to be done?' said Hoyel.

'You must leave. That is your only realistic course of action,' said Gorth.

Hoyel paced up and down the metal interlocking rings of the floor, studying the ideograms that described the deeds of his ancestors. For a moment he was lost in thought, and the Crimson Castellans feared he had abandoned hope. It was not unheard of, in the face of so terrible an enemy, for mortal men to succumb to their fear.

Hoyel was forged of harder iron. He was sombre when he spoke next, but his voice was steady.

'If I leave, what of my people? Are we to abandon them to their fate? No, I say. It is given unto me the charge of those beneath me. I will not flee while they die. I command you, as is my right, use your skills to hold back the swarm, so a portion of the population might be saved.'

The Space Marines looked to one another.

'It can be done, can it not, brother-captain?' said Gorth.

'My men will fight to the last, though they be but few,' said Yoth.

Raankin thought for a moment. 'If you commandeer all craft in orbit around Ector, and issue an emergency petition to the Imperial Navy Segmentum Command at Hydraphur, we might be able to save seven hundred thousand souls. More, if the governors of Valedor and Megus pledge their aid. It is unlikely that the Naval authorities will send further craft piecemeal to this system to be destroyed, but I can see no good reason why they would deny you the use of those that are already here. They will be running before the storm in any case.'

'Megus especially has many craft in its service,' said Yoth.

'They will not come,' said Hoyel. 'And who can blame them? We are all in the same corner.' He rubbed at his face. 'We share the same sun, yet relations

between the worlds of Valedan are fractious. Valedor and Megus are bound tightly, and so Governor Mothrein of Megus is dependent upon Governor Torka of Valedor's goodwill, and will follow his lead. There has been rivalry for untold generations between the houses of Hoyel and Torka. The present Lord Torka would not put out a fire that would consume him, if he thought I would burn also. Commodore Justarin, who commands the Navy here, will jump whichever way Mothrein says. His remit in this system is to guard the ore shipments from Megus and it is unlikely he will do more. He is an inflexible man.'

'You propose evacuation, my lord. There are forty billion people resident on Ector,' said Annelia. 'Seven hundred thousand is nothing.'

'Better those seven hundred thousand than none at all,' said Gorth.

'Who do we save?' said Rovor. 'And how do we choose?'

'I have a solution,' said Kyrax, breaking his silence. 'We shall hold a lottery.'

'That will cause much strife,' said Raankin.

Kyrax smiled bleakly. 'Unless you have a better suggestion, lord, I do not see an alternative.'

Hoyel agreed. 'See that it is done,' he said. 'All Imperial servants of the higher orders are to be saved. The remainder will be drawn from the women and children only, no exceptions,' he said sternly. 'Everyone is to have an equal chance, or we will be killing each other before the xenos arrive. Make it known that anyone who attempts to fix the lottery will be executed, and any of the nobility especially caught cheating will be delivered to the Adeptus Arbites precinct house. Annelia, send messages to the other planetary governors by vox and astrotelepathy. I call upon my rights to assemble a system-wide council of war.'

'No, no, no!' said Governor Torka emphatically. He was a large, bearish man with a huge beard and an augmetic skullcap under his tall shako. His wrath was expressed obviously and often. This behaviour doubtless terrified his servants, but had no effect upon the Space Marines. 'I can spare no aid. We prepare to defeat the aliens ourselves! I require my men to defend Valedor. I thank my lord Space Marines for their intelligence on this matter, but I cannot in all good conscience follow your advice. Abandon my world? Never!'

It was four days after Mazurn's vision, and preparations were in train. The governors of the three populated worlds of Valedan were all present upon Ector in person, an unusual happening in itself. Still, Torka was intransigent as expected, Mothrein followed his lead, also as expected, and the council had

made little progress.

The banqueting hall that they held their meeting in echoed with their disputes. A host of generals and Naval officers were there, as were major officials of Valedan's Imperial adepta. The air was cloudy with narcotic smokes and plates of half-eaten food held down unfurled charts. Servants whispered past, trying to keep the disorder to a minimum. Data-slates were scattered about. Archive-savants mumbled in dirty robes, repeating the words of every man present and so committing them permanently to their damaged minds – scriveners scribbled, pict-artists documented. Even when the delegates were silent, the room was noisy, a hushed dissonance of droning machines and voices.

A holographic map of Ector rotated over the banqueting table. Habitable regions were in the tight band of the tropics. All twenty of the planet's hives were in this zone, some a little further to the north or to the south, but none beyond twenty degrees either side of the equator. A metal tube, elevated high from the surface and broad enough to be seen from orbit, carried multitudinous roads, rail links and other infrastructure right around the planet. Each hive either stood directly over this artery, or was linked to it via short spurs. Habs and facilities clung to it like barnacles. The result was, in effect, a long, continuous hive studded with twenty spires – Ector's Girdle of Steel. Where the hives gave out, a narrow industrial wasteland blended into the steppes and tundra that covered the rest of the planet's ice-free surface. A large polar ice cap crowned the arctic region, a lesser one the antarctic. Still large enough to swallow two-thirds of the hemisphere, it extended far into the tropics. Ector was a dirty ball of snow and drab grey plains, a ring of metal and light about its middle.

'You would be advised to evacuate, governor. The hive fleet will make planetfall upon Valedor first. Your population is smaller – flee now and send what aid you may so that we might save more of the people of Ector.'

Governor Torka snorted. 'Abandon my post? Leave my world? Is that your response, Governor Hoyel, flight? What of Megus? Will you request that the Imperial Guard regiments stationed there withdraw to aid you too?'

'These creatures have stripped a thousand worlds bare. If we remain, we will all perish. The best outcome is the removal of the people of Ector. It is the moral action, and will deprive the tyranids of much prey,' said Hoyel.

'You have no right to command me! Should I run and become a beggar king? Never! A lord with no domain is no lord at all. I stay to defend my birthright. You will be held to account for leaving yours.'

'He will not,' said Gorth coldly. 'The High Lords have decreed themselves that

evacuation of all planets below aestimare G279 is to be undertaken in the face of tyranid invasion, should insufficient Astra Militarum assets be present. This system is wealthy, but strategically unimportant.'

'I say sufficient assets are present!' said Torka.

'You have not fought this foe before,' said Raankin.

'Nor have you, I have heard,' countered Torka. Mothrein nodded nervously, a slim, anxious man drowning under a weight of jewels and responsibility.

'We know those who have. We have studied the Tyrannic Wars in great detail. Scorched earth is the only viable strategy. We must evacuate,' said Gorth.

'Scorched earth? You would destroy our worlds too, as well as divesting us of them? Outrage!' Torka's large fist slammed down.

'If we had my way, I would have each and every one of the worlds of this system subjected to Exterminatus,' said Raankin. 'Be glad we do not possess the means. To remove your people is to deprive the aliens of what they seek. You, my lord, are their food. Do you not see? We must concentrate our efforts, defend one world, and evacuate as many men, women and children as we might.'

'I will not abandon my command. Perhaps your efforts on Ector will preserve we of Valedor?'

'I remind you that they will come to you first, my lord,' said Gorth.

Torka threw up his hands. 'The boldness of the Space Marines is much overrated if you rout at the first sight of an enemy. We remain,' he barked.

'You are ill-advised to call the Adeptus Astartes cowards, my lord,' said Yoth, half rising.

'Sergeant Yoth!' barked Gorth. Yoth glared at Torka and sat again. 'And you, Lord Mothrein,' said Gorth, addressing the other governor directly. 'What is your response?'

Mothrein licked his lips, looking at Torka as he spoke. 'My world will be struck before Lord Governor Hoyel's and before Lord Governor Torka's. Perhaps they will pass us by? We are few in number, the world is poor in biologic resources and we are well defended.'

'In these circumstances, every fortress is a trap,' said Gorth.

'I have twelve Imperial Guard regiments to aid me,' said Mothrein.

'And they will perish. We cannot let ourselves be divided,' said Hoyel.

'Ever has the House of Hoyel tried to further its own interests at the expense of the House Torka!' bellowed Torka. 'This is madness, selfish madness!'

The chamber erupted into shouting. The exalted rank of the three Imperial governors was forgotten as generals, astropaths, officials and others hurled

accusations and threats at each other.

'Silence!' shouted Gorth. He stood to his full height. His muscles were huge beneath his loose crimson robe. He glared down at the men beneath him. Several flinched. 'Call yourselves masters of the Imperium? You are children! Master yourselves and your fear before it destroys you all.'

Shocked silence. Torka's face was as crimson as Gorth's vestments with outrage.

'I will send no aid to Ector. If you wish for a united front, we make our stand on Valedor,' he said quietly, anger barely checked. 'You are welcome to join us. Mothrein, what say you send your regiments and planetary defence forces to my world – we have time to fortify. We shall prevail.'

'I… I… My lord, I cannot stand by and let my people be slaughtered. Remove my men? The tithe for Megus is the highest in the system. It is there we should fight, surely, where the wealth of Valedan is concentrated? We are all liable – you, I, Hoyel – for the preservation of our worlds.' Finding no approval for his words in Torka, Mothrein now looked to Hoyel.

Torka's face darkened.

'I see in my hour of need, my ally deserts me. So be it,' Torka said. He gestured for his delegation to stand. A dozen officers and officials rose to the scraping of chairs.

'My lord, where do you go?' said Hoyel.

Torka cleared his throat, and spoke quietly again, this time with less anger. 'The time for talking is done. I return to Valedor, there to prepare my own world for invasion. Let Ector look to its own defence. Emperor preserve us all.'

Mothrein stood hesitantly. His own men looked to him for leadership. Yoth thought they would find little there.

'My Lord Mothrein, please!' said Hoyel.

'I am sorry, Hiro,' he said. He ducked a quick bow and followed Torka. His officers made courteous farewells and went after him.

Some others remained, Commodore Justarin and a number of the officials whose responsibilities were supra-planetary within the system.

'And so the plenum is dissolved,' said Hoyel wearily. His savants murmured his words back at him.

'My lord,' said Justarin. 'If Lords Torka and Mothrein give no order for evacuation, then I shall pledge the Navy's vessels to your service. Our friends of the Crimson Castellans are correct – to stand divided before the swarm is to fall. I do not have sufficient ships to oppose the tyranids, but I will send every bulk

carrier under my command to this world, and see that they are escorted as safely as possible out of the Valedan system. I have been ordered by Hydraphur to withdraw. It is my discretion to execute my orders as a fighting withdrawal.'

Justarin is not so inflexible as suspected, thought Yoth. He stood, and looked at a long-range scoptic capture of the swarm in space: a fuzzy mass against the stars, terrifying in its magnitude.

'We must plan our defence,' said Yoth. 'The better prepared we are, the longer we shall hold out. How go the preparations?'

'Fear is rife,' said Rovor. 'But the lottery has given my men heart. They are frightened, but aware that they are fighting for the survival of their families, their children. They will not run. They will stand. The planetary governors of the Gospar system have agreed to take us in.'

'That is rare good news,' said Raankin. 'I expected no less. The people of Ector are stout-hearted. As for we of the Crimson Castellans, we will despatch each of our brothers back to their hives. They will organise the defence batteries. We must be quick to work. We have little time.'

'You will not lead from the front?' said Rovor.

'Not at first,' said Raankin. 'That is not our way. We might inspire your troops and your people, but only for a short space before we fall. Our efforts are best placed in Fire Control. We will devise killing patterns far superior to any that could be conceived by your men. This way, we will slaughter many times more than if we were to meet the alien face to face. Greater kill ratio efficiency is assured.'

'My men may think you cowards if you hide,' warned General Rovor.

'Your men would be as foolish as Torka to do so. And they will not think so, once they see the devastation we shall wreak upon the foe. The Crimson Castellans are masters of defensive warfare, General Rovor. We play to our strengths, as all wise warriors must. Your men will live longer if we do. The time for melee will come, but not before we have rebalanced the scales a little in our favour,' said Raankin.

'What of the fences? If they land to the north, can the fences be used against them?' Rovor spoke of the two lines of watchtowers upon the plains, linked by sections of high, electrified fencing. 'The outer is strong enough to keep the megamamut and icesharks from our herds on the tundra, but will it stop the tyranids? I have never encountered such creatures, but I am guessing, my lords, that it will not.'

'Your assumption is correct,' said Raankin. 'There is much harvestable

material in the north – these creatures of yours. This is attractive to the Great Devourer, and the tyranids will likely land at least a part of their forces on the far side of the fences. If the fences slow them, then so much the better – but it will only slow them, and only if we are lucky. To focus our efforts on either fence would be a grave error. And I doubt the lesser, inner fence will provide any barrier to them at all. In any case, they are as likely to attack the hives directly.'

'With your permission, lords, I will lay minefields where I might, close by the Girdle,' said Yoth.

'Of course,' said Raankin.

'I will not have time to cover much ground, and will require much manpower.'

Hoyel nodded. 'See that Sergeant Yoth has everything he needs.'

'At my Lord Governor Hoyel's request, I have ordered the withdrawal of every man, woman and child upon the surface into the safety of the hives,' said Seneschal Majar. 'They may well perish here, but whatever chance at survival we have must be taken. The ice trains are making their way south. All personnel have been instructed to abandon unnecessary material and make all haste. I have seized all transportation assets from every noble house and cartel to ensure that Lord Hoyel's orders are obeyed.'

'And the lottery?' said Gorth. 'I have heard reports of disturbances in the lower hives.'

'It goes well, lord,' said Majar. 'Things are quieter than we expected.'

'My priests will give sermons,' said the Episcopant. 'The Emperor will call them to fight.'

'Be warned, some will refuse,' said Raankin.

Hoyel was irritated by this. 'Of course, lord captain. We are masters of a hive world, not ingénues abroad. We are aware of what might happen.'

'You might be, Lord Governor Hoyel. Others have a less realistic view of the true hearts and minds of men,' said Raankin. 'If it offends you by my saying, I am sorry, but it is better to speak a truth if it leads to betterment than not say it for fear of offence.'

'Lord Hoyel has shown prudence in ordering the nobility to fight,' said Majar. 'To show all men that in the face of this threat they are equal.'

'To a tyranid swarm it does not matter if you are high or lowborn, all are prey,' said Raankin approvingly. 'There will be riots and general disturbance. Better to keep your people's minds on the real foe, or they will turn upon each other. You rule wisely, lord governor.'

'Thank you,' said Hoyel tightly. 'Is there any chance that we might weather

this and survive?' he said. 'I pray daily that it might be so. Tell me the truth again so that I will be prepared. To abandon a throne is no small thing, my lords.'

Raankin played with a crystal glass half full of wine. It was toy-like in his giant hands. 'If the tyranids are driven off once, they will attempt a larger assault, then a larger one still, until the hives are overwhelmed. And they will be overwhelmed. Their resources are greater than ours. They have no fear, no remorse, and will not tire. They cannot be bought or bargained with. They reproduce as fast as they are slain.'

'Very good,' said Hoyel grimly. 'Just so that we all know what we face. Now what?'

'Lord governor,' said Raankin, 'now we prepare, and then we wait.'

Their discussions went on long into the night, and were but the first of many.

CHAPTER FOUR

Xenos in the Underhive

A few days before the war council, when the invasion was but one wild rumour among a million more, Senior Enforcer Schreck paid a visit to the middle hive. He keyed open the express lift with his officer's badge and he and his two men went into the heaving industrial guts of Luggenhard.

