



The Masters, Bidding

by Matthew Farrer

In the days between the third and final Waaagh! Ungskar and the wars that the Imperium was to name the Greyblood Tribulations, Chengrel of the Iron Warriors greeted four visitors in his fortress home among the wrecked worlds of the Mitre Gulf.

It was an outlandish procession that came from the landing craft which had touched down at his outer walls. Chengrel watched it with surly suspicion, for all that he had invited these visitors himself. The paths were lit up with the riotous clamour of the Emperor's Children and the more regal but equally dazzling livery of the Thousand Sons. The Night Lords cloaked their armour and kept their silence, but the Word Bearers hoisted their banners proudly and lifted their voices in discordant songs of worship. Chengrel glowered at them all as they converged on the meeting-square he had built, exchanging taunts and boasts.

They had landed in a great ring of fortifications that Chengrel had erected on the world he had claimed, a place designed to flaunt his power. In a half-circle around the eastern walls he had built stone ziggurats capped with platforms for the landers, and broad fields in which

his visitors could set their pavilions. In the centre of the ring were the ruins of an old Imperial settlement, and in these ruins was the meeting-square beneath a canopy of wiry and blighted trees, just large enough for Chengrel to confer with only his most distinguished guests. There was a surrounding wall and an arch for his guests to file through, and a stone platform upon which Chengrel himself could stand and address them.

Chengrel had made his own home out of a crashed orkish raider-ship, which had ploughed into the world's surface during the fiercest fighting of the Waaagh! years before. He had hollowed out the great mound of hull, sunk pits into the rock beneath it, and filled the space with barracks, forges and batteries. The ramming-prow was rebuilt into a high-crowned gate and processional down which Chengrel could lead his warriors when he wished to hunt, or to go forth to war.

It was when Chengrel first picked over the wreck of this ship that he had found an unusual prize. In a net of fine diamond-fibre were a full dozen stones, fist-sized, gently curved almost like eggs, impossibly hard, so smooth they were almost slick to the touch, and such a deep and lustrous red that they almost seemed to burn. Chengrel knew full well what he had found, although not how they had come to be there. Had the eldar really allowed so many soulstones to fall into the hands of the orks? Or had the stones already been torn from their dead owners' baubles that caught a greenskin's eye when their original collector had become a trophy in their own turn? No matter. Although Chengrel himself had little direct use for the stones, he knew many others valued them as precious indeed, and so he sent out his heralds.

For four responses. That gnawed at his pride. Certainly, Chengrel had not expected every one of his summons to be answered. Some of his heralds had been unable to find their recipients amongst the churn of the Eye of Terror or along the perpetual trails of war that the Traitor Legions blazed. Others had returned with rebuffs, and some had not returned at all. But still, no more than four. Was there some plot afoot among the other Legions to defame him and isolate him? What enemies were moving against him?

So thinking, he went down from his fortress to greet his guests.

Master Chengrel was an Iron Warrior of old, who had earned his scars and his honours at the walls of the Imperial Palace during the last

fearful days of the Horus Heresy. Millennia of fighting the Long War had taken its toll on his body, stripping the flesh and then breaking the steel which replaced it. Now Chengrel's remains floated in a thick flesh-syrup within a great four-legged Dreadnought built to his personal design. His face, miraculously untouched by war but bloated and puffy like a baby's, peered out at the world through a hemisphere of armoured glass built onto the hulk's front, with eyes that writhed as though their sockets were packed with maggots.

What those eyes now saw was the four emissaries striding into the square, each seeking to outdo the others in the arrogance and power of their bearing. Chengrel had set out a half-circle of iron chairs for his guests, adorned with sullenly glowing gems and angular scrollwork, and now each wordlessly paid their respects to their host and took their seats.

On the far left sat Hodir of the Night Lords, dressed in worn and pitted battle armour over which he had thrown a cloak of shining black feathers. Every so often, luminous blue-white trails would crawl and sizzle from the cloak and worm their way over the surfaces of his warplate. At each hip was a braided leather rope to which the scalps of his enemies were fixed with wire, each rope trailing far behind him as he walked. As he sat he drew them in, coiling them about his feet and stroking the scalps as though they were pets.

To his right, second in the arc, was Emmesh-Aiye of the Emperor's Children, a notorious reaver and architect of degeneracies. Emmesh-Aiye's skin was pallid and wrinkled, the mark of the neural mites with which he had infested himself on some trackless death world to ensure the constant, agonising stimulation of his nerves. He was armoured in a breastplate of dazzlingly polished silver, studded all down its length with barbed hooks and metal burrs of exquisite fineness and elegance, and he wore his tongue stretched from his mouth, drawn down and pinned over these spikes, so that he could toss his head and relish the sensation of the tender meat being torn.

Third was the Word Bearer Drachmus, who placed in front of his seat a brass bowl of smouldering ash that was his personal talisman. This ash was made from the burning bones of Imperial Adeptus Astartes whom he had defeated but who refused to turn their loyalties to the Ruinous Powers he served; worked so that they would burn forever in the bowl and never be consumed. Atop the left pauldron of Drachmus's

ancient and dark red plate rode a tiny gargoyle whose belly was all bright clockwork and engines, but whose limbs and head were daemon-flesh. The creature grasped one of the great steel horns on his helm and whispered passages from the works of Lorgar in a tiny, scratching voice.

The fourth in the arc, sitting at Chengrel's right, was Khrove of the Thousand Sons, who had arrived alone declaring himself the envoy of the several sorcerer-lords to whom Chengrel had sent heralds. Khrove was dressed in the baroque custom of his Legion, his armour and cloak worked with lustrous blue and gold, adorned with a rich azure surcoat whose hem shimmered with all the colours the eye could describe and with the indescribable hues of the warp. In one arm he cradled a tall adamantine staff, inlaid with threads of psycho-reactive crystal and topped with a great darkened sapphire.

Chengrel's head bobbed in its little curved window as he looked from one to the other, his displeasure unabated. He resolved to make it known from the first who was the master of masters here, and addressed the other legionaries with the following.

'Resolve upon my words, my blood-cousins and fellow champions of the Legions! You attend here upon Chengrel, birthed a child of long-razed Olympia and wrought a blood-child of great Perturabo, mighty among all the primarchs! Named Iron Warrior in the Great Crusade of old and named Traitor when our Legion-fathers rose up to make an eternal corpse of the one who named himself Emperor, in punishment for his vanity and his faithlessness! Made outcast when our Legion was forced from the ramparts of Terra, and made master on unconquerable Medrengard when my warsmith saluted my prowess before Perturabo's gates and in sight of my company!

'It is I who claim this world and make this fortress of it, and I who recovered these caged souls before you,' for the lustrous stones were set at Chengrel's feet, flanked by two of Chengrel's most trusted Terminator guard. 'And although I shall dispose of these stones to whichever of you offers the greatest tribute in exchange, you must acquit yourselves in another way.' The grate of his voice from his speakers mixed with the creak of metal and the hiss of pistons as his tank shifted on its stout legs.

'I am no beast-thrall or petty hetman such as think themselves grand for raising up a rabble in the Eye of Terror or on some decaying colony

world,' he told them. 'And I shall treat with none who are not my peers. For your bids you shall present not only your material offerings, but an accounting. You shall tell, on the honour of your Legions, of a feat of arms and generalship, showing yourself most deserving of this prize.

'And consider now the evidence of my goodwill and favour, for before you begin your bids I shall furnish you with an account of myself, by which you shall know my power and my worth.'

In this way Chengrel of the Iron Warriors began his tale.

'Accursed are the sons of Dorn, who call themselves the Imperial Fists! Accursed are the sons of Guilliman, who call themselves the Ultramarines!

'Do you recall the face of Dorn? His vanity and his intransigence? His petulance? His worming sycophancy?

'Do you recall the face of Guilliman? His arrogance and his presumption? His treachery? His cowardice?

'What soothing balm it was to see those faces at the Iron Cage! Dorn's cries in the trenches, Guilliman's dismay when he saw what we had made of his weakling brother. These were memories I took care to harden against the passage of time and to return to over and over again. By the day of my ascension to my own command, when I watched a cohort of Iron Warriors raise their fists above their heads and shout their loyalty to me, I knew my first endeavour would be to once again see the sign of the Fist and the sign of the Omega brought low together.

'Heggoru! This was the world I chose for my purpose. Slow-boiling Heggoru with its shifting lands of slick, grey rock and the rich red cauldrons of its oceans under sulphur skies. I had passed close by there in Crusade – and you, any of you, did your fleets take you into the galactic south-west? No answer? No matter. At Heggoru, we heard, the Imperial Fists had celebrated the world's compliance with a ring of great works around the polar coast. Towering hive-cities, thrusting high above the heat-haze of the land, linked one to the next with bullet-rails and laser nets that flickered in the cloudy dusks.

‘The Imperial Fists had crowned Heggoru, so they said, given it a regal coronet to celebrate its accession to our Human Imperium. We laughed to hear that, until we saw that Perturabo did not laugh, but looked at the pict through hooded eyes and then turned his back upon them. From then on we only spoke of “yellow-crowned Heggoru” in soft and bitter tones.

‘Much later, too long and strange a time of warp-faring for me to know the years, the name came to my ears again, as I roamed that tract of space brooding upon how best the Crusade’s work could be unworked again. The warp was thick with the babble of Imperial astropaths, and when my own seers plucked the connections between their minds we found the hailing codes of the Ultramarines, the strutting and preening heirs of the strutting and preening Guilliman. They boasted of an Ultramarine’s triumph, doubtless unearned. Bloodshed had come to Heggoru in the form of reaving xenos whose nests the Ultramarines had purged. What water-blooded things the Thirteenth have become, to boast of this as a mighty victory! But boast they did, and when I led my loyal Iron Warriors back to Heggoru their words still burned in my mind.

‘Their words burned, so we burned the cities to match them. We re-crowned Heggoru in the rich yellow of flame, not the spiritless yellow of the Seventh’s banners. We showed the defenders of the Dorn-built cities who was the more steeped in siegecraft. Our lance and battery strikes tore the atmosphere until it boiled, scrubbing whole flights of their attack craft out of the skies, forcing their defence silos to try to track us through superheated clouds and radiation static while we bombarded them with precision. Twenty days we jousting with their cannons from orbit, the sum of the numbers of Guilliman’s and Dorn’s Legions, and on the twenty-first we took to our landers to bring the little mortals their doom with our own hands.

‘I was not as you see me, not then. I strode to war in Terminator array, badged in adamantium and black and yellow. I rode with my assault pioneers in the first flight of storm-torpedoes, spearing through the skin of Roeghym Hive, whose voids had crumbled to us. The upper hive had been sloped to deflect just such an entry, layered and honeycombed to rob a storm-torp of its momentum and trap it in a maze of half-collapsed cells. But those we left behind in the Imperium are stupid, my brothers, and they forget. The defences had been quarried hollow, leached of their strength by complacent generations. Ah, the glorious

clamour of a storm-torpedo's passage into an enemy bastion! There are moments in a siege more satisfying, but few more exhilarating.

'Once we were in among them they forgot any fortitude they had known, and fled from us. I had vowed that I would spend my shells only in true combat, and so instead slew with my power fist and the raking-spikes of my armour, painting my arm in blood to the shoulder. The blood and dust from our bombardment made a red-grey slurry on my fist, which stained the golden aquila from the temple spire when I crushed it in my claws.'

Chengrel's head twitched and bobbed in its fluid as the memories of the slaughter excited him more and more.

'What worth now, the pride of Dorn? Had he made something that could stand against us? He had not! Roeghym was our breach and into it we poured. The Emperor's flocks were panic-blind, and only one of the neighbouring hives thought to destroy its bullet-rail links in time. To reward them, my artisans built blast-carriages that rode out along the rails faster than sound, wrecking themselves where the rails had been severed and flinging plasma charges into the flanks of Tolmea Hive. Along the other line to Behremvalt Hive went the hive's own cars, wrapped in cunning armour fashioned by my metalworkers and warpsmiths, filled with warriors I had handpicked to present my greetings. Cold-armoured, cold-eyed siege teams, adept in crippling a hive's vital systems or weakening its adamantium and carbon-foam bones. And, the fire to their frost, hot-blooded berserkers, brothers who had forsworn their loyalty to the Throne of Gold and pledged it to the Throne of Skulls.

'No one who has not built a fortress can truly understand what it is to destroy one. A fortress falls the way a warrior falls, and every fortress's death is unique. Every tine in Heggoru's coronet died its own death.

'Tolmea died like a warrior before an enemy's guns, its side caved by the plasma charges like a breastplate breached by a bolt-round. For two days it staggered in a death agony and sagged over the crater in its side as a man might double over a death-wound, and then the peak and shoulder fell in upon the foundations, crumpling in that obeisance to dying that we have all seen on the battlefield. The pall from the collapse still shrouded its ruin as we took our leave from Heggoru.

‘Behremvalt was stung by our troop trains like an unwitting scout stung by death world vermin. My warriors were the infection, the venom. The berserkers roared through its halls like a fever in the veins, wetting the toothed chains of their weapons so deeply that they may still drip with Behremvalt blood today. My own Iron Warriors were a subtler poison, stopping the organs and nerves: they crippled the power and data lines, the air and water purifiers, the climate controllers, and left Behremvalt’s corpse dark and still.

