



LIBERATION DAY

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One hundred and fifteen days to liberation

Do not breathe.

Do not move.

The Emperor is my strength.

Faith is my shield.

By the Emperor's Grace I will be saved.

Here it comes...

HE COULD SEE them through the cracked and rusted floor of the pipe. Flickering glow-globes and the lights of the camp threw an erratic yellow cast over green hide and rusted armour, and then over tusks and stiff bristles as the sentry's pet beast began snorting and huffing the air for something it could not see.

The Emperor is my salvation. Challis made his hands still, fought to calm himself.

The yelping changed note and Challis realised it had worked. The rancid meat he had dropped behind the girder had confused the hound and buried his scent. He could hear footfalls again, but the greenskin and its bouncing, yapping hound had moved out of sight. Challis listened carefully, wiped sweat off his forehead. Twenty seconds went by with no returning steps, so he risked a quick crawl to where the pipe swung away from the wall and out over the hangar bay.

Or what had once been a hangar bay. Now it was a slave stockade, bathed in crude arc lights and full of the crack of whips, brutish bellows of command and the cries of the hopeless. Challis allowed himself a moment of rage. Abominations of nature. No mercy. Then he shook his head and focused.

With the sentry out on patrol the small greenskins left guarding the gate were screeching and squabbling and kicking one another's shins.

Clinging to the top of the pipe, Challis inched forward in the dimness, every movement agonisingly loud to his tension-sharpened ears. He was almost above the stockade wall now, close to the limit of the protective shadows. Now or never. With another glance at the brawling creatures he dropped from the pipe, rolled and ducked behind the smashed chassis of a wrecked vehicle he had seen the greenskins careening around the corridors in. Heart pounding, he wormed his way under the wreck and lay still as advancing footsteps and the yells of the returning sentry put paid to the fight by the gate.

They had not spotted him. He allowed himself a grin. Unnoticed and in one piece, he was inside the slave camp.

Now, the trick of getting out again would be far more difficult.

CHALLIS HAD NEVER been this far into the bay before, but he had studied the place from every perch he could find in the hangar ceiling and now he unrolled a mental map with practised ease. The beasts had ignored the maze of corridors and compartments in the decks and simply built a sprawl of shacks and hovels on the hangar floor as they would have on an open plain. Challis could even see a new one going up: in the middle distance a greenskin had bolted a frame together and was fixing

rough metal plates to it, driving the rivets home with well-aimed blows of its forehead.

The layout was crude, but it had made the camp easy to scout. I'm... he glanced around... on the south side, so the slave pens should be... he squinted, there.

Slave pits would have been a better term. Huge holes had been blasted out of the deck, roofed over with tangles of wire and metal and the slaves thrown in with whatever clothes they had on their backs. Many were nearly naked from months of squalor and floggings, emaciated and broken-spirited.

There were greenskins on guard here, and Challis had to stay flat to the deck as he worked around the perimeter. There! A burning device the greenskins used to make the holes was still set up. That meant a new pit, dug for fresh slaves.

He snaked forward to see in. The slaves looked new indeed and were numerous - at least forty or fifty of them - barely wounded and most of their clothing intact. Those would be the ones. The others were as good as dead already. Back in the shadows, he slipped back towards the only shed that the greenskins kept locked.

A gap low in one wall let him crawl in, and his guess had been right - it was the ammunition store. Enough light came in through the rickety roof to make out piles of crude ammo clips, boxes of bombs, battered jerry cans of what smelled like flamer fuel. Challis tugged on a cord about his neck, pulling out the little handheld igniter he had stolen two days before. Looped at his belt was a length of tough, ropy creeper he had found could work as a wick. One end went into the valve on one of the fuel-cans, and after a couple of tries he got a puff of yellow flame out of the igniter and set the dried creeper to smouldering. Adrenaline made his stomach lurch as he wriggled back out of the shed and scuttled for cover. You're going soft, he told himself, too used to fancy charges with amulet-clocks to time them and—

The wick burned faster than he'd expected - there must have been vapour from the fuel-cans in the air. The blast thundered all across the hangar, and Challis fled for cover to a string of booms and cracks as the other munitions blew apart. All around greenskins bellowed to each other and charged towards the flames.

Except one by the slave pen, looking distractedly at the fire engulfing the centre of the camp. Its back was to the mound of solidified slag left from the pit's digging.

Challis ran up the slagpile pulling two heavy black-bladed knives from his belt. A leap took him onto the beast's broad shoulders, sending it

staggering. A second later both blades sank into its neck, cutting its bellows of protest to strangled gurgles. Challis vaulted clear as it staggered away, trying to hold its head on, and ran to the rim of the pit. Staring up at him in the brightening firelight, the slaves looked aghast. 'Who are you?' one haggard face demanded.

'No time! Let's go!' Challis began pulling the spiked roof-bars aside. 'You, the big one. Grab its weapon. You two grab those spanners. The rest of you, here.' A moment more and they began to scramble out.

Getting the slaves out by the route he had come in was out of the question, but he had scouted a path back from the main south entrance too. Its arch came into view between the shacks as they ran, gates hanging open but four more huge greenskins were on guard.

