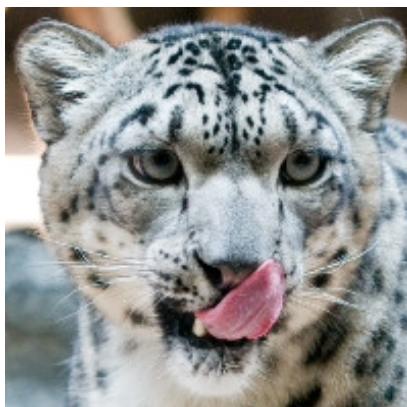


The Raven's Claw

An Assasinorum Short Story from "Let the Galaxy Burn"

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Created by



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'MY LORD GOVERNOR, I see shadows ahead. I see ravens wheeling, but beyond the shadows there is only darkness.' The man was nervous, wary.

'Are we in danger then, Rosarius? Are all our schemes to come to naught? Look again. Look again!' his master insisted.

'My lord, I- I cannot tell... Wait, there is something, the darkness is clearing... I see fire. No... a star, it is falling in the night... falling from the sky. What does it mean? No, no, wait... it is gone, I can see no more.'

Then try harder. We must not fail. Too much is at stake here. You've got to protect me until all this is over. This place is full of treachery and I trust no one. If anyone so much as thinks ill of me I want to know about it. We're taking a massive gamble here, and I want to know that it's going to pay off. Don't worry, when it does, I will remember who my loyal servants are. Keep looking - I must know when victory is close.'

Governor Torlin turned on his heels, and stalked over to the windows. He was a short man, but his gait was commanding, almost a swagger. He stood with both hands resting lightly on the sill, looking out over his capital. Far in the distance he could see flashes of light as the defence troops straggled to hold the city's perimeter. The triple-insulated glass dampened the sounds, but even from this distance, he could see distortions in his vision as the steady crump-crump of artillery caused the plexi-glass to vibrate. He couldn't tell whether the explosions were coming closer, but he knew it couldn't be long before the walls were overrun and the city brought to its knees. He started to stroke the lines of medals on the chest of his gaudy dress uniform, as he always did when he was lost in thought.

Rosarius, a thin, sallow man dressed in dark robes, stared at his back. His milk white eyes, blind since his days at the Adeptus Astra Telepathica, gazed unseeing into the void. He could hear the governor's breathing, sense his faint odour of tension and fear, feel the intense electrical activity of his brain. He could almost tell what he looked like, so well did he know his aura, but he ignored these false clues to reality, and concentrated instead on the images he could see with his inner eye. Far beyond the window, he could feel the desperation of the Guardsmen holding the walls, feel the determination of the attackers, their mad lust for battle as they threw themselves against the

defenders. He sent out fingers of thought, searching for pathways to the future, like tendrils, snaking their way into possibility. He searched for clues to potential outcomes, the easiest way to victory, the conclusion of their plans. He shook his head in frustration - whichever way he looked, all he could see was darkness, and stars falling from the sky.

In the distance, high in the sky, a flash of light amidst the orange and red bursts of plasma and high explosive caught the governor's attention. Sunlight on metal, moving fast. He followed the object downwards, until it disappeared from view, leaving a thin trail of scorched air behind it from its white hot entry shield.

THE DROPSHIP fell out of the sky like a burning comet. Inside the hold, a hundred men struggled to stay upright, holding tightly onto the steel cords that held them fast against the wall. The ship rocked as anti-aircraft fire exploded like deadly orange flowers around it and servo motors struggled to keep the ship upright against the buffeting gale of explosions and shock waves.

Altitude ten thousand feet and counting. The voice was metallic and harsh.

Vero stood still, his feet apart, bracing himself against the wall, willing his mind to slow, to calm down. Around him men groaned as the rapid descent caused their ears to bleed and their senses to spin. His head felt groggy and painful from the changes in pressure caused by their fall. It was dark, the only light a dirty red glow from the power room. The heat was almost tropical and the air was thick with sulphurous fumes from the badly regulated engines.

Altitude five thousand and counting.

An explosion thumped the outer shell of the ship with a giant's fist and span it around violently like a cork in a whirlpool. Vero could hear bones snapping as bodies jerked against the cables holding them to the walls. The dim red lighting flickered twice, then seemed to stabilise itself.

Altitude two thousand and...

The ship hit the broken ground with a jolt that forced the pneumatic shock absorbers to groan and wheeze like an asthmatic old man. Vero felt

as if his spine was being pushed up through the top of his skull. His muscles automatically reacted to the sudden feeling of heaviness as the planet's gravity took over abruptly from the weightlessness of freefall.