‘Massoga Hive perished like a trooper whose foot has kicked a mine. A seismic bombardment cracked its geothermal core and the shockwave of magma that burst up through its foundations toppled the hive, lit up the night and choked the sky. Dekachel Hive bled out, its populace streaming out onto the hot gravel of the wastelands as we wounded the upper levels. Kailenga Hive died a coward’s death, paralysed by the sight of true war, torn between trying to evacuate itself, fight or surrender. The indecision robbed it of sinew and made it prey for us. Dauphiel Hive, weakened the most by the xenos purging, died a death worthy of respect, the death of a wounded veteran who will not allow his wound to humble him.

‘It ended in madness, at Attegal Hive, with all the rest of Dorn’s coronet left behind us in ruin. My berserkers still rode their rage, as though their fury was a furnace and the endless bodies they scythed through just fuel to stoke it. Some had drowned so deep in bloodlust that they chased fleeing refugees away into the wastes and could not be recalled, but the rest put the sacking of Dauphiel at their backs and lunged across the wastes. When they exhausted the fuel in their own transports, they pillaged the refugee columns for trucks or gravel-crawlers; when they had burned out the engines of their new steeds, they tore them apart in pique and rushed on, on foot. They had run loose in bloody delirium through half of Attegal before we caught up and saw their handiwork.

‘We found Khorne’s sigil hacked into the rockcrete walls with chainblades, or scrawled in the blood slicks that ran in the roadways. We heard the guttural prayers they had set the hive’s address systems to repeating, beneath squeals and crackles as the power of the name surpassed the fragile vox-circuits’ tolerances. We heard them screaming the name of their god over the scream of chain-teeth biting bone.

‘Now their brass-shod master’s gaze fell on them, counting the skulls they littered in their wake for him, and as Attegal Hive became a slaughtering-pen he made his favour known. Some berserkers seemed to be running through water, leaving ripples and wakes behind them. Others cast too many shadows, which reared and thrashed with a life of their own. The smoky breeze carried howls and snatches of shrieking laughter that came from no human throat. Gash-marks and bloodstains began to scar the walls where there were none to make them. The daemons of Khorne were making themselves manifest.

‘In silence my brothers and I left the charnel-floor to the berserkers and climbed through the hive. We witnessed screeds etching themselves into its walls, blasphemies bursting from the vox-horns, faces forming in the clouds beyond the window-walls. The trees in the arboreta had turned blood-red and sprouted thorns like fangs, and their boughs thrashed in time with the heart-drums of the daemons below them.

‘Standing at the pinnacle of Attegal Hive I proclaimed our task complete. We cast down the golden aquila that had spread its wings atop the final tine of Heggoru’s coronet, and in its place raised our own marker, a single upright girder decked in adamantium and yellow and black as our own armour was, splashed with blood from Khorne’s killing-house below us.

‘The hives of Heggoru burned! The legacy of Dorn was trampled and cast down!

‘The verminous Imperials of Heggoru perished! The labours of the children of Guilliman were in vain!

‘And so I show to you the trophies of my victory!’

Into the amphitheatre clattered a procession of Defilers, each bearing the wrecked remains of a golden Imperial aquila high on its hull like a diadem.

‘The eagles from each spire-tip that fell into Heggoru’s stinking clouds! The prize from my finest conquest! Iron within! Iron without!’ The two Terminators guarding the bag of stones took up the Iron Warriors’ mantra at Chengrel’s shout, and a moment later it began to issue from the

speech-horns of the Defilers themselves in counterpoint to their tread. The whole meeting-square filled and rang with the noise.

When the monstrous parade had passed, Chengrel declared the first day of the gathering to be over, and bade all his guests depart to muse upon his tale and decide for themselves if they had any to match it. Then, satisfied that he had the measure of this meagre assembly, Chengrel returned to his citadel where he withdrew his bloated head deep into his tank and had his chamber shrouded in darkness.

Emmesh-Aiye hurried away to his barbed and scarred cutter-craft – he craved raw sensation after so long with little but words for his senses to batten on. Khrove was behind him on the trail to the landing-camps, but made no effort to enter the shining, pyramidal lander that hung over his ziggurat. Instead he drew his feet up under him, hanging unsupported in the air, and a moment later the ground beneath him creaked and erupted into a great thicket of thorned tendrils formed of strange stuff that seemed at once metallic and gem-like. They enclosed him and hid him from view.

Drachmus the Word Bearer and Hodir the Night Lord went walking more slowly back through the ruins, their cadres filing behind them and studiously ignoring one another.

‘How do you consider our host, then?’, asked Drachmus after an interval long enough for his little homunculus to have recited the Four Thousand and Eighty-Second Epistle of Lorgar in its entirety.

‘Old,’ Hodir replied thoughtfully, ‘Clever. Fortunate.’ He looked behind him. ‘Well-guarded.’

‘Fortunate,’ Drachmus replied with equal care. ‘Fortunate, indeed. And one whose fortunes will bear watching. Perhaps we are of one mind here?’ Hodir was generous enough to concede this with an inclining of his dark-helmed head. ‘Well then,’ Drachmus went on, ‘we shall hear more of this convocation soon.’ He did not bow or salute, but made a deliberate step away to show the conversation was at an end. Hodir did likewise, weaving his feet so as not to crush his ropes of scalps, and the two parted to return to their camps.

Seventeen hours passed before a klaxon sounded from Chengrel’s fortress, the blaring followed by a quartet of household serfs, who

scattered out through the ruins and to the landing-pads with the message that the master would soon be ready for the new day's audience.

Khrove was the first to return, appearing from his nest of vines as it unravelled and striding alone to the meeting-square to take his seat. After a few moments footsteps sounded behind him, and over them came the voice of Drachmus's daemon-homunculus droning through the opening stanzas of Meditations on Two Transcendences. It was one of Lorgar's more pedestrian works, and the papery little monotone did nothing to capture what nuances it did have. Hodir took his seat, settling silently into the same posture he had had for the previous audience. The addition of two silver armatures mounted on his armour's backpack, which now kept his scalp-ropes suspended in a cat's cradle above his head, was the only sign he had moved at all.

Emmesh-Aiye was the last to join them. He still wore his silver breastplate, although his tongue had been unpinned from it and rearranged on a different sequence of hooks. Across his shoulders was a mantle of glass links, deliberately crude in make so that they grated against one another with a sound to put the teeth on edge. Maddening as the sound was to those around him, it clearly soothed Emmesh-Aiye, whose amplified hearing craved input in this relative quiet.

Chengrel broke that quiet for them, his tank-hulk walking into the enclosure with a heavy tread and taking up position on his stone platform.

'I have granted you ample time to prepare yourselves,' he boomed. 'Now we shall see what you bring me in return. Look to your own accounts. Hodir! Night Lord! Master Hodir, son of the fallen Curze! You shall speak first. Begin.'

If Hodir took offence at the curt instruction, he gave no sign of it. Instead, he stood and walked towards Chengrel with something in his hand.

Instantly, one of the Iron Warrior's bodyguards came forth, something in a shape that might once have been an armoured Space Marine but which was now a hunched and creaking thing. Its legs were fused together and it moved on a rolling tank-track that had replaced its feet, although this track was made of thick muscle and its treads were bone claws. Its arms ended in bundles of gun-barrels and its face,

sprouting directly from its neck between clusters of thick steel horns, was a leering mask made of tarnished ceramite. A meaty tongue flopped through the mask's mouth-slit and tasted the air.

'I intend no violence to your master, and none to you,' Hodir told it, 'but since you are studying me for him, then examine this.' He held out the thing he was carrying: a triangle of white and yellow cloth, obviously cut from a larger piece, embroidered with a complex design. As the green-black tongue lapped the air near it, Hodir turned it over to show that it had been sewn, back-to-back, with a triangle of human skin.

'Skin only recently stripped,' Hodir declared. 'Can you sense that?' The bodyguard, uncertain of its reply, swivelled on its squelching, clicking tread-foot and looked up at Chengrel. 'Fresh to confirm that we do have him, and that he's still alive and healthy. He was when I set out to visit you, anyhow. From there on you must take us on faith.'

'You give me riddles,' replied Chengrel amid the thrum of his speakers. 'Give me an offering and an accounting, or be sent back to tell your Legion of my disappointment with their envoy.'

Hodir did bristle at that, drawing himself up and letting the others see that his free hand had made a fist. But he kept his temper and turned so he addressed both Chengrel and the other Traitor Marines.

'If I am to recount something for my bid,' he said, pointedly not using Chengrel's word offering, 'then my account and my bid go together. Here.' He held up the sewn flap of skin and cloth again. 'I will explain what it is, how we came by it, and what it is worth. To all of you.'

Hodir of the Night Lords began his tale.

'The tattoo on this skin,' declared Hodir, 'is a Navigator crest, the sign of the House of Drunnai. A House of no particular glory. I had not heard of them before the man who yielded us his skin told us his name. Vivyre Drunnai. A young one, but a skilled one. How skilled, you shall see.'

'Vivyre Drunnai is not the bid, but he is part of it.'

‘Now. There is a warp-vortex northward of the Tembine Drifts in the galactic north-west that pierces down through the galactic plane. It boiled there when the Crusade first mapped the borders of what they now call Obscuras, and it boils there still. The violence of the funnel-current is fed by the storms radiating out from the Eye below and north-east of it. Shipmasters driven by haste or hubris sometimes catch the edge of the tide and let it fling them towards Cypra Mundi, but it is a turbulent, dangerous passage. Its lower reaches, I am told, have never been charted, and who is to say if there is any end to it? Perhaps it plunges out of our galaxy and continues forever down into the gulfs. Drift too close into the funnel of the storm and you will be dragged in and dragged apart. There is no surviving it.

‘The vortex is not the prize, but it is part of it.

‘There is a place where the vortex bends through an angle from the push of a counter-tide, and there the storm’s cohesion breaks. That is the Jaw, where a storm-whirl juts out like a greenskin’s chin. It throws out blast-fronts that are felt sectors away, vortices that spin for a hundred light years before they exhaust themselves. It makes storm-stitched patterns that wriggle and swim and fight to come to life. And it disgorges ships. The Molianis Reach in real space out beyond the Jaw is a hulks’ graveyard like few others. The storm drags ships from their courses and plunges them through who knows what depths, and the gravity well of Molianis’s great blue star is where so many of them are dragged back again. A trail of wrecks, parsecs long, strung out and drifting.

‘The ships’ graveyard is not the prize, but it is part of it.

‘The Imperium sits with their back to it! They are so sure that this great ships’ graveyard is a graveyard indeed, and no threat to them. They have built a fortress at the far end of the stream of wreckage. A magnificent thing, truth be told, tier on tier of gun decks, lance mounts, deep-gauge auspex arrays. It trails free-floating fortifications behind it, communications boosters, munitions depots, shipyards and repair docks. Squadrons of warships fuss around it. The scale of the place has grown. They are colonising other moonlets nearby so the fortress crews can expand. Who knows? Perhaps Molianis might one day house a world’s worth of colonists.

‘The fortress is not the prize, but it is part of it.

‘The Imperials are sure that the stream of warp-wreck emerges from the storm broken beyond all chance of threat. Fitful patrols through the graveyard sweep the hulks with auspex, and they mutter on the vox about quarantine checks, wrecks to be sterilised of genestealers and ransacked. Beyond Molianis there are thickly-infested orkish enclaves, and so the Imperium’s attentions turn that way. The goal is to place an Imperial eye between the greenskins and the graveyard, to make sure that no salvage can fall into orkish hands and into their war machine.

‘The Imperium’s unguarded flank is not the prize, but a part of it.’

While he spoke, Hodir had been walking slowly to and fro beneath the window in Chengrel’s tank-hulk, while the Iron Warrior looked down at him with an expression intended to show benevolent indulgence. Now he faced the other bidders, again holding up his token of stitched skin and cloth.

‘We went raiding, my Night Lords and I, in the Greater Tembine Drift, which stretches out across the north-eastern quadrant like a shoulder blade. Ships striking out from the rich worlds of the Lesser Tembine Drift and pushing up through the unsettled layer between them can expect a long and tranquil voyage, coasting on the gentle outward pressure of the drift-tide towards the far northern marches of the Ultima Segmentum. Such was the voyage our prey had in mind when they ignited their drives at Isith.

‘It was a supply convoy, heavy and slow like fattened cett-cows, plodding towards the reaches with materiel from the Mechanicus forges. Fusion-formed alloys, tailored reactant blocks for plasma furnaces, biological stock, weapons, machines. We heard tell that the cargo was on its way to a string of new colonial hives. We had other intentions for it.

‘You need not hear the details of how we struck and what we took. All of us know the ways of these things. You can imagine the ambush and the boarding. We had three of the four ships by the time they reached the Isith jump-zones, plucked them where the Imperial flotillas could not defend them. The convoy’s lead ship was the Hymn of Phelinde, and I marked her as my prey and my prize. We harried her with weapon-bursts and vox-taunts. We collected vox-signals from the taking of the other craft, boosted them and beamed them into the Hymn of Phelinde, to let

them hear how they die, those who fight the Night Lords, and when they did not surrender we opened our own engines and bore down on them, skewering their hull with lance-cuts and flying assault boats into the wounds, driving the crew into their suits, ready for the fighting.