'This way,' he said, gesturing to his men. They set off down an arterial path that skirted a hundred manufactoria of prodigious size. It opened up after half a kilometre, giving them a view down to a roadway where haulers laden with raw materials crawled. The route was thick with people, more crowded than the upper levels. Out and out poverty was not much in evidence, but the shadow of it was never far away. Clothes were threadbare, faces pinched with hunger and overwork. From side corridors came the sounds of babies crying and couples squabbling in tiny, windowless quarters. The fabric of the hive thrummed with the pounding of sleepless industries, the noise rising so loud at times that Schreck had to shout to speak to his men over their helmet voxes. To Schreck this was normal. He had been born down there, after all, and he shoved his way remorselessly through the crowds as all those who were born to them did.

Passing a row of peeling posters – 'The Hand protects' each read, below a white hand on a black background – they reached a plaza: a round, low-domed room, the sides of which were covered with hissing pipes. Five major manufactoria opened up off this place, their entrances grandiose and topped with motivational slogans cast in metal. Tolliver often used it for his meetings.

'There he is,' said Schreck. 'Take it easy, all right? We don't want to spark a riot. We're here to kick down the fire before it catches light, not douse it in promethium. Got that?'

‘Yes, sir,’ his men said.

People stood around in knots, the rearguard of a large mob crowded around a man – the demagogue Tolliver – who stood upon an oil barrel. Crudely printed placards framed him. The image they depicted was also of a hand, this one shielding a stylised family of four. ‘The Hand protects’ was printed beneath. Similar images were posted to the piping of the hall, while other placards bobbed among the crowd.

‘Look at this place,’ Schreck muttered to his men. ‘No one’s working. Again! Lord Condirion will have my hide for this. Make way, make way for the enforcers of Hive Luggenhard!’ he cried out. ‘Official business. Clear the way!’

The crowd moved grudgingly, but were wary of the black carapaces and weapons borne by the enforcers. They were not rebellious, yet. Not even if Schreck brought down his entire station would he ever be able to stand against so many, but he was not expecting a riot. A light hand for light misdemeanours, he always said.

‘…come into the protection of the Hand. Join with us! He brings food, he brings medicine, he brings news of the terrors in the dark below and the dark up there. Information is power! Know thy enemies, it is said, to better defy them!’ Tolliver pointed upwards. ‘The Hand shows us the way, the way to weather the storm that approaches. We have no creed, no message of disobedience. We desire only safety, and safety the Hand may provide…’

‘All right, Tolliver, the speech is over. Everyone get back to work.’

Tolliver searched the crowd until he lit upon Schreck, stood in the middle of a widening circle. ‘Senior Enforcer Schreck, a pleasure to see you!’ he shouted. Tolliver was a wiry, shock-headed individual whose thin limbs were all at play at once, except when he spoke of the Hand. Only then was he still.

‘Get down off that barrel. Come on, everyone back to work!’ Schreck clapped his gauntleted hands together. His two men moved off and began to push people gently away.

Tolliver didn’t so much jump as collapse off the barrel, arms waving. He landed awkwardly but the jumble of elbows and knees somehow reassembled themselves into the shape of a man.

‘We don’t often see you down here, Daen.’

‘Senior Enforcer Schreck, Tolliver.’

‘You know I find that hard,’ Tolliver smiled. He bobbed about as he spoke. ‘I’m just glad you haven’t forgotten us, now you’re an officer of the law and all.’

‘I’m down here a lot more often than I’d like. There’s been too much stoppage,

Tolliver. They've not got anything against social groups up top, provided you keep the politics out of it.'

'We are apolitical,' protested Tolliver. 'We do exactly as I say. We are a charity. So what if our benefactor is a little mysterious, he–'

'Save it.' Schreck held up his hand. 'No more stoppages, Tolliver, do you understand? Any more of this and the arbitrators will start to get interested. You don't want the judges poking about in your business. They might just think a pre-emptive strike is in order, just in case your lot get a little too above themselves. Keep your meetings to shift changeover and rec time. No more speaking during shifts. Do you understand? I go light on you because of the old days. My men haven't even broken out their mauls. I want it quiet, do you hear? You keep things quiet and the workforce working, I don't care. I'm a ranking enforcer now, Tolliver. I keep coming down here to remind you of this, and people are going to ask a lot of questions. The answers will be more uncomfortable for you than for me. Emperor knows neither of us want that, do we?'

Tolliver stopped his constant movement for a moment and nodded his head. 'Yes.' He hesitated.

'Something on your mind? Spit it out, I'm a busy man.'

The plaza was almost clear again. Tolliver glanced about nervously. 'Daen… Daen, there's something up.'

'Emperor save us, Tolliver. Don't tell me you did this deliberately to drag me down here? You want to speak to me, use the system – don't throw a meet to coax me down.'

'No, no. I didn't do that. Really. But you're here now. I was going to send a message upaways, even though you are so hard to get hold of. You've no time for your old friends.'

'Didn't I say that I'm a busy man, Tolliver? I have a lot of responsibility.'

'Well, you're here now.'

Schreck looked about. Business was returning to normal. One of his men was reaching for a poster to rip it down. Schreck shook his head slightly. The enforcer dropped his hand.

Tolliver was unusually still, something had got to him. When he spoke, Schreck listened.

'In the underworld. There's something.'

'Yeah yeah, Papa Bones, King Silence and the Mother of Rock. They're bogeymen, as in not true. Stories to scare kids. The only things down there are

muties, scum, break-in ice vermin and giant rats, if they aren't bad enough.'

'This is worse.'

'Now you're wasting my time, Tolliver.'

'Wait!' Tolliver grabbed Schreck's shoulder as he made to go. 'This way, please. I have evidence.'

Schreck stared at the offending hand until Tolliver dropped it. 'This better be good.'

'Oh, oh. No, it's not good. In fact,' said Tolliver, coming in so close Schreck could smell the metaelph bone mould on his breath. 'It's very, very bad.'

Schreck thought little of what Tolliver had to show him. There were things in the underhive that no man could name. That is, until a few days later, when the news of the invasion broke, broadcast from every screen and address system and private entertainment unit.

Then he became very concerned indeed.

After planning out the deployment of minefields in concert with General Rovor's staff, Yoth spent much of the following week in Hive Luggenhard. It was the capital, the planet's largest space ports were situated there, and so it was determined that there the last stand would be. The situation was tense, the lottery nearly over. There had been no outright sign of unrest yet, but Yoth was sure it would come. Much against the wishes of the rich, Governor Hoyel's decree that, after valued Imperial servants, women and children would be given priority had been rigidly adhered to. It was a weakness, this humanitarianism. Yoth would rather fighting men were removed to fight again, but it was admirable, in its way.

Captain Raankin was to direct the hive's outer defence, and so Yoth spent his days supervising the lockdown of the space ports under the Castellans men-at-arms, then organising the civilian population of the city. As in the other hives, those facilities that could be repurposed to the manufacture of weaponry were. Yoth oversaw the construction of strong points all through Luggenhard. Sections were sealed or, in some cases, collapsed. The transit tube around the planet was rigged for demolition. The high walls around the city were provisioned, repaired and fully garrisoned. All known entrances into the hive, excepting a handful, were blocked. For those left open Yoth devised a staggered series of defence lines. Yoth was diligent here, but concerned in case attack came from below once the walls fell. The underhive was an unknown quantity, for the foot of the hive was a mess of ancient metal crags and ice caverns that opened on many secret places. He had as many as he could find stopped up. He was sure there

were ten thousand more.

He worked for day after day, grabbing a little sleep here or there. Where his duties were light, he made use of his catalepsean node, but even his altered metabolism struggled with the demands placed upon him.

The fateful fortnight went by. The lottery was accomplished, seven hundred thousand refugees, selected by the Emperor Himself, it was said. A rebellion by Hive Joteun's nobles was brutally suppressed, in part thanks to their own servants turning on them. The hive fleet reached the system and psychic communication became unreliable, then impossible. Vox frequencies were wracked by weird interference. News was scant. Refugees fleeing the van of the fleet told of the fall of Megus to the tyranids after a mere six days of fighting. Valedor kept contact longer, until Leviathan opened its maw and swallowed it whole. Fragments of comms traffic suggested it held out better than Megus had; their dwindling over time told of man's slow extirpation from the planet.

Dread became the default emotion for the Ectorians. The population worked hard, but at rest it was mute. After the public execution of Joteun's ruling caste, disturbances were minimal. When they occurred Yoth found himself dragged into them as often as not. The Adeptus Arbites had come out of their precinct house to bolster the local enforcers. Whereas these agents of Imperial justice inspired fear, the Space Marines inspired awe, and consequently Yoth and his brothers were frequently petitioned to bring a peaceful end to one dispute or another.

It was a request of this nature that he expected when Enforcer Schreck came to call.

Yoth had returned to the Crimson Castle, spoken with Raankin and was preparing to grab a few hours rest when Chamberlain Meretricion knocked upon the door of his cell.

'My lord, I am sorry, there is an enforcer requesting an audience.'

Yoth groaned. 'Now?'

'He says it is urgent, my lord.'

Yoth looked at his pallet longingly. 'Who is it?'

'Senior Enforcer Schreck. He has news of some import. Events in the underhive that demand attention, or so he insists.'

'Can it wait?' said Yoth.

'He says not, my lord.'

'Show him into the Chamber of Hospitality Minoris. I will be there in a few moments.'

Yoth dragged his robes back on, and made his way down cold metal stairs into the public areas of the castle.

Within the small, comfortably appointed room, he found the enforcer, looking at paper plans scattered about.

'This is all bad, isn't it?' said the enforcer as Yoth came in.

'My answer depends on how you will react,' said Yoth.

'Me? Oh, I expect we will all be exterminated like rats in a trap. Everyone's got to go sometime. At least I'll have company.'

'In that case, yes, it is very bad.' Yoth sat down heavily in a chair. 'We will keep the gravity of the situation secret as long as we may, but Ector will fall.'

The enforcer was a tall man by the standards of non-Space Marines. His bulk was enhanced by his armour, a light carapace patterned after that worn by the arbitrators. He held his helmet in the crook of his arm. He had a square, stolid face marked with scars. He bowed to Yoth.

'My lord,' he said. 'I'm sorry. I forget myself. Sign of the times, I suppose.'

Yoth pulled a face. 'I really don't care. My vocation is the preservation of mankind, not to seek reverence. I'm a warrior, not an idol, although people often forget that. What news have you for me?'

'I've been trying to bring this to someone's attention for a couple of days. It's got very difficult to get anyone to listen. You're all busy, my lord, as are my men.'

Yoth nodded. 'Tell me, will you take some wine?' He rang a bell. A serf entered. 'Two bottles, two goblets,' Yoth said. The serf departed. 'Now, what is it you have for me? I must sleep or I will fall onto my face.'

'I have this.'

Schreck pulled a roll of flimsy prints from his belt.

'What is it?'

'Normally, my lord, I would not bother you with this. But with the invasion, well, I put two and two together. I hope I haven't made five. Although it might be better if I were mistaken. There are images there, from the edge of middle hive.'

He unrolled the flimsies and handed them over.

'This was taken by pict-augurs operated by the Hand organisation.'

'Should I have heard of it?' said Yoth.

'No, my lord. It is a charitable affair, taking care of the sick, orphans and the like. There's probably a spire lord who feels a bit guilty behind it. Who, I do not know. They cause no trouble, other than their spokesman, Tolliver, who

sometimes preaches the cause in shift hours.'

'You have not acted against them?'

'I have advised Tolliver myself to cease his meets in the hours of activity, but no, I have not moved to stop him. They're proving their worth in the current crisis. Without such groups, the middle hives would crumble into anarchy. They might not be strictly legal, but it's best to police them carefully, I find.'

'Your judiciousness is commendable.'

Schreck was relieved. 'Thank you, my lord.' He pointed at the images. 'These picts are from augur eyes around the Decimus Nine district, Foundry 87-34. They were taken several days before the news broke. I admit only then did I properly check them, because Tolliver is… Well, he's a little crazy. The next picture, that one. It shows a service tunnel that runs under the workers' quarters. They had some problems with ice vermin coming up from a rent in one of the tubes a few years back. The problem was resolved, but the augur eyes remain. The foundry allows the Hand to use them to guarantee the peace.'

'That is generous,' said Yoth.

'The Condirion family are no fools. Low crime and reasonable freedom from want makes their workers happier, and happier workers work harder. It does not cost them anything. And it makes my job easier.'

'There is nothing here.' Yoth leafed through the grainy images. The print quality was appalling. 'I… Ah, I see.'

'My lord, you know what you see? Before the news broke, I thought it could be something from the deeps. I have never seen its like before, and it resembles none of the creatures of the outside world. I bring no shadow play.'

Yoth nodded. 'I believe I know its type. You have this in motion?'

'My lord,' said Schreck. He unclipped a small data-slate from his belt. He fiddled with it, and brought up multiple augur images presented as a standard, surveillance grid pattern. 'The sequence is less clear than the enlargements, but it is in this image here.'

Yoth leaned in closer. When the clip was done, he said, 'Bring up that sequence again, from forty-five-zero-eight. Isolate the relevant feed alone.'

'Of course.' The enforcer played the segment again, enlarging it. It was not much clearer. They watched in silence. A blurred shape moved past the augur. It was hard to see what it was, but it was large. A long tail whipped back and forth as it slipped into a gap that looked too small to take it.

'Who knows of this?' asked Yoth.

'Tolliver told me that none but he had seen it, but I do not see how that can be

so, my lord. It is difficult to keep any kind of secret in the hive. Too many ears, and too many tongues. Is it… well, is it what I think it is?'

'Yes. Yes it is. This puts a different cast on the situation. It is worse than I feared,' said Yoth. 'The tyranids are already here. Has it killed yet?'

Schreck shook his head. 'Not that I know. Should we leave it?' he asked. 'I'm assuming it's not harmless, but one can't make a difference, can it?' He sounded hopeful. Yoth disappointed him.

'It can. This is a scout.'

'Do they have a way of communicating intelligence, should they even gather it?'

'Almost certainly.' Yoth levered himself up from his chair. The enforcer took a step backwards as the Space Marine loomed over him. 'If it has not killed yet, it will begin to soon. They have another use, as terror weapons. One alone can cause much panic.'

Yoth touched a vox-pendant at his neck. 'Brother-Captain Raankin, this is Sergeant Yoth.'

'Brother-sergeant, how goes it?'

'Badly, my lord. I have evidence of tyranid vanguard organisms already present within the hive.'

'These are poor tidings.'

'The creature will be cataloguing all the weaknesses in our defences. I ask your leave to investigate.'

'Of course. Go swiftly, and may the Emperor's favour find you. Shall I send support?'

'No, my lord. Our brothers and men-at-arms are needed at their stations. But I will not go alone. I will take the enforcer who brought me this news.'

'Now just wait a minute–' began Schreck.

Yoth silenced him with a glance.

'Very well. Report back when you may.'

'Yes, captain. Yoth out.'

The serf returned with the drinks, left them on the table and withdrew. Yoth poured.

'I never said I'd come with you,' said Schreck. 'I have duties and responsibilities…'

'We all have,' said Yoth. 'Who says you have a choice in what they are?'

'Down there in the underhive, it's not pretty, my lord. We enforcers don't venture below the six hundredth level unless we have to.'

‘I have waged war in some of the worst places in the galaxy. Warriors of the stars we may be, but I have fought in the grandest palace, and the grimmest sewer. I need aid. You are to provide it. Is that clear?’

‘Of course, my lord,’ Schreck said. ‘I’ll do what I can, but… I was a middlehiver, I used to run in the underhive as a boy. But not deep. There’s all kinds of danger down there. Ice vermin get in from outside sometimes, and it gets cold where there are breaches. But most of the danger is of the human kind. The scum down there are ungovernable.’