Challis made a quick count. About eight slaves per guard, about half of them with stakes, spanners or whatever they had grabbed on their way out of the pit. Not the best odds, but it would have to do. No time to go looking for more tools or bodies to strip.

'Right,' Challis hissed, 'we go through that gate. Anyone here fight before?'

The hulking slave who'd taken the pit guard's cleaver raised his hand, another half-dozen behind him. Challis sheathed one of his knives and pulled a battered laspistol from his knapsack.

'The rest of you follow the armed people in. When I say go, you go! Any of you that can run past, do it! Don't play hero. Once we're past the gate keep heading along the corridor south. After a couple hundred paces you'll reach a fork. Take the left. When you reach the old torpedo gantry, jump down into the large ventilation pipe. It will drop you a few decks down near a waste reclamation plant. Go into the storage cells at the back and wait. Save any questions for after we're out.' He primed his laspistol.

'Emperor bless us,' whispered one of the slaves.

'We pray that He will,' Challis joined the rest of them in the reply. Then: 'GO!'

Running, Challis dropped the first guard with a frantic point-blank headshot. A burst of yellow gunfire in the gloom and two slaves convulsed and flew backward. The big man swung his cleaver down, forcing his target to parry as the other two were mobbed by slaves. Challis ducked low to avoid the sweep of an axe that took the head off the slave to his left.

One guard went down, but there were humans dead underfoot too. Challis shouted at them to go through and bodies raced past him.

The big slave and the guard were still locked together as another guard fell to a wild shovel swing. The last howled with rage as the slaves slipped past them. Challis thrust his knife but was knocked backwards - winded, he looked around and saw more charging towards the gate, while in the distance came the cough and roar of engines. And the last damned guard would not die.

Then the big slave lunged, turning his weapon at the last moment to bypass the guard's counter swing and sink the blade deep into its shoulder, severing its arm and splitting its body. It fell to the deck, bisected and swearing.

'We've got to go NOW!' Challis shouted. A shell whined over their heads. The big man looked past him and saw what was coming. He gave Challis a sombre grin and hefted the cleaver.

'You go. I'll hold 'em.'

Challis bit his lip. The slave's bravery was humbling. He gave a nod.

'The Emperor will welcome your soul.'

'I gladly give it. Go on.'

Challis turned and ran.

Behind him there was a cry of "For the Emperor!" against the roars of enemy, then he was into the south corridor. The left fork. The torpedo gantry. He paused at the lip of the pipe, hoping against hope to hear another human shout from behind him, but there was nothing but the inhuman babble of the greenskins and the revving of engines. Challis turned and dived into the dark.

'YOU'RE GOING TO have to talk to them before long.' It was one of the women, whippet-lean and green-eyed. 'One or two of them are about ready to drop, and another couple are about ready to fight each other.' Challis shook his head.

'We keep moving. They were stirred up already, prowling all over the hulk from half a dozen camps, and this will make it worse.'

They had come to a joist, torn from the ceiling and blocking most of the passage. The slaves crawled under it one by one, stiff and gasping. Challis swung deftly under it by one hand. When he stood up on the far side the woman was watching him still.

'You've been this way before. You know this passage. Do you know where we're going?' He shoed them into motion again before he answered.

'I came this way when I started scouting the slave pens. I've been along here a few times. And it's a lot like home.'

'Home?' Brighter light was filtering in from somewhere through rents in the walls, enough for her to see him more clearly. His hair and beard were iron-grey, his features grizzled, but Challis's skin was pearl-white, almost transparent.

'You're a hive-worlder. A down-hiver, at that.' She found the spirit to grin. 'I don't wonder you've learned your way around. You're in your element here.' He snorted and called ahead.

'Wait. See that spot where the metal's ripped? There's some lichen leaves dropped next to it as a marker. That's the one. Through there.' He turned at a tap on his shoulder; the woman had her hand out.

'I'm Hyl. Thank you for coming in for us.' His expression softened a little and he took her forearm in his old gangers' greeting.

'Challis. Pleased to have you along.'

The crawlspace was an old corridor, crushed to a narrow metal slot and tough to negotiate. It was twenty minutes before they had all passed through to stand on a mesh platform over a giant shaft that blew chilly air up at them. The going was easier here and Hyl soon had breath to talk again.

'I was taken from a ship that this hulk almost hit while we were in the Immaterium. The Cezarro's Dreaming. Bonded trader. My father was the chief steward to the guild household. We both dropped into real space and they sent boats out to board us. What world are you from? I didn't realise this thing was big enough to take a planet.'

'Vanaheim. Noatun Hive.'

Her expression changed. 'So Vanaheim's fallen? Throne of Earth, how many of those creatures are there on this thing?'

'Fallen I don't know about. This piece of trash somehow made it practically into orbit before any of the misbegotten bastards up-hive thought to check their scopes.'

'You're a ganger?'

'Not for a few years.' Challis tapped a tarnished silver stud on his tunic.

'Section Commander, Fourth Division, House Skadi Integrated Militia.

They dropped onto the hive and broke in at the shoreline. When we started putting up a good fight at the breaches, they dropped a chunk of rock into the sea just outside and sent a wave in that flooded the lower levels. Then they came back in and scooped us up. That's when they got my team. I don't know what happened after that.'

