

IN THE GRIM DARKNESS OF THE FAR FUTURE THERE IS ONLY WAR!

Into the Maelstrom

EDITED BY MARC GASCOIGNE & ANDY JONES



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INTO THE MAELSTROM

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IT IS THE 41st millennium. For more than a hundred centuries the Emperor has sat immobile on the Golden Throne of Earth. He is the master of mankind by the will of the gods, and master of a million worlds by the might of his inexhaustible armies. He is a rotting carcass writhing invisibly with power from the Dark Age of Technology. He is the Carrion Lord of the Imperium for whom a thousand souls are sacrificed every day, so that he may never truly die.

YET EVEN IN his deathless state, the Emperor continues his eternal vigilance. Mighty battlefleets cross the daemon-infested miasma of the warp, the only route between distant stars, their way lit by the Astronomican, the psychic manifestation of the Emperors will. Vast armies give battle in his name on uncounted worlds. Greatest amongst His soldiers are the Adeptus Astartes, the Space Marines, bio-engineered super-warriors. Their comrades in arms are legion: the Imperial Guard and countless planetary defence forces, the ever-vigilant Inquisition and the tech-priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus to name only a few. But for all their multitudes, they are barely enough to hold off the ever-present threat from aliens, heretics, mutants – and worse.

TO BE A man in such times is to be one amongst untold billions. It is to live in the cruellest and most bloody regime imaginable. These are the tales of those times. Forget the power of technology and science, for so much has been forgotten, never to be re-learned. Forget the promise of progress and understanding, for in the grim dark future there is only war. There is no peace amongst the stars, only an eternity of carnage and slaughter, and the laughter of thirsting gods.

SALVATION

Johnathan Green

THE ROAR OF their storm bolters drowning out their battle-cries, the veterans of Ultramar's First Company vented their righteous fury against the abomination that was the tyranid race. Shrieking, the hideous elongated head of a hormagaunt appeared in front of Brother Rius, its fanged mouth dripping with strings of saliva. Responding instinctively, Rius turned his weapon on the creature. He watched with grim satisfaction through his visor as the creature's grotesque visage disintegrated. As his storm bolter kicked in his hand, the back of the creature's skull exploded outwards in a splattering burst of purple blood and bone fragments.

As another in a long line of vanquished foes fell before him, Rius found himself looking across the entirety of the vast battlefield. The rocky plain was covered with a seething mass of flesh and armoured warriors, accompanied by a host of support weapons and vehicles. To both left and right the barren plain rose up to meet steep cliff faces, above which the land bristled with a profusion of plants clustered in primeval jungles. The yellow sun shone down on the prehistoric steppes from a cloudless sky. At any other time the conditions could have been described as almost pleasant.

Reacting automatically, Rius turned his storm bolter on an advancing brood of red-skinned termagants, pumping several rounds of armour-piercing shells into the pack before they had even mounted the outcrop. Despite the repulsing fire of the squad several of the cunning creatures managed to infiltrate the Terminators' position.

With an electro-chemical surge, a fleshborer propelled its cargo of living ammunition towards its target. The veteran Space Marine was standing his ground before the milling termagants as they closed on the Ultramarine lines. The borer beetles impacted on the warrior's Terminator armour, many splattering harmlessly against the ceramite plates. A few survived, expending their remaining life energy in gnawing through the armour with their viciously gnashing teeth, but none of the voracious insects made it through to the warrior within the plasteel shell. The Marine's response was to swing his free right hand, enclosed by its power fist, into the termagant's body. The creature's ribcage

shattered under the blow, the fist's disruption field liquefying its internal organs.

With a convulsive spasm, a spike rifle in the grip of another of the hive-mind's assault troops launched a harpoon-like projectile. The barbed spike cut through the air with a hiss before embedding itself deep in the power armour of another of Rius's battle-brothers. The Terminator Marine replied with a burst of fire from his assault cannon. The termagant was torn apart by a hail of shells, its ruined carcass knocked back into the genocidal horde.

Despite the Terminators' valiant resistance, Rius judged that soon they would be overwhelmed. As each of the murderous aliens fell it seemed that there were two more all too willing to take its place. Unaffected by grief for the death of their fellows or remorse for their actions, the inscrutable members of the hive-mind were an awesome enemy indeed.

When the *Gauntlet of Macragge* had come out of the warp, the mighty starship's sensors had picked up the tell-tale signals of a massive alien presence. Scanners quickly confirmed the presence of a hive fleet in orbit around the fourth planet in the Dakor star system. Initial long-range scans of the world had revealed it to be in a state of evolution much like that of Old Earth millions of years before the rise of Man. Warm, tropical equatorial seas separated three massive continents which abounded in different environments: great burning deserts, coastal jungles and steaming swamps, forested uplands, globe-spanning mountain ranges.

A search of the *Gauntlet of Macragge*'s library banks had revealed that this was the lost world of Jaroth. According to Imperial records, the planet had been settled millennia ago by isolationists and had subsequently become cut off from the rest of the galaxy by particularly violent warp storms which had only abated in the last hundred years. So it was that in a routine patrol of the wild eastern fringe of the Ultima Segmentum, the flagship of the Ultramarine fleet had rediscovered Jaroth. The Chapter's commanders' first thoughts had been that no doubt if any of the human populace remained their society would have reverted to one of superstitious primitivism. The secrets of the Imperium's Techno-Magi would be lost to them. Jaroth would now be a feral world inhabited by a feral people.

The presence of the tyranid fleet decided the matter. Whatever the state of its population, Jaroth was just the sort of world that the Great Devourer would relish in plundering of all life, human or otherwise. The galaxy-spanning entity that was the tyranid race was voracious in its appetite. Dozens of Imperial worlds had already been totally scoured of all life to provide the alien horror with raw material from which to perpetuate itself. Who knew how many hundred

others had been infested by the insidious cults of genestealers, the blasphemous alien monsters working in collaboration with their corrupted human brood-brethren? The Ultramarines Chapter could not let another planet fall to the Great Devourer. It was their sacred duty to uphold the Emperor's laws, to defend the Imperium against the myriad menaces that threatened to engulf it from all sides. The feeding frenzy of the hive-mind's children was as effective at wiping all life from the surface of a planet as the world-scouring process of the Exterminatus, as a score of worlds would testify.

Squad Bellator fought atop a rocky escarpment in the centre of the bleak valley alongside the veteran Squad Orpheus. Here and there granite formations thrust up from a dried-up river-bed. Every outcrop was the scene of some conflict or other, with the bravest warriors of the Imperium fighting desperately to repel the invading alien horde.

Rius, himself a veteran of Ichar IV, was no stranger to the horrors of the hive-mind. But no matter how many times he witnessed the foul abominations, nothing would ever inure him to them. He could only face each battle with the resolve and courage of the Ultramarines, as laid down in the ordinances of the Codex Astartes by the primarch of the Ultramarines, Roboute Guilliman himself, centuries before.

A unit of tyranid warriors emerged from the slavering ripper swarms to confront the Ultramarines. As Rius watched, a bonesword sliced down through the ceramite shoulder pad of one Space Marine's power armour, severing the skin and sinews underneath. As soon as the serrated edge connected with flesh, the nerve tendrils within the bonesword delivered a potent psychic jolt to the warrior's body. The stun would only be momentary but it was long enough for the tyranid, howling in triumph, to remove the man's head from his shoulders with its second blade.

Striding behind the charging tyranid warriors, lording it over his swarm, the hive queen's consort came into view. The hive tyrant was a truly terrifying figure to behold. The monster stood over two metres tall and its presence exuded a malign intelligence that filled the Ultramarines with dread.

Rapid bursts of laser energy struck the hive tyrant, but to no effect: the monstrosity's toughened carapace absorbed the lethal blasts. With unintelligible roars, and no doubt telepathic signals as well, the master of the swarm directed the broods to seek out the humans and destroy them, consuming all available bio-mass in the process as well. The tyrant had to die!

KILOMETRES OVERHEAD, THRUSTERS fired, desperately turning the vast

spacecraft on its axis, but it was too late, and the *Gauntlet of Macragge* collided violently with the asteroid-sized pod launched from the hive ship. The massive spore mine detonated with the power of a thermonuclear explosion, the resultant shockwave shaking the spaceship.

