



**IRON
WARRIOR**

GRAHAM McNEILL

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Warhammer 40,000](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Legal](#)

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A WARHAMMER 40,000 NOVELLA

IRON WARRIOR

Graham McNeill



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WARHAMMER 40,000

IT IS THE 41ST MILLENNIUM. FOR MORE THAN A HUNDRED CENTURIES THE EMPEROR HAS SAT IMMOBILE ON THE GOLDEN THRONE OF EARTH. HE IS THE MASTER OF MANKIND BY THE WILL OF THE GODS, AND MASTER OF A MILLION WORLDS BY THE MIGHT OF HIS INEXHAUSTIBLE ARMIES. HE IS A ROTTING CARCASS WRITHING INVISIBLY WITH POWER FROM THE DARK AGE OF TECHNOLOGY. HE IS THE CARRION LORD OF THE IMPERIUM FOR WHOM A THOUSAND SOULS ARE SACRIFICED EVERY DAY, SO THAT HE MAY NEVER TRULY DIE.

YET EVEN IN HIS DEATHLESS STATE, THE EMPEROR CONTINUES HIS ETERNAL VIGILANCE. MIGHTY BATTLEFLEETS CROSS THE DAEMON-INFESTED MIASMA OF THE WARP, THE ONLY ROUTE BETWEEN DISTANT STARS, THEIR WAY LIT BY THE ASTRONOMICAN, THE PSYCHIC MANIFESTATION OF THE EMPEROR'S WILL. VAST ARMIES GIVE BATTLE IN HIS NAME ON UNCOUNTED WORLDS. GREATEST AMONGST HIS SOLDIERS ARE THE ADEPTUS ASTARTES, THE SPACE MARINES, BIO-ENGINEERED SUPER-WARRIORS. THEIR COMRADES IN ARMS ARE LEGION: THE IMPERIAL GUARD AND COUNTLESS PLANETARY DEFENCE FORCES, THE EVER-VIGILANT INQUISITION AND THE TECH-PRIESTS OF THE ADEPTUS MECHANICUS TO NAME ONLY A FEW. BUT FOR ALL THEIR MULTITUDES, THEY ARE BARELY ENOUGH TO HOLD OFF THE EVER-PRESENT THREAT FROM ALIENS, HERETICS, MUTANTS - AND WORSE.

TO BE A MAN IN SUCH TIMES IS TO BE ONE AMONGST UNTOLD BILLIONS. IT IS TO LIVE IN THE CRUELLEST AND MOST BLOODY REGIME IMAGINABLE. THESE ARE THE TALES OF THOSE TIMES. FORGET THE POWER OF TECHNOLOGY AND SCIENCE, FOR SO MUCH HAS BEEN FORGOTTEN, NEVER TO BE RE-LEARNED. FORGET THE PROMISE OF PROGRESS AND UNDERSTANDING, FOR IN THE GRIM DARK FUTURE THERE IS ONLY WAR. THERE IS NO PEACE AMONGST THE STARS, ONLY AN ETERNITY OF CARNAGE AND SLAUGHTER, AND THE LAUGHTER OF THIRSTING GODS.

CHAPTER ONE

The planet had no name. Not because it had been forgotten over the countless millennia since it had first been discovered, and not because it had passed into history as a dusty footnote at the end of some ancient chronicler's archive. It had no name because it had never been given one, its discoverers knowing on some subconscious level that to name this world would bring others to it.

In the wake of the Great Betrayal, explorators seeking out new worlds for the resurgent Imperium of Man had found the world inimical to human life on almost every level. Howling winds swept over a bleak landscape of siliceous dunes, ashen basins of crushed quartz and towering cliffs of basalt and knife-edged obsidian. Nothing lived on this world, and the first men to set foot on its glassy deserts, the shimmering sand crunching beneath their cumbersome exo-armour, felt the planet's hostility leeching through the heavy gauge plasteel of their environment suits.

Thirteen hours later, six men committed suicide by opening their suits to the atmosphere, and another turned a plasma torch on his fellows. Within the next six hours, another ten men were dead, driven into paroxysms of madness and homicidal rages.

The survivors fled, leaving the planet unnamed and unmarked in the records of the Imperial Cartographae, hoping to spare others the fate that had overtaken them.

The forsaken planet spun in the void, unknown and unvisited.

But such ill-fated places are a beacon to those in the service of discord.

Mountains like a row of black fangs reared from the rocky hinterlands at the edge of the continental dustbowl. Slicing gales of powdered glass billowed from the quartz deserts, and a sky of cracked slate pressed down upon the world like a great hammer about to fall.

Honsou climbed over the edge of the vast depression, his growling transport perched on a rocky ledge a hundred metres below. Screaming winds tore at him with spiteful claws, but power wrought into his bones by ancient craft, and the mechanical strength of his burnished iron armour allowed him to remain upright in the face of their fury.

‘We’re close,’ he said to the four warriors who followed him. ‘She’s here, I can feel it.’

‘No one lives here,’ spat Cadaras Grendel, sealed within battered and scored battle plate the colour of bare iron. Grendel shielded his visor from the swirling particles and said, ‘This is a waste of time, Honsou, there’s nothing to find here.’

‘Frightened are you, Grendel?’ said Honsou, unable to resist baiting the warrior. ‘Never thought I’d see the day.’

‘This is a cursed world,’ said Grendel, keeping a tight grip on his weapon, a blackened melta gun that had sent a thousand souls to their doom. ‘We should leave.’

Towering and powerful, Grendel’s violence was a stark promise, and Honsou was surprised he hadn’t risen to the bait.

Beside Grendel, the Newborn watched their conversation with the keen attention of a student. Beneath the expressionless mask of its helmet, its face was a melange of skin sliced from the dead, its body created in a fusion of stolen genetics and warp science. Its power was greater than any of them fully understood, but its mind was new and easily moulded.

The fine-grained glass had scoured the plates of their armour bare of all colour, insignia and markings of rank. Their shoulder guards had, only hours ago, borne the heraldry of the Iron Warriors, but the lashing tongues of the wind rendered Honsou, Grendel and the Newborn nearly identical.

Nearly, but not quite.

The surfaces of the Iron Warriors’ armour were flensed and dulled by the flying glass dust, but Honsou’s silver arm gleamed like liquid mercury. No sooner was its surface abraded than it was renewed, as though possessed of some dreadful regenerative power.

Nor was it just their armour that differed. Honsou carried himself with an insouciant swagger of brash self-confidence, while Grendel was tensed like a bar brawler on the verge of terrifying bloodshed. In contrast, the Newborn stood unbending in the wind, proud and with an innocence that flew in the face of the brutal angles of its armour.

‘Honsou is right,’ said the Newborn. ‘This world is home to great power. Psychic venom has poisoned it beyond redemption.’

‘Perceptive, isn’t it?’ said Ardaric Vaanes, alone of the warriors not clad in bare iron armour. ‘But you don’t need any warp-sense to know this is a forsaken place.’

Vaanes’s armour was the colour of the blackest night, though it too had been

scored bare of insignia and markings by the scouring winds. Once, it had borne the winged emblem of the Raven Guard overlaid with the jagged cross of the Red Corsairs. The wind had obliterated both symbols of allegiance, as though he were a warrior without a master or a past.

‘Indeed he is,’ purred Notha Etassay, the last member of Honsou’s group, a warrior clad in buckled straps that held strategically situated elements of flexible plate close to his body, leaving much of his tanned, spare frame exposed. By rights, the flesh should have been scraped from his bones by the powdered glass wind. A rippling energy sheathed his body, though its protection was far from total. Shallow cuts were carved in Etassay’s skin with every gust of wind, but the lithe warrior seemed to enjoy the sensation. ‘He is a unique creature, one I would sorely love to test my talents against.’

Honsou frowned, unsure of Etassay’s meaning, and unable to read the expression beneath the blademaster’s mask of silver and leather. Etassay was an androgynous beauty of uncertain sex, a hedonist who indulged his every whim of sadism, butchery and masochism. He was also a killer who honoured the art of blades and to whom no secret of swordsmanship was unknown. Honsou had won Etassay’s army at the Skull Harvest on New Badab, along with nearly seventeen thousand warriors of all stripes.

‘You can feel it?’ Honsou asked the Newborn.

‘I can.’

‘Tell me,’ commanded Honsou.

The Newborn cocked its head to one side, as though listening to something hidden within the howling cry of the wind.

‘Rage,’ said the creature. ‘A rage born of betrayal. It withers everything it touches.’

‘Yes,’ agreed Honsou. ‘That’s it exactly, hateful bitterness that sours the very heart of this place. This world is the one, I’m sure of it.’

‘Then let’s get on and find it then,’ snapped Cadaras Grendel. ‘I don’t fancy being withered by whatever it is we’re here for.’

‘Not *what*,’ said Etassay. ‘Weren’t you listening? It’s a person we’re looking for. A woman.’

Grendel bristled at Etassay’s words, his fingers flexing on the grip of his gun. Etassay and Grendel had taken an instant dislike to one another, and Honsou, remembering the Tyrant of Badab’s last words to him, did nothing to dispel it.

‘It’s a woman, right enough,’ said Honsou, setting off into the teeth of the wind, ‘but no ordinary woman.’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Vaanes.

‘I’m looking for Moriana,’ said Honsou. ‘The seer who guided the Warmaster.’

They marched through blinding sheets of wind-blown glass, trudging through rolling dunes of the stuff, over craggy ridges of black rock like the spines of buried dragons. Honsou could feel the malice carved into the flesh of this world, and it gave him strength. He knew in his bones that this was the place, but looked for any sign that would confirm it.

The swirling air before him dropped and he saw a low haunch of smooth boulders gathered together in the far distance... like a cairn or burial mound primitive savages built for their dead. He laughed and looked to the sky, silently thanking the dark gods of the warp for leading him to this place.

‘The Hag that dwells in the Bone House,’ he said, feeling his heart beat faster at the sight of a darkened cave mouth amid the boulders. It had been a long road from the Iron Warriors home world of Medrengard, a grim procession of murder and mayhem that had seen a world of the Emperor destroyed and an army gathered to his banner.

All in service of Honsou’s vengeance upon Uriel Ventriss of the Ultramarines, the only warrior ever to walk away from him. And if Honsou had interpreted the hidden clues in the ancient books correctly, then the end of that road was almost in sight.

Grendel came alongside him, peering through the mist and ashen wind at the mound of boulders. Vaanes and the Newborn stood apart from the warrior, while Notha Etassay sashayed through the scoring wind with his arms upraised to better enjoy the sensation of glass abrading his skin.

Honsou sensed their confusion and waited to see who would speak first.

‘Horus Lupercal?’ spat Grendel. ‘That Warmaster?’

Honsou shook his head. ‘No, the Despoiler.’

Grendel gave a harsh bark of laughter. ‘Then you’d best not heed her words, for they did Abaddon no good. That fool has been sent packing with his tail between his legs more times than I’ve killed the dogs of the Emperor.’

‘I’m well aware of that, Grendel,’ said Honsou, ‘but the Despoiler’s failings are his own. It was Moriana who guided him to the Blackstone Fortresses.’

‘The Gothic War?’ asked Vaanes.

‘So the Imperials call it, aye,’ agreed Honsou.

‘That was over eight hundred years ago, surely she must be dead.’

‘You think seers have no power to step outside the passage of time?’

‘I’m not sure I want to find out,’ said Vaanes. ‘Anyone who has cheated death for so long gathers ill-fate to them like crows to a battlefield.’

‘And how much longer than a mortal man have you lived, Ardaric Vaanes?’ asked Notha Etassay with a silky chuckle. ‘We are all harbingers of death here. You, me, Honsou. Grendel especially. And even this grotesquely ugly by-blow has existed far beyond its span.’

‘You’re a great comfort, you know that, Etassay?’ snapped Vaanes.

‘Enough,’ said Honsou. ‘We’re here.’

The mouth of the cave was hung with talismans and fetishes that sang in the wind, tinkling musically as bone and glass swayed back and forth. Tendrils of aromatic smoke issued from the darkness, as though something vast and ancient dwelled within. The rocky mound stood inside a stunted grove of trees amid a withered glade, and to see such an approximation of living things was strange and unsettling.

‘Now what?’ asked Vaanes. ‘Do we go in?’

‘No,’ said Honsou. ‘I go in, you wait here.’

‘Suits me,’ said Grendel, staring in apprehension at the black maw of the cave.

Honsou took a moment to gather his courage. He had faced the mightiest of champions of Chaos during the Skull Harvest, yet the prospect of marching into this cave to face this seer sent tremors of unease along his spine.

‘I will fear nothing,’ he whispered. ‘I am what others should fear.’

Without a word to his subordinates, Honsou left them behind.

The darkness of the cave swallowed him.

Honsou’s eyes adjusted to the darkness slowly, the mechanics of his armour and the augmetic eye whirring as they sought to penetrate the unnatural gloom. He felt a moment’s dislocation, a sharp spike of dizziness, as he crossed the threshold of the cave, as though he had stepped from one realm and into another. He looked back over his shoulder, but instead of the reassuring silhouettes of his warriors against the bleak light of the nameless world, he saw only a deeper blackness.

‘Come farther, Honsou of the Iron Warriors,’ said a voice from the darkness.

Honsou obeyed without hesitation, knowing on a deep, instinctual level that to disobey would be a terrible mistake. With each step he took into the cave, the more he saw of his surroundings, as though its occupant was choosing to only gradually reveal it to him.

The walls were smooth stone, machine finished, and every inch was covered

with tightly wound lettering, an entire library copied onto the rock. Yet more charms and fetishes hung from the ceiling, grotesque trophies torn from living bodies or crafted from their remains. Noxious candles flickered in bowls fashioned from the lids of skulls, and scrolls crafted from human skin were spread across tables of bone.

Honsou had seen far worse in his time, and such petty cruelties were little more than shabby window dressing to frighten those who had not stared into the warp and seen true horror. A low fire burned in the centre of the cave with an amethyst light, and a hunchbacked creature squatted behind it. Honsou saw the figure was clad in what might once have been a hooded dress of vivid green, but which was now little more than a tattered, filthy shift.

‘You are Moriana?’ asked Honsou, removing his helmet and taking a breath of the foetid, herbal stench of the cave. The molten glass smell of the world beyond was gone, and beneath the fragrant poultices, Honsou could smell the reek of something long dead.

The hunched figure rose from behind the fire and drew back her hood, revealing the crumpled face of an ancient crone with leprous flesh, cratered and pitted like the surface of a dead moon. Grey and pallid, her features were gnarled and ancient, her eyes gouged out long ago by some long-dead torturer, yet still weeping tears of blood.

‘Of course I am,’ wheezed the crone. ‘Who else would dwell in such a place?’

‘Then you know why I am here?’

‘I do,’ confirmed Moriana, spitting a black wad of phlegm as a hacking coughing fit bent her double. ‘You seek the Thrice Born.’

‘It’s real then?’ said Honsou, coming forward, his eagerness overcoming his natural caution. ‘Tell me where I can find it!’

‘Patience,’ wheezed Moriana. ‘All in good time.’

‘No,’ demanded Honsou. ‘Now.’

Moriana laughed at his impatience and said, ‘The mightiest champions of the warp have sought my counsel, by what right do you dare come before me?’

‘By right of battle and by right of knowledge,’ said Honsou. ‘I know who you are and what you have done. I know you once stood in the presence of the corpse-emperor and I know why you fell from grace.’

‘You know nothing!’ said Moriana, spitting the words at him. ‘You read a few ancient tomes and you think that makes you wise? Yes, I stood before the golden throne, but a half-breed like you will never understand the truth of those times.’

‘Don’t call me that,’ snarled Honsou. ‘People who call me that end up dead.’

‘You think you can threaten me?’

‘Why not? I could kill you where you stand.’

‘Always with your kind it is threats,’ said Moriana, as though saddened by his predictability. ‘Mighty Abaddon thought to open my throat with the claw he took from Horus Lupercal’s corpse, but even he knew better. Others have come since then, and all have barked their empty threats. Listen well, half-breed, I have stared into the abyss and treated with the foulest monsters of the deepest dark, so I do not fear your petty torments.’

Honsou swallowed his anger with difficulty. It sat ill with him to allow an insult to go unpunished, but without Moriana, his schemes of vengeance would come to nothing.

‘Very well,’ said Honsou. ‘Speak and I will listen.’

‘It is not enough simply to listen, Honsou. What will you offer in return for my help?’

‘Name your price,’ said Honsou. ‘Whatever you ask I will grant you.’

‘You are impetuous, Honsou, but I am never one to forego such an offer. I require only your word that you will see this through to the end, no matter what. When all others falter, you must not. When all hope is gone, you must remain true, for great deeds require great sacrifice.’

‘You have my word on it,’ promised Honsou.

‘The word of men is valueless,’ croaked Moriana. ‘Blood is the only thing that speaks true. Come closer.’

Reluctantly, Honsou took a step towards the blinded seer, his lip curling in distaste as she lifted a hand to his face. The withered claw caressed his skin, long curling nails like talons encrusted with centuries of filth tracing a path over his features: his strong jaw line, his aquiline nose and the crude augmetic grafted to his skull where a bolter round had pulped the side of his face.

Moriana snatched at him, slicing the skin of his cheek, and Honsou flinched, more in surprise than pain. Blood welled briefly from the cuts, running down Moriana’s curling nails as she brought them to her mouth. The seer’s tongue flickered out, like a snake’s, and she moaned in pleasure at the taste of his blood.

‘Ah...’ she sighed. ‘Yes, I feel the fire of your ambition, it reminds me of my own foolish dreams of youth, when all I could see was the path before me and not the world around me.’

‘Then you will tell me what I want to know?’

Moriana nodded, moving from beside the fire to where a stack of scrawled parchments, scrolls and dusty books were piled beside an obsidian statue of

some nameless creature that defied identification. ‘I shall, but first... tell me what you know of the Thrice Born.’

‘Very little,’ admitted Honsou. ‘After the destruction of Khalan-Ghol, I emptied the libraries of the ruined fortress before taking the *Warbreed* from the Crooked Tower and setting off into the stars.’

‘You sought a weapon to use against your enemies,’ stated Moriana, lifting a wadded armful of leaves, roots and pouches towards the fire.

‘I did. The Warsmith before me was a meticulous records keeper, and since he had bound the Heart of Blood to his fortress, I hoped to find knowledge of other lords of the abyss I might bind to my cause.’

‘And what did you find?’

‘It was frustrating work, for each book was ancient beyond imagining. All were fragmentary, archaic and couched in language that defied easy interpretation.’

‘Many were penned around the time of the rebellion of Horus,’ explained Moriana. ‘Many men and women lived then to tell tales of those times, but none now remember them.’

‘I spent every waking moment with those books,’ continued Honsou, ‘and I had all but given up hope of finding anything of value when I came across an oblique reference to a daemon prince known as the Thrice Born, the father of the Blue Sun.’

‘Yes... the Keeper of the Red Word, M’kar.’

‘M’kar? That is its name?’

‘One of them,’ said Moriana. ‘A fiction to deal with mortals and protect its true name, but one it has gone by in these last few millennia. What else do you know of it?’

Honsou hesitated, unwilling to show how little he had gleaned from the books of his former master, but sensing that to lie to Moriana would be dangerous in ways he couldn’t imagine.

‘Only that the Thrice Born is the bane of the Gatekeeper of Zalathras,’ said Honsou, letting his frustration show as Moriana crouched beside the purple fire. ‘And that it would rise again in the Time of Ending to wreak bloody revenge on those who paid homage to his sons.’

‘And do you know the identity of the Gatekeeper?’

‘I do,’ said Honsou. ‘Ardaric Vaanes told me of the Siege of Zalathras, a war fought a century ago on the southern arm of the Ghouls Stars. It’s said that Marneus Calgar of the Ultramarines supposedly held a greenskin horde at bay

for a day and a night. Ridiculous, of course, but just the sort of overblown nonsense Guilliman's warriors would put about. And if the Thrice Born is the bane of the Ultramarines, then I want to know more of it.'

'And that is all you know?'

'I could learn little more, for the cunning or madness of the writers buried the secrets of the Thrice Born in allegory, metaphor and riddles.'

'They were written to confuse the unwary or the unworthy. Only those with true vision could see the truth. So tell me, Honsou, do you have vision?'

'I'm here aren't I?'

