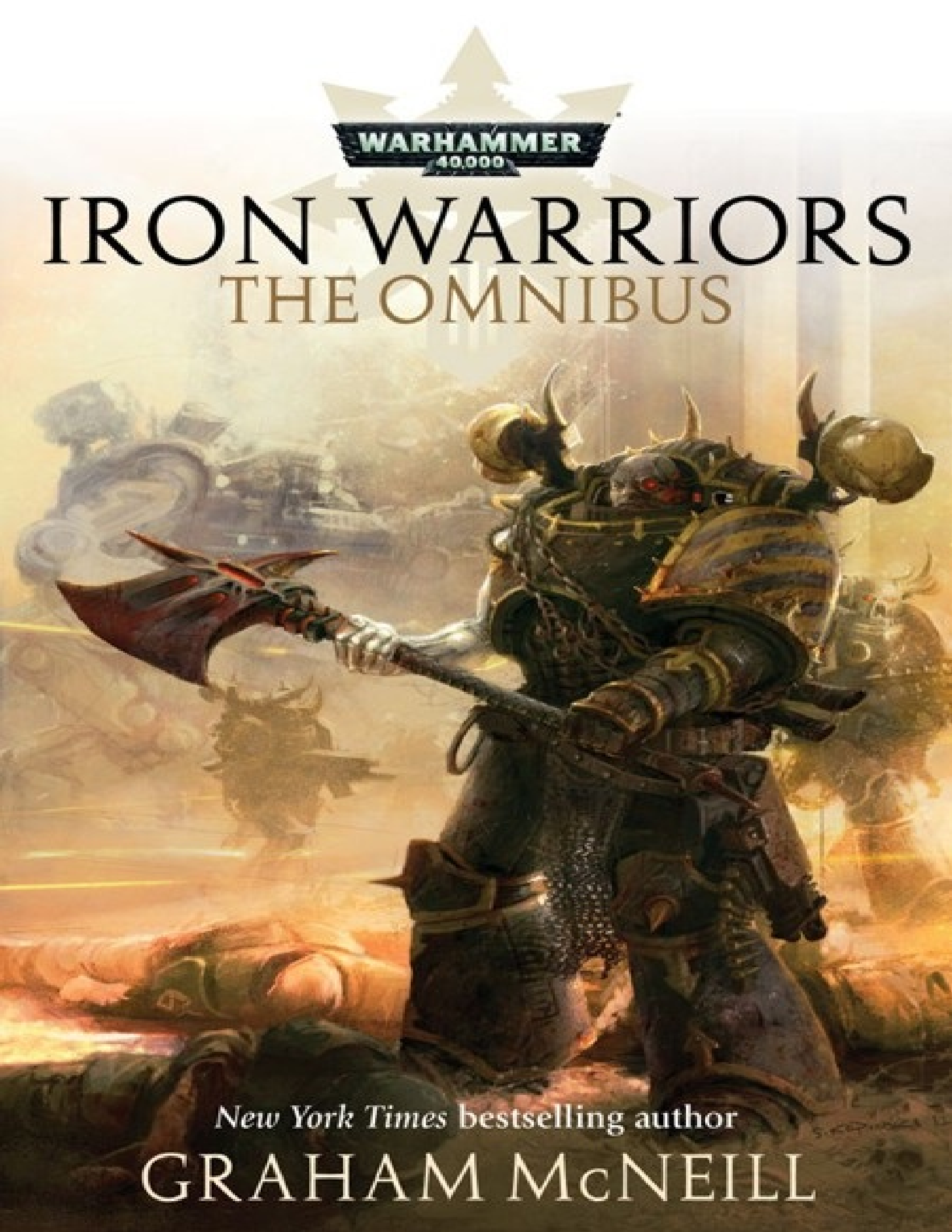
WARHAMMER 40,000

IRON WARRIORS

THE OMNIBUS



New York Times bestselling author

GRAHAM McNEILL

A

WARHAMMER 40,000 NOVEL

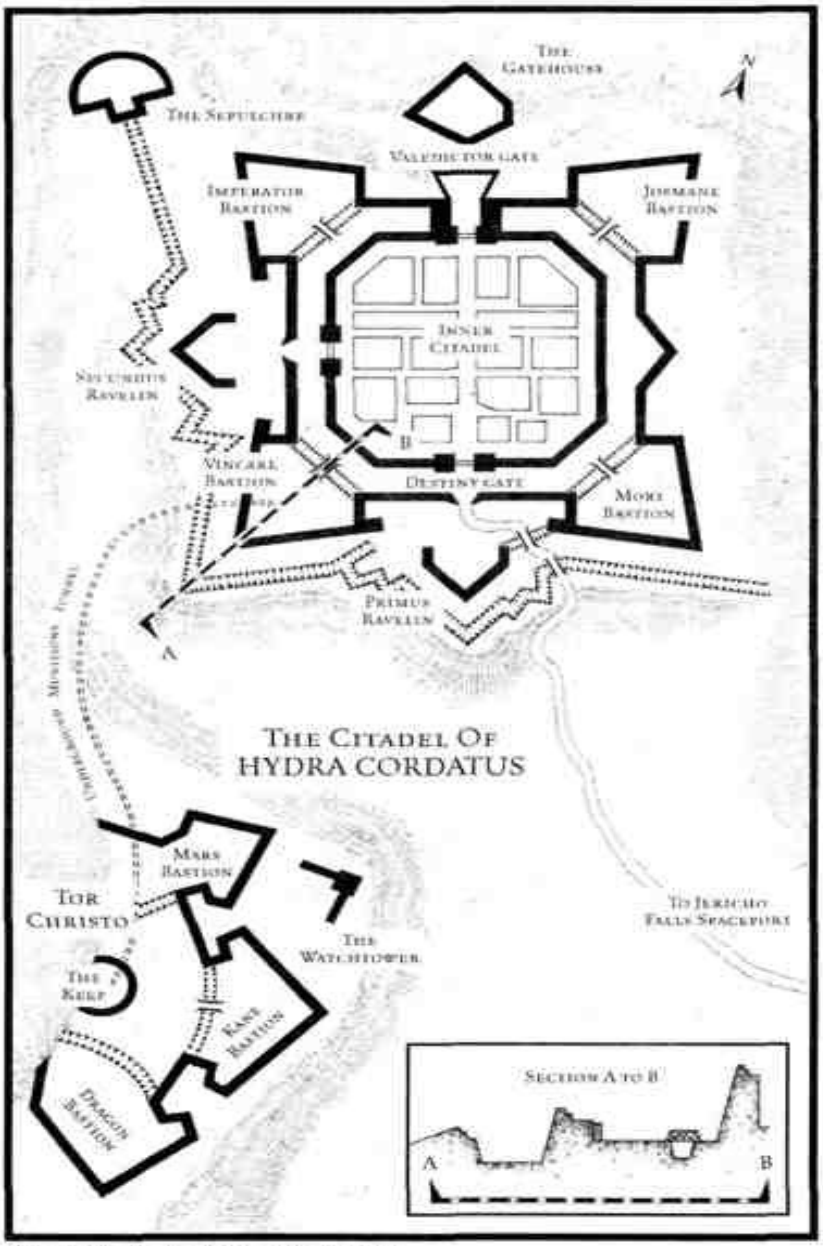
IRON WARRIORS

The Omnibus

Graham McNeill

Book 1

STORM OF IRON



Imperial cartography ref: GC43/h [Index Expurgatoria]

PROLOGUE

THE ELECTRO-CANDLES in the astropaths' chamber were kept dim, though its occupants neither cared nor were aware of their surroundings, their eyes long since burned from their sockets. The aroma of sacred incense filled the chamber, the quiet hum of machinery and the scratching of a score of tonsured quill-servitors the only sounds.

The servitors sat facing each other in two rows, hunched over gnarled lecterns, their ink-stained fingers darting across parchments as information poured into what remained of their minds and out through their calloused hands. Behind each servitor stood an angled, brass capsule, sparkling like a gleaming coffin. Golden wires trailed from each one's frosted surface and ribbed cabling snaked from their sides, running in long lines along the chamber's edge.

A hunched figure, swathed in the red robes of the Adeptus Mechanicus with gold lettering stitched along the hem made his way slowly along the stone-flagged nave towards the chamber's end, pausing every now and then to peruse the elegant scriptwork of a servitor. Shadows hid the adept's face, the telltale gleam of bronze all that was visible beneath his thick hood. He stopped beside the furthest servitor, examining the expressionless features of the lobotomised slave. Its quill hand was making quick, angular patterns over the page.

He moved past the servitor, coming to stand before the golden coffin device behind it. A coiled bundle of fine wires trailed from the top of the coffin to a series of plug-in sockets drilled in the back of the servitor's skull.

The adept wiped a black-gloved hand across the glistening surface of the golden coffin and stared through a misted glass panel. Inside, a young female astrotelepath lay recumbent, her emaciated body fitted with transparent cables that fed her nutrients and chemical stimms, and removed her bodily waste. Like the quill-servitor, she was eyeless, her lips moving in a soundless whisper. The telepathic message she was receiving from half a galaxy away passed from her to the quill-servitor along psychically-warded cables and thence to its wiry fingers, where the message finally became tangible on the blessed parchment.

The adept removed a small vial of amber liquid from beneath his robes, easing past the girl's prison and kneeling beside the massed rows of pulsing cables attached to its rear. He picked through a handful of tubing and sorted through it, at last finding the one he sought. He disconnected the nutrient tube from the back of the girl's capsule and broke the seal of the vial, careful not to allow any of the liquid to touch him.

The adept held up the disconnected pipe, gruel-like nutrients oozing from its end, and emptied out a portion onto the floor. He carefully poured the vial's contents into the pipe, allowing it to seep into the colourless jelly before reconnecting the pipe to the capsule. Satisfied, he stood and returned to the nave as the amber liquid began working its way around the chamber, flowing through the nutrient pipes to each of the astropaths' capsules.

Swiftly he made his way to the chamber's door, pausing as he opened it to listen.

He smiled beneath his hood as, one by one, the scratching of quills was silenced.

BRIDGEHEAD

One

THE EMPEROR DAMN Major Tedeski's soul to the warp, thought Guardsman Hawke bitterly as he huddled closer to the plasma wave generator that provided what little heat there was in the cramped surveyor station. With no small measure of glee, he imagined putting a las-bolt into the back of his company commander's head as he stalked up and down the ash-coated esplanades of Tor Christo.

One thing! Just one little thing and Tedeski had busted them from a cushy little number up on Tor Christo, free from interfering officers, to this damn place!

He glanced without interest at the sensor display before him, noting with boredom that - surprise, surprise! - there was nothing happening outside.

As if anyone in their right mind would want to try and attack Hydra Cordatus. A single crumbling citadel on a damned dusty rock, bleaker than a killer's heart, with nothing of remote interest to anyone. Least of all, Guardsman Hawke.

People didn't come to Hydra Cordatus voluntarily; they ended up here.

He sat inside the cold, cramped confines of one of the sixteen mountain surveyor stations that ringed Jericho Falls spaceport, the one lifeline this place had with the outside world. The machines housed here constantly swept for the approach of any would-be attackers. Not that there ever would be, even if they knew about the citadel.

It was a nightmare detail to be posted here and everyone knew it. The heaters barely worked, the deafening roar of the scouring wind as it howled down from the high peaks was maddening, there was nothing to do and the sheer boredom could drive even the strongest willed to despair. The only thing there was to do was watch the machines and report the odd spike on the display slate.

He cursed his foul luck and went back to imagining new and inventive ways of busting Tedeski's head.

Sure, so they had turned up for duty pretty badly hung-over. Well, probably still drunk from the night before, truth be told. But it wasn't as though there was anything else to do on this Emperor-damned rock. It wasn't as if they'd been entrusted with some kind of top-secret, highly important mission. They were just on the early watch before changeover. By the Throne, they'd turned up for duty drunk before and had never had any problems.

It was just bad luck that Tedeski had pulled an alert drill that morning and the three of them had been caught sound asleep on the Christo's walls. Bad luck as it was, they counted themselves lucky they hadn't been caught by Castellan Vauban.

They'd received a roasting from Major Tedeski, and here they were: stuck in the mountains in a rockcrete can, looking for enemies who would never come.

He sat alone for now. His two companions in misery were out in the dust-stained rocks, some hundred metres in front of the post. He rose from beside the ineffective heater, stamping his feet and slapping his arms around himself in a futile effort to warm up, then stepped closer to the rockcrete walls of the miniature bunker. He peered through what were - laughably - named vision blocks, over the stubby firing grip of the rear assault cannon, to see if he could spot either of his two fellow victims of Tedeski's wrath.

After a few minutes he gave up in disgust. He couldn't see a fragging thing through the swirling dust. They'd be lucky if they found anything in that grey soup. One tiny spike had registered on the display and they'd drawn straws to see which lucky pair would venture outside and check it out.

Thank the Emperor he'd cheated and didn't have to leave the meagre warmth of the post. The others had been gone for nearly half an hour and he realised it was about time he checked in with them. He thumbed the dial on the vox-panel, 'Hitch, Charedo? You two find anything out there?'

He turned the dial to 'receive' and waited for a response.

The white hiss of static poured from the battered vox, filling the surveyor station with a haunting, empty noise. He turned the dial again, staring through the vision blocks and fingering the trigger guard on the assault cannon.

'Hey, you two. If you're okay, answer me. Do you copy?'

Static came again and he anxiously flicked the external cannon's safety off. He was ready to call again when the vox barked into life and he laughed with relief.

'You gotta be kidding, Hawke. There ain't a damned thing out here except us!' said a voice that, despite the roaring of the wind, he recognised as belonging to Guardsman Hitch. The distortion on the soldier's voice was thickening so he adjusted the controls, relieved to hear a friendly voice.

'Yeah, I figured that/ he replied. 'Miserable out there, I bet!' he laughed.

'Frag you, man!' snapped Hitch. 'We're freezing our backsides off out here. Sod this, huh?'

Hawke chuckled to himself as Hitch swore again.

'There's nothing here. It must be a surveyor fault or something. We're right where we're supposed to be and there ain't a damn thing alive for kilometres around us.'

You're sure you're in the right place?' asked Hawke.

'Of course I'm fragging sure!' shouted Hitch. 'I can read a map, you know. We're not all as stupid as you.'

'Don't bet on it, Hitchy-boy!' said Hawke, enjoying his comrade's annoyance.

'There's nothing out here,' cursed Hitch, 'we're coming back in.'

'Okay, see you in a while then.'

'Just get the caffeine on, huh? And make sure it's hotter than hell, okay?'

'Sure thing/ answered Hawke, flicking off the vox-unit.

He'd already drunk the last of the caffeine, so he took a belt of amasec from his silver hip flask, savouring the heat as it snaked its way down his neck to his gut. It was the only thing that gave him any real warmth here. He tucked it away deep in his pocket, not wanting to share any with Hitch and Charedo, and knowing that they'd be back any minute.

The storm continued to howl around the small listening bunker as he stomped around, his foul mood worsening with each step. He'd just made his routine two-hourly check-in with the command post back at the spaceport and had been told by a smug vox-flunkey that their relief would be a couple of hours late. The ash storm was playing hell with the ornithopter's engines again, so they were stuck here until the Emperor knew when.

It was just one thing after another!

He supposed he should be used to it by now. He'd been in the Imperial Guard for almost ten of his twenty-five years now. Picked from a clutch of the best PDF troopers on Jouran III to serve in the 383rd Jouran Dragoons, he'd looked forward to seeing new worlds and strange creatures. A life of adventure surely beckoned.

But, no, he'd been stuck on this damned rock for nearly all ten of those years with nothing but demerits and black marks against his name. There was nothing here but the citadel, and nothing inside that worth fighting for as far as he knew. Why they felt it was worth stationing over twenty thousand soldiers of the Emperor, a demi legion of Battle Titans and all those batteries of artillery here was beyond him.

Used to a life of boredom in the PDF, it had been a wake-up call to him when he joined the regiment. Constant drilling, weapons training and tactics had been drummed into him like there was no tomorrow.

And for what?

He hadn't fired a shot in anger in ten years!

In truth, he was bored.

Hawke was a hellraiser. He wanted some action, a chance to show his stuff. He picked up his rifle and shouldered it, imagining some alien raider in his sights.

'Bang bang, you're dead/ he whispered, spinning and squeezing off more imaginary shots at his imaginary enemies.

He should be so lucky. He chuckled to himself and put down the rifle, having won the battle.

Yeah, right, he thought.

THE HUNTER WHO was about to kill Guardsmen Hitch and Charedo had been stealthily approaching the surveyor station in the darkness for the last hour, his enhanced vision turning night into day.

His name was Honsou and in the last hour he had advanced two hundred metres on his belly, centimetre by centimetre, the auto-senses in his helmet alerting him to the surveyor sweeps of the armoured bunker. Each time his earpiece growled a warning he would freeze as the questing spirits of the ancient machinery sought him out.

The other members of his squad were invisible to him, but he knew that they too were slowly approaching the station. Two of their targets had left the bunker. Were they hunting? Was it just a regular patrol or had someone inside the bunker caught something suspicious on their surveyors? Briefly, he wondered if the soldier within had reported yet.

Probably not, he thought, as he watched the two morons blunder about in the dust storm. They'd passed within a metre of his position as they headed to where they thought their quarry was, making enough noise to stampede a herd of grox.

Hopefully the third soldier in the surveyor station was as pathetic as these two. He had waited, watching them wander aimlessly for nearly half an hour before seeming to come to the conclusion that their hunt was fruitless, and beginning the trek back.

They stumbled away and Honsou wondered again how the Imperium had lasted for the last ten thousand years with men like these defending it. Would that all the False Emperor's soldiers were like them.

Slowly, he followed them, making better time on his belly than his prey did on foot until he was practically on top of them. He was now less than seven metres from the bunker's rear, and only, door.

He shivered as he saw the stubby, multiple barrels of the rear-mounted assault cannon and took a deep breath.

Patience. He had to wait until they entered the code and opened the door.

Still flat on his stomach, he pulled his bolt pistol from its insulated holster and worked the action, chambering a round. The storm easily swallowed the noise. He flicked off the safety and waited.

His targets entered the sheltered lee of the bunker and the tallest of the pair began punching the entry code into the keypad. Honsou sighted on the soldier nearest him, lining the fore and back sight precisely on the gap between the man's helmet and flak jacket. He exhaled slowly, calming his breathing, preparing to shoot.

Everything faded from his perceptions. Everything except the shot.

The code was almost entered. His finger tightened on the trigger. His vision narrowed to a tunnel, following the path his bolt would take.

HAWKE GRIMACED AS the door to the bunker slid jerkily open, draining away the little heat left in the listening post. Why the hell didn't they put a two-door approach system on these places? Not just for the security, but to keep the warmth in.

He glanced at the external pict-display as the door slid further open and did a slow double-take as the wind dropped and the swirling dust abated. Behind Charedo he saw a huge armoured figure with a raised pistol.

Without a second thought he leapt for the emergency door override and slammed it down.

The roaring of the wind drowned the first shot.

Hawke heard a second, followed by two dull thuds. He swore, seeing Hitch and Charedo slump to the ground, gaping craters where their faces had been.

He grabbed the handle of the rear cannon and yanked the trigger hard. He swung

the gun from side to side, not aiming, just shooting. The roar of the cannon was deafening, the rattling of spent shells ringing from the grey walls.

The supersonic shells blew up a storm, churning the mud and earth outside to atoms as thousands of rounds turned the area before him into a death-trap, shredding anything within its arc of fire.

He screamed as he fired. He didn't know whether he was hitting anything and didn't much care.

'You just messed with the wrong guy!' he yelled.

Dust blew in his face, filling his mouth and he angrily spat it clear. Then he- Dust? He glanced quickly at the door.

Oh no...

Hitch's body was blocking it, preventing it from closing.

Indecision tore at him. Door or cannon?

'Damn you, Hitch!' he shouted and jumped down from the cannon's firing step. He grabbed Hitch's headless corpse and pulled, hauling his former squadmate inside, out of the door's path.

A shape loomed up out of the dust. He fell back as a bullet tore across his shoulder.

Hawke screamed and snatched up Hitch's fallen rifle as a giant shape loomed in the doorway.

He fired the rifle, laughing as his shot punched into the figure's chest. The massive silhouette reeled, but didn't fall. Hawke unloaded the remainder of the power cell through the door, shot after shot. He laughed as he finally managed to pull Hitch's body inside the bunker and slammed himself against the door-

closing handle.

'Ha! Get in now, you fraggers!' he shouted at the closing door, whooping with excitement.

Something clattered on the ground as the door finally shut and the laughter died in his throat as he saw the two gently spinning grenades at his feet.

'Oh no...' he whispered.

Instinctively he kicked out, sending them skittering across the sloping floor to the grenade sump, a deep and narrow trench cut into the floor at the wall of the listening post for just such an emergency. The first grenade dropped into the sump, but the second bounced clear, rolling back towards him.

Dropping everything, he sprinted for cover behind the vox-panel.

The grenade exploded.

Fire and shrapnel, blinding light and ringing eardrums. Blood and noise as the bunker became a raging inferno.

Guardsman Hawke screamed as fire and whickering fragments lashed his body. The force of the explosion picked him up and slammed him against the wall of the listening post.

Bright lights sunburst before his eyes and pain swallowed him whole. He had time to scream once before the pressure wave snatched the breath from his lungs, slamming his head into the wall and taking the pain away.

As THE DUST settled, Honsou stepped across the shattered threshold and surveyed the devastated remains of the bunker. Blood clotted on his chest where the Guardsman had shot him.

But that was the least of his concerns. The Imperial lackey had turned his

carefully planned assault into a bloodbath.

Two of his men were dead, blown away in the first roar of the assault cannon.

A couple of grenades into the bunker had silenced the cannon, however. Frags weren't the most powerful grenades, but contained within the cramped confines of this bunker they had been devastating.

He kicked the blackened, smouldering corpse of the Guardsman, venting his frustration on the dead body. He ducked below the lintel of the bunker, black smoke pouring from its interior, and stood erect. Almost as tall as the bunker, Honsou was a giant of a warrior. He was clad in power armour the colour of burnished iron, its surfaces pitted and scored by three months of living in the hostile environment of Hydra Cordatus. He wiped the dust clogging his visor and engaged the illuminator on his shoulder. The powerful glow cast a stark light across his armour, shadowing his moulded breastplate and the symbol of the Iron Warriors on his right shoulder guard.

He crunched through the dust and trained his gaze further down the mountains towards the spaceport. He could barely make it out through the dust clouds, and knew the storm was beginning to blow itself out. They must move quickly.

He had lost two men, but, in the end, he supposed it did not matter. With two listening posts down, they now had a narrow blind-spot running towards the spaceport and he had more than enough men to successfully complete his mission.

He voxed the remainder of his warriors.

'We are clear now. All teams close on me and move out.'

Two

JERICHO FALLS SPACEPORT squatted at the foot of the mountains, a glowing beacon of light in the greyness of the dust storm. Such storms were not uncommon on

Hydra Cordatus, and were just one of the unpleasant phenomenon that simply had to be endured. A typical Imperial military establishment, it boasted a collection of three dozen buildings, ranging from armoured hangars for Marauder and Lightning aircraft, fuel stations and mess halls to barracks and maintenance sheds. The landing strips and hardened runways covered over eighty per cent of the ground enclosed by the three metre high perimeter walls, enough to land or launch an entire attack wing of aircraft in under five minutes. Vast supply shuttles, each capable of landing a Battle Titan, could be handled by the base, though it had been many years since anything larger than a Thunderhawk gunship had availed itself of the facilities.

The command post of the spaceport was housed in what was known by the soldiers as 'The Hope', due to an oft-repeated mantra amongst the Guardsmen stationed on Hydra Cordatus that they *hoped* not to pull duty at Jericho Falls. A thick, armoured tower with a flattened disc on top, set on the northern edge of the landing fields, the Hope was protected by reinforced rockcrete walls, which in turn were plated in sheets of adamantium specially commissioned from the shipyards of Calth. Howling winds swept across the open ground of the base, whipping the abrasive dust into every fold and crease of a soldier's uniform, getting into mouths and behind goggles to choke and blind.

The only way in or out of the Hope was through an adamantium door that required four gigantic pistons to open.

Five companies of the Jouran Dragoons were stationed here, housed in reinforced barracks and a hardened hangar. Green and red lights winked on the numerous landing platforms and runways, and powerful arc lights fought to penetrate the swirling dust and illuminate the outer perimeter of the base. Patrol vehicles, their engines modified to resist the intake of dust, circled the base, their headlights feebly piercing the gloom.

THE ATMOSPHERE WITHIN the Hope was subdued. This close to dawn was always slow, no different from any other time of the day. An hour before the shift change, the staff were tired and restless. The soft ticking of logic engines and hushed conversations with patrolling vehicles and soldiers were the only sounds.

Operator Three, Koval Peronus, rubbed his grainy eyes and took a hit of caffeine. It was cold, but did the job. Once again he leaned towards the vox-panel.

'Listening post Sigma IV, come in please/ he said. A burst of static was his only answer. He checked the time. It had been two hours and ten minutes since Hawke's last check-in. He was late. Again.

'Listening post Sigma IV, come in. Hawke, I know you're there, so pick up the damn vox!'

Disgusted, Koval dropped the vox-handset and took another gulp of caffeine. Trust bloody Hawke to put a spanner in the works.

He'd try once more and if he couldn't get an answer then he'd have to kick it higher and tough luck to Hawke.

He called again. Nothing.

'Okay, Hawke. It's your butt if you want to sleep on the job again/ he whispered and thumbed the vox-link connecting his panel to the adept's station.

'Yes, Operator Three?' answered Adept Cycerin.

'Sorry to disturb you, adept, but we may have a problem. One of the surveyor stations has not checked in and I can't raise them/

'Very well, I shall be there directly/

'Yes, adept/ replied Koval, lounging back and waiting for his superior.

Hawke was for it this time. He'd already been busted onto report, ending up in the mountains and if this was another of his classic screw-ups, then he was finished as a Guardsman.

Adept Cycerin appeared at his shoulder and leaned over the panel, the rasping static of his vox-amp in his throat hissing in displeasure. He smelt of incense and oil.

'Who is stationed at Sigma IV?' he asked.

'Hawke, Charedo and Hitch/

The adept's vox-amp crackled in what Koval took to be a sigh of frustration; apparently Hawke's reputation had spread even to the priests of the Machine God.

'I've tried them three times, adept. I can't even get the standby signal/

'Very well. Keep trying, but if you still can't raise them after another ten minutes, send a flight of ornithopters to investigate. Keep me informed/

Yes, adept/

There would be no saving Hawke this time.

HONSOU COULD SEE the hazy glow of the spaceport just ahead. The bobbing lights of a vehicle wove their way through the gloom, a pair of sweeping beams swinging in their direction. He dropped to his knees and raised his fist. Behind him, thirty armoured figures dropped to their knees, bolters at the ready. It was unlikely that the vehicle's beams could penetrate the thick, dusty air as far as their position, but there was no sense in being reckless.

The lights moved on and Honsou relaxed a fraction. Routine had made the Imperial troops careless. These last few months had allowed him to study the circuits made by the patrol vehicles and plot their routes and timings. The warp alone knew how long these particular soldiers had been stationed on this planet, but it must have been a long time. It was only natural that their alertness would drop and patrol patterns would become predictable. It was an inevitable price for long tours of duty and it would soon see them dead.

Satisfied the patrol vehicle had moved on, he extended his fist once again, opening and shutting it three times in rapid succession. They were too close to the spaceport to risk any form of vox communication. Honsou heard muffled footfalls behind him and turned as a figure in steeldust armour, chevroned with yellow and black, crept towards him. Goran Delau, his second-in-command, knelt beside him and nodded. The newcomer's power armour was heavily modified and ornamented with skull-faced rivets and brass mouldings of writhing faces cunningly worked into the edging of his shoulder guards. A whining servo limb, like a clawed digger arm, lolled over Delau's right shoulder, the ribbed grip sighing open and closed as though with breath of its own.

Honsou pointed to the sky then clenched his gauntleted fist again, hammering it into his palm. Delau nodded and removed a crude looking slate from the side of his bulky backpack, adjusting a brass dial on its front. A red light flashed on the otherwise featureless front panel, flickering for a second before becoming a steady, blood-red glow.

Delau raised his hands to the sky, the servo arm mimicking his movements. Honsou could not hear his words, but knew that Delau was offering his thanks that the Dark Gods had again given them a chance to strike back against the ancient enemy.

Honsou watched the red light on Goran's slate and marked this moment in his memory. The targeting beacons they had spent the last three months planting around the spaceport on this barren rock were all now active, shrieking their locations into space.

This was the most dangerous part of their mission. The Imperials within the spaceport would now know that there were enemies close.

If the favour of their Lords deserted them then they would all be dead soon. He shrugged, the servo muscles in his armour whining as they tried to match the gesture. If it was the will of the gods that he should die here, then so be it. He had asked nothing of them and expected nothing in return.

He just hoped that if he was to die on this barren world it would be by the will of

the gods, and not because of that madman Kroeger.

PIERCING SHRIEKS FILLED the command centre of the Hope as Honsou's signal locators screamed into the sky. Technicians wrenched headsets from their ears at the din, and alarm sirens began wailing.

Adept Cycerin stared, ashen faced, at the runic display. Bright dots of light pulsed on the map projected before him. Each dot indicated one of the orbital torpedo silos or air defence batteries, and operators hurriedly tried to contact the men stationed there to ascertain what was happening.

Were they broadcasting? Were they under attack? What in the name of the Emperor was going on?

Cycerin returned to his monitoring station, placing his hands on the ridged, metal fixtures of the armrests. Thin, wiry tendrils of silver metal slithered from beneath his fingernails like gleaming worms and clicked into brass sockets on the ridges. The adept sighed, and his organic eye flickered behind a pale lid as information relayed from the multitude of surveyors and augurs positioned around the spaceport flooded his senses through the technology of his mechadendrites.

Awareness flooded him, his mind-sense perceiving space and distance as vectors, ranges and coverage of ground. His senses reached into space, following the sweeps of the orbital augurs. Information flowed through him, processed and compartmentalised in the synthetic logic stacks of his augmented brain. Even with his machine affinity, he could barely keep pace with the barrage of sensory data.

There had to be something, this couldn't be happening without reason. Logic dictated that there was a cause for this effect. Something must be out of place...

There, in the north sector! He narrowed his perceptions, shutting off areas of sensory retrieval that were extraneous to his search and closing in on the anomaly. Where there should have been washes of energy sweeping down from the mountains, there was only black emptiness. The surveyor stations on the

northern slopes were silent, their auguries no longer active. He immediately saw that this left an open corridor, through which an enemy could approach undetected to the very perimeter of the base.

How had this not been seen? Why had the operators here not reported such an unforgivable lapse in security? The identity of the surveyor station flashed up.

Sigma IV.

He cursed as he realised that the anomaly had been seen, but that the surveyor station's failure to report had been put down to human error on the part of those within. He swore again, uncharacteristically letting slip his emotionless demeanour, as yet more sirens screeched around the control room.

Startled, Cycerin reopened his mind to other portions of his awareness and his breath caught in his throat as he felt the presence of dozens of starships in orbit above Hydra Cordatus. Inconceivable! Where had these ships come from and why had they not been detected before now? Nothing should be able to enter even the outer edges of the system without them being aware of it... could it? Or was this another example of human error? No, the logic engines would have screamed the place down many days ago if it had detected this size of fleet approaching. Somehow these starships had avoided detection by some of the rarest and most precious equipment available to the Adeptus Mechanicus.

Briefly he wondered what technologies these ships had and how it worked, but shook his head at such irrelevance. He had more important things to worry about. The defenders at the citadel must be warned that an invasion was imminent. He opened the mind-link to Arch Magos Amaethon's Machine Temple in the citadel and sent the psychic alert code. The astropaths stationed there would detect it and send a more powerful psychic distress call for aid to Hydra Cordatus.

Hurriedly he closed off his mind-link and withdrew his digital mechadendrites from the monitoring station, opening his eyes on a scene of controlled efficiency. System operators called to the torpedo outstations, authenticating launch codes and feeding their operators firing solutions towards the collection of starships in

orbit. Time was of the essence now and they had to get the torpedoes in the air.

Alert sirens would be ringing out in the pilots' barracks by now and soon there would be a swarm of aircraft in the air, ready to meet whatever threat was approaching, and soldiers from the Jouran Dragoons were mustering even now to repel the attackers.

He had drilled the operators here for this eventuality time and time again, and now that it was happening for real, he was pleased to note the calmness evinced by his staff.

Adept Cycerin!' shouted one of the orbital monitoring operators. 'We have multiple signals detaching from several contacts in orbit.'

'Identify them!' barked Cycerin.

The operator nodded, bowing his head to his station, running his finger down the slate beside his display.

'They're too fast for landing craft, I believe they are inbound orbital munitions.'

'Plot their vectors! Quickly, man!' hissed Cycerin, though he feared he knew the answer already.

The man's hands danced across his slate, and green lines extended from the rapidly moving blips, reaching out to the representation of the planet's surface. Cycerin's vox-amp crackled in sudden fear as he saw the approach vectors of the incoming bombs matched almost exactly the locator signals being broadcast from the torpedo launch silos.

'How...?' whispered the operator, his face ashen.

Cycerin lifted his eyes to the armoured glass windows of the Hope.

'There's someone out there...'

NEARLY A THOUSAND men died in the first seconds of the Iron Warriors' initial bombardment of Jericho Falls spaceport. The battle barge *Stonebreaker* fired three salvoes of magma bombs into the desolate rocky slopes surrounding the spaceport, blasting vast chunks of rock hundreds of metres into the air and flattening almost all the torpedo silos in the mountains with unerring accuracy.

Alarm sirens screamed and the spaceport's weapon batteries rumbled into firing positions as their gunners desperately sought to acquire targets before being annihilated. A few hastily blessed torpedoes roared upwards through the orange sky on pillars of fiery smoke and powerful beams of laser energy stabbed through the perpetually cloudless heavens.

More bombs fell, this time within the perimeter of Jericho Falls, demolishing buildings, gouging great craters and hurling enormous clouds of umber ash into the atmosphere. Flames from burning structures lit the smoke from within and bodies lay aflame in the wreckage of the shattered spaceport. Smashed aircraft littered the ground and more exploded as the heat from the fires cooked off their weapons and fuel tanks.

Bombs slammed into the rockcrete, scything lethal fragments everywhere. Others smashed into the runways, cratering them and melting the honeycombed adamantium with the heat of a star.

The Marauders and Lightnings out in the open took the worst of the barrage, pulverised by the force of the explosions.

The noise and confusion were unbelievable; the sky was red with flames and black with smoke. Heavy las-fire blasted upwards.

A number of shells impacted on the main hangar's roof. Its armoured structure had absorbed the damage so far, though vast cracks now zigzagged across the reinforced walls and roof.

The main runway was engulfed in flames, burning pools of jet fuel spewing thick black smoke that turned day into night.

Hell had come to Hydra Cordatus.

Three

THE FIRST WAVE of drop-pods fired from the *Stonebreaker* landed in clouds of fire and smoke as their boosters slowed them after their screaming journey through the atmosphere. As each pod hit the ground, the release bolt on its base slammed home and the sides unfolded to reveal their interiors.

Each pod in this wave was Deathwind class, equipped with an auto-firing heavy gun platform. As they opened, the weapons began to pour their lethal fire in a spinning, circular arc. Fresh explosions erupted across the ready line as the bolts found their marks in the exposed attack craft and pilots. The volleys from the battle barge in orbit ceased as more streaking lines of fire followed the first wave. Gun turrets mounted on armoured bunkers engaged the weapon pods, methodically targeting them one at a time and destroying them with well-aimed gunfire. But the Deathwinds had done their job, keeping the gunners occupied as the second wave of drop-pods slashed downwards, unmolested, through the atmosphere towards the base.

KROEGER GRIPPED HIS chainsword tight and repeated the Iron Warriors' Litany of Hate for the ninth time since his Dreadclaw drop-pod had fired from the belly of the *Stonebreaker*. The pod shook with the fury of its fiery journey through the atmosphere and, as their passage became smoother, he knew that the curses and offerings to the Powers of Chaos had appeased their monstrous hunger. He grinned beneath his helmet as he watched the bone-rimmed altimeter unravel, counting the seconds to their landing.

They would now be within the lethal range of the spaceport's guns, but if the half-breed, Honsou, had successfully completed his mission, then there should be little or no incoming fire to meet them. His lip curled in contempt as he thought of that mongrel leading one of the Warsmith's grand companies. It was unseemly for a half-breed to attain such responsibility, and Kroeger despised Honsou with every fibre of his being.

He cast his gaze over the armoured warriors who sat around the steel-panelled walls of the drop-pod's interior. Their dented power armour was the colour of dark iron, heavy and baroque, none less than ten thousand years old. Each man's weapon had been anointed with the blood of a score of captives, and the stench of death filled the pod's interior. The men strained at the harnesses that held them in place, eyes fixed on the iris hatch on the pod's floor, every thought slaved to the slaughter of their foes.

Kroeger had picked these killers personally; they were the most blood-soaked berserkers of his grand company of the Iron Warriors, those who had trodden the path of Khorne for longer than most. The Blood God's hunger for death and skulls had become the driving imperative for these warriors, and it was doubtful that they would ever break from the cycle of murder and killing that had swallowed them. Kroeger himself had revelled many times in the fierce joy of slaughter that so pleased Khorne, but had not yet fully surrendered to the frenzy of the Blood God.

Once a warrior lost himself in that red mist, he was unlikely to survive and Kroeger had agendas yet to follow, paths yet to tread. For Khorne was no sanguineous epicure. He cared not from whence the blood came and as the worshippers of the Blood God often discovered, their own vital fluid was as welcome as that of the enemy's.

The drop-pod's retros fired, filling the cramped vessel with a howling shriek like a banshee's wail. Kroeger took the hateful screaming as a good omen.

He raised his sword in the salute of the warrior and roared, 'Let blood be your watchword, death your companion and hate your strength.'

Barely a handful of the warriors acknowledged him, most too immersed in thoughts of the blood they would shed to even register that he had spoken. It was immaterial; the hated Imperial followers of the corpse-god would die screaming as he ripped their souls from their torn flesh. His blood sang at the prospect of killing yet more of their ancient foes and he prayed to the Majesty of the Warp that the honour of the first kill would be his.

He felt the bone-jarring impact of the Dreadclaw drop-pod through the thick ceramite plates of his power armour as it slammed into the ground. Scarcely had the bottom hatch irised open than he dropped through it, bending his knees and rolling aside as the next warrior followed him down. Thick, grey smoke from the retros obscured his vision, and the flames burning across the spaceport rendered the heat augurs in his helmet useless.

He drew his pistol, offering his thanks to the power of Chaos for giving him such a chance to bring death to his enemies.

ADEPT CYCERIN WAS close to panic. He had had no response to his pleas for aid from the citadel, though they must surely be aware of their plight. The thought that there were enemies with the power to circumvent their surveyors and approach their fastness, unseen and unknown, had all but unmanned him. He cursed the weak, organic part of him that felt such bowel-loosening terror and wished again for the emotional detachment of his superiors.

The data-slate on the wall indicated a breach in the outer wall and garbled contact reports howling across the vox circuits told of giants in armour of burnished iron slaughtering all those who stood before them. He could not co-ordinate a defence without better reports and the chaos of battle was...

Chaos.

The very word sent a hot jolt of fear down Cycerin's spine and suddenly he knew how their enemies had managed to elude their auguries. Accursed, warp-spawned sorcery must have confounded the spirits of the machines and rendered them blind to the monstrous evil that approached Hydra Cordatus. As soon as this first thought had struck, a second followed.

There could only be one reason the followers of the Ruinous Powers would come to this place and the thought made him shake with fear. Confused icons flashed on the holomap of the base, representing friendly forces deploying from barracks and attempting to engage the invaders. Cycerin could see that it would not be enough; there had simply been too much devastation in the opening moments of the attack.

But he consoled himself that he and his staff were safe enough in the Hope. Protected high within its armoured structure, there was no way an enemy could penetrate its security. No way at all.

HONSOU HACKED HIS sword through a weeping soldier's torso, separating his upper and lower halves with a single blow. Their attack through the breach in the wall had caught the mustering Imperial soldiers completely by surprise. Most were already dead, crushed by masonry blasted from the wall by his heavy weapon teams.

An enemy officer attempted to rally his men from the hatch of his command Chimera, screaming at them to stand firm. Honsou shot him in the face and vaulted a rebar-laced chunk of rockcrete, swinging his mighty sword amongst the horrified soldiers. Gunfire raked the ground beside him, explosions of ash kicked up in red spurts by the Chimera's hull-mounted heavy bolter. Honsou rolled aside as the turret began traversing in his direction.

'Take that vehicle out!'he yelled.

Positioned on the walls, two iron giants carrying long barrelled cannons on their shoulders swung their heavy weapons to bear. Twin streaks of incandescent energy blasted into the vehicle. Seconds later, it vanished in an orange fireball, raining yet more debris down upon the battlefield. Honsou picked himself up as another Chimera attempted to back away from the breach, firing its weapons as it retreated. His gunners on the wall methodically swept their weapons around and destroyed it with contemptuous ease.

The base was in flames, but Honsou's practiced eye could see that the vital runways and landing platforms had escaped most of the violence of the bombardment. As his men gathered at the foot of the wall, he aligned himself with the map projected on the inside face of his visor. Through the smoke and billowing flames, he could see the faint outline of a tall tower with a flattened circular top. This must be the control tower and it was his next target. Wreckage and bodies littered the battlefield: drop-pods, aircraft and burning vehicles, their crews either dead or battling for their lives.

The sky was streaked with lines of fire as more Iron Warriors descended to the planet. His fellow company commanders, Kroeger and Forrix, would even now be bringing death to this world. He could not be seen to be doing less in the eyes of the Warsmith.

We have them now, brothers, and there is death yet to be done. Follow me and I will give you victory!'

Honsou raised his sword and set off at a sprint towards the control tower, knowing that its capture would earn him great reward. He wove a zigzag course towards the tower, pools of burning fuel and wrecked machines forcing him into frustrating detours. After three months of creeping through the mountains, it was a cathartic release of his fury to be amidst such brutality. The air was thick with death, and though he was no sorcerer, even he could feel the actinic tang of slaughter that they had brought to Hydra Cordatus.

Here and there, they met pockets of resistance, but the sight of his thirty blood-soaked warriors charging towards them broke the courage of all but the most stalwart. Honsou's blade was dripping with gore as he and his men finally reached the tower.

Grudgingly he was forced to admit that its construction and defences were formidable. Soldiers in prepared positions surrounded it in well-constructed, angled redoubts, laying down a hail of bright las-bolts. Behind four linked and high-walled berms, Honsou could see the aerials of tanks, but what pattern they were he could not yet tell.

Armoured bunkers at each of the compass points sprayed the area in front of the tower with deadly bullets, turning the open ground into a killing zone.

Honsou and his men moved into concealed positions behind the twisted wreckage of a Marauder bomber, as the thunderous crack of a tank's main gun activated the dampers on his armour's auto-senses. Clouds of dust and rubble rained down and Honsou could hear the cries of those wounded by the blast. They had to move fast or the citadel's defenders would be able to counterattack before the Iron Warriors were able to consolidate their position here.

He peered through a ragged hole torn in the side of the aircraft, wrenching the pilot's bloody corpse out of the way and pondered the situation. The corner bunkers were the key: take them and they could roll up the Imperial line with ease. The gunfire sawing from the bunkers was murderous; anyone who attempted to charge through it would pay the price for such stupidity. He grinned wryly as he saw several of Kroeger's men, berserkers by the look of them, lying torn open, their blood leeching into the dusty ground. He wondered if perhaps Kroeger himself might be numbered amongst the dead, but knew that, despite his recklessness, Kroeger was no fool and would not risk his own neck if he did not have to.

Even as he formed the thought, he caught sight of his nemesis some two hundred metres away, firing his pistol ineffectually at the Imperial defenders. Kroeger's attack on the tower had failed and Honsou knew that this was his chance.

He crawled along to his heavy weapon gunners and hammered his fist on the shoulder guards of the warriors with the lascannons, slung across their shoulders as easily as a human soldier might carry a walking cane.

The gunners turned, acknowledging their leader with curt nods.

Another rain of debris fell around them as a tank shell exploded nearby. Honsou pointed towards the tower, shouting, 'When I give the order, aim for the salient angle of the near bunker, and keep firing until you break it open.'

The gunners nodded and Honsou moved further down the line. He knew he was condemning those men to death, but didn't care. Another of his heavy gunners carried a hissing weapon with a wide, flaring barrel etched with elaborate traceries of flame. The gunner's armour was dented and scorched in places, but the weapon was pristine, as though freshly pressed from a weapon forge.

'When the lascannons blow open the bunker, I want you to put enough melta fire into that bunker to make the rock run like liquid.'

Without waiting for a response, Honsou rolled over towards the lascannons and jabbed his fist towards the bunker, voxing the order to stand to throughout his

squads. He scrambled to the edge of the wrecked Marauder, watching as the two warriors carrying the lascannons moved into firing positions and aimed their weapons. Bolt after bolt of powerful las-blasts slammed into the protruding salient angle of the bunker, blasting away huge chunks of armaplas and rockcrete. Realising the danger, Imperial gunners switched their fire to the two heavy gunners, tearing up the ground in a storm of las-blasts and bolter fire.

The two Iron Warriors paid no attention to the incoming fire, sending shot after shot of unimaginably powerful energy into their target. Honsou watched as the angled corner of the bunker cracked wide open, the rockcrete burning orange in the heat. For a moment it appeared that the gunners might survive the hail of shots directed at them.

But the thunder of Imperial battle cannons settled the matter, obliterating both gunners in an explosive storm of ordnance. Before the echoes had died, the Iron Warrior with the multi-melta rose from his concealment and charged forwards to fire. The gun's discharge built to a deafening screech before erupting from the barrels in a searing hiss. The warrior's aim was true and the air within the bunker ignited with atomic fury, spurts of vaporised flesh and superheated oxygen blasting from the weapon slits.

A huge hole had been blown in the tower's line of defence. Honsou rose up from his cover and screamed, 'Death to the False Emperor!'

He leapt over the Marauder's fuselage and sprinted towards the molten hell of die wrecked bunker, its walls now flowing like wax across the ground. His men followed him unquestioningly. To his left, he could see Kroeger gathering his men for the charge, obviously realising that Honsou would beat him to the tower.

Honsou leapt onto the remains of the bunker, his iron-shod boot sinking into the molten rock. The heat scorched his leg armour, but it held firm as he pushed off and dropped into the heart of the defence.

He caught a glimpse of the carnage his men had inflicted and rejoiced to see that his labours had borne such bloody fruit. Scorched and blackened limbs lay strewn about, all that remained of those stationed too close to the bunker; the

backwash of the melta impact had burnt flesh and bone to cinders in an instant. An open mouthed head lay perched bizarrely atop a pile of rabble as if placed there by some macabre prankster. Honsou punched it aside as he passed.

Imperial soldiers were frantically reorganising their battle line as the Iron Warriors poured in through the gap in their defences. Honsou could see a tank - a Leman Russ Demolisher - reversing from its revetment and bringing its ponderous turret to bear on the attackers. Honsou dropped as the sponson-mounted weapons sprayed shells overhead, the ricochets tearing up the blasted rubble around him. Another white-hot blast of melta fire flashed and the Demolisher's turret was engulfed in the inferno of the impact. Steam and smoke obscured the tank for brief seconds, but, unbelievably, it continued onwards through the boiling cloud.

Time slowed as Honsou watched the barrel of its main gun depress and knew that any second it would blast him to atoms. Then, with a terrific explosion, the turret lifted clean off, the tank detonating spectacularly from within as the shell exploded inside the main gun. Deadly shrapnel whickered through the Imperial ranks, scything men down by the dozen and ripping them to bloody rags. Honsou roared in release as he realised the heat of the melta blast must have warped the barrel enough to cause the weapon to misfire and the shell to detonate prematurely.

He rose to one knee and opened up with his bolt pistol, raking his fire over those fortunate enough to survive the destruction of the Demolisher, killing everything he saw in his battle rage.

Kroeger's blood-maddened berserkers clambered across the shattered walls of the redoubt, ignoring wounds that would have felled a normal human a dozen times over. Not for tliem the elegance of precisely orchestrated attacks using sound principles of military engineering. Bodies were hurled aside, ripped apart with their bare hands when there was no weapon to wield.

Honsou spotted Kroeger amongst his men, wading through a press of bodies, hacking left and right with his chainsword. He raised his own sword in acknowledgement towards his fellow commander, but Kroeger ignored him, as

Honsou knew he would. He smiled beneath his helm and sprinted through the blazing wreck of the Demolisher towards the tower.

ADEPT CYCERIN WATCHED the battle raging below with analytical detachment. His moment of panic had passed. Now, secure within the Hope, he watched the dance of attackers and defenders as coloured icons moving across a topographical representation of the base. Red icons surrounded the tower, periodically closing in, but each time fading as the fire of the defenders below saw them off.

He felt mildly ashamed at the panic he had displayed earlier and resolved again to request ascension to the next level of symbiosis with the holy machine. He would seek permission once these impudent creatures had been defeated. Despite his failures in the past, surely Arch Magos Amaethon would not deny him again after his masterful defence of Jericho Falls? He smiled to himself as he watched yet more red icons fade from the slate.

The smile fell from his face as the icon representing the southern bunker faded from a steady blue to an ominous black.

'Operator Three, what's happened?' he asked.

'It's gone, destroyed/ replied Koval Peronus. 'One second it was there, now it's not!'

Cycerin watched, horrified as the red icons suddenly spilled over the location that had, only moments before, been one of the lynchpins of his defence. As the defences were breached, the entire line fell apart with horrifying rapidity. The blue icons vanished as they were systematically eliminated. Cycerin could not even begin to imagine the carnage occurring less than twenty metres from where he stood.

Eerie orange glows from the fires flickered through the armoured glass windows, but no sound penetrated the control room, making it appear remote and detached. Just below him, countless lives had been lost and there would be many more

before this day's slaughter was over.

He consoled himself with the knowledge that the tower itself was totally secure and that there was nothing more he could have done to prevent this disaster.

A deathly hush fell upon the operators and staff within the tower as a massive thudding boom suddenly echoed up from the main entrance.

'What in the name of the Machine was that?' Cycerin whispered in terror.

FORRIX WATCHED THE adamantium door shudder under the impact of the Dreadnought's siege hammer, the metres-thick door buckling under the repeated blows. It was only a matter of moments until the door would be ripped from its frame by the screaming war machine. Thick chains, looped through bolted rings, ran from its legs and shoulder mounts, where two dozen of the strongest Iron Warriors stood ready to restrain the machine once it had broken down the door to the control tower.

He could well imagine the torment the damned soul bound within the armoured sarcophagus must be undergoing. To be cut off from the sensation of bloodletting, never to feel the beat of blood in your veins at the moment of the kill. To be denied the thrill of bare flesh against flesh as you

took another being's life. Such a fate was indeed misery and suffering. It was small wonder that, once confined to the shell of a Dreadnought, the scraps of flesh that awoke to find themselves confined within the cold, metal walls of such an eternal prison could not escape the clutches of madness.

At least for those lunatic war machines, madness was some sort of release. For killing held no joy for Forrix any longer. Ten thousand years of butchery and murder had allowed him to explore the deepest, most wretched corners of the human capacity for cruelty and death. He had shot, cut, tortured, strangled, snapped, choked, bludgeoned and dismembered uncounted souls in his long life, yet he could remember none of them. Each blended into a seamless segue of banal horror that had long since dulled his senses and vicarious enjoyment of

such slaughter.

Gunfire sounded sporadically, the last pockets of resistance being mopped up even now. The half-breed's warriors were clearing out the Imperial soldiers from the ruins of their barrack complex, and despite Forrix's contempt for Honsou's flawed heritage, he had to admit that his rival was a competent commander. Furthermore, he still believed in the dream of Horus, and the unification of Humanity under the terrible Powers of Chaos.

Forrix watched Kroeger pace like a caged animal, straining to be let loose within the confines of the tower. Kroeger's impatience had long ceased to anger Forrix; now it simply irritated him. The man was a proficient killer, and he had fought the Warsmith's enemies for ten thousand years, admittedly, but he lacked the perspective that such an eternity of war and despair should bring. Unlike Honsou, Kroeger had long since cast off any notions of the good of humanity. He fought for greed, for slaughter and the chance to exact a measure of revenge upon those who had bested them so long ago.

As for himself? Forrix no longer knew what he fought for, only that there was nothing else he could do. He had been damned the instant he had spat upon his oaths of loyalty to the Emperor. Now he could walk no other path.

His own warriors waited behind him, drawn up in serried ranks, ready to begin the massive logistical operation of landing tens of thousands of slaves, workers, soldiers and war machines from orbit. In the centuries since the betrayal on Terra, Forrix had organised hundreds of such operations and could land ten thousand men and have them ready to march off in battle order in under five hours.

Until they landed the Titans, the sheer mass of the tower was proof against their available weapons, and the Warsmith himself had impressed upon Forrix the need for swiftness in this campaign. He could not risk bringing the massive bulk carriers, essentially vast barrack ships, down into low orbit until the control tower was theirs. It was entirely likely that there were torpedo silos or orbital batteries concealed within the mountains just waiting for the chance to down such valuable targets.

Once Kroeger had taken the tower he would begin the landings.

And then this world would burn.

KROEGER WATCHED THE Dreadnought rip the bludgeoned door from its frame and hurl the massive piece of metal through the air. The mad howl of the machine echoed across the spaceport as its keepers dragged its massive bulk away from the low-ceilinged interior of the tower.

He snarled and leapt through the shattered remains of the door, blood pounding through his veins in hot excitement. His bloodlust was up, stoked by the infuriating delays in achieving entry to the tower. Screams and roars followed him, as a tide of armoured killers poured inside the last bastion of the Imperial defenders.

Las-bolts burst around him and ricocheted from his armour, but nothing could stop his powerful form. Around fifty men defended the internal space of the tower, cowardly wretches who had allowed their comrades to be butchered while they had prayed for a deliverance that would never come.

Kroeger charged straight for the heart of the defence as Iron Warriors armed with gargoyle-mouthed heavy bolters

took up position either side of the tower's door, spraying the defenders' barricades with shells.

Five powerful strides and Kroeger was amongst the Imperial soldiers, chopping and hacking with his sword. Blood fountained and cries of terror echoed from the gore-spattered walls as the Iron Warriors slew every man that stood before them. It was an uneven struggle and as Kroeger wrenched his sword from the belly of the last man, it was with a snarl of displeasure. Where was the sport to be had in slaughtering such weaklings? The lmperium had grown soft.

Not one of these soldiers could have stood on the walls of Terra in the last days and held their head high. Kroeger shook his head, clearing his mind of ancient

memories. There was battle still to be had.

ADEPT CYCERIN SAT at his monitoring station and awaited death. He listened to the shrieks of the dying echoing from the vox-speakers, and felt his terror rise once more, suffocating in its intensity. His hands shook uncontrollably and he had not been able to move his legs for the last few minutes. He was going to die. The logic stacks in his engineered brain could offer no other probable outcome, no matter how often he pleaded and prayed.

The staff of the command centre huddled, shaking, at the far end of the room, holding one another as death approached. Koval Peronus stood alone, holding a pair of laspistols pointed at the door. Cycerin was under no illusion now as to how flimsy a barrier it truly was and was impressed by the determination that shone from his underling's features.

Suddenly the awful shrieks and clamour of battle ceased from below and Cycerin knew that the soldiers were all dead. Strange how inviolable he had felt here, and how quickly mat security had been stripped from him. Watching Peronus, he saw beads of sweat gathering on his forehead, muscles bunching along his jaw-line and noticed the barely perceptible tremor to his arms. The man was terrified, yet stood his ground in the face of insurmountable odds. Cycerin was no soldier, but recognised true courage when he saw it.

Stiffly, he rose from his seat, forcing his trembling body to stand beside Koval Peronus. He may be about to die, but as an adept of the Machine God, he would die standing before the enemy with chin held high. Koval turned his head as the adept stood alongside him and smiled weakly, nodding briefly in gratitude for his superior's support.

He reversed the grip on one of his pistols and offered it to Cycerin.

'Have you ever fired a weapon in anger?' he asked.

Cycerin shook his head. 'I monitored the production of them in a weapons forge on Gryphonne IV for fifty years, but never managed to actually fire one.'

He swallowed hard. It was the longest sentence he had ever uttered to one of his staff.

'It's easy. Just point and pull the trigger,' explained Peronus. 'I've set the power to maximum to give us a chance of actually hurting one of these heretics, so you'll only get three, maybe four shots at the most. Make them count.'

Cycerin nodded, too scared to even reply. The pistol felt heavy in his hands, but reassuringly lethal. Let the enemy come, he thought. Let them come, and they will find Adept Etolph Cycerin ready for them.

KROEGER CROUCHED AT the end of the corridor leading to the control room and watched as two Iron Warriors planted shaped melta charges across the door's centre. They turned to him and nodded, retreating and taking cover as the timers activated, detonating the charges in a ball of incandescent light.

Kroeger was momentarily blinded as his auto-senses darkened his receptors to compensate, but when they reactivated, he snarled in satisfaction as he saw the door and half the wall had been obliterated.

Nothing came through the door, not a single shot, grenade, or warrior intent on dying with some measure of honour. Angry now at having been cheated of the chance for glory, Kroeger smashed his way through the smouldering remains of the door, his bulk taking a portion of the wall with him and wreathing him in smoke.

Two figures stood before him, pistols held wavering before them. Perhaps here he would find a foe worthy of his blade. He grinned as he smelled their fear.

The smile faded as he saw that neither man was a warrior. One was a tonsured technician, while the other was one of the deluded priests of the machine.

What then could they offer him that he had not already ripped from five score men already? The robed machine priest shouted and fired his pistol, the blast punching a hole in the wall beside Kroeger. The technician fired a heartbeat later

and Kroeger rocked back on his heels as the impact blasted a crater in his power armour. Before the Imperial could shoot again, Kroeger was upon him, backhanding his fist across his face and decapitating him in an explosion of blood and bone.

The adept fired again, the blast scoring across Kroeger's back. He spun, plucking the pistol from the man and tearing the hand from his wrist. The adept dropped to his knees, open mouthed in horror as blood jetted from the ragged stump.

Kroeger drew his pistol, ready to finish off the fool, when a sibilant, velvet voice hissed from the blasted doorway.

'You would cost me my victory, Kroeger? That would be unwise of you.'

Kroeger spun, the blood surging to his head as he lowered his weapon.

'No, my lord,' he stammered, dropping to his knees, awed and humbled at the unexpected presence of the Warsmith.

The darkness within the room swelled as one of the mightiest leaders of the Iron Warriors entered to claim his victory. Kroeger had a barely perceived vision of armour of darkest iron, almost black, and a ravaged face glowing with pale light. Horrible vitality pulsed from that face. Kroeger fought to keep from vomiting inside his helmet, such was the force of his leader's presence.

The Warsmith's burnished armour was magnificent and, eyes cast down, Kroeger could see writhing shapes and leering faces swimming up from its translucent depths. Their agonised wails clawed at the edge of his hearing,

bound forever within the blasted stuff of the Warsmith's body. His footfalls fell with the weight of ages, imbued with the authority of one who had fought alongside the Legion's Primarch, the great Perturabo, on the accursed soil of Terra.

Wisps of ghostly smoke smouldered where he walked, each twisting like a

tormented soul before fading into nothing. Kroeger dared not look at the Warsmith without first being commanded, for fear of instant death at the hands of one of his infernal Terminator bodyguards. They stood a respectful distance from their lord as he slowly circled Kroeger.

The Warsmith brushed his gauntleted fingers along his scarred armour and Kroeger felt intense clamps of nausea seize him in a burning grip. Every cell in his body seemed to recoil at the Warsmith's touch and only through a mantra of hate did Kroeger remain conscious. Though the pain was intense, he felt a powerful yearning for such power. What must it be like to command the power of the empyrean, to have its unimaginable power pump through your veins like blood itself?

'You are reckless, Kroeger. Have ten thousand years of battle taught you nothing?'

'I desire only to serve and to kill those who would deny us our destiny.'

The Warsmith chuckled, the sound like earth falling on a coffin. 'Do not talk to me of destiny, Kroeger. I know why you fight and it is not for anything so lofty as that.'

Kroeger felt blinding waves of pain lance through his skull as the Warsmith leaned in close to the back of his head.

'That you kill the lackeys of the corpse-emperor is enough for me, but have a care that your own needs do not interfere with mine.'

Kroeger nodded, unable to speak, again feeling the roiling sensation of the Warsmith's impending change wash over him. He fought to retain consciousness.

The Warsmith turned from him and Kroeger sighed in relief. The master of the Iron Warriors stood over the still-twitching form of the adept who'd shot at him. From the corner of his eye, he saw the blurry outline of the Warsmith bend and scrutinise the howling adept with the bleeding stump.

'My sorcerer, Jharek Kelmaur, spoke of this man. The servant of the machine with only one hand. He is important to me, Kroeger. And you almost killed him.'

'I... I beg your forgiveness, my lord/ gasped Kroeger.

'See to it that he does not die and you shall have it.'

'He will not die.'

'If he does, you will follow him screaming into hell,' promised the Warsmith, stalking from the room.

As his master departed Kroeger felt the nauseous contractions in his gut subside and pushed himself to his feet. He turned to the mewling form of the bloodstained adept.

He lifted the whimpering man roughly by his robes and dragged him from the room.

Why the Warsmith should want this one saved was beyond him, but if it was his lord's will that the enemy be spared, then so be it.

Four

THE LAST SOUNDS of battle had faded as the commanders of the three grand companies of the Iron Warriors that had come to Hydra Cordatus gathered at the behest of their lord and master.

The Warsmith stood, resplendent in his monstrous suit of power armour, pleased with the bloodletting wreaked in his name. His three champions knelt before him, each man's armour spattered with blood, hued orange by the high midday sun. The Warsmith ignored them, casting his gaze out over the blasted wasteland that had once been a spaceport. The devastated appearance was deceptive, however.

Lumbering, earth-moving machines, brought down from orbit less than an hour ago, were already bulldozing wrecked aircraft and drop-pods from the runways and landing platforms. Bodies were crushed under their grinding tracks or gathered up in vast dozer blades and dumped unceremoniously in giant craters. He cast his eyes to the fiery sky, remembering the first time he had set eyes on this world. Both he and the planet had been very different back then, and he wondered if those who called this place home even knew how it had come to resemble such a pleasing vision of hell.

Far above him he saw a bloated shape, blurred and indistinct, but visible to his enhanced and changing eyes, floating in the fiery haze of the upper atmosphere. The massive starship strained against the oppressive attraction of gravity, disgorging hundreds of landing craft from its belly like some vast sow giving birth to her litter.

Each of this craft's spawn was hundreds of metres in length and crammed with a mixture of slaves, soldiers, ammunition, weapons, siege engines, tools and all manner of materiel required for a besieging army. Forrix knew his trade and the Warsmith was confident that this complex and demanding operation would proceed without problem.

He knew that time was his greatest enemy. Abaddon the Despoiler had bidden them complete this task before his great machination unfolded in return for settling the debt of the Iron Warriors' withdrawal from his designs. To the Warsmith, the Despoiler's plans reeked of the same betrayal that had forced their hand so long ago and driven them to the fold of the dark gods. Perturabo had made the mistake of trusting one he thought was his friend and lord. The Warsmith would not make that mistake himself.

Abaddon may have his plans, but the Warsmith had his own as well.

There was a pleasing synchronicity to his return to Hydra Cordatus. Just now, as he stood on the brink of greatness, he had returned to the world where he had first put into practice the skills he had learned as a novitiate on Olympia.

What he had once helped create, he would now tear asunder.

He returned his gaze to his war leaders, scrutinising each in turn.

Forrix, captain of the foremost of his grand companies, with whom he had held the last gate of the Jarelphi Palace, who had led the retreat from Terra and whose oath of loyalty had been sworn above the clone body of Horus himself.

His experience was second to none and the Warsmith valued his counsel above all others. The fires of glory had long since burned out in his one-time brother, but ten thousand years of war had not dimmed his strength, the saturation of Chaos imbuing his ancient frame with incredible power. His crafted suit of Terminator armour had been struck in the forges of Olympia itself, each greave, vambrace and cuissart hand-tooled by artificers whose skill was now all but a whispered myth.

Beside Forrix: Kroeger, the young-blood, though such a term seemed laughable now, given that Kroeger had fought the long war almost as long as Forrix. But he had always been the young firebrand, with a physical need to plunge into the crucible of combat. His armour was dented and burned in a dozen places - testimony to his ferocity in battle - yet the Warsmith knew that Kroeger possessed a cunning beyond that of a simple butcher. No Kharn of the World Eaters this one, but a killer possessed of single minded drive. Had he simply been another one of those who succumbed to the hunger of the Blood God he would never have lived this long.

Even though they dared not look at each other in his presence, the Warsmith could feel the hatred between Kroeger and the half-breed Honsou. The blood of Olympia flowed in his veins, but he had also been implanted with gene-seed ripped from the bodies of their ancient foes, the Imperial Fists. His blood was tainted with the seed of the corpse-emperor's lapdog, Rogal Dorn, and for that Kroeger would never forgive him. No matter that he had proven himself time and time again, some hatreds were carved on the heart. No matter that his dark deeds were at least the equal of Kroeger's. Honsou had led the Forlorn Hope through the breach in the Cadian bastion of Magnot Four-Zero after a volley of Basilisk fire had obliterated his captain. He had personally broken the siege of Sevastavork and led the Lorgamar Rebellion to ultimate victory. Yet nothing could atone for the hated blood that flowed in his veins and for this, and other

reasons, the Warsmith had not named Honsou as captain of the grand company, despite his utter suitability.

The Warsmith could smell the stench of belief and ambition on Honsou, and its sickly aroma pleased him greatly. This one would risk much for the honour of his captaincy. The rivalry he had carefully cultivated between his commanders was a pungent sweetmeat that nourished his senses.

The Warsmith no longer saw as other men did: his gaze was increasingly drawn into the realm of the immaterium, perceiving things beyond the ken of mortal men, things that would drive them to insanity. In every twisting weave of air he saw hints, suggestions and lies of the future. Every dancing particle of matter whispered tales of things to come and things that might never be. He saw a myriad of futures emanating from his champions, the roar of toxin-ridden filth flashing through nightmare darkness, a terrible explosion like a new born sun, and a mighty battle with a one-armed giant whose eyes burned with icy fire. What they were he did not know, but the promise of death they imparted made him smile.

'You have done well, my sons,' began the Warsmith, lowering his eyes to his champions. None answered; none dared to utter a word unless so bidden by their master.

Pleased at their awe, the Warsmith continued. 'We come to this world at the behest of the Despoiler, but it is for my purposes that we do what we must. There is a fortress here that contains something precious to me, and I would see it in my possession soon. You, my sons, shall be my instruments in its obtaining. Great reward and patronage awaits the man who brings me what I desire. Defeat and death await us all should we fail/

The Warsmith raised his head to the rocky slopes that stretched upwards to the west of the smouldering spaceport. A well-maintained road wove its way towards their goal, the reason for the coming battle. At the road's end, the Warsmith knew that the culmination of everything he had striven for lay secreted below the world - a prize so valuable and so secret that not even the highest and mightiest within the corrupt Imperium knew of its existence.

Without waiting for his champions, the Warsmith set off towards a chevroned Land Raider with thick armour plating bolted to its side and bronzed tracks. The adamantium door slid open with a grating hiss, and the Warsmith turned to address his champions. 'Come, we shall gaze upon the enemy we must destroy/

HONSOU STEADIED HIMSELF on the cupola of his command Rhino, scanning the skies for any airborne threats to their column of vehicles. He did not really expect anything, the spaceport was in their hands and the skies above it were filled with craft launched from the orbital landers. But Honsou's natural caution made him wary.

Dust gathered in his throat and he hawked a morsel of phlegm over the side of his vehicle, the neuroglottis implanted in his throat assessing the chemical content of the air.

The organ no longer functioned as effectively as it once had, and many of the faint echoes of toxins he could taste were unknown to him. But he tasted enough foulness in the air to know that this planet had once been poison to any living thing that set foot on its blighted surface.

He craned his neck around to look back over the route they had taken, over the dusty, arid rocks of the mountains he had called home these last three months. A haze hung over the rocks where centuries of accumulated sands had been blasted free by the orbital bombardment. Under normal circumstances, an orbital barrage was a risky venture, and surgical strikes almost unheard of. But Honsou's covert mission in the mountains had given the gun creatures on the *Stonebreaker* something to aim for, and allowed them to bring the fearsome power of a battle barge to bear upon this planet's defences.

It felt good to have the armoured might of a Rhino beneath him as he rode into battle at the head of his warriors. The foe awaited and Honsou craved the excitement of battle as it pounded, hot and thrilling, through his veins. The battle at the spaceport had been a huge release, but now he looked forward to the destruction of an Imperial fortress, the logical methodology, the precise cause and effect initiated by careful planning and organisation.

Dust filled the air and he spat again, wondering what had happened to this world to make it so barren. He dismissed the question as irrelevant, turning his gaze towards the top of the ridge ahead where the transports of Kroeger, Forrix and the Warsmith had halted, their engines idling, plumes of black smoke belching from their gargoyle-topped exhausts. It was galling to be forced to travel behind the company captains, like some kind of lap-dog. He had fought and killed for almost as long as Kroeger and Forrix; he too had committed heinous acts in pursuit of their goals, had led men through the fire and proved his worth time and time again. Why then was he denied his captaincy; why must he constantly fight to prove his worth?

The answer came easily enough as he glanced at the pattern of dried blood on his gauntlet. His polluted blood was his curse. To be created from the seed of the enemy was an insult to both himself and that enemy, and a constant reminder that he was not pure, not of true Iron Warrior stock, despite those fragments of gene-seed that had come from the chosen of Olympia.

Bitterness rose in him and he let it come, revelling in the ashen taste in his mouth. Bitterness was easier than the stench of desperation and frustration he smelled on himself, the knowledge that no matter how hard he strove, he would never be accepted.

The driver of his Rhino, once an Iron Warrior, now so mutated that he and the vehicle were virtual symbiotes, pulled onto the top of the ridge, halting the vehicle beside that of Forrix. The gnarled veteran acknowledged his arrival with the briefest nod of his head, while beyond Kroeger ignored him.

Honsou allowed himself a tight grin. No matter how bitter he felt towards his master, he could always take solace in the fact that he was warrior enough to threaten Kroeger. He knew that the Warsmith valued Kroeger, and if the headstrong captain of the second company felt that Honsou was a threat, so much the better.

The Warsmith stood at the edge of the ridge, lost in thought, and Honsou shuddered in unreasoning fear as his eyes followed the writhing of the damned souls that undulated within the substance of his lord's armour. His eyes stung if

he stared too long, but his attention was claimed by something far, far greater than the Warsmith's armour.

Ahead, cupped within the red-brown rocks of the valley, sat the fortress complex of Hydra Cordatus.

Honsou could scarcely believe his eyes. The perfection of the citadel before him was breathtaking. Never before had he laid eyes upon such a wondrous example of the military architect's art.

Ahead, hunched on a rocky promontory high above the plateau sat a small, three-bastioned fort, with sloped walls of featureless rockcrete. Before the centre bastion stood a tall, crenellated tower, with sweeping walls protecting the narrow gorge between the left and centre bastions. The tower commanded the plateau, though in a protracted siege, Honsou saw that it would be the first location to be destroyed. The height and steepness of the slopes leading up to the fortress presented a formidable barrier in itself, and Honsou knew well enough that any assault on its walls would be bloody work indeed. Every centimetre of the plateau before the fort was sure to be covered by guns and there could be no approach to the main citadel while this outwork remained in Imperial hands.

But as his gaze travelled further north from the high fortress, Honsou forgot the impressiveness of the fastness atop the promontory. It was but the smaller cousin to the main citadel itself, and Honsou felt the blood thunder in his veins at the prospect of attacking this mighty edifice. Its proportions were so perfect that he wondered whether even he or any of the Iron Warriors alive could have designed such a majestic creation.

Two vast bastions, each large enough to contain thousands of warriors, squatted threateningly on each side of the valley, the majority of their armoured structure concealed below the slope of the ground as it angled downwards towards Honsou. The geometry of their construction was flawless, the precision of their construction a marvel. A long curtain wall connected them and, between the two massive bastions, Honsou could see the top of what looked like a forward ravelin, an angled structure shaped, in plan, like a flattened V. The ravelin protected the curtain wall and gate behind from attack, and could sweep

attackers from the faces of the two bastions with murderous flanking fire. Both fronts of the ravelin were in turn covered by the faces of the bastions, so there could be no refuge from the storm of gunfire and artillery.

Though the slope of the ground concealed the foot of the bastions and ravelin, Honsou knew that each would have a lethal mix of ditches, fire traps, killing zones, minefields and other defensive traps.

Hundreds of metres of razor wire stretched out from the lip of the glacis, the slope built up at the forward edge of the ditch before the walls to prevent them from being targeted with direct-fire artillery weapons, the wire forming a barbed carpet across the entire floor of the valley.

Much of the remainder of the fortress was concealed from his vision by the angle of the ground and the cunning of its builders, but in the centre of the northernmost face of the valley, Honsou could see a diamond-shaped blockhouse built high on the slopes, its upper walkways bristling with guns. Its positioning could only mean one thing: that it was protecting something below and out of sight, possibly an entrance to the underground defences within the mountainside.

Positioned on higher ground, nearly a kilometre to the west of this blockhouse sat an ornate tower, crowned with winged angels and carved from a smooth black stone. Even from here, Honsou could see that it was not constructed from local materials, but ones brought from off-world. A statue lined walkway sloped down from this tower, vanishing from sight as it travelled below the horizon of the bastion tops.

What its purpose was, or how such an exquisite piece of delicate architecture had come to be built in such a desolate place, was a mystery, but Honsou paid it no heed. Its strategic importance in any plan to attack this fortress was negligible, and thus it was irrelevant to him.

Whoever had designed this citadel was a master of the art indeed and Honsou felt a fierce stirring in his belly as he imagined this place churning with men and machines, blood and death, the thunder of artillery rumbling from the valleysides, blinding clouds of choking, acrid smoke and the screams of men as

they drowned in thick, sucking mud, crushed underfoot by the tread of mighty Titans.

What secrets did this citadel hold? What mighty weapon or unknown treasure was concealed within its walls? In truth, Honsou did not care, the chance to assault a place of such majesty would be honour enough. That the Warsmith desired to unlock its mysteries was sufficient for Honsou, and he vowed that whatever it took, whatever acts he had to commit, he would be the first across the shattered rabble of this citadel's walls.

A hollow boom echoed from the sides of the valley and Honsou saw a puff of dirty smoke blossom from behind the walls of the promontory fort. Even as the shell arced through the orange sky, Honsou could see it would land short. Sure enough, the shell impacted over half a kilometre before their position on the ridge, throwing up great chunks of earth and a long plume of smoke.

The Warsmith stared in the direction the shot had come from and said, The battle has begun and it is time we learned more of our foes' capabilities.'

He turned to his champions, nodding to Kroeger.

'Bring up the prisoners...'

Five

THE COMMANDER OF the 383rd Jouran Dragoons regiment, Prestre Vauban, took a lungful of tobacco from his cigar and closed his eyes, allowing the acrid blue smoke to swirl in his mouth before exhaling slowly. The thick cigar was a gift from Adept Naicin and, while he normally preferred a milder cheroot, there was something strangely satisfying about the powerful taste of this monstrous, hand-rolled cigar.

Naicin smoked them constantly and swore blind that a day would come when the Imperial apothecaries would

finally admit that cigars were a healthy pastime for a man to indulge in.

Vauban somehow doubted it, but it was hard to put a dent in Naicin's conviction once he had an idea in his head. Vauban rested his arms on the iron guard-rail and surveyed the landscape before him.

The view from the briefing chamber's south balcony was spectacular, to say the least. The blazing orange sky had awed him with its primal fire when he had first come to this world, but now its radiance simply nauseated him. Much like everything else on this Emperor-forsaken rock. Ash covered mountaintops stretched as far as the eye could see, and were it not for his cold fury and the thick pillars of black smoke burning far to the south-east, he might have been able to enjoy the rugged beauty of the scene.

Vauban would never forget the horror of the images of Jericho Falls he'd seen on the remote pict-viewers for as long as he lived: the spaceport had burned red with the blood of his regiment. That he could not have prevented it did nothing to ease the burden of his soldiers' deaths. They were his men and had a right to expect their commanding officer not to put them into harm's way without good reason. He had failed in his duty to his men and the pain of that failure was a splinter in his heart.

Jericho Falls in enemy hands, and so many dead it was inconceivable to the soldier in him.

Vauban caught himself staring at the magnificent panorama of steep-sided mountains before him, thinking about the battles to come.

What would it matter if they lived or died here, he wondered? Would the mountains crumble to dust, the wind blow any less fiercely or the sun grow dimmer? Of course not, but then he thought of the vile images he'd seen at Jericho Falls. The evil they promised was unlike anything Vauban had experienced before, and every nerve in his body recoiled at the thought of such forces. They had no right to exist in the universe.

Beings who would wreak such carnage were, by their very nature evil and must

be opposed.

It might not matter to the rocks and the sun whether they died here, but Vauban knew that such evil had to be opposed wherever it appeared.

'Sir?' said a voice, rousing him from his grim thoughts.

A staff officer stood at the armoured door that led to the briefing chamber, coughing in the stagnant air. He held a thick sheaf of folders and papers clutched close to his chest.

Are they all here?' asked Vauban.

'Yes, sir. Everyone has arrived,' replied the officer.

Vauban nodded his acknowledgement as the staff officer gratefully retreated within. He took a last look at the soaring peaks and breathed deeply, drawing his sky blue uniform jacket tighter and buttoning his collar.

They might be at war, but appearances had to be maintained.

Vauban shivered, telling himself it was the crisp mountain air, but he only half believed it. An enemy more evil that he could possibly have imagined had come to this world.

Now they would plan how to fight it.

THE BRIEFING CHAMBER felt uncomfortably warm to Vauban, but he ignored the sweat prickling on his brow and made his way to his chair at the head of the meeting table. Regimental colours and plaques of all the regiments that had garrisoned this citadel over the centuries lined the walls and Vauban nodded respectfully to the ghosts of his predecessors.

Every seat was taken. The senior commanders from his battalions and heads of station were gathered around the long, oval table. The commanders of his

regiment sat along one side: Mikhail Leonid, his second-in-command, and the three battalion commanders Piet Anders, Gunnar Tedeski and Morgan Kristan. Along the other side of the table sat the representatives of the Adeptus Mechanicus. Adept Naicin sat with his gloved hands laced before him, smoking a long cigar, his artificial lungs purging the smoke from exhaust ports along his flexing, silver spine. A retinue of blind scriveners and auto-recorders stood behind him, meticulously noting down their master's every movement and utterance.

Beside Adept Naicin, a brass-rimmed, holo-slate displayed a flickering image of an ashen face, haloed by wires and gurgling tubing. The face twitched as half-remembered muscle memories flickered across its features, their organic nature now subservient to the pulse of the machines around them. Arch Magos Caer Amaethon, Master of the Citadel of Hydra Cordatus, frowned from the depths of his machine-temple where he was forever linked to the beating, mechanical heart of the citadel, interfaced with every facet of its operation. So immersed in the internal matrix of the citadel, the scant remnants of Amaethon's body could never leave his mechanised womb buried deep in the heart of the fortress.

Junior officers circled the table pouring caffeine and handing out briefing notes packed with columns of numbers listing operational strengths of units and supply readiness.

Vauban grunted with distaste. 'There's three kinds of lies/ he said, quickly scanning the document, 'lies, damn lies and statistics!'

Behind the table, tonsured technicians prepared the view-slate for the graphics Vauban had ordered and a gunmetal grey lectern was set up slightly to the side.

As the last of the techs and aides left the room, Vauban rose from his seat and moved to stand behind the lectern. The brusque commander exhaled a prodigious cloud of smoke and addressed the council of war.

AVell, gentlemen, we've been hit badly and the situation's probably only going to get worse before it gets better/

A few scowls crossed the faces of his junior officers at this apparently defeatist statement. Vauban ignored them and continued.

'We don't have a lot of time, so I want to keep this as brief as possible. Then we can start getting even. We've taken a hit, and a damn bad one at that, but if we act now, I think we've got a good chance of kicking the enemy right in the teeth.

'First, I'm going to give you all a rundown on what we've been seeing from here. Now, I'll be fast, so keep up, and if I ask a question you'd better answer me quickly. But if you want to ask any questions, wait until I'm done/

Taking the officers' silence as assent, Vauban turned to a large scale map of the citadel and its surrounding environs that had appeared on the slate behind him. Jericho Falls was highlighted in red, while the citadel, Tor Christo and the underground tunnel between the two were picked out in green.

'As you can see, the enemy have taken Jericho Falls and has denied us any hope of utilising the facilities there. This also precludes us from expecting any air cover or superiority/

Vauban turned to face Gunnar Fedeski. 'How many aircraft were based there, Major Tedeski?'

The stocky major was a small man, an ex-Marauder pilot with one arm and a crudely cauterised right eye socket of burnt flesh. Shot down whilst strafing an ork convoy, he had been taken prisoner and tortured by the greenskins before being rescued by warriors from the Ultramarines Fourth company.

Tedeski answered without consulting his notes. 'Five squadrons of Lightnings and four of Marauders. A total of one hundred and twelve aircraft, mostly air interceptors and, we suspect, mostly destroyed/

Very well, so at least we can be fairly sure that the enemy won't be using our own craft against us. Anyway, putting that to one side for now, we still have the logistical and strategic advantage. How long that con-'

'Excuse me, Colonel Vauban/ interrupted Magos Naicin, 'but can you explain how you arrived at such a conclusion? It is my understanding that we have lost the one lifeline we had to the outside world and now the enemy is using our own facilities to land yet more troops and war machines. I fail to see how this is to our advantage/

Vauban didn't bother to hide his annoyance, leaning on the lectern and speaking as though to a particularly stupid junior officer.

'Magos Naicin, you are a man of science, not war, so you cannot be expected to understand, but it is plain to me that this attack on our citadel cannot succeed. We have over 20,000 soldiers, a brigade of armoured vehicles and a demi-legion of the Legio Ignatum at our disposal. I know this fortress and have read the journals of its former castellans. The kill ratio for the citadel's bastions is, at worst, four to one and I am sure that even you will admit that such numbers are beyond the pale of what we can expect from any opposition.'

Naicin bristled at such a dismissive answer, and Vauban returned to the view-slate. Troop dispositions flashed up onto the screen, and Vauban pointed to each glowing icon in turn. 'Our forces are dispersed throughout the main commands. Battalion C is based here along with Battalion B, altogether some 12,000 soldiers and 900 armoured vehicles. Battalion A was split between Jericho Falls and Tor Christo, and, taking into account the losses suffered at Jericho Falls, the battalion now stands at a little under 7,000 men, all currently based in Tor Christo.'

The viewscreen changed again as enemy troop positions and strengths were overlaid on the map.

'As to the enemy, we know that since the battle at the Falls, very little has moved out of the spaceport. As to their numbers we can only guess, but we're assuming they can't have more than 30 to 40,000 soldiers, well armed and, right now, well motivated and led.'

Vauban paused to let the hugeness of the number sink in, pleased to note the absence of any fear in his audience.

'Right then, so that's the situation, as far as we can understand it. Now I want each of you to give the rest of us a quick update on your commands. Nothing fancy, and be honest. If your unit's a mess, short of supplies or otherwise below par then I need to know about it. Understood?'

Vauban addressed the flickering, holographic figure of Magos Amaethon at the end of the table. 'Arch Magos Amaethon, you are closer to the workings of this fort than most men, is there anything I need to know?'

The image of the arch magos fluttered on the holo and Vauban was about to repeat his question when Amaethon answered, his voice wavering and unsure.

'I believe we must hit hard and hit quickly... yes. This citadel is strong... but any fortress will ultimately fall unless it is assured of relief, you see. We are on borrowed time unless we know that reinforcements are on their way to us. We must strive to hold out until reinforcements can arrive.'

Very well, you all heard the magos. I want full ammo inventories by tomorrow morning from every station. Now normally I don't like reacting to an enemy's moves, it gives him the initiative and keeps us on our back foot. However, in this instance, I don't think we've got much choice.'

Vauban turned to his battalion commanders. 'Gunnar, Piet, Morgan? What's the status of your units?'

Piet Anders was the first to answer. 'Sir, we'll teach those curs a thing or two about fighting, 'pon my soul we shall! Battalion C will send those heretic dogs packing with their tails between their legs before they even get to see the walls of the citadel.'

As will Battalion A,' snapped Tedeski.

Vauban smiled, pleased at the aggressive spirit of his officers.

'Very well. Good work.'

The officers saluted, eager to please their commanding officer and anxious to see some action.

The castellan of the citadel continued his briefing, emphasising each point with a jab of his fist as he circled the table.

'Major Tedeski will continue to hold Tor Christo, reinforced by two artillery platoons from each of the other battalions. I want to lay as much ordnance on these fraggers as we can before they even get near the citadel. Major Kristan, you will hold the Vincare bastion while Major Anders holds the Mori bastion. Elements from both your battalions will take rotations in the Primus Ravelin, falling under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Leonid.'

Vauban's officers nodded as he outlined more of his plans.

*We are in for a hard fight, gentlemen, and we won't do ourselves any favours by giving the enemy any respite. Assuming I can get Princeps Fierach of the Legio Ignatum to agree to my proposals, I intend to use his Titans and our armoured companies to take the fight to the enemy when a suitable opportunity arises and allow them neither time nor peace to complete their works. The longer we can delay the enemy's advance and keep him from reaching the walls of the citadel, the more time we give reinforcements to arrive.'

Leonid leaned forwards, resting his elbows on the table and said, 'How soon before we can reasonably expect reinforcements to arrive?'

'I can answer that/ replied Magos Naicin. "With your permission, Castellan Vauban?'

Vauban nodded his assent and the magos continued.

'Before the capture of Jericho Falls, the Adeptus Magos stationed there was able to despatch a coded communique with the highest priority prefix. This will be received by all nearby Adeptus Mechanicus outposts very soon. The security prefix I detected on the message should engender the swiftest response.'

'And how soon will that be?' pressed Leonid.

'It is impossible to say with any degree of certainty. Travel over such distances is fraught with all manner of variables and there are many factors that could adversely affect the arrival of our reinforcements.'

'Your best guess then.'

Naicin shrugged and sighed, the sound like a burst of static from his vox-amp.

'Perhaps seventy days, no more than one hundred/

Leonid nodded, though he was clearly unhappy with the answer he'd received.

'Have we despatched another message from the Star Chamber here? In case the first message does not get through/

Magos Naicin shuffled uncomfortably, glancing over at the holographic form of his master before continuing. 'Unfortunately we have been having some problems with encoding messages for transit recently and the Star Chamber is... currently unavailable to us at this time/

Regaining his composure, Naicin said, 'Do not let this concern you, major. It may be that our foes can defeat us by sheer weight of numbers, but that will take them time. Time they do not have if we have reinforcements on the way. They will be reckless with the knowledge that time presses upon them, making them careless. This works to our advantage/

Naicin sat back as Vauban returned to his seat.

'Alright, gentlemen, are we clear on what we're all doing? We're going to have to be sharp and quick. And we can't afford any mistakes, so keep your rifle close and your sword sharp-Any questions?'

There were none, and Vauban continued. 'Make no mistake, the threat we face

here is very real. The coming conflict will demand the best of you and your men. The price of victory will be high, damnably high, and it is a sacrifice we must all be willing to make.

'Now let's go. We have a battle to fight/

THE FIRST PARALLEL

One

BLOODY, BROKEN AND dejected, the column of men and women shuffled up the road that led from Jericho Falls spaceport to the plateau above. Their heads were cast down; many were grievously wounded and would soon be dead without medical attention.

The Iron Warriors that herded them to their deaths cared not for the condition of their charges. That they could walk was enough.

The column was a mix of thousands of emaciated and malnourished slaves, brought to Hydra Cordatus to work and die, and prisoners taken captive during the attack on the spaceport, spared from death only because it suited the purposes of the Warsmith.

Kroeger marched alongside the wretched column, feeling his contempt for these pathetic so-called humans as a disgusted knot in his belly. How could these snivelling excuses for a species ever hope to rule the galaxy? They were weak and followed the teachings of a rotted corpse on a planet few of them even knew the name of and none would ever have set foot upon.

It galled him to have to use these beasts as fodder, but what choice did they have? The Warsmith had decreed that they be the first into battle and the honour he did them in this manner stuck in Kroeger's throat.

Kroeger felt his rage building and swallowed hard, fighting it down. He was slipping more and more into the frenzied lusts of the Blood God and knew that

he must restrain himself.

To satiate his sudden anger he lashed out with his fist, smashing a nearby prisoner's ribs to splinters. The man dropped to the ground, wheezing and wide-eyed in agony. A few nearby captives stooped to help the dying man, but a warning growl from Kroeger soon dissuaded them. The prisoner was unceremoniously kicked aside, and rolled out of the path of the thousands who followed.

'You march to your deaths and know not the honour you are being accorded!' shouted Kroeger as the top of the ridge came into sight. He swung his arms wide, walking backwards up the hillside, lifting his voice so that more could hear him.

'I make you a solemn promise: if any of you survive the task that you have been given, you shall live. You have my word as an Iron Warrior.'

Kroeger turned his back on the column with a hollow laugh before a woman's voice called out, 'And what is that worth, traitor?'

A frozen moment stretched for long seconds as Kroeger drew his chainsword and marched back to the column of people, his face twisted in fury.

"Who dares address me?' he bellowed. 'Which of you weakling scum thinks to question me?'

Terrified men and women desperately pushed themselves from Kroeger's rampage as he swung his sword about him like a butcher, hacking limbs and heads from bodies in his rage.

Kroeger's chainsword rose and fell a dozen times more before the same voice, stronger now, spoke again.

'I do, traitor. Lieutenant Larana Utorian, 383rd Jouran Dragoons. I question what the word of a heretic such as you is worth.'

Kroeger felt the red mist descend upon him, his vision narrowing to a point where all he could see was the woman who had dared speak to him, the pulsing artery in her neck, the arc his sword would take before it hacked her head from her shoulders. But he held the rage in check and forced himself to lower the chainsword. He towered over the prisoner, a lean, insolent-faced woman in a tattered sky blue uniform of the Imperial Guard. The woman was bloody, her arm held in a crude sling, but she stared at him with a fierce hatred.

A strange, unnatural sense of familiarity struck him, though he could not say why. Strangely, Kroeger felt his rage dissipate. What could she hope to achieve by this show of defiance but a swift death? Kroeger leaned down to meet Larana Utorian's gaze, gripping the woman's wounded arm in his gauntlet and squeezing.

Her face contorted in agony, but Kroeger kept pressing until he felt the splintered ends of bone grinding beneath the skin.

What is your word worth?' repeated Larana Utorian through gritted teeth.

'Not much/ admitted Kroeger, twisting his grip and drawing a fresh cry of pain from Utorian, 'but you are possessed of a modicum of courage, prisoner, and you shall bear the fruits of that courage.'

Laughing, Kroeger released the woman's arm and said, 'This one shall be in the first wave.'

Two

THE FIRST THOUGHT that penetrated the fog of Guardsman Hawke's semiconsciousness was that he had taken it too far this time, that he had drank something that had finally got the better of him. In all his notorious drinking sessions, he'd never felt such all over pain before, as though his body was one enormous bruise being pounded on by an angry carnosaur.

Darkness and dust surrounded him and he coughed as his lungs heaved,

wondering what the hell was going on. He slowly opened his eyes, taking a moment to focus on the view before him. The rockcrete of what looked like the floor of the listening post was right in front of his face, but he could see nothing beyond that. Orange light and swirls of dust ghosted before him.

He tried to shift his position and hot pain stabbed in his left shoulder, drawing a colourful oath and a sticky wetness that ran down his arm.

Hawke turned his head slowly, trying to make sense out of the scorched, acrid-smelling place he was lying in. A blackened, lumpen mass lay against one wall, though he could not make out its nature in the gloom. Hawke's ears rang and every sound his movements made seemed tinny and far away. He shifted position once more, twisting onto his back and gritting his teeth as pain lanced through his shoulder again. But this time he was able to gain more of a sense of his situation. Something heavy lay across his legs and as he twisted around he could see it was the shattered carcass of the vox-unit.

Hawke dragged himself from under the bulky unit as the events of - how long ago now? - came trickling back into his consciousness. He propped himself up against one wall, exploring his injuries with his good arm and remembering the clatter of the grenades as they landed inside. He'd gotten one into the sump, but the other had detonated before he could reach. Thank the Emperor that the decrepit equipment installed in this wretched place was so clunky that it had shielded him from the force of its blast.

He rubbed his arm, feeling the pain from the gash at his shoulder flare anew then glanced over at the blackened shape across the bunker from him. The gleam of bone and the hand burned into a claw told him that it had once been his fellow squadmate, Hitch.

Hawke couldn't feel sorry for Hitch, he had his own problems to deal with - like what the hell was he supposed to do now? The equipment here was smashed and he was sure that there was no way he could fix it. He was stuck near the top of a fragging mountain with no sure way down, and his arm hurt like a cast-iron bitch.

With a groan Hawke pushed himself onto wobbling legs and leaned back against the wall of the listening post. His breath hurt in his chest and he wondered if any of his ribs had been broken. He lurched drunkenly towards a gunmetal footlocker, partly concealed beneath the remains of the assault cannon and vox-console. He kicked the debris clear and hauled open the locker lid, lifting out a canvas rucksack and rummaging around inside. He lifted out a small medi-pack and ripped it open, painfully shrugging off his uniform jacket and undershirt.

As he doused his wound in analgesic fluid and applied a pressure swab to his arm, he wondered who the hell had attacked him. The question only occurred to him as his thoughts became less disjointed and confused. He hadn't had much of a look at them, but whoever they were they were enormous. He'd had a fleeting impression of iron-grey vastness, too bulky to be anything but a Space Marine.

Hawke paused in his ministrations as the breath caught in his throat.

Space Marines...

He'd seen Space Marines a few times - when he'd been unlucky enough to pull a tour at the Hope and had watched them march from their armoured gunships. At first he'd been in awe of their stature, longing to ask one of them about his life, the battles he'd fought and the places he'd seen. But their stoic demeanour, martial bearing and enormous guns had made it clear that to do so would probably be the gravest and last mistake he'd ever make.

Still, there was something about the glimpse he'd had of the anonymous warrior that caused him to shiver in sudden fear. He was like no Space Marine Hawke had ever seen before. For all their arrogant superiority, none of them had, even when they deigned to glance his way, chilled him with such ancient malevolence. This was something else entirely.

A wry smile creased Hawke's ash-streaked features as he suddenly realised that his desire for action had been granted in the most concrete way possible. He had come eye-to-eye

with the enemy and was still alive. The puzzle of why his attackers had let him

live was solved when his gaze fell once more on the body against the wall. They'd seen Hitch's corpse and figured it for his. He laughed, the pitch a little too high.

'Well, Hitchy boy/ giggled Hawke, 'looks like you managed to do something useful with your life after all.'

Like most people had throughout Hawke's life, the enemy had underestimated him and he felt a sudden anger rise up in him. He was a soldier, damn it, and he'd make sure these bastards knew it.

Cradling his arm close to his chest, he fashioned a crude sling with bandages from the medi-pack and dumped the contents of the rucksack onto the floor, tossing aside items that were just extra weight and loading up with anything that looked useful, not that much had survived the explosion. He stuffed as many ration packs as he could find into his pack as well as a couple of plastic bottles of hydration capsules. He checked his uniform jacket for detox pills, sighing in relief as he felt the container in his inside pocket. Without them, he might as well put a bullet through his brains right now as the poisons within the atmosphere would cause him to sicken within the day unless he took the purgatives and cleansing chemicals the Adeptus Mechanicus Biologis distilled and manufactured for the soldiers. They were perhaps the foulest things Hawke had ever tasted, but if they kept him alive, then he guessed he could bear it. He didn't have too many left, though...

He rummaged around the locker, pulling out a battered respirator kit and stuffing it in the rucksack. The oxygen level inside was just over half-full, but it would come in handy if he got caught in one of the frequent dust storms that lashed the mountains.

