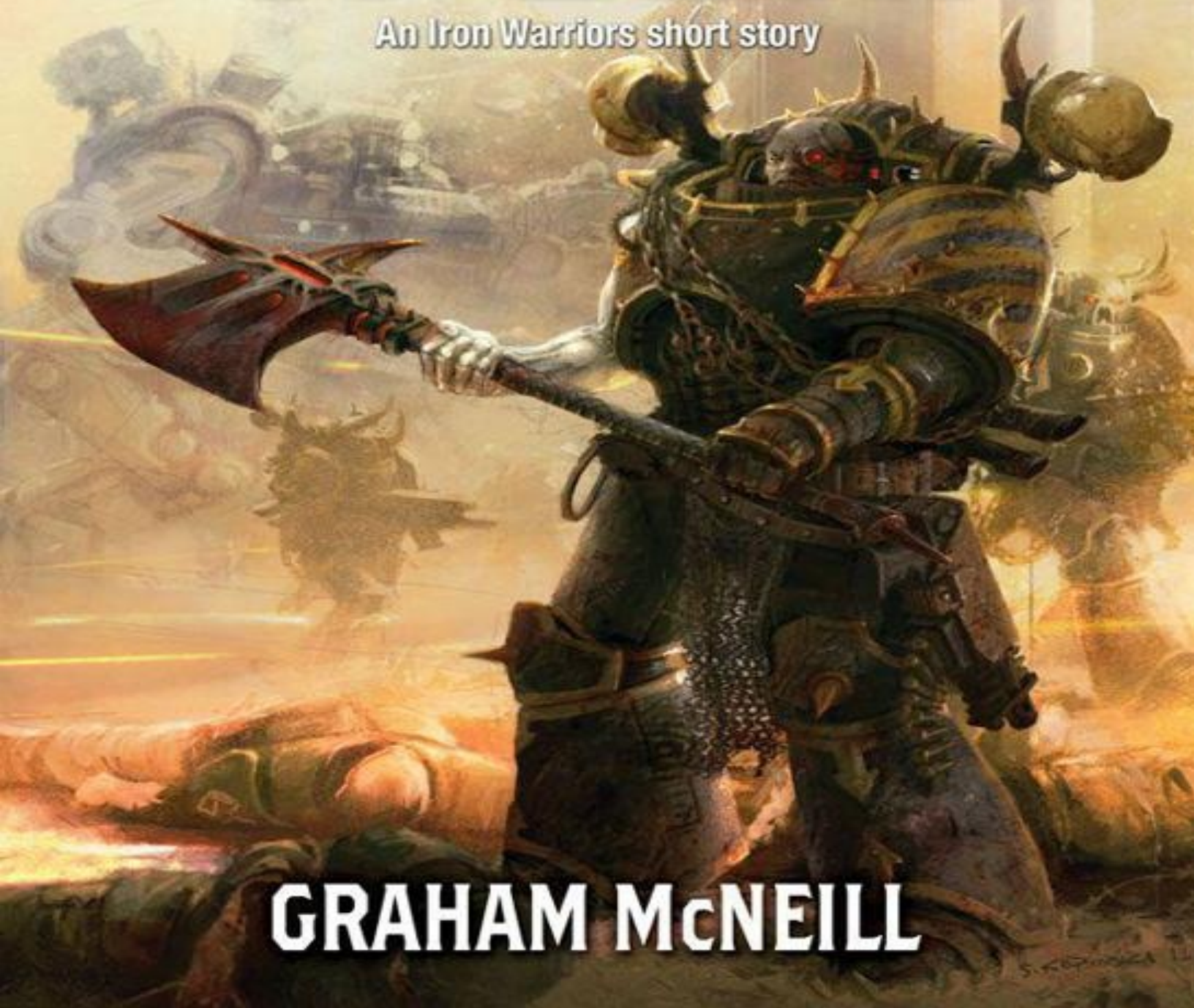


**WARHAMMER**  
40,000

# THE BEAST OF CALTH

An Iron Warriors short story



**GRAHAM McNEILL**

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# THE BEAST OF CALTH

Graham McNeill

Blood dripped from the tip of the blade as it hovered in front of Kellan's eye. He'd watched its lethally-sharp edge cut his comrades up, helpless to stop their mutilation and murder. The beast had killed them all. Joelle, their flinty-eyed sergeant, had fallen first, her belly opened in grotesque mockery of the births she had once presided over in her pre-Defence Auxilia days. Dour-hearted Aquillen had been next, the blade opening him from groin to sternum.

Young Telion, named for the venerable scout of the Chapter, had cried for his mother as the knife removed his leg with the speed of a laser-amputator. He'd bled out after a few minutes, weeping and begging her to take away the pain. Karysta had given the beast nothing: no screams, no pleading cries for mercy. She'd heard the scare stories too, and known the beast had no mercy in him. She wasn't about to waste her breath on futile words.

Then the beast had turned on him, gladius in hand. Proportioned for an Adeptus Astartes warrior, it was enormous to a mortal: a hewing broadsword with a blade that could cut deep into the toughest war plate. It had sliced through the layered mesh and kevlar of their Defence Auxilia uniforms like paper.

The beast had come out of nowhere, a monstrous figure in battered armour with the paint stripped from its plates. Flashes of yellow and black leapt from between two abandoned dwellings, and Joelle was dying, down on her knees and vainly attempting to stop her guts from spilling out over the rocky ground. Kellan had managed to fire a shot, the only one of their squad able to even raise his weapon, but it hadn't done any good.

A fist punched him through the air and left him sitting with his back to the wall of an empty domicile with his breath coming in painful, rasping gurgles. Like everyone in the Calth Defence Auxilia he'd received training from the medicae. Not much, but enough to know that several of his ribs were broken and

that at least one of his lungs was punctured.

The beast had killed them all, and Kellan had watched the whole thing, unable to move and unable to block out the agonised cries of his squad. The beast had made him witness the mutilation of their corpses, promising to inflict even greater pain were he to look away from the butchery. Blood sprays painted the grey-tiled walls in dripping arcs, and the beast had wet his fingers in the gaping wounds he had cut, daubing strange symbols on the buildings: cursive stars, leering skulls and hideous words in an abominable language unknown to Kellan. It had the appearance of unclean sorcery, but that was only to be expected from such a monstrous enemy, one that had sold its soul to the Dark Gods. Kellan didn't look at the designs, remembering the teachings Prelate Justian had drummed into them at the very beginning of the invasion.

With his mutilations and obscene graffiti complete, the beast knelt before Kellan and rested one enormous hand upon his shoulder as though to comfort him. Kellan wanted to shrug off the killer's loathsome touch, but it was too painful to move.

'To know the workings of the enemy is to be corrupted by them...' he whispered, screwing his eyes tightly shut.

'I told you what would happen if you didn't look,' growled the beast, prising them open once again. Kellan's eyelids tore free, and blood streamed into his eyes. Antasia had once sleepily told him that his eyes were his best feature, and he clung to thoughts of her as unbearable pain lanced deep into his skull. Kellan couldn't blink the sticky fluid from his eyes, and saw the hideously disfigured face of the beast through a scarlet haze.

Ruined by war and injury, the beast was everything Kellan had imagined him to look like: scarred, stitched with bloody augmetics and hideous beyond belief. Since the defeat of the Bloodborn, stories had been circulating the lower caverns of a hideous spawn-creature, loosed by the defeated enemy to devour the honourable people of Calth. No one had given the stories real credence, and the wealth of people still listed as missing after the war made it that much harder to confirm or refute the stories of deaths and mutilations.

Kellan now knew the truth, and it was far worse than any monstrous creature.

Though his pain was incredible, Kellan was grateful for the haze misting his eyes. To look into the eyes of the enemy would be to damn his soul for all eternity.

'There is only the Emperor,' stated Kellan. 'He is our shield and protector.'

The beast shook his head, as though disappointed at so predictable a response.

'Is that what they tell you?' the beast asked him. 'I thought Guilliman's people would know better. It's almost pitiful how much you've forgotten of your past.'

Kellan didn't answer, his stinging eyes roving the bulk of the beast. The armour rendered him enormous, and there was no mistaking his genhanced physique for anything other than a Traitor Space Marine. The devotionals said the Iron Warriors had been utterly defeated, that their forces were being routed all over Ultramar. Six long, hard months of fighting since the victory at Castra Tanagra had seen the Bloodborn driven from every world they had defiled. Kellan had railed against the fates that had seen his unit confined to tunnel clearance on Calth instead of taking the fight to the enemy.

Caretaker duty, that's what Aquillen had called it. Six months of patrolling empty caves to ensure every last shred of the enemy was gone. Six months of boredom and endless hikes through wide caverns, forgotten tunnels and echoing underground galleries. Their daily patrols had explored cathedral-like caverns filled with glittering blue stalactites as thin as threads, rainbow caverns of frozen rad-waste and abandoned agri-caverns that had exploded with all manner of strange and fecund vegetation. Karysta had once joked that they were getting to see areas of Calth even its people had forgotten about.

But something else had found these negative spaces and made its lair in the dark.

It had hidden from the light, biding its time, and they had stumbled across it in this last patrol. The map didn't even have a name for this sunken gallery of tunnels and caves, simply a greyed-out region that had long since been abandoned in favour of roomier caverns with better light and access to the surface mag-levs.

An abandoned settlement, its name unrecorded, sprawled empty and forsaken at the edge of a deep chasm. Though it had likely been many centuries since the buildings had been occupied, they had not fallen into disrepair. Such was the attention to detail and skill of Calth's builders that all it would take to render them habitable again would be a strong back and a broom.

Every such abandoned place needed searching for signs of the enemy, though, of course, none had yet been found. Everyone knew the Bloodborn had been stopped at Four Valleys Gorge, and the idea that any of that bastard horde might have found their way into the caverns beneath Calth was laughable.

Kellan wasn't laughing now.

'You're the beast, aren't you?' he said, fighting to keep his voice from betraying his terror.

'Is that what they're calling me?' replied the beast. 'Trust Guilliman's lot to come up with something so unoriginal. After all the people I cut up, I'd hoped for something with a bit more... theatre to it.'

'You're a monster,' spat Kellan.

‘You say that like I don’t know already know it,’ said the beast, looking over his shoulder at the bloody heaps of dismantled bodies. ‘I’ve been doing this for a very long time, and it would be hard to deny the horror of what I’ve done.’

‘Then why do it?’

‘Do you like what I did to your friends?’ asked the beast, ignoring the question and turning the tip of the blade in front of Kellan’s eye. ‘And the symbols? What do you think of them? I’m not sure they’re right, but they’re close enough. Should get the attention of someone who matters, don’t you agree?’

‘Don’t make me look at them,’ said Kellan. Unable to blink, his eyes felt like they were on fire, the dry air of the cavern sucking up what little moisture was left in them. ‘You’re going to kill me. Don’t damn my soul as well.’

‘Stupid not to look,’ said the beast. ‘The first thing you need to know is who your enemy is and what he’s capable of. Wasn’t it the Imperial Fists primarch who said that the first axiom of defence is to understand what you defend against?’

The hulking figure chuckled, a rumbling avalanche of sound that began deep in his belly and gradually spilled from his lips. ‘Gods preserve me, but Obax Zakayo’s soul will be burning in the warp to hear me quoting Dorn.’