'Then tell me *how* you came here, for I make it my business not to be easily found.'

'The prophecies of the Thrice Born wilfully contradict one another, and apocryphal tales spin lurid sagas of its depravities, but they all agree on one thing; that a former handmaiden of the Imperium's master, who dwells in endless darkness on a nameless world, knows how to find it.'

'That alone led you to me?'

'The warp whispers your name, Moriana, and I am not without means to listen to its gibberings. The Newborn led us here, though I don't know how it knew of this place.'

'It knew because its mind is collapsing,' said Moriana. 'Its brain is a gestalt organ; a hybrid creation of a damaged child's psyche, implanted doctrine, warp-spawned knowledge and stolen memories. An imperfect thing, it has begun to unravel since leaving New Badab, you must know that?'

Honsou nodded. In the months since leaving the fortress world of Huron Blackheart, the Newborn had suffered agonising fits of madness and lucid nightmares of a life unlived.

'Its mind is at war with itself,' continued Moriana. 'It is remembering things from its past life, but imprinted memes are slowly destroying what it once was. But more than that, it knew because the one you hate has been here before, and thus your creature knows of it.'

'Ventriss was here?' hissed Honsou. 'When?'

'Less than two decades ago,' said Moriana. 'When he wore the armour of black, he and his warriors were sent here to kill me. Naturally, they failed.'

Honsou fought to contain his excitement.

'Tell me how I may find the Thrice Born,' he demanded.

'It last walked this realm many years ago,' said Moriana, 'when its host of the damned stormed the star fort *Indomitable*, a vast fortress anchored in the stars

that rivals even the Blackstones coveted by the Despoiler. The Lord of the Ultramarines led his greatest warriors in battle, and they defeated the daemon prince, banishing his army to the warp where they await his return to the material realm.'

'Then how do I summon the Thrice Born back?'

'It cannot be summoned, for it was never banished.'

'Speak plainly,' said Honsou, tiring of the woman's oblique answers.

'M'kar was defeated, but the Lord of the Ultramarines was unable to destroy it, for the daemon was too strong, even for one such as he. Instead he and his allies imprisoned it within the molten heart of the *Indomitable*, bound with chains a thousand times stronger than adamantium. And while the mighty prince slumbers, his daemon army haunts the swells and currents of the warp in readiness for their master's return.'

'Where is this star fort?'

Moriana smiled, a thin-lipped expression of triumph and venom. 'It orbited a world with a poisoned sun, a world whose atmosphere was burned away in a long ago age of heroes.'

'Calth...' whispered Honsou.

'You know this world?'

'It is the home world of Ventris,' said Honsou, feeling his skin flush with the thrill of a hunt nearing its end. Such synchronicity could not be accidental, and he felt himself closing in on his quarry like a flesh hound with the scent of blood in its nostrils.

Honsou turned to leave, but Moriana's words halted him in his tracks.

'You think the Lord of the Ultramarines would be foolish enough to leave so dangerous a foe tethered to one of his dominion worlds? No, the *Indomitable* is long gone from Calth.'

'Then where is it?'

Moriana shrugged. 'The Lord of the Ultramarines was cunning. To move so vast a leviathan is no small task, for it cannot move without help. A small fleet of ships attend it, like sucklings around a sow. The *Indomitable* jumps at random through the Empyrean, never stopping for long, and forever on the move. None save its master ever knows where it will appear next.'

'So how do I find it?' said Honsou bitterly.

Moriana threw a handful of herbs and roots onto the fire, and Honsou gagged as the flames consumed them hungrily. Narcotic smoke billowed from the fire and he tasted the actinic tang of warp energy as it filled the cave.

‘So strong is M’kar’s hatred of Guilliman’s sons that no matter how distant a course its Navigators plot, the *Indomitable* remains forever shackled to Ultramar.’

‘That’s still a lot of space to search,’ said Honsou.

‘Only if you do not know where to look.’

‘Then tell me where I should look,’ demanded Honsou, tiring of Moriana’s evasiveness.

‘I cannot,’ said the blind seer, ‘but the denizens of the warp will know. Past, present and future are all one in that realm of gods and monsters. They will know where you must go, for the daemon horde of M’kar watches over their master still...’

CHAPTER TWO

It began as a flickering point of unlight in the outer reaches of the Triplex system, a little travelled region of space at the furthest extent of Ultramar. Distant from Macragge and comprising only three uninhabited worlds, few cartographers even counted the Triplex system as part of the Ultramarines' realm.

That flicker of blackness, that veiled region of space where light was swallowed, expanded and swirled with colours radiating in spectra beyond those of the material universe. Like a needle pricking at a black cloth from a lighted room, more light spilled from the crack in reality until it grew wider and wider and eventually tore the curtain of space apart in a thunderous, silent explosion of light and inimical matter.

A trio of blunt, wedge-nosed craft vomited through the tear, giant slabs of iron and stone worked into the form of enormous, columned fanes. Each was a kilometre long, an escort vessel decorated in the blue and gold of the Ultramarines, and each trailed a frothing scum of immaterial detritus. Sparkling clouds of waste matter spalled from their hulls, crackling and hissing as it slowly dissipated in the face of stubborn reality.

In the midst of the escorts was a sleek, dart-shaped vessel whose sprawling silver and gold etchings along her forecastle named her the *Omnis Videre*. The proud ship bore the heraldry of the Castana family, one of the most respected Navigator clans of Terra, and a dynasty said to have served the Ultramarines since the earliest days of the Imperium.

Behind the escorts and Navigator ship came a host of smaller craft, each similarly wreathed in wastelight from an alternate universe. Little more than giant plasma drives with a rudimentary crew compartment attached, six hundred of these tugboats trailed enormous iron chains with links fifteen metres thick.

The tear in reality widened still further as something impossibly vast forced itself through, a huge, monstrous city in the stars that glittered with light. A colossal gothic basilica of iron spires, graceful flying buttresses, crenellated towers and golden statuary reared at its centre and towering martial structures spread outwards to its furthest extremities. Four mighty piers extended from the central basilica, each a carved metropolis of docking bays, temples, armament

assemblies, impregnable bastions and weapon emplacements.

Shimmering plates of rich blue and gold and pearl identified the star fort as the *Indomitable*, a Ramilies-class star fort that had served the Ultramarines faithfully since before the Wars of Apostasy. Its design, according to Mechanicus legends, came from the hand of Artisan Magos Lian Ramilies from materials captured in the purgation of Ulthanx. The *Indomitable* was no longer shackled to the defence of a single world, yet it still served the heirs of Guilliman, though in a far different capacity.

Space around the vast star fort heaved and bucked, its rebirth back into the material realm a tortuous and shrieking translation of protesting reality and tortured physics. At last the star fort heaved its way through, followed by a flotilla of supply ships and yet more escorts towards the outermost planet in the Triplex system, a world named Aescari Exterio.

A striated bronze gas giant largely composed of hydrogen, with a volatile magnetic core of iron and ice surrounded by a thick layer of metallic hydrogen, Aescari Exterio was encircled by a prominent system of rings, composed of ice particles, rock debris, dust and hundreds of enormous asteroids trapped by its gravitational field. Frothing spurts of electromagnetic radiation from the planet's atmosphere were amplified and scattered by the planet's rings, making it the perfect place to conceal the *Indomitable's* presence.

Or the perfect place to lie in wait for prey.

Rust coloured light filled the command chapel of the *Indomitable*, situated in the Basilica Dominastus, the mightiest structure at the heart of the star fort, and leering gargoyles on vast corbels watched the bustle of the crew below impassively. Great stone arches supported the enormous domed ceiling, and silver statues of Ultramarines heroes were rendered gold by the fierce light of the ringed world.

Pict-slates hissed with static as the hull surveyors fought to penetrate the hash of interference that surrounded the star fort from its recent translation. Automated servitors clattered and swapped data packets in blurts of binaric code, while mortal crew correlated anticipated star patterns with the information slowly coming from myriad sources.

Overseeing everything from a specially widened bay towards the rear of the chapel was the master of the *Indomitable*, Brother Altarion, a giant in ceramite, armaplas and steel who viewed the world around him through technology no less sophisticated than that employed by the star fort itself.

‘Translation complete,’ said the pilot, a skeletally thin man seconded from the *Omnis Videre*. His name was Pater Monna, and he spoke with an ethereal lilt, as though travelling through the warp were no more difficult or interesting to him than walking through a door.

<Confirm our position,> said Brother Altarion, his command carried on numerous channels. <I want to know that we have arrived precisely where we intended.>

‘Of course,’ said Pater Monna, his truculent tone passing over Altarion without comment. His fingers danced over the clacking bronze keys and a faint blue glow lit his pallid features as scrolling lines of telemetry flickered on the slate beside him.

‘Surveyor gear is still showing interference, but known datum points match up to current locations,’ said Pater Monna. ‘Ninety seven point nine three accuracy of jump,’ he added with just a hint of smugness.

‘Confirmed,’ said Brother Hestian, a warrior clad in gleaming battle plate bearing the colours of the Ultramarines 5th Company. One ebonite-trimmed shoulder guard displayed the white ‘U’ of the Ultramarines, while the other was painted deep red and bore the black and steel cog symbol of the Adeptus Mechanicus.

Standing at Brother Altarion’s side, Hestian’s enhanced facility for calculations checked Pater Monna’s figures almost as fast as the Navigator bondsman. ‘We are at the edge of the Triplex system, and are approaching Aescari Exterio.’

<Gather information on local objects, Lucian, make sure we are alone,> commanded Altarion.

‘I am Hestian,’ said the Techmarine without looking up from his work. ‘Lucian attended you over two centuries ago.’

<Of course, Hestian,> replied Altarion. <My apologies.>

Watching from the centre of the chapel, Brother-Sergeant Olantor watched the familiar dance of technology and protocol that attended every translation of the *Indomitable*. Like Hestian, Olantor proudly bore the colours of the 5th Company, though he was Ultramarines through and through and owed no allegiance to the priests of Mars.

‘Is that common?’ whispered the slightly-built woman beside Olantor. ‘Brother Altarion seems a trifle... forgetful.’

‘When you have lived as long a life as he has, you’re entitled to forget a few things.’

‘But is it safe?’ said the woman. ‘Surely there are others more qualified for such an important position.’

Momentary anger flared in Olantor’s heart and he turned to face the woman, looming over her in his bulky plate armour. What did one such as she know of the immense sacrifices made by Altarion, or the burden his mighty shoulders carried?

‘Brother Altarion is one of my Chapter’s Old Ones, Mistress Sibiya,’ said Olantor, looking back towards the armoured bay enclosing the hulking form of Altarion. ‘The polished granite of his sarcophagus bears a bas-relief carving hewn from the mountains of Castra Magna. Marneus Calgar himself presented him with the mighty hammer of his left arm after the Battle for Macragge to honour the sacrifice that saw his mortal flesh all but destroyed.’

Olator felt a surge of pride to be stationed alongside such a venerable hero. ‘As such, he is to be accorded your honour and respect at all times. His word is law on this star fort, and you would do well to remember that.’

‘I intended no disrespect,’ said Sibiya Monserat, Interrogator Tertius of Talasa Prime.

‘Then see that your tone matches your intent,’ said Olantor.

‘Always,’ said Sibiya. ‘I shall see to it that you will never be in doubt as to my intent.’

Olator searched her face for mockery, but found none. That didn’t surprise him, for Sibiya Monserat was a woman trained in obfuscation and deception by her masters at the Inquisitorial fortress of Talasa Prime. He made a mental note not to underestimate Sibiya just because he could break her in two with a flick of his wrist or that she was a low-ranking soldier of the Inquisition.

Sibiya lowered her gaze. She was a fresh face aboard the *Indomitable*, though the presence of the Inquisition was far from new. Ever since the decades-old battle to reclaim the star fort from the daemons, the Chapter Master of the Ultramarines had deemed it necessary to have a permanent observer on board to ensure that no lingering taint remained.

It seemed unnecessary to involve an outside agency in the business of the Chapter, but Marneus Calgar and Varro Tigurius had been adamant.

Olator turned away from Sibiya. His hair was grey and his face pockmarked with the passage of four centuries of service to his Chapter. A career sergeant, Olantor had not the ambition or desire to advance up the command structure, happy with his role as veteran sergeant in one of Captain Galenus’s Tactical squads.

Known as the Wardens of the Eastern Fringe, the duty of manning the *Indomitable*, had naturally fallen to the 5th Company, and though it was a duty carried out with the customary honour and duty of the Ultramarines, Olantor could not help but feel that his skills were being wasted in guarding a star fort that did not protect anything.

Nearly ten years had passed since Olantor had been seconded to the *Indomitable*, and he missed the brotherhood of his company with every passing day. With less than a year until his rotation was finished, each day now seemed like a lifetime.

Information passed back and forth across the bridge in various formats: verbal, binaric and noospheric. Though Olantor was not modified to receive noospheric communication, he saw Hestian sifting through invisible streams of data with efficient sweeps and stabs of his haptically enabled gauntlets.

‘Translation complete,’ said Pater Monna in his limp, boneless voice. ‘Navigation systems nominal and local space clear.’

<Shields?> demanded Altarion.

‘Aether degradation is not yet low enough to ignite the shields,’ reported Hestian. ‘I estimate at least six point seven minutes.’

<At least tell me the weapon systems are active, Hestian,> barked Altarion. <You are too slow! Lucian was quicker, you must improve or I will replace you.>

‘You appointed me *because* I was quicker than Lucian ever was,’ said Hestian matter-of-factly.

Olator smiled. It was a familiar routine between Hestian and Altarion. Translating from the warp to real space was a dangerous and messy affair with all manner of celestial phenomenon affecting the time it took delicate systems to return to full readiness. Shields and weapons were, unfortunately, the technologies most affected by such violent transitions. Brother Hestian was one of the best Techmarines in the 5th company, and no one could bring the *Indomitable* back to life faster.

‘Power to weapon systems sequencing now,’ reported Hestian, seemingly untroubled by Altarion’s words. ‘Northern docking pier reports confirmation of readiness. Eastern pier reports readiness in two point four minutes.’

<Let it be so entered in the log,> said Brother Altarion. <Translation log one-eight-five complete.>

‘Actually, it’s one-nine-three,’ corrected Pater Monna.

<Are you sure?>

‘The bondsman is correct, brother,’ said Hestian, reading the noospheric link from the Navigator’s station. ‘This was translation one-nine-three.’

<Of course, Hestian.> said Altarion. <I see that now.>

That was Altarion’s second mistake. One was bad enough, but two...

Olantor felt Interrogator Sibiya’s gaze upon him and tried to mask his unease.

Before he could say anything, a shrill warning bell tolled and panicked screeches of binary spat from the mouths of every surveyor servitor in the chapel.

‘Contacts!’ shouted Pater Monna, all traces of boredom gone. ‘Multiple incoming tracks of sixty-plus fast movers! Torpedoes! Make that seventy!’

<Where?> bellowed Brother Altarion.

‘The rings of Aescari Exterio,’ said Brother Hestian, his voice calm and measured. ‘Pack hunter predators lying in wait.’

‘Lying in wait?’ snapped Sibiya, moving towards the nearest surveyor plotter as it came alive with trceries of light depicting the unfolding tactical situation. Olantor moved alongside her, watching in horror as the incoming track lines slid inexorably towards the blue icon representing the *Indomitable*.

Olantor took in the details of the torpedo tracks in an instant, knowing that the enemy commander was either incredibly lucky or skilled beyond all comprehension.

‘They’re targeted on the southern pier, and we don’t have any shields or weapons powered there,’ he said.

‘How could they possibly have known where we would translate?’ demanded Sibiya.

No one answered her, for the business of defending against an attack did not allow time to answer superfluous questions.

Olantor turned and made his way from the command chapel, unsnapping his helmet from his belt. Some of the incoming tracks were too slow to be torpedoes loaded with conventional hull-breaking munitions.

Bulk carriers.

Or worse, boarding torpedoes.

All through the *Indomitable*, alarms sounded, rousing the fifty warriors of the 5th Company from their training rituals and the six thousand Ultramar Defence Auxilia soldiers stationed in their many barracks.

Within a Stormcrow assault boat surging from the debris clouds and electromagnetic soup that churned with flaring bursts of dangerously unstable

energy pulses, Honsou watched as the *Indomitable* went onto a war footing. Flickering bursts of light snapped and fizzled across the star fort's craggy surface as its void shields fought to ignite in the face of interference from the planet's unstable field and the normal translation delay.

'Too slow,' he said with relish.

A golden wire trailed from the augmetic grafted to the side of Honsou's skull and plugged into the brass console at the rear of the Stormcrow. Through that wire, information flowed into him from the sensory perceptions of Adept Cycerin, the Adeptus Mechanicus magos he had captured on Hydra Cordatus and infected with a warp-spawned techno-virus.

Honsou kept his remaining eye shut, for the sensation of two optical inputs to his brain induced nausea and dizziness that not even his genhanced physique could counteract.

Though he felt the hard vibrations of the assault boat as it thundered through space towards the *Indomitable*, heard the droning chants of his warriors and felt its movements beneath him, it warred with the stillness he perceived. Through Cycerin's multiple senses, Honsou saw this region of space as a three-dimensional sphere of data tracks, information light, arcing trajectories and numerical representations of visual media. Much of it made no sense, yet he felt limbs that were not his own manipulating that information as easily as he might field strip a bolter.

Agglomerations of numbers represented the fleet he had assembled at New Badab, an ugly collection of battered warships, bulk carriers, gunboats, system monitors and captured cruisers. Guided by Moriana's sorceries, his ships had anchored within the concealing radiation of Aescari Exterio for almost a month before the screaming vat-psykers gibbered in anticipation of the *Indomitable's* arrival.

Cycerin immediately plotted the sequencing of the star fort's activation cycle and brought them in on its most exposed flank, and the attack had been launched. Like the wolf packs of old, Honsou's fleet surged from concealment, predators striking before their prey was even aware of them.

Honsou yanked the golden wire from his forehead and shook off the vertigo that accompanied his vision returning to normal; all hard edges, solid bulkheads and twin rows of armoured Iron Warriors ready to take the fight to the hated Imperium once more.

Auto-firing defence turrets engaged the Iron Warriors' torpedo screen as soon as

it came within range and space blossomed with massive explosions. To hit something as swift and small as a torpedo was next to impossible, but with enough fast moving debris slashing through space, it might be possible to bring down enough of the incoming weapons.

Without central guidance from the command chapel, these weapons were firing blind, and their chance of stopping enough of the enemy torpedoes to matter was small indeed.

Wave after wave of torpedoes slammed into the southern docking pier. Hull-breaching charges blasted through the thick plates of armour before a secondary motor ignited and thrust the warhead deep into the superstructure. Mushroom clouds of debris and fire bloomed across the surface of the star fort as new suns winked into existence and flattened vast swathes of the mighty bastions that studded its surface.

Hot on the heels of the ordnance came fast moving raiders armed with deadly lance batteries that pummelled the explosion-wracked surface of the *Indomitable* with raking beams of white-hot energy. Launch bays were targeted with ruthless precision and entire squadrons were immolated on their launch rails before they could take flight.

Flocks of Iron Warriors ships swept towards the battered southern pier and the defences were overwhelmed with volley after volley of punishing battery fire. Secondary explosions detonated in the heart of the pier and defensive architecture crafted in a forgotten age by masters of their art was blasted to dust. Each ship pulled away after its attack run, chased by snap-fired torpedoes and lethal barrages from the fully operational defence batteries mounted on the central basilica.

The assault element of Honsou's fleet bombarded the docking pier with devastating thoroughness, tearing it open and flattening square kilometres of its structure. The damage was horrendous, and hundreds of bodies tumbled into space, snatched from the warmth of the star fort by screaming decompression. Jets of freezing oxygen and hydraulic fluid gushed into space, forming a glittering dome of sparkling crystal over the ruins below.

While much of Honsou's fleet directed its violence against the docking pier, a sizeable portion stood off the main assault as the cruisers and escorts tasked with the star fort's defence came about. High above the assault, the Ultramarines escorts dived into the fight with a vengeance. Yet more torpedoes criss-crossed the gulfs between the enemy vessels as they gave battle, and ferocious broadsides battered down shields and smashed open hulls in flaring bursts of

pyrotechnics.

That the Ultramarines ships were outgunned meant nothing, their crews would have turned to fight even were they outnumbered a million to one.

