

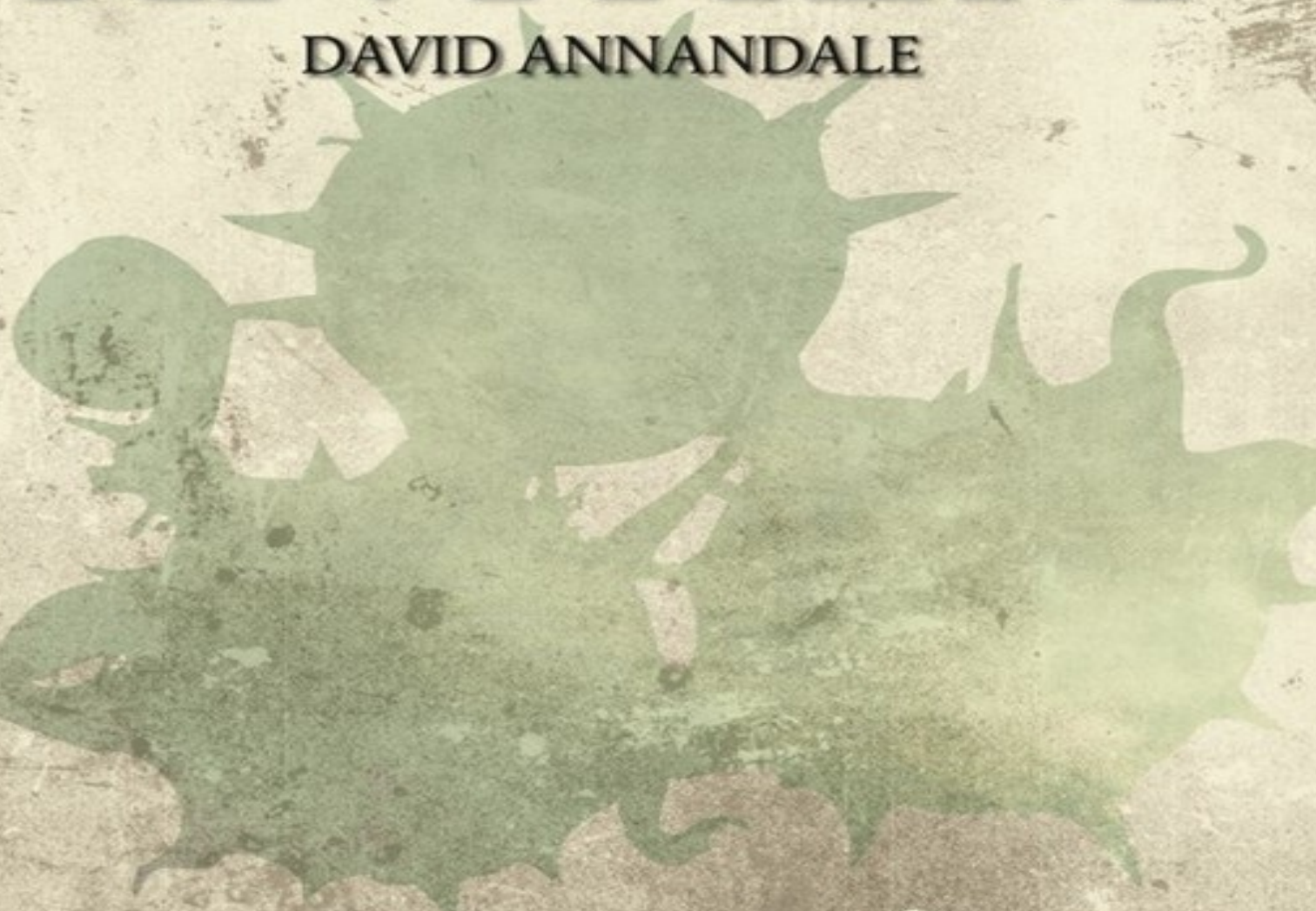
TALES FROM  
THE ARCHIVE

**HAMMER AND BOLTER EDITION**



# THE CARRION ANTHEM

DAVID ANNANDALE



A NURGLE SHORT STORY

**WARHAMMER**  
40,000

# **THE CARRION ANTHEM**

David Annandale

He was thinking bitter thoughts about glory. He couldn't help it. As he took his seat in the governor's private box overlooking the stage, Corvus Parthamen was surrounded by glory that was not his. The luxury of the box, a riot of crimson leather and velvet laced with gold and platinum thread, was a tribute, in the form of excess, to the honour of Governor Elpidius. That didn't trouble Corvus. The box represented a soft, false glory, a renown that came with the title, not the deeds or the man. Then there was the stage, to which all sight lines led. It was a prone monolith, carved from a single massive obsidian slab. It was an altar on which one could sacrifice gods, but instead it abased itself beneath the feet of the artist. It was stone magnificence, and tonight it paid tribute to Corvus's brother. That didn't trouble Corvus, either. He didn't understand what Gurges did, but he recognized that his twin, at least, did work for his laurels. Art was a form of deed, Corvus supposed.