Yoth became thoughtful. ‘The children… The dispossessed, they are there also?’

‘Yeah, sure, a crying shame, but what are we to do?’

‘That is not what I meant, enforcer. We shall seek our guides among them. Now drink. We leave immediately.’

The Spire Hounds’ bunkhouse was a pile of scavenged junk on Euphoria sublevel 12. It lurked in a corner on the edge of a rust-coloured lake, a sheer wall of plates rearing right out of the water. Not easy in, not too easy out, a good position. Kal thought he’d never see it again, but there he was, rattling about it with Marny like they were knucklebones in a box. With the rest of the gang dead or gone, it was too big. No life to it. He remembered the good old days when there was a ring of dirty faces crowded round the fire, roasting rats on the griddle. Tunny made that. Tunny had made everything, but he was gone now, and the fire lit only the pair of them. Kal squatted at the edge, poking it needlessly, arm on his knees, face half hidden behind it. Marny stayed back from the warmth; it was freezing down there, but she wouldn’t come close. It was like he was contagious or something. Diseased.

Didn’t stop her talking, though.

‘You’re head-broke, Kal. I don’t gunny it. What were you thinking, speaking uppity like that?’

‘I don’t sabby,’ he said quietly, although he knew only too well. The big one in the red and black, the Chaplain – he knew how he felt about Marny. Now she knew too. He was burning with embarrassment.

‘You tossed it, like it was nothing. You and your lip. They were going to choose you!’

‘Drop it, Marny, would you? I’m a-thinking.’

She made a strangled noise of annoyance. He feared for a moment that she’d bring up what the Chaplain had said or, worse, walk away, but she didn’t.

‘What you a-thinking on?’

‘We’m gotta get aways from here,’ he said, glancing around. ‘No ways we can defend this on our own. We either get gangers, new gangers, or we’m get out. Mebbe join with some other blockies, make a new place with them. Two of us here? Someone come and take this offa us so easy, we’m better giving it away before we’m killed for it.’

‘You trust anyone? Who you got in thinking, for new blockies, I mean?’

‘I dunno,’ he said, and poked his fire again. ‘That’s why I need the quiet. Give me thinking space. We can’t stay.’

‘The boy is right.’

A voice from the dark, soft yet commanding. Marny squealed. Kal near jumped out of his skin, but had presence of mind enough to grab his gun.

‘Who there?’ he shouted. The shadows danced in the fire.

A huge figure stepped forward. For the briefest second, Kal thought Papa Bones had come for him, and his legs nearly gave way. He fired reflexively and his bullet spanked off armour. The whistle of the ricochet died slowly. A Space Marine stepped into the firelight. He spread his hands in a gesture of peace. He wore no helmet.

‘Brother-Sergeant Yoth of the Crimson Castellans is here. I require your services. I need a guide.’

‘A guide, for what?’ Kal asked.

‘Have you not heard? There is an invasion en route to your world.’

‘Yeah, I’m hearing. I don’t sabby how that’s my problem, yeah?’

‘Underhivers works for themselves, is true,’ said Marny, finding her voice again. ‘There’s another here, Kal. Enforcer.’

‘What you’m want? I ain’t going to the pokey! I ain’t been doing none bad.’ He jabbed his gun barrel at the Space Marine’s face.

‘This is no trap. I speak the truth. We have no interest in whatever crimes you may or may not have committed. The time for that has passed. All the hive must fight. This is your problem, boy, as much as it is mine. Do you know the tyranids?’

Kal shook his head mutely.

‘They are devourers of worlds. They come unannounced from the depths of space. After slaughtering every sentient being of a world, they take everything, leaving nought but barren rock behind. They will come through here. They will kill you and consume your body. They are, in fact, already here. That is why I need your help.’

Kal shrugged as if the end of the world meant nothing to him. Hivers like him were insular; the outside world was a myth, never mind things from the stars. Was this naivety or bravery, thought Yoth, or has he simply given up?

'No seen nothing,' the boy said.

'The beast is cunning. You would not see it unless it wished you to, and then you would be dead. I need you to take me here.' Brother Yoth held out an auspex. A map was displayed upon its small screen. Kal looked at it uncomprehendingly.

'Foundry 87-34, Level of Ambitions Realised, sublevel 6 of that. You know a way in and out of the ducts below?' asked Schreck.

Kal glanced at Schreck.

'No sabby,' he said.

'Bottom Iron, last factory on Burnt Zone upside,' said Schreck.

'Yeah, yeah. I know it,' said the boy.

'You will take us?' asked Yoth.

'I will if you'm feed us.'

Yoth laughed. 'Agreed. See, Enforcer Schreck, we have one of the most cunning guides you could wish for.'

Kal nodded at Marny.

'I ain't going without my blocky.'

'You are in the service of the Crimson Castellans now, boy.'

Kal shook his head. 'Down there, hunting offies? Just me and you'm and the lawman? We need her, need her to be eyes out.'

'Very well.'

'And I'm bringing my gun. Take it everywhere. Made it myself.'

Yoth glanced at it. 'Impressive work. I would advise you to arm yourself in any case. You will need it.'

CHAPTER FIVE

Rainbow Falls

‘This be the place,’ said Kal, pointing at a ragged cleft in the metal.

Through the small spaces the boy had taken them, where it was hard for Yoth to go. He did not wish to remove his armour. The way would have been easier for him, but the risk outweighed the benefit and so he forced himself through every narrow passage they came to.

The A-shaped conduit under Foundry 87-34 was broad enough to take him, if low. His head brushed the cabling running along the apex, forcing him to hunch. His shoulder pads scraped at the metal of the walls. Lack of space caused him to keep his bolter tight into himself.

Kal looked back up at him. Not once had the boy bemoaned his fate. He had accepted the Chaplain’s judgement. He had stood up for what he believed in and taken his punishment as just, and soberly. Yoth respected his stoicism. He and Gorth had never been close; Gorth’s high-handed manner was alienating. The Chaplain was Yoth’s superior, and so Yoth respected his decisions utterly, but in this instance he increasingly felt Gorth had made a mistake.

He motioned to the boy. ‘Get behind me, stand with the girl.’ Kal ducked between his legs. ‘Is all clear, Enforcer Schreck?’

‘Yes,’ said the enforcer from the back of their line. ‘I’m not getting anything from my men at the entrance either, my lord.’

Yoth went down on one knee. He stared into the hole. The blackness within was complete; no artifice of his helm could penetrate it. The beam from a luminator, borrowed from Schreck and shone within, vanished. Residue was upon the sharp edges of the hole. Scrapings from some hard substance.

‘The augur eye must’ve distorted it,’ said Schreck, peering over his shoulder.

‘Made it look bigger than it is. There’s no way it could have squeezed in there.’

‘The creature is as big as it looked, and it did go in.’ Yoth paused, weighing their options. ‘But we cannot follow.’

‘Lemme through, er, my lord,’ said Kal. He still was not at ease addressing Yoth so. Yoth thought it important that he learn. ‘I can squirm in, easy as.’

‘You broken?’ piped up Marny.

‘I agree,’ said Yoth. He barred Kal’s path into the hole with a mighty arm, as immovable as a mountain’s ridge. ‘It would be folly.’

‘What we do then, lord?’ said Kal.

‘Do you know where this crevice emerges?’

‘No,’ said Kal. ‘But I can guess.’

They went a tortuous route that finally brought them to a level only twenty metres below. Another corridor, this one rarely trod. Foundry 87-34 was on the edge of the Burnt Zone. That area of the hive had suffered a catastrophic fire some generations past, and had been abandoned. As a result, the underhive intruded far into the middle hive in those places. Yoth looked constantly to his auspex.

‘No signs of life, no movement,’ he said.

‘I don’t expect much,’ said Schreck. ‘No one and nothing here, except dregs, lawless dregs. Not many. Life’s too hard in the Burnt Zone. We’re only a couple of hundred metres above the true underhive. Better down there, even if it’s nearer the surface.’

‘Ain’t no such place,’ muttered Marny.

‘There is, girl, and an outside,’ said Schreck absently.

‘Should be someone here. Should be gangs, scavs, orphan-babes. Too high for muties, but should be someone. It ain’t gone crashed’m all down, this beasty-beast from the black?’ Kal looked to the Space Marine. Yoth gazed impassively back.

Kal shivered. He pointed forwards to a hole in the ceiling. ‘I reckon that’s it. That where that hole come out. Right here. Trust me.’

The hole might have been an access hatch, but it had been forcibly enlarged. Blows from within had shattered the frame, and it lay with other fresh debris upon the floor: wires, sections of pipe and bent ceiling panels. Water dribbled down a jag of metal, falling from it in slow drips to puddle beneath the tangle.

Yoth checked the edges of the hole: more of the residue. Around the corridor were fresh scuffs and scratches. ‘The creature has passed this way many times.’

‘Well, duh,’ said Kal. Yoth stared at him sternly. The boy coloured. ‘Sorry. I mean, my lord, I can see that.’

‘Can you track it?’

‘I gunny it. Need to go frontwise, though. You hop along behind us, yeah? My lord,’ he added hurriedly.

‘Lord Sergeant Yoth,’ said Schreck, laying a hand on his arm. ‘Down yonder is the underhive proper. We don’t want to go down there if we can help it.’

‘Do we not now?’ Yoth surveyed the corridor disapprovingly. ‘This place is riddled with holes. How are we to cover every way to the middle hive from below? Truly hives are the worst fortresses of all, but that is no excuse to allow the enemy free range. We go on.’

Kal nodded, and went forwards. ‘Don’t you’m shine too many lights on this, yeah? Need to pick it out with me hive eyes. And stop when I say stop. Righty?’

‘As you wish,’ said Yoth.

Kal set off slowly, examining the floor.

‘There’s loads of holes, I know. But that’s why we have walls, yeah?’ said Marny in a frightened voice. ‘They’ll keep the xenos out, won’t they?’

‘A wall can be circumvented, passed over, or undermined. At the last they can be stormed. They will slow the enemy, that is all.’ Yoth walked on.

Schreck gave Marny a squeeze on the shoulder and an understanding look.

‘Cheery, these Space Marines. You stick with me, and I’ll see you right.’

Marny bit her lip, and smiled.

‘You just keep that gun up.’

‘You don’t need to tell me that,’ she said, and her face hardened again.

Onwards and downwards they proceeded, through the charred precincts of the Burnt Zone. The stink of fire still clung to the place a hundred years on. They said the fires had burned so hot there that the bones of the inhabitants had turned to ash, and the metal in the walls had run. Kal saw the truth of it as they passed pooled slicks of metal, hardened like old lava flows. Nothing had lived there since.

‘The creature is hiding out of sight, coming up only to scout,’ said Yoth. ‘This is its pathway.’

‘Yep, something or so,’ said Kal. ‘Nearly down in our zone now, out of the burn, down in Euphoria. Home sweet home.’

Only it wasn’t, not without his blockies and monsters running about and all, but he dared not say that.

They passed out of the Burnt Zone into the underhive proper. Charred service

corridors gave way to rusting halls, manufactoria and habzones abandoned so long ago. There was little of worth in them, as all had been stripped out and recycled. The ceiling was frequently buckled by the weight of the hive above. Wide pillars of gleaming adamantium braced these sections, incorruptible wonders shining amid the decay. The further they went, the fouler the air became. The walls were streaked with moisture. Pools of contaminated water gathered on floors, running away in dirty rivulets. Filth dripped from stalactites of effluvia to join them. The rivulets became brooks, then stinking streams, hurrying off to join an underground torrent whose voice came and went, becoming louder with each return.

'Rainbow Falls,' said Kal. 'Not been much deeper than this. Hey, mebbe we'm catch a flicker of them, Marny? Won't that be grand? Went down once, saw the river, never made it to the falls. Always wanted a vez.'

Marny scowled back.

'Another weakness in the defences,' said Yoth.

They came upon the river four hours later, a coloured rapid whose steams reeked of poison and glowed with chemical light. Unspeakable muds formed its banks, thick with rubbish and bones. Yoth's suit indicators went wild, screaming the danger of toxins. Schreck coughed, eyes streaming from the fumes, and clipped his helmet respirator across his face. The children pulled rags from their clothes and tied them across their noses.

'This'm big bad river, not nice. Bad to drink, bad to smell. Whatever's doing, don't fall in, you sabby? That very bad. Even you, mister lord, melt you through even that.' He pointed at Yoth's battleplate.

'Do not concern yourself with me. I am a Space Marine of the Emperor. You look to your own safety.'

'Just saying. Thing went this way, along the banks.' Sharp-clawed footprints showed up in the muck. 'Kiddy could follow this, it's just not trying now.'

The caustic river had burned its way through the hive, linking room after room into one long watercourse running through a canyon of layered metals. Strata of crushed floors were revealed by this erosion, while those uncompressed formed darkling caves into which the party looked warily. Narrow where it ran deep, spread wide into wetlands sheened with oily, rainbow scum where it did not, the river flowed rapidly, its acid spray etching the walls into disturbing patterns.

They followed the river. Yoth estimated that now they were nearing the planet's original surface. Schreck confirmed this to him.

'We never come here,' he said. 'This is mutie country.'

Mutant signs were everywhere. There were paths beaten hard into the filth, bridges of metal over tributaries to the reeking flood. Of their makers, there was no sign. Signs of habitation increased, but no inhabitants presented themselves. Kal, initially buoyant and cocky, grew nervous, Marny too.

A vast space opened before them, forested with columns of adamantium bearing up the hive. The river meandered between them in garish loops, its acids unable to harm the columns but eating the floor around them, so that they took on a strange, half-natural aspect. They skirted the cliffs, now drawn two hundred metres apart, passing under a dark-eyed fort atop the precipice. Yoth saw no sign of life within and they moved on.

And so they came then to the edge of the abyss.

The Basement Gap, the boy called it. The cliffs of the river's canyon bent back around it, the river pouring through a deep cleft in the floor and thundering over the edge in a choking spume. The river's luminescence could not save it from the blackness, and it disappeared into a night that would never break.

This 'Gap' was the bottom of the hive's central shaft, its round shape distorted by the river's action. It was over three-quarters of a kilometre across at that point. The ancient walls were ribbed by geothermal conduits and, in their midst, the Infinite Stair. The Stair was the same dimensions as above, and so seemed isolated in the shaft's wide centre. It came down through the hive-sky. Black and unknowable as the abyss's depths, only a faint shine in the dark hinted at the bursting city high above. Shortly after it came clearly into view, a hundred-metre section was missing entirely. Spars and dangling girders traced its path, the steps corroded to nothing. Then, fifty metres down from the lip of the chasm, it was suddenly whole again, and plunged downwards after the river. One landing, two stairs, one landing, one stair, one landing, two stairs and on and on, up and down, the same pattern here as in the hive's upper reaches.

'We are above the bottom of the hive,' Yoth said, checking his helm displays. 'My cogitator suggests we are only three hundred and twenty-nine metres from the planet's surface.'

'Really? You gunny it? It don't be so,' said the boy. 'Long ways down, for sure, but no matter how far you is, the Stair is always going further downaways. Down and down, it don't never stop.' He said this with quiet fear and awe. 'I been down here once, only once. Never did see the falls, and swore never try again.' He looked about. 'But ain't no muties, not now. I don't gunny it, Emperor and all, I just don't gunny it.'

There came a soft slap and splash behind them, just audible over the thunder

of the water, and then only to Yoth. The Space Marine was instantly alert.

'We are being watched,' he said. 'Stay close. Do not run. Do not seek cover. Death waits in the shadows.'

He raised his gun.

A blur in the gloaming. Something huge moving fast. Yoth stepped back in time to save his life, but not his weapon. A claw as tall as a man sheared through the barrel, jarring it from his fingers.