‘To a Night Lord, shipboard survival suits are a weapon in themselves. They blinker the sight, with their little goggle insets or their narrow visors, so the prey’s imagination fills their blocked peripheral vision with monsters almost the equal of the monsters we are. They blur the hearing and fill it with scratches and garbling echoes to taunt tight-strung nerves. In those lucky enough to have vox-circuits, they open themselves to our whispers and screams should we find and break their transmission band, and we always, always do. They surround the limbs with heavy wrappings, burdening movements, concentrating the sense in each prey’s mind that they are cut off, alone, their companions now unfamiliar shapes on the other side of a visor.

‘To a Night Lord, each of these things is like a slender stiletto, planted in the enemy before we even lay hand to them.

‘We breached some sections of the Hymn to space. In others we pumped dusts and toxins into the airflows, or bled superheated gas from the plasma pipes to send firestorms through whole decks, then walked through flames and chemical smoke to cut apart repair teams. We let word of us travel up the ship, always leaving one prey alive long enough to scream a warning into a speaking-horn or flee to spread panic in person. We cut the lighting to whole decks, then left those decks to panic while we showed ourselves in compartments that had thought themselves uninvaded. Then we made those levels erupt in cries or fall silent forever, so that as we worked our way towards the bridge we were fighting enemies tormented almost to madness by their own fear. This is our way, and if you, my fellows, have fought alongside us then you will know it for yourselves.

‘The only way this prey-boat could think to fight back was to spite us of our prize, and drag us into the immaterium to die with them. The ship began to shake around us, and we heard the alarms in the corridors and the prayers and weeping of those who knew what they meant. We had not wrecked the warp engines, not when there would be salvage to be had there, and the captain had given the order to breach.

‘We had little time. We had broken through in a calm current, but soon the fear and the violence would echo, cohere and turn in on us. Geller field systems are tenuous things even on an undamaged craft. We had to move swiftly.

‘Now we became true predators, dealing out quick butchery in place of slow terror. By the time we had scoured the crew-decks and mustered at the base of the bridge tower, hot shadows were moving in the Hymn of Phelinde’s warp-wake, and as we brushed aside the last surviving crew we could all feel the ship shudder and our thoughts twist as conscious force began to grip the Geller field and crush.

‘There were none left living among the bridge crew. By the time we reached them some had turned on the others. Fear? An attempt to mutiny and make for real space again? Warp-phantoms colouring their thoughts? No matter. But then we found that the captain had ceded control of the helm directly to the Navigator roost. Our steersman now was Vivyre Drunnai. And Drunnai’s order was to plunge the ship into that vortex that leads to the Jaw, to be torn apart down to its adamantine bones and its plasma heart.

‘And now the battle for the Hymn of Phelinde, and for our own lives, began in earnest.

‘Engineering servitors had welded the shutter-doors to the final sanctum that held the captain’s and Navigator’s eyries, the welds new enough to still glow in our infrared as we broke through. All the while the vortex tides tore at the Geller field like a butcher trying to flay a carcass with too blunt a knife. We could feel the hottest humours of the immaterium trying to boil into our thoughts.

‘Three servitors were still there, sealed in with instructions to try and fight us. Two had had their welding torches broken so that we could not commandeer them, and those two assaulted us with rivet-drivers that scarred our armour with red-hot plugs of alloyed steel.’ Hodir turned now, dipping one shoulder to show chips and scoring along one rim of his pauldron. ‘The third rushed at us with its torch still ignited and Gyaz, who aspired to lead my Second Claw and is boastful and eager, stepped forwards to show how he could cut it down. Then we heard the ultrasonic whine of its power pack and understood its purpose; it was overcharged and about to explode, and so Gyaz shot it apart instead.

‘In the captain’s roost all light was extinguished, as though he thought darkness might discomfit us. But we could see the smashed holotank, the displays and consoles slagged by the servitors’ torches, and we knew then how desperate we had made this man for him to mutilate his most sacred sanctum like this. He intended to take away all hope we had of breaking back through into the materium.

‘The captain himself was a dim shape behind the glassaic of his support cocoon. “Kill me now if you must, traitors,” he told us through the brass horns that clustered at the corners of the room, “or let the warp take me as it will take you. And let mine be the last loyal life you murder before you yourselves stand before Him for your final, immortal rebuke.”

‘With that he abandoned his threats and turned to prayers, which began to distort and be intertwined with more profane voices and more obscene words as warp influences trickled through the failing Geller field and began to alter the ship. But we realised that not all the screaming in the vox-horns was the work of... outside. No intruder from the warp would ever have cried out an Imperial prayer, or plead for the captain to show mercy and rescind his order. The voice was Vivyre’s, losing his mind to fear as he saw before him a fate that Navigators must understand more keenly than any of us.

‘The captain roared back, his voice shaking the horns, and even with only those mechanisms to give him speech rather than his own throat and tongue, even as the ship’s gravity began to fail and light and sound to distort, we could hear the note of command in that voice that must have propelled his crew to take up arms against us even in their terror. He shouted into the storm, telling the Navigator to obey his captain and his Emperor, lay down his life and soul and deny the traitors to the last.

‘Ulsh breached his cocoon and killed him then. “Traitor” has never been a label he has cared for.

‘Now the guidance of the ship fell solely to Drunnai, and I knew I would perish there. Navigator’s commands must pass through the captain’s own systems to be turned into intricate orders to the helm and crew, manipulating all the ship’s systems in concert. What little direct control a Navigator normally wields could not prepare him for this. We were as good as adrift, at the mercy of the vortex.

‘So I thought. So we all thought. But here is a lesson all Night Lords know: terror transforms. And when Drunnai thought himself lost, his terror ousted all conscious thought. He could not bring himself to abandon his soul to the warp.

‘And so we rode the vortex down. How? I do not know how. I am no Navigator, nor a seer,’ and here Hodir gave an inclination of his helm towards Khrove, who returned the politeness in kind. ‘But I have seen warriors lent a genius by terror. Who amongst you has not seen it, friend or enemy, terror fuelling their prowess until it burns them out entire? Navigator Drunnai, who had steered us into a suicide plunge against orders he had never wished to hear, now broke those orders and fought for his life against the storm.

‘I remember moments of calm when the ship spun in its length so fast that the failing gravity was overwhelmed and we skidded and crashed against the walls. Uzchel, our best demolisher whose chainfists had cut our way from the bridge, was thrown into the dead captain’s cocoon and vented his fury on the corpse and its systems.

‘I remember the times when the vortex stripped the field away from us, and Drunnai would shriek with panic to match the shrieking of the ship’s hull. The shrieks, too, of whatever was grasping the hulk of the ship. Cries of pain at contact with matter, perhaps, or of pleasure at having this new strange thing to play with. Perhaps they were born of no emotion any of us could understand. Perhaps some were even from survivors elsewhere on the ship, meeting the fate from which Drunnai was fleeing. At these times the whole ship would lash back and forth like a crotalid’s tail.

‘I remember seeing the controls come to life again. The slag of the instrument panels began to writhe and rearrange itself, and a ghostly form of the holotank lit up over the wreck of the original. They lit up and showed us our own faces, and faces we had murdered and faces we had fought with, and turned them into faces such as no human has ever worn. Electricity leapt between the craters in the instrument panels, the arcs rising up and taking on shapes I cannot describe, for they have left only pock-holes in my memory. I remember that the sound of the engines, the great deep note that permeates every starship, never ceased, but it faltered and choked, and sometimes became a rhythmic sound like a

living heartbeat, and sometimes like laughter. Uzchel said he heard whispers in it, and when he tried to talk back to them whatever those whispers told him in reply made him howl and swing his chainfists at empty space in front of him.

‘The form of the ship began to soften and stretch around us. The captain’s remains flowed and blended, the debris they lay in bubbled and shifted. Parts of it turned to emerald, parts to blood and parts to light. The whole chamber stretched and narrowed. The deck under our feet suddenly darkened with corrosion and spat little puffs of dust, but as we looked back through the door we saw the antechamber’s walls turn to ribbed bone, gasp and rattle with some manner of life, then fossilise in seconds and become stone. Dancing lights cackled and chased each other around our heads. Gyaz shot a bolt-shell at one, and it turned from the chase and enveloped him for no more than a second. When it pitched him to the deck and departed, he thrashed on the floor and told us that it had dragged him into itself and toyed with him for thirteen years.

‘How long all this lasted I do not know. I can tell you that four months passed by the sidereal calendars between us breaching warp at Isith and overhearing our first Imperial transmissions at Molianis, but to most of us that plummet down the vortex seemed to take only days. But we all know the fickleness of the warp and time.’ The other legionaries made small motions to indicate their assent.

‘Finally, however, the vortex gave us up. After a final, wrenching convulsion, the ship began a steady turning that we realised was a drift through real space. The decks and bulkheads ceased to change, leaving the chamber in its strange, angle-less shape. Beyond it we could see the stone ribs of the remade antechamber walls lit by dim starlight. Cautiously, we left the captain’s sanctum to see what was left of our prize.

‘The warp had remade the Hymn of Phelinde beyond any recognition. Her whole form was drawn out and scattered as though something in the warp had pegged her out on a dissecting table. The hull had opened up to space, in some places looking torn open, in some places simply gone, as though melted or dissolved or stretched until it had parted. In some places it had even grown. A ridge of excrescences had pushed out of the hull along the port side that aped the shape of the bridge tower, even growing vestigial windows. Vanes and turrets had been shorn off or had sunk back into the surrounding hull to form strange,

organic-looking shapes. The plasma engines had finally fallen silent, and we could see the tail of the ship cold, with no reactor heat or drive plume. In the plasteel of the decking was a set of neat footprints, of bare feet the size of a child's, sunk into the metal the way they will sink into wet sand. They meandered into the bridge and ended there. We never learned what made them.

‘But when we turned our attention back the other way we realised that Vivyre Drunnai yet lived. The seals and provitae systems of the Navigator's roost are intended to allow it to function while sealed off unto itself, so that any warp intrusion there might be checked before it can spread to the rest of the ship. Here they had worked in reverse, protecting him from the efforts of the warp to render the Hymn down to nothing.

‘As we walked back through the wreckage towards the roost we could hear Drunnai mewling on the vox, trying to hail the crew. His systems must have been wrecked by the transit, and his eyes out to the rest of the ship were blind. He did not know that we were the only ones he shared the hulk with now. He called for his captain and his retainers. He pleaded for status reports and sustenance. At times he even seemed unsure whether the ship was still in the warp – I think his senses were still ringing from the storm in the Jaw.

‘I think he realised what company the storm had left him with when we began trying to break into the roost. The roost was an easy thing to see now. It had largely withstood the warp erosion, but the hull and decking around it had been reduced almost to lacework. We linked the vox and auto-sensor systems in our armour under the guidance of Hotesch, our signal-smith. These roosts are built with defences and wards, but not against the kind of attack we were mounting now, and not against invaders of our skill. Soon we had control of the internal cogitators of the roost, cut off Drunnai's vox-link and began to use the roost's more powerful systems to spy out our location.

‘The sensors of our own armour had registered whipcracks of noise and flickers in our visors, which we dismissed as the after-effects of the tumult from the voyage. But coupled into the Navigator bubble we were able to decipher what they were. We were listening to a cascade of military-strength auspex pings: a stream of them, all tumbled over one another, some from mere light minutes away, others far older and fainter,

sounded by ships prowling the other side of the system. The Molianis system.

‘With a brilliance born of terror and reflexes strung with the raw instinct to survive, Vivyre Drunnai found a skein of warp-flow down through the vortex from the Tembine Drift into the warp storm of the Jaw. A needle’s eye that leads into a blind and undefended flank of a prime Imperial military system.

‘The Night Lords will ride on Molianis again.

‘And that is the prize. This is what I am empowered to offer you, Brother Chengrel. Take this crest as a token of alliance. What Drunnai did once, he will do again. Send your finest warriors to ride back down the vortex and through the Jaw with us, or honour us by leading the force yourself. Let us come upon the Imperial sentries whose eyes are all turned outwards, and fall upon them, become their red-eyed nightmares.

‘If you wish simply to wound the Imperium, then wound it we shall. If you wish the fortresses of Molianis as your prize then claim them, my Legion has no plans for them. If you wish a share of the plunder when the system is ours, then you shall return to your own fastness with great riches indeed.

‘That is the account and the bid of the Night Lords. What say you?’

Hodir finished his tale standing directly before Chengrel’s tank, with his token upraised. The bodyguard’s tongue had once again slipped out and twitched in the direction of the skin. The other three Traitor legionaries sat and studied the embroidery again, allowing their host to be the first one to speak. After a long silence, he did.

‘My warsmith imparted good words to me,’ he said. ‘He told me “there are none among us more cunning than a Night Lord with the opportunity of murder put before him”. You understand why I recall those words now.’ Hodir made a gesture of assent. ‘You had all the makings of an offering that would honour the Night Haunter’s memory, Hodir,’ Chengrel went on, ‘and perhaps, with my own tale to inspire you, you will be able to leave this place and do so.’