‘They’ll hunt you down,’ said Kellan with pink-frothed breaths as his head lolled onto his shoulder. ‘When they know what you are, the Chapter will send everyone they have to find you.’

‘That’s what I’m counting on,’ said the beast, taking hold of Kellan’s head with one hand and twisting it to face him.

‘They’ll kill you for what you’ve done,’ said Kellan.

‘You’re probably right,’ agreed the beast. ‘But you never really defeat an Iron Warrior, not entirely. He’s always got one last trick left to him, a final solution that makes him just as dangerous in death as he was in life. If I die down here, half of Calth is coming with me.’

Kellan tensed as the beast brought the knife closer, its polished steel tip scratching the surface of his cornea. The blade eased forwards and clear fluid mixed with the dried blood as it sliced deeper into his eye. Kellan screamed, and though his body thrashed in agony the beast held his head immobile.

‘I’m not going to kill you,’ smiled the beast. ‘But I *am* going to hurt you.’

Inquisitor Arakai had been fond of employing gardening metaphors in his teachings, and had liked to quote Galan Noirgrim, a man who had evidently shared his love of growing things. As a young interrogator, Namira Suzaku had endured much pious pontificating on all things heretical crouched in images of weeds and cankerous roots.

Suzaku disliked such obvious allegories, believing that they reduced the most terrible threat humanity faced to something the common man might understand. Since her elevation to full inquisitor status, Suzaku believed that the mysteries of heresy and the machinations of the immaterium should be left unknowable to the bulk of her species. Once that lightning had escaped the bottle, there was no putting it back.

Better to leave the bulk of humanity ignorant of such things.

The war against the Bloodborn had convinced her of that more than ever.

And now this...

The cavern was wide and high-ceilinged, though some quirk in the rocks' structure was preventing the range-finders incorporated into her ice-blue eyes from determining exactly how high. Certainly it was large enough that three Adeptus Mechanicus battle engines could stand upon each other's shoulders and barely brush the roof. Even Magos Locard's *Lex Tredecim* could pass through and seem small.

The walls glittered with moisture, but the air was chill. Suzaku pulled her long black storm coat tighter about herself as she stepped from the warm interior of her Rhino.

Underground winds, stirred from deeper caverns, tousled her winter-white hair, stark against the caramel hue of her smooth skin. The tattoo of the hammer on the underside of her wrist itched, and she had long ago taken that as an omen of dark times ahead. She kissed the tattoo, an unconscious gesture of childish superstition she'd never quite been able to shake ever since Soburo had shown it to her in the scholam.

Thoughts of her brother made her pause, and she took her hand from the ebony-inlaid handle of her long-barrelled pistol. Suzaku hadn't fired the weapon since the battle against the Bloodborn in Four Valleys Gorge. She had field-stripped the weapon a hundred times or more, oiling the mechanisms and cleaning each individual part while reciting the mantras of accuracy and the catechisms against jamming with every sweep of her cloth.

But no amount of obsessive maintenance could purge the memory of the shot that had ended her brother's life.

'That's another bottle of scalp-oil you owe me,' said Milotas, as he turned to climb down from the Rhino onto its plasteel running board.

'What?' replied Suzaku, though she had heard her savant perfectly.

'You know fine well, Namira,' said Milotas.

Milotas Adelmo was one of the few individuals permitted to use her given name, a privilege he had earned many times in their long association. Though it was awkward for him to disembark from the Rhino, Suzaku knew better than to

offer him a helping hand. Milotas was no dwarf, but his spine had been dreadfully foreshortened and twisted after long months of painful reconstructive surgery in the aftermath of their banishment of the Uromere Pseudoscorpionida.

Her savant's stunted physique made even the simplest tasks difficult, but he had steadfastly refused any augmetic repairs to his body. The flavour of Imperial Cult that flourished on his homeworld promulgated a vision of human perfection in the Emperor's image, and shunned mechanical augmentations. It made for a contentious relationship between the planetary government and the Adeptus Mechanicus at times, but a global quirk of genetics that produced a much higher proportion than average of mathematical and statistical savants per head of population ensured that any areas of theological friction were diplomatically navigated.

'I wasn't thinking of Soburo,' said Suzaku.

'Then why did you release your pistol?' asked Milotas, dropping from the running boards while holding onto the flanged hull plates of the armoured vehicle.

Suzaku looked down. She hadn't even realised she had let go of the weapon.

Milotas stepped down to the rock of Calth with a grimace of discomfort and adjusted the roomy surplice of purple and crimson he used to mask his affliction. Blessed with absurd good looks and a gracefully aged face that was free of juvenat treatments, his hairless skull gleamed with an application from his extensive – and growing – collection of oils and fragrant perfumes. Tucked under one arm was his mirror-slate, and Suzaku knew a snub-nosed pistol was holstered beneath his shoulder. Too small to be of any real use in a serious fight, it was, nevertheless, perfectly able to penetrate his own skull should the need arise.

'Because I don't need to draw it,' said Suzaku, archly. 'Don't make me change my mind.'

'And you kissed the hammer tattoo,' said Milotas, pressing his palm to the face of his slate and giving a soft smile as it responded to his touch with a pleasing chime. Numerical data streams cascaded over its reflective face, unintelligible to anyone except a savant or augmented calculus-logi.

'Fine,' admitted Suzaku. 'Yes, I was thinking of Soburo.'

'Aha,' said Milotas without looking up from his numbers. 'I think a bottle of distilled crimson saxifrage would be nice. I hear it grows in some of the deeper caverns here on Calth. Apparently, the artificial sunlight gives it a quite unique scent.'

'Fine, I'll see to it.'

'Do you want another lecture from me?'

‘Throne, no!’

‘It wasn’t really a question, you know,’ said Milotas, staring at her with unabashed frankness. ‘Soburo’s death was a necessary death. You know that. He had been tainted by the warp-sorcery of the Archenemy. You couldn’t have allowed him to live.’

‘You’re right, I *do* know that, Milotas,’ said Suzaku with a faint sigh. ‘I don’t need to hear it again.’

‘You know it, but you don’t *believe* it,’ said Milotas, modulating his tone to one less flippant. ‘You forget that I was there too. I stood on the walls of Castra Occidens when the enemy warpcraft struck. Soburo knew he was tainted and accepted the only option open to you.’

‘He forgave me with his last breath.’

‘I remember,’ said Milotas with a nod. ‘He was a good man.’

‘He was, but I didn’t think he’d make a good inquisitor. I thought he was too compassionate, that his empathic gifts made him too... open. Too forgiving.’

‘And now?’

‘Now I think he might have made a better inquisitor than I.’

Milotas reached out and took her hand, placing it back on the textured grip of her pistol.

‘You’re wrong,’ said Milotas, and Suzaku smiled a little. ‘Yes, Soburo was a good man, but the Inquisition does not need *good* men, it needs strong men and women who can make the decisions others are afraid to make. It needs agents who will countenance the unthinkable act because no one else dares to. You and I both know the threats we face are too real and too dangerous to be met with the slightest moment of indecision or compassion. To believe otherwise is dangerous folly. And while I have the greatest respect for the sanctity of human life, I understand the hard truth of the dreadful arithmetic that must be employed to determine who lives and who dies. You understand it too, and that’s what makes you an inquisitor.’

‘Are you sure about that? Now?’

‘More than ever,’ said Milotas with a sage nod. ‘You wouldn’t have pulled the trigger and killed your brother if you didn’t accept the truth of it. Now that today’s lecture is done with, shall we see what has Sergeant Dante so agitated?’

‘Do we have anything further on why we’re here?’

‘Nothing more than a request for your attendance at this location,’ said Milotas.

Suzaku nodded and set off into the cavern, wondering what could be left on Calth that was so important it required the presence of an inquisitor. Part of her was irritated at such a peremptory summons, but her instincts for trouble were

warning her that this day would be like no other, and she kept her ire in check.

Two of her storm troopers disembarked from the rear of the Rhino, falling into lockstep on either side of her. Once, they had been elite soldiers of the Jacintine Marauders, but now they were the bodyguards of an inquisitor, augmented and weaponised to be even deadlier.

Milotas followed Suzaku with a waddling gait, scanning the surface of his slate and surveying the extent of the cavern.

‘One hundred and ninety-three point seven six metres high at its apex, six point seven five kilometres long and with a mean width of six hundred and fifty point two metres. Small, by Calth’s standards.’

Regardless of its size, the cavern was filled with activity. Two Defence Auxilia Chimeras were parked up at the outskirts of a collection of structures that looked much like every other settlement in Calth’s underground warrens. Imperial architecture tended to modularity, and the dwelling places of Calth were no exception, but Suzaku had to admit the proportions, integrity and aesthetic of Ultramar’s buildings were more pleasing to the eye than most.

Sitting apart from the Chimeras was a solitary Rhino, painted a vivid blue and with the pristine white symbol of the Ultramarines emblazoned on its assault doors. Superficially, it was no different to Suzaku’s transport, but where hers was laden with gene-locked librarium engines, surveyor gear and the tools of her vocation, this vehicle seemed somehow heavier, tougher and altogether more solid.

This was a vehicle forged for war, an armoured chariot designed to deliver the deadliest fighters in the galaxy into the heart of an enemy battle-line. The moment Suzaku had seen that the summons to this cavern was prefixed by an Ultramarines vox-stamp, she had known that this would be no simple matter.

‘Does this place have a name?’ she asked, taking her Inquisitorial rosette from her storm coat as a squad of Defence Auxilia troopers moved to intercept them.

‘Checking now,’ said Milotas, his agile fingers pinching, sweeping and tapping at the slate. ‘Ah, yes, here it is. Had to dig into the Mechanicus files to get it. It was called Pelasgia Theta 66. It used to be a refinery station for a series of stull-stope mines worked into the face of the wide chasm upon which the settlement perches.’

‘Used to be? Why was it abandoned?’

‘Some of the stulls, that’s the supports, collapsed and brought down a number of the sloping shafts, which in turn caused the upper ledge of the cliff to collapse. A hundred and fifty-four people died.’

‘And they just abandoned it after one accident?’

‘Yes. A hundred and fifty-four deaths isn’t a lot by Mechanicus standards, but

on Ultramar it's considered disastrous. The workers felt the Martian priests weren't taking enough safety precautions and most of them just moved away.'

The Defence Auxilia stopped before them and Suzaku felt the tension in the posture of her bodyguards ratchet up a notch. They didn't like anyone with guns coming near her, even ones garbed in the uniforms of Ultramar.

'Identification, if you please,' said a trooper with a face only a mother could love. His stripes and the letters stencilled over the inverted omega on his right breast identified him as Sergeant Lerato.

Suzaku held her rosette out and said, 'Inquisitor Namira Suzaku.'

Though she had been in Ultramar for over a year, it still felt strange to announce herself so obviously. A lifetime spent working in the shadows was not shed without some unease. Lerato studied her symbol of authority carefully and swept a signifier wand over the seal of red, black and silver. Where most people blanched at such a feared icon of Imperial authority, the sergeant simply nodded as a light at the base of the signifier wand base flashed green.

'Pass, inquisitor,' said Lerato, stepping away with a short bow.