He moved his arm and the bindings that bound him fast to the wall automatically increased resistance around his wrist, limiting his movements. His wrists were chafed raw where the tight steel bonds had cut into his flesh, and his body ached from sitting motionless, thrown around by the violently descending craft.

It had seemed like hours since he had woken, an eternity in the dark, hearing the engines rumble. Time in his own head had lost meaning and focus, he felt confused and disorientated. His head felt heavy, full of strange images that came unbidden in the near-darkness. His memory was restless. He couldn't remember being captured, and he couldn't think of any reason why he should be bound up in this manner. He struggled to remember how he had come to be here, chained up in a plummeting ship heading only Emperor knew where.

The first thing he remembered was waking up confused, unable to even remember his own name, but he had seen a single glistening word tattooed on his forearm - Vero - and assumed that that was his name. Looking around now at the similarly tattooed men around him, he felt that his guess was correct. Some of the men seemed to know each other and as they woke up, greeted each other with rueful smiles and shaking heads. A low buzz of conversation started up in parts of the hold, others were silent. He'd questioned a couple of them, but they hadn't known who he was. He didn't recognise his clothes, nondescript khaki fatigues, and even his own body looked strangely unfamiliar. His thick-set hands were scarred across the knuckles, but his legs looked strong and sturdy through the rough cloth. But he did not know them as his own.

THE FAR WALL cracked open, harsh white light spilling across the men. A shadow fell in front of the door, and a figure appeared. The newcomer was hefty and grizzled. His dull brown Imperial Guard uniform was torn and a dirty bandage covered most of his head. He pressed a button on his belt unit and the steel bonds holding the prisoners against the wall relaxed. The cuffs opened, allowing them to rub life back into their limbs. The man moved into the hold and aimed his electro-prod at the nearest captive, lying recumbent on the floor. The man's body jerked as the electrode touched his torso, but he didn't

get up. Whatever fate awaited them on this planet, some, at least, had been mercifully spared.

'Come on, you pigs, move it! Out, out, out!' the burly man shouted at them, his accent harsh. Other guards appeared, brandishing weapons at the men. Slowly, a ragged line started to form. Vero, struggling to get up through the burning cramp in his legs, found himself beside a huge bear of a man, stripped to the waist, fluorescent tattoos glistening on his

thickly muscled neck and arms. Vero stumbled as he approached the ship's ramp, and the man caught his arm, preventing him from falling. He grinned at Vero, though much of his mouth was hidden behind a shaggy, ginger-brown beard. Almost concealed beneath the thick hairs on his arms, Vero could read the word 'Whelan', and he nodded his thanks.

'It's the sedatives they give you for the journey.' Whelan muttered to him quickly. His voice was deep, almost a growl. 'They make you a bit unsteady on your feet, and that's also probably why you don't remember anything. Trust me, I've seen it before. You can't remember anything now, but it'll come back.'

Vero didn't have time to ask where Whelan had seen it before. The big man seemed to know a lot more about what was going on than Vero himself did.

The faint light became much brighter, causing Vero to shield his eyes from the glare. He realised that it was only weak sunlight, but it seemed strong to him after so much time locked in the darkness of the hull. The sky was a watery grey, and a light drizzle was falling, quickly wetting Vero's dark hair through. For a moment it was quiet. A soft breeze blew, and it felt like the breath of heaven. Vero stretched, flexing his muscles where the cruel bindings had cut into his flesh. He winced as the raw weals opened again, the fresh wounds livid on his olive skin. Despite the inactivity of the trip, he still felt strong and fit. Behind him, the dropship sat on the pitted ground like a large black beetle, towering over the people standing underneath, sheltering from the rain beneath its black armoured carapace.

Then the shelling started again.

The men all ran from the cover of the dropship, the crashing of shells drowning out the sounds of their feet. Vero felt as if he was running in a

vacuum. He could not feel his legs, cramped as they were from the journey, his ears deafened by the pounding of the incoming shells. The guards were herding them towards a low building built from crude concrete. Vero and Whelan stopped in front of it, with the rest of the prisoners, shifting their feet to try and restore circulation.

Whelan.' Vero began, looking around him at the motley assortment of soldiers, 'where in hell are we? And what am I doing here? Do you know me?'

The larger man looked pointedly at the tattoo on Vero's arm.

Vero, is it? Well, I don't know you, but you've answered your own question.' He looked grim. We are in hell. It doesn't matter a damn what planet we're on. All you need to know is that you're part of the Fourteenth Esine penal battalion. The "Holy Fourteenth", they call us, but the Emperor alone knows why. Are you telling me that you really don't remember anything at all? You don't even remember how you came to be on the penal ship in the first place?'

Vero shook his head. A couple of other men strode over to where they were talking. Whelan smiled, the gap-toothed grin splitting his shaggy beard in two.