They fell silent as the group scrambled through a gully where the deck was wrenched up at a right angle. At the top of the slope Challis took them into a sloping tunnel full of metal flanges that Hyl realised after a moment were stairs - they were walking down one wall of a stairwell that

was on its side. Several slaves were crying with exhaustion now; pulling, cajoling, and carrying one another, they scrambled to the end, crowded into the bottom of the well where a corridor soared straight up over their heads. Challis lit a torch from his igniter and the others flinched away from the sudden glow.

'Listen, now. Not far. Beyond this we'll be safe from any greenskins, even if the breakout stirred them up more than I think it did. But you're going to need to be careful. All of you get a torch from that pile. Good. There are some spares, get one in each hand if you can. Get them all lit. I made them to be used, I don't want to have wasted my time.'

He stood in a circle of torchlight.

'Listen well. Be quiet and careful. Watch one another's backs. Any movement, keep a flame between you and it and make sure people around you know you saw it.' He stepped back and reached into the tangle of metal wedged across a door that was tilted into a sideways slot. Hyl realised it was a barricade, lashed and riveted across the door and covered with a brutish alien scrawl, but Challis gripped a couple of struts that looked like all the others, slid them aside and vanished through the hole. Warm, musty air came out of the opening.

Hyl looked around as the others shuffled and looked fearfully at the opening. No one moved.

'The hell with you all, then,' she told them, and clambered through the opening with her torch out in front of her. On the other side, Challis watched her stand up, they watched the first of the slaves follow her through and grinned.

One hundred and twelve days to liberation

'WHAT DID YOU mean when we first broke out, when you talked about them all getting stirred up?' Hyl asked.

They were sitting in a dim oubliette behind a hatch that still closed. Their first torches had long since burned down, but Challis had pointed them to a stockpile of replacements and to a fire pit he had made in the hollow of two vent-pipes. The slaves were slurping water from a channel low in the floor and chewing on a bitter lichen that Challis had told them was edible. 'The greenskins? It's how they get when there's a fight in the air. There hasn't been as much squabbling between them as usual, but they still seem to get wind of a fight or a hunt a lot faster when they're bored. I wish I knew how they know when things like this are happening.'

'We think it might be mind-to-mind, sir.'

Challis and Hyl looked around at a slim boy, not more than twenty, the grubby remains of an Adeptus apprentice's braid hanging at the side of his head. He spoke nervously, as if he was unaccustomed to speaking to groups.

'We think they can talk to each others' minds like astropaths can. Ideas, feelings, they can... sort of ripple through large groups of them. It's how they can make armies so fast. And how they can get excited and wanting to hunt even before they actually hear the news that a group of slaves have escaped.'

'An astra-what?' said Challis. 'Talk sense, boy.'

'Sounds like witchcraft to me,' Hyl said, and made an uneasy face. Challis shot her a look, equal parts annoyance and confusion, until she noticed it and explained. 'My father's ship had its contingent of witch-workers - they let starships steer, see where they're going, talk to other ships and planets. But I never knew greenskins had their own.'

Challis scowled at his own ignorance for a moment more then shrugged. Hyl was just realising that Challis had likely never even seen a space ship when he snapped his fingers and made her jump.

'That would explain it.' Both the boy and Hyl looked at him quizzically.

'I found a chamber near the outer hulk when I was first finding my way around,' he explained. 'Dozens of greenskins, scores, all chained together and filling the air with lightning. I saw one or two wyrds in the hive sumps back home, and they made my guts crawl in exactly the same way.'

The boy nodded in sudden excitement at Challis's description. 'Yes, the mutant offshoot! Psychics! We knew they must exist, but we never learned much about what kind of work they do. But what you are saying, sir and madam, it fits well.'

For the first time Challis took a moment to look the boy properly up and down. Had he had choices he wouldn't have saved this one - too thin, too frail-looking, scholar's stoop. But on the other hand...

'Fits, does it? Your name? And you know all this how?' The boy straightened a little.

'Korland, sir. I was apprenticed to the household of Magos Biologis Emmanael Cort on Othera. I was compiling my journeyman's thesis on orkoid behaviour, sir.'

'Orkoid?' Challis asked. He looked at Hyl but she just shook her head and shrugged.

'Orks, sir. That is the proper name for the greenskins. "Ork".'

Challis spat onto the deck. 'The bastard greenskins don't deserve a proper name!' The other slaves looked over then cringed away from the

sudden boom in Challis's voice and Korland seemed to shrink visibly. Hyl broke the tension and clapped the boy on the shoulder.

'Oh, the irony, eh, Korland?' she said drily. 'Bet you didn't expect to be studying them from this close to hand.'

Korland hazarded a short laugh, and when Challis simply snorted he started to talk again.

'We were planning to pick up some of the creatures left behind on worlds they attacked. We got too far ahead and arrived at Vanaheim while the hulk was in orbit. One of their ships crippled our engines as we tried to get clear and their boats took some of us before the ship fell into the atmosphere.'

'You sure? The captains of the smaller ships co-operating with the ones on the hulk?' Hyl's tone was sceptical and Challis nodded agreement.