What bothered him was the walls. Windowless, rising two hundred metres to meet in the distant vault of the ceiling, they were draped with immense tapestries. These were hand-woven tributes to Imperial victories. Kieldar. The Planus Steppes. Ichar IV. On and on and on. Warriors of legend both ancient and new towered above Corvus. They were meant to inspire. They were there to draw the eye as the spirit soared, moved by the majesty of the tribute paid by the music. The arts in this monumental space—stone, image and sound—were supposed to entwine to the further glory of the Emperor and his legions. But lately, the current of worship had reversed. Now the tapestry colossi, frozen in their moments of triumphant battle, were also bowing before the glory of Gurges, and that was wrong. That was what made Corvus dig his fingers in hard enough to mar the leather of his armrests.

The governor's wife, Lady Ahala, turned to him, her multiple necklaces rattling together. Its nice to see you, colonel, she said. You must be so proud.

Proud of what? he wanted to say. Proud of his homeworld's contributions to the Imperial crusades? That was a joke. Ligeta was a joke. Of the hundred tapestries here in the Performance Hall of the Imperial Palace of Culture, not one portrayed a Ligetan hero. Deep in the Segmentum Pacificus, far from the front lines of any contest, Ligeta was untouched by war beyond the usual tithe of

citizens bequeathed to the Imperial Guard. Many of its sons had fought and fallen on distant soil, but how many had distinguished themselves to the point that they might be remembered and celebrated? None.

Proud of what? Of his own war effort? That he commanded Ligetas defence regiment? That only made him part of the Ligetan joke. Officers who were posted back to their homeworlds developed reputations, especially when those homeworlds were pampered, decadent backwaters. The awful thing was that he couldnt even ask himself what hed done wrong. He knew the answer. Nothing. Hed done everything right. Hed made all the right friends, served under all the right officers, bowed and scraped in all the right places at all the right times. He had done his duty on the battlefield, too. No one could say otherwise. But there had been no desperate charges, no last-man-standing defences. The Ligetan regiments were called upon to maintain supply lines, garrison captured territory, and mop up the token resistance of those who were defeated, but hadnt quite come to terms with the fact. They were not summoned when the need was urgent.

The injustice made him seethe. He knew his worth, and that of his fellows. They fought and died with the best, when given the chance. Not every mop-up had been routine. Not every territory had been easily pacified. Ligetans knew how to fight, and they had plenty to prove.

Only no one ever saw. No one thought to look, because everyone knew Ligetas reputation. It was the planet of the dilettante and the artist. The planet of the song.

Proud of that?

And yes, that was exactly what Ahala meant. Proud of the music, proud of the song. Proud of Gurges. Ligetas civilian population rejoiced in the planets reputation. They saw no shame or weakness in it. They used the same logic as Corvuss superiors who thought they had rewarded his political loyalty by sending him home. Who wouldnt want a pleasant command, far from the filth of a Chaos-infested hive world? Who wouldnt want to be near Gurges Parthamen, maker not of song, but of The Song?

Yes, Corvus thought, Gurges had done a good thing there. Over a decade ago, now. The Song was a hymn to the glory of the Emperor. Hardly unusual. But

Regeat, Imperator was rare. It was the product of the special alchemy that, every so often, fused formal magnificence with populist appeal. The tune was magisterial enough to be blasted from a Titans combat horn, simple enough to be whistled by the lowliest trooper, catchy enough that, once heard, it was never forgotten. It kept up morale on a thousand besieged worlds, and fired up the valour of millions of troops charging to the rescue. Corvus had every right, every duty to be proud of his brothers accomplishment. It was a work of genius.

So hed been told. He would have to be satisfied with the word of others. Corvus had amusia. He was as deaf to music as Gurges was attuned to it. His twins work left him cold. He heard a clearer melody line in the squealing of a greenskin pinned beneath a dreadnoughts feet.

To Lady Ahala, Corvus said, I couldnt be more proud.

Do you know what hes offering us tonight? Elpidius asked. He settled his soft bulk more comfortably.

I dont.

Really? Ahala sounded surprised. But youre his twin.

We havent seen each other for the best part of a year.

Elpidius frowned. I didnt think youd been away.

Corvus fought back a humiliated wince. Gurges was the one off-planet, he said. Searching the stars for inspiration, or some other pampered nonsense. Corvus didnt know and didnt care.

Hanging from the vault of the hall were hundreds of glow-globes patterned into a celestial map of the Imperium. Now they faded, silencing the white noise of tens of thousands of conversations. Darkness embraced the audience, and only the stage was illuminated. From the wings came the choir. The singers wore black uniforms as razor-creased as any officers ceremonial garb. They marched in, until their hundreds filled the back half of the stage. They faced the audience. At first, Corvus thought they were wearing silver helmets, but then they reached up and pulled down the masks. Featureless, eyeless, the masks covered the top half of each mans face.

How are they going to see him conduct? Elpidius wondered.

Ahala giggled with excitement. Thats nothing, she whispered. She placed a confiding hand on Corvuss arm. Ive heard that there havent been any rehearsals. Not even the choir knows what is going to be performed.

Corvus blinked. What?

Isnt it exciting? She turned back to the stage, happy and placid before the prospect of the impossible.