"Well, look who we have here! Which sorry rock did you two crawl out from under? I didn't see you on the ship when I was cruelly shaken out of my beauty sleep.' Whelan greeted the newcomers by knocking his knuckles against theirs.

Vero.' Whelan continued, still smiling. 'Let me introduce you to a couple of the dumbest dirtbags around. This here is Oban. In his time he's been done for assaulting a senior officer, second-grade treason, heresy... Oh.' he added at a scowl from Oban, 'make that reformed heresy - this guy's now one straight up, down the line catechismic fellow.'

"That's right.' Oban affirmed, nodding his head vigorously. He was a sharp-featured man, with a broken nose that seemed almost too big for his face. Oban held out his clenched fist chest high to Vero, and after a second, Vero knocked his own knuckles against it. Oban smiled. He looked like he was about to say something, but Whelan interrupted him.

'Me and Oban are old hands here. How many tours we done now, Oban? Six all told I think, including this one.'

Oban sucked in his breath. 'Let's call it five, Whelan. We'll make it six when we're off this dustbowl in one piece. Emperor willing.'

'And this here is Creid.' Whelan pointed at the second man, a tall, rangy figure in battered fatigues, who grinned at Vero from behind a pair of blast goggles. 'I don't even know where to start with this guy. You name it, he'd done it. Law of averages says he should be dead, the amount of tours this guy's had to do. But some people are just born lucky, I guess. Eh, Creid?'

You said it, brother.' Creid pulled his goggles up onto his forehead to peer at Vero. Creid's right eye had gone, and a crude bio-implant glittered coldly in the socket. Creid noticed Vero's somewhat startled look, but did not seem to take offence. 'Some crazy smuggler took my first eye during the battle for Sonitan VII - stray blaster shot.' Creid volunteered. The docs said I was lucky it wasn't my whole head that got blown away, but they patched me up good and proper. Said it was my due reward for bravery.' He shook his head at the memory.

'Silence!'

A path suddenly appeared through the throng for the man who spoke. He swaggered through the crowd of men, a bulky plasma pistol banging against his lean thigh as he moved. A hush fell on the group as he turned to face them.

'I am Commander Bartok, and I am senior officer here. I will be commanding you for this little fracas.'

The officer was young, probably less than twenty - this was most likely his first command. Despite his strong words and careful swaggering walk,

he looked inexperienced and nervous. He was tall and slim, boyish even. Neat sandy hair was brushed down smartly over a broad forehead.

Whelan muttered something about 'Damned rookies!' under his breath, and Vero knew just what he was thinking.

'OK, you lot, this is the end of your journey,' Bartok continued in a voice plainly unused to being raised. 'Where you are doesn't matter, but I'll tell

you why you're here. This Imperial outpost is under attack, and we're still waiting for reinforcements. In the meantime, the Imperium has seen fit to send you lot to help us, and empty its prison ships at the same time.' He stroked his officer's insignia as he spoke, as if to reassure himself of his authority amongst so many men. 'I'll be blunt. I don't like penal battalions - you're all scum as far as I'm concerned - but I don't have any choice in the matter. You're here and you're going to fight.'

Vero looked around. There were more men than he could easily count. Many of them were prisoners such as himself, but still more were Imperial Guardsmen, dressed in standard grey uniforms, with the symbol of a purple glove on their armbands. A purple glove... it meant nothing to Vero; he had no idea which planet he was on, let alone which unit he was meant to be fighting with. The officer continued.

'Listen up! Our job is to defend the perimeter. And don't think of trying to escape - there's nowhere to go. If the enemy catches you, they'll kill you - and if I catch you, you'll wish they had killed you. The governor's psyker himself has foreseen victory for us, and he's the best telepath in this system - nothing gets past him, so we have got nothing to worry about.'

Men passed through the group, distributing lasguns and combat knives. Vero took the weapons he was given, turning the unfamiliar shapes over in his hands. The lasgun's metal and plastic felt strange, but as he turned the butt and grasped the handle, his hands slid into position, seemingly of their own volition, and his finger caressed the trigger. It just felt right somehow. Vero shifted his weight around, rocking gently on the balls of his feet until he felt totally comfortable toting the weapon. He checked what he somehow knew was the power gauge, and flicked the safety catch on and off, noting everything. Whelan glanced at him curiously.

'Used one of these before?' he asked.

'I don't know... I don't think so.'

'You seem to know what to do,' the other man said with a shrug.

Vero looked down at his hands. He felt his muscles heave, and as he looked at his fist, he saw the tendons stretch and become hard. His knuckles, when he touched them, were like steel. He felt a surge of adrenaline pump through him and strength flood through his body. Strange thoughts filled his head. Marble corridors, skies bright with

stars, the low hum of machinery. He stood stock still, trying to latch onto the thoughts, but they fluttered away from him, dark as ravens' wings.