Suzaku slide her rosette back into her storm coat and gave him a respectful nod, knowing that even Roboute Guilliman would need to present some form of identification before Sergeant Lerato would allow him past.

'Thank you, sergeant,' she said.

'You're welcome, ma'am,' said Lerato. 'I'm glad you're here. It's a bad one in there. Real nasty. Has the touch of the Archenemy to it.'

Suzaku felt the hammer tattoo on her wrist itch, and her earlier instinct that this would be no ordinary day returned with even greater force.

'What makes you say that?' she asked, gratified to see a hint of unease in Lerato's face.

'The blood,' said Lerato. 'Nothing of Ultramar did that to Sergeant Joelle's squad. That's the work of something damned, that is.'

Suzaku interpolated the gaps in her knowledge quickly. Calth's underground clearance patrols were systematically sweeping the lower caverns for any trace of the Bloodborn. They kept in touch with regular vox-checks, and if any check was missed, it immediately raised a red flag. Clearly this Sergeant Joelle had missed a check, which had brought Sergeant Lerato's squad to Pelasgia Theta 66.

'You found Sergeant Joelle's squad?' she asked.

'Yes, ma'am,' confirmed Lerato.

'Come with me,' said Suzaku, turning on her heel and marching into the settlement. Knowing the value of first-hand information better than anyone, she wanted Lerato with her. 'Tell me what happened.'

‘After she missed her vox-check, I led my squad down to where she’d last reported in,’ said Lerato, matching her quickened pace. ‘We found their Chimera at the edge of the abandoned settlement and moved in. Didn’t take long to find the poor bastards. Begging your pardon for the profanity, ma’am, but it was a mess.’

Suzaku studied the sergeant’s face as he shook his head at the memory. ‘I fought at Four Valleys and I saw things there I never want to remember, but this was worse, much worse.’

‘Her squad were all dead?’

‘No, Trooper Kellan survived,’ said Lerato with a shudder. ‘That’s what made it worse.’

Sergeant Dante was waiting in the cramped central square of the settlement, his vast bulk unmoving and solid as a statue. The plates of his armour glistened with moisture, the blue plates, golden eagle and emerald green edging shining brightly in the drab light of the cavern. It had been some time since Suzaku had met with a warrior of the Ultramarines; only token forces were left on worlds declared free of taint while the majority of the Chapter was engaged in driving the last remnants of the Bloodborn from Ultramar.

Suzaku smelled the blood before she saw it, the unmistakable aroma that some said smelled of copper or tin, but which had always reminded her of a faulty voltaic battery. A great deal had been spilled here, and the plain walls were liberally streaked with arterial squirts and fans whipped from the edge of a blade. Amid the blood spatters, bizarre symbols had been drawn in the same vital fluid, eight-pointed stars and skull motifs that looked almost childish in their crudity.

‘Emperor’s mercy,’ said Milotas, and Suzaku heard a soft inhalation of breath from her bodyguards. Though Sergeant Lerato had witnessed this sight before, even he gave a low moan of disgust. Suzaku had expected a scene of slaughter – such things were not new to her – but the hideous assembly of dismembered flesh, flensed skin and wanton mutilation in the centre of the square was shocking in its theatrical grotesquery.

‘Inquisitor,’ said Dante, breaking from his immobility as she approached and making no attempt to disguise his guardedness.

‘You are Sergeant Dante?’ she asked, like there could be any doubt.

The Space Marine nodded. ‘I am Dante, Fourth Company.’

‘Can you tell me what happened here?’

‘I am hoping you can tell me,’ said Dante, removing his helmet to reveal a deeply tanned and lined face of wide cheekbones, noble features and eyes of silver-flecked amber. His hair was as white as hers, and the glittering studs

embedded in his forehead spoke of a lifetime of service to the Ultramarines. Dante was handsome in a strange, unattainable way, shaped like a bronze cast by a heroic sculptor of antiquity.

‘Has anything like this ever happened on Calth before?’ asked Suzaku, kneeling beside the dreadful arrangement of body parts and pooled blood.

Dante looked offended by the question, but shook his head.

‘No, never,’ he said, without fear of contradiction.

‘You’re sure? No incidences of psychotic breakdown? It’s not uncommon in the aftermath of a war, especially one fought against the Ruinous Powers.’

‘Never,’ repeated Dante, the threat in his tone unmistakable. ‘You are the expert on all things blasphemous, but I know the people of Calth.’

Suzaku understood the source of his simmering hostility and was not offended; she had encountered it many times before with pious servants of the Imperium. To fight an enemy, one first had to understand that enemy, but such knowledge was dangerous and more than one inquisitor had succumbed to the temptations offered by such potent secrets. To Dante, she was just another heretic and daemon consort waiting to happen.

‘Very well,’ she said, taking a moment to study the scene and swallow back her revulsion. To objectively examine the carnage she needed her faculties to be unclouded by horror and sickness, which was easier said than done. She stood and circled the arrangement of body parts, letting her eyes roam dispassionately over the detestable violations. Images of horror were stored in her meme-coils as she blink-clicked snapshots of the murdered troopers.

‘They were killed here, that much is obvious,’ said Milotas, circling in the opposite direction and holding his mirrored slate up to the blood-streaked walls.

‘How can you be sure?’ asked Dante, looking at Milotas as though the savant’s awkward gait was some kind of mutation instead of an injury received in service of the Imperium.

‘The volume of blood on the walls and pooled on the ground is sufficient to make such an assertion with a ninety-three point six five percent probability of accuracy,’ replied Milotas, oblivious to Dante’s scrutiny. ‘If these troopers had been killed elsewhere, there would have been significant blood trails leading into this square. No such trails exist, therefore it is not unreasonable to assert that they died here.’

‘You trust this man’s knowledge of such things?’ asked Dante.

‘If Milotas Adelmo says they were killed here, then they were killed here,’ said Suzaku with more than a hint of pride. ‘Before he was seconded to my staff, my savant was engaged by the Kar Duniash precinct houses of the Adeptus Arbites. Trust me, his statistical analysis of blood spatter patterns sent more

murderers to their deaths than any Scipio-pattern shotcannon.'

Dante looked unconvinced, but said nothing more.

Suzaku stepped back to examine the staging of the bodies, for it was immediately apparent they were lying in a pattern that had been deliberately arranged. Legs had been broken at the knees and used to form a crude circle, within which was a smaller circle formed from pieces of arms. Severed fingers formed radiating points that linked the two circles, and fanned out strips of skinned flesh had been laid out like the pages of some blasphemous book of blood.

At the top of the circle, eyeless heads were stacked in a pile, and meaningless symbols had been smeared on their cheeks and foreheads in their own blood. Suzaku did not recognise them as representative of any of the more common Archenemy sigils, and like the symbols daubed on the walls, they had a haphazard look to them, as though the killer hadn't really known what he was doing.

'How many were in Joelle's squad?' she asked Lerato.

'One sergeant and four troopers,' replied Lerato, keeping his eyes averted.

'You said there was one survivor, but there are only three bodies here,' she said, though it hadn't been clear at first how many she was looking at, such was the thoroughness of butchery. Only the stacked human heads told how many lives had been ended here.

Dante knelt beside the pile of heads and said, 'There are four heads here.'

'Mistress Suzaku is correct, my lord,' said Milotas. 'Readings based on mean weight of Defence Auxilia personnel indicate only enough mass for three individuals.'

'So we have three bodies and one survivor,' said Dante. 'The question then becomes, where is the fourth body?'

'Impossible to say for sure,' said Suzaku. 'Perhaps the killer took it with him.'

'Why would he do such a thing?'

'Perhaps as a trophy,' said Suzaku, kneeling beside the severed heads and bending to examine the flesh at the edge of the cuts that had removed them from their bodies. 'Maybe he requires it for some dark ritual. Or...'

'Or?' prompted Dante, when Suzaku didn't continue.

'Or perhaps he took the last body to eat.'

'A cannibal?' hissed Dante, horrified at the notion.

'It's possible,' said Suzaku. 'The Archenemy are not like us, and the mores of civilised behaviour that you and I adhere to do not apply to them. The person that did this has been here for six months at least, and if it is the kind of individual I think it is, then the eating of human meat would hold no terror.'

Dante knelt beside Suzaku. ‘So what manner of individual do you think did this?’

‘You see these neck wounds?’ she said, indicating the precise cuts that had severed the heads. ‘These wounds were made with one blow, and only a warrior with incredible strength and a heavy, razor-sharp blade like yours could do that with such exactitude.’

Dante understood the significance of Suzaku’s words in a heartbeat.

‘A Traitor Space Marine did this,’ he hissed.

‘We need to talk to the survivor,’ said Suzaku. ‘There’s an Iron Warrior still on Calth.’

Leaving Sergeant Lerato and his squad to clean up the mess of body parts in Pelasgia Theta 66, Suzaku followed Sergeant Dante back to his azure Rhino. Seen up close, it was even more formidable, its paintwork still bearing the bare-metal scrapes of daemonic claws and the dented craters of weapon impacts. Its engine rumbled as they approached, like a sleeping dragon sensing intruders within its lair. The matt-black weapons on the forward-mounted cupola spun around to face them and targeting augurs whirred with clattering belligerence. Dante paid the guns no mind, but Suzaku felt the red range-finding lens scan them with the passive detectors incorporated in the arcane mechanics of her eyes.

‘Those guns are primed and ready to fire, ma’am,’ said one of her bodyguards, his own combat augmetics registering the same thing.

‘I know,’ she said. ‘Make no threatening move or it will shoot you dead.’

The man powered down the implanted weaponry in his arm, and the weapons on the Rhino returned to their idle position.

Dante hammered a fist on the vehicle’s rear assault ramp, and tapped out an unseen code into the oversized keypad enclosed by a blast shield. The door whined on well-maintained hydraulics as it lowered, and the mixed aroma of engine oil, counterseptic, blood and aromatic unguents pleasing to the primal heart of the Rhino gusted out like fragrant breath.

Trooper Kellan lay within, looking absurdly small on a gauze-covered stretcher designed to bear a wounded Space Marine. Three enormous warriors in burnished blue war plate with green trims on the shoulder guards sat at the farthest extent of the crew compartment. They held their monstrous boltguns between their knees and spared Suzaku and Milotas only the most cursory glance as the ramp opened.

Suzaku felt their instant appraisal, and anger touched her at the speed with which they had dismissed her as a threat. She shook off the irrational feeling as a

fourth Space Marine, encased in armour of dusty white, bent over Kellan. Gurgling tubes coiled from vac-sealed cylinders on his back, and a flipped-up hololithic display on his enormous forearm flickered with the erratic bio-rhythms of the injured man.

The serpent-wrapped staff with flared wings on the warrior's shoulder guard told Suzaku that he was an Apothecary, a healer of the Adeptus Astartes. The Apothecary attached monitoring cables and intravenous fluid lines to the man's body, but Suzaku couldn't yet see the extent of his injuries. She wondered what one trained in restoring the bodies of super-engineered humans knew of frail mortal anatomy, but decided this wasn't the time to ask.

'Get in and close the door behind you,' snapped the Apothecary.

'Better do as he says,' advised Dante. 'Apothecary Selenus is known for his foul temper.'

Selenus spun around to face them, and Suzaku saw his stern features were perfectly angular, like a bust carved by one to whom gentle curves were unknown.