Hawke grinned as he pulled out a portable vox-unit from the bottom of the locker, though calling it portable was a joke. The bulky battery packs weighed a kilo each and the vox itself would take up over half the space in his pack. Still, he'd heard it said that there was nothing more dangerous on the battlefield than a man with a means of communication.

Personally, he would rather have a lascannon, but such was life.

He emptied Hitch's and Charedo's packs, searching for anything useful amongst his former friends' gear.

A direction finder and a set of magnoculars once belonging to Charedo went into one pocket, as well as six energy packs for a lasgun. A gleaming knife and tooled leather scabbard, once the pride and joy of Guardsman Hitch, was buckled around his waist with a quick nod to the blackened corpse.

'You don't mind if I take this, do you? No, thought not. Cheers, Hitch.'

Satisfied that he had salvaged all he could from the listening post's meagre supplies, Hawke turned to search for his lasgun, overturning twisted debris and kicking aside drifts of amber dust that had drifted in through the door.

There. He reached down and gripped the stock, pulling the weapon clear of the dust. Seeing that the barrel was twisted and buckled he dropped the useless weapon with a growl of disgust, and turned towards the buckled doorway.

Hawke stepped outside, squinting in the sudden brightness and staring in open-mouthed surprise at the pillars of smoke rising in the distance from Jericho Falls.

'Emperor's holy blood!' hissed Hawke as he gazed up at the packed sky, clustered with enormous craft that surely should not have been able to stay aloft such was their vast bulk. The Falls was busier than he had ever seen it. Tens of thousands of men and machines filled the environs of the spaceport, even more than when the entire regiment had been gathered for embarkation at the Great Muster on loura.

His knees sagged and Hawke felt the hotness of the mountain ash through his combat fatigues as he sank to the ground. Who could believe that anyone could organise such vast numbers of men? He put his hand out to steady himself, his fingers meeting cold metal and closing around the barrel of a gun.

Hawke looked down, seeing a Jouran pattern lasgun on the ground, its stock smeared with dark blood. Smiling, he picked it up and saw that the charge indicator read a healthy green.

Fresh resolve filled him, and he pushed himself to his feet.

He had to do something, but what?

He couldn't fight that many men. Even the fireside legends of the Space Marine primarchs balked at such odds, yet the Emperor had seen fit to grant him this chance to prove himself worthy. How he would do that he wasn't sure, but he was pretty resourceful, he would think of something.

He couldn't see the citadel from here, but the knifeback ridge that ran north-west from the listening post climbed another thousand metres or so, and should provide him with a fine view down onto both the valley of the citadel and Jericho Falls spaceport.

He slung the lasgun and picked his way over the rocks to where the ground became steeper and more rugged. He sucked in a deep breath, coughing as the dusty air caught in the back of his throat, and took stock of his situation.

Stranded on the mountains with nothing but a portable vox, a rifle with six clips and a combat knife to his name.

Enemies of the Emperor beware, he thought grimly, and began to climb.

Three

FORRIX WATCHED AS yet another column of flatbed trucks carrying sallow-faced troopers roared across the runway towards the gateway in the outer wall of the spaceport. All manner of conveyances rumbled in an endless line from the vast bellies of scores of transports as they touched down and disgorged convoy after convoy of tanks, trucks, supply wagons, armoured carriers and mobile artillery pieces. Thousands of vehicles passed him, directed at each stage of their journey

by an Iron Warrior from Forrix's grand company. Nothing was left to chance; every aspect of this logistical nightmare had been foreseen by Forrix and planned for.

Each craft descended in a precise pattern, landing in blinding clouds of ash and retros, disgorging their cargoes before lifting off in a carefully ordered sequence. Forrix knew exactly which ship captains were cautious and which were reckless in their approaches, how long each would take to land and how efficient each one's ground crew were. The noise was deafening and most of the humans landing on this planet today would never hear again.

To the uninformed observer's eye, the spaceport was a heaving mass of bodies and machinery, but had that observer looked closer, they would have seen an underlying structure to the movements. No random Brownian motion this, but a carefully orchestrated manoeuvre whose complex patterns could only be perceived by those with centuries of experience in moving such gargantuan volumes of men and machines.

The sheer scale of the operation and the speed with which it was being undertaken would have amazed Imperial logisticians. Were it not for the Iron Warriors' damnable purpose, those same logisticians would have willingly prostrated themselves before Forrix and begged him to teach them his skills.

As well as overseeing operations from within the spaceport, Forrix had his warriors directing operations from without. The pitiful excuse for defence that had been broken open during the initial attack was even now being repaired and lines of contravallation were being erected to defend the spaceport from any external threat. Not that Forrix particularly expected any, but it was procedure and thus was done. If history and his long years of war had taught him anything, it was that the minute you thought yourself safe from attack was when you were at your most vulnerable.

With a speed that would have put the finest Imperial engineers to shame, a nightmarish assembly of trench lines, razor wire fields and armoured pillboxes were being constructed in defensive formations around the spaceport's perimeter. By nightfall, Forrix expected the lines of contravallation to be complete and lericho Falls to be as secure as it had ever been in its long existence.

The spaceport was his responsibility and he would not allow it to remain unprotected, no matter how much the Warsmith had assured them that there was no way the

Imperial forces could summon aid, that their psychic link to the rest of the galaxy had been terminated.

Forrix was not so sure. Jharek Kelmaur, the Warsmith's cabal sorcerer, had looked uneasy as the Warsmith glibly dismissed the Imperial telepaths and Forrix wondered what guilty secret the sorcerer might be keeping. Had the Imperial forces been able to make some communication with the outside world that the sorcerer's machinations had been unable to prevent? It was an interesting notion and Forrix would store that nugget away lest it prove a valuable bargaining tool at some later date. The passion for intrigue had long since left Forrix, but he was astute enough to realise that knowledge was power, and it never hurt to have some potential advantage over your rivals. For now he would assume that there was at least the remote possibility of the citadel being relieved and he would plan his defences accordingly.

A rune flashed on his data-slate and Forrix put aside the paranoid intrigues that

were the meat and gravy of the Iron Warriors and watched as the main runway was smoothly cleared of soldiers and vehicles as yet another vast ship hauled its bulk through the deep amber sky in shrieking clouds of engine fire. No sooner had the vessel cleared the outer markers of the landing field than a ponderous shadow slipped slowly across the spaceport, its inky blackness spreading across the entire facility like an obscene oil slick.

Forrix knew without looking which craft had entered the approach pattern, and while more easily impressed heads craned skyward to gawp at the leviathan descending towards Jericho Falls, he was merely irritated that it was almost thirty-six seconds behind his schedule. A groaning like the sound of the world cracking open split the air, the grinding screech of massive organic pistons and gears overcoming the bass thrumming of the mechanisms that kept the bloated craft aloft. These ancient and arcane devices, a hideous mix of what had once been organic components and ancient technology, had been created specifically for this craft and there was nothing in the galaxy like it. Their construction owed as much to the power of hyper-evolution and sorcery as engineering, and the physics of their operation should have been impossible. Forrix knew for a fact that their manufacture had only been possible within the Eye of Terror, that region of space where the warp spewed into realspace and all laws of reality ceased to have meaning. That region of space called home by the Legions of Chaos.

As the ominous shadow stopped moving and the deafening grinding noise continued, Forrix glanced up to check that the ship was maintaining the correct altitude.

The cargo now being delivered here was vital to the success of the campaign.

The massive vessel resembled a vast spire of rock pitched on its side and left to lie for millennia at the bottom of some depthless ocean. Its ancient surface was a loathsome, glossy black, like the carapace of some vile insect, pitted and encrusted with lesions and fluid-leaking orifices. Its underside was studded with sphincter-like caverns that shimmered in a monstrous heat haze.

Once, long ago, this vessel had plied the icy depths of space in the unutterable

vastness between galaxies, home and locus to billions of creatures linked together in a gestalt consciousness, enslaved to the imperative to consume biological matter and reproduce. It had drifted from world to world, stripping each bare of life, each creature within its shared mind acting in perfect concert with the vast over-mind. That had come to an end when the Warsmith had caused its neural pathways to become infected with the same techno-virus that infested the insane Obliterators, severing the vital link between the massive parent vessel and its offspring, stripping away the smothering blanket of belonging from the swarm.

No one knew how long the leviathan had fought the infection before the Warsmith's sorcerers had defeated its defences and dragged the barely sentient carcass to the Eye of Terror. Perhaps the creature-ship had thought it was to be granted succour, but in that regard it was to be sorely mistaken.

Defiled and perverted to serve instead of rule, it had been enslaved to the Warsmith's desires and became yet another cog in his grand design.

Like some bloated sea monster from legend, the gargantuan vessel's vast belly hung open, geysers of putrescent gases venting from its interior. Over two thousand metres in length, it hovered impossibly above Jericho Falls.

From the sweating darkness of its ribbed interior, two shapes slowly descended from the vessel, cries of terror and welcome rising in equal measure as the human soldiers pressed into the service of the Iron Warriors screamed a welcome to their gods of war.

Their upper reaches swathed in metres-thick cable-like tentacles, two vast Battle Titans of the Legio Mortis descended to Hydra Cordatus. First came their massive legs, each like the tower of a castle, their surfaces studded with gun ports and scarred by millennia of war, followed by wide torsos and armoured chests.

Shaped in the image of Man, their resemblance to their creators ended there. Powerful arms, bearing guns larger than buildings, hung inert from wide, turret-like shoulders. Then came the heads, and Forrix, for all his weariness of battle,

could not help but be struck by the terrible power inherent in these glorious creations. Whether they had been carved, moulded or shaped by the will of the dark gods themselves none could say, but their daemonic visages shone with the very power of Chaos, as though a fragment of that raw energy might be contained within their hellish features.

The ground shook with thunderous vibration as the feet of these glorious machines slammed down like the tread of an angry god. The glistening cable-tentacles, slipped free of their charges, coiled back into the belly of their host and vanished from sight as the next two Battle Titans were readied for landing.

Forrix watched as the two Titans stood motionless on the landing field, their power and majesty palpable even in their stillness. A sinuous tail, bearing a spiked wrecking ball larger than the greatest super heavy tank, twitched at the back of the largest Titan and a massive cheer burst from the assembled warriors.

A powerful whine burst suddenly from the Titans as the mighty weapon-arms began to move, a fierce and monstrous anime enlivening each of the war machines with vigour. The first war machine, once an Emperor-class Titan in the service of the corpse-god, now known and feared as the *Dies Irae,* took a ponderous step forward, its mighty foot crashing down on the ground with teeth-loosening force, its daemonic princeps eager to plunge into battle lest his monstrous war machine turn its fury upon its allies.

Its companion in death, the *Pater Mortis,* raised its guns to the heavens, as though saluting the gods for delivering it to war once more and roared its battle lust across the world. Smaller than the *Dies Irae,* it followed its massive sibling like a devoted acolyte.

Forrix allowed himself a tight smile as he watched the two mighty engines of destruction stride from the spaceport towards the mountains. Tanks and infantry swarmed around their legs. Those who had fought alongside these lethal machines before kept a sensible distance from them while those unused to seeing the power of their masters so physically manifested clustered around to pay homage. Many of their foolish human soldiers paid the price for their unwise

devotion, as whole swathes of men were crashed underfoot with each step of the gigantic machines.

Two more Titans were even now descending to the planet's surface and there would be many more before this day's operation was complete. Forrix had much yet to do, but was content that everything was proceeding on schedule.

Within another two hours there would be an army of conquest ready to take this world apart in a storm of iron.

Four

LARANA UTORIAN FOUGHT to keep the pain of her ruined arm at bay just a little longer. Even if she lived through this nightmare, which she acknowledged was unlikely, she knew she would lose it. The giant who had brought them here had seen to that, crashing every bone and ripping every tendon in her arm. Each step sent bolts of pain shooting through her and it took a supreme effort of will not to drop to her knees and just give up.

She had seen what happened to those who had done that, and had no wish to end her days as a screaming, eyeless wreck, nailed to the chassis of a traitor's tank. She would face death on her feet like a true soldier of the Emperor.

Painfully, she shuffled uphill, keeping her eyes focussed on the neck of the man in front, concentrating on putting one foot before the other. She glanced up as he suddenly stopped and felt a hot, roiling sensation of fear work its way through her gut as she saw the formidable, rocky slopes of Tor Christo before her. The grey bastions on the rocks above were over a kilometre away, but Utorian fancied she could make out the faces of the gunners and soldiers on the firing steps. What must they be thinking, she wondered? Were they afraid, or were they full of bravado, confident that nothing could breach their high walls? Larana hoped they were afraid.

Their column began moving forwards as smoke-belching trucks roared alongside them. The tracks skidded to a halt at the head of the columns and sudden hope

flared in Larana's heart as she saw men in crimson overalls with crude eight-pointed stars stitched over their left breast on the back of the tracks handing battered, but serviceable looking rifles to the startled prisoners. If these traitorous curs thought that the men and women of the Jouran Dragoons would fight for them, then they were even more deluded than she had thought. As soon as she was given a weapon, she would turn it on their captors and damn the consequences.

But any hope of a swift death in a glorious last stand were dashed as Larana took hold of one of the rifles and discovered it was nothing more than a hollow framework, the internal workings missing. She felt tears of frustration well up inside, but suppressed them viciously. Hands pulled at her, dragging her and the others forward and lifting them onto the backs of the trucks. Too numb to resist, she allowed herself to be packed into the vehicle, biting her lip to avoid screaming as more and more prisoners were pressed inside the truck. The stench of fear was overpowering. Soldiers vomited and soiled themselves in terror as their reserves of courage finally reached their limit.

Larana, pressed at the side of the truck, caught only glimpses of what was happening outside. The revving of engines built to a deafening crescendo and she could see hundreds of trucks, all as crammed as this one, lined at the edge of the plateau. Interspersed between the trucks, Larana could see boxy, armoured personnel carriers, similar to the ones she had seen Space Marines using. She knew they were called Rhinos, but these bore little resemblance to the noble vehicles she had seen members of the Adeptus Astartes employ. Their armoured sides had a disgusting, oily texture, as though somehow alive, their every surface festooned with spikes, chains and skulls. The roar of their exhausts was like the bellowing of some impatient predator, and each bucked madly, as though chafing at the delay enforced upon them.

Larana bit her lip hard enough to draw blood as the truck lurched forward, its wheels churning the dusty ground as its wheels fought for purchase. Her vision spun crazily and she gripped the stock of her useless lasgun trying not to imagine the next horror that awaited her.

Gunnkr First Class Dervlan Chu watched the approaching line of vehicles

through the gunsight of his Basilisk artillery piece mounted behind the walls of Tor Christo's Kane bastion with undisguised relish. The image was grainy and static interference washed through the sight, but its beauty was unmistakable. It was an artilleryman's dream. He tried to get a count on the number of targets approaching the fortress, dividing the approaching line in two and then halving it again. He made out roughly three hundred trucks, no doubt laden with traitorous scum eager to dash themselves against the bulwark of Tor Christo, and perhaps two dozen APCs.

These fools hadn't even bothered to commence their attack with an artillery barrage or under cover of smoke. If this was the calibre of their opposition, then the warnings of their company commanders had been largely unnecessary. They would send these incompetent idiots home in pieces.

Chu already had his zones of fire mapped out, he knew the precise ranges of his gun, and his loading team already had one of the metre-long shells loaded in the breech of the massive artillery piece. He allowed himself a quick glance along the line of emplaced artillery, pleased to note that every other gun appeared to be locked and loaded. Jephen, the commander of the next Basilisk in line, gave him a smiling thumbs-up.

Chu laughed and shouted, 'Good hunting, Mr Jephen! A bottle of amasec says I tally more than you and your boys!'

Jephen sketched a casual salute and replied, 'I'll take that wager, Mr Chu. Nothing tastes as fine as amasec another man has paid for.'

'A fact I shall no doubt rejoice in later, Mr Jephen.'

Chu returned to his gunsight as the line of vehicles rumbled closer, the roar of their engines little more than a distant growl from his elevated position. Smoke and dust billowed behind the attacking vehicles and soon they would be in range.

Chu swivelled on his gun-chair to watch the senior officers of the Christo, together with the omnipresent priests of the Machine God, gathered far behind the guns, consulting an attack logister that was no doubt wired into the gunsights

of their artillery pieces.

A liveried aide passed round crystal glasses of amasec to the senior officers from a silver tray as another handed out ear protectors. The officers laughed at some private joke and toasted the success of the venture, downing their drinks in a single gulp.

The officers removed their peaked caps and donned their ear protectors. One officer, who Chu recognised as Major Tedeski, stepped towards the guns and raised a portable vox to his mouth.

The oil-stained speaker beside Chu hissed and Tedeski's harsh, clipped tones announced, 'My compliments to you, gentlemen, you may fire when ready.'

Chu smiled and returned to his gunsight, watching the range counter unwind as the enemy approached.

HONSOU DUCKED INSIDE the crew compartment of his Rhino and spun the locking wheel of the hatch behind him. There was little point in manning the bolters now, and he would only expose himself to unnecessary risk by riding with the hatch open.

He returned to his commander's seat as the Rhino bucked over the undulating ground, the driver easing back on its speed and allowing the trucks carrying the prisoners to take the lead. There were sure to be minefields before the hill fort, and it was the tracks' job to find them first.

The warriors accompanying him chanted a monotonous dirge - a prayer to the Dark Gods, memorised and unchanged these last ten millennia. Honsou closed his eyes and allowed it to wash over him, his lips moving in time with the words. He clutched his bolter tight, though he knew that it was not yet time to sate its battle hunger with the blood of traitors. The only deaths likely this day were those of worthless prisoners, men who deserved to die anyway for their stubborn refusal to follow the only true path that could save mankind from the multifarious horrors of this universe.

Where else but in Chaos could humanity find the strength to resist the implacable advance of the tyranids, the barbarity of the orks or the nascent peril of the ancient star-gods that were even now awakening from their aeons-long slumbers? Only Chaos had the power to unite a fragmented race and defeat that which sought to destroy it. The soldiers of the corpse-god only speeded the ruination of that which they purported to defend by resisting Chaos.

Well, the great work they undertook here would bring the ultimate victory of Chaos one step closer, and the Warsmith would surely reward all those who aided in his victory with the patronage of the gods. Such a prize was worth any price and Honsou knew he would risk anything to win such reward.

The roar of the Rhino's engine deepened, startling Honsou from his reverie and he knew that the time had come to implement the next stage of the attack.

THE TRUCK BOUNCED over the uneven ground and Larana Utorian felt her legs sag as pain washed over her. She fell against the side of the truck, sinking to her knees and slamming her face against its timber panelled sides. She tasted blood and felt a tooth snap from her gums.

Larana tried to push herself upright, but the press of bodies was too great and she couldn't move. She was trapped by jostling legs, her trousers soaking up the human waste swilling around the truck's floor.

Through a splintered plank, she watched the truck alongside them, the crimson overalled driver heedless of the human cattle in his vehicle. She locked eyes with a young soldier across from her, his eyes wide in terror, tears streaking tracks down his dirty face. The boy's eyes were full of mute pleading, but Larana could do nothing for him. As though in a race, the boy's truck began pulling ahead and she watched as it bounced across a rugged patch of scrub.

A huge explosion lifted the vehicle into the air, spinning it onto its front section, the chassis breaking in midsection. Bright flames and afterimages danced across Larana's eyes as she saw bodies flung in all directions. The buried mine threw out secondary munitions - anti-personnel charges that exploded seconds later to shred anyone fortunate enough to survive the initial blast. She lost sight of the

boy as the wrecked truck was swallowed in the dust behind them, knowing there was no way he could have survived.

She was thrown forward, the cries of terror growing louder as she heard more explosions. The truck skidded to a halt in a billowing cloud of obscuring red dust. What was happening? She heard desperate shouting and screams as the tailgate of the track was wrenched down and fiery light flooded the rear of the track. Snarling voices and barbed clubs hammered into the prisoners, their captors were dragging them from the illusory safety of the trucks.

Larana was propelled to her feet by the mass of men debarking from the truck and fell to the hard-packed ground. Black smoke billowed upwards from scores of wrecked vehicles, their twisted hulks broken by the detonation of mines. Bodies lay strewn about and the screams of the wounded were ignored as the prisoners were clubbed forward. The spike adorned Rhinos ground to a halt behind the smoking wrecks and, with practiced ease, the iron giants who had brought them to this slaughter emerged, weapons at the ready.

A terrified man, his eyes wild, stumbled past her, heading in the opposite direction. Larana watched as one of the giant warriors casually gunned him down, a single bolt from his weapon blasting the man's entire torso away. Larana rose to her feet, dazed and blinded by dust and pain. Smoke stung her eyes and she could no longer feel her arm. She stumbled in the direction everyone else was running. Was it to safety? She couldn't tell.

Howls of pain and confusion tore at her ears and she gripped the barrel of her impotent lasgun, vowing that she would use it to crash an enemy's skull before the day was out. More gunfire sounded behind her. A body, gory holes torn in its flesh, fell into her and streaks of bullets whipped by her head.

She pushed the body away and ran into the smoke.

DERVLAN CHU PRESSED the firing stud on the armament panel and closed his eyes as the Basilisk fired. The massive barrel's recoil pushed almost its entire length into the track unit, the crack of the shell's discharge easily penetrating the ear protectors he wore. Despite the bolted locking clamps, the track unit rocked

under the force of the recoil. Even as the first shell arced through the air, his loading team was ejecting the spent casing and unlimbering a fresh shell from the gurney beside the gun.

He pressed his eye to the gunsight, checking to see how much the recoil had caused the barrel to drift from its aiming position. Not much, he saw, spinning the correction wheel, bringing the aiming reticle back to centre, and adjusting fire for the next shot.

'Loader alpha ready!' came the shout from below.

'Up!' answered the breechman.

Chu smiled. Their first shell hadn't even impacted yet and they were ready to fire again. He and his crew had trained hard for just this kind of fight and now that training was paying off.

He centred the aiming reticle on a smoking track with scores of men milling in confusion around it and pressed the firing stud again.

EVEN OVER THE screaming and confusion, Larana Utorian could hear the shriek of the incoming shell and recognised it for what it was. She hurled herself flat, screaming as her arms jarred on the hard earth. The ground whipped upwards, tossing her through the air as the first Basilisk shell impacted, blasting a crater fifteen metres across and obliterating a dozen men in an instant. Shrieks sounded as further shells struck the ground with thunderous hammer blows. Huge chunks of rock and dust were blasted skyward as the first volley hit. Larana slammed back to the ground, the impact driving the breath from her lungs. She rolled over, across the lip of a crater, and flopped to its smoking base.

Scraps of flesh and bone spattered the interior surface of the crater, the stench of scorched human meat and burning propellant filling her nostrils. Another prisoner sheltered in the crater. His mouth was open, stretched wide as he screamed in terror, but Larana could not hear him, her skull filled with an all-encompassing ringing.

She felt wetness seep from her ears.

The man sheltering in the crater stumbled over to her, his mouth working soundlessly up and down, but Larana ignored him, crawling to the lip of the crater, clutching her lasgun like some kind of protective talisman. The man was insistent though and clawed at her uniform. Larana pushed him away, shouting something incoherent over the whoosh of displaced air as another volley of shells screamed in. The man rolled into a foetal ball, rocking back and forth in terror.

Larana buried her head in the ground as she felt the awful vibrations of the shell impacts hammer the ground. With her good arm she clutched the soil. Dust filled her mouth and the Shockwaves from the explosions threatened to pulp her bones to jelly.

She knew she couldn't stay here. She had to get back. But which direction to go? One place was as likely to take a hit as another and the smoke and disorientation had made a mockery of her sense of direction.

She scrambled to the weeping man at the crater's base, and dragged him by the collar towards the rear edge of the crater.

'Come on! We have to get back!' she yelled.

The man shook his head, fighting Larana's grip with the strength of a madman and pulling free of her grasp.

You'll die if you stay here!' she shouted. The man shook his head and Larana was unsure whether he'd even heard her or she'd made any kind of sense. She'd tried her best, but if the idiot didn't want to move, there was nothing she could do to make him. She dropped flat as another thunderous detonation rocked the ground, the impact throwing her from the crater.

She landed on something soft and yielding, and rolled clear with a terrified cry as she saw that she was lying on shredded flesh and mangled limbs. Shapes ran through the smoke, but where they were going or who they were, she couldn't

tell. She could see nothing more than a few metres away, the drifting smoke and dust rendering everything beyond invisible.

A smoking wreck lay on its side, belching black clouds just at the edge of her vision and she began crawling towards it over torn-open corpses and crying men with no legs or arms. One man was on his knees, vainly trying to gather up his looped entrails and push them back into his raptured belly. Another stuffed his severed arm into his jacket, beside a man vomiting thick ropes of red gore. Each few paces brought fresh horrors and Larana wept as the ground continued to shake as though in the grip of the most violent of earthquakes.

She reached the blazing track, weeping and laughing hysterically at this small victory. A blackened corpse lay under the shattered cab of the vehicle, severed through the torso by the track's fall. Larana could see the corpse wore the crimson overalls of their captors and felt a burning hatred light in her belly. She snarled in fear and anger, pounding her rifle butt against the corpse's skull, smashing it to destruction, fresh sobs bursting from her lips with every blow. She threw aside the bloody weapon and took what shelter she could from the burning truck. Tyre tracks from the vehicle led back through the smoke towards the place where - presumably - this insane venture had begun. Taking a deep breath she waited until another barrage of shells landed.

Knowing that there was no way she could survive, but unwilling to give up, Larana Utorian set off to find a way out of this hell.

ACRID PROPELLANT FILLED Kane bastion, but Dervlan Chu was exultant despite the sting in his eyes and the ringing in his ears. The attack had been stopped in its tracks before it had covered even half the distance to the Christo. They had comprehensively bracketed the enemy force within their fire zones and put their entire load on target. He knew for a fact that his crew had laid more shells on target and in a faster time than Jephen, and looked forward to receiving his bottle of amasec in the mess hall tonight.

Night was drawing in and drifting smoke obscured much of the shattered battle line of what had once been hundreds of vehicles. Major Tedeski had called a halt

to the barrage until the smoke cleared, unwilling to waste ordnance on a foe that was already destroyed.

He sat back on the railings of the gun platform and pulled out a silver case of cheroots, lighting one and tossing the case down to his loader and breechman.

"Well done, men, I think we managed to put a sizeable dent in the foe this time.'

His crew smiled, teeth gleaming in their soot-stained faces as he said, "When I get that bottle of amasec from Jephen, I'll be sure to share it with you.'

He took a satisfied draw on his cheroot, and took another look through the gunsight of the Basilisk. The smoke was clearing and his professional eye was pleased with the utter destruction he saw. Hundreds of burning wrecks littered the ground, flames licking skyward as they and their traitorous passengers burned. Their fire zones were cratered wastelands, the ground churned unrecognisably by the sheer power and fury of the barrage.

As he swivelled the gunsight around, he saw that the guns mounted in Mars bastion had been equally thorough. The guns of the Dragon bastion covered the southern approaches to the Christo, and Chu could well imagine the frustration of its commander that the gunners in the Kane and Mars bastions had got the glory of the first kills.

Chu returned the gunsight to his own fire zone. The wind was beginning to clear the smoke more rapidly and he could make out shapes moving in the dusk. Chu was surprised there was anything left alive down there. He switched up a level of magnification as the smoke cleared still further and saw more vehicles through the haze: the armoured personnel carriers that he had briefly glimpsed just prior to the commencement of the barrage.

He pressed the range finder button on the armament panel and cursed as he realised the APCs and the warriors standing before them were some hundred metres beyond the maximum range of his gun. A handful of stumbling shapes crawled or walked towards the warriors. As he increased the magnification another level, Chu was suddenly sick to the pit of his stomach as he saw the

stained uniforms their targets were wearing.

Dust covered and bloodstained, but unmistakably the sky blue of the 383rd Jouran Dragoons. Horrified, he spun the gunsight back to the cratered desolation his gun had helped to create, moaning as he saw more and more familiar uniforms scattered across the ground, lifeless and broken.

Chu felt his gorge rise as he realised what they had just done. The thought of winning a bottle of amasec from this slaughter made him want to weep.

HONSOU WAS PLEASED. He had watched the barrage from the hilltop fort with calm detachment, noting how far the shells reached, how long they had taken to travel to their targets and how wide each bastion's arc of fire was. The southernmost bastion had not fired, but Honsou knew that, at this range, its big guns were irrelevant. Its artillery pieces could only cover the far southern approaches, but the close-in guns and soldiers on the wall could sweep the face of the centre bastion with murderous crossfire.

His armour's auto-senses had easily penetrated the smoke of the barrage and, despite his hatred for the men in the fort, he grudgingly admitted to himself that they were competent gunners. Competent, but not intelligent. Honsou now had an exact plan of the fort's fire zones mapped out in his head. Normally an attacker would pay a fearsome butcher's bill to obtain such information, but where was the cost when you could use prisoners?

Honsou watched the survivors of the artillery barrage stagger back from the killing ground and drew back the hammer on his bolter. Looking at the sorry state of the men that emerged from the rolling banks of smoke, he realised that there was little point in letting them live. Most would be no use as slaves, for how could a deafened man understand orders or obey them? What use was a man with one arm? How could he dig a trench? And if they could fulfil no useful function then they were of no interest to Honsou.

He nodded to his men and in perfect concert, the Iron Warriors raised their bolters and opened fire.

They worked their weapons left and right, shredding the pitiful survivors in a hail of mass-reactive bolts. Pleading faces screamed for mercy, but the Iron Warriors had none to give.

Within seconds almost every last one of the five thousand prisoners who had advanced into the teeth of Tor Christo's guns was dead.

Honsou watched a swaying figure emerge from the smoke, cradling her arm close to her chest, and levelled his bolter at the woman's head.

Before he could pull the trigger, a gauntleted hand reached up and slapped aside his weapon. Snarling, Honsou reached for his sword.

Kroeger whipped his own sword up to swipe Honsou's hand from the scabbard.

Honsou stepped back, his pale features twisted in fury.

'Damn you, Kroeger! You go too far.'

Kroeger chuckled and turned his back on Honsou, gripping the tunic of the sole survivor of the attack and hauling her level with his face.

'Do you see this woman, half-breed? She has courage. She may be a lapdog of the False Emperor, but she has courage. Tell this mongrel scum your name, human.'

Honsou watched the woman's features twist in incomprehension until Kroeger repeated his order. He saw the woman's eyes focus on Kroeger's lips and realised she was probably deafened by the violence of the shelling.

At last she seemed to understand Kroeger's words and croaked, 'Lieutenant Larana Utorian, 383rd Jouran Dragoons. And you gave your word-'

Kroeger laughed and nodded. Yes, I did, but did you really expect me to keep it?'

The woman shook her head and Honsou was surprised when Kroeger threw her towards one of his squad leaders and said, 'Take her to the Chirumeks and have the wounded arm removed. Replace it and bring her to me.'

'You are sparing her life, Kroeger? Why? Mercy does not become you.'

'My reasons are my own, half-breed,' snapped Kroeger, though Honsou could see that he seemed just as surprised himself. 'You would do well to remember that, but I am wasting my breath on you. The Warsmith demands you lead your men forward and obtain information regarding the defences closer in. Now that I have the guns mapped I can begin the first parallel.'

'Before we know the sites of any close-in redoubts or traps?'

'Aye, we are to proceed with all speed. Or did you think that the Warsmith's orders did not apply to you?'

'You are unwise to begin the trenches before we know more/ pointed out Honsou.

And you are a mongrel whelp, not fit to lead a company of the Iron Warriors. I can smell the stench of the ancient enemy upon you. You and your disgusting bastard company. It is an affront that you wear the symbol of the Iron Warriors upon your shoulder guard and I weep for the future of our

Legion to know that unclean hybrids like you are counted amongst our number.'

Honsou fought to keep his bitter rage in check, clenching his knuckles white on the hilt of his sword. How easy it would be to rip it from its scabbard and attempt to strike Kroeger down, but that was just what his rival wanted, for him to prove that he was not worthy of the Iron Warriors. With difficulty, he forced down his anger, seeing the disappointment in Kroeger's eyes as he realised Honsou was not about to rise to his challenge.

'It shall be as the Warsmith commands,' replied Honsou and turned away.

Five

NIGHT HAD CLOSED in completely as Honsou crept through the cratered wasteland before the walls of Tor Christo. The sky was a dull, lustreless orange, streaked with scarlet bands drifting in the upper atmosphere. But to Honsou, the ground before him was as clear as though he walked in the brightest sunlight, the augmented senses of his armour turning night into day.

Far behind him, the warriors of Forrix's company pegged out the arc of the first trench to be dug before the walls of the hilltop fortress. Called a parallel, it was dug in line with the curtain wall of the fortress to be attacked. Deep, but narrow, it was just outside the range of the fort's guns, and would form the first line of attack. From this first parallel would be dug the attack trenches, known as saps. These would be driven towards the fortress on a line which, if extended, would miss the fortress, thus preventing the garrison from firing down the length of them.

When the sap had reached a point where the Iron Warriors' artillery pieces had the range to the hilltop fortress, a second parallel would be dug and breaching batteries placed to batter the walls to rubble in preparation for an escalade. Should it prove necessary, more saps could be dug forward and a third parallel established to place yet more batteries that would lob high explosive shells over the walls and into the heart of the garrison.

Honsou doubted that such a thorough siege would be required to take Tor Christo. The garrison would clearly be able to see the progress the attackers were making and would, in all likelihood, abandon the fortress and pull their men back to the main citadel.

Taking Tor Christo was a necessary precursor to any assault on the citadel, but it was sure to be thankless, bloody work and there would be little glory to be had in such a venture.

This current mission was a prime example of the gritty necessities of a siege. From a distance it was all too easy to rely only on what you could see, trusting to distant observations to prepare a plan of attack on a fortress. Honsou had seen

dozens of attacks on fortifications founder due to lack of proper reconnaissance when attackers had run into previously unseen traps or redoubts that rendered their plans obsolete.

Honsou kept one eye on the watchtower that commanded the plateau and one on the ground before him, careful to avoid any fragments of shell casings or discarded weapons and battle gear. Sound carried further at night and the last thing he needed was to be caught out in the open with no immediate support in the vicinity. He and forty warriors from his company crept through the killing zone that had seen thousands of men die that very day, and by stealth, managed to get closer than any of the prisoners had by direct assault.

Carefully, he stepped around a mine his auto-senses detected and dropped a marker for the following troops to avoid. The minefield they traversed presented no significant threat to the Iron Warriors, but it would slow the digging if the prisoners and slaves were afraid of unex-ploded munitions every step of the way. The crack of metal sounded and Honsou cursed silently as he saw the ponderous form of Brakar Polonas, one of Forrix's senior engineers, step around the mine, marking its position on a light-proofed data-slate. The venerable warrior walked with an awkward, limping gait, his left leg a bionic replacement. It seemed this augmentation also made him incapable of moving quietly. It was a calculated insult by Forrix to send Polonas, letting Honsou know that his information was only trustworthy if accompanied by verification. It was just another entry in a catalogue of carefully measured insults to his prowess. He just hoped Forrix's clumsy insult didn't get them all killed.

He pushed the interloper from his mind as they continued forward, making good time despite their caution and Polonas's lack of stealth.

Honsou was now less than two hundred metres from the base of the rocky promontory that Tor Christo sat upon. Already this reconnaissance was bearing fruit. Ahead he could see three concealed artillery pits carved into the base of the hill. Rock-sheathed doors led within and, were it not for the rails that would carry the guns forward into position, he might never have spotted them.

Again he was forced to admire the cunning of the architects of Hydra Cordatus.

These artillery pits were designed to remain silent and hidden until the Christo's attackers believed they had knocked out the fort's guns. Once attackers had established their breaching batteries, these guns would unleash deadly salvoes of ordnance to destroy their artillery pieces.

They were dug at an angle into the rock face, making it difficult, if not impossible, to target with counter-battery fire and Honsou realised that with this information he had a chance to prove his worth to the Warsmith.

He waved over his second-in-command, Goran Delau, and indicated the artillery positions.

'Clever,' observed Delau.

Aye/ agreed Honsou darkly. 'It will be a devil of a job to destroy them.'

'Indeed.'

Honsou glanced round as the scrape of metal on rock sounded again, and he stifled a curse as Brakar Polonas noisily joined them.

'Why do we stop?' he asked.

Honsou didn't answer, he simply pointed towards the concealed artillery positions.

Polonas nodded, studying the positions with his practiced eye.

'We can mark their positions and shell them once the first parallel's batteries are in place/ suggested Delau. 'We can bring enough rock down to block the guns/

Polonas shook his head. 'I do not believe it can be done with guns. Look, there is a rock canopy built across the top of the door and a ditch before them to catch any rubble that may be blasted loose/

Honsou was impressed. He had not noticed those defences and his respect for the old man rose a fraction.

'Then we take the fight to them, and capture the guns now/

Once again, Polonas shook his head.

'Keep your impatience in check, half-breed. We must not act in haste. Think about it. These doors lead within the rock of the fortress, most likely just to this outwork, but possibly even to the main citadel. Were we to attack now, the enemy would simply seal the tunnels beyond our means to breach and defend them with great vigour/

'Then what do you suggest, Polonas?' snapped Honsou.

Polonas turned his gaze on Honsou and snarled, 'You must learn to respect your betters, half-breed. The first lesson of intelligence gathering is knowing how to use the information you accumulate. To act precipitously would be to alert the enemy of what we know/

Then what? We just ignore the fact that we have discovered these positions?'

'No, far from it. We continue as though we are unaware of their existence. Await their deployment and take the positions by storm by previously infiltrated troops. In conjunction with a frontal escalade, this will allow us to take Tor Christo in a matter of hours/

Honsou bit back a retort as he saw the sense in what Brakar Polonas was suggesting. It was a salutary lesson and Honsou bowed his head, accepting the words of Forrix's engineer.

Very well, we will do as you direct, Brakar Polonas/ said Honsou formally.

Swiftly, Honsou contacted the remainder of his warriors and issued the command to return to the rally point. He deactivated the vox-link and was

preparing to move out when Brakar Polonas turned and slipped on a loose patch of shale, the metal of his bionic leg scraping noisily between the faces of two boulders.

The Iron Warriors froze.

Tense seconds passed in the stagnant darkness as Honsou held his breath. He scrambled across to the veteran warrior as quietly as he was able and saw that his leg was wedged tight between two rocks. He cursed silently to himself and pressed his gauntlets flat against Polonas's shoulder guards.

'Be still/ he warned.

Just as he had begun to think they had not been detected, a spear of phosphorescent light streaked skyward, closely followed by a second. Both burst within seconds of one another and the plateau was suddenly illuminated by twin suns burning brightly as they slowly descended on small grav-chutes.

A cry of alarm was raised high above them and Honsou cursed aloud this time, uncaring of who heard him.

'Damn you, Polonas!' snarled Honsou, wrenching the ancient warrior from the ground. The metal of the bionic leg was wedged tightly and it was the organic components of the limb that failed first, tearing free in a wash of blood as Honsou ripped Polonas from the ground.

Polonas grunted in pain, the accelerated healing mechanism of his body stemming the flow of blood from his severed leg in seconds. Honsou shucked the man onto his shoulders and shouted, 'Iron Warriors, go! As fast as you can!' He heard the unmistakable cough of mortar fire.

Honsou knew that the first rounds would be for ranging purposes, but there would be spotters on the wall to direct subsequent volleys. They had to make as much use of this time as they could. The strobing light of the two sunflares cast lunatic shadows across the cracked ground and it took all Honsou's skill not to lose his footing as he raced from the base of the mountain. The ground rocked as

mortar shells burst ahead of them, scything deadly fragments in all

directions, but they were landing too long. The height of the mortars was working against the Imperial gunners now. Their elevation gave them longer reach, but also meant that it was impossible to engage targets within a certain range.

Perversely, Honsou knew they had been safest where they were, but also knew it was only a matter of time until troops were sent to flush mem out. It was unlikely the Basilisks would join the fight, as it would be a waste of ordnance to engage so few targets with so remote a chance of hitting.

Another volley slammed into the ground, closer this time, and Honsou stumbled to his knees, just barely keeping his balance with the weight of Polonas on his shoulder. More sunflares exploded overhead and now small arms fire began bursting around them. Las-bolts vitrified the dust and heavy bolters churned the ground. He felt an impact graze his shoulder and another clip his thigh, but these were little but annoyances; his armour was proof against such weaponry.

Heavier impacts blasted into the ground beside him and he swore again as he realised that the defenders had managed to bring some heavy weaponry up to the firing step. A bolt from a lascannon hammered into the ground beside him, cracking the earth and flashing the dust to vapour.

More shells landed and this time Honsou was thrown to the ground as a mortar shell burst less than five metres directly above him, spraying him with razor sharp shrapnel. Red runes winked into life across his visor as the spirit within his armour registered breaches in its structure. Honsou could feel the stickiness of blood briefly run down his leg and back before his enhanced metabolism clotted the wounds.

He offered a brief prayer of thanks to the gods for sparing him. Power armour was amongst the best protection a warrior could have, but even it had its limitations. He reached over to grab Polonas and realised why he had been spared.

The veteran's back was laid open to the bone, his thick ribs and spine glistening and red. His head was a mass of gristle and bloody flesh, pulped grey matter pouring in a glutinous flood from his shattered skull. Honsou shrugged and tapped

Polonas's Iron Warriors' icon on his shoulder plate in thanks for saving his life, then picked himself up from the ground.

Honsou pushed himself forward and, freed from the weight of Polonas, was quickly able to outdistance the mortars, pounding across the cratered ground in a lumbering sprint.

Shells continued to land behind him, but the gunners on the walls were firing at phantoms now, their targets having escaped their wrath. Honsou slowed to a jog and counted in his men, coming up one short. Aside from Polonas, only one other warrior had fallen. Honsou considered they had been lucky.

More sunflares continued to turn the valley's night into day, but the Imperials were simply wasting shells now.

Honsou strode through the picket lines protecting the digging parties, satisfied at the progress the slaves were making. The ground was dusty and hard-packed, but given the right threats and impetus, the slaves were working fast enough.

Over two thousand men dug the barren soil of Hydra Cordatus, creating a trench that ran from the eastern edge of the valley wall to a point mapped out by today's foray of the prisoners at the extreme range of Tor Christo's guns. Here the trench bent southwards, following the curve of Tor Christo's curtain wall.

The earth excavated from the trench was piled on its outer edge, on the side facing the fortress, providing a ready-made fire step and protection for the diggers. Once the trench had been completed, the Iron Warriors would build more permanent fortifications along its length, adding linked bunkers every fifty metres and laying minefields of their own.

Honsou jumped across the trench, nodding in acknowledgement to men from his

company as they supervised the labouring slaves, ensuring everything was constructed to their satisfaction. The work was progressing at speed and, barring interference from the Imperials, the trench was sure to be complete before morning.

He moved easily through the swarming throng of bodies engaged in digging and stockpiling supplies ready for the push towards Tor Christo. Slaves either dragged enormous flatbeds of shells and explosives forward or sweated under the load of adamantium sheets to form roadways for heavy artillery and tanks. Others were arranged into chanting groups gathered around hastily emplaced shrines to the Dark Gods, their mutterings overseen by one of Jharek Kelmaur's sorcerers.

Bright arc lights were erected on baroque towers of iron, each placed at points decreed by the sorcerers to create some form of cabalistic arrangement. Quite what this would achieve, Honsou was unsure, but he reasoned that it couldn't hurt to appease the gods, whatever measures were used. Honsou honoured the Dark Powers of Chaos, but preferred to rely on the strength in his sword arm and the explosives in his artillery to win campaigns. To rely on Chaos was to invite disaster at the capaciousness of the gods. Had Angron himself not failed on Armageddon by doing just that?

He saw the Warsmith's pavilion set upon the rocks on the eastern flank of the mountains. Its bronze poles supported billowing steeldust fabric patterned with twisting, chaotic designs that enraptured the eye and held its fascination until reason itself became lost forever within the swirling significance that remained forever elusive. Honsou had learned never to allow his gaze to be lured into the foul pattern and kept his eyes firmly fixed on the figures that reclined beneath its treacherous design.

The Warsmith sat on an enormous throne, carried from lost Olympia and said to have been crafted by the holy Per-turabo himself. The Warsmith claimed it was a gift from the primarch after the fighting on Tallarn, though Honsou doubted that their monstrous, daemonic progenitor would have been so generous after that particular campaign. Beside the hulking, sickening presence of the Warsmith stood the dead-faced Forrix, reading out lists of numbers and displacements of

troops from a bone-rimmed data-slate.

Behind the throne stood Jharek Kelmaur, the sorcerer whose pronouncements had led them to this world. The sorcerer's armour was embossed with gold and silver, the traceries and patterning bewilderingly complex. Skulls decorated his greaves and cuissart, and his breastplate was moulded in the shape of Adonis-like musculature. He wore no helmet and his features spoke of a sly cunning: a lipless mouth and sewn-up eyes, set within a swept-forward brow. His pale skull was hairless and tattooed with bizarre symbols that seemed to writhe with a life of their own.

Honsou disliked Kelmaur, and did not trust his magicks and subtle manipulations. Kelmaur's head turned in Hon-sou's direction, as though sensing his thoughts, and a hidden smile creased his papery skin.

Crouched at Kelmaur's feet was a robed figure, its face hooded and unseen. A monochrome cogwheel symbol stitched on its back identified it as a member of the Cult of the Machine, and briefly Honsou wondered what purpose the creature served.

He dismissed the thought as he halted at the entrance to the pavilion, awaiting his lord's permission to enter his presence. Forrix looked up from his lists and his eyes narrowed as he saw that Honsou was alone. The Warsmith glanced up, his face shrouded in flitting shadows, and said, 'Honsou. Enter and tell us of your mission.'

'My lord,' whispered Honsou as he stepped into the pavilion. He felt the queasy sensation build in his stomach at the Warsmith's presence, fighting down his nausea as he gave his report.

'We were able to approach to within two hundred metres of the promontory and I have to report that there are concealed artillery positions at its base. They will be almost impossible to target with gunnery and it is my belief that-'

'Where is Brakar Polonas?' interrupted Forrix.

'He is dead/ stated Honsou with no small measure of satisfaction.

'Dead? How?' asked Forrix, his tone emotionless.

'He took a hit from a mortar shell at close range and was killed instantly.'

Forrix glanced over to Jharek Kelmaur, who nodded imperceptibly.

'The half-breed speaks the truth, Brother Forrix, and the information he brings will aid us greatly'

Surprised at the unexpected support of the sorcerer, Honsou continued, wondering what price the magicker would later expect.

'We can infiltrate warriors into a position whereby the guns can be seized as they prepare to fire. If we combine this attack with an escalade on the main walls, we should be able to take Tor Christo within hours. The tunnels are sure to lead within its walls, and perhaps even run to the main citadel.'

'You presume too much, Honsou,' stated the Warsmith, his voice like the scraping of iron nails on slate.

'My lord?'

'You seek to plan this campaign for me? Is it your belief that I do not understand the proper workings of siegecraft?'

'No, my lord,' said Honsou quickly, 'I merely thought to offer a suggestion as to-'

'You are young and have much to learn, Honsou. Your inferior mixed blood holds much sway over your thinking and it saddens me to see that you have not learned from your betters. You think like an Imperial.'

Honsou flinched as though slapped. His anger arose, but he clamped bands of iron will around it, holding it and letting it smoulder dangerously within him.

When I desire your "suggestions" I will ask for them, Honsou. You are not yet worthy to make such offerings to my table. Understand that it is not your place to suggest anything to me. You must spend another thousand years as my servant before even daring to think you are qualified to do so. I shall permit you this one indiscretion, but I will not again. You are dismissed.'

Honsou bit back an angry retort, seeing the satisfaction Forrix took in yet another of his public humiliations. He should be used to the insults and slaps in the face his polluted blood brought him, but it was almost too much to bear when he knew in his gut that he was right.

Stiffly, he bowed and withdrew from the Warsmith's pavilion, his heart burning with controlled fury.

He would prove them wrong. All of them.

*

Six

DAWN BROKE ITS first light over the mountain peaks in sickly red streams, bathing the mountains in the colour of blood. As the echoing boom of distant artillery fire roused him from a fitful sleep, Guardsman Hawke rolled over and grunted as his shoulder grazed an outcrop of black rock. Groggily, he opened his eyes and stared into the lacerated sky.

His limbs ached, his throat was raw and his eyes felt like someone had been rubbing them with sandpaper all night.

He sat up and rummaged through the pouches on the side of his pack, pulling out his hydration pills. He swallowed a pair of blue capsules with a mouthful of water from his canteen. He had water and tablets enough to last for maybe three weeks and meal packs for two - depending on how he was able to ration himself.

But food and water weren't his main worries.

No, his main concern was his lack of detox pills. He pulled the plastic pill container from his pocket and counted out the capsules inside. Without this medicine, the Adeptus Mechanicus claimed, anyone stationed on this planet would become unbearably sick. It had never happened to him yet, but he was in no rush to put the theory to the test.

Glumly he realised that he had enough for another six days, but, Emperor willing, he hoped to be back in the citadel by then. He had a vox-unit and though he had been unable to raise anyone last night, he fervently hoped he'd be able to make contact today. '

He yawned and stretched, pushing himself to his feet with a groan of stiffness. He had climbed a thousand metres over steep, rocky terrain and, though he hated to admit it, he realised he was badly out of shape. It had been early evening by the time he'd reached this perch overlooking the valley of the citadel and Jericho Falls, his legs burning and his lungs afire. He'd needed ten minutes on the respirator just to get his breath back.

Just in time for a grandstand view of the horror of watching thousands of his comrades in arms herded forward like cattle to be butchered in the storm of shelling from Tor Christo. He'd screamed himself hoarse with frustration. Couldn't they see they were shelling their own men? He'd burned out a whole battery pack trying to raise the gunners on the Christo and tell them of their error.

The smoke had obscured the worst of the horror, but when it cleared, he'd been shocked rigid at the carnage he saw below him through the unflinching lenses of the magnoculars. What manner of foe had come to Hydra Cordatus? Death in battle he could understand, but this senseless slaughter was beyond his comprehension.

Though he'd tried to get some rest, sleep constantly eluded him. The rumble of artillery, heavy vehicles and ultra-rapid construction had echoed constantly from below. When the sky had lit up with sunflares, he'd used the magnoculars to try and see what was happening, but all he could see were tiny explosions bursting on the plain before the Christo as the gunners lobbed shells over their walls.

Hawke pulled his jacket tighter about himself and shouldered his pack, tossing aside the burnt out vox-battery and ration pack he'd consumed last night and limped towards the edge of the ridge. He pulled out the magnoculars, training them on the base of the mountains to see what this morning's light brought.

The pace of operations at Jericho Falls had slowed, but not by much. The huge cargo ships that had been descending in a more or less constant stream were still arriving, but there were noticeably fewer than yesterday.

'Great balls of the saints!' swore Hawke as he shifted his gaze from the spaceport to the gap in the mountains that led from Jericho Falls to the citadel.

Enormous numbers of vehicles, artillery and siege engines rumbled along the road in ordered ranks, though there was a strange, shimmering haze obscuring some of the larger machines, and what seemed like an unnecessarily large number of guards stationed around them. Hawke noticed that these guards were all facing inwards as though the machines themselves were the threat.

Shocked by the sheer amount of hardware on its way to the citadel, he turned and clambered across the jagged rocks to the other side of the knifeback ridge and trained the magnoculars on the valley below.

He gasped as he saw the vast scale of the engineering works carried out during the night. A vast trench, at least a kilometre long, stretched due west, its outer edges piled high with earth, before bending in a sloping, concave arc to the south-west. The curving arm of the trench exactly followed the sweep of the walls of Tor Christo and its outer face was likewise strengthened with earthen walls.

Further trenches, like snaking roots, wound their way back to enormous supply depots, huge stockpiles of artillery shells and construction materials where long trains of men dragged supplies throughout the sprawling campsite.

Already Hawke could see working parties digging forward from the main trench parallel to the walls. A constant thunder of distant artillery boomed from the high walls of the Christo, powerful explosions slamming into the earth around the

working parties, but the high, earthen berms thrown up on the exterior faces of the trench protected the workers from the worst of the blasts.

And the saps continued inexorably towards Tor Christo.

Behind the trenches sprawling bunkers and massive artillery positions had been built. Though nothing occupied the latter at present, Hawke wondered what manner of gun might fill such a site. The stone of their structures appeared to have been quarried from the mountainside during the night by vast, tracked drilling machines. Hawke could see these were even now boring into the rock for more building materials. Everything suggested a monstrous controlling influence that knew every last detail of every operation. The sheer mechanical, unfeeling nature of what he saw chilled Hawke to the bone.

A swelling roar of affirmation rose from the valley floor and Hawke saw that almost the entire population of the camp had ceased its labours, parting before something as yet hidden from Hawke's sight.

The echoes of ponderous footsteps reached him and Hawke's blood slowed as he watched a legion of enormous dark gods tread the earth.

He shucked the pack from his shoulders and desperately fumbled for the vox-unit.

HONSOU WATCHED IN rapt adoration as the Battle Titans of the Legio Mortis strode the earth, the thunder of their footsteps threatening to break apart this planet's fragile crust. The majority of the hellish war machines stood over twenty metres in height, their fearsome physiques cast in the form of mighty daemons from the depths of the warp. Each growled with a primal ferocity, their hunger for destruction only barely kept in check by that which controlled them.

The largest of these monstrous leviathans, the *Dies Irae,* led the Battle Titans, its barbed tail sweeping back and forth in anticipation of the slaughter. Vast spires, like perverted and defiled cathedrals, rested upon its gargantuan shoulders, gun platforms and massed batteries of artillery clustered on each twisted steeple.

To witness the gathering of creations which were so close to Chaotic divinity was a privilege Honsou had experienced only a handful of times, and he felt humbled by such a potent display of the power of the gods of Chaos. The shadows of the Titans swallowed the camp, swathing the acres of men and materials in darkness as they passed.

Honsou watched as hundreds of chained prisoners were herded forward to be crushed underfoot as an offering to the daemonic powers that dwelt within the Titans' unholy bodies. Their lumbering stride continued, giving no sign that they even noticed the carnage they caused with every step. The *Dies Irae* paused in its thunderous march and its upper body ground towards the fortress of Tor Christo, as though taking the measure of its foe. Honsou watched as it raised the enormous bulk of its hellstorm cannon and plasma annihilator towards the fortress in mocking salute.

Honsou knew the commanding officers in Tor Christo would be watching the arrival of these magnificent war machines, and the message they delivered was sure to be clear.

Your time has come.

**

Seven

Magos Ferian Corsil adjusted the dials on the communications panel again, tweaking the broadcast bandwidth in an attempt to increase the capacity of the long range vox-casters. Beside him, the row of servitors plugged into the long vox-console sat in lobotomised silence, each attuned to one of the various Imperial Guard frequencies. Their shaven heads and cable-plugged eye sockets nodded monotonously in time with the cycling bands of static that filled their skulls.

Since the unexplained quarantining of the Star Chamber by Magos Naicin, they had been forced to try and adapt the vox-casters to provide them with some sort

of link to the outside world. Much as it went against everything Corsil had learned on Mars, he had spent the last day and a half working on a dozen disassembled vox-panels attempting to *alter* the divinely decreed circuitry within each blessed device.

A burst of static spat from the speakers indicating the machine spirit's displeasure and Corsil hastily made his obeisance to it.

'Blessed machine, a thousand pardons for my unworthy hands. Deus in Machina/

Mechadendrites waved from his spine plugs like dreaming snakes, each ribbed, copper prosthetic terminating in mechanised digits or some form of power-driven tool. Two mechadendrites worked deep inside an open access panel on the side of the console, adjusting the power couplings in attempt to reroute some of the power to the broadcast amplifier.

If he could isolate some of the more redundant systems -perish the thought that such a term could exist in relation to a machine - then he might be able to increase the range of the vox-casters by up to four per cent. His mechadendrites continued working away inside the panel as he cycled through the various vox-nets.

As he hit upon the squad-level net, a servitor suddenly stopped its repetitive bobbing and sat upright, its mouth jerking into life.

'-dy hear me? What the hell's the point of a vox if no frag-ger ever answers?'

Corsil jumped at the sound of the voice, knocking the dial on the panel and glancing in puzzlement at the servitor as it returned to its previous static-filled life. The squad-level vox-net? That was normally reserved for small unit actions; for platoon and squad leaders to issue tactical orders. It was not supposed to be in use now.

Hurriedly he returned the dial to its previous setting and disengaged his mechadendrites from beneath the console.

Once again, the servitor sat upright, its expressionless face relaying the message from this unknown source.

'...come in. This is Guardsman Julius Hawke, serial number 25031971, lately of listening post Sigma IV; I repeat this is Guardsman Julius Hawke attempting to raise Imperial forces in either Tor Christo or the citadel. Enemy Titans are inbound on your position together with brigade strength armour and infantry support.'

Corsil stared, open mouthed, at the console and the servitor relaying Hawke's message for long seconds before bolting from the room.

WORD OF HAWKE'S survival spread quickly through the upper command echelons of the citadel with mixed reactions. Many believed it was a trick of the invaders to feed them disinformation, while others felt that the Emperor had spared this man for some divine purpose. The irony of the idea that a man like Hawke could be an instrument of divine purpose was not lost on the officers that knew him.

Castellan Vauban paced his chambers, sipping a glass of amasec and pondering the Hawke dilemma. Lieutenant Colonel Leonid sat behind a desk reviewing Major Tedeski's file on the Guardsman, preparing a selection of questions they could use to verify that they were indeed talking to Hawke, and that he was not speaking under duress. Men from Hawke's platoon were even now being questioned for additional information that could verify his identity.

Should the voice on the end of the vox genuinely prove to be Hawke, then they would have a first-rate source of

intelligence regarding the enemy's disposition, strength and movements, but Vauban wanted to be absolutely certain before he made any kind of decision. Magos Naicin was at this very moment researching the logic stacks within Arch Magos Amaethon's Machine Temple for some way of detecting whether the words spoken over the vox-caster were genuine, though he hadn't sounded hopeful. Naicin had balked at Vauban's idea of employing an empathic server to gauge the truth, citing the unreliability of such a procedure without the subject actually being present.

For now, at least, it looked as though they were going to have to do this on their own.

Vauban knew of Hawke, having seen his name appear on more disciplinary reviews than he cared to remember, but had never met the man. Drunkenness, disorderly conduct, brawling and theft were but a taster of the trouble Hawke had been involved in and Vauban was reminded of the story of the Hero of Chiros, Jan van Yastobaal. Lionised by the people of the Segmentum Pacificus as a true hero of the people, Yastobaal had fought in the wars against the Apostate Cardinal Bucharis during the Plague of Unbelief. History told that he had been a noble, selfless man who had sacrificed all he had to free his people.

Vauban had been inspired by Yastobaal as a youth and had made a study of the man while a captain in the Jouran Planetary Defence Force. The deeper he researched and the more he had become acquainted with the real Yastobaal, the more he had found him to be a reckless, unorthodox man, prone to taking unnecessary gambles with his mens' lives. Everything he read of the man spoke of a rampant ego and colossal vanity that bordered on psychosis, and yet there was still much to admire about him.

But read any Imperially approved historical text and the story of Yastobaal would be told as a noble battle of courage over tyranny.

In years to come, what would the history books say of Guardsman Julius Hawke?

TOR CHRISTO

One

THE VAST, SOUTHERN gate of the citadel measured exactly forty-four metres high, thirty metres wide and was known as the Destiny Gate. Each layered half of the bronze gate was four metres thick and weighed hundreds of tonnes. No one knew exactly how they had been constructed, when they had been brought to Hydra Cordatus, or even how such massive portals could be opened with such

ease.

Both gates were covered with battle scenes etched into their surfaces, the detail obscured by the ravages of time and green trails of oxidation, but they were impressive nonetheless. Flanked by the threatening forms of Mori and Vincare bastions, they were set within the sixty-metre high curtain wall of the citadel, surrounded by carven statuary.

Morning sunlight gleamed gold on the surface as the gates smoothly swung outwards, the battles immortalised on their faces seeming to twist with life as the light caught them. At last they were opened fully and massive shapes began to move through the gateway with thunderous footsteps.

Like giants from legend, the Battle Titans of the Legio Ignatum marched to war, their armoured hides painted in vivid reds and yellows, the power in their mighty steps shaking the ground. Huge honour banners hung between their massive legs and enormous kill banners fluttered from their weapon mounts, a litany of battle and victory stretching back to the days of the Great Crusade, unmatched by any other Titan Legion.

Princeps Fierach commanded the Warlord Titan *Imperator Bellum,* marching at the head of eleven more god-machines. Another two Warlords flanked Fierach, the *Honoris Causa* and the *Clavis Regni,* their princeps similarly eager to take the fight to the enemy. Fierach brought the *Imperator Bellum* to a halt at the open rear of the Primus Ravelin, the soldiers inside cheering as his thirty-metre high war machine raised its weapons high in salute.

Yet more Titans of the Legio Ignatum joined their Warlords. Five Reaver Titans, smaller cousins to their leader's war machine, took up rear positions and four Warhound Scout Titans loped alongside the Battle Titans. The Warhounds split into pairs, each taking position on the flanks of the larger machines. The Titans waited in the shadow of the counterguard wall as the armoured units of the Jouran Dragoons rumbled from the citadel and swarmed around the massive feet of the Battle Titans.

From his elevated position in the head of the *Imperator Bellum,* Princeps Fierach watched the mustering of the tanks and infantry carriers with mixed emotions. He was glad of their support, but knew that, with enemy Titans in the field, they could be unreliable allies. Fierach knew how easy it could be to break the courage of an enemy with the unstoppable power of a Titan. Like many princeps who had commanded a Titan for a considerable time, Fierach had a scornful disregard for those not able to take to the field of battle as he did. To have such destructive power at his fingertips bred arrogance and a withering contempt for the insignificant weapons and machines employed by those armed forces without the heritage of the Titan Legions.

Fierach sat within the head of the *Imperator Bellum,* wired into its every system via the ancient technologies of a mind impulse unit. Only by becoming part of the god-machine's consciousness was it possible to take command of these awesome machines, to feel each motion of its limbs and surge of power along its fibre bundle muscles as though they were his own.

To have such power to command was an intoxicating sensation and, when not joined with the god-machine, Fierach felt weak, shackled to the limitations of his mortal body.

Fierach shifted in his seat and meshed his senses with those of the Titan, allowing the barrage of information the sensorium of the *Imperator Bellum* was receiving to wash over him. He closed his eyes, feeling the sudden vertigo as his mind's eye shifted into a top-down view, depicting the battlefield as a series of bright contours and pulsing blips. Icons representing his own forces and those of the Jourans continued to mass in the ditch before the counterscarp that protected the base of the walls and bastions. Concealed tunnels sloped upwards through the ground, emerging on the plains before the citadel, allowing the armoured units of the Guard to rapidly deploy and support the Titans. Five hundred vehicles, a mix of battle tanks and armoured fighting vehicles, formed up in lines along the length of the ditch, smoke belching in blue clouds from their throbbing exhausts.

Fierach was unhappy with this attack and had voiced his concerns to Castellan

Vauban in the strongest terms, but he was a senior princeps of the Legio Ignatum and pledges of servitude had been sworn many millennia ago between the Legio and the commanders of this citadel, and Fierach would not be known as an oath breaker.

It reeked of desperation to Fierach to gamble so much on the word of a poor soldier, but if this Hawke was correct, then they had an opportunity to take the fight to the enemy before they were able to properly deploy their Battle Titans. Despite his reservations, Fierach was elated at the prospect of taking his warriors into battle. While their duty to protect this citadel was sacrosanct, it was not the most satisfying of

postings for a warrior who had forged his reputation on countless battlefields throughout the galaxy. The honour and kill banners hanging from the *Imperator Bellum* were the latest in a long line. Many that had previously been carried into battle were now hanging in the Chapel of Victory on the Legion's homeworld of Mars, their roll of honour scarcely able to contain the sheer number of battles won and enemies slain.

Fierach removed his senses from the tactical plot, grunting in satisfaction as Moderati Yousen reported, 'Lieutenant Colonel Leonid reports that Force Anvil is in position and ready to move out on your order.'

Fierach acknowledged the information with a raised finger, impressed at the efficiency of Leonid. He had always liked Vauban's second-in-command more than the castellan himself, feeling that Leonid was far more a natural warrior than Vauban.

'Very good, Moderati. Open a channel to all Titans.'

Yousen's finger danced across the panel before him. He nodded towards his princeps.

'All princeps, this is Fierach. You all know what to do, so carry out your orders. I wish you joy of the day and good hunting. May the Emperor guide your aim.'

He closed the channel without waiting for a response and trained his eyes on the red expanse of plain that stretched before his Titan, noting the distant plumes of smoke that marked the locations of the enemy camp.

Fierach whispered a mantra of salute to the spirit of the *Imperator Bellum* and said, 'Engineer Ulandro, give me striding speed. We go to battle.'

PRINCEPS CARLSEN RELISHED the sense of speed that coursed through his body as his Warhound Titan, the *Defensor Fidei,* sprinted ahead of the Legio's Battle Titans. Less than half the size of a Reaver Titan, the Warhound was an agile Scout Titan, the forward eyes and ears of the Legio. Less well armed and protected, it was no match for larger Titans, but could tear apart infantry formations with a combination of its deadly assault weaponry and speed.

His wingman, the *Jure Divinu,* thundered alongside him, keeping pace with his evasive manoeuvres to throw off any incoming fire that might be directed at them. There was none at the moment, but it never paid to be too complacent when your void shields could be taken out with one good volley.

Carlsen turned to Moderati Arkian and said, 'Anything?'

Arkian shook his head. 'No, not yet. But it won't be long now.'

Carlsen nodded and returned his attention to the ground before him. A spur of rock from the valley sides some five hundred metres away offered some protection should it prove necessary to take shelter from incoming fire. The enemy line was a kilometre away and he knew their speed would protect them from all but a desperately lucky shot.

Behind him, advancing abreast, came a portion of the armoured might of the 383rd Jouran Dragoons, and unlike the princeps of the larger Titans, Carlsen had a healthy respect for infantry and armoured vehicles. Friendly support was vital for a Titan of his size. Enemy infantry and vehicles could pose a serious threat to a Warhound.

'Have they even seen us yet?' he wondered aloud.

'Maybe we caught them at meal time,' offered Moderati Arkian with a grin.

'That would be handy indeed, but I think we've just disturbed them,' replied Carlsen as he spotted tongues of flame belch skyward from artillery behind the monstrous earthworks thrown up before the enemy camp.

He jinked the *Defensor Fidei* sideways, keeping close to the valley walls.

Lieutenant Colonel Leonid rode in the top of his command Chimera, the wind whipping past his face. His goggles and bandana kept the worst of the dust from his mouth and eyes, and, riding at the head of his tanks, he had a magnificent view of the battlefield. His bronze breastplate shone gold in the red afternoon sun and as he rode to battle he was filled with a fierce pride in his regiment.

Like Fierach, he too had reservations about this attack, but seeing so many tanks roaring forward at speed with the ground shaking to the tread of the Legio Ignatum, he was swept up in the glory of this charge. Ahead he could see the traitor lines, their dark fortifications raised high in an impossibly short time. Whoever was organising this operation must be working his men to death.

Leonid watched the two Warhounds tasked to his storming force race ahead, their speed incongruous for such large machines. Slower moving Reavers strode alongside his formation while the majority of the Legio advanced on the salient angle of the attackers' trench line - the point where it bent towards the south-west and could bring the least amount of fire to bear. The Titans were to smash through the salient with the guns on Tor Christo covering their exposed right flank with the tanks and men of the Jouran Dragoons covering their left.

At the same time, the Jouran armoured thrust would hit the east/west trench line, storming the trenches with four thousand warriors hell-bent on revenge. Leonid had allowed the true identity of those soldiers killed in the initial attack on Tor Christo to become known and the Dragoons were hungry to avenge them.

Once the Titans had established their breakthrough, they would link with the fighting in the trenches, allowing them to sweep forwards into the invaders' camp, wreaking whatever havoc they could before falling back in good order to the citadel and avoiding the inevitable counterattack.

On paper it was sound strategy, but Leonid was enough of a warrior to know that few plans survived contact with the enemy, and was prepared to exercise his own initiative if the situation turned sour. But looking at the armoured might at his command and the gargantuan god-machines that marched beside them filled him with supreme confidence.

Distant booms of artillery roared from behind him as the citadel's guns fired, supporting the attack with carefully arranged fire plans that would hopefully keep the invaders' heads down until the charge was right on top of them and the men and women of the Jouran 383rd smashed home.

Beneath the bandana covering his mouth, Leonid smiled to himself.

FORRIX WATCHED THE charging Imperial forces approaching their lines with disinterest, knowing that their circumvallations were as secure as they could be. He stood at the salient angle of the lines, watching the Imperial Titans march towards them. The transparency of their plan was obvious even from here.

The guns of Tor Christo opened fire, sending screaming projectiles towards their lines, but Forrix had been building fortifications for thousands of years and was a true master of siegecraft. The high, earthen ramparts of his trenches absorbed the worst of the blasts and the damage inflicted was minimal. A few parties of slaves fled their work, but as soon as they broke cover they were shredded by the storm of explosions.

The guns from the citadel were also firing, wreathing the plateau in smoke, but Forrix had situated the first parallel beyond their range so the Imperial defenders were simply wasting ammunition. Thick grey smoke wreathed the plateau, obscuring the Imperial tanks, but the Iron Warriors in the bunkers were able to penetrate such petty obstacles as smoke with their gunsights.

The Titans of the Legio Mortis stood behind the main lines, ready to be unleashed at the foe once the Warsmith decreed where they should attack. The *Dies Irae* stood motionless just behind him, its mighty guns awaiting the coming conflict. Its form shimmered as the void shield generators powered up, sheathing the machine in layers of protective energy fields.

Diesel smoke and the choking stench of exhaust fumes filled the air as hundreds of armoured tanks rolled through the campsite, heading for the gateways in the defensive lines, ready to sally forth and engage the enemy. Gunners in artillery positions cranked their guns around to face the plain before the citadel, Tor Christo no longer their target for now.

Forrix could see Honsou and Kroeger marshalling their warriors for the coming battle, bellowing orders to the indentured soldiery and thrusting them into the trenches. He could practically feel their lust for battle and wished he shared it. But this conflict promised to be yet another that would eventually blur into a seamless life of slaughter for him.

Glancing round at the Warsmith's pavilion, he was again struck by the sense of impending change that saturated the Iron Warriors' great leader. There was always a feeling of barely contained power around the Warsmith, and Forrix's gut told him that his master was on the brink of some monumental change, but what?

The gods of Chaos were fickle beings, capable of raising their servants to the highest pinnacles of daemonhood or dashing them to a life of mindless savagery as a spawn. It was for them to decide which and no one could predict what choice they would make.

Could this explain the urgency of the Hydra Cordatus campaign?

Was daemonhood to be the Warsmith's reward for its successful completion?

If so, might it not be possible for those who had accompanied him and aided him on that journey to follow in his wake, to ride his ascension to newer and greater

things, where the time spent since the defeat on Terra was just the blink of an eye and a universe of potentiality might be opened up?

Forrix felt an unfamiliar sensation stir in his belly and was mildly surprised to find that the fires of ambition, which he had thought extinguished forever, had merely been smouldering unnoticed in the farthest corners of his mind.

He returned his gaze to the Warsmith and a cold smile touched his lips.

PRINCEPS FIERACH STRAINED to see the enemy battle lines through the clouds of smoke thrown up by the barrage from the citadel and Tor Christo. Billowing banks of red dust hung in the air, rendering him virtually blind and he quickly voxed the senior gunnery officers, shouting, 'All guns, cease fire! I repeat cease fire!'

A few explosions erupted before the traitor lines from shells already in the air, but Fierach could see that his order had been obeyed with alacrity, the smoke that drifted from those impacts was not followed by fresh detonations. He swung the ponderous head of his Warlord to the left, looking to see what damage the citadel's guns had inflicted on the main trench line, but the slow-drifting smoke frustrated his efforts.

He linked his consciousness to the Titan's sensorium, noting that his battle group was moving a little too fast, outpacing the slower tanks of the Guard in their haste for battle. Briefly he considered ordering Engineer Ulandro to reduce speed, but immediately discarded the idea. It did well to reinforce their superiority over the Guard now and again, and a little rivalry between the different arms of the citadel's defenders never hurt either.

The smoke ahead parted momentarily and his breath caught in his throat as he caught a glimpse of something vast and obscene moving through the haze. Surely it could not be... it was too large.

But if it was...

He opened a channel to Princeps Cullain and Princeps Daekian, commanders of the Warlords on either side of him.

'Cullain, Daekian, did either of you see that?'

'See what, princeps?' asked Cullain.

'I saw nothing through the smoke,' affirmed Daekian. 'What did you see?'

'I'm not sure, but for a second it looked like-'

The words died in his throat as the wind lifted the concealing smoke and Fierach saw a towering nightmare lurch from the traitor lines like a daemon from the warp. Its red and brass structure towered over him, its guns and towers horrifying in their size. The monstrous Titan stepped towards him and its blazing green eyes seemed to lock with his own, promising nothing but death. Fierach's heart pounded and the *Imperator Bellum* faltered in its stride, the mind impulse link attempting to match its princeps' reaction.

'Blood of the Machine!' swore Cullain, the vox-link between the princeps still open.

'Legio Mortis!' snarled Daekian, recognising the skull icon on the massive enemy Titan's upper bastions.

Fierach saw the kill banner hanging between the gargantuan towers of the Titan's legs and the host of blasphemous symbols that writhed there. Hot anger flooded him as he knew that some of those markings must represent Titans and princeps from the Legio Ignatum. The beast's head was plucked from his worst nightmares, a hellish fusion of machine and daemon, the very image of death.

Legio Mortis, the ancient foe! And not only that...

If he was not mistaken, this diabolical machine was none other than the dreaded

Dies Irae, that infernal blasphemy that had breached the walls of the Emperor's Palace at the dawn of the Imperium. Here on Hydra Cordatus. Could a warrior of the Legio Ignatum ask for anything more? Fierach's lip curled in hatred, and burning excitement coursed through his veins at the thought of combating this monster from the dawn of time. A primal battle fought between two ancient foes. The honour that would be his at having finally brought down the Legio's most ancient nemesis was immeasurable. Fierach roared in battle fury.

'Clavis Regni, Honoris Causa and Battle Group Sword with me! Ignatum!'

'Princeps?' queried Cullain, 'Are you sure? Such a manoeuvre will leave the Jourans dangerously exposed.'

'Damn the Jourans!' bellowed Fierach, 'I want that Titan! Now be silent and follow me!'

Fierach bellowed to Engineer Ulandro for more speed and activated the *Imperator Bellum's* massive chain fist as he charged into battle.

Two

As THE ARTILLERY ceased its deafening barrage, the battle tanks of Leonid's charge spread into a line formation, firing everything they had. The traitor lines vanished in explosions as the Imperial weaponry struck. The smoke was quick to disperse though, blown clear by the day's breeze.

As the distance between the two forces closed, the wedges of troop carriers unfolded into line formation. Several of the heavier tanks halted and assumed firing positions, their mighty battle cannons pounding the trench line. The noise was deafening as laser fire, shell fire and artillery mingled with the bass rumble of straining tank engines. Leonid was dismayed to see how little an effect their guns were having.

The gap between the two enemies closed still further.

Leonid watched the manoeuvres of his battalion with a fierce admiration. He had seen his share of combat, but there was nothing quite so inspiring as watching an armoured cavalry charge across open ground. They were almost there and hundreds of tanks belched smoke from their dispensers to confound the targeting spirits in their enemy's weapons.

He wondered why their Titan support hadn't opened fire yet as planned. He reached for the vox handset to request a fire mission when a shot streaked from a bunker in the centre of the traitor line, covering the distance to its target in less than a second. A Leman Russ was slammed sideways as the missile punched through its frontal armour. The superheated core of the missile ignited the vehicle's fuel and cooked off its ammunition, blowing it apart in a greasy black fireball.

The shot was the signal for the rest of the Iron Warriors to engage and the line erupted in a flurry of lascannon shots and missile contrails as the massed firepower of the traitor legion was unleashed.

The closest vehicles had no chance.

The gunners of the Iron Warriors picked off tanks with ease and huge explosions blossomed along the Imperial lines as lascannon shots and missiles found their targets.

The screaming of soldiers was audible even over the continuous thump of explosions and the hiss of flashing lasers. Then the heavier blasts of enemy Titan weapons joined the fray, blasting tanks to atoms with the unimaginable power of their weapons.

Trapped by the burning wreckage, tank drivers attempted to ram their vehicles to safety, the crash of buckling metal adding to the din. A Leman Russ smashed into the remains of a blackened Chimera, attempting to clear a path, but a keen-eyed gunner spotted the breakout and despatched the battle tank with a well-placed missile to the vehicle's rear.

The doors of the Leman Russ opened, spewing black smoke and burning

Guardsmen from the crew compartment. They rolled desperately in the dust while screaming in agony as the flames consumed them.

Leonid held on for dear life as bright spears of lascannon fire ripped through the armoured hulls of his Chimeras with ease. Vehicles exploded in quick succession, slewing from the line and belching thick plumes of smoke.

He was flung sideways as his driver threw the Chimera into a series of screeching turns in an effort to throw off the enemy gunners' aim. The Chimera crashed into the rear quarter of the burning tank and the roaring of its engine intensified as the frantic driver gunned the engine and attempted to barge the heavier tank out of his way. But the Leman Russ was wedged tight and immovable.

Leonid dropped into the Chimera's crew compartment and slammed the rear ramp release lever, yelling, 'Everybody out! Go! Go! Go!'

His command squad needed no prompting. To stay in the Chimera was to die. Leonid hustled his men down the ramp before following them into the confusion of the battle. He had barely cleared the ramp when a missile ripped through the side of the Chimera. With the rear ramp open, much of the force of the explosion was vented outwards, but still the tank was lifted into the air by the blast. Leonid staggered, feeling as though a giant fist had swatted him to the ground. He spat dirt, a terrific ringing in his ears. He turned to see Ellard, his sergeant, yelling at him, but he couldn't make out the words. The sergeant pointed towards the enemy trench line and Leonid nodded, hauling himself to his feet.

He saw Trooper Corde dragging a body, its sky blue jacket splattered red. He shouted, but realised he stood little chance of being heard over the roar of explosions and gunfire.

Confusion reigned supreme as he saw scores of tanks and Chimeras belching noxious black smoke. A hand grabbed his shoulder and he turned as Sergeant Ellard handed him his rifle. The sergeant had already fixed the bayonet for him and Leonid nodded his thanks.

Bodies lay everywhere. On tanks. On the ground. Blood, fire, noise and screams.

All he could smell was smoke, burning oil and flesh.

Another vehicle exploded and he dropped to the ground, losing his grip on his rifle as red hot fragments scythed overhead, pinging on the side of another tank.

Dim snatches of desperate shouts came to him. Shouted questions that made no sense. Calls for support, medics and extraction. Soldiers lay all around in the oil-slick dust firing their rifles at the trench line. Without conscious thought, he grabbed his rifle from the ground, shouldered it and began firing until the charge counter read empty.

He removed the empty power cell and slammed in a fresh one. It took him two attempts; his hands were shaking so much.

All around him, surviving tanks fired their main guns whilst their drivers desperately zigzagged in an attempt to evade the enemy fire. Some succeeded and began returning fire against the traitors. Those that did not were quickly isolated and blown apart.

Leonid slithered across to Sergeant Ellard, who handed him a vox-unit as he ripped off his helmet and put the handset to his mouth.

'Princeps Fierach? We need a fire mission now! Come in please! Where are you?'

The vox hissed and spat static at Leonid as he continued to call for help. 'Princeps Fierach, anybody, come in, damn it! Acknowledge please!'

Garbled voices and more static were his only reply, and he threw down the handset in disgust.

'Colonel!' screamed Ellard, 'What's happening? Where the hell's our Titan support?'

Leonid scooped up his helmet, pushed it on and said, 'Damned if I know, sergeant.'

Another explosion rocked the earth close by. 'Sound off!' Leonid shouted, 'Who's missing?'

Corde yelled, 'Commissar Pasken and Lieutenant Ballis are dead and Lonov is wounded. I doubt he'll make it.'

Leonid nodded stoically and flinched as another vehicle exploded nearby. The squad was in bad shape, their faces blackened and terrified. For many of them, it was their first real taste of hard combat and he knew that one of two emotions would win out here: fear or courage.

In the first heat of battle an infantryman would be plunged into a flash flood of emotions. Terror, anger, guilt and hate. All the feelings that boiled to the surface when confronted with the prospect of dying or killing another human being. In the right combination they would carry a man forwards to the enemy, as a fearsome, merciless killer. But equally they could send him fleeing in terror back to his own lines. Some men were born with the right combination; others needed it hammered into them.

It was his job to make sure he got the best out of his men and he knew that they were close to going either way. He'd have to push them to get the fires of anger burning in their hearts. To stay here would drain their courage to the point that not even the threat of a commissar would get them moving.

He scrambled to the edge of their shelter and ducked his head around the gutted Chimera, trying to get a feel for the situation.

By the Emperor, it was bad! The sky blazed red and black as scores of tanks burned fiercely and countless bodies littered the bloody ground. Heavy weapons fire was sporadic now as the drivers whose vehicles had escaped the initial slaughter took refuge behind their wrecked comrades. They were trapped, realised Leonid.

What the hell had happened to the Titans?

'CYCLE THE AUTO LOADERS!' yelled Princeps Fierach, 'and get those void shields back up!'

The *Imperator Bellum* was closing the gap between it and the *Dies Irae,* but it had taken a punishing barrage from the leviathan's hellstorm cannon. From a distance the massive barrels appeared to be turning at a leisurely tempo, but the rate of fire was deceptive and explosive shells had almost stripped them of their protective void shields in a single volley.

'Moderati Setanto, charge the plasma generators! Prepare to fire plasma cannon!'

'Yes, princeps!' replied the weapons officer.

Fierach knew that if they were to defeat this monster they had to quickly knock down the *Dies Irae's* shields or close with it and take it down in close quarter battle. Neither prospect promised to be easy.

Fierach saw the *Honoris Causa* rock under a volley of gunfire from the enemy Titan, the enormous machine reeling under the ferocious impacts. The Warlord staggered, one massive foot slamming down on the salient of the enemy trench system, crushing two bunkers and a score of men. One of the Titan's arms slammed into the ground, sending up a tall plume of dust, the other flailing wildly as Princeps Daekian fought for balance.

Fierach stepped forward to shield the *Honoris Causa* and raised his weapon arms as Moderati Setanto shouted, 'Plasma cannon fully charged, princeps!'

'I have you now!' snarled Fierach as he unleashed a torrent of white-hot plasma at the devil machine before him. The viewscreen darkened as the bolts struck the *Dies Irae,* its void shields flaring as they overloaded under the onslaught of the *Imperator Helium's* guns. It was still shielded, but the range was closing.

The Reavers of Battle Group Sword circled to Fierach's right, using their superior speed to flank the enemy Titan. A flurry of powerful laser blasts overloaded the void shields of the lead Reaver and even as its crew realised their danger, an incandescent pulse of energy slashed from the *Dies Irae's* plasma annihilator and hammered into the command bridge in the head section.

Fierach shouted a denial as he saw a huge explosion rip the head from the Reaver and topple the machine. Gracefully, the Reaver collapsed, its artificially generated muscle movements dying with its princeps. The machine's knees buckled and it smashed into the ground in a vast cloud of red ash. The remaining four Reavers scattered as Fierach shouted for more speed.

As though sensing that the *Imperator Bellum* was the leader of this force, the *Dies Irae* turned its ponderous upper body to face Fierach.

This was how it was meant to be. Man against daemon, flesh, bone and steel against whatever horror animated the daemonic machine.

The *Clavis Regni* charged before him, its void shields flaring as enemy heavy tanks and weapon teams added their fire to that of the *Dies Irae.* Impacts hit his own Titan, knocking down another shield, and, as he saw another battle group of enemy Titans emerge from the smoke with hundreds of tanks following them, Princeps Fierach knew doubt for the first time in many years.

It was not for nothing that this foe had stalked the galaxy with impunity these last ten thousand years. It was a deadly enemy and many a vaunted princeps had met his end by its guns.

A volley of cannon fire from the enemy reinforcements slammed into the *Clavis Regni* and Fierach watched, horrified, as his brother princeps struggled to hold his Titan upright. Flames roared from the inferno gun mounted on its arm and suddenly the weapon exploded, showering the *Clavis Regni* with superheated fuel.

Moderati Yousen shouted, 'Princeps! Colonel Leonid requests immediate support. He reports they are taking heavy casualties!'

Fierach nodded, too busy to respond as he sidestepped a powerful blast from the *Dies Irae's* defence laser. He felt, rather than saw, another of the Reavers go down, the war machine toppled by the horrendous firepower arrayed against them.

One of the enemy Titans lurched towards the *Imperator Bellum,* shielding it from the fire of the *Dies Irae,* its monstrous head swinging ponderously from side to side as it charged.

Fierach stepped forward to meet this new foe, swinging his chainfist at the Titan's head. The vast motorised saw-blade grazed the armoured carapace of the enemy machine, sliding clear in a shower of fat orange sparks. In reply, the monster thrust its own roaring chainblade at the *Imperator Bellum's* midsection. Fierach felt the thunderous impact, the shriek of tearing metal as the energised blade ripped through the thick armour of his Titan like paper.

Screams filled the internal vox as men below died and Fierach heard Engineer Ulandro yell, 'Princeps! We have a reactor breach on level secundus!'

Fierach didn't reply, desperately fending off another blow from the enemy Titan and stepping inside its guard to deliver a mighty stroke across its neck. Orange fire blasted from the enemy war machine as the *Imperator Bellum's* blade sheared through its armour and tore its head from its body. Fierach roared in triumph as massive secondary explosions ripped through the falling Titan.

Smoke boiled throughout the command bridge and furious red warning symbols flashed urgently before Fierach. The reactor was going critical, but he knew that Ulandro was the best there was, and if he couldn't prevent an overload, then no one could.

He swung the *Imperator Bellum* around in time to see the death of the *Clavis Regni,* its void shields finally collapsing in a spectacular pyrotechnic display as its generators overloaded and massive explosions whiplashed inside the machine. The Titan convulsed as the internal detonations ripped it apart from within and Fierach bellowed in anger to see such a heroic Titan die in such a manner.

A thunderous impact shocked him from his fury and he turned to see the *Dies Irae* in all its hellish glory, its leg bastions wreathed in flames. He snarled, pushing the *Imperator Bellum* forwards as he saw yet more warning runes wink into life on the reactor panel.

Engineer Ulandro was fighting a losing battle to contain the reactor breach, and as Fierach heard the desperate, pleading screams of the Imperial Guard soldiers over the vox, he knew he had made an unforgivable tactical decision.

By indulging his lust for vengeance on the Legio Mortis, he had deserted his brother soldiers, and Fierach was filled with shame.

The Reavers of Battle Group Sword had defeated the supporting enemy Titans, but only two remained standing, flames billowing from their weapon mounts and twisted carapaces.

He had doomed them all.

The *Clams Regni* was gone, but the *Honoris Causa* still stood, trading shots with the *Dies Irae* in an unequal battle that could have but one outcome.

Fierach opened a channel to Princeps Daekian as he marched resolutely towards the firefight.

'Daekian! Pull back eastwards, reinforce the Jouran units/

'Princeps?' queried a breathless Daekian.

'Do it, damn your eyes! Take what's left of Sword and try and salvage something from this disaster!'

'Yes, princeps/ acknowledged Daekian.

Fierach saw the reactor breach was getting steadily worse and felt a fatal sluggishness to the *Imperator Bellum's* movements. The god-machine was dying, but he would not allow such a mighty warrior to walk the road to hell alone and turned his Titan to face the towering form of the *Dies Irae.*

Death awaited him and he welcomed it.

Suddenly calm, Fierach said, 'Daekian, I ask only one thing of you. Avenge us/

LEONID'S SQUAD HUDDLED in the dust, glittering with the sheen of spilt engine fuel, and kept their heads down as the constant thump of heavy weapon fire blasted from the enemy trenches.

Despite shouted promises over the vox-net, their Titan support had yet to materialise. The Chimera rocked with the Shockwaves of nearby explosions and Leonid had to shout to be heard over the noise of battle.

'Corde! Any news on those Titans?'

Guardsman Corde shook his head furiously as another blast shook their refuge and Leonid knew that it was only a matter of time before the Chimera was blown to bits.

The entire squad, or at least what was left of it, was filled with the same indignant fury as Leonid, and even the normally placid Guardsman Corde was hell-bent on getting to grips with the enemy.

But, courageous as they were, it would be almost impossible for them to charge across such open ground. They would be heroes, but not even heroes could take a missile and survive, no matter how brave they were. Leonid knew that they had to do something and realised that this was a time when he had to earn the rank badge on his shoulder boards. This was the time when, as a leader, he had to do just that. Lead.

His mind made up Leonid turned to face Ellard and shouted, 'Sergeant, gather the men. We're going forward!'

The sergeant looked for a moment as though he hadn't heard Leonid, then nodded sharply and started shouting at the men, gathering them into position. Leonid snatched the handset of the vox unit carried on Corde's back and opened a channel to the units under his command.

'All units, this is Lieutenant Colonel Leonid. We are attacking the traitor trench line. Be ready and remember, the Emperor expects every man to do his best! Leonid out/

He dropped the vox and locked eyes with Ellard.

'Ready, sergeant?'

Ellard nodded. 'As I'll ever be, sir. You?'

Leonid grinned. 'I guess we're about to find out/

He reached out to shake Ellard's hand, saying, 'Good luck, sergeant/

'You too, sir/

Leonid hefted his rifle and, after taking a deep breath to slow his pounding heart, burst from cover with a roar of hatred. His command squad rose and followed their leader's example, charging forwards with a howling battle cry.

Gunfire reached out to them, instantly cutting a swathe of Guardsmen down and scattering the rest.

'Spread out! Spread out!' yelled Leonid.

They fired their lasguns and grenade launchers, but the range was too great.

Despite the tiny impact Leonid's command squad had on the traitor line, the effect on the Imperial troops was electric.

The embers of a fierce, wounded pride and a towering sense of outrage were stoked amongst his soldiers. The men of the Jouran Dragoons rose and followed their courageous commanding officer.

Leonid and Ellard charged forwards together, their boots throwing up great clouds of ash behind them. The squad followed at their heels, incoherent yells of anger and fear carrying them through the fire.

Hot adrenaline dumped into Leonid's system. As he fired his rifle, he was engulfed by a wash of emotions. Mad exuberance gripped him, a wild sense of danger and excitement. His fear was swept away and he laughed with the sheer vitality he possessed. The sky above had never seemed quite so red, nor his eyes so preternaturally sharp. He could make out the faces of the enemy before him in graphic detail.

He felt like he was charging in slow motion, bullets and lasfire flashing past him like bright streamers, and he turned to yell encouragement at the men behind him. Explosions burst around him, but he ran on, invincible.

New strength filled his limbs and he surged ahead of the others.

Firing from the hip, the noise was incredible. He heard wild howling. His own?

Something jerked his sleeve. Sharp red pain blossomed up his arm, but he didn't care.

He was riding a wave of courage and insanity.

A terrible roaring, ripping sound dopplered in and out and he saw the din kicked up in spurts before him. The line of fire kinked right and tore amongst the squad beside him. Four men were pitched backwards, bright blood spraying from their shattered chests.

That couldn't be right. This was a charge to glory! Their faith in the Emperor and the justice of their cause was their shield against harm. They were supposed to be invincible.

His step faltered and his vision suddenly expanded to encompass the carnage around him. Bodies littered the ground. Hundreds? Thousands? There were so many, who could tell?

Brave and glorious though their charge had been, the rational part of Leonid's brain suddenly realised its folly. Frantic charges against fortified positions without fire support were the stuff of legend until you actually had to do it yourself. Though he didn't appreciate it on a conscious level, Leonid had reached the point that all infantrymen must at some point face.

The point where the initial surge of adrenaline had worn off and the body's innate sense of self preservation kicked in. This was when true courage was required to carry a soldier the last few metres towards the enemy.

Leonid screamed and continued forwards, side by side with his soldiers, his blood pounding and his heart racing.

They were going to make it!

The traitor line was barely ten metres away.

Then it vanished in a series of bright flashes, smoke and thunderous noise.

A giant fist smashed him in the chest.

He fell, fighting for breath, his vision cartwheeling.

The ground rushed up to meet him and slammed into his face, hot and solid.

Someone screamed his name.

Pain, bright red, razor stabs of pain in his chest.

He rolled onto his back as noise swelled around him; screams and gunfire. He lifted his head and moaned as he saw scarlet blood on his breastplate. Was it his?

He dropped his head and closed his eyes as an immense weariness settled over him.

Then screamed as he was hauled violently up and thrown over someone's shoulder, his chest spasming in pain. He saw broken, blood stained earth bouncing below him and a bloodstained Jouran uniform jacket.

He was being carried away from the trenches, he realised, bouncing around on his rescuer's shoulder, the world spinning around him. Nothing made sense. He tried to find his voice, but all that he managed was a hoarse croak.

The man carrying him suddenly stopped and shucked Leonid from his shoulder, propping him up against the side of a wrecked tank.

Leonid's eyes swam into focus.

Sergeant Ellard knelt beside him, checking the wound in his chest.

'What happened?' Leonid asked thickly.

You got yourself shot, sir/ answered Ellard.

Leonid looked at his chest. 'Did I?'

'Aye, sir. You were ahead of everyone else and took a round to the chest. Good thing you had your flak jacket on underneath your breastplate, eh? Still, you're going to have a hell of a braise, sir.'

'Yes, I suppose/ said Leonid, relief flowing through him. 'The last thing I remember, we were just about to jump those bastards/

'Well, I guess our charge wasn't meant to hit home. Anyway we've got to keep our heads down, because Corde tells me that our vaunted Titans are inbound any minute and we sure as hell don't want to be anywhere near those trenches when they open fire/

Leonid tried to stand, but pain flooded through him and he slumped back. 'Imperator, this hurts!'

Yes, I think you caught it in the solar plexus, so just lay still for a while, sir. You're going to be alright/

'Sure/ said Leonid. 'By the way, thank you, sergeant. For carrying me out/

'Not to worry, sir, but if you don't mind me asking, what the hell were you doing? With all due respect, sir, you took off like a bloody madman/

'I don't know, sergeant. I couldn't think straight/ said Leonid, shaking his head. 'All I could see was the line of trenches and how I had to get there. It was insane, I know, but, by the Emperor, it felt amazing! It was as though I could hear and see everything so clearly and there was nothing I couldn't do... And then I got shot/ he finished lamely.

More bodies began to join them as the distant thunder of Titan footsteps carried through the afternoon air. Leonid had never heard a more welcome sound in his entire life.

He pushed himself painfully to his feet and shouted to everyone in earshot, his parade-ground voice cutting through the bark of sporadic gunfire and the thump

of explosions.

'Right, listen up, everybody! We have Titans coming in, so everyone on your feet! As soon as they hit I want everyone back to the citadel in double time or better. Make sure we don't leave anybody behind and we'll get out of this in one piece, okay?'

A few muted affirmations greeted Leonid's words, but the survivors of the attack were too weary and shell-shocked to respond with much enthusiasm.

Leonid turned his gaze to the north-west, seeing the lumbering shapes of Titans approaching through the smoke. Despite the pain in his chest, he grinned to himself

The god-machines would surely turn the traitor line into a maelstrom of death and shredded bodies.

KROEGER WATCHED THE slaughter before the trenches with fierce longing, his fist thumping against the side of his Rhino in time with the crack of explosions. The carnage was pleasing to him, though he was disappointed the Imperials had not had the courage to even reach their lines. His sword was unsheathed and was yet to draw blood. Its spirit would be angered if it was to be scabbarded unwetted. It took all Kroeger's willpower not to climb aboard the Rhino and order a full advance, but he could not do so unless decreed by the Warsmith.

Kroeger stood resplendent in his freshly polished armour, the burnished iron gleaming like new. The female prisoner he had spared from the initial massacre had restored his armour's lustre, and though he still couldn't say why he had not killed her, it was pleasing to him to have a lackey of the Emperor serve him. There was more to it than that, but he did not know what, and the feeling that the decision had not been his would not leave him. Kroeger dismissed the woman from his thoughts; he would probably kill her within a day or two.

