



The Long War

by Andy Hoare

Ferrous Ironclaw, warsmith of the Iron Warriors Traitor Legion, snarled in bitter derision as the smoke parted to reveal the battlefield across which his grand company would assault the enemy fortress. He barely noticed the sharp crunch of scattered bones beneath his tread, or the hot wind, which carried the stench of propellant, death and the rank fear of the lackeys of the Emperor who cowered behind the towering walls barely a kilometre ahead.

‘In the name of Perturabo,’ Ironclaw growled into the vox-pickup mounted in his Terminator armour’s collar, his voice a blasphemous fusion of the machine and the organic, ‘unleash the fires of damnation.’

There was a brief pause during which stray autocannon rounds whipped in across the battlefield to burst ineffectually against the Iron Warriors’ fieldworks. Muzzle flares blinked along the length of the curtain wall, individual las-rounds whip-cracking overhead, their energy all but dissipated by the dense particulates obscuring much of the killing ground.

Then, a deep tremor grumbled through the cratered, bone-wreathed ground, and the warsmith's mouth twisted at one corner as something like anticipation bloomed inside him. The tremor grew to a roar, and in an instant the air was split by a sonic boom that made even the nearby Traitor Marines pause in awe.

A barrage of super-heavy munitions thundered through the tortured skies of Bellum Colonia, parting thick banks of black smoke and scattering the debris littering the ground below with their turbulent wake. Ironclaw had paid his apostate Mechanicus allies handsomely for their aid in breaching the Bastion Primus, scouring an entire subsector for the price the fallen tech-priests had demanded in return for fielding their terrible siege engines. The soul-foundries of their daemon forge-world would blaze for decades to come as a result.

Seconds later, the barrage struck. The Bastion Primus had been constructed in millennia long passed by the finest of the Imperium's siege masons, yet no stronghold in the entire galaxy was beyond the capability of the Iron Warriors to breach. None except one – a flash of contempt seared through Ironclaw's mind – but that would come, one day, at the conclusion of the Long War.

Nucleonic fires burst into being as the warheads obliterated themselves upon striking the invisible void shields thrown up to protect the bastion. But Ferrous Ironclaw knew the science of siegecraft as others knew the wielding of the blade or the application of ballistics. The barrage was staggered, the first warheads overloading the voids. The shield projectors would be forced to shut down to isolate the void generators from the awesome feedback of such an overpowering strike, but Ironclaw knew they would never be fired again.

When the void shields collapsed, the entire battlefield was pounded by a wave of overpressure that sucked the oxygen from the lungs of scores of defenders, blinded others and exploded the eardrums of those foolish enough to stand unprotected before the might of the Iron Warriors. Most would not live long enough to regret their incaution, however, for with the void shields down the main payload was about to be delivered.

A dozen super-heavy siege shells smashed into the black walls of the Bastion Primus, the white fusion fires igniting a new sun that rivalled that shining wanly down through the smoke-wreathed skies. Though they

blazed for but a fraction of a second, these miniature stellar cores unleashed such fearsome energies that a vast stretch of the curtain wall was reduced to atoms, as the raw stuff of ceramite, plasteel and flesh fuelled the nucleonic fires. Black smoke mushroomed upwards, and soon the entire bastion was obscured from the warsmith's view. Only the bass roar of the dwindling fusion reaction and the tortuous grinding of collapsing fortifications spoke of the devastation being wrought within the boiling clouds.

'Grand company,' Ironclaw growled. 'The command is given. Advance!'

The warsmith's order was heard and heeded by every one of his warriors, each a power-armoured veteran of the Long War against the hated False Emperor of Mankind. With the walls of the Bastion Primus wreathed in smoke and its surviving defenders reeling from the shocking devastation unleashed upon them, the Iron Warriors advanced across the cratered no-man's-land all but unopposed. The Traitor Marines pressed forwards with the combination of cold precision and bitter determination they were known and feared for across the galaxy, their advance long planned and their deployment as exact as a victory procession. Clad in armour the colour of well-oiled gunmetal and bedecked in runes combining the machine and the arcane into a blasphemous hybrid script, the Iron Warriors crushed the bones of the thousands of unhallowed dead that lay scattered and broken across the killing grounds. They cared not at all that the remains were those of slain warriors once intent upon the same objective as they.

As the ironclad squads pressed onwards towards the shattered wall, a second wave parted the drifting smoke behind them. Ironclaw's bitter heart pounded in cruel expectation of that which would appear next, for if the apostate Mechanicus had exacted a steep price for their aid, the daemonologist-engineers had asked far more. The warsmith had long ago lost count of the souls offered up to invest each engine with the daemon-thing sealed within its rune-bound shell. As the smoke stirred, dark, jagged silhouettes resolved before the great daemon-engines crawled forwards. From the klaxon-grilles of each blared an atonal dirge that combined the wailing of the machine with that of tortured souls reduced to pulp by grinding gear wheels, the glorious sound growing so loud that even the tumbling of the curtain walls was all but drowned out.

To Ferrous Ironclaw, the sound was the victory chorus of the Ruinous Powers, the cacophony of the warp resounding across the battlefield to bring shattering insanity to those who refused to acknowledge its power. To deny the glory of Chaos was to deny reality, Ferrous Ironclaw knew, and one day all of the galaxy would know it too.

As the warsmith and his attendant Chosen – each a champion of the Iron Warriors, and clad in the very oldest and most revered Terminator armour – advanced, the smoke wreathing the breach ahead slowly lifted. Five hundred metres from the breach the ground was littered with rubble thrown up by the detonation of the super-heavy ordnance. The air was hot with the residue of the fusion reactions that had brought the void shields and walls down, and the warsmith felt the actinic sting of radiation on the skin of his bare face. Such a thing was of no consequence to a mighty champion such as he, though he judged that the mortal defenders of the bastion would, should they survive the day, fall victim to its curse within weeks. None, he swore silently, would survive this day.

At three hundred metres precisely, the warsmith enacted the next phase of his plan. With a fell word of command, he ordered the numerous daemon-engines bound to his Legion's service to converge on the breach, which was even now becoming visible as the smoke of nucleonic devastation cleared. The machines redoubled their atonal cacophony as they pounded forwards, some on clanking mechanical legs, others on tracks that ground the desiccated remains of former besiegers to dust in their passing. Ironclaw allowed himself a moment's pause as dozens of daemon-driven mechanical behemoths overtook him and his bodyguard. Some passed so close that he could feel the waves of malignance radiating outwards and sense the primeval rage of the denizens of the warp entrapped within. It was only by the application of the most binding of seals that the machines did not turn upon the Iron Warriors in their savage urge to rend the material universe to shreds. Their thirst for the souls of the mortals before them was tangible. Ironclaw felt that thirst too, for he had known its allure for ten thousand years.

Soon, the daemon-engines were drawing near to the breach, and as the smoke thinned still further the warsmith could finally look upon the glorious destruction his earlier word of command had wrought. The walls of the Bastion Primus soared a hundred metres and more overhead, and curved around many times further to left and right. Yet, where before the walls had stood proud and impregnable, defiant by their very existence of

the glory of Chaos, now they were rent by a colossal wound. An entire section of the wall had been consumed by the short-lived nucleonic fires of the super-heavy siege ordnance, a raw scar resembling an axe wound in the chest of a fallen enemy marking the route the warsmith's forces would take to storm the bastion. Like shattered, exposed ribs, twisted stanchions jutted from the sides of that wound, the super-dense metals melted into organic-seeming forms and solidified with the dying of the fusion infernos.