Oxygen fires burned brightly and briefly across the southern docking pier, the *Indomitable* shuddering as it vented its lifeblood into the hard vacuum. Even as the fires died, assault craft were arcing down to the surface, hundreds of troop carriers and heavy bulk lifters packed with armoured vehicles and siege equipment.

The southern pier was wide open, but the rest of the star fort was undamaged. Wounded as it was, the *Indomitable* was more than capable of winning this fight on its terms.

But Honsou had no intention of fighting on its terms.

To conquer this star fort would require more than naval power, it would require the most determined and skilful warriors on the ground, battering their way to its heart.

The *Indomitable* was a prize that could only be won by the warriors of Perturabo fighting as they were always meant to fight; with battery upon battery of artillery and thousands of warriors ready to sweep all before them in a bloody storm of iron.

Brother-Sergeant Olantor sped towards the southern docking pier through the echoing cloisters and wide thoroughfares of the Via Rex on a servitor piloted skiff. The wide processional of machine temples housed the generators that provided energy to the lance batteries of the southern pier, and silent snaps of electrical discharge arced between the power spires. Panicked tech-priests and their attendant servitors fought to contain the damage from the bombardment as the skiff raced by.

Interrogator Sibiya sat next to Olantor, consulting a data-slate that projected rippling lines of text onto her pinched features. Occasionally she would speak into a vox-bead attached to the collar of her glossy black power armour.

Olator had never seen a woman clad in battle plate, but Sibiya wore the armour like a natural. He knew she had come to the *Indomitable* with a force of Datian Saurians, a fierce regiment that had fought with honour alongside the Ultramarines during the Zeist campaign. Sibiya had made veiled mention of other forces at her disposal, but had been vague concerning the details.

Tolling bells sounded from the cloisters along the length of the bastion precinct as though calling the faithful to prayer. Flashing lumen globes set in the

angled walls pulsed in time with his heart, reflecting from the sealed armaglass of the skiff's canopy.

Information scrolled across Olantor's visor, troop readiness levels, defensive topography overlaid with damage reports and schematics of the devastated southern pier. He processed this information as the voice of Sergeant Decimus apprised him of the tactical situation through the vox-bead in his ear.

'They hit us hard, whoever they are, and they knew what they were doing. We'll be lucky to hold the south,' said Decimus, ever the pessimist. 'The far end of Via Rex has been obliterated and the lance batteries are gone, as well as many of the surrounding launch bays.'

'How many can we count on?' asked Olantor. 'We need fighters in the air.'

'Impossible to tell. Some launch bays are destroyed and some are simply not responding.'

'Which ones?' said Olantor, fearing he already knew the answer.

'The ones on the south-eastern quadrant,' confirmed Decimus. 'The ones spared the worst of the barrages.'

'And where damn near fifty of those boarding torpedoes were headed.'

'Exactly,' said Decimus. 'Bomber hangars and fighter wings, at least two hundred aircraft. The Master of Skies is working up a manifest on how many the enemy may have seized.'

'Come on, Decimus, give me some good news. It can't all be bad.'

'Well, the Gauntlet Bastions are manned and ready,' said Decimus. 'Even if they come at us now, they'll find a warm welcome awaiting them.'

'Our warriors are already in place,' said Olantor, a statement not a question.

'Naturally. I've spread Ultramarines combat squads through the Defence Auxilia to stiffen their backs, and Chaplain Sabatina's filling their hearts with promises of glory.'

'Very good, Decimus,' said Olantor. 'Interrogator Sibiya and I are approaching the towers just now, so we'll be with you shortly.'

'Hurry,' advised Decimus. 'There's lots of activity in the rubble, and it looks bad.'

Olator shut off the link to his fellow sergeant and turned to Sibiya.

'You get all that?'

'I did,' said Sibiya. 'Decimus didn't give you any clue as to who is attacking us?'

'*Brother* Decimus,' corrected Olantor. 'And you heard what I heard.'

Sibiya nodded and scratched her cheek.

‘I still don’t understand how they knew we’d be here,’ she said. ‘They shouldn’t have been able to predict our translation point. Damn it all, we don’t even know *who* they are!’

‘No, we do not, interrogator,’ said Olantor. ‘But I have an enemy to fight, that is all that matters. As soon as I lay eyes on them from the tip of the Gauntlet Bastion I will know them. And when I know them, I will know how to defeat them.’

‘It doesn’t matter to you, maybe, but it matters a great deal to me,’ snapped Sibiya, her mind racing off on a tangent. ‘The whole point of these random jumps was to confound anyone who might try to find the *Indomitable*. The only way they could have found us is if our jumps haven’t been random.’

‘What are you saying?’ asked Olantor, not liking the insinuation he heard in her tone.

‘That our last jump wasn’t as random as it should have been.’

‘Brother Altarion chooses the translation points.’

‘My point exactly,’ said Sibiya. ‘Perhaps his lapses in memory are not simply confined to the name of the Techmarine who attends him or the number of warp jumps he’s made.’

Olator wanted to contradict Sibiya, but her logic was faultless. It should have been next to impossible for an enemy to find them unless Brother Altarion’s venerable mind was no longer as functional as it should be. *Had* he fallen into a predictable pattern?

‘How strong are the Gauntlet Bastions? Really?’ asked Sibiya, changing tack completely.

‘I’ll show you and you can decide for yourself,’ said Olantor as the skiff emerged from the electrical flashes of the *Via Rex*.

The gargantuan footings of two vast towers reared above the skiff, impossibly tall and casting long shadows over the lower reaches of the star fort. Red light from Aescari Exterio bathed the verticality of the landscape with a light the colour of sunset. To the skiff’s left, the Tower of Corinth was the taller of the two, its splendid arches and immense solidity the very embodiment of the men who manned its guns.

The Tower of the First was a more sombre structure, a memorial to the heroic warriors of the Veteran Company of the Ultramarines who fell defending their home world from the Great Devourer. For all its solemnity, it was as strong and immovable as its twin.

Sibiya gasped in astonishment. She had been on the *Indomitable* less than a

month, but it still irked Olantor that she had not made the effort to tour the outer defences of the star fort. Instead, she had spent the bulk of her time ensconced within the depths of the Basilica Dominastus. The skiff passed between the two towers, coming to a halt beyond them in the midst of a heaving mass of armed men in the sky blue and gold uniforms of the Ultramarines Defence Auxilia.

Clad in armoured environment suits and all-enclosing helms, the defenders of the *Indomitable* were ready to meet the invaders head on. Eagle-topped banners were raised and officers passed orders over the vox as soldiers climbed to firing steps and static weapon emplacements were powered up. The docking pier's atmosphere might have been blown out by the enemy attack, but the gravity field generators were still functional.

'Ready?' asked Olantor as Sibiya craned her neck to see the top of the towers.

Reluctantly, she tore her gaze from the magnificent structures and fitted her helmet, the silver faceplate worked in the form of an Imperial saint, though Olantor did not recognise which one. Sibiya nodded and he disengaged the vacuum seals of the skiff.

Together they made their way through the press of bodies towards the edge of the wall. Olantor climbed to the firing step, the soldiers bowing to him as he reached the rampart. Decimus was already there and the two warriors greeted each other with respectful formality.

Olator turned his gaze outwards, and the sight of the Gauntlet Bastions filled him with confidence. The twin redoubts guarded the inner rings of the fortress, hundreds of feet high and studded with weapon emplacements. Each one's walls were precisely angled to allow supporting fire from its twin to sweep over its armoured face, and concealed guns set in recessed firing chambers covered the approaches to Varro's Gate, the golden, eagle-stamped portal that sealed the route to the Via Rex.

Sibiya's gaze took in the vast, implacable strength of the walls as devotional banners unfurled from the high ramparts and catechisms of battle were broadcast over the vox.

'Impressive,' she said at last.

Olator laughed at her understatement. 'These walls have a strength in them that has endured for centuries and will withstand this brazen attack.'

'Let us hope you are right,' said Sibiya with real feeling.

Olator nodded and looked beyond the walls to where glittering clouds of frozen oxygen and fuel obscured the farthest extent of the ruined southern pier. It was impossible to tell exactly what was going on, but flaring bursts of retros and

signs of great industry boded ill.

‘We’ll give them a fight they’ll not soon forget,’ said Decimus, and Olantor nodded, relishing this chance to prove his mettle once more.

He heard the click and whirr of lenses from Sibiya’s helm.

‘What’s that?’ she asked. ‘Some kind of standard?’

Olantor narrowed his eyes, peering through the haze of ice crystals to where the interrogator was pointing. A huge berm of stone had been thrown up at the end of the docking pier and his enhanced vision picked out the hazy outline of a dull, iron coloured banner pole wedged in the rubble.

Set in the centre of an eight-pointed star was a grinning skull-masked helm, the icon of a dread foe from the ancient days.

‘Iron Warriors,’ he hissed.

A phrase of which his tutor on Macragge had been fond flashed into his mind.

Be careful what you wish for.

CHAPTER THREE

Within moments of landing, the Iron Warriors were at work. Tonnes of materiel were ferried down to the fort's surface in the opening minutes of the landing, along with thousands of warriors, slaves and specialised labourers. The ruined edges of the southern docking pier and the smashed buildings to either side were bulldozed into enormous contravallations to protect the flanks.

Unable to dig into the adamantium structure of the star fort, gargantuan earth-moving machines instead shaped the rubble into high walls of debris and statuary in jagged lines of saw-toothed ramparts. No enemy force could now threaten the main thrust of the Iron Warriors' attack without being forced to fight over a defensive wall at least as powerful as those facing the invaders.

As the flanks were made secure, the high gun towers on the farthest end of the pier were rebuilt and strengthened. On solidly anchored iron platforms, hulking interceptor guns and flak batteries were positioned and linked to the surveyors of the ships above. The defenders would almost certainly launch bombing raids and strafing runs from the launch bays still under their control, but these guns raised an umbrella of cover over the siege works.

A rain of frozen particles drizzled over the battlefield, shimmering in the copper light of the planet below, and the first captured fighters and bombers streaked from the landing bays seized by Cadaras Grendel. The fight to secure the hangar bays had been brutal and bloody, but the outcome had never been in doubt, for the defenders were cut off and vastly outnumbered by a foe that offered no mercy and was relentless in the business of killing.

Even as the Iron Warriors' landing was being secured, the ships of Honsou's fleet fought in the space around the *Indomitable*, keeping the few remaining escorts of the Ultramarines at bay.

Enormous earthworks of pulverised rock were swiftly thrown up before the Iron Warriors' positions, banks of heavy stone and steel that provided protection from the many guns mounted on the two colossal towers overlooking the seized pier. Pounding blasts of fire hammered the newly-established positions, but it was already too late to prevent the invaders from securing their hold on the pier.

Behind these huge redoubts, the carriers of the Iron Warriors ferried a constant stream of men and supplies to the *Indomitable's* surface: great tunnelling

machines, diggers, augurs – equipment at least as important as the artillery pieces, armoured vehicles and warriors who came in equal number.

The Iron Warriors had their bridgehead.

Honsou felt his soul thrill at the sight of so much martial industry. Within minutes of setting foot on the enormous star fort, he had felt his old instincts returning. Every structure became a focal point for launching an escalade, every shattered cloister and ruined thoroughfare a potential lynchpin of a defence in depth. No sooner was an avenue of attack identified than a fortified wall arose to block it.

‘I’ve been away from this for too long,’ he said, stood atop the remains of what had once been a vast lance battery. The monstrously huge barrels were twisted out of shape and looked like enormous brass tunnels laid out in a haphazard manner on the surface of a moon.

‘What did you say?’ said Cadaras Grendel, his armour bloody from the slaughter in the hangar bays.

Honsou swept his arms out to encompass the siege works taking shape around them. A dozen raids on outlying Imperial worlds too far from help had furnished Honsou with thousands of slaves to dig his trenches and raise his walls. An army of men and hundreds of machines laboured to raise defensive bulwarks and armoured redoubts.

The first parallel, a defensive wall studded with hardened bunkers, buried magazines and vacant battery pits, was almost complete, giving the Iron Warriors the perfect place to begin the first approaches to the walls.

‘This,’ he said, as dozens of chained guns crunched through the ruins under the wary supervision of the gunnery masters towards their assigned firing positions. ‘I’ve been so busy orchestrating things for a distant goal that I forgot how good it feels to take the iron to the stone once more. This is what I was made for, and it’s about time the Imperium learned why they fear the Iron Warriors.’

Grendel’s lip split in a feral grin. ‘Aye, it’ll be good to get in the dirt and blood of a trench, storm a breach and carry a wall.’

Honsou nodded, feeling a rare camaraderie with Grendel. The moment passed as he saw Ardaric Vaanes and the Newborn climbing the slope of rubble towards him. Vaanes’s armour had been bulked out with the addition of his jump pack, and the Newborn’s patchwork face was hidden by a battered iron helmet with chevrons of yellow and black. Its armour had been repainted in the colours of the Iron Warriors, as had Honsou’s and Grendel’s. Alone of the gathered warriors,

only Vaanes was a warrior without visible allegiance.

‘You know what you have to do?’ asked Honsou.

‘Yes,’ confirmed Vaanes. ‘Get behind their lines and sow as much fear and confusion as we can. Cut supply lines, destroy communications and divert troops from the front lines.’

‘You think you can do it?’ said Grendel. ‘We won’t come get you if you run into trouble.’

‘I didn’t think you would,’ replied Vaanes. ‘But this is just the sort of work I trained for.’

‘What about that?’ said Grendel, jerking his thumb at the Newborn. ‘Can it cut it?’

‘It can hold its own,’ said Vaanes. ‘And we have the loxatl brood-group of Xaneant too. I think we’ll be fine.’

‘Too bad if you’re not,’ said Grendel.

‘Yes, too bad,’ snapped Vaanes, his lightning-sheathed claws sliding from his gauntlet. Ever since New Badab, Grendel and Vaanes had been at loggerheads, but that was nothing new, for Grendel was an easy man to dislike. Honsou sensed an undercurrent to Vaanes’s anger, as though his true hatred was more directed inwards than upon Grendel.

‘Go,’ said Honsou. ‘Get inside however you can and wreak havoc. I’ll see you in the basilica when the fight is done. Me and Grendel will be taking a more direct route.’

‘Through the walls?’ said Vaanes.

‘Aye,’ grinned Honsou. ‘With big guns and brute strength. It’s what I do best.’

The guns of the Iron Warriors opened fire en masse less than an hour later. A hundred artillery pieces spoke with one cataclysmic voice and a volley of high-explosive rounds slammed into the walls of the Gauntlet Bastions. The walls vanished in a firestorm of impacts, screeds of masonry and sheet steel falling like rain to the ground.

Yet the defensive engineers had done their work well, strengthening the walls with all manner of reinforcements and refinements to withstand such pounding. The guns fired again and again, gangs of slaves working in shoddy vacuum suits that leaked or provided little protection from the rigours of working in such a hostile environment. Scores of men died every hour as their suits failed or they came too near one of the daemonic artillery pieces and paid for such incaution with their lives.

Gunners of the Iron Warriors plotted optimal fire patterns and orchestrated simultaneous firings to increase the force of their barrages tenfold. Shells impacted within seconds of one another, tearing cracks wider and deepening craters in the walls with every earth-shaking detonation.

Under the cover of each barrage, a thousand slave labourers worked in the shadow of the vast bulldozers, pushing angled walls of rock and debris forward from the opening parallel to form a pair of sheltered walkways that inched towards the mighty bastions. Honsou oversaw the approach to the left bastion, Grendel the right, and a keen sense of rivalry drove each approach forward as much as the picks, shovels and back-breaking labour of the slaves.

Counterbattery fire hammered these walled approaches, but as each Imperial battery unmasked to fire, Adept Cycerin identified its position and passed its precise coordinates to the Iron Warriors gunners. Ruthless bracketing fire hammered the battery, destroying it before it could retreat beneath its armoured hoardings.

In their eagerness to push forwards, some of the bulldozers exposed themselves to the two towers behind the bastions and were obliterated by deadly accurate return fire. Against these guns, the Iron Warriors had no defence save hunkering down behind their walls or in hardened bunkers.

Slaves and labourers were forced to press themselves into whatever cracks in the stonework they could find and many were buried beneath tonnes of rubble as the day's work was undone by the Imperial guns. Still, no matter how much damage the counter battery fire inflicted, it could not keep up with the relentless, implacable pace set by the Iron Warriors.

Imperial bombers launched attack after attack on the siegeworks, but aircraft from the captured launch bays kept the majority of them at bay. Even those that penetrated the screens of fighters were soon brought down by the interceptor guns under Adept Cycerin's control. The corrupted Magos unleashed a scrapcode infection into the star fort's outlying systems, a burbling corruption that caused system failures and power blackouts throughout the mighty fortress as it replicated and worked towards the central logic engines of the Basilica Dominastus.

Day by day, the approaching ramparts of stone crept closer to the walls, zigzagging towards the tips of the bastions so that no matter how cunningly the defenders sited their guns, they could not enfilade the approaching troops.

Within five days, the approach trenches had covered a third of the distance between the end of the docking pier and the Gauntlet Bastions, and Honsou

ordered the construction of the second parallel. A great wall of stone and iron branched out from each of the approaches, linking in the middle to provide cover from which to unleash ever more deadly and carefully aimed barrages.

Shadows flashed past Ardaric Vaanes as he dropped from his position of concealment in the recessed machicolations of the slate-coloured ore barn. His claws unsheathed from his gauntlets with a crackling *snick!* His jump pack flared a last minute burst of fire and he landed in the midst of the shocked soldiers with a crack of stonework.

Vaanes swept his arms out. Screams and blood followed him.

He saw panicked faces, saw their terror and shut it out as he killed.

Fifty men, two armoured fighting vehicles and a trio of supply skiffs, their most ambitious attack yet, but there were few that could match the Raven Guard for their skill in ambush killing. Rifles fired and las-bolts sparked from his blank armour as he spun and sliced his way through the soldiers. The reptilian loxatl crawled and skittered across the walls, flechette rounds slashing downwards to shred officers and sergeants trying to impose some kind of order on the slaughter.

One of the fighting vehicles exploded, its engine block a flaming ruin as a loxatl flechette bomb punched through the armoured glacis. Men on fire fell from escape hatches and Vaanes watched them burn with a hideous sense of pleasure. The smell of their seared flesh and hair, the thought of their liquefying skin as it ran from their bones like melted rubber...

His inattention almost cost him his life as a shimmering rapier slashed for his neck. Vaanes spun beneath the blade and punched out with his clawed gauntlet, spearing his attacker and spraying his helmet with blood. An officer in a blue frock coat and golden breastplate stamped with the inverted omega of his masters flopped like a landed fish on the claw, his flesh sizzling and frying with the electric heat of the weapon.

Vaanes flicked the body from his claws, angry with himself for being so easily distracted in the heat of a battle. Distractions were what got you killed. He drove all thoughts of sensation from his mind, focusing on the job at hand.

The supply skiffs were bolting, skidding around the burning wreck of the lead fighting vehicle, but a spray of loxatl darts shattered the armaglass canopy and shredded the first driver. It slammed into the side of the ore barn and rucked up on a stack of barrels and pallets.

The remaining two skiffs fought to break out of the trap, the pilots reacting

with commendable speed and calm at the sudden, shocking violence around them.

Ultramarines training, thought Vaanes. Too bad mine is better.

More flechette rounds blew out the engines of the second skiff, knocking it out of the air and sending it screeching and spinning across the ground. The last skiff was brought down when a dozen loxatl leapt upon it and clawed their way inside. The grey-skinned aliens moved and fought with a series of jerky movements that appeared riotously uncoordinated and yet amazingly supple at the same time, their wiry limbs and powerful dewclaws able to tear through thin armour and flesh with a single sweep. Snapping jaws and hooked talons ripped the crew of the skiff apart in moments.

A heavy, chugging series of impacts tore up the rockcrete beside him, and Vaanes dived aside. He rolled smoothly to his feet, seeing the gunner in the hatch of the second armoured fighting vehicle slew his heavy calibre weapon around. Before the gunner could fire, a warrior in iron armour reared up behind him and tore his head off with its bare hands. Blood jetted over the vehicle, and the corpse slumped over the gun, sending a last geyser of shots into the air.