'They can't stop fighting among themselves, from what I've seen since I've been trapped here,' he said. 'They've even divided this craft into territories, as far as I can tell. Some of the greenskins wear different paints, like gang colours, though that doesn't seem to matter much. I've seen ones from the same bunch bash each other around a good amount.' Challis shook his head. 'No, the damn beasts are too dumb to co-operate.'

Hyl added her agreement in turn. 'You must have been boarded straight from the hulk.'

'I intend no insolence, sir, ma'am, but I am sure it was the smaller ship. That was part of our study, to find out how orks co-operate. Normally they don't, as you've seen, but you do find rivals co-existing when...'

The rest were gathering around now to listen, but Korland had frozen under Challis's gaze.

'When what, Korland? What are you saying has got them all working together?'

'I think there's a war on the way, sir. A crusade of some sort, catching up orks from all across the sector. The orks have a word for it, or we think... thought it might be a word, just a kind of bellow...'

Challis swallowed, took a deep breath. Hyl closed her eyes and bowed her head.

'I've heard of them, these great greenskin wars. Great Terra, what have we been caught up in?'

'That's why my master was trying to capture specimens, sir! We thought we might be able to divine the target of the war from them! It fits, sir - the migrations of orks from all around, we've been able to track them, the lack of infighting, the capturing of slaves to build war engines...'

'We just needed to discern the trigger...' Challis's gaze zeroed in on him again. Korland's voice faltered for a moment before he went on.

'A crusade like this usually has a trigger, a focal point, something to turn the orks' aggression outward. I think I know what it is.'

All of the slaves were looking at Korland now.

'The Adeptus Astartes, sir. Master Cort knew something of the ork language, and he told us what he had been able to discern. This hulk, other greenskin ships, they're all being drawn to a system where the orks are at war with the Astartes.'

Challis squinted at him, waiting for an explanation; beside him Hyl's eyes widened.

'The Astartes,' she breathed. 'We're going to be sent to war against the Space Marines.'

'Space Marines?' Challis said incredulously. 'The, what do they call them, the Angels of Death? From the stories and hymns? Lord Dante and all the rest? I've heard some of these names, there was a pageant every year at Noatun. All the tales paint them as gods-in-flesh. You're telling me that's what we're going to be meeting? In a song or a tale, maybe, but...' He looked to Hyl for support but she was shaking her head.

'They are real, Challis, trust me. They came aboard our ship once, long ago when I was a girl. They had come to save our convoy from...' Hyl stopped speaking and bit her lip. She raised her head up to look at the darkness above them and simply said, 'Yes, they are real.'

Korland had folded his arms, as if watching a slow student help an even slower one do their numbers. And as he watched, a fire began to come into Challis's face, the grimness turning to a savage joy.

'Do you realise what you're saying? Either of you? Did you hear that, the rest of you? Don't look so miserable, Korland: you've just given us something to fight for!'

Challis stood and walked around, facing each slave with blazing eyes.

'Don't you understand? This hulk's days must be numbered now! Listen to what Korland is telling us! The Astartes! The Emperor's own! No cowering in tunnels for us, not now! Think of what you have to hold out for! The day when the Astartes break this ship's back and come to free us! Liberation Day!'

Challis threw back his head and laughed.

Fifty-eight days to liberation

THERE WAS A human skull lying in a silt-drift where the corridor crumpled through an angle; despite herself, Hyl had been watching it for

several minutes. She was getting used enough now to the fungus-light of these levels to be able to pick out shapes, although it had taken her eyes days to adapt. She had been terrified at first that Challis or one of the others would order that she be left behind as they moved through the Wilds.

Wilds. It had been Korland's term. A great wedge of old ship - Hyl thought it must have been a transport - driven edgewise into the giant wreck that made up the hulk's backbone. The ship was canted over at an angle, sealed off from the surrounding decks as it wrecked them in that long-ago crash, cut off from most of the power supplies, some parts airless and locked in lethal cold, much of it choked with rot and silt that had come from who knew where. When the greenskins had come they had filled the Wilds with their own fungi and feral beasts, closed up whatever openings remained and left them.

'These decks were their larder and their livestock-pen,' Challis had told them. 'Whenever they needed to hunt food or catch beasts to fight for them they would come in hunting parties and seal up behind them when they left again. Shadowing the hunting-packs was how I got to know the ways in and out.'

The Wilds had also been a jail. Hyl shifted in her spot and looked at the skull again. No camps in the outer hull for Challis and the thousands from his hive: in the charge of a different slave-master than her own band, they had been herded into the Wilds and sealed there, perchance to be rounded up again at the end of the voyage but as likely to serve as beast-food before then. Challis had not spoken of how the other captives had died, and the darkness that took his expression at those times meant that no one had pressed him.

She shifted round and looked at the shaft behind her as voices drifted up it.

'It's working, sir. Damn, but it's working! Three more of 'em dead since yesterday and still not one of 'em looks like coming out on top. There'll be more to follow, I don't doubt.'

She could hear the wolfish satisfaction in Cante's voice, muffled as it was. He had been a maintenance rating aboard his old ship, and knew how to slip through the hulk's crawlspaces like an oiled shadow. He had been spying on the orks that they had tried Korland's latest theory on: assassinate any large ork and its warband would neutralise itself for days, dissolving in petty brawls as the others fought for dominance. Impending ork-crusade or no, it seemed to be working so far.