The din of battle echoed from the valley sides and the discordant clash of steel on steel was music to Kroeger's ears. For thousands of years, Kroeger had lived

with this sound and he wished he could make out the huge shapes battling through the smoke to the west, where the Legio Mortis grappled with the enemy Titans. There was a battle indeed! To fight in the shadow of such creations was to fight in the realm of true death, where a warrior's life hung by the threads of chance as well as skill.

Kroeger impatiently stalked to the edge of the trench's firing step, watching the wall of smoke and flames with hunger. He cast his gaze over the troops that waited either side of him, pitiful humans who thought that by their service to the Iron Warriors they would be honoured in the sight of Chaos. He despised them.

Further west, Kroeger could see Honsou and his company of mongrels. Honsou also looked impatient to enter the fray, and in this at least, Kroeger knew they shared a common bond.

He heard the rumbling of powerful engines behind him and turned to see three massive Land Raiders moving into position at the main gateway. The frontal ramp of the mighty vehicle in the lead dropped with a heavy clang and a powerful figure, clad in ornate Terminator armour stepped out into the red, afternoon sun.

Forrix marched across the steel decking that bridged the trench and joined Kroeger on the firing step, an ancient and heavily ornamented combi-bolter clutched in his right hand, while the left was a monstrous, crackling power fist.

'The Warsmith has decreed that we are to attack,' said Forrix.

'We?' asked a bemused Kroeger. Forrix had not taken to the field of battle in nearly three millennia.

'Yes, we. I am an Iron Warrior, am I not?'

'You are that, Forrix/ nodded Kroeger as Honsou strode across to join them.

'Forrix?' said Honsou. 'You fight with us this day?'

'Aye, half-breed, I do. You have something to say?'

'No... brother. You do us honour with your presence.'

'I do,' nodded Forrix.

Kroeger and Honsou shared a glance, both equally puzzled and a little unsettled by this latest development. Kroeger laughed and slapped a gauntlet across Forrix's shoulder guards.

'Welcome back, Forrix. It has been too long since you shed the blood of the enemy. I'll wager that power fist comes back with more blood on it than even the half-breed or I can shed today.'

Forrix nodded, clearly uncomfortable with Kroeger's bonhomie. He shook off Kroeger's hand and snapped, 'Stay away from me, Kroeger. You are nothing to me.'

Kroeger removed his hand with exaggerated care and took a step back.

'As you wish.'

Honsou stepped away from Forrix and returned to his position in the line just as Kroeger left the firing step to rejoin his company. He cast furtive glances back towards the giant figure of Forrix, silhouetted in the deep red of the sky. Something had happened to Forrix and Kroeger was instantly suspicious. There had been a fire in the ancient veteran's voice that Kroeger had not heard for many centuries.

Something had rekindled Forrix's spirit and Kroeger suspected that the old general was privy to some secret that both he and Honsou were ignorant of. What that might be or how he came by it, Kroeger could not guess, but he would make it his business to find out.

Further speculation was ended when a deafening roar sawed through the front

ranks, blasting dozens of men on the firing step to shreds. Heavy calibre shells ripped apart the lip of the trench in a hail of fire, sending earth and bodies flying in all directions and a fierce grin broke on Kroeger's face.

Through the billowing smoke he could make out the blurred outline of what looked like a Scout Titan. He jogged quickly to his Rhino, jumping onto the running boards and hammering his fist upon its roof.

The Rhino's engine roared as it powered forwards, following Forrix's Land Raiders through the gateway and into the smoke of battle.

Kroeger stood tall and raised his chainsword for all his warriors to see.

'Death to the followers of the False Emperor!'

*

Three

LEONID WATCHED THE loping forms of the Warhounds as they circled his position, pouring fire from their Vulcan bolters onto the traitor lines. The men under his command cheered and punched the air at this show of defiance, though Leonid knew that was all it was. The Warhounds would buy them time to regroup, but nothing more.

'All units, this is Colonel Leonid. Regroup and fall back to the rally point immediately. Do it quickly, we don't have much time/ ordered Leonid as the deep throated roar of vehicles swelled from the traitor lines.

PRINCEPS CARLSEN JINKED his agile Warhound Titan from side to side, frantically evading enemy shots while attempting to manoeuvre into a favourable firing position for his weapons moderati. Lie and Princeps Jancer in the *Jure Divinu* took it in turns to dart forwards and hose the trenches with their Vulcan bolters and turbo lasers, shredding anything that dared show its face, before rapidly

withdrawing to safety in the smoke. Their height made a mockery of the protection offered by the firing step, killing scores of men with each volley, but he knew that the casualties they were inflicting were largely irrelevant.

Without the heavier guns of Battle Group Sword, their efforts here were purely a delaying tactic. Carlsen had not believed his ears when he heard Princeps Lierach give the order to abandon the Jourans in favour of going head to head with an Emperor class Titan, and had listened with growing horror to the vox traffic flashing between the Battle Titans as they fought for their lives.

He and his brother Warhound were too far east to go to the aid of their brethren, and had had to content themselves with following the Jouran armoured attack, though without the Reavers they had been forced to wait until the Imperial Guard either broke through or were repulsed.

Las-bolts and bolter fire flared against his void shields, but he ignored them as irrelevant. It was the enemy tanks that gave Carlsen cause for concern. Each time he'd gone forward, he had seen more and more of them lurking behind the trenches and knew it was only a matter of time until the enemy commander counterattacked.

Three Land Raiders burst from the smoke, followed by a wide line of Rhinos and transports that looked like some bizarre cross between a Chimera and a flatbed truck. The troops crammed into them screamed as they bounced along the ground towards the retreating Guard.

'Princeps Jancer, with me!' shouted Carlsen as he turned his Vulcan bolter on the lighter vehicles following the Land Raiders. Shells tore up the ground, stitching a path towards them and sawing three apart in a burst of flames and blood. All three exploded, the shells ringing from the side of a Land Raider. The heavier vehicle lurched sideways, smashing into one of the Chimera trucks and flattening it with a shriek of tortured metal.

The *Jure Divinu* appeared at his side, its guns bellowing with thunder and raking the enemy attack with deadly shells. Two Land Raiders skidded away from the Titans, attempting to evade their guns, but Carlsen was quicker, lashing out with his Titan's foot and catching the closest vehicle square in the side panels, buckling its armoured hull with ease and hurling the wreck through the air.

The second slewed around, bringing its sponson mounted lascannon to bear and Carlsen felt the painful sensation of his void shields collapsing as the Land Raider's gunners found their mark.

'Damn you!' yelled Carlsen, hauling backwards as the tank's guns fired again, the deadly beams flashing overhead.

'Moderati Arkian, get those shields back up! Now!'

Carlsen walked his Titan backwards, spraying the traitor vehicles with fire, careful to try and avoid the running soldiers of the Imperial Guard. Sweat ran in runnels from his face as the strain of such precise piloting took its toll.

The *Defensor Fidei* stumbled as Carlsen brought one of its feet down upon the smashed hulk of a Leman Russ, the pilot's compartment swaying dangerously close to the ground. *The Jure Divinu* stood sentinel over its brother Titan, firing and moving as the enemy advanced more cautiously now.

'Arkian!' bellowed Carlsen, Where are my damn shields?'

'Working on it, princeps!'

'Work faster!' demanded Carlsen as he saw the two surviving Land Raiders emerge from the smoke on a direct course for him.

THE IMPERATOR BELLUM was dying, but Princeps Fierach was not about to give up just yet. Blood and sweat coated his features and he was sure Moderati Yousen

was dead. The Emperor alone knew what was going on in the engineering decks; he had not been able to raise anyone down there. The *Dies Irae* was taking him apart piece by piece, but Fierach was not going down without a fight, and it was taking terrible damage. The tanks that had accompanied the other enemy Titans had swept past him, content to allow their war god to destroy him.

Fierach just hoped that the survivors of Battle Group Sword were able to protect the Jourans and allow them to escape.

Another hammer blow fell upon him and shooting bolts of fire lanced through his skull in sympathetic pain. What the *Imperator Bellum* felt, he felt.

He brought up his chainblade, the now dulled edge scoring across the barrel of the *Dies Irae's* plasma annihilator. Gouts of searing plasma energy spurted from the enormous gun, hissing clouds of superheated vapour geysering downwards and vaporising a hundred men in its fury.

The *Dies Irae* stepped in and smashed its leg against Fierach's, buckling the knee joint and destroying it in an explosion of sparks. Warning klaxons blared and thick ropes of blood ran from Fierach's mouth as he bit down hard on his tongue, the pain almost unbearable. He vainly tried to step away from the enemy Titan, but the *Imperator Helium's* left leg was fused solid and he could not escape.

The *Dies Irae* advanced again and hammered one of its weapon arms against the *Imperator Bellum* s torso. Fierach's Titan was slammed sideways by the thunderous blow and yet more warning lights flared into life as systems failed all over his war machine. He fought for balance, but the external

gyros were smashed and he was forced to rely on his own reeling senses rather than those of the Titan.

Amazingly, he was able to recover his balance and faced die *Dies Irae* once

more, swinging his chainfist, the one system he knew he could rely on.

The blade shrieked across the *Dies Irae's* midsection, tearing away great chunks from the beast's armour. Fierach knew an Emperor class Titan's reactor was buried deep within its belly and if he could but hack through enough of its armour, then others might later have a chance to slay the monster. The *Dies Irae* stepped aside and batted away the chainblade with the barrels of its hellstorm cannon, planting the muzzle of its weapon flat against the top of his hissing leg joint.

Incandescent fire erupted from the weapon, explosive shells bursting at point blank range against his already damaged leg. The joint exploded, the metal running molten like mercurial blood down the war machine's leg. Fierach screamed as he felt his Titan's pain as his own, the feedback along the mind impulse unit frying much of his cerebral cortex.

The mighty war machine slumped sideways, the Titan's groin hammering into the severed leg, wedging the *Imperator Bellum* there at an angle.

Fierach laughed hysterically as his fall was arrested.

'Thank you, old friend!' he screamed, and with one last herculean effort, forced his dying brain to command the Titan in one last act of defiance.

The *Imperator Bellum* pushed off with its one good leg, lurching forward to smash its bridge section against the *Dies Irae's* head with terrifying force.

The impact smashed the armoured front of the Imperial Titan's cockpit and Fierach's last sight before the *Imperator Bellum* s reactor went critical was of a single, burning green eye as he was crushed against its surface.

FORRIX WATCHED THE Warhound in front of them back off through the smoke, realising its shields must have been knocked down.

'Follow it! Go after it!' he bellowed. The Titan was not just an enemy war machine to him now, it was a beast from the Olympian legends and he felt a burning, primal desire to slay it. He almost laughed aloud at the passions seething within him. Emotions and desires once thought lost forever rushed to the surface of his mind like a drowning man clawing for oxygen. He felt hate, bright and keen, battle-lust hot and urgent, and desire as fervent as anything he had ever felt in his long life.

His new-found purpose was reawakening in all its visceral glory.

Forrix fixed his eyes on the viewing holo, watching the chaos of the battle before him. Another Land Raider roared alongside his own, its lascannon stabbing into the smoke. He could see enemy infantry falling back towards the citadel, some carried on vehicles or grabbing onto their running boards. Here and there, pockets of resistance fired on their attackers, buying time for their comrades to escape.

A ringing impact slammed into the Land Raider, throwing Forrix sideways and he knew they had been hit badly. Smoke and flames spewed into the crew compartment and as he looked back, Forrix saw a great hole torn in the side of the vehicle's side armour. Through the ragged tear, he could see the red sky and the looming form of another Warhound Titan coming for them. Its snarling face was carved in an expression of fury and Forrix was again seized by the desire to slay one of these beasts.

'Disembark now!' bellowed Forrix, as the frontal ramp dropped and four giant warriors, similarly clad in Terminator armour, debarked from the Land Raider after their leader.

KROEGER CHARGED THROUGH the smoke, screaming a bloodcurdling battle cry as he scythed the head from an Imperial Guardsman with a single stroke of his chainsword. He kicked another soldier in the gut, rupturing his belly and shattering his spine. Terrified faces surrounded him, some screaming, some begging for mercy. Kroeger laughed at them all, killing anything that came within reach with equal impartiality.

Kroeger's warriors hacked a bloody path through the men of the Jouran Dragoons, their blades soaked in gore. This was no battle any more, it was simple butchery and Kroeger revelled in the slaughter, feeling the surge of satisfaction hammer in his blood as he slew. His senses contracted until he could see nothing beyond the arterial spray and hear nothing beyond the screams of the dying.

A man fell to his knees before him, weeping and screaming, but Kroeger spun low, slashing his sword across the man's neck. He dropped his sword and reached down to pluck the dying man from the ground. Kroeger tore off his helmet, raising his victim up and allowing the spray of the man's lifeblood to spatter his face. Blood streamed down his face in thick rivulets and Kroeger tipped his head back to allow the life-giving fluid to fill his throat.

The hot blood tasted sublime, infused with terror and pain.

Kroeger roared with a monstrous lust, ripping the corpse in two then raising his sword high. His senses screamed at him, every nerve alive with hunger for more.

Always more. There could never be enough blood.

The red mist dropped over his eyes and Kroeger set off once more into battle.

HONSOU FIRED AS he ran, leading his warriors forward. He dived forward as a disciplined volley of las-fire blasted overhead, rolling to his knees and firing bursts at the source of the shots. Distorted screams echoed through the smoke as his bolts found homes in human flesh. His warriors darted forwards in groups, each covering the other's advance with carefully placed fire.

Men and tanks roared through the smoke, swirling banks of white clouds belching from the vehicles' smoke dispensers.

Honsou cursed as one of Forrix's Land Raiders rumbled past him, its sponson-mounted lascannon missing him by less than a metre. His auto-senses kicked in as the powerful weapon fired, flaring the smoke to vapour as it speared into the

distance.

A massive burst of light from ahead told Honsou that there was a Titan there, one of its void shields now stripped away. He grinned as he imagined the desperate crew within, frantically trying to raise that shield as the Iron Warriors continued their attack. The soldiers pressed into their service sprinted alongside Honsou, the Warsmith deeming his company in need of support from such rabble. It angered Honsou that these scum fought beside his men, but he would not lower himself to voicing his outrage at this latest insult.

He worked the fire of his bolter left and right, deliberately catching a few of the red-clad soldiers in his volley, and rose to his feet. He sprinted forward, joining a firing squad of Iron Warriors. They had a large number of Imperial Guardsmen pinned in a dusty crater, its lip wreathed in barbed razorwire. A missile slashed from the crater, slamming into a rumbling transport vehicle behind him and blasting it open with a ringing clang.

Seconds later another missile streaked from the crater, but foolishly, the weapon team had not displaced before firing again and an answering volley of gunfire ripped the two-man team apart in a hail of bullets.

Keeping low, Honsou ran over to where a rabble of men in crimson overalls squatted behind shattered rockcrete tank traps. They fired crude, bolt-action rifles over their tops towards the crater. Honsou gripped the back of the nearest man's overalls and hauled him level with his helm.

'You are wasting ammunition, fool! Dig them out with your blades.'

The man nodded frantically, too terrified of Honsou to reply. Honsou hurled the wretch aside, wiping his gauntlet against his thigh armour and returned to his squad.

Lieutenant Colonel Leonid lay on the slopes of a cratered ridge, firing his lasgun as the first platoon sprinted back to the next rally point. His face was blackened and lined with fear-induced fatigue, but he was still alive and fighting,

which was something given the confused nature of this battle. Sergeant Ellard lay beside him, pumping shot after shot into the indistinct shadows running through the smoke. The terror and threat of being surrounded, cut off and overwhelmed was a physical thing, and Leonid had to consciously fight to remain calm.

He had to lead by example, and though his chest was a knotted mass of pain, he fought it to set a good one to his men.

'Front rank fire! Rear rank withdraw!' he shouted as Ellard pushed himself to his feet and began chivvying the rear rank back towards the next rally point. Volley after volley of las-gun fire hammered through the ranks of the red-coated troopers charging through the madness of the battle, who were dropping by the dozen. So far he was holding the retreat together, but it was balancing on a knife-edge. The men were stretched to the limits of their courage and they had performed as well as he could ever have asked. But they were nearing the end of their reserves and could not hold forever.

It was a race against time as much as anything as to whether they could get back within the cover of the citadel's guns before that courage was exhausted.

Guardsman Corde crawled over to him, yelling over the crack of gunfire and rumble of tanks and explosions. The vox slithered around on his back as he crawled and he carried a hissing plasma gun, steam drifting from the coolant coils on its barrel.

'Sergeant Ellard reports they're at the rally point, sir!'

"Very good, Corde,' said Leonid, slinging his rifle and shouting, 'Front rank, let's get the hell out of here!'

The Jourans did not need to be told twice. They scrambled back down the slope as covering volleys of lasgun fire from Ellard's section stabbed into the smoke. Leonid waited until the last of his men had withdrawn before he and Corde moved to join the rest of the platoon.

A roar, like that of a Jouran carnosaur, came from the slope behind him and Leonid turned to see a legion of horrifying iron behemoths lurch over the ridge, slamming down with teeth-loosening force. The tanks were huge, perverted Leman Russ variants, their armoured flanks daubed

with obscene symbols and their turrets grinding with the squeal of ancient gears. A wide-barrelled gun mounted on the nearest tank's forward hull chattered, spewing high velocity shells down the slope and ripping across the blasted ground. Leonid grabbed Corde and dropped, bullets sawing through the air above them.

He raised his head and terror flooded him as the tank rumbled forwards, ready to crush him under its bronze tracks. More bullets filled the air and the main gun fired with an ear-splitting crack, followed seconds later by a distant explosion. The track rumbled towards Leonid and he rolled in the only direction he could.

He rolled beneath the hull of the tank, its roaring metal underside passing a whisper from his head. Hot gasses and stinking exhaust fumes belched and he gagged. Something splashed him and he felt warm wetness cover his face and arms. He covered his ears and pressed his face into the dust, flattening his body as much as he could.

'Emperor protect me...' he whispered as the monstrous tank rumbled overhead. A protruding hook of metal caught on a fold of his uniform jacket and Leonid grunted in pain as he was dragged along the rough ground beneath the tank for several metres before he was able to work himself free.

Suddenly he was clear and the tank rumbled onwards, leaving him shaking with fear and relief. He took a deep breath and crawled back to Corde, who lay unmoving behind him.

Leonid felt his stomach rise and vomited explosively at the sight of Corde's mangled corpse. Corde had not been as lucky as he had, his lower body crushed to an unrecognisable pulp by the tank's mass. Blood still flooded from his mouth and Leonid dry-heaved, realising what the wetness that had splashed him under the tank had been.

The vox was crashed, but Corde's weapon was still intact and Leonid snatched it from the dead trooper's hands. A towering rage filled him at the thought that Corde's murderers probably didn't even know that they had killed someone. Leonid pushed himself to his feet and staggered drankenly after the iron monster.

The thing wasn't hard to find; it was rumbling slowly after his men, slaughtering them with bursts of gunfire and shells from its main gun. Leonid screamed himself hoarse at the traitors within, skidding to a halt less than ten metres from the rear of the tank and raising Corde's plasma gun.

He squeezed the trigger twice in quick succession, sending bolts of white-hot plasma energy towards the tank. The shots impacted squarely on the thin rear armour and punched through it easily, instantaneously igniting the tank's fuel and ammo. The tank exploded in a red fireball, the turret buckling from the pressure of internal detonations. The Shockwave swatted Leonid down, his chest searing in pain as he fell.

Black smoke plumed from the ruptured tank and Leonid screamed in fury as another shape came running towards him through the battle. He swung the plasma gun up, but it was still recharging. Angrily, he tossed the weapon aside and reached for his lasgun as Sergeant Ellard emerged from the smoke.

The sergeant didn't waste any time, hauling his commanding officer to his feet and dragging him away from the blazing wreck.

CARLSEN CRUSHED ANOTHER vehicle beneath his heavy tread and sidestepped as another tried to ram him. He groaned with effort as he spun the agile Warhound on its central axis and unleashed a short volley into the tank's rear. The ammo requirements for his main guns were eating into the reserve hoppers and he knew that, at this current level of engagement, his guns would be empty in minutes.

And then this battle would be all over. Moderati Arkian had worked miracles, coaxing the Machine Spirit to invest their shields once more, and without a second to spare as that damned Land Raider had come at them again. Once again it had stripped him of his protective shields before the *Jure Divinu* had flanked it

and blown it back to the warp. Some warriors had gotten out, but before he could bring his weapons to bear and finish them off, they were swallowed up in the smoke and confusion.

If they could just hold on a little longer, then they would be back within the visual range of the citadel and its guns. Then they would be safe.

FORRIX CHARGED ACROSS a crater, a loop of razor wire trailing from his leg, and worked the fire of his storm bolter across the backs of some cowering Guardsmen sheltering in its base. Across the battlefield he could see Kroeger slaughtering a clutch of soldiers unlucky enough to have been outpaced and cut off.

Forrix paused in his charge and his eyes narrowed as he watched the slaughter-maddened frenzy with which the young-blood butchered the enemy soldiers. His silver armour, gleaming and pristine before the battle, was now soaked in gore, its iconography obscured by glistening blood. Kroeger was going too far now, the call of the Blood God too strong for him to resist.

Honsou appeared on his right flank, leading his men forward in good order, firing and moving, firing and moving. Much as he hated to admit it, the half-breed was an adept commander, despite his mixed blood.

The battle had devolved into a series of smaller engagements now that the main Imperial offensive had been routed. There was little point in continuing the pursuit, those units that had escaped were so badly mauled that they were unlikely ever to regain field readiness.

All that remained was to slay the Titan.

With blissful synchronicity, the smoke parted and there it was before him, its red and yellow carapace blazing in the sunlight. Its snarling face challenged him to fight it.

'You task me...' he whispered, 'You task me,' and set off to meet this armoured

monster, but as suddenly as it had appeared, it turned and set off at speed into the smoke.

Cheated of his prey, Forrix halted and whispered, Another time, beast...'

LEONID STUMBLED AND lurched across the wasteland before the citadel, each breath hot in his chest. Were it not for Sergeant Ellard's support, he would surely have collapsed.

He could hear the cries of the enemy close behind, and the screams of those they had caught.

Suddenly he caught sight of three massive forms standing just at the edge of sight before him and, as Ellard continued pushing him forward, he almost laughed with relief as the shapes resolved themselves into the welcome form of two Reaver Battle Titans and a Warlord.

But as he drew nearer he saw, with a mounting sense of horror, that the Titans were horrendously damaged. Their carapaces were buckled and scorched by repeated weapon impacts. What had happened to these war machines? As he took in the scale of the damage he realised again the terrible nature of the foe they faced here and the folly of underestimating them. How many lives had been lost today because of such a mistake?

Two Warhounds lurched backwards through the smoke and dust, their weapons firing controlled bursts into the ranks of the enemy. Both were damaged, their armoured flanks scored and burned, but both were still fighting.

He watched as the Reavers and the Warlord opened fire and the air exploded with the shocking noise. The Warhounds gratefully took shelter in the shadow of their larger cousins, adding their own gunfire to the barrage.

Leonid stumbled forward, past the Titans and into the cover of the guns of the Primus Ravelin, relieved beyond words that he had made it back alive. Fresh troops manned the firing step at the edge of the forward ditch and Ellard passed

him off to a frightened-looking soldier before returning to the battlefield to see to his men. Leonid leant against the wall of the parapet, cradling his head in his hands as the full horror of the battle crashed down upon him.

With those Dragoons who could escape now under the protection of the Titans of the Legio Ignatum and the citadel's gunners, the majority of the enemy did not appear too keen to continue the massacre, turning back to their own lines with raucous cries and taunts on their lips. Some could not contain their lust for killing and tried in vain to catch their victims, only to be mown down by close range fire from the Titans and the columns of fire from the ravelin and bastions.

Leonid felt an unbelievable exhaustion smother him. He put a hand out to steady himself, but the world spun crazily and he slid down the wall and collapsed before the soldiers next to him could catch him.

Four

DESPITE THE WARM wind that gusted across the mountain peaks, a shiver passed down Major Gunnar Tedeski's spine as he watched the activities below the fortress of Tor Christo. The stocky major leant over the parapet of Kane bastion, steadying himself with his one arm, and tried to guess at the number of men working below on the plains. At a conservative estimate, he guessed there were perhaps eight or nine thousand workers digging or otherwise engaged in the siegeworks below. The enemy was not short of men to dig, that was for sure, but how many actual warriors faced him was impossible to say.

'Uh, Major Tedeski, I'm not sure that's such a good idea,' ventured his aide-de-camp Captain Poulsen, who followed behind him clutching a data-slate.

'Nonsense, Poulsen, these Chaos scum aren't the sort to go in for snipers.'

'Even so, sir/ reiterated Poulsen as the boom of artillery echoed from the sides of the valley.

Tedeski shook his head, saying, 'It's too short to matter.'

Sure enough the shell landed in the ruins of the watchtower, sending up a plume of dust and rock fragments. The watchtower had been demolished after less than a day's shelling, but it had never been designed to withstand such a comprehensive bombardment in the first place.

Tedeski pulled back from the parapet and continued his walk around the perimeter of the bastion's walls. Soldiers sat, playing dice or sleeping below the level of the parapet. A few scanned the ground before them, their faces lined in exhaustion and lack of sleep. The more or less constant shelling had denied everyone sleep, and nerves were stretched taut.

In the week since the abortive attack on the traitors' trench system by the Legio Ignatum and the armoured units of the Dragoons, the plateau had changed beyond all recognition. Enemy artillery had pounded the plains day and night with high explosives, obliterating razor wire and detonating mines. Zigzag trenches covered the ground, reaching out towards the promontory that Tor Christo sat upon, their sides heavily reinforced with earthen ramparts. Tedeski's gunners had done their best, but the trenches had been constructed with mathematical precision and they were impossible to enfilade. Only once, when a portion of the trench had overreached, were they able to cause some real damage, killing the diggers and obliterating their machinery.

But since then, as each trench approached a point where the guns would be able to fire down their length, giant figures in grey-steel armour would direct the workers to alter the angle of digging.

A spider web of communication trenches and redoubts spread back to the main campsite and, though the Christo's guns shelled them daily, his observers could see no appreciable damage. It was maddeningly frustrating to see the foe advance with such impunity. The enemy had thrown out a second parallel at the termination of the saps, its sharp curve matching the sweep of his walls exactly. In two sections of this new parallel, high walls had been built. No doubt the trench behind them was being deepened and widened to allow the placement of large-bore howitzers.

Though the men in the Christo had been under fire for over a week, the range

was too great for the enemy guns to do more than chip away at the walls. However, the range was ideal for delivering ricochet fire, which had dismounted a great many of Tor Christo's wall-mounted guns. Tedeski had ordered the remaining guns to be pulled back into the fort, and though casualties had been light - fifty-two men dead so far - that would all change when the batteries of the second parallel were completed.

But Tedeski had a surprise in store for Tor Christo's attackers.

Guns situated at the base of the rocky promontory, kept in reserve thus far, would soon make their presence felt when the enemy moved their heavy artillery forward into those newly constructed batteries.

'It won't be long now, Poulsen,' mused Tedeski.

'What won't, sir?'

'The attack, Poulsen, the attack,' replied Tedeski, unable to mask his irritation. 'If we can't stop them from completing those batteries, they will bring up their big guns and lob high explosive shells right over our walls. Then they won't need to batter our walls down, they'll be able to walk right up to the main gate and come in, because there will be no one left alive to stop them.'

'But the guns below will stop them, surely?'

'Possibly,' allowed Tedeski, 'but we'll only be able to pull that trick once. And that's assuming they don't know about them already. Remember that reconnaissance party we fired on at the beginning of all this?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Well there's every chance our enemies know of the guns down there, and have planned accordingly.'

'Surely not, sir. If the enemy had discovered them, they would have attempted to

shell them before now, would they not?'

Tedeski nodded thoughtfully, resting his elbow on the stonework of the parapet, its sharply angled construction allowing a soldier to fire at attackers almost directly below.

'There is that, Poulsen, and that's the only reason I haven't had the passages below ground blocked. I can't risk not having those guns firing when the time comes.'

Emboldened by his superior officer's cavalier attitude to the potential danger of snipers, Captain Poulsen stood at the edge of the parapet and watched the bustling activity on the plains.

'I never thought to see such a thing/ he whispered.

'What?'

Poulsen pointed towards the towering form of the *Dies Irae,* standing immobile where the death of the *Imperator Bellum* had crippled it. Its lower legs were blackened and still

smoking where the meltdown of the Imperial Titan had scorched it. Vast swathes of scaffolding and buttresses had been erected around its legs as hundreds of men worked to try and repair the grievous damage done to it. The Titan's upper body had escaped the worst of the blast and each day its guns would fire upon the citadel, wreathing its walls in tremendous explosions, daring its enemy to come out and face it once more.

Tedeski nodded, 'Nor I. It was an honour to watch so brave a warrior fight such a diabolical monster. His brother Titans will avenge him though.'

'And who will avenge us?' pondered Poulsen.

Tedeski rounded on his aide-de-camp and snapped, 'We shall not need avenging, Captain Poulsen, and I will have words with any man who publicly voices such an opinion. Do you understand me?'

'Yes, sir/ replied Poulsen hurriedly. 'I only meant-'

'I know what you meant, Poulsen, but do not say these things aloud/ cautioned Tedeski, waving his arm at the soldiers who manned the parapet and the gunners who tended their artillery pieces.

What do you think is the single most important element of a fortress, Poulsen? Its walls? Its guns? Its position? No. It is the men who stand behind its walls and say to the enemy, "No, you shall not take this place". The fighting spirit of these men is all that keeps the enemy beyond these walls and only by standing together, with faith in the Emperor and an utter belief in our ability to hold, will we prevail. Regardless of the facts, the men need to believe that *we* believe the Christo can hold. Otherwise we are lost/

Poulsen nodded thoughtfully before saying, 'Do you believe we can hold, sir?'

Tedeski returned his gaze to the plains below. 'Ultimately, no, we cannot hold. Tor Christo will fall, but we will hold it for as long as we can. When I decide that the day is lost, I will order the withdrawal along the tunnels and overload our reactor to blow this place apart before I allow these bastards to make use of the Christo/

*

HONSOU PUSHED ASIDE an emaciated slave worker and followed Forrix along the twisting trench that led to the forward parallel. As the two Iron Warriors passed, slaves hurriedly dropped their shovels and picks and abased themselves before their masters. Neither Forrix nor Honsou paid the wretched creatures any heed, too intent on the looming shape of Tor Christo above them. Honsou felt the familiar anticipation as they stepped into the main parallel and he saw the thoroughness with which it had been constructed.

It had been dug to a depth of three metres, the wall nearest Tor Christo angled inwards to minimise the effect of airbursting shells. Propped dugouts were cut into the trench sides where slaves slept, ate and died. Too bone-weary to dispose of their dead in any other way, corpses were pushed to the side of the trench, the rotted remains filling the air with the stench of decay. Timber boards on iron sleepers were laid across the base of the trench and Honsou was impressed with the speed with which Forrix had driven the trench forward.

The first battery will be here,' said Forrix, pointing to a portion of the trench Honsou estimated was some six hundred metres from the base of the mountain. He could see that work had already begun on widening the trench. Thick sheets of steel were piled at the entrance to the new battery, ready to be laid across the ground to enable the big guns to fire without their recoil burying them in the ground.

Honsou nodded, looking up towards Tor Christo, picturing the angle of fire this guns placed in this battery would have.

The most vulnerable point of any fortification was its salient angles, the projecting points of its bastions where the ground in front was not covered by direct fire from the parapet. Forrix had dug the main sap directly towards the central bastion, with this forward parallel constructed well within the range of the fort's guns, but protected by their depth and earthen ramparts.

Honsou could see that batteries were being dug to either side of the bastion's salient, angled inwards so that the guns placed there would fire perpendicular to the face of

the bastion and break it open efficiently. Once the walls had been breached with direct firing guns, howitzers would send screaming shells into the gap to sweep it clear of enemy infantry before the main attack went in. Even so, it was sure to be a bloody enterprise.

There was a pleasing inevitability to the mechanics of a siege thought Honsou, as he watched dying slaves digging the gun battery. He had heard tales that in ages past there was a prescribed series of stages an attacker would be forced to

go through before it was deemed that he had done enough to earn the surrender of a garrison. Once it had been decreed that both forces had done all that honour demanded, the defenders would surrender and be allowed to quit the fortress carrying their weapons with their colours raised high. Such a notion was clearly ludicrous, and Honsou could not imagine a time when he would accept an enemy's surrender.

Once the Iron Warriors began a siege, there was no way to stop it.

When the great Perturabo had still led his warriors in battle, he offered his foes one chance to surrender before he had even planted a single shovel in the ground. Should that offer be refused, there would be no others, and such a siege could end only one way: in blood and death.

'You have sited your batteries well, Forrix,' noted Honsou.

Forrix nodded briefly, accepting the compliment. 'I do not believe we need to dig any further. To do so is pointless - we would expose ourselves needlessly to airbursting shells and the slope of the promontory will obscure the walls of the fortress should we press forward.'

Honsou saw that Forrix was correct. 'What about the batteries at the foot of the mountain? This will be well within their ideal range and the guns here will undoubtedly be targeted.'

'I realise that, Honsou, but when our guns are in place I will lead warriors from my company to take the enemy gun positions by storm.'

Honsou narrowed his eyes, aware that Forrix had called him by his name for the first time. Then the notion that he

would be denied the chance to capture the guns he had discovered hit him and he snarled, Той will capture the lower guns? I discovered them, the honour of their capture should be mine!'

'No, Honsou, I have another task for you.'

'Oh, and what would that be? Keeping the guns fed with shells? Guarding slaves?'

Forrix said nothing and pointed to a gap in the trench wall that was filled with sandbags and defended by a full squad of Iron Warriors.

'When the time is right, you will lead the storming parties from this point and take the breach. You will hold it until the human soldiers are able to scale the rock face and escalade the walls with ladders and grapples.'

Honsou opened his mouth to retort, then snapped it shut as he realised the honour of the task he was being given. His chest swelled with pride before his natural cynicism and suspicion came to the fore.

'Why, Forrix? Why do you do me this honour? You have done nothing before now but deride me and keep me in my place as a mongrel, a half-breed.'

Forrix was silent for long seconds, as though he himself did not know exactly why he had made such an offer. He turned from the mountain and faced Honsou.

'There was a time I thought like you do, Honsou. A time when I believed we fought for something more important than simple revenge, but as the millennia of battle ground on, I came to realise that there was no point to what we did. Nothing ever changed and nothing brought us closer to victory. I have been too long from the field of battle, Honsou, and as I watched you fight the Imperials, I knew that in your heart, you are an Iron Warrior. You still believe in the dream of Horus; I lost my hold on it many centuries ago.'

Forrix grinned suddenly. 'And the fact that it will send Kroeger into a towering rage.'

Honsou laughed, feeling uncharacteristically charitable towards the venerable Forrix.

That it will, Forrix, but he will be shamed by your decision. Are you sure you are wise to antagonise Kroeger in this

way? He descends further into the grasp of the Blood God with each passing day'

'The young-blood is nothing to me. I see nothing for him beyond mindless slaughter, but you... for you I see great things. The Warsmith does too, I see it every time he speaks to you.'

Honsou said, 'In that I think you are mistaken. He hates me.'

True, and yet you lead one of his grand companies/ pointed out Forrix.

'Only because Borak died at Magnot Four-Zero and the Warsmith has not yet named his successor.'

'Again true, but ask yourself this: how long ago was the Battle at Magnot Four-Zero?'

'Nearly two hundred years.'

Aye, and do you think that in all that time the Warsmith could not have found someone to lead the company?'

'Obviously not, or he would have done so.'

Forrix sighed and snapped, 'Perhaps that tainted blood of yours has made you as slow-witted as Dorn's lap-dogs from whence it comes! Think, Honsou. Had the Warsmith named you Borak's successor there and then, would any of his warriors have accepted you? No, of course not, and nor should they have, because to them you were just a despised half-breed.'

'Not a lot has changed, Forrix.'

'Then you are more foolish than I took you to be,' snarled Forrix, marching back

along the trench to the supply depots and leaving Honsou confused and alone in the half-finished battery.

Five

THE MACHINE TEMPLE at the heart of the citadel pulsed with barely contained power as though the very walls themselves breathed with an inner life or sentience. Its structure was strangely organic, though the chamber was built in honour of exactly the opposite.

The mass of the chamber was filled with baroque machinery that infested the space like a gigantic coral reef, steadily

growing and increasing its mass with every passing year. A sickly amber glow permeated the chamber, alongside a low, throbbing hum, just at the threshold of hearing.

Shaven-headed technicians and servitors in faded, yellow robes wandered like ghosts through the bewilderingly complex labyrinth of machines, their ministrations to the holy technologies ritualised over thousands of years to the point that any true purpose had long been forgotten.

Regardless of their function, the rituals and blessings applied to the machines served their purpose: keeping the chamber's sole inhabitant alive.

Arch Magos Caer Amaethon, Keeper of the Sacred Light, Master of Hydra Cordatus.

Lodged atop a tapered rhomboid at the chamber's centre, the flesh of the arch magos's face - all that remained of his organic body - was suspended in a gurgling vat of life-preserving fluids. Ribbed copper wiring trailed from behind the skin, twitching wires stimulated the atrophied muscles of his face. Clear tubing pumped oxygen-rich nutrients through his ravaged capillaries and the fragmentary scraps of cortex that were all that remained of his brain, the rest having been replaced and augmented with kilometres of twisting corridors of

logic stacks.

Amaethon's features creased as twitching electrical impulses awoke him to the fact that he was being addressed.

'Arch Magos Amaethon?' repeated Magos Naicin, taking a draw on a smoking cheroot. The smoke gusted from his back, whipped away as the recyc-units cleared the arch magos's chambers of their pollutants.

'Naicin?' asked Amaethon hesitantly, the fleshy lips having difficulty in forming the words. 'Why do you disturb my communing with the holy Omnissiah?'

'I come to bring you news of the battle.'

'Battle?'

'Yes, master, the battle above on the surface.'

'Oh, yes, the battle/ stated the arch magos. Naicin ignored Amaethon's lapse in memory. For six centuries, Amaethon had been linked to the beating heart of the

citadel, monitoring every facet of its operation and that of the cavernous laboratorium hidden beneath it. For the last century of that service, he had been unable to leave this sanctuary, steadily becoming more a part of the citadel as each portion of his body withered and died. Soon the old man would be gone completely, his bio-engrams broken down and reduced to nothing more than task instruction wafers to be fed into worker-servitors.

Naicin knew Amaethon's fragile grip on reality was slipping, and it was a rare moment when he was able to summon up enough memory to interact with others. The first flush of panic when the invaders had attacked had galvanised the arch magos into remarkable lucidity, but even that was beginning to fade.

'The battle,' repeated Amaethon, a fragment of his crystal memory reacting to the word. 'Yes, I remember now. They come for what we protect here. They must not

have it, Naicin!'

'No, arch magos, they must not/ agreed Naicin.

'How could they even know of its existence?'

'I do not know, master. But they do, and we must make plans in case the citadel's defences do not hold the invaders at bay/

The flesh of Amaethon's face bobbed in its amniotic suspension. 'But they must, Naicin, this citadel was built by the finest military architects of the day, there are none who can breach its fastness/

'I am sure you are correct, arch magos, but nevertheless we should have a contingency plan. The Guard are but men. Flesh, blood and bone. Organic and therefore weak. They cannot be relied upon/

'Yes, yes, you are right/ agreed Amaethon dreamily. The flesh is weak, Naicin. Only the machine is strong. We must not allow the laboratorium to fall into enemy hands/

As ever, your words are filled with wisdom, arch magos. But even as we speak the enemy drive towards the fastness of Tor Christo, and it is likely that it will fall within days/

Amaethon's flaccid features twitched at this news, his eyes fluttering in sudden alarm.

'And the tunnel that links us to Tor Christo? Do the enemy know of it?'

'I do not believe so, arch magos, but should the Christo fall, it is inevitable that they will discover it.'

'They must not be allowed to make use of it!' trilled Amaethon.

'I agree, that is why I have armed the demolition charges that will destroy it.'

'Have you made Vauban aware of this?'

'No, arch magos.'

'Good. Vauban would not understand the necessity of such action. His compassion for his men would be our undoing/

Amaethon seemed to sigh and was silent for some minutes before saying, 'I am... not as strong as once I was, Naicin. The burden I carry here is great.'

Magos Naicin bowed. 'Then allow me to bear some of that burden, arch magos. When the time comes that the enemy approach the inner walls of the citadel, you will be under immense strain to hold the energy shield in place as well as maintaining the citadel in working order. Allow some of that burden to fall upon my shoulders.'

Amaethon's skin mask nodded and with an abrupt change of subject the arch magos whispered, And what of the astropaths? Have you been able to isolate the contagion that afflicts them and renders their mind-voices mute?'

Momentarily taken aback, Naicin paused before answering. 'Ah, regrettably, no, but I am confident the answer lies within your logic stacks. It is just a matter of time before I am able to restore their abilities and once again send messages off-world.'

Very good. It is imperative that we summon aid, Naicin. The magnitude of the consequences should we be defeated here is beyond imagination.'

'We shall not be defeated/ assured Magos Naicin with another bow.

ON THE MORNING of the eleventh day of the siege, Forrix's batteries were complete and the giant guns of the Iron Warriors

were either dragged forwards by gangs of sweating slaves or rumbled along under their own diabolical power. Within minutes of the observers on the walls of Tor Christo spotting the movement of the giant artillery pieces, the Imperial Basilisks began firing, the endless barrage of shells turning the ground before the fortress into a hell of fire and shrapnel.

But the deepened and widened trenches were proof against all but direct hits, and only two machines were destroyed, their crews and those manhandling them shredded by lethal steel splinters. One massive gun, an ornate long-barrelled howitzer, was struck a glancing impact by a shell bursting directly overhead. Imbued with the bound energy of a daemon from the warp, the war machine screamed in lunatic fury, breaking free of its sorcerous bindings and running amok in the communication trench, crushing the four score slaves who pulled it and the guards who watched over it.

It took the combined efforts of Jharek Kelmaur, seven of his cabal sorcerers and the souls of a hundred slaves to placate the daemon, but soon, the gun was in its prepared position before the walls of Tor Christo.

The gunners on the walls attempted to shift their fire to the two batteries, realising that the chances of damaging the war machines traversing the trenches were slim, but Forrix had placed his batteries well and the Basilisks could not land their shells so close to the promontory.

It took another three deafening hours before Forrix was happy with the placement of his guns and the slaves shackled the daemonic war machines to the steel plates laid on the floor of the batteries.

At last, several hours after the sun had passed its zenith, Forrix gave the order to fire.

THE FIRST SHELLS smashed into the south-eastern face of Kane bastion, throwing the men stationed on its walls to the ground. The rockcrete cracked under the impact, fist-sized chunks of grey rubble blasted skyward in a cloud of choking dust. It was followed seconds later by a volley from the second battery, smashing into the opposite face of the bastion.

This second volley was aimed high, blasting the top of the firing step clear in a storm of stone fragments that scythed men down by the dozen.

Blood and screams filled the air. Medics rushed to the aid of the wounded as their comrades dragged screaming soldiers from the walls to the courtyard below. Barely a minute had passed when yet more shells slammed into the walls of the Kane bastion, shaking it to its very foundations.

The noise was unbelievable. Major Tedeski knew that he would never forget the sheer, skull-pounding volume of the enemy bombardment. Each battery took it in turns to fire, the massive guns hurling explosive projectiles at his walls with incredible force. The stocky major had changed from his normal dress uniform and simply wore the standard issue sky blue jacket of the regiment, the one empty sleeve tucked inside. A flinching Captain Poulsen stood behind Tedeski, his face twitching with every crack of shell on stone.

Tedeski watched the corner gun tower crumble from the walls, carrying a dozen men screaming to their deaths on the rocks below.

'Upon my soul, it's bad/ he muttered.

'Sir?' enquired Poulsen.

'Nothing/ said Tedeski, scanning the walls. 'I want those men off the walls. Leave platoons one and five on the parapet and order all the others to withdraw/

Poulsen relayed his commanding officer's order, grateful to have something to distract him from the thunderous shelling. Tedeski watched as the command filtered through to the walls, seeing the relief on the faces of the men ordered to withdraw and the fear of those who remained. The ground shook again as more shells impacted and Tedeski swore as an entire section of the southern wall cracked and crumbled to the base. Though the firing step was taking a punishing barrage, it would be some time before the enemy guns had pounded enough of the walls to form a practicable breach and brought down enough rubble for attacking troops to climb.

Stone splinters ripped through the bodies of the men who remained on the walls, tearing them to bloody rags, but

Tedeski knew that he couldn't leave the walls totally unmanned for fear that an escalade was underway. There was every chance he was consigning these men to die, and the guilt of their deaths tasted like ashes in his mouth.

Suddenly, he set off towards the walls, climbing the dusty, fragment-strewn steps that led from the courtyard to the parapet.

'Sir?' shouted Poulsen, 'Where are you going?'

'To stand on the walls with my men/ snapped the irascible major.

Years of ingrained obedience kicked in and, without thinking, Poulsen trotted up the steps after Tedeski before his conscious brain truly understood what he was doing.

A ragged cheer greeted Tedeski's arrival as he marched to the head of the bastion, defiantly facing the enemy guns. The parapet here was cracked and sagging, several metres of rockcrete missing from its length, and Tedeski had a clear view of the scene below.

The two batteries were wreathed in clouds of thick grey smoke, which was periodically pierced by flashes of fire. Screaming projectiles slashed through the air as a soldier unnecessarily shouted, 'Incoming!'

The shells slammed into the base of the wall below Tedeski, blasting chunks of rock high into the air and enveloping him in a drifting bank of smoke. Tedeski didn't flinch and when the cloud cleared, merely dusted off his uniform jacket with his one hand.

As the noise of the explosion faded, Tedeski shouted, 'The enemy must have bad fevers. Do you hear them cough? Perhaps we should offer them some sweet wine!'

Laughter and cheering swelled from the throats of Battalion A of the Jouran Dragoons, their courage bolstered by their commander's words and bravery.

Another nerve-stretching hour of shelling followed which Major Gunnar Tedeski endured with his men in determined silence.

As dusk turned the sky the colour of congealed blood, Tedeski turned to Poulsen, and took his aide-de-camp's data-slate with a shaking hand.

With an effort of will to keep his voice from breaking, he said, 'Order the guns below to deploy and shell those batteries out of existence.'

FORRIX PICKED HIS way across the cratered plain as quickly as his bulky suit of Terminator armour would allow him, followed by thirty of his hand-picked warriors. Like him, they had dulled the lustre of their Terminator armour with red dust from the plains, and under the fury of the bombardment would hopefully escape detection by the soldiers above them.

He knew they did not have much time. The commander of the garrison above would know by now how devastating the artillery of the Iron Warriors was, and that unless he destroyed it quickly, his fortress was lost. It followed that he would now deploy his hidden guns and this was just what Forrix wanted. Honsou waited in the forward parallel with forty of his warriors and nearly six thousand human soldiers spread along the extent of the trench.

The timing would need to be precise. Too early and the Imperials would seal the tunnels leading to the guns; too late and his artillery would be bombed out of existence.

Forrix stalked through the cratered wasteland and secreted himself less than fifty metres from the entrance to the concealed artillery pits. His veteran warriors filed into position alongside him and waited, the noise of the shelling swallowing the thump of their heavy footfalls.

They did not have long to wait. A sliver of light and rumbling of heavy rolling

stock grinding along rails announced that the guns were indeed moving into position.

'Honsou/ hissed Forrix, rising to his feet and charging towards the guns, 'go now!'

HONSOU SNARLED IN anticipation as he heard Forrix's words echo within his helm and kicked down the sandbagged barricade that led from the forward parallel onto the plain. He sprinted forward, the Iron Warriors fanning out behind him as they raced across the uneven ground towards the base of the steep, rocky slope. Behind him thousands of red-clad soldiers climbed from the trench and the guns continued to fire, pounding the walls to breach the central bastion.

The augmented fibre bundle muscles of their armour powered the Iron Warriors upwards, leaving the human soldiers floundering in their wake, stumbling around in the strobing, shell-lit twilight.

He and his warriors would be first to reach the fortress. This type of action had once been known as a Forlorn Hope, because the first men into the breach would invariably be the first men to die. It was the duty of the Hope to draw the enemy fire as the remainder of the force closed with the fortress. The men of the Hope would storm the breach and buy time with their lives for the following troops to push through. Hundreds of men might be sacrificed in this way simply to get a handful through the breach.

Storming a breach was always a bloody affair, because the enemy knew exactly where the attack would be coming from, though Honsou hoped the constant bombardment from the batteries would keep the Imperial defenders' heads down.

He clambered swiftly up the jagged rocks, each powerful thrust of his thighs pushing him closer to the top. As the noise of shell impacts intensified, he looked up into the darkening sky, seeing the broken top of the ramparts and a huge tear ripped in the side of the bastion. Tonnes of rabble spilled down its flanks and provided a ready-made ramp to the defenders above.

'Battery guns, cease fire/ ordered Honsou as he cleared the top of the slope.

Shouts of alarm echoed from the top of the walls and a handful of las-blasts stabbed towards him, but they were poorly aimed and flew high.

Honsou muttered the Iron Warriors' catechism of battle: 'Iron within, iron without/ as his men pulled themselves onto the ground before Tor Christo and charged with him towards the breach.

FORRIX SWEPT HIS power glove through the chest of a man wearing a gunner's reinforced flak vest, his upper body

exploding in blood and bone. Roaring reaper cannon fire ripped through the Imperial gunners and soldiers, spraying the flanks of their artillery with blood.

'Protect the guns!' screamed a junior officer before Forrix tore his head off.

Fools. Did they really think the guns were their target; that the Iron Warriors did not already have a surfeit of guns?

Their attack had hit without warning and the first Imperial troops had died without knowing what had killed them. Their guards tried to fight back, but within seconds had realised the fight was hopeless and fled before Forrix and his Terminators. But the old veteran was not about to let his prey escape him so easily. Three of his warriors levelled their reaper cannons, the barrels studded with spikes, and unleashed a deadly hail of shots that felled men by the dozen.

Forrix lumbered forward, ignoring the Imperial guns and charging as fast as he could towards the wide doors in the mountainside. Already the alarm had been raised and they were rumbling closed, but too slowly. Forrix and his retinue burst through into the space beyond.

A volley of las-fire greeted them, hissing harmlessly from the thick armour of the Terminators. Scores of Guardsmen were spread through the cavernous chamber, but Forrix ignored the bright flashes of weapons fire as he searched for

the door mechanism. Thick rails ran across the rockcrete floor from three enormous bays and ordnance magazines, each with cranes and pulley chains filling the space above them.

He could see stairs ahead leading upwards carved through the rock. The majority of the cavern's defenders were gathered at their base behind hurriedly constructed barricades of crates and barrels. Another group was clustered behind a pair of giant bulldozers, firing from behind their yellow bulk at the invaders. Guessing the controls for the door were housed here, Forrix charged forwards through the hail of shots, his armour easily deflecting the defenders' pitiful fire. He and his Terminators fired their combi-bolters across the flanks of the bulldozers, explosive

shells killing a dozen soldiers and ricocheting from the dozers' flanks with flaring detonations.

More Terminators headed for the soldiers guarding the stairs as Forrix rounded the forward edge of the closest bulldozer and hosed the men there with bolter fire. Grenades burst harmlessly around the Terminators as one man dived aside and swung a heavy rifle with a ribbed barrel towards Forrix.

A white-hot beam of plasma energy slammed into his chest, instantly obliterating the blasted iconography there and searing through layers of ceramite armour. Forrix felt the heat of the plasma scorch his skin and he staggered under the force of the impact. His Terminator armour had been forged on the Anvil of Holades on Olympia itself and its ancient spirit was as corrupt as he, and not yet willing to fall. Forrix recovered his balance and punched his power fist through the plasma gunner's chest in a shower of bone splinters, lifting the impaled body from the ground and hurling it through the air in a bloody arc.

Bursts of bolter fire and disembowelling sweeps of lightning claws silenced the resistance. Forrix strode to the access door controls on the far wall and wrenched the release lever into the 'open' position. The doors screeched, the mechanisms protesting as their motors suddenly reversed and began to rumble open again. Forrix backed away and put three bolts through the control mechanism.

Satisfied the gun bay doors would not be closing any time soon, Forrix rounded the blood-splattered bulldozer, watching as his warriors with reaper cannons began slaughtering the remaining defenders of the cavern in controlled bursts of gunfire.

As the slaughter continued, the Guardsmen broke and ran for the steps. Those not quick enough to reach the cover of the stairs were shredded by the Iron Warriors' firepower, their screams drowned in the deafening roar of the cannons. Any not killed in the initial bursts were soon torn apart as the shells destroyed their barricade in an instant. Within seconds the entire defence was gone, only chewed up crates and mangled corpses remaining.

A single, terrified soldier suddenly broke from cover, sprinting for the stairs. Three cannons tracked him as he ran, but Forrix said, 'No, this one is mine.'

Forrix let the man get within a hair's breadth of safety before he fired his weapon.

Shells tore great chunks from the wall behind his victim, shattering several control panels.

As fast as the soldier had run, it was not fast enough. A single shell clipped his thigh as he twisted out of the line of fire, instantly shearing his leg from his body just below the hip.

He landed in a bloody bundle, shrieking in agony as he saw the ragged stump of his leg, its remains hanging by gory threads. Forrix smiled and marched across the rockcrete floor, stepping across the wide rail tracks to stand above the man. He was hyperventilating and staring in horror at his ruined leg.

'The hydraulic shock will drag the blood from your heart in a few seconds/ said Forrix, his voice distorted by his armour's vox-unit. The man glanced up, uncomprehending, his eyes glazing over as death drew near.

'You are lucky/ said Forrix. 'You will die before the Warsmith ascends. Thank your Emperor for that/

The sound of battle faded and the cavern was theirs. Terminators hurried past him, eager to continue the killing.

He opened a channel to the remainder of his company.

'The lower level of the fort is ours. Send the rest of the men/

Forrix lifted his eyes from the dying soldier and climbed the stairs to where two Terminators were attacking a wide set of steel doors, driving their powerful chainsaw-equipped fists into the junction of the doors.

Molten sparks filled the tunnel, spilling down the steps onto the waiting Terminators.

HONSOU SCRAMBLED UP the jagged piles of debris and loose rubble cascading down the breach in his wake. Twisted reinforcement bars jutted from smashed blocks of rockcrete like tendons, and dust fogged the air. Bright stabs of las-fire from

above pierced the smoke in huge numbers, melting rock and hissing against armour. A bolt stuck his shoulder guard, staggering him, but he pressed on. A grenade burst at his feet, deadly fragments ringing from his armour and embedding themselves in his leg greaves.

He could see the enemy had cast down a barrier of rusted abatis, sharpened iron girders, crudely welded together to form waist-high obstacles to their charge. Honsou knew that the longer they were under fire, the less likely they were to be able to scale the breach. This was the point at which many assaults came to end, broken by obstacles and shredded by the defenders' fire.

For this attack to have any chance of success at all they had to mount the breach in one leap to overwhelm the defenders lining the parapet. Honsou tripped as the rocks slid out from beneath his feet, narrowly avoiding being obliterated by a shot from a lascannon. He pushed himself angrily to his feet and cursed as he saw three black-steel tubes bound together with packing tape clatter down the

slope of the breach.

Honsou threw himself flat onto the rocks as the demolition charge exploded. The Shockwave dislodged whole swathes of rubble and he felt himself sliding back down the breach, his auto-senses kicking in to protect him from the deafening and blinding detonation. Two Iron Warriors were snatched away in the blast, their armour ripped open by the force of the demo charge. Honsou rolled upright, his armour smoking from the explosion and clawed his way back up the breach.

More shots riddled the shattered breach, vitrifying the rock and pitting the ground with bullet impacts. Honsou felt powerful impacts from a heavy bolter slam into his armour. Pain blossomed up his left arm as one shell found its mark in the gap between his vambrace and elbow guard. Fire from the bastion to the north delivered murderous flanking fire into his men. The sheer amount of enemy firepower was now telling. Honsou saw another Iron Warrior fall, his armour pierced by a smoking hole punched in his breastplate.

More grenades bounced down the breach. Honsou pushed upwards, reaching for the abatis and pulling himself forward. The grey flanks of the wall stretched high above him. The only way in was through this six metre wide breach the guns had blasted, and the sliver of red sky he could see through it was a beacon to him.

This was taking too damn long! Already the human Chaos soldiery were clambering over the lip of the rocks below and he hadn't even fought his way into the mouth of the breach yet. Honsou gripped the rusted girders of the abatis in both hands, roaring as he ripped them from their position, sending them tumbling to the base of the breach, crushing half a dozen soldiers as they fell.

Another Iron Warrior climbed up to join him and the two of them went forwards, firing their bolt pistols as they climbed. Through the dust and smoke, Honsou could see shadowy forms at the jagged top of the breach and could hear screaming voices yelling him onwards. He shot into the smoke, hearing screams of pain as his bolts hit home.

He pushed forwards, gripping the stonework as the slope grew steeper. A shot punched into his breastplate, another grazed his head. Shots filled the air, flashes

of las-fire vaporising the smoke as they slashed past him. The one remaining tower at the head of the bastion sprayed bullets across the breach, kicking up spurts of rock dust while grenades wreathed them in ringing detonations and spinning fragments. The warrior beside him fell, his helmet a molten ruin, but Honsou pushed on through it all, oblivious to the screams of dying men around him and the battle cries of the hundreds of soldiers that now clambered up the rocky slopes behind him.

The top of the breach was close now; he could make out individual forms through the smoke. He saw a Guardsman rigging another demolition charge and waited until the man stood up, ready to heave the explosives over the lip of the breach, before shooting him in the head. Blood sprayed from the stump of his neck and the man tumbled backwards, the primed demo charge falling from his dead fingers.

Honsou dropped flat as the rocks above him were swept clear of defenders by the massive explosion. Screams and desperate orders sounded from above. He leapt to his feet, drawing his sword and sprinting for all he was worth towards the billowing pillar of black smoke that wreathed the crest of the breach.

He collided with a pair of figures dressed in sky blue uniforms, and swept his sword across their chests, dropping them screaming to the ground. He could see more soldiers rushing to plug the sudden gap in their defence and shouted, 'Iron Warriors, with me!'

But Honsou was alone. He turned to face the nearest Guardsmen as they charged him. He killed the first men easily, but soon more and more clustered around him, entangling his blade with their bodies and restricting his movements with their corpses. He kicked out, spinning in a bloody arc as he clove his sword through his enemies. Shots and blades rang against his armour.

Where were the rest of his men?

He glanced down the sloping face of the breach. Below was a hell of lasers and bullets, enfilading fire from the flanking bastion ripping great holes in the ranks of the human soldiers as they struggled up the rocks. Hundreds had fallen, their

bodies shredded by automatic weapons or burned by las-fire. The northern bastion had escaped relatively unscathed thus far. A few shells burst overhead, but the main shelling had been directed against this bastion, and the men assaulting it were now paying the price for that decision.

More enemies closed in around him as he shot, cut, stabbed, kicked and punched a red ruin through the defenders, roaring in triumph as the warriors of his company climbed onto the walls, sweeping left and right along the ramparts. Bolters fired again and again and men died in droves as the Iron Warriors took the ramparts of Kane bastion in blood and steel.

Silhouetted in the flames of the defenders' rout, Honsou leapt for the courtyard below, the stonework cracking under his weight. Enemy soldiers streamed towards the narrow

neck of the bastion, Iron Warriors in hot pursuit. The momentum of the charge must not be lost. Despite this success, there were sure to be thousands more soldiers in the bastions either side of this one.

Honsou ran through the confusion of the battle, firing as he ran and cutting down those soldiers not quick enough to escape. At the neck of the bastion he saw the Imperial troopers were heading for a wide trench, crossed by a narrow bridge. Troops bottlenecked on the crossing despite the desperate shouts of officers for them not to. As Honsou watched, the bridge collapsed into the trench, crushing those unfortunate to be trapped beneath it. Some soldiers dropped into the trench, turning to fire on the Iron Warriors, but many more were streaming in panic to the main esplanade where a squat, round tower crouched at the base of the steep escarpment.

Black coated officers in skull-embossed peaked caps bellowed orders for their men to stand firm, enforcing these orders with bullets. Honsou let them shoot their own men, blasting holes in those enemy soldiers who weren't running. A swelling roar of hate filled the night as the Iron Warriors' indentured soldiery swarmed over the walls, fanning out towards the stairs or simply jumping into the courtyard. The bastion was theirs, now they just had to break out of it.

Stuttering volleys of las-fire blasted from the trench, but it was too little, too late as Honsou dropped into the prepared position and killed with wanton abandon. His sword chopped through a terrified Guardsman, the reverse stroke disembowelling another. He worked his way down the trench, hacking a bloody path through the defenders who fell back in horror from his deadly blade. As Honsou killed the Guardsmen, he revelled in his superiority, and could well understand the attraction of Khorne's path.

The Iron Warriors swept over the trench killing everything in it with the fury of those who had fought their way through hell and lived to tell the tale, butchering anything that came within reach.

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FROM INSIDE THE keep of Tor Christo, Major Gunnar Tedeski watched the slaughter with a desperate heart. His men were dying and there was nothing he could do to stop it. He'd gambled with the lower guns, trusting that they would be able to stop the relentless advance of the Iron Warriors, but they had second guessed him, and now the fortress was as good as theirs.

He had failed and while Tor Christo's fate had never really been in doubt, it was galling for it to have fallen so quickly. The attackers had not yet broken out of Kane bastion, but they would surely overrun the entrenchments behind the bastion soon. He knew the images he was seeing on the remote pict-viewers did not capture the horror and carnage taking place outside. Thousands of men were streaming over the walls and it would only be a matter of time until the Mars and Dragon bastions came under attack from their vulnerable rears. If he let them, the men there would fight bravely, but they would die, and Tedeski would have no more deaths on his conscience.

'Poulsen!' sighed Tedeski, wiping dust and sweat from his brow.

'Sir?'

'Send the "Heaven's Fall" signal to all company commanders and Castellan

Vauban.'

'"Heaven's Fall", sir?' queried Poulsen.

'Yes, damn you!' snapped Tedeski. 'Quickly, man!'

'Y-yes, sir,' nodded Poulsen hurriedly and ran off to pass the evacuation code to the vox operators.

Tedeski turned from his aide-de-camp and straightened his duty uniform jacket before addressing the remaining men and officers standing with him in the Christo's command centre.

'Gentlemen, it is time you left this place. It grieves me to say that Tor Christo is about to fall. As the commanding officer, I am ordering you to lead as many men as you can into the tunnels and make your way to the citadel. Castellan Vauban will need every man on the walls in the coming days and I will not deny him those men by sacrificing them needlessly here.'

Silence greeted his words until a junior officer asked, "Will you not accompany us, sir?'

'No. I will stay to overload the reactor and deny our foes this fortress.'

Tedeski raised his arm as objections were shouted. 'I have made up my mind and will not be argued with. Now go! Time is of the essence!'

THE HEAVEN'S FALL signal has been sent from Tor Christo, arch magos,' reported Magos Naicin, staring at the encrypted vox-thief before him.

'So soon?' hissed Amaethon, and though his flesh had lost any true emotive qualities, Naicin saw a passable approximation of genuine alarm cross the face of the arch magos.

'It appears that the men of the Guard are weaker than even I feared,' said Naicin

sadly.

"We must protect ourselves! The citadel must not fall!'

'It must not/ agreed Naicin. 'What would you have me do, arch magos?'

'Blow the tunnel, Naicin! Do it now!'

CAPTAIN POULSEN HURRIED down the carved steps, clutching bundles of paper folders and an armful of data-slates. The fear was unlike anything he had felt before. He'd never been on the front line before, his talents in organisation and logistics making him much more valuable to the command echelons behind the line.

But standing on the walls of the Kane bastion with shells exploding all around him, he'd felt the bowel-loosening terror of an artillery bombardment and was desperately grateful he had been spared the horror of combat. Hundreds of men thronged the tunnels beneath the keep, descending into the depths of the promontory and heading for the wide cavern-tunnel that led back to the citadel. Similar underground passageways allowed the men from the flanking bastions to escape, though it was too late for the men in Kane bastion.

It was inevitable that some men would have to die so that the others might live.

Weak illumination from the glow-globes strung from the ceiling cast a fitful light over the soldiers around him. Fearful and guilty expressions were writ large across his fellow officers' faces. Dust drifted from the ceiling and sputtering recyc-units struggled to keep the air moving in the hot, stagnant underground.

Eventually, the steps ended and the tunnel widened into a large, roughly circular cavern with passages leading off into the rock beneath Tor Christo. Men from the Dragon and Mars bastions were already streaming from these tunnels, yellow-coated provosts attempting to impose a semblance of order of the retreat with limited success. Major Tedeski's order to withdraw was being obeyed with speed. Four giant, blast-shielded elevator doors studded one wall and, ahead, the

cavern narrowed to a well-lit underground highway, nearly twelve metres wide and seven high.

Normally this level of the fort was used to move artillery and ordnance between Tor Christo and the citadel, but it was equally well-suited for large scale movements of troops. Poulsen jostled alongside sweating troopers, the shouts of fiie provosts and soldiers almost deafening. The heaving mass of men moved towards the main tunnel and Poulsen felt himself being carried along with it. An elbow dug painfully into his side and he yelped, dropping the armful of data-slates to the painted floor.

The bureaucrat in him took over and he fell to his knees to gather up the fallen slates, cursing under his breath as a booted foot crunched the nearest one to splinters. A hand grabbed him and hauled him roughly upright.

'Leave them!' snarled a grim-faced provost. 'Keep moving.'

Poulsen was about to protest at this rough treatment, when the ground shook and cries of alarm echoed around the cavern. A rain of dust dropped from the roof and an eerie quiet descended upon the chamber.

'What was that?' breathed Poulsen. 'Artillery?'

'No/ hissed the provost. 'We wouldn't hear artillery down here. That was something else/

Then what?'

'I don't know, but I don't like the sound of it/

Another louder vibration shook the cavern, then another. Shouts of alarm turned to cries of terror as Poulsen saw a hellish orange glow race towards them down the main tunnel, followed by a furious whooshing roar. Poulsen watched the approaching glow with incomprehension. What was happening?

His unasked question was suddenly answered as someone shouted, 'Emperor's Blood, they're blowing the tunnel!'

Blowing the tunnel? That was inconceivable! While there were men still here? Castellan Vauban would never give such an order. This couldn't be happening. Hundreds of soldiers turned in panic and attempted to race back into the tunnels they had recently fled, pushing their comrades aside in terror. Men fell and were trampled underfoot as the terrified men of the Jourans stampeded back from the collapsing tunnel.

Poulsen stumbled backwards, dropping the slates he had collected from the floor, all thoughts of their worth forgotten. Explosions of demolition charges marched their way along the tunnel, bringing down thousands of tonnes of rock upon the trapped men of the Guard within it.

He staggered back towards the clogged tunnel he had just come from, clawing at the men in front of him, desperate to escape.

The main tunnel suddenly exploded in fire and noise, rubble blasting from its mouth, crashing and burning hundreds of men in an instant. Poulsen wrenched a man from in front of him, and pushed his way forwards as he heard an ominous crack from the ceiling above him. A demolition charge set in the centre of the cavern's roof exploded, showering the soldiers below in chunks of rock and collapsing the entire cavern roof.

Poulsen screamed as falling rocks pummelled him to the ground, smashing his skull and crashing his body to a jellied pulp.

Nearly three thousand men joined him in death as the tunnel between the citadel and Tor Christo was sealed.

MAJOR TEDESKI SWIGGED from a bottle of amasec as he stared at the pict-viewer displaying the exterior of the keep,

watching thousands of soldiers in red swamp the walls of his fortress. Mars and

Dragon bastions were thronged with enemy soldiers, firing their weapons into the air and cheering at their victory. He'd watched in fury as his captured soldiers were lined up and shot against the bastion walls or herded into the trenches and set alight with flamers. Tedeski had never felt such a strong hatred before. A grim smile touched his lips as he pictured sending these bastards to hell.

He took another drink from the bottle and nodded slowly. The command centre was empty except for himself and Magos Yelede, who sat dejectedly in the corner. The machine priest had protested at being ordered to stay behind, but Tedeski had told him that he would either stay willingly or he would be shot.

Tedeski drained the last of the bottle and turned away from the sickening atrocities being committed within his walls. He gripped Magos Yelede's robes, hauling him to his feet.

'Come on, Yelede. Time to earn your keep.'

Tedeski dragged the reluctant magos from the control centre, through a maze of corridors and security sealed barriers before descending in a key-controlled elevator to the power chamber far below the keep. As the elevator rumbled downwards, a pounding vibration shook the elevator car, the lights flickering and metal squealing as it ground against the walls of the shaft.

What the hell?' began Tedeski as the elevator began its downward journey again.

No sooner had the elevator doors opened than Tedeski pushed Magos Yelede out into the featureless grey corridor that led towards the reactor chamber. He tried to raise Captain Poulsen and the rest of his company commanders on the vox, but met with no success and his worry grew with each step.

The powerful shockwave had felt like some vast, underground detonation and as far as he knew there was only one way such a detonation could have occurred. But surely Castellan Vauban would never have allowed the Adeptus Mechanicus to destroy the tunnel and cut off thousands of

men from their retreat? A terrible sinking feeling settled in his gut and he

fervently hoped his suspicions were unfounded.

At last they arrived at the main doors to the reactor chamber and Tedeski stood aside to allow the machine priest to access the entry controls.

'Open the damn door!' snapped Tedeski when Yelede failed to move.

'I cannot, Major Tedeski.'

'What? Why the hell not?'

'I have been given instructions not to allow this facility to be destroyed.'

Tedeski slammed Yelede against the wall and drew his bolt pistol, shouting, 'If you don't open that door, I will shoot you in the head!'

'Anything you can threaten me with is irrelevant, major/ protested Yelede. 'I have been given a sacred order by my superiors and I cannot disobey it. Our word is iron.'

'And my bolt is 0.75 calibre, diamantine tipped with a depleted uranium core and if you don't open this bloody door right now, I will fire it through your poor excuse for a brain. Now open the damn door!'

'I cannot-' began Yelede as a roaring screech of tearing metal ripped along the corridor. The two men watched as an enormous, crackling fist tore open the elevator doors and a gigantic figure stepped through, filling the corridor with its bulk.

Almost three metres tall, the huge figure took a step into the light and Tedeski felt his heart hammer against his chest. The figure wore a bloodstained suit of iron-grey Terminator armour, slashed with diagonal chevrons of black and yellow stripes. The helmet was carved in the shape of a snarling jackal, and his molten chestplate bore the visored skull-mask of the Iron Warriors.

Yelede whimpered in fear and squirmed free of Tedeski's grasp, swiftly pressing his palm to the identification slate.

'Blessed Machine, I abjure thee to grant your unworthy servant entry to your holy sanctum, to your beating heart/ said Yelede, the words coming out in a desperate rash.

'Hurry up, for the Emperor's sake!' hissed Tedeski as the Terminator lumbered towards them. More enemy clambered from the wrecked elevator car, following their leader. Tedeski fired a short burst from his bolt pistol, but the heavy suits of armour were impervious.

The reactor room door slid smoothly open and Tedeski and Yelede gratefully ducked inside as it slammed shut behind them.

Tedeski pushed Yelede towards the centre of the chamber where a tall podium with a dozen thick brass rods set into grooves on the floor pulsed with energy.

Tedeski dragged the protesting magos towards this arrangement and pointed his pistol at his head.

'Give me any more trouble and I will kill you. Do you understand?'

Yelede nodded, what little flesh remained of his face twisted in fear. The magos jumped as thundering impacts slammed into the door and the inner face bulged inwards. Quickly, he ran to the brass columns and pressed his palm into the top of the first, twisting it and chanting a prayer of forgiveness to the Omnissiah. He climbed onto the central dais and rotated several cogged dials.

Tedeski fought for calm as the first brass column rose from the floor, steam hissing from the newly revealed metal. Warning klaxons blared and a stream of words, meaningless to Tedeski, issued from a pair of speakers mounted on the dais.

'Can't you do this any faster?' hissed Tedeski urgently as the door buckled

inwards again.

'I am going as fast as I can. Without the proper ministrations to appease the machine spirits that invest the reactor, I will not be able to persuade them to aid us.'

'Then don't waste time talking to me/ snapped Tedeski as another hammer-blow slammed into the door.

FORRIX SMASHED HIS power fist into the door, feeling the layered metal starting to give. He knew he did not have much time. The Warsmith's captured magos had told mem of the capacity of Tor Christo's commander to destroy the fortress

and Forrix was under no illusions as to what the two men within this chamber were attempting to do.

His warriors gathered behind him, impatient to kill their prey and begin refortifying this place. He slammed his fist against the door again, feeling the metal crumple beneath his assault. He gripped the twisted metal and pulled, tearing the door from its mounting with a roar of triumph. Forrix pushed through the doorway to see a magos in white robes ministering to a machine in the centre of the chamber, and a one-armed Imperial Guard officer standing beside him. The man fired his bolt pistol and Forrix grinned as he felt the ringing impacts against his thick armour. He felt a sensation he had not known in many centuries, but recognised as pain.

He raised his own weapon and squeezed off a short burst, the shells taking the magos between the shoulders, disintegrating his torso and blasting him clear of the dais in a welter of blood and bone.

The Guard officer turned and leapt towards the dais, fumbling with the brass columns, vainly attempting to complete what the magos had begun. Forrix laughed at the man's efforts and shot him in the leg, toppling him to the floor with a scream of pain. He deactivated the energy field surrounding his power fist and lifted the howling officer from the ground, hurling him to a waiting

Terminator.

Forrix mounted the dais and saw that they had cut it close, a few more minutes and Tor Christo would have been reduced to a useless molten ruin. He put a bolt through each of the wall-mounted speakers and the screaming klaxons were silenced.

'Replace the rods. It will prevent the reactor blowing,' he said to another of his Terminators and strode from the room.

Tor Christo had fallen.

THE SECOND PARALLEL

One

As Lieutenant Colonel Leonid entered the Sepulchre the flame at the end of the taper wavered in the draft that gusted in from the open door. Kneeling before a basalt statue of the Emperor in the chapel's ossuary, Castellan Vauban cupped the flame behind his hand, shielding it from the wind and lit a candle for the men of Battalion A, as he had done every day for the last six days since Tor Christo had fallen.

Leonid kept a respectful distance from his commanding officer, awaiting the completion of his ministrations to the dead, and Vauban was grateful for his officer's understanding.

The grim tower known as the Sepulchre stood on the north-western slopes of the mountains, high above the citadel. Constructed of smooth, black marble, veined with threads of gold, it was a tall, hollow tube, some thirty metres in diameter and a hundred high. Its inner walls were studded with hundreds of ossuaries containing the bleached bones of every man who had borne the title of castellan. It

had been a great comfort to Vauban to imagine that one day he too would have a

place of honour amongst the immortal dead, but he knew that was nothing but a dream. In all likelihood, he would end his days as a desiccated corpse somewhere below in the citadel, murdered by this infernal foe. The thought of his bones scoured clean by the dust storms of this planet filled him with great melancholy.

The entire floor was a polished disc of solid brass, its surface etched with intricate traceries and swirling lines that looped gracefully across its surface, weaving and intersecting in a beguiling dance. It looked like a puzzle where the solution, if there even was one, was forever elusive. Vauban knew it was possible to happily lose several hours trying to untangle the design with your eyes, but he had long ago decided that it was a mystery he would never solve.

He rose from his knees, wincing as his joints cracked painfully. War was a young man's game and he was too old to bear the horrors being placed before him. He bowed towards the Emperor's graven image and whispered, 'Lord Emperor, give me the strength to do your bidding. I am but a man, with a man's courage, and need your holy wisdom to guide me in this, our time of need.'

The statue remained silent and the commander of Hydra Cordatus turned on his heel, marching towards the door to the outer chambers of the Sepulchre.

Vauban thought he had known anguish as he had watched the scenes of destruction at Jericho Falls and on the plains when the Iron Warriors had tricked the gunners at Tor Christo into shelling their own men.

But with the fall of Tor Christo and the death of nearly seven thousand men, he knew the true depths of misery. So many dead, and the battle not yet over.

He nodded to Leonid as he passed, his second-in-command closing the door to the candlelit house of the dead. The outer chambers of the Sepulchre were light and airily constructed, as though the architects had understood that the human mind could absorb only so much grief, and that there were times when it was good to rejoice in the immortality of the spirit.

Bright glow-globes, set behind arched windows of stained glass, threw gold and

azure light across the marble-flagged floor. Vauban paused to admire the handiwork of artists dead these last ten millennia. Scenes of battle were played out above him alongside images of the Emperor ascending to his throne and feats of bravery of long-dead Space Marine heroes.

'Beautiful, aren't they?' whispered Vauban.

'Yes, sir, they are/ affirmed Leonid.

'Sad then, that they will be destroyed.'

'Sir?'

Vauban returned his gaze to his second-in-command with a sad smile. 'I think our enemies would as soon see this place reduced to dust, don't you, Mikhail?'

'Possibly/ conceded Leonid, bitterly. 'But as long as we are not betrayed by one man's lust for glory, or anomer's cowardice, we shall make them pay for every metre they advance/

Vauban could understand Leonid's venom. Princeps Fierach had doomed nearly two thousand men to death when his Titans had abandoned the Jourans to hunt the corrupted Imperator Titan. Those Titans that had survived the battle had wisely retreated to their armoured hangars for repairs, their crews confined to barracks while the Legio's judiciary sought to apportion blame for the debacle. Fierach's death made it that much easier for them, giving them a conveniently dead scapegoat. Princeps Daekian, commander of the Warlord Titan *Honoris Causa* had come before the senior officers of the Jouran Dragoons in full dress uniform, offering his sorrow and a formal apology on behalf of the Legio Ignatum.

For the sake of unity, Vauban had accepted the apology, but the words tasted bitter. Leonid had shown no such restraint, walking up and striking Daekian. Vauban had been ready for the worst kind of reaction, but Princeps Daekian had merely nodded and said, 'That is your right and privilege, Lieutenant Colonel

Leonid, and I bear you no ill-will/

Princeps Daekian had then drawn his curved sabre, stepping forward to offer it, hilt first, to Leonid.

'But know this: the Legio Ignatum stands ready to fight at your side and we will not fail you again. I swear by my blade that it shall be so.'

Vauban had been stunned. For an officer of the Legio to offer his sword to another was a declaration that should he fail in his sworn duty, he was willing to be killed by his own blade, and have the gods of battle mock him for all eternity.

Leonid had stared at the blade for several seconds. In such circumstances it was customary for an officer and a gentleman to refuse to accept the sword, indicating that the gesture was enough. But Leonid had taken the sword and thrust it through his officer's sash before returning to his seat. Vauban had been disappointed, but not surprised. Leonid's battalion had been badly mauled in the battle and he was determined to extract a blood price for his men's deaths.

Leonid wore the sword still, and Vauban knew that when word of this incident had reached the ears of the common soldiers, his popularity had soared within the ranks.

'I am proud of you, Mikhail,' said Vauban suddenly. 'You have a quality that I do not: you have the ability to empathise with the men in your command on every level. From the formality of the officers' mess to the gutter-talk of the barracks.'

'Thank you, sir,' beamed Leonid, pleased with his commander's sentiment.

'I am a competent and experienced leader,' continued Vauban, 'but I have never enjoyed the love of my soldiers. I have always told myself that it is not necessary for my men to love me, only that they obey. Your men love and respect you, and, better, they trust you not to lead them into harm's way without good reason.'

The two officers left the Sepulchre, pulling their uniform jackets tighter about

themselves as they stepped into the whipping wind that blew stiffly across the high peaks of the mountains. A thousand steps led downhill between eroded statues of faded Imperial heroes, and an honour guard of fifteen soldiers awaited to escort them back to the citadel.

Both officers stared in trepidation at the blasted plain before the citadel, feeling a gut-twisting sense of despair at

the sight that met their eyes. Pillars of smoke curled skyward from countless forges and campfires as the enemy soldiers broke their fast this morning. The plain was a mass of men and machines, supply depots and digging parties.

In the days after the fall of Tor Christo, the main east/west parallel had been extended westwards to the base of the rocky promontory, and two zigzagging saps were being driven towards the citadel. The first was aimed at the salient angle of the Primus Ravelin, while the second was on a course for Vincare bastion's left flank.

'We're not slowing them down enough,' said Vauban needlessly.

'No/ agreed Leonid, 'But we are slowing them.'

'Yes, but we need to stop them/ said Vauban, lifting his eyes to the blackened form of the Imperator Titan standing immobile at the foot of Tor Christo, still swarming with men attempting to buttress it firmly and allow it to fire without collapsing. Behind it, huge gangs, thousands strong, had spent the last six days heaving and sweating to carry massive siege mortars and howitzers up the rocky slopes to the forward edge of Tor Christo's promontory. From there they would be able to lob their shells with impunity within the walls of the Vincare bastion and place breaching batteries to shoot over the glacis, targeting the main curtain wall with direct fire.

They were still some days away from completion, but when they were ready the carnage they would inflict on the garrison was sure to be horrific.

'By the Emperor, Mikhail, it will go badly for us once those guns are brought to

bear/

Leonid followed Vauban's stare and said, 'Have you thought any more about my idea for Guardsman Hawke?'

Guardsman Hawke, still trapped in the mountains, was proving invaluable to the artillerymen of the citadel. His daily reports of where the main work parties were gathering had forced the invaders to dig extra approach trenches to ensure that they were able to reach the front line alive, slowing the advance. Vauban's admiration for this lowly soldier had grown daily, as he had reported the enemy's movements,

dispositions and apparent numbers in minute detail, allowing them to get a clearer understanding of the enemy's capabilities and direct their artillery fire accordingly. If they lived through this, Vauban would ensure that Hawke received a commendation.

'I have, but such a plan would involve the Adeptus Mechanicus and I do not trust them any more.'

'Nor I, but we will need their help if it is to work.'

'That is for Arch Magos Amaethon to decide.'

'Sir, you know Amaethon is slipping and cannot be relied upon any more. He is a fool, and worse, he's dangerous. Just look at what he did to the tunnel!'

'Be careful, Mikhail. The Adeptus Mechanicus is an ancient and powerful body, and Amaethon is still senior to you and therefore deserving of your respect. Despite the truth of your words I will not have you utter them again. Understood?'

'Aye, sir. But we are supposed to be above this sort of thing!'

'We are above it, my friend, which is why you will say nothing more about it. If

we are to triumph here, we need to keep the Adeptus Mechanicus on our side. It will achieve nothing if we alienate them.'

Leonid said nothing more, and Vauban both understood and agreed with Leonid's reticence concerning the priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus. Blowing the tunnel between the Christo and the citadel was an act of unforgivable callousness, and were Amaethon not already less than a man, he would have made him pay for his crime.

Magos Naicin had explained how he had pleaded with the arch magos not to destroy the tunnel, but the venerable Amaethon had not listened to reason. Vauban had also asked Naicin why, after the Heaven's Fall signal had been received, the Christo had not been destroyed.

'I do not know, Castellan Vauban/ had been Naicin's answer. 'Perhaps Major Tedeski's courage failed him at the last and he could not fulfil his duty.'

Vauban had come close to losing his temper then, remembering the horrific sight of a swaggering giant in Terminator

armour hurling Tedeski to his death from the battlements of the Mars bastion at the battle's end.

Fighting to keep the fury from his voice, he said, 'Be that as it may, but in future there will be no action taken by the Adeptus Mechanicus without direct approval from myself or Lieutenant Colonel Leonid. Is that clear?'

'As crystal, Castellan. And let me say, that I agree with you wholeheartedly. I cannot bring myself to condone the death of the men you lost at Tor Christo, but the magos is old and does not have long left in this world. He will soon be with the Omnissiah, and, may the holy spirit of the Machine forgive me for saying so, perhaps it might be better for us all were he to be taken sooner rather than later.

Vauban had not replied to Naicin's sentiment, but had immediately sensed the younger magos's desire to take over from Amaethon.

And, while he did not approve of such machinations, he gloomily realised that Naicin might well be correct.

GUARDSMAN HAWKE RAN a hand through his tousled hair and settled into a more comfortable position on the rocks, using his jacket as a rest for his elbows and training the magnoculars on the enemy camp below.

'Right, let's see what's going on now/ he muttered.

The dusky plain below was a patchwork of activity, with whole swathes of ground given over to weapon and tool manufacture, with thousands upon thousands of men milling about in regular patterns. It had taken him a few days to find this perch from which to observe the camp. It was far from comfortable, but it was probably as good as it got in these mountains. It was sheltered from the worst of the winds and there was a rocky overhang that allowed him to snatch some sleep when the noise from below wasn't too bad. He yawned, the mere thought of sleep making his body crave it all the more. Night was drawing in anyway and he wouldn't be able to see much more at the rate the daylight was fading.

He'd eaten and drunk only sparingly and his food and water supplies were still holding out, but he had long since

ran out of detox pills. However, worries that he would fall prey to the toxic atmosphere of Hydra Cordatus appeared to be unfounded. His health, aside from a few braises and scrapes, was better than it had been since he'd ended up on this useless planet.

After the initial pain and stiffness had left his underused muscles, he had felt clearer and fitter than ever. The constant headaches had vanished like morning mist and the ashen taste that always caught in the back of his mouth had also disappeared. His skin was taking on a healthy glow; his natural paleness replaced by the beginnings of a tan.

Whatever the cause of his sudden good health, Hawke was grateful for it.

Perhaps it was the feeling that he was now proving his worth to the regiment; that he was a good soldier and could hack it with the best of them. As he panned the magnoculars across the enemy camp, counting the number of work parties that made their way to the approach trenches, Hawke was forced to admit that, all things being equal, he was having the time of his life.

Two

THE BONE-BLADED knife scraped a clean furrow through the ingrained blood on the heavy vambrace, the dried crust gathering on the curved rear of the blade. Larana Utorian dipped the blade in the bucket of warm water beside her and returned to her task. Once again, Kroeger had returned to the dug-out with dried blood caked across his armour and without a word to her, had indicated that she should remove his armour and clean it for him.

Each piece was heavy, almost too heavy, and were it not for the wheezing mechanical arm Kroeger's butcher-surgeons had grafted to her shoulder she would have been unable to lift his armour clear. The black-steel metalwork of the mechanical arm was nauseating to look at and the feel of its corrupt bio-mechanical components worming their way through her body made her want to rip it from her shoulder. But the writhing black tendrils of synth-nerve had forged an unbreakable bond with her own flesh and she could no more remove it than she could stop her heart from beating.

A heavy steel frame carried the individual components of Kroeger's armour, each moulded breastplate, cuissart, greave, vambrace and gorget precisely arranged so that it resembled some gigantic, disassembled mechanical man. Virtually every surface was stained with gore and the stench of decaying matter made her want to gag every time she looked at the armour.

She bent to her task once more, scraping yet another clean furrow in Kroeger's armour. Tears ran down her cheeks as she cleaned the armour of a monster, knowing that tomorrow she would be performing the same task again.

Why Kroeger had not killed her was a mystery and every day she found herself almost wishing that he had.

And every day she found herself hating herself for wanting to live.

To toil in the service of such a beast was to play handmaiden to a daemon itself.

And this was a capricious daemon; there was no way she could predict its moods and behavioural mores, no way to know Kroeger's reaction to anything she did. She railed against him, beating her fists against his bloody armour and he laughed, throwing her aside. She acquiesced to his desires and found him surly and brooding, picking at old scars and licking his own blood from his hands - he refused to allow his wounds to clot - as he glared at her with contempt.

She hated him with a fiery passion, but so wanted to live. There was no way to know how to behave to stop Kroeger killing her. She scraped the last of the blood from the vambrace and put aside the bone knife, taking up an oily rag and polishing the silver of its surface until it shone. Satisfied that the heavy piece of armour was as clean as she could manage, she rose to her feet and hung it upon the armour frame.

As she hung the vambrace in place, she found her eyes drawn again to the sight and stench of the interior faces of Kroeger's armour. She polished and cleaned the exterior of his armour, but she would not touch its interior surfaces. Coated in a loathsome, creeping horror, these internal surfaces looked like flensed hunks of rotten meat, their putrid surfaces undulating as though imbued with some foul

internal life. Yet for all its vile appearance, the armour exuded a hateful attraction, as though it called to her on some unknowable level.

She shivered as she removed the next piece of armour from the frame, the rounded elbow guard. This piece was not so heavily stained and would not take long to clean.

The blood I have worn will take more than your little knife to clean...

She picked up her knife again she glanced furtively to where Kroeger's weapons lay upright on an ebony and silver rack. A massive, toothed sword, its hilt carved in the shape of an eight-pointed star and quillons tipped with stabbing spikes.

Beside that, an ornate pistol with a skull-mouthed barrel and bronze plated flanks. The magazine alone was bigger than her forearm.

Go on, touch them... feel their power...

She shook her head; Kroeger never allowed her to clean his weapons, and the one time she had offered had been her last. He had backhanded her lightly across the face, cracking her cheekbone and loosening teeth, saying, 'You will never touch these weapons, human.'

Bitterness rose with her tears and she cursed herself for wanting to live, for serving this creature of evil, but she could see no other way. She was powerless to do anything except play house-pet to a madman who bathed in gore and revelled in slaughter.

Is that so bad? To take pleasure from the death of another... is that not the highest honour you can pay another creature?

Her hate for Kroeger was a bright flame burning in her heart and she felt that if she did not let it out it would eventually consume her.

Yes, hate, little one, hate...

Her eyes were once again drawn to the armour and she swore she could almost hear distant laughter.

FIRST LIGHT WAS breaking across the mountains as Honsou watched the slave gangs haul the last components of an artillery piece's gun carriage over the lip of the promontory. He noted with satisfaction that there were a few slaves with

the blue jackets of the enemy within their numbers. It seemed as though there were a few yet able to serve the Iron Warriors.

Forrix stood beside him, a head higher in his Terminator armour, surveying the slow progress below on the plain. Between the booming explosions of artillery

fire from the two bastions and the central ravelin, the saps were advancing from the extended parallel, but they were doing so cautiously, moving forward under the protection of heavily armoured sap-rollers, low, wide-bodied behemoths crawling slowly forwards to shield the workers who dug the saps.

The Warsmith is displeased/ said Forrix, sweeping his arms out to encompass the works below.

Honsou turned to face the pale veteran, his brow wrinkled in puzzlement. 'But we have proceeded with great speed, Forrix. In less than two weeks we have captured this outwork and our saps are almost close enough to the citadel that we can link them into a second parallel. Scarcely have I seen a siege progress with such haste.'

Forrix shook his head. There are matters afoot that require we make even better speed, Honsou. The Warsmith wishes us to be done with this place within ten days.'

'Impossible!' sputtered Honsou. 'With the second parallel not yet complete? The batteries here will take another four days at least to prepare, and it will probably take several days for them to effect a breach in the walls. And I do not believe we will be able to make a practicable breach without the establishment of a third parallel and bringing up our siege tanks. All this will take time, you know that better than anyone.'

'Nevertheless, it must be done.'

'How?'

'By any means necessary, Honsou. Time is a luxury we do not have.'

Then what do you suggest?'

'That we push the saps forwards with greater speed, build more sap rollers, throw slaves and men at the digging, so that the mounds of corpses will shield the

diggers from the Imperial artillery/ snapped Forrix suddenly.

'That will be difficult, Forrix/ said Honsou slowly. 'The Imperial gunners are proving to be uncannily accurate with their fire.'

'Indeed they are/ mused Forrix, staring at the mountains surrounding the plains. 'Almost too accurate, wouldn't you say?'

'What do you mean?'

'You are sure you killed everyone in the places you attacked before the invasion?'

'Aye/ snarled Honsou, 'We left nothing alive.'

Forrix returned his gaze to the mountains and sighed.

'I think you are mistaken, Honsou. I believe there is still someone out there/

Honsou said nothing and Forrix continued. 'Send Goran Delau back to the places you attacked and if there are any signs of survivors, have them hunted down and killed. We cannot afford to be slowed further by your incompetence/

Honsou bit back an angry retort and simply nodded stiffly before marching away.

THE HEART WAS a notoriously hard organ to burn, but the blue flames curling from its roasting muscle tissue were well worth the effort thought Jharek Kelmaur, sorcerer to the Warsmith and Wielder of the Seven Cryptical Magicks. The darkness of his tent was wreathed in ghostly shadows cast by the burning heart and moonlight pooling at its entrance. He rubbed his hands across his tattooed skull, spreading his arms before the blazing organ.

Though his eyes were sewn shut, he stared into the flames, seeing spectral images, beyond the ken of mortal sight. They flickered in and out of focus as his magicks sought to shape the power bestowed by this latest offering into a

useable form. He opened his mind to the glory of the warp, feeling the rush of power and fulfilment that came each time he communed with the immaterium. As always he felt the scratching, insistent presence of innumerable astral beasts that clawed at any intrusion into their realm, their mindless thrashings drawn by his presence.

Such formless phantoms were of no consequence to him, it was the other, mightier creatures that lurked in the haunted depths of the warp that were of more concern.

He felt the warp-spawned energies flow through him, channelled and intensified by the carven sigils on his gold and silver armour. Symbols of ancient geomantic significance helped contain the powerful energies he drew within his flesh, and though his physique was enhanced, he knew that the power he was tapping could destroy him in an instant were he to lose control of it.

The power raced along his fragile nerve endings, dispersing throughout his body and a luminescent green fire built behind his eyes, spilling out from beneath the stitching, and gathering like emerald tears on his cheeks before billowing out in a noxious cloud of glittering fog. The fog twisted and spiralled, though no wind disturbed it, coiling from his mouth and eyes before slipping around his shoulders like a snake.

Questing tendrils of green light slithered from the sorcerer and waved through the air to reach into the flames of the burning heart, the flames hissing and sputtering with greater ferocity as they consumed it.

Fleeting images flashed before Kelmaur's eyes: the rock of Tor Christo, a hidden chamber in its depths, a disc of bronze that shone like the sun and, enfolding it all, a slowly spinning cog wheel, its surface cracked and blemished. As Kelmaur watched, the cog suddenly erupted with brown, necrotic threads of rust, each one spreading rapidly through its structure until it crumbled to dust.

As quickly as the vision had appeared, it vanished, to be replaced with one of a spear of white light arcing through the darkness, its brilliance fading as it travelled before it was in turn replaced by a warrior in yellow power armour, his

weapons trained directly at Kelmaur. As he watched, the warrior turned his weapon towards the sorcerer and pulled the trigger, the barrel exploding in brilliant light.

Jharek Kelmaur screamed and collapsed to the floor of his tent, blood leaking from every orifice in his head, and pounding pain thundering against the innards of his skull.

He groggily pushed himself to his feet, steadying himself against the iron tent pole.

He moved unsteadily to a long, cot bed and sat on its edge, rubbing the heels of his palms against his inked temples and taking deep breaths. It was the same as before, but with each passing vision, the intensity grew stronger and he knew a crucial time of confluence was approaching.

He had to divine the meaning of the visions, though he feared he knew the answer to the second apparition. As the Iron Warriors had attacked the spaceport, he had sensed a psychic signal reach out from the planet, too quick for him to block, yet surely too weak to be received by its intended recipients. But Kelmaur was afraid that others may have heard it, and if they grasped its significance, might already be on their way to this planet now. He had not told the Warsmith, and trusted that his master's war-captains would be able to complete the destruction of the citadel before whatever aid was coming to Hydra Cordatus arrived. He had despatched the battle barge *Stonebreaker* to the system's distant jump point to lie in wait for any would-be-rescuers, but, consumed by the nagging suspicion he was already too late, he had since recalled it.

His cabal of acolytes had spoken of mind whispers on the planet that were not theirs, and how this could be was a mystery to Kelmaur. It would take great cunning to have evaded detection by the *Stonebreaker,* but then it wasn't here, was it... ? The vast cargo ships that orbited this planet were not equipped with mystical surveyors that would allow them to detect any approaching enemies. Had something slipped past while the *Stonebreaker* had been away?

And if so, where had it gone and what had it done in the intervening time?

Paranoia, his constant companion, held him tight in its grip and his mind was alive with all manner of fearsome possibilities. Should he tell the Warsmith of his suspicions? Should he deal with it on his own? Should he feign ignorance?

None of the options were particularly appealing and Kelmaur was filled with a dreadful foreboding. As to the first

vision... well, that he was more sure of. He turned as a low moan sounded behind him.

He smiled grimly, staring into the face of Adept Cycerin.