Chunks of bone-like shell as thick as a fortress wall bombarded the craft. Some shards disintegrated as they struck the vessel's force-field but the shields had been damaged by the initial explosion and provided only intermittent protection. Other fragments struck the vast ship like meteors, wrecking communications antennae and tearing holes in its hull through which the accompanying shower of acids, algae and virus-bearing particles could gain access to the craft's interior.

The Imperial Navigators reacted swiftly, bringing the six kilometre-long vessel under control. Fission-boosters firing, the *Gauntlet of Macragge* moved off in pursuit of the bio-ship.

The prehistoric world resting six hundred kilometres below appeared as a welcoming blue-green paradise, its atmosphere streaked with wisps of white cloud, a total contrast to the smog-polluted planets that were so often the refuges of humanity. Jaroth's airless moon, no more than a planetoid that had become trapped by the larger astral body's gravitational pull, rose over the glowing nimbus of the planet. Then the stricken bio-ship came into view.

From the bridge of the Ultramarines' flagship, Commander Darius watched through the view screen wall as the *Gauntlet of Macragge* closed in on the tyranid craft. The gigantic curled body of the organic vessel was tilted at a strange angle and appeared to be drifting. However, as the mighty gothic cruiser closed the distance between itself and the tyranid craft, Darius could see yet more spore mines and other sleek, finned creatures being disgorged from the bio-ship's gaping hangar-wide mouth.

'On my mark, hit that abomination with everything we've got!' the commander ordered the soldiers at their control consoles. Returning to his throne of command Darius sat down, never once taking his stern gaze from the monstrosity displayed before him on the view screen. His brow furrowed. 'Fire!'

A hundred turbo lasers blazed into life, great beams of intensely focused light energy striking the already weakened tyranid mother ship. In a blaze of coruscating fire, the nautilus shell of the massive space-travelling organism splintered, mountainous shards flying from the creature and its soft internal organs rupturing as its body depressurised. Its hundred kilometre-long innards spilling into space, the great creature dropped away from the cruiser as it was caught in Jaroth's gravitational field. The bio-ship plunged towards the planet's surface through the atmosphere, its shattered shell glowing red hot. As Darius

watched, the organism began to burn, its pink flesh cooking as it hurtled planetward.

THE TERMINATOR SQUAD moved cautiously through the undergrowth with grizzled Sergeant Bellator at its head. The Space Marines covered the jungle in front of them and to either side with sweeps of their guns, monitoring their motion sensors for signs of potentially hostile life. The surrounding trees were alive with sound. Unknown bugs clicked and hummed while mosquito-like insects as long as a man's hand buzzed around the armoured warriors.

With the defeat of their hive tyrant, the tyranid hordes had been thrown into disarray. Pressing home their advantage, the elite warriors of the Imperium had routed the foul alien army. The less determined termagants and hormagaunts had fled immediately but the rampaging, bestial carnifexes continued to hammer the Space Marine ranks.

Even when its fellows lay dead around it, one of the screamer killers relentlessly charged a razorback. Smashing into the tank, the alien horror scythed through the plasteel armour, its razor-edged killing arms flailing. A living engine of destruction, the carnifex had gutted the vehicle and slaughtered its crew before it was felled by a bombardment of missiles from an Ultramarines Whirlwind.

There was a screeching cry from deep within the trees to the right of the Terminators' path. Sergeant Bellator fired off several rounds from his storm bolter into the foliage. All was quiet again.

'Precautionary fire.' Bellator's growling voice came over the Terminators' comm-units. 'It could have been a tyranid.'

Had it been a tyranid? Rius wondered. It could just have been one of Jaroth's indigenous life forms. There was no way of knowing. With the main tyranid force wiped out, the Terminators had been sent into the jungle to carry out a clean-up operation. With the hive tyrant gone, many of the tyranid troops had gone rogue, randomly attacking Space Marines that far outnumbered them or fled into the primeval jungles where it was harder for the Ultramarines to follow.

Although the tyranids had been defeated, the veteran squad was still tense with anticipation. The Ultramarines' lines were miles away and out here in the depths of the jungle they were as much the aliens as the tyranids.

'There's something up ahead,' Brother Julius said, breaking the communication silence. The others checked their motion sensors. Several red blips had appeared at the outer limit of the small displays.

‘Be ready, brothers,’ the squad sergeant hissed.

The fronds gave way to a clearing. On the far side of the glade was the crumpled fuselage of an Ultramarines Thunderhawk gunship.

It was instantly obvious to the veterans what had happened. A broad hole gaped in the side of an engine housing. Its edges were corroded with an acidic slime and splinters of bone were lodged in the plasteel hull around it. The living cannon of a biovore had fulfilled its deadly purpose. Having been fatally hit by the spore mine, its crew no longer able to control it, the aircraft had come down on the forested plateau.

A scorched path through the jungle showed where the Thunderhawk, its engines burning, had seared through the trees. It had flattened everything in its wake until it ploughed into the clearing, the soft soil thrown up around it putting out the fires.

But what had happened to the crew?

‘Spread out!’ Bellator instructed and the Terminators immediately began to take up appropriate positions around the crashed craft.

The blips were still present on their motion sensors. From the readings Rius could see that almost all the organisms were actually inside the downed gunship. As yet, however, the Terminators had not made visual contact with them. Were they the injured crew, tyranids or denizens native to the planet? Were they hostile or totally harmless?

As if in answer, Rius heard his sergeant’s voice again over his comm-unit: ‘Expect the worst.’

Cautiously the squad strode across the glade, the servo-assists in their cumbersome suits whirring, closing in on the Thunderhawk with every step. When the craft had gone down it had probably been assumed that the crew had perished. However, it was just as likely that the crash would have gone unnoticed to the Ultramarines commanders as wave after wave of mycetic spores hurtled down onto the teeming battlefield. Whatever the case, a rescue attempt had not been ordered.

From Rius’s motion sensor, it appeared that the creatures inside the Thunderhawk had stopped moving. Were they aware of the Terminators approaching them? There were too many blips for it to be any surviving crew members, the Marine convinced himself – but were they tyranids?

Brother Hastus was the first to reach the crumpled fuselage. He edged his way towards the open cargo bay hatchway as the others covered him. Several seconds dragged by as Hastus checked the interior of the cargo bay. A wave of his power

fist and the rest of the squad moved in.

Rius followed Brother Sericus into the shadowy interior of the crashed Thunderhawk, the optical sensors in his helmet adjusting from the glare of the clearing to the gloom instantly. Lightning claws raised, Sericus advanced slowly through the gunship, brushing aside dangling pipes that dripped oily fluid into the chamber.

Rius glanced down at his motion sensor and then immediately looked up at the ceiling in alarm. A six-limbed, insectoid nightmare dropped out of the darkness. His reflexes working far faster than conscious thought, the Ultramarine automatically raised his power fist to protect himself. The creature hit its crackling distortion field and screamed as its carapace shattered; it fell squirming onto the floor behind Rius. Julius stepped over it, thrusting a whirring chainfist into its face. Then another of the purple-skinned monstrosities was on his back.

Genestealers! His worst fears had been confirmed. Before he could train his weapon on the tyranid construct and blow its vile carcass apart, the monster plunged a taloned claw through the back of Julius's armour. It yanked it out again, dragging with it the man's spine, slick with blood.

A hail of armour-piercing shells from Rius's bolter punched through the genestealer's exo-skeleton and the alien's corpse joined that of Brother Julius on the floor of the cargo bay.

Something heavy slammed into Rius, sending his heavily-armoured body sprawling on the metal floor with a resounding clang. Gripping his left arm between its vice-like jaws, another hissing genestealer was trying to bite through the ceramite shell to get to the flesh within. The creature was swiftly dispatched with a bullet to the temple but even in death the genestealer's jaws refused to release their grip. Several more shots shattered the creature's skull allowing Rius to extract his arm.

To his left, Brother Sericus was grappling with two of the tyranid creatures, one gripped in each fist. A jet of orange flame illuminated the cargo bay as Brother Hastus kept yet more of the creatures from approaching his overwhelmed fellows.