The light continued to fade until there was only a narrow beam front and centre, a bare pinprick on the frozen night of stone. The silence was as thick and heavy as the stage. It was broken by the solemn, slow clop of boot heels. His pace steady as a ritual, as if he were awed by his own arrival, Gurges Parthamen, Emperors bard and Ligetas favourite son, walked into the light. He wore the same black uniform as the musicians, but no mask. Instead

Whats wrong with his face? Ahala asked.

Corvus leaned forward. Something cold scuttled through his gut. His twins face was his own: the same severe planes, narrow chin and grey eyes, even the same cropped black hair. But now Corvus stared at a warped mirror. Gurges was wearing an appliance that flashed like gold but, even from this distance, displayed the unforgiving angles and rigidity of iron. It circled his head like a laurel wreath. At his face, it extended needle-thin claws that pierced his eyelids, pinning them open. Gurges gazed at his audience with a manic, implacable stare that was equal parts absolute knowledge and terminal fanaticism. His eyes were as much prisoners as those of his choir, but where the singers saw nothing, he saw too much, and revelled in the punishment. His smile was a peeling back of lips. His skin was too thin, his skull too close to the surface. When he spoke, Corvus heard the hollow sound of wind over rusted pipes. Insects rustled at the frayed corners of reality.

Fellow Ligetans, Gurges began. Before we begin, it would be positively heretical of me not to say something about the role of the patron of the arts. The life of a musician is a difficult one. Because we do not produce a tangible product, there are many who regard us as superfluous, a pointless luxury the Imperium could happily do without. This fact makes those who value us even

more important. Patrons are the blessed few who know the artist really can make a difference.

He paused for a moment. If he was expecting applause, the knowledge and ice in his rigid gaze stilled the audience. Unperturbed, he carried on. I have, over the course of my musical life, been privileged to have worked with more than my share of generous, committed, sensitive patrons. It is thanks to them that my music has been heard at all. He lowered his head, as if overcome by modesty.

Corvus would have snorted at the conceit of the gesture, but he was too tense. He dreaded the words that might come from his brothers rictus face.

Gurges looked up, and now his eyes seemed to glow with a light the colour of dust and ash. Yes, he said, the generous patron is to be cherished. But even more precious, even more miraculous, even more to be celebrated and glorified, is the patron who inspires. The patron who opens the door to new vistas of creation, and pushes the artist through. I stand before you as the servant of one such patron. I know that my humble tribute to the Emperor is held in high regard, but I can now see what a poor counterfeit of the truth that effort is. Tonight, so will you. I cannot tell you what my patron has unveiled for me. But I can show you.

The composers last words slithered out over the hall like a death rattle. Gurges turned to face the choir. He raised his arms. The singers remained unmoving. The last light went out. A terrible, far-too-late certainty hit Corvus: he must stop this.

And then Gurges began to sing.

For almost a minute, Corvus felt relief. No daemon burst from his brothers mouth. His pulse slowed. He had fallen for the theatrics of a first-rate showman, that was all. The song didnt sound any different to him than any other of Gurgess efforts. It was another succession of notes, each as meaningless as the next. Then he noticed that he was wrong. He wasnt hearing a simple succession. Even his thick ears could tell that Gurges was singing two notes at once. Then three. Then four. The song became impossible. Somehow still singing, Gurges drew a breath, and though Corvus heard no real change in the music, the breath seemed to mark the end of the refrain.

It also marked the end of peace, because now the choir began to sing. To a man, they joined in, melding with Gurgess voice. The song became a roar. The

darkness began to withdraw as a glow spread across the stage. It seeped from the singers. It poured like radiation fog into the seating. It was a colour that made Corvus wince. It was a kind of green, if green could scream. It pulsed like taut flesh.

It grinned like Chaos.

Corvus leaped to his feet. So did the rest of the audience. For a crazy moment of hope, he thought of ordering the assembled people to fall upon the singers and silence them. But they weren't rising, like him, in alarm. They were at one with the music, and they joined their voices to its glory, and their souls to its power. The roar became a wave. The glow filled the hall, and it showed Corvus nothing he wanted to see. Beside him, the governor and his wife stood motionless, their faces contorted with ecstasy. They sang as if the song were their birthright. They sang to bring down the sky. Their heads were thrown back, their jaws as wide as a snakes, and their throats twitched and spasmed with the effort to produce inhuman chords. Corvus grabbed Elpidius by the shoulders and tried to shake him. The governor's frame was rigid and grounded to the core of the Ligeta. Corvus might have been wrestling with a pillar. But the man wasn't cold like stone. He was burning up. His eyes were glassy. Corvus checked his pulse. Its rhythm was violent, rapid, irregular. Corvus yanked his hands away. They felt slick with disease. Something that lived in the song scabbled at his mind like fingernails on plastek, but couldn't find a purchase.

He opened the flap of his shoulder holster and pulled out his laspistol. He leaned over the railing of the box, and sighted on his brother's head. He felt no hesitation. He felt only necessity. He pulled the trigger.

Gurges fell, the top of his skull seared away. The song didn't care. It roared on, its joy unabated. Corvus fired six more times, each shot dropping a member of the choir. He stopped. The song wasn't a spell and it wasn't a mechanism. It was a plague, and killing individual vectors was worse than useless. It stole precious time from action that might make a difference.