'Right, you sorry lot, lock and load, and let's go and get ourselves some action!' Bartok was yelling. 'You four.' he finished, pointing at Whelan's little group, 'you're with me. You.' he said to Oban, 'you're comms. Let's move out!' One of the Imperial Guardsmen handed Oban a comms-unit, and he hefted it onto his back without complaint.

Whelan scratched his beard thoughtfully, and looked at Vero. 'Come on, we'd better shift our butts, or else we're gonna get a bolt in the back of the neck for lack of zeal. I reckon that kid commander's dying to take a pop at somebody, and if we're in the way we're as likely to get it as anyone else. These sort of people are famous for fragging their own side as often as the enemy's. Stick with us. As I said, this is my sixth penal tour of duty. I've survived so far, even been commended for valour once. Stay close and you'll get through alright.'

Vero didn't seem so sure, but the feel of the weapon in his hands, at least, was reassuring. They set off behind Bartok, jogging alongside the other prisoners from the dropship, heading for where the sounds of battle were loudest.

'ROSARIUS, YOU FOOL, are you a telepath or are you not? Have you served me so faithfully for so long, only to have your powers fade at the moment when I need them most? What is the use of shadowy images, when what I need are facts!' Torlin's voice could not disguise his furious rage. He swept a pile of papers off his enormous desk, sending them fluttering around the chamber.

'My lord, for a second I saw something, but then it was gone. This darkness troubles me more than I can say. For a moment, I saw the raven again, then stars, marble halls. And now nothing. I am as blind now in the ether as I am in your world.'

'You fool, Rosarius, there is nothing there for my victory is certain. I don't need for you to start getting the jitters now. You're an old man; maybe you should leave the predictions of war to me. We go on.'

'My lord, I beg you...'

VERO'S UNIT ARRIVED at the perimeter defences to find themselves in the midst of a ferocious firelight. Hundreds of men were crammed

into makeshift concrete battlements and the roofs of bunkers, and beyond these positions, Vero saw a sea of rubble where weeks of artillery bombardment had shattered the outer edges of the city. The air buzzed with laser fire and the roar of heavy weapons. The sounds of battle raged in his ears. He felt strong.

For the first time he could see the enemy up close. As far as he could tell, they were human like him, and from the number of casualties on this side of the wall, well armed. As they moved into position, a man he didn't know, standing right next to Oban, was hit by enemy auto-cannon fire.

One moment he was firing into the distance, the next there was a roar and tatters of the man's flesh covered them. Vero wiped the mess from his face, tasting the metallic tang of blood on his tongue. He followed Whe-lan's example and ducked down behind the crenellated walls. The pair of them began firing out across the ruins.

Across this nightmare landscape, Vero could see hundreds of bodies, scattered and broken, limbs cut from bodies by powerful laser fire or ripped apart by the relentless artillery. The ground shook every time another shell landed, and it seemed as if the corpses were dancing on the ground, their arms and legs jerking in time to the exploding shells.

The stones before them shook. Looking down, Vero saw gloved fingers clutch the stone of the parapet in front of him, and before he could react, the largest man he had ever seen swung over the wall. Dressed from head to toe in dull grey battle armour, he swung a huge chain-axe at Vero's unprotected head. Vero heard the rasping of the axe's teeth chewing the air as it swung towards him. Acting from pure instinct, he jumped backwards and sideways, putting space between himself and his assailant. The axe missed Vero's head, but the whirring blade shattered the barrel of his lasgun. Splinters of hot metal flew in all directions. One hit Vero's forehead, and blood welled into his eye, making him blink. Vero dropped his useless weapon, and pulled his combat knife from its boot sheath. He dropped into a crouch, balancing his weight on the balls of his feet. Somewhere deep inside his own mind, Vero found he was watching himself with a mixture of admiration and alarm.

Trying to concentrate, he ducked under the next swing and threw himself at the enemy, inside the arc of the chain-axe. He could smell stale sweat and blood, but as his opponent staggered back, Vero forced the steel point of his knife in towards the man's chest and pushed hard, shattering ribs and severing muscle.

As he plunged the ice-tempered blade deep into his opponent's chest, Vero felt something take him over. Some savage spirit possessed him and he twisted the blade, feeling it bite into soft tissue, then brought his knee up to push himself away from the falling body, pulling the knife with him. The man gasped and died in front of him on the broken ground, his madly staring eyes clouding over as blood gouted from the wound in his shattered ribcage.

Vero staggered back as sensations flooded through him. He didn't remember ever having learnt to use a combat knife, yet at the precise moment the crazed man had leapt at him, he had felt something take him over, some instinct, some training, that had enabled him to pull the knife from his boot, twist it in his hand and plunge it fatally into the chest of his opponent.