The other three, experienced in reading hints of posture and movement through bulky armour, saw the anger rise in Hodir. They watched as he folded the token with exaggerated care and clipped it at his waist, and they saw how his hands clenched the instant he was not consciously controlling them. Chengrel, not seeing this or not caring, talked on.

‘In exchange for your offering, Chengrel of the Iron Warriors gives his salute to your cunning and your audacity. But let my fortress and my account be an instruction to you. You must learn ambition, Hodir. A legionary with ambition befitting his stature would have come to me not begging for alliance, but piling trophies before me. The heads of the Naval captains and commissars, their caps nailed to their skulls, a bargehold full of materiel looted from their vessels. From Navy vessels, mark you, Hodir. Warships. I would not have accepted an offering of your scroungings from a graveyard of hulks, or some fat and plodding supply convoy.

‘So this is your account? Chasing a handful of cargo haulers and being pulled into a storm you had no intention to enter? This is the tale that will have me think your warband great among the Night Lords? You belie your own pretensions to greatness. But still,’ and there was a slow burbling as Chengrel made what passed for a sigh, ‘if the offerings of these others are more meagre still then I may yet confer the prize upon you.’

As the echoes of his voice died away, the enhanced hearing of the others, Emmesh-Aiye’s most of all, detected a small, rhythmic, metallic noise. It was the mechanised joints in Hodir’s armour. They were sounding as he rocked almost imperceptibly back and forth, one hand now openly gripping the hilt of the power knife slung at his left hip.

‘When the Night Lords return to Molianis,’ said Hodir in a voice plainly shaking with the strain of controlling his anger, ‘I do not think we will enlist the forces of Master Chengrel as our allies.’ For a moment he seemed to have more to say, but instead he walked stiffly to his seat, placed himself upon it and would say no more.

‘Drachmus!’ boomed Chengrel as his bodyguard lurched back into the shadows by his tank. ‘Drachmus of the Word Bearers! Your Legion has written its history with distinction. I have no doubt that you have a

magnificent tribute and majestic tale to bid for my prize. Speak, Drachmus, and stake your claim.'

For a few moments Drachmus still sat, staring down into the bowl of cinders on his lap and listening to the imp on his shoulder declaiming the Liturgy of Vilemost Blessing. Finally he seemed to see something in the ashes that pleased him. He placed the bowl carefully on the flagstones and walked to the centre of the half-circle. His gargoyle lowered its head and dropped its voice to a whisper, but never stopped speaking as Drachmus raised his own voice over it.

'Lorgar tells us in the eighth chapter of the Admonition to the Belocrine Crusade that "they are contemptible who seek an abdication of the self in subjugation to the transcendent", and now you shall hear how I and my brothers gave exegesis to his words through bold action, through spiritual strength and through the war we brought to the world of Aechol Tertia.

'How wretched was the furthest world in the Aechol cluster when we came upon it! Tertia had been a world of humanity since ages before our memory, paying tribute to the Great Crusade and its self-proclaimed Emperor. But the shadow of the Imperium waned over the millennia, the grip of the dead faith of the aquila began to slip. Aechol became fickle. One of its worlds fell to the lure of the four-armed marauders heralding the hive-fleets, and only then did the Imperium show a face in the system to stamp out the infection. But they won no love from Aechol by it, and before long Aechol Tertia was in open secession to seek shelter in the fold of yet more xenos – the ambitious and striving tau, who seek not to expunge other races but to subjugate and regiment them under the "Greater Good" in whose name they claim to rule.

'But Lorgar tells us in the Varigon Encyclical that "the strong hand cannot be directed by the clouded eye" and as you shall see the eyes of the tau are clouded indeed. Their viceroys promised a just and firm rule of Aechol rather than the capricious and neglectful Imperium, but having taken the reins at Aechol the creatures could not hold them.

'The tau do not understand the warp-touch in the way that humans can. They cannot feel the currents of the god-sea and respond to it, can never share our relationship to the primal. And thus blind, they knew not how to govern once a new generation began to grow on the world they

had “freed” for themselves to rule. The children grew. Their children grew. The numbers of psykers grew. And the tau would not understand what was happening. They scoffed at the Imperial traditions as witch-myths peddled by Imperial confessors, to foment anger and weaken the flock for more effective control. And so the warp-touch spilled out upon Aechol Tertia.

‘Lorgar tells us in the Sixty-Four Primary Meditations that “the gifts of the god-sea must never slip the traces of understanding” and when we saw the fate of Aechol we gave praise to the primarch’s words. Here was a world caught between two masters, slipping free of the xenos leash, but not yet back beneath the shadow of the aquila. A world ready for a deeper, grander, truly godly allegiance.

‘When we overflowed the broad land that rode high against the planet’s polar circle like a pauldron on a shoulder, we found the frost-dusted shingle plains crisscrossed with railtracks and pocked with mass-driver silos. When Aechol had been in its prime, the tau had loaded shells full of Aechol’s silica sands and rich biocultures, and blasted them into orbit for their freighters to snare and drag back to their own heart worlds. After the tau quit the system, bands of humans came fleeing from the bloodshed further south and turned the stripped silo compounds into refuges. Some still held out, some were abandoned, some had become home to psyker-children and become charnel houses or worse.

‘Two of Aechol’s continents straddled the equator. The first was a jagged, dislocated thing split by two tectonic seams, knuckled with mountains and restless with earthquake and lava. The humans here were base creatures of no dignity who scavenged the rubble of tau-built cities. In the winters they formed great caravans, travelling to sell their salvage to the surviving cities along the temperate coast. The scavengers prized their psyker-children highly, and willingly took the risks of raising them in order to make them weapons against their rivals.

‘The second equatorial continent was low and flat, and stippled with seas and forests where survivors lived and warred. A belief had sprung up there that the psyker resurgence had come upon the world because the tau had fled it, not the reverse, and so they had turned the old tau sandmining rigs in the shallow inland seas into holy places. Here they would congregate according to ceremonial calendars, ritually hang those they suspected of psykerhood, and perform acts of worship to abandoned

tau artefacts, pleading for their old xenos masters to return and deliver them. Between the great lakes the rest of the old citizens had taken their loyalty in the other direction, hailing the emergent psykers as their saviours, reaching back for old scraps of memory of the Imperial faith to weave fanciful stories of saints and angels around the mad and possessed creatures whom they made their kings and prophets.

‘It was the last continent, and among its serried islands and basalt reefs, where madness had truly incarnated. Here was where the tau had laid down their quarantine camps for what they thought was madness and rebellion, exiling here the first psykers to arise among their subjects as they strove to stay ascendant. By the time we landed there, the black cliffs and lichen groves had become playgrounds to the warp-touched at their maddest and most free. When we stepped from our lander we were greeted by a flayed torso and head that walked towards us on spider-legs made of lightning, calling our names. Behind it crawled a thing made of four human bodies that wriggled along on a tangle of limbs and turned the ground it passed over to bleeding flesh.

‘But Lorgar tells us in the second book of the *Tractatus Entropia* that “to some Powers it is given to us to be pupils; to some we are destined to be soldiers, but to others we know ourselves to be their masters, and over some we must understand that we are stewards”. So I had sermonised to my brothers before we landed, to resolve them upon our mission. We were here as stewards, as builders and marshals and generals, and the folk of Aechol Tertia, awoken to the grandeur of Chaos, were to us as children now, as pupils given us to guide.

‘We sought them out, these wild ones who ran in packs or covens or roamed alone. They were feral, even the potent ones, wild and untrained, and we contained them and brought them to heel, showed them the meaning and the glory of their natures. Others were insane, or given over wholly to something that had entered them as their untrained gifts blazed into the immaterium. We found places where distance and dimension had been mauled and folded in the wake of some calamitous possession that had consumed its host utterly. We found stretches of land burned sterile by warp-fire, or torn up as though by monstrous hands or claws, although we never found any possessed whose forms matched those marks.

‘Some we broke to the lash, some we bound with wards and scriptures. Some could not be made subjects, and then with prayers and

absolutions we broke the flesh vessel and let the pure essence dissipate back into the warp. Some we harnessed to occult engines or bound into metal beasts of war. And when that land was ours we moved north again.

‘On the continent of seas we came as both conquerors and liberators. We subjugated the tribes with might and with zeal and inspiration. Assembled in great throngs along the shores, they watched while we stormed the old tau rigs and slaughtered their enemies there. After that they did not trudge before us as serfs, but marched joyously in our train as acolytes, begging any Word Bearer they saw to teach them, or bless them, or pray over them, for as Lorgar tells us in the Four Entreaties to Kyush-Beghan, “it is the breaking of dead loyalties that leads to transfiguration and rapture”. We put them to work rebuilding the rig-cities as fortresses, temples and armouries. Then we moved on anew.

‘We voyaged to the shore of the great fractured continent and its cities. No great hives these, but sprawls full of violent slums, the compounds of vicious and arrogant nobles, and towers or pits where the raw psykers would congregate and fight or brood. To each city we announced our presence, declared that we were there to teach them a more potent faith than the leprous lies of the Imperium or the bloodless wittering of the tau’s “Greater Good”. Some cities embraced us and saw us in to preach and teach. Some did not recognise us for what we were and fought, and we sent the smoke of their burning into the sky as a beacon to the faithful.

‘We rode out into the volcanic plains at the end of the winter, and by the turning of the summer every scavenger clan was mustered behind a Word Bearers banner and their chieftains pledged to us. When the next winter in turn came we did not allow them to flee to the temperate coasts, no – now we made them prove themselves to us. They raised a chain of shrine-cities across the heart of the continent, then mustered for war and raiding across the sea to the north, doing battle in the bitter winds and bringing Tertia’s final continent into our grip.

‘We could make the people of Aechol march for twenty-four hours without rest, fight like daemons with autogun or blade or simply their fingers and teeth, and send up a shouted sacrament to the Four Powers in beautiful unison from an assembly that might number ten or ten thousand. Every chieftain could recite the titles of all the works of Lorgar and repeat scriptures on spiritual leadership, fealty, zeal and hatred of the

Imperium. Every ordinary subject on Aechol could bow down and say the correct blessings and oaths when a Word Bearer passed them by, and by now every psyker had been bound over to service in the great congregation of Chaos, or had laid down their life in disobedience. We had found Aechol the home to a worthless rabble, and made of it a congregation befitting any temple from Milarro to the palace of the primarch himself.

‘Now we remade this world. Every city was rebuilt around its shrine, and we put the forges on our own war-hulk to work to turn out what was needed: weapons, wargear, everything from devotional icons to brands with which to etch the proverbs of Lorgar upon our new soldiers’ flesh.

‘For we knew what was coming. Our omen-setters had seen an eagle’s wings spread across the stars, and been haunted by visions of kneeling before a shrine to the Four Ruins that remade itself into a golden throne amid screams and the crashing of hammers. We knew that the Imperium was on its way.

‘And they broke! Broke, my brothers! The aquila’s claw broke upon the rock we had made! A flotilla of warships, two great transports of the Imperial Guard, a clarion-craft bonded to the Ecclesiarchal sisterhood, and they could not sway Aechol Tertia from our teaching! Their soldiers disgorged onto the surface in their millions, sure of easy conquest, but we harried them on the frost plains, we savaged them with ambushes and raids as they tried to overthrow the temple-forts beneath the volcanoes, we made them pay a hundred lives for every las-bolt and siege shell they fired at the rig-cities that yet stand in the inland seas!

‘The Sisterhood spread out with the Imperial vanguard, to make Aechol buckle once again to Throne and eagle, but now our congregation showed us what they had learned. They marched with their own banners held high, the Eightfold Arrow and the icons of the four greatest behemoths of the god-sea. The Imperials shed blood on the frost, burned our tanks beneath the ash clouds, even felled brother Bearers of the Word in our fortresses... But they could not make our congregants doubt their loyalty. They could not sow treachery among our flock.

‘The Guard fought until our counter-attacks rolled them back, exhausted them and crushed them. The Sisters preached and burned until the Aecholi turned on them in flames of rage and destroyed them.

They even brought inquisitors, two learned old fools with great retinues whose boasts, we were told, were that they could loosen the hold of Chaos on the most dedicated minds. And both their heads swung by their hair from the front of my Land Raider as we paraded in triumph down the length of the volcanic plains! All their learning and all their violence. And not a single word of treachery could they sow. Aechol Tertia remains a bastion of the Eight Blessings of Chaos, loyal to the true faith to this very day.

‘This is what faith can achieve, Master Chengrel! This is the power that worship brings! Does Lorgar not pay tribute to it in the Pentadict, and the Book of Lorgar, and the Codex de Barathra? And so in celebration of what blessings we may earn through worship, here do I present my offer. But say the word, and from my craft up above us I shall bring you an endless scroll, warp-charged, that will hang in the air about you and present you with the words of any and every scripture of Lorgar, moulded to your thoughts and situation, for you to be enlightened and strengthened. With it I offer sixty-four Flesh Prayers, the eyeless and limbless bodies of the enemies of Chaos, now with their minds stripped and left only with the ability to howl out prayers and psalms to Chaos. They are all strong, all will cry out their prayers many times before they perish, and between them they recite every major supplication and blessing from our body of doctrines. Also do I pledge to you four orbital shrine-spires, to be wrought by the finest artisans of my congregation. Each shall be a personal retreat for your worship and meditation, each dedicated to one of the four Powers who are the chief manifestations of that ultimate and divine Ruin to which we all owe fealty. They shall be consecrated in your presence and set in motion about this world, that you and your warband may always know that the gods of the warp watch over you.