A veteran of countless breaching operations, the warsmith had concentrated his barrage in such a way as to bring the fabric of the walls crashing down to form a ramp, up which his forces could climb. Even as the Iron Warriors pressed on, the ground beneath them rearing up this new, artificial rise, the daemon-engines raced forwards in their eagerness to tear apart the soft meat cringing beyond the rubble.

'Warsmith,' one of Ironclaw's Chosen barked a clipped warning. "Ware the breach.'

Slowing his advance up the uneven base of the rise, the warsmith glanced towards its smoke-wreathed summit. His lip curled in derision, baring iron teeth sharper than any predator's as a ripple of las-fire erupted from hidden firing positions amongst the tumbled masonry. Evidently, the defenders had rushed their second line forwards to defend the undefendable. The warsmith's expression turned to savage eagerness as the lust to rush the breach all but consumed him. But the Iron Warriors were no mindless berserkers ready to throw themselves carelessly down the gullet of death. They wielded their fury artfully, as a weapon of precision, overwhelming their foe with clinical slaughter.

'Ka, ib norag,' the warsmith growled, the air around him visibly rippling as the word of power left his mouth. A moment later, the ground beneath his feet shook and great chunks of debris dislodged themselves from further up the ramp, crashing down before being swallowed in the drifting banks of smoke. The reek of burning souls assailed the warsmith's nostrils, and three dark forms reared up behind him. Without turning, he gestured with one of his lightning claw-gauntleted hands and the three Defilers prowled forwards. Within seconds, the weight of fire had doubled and then tripled as the defenders at the summit saw their doom clawing its way upwards towards their position. Each of the engines was constructed like some huge, mechanical spider, the weapons mounted on

the sides of their turrets spitting death as vast, scorpion-like foreclaws flexed in anticipation of the ruin they would soon exact upon the soft flesh of their enemies.

‘How like the taking of the Lazurite Citadel,’ Ironclaw mused aloud as the three daemon-engines crawled ever upwards, hundreds of las-rounds snapping through the air to strike harmlessly against their armoured hides.

‘My lord?’ the nearest of Ironclaw’s Chosen answered, his features obscured by the impassive mask of his Terminator armour.

Ironclaw’s deeply lined eyes narrowed as he regarded the Chosen, dredging through countless years of memories. No, this warrior had not been present during the Tallarn campaign, so he had not witnessed the final battles against the fractured remnants of the loyalist armies, nor had he been present when the gleaming domes of the Lazurite Citadel had been shattered.

‘It matters not,’ the warsmith snarled. ‘All that matters is the destruction of these walls. Muster the warriors. We advance, for the glory of Perturabo.’

As the Iron Warriors began their ascent of the breach, the weight of fire pouring from the defenders’ positions at the summit grew steadily more intense. The Defilers took the brunt of it, and while they could easily shrug off the blizzard of lasgun-fire, the defenders wasted no time in bringing forwards heavier weaponry. As the Defilers clambered claw over mechanical claw towards their position, the defenders opened fire with lascannons and missile launchers. The first shot, a warhead fired in haste and panic, corkscrewed through the smoke-wreathed air, its machine-spirit improperly appeased, to explode against the jagged masonry of the breach’s interior edge. The second shot was from a lascannon, the bright beam lancing downwards and missing the lead daemon-engine by no more than a metre. Enraged by this affront, the infernal will that animated the war machine sent it surging forwards so fast that the second shot aimed towards it went awry, though it struck another engine a glancing blow to its turret.

The weapons blister mounted on the Defiler’s turret’s side exploded in a hail of sparks and razor-sharp shrapnel, the daemon-engine rearing

up upon its spider-like mechanical legs and unleashing a metallic howl of rage. The weight of fire raining down from the summit faltered as the defenders cowered before such daemonic fury; then Ironclaw caught the sound of a voice bellowing for order and the fire returned to its former rate.

‘Mine...’ the warsmith growled, striding forwards. Using his lightning claws to aid his ascent, Ironclaw hauled himself up the rubble-strewn breach, the wounded Defiler so close behind that its massive claws and legs churned up the ruined ground about him, its hull looming ominously overhead. Now, the Defiler’s body was cratered from repeated strikes, lascannon-rounds and krak missile warheads streaking about it. Another blinding beam lanced out and this time the firer’s aim was true, striking the Defiler just beneath the mantlet of its main gun. The beast shuddered as the lascannon-round punched out its rear deck.

Knowing his protector was slain, Ironclaw redoubled his rate of ascent until he was at the very van of the force storming the breach. Behind him, the mortally wounded Defiler thrashed and spasmed as the daemon within shrieked its pain and fury into the air. With its armour compromised the daemon was free of its arcane fetters, but it was apparent the fell thing craved not release but the blood of its foe. Unable to animate its machine-prison, the daemon had lost its ability to slay its enemies and its frustrated rage was a terrible thing to witness. The creature howled as its essence leached through the wound in its former prison, and the defenders flinched before the abominable spectacle. Inured to the taint of the warp, the warsmith gritted his teeth as he attained the plateau where the defenders waited, their faces blanched with shock and their eyes alight with terror.

‘Address!’ Ironclaw heard the voice again. It was a voice used to command. It was a voice used to being obeyed.

Savouring the moment, the warsmith waited, activating his lightning claws and flexing the weapon-tipped mechatendrils that writhed at his back. Arcing energies played up and down the gleaming lengths of the wickedly serrated claws, their power field humming threateningly.

‘Address!’ the voice bawled again, and the sound of several meaty impacts reached Ironclaw’s ears. He took a step towards the shouts and a shape emerged from amidst the shattered blocks of masonry.

It was an Imperial Guardsman, a veteran of numerous campaigns, judging by the scar tissue visible beneath the layer of grime and soot that coated his face. As the man pulled himself erect he gunned the motor of a chainsword held loosely at his side. Almost pitiable, the warsmith mused, until his eye was drawn to more figures stirring from the gaps between the fallen blocks behind their leader. His eyes narrowed as he snarled. Perhaps there was a challenge here after all, he thought, though still it would scarcely test one of his skill and experience.

‘Blessed be the martyr,’ the man said, his eyes blazing with defiance. ‘For he shall live eternal by the Emperor’s side.’

A twin flare of bitter derision and long forgotten memory flashed through the warsmith’s consciousness. For a moment, he was standing at the gates of the Crescent City, the hosts of Tallarn arrayed upon the blasted wastes before their erstwhile capital. The Caliphar was mortally wounded and his doomed armies had mustered in one last act of defiance against the Warmaster’s forces. The ruler’s vat-grown champion, a berserker-dervish of fearsome repute, had stepped alone through the city gates to confront them. That champion had said something very similar. The man was a fool, but he had died well, Ironclaw conceded.

‘The codes of my Legion demand I offer you one opportunity to quit this wall,’ the warsmith addressed the enemy leader, paraphrasing his primarch. He knew the man would not do so, and in truth he cared little either way. This lone defender was utterly insignificant, no matter how many of his men joined him in their futile defence.