The former priest of the Adeptus Mechanicus that Kroeger had almost killed in the attack on the spaceport was chained, naked, to an angled trestle, part surgical table and part engineers' workbench. His missing hand had been replaced with an augmented bionic gauntlet, its pulsating black surface daubed with ancient symbols of power. Encircling the wrist was a broad, spiked bracelet with curved talons embedded deep in the flesh above the gauntlet. A modified form of the Obliterators' techno-virus seeped from the talons, slowly working its way around Cycerin's body. Eruptions of mecha-organic components appeared all over his flesh, their form fluid, yet angular. His flesh seethed with the workings of the virus as they integrated themselves with his organic matter.

Jharek Kelmaur smiled humourlessly and rose to go to the twitching priest of the Machine God.

The changes wracking his body must have been painful, but the adept's face gave no sign of it. Instead his features were twisted in rapture and obscene pleasure.

'Yes/ whispered Kelmaur. 'Feel the power of the new machine fill your flesh. You have great work ahead of you.'

Cycerin opened his eye, the pupil a dilated black, its internal surfaces alive with

crawling, newly-birthed circuitry. He smiled and nodded towards the pulsing gauntlet.

'More,' he hissed. 'Give me more...'

Three

ON THE TWENTIETH day of the siege the two saps driven forward from the first parallel were linked by a second parallel, some six hundred metres from the edge of the ditch protecting the walls of the frontal bastions. This was well within the range of the unerringly accurate Imperial gunners and thousands of lives had been expended to complete the second parallel, but the Iron Warriors were heedless of the human cost of such endeavours. All that mattered was that the Warsmith's orders were obeyed.

The second parallel stretched from the ground in front of the Vincare bastion's salient to that before the tip of Mori bastion. The second parallel's northern face was piled high with rammed earth and revetted with iron hoardings to ensure that it could withstand artillery impacts. A well laid out battery was constructed at either end, their firing embrasures placed perpendicular to each bastion's flank.

Already, markers had been laid for yet another approach sap, this time aimed at the head of the Primus Ravelin, but until the batteries had had a chance to open fire and dismount most of the citadel's wall guns, work could not yet begin. This was siegework at its most brutal and obvious. There would be no methodical approach to flank each of the bastions in turn, but a full frontal advance on the works, with batteries to pound the walls to oblivion before a devastating assault was unleashed.

With the establishment of the batteries, the trenches behind were widened and deepened to allow the daemonic war machines to move safely to the front line. Lessons had been learnt following the destruction unleashed by the rampaging war machine in the trenches approaching Tor Christo, and those charged with keeping the monstrous daemon engines in check were taking no chances.

The following morning, the guns placed in the batteries of the second parallel opened fire in conjunction with those situated on the northern slopes of Tor Christo's promontory. The guns in the batteries were not yet close enough to fire over the lip of the glacis - the raised area of ground before the ditch that prevented enemy artillery from striking the vulnerable base of the walls - but they could hammer the ramparts and make the firing step untenable for the defenders. And this they did with remarkable efficiency, smashing the wall head with solid projectiles and reducing the thick ramparts to jagged piles of rubble. Counterbattery fire from the citadel was desultory and shots that did strike home were either deflected by the reinforced earthworks or, in the case of the guns on Tor Christo, found to be out of range.

Hundreds of men died in the first minutes of the bombardment, before the order was given to fall back within the

bastions' enclosures. For the men of Mori bastion this was a life saving order, but for many of those in Vincare it proved to be a death sentence.

Howitzers from the promontory now fired explosive shells on high trajectories, landing their bombs within the walls of Vincare bastion and shredding the men gathered within its walls. Scores of men died with each shrieking explosion, the airbursting shells taking a fearsome toll, razor fragments ripping flesh and bone apart with ease. Officers rallied their men, shouting at them to take cover within the wall bunkers.

As their targets took shelter, the guns on the promontory shifted their fire to the interior of the citadel, their increased elevation giving them the range to drop shells inside the perimeter of the inner curtain wall. Three large barrack buildings were gutted by fire and a handful of others reduced to rubble before Arch Magos Amaethon was able to raise the energy shield that protected the inner citadel.

The shelling continued throughout the day, ripping apart the tops of the two bastions and the ravelin, dismounting a huge number of guns and rendering much of their frontal sections wide open.

As night fell and the guns continued to pound the citadel, hundreds of slaves trudged through the approach trenches from their corpse-infested dugouts and began digging the approach sap forward.

Four

VAUBAN CIRCLED THE briefing table and poured each of his weary officers a glass of amasec, searching their faces for signs of resignation. Pleased to find none, he returned to his seat at the head of the table, poured another glass and set it before Gunnar Tedeski's empty seat.

All the officers appeared to have aged, their features lined with fatigue and numb with the unceasing, grinding nature of the siege.

Morgan Kristan looked the worst, his arm in a bloody sling and a wide bandage wrapped around his midriff where fragments from an exploding shell had torn into him. His

men in the Vincare bastion had taken a battering and he had been there with them during it.

All his officers had been blooded now and he was fiercely proud of them.

'Gentlemen/ began Vauban, raising his glass. 'To you all.'

His officers raised their glasses and drained their amasec as one. Vauban set down his glass and poured himself another. None of the men gathered around the table said anything as the castellan of Hydra Cordatus sipped his drink.

Leonid consulted a featureless gold box before nodding slowly to Vauban.

Eventually Vauban broke the silence, saying, 'We are in a perilous position, gentlemen. The enemy is at the gates and if the estimates of our engineers are correct, we have days at best before they breach our walls and enter the citadel.'

'I pledge that my men will fight to the last,' vowed Morgan Kristan, slamming the table with his one good hand.

'As will those of Battalion C/ echoed Piet Anders.

Vauban suppressed a sly smile and said, 'Hopefully that will not be necessary. There have been some... unexpected developments in the last few hours and Lieutenant Colonel Leonid has a plan that may buy us some more time. The enemy artillery, especially that on the promontory, is killing us. To have any chance of survival we must knock it out, and that will not be easy. Mikhail?'

Leonid stood and checked the gold box again to make sure that the vox-scrambler was functioning properly before handing out data-slates to the senior officers of the Jourans. Leonid and Vauban watched as each man scanned the contents of the slate, their expressions changing from weariness to sudden hope.

'Is it really true?' asked Major Anders.

'It is, Piet/ confirmed Leonid. 'I have seen them/

An entire company?' breathed Kristan. 'How?'

Vauban raised his hand, halting further questions and said, 'The files you are holding in your hands are to be considered the most sacred thing in your possession, gentlemen. Follow the orders within them. Do so with care and resolution, and tell no one outside this room what we

are about. Be ready to move on this plan the instant I give the order, for if you are not, then we truly are lost/

Morgan Kristan scanned further down the slate and grunted as he saw a familiar name.

'Is there a problem, Major Kristan?' asked Leonid.

There may be/ nodded Kristan. 'Any plan that involves -relies even - on Hawke, scares me to the soles of my boots/

'Do not concern yourself with Hawke's involvement in this/ soothed Vauban. 'I have faith in him, and Lieutenant Colonel Leonid will handle that part of the plan/

Piet Anders lifted his eyes from his slate and asked, 'And who will lead us?'

'I will/ replied Vauban.

THE RUINS OF listening post Sigma IV had long ceased smouldering as Goran Delau squatted by its entrance, his servo-arm sifting through the wreckage.

He and ten soldiers clad in red overalls had searched the mountains these last few days without finding another living soul and Delau was beginning to believe that Honsou had sent them on a fool's errand. A body without a face lay beside the buckled doorway, its bones gleaming through the torn fabric of its uniform and Delau kicked it aside as he ducked inside the listening post, remembering the battle they had fought to take this place, the roar of assault cannon fire and the storm of shells as it tore through them.

Inside, all was darkness, but Delau's enhanced vision easily pierced the gloom. Shattered equipment and blackened metal lay strewn about, the walls peppered with grenade fragments. A body lay against one wall, the little flesh that remained on its skeleton was scorched and black. This body's face was blown away, and Delau remembered the two shots Honsou had fired to kill these men.

Where then was the body of the third?

As he scanned the deserted listening post, he saw the open footlocker and the discarded items that lay strewn about it. He fell to his knees, examining them all in turn. All were useless trinkets and, to a man trapped on the mountain, worthless.

So, one soldier had somehow survived and salvaged everything of value from the bunker.

Where had he gone?

Delau marched from the listening post and examined the dusty ground outside. The corpse on the ground had no rifle and Delau guessed that the survivor had taken it before moving on.

Delau sniffed the air and knelt beside the decaying corpse, noting a patch of discoloured rock beside its feet. Without needing to taste it, he knew it was blood and, from its patterning, that it had not come from the corpse's wound.

So Forrix was correct. There was someone still alive on the mountains. A resourceful man as well, if Delau's reasoning was correct.

Scanning the surrounding environment, he knew there was only one way a man determined to strike back at the Iron Warriors would have gone: north-west across the knifeback ridge to a position of observation.

Swiftly he gathered the indentured soldiery to him and set off up the mountainside.

Goran Delau grinned within his helmet at the thought of facing this worthy foe.

HAWKE SCRAMBLED ACROSS a jagged outcrop of rock, breathing heavily as he traversed the steep slopes of the mountain. He had travelled three kilometres across exceptionally difficult terrain and had another two kilometres to go before nightfall, but he was determined to make it.

Despite the weary exhaustion filling his limbs, he was filled with real purpose. He pulled himself onto a relatively flat slab of rock and took a moment to get his breath back. He checked his location on the direction finder, knowing where he had been ordered to go, but not knowing exactly what he would find when he got there. Lieutenant Colonel Leonid himself had given him his mission on the vox earlier that day and Hawke had assured him that he would not let them down.

'You cannot,' Leonid had said, 'all our hopes rest upon you.'

Hawke had felt that was kind of melodramatic, but hadn't said so. He was too pleased by the fact that he was being trusted with something so important.

Well, Hawke,' he chuckled to himself, 'It's a commission for you when you get back home.'

He mopped his brow with his sleeve and unwrapped one of his last ration packs, chewing on the remains of a high-energy bar. Hawke groaned as he pushed himself to his feet. He was amazed at how good he felt, despite not having taken any detox pills for over two weeks. He had become lean and his muscles, especially in his legs, had become well-defined. He smiled as he realised he was in better shape than he had been for years. His spreading midriff was gone and his lungs felt clearer than ever.

True, his food and water supplies were all but exhausted, but Lieutenant Colonel Leonid had assured him that they were working on that even now. He wolfed down the last of the food bar and tossed the wrapping aside as he squinted into the afternoon sun.

'Well, you ain't gonna get there just by standing here, Hawke,' he said, climbing further along the rockface.

Hawke set off again through the afternoon's heat.

VAUBAN AND LEONID stood watching the rainbow flares of energy rippling above their heads, as enemy shell impacts slammed into the invisible energy field that protected the areas within the curtain wall.

Observers in the blockhouse on the northern slopes scanned the shield for breaches, as some shells were slipping through where coverage was incomplete, and detonating within the citadel's supposed safe areas. The warning they could give was probably too short to do any real good, but it was better than nothing and, once again, Vauban felt his anger mount towards Arch Magos Amaethon.

When the shells had first breached the shield he had spent an infuriating hour waiting to be hooked up with the Machine Temple on the holo-link. He knew he would be wasting his time attempting to see the arch magos in person.

Why is the shield not holding?' he had demanded.

'It is... arduous work to maintain such a... a prodigious energy barrier/ explained the arch magos in stuttering, halting speech. 'To maintain all other systems at peak efficiency as well as the shield... requires great strength.'

Then let the other systems go to hell/ raged Vauban. 'If you allow the shield to falter, then very soon there will be no other systems to maintain!'

'That cannot be/ snapped Amaethon as he shut off the link, and no matter how desperately Vauban petitioned the arch magos, he would not re-establish it.

Perhaps Naicin was right; perhaps it would be better for them all if Amaethon were to be got rid of. Indeed, Naicin had contacted him personally not long after his brief conversation with Amaethon and had insinuated that such an event might not be too hard to contrive.

Vauban pushed his thoughts of the damned arch magos and his scheming underlings from his mind, forcing himself to concentrate on the job in hand.

'Have you heard from Kristan and Anders yet?' he asked Leonid.

Leonid nodded. 'So far everything is proceeding as planned. Weapons, ammunition and demolition charges have been distributed to the soldiers taking part in the mission and the storming parties are gathering at the rally points.'

Vauban looked up into the crimson sky just as the day slipped from afternoon's warmth into evening's twilight. 'I wish it was already dark. I can't abide this waiting/

'They say the waiting is the hardest part, sir/

And are they right, Mikhail?'

'No/ chuckled Leonid. 'Not by a long shot. Give me the waiting any day/

Vauban checked his pocket chronometer and frowned. 'Any word from Hawke?'

'Not yet, sir, no, but we should give him time to get there/

'He'd better get there soon or that magos you sequestered will be missed by his brethren and spill his guts. I'm keen to avoid that, at least until it is too late for them to interfere, Mikhail/

'We should give Hawke a little more time, it's a tough journey/ pointed out Leonid.

'Do you think he can do it even if he does get there?'

'Yes, I think he can. His profile has him as above average intelligence, and he's come a long way from the disgrace of a man we once knew as Guardsman Hawke. He's a soldier now/

Any idea why he's not coughed up his lungs yet? He claims to have ran out of detox pills over a week ago/

'Not yet, sir. I asked the Magos Biologis how long we could expect Hawke to keep going, but he was pretty vague, and claimed it wasn't possible to predict exactly/

Vauban shook his head. 'Emperor preserve us from the meddling of the Adeptus Mechanicus/

Amen to that, sir/ agreed Leonid. What of our new arrivals? Are they in agreement with our plan?'

Vauban smiled, though there was no warmth in his expression. 'Oh yes, they are wholeheartedly with us/

Leonid nodded, but said nothing, noting the way the castellan gripped the hilt of his power sword. Both officers were arrayed for battle and had taken pains to appear so for their men. Vauban had put on his dress uniform jacket and wore his silver breastplate over it, the bronze eagle at its centre polished to a brilliant sheen. Leonid's breastplate was bronze, but also gleaming. The dent in its centre where he had been shot had been repaired and the armour was as good as new.

'How long now?' asked Vauban.

Leonid looked at the darkening sky and said, 'Not long/

GORAN DELAU TURNED the drained vox-battery and ration pack in his hands as though trying to gain some deeper understanding of his prey by touch alone. His early admiration for this man had diminished as they had closed in and discovered the detritus of his passing. The man had not even bothered to cover his tracks, leaving his waste in the open where any half-competent tracker would easily discover it.

He guessed that his prey could not be more than an hour or so ahead of him and

Delau was irritated by his foe's lack

of savvy. The challenge of the hunt had now been reduced to reeling in the man and then killing him.

The men who followed him now only numbered six. One had fallen to his death down a wide ravine they had been forced to leap; the other three Delau had killed himself because of their lack of skill and stamina. They were irrelevant and he knew he could kill this man on his own anyway.

Wherever this man was going, he seemed to be making his way there with real purpose, since his course had kept true this last few hours. Whatever lay at the end of this chase, Delau was certain of one thing.

It would end in the prey's death.

HAWKE CHECKED THE direction finder to check he was in the right place, unable to see anything much in the encroaching darkness. He stood on a flat plateau, in part of the highest reaches of the mountains, the constant thunder of the invaders' artillery nothing more than a distant rumble from here. His breath caught in his throat and he wiped sweat from his brow. He was exhausted, but pleased to have arrived here - wherever here was - before darkness had fallen.

There wasn't much to see, just a spill of rocks lying against a flat, vertical slice of the mountainside, though the ground looked pretty churned up, as though someone had set off a bunch of explosives. He shucked off his pack and pulled out the portable vox, cursing as he saw he was down to his last battery.

He slotted the battery home and pressed the activation rune, breathing a sigh of relief as the front panel lit up with a reassuring glow. He lifted the handset, spun the dial to the correct frequency and thumbed the talk button.

'Bastion, this is Hawke, do you copy?'

The vox crackled for a second before a voice came on the line. 'Receiving you

loud and clear, Hawke. This is Magos Beauvais, are you at the specified co-ordinates?'

'Yeah, but aside from the view I don't see anything that makes the climb worthwhile.'

'Describe what you can see/ ordered Beauvais.

'Not a hell of a lot. It's pretty damn flat here, aside from a pile of rocks, but not much else.'

'Go over to the pile of rocks and tell me what's there.'

'Ok/ said Hawke, lugging his pack and the vox over to the rocks and peering through the gloom. He stepped forwards and brushed away a thick coating of dust.

There's a door behind here! The rock fall's covered most of it, but there's definitely a door/

'Is there a panel widi a keypad visible to the side of the door?'

'Yeah, it's a bit dusty, but looks alright/

'Good, here's what you have to do/ explained Beauvais. 'Using the keypad, enter the following code: tertius-three-alpha-epsilon-nine/

Wedging the handset between his shoulder and ear, Hawke punched in the code and stepped back as the door juddered open on buckled rollers. A faint wind brushed past him, like the exhalation of a dead thing and he shivered.

'Ok, door's open. I guess I'm going in/ said Hawke.

Yes, go inside/ confirmed Beauvais. 'And follow my directions. Do not deviate from them at all/

'What the hell do you think I'm going to do, go on a tour?'

He ducked his head below the rocks and entered a gloomy corridor. He stepped forward, stumbling as his foot met resistance then tripped as he trod on something soft. He swore as he hit the ground and rolled onto the floor of the corridor, finding himself face to face with a corpse, its mouth twisted in a rictus mask of death. He yelped and pushed himself back towards the dim light at the door where he saw another three bodies slumped on the ground.

Their fists were covered with dried blood. Looking at the door, Hawke saw bloody handprints smeared over its inside surface.

'Imperator! There's dead bodies here!' shouted Hawke.

Yes, the orbital bombardment was slightly off-course, and hit the mountains instead of the facility. We believe the explosions threw enough debris up to cover the oxy-recyc units and the men within choked to death/

'Choked to death? Then why are their hands covered in blood?'

'It is logical that the men stationed here would have tried to exit the facility when they realised their air supply was cut off,' said Beauvais, his voice devoid of any compassion for the dead.

'But why couldn't they get out?' wheezed Hawke as his breathing returned to normal.

'Facility staff do not have access to the codes that allow the exterior doors to open. It would constitute a security risk were one to be compromised.'

'And for that, they died. You cold bastards!'

'A necessary precaution and one all staff are aware of when stationed in these facilities. Now, if we may continue? The facility commander should have a bronze key around his neck? Take it.'

Forcing down his repugnance, Hawke checked the bodies, finding the key on the third body. He vowed that if he got out of this alive, he was going to find Beauvais and punch his face in. He stepped over the bodies and made his way down the corridor, tucking the key into his pocket. The air felt stagnant and he soon found himself wheezing.

'I can hardly breathe in here/ he complained.

'Do you have a respirator to use until the outside air filters in?'

'Yeah, I got one/ snapped Hawke. He fumbled in the pack for the clumsy breathing apparatus and dragged it over his head, flicking on the illuminator above the faceplate.

A featureless corridor stretched off into the darkness, and he started his descent. Following Beauvais's instructions, he passed several iron doors sealed with keypads which were unmarked save for the cog symbol of the Adeptus Mechanicus. His breathing sounded loud in his ears and the click of his worn-down boot heels and the tinny voice of Beauvais echoed from the walls, the torch-lit darkness seeming to magnify the sounds. Despite himself, Hawke felt his trepidation growing the further he descended into the mountain.

At last, Beauvais's directions led him to an unremarkable door, stencilled with wording he couldn't read, but a symbol

that was clearly a warning. He raised the handset to his mouth.

'Right, I'm here, now what?'

'Use the key you took from the facility commander to unlock the door/

Hawke dug the key from his pocket and did as instructed, standing back as the door clicked open and a gust of oil and incense-scented air rushed to meet him. Inside was darkness and he stepped through the door, panning the light from his respirator around him.

The room appeared to be circular, its blank walls running around a gigantic white pillar at its centre that took up most of the space. A metal-ranged ladder set into the rockcrete wall ascended into the darkness beside him, and he stared in puzzlement at the massive object before him.

Hawke put his hand out and touched it. It was warm to the touch and felt as though there was a quiver of movement within, but perhaps that was just his imagination. The base of the column sat in a sunken pit and as he leaned over to get a better look, he saw what appeared to be vast nozzles, like the ones he'd seen on the end of one of the heavy weapon team's missiles, but bigger.

Bigger...

Realisation sank in as Hawke craned his neck in an attempt to see how high this chamber was.

'Is this what I think it is?' he asked Beauvais.

'That depends on what you think it is, but I can tell you that it is a Glaive class, ground-launched orbital torpedo/

And what in the name of the High Lord's balls do you expect me to do with it?' spluttered Hawke.

4Ve want you to fire it, Guardsman Hawke/ explained Magos Beauvais.

Five

FOLLOWED BY NEARLY two thousand men, Castellan Prestre Vauban clambered over the lip of the citadel's ditch and sprinted towards the Iron Warriors' raised earthworks. There was no battle cry, no shout of rage, only the silence of soldiers who knew their only chance of survival was stealth.

The men's faces were smeared with soot and their sky blue uniform had been left in the barracks in favour of plain black flak jackets.

Leonid's storming parties spread out from the ditch, clustered around the demolition teams and Vauban knew that this attack was a desperate gamble indeed. But as his second-in-command had pointed out, they had no choice but to attempt to destroy the enemy guns. To not try would be to allow the Iron Warriors to pound them into dust.

A thrill of fear and exultation coursed through his veins at the prospect of battle; it had been too long since he had led men into combat.

He clutched his bolt pistol close to his chest, running crouched over, the breath heaving in his lungs. The traitor line was still a few hundred metres away. His breathing sounded hellishly loud and the thump of boots on the dusty earth was like the thunder of a Titan's tread, but so far the alarm had not been raised. Perhaps there was a chance this reckless attack might just succeed.

Even in the dim light, Vauban could see a head raised above the level of the ramparts of the enemy earthworks and counted down the seconds until the attack hit home.

All they needed was a little more time.

URAJA KLANE PULLED himself up to the ramparts of the earthworks and peered into the darkness, resting his rifle on the rough, earthen parapet. There was something happening in front of the works, but he couldn't quite see what. Lord Kroeger had charged them with the protection of these guns and he knew better than to disappoint his master. But the flickering lights and noise from the sprawling campsite made it difficult to make out anything.

Behind him, several hundred soldiers slept on the firing step or drank distilled spirits from tin mugs in their muddy dugouts.

He glanced down and kicked Yosha awake. He had a pair of battered field glasses that could see in the dark, didn't he?

'Hey, Yosha, wake up, you useless piece of...' hissed Klane.

Yosha mumbled something foul and unintelligible, then rolled over. Klane kicked him again.

'Yosha, wake up, damn you. Gimme your goggles!'

'What?' slurred Yosha. 'My goggles?'

'Yeah, I think there's something out there.'

Yosha grumbled, but dragged himself to his feet, rubbing his eyes with filthy hands and yawning hugely. He peered out into the darkness.

'There's nothing out there/ he declared sleepily.

'Use your damn goggles, you idiot.'

Casting a scathing look at his comrade, Yosha pulled out a set of blackened and ancient field goggles. A bizarre protuberance slotted over the eyepiece and Yosha pulled it over his shaven head. He rested his chin on his hands and trained his gaze over the parapet.

'Well,' pressed Klane. 'You see anything?'

'Yeah/ whispered Yosha. There's something coming. Looks like-'

'Like what?'

'Like-'

Klane never got the chance to find out. A sharp, buzzing crack whipped by him and blasted the back of Yosha's head open in an explosion of blood and brains. Yosha crumpled slowly and toppled from the rampart.

'Khorne's teeth!' swore Klane, jerking back and switching his gaze from the headless corpse to the ground before the earthworks.

The whipping noise slashed past him again and a puff of earth exploded next to him.

Sniper!

Klane ducked down behind the parapet and cocked his rifle, his head working left and right to see other sentries dropping, no doubt picked off by Imperial snipers on the walls of the ravelin. He swore again. There must be an attack coming in!

He crawled along the firing step, clambering over sleeping bodies towards the alarm siren, and pulled himself up the timber spar where the flared bullhorn was bolted. He grabbed the cranking handle.

Klane heard booted steps approaching the parapet and realised he didn't have much time. He turned the squealing handle, the wailing cry from the bullhorn growing in volume as he spun it faster and faster. A shot blasted the timber beside him, showering him with splinters and he flinched, releasing the handle and taking up his rifle.

Thudding footsteps hit the soil of the earthworks below. Damned Imperials! He snarled, pleased to have this chance to kill. Scrabbling hands sounded on the far side of the parapet.

No bastard Guardsman was going to get past Uraja Klane!

He roared in hatred and rose to his feet, swinging his rifle around to find himself facing a giant warrior in yellow power armour with a crackling sword and scarlet Imperial eagle on his breastplate.

'What the f-' was all he had time to say before the Imperial Fists Space Marine clove him in two with his power sword.

SIRENS SCREAMED, PIERCING the night with their cries and Vauban knew that with the element of surprise lost they had only a limited time to achieve their

objective before they would have to fall back. He climbed the steep exterior slope of the earthworks, using the butt of his pistol for purchase. His soldiers scrambled over the parapet with a roar of released fury.

A grenade detonated nearby, showering him with earth and he slipped, feet scrabbling for grip.

A gauntleted hand reached down and closed on his wrist, lifting him easily across the parapet in a single motion. He was deposited on the firing step beside a broken corpse, and swiftly drew his power sword. The Space Marine who had hauled him over the parapet turned and began firing a bolt-gun into a mass of enemy soldiers in red overalls. His brethren were pushing further into the entrenchments as the Imperial Guard scrambled over the parapet and into the battery.

'Thank you, Brother-Captain Eshara/ said Vauban breathlessly.

The Imperial Fists captain nodded, slammed a fresh magazine into his bolter and said, 'Thank me later. We have work to do/ before turning and charging from the firing step.

Gunfire and explosions lit the trenches and dugouts of the battery with strobing light, screaming soldiers and wounded men providing a cacophonous backdrop to the attack. Hundreds of Jourans poured over the earthwork, killing anything in their path. The Chaos soldiery had been caught largely unawares, and the Imperial troops offered no quarter to the unready foe. Storming parties slaughtered the enemy soldiers, shooting them where they lay or stabbing them with bayonets as they scrambled for weapons.

Fifteen gigantic war machines were situated here, enormous howitzers and long cannons with barrels so wide a man could stand upright inside. Bronze plates embossed with skulls and unholy icons were fixed on each machine's flank, and thick chains looped around giant rings were securely bolted to their track units. There was a terrible sense of menace surrounding the siege engines and Vauban had a gnawing sense of wrongness in his gut. He knew without doubt that such blasphemous creations should never have been allowed to come into existence.

The Imperial Fists swept efficiently through the battery, securing its perimeters and killing the war machines' gunners. They established themselves in strong positions around the approach trenches and parallel, ready to hold off the inevitable counterattack.

Vauban dropped from the firing step and shouted, Alpha demo team, with me! Bravo team with Colonel Leonid!'

Two dozen men followed him towards the machines and, even over the crack of small-arms fire, Vauban shivered as he felt the pulse of monstrous, daemonic breath grating along his spine just below the threshold of hearing. He stepped across scores of corpses, making his way quickly towards the daemon engines. As he and his men drew near, the sense of wrongness grew stronger and stronger. As he set foot on the metal decking where the machines were chained, agonising pain ripped into him and he felt his guts cramp and his

knees buckle. Terror seized him as his mind was filled with the unshakable belief that to touch these unholy monsters was to die.

He could see he was not alone in this hideous sensation. Soldiers were dropping to their knees, some vomiting blood as the daemonic aura of the nightmare machines washed over them. Chains rattled and metal groaned beneath them as the war machines supped on the red liquid, a bass thrumming building from the line of daemon engines.

The sounds of bolter fire intensified from the edges of the battery, and Vauban knew the Iron Warriors must be counterattacking, fearful of losing their hellish artillery.

They couldn't fail! Not now they had come so close.

Vauban pushed himself to his feet, gritting his teeth against the waves of sickness that wracked him and dragged the soldier nearest to him to his feet.

'Come on, damn you!' he yelled. 'On your feet, soldier!'

The man grabbed his satchel charges and stumbled after Vauban, his face contorted in terror and agony. The two men lurched towards the nearest machine, its chains jangling furiously and geysers of steam venting from corroded grilles. A furious static descended upon his vision, like looking through a faulty holo. A bitter, metallic taste flooded Vauban's mouth as he bit the flesh of his lip to keep from screaming.

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the pain and terror vanished like the light from a snuffed candle. Vauban felt a huge, pressing weight lift from his mind. His lungs heaved and he spat blood, spinning as he heard a booming chant from behind him.

One of the Imperial Fists, his yellow armour decorated with numerous purity seals and one shoulder guard painted blue, strode towards the daemon engines, his proud voice clear and true. He carried a carved staff of ebony, coils of blue light coruscating along its length.

Vauban did not know the warrior's name, but knew by his words that their saviour was a psyker, one of the Chapter's Librarians. Somehow, he was fighting against the corrupting

power of the daemon engines and protecting them from its malign influence.

Ghostly streamers of insubstantial energy flared from the icons and markings on the armoured flanks of the war machines.

Vauban could see by the sweat pouring in runnels from the Librarian's face and the pulsing vein in his temple that the effort of holding their daemonic essence at bay was stretching him to the limit.

The Librarian had bought them a chance, but they would need to be quick.

'Quickly!' he bellowed over the bark of gunfire and explosions. 'Demo teams, plant your charges and let's get the hell out of here!'

The men with demolition charges picked themselves up from the steel decking of the battery and, under the direction of Vauban's best ordnance officers, began placing the explosive charges at vital points on each daemon engine. The vast machines strained at their bindings, thrashing in fury at these mortals who dared to defile them.

As the men moved on to the next machine the vox-bead in Vauban's ear clicked and Captain Eshara's voice filled his skull. 'Castellan Vauban, we must leave! The enemy are coming in overwhelming numbers with heavy support and I do not believe we can hold them.'

'Not yet!' yelled Vauban. 'Give us enough time to set the explosives then fall back! We need you alive!'

'How long do you need?' asked Eshara, his voice muffled by nearby shots and detonations.

Vauban looked along the line of bucking war machines and said, 'Give us four minutes!'

'We'll try! But be ready to move when you see us falling back!'

'Hold on a minute!' snapped Hawke. Attach the bronze cable with the sacred halo symbol to the two pins with the what?'

Even over the vox-link, Hawke detected more than a trace of impatience in the magos's voice as he answered.

'The bronze cable attaches to the pins with the demi-cog symbol. Just like I said before. Once you have-'

'Hold on, hold on...' grumbled Hawke, fiddling with the cable clips as he fought to find the correct pins and hold the wire steady over the exposed circuitry. The illuminator on his respirator was growing dim and he had to squint to see the symbols Beauvais was talking about. There! He reached in and snapped the clips

over the pins, flinching and almost losing his balance when they sparked violently and burnt his fingertips.

He grabbed onto the steel gantry he was lying on and tried not to think of how high above the floor he was. The gantry was solidly constructed, one of several bolted to the wall at various points around the room, presumably for technicians to carry out routine maintenance to the torpedo. He seriously doubted it was used for people trying to hotwire the device. Behind him, a mesh grille in the wall led off into darkness. It had taken him a frustrating twenty minutes to climb the ladder, find the correct access panel in the side of the giant torpedo and use Hitch's knife to undo the sacred bolts that held it in place.

And over the past hour, he'd been mildly electrocuted twice, burnt his fingers three times and almost fallen thirty metres to the solid rockcrete floor. Hawke was not a happy man. He steadied his breathing and spoke into the vox.

'You might have bloody warned me!' he complained.

'Is it done?'

'Yes, it's done.'

"Very good, you have now armed the torpedo.'

Hawke pushed himself back along the gantry, suddenly very alarmed at the prospect of this armed behemoth being less than a metre from his head. 'It's armed. What next?'

'Now we have to inform the war-spirit within the torpedo the whereabouts of its victim.'

'Uh-huh...' shrugged Hawke. 'And how exactly do I do that?'

You don't. I will perform that sacred task. Now, I need you to remove a red and gold cable embossed with the rune of telemetry, then-'

'The what? Just tell me what the damn thing looks like.'

Beauvais sighed. 'It resembles a winged triangle with a cog at its centre. It is connected to the war-spirit's seeker chamber. That's the gold box at the top of the panel. Once you have the cable, plug it into the vox-unit's remote triangula-tion output socket and wait. Once the lights on the vox stop flashing, reattach the cable to the war-spirit's seeker chamber.'

Hawke found the plug and pulled it from the panel. He swore as he saw it would only extend some fifteen centimetres from the torpedo. He lifted the vox unit to the edge of the gantry, propping it against one of the uprights. He slotted the cable home, watching as the front panel of the vox unit faded and the lights arranged around the dial flickered in strange patterns. As the sequence continued he propped himself up on one elbow, looking up at the top of the giant torpedo.

The top of the giant missile was rounded and strangely irregular. There was a serrated, spiral groove cut in the warhead and Hawke guessed that this was to help it burrow through the thick hull of a starship before detonating deep inside.

He waited for several minutes before the clicking sequence of lights finally stopped, then unplugged the cable and reconnected it to the torpedo. He thought he heard a noise below and glanced over the gantry. Dismissing it, he returned his attention to the torpedo as Beauvais came back on the vox.

'The war-spirit now knows its prey, Hawke. Now you must speak the Chant of Awakening to set it on the hunt.'

'Ok, Chant of Awakening... right. And after that, then what?'

'Simply strike the rune of firing upon the-'

Beauvais never finished his sentence as a hail of bolter fire ripped through the vox and blasted it to fragments. Hawke jumped in shock, grabbing onto the upright, very nearly going over the edge of the gantry.

'Emperor's holy blood!' he swore, grabbing his rifle and pressing his back against the cold metal grille in the wall

behind him. His breath pounded in his throat and his heart beat wildly against his chest. What the hell was going on?

He risked a glance over the gantry and saw a giant in iron-grey power armour with a smoking gun and a mechanised claw snaking over his shoulder. Men in red uniforms clustered around the warrior, all carrying rifles aimed upwards.

A deep voice, rich and full of threat drifted up to him.

'You are going to die, little man. You have led us a merry dance, but now it is over.'

Hawke shut his eyes tight and whispered, 'Oh damn, oh damn, oh damn...'

INCANDESCENT FIRE ERUPTED from the first demolition charges, vaporising the chains and bindings holding the first daemon engine in place. Painstakingly wrought symbols of arcane protection were incinerated and the mechanical components of the war machine ran molten under the volcanic heat of the explosion. The scream of the daemon engine's death whiplashed around the battery as the terrifying creature bound within its infernal mechanisms was freed by the blast.

Those closest, even though well clear of the explosives' blast radius, were swatted to the floor of the battery by its shriek of release. A swirling hurricane of etheric energy, insane geometries warping through its daemonic form, tore through the Jourans with the power of the immaterium, turning men inside out and exploding others from within as it shrieked in the throes of its dissolution.

HONSOU HEARD THE screech of one of the creatures of the damned and cursed Kroeger again. Where were the men from his company tasked with guarding these precious beasts? Creatures that had required countless thousands of lives and diabolical pacts to conjure into being. The answer came easily enough;

drunk on slaughter somewhere, slaking their thirst for blood in an orgy of butchery.

He ducked as a hail of bullets stitched the trench wall before him and a clutch of human soldiers fell, their bodies blown apart by the burst. He racked the slide on his own

weapon, then paused as he realised the shots he'd heard were fired from a bolter. Honsou stepped over their bleeding corpses and jerked his head around the bend in the trench. He was stunned to see a Space Marine in yellow power armour firing down the trench. The length of the narrow earthen corridor was choked with bodies and there was no way through.

Hundreds of human soldiers gathered behind him, fearfully clutching their primitive rifles as they crouched in the shelter of this trench. They looked to him for guidance and Honsou snarled as he reached back and grabbed one by the neck, tossing him into the approach trench. The man landed hard and, as he rose to his feet, bolter fire shredded him.

Before the body had even hit the ground, Honsou spun low around the corner of the trench, firing controlled bursts at the Space Marine. His victim crumpled, his armour breached by his shots. Honsou's jaw hardened as he saw the clenched, black fist icon on the warrior's left shoulder guard.

Imperial Fists! The ancient enemy, source of his polluted blood and cause of millennia of misery at the hands of those who were not fit even to serve beside him.

Blind rage took Honsou and he roared in hate, charging through the body-filled trench, the desperate need to kill Imperial Fists driving him onwards. Another yellow-armoured warrior appeared at the entrance to the battery and levelled his bolter, but Honsou was quicker, pulling the trigger and emptying his weapon's magazine at the hated foe.

Sparks and earth flew as his shots ricocheted from the Space Marine's armour.

Honsou screamed in fury, throwing aside his bolter when the hammer slammed down empty, and drew his sword as the warrior before him dropped to one knee and took careful aim.

He felt impacts slam into his chest, but nothing, not even death itself would prevent him from reaching his enemy. Pain ripped through him, but he ignored it, hammering his boot into the Space Marine's breastplate. He reversed his grip on his sword hilt and drove it downwards through the

chest of the fallen warrior, hate-fuelled strength driving it hilt-deep into his victim.

Blood splashed him as a flaring explosion thundered through the battery and another daemon engine vanished in a sheet of flames, its shriek momentarily drowning out the noise of the blast. Psychic Shockwaves buffeted Honsou and he felt the ancient malice of a being that was ancient before mankind was born roar through him. He rejoiced in its hate, feeling it consume him, pouring fresh vigour through his body as it took his unworthy flesh for its own. He spread wide his arms, actinic bolts of black lightning arcing from his hands.

Destruction ripped through the battery as the bolts lashed out, indiscriminately ripping apart banks of soil, machinery and groups of soldiers - both enemy and allied.

Honsou revelled in such carnage, though he knew that it was but borrowed power. Flaring purple afterimages seared across his retinas, but he laughed, hurling spears of warp energy into the confused mass of men and machines. His body swelled as daemonic power poured in. His armour buckled and he screamed as joints and sinews stretched, bones cracked and his jaw stretched wide in a soundless cry of agony.

More thunderous detonations rocked the battery and Honsou felt yet another daemonic presence explode from within its iron machine-prison. He dropped to his knees as the daemon within him suddenly withdrew, feeling its hatred of the newly-birthed entity. As the power drained from him, he watched the two daemonic creatures spiralling heavenward, locked in battle and fading from his

vision even as he watched. He ached for such power again, even though he knew it would destroy him.

He groaned in pain as the terrible damage done to him by the daemon's brief occupancy surged through his nerve endings. He pushed himself to his feet as the human soldiers swarmed around him, shooting into the mass of Guardsmen and Space Marines.

A mad shrieking filled the battery as more explosions lit up the night. A daemon engine, its bindings cracked and flailing, howled as it fought to finally sever the magicks that bound it to the war machine. Men were crushed beneath its bronze treads, and Honsou watched as its mighty gun swung ponderously around and fired repeatedly. The screaming projectiles sailed over his head, exploding somewhere deep in the Iron Warriors' camp, and a string of secondary detonations swiftly followed.

Honsou dragged his sword from the body beside him, wincing as his tortured muscles protested. There were still Imperial Fists to slay and he set off into the fiery hell of the battery to find them.

BOLTER IMPACTS RANG from the walls, almost deafening, and Hawke felt the impact of countless bullets hitting the underside of the gantry. Desperately he hammered his elbow against the grille behind him, firing the lasgun blindly over the edge.

Sparking ricochets spanged from the torpedo and Hawke filled the air with a constant stream of expletives, expecting the damn thing to blow with every impact. Fie could hear the metallic thunk, thunk, of boots on the ladder beside him, and rolled over in time to see a grizzled face atop a red collar appear at the edge of the gantry.

He lashed out, his elbow smashing the man's nose across his face in a spray of blood. The man's hands flew to his face. He screamed as he fell from the ladder.

Flawke yelled, And stay down!' before glancing over the edge of the gantry to

watch him fall. A bullet streaked past him, grazing his temple and he yelped in pain, blood washing down his face from the cut. He rolled back as another man clambered up the ladder.

A bolter shell plucked at his sleeve and blood streamed from his bicep. His hand spasmed and he dropped the las-gun. It rolled to the edge of the gantry and he lunged for the rifle, just stopping it from falling. Something heavy landed on him.

A fist cracked against his jaw, but he rolled with the blow, twisting his head aside as the man on top of him repeatedly punched him.

Hawke drove his knee into the man's groin and delivered a thunderous head-butt as his opponent's shoulders dropped. He hammered the heel of his hand into the man's neck and gripped his red overalls. Hawke slammed his head into the metalwork of the railings before heaving him over the edge.

Another enemy soldier stood in front of him, aiming a rifle.

Hawke kicked out hard, cracking his boots against the man's legs and shattering his kneecaps. The man shrieked and dropped to the floor of the gantry.

Hawke fired a hail of las-bolts, ripping the man's chest to bloody ruin and blasting clear the wall-mounted grille behind him. More bullet impacts raked the wall around him and he rolled away from the gantry's edge, finding himself looking into the depths of the torpedo's access panel.

How the hell did he fire this bloody thing?

He couldn't remember.

He heard more people climbing and cursed as he saw the charge indicator on the rifle flash red. Almost empty. He could see another soldier had reached the top of the ladder. He snatched the late Guardsman Hitch's pride and joy from his belt and rammed the full length of the Jouran fighting-knife into the man's neck.

Bright arterial blood spurted from the wound, drenching Hawke. He frantically wiped his eyes clear, scrambling back towards the torpedo and ramming the knife back in its scabbard.

Gunfire sounded from below, but none of the shots seemed to be directed at him. He risked another furtive glance over the gantry and saw that the armoured giant had killed his remaining soldiers. Perhaps they hadn't been keen to meet the same fate as their comrades.

Hawke grinned suddenly. He didn't blame them.

'You are braver than I took you for, little man/ said the Chaos Marine, mounting the iron ladder. 'I will honour you with the most brutal death.'

'If it's all the same to you, I'll pass on that,' shouted Hawke, firing his lasgun, but the weapon was useless, his shots bouncing from the warrior's burnished armour. He

searched desperately for something to use as a weapon, his gaze finally falling on the one thing he knew would finish this bastard off.

But how to use it? What had Beauvais said?

Strike the rune of firing upon the...

The what?

He bit his lip as he heard the warrior climbing.

To hell with it/ he said and closed his eyes, reaching inside the access panel and hammering his open palm against the exposed runes, switches and buttons.

Nothing happened.

'Emperor damn you!' Hawke screamed in frustration. 'You useless pile of

worthless junk! Fire, damn you! Fire you bastard! Fire!'

As the last word left his mouth, a rumbling tremor filled the chamber, klaxons blared and a series of lights began flashing at the chamber's top. Hawke opened his eyes and laughed hysterically. Of course! The Chant of Awakening!

Sudden heat filled the chamber and steam flashed up the walls as powerful rocket engines began igniting sequentially. He'd only gone and bloody done it, hadn't he?

As the heat in the torpedo room suddenly leapt upwards he realised his danger. The ladder was sure as hell not an option and he cried in relief as he saw the duct exposed by the shattered grille. He didn't know where it led, but was sure it had to be better than here.

'Well, Hawke, my lad/ he whispered, 'time to get going/

Swiftly he crawled towards the duct, pushing his lasgun ahead of him. It was easily wide enough to accommodate him and he slithered inside.

Something tugged at his fatigues. He turned and cried out as he saw the Chaos warrior's loathsome, mechanised claw snap shut on his ankle.

The giant was too large to enter the duct, but the claw would soon pull him out.

'If we are to die, we will die together, little man/ promised the warrior.

'Guess again/ snapped Hawke as he drew his knife and sawed through the throbbing power cables that ran from the

claw. Black oil and hydraulic fluid spurted out, and the claw jerked spastically.

Its iron grip slackened and he kicked it clear, powering along the smooth metal duct. With every passing second he expected a bullet in the back, but none came. Vibrations rumbled along the duct and he pushed his muscles harder than he

would have believed possible.

Hot steam billowed after him. Sweat poured from his brow as the aimbling of rocket engines grew behind him and the ductwork creaked as it expanded in the burgeoning heat.

Suddenly there was space above him. He pulled himself from the duct and slung his rifle over his shoulder as he found himself in what looked like a vent chamber. Other ducts fed into the chamber and another ladder ascended to a circle of reddish sky high above him. He leapt onto the ladder, climbing as fast as he could, hearing the rumble behind him build to a full-throated bellow, like a mighty dragon waking from its slumbers.

He climbed and climbed as the roar built below him.

Geysers of scalding steam flashed past him.

The heat was intolerable and he gritted his teeth. His skin blistered, but he shut out the pain, putting one hand above the other and pulling himself onwards.

Hawke reached the top of the ladder and moaned in fear as he felt a blaze of heat rash towards him and searing orange light flare around him. He shouted with one last herculean effort, hurling himself over the lip of the vent and rolling aside as a fountain of fiery exhaust gasses exploded behind him.

Hawke squeezed his eyes shut, and rolled away from the heat until he was sure he was safe. He gasped for air and pushed himself into a sitting position, opening his eyes in time to see the torpedo roaring through the sky on a pillar of fire.

Guardsman Julius Hawke knew he'd never seen a more beautiful sight.

THE GLAIVE CLASS ground-launched orbital torpedo climbed rapidly through the red sky of Hydra Cordatus on a blazing tail plume, lighting the battlefield below with its brilliant glare. It soon became nothing more than a flickering point of light in the sky, climbing to an altitude where the air was thinner and its speed

could increase. As it reached a height of nearly one hundred kilometres, the first stage of the torpedo separated and stage two ignited, increasing its velocity still further as the war-spirit caged within the warhead calculated the time, distance and vector to its target.

The torpedo nosed over, travelling at almost fourteen thousand kilometres per hour, and began hunting for its prey. The Adeptus Mechanicus had cursed its target and that curse now passed to the war-spirit. As the torpedo angled itself back towards the planet, the warhead identified its target.

With its target locked in its sights, the war-spirit vectored the nozzles on the second stage to fire a corrective burn that altered its flight path and sent the torpedo plummeting back to Hydra Cordatus.

FORRIX STOOD AT the edge of the promontory watching the battle raging below with impotent frustration. The batteries were being attacked by the Imperials and he could do nothing about it. Who would have believed the curs of the corpse-god could be so bold? His hands bunched into fists and he vowed that someone would pay for this.

Flashes and rippling explosions lit up the night and his enhanced sight could follow individual acts of bravery and heroism in the battle. Not only that, but he could clearly see the yellow armour of the Imperial Fists in the flickering light. To have the ancient foe here was as close to perfect synchronicity as he could have wished. He remembered fighting Dorn's warriors on the walls of the Eternity Gate on Terra, ten thousand years ago. Then they had been warriors to walk the road to hell with, but now... ?

He would soon find out. An inferno of hate burned within his heart with a passion he had all but forgotten.

He'd watched the spear of light roar from the mountains to the east of the citadel and had experienced a moment's

unease as he watched the orbital torpedo climb higher and higher.

How had it been fired and where was it bound? But these questions seemed largely irrelevant now, as it had streaked into the heavens then vanished through the clouds.

Forrix returned his attention to the battle below, sneering in contempt as he saw the Imperials begin to pull back under the fury of the Iron Warriors' counterattack. He saw Honsou leading a rabble of soldiers through the battery, killing those not quick enough to make their escape, and smiled grimly.

Honsou was becoming a fearsome war-leader and Forrix knew that, given the chance, he could be amongst the greatest Warsmiths the Legion had ever seen.

The battle below was as good as over. Forrix turned away, marching past the huge number of artillery pieces he had assembled on the promontory and over the breach Honsou had fought his way across. Tomorrow they would begin firing again and the walls of the citadel would crumble.

He crossed the entrenchment on long, flat sheets of metal, stopping as a sudden premonition sent a shiver along his spine. He craned his neck upwards.

The sky was, as usual, the colour of blood, lit by reflected flashes of explosions from below.

What had made him look up?

Then he saw it.

A burning dot of light high in the sky, arcing down towards the planet at fantastic speed. Forrix's jaw hung slack as he realised the ultimate destination of the torpedo. Hot anger flooded his body as he watched molten streamers of light flare from the torpedo as it entered the lower atmosphere.

He bolted for the keep, shouting a voxed warning to the warriors inside.

'By all that is unholy, raise the keep's void shield!'

He lumbered towards the sunken blast doors that led within, casting a hurried glance over his shoulder. The burning corona of fire that surrounded the torpedo appeared to him like a baleful eye in the heavens, aimed straight for his heart.

Forrix entered the keep, hammering his fist across the door-closing mechanism and set off towards its command centre. He heard the pervasive hum of the void shield generator buried beneath the tower powering up and fervently hoped that it would raise in time.

For if it did not, he and everyone in the keep were as good as dead.

THE TORPEDO IMPACTED almost exactly in the centre of the Kane bastion of Tor Christo where its triple stage warhead detonated with devastating results. The lead element of the warhead was designed to crater an opening through the thick hull of a starship, while the tail element would explode simultaneously, acting as a propellant and hurling the middle charge deep within its target,

But instead of the metres-thick, reinforced adamantium bulkhead of a starship, the torpedo slammed into the ground of the Kane bastion, travelling at over a thousand kilometres an hour. The first stage of the torpedo exploded with phenomenal power, flattening everything within three hundred metres and blasting a crater fifty metres deep. The tail section blew and thrust the torpedo deeper into the rock of the promontory where the more powerful centre charge detonated with the power of a sun, ripping the rock of Tor Christo apart.

Night became day as blinding light fountained from the impact. Tank-sized chunks of stone were hurled through the air like pebbles as an expanding wave of blinding smoke and dust filled the valley. The thunderclap of detonation was like the hammer of the gods, come to smite the surface of the planet, and a surging mushroom cloud billowed a thousand metres into the sky, hurling ash and burning rock in all directions.

The ramparts of the bastions either side of the torpedo's impact sagged and cracked, their rockcrete walls splitting under forces they were never designed to endure. The crater in the centre of the promontory expanded with terrifying rapidity, tonnes of rubble and artillery pieces collapsing into the fiery pit.

With a tortured groan, millions of tonnes of stone cracked and rumbled, sliding free of the slopes of the promontory, crashing down in a rocky tidal wave of destruction. The western end of the first parallel was buried beneath the avalanche of rock, and the zigzag approach saps leading to the second parallel filled and collapsed. Thousands died screaming as they were crushed beneath the sweeping tide of earth.

The battery constructed before the walls of the Vincare bastion vanished in a torrential downpour of earth and rock, the guns buried forever beneath thousands of tonnes of debris.

Hundreds of secondary explosions were touched off as burning shards of wreckage dropped into the Iron Warriors' camp, detonating ammo dumps and fuel bladders, and setting light to hundreds of tents. Anarchy filled the camp as men attempted to fight the blazes, but they were as ants fighting a forest fire; nothing could halt the spread of the voracious flames.

The blast wave buffeted the towering form of the *Dies Irae,* but the workers had done their job well and the towering buttresses and scaffolding held, keeping the monstrous leviathan from toppling. The massive Titan shook, its joints groaning and squealing as its external gyros fought for balance, but the Shockwave passed over it and left it intact. Several other Titans were not so fortunate and three Warlords of the Legio Mortis were brought down by massive hunks of rock or collapsed by the force of the blast.

The death toll had reached nearly ten thousand by the time the final echoes of the blast had died away and the blinding light of the torpedo's detonation had faded. All that remained of Tor Christo was the void-shielded keep, perched precariously on a splintered corbel of rock.

In a single stroke, Guardsman Hawke had suddenly tilted the balance of power on Hydra Cordatus.

CASTELLAN VAUBAN PUSHED himself up out of the dust and earth and shook his head clear of the ringing din that filled his skull. Bright light filled the valley and

he laughed in triumph as he saw the enormous mushroom cloud wreathing Tor Christo in smoke and flames.

He and Leonid had seen the torpedo launch, but they had been too busy rallying the men to fall back towards the Primus Ravelin to follow its course. The chaos of the attack on the battery had consumed him and the first he'd known of the torpedo's impact was when he'd seen his shadow suddenly thrown out before him and an enormous force smashed him to the ground. Fleeting impressions of flashing light, thunderous detonations and pain as rocks and earth came hammering down around him.

Dizzily he pushed himself to his feet, casting his gaze through the grey smoke, attempting to see the extent of the damage, but it was futile. He couldn't see more than a dozen metres; the dust and smoke was too thick. He could see shapes picking themselves slowly from the ground, but whether they were friend or foe was impossible to tell.

Muffled rallying cries of sergeants pierced the gloomy, dust-filled air and he thought he heard Leonid's voice calling his name, but it was hard to tell. He tried to shout a reply, but his mouth was dry with ash and all he could manage was a hoarse croak. He spat, wiping his face clear of dirt and futilely dusting down his jacket and breastplate.

It was time to impose some order. He stumbled towards where he thought he'd heard Leonid's voice. He turned blindly, all sense of direction lost in the haze.

Vauban froze as he heard a voice in the smoke and an enormous figure in burnished, dust and blood stained armour wearily emerged from the swirling clouds before him.

The warrior was helmetless, his close-cropped black hair tight against his skull and his eyes burning with a hate that chilled Vauban to his very soul.

The two faced one another in silence until Vauban drew his power sword and assumed a relaxed fighting stance, though fear of this warrior pulsed along every nerve of his body.

In a calm voice he said, 'I am Castellan Prestre de Roche Vauban the sixth, heir to the lands of Burgovah on the

planet Joura, scion of the House of Vauban. Cross blades with me if you wish to die, foul daemon.'

The warrior smiled. 'I have no such impressive titles, human. I am called Honsou. Half-breed, mongrel, filth, scum. I will cross blades with you.'

Vauban activated the blade of his sword and dropped into a fighting crouch as Honsou approached. The battery fell silent as the two combatants circled one another, searching for a weakness in the other's defence.

Vauban raised his sword in salute and, without warning, leapt towards Honsou, thrusting with his energised blade.

Honsou swayed aside and swept his sword round, slashing the blade towards Vauban. He ducked and spun away, slashing high with his sword.

Honsou deflected the sweep and stepped back, his sword raised before him. Vauban recovered his balance and advanced towards Honsou. He lunged again and Honsou expertly blocked the thrust, rolling his wrists and slashing at Vauban's head. But he had read the move in Honsou's eyes and the castellan dodged the blow.

Wary now, the pair again circled each other, their defences alert for any sudden moves.

Honsou attacked, a flashing whirlwind of steel, forcing Vauban backwards step by step. Vauban parried a vicious slash aimed at his chest, launching a lightning riposte at his foe. The blade scraped a deep furrow in Honsou's armour, but slid clear before drawing blood.

Honsou retreated and Vauban followed with a grin of anticipation, launching himself at Honsou with fresh vigour. Honsou was a powerful warrior, but Prestre

Vauban had been a student of swordplay his entire life and each attack drew fresh blood from his adversary.

He hammered his enemy's defences again and again, forcing him slowly backwards until Honsou stumbled and lost his footing.

Vauban spun left and struck out at Honsou's sword arm. Honsou was quick, bringing his block up just in time to intercept the blow, and their weapons met in a coruscating halo of sparks. Vauban roared as Honsou's blade snapped

and his own smashed home. The Iron Warrior grunted in pain as his arm was severed just above the elbow.

Honsou retreated, stumbling as blood sprayed from the stump of his arm.

Seizing the opportunity, Vauban leapt in to deliver the deathblow, but, at the last second, realised that Honsou had lured him into the attack.

Honsou roared and stepped to meet Vauban, slamming inside his guard and hammering the snapped length of his sword blade through his silver breastplate and into his heart.

White-hot pain flooded Vauban as Honsou twisted the blade, bright blood pouring down his chest and darkness veiling his sight. Had he heard someone crying his name?

He felt his lifeblood pouring from him and looked into the eyes of his killer.

'Damn you...' he whispered.

'That happened a long time ago, human,' hissed Honsou, but Vauban was already dead.

Six

DAWN BROKE ACROSS the valley, scarlet beams of light throwing its unforgiving glare over a scene of utter devastation. A pall of grey dust hung heavy in the air and smothered all sounds in an unnatural silence.

The Warsmith surveyed the destruction before him with an impassive eye. The swirling metamorphic shadows that wreathed his features were a clue to his fury, and none of his war-captains dared approach their master for fear of his rage. The writhings in his armour spun faster, their agonised mewling becoming more desperate.

Two batteries all but destroyed, the guns on Tor Christo gone and almost every daemon engine shattered. Millions of rounds of artillery had been blown to pieces, thousands were dead and weeks of work had been buried under the rubble of a destroyed mountain.

The Warsmith turned to face his captains and not one was spared a moment of utter terror as he advanced towards them. Each of them could see that the forces of change at work within the Warsmith's body were increasing at a furious rate and the force of his presence was almost overpowering.

'You disappoint me/ he said simply.

Each captain felt the horrendous changes working in the Warsmith's body wash over them. He leaned close to his first captain.

'Forrix, I trusted you to have our siegeworks at the walls by now. They are not.'

He moved on. 'Kroeger, I trusted you to protect my war-engines. You did not.'

The Warsmith faced his last war-captain, his voice dangerously soft and controlled.

'Honsou, you have been blessed by the touch of a creature of Chaos. You are now one of us. You have done well and I shall not forget this service you have done me.'

Honsou nodded his thanks, flexing the freshly-grafted mechanical arm the Warsmith's personal Chirumek had gifted him with at the conclusion of last night's battle.

The Warsmith stepped back, his monstrous form swelling and the darkness of his face parting for the briefest moment to reveal the roiling chaos beneath.

He roared, his voice like the bellow of an angry god, 'I do not have time to be thwarted in my ascension by your incompetence. Go now! Get out of my sight and break open that citadel!'

THE THIRD PARALLEL

One

IT WAS FITTING that the interment of Castellan Prestre Vauban took place under overcast skies. Colonel Leonid - Castellan Leonid now - thought it would have been inappropriate for the sun to be out on this sombre day.

It had been two days since the torpedo had struck Tor Christo, but thick clouds of ash still hung low in the blood-red sky, plunging the valley into perpetual twilight and dropping the temperature to almost freezing. Leonid shivered as he made his way up the thousand steps on the northern flank of the valley towards the Sepulchre. He was one of the four pallbearers carrying their dead leader to his final resting place.

A final honour guard of two thousand men lined the last route of their commander, one on each side of every wide step, and Leonid felt tears gather in the corners of his eyes at this spontaneous tribute.

Vauban had said that he believed his men did not love him.

Now Leonid knew he had been wrong.

Between them, Morgan Kristan, Piet Anders and Brother-Captain Alaric Eshara of the Imperial Fists carried a bier of dark Jouran oak upon which lay a simple ebony casket. Inside lay the mortal remains of Castellan Vauban, his bones prepared by the Magos Biologis to take their place in the Sepulchre's ossuary. The day was deathly silent, as though even the enemy paid tribute to the brave warrior who was laid to rest.

Thinking of the enemy sent fresh tears spilling from Leonid's eyes.

He had watched the Iron Warrior drive his sword through Castellan Vauban's chest, as he screamed a denial and dropped to his knees in the rubble-filled battery. Captain Eshara and Librarian Corwin had driven the foe away from the castellan's body, and the soldiers of the 383rd Jouran Dragoons had borne their commander-in-chief back to the citadel.

He hoped that Vauban had died knowing how successful his daring raid into the enemy's camp had been. Virtually every war machine in the battery had been destroyed, either by Jouran bombs or the cataclysmic detonation of the orbital torpedo. Emperor alone knew how much collateral damage had been caused by the fallout from the explosion.

Leonid again offered his thanks to the almighty God-Emperor that He had seen fit to deliver the Imperial Fists to them. Not only had their arrival caused the morale of the garrison to soar, but the news they brought had made Leonid believe that there was real hope.

News of their arrival had reached him just before he was due to present his plan of attack to Castellan Vauban. At first he had not believed it, thinking it to be some cruel hoax, but as he sprinted from his chambers and saw them, ash-stained and weary, he'd raised his eyes to the heavens and blessed the name of Rogal Dorn.

He'd run to the Imperial Fists, but all he could think to say was, 'How?'

The leader of the Space Marines said, 'Brother-Captain Eshara. Are you the commanding officer here?'

'Uh, no...' he'd managed. 'Castellan Vauban commands the citadel. I am Lieutenant Colonel Leonid, his second-in-command. Where did you come from?'

'Thejustitia Fides, our strike cruiser, was about to make the jump into the Empyrean when the astropaths reported a faint distress signal emanating from this planet/ explained Captain Eshara. 'The prefix on the signal was of sufficient urgency that I immediately ordered them to pass it on to the naval base at Hydraphur before turning the ship back to Hydra Cordatus.'

'But what about the enemy vessels in orbit?'

'We narrowly avoided detection by a Chaos warship near the jump point, but once we were clear, I ordered best speed to the source of the distress signal. It was a relatively simple matter to evade detection by the cargo hulks in orbit, but to avoid being spotted by enemy ground troops we flew the Thunderhawks to the mountains some hundred kilometres north of this fastness. After that, we simply crossed the mountains on foot to reach you.'

Leonid still marvelled at Eshara's casual description of his men's incredible journey across the mountains. Two days to cross some of the most inhospitable terrain Leonid had ever seen. It had taken Guardsman Hawke almost a full day to cross eight kilometres, never mind a hundred.

Not only that, but less than five hours later, the Space Marines had fought a major battle and emerged triumphant. The Battle of the Battery was as much their victory as the Jourans'.

Leonid shivered as he looked up at the grim, black tower before them, hating its bleak austerity and wishing that they did not have to perform this solemn duty. But perform it they must. He lowered his eyes as they approached the doors to the Sepulchre.

Tonsured priests stood at the open portal with their heads bowed. Smoking censers hung from hooks beside the door, giving off the heady aroma of Jouran

incense.

As the pallbearers entered the Sepulchre, a lone voice sounded from the ranks of the assembled soldiers, '383rd, present arms!'

The sound of two thousand men slamming their heels down on the steps echoed from the mountainsides and the valley resounded to the deafening salute of rifles firing in perfect unison.

THE BRIEFING CHAMBER was hot, despite the chill of the day, as the citadel's commanding officers filed into the room. Even though he was now in command of the Jouran Dragoons, Leonid was not sitting at the head of the meeting table, but in his usual seat to the right of Vauban's chair.

He watched as the officers of his regiment - his regiment now, the thought had not yet sunk in - entered the briefing chamber, saluting before they took their seats. They looked to him for leadership now, and he just hoped he could provide it.

Vauban had been a natural leader who made command look effortless, but the last two days had shown Leonid how difficult it truly was. Every day, a hundred decisions had to be made and each one had potentially life-threatening consequences. Could he really take charge of the regiment and command the citadel's defences? He didn't know.

Morgan Kristan and Piet Anders took their usual seats. Opposite them sat the two leaders of the Imperial Fists detachment: Brother-Captain Eshara and Librarian Corwin, their polished armour a brilliant yellow. Leonid felt grateful for their support and knew he would need to rely on them more than ever over the coming days now that Vauban was gone. Princeps Daekian and Magos Naicin were also present, but their placement further down the table was indicative of their status as pariahs to the Jourans.

Major Kristan lifted the bottle of amasec from the tray at the table's centre with his good arm and poured a glass for himself, Leonid and Anders before also

filling the glasses at the empty seats of Vauban and Tedeski. He offered the two Space Marines a drink, but both politely refused. Pointedly, he did not offer a drink to the new commanding officer of the Legio Ignatum or the representative of the Adeptus Mechanicus. Piet Anders took out a bundle of thin, twine-bound cheroots, the kind Vauban had enjoyed, from inside his uniform jacket and offered them around the table. All the Jouran officers took one in honour of their former leader, but again the Space Marines declined.

Once the drinks were poured and the cigars lit, Leonid raised his glass, sweeping his eyes around the regimental colours and shields mounted on the wall. So many men had garrisoned this place, so many forgotten heroes. He promised himself that Prestre Vauban would not go unremembered.

'To Castellan Prestre Vauban/ toasted Leonid, raising his glass.

'Castellan Vauban/ repeated the officers, draining their amasec in a single gulp.

Leonid took a draw on the cheroot, coughing as the acrid smoke caught in his throat. A few chuckles greeted his discomfort. They all knew he disapproved of such vices.

'Gentlemen/ began Leonid, grimacing in distaste at the smoking cheroot. 'It has been over three weeks since this siege began, and though it has been hard and we have seen good friends fall, we've given these Chaos scum a bloody nose they'll not forget. Regardless of the eventual outcome of this battle, I want you all to know that you have done all that honour demands and I am proud to have fought beside you/

Indicating the Space Marine on his immediate left, Leonid continued. 'Captain Eshara informs me that the Imperium is now aware of our plight, and that relief is en route to us even as we speak. Captain Eshara expects aid to arrive within-'

'Fifteen to twenty days at the most/ said Eshara, his voice clipped and regal. 'Fortunately, there is an Adeptus Mechanicus astrotelepath way-station less than twenty light years from where we picked up your distress call and naval vessels are within easy reach. The alert code we encrypted in the communique will

ensure swift reaction/

Smiles broke out across the table and hands were shaken in congratulation as Leonid pressed on. Aid is on its way, but in order to maintain discipline I do not want that fact to become common knowledge. When the soldiers ask, tell them only that we are expecting to be relieved, but not when. Make no mistake, the enemy will now be more determined than ever to avenge their defeat in the battery.'

'Your castellan is correct/ said Librarian Corwin, leaning forward and steepling his fingers before him. His face was still drawn and pale from the effort of shielding the Jourans from the Chaotic energies of the war machines.

'The guns you destroyed in the battery were more than simple weapons of war, they were imbued with terrifying daemonic entities, conjured into the machines with the blood of innocents and diabolical pacts made with the Ruinous Powers. The destruction unleashed in the battery will have caused many of those pacts to be broken and the Iron Warriors will need blood to restore them. Our blood.'

'You know a great deal about the Iron Warriors, sir. Is there anything you can tell us that will help us fight them?' asked Piet Anders.

Corwin nodded, saying, 'The Iron Warriors are amongst the most terrible foes the Imperium has ever seen. Once, ten thousand years ago, they were counted amongst the Emperor's most favoured sons, his best and bravest fighters, but they became bitter and twisted as the long wars of the Great Crusade continued, their own desires taking precedence over their duty to the Emperor. When the Great Betrayer, whose cursed name I will not speak, rebelled against our lord and master, the Iron Warriors renounced their oaths of loyalty and joined him in war against the Emperor. Much of the truth of these days has been lost, but what is true is that the Iron Warriors desecrated the holy soil of Terra, using skills honed by constant warfare to breach the walls designed by our holy Primarch, Rogal Dorn.

The biggest mistake you can make is to underestimate the Iron Warriors. Yes, they have suffered a grievous blow with the loss of their daemon engines, but

they will find other ways of striking back at us. And we must be ready for them.'

'Librarian Corwin is correct,' stated Leonid. 'We must do everything we can to be ready for when they come at us again.' He pushed back his chair and stubbed out the cheroot, rising to circle the table with long paces.

We need to get the parapets repaired so we can put men behind them again. We need to remount the guns on the walls as I have no doubt that they are digging fresh trenches towards us even now and I want them hammered every second of every day and every night.'

'I am not sure if we have the ammunition stockpiles to maintain such levels of expenditure, Colonel Leonid,' pointed out Magos Naicin.

Leonid didn't bother to mask his contempt for the magos. 'Naicin, when I want your input I shall ask for it. Understand this: the more powder we burn now, the less blood my men will shed when the final assault comes.'

Turning from the magos, he said, 'I want the platoons in each battalion divided into shifts, six hours on the walls, six hours off. The men are exhausted and I want the soldiers manning the ramparts to be at their best. But drill them hard in manning the walls. When an alert signal is given, I want every soldier on the walls in an instant.'

Anders and Kristan nodded, taking notes on their personal data-slates. Princeps Daekian scribbled one last note before asking, 'What can the Legio do to help?'

Leonid glanced down the table.

'I don't know. What *can* the Legio do?' he growled.

Daekian stood stiffly, clasping his hands behind his back.

'Until the enemy cross the outer walls, not a great deal/ he admitted.

'Then what use are you to me?' snapped Leonid.

Daekian continued smoothly, as though Leonid had not spoken. 'But if the enemy do carry the walls, we can cover your retreat to the inner curtain wall more efficiently/

Seeing Leonid's sceptical look, Daekian smiled grimly, 'Wall-mounted guns can be quickly bracketed and destroyed, believe me. I have two Warhounds left that will not prove so static. Warhounds are not tall enough to be targeted from beyond the walls and will provide the best fire support. The Reavers and the *Honoris Causa* will need to remain behind the curtain wall or they will be destroyed before battle is joined, but they give you a powerful reserve for a counterattack/

Daekian paused before continuing. 'You are a proud man, Castellan Leonid, but I know you are wise enough to see the truth of this. Do not let your anger towards the Legio blind you to the sense of my words.'

The muscles bunched in Leonid's jaw and the colour rose in his cheeks.

Captain Eshara rose to his full height and stepped between the two officers.

'Castellan Leonid, might I interrupt here?'

Leonid nodded and returned to his seat, lacing his hands before him as Eshara circled the meeting table, collecting each officer's marching cane. Each thin, silver-topped cane was a purely ceremonial affectation, carried tight under the left arm by the officers of the regiment during marching drill.

When he had gathered enough of the canes, he returned to stand beside Leonid's chair, handing him one.

'Break it/ he said.

'Why?'

'Indulge me/

Leonid easily snapped the cane in two, placing the splintered wood on the table.

The Space Marine captain handed him another. 'Again/

'I don't see what this has-'

'Do it/ commanded Eshara. Leonid shrugged and snapped the second cane as easily as the first, laying the pieces next to the others. A third cane was broken before Eshara picked up the six pieces lying before the commander of the Jourans. He gathered them in a bundle, bound them together with the twine from the cheroots and handed them to Leonid.

'Now try to break them/ he ordered.

As you wish/ sighed Leonid, gripping the thick bundle and twisting. He grimaced with the strain as he tried to break the pieces, but without success. Eventually he was forced to give up and tossed the unbroken bundle onto the table.

'I cannot/ he admitted.

'No, you cannot/ agreed Eshara, picking up the bundle and placing his hand upon Leonid's shoulders.

'When I look around this room, I see men of courage standing firm in the face of the most dreaded of foes and it fills me with pride. I have fought for longer than any of you have been alive. I have faced enemies of all kinds and fought beside some truly great warriors. I have never been beaten, so listen well. To do battle in the service of the Emperor you must understand that you are part of an unimaginably larger war and that you cannot fight for yourself. That way lies damnation and ruin.

'Together you are stronger than adamantium, but if you do not stand as one, you

will all be broken like these canes. Castellan Vauban knew this. He may have been angry with certain decisions that were made in the past, but he knew not to put his own feelings before the welfare of his command/

Eshara marched to the Jouran regimental flag and lifted it, tracing his finger along the hand-stitched lettering of the embroidered scroll at its base.

'Your regimental motto, Castellan Leonid: *Fortis cadere, cadere non protest.* Tell me what it means/

'It means, "the brave man may fall, but will never yield".'

'Exactly/ said Eshara, pointing down the table. And Magos Naicin, is "Strength through Unity" not one of your order's aphorisms?'

'One of many/ conceded Naicin.

Eshara nodded towards Princeps Daekian. 'Princeps? Your Legio's motto if you please/

'Inveniam viam aut faciam. It means, "I will either find a way, or I shall make one"/

"Very good/ nodded Eshara returning to his seat. 'Do you all understand? I have been here but a short time, but already I see division amongst you. Such petty squabbling must be put aside. There can be no other way/

Leonid looked at the unbroken bundle of canes before him and rubbed his hand across his unshaven jaw before rising to address his men.

'Captain Eshara speaks with a truth and clarity we have lost. Gentlemen, from this moment on, we are a brotherhood united in our holy cause, and I will have words with any man who dares put that brotherhood asunder/

Leonid marched towards the end of the table to stand before Princeps Daekian, who rose from his seat. The Castellan of Hydra Cordatus drew the sword Daekian had given him and bowed as he presented it to its rightful owner.

'I believe this belongs to you/ he said.

Daekian nodded, proffering his hand to Leonid. 'You keep it, Castellan Leonid. It looks better on you. I have another'

'As you wish/ smiled Leonid, scabbarding the sword and accepting Daekian's grip.

The two men shook hands then Leonid rounded the table to face Magos Naicin.

'Magos. Any help you could give us would be gratefully received/

Naicin stood and bowed. 'I am your servant, colonel/

Leonid shook Naicin's gloved hand and nodded his thanks to Captain Eshara.

Perhaps he could hold this brotherhood together after all.

Two

HONSOU KICKED OVER a blasted chunk of rubble. Squatting on his haunches, he picked up a handful of rock dust and let it spill through his mechanical fingers. The new arm pleased him mightily, it was stronger and more robust than his own had been. It had originally belonged to Kortrish, the Warsmith's former champion, and was a physical indication of his master's favour. Honsou was surprised by the Warsmith's sudden favour, since he had equalled, if not exceeded his deeds in the battery many times before.

He was also sure that Forrix must have told the Warsmith how Honsou had failed to kill everyone in his initial attacks and thus was responsible for the destruction unleashed by the torpedo. Since that time Honsou had been unable to

make contact with Goran Delau, and was forced to assume that his second-in-command had failed.

But if that were the case, why then did the Warsmith honour him so?

Perhaps in part it was due to the cleansing presence of the daemon that had briefly possessed his unworthy flesh. Had it stripped away the polluted gene-seed within him in the searing fire of its occupancy, to make him pure? The magnitude of the power he had felt in those fleeting moments had been intoxicating and though he knew it would mean oblivion, he longed for its touch once again. His body was still healing after the daemon's blissful violation and, though he was unsure, he believed he could feel some lingering remnants of its presence within him.

Had the Warsmith also sensed it, recognising a kindred power within him?

Kroeger had been livid and Forrix dangerously quiet following their admonishment by the Warsmith, and Honsou had stayed clear of both captains since then. Kroeger had, unsurprisingly, chosen to vent his frustrations on prisoners, slaking his anger in their bloody entrails. Honsou wondered how long it would be before Kroeger irretrievably descended into madness to become just another faceless berserker.

The Warsmith had then charged Forrix and his warriors with the thankless task of constructing and advancing the final sap. Honsou smiled to himself at the thought of Forrix, commander of the First grand company, labouring in the trenches, a task that had surely been earmarked for Honsou and his impure company.

The trenches were still knee deep in ash, despite the hundreds of slaves working constantly to clear them. Looking around him, he knew there was no way that the siegeworks were going to be at the walls within the ten days the Warsmith had demanded.

The final sap was pushing forward to the head of the central ravelin, but its progress was maddeningly slow. This close to the citadel, the angle of each

zigzag arm of the sap had to be dug in increasingly shallower angles as they came within range of the weapons carried by the soldiers on the walls. Whereas the saps dug forward from the first and second parallels were constructed by piling excavated earth onto the forward edge of the trench, this sap had, by necessity, to be advanced with much more care and sophistication. Most of the surviving slaves (and there were precious few left, thanks to the Imperial torpedo) were digging out what materials and supplies had survived the destruction of Tor Christo back in the campsite, while the Iron Warriors themselves prepared this last sap.

Teams of Iron Warriors inched forwards on their hands and knees under cover of the lumbering sap-rollers, laboriously ramming the excavated earth on the trench's outer face then dragging forward iron palisades to strengthen it. Gangs of specially picked slaves followed behind, deepening the trench and readying the sap for the storming squads. Constructing such a sap was dangerous and tedious work, requiring a great deal of skill and teamwork, since the workers were under constant fire from the citadel's defenders. If the trench had advanced ten metres by nightfall, it was counted a good day's work.

Work parties from Kroeger's company were even now cannibalising every non-essential vehicle for parts to construct more sap-rollers, for the Imperial forces had managed to remount many of their parapet weapons following the attack on the battery. The Imperial guns would hammer each sap-roller with devastating barrages, blowing them apart within hours, and the Iron Warriors had little with which to reply.

The *Dies Irae* pounded the citadel, but its remaining guns were at their maximum range and unless the mighty war-engine could be made mobile again, its usefulness was limited. The remaining two Titans of the Legio Mortis were being kept in reserve until the final assault, though Honsou wondered if the grievous wounding of the *Dies Irae* had broken the nerve of the Legio's warriors.

Even from here, Honsou could see that the ramparts were being quickly repaired, no doubt under the direction of the reviled Imperial Fists. Much as he hated to admit it, the ancient enemy were competent siege engineers and would make

their job all the harder.

Honsou eagerly awaited the final attack. The need to kill Imperial Fists was now his only imperative, and he chafed at the slow speed at which the sap advanced.

Slow though their progress was, Honsou calculated that within three days the sap would be almost at the lip of the citadel's huge ditch, in a position where it could be

branched left and right to form the third parallel. Under normal circumstances, a trench cavalier would be built along the parallel's length, a solid earthwork some three metres high with a parapet that would allow troops manning its firing step to obtain plunging fire into ramparts of the ravelin. This, combined with fire from Vindicator siege tanks and the spider-legged Defilers, should compel the defenders to abandon the ravelin, allowing the attackers to assault the breaches.

But these were not normal circumstances and the unexpected destruction of their siege batteries meant there were no breaches in the walls.

They would need some other way of bringing down the walls if they were to take this citadel. As he turned back towards the camp, it came to him how such a feat could be achieved.

CROUCHED IN A dark part of Kroeger's dugout, Larana Utorian rocked back and forth, her knees tucked up under her chin, her hands clasped over her ears. A red line dribbled down her chin where she had chewed her lip and her thin, wasted frame was malnourished to the point of starvation. Her features were gaunt and sallow and her ribs pushed against her filthy skin beneath the threadbare remains of her uniform jacket.

Kroeger's armour once more hung on its frame, its surfaces slathered in gore.

On the ground before her lay the armoured gauntlet, the fingers curled in a fist, the knuckles caked with pounded-in blood. Her bone knife rested against it, its edge nicked and bloody.

Larana's breathing came in short, hiked gasps. The voice had come again.

Who are you?' she asked, the sound no more than a hoarse whisper. There was no answer and for the briefest second she wondered if she had imagined the hissing voice that had spoken to her.

A nervous laugh built in her throat, but died as the voice came again.

I am all that you want, little one. I feel your hate and it is exquisite.

The voice slithered around her head, seeming to come from all around her, sounding more dead than alive. The horrific voice was composed of many, each overlaying the other, monstrously intertwined with sussurating hoarseness.

Larana whimpered in fear. Looking up at Kroeger's armour she saw a pale nimbus of light building up behind the visor of the helmet. The eyes seemed to be looking straight through her, through her skin, past her bones and organs and into her very soul.

The sense of violation was horrific.

She screwed her eyes shut and wept as the sensation crawled around her mind, teasing open every dark and secret place of her soul.

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the loathsome exploration was done.

Oh yes, you are ripe, little Larana. You have a fecund and inventive hate. You shall he my greatest work...

'Stop speaking to me!' wailed Larana, beating her fists against her head. "What do you want?'

I want to take away your pain if you will but let me. I can make you strong again.

Larana opened her eyes, hope and fear shining in equal measure.

'How? Why?'

i *am done with Kroeger. He has descended to the point where his petty slaughters no longer amuse me. But you, oh you have such hate within you! It smoulders, but I see in you the seeds of an inferno. It will be an age before I tire of you, Larana.*

Almost against her will, her eyes were drawn towards the gauntlet lying on the dusty floor of the dugout. As if sensing her gaze, the fingers of the gauntlet slowly uncurled so that it lay palm up before her.

Go on! I can feel hate oozing from every pore of your flesh. We shall strike back! He is a butcher of men and deserves to die, does he not? I can help you kill him. Is that not what you desire above all else?

'Yes!' snarled Larana, picking up the heavy gauntlet and slipping her hand inside.

CASTELLAN LEONID RESTED his elbows on the parapet of the curtain wall and stifled an exhausted yawn as he watched the men on the walls of the two forward bastions with pride. Under the direction of the Imperial Fists, the ramparts had been rebuilt, fresh entrenchments dug at the necks of the bastions and bomb shelters constructed at the base of the walls. The sense of optimism amongst the soldiers was palpable.

He and Captain Eshara stood on the walls beside the towers flanking the Destiny Gate, looking out over the blasted expanse of the plain before the citadel. Craters and thousands of metres of trenches covered the ground, with bodies and wrecked machines left to rot and rust where they lay. Smoke rose in a constant pall from the camp at the end of the valley and seeing the might of the Iron Warriors like this, Leonid wished he shared his soldiers' optimism.

Despite a fearful hammering from the remounted wall guns, the sap driven forward from the partially collapsed second parallel had come to within fifteen

metres of the edge of the ditch. A fresh scar on the landscape stretched before them, a third parallel running from the flank of Vincare bastion to that of Mori bastion.

'It will not be long, will it?' asked Leonid.

'No, not long/ replied Eshara.

When do you think they will attack?'

'It is difficult to say,' answered Eshara. 'The Iron Warriors never begin an attack until every detail of the assault is in place. There will be a bombardment, feint attacks, diversionary tactics and frontal escalades. Everything will be designed to keep us off balance.'

'I will need you with me when the assault comes, captain.'

'I shall be honoured to fight alongside you.'

'How will they come at us, do you think?'

Eshara considered the question for a moment before replying.

'Without their batteries, it is unlikely that they will try and blast a breach in the walls. All the signs suggest that they will attempt to undermine the walls.'

'They do?'

'Yes. Your forward observers have not reported the construction of batteries, but this parallel is close enough for siege tanks to be deployed behind the earthwork.'

'So why does that suggest the Iron Warriors will be constructing a mine?'

Eshara pointed towards the sap that ran from the second parallel to the third. Plumes of exhaust wreathed the trench in clouds of blue oilsmoke.

'There is an almost constant stream of vehicles travelling back and forth from the forward trench. The trench here is not being widened or extended, yet the earthen rampart they build before it continues to grow. That would suggest that there are mining works being carried out below.'

Leonid swore. He should have noticed that himself. He cursed himself for a fool for not thinking of such a possibility.

'What can we do to stop it?'

'I have begun a series of countermines. One from within a derelict building behind the inner wall and another from within the Primus Ravelin. When they are complete I will fill them with assault troops equipped with auspexes. The troops also have charges for blowing any tunnels they discover and the Adeptus Mechanicus have provided me with an unpleasant surprise for anyone within those tunnels. However, countermining is not an exact science, and we will need to be ready should the Iron Warriors manage to bring down a significant portion of the wall.'

Leonid nodded, watching the activity on the plain with fresh eyes, picturing how the enemy would come at them, and devising counters to meet them.

The citadel's first line of defence was the ditch, six metres deep and thirty wide, in which sat the Primus Ravelin. After crossing the ditch and ravelin, all the while under constant fire from the ramparts, the attackers would have still have to fight their way across the walls.

And if the enemy did manage to carry the walls, then every building within the perimeter of the citadel was a fortress in its own right. From the stores of the Commissariat to the field hospital, each building was equipped with looped windows, armoured entrances, and was capable of offering fire support to those nearby.

But many buildings had taken severe damage already and were continuing to suffer as Arch Magos Amaethon's ability to maintain the shield grew weaker with every passing day.

All the defences needed strengthening, and the men of the Jouran Dragoons worked hand-in-hand with the warriors of the Imperial Fists to make the citadel as impregnable as possible. Eshara and Leonid watched the labours of the soldiers below and were heartened by the sense of shared purpose and camaraderie they saw.

'My compliments, Castellan Leonid, your men do you proud,' observed Eshara, following Leonid's gaze.

'Thank you, captain, we have made fine fellows out of them.'

Yes, it is a pity that war brings out both the best and worst in men/ sighed Eshara.

What do you mean?'

'You have seen combat, Castellan Leonid, you know full well the barbarity soldiers are capable of in the fire of battle. But look around you: the bond of brotherhood that has formed here is something that only soldiers facing death can truly know. Every man and woman here understands that they may be dead soon, and yet they are in fine spirits. They have seen the sun rise, but none know whether they will live to see it set. To know that and make peace with it is a rare gift.'

'I don't know that many soldiers would appreciate that.'

'Probably not on a conscious level, no/ agreed Eshara, 'but on a level they may not even be aware of, they do. They fear death, but only by facing it can they truly find their courage/

Leonid smiled. 'You are a remarkable man, Captain Eshara/

'No/ said Eshara, without hint of false modesty. 'I am a Space Marine. I have trained my whole life to fight the Emperor's enemies. I have the finest weapons, armour and faith in the galaxy. It is of no matter to me who I fight; I know I shall be triumphant. I say this without arrogance, but there are few foes in this galaxy that can stand before the might of the Adeptus Astartes.'

In any other person, Leonid would have said Eshara's words were arrogant, but he had seen him fight in the battery and knew that the Space Marine captain spoke the truth.

'I know I can defeat any foe/ continued Eshara, 'but your soldiers have no such knowledge, yet still they stand, knowing the enemy is superior to them. They are true heroes and will not fail you.'

'I know that/ said Leonid.

'Speaking of which, have you been able to raise your man Hawke yet?' asked Eshara, looking towards the mountains.

Leonid frowned and shook his head. 'No, not yet. Magos Beauvais lost contact with Hawke just before the torpedo launched. Once the Adeptus Mechanicus got over their pique at having been kept out of the loop on that one, they went over the recordings and filtered the last few seconds through their cogitators. It seems that there was gunfire just before the signal was lost.'

'So you think Hawke is dead?'

'Yes, I believe he is/ nodded Leonid. 'Even if his attackers didn't kill him, the torpedo's engines would have/

'A shame/ noted Eshara. 'I think I would have liked to meet Guardsman Hawke. He sounds like a most heroic individual/

Leonid smiled. 'Had anyone used the words "Hawke" and "heroic" in the same sentence a month ago, I would have laughed at them/

'An unlikely hero then?'

'The unlikeliest/ agreed Leonid.

FORRIX SWEATED INSIDE his armour, the heat and choking air of these tunnels an anathema to him after the planet's surface. The floor of the tunnel sloped down at a steep angle, rough-hewn steps leading into the sweltering depths of the mine. The red rock of this planet held the day's heat in a miser's grip, releasing it as night fell in baking waves. Scores of slaves had died of heat exhaustion already, but the tunnel was making swift progress.

Galleries already branched to either side of the main tunnel. Lined with explosives to blow the lip of the ditch, they would allow the attackers to descend into it. Beyond these branches, the tunnel dipped more steeply in order to pass under the ditch, where the drilling rigs pushed towards the main curtain wall. Once this tunnel was complete, further galleries would be constructed beneath a sizeable length of the wall's foundations and a vast quantity of explosives detonated to bring it crashing down.

Like the construction of the third parallel, it was dirty, thankless work and brought little glory to its builders. Forrix knew he was being punished, and the knowledge that his punishment was unjustified was a twisting knife in his gut. He had watched Honsou strutting around with the bionic arm that had once belonged to Kortrish, swaggering in his new-found favour. Did he not realise that it had been him, Forrix, who had nurtured his ambition, kept him hungry to prove himself? And this was how he was repaid, forced to toil like a slave, a

beast. He, the captain of the First grand company, labouring in the depths of a mine!

How could things have reversed so suddenly? Less than a week ago, he had been pre-eminent in the Warsmith's eyes; credited with the swift capture of Tor Christo and honoured with the direction of the advancing saps and parallels. No matter that Kroeger had allowed the daemon engines to be destroyed! No matter that Honsou's incompetence had allowed the Imperials to launch an orbital torpedo at them.

With the Warsmith on the brink of greatness, being stuck down here was the very last place he needed to be.

Jharek Kelmaur had confessed the truth of the matter after the debacle in the battery. Forrix had gone to the sorcerer's tent with murder in his heart and stormed in, his power fist sheathed in lethal energies. He had lifted the shocked magicker from his feet and thrown him across his alchemist's table, where a bound figure writhed in gurgling pleasure.

'You knew!' stormed Forrix. 'You knew the Imperial Fists would come to this place. You knew and you did not tell us.'

Kelmaur picked himself up and rounded on Forrix, his hands spreading with the beginnings of a sorcererous incantation. Forrix smashed his fist into Kelmaur's belly, doubling him up, and lifted him from his feet.

'Do not waste your cantrips on me, sorcerer,' sneered Forrix, hurling Kelmaur to the ground and squatting beside him. He wrapped his gauntlet around Kelmaur's neck and bunched his power fist above the sorcerer's head, poised to pound his skull to destruction.

'You knew the Imperial Fists would come, did you not?'

'No! I swear!'

'You are lying to me, Kelmaur/ snapped Forrix. 'I saw the look on your face when you told the Warsmith that the defenders had not managed to send a warning. You lied to him, didn't you? There was a warning given, wasn't there?'

'No!' wailed Kelmaur. Forrix slammed his power fist into Kelmaur's face, deactivating the energy field at the last second. Kelmaur's nose broke and he spat bloody teeth.

'Do not lie to me again or I will keep the fist active next time/ warned Forrix.

'I did not... know exactly, but I feared there had been a signal sent. It was so weak I knew it could not have left the system and believed that no one would hear it/

'But someone did, didn't they?'

'So it seems, but I took steps to try and prevent any intervention/

'What steps?'

'I despatched the *Stonebreaker* to the system jump point to intercept any reinforcements/

Forrix groaned at Kelmaur's foolishness. 'And it never occurred to you that this might well have allowed them to approach the planet in the first place? Your stupidity is galling/

Forrix released the sorcerer and shook his head. 'Answer me this then, Kelmaur. Why are we here? Why does the Warsmith bid us attack this place? What drives us towards this citadel with such haste and, more importantly, what is happening to the Warsmith?'

The sorcerer did not answer immediately and Forrix reactivated his power fist. Kelmaur squirmed away, but not quickly enough. The Iron Warrior gripped his robes and dragged him to his feet.

'Speak!'

'I dare not!'

'You will tell me or you will die. Decide now/ snarled Forrix, drawing back his fist.

'Gene-seed!' wailed Kelmaur, the words tumbling from his lips in a desperate rush. 'This citadel is a secret bastion of the Adeptus Mechanicus. They store and monitor the purity of the Adeptus Astartes' gene-seed here. There is a laboratorium hidden beneath the citadel with enough genetic material to create legions of Space Marines! The Despoiler had given the task of its capture to the Warsmith in return for his ascension. If we are successful, the Warsmith ascends to daemonhood! If we fail, he will be destroyed, reduced to the mindless horror of spawndom, cursed to live forever as a writhing, mutated monstrosity/

Forrix lowered Kelmaur as the implications of such a prize sank in.

Gene-seed. The most precious resource in the galaxy. With such a prize, there would be no limit to the Despoiler's power and his Black Crusades would carve a new empire from the ashes of the Imperium. The scale of such a vision astounded even Forrix's jaded senses.

Daemonhood! To become a creature of almost limitless potential, with the power of the warp to call your own; to be able to mould reality to your own ends and become master of a million souls. Such a prize was worth any cost and Forrix now understood the Warsmith's all-consuming need to break into the citadel. And if that meant sacrificing every warrior here to achieve those ends, then that was a small price to pay for immortality.

Such a prize would be worth risking everything for. To travel in realms beyond the ken of mortal men, where nothing was denied and every possibility could be played out

was a dream Forrix could well understand. His flinty gaze locked with Kelmaur's.

'Tell no one what you have told me, or the Warsmith shall hear of your folly'

'He would not believe you/ whined Kelmaur.

'That is irrelevant. If the Warsmith even suspects you have deceived him, he will kill you. You know this to be true/ promised Forrix, stalking from the tent.

Now, deep in the dim tunnels below the planet's surface, Forrix watched as a gang of emaciated slaves dragged back another load of excavated soil. The tunnel was advancing and soon the Iron Warriors would be inside the citadel.

Forrix smiled, picturing the limitless possibilities ahead of him.

LARANA UTORIAN WATCHED as Kroeger placed his helmet on the iron frame and stood naked before her. His body was a mass of scar tissue, his slab-like muscles powerful and well-defined. But she had a sense of diminishment, a sense that without his armour he was somehow less terrifying.

His voice was dull and lethargic, and as always after his slaughters, his movements were sluggish, as though bloated with the blood he had consumed in his butcheries.

She kept her hand tucked within her jacket, its flesh pink and raw where she had worn the gauntlet. The skin still burned with the sensations that had wracked her body as renewing fire seared her from the inside out. Already, she felt her strength returning.

New flesh filled her, monstrous vitality pulsing through every fibre of her being, strength coursing along every artery and vein. Her heart pumped with power and she saw with a clarity she had never experienced before.

The sense of impending revenge was intoxicating and she had to keep the excitement from her face as Kroeger sullenly bade her once more clean his armour. He stumbled towards a corner of the dugout and collapsed into blood-gorged unconsciousness.

Larana calmly approached the corrupted armour, feeling its soundless call. She smiled as she felt its silent approval and removed the gauntlet she had first worn; lifting it to her lips and sucking on the fingers, tasting the blood and feeling its power suffuse her.

Yes, the blood is the power, it fills you, drives you. It carries your passions, your lusts, your hate and your future. Only the blood can save you.

Larana nodded, the words making complete sense to her. She could see clearly now. To survive, she must look to whatever power offered her a chance to exact her revenge.

She thrust her hand into the gauntlet, throwing her head back in rapture as power flooded her limbs, hot and urgent. The skin of her arm stretched as muscle tissue grew and swelled, layering upon her bones with grotesque speed.

Yes! Yes! Now the rest and our bargain will be sealed...

Piece by piece, Larana removed Kroeger's armour from its frame, donning each piece without conscious thought. Though designed for a warrior far larger than her, each portion fitted her exactly. Strength poured through her and Larana laughed as her body swelled with terrible power.

As each piece adhered to her body, she felt the armour become more and more part of her, its undulating inner surfaces moulding to her own body, dark tendrils of energy pushing inside her.

Deep within Larana, a tiny voice screamed in warning, but it was lost in the howling gale of powerful change that remoulded her. It shrieked to her of the price to be paid for such abominable gifts, but consumed with hate, Larana pushed it aside.

One last step, Larana. One last bargain to be made. You must give me all, hold nothing back. Your soul must be mine and then we shall be one. We shall become the Avatar of Khorne!

Larana lifted the grinning, skull-masked helm and slowly lowered it over her head.

'Yes/ she hissed. 'Take it all. I am yours...'

And the warning voice within Larana was pushed to the lid of her creaking skull as the Armour of Khorne claimed her.

Her last act as a human being was to scream as for one terrifying instant she realised the scale of the mistake she had just made.

KROEGER WOKE SUDDENLY, a scream dying on his lips as he rose from a dreamless void, terrifying in the oblivion it promised. His breath came in short, dry heaves and it took long seconds before he could remember where he was. Dim light filtered **into** the **dugout** from the doorway, and Kroeger was suddenly struck by a sense of something deeply wrong.

He pushed himself to his feet and padded through to the entrance of his dugout. Shadows coiled and his belief that there was something amiss grew to a raging certainty. He reached for his sword, his fury growing as he saw that it was missing. Had the little human bitch taken it? She would pay for such a transgression with her life.

Suddenly Kroeger became aware that he was not alone in the dugout and he turned around slowly. There was a gloom here that was not wholly natural and he squinted, trying to make sense out of what he saw before him. His armour stood where he had left it, but there was something different... It took him several seconds before he realised what.

There was someone wearing it. And they carried his sword.

'Whoever you are, you are dead/ promised Kroeger.

The intruder shook its head. 'No, Kroeger, you are. We grow weary of you, and have no more need of you.'

Kroeger started as he recognised the voice. But it was impossible. It could not be her, not that weak snivelling human.

She would pay for such impudence. He launched himself forward, club-like fists raised to strike her down. The woman swayed aside, slashing the sword across his flank, the blade biting a hand's-breadth into his flesh. Kroeger roared, blood washing in a crimson flood from his body.

Before he could recover, the sword struck again, ripping through his belly and spilling his looping guts to the earthen floor of the dugout. Kroeger dropped to his knees, a pleading look in his eyes. The sword came at him again and he vainly raised his hands to ward off the blows.

The armoured warrior spared him no mercy, hacking him into pieces. First came his hands, then his arms. Kroeger flopped onto his back, amidst his severed limbs and pooling blood as the woman knelt astride him and cast aside the sword.

With deliberate slowness, the warrior removed the helmet and Kroeger coughed thick gobbets of blood as he saw the reborn face of Larana Utorian.