'A fact you would do well to remember if you want me to put you back together when next we go to war,' said Selenus, jabbing Dante in the centre of his chest as he climbed into the crew compartment.

Suzaku and Milotas followed Dante up the ramp, and she was immediately struck by the apparent space within the Rhino. A Space Marine vehicle was stripped down to the bare bones, every non-essential system removed to give it greater speed and manoeuvrability. Where other Rhinos made concessions, albeit half-hearted ones, to the crew's ability to function, this was simply an armoured shell designed to keep the warriors within safe. Any available space was taken up with stowage for weapons or ammunition, and Suzaku was forced to admire the spartan aesthetic.

'Duly noted, Apothecary,' said Dante, moving around the stretcher. 'It's not my fault you aren't with the Swords of Calth just now.'

'I should be with my battle brothers,' retorted Selenus, rising to Dante's obvious bait. 'I should be fighting alongside my captain, not nursemaiding a mortal who didn't have the good sense to get himself killed instead of burdening me with his stupidly fragile body.'

'I'm sure Captain Ventris will be fine, it's only a search and rescue mission,' said Dante dismissively. 'In any case, he has Petronius Nero at his side, and neither Hadrianus nor Cyprian will let anything happen to the captain. Not to mention Peleus. He'll put a round through the eye of anyone stupid enough to attack the Swords.'

'And if they don't protect him?' asked Selenus. 'Who'll be there to pick up the

pieces? Tell me that, Korvin Dante.'

Despite the apparent hostility, Suzaku sensed a fierce loyalty between these warriors, a fraternal bond that only those who have shed blood in common cause can know. Though they spoke with gruff harshness, she felt the great respect and friendship between them.

She approached the stretcher upon which Trooper Izaak Kellan lay, and no sooner had she laid eyes on his face than she was grateful a gauze covering obscured the rest of his body.

'Emperor's Mercy...' she breathed, holding a hand to her mouth.

Inquisitors saw a great many terrible things in their years of service, and Suzaku had a library's worth of memories she wished she could forget: damned souls torn apart by possession, mountains of children's skulls offered up as sacrifices by insane cults, planetary populations drowning in a hellish tide of daemonic incursion and the subsequent viral fury of the Life Eater. She had seen things that had driven lesser minds to insanity, but what had been done to Kellan was more horrifying for the all too human scale of it and the wanton cruelty of his mutilations.

The sterile sheet couldn't completely cover the man's injuries, and Suzaku knew it would be a kindness to put a bullet through his head right now. His arms had been stripped of skin from wrist to shoulder, and his chest was a mass of deep incisions cut in the form of an eight-pointed star that no amount of anti-coagulant could stop bleeding. A steady dripping from the metal frame of the stretcher told Suzaku that the man had been hamstrung, his legs now useless appendages of meat and bone.

But it was upon Kellan's face that his attacker had wrought the most heinous tortures.

One of the man's eyes had been slowly gouged from its lidless socket, the other left relatively untouched so as to bear witness to the unimaginable malice. His cheeks had been sliced open to the farthest extent of his jawbone, as though a blade had been forced laterally into his mouth. Teeth gleamed bloodily through fresh sutures, and a leering skull had been cut deep into his forehead. Even if Trooper Kellan survived his injuries and debriefing, the Ruinous Powers had forever left their mark upon him.

'Can he talk?' asked Suzaku, holding back a wave of bilious nausea.

'Why don't you ask him?' replied Selenus.

She looked down at the ruined man and he gave an almost imperceptible nod.

'My name is Namira Suzaku,' she said. 'Can you understand me?'

Another nod.

'I am going to catch the person that did this to you,' she said. 'With the help of

these Space Marines, I am going to hunt him down and kill him.'

She saw urgency in Kellan's eyes and leaned in close as his lips trembled with the effort of trying to speak. The man was full of morphia, but she could see it was still causing him great pain to talk. The sutures at his cheeks pulled against the gouged flesh, and his remaining eye wept milky, blood-flecked tears.

'Got... to... catch him...' he said.

'I will,' promised Suzaku. 'But you have to help me. Can you tell me who did this? It was an Iron Warrior, wasn't it?'

Kellan nodded, and she felt the righteous anger of the Space Marines swell around her. No greater foe existed for them. No enemy was hated more. The greenskin and the tyranid were little more than animals, and even the more advanced xenos races were simply enemies to be overcome. The purest hate was reserved for the fallen of the Traitor Legions, and it was a terrible thing to behold.

'Need to kill him. Quickly,' hissed Kellan, as parallel lines of blood ran down his face on either side from separating sutures. 'Never. Defeat... Iron Warriors.'

Dante leaned in and placed a surprisingly gentle hand on Kellan's shoulder. It was a gesture of respect between warriors, a touching familiarity that Suzaku knew was wholly genuine.

'Trust me,' said Dante. 'I'll defeat this one.'

Kellan shook, and gripped Suzaku's hand. The glistening tendons that worked his hand trembled and she felt her gorge rise at the sight of the exposed inner workings of his arm. The bio-readouts on Selenus's arm trilled sharply and every number spiralled higher.

'No,' hissed Kellan, pausing to let the blood collecting in his mouth drain through the wounds in his cheeks. 'Said that even... even if you killed him... he'd take half of Calth... with him... Said that he has... a plan.'

'A plan?' demanded Suzaku. 'What plan?'

'That's enough,' interrupted Selenus. 'We need to get this man to a proper medicae facility right now. The back of a Rhino is no place for life-saving surgery.'

'Just a moment longer, Apothecary,' said Suzaku.

'I said no,' stated Selenus.

Suzaku rounded upon the Apothecary, and said, 'There is an Iron Warrior loose on your world, and I need to speak to this man.'

'He'll die if I don't medicate him, and I'm not letting that happen.'

Suzaku fought the urge to pull out her rosette and remind Selenus of her absolute authority, knowing it would only undermine her position. She had to appeal to the Apothecary's sense of logic.

‘Many more are going to die if we don’t find out everything this man knows.’  
‘He is a warrior of Ultramar,’ said Selenus. ‘And he deserves a chance to live.’  
‘And I’ll give him that chance,’ promised Suzaku. ‘As soon as I’m done talking to him.’

‘You condone this, Korvin?’ demanded Selenus.

‘I do,’ confirmed the sergeant. ‘I do not like it, but she’s right.’

The Apothecary nodded. ‘Very well. A minute longer, but not a second more.’

Suzaku returned her attention to Kellan. His skin was ashen, and there were deep shadows under his eyes. Any battlefield triage would have administered palliatives to allow Kellan to die painlessly before going on to attend less grievously wounded men, but she had no choice but to keep him conscious and talking. Her Inquisitorial instincts told her that a great many lives rested on the outcome of the next minute.

‘What did this Iron Warrior say, trooper?’ asked Suzaku.

Kellan’s eye swam out of focus, and she knew he might not even last another minute. But with an effort that redefined the word ‘heroic’ in Suzaku’s mind, Kellan clamped tight to his will and blinked back the pain.

‘Said he was... going deep,’ said Kellan. ‘Cut out my eye... told me he would crack open the world. His greatest siegework... an approach to Calth’s heart.’

Kellan coughed a wad of red-frothed fluid, and his entire body began convulse. Blood oozed from the skull carved into his forehead, and the image of an eight pointed star began to appear on the gauze sheet covering his chest as blood seeped from the deep cuts gouged there. Chiming warnings rang and a cry of anguish was torn from Kellan’s lips.

‘That’s enough!’ bellowed Selenus, barging Suzaku out of his path as he loomed over the stricken soldier. Suzaku watched him work with grudging fascination. Drug lines and anti-shock balms were administered with a swiftness that was as thorough as it was exact. Suzaku had been injured many times in the line of duty, but the next time she shed her blood in service of the Imperium, she hoped it was in sight of a Space Marine Apothecary like Selenus.

‘No!’ cried Kellan. ‘You have to stop him!’

‘We will,’ promised Suzaku, as Dante led her and Milotas from the back of the Rhino.

The hatch pulled up behind them, and the cool, dry air of the cavern was a relief after the sterile, blood-soaked atmosphere in the back of the Rhino.

‘Will Apothecary Selenus be able to save Trooper Kellan?’ asked Milotas.

Dante looked down at her savant, as though considering ignoring the question, but recognising the man’s value despite his obvious injuries.

‘He and a Deathwatch Apothecary once saved our captain from phage-cell

poisoning after a tyrannid bio-queen skewered him with a poisoned javelin,' said Dante. 'If anyone can save that man, it is Selenus.'

Suzaku nodded and walked away from the Rhino, letting her eyes roam the crystal and rock walls of the cavern. Once this place would have been full of life, people and industry. It seemed a needlessly precarious way of life to choose an existence spent forever underground. Only a tenacious desire not to give an enemy the satisfaction of abandoning your homeworld would force a planet's population to remain so close to the edge of survival.

'So what do you think Kellan's words mean?' asked Milotas, tapping at his slate.

'I'm not sure,' answered Suzaku. 'It could be spite. A defeated foe's last jibe at his enemies.'

'But you don't believe that,' said Milotas, without looking up.

'I don't think Iron Warriors are given to empty threats.'

'No Space Marine makes empty threats,' said Dante. 'Least of all Traitor ones. If this Iron Warrior believes he can do Calth great harm, then we must assume he has abundant reason to think he can hurt us.'

'Do you have any idea what he might be planning?'

Dante shook his head, and Suzaku saw the admission was painful to him.

'If I might make an observation,' said Milotas, turning his slate around so that Suzaku and Dante could see it. Amid the scrolling data-streams cascading down the sides, a central image swam into clarity, a colossal red-lit tower of ironwork, automated machinery and the black and white cog symbol of the Adeptus Mechanicus. Billowing clouds of superheated steam and flares of venting gases fogged the image.

'What is that?' asked Suzaku.

Milotas looked disappointed at the question, and tapped the blinking map icon in the top right corner of the image. Suzaku wasn't familiar with the mapping conventions of Calth, where standard techniques of cartography were useless.

'This is geo-station Aries Pyros,' said Milotas, when she didn't answer.

'I don't know what that means,' snapped Suzaku. 'Just tell me what it is.'

'This is one of the dozen Adeptus Mechanicus geo-thermal power generating stations that supply the vast majority of the energy to the underground sub-station relays that link the cities of Calth together. Buried in artificial, force-shielded bubbles sunk into the planet's upper mantle, they tap into the immense temperatures and pressure to generate vast reserves of power that make Calth more than self-sufficient.'

'Where is that place?' asked Dante, tapping the slate, and earning an irritated glance from Milotas Adelmo. The savant pointedly paused to wipe a silk cloth

over the mirrored slate before answering the Space Marine.

‘It’s ten point six kilometres below us, fifteen point one to the east,’ he answered.

‘Could the Iron Warrior be planning to sabotage this facility?’ asked Suzaku.

‘Impossible,’ declared Dante. ‘You don’t just walk into a place like that. There are Mechanicus praetorians, battle-servitors, and entire detachments of skitarii protecting each one. It’s a fortress in its own right.’

‘And who do we know who excel at bringing fortresses to ruin?’

‘You are jumping at shadows, inquisitor,’ said Dante. ‘You are being paranoid.’