He opened his mouth and yelled, a guttural howl of triumph - and he felt a sudden flash of memory illuminate his mind. He straggled to hold

on to it, but it slipped away like a sump-eel, slithering away from his conscious will, leaving him none the wiser. But for a second, he had seen in his mind's eye the image of stars burning behind a huge glass window, heard the sound of feet rustling on polished stone, and a smell like... like something he couldn't put his finger on. Then it was gone and the moment passed.

He sensed movement to his left and wheeled around, snatching up his dead assailant's chain-axe. A soldier had vaulted the parapet, a knife gripped between broken teeth as he used one hand to pull himself up and over the concrete wall. In the other he waved a battered bolt pistol. The man was covered in scars, and his hair stuck up in tufts all over his head. They looked at each other for less than a heartbeat... then Vero clenched the lever on the weapon's handle, and the chain-axe snarled into life. He lunged, and there was a deafening scream as his opponent fell gasping into the mud, arm severed at the shoulder.

Suddenly, as if at a signal, the walls before them were being scaled by tens of warriors, swarming over the parapet. Shocked, Vero jumped back, and looked around for his companions. He saw Whelan laying down a withering blanket of las fire, as Creid and Oban lobbed frag grenades that Commander Bartok was tossing over to them from the bottom of the wall, forming a human chain of destruction.

And then Vero was fighting for his life, swamped by attackers, carried along by the press of enemy bodies. He lost sight of his comrades for a few moments as he swung his stolen chain-axe in a whirling figure of eight before hurling it at the closest foe, cleaving his skull in two. He picked up a laspistol from a fallen Guardsman, quickly checking the power cell, and cleared himself some breathing space. Grabbing Whelan's shoulder, he shouted above the din.

'Where's Bartok?'

'Gone!' came the answer in a growl.

'Dead?'

'No chance. Run off!' Whelan looked pale, obviously sure that his sixth tour was turning into his last.

Vero assessed the situation. 'Fall back!' he shouted at the others. They looked at him suddenly, and he was momentarily confused, unsure where the sudden note of command in his voice had come from. They began to retreat, using the rained walls as cover. Enemy artillery shells sailed over their heads in the direction of the city, the eerie whistle making the men shudder. Vero grabbed Creid by the shoulder, as he lobbed his final grenades.

'Come on!' he shouted, pulling the man away, 'fall back, follow me.'

They did so, suddenly surrounded by fleeing Guardsmen, making for the cover of the buildings, fiery laser shots stabbing the darkness behind them. Vero lost sight of Creid in the confusion, swept away in

the general rout, and he prayed silently that he would escape with his life.

There was a roaring noise next to them and Oban stumbled, his legs seeming to give way under him.

Whelan, help me!' Vero shouted, slipping on the blood-slick ground. The larger man grabbed Oban's arms and helped Vero drag him towards a ruined building nearby. They may all be dead men, with no one to bury them after this debacle was over, but Oban was a comrade-in-arms; besides, he had the comms-unit, and there was no way any of them were going to get out of this mess alive if they lost all contact with command.

They made it through a burnt doorway that led into some sort of warehouse. Molten plastic fell from the ceiling in droplets of lethal rain. Whelan and Vero put Oban down and leant against the wall, panting from both fear and exhaustion.

Vero ran one hand through his hair as Whelan knelt to examine Oban. When Whelan stood up again there was blood on his hands, and a look of concern on his bearded face.

'What's the score?' Vero asked warily.

'Still hanging in there, but I don't think he's gonna last much longer. Both legs are shattered, and he's losing blood faster than I could hope to stop it. I'm surprised he's got this far.' Whelan looked around, eyes full of panic. 'What the hell are we going to do now?'

Vero shook his head. He hefted up Oban's comm-unit, but the cheaply mass-produced unit was broken, the casing cracked and scored by the explosion. He threw it down in disgust and sat down wearily on a slab of rubble. The sound of shellfire was still in his ears. He rubbed his sore eyes, feeling the sting as acrid smoke was rubbed into them from his face. A water bottle lay half-hidden by rubble, no doubt dropped by a fleeing soldier. Vero sniffed the contents cautiously and then swigged at the brackish water inside. He tried to remember the thought that had entered his head as he killed the enemy soldier, but it was gone for good. He cursed. His memory was clear since coming to this planet, but as for what had gone before - nothing. He closed his eyes and tried to retrace his steps since arriving, searching for some clue as to who he was and what he was doing.

In his mind's eye, he saw movement: a tracked vehicle making its way towards them. Could it be safety, or the enemy? He couldn't tell, the image was unclear. He felt as if something was happening just beyond his reach.