‘Be gone, Emperor-hating bastard,’ the man barked. Perhaps there would be some sport here after all, the warsmith thought. ‘Be gone, for with my last drop of blood I shall—’

Anger flaring in his bitter heart, the warsmith brought one of the metallic tentacles waving at his back sharply about. The melta-discharger mounted at the mechatendril’s tip blazed searing orange and the bold Imperial Guard leader was atomised in an instant. One moment the man had stood defiant at the summit of the breach, the next his body had been seared to angry cinders drifting upon the irradiated wind.

A metallic growl rumbling deep in his chest, Ferrous Ironclaw swept his baleful glare across the mass of defenders arrayed against him. He knew nothing but contempt for these worthless scraps of human flesh, their flak jackets bearing the same two-headed eagle device he himself had once marched to war under. How little they knew of the deeds that had been done in the name of that sigil. How little they deserved to bear it. How little they deserved to even live...

Baring his metallic teeth in a feral leer, the warsmith spread his serrated lightning claws wide. Unleashing a war cry that was at once a blurt of soul-shattering scrap code and a howl of primordial rage, he started forwards, his Chosen advancing in his wake.

The slaughter that ensued was over in seconds, the blood of the Imperial Guard defenders anointing the rune-encrusted Terminator armour of the warsmith and his retinue as an offering to the Ruinous Powers. Scenting spilled viscera, the daemon-engines surged up the rubble slope with such haste that their claws and tracks dislodged mighty chunks of rubble, and brought more loose debris tumbling from the ragged edges of the shattered walls on either side. Another wave of defenders rose up from positions further back, the breach echoing to their cries of misplaced piety. Las-rounds whipped through the air, and soon the throaty roar of a battery of heavy bolters was added to the deafening cacophony of battle.

Rounds splitting the air about him, Ironclaw gloried in the anarchy of war. Standing upon the rubble of a fallen wall, the heat of battle stinging the flesh of his face as the stink of burned flesh filled his nostrils –here was where he was created to be.

Precise bursts of disciplined bolter-fire rang out as more of the warsmith's squads advanced. Soon the last of the fleeing defenders were gunned down and the breach belonged to the Iron Warriors.

Turning his back upon the last of the slaughter, the warsmith looked down the length of the rubble slope. A pack of Maulerfiend daemon-engines had paused by the wreck of the fallen Defiler like carnivores gathering to pick over the remains of some larger predator further up the food chain than they. Then the pack was overcome by their impatience to be through the breach, each engine clambering up the loose rubble slope, their hunger to share in the killing obvious.

After the Maulerfiends came more of the warsmith's Iron Warriors, their formation impeccable even as they negotiated the rough and uneven terrain. In their wake came a group of Mutilators, each a hulking mountain of armour and muscle, a former Chosen whose body had been warped beyond all recognition by the glory of Chaos. The air was thick with the stink of propellant and burned fuel, and it visibly shimmered with the proximity of the warp. Beyond a lumbering Dreadnought that had just begun its ascent, the drifting smoke obscured the remainder of Ironclaw's army; as well as the forces of the other factions that had allied themselves to him.

One of those factions was making its presence known even as the warsmith turned back, just in time to catch sight of a banner borne aloft by a bold, if suicidal, Imperial Guard trooper. The view beyond the summit was still obscured by the clouds of dust thrown up when the walls collapsed, but it was clear that the defenders were intent upon mounting a counter-attack.

Good, thought Ferrous Ironclaw, let them come. Let them come on in endless waves like they did on Corinar when we breached the Shriving Wall and cast down the Lucid Tower. Let them bellow their defiance even as we scythe them down as we did upon the plains of crimson marble.

For an instant, Ironclaw's vision wavered as nigh overwhelming memories of past battles impressed themselves upon his consciousness. In his mind he was striding from his drop-pod onto the flatlands of Tallarn's primary continent, the once-verdant pastures reduced to bubbling slag by the life-eater virus his primarch had unleashed upon that world. The ground at his feet was thick with the viscous slime that had once been an entire planet's biomass. So voracious was the primarch's curse upon Tallarn that even the world's native bacteria had been destroyed. Without them, the rendered-down stuff of life would take years to disintegrate. The stink of so much organic matter reduced to slurry assailed the warsmith's nostrils, the false reality threatening to overwhelm his senses entirely.

Then a hard round spanged hard from his left shoulder, his armour's auto-reactive systems countering the impact with a hiss of hydraulics. The sundered plains of Tallarn melted away in an instant and he was back on Bellum Colonia, in the very gullet of the breach in the walls of the Bastion

Primus. A second shot whipped past his face, its stinging wake bringing him fully back to the here and now.

Someone had dared fire upon him.

Someone would die.

The smoke parted as the counter-attacking defenders rushed headlong towards the Iron Warriors. This time, there must have been an entire company, and every Guardsman had his bayonet fixed to the barrel of his lasgun and was bellowing a prayer to the hated Emperor of Mankind. Squad after squad emerged from the roiling dust and smoke, throwing themselves into the defence of the breach.

‘Hold!’ Ironclaw bellowed, firing his serrated gauntlets to full power as his Terminator armour-clad Chosen formed up beside him. The air filled with oaths the defenders would have denounced as blasphemy had they not been shouting their own so loud they could hear nothing else. More Iron Warriors took position at their warsmith’s back, and the daemon-engines prowled behind them, barely restrained by their master’s command.

Only one of Ironclaw’s allies had not yet made itself known, and therein lay the reason for his order to hold. The moment to unleash this ally was now.

A shadow as dark as the abyss passed over the Iron Warriors, the smoke at their backs parting as dark waters swell at the unseen passing of an oceanic predator. Ironclaw fixed his enemy with a baleful glare, a cruel leer twisting his war-torn features. Having cast the warsmith’s gathered host in night, the shadow crept forwards towards the oncoming Imperial Guardsmen. As it passed over their front ranks, Ironclaw saw the first of them falter as their wrathful gaze was torn from the object of their hatred to the vast shape resolving itself in the breach.

The front rank stumbled as the Guardsmen took in the shocking enormity of the war machine looming into view. Men fell, and others trampled over them before coming to a desperate halt, their eyes wide with stark terror.

Then, it gave voice to its own war cry.

The Traitor Titan's war horn blared forth such a blasphemous, atonal dirge that men's hearts froze at the sheer horror of it. The noise was in part the wailing of a gargantuan klaxon, but that was by far the lesser part. The worst of it was the voice of the god-machine venting its rage upon the souls of man, singing the doom of the Imperium and ten thousand years of hatred for the withered carrion god seated upon its throne. All of this men knew even as their eardrums burst and they collapsed to their knees, hands clasped to their heads to shut out the infernal sound.

Ironclaw raised one taloned arm high as he watched the proudly borne banner waver, its custodian stumbling upon the bodies of fallen comrades, his gaze fixed wide-eyed upon the form in the breach.