Gone was the terrified woman he had tortured these long weeks, and in its place was a twisted face, devoid of pity or mercy. A face so full of hate that it chilled him to the very core of his being.

She raised her arms high above her head, a dulled bone knife gripped in both hands.

The thing that had once been Larana Utorian plunged the knife through Kroeger's eye socket and into his brain, stabbing again and again until there was nothing left of her tormentor's skull but a pulverised mass of shattered bone and matter.

FORRIX CONSULTED A dust-covered data-slate, checking on the position of the mine, content it was following the correct path. The tunnel had traversed beneath

the ditch and he expected to be under the walls within the hour. He stepped over the corpse of a slave and watched the activity on the rockface before him. The drilling rigs could not work this close to the wall for fear of Imperial detection and so gangs of slaves worked with cloth-wrapped picks and shovels to extend the tunnel.

Human soldiers guarded the slaves with barbed cudgels and electro-prods. It was a pleasing irony that these fools were precipitating their own species' downfall.

Satisfied that all was proceeding as planned, Forrix made his way back along the hot tunnel, pushing past teams of cowering slaves. He passed various galleries and blind passages designed to disguise the true direction of their attack from the Imperial sappers.

Iron props supported the roof of the tunnel and sound absorbent mats were laid along its length. Forrix was taking no chances that this tunnel might be discovered, though he knew that the enemy must be aware of the tunnelling operation. There was always the chance the Imperials might discover it through blind luck.

Forrix had prayed they would not and that his successful demolition of a portion of the curtain wall would restore his master's favour.

He had not seen the Warsmith since the destruction of the batteries. The lord of the Iron Warriors had retreated within his pavilion and had allowed only Jharek Kelmaur into his presence. He didn't know whether the Warsmith was aware of Kelmaur's folly, but he fully intended that he would learn of it. The idea of the sorcerer's downfall was only marginally more appealing to him than Honsou's. Why the Warsmith had allowed the half-breed to live after Forrix had told him that it was Honsou's failure that had cost them the guns on Tor Christo was a mystery to him.

Thinking of Honsou brought his anger to the fore again, and he vowed the ungrateful half-breed would pay in blood for his usurping of Forrix in the Warsmith's favour.

Consumed with resentment, Forrix almost didn't hear the noises from the rockface until it was too late. Screams and the crash of stone startled him from his bitter reverie and he threw aside the data-slate as he realised what was happening.

He grabbed the nearest soldier, shouting, 'Go to the surface and send warning. The tunnel is under attack!'

Forrix dropped the terrified soldier, who scrambled away from the giant Terminator and sprinted back along the tunnel in panic. Forrix heard the crack of gunfire and screams echoing through the mine and activated his power fist, the crackling blue arcs of energy throwing the darkness of the tunnel into stark relief.

The rapid firing of automatic weapons grew louder as he strode through the tunnel, combi-bolter at the ready. A group of human soldiers ran towards him, dropping their electro-prods and clubs as they ran in terror from the rockface. Throngs of slaves fled alongside them. Forrix shot them down in a hail of bolts, stepping over their shredded bodies as he fought his way forward.

Ahead, he saw five figures in yellow power armour beneath a hole blasted in the cavern roof, standing in a ring of dead bodies. Two Space Marines were advancing towards him, while the others prepared explosives to bring down the tunnel before it could reach the citadel's wall. Forrix opened fire before they saw him, the sound of his weapon deafening in such a confined space. One Imperial Fist dropped, a series of red craters torn in his breastplate.

Ricochets blew out the glow-globes, sputtering light casting lunatic shadows over the tunnel walls. The second Space Marine dropped into a crouch and returned fire with his bolt pistol. The impacts hammered against Forrix's breastplate, but Terminator armour had been designed for just this kind of close-quarters fighting and not a single bolt could penetrate the thick armour.

Forrix shot again, swinging his power fist. The warrior ducked and rolled aside, Forrix's blow smashing apart an iron prop and pulverising a huge section of wall. Rock and dust filled the air as he rounded on his opponent. The Imperial Fist

drew a sword, its blade wreathed in amber fire, but the tunnel was too cramped to wield it effectively.

Forrix batted aside the blade and pistoned his fist through the warrior's chest, smashing his ribcage and ripping out his heart and lungs. He pushed aside the bloody corpse, stepping into the main gallery and spraying the Imperial Fists with bolter fire. One man dropped, blood washing down his thigh as the others dived for cover. Bolter fire blasted the rock around him and pounded his armour.

Somehow a bolt found its way through his shoulder guard and blood started to pour from a wound in his arm. He roared in anger and emptied the remainder of his bolter's magazine into the nearest Imperial Fist, the snap of the hammer dropping on an empty chamber shockingly loud in the cramped tunnel.

Behind him, Forrix could hear the shouts of approaching soldiers. His bolter empty, he pulled back the arming slide on his combi-weapon's other armament fixture.

The last Space Marine rose from his cover and opened fire, hosing Forrix with bullets. Forrix rocked under the impacts, bringing his weapon to bear and fired the underslung melta gun. The white-hot blast of superheated air punched into the Imperial Fist, incinerating his torso with a hissing detonation, the oxygen-rich blood in his body flashing to a stinking red steam.

A pile of armoured limbs and a head - all that remained of the Space Marine - clattered to the floor, the gory stumps cauterised and molten. Forrix dropped his weapon and swept up a fallen bolter as red-clad human soldiers raced to join him from the surface.

Suddenly, Forrix caught the stench of something vile from the opening in the cavern roof and realised he had to get out of here. He turned from the rockface and ran past the startled soldiers without a word. He ran as fast as he could back towards the surface, but as he heard the roaring thunder behind him, he realised he wouldn't make it in time.

Forrix lurched left into one of the deception tunnels. He heard screams from

behind him and knew that every soldier down here was a dead man. The roaring grew louder, magnified by the closeness of the walls.

Forrix continued down the side tunnel, ducking round a bend as the first rush of chemicals swept towards him.

A tidal wave of poisoned chemical waste thundered through the tunnels, diverted from every culvert, septic tank, latrine and night-soil pipe in the citadel. Forrix had smelled the reek of the waste and the acrid tang of the bio-toxins. He clung onto the rough walls as the foul, liquid effluent roared through the tunnels, sweeping all before it.

Men were crashed to death against the rocky walls as the vile solution pummelled them, filling the tunnels with excremental fluids. Those not killed by the first tidal wave were drowned or poisoned in the toxic waste as it rose to the ceiling, shorting out the remaining glow-globes and snuffing them out one by one.

Sheltered from the worst of the flood in the side tunnel, Forrix hung on as the grey-brown sludge sloshed around him, rising higher with each second until he was immersed in the thick tide. He knew he was in no danger, his armour was proof against the hard vacuum of space and it had suffered worse fates than this in its long life.

How far up the tunnel the flood of liquid would reach, Forrix had no idea, but guessed it could not be too far. To effectively flood the tunnels, this amount of waste would have had to have been diluted with much of the garrison's drinking water. Perhaps, believing their salvation had arrived in the shape of the Imperial Fists, the defenders thought they could afford to be cavalier with their water supplies.

A few minutes passed before the tunnel began to drain. The Imperials' plan had failed. Forrix had built scores of such mines and had had more lethal substances than toxic waste flooded through many of them. Drainage channels diverted much of the water into specially constructed flood chambers and the natural dryness of the soil absorbed a great deal of moisture. The tunnel would survive,

but there would need to be additional props installed to keep it from subsequently collapsing. Such work would need to be carried out by the Iron Warriors, since these toxins would remain lethal for many hundreds of years. But to warriors in power armour, they were irrelevant.

Forrix shook his helmet clear of thick sludgy deposits and waded back through the waste-filled darkness to the main tunnel, knowing what must happen next. Bones crunched beneath his heavy tread as he stepped on drowned corpses. The toxic waste was draining rapidly. As he made his way back to the rockface he checked the action of the bolter, clearing it of obstructions.

Up ahead he could see beams of light stabbing down into the cavern from the hole in the roof and heard the first splash of something heavy drop from above. The darkness of the tunnel was no impairment to Forrix, and he saw an Imperial Fist rise to his feet. The Space Marine moved swiftly through the knee-deep sludge towards the tunnel mouth.

Forrix shot him in the head as more Imperial Fists dropped to the cavern floor, spreading out as the echo of his shot faded. Bullets hammered the rock around him and ricocheted from his armour. He raised the bolter and swept its

fire around the cavern, gunning down Space Marines as he backed into the relative safety of the tunnel where the enemy could not bring their superior numbers to bear. If they wanted to kill him, they were going to have to come and dig him out.

Shapes darted across the opening and he fired at each one as it presented itself. Forrix laughed as he killed, spraying the tunnel mouth with bolter fire. Muzzle flashes lit up the Stygian darkness as gunfire blasted from the walls of the tunnel. He felt sharp pain in his side and shoulder as more bolts impacted on his armour. As mighty as Terminator armour was, it could still be brought down by sheer volume of fire.

The bolter he carried clicked empty and he dropped it into the effluent, reactivating his power fist as two Imperial Fists rushed him. He killed the first with a mighty punch to the head, and the second with a reverse stroke that tore

out his throat.

Another two warriors charged. Forrix roared in battle fury as he felt the blade of a crackling sword rip through his armour, between his ribs and into his primary heart. Angrily he slammed his fist down across the blade, wrenching it from the Space Marine's grip before removing his arm with a backhanded blow. He shoulder charged the other warrior, crushing his helmet against the tunnel wall before disembowelling the armed Space Marine with his power fist.

Gunfire hammered him and he felt the bone shield within his chest cavity crack as a bolter shell exploded within the ceramite plates of his armour. He dropped to his knees as the Imperial Fist closed the gap, firing as he advanced. Forrix tore out the sword protruding from his chest and hacked the warrior's legs out from under him, pitching him face-first into the waste matter.

He pulled himself to his feet as more bullets hammered him. A grenade splashed next to him and he hurled himself back as it detonated. Muffled by the water, the blast threw up a spray of liquid and debris, but its lethal force was spent and he was unharmed.

He rose to his knees as another Imperial Fist charged him. A bolt took Forrix high on the temple, blasting a portion of his helmet clear and blood streamed down his face. Something slammed into his visor, ripping the helmet from his head. He felt his jawbone shatter. Bright lights burst before his eyes and he splashed backwards into the water, gagging as the liquid waste poured into his nose and open mouth.

The toxins seared his eyes and blistered his skin in seconds. He lashed out with his fist, feeling it connect with something solid, and scrambled back, lifting his head from the slime. He spat a froth of viscous matter, retching as his body fought against the toxins he had ingested.

He blinked through the searing pain in his eyes, battling to focus as something came towards him. He punched out blindly, but missed and bellowed in pain as he felt the wide blade of another sword pierce his chest, tear through his lungs and burst through the backplate of his armour.

He gripped the sword blade and kicked out, hearing something splinter and a cry of pain. Blindly, he groped in the swirling, bloody water, feeling something thrashing in front of him. Forrix roared and smashed his power fist down upon the shape, breaking it apart in a flurry of crushing blows. His chest burned with hot agony as his secondary heart and multi-lung fought to keep him alive despite the massive traumas his body had suffered.

He heard more shouts behind him, but he had lost all sense of direction in his blindness. Rescuers or killers?

'Iron within!' he bellowed, raising his power fist, the pain in his chest more intense now.

'Iron without!' came the answering shout and Forrix lowered his arm as the warriors of his company swept past him. He heard echoes of bolter fire and roars of hatred, but they seemed to be growing more and more distant with each passing second.

Forrix tried to climb to his feet, but his strength was gone and he could not move.

A tremendous, deafening explosion shook the tunnel. Rocks fell from above him and orange flames briefly lit up the battle-scarred tunnel walls.

He sagged forward, supporting his broken body on shaking arms.

He heard the victory chant of the Iron Warriors coming from somewhere that seemed impossibly far away.

Only then did Forrix allow his elbows to buckle, collapsing him to the tunnel's floor.

IN THE DAYS following the abortive attack on the Iron Warriors' tunnel system, the morale of the citadel's garrison slumped as it became obvious that nothing they could do would prevent the mine from reaching the walls. Another assault was

mounted through the countermine in the Primus Ravelin, but it was repulsed with heavy losses by a strong tunnel guard that never left the mine workings.

Forrix was carried back to his dugout, where he was attended by the Warsmith's Chirumeks. The master of the Iron Warriors made it very clear that their survival was directly linked to that of his war-captain.

While Forrix healed, Honsou volunteered to take over supervision of the mining operations. Kroeger had not emerged from his dugout for days and Honsou wondered what new blood-madness now possessed him. The Imperial Fists had explosively sealed their countermines when it had become obvious that their attacks could not succeed. Once the damage done by the sally had been repaired, the undermining works progressed once more.

Siege tanks now moved up through the saps towards the third parallel, taking their positions in the heavily fortified earthwork. Day and night, trucks laden with shells for these iron behemoths would make the dangerous trip from the campsite, depositing the ordnance in newly constructed and heavily armoured magazines.

Observers watched as embrasures were cut in the earthworks, the soil left in place until such time as the tanks were ready to unleash their firepower against the defenders.

Fresh trenches were dug backwards from the third parallel, equipped with smaller parallels where huge numbers of soldiers could muster, ready to hurl themselves at the walls.

A sense of dread began to permeate the garrison, despite the officers' attempts to raise spirits and boost morale. The sheer scale of the assault soon to be unleashed upon them preyed upon the minds of even the most determined Imperial defenders.

Three days after the attack on the tunnels a terrible rumbling rocked the walls of the citadel, like the beginnings of an earthquake. The ground beneath the fortress heaved upwards and cracks split the roadways throughout the inner walls.

Along the edge of the ditch, a huge wall of fire and smoke leapt upwards as explosives planted there blasted its crest apart, scattering rubble into the ditch and providing a means for infantry to descend into it.

But barely had the dust settled when an explosion of far greater magnitude shook the ground. Wide galleries that ran underneath the curtain wall linking the Destiny Gate and the right flank of the Mori bastion collapsed as vast quantities of ordnance detonated and vaporised huge swathes of the wall's foundations.

The centre section of the great wall groaned as it sagged, the noise swelling as a giant crack split the curtain wall, the sound like a deafening gunshot. Officers shouted at their men to clear the walls, but for many it was already too late as the sixty-metre high wall slid ponderously into the ground, huge chunks of rockcrete shearing away and tumbling into the ditch. Hundreds of men were carried to their deaths and vast clouds of dust billowed skywards.

As more of the wall fell, the speed of its collapse increased exponentially, whole sections of the ramparts toppling into the ditch. The scale of the destruction was incredible and it seemed inconceivable that such a mighty edifice could be so thoroughly annihilated.

By the time the collapse had ceased, almost the entire centre of the wall had been brought down. A great breach some thirty metres wide had been torn in the curtain wall, the rubble from the wall's destruction forming a debris slope that ran from the floor of the ditch to the crest of the breach.

The Iron Warriors had broken open the citadel.

STORM OF IRON

One

As THE GREAT wall came crashing down into the ditch, a swelling roar burst from the thousands of Iron Warriors' human soldiers who went over the top of their trenches and charged the citadel. Despite the pleas from his officers, Leonid

stood on the rubble at the crest of the breach, his power sword and bolt pistol drawn. His bronze breastplate shone like new and his uniform was freshly pressed and immaculate. Brother-Captain Eshara stood alongside him, twin swords gripped tightly in his gauntlets.

Leonid felt the fury of the enemy soldiers strike him like a blow and its intensity stunned him.

'They hate us so/ he whispered to himself. 'Why?'

'They are heretics and hate all that is good/ stated Eshara in a voice that brooked no argument. The Space Marine captain swung his arms, loosening his shoulder muscles and rotating his neck.

The guns of Mori bastion opened fire and a second later were joined by those in the Primus Ravelin. Hundreds of soldiers were scythed down in the murderous crossfire, their bodies torn apart in a hail of shells and lasers.

The first wave was almost completely annihilated, but thousands more followed, spilling down into the ditch and swarming across the rubble-strewn ground.

The floor of the ditch heaved upwards, obscuring the attackers in fire and shrapnel, as anti-personnel mines exploded and gouged bloody holes in the charging horde. The ditch became a blood-soaked killing ground as soldiers died in their hundreds, blown apart by mines or shot from the walls. A few hardy souls managed to climb to the top of the ravelin where they were brutally hacked down by Guardsmen with long-bladed poleaxes. The noise of gunfire, screams and the clash of steel on steel echoed from the valley sides as the slaughter continued.

More mines exploded. As some bloodied survivors managed to push themselves through to the rubble slopes of the breach, they found themselves facing a barbed and spiked barricade of twisted girders hurled from above.

The attack floundered at the base of the breach, the ditch carpeted with bodies and blood. In the re-entrant angle of the Mori bastion, where the arrowhead

shape of the bastion narrowed before rejoining the main wall, Leonid had placed cannons armed with shells filled with ballbearings, bolts and metal fragments. The first cannon fired, the shell bursting apart as it left the muzzle and spraying lethal fragments in an expanding cone. The remaining cannons fired seconds later and the attackers at the base of the breach were snatched away in the bloody storm, torn to ribbons by the guns' discharge.

Leonid shouted a warning to Major Anders in the Primus Ravelin, as the sheer volume of soldiers flooding the ditch finally managed to sweep around the flanks of the V-shaped outwork. But Piet Anders was ready for them, leading his warriors in a furious counter-charge. Battle was joined within the ravelin as the men of the Jouran Dragoons crashed into the disordered mob of soldiers, chopping them down with swords and bludgeoning them with rifle butts. Major Anders hacked a bloody path through the attackers with his blade, the ensigns bearing his colours fighting to keep up with the officer, killing anyone who came near.

The battle for the walls of the ravelin became fiercer as a giant of a man with a huge axe gained its ramparts. Huge and fat, his reach was long and he killed anyone that stood against him. Enemy soldiers bunched around the man, beginning to fan out along the ramparts in a fighting wedge that would allow yet more warriors to climb to the ramparts.

Leonid watched in desperation as the giant slaughtered the ravelin's defenders until a squad of Imperial Fists on the eastern wall counterattacked. A volley of grenades blasted a hole in the wedge and the squad's sergeant shot the axe-wielding giant dead, blasting his head from his shoulders with his plasma pistol. The defenders rallied and pushed the last of the enemy from the walls. Leonid let out the breath he hadn't realised he was holding.

The carnage below was terrible. The scale of such killing in so short a time was incredible. But despite the death-toll, the soldiers in red kept coming at the walls until every square metre of the ditch was covered in blood or bodies.

'They are brave, I'll give them that/ said Leonid, watching as another enemy soldier was shot dead as he clambered across the barricades below.

'No,' snapped Eshara, raising his voice to be heard over the din of battle. 'They are not brave. Do not ever give voice to such thoughts, Castellan. These traitors are heretics and know nothing of notions such as bravery and honour. They keep coming at our walls to die because they fear the wrath of their masters more than us. Push such thoughts from your mind. You must not allow yourself to identify with this scum in any way, lest you find pity staying your hand and pay with your life for that moment of laxity'

Leonid nodded and returned his gaze to the massacre below. 'What purpose is served here?' he asked. 'They will never gain a foothold on the walls like this. It is madness.'

'They gain a clearer understanding of our defences, explode our minefields and clog the walls with dead/

'Why don't the Iron Warriors come, damn them?'

'Do not worry, Castellan, you will get your chance to fight the Iron Warriors, but you may soon regret that wish.'

'Perhaps/ said Leonid, watching as a dozen soldiers managed to survive long enough to traverse the barricades below and begin scrambling up the breach. To either side of him, his platoon waited, rifles aimed in a line down the breach. Leonid swept down his sword and shouted, 'Fire!'

Thirty rifles fired in a perfect volley and the enemy were blasted backwards, flopping like boneless puppets as they cartwheeled down the breach.

For a further three bloody hours the enemy threw themselves at the wall before pulling back at some unheard signal, leaving over two and a half thousand men dead in the ditch. Not a single traitor had managed to climb the breach.

A hoarse cheer followed the traitors back to their lines as the weary Guardsmen hurled enemy corpses from the walls of the ravelin, and orderlies rushed from posterns in the Destiny Gate to carry back the wounded.

'Well, we survived/ said Leonid.

'That was just the beginning/ promised Eshara.

CAPTAIN ESHAKA'S WORDS were to prove prophetic, as the soldiers of the Iron Warriors launched another two assaults on the walls. Thousands more died in the nightmare hell of the ditch, shelled to bloody rags, shot or blown apart by mines. On three occasions, the Primus Ravelin almost fell, but Piet Anders and the Space Marines managed to rally the defenders every time and take back the walls just when everything seemed lost.

Flanking fire from the face of the Mori bastion swept the face of the ravelin clear of attackers and as night fell on the first day of the escalade, Leonid guessed that some five thousand enemy soldiers lay dead in the citadel's ditch. The preliminary butcher's bill amongst his own men for today's fighting was estimated to be a hundred and eighty dead, with perhaps twice that seriously wounded. Of these wounded, perhaps a third would not fight again.

The Iron Warriors could afford to suffer such horrendous loss of life without fear, but Leonid could not.

Even if the Jourans could keep up such an impressive kill-ratio, the Iron Warriors would inevitably wear them down. Leonid knew he could not allow this battle to become one of attrition.

Under cover of darkness, he and Eshara descended from the walls, leaving the citadel through the Destiny Gate's postern and making their way to the Primus ravelin. Here they found Major Anders, his face blood and sweat stained, sitting with his men drinking a mug of caffeine.

'You've done well, men/ called Leonid. 'Damn well/

The soldiers beamed with pride at their commander's words.

'But tomorrow will be just as hard, and I'll need your very best/

'We won't let you down, sir/ said a soldier from the ramparts above.

Leonid raised his voice and said, 'I know you won't, son. You're doing fine here, and I'm damn proud of you. You've shown these curs what it means to take on the 383rd!'

The soldiers cheered as Leonid turned to Piet Anders and shook his hand.

'Nice work, Piet, but watch your left flank/ he cautioned. 'With the breach on that side, we can't bring enough guns to bear and more of the enemy are getting around it/

Anders saluted. 'Aye, sir, I'll keep an eye out/

Leonid nodded, confident in his officer's ability to hold the ravelin. He returned Anders' salute before he and Eshara returned to the citadel.

They visited Vincare bastion, the curtain wall, the breach and Mori bastion, heaping praise on the soldiers and exhorting them with tales of valour from the other sections of the citadel. Each body of men vowed to outdo the others, and by the time Leonid returned to his temporary billet in the gate towers he was exhausted and a little light headed from the amount of amasec his men had forced upon him.

He lay down on his simple pallet bed and fell into a dreamless sleep.

*

Two

JHAREK KELMAUR CLIMBED the blasted mountain of Tor Christo, picking his way confidently across the rubble, despite the darkness. His head scanned from side to side, as though searching for something, while a red-robed figure followed behind him, hands clasped beneath its robes and head bowed. The robed figure's physique was swollen and disproportionate, with broad shoulders, grossly

misshapen arms and a barrel chest.

The sorcerer crested a ridge of jagged rock and scanned the ground before him. His tattooed skull bobbed as he hunted for something within the wreckage of the mountain. Something that, for now, eluded him.

'It should be here/ he muttered to himself, withdrawing a tattered scroll, its gold lettering faded and almost illegible. His frustration was growing and he knew he did not have much time left. His vision had promised him a hidden chamber beneath the rock of Tor Christo, so where was it? He descended into a huge crater of loose stone and scarred rock, his footing sure even through the black night and rough ground.

His silent companion dutifully followed him, its footsteps surprisingly heavy for a being of such mass.

The moonlight pooled around the curious pair, bathing them in vermilion light. Kelmaur circled the crater with increasing desperation. Behind him, the robed figure stopped abruptly and lifted its head to stare directly towards a huge slab of rock, toppled from the mountain and lying flush with the blasted rockface.

Without any word to Kelmaur, the figure strode across the crater towards the rock, halting ten metres from the slab.

Jharek Kelmaur smiled.

'You sense it, don't you?' he whispered and watched as the figure unclasped its arms and extended them towards the slab. The fabric of its robe rippled, as though some monstrous motion disturbed it, and something black and glossy extended from the ends of the sleeves.

The crater was suddenly bathed in light as twin beams of incandescent fire shot from the figure's arms and the rock exploded into fragments. As the dust dissipated, Kelmaur rejoiced at the sight of an ancient, verdigris-stained bronze gate. Again the searing beams stabbed out and the gate exploded into molten chunks, revealing a darkened passageway that led deep into the mountain.

Kelmaur felt his heart race in excitement. Here, he would walk passages that had not known the tread of man for ten thousand years. The robed figure clasped its arms once more and set off towards the revealed passage. Kelmaur followed and the pair made their way through the remains of the gate and into the mountain.

Neither Kelmaur nor his fellow traveller required light to see. The sorcerer marvelled at the precise, geomantic precision of the tunnel as it descended for hundreds of metres into the rock of Tor Christo.

Eventually, the tunnel emerged into a wide, domed chamber, lit by a diffuse glow that radiated from the walls. The floor was a broad disc of solid bronze, almost thirty metres in diameter, with an intricately designed pattern etched onto it. It was familiar to Kelmaur, but he could not remember why. Reluctantly, he tore his senses away from its beguiling pattern.

His wordless companion moved to the chamber's centre, reaching up with glistening, black hands that seemed just a little too large, and pulled back the hood of its robes.

Beneath was a face that had once been human, but was now disfigured beyond all recognition. Adept Etolph Cycerin's face was alive with crawling bio-organic circuitry. Even the augmentations grafted on by the Adeptus Mechanicus had transformed, their mechanical structure hideously altered by the techno-virus. Cycerin turned expectantly to face Kelmaur and raised his other arm, the flesh of the limb running, liquefying and transforming from the shape of a weapon into a hand. The hand pointed at Kelmaur and the sorcerer frowned at such impatience.

Had the transformation obliterated any sense of awe or reverence Cycerin once had?

Kelmaur removed the tattered scroll once more and unravelled it, clearing his throat before chanting a series of guttural and clicking harmonics in a language that had not been spoken in ten millennia. The chant consisted of syllables no human mouth was ever meant to give voice to, sliding between the air, pulling its fragile structure further and further apart.

Whipcord arcs of purple lightning flickered around the circumference of the bronze disc, growing in brightness as Kelmaur's chant continued. The air in the chamber grew dense, like the heavy overpressure before a thunderstorm, and the actinic tang of ozone set his teeth on edge.

The chant neared its end, the lightning arcs whipping upwards and joining in a tensing web of magenta that spun faster and faster around the disc's perimeter.

As the last syllable passed Kelmaur's lips, crackling, whirling lightning exploded, flaring outwards with a powerful coronal discharge. The sorcerer was hurled from his feet and slammed into the cavern wall, slumping to the floor in a bruised pile.

Dazed and in great pain, Kelmaur raised his head and smiled.

The creature he had created from Adept Cycerin had vanished.

A BLAZE OF light flared in the centre of the glowing disc, a dancing crackle of energy swirling around the chamber as the pulsing afterimages slowly faded. Adept Cycerin turned his head left and right, orientating himself with the location he had been transported to. The scent of Jouran incense filled the air, and his altered eyes precisely mapped out the exact trigonometric properties of the chamber he found himself in.

He wondered if he had set foot here in his previous life, but could not remember. He could only remember the imperatives that thundered in his brain, firing along strange, new inorganic dendrites infesting his skull.

The chamber stretched high above him, black and studded with reliquaries. He stood on a floor of bronze, on a disc identical to the one he had just left. Two tonsured priests hurried towards him, their faces lined with frantic worry.

The priests stopped at the edge of the disc and shouted at him, the words were unintelligible; part of his previous existence. He could only converse in the machine language of the techno-virus now and the priests' banal, limited form of

verbal communication was utterly inimical to him.

He raised his arms, the black surface of his limbs writhing as the virus within him moulded his machine-flesh into a new form. Metallic barrels and hissing muzzles formed from the engorged substance of his arms and Cycerin opened fire with his biomechanical weaponry, blasting the two priests from their feet in a storm of shells.

Dozens of urns in the lower levels of the Ossuary shattered, spreading the bones of former castellans across the floor. Skulls grinned up at Cycerin as he passed, making his way to the Sepulchre's exit.

At the door to the outer chambers, he stopped, lowered his arms and waited.

JHAREK KELMAUR PICKED his way painfully down the rocky slopes, pleased that he had answered the potential of his vision. He did not know what part Adept Cycerin had yet to play in the unfolding drama on Hydra Cordatus, but was satisfied that he had been instrumental in its fulfilment.

As soon as Cycerin had vanished, the pattern etched in the bronze disc in the floor had begun to fade along with the glow in the walls, until any hint that either had existed was gone. The scroll had crumbled to dust and, with it, any means of using the ancient device again. Kelmaur knew it didn't matter: Cycerin was where he needed to be and his involvement with him was over.

He groaned. The expenditure of so much power had left him drained and his bones hurt where Cycerin's explosive teleportation had thrown him against the chamber wall. His 'near-sense' was weakened and he stumbled several times, losing his footing on the slippery rocks and loose rubble.

As he reached the bottom of the slope he straightened his cloak and set off towards his tent, his strides becoming more confident as he found himself among more familiar surroundings.

Acolytes bowed as he passed, but he ignored them, too intent on rest and

recuperation. As he ducked below the low entrance to his abode, painful cramps seized his stomach. Immediately he sensed the Warsmith's presence.

'You were successful/ said the Warsmith. It was a statement, not a question.

Kelmaur bowed extravagantly.

'Yes, my lord. The servant of the machine with but one hand has gone. The secret chamber was below the mountain, just as I had foreseen.'

'Good,' hissed the Warsmith, raising himself up to tower over Kelmaur. The sorcerer turned his head away, unable to look directly at the roiling metamorphosis of the Warsmith's face. The lord of the Iron Warriors reached up and cupped Kelmaur's chin in one massive gauntlet.

Kelmaur gasped in pain at the Warsmith's searing touch, squirming against his grip as black discolouration spread from where his master held him. The tattoos on his skull danced as Kelmaur cried out, his face contorted in agony.

'Now, Jharek, is there anything you wish to tell me? Anything you have kept from your Warsmith?'

Kelmaur shook his head. 'No, my lord!' he wheezed. 'I swear I have told you true every vision I have had.'

'Is that true?' asked the Warsmith, his disbelief plain. No answer was forthcoming and he sighed in feigned regret.

The Warsmith said, You achieve nothing by lying to me, Jharek/ and reached out his hand, pressing a burning palm against the sorcerer's temple.

Kelmaur screamed in agony as his flesh hissed and melted, filling the tent with the sickening stench of burned meat.

You have one chance to live, Jharek/ promised the Warsmith. 'Tell me anything

else you have kept from me and I will not kill you/

'Nothing!' gasped Kelmaur. 'I have kept nothing from you, my lord, I swear! I see nothing more than that which I have told you!'

The Warsmith said, 'Then you are of no more use to me/ and exhaled a foetid breath of dazzling orange and green.

Kelmaur, already hyperventilating in fear, took a huge breath of the Warsmith's corrupt substance and began convulsing.

Kelmaur burned with horrific change and his screams were music to the Warsmith's ears. Evolutionary anarchy ripped through the sorcerer's frame. Kelmaur's body spasmed, grotesque changes warping through his flesh in a tornado of mutation. Tentacles, pincers, wings and other more unnameable organs burst from every part of his rebellious anatomy; his body now unrecognisable as human in the soup of aberrant growths.

Within seconds, all that remained of the sorcerer was a seething pile of pulped meat and bone, too grossly misshapen to survive.

'I promised I would not kill you, did I not?' sneered the Warsmith, turning and leaving the hideously mutated body of Jharek Kelmaur hissing in mindless torpor on the floor of his tent.

Amongst the gibbering ruin of distorted flesh, a single unblinking human eye stared out in horror and incipient madness.

Three

THE ATTACKS ON the walls continued for another three days, with thousands of men throwing themselves at the citadel and dying in droves. Casualties amongst the Jourans were lighter than on the first day, the weakest men having fallen in the early assaults.

On the third day, at the height of the attack, the embrasures were removed from the earthwork that ran the length of the third parallel and in a jet of exhaust fumes one hundred and thirteen Vindicator siege tanks moved into position and opened fire with an ear-splitting crack.

The walls of the citadel and bastions disappeared in a rolling bank of grey smoke and fire. Before the echoes had begun to fade, a second volley of shots battered the walls. Soldiers from both forces were pulverised in the massive barrage as shell after shell hammered the walls and breach.

Whole swathes of unstable structure tore free from the breach, hundreds of tonnes of rubble crashing downwards, carrying scores of men to their deaths and burying yet more beneath the falling blocks.

The bombardment continued for two punishing hours, undoing the repair work undertaken by the Imperial Fists and the Jourans to the ramparts. Hundreds died before they were able to take shelter in the bombproof shelters and the screams of the wounded carried as far back as the statue-lined road that led towards the Sepulchre. The face of the Mori bastion crumbled under the onslaught, tonnes of shattered masonry crashing into the ditch and forming a steep, but practicable breach. But by this time, there was no one left alive in the ditch to exploit it.

Broken by the twin blows of the stubborn defence of the Jourans and the betrayal of their masters, the Iron Warriors' soldiery turned and fell back from the walls in disarray.

As the bloodied survivors of the attack stumbled away from the citadel, shell-shocked and insane with terror, they broke and swirled around a giant figure in iron-black armour. A clear space surrounded the giant, who stood as still as a statue amongst the fleeing soldiers of his army.

The Warsmith marched through the mob, the soldiers parting before the bow-wave of corruption that travelled before him. He carried an arrowheaded icon bearing the skull-masked symbol of the Iron Warriors, which he planted in the blood-soaked earth at the edge of the ditch.

Leonid lowered his bloody power sword and watched the giant figure with a terrible sense of foreboding. Who this warrior was, he had no idea, but, instinctively, he feared him.

He turned to Corwin. The Space Marine Librarian's armour was scored with dozens of lasblasts, and blood ran from a gash torn in his upper arm.

'He is their Warsmith, the leader of this army,' said Corwin.

The Warsmith was well within weapons range, yet not one amongst the garrison could raise his gun to open fire.

They watched as the Warsmith pointed to the icon and then towards the fortress. Then he lifted an enormous axe from a shoulder scabbard and, in a rasping voice that carried the weight of ages said, 'You have until tomorrow morning to satisfy your honour and fall upon your swords. After that, your souls belong to me and I promise I will send every man alive within these walls to hell.'

The enemy commander's voice should not have been able to carry across the walls, but every soldier of the Jourans felt the terror of the Warsmith's words lodge like a splinter in his heart.

Leonid watched the Chaos warlord turn and march back through the earthworks, the lingering nausea in his gut fading to a dull ache as the Warsmith vanished from sight.

NIGHT WAS FALLING as the Warsmith's champions gathered beneath his intricate pavilion. They knelt before the master of the Iron Warriors, in awe at the changes rippling through his form. Honsou watched as a darkening shadow ghosted behind the Warsmith's body, rippling the air with its passing, like mighty wings beating the air, or at least the *suggestion* of wings. The roiling souls spinning within his armour were silent, their cries drowned out by the unheard crescendo of change writhing within the Warsmith.

'A time of great moment is upon us, my champions/ began the Warsmith.

He turned his gaze towards the hazily lit silhouette of the citadel, barely visible over the lip of the earthwork. Flashes of artillery fire lit the sky as Imperial mortars dropped shells on the Iron Warriors' camp, but it was undirected; and the vehicles and troops were protected from all but direct hits in their reinforced bunkers.

'The future is becoming less tangled now, its paths unravelling and revealing their ultimate destinations to me. It is a wonderful thing to see and to know that Perturabo chose the right path. To see the enemy's palaces in ruins, to see his warriors hung, broken and defeated from stakes lining the roadways from here to the gates of Terra vindicates everything we have done. I have seen this and more, victories and slaughters magnificent in their scale. It is pleasing, and the poor fools we must destroy will not accept this. Like most mortals, the true majesty of Chaos turns them into frightened children. Such limited understanding and vision is to blame for what their Emperor has brought them to.'

Honsou felt his pulse rising in time with the cadence of the Warsmith's voice. Each word dripped with potential. The battle here was almost at an end and the Warsmith was promising them victory. The human soldiers had fulfilled their appointed task and now the honour of taking the citadel would fall to the Iron Warriors. It would be soon; the Warsmith would not, could not, wait any longer.

Any fool could see that.

Even the faintly disturbing presence of Kroeger beside him could not dampen his enthusiasm for the coming fight. Kroeger had not spoken a single word to anyone for several days and while normally Honsou would have been grateful for such a reprieve, his suspicions were aroused. Though he could not see his face beneath his helmet, Honsou's warrior's eye could tell that there was something different about Kroeger. He moved with a confident, easy grace, rather than the bullish swagger he usually affected, more like a fighter than of a simple butcher and Honsou did not like the change one bit.

He glanced over at Forrix, the ancient veteran shifting painfully under the weight of his new bionics. The Chirumeks had worked wonders to reconstruct his body in so short a time, and daemonic sorceries had brought his life back from the

brink of the void.

The Warsmith approached them again and Honsou steeled himself for the aching cramps and nausea.

'I now know the truth of the universe/ began the Warsmith. 'Only Chaos endures. The web of action and reaction, cause and effect that has brought us to Hydra Cordatus began many thousands of years ago, though in this universe nothing ever really begins or ends.'

The Warsmith turned and spread his arms before him, encompassing the extent of the citadel.

'Towards the end of the Great Crusade I helped build this citadel, working shoulder to shoulder with the great Perturabo himself. We raised its magnificence towards the heavens for the glory of the Emperor. But Perturabo knew, even then, that the Emperor would one day betray us, and fashioned it with great cunning. What I created, you will now put asunder.'

Honsou was amazed. The Warsmith had built the citadel? Now he began to understand the true genius behind its construction. Had this been any other fortress, it would have fallen much sooner. The finest siege engineers of the day had built it and it would take the finest warriors to tear it down.

'Billions upon billions of potential consequences spread out from the here and the now and each is capable of being massively shaped by the tiniest action/ continued the Warsmith. 'Each of you will play a part in that future and you will not fail me. You will not fail me or you will die, by my hand or the enemy's, it matters not. Some of you will die, and some of you have died already/

Honsou's brow wrinkled as he pondered the Warsmith's words. Was he going to tell them the outcome of tomorrow's battle? As though hearing his thoughts the Warsmith answered Honsou directly.

'Only the Great Conspirator himself knows the infinite possibilities the future can bring, but I have seen tantalising glimpses of the shape of things to come.

The myriad complexities of alternate histories yet to be written lie open to my sight/

The Warsmith stood before each of his champions and bade them stand with a curt gesture.

'Honsou, you have proven yourself to be a worthy leader and though your blood is polluted beyond redemption with the seed of the very enemy we face, you are a true son of Chaos and I see worlds that will yet burn in your name. Your life hangs by the most slender of threads and it is probable you will die tomorrow. If it is to be so, die well.

'Forrix, I have fought beside you many times and we have shed the blood of millions together. Whole sectors cursed our names, and legions of the dead await to walk with you on the road to hell. You will be a legend amongst the Iron Warriors.

'Kroeger... Kroeger, for you I see nothing beyond the slaughter of these walls. You will go places I shall never see, but I do not know whose is the greater loss.'

Honsou could not understand all the Warsmith's words, but knew there was great significance in every one. He had barely heard the words directed at the other captains, so intent was he on fathoming the meaning of those directed at him. Was he to die tomorrow? Would he yet live to make more worlds of the False Emperor bleed?

Such concerns were beyond his ability to comprehend; yet he felt a terrible vindication as he received the Warsmith's acceptance.

His FOOTSTEPS WERE loud against the smooth stone steps, but Magos Naicin knew there was no one to hear them. Even had there been, he could easily have explained away his presence here.

The dark tower was a black spear against a garnet sky and Naicin rubbed a gloved hand against the metal of his bronze mask, feeling its edge chafe against

the tissue beneath. It would be pleasing to finally be rid of the augmentations enforced by his role and feel air against his true flesh again.

Naicin felt a thrill of anticipation course through his body at the thought of the task before him. Until now his greatest challenge had been to mislead and confuse an already disorientated, barely-human machine priest who grew easier to influence with each passing day. Since the day he had replaced the real Naicin, nearly a century ago on Nixaur Secundus, the threat of discovery had been negligible, and it was a testament to how blindly the dogmatic machine priests could be manipulated and fooled.

All it required was the correct symbols, a few ritualistic lines of doggerel and they would believe you were one of their own. It was galling to think that an organisation that could be so easily deceived was one of the foundations the cursed Imperium rested upon. The sooner his master destroyed it the better. United under the yoke of Chaos, humanity would be the stronger for its absence.

Naicin reached the top of the slope and looked back upon the wasteland of Hydra Cordatus. The Iron Warriors' attack would come with the dawn, and a storm of iron would engulf the citadel, against whose wrath none could stand. The men struggling on the walls below were fighting bravely, but he wondered if they would fight as hard knowing the truth of what had happened to this world, why it was such a desolate wilderness. Or, indeed, what was happening to their own bodies even now.

He raised his eyes to the opposite flank of the valley, wondering again where the body of that troublesome soldier Hawke lay. His survival had almost alerted Leonid to the truth of how the Adeptus Mechanicus had deceived them all, but Naicin had briefed his underlings well and the colonel had emerged from the Biologis infirmary none the wiser.

He strode towards the doors of the Sepulchre, sputtering torches guttering in their sconces either side of the portal, and pulled them open, smelling the distinctive tang of blood and death the instant he opened the door. This place was a tomb, and thus he was not surprised at the latter stench, but the former was a newcomer to the Sepulchre.

Naicin stepped into the well-lit outer chambers, marvelling at the images on the stained glass windows above him.

Depicting anonymous Space Marines in battle, the utter ruthlessness they displayed was out of all proportion to their enemies; the savagery frightening in its intensity. No loyalist Space Marines these, but a tangible warning of how easy it was for even those raised above all others to fall from grace.

The irony of the windows' subject matter was not lost on Naicin, given that he knew the truth of this place and the true identity of its architects, but he was not here to admire the aesthetics of the Sepulchre, he had a more vital errand.

Thin slivers of red light were making their way across the floor as night released its grip on the valley and the dawn of the Iron Warriors began. It was time.

Gripping the handles of the Ossuary's door, Naicin took a moment to savour the significance of this moment, etching the sensations of each second on his memory before pulling wide the inner doors.

A tall, weirdly baroque leviathan stood on the other side, thick, cable-like arms hanging by its side and clad in robes that rippled with barely concealed motion. Naicin could see the face of the corrupted Adept Cycerin below its hood, the skin of his face alive with writhing mecha-organic circuitry as it wove into new and more evolved patterns in his subcutaneous layer. The colour had drained from Cycerin's face and his skin was a flat, metallic white with crawling mercurial veins. A terrible power radiated from the former machine priest and Naicin felt a suffocating fear rise in his chest at the monstrous creature before him. He stepped back in awe.

Cycerin's arms raised, fluidly morphing into wide barrelled, biomechanical weapons as his eyes tracked Naicin's movements. For a second, Naicin was sure Cycerin was about to destroy him, but some unknown algorithm in the adept's altered brain must have identified that he was not a threat, and the weapon arms lowered.

Naicin gulped away his fear and indicated the doors that led down the

mountainside towards the citadel.

He said, 'Adept Cycerin, I have come to take you home.'

Four

DAWN WAS AN hour old as Honsou watched spears of light break over the top of the earthworks. His sense of urgency mounted with the sun as the red sunlight spilled over the valley, throwing the shadow of the citadel out across the ditch and making his gunmetal armour shine like bloodstained silver. An artillery duel was underway between the Imperial gunners and the siege tanks of the Iron Warriors, throwing up plumes of earth and smoke. It was an unequal struggle as the siege tanks methodically dismounted the citadel's guns one by one.

Honsou crouched with his warriors behind the siege tanks. The noise was phenomenal and the ground shook with the violence of their firing. In moments he would unleash his warriors over the earthworks and attack the Primus Ravelin, capturing the outwork and preventing its guns from flanking warriors from Forrix and Kroeger's companies to his right. Forrix had been granted the honour of attacking the breach in the curtain wall, while Kroeger and his berserkers were poised to storm the tear blasted in the Mori bastion. But both attacks would surely founder without the fall of the ravelin.

Once the ravelin had fallen, he was to lead his men across the ditch and follow Forrix through the breach. After that, any strategy or plan was irrelevant as the soldiers who had fought through the hell of a storming would be so blood-maddened that almost nothing could stop a rampage of colossal proportions. Honsou looked forward to it.

Forrix and his men gathered in the approach trench that zigzagged its way back from the third parallel, and Honsou could see the veteran captain was becoming more used to his mechanised body with each step. At the far end of the parallel, Kroeger stood motionless before the firing step of the earthwork, staring intently towards the breach he would soon be attacking. Normally Kroeger would be strutting up and down the length of the parallel, boasting of his prowess and heaping scorn upon Honsou, but there was nothing now, merely a sinister

silence.

Honsou had approached Kroeger as dawn had broken, sensing the change that had overtaken his nemesis more clearly than ever.

'The Warsmith honours you, Kroeger,' he had said, but Kroeger had not answered him, nor even acknowledged his presence.

'Kroeger?' repeated Honsou, reaching up to grip the edge of Kroeger's shoulder guard.

As soon as Honsou's hand touched the metal of the armour, Kroeger's hand shot up and gripped his wrist, wrenching it away and pushing him back. Honsou snarled, drawing his sword partway from its scabbard, but Kroeger turned, and Honsou was seized by a dire premonition that to attack Kroeger would be to die. A pale nimbus of light played around Kroeger's helmet and, though he couldn't be sure, Honsou thought he could see that same light seeping through the visor of Kroeger's helm. The light carried hints of an ancient malevolence and Honsou had slowly sheathed his sword, turning on his heel and returning to his company.

He shook his head free of the memory, shifting his weight from foot to foot, impatient for the attack to begin. The boom of the Vindicators suddenly ceased and, with a huge revving roar, the siege tanks pulled back from the earthworks. This was the signal he had been waiting for. Honsou rose to his feet, raising his pistol and sword high above him.

'Death to the False Emperor!' he roared and sprinted through the embrasure in the earthwork. He scrambled down its blasted front, his warriors following him through this and other gaps fashioned in the earthwork.

The rubble slope of the ditch was less than ten metres away and Honsou ran towards it as the crack of small arms fire snapped from the crumbling ramparts of the curtain wall and the flanks of both bastions. Shots slashed through the air beside him, bright streamers of las-fire plucking at his armour or vaporising nearby patches of earth. A roar of hate built in Honsou's throat as he slid down the rocky slope into the ditch.

A sea of red bodies, already beginning to rot in the heat, carpeted the trench. He charged across the multitude of corpses, crushing bones and pulverising soft, decaying tissue underfoot as yet more fire was directed at them. The soldiers on the Primus Ravelin had fought hard these last few days, but they had faced only the chaff of the Iron Warriors' army. Now they would fight the best.

Heavier blasts of las-fire speared from the ramparts, blasting craters in the floor of the ditch and tossing severed limbs and gas-bloated corpses high into the air. But Honsou could see the inferior quality of the Imperial soldiers was telling now as the majority of their shots flew high. Without a huge mass of targets to aim at, their shooting was woefully inaccurate and barely a handful of Iron Warriors had fallen.

Honsou reached the blasted foot of the ravelin, its once-smooth face now cracked, broken and easily climbed. He fired at the top of the ravelin and began scrambling his way up the slope. A shot struck the top of his shoulder guard, but he ignored the impact and kept climbing.

Withering hails of bullets and las-bolts from the flank of the Mori bastion hammered the walls of the ravelin. He heard a roar of warriors unleashed far to his right and knew that Forrix and Kroeger were beginning their attack.

Dozens of warriors were clambering up the slopes of the ravelin amid the explosion of grenades and constant snap of lasgun fire. The Iron Warrior beside him lost his grip as a shell burst above him, tearing his head off in a fountain of blood. His heavy corpse smashed half a dozen warriors from the wall as he fell.

Honsou shook his helmet clear of blood, punching his fist deep into the wall and gripping onto a reinforcement bar as he saw a cluster of grenades slither down the wall towards him. He pressed his body flat against the wall as they detonated, blowing clear a chunk of grey rockcrete. Torn ligaments in his arms shrieked as the force of the blast lifted him from the wall, but his grip on the rebar held him firm.

Red runes winked into life on his visor, and he felt blood flowing along his limbs, but he pushed upwards, dragging himself up the wall.

The slope grew less steep as he climbed, reaching the broken sections of the wall pulverised by the siege tanks. Gunfire from below slackened as the Iron Warriors firing at the parapet now holstered their weapons and began climbing.

A face appeared above Honsou. He put a bolt through it and carried on upwards. He risked a glance behind him. Perhaps a dozen Iron Warriors were dead and they had yet to clear the ramparts. Honsou turned in time to see an Imperial Fist swing the crackling edge of a power sword towards his head. He threw himself flat against the wall, feeling the sword blade hack a portion of his shoulder guard away. He rolled as the sword swung again, cutting through the rockcrete and sliding free in a shower of orange sparks as it struck an embedded reinforcement bar.

Honsou dragged his own sword from its scabbard and rolled as he saw the Imperial Fist on the rampart draw back his sword for another strike. Honsou lunged, spearing his foe through the chest with his sword. He hurled himself over the parapet, barrelling into a group of Guardsmen rushing to plug the gap in the walls and landing in a tangle of limbs.

Honsou battered his elbows downward, hearing screams, feeling bones break and skulls cracking open.

He rolled to his knees, slashing low with his sword at a charging Imperial Fist, hacking his legs out from under him. Honsou reversed the grip on his sword and hammered the blade through the Space Marine's helm, dragging it free in time to block the swing of another sword, this time swung by an Imperial officer with a major's star on his chest.

Honsou blocked a clumsy thrust and kicked the man in the groin, shattering his pelvis and dropping him screaming to the ground.

'Iron Warriors to me!' he bellowed, clearing a space around him with wide sweeps of his sword. Bullets and las-bolts ricocheted from his armour.

Another two Iron Warriors climbed over the lip of the parapet, forming a wedge with Honsou at its point. Together, the Iron Warriors hacked a path through the

Imperial Guardsmen, splashing their silver armour with blood.

An Imperial Fist sergeant saw the danger and charged towards Honsou, firing his plasma pistol as he ran. Honsou swayed aside, the beam streaking past him and punching through the helmet of an Iron Warrior as he pulled himself over the parapet.

Honsou gripped his sword two-handed and charged to meet the Space Marine, diving forward and rolling beneath the swing of his opponent's blade. He rose to his feet and cut high, decapitating the Space Marine in a single blow.

Perhaps a dozen Iron Warriors had gained the ramparts and more were flooding the walls as Honsou's wedge pushed further into the ravelin, pushing the enemy back before them. Honsou yelled in triumph as his men spread out along the walls, killing everything in their path. The Guardsmen fell back in the face of such savagery and the ramparts were his. The enemy retreat was practically a rout, a few Imperial Fists all that held it from collapsing completely.

Honsou leapt from the ramparts as he saw a reserve of Guardsmen with heavy weapons, commanded by a junior officer, lying in wait in the centre of the ravelin. He hit the ground and rolled, watching the officer gauging the correct moment to fire.

The officer's sword swept down and heavy weapon fire raked the inner faces of the ravelin, pitching four Iron Warriors from the walls. Bolter fire answered them and a handful of men fell, clutching gaping wounds in their bodies.

The crescendo of guns and screaming soldiers was powerful in its intensity as battle was joined across the walls and bastions. Smoke billowed from fires set by shell impacts and gunfire that had ignited the uniforms of the fallen.

More bolter shots tore amongst the Guardsmen as the officer swept his sword down again, but it was too late. Honsou was amongst them, hacking and killing with frenzied abandon. Blood spurted, limbs were severed and entrails spilled as he tore the beating heart from the defence.

Dozens more Iron Warriors were spilling into the ravelin itself. Yellow armoured Space Marines were like tiny islands of stubborn resistance, but Honsou could see they would soon be overwhelmed.

Ahead he could see the massive golden gate of the citadel, flanked by two high towers and topped with battered gun turrets. Without siege tanks it was inviolable, but to the right of the gate was the great breach and Honsou could see fierce fighting raging at its top.

'Iron Warriors, rally to me!' roared Honsou, bellowing to be heard over the din of battle. Raising his bloody sword, he set off at a run towards the breach.

The Primus Ravelin had fallen.

'FORWARD!' SCREAMED FORRIX from below the crest of the breach, his power glove crackling with deadly power. They were so close he could taste victory. His armour was dented and torn open, but he felt nothing, the arcane mechanics of his newly augmented body impervious to pain. He felt another impact against his chest and laughed insanely as the bolt exploded against his breastplate, the shell fragments scoring shallow gashes in his helmet.

The breach was wreathed in the smoke and confusion of battle. Bodies lay strewn about, both friends and foes. Three times they had taken the crest of the breach and three times they had been hurled back by Dorn's lapdogs.

He clambered up, pulling himself forward in great powered strides.

Then he was hurled backwards as a buried mine exploded beneath him, the ground rearing upwards in a pillar of smoke and fire. A chunk of rock smashed into his newly repaired helmet and shattered the visor, cracking it too badly to see through. Forrix rolled a few metres down the breach, before sliding to a halt in the loose rock.

Angrily, he pushed himself to his feet and wrenched off his ruined helmet, hurling it into the smoke above him. He could see dim shapes ahead and opened

up with his combi-bolter, spraying the breach with fire. One figure dropped, but the others swung their weapons to bear at him.

A blast of gunfire ripped into the *hazy* figures, deadly fire from a reaper autocannon that swept them away in a hail of shells. Forrix glanced around him, seeing that his company had suffered fearsome losses to get this far. It would all be for nothing if they should fail now. Iron Warriors climbed past him towards the top of the breach.

He heard a great roar of victory from below and knew that the half-breed had succeeded in capturing the ravelin. But how Kroeger's attack on the eastern bastion was faring, he had no idea. He snarled and resumed his climb, shooting blindly into the smoke above him. Nearly twenty Iron Warriors in Terminator armour climbed with him, firing their weapons into the breach.

Las-bolts and bullets spat from the nubs of wall to either side of him, but Forrix ignored them. The breach was all that mattered.

His powerful strides had almost taken him to the top of the breach when a deafening roar erupted from beyond the crest and the rocks before him exploded, huge chunks of rockcrete blasted to powder by shell impacts. Six Iron Warriors were obliterated in a single, devastating volley as a searing energy beam vaporised another's upper body, leaving his legs standing for a second before they toppled back down the rubble slope. Forrix dropped and crawled towards the edge of the breach, lifting his helmetless head over the rocks.

The beast of legend was before him, not just one, but two of the agile Scout Titans darted back and forth in the gap between the citadel's inner and outer walls. Constantly in motion, the Warhounds loped back and forth like caged beasts, pausing every now and again to spray the breach with murderous fire from their Vulcan bolters.

Forrix's heart sank.

While the Warhounds covered the breach, there was almost no way they could

cross it.

THE THING THAT had once been a determined lieutenant in the Jouran 383rd, but was now something infinitely older and more malevolent, pushed its way forwards over the jagged steel and rockcrete of the Mori bastion's breach. The Avatar of Khorne roared in primal lust as it drank deep from the well of hatred supplied by Larana Utorian.

Hatred of the Guard for shelling her.

Hatred of Kroeger for driving her to this.

Hatred of the Emperor for allowing this to happen.

Larana Utorian now had hatred carved upon her heart.

The warriors of Kroeger's company followed the thing they believed to be their leader, fighting their way through the hell of gunfire and explosions, in awe of the ferocity and sheer good fortune he displayed.

Bullets seemed to float around him, lasers passed through him and explosions that should have ripped him in two pattered like rain against his pristine armour. Where they struggled up the steep slope, their leader ascended as effortlessly as if he walked on level ground. The distance between the Avatar and the Iron Warriors widened as it powered ahead to the top in easy, loping strides.

As the Avatar leapt to the top of the breach, its sword sang out in dizzyingly beautiful traceries, and wherever it struck, an enemy died. The Iron Warriors were still some distance behind, and soon Imperial Fists surrounded the Avatar, their swords bright and deadly.

The Avatar cared not. It welcomed this. It needed it. It vaulted over the heads of the lead warriors, decapitating two before it landed behind the others. It kicked out, snapping a warrior's spine and clove another in half with a two-handed sweep. Imperial Fists and Guardsmen clamoured around it, but none could land a

blow.

The Avatar pistoned its fist through the skull of a screaming soldier, gripping his uniform jacket and hauling him upwards to allow the jetting spray of blood to drench its gleaming armour. The blood hissed as it landed, seeping within the armour with a monstrous suckling noise.

Yet more foes closed in, and each died at the hands of the Blood God's Avatar.

A rippling haze formed around the Avatar, its form bulging as though unable to contain its sheer vitality. A booming laugh, redolent with the malice of ages echoed across the Mori bastion, and the Imperial defenders quailed before such evil.

The Iron Warriors finally clambered over the lip of the breach, spreading out from behind the Avatar, drawing their weapons and hurling themselves into the fight.

The Avatar watched it all, feeling the waves of hatred and aggression washing through it like a tonic, nourishing its new host with pain and death.

A sharp jolt of cold pain startled the Avatar from its reverie of carnage and the white glare behind its helmet burned with the fire of a sun as it sought out its attacker.

A Space Marine in the spartanly embellished armour of an Imperial Fists Librarian advanced towards it. He carried a crackling force staff and the Avatar laughed as it recognised the power of a psyker. Here was a death worth inflicting.

Glittering haloes of psychic energy flared from the Librarian's helmet, engraved with hexagrammic sigils of great potency and scrimshawed purity seals.

Abomination!' hissed Librarian Corwin. 'I shall send you back to the hell from which you crawled!'

A beam of coruscating light lanced from the Librarian's force staff and struck the Avatar in the centre of its chest. The Avatar staggered, dropping to its knees as it was bathed in flickering balefires. It bellowed in pain, suddenly thrusting with its sword and impaling an Iron Warrior on its blade.

Blood sprayed along the weapon and the Avatar roared as it fed, rising to its feet as the drained Iron Warrior collapsed to the ground.

Flaring washes of energy erupted from the Avatar's body as the power earthed through its armour. The Avatar laughed again.

'You are deluded/ grated the altered voice of Larana Utorian. 'Do you not realise that Khorne is the bane of psykers?'

The Librarian braced himself against the rocks as the desperate struggle at the top of the breach swirled around them. Neither side was willing to intervene in this battle that was fought in the realm of the spirit.

'The power of the Emperor commands you!' bellowed Corwin, striking the Avatar with another blast of light and driving it to the ground once more. 'Begone, foul daemon!'

Again and again he fired searing bolts of psychic power at the figure of the Avatar, sagging against the side of the breach as his reserves of energy dwindled.

His very soul was being drained as he fought to destroy this monster.

The Avatar spread its arms and gave vent to a shout of hatred that shook the very walls of the bastion with its fury. A rippling whirlwind of raw, red hunger swept from the Avatar's armour, spreading throughout the breach like the pressure wave of an explosion and scything through every warrior within a hundred paces. A lashing storm of hate-fuelled energy whipped around the interior walls of the Mori bastion, and every man touched burst apart in an explosion of red, his blood swept up in the etheric whirlwind as it howled back to the Avatar at its epicentre.

The Avatar swelled to monstrous proportions, its armour creaking and groaning as it sought to master the energies ripped from the deaths it had just caused.

Dry, fleshless husks surrounded it, Iron Warriors, Jourans and Imperial Fists, their vital fluid drained to feed the monster that had killed them. The Avatar rose to its full height, towering in the breach, its armour and weapons blazing with barely-contained power.

Only one figure remained standing: Librarian Corwin, his knees buckled and the sacred sigils on his armour little but faded scorch marks. He supported himself on his staff, swaying unsteadily as the Avatar's pounding footsteps crashed towards him across the breach.

'Not dead yet, psyker?' roared the Avatar, raising its sword. 'Soon you will wish you were.'

Corwin looked up into the blazing eyes of the Avatar and saw death.

The Avatar swung its sword, the passage of the iridescent blade cutting through the fragile veil of reality with a dreadful ripping sound, like tearing meat.

A black gouge torn in the walls separating realities opened, filling the air with sickening static, as though a million noxious flies had flown through from some vile, plague dimension.

Librarian Corwin closed his eyes and died without a sound as the Avatar's blade split him in two, both halves of his body sucked into the black tear opened in space and time.

The Avatar feasted on the slaughter it had caused, sensing the oceans of blood yet to be shed through the gateway its sword, bloated with death, had torn in the world. Galaxies of billions upon billions of souls awaited harvest and feeding to the Blood God. There were realms where the time it had wasted here was but the blink of an eye, where there were slaughters that would perhaps one day assuage Khorne's hunger.

The Avatar laughed, knowing that such a thing could not come to pass: the Blood God's hunger was a depthless ocean and would never be sated. New life and new purpose thundered through the bulging fabric of its armour as the pull of fresh souls suffused it.

Larana Utorian continued to scream inside her mind as she saw the eternity of slaughter that lay before her, and all the deaths to come.

She screamed because she realised that some vile part of her soul desired this.

Without a backward glance, the Avatar abandoned Hydra Cordatus to its fate, stepping through the dark portal to a time and place beyond mortal understanding.

An age of battle awaited, and it had time without end to be part of it.

HONSOU SCRAMBLED UP the slopes of the breach, his blood afire with killing. Iron Warriors gathered at the crest of the breach, the rocks there enveloped in clouds of explosions pierced with stabs of flame from some unseen weapon. Already he could tell that the gunfire had to be coming from a Titan.

Forrix saw him coming and waved him forward, shouting over the din of the sawing fire of the Warhounds' Vulcan bolters.

'We cannot go further!'

'But the guns of the bastion will cut us to pieces if we stay here!' retorted Honsou. 'We must carry the breach!'

Forrix pointed through the smoke to the shadowy outline of the Mori bastion and Honsou suddenly noticed the complete absence of any sounds of battle. No gunshots, no screams of wounded men and no clash of steel on steel. Only then did he notice the slowly shrinking wound torn in the air that hung in the breach, a veil of stars glittering from beyond.

'What in the name of Chaos is that?'

'I do not know, half-breed, but it is where Kroeger has gone.'

'I don't understand/ said Honsou as the shimmering vision faded to nothingness.

'Nor I, but the whereabouts of Kroeger is the least of our worries. We need something to shift these thrice-damned Warhounds.'

As if in response to Forrix's demand, the thunder of something impossibly vast slamming against the earth shook the ground, loosening giant rocks from the breach. The massive vibration hammered through the ground again and Honsou turned as he felt the presence of something ancient and fearsome approaching.

More rocks tumbled downwards from the breach as the tempo of the thunderous impacts grew.

The smoke parted and the *Dies Irae* limped from the smoke and strode towards the citadel.

HIGH IN THE command bridge of the Warlord Titan, *Honoris Causa,* Princeps Daekian heard the excitement in Princeps Carlsen's voice even over the vox, and smiled with grim resignation.

'It's the *Dies Irae,* it's mobile again. Emperor knows how, but it's coming straight for Vincare bastion, princeps!'

Carlsen's warning was unnecessary; Daekian's forward observers had already reported the appearance of the corrupted Emperor Titan. He could sense the unspoken desire of Carlsen to come and join the fight against the *Dies Irae,* but even a cursory glance at the tactical plot told Daekian that Carlsen's Warhounds were best employed covering the breach.

'Hold fast, Princeps Carlsen. Stay where you are/ he ordered.

'Aye, princeps/ replied Carlsen, his disappointment plain.

Daekian expertly walked his Warlord through the gateway of the inner wall, ducking the Titan's massive head to avoid losing its carapace weapons. The two Reavers that followed him, the *Armis juvat* and the *Pax Imperator,* were smaller and passed below the gate without trouble. All three Titans had undergone hurried repairs after their first engagement, but none was yet fully operational.

Daekian had faith in his crews and the fighting spirit of the *Honoris Causa,* but he had made his peace with the Emperor before climbing to the bridge of his Titan. He had long known that it would come to this and though he was sure it would mean his death, he was honoured that it would fall to him to avenge Princeps Fierach.

Already he could see the effect the *Dies Irae* was having on the battle. Imperial troops were streaming back in terror from the gargantuan apparition that had emerged from the smoke. The Imperial Fists fell back in good order, even the Space Marines realising the futility of standing before this beast. Their ramparts were no protection against such a towering monster, able to cross the bastion with a single step, able to obliterate the walls with a shot.

Daekian cursed as the troops fled beneath him, unable to step forward for fear of crushing whole platoons beneath his tread. The *Dies Irae* had reached the third parallel and was barely seconds away from reaching the walls.

'Moderati Issar, take down that abomination's shields!' he yelled, raising the massive foot of his Titan and praying that the men below would get out of his way.

'Engineering deck, give me slow striding speed/

He watched as flaming traceries of staccato gunfire pumped from his carapace-mounted Catling blaster, the high velocity shells ripping across the body of the *Dies Irae.* Bright pulses flared as void shields collapsed, but Daekian knew that

it would take more than the gatling blaster to finish this beast off.

The *Armis Juvat* and *Pax Imperator* spread out to his flanks, firing as they went, as he gracefully manoeuvred the *Honoris Causa* through the mass of fleeing troops. A massive explosion threw up chunks of rockcrete as the enemy Titan's plasma annihilator opened fire and vaporised a corner gun tower on Vincare bastion, melting the rockcrete of the walls and causing them to sag under the intolerable heat.

Daekian grunted as he felt shields collapsing under the weight of fire from the *Dies Irae,* cursing as he swung his Titan left into the bastion, stepping over the lines of entrenchments.

His monstrous foe was before him, and a cold, lead weight settled in the pit of his stomach as he clearly saw the terrifying form of the *Dies Irae* over the jagged top of the broken ramparts. Its body was blackened and scorched by fire and its head was a molten, dented mass, green fire blazing from behind its single remaining eye. Gunfire blazed from its weapon mounts, sawing through the ramparts and hammering the Titans of his battle group.

The *Armis Juvat* staggered, a round from the enemy Titan's hellstorm cannon defeating its shields and clipping the knee joint of its left leg.

'Armis Juvat and *Pax Imperator,* brace for firing!' shouted Daekian as he increased speed and thundered towards the bastion's flank.

The princeps of the Reavers planted their Titans' feet squarely on the ground and unleashed a deadly volley of fire at the *Dies Irae.* The enemy Titan returned fire as it continued to advance. Daekian initialised the linear accelerators that powered the Volcano cannon and took command of the weapon himself. Not that he did not trust and respect the Moderati who controlled the weapon, but if there was to be a kill shot, he would be the one to make it.

Another shot from the *Dies Irae's* plasma annihilator blew apart a further section of the wall as it stepped down into the ditch, crushing hundreds of corpses with every ponderous tread. He flinched as a flare of bright light to his side briefly illuminated the bridge and he craned his neck to see what had exploded.

The *Armis Juvat* toppled backwards, the top half of its upper body blown away. Geysers of plasma fire spilled from the ruptured reactor as the slain Reaver crashed to the ground. The *Pax Imperator* was suffering under the barrage of fire from the daemon Titan, but was still fighting.

'Void shields failing, princeps!' shouted Moderati Issar as a volley of shells struck the *Honoris Causa.*

'Full speed! We must close with the monster before we suffer a similar fate!' replied Daekian.

Less than a hundred metres separated them now and Daekian could make out the terrible damage Princeps Fierach had managed to inflict on this warp-spawned beast before being dragged to his death. Huge steel plates were crudely welded across the *Dies Irae's* midsection and all manner of auxiliary mechanisms had been grafted to its legs to allow it to move.

Fire from the gatling blaster blasted off more of its void shields and as Daekian saw a single shell explode against its upper bastions, he knew that the beast was stripped of its infernal protection.

He pushed the *Honoris Causa* forward and raised the volcano cannon.

This is for Princeps Fierach/ he snarled and fired.

He watched the searing beam of unimaginably powerful energy streak towards the *Dies Irae's* head, knowing, even as he fired, that the shot was true.

His triumph turned to disbelief as the beam struck on a void shield, repaired at the last second before impact. The *Dies Irae* ground its torso towards him, the white-hot barrel of its plasma weapon aimed directly at him.

'Evasive manoeuvres!' he bellowed, even as he knew it would be too late.

The *Honoris Causa* lurched sideways as the plasma bolt fired.

Princeps Daekian was almost quick enough. Almost.

The shot impacted on the Warlord's volcano cannon, instantaneously vaporising the weapon in a seething ball of plasma. The explosion ripped up the Titan's arm, the adamantium structure flashing molten in a heartbeat.

Daekian screamed in agony, convulsing as the flashback from his arm's destruction flared along the mind impulse link. Blood streamed from his nose and ears, but he kept true to his course, striding towards the hazy outline of the *Dies Irae* through the smoke filling the command bridge.

He reached the walls at the same instant as the *Dies Irae,* the raised ground inside Vincare bastion bringing him level with his foe's head. The *Pax Imperator* circled around to his right, its carapace running with plasma fire and limping as its leg joints trailed streamers of white sparks.

Daekian lashed out with the *Honoris Causa's* one remaining arm, his battle claw slamming against the *Dies Irae's* chest. The massive Titan rocked back under the powerful blow, swinging its arm against the lip of the bastion and smashing through the rockcrete and hammering into the *Honoris Causa's* upper leg.

Daekian felt the leg crack and heard the screams over the vox from the engineering decks. He had moments at best.

He swiped again at his gigantic foe, ripping the armour plating away from the *Dies Irae's* belly as it pummelled his wounded flank with its arms. It lurched backwards, attempting to protect its now vulnerable reactor.

The horrendously damaged *Pax Imperator* charged into the fight, its chain fist ripping through the upper bastions of the *Dies hae,* its blade shrieking as it tore downwards towards the war machine's bridge.

The *Dies Irae's* barbed tail swung and pulverised the knee joint of the *Pax Imperator,* shaking loose its chain fist and staggering the mighty god-machine.

Daekian watched the *Dies hae* turn and hammer the barrel of its plasma annihilator into the bridge of the *Pax Imperator* and fire at point-blank range.

The upper half of the Reaver vanished in a searing blast, enveloping the two battling Titans with liquid fire. The remains of the *Pax Imperator* crashed over the walls of the bastion into the ditch, huge plumes of black smoke trailing from its burning hulk.

But its death had given Daekian the opening he needed.

He rammed his battle claw against the heat-softened midsection of the *Dies Irae's* reactor chamber, through the wound first opened by Princeps Fierach. He roared as he punched through into his foe's guts, gripping its nuclear heart in his iron grip and crushing it with all his might.

HONSOU WATCHED THE battle between the enormous war machines through the drifting haze of smoke, willing the majestic form of the *Dies Irae* to smash its inferior foes to scrap metal. He sheltered in the lee of the breach, his armour dusty and bloodstained.

His frustration grew with every explosion above him. They could not force the breach like this.

He watched as the leviathans struggled on the far bastion, their battle shaking the ground as though a powerful earthquake gripped the world. 'Forrix!' he yelled over the din of shells exploding at the crest of the breach. 'One way or another, this battle will soon be over. It is time to withdraw!'

Forrix shook his head, sneering. 'I should have known your cowardice would finally come to the fore! We stay and take this breach.'

Honsou felt his anger flare and gripped Forrix's armour, shouting. 'We have to go! The attack has lost its momentum and the enemy will be regrouping behind the walls. We only reinforce failure if we stay. There will be another time!'

For a second, Honsou thought Forrix was about to rebuke him again, but the fury drained from his eyes and he nodded, turning without a word and scrambling down the breach.

Honsou followed him and the Iron Warriors retreated from the walls, falling back to the ditch in disciplined groups. As he clambered over an iron-bar-studded chunk of rockcrete, the day was lit by a terrible brightness. The sky was bleached of colour and everything before him was bathed in the blinding light of a star.

The *Dies Irae* was enveloped in a dazzling ball of incandescent fire, huge sprays of plasma gouting from its belly. The enemy Titan with the burning white eyes had its fist buried in its guts, tearing and destroying the magnificent daemon machine. Locked together, the two Titans wrestled to escape each other's grip, the ground heaving with their battle.

As Honsou watched, a terrible groaning rent the air as the two machines rocked past their combined centre of gravity and slowly began to fall towards them into the ditch.

'Run!' he shouted, all thought of a disciplined retreat forgotten in the face of this new danger. He sprinted past the ravelin and leapt up the rubble slopes of the ditch as the two war machines slammed into the outer face of the curtain wall between Vincare bastion and the gate. Their massive bodies scraped down its face, trailing flaming sheets of burning plasma and ripping another great tear in the walls.

Honsou scrambled over the lip of the ditch, desperate to reach the safety of the earthworks. Forrix ran alongside him, his new bionics enhancing his speed, despite the Terminator armour he wore.

The two Titans slammed into the ground, the impact throwing Honsou from his feet and hurling him forward. He smashed into the top of the earthwork, rolling over its top as a river of plasma spilled from the ruptured reactors of the Titans.

Burning plasma flooded the ditch, incinerating the corpses that filled it in an instant. The Primus Ravelin was destroyed, crushed beneath thousands of tonnes of armaplas and ceramite. Huge flames and geysers of magma-hot steam ripped along the ditch, vitrifying the rocks throughout its length.

Razor sharp chunks of white-hot debris rained down inside the citadel, one shard from the *Honoris Causa's* bridge section hammering through a section of ramparts less than five metres from Castellan Leonid.

Both war machines thrashed weakly in the molten soup that filled the ditch, grappling to the last as the searing fires consumed them.

The first attack had failed.

Five

CASTELLAN LEONID POURED himself a glass of amasec and drained his glass in a single swallow. He set down the glass on his desk and sat on the edge of his bed, his entire body aching. He winced as stitches from a dozen shallow cuts pulled tight across his arms and legs, rubbing his temples in an attempt to ease the pain

of the last few days.

Such a miracle was beyond his powers. He poured himself another glass, looking through the armoured loophole in the tower's wall. A dim glow still radiated from the dying plasma fires in the ditch where the two Titans had fallen and he raised his glass to the light. 'Here's to you, Princeps Daekian. May the Emperor watch over your soul.'

He drank the fiery spirit and briefly considered pouring another. He decided against it, knowing he had much to organise before morning. He rubbed a calloused hand through his hair when a knock came at his door.

'Come in.'

Brother-Captain Eshara ducked his head as he entered the room, pulling up a sturdy chair from beside Leonid's desk and sitting opposite the citadel's castellan.

The pair sat in a companionable silence before Eshara said, 'Your men fought bravely today. They are a credit to Joura, and your kin would be proud of you all.'

Seeing Leonid's sadness, he added, 'I was grieved to hear of Major Anders's death/

Leonid nodded, remembering the awful sight of an Iron Warrior casually butchering his brave friend in the Primus Ravelin.

'As did yours, captain. We all feel Brother Corwin's loss.'

Eshara's face was lined with sorrow, 'I do not pretend to understand what happened in that bastion, but I believe he gave his life to save us all.'

As do I/ replied Leonid.

Reports of the battle in the Mori bastion were confused to say the least. The infirmary building was awash with soldier's ravings, telling of a giant warrior killing everything in the bastion by his voice alone and a whirlwind that fed on blood. Luckily, Leonid had been able to scotch these wild tales before they had reached the remainder of the garrison.

'Tomorrow will be the last day will it not?' asked Leonid.

Eshara didn't answer and Leonid thought he was avoiding the question, but the Space Marine had merely been considering his answer.

'If we do not pull back to the citadel's inner wall, then, yes, it will be. We have less than four thousand men, virtually no heavy guns and three breaches. The wall is too long and we cannot hold everywhere at once. We will make it a thankless, bloody battle for our enemies, but, ultimately, the citadel will fall'

'Then we will give up the outer wall and fall back to the inner citadel. The wall there is unbroken and, despite its irregular coverage, we still have the protection of the energy shield.'

Eshara nodded. 'Aye. The sacrifice made by Princeps Daekian has bought us some time to regroup, and it would be best if we begin now.'

'I will issue the orders immediately,' stated Leonid pouring himself a last glass of amasec and taking out his vial of detox pills.

He swallowed one and shook his head at the dreadful taste, placing the vial on the desk.

'I have observed your men taking these pills as well,' noted Eshara. 'Might I enquire as to what they are?'

'What, the detox pills? Oh, of course, you do not need these do you? Well, I don't suppose any of us will need them any more really'

Eshara looked puzzled and said, 'Need them for what?'

"Well, it's the air here,' explained Leonid, waving his hand around him, 'It's poisonous. The Magos Biologis of the Adeptus Mechanicus provide these pills to keep the men from getting sick from the toxins in the air.'

Eshara leaned closer and lifted the vial. He shook out a handful of pills and took what seemed, to Leonid, an unnecessarily deep breath.

'Castellan Leonid, are you aware of an organ unique to the physiology of the Space Marines known as the neuroglottis?'

Leonid shook his head as Eshara continued. 'It is situated at the back of the throat and is capable of analysing the chemical content of anything we ingest or breathe. If need be, it can shift the pattern of my breathing to divert my trachea to a genetically altered lung better able to process the toxins in any given atmosphere.'

Eshara replaced the vial on Leonid's desk and said, 'I am afraid you have been misled, my friend, because I can assure you that the air on this planet is quite harmless. Unpleasant to breathe, yes, but poisonous? Most definitely not.'

LEONID FEU HIS anger grow with each step that took him towards the Machine Temple, situated deep beneath the citadel. He clutched the vial of detox pills in his left hand, his laspistol in his right, as he made his way along the antiseptic corridors that led to the lair of Arch Magos Amaethon. Captain Eshara was beside him and his honour guard of carapace-armoured Guardsmen marched in step behind him.

Now he knew why Hawke had not sickened and died on the mountains. Now he knew why the men stationed here were afflicted with headaches and constant nausea.

Now he knew why there were so many flags and regimental plaques around the briefing chamber. With these 'detox' pills, it was only a matter of time until the

citadel would need another garrison.

Eshara had sampled one of the pills, allowing the chemicals to swill around his mouth before spitting them into an empty water jug.

'Poison/ he declared at last. 'Slow-acting to be sure, and subtle in its effects, but poison nonetheless. There are many chemicals present in this tablet I know to be highly carcinogenic. It is my guess that after a few years of taking these, the victim would be suffering from one or more highly virulent cancers.'

Leonid was horrified and stared in revulsion at the vial of pills before the cold realisation of how long he had been taking them struck him. 'How virulent?' he whispered.

Eshara frowned. 'Debilitating after maybe six or seven years and fatal soon after that.'

Leonid was speechless with rage. The magnitude of the betrayal was unbelievable. That the Adeptus Mechanicus could have perpetuated such a lie upon their own people was staggering. Thinking of the hundreds of regimental flags in the briefing chamber, he tried to calculate how many men the Adeptus Mechanicus had murdered, but gave up, appalled, as the numbers spiralled into the millions.

'Why would they do such a thing?'

'I do not know. What is it that this citadel defends? Is it so valuable that not even its defenders can be allowed to tell what they know?'

Leonid shook his head. 'No, well, maybe, I don't know for sure. As far as I know, this place is some sort of way-station for xeno artefacts discovered in the sector. I was told that the facility was built upon a ruin from the Dark Age of Technology-'

'Again, I feel you have been misled. I do not believe the Adeptus Mechanicus

would stoop to such base behaviour simply to protect recovered xeno artefacts. There is a secret hidden within this citadel that is worth the life of every man who serves here.'

Leonid vowed he would find out what that secret was, even if he had to wring Naicin's neck or threaten to put a las-bolt through whatever machine kept the remains of Amaethon alive. It might already be too late for the 383rd Jouran Dragoons, but Leonid would make damn sure the Adeptus Mechanicus were made to pay for their crimes.

Several corridors branched off the main one, but Leonid unerringly followed the path towards the Machine Temple.

'Someone is ahead of us,' whispered Eshara, drawing and cocking his bolt pistol.

Leonid followed suit as his honour guard raised their rifles and moved to surround him.

The armed party rounded a bend in the corridor as it widened into a vaulted chamber, with latticed iron girders lacing above them to form a web-like dome. Glow-globes floated in suspensor fields, the walls were inscribed with cog symbols and all manner of metal crates and bulky machines lay scattered around the room. Worker servitors and indentured labourers moved mechanically around the wide room, oblivious to the goings on around them.

At the far end of the chamber, a wide, semicircular cog-toothed door sat half open, a small group of people clustered around it.

Leonid immediately recognised Magos Naicin and the ungainly form of two Praetorian battle-servitors. Servitors were surgically altered slaves utilised by the Adeptus Mechanicus for a variety of manual tasks. Praetorians fulfilled the adepts need for heavy defence, featuring an augmented slave body atop a mechanised track unit, with a variety of lethal weapon combinations implanted in the servitors' arms.

The last figure was unknown to Leonid, but he was astonished at the hideous bulk of the man that not even his shapeless robes could conceal. His skin was the colour of black steel, his face more dead than alive.

Naicin saw them coming and darted through the door, dragging the enormous robed figure after him.

Leonid growled in anger and set off towards the closing door as the two battle-servitors rumbled forwards. Leonid was too intent on the door to pay them any heed. Nothing would prevent him from reaching Naicin and killing him.

The first Praetorian raised its weapon arms as Leonid's honour guard rushed after him, realising his danger. The fastest man of the team dived for his commander, knocking him to the ground as the Praetorian opened fire, the rhythmic thumping of a massive bolter filling the chamber as it hosed the chamber with shells.

The shells passed over Leonid, but the men behind were not so lucky. Three were thrown back, huge holes blasted in their chests. Leonid and his rescuer rolled into the cover offered by a huge tracked drilling rig as more shots filled the chamber, heavier auto cannon shells blasting metal chunks from the machine.

A flurry of las-blasts struck the Praetorian, which rocked back, bloody craters torn across its body. The battle-servitor didn't slow, it merely adjusted its aim and ripped apart yet more of Leonid's guard with deadly accurate gunfire, bullets spewing from the gun at a furious rate.

The man who'd saved Leonid's life spun from the cover of the drilling rig, taking careful aim at the Praetorian's head. He dropped as he was struck in the head and

chest, blown apart by the mass reactive bolter shells as they detonated within his flesh.

Leonid scrambled away as the heavy bolter and auto cannon began tearing up the chamber. Glass, plastic and blood erupted all around, showering them with sparks as soldiers and worker-servitors went down, panels and glow-globes shattering.

The lobotomised worker-servitors were not programmed to react to such external stimuli and continued working at their posts. They died silently as the Praetorians walked the shells into them, raking their fire left and right, servo assisted muscles easily absorbing their guns' huge recoil.

Emergency lights flickered on as fluorescent panels were shot out and Leonid slithered towards Eshara, who had drawn his crackling power sword.

Human workers scrambled to disconnect themselves from their stations and seek shelter as the battle-servitors slowly advanced towards them. One dropped to his knees, begging for mercy.

The Praetorian shot him in the face.

The rest died in three controlled bursts of fire.

Leonid surged from behind the drilling rig as the wounded Praetorian finished the slaughter of the technicians. He squeezed off two rounds and the servitor staggered, two massive holes blasted in its skull. It raised the heavy bolter and fired as Leonid's third shot took it in the throat, blowing its head clean off.

It fell backwards, firing the gun as it toppled, stitching a line of bullets towards Leonid and clipping his shoulder. He yelled in pain, the impact spinning him to the floor.

The second Praetorian trained its auto cannons on Leonid, the firing mechanisms whining as they built up speed to fire.

Before it could shoot, Eshara leapt from the cover of the crate and slashed his sword through the barrels in a bright explosion of sparks. He spun on his heel, hammering his elbow into the battle-servitor's face and smashing its skull from its shoulders in a welter of blood. His reverse stroke hacked the organic top half of the Praetorian's body from the track unit. The whine of its weapons motor sputtered and died.

Leonid picked himself up from the ground, clutching his wounded shoulder, and nodded his thanks to Eshara before turning the closed door behind which Naicin and his unknown accomplice had vanished.

'Damn!' he swore. 'How in the name of Joura are we going to get through that?'

Eshara looked over Leonid's shoulder and indicated something behind him.

Leonid frowned and turned to see what the Space Marine was pointing at. And grinned.

THE DOOR TO the Machine Temple was thirty centimetres thick and composed of solid steel, but it crumpled like tinfoil when the eighty-tonne drilling rig slammed into it. The roof section was torn free by the low clearance of the door as it came screeching through, spewing torn scraps of steel and sparks all across the inner sanctum of the Machine Temple. The giant tracked machine slewed around as Eshara lost control for a second, the enormous rig smashing into a bank of monitors and control panels. The amber-lit chamber was filled with pulsating machinery and barely had the drilling rig skidded to a squealing halt than Leonid, Eshara and the four surviving members of his honour guard leapt from the rambling machine.

Leonid grunted in pain as he landed, trying to make sense of the scene before him.

Magos Naicin stood with his head bowed beside a squat, rhomboid structure topped with a shattered vat of draining fluid. In one gloved hand he held his bronze facemask and, in the other, what looked like a glistening slab of wet

meat. He tossed it aside and Leonid was horrified to see the slack features of Arch Magos Amaethon staring up at him from the floor. After centuries of service, the organic remains of the arch magos were finally dead.

The bulky figure that had accompanied Naicin stood atop the rhomboid, its wide, misshapen arms spread wide. Bulging motion undulated beneath its robes as though a collection of snakes writhed beneath them. Even as he watched, the robes split and fell from its body, revealing a massive, iron-black musculature that rippled in a horrific amalgamation of organic and biomechanical components. Was this creature machine or man, or some horrific symbiosis of the two?

'Naicin!' shouted Leonid. 'What have you done?'

The magos lifted his face and Leonid gasped in horror as he saw Naicin's true features, a swirling mass of thin, wormlike tentacles that glistened and writhed together to form the mass of his head. A cluster of milky and distended eyes bulged in the centre of his features, above a sphincter-like mouth, ringed with needle teeth.

'Mutant/ spat Eshara, raising his pistol.

The four Guardsmen were transfixed in horrified wonder at the bizarre sight before them. And their perverse fascination killed them.

The figure atop the rhomboid raised its arms, its flesh writhing as they transformed into two massive-barrelled weapons. A roaring crescendo of fire erupted from the weapons, blasting through Leonid's honour guard and disintegrating them in a heartbeat. Leonid once more dived for cover behind the drilling rig as Eshara charged towards the giant figure at the chamber's centre.

Magos Naicin hissed and leapt to intercept him, moving with inhuman speed, his arms whipping out and toothed proboscis erupting from his fingertips to smash Eshara from his feet. Hissing ichor splashed Eshara's shoulder guard, the ceramite plates of his armour rapidly dissolving beneath it. The Space Marine

captain rolled beneath the questing mouths as Naicin came at him again, hissing acids spraying from his lashing, whip-like hands.

Leonid took advantage of the distraction to rest his pistol against the track guard of the drilling rig and take aim at the monstrous figure that had killed his men.

The gun arms had changed again, morphing into long, ribbed cables that waved like serpents. As he squinted down the barrel, the figure's ribs cracked wide open, spreading apart like some ancient moss-covered gateway. A dozen grooved tentacles of dripping green metal snaked from his chest cavity and spiralled through the air as though searching for something.

Leonid squeezed the trigger, the las-blast striking the figure in the head.

But a blaze of green light flared and Leonid saw his target was unharmed.

Leonid fired again and again, but his shots were wasted. The thing on the platform was invulnerable. The metallic tentacles continued to lengthen, hooking into the banks of machines around the chamber's centre. More tentacles sprouted from the writhing mass of biomechanical intestines, slipping through the air like branches of a tree and attaching themselves to the life-preserving mechanics of the Machine Temple and the regulatory systems of the citadel.

Alarm bells chimed and warning lights flashed around the chamber's circumference.

Leonid knew he could do nothing to stop the vile creature without Eshara and rushed towards the Space Marine, who was fighting the abhorrent mutant.

Eshara swung his sword at Naicin, but the thing moved with blinding speed, its dripping proboscises swaying aside from his every blow. The captain's bolt pistol was a molten pile on the floor and Leonid could see Eshara's armour was pierced by several smoking round holes where Naicin's corrosive proboscis had struck. He raised his pistol.

'Step back, Brother-Captain,' ordered Leonid.

Eshara dodged a blow aimed at his heart and rapidly backed away from the disgusting mutant. Naicin drew back to the base of the rhomboid platform as the chamber's omnipresent amber light dimmed, changing to a sickly green. Leonid drew a bead on the mutant's head.

Naicin chuckled, the sound somewhere between slurping and gurgling. 'Fools! You cannot win. You can kill me, but my masters will trample your bones within the day.'

'Why, Naicin?' asked Leonid.

'I could ask you the same question,' spat Naicin. 'You do not even know what you fight to protect.'

'We fight to protect a world of the Emperor, mutant/ snapped Eshara.

Naicin laughed, a horrible retching noise. 'You think your Emperor cares about this world? Look around you, it is a wasteland! A wasteland created by human hands. This was once a fertile and bountiful world until the Adeptus Mechanicus sought to make it their own. Virus bombs killed every living thing on the surface of this world and rendered it uninhabitable for centuries.'

'You lie. Why should the Adeptus Mechanicus do such a thing?'

'They wanted to make sure no one ever desired this world. So that when they built their geno-labs here, they would be undisturbed and forgotten. You stand in one of the most hallowed places of the Adeptus Mechanicus and you don't even know it. The gene-seed you prize so highly, the future of the Space Marines... this is one of only two places in the galaxy where it is created and stored.'

Seeing the look of horrified shock on Eshara's face, Naicin laughed. 'Yes, captain, when the Warsmith and the Despoiler have your gene-seed they will use it to create Legions of Space Marines loyal to the glory of Chaos!'

'But you won't be around to see it/ snarled Eshara plucking the pistol from Leonid's hand and pulling the trigger.

Naicin's head exploded, showering the platform with stinking yellow fluid and scraps of rubbery, tentacled flesh. The corpse slumped to the ground as Eshara pumped another four shots into the body.

Eshara wordlessly handed the pistol back to Leonid as alarms began shrieking throughout the chamber. Both men looked up as the figure on the platform was lifted from its feet, its arms spreading wide in a cruciform pattern. More and more cabled tentacles sprouted from its body, the green haze that filled the chamber pulsing from deep within its chest.

Explosions of jade sparks burst from the edges of the room, flickering lines of lethal electricity arcing from machine to machine as the corruption of the techno-virus spread to every system of the citadel.

A lashing tongue of electrical discharge licked the ground beside Leonid and Eshara, and the two warriors stumbled away from the monster in front of them. Explosions filled the chamber and a crackling storm of lightning blazed through the Machine Temple. Eshara gathered Leonid into the shelter of his body as he sprinted for the ragged hole of the door. Spears of emerald lightning flashed around the chamber. A bolt struck Eshara's back and he grunted in pain, diving through the doorway as forks of green fire blasted behind him.

Eshara rolled aside as the unnatural lightning danced across the door to the Machine Temple, forming a crackling electrical web that completely blocked the entrance.

The two scrambled away from the pulsing green light, breathless and groaning in pain.

Eshara pushed himself to his feet and offered his hand to Leonid, who gripped his wounded shoulder and pulled himself upright. Before either man could speak, the vox-bead in Eshara's helmet crackled and the captain listened intently to the message he was receiving.

Leonid could tell the news was not good.

'Well?' he asked, expecting the worst.

'It has begun. The shield has gone down and the enemy are attacking once more/

Leonid nodded and looked back into the sealed green hell of the Machine Temple.

'Then our place is on the walls/ he said grimly.

THE REMAINING TWO Titans of the Legio Mortis advanced on the citadel accompanied by a wave of Vindicator tanks and forty-two screaming Dreadnoughts. Nearly six thousand battered soldiers in red uniforms sprinted amongst this armoured thrust and dropped into the ditch, its surfaces smooth and vitrified by the plasma fire from the downed Titans.

Sunfire shells streaked into the darkness as alarms rang from the citadel and scattered shots lanced out to the charging horde.

Honsou watched from the bastions mounted atop the shoulders of the *Pater Mortis,* nearly thirty metres above the ground. He saw the Vindicators pull into their firing revetments along the third parallel and pound the weakened walls of the citadel, bringing down vast quantities of masonry as the Dreadnoughts made for the ditch. He gripped the edge of the bastion's iron pallisading as the Titan stepped down into the ditch, the rubble claws fitted over its massive feet keeping its stride sure.

Sixty-two Iron Warriors, all that remained of his company, filled the bastions either side of the Titan's head, ready to be unleashed upon the ramparts of the inner wall of the citadel. The Imperial defenders had abandoned the outer wall and the shield was down. They would never get a better chance than this.

The fire against the bastions and curtain wall slackened as the Titans closed with

the walls, now little more than shattered piles of rubble. Honsou raised his sword in salute to the Dies *Irae* as they passed over its molten remains.

Honsou glanced to his right, making out the shadow of the Legio's other remaining Titan, its bastions crammed with Forrix's warriors. This was the last assault and it could not afford to fail. He braced himself as the mighty war machine battered its way through the breach torn by the death of the *Dies Irae* and felt the rumbling roar of fury build from within the daemon Titan. Powerful blasts of gunfire ripped from both war machines, blowing great chunks from the inner wall and demolishing whole sections of rampart.

The gap between the inner and outer wall was empty of foes; the Warhounds that had frustrated the first assault wisely having withdrawn behind the inner wall. Soldiers on the wall opened fire, but the Titans' shields were proof against such pinpricks. Flickering green fires played around the wall-mounted guns. Honsou could not understand why they were not firing, but gave thanks to the dark gods for their silence.

As the two Titans thundered forwards, the Vindicators churned over the breaches in the outer wall. The walls shook with thunderous impacts from the siege tanks, the inner gate pounded by shell after shell. The Dreadnoughts added their own weight of fire to the barrage. Three of the insane war machines, gripped in the frenzy of battle, lumbered forward to attack the gate with their massive hammer arms, only to be caught in the Vindicators' fire and blown apart.

The gap closed with every step of the *Pater Mortis,* and Honsou could clearly see the faces of the men lining the walls. Las-fire slashed towards him, but he laughed, feeling utterly invincible. He swayed forward as the Titan's arms pistoned into the walls, bracing hooks punching deep within the rockcrete.

Seconds later, the battle drawbridges slammed down from the shoulder bastions, crushing the rampart beneath them as they dropped.

Honsou raised his sword and charged onto the walls, shouting, 'This place is ours! Show no mercy!'

He jumped onto the rampart, hacking a trio of Guardsmen to death with one blow and firing his bolt pistol down the line of the walls. Hundreds of warriors were arrayed against them, but Honsou faced them all without fear, killing with preternatural skill.

Iron Warriors fanned out from the Titan's shoulder bastions, slaughtering the defenders and hurling them back. The noise was tremendous as the ramparts became slick with blood and entrails. Each time the Iron Warriors came close to breaking through the defenders' lines, the Imperial Fists would lead a desperate counterattack and push them back and hold the line together. Honsou killed another Guardsman and risked a glance to where Forrix led his warriors. Here too, the Iron Warriors were confronted with the incredible tenacity and stubborn defiance of the citadel's defenders.

They were holding, but only just, and Honsou saw they were close to breaking.

Honsou blocked a blow aimed at his neck and disembowelled his attacker as a monstrous, black shadow, darker than the blackest night fell across the walls. For the briefest second, the fighting slowed as heads craned upwards to see what new devilment had been unleashed.

With a thunder that cracked the walls, the Warsmith crashed down on the rampart, the newborn darkness of powerful wings spread behind him. Guardsmen around him dropped, vomiting blood and convulsing. His arms swept out, his taloned hand and mighty axe killing everything within reach. The darkness enfolding the Warsmith's head billowed and spat bolts of dark light that dissolved everything it struck.

Screams of terror spread along the walls and horrified soldiers turned and fled before this diabolical apparition. The Warsmith reared up to his full height, his armour stretching and swelling, the keening faces bound within his armour straining and wailing a banshee's choir.

Shaking off his amazement, Honsou bellowed, 'We have them now!'

He charged after the fleeing mass of soldiers, hacking them down with his

sword. The Imperial front line collapsed and not even the Imperial Fists could halt the rout.

He could see Forrix slaughtering fleeing Guardsmen by the dozen. A terrific crash echoed from below, and Honsou knew the citadel's inner gate had fallen. The Warsmith took to the air once more as the carnage on the walls continued, casting his pall of corruption and change throughout the ramparts.