Hyl leaned into the shaft and peered down, leaving Luder to guard the corridor with a captured ork pistol that it took the other woman both hands

to lift, hefting it by the crude shoulder-stock they had had to make for it before any of the slaves could use it. Below her, the shaft ended in a flattened, malformed plug of metal and ceramite, three dead rocket-ports gaping up at her in the dimness.

It had been Cantle who first recognised it for what it was when they had discovered this shaft: a boarding torpedo, remnant of a long-ago Imperial attack. The shaft - Hyl looked up at the odd, lumpy walls where layers of decking had been half-melted and smashed aside - had been the tunnel it had bored deep into the hulk before it ground to a halt in this wreck's guts. Old as it was, it had cheered the ex-slaves, bone-weary after days of hit-and-run raids and ambushes against the greenskins in the mazes of decking. It was a reminder that somewhere out there were humans, an Imperium, the wait for liberation day.

There were sounds below her. Cantle had squeezed out through a rent in the torpedo's side and was clambering out of the pit it lay in. Hyl caught his hand and pulled him up to the floor she stood on, and he grinned at her.

'Go on, hop down, have a look. Challis is in pretty good spirits.'

Hyl swung herself over the edge and felt her way downward. The air in the shaft still had a faint tang of oilsmoke: two weeks ago Luder had had the idea of burning stolen motor fuel in the airways, the smoke too thin to affect them but enough to blunt the fine noses of the beast-hounds. They hadn't bothered keeping the fires up since she and Challis had led a sabotage team to blow out an air-seal, opening the orks' kennels into space.

She hoped Cantle was right about their leader's mood. Lucky as the find was, she thought Challis still hadn't forgiven Korland for sneaking off - alone of all things! - to investigate the shaft during his assigned sentry shift. She could remember hearing their argument echoing through the little amphitheatre they used as a base.

'And you wonder why I was angry? This is not a game, child, or some scholarly investigation. Lives are at stake. We need everyone! That includes you and that bucket of learnin' you have. How dare you run off like that, without a word to Hyl, or me, or—'

But Korland had been unrepentant, not letting up until Challis had followed him back out to see the torpedo for himself. Hyl leaned close and fitted her head and shoulders through the gap. Challis was the suggestion of an outline around the little glow of his igniter and, peering about, she could start to make out the dim shapes of corpses, dried and shrivelled, still locked into their pews and sunken into heavy environment suits and carapace armour. Challis was braced against a column that ran down the

middle of the torpedo, a column studded with what had to be weapon racks.

'I've got the lockers open, managed to get a look inside. Lasers and stubbers, a grenade launcher I think we can fix, hand weapons. Enough for about half of us. Weapons made for humans, not salvaged ork guns we can barely use.' Hyl clambered through the hole to join him, standing awkwardly on the tilted floor as he pointed to the compartments around them.

'There's damage to this thing. I don't know what caused it, but it looks like that's what killed the crew.' Hyl looked around. The torpedo casing was full of gouges and dents from its passage through the hull, and below her toward the point there was a great circular wound where the skin of the torpedo had been punched inward.

'But look up here,' said Challis. 'The ammo lockers on these things look like they're made to last, and I mean last. Lasgun cells will keep for just about ever, and I think there are even flamer tanks back there that survived the impact.'

Challis grunted with satisfaction as he forced a stiff clamp open and turned around with a matt-grey assault shotgun in his hands.

'We're going to be an army now, Hyl. Not a rag-arsed collection of escapees. Korland's words about the Astartes were an omen, right enough. The Emperor's grace brought us news of our freedom, now He's given us the tools to meet our liberators proudly. Weapons in our hands and the blood of greenskins on our fists.' But Challis's tone was still thoughtful, his eyes hooded.

'Something's still on your mind, though, Challis. What is it?'

'Cantle told me that starships have other kinds of these...' he gestured around them.

'Torpedoes.'

'Torpedoes. But they don't carry warriors, they carry bombs. That's what's preying on me now, Hyl. We can fend off these creatures until this hulk goes into its battle, but the Astartes won't know we are here. We have to find a way to make sure they come to free us instead of just firing on this thing and blowing it to pieces. We need to find a way to tell them we're here.'

Hyl took a breath.

'That's why I came to find you, Challis. I think I know where that chamber of witch-orks you told us about is, and I've been talking to Korland about it. I think we have a way to call the Space Marines to free us.'

Thirty days to liberation

WITCHCRAFT. CHALLIS LOATHED the idea, loathed alien witchcraft even more, but there was nothing else for it now. Challis still couldn't fully accept that space ships needed sorcery to talk to one another, even after Hyl and Roland had explained it to him as best they could.

Ever since the gut-wrenching half-day when the hulk had fought its way back into real space they had been on edge. And when the scouts had reported a rush of agitated orks to the hangars and gun decks, and distant flares of light beyond the viewports, they knew a battle had begun. Now he was back at the witch-place, crouched in a breach in the wall of what Hyl said had once been the Navigator cathedral. His eyes wanted to lose focus and the air tasted of metal and felt hot and cold at once and there was a constant pressured feeling as though they were in a fast-dropping lift. Witchcraft.