‘How say you, Chengrel Iron Warrior? Do you accept our price?’

Chengrel’s face had distorted in an expression that after a moment became recognisable as concentration. His eyes had drifted closed, and his toothless mouth worked. After a moment he opened his eyes and spoke.

‘You speak with great care of your... missionary efforts, and the state of the world before you arrived there. But when you come to the meat and bone of the matter, Drachmus, to the iron of the matter, you

leap over it with little care. Is all your story about preaching? About listening to this rabble say their lessons? Have you no pride in how you met the Imperial assault?’

‘The war was magnificent,’ declared Drachmus in reply, as his little daemon scuttled up behind him, clambered up his back and resumed its perch on his shoulder, whispering all the while. ‘But the war was the proof of our work, not the work itself. I have spoken to you of the spreading and marshalling of faith, Master Chengrel. The true faith that our primarchs and ancestors battled the Emperor himself to uphold. Is this not the great work, as Lorgar tells us?’

‘It is not, Drachmus!’ snarled Chengrel, his tank creaking forwards as he spoke. ‘It is not! The great work is not to prate of this verse and that psalm, and these prayers and those books! Shake the dust of Colchis from your feet, Drachmus, and remember yourself! Remember your Legion and your legacy! Does the shaming of your primarch mean nothing to you? Are you so soft-hearted that you set aside your grudge so easily? I set nothing aside, Drachmus. I do not value the scriptures and scrolls you offer me. They will not win you my prize, and your account, which could have had me hail you a true brother, does not earn my respect. You may be seated.’

Drachmus turned to look at each of the other guests in turn, but none would give any word or any sign of their thoughts. The Word Bearer walked to his seat, picked up his bowl of smouldering bone and stared into the smoke from it as he stood with his back to Chengrel’s tank.

‘I withdraw,’ declared Chengrel when it became apparent that Drachmus was not going to turn around. ‘Emmesh-Aiye of the blood of Fulgrim. Khrove, scion of Magnus. Consider what you have heard from your brothers and resolve, each of you, to tell a tale worthy of your Legions’ names.’

Once again Chengrel’s tank backed away from the little assembly and stalked off, and after a few moments the other four Chaos Space Marines made their impassive way back to their landing-camps to let the night end and the next day of bidding begin.

‘So. Neither of us, it appears,’ observed Drachmus to Hodir. Once again, the two found themselves walking away from the meeting together,

with Emmesh-Aiye loping rapidly ahead of them in his clinking glass cloak and Khrove, solitary and inscrutable, hanging behind.

‘None of us at all,’ growled Hodir in reply. ‘It seems to me that so-called Master Chengrel has made up his mind that his prize will not change hands at all, whether or not he has done so consciously.’

‘Chengrel’s strength must be formidable, to entitle him to such a prize, let alone to this demeanour,’ said Drachmus. Everything in his tone made the statement a question.

‘To parade such a prize in front of armed visitors would require great... confidence that one had such strength,’ Hodir replied.

The two walked on a little further, each turning to look at the terrain about them and back at Chengrel’s palace. Each examined the other’s marching retinue. Each knew the other was doing the same. Each knew that the other was appraising their followers as potential opponents as well as potential allies. Neither bothered to comment on the fact.

They came to a halt at the top of a little rise from which they could see their landing-ziggurats and pavilions. Emmesh-Aiye was a dot scrambling up his ziggurat’s steps to the open hatch of his cutter.

‘Do Lorgar’s scriptures have much to say on being ready for the necessity to strike?’ Hodir asked.

‘Indeed,’ Drachmus chuckled. ‘I can think of over a hundred passages.’

‘I thought so.’

At that moment Khrove overtook them, moving up the road, in haughty strides but somehow seeming to glide along even faster than the movement of his legs warranted.

‘Have you a bid ready, then, Lord Khrove?’ asked Hodir as it became clear that the Thousand Son was about to simply pass them by.

‘A bid and an account, as have we all,’ Khrove answered him.

‘We were discussing our host’s humours,’ said Drachmus. ‘We have contingencies ready if matters go astray.’

‘As have we all,’ said Khrove again, and with a perfunctory salute with his staff was on his way. The other two Legion contingents parted a moment later and went their own ways.

‘These reports I hear do not move me to admiration,’ Chengrel declared to his sullen guests the following afternoon. ‘Under the Warmaster’s banner we lanced the hide of the false Imperium from Cadia to Calth and back again. How is it that the Legions send such little lost lambs to me now? Emmesh-Aiye of the Legion of Fulgrim, I know that you have special reason to desire what I offer. Come before me and prove it.’

This day Emmesh-Aiye had not come alone. Pinned to his flesh were two long cords of woven skin, and tethered by collars to these cords were two crippled and naked followers, twin brother and sister, both Emmesh-Aiye’s slaves of many years.

Emmesh-Aiye had blinded the boy and deafened the girl, and then had cut off their arms at the shoulders. In this way they were always aware of one another, but unable to converse or embrace. Sometimes their master allowed them to sit together, clumsily trying to comfort each other with their cut and scarred bodies unable to embrace, Emmesh-Aiye giggling and trilling with excitement over the misery he was inflicting.

Unable to shape words with his mutilated tongue, Emmesh-Aiye would grunt and yelp and clash his distended fingers in a cacophony that he had carefully and brutally trained the boy to interpret. Now strutting in the centre of the meeting-square, Emmesh-Aiye began to warble and clap. At each pause in his antics the boy-twin spoke while the girl, unable to hear her brother’s words, looked up at Chengrel or around the chamber at the others.

‘Emmesh-Aiye, whose words I speak, speaks his gratitude,’ said the master through the voice of his slave. ‘Emmesh-Aiye, whose will and instrument I am so pleased to be, speaks welcome and companionship to his fellow devotees and servants of the Powers of the Wellspring.’ Hodir and Khrove exchanged a look at that, and Chengrel’s expression turned stony, but Drachmus nodded and stirred the smoking ashes in his bowl.

‘Emmesh-Aiye presents himself for your admiration as the brave, the elegant, the exquisite master in the train of Slaanesh. Emmesh-Aiye shall present his offering and his account, certain that both shall delight even as our service to the Great Ruin delights us all. Emmesh-Aiye now speaks to his fellow masters direct, and bids my voice to speak just as his own as he recounts a tale of his deeds.’

In such a fashion, laced with both vanity and strangeness, did Emmesh-Aiye begin his tale.

‘It is evident that there is no higher calling than of delight,’ went the boy-twin’s words, ‘and there is no higher delight than subjugation at the feet of Slaanesh, who bestows riches of excess that this cold and rule-bound universe cannot match. What better account to present than that of a liberation from drudgery and the elevation into rapture? Is this not the most perfect refinement of the concept of victory?’

‘We all know, we of the Nine Legions, of the one Legion among us who have turned their back on delight. Who have not only allowed the life of the senses to slip through their fingers but who have opened their hand and let it fall into the dust.’ Emmesh-Aiye’s gestures aped his words, slowly uncurling the six joints in each of his six fingers. ‘You, Khrove, subject of the Great Conspirator, may vouch for this! These are your enemies as they are mine. The devotees of Nurgle. And here is what I won from them.’

‘My court and I were dancing our celebration of the ruin of the maiden world Ethuaraine when word came to me that Typhus, that bitter little soul, was mustering his plague fleet for some great work. The news pricked my wits, woke me to possibilities. What a conquest! What a victory to lay at the feet of the Ecstatic Prince! What new doors might be opened to my consciousness in reward!’

‘My sweet daemon-consorts slid their barbs into my senses and cast visions into my eyes and words into my ears. They showed me Typhus’s contention with some mighty Imperial preacher, who had led a great host of his faithful to claim a world whose own faith was already claimed elsewhere. They showed me Typhus raising his tattered banner in the fray, the confrontation that drove the Imperial invaders back, and the tiny clutch of eggs under the preacher’s skin, undetected among the sting-welts from Typhus’s unhallowed Destroyer swarm, incubating in him even

as their parent swarm lived in Typhus's own flesh. Soon the upstart swarm had made a hollow wreck of the upstart missionary's body but yet had not taken his life, and now Typhus was preparing to follow the failed crusade back home, wither the man's hive down around him and take him away with them, reborn into an endless life of servitude to despair.

'How repugnant a fate! How bountiful my Thirsting Mistress's generosity that allowed me to make him mine instead! Truly I am the instrument of magnificence!

'My visions showed me the Terminus Est leading Typhus's fleet out of its anchorage, and we flew like darts to remain ahead of them. We found his doomed preacher before he did, and we went to work.

'The man had ordered himself into seclusion, you see. He had ordered the reclusiam at the summit of his temple to be sealed, with himself and the handful of survivors of his failed crusade inside. He understood he had brought contagion back from the dark places, and he had it in his mind to bow down before the aquila in prayer until his Emperor rewarded his passion by burning the swarm out of his flesh. But his Emperor's ear seemed deaf to him, and when the swarm hatched anew his cries for his gold-enthroned god were drowned out by the cries of his congregation devoured around him.

'But his true salvation was on its way, by my hand.

'I brewed a delicious psyker-scent that we breathed into the blooms that lined the temple roads. Now the fragrance coaxed the pilgrims' spirits out of the drab grey rut of the Emperor's footsteps. My courtiers sent whispers floating about the penitents so that their scourges and brands inflamed their senses rather than punishing them.' Emmesh-Aiye no longer strutted, but hunched over and padded about as if creeping among shadows. The clinking of his armoured feet against the flagstones counterpointed the rustle of the bright-coloured rags that dragged from his ankles. A drop of pinkish-white fluid, formed in one of the gouges in his tongue, ran down it to the pierced and dangling tip, and splatted to the ground.

'Oh, none were wise to us, for we were cunning ghosts wrapped in clever warp-weaves,' he went on in the voice of his slave, 'but the mangy hounds who herd the cud-chewing Imperial mob could see that mob

becoming unruly, and tried to lash and harangue them into renewed obedience. Useless! Fruitless! The fire was spreading. We had opened minds, and now we opened bodies, letting the herd see their hounds picked apart and spread out beneath the hot purple-white sun. They began to rejoice as they felt their senses brightening, and raced to outdo one another in fresh ways to flood their nerve-endings. Now we showed ourselves, my courtiers and I, and danced among them on blood-slicked roads as the spires lit up and then burned down around us.

‘Finally, as the very shape of the stones and the colour of the sky began to change, and the breezes and flowers themselves began to dance and sing and murder, Typhus’s plague fleet arrived.’

Here, at the memory of the joke he had played, Emmesh-Aiye was consumed by fits of laughter that doubled him over and shook him to his knees. Both his slaves instantly knelt to mimic him, but Emmesh-Aiye paid them no heed. His mutated larynx gave out squeals so shrill that the blind boy-slave moaned in pain to hear them, and guffaws so deep that for a few moments Chengrel was sure he could feel the inhuman racket buzzing through his life-support syrup and into the remains of his organs. Finally the fits passed and the Traitor Marine collected himself.

‘When the Terminus Est appeared in the night sky,’ he said, ‘it dimmed the stars around it with its presence, its bleak aura glowing like a chilly canker sore over our heads, eating the life out of the space around it to draw the rest of the fleet through. Skeletal hulks, whose crews brooded in decks rotted open and sealed shut again with hull plates flayed from vessels they preyed upon, drives burning hot like killing fevers.

‘And oh, my brothers and companions, it was a killing fever that came upon Typhus when he saw what had become of his conquest! He led his reeking and downtrodden column down to the doctrinopolis where we ran and slit our skins and laughed aloud. He planted his boots on the great road that led to the doctrinopolis spire and spoke in a voice like a bone-rasp, that clouded and cracked the road he stood upon, which had been dusty flagstones and was now brightly-coloured glass.

‘There was no grandeur to the rage of Typhus. He did not brandish his blade up to the sky or call down vengeance in a thunderous voice. But in that sick-roughened tone he demanded who had brought this insult

against him. I answered his call, dancing upon the chiming, scented glass of the road in front of him. He hissed his rebukes of me, struck with his blade at me, sent fat and dripping creatures of his swarm through the air to sting and lash at me. I capered away from him, eluding him, drawing him on.

‘As Typhus gave chase, drooling mucus from his armour-seams, his host began to make war with us. And faltered! Failed! For we had made this place so wholly ours that when the thralls of Nurgle tried to mar it, it changed them instead! Our new city brought tingling to their long-dead nerves and thawed the rime over their hearts. The foot soldiers, the ones with no Mark from their master but only the marks of their weary servitude to him, cried and spasmed as our delirium woke their senses in ways they had never known. Typhus had brought daemons whose bodies were made from the purest dream of rot given form in the Wellspring, but my own master’s most exquisite beasts and fiends came to meet them, and when they found that the enemy would not dance with them they took pity on such creatures as were made unable to feel delight, and unravelled them.