The Newborn hauled the body from the turret and dropped a pair of grenades inside before slamming the hatch shut. A tremendous detonation rocked the vehicle, and acrid smoke billowed from its vents and underside.

The sounds of fighting were suddenly silenced, and Vaanes let out a pent up breath of... what? Exhilaration? Regret? He wasn't sure.

The Newborn dropped from the back of the destroyed vehicle and walked over to him. Fifty men were dead, two tanks destroyed and a trio of skiffs seized, but it seemed as untroubled as though it had just completed a training session.

Vaanes took a moment to compose himself, restoring his calm after the exhilaration of the victory. The killings had inflamed the part of him that relished the defeat of his enemy, but it had been more than that. The time they had spent behind the lines of the enemy, attacking supply convoys, small unit redeployments and isolated repair crews had awakened something in him he thought long buried.

Pride.

He had always been the best at what he did, and to have his abilities compromised by these newly awakened appetites angered him greatly. He quelled the rising fury, silently mouthing the Mantra of the Hidden Hunter. His heartbeat returned to its resting state and he felt a wordless shiver of distant anger from somewhere far away.

‘Another good ambush,’ said the Newborn, removing its helmet now that the fighting was done. ‘You have great skill in anticipating where to find the most lucrative targets.’

Vaanes nodded. ‘I was trained by the best,’ he said.

‘The Raven Guard?’

‘Yes, the Raven Guard,’ said Vaanes. ‘I was a senior training instructor at the Ravenspire.’

‘What’s that?’

‘It was... *is*... the fortress monastery of my Chapter,’ said Vaanes. ‘A grand tower on the dark side of Deliverance. It’s a wonder, you know, the largest man-made structure on the planet. Or pretty much any planet, come to think of it. It’s an incredible place, a place where the very walls are made of history and legend.’

‘You sound like you miss it,’ said the Newborn without irony.

Vaanes started to reply, but the easy dismissal forming on his lips died as he realised the Newborn was right.

In the hold of her ship, berthed in one of the roof hangars of the basilica, Interrogator Sibiya shivered. She stood inside a large refrigerated shipping container, but she wasn’t cold, for her power armour protected her from the artificially maintained chill of the air. No matter how many times she told herself it was dormant, there was always that thrill of fear whenever she came here. Vapour gusted from wall vents like breath. Which, she supposed, it was in a way. Coiled ribs wrapped the specialised container in humming machinery and the chemical bite of coolant fluids was an acrid tang at the back of the throat.

‘Why have you brought me here?’ asked Brother Olantor, looking in puzzlement at the wealth of complex machinery built into the walls of the chamber. ‘I have a battle to fight.’

‘Surely Brother Altarion can manage without you for a little while, or don’t you trust his ability to command?’

‘That’s not the point,’ said Olantor. ‘I have a duty to stand with my men.’

‘This will only take a moment, I just wanted you to see this.’

‘See what? All I see is a freezer compartment in the hold of your starship.’

Sibiya nodded to a hooded adept in a thickly-furred robe who stood with his shaven head bowed by the only entrance, an armoured door that not even Olantor could break down. The adept ran his fingers over a gem-studded console of flashing lights and brass dials. Numerous pict screens displayed steady,

pulsing lines like ponderously slow vital signs.

Sibiya's breath misted before her and she pulled her cloak tighter about her shoulders as a blunt, oblong box slowly lowered from the ceiling. Formed from banded ribs of adamantium and steel, it resembled something used to contain hazardous bio-matter or unstable atomics.

Its surfaces were fogged with crystals of white, and long icicles dripped like glassy knife blades from its overhanging surfaces. Sibiya warily approached the container and wiped her hand across a frosted glass panel on its topside, beckoning Olantor to join her.

The Space Marine looked down through the glass and she saw his confusion.

'What is this?' said Brother Olantor.

'A last resort,' said Sibiya.

Honsou watched from the roof of his personal bunker as the bombardment of the Gauntlet Bastions continued. It was impossible to see the walls, for they were wreathed in smoke and flames. He felt the vibrations of the distant impacts through his boots and relished this chance to reduce a bastion of the Ultramarines to ruin.

This was what it was all about. He had been a shadow of his former self since he had left the Eye of Terror, so consumed by vengeance that he had forgotten what made him the man he was. He was a product of two gene fathers, yet he was wholly an Iron Warrior and the scale of industrialised warfare around him was like a vision of paradise.

The batteries of the second parallel were bludgeoning the walls before them to submission and it would not be long before they had affected a practicable breach. It had been too long since he had led warriors through a broken wall, climbed the rubble into the teeth of guns and swords with his own weapons howling their prayers to the dark gods.

The hot taste of steel and burning propellant was a thick reek in the air, the smell of warfare as it was always meant to be waged. A near continuous rain of shells from the two enormous towers beyond the walls pounded the Iron Warriors' position, but their master had taught them well and only the slaves bore the brunt of the shelling.

The main weapon systems of the star fort were next to useless in such a conflict, for its guns were designed to hurl explosive projectiles vast distances across space at attacking warships, not troops crawling across its surface like ants. The vast majority of its weapon systems simply weren't capable of

shooting at its own structure. Which wasn't to say the defenders were powerless, for a great many soldiers manned the battlements and the guns mounted on the towers were mighty indeed.

Yes, a worthy enemy was ranged against them, but Honsou liked nothing better than a challenge that would prove his mettle to those around him.

'Tell me,' said Notha Etassay, reclined on a chaise longue of flayed human skin, 'Are such battles always such tedious affairs? When do I get to bare my blade?'

Honsou sighed, his reverie of shell impacts and escalades broken by the bladedancer's lugubrious tones. 'Ever since we began this fight that's all you've been asking. It takes time to batter down the walls of a fortress. Approaches have to be made, parallels raised and the proper time taken to break it open. It's the perfect meeting of science and martial glory.'

'Really? I thought it was a necessary evil,' said Etassay. 'A long, drawn out affair that you Iron Warriors specialise in before the real feast of death.'

Honsou felt his good mood evaporate at Etassay's words. 'The Iron Warriors learned their craft in the earliest days of the Great Crusade, Etassay, when their siege fleets toppled the fortresses and donjons of countless alien races and splinters of humanity who resisted the coming of the Imperium. It was a craft that saw my Legion used to exhaustion, pushing the warriors beyond the limits of endurance.'

'I didn't think you were alive to see such times?' said Etassay.

'I wasn't,' admitted Honsou. 'I was elevated to the Legion in the aftermath of the war.'

'So I heard,' replied Etassay, glancing over at Cadaras Grendel. No doubt the mohawked warrior had delighted in telling Etassay of Honsou's mongrel heritage.

'I may not have faced the walls of Terra but I have stood before countless others, and they have all fallen. There is no wall that can be thrown up before me that I cannot tear down. The great Perturabo might not venture from his lair in the mountains of Medregard, but his warriors continue the Long War in his name.'

'If flattening castles is such a joy to the Iron Warriors, then why is he not here?'

Honsou shook his head. 'Perturabo has a thousand lifetimes worth of hate in his heart,' he said, remembering the deep, dark valleys of the mountains and the dread temples and forsaken towers of Perturabo's nightmare city. Though he had

not seen the fallen Primarch of the Iron Warriors, he had felt his brooding hate on the bitter winds that howled through every haunted street. ‘And such a warrior does not stir for any but the most titanic of conflicts.’

Etassay stood and swung his arms, loosening the muscles of his shoulder and performing a series of painful looking stretches. Even clad in a form-fitting bodysuit and enclosing helm of androgynous passivity, the warrior’s physique was impressive. His impatience was obvious, but Honsou wasn’t about to launch his assault on the bastions until he was ready.

‘If you’re so desperate to swing your blade, you could always join Kaarja Salombar’s corsairs or what’s left of Pashtoq Uluvent’s berserkers,’ suggested Cadaras Grendel.

‘Kind of you to offer, Grendel,’ said Etassay with an elaborate bow, ‘but I think I’d rather fight where there’s a chance I might live. The berserkers don’t care one way or the other and Salombar... well, empty heroics may be very piratical, but they aren’t very productive. Sensation can only be wrung of all its juices while one is alive to enjoy the flavour.’

‘Don’t say we didn’t offer,’ said Grendel.

Honsou was fully aware of the loss of men resulting from the impetuous Salombar’s rash charges on the walls, but the Corsair Queen cared not for the impossibility of carrying a well defended wall with only courage and foolish thoughts of glory. Pashtoq Uluvent’s berserkers, unhinged madmen who lusted only to kill, had become a liability of late, and though they too had little chance of carrying the walls, Honsou shed no tears for their losses.

Besides, the constant assaults on the walls was keeping the defenders’ guns occupied, allowing the covered ways and approaches to creep ever closer to the wall. When a third parallel was established, Honsou would be in a position to mount his direct firing guns to blast the footings of the walls to dust.

And looking at the drifting banks of smoke that perpetually wreathed the walls, Honsou didn’t think it would take much longer.

Brother-Sergeant Olantor fired the last of his shells at the fleeing warriors and slumped against the blasted stump of this section of wall. His breath came in short, sharp hikes, the result of numerous breaches in his armour. Though vacuum sealant had prevented a catastrophic decompression, it had left his air supply dangerously thin.

Decimus knelt beside him and passed him a fresh magazine.

‘You always did have lousy fire discipline,’ said his fellow sergeant.

‘Thank you,’ replied Olantor, switching magazines with automatic precision. He glanced over the walls, seeing a cratered wasteland of rubble and bodies. The expanse of the star fort’s southern quarter resembled the very worst warzone imaginable, like a devastated city that had changed hands a dozen times or more.

The battered survivors of this latest attack gathered behind hastily thrown up walls and sheltered redoubts that had been built at their back as the assault came in. It astounded Olantor how quickly the Iron Warriors could build such things, and no sooner had one attack been beaten back than the next was coming in.

He looked along the length of the shattered wall, its once proud ramparts little more than ragged outcroppings of stone and jutting rebars. It was little enough to shelter from enemy fire, but it was all they had. Olantor could see seven Ultramarines, and around a thousand Defence Auxilia troops. Chaplain Sabatina held his crozius high, reciting the litanies of hate for traitors over the Auxilia vox-net.

The mortal soldiers were fighting with great courage and honour on a battlefield where even minor damage to an environment suit could see a man dead in moments. Each was trained to quickly seal a tear, but much of the firepower coming at them caused such horrendous damage that repairs were impossible.

Even Interrogator Sibiya had surprised him, fighting on the front lines with her Datian Saurians at her side. The Saurians were swarthy-skinned men with long-barrelled melta guns and heavy armour of umber scale. A twitching preacher in ill-fitting haz-mat armour never left Sibiya’s side, chanting words from a heavy book carried on the back of a thickly-muscled, vat-grown bearer. The man seemed oblivious to the fact that only he could hear his own words.

Olator felt the crash of iron footfalls behind him, recognising the heavy tread of Brother Altarion. For all that he had entertained doubts as to the Old One’s ability to command the star fort, he had no doubts as to his ability as a warrior. Since the first attack, Altarion had stood alongside the defenders of the Gauntlet Bastions, and the Dreadnought’s presence had done more to raise morale than any number of inspiring speeches from Chaplain Sabatina.

Those few attackers who had somehow reached the ramparts on automated grapnels, had been met by the crackling hammer or roaring cannon of Brother Altarion. None who reached the top of the wall survived.

<Arise, brothers!> bellowed Altarion over the vox. <The fiends return!>

‘So soon?’ sighed Olantor.

‘Looks like,’ said Decimus, glancing over the wall.

CHAPTER FOUR

Honsou got his breach seventeen hours later. As the corsairs and berserkers scrambled up the pitted and easily-climbed walls of the Gauntlet Bastions, the Iron Warriors built and fortified their final batteries. Their works were too close to the walls for the defending gunners in the mighty towers of the basilica to target without fear of hitting their own men, and thus the work was undertaken with only minimal disruption.

The huge, elevated platforms were raised with sheet steel and hard packed slabs of rockcrete salvaged from the ruins. Within two hours of their completion, six enormous guns rolled along the covered ways from the Iron Warriors' bridgehead. They had belonged to Lord Toramino and Lord Berossus, warsmiths who had laid siege to Honsou's fortress on Medrengard, but in the aftermath of their defeat, Honsou took the weapons for his own.

Toramino once claimed his guns had fired on the walls of Terra, and while that was a boast made by many a warsmith, Toramino's likely had merit.

The movement of so many colossal weapons could not go unnoticed, and the Imperial gunners bent their every effort into stopping them, but the Iron Warriors had done their work well. Where the covered ways were breached, battalions of slaves and bulldozers rushed forward to repair the damage and level the roadway. Where there was any danger of the Imperial defenders zeroing in on the artillery pieces, Adept Cycerin assigned extra firepower to suppress them. After a punishing five-hour journey, all six guns reached their battery positions without suffering any damage.

A mix of high-energy conversion beamers, conventional, direct-firing macro-cannons and mobile laser drills, the war machines went to work on the base of the Gauntlet Bastions with a vengeance. Using the wall's mass against it, the conversion beamers blew open crater after crater in the structure, while the laser drills sliced through adamantium rebars with horrifying ease. A booming rumble, like distant thunder, signalled the first collapse, and a wide crack split the edge of the leftmost bastion, snaking violently from the base of the wall to the rampart in a matter of seconds. At the top, men scrambled to flee the disintegrating wall, but it was too late for many of them. Tank-sized chunks of rock and compacted stone tumbled down, carrying hundreds of men to their doom as the rubble

crashed to the ground in a rain of debris.

Billowing clouds of smoke drifted over the Iron Warriors' position and within moments it was clear that a practicable breach had been achieved. A vast section of the bastion had collapsed, spilling a sloping ramp of craggy rock and stone into the ditch before it.

The Rhino slammed down on the rock with a thunderous crack, and Honsou held onto the stanchion beside his head as the impact threatened to tear him from the bench seat. Acrid fumes filled the interior of the vehicle and red light from the driver's compartment flickered through the grille that separated it from the troops.

He could hear the booming reports of artillery and the snapping fizz of lasers. Shrapnel and rock pellets pinged from the hull in a constant rain. Any normal soldier would fear venturing out into such a maelstrom of violence, but Honsou relished it. This was where he was meant to be, in the thick of the fighting, winning back the victory Horus Lupercal had let slip from his grip one body at a time.

No doubt Vaanes would have tried to talk him out of spearheading the assault, whereas Grendel and Etassay were only too happy for him to lead from the front. His death could only advance their prospects, and Grendel practically shoved him to the Rhino when the time came to launch the assault. Far from letting Honsou snatch all the glory, Grendel's urge to kill and maim had seen him take his place in the storming of the breach also.

The Rhino suddenly rucked upwards, and hot exhaust fumes spurted into the troop compartment as it fought for traction in the loose rubble. Honsou pushed himself to his feet, and slid down the compartment to the heavy doors on the side of the Rhino. He hammered the door release, but something was preventing the doors from opening. He slammed his foot against the metal, tearing the door from its hinges and sending it tumbling down the slope of the breach.

Strobing light filled the Rhino's interior and the noise of battle swelled to deafening proportions. A stray round spanked from the buckled frame and Honsou grinned at the thought of getting into the thick of such a furious battle.

'Follow me!' he shouted, leaping from the troop compartment.

A dozen Rhinos were staggered on the lower slopes of the breach, each with their engines revving furiously and belching thick geysers of exhaust smoke. Three were in flames, little more than blackened hulks, but Iron Warriors poured from the rest in a steeldust tide. Kaarja Salombar's corsairs came with them, and a host of wiry kroot with rippling head spines vaulted from rock to rock as they

climbed to the defenders above. Their skins exuded an oily residue that stank of burned fat and oil, but whatever it was it protected them from the vacuum and allowed them to breathe.

Behind Honsou, a pack of multi-legged battle machines, the daemon-engines of Votheer Tark, climbed over the rubble, vast iron pincer arms snapping and heavy rotary cannons spewing thousands of shells at the ramparts. Votheer Tark himself, a hybridised meld of automaton and flesh, rode into battle within an underslung pod attached to a spider-like creature with racks of mortars on its back like a nest of spines. Two of his machines exploded as they triggered buried mines, spraying razor fragments through the attacking horde. Another crashed down, its legs blown off as a volley of heavy fire from above tore into it.

Brutish ogre creatures, abhuman freaks gene-bred for strength and blind obedience, lumbered alongside the attackers. Each was armed with a fearsome chain grapple and enormous cannons torn from the wrecks of fighter craft.

Notha Etassay's warriors moved over the rubble as though it were no more an inconvenience to them than a gentle slope. Their movements were supple and their swords shimmered in the flickering light of battle. Etassay's crimson bodysuit and golden helmet were surely a magnet for any enemy sniper, but the androgynous blademaster seemed to float through the hail of fire as though it moved in slow motion. The mark of a great warrior was to find the space in which to kill, space in which you could deliver a killing blow, but to achieve that in the midst of gunfire was simply incredible.

Though this horde of renegades, corsairs and killers was a far cry from the glory of an Iron Warriors army, it was, nevertheless, a vast wedge of force aimed at the hole torn in the defences. Toramino would have scorned to fight alongside such a rabble, but he was dead and all Honsou cared was that this army fought and died at his command.

The axe sheathed at his back hungered for blood, but until he reached the crest of the breach, this was a fight for guns not blades. He racked the slide on his bolter and clambered uphill. The ground was loose shale and powdered rock, slippery underfoot, but he had climbed breaches in the face of determined resistance many times. Solid rounds and lasers flashed around him, ricocheting from stone and steel and armour in equal measure.

A heavy impact slammed into his chest and he grunted, knowing that only a bolter round would have the power to stop a Space Marine in his tracks. He looked up and saw a pair of blue armoured warriors atop a precariously balanced nub of rock.

Ultramarines!

He'd known this star fort was manned by Ventris's Chapter, but to see them so close fanned a fire of anger in his heart that had been building ever since he'd left Medrengard. He pulled his own bolter hard to his shoulder and squeezed off a short burst. One of the warriors spun away from the wall, but Honsou already knew he hadn't killed him.

'On! Up!' he shouted, slogging up the slope at the head of fifty Iron Warriors.

Withering fire sheeted from the walls above, streaking bolts of hard light and whickering trails of bullets that left spiral holes in the smoke. Fighters less well armoured than the Iron Warriors fell back, torn up by the weight of fire, and hissing, venting bodies littered the rubble slopes as their suits equalised pressure, spraying fans of blood into the air. Honsou felt the ground below him begin to shake and dropped into cover as the slope ahead of him heaved upwards before sinking down rapidly. A concussive blast erupted as a subterranean shell detonated and sent a plume of fire and rock skyward. Avalanches set off by the underground blasts cascaded downwards, carrying debris and bodies to the base of the wall.

Hundreds were dying, but with every passing moment, the attackers were gaining metre after metre of ground. Honsou pulled himself upright and climbed onwards.

Something bounced on the rocks towards him, and he threw himself flat as the heavy disc of a melta charge spun towards him. It struck a hand jutting from the fallen masonry and flew over his head, exploding with a shrieking bang of superheated air. Honsou looked over his shoulder to see one of the ogre creatures staring dumbly at the space where its arm used to be. The entire right side of its body was torn open and the fused ends of its ribs smoked as its boiled innards slopped from its ruined body.

It toppled slowly to the ground, as though confused as to why its strength was fading. Its fellows seemed to find its death greatly amusing, and guffawed and bellowed as they ripped what ammunition that hadn't been set off in the blast from its body.

More grenades followed the melta charge, and while the rubble made for excellent shrapnel, it also provided a great deal of protection and few were felled by these desperate measures. Honsou and his warrior squads dodged from cover to cover, always moving up and pausing for snap-fire opportunities whenever a target presented itself. He saw flashes of blue armour, but never clear enough for a shot. More underground blasts sent whole swathes of the rubble slope crashing

downwards.

Thirty metres to his right, he saw Grendel, the warrior's armour unmistakable amongst the other Iron Warriors. A vivid red plume flew from his horned helmet, making him look more like a berserker than an Iron Warrior. Honsou was reminded of Kroeger, the last Iron Warrior to tread the path of the Blood God, and where it had led. Grendel fired his melta gun at the ramparts, vaporising sections of stonework and men where they stood. The warrior's enthusiasm for the slaughter was infectious and Honsou found himself laughing as he broke from cover.