Spread out below them was the scene he remembered, no less strange for seeing it a second time. Filling the tiered pews were scores of greenskins, chained together with heavy copper shackles. Some seemed to be concentrating and muttering; others were thrashing and yelling, green sparks flying from their eyes and ears.

The great holograph globe hanging above the chamber was cracked and long broken, but occasionally when a sparking greenskin looked at it would brighten with green mist and faint images, though the greenskins paid little attention to it. Pictures: outlines of giant craft against the stars or bellowing greenskins in what Challis realised with a jolt were other ships in the fleet.

Oh yes, this was the place alright. The place where these spark-spitting orks talked to others on other ships and helped the hulk's commanders see their enemies. The witch-powered aliens who, Korland had told them confidently, would die of their own excitement as soon as any fighting started, leaving the hulk blinded and the greenskins unable to communicate.

Fine. As long as they made some kind of contact first. The place had taken him a week to find again; the raid had taken three times that long to prepare. There would be one chance only.

The force of the orks' brains beat at his eardrums like surf in a storm, and Challis almost didn't hear the muffled explosion at the far end of the chamber as their bombs went off. Then smoke began to roil from several places along the walls and suddenly the air was filled with screams as the chained orks began to convulse and catch fire. Green smoke spurted from mouths, arcs of power crackled between ears, eyes lit up like emerald searchlights.

Challis kicked open the air vent and rappelled down the wall, the rest of his team behind him. Hyl's shoulder jerked as her grenade launcher recoiled, and flechettes stippled the skins of a dozen howling orks. Challis's shotgun boomed twice and felled a surprised attendant as Keif's flamer lit the air behind them.

Challis felt his head being crushed in an invisible vice. Next to him, blood was running from Luder's nose and mouth. In front of them, two orks' heads exploded in showers of green light.

He ran to stand in front of the biggest witch-ork, forced himself to look the creature in the eye. Slowly, so that its brain would blast the image out into the minds of every astropath in the system, he raised his shotgun and spoke.

'My name is Challis. There are humans on this hulk. We beg you, help us in liberation!'

There were shots and cries from behind him, and he forced himself not to flinch.

'Please! If anyone hears this!'

And then, suddenly, the creature straightened from its orkish slouch and stood over him. Its expression changed, its eyes fixed on him. As it spoke in a deep, oddly accented human voice the green steam around it seemed to curl into the suggestion of a helmet and faceplate, curved shoulder-guards and a great cloak.

'Human Challis. I speak from the battle-barge Ragnarok. You will undermine the turrets and defeat the shields for the wing of the hulk from which you speak. You will open it for attacks by my company and—'
Challis stammered to speak, 'W-we are poorly armed. I am unsure of where this wing is you speak of. I—'

The ork leaned over Challis, voice booming. 'Pay heed! The place you speak from juts from the side of your misshapen craft like a wing. It is decked with cannon and turrets, guns the orks will use to fire at us as we close the distance to storm it, walls of energy that mean we cannot teleport in to find you.'

Challis fought to think through the psychic yammer around him. He remembered the crater in the front of their boarding torpedo. How could he have been so stupid? They would fly at the hulk and their torpedoes would be shot at, breached, the great Astartes might even perish... Above him the image faded for a moment as the witch-ork began to convulse, then sharpened and spoke again.

'We shall watch you, Challis, and mount our sortie when your destruction of the defences is done. Even as I speak we are in battle, and the defences must be open in thirty days or our attack may fail. Know that we

will fight to liberate you, but know that you must fight too before we can reach you. Do you understand?'

'Yes, yes sir.' The gaze looking at him through the creature's eyes seemed to hold him like an iron clamp.

'We will meet thirty days hence, then. Farewell, human Challis.'

The ork's head slowly crumpled into fragments. Challis felt blood erupt from his own nose. There was a fizzing sensation under his skin. His vision swam as he looked around. With an exultant shout Cante completed his adjustments to a half-wrecked console and blast shutters slammed over every door from the chambers. In the flames and bedlam they sprinted for their tunnel as, behind them, the last of the orks overloaded in a deafening blast of green light.

Liberation day

UP AHEAD THE barricades had gone up as he instructed. Behind them the ork mob rounded the corner, their fury seeming to intensify with every step, and all around came the distant boom of explosions as the slaves' sabotage did its work.

Keif was dead, gone in the first of the great detonations they had triggered in the base of the bridge-tower. There had been more orks than anyone had been ready for, and just as Challis was realising that they would never be able to fight their way down the stairs to the power regulators, Keif had kicked the drum of promethium off the edge of the catwalk they had been fighting on and leapt after it, turning his flamer on himself to become a dying, blazing detonator. They could only hope that the explosion had done enough damage to destroy the shields that the Astartes had spoken of.

The mob filled the width of the large corridor, shouldering one another aside to be at the fore. At the rear blue smoke jetted from the hulking, armoured greenskin pushing the mass forward. In front of him Hyl and the last of the others were already in place, and with a last burst of energy Challis vaulted the metal beams that formed the front line of the defences as hands reached to haul him up the last stretch of barricade.