‘Do you want to risk your planet on that assumption?’ asked Suzaku. ‘This enemy warrior has managed to stay off the radar for six months. He’s avoided every sweep designed to catch any survivors of the invasion force, and he’s doing something that could complete his masters’ plans for this world.’

‘He is just one man,’ said Dante, unwilling to credit a Traitor with the skill to carry off so daring and suicidal a mission. ‘He couldn’t possibly succeed.’

‘But what if he did?’ pressed Suzaku. ‘Milotas, what kind of damage could be done if that place were destroyed?’

Milotas called up a fresh batch of statistics, and pursed his lips with a rueful shake of his head. He swiped his fingers in a complicated motion across his slate and let out a soft exhalation.

‘The Calth energy grid is a delicate structure, one where the lines of power interconnect on hundreds of different levels. If our nameless foe somehow managed to destroy that facility, he could disrupt the entire grid.’

‘So a few places would lose power for a few days?’ asked Dante. ‘The grid would compensate.’

‘I’m afraid not, sergeant,’ said Milotas. ‘You see, each of these power facilities is, in effect, a collection of atomic reactors resting on the molten structure of this planet. If an enemy were to, say, drop one of these plants into the mantle and detonate it, the effects would be catastrophic. And that’s a best case scenario.’

‘What’s a worst case scenario?’ asked Suzaku.

‘That the seismic shock rips through the upper mantle and cracks the crust open. Earthquakes, cave-ins, tunnel collapses on a global scale. Wherever the structure of the crust was sufficiently compromised, the mantle would pour through, and... well, you don’t need me to tell you how devastating that would be to any cities nearby.’

Before Dante could reply, the assault ramp of the Rhino gave a metallic squeal as it lowered and Apothecary Selenus emerged, the white of his gauntlets

smearred red and his face lined with anger.

‘Trooper Kellan died of his wounds,’ he said. ‘I hope whatever he told you was worth his life, inquisitor.’

‘He died serving the Emperor and Ultramar,’ said Suzaku, meeting Selenus’s accusing stare. ‘No death in such service is in vain.’

‘Is that it?’ demanded Selenus. ‘Platitudes?’

‘The truth,’ said Suzaku, softening her tone and knowing she had to give Selenus something. ‘He may have helped us save a lot of lives. We believe the Iron Warrior is planning to sabotage one of the geo-thermal power facilities.’

Selenus looked to Dante for confirmation, and gave a slow nod when he saw the truth of the inquisitor’s words in his eyes.

‘Then the Emperor will remember him,’ said Selenus, wiping his hands clear of blood with a used dressing. ‘I will instruct Sergeant Lerato’s squad to return the bodies of their comrades to Highside City.’

Dante opened his mouth to reply, but before he could speak, Suzaku heard a fizz of static from the vox-bead in his ear. Dante pressed his fingertips to his head and squared his shoulders as he listened to the message.

From the grim set to his features, Suzaku knew it was bad news.

‘What is it?’ she said.

‘There has been another attack,’ said Dante.

‘Where?’ asked Milotas, ready to plot its location on his slate.

‘Three kilometres down,’ replied Dante. ‘In one of the tunnels en route to Aries Pyros.’

Sergeant Lerato watched the Ultramarines Rhino chew dirt and speed off into the deeper tunnels of the cavern. The inquisitor’s vehicle roared after it, and within moments they had vanished from sight. He let out a breath, aware now that he had been on edge ever since he had seen the approaching woman. Not because of her Ordo affiliations, Atium Lareto had no reason to fear the Inquisition, but because he had heard what she had done on the walls of Castra Occidens.

Anyone who could shoot her own brother in cold blood deserved a little fear.

Lerato exhaled a long breath and pulled himself together. He had a job to do. Fallen comrades needed honouring, and they needed to be taken back to Highside City for return to their families. Trooper Kellan and the rest of Sergeant Joelle’s squad were laid out in neat lines, secured within in the regulation Munitorum body bags that were standard issue on every Defence Auxilia fighting vehicle. The thermal insulating properties of these bags enabled them to be used as sleeping bags when in the field, but few soldiers risked attracting Fate’s eye by lying down inside them.

*Better breathing and cold, than warm and dead*, was a favourite saying when the temperature dropped. Lerato had heard that most of the men and women who fought for the Imperium in far-flung reaches of space would never return to the worlds of their birth, that they would be buried in alien soil or simply ejected from the airlock of a starship.

The notion disgusted him. A soldier should be buried in the rock of the world he called home, the world he had fought and died to protect. When Lerato's turn came, he hoped he would be returned to the balmy, tropical caverns of Uptis Majoris on the equatorial band, where the proud warriors of his family were buried along with generations of heroes.

He shook his head clear of such maudlin thoughts and gathered his men around him with a circling gesture above his head.

'On me,' he shouted, his voice echoing from the walls.

With customary speed, his squad jogged over to him and took a knee. He knew each of them well, having chosen them for his squad with care and attention to detail that was unheard of in regiments beyond those of Ultramar. He had trained them to work as a team, and had seen every one of them fight with honour in the war.

Trooper Jacen had fought to recover the banner of a brother unit of Defence Auxilia, sustaining two gunshot wounds to the leg in the process. He'd only just returned to active service, and was hungry to prove himself ready. The Chimera's driver, Lorz, was the oldest in the squad, a heady twenty-seven years old, and he had taken on an entire Bloodborn squad armed only with a downed Space Marine's chainblade. With the Ultramarines' consent, that blade was now mounted in the company squad room.

Yelzar and Luta had held a foxhole with a succession of heavy stubbers in the face of wave after wave of Bloodborn fanatics, and Lerosy had thrown himself on an enemy satchel charge that had landed in the midst of his platoon. That the charge had proved to be a dud did not lessen the courage of the deed, and his squad mates never missed an opportunity to good-naturedly mock him.

'So what's up, sergeant?' asked Jacen. 'Do they have a line on who did this to Kellan?'

'I don't have specific information just now, Trooper Jacen,' said Lerato. 'But judging by the speed the Inquisitor and the Space Marines pulled out, I'm guessing that Kellan gave them something useful.'

'Was it the beast?' asked Lerosy. 'No man of Calth could do that to someone.'

'I heard the beast was a warp monster,' said Yelzar, her youthful features pale and tremulously excited at the prospect of such a hunt. 'Like it was summoned or something.'

‘Secure that kind of talk,’ said Lerato, mindful of the speed with which rumours could spread in any military organisation. ‘There’s no monster, but there’s likely a rogue Bloodborn soldier still at large in the caverns.’

‘Then why aren’t we going with the Ultramarines?’ asked Lorz. ‘Calth’s our world too. We have a right to protect our own people.’

‘That we do, but we have another job,’ said Lerato, seeing his soldiers’ faces fall at the thought that they wouldn’t get to take down the bastard that had done this to their comrades. ‘A job that’s just as important. Sergeant Joelle’s squad need to be taken back to Highside City, and that’s not a job for the Ultramarines, it’s a job for us. They were our people, our fellow soldiers, and we owe it them to take them home with honour.’

Lerato saw a mix of pride and dignified sorrow on the faces of his soldiers, and knew that they would perform this job with as much dedication as they would were it a combat operation. Every soldier in the Ultramar Defence Auxilia knew that were he to fall, his mortal remains would be returned to his loved ones, and it was this surety of remembrance that made each soldier fight with courage and honour.

‘Trooper Lorz, I want you to take Sergeant Joelle’s Chimera. We’ll load the bodies in the back. Make sure to strap them down properly, I don’t want them rolling all over the place when we ride over some rough ground. Remember, these are our comrades we’re talking about. You’ll show them some respect.’

‘Who’s going to drive *Azurite Fist*?’ asked Lorz, and Lerato hid a smile at the man’s proprietary attitude. The Chimera was not his property, but he treated it as though it were, regularly checking the work of the engineers and (though he was careful not to be too obvious) working his own modifications to the controls and onboard logisters. Since they actually seemed to improve the vehicle’s functionality, Lerato turned a blind eye to the man’s tinkering, and was careful to let him know when he was pushing it too far.

‘Luta will drive the *Fist*,’ he said. ‘We’ll follow *Calth’s Light* back to the surface through Guilliman’s Gate.’

Lorz shrugged and turned to Luta. ‘Return the *Fist* to the depot with any new dents, and we’ll be needing another body bag, you read me?’

Luta pretended to be offended and said, ‘You’re the one who put all those dents in her in the first place.’

The squad laughed, and Lerato held up a hand to forestall an angry response from Lorz.

‘Enough,’ he said. ‘Now everyone get a move on, I want to be back in the field before they find the bastard that did this. I want us back at Highside City, refuelled and ready to fight by the end of the day. Understand?’

‘Understood,’ said his squad, and they began the solemn task of loading their comrades into the back of the Chimera that had brought them to their deaths.

Suzaku surveyed the smouldering remains of the fuel relay with a cold, dispassionate eye. The structure was little more than a way station, mostly unmanned, but – in this case – home to a Mechanicus adept and a trio of servitors. All four were dead, burned black by the searing flames that had consumed the relay when it had exploded.

Constructed around a circular conduit three metres in diameter, the structure of the building was built hard against the wall of the cavern and fashioned from steel and heavy blocks of carved stone. Though it was little more than a functional structure, it had been built with typical Calthian attention to detail and robustness that was said to have been the hallmark of an exterminated race of Ur-folk.

Three of the four walls were scorched black by fire, but were still standing, though the conduit pipe had been severed. Thousands of insulated and sheathed cables flopped like artificial intestines from the shattered conduit, sparking and whipping like angry snakes fighting over a choice morsel.

‘Looks like you were right,’ said Dante.

‘About what?’ asked Suzaku.

‘That the Iron Warrior is heading for Aries Pyros.’

Suzaku nodded, taking measured steps towards the structure as she let her eye wander at random over the destroyed fuel relay. Something about this destruction struck her as strange, but it wasn’t immediately apparent what it was. Milotas Adelmo came alongside her, but said nothing, recognising her introspective mood.

‘Why?’ she asked.

‘Why what?’

‘Why attack this place?’

‘Because it controls the feed lines away from Aries Pyros,’ said Milotas. ‘It’s one of the relays that ensures the power levels being distributed from the generating station are kept in equilibrium.’

‘Sounds like it makes perfect sense that this place was attacked,’ added Dante, running a hand through his white hair as flakes of settling ash landed on his head and the shoulder guards of his armour.

Suzaku moved closer to the broken conduit pipe, noting the blast damage and spread of twisted metal where the explosion had occurred. At first she had assumed that the pipe had been destroyed in an attack, but now another possibility began to rear its ugly head. Suzaku imagined a lone Iron Warrior

approaching this structure, putting herself in the roof of his mind as he plotted to destroy it. Vast amounts of electrical energy were pouring through the building, and it would be easy to cause a huge amount of damage.

‘Why here?’ she asked. ‘He could easily have disrupted the flow elsewhere without coming close to somewhere that might have been occupied.’

‘He’s an Iron Warrior,’ said Dante. ‘He *wants* us to know what he’s doing. He’s taunting us that we won’t be able to stop him. This bastard thinks he is going to destroy Aries Pyros and he wants us to know that we’re always going to be too late.’