Honsou kicked down the iron door to one of the giant towers that flanked the gate and dived through, firing as he rolled. The soldiers within the tower screamed in terror as he rose to his feet. They were no threat, but he killed them anyway.

He swiftly made his way down the stairs, his blood afire and singing with the promise of victory.

'Iron Warriors! With me! The citadel is ours!'

FORRIX THUNDERED DOWN the stairs of the tower, firing as he went. The stair spiralled downwards to the left, bolter shells whining and ricocheting from the walls. On two levels there were defensible landings, but the furious assault of the Iron Warriors could not be stopped. Forrix and his Terminators smashed each one aside with ease.

Even as he killed, he marvelled at the appearance of the Warsmith. Their leader stood at the very cusp of daemonhood, the changes wracking his body becoming more manifest. Surely his final ascension was at hand? Forrix had sensed a terrible urgency to the Warsmith, and knew that he was fighting to hold his form coherent. One wrong move now and the Warsmith could just as easily explode into the thrashing riot of anatomies of a Chaos spawn, doomed for an eternal life of mindless mutation.

The base of the tower levelled into a wide killing zone, but it had been designed to defend against attacks from outside, not inside, and the defenders had nothing to shelter behind. Las-fire raked the walls beside Forrix. He swept his combi-

bolter around the room, slaughtering Guardsmen with every pull of the trigger.

Terminators spilled down after him, their horned helmets carved in the masks of snarling beasts of prey. The image was not inappropriate, thought Forrix. Narrow doors led from the tower, too small to allow a Terminator through, but Forrix slammed his power fist into the stonework, shattering the lintel and punching his way through. The Terminators followed him outside into the citadel's interior.

Forrix grinned as he watched the Warsmith swooping high above the battlefield. The wings at his back were becoming more substantial and his form rippled and blurred, as though in a constant state of flux. Across the ruined gateway, he could see Honsou leading his warriors from the opposite tower, hacking down a mob of fleeing Guardsmen.

Ahead, across a wide cobbled esplanade, he could make out a cluster of ruined buildings, their windows gaping like blackened, empty eyesockets. Human soldiers, Vindicators, Dreadnoughts and Defilers poured through the blazing remains of the gate, gunning their engines as they spread out to avoid the return fire coming from the ruins.

Amidst the flames, sporadic volleys of las-fire pierced the night, but it was disorganised and undirected. Smoke billowed in thick, black plumes from the ruins and Forrix heard the crash of massive power claws tearing at the curtain wall behind him as the two Titans of the Legio Mortis ripped it down, eager to be part of the slaughter.

The smoke parted and the high-pitched blasts of Vulcan bolter fire ripped up the esplanade in a line towards the gate. Three Vindicators exploded and a Dreadnought toppled, thrashing its arms in frenzy as it tried to right itself.

Forrix charged across the courtyard as he caught sight of the Warhound he had marked for himself earlier. The beast darted through the smoke, pausing only long enough to draw a bead on the charging Iron Warriors. But in the open, its gunfire was nowhere near as effective as it had been in the breach.

'Spread out!' yelled Forrix as he gathered his Terminators to him and set off

towards the Warhounds.

'You escaped me once, beast, but this time I have you/ he promised his prey.

'MARK YOUR TARGETS!' yelled Leonid as volleys of las-fire lashed the Iron Warriors charging from burning building to burning building. Smoke filled every street. None of their attackers were falling, and Leonid knew they must make every shot count. The Warhound *Defensor Fidei* walked backwards behind his men as they fell back from this assault, firing into the mass of the enemy as they pursued the Jourans.

Through gaps in the smoke pouring from shelled buildings, he could see massive chunks of rockcrete being torn from the wall by the Titan siege towers, and knew they had only minutes until these gargantuan war machines joined the battle. Tanks and grotesque, multi-limbed constructs, with turrets adorned with hateful runes, poured through the smashed gate, and fear was visible in every bloodied face.

Brother-Captain Eshara had regrouped the survivors of his company, thirty Space Marines, and fought alongside him, firing his bolter with every grudging step backwards.

Suddenly, a dozen of the Iron Warriors' damnable red clad soldiery charged through the smoke to their side. Shots from crude rifles felled five of his men before they could react. Leonid knelt, jamming his rifle to his shoulder and opening up on full auto, spraying the smoke-filled street with bright lasbolts. Three enemy soldiers dropped and Eshara killed another four with deadly accurate bolter fire. The remainder drew a bead on Leonid, but before they could shoot, the ground rocked and a massive adamantium foot slammed down, crushing them to death.

The *Jure Divinu* sprayed the building across from Leonid with turbo laser fire and he saw six enemy soldiers tumble from it, burning debris crashing down as its already unstable structure finally gave way.

From the smoke, Leonid saw a warrior in Terminator armour charging straight for the *Jure Divinu,* bright hunger etched on his face. His dead features spoke of ancient malice and bitter hatred.

Leonid had no time to think. Eshara grabbed his arm and hustled him back through the burning ruins towards the northern wall of the citadel. Space Marines ran alongside them, the men of the Guard having already passed through the Valedictor Gate and descended into the caverns.

Built flush against the flank of the mountain with two armoured blockhouses to either side of it, the Valedictor

Gate was intended to bar the route into the underground caverns, but with Naicin's betrayal in the Machine Temple, it remained treacherously open.

Explosions ripped through the buildings behind Leonid and smashed him to the ground.

Eshara dragged him to his feet as the thirty Imperial Fists formed a semi-circle around the Valedictor Gate, facing outwards.

The Space Marine captain lowered his dented and blackened helm level with Leonid's and said, 'Castellan, you must get below and destroy the gene-seed.'

'How?' gasped Leonid breathlessly. 'The Machine Temple's gone, there's no way to do it.'

Eshara gripped his arm tighter. 'Do what you must, find flamer units, plasma gunners, anything, but do not let even a scrap of gene-seed fall into the enemy's hands. It is better that it all be destroyed than have the foe claim it. Do you understand?'

'We will need time to destroy it all, my friend. Can you hold them here for long enough?' asked Leonid, fully aware of the price that time would be bought with.

The two warriors locked eyes then shook hands in the warrior's grip, wrist to wrist.

'We will hold them for long enough/ nodded Eshara as he dropped his empty bolter and drew both his power swords.

Leonid said, 'Good luck, Brother-Captain Eshara.'

'And to you, Castellan Leonid.'

Without another word, Leonid turned and sprinted through the Valedictor Gate.

FORRIX WATCHED THE beast stagger as a shell from a Vindicator burst against its leg. The Warhound lurched, its weapon mount shearing off as it slammed into a ruined building. They had it now, backed into a corner and stripped of its protection.

There was another Warhound nearby, but the billowing smoke and thump of explosions obscured its whereabouts.

'It is time for a reckoning, beast!' he yelled as he crashed forward. More gunfire hammered the armoured carapace of the Warhound, its legs buckling under the weight of fire. The pilot's compartment swung low to the ground, the green of its eyes locking with Forrix and he laughed, knowing that the beast's life was forfeit. He had it now.

He and his Terminators closed on the struggling machine, power fists raised to deliver the killing blow. Forrix clambered onto its massive foot and hammered his power fist into the ankle joint of the Warhound's leg again and again.

The war machine lifted its leg, realising the danger and stepped backwards, swaying drunkenly and smashing into the building across the street, causing it to collapse.

Forrix held on for dear life as the Warhound sought to dislodge him, hammering

his fist against its ankle. The Titan's leg swept round, slamming down on a jagged section of rubble. Forrix was thrown clear as the full weight of the Warhound came down awkwardly on its pulverised ankle.

The joint sheared off in an explosion of flame and the Warhound toppled, smashing backwards through the burning building and slamming into the ground in a cascade of rockcrete blocks. The pilot's compartment cracked open under the impact and Forrix scrambled across the flaming wreckage to finish the beast.

Shadowed forms struggled weakly within as Forrix emptied his combi-bolter into the Warhound's bridge, slaughtering its crew in a storm of bolts.

Forrix laughed as he slew the crew of the *Jure Divinu,* racking the arming slide of his underslung melta gun.

The wall behind the slain beast collapsed, showering him with rock and smoke, momentarily obscuring his vision.

As it cleared he felt his pleasure at the kill drain from him as he found himself staring into the baleful eyes of the second Warhound.

'No!' hissed Forrix.

Its weapons whined, building power to fire.

Forrix raised his weapon and pulled the trigger as both the turbo lasers and Vulcan bolters fired.

Forrix had the briefest sensation of pain and frustration before the *Defensor Fidei's* guns utterly destroyed him.

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HONSOU JOGGED THROUGH the fallen citadel, elated beyond words at the slaughter

around him. The warriors of both his and Forrix's company followed him through the streets of their enemy's fastness, cheering his name to the dark gods.

Loud gunfire roared from somewhere to his left and he angled his advance towards it, rounding a corner in time to see a wrecked Warhound topple to the ground and Forrix charging towards the war machine's head.

Honsou saw the wall before Forrix collapse and the furious form of the Warhound's twin emerge from the smoke. He saw it raise its weapons and blast Forrix from the ruins in an explosion of blood and mechanised body parts.

As he watched Forrix die, Honsou felt nothing but triumph. Kroeger had vanished and Forrix was dead; truly the gods of Chaos favoured him this night.

The Warhound's victory was short-lived as the might of the *Pater Mortis,* its crashing footsteps collapsing buildings all around them, emerged from behind Honsou and fired its weapons. The Scout Titan vanished in a flurry of bright explosions, its few void shields and light armour no match for the power of the Warlord Titan.

It reeled under the impacts and, for an incredible moment, Honsou believed it had survived, but a massive explosion engulfed its head and the Warhound fell, its crew compartment a blazing rain.

Honsou snarled in satisfaction and set off once more.

Everywhere the enemy was defeated, broken and fleeing before them.

He emerged into a wide square, at the far end of which he saw a pitiful ring of the Imperial Fists. They stood, swords bared at the entrance to caverns gouged into the mountains, their faces proud and defiant.

Honsou laughed as he marched at the head of his company, the Warsmith descending from the hot darkness above him. The master of the Iron Warriors landed hard, the cobbles hissing molten with his step, as though the ground itself

rebelled against the chaos writhing within him. His body rippled with change, as though a million forms sought to be birthed from his unquiet anatomy. The black wings at his back quivered and his armour was becoming glossier, more organic looking, like the carapace of an insect.

The Warsmith nodded to Honsou, a gesture of respect between warriors.

'It is time we finished this/ rasped the Warsmith, his voice thickened and coarse.

'Aye,' agreed Honsou, marching towards the Imperial Fists as the Iron Warriors spread out to surround them, weapons raised.

A stillness fell as the ancient foes faced one another in the glare of the burning citadel and a massive shadow fell across the square as the *Pater Mortis* strode from the ruins.

A warrior stepped from the ring of Space Marines and removed his helmet. Honsou could feel the hatred this warrior had for him as he spat, 'I am Brother-Captain Eshara of the Imperial Fists, proud son of Rogal Dorn, soldier of the Emperor and scourge of deviants. Face me and die, traitor.'

The Warsmith faced Eshara and Honsou grinned as he saw the effect his presence had upon the Space Marine. As the captain's face twisted in sudden pain, the Warsmith leapt forward, his mighty axe sweeping down to cleave Eshara in two.

Eshara crossed his swords above his head, blocking the blow, the impact driving him to his knees. He grunted and spun low, slashing a blade across the Warsmith's flank. Black blood gouted from the wound. The Warsmith smashed his fist against Eshara's chest, cracking his breastplate open.

As Eshara fell, the Imperial Fists charged, the name of Rogal Dorn on their lips.

Gunfire erupted from the Iron Warriors, cutting them down as battle was joined.

But it was an unequal struggle and though the Imperial Fists fought hard, the outcome was never in doubt.

Honsou drove his sword through an Imperial Fist, watching in amazement as Eshara groggily rose to his feet, coughing thick wads of blood. The Warsmith roared and hammered his axe down upon Eshara's shoulder guard, cleaving him from collarbone to pelvis, the blade shearing through his armour like paper.

Eshara crumpled, but weakly raised his head as the Warsmith sheathed his massive axe and stooped to lift him from the ground.

'Know this, son of Dorn/ hissed the Warsmith. 'I will gorge myself on your gene-seed and I shall make you and all your kind extinct/

The Warsmith lifted Eshara's dying body to his head where there was a monstrous cracking, sucking noise. Blood splashed the steaming ground at the Warsmith's feet and he bellowed in orgiastic pleasure, dropping Eshara's mutilated corpse.

Even Honsou was shocked as he saw the Space Marine's entire chest cavity had been bitten through, the organs within sucked from his body and devoured by the Warsmith.

Honsou dismissed the incident from his mind and set off after the Warsmith as he charged through the gateway that led into the mountains and their ultimate goal.

LEONID HAMMERED HIS rifle butt through the glass of an incubation tank and stood back as the amniotic fluid spilled out along with its foetal cargo. He used brute force because his lasgun's power cell had long since drained. He moved onto the next capsule, staring in awed wonder at the sheer scale of the cavern stretching before him. Its end was lost in shadows, the vastness broken up by wide avenues of incubation capsules. Thousands of tanks ran in ordered lines into the darkness, their clear surfaces frosted and cold to the touch.

Now Leonid understood the danger inherent in this place. If what Naicin had told them was even partly true, there was enough genetic material stored here to create untold thousands of twisted warriors of Chaos. The very thought of such creations being birthed from here was truly horrifying.

Worker-servitors with shoulder-mounted illuminators were spots of light in the darkness, moving silently through the echoing cavern as they tended to their biological charges. Hundreds of his soldiers rampaged through the cavern, shooting, burning and smashing everything they could. But Leonid knew it was a hopeless task, the sheer scale of the

facility here would defeat them. There was no way they could destroy it all before the Iron Warriors came to kill them.

But they would try. It was all they had left.

Honsou and the Iron Warriors followed the Warsmith as he sped down through the corridors beneath the mountains. There was a desperate hunger to the Warsmith now, like a fleshhound with the scent of blood in its jaws. His body pulsed like a heart in the throes of a massive seizure, as though containing a whirlwind of potentiality that strained to be born.

Ahead, Honsou heard sounds of destruction and knew they were approaching the prize the citadel had jealously guarded. As the passageway widened and levelled out, he saw a massive set of gold doors, green lightning dancing across their surfaces, and a cavern beyond.

Shouts and the sound of shattering glass quickly turned to cries of alarm as the humans saw the charging Iron Warriors. A few brave souls attempted to stand before the Warsmith, but quickly crumpled as he neared them, screaming and spasming in agony.

The Iron Warriors plunged into the cavern, gunfire echoing from the walls as they slaughtered the last defenders of the citadel.

The Warsmith halted beside a shattered incubation capsule and dragged out a limp rag of pink flesh, sodden and only vaguely humanoid. The Warsmith feasted upon the genetic host matter, feeding on the soft, boneless tissue and Honsou felt his skin crawl as though a powerful electric charge was building.

The Warsmith moved to the next capsule and fed once more. He turned to Honsou and rasped, 'Finish them all/

LEONID WORKED HIS way back to the cavern's entrance, his power sword gripped tightly and his face set with grim resolve. There was no more they could do here to make a difference and he felt their failure as a bitter weight in the pit of his stomach. If this was to be their end, they would meet it head on, not hiding. His men had no ammunition left and the sounds of battle around him were brutal and short lived.

He and perhaps fifty soldiers followed a revolting sucking, guzzling noise, determined to sell their lives as dearly as possible now that the end was inevitable.

Leonid rounded a corner of dripping capsules and recoiled at the sight before him.

THE WARSMITH CAST his arms to the cavern roof as he felt the power of the gene-seed coursing through him, though he realised that its power was largely symbolic. He had succeeded and the power of the dark gods poured into their chosen vessel, ripping him from his mortal flesh and gifting him with the boon of immortality.

His armour sloughed from his body, its material form no longer appropriate for such a magnificent creature of Chaos. A spiralling vortex of dark energy surrounded him, cracks exploding in the rockcrete floor as power flared from his limbs.

As the psychic energy built up, the Warsmith swelled, roaring as he felt his power magnifying.

His chest hiked convulsively as the might of Chaos poured through him. He was aware of his warriors and the Imperial soldiers, but he needed all his concentration to direct the incomprehensible energies that remoulded his new daemonic flesh.

The Warsmith roared in ecstasy and agony as unprecedented power engulfed him. His body swelled hugely, bloated by the maelstrom of energy that cycloned within.

A ridged horn burst from his forehead in a welter of blood and tissue. The mottled spike writhed like a living thing, swelling and wrapping itself around his head. His skin darkened, taking on a loathsome scaled texture. His spine cracked and he screamed as it elongated and thickened, roaring as the shadows at his back solidified and the dark wings spread wide and flapped powerfully.

The newly elevated Daemon Prince was lifted from the ground, hanging suspended before the horrified witnesses to its birth as the last of the psychic energy drained from its body in an explosive wash of power.

THOUGH HE KNEW it meant death, Leonid raced towards the floating daemon, his sword raised to strike it down.

The winged daemon turned its gaze upon him and he dropped to his knees as the sickening aura of the creature overcame him. Its monstrous form was utterly black, the nightmare depths of its form glittering with far-off galaxies and stars. He felt revolted just looking at the beast and rolled onto his side as debilitating cramps seized him.

He vomited, feeling his guts contract again and dry-heaved, having nothing more to expel. He vainly tried to push himself to his feet, but the pain was too great, like a red-hot knife twisting in his belly. His men were also on the floor, their bodily functions rebelling in the presence of such horrific power.

Leonid wept in pain, hearing the terrible, booming laughter of the daemon prince above him, the discordant noise sending jagged bolts of pain down his spine.

He felt unconsciousness rising to claim him and tried to fight it.

But he could not resist its balm and slipped into darkness.

THE FIRES STILL burned throughout the citadel as the first rays of morning crested the mountains and columns of tracked tankers rumbled through the molten remains of the Destiny Gate. Each tanker had been specially built for this moment, insulated and rigged with blast freezing mechanisms to preserve the precious gene-seed on its journey through the immaterium towards the Eye of Terror and Abaddon the Despoiler.

The fallen Iron Warriors were already aboard the ships in orbit, the Chirumeks dissecting them even now to harvest their organs for implantation into the next generation of Iron Warriors.

There had not been enough of Forrix to bring back and while stripping down the siege works, a party of slaves had found a rotting corpse in Kroeger's dugout. It was clearly that of an Iron Warrior, but if the body was Kroeger's, who had led the assault on the eastern bastion?

It was a mystery that Honsou guessed he would never know the answer to, though in that, he was very wrong.

Honsou watched the tankers as they made the slow journey through the blasted landscape of the plain before the citadel. The satisfaction of victory was tempered with a hollow emptiness from knowing that the foe was defeated and there were no more battles to be fought here.

When the Warsmith had ascended to daemonhood, Honsou had prostrated himself before the daemon prince, prayers of devotion spilling from his lips.

'Stand, Honsou,' commanded the daemon.

Hurriedly Honsou obeyed as the daemon continued, 'You have pleased me mightily these last centuries, my son. I have groomed your hatred well and you

have the seed of greatness within you.'

'I live only to serve, my master/ stammered Honsou.

'I know you do. But I know of your hunger to lead, to tread the path I have taken. It is clear to me now the course the future must take.'

The daemon Warsmith drifted towards Honsou, its massive form towering above the Iron Warrior.

'You shall be my successor, Honsou. Only you hold true to the vision of Chaos, of the final destruction of the false Imperium. Forrix had lost that vision of our ultimate destiny and Kroeger, well, he cast it aside long ago. I shall not name you captain, I shall name you Warsmith.'

Before Honsou could answer, the Warsmith folded his midnight wings around his body, his form a sliver of impenetrable darkness.

'The power of the warp calls me, Honsou, and it is a call I cannot refuse. Where I go, you cannot follow... yet.'

The Warsmith's outline shimmered as he faded from the material realm into places beyond Honsou's understanding.

He still couldn't believe it. Honsou the half-breed. Now Honsou the Warsmith.

He turned from the wreckage of the citadel and made his way back towards the ridge that led down to the spaceport, passing a wretched column of blue-coated prisoners marching towards the prison hulks and a life of slavery. Honsou caught sight of a prisoner in a bronze breastplate with the shoulder boards of a lieutenant colonel, his battered features cast down in crushed resignation, and laughed.

He quickly outpaced the prisoners, marching through the masterful contravallations Forrix had constructed around the spaceport, past the heavy,

transport shuttles that were returning the surviving tanks and artillery pieces to the cargo hulks.

The landing platforms were awash with men and machines preparing to depart Hydra Cordatus.

He crossed the runways towards a shuttle idling on a far landing platform.

An honour guard of Iron Warriors stood before the cavernous entrance to the vessel.

'Your shuttle is ready, Warsmith/ said a bowing Iron Warrior.

Honsou smiled and stepped aboard the shuttle without a backward glance.

EPILOGUE

THE ADEPTUS MECHANICUS vessel *Mordekai's Light* drifted in geo-stationary orbit above Hydra Cordatus, its smooth black surfaces dull and non-reflective. Its kilometre-long hull was sleek and quite unlike the ungainly vessels of the Imperial Navy.

This vessel was designed for speed and stealth.

Dark robed adepts of the Machine God ghosted through the incense-scented air of the command bridge, reverently tending to the arcane technologies of the massive starship.

Standing behind the command altar at the end of a wide, veneered nave, High Magos Kuzela Matrada stared at the smouldering ruin of the citadel projected on the forward viewing bay. The great fortress was no more, its mighty bastions cast down, its walls reduced to rubble and, more importantly, its precious gene-seed stolen.

The scale of this disaster did not bear thinking about and the repercussions would reach to the very highest and mightiest on Mars and Terra.

A light flashed on the pict-tablet before him and he swept his bronze hand across the runes beside it. An interference filled image swam into focus on the tablet, the hooded face of Magos Sarfian, staring up at him from the surface of the planet below.

'Well?' demanded Matrada.

'You were correct, high magos. The laboratorium is empty and the gene-seed gone.'

'All of it?'

'All of it,' confirmed Sarfian.

'Have you found any survivors?'

'No, my lord, only corpses. From the wreckage and sheer level of destruction we have discovered, it is evident that the battle was fierce indeed.'

'Have you removed all evidence of our blessed order?'

Sarfian nodded. 'The cavern has been purified with fire and melta charges set.'

'Very well, return to the ship and we will cleanse the entire site from orbit.'

'Yes, my lord,' said Sarfian.

Matrada shut off the link and opened a channel to his ordnance officer. Yes, this was a disaster, but he would ensure that no one would ever find out about it.

'Lock in co-ordinates and prepare to fire on my order.'

GUARDSMAN HAWKE STUMBLED down the rocky slopes of the mountains, dehydrated, malnourished and suffering from second-degree burns. He'd watched as the enemy had seized the citadel, butchering the last remnants of his regiment, helpless as the battle raged in the darkness. With the citadel's fall, the enemy had pulled back from the valley and left Hydra Cordatus with the same speed and efficiency with which they had arrived.

Never in his whole life had Hawke felt quite so alone. With the departure of the enemy forces, the silence was unnerving. The constant rumble of artillery and explosions was gone, as was the distant screaming of men in battle. Only now, with it absent did Hawke realise how omnipresent it had been.

Not a soul moved on the plain below and he decided that enough was enough. He scavenged a few unspoiled ration packs from the torpedo facility's crew quarters as well as some hydration tablets and, thankfully, some detox pills.

With the battle over, he began the long trek to the valley floor, a skinny shambling wreck, covered in dust and blood. Quite what he intended to do when he got there, he didn't know, but knew that it sure beat staying in the mountains.

It was on his third day's travel, as he rested in the shadow of a tall boulder, that he saw the ship. It roared low along the valley before vanishing to land beyond the smashed walls of the citadel.

Though he knew he was too far away to be heard, he shouted himself hoarse, scrambling downhill at a furious rate. The fact that he was almost a day's journey from the citadel didn't occur to him, and soon he was breathless and exhausted, his head pounding in pain.

When he recovered, he set off once more, filled with fresh determination. He travelled for another five hours across the treacherous terrain of the mountains, when he heard the whine of the ship's engines once more.

Hawke watched the ponderous craft rise up from the distant citadel and angle itself towards the crimson sky.

'Oh, no,' he moaned. 'No, no, no... come back! Come back you bastards! Come back!'

But the crew of the ship ignored his pleading and the craft shot upwards on a burning tail plume. Hawke dropped to his knees as the craft vanished from sight, weeping and cursing its crew.

He was scanning the sky, desperately hoping the ship would return, when the first orbital lance strike lit up the sky with unbearable brightness and streaked through the atmosphere to impact on the citadel.

He sat bolt upright as a massive explosion mushroomed from the citadel, scrambling backwards as a cascade of light fell from the sky, enveloping the citadel in blinding explosions.

Hawke watched, horrified as the barrage continued for another three hours. By the time it was complete, there was nothing left to indicate that the citadel had existed at all.

He slumped onto his side, closing his eyes as the weight of the last few weeks crashed down upon him and he realised he was trapped on Hydra Cordatus. He squeezed shut his eyes and rolled onto his back as exhaustion finally claimed him.

ROUGH HANDS SHOOK him awake and he grunted in pain as he felt himself being dragged to his feet. He tried to open his eyes, but they were gummed with dust. All he could make out were blurred, yellow forms and shouted questions. Shapes either side of him held him upright as an insistent voice nagged at him.

'What...?' he slurred.

'What is your name?' repeated the voice.

'Hawke/ he managed, 'Guardsman Hawke, serial number 25031971, who the hell are you?'

'Sergeant Vermaas of the Imperial Fists strike cruiser *Justi-tia Fides,'* said a voice in front of him.

He felt hands lifting his dog-tags from beneath his uniform jacket.

Hawke blinked his eyes and turned his head, seeing two giants in yellow power armour either side of him, a third standing before him without his helmet. Even in his exhausted state, Hawke recognised Space Marines and wept in relief when he saw the boxy shape of a Thunderhawk gun-ship sitting on the plain behind them.

Where is Captain Eshara?' demanded Vermaas.

Who?'

'Brother-Captain Alaric Eshara, commander of the Imperial Fists Third Company'

'Never heard of him/ said Hawke.

Vermaas nodded to the Imperial Fists either side of him and Hawke was marched roughly towards the gunship as the Space Marines boarded ahead of him.

'Where are you taking me?' he asked.

We're taking you home, soldier/ said Sergeant Vermaas.

Hawke smiled and stepped aboard the Thunderhawk.

Book 2

ENEMY OF MY ENEMY

THE MAN WAS too weak to scream as Obax Zakayo picked him up by the ankle and tossed him into the wide fanged jaws of the furnace. None of the other slaves looked up at this fresh atrocity. None dared to. The wrath of Obax Zakayo was a capricious thing; unpredictable and random and no-one in this sweltering hell could be counted safe from his spite.

The murderous giant took a lumbering step through the orange-lit nightmare of the forge temple, bellowed commands laced with grating static booming from the vox-amp built into his burnished iron shoulder guard. Yellow and black chevrons edged the plates of his power armour and hissing pipes wheezed from every joint, leaking stinking black fluids and venting puffs of steam with every step. He carried a screaming axe, its edge toothed and brutal, and a crackling energy whip writhed on the end of a mechanised claw attached to his back.

Billowing clouds of steam and exhaust gasses filled the forge, shot through with streaks of bright flames. Fat orange sparks flew from vast grinding machines and rivers of lava-hot metal streamed from colossal cauldrons - each larger than a titan's head - into grooved weapon moulds. Monstrous, debased creatures in vulcanised rubber masks with rounded glass eye sockets and ribbed piping running into tanks carried on their backs cracked barbed whips.

They lurched with a twisted, mutated gait and gurgled monotone commands to the hundreds of slaves that filled the screaming forge.

That such malnourished, wretched specimens of humanity could still live and work in such a terrible place was testament to the indomitable spirit that had sustained them in the time since their capture. None amongst them knew how long it had been since they had been dragged in chains from the proud defence of an Imperial citadel to this nightmare world. A world where a black sun beat down from a sky that burned a retina-searing white and from which smoky black threads poured into a cyclopean city of such insane proportions that men had been driven mad just by gazing upon its impossible geometries for too long.

Some three thousand men had been brought to this world, called Medrengard by its inhabitants, though less than a quarter of that number still lived. Whipped, beaten and fed barely enough to survive, their incarceration was little more than a slowly enacted death sentence. The grinning face at the end of the forge's nave roared and seethed, filling the air with a screeching howl of fury. Here, an incarcerated daemon's immaterial energies drove the ceaseless hammering of giant pistons while its anger heated the furnaces with the power of a star. Golden wards carved into the floor bound the daemon to its fate, and its red eyes blazed above the forge, driving men to madness and murder.

But such was a small price, and gladly paid by the masters of the forge. A hundred slaves or more died every day, but the Iron Warriors cared not.

Where a hundred died, a thousand more would be brought to work until death claimed them as well.

A TRIO OF TRACKED bulldozer engines hauled themselves into the forge, dragging rusted troughs behind them through the kneedeep ash. More of the rubber-masked mutants drove the dozers and, even before they stopped, slaves clustered around them, leaning over the edges of the troughs to scoop up handfuls of the thin, greyish gruel that slopped around their bases. Men who had once called each other brother and had fought the dark powers shoulder to shoulder, punched and kicked each other bloody as they fought for the meagre scraps their captors allowed them.

Sergeant Ellard carefully made his way through the press of bodies to where a slumped figure sat exhausted, his head drooping between his knees. Unkempt, filth-encrusted hair that had once been blonde, but was now dull and grey covered most of the figure's ash-smeared face.

'Sir,' said Ellard, 'some food.'

The figure looked up, red-rimmed and bloodshot eyes stared at the sergeant through the lank rats' tails of his hair, but said nothing.

'Sir, you have to eat,'

'Why?'

'Because you'll get sick if you don't eat.'

'We're already dying, Ellard, remember? The Adeptus Mechanicus made sure of that with their damned cancers, so what's the point in postponing death?'

Ellard squatted on his haunches, still holding out his dripping hands, coolly regarding his commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Mikhail Leonid.

'Because we're soldiers of the 383rd Jouran Dragoons,' said Ellard. 'We don't give up until the last breath has been crushed from us.'

'Just like Corde,' said Leonid.

'What?'

'Never mind,' said Leonid, holding out his hands and allowing Ellard to pour what passed for nourishment into his hands. He looked at the grey liquid, oily patches of Emperor only knew what floating like a frothy scum on its surface.

He raised his hands to his mouth and drank the foul broth, feeling the gristly lumps of meat catch in his throat. He didn't know what meat it was and didn't want to think too hard about the strongest possibility of its identity.

He felt his stomach cramp and fought the familiar urge to vomit its contents onto the ground. The carcinogens he and his regiment had been infected with were making their presence felt and Leonid closed his eyes as a jagged spike of pain ripped through his gut.

But Ellard was right, they were soldiers of Jouran and the Emperor, and they did not give up, no matter that they were all dead men who refused to lie down. He forced down the last mouthful of the gruel and watched as the Iron Warrior bastard, Obax Zakayo, marched down the length of the forge, the loathsome claw on his back cracking the energywreathed whip into the huddled masses of slaves.

'On your feet, scum!' he bellowed. 'There's work to be done. I'll grind your bones to powder and feed you to the daemon of the forge! Up! Up!'

How could it have come to this?

Though it seemed he had spent a lifetime toiling in this nightmare existence, he knew it could not have been long. A few scant months since the citadel of Hydra Cordatus had fallen to the Iron Warriors and they had been dragged off in chains to the echoing prison hulks in orbit.

His last sight of the citadel had been of its walls being cast down, its once-proud buildings in flames and the desecrated corpses of Captain Eshara's Imperial Fists scattered before the Valedictor Gate like offal. Herded like animals onto the darkened prison barges of the traitors, they had been kept chained and beaten

until arriving at this terrifying place.

Leonid knew that the galaxy was a big place, with many strange and incredible sights, but this was something else entirely. Hoary old veterans told tales of worlds located in a horrifying place known as the Eye of Terror, where mighty daemons and the followers of the Ruinous Powers ruled supreme. They spoke of insane worlds where gods whose name could never be spoken held sway over all before them and who shaped their worlds to their lunatic whims. Like others, he had laughed at these tales, though there had always been an edge of fear to the laughter.

What if they were true?

Now he knew they were.

The shadow of Obax Zakayo swallowed him, the monster in dark iron armour thrown into silhouette by the fires of the furnace.

'You. Slave. Stand up,' ordered the Iron Warrior.

Leonid rose to his feet. To disobey Obax Zakayo was to die and, as wretched as their lot was, he was damned if he'd die at this bastard's hands.

The Iron Warrior leaned down, the hot breath from his helmet's rebreather making Leonid gag and the yellow light from his visor bathing him in a sickly glow.

'Slaves bring you food. You are their leader?'

'I was,' nodded Leonid. 'Not now.'

Obax Zakayo laughed, the noise a harsh grating that scraped along Leonid's nerves like a rusty blade. He plucked at a tattered epaulette on Leonid's shoulder, wiping away a film of grease and ash to reveal the faded gold shoulder boards of a lieutenant colonel.

'You let yourself be captured,' said Obax Zakayo. 'The gods of battle will mock you for all eternity, slave.'

'Better that than be damned for all eternity,' snapped Leonid.

'Damned?' chuckled Obax Zakayo, as though hearing the word for the first time. 'Perhaps, but I am immortal.

Powerful. What are you?'

Leonid said nothing, feeling his hatred swell, but keeping a tight grip on its power. Hot pain suffused his limbs and though he was weary beyond measure, he stood firm in the face of the taunting Iron Warrior.

From the corner of his eye he caught a glimpse of furtive movement and heard a muffled cry over the heavy hammering of the forge and the roar of the imprisoned daemon. Obax Zakayo caught the motion and turned in time to catch a fleeting glimpse of a swinging iron bar before it hammered into his helmet.

Leonid ducked back as the traitor dropped to one knee.

A group of scrawny slaves clambered across the engine block of the lead troughhauler, dragging the masked creatures from within and bludgeoning them with jagged lumps of hardened ore. The daemon forge howled in glee at the slaughter, its wailings rising to a screaming gale.

Gunshots filled the forge and a handful of slaves went down. Blood spurted, spilling into the hissing weapon moulds and filling the air with its stink.

Mutants tried to reverse the remaining two troughhaulers, but the enraged slaves were upon them, tearing them apart with a fury borne from months and months of systematic abuse and torture.

Sergeant Ellard reacted first, running over to join the slaves clambering across the nearest troughhauler.

'Turn it around!' he bellowed, pointing to the forge's main doors, which were being dragged shut by gangs of twisted mutants. Leonid grinned ferally, realising that this was their chance, when a powerful spasm tore through his stomach and doubled him up in pain. He dropped to his knees and vomited the putrid gruel he had eaten, feeling his stomach contract as it tried to expel his stomach lining.

A fierce madness seized the slaves as they beat their tormenters to bloody ruin, tears of released horror streaking their filth-encrusted faces. Giant cauldrons of molten metal passed overhead as one of the Jouran slaves finally managed to take control of the lumbering vehicle. The troughhauler lurched forwards, its tracks spinning clouds of choking ash into the air.

Leonid watched as the cheering slaves clambered aboard, whooping in savage joy as it headed towards the exit and the burning white sky beyond.

Then Obax Zakayo regained his feet and raised his arm, a mass of twisting pipes, hissing vents and gun barrels.

Leonid tried to shout a warning, but the pain in his belly had stolen his voice.

Foot-long tongues of flame blasted from Obax Zakayo's arm, explosive bolts ripping across the side of the troughhauler, spilling slaves and blood to the ground. Screams and cries of pain echoed through the forge as the Iron Warrior worked the killing fire of his weapon over the slaves.

'No!' cried Leonid. 'Stop!'

Obax Zakayo laughed in the face of Leonid's protestations, reaching down to haul the former lieutenant colonel to his feet to better witness the slaughter. Blood and viscera coated the sides of the trough hauler as it slewed over to the side of the forge, the top of its driver's head blasted clear. Slaves scattered before the Iron Warrior 's lethal retaliation, abandoning the troughhauler to find cover.

Leonid twisted in his captor's grip, watching as the troughhauler slammed into the stanchions supporting the greased rails carrying the vast cauldrons of molten metal. The vehicle wasn't moving quickly, but its sheer mass was enough to rip

the stanchion from its moorings and crumple it with its momentum. The cauldron currently traversing the forge swayed in slow motion, tipping slowly to one side before toppling from the rails and dropping to the floor.

A wave of fiery liquid spilled out, magma-hot ore turning flesh, bone and metal to stinking clouds of vapour in a heartbeat. Scores of slaves perished in seconds, the troughhauler dissolving into hissing molten slag. Rivers of redhot metal rolled onwards in a deadly tide, the intricately carved runes of embossed gold on the floor flashing to steam under the heat.

As the river of molten metal rolled onwards to the forge mouth, yet more of the runes were obliterated and the roaring of the bound daemon in the forge rose to fresh heights of relish as more and more of the wards imprisoning it were destroyed.

Suddenly realising what must happen, Obax Zakayo dropped Leonid and ran for the forge's exit, leaving the gasping Jouran coughing and spluttering as the hissing metal began cooling and slowing its advance.

But by then the damage was done.

The last rune dissolved and the daemon broke free.

Imprisoned for millennia, the scion of the warp was in no mood to be merciful and lashed out in blind fury, a frothing miasma of black light with a swirling vortex of forms and geometries twisting through its nebulous matter. Those closest to the daemon drew breath to scream, but did not have time to do so the flesh sloughed from their bones.

Leonid rolled aside as a dark tendril slashed the ground, leaving a hissing residue in its wake. A whipping, octopoid form writhed in the dark light, feeding on the powerful energies of fear and hate swirling around the inside of the forge. Streamers of black, oily matter whip lashed around the forge, slicing men to bloody ribbons and lifting others high into the air.

Skeletal husks dropped to the floor, bled dry of their souls and Leonid scrambled

onto a growling piece of machinery to escape the creeping tide of cooling - though still fearsomely hot - molten metal. Throughout the forge, slaves scrambled for high ground, fighting like animals to secure their safety. Men hurled one another into the fires in desperate attempts to prolong their own lives.

The darkness flailed like madness given form, expanding and solidifying tentacles of dark matter smashing through the walls and roof of the forge as easily as a man might destroy a doll's house. With a tortured shriek of shearing metal, the latticed girders of the roof and far wall buckled and tumbled to the floor. Leonid covered his head with his arms as smaller fragments and sheets of corrugated iron crashed down around him, praying to the God-Emperor that he might survive this carnage.

Long seconds passed before he realised that he was still alive and the screaming daemon was silent. He risked a glance through his fingers, seeing the burning white sky through the giant tear the vengeful daemon had ripped through the walls of the forge. Of the daemon itself, there was no sign, save a spot of darkness flaring into the sky.

Leonid grimaced in pain. Staring too long at that impossible sky was like staring directly into the sun, and he wrenched his gaze from its hateful brightness.

Little remained of the troughhaulers save hissing piles of molten metal. Here and there flames licked across the bones and charred limbs of slaves and mutants protruding from the hissing ore. The dull throbbing of the forge faded as the daemon-powered engines slowly ground to a halt, the hammers and pistons starved and useless.

As Leonid took stock of the devastation the escaped daemon had wreaked, he was relieved to see Sergeant Ellard pull himself from behind the ruins of a giant milling machine.

Scores had died in the abortive - and unplanned - escape attempt, and those who had survived were too stupefied to take advantage of the momentary lack of overseers.

Leonid knew he had seconds at best to capitalise on the situation when the forge doors crashed open and a dozen Iron Warriors were thrown into stark relief by the bone-white sky.

Whatever chance they might once have had vanished like ash on the wind.

LEONID KEPT HIS eyes glued to the bleak, grey rockcrete platform, whorls of dust and ash describing wind-blown spirals before him. He tried to shut out the hateful screams of the sleepers as the burning sky blazed white above them, beating down with fierce brightness, the dark hole of the sun rippling like a baleful eye. Fellow slaves and Jourans were pressed tightly around him, the stench of unwashed bodies, blood and fear mingling to create a heady cocktail of aromas.

The former lieutenant colonel shivered as daemonic scents gusted through them, expelled like corpse-breath from the newly formed tunnel mouths.

He risked a glance into its haunted blackness, feeling a splintering pain in his head as his limited senses tried to comprehend the shifting images of multiple realities intersecting with the sound of clashing blades and bells.

He felt every molecule in his body vibrate as the resonant frequencies of this dimensional abscess widened, rippling waves of sickness and filth spreading from this wound in space time.

He could feel a terrible imminence, like the tension in the fabric of the sky before a storm. Something was coming.

Something so dark and ancient that his mind could not even begin to comprehend the scope of its evil.

Then Obax Zakayo moved between him and the tunnel and its spell was broken.

'You sense it's coming intersection don't you, slave? The Omphalos Daemonium.'

Leonid did not answer, his guts clamping in pain at the sound of such damned syllables given voice and wishing again that he had died on the journey to this cursed place.

The failed escape attempt in the forge had been paid for in the blood of his former soldiers. Obax Zakayo strode through the cowering survivors of the daemon's escape, clubbing slaves to death with each sweep of his fist. Slaves were dragged from their hiding places and hurled onto spinning lathes, pressed into crushers or lowered into steaming vats of ore. Limbs were ground to gory stumps and bones crushed to powder within the jellied ruin of their flesh. No pain went unexplored and no form of suffering was omitted from the Iron Warriors' retribution. Within minutes, hundreds were dead, slaughtered to sate the traitors' lust for pain and humiliation.

Obax Zakayo had lifted Leonid from the ground and held him before his battered visor.

'You are their leader.'

'No,' gasped Leonid. 'I told you, I don't-'

'They still look at you as their leader,' interrupted the Iron Warrior. 'For this I will kill some of them now. Keep your men in line or I will kill all of them. Not you, though. Just them. All of them.'

'But-'

'Silence,' snarled Obax Zakayo. 'Just do it. You are no use here now that the daemon has gone. You are to be taken to the Warsmith Honsou and put to work in his weapon-shops. Try and escape from him and you will not be dealt with so lightly.'

Marched from the devastated forge, those slaves not fed inch by inch to the

machines had been driven out into a twisting labyrinth of fortifications crowned with blades and kilometres of deep trenches lined with corrugated sheets of metal. Forests of razorwire linked armoured blockhouses and pillboxes bristling with heavy artillery pieces and guns that defied all proportion and reason.

The rumble of artillery fire was a constant drone at the edge of hearing, but who was fighting and why was a mystery. Dozens of slaves died en route to whatever fate awaited them at the hands of the Warsmith Honsou, dropping in exhaustion or starvation or from the merciless beatings and random killings inflicted by Obax Zakayo.

The gruelling death march continued for days though on a world such as this, where the sun never set and the skies never darkened, time was an absurd notion. Each day brought fresh horrors and new obscenities: roads lined with eviscerated bodies - human, alien and some so grossly misshapen as to defy any classification of form. Towers of skulls, harvest fields of billowing flesh and great monoliths raised with the scrimshawed bones of the dead.

Leonid saw that each step brought them closer to a range of brooding, smoke wreathed mountains, their topmost peaks lost in the brightness of the sky and obscured by a layer of dark clouds. Pillars of coiling, sentient smoke rose from the plains around the mountains, called by some nameless attraction to conceal whatever terrors and wonders lurked above in the darkness.

No matter their course, the sinister mountains always drew closer and Leonid knew with dreadful certainty that they were their destination. In the same realisation, he also knew that none of them would survive to reach the heights of those dreadful peaks.

Each glimpse of the desolate mountains through the twisting circumvallation simultaneously fascinated and repulsed him. The citadel of Hydra Cordatus had been constructed by an unknown genius of military architecture, though compared to the monstrous fortifications raised on this world, it was a mere trifle - a footnote to the dark grandeur of this world's defences. Leonid doubted that anything could penetrate these redoubts or that any foe could cast down its walls.

Finally, their march had come to an end. A barbed gate of bronze led into a rectangular, earthen arena, fully a kilometre wide and twice that in length.

From somewhere nearby he could hear screaming; wails of the damned in torment that set his teeth on edge and seemed to pierce his skull with lancing, glass shards of pain. The ground underfoot was surprisingly soft and loamy, crimson liquid oozing from the water-logged earth. As Leonid looked more closely, he saw that the ground was not water-logged, but soaked in fresh spilled blood, bones and grinning skulls gleaming whitely through the red ground.

His mind reeled at the prospect. How many must have been drained of their lifeblood to irrigate such a vast space so thoroughly? How many arteries had been emptied to satiate the vile thirst of this dark, dark earth?

Leonid's stomach knotted in disgust, but he had nothing in his belly to expel and dry heaved as the awful stench of fresh blood filled his senses. Sergeant Ellard held him upright as they marched across thick, timber duckboards to the centre of this place, this killing ground.

Was that it? Was this a place of execution? Had they been brought here so that their blood might mingle with the thousands who had already been drained?

He shook off Ellard's hand, determined to meet whatever fate the Iron Warriors had planned for them on his feet and unaided. As they drew nearer to the centre of the arena, Leonid saw a long strip of rockcrete had been built atop the blood-soaked ground and dull, bloody rail tracks laid, running across the middle of the arena and ending at opposite walls. As they mounted the steps to the rockcrete platform, the source of the screaming was finally revealed to the Jouran slaves.

Each sleeper laid between the rail tracks writhed in agony; a jigsaw of bodies and limbs knotted together by some dark sorcery, screaming in lunatic fever-dreams, their cries like a choir of banshees. Eyes and mouths churning in the fluid matter of each sleeper gave piteous voice to their suffering before being forced from form to formlessness that another soul might vent its endless purgatory.

Men dropped to their knees, weeping at this fresh vileness, the frayed ends of their sanity unable to bear any more.

Obax Zakayo hurled them from the platform, spinning the gibbering madmen to land in red splashes. No sooner had they landed than fleshless, bony hands reached up through the dark earth, clawing and grasping at their bodies and dragging them below the surface to whatever fate awaited them beneath.

Leonid tried to shut out the gurgling cries of the doomed men who drowned in the bloody ground to feed the rapacious souls beneath.

He shut his eyes...

Splintering crystals of alternate existences clash and jangle, detaching from the walls of one plane and shifting their position to resonate at a different frequency. Echoes in time allow the planes to shift and change; altering the angles of reality to allow the dimensions to unlock, dancing in a ballet of all possibilities.

...and cried out, his eyes snapping open again, dizzy and disorientated. He reached out to grab Ellard, steadying himself on his sergeant.

'Sir?'

'Emperor 's blood!' hissed Leonid, looking around the death arena. He felt a sickening vibration deep in his bones as a restlessness rippled through the ground. The jagged stumps of bone jutting through the ground retreated into its sanguineous depths and the screaming sleepers howled with renewed anguish.

Where the rail tracks vanished into the walls of this vast courtyard, streamers of multi-coloured matter were oozing from the stonework.

Rippling spirals of reflective light coiled from the mortar, twisting the image behind like a warped lens. The walls seemed to stretch, as though being sucked into an unseen vortex behind, until there was nothing left but a rippling veil of impenetrable darkness, a tunnel into madness ringed with screaming faces.

Warped realms, a universe and lifetimes distant, flow together, joining all points in time on the bronze bloodtracks. On a journey that leads everywhere and begins nowhere, the Omphalos Daemonium pushes itself from nothingness to form. Snaking from its daemonic womb and leaving nothing but barren rape and death in its wake.

Obax Zakayo laughed, though Leonid could feel the fear that lurked beneath.

And the Omphalos Daemonium came.

THOUGH HIS SCREAMING flesh had warned him of the might and power of its evil, it had been but the merest hints of the thing's diabolical majesty. Roaring from the tunnel mouth like a brazen juggernaut of the end times, the Omphalos Daemonium shrieked along the bloodtracks towards the horrified slaves.

Some tried to run: they were struck down. Some dropped dead with fright while others curled into foetal balls and soiled themselves like newborns.

Leonid dropped to his knees at the sight of the monstrous daemon engine.

'It is fitting that you give homage,' nodded Obax Zakayo.

Vast bone-pistons drove it forward, iron and steel flanks heaving with immaterial energies. Bloody steam leaked from every demented, skull-faced rivet as wheels of tortured souls ground the tracks beneath it to feast on the oozing blood of the dead earth.

Deep within its insane structure, it might have once resembled an ancient steam-driven locomotive, but unknown forces and warped energies had transformed it into something else entirely. The thunder of its arrival could be felt by senses beyond the pitiful five known to humankind, echoing through the planes of reality that existed and intersected within the Eye of Terror, where such things were the norm rather than the incredible.

Behind it came a tender of dark iron and a juddering procession of boxcars, their timbers stained with aeons of blood and ordure. Leonid knew somehow how that millions had been carried to their deaths in these hellish containers;

carried to whatever loathsome destination this horrifying machine desired and then exterminated. The Omphalos Daemonium slowed, the sleepers driven beyond sound in their torment as the towering daemon engine halted at the edge of the platform.

Leonid wept tears of blood, his bladder and bowel voiding as the power and evil of the daemon engine swept through him. He thought he heard booming laughter and the grinding squeal of warped timber doors sliding open on runners rusted with blood.

He rolled onto his back, seeing gusts of blood-laced steam hiss from the armoured hide of the Omphalos Daemonium. Brazen laughter rippled through the tendrils of steam as they writhed on some evil business of their own. Each tendril thickened and became more solid as they wormed through the writhing forms of the slaves on the platform.

One lifted a sobbing man from the ground, wrapping itself around his body like a snake. Like quicksilver, the other tendrils whipped over, latching onto the body and attacking it like predators in a feeding frenzy until there was nothing left.

Leonid blinked, too numb with horror to react as he saw the tendrils of smoke vanish and eight figures appear standing in their place. They wore grey, featureless boiler-suits and knee-high boots with silver buckles along the shins.

Each carried a fearsome array of knives, hooks and saws on their leather belts.

Their faces were human in proportion only, flensed of the disguise of skin and glistening with revealed musculature.

Crude stitches crisscrossed their skulls and, as they turned their heads as though hunting by scent, Leonid saw they were utterly featureless save for distended and fanged mouths. They had no eyes, nose or ears, only discoloured, cancerous

swellings that bulged and rippled beneath their fleshless skulls.

The daemons circulated through the slaves, selecting men at random and lifting them from the ground to snap their spines and fasten fanged jaws to the blackened and swollen melanoma on their necks. Leonid pressed his hands to his ears as the daemons suckled on the cancers that grew and multiplied within the bodies of the Jouran slaves.

One passed within a metre of Leonid and he felt a suffocating fear rise up in him, though he could barely believe that his terror could rise to greater heights.

He saw its patchwork face swing towards him the tumourous tissue in its neck bulging with a horrid appetite as its blackened fingers reached for him, gripping his tattered uniform and hauling him upright. Its touch felt like rotted meat, wriggling with the suggestion of maggots and freshly hatched larvae. Its dead skin mask was inches from his face, its breath like a furnace of cadavers. It moved its undulating face around his, as though tasting his scent.

'The Sarcomata favour you,' hissed Obax Zakayo. 'Corruption of the flesh given form and purpose, the malignancies devouring your body are the choicest sweetmeats to them.'

Leonid waited for death, but the Omphalos Daemonium had greater purpose for him than mere murder, roaring in impatience as the Sarcomata's mouth descended to the swellings on his neck. The daemon hissed in submission before tossing him through the doors of the boxcar directly behind the Omphalos Daemonium. He landed on a carpet of decomposing matter that stank of excrement and blood.

Their loathsome hunger sated for the moment, the Sarcomata herded the rest of the slaves into the boxcars, packing them in tightly before shutting them in the darkness with nothing but their terror for company.

'WHERE DO YOU think they're taking us?' said Ellard.

'I don't know, sergeant,' replied Leonid, 'but I heard that bastard Obax Zakayo mention a name. Honsou, I think.'

'Honsou?'

'Aye, that's what it sounded like.'

'I've heard that name before,' said Ellard.

'You have? Where?'

'On the prison hulks that brought us here. By the sound of it, I think he was their war leader on Hydra Cordatus.'

Leonid shivered, remembering the sight of the Iron Warriors' leader as he stood before the walls of the citadel.

Captain Eshara had called him a Warsmith and Leonid remembered the blasted rune standard and the nauseous terror that settled in his belly at the sight of such an ancient and terrible warrior.

If they were truly to be delivered into the hands of such a monstrous being, then perhaps death at the hands of the Sarcomata would have been preferable to this stinking hell. Nearly a hundred men were packed tightly into a boxcar made to carry half that number, and the stench was an assault on the senses. So crammed were they that each man was forced to stand upright, pressed tightly against his comrades, unable to make more than the smallest movement. Men wept and wailed, slatted shafts of bright light dopplering through the warped timbers of the boxcar as the daemon engine rattled and clattered its way up into the mountains.

Leonid could taste smoke in the air and an acrid tang of electrical build-up, like he'd felt deep in the Machine Temple of the citadel. He pressed his face to a

blade of light, peering out into the bright day.

Ash-stained rocks flashed past, green sparks flaring from the soul wheels as they carried the Omphalos Daemonium higher.

The dark layer of clouds drew nearer, parting every now and then to reveal a tantalising glimpse of a jagged spire, a bladed bastion or a gun-studded redoubt. As the daemon engine began turning in a long, lazy curve, Leonid saw that their route carried them across an impossible bridge of dizzying proportions. Thousands of girders and beams were laced together in a gravitydefying structural lattice that spanned a gorge of gargantuan proportions. Its bottom was lost to sight, roiling mists and screeching beasts swooping through in its lightning-filled depths.

'We have to get out of here, sergeant.'

'I know. But how?'

'I don't know yet, but we're all dead men if we stay.'

'Most of the men I know who would have been handy in a fight died in the forge temple. We don't have much in the way of forces.'

'You think I don't know that, Ellard?' snapped Leonid. 'Even if we die trying it's got to be better than what we're being taken to. The forge of Obax Zakayo was bad enough. I don't want to find out what this Honsou's going to be like.'

Ellard nodded and rested his head wearily against the wall of the boxcar, staring out into the desolate landscape.

Deep lines ringed his eyes and Leonid noticed for the first time how haggard his sergeant had become. Like most officers, Leonid had relied heavily on his sergeants to run his company, and none more so than Ellard. To see a man of such formidable physical presence reduced to such a wasted creature was dispiriting in the extreme.

Leonid yawned, suddenly bone-deep tired and felt his eyelids drooping. Dimly he heard a series of dull cracks, like gunfire, but was too weary to react.

'Get down, sir!' called Ellard, leaping forward to drag Leonid to the floor of the boxcar. Tightly-packed bodies hampered his efforts, but the sergeant's strength, though diminished, was still prodigious, and he was able to bundle his commanding officer to the ground.

'What the hell are you doing?' asked Leonid.

'Stay down!'

Leonid rolled onto one elbow as the sides of the boxcar exploded inwards with fist-sized bullet impacts. Shafts of light speared in as the bullets stitched a path across the side of the boxcar, slashing bloody paths through the packed slaves. Blood and screams filled the air as men jerked like mad things under the fusillade.

Gunsmoke drifted through the bedlam-filled car. Dead men slumped against one another, held upright by the press of bodies. Blood pooled on the floor, swilling out the doors as Leonid heard a thunderous impact on the roof of the boxcar.

'What the hell's going on?'

'I think we're under attack, sir. Or being rescued. I'm not sure which.'

A crackling trio of blades punched through the bronze roof of the boxcar and a massive fist tore the sheet metal back as though it was no more than paper.

Silhouetted against the dazzling whiteness of the sky was a huge figure in midnight black power armour. A Space Marine...

Sudden hope flared as the figure shouted, 'Slaves! Rise up and fight! Fight the Iron Warriors!'

Leonid clambered to his feet, fresh energy filling his limbs at this answer to his prayers. The Space Marine looked up along the length of the train and said, 'Hurry. The Sarcomata will gather soon.'

Laughing hysterically in relief and released fear, Leonid began climbing to freedom, the splintered holes in the side of the boxcar providing ample hand and foot holds. He pushed his head above the level of the roof, relishing the cleansing feeling of the wind whipping through his hair. He hauled himself through the hole the Space Marine had torn in the roof and pushed himself to his knees, reaching down to help Ellard.

The sky blazed white above them, the black sun beating down with greasy dark tendrils to somewhere beyond yet another range of mountains. Leonid forced his gaze from the sight as the energy claws retreated into the Space Marine's gauntlet.

Looking closer, Leonid saw that the warrior's armour was a far cry from the gleaming brilliance of the Imperial Fists he had seen on Hydra Cordatus; ravaged with dents, scarred and patched in dozens of places with crude grafts and filler. Hot vapours vented at his shoulders from the nozzles of a massive jump pack, and a white symbol - a bird of prey of some kind - had been painted over with a jagged red cross. His helmet bore a similar symbol across his visor.

Looking along the length of the boxcars, Leonid saw yet more of the Space Marines. Clad in an eclectic mix of colours and styles of armour, almost all of them bore a different Chapter symbol on their shoulder guards. They pulled slaves from captivity and herded them towards the rear of the daemon engine's boxcars and, glancing down into the filthy prison he had escaped from, Leonid saw that he and Ellard were the only two to follow the Space Marine's order to climb out. Perhaps forty men remained, staring up with terrified eyes at the armoured warrior.

'Who are you?' shouted Leonid over the roar of the wind.

'I am Ardaric Vaanes of the Red Corsairs,' said the warrior, drawing a pistol. 'Get behind me.'

Leonid and Ellard scrambled across the roof, hugging its rough surface closely. Leonid risked a glance over the edge of the roof and experienced a moment's sick vertigo as he stared down into the abyss the daemon engine was crossing. He rolled onto his back in time to see Obax Zakayo clamber onto the roof, his lashing energy whip coiling above his helmeted head.

'Look out!' shouted Leonid as the whip cracked.

Vaanes brought up his arm to deflect the blow, the crackling lash ensnaring his limb and discharging a powerful corona of blue light. Ardaric Vaanes grunted in pain, his pistol clattering to the roof of the boxcar and skidding to the edge.

The Space Marine backed away from the giant Iron Warrior, risking a glance at Leonid and Ellard.

'Get to the front!' he shouted. 'You have to stop this daemon-thing before we reach the gatehouse. Go now!'

Obax Zakayo's whip lashed again, driving Vaanes to his knees as Leonid and Ellard scrambled along the roof to peer over the bladed front of the boxcar.

The Iron Warrior took a ponderous step towards the convulsing Space Marine, his mechanised claw reaching out to snap his neck.

Vaanes roared and thrust with his lightning-sheathed blades. Obax Zakayo batted the blow aside with his axe as his mechanised claw clamped on Vaanes's gorget.

'You renegades dare try to steal the slaves of Warsmith Honsou?' snarled Obax Zakayo. 'For this you must die.'

The claw tightened on the Space Marine's neck, and Leonid heard the crack of ceramite over the rushing wind.

White sunlight glinted off metal and he saw the Space Marine's pistol juddering at the edge of the boxcar's roof.

He reached over and dragged the heavy gun closer, amazed at its bulk and weight. Too heavy for him to fire onehanded, he rolled onto his back, cradling the gun to his chest and supporting its weight on his forearm.

He pulled the trigger, the recoil hurling the gun from his hands. He rolled and grabbed the pistol's oversized grip before the weapon could tumble into the abyss below.

But his shot was accurate, or at least accurate enough to matter. It struck the visor of Obax Zakayo's helmet and spun him around. The claw choking Ardaric Vaanes released its grip and the Space Marine leapt to his feet to face the Iron Warrior.

'Go! Quickly!' he bellowed, pointing further along the bloodtracks. 'I told you to stop this thing before we reach the gatehouse!'

Leonid turned and gazed through the dark smog ahead, not truly believing the sight before his eyes.

Emerging from the darkness ahead was a fortification built into the mountain from dark madness, standing in defiance of all reason. Its steepled towers wounded the sky, its massive gateway a snarling void that swallowed the tracks the Omphalos Daemonium travelled upon. Its walls were darkened, bloodstained stone, veined with unnatural colours that should not exist and which burned themselves upon the retina. Lightning leapt between its towers and the clanking of great engines and machines echoed like thunder from beyond its walls. And this was but a gatehouse?

'Blood of the saints!' whispered Ellard.

'I couldn't agree more,' said Leonid.

The clash of weapons behind them and the sight of the monolithic fortress drove them on and the two Jourans slithered forwards on their bellies to the end of the boxcar. A miasma of evil and uncounted aeons of torment pulsed from the howling daemon engine, and Leonid felt blood drip from his nose and ears the closer they crawled.

He pushed himself up, ready to make his way onto the daemon engine. A horrifying, bloodstained tender was coupled between it and the boxcars, filled with dismembered corpses. Red steam trailed from the thundering engine, spinning like bloody streamers as the Sarcomata feasted on the cadavers.

'We'll need to move quickly,' said Ellard.

Leonid nodded and swallowed his disgust, dropping into the oozing carpet of bodies. The tender lurched on the bloodtracks and he fell, throwing his arms out before him and sinking knee deep in gore and severed limbs. Ellard dropped next to him and pulled him upright. Together they waded unsteadily through the

bodies, corpse gases and semi-coagulated blood misting the air with every step. The tendrils of bloody steam slithered around them, more solid than smoke had any business being.

'Emperor forgive us,' said Ellard as a slack, dead face rolled over under his boot.

Leonid gratefully reached the end of the tender, keeping an eye on the circling smoke.

He hauled himself over the lip of the tender, turning back to help his sergeant.

A ghostly face swam out of the smoke, a fleshless patchwork of musculature with no features save a fang-filled mouth.

'Hurry!' shouted Leonid, dropping Ardaric Vaanes' pistol behind him and dragging Ellard forward. Wraith-like arms wrapped themselves around the sergeant's shoulders and began pulling.

Only partly formed, the Sarcomata's strength was not the equal of the two Jourans, and Leonid hauled Ellard from the tender with one last desperate heave.

The two men collapsed on the iron deck at the back of the Omphalos Daemonium, a bronze doorway rattling in its frame behind them. Leonid could see no handle, tasting ashes and the scent of burning flesh gusting through an iron grille at its top. Solidifying smoke-trail bodies of the Sarcomata began climbing from the tender, hissing with hunger at these fresh morsels.

The two Jourans backed into the door, Leonid dropping to one knee to recover the fallen pistol. One of the Sarcomata pounced towards him, clawed arms reaching for his neck.

The pistol boomed and ripped the top of the daemon's head off. Daemonic blood splashed the door, the metal undulating as the blood hissed and vanished like droplets on a hot skillet.

The entire doorframe rippled and, as Leonid fell back against the door, it opened as though freshly unlocked.

He sprawled into a blisteringly hot engine room, Ellard wasting no time in following him inside and slamming the door shut behind him. The door buckled in its frame as the Sarcomata hurled themselves against it, desperate to feast on the cancers within them.

Leonid could feel their hunger as a physical thing as he groggily pushed himself to his feet.

As he saw where their desperate flight had taken them, he wondered whether they might have been better off taking their chances with the Sarcomata. The interior of the daemon engine defied geometry, impossibly stretching beyond the limits of vision to either side, a sweltering, red-lit hell cavern, larger than the forge temple of Obax Zakayo. A wide-doored firebox roared and seethed, tended by a giant in a clanking, mechanical suit of riveted power armour and thick, vulcanised rubber. Over its ancient iron armour, it wore a blood-stiffened apron, and a crown of metal horns sprouted from a conical helmet with a raised visor.

Muttered doggerel and guttural curses spat from beneath the helmet as the figure approached a long line of dangling chains and pulleys, each with a limbless human torso skewered on a rusted hook. The figure stabbed a long billhook into a headless torso and thrust it into the firebox. He stoked the daemon engine with flesh and blood, and belching stacks spewed ashen bodies into the air.

'There...' said the figure, its voice rasping and hoarse. 'What need I incantations or words? Word magic is poor man's sorcery; it is flesh magic that is strong. Flesh powers ye, blood sustains ye and I bind thee.'

'What the hell is this?' said Leonid, casting uneasy glances over his shoulder at the rattling door.

Though his words were spoken in a whisper, the armoured giant stiffened and turned quickly to face them, its butcher's blade held out before it.

'Well then, what's this? The Sarcomata come knocking at my door and flesh comes to throw itself in the fires? Good flesh, helpful flesh. Much better than the deadmorsels we get...'

Leonid raised the pistol and said, 'Who are you?'

'Me?' said the giant, swinging his blade from side to side. 'I's the Slaughterman. Iron Warrior true. Cut and slice, cut and slice. Flesh for the machine. Blood for the cogs and flesh for the fires.'

The firebox growled, clawed tongues of flame slashing in vain at the giant's turned back. He chuckled, the sound sending shivers up the Jourans' spines, and shouted over his shoulder.

'No, no, no, you won't be eating my skin and bones, daemon. Thrash and struggle all you want. Bloodmeat for me, deadflesh for you.'

'You feed this thing bodies?' said Ellard, his revulsion plain.

'Yes, deadflesh feed the daemon, two hooks ready for you two. Fresh meat for me. I will cut you up nicely, dress your flesh with reverence, and sup your blood as it spills onto me. Now come here like good flesh so I can chop you.'

The Slaughterman beckoned with an encrusted gauntlet.

Leonid raised Vaanes's pistol and said, 'I don't think so. Just stop this thing and I won't kill you.'

The Slaughterman laughed, and shook his head as he advanced towards Leonid. 'You kill me? No, you are meat, nothing more. We will talk no more and you will die.'

Leonid fired the pistol, the bolt striking the Slaughterman square in the chest.

Sparks flew and a frothing gruel of fluid and matter dribbled down his filthy

apron. The giant snarled, his blackened features twisted in rage.

'You shot me,' he said. 'I cut you to death slowly now. Cut your flesh screaming into morsels that I will feed you. I will feed you your feet, your legs and then your arms. And then I will give you to the Omphalos Daemonium and you will know true pain.'

Leonid fired again, but this time the bolt was smashed aside by the Slaughterman's billhook.

With a roar, the Slaughterman charged, his giant blade sweeping down to cleave Leonid in two. Leonid ducked and rolled aside, the billhook scraping a flaring gouge in the floor.

Ellard ran behind the Slaughterman, desperately searching for a weapon, as Leonid stood and fired again. The bullets went wide, smacking wetly into the hanging torsos and blowing them apart from the inside.

'No!' shouted the Slaughterman. 'Not the deadflesh. Bad flesh must stop. Needs to be chopped quick.'

The giant Iron Warrior turned as Leonid backed into the swaying cadavers, firing into the butcher's rack of meat, ripping them from their hooks in a hail of bullets.

The Slaughterman wailed and roared, his billhook slashing a path through the meat towards his prey. Leonid kept the trigger pulled until the hammer slammed down on an empty chamber.

Bloody hooks swung and jangled before him, scraps of meat still sliding down the dark metal. One hook slid to the floor, a looping pile of chains rattling down from the winch above. As the Slaughterman pushed the last cadaver aside and stood face to face with Leonid, he saw Ellard standing beside the levers that controlled the chain pulley mechanism.

The firebox seethed in hunger behind the Slaughterman.

Leonid reached down and grabbed the hook, holding it before him like a weapon.

'Bad flesh, you. No reverence for you now. Chop, chop, chop. Deadflesh.'

The Slaughterman leaned down, and Leonid could finally see his face beneath the conical, horned helmet. Vacant and puffy, his features were curiously childlike, with a rotten-toothed grin and rheumy eyes that spoke of an unthinking cruelty.

One meaty gauntlet reached down, scooping up Leonid before he could dodge aside and lifting him from the ground. He grunted in pain as the giant lifted him up.

'Bad flesh,' said the Slaughterman.

'Won't even wet my blade with you. Just bite you into pieces.'

The Slaughterman's jaws cracked as they opened, stretching and swelling as if to swallow him whole. Foetid breath, reeking of decomposing matter, wafted from the depths and Leonid gagged, kicking at the Slaughterman's gut in desperation.

As the Slaughterman's jaws reached down towards him, Leonid swung the butcher's hook upwards in a vicious arc.

Bone splintered as the iron point punched through the giant's jawbone before exploding through his eye-socket.

Leonid fell to the floor as the Slaughterman howled in pain, the chain attached to the end of the hook pulling taut as Ellard frantically cranked the winch. The Slaughterman dropped his weapon and scrabbled at the barb, black blood spraying from the wound as he sought to pull some slack in the chain.

But Ellard was having none of it, reeling the Slaughterman in, winching the chain screechingly along its rails and dragging the wounded giant towards the

firebox. His howls were piteous, but Leonid had no sympathy for the monstrous cannibal.

Daemonic flames leapt from the firebox, blazing claws slashing at the Slaughterman's back. He screamed, fighting to get clear, but the tormented daemon had him and was not about to release its grip. Incandescent flames enveloped the Slaughterman and he was dragged into the inferno of the daemonic firebox. Soon he was lost to sight and the heavy iron door slammed shut behind him as the maniacal daemon within wreaked its terrible vengeance on its captor.

No sooner had the firebox's door shut than the vast bone-pistons slowed and the hissing machineries released scalding bursts of steam. The orange glow that pervaded the engine room faded and the impossible geometries of the chamber began returning to those dimensions that did not baffle the senses.

Leonid dropped to his knees, exhausted beyond words as the horror of the past few days threatened to overwhelm him. Ellard stumbled over to him and offered him his hand.

'I can't believe it. We got him.'

'Yes, sergeant, we did. Well done.'

'Now what do we do? Is this thing stopping?'

'Certainly feels like it.'

Leonid glanced over at the bronze door they had come through. Strangely, the thudding booms of the Sarcomata had ceased. Was their very existence somehow linked to the daemon within the firebox or even the Slaughterman himself? Even as he formed the thought, the door exploded inwards and Ardaric Vaanes stood framed in the white light of the sky.

'You did it,' he said, sounding surprised.

'Yes, we did,' agreed Leonid. 'Did you kill Obax Zakayo?'

'No, but he's gone. Gone with the rest of the boxcars.'

'What are you talking about?' said Leonid, limping towards the door.

As he and Ellard left the Slaughterman's domain, they saw that the tender was all that was left attached to the Omphalos Daemonium. Batteredlooking Space Marines filled it, but the boxcars were nowhere in sight.

'What the hell did you do?' screamed Leonid. 'I thought you came to rescue us?'

'No,' said Ardaric Vaanes. 'We were never here to save you. We came to stop the Iron Warriors getting more slaves for their weapon shops. Without slaves they cannot make weapons to fight us.'

'You killed them,' said Ellard, looking down the tracks for any sign of the boxcars.

'Trust me, if they truly understood what awaited them in Honsou's citadel, they would thank me for my mercy.'

'Mercy! You bastard, those were my men,' shouted Leonid. 'I fought shoulder to shoulder with them and you betrayed their courage.'

'They were not the men you fought beside any more. You know this. They were broken. But you have steel in you, I can see it plain as day. If you wish, you may come with us and strike back against the Iron Warriors. But decide now; we are through the gatehouse, and its guards will be upon us soon if we are not away.'

Vaanes climbed into the tender and held his hand above the coupling mechanism.

'Are you with us?' he asked.

'Go with you? We don't even know what you are,' said Leonid.

'We were once Space Marines of the Adeptus Astartes and fought for the Emperor, but now our only allegiance is to each other,' said Vaanes. 'Our former battle-brothers would call us renegades, but right now we are the nearest thing you have to friends.'

Leonid started to reply, but felt Ellard's hand on his shoulder.

'Sir, he may be right.'

'He killed our men, sergeant!'

'I know, and we will never forget that, but as Castellan Vauban used to say "the enemy of my enemy..." '

'...is my friend,' finished Leonid.

Book 3

THE HERACLITUS EFFECT

THE MONSTER WITH the patchwork face was right behind him. He could hear it crashing through the overgrown forest with bludgeoning force, trampling the fruits of their invention with every giant stride. He kept running. Running was all he could do. He couldn't fight such a terrible thing it was too much.

Magos Third Class Evlame fled through the forest in panicked flight, a forest that had once been a place of wonder and miracles, a place that had literally blossomed as a result of their labours. Every day spent here had been a day spent with the thrill of discovery and pride in their achievements, but now it was a place of horror, a blood-drenched nightmare of dismembered bodies and death.

Evlame's breath came in sharp spikes in his chest, his overlarge frame unused to such exertion and his heartbeat pounding in his ears as he ran. Massively wide leaves and sharp branches whipped past him, cutting his face and hands as he pushed through the forest. The ripe smell of new growth filled his nostrils and ruptured fruits, larger than his head, hung dripping from branches shredded with gunfire.

The sweet smell of pulped vegetation was almost overpowering, catching in the back of his throat as his lungs heaved in panicked breath after panicked breath. Breathless, Evlame paused to get his bearings, seeking something familiar in the landscape around him.

Swollen trees with trunks thicker than a Titan's leg surrounded him, their tops lost in the claws of mist that hung in the stagnant, moist atmosphere. Drooping branches laden with vivid growths in a rainbow of colours hung almost to the ground and gleaming chemical atomisers stood amongst the trees like the silver sculptures he'd seen in shrine parks, their waving, articulated limbs dispensing microscopic amounts of the Heraclitus strain into the atmosphere in controlled puffs of vapour.

A bright yellow generator hummed at the base of a towering, copper-barked tree laden with thick golden orbs that were wonderfully sweet and nutritious. The generator was stencilled with the number seventeen, which told him he was to the north of the Adeptus Mechanicus compound and home.

He heard the crunch of a heavy footfall beyond the limit of sight and froze in place as he tried to pinpoint the source. The reek of spoiled meat drifted on the wind, a rank, unpleasant odour after the fragrances he was used to in the forest. His eyes scanned left and right.

And then he saw it...

A glint of sunlight on armour, a reflection on dulled steel and a glimpse of his hunter's grey, nightmare face. Though he had only the briefest flicker of the features, he wished for no more complete a view, for the dead face was the horror of a badly maimed mannequin, the bloody remnants of a bomb blast victim.

Evlame turned and ran, knowing the genhanced vegetation underfoot and rampant growth of the forest would make stealthy movement impossible. He fled south, following the route of ribbed copper cables as they snaked through the humid forest like indigenous serpents. Pungent mulch carpeted the forest floor and Evlame felt like he was running in some terrible nightmare, where the monster is forever at your shoulder and your feet move as though through the most viscous glue.

Tears and snot covered his face as he blundered onwards, praying to the God-Emperor and every saint he could think of to deliver him from this terrible killer. He risked a glance over his shoulder, but could see nothing behind him. His foot connected with something solid and his world cartwheeled as he tumbled to the ground.

Evlame hit hard, the breath driven from his lungs by the impact and bright light exploded before his eyes. The cloying texture of fruit mash filled his mouth, as well as a pungent smell of opened meat. He spat seeds and fruit flesh, shaking his head as he pushed himself upright.

He knelt in an open clearing of enormous, ovoid fruit, most reaching to his chest in height and at least as wide - their enhanced growth rendering them swollen and ripe.

A headless body lay beside him, the ragged stump of neck still enthusiastically pumping blood onto the dark, almost black, soil. Another corpse lay amid the dripping carcass of an exploded fruit, its chest cavity ripped open as though an explosive charge had detonated within. Other bodies lay in similar states of terrible ruin - heads crushed, limbs removed or torsos ripped apart.

Evlame's mouth dropped open in mute horror, unable to take in such brutal, visceral evidence of murder. He pushed himself upright and set off towards the habitat domes, following the twisting cables like a lifeline. Rasping breath, like that of a consumptive, hissed behind him and he whimpered in terror, awaiting the blow that would split him open as surely as the ripened, overlarge fruits that surrounded him.

Such a blow never landed and he pushed his burning legs onwards, trampling through the soft mulch of pulped fruit and bloody earth. He sobbed with every step, his limbs flailing and his eyes streaming with tears of raw, unmanning fear.

Through his tears he saw the gleam of the silver-skinned habitat domes between the thick trunks of the towering forest and aimed his flight towards salvation. Surely Magos Szalin would know what to do? An entire company of cybernetically enhanced Tech-Guard were stationed at the Golbasto Facility and he began to laugh uncontrollably at the thought of reaching safety, his hysteria bubbling up like a geyser.

Evlame emerged into the open and stumbled across the automated firebreaks and pesticide barriers that protected the facility from the rampant growth of the genhanced forest. After the gloomy, spectral twilight of the undergrowth, the glare of the planet's warm yellow sun was dazzlingly bright and he shielded his eyes as he staggered and swayed like a drunk towards the Adeptus Mechanicus experimentation facility, the domes blurred through his lens of tears.

He saw movement and heard voices. He wiped his sodden face with the sleeve

of his robe and wept in joy as he saw scores of massively broad warriors in burnished battle plate, their bulk unmistakable as anything other than Adeptus Astartes.

The Space Marines had come!

Relief lent his battered limbs new strength and he ran towards the facility with fresh vigour, anxious to have these brave protectors of mankind between him and the monster that pursued him. Evlame ran like a man possessed, smelling an acrid chemical stink from the smashed domes and seeing flame-shot smoke as it billowed into the clear sky.

Bodies littered the ground and the skins of the domes were pocked with bullet holes.

Clearly the monster had not come alone...

But now the Adeptus Astartes were here, there was surely nothing to fear, for what could stand against such perfect warriors - their flesh enhanced by the artifice of the Emperor and fragments of His greatness encoded into their very bones. Such holy vision had served as the model for their work on Golbasto and Evlame longed to speak to these warriors of legend to tell them of the achievements wrought here.

'Over here!' he yelled, his voice hoarse and rasping after his lung-searing run through the forest. 'Help! It's coming after me. There's another one in the forest!'

The armoured giants turned at the sound of his voice, their massive, oversized weapons trained on him in an instant. He saw a confusing mix of armour marks and colours and laughed as he shook his head at their mistake.

'No, no! It's Magos Third Class Evlame!' he shouted, the brief vigour lent to his limbs fading and his steps becoming more uneven. He laughed and waved his arms like a madman, simultaneously amused and terrified at the irony of nearly being gunned down by his rescuers. 'I work here, I minister to the atomiser machines of the forest! I...'

His words trailed off as he dropped to his knees, his strength spent. He sank onto his rump, head tilted to the sun and his chest heaving as he sucked in shuddering breaths.

Evlame heard crunching footfalls and a chill fell across him as he was enveloped in the broad shadows of the towering warriors. He squinted into the glare of the sky and wiped the back of his hand across his tear-swollen eyes.

A trio of cruel faces cut from cold steel stared down at him, scarred and battle worn. One warrior's face was that of a killer, hostile and unforgiving. His skull was partly shaven and a ragged mohawk ran across its centre. Another warrior in dark plate wore his long black hair in a tight scalp lock, hooded eyes deep set in angular, pale features.

Half the final warrior's face was a ruined, knotted fist of crude augmetics, a glowing blue gem where his left eye ought to have been. His other eye glittered with cruel amusement and his dose-cropped dark hair was smeared with blood spatters.

The one with the killer's face itched to do him harm and Evlame felt a burgeoning horror swell within him as the truth of the matter began to dawn on him.

No Astartes these, but...

"You work here?' said the warrior with the ravaged face, squatting down on his haunches before him. Evlame nodded, his jaw slack with terror and he felt himself lose control of his bodily functions. The warrior reached out and took hold of his chin. Even in his fear-demented state, Evlame was Mechanicus enough to notice that the arm was fashioned from shimmering silver, a prosthetic quite unlike anything he had seen before. The digits were cold and smooth and articulated without recourse to any joints he could see.

The icy grip turned his head left and right, as though he were being regarded like a specimen in a jar.

Ardaric,' said the warrior with the strange arm, 'has Cycerin got everything we need?'

'He's almost done extracting the information from the senior magos,' answered the warrior in the black armour with jagged red crosses painted across his shoulder guards. The cogitators were smashed before we got to him, but the fool didn't think to wipe his own cranial memory coils.'

'And the canisters we came for?'

'Servitors are loading them onto the Stormbird as we speak.'

The killer with the mohawk said, 'Kill this last one, Honsou, and let's be on our way'

The warrior named Honsou lifted his gaze to something behind Evlame. 'Not yet, Grendel. I think I'll let my new champion finish what he started.'

The warrior released Evlame and pushed himself to his feet. It took an effort of will for Evlame to tear his eyes from Honsou's incredible silver arm.

He heard the whine of automatic targeting servos behind him and turned to see the incinerator units that had been used to contain the forest's expansion aiming at a singular figure that marched across the scorched borders of the Mechanicus facility.

Evlame whimpered in terror as the patchwork-faced monster that had killed the rest of his colleagues walked towards him. Its pace was leisurely, though he could see a fire of agony in its storm-cloud eyes, as though its every step was painful.

Like most of the others in this terrible group, it wore Astartes battle plate the colour of bare metal with chevron trims of yellow and black. The closer it came, the more he could see its aquiline features were drawn in a mask of anguish.

Its skin clung to its skull but loosely, as though ill-fitting and not intended to clothe the skull beneath it. Wire stitching criss-crossed its ashen face and Evlame felt he was looking into the eyes of a madman staring through a mask of stolen flesh.

'No...' he whispered. 'Please don't... I never did anything to hurt you.

The leathery-faced monster leaned down and said, 'I live in pain. Why should you not?'

TRAVELLING THROUGH THE empyrean was something Honsou of the Iron Warriors never enjoyed, for the placing his fate in the hands of others and the lack of influence he could bring to bear should something go wrong was anathema to him.

The strategium of the Warbreed thrummed with noise, the pounding beat of distant hammers and far-off machines vibrating the deck plates with industrious motion.

The ship had belonged to Honsou's former master and had been moored above Medrengard for a timeless age. Honsou and his few hundred warriors had travelled from the wrecked fortress of Khalan-Ghol to the impossible landmark of the Crooked Tower in order to claim the vessel as their own.

A twisted spire of jagged black rock, the numberless steps of the Crooked Tower spiralled downwards into the bowels of Perturabo's deepest forges and soared to the lost stars that orbited the dead world of the Iron Warriors.

They had climbed for an age, each footfall a lifetime and a heartbeat in the same breath, and the blasted earth of Medrengard had fallen away until they climbed to the stars themselves. Blackness enveloped them and a host of starships surrounded them, drifting in the utter dark and still of space.

The sheer impossibility of their physical surroundings had not fazed Honsou, and he had not been surprised when the steep stairs had led straight to the open hatches of the Warbreed.

The mighty ship had once taken the fire of the war-master to the followers of the false Emperor in days now ancient to those who had once defied them. Its guns had bombarded the last vestiges of life from Isstvan V and its orbital strikes had helped tear open the walls of the Imperial palace on Terra.

Its pedigree was mighty and its history proud, and Honsou could think of no finer vessel to take from the silent fleet berthed around the tower's summit.

Hissing vapours billowed and mighty pistons wheezed and ground up and down at the edges of the vaulted chamber, its walls arched with great girders of brazen metal and hung with ragged war banners of gold and black.

Cabals of hardwired crew submerged in vats of oxygen-rich oils regulated the workings of the ship and hissing mechanical creatures with multi-jointed legs drifted over the glistening pools with crackling cables trailing into the fluid.

The strategium tapered towards its front, the deck crew stationed here and plugged into the ship's vitals more like ordinary humans, tending to the ship's needs as it negotiated a passage between the stars through the swirling maelstrom of the immaterium. At the apex of the strategium stood the hulking, purple-robed form of Adept Cycerin, his mecha-organic flesh and kinship with the raw matter of the warp making him the perfect steersman.

'How much longer?' asked Honsou, his voice easily carrying the length of the strategium.

Cycerin turned his massive, machine-bulk to face Honsou, his swollen head buzzing with living circuitry and organic techno-viral strains. Slithering, blackened arms writhed like snakes from the tattered sleeves of his robes, the flesh and machine parts running like waxen mercury to form withered digits like mechanised quills.

Cycerin's green and yellow eyes brightened with a pulse of irritation as his hands described a series of complex motions in the suddenly misty air before him. Honsou stared at the plotting table before him as the adept's angular script appeared on the hololithic slate.

As it was every time he asked, the answer was frus-tratingly vague, but then what had he expected? Travel through the warp was unpredictable, even aboard a ship with a pilot uniquely qualified to ply its treacherous depths and who possessed a sense for the currents of the immaterium keener than the most aberrant patriarch of the Navis Nobilite.

Once, Cycerin had been Adeptus Mechanicus, but following his capture on the far distant world of Hydra Cordatus, he had been elevated from his paltry hybridised form of man and machine to something infinitely greater. Strands of the Oblitera-tor virus had been merged with his augmetics and his fundamental gene structure, rendering him into something post-human and far beyond simple cybernetics.

The techno-virus had made him superior, but it had also made him arrogant.

Honsou's memories of the Hydra Cordatus campaign felt as though they belonged to a previous life. Much had changed since then and his remembrance of the bloody siege had blurred into one unending hurricane of battle that had fanned the smouldering coal of his resentment into a roaring inferno of ambition.

Schemes of murder circled like carrion birds in his mind, threads woven from fragments of his new champion's fractured memories and the libraries worth of knowledge in Cycerin's cybernetic brain coming together to set them on their current course of revenge...

Many aboard the Warbreed thought him mad to pursue such a plan so soon after the bloody batde against Berossus and Toramino, but Honsou knew he would not be satisfied until he had inflicted die most wretched humiliations on the one enemy to escape him.

'If you want to hurt the fox, first strike at its cubs, he whispered.

He resumed his pacing of the deck, his bearing that of a caged predator, his face a mask of irritation and anticipation. It chafed him to have set such grand designs in motion, but then be forced to wait while such mundane concerns such as warp travel forced delays upon them.

'Pacing won't make us travel faster,' said Cadaras Grendel, who stood behind him, his gleaming bolter held lightly in one scarred hand, an oiled cleaning rag in the other.

'I know,' said Honsou, 'but it gives me something to do instead of just waiting.'

'You mean instead of training with your new champion.'

Honsou stopped in his pacing and said, 'I tasked Ardaric Vaanes with his training.'

'And that's the only reason you're not down there in the battle deck?'

'Of course, what of it?'

'It's not him,' said Grendel at last. 'It's not Ventris. It has his likeness, but it's not him.'

'I know that,' snapped Honsou. 'I'm not stupid, Grendel.'

'I don't blame you for not wanting to look at him,' said Grendel, wiping the cloth along the hard edges of the gun. 'After all, he's the spit of the only warrior to ever beat you.'

Ventris did not beat me!' shouted Honsou, rounding on his captain of arms, a warrior who had formerly served his enemy, Lord Berossus. Honsou's axe leapt to his hands, its edge lethal and hungry.

Cadaras Grendel didn't flinch as the axe came up to his neck.

'Whatever you say, Warsmith,' said the warrior, pushing the blade of the axe away with the barrel of his bolter. The muzzle passed before Honsou's face and he saw a smile crease Grendel's face as he stared into it. 'He didn't beat you, but then... you didn't beat him either. And it's your fortress that's a pile of rubble, eh?'

Honsou turned away from the confrontation, irritated that Grendel had managed to rile him with such ease. Ever since the destruction of Khalan-Ghol on Medrengard, Honsou's temper had been on a short fuse. The merest slight against his victory over the combined armies of Berossus and Toramino filled his blood with a surge of killing rage.

In any case, Grendel was right.

Each time he looked upon the face of his new champion (the newborn as it insisted on being called) he could see the features of the warrior who'd defied him and then thrown his offer to join him back in his face.

Uriel Ventris and his companion were of the Ultramarines Chapter, but what crime they had committed to be banished to a daemon world in the Eye of Terror he didn't know. However they had come to Medrengard, they had proved to be resourceful enemies.

They had survived the Halls of the Savage Morticians and freed the Heart of Blood, the mighty daemon imprisoned within the heart of Khalan-Ghol.

Honsou took a deep breath and said, 'By all the twelve sigils of the Rapturous Ruin, you almost make me wish Forrix and Kroeger weren't dead.'

Who?'

'Former captains who also commanded elements of the Warsmith's grand company back on Hydra Cordatus,' said Honsou, before adding pointedly. They're long dead now.'

'Did you kill them?'

Honsou shook his head. 'No, though I would have if they hadn't managed it themselves.' What happened to them?'

'Forrix went up against a Titan. He lost,' laughed Honsou, his good humour restored at the memory of his rival's obliteration by the great war-machine's guns.

'And Kroeger? What did he take on?'

T don't know,' admitted Honsou. 'Forrix told me he vanished through some kind of warp rift, but when we broke down the siege works, we found a body in his dugout.'

Was it Kroeger?'

Honsou shrugged. 'Maybe, I didn't bother to find out. Kroeger was gone, what did I care where? With them both dead, the Warsmith's army and his fortress were mine.'

'Until Toramino blasted it from under you,' reminded Grendel with a viperous smile.

Honsou smiled grimly. 'Aye, he did, but he hadn't reckoned with the Heart of Blood.'

'No one did. Not even you,' said Grendel, his normally gruff voice hushed at the mention of the ancient daemon. Honsou could well understand Grendel's tone, shuddering as he remembered rousing the daemon by kicking its head in rage at Ventris's escape.

'No,' he said, 'not even me.'

Fortunately, the creature had sensed that his flesh had once briefly hosted a

creature of the warp and ignored him, instead wreaking its bloodlust on Toramino's army beyond the walls.

The slaughter and destruction the daemon had unleashed was unlike anything Honsou had ever seen before, its ancient fury deeper than the darkest chasm in Perturabo's lair. It had reduced everything before it utterly to ruin and Medrengard's blazing black sun had gorged on the souls released into the dead sky.

'Let's hope you haven't overlooked anything this time, eh?' said Grendel. 'I haven't,' promised Honsou. We'll see.'

'One day I'll kill you for your presumption,' said Honsou. "Vou know that, don't you?'

'You'll try,' replied Grendel. Whether you succeed... well, that'll be an interesting day'

Honsou ignored Grendel's challenge and asked, The newborn? You said it's with Vaanes?'

Grendel nodded. Aye, he and his misfits are training it on the battle deck below'

'Good.'

'No,' chuckled Grendel. There's nothing good about that thing at all.'

THREE WARRIORS SURROUNDED the crouching figure in the centre of the chamber, their weapons raised before them. If their victim felt threatened, he gave no sign, his posture relaxed and his mien unconcerned at the potential violence to be unleashed against him. The three attackers were clad in armour, though no one suit resembled another in colour or repair.

One suit was a battered grey, another a faded white and the last a gleaming black. All that bound the three in any visible form of confraternity were the red crosses painted on their shoulder guards, but even those unifying marks had largely disappeared as paint flaked or was scraped away by battle damage.

Though there were no visible signs of rank, it was clear that the leader of the three was the tall warrior in black armour: Ardaric Vaanes, formerly of the Raven Guard. Vaanes was tall and slender, his bulk massive compared to a mortal, but slight for a Space Marine. Possessed of the strength to shatter bones and bend steel, his speed and poise marked him as more than a simple weapon of brute force.

The warrior to his left, Jeffar San, had once been of the White Consuls, though he now reserved his most bitter hatred for his former battle brothers. Vainglorious masters had stripped his honour from him, yet fierce warrior pride had kept him alive through their attempts to destroy him. Proud and haughty, Jeffar San was a warrior who embodied what it was to be cast from superior clay, his elegant, rapier-like sword held in the guard position.

To his right, Svoljard of the Wolf Brothers - an ill-fated Chapter from the beginning - bounced impatiently from foot to foot, his axe gripped tightly in his meaty fists. Where Vaanes exemplified the swift and sure strike, Svoljard was the wild blow that cut a man in two with a flurry of wild slashes.

All three were killers of men and xenos, warriors whose craft had been honed on a thousand battlefields under a thousand suns and who had faced the darkest horrors of the galaxy.

Yet none could quell the loathing each felt for the crouching figure between them.

The newborn squatted on one knee, his head bowed as though in some meditative trance and his grey flesh reeking of spoiled food. Unlike the warriors around him, the newborn was unarmoured, clad only in the flesh sutured to his muscle and bone.

His fists were clenched at his side and his every breath fought for existence.

'Begin,' said Vaanes, twin lightning claws unsheathing from his gauntlets.

Svoljard moved first, howling with an ululating war cry and slashing his axe towards the newborn. His target moved without warning, the newborn leaping from his crouched position to somersault backwards over the blow. Vaanes moved to the side, his claws raised as the newborn landed. Svoljard was exposed, his reckless attack overbalancing him, but the newborn spun away from him and batted away Jeffar San's swinging blade with the flat of his palm.

Vaanes saw his opening and thrust with his claws, the crackling energy that normally sheathed his blades deactivated for this training session. The newborn swayed aside from the blow and pistoned the flat of his palm towards Vaanes. The former Raven Guard threw himself back to avoid the blow, but was too slow, the spoiled-meat smell of the newborn's flesh nauseatingly strong as it hammered into his chin.

Even as he reeled from the blow, he knew it had been pulled at the last moment. He shook his head clear of the newborn's stink, wondering briefly what Svoljard's preternaturally sharp senses must be enduring. Perhaps that was why he was fighting with such reckless abandon, the better to end this session quickly...

The Wolf Brother howled as he attacked, his axe slashing in complex arcs as it sought to find a home in the newborn's body. Vaanes cursed as he saw that Svoljard's wild blows had allowed the newborn to break from being surrounded. Jeffar San fought with precise skill, but his thrusts were being hampered by Svoljard's frenzy.

The newborn ducked a decapitating sweep of the Wolf Brother's axe and hammered his elbow into his attacker's side. Had any normal enemy struck such a blow, it would have barely registered on Svoljard, but ceramite plate cracked under the force of it and sent the Wolf Brother crashing to the floor.

Jeffar San had pulled back to marshal his next attack and Svoljard was

completely exposed, his throat there to be ripped out.

But the newborn ignored his fallen enemy and spun to face Vaanes as the lightning claws descended to slash him open. Too slow, the newborn threw up his forearm to block the blow, and Vaanes's claws tore down his chest, opening his sheath of flesh and laying bare his glistening musculature.

The newborn howled in agony and dropped to his knees as Jeffar San lunged and thrust his blade between his ribs from behind. The tip of the weapon punched through the newborn's chest and a froth of stinking blood washed down his opened chest.

Svoljard rolled to his feet with a roar of anger and swept his axe high to cleave the newborn from top to bottom, but Vaanes retracted his daws and thundered his fist into the charging warrior's face. Svoljard crashed to the deck, his face a mask of anger and blood where Vaanes had broken his nose.

'Enough!' shouted Vaanes. 'It's over.'

'I'll kill you!' snarled Svoljard, spitting a wad of coagulated blood from between his fanged teeth. You shame me in front of his... pet.'

'You shame yourself with your anger,' spat Vaanes. 'Now clean yourself up before we go again.'

Svoljard spat more blood on the deck, but turned and stalked off to the benches at the side of the deck. Vaanes let out a relieved breath as he watched Svoljard's retreating back. Without the discipline he had been used to in his time with his Chapter, the Wolf Brother was becoming more feral and uncontrolled, his anger making him more of a liability than an ally.

'Be careful, Vaanes,' warned Jeffar San, appearing at his side and running a hand through his long blond hair. 'One day he will not hold his rage in check.'

'I know,' replied Vaanes sourly, 'but I have you to watch my back, don't I?'

The White Consul nodded stiffly and sheathed his sword in one smooth motion. 'I swore an oath to do so on that dead world, did I not?'

Vaanes gave a short bark of bitter laughter and said, 4Ve all swore oaths a long time ago, my friend and look where it's got us.'

Jeffar San did not reply, but bowed stiffly before turning on his heel and marching towards his weapon rack. Vaanes sighed and hung his head as the last of his surviving warriors took his leave.

'You antagonise the warriors who follow you,' said a thick voice behind him. 'I do not think that will foster their loyalty, or is there something I am missing?'

'No,' said Vaanes, turning to see the newborn standing behind him. A raw, sucking sound rippled from his flesh as the dead skin that clothed the newborn reknit itself whole once more.

A crawling yellow glow, like the last light of a wounded sun, seeped from the wounds he and Jeffar San had caused, the warp-born energies that had fuelled this... creature's unnatural growth, keeping him alive despite injuries that would have killed a normal man thrice over.

Such grievous wounds would have put down even one of the Adeptus Astartes, but the newborn barely registered them now.

The newborn followed his gaze and said, 'We travel through the realm of my masters. Here I heal quicker.'

'And you already heal fast,' said Vaanes. The power of Chaos is everywhere and grows stronger every day' 'Spoken like a true pupil.'

What do you mean?' asked the newborn, his curiosity genuine.

'I mean that sounds like something someone told you rather than something you know.'