The Titan was, as the name suggested, a vast war machine. Vaguely humanoid in form it towered dozens of metres into the tortured skies. One of its arms was a colossal power fist, with which the god-machine grasped the ragged edge of the breached wall to steady itself as it began its ascent of the rubble slope. The other was a laser weapon able to unleash such fearsome power that it could, in theory, pluck a warship from low orbit, should the Ruinous Powers confer their blessings upon the weapons-moderati. Beneath a metres-thick carapace, on which was mounted a pair of multiple-missile launcher pods, glowered the head that served as the machine's cockpit, its eyes aglow with warp-spawned furnace fire.

The god-machine hauled itself forwards, uncaring of the rain of debris dislodged from the shattered wall as it gripped the side. Though not one of the warsmith's warriors showed an iota of fear, the counter-attacking Imperial Guard were by now paralysed by the awesome sight.

The warsmith clenched his taloned hands, the air ringing as the serrated blades scissored shut.

The god-machine heard, and the god-machine obeyed.

The multiple-missile launchers on the Titan's carapace erupted into fire, dozens of guided munitions closing on their target within the blink of an eye. The summit of the breach was transformed into a vision of hell, men and masonry swallowed up in the raging infernal fires. The

overpressure propelled jagged shrapnel outwards in a tidal wave of death that shredded those defenders not consumed by the fires, razor fragments scything through the air and ricocheting from the dull metal armour of nearby Iron Warriors.

Even before the fires had fully receded, Ferrous Ironclaw saw that the defenders had been slain to a man. Nothing but scattered fragments of charred flesh and the stink of flash-cooked meat remained of the hundred and more men.

The breach was taken. Now the Bastion Primus must fall.

Within the hour, the Iron Warriors had marched down the reverse slope of the breach, howling daemon-engines pressing forwards as the warsmith's squads consolidated their victory. The Titan strode onwards, hauling itself up and through the breach using its colossal power fist before taking position on the other side, Rhino and Land Raider armoured vehicles passing under its vast bulk as it stood overwatch.

Beyond the breach, the interior of the Bastion Primus was a mass of structures crammed together seemingly at random. As was common in such fortifications, an open space separated the wall from the city proper, a space in which the defenders could muster a response to an attack such as the Iron Warriors had undertaken. As Ironclaw led his warriors out and onto the rockcrete expanse, he knew that such a response would surely be launched at any moment, and he scanned the tall buildings beyond for any sign of it developing.

The buildings were constructed from a pale sandstone far weaker than the black masonry of the curtain wall, and barely any of them were untouched by the hand of war. Most bore signs of the thunderous preparatory bombardment the Iron Warriors had launched before their final assault, the once finely wrought statues of saints and martyrs covering their surfaces now pock-marked and burned. Others had almost entirely collapsed, leaving little but blackened skeletal remains. Centuries of experience of war told Ferrous that a ruined cityscape was far harder to take than an intact one, for the defenders could move through it by unpredictable routes, fire upon an attacker from every cracked wall and launch devastating, if suicidal, ambushes from the least expected quarter. Scanning the line of ruins, the warsmith caught sight of just such a defending force, a mass of figures appearing from the rubble.

A blurt of scrap-code told the warsmith of the Titan's eagerness to lay waste to this second wave of defenders, but Ironclaw's sub-vocalised growl silenced it. He was master here, and even the god-machine towering overhead would acknowledge that fact.

A second burst of feedback-laced machine code told Ironclaw that the mighty war machine would heed his will, if reluctantly. Satisfied that the Titan would hold its fire, the warsmith studied the killing ground between the breach and the mass of buildings.

The far side of the open space was now swarming with figures, a line several hundred metres wide advancing in such tight formation that it presented a mass of flesh. But the warsmith was blessed with the acute senses of his Legiones Astartes heritage, refined to preternatural sharpness by the gifts of the Ruinous Powers. He soon saw that the wave of defenders represented no disciplined counter-attack by well-prepared Imperial Guardsmen. Indeed, at least one in three of the figures carried no weapon and few wore a complete set of body armour.

'Convicts,' the warsmith sneered, his voice laced with hate. 'They dare send penal troops against me...'

The air filled with the pounding of feet and a roar of maddened savagery as the penal legionnaires advanced into the open space. But the warsmith knew that 'advanced' was the wrong term. No, these wild-eyed scum were not advancing, they were being herded. Each wore about his neck a thick collar containing an explosive charge. At the first sign of cowardice the overseers would detonate a select few of these and make a grisly example the remainder could not fail to appreciate. In addition to the collars, the warsmith knew that it was likely that the convict-troopers were pumped up on frenzon or some other combat stim, administered by implanted dispensers and controlled by those same overseers. In all probability, the penal legionnaires were in the grip of a chem-fuelled rage that would render them immune to pain and devoid of all sense of self-preservation.

A small part of Ironclaw approved of such tactics, for the Traitor Legions often fielded such auxiliary cannon fodder in a similar fashion. There was no shortage of lesser men driven to give their lives in the service of the warp, and the same was true of those fighting in the name

of the Emperor. But another part of the warsmith knew the real reason the convicts were being herded forwards to their obvious doom.

‘God-machine,’ Ironclaw said into the vox. The Titan’s bale-eyed features turned in his direction, seeking out its master in the mass of tiny beings at its feet.

Following the line of buildings to the extreme left and right flanks, Ironclaw said, ‘Our enemies believe us fools to be so easily distracted by such an obvious target. The flanks,’ he ordered. ‘Open the unseeing eye.’

The Titan’s war horn sounded, deep and booming, its bass tone alone so violent it seemed as if it would bring the entire city crashing down. Even as the first, apocalyptic blast faded, a second, even louder one brought debris toppling down from already weakened towers.

Following its master’s order, the god-machine engaged its full array of sensors, from conventional augurs to sorcerous etheric inductors. The machine’s princeps, a once-celebrated hero of the Imperium long ago reduced to a drooling shell animated by the divine power of Chaos, imbibed the full range of sensor feedback and in an instant located what the warsmith suspected must be nearby.

‘Imperial armoured battlegroup,’ the princeps’ voice gurgled over the vox. ‘Descending at battle speed from the south.’

At last, thought the warsmith. An enemy worthy of my attentions.

‘Constituting?’ Ironclaw replied.

The princeps did not answer straight away, the god-machine’s systems, an unclean hybrid of silicon and cranial matter, working to refine the signal stream flooding in from its sensors.

‘Three super-heavies...’ the phlegmy voice bubbled over the vox. ‘A dozen battle tanks. Numerous lighter vehicles.’

The warsmith was thrilled that three super-heavy tanks might be about to join the battle, but he could hardly miss the disappointment in the princeps’ voice. Clearly, the god-machine desired to match its power against one of its erstwhile brothers in the Titan Legions. Ironclaw could

well understand such a desire, though he had little time or inclination for empathy. With countless frenzon-driven penal legionnaires screaming across the open ground, and the real threat pushing in from the south behind the cover of the ruined city, he had very little time at all.

In the span of time most men take to decide to flee, the warsmith formulated his response, as he had in so many equally pressing battlefield situations throughout his long tenure as commander of an Iron Warriors grand company. Memories of the Triumphal Gate at Argent Rex smashed asunder surged to the forefront of his mind, but he repressed them savagely lest his senses became dulled on the glut of past glory.