Kal, Marny and Schreck all opened fire.

The shadows shrieked and shivered. Camouflage rippled, and before them a lictor was revealed, its body taking on the bone and purple colouring of the Leviathan strain. Three metres tall, mantis claws arched up from its shoulders to add half again to that height. Multiple eyes glinted in deep-set sockets above a mouth massed with tentacles. Hooved, backward-jointed legs supported a chitinous torso. Beneath the giant scythed claws were two arms ending in grasping hands.

'Stay back!' shouted Yoth. Marny and Kal scattered. Schreck stood his ground, firing methodically with his pistol. Claw-tipped sinews sped from the beast's body, hooking themselves into Schreck's flesh. The lines convulsed and Schreck was dragged from his feet. The creature embraced him, bent its head to his and bit down with a crunch.

The beast sucked at the enforcer's cranium as his legs kicked frantically. A final spasm, and Schreck was still.

The beast dropped his corpse, blood and cranial fluid dribbling from its tentacles. It rounded on the children.

Yoth pulled free his bolt pistol and fired a pair of swift rounds at the beast's side, aiming for the intercostal spaces of its thorax.

One was deflected. With the other he achieved a partial embedding. The bolt detonated too close to the surface, lifting a section of bony chitin free. The lictor screeched in annoyance. The thing was tough, practically unharmed. Yoth's goal was partly achieved, however, for it turned from the underhivers and leapt at him in their stead.

The xenos creature was unbelievably swift, almost too quick for him. His shots went wide as it closed the gap. Great hands closed themselves around his body. Tentacles slobbered against his faceplate, probing at his helmet and seeking to wrench it free. Yoth's right hand was pinned. He could not raise his pistol. With his left hand he reached for his combat knife. His helmet display fizzed as the tentacles in the creature's mouth tugged. He swung up and out, severing a

number of them. The lictor reeled back. Gunfire from the hivers smacked into it, but their autoguns were too weak to harm it, and barely distracted its attentions from Yoth.

Yoth hacked again and again. He spun his knife around in his hand and drove it upwards, directly into the creature's mouth, towards its brain. His hand jarred as the knife bit into bone, and the lictor flung its head back, tearing his blade from his grasp.

The beast's grip weakened. Yoth kicked and twisted free, landing on his back. His arm freed, he slammed four rounds into the creature's chest before the gun was knocked out of his hand. The lictor stared down at him, eyes cold and unknowable. Then it reared backwards, stretched its scythe claws to their greatest extent, and prepared for the killing blow. Yoth scrambled away, but he knew he could not escape. The scythe-arms of the beast would pin him to the floor, and then it would devour his mind.

A burst of projectiles came hissing through the air, spinning discs glinting in the half-light. They buried themselves in the xenos beast. It roared loudly and swung about in time to receive another volley to its face. For a moment it swayed, and then crashed down with an awful shriek.

Yoth was up and had retrieved his weapon before the creature was dead. He took cover behind the body and tracked the pistol around the cavern, searching for his saviour.

'Come out!' he shouted, his voice brutal through his vox-grille. 'Show yourself.'

A grey figure emerged briefly from the edge of one of the columns, before disappearing into the shadows again.

'I see you,' called Yoth.

'I show myself because I wish to be seen, and I would have you know I am not your foe.' It was not a human voice.

'Who are you?'

The figure re-emerged, then disappeared with a laugh. Yoth could not keep his bolt pistol trained upon the figure. Despite his helm's image enhancers, Yoth struggled to see him; his form was inconstant, some kind of cloaking device or cameleoline.

'I am a friend, Space Marine.'

'You are xenos, and not welcome here!'

'We desire no harm to you, none at all. The contrary in fact. I am Isarion the Dispossessed, an agent of the Hand, he who protects the people of Ector!'

The figure was as stealthy as the lictor. Now here, now there, its voice thrown to further Yoth's confusion. 'We have no quarrel, you and I. Our goals are the same. We eldar do not wish to see the Valedan system fall.'

'You are eldar? You cannot be trusted!'

'Always the same songs your kind sings. You are the ones not to be trusted, I say. We know much, but trust you only with what you can be trusted with – that is why we appear untrustworthy. You cry foul when the crime is yours alone. Now, push the body of the beast into the river. Let the foulness of the water dissolve it. If you do not, others of its kind will follow its death-scent. There are several here. You cannot find them all. Beware – should they devour its brainstem, they will know you and your ersatz brothers are present, adept of the stars. They might already know and they might not, for their psychic network is but weak in such small numbers. Stay away from the depths, they cannot be held. Let your presence here be an unpleasant surprise to the void spawn, if it can. The less the enemy knows of either you or I the better, Brother-Sergeant Yoth of the Crimson Castellans!'

The figure reappeared. Yoth opened fire. The muzzle flash of his bolt pistol lit up his surroundings, its bark mingling with the thunder of the falls. Bolts exploded off a column. A flash of movement, then nothing. He stopped when he'd shot off half a clip.

He waited. There was no further communication, no further movement.

He ran forward, hugging levees left by flood and heaps of metal roof-fall.

When he reached the last place he had seen the eldar, there was nobody there.

CHAPTER SIX

Hive Fleet Kraken

Mazurn slept often. The hive mind troubled him. Sleep offered some respite, although the dreams of astropaths were not lightly endured. With a sleeping mind open to the warp, an astropath's nights are parades of horror and temptation. Mazurn's own will was lacking.Only the gifted soul-shine of the Emperor kept him safe as he slumbered. Yet awful as his dreams were, they were better than the waking presence of the hive mind.

Mazurn's dreams were coloured by his recollections of his sighted days. Faces long gone but untarnished by time, locked safely in his memory. His mother, his father, his brother and cousins; those to whom he had been close before the Black Ships came. Too often these precious memories were tainted by nightmare. So it was that his mother's face ran like wax in a fire as she told him a bedtime story, and the expanse of the void opened up in its place. Where his childhood room was safe and warm, instead he hung unprotected in the full and pitiless gaze of the stars.

Space rippled, the blackness convulsed. Stars do not shimmer in the void, for there is no air to distort their glow. These wobbled frantically. A tear appeared, twisted as a cruel mouth, and parted. A lipless maw that held terror in its gorge. Unclean light blazed, unnameable colours that entranced and repulsed equally.

The sleeping mind of Mazurn stared into the throat of hell as the Vortex of Despair yawned, the transient warp rift of the Valedan system.

Something emerged. There was a flash, a crack of thunder in the noiselessness of the void. The rift closed. Empty space was empty no more. The vortex had spat a fleet into real space, thousands upon thousands of ships. Mazurn's ethereal being rippled with horror as he took in the endless vessels. Bio-constructs of the

tyranids, blasphemous in form and awful in their multitude. For a moment, they seemed dead, adrift without direction, and Mazurn prayed they would remain so.

It was not to be. There were signs of movement. Small twitches, the shuddering of drive-palps. The sealed-over aperture of one curled shell cracked and fell away. A tentacle unfolded from within to taste the nothingness of space, and then dozens followed suit. The fleet shook the unreality of the warp from itself. Mazurn's psychically sensitive mind picked up the rolling motion of a vast intellect awakening. It looked about itself with alien malice. A trip through the howling madness of the empyrean would drive any sentient creature insane, but the tyranids' hive mind was unshaken. It had passed through the inferno, and emerged merely hungry.

Mazurn observed the flare of bio-plasma from retrosphincters as the fleet drew closer together, and arrayed its vessels according to its predatory plan. Innumerable psychic tendrils, part of the hive mind and yet separate, reached out. One brushed him, and once more Mazurn felt the soul-numbing terror he had experienced in the sending chamber.

Shocked from sleep, he sat bolt upright in bed.

'Emperor preserve us,' he said. 'Emperor preserve us!'

He leapt from under his coverlet, running madly at his door. He grappled with the handle, but in the depths of his fear he could not work it. He pounded upon the rough plasteel until his fists were bruised. His servants, used to his nocturnal voyaging, were quick to react.

'Call Chaplain Gorth, call Tenth Captain Raankin, call them all!' Mazurn wailed as the door was shoved open and his men grappled with his flailing limbs.

'Calm yourself, my lord. Calm yourself!'

'No, no, no!' he wailed, and collapsed into the arms of his serfs. 'There is another hive fleet coming. Tell our masters, there is another hive fleet coming. Oh, Emperor save us all!'

Yoth spent a fruitless hour combing the deeps for the eldar.

'Aren't we going back to the surface?' asked Marny. Neither she nor Kal could keep their eyes from the hollowed skull of Schreck. They had seen horror in their lifetimes, but this awful sight was too much for them.

'No, we are not. The eldar are devious xenos. Who knows what their purpose is in your underhive. I have heard tell of them aiding the warriors of mankind, but they are just as likely to open the gates to our enemy or foment rebellion. He

must be found.'

A chime in his helmet. An incoming message. The vox tracked over the frequencies, but could not get a lock.

Yoth's attempt to snag the signal refocused his attention on his helm's displays. Ghostlight, all of it, intensifying the claustrophobia of the underhive.

'Brother-Captain Raankin, this is Sergeant Yoth. Brother-captain?'

Squeals and pops in his ears; the weight of the hive crushed vox-waves as well as the human spirit. When Raankin replied, Yoth was relieved.

'Brother-Sergeant Yoth. I am glad to reach you. How goes your hunt?'

'With complication. The tyranid is slain. If there are more, I cannot say. But I have encountered an eldar.'

'They are tricksters, deceivers. We must be wary. They laid claim to this system once, perhaps they seek to profit from our destruction.'

'I will hunt him, my lord, and wring the answers from him myself.'

'You will return. Whatever the purpose of this intruder, it must wait. We have a greater problem. A second hive fleet is inbound and will arrive within hours.'

Yoth froze. His mind fell back on his conditioning. The defences, all he could think of were his defences. 'The walls, the minefields, they are incomplete,' said Yoth.

'Just so, my brother. Now is the time to test our mettle against the Great Devourer. We shall stand shoulder to shoulder, and let them break upon the walls of our armour.'

Yoth stood for a moment, digesting the news. Two hive fleets attacking one system was unheard of, and eldar in the underhive… Yoth was not the sort to think on what this all meant. His kind were the builders of walls, and so he would build more.

'We must go,' he said to the underhivers. He holstered his gun. Grunting with effort he heaved at the dead lictor, pushing it towards the falls. The weight of the thing was phenomenal; only when the children of Ector found metal poles and levered at it alongside him did the corpse tumble into the river. Colourful effluent snatched it away.

'What about him – the lawman? We'm can't just leave him crashed and out like this. I got no love for the law, but he was okay. We all sabby him well,' said Marny.

Kal nodded. 'Yeah, wouldn't be…' He searched for a word, little used in his day-to-day argot. 'Honourable.'

Yoth nodded reluctantly. 'It would not, but I cannot carry him back.'

‘You plenty mighty!’ said Kal accusingly.

‘I am. But I need my hands upon my weapons.’ He glanced at his shattered boltgun as he said this. ‘Let us put him into the water. It is a vile grave, but better that than the creatures of the enemy devour his flesh and make it part of their own.’

Kal and Marny said a childish prayer to the Emperor as Yoth dropped Schreck as gently as he could into the torrent. No matter Yoth’s care, it was an undignified funeral.

‘So passes a bold servant of the Emperor,’ said Yoth. He left the riverside. ‘We are done here. We must go.’

There was little time to redeploy the defence grid. Much of the planet’s orbital weaponry had been moved to the sunward side of the planet, the expected approach vector of Hive Fleet Leviathan. Against Kraken, coming from the other side, Ector’s depleted network of defensive stations and war satellites held but briefly before collapsing. Those heavy lasers and mass casters in range took their toll, but the tyranids came in such numbers that the orbitals were swiftly overwhelmed, and the vox frequencies were alive with the screams of dying men. Blasted to glittering clouds of junk by living torpedoes, or bodily grappled by tentacled Kraken ships into the atmosphere, one by one the orbitals died.

Kraken enveloped Ector like a hand, multiple tendrils encircling the globe. Imperial ships, the *Redoubt* among them, played games of cat and mouse with the fleet, turning aside a handful of Kraken’s probings before losses forced the ships to fall back to the evacuation corridor, where they fought tooth and nail to keep the way open. Commodore Justarin’s orders ceased around noon, his ship overwhelmed by Leviathan further in-system. Thereafter, Tenth Captain Raankin gave the order that the remaining ships follow the lead of Sergeant Tularis, acting as captain of the *Redoubt.* The danger offered by the Girdle’s defence lasers kept the Kraken back from the equator, but only through Tularis’s quick thinking and rapidly shifting tactics was the space lane kept completely clear for the evacuees.

Imperial ships of all sizes came in as close as they could to the planet. An endless stream of shuttles roared between hive and orbit, gathering up those lucky few whose numbers had been drawn in the grand lottery.

For a time, Raankin feared that Tularis’s efforts would be insufficient, and indeed it appeared to be that way, for three of his frigates fell to the invaders in quick succession and the cordon was stretched thin. But the swarm appeared

content to have extracted the Imperial fleet's fangs, and formed a wall of their own, away from the fire arcs of Ector's terrestrial defence lasers. To the north polar region they went instead, where few weapons were to be found, and Ector's autochthonous beasts dwelt aplenty.

Behind multiple screens of escorts, the hive ships came in close to the planet. These immense living vessels were the size of void whales, their long slug-like abdomens sheathed in layers of bone and ablative keratins, tipped at the prow with a tiny head and thorax. The craft shoaled high over the pole, their flanks shuddering as they spat out their cargoes. Thousands of seed-like pods accelerated towards Ector. The night sky lit up with fiery trails as they rained down.

Shortly after this landfall, the first of the polar stations went dead. Scoptic capture showed giant tyranid combat beasts battling the ferocious polar fauna of Ector. These were worthy first targets for the hive fleet's hunger.

The scouring of the pole took five hours. After this time there was no living thing larger than a snow hyrax above the planet's fiftieth parallel. The few human installations were overrun, the fires of their burning glittering upon the carapaces of a billion tyranid creatures.

With one purpose, the Great Devourer turned south.

The beasts of Kraken came to Hive Valentis shortly after the fall of the ninth evening. The Ice Spire, they called it, the most northerly of all Ector's city-peaks, and the smallest. It terminated a branching line of the planet's massive transit system, far out past the limits of the Brown Wastes in the steppe proper. A centre for the herders and meatmen of Ector, here the cryodons and metaelphs were brought for slaughter. Their meat fed the rich, their by-products the poor. Potent extracts from their cold-adapted bodies were sent off-world to the laboratories of the Adeptus Biologis of Kaidar VII. Here too was the Huntsmens' Guild of Daea, those men who once braved the hellstorms of Valedan's innermost world to snatch similar prizes from creatures born to fire, but nevermore. Man's time in the Valedan System was done.

The lottery was over. Those not chosen were ready to fight. Propaganda broadcasts were constant. Priests in every major thoroughfare exhorted all inhabitants of the hives to repel the aliens. Stern officers and commissars gave speeches on floating screens carried by pseudo-cherubim. Servo-skulls and less venerable constructs blared dire threats amid motivational paeans. 'All must fight, all must fight, all must fight,' they chanted as they swooped over the

bastions on the skirts of the hives. ‘To fight is to honour the Emperor,’ they said to hive gangers crouched in the dark reaches of the underhive. ‘Abhor the alien, crush the alien, slay the alien. Fight, and live. Embrace cowardice, and die,’ they said to citizens in the richer districts, grasping weapons in unsure hands. Everywhere, Adeptus Arbites, commissars of the planetary defence regiments, officers, brute squads, foundry foremen, enforcers, factory martinets, dormitory arbitresses and every other keeper of order stalked the city, keeping a watchful eye on the people of Ector lest they break and hide, or turn on each other through fear.