'Is there a difference?'

'Of course there is,' said Vaanes, his patience wearing thin at the newborn's insatiable curiosity. He had joined Honsou to train the newborn to fight, not to be his teacher of ethics and knowledge.

Tell me the difference.'

'It means that you are being told a lot of things, but are learning very Hide,' said Vaanes.

The newborn considered this for a moment, cocking his head to one side and chewing its bottom lip like a child thinking hard. Vaanes let his eyes drift away from the creature... he still couldn't think of him as a person, not when he had been a child mere months ago.

The fact that he so closely resembled a man he hated didn't help much either.

The last he had seen of Uriel Ventris had been in the mountains of Medrengard as the fool had been about to attack Honsou's fortress with a pack of rabid, cannibalistic monsters at his heel. Though Vaanes had been sure Ventris would perish within the fortress, it appeared that the resourceful captain had prevailed and helped bring down Khalan-Ghol.

'Do you hate me?' asked the newborn suddenly.

What?' he asked.

'Do you hate me?' repeated the newborn. 'I think you do.'

'Hate you? I don't even know what you really are or what to call you.'

'I don't have a name,' said the newborn. 'I have not earned one yet.'

'You don't earn names, they're given to you when you're born.'

'I remember my birth,' said the newborn.

You do?'

Yes.'

What... what was it like?' asked Vaanes, curious despite himself.

'Painful.'

Vaanes knew Hide about how creatures such as the newborn were created, save what Ventris had told him when he had sold the lie of honour to his warrior band at the Sanctuary. But he had learned enough to know that the newborn had been little more than a child when the transformation of his entire flesh had begun.

Biological hot-housing, daemonic magic and debased techniques of genetic theft had accelerated his growth with strands of geneseed ripped from the meat and bone of Uriel Ventris. Diabolical suckling within the womb of a daemonic host creature had nourished it and sagging skin carved from the bodies of slaves had clothed him.

Though he had the flesh and physique of a Space Marine, he had the mind of a neophyte.

'Painful...' said Vaanes. 'I imagine it was.'

Was?' said the newborn, shaking his head. 'It still is. My every waking moment is pain.'

'I know what you mean,' said Vaanes.

'No,' said the newborn, stepping close to him with its teeth bared. You don't. I am the broken shards of a human being, Ardaric Vaanes. My every breath is pain. Every beat of my heart is pain. Everything is pain. Why should I be the only one to suffer like this? I want everyone to hurt like I do.'

'And you do a good job of that,' said Vaanes, meeting the angry stare of the newborn, and remembering the horrific, mutilating death of the magos on Golbasto.

'It is all I have,' spat the newborn. 'You have your name and a lifetime of memory, all I have are nightmares and the stolen memories of another.'

'You have Ventris's memories? I didn't know that.'

'Not memories really,' said the newborn, his anger diminishing. 'More like fragments of half-remembered dreams. The world we travel to is one I see in those fragments.'

'Do you know this world's name?' asked Vaanes, intrigued.

'No,' said the newborn, 'but I know it is precious to him. An army of great and terrible hunger came here, but it was defeated.'

'Is that all you know?'

'I think so... I... I... know things of him and I feel the soul of his flesh within me, but...' 'But what?' asked Vaanes.

'But everything I am taught by my masters of the power of Chaos tells me to reject such feelings. I am an instrument of the will of gods that were and ever shall be, a weapon to be used in their service and nothing more.'

Aren't we all...' said Vaanes, beckoning Svoljard and Jeffar San back to the centre of the battle deck. 'But it does explain something.'

What?'

Why we keep beating you,' said Vaanes. 'It's Ventris. Everything about him is part of you. The things that make him who he is are imprinted in your very flesh and as much as Honsou and Grendel try to beat that out of you, it's always going

to be there.'

'Are you saying I am imperfect?'

Vaanes laughed. That goes without saying, but Ventris's childish sense of right and wrong, good and evil... they're pulling you apart from the inside. You fight fair and that's not how we do things around here.'

Svoljard and Jeffar San rejoined Vaanes and he jabbed his finger into the newborn's chest as he said, We fight again and this time no pulling of punches. You had Svoljard at your mercy and you didn't finish him. Don't make that mistake again. Understood?'

'Understood/ growled the newborn, casting a hostile glance at the Wolf Brother.

Once again, the three warriors surrounded the newborn and made ready to fight.

'Now-' began Vaanes.

Before he could finish, the newborn was in motion, his fist smashing into Svoljard's jaw and tearing it off in a shower of blood and splintered bone. The stricken warrior dropped his axe and clutched at his ruined face. Blood jetted from the wound and a horrific, wet scream gurgled from Svoljard's throat.

The axe fell and the newborn swept it up, spinning on his heel to smash it into Jeffar San's breastplate. The blade clove through ceramite plate and ossified bone to lodge deep within the White Consul's chest cavity. Jeffar San's legs buckled and he collapsed to his knees, an awful mask of shock and pain twisting his proud features in horror.

Even as Vaanes registered the speed with which the newborn had moved, he leapt upon him, his bloody fists reaching for his neck.

Vaanes moved in tune with the newborn's attack, swaying backwards and buying himself precious moments of life. He twisted his body along the direction of its

lunge.

Razor claws snapped from his gauntlets.

He punched up into the newborn's belly and heaved.

The impaled newborn sailed over him, landing in a crumpled heap on the deck.

Vaanes rolled to his feet as the newborn wailed in pain and Jeffar San fell forwards onto the deck with a solid thump.

Had the fight taken so short a time?

Vaanes drew back his lightning claws into a fighting posture and activated the crackling energy sheath with a thought. The newborn was in killing mood and Vaanes could afford to take no chances.

But it seemed the fight had gone out of the newborn as he pushed himself painfully to his knees. Blood and the familiar oily, yellow glow oozed from the mortal wound at his belly as it closed, but he seemed not to care.

Was that better?' hissed the newborn, grinning at the suffering he had caused.

'Much better,' said Vaanes.

THE IMPERIAL BATTLESHIP sailed away from the Warbreed, its enormous bulk a slab of bristling, ancient metal as it plied its stately course through the stars, oblivious to the enemy that passed beneath it. Its name was a mystery, but the threat it represented should any of its surveyors, auspex or escorts discover them was very real indeed.

Ever since Cycerin had brought the ship through the gates of the empyrean, they

had followed a stuttering course towards their target, avoiding patrol flotillas, system monitors and listening posts scattered throughout the system.

Now the image of the planet filled the viewing bay, a frigid white orb with ugly blotches of unnatural colour spread over its surface like liver spots on the skull of a withered old man. Honsou neither knew nor cared for its name. That it was known and valued by Ventris was all that mattered.

Honsou smiled as he watched the image of the bat-deship recede on the plotting table, his fear that the ship would discover them diminishing along with its engine signature. The strategium of the Warbreed was subdued, as though their Imperial enemies might somehow hear them from so far away.

They've missed us!' breathed Cadaras Grendel, gripping the edge of the plotting table with white knuckled hands. 'I don't believe it...'

Honsou nodded and said, That was the last one. We're inside their patrol ring now.'

Grendel smiled a predator's grin and shook his head in disbelieving amusement. 'Now all we have to do is worry about the planetary monitor ships. All it'll take is one of them to get so much as a sniff of us and we're dead.'

That's why we have our guide,' said Honsou, nodding towards the strategium's prow.

Adept Cycerin stood before his iron lectern as always, his hands clasped either side of the newborn's head, who knelt with his back to the monstrously transformed magos. Ardaric Vaanes stood a little to one side of the lectern, grimacing in disgust at the sight of the organic plugs Cycerin's hands had become as they slithered within the back of the newborn's skull.

The newborn's skin rippled with a grotesque undulant motion as the bio-dendrites rooted around in his brain for the information they needed to survive this journey. His eyes fluttered behind tightly squeezed lids and his lips moved in a soundless mantra.

'Does that hurt it?' wondered Grendel.

'Does it matter?' countered Honsou. Ventris was here and he knows the deployment protocols of the ships and that means the newborn knows them. Maybe not consciously, but the deployments, the Veritas codes, everything. They're all in there. We need that if we're to get close enough to do what we planned.'

True enough,' agreed Grendel. Tm all for whatever gets us out of here in one piece.'

'Likewise,' said Honsou. Though a little risk is never a bad thing, eh?'

'Sometimes I think you like risk too much.'

Honsou nodded and said, 'You might be right. I remember Obax Zakayo said the same thing when we attacked the artillery battery in Berossus's camp.'

'Sensible man,' said Grendel.

'Not really, he betrayed me.'

'He's dead then?'

'Yes, very dead,' agreed Honsou. You could learn from him.'

'I learn quick,' said Grendel, 'but you'll bite off more than you can chew one day'

'Maybe,' shrugged Honsou with a grin. 'But not today'

Ardaric Vaanes marched towards them along the central nave of the strategium, his attention switching between the image on the viewing bay to the pain of the newborn.

Honsou and Grendel looked up as he approached.

'Well?' asked Honsou.

'Cycerin says that one will do,' he said, pointing to a flicker of light above a point on the planet's equator. 'It's furthest from the ships and is above the largest concentration of xeno vegetation.'

Honsou nodded and fixed his attention on the light, knowing it meant the first step to wreaking a great and terrible vengeance upon Ventris. What he did here would be a blatant challenge, a call to arms that a stickler like Ventris would not be able to resist answering.

The three warriors watched the pinpoint of light grow from a speck in the darkness to something more angular and blocky. As the distance lessened, the shape resolved into a gendy spinning orbital defence platform, though the majority of its launch bays were angled towards the planet's surface.

The defence platform hung in geostationary orbit above the planet's equator above a loathsome stretch of purple that spread across a wide, ochre landmass.

Tell me something,' said Vaanes, turning from the image of the orbital station. 'Once you'd defeated Berossus and Toramino, why did you not stay on Medrengard?'

'Khalan-Ghol was ruined, there was nothing left of it.'

'You could have built another fortress. Isn't that what you Iron Warriors do?'

'I could have,' agreed Honsou. 'But fortresses are static and when everyone on the planet has armies geared for siege, it's only a matter of time until someone attacks you. I made a mistake going back to Medrengard. I should have stayed out in the galaxy and carried on the Long War.'

That war was ten thousand years ago,' said Vaanes.

To you maybe, but to the Iron Warriors it was yesterday, the blink of an eye. You

think the passage of years matters to something as powerful as vengeance? When you dwell in a place where time itself is a meaningless concept, the defeats and glories of the past are only a heartbeat away. I fought alongside warriors who once bestrode the surface of Terra and marched with the primarchs at their head, and it galls me to see the pale shadows the great Astartes have become. You are weaklings compared to what those warriors achieved.'

Honsou felt his anger threaten to overcome his composure and forced himself to calm down as he pondered the strength of his fervour. Before the battles on Medrengard, he had no such high notions of the warriors who had fought in Horus's war, openly mocking Forrix and Kroeger for their misty-eyed reminiscences of a campaign he had not taken part in.

He took a deep breath and looked back to the glinting form of the orbital platform.

'Cycerin!' he shouted. 'Give them something to worry about.'

The magos withdrew his crawling plugs from the back of the newborn's head and turned to face him. The newborn slumped forward, supporting himself on his forearms as his breath came in ragged, wheezing gulps.

Without answering Honsou, the magos slid his morphing limbs into the lectern and a pulsing hum travelled the length of the strategium. The lights dimmed as the magos became one with the Warbreed and bent his unknown powers to the misdirection of their enemies.

'What's he doing?' asked Ardaric Vaanes.

Watch and see,' said Honsou.

The image on the viewing bay remained much as before, the station gendy spinning before them as the Warbreed drifted closer, unseen and unknown. Then, slowly, the station's guns and surveyor arrays came to life, swivelling in their mounts to train on a distant portion of space.

Honsou glanced down at the plotting table as a flickering icon appeared, representing the location the nameless Imperial servants had just targetted.

As they watched, the platform came alive with vox-chatter, the words of its occupants crackling the length and breadth of the strategium as they barked from a freshly formed amplifier unit on Cycerin's chest.

The words were scratchy and overlaid with static, but the panic in them was unmistakable.

'...tress one, three omega! Contact in grid delta-epsilon-omega! Auger signatures indicate hostile xenos life form! Request intercept. On present course, contact will be in range in two hours. Any ships capable of rendering assistance please respond!'

Vaanes watched as the phantom icon drifted slowly across the plotting table towards the platform and said, That's nowhere near us.'

'Exacdy,' said Honsou. 'And thanks to Cycerin's deceptions, that's where the planetary monitors will head. By the time they realise there's nothing there, we'll be long gone.'

Honsou turned from the image of the orbital platform and lifted his bolter.

They're looking for help,' he laughed. 'So let's go give them some.'

ALARM BELLS ECHOED along the bare metal corridors of Defence Platform Ultra Nine, ear-splittingly loud as First Officer Alevov raced towards the embarkation deck. Calling it a deck gave it a sense of scale it did not possess, the pressurised chamber where crew transferred onto docked ships simply a vaulted chamber with bare bronze walls and numerous pipes and locking wheels that led to the various umbilicals.

Imperial Guardsmen raced to prearranged choke points, ready to defend the orbital platform against boarders, though Alevov knew such precautions were likely unnecessary. Given the heightened state of alert the fleet had maintained since the initial invasion, it was unlikely that the lone enemy contact would reach the platform intact.

Even so, it had been a stroke of luck to have the nearby monitor on station. They hadn't detected it, but as it was engine-on to the sun's corona that wasn't surprising. The Veritas codes were old ones, but were still genuine and permission had been granted for it to dock.

The captain's offer of assistance had been gratefully accepted, for, as much as the soldiers on the platform seemed to know what they were doing, more bodies wouldn't hurt in case something unexpected happened.

Alevov passed the turn in the defensive architecture leading to the embarkation deck and pushed past two blue-jacketed soldiers fixing a gun with a long, perforated barrel to a bipod.

He felt his ears pop as he entered the bronze chamber, making a mental note to have the enginseers check the pressure seals. A green light winked into life above a thick blast door and he breathed a sigh of relief.

The clank of metal on metal sounded from beyond the door as he took hold of the locking clamp and turned the wheel. Jets of stale atmosphere gusted from the door seals as air from different worlds mingled.

'Glad to have you aboard,' said Alevov as the door swung open. 'Probably a bit unnecessary, but you can never be too careful, can you?'

'No,' said Honsou, stepping from the airlock, 'but apparently you can be too stupid.'

Honsou raised his bolter and shot First Officer Alevov in the face.

THE HEADLESS BODY slammed against the bronze walls of the airlock and the gun's report echoed deaf-eningly in the confined chamber. Honsou moved swiftly forward, seeing two open-mouthed soldiers at the chamber's exit with a heavy calibre weapon.

Shock and horror had paralysed them for a moment, but it was all Honsou needed. His bolter roared again and the soldiers were torn in two by a sawing arc of bolter shells.

'With me!' he yelled, slamming his back into the wall at the chamber's door. He ducked his helmeted head through the doorway, seeing more of the blue-jacketed soldiers manning defended positions further around the curving corridor.

Honsou rolled around the door; his bolter raised to his shoulder and pumping out lethally aimed shots directed by his augmetic eye. Three soldiers flopped back, their chests pulped to ruptured craters by three shots.

Iron Warriors moved past him, deploying with grim, wordless efficiency to secure the passages leading to the platform's hub. Honsou was pleased at the accuracy of his shots, for it had taken him a little time to retrain his body to fire the bolter left-handed and sync it to his newly grafted eye, but the results spoke for themselves.

Cadaras Grendel and Ardaric Vaanes moved past him, moving anticlockwise around the rim of the orbital and firing as they went. Grendel's underslung melta gun trailed smoke and Vaanes's lightning claws threw off arcs of blue lightning, making the air taste of ozone.

He smelled the newborn before he saw it, despite the case of armour it wore about its body. Even his own helmet's filters couldn't keep the stench of it from him.

'Stay with me,' ordered Honsou. 'Kill anything that isn't ours.'

The newborn nodded and they set off after the sound of gunfire.

CADARAS GRENDEL GRINNED like a madman as he charged down the curving corridor, his teeth bared and his heart beating wildly in his chest. It had been too long since he had killed something and he itched to fight something worthwhile, though he suspected there would be precious Hide sport on this grubby little platform.

But Cadaras Grendel wasn't fussy; he'd kill whatever came his way.

He and Vaanes pounded down the corridor, its walls strobed by red warning lights and ringing with blaring klaxons. It was the symphony of battle and needed only the bark of gunfire and the screams of the dying to make it complete.

As if in answer to his thoughts, a ragged squad of soldiers rose from a defensive position before him and opened fire. Their weapons spat bright bolts of energy, daggers to fight a Titan, and Grendel laughed as he opened fire, the vox-unit on his armour broadcasting his demented, psychotic amusement as a howling yell of rebellion.

One soldier crumpled, his shoulder blasted away and his face shredded by exploding fragments of bone. Another ran screaming from the barricade, while the rest stood with grim stoicism in the face of Grendel's onslaught.

Las-fire spat, the impacts against his armour insignificant. His bolter fired again, a bark of shots that cut down a handful of the men in sprays of blood and shattered armour.

Vaanes had eschewed his jump pack for this close and dirty fight, but Grendel had to admit his speed was impressive nonetheless. The former Raven Guard was faster than Grendel and reached the barrier first, leaping forward in an arcing dive that took him over the barricade and into the midst of the soldiers.

Actinic blurs of silver steel flashed and squirts of blood sprayed the walls as Vaanes rolled to his feet, striking left and right with his lightning claws. Arms flopped to the metal decking and torsos sheared from bodies as the energised edges cut through armour, meat and bone with an electric hiss and spit.

Screams of pain and terror echoed from the walls, and in seconds the skirmish was over.

Grendel nodded in approval as he rounded the barricade to see Vaanes standing in a circle of blood, chuckling as he found it impossible to tell how many had died given the profusion of dismembered body parts.

His amusement turned to glee as he saw a pair of soldiers huddled in the shadow of the barricade, clinging to one another and weeping in terror. Their blue uniforms bore the wreckage of their fellow soldiers' deaths and they were little more than mindless sacks of blood and pain now.

Grendel reached down and hoisted one of the soldiers from the ground, letting him dangle above the deck as his wrist was slowly crushed.

'Don't seem like much, do they?' he asked.

Vaanes didn't answer immediately, his helmet fixed on the carnage his deadly claws had wrought. For all the motion Vaanes displayed, he might as well have been a statue.

Vaanes?'

'I heard you.'

Grendel shrugged and dropped the wailing soldier, who crawled away holding his shattered wrist close to his chest. Grendel let him get a few metres away before turning his weapon on him and unleashing a superheated blast of energy from the underslung melta gun.

The protective senses of his helmet dimmed momentarily as the white-hot blast engulfed the soldier and Grendel laughed as the glow faded and he saw the stumps of feet and charred skull lid that was all that remained.

He turned to Vaanes and said, 'I'll leave the last one for you.'

FIGHTING ALONGSIDE THE newborn was much easier when it wore a helmet, for Honsou was not forced to look upon the face of Ventris in the midst of a batde. The fight for the outer ring of the orbital platform was virtually over, the soldiers defending it no match for the relentless ferocity of an assault of the Iron Warriors. Few soldiers were.

Honsou watched his champion kill their enemies without mercy, fighting with a skill and familiar style that took him a moment to recognise. The blows it struck were practiced and precise, the very image of those taught to the Adeptus Astartes... exactly how a warrior of the Ultramarines would fight.

The challenge of killing mortals with his bolter had grown stale, and Honsou now fought with his axe, cleaving a screaming path through his enemies. Truth be told, there was little more challenge in fighting them in close quarters, but it had the virtue of being bloody.

Honsou's axe growled as it slew, the monstrous endty within it feeding on the souls of the dead even as it feasted on the blood of their burst bodies. His blade reaped a fearsome tally, the blue-jacketed soldiers fighting on despite the impossibility of their victory. Honsou admired their courage, if not their ability.

He wrenched his axe from the golden breastplate of some kind of officer, the axe protesting with a ripple of dead eyes across the blade's glossy surface. A tremor of rage passed along his arms from the weapon and Honsou snarled as he exerted the force of his will to quiet the daemon within.

The sounds of battle were diminishing throughout the station and Honsou knew

the battle was almost won. Even as he relished the victory, he saw a ragged scramble from the end of one of the spoke passageways that led to the central hub. One soldier carried a stubby tube on his shoulder, into which another man stuffed a finned missile.

Honsou wanted to laugh at the desperation of the weapon, before realising that the detonation of such a missile would explosively decompress the entire outer ring and send everyone within hurtling into space.

He tried to move, but his limbs would not obey his commands and he looked down in anger at the axe that shuddered in his grip, its will to dominate pushing back against him.

'Now is really not the time!' he snarled through gritted teeth, fighting to force the essence of the daemon back into the darkly shimmering depths of the blade.

A bloom of noise, light and smoke erupted from the soldiers and, though it was surely impossible to see such a fast moving object, Honsou saw a needle-nosed missile streaking towards him.

Honsou felt the daemon withdraw into the weapon and end the battle for control, but knew it was far too late to avoid the missile. He threw his arm up before him in an instinctive gesture of defence.

The force of the impact hurled him from his feet and he felt a terrible, leeching power within him, as though a loathsome, dark force tapped into his life-force. His head slammed against the wall and he looked down to see the smoking, hissing fins of the missile embedded in the rippling silver of the arm he had taken from the Ultramarines sergeant.

Light pulsed in the depths of the arm, flitting fireflies of energy that spoke of technology wrought in an age long forgotten and a race of such malice that his own petty evils were insignificant when measured alongside theirs. Even as he watched, a fiery orange line hissed around the circumference of the portion of the missile that protruded from his arm and it fell to the deck with a clatter of metal.

Honsou stared in wonder at the unblemished surface of his arm, looking up as the equally astounded soldiers reloaded the weapon.

He scrambled to his feet, but quickly saw there was no need for haste as the newborn launched himself towards the soldiers and began their butchery. Until now, Honsou had only seen the newborn kill with the mechanical precision of the Adeptus Astartes, albeit employed with a vicious joy no Space Marine would condone, but his champion now fought with brutal savagery, every blow excruciatingly mortal and delivered with fluid economy of force.

No movement was wasted, no blow more powerful than required and no opening left unexploited. Within seconds the soldiers were dead and the battle over.

Honsou joined the newborn at the scene of the slaughter as more Iron Warriors secured the spoke corridor. Specialists with shaped charges moved down its length and prepared to blow the doors to the central hub. Within moments, the orbital platform would be theirs.

Honsou put a hand on the newborn's shoulder, feeling his hostility towards his new champion diminish in the face of the obvious relish taken in causing death.

'Ardaric Vaanes is training you well,' he said.

Ardaric Vaanes inclined his head to the last trooper. The man's face was a mask of tears and blood, his eyes glazed as his head shook back and forth in terror. Cadaras Grendel stood with his shoulders squared, the threat and challenge of his body language plain.

'He's dead already,' said Vaanes.

What?'

'I said he's dead already. He's no threat to us anymore.'

'So? What's that got to do with anything?' said Grendel, moving to stand inches in front of him. You not got the stomach for killing a man unless he's got a gun pointed at you?'

'I just don't see the need anymore.'

The need?' said Grendel. Who said anything about need? Kill him. Now.'

Vaanes met Grendel's angry stare, the challenge and hostility evident even through the masks of ceramite that separated them. The sound of battle surrounded them, the fighting pushing ever closer to the hub of the orbital platform, but Grendel was ignoring it, intent on pushing Vaanes and seeing what he was made of.

'I don't think you've got the guts, Vaanes,' said Grendel. 'I think maybe you're still working with the Imperials. Honsou thinks so too, I can tell he doesn't trust you.'

'He doesn't trust you either,' pointed out Vaanes.

'No, but I don't try and pretend like I won't betray him someday. He and I, well, we got ourselves an understanding.'

Grendel turned away from Vaanes and scooped up the last surviving trooper. He held him up before Vaanes and said, 'Go on. Kill him. Kill him or I'll kill you, I swear.'

Vaanes took a breath, wondering if he would have to fight Grendel now. The warrior had been spoiling for it ever since he had joined Honsou's band, but as he tensed his muscles in readiness for action, his eyes caught a glint of silver on the dangling trooper's uniform.

An honour badge pinned to his collar.

Droplets of blood had stained the uniform around it, but not a single drop sullied the badge itself and the image of a stylised silver 'LT upon a rich blue background was unmistakable...

Ultramarines.

Picked out in gold behind the symbol of the Ultramarines was the numeral IV, and Vaanes felt a surge of anger as he realised the meaning of the symbol. It was a campaign badge awarded to those who had fought alongside the Fourth Company of the Ultramarines.

Vaanes leaned down and said, 'How did you get this?'

The soldier didn't answer, his mouth working in a monotone wail of pure terror, his eyes squeezed shut as though he could escape the terror of his situation by keeping it from sight.

'How did you get this?' shouted Vaanes, gripping the soldier's jacket and tearing him from Cadaras Grendel. Hysterical babbling was his only answer and Vaanes screamed his question again, his right fist pulled back and ready to strike, the fizzing crackle of the lightning energy loud in his ears.

'Do it...' hissed Grendel, and the urge to kill this man, to hurt him, to maim him and inflict suffering beyond measure was greater than anything Vaanes had ever known. Vaanes heard a sibilant whisper in his ear as though an unseen speaker's voice was hidden in the rising buzz of his lightning claw, a voice only he could hear.

The sensation was not unpleasant, a silent urging and a silken pressure on his mind that promised new wonders, pleasures undreamed of and the ecstasy of experience. All this and more were encapsulated in the wordless whisper and Ardaric Vaanes knew without understanding that this was the offer and the price of the bargain he had struck with Honsou on Medrengard.

His vision narrowed until all he could see was the Ultramarines honour badge, the winking silver and gold mocking him with their purity and lustre. The face of

Uriel Ventris appeared in the forefront of his mind and he cried out in anguished rage.

The lightning claw slammed forward, punching through the trooper's chest and exploding from his back. The blow continued and his fist followed the claws through the man's torso, pulverising bone, heart and lungs on its way through the substance of his body.

Vaanes tore at the body until his hissing claws had reduced it to scraps of torn meat, a ruined gruel of smashed bone and offal. The breath heaved in his lungs and he stepped back from the wreckage of the man's remains and felt a wave of acceptance pour through him, his limbs filled with energy and exhilaration.

He heard Cadaras Grendel laughing and felt the killer's gauntlet slap him on the shoulder guard. Words were spoken, but he didn't hear them, too caught up in the wonder he had just experienced.

Vaanes stared down at what he had done, the bodies around him so torn that their very humanity was obliterated. Finally, he understood the lie he had been living since the shame that had driven him from the Raven Guard.

There was no self-delusional status he could impart to salve his own conscience and no middle ground between loyalist and traitor. In the Long War, such labels were meaningless anyway - there were only victors and defeated.

At last, the truth of what he had become was apparent in this baptism of murder and blood.

Ardaric Vaanes welcomed it.

THE CENTRAL CONTROL room of Defence Platform Ultra Nine reeked of blasting charges and blood. With the doors blown, the men inside had no chance of life and had made the best job they could of disabling the systems and calling for

reinforcements, but Honsou knew the nearest Imperial ship was many hours distant.

Adept Cycerin stood before the smashed consoles, a morass of writhing cables snaking from the cavity of his bio-mechanical chest to mesh with the inner workings of the smashed consoles.

The doomed mortals had been thorough in their vandalism, but Cycerin had made swift work in undoing the damage, and his unique talents allowed him to coax the required life from the smashed systems without difficulty.

'Is everything ready?' asked Honsou, impatient to see the results of his labours bear fruit.

Cadaras Grendel shrugged as he ran his eyes over the buckled and las-shot console. Red lights winked on surviving, brass-rimmed dials and sparks fizzed and sputtered.

'Hard to say for sure, but we swapped over the missiles' payload,' said Grendel. 'All but one is loaded up with the stuff we took from Golbasto. It's up to Cycerin now'

Why all but one?' asked Ardaric Vaanes and Honsou caught a subtle change in the warrior's voice, a shift in tone of a warrior who has at last come to know himself.

The last one is a message to Ventris.'

What does it say?'

'It's not what it says,' said Honsou, 'it's what it represents.' 'And what's that?'

That you don't walk away from a fight with Honsou without paying a price.'

A SALVO OF sixteen orbital torpedoes surged from the planetside launch bays, followed by another rippling salvo seconds later. Another three salvos launched until all but one of the platform's entire payload of missiles was expended. Each missile dropped away rapidly from the platform, the blue-hot coals of their engines firing for long enough to put them in a ballistic trajectory towards the planet's surface.

They swooped downwards like hunting raptors, their formation breaking up as the spread pattern implanted into each warhead by Adept Cycerin took hold of each one. The missiles diverged until their contrails were spread around the planet like a glittering spiderweb.

Heat shields burned with conical fire as the missiles plunged through the atmosphere, emerging into the crystal skies of the planet. Hurried defences scrambled to lock onto the missiles, but launched from low orbit, they were already travelling too quickly and were too close to be engaged with any hope of success.

As the missiles reached a predetermined altitude over the planet's surface, each one exploded and spread its viral payload into the air. Vast quantities of the experimental Heraclitus strain were released into the atmosphere in doses billions of times greater than had been employed on Golbasto.

All across the planet, a terrible rain fell, the genius of Magos Szalin of the Ordos Biologis wreaking terrible damage as it went to work on the indigenous and xenos vegetation.

A few short years ago, this world had suffered the horror of invasion, monstrous swarms of ferocious alien killers rampaging across its surface. A great war had been fought; in space, in the air, on land and finally in the very bowels of a living spacecraft that had travelled from another galaxy for uncounted aeons.

Though the invasion had been defeated, the dreadful legacy of the alien invaders remained to taint the planet's ecology forever. From pole to pole, horrific spires of dreadful alien vegetable matter towered over the landscape, slowly choking the life from the natural landscape.

The alien flora had subsumed entire continents, a rapacious instinct to devour encoded in every strand of its genetic structure. Nutrients were leeched from the soil and used to create hyper-fertile spore growths that drifted on the heated currents of the air to seed new regions and pollute yet more land.

Only rigorous burning policies ensured the planet's survival - for a world of the Imperium could not simply be abandoned, not after all the blood that had been shed in its defence. The shining steel cities, islands in a sea of alien growth, still produced masses of munitions and armoured vehicles for Imperial wars throughout the subsector.

Salvoes of anti-plant missiles, slash and burn pogroms and pesticide overflights were a matter of routine since the defeat of the invasion.

Such things were thankless tasks, but necessary for the planet's continued survival.

But all that was rendered moot in the face of Magos Szalin's creation.

Developed from a partial fragment of ancient research conducted by Magos Heraclitus, the bio-toxins were intended to increase the growth rate of crops on agri-worlds. Magos Szalin had taken the next step and pioneered techniques designed to increase the productivity of such worlds a thousand fold.

Now that work was put to the ultimate test, mixing its monstrous potential for increased growth with an alien organism that was at the apex of its biological efficiency.

Within seconds of the Heraclitus strain being released into the atmosphere, the alien growths reacted to its touch, surging upwards and over the planet's terrain. Slash and burn teams were instantly overwhelmed by mutant growths, poisonous plant life expanding kilometres in seconds as the virulent growth strain sent its metabolism into overdrive.

Huge amounts of nutrients were sucked from the ground and released as enormous quantities of heat, raising the ambient temperature of the world in a

matter of moments. Oxygen was sucked greedily from the atmosphere by horrifyingly massive spore chimneys and the planet's protective layers were gradually stripped in unthinking biological genocide.

This was not the rapid death of Exterminatus, but ecological death of worldwide proportions.

Panicked messages were hurled out into the immaterium and only those with the money, influence or cunning escaped on hastily prepped ships that fled the planet's destruction.

But these were few compared to the billions left behind and, weeks later, as the last of the planet's atmosphere was stripped from it by the hyper-evolved alien biology, stellar radiation swept the surface, killing every living thing and laying waste to all that remained.

Months after the launch of the missiles, nothing remained alive, the deadly alien vegetation killed by lethal levels of radiation and the frigid cold that gripped the planet without its protective atmosphere.

All that now remained of the planet was a dead, lifeless ball of rock, its surface seared and barren, with only the skeletal remains of its blackened cities left as evidence that human beings had once lived upon it.

THE SILVER-SKINNED drop-ship fell through the airless vacuum of the planet. A host of Marauders and Raptors followed it down, though nothing lived here now. The drop-ship's retros screamed as the pilot brought it in on final approach, the skids deploying just before it landed in the midst of dead plant matter and scorched alien trees.

A drogue arm deployed to test the external environment and once it retracted, the pressure door on the side of the craft opened and a heavy ramp extended to the surface.

Cautiously, for none aboard truly felt safe, a squad of Adeptus Mechanicus Tech-Guard clad in heavy environment suits - similar in function and design to the Terminator armour employed by the Adeptus Astartes - emerged and descended to the planet's surface.

Following the group was a figure whose heavy armour was swathed in vivid red robes emblazoned with the black and white cog symbol of the Adeptus Mechanicus.

His name was Magos Locard and this was not the first time he had come to this world.

With quick, precise gestures, Locard directed the Tech-Guard to collect samples of the dead plants and the underlying strata. Diggers and corers rolled down from the drop-ship and Locard watched them as they gathered information that might offer some clue as to what had caused this catastrophe.

Despite the many augmentations applied to his flesh, Locard was not so far removed from humanity that the fate of this world did not cause him great sadness. Like many others, he had fought to save it and had been instrumental in what he had thought was its salvation.

Now all that was ashes and Locard felt a great anger build within him.

Whoever had done this would pay.

A Tech-Guard soldier approached Locard and said, 'My lord, we've found it.'

Locard followed the man as he waded through thick piles of ashen vegetation to the source of what had led them to this exact place. Though the planet was now bereft of life, a constantly repeating signal had reached into space, its plaintive voice almost lost in the void, but shrill and insistent, demanding attention.

The vegetation thinned and Locard realised he was walking in a deep trench carved by the impact of something that had fallen from the skies.

'Here, my lord,' said the Tech-Guard, backing away from Locard.

Locard saw a battered silver tube, perhaps ten metres in length - an orbital torpedo, though his exo-armour's auspex told him there was no ordnance or

explosives loaded in the warhead. This was the source of the signal and Locard knew that someone had wanted them to find this.

He walked along the length of the torpedo towards the payload bay and deployed bolt-clasps from the forearm of his armour. One by one, he removed the bolts of the payload bay and hurled it aside when he unscrewed the last one.

The inside of the bay was dark, but his enhanced ocular implants could easily make out what it contained. He frowned and reached inside the bay to remove its contents.

He turned to the Tech-Guard next to him and handed him a cracked helmet, the paint chipped and one eye lens missing. The helmet was a deep blue and bore a symbol on the forehead that was known to Locard.

The inverted omega of the Ultramarines Chapter of the Adeptus Astartes.

'I don't understand,' said the Tech-Guard, turning the helmet over in his hands.

'Nor I,' said Locard, turning and marching from the missile. 'Not yet.'

As the Tech-Guard followed Locard he said, 'What happened to this place?'

This place has a name, soldier,' snapped Locard. 'Imperial citizens died here.'

'Apologies, my lord, I meant no disrespect,' said the Tech-Guard. What was it called?'

Locard paused, casting his gaze across the blasted wasteland that was all that remained of a once proud Imperial world that had stood defiantly before the horror of a Tyranid invasion.

'It was called Tarsis Ultra.'

Book 4

THE SKULL HARVEST

DEAD, GLASSY EYES stared up at the bar patrons from the floor as the rolling head finally came to a halt. It had been a swift blow, the edge of the killer's palm like a blade, and the snarling warrior's head was ripped from his neck before the last words of his challenge were out of his mouth.

The body still stood, its murderer grasping the edge of its crimson-stained breastplate in one gnarled grey fist. Blood pooled beneath the head and squirted upwards from the stump of neck. The body's legs began to twitch, as though it sought to escape its fate even in death. The killer released his grip and turned away as the body crashed to the dirty, ash-and dust-streaked floor in a clatter of steel and dead meat.

The excitement over, the patrons of the darkened bar returned to their drinks and plotting, for no one came to a place like this without schemes of revenge, murder, pillage and destruction in mind.

Honsou of the Iron Warriors was no exception, and his champion's bloody display of lethal prowess was just the first step in his own grand design.

The air was thick with intrigue, grease and smoke, the latter curling around heavy rafters that looked as though they had once been part of a spaceship. Irregular clay bricks supported a roof formed from sheets of corrugated iron, and thin slats of harsh light, like the burning white sky of Medrengard, shone through bullet holes and gaps in the construction.

The killer of the now headless body licked the blood from the edge of its hand, and Honsou grinned as he saw the urge to continue killing in his champion's all too familiar grey eyes and taut posture. It called itself the Newborn, and was clad in tarnished power armour the colour of wrought iron. Its shoulder guards were edged in yellow and black, and a rough cloak of ochre was draped around its wide shoulders. It was every inch an Iron Warrior but for its face; a slack fleshmask of stolen skin that was the image of a man Honsou would one day kill. Stitched together from the skins of dead prisoners, the Newborn's face was that of the killer in the dark, the terror of the night and the lurker in the shadows that haunts the dreams of the fearful.

It turned towards Honsou and he felt a delicious shiver of vicarious excitement as he glanced at the dead body on the floor.

'Nicely done,' said Honsou. 'Poor bastard didn't even get to finish insulting me.'

The Newborn shrugged as it sat across the table from him. 'He was nothing, just a slave warrior.'

'True, but he died just as bloodily as the next man.'

'Killing this one might make you the "next man" to his master,' said the Newborn.

'Better he dies now than we end up recruiting him and he fails in battle,' said Cadaras Grendel from across the table as he finished a tin mug of harsh liquor. 'Don't want any damn wasters next to me if we have to fight anything tough in

the next few days.'

Grendel was a brute, an armoured killer who delighted in slaughter and the misery of others. Once, he had fought for a rival Warsmith on Medrengard, though in defeat he had transferred his allegiance to Honsou. Despite that switch, Honsou knew Grendel's continued service was bought with the promise of carnage and that his loyalty was that of a starving wolf on a short leash. The warrior's face was a scarred and pitted nightmare of battered flesh, his cruel features topped with a close-cropped mohican.

'Trust me,' said the warrior next to Grendel, 'the Skull Harvest weeds out the chaff early on. Only the strongest and most vicious will survive to the end.'

Honsou nodded and said, 'You should know, Vaanes. You've been here before.'

Clad in the midnight-black armour of the Raven Guard, Ardaric Vaanes was the polar opposite of Cadaras Grendel; lithe, elegant and handsome. His long dark hair was bound in a tight scalp-lock and his hooded eyes were set in a face that was aquiline and which bore ritual scars on each cheek.

The former Raven Guard had changed since Honsou had first recruited him to train the Newborn. Honsou had never fully believed that a warrior once loyal to the False Emperor could completely throw off the shackles of his former master, but from what Cadaras Grendel had told him of Vaanes's actions on the orbital battery above Tarsis Ultra, it seemed such concerns were groundless.

'Indeed,' agreed Vaanes. 'And I can't say I'm happy to be back. This isn't a place to come to unless you're prepared for the worst. Especially during the Skull Harvest.'

'We're prepared for the worst,' said Honsou, leaning over and lifting the severed head from the floor and depositing it on their table. The dead man's expression was frozen in surprise, and Honsou wondered if he'd lived long enough to see the bar spinning around as his head rolled across the floor. The skin was waxy and moist, the iconic mark of a red skull branded into its forehead over a tattoo of an eight-pointed star. 'After all, that's why we're here and why I had the

Newborn kill this one.'

Like his warriors, Honsou had changed a great deal since his rise to prominence had begun on Hydra Cordatus. His unique silver arm was new and a bolt-round had pulverised the left side of his face, leaving it a burned and bloody ruin and making a glutinous, fused mess of his eye. That eye had been replaced with an augmetic implant and as much as he had changed physically, Honsou knew that it was nothing compared to the changes wrought within him.

Vaanes reached over and lifted the head, turning it over and allowing the blood to drip down his gauntlets. Honsou saw Vaanes's eyes widen as he touched the head, his nostrils flaring as he took in the scents of the dead man, while running his fingers over the cold flesh.

'This was one of Pashtoq Uluvent's fighters,' said Vaanes.

'Who?'

'A follower of the Blood God,' said Vaanes, turning the head around and tapping the sigil branded on its forehead. 'That's his mark.'

'Is he powerful?' asked Grendel.

'Very powerful,' said Vaanes. 'He has come to the Skull Harvest many times to recruit fighters for his warband.'

'And he's won?'

'Champions that don't win the Skull Harvest end up dead,' said Vaanes.

'Killing one of his men ought to get his attention,' said Honsou.

'I think it just did,' said Grendel, nodding towards the bar's door with a wide grin of anticipation.

A towering warrior in armour that had once been black and yellow, but which was now so stained with blood that it resembled a deep, rusted burgundy, marched towards their table.

Grendel reached for his weapon, but Honsou shook his head.

The warrior's helm was horned and two long tusks sprouted from beneath the visor of his helmet. Honsou couldn't tell whether they were part of his armour or his flesh. The same symbol branded into the head was cut into the warrior's breastplate, and his breath was a rasping growl, like that of a ravenous beast. He carried an axe with a bronze blade that dripped blood and shone with the dull fire of a smouldering forge.

The warrior planted his axe, blade down, on the floor and banged his fist against his breastplate. 'I am Vosok Dall, servant of the Skull Throne, and I have come to take your life.'

Honsou took the measure of the warrior in a heartbeat.

Vosok Dall was former Astartes, Scythes of the Emperor by the crossed-scythe heraldry on his shoulder guard, but a warrior who now killed in the name of a blood-drenched god that revelled in murder and battle. He would be strong and capable, with a hunger for glory and martial honour unmatched even by those who still fought for the Imperium.

'I thought your Chapter was dead,' said Honsou, pushing himself to his feet. 'Didn't the swarm fleets turn your world into an airless rock?'

'You speak of events that do not concern you, maggot,' barked Dall. 'I am here to kill you, so ready your weapon.'

'You see,' said Honsou, shaking his head. 'That's what you followers of the Blood God always get wrong. You always talk too much.'

'No more talk then,' said Dall. 'Fight.'

Honsou didn't answer, simply sweeping his axe from beside the table. The blade of the weapon was glossy and black, its sheened surface featureless and seeming to swallow any light unfortunate enough to touch it.

Honsou was fast, but Dall was faster and brought his own axe up to block the strike. The warrior spun the axe and slashed it around in a bifurcating sweep. Honsou ducked and rammed the haft of his weapon into Dall's gut, spinning away from his opponent's reverse stroke. The blade passed millimetres from his head and he felt the angry heat that burned within the warp-forged weapon.

He took a double-handed grip on his axe and widened his stance as Dall came at him. The warrior of the Blood God was fast and his roar of hatred shook the very walls, but Honsou had faced down more terrifying foes than Vosok Dall and lived.

Honsou stepped to meet the attack, throwing his arm up to block the blow. The axe slashed down and bit deeply, the blade stuck fast into Honsou's forearm. Like the Newborn and Cadaras Grendel, Honsou wore the naked metal colours of the Iron Warriors, but the arm struck by Vosok Dall's axe appeared to be incongruously fashioned from the purest, gleaming silver.

Dall grunted in shock, and Honsou knew this warrior would expect anything he hit with his axe to go down and stay down.

That shock cost him his life.

The warrior tugged at his weapon, but the blade was stuck fast and Honsou swung his axe in a mighty downward arc, hammering the glossy black blade through the top of his foe's skull. The axe smashed through Dall's helmet, skull and neck before finally lodging in the centre of his sternum.

Vosok Dall dropped to his knees and toppled onto his side, his dead weight dragging Honsou with him. Dall's entire body convulsed as the malevolent warp beast bound to Honsou's axe ripped his soul apart for sport.

Blood fanned from the cloven skull in a flood of crimson, and even as Dall's soul

was devoured, his grip remained strong on his weapon.

A bright orange line, like that of a welder's acetylene torch hissed around the edge of where Dall's axe was buried in Honsou's arm and the weapon fell free with a crescent-shaped bite taken from it. Even as Honsou watched, the fiery lustre of the blade faded as its power passed into Honsou's weapon.

Where Dall's blade had penetrated Honsou's arm was unblemished and smooth, as though it had come straight from the silversmith's workbench. Honsou neither knew nor cared about the source of the arm's power to heal itself, it was enough that it had saved him once again.

He rose to his full height, standing triumphant over the dead body of Vosok Dall as the patrons of the bar stared in amazement at him.

'I am Honsou of the Iron Warriors!' he bellowed, lifting his axe high over his head. 'I am here for the Skull Harvest and I am afraid of no man. Any warrior who thinks he is worthy of joining me should make himself known at my camp. Look for the banner of the Iron Skull on the northern promontory.'

A man in a battered flak vest with a long rifle slung over his shoulder and a battered Guardsman's helmet jammed onto his rugged features stood up as Honsou made his way to the door.

'Every warlord that comes in here thinks he's got a big plan,' said the man. 'What's so special about yours? Most of them never come back, so why should I fight for you?'

'What's your name?'

'Pettar. Hain Pettar.'

'Because I'm going to win, Hain Pettar.'

'They all say that,' said Pettar.

Honsou shouldered his axe and said, 'The difference is I mean it.'

'So, who you planning to fight if you live through the Skull Harvest?'

Honsou grinned. 'The worlds of Ultramar are going to burn in the fires of my crusade.'

'Ultramar?' said Pettar. 'Now I know you're crazy; that fight's suicide.'

'Maybe,' said Honsou. 'But maybe not, and if it's not a fight worth making, then this galaxy has run out of things to live for.'

THE MOUNTAIN CITY simmered with tension and threat. Warriors of all size and description thronged the paths, squares and narrow alleys that twisted between the city's ramshackle structures of brick and junk. This close to the Skull Harvest, the city's inhabitants were on edge, hands hovering near the contoured handles of pistols and skin-wrapped sword grips. Honsou could read the currents of threat as clearly as the transformed magos, Adept Cycerin, could read the currents of the empyrean and knew violence was ready to erupt at any second. Which was just as it should be.

The sky was the colour of a smeared borealis, swirling with unnatural hues known only to the insane. Lightning flashed in aerial whirlpools and Honsou tore his gaze from the pleasing spectacle. Only the unwary dared stare into the abyss of such skies and he grinned as he remembered his flesh playing host to one of the creatures that dwelled beyond the lurid colours.

The streets were sloping thoroughfares of hard-packed earth, and Honsou scanned the crowds around them for an old enemy, a new rival or simply a warrior looking to make a name for himself by killing someone like him.

Hawkers and charlatans lined the streets, filling the air with strange aromas, chants and promises, each offering pleasures and wares that could only be found

in a place this deep in the Maelstrom; nightmare-fleets, blades of daemon-forged steel, carnal delights with warp-altered courtesans, opiates concocted from the immaterial substance of void-creatures and promises of eternal youth.

In addition to the swaggering pirate bands, mercenary kin-broods and random outcasts, lone warriors stood at street corners, boasting of their prowess while demonstrating their skills. A grey-skinned loxatl climbed the brickwork of a dark tower, its armature weapons flexing and aiming without apparent need for hands. A robed Scythian distilled venom before a gathered audience, while a band of men and women in heavy armour demonstrated sword and axe skills. Others spun firearms, took shots at hurled targets and displayed yet more impressive feats of exceptional marksmanship.

'Any of them taking your fancy?' asked Cadaras Grendel, nodding towards the martial displays.

Honsou shook his head. 'No, these are the chaff. The real warriors of skill won't show their hand so early.'

'Like we just did?' said Vaanes.

'We're new here,' explained Honsou. 'I needed to get my name into circulation, but I'll let Pashtoq Uluvent build it for me when he comes against us.'

'You had me kill that man to provoke an attack on us?' queried the Newborn.

'Absolutely,' said Honsou. 'I need the warriors gathered here to know me and respect me, but I can't go around like these fools telling people how powerful I am. I'll get others to do that for me.'

'Assuming we survive Uluvent's retaliation.'

'There's always that,' agreed Honsou. 'But I never said this venture wouldn't be without some risk.'

THEY MADE THEIR way through the streets of the city, following a path that took them through areas of bleak night, searing sunlight and voids of deadened sound where every step seemed to take a lifetime. Coming from Medrengard, a world deep in the Eye of Terror, Honsou was no stranger to the chaotic flux of worlds touched by the warp, but the capricious nature of the environment around the mountain was unsettling.

He looked towards the mountain's summit, where the mighty citadel of this world's ruler squatted like a vast crown of black stone. Hewn from the rock of the mountain, the entire peak had been hollowed out and reshaped into a colossal fortress from which its master plotted his sector-wide carnage.

Curved redoubts and precisely angled bastions cut into the rock dominated the upper reaches of the mountain and coils of razor wire, like an endless field of thorns, carpeted every approach to its great, iron-spiked barbican.

Honsou's Iron Warrior soul swelled with pleasure at the sight of so formidable a fortress.

Mighty defensive turrets protected the fortress, armed with guns capable of bringing down the heaviest spaceship and smashing any armada that dared come against this place.

Even in its prime, Khalan-Ghol could not have boasted so fearsome an array of weapons.

Ardaric Vaanes leaned in close and pointed to a nearby gun emplacement aimed at the heavens. 'Big guns never tire, isn't that what he always says?'

'So it's said,' agreed Honsou, 'but if what happened on Medrengard taught me anything, it's that fortresses are static and it's only a matter of time until someone attacks you. This place is impressive, right enough, but my days of fortress building are over.'

'I never thought I'd hear an Iron Warrior say he was tired of fortresses.'

'I'm not tired of fortresses, Vaanes,' said Honsou with a grin. 'I'm just directing my energies in bringing them to ruin.'

HONSOU HAD BASED his warriors on a northern promontory of the mountain, a site that offered natural protection in the form of sheer cliffs on three sides that dropped thousands of metres to the valley floor. Under normal circumstances, it would have been a poor site for a fortress, as it could easily be blockaded, but Honsou had no intention of staying for any length of time and his warband had cleared the promontory of its former occupants in a brutal firefight that had seen them hurling their captives to their doom as an offering to the gods.

The Iron Skull flew over Honsou's temporary fortress, a graceless collection of gabions fashioned from linked sections of thick wire mesh lined with heavy-duty fabric and filled with sand, earth, rocks and gravel. A line of these blocky gabions stretched across the width of the promontory, and yet more had been stacked to form towers where heavy weapons could be mounted.

In truth, it was more of a defensive wall than a fortress and wasn't a patch on even the lowliest Warsmith's citadel on Medrengard, but it was as strong as he could make it and should suffice for the length of the Skull Harvest.

An adamantine gate swung outwards as Honsou and the others approached, the guns mounted on the blocky towers either side of it tracking them until they passed inside. Two dozen Iron Warriors manned the walls, their armour dusty and scored by the planet's harshly unpredictable climate. The remainder of Honsou's force was spread throughout the camp or aboard the Warbreed, the venerable ship that had brought them here and which now moored uneasily among the fleets in orbit around this world.

Honsou marched directly to an iron-sheeted pavilion at the centre of his camp, itself protected by more of the blocky, earth-filled gabions. His banner snapped

and fluttered in the wind, the Iron Skull seeming to grin with a mocking sneer, as though daring the world to attack. Grendel, Vaanes and the Newborn followed him past the two hulking warriors in Terminator armour guarding the entrance to the pavilion. Each of the giant praetorians was armed with a long, hook-bladed pike and looked like graven metal statues, their bodies as inflexible as their hearts.

Inside the pavilion, the walls were hung with maps depicting arcs of the galaxy, planetary orbits, system diagrams and a variety of mystical sigils scrawled on pale sheets of skin, both human and alien. An iron-framed bed sat in the centre of the space, surrounded by bare metal footlockers filled with books and scrolls. A trio of smoking braziers filled the pavilion with the heady scent of burning oils said to draw the eyes of the gods.

Honsou set his axe upon a rack of weapons and poured himself a goblet of water from a copper ewer. He didn't offer any to his champions and took a long draught before turning to face them.

'So,' he began, 'What do you make of our first foray?'

Grendel helped himself to a goblet of water and said, 'Not bad, though I didn't get to kill anything. If this Pashtoq Uluvent is as mad as all the other followers of the Blood God I've met, then we shouldn't have to wait too long for his response.'

'Vaanes? What do you think? You've fought in one of these before, what happens next?'

'First you'll be summoned to the citadel to pay homage,' said Vaanes, idly lifting a book from the footlocker nearest the bed. 'Then there will be a day of sacrifices before the contests begin.'

'Homage,' spat Honsou. 'I detest the word. I give homage to no man.'

'That's as may be,' said Vaanes. 'But you're not so powerful you can break the rules.'

Honsou nodded, though it sat ill with him to bow and scrape before another, even one as infamous as the master of this world. He snatched the book Vaanes held and set it down on the bed.

'And after all this homage and sacrifice, what happens after that?'

'Then the killings begin,' said Vaanes, looking in puzzlement at him. 'The leaders of the various warbands challenge one another for the right to take their warriors. Mostly their champions answer these challenges, for only when the stakes are highest do the leaders enter the fray.'

'These challenges, are they straight up fights?' asked Honsou.

'Sometimes,' said Vaanes. 'The last one usually is, but they can take any form before that. You almost never know until you set foot in the arena what you'll be up against. I've seen clashes of tanks, bare-knuckle fighting to the death, battles with xenos monsters and psychic duels. You never know.'

'That mean I'll maybe get to kill something?' said Grendel with undisguised relish.

'I can as good as guarantee it,' replied Vaanes.

'Then we need to know what we're up against,' said Honsou. 'If we're going to get ourselves an army, we need to know who we're taking it from.'

'How do you propose we do that?' said Grendel.

'Go through the city. Explore it and find out who's here. Learn their strengths and weaknesses. Make no secret of where your allegiance lies and if you need to crack some heads open, then that's fine too. Grendel, you know what to do?'

'Aye,' agreed Grendel, with a gleam of anticipation in his eye. 'I do indeed.'

Honsou caught the look that passed between the Newborn and Ardaric Vaanes,

relishing their confusion. It never did to have your underlings too familiar with your plans.

'Now get out, I have research to do,' said Honsou, lifting the book he had taken off Vaanes from the bed. 'Amuse yourselves as you see fit until morning.'

'Sounds like a plan to me,' said Grendel, drawing a long-bladed knife.

Honsou was about to turn away from his subordinates when he saw the Newborn cock its head to one side and the inner light that lurked just beneath its borrowed skin pulse with a shimmering heartbeat. In the months they had fought together, Honsou recognised the warning.

'Enemies are approaching,' said the Newborn, answering Honsou's unasked question.

'What? How do you know?' demanded Grendel.

'I can smell the blood,' said the Newborn.

THE GROUND BEFORE Honsou's defensive wall was littered with bodies. Gunfire flashed from the towers and ramparts, a brutal curtain of fire that sawed through the ranks of flak-armoured warriors who hurled themselves without fear at the gates. Sudden darkness had fallen, as though a shroud of night had been cast over the promontory, and stuttering tongues of flame lit the night as the two forces tore at one another.

The Newborn's warning had come not a second too soon and Honsou had massed his warriors on the crude walls in time to see a host of screaming men emerge from the darkness towards them. They were an unlikely storming force, a ragged mix of human renegades of all shapes and sizes. Most wore iron masks or skull-faced helmets and their uniforms - such as they were - were little more than bloodstained rags stitched together like the Newborn's skin.

They came on in a howling mass, firing a bizarre mix of weapons at the defenders. Las-bolts and solid rounds smacked into the walls or from the ceramite plates of the Iron Warriors. What the attackers lacked in skill and tactical acumen, they made up for in sheer, visceral ferocity.

It wasn't nearly enough.

Disciplined volleys barked again and again from the Iron Warriors and line after line of attackers was cut down. Their primitive armour was no match for the mass-reactive bolts of the defenders, each a miniature rocket that exploded within the chest cavity of its target.

Heavy weapons on the towers carved bloody gouges in the attacking horde, but the carnage only seemed to spur them to new heights of fanaticism, as though the bloodshed were an end in itself.

'Don't these fools realise they'll never get in?' said Ardaric Vaanes as he calmly snapped off a shot that detonated within the bronze mask of a flag-waving maniac as he ran at the gate without even a weapon unsheathed.

'They don't seem to care,' said Honsou, reloading his bolter. 'This isn't about getting in, it's about letting us know that we're being challenged.'

'You reckon these are Uluvent's men?' said Grendel, clearly enjoying this one-sided slaughter. Grendel had allowed the enemy to reach his section of the walls before ordering his men to open fire, and Honsou saw the relish he took in such close-range killing.

'Without a doubt,' said Honsou.

'He must have known they'd all get killed,' pointed out Vaanes.

'He didn't care,' said the Newborn, standing just behind Honsou's right shoulder. Its unnatural flesh was still glowing and there was a hungry light in its eyes. 'His god cares not from where the blood flows and neither does he. By throwing

away the lives of these men, Pashtoq Uluvent is showing us how powerful he is. That he can afford to lose so many men and not care.'

'Getting clever in your old age,' said Grendel with a grin and slapped the arm of the Newborn. His champion flinched at Grendel's touch and Honsou knew it detested the mohicaned warrior. Something to bear in mind if Grendel became a problem.

The slaughter - it could not be called a battle - continued for another hour before the last shots faded. The attackers had not retreated and had fought to the last, their bodies spread like a carpet of ruptured flesh and blood before the Iron Warriors compound.

The strange darkness that had come with the attack now lifted like the dawn and Honsou saw a lone figure threading his way through the field of corpses towards the fortress.

Cadaras Grendel raised his bolter, but Vaanes reached out and lowered the weapon's barrel.

'What the hell do you think you're doing, Vaanes?' snarled Grendel.

'That's not one of Uluvent's men,' said Vaanes. 'You don't want to kill this one.'

'Shows what you know,' said the scarred warrior, turning to Honsou for acknowledgement. Honsou gave a brief nod and turned to watch as the newcomer approached the gate without apparent fear of the many guns aimed at him.

'Who is he?' said Honsou. 'Do you recognise him?'

'No, but I know who he represents,' said Vaanes, gesturing to the looming citadel that dominated the skyline.

'Open the gates,' ordered Honsou. 'Let's hear what he has to say.'

DESPITE HIS EARLIER confidence, Honsou couldn't help but feel apprehensive as he climbed the twisting, corkscrew stairs carved into the sheer sides of the rock face that led towards the mountainous citadel. The emissary led them, his sandaled feet seeking out the steps as surely as if he had trod them daily for a thousand years. For all Honsou knew, perhaps he had.

Honsou had met the emissary, a nameless peon in the robes of a scribe, at the gate of his makeshift fortress where he was handed a scroll case of ebony inlaid with golden thorns. He removed the scroll, a single sheet of cartridge paper instead of the more melodramatic human skin he'd expected, and read the tight, mechanical-looking script written upon it before passing the scroll to Ardaric Vaanes.

'Well?' he'd said when Vaanes had read its contents.

'We go,' said Vaanes instantly. 'When this world's master summons you, it is death to refuse.'

His message delivered, the emissary turned and led them through the squalid streets of the city towards the tallest peak, climbing steep stairs cut into the rocky flanks of the mountain. Honsou had brought Vaanes and the Newborn with him, leaving Grendel to finish the execution of the wounded attackers and keep the compound safe against further assaults.

The climb was arduous, even to one whose muscles were enhanced with power armour, and many times Honsou thought he was set to plummet to his death until the Newborn helped steady him. Their route took them across treacherous chain bridges, along narrow ledges and though snaking tunnels that wound a labyrinthine passage through the depths of the mountain and avoided the fields of razor wire. Though he tried to memorise the route, Honsou soon found himself confounded by occluded passageways, switchbacks and the strange angles within the bowels of the fortress.

On the few occasions they emerged onto the side of the mountain, Honsou saw how high they had climbed. Below them, the city shone like a bruised diamond, torches and cookfires dotting the mountainside like sunlight on quartz as the skies darkened to a sickly purple. Thousands upon thousands of warriors were gathered in makeshift camps throughout the city and Honsou knew that if he made the right moves, they could be his.

Any army gathered from this place would be a patchwork force of differing fighting styles, races and temperaments, but it would be large and, above all, it would be powerful enough to achieve its objective. And if the books he had taken from the chained libraries of Khalan-Ghol gave up their secrets, he would have something of even greater value than mere warriors to drown the worlds of Ultramar in blood.

The higher they climbed, the more Honsou felt his appreciation for the design of this fortress shift from grudging admiration to awe. It was constructed with all the cunning of the most devious military architect, yet eschewed the brutal functionality common to the Iron Warriors for a malicious spite in some of the more deadly traps.

At last, they emerged within an enclosed esplanade lined with pillars and crowned with what could only be the outer hull plates of a spaceship. The metal was buckled and scored from multiple impacts, the sheeting blackened and curved where the intense heat of laser batteries had pounded the armour to destruction.

A great, thorn-patterned gate stood open at the end of the esplanade and a hundred warriors in power armour lined the route they must take through it. Each of the warriors was armoured differently, a multitude of colours and designs, some so old they were the image of that worn by Honsou. Only one thing unified these warriors, a jagged red cross painted through the Chapter insignia worn on their left shoulder guard.

The emissary led them down this gauntlet of warriors, and Honsou saw Salamanders, Night Lords, Space Wolves, Dark Angels, Flesh Tearers, Iron Hands and a dozen other Chapters. He noted with grim amusement that no

Ultramarines made up these warriors' numbers and doubted that any of Macragge's finest would be found in this garrison.

Beyond the gateway, the fortress became a gaudy palace, a golden wonder of fabulous, soaring design that was completely at odds with the external solemnity of its design. Honsou found the interior garish and vulgar, its ostentation the antithesis of his tastes, such as they were. This was not the palace of a warlord; it was the domain of a decadent egotist. Then again, he should not have been surprised, after all, wasn't it his monstrous ego and megalomania that had brought the citadel's builder low in the first place?

At last they came to a set of gilded doors, taller than a warlord titan, which swung open in a smooth arc to reveal a grand throne room of milky white marble and gold. The sounds of voices and armoured bodies came from beyond and, as Honsou and his retinue followed the emissary through, they saw the towering form of a daemonic Battle Titan serving as the backdrop to a tall throne that sat on a raised dais at the far end of the chamber.

A hundred captured battle flags hung from the vaulted ceiling and the chamber was thick with warriors of all sizes and descriptions.

'I thought this summons was just for us,' said Honsou.

'What made you think that?' replied Vaanes. 'Did you think you were a special case?'

Honsou ignored the venomous relish in Vaanes's words and didn't reply. He had thought the summons was for him and him alone, but saw how foolish that belief had been. This was the Skull Harvest and every warrior gathered here would be thinking that he alone would be the victor.

He saw a profusion of horns, crimson helms, glittering axes and swords, alien creatures in segmented armour and a riotous profusion of standards, many depicting one of the glorious sigils of the Dark Gods.

'Should we have brought a standard?' hissed Honsou, leaning close to Ardaric

Vaanes.

'We could have, but it wouldn't have impressed him.'

'There is fear in this room,' said the Newborn. 'I can sense it flowing through this place like the currents of the warp.'

Honsou nodded. Even he could sense the lurking undercurrent of unease that permeated the throne room. The throne itself was empty, a carved block of thorn-wrapped onyx that would surely dwarf any man who sat upon it, even a Space Marine.

He turned as his instincts for danger warned him of threat and his hand snatched to his sword hilt as a looming shadow enveloped him.

'You are Honsou?' said a booming voice like the sound of tombstones colliding.

'I am,' he said, looking up into the furnace eyes of a warrior clad in vivid red battle plate that was scarred and burned with the fires of battle and which resembled the lined texture of exposed muscle. His shoulder guards were formed from an agglomerated mass of bones, upon which was carved the icon of a planet being devoured between a set of fanged jaws.

Upon a heavily scored breastplate of fused ribs, Honsou saw a red skull branded over the insignia of an eight-pointed star and knew who stood before him. The warrior's blazing eyes were set deep within a helmet fashioned from a skull surely taken from the largest greenskin imaginable, and they were fixed on Honsou in an expression of controlled rage.

'Pashtoq Uluvent, I presume,' said Honsou.

'I am the Butcher of Formund, the bloodstorm of the night that takes the skulls of the blessed ones for the Master of the Brazen Throne,' said the giant and Honsou smelled the odour of spoiled blood upon Uluvent's armour.

'What do you want?' said Honsou. 'Didn't you lose enough men attacking my compound?'

'Simple blood sacrifices,' said Uluvent. 'A statement of challenge.'

'You let your men die just to issue a challenge?' said Honsou, impressed despite himself.

'They were nothing, fodder to show my displeasure. But Vosok Dall was a chosen warrior of my warband and his death must be avenged with yours.'

'Many have tried to kill me,' said Honsou, squaring his shoulders before the champion of the Blood God, 'but none have succeeded, and they were a lot tougher than you.'

Uluvent chuckled, the mirthless noise sounding as though it issued from a benighted cavern at the end of the world, and reached up to tap Honsou's forehead. 'When the Harvest begins, you and I shall meet on the field of battle and your mongrel skull will be mounted on my armour.'

Before Honsou could reply, Pashtoq Uluvent turned and marched away. Honsou felt his anger threaten to get the better of him, and only quelled the urge to shoot Uluvent in the back with conscious effort.

'It'll be a cold day in the warp before that happens,' he hissed as the Battle Titan's warhorn let out a discordant bray of noise; part fanfare, part roar of belligerence. The harsh wall of noise echoed around the chamber, reverberating from the pillars and reaching into every warrior's bones with its static-laced scrapcode.

Honsou blinked as he saw that the throne at the foot of the Battle Titan was now occupied. Had it been occupied a moment ago? He would have sworn that it had been empty, but sat like a great king of old upon the onyx throne was a towering warrior in crimson armour edged in gold. A halo of blades wreathed his pallid, ashen face and his right arm was a monstrous claw with unsheathed blades that shimmered with dark energies.

A great axe was clasped in this mighty king's other hand and his merciless eyes swept the warriors assembled before him with a searching gaze that left no secret unknown to him. At his shoulder squatted a chittering, reptilian beast that wrapped its slimy flesh around the vents of the warrior's backpack.

The howl of the titan's warhorn ceased abruptly and all eyes turned to the warrior king upon the onyx throne. Every champion in the room dropped to one knee at the sight of so mighty a warlord.

Huron Blackheart.

The Tyrant of Badab.

AT LENGTH THE Tyrant spoke, his voice booming and powerful. A voice used to command. A voice that had convinced three Chapters of the Adeptus Astartes to side with him against their brothers. A voice belonging to a warrior who had survived the death of half his body and not only lived, but returned stronger and more deadly than ever.

Though he tried not to be, Honsou couldn't help but be impressed.

'I see many hungry faces before me,' said the Tyrant. 'I see warlords and corsairs, mercenaries and outcasts, renegades and traitors. What you were before you came here does not interest me, all that matters in the Skull Harvest is who is the strongest.'

Huron Blackheart rose to his feet and stepped from the dais to move amongst those who came before him. The loathsome creature at his shoulder hissed and spat, the pigments of its mottled hide running from spotted to scaled and back again in a heartbeat. Its eyes were black gems, devoid of expression, yet Honsou sensed malignant intelligence behind them.

A warrior in the armour of the Astral Claws, the Tyrant's former Chapter,

followed behind Huron Blackheart and Honsou sensed a darkly radiant power within him, as though what lurked beneath the ceramite plates was something no longer wholly human.

Accompanying this warrior was a tall woman of startling appearance, with features so thin as to be emaciated. Her dark hair was pulled severely back from her face and cascaded to her ankles. Golden flecks danced in her eyes and her emerald robes hung from her thin frame as though intended for someone more generously proportioned. She carried a heavy ebony staff topped with a horned skull. Honsou recognised a sorceress when he saw one.

As Huron Blackheart made his way through the crowds of warriors, Honsou saw that the size of the man's throne was not simply an exercise in vanity; he dwarfed even the mightiest of his supplicants.

No wonder the piratical fleets that raided the shipping lanes around New Badab were the terror of the Imperium's shipmasters. Blackheart's reavers plagued the worlds of the Corpse-Emperor from the Tyrant's bases scattered around the Maelstrom, bringing him plunder, slaves, weapons and, most importantly, ships.

The Tyrant and his bodyguards moved through his throne room and the warriors gathered before him bowed and scraped. Honsou felt his lip curl in distaste.

'They worship him like he was a god,' he said.

'On New Badab he might as well be,' said Vaanes. 'He has the power of life and death over everyone here.'

'Not me, he doesn't.'

'Even you,' promised Vaanes.

'Then I'll be sure to keep my thoughts to myself.'

Vaanes chuckled. 'That'll be a first, but it doesn't matter. That creature on his

shoulder, the Hamadrya, is said to be able to see into the hearts of men and whisper their darkest thoughts in the Tyrant's ear. Imperial assassins have tried to slay Blackheart for decades, but none have ever come close, the Hamadrya senses their thoughts long before they get near.'

Honsou nodded at Vaanes's words, watching the unseemly displays of fealty and obeisance made by the various warlords and corsair chieftains. He looked across the throne room and saw that Pashtoq Uluvent also kept himself aloof from such toadying, and his respect for the warrior went up a notch.

Then the Tyrant turned his gaze on Honsou and he felt the blood drain from his face and a chill touch of fear run the length of his spine. It was a sensation new to Honsou and he liked it not at all. The Tyrant of Badab's thin, lipless mouth smiled, exposing teeth sharpened to razor points, and Honsou found himself helpless before the warrior's gimlet gaze.

The warriors parted before the Tyrant as he strode towards Honsou, the claws of his huge gauntlet alive with baleful energies and the Hamadrya hissing in animal rage.

Huron Blackheart was a giant of a warrior, his already formidable physique boosted by cybernetic augmentation and the blessings of the Dark Gods. Honsou's head came to the centre of the Tyrant's chest plate and though it galled him to do so, he was forced to look up to the lord of New Badab.

He felt as though he were a morsel held helpless before some enormous predator or a particularly rare specimen about to be pinned to the board of a collector. The Tyrant stared at him until Honsou felt he could stand no more, then transferred his gaze to the Newborn and Ardaric Vaanes.

'This one is touched by the raw power of the warp,' said the Tyrant, lifting the Newborn's head with the tips of his claws. 'Powerful and unpredictable, but very dangerous. And you...'

This last comment was addressed to Ardaric Vaanes and with the Newborn forgotten, the Tyrant turned Vaanes's shoulder guard with the blade of his axe,

nodding as he saw the red cross of the Red Corsairs.

'I know you,' said the Tyrant. 'Vaanes. Late of the Raven Guard. You fight for another now?'

'I do, my lord,' said Vaanes, bowing before his former master.

'This half-breed?'

'The last person who called me that ended up dead,' snarled Honsou.

Without seeming to move, the Tyrant's claw shot out and punched into Honsou's breastplate, lifting him from his feet. Honsou could feel the cold, dark metal of the claws digging at the flesh of his chest, the force of the Tyrant's blow precisely measured.

'And the last person who failed to show me respect in my own throne room suffers now at the hands of my most skilled daemonic torturers. They tear his soul apart each day then reclaim its soiled fragments from the warp and the process begins anew. He has suffered this agony for eight decades and I have no inclination to end his torments. You wish a similar fate?'

Honsou's life hung by a thread, yet he still managed defiance in his tone. 'No, my lord, I do not, but I am no longer the half-breed. I am a Warsmith of the Iron Warriors.'

'I know who you are, warrior,' said the Tyrant. 'The immaterium gibbers with your slaughters and the corruption you have wrought. I know why you are here and have seen the path of your fate. You will wreak havoc in the realm of the Corpse-Emperor's worshippers, but those you have wronged will shake the heavens to see you dead. Yet for all your arrogance and bitterness, you have something most others lack.'

'And what's that?' spat Honsou.

'You have a grand vision of revenge and the chance that you might succeed is all that stays my hand.'

Huron Blackheart then turned his attention back to Vaanes and said, 'You wear my marking upon your armour, Ardaric Vaanes, but I sense that you serve a power greater than this half-breed. Just remember that the Dark Prince is a jealous lord and suffers no other masters but he.'

Blackheart sheathed his blades and Honsou dropped to the floor of the throne room, breathless and chilled to the bone from the touch of the Tyrant's claws. The breath heaved in his chest and he felt the nearness of death as a cold shroud upon his heart. He looked up, but the Tyrant had already moved away.

As Honsou picked himself up, he saw the Tyrant's sorceress stare with naked interest at the Newborn, her eyes lingering long over the stitched nightmare of its dead fleshmask. Blackheart climbed the dais to his throne and turned to address the gathered champions with his axe and claw raised above his head.

'Any warrior who dares to bare his neck in the Skull Harvest should present his blade upon the Arena of Thorns when the Great Eye opens. Blood will be spilled, the weak will die and the victor shall benefit greatly from my patronage.'

The Tyrant lowered his voice, yet its power was still palpable and Honsou felt as though the words were spoken just for him. 'But know this: the gods are watching and they will rend the souls of the unworthy for all eternity.'

IN DAYS THAT followed, Honsou's warriors explored the city on the flanks of the Tyrant's mountain, learning all they could in preparation for the violence to come. Warbands were identified and their warriors observed, for each warlord was keen to display the prowess of his fighters and champions.

Ardaric Vaanes watched the sensual slaughters of Notha Etassay's blade dancers, a troupe of decadent warrior priests to whom no sensation of the blade was

unknown and whose every kill was performed with the utmost grace and enjoyment. Notha Etassay, an androgynous beauty of uncertain sex, bade Vaanes spar with them and, upon tasting his blood, immediately offered him a place within the troupe.

With every battle he fought, Vaanes felt the vicarious thrill of the kill as every sensation of the graceful ballet of blades was channelled through every warrior priest. It was only with great regret that Vaanes declined Etassay's offer of a bond ritual with the troupe.

Unimpressed with the delicate bladework of Notha Etassay, Cadaras Grendel left Vaanes and the Newborn to their sport and spent his days watching the blood games of Pashtoq Uluvent's warriors as they hacked their way through naked slave gangs. Their victims were armed with little more than knives and raw terror, and such brutal murders were more to Grendel's liking. Soon he found himself wetting his blades with blood in Uluvent's arena. Such was his bloodlust that within the hour he was granted an audience upon the killing floor by Pashtoq Uluvent himself.

Those battle machines of Votheer Tark that could be brought up the mountain roared and rampaged, their engines howling like trapped souls as they crushed prisoners beneath their tracks or tore them limb from limb with clawed pincer arms. Kaarja Salombar's corsairs staged flamboyant displays of marksmanship and sword mastery, but Vaanes was unimpressed, having seen the exquisite bladework of Notha Etassay's devotees.

Honsou himself ventured little from behind his walls, his every waking moment spent in contemplation of the ancient tomes he had brought from Khalan-Ghol. What he sought within their damned pages he would not reveal, but as the days passed, his obsession with the secrets contained in the mad ravings committed to the page grew ever deeper.

The Newborn stayed close to Ardaric Vaanes, watching the killings and displays of martial ability with a dispassionate eye. It was stronger and more skilful than the majority of the warriors here, yet only recently had it begun to take pleasure in the infliction of pain and death. Differing angels warred within its mind; the

teachings of its creator and the buried instincts and memories of the gene-heritage bequeathed to it by Uriel Ventris.

Of all the warrior bands gathered for the Skull Harvest, the Newborn was most fascinated by the loxatl, a band of alien mercenaries that laired in burrows hollowed from the sides of the mountain. Vaanes and the Newborn watched the fighting drills of the loxatl on a patch of open ground before these caves.

The leader of this brood-group was a kin leader who went by the name of Xaneant. Whether this was the creature's true name or one foisted upon it by human tongues was unclear, but the Newborn was impressed by the alien mercenaries, liking their fluid, sinuous movements and utter devotion to the members of their brood.

Something in that kin-bond was achingly familiar and the Newborn wondered where the sense of belonging it felt came from. Was it responding to a memory buried deep within its altered brain or was this a fragment of the psyche the Daemonculaba had stamped upon it?

'They are all related,' said the Newborn, watching as the loxatl spun like fireflies through a series of lightning fast manoeuvres designed to showcase their speed and agility. 'Would that not hinder them in battle?'

'In what way?' asked Vaanes.

'Would there not be grief or horror if a kin-member died?'

'I don't think the loxatl think that way,' said Vaanes. 'It sounds obvious, but they're not like humans. It's a good observation though. I remember reading that in ancient wars, kings would sometimes raise regiments formed by men and women from the same towns, thinking it would create a bond of loyalty that would make them stronger.'

'And did it?'

'Before the killing started, yes, but when battle was joined and people began to die, the sight of friends and loved ones torn up by shellfire or cut to pieces by swords and axes destroyed any fighting spirit they might have had.'

'So why do the loxatl do it?' asked the Newborn. 'If such groupings are so brittle, why do it? Surely it is better to fight alone or alongside those you do not care about.'

'Yes and no,' said Vaanes, slipping back into the role of mentor and instructor. 'What keeps many fighting units together is the warrior next to him and the desire not to let your battle-brothers down. Shared camaraderie gives a fighting unit cohesion, but that needs to be alloyed to an unbreakable fighting spirit in order to avoid being broken when the killing starts.'

'Like the Adeptus Astartes?'

'Not all of them,' said Vaanes bitterly.

'The Ultramarines?'

'Yes, the Ultramarines,' sighed Vaanes. 'You get that from Ventris?'

'I think so,' said the Newborn. 'I have a desire for brotherhood with those I fight alongside, but I don't feel it.'

Vaanes laughed. 'No, you won't in Honsou's warband. It's said the Iron Warriors were never ones for easy camaraderie, even before they followed Horus into rebellion.'

'Is that a weakness?'

'I don't know yet. Time will tell, I suppose,' said Vaanes. 'Some warbands fight for money, some for revenge, some for honour and some for the slaughter, but it all ends up the same way.'

'What way is that?'

'In death,' said a voice behind them and both the Newborn and Vaanes turned to see Huron Blackheart's emaciated sorceress. The woman's gaunt features were even more skeletal in the daylight, the brightness of the sky imparting an unhealthy translucence to her skin and reflecting from the gold in her eyes. Her robes shimmered and her hair whipped and twisted like a dark snake with the motion of her head.

'Yes,' said Vaanes. 'In death.'

The sorceress smiled, exposing stumps of yellowed teeth, and Vaanes grimaced. The woman appeared young, yet the price she had paid for her powers was rotting her away from the inside out. 'The Lost Child and the Blind Warrior, fitting I should find you observing the displays of an alien species whose thought processes are utterly inimical to humanity.'

Vaanes felt his skin crawl at the nearness of the sorceress. Within the seething cauldron of the Maelstrom, the terrifying power of the immaterium was a constant, gnawing presence on the edge of perception, but her proximity seemed to act as a locus for warp entities gathering like vultures around a corpse. Vaanes could feel their astral claws scratching at the lid of his mind.

He glanced over at the Newborn, seeing it twitch and flinch as though there was an invisible host of buzzing, stinging insects swarming around its face, but which it was trying to ignore.

'What do you want?' said Vaanes, gripping the Newborn's arm and dragging it away from her loathsome presence. 'I detest your kind and wish to hear nothing you have to say.'

'Do not be so quick to dismiss what I have to offer, warrior of Corax,' hissed the sorceress, reaching out and placing a hand on the Newborn's chest.

'Never speak that name again,' snarled Vaanes. 'It means nothing to me now.'

'Not now, but one day it will again,' promised the sorceress.

'You see the future?' asked the Newborn. 'You know what is to happen? All of it?'

'Not all of it,' admitted the sorceress, 'but those whose lives stir the currents of the warp are bright lights in the darkness. A measure of their path is illuminated for those with the sight to see it.'

'Do you see mine?' said the Newborn eagerly.

The sorceress laughed, a shrill bite on the air that caused the loxatl to halt their martial display and screech in rage. Shimmering patterns danced over their glistening hides and they vanished in a blur of motion, slithering and skittering across the mountainside to boltholes carved in the rocks.

'The destiny of the Lost Child cleaves into the future like a fiery speartip,' said the sorceress. 'His destiny is woven into the tapestry of a great hero's death, the fall of a star and the rise of an evil thought long dead.'

'You speak in meaningless riddles,' said Vaanes, dragging the Newborn away.

'Wait!' cried the Newborn. 'I want more.'

'Trust me, you don't,' warned Vaanes, seeing Cadaras Grendel marching towards them, his armour splashed with blood. 'Nothing good can come of it.'

'The Lost Child wishes to hear what I have to say,' screeched the sorceress, barring their way with her skull-topped staff.

Vaanes unsheathed the caged lightning of his gauntlet-mounted claws and rammed the foot-long blades up into the sorceress's chest, tearing up through her heart and lungs. She died without a sound, the breath ghosting from her lips in a sparkling, iridescent cloud and the golden light fading from her eyes. Vaanes sucked in her dying breath, revelling in the sensations of fear, horror and pain it

contained. His entire body shook with the deliciousness of her soul and all thought of consequence fled from his thoughts at the ecstasy of the kill.

Vaanes lowered his arm and let her skeletal frame slide from the blades of his gauntlet. Her corpse flopped to the ground and he set off towards Cadaras Grendel with the Newborn in tow.

'What was that about?' said Grendel, looking over at the shrivelled body of the sorceress. Whatever force had animated her wasted frame had fled her body, leaving a desiccated husk of shrivelled flesh and dried bone.

'Nothing,' replied Vaanes, drawing a deep breath. 'Forget it.'

'Fine,' said Grendel, gesturing towards the sky. 'Honsou wants you back at the compound. The Skull Harvest is about to begin.'

Vaanes looked up, seeing the swirling colours gathering around a toxic swirl of amber, like a cancerous epicentre of a diseased whirlpool.

'The Great Eye... it's opening,' he whispered as Grendel made his way past him in the opposite direction. 'Are you coming back too?'

Grendel nodded, grinning with feral anticipation. 'Don't worry about it. I'll see you in the arena.'

Vaanes didn't like the sound of that, but let it go, wondering whose blood stained Grendel's breastplate. The Iron Warrior looked down at the withered remains of the sorceress.

'Did she try and tell your fortune?' said Grendel, kneeling beside the sagging cloth of the sorceress's robes.

'Something like that,' agreed Vaanes.

'And you killed her for it?'

'Yes.'

'Too bad for her she didn't see that coming.'

THE SKULL HARVEST got underway, as all such gatherings do, with sacrifice. Framed by the towering majesty of a growling Battle Titan, the Tyrant of Badab tore the heart from a captured warrior of the Howling Griffons and hurled it into the arena, where it pulsed bright arterial blood onto the gritty sand until it was emptied.

The first day was taken up with the various champions' warbands announcing themselves to the Tyrant, who sat upon a grand throne of bronze and amber, and the allocation of challenges. Blood feuds would be settled first and a number of champions bellowed the names of those they wished to fight in the name of avenging an insult to their honour.

Honsou expected Pashtoq Uluvent to issue such a challenge, but the red-armoured warrior had yet to appear.

'I expected Uluvent to be here,' noted Vaanes, as though reading his mind. 'Champions of the Blood God are usually the first to arrive and begin the killing.'

'No, Uluvent's smarter than that,' said Honsou.

'What do you mean?'

'I think he wants to wait until further into the Harvest before trying to kill me. It'll be more of a triumph for him if he slays me after we've taken other warbands with our own killings. He'll have his blood feud resolved and he'll take all my warriors.'

'Then he's more cunning than most champions of the Blood God.'

'Maybe,' agreed Honsou with a smile. 'We'll see how that works out for him.'

'And Grendel, where's he?' asked Vaanes. 'I haven't seen him since yesterday. He said he'd be here. The other champions will know that one of our inner circle hasn't appeared for the beginning of the death games.'

'Forget Grendel,' said Honsou. 'We don't need him.'

'I see him,' said the Newborn, gesturing with a nod of his helmet to the opposite side of the arena. 'Over there.'

Honsou looked over and saw the ranks of gathered champions part as Pashtoq Uluvent took his place on the circumference of the arena. The red-armoured warrior with the ork-skull helmet raised his red-bladed sword and a raucous cheer was torn from thousands of throats as his skull rune banner was unfurled.

Standing beside Uluvent was Cadaras Grendel, his armour streaked with fresh blood and his chainsword unsheathed. The Iron Warrior shrugged and raised his sword to lick wet blood from the blade.

'Grendel's betrayed us?' said Vaanes, his voice thick with anger.

'It was only a matter of time,' said Honsou. 'To be honest I expected it sooner.'

'I'll kill him,' snarled Vaanes.

'No,' said Honsou. 'Grendel and I will have a reckoning, but it won't be here. Do you understand me?'

Vaanes said nothing, but Honsou could see the anger in the warrior's eyes and just hoped the former Raven Guard would be able to restrain the urge to strike down Grendel for now.

'I don't understand you, Honsou,' said Vaanes eventually.

'Not many people do,' replied Honsou. 'And that's the way I like it.'

*

A WARRIOR IN bronze armour emblazoned with the skull rune of the Blood God made the first kill of the day, disembowelling a champion in spiked armour who Honsou saw was hopelessly outmatched in the first moments of the duel. The slain warrior's head was mounted upon a spike of black iron beneath the Tyrant's throne.

The warband of the defeated warrior now belonged to his killer, their loyalty won through the display of greater strength and skill. Such loyalty could be a fragile thing, but few gathered here cared for whom they fought, simply that they fought for the strongest, most powerful champion of the Skull Harvest.

Ranebra Corr's sword-champion slew the hearthguard of Yeruel Mzax, a clan warrior of the Cothax stars. The clan-laws forbade Mzax to fight under the leadership of another and he hacked his own head off with an energised claw attached to the upper edge of his gauntlet.

Votheer Tark's battle engine was a hulking monster that had once been a Dreadnought, but which had been altered by Tark's Dark Mechanicum adepts into the housing for a shrieking entity brought forth from the warp. It tore through the warbands of three champions before finally being brought low by one of Pashtoq Uluvent's berserk warriors who fought through the loss of an arm to detonate a melta bomb against its sarcophagus.

The daemon was torn screaming back to the warp and the lower half of the berserker was immolated in the blast. Even with his legs vaporised, the berserker crawled towards Huron Blackheart's throne to deposit the defeated engine's

skull-mount.

The Newborn won two duels on the first day of killing; crushing the skull of Kaarja Salombar's corsair pistolier before he could loose a single shot, and eventually defeating the loxatl kin-champion of Xaneant's brood group. This last battle was fought for nearly an hour, with the loxatl unable to put the Newborn down, despite exhausting its supply of flechettes into its opponent.

A daemonic creation of Khalan-Ghol's birth chambers, the Newborn's powers of regeneration were stronger in the warp-saturated Maelstrom and each wound, though agonising, was healed within moments of its infliction.

Exhausted and without ammunition, the loxatl eventually pounced on the Newborn, using its dewclaws to tear at its armour, but even its speed was no match for the Newborn's resilience. At last, the hissing, panting beast was defeated, drained and unable to defend itself when the Newborn crushed its neck and tore its head from its shoulders.

As the fighting and killing went on, warbands began to agglomerate as their champions were slain and armies formed as the most powerful warlords drew more and more fighters to their banner.

Cadaras Grendel fought with his customary brutal remorselessness, winning several bouts for Pashtoq Uluvent, and Honsou could see Ardaric Vaanes's fury at this betrayal simmering ever closer to the surface. To dilute that anger, Honsou sent the former Raven Guard into the arena while the Newborn healed and Vaanes eagerly slaughtered warriors from three warbands, one after the other, bringing yet more blood-bonded fighters into Honsou's growing army.

Honsou himself took to the field of battle twice; once to slay a pirate chieftain armed with two razor-edged tulwars, and once to break a kroot warrior leader who fought with a long, twin-bladed stave he wielded with preternatural speed and precision.

As the Newborn strangled a towering ogre creature with its own energy whip, winning a hundred of the brutish monsters to Honsou's banner, the fourth day of

killing drew to an end.

The armies of three champions were all that remained.

Pashtoq Uluvent's force of blood-hungry skull-takers, Notha Etassay's blade-dancers. And Honsou's Iron Warriors.

WITH THE VICTORIES he and his champions had won, Honsou's force had grown exponentially in size, numbering somewhere in the region of five thousand soldiers. Scores of armoured units and fighting machines, as well as all manner of xenos and corsair warbands were now his to command. The swords of seventeen warbands now belonged to Honsou and, by any measure of reckoning, he had a fearsome force with which to wreak havoc on his enemies.

Pashtoq Uluvent had amassed a force in the region of six thousand fighters, while Notha Etassay had procured five thousand through his exquisite slaughters. Any one of these forces was powerful enough to carve itself a fearsome slice of Imperial space and enjoy a period of slaughter unmatched in its previous history.

But the Skull Harvest was not yet over and the Tyrant's rule decreed that there could be only one champion left standing at its end.

Darkness closed in as the three warriors stepped into the arena, clad in their armour and each armed with their weapon of choice. Honsou's arm glittered in the torchlight that surrounded the arena as baying crowds of warriors cheered for their respective champions.

The three warriors marched to stand facing one another in the centre of the arena and Honsou took the opportunity to study his opponents, knowing his life would depend on knowing them better than they knew themselves.

Notha Etassay wore a light, form-fitting bodyglove of rippling black leather with

buckled straps holding strategically situated elements of flexible plate. The androgynous champion sashayed into the arena and performed a scintillating pre-battle ritual of acrobatic twists and leaps while spinning twin swords of velvety darkness through the air. Etassay's face was concealed by a studded leather mask with scar-like zippers and tinted glass orbs that glittered with wry amusement, as though this were a meeting of comrades instead of a duel to the death.

Pashtoq Uluvent planted his sword in the bloody earth of the arena and roared a wordless, inchoate bellow of ferocity to the heavens. His armour dripped with the blood of sacrifices and the flesh-texture of his armour seemed to swell and pulse with the beat of his heart. His eyes were like smouldering pools of blood within his helmet and he reached up with a serrated dagger to cut into the meat of his neck.

The champion of the brazen god of battle hurled the dagger away as blood began leaking from the open wound.

Honsou narrowed his eyes. 'Giving up already, Uluvent?'

'If I cannot kill you before my life bleeds out, then I am not worthy of victory and my death will honour the Skull Throne,' said Uluvent.

'Don't expect me to do anything like that,' said Honsou.

'I don't,' replied Uluvent. 'You are the mongrel by-blow of melded genes wrought in desperate times. You are a creature without honour that should never have been brought into existence.'

Honsou controlled his anger as Uluvent continued. 'One of your champions has already sworn himself to me, but I will kill you quickly if you submit to my dominance.'

'I don't submit to anyone,' Honsou warned his enemy.

Notha Etassay laughed, a high, musical sound of rich amusement. 'Whereas it's something I do rather well, though I prefer to be the dominant one in any intercourse.'

'You both disgust me,' snarled Uluvent. 'It insults my honour that I must fight you.'

The howl of the Battle Titan's warhorn echoed across the arena and the cheering warriors fell silent as the Tyrant of Badab rose from his throne to address the gathered champions, the Hamadrya curled around his thigh like a vile leech.

'Tonight the Skull Harvest ends!' said Huron Blackheart, his voice carried around the arena to the furthest reaches of the mountain. 'One champion will be victorious and his enemies will be broken upon the sands of this arena. Fight well and you will go forth to bring terror and death to those who betrayed our trust in them.'

The Tyrant of Badab locked eyes with each of the three champions in turn and raised his mighty clawed gauntlet. 'Now fight!'

Honsou sprang back from a decapitating sweep of Pashtoq Uluvent's axe, swaying aside as Etassay's black sword licked out and sliced into his shoulder guard. Honsou's black-bladed axe lashed out in a wide arc, forcing both opponents back and the three champions broke from the centre of the arena.

Etassay danced away from Honsou, swords twirling and face unreadable behind the leather mask, while Uluvent hefted his sword in a tight grip, watching warily for any movement from his opponents. Honsou knew Uluvent was the stronger of his foes, but Etassay's speed was ferocious, and who knew what power rested in his dark blades.

Honsou's axe was hungry for killing and he felt its insatiable lust to wreak harm running along the length of its haft and into his limbs. Or at least one of them. The power residing in the silver arm he had taken from the Ultramarines sergeant was anathema to the creature bound to his weapon.

This stage of a battle would be where each warrior sought to gauge the measure of the other, searching for signs of weakness or fear to be exploited. Honsou knew he would find neither in these two opponents, warriors hardened by decades of war and devotion to their gods.

Every fibre of Uluvent's being would be dedicated to killing in the Blood God's name, while Etassay would seek to wring every sensation from this bout. Winning would be secondary to the desire to experience the furthest excesses of violence, pain and pleasure.

Honsou cared nothing for the thrill of the fight, nor the honour of the kill. This entire endeavour was a means to an end. He cared nothing for the piratical schemes of the Tyrant, nor honouring any one of the ancient gods of the warp.

Etassay made the first move, leaping in close to Uluvent, his dark swords singing for the red-armoured champion. Uluvent moved swiftly, swinging his own sword up to block the blows and spinning on his heel to slash at Etassay's back. But the champion of the Dark Prince was no longer there, vaulting up and over the blade in a looping backwards somersault.

Honsou charged in, swinging his axe for Etassay, but the warrior dropped beneath the blow and smoothly pivoted onto his elbow, swinging his body out like a blade to take Honsou's legs out from under him.

Uluvent leapt towards Honsou as he fell, the red-bladed sword thrust downwards at his chest, but Honsou scrambled aside and the weapon plunged into the earth. Etassay's boot thundered against Uluvent's helmet and the roaring champion of the Blood God fell back, leaving his sword jammed in the ground.

Honsou pushed himself to his feet and furiously blocked and parried as Etassay spun away from his attack on Uluvent and came at him with a dizzying series of sword strikes. The champion of the Dark Prince was unimaginably fast and it was all Honsou could do to keep himself from being sliced into ribbons. His armour was scored and sliced numerous times and he realised that Etassay was playing with him, prolonging the battle to better enjoy the sense of superiority.

Honsou's bitterness flared, but he fought against it, knowing that Etassay would punish him for even the smallest lapse in concentration. Instead he forced himself to concentrate on exploiting the warrior's arrogance. Etassay thought he was better than Honsou and that would be his downfall.

Out of the corner of his eye, Honsou saw Uluvent circling them, waiting on a chance to reclaim his sword with a patience the Blood God's warriors were not known for. Honsou kept himself close to the weapon, forcing Uluvent to keep his distance. One opponent he could handle. Two? Probably not.

At last Etassay seemed to tire of Honsou and said, 'Let the other one have his blade. This contest is tiresome without his colourful rages.'

Honsou did not reply, instead turning towards the sword embedded in the sand and hacking his daemon axe through the blade. Uluvent's sword shattered into a thousand fragments and Honsou sensed Etassay's petulant displeasure through the studded mask.

Etassay leapt towards him, but Honsou had banked on such a manoeuvre and was ready for it. He hammered the pommel of his axe into Etassay's sternum and the champion dropped to the ground with a strangled, breathless cry.

Honsou heard Uluvent make his move and turned as he stamped down hard on Etassay's chest, hearing a brittle crack of bone. Uluvent slammed into Honsou and they tumbled to the sand. Honsou lost his grip on his axe as Uluvent's gauntlets fastened on his throat. The two warriors grappled in the bloody sand, pummelling one another with iron-hard fists.

Uluvent spat into Honsou's face. 'Now you die!'

Honsou rammed his knee into Uluvent's stomach, but the warrior's grip was unbreakable. Again and again he slammed his knee upwards until at last he felt the grip on his throat loosen. He managed to free one arm and slammed the heel of his palm into Uluvent's skull-faced helmet. Bone shattered and the bleeding wound in Uluvent's neck was exposed, spattering Honsou's helmet in blood.

Honsou slammed his fist into the wound, digging his fingers into Uluvent's neck and tearing the cut wider. His foe bellowed in pain and rolled off Honsou, rising unsteadily to his feet and lurching over to his followers to retrieve another weapon with one hand pressed to the ruin of his neck.

Honsou stood, groggy and battered, and set off after Uluvent, snatching his axe up from the ground next to the groaning figure of Etassay. He ignored the Dark Prince's champion, the warrior was beaten and probably in throes of ecstasy at the pain coursing along every nerve ending.

Honsou felt new strength in his limbs as he followed Uluvent. The warrior had torn off his shattered helmet and Honsou saw his face was hideously scarred and burned. Blood squirted from where Honsou had torn his neck wound further open, but the pain only seemed to galvanise Uluvent as he bellowed for a fresh blade.