‘You could be right,’ agreed Suzaku. ‘You probably are. The Archenemy are nothing if not arrogant. In all likelihood, you are one hundred percent right.’

‘So why do you sound like you don’t believe it?’

‘Because it seems just so... *obvious*.’

‘Do I need to remind you of the Lex Parsimoniae?’ asked Milotas.

‘No, you do not,’ said Suzaku, bending down to go beneath the conduit. The rock on the far side of the pipe was blackened with primary impact damage, indicating that whatever had caused this blast had been on the cave side of the conduit. Standing on portions of the fragmented steelwork and broken rocks, she reached up and scraped some blast residue onto her fingernail.

She dropped back to the floor of the cave and held her hand out to Milotas, who scraped the greasy black residue from beneath her fingernail with a thin-bladed scalpel. He then fed the blade into the side of his mirror slate and tapped a complex series of binaric commands.

‘What is he doing?’ asked Dante.

‘Running a chem-analysis on the blast residue,’ said Suzaku.

‘For what purpose?’

‘I want to know what manner of explosion this was,’ said Suzaku, turning to face the ruined structure. She set off towards the building, noting the direction of fall of the scattered debris and the blast patterning on the surrounding rock.

‘Two of the servitors were found inside the building, yes?’

‘Yes,’ agreed Dante.

‘The Mechanicum adept and the third servitor were found in the middle of the tunnel.’

‘Again, yes,’ said Dante. ‘What does that prove?’

‘I don’t think this was an attack,’ said Suzaku. ‘I mean, it was clearly an *attack*, but I don’t think the attacker was here when it happened. Look, imagine you’re a lone infiltrator in the depths of an enemy planet, what’s your priority all through your mission?’

‘To wreak as much damage on the enemy as possible,’ said Dante.

‘No, that’s a secondary concern,’ said Suzaku. ‘The first priority is evasion of capture, and the best way to achieve that is to keep your enemies looking in the opposite direction of where you’re going.’

‘I’m not following you,’ said Dante. ‘I am a direct man, speak plainly to me.’

‘Very well. Look at the positioning of the bodies. The adept and his servitors came here on a regularly scheduled maintenance check, the logs confirm that. The damage caused to this conduit is the result of a bomb, not a gunfight or collateral battle damage. When those bodies are examined, there won’t be a single bullet hole or combat injury on any of them, I’ll stake my reputation on it.’

‘So what does the positioning of the bodies have to do with anything?’

‘Any adept worth his title would have detected the presence of a foreign object on the conduit almost immediately and gone out to check to see what it was. He left two servitors in the fuel relay and took another out to see what was wrong. Perhaps he tried to remove it or it was rigged to detonate just before the next maintenance check. Either way, it blew him and his servitor across the cavern, broke the conduit and blew down the facing wall of the relay building.’

Dante nodded as he followed her logic and took in the details of the blast damage.

‘Ma’am,’ said Milotas, as his slate buzzed at the completion of the chemical analysis.

Suzaku rejoined her savant as he held out the slate.

‘Summarise it for me,’ she said.

‘Very well, I won’t bore you with the exact chemical composition, but suffice to say that this is Adeptus Astartes grade explosives, mixed in with numerous chemical additives more commonly found in agricultural products. From chemical and spread density, it’s safe to say that this was a big bomb, one that was fabricated with a great many items purloined from the supply depots of Calth along the way. This wasn’t an attack of opportunity, whoever did this knew how to craft a powerful explosive compound and took their time in doing it.’

‘So far that just proves it’s our Iron Warrior,’ said Dante. ‘What else does it tell us?’

‘It tells us that he had time to set this up,’ said Milotas.

‘And it tells me that we’re up against a very cunning individual who has had time to plan out exactly what he’s doing,’ added Suzaku.

‘Then it is even more imperative that we find him.’

‘Agreed,’ said Suzaku. ‘I just hope we’re looking in the right place.’

Of the many duties an adept of Aries Pyros could be assigned, the security detail

that kept watch on the surrounding tunnels, caverns and approaches to the geothermal facility was amongst the dullest and yet most sought after. This deep in a world of Ultramar, there was little need for security, for there were few guardians more thorough in their diligence than the Ultramarines.

It was a task of unremitting monotony, which allowed the adepts stationed there time to pursue their own projects, contrivances and passions. Tech-Priest Dettela relished the time he could spend in the security hub. Between running diagnostics on his own internal systems he spent his time compiling statistical comparisons on the magnetic flux patterns within the unimaginable heat of the planet's mantle.

To keep a facility like Aries Pyros operational required precise attention to detail, as the slightest miscalculation in the shield harmonic matrix could have disastrous consequences. The deep magnetic flux of Calth's mantle was chaotic and unpredictable, and every Mechanicus adept sought to compute an exact logarithmic proof that would allow the force shield harmonics protecting the facility to be generated more efficiently and thus earn the approbation of the High Magos.

The power consumption of the field generators was ruinously high, taking up over half of the energy produced by the station. If that figure could be reduced, even by as little as ten percent, then the surplus power would be incredible. Using code fragments collated in the decades he had spent in the libraria of Mars, Dettela had developed a methodology based on topological mixing to better calculate the function of systems in a constantly varied-state environment. He hoped that this would lead to a predictive logarithm he could present to the conclave of Magi at the next symposium.

With his internal systems dedicated to running trillions of calculations, it took Dettela a few seconds to identify the intrusive warning sound offering stimuli to his auditory receptors. He had never heard this sound before and it did not immediately register with him as to what it might be.

Dettela paused the logarithmic equations and reorganised his brain chemistry to process outside stimuli. The world of calculus, algebra and calm ordered arithmetic fell away as the geometry of the physical world intruded on his senses. The security hub was a small chamber, buried in the heart of a tall tower that jutted from the semi-submerged geo-thermal facility like a lone lighthouse on a storm-lashed island in a sea of fire.

Writhing mechadendrites disengaged from the brass-cogged output ports of difference engines one and two, but Dettela kept himself plugged into number three. The simpler base calculations of the lower powers could be kept running in the background. Info-spikes slid home in the logisters processing the surveyor

inputs. The machinery that swept this cavern was necessarily specialised, as conventional apparatus would simply register an overload of electromagnetic hash and false returns from the electrically hostile environment of this depth.

The display was a cascading waterfall of binaric shapes that transformed the void of the cavern into geometric areas, each one a precise volume and dimension. Any variance in either ratio would trigger an alarm and allow simple algebraic equations to form an exact shape of any intruding object. Dettela quickly scanned the lower levels of the cavern, but nothing untoward registered until he brought the upper levels into focus.

Immediately he saw the disturbance in the uppermost reaches of the cavern, a darting shape that flitted between geometric zones like a migrating electron between two competing nuclei. The station's systems had never detected any such intruder, and Dettela assumed that this was some form of glitch, the machine spirit reminding its users that it had been some time since its last appeasement.

Then the dusty slate before him winked to life, the groaning cathode tube taking a tense six point four seconds to warm enough to display the extrapolated wire-frame image of the intruder. Dettela looked at it, knowing exactly what it was, but finding it hard to process the knowledge and reality of it.

Its form was unmistakable, a remote surveyor drone used in forward reconnaissance, but of a design that was unfamiliar to him.

'Identify,' he said.

The machine buzzed and spat a garbled blurt of binary until Dettela bowed his head and paused the background calculations he was running. The surveyor gear needed finesse and the full attention of its operator, and so singular an event demanded that he properly honour its discovery. Dettela switched from organic speech, letting the invocation pour from him in a ritualised form of binaric cant.

'Holy Machine whose blessed workings are most exacting, grant me the boon of your wisdom. In sacred binary I honour you, with hexadecimal praises I offer my devotion, and with the voltaic light of my existence I offer galvanic energy to your inner processes.'

Dettela sent a jolt of current into the machine, and the pict-slate brightened as its inner workings whirred with activity. A clattering of internal magnetic memepates shook the machine, and a whining squeal built until a shimmering image appeared on the slate, together with a warning in red-lit binary.

'Fabricator's Mercy...' whispered Dettela, unconsciously switching back to the language of his birth.

The wire-frame image was replaced by a grainy representation of what looked like a daguerreotype of an ancient book. The pages were faded and yellowed,

with no indication as to its origin or authenticity. The pages were obviously from some form of armourers' treatise, and the drone was clearly labelled with meticulous, yet simple clarity.

*Bartizan Class Remote Seeker Drone, Olympian Pattern.*

Dettela opened a vox-link to the skitarii barracks in the tunnels surrounding Aries Pyros.

'This is Tech-Priest Dettela, designation 445355-919/Lambda.'

'Proceed,' answered a growling, atavistic voice in his ear.

'Full alert,' said Dettela with as much calm as he could muster. 'There is an Iron Warriors seeker drone flying over Aries Pyros.'

Though it was utterly inimical to human life, the surface of Calth was a place of savage beauty, and Sergeant Lerato often wished he could see it first hand, as opposed to viewing it through the *Azurite Fist's* cupola viewing blocks. The horizon was a mixture of blue and yellow streaks, like a spill of paint across an artist's canvas. Purple and orange hues bled into the mix as his eyes roamed higher until they blended into the black of the heavens and the tiny pinpricks of light from the stars.

The planet's blue sun was setting just over the mountains, and long, stark shadows knifed over a rad-swept surface that had once, according to legend, been amongst the most fertile of Ultramar; a garden to match Prandium or Espandor. That was all gone now, and the surface of Calth was an irradiated wasteland, lashed by toxic winds from the poisoned sun that glowered like an unblinking cyclopean eye upon the world it had once nourished.

With Sergeant Joelle's squad loaded and strapped down, the mood had remained sombre, and everyone kept their thoughts to themselves. Luta kept them steadily on course, following in the dust wake of *Calth's Light*. Aside from being forced to refill *Calth's Light's* tanks at the fuel depot housed in Guilliman's Gate after a faulty gauge had informed Lorz he had a full reserve when the engine had clearly run dry, the journey had been without incident.

Though life on Calth was lived underground, and its caverns were as light and airy as they could be made, Lerato had always believed there was something in the human soul that needed the expanse of an open sky. When he had finally been posted off-world, he had been surprised and a little disappointed to find he suffered from a mild agoraphobia whenever he went outside for any length of time. Not enough to prevent him performing his duties, but enough to make him crave the sight of a rocky ceiling over his head.

He shook his head at the memory, and consulted the map scrolling across the hololithic display beside Luta's raised chair. They were making good time across

the steel roadway that cut across the Bakkerian Plain, and were in sight of the fitful glow of Highside City on the edge of the mountains.

It had been a long day, and the rocking motion of the Chimera was lulling him towards sleep, but another hour should see them through the gates of Highside City. Then it was a short drive to where their eagle-fronted regimental headquarters stood on the edge of the vast, grav-compensated landing platforms.

There they would bear their fallen comrades to their final rest in the company chapel, and honour their sacrifice for Calth. A full requiem would come later, but Lerato desperately needed to sleep before that. It would be an uplifting ceremony, as Prelate Justian wasn't given to sentimentality; he was more a fire and damnation kind of preacher. The Chimera rounded a corner, and the silver-walled expanse of Highside City sprawled out before them.

'Guilliman's blood,' sighed Luta. 'I never get tired of seeing this place. No wonder Lorz always wants to drive.'