He ran from the box. In the vestibule, the ushers were now part of the choir, and the song pursued Corvus as he clattered down the marble steps to the mezzanine and thence to the ground floor. The foyer, as cavernous as the Performance Hall, led to the Great Gallery of Art. Its vaulted length stretched a full kilometre to the exit of the palace. Floor-to-ceiling stained glass mosaics of

the primarchs gazed down on heroic bronzes. Warriors beyond counting trampled the Imperiums enemies, smashing them into fragmented agony that sank into the pedestals. But the gallery was no longer a celebration of art and glory. It was a throat, and it howled the song after him. Though melody was a stranger to him, still he could feel the force of the music, intangible yet pushing him with the violence of a hurricanes breath. The light was at his heels, flooding the throat with its mocking bile.

He burst from grand doorway onto the plaza. He stumbled to a halt, horrified.

The concert had been broadcast.

Palestrina, Ligetas capital and a city of thirty million, screamed. It convulsed.

The late-evening glow of the city was stained with the Chaos non-light. In the plaza, in the streets, in the windows of Palestrinas delicate and coruscating towers, the people stood and sang their demise. The roads had become a nightmare of twisted, flaming wreckage as drivers, possessed by art, slammed into each other. Victims of collisions, not quite dead, sang instead of screaming their last. Everywhere, the choir chanted to the sky, and the sky answered with flame and thunder. To the west, between the towers, the horizon strobed and rumbled, and fireballs bloomed. He was looking at the spaceport, Corvus realized, and seeing the destruction caused by every landing and departing ship suddenly losing all guidance.

There was a deafening roar overhead, and a cargo transport came in low and mad. Its engines burning blue, it plowed into the side of a tower a few blocks away. The ship exploded, filling the sky with the light and sound of its death. Corvus ducked as shrapnel the size of meteors arced down, gouging impact craters into street and stone and flesh. The tower collapsed with lazy majesty, falling against its neighbours and spreading a domino celebration of destruction. Dust billowed up in a choking, racing cloud. It rushed over Corvus, hiding the sight of the dying city, but the chant went on.

He coughed, gagging as grit filled his throat and lungs. He staggered, but started moving again. Though visibility was down to a few metres, and his eyes watered and stung, he felt that he could see clearly again. It was as if, by veiling the death of the city from his gaze, the dust had broken a spell. Palestrina was lost, but that didnt absolve him of his duty to the Emperor. Only his own death

could do that. As long as he drew breath, his duty was to fight for Ligeta, and save what he could.

He had to find somewhere the song had not reached, find men who had not heard and been infected by the plague. Then he could mount a defence, perhaps even a counter-attack, even if that were nothing more than a scorched-earth purge. There would be glory in that. But first, a chance to regroup. First, a sanctuary. He had hopes that he knew where to go.

He felt his way around the grey limbo of the plaza, hand over his mouth, trying not to cough up his lungs. It took him the best part of an hour to reach the far side of the Palace of Culture. By that time, the worst of the dust had settled and the buildings intervening bulk further screened him. He could breathe again. His movements picked up speed and purpose. He needed a vehicle, one he could manoeuvre through the tangled chaos of the streets. Half a kilometre down from the plaza, he found what he wanted. A civilian was straddling his idling bike. He had been caught by the song just before pulling away. Corvus tried to push him off, but he was as rigid and locked down as the governor had been. Corvus shot him. As he hauled the corpse away from the bike, he told himself that the man had already been dead. If Corvus hadnt granted him mercy, something else would have. A spreading fire. Falling debris. And if nothing violent happened, then

Corvus stared at the singing pedestrians, and thought through the implications of what he was seeing. Nothing, he was sure, could free the victims once the song took hold. So they would stand where they were struck and sing, and do nothing else. They wouldnt sleep. They wouldnt eat. They wouldnt drink. Corvus saw the end result, and he also saw the first glimmer of salvation. With a renewed sense of mission, he climbed on the bike and drove off.

It was an hour from dawn by the time he left the city behind. Beyond the hills of Palestrina, he picked up even more speed as he hit the parched mud flats. Once fertile, the land here had had its water table drained by the citys thirst. At the horizon, the shadow of the Goreck Mesa blocked the stars. At the base of its bulk, he saw pinpricks of light. Those glimmers were his destination and his hope.

The ground rose again as he reached the base. He approached the main gate,

and he heard no singing. Before him, the wall was an iron shield fifty metres high, a sloping, pleated curtain of strength. A giant aquila, a darker night on black, was engraved every ten metres along the walls two kilometre length. Beyond the wall, he heard the diesel of engines, the report of firing ranges, the march of boots. The sounds of discipline. Discipline that was visible from the moment he arrived. If the sentries were surprised to see him, dusty and exhausted, arriving on a civilian vehicle instead of in his staff car, they showed no sign. They saluted, sharp as machines, and opened the gate for him. He passed through into Fort Goreck and the promise of salvation.

On the other side of the wall was a zone free of art and music. A weight lifted from Corvuss shoulders as he watched the pistoning, drumming rhythm of the military muscle. Strength perfected, and yet, by the Throne, it had been almost lost, too. A request had come the day before from Jeronim Tarrant, the bases captain. Given the momentous, planet-wide event that was a new composition by Gurges Parthamen, would the colonel authorize a break in the drills, long enough for the men to sit down and listen to the vox-cast of the concert? Corvus had not just rejected the request out of hand, he had forbidden any form of reception and transmission of the performance. He wanted soldiers, he had informed Jeronim. If he wanted dilettantes, he could find plenty in the boxes of the Palace of Culture.