At the Fire Control Centre of Valentis Hive, Brother Karsikon was ready.

‘Firing solutions present themselves, Lord Karsikon. The xenos approach the inner fence.’

Brother Karsikon looked over the shoulder of the gunnery officer. There were innumerable augur eyes all over the hive, showing the outer shell, ramparts and wasteland from a dizzying array of angles. His attention, however, was fully given to a bank of semi-holo projectors depicting a mass of tyranids running fast over the steppe. Ector was seldom truly dark; so much snow and ice gave the planet a high albedo, and the sky glowed with reflected light. The tyranids came through this unsure twilight, so many it appeared that the steppe was covered in spiny, writhing grasses. They were as yet many kilometres distant, and the silence of their advance on the screens was eerie.

With image enhancement, Karsikon could clearly see the make-up of the horde. Hundreds of thousands of hormagaunts ran in front of a secondary line of tyranid warriors. These creatures had been unfamiliar to him, but Raankin’s briefing had been thorough. The warriors, which Raankin described as the aliens’ officer cadre, were accompanied by greater creatures: living tanks who tossed their heads and snorted plumes of gas through the chimneys on their backs. Beyond this line were greater shapes, some as large as Titans.

‘Let them come,’ he said, his voice carrying to the artillery officers’ implanted vox-units. ‘We are ready.’

Sixty-nine per cent of Ector’s heavy weaponry emplacements had been redirected from orbital scouring to ground target annihilation. As Raankin had promised, a wall of fire awaited the tyranid invasion force.

‘Hold fire until my command,’ said the Crimson Castellan. ‘We shall wait until the first ranks of their horde are well within our maximum ranges, only then shall we open fire. I wish to destroy as many as we can, and will not risk their turning back at our first volley. Is that clear, men of Ector?’

‘Aye!’ came their replies.

Karsikon watched power read outs flicker as the tyranids overran the inner fence. Already they had crushed the outer to negligible effect on their numbers. Energy that would deter the greatest of Ector’s snowbeasts did nothing to them. The inner fence, intended only to ward the hives’ hinterland from the hivers’ own giant livestock, was lesser in stature and quickly cast down.

Karsikon paced up and down the lines of gunners sat intent over their read outs. Every man commanded a dozen artillery pieces slaved to an incorporated servitor. There were five hundred men in the gunnery station, buried deep in the most heavily armoured part of Hive Valentis. Six thousand large guns pointed at the onrushing horde, and there were many thousands of others of lesser potency, directly manned, in emplacements and studding the ramparts of the bastions hugging the base of the hive exterior. All the men, at General Rovor’s order, hung on the word of Brother Karsikon.

Tension built in the room, fingers hovered over firing icons. Feeder lines linking cybernetic rangefinders to the brains of the men assembled and their servitor slaves hummed with building energy.

Karsikon made sure to cover as many of the galleries as possible. He was aware that his presence was an inspiration. His armour whirring behind the men as he passed emboldened them. ‘I am an Angel of Death, and under me, you shall be my messengers!’ he said. He checked in his helm display, mirroring in miniature the larger read outs of the hive’s holobanks. He waited until the lead elements of the swarm were just outside the reach of the shorter-ranged weapons at his disposal.

‘Open fire!’ he cried. ‘For the Emperor, for your homes, for your very lives, fire, fire, fire!’

The men of Ector obeyed. Following firing patterns set by the Crimson Castellans, the heaviest weapons – defence lasers, macro cannons, medusae and others – sought out the biggest creatures of the alien swarm, slamming shells and las-beams into them. The lesser guns took for their targets the medium-sized beasts. The least of them, should any survive, would be left to the men manning the walls.

The steppe boiled with fire. Explosions were so numerous they blended into a continuous wall of earth and flame. The tyranids were entirely obscured. The firestorm whited out most of the displays, and the men fired blindly, on and on, shell after shell. The hive shook with anger as millions of tonnes of munitions exited the muzzles that bedecked its every level.

Still the tyranids came on. For two hours the barrage proceeded, until the ground shook and Karsikon's metahuman eyes were wearied by the screen burn of atomic detonations. Reports came in to Karsikon from his brethren as the main belt was assailed. The same situation there as at Valentis: endless slaughter.

Three hours passed by, and the guns ran hot in the freezing winds of Ector.

'Colonel Chorstroff, what news from the walls?' asked Karsikon.

Chorstroff's voice, tinny on inferior vox equipment, spoke over the quiet chatter of men about the business of shattering a world.

'No creature seen for a full half hour, my lord.'

Karsikon stopped pacing.

'Cease firing, all weapons,' he breathed. 'Let us see what we can see.'

He waited for the earth to settle, then recalibrated the displays, keying his helm's tactical read outs into the hive's external augur eyes. The images clear once more, he scanned rapidly over the field. Smoke blew over a broken landscape in ethereal flags of surrender. Fires guttered in the shells of dead aliens. The permafrost had melted under the barrage, and the ground had become a quagmire of mud and alien blood. The steppe was no more. A lone alien bounded sideways across the view, parallel to the hive line. There was no other movement.

Hours passed. The smoke blew away from the wounded steppe. The heat of weapons' discharge dissipated, and frost rimed the raw earth. Night deepened.

Karsikon was satisfied. 'Brother Karsikon reporting. All tyranids in Valentis sector destroyed.'

Similar replies came from other hives. Men sat back. Some dared smile.

'Be vigilant. This is but the first of it,' came Brother-Captain Raankin's command. 'There will be more waves. Reload your guns, tend to your malfunctions and your bodily needs, and ask that the Emperor turn His gaze upon you. It will be a long night.'

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Fall of Hive Valentis

Seven weeks passed. The Crimson Castellans vigilance did not cease. In Hive Valentis's Fire Control, Karsikon took an incoming message from one of the Chapter men-at-arms at Luggenhard.

'The eighty-ninth transport group is away, my lords.'

'Acknowledged,' said Karsikon. His brothers followed similarly. Karsikon needed sleep less than the unaltered men, but they were being fed a constant drip of stimulant via their hard-wiring. It was likely none of them would ever know the pleasure of a full four hours sleep cycle again. The men were encouraged by the news, and Karsikon allowed them ten seconds of jubilation before silencing their cheers. One hundred and six more transport runs were planned, then the cargo ships in orbit would be full, whereupon the fleet would run for Gospar. These warriors would be left to die.

'Riots continue in three of the hives.' Captain Raankin's voice replaced that of the man-at-arms. All communications between them were now secretive, conveyed over the Space Marines own vox-net.

'I will keep this from my men,' responded Karsikon.

'I command that all will,' ordered Raankin. 'The fewer distractions the better.'

'Is the rioting within expected parameters, brother-captain?' said Brother Philodon.

'As we anticipated, the worst riots are occurring around the evacuation ports. They are, however, less serious than I expected. They are an annoyance, diverting resources away from the outer defences, nothing more,' said Raankin. 'These people of Ector have backbone. Remain vigilant, brothers.'

'Acknowledged, brother-captain,' Karsikon said, as did the others.

The tyranids will come again, thought Karsikon, but when? After the first attack they had been expecting them to mass immediately for a second, larger assault. None had come. From what Raankin said, their tactics were unsubtle but brutal. Karsikon was disturbed.

Later that day, Karsikon discovered the reason for the delay.

'My lord, we have multiple contacts approaching our position,' his augur array officer said.

'Put them on the general screens. Give me holo.'

Multiple viewscreens in the room displayed the hive's auspex readings. A glowing mass of pulsing contacts filled each one from side to side. Like the first swarm, it was coming at them from the dropzones to the north.

'Prepare weapons!' shouted the gunnery officers.

'Wait!' said Karsikon. 'This is different.' He scrutinised the read outs. The blobs were moving fast.

'The enemy is at elevation, lord.'

'Air swarm,' said Karsikon. 'All guns, maximum elevation! Pick your targets by section. Prioritise the larger creatures. Imperator victorius!'

This new wave was on them in minutes, streaking through the cold dawn of Ector. A horde of creatures all with wings. Some were truly exceptional in size, harridans with broods of gargoyles clustered all over their bellies like a litter of pups at the teats of their mother.

They were testing our defences, as Raankin said they would, thought Karsikon. And now they have adapted.

'This is the true attack. Stand fast. Keep your focus. Open fire!' he shouted.

Once again, thousands of weapons spoke. Defence lasers lit the swarm ruby red, scores of searing energy beams that struck lines of tyranids burning from the sky. Airburst shells exploded in their midst, consuming hundreds in fire, shockwaves blasting more to the ground.

But this horde was faster, far faster than the terrestrial creatures – faster than anything with wings had any right to be. Tens of thousands were slaughtered, but the creatures did not falter. They closed range quickly. Many of the guns were too big to target them. Anti-starship projectile cannons made for effective ground weapons, but were ineffective in countering the aerial assault. Vox chatter increased enormously as the aliens came within range of the ramparts, beneath it the sounds of weapons fire. First the smaller artillery, then man-portable heavy weaponry, then the crack of lasguns, so many discharging at once that the noise was like water dropped into boiling fat.

Shortly after, the screams started. The hideous chittering of the aliens made its own war on shouted orders and gunfire.

On the screens, Karsikon watched the tyranids assail the ramparts. Biological guns, bonded to their wearers, spat streams of grubs at the men on the walls. As they neared, the creatures vomited searing venom that melted through the cold-weather scarves and goggles of the Ectorians. Many fell to the ground, clawing at their faces.

'Concentrate support on sector fifteen,' Karsikon ordered. 'Sector twelve, sector three, sector two!' Heavy bolters emplaced in the walls swivelled down, gunning for the tyranids crawling all over the walls.

'Ground forces approaching!' shouted an ops officer.

Augur eyes up to the height of the bottom third of the hive were obscured by knots of flapping wings and teeth. The augurs were failing en masse, smashed to pieces by the creatures, who appeared to know all too well what they were. The higher imagers were safe, for now, and looked down on a boiling cloud of beasts swarming all over the hive's lower reaches. Further out, a fresh line of tyranids was advancing over the steppe.

'Heavy artillery, elevate and engage. Direct line fire weaponry only on the aerial swarm! Engage flamers. Burn them from the sky.'

'We will hit our own men.'

'It is inevitable. They are lost already. Fire!'

Flames billowed out from the flanks of the hive over the ramparts, incinerating tyranids and men alike. But Karsikon was right. There were few men left to die this way.

'My lord, they have taken the lower rampart – east section seventeen!'

So quickly, thought Karsikon. 'Colonel Chorstroff's concern. Keep up fire,' he said. 'Slaughter as many as you can. We will–'

A resounding boom shook the hive.

'What was that?' called someone.

'Concentrate!' said Karsikon, as disquiet ran through the stacked tiers of his gunners. 'Sounded like an impact. Something solid. Get me an auspex feed.'

The auspex was uninterpretable. There were so many contacts that whichever device Karsikon viewed the input on, he could make no sense of it. The vox crackled into uselessness. They were being jammed, somehow. Perhaps by the clouds the larger creatures emitted from their carapace chimneys. Perhaps by some more uncanny means.

Another bang, then another. More followed. Alarms clamoured.

‘Get me a fix on those impacts.’

‘Augurs are out all over the upper reach now also, lord.’

‘Find me one that works!’

A crackling image from a damaged eye came on. Dark shapes, as large as gunships, were plummeting in line from the sky, their wings folded. The first fell past the augur. Shortly after there came another loud bang, and the squeal of metal.

‘They are striking the hive!’ someone shouted.

More alarms. ‘Breaches are reported in fifteen, seventeen, twenty areas.’ The calls of Karsikon’s men were getting ever more panicked.

‘The tyranids have entered the lower halls, the tyranids have entered the lower halls.’ Colonel Chorstroff’s voice overrode the dying vox-net. ‘All citizens, prepare to fight!’

The banging continued with more frequency. Other augurs showed more of the plummeting creatures coming in multiple trains. Images tumbled away as the weapons the eyes were attached to were shorn off by razor-sharp wings, and always came the endless banging as the creatures raked their pinions down the side of the city-mountain. Debris tumbled onto the ramparts, crushing the few men still battling there. The walls were lost. A few bastions held out, but their remaining time could be numbered in minutes.

Gargoyles and harpies flew in thick streamers to the ruptures made in the hive’s skin. More and more of these opened up, and after a time power feed indicators began to fall as the creatures attacked the hive’s power lines. Karsikon was unconcerned; the energy feed for the defensive weapons’ banks came from generatoria beneath Fire Control itself, but it showed an alarming amount of intelligence on the part of the aliens.

Karsikon was barking orders and redirecting his dwindling banks of weapons when he stopped dead.

‘Lord?’

‘Shhh!’ He held up a gauntleted hand. The frantic chatter of the men died away. Karsikon dialled his vox volume down and listened intently. He dropped his hand. ‘Gunfire. Close by. They’re coming for us,’ he said. ‘Door guard, stand ready.’

‘You are sure, my lord?’

‘These are not animals. Something sinister is at play here,’ said the Space Marine.

‘I have movement,’ said the officer watching over the approach to Fire

Control. ‘I can’t see much, but they have something big with them.’

Karsikon spared a swift glance for the display. It was poor quality and the image juddered as the hormagaunts went by. In the smoke behind, a hulking shape loomed. He had the impression of a giant claw, then the feed cut out.

‘They have disabled the corridor augurs.’

Karsikon unhitched his bolter. ‘Lieutenant Gord, you have command. It is time for me to bring my other skills into play.’ He communicated his intentions to Captain Raankin.

‘Go with honour, Crimson Castellan,’ came Raankin’s abrupt reply, shattered to near unintelligibility by the disrupted vox.

His brothers began the litany of ending for him. Their static-broken eulogies filled his helmet with music, and his heart with resolve.

Karsikon stepped through the armoured doors of Fire Control onto the arching bridge that linked it to the rest of the hive. A metal canyon separated the control room from the main body of Valentis, its sheer-sided walls – windowless and streaked with moisture – disappearing into darkness above and below. Fire Control was a thin sliver of metal and technology delicately poised in the dark. Karsikon imagined the weight of the hive slamming the gap closed. He shook away the image.

A bunker was set either side of the bridge, bristling with weapons, five elite Ectorian Guard in each.

‘Men, stand ready,’ he said to them. Four heavy bolters held in cupolas above the bunkers whirred to life.

The sounds of fighting came from the far side of the bridge. Beyond mighty blast doors, a full platoon held more bunkers commanding the corridor approach. As thick as the doors were, Karsikon heard weapons at play through them, muffled by half a metre of plasteel but apparent to his sensitive hearing nonetheless. Alien screeches and human screams mingled.

They stopped.

Regular banging came upon the door, plangent booms that echoed over the chasm.

Guns clicked and powered up behind the Crimson Castellan as he strode forwards onto the narrow span.

‘You shall not enter,’ said Karsikon. ‘I bar the way.’ He prepared himself, setting his stance, thumbing the safety catch on his bolter, checking the chamber.

Thoom, thoom, thoom, the door vibrated.

‘I am the walls, I am the tower,’ he said. His gun clicked as a bolt slid into place in the chamber. He touched each of his oath papers. Some of these papers were fresh applications of old oaths made as a neophyte, some newly taken for this engagement. He knew they would be his last.

Thoom, thoom, thoom.

The tabard between his legs, white, emblazoned with a crimson tower, fluttered in a sudden draught. Screeching sounded from somewhere very high above him.