Neck wound or no, Uluvent was still a fearsome opponent and armed with a fresh weapon, could still easily kill Honsou.

Cadaras Grendel held a wide-bladed sword out towards Pashtoq Uluvent and Honsou held his breath...

Pashtoq Uluvent reached for the weapon, but at the last moment, Cadaras Grendel reversed his grip and rammed the blade into the champion's chest. The tip of the weapon ripped out through the back of Uluvent's armour and the mighty warrior staggered as Grendel twisted the blade deeper into his chest.

Uluvent roared in pain and spun away from Grendel, wrenching the sword from his grip and dropped to his knees. Honsou gave him no chance to recover from his shock and pain, and brought his axe down upon the warrior's shoulder. The dark blade smashed Uluvent's shoulder guard to splinters and clove the champion of the Blood God from collarbone to pelvis.

Stunned silence swept over the gathered crowds, for none had ever expected to see Pashtoq Uluvent brought low. Cadaras Grendel stepped from the ranks of the Blood God's warriors to stand next to Honsou as the blazing fire of Pashtoq

Uluvent's eyes began to fade.

'Sorry,' said Grendel with a grin. 'Honsou may be a mongrel half-breed, and even though I know you'll lead me to a bloodier fight, I think he'll lead me to one I'll live through.'

Uluvent looked up at Honsou with hate and pain misting his vision. 'Give... me... a blade.'

Honsou was loath to indulge the champion's request, but knew he would need to if there were to be any shred of loyalty in the warriors he would win from Uluvent.

'Give it to him,' ordered Honsou.

Grendel nodded and reached down to drag the sword from the defeated champion's chest in a froth of bright blood. He held the weapon towards Uluvent, who took the proffered sword in a slack grip.

'And... my skull,' gasped Uluvent with the last of his strength. 'You... have... to take... it.'

'My pleasure,' said Honsou, raising his axe and honouring Pashtoq Uluvent's last request.

WITH PASHTOQ ULUVENT'S head mounted on the spikes below Huron Blackheart's throne, the Skull Harvest was over. Hundreds had died upon the sands of the Tyrant's arena, but such deaths were meaningless in the grand scheme of things, serving only to feed Blackheart's ego and amuse the Dark Gods of the warp.

At the final tally, Honsou left New Badab with close to seventeen thousand warriors sworn in blood to his cause. Pashtoq Uluvent's warriors, and those he

had won, were now Honsou's, their banners now bearing the Iron Skull device.

Notha Etassay had survived the final battle and had willingly sworn allegiance to Honsou after hoarsely thanking him for the exquisite sensations of bone shards through the lungs.

Huron Blackheart had been true to his word, and the victor of the Skull Harvest had indeed benefited greatly from his patronage. As the Warbreed broke orbit, numerous other vessels accompanied it, gifts from the Tyrant of Badab to be used for the express purpose of dealing death to the forces of the Imperium. In addition to these vessels, the ships of the defeated champions formed up around Honsou's flagship to form a ragtag, yet powerful, fleet of corsairs and renegades.

Battered warships, ugly bulk carriers, planetary gunboats, warp-capable system monitors and captured cruisers followed the Warbreed as it plotted a careful route through the Maelstrom, away from the domain of Huron Blackheart.

The sickly yellow orb of New Badab was swallowed in striated clouds of nebulous dust and polluted immaterial effluent vomited from the wound in real space as the fleet pulled away, and Honsou recalled the final words the mighty Tyrant had said to him.

Blackheart had pointed his dark-bladed claw towards Ardaric Vaanes, Cadaras Grendel and the Newborn as they boarded the battered Stormbirds ahead of Honsou.

'Kill them when they are of no more use to you,' said the Tyrant. 'Otherwise they will only betray you.'

'They wouldn't dare,' Honsou had said, though a seed of doubt had been planted.

'Always remember,' said Huron Blackheart. 'The strong are strongest alone.'

Book 5

IRON WARRIOR

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 chroniclers 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 mimical 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 cumber-some 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 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 fmd 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, bore 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 tensed 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 contract, 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 Etassays 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.

‘lean.’

‘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, Im 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.

Im looking for Mariana 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 Ventris 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 the 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 laugher. ‘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 the Despoiler 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 augmentic 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 tom 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 1 am here?’

‘I do,’ confirmed Mariana, 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, corning forward, his eagerness overcoming his natural caution. ‘Tell me where I can find it!’

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

‘No,’ demanded Honsou. ‘Now.’

Mariana 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, 1 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 augmentic grafted to his skull where a bolter round had pulped the side of his face.

Moriana snatched at him, slicing the skin of his check, 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, 1 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 1 want to know?'

Mariana nodded, moving from beside the tire 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 Mariana, lifting a waded 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 1 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 Mariana. '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 Mariana 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 Mariana 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 Ghoul 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 over blown 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 led you to me?’

‘The warp whispers your name, Mariana, and I am not without reasons 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 Mariana. ‘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.’

‘Ventris 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 1 may find the Thrice Born,’ he demanded.

‘It last walked this realm many years ago,’ said Moriana, ‘when its horde 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 Ultramarine& 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 1 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 masters return.'

'Where is this star fort?'

Mariana 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 Mariana'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 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 if 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 spilled 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 Castanas 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 compartments 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 uom 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 it's 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 completed,' 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 U1tramarines 5th Company.

One ebonite-trimmed shoulder guard displayed the white ‘U’ of the U1tramarines, 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.'

Olantor 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.'

Olantor 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 of 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.

Olantor 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.

Olantor 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 is 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 traceries 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 hullbreaking 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 augmentic 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 technovirus.

Honsou kept his remaining eye shut, for the sensation of two optical inputs to his brain induced nausea and dizziness that not even his enhanced 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 Warrior’s 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 forts 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.

BROTIIER-SEAGENT 0LANToR 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 meed by.

Interrogator Sibiya sat next to Olantor, consulting a dataslate 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.

Olantor 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,’

Olantor 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.’

Olantor 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.

Olantor 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.

Olantor 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.

Olantor 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 he]m, ‘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 material were ferried down to the fort's surface in the opening minutes of the landing, along with thousands of warriors, slaves and labourers. The ruined edges of the southern docking pier and the smashed buildings to either side were bulwarked 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, bulking 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 provided an umbrella of cover over the siege works.

A rain of 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 costly, 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 throne up before the Iron Warriors' positions, banks of heavy stone steel that provided protection from the

many guns mounted on the twin colossal towers overlooking the seized pier. Pounding blasts of fire hammered the newly-established positions, but it was already to late to prevent the invaders from securing their hold on the pier.

Behind these huge redoubts, the carriers of the Iron Warrior's 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 ms 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 the 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 gunner 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 mud 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 a heap of rubble towards him. Vaanes’s armour had been bulked with the addition of his jump pack, and the Newborns 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 can hold its own,’ said Vaanes. ‘And we have the loxatl broodgroup of Xaneant too. I think we’ll be fine.’

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

‘It is too bad,’ snapped Vaanes, his lightning-sheathed claws sliding down his gauntlet. Ever since New Badab, Grendel and Vaanes have been at loggerheads but that was nothing new, for Grendel is an easy man to dislike. Honsou sensed an undercurrent to Vaane’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. Ill 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 l 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 flre 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 fuces, 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 bum 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 rocked 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 Newbom 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 bumming 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. '1 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. ‘1 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 w 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. lt 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 Ultramarine& 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 paradises.

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 he 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 Firing step

Iron Warrior artillery pieces displaying

differing mantlet arrangements.

Counter scarp Glacis

Frequently constructed of stone or

similar materials, such fortifications

require little maintenance, but typically

result in greater amounts of shrapnel in

an artillery exchange.

Iron Warrior artillery pit. Dug down into ground, the excavated material is used to provide protection from direct fire and ballistic projectiles.

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 Medrengard, 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 is left of Pashtoq Uluvent's berserkers,' suggested Cadaras Grendel.

'Kind of you to offer, Grendel,' said Etas say with an elaborate bow, 'but 1 think I'd rather fight where there's a chance 1 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-helmet.

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-barreled melta guns and heavy armour of umber scale. A twitching preacher in ill-fitting haz-mat armour never left Sibiyas 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.

Olantor felt the crash of iron foothills behind him, recognising the heavy tread of Brother Altarion. For all that he had entertained doubts as to the Old Ones 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 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 out 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 steel dust tide. Kaatja 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 tom 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 gun fire 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 tom 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 tanned 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 Iron Warrior

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, tom 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 tire 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 tom 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 nibble 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 homed 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 infections 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 Ultramarine& 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 tanned 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,

OLANIOR 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 bis 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, in 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. lf the enemy could hold them here long enough, the tire 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 burbled 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 champions 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, skullrimmed 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 creatures 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 beasts 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 bar 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 frontlines 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 Newborns 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. ‘1 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. 1 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. ‘1 bear the gene-seed of the Ultramarine&.’

‘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 Ultramarine&.’

‘Yes, I suppose he is. Honsou and Grendel both.’

‘I think Grendel would be happy to kill anyone, doesn’t matter if they’re Ultramarine& 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 tom 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. ‘Arid 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 shutdown, 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 strung 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.>

Olantor 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!>

Olantor 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. wEnemy 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 Im afraid of,’ said Olantor.

1im FIRST WARNING Sergeant Decimus had that something was wrong came when he caught a fragment of Deacon Calefs 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 carried 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 Emperors 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 confirmed 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 tire. 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 tom 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 blademasters 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 noose 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 reveled 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 TIIE 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. '1 thought you were supposed to protect us? So much for the vaunted Ultramarines, eh? Fat lot of good you did us!'

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

'While an Ultramarine lives, there is hope.'

Olantor 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…'

Olantor 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 tire 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 augmenters 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 suspicious were continued 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 ski ~ 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 enhance 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 Magus 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 basilicaw 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 heating 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 Interrogators 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 forts warp core.

Olantor 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 after images of snapshot memories.

Clawed hands, gaping maws and burning eyes.

Even beneath the plates of his armour, Olantor could feel the immense, impossible, energies hound 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 tum on us.’

Olantor 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-Olantor waved his hand to stall Pater Manna'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 Manna, 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? If 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 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 comer. A wide set

of iron stairs led down to the blastshielded 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 Salombars 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 comer.

He leapt straight to the bottom of the stairs, landing right in front of the barricade with a tremendous clang that buckled the metalgrilled floor. His augmentic 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 tom 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 locked 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 moments 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 stimm-shunts, but that was all he saw before it was amongst them.

It moved faster than even Etas say, 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 tire, 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 assassins 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 a fire 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 blademaster 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 blademaster 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 blademaster 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 Etas say 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 Etas say'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.

ALDARIC 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 kinbrood 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 technovirus, 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.

Iron Warrior

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 assassins 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 tire, shredding a dozen of Kaarja Salombars 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 hammer blow slammed into the warp core. The bronze plates buckled with the force of the blow and streamers of blue energy spun glittering traceries 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, quadheaded 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 assassinw 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,' hecomman~

The first ogre's chain grapple hammered into the Dreadnought's upper glacis, where the armour had been tom from it earlier. The hook buried itself in the workings of the Dreadnoughts 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 machines 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,w 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 bum 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 tight 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, homed 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 systems star, space collapsed as the veil of real space was tom aside and the star font 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 Ultramarine & Ultramar.

Book 6

THE IRON WITHOUT

NOW

His name was Soltarn Vull Bronn and ten of his vertebrae were mangled beyond the power of even the most mechanically adept Apothecary to save. His legs had been crushed to paste and his left arm jutted from the misshapen ruin of his

chevroned shoulder guard like a broken girder. No amount of will could force it to move, but he was able to free his right arm from beneath his breastplate.

The circumvallations at the cave mouth were gone, buried beneath the collapsed ceiling of the enormous cavern. Through dust-smeared eyes, he saw that the wall and his command staff were a crushed ruin of flames and smoke. That meant Teth Dassadra was likely dead as well. Bronn had no feelings towards the man save apathy and an Iron Warrior's natural mistrust, but at least he had been a vaguely competent siege-smith.

His collapsing lungs heaved to sift enough oxygen from the smoke-and dust-clogged air as his ears rang from the apocalyptic detonation that had triggered the collapse. He coughed a wad of bloody phlegm, knowing the position was lost and that any of his warriors who had survived the cave-in he had caused were as good as dead. The Ultramarines' guns would see to that.

Had that been the plan all along?

Try as he might, Bronn could see no other conclusion.

He had followed the Warsmith's orders to the letter, with diligence and dogged loyalty.

In retrospect, perhaps that was the problem.

The Warsmith was a warrior like no other, a killer of men whose mind functioned in a radically different way to the Legion in whose name he once fought. To some, that had marked him for greatness, but to others it was a vile stain on their honour that he should bear the visored skull of the Iron Warriors.

Half-breed, they called him.

Mongrel upstart.

Honsou.

He had left them to die, and though Bronn suspected that defeat would be the inevitable outcome of so risky a war, he found he was still surprised. A lifetime of betrayals; from the dawn of the Imperium, when gods walked among their disciples, and all through the Long War to this latest spasm of rebellion. Ever was it the lot of the Iron Warriors to taste perfidy, but this latest treachery was the bitterest Bronn had ever swallowed.

He had *believed* in Honsou.

Despite his squalid inception, the half-breed had risen through the ranks with the persistence of a monotasked servitor digging an approach trench, displaying just the right balance of initiative and blind obedience to his betters until those less skilled had fallen by the wayside.

It had been on Hydra Cordatus his chance to excel had finally come. Bronn remembered the thundering violence of that siege, the brittle regolith that collapsed at every turn, the hot sun that baked slaves alive and bleached their bones before they were buried in the foundations of the redoubts. Most of all, he remembered the deep yellow rock that resisted every pick and shovel.

It had been a masterfully wrought approach, each sap pitched at a precise angle and every battery thrown up with a speed that would have made the artisan masters of lost Olympia proud. Bronn had fought in the Grand Company of Forrix, and he could still remember the pain of seeing his master gunned down by the Imperial battle engine at the moment of final victory. Standing triumphant in the ruins of the fortress, Forrix had been killed in the moment of regaining his lost fire.

At battle's end, Honsou was named the Warsmith's successor and he had given Forrix and Kroeger's warriors a stark choice: accept him as their new Warsmith and live, or deny him and be destroyed. It was no choice at all, and every warrior had dropped to one knee and sworn fealty to their new master. From Hydra Cordatus, they had battered a path through Van Daal's Black Legion whelps at Perdictor and returned to Medrengard. Honsou had claimed the timeless fortress of Khalan-Ghol for himself, as was his right, but brooding in a crooked spire was not to be the half-breed's destiny.

Jealous eyes had fallen upon Khalan-Ghol, and the grand armies of Lord Toramino had joined forces with the berserk horde of Lord Berossus to attack Honsou in his mountain lair.

Though pain was eating away at his formidable powers of endurance, Bronn grinned wryly at how the two lords of Medrengard had been humbled by the upstart half-breed, their armies broken and scattered to ashes beneath the cruel light of the daemon world's black sun.

Whisperers railed at being commanded by a warrior without lineage, a half-breed with no memory of the Great Betrayal, who had not known the pain of the thousand indignities heaped upon the Legion by the Emperor, and who had not earned his bitterness on the fire-blackened rock of Terra. Honsou's warriors were now fighters without a fortress, rootless wanderers little better than sell-swords, and that was hard to stomach for men who had stood at the side of a living god.

Even after the destruction of Tarsis Ultra, they called Honsou unworthy, and not even the release of the daemon lord M'kar from his imprisonment on the *Indomitable* had appeased his doubters. They hated him, called him impure, and plotted his downfall. Heritage and purity of genetics was all that mattered to these schemers, and no matter how many victories Honsou won, they would never accept him.

Bronn had hunted those who spread dissent and ended them, for he had always known that a warrior's worth was measured in the blood he shed, the soil he dug, the walls he raised and the citadels he split asunder.

By that measure, Honsou was a true Iron Warrior.

But now this…

Bronn could stomach betrayal, it was the Iron Warriors' lot, but to have it come from within on so grand a scale was galling.

What could be so important beneath the surface of Calth that was worth *this*?

THEN

Earth-moving machinery roared and bellowed, spitting clouds of caustic, lung-tarring smoke, spraying stone chips from beneath solid rubber tyres. A hundred and fifteen machines pulled like blood-maddened flesh hounds on chains at the cave's exit. The confined air reeked of machine oil, blood offerings, petrochemical fumes and sweat. Over four thousand mortals in reinforced work overalls and canvas hoods huddled in the shadow of the heavy machines, armed with picks, shovels and rock-breaking drills.

Soltarn Vull Bronn swept his gaze around the widened chamber with a critical eye.

'I need more machines,' he said.

'A hundred and fifteen should be more than enough,' replied Teth Dassadra, comparing the arrangement of machines with hand-drawn schemata plotted out by Bronn less than an hour ago. 'The forward redoubt only needs to be five hundred metres wide and twenty high.'

'You say "only" as though we will be building it in a summer meadow with the enemy attacking us with flower blossoms,' said Bronn.

'No,' said Dassadra, unable to keep the impatience from his voice. 'I know the mathematics of construction as well as you. My logarithmic calculations are correct, even allowing for losses.'

'And if those losses are greater than we expect?'

'Why should they be?'

'Because this is a world of Ultramar,' said Bronn.

‘A world like any other,’ said Dassadra with a dismissive shrug as they reached a group of workers crouched behind a kinetic mantlet and bearing heavy picks across their shoulders. The men were tense, awaiting the order to advance into the teeth of massed artillery. For men under a virtual death-sentence, they appeared remarkably calm.

Bronn rounded on Dassadra. ‘No, it is not. These are the best fighters we have faced. They fear us, yes, but not so much that they will break and run when the first shells land among them. So long as the Ultramarines stand, so too will they.’

‘You admire them,’ hissed Dassadra.

‘I do not admire them, fool, I simply recognise their abilities,’ countered Bronn. ‘It would be stupid to do otherwise.’

Dassadra gestured to the thousands of men, servitors and drones gathered around the machines. ‘Plenty of meat and bone to raise a wall if the diggers fail.’

Bronn turned to the group of men sheltering behind the mantlet. With a casual twist of his arm, he unsheathed his entrenching tool from its shoulder scabbard. Its name was *Earthbreaker,* and its dull iron was scored and nicked where swords and axes had gouged its haft, yet the pointed half-moon of its blade was as sharp as the day it had been taken from the forge-armoury.

As a tool of siege, *Earthbreaker* had dug countless trenches, excavated a thousand tunnels beneath the hardest rock and raised earthworks so vast as to be visible from low orbit. As a weapon, it had taken the head of ten captains of the Fists, had split the spine of a greenskin warlord of six systems and hewed innumerable humble rankers in the bloody heave and swell of close-quarters battle.

Bronn hammered its blade into the nearest slave’s back. Blood welled around the embedded iron, and the man jerked as his ruptured spinal column sent contradictory impulses flailing around his dying body.

‘Mortal muscle to drive iron tools is in plentiful supply, and can be easily replaced when blood inevitably soaks the earth,’ said Bronn, irritated at needing to explain his methodology to Dassadra. ‘Machines are less easily replaced.’

Bronn shook the split body from his blade as another mortal ran up from the rear ranks to take his place. The dead man’s former comrades threw his corpse in front of the bulldozer, to be crushed into the rock when the assault began.

Using *Earthbreaker* like a walker’s staff, Bronn moved through the cavern, marking out lines of advance and reinforcing his construction orders as he went. The mortals looked up in terror as he passed, which was as it should be. He was sending them to their deaths, but even marching out into a hellstorm of artillery, gunfire and shrapnel was more palatable than displeasing an Iron Warrior.

Dassadra watched his every move, searching for mistakes and flaws in his orders, but Bronn knew he would find none. His aide had come to him from the shattered survivors of Lord Berossus’s army, and though those warriors had sworn loyalty to Honsou, they were little better than whipped dogs, volatile and always looking for advantage.

Bronn paused at the machine closest to the cavern mouth, a towering eighteen-wheeler on spiked iron tracks and with a giant hopper of crushed stone secured at its rear, rubble gathered from the collapsed ruin left by the defenders after the destruction of the giant tunnel leading from Guilliman’s Gate to Four Valleys Gorge. From this debris would be built a wall to shelter the heavy guns of the Iron Warriors, and the dark symmetry of this pleased Bronn no end. Flexible pipes at its sides pulsed like intestines, filled with rapid-setting permacrete that would be used to bind the loose rubble together and allow the mortal slaves to erect the mesh-wrapped blockwork of the batteries.

The cavern mouth was a semi-circular slice of wan daylight, something that grated against Bronn’s sensibilities. They were underground, and underground places should be dark. It made no difference to the projected operation, but it offended his sense of the way things ought to be. Bronn knew the subtleties of

rock better than anyone, and it was said with only a spoonful of irony that it *spoke* to him.

Where there was a weak seam in a wall, Bronn would find it. Where the soil was softer and more amenable to undermining, he would know of it. Just by touching the rock, Bronn could know its hidden strengths, its complex structure and its inherent weaknesses. Where others might mount an escalade with more flair or know best when a breach was practicable, no-one knew the rock better than he.

Bronn held out his hand for the plan he had drawn earlier. Dassadra gave it to him with the speed of one who knows well his master's desires. Bronn checked the distances between his machines and the cavern walls, the lines of advance and the routes of dispersal once they emerged from the transient safety of this tunnel.

'This is all wrong,' he said, swinging up onto the integral steps machined into the flank of a vast bulldozer with its shovel blade worked in the form of an enormous fanged daemon maw. The machine had been a gift from the Tyrant of Badab after the Skull Harvest, and was, to Bronn's eyes, needlessly embellished. The operator's cab was set behind a heavy mantlet of flared horns and armoured in sheets of layered metal, with only a thin slit by which the driver could see out.

He hauled open the door to the operator's cabin and growled at the hunched figure hard-wired into the control mechanism. A hybrid thing of machine parts and bruised flesh, it had once been an Iron Warrior whose mortal remains had been housed in the sarcophagus of a Dreadnought.

'Brother Lacuna,' said Bronn, his voice muffled behind the fire-blackened visor he had taken from the pulped remains of his former captain on Hydra Cordatus. 'You are too far forwards. Pull back ten metres.'

'I will not,' answered the operator, his voice a wet, rasping thing of droning vox-scraps stitched together to form a stunted vocabulary. 'To raise the first block, I must be ahead of the pack.'

Bronn sighed. No Iron Warrior who could stand, wield a weapon or entrenching tool wished to demean himself by operating one of these machines, yet they were an integral part of the Iron Warriors modus operandi. Just another of the many contradictions inherent to the Iron Warriors. Only those plucked from wrecked Dreadnoughts or too badly injured to survive were deemed fit for such duties, and even then they weren't the most suitable candidates.

'You must pull back,' insisted Bronn. 'The first layer of foundation needs to be dug simultaneously. The rock at this depth is layered with staggered bands of loose soil and will collapse inwards if it is not strengthened at the same time. You understand?'

Lacuna stared at Bronn, though it was impossible to tell what was going on in his ravaged brain. The similar urge to wreak harm and inflict mayhem that saw many Dreadnoughts reduced to blood-crazed madness afflicted the machine operators, though their madness was of an altogether more dangerous kind.

The kind that could cause a fortress to fall.

'I understand,' said Lacuna in his chopped-up language. A hash of binary blurted from his vox-grille, and Bronn was glad the visor hid his grin as he caught the gist of Lacuna's insult.

'Just get it done,' said Bronn. 'And if you call me a fabricator of wooden walls again, I'll have what's left of you wired into a mine-clearance drone.'

Even with half his face gone and the remainder replaced by cannibalised servitor parts, Lacuna was able to register surprise at Bronn's understanding of binaric cant. A frothed grate of machine laughter bubbled up from Lacuna's rebuilt throat, as the bulldozer's engine fired up and the gears clattered into reverse.

Bronn withdrew from the cab and slammed the door shut, riding along on the running boards until he was satisfied the machine was where it was supposed to be. He banged a hand on the door and dropped to the hard floor of the cavern. Its surface had been planed smooth by melta fire in readiness for the earth-moving

machines and the Black Basilica, and Bronn felt its strength as he knelt and placed his palm upon it.

‘Is the rock strong?’ asked the harsh, guttural bark of this host’s war leader.

Bronn stood and gave a curt nod. ‘It is good rock, Warsmith Honsou, *old* rock,’ he said. ‘The kind of rock that can stand against everything the universe has to throw at it. The kind of rock that once formed the heart of Olympia.’

Honsou shook his head at such ill-placed nostalgia. ‘Olympia’s rock failed in the end, didn’t it?’

Bronn’s jawline clenched. ‘Its people failed,’ he said. ‘Not its rock.’

Honsou never missed a chance to remind his Legion that they had destroyed their own homeworld after its populace rebelled against their lawful rulers. It seemed wilfully perverse to twist such a knife in the guts of his men, but Bronn had long-since learned to let such barbs pass without comment.

‘But the rock of Calth will fall?’ asked Honsou.

‘It will not stand before the inevitability of Perturabo’s true sons,’ Bronn assured him, meeting Honsou’s barb with one of his own.

‘I never thought it would,’ said Honsou with a lopsided grin. The upper quadrant of the Warsmith’s face was a mangled, knotted mass of scar tissue, mortician-grafted augmetics and raw flesh, the result of a close encounter with a bolter shell and a collapsing tunnel. What might once have been considered roguish was now pulled into a permanently sardonic leer. One arm was encased in Mark IV plate pulled from the body of a dead Iron Warrior, the other a perfect replica of an arm fashioned from silver mercury.

Honsou saw Bronn’s attention and lifted the arm up before him.

‘This whole cave could fall and this arm wouldn’t have a scratch on it if you dug it out.’

‘The rest of us would be crushed, though,’ pointed out Bronn.

Honsou grinned. ‘Always so literal,’ he said. ‘I think that’s the real reason the Iron Warriors followed the Warmaster into rebellion. Horus probably said it as a joke and Perturabo took him at his word.’

‘Then that just shows how little you know,’ snapped Dassadra.

Bronn held up a fist to prevent Dassadra speaking again, but Honsou appeared to be amused rather than angered at his aide’s outburst.

‘He has spark, this one,’ said Honsou.

‘One of Berossus’s men,’ answered Bronn.

‘Ah.’

Before Honsou could provoke Dassadra again, Bronn said, ‘Is there something you needed, Warsmith?’

Honsou nodded, acquiescing to Bronn’s authority here. ‘You are ready to begin the advance?’

‘I am,’ confirmed Bronn. ‘Just give the word and I’ll have a wall built across that ridge inside a day.’

‘Good. Who’s leading the first push?’

‘Jaegoth Ghent.’

Honsou nodded. Ghent was a good man under fire. Lord Toramino had had most of his nervous system stripped out by adepts of the Dark Mechanicus and replaced with artificial receptors. It made him a dour battle-brother, but a warrior who wouldn’t flinch if an artillery shell landed right next to him. Ghent had directed the approach saps to Khalan-Ghol, and Honsou had been careful to spare his life in the wake of the carnage surrounding the last days of his former abode.

‘Tell him to stand down,’ said Honsou.

‘What? Why?’

‘You and I are going lead the push from the cavern,’ said Honsou.

‘Are you insane?’ demanded Bronn. ‘Why would you order such a thing?’

‘It’s been too long since I got my hands dirty with a pick and broke the earth of an enemy world,’ said Honsou. ‘I need to get back to what I do best, building walls for big guns. And if I’m going to do that, I need someone who knows the rock better than anyone else at my side.’

‘If the half-breed wants to die, let him,’ said Dassadra. ‘No-one will mourn him.’

Bronn expected Honsou to kill Dassadra for his temerity, but Honsou just laughed.

‘Maybe not,’ said Honsou. ‘The daemon lord may command the Bloodborn, but I lead this host, and one of the benefits of that is being able to do what I damn

well please. Bronn, get this little bastard away from me before he spoils my good mood and I kill him.'

Bronn ordered Dassadra away with a curt nod, and stared at Honsou.

'Why are you really doing this?' he asked once Dassadra was out of earshot.

'Do I need a reason?' countered Honsou.

'If you're going to lead my machines out there, I need to know you're doing it for the right reasons. I'm not going to let you get them destroyed just to prove a point to the daemon lord or the Legion.'

'And what point would I be proving?'

'That you're an Iron Warrior,' said Bronn. 'A true son of Perturabo.'

'Do I *need* to prove that? Look at where we are. Not even Perturabo brought the iron and the stone to Ultramar.'

Bronn shook his head and lowered his voice so that no-one but Honsou would hear him.

'No matter how many escalades you make, no matter how many breaches you storm or fortresses you raze, they will never respect you as an Iron Warrior. This will make no difference to how these warriors see you. To them you will always be the half-breed.'

Honsou put a hand on Bronn's shoulder and turned him towards the light at the cavern mouth. Rippling shafts of sunlight danced in the blue-hazed fumes of the grumbling bulldozers and lifter rigs.

‘Beyond that opening are my enemies,’ said Honsou. ‘Behind me are warriors who would happily turn their weapons on me if they thought they could get away with it. Do you really think I’m doing this to try and impress anyone? I know who I am, and I don’t give a greenskin’s fart what anyone thinks of me.’

‘Then what *do* you hope to achieve?’

‘I need them to see me make war like an Iron Warrior,’ said Honsou, leaning in close and baring his teeth in sudden anger. ‘Even if they never accept me as one, I need them to know that I fight like one. I need them to understand that if anything happens to me, if any of them make a move against me, then they’re all going to die on this forsaken rock. I’m the only one who can win the war on Calth, and I want them to know that. Without me, this invasion is over.’

‘And if we die out there?’ asked Bronn as Honsou walked away. ‘What happens then?’

‘We’ll be dead,’ said Honsou. ‘What does it matter what happens after that?’

Leaving Soltarn Vull Bronn to oversee the last preparations for the assault, Honsou made his way back through the cavern, relishing the sudden sense of excitement that filled him. It had been a spur of the moment decision to lead the assault into the great underground cavern, but it felt right. It felt *good*. Every word he had said to Bronn was true, but there was more to it than that.

Honsou cared little for the esteem of his fellow Iron Warriors, but the voices that harped at him from the darkest recesses of his mind demanded he prove his worth every moment of every day.

They are right to hate you…

The Clonelord should never have wrought you…

You are nothing but an aborted experiment that escaped the furnace…

Most of these voices made no sense to Honsou, for he remembered nothing but disjointed scraps of his birth as an Iron Warrior. Nor could he recall the life he had lived before being transformed into a thing reviled by those he had been crafted from and those he had been created for. No, the drive – the *obsession* – he had to place himself in harm's way came from the need to prove those voices wrong.

He *was* as good as any Iron Warrior.

He could fight as hard and with as much cunning and dogged determination as any of those crafted from Perturabo's gene-seed. And if he had to set the galaxy afire from one spiral arm to the other to prove it, then so be it.

Honsou had long ago come to this realisation, but had never voiced it to another soul. Let them think he wanted to be like them. Let them think he wanted to *be* one of them. Their hate only spurred him on, and their sneering condescension only made him stronger.

His fists clenched and he unsheathed the monstrous, night-bladed axe from its leather harness at his shoulder. The weapon had belonged to a warrior of the Black Legion, but like most of the accoutrements of war Honsou now sported, it had been taken as a trophy of murder. His augmetic eye had been plucked from the ruined skull of a Savage Mortician, and the impervious, silver-steel arm had been sawn from the body of a captive Ultramarine.

Further back in the long tunnel that led to the irradiated surface of Calth, a series of armoured blockhouses had been built in staggered chevrons. The Iron Warriors never paused on the march without constructing solid walls to protect their fighters. M'kar might have an inexhaustible army of daemons to call upon, but Honsou needed to husband his resources.

Warriors in burnished plate ran mock assaults with tiny clockwork armies thrown against miniature fortresses, cleaned weapons that had been cleaned a

thousand times already or simply stood like ageless statues and waited for the order to attack. Honsou saw Cadaras Grendel and the Newborn working through a series of combat drills before a blockhouse at the centre of the ugly constructions of steel and stone.

Grendel had taken over the Newborn's training since Ardaric Vaanes' capture, but his methods were far from subtle, and he did not have the fluid panache of the former Raven Guard. Where Vaanes had sought to teach the Newborn from a standpoint of making it a better warrior, all Grendel wanted was to make it a better killer.

A subtle difference, and one that mattered little in the crucible of combat, but a difference nonetheless. Honsou had often watched the Newborn train with Vaanes, grudgingly enjoying the ballet of limbs and blades, the lethal choreography of death and the bouts that were more like dances than brutal combats. The Newborn had tried to learn more than just battle skills from Vaanes; it wanted to learn of its soul and how it could rise above its nature to become something more. No such teachings were to be found in Grendel's sparring, only bloody, bruising lessons in killing. If the Newborn sought any higher truths to its existence in Grendel's tutelage, it was having those desires beaten out of it.

Honsou found it hard to look upon the creature, seeing the face of his nemesis in its lopsided features and dead skin mask.

Hot-housed in the nightmarish Daemonculaba womb-slaves, the Newborn was a dark mirror of Uriel Ventris, a hybrid by-blow of warp spawned genetics. No-one had expected it to survive, but it had lived and become stronger than anyone could have foreseen. Better to harness and mould such a creature in the ways of its masters before allowing it to become something of its own.

Honsou paused to watch Grendel and the Newborn fight.

It wasn't pretty, a brawl of superhumans who fought without the drag of honour, rules or the need to play fair. Knowing the skill of Grendel and the Newborn, it was likely the bout had been going on for quite some time. Elbows, knees and

heads were weapons, a moment of weakness an opening. Their fight was not about who was the best, but about who was left standing. Grendel sent a vicious right cross at the Newborn's jaw, the fist driving with enough force to pulp rock. The Newborn swayed aside, but Grendel's elbow jabbed, cracking it in the jaw and hurling it from its feet.

Grendel followed up with a crushing knee to the groin and a thundering series of rabbit punches to the Newborn's throat. Honsou grimaced as he heard bone break and flesh rupture. The bout was over, but Grendel kept up his furious assault without pause.

'I think you beat him,' called Honsou, and Grendel turned to look at him with a grin of triumph. The mohawked warrior's chest heaved with the adrenaline of battle as the Newborn spat a geyser of brackish fluid and rolled onto its side.

'Remind me never to get into a fight with you, Grendel,' said Honsou, holding a hand out to his lieutenant. Grendel looked up, his malignantly scarred features a clenched fist of venomous anger.

Honsou saw the look and said, 'Don't even think about it.'

Grendel shrugged and took Honsou's silver hand. His fists were coated in blood that vanished into the depths of the alien limb as Honsou pulled him to his feet.

'After we're done here, you and I need to get in the ring,' said Grendel. 'Ever since Khalan-Ghol I've wanted to beat you bloody.'

'Trust me,' said Honsou. 'The feeling's mutual, but I need you alive.'

Grendel twisted his neck and spat a mouthful of crimson spittle as the Newborn climbed to its feet. A faint luminosity shimmered beneath its skin, as though its heart were a lumen globe buried beneath its armour instead of a beating organ. The bones Grendel had broken were already healing, and the cuts his mailed fists had opened on the Newborn's face were sealing even as Honsou watched. He'd

long been aware of the Newborn's ability to undo the most horrific damage, but it never failed to unsettle him.

'Is it time to launch the attack?' it asked.

Honsou nodded, but kept his eyes on Grendel.

Though its skin hung loosely on the bone beneath with a mannequin's artificiality, there was no mistaking the patrician cast of its inherited features. He didn't know what the creature had looked like before its transformation in the Daemonculaba, but it bore the unmistakable gene-cast of Uriel Ventris.

'Bronn has everything in place, and we're ready to move,' said Honsou.

'I don't like Bronn,' said Grendel.

'You don't like anyone,' pointed out Honsou.

'True,' admitted Grendel. 'But he *really* gets under my skin.'

'Why?' asked the Newborn. 'From what I have seen, Soltarn Vull Bronn is a highly competent warrior. His geophysical knowledge is second to none. Better even than yours, Warsmith.'

Honsou wanted to feel slighted, but he knew the Newborn was right.

'There's a trace of the witch to him,' said Grendel, swinging his shoulders to loosen the muscles and twisting his neck from side to side. 'I don't care how many sieges a man's fought, you can't know the heart of a planet's rock just by touching it and looking at it.'

'I don't care how he does it,' said Honsou. 'He's never wrong.'

‘There’s truth in that,’ nodded Grendel with customary capriciousness. ‘How long before he gets a practicable wall up?’

‘It won’t be long, no more than a day,’ said Honsou.

‘We will lose a great deal of men to complete a wall in so short a time,’ said the Newborn.

‘We stand to lose a lot more than just men if we don’t get this done quickly.’

The Newborn nodded, accepting Honsou’s logic, but its head cocked to one side as it read a hidden truth behind his expression.

‘What are you not telling us?’ it asked.

The attack began, as all Iron Warrior attacks began, with a punishing artillery barrage. The guns at the tunnel mouth boomed and roared, filling the cavern with choking banks of acrid propellant smoke. Vast, ceiling-mounted extraction units sucked great lungfuls of the smoke and pumped it back through the rock to the surface of Calth, though no amount of machinery could totally eliminate the chemical reek of explosives fashioned in the heart of a daemon world. No sooner had the first barrage been launched than the second was away. Mutants and adrenal-boosted mecha-slaves fed the voracious appetite of the guns, hauling heavy flatbeds of shells to the artillery line.

Bronn watched the thundering power of the artillery and knew the field of fire was woefully narrow for the task at hand, but with the restricted frontage allowed by the cave mouth, there was little that could be done to widen it. The vibration of the shellfire was titanic, and the cavern shook with the violence of it. Dust and fragments of stone fell from the ceiling, and Dassadra looked up with a critical eye.

‘Don’t waste your energy worrying about the cavern,’ said Bronn over the helm vox. ‘The rock above will hold.’

‘You’re sure?’

‘Positive.’

Dassadra looked unconvinced, but Bronn had little time to waste in reassuring him. Any Iron Warrior who couldn’t read the structural strength of a cavern like this wasn’t worthy of the name. Bronn heard the sound of distant explosions, a subtle change in the pitch of the unending pounding that filled the cavern.

‘Earth and deep rock,’ he said, angrily. ‘We’re hitting their earthworks.’

‘You want the guns realigned?’

Bronn considered Dassadra’s request. It was not a suggestion without merit, for the shellfire was killing nothing of note; maybe a few units of the Ultramar soldiery, but certainly none of the Space Marines sure to be in the valley beyond.

‘Yes,’ he said at last, ‘but remember that these volleys aren’t about killing, they’re about keeping the bastards’ heads down. Move the guns forward and increase the tempo as the flanking artillery widens its fields of fire.’

Dassadra passed the word to the gun crews, and moments later the rapid tempo of the guns stepped up as yet more shells arced into the valley. Dust and pulverised rock hung in the air like heavy fog as the artillery line moved forward with mathematical precision. Bronn felt the vibration of footsteps behind him, and knew from the weight and length of them that his Warsmith was approaching.

Bronn turned to see Honsou hefting a short-handled entrenching tool. Like *Earthbreaker*, it was as much a weapon as a tool of siege.

‘Yours?’ asked Bronn.

Honsou nodded, and hefted the tool up for him to see. The haft was scored steel and its blade was notched with repeated impacts on hard earth and brittle bones. Flaking brown stains coated its edges, the residue of a thousand or more deaths, and the dirt of myriad worlds encrusted its ragged edge.

‘I crafted it myself,’ said Honsou proudly, offering it to Bronn.

‘As any proper Iron Warrior should,’ agreed Bronn, feeling the heft of the entrenching tool. ‘It’s shorter than most I’ve seen.’

‘All the entrenching tools made in the weapon forges of Warsmith Tarasios were short. Made them better weapons for fighting in a trench.’

Bronn’s eyes widened in respect for the lost Warsmith.

‘The Warsmith who broke open the Jade Bastion,’ said Bronn with an admiring nod. ‘I forgot he trained you. That explains why it’s weighted towards the digging end.’

‘You know as well as I do that battles fought in the trenches are bloody toe-to-toe affairs,’ said Honsou, taking back his entrenching tool. ‘Brute strength, ferocity and a short swing are more important than skill.’

‘And you lack for none of these qualities,’ laughed Bronn. ‘You are a scrapper and a brawler.’

‘Is that a compliment or an insult?’ asked Honsou.

‘You decide,’ replied Bronn. ‘Now are you ready to use that thing?’

Honsou grinned and tucked it in tight to his chest. ‘Give the word, Soltarn Vull Bronn.’

Bronn lifted *Earthbreaker* and held it aloft for long moments before ramming it down into the hard rock of the cavern floor. The vitrified stone split apart and as the cracks spread out from his feet, a mighty roar went up from the thousands of workers gathered behind him.

As the guns fired once more, Bronn jogged with heavy, mile-eating footfalls towards the mouth of the cave. The rocky floor shook with the force of the heavy digging machines moving through the gaps between the artillery pieces, and trumpeting, honking, screaming war horns blared in unison as the Iron Warriors advanced into the teeth of the Ultramarines defences.

Bronn ran at a relentless pace, stolid and inexorable, with Honsou on one side and Teth Dassadra on the other. They moved without haste, but with a terrible inevitability that had seen even the mightiest citadels humbled. Howitzers spoke with thunderous booms, and the roar of engines echoed from the cavern sides like the howling of an army of daemons.

The light at the cavern mouth swelled before them. The noise was deafening, a titanic hammerblow of shockwaves that made a mockery of any attempt of their armour’s auto-senses to attenuate the crescendo of destruction. Bronn felt the percussive body-slam of artillery fire as they ran past the forward line of emplaced Basilisk guns. Spewing clouds of ejected smoke billowed in chaotic vortices, hauled and yanked by the extractors and subterranean atmospherics.

‘Iron Within!’ shouted Honsou.

‘Iron Without!’ answered Bronn.

Honsou had seen Four Valleys Gorge before through the eyes of remote drone servitors, each time a fleeting glance before a lethally accurate artillery round atomised it, but this was the first time he had seen it with his own eyes. In times of peace, it would have been place of bucolic splendour that led deeper into the

caverns beneath Calth, but now it was like a page from Perturabo's great *Castellum Arcanicus*, with entrenchments spread across the landscape like the sutures on the Newborn's face.

Earthen redoubts and permacrete strongpoints occupied the high ground, while firing trenches, automated pillboxes and armoured brochs covered the dead ground where landscape did not conform to the needs of defence. By any estimation, it was a fearsome array of textbook defences, but what was textbook to the Ultramarines was predictable to an Iron Warrior. Three fortresses of green marble barred further passage downwards at the cardinal points of the enormous cavern, and though each was a powerful bastion, with overlapping fields of enfilading fire, none offered serious impediment to the Iron Warriors.

Honsou saw this in an instant, spotting where the defences were weakest, where an approach might be made – though he would not be making it himself – and where the Ultramarines were hoping to lure them into attack. His view was obliterated a second later as a thundering series of hammerblow detonations marched across the landscape, booming mushroom clouds of geysering earth and fire and smoke.

The sound rolled over Honsou and he grinned at the visceral thrill of fighting at the sharp end of a charge. The plateau before him was empty and shaped like a flat oval, a place for visitors to Calth's underground to marvel in the sheer technical bravura that had shaped so vast a space for human habitation from the rock of a lethal world and rendered it as hospitable and welcoming as any heavenly paradise.

In a heartbeat that vision changed from a place of wonder to a place of death.

The first enemy artillery shells screamed down and exploded above the plateau in a storm of deafening horror. Air-bursting warheads flensed the ground with a hellstorm of red-hot steel fragments; some no larger than a fingernail, others like scything axe-heads, and the carnage wreaked amongst the slave workers was horrendous. Honsou saw a man shredded to the bone, his skeleton pulped to a rubbery mass a second later by the pounding shockwave of detonation.

A group of near-naked slaves with heavy picks slung over their shoulders vanished in a fiery mass of swirling fragments, their remains no longer recognisable as human. Hundreds died in the first instants of the barrage, and a hundred more in the rippling firestorm that followed. Honsou heard their screams, but paid them no mind. Mortal flesh was of no consequence to him. He would sacrifice a million lives on the altar of his ambition, and then a million more.

Shredded carcasses littered the ground, dancing bloody jigs as the ground shook and the air buckled with the bludgeoning force of the blasts. Black streaks of burned smoke and the sucking heaves of pressure drops, sudden vacuums and bangs of displaced air made all sense of direction meaningless. Any sense of up or down, left and right was obliterated in the terrifying disorientation of overloading sound and light and pressure.

Honsou's armour saved him from the worst of the hellish thunder, but it could not fully mask the cataclysmic hammering. His every plate rang with impacts, as though someone was unloading shotgun shells against the back of his helmet with every step. The ground heaved as though in the grip of a powerful earthquake, and fires erupted sporadically from the ignited clothing of the dead.

He could see little before him save banks of shrapnel-twitched smoke and sheeting knives of fire from above that lit fresh scenes of suffering and bloodshed with every strobing flash. Black gashes torn in the ground filled with boiling blood and severed limbs, headless trunks and bones shorn of their flesh. He lost sight of Bronn and the few other Iron Warriors who had made this charge with him. It was impossible to tell if they were still alive or were unrecognisable chunks of gouged meat and metal.

Adrenaline surged around Honsou's body, driving him on through the nightmarish blitzing hurricane of pounding blast waves and fizzing shrapnel. He knew it was foolish to expose himself like this, that he was risking the success of the invasion of Calth with his reckless theatrics, but there was little choice but to show the warriors who followed him that he was willing to risk his own life and that he could fight like an Iron Warrior.

Something struck the side of Honsou's helmet like the thunder hammer of a Dreadnought and he was sent flying. A body flashed past him, and he braced for impact as the clashing, intersecting waves of force flung him about like a leaf in a storm.

He hit the ground hard and skidded across the cratered rubble of the plateau. After a quick check to make sure he still had all his limbs, Honsou pushed himself to his knees with his entrenching tool. The sky rippled with orange and red streamers of arcing shells and fiery detonations, but it felt distant and somehow unreal.

The smell of cooking meat came to him, and Honsou looked down to see a long shard of shell casing jutting from the centre of his breastplate. The metal sizzled, and it was still possible to make out a white eagle and read the stencilled lettering on its side. He grunted and pulled the fragment from his body. Its tip was sharpened to a dagger point, the last ten centimetres coated in blood.

'You don't get me that easy,' he snarled, standing calmly in the midst of the barrage.

Along the length of the plateau, Bronn's earth-moving machines were advancing through the constant rain of artillery shells. The air-bursting shells were having little effect on their up-armoured topsides, and they were driving ever-increasing heaps of rubble and pulverised rock towards the edge of the plateau. A waist-high berm of Calth's earth was being pushed out before the machines, and would swiftly give the mortal slaves a measure of protection while they built up the more permanent defences.

Dozens of machines had been crippled with lucky strikes to vital components, while others had been comprehensively wrecked by enemy gun crews who'd realised the futility of air-bursting man-killers and switched their weapons to high-explosive shells. He saw Teth Dassadra waving more diggers forwards, allocating them work space in lieu of wrecked machines. Honsou remembered Dassadra from the final days of Khalan-Ghol, a warrior who had only too readily switched his allegiance from one master to another. Honsou couldn't fault him

for that, where was the sense in staying with a master whose star had been eclipsed?

Honsou would have done the same, but it meant keeping such a man appeased with victory and enough scope for his own ambition to prevent him from turning to bite the hand that fed. Honsou remembered Huron Blackheart's last words to him, and decided that when the time came to abandon this front, he would leave Teth Dassadra behind.

'Are you just going to stand there or are you going to use that damn tool?' demanded Soltarn Vull Bronn, emerging from the smoke and hanging fog of dust particles. Honsou grinned and took a two-handed grip on its short haft.

'Show me where to dig,' he said, and Bronn gestured towards the forward edge of the plateau. Honsou and Bronn ran past a blazing digger, its cab a mass of fused metal and molten rubber pouring from its conduits and exposed pipework. Something writhed within the operator's cabin, something still alive and unable to die in the killing fires. Thick black smoke obscured the horror, and it was behind them before Honsou could make out more than a blackened skull twisting on a serpentine neck, screaming in pain that would never end.

'That trench needs to be another metre deep, and at least half a metre wider if the foundations are going to hold up to a barrage!' shouted Bronn. 'See it done.'

Honsou felt no anger towards Bronn at his brusque tone. This part of the campaign was Bronn's to run as he saw fit, and if that meant dragging the Warsmith towards a trench then so be it.

'Consider it done,' said Honsou, dropping into the trench. A hundred or more mortals in shredded work wear hacked at the earth, picks battering the bedrock of Calth in a staccato rhythm. Some looked up as he landed among them, but most kept their heads to the earth, terrified that if they looked up and acknowledged the carnage going on around them it might reach out and pluck them from their illusory safety.

‘Dig together!’ shouted Honsou, though he had no idea how many heard him over the constant pummelling of artillery. ‘With me!’

Honsou bent his back and drove his entrenching tool into the earth, the blade biting deep and parting the soil of Calth like the softest flesh. He twisted and tossed the earth backwards without breaking the rhythm of his swing, and even before it landed, his shovel blade was embedded in the earth once again.

‘Together!’ bellowed Honsou, his digging like the regular piston strokes of a battle engine. Dig, lift, twist, thrust. The motion never changed, and Honsou grinned as the memory of his early days in the Legion returned to him. He remembered days spent digging on his belly, pushing approach trenches forward, filling sandbags and gabions with turned earth. Instinctive muscle memory drove his arms, his strength working his body like a perpetual motion machine. There was purity in this work, a singular purpose that allowed for none of the infighting between warbands or any rancour of past betrayals to interfere.

All that mattered was the man and the soil, and the powerful strokes to shift it.

Honsou glanced to his left, and saw the men around him were attempting to mimic his pattern of dig, lift, twist and thrust. They couldn’t match his speed or apparently effortless rhythm, but they were at least working together. The trench was already widened and getting deeper with every passing minute.

He heard a screaming whine, louder than the others that blended together in a banshee’s chorus, and looked up. Through the billowing, dancing clouds of smoke and dust, Honsou saw a bright streamer of a shell’s contrail as it arced over with agonising slowness and aimed its warhead down towards his trench. It should have been moving too fast to see. There should have been little more than a split second’s warning, but Honsou saw the gently spinning shell as though upon a slow-motion pict-capture. Its wide body was tapered at both ends, spinning slowly and painted sky blue. Its tip was gold, which struck him as needlessly ornate for a weapon of war, and he had time to wonder whether it would be better to be killed by a precious metal or a base one.

‘Incoming!’ he shouted, though few would hear his warning or be able to respond to it in time. Honsou threw himself into the forward wall of the trench he had just dug, pressing his body into the earthen rampart and hoping the shell wouldn’t be one of the lucky ones to score a direct hit. He clutched his entrenching tool tight to his chest as the scream of the shell’s terminal approach battered through the endless thunder of impacts and detonations.

Honsou knew artillery sounds, and this was the sound of a shell coming right at him.

He closed his eyes and exhaled as the shell struck.

The high-explosive shell slashed down and struck the centre of the trench, as though a mathematician had plotted its trajectory. Confined by the high walls, the blast roared out along the trench, incinerating those closest to its point of impact, and shredding those beyond in tightly packed storms of tumbling metal. The shockwave blew men out of their overalls, leaving them naked and twisted into grotesque knots of liquefied bone and shattered limbs.

Honsou was plucked from the trench and hurled into the air. Dozens of red icons flashed to life on his visor as the reflecting blast waves pulled his body in a hundred different directions. Seams split, plates cracked and pressurised coils beneath his breastplate ruptured, venting corrosive gases and precious oxygen. He lost all perception of spatial awareness, and only knew which way was down when he slammed into a line of prefabricated, mesh-wrapped blocks of wall being driven forwards by the second wave of diggers.

Gathered up in the tumbling debris before the blocks, Honsou had no control over his movement. His body was still paralysed by the numbing force of the explosion, and he roared in frustration as he was pushed back towards the trench line. Earth and rock gathered around him, pinning his arms in place, but every nerve in his body was still reverberating in the aftermath of the blast, and he couldn’t move.

The yawning black line approached, and Honsou knew there was nothing he could do to prevent his being buried in the trench. A fitting end to his short-lived

reign as Warsmith or a bitter irony to be buried in the foundations of a siegework? He kept struggling, though there was nothing he could do to prevent being buried alive. To the last breath he would fight, even as hundreds of tonnes of rubble crushed him to death in the depths of an invaded world.

The harsh rumble of the digger's engine changed pitch, changing from the throaty roar of a corpulent dragon to a squealing wail of a denied hedonist. Honsou teetered on the brink of the abyss, a rain of pebbles, soil and permacrete drooling into the trench in front of him. He let out the breath he hadn't realised he was holding and felt sensation return to his limbs. A hand reached out to him. He grabbed it unquestioningly and hauled himself upright, steadying himself with his entrenching tool.

'Getting buried in the foundations of a fortress wall is one way to prove you are a true Iron Warrior,' said Soltarn Vull Bronn. 'But I wouldn't recommend it.'

Honsou gasped, his body now his to control again, but his racing senses too stupefied to reply. He nodded his thanks as Bronn pulled him away from the front of the earth-moving machine as its engine revved up again, vomiting a petulant blast of exhaust fumes in his face.

'Brother Lacuna does not like to be stopped in his tracks,' explained Bronn, as the machine's horns emitted a series of angry honks and squirts of binary static.

Honsou saw a hostile pair of cybernetic eyes glaring at him from the thin slit cut into the armour of the operator's compartment, and moved away from the machine as its tracked wheels spun and bit. Its feed pipes retched as they poured sludgy grey permacrete into the trench. The oozing mixture set almost instantaneously to form a foundation bed for the blocks coming in on the mass-loaders.

'Won't happen again,' promised Honsou. 'He's bigger than me.'

'When has *that* ever stopped you getting in a fight?'

‘Never,’ grinned Honsou, taking stock of the work around him.

Despite the continuous bombardment, the shape of the fortification was taking shape all along the plateau. The trench line was filled with rubble and rapid-setting permacrete, onto which hundreds of rectangular, mesh-wrapped blocks of debris were being fixed. Already they formed a waist-high wall embedded with iron spikes and the beginnings of gun ports. The artillery duel was still ongoing, with the Ultramarines having the better of the exchange in terms of lives taken.

But this first sortie had never been about taking lives.

Booming reports exploded overhead, and hammering detonations shook the plateau, but kinetic mantlets were now in place, sheltering the slave workers from the worst of the barrage. As the ground level smoke began to thin, Honsou saw the plateau was a cratered no-man’s-land of torn up rock, craters filled with steaming blood and bobbing body parts. A vision of desolation, ruin and death.

‘You have your bridgehead, Warsmith,’ said Bronn proudly.

‘What’s the cost?’

‘Negligible,’ replied Bronn, picking his way over the broken ground to stand in the outline of a gun tower yet to be built. ‘Perhaps two thousand slave workers, but there are plenty more on the surface yet to be brought down.’

‘Machines?’

Here, Bronn looked concerned. ‘At least fifty out of action, and maybe half of those will never raise earthworks again.’

‘Fifty? So many?’

Bronn shrugged. ‘As I told Dassadra, this is not a normal foe we face. These are warriors of Ultramar. They fight hard, just like us.’

‘You’re wrong,’ said Honsou. ‘They don’t fight like me.’

‘Maybe not, but it’s going to be a hard bloody slog to reach those fortresses, no matter how you fight. *That* I can promise.’

Honsou unsnapped the ruptured seals at his gorget and pulled off his helmet. Dried blood streaked his face and he felt a fragment of green glass embedded in his cheek. He had long ago become inured to pain and tore it clear without even noticing.

‘The fortresses are unimportant, Bronn,’ said Honsou, marching back through the mass of rumbling machines. Milling warriors and bustling slaves jostled in the smouldering ruins as they dragged more and more blocks forwards to raise the fortifications still higher. Much remained to be done on the wall before it could be called practicable, but the hard work had been done. The foundations had been laid and mortared with blood. All that remained was simply a matter of arithmetic and the cold hard logic of war.

‘Unimportant?’ repeated Bronn. ‘That doesn’t make any sense.’

Iron Warriors stood tall as Honsou passed, and he knew he had, if not won their unquestioning loyalty, at least earned a measure of temporary respect for his willingness to fight at the lethal edge of battle. The weapons of war may change, knew Honsou, but every war needed a powerful will of bone and muscle and living flesh to win it. No matter how big the guns, or towering the war machines, every siege came down to men putting themselves in harm’s way and breaking open the soil of an enemy world. Since the first wooden palisade walls had been raised on hilltops by savages in a forgotten, lightless age it had ever been thus, and always would be.

‘It will make sense all in good time, Bronn,’ promised Honsou.

‘Speak plainly,’ demanded Bronn, taking hold of his arm. ‘How can the fortresses be unimportant? How else are we going to get below the surface except by breaking them open?’

‘*We* aren’t getting below the surface,’ said Honsou. ‘I am.’

‘Have you gone mad?’ stormed Bronn. ‘Ardaric Vaanes was your master of stealth and even he failed to insert himself behind the enemy lines.’

‘I’m not planning on doing it stealthily, it’ll be in plain sight, but they’ll not see me coming,’ said Honsou, shrugging off Bronn’s hand. ‘But this is where I need you to trust me like you have never trusted anyone. Can you do that?’

Bronn stopped to remove his helm, and tucked it under his arm. He looked at Honsou with a resigned expression that spoke of a lifetime of bitter disappointments.

‘I would rather not,’ he said.

‘Honest, at least,’ laughed Honsou.

‘What did you expect? You didn’t get to become Warsmith by being a model of trust and honour.’

‘True,’ admitted Honsou. ‘But I need you to fight in a way you’ve never fought before.’

‘What way is that?’

‘I want you to attack this cavern like you’re looking to win, but fight simply to hold.’

‘What is the point of that? If I attack, it will be to win.’

‘I don’t need that,’ said Honsou.

‘Why? There is no purpose to war if not to crush the enemy.’

‘Listen well, Bronn,’ said Honsou. ‘There is something beneath this world the daemon lord requires me to destroy, and I can’t do that if I have a host of Ultramarines in pursuit. They need to be kept here, pinned in place for as long as I’m gone. I need them to think this is our true purpose in coming here.’

‘Then what is our purpose if not to conquer this world?’

‘Better you don’t know,’ said Honsou. ‘We’re here for one thing, and it’s something I can only do without an army at my back.’

‘You’re leaving the army?’ asked Bronn in disbelief. ‘Who will command? The Grand Company won’t accept Grendel as their leader; the man’s a brute. And that… *creature* from Medrengard you keep around. It’s an abomination and it insults every son of Perturabo that you allow it to wear our Legion’s colours.’

‘Don’t worry,’ said Honsou with the grin of a man who knows the punchline of a joke no-one even knew he was telling. ‘Grendel and the Newborn are coming with me.’

‘So who will command?’

‘You will,’ said Honsou.

It took another fifteen hours for the wall to rise to its prescribed height, twenty metres of hard-packed blocks sheathed in molten metal, strengthened with adamantium reinforcement, and built upon bloody permacrete footings hacked deep into the flesh of Calth. Circular towers with angled abutments, deflector hoardings and numerous loopholes where heavy guns could launch explosive warheads into the valley punctuated its length. Deep artillery pits were dug in the shadow of the banner-topped wall, and into them masked slaves dragged wide-barrelled howitzers on bloody chains. Shaven headed madmen attended these guns, iron-visored priests of the Dark Mechanicus and corrupted calculus-logi with eyes that saw not in hues of mortality, but in angles, trajectories and degrees of deflection.

The Bloodborn army was now ready for battle, thousands of soldiers clad in combat fatigues, gore-smeared armour, fright masks and ragged semblances of uniforms stitched with the daemon lord's rune. Entire regiments were poised in the shadow of the wall, eager to spill the blood of their enemies. Scattered through the host, impatient squadrons of battle tanks, hulking daemon engines and weaponised servitor-things blared their hatred from saw-toothed augmitters. Ten thousand Bloodborn swords clattered on spiked shields, and a rhythmic chanting of meaningless doggerel filled the air beneath the rumble of gunfire.

While the Bloodborn waited for the order to attack and the Iron Warriors busied themselves with the mortal mechanics of their craft, other beings made their way to the centre of the wall. Clad in flesh-sewn robes, they were an incongruous sight amid such industrial activity and mechanistic surroundings. They moved with the lurching, awkward gait of cripples, broken clockwork automatons or things that were unsuited to using mortal bodies for locomotion.

An unnaturally tall being in a fuliginous robe of crimson led them, skeletally thin and hunched over as though made from twisted wire. Its hood flapped loose, as though draped over the long skull of a crocodylus. Wheezing breath escaped from beneath the hood, cold as the grave and just as lifeless.

Bronn and Teth Dassadra watched the approaching warlocks from the centre of the wall with more than a measure of distaste.

‘It offends the rites of advance that we use such unnatural means to fight the enemy,’ said Dassadra. His hand rested on the butt of his boltgun, as though he was considering turning it upon the witches.

Bronn shrugged. ‘We are at war, and we use what weapons are made available to us.’ But he too was irked at the appearance of these lurching, wiry figures. Though they were ready to storm the valley, Honsou had postponed the attack until these daemonic sorcerers had done their work.

‘What can warpcraft do that our guns cannot achieve?’ pressed Dassadra.

‘Wait and find out.’

‘Where did they even come from? They weren’t on any of the ships that came to Calth.’

‘You know that for sure, do you?’ said Bronn, growing tired of Dassadra’s constant harping. ‘You searched every scrap of darkness aboard our warships and know they were not among us?’

‘I didn’t see them when we took Ultimus Prime,’ said Dassadra more warily. ‘Where were they when we had to fight through an army of skitarii and battle-servitors?’

‘Perhaps you should ask M’kar himself,’ said Bronn. ‘I’m sure the daemon lord would welcome your questions.’

Dassadra fell silent at the mention of M’kar’s name, and watched as the figures formed a circle, into which was led a group of slaves who walked with the sluggish, dragging footsteps of sleepwalkers. Their flesh was excoriated and raw, cut with symbols that meant nothing to Bronn, but which he presumed were of significance to the warlocks. The slaves dropped to their knees, idiot grins plastered across their willing faces as they bared their necks.

The leader of the skin-robed witches stepped into the circle of sacrifices and a long blade of a finger unfurled from his ragged sleeve. Part organic, part sharpened wire, it flicked out like a scorpion's stinger, and a throat was opened with a whip-crack of metal on flesh.

'*M'kar tothyar magas tarani uthar!*' screamed the warlock as blood squirted from the slave's ruined artery. Before the first drop hit the ground, the pack of thrall-warlocks fell upon the slaves in a jagged, jerky frenzy of stabbing blades and shrieking wire-claws.

Like a shoal of ripper fish, they tore the slaves to gory tatters, letting their blood fill them like water pumped into empty bladders. The bodies of the warlocks, once so skeletal and thin, now swelled with black life as they gorged themselves on the slaves' life force. They howled with perverse satisfaction, but their joy was short-lived as the master of the sorcerers supped greedily from their newfound well of power.

The blood was drawn from them like dark mist, pulled towards the master of the warlocks like spiralling ribbons of oil in an ocean maelstrom. His hunched form gradually straightened until he stood taller than a Dreadnought, his once frail-looking frame now made monstrous. He raised his curling arms to the cavern's roof and loosed a piercing scream that split the air like the sonic boom of a Hell Talon.

The beat of a thousand Bloodborn drums echoed from the cavern walls in answer as roiling thunderheads formed just below the rocky ceiling. Bronn had quickly adjusted to the changeable weather patterns of the cave, but this was something else entirely.

Arcing bolts of lightning leapt from cloud to cloud, gathering strength and frequency with every passing second. The temperature in the cave dropped sharply, and a cold wind blew from the mouth of the tunnel that led back to the surface.

‘Blood of Iron,’ cursed Dassadra. ‘Lightning? With this much metal? They’ll kill us all!’

Bronn said nothing, knowing that this was no ordinary lightning to be drawn to iron as metal is drawn to a magnet. This was warp lightning, brought into being and directed by the towering figure at the heart of the sorcerers. A booming peal of thunder eclipsed the maddened drumming, and a sheet of dazzling lightning blazed from the clouds. The atmosphere in the cavern *twisted* as though some fundamental aspect of it had changed, and blinding traceries spat from the unnatural clouds. Black rain fell in torrents, turning much of the cavern floor to quagmire and slicking the armour of the Iron Warriors with an oily, rainbow sheen.

Instead of striking amid the Bloodborn as Dassadra had feared, the lightning slammed down again and again over the upland ridges where the enemy artillery pieces were sited. Mushrooming flares of explosions curled into the air, followed moments later by the crack of detonating munitions. Fire raced over the high ground as weapon after weapon went up, vanishing in a spreading bloom of electrical fire. Explosions lit the underside of the clouds, and Bronn blinked away dazzling afterimages of darting, invisible forms; all black wings, reptilian bodies and screaming fangs.

‘Now do you see the worth of these warlocks?’ asked Bronn.

Dassadra nodded curtly. ‘They are effective, I’ll give them that.’

That was as much as Dassadra would allow, and Bronn grinned as the ridges between the three fortresses burned in the fires of the warp.

‘Order the advance,’ said Bronn. ‘Tanks and infantry only.’

Dassadra looked up, puzzled. ‘Only tanks and infantry? Why not the daemon engines?’

‘Because that is the order,’ said Bronn.

‘We should attack with everything we have,’ protested Dassadra. ‘First Wave doctrine requires overwhelming force to break the will of the defenders.’

‘I know Perturabo’s doctrines, Dassadra, I need no lessons from you.’

‘Then why–’

‘Carry out your orders!’ snapped Bronn.

The sounds of battle were muted by the rain and distance, but even from behind the high wall he had built, Bronn could hear sharp exchanges of gunfire, explosions and screams. Dassadra remained on the wall, and though the man had balked at Bronn’s seemingly inexplicable orders, Bronn had given him no choice but to obey.

Bronn marched through the screaming, stamping mass of cyborg battle engines Votheer Tark had contributed to the invasion of Calth, knowing better than to stare too long at the binding symbols hacked into the meat and iron of their bodies. Some were restrained by chains of cold iron, others by more esoteric means, but every one was a lethal engine of bloody death that could fight for an eternity without tiring of the carnage.

Had these machines been sent into the fight, the enemy might already be broken, but Honsou did not want the enemy broken. It seemed like folly of the highest order, but Bronn forced himself to stop second-guessing Honsou’s plans. The Warsmith had the favour of the daemon lord, and the workings of such a mind were not for mortals to know.

Bronn entered the vast arch that led back towards the surface, following the sound of shrieking hydraulics, low-grade melta cutters and clattering armour. Arc lights riveted to the cavern walls illuminated ammunition and explosives gathered in towering stacks, and the light reflected dazzlingly from vast iron

plates being bolted to the rock of the cavern. The metal roadway was being laid in readiness for the arrival of the Black Basilica, the hulking leviathan that was part mobile cathedral to the great gods of the warp, part awesomely destructive war engine with the power to level cities.

The Iron Warriors and the Bloodborn had reached the valley through tunnels dug by subterranean Hellbore diggers, but the Black Basilica needed the rubble blocking the full girth of the tunnel cleared before it could take part in the battle. Its overwhelming firepower would be decisive, and Bronn wondered how he could possibly maintain the stalemate Honsou desired with so powerful a weapon at his disposal.

He paused in his journey to place a hand on the cavern wall, letting the soul of the planet come to him through his gauntlet. The rock glistened in the glow of the arc lights, the quartz and nephrite shimmering like specks of sickly gold. Bronn pressed his cheek to the stone, feeling every tiny vibration, every imperfection and every teasing ripple from afar. The Black Basilica was close; he could feel the tremors of its monstrous weight and the core-deep rumble of its engines.

‘Two hours perhaps,’ he said quietly. ‘No more than three.’

This world was hurting, and every pick, shovel and drill that pierced its skin was a wound that would never heal. Though Calth was a planet honeycombed by tunnels burrowed through its mantle, they were passages opened by people that had once called its surface home before Lorgar’s spite had poisoned its sun. Calth had not resented those intrusions, but the Iron Warriors were unwelcome visitors, and every grain of soil they dug was begrudged.

Bronn pushed himself away from the wall and continued deeper into the cavern until he came to a row of five tubular machines shaped like enormous torpedoes with rock-drilling conical snouts. Each Hellbore was as long as a Stormbird, but wider in beam and more heavily armoured. Their flanks were bare, scraped iron and all five had their crew ramps splayed wide as the assault forces boarded.

Only the nearest of the Hellbores would be carrying Iron Warriors, the others transporting Bloodborn shock-troops or Astartes warriors from the renegade Legions spawned in the aftermath of the Great Betrayal. None of these latter warriors were closer than six foundings to the first Legions, and yet they called themselves Space Marines. Mixed in with these inferior copies were a bastard mix of xenos species, some bipedal and birdlike, crested with spines of many colours, others arachnid, quadruped or unclassifiable in form.

Bronn shook his head at such a mongrel mix of killers.

'I know what you're thinking,' said Honsou, approaching from the nearest Hellbore. 'It's an ugly looking army.'

'Ugly doesn't even begin to cover it,' said Bronn. 'I can accept a great many things, but to know that we have fallen so far is… galling. We once fought alongside the primarchs, gods of the battlefield, and now we draft sub-par warriors who call themselves Space Marines and unclean species from who knows where in the galaxy to fight our battles.'

'These are cannon fodder,' said Honsou. 'And if it makes you feel any better, they're all going to die.'

'Yet you are going with them into the valley.'

Honsou shook his head. 'No, these are just a distraction, something to keep the Ultramarines looking straight ahead while I go beneath them.'

'Hiding in plain sight,' said Bronn with a slow smile of understanding.

'Just so,' agreed Honsou.

Bronn's hand unconsciously moved towards his pistol as Cadaras Grendel and the creature Honsou called the Newborn approached. Both saw the gesture and

their posture changed immediately. Grendel grinned in anticipation of a fight, while the Newborn looked at him curiously, as though trying to decide which limb to remove first. It took an effort of will, but Bronn removed his hand from his weapon.

Grendel laughed and jerked his thumb in the direction of the Newborn. ‘Very wise, this one would have ripped your head off before that gun could clear its holster.’

Bronn ignored Grendel, watching as the sinuous forms of the blade dancers climbed into the last Hellbore. Each was a swordmaster of sublime skill that had followed their champion, Notha Etassay, to New Badab in search of enemies worthy of their blades. Bound to Honsou after he had defeated Etassay during the final duel of the Skull Harvest, they were devotees of the Dark Prince and therefore not to be trusted.

Honsou followed his gaze and said, ‘This is war; and I’ll make use of such weapons or warriors as I have without care or regret.’

‘I said the same thing to Dassadra,’ replied Bronn. ‘But I was lying.’

Honsou shrugged. ‘You still believe in the old ways, Bronn. That’s always been your problem.’

‘The old ways were good enough for Lord Perturabo,’ said Bronn.

‘And look where that got him,’ said Honsou with sudden anger. ‘Stuck in a dead city on Medrengard, imprisoned by his own bitterness and resentment. If he cared so much about the wrongs done to him, why isn’t he out bringing every Imperial stronghold to ruin? There isn’t one fortress wall left standing that he couldn’t put to rubble in a day.’

Honsou’s vehemence surprised Bronn. He hadn’t thought the Warsmith cared anything for the Long War or Perturabo’s notable absence from its battles. Had

Bronn misjudged him or was this yet another piece of theatre designed to achieve an end that could not yet be seen?

‘The ways of our master are not for us to judge,’ he said, though words sounded hollow even to him.

‘You’re wrong,’ said Honsou. ‘They *are* ours to judge. And one day someone will take Perturabo to task for his lack of action.’

That made Bronn laugh. ‘Really? And who will that be? You?’

Honsou’s anger vanished, and Bronn was reminded how unpredictable Honsou could be, as violent as a berserker or as capricious as a pleasure-seeker of the Dark Prince.

‘Who knows?’ said Honsou with a broken-toothed grin. ‘Maybe I will one day. Wouldn’t that be delicious? A half-breed mongrel bastard sat atop the Ivory Throne. What I wouldn’t give to see old Forrix’s face if he could have lived to see that!’

‘You’re insane,’ said Bronn, as sure of that fact as he was about the composition of Calth’s bedrock.

‘You might be right,’ said Honsou, turning away and making his way towards the assault ramp of the Hellbore. ‘But I have a shrine to find and you have a battle to prolong.’

A group of perhaps forty Iron Warriors marched ahead of Honsou, filing into the Hellbore with unquestioning discipline. Bronn knew a great many of these warriors; they were among the finest killers left to the Legion. All had fought on Terra, and each had sworn personal oaths of moment before the Ivory Throne. A pang of bitter and solemn regret touched Bronn to see such warriors engaged in such an ignoble war.

Honsou climbed to the top of the ramp and turned as Grendel and the Newborn went inside. He raised a fist to Bronn and slammed it hard against his breastplate.

'Give me a day,' said Honsou. 'Give me a day, and I'll give you a victory that will make you forget there ever were any "old ways".'

Bronn nodded as the assault ramp folded up into the body of the Hellbore, but his heart sank as he heard the lie in the Warsmith's voice.

Honsou was leaving them to die.

NOW

The pain was getting worse.

His armour was non-functional, and he could barely move. His strength, once so formidable, was deserting him. Plates that had once protected him from harm were now a burden his weakening body could no longer endure. He remembered being presented with his armour in the columned majesty of the Gallery of Stone, kneeling with thousands of his fellow warriors before the burnished form of the primarch.

Bronn remembered the unbreakable pride he had felt, the sense of belonging to something greater that had sustained him all through the darkest days of the Great Betrayal. The Long War and the decline of the Legion had shown him there was no such thing as unbreakable. Even the greatest pride could be humbled, even the mightiest fortress could be breached, and even the staunchest faith could be shattered in the face of betrayal.

How had he failed…?

The attack of the Bloodborn had been defeated, broken and hurled back by the combined might of the Ultramarines and their mortal armies. The savage warriors of the Mechanicus had fallen upon their dark brothers, fighting with a

ferocious hatred born of the knowledge that their foes had once been like them. Yet even as the battle turned in the favour of the Imperial forces, the Black Basilica had joined the fight, and its vast array of guns had wrought fearful carnage upon the defenders, bringing them to the verge of destruction.

But even that mighty weapon had been lost…

Pieces of the dark leviathan lay scattered around the cavern, its priceless debris left to rust in the moist atmosphere, for no adepts of the Dark Mechanicus remained alive to gather them. Bronn should have anticipated a stealthy insertion, after all the Raven Guard had always been the masters of the shadow strike and the infiltration of the most heavily defended citadels.

Bronn remembered fighting alongside Corax and his warriors many years ago, in battles that had been forgotten by that primarch's sons, but which were still fresh in his mind. For all that the Space Marines of this stagnant Imperium were pale shadows of the great Legions of old, the man who had led his team into the heart of the Black Basilica was a warrior worthy of the title. Professional admiration gave way to pain as he coughed a wad of blood onto his chest.

With the destruction of the Black Basilica, the fight had gone out of the Bloodborn, and Bronn cursed Honsou for allying what little strength remained to their fragment of the Legion to such dross. Dassadra had slaughtered scores as they fell back over the wall, bloodied and broken against the ceramite and blue lines of the cavern's defenders.

A gloomy status quo had fallen between the two armies as Bronn and Dassadra sought to re-establish control over the shattered mortals of the Bloodborn. Threats, promises of plunder and a number of strategic executions had brought order back to the host, and Bronn had drawn up plans for a second assault when yet another disaster had struck.

With the Bloodborn drawn up in readiness to assault the valley once again, word came of an attack from the rear. Sporadic explosions and gunfire drifted from the tunnel they had fought to clear for the Black Basilica, the rattle of small-arms fire and the heavier blasts of wide-bore guns belonging to battle tanks. It should

have been impossible. Hadn't the Ultramarines been broken on the surface? But as more contact reports screamed over the vox, it became impossible to deny the reality of the catastrophe.

A ragtag host of scavenged armoured vehicles, ad-hoc battalions and Ultramarines surged from the tunnel mouth and fell upon the Bloodborn with the fury of berserkers. Bronn knew some form of communication must have passed between these Ultramarines and the defenders of the valley when an answering battle cry went up from the three fortresses.

Their gates had opened and thousands of blue-armoured soldiers had charged out with squads of Ultramarines at their head. Despite the best efforts of Bronn and Dassadra, the sight of two forces closing on them had shattered the last courage of the Bloodborn and they had scattered into disparate warbands, striking out for their own survival, little realising that by doing so they had doomed themselves.

Hammer and anvil, both forces of Ultramarines had smashed together, crushing the Bloodborn between them, and they had not been merciful. Yet for all that the battle was lost, the Iron Warriors were not about to lay down their weapons and go quietly into defeat. Knowing that Honsou had left them to die, Bronn had prepared for such a moment and waited until the time was right to vent his last breath of hatred.

The traitor Warsmith Dantioch had called it the final solution to any siege, and in that at least he had been right.

A vast array of explosives rigged along the length of the tunnel awaited his trigger signal, and as Bronn saw an Ultramarines sergeant coming for him with murder in his stride, he had known that time had come. With one last look at the fortifications he had fought and bled to build, Bronn mashed the firing trigger and the world ended in fire, falling rock and thunder. He expected to die in the collapse, but he had lived, though it was to be only a brief respite.

Bronn blinked away afterimages of crackling detonations, strobing flashes of secondary explosions and crackling ammo fires.

He knew he was dying, but to die for this?

To be nothing more than… what, a distraction for a mission that had clearly failed?

That was galling for a warrior of his heritage.

He felt the earth shake again, and his eyes flicked towards the roof of the cavern. Dust fell in a dry rain, and spalling flakes of glassy stone sounded like sand trickling through an hourglass as it slowly coated the battlefield. Though the cavern's structure was sound, Bronn wished for the cave to collapse, to bury this moment of infamy beneath millions of tonnes of rock and deny his foes any succour in triumph.

The ground shook again, but this was no aftershock of his final solution, this was a tremor of something moving beneath the earth. Bronn knew rock well enough to know the difference, and he pressed his palm to the ground, letting it speak to him as it had on countless occasions before. He felt the seismic communication, the echoes and the gnawing bite of melta-bladed cutters as they clove the rock like a pack of subterranean borer-ambulls.

Beyond the mangled remains of a trio of Basilisk artillery pieces, the earth heaved upwards, and a geyser of spraying stone and mud exploded into the air as something iron and yellow heaved its bulk into the cavern. Bronn instantly recognised the conical snout and flared rock scoops of a Hellbore drilling rig.

'Careful, you idiot…' he hissed. 'The soil is always thinner nearer the surface.'

Whoever was driving the Hellbore was unskilled in the finer points of its operation, handling it like a runaway Land Raider instead of a precision tunnelling device. Sparks flew as its drill cogs tore through a wrecked chassis of a smouldering battle tank. Metal shavings flew like glittering decoy chaff ejected from the defence pod of a Thunderhawk.

The Hellbore vanished from sight as it lurched past its centre of gravity and crashed down onto its side. An explosion ripped up from the mangled tank as an ammo cache exploded. More than likely, the occupants of the Hellbore were now trapped within. If the Ultramarines didn't kill them, the lack of oxygen would eventually see them dead.

Whoever had brought the machine back to Four Valleys Gorge had returned to defeat and death, and Bronn dismissed the tunneller as he heard the voices of Ultramarines, curt orders barked in a battle cant that had not changed in ten thousand years.

Such a span of time was almost incomprehensible. To Bronn, those days of gods and heroes were a past he had lived in the span of a single lifetime, but these warriors had only half-remembered myths to tell them of such long ago days. They could not remember what was a recent memory for him…

I was there when the walls of the Imperial Palace fell.

Bronn turned his head, searching for a weapon to hold as he died. A bolter lay within easy reach, but beyond it he caught sight of *Earthbreaker*, the weapon that had cast unnumbered fortresses down and raised myriad others to the skies. His gauntlet closed on the T-shaped pommel, and he dragged it over the broken ground with his fingertips. The blade scraped over the black stone brought down from the cavern's ceiling, high-density igneous rock laid down in volcanic eruptions before men had set foot on this world.

'Fused metamorphic stone from close to the surface,' he said with a wheezing, frothed breath that told him his lungs had finally collapsed. With only his secondary organ dragging oxygen to his broken body, it was only a matter of time until hypoxia killed him.

'Aurelian's sons were thorough in their spite,' he noted, seeing fragments of irradiated flakes mixed in with the rock.

‘Yet still they were defeated,’ said a cultured, perfectly enunciated voice above him.

A foot stamped down on *Earthbreaker’s* haft, snapping the weapon in two. Anger engulfed Bronn, and he rolled onto his back, ignoring the shooting spikes of searing pain that engulfed his chest, yet left his body below untouched. He looked up at a broad-shouldered warrior in the azure battle plate of the Ultramarines. A golden eagle glittered at his chest and star-bleached emerald trim lined the notched edges of his shoulder guards.

‘Things might have been different had the Iron Warriors been with them,’ hissed Bronn, clutching the broken handle of *Earthbreaker* to his chest. The warrior shook his head and removed his laurel-wreathed helm, revealing a face of classic patrician proportions, symmetrical and with high cheekbones, a strong chin and close-cropped blond hair that framed eyes of milky blue. Every inch an Ultramarine.

‘You are defeated here,’ said the warrior, sliding a fresh magazine into his pistol. ‘I do not think the outcome then would have been much different had a wretch like you been there.’

‘You are wrong, whelp, iron is forever,’ said Bronn, letting his head loll to one side. ‘From iron cometh strength. From strength cometh will. From will cometh faith. From faith cometh honour. From honour cometh iron.’

‘What is that?’ asked the warrior, his voice dripping with contempt. ‘A prayer?’

‘It is the Unbreakable Litany,’ said Bronn, his strength fading. ‘And may it forever be so.’

Through the dancing flames of defeat, Bronn saw a darting figure slip through the wreckage of the Basilisks crushed by the Hellbore, a half-glimpsed shadow with a limb that threw the firelight queerly from its mercurial surface. Though it

should have been impossible, Bronn thought he saw a pale blue glow of an augmetic eye through the sheeting dust and ash.

Your mission is complete, the eye seemed to say. *But mine goes on…*

‘Why did you come here?’ demanded the Ultramarine. ‘You must have know you could not defeat the true sons of Guilliman.’

‘Why did we come here?’ smiled Bronn, shaking his head as a weight lifted from his broken body. ‘Better you don’t know.’

He loosened his grip on the iron will that held his life anchored to his flesh, staring up at the Ultramarines warrior with a last breath of defiance.

‘You think you have won a victory here?’ he said.

‘I know we have,’ said the warrior. ‘Your force is destroyed, and Calth is ours again. All across Ultramar, your master’s armies are being pushed from our worlds. Yes, I would say this is a victory.’

‘The years have not been kind to the Ultramarines,’ said Bronn. ‘Once they were the Battle Kings of Macragge, but you are just poor shadows of those giants.’

The warrior levelled his pistol at Bronn.

‘I should leave you to suffer your pain, but it insults me to let you sully this world with your life a moment longer.’

‘Who are you?’ asked Bronn. ‘Tell me the name of the man who is going to kill me.’

The warrior considered his request for a moment before nodding.

‘I am Learchus Abantes, sergeant of the Ultramarines Fourth Company.’

Bronn smiled. ‘The Fourth, yes. Of course it would be one of you.’

Learchus pulled the trigger, and Bronn died knowing yet more blood would be spilled before the Iron Warriors were done with Calth.

Book 6

THE BEAST OF CALTH

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

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

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

The beast had come out of nowhere, a monstrous figure in battered armour with the paint stripped from its plates. Flashes of yellow and black leapt from between two abandoned dwellings, and Joelle was dying, down on her knees and

vainly attempting to stop her guts from spilling out over the rocky ground. Kellan had managed to fire a shot, the only one of their squad able to even raise his weapon, but it hadn't done any good.

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

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

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

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

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

couldn't blink the sticky fluid from his eyes, and saw the hideously disfigured face of the beast through a scarlet haze.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Caretaker duty, that's what Aquillen had called it. Six months of patrolling empty caves to ensure every last shred of the enemy was gone. Six months of

boredom and endless hikes through wide caverns, forgotten tunnels and echoing underground galleries. Their daily patrols had explored cathedral-like caverns filled with glittering blue stalactites as thin as threads, rainbow caverns of frozen rad-waste and abandoned agri-caverns that had exploded with all manner of strange and fecund vegetation. Karysta had once joked that they were getting to see areas of Calth even its people had forgotten about.

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

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

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

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

Kellan wasn't laughing now.

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

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

‘You’re a monster,’ spat Kellan.

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

‘Then why do it?’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And now this…

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Milotas Adelmo was one of the few individuals permitted to use her given name, a privilege he had earned many times in their long association. Though it was awkward for him to disembark from the Rhino, Suzaku knew better than to offer him a helping hand. Milotas was no dwarf, but his spine had been dreadfully foreshortened and twisted after long months of painful reconstructive surgery in the aftermath of their banishment of the Uromere Pseudoscorpionida.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Fine,’ admitted Suzaku. ‘Yes, I was thinking of Soburo.’

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

‘Fine, I’ll see to it.’

‘Do you want another lecture from me?’

‘Throne, no!’

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

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

‘You know it, but you don’t *believe* it,’ said Milotas, modulating his tone to one less flippant. ‘You forget that I was there too. I stood on the walls of Castra

Occidens when the enemy warpcraft struck. Soburo knew he was tainted and accepted the only option open to you.'

'He forgave me with his last breath.'

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

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

'And now?'

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

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

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

'Are you sure about that? Now?'

'More than ever,' said Milotas with a sage nod. 'You wouldn't have pulled the trigger and killed your brother if you didn't accept the truth of it. Now that

today's lecture is done with, shall we see what has Sergeant Dante so agitated?'

'Do we have anything further on why we're here?'

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

Suzaku nodded and set off into the cavern, wondering what could be left on Calth that was so important it required the presence of an inquisitor. Part of her was irritated at such a peremptory summons, but her instincts for trouble were warning her that this day would be like no other, and she kept her ire in check.

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

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

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

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

Sitting apart from the Chimeras was a solitary Rhino, painted a vivid blue and with the pristine white symbol of the Ultramarines emblazoned on its assault doors. Superficially, it was no different to Suzaku's transport, but where hers was laden with gene-locked librarium engines, surveyor gear and the tools of her

vocation, this vehicle seemed somehow heavier, tougher and altogether more solid.

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

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

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

'Used to be? Why was it abandoned?'

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

'And they just abandoned it after one accident?'

'Yes. A hundred and fifty-four deaths isn't a lot by Mechanicus standards, but on Ultramar it's considered disastrous. The workers felt the Martian priests weren't taking enough safety precautions and most of them just moved away.'

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

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

Suzaku held her rosette out and said, ‘Inquisitor Namira Suzaku.’

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

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

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

‘Thank you, sergeant,’ she said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Yes, ma'am,' confirmed Lerato.

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

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

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

'Her squad were all dead?'

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

Sergeant Dante was waiting in the cramped central square of the settlement, his vast bulk unmoving and solid as a statue. The plates of his armour glistened with moisture, the blue plates, golden eagle and emerald green edging shining

brightly in the drab light of the cavern. It had been some time since Suzaku had met with a warrior of the Ultramarines; only token forces were left on worlds declared free of taint while the majority of the Chapter was engaged in driving the last remnants of the Bloodborn from Ultramar.

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

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

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

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

The Space Marine nodded. 'I am Dante, Fourth Company.'

'Can you tell me what happened here?'

'I am hoping you can tell me,' said Dante, removing his helmet to reveal a deeply tanned and lined face of wide cheekbones, noble features and eyes of silver-flecked amber. His hair was as white as hers, and the glittering studs embedded in his forehead spoke of a lifetime of service to the Ultramarines. Dante was handsome in a strange, unattainable way, shaped like a bronze cast by a heroic sculptor of antiquity.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dante looked unconvinced, but said nothing more.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Why would he do such a thing?’

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

‘Or?’ prompted Dante, when Suzaku didn’t continue.

‘Or perhaps he took the last body to eat.’

‘A cannibal?’ hissed Dante, horrified at the notion.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Suzaku felt their instant appraisal, and anger touched her at the speed with which they had dismissed her as a threat. She shook off the irrational feeling as a fourth Space Marine, encased in armour of dusty white, bent over Kellan. Gurgling tubes coiled from vac-sealed cylinders on his back, and a flipped-up hololithic display on his enormous forearm flickered with the erratic bio-rhythms of the injured man.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘And if they don’t protect him?’ asked Selenus. ‘Who’ll be there to pick up the pieces? Tell me that, Korvin Dante.’

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

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

‘Emperor’s Mercy…’ she breathed, holding a hand to her mouth.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Another nod.

'I am going to catch the person that did this to you,' she said. 'With the help of these Space Marines, I am going to hunt him down and kill him.'

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

'Got… to… catch him…' he said.

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

Kellan nodded, and she felt the righteous anger of the Space Marines swell around her. No greater foe existed for them. No enemy was hated more. The

greenskin and the tyranid were little more than animals, and even the more advanced xenos races were simply enemies to be overcome. The purest hate was reserved for the fallen of the Traitor Legions, and it was a terrible thing to behold.

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

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

‘Trust me,’ said Dante. ‘I’ll defeat this one.’

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

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

‘A plan?’ demanded Suzaku. ‘What plan?’

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

‘Just a moment longer, Apothecary,’ said Suzaku.

‘I said no,’ stated Selenus.

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

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

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

‘Many more are going to die if we don’t find out everything this man knows.’

‘He is a warrior of Ultramar,’ said Selenus. ‘And he deserves a chance to live.’

‘And I’ll give him that chance,’ promised Suzaku. ‘As soon as I’m done talking to him.’

‘You condone this, Korvin?’ demanded Selenus.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'No!' cried Kellan. 'You have to stop him!'

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

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

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

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

‘He and a Deathwatch Apothecary once saved our captain from phage-cell poisoning after a tyranid bio-queen skewered him with a poisoned javelin,’ said Dante. ‘If anyone can save that man, it is Selenus.’

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Do you have any idea what he might be planning?’

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

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

Mechanicus. Billowing clouds of superheated steam and flares of venting gases fogged the image.

‘What is that?’ asked Suzaku.

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

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

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

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

‘Where is that place?’ asked Dante, tapping the slate, and earning an irritated glance from Milotas Adelmo. The savant pointedly paused to wipe a silk cloth over the mirrored slate before answering the Space Marine.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Before Dante could reply, the assault ramp of the Rhino gave a metallic squeal as it lowered and Apothecary Selenus emerged, the white of his gauntlets smeared red and his face lined with anger.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘What is it?’ she said.

‘There has been another attack,’ said Dante.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Trooper Lorz, I want you to take Sergeant Joelle’s Chimera. We’ll load the bodies in the back. Make sure to strap them down properly, I don’t want them

rolling all over the place when we ride over some rough ground. Remember, these are our comrades we're talking about. You'll show them some respect.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Suzaku surveyed the smouldering remains of the fuel relay with a cold, dispassionate eye. The structure was little more than a way station, mostly unmanned, but – in this case – home to a Mechanicus adept and a trio of

servitors. All four were dead, burned black by the searing flames that had consumed the relay when it had exploded.

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

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

‘Looks like you were right,’ said Dante.

‘About what?’ asked Suzaku.

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

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

‘Why?’ she asked.

‘Why what?’

‘Why attack this place?’

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

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

Suzaku moved closer to the broken conduit pipe, noting the blast damage and spread of twisted metal where the explosion had occurred. At first she had assumed that the pipe had been destroyed in an attack, but now another possibility began to rear its ugly head. Suzaku imagined a lone Iron Warrior approaching this structure, putting herself in the roof of his mind as he plotted to destroy it. Vast amounts of electrical energy were pouring through the building, and it would be easy to cause a huge amount of damage.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘What is he doing?’ asked Dante.

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

‘For what purpose?’

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

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

‘Yes,’ agreed Dante.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Suzaku rejoined her savant as he held out the slate.

‘Summarise it for me,’ she said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Of the many duties an adept of Aries Pyros could be assigned, the security detail that kept watch on the surrounding tunnels, caverns and approaches to the geo-thermal facility was amongst the dullest and yet most sought after. This deep in a world of Ultramar, there was little need for security, for there were few guardians more thorough in their diligence than the Ultramarines.

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

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

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

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

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

Writhing mechadendrites disengaged from the brass-cogged output ports of difference engines one and two, but Dettela kept himself plugged into number three. The simpler base calculations of the lower powers could be kept running in the background. Info-spikes slid home in the logisters processing the surveyor inputs. The machinery that swept this cavern was necessarily specialised, as conventional apparatus would simply register an overload of electromagnetic hash and false returns from the electrically hostile environment of this depth.

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

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

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

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

'Identify,' he said.

The machine buzzed and spat a garbled blurt of binary until Dettela bowed his head and paused the background calculations he was running. The surveyor gear needed finesse and the full attention of its operator, and so singular an event

demanded that he properly honour its discovery. Dettela switched from organic speech, letting the invocation pour from him in a ritualised form of binaric cant.

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

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

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

The wire-frame image was replaced by a grainy representation of what looked like a daguerreotype of an ancient book. The pages were faded and yellowed, with no indication as to its origin or authenticity. The pages were obviously from some form of armourers’ treatise, and the drone was clearly labelled with meticulous, yet simple clarity.

Bartizan Class Remote Seeker Drone, Olympian Pattern.

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

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

‘Proceed,’ answered a growling, atavistic voice in his ear.

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

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

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

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

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

He shook his head at the memory, and consulted the map scrolling across the hololithic display beside Luta's raised chair. They were making good time across the steel roadway that cut across the Bakkerian Plain, and were in sight of the fitful glow of Highside City on the edge of the mountains.

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

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

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

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

'Yes, sergeant,' replied Luta.

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

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

Vast hulls soared like cliffs, and broadside batteries like fortress walls tapered to vanishing points beneath the cold blue of the sun. Angled prows adorned with

the symbol of the Ultramarines rose hundreds of metres into the air, and enormous winged angels reached out into the void like titans of legend.

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

The shipyards were working at full capacity, repairing damage the Bloodborn ships had wreaked amongst the fleets of Ultramar. Numerous vessels had been lost in action and many more would forever bear the scars of the fighting, which was only right and proper. The grand dams of the fleet were ancient hellions of war, and historians could trace their lineage back to their keels being struck by the residue of battle damage cut into their hulls.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘I know that,’ said Dante.

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

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

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

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

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

‘Affirmative,’ answered Suzaku. ‘We go on your signal.’

Dante nodded to Selenus and said, ‘Courage and honour, brother.’

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

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

He racked the slide on his pistol and checked the action of his sword was clear, rolling his shoulders to loosen the muscles. It had been too long since Dante had seen action, and the prospect of sending this Iron Warrior to his death sent a thrill of excitement through his body. Though some considered it unseemly to take pleasure in combat for its own sake, Dante did not count himself among them. To face the warriors of the Ruinous Powers and destroy them was something to be enjoyed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'My thanks, Selenus,' he said.

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

'Go,' ordered Dante. 'This one is mine.'

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

bodyguard reached the tunnel wall at the same time as Dante, and he saw the same anger reflected in her curiously glassy eyes.

‘He is mine to kill,’ said Dante.

‘Understood,’ replied Suzaku.

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

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

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

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

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

‘Anything else?’ asked Suzaku.

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

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

Dante didn't waste any words and put three shots into the back of the figure's head. Each shot was dead on target and the Iron Warrior was punched onto his front, his helmet torn from his head in a smoking ruin of torn metal.

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

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

'By their countenance shall you know them,' said Dante.

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

'It's over,' he said, holstering his pistol.

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

'This warrior has been dead for months,' said Suzaku.

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

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

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

'A what?'

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

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

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

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

'Because he just wanted us to waste our efforts by looking down here,' said Suzaku. 'He doesn't care about Aries Pyros.'

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

The answer came to them at the same instant.

‘He wants to get off-world,’ said Suzaku.

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

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

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

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

Someone had been inside this fuel drum.

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

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

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

The Beast of Calth…

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

Lerato had turned to run, but a thunderous impact hurled him to the ground with his shoulder exploding in pain. He’d fallen, his face slamming into the smooth rockcrete of the apron and cracking the cheekbone. Looking underneath the Chimera, Lerato saw Lorz lying at the front of the tank, his chest caved in and his mouth flapping for breath like a landed fish.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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