'What is it?' Whelan asked him, looking concerned. 'Can you hear something? What's happening?'

In the corner of the room, Oban moaned, and blood ran in streams from his mouth and nose, but Vero hardly noticed. He could hear the sound of a raven cawing. He saw a face swimming in front of his eyes.

Grizzled grey hair, arrogant, aristocratic eyes, some sort of uniform, medals. He remembered how his strength had returned so quickly after landing on the planet, despite his weakness on the ship. He remembered how he had mastered the weapons, his instinctive fighting when attacked at the wall. He remembered the hardening of the tendons in his hands and his fingers twitched. And then, nothing. His mind went blank, and all he could see was the ruined building they were hiding in, and Whelan kneeling next to Oban.

Whelan.' he said in a thick, pleading voice. 'Something's happening to me.'

'MY LORD GOVERNOR, the situation is getting too dangerous. For a second I almost saw something, but now I can see no outcome for our strategy except destruction. We must escape, and soon.'

'But the rebels are so close, how can we fail? Everything is proceeding exactly as we planned it. What can go wrong?'

'My lord, even in a psychic darkness, I can usually see something, some glimmer of intent, of the future. Here I can see nothing.' Rosarius's voice was cracked with strain. 'It is true that my powers cannot see danger ahead of us, but that is why I have cause for worry. I have never had my second sight so blinded. There are futures hovering on the edge of my vision, but there is a cloud, like ink in water, confusing, blocking everything. If I could foresee our doom, that at least, would allow me to plot a course away from that outcome. But there is nothing.'

'Then we will leave for the bunker. It will be safer there. Perhaps I was foolish returning to the city, but I wanted to be there to watch as the city fell.'

Rosarius shook his head at his master's egocentricity. Pressing a button on the governor's barren desk, he spoke into the comm-link.

'Sergeant, prepare the governor's personal transport. We'll be there in a few minutes.' As the two of them turned to leave, Rosarius reflected, not for the first time, on the limits of his own psychic powers in not forewarning him of the ill-luck of his appointment as personal advisor to Torlin.

Leaving the ornate double doors standing open, they clattered down the grand staircase, not trusting the lift. Lights flickered as the generator straggled to cope with the demands of the power shields protecting the governor's official residence.

Under the palace, the governor's personal liveried Lemman Russ armoured personnel carrier was belching black smoke, causing Rosarius to wheeze. Torlin prayed that the inefficiencies of his governorship hadn't extended as far as his own personal transport, and that the mechanics had added the extra side armour as he had demanded. His bodyguard, thirty hand-picked soldiers of impeccable loyalties, snapped

to attention as he appeared. He nodded at them curtly and waved a vague salute. While the governor and Rosarius climbed into the Russ, strapping themselves into the seats, the bodyguard piled into two Rhinos. The driver sealed the hatch behind them. To Rosarius it sounded like the closing of a coffin.

The driver gunned the engine, and they lurched forward, nearly jolting Governor Torlin's head from his shoulders. 'For pity's sake.' he growled at the driver, 'be more careful. I want to get out of here alive.'

The Russ, with its escort of Rhinos, drove slowly through the burning city, slowing often to manoeuvre around ruined buildings and shell-pocked roads. The light outside was made eerie by the many magnesium flares sent up by the spotters, but the sound of small arms fire had faded. The governor didn't know whether mis was a good sign or not. Even through the vehicle's filters, he could smell the smoke from the burning buildings, the stench of corrosive chemicals, burning plastic, and, faintly, the odour of charred flesh as the victorious rebels lit their celebration pyres. His city was deserted, its citizens long fled. Torlin listened with half an ear to the sound coming from the comm-link with their escort, and chewed his nails thoughtfully. Rosarius was slumped against his seat, seemingly lost inside his robes.

'Fury One, we have snipers point two zero zero. Over.'

'Fury Two, I see them.'

They could hear the ricochet of shells bouncing around the armoured hide of the APC, and then the returning rattle of bolter fire.

'Snipers neutralised.'

'Fury Base, we are on our way, ETA thirteen minutes and counting. Over.'

'Receiving, we are awaiting your arrival. Keep us updated. Over and out.'

Suddenly, Rosarius sprang bolt upright, his eyes crazy with fear. 'My lord!' he exclaimed. 'I see fire, fire from the sky!'

The comm-link from the lead Rhino screamed: 'Incoming, incom-'

The explosion drowned out the rest of the voice.