Thoom, thoom, thoom. The door shivered visibly. Incredibly, bulges appeared in it.

‘I am the bastion, the moat. I am the ward, I am the keep!’ He levelled his gun at the door.

Thoom, thoom, thoom! The door bent inwards and gaps appeared at the top left corner, then all around it, the housing twisted out of shape.

‘I am the gate.’

The door burst, flying from its mounts and banging from the bridge railings with force. Clangs rolled out as it smashed into the side of the chasm and fell.

Smoke and tongues of fire billowed through the doorway. Sparks of electricity lit it like lightning in the clouds. Dark shapes moved.

Tyranids came screaming out of the smoke.

‘I am the gatekeeper. This way is shut.’

Karsikon opened fire, as did the men behind him. Bolt-rounds and las-bolts streaked across the bridge, blowing the first wave of attackers apart. Their body parts spun away into the dark. Fountains of blood burst sideways, then fell like rain into the hive’s never-ending night. More came, then more still. Shattered alien corpses piled on the span, providing a degree of cover. A scythe-armed monster the size of a large dog made it through, clearing the gap between the bridge end and Karsikon with one bound. The Crimson Castellan tracked the creature through the air with his gun. He fired a round into its throat, exploding it in midair and showering him with gore.

A terrible roar. A great weapon beast, three times the height of a man, forced its way through the doorway. Plasteel grated on chitin, crab-like claws, each the size of Karsikon, buckling and scoring the metal as the creature pulled itself through onto the bridge.

The men behind him behaved commendably, firing with precision. They targeted its weak spots, the eyes, the mouth, the gaps between its armour, but their weapons were ineffective. A heavy bolt-round found a soft spot, bringing

forth gouts of blood. The lower left of the creature's four arms went limp and it roared. It hunched down, lowering its head and presenting the thick armour of its back to them. It crossed the giant claws of its forearms across its face. Its vulnerable parts thus shielded, the carnifex walked across the bridge.

'Intensify fire!' shouted Karsikon. The heavy bolters chattered louder. Their miniature missiles bounced from the beast's armour in all directions. Chitin blackened where las-bolts scored it, but on the beast came.

A rattling from behind told Karsikon that one heavy bolter was dry of rounds. A second followed shortly after. He snatched out his combat blade, firing his bolter one-handed.

The creature halted in the centre of the bridge. An awful scream built. Suddenly, it dropped its claws, lifted its head and vomited a ball of incandescent energy from its pulsating throat. Karsikon dived aside, sliding on the metal of the bridge. There was a sickening sensation as he felt it give out underneath him. He dropped his knife and grabbed at a railing post, stopping himself just before he fell from the side.

The bunker burst apart as ammunition within detonated, taking two of the door heavy bolters with it. Karsikon dangled from the post as the carnifex stomped past, the bridge vibrating. Gunfire battered into the xenos as harmlessly as rain against a roof.

Karsikon tried to haul himself up one-handed, but even with the aid of his armour, it was too arduous a task. With a shout of frustration, he dropped his boltgun into the darkness below. He slapped his other hand onto the bridge, and heaved. His chestplate scraped and he was onto the span again. With difficulty he got his backpack under the railing.

He stood in time to hear the carnifex scream once more, right against the second bunker's viewing slit. The vile energies these harmonics generated filled the fortification with brilliant light. The firing from within stopped.

There was but a single heavy bolter still active. The carnifex reached up, closed an immense claw around it and pulled it free from its housing in a shower of sparks.

The creature turned its attentions then upon the door into Fire Control.

More tyranids were coming to the edge of the bridge. Karsikon pulled his pistol from its holster and snapped off three shots, killing two. The others withdrew, hissing. They were waiting, he was sure, for the door to come down, then they would be upon him and his service to the Emperor would be done.

He cast about, attention flicking to the far end of the bridge and back again.

The carnifex ignored him, intent upon breaking through the armoured door into the complex. Karsikon found his knife. He grabbed it up, and came to a quick decision. He put away his pistol.

Karsikon ran at the carnifex. Winding up his arm as he came, he put all his strength and momentum into the knife, slamming it into the poorly armoured joint at the back of the carnifex's left knee. The creature roared and lumbered about. Karsikon held fast. He levered the blade upwards, creating a gap in the ribbed cartilage there. Ripping a krak grenade from his belt, he jammed it into the gap, and let go.

The carnifex towered over him, roaring. The grenade exploded. The leg remained attached, but buckled under the creature's weight. The carnifex flailed with its three functioning arms as it toppled sideways. Doomed by its own top-heavy anatomy, it tumbled off the bridge. One of the great claws closed around the full depth of the bridge's metal, scissoring it partway through. Karsikon walked over to it, pistol out again. Taking careful aim, he pumped a full magazine into the elbow joint. Bolt after bolt exploded there until, with a wet tear, the arm gave way. The carnifex fell roaring into the dark, bright plasma trailing it. The claw remained, bitten deep into the metal.

Immediately, Karsikon was facing the bridge end again, pistol reloaded. Creatures were coming through the far door unhindered. He fired once, twice, then five times. Twelve shots and his gun was empty, all his ammunition spent.

He looked back to the door. It was so badly buckled that he could not retreat within.

Casting his pistol away, he held his combat knife reversed in front of him, palm flat on the pommel.

A winged tyranid warrior, paired crackling symbiote swords held in its upper hands, came through the door and advanced upon him.

'I am the gatekeeper,' Karsikon intoned.

The fleshy weapon in the warrior's lower limbs spasmed, the gills along its length rippling obscenely as it pumped a stream of acids and grubs at him. Searing pain stabbed him as it ate into his armour.

Against the warrior with the swords, Karsikon stood little chance. He was still staggered by the effects of its gun when it charged at him. He dodged one swipe, then a second. The third bit into his left arm. The weapon was of sharpened bone, but the disruption field around it was every bit as deadly as that of an Imperial powerblade. It sheared through his armour with ease. He grunted as his arm was severed. A second blow cracked his chestplate and brought him to his

knees.

He was coughing up blood into his helmet as the tyranids swarmed past. They ignored him; his time as a threat to them had passed. He lived long enough to see the tyranid leader beast shatter the weakened door, and then he died.

In a similar manner, all the hives of Ector would fall.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Last Days of Ector

‘They are coming again, make ready!’ Yoth called. His small army manned the barricades. They were a motley band – gangers, underhive scum, factorymen, upper hivers, nobles, soldiers, children, matrons, wives and mothers. They fought side by side, no matter their age, sex or origin. They were all dirty now, whatever finery an individual might have had left tattered by weeks of war. For once, the citizens of Ector were equal.

‘Sergeant,’ said one, ‘I see movement!’

Yoth scanned the darkness down the Infinite Stair. There was little power at this level any longer. His helm lenses glowed as image intensification picked up the unified movement of a number of tyranids. They ran together, switching direction like birds in flight, flitting from cover to cover. The hive had taken much damage and debris blocked the stairways in many places. This only made it easier for the tyranids to assault them.

‘Steady,’ shouted Yoth. ‘Hold your fire!’

Ammunition was scarce. The last of the factory levels had fallen three days before. They would be getting no more.

Something was wrong. There were too few tyranids in evidence, and the approach of this group was too obvious. Yoth was holding one of those landings approached by two stairs coming together, to its left and right sides. Behind him, the next rise went up alone. He marched to the other end of the landing, Kal in tow. They peered down the second stair. Yoth took an improvised flare offered him by Kal, magnesium scavenged from the lost manufactoria. He flicked the switch on its ignition source and hurled it as far down the left-hand stairway as he could. It trailed sparks as it flew, clattering loudly in the emptiness of the

ravaged hive as it bounced.

With a sputter it caught, revealing a second swarm of xenos creatures creeping forward. They shrieked at their discovery and broke into a run. An answering chorus of screeches came from the opposite stair, and the two groups attacked at once.

'Fire!' bellowed Yoth.

Guns spoke together. A mix of improvised slug-throwers, sanctioned civilian sidearms and Astra Militarum-issue lasguns, their individual sounds coalescing into a symphony of death. The rounds smacked into the onrushing creatures, killing many. Their corpses tripped those coming behind, but it served to slow them only a little.

Yoth's bolter boomed, the propellant of each bolt streaking the darkness. The light trails vanished as the rounds hit home. Gaunts exploded, showering the stairs with blood. He shouldered it as the aliens came closer, drew out his pistol and lobbed a grenade down into the horde, bringing short-lived illumination to the scene. Before it had died away, he had drawn his combat knife.

The aliens neared. The light fleshpistols they had bonded in pairs to their fists crackled and spat their poisoned darts. A man cried in pain near Yoth, sliding down and convulsing as the toxins did their work. Another volley, and the creatures were upon them, scrabbling over the barricades. Yoth laid about him with his combat knife, chopping creatures down left and right, hewing their limbs from their bodies.

Men and women wrestled with the beasts, rifles held crosswise in front of them to keep snapping jaws from their faces. Yoth helped where he could, firing shots from his pistol or stabbing with his blade. His blows shattered the aliens' armour with ease, but the unenhanced struggled. Clumsy strikes from kitchen implements and sharpened metal slivers skidded from chitin. Yoth saw one man impale his own leg in this manner, then die screaming as his opponent leapt up and savaged him.

The situation was hopeless. These were among the enemy's weakest creatures, and they were too much. Yoth caught sight of larger shadows moving up to engage.

'Fall back,' he cried. 'Fall back to the next line!'

Many of his militiamen were torn down screaming as they ran. Kal and Marny kept pace with him; he'd never been able to shake them. The ones who survived longest tended to be the underhive gangers. In perverse circumstances, they were finally ascending to the better parts of their city.

They wove a path through a debris field up the single flight. The pursuing tyranids did not see the mines secreted within. Explosions boomed behind Yoth as he made it to the barricades fronting the next landing. Waiting hands pulled them through its narrow gate. Yoth looked back. Two or three stragglers, no more, a horde of xenos on their heels.

'Open fire! Shut the gate!'

A heavy stubber raked the stairs, setting off unexploded mines and slaughtering tyranids by the dozen. Small arms joined it, dropping more of the creatures until there were none left to see. The stragglers were cut down along with the enemy.

So had the battle of Luggenhard gone on for a fortnight.

One by one the hives had fallen, Valentis first, Uxtar soon after. There were gaps of many days between the losses, then a handful would go at once. The last before Luggenhard was Kirithia. In their desperation to escape, its population had attacked the space ports there en masse, leaving the city wide open. Panic was the deadliest of all foes.

Once the city walls had fallen, the Great Devourer had found its way into Luggenhard through the porous lower levels, as Yoth predicted. His battle had gone on in a similar vein ever since: he'd hold a landing for a day or two, then retreat to the next. All the while the population shrank until the great city's middle portions were empty. There were so few left, barely enough to hold the Infinite Stair and the corridors around it.

'They're coming!' yelled the landing lookout. 'Ware below!'

Huge creatures lumbered out of the grey, perpetual twilight of the hive.

Yoth cursed fluently. 'Remember, aim for the eyes, aim for the joints. Do not waste your ammunition on their shells!'

Five creatures, carnifexes, living tanks equipped for heavy assault. 'So it ends,' whispered somebody.

'It's not over until he says it's over!' shouted Kal. Marny was next to him. He released the grip on his gun and squeezed her arm.

The militia levelled their weapons. Defiance was more important than survival now. On the landings above, others were waiting, no doubt in fear at the sound of the battle coming closer. Yoth was proud of how these men and women had held their ground. Knowing that there was no escape for them, they fought on anyway.

Before Yoth could order them to fire, the shaft was filled with shards of glittering light. Through the gaps between the tank-beasts, Yoth and his men saw

glowing alien warriors, clad in bright armour. A nimbus surrounded them, as of light shone through crystal. The sounds of shrieking alien weaponry rang up the stairs. The creatures turned to face them.

'The Hand! The Hand! He is here again!'

'The Hand!'

Others took up the cry, until all were chanting the name. There was relief, and tears.

'Silence!' roared Yoth. 'We do not know the true purpose of this aid. The alien is to be feared. None are as devious as the eldar.'

Yoth hated to admit it, but he had come to rely on the mysterious eldar. He caught a glimpse of the one called the Hand, a slender being decked with shimmering banners, a tall helm upon his head. He danced around the carnifexes' clumsy swipes, slashing at them with a long sword. Discs from the device mounted on the back of his other hand joined the merciless hail of projectiles shot by his followers, a hail that hissed into the tyranids, slicing through their armour and severing their tendons. Like the men of Luggenhard, the eldar interlopers targeted the weaker points of the creatures, only their weapons were far more effective. A living tank fell to the floor as its knees gave out. It dragged itself forwards on its other four limbs, roaring in outrage. Yoth and his men watched as a glimmering warrior leapt onto its head, put the fluted barrel of its weapon against the creature's neck and slew it.

The Hand accounted for two himself. Yoth was entranced by his skill at arms. Relief vied with hatred in his heart. The Crimson Castellans were a xenophobic breed. Yoth defiled himself by his acceptance – gladness, even – of this filth's intervention, and yet… And yet as he watched the alien weave his way through the blows of the carnifexes, felling them with pinpoint strikes to the few vulnerable parts of their anatomy, he could not help but feel the respect one warrior holds for another.

The Hand's men, if men was a fit word for them, were not invulnerable. One was caught despite his agility. Crushed in a claw, his screams mingled with the shattering of glass.

'Chaplain Gorth,' Yoth signalled. 'Sergeant Yoth. The alien fights here again on our side.'

Gorth replied. His voice was hoarse. Many long days of command had taken their toll. Raankin was dead, slain by the sky swarm, as were all but four of their brothers. Once their commands had fallen, these few had made their way back to Hive Luggenhard, the last redoubt of Ector. Their adventures would fill whole

tomes of the Chapter's history. Their deeds would go unrecorded.

'By your side?'

'No, my lord. He is yet distant. We look on and he slaughters the enemy in our stead.'

'That is a great shame, for proximity brings opportunity. Should you get such opportunity, Sergeant Yoth, I expect you to take it. Strike him down. We have lost. Felling such a warrior as he will cause the eldar some discomfort. A trifle in recompense for this world, but a stone to be built into the walls of the Imperium nonetheless.'

'Yes, my lord,' said Yoth, hoping the hesitation did not show in his voice. 'We have been driven back to the nine hundred and fifty-first landing. We are nigh to the middle hive wall and the upper spire.'

'Hold them as long as you can. Withdraw fighting. The last of the evacuation fleet is preparing to depart the system. They are as yet unmolested. The *Redoubt* holds position. There is little to remain here for. Kill as many as you can, and then we shall leave this world to its fate. These are the last days of Ector.'

'There are men here who have fought bravely, my lord.'

'And we will honour them when we return to the fleet. Their families, at least, had their chance in the lottery. Their deaths may serve the Emperor here – yours will not. You are worth ten thousand lesser men. Do not sacrifice yourself. We have lost too many brothers already. Do you understand, sergeant?'

'Yes, my lord,' said Yoth.

Gorth's voice cut out.

The last of the carnifexes were dying artful deaths. A pair fell simultaneously, and the fight was over. The eldar came to a halt. From somewhere deep in the hive, Yoth heard the crackle of weapons. Distant alien screeches troubled the air, followed by a brief hush. This silence was ill, unnatural in a city such as Luggenhard. It was the quiet of Death himself; his breath stirred Yoth's tabard.

The glittering warriors gathered behind their leader. The Hand was taller than they, with broad armoured shoulders, a red helm with a white war mask inset, and a black and white crest curling over its height.