Cante and his scouts were gone as well. Their plan had worked perfectly, using baits and fires to drive a stampede of gnashing beasts into the shafts where the orks fed ammo up to their turrets. The guns had soon fallen silent but Cante and the others had been cut off and lost, unable to get to the rendezvous point they had fortified. Challis had bid them a silent farewell - he had no illusions that their liberators would have time to comb the tunnels for the missing. The message had left no doubt that the

blessed Space Marines were going to have to fight their way in and out of even this one weak spot.

Challis dropped down the far side of the barricade and shots erupted around him: the deep chug of Hyl's grenade launcher, the roar of the high-speed ork cannon that Luder and Korland had learned to work, las- and stub-bursts. Challis scrambled to his feet and added the last of his shotgun rounds to the fusillade.

Last stand, he thought, glancing over his shoulder at the hull-wall behind them. If the blessed Astartes can't find us soon, it ends here. His shotgun was empty and the orks were a mere dozen steps away.

They'll not find us in time, not now.

The armoured giant was in the lead, shots bouncing off the metal plates riveted to its skin. Challis pulled his knives from his belt and readied himself, tears of rage in his eyes.

To have come so far to have it end like this!

In the last few moments of frantic gunfire the flash of light behind the orks went unnoticed.

The Emperor is my...

Until the shooting started.

A whoosh of flame incinerated the rearmost orks, the humans ducking down to avoid the wash of heat. The chieftain turned, roaring in rage, the motors on its armour rattling and smoking.

Challis lifted his head. Through the smoke and orks he counted ten great silver figures, stepping into firing poses and felling one greenskin after another with sweeping, methodical bursts. In a few moments of deafening gunfire the armoured chieftain was alone, green corpses piled to its knees, and the shooting ceased.

The ork revved its armour into a run and one silver figure stepped forward to meet it, racks of golden blades on each arm crackling with blue energy. The ork's swing never connected; the blue-gold claws turned the creature into a cascade of blood, viscera and metal plates, until after another moment the silver being hoisted the carcass up and flung it aside. The remains flopped to the floor and lay oozing.

And in the silence that took the battlefield now, Challis could hear the explosions change note - no longer muffled and deep but nearby clangs and crunches that he guessed must be Astartes boarding torpedoes hitting home.

FROM BEHIND THEIR last barricade, the slave fighters came out, silent with awe, to meet their liberators over the gore-splattered deck. In the clearing smoke Challis took his first good look at the great Marines.

Their dull silver power armour had golden trim, the eyepieces of the helms lit with a green glow. Challis looked for a name or badge to identify his liberators, but saw none that he recognised. Korland, frowning, had hurried to catch up with him and opened his mouth to speak. Challis waved him to respectful silence. He was grateful for the boy's brain, but a time like this needed no prattling, no matter how well-educated.

One armoured figure after another regarded his procession. None barred their way, but neither did they offer greetings.

It was the golden-clawed Space Marine, his armour glistening with ork blood, who stepped into Challis's way. The captain's helm was the same golden colour as his claws and the shoulders of his hulking suit were maned by long golden spines, decorated with skulls both old and new. Flanking him were massive figures in duller, baroque armour of a different design, the metal flowing from one plate to another in fluid, organic lines. Looking at them in delighted awe, Challis fell to one knee until the being gestured for him to rise.

Challis spoke first, using the formal High Gothic for addressing a superior. 'Hail Astartes! Hail to our liberators! I am Challis, leader of the slave revolt. We hoped you would come to free us. The Emperor, praise to his name, has answered our prayers!'

Several of the figures around them began to laugh. The sound chilled Challis for a moment before he realised what it must be. The Astartes were showing the joy of victory too. Despite their frightening armour there was humanity in them still. Challis grinned back at them.

The voice was a deep, flat baritone, in an antiquated accent Challis had to pay close attention to.

'And our greetings to you in return, Challis. I am Lord Sliganian, leader of this humble company you see before you. My praise to you, sir - you have led your warriors bravely and well. I have not seen the like for many a year.'

'Thank you, Lord Sliganian. We are honoured by your presence and your words.'

'Indeed you should be. Not many of your kind have gazed upon us this close in many ages.' There was a boom behind them, and the faint sound of gunfire. Sliganian cocked his head for a moment, listening to something.

'I would talk with you more, Master Challis, but now is not the time. Our position here is embattled, not a place to make conversation. The task at hand is your liberation.'

Challis bowed.

'Of course, lord.' He waved his soldiers forward. 'Step forward, all of you. Give praise and thanks! How are we to board your craft, Lord Sliganian?' 'Board? Why?' The giant Marine sounded vaguely puzzled. 'You, Challis, I may bring away with us - you, I have hopes for. But you must know that the liberation you have fought for has been brought to you - you need travel no further in search of it.'

'Lord Sliganian,' Challis began, hearing the puzzlement creeping into his own voice, 'are you saying that you will board and keep this hulk? We must leave it otherwise. I mean, true freedom is in faith and spirit, sir, but...' Korland was tugging at his sleeve, mouthing something. Challis shook him off.