THE BLAST ROCKED the ruined building where the two survivors were holed up, dislodging great chunks of plaster and rubble from the ceiling. Vero crept towards the ruined window, keeping his head back for fear of sniper fire. Peering across the wrecked boulevard he saw the smoking ruin of a tracked armoured vehicle, fire raging from its engine. Across from it, another similar vehicle had been completely buried in rubble from a building hit by the missiles. Between the two was a battle tank, lying on its side, the upper track still revolving, the tread shattered. The tank's massive lascannon drooped, useless, its barrel bent beyond repair. Sparks flickered across the undercarriage and oily black liquid leaked from the cracked carapace.

The liquid slowly crept its way towards the sparking underside and Vero knew whoever was inside had only moments before the vehicle went up in flames.

'Cover me.' he found himself shouting at a startled Whelan. Vaulting from the window, Vero ran across the open ground, lasgun fire from snipers in the rooftops in the next block following him, spitting up shards of rock behind his feet, and the returning fire from Whelan flickering around his ears.

He leapt onto the moving track, using its motion to propel himself over the stricken tank and into cover. Bracing his boots against the wet

earth, he unsheathed his knife, wedging the point of the blade into the crack between the top of the vehicle and the access hatch. He leaned on the blade, praying it wouldn't break, but the adamantine tip held strong. With a groan of metal, the hatch opened, belching a cloud of hot smoke into the night air. Blinking against the fumes, he peered into the shattered interior.

Slumped against the control was the driver, but he could see immediately that he was beyond help: a supporting strut from the chassis had driven deep into his chest. The gunner was moaning gently, but the blood bubbling from his mouth was arterial red, bright oxygenated blood; he would not last more than a few minutes.

In the darkness beyond he saw a figure, pinned to the floor by a broken stanchion of metal from the armoured walls of the vehicle. He looked closely. Grey hair, aristocratic eyes, the medals on his chest. He'd seen this man before.

Suddenly memory exploded inside his head like the heart of a star collapsing under its own weight.

HE WAS SITTING at the end of a low bier in a hall of highly polished marble. In front of him, a man dressed in dark robes was reading from a large, leather-bound book. Around them both were banks of humming machinery, dim green screens which flickered with images. He could hear the soft whisper of leather slippers on polished stone. Tech-priests moved gently through the aisles between the rows of ancient machines, adjusting, taking readings, reciting prayers.

The humming became louder. Gentle hands were placed upon his shoulders, easing him back so that he was lying flat on a warm, padded bench. Above him was a large monitor, and on it he could see the face of a robed man. His face was aged but unlined. The man spoke and his voice, calm and measured, seemed to bypass his ears and speak directly into his brain.

Averius, Callidus assassin, relax. Be still and relax.'

The procedure was carefully explained to him. 'It's quite simple, I assure you. A man's mind is made up of two parts. The first part includes memory, your personality, thoughts that are unique to you. Then there is the part which controls your day to day functions, your knowledge of weapons, infiltration, poisons, everything that enables you to function as an assassin, as

well as your animal instincts, the fight or flight, your powerful instinct for survival. All we are going to do is to temporarily erase the first part, allowing you to get past the normal psychic screening with which the ever-paranoid Governor Torlin surrounds himself. You will have no recollection of who you are, or what your mission is, so his sanctioned psyker will have no forewarning of you until it's too late. You are Averius, and so this mission has the code-name Vero.'

A helmet, humming with power, moved down over his head, covering his eyes. He saw faces, scenes of battle, carnage, the rage of guns, and then a face framed by grey hair, eyes full of ambition and a palpable thirst for power. His quarry: Governor Torlin. Images from his own life, past terminations, death throes, passed before his eyes, spooling backwards, and then there was only darkness.

THE VERY NEXT thing he knew he was in a metal comet, falling to earth, his arms bound tightly behind him. Now everything was clear. He was Averius, Callidus assassin - and he had found his quarry.

Next to the governor, a terrified-looking elderly man dressed in dark robes looked at him. He muttered softly to himself. Averius leaned over to hear him better.

You... you are the raven?' the psyker croaked. Why did I not see you? Why could I not read your mind? Why could I not predict your coming?'

Blood trickled from his nose, his breath coming in gasps. The assassin raised his fist.

'Be silent, psyker,' he spat, and his hands cut off the old man's questions.

Averius pulled roughly at Torlin, ignoring the man's moans as the broken metal pinning him to the Russ tore through his flesh. He pulled him out of the vehicle, and dragged him to the building. He felt a wave of heat, as the leaking fuel flooded one of the sparking circuits, and the tank exploded in a ball of molten metal and plastic.

Whelan was waiting for him back in the ruined building, covering his return from the shelter of the shattered window.

Vero, who is it?' he asked as the assassin stalked back into their crude shelter and flung his prize roughly onto the ground. When there was no

answer, Whelan grabbed his upper arm and swung Averius round to face him.

Vero, what is it?' he asked, but the assassin looked at him blankly. All previous thoughts of comradeship were erased from the assassin's mind by the full knowledge of his mission.