'A tempting shot,' said Yoth in the privacy of his helm. He looked from right to left at the men beside him, their faces showing wonder at the glimmering apparitions. He wondered what they would do should he gun the Hand down. Would they turn upon him?

Perhaps they would be right to, he thought. Such a course of action seemed deeply dishonourable, no matter Gorth's edict.

The aliens, forty or so, moved as one up the stairs. They did not advance as physical beings, but flickered like phantoms from place to place, although their weapons were solid enough.

'Stand ready,' said Yoth. 'This may well be a trick.'

His men blinked at one another as if they had woken from some enchantment. Those with their wits about them jostled their fellows and gestured at the eldar. Reluctantly, the hivers aimed their guns at their saviours.

Yoth's finger tightened on his bolter's trigger. The aliens came to a halt well within range. Still Yoth did not give the order to open fire.

The warriors were silent. They stared at the humans from behind blank faceplates. Prismatic light shifted around them. For all the beauty of the aliens, and the aid they had brought, the men behind the wall became uneasy. There was something coldly sinister about them.

'Is this the manner in which the sons of Terra greet their saviours, with blade and bullet? Shame on you and yours. Put up your weapons!'

A musical voice Yoth recognised: the eldar Isarion he had encountered in the underhive. A shadowy figure came from within the midst of his shining comrades. Remarkable for his mundanity, he gave off no glow. Instead, his cloak was the stuff of shadow.

Talk went down the line of the defences. Fingers relaxed, guns were pointed elsewhere.

'Stand firm!' bellowed Yoth, the harshness of his vox-grille making his men flinch.

'We would speak with your leader, the altered mon-keigh named Yoth. We stand here under the oath of truce. Let no one draw aim upon us nor loose shot, or there shall be dire consequences.'

'You see me,' said Yoth. 'Why do you not address me directly?'

'I seek no offence and you find it, even though it is you who offer it. I would not address you without your permission lest you take it as insolence.' Isarion swept back his arm to encompass his ghostly comrades. 'Here are the heroes of the eldar. It is a great honour they do you in fighting for your cause, and you would slay them! Mankind has fallen far into folly.'

Yoth stared at the Hand. The eldar stared back. Yoth's will was great, armoured by catechism against the influence of others, and yet he felt small under the dread eldar lord's gaze. He was acutely aware of his own filthy state, the battered and streaked nature of his armour and tabard.

'The Hand desires you to know that the end is upon you. Ector will fall soon.

A great host of void spawn makes its way hither. The beasts you saw us slaughter are but its vanguard. If you wish for the remainder of your chosen people to depart, you must join forces with us. Let us fight side by side. We have no quarrel with you, only common cause.'

'Today, perhaps,' said Yoth. 'But oftentimes the words of the eldar prove hollow.'

'It is because you do not listen, and assume the speakers are all the same. Are you the same as these men? Is your word not worth more than theirs? The might you have to effect your promises is greater, and so your word is greater, is it not?'

Yoth glanced at the tired and dirty men beside him.

'So it is with us. We are among the mighty of our people. We give you our word we seek no advantage here, at least none to your detriment,' said Isarion. 'Our threads run together for a time. Do not question it.'

A roar rumbled up from far below, then many more. Isarion looked back into the dark beyond the lambency of the silent warriors. 'Be quick about your choices, Sergeant Yoth. We gain little from this debate. If you decline then tell us so, and we will depart.'

Gorth's words came back to Yoth. 'Proximity brings opportunity.'

'Let them in,' Yoth shouted, holding his hand aloft. 'For now, we fight as allies.'

'Here is where we will make our stand,' said Isarion. A holomap flashed crystal-perfect from his hand in the dark, the interior of Luggenhard depicted in breathtaking clarity. 'This grander landing, twelve levels up. Pull your men from the intervening stations. With their and our arms en masse, we will stay the void spawn long enough for your last transport to depart.'

Yoth thought on the eldar plan. It went against his own strategy, but the time for this constant, attritional retreat was coming to an end.

'Bring your men in from the galleries and chambers around the Stair also,' Isarion was saying. 'It is the biological mass of this world the tyranids desire. Concentrate it in one place, and they will come all at once and be hindered by their own numbers. Upon the narrower front, they can afflict us less. The presence of the wall will give them only one avenue of attack, even should they break through into the upper reaches.'

Yoth nodded. 'Very well. Whatever the merits of your suggestion one thing is true – the endgame approaches.'

‘This ultimate stairway,’ Isarion’s map scrolled upwards, ‘below the wall that separates the poor from the rich. This has been prepared for demolition?’

‘It has,’ said Yoth, not liking that this alien knew so much.

‘Then when the situation is hopeless, go from this place, destroy the Stair and seal the wall.’

‘We have refrained from doing so thus far, for fear it would concentrate the attention of the aliens upon the upper spire directly.’

‘And wise you were to do so. Now is the moment to enact your final plan. It is a delaying tactic.’

‘That was our intention.’

‘Well now is the time for delay.’

Yoth sent out his orders. Two of his brothers responded. Bost and Meklenholm. Bost had been organising the defenders on the far side of the spire wall dividing the upper realms of the city from the lower reaches. Meklenholm had been leading search and destroy missions within the hive shell. They discussed the situation, and agreed. Meklenholm would withdraw to Bost’s position, and await Yoth.

‘What of Philodon and Osko?’ asked Meklenholm.

‘Let them remain in the spire space port,’ said Yoth. ‘Their efforts are needed there. The air swarm harries it. I will inform them of my retreat once I am on my way.’

He was relieved his brothers did not insist on descending to his level of the Stair. The presence of the Hand and his followers added too many complications.

‘I am ready,’ he said to the eldar, trying hard to keep his voice neutral.

‘Then lead on,’ said Isarion.

‘No. You and yours will go first. I will fight beside you, but I do not trust you at my back, eldar.’

CHAPTER NINE

The Battle of Heaven's Welcome

They went upwards many landings. The darkness above solidified as they drew closer to the hive wall. There the Infinite Stair went through twin gates: round, extravagantly decorated holes in the horizontal spire wall. The gates could be closed, and with them all fresh air and water to the lower hive cut off. They were a standing defence against the threat of rebellion; it was to Governor Hoyel's credit that they had remained open throughout his reign.

An hour into Yoth's trek he received notice from Bost that Meklenholm had come through the wall.

As they passed the intervening landings, Yoth gathered his warriors band by band. Soon a stream of humanity was heading upwards to the final landing of the middle hive – the Landing of Heaven's Welcome.

They reached it shortly after noon. The constant darkness of the powerless city made a nonsense of the term.

Heaven's Welcome was the largest landing in all the hive, and the site of a great deal of official business before the invasion. Now its five hectares of heavily decorated floor were as silent and lifeless as everywhere else. The toll booths and document offices were empty, papers scattered all over the floor. Queue dividers were heaped high in the centre, the queues long fled or devoured. A grandiose place once, but in the light of its few remaining lumoglobes and lamps, it seemed a mausoleum before the last candles of burial burned themselves out.

The people of the hive had fortified the landing as best they thought, barricading right the way across the top of the single stair approaching the landing. But the stairway was very wide here, filling the full three hundred

metres of the shaft's diameter, and with so much ground to cover the barricade was somewhat scrappier than those below.

'Not good this, is it, my lord?' said Kal. 'I don't sabby this be way defensible.'

'You have a good eye. It is not. Let us do something about it,' Yoth said. 'We will strengthen these walls,' he said, shouting to the weary men, women and youths coming up the stairs. There were ten thousand or so people on their way. A great many it seemed, but a tiny fraction of the hive's original population of one hundred million. Yoth, a native of a backward, sparsely settled world, still found such numbers hard to comprehend.

The defenders of Heaven's Welcome greeted their fellows warmly, but at the sight of the eldar making their way up the centre of the stairway they became restive, half afraid, half awed. Yoth shouted at them, chivvying them to greater efforts. He gathered his more trusted lieutenants and sent them off into the hive, ordered to scavenge materials.

Four hours he gave them. A quarter of them did not return.

When the four hours had passed, he had the towering doors into the hive proper sealed. That left only the stairway and the shaft as avenues of attack – and the twin gates six hundred metres above him, should the tyranids break into the spire. He trusted his brothers would prevent that from happening.

The dark clamoured with the noise of tools as the last men of Ector worked to remain alive a little longer.

Under Yoth's direction, a maze of defences sprang up to await the creatures. Two walls, one upon the lip of the Stair, the other one hundred and seventy metres to the rear. Obstacles dangled from the Stair's supports and the catwalks that criss-crossed the central shaft. The stairways were mined. Snares of razor wire coiled across the steps.

It was as good as he could manage, this ad hoc fortress. Once it was completed and the noise of construction ceased, there was quiet for an hour. The humans rested while the eldar stayed aloof. Yoth wished that the enemy would come. The wait was sapping the hivers' morale. Yoth suspected the tyranids delayed deliberately.

The first shriek of the approaching creatures brought more relief than fear. The landing came alive, people rousing themselves from sleep or terror's trance. Gun bolts slid and clicked, orders were spoken quietly. In the earlier days there had been bravado from the gangers and cowardice from those from more peaceful levels. Neither were apparent now. The war had winnowed out the terrified and

the boastful, leaving a hardcore of the courageous, the clever and the lucky. How rapidly they have become warriors, thought Yoth.

'Look out below,' called one lookout, then another, then a third. A scream above and one of the sentries was torn from his perch amid a flurry of leathery wings. His body thumped hard onto the landing.

'Eyes up!' shouted Yoth. Heavy stubbers, emplaced behind the main barricades for the purpose of air defence, opened up.

So were the first shots fired in the battle of Heaven's Welcome.

Five times the swarms of tyranids came up the stairs. The first wave was annihilated by the mines and razor wire traps. The second broke in a fury of claws upon the defences. Scavenged fabrics and chains channelled gargoyles into the heavy stubbers' fields of fire. Their bodies rained down, taking a toll on the defenders equal to that reaped by the bio-weapons. For four hours this opening skirmish raged, until there were no more tyranids in the air or upon the ground.

A short time passed. The remaining lights failed, then another wave came. Yoth ordered more defenders forward as their fellows were killed. They skidded on the blood of the slain as they rushed to man the battered walls. The aliens were repulsed at great cost.

Having exhausted the defenders' energy and depleted the larger part of their number, the Great Devourer set upon the walls of Heaven's Welcome a fourth wave of larger creatures. A phalanx of warriors were in the lead, twelve of them, tall and hideous, heading with purpose to a point in the barricade that had been much weakened. A carpet of leaping beasts, like giant lice, swarmed about the warriors' feet.

The Hand was there at the broken wall, his shining warriors with him, pouring shuriken fire into the horde. Their hissing discs dismembered half the warriors. The remaining six slammed into the wall nevertheless.

The towering tyranids were imposing, and men fled from them as the eldar braced for their assault, but the true danger came from the tiny rippers. No matter that the defenders fired into them, bursting hundreds like ripe fruit, there were tens of thousands and not even a fraction could be stopped. They bounded up the rough barricades on scrabbling legs, then poured over the top. Men were pulled down, disappearing under the writhing mass of the creatures. Their screams were bloodcurdling, high shrieks turning wet and bubbly as the flesh was stripped from their bones.

Giants came next, crushing the ripper swarm underfoot. Gunfire clattered from

their armoured shells. They barged into the metal plates that made up the wall, smashing them wide. The rippers poured in through the gap in great swarms, and the defenders fled.

'Fall back!' shouted Yoth. 'Fall back!'

Then he was away, pushing terrified hivers towards the gate of the second wall. Improvised flamers scoured the ground of the rippers, burning them by the thousand until there were but scattered groups of them, and these were finally gunned down.

Fire and the glimmer-glow of the crystal warriors were the sole sources of illumination upon the landing. As he reached the second wall, Yoth glanced to the upper hive. Lozenges of bright light marked the entrances, shining hard upon the grand stairs leading up to them. Sanctuary.

He turned from it.

The eldar slaughtered the tyranid warriors to the last. They duelled with carnifexes. They felled several, but there were many and the eldar retreated.

In the eldar came, rushing past Yoth. He was bathed in their cold light. Isarion then, thanks flying from his lips. Finally, the Hand.

The lead carnifex following bellowed, yellow saliva dripping from long tusks.

Yoth withdrew through the gate.

'Close the gates,' he said. Three men pushed a great sheet of metal across the entryway. Girders were hurriedly welded into place.

Corpses were thick upon the landing outside the wall. Only five hundred hivers were left alive, and fear had taken the majority of them.

They were given no respite. The gate shook with claw blows. Men shot wildly into the mass of giant creatures at the wall. Yoth had bade them build it as high as they could, yet still the uppermost parts of the carnifexes overtopped it.

There was a terrible wail and greenish plasma lit up the landing. A section of wall was engulfed. It glowed red-hot, the men standing there turned to ash.

More clanging began. Yoth looked frantically for its source. He stared down at the floor as it heaved upwards. He was thrown sideways as a multi-limbed, snakelike monstrosity pulled itself through the hole and slithered onto the landing. A rush of smaller, similar beasts came with it. The monster reared high. Its torso shook and a dozen quills the length of spears shot from its chest, impaling men all along the wall. Its cohorts spat black grubs from their own chest-weapons, killing many more. One went for Yoth and he parried desperately, avoiding a spray of mucous and ammunition beetles. It stabbed hard at him with long, bony fingers, penetrating the weaker, flexible part of his

armour around the stomach. He ground his teeth in pain, and ended the creature with a blow from his knife.

'Trygon!' shouted Yoth. 'A trygon!' How it had come there amazed him. There were multiple skins over the underside of the stairs, covering a maze of ducts and service ways, but the full depth of them was not great. For it to squeeze its way through such confines was something he had thought impossible.

Squeeze through it had. With the trygon's arrival, the defence was effectively over. The gateway was barged in. A triad of carnifexes lumbered through. One of its number began the cry that would unleash another burst of plasma. A second roared and fell, shell shattered by shuriken fire. Yoth recovered his feet, clutching at his wound. He shot repeatedly into the glowing maw of the screaming carnifex to no effect, his rounds detonated by the heat of its gathering plasmas.

Something hit him hard from the side. It was not enough to knock him down, but he fell sideways, teetering near to the edge of the hole created by the trygon. Nothing but darkness and the howls of alien horrors was below.

A slender hand grabbed him, pulled him back from the brink.

Isarion nodded to him. Yoth raised his bolt pistol. Isarion's eyes widened in shock. The Space Marine pulled the trigger, exploding the head of the ravener rearing up behind the eldar prince.

Another ravener came at them. Yoth wounded it, narrowly deflecting its response. Isarion pushed himself away from the ravener's arm blades. He sidestepped adroitly as Yoth brought his blade around in a whistling arc. Strength Yoth had in great excess, but he felt as agile as a tree compared to the prancing eldar. He growled in frustration. Isarion laughed and dropped the ravener with a blast of fire from his weapon. The ravener's tail jerked with the violence of its death throes. It swung at Isarion, catching him unawares, and sent him to the ground. The laughter was knocked out of him along with his breath.

Yoth stood over the eldar. Isarion reached out a hand.

In reply, Yoth pointed his bolt pistol down at Isarion's head.

'Proximity brings opportunity.' Gorth's words rang in his mind again.

His finger hovered over the trigger. Kill Isarion, he thought, and the way to the Hand is open. The eldar hero was fully engaged fighting the trygon, wheeling and spinning between its jabbing arms. One shot, perhaps two, thought Yoth.

Isarion looked up at him. A profound stillness had come over the eldar prince.

'Why do you pause? Slay me. You have your wish – destroy the enemy of man. That is what you are, what you are made for. Do it!' he shouted.