The crest of the breach was just above him, and he roared to see a line of warriors in the blue and gold of the Ultramarines march to claim it. Fourteen of them. Warriors in gleaming blue battle plate edged in midnight black trims. A medley of Imperial iconography, eagles, skulls and silver halos adorned their pauldrons, and their winged, crested helmets were absurd with needless decoration.

A trio of tracked units, each with a heavy gun equipped with four barrels, sat alongside the Ultramarines, their barrels red and smoking from such rapid firing. A multitude of warriors in hostile environment suits and blue surcoats fanned out behind them, a solid wall of men that stood between him and his prize.

'It'll take more than you to stop me,' hissed Honsou, swinging his axe from its sheath at his back.

Cadaras Grendel fired his melta gun until it bled empty and hurled the weapon away. Unlike many warriors, he had no sentimental attachment to the gun. If they won, he might go back and get it. If they didn't then it wouldn't matter anyway. He drew his pistol and combat knife, a long shank of steel with a monomolecular blade. Grendel was a warrior who liked his killing up close and personal.

He saw Honsou scrambling to meet the Ultramarines and picked up his pace, vaulting a fallen column and joining a pack of blood-maddened abhumans resembling hugely inflated sacks of meat draped in all-enclosing armour and carrying crackling chain grapples. Straggling bands of Iron Warriors followed him, grim warriors in skull-masked visors and dull, metal plates of armour. The industrial yellow and black seemed so bare to him now, save where the surfaces were coated in blood.

Honsou's warriors were almost at the crest of the breach, and as much as he wanted to be there too, he knew it was best to let the master of this army have

his moment of glory.

And... if he happened to get killed achieving it, then so much the better.

Olantor marched in perfect lockstep with his brothers to the edge of the breach. To see so grievous a wound in the majestic structure horrified him. It seemed impossible that so mighty a defensive bulwark could fall, but if any foe could tear it asunder, it was the Iron Warriors. Tales of these brutally efficient siegemasters were legion, yet Olantor had never expected to face such a foe in a place like this.

His bolter bucked in his grip as he fired into the charging mass of warriors. He shot from the hip, for it was impossible to miss. A pair of warriors were punched from their feet, but a host of others rushed to take their place. It violated his very soul to see such an abominable horde, a horrifying mix of traitors from an age long thought consigned to legend, and the very worst dregs of the galaxy. Renegades, xenos, pirates and mercenaries all gathered under one banner of damnation.

A vile-skinned kroot sprang from the rocks towards him and he put a bolt through its skull. Coloured spines and brain blew out the back of its head and a gust of spraying air erupted from where the sealant gel enveloping its skin was breached.

‘Fire discipline!’ shouted Decimus. ‘Target the heavily armoured enemy first!’

Volley after volley of bolter fire boomed in perfect unison and more blood and vented oxygen sprayed from ruptured armour. On this battlefield, even the smallest wound could be fatal. Grenades sailed over his head, demolition charges, and even heavy boulders were pushed from the ramparts.

The Thunderfire cannons boomed once again, throwing up geysers of rock dust as they pummelled the slope of debris with powerful shockwaves. The horde was close enough that the air between both forces was thick with gunfire. Astartes armour was amongst the most powerful in existence, but it could only take so much.

Brother Tanicus went down, his leg hanging from his pelvis by stringy ropes of ruptured flesh. He shuddered as his armour fought to close the wound and the last of the leg was severed by the integrity seals. Tanicus fought from the ground, still firing his bolter at the oncoming enemy.

‘Tanicus!’ shouted Brother Braxus, moving to help the fallen warrior.

‘Hold your position, brother!’ shouted Olantor.

Streaming gouts of fire licked down the breach and Olantor looked up to see

Interrogator Sibiya atop the overhanging stub of rampart. Her Saurians raked their melta-lances over the enemy ranks. Flames leapt briefly over the enemy warriors before the lack of oxygen killed them, but the instantaneous superheating melted through armour plates and flesh with a flash of molten metal. The preacher was still with her, still reciting his unheard mantra, but all Olantor could think of as he looked at Sibiya was the cold, dormant thing lying like a living bomb in her ship's hold.

He shook off the distaste he felt for such things and emptied the last of his magazine into the oncoming enemy warriors. In an instant he saw that the enemy were close enough that bolters would be no use.

'Switch weapons!' shouted Olantor. 'Swords and pistols!'

Each of his warriors smoothly slung their bolters and charged to their close combat loadout in an instant. Normal codex equipment for men such as these did not include such a fit of weapons, but Marneus Calgar had granted Brother Altarion special dispensation to equip the defenders as he saw necessary. As strange as it was, Olantor was grateful for that unheard of leeway in the codex.

'For Macragge!' cried Sergeant Decimus, and the cry was echoed by a thousand throats.

The instant before the two forces clashed, a booming, stentorian voice cut through the chatter on the vox-net.

<Make way, brothers!>

Instantly, the Ultramarines parted as the towering and mighty, powerful and unstoppable form of Brother Altarion took position in the centre of their ranks. His monstrous hammer was raised and sheathed in flickering arcs of blue lightning, his assault cannon spinning at an incredible rate as he took aim down the breach.

<Learn well now, the fate of all traitors!>

Honsou saw the towering form of the Dreadnought as the Ultramarines parted before it. This close to such an armoured behemoth was not a healthy place to be and he dived to one side as its enormous cannon opened fire. A blazing plume of white light roared from the barrel and a rain of copper-jacketed shell casings sprayed from its ammo hopper.

Three Iron Warriors behind him vanished in a sparking explosion of metal, flesh and bone. Blitzing shells sawed through the ranks of warriors packed tightly below the lip of the breach and ripped into the hull of one of Votheer Tark's battle-engines. The machine shrieked a squall of binary as it died,

collapsing into a pile of twisted metal and flames.

Weapons fire spattered from the Dreadnought's hide, bolter shells and lasrifles useless against its armoured plates. Heavier shells rocked it back on its thick legs, but like a statue of some ancient god, it refused to be moved.

Once more its heavy cannon roared and yet more of Honsou's warriors were cut down. Two of the hulking ogre creatures were hit, losing limbs, but carrying on without them. One even managed to snag the Dreadnought's granite glacis with its chain grapple, but a tongue of superheated melta fire from above finally brought it down. The links melted, leaving the grapple hook embedded in the Dreadnought and the chain swinging at its side.

The tracked gun units fired again, and the slope heaved and groaned. Rock and rubble streamed downwards from the underground blasts, but few men were killed. Honsou shook his head. A host of enemy warriors before you and you waste your guns firing into the ground. It made no sense until you factored in the Ultramarines slavish devotion to a book ten thousand years out of date.

Grendel and Etassay dropped into cover beside him as the Dreadnought's cannon shot up a pack of kroot warriors seeking to outflank the defenders. Grendel was tensed and ready to fight, his muscles coiled and *needing* to kill something with his bare hands. Etassay leaned against a fallen carving of a great eagle, its wings shorn and its head pocked with bullet impacts. Though his golden helm obscured his features, Honsou could tell Etassay was enjoying this assault immensely.

'Wondrous, Honsou, simply wondrous!' cried Etassay. 'The horror! The violence and blood! I've never known the like. It almost makes the tedium of waiting for a breach worthwhile!'

'We have to go forward!' shouted Grendel, ignoring Etassay's rapturous delirium.

'You think I don't know that?' replied Honsou, jerking his axe blade in the direction of the Dreadnought. 'We can't until that thing's taken out.'

'So get it taken out!' snarled Grendel, scraping his blade over his breastplate.

Honsou recognised the criticality of this moment. If the enemy could hold them here long enough, the fire and momentum of the charge would be lost and they would be slaughtered only metres from their goal. But to go forward prematurely would see them cut to pieces.

'Tark!' shouted Honsou. 'Get your machines into that breach! Take out that bastard Dreadnought!'

A frothing mix of scrapcode burred in his helmet, followed by a swirl of

static and corrupt binaric hash.

‘You understand that?’ barked Grendel.

‘Not even a little bit,’ said Honsou.

The substance of Votheer Tark’s answer was made plain moments later, as a trio of the champion’s battle-engines dragged their bulk upwards. Two were heavily-armoured vehicles with multiple guns on a rear-set turret, and spiked tracks that clawed the rubble as they slowly made their way uphill. The third was a monstrous mechanical hybrid of a scorpion and centaur. Its multiple legs rapidly hauled its heavy, segmented bulk uphill in sinuous sweeps, a brass, skull-rimmed cannon in its chest spitting gobbets of electrical fire.

Honsou ducked as the mecha-organic beast stomped past him, the impacts of its heavy treads sending yet more rubble skittering downhill. A bolt of blue lightning arced from its chest gun to the summit of the breach, and a dozen mortal soldiers were burned to cinders where they stood, their suits erupting in oxygen-rich flames before swiftly snuffing out. One of the Ultramarines dropped to his knees, his armour burned and hissing oxygen where the seals had burst.

The Dreadnought rocked back, liquid lightning dancing across its granite sarcophagus and crackling hammer arm. Its cannon streamed a thundering blizzard of shells that tore across the battle-engine’s flanks, blasting off armour plates and chewing up the mechanised flesh beneath. Pale liquid, like the blood of some giant insect, sprayed and the monster howled in agony, but it kept going.

Tark’s vehicles didn’t fire, the angle too steep for their main guns to be brought to bear. Unstoppable and indestructible, the heavy tanks crunched upwards behind the rapidly-climbing scorpion beast. They would roll over any opposition, and Honsou wished he had a hundred more like them.

Another underground blast rocked the slope of the breach as the scorpion machine clawed its way onto the top of the breach. Its red flesh pulsed in battle fury, the sparking conduits that slithered around its underbelly glowing with wychfires. The battle-engine’s giant pincer arms snapped at the Dreadnought, tearing off an eagle-stamped sheet of adamantium and ceramite. Sparks and flames erupted from the wound, but the Dreadnought simply stepped in closer to its attacker and brought its hammer down with crushing force on the scorpion creature’s head.

Driven by hate as much as mechanical, fibre-bundle muscles, the energised hammer slammed into the scorpion beast’s body with seismic force, obliterating its mechanised skull and exploding its chest in a welter of artificial blood and machine parts. The battle-engine died with a deafening shriek of scrapcode that

sliced through Honsou's skull like a laser drill.

He cried out and dropped his weapon, his hands unconsciously flying to the sides of his skull as if to better block the sound. Grendel too, jerked in pain, but Notha Etassay leapt to his feet, jerking like an electrocution victim, and Honsou could hear his moans of ecstatic pleasure over the scorpion beast's death scream.

Blinking away the aftermath of the agonising spike of pain, Honsou felt the ground lurch beneath him, as though the slope had suddenly and horribly shifted. With a cold jolt of realisation he suddenly understood why the Imperials were using their mobile artillery pieces in such an unorthodox manner.

'Iron Warriors!' he shouted, as the rocks beneath him began grinding together and he felt a monstrously powerful vibration work its way up from somewhere far below. 'Everyone get back! Get down now!'

He scrambled to his feet and began skidding and sliding down the slope of the breach. Warriors who had been, moments before, fighting to reach the top of the breach, milled in confusion.

Etassay's voice sounded in his ear. 'Retreat? Are you mad? This is too good to stop now!'

'Move now or you're going to die!' snarled Honsou, risking a glance over his shoulder in time to see the blackened and scarred Dreadnought raise its hammer once more and strike a mighty blow against the rubble at the top of the breach.

It was all the force needed to complete the work begun by the subterranean blasts.

With a tortured vibration of cracked and broken stone, the entire slope of rubble slid away from the walls, its previously stable condition of tightly packed debris undone by the defenders. Enormous sections of the slope simply collapsed like sinkholes, dragging scores of warriors to their doom, while others were swept away in devastating avalanches of rock. Tark's battle-engines, so close to the breach, fell into the deep chasm that opened up between the rubble slope and the wall. Thousands of tonnes of rock and steel collapsed in a crashing flow of debris that crushed men and machines, burying them forever beneath a sea of stone.

Honsou ran for his life, fighting to keep his feet on a juddering carpet of uneven ground. Shattered chunks of the walls bounced past him, crushing anything in their path. A rebar of orange steel slashed downwards to impale the Iron Warrior running alongside him. The spinning head of an Ultramarines statue slid past him, the enigmatic smile on its alabaster face seeming to mock his attempts to stay alive.

He heard panicked cries echoing in his helmet, but cared nothing for the men dying around him. All that mattered was his own life. The ground heaved, an animal desperate to hurl him from its back, and he felt his balance failing.

A flying rock struck the side of his helmet with dizzying force and he fell, tumbling end over end down the avalanche, carried as helpless as an insect in a surging river.

Rocks, steel and bodies pummelled him as he fell, the world spinning around him and disintegrating into an impenetrable mass of light and sound and pain.

CHAPTER FIVE

High in the shadowed roof beams of a metal fabrik in the eastern reaches of the Via Rex, Ardaric Vaanes leaned against a heavy iron stanchion. His helmet sat before him on the wide girder, and he took a deep breath of air. It tasted of metal shavings and the warm, animal reek of the loxatl, but the chance to remove his helmet was too good to pass up. This deep in the star fort, atmospheric integrity had not been compromised and even the stale taste of recycled air was like a refreshing mountain breeze in his lungs.

Far below, huge piles of refined metal covered vast areas of the floor between the dormant forges and idle milling machines. Further along the girder, the Newborn watched the surviving loxatl with rapt attention. The lizard-like beasts clung to the iron girders, as dormant as the machinery below, and their chameleon-like skin rippled through shades of darkness as the light changed.

While Honsou and his Iron Warriors laid siege to the Gauntlet Bastions, Vaanes, the Newborn and the loxatl had taken the fight to the Imperials in a shadow war behind the front lines. Day and night, they sabotaged communication nodes, blew power relays, generators and void arrays. With looted weapons and explosives they set improvised traps that claimed the lives of hundreds of enemy soldiers.

Supply trains, repair crews and isolated patrols were ambushed and killed, and now the Imperials never travelled without an escort of heavily armoured vehicles. Hundreds of men had been drawn from the front lines to guard vital locations, and Vaanes could almost taste their fear in the air. Something in the dark was hunting them, and the terror of that unseen foe was scraping at their nerves like a rusty blade.

Realising the enemy had infiltrated their rear echelons, the Imperials sent scout patrols to seek them out, tough soldiers schooled in working behind the lines. They were good, the best of their regiment no doubt, but their prey was a hunter trained since birth to be like a shadow himself. Ardaric Vaanes had been Raven Guard, a warrior first and foremost, but haunting the shadows, striking from ambush and killing in the darkness, he was in his element, and there were no finer hunters of men than the scions of Corax.

He glanced at the bare plates of his shoulder guards. Once they had proudly

borne the heraldry of the Raven Guard, a winged white hunting bird. A moment of madness had seen that symbol's meaning and identity stripped from him, and strange circumstance had forced him to adopt a new symbol, that of the renegade; the jagged red cross of the Red Corsairs.

Now, even that was gone and the stained, featureless metal was a perfect reflection of his soul. He was a warrior without a Chapter, a killer without a code and a man who saw a great abyss before him.

A great abyss into which he wasn't sure he hadn't already fallen.

Looking at the shoulder guard, he wondered if, one day, there might be a symbol of which he could be proud emblazoned upon it. Was there yet hope for redemption? Or was this yet another sign that he was slowly becoming less than nothing, simply malleable clay that monstrous powers were moulding into something terrible?

'They never speak,' said the Newborn, breaking Vaanes's train of thought and startling him from his gloomy reverie. 'Why do you suppose that is?'

'What are you talking about?' said Vaanes. 'Who never speaks?'

'The loxatl. They don't speak, at least not that I can see.'

'They speak,' replied Vaanes. 'Just not the way we do.'

'How do they speak?'

'I'm told it's through the patterning of their skin, but I don't know for sure.'

'Are they talking right now?'

Vaanes sighed. At times the Newborn's curiosity was refreshing, at others, irritating. This was one of the latter.

'Maybe,' he said, seeing a grimace of pain cross the Newborn's face. 'Does it matter? Anyway, you should get some rest. We've been on active operations behind enemy lines for a long time now. We need to refresh ourselves or we'll start to get careless.'

'I am refreshed,' said the Newborn, a faint light oozing between the stitching of its patchwork features. 'The presence of the chained daemon lord nourishes me, fills my limbs with strength. I am stronger than ever.'

'You can feel it?' said Vaanes, interested, despite himself.

The Newborn nodded. 'I can. The Master of the Ultramarines had his allies bind it within the warp core of the star fort. The very energies that sustain it also imprison it, and the more it struggles against its bindings, the tighter they pull.'

'Clever.'

'Yes,' agreed the Newborn. 'Marneus Calgar is a great man: strong, proud and honourable. I would very much like to meet him.'

Vaanes chuckled. 'That's Ventris talking,' he said. 'You're admiring a man you've never met, a man who would kill you on sight if you ever did.'

'Why would he kill me?' asked the Newborn angrily, its mood changing from inquisitive to hostile in a heartbeat. 'I bear the gene-seed of the Ultramarines.'

'Don't let Honsou hear you say that,' advised Vaanes. 'He'll kill you himself for saying that. He's obsessed with destroying all trace of the Ultramarines.'

'Yes, I suppose he is. Honsou and Grendel both.'

'I think Grendel would be happy to kill anyone, doesn't matter if they're Ultramarines or not. The man's a killer, pure and simple.'

'Like me,' said the Newborn sadly. 'Like you.'

'No,' said Vaanes, picturing a needle-like spire on a darkened world on the far side of the galaxy he had once called home. 'Not like me at all.'

The mood in Honsou's bunker was strained, the defeat at the breach having soured everyone's enthusiasm for the siege. Only Cadaras Grendel seemed energised, pacing the interior of the bunker like a caged predator.

Honsou looked through the integrity field built into the bunker's vision ports at the scarred face of the Gauntlet Bastions. Both arrowhead redoubts had suffered horrendous damage, but they were still standing and they were still in enemy hands. A great spread of rubble carpeted the ground before the V-shaped gouge torn in the left bastion.

He turned away from the dispiriting view and returned to a set of plans he'd sketched out an hour before, architectural plans of the battlefield that would have put a calculus logi to shame with their accuracy and technical detail.

Notha Etassay, resplendent in a fresh bodysuit of lacquered black and silver, glanced at the drawings with disinterest, while Grendel simply studied them for a moment before jabbing a finger down and saying, 'What are you waiting for? Begin the barrage again!'

Etassay sighed. 'Must we endure yet more tedium as you break your way into the other bastion?'

'Don't be a fool, Etassay,' hissed Grendel. 'We simply batter another slope through the damaged wall. Go back in the same way.'

'How unimaginative,' said Etassay. 'And entirely predictable.'

'I'll show you predictable,' hissed Grendel, balling his fists and reaching for his blade.

Before his knife was an inch from its scabbard, Etassay's shimmering energy rapier was at his throat.

‘So predictable,’ said Etassay with an insouciant smile.

‘Enough, the pair of you,’ growled Honsou. ‘I’m trying to think.’

Grendel released his grip on the knife and returned to his pacing, muttering and casting hateful glances at Notha Etassay.

Honsou ignored them both, instead calculating angles of attack, time and distance factors, and defence depth to attack weight ratios. None of the figures his enhanced cognitive processes were coming up with were good enough, and he began to fear that Grendel might be right, that they would have to go back in the same way.

That didn’t sit well with Honsou, for what had failed once would likely fail again.

The attack on the left bastion cost them dearly in terms of time and effort, but little in real worth. Most of the dead were numbered amongst the chaff or alien species he’d swept up in the Skull Harvest. His Iron Warriors, two hundred grim siegemasters of Perturabo, had survived the collapse of the rubble slope, simply digging their way free. Their power armour was proof against mere rocks and rubble, which was more than could be said for the hundreds buried alive or crushed by the rockfall.

‘Can Adept Cycerin do nothing?’ asked Etassay. ‘Can he not order the weapon systems of this fort to shut down, overload the artificial gravity or use some other technical sorcery to aid us?’

‘That’s exactly what he *is* doing,’ said Honsou, ‘but whatever priest of the machine they have in the *Indomitable’s* basilica has defeated his every attack.’