‘Iron Warriors!’ the warsmith bellowed, his voice amplified over the roar of the oncoming horde and the thrumming systems of the Titan at his back by his numerous machine augments. ‘Forward by squads, wipe them out! Stain the ground crimson as we did upon the moons of Lemuria!’

At their warsmith’s order, the squad leaders led their warriors forwards to meet the onrushing horde, their advance implacable as their bolters spat mass-reactive death in disciplined staccato bursts. Yet, Ironclaw had more orders to give.

‘God-machine,’ he addressed the Titan, its weapons already tracking towards the as yet unseen armoured battlegroup. ‘Target the intact building with the statue of Saint Arxades upon its facade. Sustained beam, but only upon my express order, understood?’

The Titan’s only response was a grating howl of feedback as its torso rotated with the titanic grinding of vast gear wheels. Its turbo laser levelled upon the target building, but as ordered, the princeps held his fire.

Before the warsmith could proceed, a warning bark from one of his nearby Chosen brought his attentions back to the open ground. The Iron Warriors were pressing forwards, and those penal troopers equipped with ranged weapons were returning fire. Their aim was so badly awry they could only have been dosed with a lethal amount of frenzon, making it clear that the legionnaires’ overlords held no expectation of them surviving. But then, Ironclaw knew, that was not the point.

In the final moments before the two opposing masses of troops crashed together, the warsmith barked a series of clipped orders. So well disciplined were his warriors that the force reacted as if it were an extension of his own body, each squad a limb, each of their weapons his own.

At the centre, boltguns spat a continuous stream of fire, each shot aimed and deliberate, though the enemy were so densely packed that the Traitor Marines could scarcely miss. As the range closed still further, the Iron Warriors stowed boltguns and drew weapons more suited to the butchery of close combat. Chainswords screamed as their motors were gunned in eager readiness to cleave the flesh of the enemy, while bolt pistols barked well-aimed shots that sent severed limbs arcing through the blood-misted air.

In amongst the ranks of the Iron Warriors strode other elements of Ironclaw's command. Hulking Obliterators, each half as tall again as a Chosen Terminator and twice as broad, formed walking gun-phalanxes, unleashing a devastating torrent of fire, gunning down dozens with each blast of the weapons that grew from their twisted metal flesh. A pack of howling Possessed, each once an Iron Warrior and now the vessel for a fell daemon of the warp, were the first to plunge headlong into the melee, their distended, claw-tipped limbs thrashing about so violently that each was soon wading through a flood of gore and viscera.

With a savage grin, Ironclaw braced himself to receive the convicts' charge. An instant later the torrent of bodies broke upon his line, and the battle was truly joined.

The press was so great that individual enemies seemed to melt into a screaming, surging mass of limbs. Lasguns wielded as clubs thudded against his armour while stray shots whip-cracked all around. Within seconds the warsmith was covered with grasping foes, his Terminator-armoured form taking on the appearance of a hulking prehistoric predator assailed by numerous lesser creatures, each hanging from an ironclad limb as they clawed for some weak point in his armour.

They would find none, for the only exposed part of the warsmith's body was his face, and despite appearances, even that was protected. The bone of his skull had long ago been transmogrified to ceramite and

his tendons replaced with unbreakable plasteel cabling. The bodies of the penal legionnaires were not so fortunate, however.

With a machine-flesh nerve impulse, the warsmith activated the generators in his matched lightning claws, the serrated blades spitting arcs of searing light. Flexing the blades once, he lashed out in a wide arc, and in a second everybody within a three hundred-and-sixty-degree arc was eviscerated. Even before the spilled guts of the dozen and more foes he had struck down had hit the rockcrete ground, the warsmith brought the metallic tentacles that were his mechatendrils whipping about. One was tipped by a flared flamer nozzle burning with its baleful blue pilot light.

The mechatendrill lashed about and its weapon-tip vomited a searing blast of alchemical fire. A circle of foes still wider than those the warsmith had eviscerated was transformed into a wall of flaming bodies, a hideous screech erupting all about. Only those legionnaires clinging tightly to the warsmith's Terminator armour had avoided death, their fellow convicts scattered and burned in a wide circle about him.

A desperate trooper, his face alight with frenzon-induced bloodlust, hauled himself onto Ironclaw's massive shoulder as another wrapped his body about the warsmith's leg. Twisted and blackened limbs grasped upwards from the body-strewn ground, the combat stimms driving the fallen to fight on through what should have been unbearable pain and mortal wounding.

A claw grasped for the warsmith's face, the fingers spread wide like an animal's talons. Even before he could react, a thumb dug into his eye socket up to the knuckle in a vain effort to blind him.

A metallic growl surging from his throat, the warsmith bared his sharpened metal teeth and plunged them savagely through the wrist of the hand seeking to extract his eyeball. Blood spurted across his vision as the wrist was entirely cut in two, the hand remaining in place until the warsmith shook his head, dislodging the thumb from his eye socket and clearing the blood from his vision. Thanks to his Legiones Astartes heritage and the numerous blessings of the warp, the trauma barely made an impact on the warsmith's eyesight.

His attacker was equally unmoved by the ruin done upon his own body. The man was so dazed up on frenzied that he was barely slowed by the loss of his hand. Even now, he was attempting to bring his other hand to bear as the assailant clinging to Ironclaw's back grasped down towards his bare head.

'Enough,' the warsmith growled, lashing out with both lightning claws with such fearsome speed that the legionnaire had no chance to see his death coming. The steaming chunks of his ruined body splattered across the ground.

The attacker upon the warsmith's back was lifted high by a pair of snaking mechatendrils, one coiled about his neck, the other around a foot. With a brutal thought-impulse, Ironclaw tore the man in two and cast his still-thrashing remains into the surging crowd.

Now the two forces were merged into a chaotic, seething ocean of death and rage. Each Iron Warrior fought his own war against any enemy who dared approach within his reach, and certainly, none cowered from doing so. The legionnaires numbered in the hundreds and they were utterly fearless. Men fought on even with limbs torn away by screaming chainswords, and refused to die even when mass-reactive bolt-rounds exploded their guts across the ground. Ironclaw's perceptions shifted to that timeless state of mind only attainable in the boiling cauldron of battle, where blood sung and the powers of the warp gibbered and writhed but a thought away.

Ever had it been thus, since the earliest days of Ironclaw's existence. Even before the bitter days of the Great Betrayal, he had mastered every form of death. He had fought across a hundred warzones before the Warmaster had mustered at Isstvan, from frozen wastes to boiling death world jungles. He had fought beneath the ammonia seas of Ixacta Luminus and across the anti-grav extractor platforms in the upper atmosphere of Newton Prime. But always, in moments such as this when his steel-lined veins sang with the glory of battle, he was back at Tallarn, fighting across the oozing remains of that once-verdant world. Whatever enemy he was facing, that enemy was the Tallarns. Whatever general commanded them was always the Caliphar of the Crescent City, and his champion was always that whirling cyber-berserker who had been so blessed as to die at the hands of the mighty, proud IVth Legion.

But ever were the foe too little of a challenge for one who had bestridden the battlefields of the galaxy for countless centuries. There was only one foe Ironclaw truly felt honoured to confront...