On his way to the concert, he had wondered about his motives in issuing that order. Jealousy? Was he really that petty? He knew now that he wasnt, and that hed been right. The purpose of a base such as this was to keep the Guard in a state of perpetual, instant readiness, because war might come from one second to the next.

As it had now.

He crossed the parade field, making for the squat command tower at the rear of the base, where it nestled against the basalt wall of the Mesa. He had barely dismounted the bike when Jeronim came pounding out of the tower. He was pale, borderline frantic, but remembered to salute. Discipline, Corvus thought. It had saved them so far. It would see them through to victory.

Sir, Jeronim said. Do you know whats going on? Are we under attack? We cant get through to anyone.

Yes, we are at war, Corvus answered. He strode briskly to the door. No one in this base has been in contact with anyone outside it for the last ten hours?

Jeronim shook his head. No, sir. Nothing that makes sense. Anyone transmitting is just sending what sounds like music

Corvus cut him off. You listened?

Only a couple of seconds. When we found the nonsense everywhere, we shut down the sound. No one was sending anything coherent. Not even the Scythe of Judgement.

So the Ligetan flagship had fallen. He wasn't surprised, but Corvus discovered that he could still feel dismay. But the fact that the base had survived the transmissions told him something. The infection didn't take hold right away. He remembered that the choir and the audience hadn't responded until Gurges had completed a full refrain. The song's message had to be complete, it seemed, before it could sink in. What actions have you taken? he asked Jeronim as they headed up the staircase to the command centre.

We've been sending out requests for acknowledgement on all frequencies. I've placed the base on heightened alert. And since we haven't been hearing from anyone, I sent out a distress call.

Fine, Corvus said. For whatever good that call will do, he thought. By the time the message was received and aid arrived, weeks or months could have elapsed. By that time, the battle for the soul of Ligeta would have been won or lost. The singers would have starved to death, and either there would be someone left to pick up the pieces, or there wouldn't be.

The communications officer looked up from the auspex as Corvus and Jeronim walked into the centre. Colonel, he saluted. A capital ship has just transitioned into our system.

Really? That was fast. Improbably fast.

It's hailing us, the master vox-operator announced.

Corvus lunged across the room and yanked the headphones from the operator's skull. All messages to be received as text only until further notice, he ordered.

No exceptions. Am I clear?

The operator nodded.

Acknowledge them, Corvus went on. Request identification.

The soldier did so. Corvus moved to the plastek window and looked out over the base while he waited. There were five thousand men here. The position was elevated, easily defensible. He had the tools. He just had to work out how to fight.

Message received, colonel.

Corvus turned to the vox-operator. His voice sounded all wrong, like that of a man who had suddenly been confronted with the futility of his existence. He was staring at the dataslate before him. His face was grey.

Read it, Corvus said, and braced himself.

Greetings, Imperials. This is the Terminus Est.

Typhus entered the strategium as the ship emerged in the realspace of the Ligetan system.

Multiple contacts, lord, the bridge attendant reported.

Of course there were. The Imperium would hardly leave Ligeta without a defending fleet. Typhus moved his bulk towards the main oculus. They were already close enough to see the swarm of Imperial cruisers and defence satellites. But how many are on attack trajectories? Typhus asked. He knew the answer, but he wanted the satisfaction of hearing it.

The officer looked twice at his hololithic display, as if he doubted the reports he was receiving. None, he said after a moment.

And how many are targeting us?

Another brief silence. None.

Typhus rumbled and buzzed his pleasure. The insects that were his parasites

and his identity fluttered and scrabbled with excitement. His armour rippled with their movement. He allowed himself a moment to revel in the experience, in the glorious and terrible paradox of his existence. Disease was an endless source of awe in its marriage of death and unrestrained life. It was his delight to spread the gospel of this paradox, the lesson of decay. Before him, the oculus showed how well the lesson was being learned. Bring us in close, he commanded.

At once, lord. The bridge attendant was obedient, but was a slow learner himself. He was still thinking in terms of a normal combat situation, never mind that an Imperial fleets lack of response to the appearance of a Chaos capital ship was far from normal. We are acquiring targets, he reported.

No need, no need, Typhus said. See for yourselves. All of you.

His officers looked up, and Typhus had an audience for the spectacle he had arranged. As the Terminus Est closed in on the glowing green-and-brown globe of Ligeta, the enemy ships gathered size and definition. Their distress became clear, too. Some were drifting, nothing more now than iron tombs. Others had their engines running, but there was no order to their movements. The ships, Typhus knew, were performing the last commands their crews had given them, and there would be no others to come.

Hail the Imperials, he ordered. Open all frequencies.

The strategium was bathed in the music of disease. Across multiple channels came the same noise, a unified chaos of millions upon millions of throats singing in a single choir. The melody was a simple, sustained, multi-note chord of doom. It became the accompaniment to the view outside the Terminus, and now the movement of the fleet was the slow ballet of entropy and defeat. Typhus watched a two cruisers follow their unalterable routes until they collided. One exploded, its fireball the expanding bloom of a poisonous flower. The other plunged towards Ligetas atmosphere, bringing with it the terrible gift of its weapons payload and shattered reactor.