‘Then would it not simply be quicker to bring a ship in close and blast the walls with its guns?’ suggested Etassay. ‘It would certainly allow me to sheath my weapon in living flesh before I die of old age.’

‘Do you really think I haven’t thought of that?’ said Honsou. ‘To make sure it didn’t flatten us along with the walls in its bombardment, a ship would need to take up a firing position virtually on top of the bastions.’

‘And?’

‘And the defences of the Basilica would blow it out of the sky,’ explained Honsou, as though it was the most obvious thing in the world. ‘Torpedoes and multiple batteries would kill any ship that came in close enough for a precision strike.’

‘Maybe it would,’ said Etassay, his feral grin of pleasure widening, ‘but just think where it would land.’

Brother Olantor studied the glowing holo-schematics projected from the plotting table, trying to work out what the enemy's next move would be. Gathered around the table, Brother Altarion, his armour still black and scarred from the battle with the mechanised scorpion, regarded the data as it flowed across the table, but it was impossible to read what he made of it all.

Interrogator Sibiya and a Saurian lieutenant consulted an encrypted data slate, while Techmarine Hestian sat within the enclosure that had recently been Brother Altarion's command station. Dozens of wires trailed from the Techmarine's skull, neck and forearms, trailing across the chapel's floor to the main cogitator bank. Sweat poured down his face, the muscles and sinews at his neck clenched and taut.

Hestian fought an invisible battle within the consciousness of the machine-spirits of the star fort against a suspected adept of the Dark Mechanicus. Though Hestian did not fight with bolter and chainsword, his fight was no less deadly and no less honourable.

'So do we have them beaten?' asked Sibiya, finished with her lieutenant. 'They must have lost a great many men and machines in the abortive assault on the walls.'

'They will have suffered losses, yes, but I wouldn't count on them being too severe,' replied Olantor. 'Many of the traitors will have survived. Power armour can sustain a great deal of damage, and I believe they will come at us again. Most likely at the same bastion, as it's already breached and they can demolish the remaining portion of the wall quickly enough.'

'Can we hold the breach?' asked Sibiya.

<Of course we can, Lucian,> said Altarion. <We are the First are we not? No enemy can defeat us, even one as twisted and unnatural as these xenos.>

Olator shared a worried glance with Sibiya. 'Indeed, my lord. I've moved up additional termite shells for the Thunderfires, and had seismic charges set into the launchers at the base of the wall. If they blast another ramp to the breach, we'll blow it down again.'

<And then we will counter-attack,> said Altarion. <The northern fortress must hold until Lord Calgar returns. If we lose the northern fortress, we lose Macragge!>

'Macragge?' said Olantor. 'My lord, this is the *Indomitable*. Macragge is many light years away.'

<I understand that, Lucian, but the order still stands, the fortress must hold!>

Olator shook his head as he saw Sibiya's confusion. *Not now...*

‘As you say, my lord, the fortress must hold,’ he said smoothly. ‘Now, the enemy appear to be consolidating, so while we have some breathing room I want to organise proper hunting parties for these damned infiltrators. We’re haemorrhaging men and supplies from their attacks, and it has to end now. I propose—’

‘Incoming!’ shouted Hestian, his mouth stretched in a rictus of pain. ‘Enemy vessel on approach vector.’

The display on the plotting table flickered as a haze of static washed through it and the display changed to that of the local airspace. Trajectories and orbital tracks flickered and danced, but stark amongst the information was the pulsing icon of the enemy vessel.

<Identify it!> demanded Altarion.

‘Archenemy escort... Infidel class,’ cried Hestian, his voice strained and dry. ‘Plasma signatures indicate the vessel has suffered heavy damage.’

‘Engage basilica defence routines,’ shouted Olantor. ‘Give me a tight torpedo spread, all safeties disengaged, and all close-in batteries concentrate fire on its gun batteries.’

‘What in the Emperor’s name is it doing?’ wondered Sibiya. ‘It’ll be destroyed.’

‘That’s what I’m afraid of,’ said Olantor.

The first warning Sergeant Decimus had that something was wrong came when he caught a fragment of Deacon Calef’s hectoring sermon as he switched vox-networks. On Interrogator Sibiya’s orders, her preacher had remained on the walls to fill the hearts of the defenders with fire and fury. It was wasted effort, for the soldiers of Ultramar did not respond well to such fire and brimstone hectoring. Theirs was a courage bolstered by thoughts of duty, honour and brotherhood earned through years of battle, not the hysterical fervour of the more fiery Imperial preachers.

Decimus caught a gleeful reference to the fiery comet of the Emperor’s Wrath, but dismissed it as a fanciful metaphor until he saw a great many soldiers looking upwards, a flickering golden light reflected on every visor.

He turned back to the rampart, little more than a waist-high wall of rubble and broken stonework, and scanned the shattered extremities of the star fort. What had once been a monumental expanse of soaring architecture – temples, shrines and weapon arches – was now a hellish wasteland of bunkers, razorwire, defensive earthworks, redoubts and raised batteries.

A golden light in the heavens burned as it drew closer, a haze of light surrounding it.

‘Do you see it?’ said Sabatina, coming alongside him. The Chaplain’s armour was dusty and grey, the black virtually obscured by the dust of the fighting. His crozius still shone golden, and though he had not stopped fighting since the battle had begun, he seemed as fresh as though he had yet to strike a blow.

‘Aye, Chaplain,’ said Decimus. ‘Though ’tis no fiery comet of the Emperor.’

‘No,’ agreed Sabatina.

The light continued to grow until there was no mistaking its form; a starship, perhaps three hundred metres long, though it was hard to be exact, and streaming plasma and debris from its hull as it streaked towards the star fort. Aimed like a dreadful spear at the heart of the Gauntlet Bastions, its wedge-shaped prow seemed to be grinning at the prospect of killing. Slashes of light bloomed from its fore-mounted batteries, and a portion of the Via Rex collapsed as enormous shells smashed through the roof and blew apart a generator temple.

Soldiers rushed to find cover as the vessel drew ever closer, its guns firing again and blowing out the walls of a dry dock. The explosion flattened a nearby shrine temple and tore the roof from an ore silo.

Streaking torpedoes slashed overhead, trailing blue-hot contrails as they arced up towards the starship, and pounding weapon batteries unleashed streams of fire. The attacking ship shook from bow to stern as the torpedoes slammed home and exploded deep inside its belly. Spumes of brief fires and streams of glittering fuel and steel peeled away from the craft as it was hit again and again.

Another volley of torpedoes streaked overhead amid the thundering vibrations of the basilica’s guns.

‘It’s finished,’ said Sabatina, with no small measure of satisfaction. ‘How could its captain think to survive such an attack run?’

‘He didn’t,’ said Decimus. ‘And this isn’t an attack run...’

‘What do you mean?’

‘They don’t think like us, Chaplain,’ said Decimus with a sinking feeling. ‘Life holds no meaning for them.’

Sabatina looked up at the flaming wreckage as the guns of the basilica pummelled it to destruction with furious broadsides from its close-in guns.

‘Guilliman’s oath...’ hissed the Chaplain.

Decimus opened a force-wide vox channel and shouted. ‘Everyone find cover! Now!’

But against the might of a falling starship, his warning was too little, too late.

Once it had been known as the *Fellclaw*, and had served with honour in the Imperial Navy, but its purpose had been perverted long ago, and now it was little more than a flying bomb. Its guns had blasted a trail of destruction along the Via Rex, but they were silent now, the mutated gun crews torn from their fused positions as the *Indomitable's* guns ripped the vessel to pieces.

Vast sections of the ship were blown off, but the central mass of its core remained intact, thousands of tonnes of iron falling at high speed towards the Gauntlet Bastions. The course plotted by its suicidal captain was off by a few hundred metres, but with such a weapon, accuracy was never going to be important.

The *Fellclaw* ploughed into the ditch before Varro's Gate, and the section of the wall between the two bastions was utterly obliterated by the force of the impact. A vast mushroom cloud boomed skyward as the plasma core of the vessel ruptured, and a pounding shockwave roared outwards like a blazing tsunami of searing white fire.

Both bastions vanished in the seething flames of the explosion, collapsing and vitrifying in seconds. Stone and steel and flesh instantly vaporised in a roiling wave of superheated plasma as it boiled outwards from the crash site. Not a single soul escaped the destruction of the Gauntlet Bastions, neither hardened shelters or power armour protection against such awesome destruction.

The wave of devastation spread outwards, obliterating the mighty footings and buttresses of the Tower of the First and cleaving a dreadful chunk from its structure. So colossal a tower could not survive such damage to its base and a series of cracks, each one wider than a highway, ripped their way up its length. Vast chunks of stonework fell to the ground and within moments of the explosion the entire height of the tower sheared downwards in a billowing storm of falling rubble and dust. The remains of the Gauntlet Bastions were flattened by the avalanche of stone, and the southern edge of the *Indomitable* was now little more than a massive debris field.

Nor was the damage confined to the bastions alone. The shockwave toppled sacred buildings all along the length of the Via Rex, and the star fort shuddered from end to end as the aftershocks spread through the entirety of its structure.

The death toll was in the thousands, and in one fell swoop, Honsou had broken open the *Indomitable*. Before the last shuddering vibrations of the *Fellclaw's* death had ceased, the Iron Warriors poured from fortified, void-shielded bunkers and began their final advance.

Riding in the open hatch of a Land Raider, Honsou marvelled at the destruction the crashing ship had wrought. Never one to shirk from using his assets so callously, he was amazed it had taken Notha Etassay to suggest the idea. Even Grendel had been taken aback by the blademaster's words.

A pall of hot ash filled the air, coating everything in a patina of white. The Land Raider tore over the shattered ground, the driver expertly weaving between twisted piles of rubble and gaping craters where entire sections of wall had been wiped out. They had fought and bled over this ground, but now it was an undulating field of broken defiance, a testament to Honsou's ruthlessness and drive to triumph.

Scores of armoured vehicles followed behind him, a riotous mix of Rhinos, Land Raiders, Votheer Tark's surviving battle-engines and hundreds of looted flatbeds and half-tracks. Anything that could carry fighters deep into the star fort was pressed into service. Those without transport ran through the smoking ruins of the bastions, desperate to earn a measure of blood in this final battle.

The Land Raider's tracks fought for purchase on the steep slope at the top of the remains of the bastion. They bit, and the vehicle surged forward, roaring down into the heart of the main processional way. Though spared the worst of the blast, this section of the fortress looked as though a giant had taken a wrecking ball to every structure and not stopped until it would take a hundred years to repair the damage.

Almost immediately, gunfire and heavy weapons opened up on them. Hurriedly constructed barricades and fire points had been thrown up. He shouldn't have been surprised. The few surviving Ultramarines had reacted with customary speed and efficiency to the attack, and they were going to have to fight their way down the length of the processional to the central basilica and its mighty gun towers. The enormous structure loomed ahead of him, solid, immense and, crucially, just within reach.

'Break through,' he shouted. 'No mercy, no prisoners and no stopping!'

The heavy sponson guns of the Land Raider spoke with a blazing voice, and a hastily constructed redoubt vanished in a searing sheet of fire and smoke. Streaming shots rippled from ruins either side of the building, pattering from the heavy armour of the Land Raider. Honsou slewed the heavy bolter around and racked the slide before pumping a constant stream of shells from the gun.

Detonations tore through the ruins, the explosive shells punching through the stonework and killing the soldiers sheltering behind it. He worked his fire over the soldiers, making them dance like grotesque puppets in a hail of shells. A

volley of missiles arced up from behind a barricade ahead, sweeping up into the air before slashing downwards towards the wedge of tanks.

None came near Honsou's Land Raider, but a trio of flatbeds exploded as the warheads punched through the engine blocks and drivers' cabs. Others exploded amongst the troopers running alongside the armoured charge. Rattling blasts of gunfire scythed through these unprotected troops, but Honsou cared nothing for their losses; it was the armour that would win this fight.

Lines of fire filled the air between the two forces, but the majority of it came from the Iron Warriors. The defenders had been badly shaken by the destruction of the Gauntlet Bastions and the fall of the Tower of the First. Hundreds, if not thousands, of their comrades were dead, and Honsou laughed at what notions of friendship and camaraderie led to. A warrior who cared nothing for the men he fought beside could not be undone by their deaths.

The Land Raider roared over a makeshift barricade, crushing a handful of soldiers in uniforms of blue and gold. A surviving soldier let off a burst of las-fire, and his rounds sparked off Honsou's shoulder guards. He sprayed the man with bolter shells and cut him in two. The defence was crumbling. Honsou's armoured wedge simply rolling over the defenders with its sheer mass and momentum.

One by one, the hurriedly deployed barricades were crushed, shelled by mobile artillery units or isolated and overwhelmed by the following troops. Though the discipline of these men was nigh unshakable, it was not unbreakable. As the nose of blazing tanks closed upon the defenders, they finally gave way to the inevitable.

Scores of the ogre creatures gleefully tore mortal soldiers limb from limb as they fought to escape, dragging the bodies behind them on their chain grapples like trophies. Votheer Tark's battle-engines revelled in the slaughter, multi-limbed stalk tanks scuttling over the ruins and cutting their way through the defenders with lashing tails or clawed pincers.

Tark's hybrid creation of meat and metal coughed dozens of shells at the enemy from its racks of mortars, his ruined flesh swirling in the amniotic suspension on the belly of the spider machine. Kaarja Salombar rode with her corsairs in gaudily embellished skiffs, cutting through the ranks of the defenders as they fled towards the basilica. Honsou watched as her skiff darted in and its crew slashed open blue environment suits with crackling sabres and deadly accurate pistol shots.

The corsairs' way of war was not his, too flamboyant by half, but he admired

their malice and made a mental note to congratulate the Corsair Queen on her cruelties.

The Land Raider crushed the bodies of fallen soldiers and Honsou worked the fire of his heavy bolter over the fleeing enemy, revelling in the visceral feel of the bucking weapon and the scale of this fight.

When the Thrice Born was his to command, it would be but a taster of what was to come.

CHAPTER SIX

Despite the warning klaxons and alarm bells filling the command chapel of the Basilica Dominastus, Olantor felt utter calm and stillness. The scenes of carnage on the Via Rex playing out on the picter displays were plucked directly from his worst nightmares, a massacre undertaken with such zeal and glee that he found it hard to imagine.

The Gauntlet Bastions had fallen, smashed asunder in one blow of such infamy that he could scarce recall its equal. Decimus and Sabatina were surely dead, as were the warriors of the 5th he had tasked with bolstering the defences. But for his summons to the command chapel, he would be too.

‘Emperor save us, they’re all dead,’ wept Pater Monna, his disaffected air quite vanished in the face of the enemy. ‘They’re going to kill us all...’

‘Be quiet,’ snapped Sibiya. ‘You are a servant of the Emperor. Give into despair and you are no better than a worm.’

Pater Monna looked at her with his bulging eyes, as though he couldn’t believe what he was hearing. ‘Are you insane? Look what’s happening out there! Everyone’s dead, or they will be soon! And we’re next!’

The Navigator bondsman turned angrily on Olantor. ‘I thought you were supposed to protect us? So much for the vaunted Ultramarines, eh? Fat lot of good you did us!’

Olator lifted Pater Monna from the deck by the front of his scarlet and gold tunic.

‘While an Ultramarine lives, there is hope.’

Olator dropped Pater Monna, who fell into a vacant seat and buried his head in his hands. He rocked back and forth. ‘The Emperor protects, the Emperor protects, the Emperor protects...’

Olator ignored the broken man and addressed the remainder of the command chapel.

‘Yes, our enemies are through the Gauntlets, but they cannot hope to take the Basilica,’ he said, his voice cutting through the babble of voices and clattering servitors. The panicked hubbub ceased at his booming voice, and all eyes turned to face the Ultramarines warrior.

‘The enemy have breached the outer bastions,’ continued Olantor, ‘but they

will find us ready for them. The gun towers of the basilica will sweep through them like a hurricane through wheat. Our walls are high and thick, and they will not catch us the same way twice.'

<Brother Olantor,> said Altarion, coming around the plotter table. <You are a credit to the First. With you at our side, the xenos cannot defeat us.>

Olantor thought of correcting the venerable brother, but no good could come of it. Altarion was lost in the memories of a long ago battle, and he would fight just as hard believing he fought the beasts of the Great Devourer as he would the forces of the Ruinous Powers.

He saw Sibiya understood, and gave her a brief nod of thanks.

'Hestian, shut this place down,' he ordered. 'All guns open fire on the Via Rex.'

The Techmarine did not reply and Olantor turned to repeat his order, but his mouth dropped open in surprise and horror.

Hestian's head was thrown back, his mouth pulled wide in a jaw-cracking scream of agony. Blazing electrical fire burned behind his eyes and poured from his mouth with streaming emerald light. As Olantor watched, the fire erupted from every point of Hestian's body connected to the command station, bathing the interior of the enclosure in baleful green light. Hestian howled, the sound of a soul in the vilest torment imaginable, and the fire poured from him in leaping, electrical arcs.

Bolts of green lightning flew across the command chapel, tearing into the cogitators and logic engines of the basilica. Rippling fire spread like a gleeful virus into the heart of the machines and jade sparks frothed from output sockets. Pict screens blew out and brass dials popped and melted in an instant.

Techs screamed as they were burned alive at their stations, too wired in and restrained to escape the flames. Servitors burned where they sat, unmoving and uncaring as the flesh peeled from their bones. Extinguisher sprays blasted into the command chapel, dousing the flames, but filling the air with choking, acrid fumes. Sparks flew in waterfalls from ruptured systems and the alarm klaxons diminished as emergency lights faded up with a dim, orange glow.

Olantor stalked the ruined command chapel towards Hestian, the Techmarine's body little more than a husk of blackened flesh within his scorched armour. Seared flesh still clung to his skull, and the green wychfires still burned in the sockets. A burbling laugh issued from his ruined throat, and the augmitters placed around the command station hissed and spat static.

++This place is mine now.++ hissed a loathsome voice, mechanical and

soulless.

Olantor shot Hestian's corpse, but the malevolent laugh continued unabated, its substance now infecting the systems of the star fort. His worst suspicions were confirmed when he heard Brother Altarion call his name from the plotter table.

<All our defences are shutting down!> cried the Old One. <The gates are all opening and the guns have been ordered to power down. The xenos are cunning beyond our expectations. They are upon us, brother!>

Olantor ran to join the Dreadnought, scanning through the readouts before him and taking in the scale of the disaster with a heavy heart. Bulkheads were sealing off desperately needed reinforcements, techs and adepts were shut out of their systems, launch bays were powered down, armouries locked and internal defences taken offline. Anything that might have given them a chance to resist the invaders was now beyond their reach.

'This place is lost,' said Sibiya, reaching the same conclusion.

<Then this will be our glorious last stand!> said Altarion.

Olantor looked up at Altarion's gloriously carved sarcophagus. The solid slab of granite taken from the Castra Magna depicted the final battle that had all but taken the Old One's life. The legends of Altarion's last battle were legion, and if this was indeed their ending, there were no better heroes of the Chapter to fight alongside.

'Aye, brother,' he said, placing his hand on the hilt of his sword. 'We shall raise arms together and spit in their eyes at Konor's Gate.'

<A glorious end,> agreed the Dreadnought, lost in the mists of time. <A death that will never be forgotten. That's the stuff of Chapter legend.>

Olantor turned to Interrogator Sibiya and said, 'That last resort you showed me...'

'It has already been moved,' she said. 'It is where it needs to be.'

'And where is that?' asked Olantor.

'Protecting something very valuable that cannot be allowed to fall into enemy hands.'

'Are you going to tell me what that is?' said Olantor. 'All along I have known that there is more to the Inquisition's presence on this star fort than watching for any lingering taint from the daemons who once captured it. Tell me why you are here, and tell me now.'

At first he thought she was going to refuse, but Sibiya looked down at the plotting table and the scenes of slaughter on the Via Rex.

‘Very well, I will tell you,’ she said, ‘but it will be hard for you to hear.’

Honsou dropped from the back of the Land Raider, sweeping up his bolter and joining the race to the vast gateway of the basilica. Green fire crackled around the mighty fortress’s embrasures and gun ports, rippling like liquid over the statues and gargoyles peering down at him. Lines of electrical discharge streamed over the building, as though its very structure was under attack.