‘As for Typhus himself, vengeance had put blinkers on his eyes and all he could see was myself, his enemy, dancing ever backwards.’ Emmesh-Aiye’s distended fingers whipped and whistled in the air, sometimes conducting the mad daemon-chorus that saturated his memories and sometimes re-enacting his duel against the champion of Nurgle. Above him Chengrel’s face twisted in distaste, but Hodir, of all the onlookers the most accomplished in bladework, noted what was concealed in the buffoonery of Emmesh-Aiye’s movements: the speed and poise, the deft nuances to his parries, the lightning shifts of balance and angle on his ripostes. Hodir grew thoughtful, his hand once again drifting to his knife-hilt.

‘I tempted him and baited him, oh, and I drew him on into our city. In the great crossroads, beneath the cathedral, its buttresses meeting a half-mile over our heads, we fenced together – he silent, I laughing my delight as my combat-glands flushed ever-stranger liquors through my veins. Finally Typhus’s rage pushed him into speech.

“You dare?” he demanded of me. “This city and this world and all its prizes were mine, in the name of Grandfather-Beyond-The-Eye. They

were mine that they should be his. Who are you to dare denying us what is ours? Have you no concept of what you contend against?"

"Contend?" I asked, for this was long ago and my face and tongue had not yet been remade as you see them. "No contention here, only joy! No words of harsh contumely here, only the clear and endless song of nerves and dreams flayed bare!" And I spread my arms wide, inviting Typhus to turn his senses outwards and behold the blessing we had made. But he only saw me as inviting him to assault me anew.

"Why do you tolerate this treatment from this grandfather of yours?" I asked him as we duelled again. "Your grandfather (if such you must call him, for surely your primarch's sire is your grandfather) has laid this reeking cloak upon your body and soul and called it good! Your grandfather's curse is not the plague or rot, it is numbness, sloth, eroding your passions and senses into drab despair or plodding servitude! Who would inflict such a thing on you is not your friend, Master Typhus. Let me show you! Let me turn you outwards again! Exchange your grandfather's sulking stagnation for my mistress's blazing raptures!"

'But Typhus, he would not be swayed, such was the draught of bitterness that he had swallowed to the dregs so long ago. "Grandfather?" he retorted, and swung his scythe with fresh strength and fury. "That broken toy in its palace on Terra is no grandfather of mine. His blood was water-weak, and his sons took on his weaknesses. Look at you!" and he matched the words to a twist of blade that came exquisitely close to opening me. "They tried to become conquerors and never understood what conquest truly means. True conquest is not defeat. True conquest is despair. True conquest is taking not only the life but the will to live. I will mortify the desires of my enemies to live, rot their souls into despair, and ride that despair into dominion. But you, you prancing puppet," and with that he stepped back, presenting his blade en garde, and looked me up and down, "Fulgrim's little whelps never did understand, for all that they bragged about how they would open the doors of their own minds and understand all. The soil of Chemos grew nothing but poppinjays."

'At that I laughed again. "Misguidance upon misguidance," I told him, as I watched the little creatures hatching from his hive and swarming into the air only to scatter senseless about his feet as our perfumes reached them. "I am no child of Chemos. Isstvan and Tallarn and Terra and even lost Skalathrax were memories by the time the Emperor's Children called

me into their ranks. And conquest? Of what value is conquest? What cares the gleeful mind for conquest when the ecstatic awaits? You think that taking away that grey little missionary's faith has made him another conquest for you? Let me show you what we have proven on him! Let me show you what he is with the chains of mortal sense taken from him!"

'And with that I sang a command in a voice that shattered all the glass flagstones underneath us, and Typhus looked up to see two Raptors from my court's militia, carrying their passenger down from the Cathedral spire. His hair, which had hung to his waist and been matted with pus and sweat in his seclusion-cell, had been washed, perfumed and braided, and each braid was knotted about one of the Raptors' wrists. Their claws gripped his shoulders.

'And Typhus beheld that this man, this preacher and crusader, set so high in the Ecclesiarchy, was not his prize now but ours. He saw the marks, heard the delicate warp-keening that wreathed the man's twitching body, smelt, even over his own supernatural plague-reek; the warp-musk that the preacher's flesh had begun to sweat. And he saw what had become of that first infection, the eggs that his swarm had planted whose blossoming had brought his plans and mine into motion.

'The destroyer hatchlings in the preacher-man's flesh had nearly claimed him for Nurgle's embrace, but we had worked too much of Slaanesh's wiles on him for that to last. In the preacher's body the Nurgle swarm was transfigured. Clouds of brilliantly-hued mites swarmed about his face, so small they could have been coloured smoke. Spiders pushed their way out through the flesh and then clung to it with their bright red and gold legs, holding the wound apart so the meat beneath could be stirred by the air. Elegant worms in magnificent clashing hues wriggled under his skin and hatched forth to spit sparks and perfumes at one another. The preacher's eyes were gone, but his face was pulled in a grin of delight, not the scowl of despair.

'This final humiliation Typhus could not bear. He hawked a battle-curse from his inflamed throat and lunged forwards, intent on wrecking the evidence of his defeat, but the Raptors opened the throats of their engines and bore the man away. He roared with his psyk-voice, calling the foul breath of his grandfather to wither us, and sent his Destroyer swarm to devour the preacher afresh, but our Prince's touch was on that place too firmly. His swarm scattered to the ground, insensible and

already mutating, and his warp-call was choked off as our mistress's songs pressed in upon him.

'I laughed at him, and laughed some more, and he chased me into the middle of my host. There he rasped and roared and laid about him, until he began to see the faces of his own soldiers around him. Some were overcome by what we had shown them, dancing in among us. Those who had fought that liberation were paraded in pieces, heads and limbs tossed and juggled and kicked underfoot. And in amongst this I presented myself again, ready to duel Typhus until the duel ended one of us. But Typhus stared at me a long moment, and then in the sickly intruding light-burst of a teleporter he was gone. Within the hour, I was to hear the word of my seers that the Terminus Est had left orbit and was forging its way to a jump zone. Where the tiresome brute went after seeing our wonders, I do not know.'

Emmesh-Aiye's words tapered off, and he stood slumped on Chengrel's little stone stage as though his theatrics had exhausted him. He let his eyes close for a moment, then stalked back towards his seat, head down, yanking hard on the collars of his slaves and making them stumble behind him. He dropped into his seat with a clatter of armour and ornamental fetishes, and sat there silent.

'We thought something from that tale would be your bid here, brother,' said Khrove, after it became apparent that Emmesh-Aiye did not plan to speak further. 'You have presented your account, but what is your payment to be? Pardon my impatience, but our host must hear it before I speak.'

But they never heard what Emmesh-Aiye planned to offer for the stones, for at that moment Chengrel stamped the adamantium feet of his hulk against the flagstones and thundered the anger that had been building in him while the Slaaneshi had given his account.

'No!' he roared. 'No more! I forbid it! I shall not hear it!' The hulk's motors groaned as it tilted back and forth, and there was a great crack as one of its rear legs broke a flagstone in two. 'You think this some sort of noble account? You think this is a tale befitting one of the Legionis Astartes? You think this should win anything but my contempt?' The girl-slave had shrunk behind Emmesh-Aiye, staring at Chengrel wide-eyed;

the boy could not see him but wept quietly at the pain that Chengrel's shouts brought on his hearing.

'No more! No more of this treachery! Count yourself blessed by your so-called Prince, Emmesh-Aiye, that I do not crush you upon this spot and have your carcass flung into the corpse-marshes! How can you brag of this? Have you any conception of how low you have brought yourself?'

Chengrel's fury had set the scraps of his body to twitching, and his unanchored head had floated through a fifty-degree turn. A minute, then another, passed by while he gradually manoeuvred his head around to face the front again. The occasional burbling growl of frustration came through his speakers.

'And so what of the preacher?' Drachmus asked, turning to Emmesh-Aiye while Chengrel was otherwise occupied. 'You have neglected the crucial message of your tale. Which of the Powers kept their claim upon him? Or did he return to the shadow of the aquila? Brother?'

Emmesh-Aiye did not raise his head but made a low buzzing with his breath that the boy-slave was able to interpret.

'It is barely in my memory. The manner in which my court acquired him was the marvel and the story, so what cared we for what became of him after that? We may have sold him on some border-world in the Wellspring, I think. What of it?'

Drachmus was about to reply when Chengrel cut them off again.

'No! Be silent! I'll have no more treachery discussed. Speak to him no more, Drachmus, so that his shame does not shame you.'

At that Drachmus rose from his chair, his little familiar keeping its balance on his shoulder with practised ease.

'My remark was addressed to fellow master of a fellow Legion, sir,' he declared. 'Your own labours have kept you here in this... quieter place for quite a time, Brother Chengrel, and perhaps you have not heard of Emmesh-Aiye of the Emperor's Children and his infamous Wandering Court. The reaving of the fleet of Craftworld Rhosh'aeth? The seizing of

the Thanemost Clock from its Mechanicus keepers, and the holding of it against the vengeance of the Storm Wardens Space Marines? The Epideurgic Crusade through the Segmentum Pacificus? I show respect to you as a witness to the Horus Heresy and the birth of our Long War, but I pay the respect to Emmesh-Aiye that his service to the Fourfold Ruin commands.'

Drachmus's tone made the rebuke in his final words clear, but Chengrel paid no heed to it.

'Respect?' he boomed. 'Of course you show me respect. Am I not mighty? You saw my fortress. You heard the account of my wars. And when you...' And there Chengrel caught himself as something about Drachmus's words struck home.

'Explain to me, Drachmus Word Bearer. You said you paid me respect as one who had borne arms while the Corpse-Emperor was still just the False Emperor. Explain why you remarked upon it, when it is that war, and the hate that burns from it, that defines all of us here?'

'My memories of Horus's war have been taught to me,' Drachmus said, making no attempt to conceal the surprise in his words. 'I was born into a people chosen by Lorgar to carry copies of his writings into exile when he could not be sure how far or deep the persecution of his true faith would run. I was born into the seventy-third generation, in the two hundred and fourth year of our exile after we had been hounded from our home on Kelhyte, twelve hundred years after the end of the Heresy. Omens led us to a Word Bearers barge and the fleet gave up its young as aspirants in gratitude.'

Chengrel's eyes pulsed and blinked as he pondered this, before he directed his gaze at Hodir.

'You?' he asked.

'The Te'Oran Scouring,' Hodir answered. 'The Night Lords tox-bombed the cities, then sabotaged the shelters one by one so we all had to fight for places in the last one. When there was only one shelter left they stormed it, took a hundred youngsters and left the rest to choke. I was one of the hundred. Thirty-seventh millennium, Imperial reckoning.'

‘And you?’ Chengrel snarled at Emmesh-Aiye. Without opening his eyes the latter nudged his boy-slave with the side of his foot.

‘The lineage of my master, Emmesh-Aiye, I shall present for brevity,’ the slave said. ‘He knows not where he was born or how. His memories begin in the great cages towed behind the procession of the daemon prince Avrasheil, journeying to war. He remembers a great war and a great dying beneath the gaze of many-armed Fulgrim and being remade by Fabius Manflayer. He was given commission into the Emperor’s Children warband of Chardra Bloodwine in the eighth millennium after the so-called Heresy.’

Once again there was silence in the little circle of legionaries. Chengrel glowered at his guests. Hodir and Khrove sat motionless. Drachmus picked up little pinches of ash between his fingers and let them drop back into the bowl, studying the patterns they made in the air as they fell and settled. The glow from them burnished his faceplate, for dusk was falling now and the meeting-place was shrouded in gloom. Emmesh-Aiye fidgeted and stroked his lacerated tongue. Finally Chengrel gave another growl through his speakers.

‘Khrove,’ he said, ‘Khrove of the Thousand Sons. Scion of Magnus. Son of... But are you truly a son of Prospero? Or are you, like these others, a stripling latecomer? But speak your piece, speak your piece. If your account is glorious then it may even sweeten my disposition enough to hear the bid from this so-called Emperor’s Child.’

Slow and quiet, Khrove walked into the middle of the circle and stood a few moments. Then he let out a cry and smote the flagstones with the heel of his staff, and instantly was wrapped in hissing flames of pink and blue, bright enough that Emmesh-Aiye’s girl-slave squeezed her eyes shut from the pain of it. Khrove struck again and flames fell from his body, flowing out to become a billowing ground-mist and lifting Khrove into the air on a pedestal of coloured fire. He pointed down with his staff, and wherever he pointed into the roiling colours underneath him they began to twist and churn.

With no preamble other than this extravagant show of sorcery, Khrove of the Thousand Sons began his tale.

‘No,’ he said, with a nod to Chengrel. ‘No, I was not among the first of our Legions as you, venerable Master Chengrel, were. I never saw the face of the living Emperor. I have never set eyes upon Terra or foot upon Prospero. I was raised among the mendicant logicians of Prekae Magna, travelling the roads between the Universitariate city-hubs, working to find mathematical patterns in the phrasing of Imperial scriptures and offering these insights to young scholars and labourers in exchange for alms. When we crossed paths with travellers around the space ports we would exchange tracts and treatises with them, and that was how my family came into possession of more esoteric works, passed to us in secret with whispers of truths that the most eminent scholars knew but would not teach to any save their own favourites and sycophants. We applied our calculus to these new texts and were steeped in wondrous and terrible revelations, insights that came so easily that it was like picking up treasure from the ground after a lifetime of battling to pry open locked vaults.’