'It's an impressive sight, right enough, but keep your eyes on the road,' warned Lerato.

'Yes, sergeant,' replied Luta.

Jacen, Lerosy and Yelzar pressed themselves to the armaglas blocks of the flanking guns, but the field of vision was limited, and he doubted they would see much.

Lerato stood tall in the cupola, revelling in the view his position as tank commander allowed him. As far as the eye could see, the Bakkerian plain was a vast swathe of iron and steel structures, and might have been mistaken for a city in its own right. Starships like enormous cathedrals or slices taken from the flank of a hive city sat in the rippling embraces of vast suspensor fields. Towering vessels of war were becalmed on the surface of Calth, which would have been a first homecoming for many of the vessels.

Vast hulls soared like cliffs, and broadside batteries like fortress walls tapered to vanishing points beneath the cold blue of the sun. Angled prows adorned with the symbol of the Ultramarines rose hundreds of metres into the air, and enormous winged angels reached out into the void like titans of legend.

The Mechanicus engineers had expanded the scale of the shipyards far beyond the walls of Highside City to cope with the vastly increased workload that had come to Calth in the aftermath of the war. The two Chimera were tiny specks tracing a course between these star-faring colossi.

The shipyards were working at full capacity, repairing damage the Bloodborn ships had wreaked amongst the fleets of Ultramar. Numerous vessels had been lost in action and many more would forever bear the scars of the fighting, which was only right and proper. The grand dams of the fleet were ancient hellions of

war, and historians could trace their lineage back to their keels being struck by the residue of battle damage cut into their hulls.

‘That’s the *Octavius*,’ said Lerato. ‘And I think that one is *Fist of Macragge*.’

He reached up and idly traced the path of a scar that followed the line of his jaw from his chin to where his ear had been. A fragment of shrapnel from an ork grenade had struck him in the head and ricocheted along his jaw before exploding out behind his ear. The medicae had managed to save his hearing, but there had been nothing left of his ear, and a sergeant’s pay didn’t allow for much in the way of reconstructive surgery.

The roadway traced a laser-straight course through the heart of this incredible array of vessels beached like great ocean leviathans on the blue sands of a treacherous shoreline. This roadway had been laid down in the time of Guilliman, and no amount of pleading by the adepts of Mars would sway the lords of Ultramar to divert its course in the name of temporary convenience.

To be in the presence of so many legendary vessels that had fought in some of the most infamous engagements in Ultramar’s history was humbling, and Lerato nodded respectfully to those ships whose names he knew. It was a sobering reminder of the price that had been paid to drive the Bloodborn from Ultramar’s worlds and a fearful warning of how close its armies had come to defeat.

Amid the awesome silence of this city of fallen starships, Lerato bowed his head and prayed to the Emperor.

The approach to the cave was a bad one, full of places an enemy might conceal himself or rig traps that wouldn’t be obvious until they were triggered. Dante waved Ophion and Priyam forward into covering positions, while Kain kept his meltagun trained on the most likely spot from which an enemy waiting in ambush might shoot.

Selenus waited beside him, pistol and sword in hand, and Dante was glad of his presence. Combat squads wouldn’t normally include an Apothecary in their roster, but given the nature of the incident at Pelasgia Theta 66, Selenus had chosen to accompany Dante’s warriors.

The tunnel was a kilometre from Aries Pyros and wound through enough convolutions to make the heat tolerable, but only just. Hazing clouds of steam rippled the air, and scalding gases vented from cracks in the hot rock. It was a good place to hide, lots of rogue thermals and electrostatic flares from the highly magnetised facility below. Yes, it was a good place to hide, but not good enough to evade the Ultramarines.

Inquisitor Suzaku and her three soldiers occupied an outcropping of rock to the east of Dante’s position, overlooking the cave the Mechanicus had assured

them was the source of the signal guiding the drone. On Dante's orders, the Martian adepts hadn't shot the intruding drone down and risked alerting the drone's controller that he had been discovered. Instead, it had been left unmolested until Dante's strike team were in position. Back-tracing the signal pulses from the drone to its controller had been a simple matter of triangulation, but Dante had ignored the adepts' explanation, knowing it was irrelevant.

All he needed to know was where the Iron Warrior could be found.

Tactical schematics of the cavern's topography appeared on his visor, displaying the positioning of his squad, Suzaku and the cohorts of armoured skitarii and weaponised battle servitors in the tunnels behind them. Dante would not call on those units if he didn't have to; this was a battle to be ended by Space Marines.

A wealth of tactical options flickered past his eyes on the visor display. Too fast for mortal brains to process, his enhanced cognitive abilities considered them all and discarded one after another until he came to a Codex-mandated strategy that allowed for the greatest chance of success while minimising the potential for loss.

'You know there is no way to approach the cave mouth without giving our enemy plenty of time to ready himself,' said Selenus as he received the tactical schematics from Dante.

'I know that,' said Dante.

'He has picked a good place to hide,' said Selenus with grudging respect for their foe's tactical nous. 'Just as well I am here.'

'I will try not to take that as a comment on the competence of my warriors,' said Dante, fixing his helmet in place. 'Otherwise you and I might have to have words.'

'It was not meant that way, and you know it.'

Dante nodded and watched as Ophion signalled his readiness with a short vox burst. Priyam followed a moment later, and Dante flexed his fingers on the hard grip of his sword.

'Inquisitor,' said Dante. 'Are you and your men ready?'

'Affirmative,' answered Suzaku. 'We go on your signal.'

Dante nodded to Selenus and said, 'Courage and honour, brother.'

'And to you,' replied Selenus, gripping Dante's arm. 'Remember, this is a combat action like any other, it is not a personal crusade.'

Dante shook his head and met Selenus's stare. 'Fighting the Archenemy is always personal, Apothecary,' he said. 'You of all people should know that.'

He racked the slide on his pistol and checked the action of his sword was clear, rolling his shoulders to loosen the muscles. It had been too long since

Dante had seen action, and the prospect of sending this Iron Warrior to his death sent a thrill of excitement through his body. Though some considered it unseemly to take pleasure in combat for its own sake, Dante did not count himself among them. To face the warriors of the Ruinous Powers and destroy them was something to be enjoyed.

‘Brother Priyam, Brother Ophion, begin,’ ordered Dante, launching the assault.

Both Space Marines leaned out from their position of cover and opened fire on the cave mouth. The booming reports of bolter fire echoed from the tunnel walls, the muzzle flares lighting up the gloom of the cave with stroboscopic flashes. Pockets of gas burst into flames and burst with sharp whipcracks.

‘Now, Apothecary!’ cried Dante, vaulting from cover and running towards an outcrop of rock on the western wall. Inquisitor Suzaku and her soldiers sprayed the cave mouth with a hurricane of las-bolts from rotary cannons implanted in their arms as Brother Kain stood and took a heartbeat to aim his meltagun. It fired with a thunderclap and the mouth of the cave vanished in a rippling haze of superheated air. Suzaku’s warriors moved forwards yet again, keeping a steady stream of high-energy beams playing over the cave mouth.

An explosion boomed high on the eastern approach and Dante saw one of Suzaku’s men go down, his leg missing just below the pelvis. Dante instantly knew the man’s injury wasn’t the result of a gunshot, but a buried explosive. A second of Suzaku’s men went down as his fallen comrade’s weapon chugged a series of convulsive blasts and punched a trio of holes through his chest and neck.

Another blast rocked the tunnel and a slew of giant boulders tumbled from the western edge of the tunnel above where Ophion and Priyam were in cover. The explosion filled the tunnel with rock dust, but Dante could see clearly through the billowing cloud. Ophion had rolled clear of the avalanche of boulders, but Priyam was trapped beneath tonnes of rock. Only his head, shoulders and one arm remained clear of the fall, and Dante’s fury rose to a new pitch of incandescence.

He charged straight to the cave, but before he had covered more than six paces, a thunderous impact barrelled him from his feet. He hit the ground hard and rolled as the air above him exploded in a searing flash of vaporised air and superheated oxygen.

‘Melta blast,’ he hissed, as Apothecary Selenus rolled off him.

‘I told you not to make this a personal crusade,’ said Selenus, climbing to his knees and aiming his pistol at the cave mouth. The Apothecary banged off a magazine of shells and reloaded without ever losing his aim.

Dante rolled back to his feet, aware that he had only just avoided death.

‘My thanks, Selenus,’ he said.

‘I do not need your thanks,’ said Selenus. ‘Just kill him. I need to get to Brother Priyam.’

‘Go,’ ordered Dante. ‘This one is mine.’

Selenus ran to where the wall of the cave had collapsed, and Dante moved on, keeping his pistol aimed at the darkness of the cave mouth. The heat in the cavern made it impossible to see what lay within, but all thoughts of tactical coldness were gone, replaced with a bright lance of anger that needed to be driven home into the flesh of his enemy. Inquisitor Suzaku and her remaining bodyguard reached the tunnel wall at the same time as Dante, and he saw the same anger reflected in her curiously glassy eyes.

‘He is mine to kill,’ said Dante.

‘Understood,’ replied Suzaku.

Dante spun into the cave, keeping low and moving his pistol left and right as he searched for a target. The cave was utterly black, but once out of the heat of the tunnel, his vision swiftly adjusted. He felt something beneath his boot and glanced down to see a battered meltagun emblazoned with the star of the Archenemy and trailing a number of copper wires from its firing mechanism. He crushed it beneath his boot and moved on at speed.

Suzaku and her bodyguard kept pace behind him, and Dante fought to control the anger that threatened to cloud his judgement. The explosions outside had all been traps, pressure triggered and sequential, so it was likely there were others within the cave. He slowed his rapid advance and altered the spectra his visor was displaying.

Sure enough, an invisible laser trip-wire crossed the width of the cave.

‘Ahead two metres,’ he hissed. ‘Laser trip-wire in the non-visible spectrum.’

Suzaku acknowledged his warning and they stepped over the trip mechanism. The cave narrowed, and Dante knew this was the perfect place for another ambush or trap, and stilled his beating rage with a breath.

‘Anything else?’ asked Suzaku.

‘No, it’s clear,’ said Dante. ‘Follow me. Stay close and speak up if you see more traps.’

Dante followed the winding neck of the cave until it opened into a bell-shaped cavern that dripped with condensing water the colour of cloudy milk. A lone figure in battered war plate of tarnished iron and chevroned with yellow and black knelt with his back to Dante, hunched over a machine that hummed gently and upon which a series of yellow lights were blinking.

Dante didn’t waste any words and put three shots into the back of the figure’s

head. Each shot was dead on target and the Iron Warrior was punched onto his front, his helmet torn from his head in a smoking ruin of torn metal.

‘Spread out,’ he ordered, moving towards the downed enemy. His pistol never wavered, and he felt a calming righteousness settle upon him at the sight of the fan of brain matter and skull fragments spread over the wall. The enemy warrior was dead, no question.

Dante kicked the body over onto its front with a grunt of satisfaction. Little was left of the warrior’s head, and though the back of his skull was a hollowed-out mass of glistening matter, the detonating bolt shells had left his face relatively intact.

‘By their countenance shall you know them,’ said Dante.

The Iron Warrior had been hideously ugly, his face a mass of scar tissue and contusions as though he had been on the receiving end of a beating administered by a Dreadnought. Sunken black eyes stared up from a face that was slack and pallid, and a tufted mohawk of hair ran the length of his head.