Typhus thought about its landfall, and his insects writhed in anticipation.

He also thought about the simplicity of the lesson, how pure it was, and how devastating its purity made it. Did the happenstance that had brought Gurges Parthamen into his grasp taint that purity, or was that flotsam of luck an essential piece of the compositions beauty? The composer on a self-indulgent voyage,

getting caught in a localised warp storm, winding up in a near-collision with the Terminus Est; how could those elements be anything other than absolute contingency? His triumph could so easily have never even been an idea. Then again, that man, his ambition that made him so easily corruptible, the confluence of events that granted Typhus this perfect inspiration: they were so improbable, they could not possibly be chance. They had been threaded together by destiny.

Flies howled through the strategium as Typhus tasted the paradox, and found it to his liking. Chaos and fate, one and the same.

Perhaps Gorges had thought so, too. He had put up no resistance to being infected with the new plague. Typhus was particularly proud of it. The parasitic warp worm laid its eggs in the bloodstream and attacked the brain. It spread itself from mind to mind by the transmission of its idea, and the idea travelled on a sound, a special sound, a song that was an incantation that thinned the walls between reality and the immaterium and taught itself to all who had ears to hear.

My lord, we are being hailed, said the attendant.

Typhus laughed, delighted, and the boils on the deck quivered in sympathy. Send them our greeting, he ordered.

Now he had an enemy. Now he could fight.

Corvus rejected despair. He rejected the odds. There was an enemy, and duty demanded combat. There was nothing else.

Corvus stood at the reviewing stand on the parade grounds, and, speakers turning his voice into Fort Gorecks voice, he addressed the assembled thousands. He explained the situation. He described the plague and its means of contagion. And he laid down the rules. One was paramount. Music, he thundered, is a disease. It will destroy us if it finds the smallest chink in our armour. We must be free of it, and guard against it. Anyone who so much as whistles will be executed on the spot. He felt enormous satisfaction as he gave that order. He didnt worry about why.

Less than a day after his arrival, Typhus witnessed the apotheosis of his art. The entire planet was one voice. The anthem, the pestilence, the anthem that was pestilence, had become the sum total of existence on Ligeta. Its population lived for a single purpose. The purity was electrifying.

Or it would have been, but for the single flaw. There was that redoubt. He had thought it would succumb by itself, but it hadn't. It was still sending out desperate pleas to whatever Imperials might hear. And though Typhus could amuse himself with the thought that this one pustule of order confirmed the beauty of corruption, he also knew the truth. Over the course of the next few days, the song would begin a ragged diminuendo as its singers died. If he didn't act, his symphony would be incomplete, spoiled by one false note.

So it was time to act.

The attack came on the evening of the second day. Corvus was walking the parapet when he saw the sky darken. A deep, unending thunder began, and the clouds birthed a terrible rain. The drop-pods came first, plummeting with the finality of black judgement. They made landfall on the level ground a couple of kilometres from the base. They left streaks in the air, black, vertical contrails that didn't dissipate. Instead, they grew wider, broke up into fragments, and began to whirl. Corvus ran to the nearest guard tower, grabbed a marksman's sniper rifle and peered through its telescopic sight. He could see the movement in the writhing clouds more clearly. It looked like insects. Faintly, impossibly, weaving in and out of the thunder of the pods and the landing craft that now followed on, Corvus heard an insidious buzz.

The darkness flowed from the sky. It was the black of absence and grief, of putrefaction and despair, and of unnameable desire. Its touch infected the air of the landing zone, then rippled out towards the base. It was a different disease, one Corvus had no possible defence against. And though no tendrils of the black itself reached this far, Corvus felt something arrive over the wall. The quality of the evening light changed. It turned brittle and sour. He sensed something vital becoming too thin, and something wrong start to smile.

All around him, Fort Goreck's warning klaxons sounded the call to arms. The din was enormous, and he was surprised and disturbed that he could hear the buzzing of the Chaos swarms at all. That told him how sick the real world was becoming, and how hard he would have to fight for it.

The drop-pods opened, their venomous petals falling back to disgorge the monsters within. Corvus had never felt comfortable around Space Marines, his Ligetan inferiority complex made exponentially worse by their superhuman power and perfection. But he would have given anything to have one beside him

now as he saw the nightmare versions of them mustering in the near distance. Their armour had long since ceased to be simple ceramite. It was darkness that was iron, and iron that was disease. They assembled into rows and then stood motionless, weapons at ready. Only they weren't entirely still. Their outlines writhed.

Landing craft poured out corrupted infantry in ever greater numbers. At length, the sky spat out a leviathan that looked to Corvus like a Goliath-class transport, only so distorted it seemed more like a terrible whale. Its hull was covered with symbols that tore at Corvus's eyes with obscenities. Around it coiled things that might be tendrils, or they might be tentacles. Its loading bay opened like a maw, and it vomited hordes of troops and vehicles onto the blackening soil of Ligeta.

The legions of plague gathered before Corvus, and he knew there was no hope of fighting them.