An ordnance shell thundered overhead and the warsmith's consciousness snapped back to the murderous reality of his surroundings. The enemy piled up at his feet were not the forces of the Caliphar, nor that other, hated foe. They were the penal cannon fodder of the defenders of the Bastion Primus, and they were on the verge of achieving what their brutal overseers had meant of them.

'God-machine!' Ferrous Ironclaw bellowed, his machine-augmented voice carrying over the raucous clamour of war. 'Now!'

The Titan made no answer to its master's order – not a vocalised one, at least. Instead, it braced its massive limbs and opened wide its plasma couplings. The power of a captive sun cascaded through its conduits to feed the turbo laser mounted at its left shoulder.

Forewarned of the impending blast, the Iron Warriors engaged protective armour systems, for to do otherwise would have left even such mighty warriors blinded. The penal legionnaires were not so fortunate, however, and as the air turned white, hundreds of them suffered their optic nerves burned to ash. Hair and clothing flash-ignited as the laser blast lanced overhead in a continuous stream, accompanied by a sound as of a star screaming in rage.

The object of the Titan's wrath was the building the warsmith had indicated, but its true target lay beyond the shattered mass of statue-decked masonry. The lead super-heavy, its commander hoping to approach the Iron Warriors under cover and to catch them mired in the open killing ground, was about to crash through the ruin. The turbo laser blast obliterated what remained of the building, passing through its atomised fabric with no appreciable loss of power, and lanced into the frontal armour of the oversized tank behind it.

Incredibly, the tank's glacis withstood the searing beam for several seconds before the armour turned to molten lava and the beam punched through the turret and into the engine deck beyond. The tank's plasma reactor was obliterated and the roiling energies contained within set free in an instant.

The resulting explosion left nothing whatsoever of the target, the ground torn into a ragged black crater several metres deep. The blast crippled the second super-heavy, its frontal armour torn to shreds and its crew flash-boiled alive at their stations. The third was raked by a pressure wave that rocked its titanic mass back on its suspension and buckled its main cannon. Of the other, lighter armoured vehicles that followed in the wake of the super-heavies, nothing but smoking wrecks remained.

The area between the walls and the city proper was indeed the killing ground it was designed to be, but not for the attackers. The defenders were in utter disarray. The penal legion, herded forwards to mire the Iron Warriors in the open so that the armoured battlegroup might gun them down, was all but dead, the turbo laser blast fired scant metres overhead having seared the meat from the bones of hundreds of combat-stimmed troopers. Of those that remained, it appeared that bitter reality was slowly asserting itself as the frenzon washed away. Though most were blinded by the laser burst, the survivors were stumbling away through the human wreckage strewn across the open ground, finally more scared of the invaders than of their cruel overseers.

Burning debris scything down all about him, Ferrous Ironclaw was suddenly aware that night was closing in. The city was now alight with raging fire touched off by the turbo laser blast, the roiling clouds overhead underlit flickering orange like some mad remembrancer's vision of damnation. Shattered buildings were silhouetted black against sheets of fire dozens of metres tall, the figures of fleeing defenders darting across them intermittently.

'And now begins the true battle,' Ironclaw snarled, blood rising in expectation of what was to come. The breaching of the walls had been performed according to principles of military science long ago perfected by the Iron Warriors and their genius primarch; the next phase would be something altogether different.

An air of tense expectation descended upon the Iron Warriors. Each of them was smeared in gore and dirt, their normally shining armour dulled by war. Visored helms scanned the flame-wreathed ruins and weapons tracked slowly back and forth. Time slowed as the warp pressed in about them, the eyes of its unknowable denizens turned towards these ultimate betrayers of all they had been created to be. Such destruction

had been wrought this day that the soul-thirsty beings of the empyrean were even now watching with that curious mixture of cruel approval and rank jealousy.

Sensing the pent-up fire burning in the soul of each of his warriors, Ferrous Ironclaw bared his teeth in a feral leer, the blood of his last attacker smeared across his features. The pressure of the warp increased exponentially, until it could be resisted no longer. The Iron Warriors were no longer assaulting the Bastion Primus, and neither were their foes the defence forces of Bellum Colonia. Now, each and every one of the Traitor Marines believed with utter conviction that he was closing on the inner fortress of the Caliphar, the Crescent City burning around them.

Even as reality stretched to breaking point, the warsmith gave the signal. As one, the entire force started forwards. The mighty god-machine strode across the killing ground in but three steps, a vast mechanical foot passing directly over the warsmith's retinue in its eagerness. Dreadnoughts and Defilers pounded the rockcrete to dust as they surged forwards, smashing aside the ruins as they surrendered to the fury within. Forgefiends and Maulerfiends, the daemon-engines bound to the Iron Warriors' service by unspeakable pacts, now sought to claim what was rightfully theirs, their daemononic preysight latching on to the flaring soul-light of their foes.

But most terrible of all were the Iron Warriors themselves. Each of these veterans of the Long War was a brutal tyrant, a slayer of worlds, a champion of the Ruinous Powers and the doom of mankind. They bestrode the burning city like gods of war, their ceramite tread crushing rubble, their power-armoured shoulders crashing through tottering walls, and their relentless bolter-fire gunning down any enemy they encountered amongst the ruins.

The warsmith gloried in the song of war, but he and his warriors were far from mindless berserkers and their foe far from defenceless weaklings. The Iron Warriors wielded their bloodlust as a coldly precise weapon, focusing it, rendering it down to an incandescent core. The warriors of other Legions had long ago surrendered all self-control, the bloody World Eaters being the most infamous, but the warsmith would never allow his warriors to do so. Others of his Legion had answered the call of the Blood God, burning brightly, yet all too briefly as they drowned entire worlds in blood. Ferrous Ironclaw had vowed to wage the Long

War, and would never surrender himself to such short-lived and shortsighted victories.

As the carnage ground on and the weaker of the bastion's defenders were ruthlessly culled, the stronger, more experienced of their number mustered near the city's centre to mount what must surely be their final stand. Whoever was in command of the defenders, the warsmith was forced to give him due credit, for after the initial slaughter the defenders mounted a series of well-coordinated counter-attacks. Venting their pent-up bloodlust in their typically cold fashion, the Iron Warriors were by necessity forced to spread out through the shattered, burning city and so became prone to envelopment by any sufficiently organised foe.

The warsmith had anticipated this, of course, and ensured that each of his sub-commands was formed into a smaller version of the overall force, well able to defend itself against a range of enemies. Individual squads were accompanied by Dreadnoughts, Obliterators, Predator tanks or, where they could be controlled, the fearsome daemon-engines. These small, concentrated, all-arms groupings were able to take on many times their own number, and to deal with any type of enemy that dared oppose them.

Soon, a score of bitter, close-quarter battles were raging amongst the ruins, each every bit as bloody as the slaughter beyond the breach. These confrontations came down to combat blades and knives, grenades and pistols. Where before the penal legionnaires had come on in a frenzied horde, now the defenders were drilled Imperial Guardsmen, determined to repel the brutal besiegers or to fall defending the bastion. They knew the city well, and used sewers and service conduits to move about unseen and to launch a series of coordinated ambushes.