As Khrove spoke, the mist and fire below him swam up into a little tableaux of light that acted out the scenes he was describing.

‘We counted ourselves students only, always seeking understanding, but while we pursued our studies we were being studied in turn. These disciplines were stoking the light of my own dormant gift, and when they perceived me the Thousand Sons acted.

‘This was not the true Legion of Magnus, ignorant as I was of that when they appeared among us. For all their dread bearing and proud demeanour, these were lackeys of Ahriman the Librarian, the meddling exile whom Magnus had barely spared from death. They took me away without a word. This was just after the breaking of the forty-first millennium.

‘My proper education began, built on the foundations the secret tracts had laid. I learned to master passion and delusion and dominate the Ocean with will and intellect alone. Thirsting for knowledge I began to elaborate upon my masters’ principles in my own ways, every waking moment ablaze with insights and possibilities.

‘Ahriman did not remain my master. One of the roving magisters of the core of the Thousand Sons intercepted us in the galactic north-east. I took no part in their battle, but sensed it waged with weapons and wills

across the nameless world where Ahriman had landed in search of I still know not what. They were driven from that rock before their search was successful, and I was taken as a trophy into the court of Magnus the Red.

‘And now the doors of learning were truly thrown open to me. I laboured for the sorcerer Abhenac on deriving the seven syllables of the seven true names of the Nurgle prince Phoettre Rotchoke, and then he released me into the service of Sulabhey the Arch-Invoker, who set me to work refining the principles by which his warding and summoning sigils were formed. My labours added such puissance to his own that he named me first among his adepts, and taught me the Third and Fifth Concatenations by which we could counter direct the eight fundamental immaterial temperaments. In contest with Xerdion of Nine Towers he had me create and enact a ritual by which the warp-radiance from a human psyker, as defined in the works of Carrackon the Elder, was matched in three secondary nuances of character to the tempest-flashes observed in the epistles of Ghell. Xerdion acknowledged the adepts of Sulabhey to be the better after my success, and when I used elements of this ritual to bind and discognate the daemon Herakdol, I was once again brought before Magnus and dressed in the livery of an aspirant mage.’

In the glowing mist beneath him, Khrove’s fire-puppets made gestures and wrote signs that caused the air to groan and spark.

‘Now I was taught warfare. My gifts and spells were honed to a martial edge, and I mastered the baser, more physical weapons of the Legiones Astartes. I could loose an unerring fusillade from a bolter, fence with a chainsword, command one of the Legion’s ancient vehicles, march to battle with one of my battle-brothers or one hundred of them and know what was expected of me with never a question or order needed. I rewrote my soldiers’ doctrines with the incandescent skills of the mage.

‘At every step, I was tested. I remember a battle of one hundred and sixty-two hours, beneath a sky crowded with silver towers, against two hetmen of Magnus. One plucked up stones and bones from the plain and hurled them at us upon tendrils of thought laced with scarlet sparks. The other unlaced the safe fabric of space and distance and sent crawling, crackling runes to uncouple our minds from our senses. I alone remained master of thought and limb, commanding the others in the fray. When the test was done and the towers spoke to one another in the voices of their

masters, they acclaimed me, declared me no longer aspirant but adept, and gave me those others who had survived as the core of my first coven.

‘I was brought wargear, the hollow armour of a Legion brother long dead. I reshaped it alongside the Legion’s finest forge-magi, engraving it with warp work so that it blazed with living etheric fire where once had been the simple energies of its reactor pack. When I donned the armour I was plucked from the foundry floor, to hang in a cell of folded space while the armourers assaulted the defences I had made. They tested my forge-work, my spell-carvings, the connections from my spirit into the armour’s anima, the predatory instinctual spirit-weaves, just short of minds, that I had patterned into each tooth of my chainsword and each round loaded into the magazine of my pistol. Such was their power that the simple attention of their minds scorched my body and soul, but though they picked apart my designs from every angle in four dimensions they could find nothing that displeased them, and I walked from the Seeing Mount to begin my studies with...’

But here Khrove, like Emmesh-Aiye before him, was cut off by his host’s fury.

‘Be silent, Khrove! Be silent! Be silent, Thousand Son!’ for Khrove was still attempting to speak. When the sorcerer realised that Chengrel would brook no further speech, he shrugged and allowed himself to sink back to the ground. His ghostly pantomime collapsed back into glowing fog, which whipped around Khrove’s ankles, stirred the writhing hem of his surcoat, and was gone.

This time Chengrel’s tank made no movement, but behind it in the shadows came the tread of metal on stone.

‘No more, Khrove,’ he repeated. ‘No more from any of you. Go from here. Be among your fellows. You shall hear from me in the daylight.’ Chengrel wheeled his tank about, moving it deceptively fast on its stubby legs. The two Terminators carrying the bag of stones were already departing.

Emmesh-Aiye sat with his head down and made no move to leave. Drachmus had leaned towards Hodir as if to speak, but the latter turned his back on the rest of the assembly and got to his feet. Khrove, however, kept his position in the centre of the stone circle. He said, quietly:

‘I have not finished speaking, sir.’

The other three turned and looked at him, but Khrove continued to stare after Chengrel and his retinue. Out in the dark, the sound of armoured tread stopped. Emmesh-Aiye closed his lips around his stretched tongue to slick them; Hodir and Drachmus exchanged a look and then moved quickly and purposefully out to Khrove’s flanks.

There was silence for a moment.

‘My account is not done,’ Khrove said. ‘I understood that we would treat with one another here as equals, in comradeship and respect. I trusted that we would each present our bid to you, and even these accounts you saw fit to demand of us, and be heard. I came here ready to graciously acclaim any of these others whose bids I believed to surpass mine, and to leave with no other prize than their fellowship, and yours. But I am denied. You have not heard my account or what I offer as my bid. Master Emmesh-Aiye has likewise been refused full hearing. You are a poor host, Master Chengrel. My fellows and I deserve more respect than you show us.’

Away in the shadows a moving light appeared. It was the window on the front of Chengrel’s tank, coming into view as he wheeled around, the green-white glow from inside the tank brightening as he stampeded back towards them.

‘Respect?’ he roared. ‘Respect for you, you worthless, bloodless little inbreed? You disgrace to the gene of Magnus? Had you any understanding of respect you would be prostrate on the flagstones now, begging my forgiveness!’

A bank of bolters cresting Chengrel’s tank-hulk rattled through sixty degrees of elevation and barked a salvo into the interlaced boughs overhead.

‘This is base betrayal!’ he shouted over the crashing of burning debris around them. ‘I sent out more than a hundred heralds, and this is the respect shown me? Four such weaklings? We are Legiones Astartes! We strode out in fire and blood to be humanity’s living gods of war! And

we wage the Long War to split the galaxy asunder and remake it, to make the Imperium weep for the day they failed us!

A Defiler had stamped into view on each side of Chengrel's tank, and shapes moved on all sides of the lamp-lit circle of paving.

'But now I see treachery indeed!' Chengrel went on. 'A pack of scatterbrained infants who do not understand the task their gene-seed brings with it! I expected accounts of blows struck against the Imperials, worlds burned, lords and generals cast down, revenge on the Legions who would not march with us into righteous rebellion. Accounts of you fulfilling the purpose for which your primarchs' genes were placed into your misbegotten and ungrateful bodies. And what did I hear?

'From you, Hodir, I hear that the children of Curze are so dissipated that you brag of being able to pluck some fat supply convoy and must beg for my help assaulting an Imperial fortress. Drachmus, you tell me how your Word Bearers barely managed to hold the line against Imperial invasion. Khrove, your Legion of all of them must have a grudge burning white-hot against the Emperor, but instead, as if the burning of Prospero meant nothing to you, you yap about tempest-flashes and concatenations and fundamental temperaments. Tell me of the tempest-flashes you inflicted on our erstwhile brothers in war! Tell me of how these "concatenations" helped you to bring even a single Imperial life to an end! You cannot! You betray your heritage and waste yourself!

'And from you, Emmesh-Aiye.' Chengrel was no longer shouting, but his voice was blistered with contempt. 'What possessed you to be anything other than ashamed? Crushing an Imperial city for no other reason than to thwart another Legion? Thwart a brother as great as Typhus? Where is your pride? Have the shallow glammers of your patron blinded you to the fact that if we all turn on one another so, there will be none left to strike at the Golden Throne? How may we weld ourselves together again into a force to raze Terra with such as you in our ranks?

'And you demand to know why I will not hear your bids, Khrove? Do you understand now? Do you understand why I will allow none of you this prize, until your Legions can send me champions who prove that the fires that Horus kindled in us all still burn hot? Tell those Thousand Sons you claim to speak for that their ambassador is a poor specimen indeed.'

If he had intended to say more then it was lost. For a moment it seemed as if some terrible weapon had detonated in front of Chengrel's tank, for the space on the flagstones was filled with blue-white blaze. When the light passed Khrove once again hung in the air, suspended off the ground in sizzling cobwebs of lightning. His staff pointed straight between Chengrel's eyes.

'And what of you, then?' he demanded. 'Mighty Chengrel, revered Iron Warrior? Great Chengrel, acclaimed by his warsmith? Chengrel, who once managed to sack some Imperial hives at the head of an army and fleet, and whose greatest accomplishment since then has been to build a hideaway in a sector so gutted by war that he would be safely beyond challenge in a sackcloth tent?'

At this Chengrel let out a bellow and his bolters coughed out a bright cluster of shots. An arm's length from Khrove the shells tumbled in the air and scattered away from a sparkling rune that had not been there a split second before.

'What are you, Chengrel?' Khrove went on, as though nothing had happened. The lightning had spread to form an arch that framed him. 'You set yourself up over us, sneer at our histories. You brag that you had fought in Horus's lunge for power, as if that were some badge of greatness. You who marched in the rank and file ten thousand years ago! Praised for your prowess by your warsmith on Medrengard itself, you say? Were you one half, were you one third of what you boast of being, your praises would have been born in the throat of Perturabo himself, not some vassal outside his gates. And if you are such a magnificent beast of war, Chengrel, why must you style yourself with titles like "Master"? After a hundred centuries to prove your worth, why are you not a warsmith yourself?'

'Bring him to me!' roared Chengrel in reply, as weapon armatures unfolded from the sides of his tank and two rotary cannons began scouring the ground and throwing up dust and rock chips. A Defiler scrambled past him on its cluster of metal legs and sent a belch of yellow flame towards where Khrove hung, and without looking down the Thousand Son caught the blast and stilled it in mid-air as though he had imprisoned it in a picture of itself. A moment later the flame, now a glowing cobalt blue shot through with scarlet and emerald, reversed its

motion, reversing back into the Defiler's flame-tank, which exploded in a ruinous fireball.

'Traitors, all of you!' screamed Chengrel through the din. 'The Long War is not done while the Emperor sits on that throne on Terra! And all we have left is fops and cowards who will not do what it takes to settle the account!' Even as he crashed forwards, bolters and cannons tracking, the left cannon mount fell silent. Hodir had glided forwards with perfect calm, slipped between two hulking thralls whose senses were full of flame and gunshots, and gutted the cannon's mechanism with a single precise jab of his power knife. Now he spun to defend himself as the grunting thralls closed in.

'Us?' cried Khrove as a burst from Chengrel's other cannon drove Drachmus back from his other flank, the little daemon scrambling for a grip but continuing its monologues with not a syllable out of place. 'Are you so stunted, Chengrel? So trapped? Leave your so-called Long War to the elders, all eaten up with spite, who cannot drag themselves out of a rut of ten thousand years! Think of all that Chaos offers you. Think of the power and grandeur. Think of what you have built already, and what you could achieve if you let the Great Ocean pour through you and push wide your understanding. Think of what awaits you if you would just shrug off your dreary little feud and strike out to explore! You are the traitor, Chengrel! Traitor to the potential our forefathers saw in us when they turned their backs on the Emperor and led us out into the void! Think on that, Chengrel, and learn shame!'

A shocking storm of gunfire erupted on the left flank. Drachmus's Word Bearers, waiting in the dusk, were hammering Chengrel's followers with bolts and cannonades. On the right, a pack of household thralls hacked at Hodir with power rams and combat blades, to find a moment later that they had shredded an empty cloak. Next instant the creature holding the cloak pitched over dead, a smoking hole in its forehead from where Hodir's power knife had punched through its skull. As the corpse fell, Hodir lifted a pistol in his other hand and shot the thrall overseer through the throat.

Chengrel's dorsal bolters blazed again, and once more Khrove undid the salvo with a gesture. This time the shells began to dance in front of him, leaving trails of sky-blue light that formed strange letters in the air. Chengrel snarled in anger, and the snarl emerged from his speakers as a

squeal of static that detonated the bolt shells. The concussions did not harm Khrove, but sent him skittering back through the air. Fire and lightning spread like a second cloak about his shoulders.