Rius clambered to his feet, shaking the genestealer's blood from his suit. Brother Bellator stood in the open hatchway, assailed on all sides by the rest of the genestealer brood, defending himself as best he could at such close quarters with his power sword. The savagery and ferocity of the genestealers was terrifying. His storm bolter blasting, Rius rushed to the sergeant's aid.

Another flare from Brother Hastus's flamer struck the frenzied press of purple bodies surrounding Bellator and the reek of burning alien flesh filled the

chamber. With a sizzling flash an oily puddle ignited, the flames rushing back through the cargo bay following the trail of black liquid to where it cascaded from a broken fuel pipe. Sericus's horrified gaze followed the progress of the fire, his chainfist still embedded in the metal wall through the skull of a twitching genestealer.

Rius reached the edge of the hatchway and the overwhelmed sergeant as the Thunderhawk's fuel tanks erupted in a conflagration of molten metal and oily smoke. The force of the explosion threw the Ultramarine out of the cargo bay, flinging him right across the clearing. Rius's body slammed into a thick tree trunk. The unconscious Terminator slumped to the ground, the weight of his heavy armour embedding his body in the soft ground. Flames engulfed the wreckage of the gunship.

RIUS OPENED HIS eyes slowly, his vision taking a few seconds to focus. Above him were wooden beams and the underside of a thatched roof. Cautiously he tilted his head to one side.

'Hello.' said a small voice. Sitting only a few feet from him was a human child. Her keen blue eyes regarded him with intense fascination. She wore a simple smock and her waist-length auburn hair hung in a plait over one shoulder.

'H- hello.' Rius mumbled in reply. His tongue felt thick and there was the taste of stale saliva in his mouth.

'My name's Melina.' the girl-child said. 'What's yours?'

Still only half-conscious, Rius tried to focus on the girl's question so that he could provide an answer, but he couldn't. A nebulous fog obscured that part of his memory from him.

'I don't know.' he muttered, bewildered. 'Where am I?'

'You're at home, in our house. Why don't you know your name?'

Ignoring the girl's question, Rius scanned the room from where he lay. It was small and spartan. The only other furniture in it apart from the bed was a chair and a small table on which rested a wash basin. Lying on his back in a rough wooden bed, he could feel the straw mattress beneath him.

'You do have a name, don't you?' the girl persisted.

'Come away now, Melina. Let our visitor rest.'

Rius swivelled to find the source of this second voice. A man had entered the room. He also wore plain peasant clothes and although only in his thirties, Rius judged, he had already begun to lose his hair.

'You must be tired.' the man added, addressing Rius himself now. 'We will

leave you in peace.'

'No!' Rius found himself demanding, something of the old authority in his voice returning. 'What happened to me?'

'You do not know?' the man asked, incredulously. 'Are you not a warrior of the Emperor himself, fallen from the stars?'

Rius stared at the man with incomprehension. 'Am I? How did I get here?'

'We saw the stars falling to the earth and knew that it was an omen. The menfolk set off into the untamed lands as our elders instructed. We found you in the forest. You were unconscious and badly injured.' the man explained patiently. 'We brought you back to my farm and did what we could for you. At first we were not sure if you would survive but your holy armour had helped to keep you alive. You have been asleep for almost a week.'

Desperately, Rius tried to clear the fog from his mind and piece together his shattered memories. He could remember nothing clearly from before the moment when he had awoken. There were only trace images of terrible, unreal monsters and the distant sounds of battle, like the last lingering fragments of a nightmare that are forgotten with the coming of dawn.

'Who am I? What am I?' Rius's voice was no longer aggressive and demanding, more like that of a pitiful child.

The man and his daughter looked at him sadly. 'I am sorry.' the man spoke wistfully. 'We can heal your body, as best we can, but we cannot minister to your mind. We cannot help you to remember. That is something that you will have to do yourself, given time.'

A sorrowful silence descended over the room for several minutes. Nobody moved. 'You saved me.' Rius finally said, humbly. The man smiled. 'Then I know what I must do.' Rius continued. 'I owe you my life so now I must repay the debt. I pledge myself to your service. I will do whatever you wish.'

Rius tried to sit up and immediately white-hot daggers of pain shot through his body. His face a mask of agony, he collapsed back onto the bed.

'You must rest.' the man chided, gently. 'Tomorrow is another day. Then we will see.'

EVERY DAY JEREN the farmer and his family tended to Rius's needs, bringing him his meals and seeing to his injuries. The little girl, Melina, was a constant companion. The time Rius spent with the child, hearing of her youthful adventures or helping her with her letters, filled him with joy and gave him new strength to face the long haul to recovery ahead.

But it was not to be a long recovery. Within days his wounds had healed as if they had never been. He was able to leave his bed and walk again. He began helping out around the farmhouse where he could. Jeren and his family, along with the other villagers, were in awe of Rius's restorative powers. The injuries he had suffered would have taken a mortal man months to recover from, if he did at all.

'Truly he is a warrior from the stars,' the people said and heaped blessings upon the Emperor for sending them a saviour. Yet each day Rius still came no closer to resolving his own internal struggles, no nearer to remembering who he was or where he came from.

Only a fortnight after his arrival at the farm, Rius was able to set to work in the fields. Jeren and his family were the owners of a few tidy acres at the edge of a village which consisted of nothing more than a collection of farms, a mill and the local tavern. During the following months he learnt much about the people of the village and their customs. They spent most of their days toiling in the fields in order to raise crops from the unforgiving land. It appeared that the humans fought a constant battle with the surrounding jungle, the 'untamed lands', as the farmers called them. Wherever trees were cleared to provide more land for growing cereal crops or to graze animals, the primeval forest reclaimed an acre left fallow on the farm's boundary. Weeds seemed to grow more readily than wheat and much of the villagers' time was spent clearing them from their fields. It seemed like the forest didn't want the humans there and was trying to evict its unwelcome tenants.

Rius joined Jeren and his family in their own battle with the jungle. He would be the first up at dawn, taking a mighty axe to die twisted trunks, and the last to return to the farmhouse at dusk. The other villagers marvelled at the star-man, as they called him, for his strength was many times that of the other humans. Soon he was also helping the other farmers, single-handedly repairing broken wagons and erecting barns for the grain harvest. There was not one person among the villagers who did not welcome Rius's assistance.

But for all he learnt about the resilient, magnanimous people who had taken him in, he was still no wiser as to his own origins. Perhaps, he began to think, the villagers were right, that he had been sent from the stars in order to help these kind people in their plight. This growing conviction was strengthened by news that came to Jeren's farm one chill morning.

A small party of farmers arrived at Jeren's door, out of breath and in a state of agitation. Jeren and the farmers spent a few minutes in anxious conference before turning to Rius.

‘What is it?’ Rius asked, concerned.

‘Last night Old Man Hosk’s place was attacked by something that came out of the forest. Hosk died trying to defend his home but his wife and children escaped.’ Jeren paused, as if he hardly believed what he was about to reveal himself. ‘They say it was a monster as big as a house and with the strength of a giant. And then there were the terrible, unearthly screams heard outside Kilm’s farm during the night. This morning, Kilm found his entire herd slaughtered in the fields and his grain store razed to the ground. Everyone in the village is too terrified to go after the beast. They want you to hunt the monster down for them and kill it.’

‘You’re the only one uhat can kill the Screamer, star-man.’ one of the petitioners added. You will help us, won’t you?’

The Screamer... the name troubled Rius. He was certain that he had heard it before – and that it spelled danger. Despite his unease, however, now was his chance to repay these people for their kindness and fulfil his purpose. ‘Of course I will.’

Taking up his axe, Rius left the farm with Jeren and the other villagers, and headed for what remained of the Hosk homestead. At the head of the valley in which the ruined farm lay, he saw that the farmers’ descriptions of the devastation had not been exaggerated. Most of the buildings had been demolished as if something huge had ploughed straight through the wattle walls.

Suddenly the uneasy quiet of the morning was broken by a bloodcurdling, high-pitched bestial scream that cut through Rius like a knife. ‘What was that?’ he demanded, turning to the crowd of farmers huddled behind him.

‘That was the Screamer.’ one of them replied, nervously.

The howling beast emerged from the line of trees on the far side of the valley. Although still over a couple of kilometres away, thanks to his enhanced eyesight, Rius was able to make out the monster quite clearly. He saw the bleached, bone-like dome of its head; the great curved arms; the crushing hooves; the tough, chitinous hide.