By the time the warsmith and his retinue were closing on the central citadel, his force was separated into a dozen sub-commands. None had avoided casualties, and none had expected to. One of Ironclaw's own Chosen, a veteran of the Siege of Terra, had been slain when an enemy gunship had strafed the street the retinue was crossing. It was not the gunship's fire that had struck the warrior down, however, but a cruel twist of fortune – or perhaps the fickle judgement of the Ruinous Powers, punishment for some unknown failing. The warrior had unleashed a fearsome torrent from his autocannon as he turned in the centre of the street he was crossing. The gunship's cockpit had disintegrated in a hail

of micro detonations, and bereft of control the vessel had upended, veered about and come smashing to the ground. That veteran of the Long War had been struck down and consumed by the explosion, his Terminator armour, a suit as old as he, unable to protect him from the impact and resulting explosion. In what amounted to a powerful portent, the warrior's armour had survived almost unscarred, while the body within had been burned to ash.

As the warsmith finally laid eyes upon the citadel, reports of the night's battles came flooding in. Over a dozen Iron Warriors were unaccounted for, while one of the Dreadnoughts had been lost when an air defence battery had been turned upon it. Two more Defilers had been struck down, each overeager and incautious as the lust for battle overcame the daemon-things within them.

For the defenders, however, the butcher's bill was many times higher, and the battle was not even concluded. Indeed, the siege of the Bastion Primus was yet to enter its final, climactic phase.

The warsmith had no way of calculating the precise casualties his force had inflicted, and no real desire to do so. All that mattered was that the raw stuff of reality was even now being twisted and stretched out of all recognition by the pressure of the warp as it crowded inwards. Were the slaughter to continue to engulf the entire planet of Bellum Colonia, were the Iron Warriors to slay and brutalise its entire population, then perhaps the thin skein that separated reality from the Sea of Souls might be breached, like the walls of this very bastion. Then, the denizens of the warp would come swarming through, and in all likelihood a full-scale daemoninc incursion would ensue. Bellum Colonia would become a daemon world, a half-light realm ruled over by the immortal servants of the Ruinous Powers.

But that would not be, for Ferrous Ironclaw had no interest in the world of Bellum Colonia. He cared only for its central strongpoint, the lynchpin in its defences. The Bastion Primus.

The citadel at the heart of the bastion soared overhead, its bulk black and glinting with the flickering reflections of the fires that consumed the city all about. The sky behind was lightening with a grey false dawn, and the warsmith vowed there and then that not a single defender would see the true dawn rise. He vowed that the citadel would be cast down,

one block at a time if necessary, each torn asunder by his taloned hands. The Caliphar, wounded unto death and bleeding into his silken sheets, would soon be slain, and there was nothing that the pitiful forces of Terra could do to save him...

With a snarl, the warsmith stalked before the rearing citadel, barely noticing the wall he ploughed straight through, nor the shower of debris scattered in his wake. His Chosen at his back, he walked into the open, his baleful glare fixed on the citadel's armoured portal.

'Ghar nhag,' the warsmith spoke a word of binding into his vox. A sound as of a furnace opening wide to vent its infernal heat sounded from nearby. 'Lor!'

A ruin to the warsmith's left exploded in dust and scattered rubble as a mechanical form powered forwards on mighty-pistoned forearms, followed a moment later by three more. Though smaller than the spider-form Defilers, these particular daemon-engines were far more suited to what Ironclaw had in mind for the citadel. The lead engine was a mass of pistons and flailing mechanical tentacles, its central mass a heavily armoured shell. Its forelegs were far larger than those at its rear, lending it a vaguely simian gait, its glowering head low between its massively armoured shoulders. Those following behind were of a similar type, though no two were armed identically. It was clear that here was the work of the most blasphemously skilled of daemon-engineers.

Imagining the Caliphar that doomed city stark with terror upon his deathbed, Ferrous Ironclaw gestured towards the citadel with a taloned hand.

The daemon-engines surged forwards to obey.

The first powered across the open space before the citadel, the tower's weapons batteries opening up, hundreds of rounds churning up the ground and ricocheting from its armoured bulk in a hail of dirty sparks. Ten metres from the base of the tower the mechanical nightmare bent almost double, its piston-driven limbs tense and coiled, before propelling itself with unimaginable force at the wall.

The impact was staggering, the daemon-engine's foreclaws digging into the citadel's armoured hide to lend it purchase. The creature hauled

itself up the wall, its animalistic head sweeping back and forth as if hunting some unseen prey. The head shot suddenly about, its glowing eyes narrowing as it caught some trace of its prey. It withdrew an arm, stretched it back and pistoned it hard into the wall; the entire structure trembling under the force. It seemed to listen, as if deciphering the seismic echo or sniffing out the souls of stunned defenders.

Then a searing fire guttered to life as clusters of melta-weapons mounted on its limbs unleashed the power of a sun. The roar of the weapons' concentrated fire searing through the citadel's outer armour was nigh deafening to those on the outside; it must have rendered those within entirely senseless.

But before the daemon-engine on the wall could complete its task, the warsmith gestured a second time, and another engine ploughed forwards. Clearly akin to the first, this one had a trio of wide-mouthed cannons mounted to its fore where the other sported forearms and head. It put the warsmith in mind of the ancient legends of the Grekans, where three-headed hell-dogs had guarded the gates to the underworld. But this infernal engine would not be guarding anything. Rather, it would do the opposite.

As one, all three of the engine's weapons projected a blast of concentrated warp-stuff directly at the citadel's armoured portal. The fusillade was accompanied by an atonal roar that could only be the wailing of the damned as they writhed in eternal torment in the deepest, darkest reaches of the warp. Ironclaw's ears rang with the glorious outburst, while any mortal who had not dedicated his soul to the Ruinous Powers must surely have been driven utterly insane by the merest hint of that infernal cacophony.

The armoured portal, a five-metre-tall gateway designed to withstand massed melta-cannon fire, turned to seething liquid metal under the relentless, otherworldly blast. Spurred on by the spectacle, the other daemon-engines joined the assault, throwing themselves at the walls as had the first or unleashing their own abominable weapons.

No man-made structure could hope to stand against such concentrated wrath.

The defenders' fire died off as those within were shaken and stunned by the terrible attack. Ironclaw could taste their terror, nigh see it coiling upwards as the warp closed ever tighter inwards. Truly, the eyes of unknowable beings were being turned upon the bastion this day, just as the warsmith had hoped.

'Kharak!' Ironclaw bellowed another word of command, even his augmented voice barely carrying over the relentless clamour of the daemon-engines' assault. The Forgefiend concentrating upon breaching the armoured portal resisted the order for a few seconds, before silencing its weapon with undisguised reluctance. Ironclaw bared his metallic teeth at the daemon-engine and it backed off a step or two, cowed by the being bound as its master.

'Muster the warriors,' the warsmith ordered the nearest of his Chosen. 'The end draws near.'

As the Chosen relayed his master's order to gather the grand company before the bastion, Ferrous Ironclaw crossed the open space before the portal, the defenders' gunfire now silenced.

The portal writhed with unknowable energies, and waves of baleful power radiated from its surface. Looking upon it, Ironclaw saw the twisted faces of the damned rise and sink amongst the energies, and he gloried in the sheer blasphemy of the spectacle.