But he would. Down to the last man. And though there might be no chance of survival, there would, he now realized with a stir of joy, be the hope of glory in the heroic last stand.

Night fell, and the forces of the Terminus Est grew in numbers and strength. The host was now far larger than needed to storm Fort Goreck, walls or no, commanding heights or no. But the dark soldiers didn't attack. They stood, massed and in the open. Once disembarked, they did nothing. Heavy artillery rumbled out of the transport and then stopped, barrels aimed at the sky, full of threat but silent. The rumble of arrivals stopped. A clammy quiet covered the land.

Corvus had returned to command centre. He could watch just as well from there, and the subaural buzzing was less noticeable on this side of the plastek.

What are they waiting for? Jeronim muttered.

The quiet was broken by the distant roar of engines. Corvus raised a pair of electro-binoculars. Three Rhinos were moving to the fore. There were rows of rectangular shapes on the top of the Rhinos. They were horned metal, molded into the shape of screaming daemons. Loudspeakers, Corvus realized.

Dirge Casters.

If the Rhinos broadcast their song, Fort Goreck would fall without a shot being fired.

Corvus slammed a fist against the alarm trigger. The klaxons whooped over the base. Do not turn these off until I give the order, he told the officers. Still not loud enough, he thought. He turned to the master vox. He shoved the operator aside and flipped the switches for the public address system. He grabbed the mic and ran over to the speaker above the doorway to the command centre. He jammed the mic into the speaker. Feedback pierced his skull, mauled his hearing and sought to obliterate all thought. He gasped from the pain, and staggered under the weight of the sound.

The men around him were covering their ears and weaving around as if drunk. Corvus struggled against the blast of the sound and shook the officers. Now! he screamed. We attack now! Launch the Chimeras and take out those vehicles!

He would have given his soul for a battery of battle cannons, so he could take out the Rhinos from within the safety of the noise shield he had just erected. But this would do. He didnt think about how little he might gain in destroying a few speakers. He saw the chance to fight the opponent.

He saw the chance for glory.

He took charge of the squads that followed behind the Chimeras. He saw the pain of the mens faces as the eternal feedback wore at them. He saw the effort it took them to focus on the simple task of readying their weapons. He understood, and hoped that they understood the necessity of his actions, and saw the heroism of their struggle for the Emperor. Gurges had been a fool, Corvus thought. What he did now was worthy of song.

The gates opened, and the Chimeras surged forward. The Rhinos had stopped halfway between their own forces and the wall, easily within the broadcast range of the Dirge Casters. The song was inaudible. Corvus felt his lips pull back in a snarl of triumph as he held his laspistol and chainsword high and led the charge. The courage of the Imperium burst from the confines of the wall. Corvus yelled as he pounded behind the clanking, roaring Chimera. The feedback whine faded as they left the base behind, but the vehicles had their own din, and Corvus still could hear no trace of the song.

Something spoke with the voice of ending. The sound was enormous, a deep,

compound thunder. It was the Chaos artillery, all guns opening up simultaneously, firing a single, monumental barrage. The lower slope of Fort Gericks rise exploded, earth geysering skyward. A giant made of noise and air picked Corvus up and threw him. The world tumbled end over end, a hurricane of dirt and rocks and fire. He slammed into the ground and writhed, a pinned insect, as his flattened lungs fought to pull in a breath. When the air came, it was claws and gravel in his chest. His head rang like a struck bell.

When his eyes and his ears cleared, he saw the wreckage of the Chimeras and the rout of his charge. The vehicles had taken the worst of the hits, and were shattered, smoking ruins of twisted metal. Pieces of men were scattered over the slope: an arm still clutching a lasgun, a torso that ended at the lower jaw, organs without bodies, bodies without organs. But there were survivors, and as the enemys guns fell silent, the song washed over the field. Men picked themselves up, and froze as the refrain caught them. A minute after the barrage, Corvus was the only man left with a will of his own. He picked up his weapons and stumbled back up the slope towards the wall. As he ran, he thought he could hear laughter slither through the ranks of the Chaos force.

The gates opened just enough to let him back inside. The feedback blotted out the song, but wrapped itself around his brain like razor wire. He had lost his cap, and his uniform was in tatters. Still, he straightened his posture as he walked back through the stunned troops. Halfway across the grounds, a conscript confronted him. The mans eyes were watering from the hours of mind-destroying feedback and his nose was bleeding. Let us go, he pleaded. Let us fight. Well resist as long as we can.

Corvus pushed him back. Are you mad? he shouted over the whine. Do you know what would happen to you?

The trooper nodded. I was on the wall. I saw.

Well then?

They look happy when they sing. At least that death isnt pointless torture.

Corvus raised his pistol and shot the man through the eye. He turned in a full circle, glaring at his witnesses, making sure they understood the lesson. Then he stalked back to the command centre.

A night and a day of the endless electronic wail. Then another night of watching with nerves scraped raw. Corvus plugged his ears with cloth, but the feedback stabbed its way through the pathetic barrier. His jaw worked, his cheek muscles twitched, and he saw the same strain in the taut, clenched faces of his men. The Rhinos came no closer, and there were no other enemy troop movements. Fort Goreck was besieged by absolute stillness, and that would be enough.