You are in my way,' he stated simply. He swung his hand out almost lazily and Whelan was sent flying, knocked unconscious by the force of the blow. The assassin gazed dispassionately at the prone body of his comrade, a look of surprise etched onto the man's unconscious face.

The assassin's fingers began to twitch and shake painfully. He looked down in alarm at the fingertips. He was suddenly wracked with pain, his whole

body seeming to lift up and shake itself from deep inside. Averius could feel the polymorphine flowing through his system, and his body contorted as if it was trying to throw off its skin. He felt himself grow taller, broadening out, and from his fingertips he felt a pricking as finely honed steel needles slid out from under his fingernails, razor-sharp and slick with toxic fluids. At last he was complete: the tools of his trade, his raven's daw, hidden to prevent discovery of his mission until he had found his prey.

The governor croaked from behind him as he came to. The assassin picked up the water botde from where it had been lying amidst the rubble on the floor, holding the man's head up to allow him to take a sip of water. Averius wanted his quarry to be able to answer his accuser.

'My lord,' the assassin began, as he always did. 'I come at the express order of the Officio Assassinorum.'

The governor started into full awareness: his eyes focused, then opened wide with panic. The raven,' he croaked. His voice was wild, delirious.

Averius slapped him, lightly, on one ash-grey cheek.

Wake up. Concentrate. I come to give you the Emperor's absolution.'

'What do you mean? I have done nothing, I have no need of absolution.' Torlin blustered.

The assassin ignored him. 'I have come to bring justice to this planet. You have been watched. Do you think your lapdog telepath could protect you from justice. He knew your thoughts, and his knowledge shone like a beacon to the Adeptus Astra Telepathica. Did you think treachery like yours could be hidden away?'

The governor was beginning to lose himself to utter panic. The assassin could see sweat starting to bead on the man's ashen forehead. He knew he was a dead man. But confession could at least bring a clean death. Absolution would be swift. The assassin pressed his fingers to the governor's temples and concentrated his thoughts.

You thought that you could encourage these rebels, make it possible for them to destroy the Emperor's forces stationed here on your little world.' Averius could barely keep the scorn from his voice. Then when they were victorious, you thought you would take your place at their head. Your ambition thought to lead an army across the galaxy, carve out your own empire.'

The governor gazed into the assassin's eyes, and he could see the fires of his betrayal burning. His imagination spiralled out into the vast distance of space. Torlin's mind became full of an unshakeable image: his Emperor and erstwhile master seated on the Eternal Throne of Terra. His heart ached as the assassin forced him to confront his betrayal.

'But why should you not be annihilated along with the rest of your rebellion?' Averius pressed on. 'Death is the easy part. Anyone can die - every day countless thousands die on countless thousands of worlds. As a human being, you are less than nothing. We could have launched a strike from space, bombed your palace, destroyed you in an instant. You would have

died without ever knowing why. But as a heretic you are never beneath our notice, and every heretic who dies unrepentant is a failure of orthodoxy. I am here to accept your repentance.'

In the assassin's eyes, Torlin saw the Emperor hold out his hand towards him, saw the hand getting bigger and bigger until it threatened to engulf him. As he watched, it withered, became a claw, a raven's claw, and then fell to dust.

You have sinned most grievously against the Emperor, and I am here as his judge and executioner. You will die, but you must die repenting your faults.'

The governor began to weep, great welling tears.

'I repent, I repent.' he wept over and over. Eventually his voice fell to a whisper. 'Forgive me.'

The assassin flexed his fingers, feeling the sharp needles fill with toxins from the bio-engineered pump inside his hand. He turned to the craven governor.

Torlin, Imperial Governor of Tadema's World, you have sinned against the Emperor. I accept your repentance and grant you the Emperor's mercy'

He held the governor's head still with one hand, cradling it as one would a child's, and pressed the fingers of the other against the man's face. The needles slid through the soft flesh of the governor's eyes, piercing nerves and tissue, passing the deadly poison into the man's brain. After a while, the hand holding him up opened and Governor Torlin fell lifeless to the floor.

Absolved.

The assassin stroked his hand over the penal tattoo on his forearm. The letters morphed gently into arcane runes, and he knew that they would transmit a signal through the ether to the Callidus temple. Far off in space, the Imperial reinforcements, held back until his crucial mission was completed, would swing into action and White Scar Space Marines would start dropping onto the planet. His mission was over, and he could now return for debriefing.

Pressing his thumb against the governor's forehead, he activated a bio-implant buried deep within his hand. He felt a brief flare of heat, as if he was passing his hand over a lit candle. When he removed the thumb, a mark was burned into the cold skin of the man's head. The stylised mark of a bird.

A raven.