The enormous gateway barring entry into the basilica was wide open, the few soldiers gathered in the tapering narthex staring in horror at doors that stubbornly refused to close. Bolter shells burst amongst them, and a roaring battle tank with bloodstained sides and a series of flame lances mounted on its upper carapace swept inside, setting alight the wooden panelling on the walls and silken banners hanging from the ceiling.

Kaarja Salombar leapt nimbly from her skiff, her curved blades cutting a path through the ragged defenders as they scrambled to escape the wrath of the flame tank. Hulking ogres smashed ornamentation from the walls and pulled down columns with their chain grapples.

Cadaras Grendel and Notha Etassay joined him at the entrance of the basilica.

‘Adept Cycerin has done his work well,’ said Etassay, flourishing a bloody sword.

‘Damn good job,’ commented Grendel. ‘Else we’d be out here with our necks on the block.’

‘Grendel is right,’ said Etassay. ‘Had your pet magos failed...’

‘But he didn’t,’ snapped Honsou. ‘And we are inside.’

‘Aye, that we are,’ said Grendel. ‘Now what? So where’s this daemon lord then?’

No sooner were the words out of Grendel’s mouth than a cascade of information flooded Honsou’s visor. Rippling lines of green text, overlaid with schematic diagrams of the basilica’s interior, streamed before his eyes. In an instant, the interior layout of the basilica was laid out before Honsou, as clearly and as indelibly as though he himself had been the architect.

Immediately, he saw what he was looking for, pulsing like a beating heart.

The warp core of the *Indomitable*.

‘It’s right below us,’ he said. ‘Let’s go.’

Olantor watched Sibiya’s techs and the adept with the furred robe as they attached cables to the iron box he had last seen in a refrigerated shipping

container in the Interrogator's ship. Vapour slithered over its surface and the few icicles left on its surface were melting in the heat of the cavernous chamber deep in the heart of the *Indomitable*.

Leaving token blocking forces in place throughout the compromised star fort, Olantor had followed Interrogator Sibiya's Saurians down innumerable flights of steps carved into the basilica's structure to the engineering decks, where they had passed through the treacherously opened door to the colossal fort's warp core.

Olator had never seen anything quite so incredible, and its scale took his breath away. A circular chamber the size of the largest parade ground on Macragge, with a fiery column of crackling, dancing light rising to the ceiling a thousand metres above the floor. Chains and pulleys were attached to a circular gantry surrounding the highest point of the column, hanging to the deck like dark strands of hair. The seething light was sheathed in inscribed plates of thick armoured glass and sheets of bronze, a harnessed thunderstorm of epic proportions.

Distant shapes swam in the light, twisted outlines that flickered and burned themselves on the retina like fading afterimages of snapshot memories.

Clawed hands, gaping maws and burning eyes.

Even beneath the plates of his armour, Olantor could feel the immense, impossible, energies bound within that central column of blinding light. His skin itched and his soul rebelled to see such power bound and shackled to human cause. He tried not to look at the warp core for fear of what he might see.

'How much longer?' he demanded.

'Not long,' said Sibiya. 'Trust me, this isn't the kind of thing you want to rush. One tiny mistake and it could just as easily turn on us.'

Olator turned away, still trying to come to terms with what Sibiya had told him.

The Lord of Macragge, Marneus Calgar had lied to them all.

The daemon lord M'kar still lived.

Chapter legends proudly told how Marneus Calgar and Terminators from the First Company had boarded the *Indomitable* and defeated M'kar's daemonic hordes. Pages were devoted to the battle between Lord Macragge and the upstart daemon, entire tracts describing the poetry of his every blow.

Varro Tigurius spoke of the righteous wrath by which the Chapter Master had struck the daemon down with the Gauntlets of Ultramar and torn it limb from limb.

It was all a lie.

He had not believed Sibiya, had raged at the dishonour she did to Lord Calgar with her baseless accusations. He threatened her life, but upon seeing the star fort's warp core, he had known she spoke the truth.

One look into the raging fire of the core was enough to convince Olantor that something ancient and diabolical was chained within its molten depths. Hatred bled from the light and Olantor fought to maintain his composure in the face of the bound creature and the betrayal it represented. The scale of such untruth struck at Olantor's core, his soul and faith in his Chapter shaken to their very foundations.

Under Brother Altarion's directions, Sibiya's Saurians and the surviving Ultramar Auxilia were forming barricades from overturned engineering benches, emptied barrels of machine ore and stacked crates of spare parts. It wasn't much, but at least it was something to mount a defence of the warp core.

A hundred warriors was all they could muster now, a hundred men and women to stand against a rampaging army intent on releasing a daemon lord upon Ultramar. And of those hundred warriors, only two were Ultramarines.

Admittedly, one was a Dreadnought, but still...

Their defences were as strong as they could make them, but with the mechanisms of the star fort turned against them, Olantor knew they could hold for moments at best.

But moments might be all they would need.

He turned and marched towards where a handful of techs and servitors were buried in the heart of the warp core controls. Pater Monna directed the work of half a dozen specialised Navigator-spliced servitors as they connected wires, welded portions of the plotting table and a host of other components together. Olantor didn't even try to guess what they might be.

Pater Monna looked up from his work as Olantor approached.

'You must hurry, Navigator,' said Olantor.

'I'm not a Navigator,' said Pater Monna. 'I just work for the Castanas. My family is bonded to them after the marriage of—'

Olator waved his hand to stall Pater Monna's full family history. He knew it was the man's means of coping with the stress, but he had no time to indulge his panic.

'How much longer until you are able to trigger a warp jump?'

Pater Monna shrugged. 'I don't know.'

'That is not good enough,' warned Olantor. 'Our enemies will be here soon.'

We cannot let them release the daemon. Do you understand what is at stake?’

‘Yes, of course I do. Better than you, probably.’

‘Then when will you be ready?’

‘A minute? Never?’ shouted Pater Monna, indicating the makeshift tools and mass of tangled wires, diodes and valves spilling from the core control panel.

‘It’s hopeless. I can’t work under these conditions.’

‘You have to,’ snapped Olantor. ‘These are the conditions we have.’

‘But it’s impossible,’ protested Pater Monna. ‘To manually trigger a warp jump without coordinates? It’s madness. And to make a warp jump this close to a planet...’

‘I know,’ said Olantor. ‘The gravity well will drag us into its heart.’

‘It’ll kill us all,’ said Pater Monna needlessly.

‘That’s what I’m counting on.’

‘Will it kill... that?’ said Monna, gesturing with a shoulder to the raging monster within the warp core.

‘I do not know,’ admitted Olantor. ‘That is what I hope.’

Honsou took the stairs three at a time. Following the glowing schematic overlaid on his helmet’s visor, he led his Iron Warriors down into the basilica. Gunfire raged around him, las-fire from choke points on the defensive landings and roaring bolter and flamer fire from his own warriors.

The narrow stairwells were death traps, but they were death traps for the defenders, for they were so hopelessly outnumbered that they could not hope to stem the tide of Iron Warriors. Honsou’s ogres used their chain grapples to tear down the barricades and the Iron Warriors battered their way through the defenders, killing as they went and leaving no survivors in their wake.

Grendel laughed as he emptied the magazines of his bolter. He discarded the weapon, and continued the slaughter with his viciously-toothed sword, his latest melta gun slung over one shoulder. Notha Etassay eschewed projectile weapons, favouring his twin swords and awesome speed to kill. The warrior moved like liquid, seeming to shift instantly from one place to another in the blink of an eye. Only one touched by the gods could move so quickly.

Exquisite hangings burned in the fires, and smoke billowed up the stairwells as the Iron Warriors forced their way onto the engineering levels of the *Indomitable*. Honsou fired his bolter in careful bursts, each pull of the trigger taking down a handful of mortal soldiers.

Nothing Imperial was getting out of this fortress alive.

Honsou knelt beside the body of a dead soldier. Shattered ribs poked from his armour where a bolter shell had exploded within his chest, and Honsou dipped the fingers of his silver arm into the wound.

He watched the ruby droplets fall from his hand and said, 'Their blood is weak, I can smell the fear in it. They have no substance to them.'

'You don't need to smell their blood to know that,' hissed Grendel, lifting his own bloody gauntlets.

'They fight poorly,' added Etassay, 'but Honsou is right. Their fear adds a certain... *frisson*... to the proceedings.'

'I don't know what the hell you're talking about,' snapped Grendel, like an attack dog on a leash. 'I just want to kill them.'

'Have no fear, dear Grendel,' said Etassay, sliding up behind him and whispering at his ear. 'I'll be sure to leave some for you.'

Grendel shrugged off the blademaster. 'How much further?' he demanded.

'One more level down,' said Honsou, calling up the star fort's plans onto his visor. 'This was the last choke point.'

'Then let's get this done,' hissed Grendel, setting off once more.

This deep in the basilica, the walls were steel and bronze, stencilled with bold warnings of hazards and penalties for failing to observe appropriate safety measures. Imperial eagles and brilliant white 'U' symbols adorned every warning, and Honsou sneered at such ostentation.

Typical of the Ultramarines to think of the safety of mortals.

'That will be your undoing,' he whispered as he followed Grendel along a wide corridor of hissing pipes, flashing orange lights and blaring sirens. An automated voice warned of intruders and Honsou took no small measure of pride in knowing that this was the only time that alarm had ever been broadcast.

Up ahead, the tunnel made a sharp dogleg to the left and Honsou stepped in front of Grendel as he moved up to the bend. He glanced round the corner. A wide set of iron stairs led down to the blast-shielded gateway of a chamber lit by a brilliant blue white glow.

Thanks to Adept Cycerin, the blast shield was locked open, and green sparks dripped from the locking panel at its side. A hastily-erected barricade of sandbags and overturned benches had been thrown up across the gateway, manned by at least twenty soldiers in the blue and gold of the Ultramarines' vassal soldiers.

'We're here,' he said, unable to keep the visceral excitement from his voice.

A pair of a bipod-mounted autocannon unleashed a blizzard of heavy calibre

shells, and a flurry of las-fire erupted from the soldiers' guns at the sight of him.

Honsou pressed himself flat. Explosive rounds chewed up the wall, spraying metal shavings and sparking flares over his armour, but doing no damage. Three of Salombar's corsairs screamed as wild ricochets bounced around the corridor and cut them down. An Iron Warrior dropped to his knees as a rogue shell pulped the side of his helmet. Blood streamed over his shoulder guard, but the warrior got to his feet moments later.

Honsou grinned, feeling the heady mix of combat-stimms and adrenal shunts pumping his body full of chemicals. The battle-surge was on him, and his body sang with the sweet taste of victory. He felt a rush of the recklessness that had served him well before, and rolled around the corner.

He leapt straight to the bottom of the stairs, landing right in front of the barricade with a tremendous clang that buckled the metal-grilled floor. His augmetic eye instantly picked out the gunner and loader of the nearest autocannon. Two quick squeezes of his bolter's trigger blew both of them back, the mass-reactive shells exploding within their armour and disintegrating their torsos.

'Onwards!' he shouted, charging the barricade. Lasguns spat bright bolts of energy at him, but they were hastily aimed and only two struck him. One melted a bright spot on his breastplate, the other left a glowing streak on his helmet. Neither was enough to stop him. He slammed into the sandbags, not even bothering to jump them, and barrelled through the flimsy barricade.

The other autocannon roared in defiance, but it was quickly silenced. Honsou felt others beside him, but didn't see them. His attention was on the killing around him, his bolter sweeping out to crush the skull of a nearby soldier. His silver fist shattered the ribcage of a second, a snap shot cut a third in half. Etassay danced through the melee, his blades lopping limbs with every graceful stroke. Like Honsou, Grendel bludgeoned his way through the battle, fists and elbows his weapons of choice.

In moments it was over, and the defenders lay dead, a horrific sliced, battered and torn up collection of meat and bone. Blood coated his fists and slithered around the shimmering metal of his silver arm.

Honsou stepped over the last bodies and nodded to Grendel as he surged through the gateway into the warp core.

The mighty chamber was illuminated by a searing column of light bound within curved plates of etched bronze and glass, and no sooner had he laid eyes on it, then he knew he had reached his goal. He could sense the incredible power

chained to the beating heart of the *Indomitable*, the ancient malice filling the air with hate and evil from a bygone age.

Clustered around the column were the last of the star fort's defenders, a lone Ultramarines warrior, the battle-scarred Dreadnought that had destroyed Votheer Tark's battle-engines, and perhaps sixty or so mortal soldiers.

Positioned behind more makeshift barricades, Honsou wanted to laugh at the futility of their resistance. *This* was all that stood between him and victory?

In front of the pitiful remnants of the defenders stood an upright black oblong, a hissing, dripping object that looked like a coffin. Winking lights flashed rapidly at its centre and a host of ribbed cables snaked back to where a slight woman in battle plate the colour of an oil slick held a heavy, rubberised control pad.

'What in the name of the warp is that?' said Grendel.

'You have them?' said Olantor.

'Sow the seeds of damnation and I shall reap the souls of the tainted,' said Sibiya, quoting from a text Olantor didn't recognise and rapidly blink-clicking the target acquisition lens of her helm.

One by one, she picked out the warriors she identified as the champions of this host, uploading their biometric data to the Sentinel Array.

'It's done,' she said.

'Then release it,' said Olantor.

Sibiya nodded, pressing the activation key on the control pad.

'Fear this, for it is your apocalypse,' she said.

The lights on the oblong box ceased flashing, and locking bolts around its front panel blew off in a series of percussive booms. It crashed to the grilled floor and a mist of billowing steam spilled from the box. Something moved in the haze and Honsou felt a moment's trepidation at this last resort of the Imperials.

A glossy black shape exploded from the steam, a lithe figure with a bone-white mask in the form of a skull. Its glossy black bodysuit was studded with injectors and stim-shunts, but that was all he saw before it was amongst them.

It moved faster than even Etassay, its limbs a blur of motion as it charged with a roar of hate that struck to the core of every Iron Warrior with its ferocity. A blade edged in blue fire licked out and skewered Grendel, stabbed home and withdrawn in the time it took to notice.

Grendel dropped with a grunt of surprise as the monster spun away. Gunshots

followed it, but its speed was inhuman, its body seeming to bend and sweep out of the path of every projectile. Its sword swept out, beheading an Iron Warrior and disembowelling one of Honsou's ogres. It vaulted over the ogre, its red eyes blazing with killing fire.

'Gods of the warp!' hissed Honsou, unlimbering his black-bladed axe. 'Eversor!'

They surrounded the assassin, clubbing and stabbing, but their blows met thin air. Combat-stimms boosted the Eversor's metabolism to monstrous heights, and its reactions were sharpened to impossible levels. It was a monster spawned in the depths of the

Assassinorum's darkest laboratories, a killer, a destroyer and a weapon of ultimate destruction.

No sooner had the assassin attacked than the Imperial soldiers clustered around the warp core opened fire. Las-bolts and solid rounds whickered through the ranks of the Iron Warriors, who swiftly returned fire, turning the vast chamber into an echoing cavern of reverberating reports. The Dreadnought loomed above everything, the barrels of its assault cannon spinning as it prepared to open fire.

Grendel picked himself up from the deck with a bellow of anger, a thin line of blood coating his pierced breastplate. Say what you will about Cadaras Grendel, thought Honsou, he's a tough bastard, right enough.

'Grendel!' shouted Honsou, pointing at the defenders. 'Take them out!'

'Gladly,' hissed the warrior, slipping the melta gun from his shoulder. Honsou turned back to the fray as Grendel gathered Iron Warriors, corsairs and the augmented ogre creatures for an assault on the defenders.

Honsou turned back to the battle with the Eversor, meeting its hateful gaze as it fought through the ranks of Iron Warriors. The fiend screamed as it killed, as though every death simultaneously fed and heightened its hatred and battle fury.

The roar of the Dreadnought's assault cannon echoed in the chamber, but Honsou could not risk taking his eyes from the assassin to see how Grendel and his ad hoc assault force fared. As the assassin cut and sliced with its sword, it fired a needle-nosed pistol, blowing out helmets and kneecaps with every shot. Bullets floated past the Eversor, and blades seemed to drift by it as it wove its dance of death through his fighters. Seven Iron Warriors were dead already, limbless, poisoned, shot or disembowelled, while they had yet to put a mark on the assassin.

Another Iron Warrior died as the Eversor rammed its sword through the

weaker armour under his arm and clove both his hearts. It wrenched its sword clear and tossed aside its victim, cutting a path through its foes as though they were no more than irritants. The shock of the assassin's appearance had broken the momentum of the Iron Warriors' assault in a heartbeat, and it needed to die. Now.

'Quite the killer,' said Etassay between bursts of shots. 'My blood is afire watching it.'

'I'm pleased for you,' hissed Honsou, watching as the Eversor fought its way towards them. 'It's coming for us. We're its targets, no doubt about it.'

'Oh, I do hope so...' said Etassay, his expression unreadable behind his smooth-faced mask. The prospect of facing such a highly trained killer did not appeal to Honsou, for he was under no illusions as to his ability to defeat the assassin. Honsou was a fine warrior, but the assassin was another level of killer entirely.

'You want him, he's yours,' said Honsou, content to let the blademaker risk his neck. If anyone stood a chance of killing the Eversor, it was Etassay.

'Oh yes,' said Etassay gleefully. 'I want him, oh yes, I do.'

The blademaker leapt towards the Eversor, his twin swords flashing as he met its charge.

'At last,' hissed Etassay, resplendent in his form-fitting bodysuit of black and silver. 'A worthy partner with which to caress the blade.'

The assassin registered Etassay's presence, and Honsou watched as blademaker and assassin began their ritual dance of death. Etassay duelled with twin swords of silver steel, while the assassin fought with but a single blade. Steel shimmered and cut the air, bodies flowed together.

Honsou knew he would never again witness such a peerless display of skill, and doubted two such skilled opponents had ever crossed blades in all the long history of the Imperium.

As corrupt as he was, Notha Etassay still honoured the etiquette of the duel, fighting with blinding skill and speed and finesse. The Eversor fought with no such handicap. Its sole driving force was to kill and it clung to no such antiquated or restricting notions as honour or glory. To destroy was its only goal, and that was Etassay's undoing.

Etassay executed a flawless block, spinning on his heel to lunge at the Eversor's groin, but his opponent was no longer there. A spinning kick smashed into the side of Etassay's head, sending him crashing to the deck. He rolled to his knees, agile as a cat and furious that such a low blow had been employed in a

duel. Etassay lunged, but the Eversor dived over his blade and, using his shoulders as a pivot, swung up and over the blademaster. The Eversor sailed over Etassay's head, and a series of glittering needles wired to chemical reservoirs on its arms snapped from its gauntlet.

The needles punched through the neck seals of Etassay's armour and a lethal cocktail of neurotoxins pumped out. Not even a warrior touched by the Dark Gods could resist the finest work of the Officio Assassinorum's venom-masters, and Etassay howled in a mixture of agony and ecstasy as they set to work on his body.

Pink froth erupted from the smooth faceplate of Etassay's helmet and he collapsed to the deck, thrashing in exquisite torment.

'Incredible!' he shrieked, as his back arched one last time and Honsou heard a powerful crack as Etassay's spine broke with the force of his convulsions.

At last Honsou and the Eversor were face to face, and he felt a twist of fear take hold in his gut. The face of the Eversor was the face of death itself, and it flexed the muscles of its shoulders as it advanced grimly towards him. The warriors around him backed away, knowing that to intervene would be the last thing they did.

'Just you and me,' said Honsou, readying his axe.

The assassin did not reply, its skull-mask reflecting the blue light of the warp core. Its hate and rage-filled eyes fixed on him with an expression of loathing.

Honsou caught sight of movement above the Eversor and smiled to himself.

'Or maybe not,' he said, as the Newborn slammed into the assassin.

Ardaric Vaanes slowed his descent with a quick burst of his jump pack, his boots slamming down onto the deck of the warp core with a metal-buckling crash. All around him, the loxatl of the Xaneant kin-brood swarmed down the sides of the chamber, flechette blasters filling the air with whickering darts.

With the fall of the basilica's controls to Adept Cycerin's techno-virus, it had been simplicity itself to find a way in and trace the route of the energy coils back to the warp core. Through twisting passages, humming conduits and shafts of fire, they had negotiated their way through the structure of the basilica until their route had brought them out on a circular gantry overlooking the battle. The warp core ran through the centre of the gantry, and long chains hung from its base, reaching all the way to the deck far below.