Yoth stared down. He hated this creature, hated it for what it was not. And yet it had saved his life twice. Yoth stood at a fork in the road. Dishonour lay down each branch of the path. He chose the lesser shame.

'No,' he said. He stood back, bolt pistol pointing to the ground. He offered no hand to aid the eldar. With a fluid movement Isarion was back on his feet.

'You hesitate, my friend, and it reflects well upon you. Perhaps there is wisdom and honour left within the race of mankind, if in small measure. Now, I will tell you something. Fifty-three of your years hence, Brother Yoth, on the world known as Malefix, do not hesitate. You will know the time. Farewell!'

Isarion ran to the aid of his leader, joining his master in his duel with the trygon.

Yoth wobbled, light-headed. He'd lost a lot of blood, despite his gifts. It ran down the inside of his armour, pooling hotly in his boot.

'What are you waiting for?' shouted Isarion, as he leapt in between the creature's swiping arms. 'Your time here is done. Run!'

'Fall back,' Yoth ordered. 'The middle hive is lost. To the spire, to the spire!'

His men were all dead bar two score. They ran back to the stairs, frantically dodging swooping gargoyles. The surviving eldar warriors were fully invested. The trygon bled from a dozen wounds, its snake-bodied brethren all dead. An awful rumble came up the stairs, the clatter of sharp hooves on metal. Shrieks preceded them.

Kal was by him, and the girl.

'My lord, we gotta go,' said Kal.

'I…' said Yoth.

'Marny, get his arm!'

Their attempts to help him were laughable. Neither adolescent had their full height, and the circumstances of their birth meant that would never be great. Their heads came only to his chestplate eagle. They could not shoulder his weight, and yet their desire to aid him stirred something in Yoth. They tugged at his unmoving, ceramite-clad arms, and he went with them, limping to the stairs, snapping off shots when aerial tyranids came too close.

Later, Yoth would recall the climb into the spire as a shattered mess of terrible images. Somehow, he and the youths made it to the top along with a handful of others.

They passed through the yawning gates at the top. On the marble floor of the upper hive's entrance hall, Yoth turned back. Far below, a glittering arc of eldar

warriors stood on the landing around the base of the stairs, facing an onrushing horde of creatures.

He watched a moment, Kal and Marny clutching at his sides. Then he unclipped his auspex from his belt and depressed a button.

A string of explosions leapt up and down the length of the stairs like fireworks, as far as the Landing of Heaven's Welcome, obscuring Yoth's view of the eldar with smoke. For all the violence of the charges, the stairways seemed untroubled, and his twin hearts skipped a beat.

Time stilled for an instant, until with a tortured groan the ornate structures folded in on themselves, one crashing from its mounts into the other as they fell. Together embraced, they plummeted into the depths, the booming of their fall echoing around the hive's cavity. The screams of tyranids came after it. Yoth had hoped that the weight of the stairs would bring down other flights. He was satisfied that it was so.

Some vile creature flapped towards them. An emplaced weapon shot it down. Here there was power and warriors still. 'Come, let us get away from this place,' he said. He keyed his vox on. 'This is Brother Yoth. I return. Close the spire wall.' The massive doors of the upper hive started their slow closure. For the moment, nothing else dared approach them.

The smoke had cleared by the time the gates were nearly shut. The lower landing boiled with alien monsters. Of the eldar, there was no sign.

With the two children by his side, Yoth made his way upwards once more.

CHAPTER TEN

Farewell to Ector

The grand hall beyond the gates was deserted. The hive shaft continued upwards, rising all the way to the palace wall, which divided the House of Hoyel finally from its subjects. The Stair was the same: two flights, one flight; the world Yoth and his companions passed through, utterly different.

This had also been a place of official business, for those who made it through the month-long queues on Heaven's Welcome faced another ordeal on this side of the wall. But no longer. No scribes wrote in the dusty tomes left upon lecterns. No enforcers turned rejected petitioners aside. The Infinite Stair was empty. The hivers looked about with wonder. The hall, with its endless ranks of gleaming galleries, rows of luxurious shops and eateries, and parklands gazing down from on high were like nothing they had ever seen. There were tears among them, and anger at such inequality.

Yoth was increasingly pained. His wound was deep, the functions of his armour compromised. Slowly, he made it across the hall and up a flight of marble stairs to some barricades. The hall, as huge as it was, was a perfect killing ground. The corridors around it were full of armed hivers waiting to take their small measures of revenge.

Brother Meklenholm and Brother Bost awaited him.

'You have returned, and mostly intact,' said Meklenholm. They all embraced, awkward in their battleplate. Meklenholm switched to a private vox-channel. 'Come, brother. We depart in an hour. This world is lost.' He spoke through his vox-grille again, this time to the hivers around him. 'My brother is injured. We must take him to our Apothecary. Hold the hall if the enemy breaks through. Do not advance. Sell yourselves dearly if you need to. Repay the alien with fire

doubly for what they have taken from you!'

A weak cheer went up. Meklenholm looked at Kal and Marny.

'They're coming with me,' Yoth said.

Meklenholm said nothing. Yoth's tone made it clear that there was no room for disagreement.

'Yes, brother-sergeant, of course,' said Bost.

Away from the hall the upper hive was crowded with people. Millions remained. Hysteria reigned. Drinking, fighting, fornication and prayer were the order of the day. The Space Marines passed crammed cathedrals, crowds surrounding wild-eyed preachers, lines of wailing flagellants, orgies and brawls. This was the end of the world.

'We must go quickly,' said Meklenholm. 'Our Thunderhawk is prepared. The situation here has deteriorated. The populace is quiet for the moment, but should the people realise we are departing, then I believe everything will come apart quickly. Make way,' he shouted aloud. 'Make way for the Crimson Castellans!'

People stared at them. Some cheered. Others muttered darkly. Kal and Marny were terrified by the opulence around them, and shrank into Yoth's sides at the crowd's attention.

'How goes the outer defence?' asked Yoth.

'The aerial swarm has retreated, brother-sergeant,' said Bost. 'The tyranids have won now, and they know it. We should be able to depart. If not, we shall fight our way free. It is after all but a short boost to orbit, and their aerial creatures cannot pursue us beyond the atmosphere. The evacuation has been unmolested. The last three shuttle loads bound for the *Lady Karomay* gather. As we planned, the third will not be leaving. A distasteful deception, but necessary if we are to extricate ourselves from this place and not die with it.'

'The majority of our serfs are evacuated,' added Bost. 'Gorth kept the neophytes here, but them aside, only ten of our men-at-arms remain. All others await us on the *Redoubt.*'

They took deserted corridors guarded by these last crimson-clad men. Osko and Philodon joined them. As they passed through each intersection, the men-at-arms fell in with them, casting wary looks behind.

'How fare you, brother?' said Philodon wryly, taking in Yoth's sorry state.

'Badly,' he said. He did not have energy for anything else.

They went through multiple doors to the outer bounds of the hive. A final set opened, leading them onto a flower-like landing pad cantilevered out from the side of the hive. Its armoured petals were closed, but as soon as the Space

Marines set foot upon the pad, they ground open. Air roared out through the widening gaps. Gunfire sounded outside.

Awaiting them, its bold red and white colour scheme striking amidst the chrome and soft golds of Luggenhard, was their transport.

Gorth and the neophytes were already aboard. The survivors ran to the Thunderhawk as best they could before the air was all sucked away.

'My lord,' said Yoth before Gorth could speak. 'I bring these two with me, as the boy has been of much service. If it pleases you, I beg that you reconsider his induction into our Chapter. He passed the trial. His genetic coding is a match. Brother-Captain Raankin approved him. He has atoned for his insolence with his service to me. Whether he survives the process is down to him and him alone, but I will vouch for him as he strives. As long as he is with us, I will stand in responsibility for his actions.'

The Thunderhawk's ramp whirred shut. Marny stared open-mouthed around her.

Gorth frowned. They took their seats. The neophytes who knew Marny and Kal nodded at them, but there was already distance between them.

The gunship's engines rumbled into life and it took off at great acceleration, pushing them so hard into their seats that Marny blacked out momentarily and Yoth nearly broke his teeth grinding them against the pain. Weapons thumped away on the outside of the hull, but soon they were away. Ten minutes later they passed into space. An apothecarion serf attended to Yoth, checking the state of his wound via his armour.

As they flew to rendezvous with the *Redoubt,* Yoth summoned enough energy to explain Kal's actions in the hive. Gorth listened silently. When Yoth was done, he spoke directly to Kal. 'Perhaps I was wrong about you,' he said. 'According to my brother, you showed great mettle in the face of the enemy.'

'But… but… I failed. You said I was insubbled or something,' said Kal.

'Insubordinate, boy. The word is insubordinate,' said Yoth.

Kal looked at the floor. 'I didn't sabby the meaning.'

'Blind obedience is not the sole test of who we are. You passed one far greater,' continued Gorth. 'No trial I could set is the equal of what you did. Our way is of duty to the Imperium, and of sacrifice. You were willing to lay down your life to aid Brother-Sergeant Yoth. No doubt you regard that as the natural thing to do. It is not. The urge to survive, or only to flee, in the face of such alien horror often triumphs over human altruism, strong though that is. The question is, boy, can you learn to obey?'

Kal looked at Marny.

'Do it, Kal. Do it. I'll be okay. I never was the one for you.' She shot a sad look at Jimmo. He stared forwards, and did not acknowledge her.

Kal hesitated, suddenly grasping what Marny meant to tell him but could not. He looked up into Gorth's expressionless yellow eyes. 'I think I can, lord.'

'As do I. Not all men would agree with you, however.' Gorth looked to the remaining brothers. All gave barely perceptible nods.

'It is agreed, then. I retract my prior judgement. You are hereby offered a place among our neophytes. But I warn you, I shall set especial vigilance over you. I have violated one of my own principles in altering my ruling. Any deviation from our ways, any dereliction of duty or inability to master the warcraft of our Chapter will reflect doubly poorly on Yoth and myself as it will on you. For in this opportunity and its acceptance, you have taken upon yourself a bond of honour. We will not be dishonoured. Do you understand?'

Kal sat up straight. 'I give the noddy… I mean, I swear, that I will do my best to do right by you. I won't let you down, my lord.'

'The correct appellation is "Lord Chaplain".'

'Then I will not let you down, Lord Chaplain.'

Gorth gave him a long, hard look. 'See that you do not.'

'What about Marny, Lord Chaplain? She did right by Brother-Sergeant Yoth too…'

'I approve of your attempts at proper etiquette, but the correct term is "Lord Yoth",' said Gorth.

'She is a bold warrior,' said Yoth thickly. He was exhausted and the drugs pumped into his system by suit and serf dragged at his mind.

'We will see to it that the girl is housed and fed. But she cannot remain with us. If the Emperor wills it, we will find a place for her with some adepta or other, where she shall be trained to some useful service.' Gorth glowered at them all. 'I cannot and will not offer any more than that.'

Satisfied, Yoth let himself fall asleep, lulled by the rumble of the Thunderhawk's engines. He was grateful that Gorth did not interrogate him about the eldar just yet, although that was surely coming.

EPILOGUE

To Dûriel

In the bosom of the webway, the Crystal Sons of Asuryan gathered around their leader. No song did they sing, nor talk make. They were silent and grim. They were at peace for the moment and it weighed upon them. Such warriors have no desire for peace.

Isarion was agitated. He addressed the Hand, the Phoenix Lord Asurmen. ‘Great one, you must not risk yourself in such a manner. If you were to fall on a world like Ector, your body might prove irrecoverable. What then for the eldar, without the lord of all Phoenix Lords?’

‘You presume much to tell me my business, prince of no world,’ said Asurmen. ‘This war is just beginning. The die is cast, and forces move upon this system that have not been seen since the days of glory. Here a beacon of hope will be kindled. Would you rather I stand by so that I fall not, while in my stead our race shall? There are no sacrifices too great to make, Isarion. You of all people know this. Do not forget it.’

Isarion bowed his head. ‘It sorrows me to speak thusly, but I feel that I must. Why else did you bring me into your service, if I must remain as mute as your warriors?’

‘They speak, young one, if they must. They have no need, and you do. Your advice is noted. I appreciate your timely deployment of our webway portal. Without it your dire warning may have come to pass, but no more! I am the Hand of Asuryan, and master of my own destiny.’

‘Great one, I–’

‘Hush now, another comes. What she has to say has greater import than our discussion here.’

From some fold in time and space, the slender form of Shadowseer Sylandri Veilwalker stepped into view. Isarion blinked. Already his mind was convinced she had always been there, listening quietly. The wonder of her appearance diminished. Since the loss of his throne, he had experienced a surfeit of marvels.

Sylandri cocked her head, her face hidden behind her mirrored mask. Isarion wondered what beauty was trapped within the polished bowl. A part of him whispered unbidden in his mind, 'Only shadow.' A tremor of horror afflicted him.

'Something troubles you, Isarion the Dispossessed?' she asked sweetly.

'N-no, my lady,' he stammered.

Sylandri laughed, a tinkling noise as beautiful as the shattering of mirrors. 'You lie badly. Tell me, quaking princeling, did the one named Yoth survive the battle?'

'Yes,' Isarion managed.

She clapped gloved hands together. Silver bells rang, although she wore none. 'That is good! Many threads converge here. It is a delicate time for our people in the present and the future. Yoth has his part to play when time demands. That he lives bodes well.

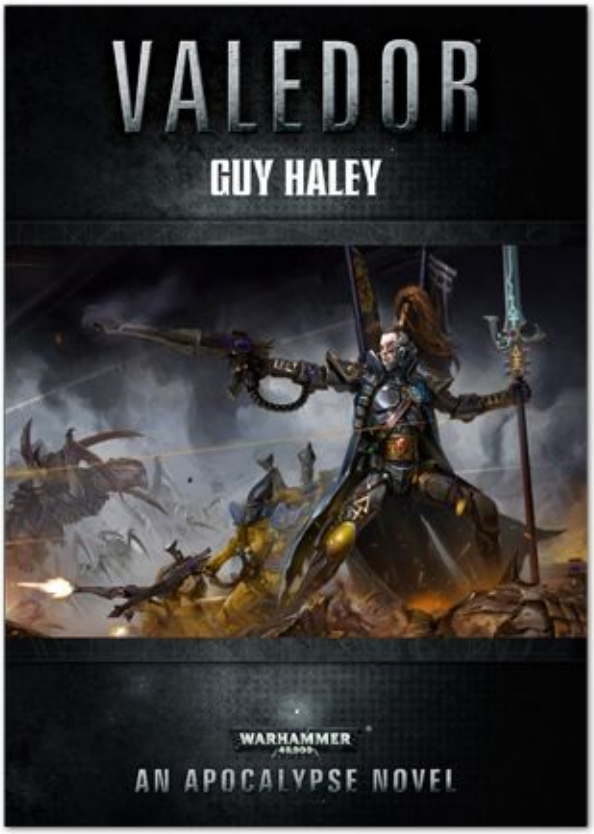
'But now, to matters imminent. All the pieces are set upon the board of Dûriel. It is time to make the play of ages. Should the initial stratagem succeed, the skein will quake and the restoration of our people go from unattainable dream to wild hope.

'The first move is complete,' she said. 'Now I say, to Dûriel without delay. The god of war calls, and he will not be denied.'

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

GUY HALEY is the author of the Space Marine Battles novel *Death of Integrity*, as well as *Baneblade, Valedor, The Last Days of Ector* and the Warhammer novel *Skarsnik*. He worked for many years on magazines, including Games Workshop's *White Dwarf*. Since 2009 he has been a wandering writer, working in both magazines and novels.

The story continues in *Valedor*



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