Instantly Rius’s mind was awash with terrifying images and recalled sensations: slaverling jaws, burning acid death, stinging tentacles, blood-drenched talons, fetid decay-ridden breath, a nightmare of purple and crimson. It was as if someone had opened the floodgates that had been holding back his memory. Temporarily stunned as forgotten experiences came crashing back into his mind, all Rius could do was stand stock-still, staring at the beast that had banished his amnesia.

‘What is it, star-man?’ Jeren asked.

‘No, not that. Rius. I am Rius,’ the Space Marine mumbled, shaking his head as if coming out of a troubled dream. ‘I know who I am, what I am.’ His thoughts and words became more focused and determined: ‘I know where my destiny and duty lie. Where is my armour? Where are my weapons?’

Hefting aside the bales of straw, Jeren uncovered the trapdoor set into the floor of the barn. ‘I always thought that one day you would ask for it back. When we found you it was encrusted with dried blood and in a condition not befitting a warrior of the Emperor. I cleaned and polished it, then laid it here, together with your mighty weapons, for safe-keeping.’ The farmer raised the trapdoor to reveal the gleaming blue armour that lay there.

The Space Marine held up the helmet, a shaft of sunlight catching its whiteness in a dust-shot beam. Reverently, Rius removed each piece of the centuries-old Terminator armour from its resting place. As he did so, his gaze lingered on the badges of honour won through decades of conflict on a hundred worlds. Pride welled up within him as he took in every crack and inscribed line of the great stone icon fixed to the left shoulder pad. Only the most honoured of the Emperor’s veterans wore the Crux Terminatus.

The winged skull carved into the chest plate of the armour attested to another righteous victory against the enemies of humanity. The Purity Seal granted him by the Chapter’s chaplains was still intact too. Its blessing had certainly not proved wanting for Rius: it had kept him alive while the rest of his squad had been condemned to death as a result of the accursed tyranids’ intervention at the Thunderhawk. Pride turned to sadness as he mourned his departed battle-brothers. He would never fight at their side again. The coming challenge he was to face would be as much for them as for the Emperor and the people of this unforgiving planet.

‘I would like to be alone now,’ the Space Marine said, turning to Jeren. ‘I must prepare for battle.’

As Rius strode out of the barn he looked nothing like the man that had entered. His mortal frame was encased within the metal body of a Terminator and mighty he looked indeed. He had donned the armour of his ancestors and chanted the litanies of war. Now he was ready to confront his foe. He addressed the overawed farmers gathered outside the barn. ‘This day I go to face my destiny’

‘Will you return?’ Jeren asked.

Rius turned his helmeted head towards the horizon. These people had shown him such compassion, hospitality and friendship. Now he could finally repay his debt to them. ‘If the Emperor wills it. If not, my death will serve the greater good.’

‘What is your name, warrior?’

‘I am Brother Rius of the First Company of the Ultramarines Chapter of the Imperium, may it never fail.’

‘Then farewell, Brother Rius. May the Emperor’s spirit go with you, as do our blessings.’

Rius saluted the man who had done so much for him and then paused before departing. ‘Jeren, will you do something for me?’

‘Of course, my friend. Name it.’

‘Remember me.’

With that the Ultramarine turned his back on humanity and strode off down the track away from the farm, towards the primeval jungle to meet his destiny.

BROTHER RIUS FROZE. There it was again, a rustling in the undergrowth ahead of him. He checked his motion sensor. There was definitely something there, but was it his quarry or yet another tree-fox? He had hunted the beast for three solid days without resting, having followed its tracks from the ravaged farmstead that now lay many miles behind him.

With a bellowing scream the carnifex broke through the tangle of fronds before him, all four of its razor-edged killing arms scything wildly at the vegetation as it ran. Instinctively, Rius hurled his heavily-armoured body to one side, out of the way, himself crashing through the undergrowth. As he hit the ground, his storm bolter was already spitting round after round of devastating fire in the direction of the rampaging tyrannid.

Still screaming, the carnifex ground to a halt and turned, ready to charge Rius a second time. The screamer killer well deserved both its name and the reputation that went with it. The piercing cry of the carnifex was enough to discourage the most resolute of men, while its diamond-hard, sickle-shaped arms could tear apart Rius’s ceramite armour as easily as it could his flesh. Its chitinous hide was virtually impenetrable to normal weapons and the great mass of its rounded body made it unstoppable as it stampeded across any battlefield.

This must be the last of its foul kind on the planet, Rius decided – left behind, as he himself had been, after the defeat of the hive-mind’s forces.

As the Space Marine struggled to get to his feet, almost cursing the bulky suit in which he was encased, the monster charged again. The carnifex hit the Terminator with the force of a mortar shell, forcing the air out of his lungs and throwing him bodily through the air. Rius crashed to the ground, splintering the branches of a tree on the way down, landing at the top of a steep, densely-

forested slope. The impetus of the charge and the subsequent momentum of his own body sent Rius rolling over the edge, tumbling down through the undergrowth.

He came to rest at the bottom of the slope, stunned and crying out in agony. It was like trying to wrestle a tank! Doing his best to suppress the pain mentally, Rius got to his feet. The fall had knocked out a servo-assist in the left leg of his suit so that he now walked with an acute limp. It would also slow him down.

He was standing in a clearing at the edge of a great plateau and, looking out beyond the cliff edge, he saw the prehistoric terrain shrouded by the smoke of distant grumbling volcanoes. Down in the broad valley, partially buried under a layer of ash, were the indistinct outlines of alien skeletons and twisted metal hulks. This was where the battle for Jaroth had been won – and where the final conflict in the war would take place.

A high-pitched screech accompanied the sound of a huge shape ploughing through the jungle towards the Space Marine. The carnifex burst through the trees – and stopped. A disgusting purple fluid oozed from several small holes in its chest where the extremely tough bone and cartilage had been punctured. He had managed to wound the beast, the Emperor be praised! However, his excitement almost instantly turned to disappointment. The flow of alien blood stopped and before his very eyes the wounds began to heal themselves. The carnifex was regenerating!

The great creature's shoulders heaved as if the tyrannid was breathing heavily. The deafening scream continued as the carnifex pawed the ground with its crushing horned hooves. A crackling field of bio-electrical energy flickered around the scissoring arms. As Rius watched transfixed, the creature convulsed violently and a glowing green ball of plasma emerged from its fang-lined mouth. Trapped in the energy field of the beast's claws, the carnifex was able to determine the direction in which it would fire the incandescent missile.

Rius ducked as the scorching ball of plasma hurtled towards him. The blazing gout splashed against the Terminator's back, bathing the armour in licking green flames. At once the ceramite began to sizzle and dissolve. Still safe as yet inside his suit, Rius raised his bolter, took careful aim and fired. As many shells rebounded off the reinforced carapace as penetrated it, and those that did wound the creature seemed to make no difference as the tyrannid's supernatural vitality and single-minded desire for slaughter drove it onwards. A new pain shot through the Ultramarine's nervous system as the bio-plasma reached his skin, having eaten through the armour. Rius realised that there was only one thing to do. He braced himself. As the rampaging monster ran at him he prepared to meet

its charge, not flinching as the distance between the pair rapidly decreased.

As the monster hit him head on, Rius grabbed the creature around its waist. At the same moment he could not contain his agony and screamed. A jagged, curving arm sliced through his armour and deep into his side. The Ultramarine was now face to face with the tyrannid. Surprised by its enemy's retaliation, the creature lost control of its charge and stumbled, its momentum carrying the two of them rolling towards the precipitous edge of the plateau.

The hulking monster towered over him. Rius gagged at the stench of the carnifex's reeking breath, its grotesque face mere inches from his visor. The Marine could feel his life-blood seeping away. It was now or never.

With the last of his failing strength he lifted his gun and rammed its muzzle between the monster's jaws. Depressing the trigger he emptied the rest of the cartridge into the carnifex's mouth. Shells blasted through the back of the creature's malformed head; others ricocheted around inside its toughened skull, liquefying its tiny brain.