'We may take this creation, Challis, you are right,' rumbled Sliganian, gesturing at the walls. 'Ungainly as it is, perhaps it will be home for a little while. Perhaps it will yield up secrets to us, or perhaps we shall destroy it yet. Do not doubt that we can, now that your own actions allowed us our landing. A hulk is simply another fortress, Challis, and the fortress has not yet been raised that our skills cannot bring down. Our progenitors are ancient and noble. Our citadels are impregnable and our engineers unmatched.'

'Challis!'

'What, Korland? Show respect before the Astartes!' But the boy was corpse-pale with fear, and Challis's alarm deepened.

'Ah, Astartes. We were Astartes once, young one, but no longer. We forswore the title the day the Iron Cage broke Rogal Dorn's conceited puppies and we showed ourselves the masters of those who still clung to their old loyalties.'

Challis's alarm dropped into outright terror. Fragments of forbidden legends, false histories whispered of around barrack-tables deep in the night. The Traitor Legions. Astartes who had - unimaginable thought! - turned from the light and brought blasphemous war against the Emperor. He could feel Korland's hand on his arm, quaking uncontrollably.

'But... you promised... you said you brought liberation...'

Sliganian came to attention and clashed his claws together in a handclap. There was more animation in his voice now, a hideous good humour.

'You are right, young Challis, we must not delay. You have earned your liberation ten times over, you and these brave warriors of yours. Why, your resourcefulness almost reminds me of myself in my younger days, before my time as an Iron Warrior.'

Iron Warrior. The words hit Challis like a hammer. Beside him, Korland wrenched Hyl's grenade launcher from her hands with a shriek.

'Run! We are deceived! We are deceived!'

He never had time to fire. The machine-man forms beside Sliganian began to emit a crackling hum, and raised arms that changed before Challis's eyes. Fingers stretched to become gunbarrels, metal gloves flowed backwards into shapes that hinted at weapon stocks, magazines. Each mutant gun-arm spat once.

Challis looked around. The head full of knowledge that Korland had spent his young life accumulating was burst open, the boy's chest caved in. Blood pooled around the corpse.

Delirious with shock, all Challis could do was stare and whisper: 'Liberation. You promised.'

'And am I not a man of my word, Challis, whatever ingratitude your young companion insisted on showing? Theomandus, quickly, please.'

There was a cry from behind him and Challis spun about. Hyl was struggling in the grip of another armoured giant, this one wrapped in a cloak of spun silver, with eyes that gave off pale, twisting lights and a voice that was a soft, creeping whisper: 'For is it not written that "the common man is like a worm in the gut of a corpse, trapped inside a prison of cold flesh, helpless and uncaring, unaware even of the inevitability of its own doom"? Such a fate do we free you from as we bring your mortal flesh to glorious union with the stuff of Chaos.'

'Yes, indeed it is most well written and right,' Sliganian responded.

'And hath not great Perturabo proclaimed: "The spirit is a machine that is unlocked by Chaos. The Flesh is a fortress that we shall overcome"?' Sliganian bowed slightly: 'Thus sayeth the Warsmith above all.'

Hyl had time for one more cry before a hazy wave of energy tore through her and she began to change.

Her mouth dropped open and a threefold tongue tipped in bone barbs uncoiled from it. Her body ballooned into an obese mass that writhed with parodies of her own face as her arms and legs withered to fleshless sticks and dropped away. And her clear green eyes stayed fixed on Challis's until, mercifully, the sanity left them and the sorcerer dropped the squalling lump of flesh onto the deck.

'And so these proud warriors embrace their freedom,' said Sliganian as the slaves were seized by the traitor Marines around them. His voice was soft, his tone not unkind. 'Your liberation from your mortality, the liberation you so crave from the rusted chains of your Imperium. A gift that so few understand, a gift that the ignorant fear and flee from. There have been worlds, Challis, where the people have risen as one and fought us when we have tried to give the gift that you asked us for. But when I heard of your call for help I knew we had to make haste to aid you. Truly, this is

the gift you have all earned, Challis, and it is my honour to be the instrument by which you will have your sweet, brief taste of freedom.' The sorcerer moved among them, taking each slave by the arm. Luder became a writhing slug-thing with a crest of dripping quills; the man behind her sprouted lashing tendrils from his mouth and nose and choked on them as his muscles swelled and their convulsions broke his bones. By the time the last of them had had their humanity wrenched away, Challis was weeping freely with rage and despair. Sliganian's hand took his shoulder.

'I know, my young friend, it is a moving thing to witness. The corpse-Emperor has no sway over them now. But for you, my warrior, their leader and inspiration, a greater gift still. My flagship has need of slaves, Challis, the fighting with the greenskins has taken its toll. Be of good cheer, brave human - you have won the right to live out your days in the service of your liberator. Hold your head high, Challis. You need wait no longer.'

The servo-claws of the smiths closed about Challis's limbs and the screaming, weeping human was carried away. As his warriors moved to their pickup points Lord Sliganian looked back at the clump of struggling, yammering Chaos spawn. Nearly half were dead already as their deformed bodies gave out; the rest thrashed and howled on the grimy metal floor.

'It is good and generous work that we do, Theomandus,' Sliganian declared, and his sorcerer bowed. 'I am never so fulfilled as upon a Liberation Day.'