He watched Grendel lead his ragtag assault force against the defenders of the warp core and saw the Dreadnought cut many of them down with its deadly gun

or crush them beneath the pounding blows of its enormous hammer.

‘Do we not attack?’ asked the Newborn as it watched the black clad assassin closing on Honsou. Vaanes didn’t answer at first, not sure what he wanted to say. The whispering voice of his pride and ambition spoke of a chance for glory, a chance to shine brighter than the greatest supernova, a chance to be the one true champion to emerge from this battle.

Another part of him, the shadow that knew his true soul, reminded him that the path he had chosen had but one outcome.

‘Yes,’ he said to himself, ‘but how we walk it is just as important.’

Misunderstanding his words, the Newborn launched itself from the gantry, swinging out and gripping one of the iron chains and sliding down its length. The loxatl let out hissing breaths of aggression as they slithered down the walls. Bathed in the glow of the warp core, their skin flickered through an unnatural spectrum of sickening colours.

The decision had been made for him, and he hurled himself from the gantry.

The flames and smoke of his landing dissipated and he saw that, incredibly, the assassin still lived. The Newborn was on its knees, the assassin’s needle-tipped gauntlet buried in its chest. Clear tubes pulsed with motion as automatic dispensers pumped toxins from internal reservoirs.

The Newborn shuddered in the grip of the assassin’s poisons, yet it did not relinquish its grip on its attacker’s arm. Held fast, the assassin spun its sword up and plunged it again and again into the Newborn’s chest. Blue white light spilled from the wounds, as though the Newborn’s blood ran with the same light as pulsed in the warp core.

Vaanes leapt towards the assassin, his lightning-wreathed claws stabbing towards its neck. Without giving any sign it had been aware of him, the assassin twisted in the Newborn’s grip and blocked his thrusting claws with a dizzyingly swift parry. It launched a riposte and Vaanes only just managed to throw his other claw up to block.

The sword slid between Vaanes’s claws and he twisted his gauntlet savagely, snapping the blade of the assassin’s sword in an explosion of flaring light. The assassin abandoned its sword, but before it could draw its pistol, a black bladed axe slammed into its chest, cleaving it from neck to groin. Hissing, chemically and genetically altered blood sprayed Vaanes, bubbling on his armour as the assassin fell to the ground.

The needle gauntlet tore free from the Newborn and it collapsed, its aberrant flesh fighting to reknit in the face of such dreadful harm. Even its formidable

regenerative abilities could barely survive such lethal toxins, and Vaanes wondered if the presence of the daemon lord was helping undo the damage.

Vaanes backed away as Honsou wrenched his axe from the dead assassin, the blade hissing and growling as though angered by the kill.

‘You took your time,’ said Honsou.

Vaanes ignored him, instead staring at the corpse as it bubbled and seethed with chemical reactions. Its flesh sizzled and its blood smoked with acrid venom as the nightmarish collection of toxins, nerve agents and viruses that flowed through its body began reacting with one another. While the killer had lived, that reaction was kept in check, but now...

‘Get back!’ yelled Vaanes.

Honsou looked down at the assassin’s body and immediately saw the danger, hurling himself flat as the corpse combusted in an explosion of virulent chemical fire.

Grendel slammed the butt of his gun against the helmet of a mortal soldier, fighting to reach the Ultramarines sergeant. The warrior fought alongside a woman in black armour with a silver helm. Her sword cut graceful arcs through renegade pirates, and her pistol spat bright bolts of white-hot plasma. They would make good kills.

He had all but exhausted his melta gun’s energy charge, and was saving its last few bursts of energy for the prize kills of this fight. Iron Warriors, ogres, corsairs, pirates and renegades surrounded the warp core, a bastard mix of fighters to be sure, but an effective one.

The Imperials had fought hard, but even with a Dreadnought to anchor their defences, their position was hopeless. A dozen bullet scars creased Grendel’s armour and his chest still ached where the assassin’s sword had skewered him. The blade had punctured his heart, but his secondary organ sustained him while his body repaired the damage.

The Ultramarines warrior noticed him, and Grendel saw the recognition of a fellow killer in his eyes. Grendel paused and ripped off his helmet, letting the electric atmosphere of the warp core stiffen his mohawk. It was foolish to remove his helmet in the midst of a battle, but he wanted to taste the warrior’s blood, feel it spatter his face as he smashed his enemy to ruin on the deck.

He caught sight of a shaven-headed figure in a stained uniform jacket sheltering behind the sergeant, a man working frantically by an opened panel at the base of the warp core. Grendel had no idea what he was doing, but

something about the way the warrior and the armoured woman were protecting him made Grendel want to kill him even more.

The Dreadnought let off another burst of assault cannon fire, shredding a dozen of Kaarja Salombar's corsairs, and crushing one of the ogre beasts with its colossal hammer fist. That was a problem for later, thought Grendel.

He stalked through the swirling combat towards his prey, rotating his neck and swinging his shoulders to loosen the muscles, though he had no intention of going toe to toe with this warrior.

'I'm going to kill you, traitor,' said the Ultramarine, dropping into a fighting crouch with a silver-bladed sword held before him.

'Guess again,' said Grendel, swinging his melta gun to bear and pressing the firing stud.

A screaming burst of superheated air erupted around the Ultramarines sergeant as Grendel's melta blast struck him full square in the chest. Armour, flesh and bone melted together as the impossible heat of the melta gun fused the warrior to the deck. Ceramite plates ran like wax, flesh vaporised and hyper-oxygenated blood boiled to steam in an instant.

The woman cried out at his death, and Grendel savoured her horror. She came at him with her sword, but he batted it aside with his melta gun and slammed his fist against her carved breastplate. She was hurled back, tumbling against the shaven-headed man working on the warp core.

She shouted something at him, but Grendel wasn't listening.

He stepped towards the man, lifting him from the deck and breaking his neck with a contemptuous flick of his wrist. He tossed the limp body aside and turned back towards the woman on the deck, already thinking of the harm he would wreak on her body.

She had scrambled to her knees and scooped up her pistol. Grendel roared and hurled himself at her as she pulled the trigger.

A blazing white light filled his vision, blinding him and filling his world with fire. Searing energies slammed into his breastplate and Grendel roared in pain as the plates of his armour vaporised in the intense heat. The bodysuit beneath melted to his skin and burning blue fire billowed over his skull, burning away his mohawk in an instant and searing the skin of his face and head. Grendel dropped the melta gun and his hands fled to his face, feeling his flesh bubble and run like molten pitch.

'That hurt, you bitch!' bellowed Grendel, as the woman desperately twisted a dial on her pistol, the magnetic coils buzzing as they recharged the weapon.

Grendel took a step forward and lifted her from the ground, holding her against the glowing plates of the warp core. Her armour began to smoke and the etchings carved into the bronze plates shone with a bitter, golden light.

The woman screamed in pain, acrid fumes hissing from the ruptured joints of her armour. Grendel had no idea what was happening to her, but suspected some enchantment or ward worked into the fabric of the warp core was attacking her. She struggled against his grip, but against the power of a fallen Astartes, she had no chance of breaking free.

The sounds of battle around him continued unabated, but Grendel ignored it, watching in fascination as the woman was burned to death inside her armour. At last her struggles ceased and Grendel dropped her charred and smoking armour, the beatific face carved into the silver of her helmet now sagging and melancholy. An ashen outline of a human form was left imprinted on the bronze of the warp core and he chuckled.

A towering shadow loomed over Grendel and he ducked as a massive hammerblow slammed into the warp core. The bronze plates buckled with the force of the blow and streamers of blue energy spun glittering trceries of light before him.

He rolled before another blow could land, scooping up his fallen melta gun.

Looming over him was the Dreadnought, its colossal, quad-headed hammer rearming for another strike.

<Time to die, xenos-freak!> roared the Dreadnought.

Honsou raced towards the warp core, watching as Grendel dropped a smoking body in black armour at his feet. Ardaric Vaanes ran alongside him, and the Newborn followed as fast as it could. The assassin's toxins were slowing it, but the fact it was alive was nothing short of miraculous. Half a dozen of the augmented ogres lumbered alongside him, together with a host of Iron Warriors and armoured renegades.

The battle was won, and now only the Dreadnought remained fighting. Though it could still wreak fearsome harm, it was doomed. The warp core blazed with light, as though the daemon lord chained within could sense its imminent freedom. Honsou's own flesh trembled, recalling the moment when a creature of the warp had briefly possessed him on Hydra Cordatus.

Grendel rolled to his feet and aimed his melta gun at the Dreadnought's chest, but Honsou had greater plans in mind for this creation of the Ultramarines.

'Don't kill it!' shouted Honsou. Grendel heard him and ducked behind the

warp core before the Dreadnought could open fire on him.

Honsou came to a halt and waved the ogre creatures forward as the Dreadnought's upper torso spun on its axis to face him.

'Take it,' he commanded.

The first ogre's chain grapple hammered into the Dreadnought's upper glacis, where the armour had been torn from it earlier. The hook buried itself in the workings of the Dreadnought's hammer arm, snagging deeper the more the machine tried to free itself. Another hook slammed into its centre section, fouling on the gimbal at its waist. Two more whipped out and buried themselves in the machine's armour.

The Dreadnought roared in anger, thrashing with its powerful actuator muscles. The ogres were pulled and spun around by its fury, but as more chain grapples hooked it, its struggles became weaker and more of the ogres bent their backs to restraining it. Its assault cannon blazed, ripping one of the ogres in two and tearing the head from another, but as more of Honsou's Iron Warriors took up the struggle the machine was finally held immobile.

Sparks and smoke rose from its mechanical muscles as it fought to break free and its assault cannon spun uselessly as its ammo hopper finally ran dry.

<Release me!> roared the Dreadnought. <I am Brother Altarion of the First Company of the Ultramarines!>

Honsou stepped in front of the Dreadnought, brash and fearless now that it was fully restrained. He glanced over at the straining ogres and Iron Warriors. They had it firm for now, but they couldn't hold it much longer.

'Grendel?' said Honsou.

'Aye,' said the warrior, emerging from behind the warp core, and Honsou was shocked at the horrendous damage done to Grendel's face. The flesh was seared black, his eyes twin pits of madness and pain.

'You still have a charge in that melta gun?'

'Enough to finish this bastard off, yes,' said Grendel, levelling the deadly weapon at the Dreadnought's sarcophagus.

'No,' said Honsou, looking up at the warp core, where the light gathered in a maelstrom of phantom claws, teeth and a multitude of eyes. He pointed his silver arm at the blackened outline of a human form that had been burned into the bronze. Where other portions of the warp core were covered in wardings, this part was bare, and tendrils of crackling light oozed from the buckled plates.

'Shoot that part.'

'Shoot the warp core?' hissed Vaanes. 'Are you insane? You'll kill us all!'

‘I don’t think so,’ said Honsou. ‘Grendel, do it.’

Grendel shrugged and shouldered the melta gun, unleashing his last charge on the brass plating where he had watched the armoured woman burn to death. The armoured plating was no match for the close range blast of a melta gun and the metal vaporised in the superheated explosion.

As though a vast ocean of seething blue white energy had been kept dammed within the core, the titanic energies bound within flooded outwards. But instead of filling the chamber with deadly forces that should have consumed the entirety of the star fort, the light poured into the bound Dreadnought.

The mighty war machine bucked and heaved as the immaterial energies suffused it, taking every molecule of its being as its own. A terrible howling echoed from the walls, but whether it was from the Dreadnought or the newly released daemon was impossible to tell.

The Dreadnought shook off its captors’ grip, tearing the chain grapples from the ogre creatures and shuddering in the grip of daemonic energies that poured into it. Its substance swelled and bloated as its limbs lengthened and stretched, becoming hideous melds of machine and daemonic flesh. Its armoured carapace stretched and cracked, burning cracks of light seeping from within as though the warp itself flowed through its circuits and joints instead of blessed oil and amniotic suspension.

The manifesting daemon dropped to its knees, screaming at this violent transition from prison to freedom. The pain of its birth was felt by everyone around it, and Honsou’s body was wracked by agonising pain, as the hurt of every wound done to him in his long life as a warrior returned to haunt him.

The granite of its carapace pulled and twisted like wax paper, and a snarling, horned head pressed itself through the stone. Metal, stone and warp-spawned flesh moulded together to shape the fleshless skull of the Thrice Born, an elongated, bestial face that writhed with the memory of ancient tattoos.

The Dreadnought’s arms stretched and cracked, the assault cannon reshaped into some hideous mecha-organic weapon of unknown function. The mighty hammer crackled with bilious light, its substance fluid and impossible to fix. Honsou blinked as it seemed to flicker through one form after another; one moment a shimmering sword, the next a clawed arm, the next a seething mass of formless light.

At last the hurricane of energy ceased and the Thrice Born climbed to its feet, now clawed and sheathed in iron. It towered over everything, a hulking, monstrous, luminous being of immaterial flesh and steel. It flexed its new limbs,

and the power radiating from its body was palpable.

Behind the mighty daemon lord, the warp core continued to beat, the power of a hundred stars still caged within its heart. Shimmering warp-spawned light sealed the wound Grendel's melta gun had caused, and screaming faces swam in that light, stretched mouths and pleading eyes; the souls of the Thrice Born's victims bound eternally to its service.

The daemon lord's fanged maw split wide open, exposing yellowed teeth like sharpened tombstones as it swept its baleful gaze around the warp core. Its eyes fixed on Honsou, and he met its appraising look with one of his own.

Dark light of torment shone in the depths of its eyes, and Honsou quailed before the hatred and malice he saw in them. His own reservoir of hate was as a paltry thing next to the venom this being had for the scions of Guilliman.

Honsou felt his heart race as it saw his purpose and rejoiced in it.

This was a being with which he would wreak a terrible vengeance. The worlds of Ultramar would burn in its wrath and Uriel Ventris would know suffering and pain the likes of which he could not even begin to imagine.

The Thrice Born raised its arms and the air within the chamber grew thick with static and the taste of blood and metal. Shapes formed from twists of folded reality and hideous creatures of scales, horns and fangs slipped through the veil that separated realities. Hundreds of monstrous daemons crackled into existence, and Honsou sensed the presence of tens of thousands more just waiting for the chance to force their way through.

'Behold the vanguard of my daemon army,' roared the daemon lord.

The rings of Aescari Exterio burned red as the *Indomitable* broke orbit, moving under its own volition for the first time in its existence. A new power burned at the heart of the star fort, one that was not bound by conventional laws of nature or the designs of a long-dead priest of the Machine-God.

Honsou's fleet and the vessels crippled in the fighting to take the fortress were berthed in its dock facilities, and even now thousands of captured techs and servitors repaired and rearmed them for the war to come. The damage done in the battle to capture the star fort was undone and the Iron Warriors built fresh fortifications atop the ruins of the old.

Where once the *Indomitable's* bastions had been raised with pride, standing with honour and majestic beauty, they were now ugly donjons of iron and stone, crowned with rusted spikes and forests of razorwire. What had once been glorious was now a hideous parody of honour, a brooding fastness of bitter anger

and spite.

A fortress of the Iron Warriors.

The *Indomitable* – though it would soon shed that name – departed Aescari Exterio, moving to the outer reaches of the Triplex system. Safely distant from the gravity well of the system's star, space collapsed as the veil of real space was torn aside and the star fort vanished, hurled into the Empyrean to ride the currents of the warp.

Its new masters had but one destination in mind.

The empire of the Ultramarines.

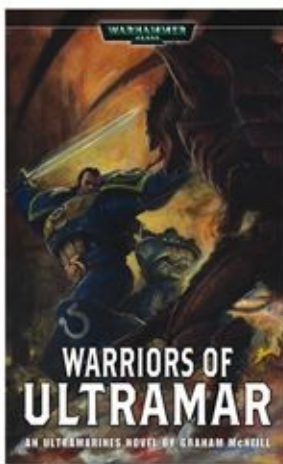
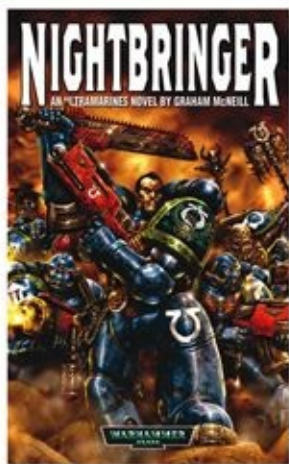
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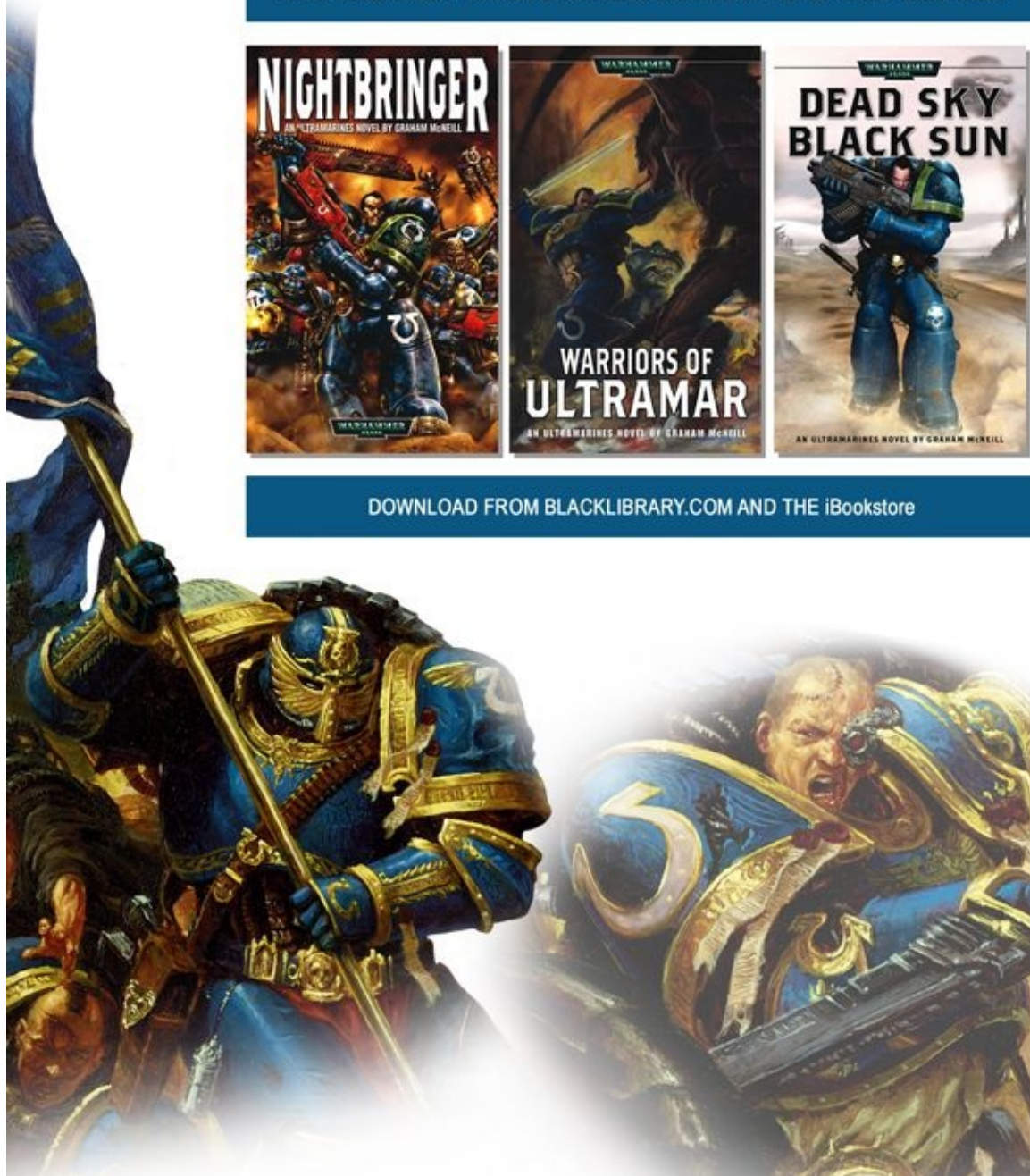
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Join the ranks of the 4th Company at www.graham-mcneill.com

READ MORE ABOUT HONSOU'S GREATEST ENEMIES IN THE ULTRAMARINES SAGA



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