Rius knew he was dead, but it no longer mattered. He had reclaimed his honour and identity and repaid his debt to the people who had saved him from ignominy. Thanks to them he could die the death of an Ultramarine. Trapped within the carnifex's grasp he could not stop the great bulk of the beast dragging him with it as it toppled over the edge of the plateau. Locked in the inescapable embrace of death, Brother Rius and the tyrannid fell into oblivion. The Battle for Jaroth was finally over.

INTO THE MAELSTROM

Chris Pramas

‘WAKE UP, CORSAIR! We’re almost there.’

Sartak snapped back to consciousness, only to find himself looking down the barrel of a bolter. Beyond it was the disapproving face of Arghun, a Space Marine of the White Scars. Although Arghun had not slept for days, his eyes were alert and his grip on the bolter firm.

‘I am not a Corsair,’ Sartak said with dignity, ‘I am like you, a Space Marine, of the Astral Claws Chapter.’

Arghun reached down, grabbed Sartak’s shoulder with his left hand and hauled him roughly to his feet. Forcing his bolter against the side of Sartak’s head, the White Scar spat in disgust: ‘You filth. The Astral Claws betrayed the Emperor! You lost the right to be called a Space Marine long ago. You’re nothing but a reaver and a pirate.’

Sartak felt the cool metal of the bolter against his flesh, but somehow he remained calm. He knew the White Scar would not kill him now. There was too much at stake. ‘I am here to restore the honour of the Astral Claws,’ he said in a level voice. ‘My reaving days are over.’

Arghun released Sartak from his grip, but kept the bolter handy. ‘Yes,’ the White Scar growled, ‘so you said in your moving speech before Subatai Khan. After years as a murdering cur, you woke up one morning and realised you still loved the Emperor.’ Arghun’s voice dripped with scorn. ‘And now you’re going to help us kill Huron Blackheart...’ The White Scar’s laughter filled the cramped quarters of the smuggler’s ship. ‘I’ve heard more convincing lies from ogryns.’

‘If you don’t believe me,’ Sartak said, flatly exasperated after days of such exchanges, ‘then why in the Emperor’s name are you here?’

‘If you were a true Space Marine,’ Arghun thundered, ‘you wouldn’t even have to ask me that question! I am here because I was ordered to be. That’s all I need to know.’

‘Arghun, I’m weary of fighting with you,’ Sartak replied with a sigh. ‘What I’ve told you is the truth. Huron Blackheart is planning a massive attack on an undefended Imperial world. If I can find my friend Lothar on Blackheart’s

flagship, he should be able to tell us where the attack will fall.’ Sartak had told his story a dozen times, but it was plain from the look on Arghun’s face that the White Scar didn’t believe a word of it. Still, Sartak felt compelled to speak the words, hoping in his heart that they were true. ‘Then,’ the Astral Claw finished, ‘we can signal the rest of your Chapter and bury Blackheart forever.’

He paused, before adding, ‘If you ever take off this inhibitor, that is.’ Almost unconsciously, Sartak ran his fingers over the heavy collar around his neck. As always, he could not find any kind of seam.

Watching with amusement, the White Scar laughed. ‘What’s wrong? Don’t you like being Arghun’s dog, Corsair? It’s the only way to teach you discipline and obedience.’ The smile left Arghun’s lips as quickly as it had come. ‘Besides, I couldn’t risk you alerting your friends in the Red Corsairs before our arrival.

‘Whatever, we are almost to the Maelstrom.’ Arghun continued. ‘You’ll have your precious powers back soon enough.’ The White Scar slung his bolter reluctantly, but kept his eyes on Sartak. ‘Just try to remember what it really means to be a Space Marine and a codicier.’

Sartak locked eyes with Arghun. ‘I swear before the Emperor to prove the truth of my words and restore the honour of the Astral Claws.’

‘Then may the Emperor have mercy on your soul, Corsair.’

ARGHUN AND SARTAK stood in the vast, reeking metal belly of Huron Blackheart’s great warship. Surrounded by the Red Corsairs, renegade Space Marines of a dozen Chapters, they awaited Blackheart himself. Arghun stood proud and upright, staring defiantly at his fallen brethren, while Sartak shifted uncomfortably, searching the crowd for a friendly face. A haze of torch and incense smoke hung over the bay, but could not obscure the leering gargoyles that adorned its walls. From here, amidst twisted iron sconces and blood-spattered altars, Huron Blackheart led the Red Corsairs in their depraved worship of the foul gods of Chaos. Sartak had heard the screams of countless victims in this dark temple, and the memories haunted him still.

Blackheart’s men were just as Sartak remembered them. Once the Emperor’s elite, full of honour and courage, these Marines had betrayed their oaths and followed Huron into heresy. Where they had once used their strength to protect the citizens of the Imperium, they now used that same savage power to offer up victims to their cruel gods. Blood, booty and terror were their masters now, and Sartak found it increasingly hard to believe that he had been one of them. Looking down at the fading Astral Claws markings on his power armour, now but a dim trace of their former glory, Sartak wondered if there was any honour

left to salvage.

Unwilling to meet the eyes of any of his former comrades, Sartak scanned the great bay. His gaze came to rest on the prone forms of Huron's dreadnoughts. These massive machines of destruction stood chained amongst the broken pillars of the central temple, as if their lifeless husks could be reanimated at any moment. But it was naught but an illusion, for the sarcophagi which housed the pilots that gave life to the stomping beasts were well away from the dreadnoughts. Sartak knew them to be housed behind the Great Seal, safely locked away in Huron's temple of temples. Although the Red Corsairs consigned the deranged and insane to lives of living torment inside the metal sarcophagi, they still treated the dreadnought pilots with an awed respect, perhaps because their irrational power reminded the Corsairs of their own inhuman gods.

A hush fell over the assembled Chaos Marines, and Sartak could hear Huron Blackheart approach. As long as he lived, he would never forget the peculiar rhythm of Huron's thumping footsteps, a product of the meltagun blast which had destroyed half of the man's body. The Red Corsairs parted before their master as he strode into view. Blackheart was a towering figure, half man and half machine. His massive armour, a corrupted mockery of that of the Space Marines, bristled with blades and saws. In place of his left arm, he had an enormous bionic claw that jerked open and closed spasmodically, so eager was it to rend the flesh of the living. Huron's wreck of a face radiated sheer menace, and his eyes burned with an unholy fire. Stopping his thundering advance only a few paces from the two Space Marines, the Blood Reaver sized up his new guests as a butcher might study cattle ready for slaughter.

'Sartak!' Huron boomed, 'I last saw you dead on the bridge of a White Scars' cruiser, yet here you stand. Tell me, how are you alive?'

'Great tyrant.' Sartak began, 'I was but knocked unconscious during that savage fight. The White Scars took me prisoner, but I would say nothing to them.' The Marine could feel his mouth getting drier as the well-prepared lies came to his lips. Hurriedly, he continued, trying to finish before his voice betrayed him. 'Arghun here helped me escape, and we hired a smuggler to bring us back to the Maelstrom. I told Arghun that you were always looking for men like him.'

Huron's twisted face betrayed nothing as his gaze swept to the White Scar. Sartak felt relieved to be out from his scrutiny. He only hoped the proud White Scar could feign the humility needed to win the tyrant's trust.

'And you, loyal White Scar.' Huron said, 'you betrayed your comrades to help Sartak escape. Why risk death to help this lowly sorcerer?'

'I care nothing for this wretch.' Arghun spat defiantly. 'I used him because I

knew he could bring me to you.’ The White Scar bowed his head ever so slightly, for the first time acknowledging the power of the Blood Reaver. ‘And you, lord, are the only man that can offer me refuge from the wrath of my gutless brethren.’

Blackheart laughed. ‘This one’s got spirit.’ He took two great strides over to Arghun and grabbed the White Scar’s neck in his wicked claw. As blood trickled ever so slowly down the hungry pincer, the Blood Reaver continued, ‘Tell me, White Scar, what did you do to earn the wrath of your Chapter?’

Arghun stood rock still, lest a sudden movement cause the claw to snap shut. ‘Great tyrant,’ he choked out, ‘I killed my sergeant in battle because he ordered a retreat. Cowards like him deserve only death.’

Blackheart stood silently for a long moment, the only sound in the room Arghun’s increasingly laboured breathing as the claw squeezed tighter. Then the claw snapped open and the Blood Reaver stepped back. Arghun sighed in relief and drew in great gulps of air.