‘It’s over,’ he said, holstering his pistol.

Suzaku knelt by the dead man, and he saw the look of consternation cross her face an instant before he realised what was wrong with this Iron Warrior.

‘This warrior has been dead for months,’ said Suzaku.

Dante knelt beside her and lifted the Iron Warrior’s head, feeling the play of bones floating in flesh and the greasy texture of dead meat.

‘His neck’s broken,’ said Dante. ‘What in Guilliman’s name is going on here?’

‘Oh no,’ said Suzaku. ‘It’s a bait and switch.’

‘A what?’

Suzaku stood and began pacing the cavern. ‘Classic misdirection,’ she said. ‘He showed us something and we filled in the blanks. Of course, I should have known it the moment I heard there was a survivor. He fed Kellan to us, and we took the bait.’

‘What bait?’ demanded Dante. ‘What are you talking about? We have to protect Aries Pyros.’

‘Don’t you understand?’ said Suzaku. ‘Aries Pyros was never in danger. We said it ourselves, there was no way one warrior could hope to get in and destroy such a heavily guarded facility. Damn it, but I *knew* this was too easy. He gave me just enough, and I followed his breadcrumbs as though I was on rails! The attack on Pelasgia Theta 66 to draw me in, the barely-veiled threat he told Kellan, the timed explosion at the fuel depot. All designed to draw me down here.’

‘But why?’ said Dante. ‘Why go to all this trouble *not* to attack Aries Pyros?’

‘Because he just wanted us to waste our efforts by looking down here,’ said

Suzaku. 'He doesn't care about Aries Pyros.'

'Then what does an Iron Warrior trapped on Calth care about?'

The answer came to them at the same instant.

'He wants to get off-world,' said Suzaku.

Lerato coughed up a wad of pain and tried to pull himself along the cold floor of the vehicle hangar. His shoulder was a splintered mass of grinding bone, his right arm dragged uselessly at his side, and his neck was wet with blood. Yelzar was dead, her pretty face caved in by a fist that seemed to come out of nowhere, and Lerosy had been killed in the confused, panicked seconds that followed. He hadn't seen what happened to Jacen, but the odds he was still alive weren't good.

They'd only just parked up in the vehicle hangar. Routine checks had seen them waved through the gates of Highside City, and coded catechism protocols gained them entrance to the temporary service yard where the regiment's vehicles were being stored in hardened shelters on the edge of the landing platforms.

Luta had brought the *Azurite Fist* to a halt, grateful to have reached home with no new dents or scrapes. They'd assembled at the rear of the tank, stretched and checked their weapons. *Calth's Light* was parked up at the edge of the service yard, in the shadow of scaffolding hung with power couplings that sparked and flickered as rigging-borne artisans worked to refit damaged starships.

They'd waited for Lorz to join them, but when he hadn't shown, Lerato had walked over to the idling Chimera to tell him to get a move on. The Chimera had been parked side-on to the wall, and as Lerato had rounded the vehicle's flank, he saw the right-hand fuel drum was hanging open. Viscous fuel residue dripped from the gently flapping drum lid as it swung on its hinges and a huge handprint glistened on the side of the tank.

Someone had been inside this fuel drum.

But who could survive inside a fuel drum for so long without succumbing to the toxic fumes of vehicle petrochemicals?

Even as the question formed, the answer immediately presented itself.

A hulking figure in bare metal armour coated in oily residue appeared at the other end of the tank, one fist clenched and bloody, the other gleaming silver and mirrored. A pale blue augmetic eye stared at Lerato from a wide face that had once been cruelly handsome, but which was now simply cruel.

The Beast of Calth...

'Thank you for the ride,' the Iron Warrior had said. 'Not the most comfortable way to travel, but it got me where I needed to be.'

Lerato had turned to run, but a thunderous impact hurled him to the ground

with his shoulder exploding in pain. He'd fallen, his face slamming into the smooth rockcrete of the apron and cracking the cheekbone. Looking underneath the Chimera, Lerato saw Lorz lying at the front of the tank, his chest caved in and his mouth flapping for breath like a landed fish.

He had to give a warning, but his right hand was useless. He rolled onto his side in time to see Yelzar, Luta and Lerosy die, bludgeoned into the ground without a moment's remorse from their killer. He presumed Jacen was already dead. It was too much to hope the youngster had gotten away.

It all happened so quickly there was little chance that anyone else had heard what had just passed. Lerato knew there was only one reason an Iron Warrior would willingly come to Highside City: to escape rightful retribution for his very existence.

He had to stop him, or at least alert others that there was a viper in the nest. Lorz had been their vox-operator, and the caster set was in the driver's compartment of *Calth's Light*. Lerato began crawling towards the side door, the sound of heavy footsteps approaching and the powerful reek of chemicals lending his agonised movements extra speed.

An armoured boot stamped down on his ankle, crushing it to fragments without effort.

'Now, now,' said the beast, kneeling down to flip him onto his back. 'They'll find you soon enough, mortal, but I need a bit more time to get aboard one of these ships before then.'

'You won't succeed,' said Lerato, through clenched teeth and a dizzying haze of unendurable agony. 'They'll find you and kill you.'

The beast grinned, and Lerato had never seen anything so hideous in all his life.

'If you only knew how many times I've heard in the last six months,' said the beast.

Lerato spat blood in the beast's face, but instead of anger, he saw grim amusement and a towering ego. The beast wiped the blood from his face with his arm, a glittering silver limb the surface of which swam like mercury trapped in glass. The blood vanished, drawn within the arm like water absorbed by a sponge.

'You know, it was depressingly easy getting to this place,' said the beast. 'All I had to do was watch and learn where your predictable little routines made you vulnerable. I just let you see what you wanted to see, and watch as you danced like good little puppets towards somewhere far, far away from here. Who'd have thought that Cadaras Grendel would actually prove to be useful for something after all?'

‘We beat you,’ snarled Lerato. ‘Just like we’ll beat anyone else stupid enough to attack Ultramar.’

‘You and your big blue friends might have beaten M’kar’s rag-tag army,’ said the beast with a conversational nod, ‘but one day someone is going to punish you for sticking to Guilliman’s dogma like slaves.’

‘Who are you?’ hissed Lerato, as the last of his life bled out of him.

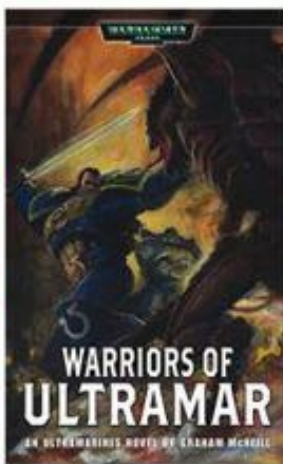
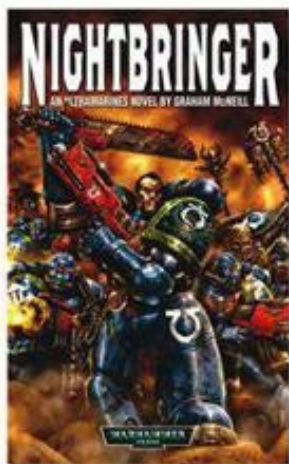
‘I’m the beast,’ said the Iron Warrior. ‘But you can call me Honsou.’

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

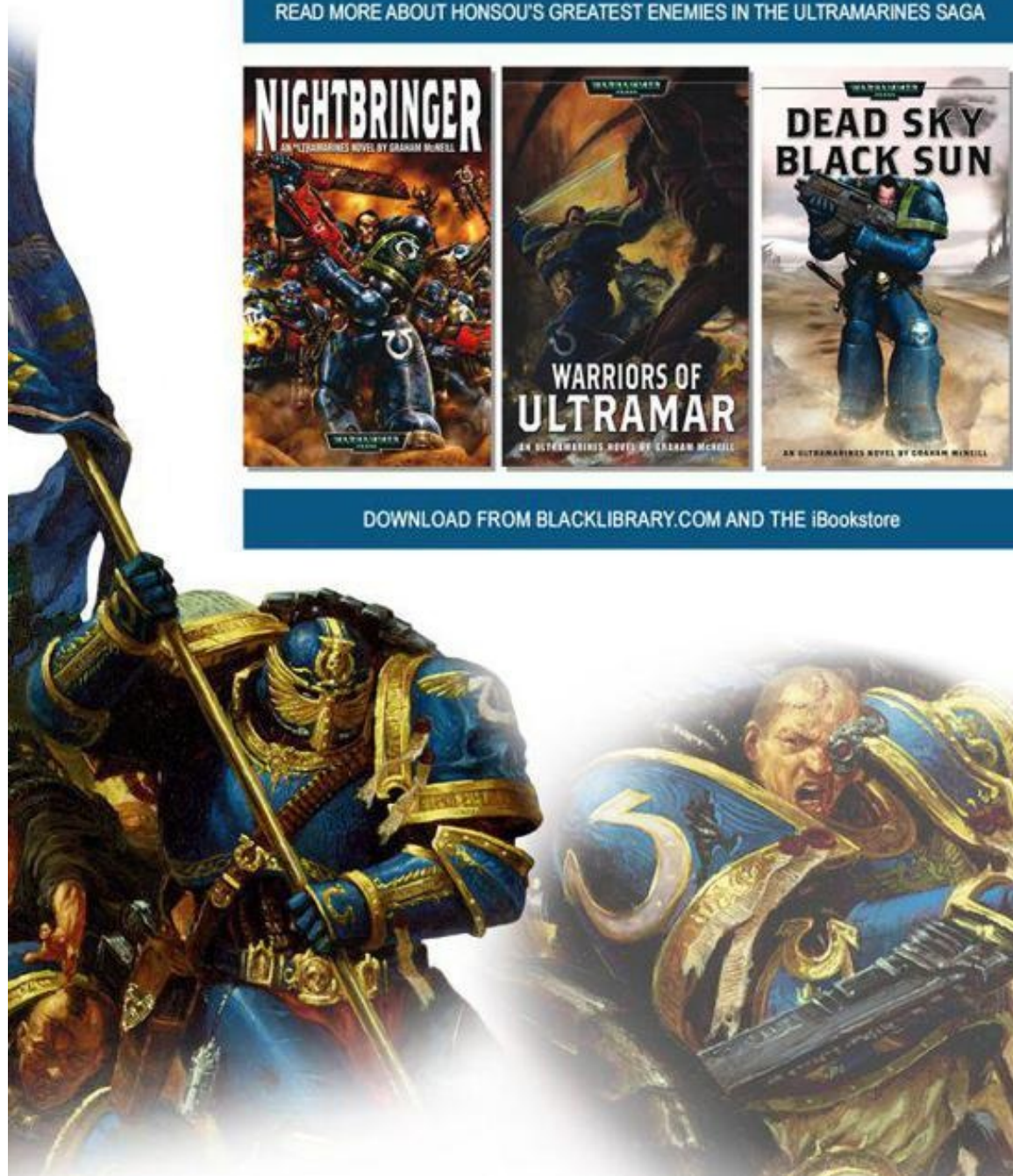
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Join the ranks of the 4th Company at [www.graham-mcneill.com](http://www.graham-mcneill.com)

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