The roar of an engine and the grinding of huge tracks caused the warsmith to turn in time to see one of his grand company's Land Raiders smash through an already ruined structure before coming to a halt and lowering its forward assault ramp. As the warriors transported within dismounted, more armoured vehicles closed in on the gathering, and soon scores of ironclad Traitor Marines mustered to begin the final assault.

So effective had the primarch's virus-bombing of Tallarn been that his own warriors had been forced to wage war from the confines of their armoured machines for long weeks, only able to dismount for limited periods lest even their Legionese Astartes bodies be overwhelmed by the contagion still ravaging the planet. The defenders of Tallarn had been unable to fight outside of their own armoured vehicles at all. Now, they cringed within their shelters or beneath the last of their domed cities, their

ruler wounded unto death and the primarch himself preparing their final doom.

‘Warriors of Iron!’ Ferrous Ironclaw addressed his grand company, a hundred and more grim-faced helms fixed expressionlessly upon him. ‘The gods themselves watch our deeds this day, and our foe cowers upon his deathbed. This place is ours, and so too shall be our enemy’s head before the day is out!’

A chorus of war-cries swept the ranks, but the warsmith held up one talon for silence.

‘But our work here is not yet done,’ said Ironclaw as the warriors fell silent. ‘Only when our real foe deigns to enter the fray shall we truly prove ourselves worthy, in the name of the primarch.’

A bitter tension descended upon the warriors of the grand company, for each and every one of the warsmith’s followers knew well the foe he spoke of. The thought of that most hated of enemies served only to fuel the already raging fires of war within each, their eagerness to face him once more a palpable thing.

Turning his back on his warriors, the warsmith faced the armoured portal, its surface still writhing with warp-spawned energies. The Caliphar of Tallarn cringed within; he was certain of it. The primarch would be pleased to receive the head of that foe, and in delivering it, Ironclaw knew that the Iron Warriors’ true enemy must surely come.

Firing his lightning claws and girding himself to the charge, the warsmith bellowed the war cry of his Legion as his warriors followed in his wake.

‘Iron within!’ he cried, his serrated claws scything through the armoured portal and sending gobbets of liquefied matter arcing in all directions.

‘Iron without!’ the warsmith’s warriors replied as the grand company plunged headlong into the tunnels of the citadel.

The slaughter that ensued made the fall of the city appear no more than an appetiser at a feast of godless carnage.

Ferrous Ironclaw's twin hearts pounded deep within his Terminator-armoured chest as he stepped through the wrecked hatch and into the chamber at the heart of the Caliphar's palace. The warsmith was covered head to foot in the blood of his foes; for the last hour he and his warriors had fought the defenders hand-to-hand, face-to-face. Though none of the Caliphar's elite palace guard were the equal of a Traitor Marine, they had fought with all the ferocity and zeal they were famed for, and to a man had died well, if messily.

Debris crunching under his tread, the warsmith entered the Caliphar's inner sanctum and glanced balefully around. It was a large chamber, the walls hung with flickering pict-slates and looped with guttering cabling. The lumens had failed, the power now intermittent thanks to the devastation the Iron Warriors had wrought upon the infrastructure of the Crescent City. The only light illuminating the inner sanctum was the flickering of the screens, which every now and then locked on to a feed of the burning city before being consumed by churning static once more.

A sharp detonation sent a shower of sparks arcing across the chamber, snapping the warsmith's attention to the clustered command terminals at its heart. His blood-flecked lips splitting in a feral leer, his metallic teeth glinting in the bright static of the nearby pict-slates, he stepped forwards, his gaze now locked upon the figure at the heart of the chamber.

'Traitor...' the man slumped across the master command lectern spat through lacerated lips.

The warsmith's vision swam as he regarded his foe, his grey military uniform soaked in his own blood and caked with dust. Was this the Caliphar...?

'You'll pay,' the man coughed, the last of strength clearly ebbing away. 'Truly is it said that the wages of sin are—'

'Spare me your decrepit sermon,' said the warsmith, coming to stand before the broken figure. 'I come for your head.'

‘Then take it, abomination!’ the dying man spat, a trickle of blood running down his chin.

Ferrous felt the bow-wave of onrushing fate even as death loomed through the warp, a thousand potential events converging into a cold, bitter singularity. He moved to the left as fast as his hulking Terminator armour would allow, just as a shadow emerged from the darkness at his back.

‘Kill it!’ the Caliphar shrieked as loud as his ruined lungs could manage. ‘Kill the traitor before he dooms us all!’

The Caliphar’s champion was little more than a blur, his genhanced body a scything whirlwind of death.

With a thought, Ironclaw’s serrated lightning blades spat into actinic life and he lashed out, one claw cleaving the air where the cyber-dervish had whirled but a fraction of a second before.

The champion dived back into the shadows before reappearing an instant later somewhere to the right, a pair of matched power scimitars scything out of the darkness in a vicious attempt to cleave the warsmith’s head from his shoulders. Ironclaw snapped his head about sharply, yet still the tip of one blade parted the skin across his left cheek, the wound so clean and precise he barely felt it.

‘I swore to my primarch I would present him with the head of the Caliphar of the Crescent City,’ the warsmith bellowed as the whirling figure dashed to one side, nothing of it but shadow and steel visible. ‘And that I shall do!’

Now the warsmith plunged headlong into that storm of blades. It was clearly the last thing the Caliphar’s champion had expected him to do, and the rhythm of the enemy’s swordplay changed drastically. One moment it was poised and deadly, the next desperate and clumsy. Sparks flew as the scimitars cut into the warsmith’s armour, great tears rent in its fabric. Even as the eyes of the Ruinous Powers turned fully upon him, the pressure of the warp so great it threatened to crush reality to a pulp, the warsmith drew back his lightning claws and brought them together in a titanic sweep.

Where the two sets of fist-mounted, serrated blades converged, the body of the champion was cut into a dozen and more chunks of meat.

Silence fell upon the ruined chamber as the unrecognisable human ruin collapsed at the warsmith's feet.

'It doesn't matter,' he heard the Caliphar whisper behind him, and he turned, flexing his lightning claws as he prepared to decapitate his enemy and deliver his head to the primarch. 'None of this matters...'

The warsmith stepped before the command lectern as the Caliphar raised his head with what must surely be the last of his strength.

'You think yourself the victor in this war,' the Caliphar said, his voice now barely audible. 'You've lost...'

With a last effort, the Caliphar of the Crescent City pushed his broken body upwards and off the command lectern, revealing a glowing pict-slate smeared with his own blood. Then he collapsed, his shattered legs unable to support his own weight, and lay before the warsmith, his face a mask a defiance.

His eyes narrowing, the warsmith approached the lectern, ignoring the man bleeding out at his feet. The screen showed a strategic plot of the region, and a mass of glowing runes had recently appeared in the upper atmosphere, directly above the fortress.

'You see, traitor,' the Caliphar breathed as his death rattle sounded deep in his lungs. 'You really have lost...'

'Fool,' Ferrous Ironclaw replied as the runes upon the pict-slate resolved themselves into solid icons rapidly descending through sub-orbital space. Each rune was a symbol, a clenched black fist within a circle, the hated Chapter sigil of the Iron Warriors' true foe.

The Imperial Fists.

'No,' the warsmith growled.

'I have won...'