Sartak also relaxed. The worst was over. He knew how merciless Huron could be with potential new recruits, but it seemed that Arghun had passed the test.

Huron strode over to Sartak and put his good hand on the Astral Claw’s shoulder. ‘Brother, you have done well. You know how few sorcerers I command and we had mourned your loss.’ Sartak, wary of trickery, could detect no falsehood in the tyrant’s words. ‘I want to welcome you back to the Red Corsairs.’ Blackheart’s voice deepened as he continued, ‘But first, you must do something for me.’

‘Anything, great tyrant!’ Sartak exclaimed, nodding his head.

Blackheart removed his hand from Sartak’s shoulder, unholstered his bolt pistol, and held it out to the Astral Claw. ‘Kill the White Scar.’

‘But, great tyrant,’ Sartak stammered, ‘he, well, he helped me to escape.’

‘He helped you to escape so you would bring him here.’ Huron said matter of factly. ‘He’s a White Scar infiltrator, no doubt sent to kill me. Now take this and execute him!’

The tone of the Blood Reaver brooked no contradiction, not if Sartak wanted to live. The Marine took the pistol and walked slowly over to Arghun. He had no love for the uncompromising White Scar, but nor did he want to be his executioner. He raised the pistol and aimed for Arghun’s temple. At least death would be quick.

‘What are you waiting for?’ roared the Blood Reaver. ‘Kill him!’

‘Kill the traitor!’ the Red Corsairs howled in unison.

Arghun looked at the Astral Claw and Sartak saw no fear in his face. 'Go ahead, Corsair.' Arghun said calmly. 'I always knew you would kill me in the end.'

Sartak squeezed the trigger twice. The White Scar died without sound or complaint and fell with an echoing thud on to the metal floor of the great bay. Not for the last time innocent blood stained the unholy ground of Blackheart's temple.

Huron Blackheart smiled and his insane joy was almost as terrible as his anger. 'Welcome home, Sartak. You've been away too long.'

SARTAK MOVED QUICKLY amidst the twisting corridors of Huron's warship. It had been two days since his return and at last it seemed safe for him to move about freely. The Blood Reaver's small fleet was even now cruising through the Maelstrom, heading for an unknown destination. Excitement ran high amongst the Red Corsairs, for Huron Blackheart had promised them booty and blood aplenty. Sartak tried to appear calm as he searched the ship for Lothar. By now his friend should have discovered where the attack was to fall, for he had won a place amongst Huron's inner circle. But the man had not been in his quarters, nor was he in the galley. Now, Sartak was forced to roam the great ship almost at random, hoping to find his friend before it was too late.

The Astral Claw found himself heading deeper into the bowels of the labyrinthine ship. The corridors stank of stale blood and he began to see skulls and bones littering the grilled walkway. This was the part of the ship claimed by the followers of Khorne, and Sartak usually went out of his way to avoid it. But he must find Lothar and this was one of the few places he had not searched.

Sartak had seen no one for almost an hour, and this only added to his agitation. Something was going on, he could sense it. Then he heard distant howls from up ahead and his heart sank. As he approached, Sartak could hear the roar of a crowd and cries of 'Blood for the Blood God!' At last Sartak emerged into a wide cargo bay and stopped in alarm. All of Huron's Khornate followers were assembled in a circle of crimson and gold, surrounding two combatants. Even above the shrieks for blood, Sartak could hear the distinct whirr of a chain-axe. He knew with cold certainty that this was no ordinary combat.

Pushing himself through the frenzied warriors, Sartak finally got a view of the combatants and his worst fears were confirmed. At the centre of the circle was Lothar, stripped to the waist and armed with a chain sword. His opponent was Crassus, a renegade Ultramarine who was Khorne's chosen champion amongst the Red Corsairs. Dark and wiry, Lothar was an experienced fighter, true enough,

but Crassus was a bloody-handed psychopath a full head taller than him, with few equals in hand-to-hand combat.

This is not a duel, Sartak thought grimly. This is slaughter.

‘Khorne demands a sacrifice!’ the berserkers chanted wildly. ‘Blood! Blood for Khorne!’

‘Lothar!’ Sartak bellowed and tried to break through the ring of blood-hungry berserkers, but half a dozen arms held him back. Lothar caught sight of him but was fully engaged in trying to fend off Crassus. The chain-axe of the insane warrior hammered down upon Lothar’s chainsword, driving the weary warrior back with every blow. Sartak could see that Lothar was bleeding from many wounds. Each time he parried, the Marine was just a little slower, while Crassus seemed to grow stronger with each blow. As the howls for blood reached a frenzied pitch, Crassus roared and smashed the chainsword from his opponent’s hands, and in the same fluid movement buried the axe in Lothar’s chest. The chewing blades of the chain-axe tore through Lothar’s flesh and he screamed in pain as his hot life-blood gushed all over the crazed Berserker.

‘Blood for the Blood God!’ the mob roared, and then, bearing Khorne’s chosen one aloft, ‘Crassus! Crassus!’

‘No!’ Sartak screamed and ran where to his dying friend lay, forgotten. Lothar lay on his back, his chest a bloody ruin. Still, he yet lived.

Sartak knelt next to him. ‘Forgive me, Lothar,’ he said. ‘I couldn’t find you.’

‘I was... discovered.’ Lothar gasped, blood frothing on his lips. ‘But the attack... the attack will fall on Razzia. Emperor... redeem us.’ His ravaged body convulsed one last time and lay still. Around Sartak, the berserkers of Khorne howled in savage celebration. Soon they were fighting furiously amongst themselves, driven mad by the sight and smell of freshly spilled blood. Taking advantage of the mayhem, Sartak slipped back into the welcome darkness.

SARTAK SAT ALONE in his chambers, still covered with the blood of his only friend. Now Lothar and Arghun were both dead, and Sartak knew it was up to him to finish Huron Blackheart alone. The Astral Claw shook with barely repressed fury as he thought about the lifeless body of Lothar, and of his own fall from the Emperor’s grace.

Sartak’s blood burned for vengeance on Blackheart, but a small inner voice crooned to him to wait. A relic of his reaving days, or a clear sign of impending madness, the voice tempted and chided his soul. It would be so easy, the voice told him, to stay with Blackheart and maintain his loyalty.

Yes, so easy, Sartak reflected, but he had followed the easy path for far too many years. Sartak remembered those dark days on Badab, when Huron had poisoned the Astral Claws against the Emperor. Sartak, loyal to his Chapter Master, as a Space Marine should be, followed him into heresy. But the years of reaving had taken their toll on the once idealistic warrior. Like a sleeping man jarred to consciousness, Sartak had opened his eyes to the depravity and corruption of the man once known as the Tyrant of Badab. With this shocking awakening Sartak had realised that there was only one way to make good his betrayal of the Emperor.

‘If I must add my own blood to that of Arghun and Lothar.’ he snarled aloud, ‘then let that be my penance.’ Sartak drew in a deep breath and steadied his beating heart. Now, it was time to finish what he had started.

THE ASTRAL CLAW knelt on the floor and pulled a small cloth bag from between the folds of his bunk. Reaching inside, he pulled out the Imperial Tarot. The magical paraphernalia cluttered about his chamber was just for show, mere superstitious frippery. Huron was strangely proud of his ‘sorcerers’ and Sartak had been forced to act the part. Runic wands, talismanic skulls, and ancient icons lay strewn about haphazardly, the accoutrements of his obscene trade.

Now all Sartak needed was the purity of the Tarot to communicate with the White Scar ship which circled the Maelstrom in eager anticipation of his message. It was time for him to take on once again the mantle of Space Marine, librarian and Astral Claw.

Sartak knelt and shuffled the Tarot. Focusing his mind, he drew three cards from the top of the deck and placed them face down. Holding his breath, he flipped them over one by one. Horror! Revealed before him were the Emperor reversed, the Tower, and the Ecclesiarch reversed.

Sartak suppressed the shock of such an ill-omened hand, quickly reminding himself that he was not divining but reforging long broken lines of communication. Trying to forget the grim portents thus revealed, Sartak concentrated on the Tower. Chanting quietly, he envisioned the Tower in the distance, across the great tide of the warp. Casting his mind outward, Sartak fell into a deep trance.