The third day of the siege was a hell of sleeplessness and claustrophobic rage. Five Guardsmen attempted to desert. Corvus had them flogged, then shot.

As the sun set, Corvus could see the end coming. There would be no holding out. The shield he had erected was torture, and madness would tear the base apart. The only thing left was a final, glorious charge that would deny the enemy the kind of triumph that he clearly desired. But how to make that attack if the troops would succumb to the anthem before they even reached the enemy front lines?

Corvus covered his ears with his hands, trying to block the whine, trying to dampen it just enough so he could think. Silence would have been the greatest gift the Emperor could bestow upon him.

Instead, he was granted the next greatest: inspiration.

The medicae centre was on the ground floor of the command block. Corvus found the medic, and explained what was required. The man blanched and refused. Corvus ordered him to do as he said. Still the medic protested. Corvus put his laspistol to the mans head, and that was convincing. Just.

The process took all night. At least, for the most part, the men didnt resist being rendered deaf. Some seemed almost relieved to be free of the feedback whine. Most submitted to the procedure with slack faces and dead looks. The men had become creatures of stoic despair held together and animated by the habits of discipline. Corvus watched yet another patient, blood pouring from his ears, contort on a gurney. At least, he thought, he was giving the soldiers back their pride for the endgame.

There wasnt time to inoculate the entire base contingent against the anthem, so Corvus settled on the best, most experienced squads. That would be enough. They were Imperial Guard, and they would give the traitor forces something to

think about.

Morning came. Though one more enemy gunship had landed during the night, the enemys disposition otherwise remained unchanged. His eyes rough as sand from sleeplessness, Corvus inspected his assembled force. The soldiers looked like the walking dead, unworthy of the glory they were about to find. Well, he would give it to them anyway, and they could thank him in the Emperors light. He glanced at the rest of the troops. He would be abandoning them to their fate. He shrugged. They were doomed regardless, and at least he had enforced loyalty up to the last. He could go to his grave knowing that he had permitted no defection to Chaos.

He had done his duty.

He had earned his glory.

Open the gates, he roared, and wished he could hear the strength of his shout over the shriek of the feedback. The sentries couldnt hear him either, but his gesture was clear, and the wall of Fort Goreck opened for the last time.

There are songs that have been written about the final charge of Colonel Corvus Parthamen. But they are not sung in the mess halls of the Imperial Guard, and they are not stirring battle hymns. They are mocking, obscene doggerel, and they are snarled, rather than sung, with venomous humour, in the corridors of dark ships that ply the warp like sharks. A few men of the Imperium do hear it, in their terminal moments, as their positions are overrun by the hordes of Chaos. They do not appreciate it any more than Corvus would have.

The charge was a rout. The men ran into las-fire and bolter shells. They were blown to pieces by cannon barrage. They were shredded by chainswords and pulped by armoured fists. Still, they made it further down the hill than even Corvus could have hoped. A coherent force actually hit the Chaos front lines and did some damage before being annihilated. Their action might have seemed like the glorious heroism of nothing-to-lose desperation. But the fact that not a single man took cover, not a one did anything but run straight ahead, weapon firing indiscriminately, revealed the truth: they were running to their deaths, and glad of the relief.

Corvus was the last. It took him a moment to notice that he was alone, what with the joy of battle and the ecstasy of being free of the whine. He was still

running forward, running to his glory, but he wondered now why there didn't seem to be any shots aimed at him. Or why the squad of Chaos Space Marines ahead parted to let him pass. He faltered, and then he saw who was waiting for him.

The monster bulked huge in what had once been Terminator armour, but was now a buzzing, festering exoskeleton. Flies swarmed from the funnels above his shoulders and the lesions in the corrupted ceramite. His single-horned helmet transformed the being's final human traces into the purely daemonic. His grip on his giant scythe was relaxed.

Corvus saw just how powerful disease made flesh could be. He charged anyway, draining his laspistol, then pulling his chainsword. He swung at the Herald of Nurgle. Typhus whipped the Manreaper around. The movement was as rapid as it was casual and contemptuous. He hit Corvus with the shaft and shattered his hip. Corvus collapsed in the dirt. He bit down on his scream. Typhus loomed over him.

Kill me, Corvus spat. But know that I fought you to the end. I have my own victory.

Typhus made a sound that was the rumble of giant hives. Corvus realized he had just heard laughter. Kill you? Typhus asked. His voice was deep. It was smooth as a deliquescent corpse. I haven't come to kill you. I have come to teach you my anthem.

Through his pain, Corvus managed his own laugh. I will never sing it.

Really? But you have already. You believe you serve order and light, but, like your carrion emperor, everything you do blasts hope and rushes towards entropy. Look what you did to your men. You have served me well, my son. You and your brother, both.

Corvus fought against the epiphany, but it burst over his consciousness with sickly green light. The truth took him, and infected him. He saw his actions, he saw their consequences, and he saw whose glory he had truly been serving. And as the pattern took shape for him, so did a sound. He heard the anthem, and he heard its music. There was melody there, and he was part of it. Surrender flooded his system, and the triumphant shape of Typhus filled his dying vision. Corvus's jaw snapped open. His throat contorted with ecstatic agony, and he

became one with Ligetas final choir.