‘The Long War gives us meaning!’ Chengrel shouted as he stormed forwards. ‘The War is our purpose! Our primarchs swore it so! How dare you turn away from the pacts that they made before Horus and each other! Traitor! I name you traitor!’ He would have said more, but now the chassis of his tank crashed through the sigils that Khrove had left hanging in the air and shivered them apart. As they cracked, the space around them seemed to crack too, and suddenly Chengrel was surrounded by dazzling spectres of light that cohered into harder, physical forms. Squat blocks of pink-glowing flesh split by chanting mouths swarmed about the tank’s legs, cackling and clawing at the joints. Beaked and toothed things with skirted mushroom-stems for bodies bounded in circles around Chengrel and his Defilers like children about a bonfire, breathing streams of coruscating light that crawled across their enemies’ metal skins. Darker shapes screamed about the Defiler’s turret, leaving furrows in its armour.

‘Soulless, substanceless little remnant of a man,’ sneered Khrove, with blue and silver light now blazing from every seam of his armour. A rippling disc of silver-white metal manifested beneath his feet and he stepped down from mid-air to stand on it. ‘The war is as good as won, and we are the victors! We who understand! The Imperium means as little to us as the tawdry ambitions of those who cannot bear to stop making war on it. The only losers in your precious Long War are those who are unable to let it go. You and your Imperium deserve one another.’

Next to Chengrel the Defiler’s cannon boomed, but there was no seeing where the machine-beast’s shot had gone. A second later one of the capering pink daemons vaulted up its side and rammed a grotesque arm straight through its turret-plates and into its innards.

‘And yet you swagger in front of us demanding that we prove ourselves your equals?’ Khrove went on, scattering from his hand a sizzling radiance that pierced Chengrel’s followers like quills. ‘It is no small satisfaction to me that I could not do so. What true heir to the primarchs would wish to lower themselves to equality with such as you?’

The obscenities that burst from Chengrel then were too foul and fast to comprehend, for his speakers could not keep pace with his rage. A

streaking missile from Drachmus's followers shattered his remaining cannon before it could fire. Chengrel's vision swam with red and black as feedback from the hit lanced into him, but all his attention remained on the incandescent figure of Khrove in front of him. He fired his bolters again and again, and although many of the shells vanished in the sorcerer's aura of flame, some had been warp-worked by Chengrel's smiths and crashed home against the ancient blue armour. Chengrel's roar as Khrove lurched back through the air was one of feral satisfaction.

While this melee blazed at the meeting-space a second contest, smaller but no less fierce, had begun on the road back to Chengrel's palace. The two Iron Warriors Terminators were marching onwards with the soulstones when the auto-senses of the rearmost registered movement and heat in overgrown ruins that should have been empty. Straight away he lashed the ruins with double combi-bolter shots, beginning in an ancient Legiones Astartes suppression pattern, then abruptly switching to a semi-random drill designed to catch a target who might have learned the same fire pattern.

Walking backwards, gun still nosing the night, the Iron Warrior watched tracking overlays and hit readouts. They showed plumes of rock dust, splintered vegetation, a little cloud of atomised sap where a bolt had punched through the bole of a twisted tree. But both he and his armour systems knew, from bitter lessons begun on Isstvan, the look and sound of a bolt-shell hitting Space Marine war plate, and there had been no evidence of that.

Then a melta-blast slagged the plasteel-bound frame of the combi-bolter, and an eye-blink later the white-hot wreck of the weapon was blown apart by the shells still in the magazine. Startled but not frightened, the Iron Warrior shook weapon fragments off his gauntlet as his companion's reaper cannon sent a salvo at the source of the blast. The two warriors had just enough time to close together before a quick-lunging figure raked a chainblade across the leader's faceplate, precisely exploiting a weak spot in the Terminator suit's range of movement that made it hard to twitch the head aside from an attack on that one vector. The Iron Warrior's eye-lens was damaged and his vision jittery with feedback, but instinct took over. There were three ways an enemy could dodge after that lunge. Two were back to safety, but the third carried forwards and would allow a grab at the bag of stones on the way clear. Without looking he swept the bladed barrel of the reaper through that

space and was rewarded with the sound of splintering armour and a cry of fury.

But now more Night Lords were joining the fray. The meltagunner shot a blast into the leader's faceplate that destroyed several sensory inputs and overwhelmed the others for whole seconds. That was long enough for Hodir's power knife to begin hacking at the arm whose gauntleted fist still held the bag.

A terse bark of battle-cant between the two Terminators communicated Hodir's position, and the Night Lord realised how long he was taking, and what a mistake that was, when the muzzle of the reaper cannon clanked into the pit of his left arm. Even in the split second between contact and firing he was twisting away, presenting the Iron Warrior with a curved armour surface for the shells to carom off. But that could not save him completely and the triple shot spun him four metres away with an ugly crater in his armour.

The Iron Warrior holding the stones felt another blast of heat that failed to injure him, but damaged enough of the fine componentry in his arm that the limb locked stiff; from behind him came the crack and flare of a thunder hammer, and he heard the curse as his companion went down on one knee. He twisted so that the bag of stones would be carried away from the Night Lords on that side, but now pain sizzled in his fingertips and he snarled in frustration as he felt the bag being snatched away. Then there was only the two of them, part-crippled, firing a hail of shells into the dark where the Night Lords had vanished.

Hodir gave a liquid, agonised cough as his fractured rib-carapace ground and his lungs worked to expel the blood already half-clotted in them. But meanwhile his thoughts danced with what power he could purchase now that the prize was out of the clutches of the pompous Iron Warrior fool. Strange and avaricious dreams filled him, such as he had not remembered having before. These dreams, Hodir realised, did not even seem to be his own. The dance of his own thoughts was alien to him. At that moment his brother Night Lords let him drop to his knees on the ground.

Hodir looked around and saw that his band of reavers had stumbled to a halt. Some were readying weapons, but clumsily, with none of the fast and lethal cohesion born of so many thousands of battles. One or two

of them were even making little jerking motions as though resisting some mad call to dance, gasping and crying into the vox.

With the ethereal song of Slaanesh trilling from his distended lips, Emmesh-Aiye sauntered into the group. His two slaves still trailed behind him, but behind them in turn came an extravagant parade cloaked in pastel light and scented steam. Hodir had faced their like before, but there was no preparation or readiness that could protect him from the savage ache of desire that flashed from his skull to his heels. He wanted to move with their beautiful rhythms, laugh like them, be like them, and these desires barely faltered when he saw them take the head of one of his warriors and drop it to the ground in a shower of blood and laughter.

But still, his pistol kicked and the creature who was reaching for the bag of stones shrieked and rippled. For a moment it was something whose features took all those strange desires and wrenched them back on themselves, and then it shrieked as Hodir's power knife opened it from throat to belly. That damage was more than its will to stay corporeal could override, and the daemonette shivered into nothing.

The thing's destruction managed a moment of ugly counterpoint to the blanket of hypnotic noise, and the Night Lords, whose minds had needed only the slightest opportunity, seized on the change and fought. Now suddenly the Slaaneshi cavalcade had to contend with resistance: curved claws and barb-tipped tongues clashed with blades, hammers, and desperate, point-blank bolter shots.

But Emmesh-Aiye would not be denied his prize. Shivering from the resonance of the sonic discharges in his bones, Hodir shivered anew as Emmesh-Aiye's finger-quills slid into his arm. His hand went warm, then numb, and Emmesh-Aiye plucked the bag from his fingers. Hodir saw the ruby light from the stones kindle in the Slaaneshi's own eyes, and then he brought his power knife up and jammed it into Emmesh-Aiye's hip.

The man convulsed, the wounds in his pinned tongue opening into weeping holes, and his red-reflecting eyes stared into Hodir's face for a moment. Then he backhanded the injured Night Lord to the ground and scampered lopsidedly away from the fight, doubled over the bag of stones he held to his belly with his slaves dragged along behind.

The mistrustful Chengrel had ordered his troops to prepare a killing-ground for his guests even before they had landed, and now his warriors prepared their positions at the landing-camps. These were Iron Warriors combat engineers, crafty and capable. They threw open carefully concealed foxholes and enfilades, and used scatter munitions to lay down instant fields of krak mines and webs of memory-wire strong enough to entangle even power-armoured legs. Shadow-quiet, they moved in amongst their new trenchworks, their fire-lanes already planned and directed, ready for master Chengrel's fleeing guests.

But of course their enemies were Space Marines too. Each point the Iron Warriors had chosen to fortify had been anticipated by the Night Lords, and the first team found themselves dealing with ambushes of diabolical precision and cohesion. Newly opened foxholes were already trapped; Iron Warriors simply vanished on the way to their positions; odd bursts of interference interrupted the vox-chatter no matter which band the Iron Warriors used, just enough to muddle their commands and make their attempts at organisation worse than useless.

The attempt to cut off Drachmus's retreat did better, but when Drachmus left Chengrel and Khrove to one another's mercies and struck out for his ship, he had more warriors with him. In time to his gargoyle's recitation of the Spiral Catechism he marched towards his landing-camp with his bowl of burning ashes held high and his banner-bearer behind him. The Iron Warriors in his way almost laughed at the crude approach, but caught themselves; Drachmus was making himself so visible for a reason. They realised that reason barely in time to mount a fight against an expert Word Bearers pincer assault with Drachmus at its hinge.

On the far flank the Iron Warriors around Emmesh-Aiye's battered little cutter was bogged down in a hellish firefight against the ship's guards, Noise Marine artillerists who fought with percussive rumbles that could shake armour and bone apart, and shrieks to rupture flesh from cellular membranes on up. Into the middle of this came Emmesh-Aiye himself, his daemoniac retinue left behind to finish the fight against Hodir's elite, dancing through the Iron Warriors line. He chirruped laughter as one armoured figure after another fell to his warp-screams and the venom of his finger-quills, and when the last scrap of resistance was desperately falling back he could control himself no longer. He leapt and cut capers on the blasted ground, scoring his slaves' skin with the spines and hooks

of his breastplate, and leaving the welts and wounds slicked with the secretions of his tongue.

That was how Khrove found him. The sorcerer had fought Chengrel to a standstill; the warding and working of the tank, and the sheer brute force of the will driving it, had been enough to blunt most of the assaults Khrove had cared to throw, and the fury of Chengrel's assaults did not allow him time to prepare deeper and more potent measures. Finally, Khrove had redirected one of his attack calculi through a false logical form, outflanking Chengrel's wards and hitting home. The forelegs of Chengrel's tank turned from metal to an elegant blue crystal that instantly shattered under the tank's weight. As Chengrel howled his fury into the dirt, Khrove had turned his back without further ado.

He did not hail Emmesh-Aiye, or curse him either. Khrove had had enough of words, and so he threw his staff down like a javelin into a spot not far from where Emmesh-Aiye danced. Suddenly Emmesh-Aiye found that he was mired in something that seemed to be at once tarry liquid and clinging dust, and after a moment found that he had sunk from his ankles to his thighs. Seeing Khrove standing on his disc up above, he launched a savage witch-howl that might have stripped armour and flesh from the sorcerer's body had he not dismissed it with a gesture.

Now Emmesh-Aiye was up to his waist and screaming with anger. He held the bag of soulstones up to keep it from becoming submerged and, like Hodir before him, felt it being plucked from his hand. What had taken it not even his senses could discern, but as he sank up to his chest he saw Khrove hang the stones from his belt.

Now, casting about desperately for leverage or footing, Emmesh-Aiye saw his slaves. Like him, they were trapped and sinking, but they had leaned together and put their heads on one another's shoulders. Each careworn face now carried a small, sweet smile, for they had realised that soon they would finally be free of their misery, and would go into oblivion together.

That stung Emmesh-Aiye more than the loss of the stones. That he could not prevent his slave-twins from dying happy suddenly seemed the most profound of defeats, and he groaned and wept and tried to lunge at them as the ground finally took all three of them under. A moment later they were gone and Khrove looked about him.

Doubtless there were ambushes around his lander too, but they did not matter. Khrove had descended from his ship by more direct means, and the blocky, golden craft in his camp was nothing more than a diversion. Now it buckled and faded as Khrove dissolved the knots of force that bound it together.

The sun was starting to rise, and Khrove could see the great ring of fortifications take shape in the dawn. Here and there was a bark and twitch of motion as the last of the brawl among the Word Bearers, Iron Warriors and Night Lords played out. Emmesh-Aiye's retinue were not to be seen, having tumbled back into their craft in a panic when they saw their master die, or melted back into the warp.

Khrove's left hand dropped to the bag of soulstones at his belt, and his right extended. After a moment his staff flew up out of the ground and into his grip. There seemed no good reason to stay longer. The sorcerer murmured a word, followed it with another, and departed for his ship in a soft thunderclap of displaced air and a flowering burst of light.

In the time between the ravages of the final Waaagh! Ungskar and the beginning of the Greyblood Tribulations, Chengrel of the Iron Warriors built himself a fortress home upon Burjan's World in the Mitre Gulf. He dwells there still, although his lordly demeanour is not quite what it was and many of his Iron Warriors have now departed from his service.

Chengrel has spent much time combing the ruins of Burjan's World for another prize like the one that was stolen from him, for he is convinced that with it he can once again purchase power and allies. When he floats in a circle inside his tank-hulk so that his head nestles in the scraps of what was his body, he still broods on revenge; but now rather than revenge on the Golden Throne he plots it on the legionaries who came to visit him after that long-ago summons, and who betrayed him so bitterly and so foolishly.

Khrove of the Thousand Sons would be amused by that, should he ever learn of it. If he and master Chengrel should ever meet again, doubtless he will point the irony out.