Always he kept the Tower foremost in his mind, as he searched for the spirit of the White Scar librarian he knew to be waiting. The warp embraced him as it always did, comforting him like a mother as it tried to suck him to its womb. Further and further he reached, beyond the gibbering hordes of demonic creatures which implored him for his soul. Then, at the last, the jolt of contact.

Across the warp, their minds came together and in an instant it was done. ‘Razzia.’ he intoned, ‘the attack falls on Razzia.’

Information delivered, Sartak broke the contract and fled back across the void to the safety of his own body. It was finished.

BEFORE SARTAK COULD so much as stand, there was a rending crash as the door to his chamber was smashed open. Standing in the doorway was Huron Blackheart, flanked by the tall, cadaverous figure of Garlon Souleater, the tyrant’s most potent sorcerer.

Sartak jumped to his feet, scattering the Imperial Tarot across the floor. ‘Great tyrant, I had not expected you.’ he stammered hastily, knowing with certainty that the Tarot had shown him the future after all.

‘No, I don’t suppose you did.’ Huron laughed. The Chaos leader shrugged towards his twisted sorcerer. ‘Garlon tells me that you have been communicating with the White Scars... and I wanted to come and thank you personally.’

‘Th- thank me, lord?’ Sartak let his hand rest on the hilt of his force sword, yet maintained a pretence of servitude a while longer.

‘Yes, Astral Claw, most certainly.’ The tyrant grinned maliciously. ‘I wanted to thank you for telling the White Scars that I would be attacking Razzia.’ Huron continued, his words dripping irony, ‘A touching show of misplaced loyalty.’ The Corsair’s voice rose to a thundering growl and he stabbed his power claw at Sartak. ‘Especially when you consider that I’ve changed my mind!’

‘Changed your mind?’ Sartak gasped, taken aback. ‘Wha—’

Huron waved his hand dismissively. ‘Well, no, I lie. I haven’t changed my mind as such – we never were attacking Razzia.’

Sartak began to see the trap which had been set for him, and his grip was firm upon his force sword. ‘You twisted, evil... what do you mean?’ The tyrant laughed widely at this show of bravado, and beside him Garlon clapped politely in mock applause.

‘We are, in fact, headed for Santiago.’ Blackheart paused to let the awful truth sink in. ‘Thanks to you, however, the White Scars will be far away when the Red Corsairs sweep down on that helpless planet.’ The tyrant grinned again, obviously delighted with the Astral Claw’s terrified expression.

Sartak staggered backwards, overwhelmed by the enormity of what he had done. ‘Santiago? But why?’ he whispered, horrified. ‘There’s nothing to steal there, it’s an agricultural world of no military significance at all.’

Garlon rubbed his bony hands together eagerly, his wet tongue licking his thin

lips in anticipation of some future pleasure.

‘Ah, but you are mistaken. There’s one thing Santiago does have.’ Huron gloated, clapping Garlon on the back. ‘Santiago has millions upon millions of defenceless citizens.’

Garlon whinnied in helpless pleasure. The sorcerer’s eyes rolled in his head and he silently mouthed the words: ‘Blood and skulls...’

Huron laughed mockingly. Sartak felt cold fury burning in his soul. The tyrant continued, ‘And what do you think would happen in the warp, my loyal little sorcerer, were I to offer up the blood of a billion victims on one night?’

‘You butcher!’ Sartak screamed. ‘I followed you, I trusted you, and you led me straight to hell!’ In his mind, he commended his soul to the Emperor. He knew what he must do. ‘In the name of all that is holy, it stops here!’ he yelled, dragging his force sword from its scabbard and charging the Blood Reaver, howling his fury.

Huron Blackheart met Sartak’s charge with a cry of delight, parrying the force sword with his great metal claw. The sword, pulsing with psychic energy, sparked and shrieked as it strove to tear the claw asunder. But the forbidden technology powering the tyrant’s claw proved too strong, and after long moments of straining sinew and muscle, Sartak was forced to pull his sword away.

Backing up as far as he could in the cramped confines of the chamber, Sartak quickly uttered a calming prayer, before focusing his mind and unleashing a psychic blast at Blackheart’s diseased consciousness. The energy of righteousness roared within him, and the bolt flew clear and true.

But Garlon Souleater, soaked in the black energies of Chaos, deflected the blow with a casual flick of a skeletally thin wrist, all the while cackling with perverse pleasure. ‘There’ll be none of that, Sartak.’ His voice oozed mockingly into the Marine’s mind. ‘Goodbye, our lovely traitor.’

The Blood Reaver closed on Sartak, even as Garlon’s twisted laughter echoed inside his skull. There was no more time for psychic trickery.

As the Tyrant attacked with all the power at his disposal, it was all the Astral Claw could do to parry the whirling power axe and merciless claws. Sartak held his force sword in both hands, trying to keep Huron at bay with great sweeps of the deadly blade.

Huron would not be denied blood. With a scream of rage and bitter satisfaction, the Tyrant slammed Sartak’s blade into the wall and pinned it there with his axe. The sword was motionless for just a few seconds, as Sartak tried in vain to

wrench the glittering weapon free, but that was enough time for Blackheart to close his great claw over Sartak's exposed wrists.

With a wicked grin, the Blood Reaver snapped the claw shut with a sickening crunch. Howling in pain, Sartak fell to his knees, staring in horror at the bleeding stumps.

Huron stood over Sartak, looking with disdain at the wretch at his feet. 'You'd like to die now, wouldn't you, last of the Astral Claws?'

Sartak would not answer. He watched his lifeblood slowly pump away, knowing that he had failed utterly.

Blackheart walked around Sartak's prone form, crushing the Tarot cards that still lay on the floor. 'But a hero's death is not for you.' he taunted, as he brought his leering face close to Sartak's bloody countenance. Sartak groaned aloud, but he could not bring himself to meet the tyrant's gaze. 'No, there will be no redemption for you, Sartak.' The tyrant howled in glee. 'Instead, I will give you the greatest gift an Astral Claw could hope for.'

Laughing with delight, Huron Blackheart turned to the capering sorcerer. 'Take him away, Garlon, and make this sad wretch a hero to be proud of.'

Garlon's mind reached out and smashed through Sartak's weakened defences. The Astral Claw fell into blackness.

SARTAK AWOKE IN total, unutterable darkness. Surprised to be alive, he tried to get up, to move, but found that he could not. Straining his limbs, he slowly realised that needles invaded his body, and unknown wires were entwined around his limbs. Some kind of mask was clamped to his face. Sartak tried to talk, but he choked on the array of tubes that had been rammed down his throat. In panic, he tried to cast his mind into the warp, but found that his powers had been suppressed.

After what felt like long, desperate hours of thrashing blindly in the darkness, Sartak lay in the blackness and waited. Huron would come to taunt him soon enough. Sartak waited and waited, cut off from feeling and perhaps time itself. How long have I been so? he wondered. Hours? Days? Time had lost its meaning.

Still Huron did not come. What have you done to me? the panicked librarian screamed silently.

Have I been jettisoned into the emptiness of space, in an escape capsule? Will I fall forever through the void?

How would that make me a hero?

His mind cast about, trying to find an answer, but to no avail. Nothing made any sense at all.

In a flash of realisation it all became clear. Sartak remembered his one walk beyond the Great Seal. He remembered seeing the maddened members of the Red Corsairs encased forever in coffins of adamantium, sealed up in the Great Temple until battle called.

Sartak knew beyond doubt that the life support systems of a dreadnought could keep a man alive indefinitely. But what if the sarcophagus were never to be hooked into a dreadnought? What if a man was locked inside and left to rot for all eternity? What then?

Sartak tried desperately to think of another possible explanation for his plight, but the logic was cold and inescapable. The epiphany of horror crashed into his consciousness with unstoppable power. He could not even scream as sanity fled.

IN THE FRIGID darkness of the Maelstrom, the fleet of Huron Blackheart tore through space, destined for doomed Santiago. The Blood Reaver was on his way to offer up a billion souls to the Dark Gods of Chaos.

EMPEROR'S GRACE

Alex Hammond

THE BURNING FLAMES leapt high, throwing long shadows about the vault. The cold floor beneath his feet refused him comfort. Light robes adorned his body, clinging to him, providing little warmth. Streck stared into the dark, eyes straining to pierce the gloom. Above and all around him, a thick silence suffocated anything that dared to make an impact on the stillness.

A noise. Streck turned, his sleep-clogged eyes still trying to get their bearings amidst the flickering shadows.

The flames flared into monstrous life. The dark corners shrunk, betraying the shape of the room. High arching supports held aloft a roof of unimaginable height. Shining steel pipes funnelled the flames into the hall, their light revealing a man in black, military medals peppering his coat. A soft buzzing became apparent; it had always been there, echoing through the halls.

The man, dark-eyed and swathed in the coat and sacred insignia of the Cult of the Emperor, approached. The flames grew, casting light upon a huge lexicon, the Imperial seal burnt into its cover. The dark man stepped forward and opened the book, its pages reflecting flickering light onto his face. Streck stared into his own eyes. The halls erupted with flame. The buzzing grew shrill and flung Streck into the howling consciousness of a warzone.

Screeching attack sirens. His narrow stretcher bed. Bolt pistol in his hand. Streck rose, smoothed his commissar's uniform, placed his peaked cap on his head and rushed upstairs to his command post.

STILL. THE CHIRPING of the large, homed insects had stopped when the bombardment began. Lieutenant Lownes could still see their multicoloured wings, like stained glass windows, fluttering as the creatures darted desperately between the thick mangrove patches.

'Intelligence of a cat,' Lownes whispered to the young Guardsman next to him.

'Sir?'

'Those insects have the intelligence of a cat, soldier.' A pair of kaleidoscope wings hovered close by the man's head. The Guardsman raised his lasgun.

‘Steady, son. It’s just taking a look at you.’

Olstar Prime. Recent Imperial colony in unclaimed space; a jungle planet rich in deep ores and petro-ethers. Lieutenant Lownes and his squad had been brought in specially from Catachan. Similar climate, similar terrain – High Command figured they’d be perfect for helping in the defence of the main colony installation. The problem was that ‘perfect’ needs ground support, covering fire and capable shelling, something the last functioning elements of the Valis Fifth Guardsmen and the local garrison on Olstar Prime were a little hard pressed to supply when the word ‘Eldar’ crackled over the airwaves.

‘The orders are clear. We’re here to destroy their commander and weaken their position. The local garrison and colonists will try and keep the bulk of their force at bay.’ Lownes whispered to his squad huddled in the ebbing shallows of the mangroves. The heat and mist had covered brawny arms and combat knives in a dewy sheen.

‘So the rumours are true?’ Sergeant Stern asked, batting an insect from his pack with the back of his huge hand.

‘Yes, we face eldar. No one’s come in contact with them yet, might have something to do with their technology, but they’re definitely out there. The alien devils have the colonists terrified while the local defence forces have no taste for battle – although facing down those sorcerous weapons doesn’t appeal to me either.’

‘Shuriken catapults, sir.’

‘Sorry?’ Lownes looked up, scanning his men.

‘Sir.’ It was the new Guardsman, a young, bullish lad with close-cropped hair. ‘Shuriken catapults, they use magnetic impulses, fire spinning discs.’

In mock horror, Lownes made a religious symbol in the air. ‘Didn’t know we had an eldar expert amongst us. What kind of heretic are you?’ He laughed and a cloud of insects rose from the ferns around him. ‘Glad to have you along.’ Not even a chuckle from his squad. They were apprehensive, and Lownes knew it. ‘Make it clean and we’ll make it through, Emperor willing. See you all at base camp.’

The Jungle Fighters each gripped their nearest comrade by the forearm, in a brief, silent display of camaraderie.

‘Alright.’ Lownes released the young soldier’s arm. ‘Let’s move out.’

There is a skill to moving in waist high water and ignoring the strange movements brushing past. The Jungle Fighters of Catachan had got it down to a fine art – that and at least four unarmed fighting styles and extensive weapons

training.

The bulbous mangrove trees sat still, the only things with sense enough not to try and move about in the quagmire. Lownes led his squad into cover behind a vine-swathed clump of the trees. Spiny trunks scratched at the exposed flesh of the fighters. A cocktail of combat drugs staved off all but the most extreme of injuries. Many a fighter had lived to see another day thanks to the potency of the Imperial chemists' brews.

A splash in the water to the left of the squad brought their honed reflexes into action. As silent as nightfall, Stern raised his lasgun. Lownes grabbed his infra-red scope and peered through it. An eldar, with a long, fluted pistol-like weapon strapped to its steel-slender body armour. It moved gracefully through the water; the swamp seemed to have little effect on its movement. Soft, discordant sounds, like an unearthly wind, came from the alien's respirator. Two, three... four in total. Outnumbering them and unseen, Lownes had the drop on them. Yet the men shuddered as the beings came into view.

Three sharp gestures from their commander and the squad went into action. Lownes tugged on two grenades and timed them long. They splashed into the water beside the two eldar on point. One moved close to the ripples in the water and stared upwards, assessing where they had come from. A second too late. The frag grenades cracked loud over the swamp. Burning body armour, flesh seared to metal, splashed into the water about Lownes's squad. Waves rushed about the grove. The Jungle Fighters leaped into the thick grenade smoke as the remaining eldar sprayed humming death from their shuriken catapults.

Tree bark and burnt foliage dropped down into the silent world of the swamp as Lownes swam in the shallows towards the unsuspecting eldar. Half his squad followed, respirators bubbling air to the surface the only sign of their passing. Chainsword spinning, Lownes exploded out of the water; the squad followed, lasguns firing controlled bursts into the mass of body-armoured warriors around them. The needle-sharp teeth of Lownes's mechanical sword ripped into an eldar, removing wrist and weapon in one fluid motion.

The aliens fell back in the face of the Jungle Fighters' numerical superiority, standing behind the tallest of their number, dressed differently in flowing robes and a strange elongated helmet. A pair of green eye sockets glowed. The robed figure raised its hand. A spray of low-powered lasfire from the remaining eldar channelled into one massive bolt that swept through the Jungle Fighters. Stern and four other men fell to the beam, identification tags and flesh fusing in one. The remainder of the squad threw themselves away from the gunfire and found precarious cover behind what remained of the mangrove trees.

The battlefield was still.

‘Their leader, it’s... it’s psychic.’ the new Guardsman stammered to Lownes.

‘I guessed, son.’ Grim faced, Lownes struggled to suppress the drugs in his blood that screamed at him to rush into deadly action against the eldar. ‘It doesn’t matter. They’re all the same when they’re dead.’

FOR THE PURITY of the Empire, in deed and mind. Let my body be a machine of war. Let courage be my companion and never let it leave my side even in my darkest hour. Blood spilt in the name of the Emperor is glory; fear is the death of courage and the death of me.

Commissar Streck prayed, staring down from the fire base at the jungle below him. Pitch floated on the shallow waters, blazing in the lasfire glare, only to show the deaths of more Imperial Guardsmen. The screams of the dying echoed through the low ridges. Many of the Valis Fifth would die in battle for the Emperor today. The dead were in their own realm now and had their own judges. It was not for Streck to judge the dead, but to monitor the living and see that they showed courage in battle. His commission was brief and to the point: Spiritual guidance necessary. Instil courage and condemn fear. Victory unlikely.

A rocket screamed through the air and collided with the armour of the steel plateau on which Streck stood. The commissar grabbed hold of the railing but it came away, rusted at the joints. Streck rolled backwards towards the edge of the platform. Below him he could see the vile eldar closing in. The line of bases that acted as the first defence, out in the tangled jungle, were falling. Streck’s sinewy arms strained, muscles shuddering as he hoisted himself back onto the platform.

The commissar stumbled through the smoking wreckage of the lower levels of the base checking bodies, and administering the Emperor’s Grace to those who could not be saved. He made for the remaining soldiers huddled beneath the main supports of the fire base. Pip-pupilled terror screamed in their eyes; shaking hands drooped lasguns at the floor. Because of the smoke they had not seen him yet.

One of the Guardsmen stood and staggered out of the bunker. Streck prayed that he’d turn back. For fear is the enemy of man. It stays his weapon in anger and dilutes his potency.

‘State your name and rank, soldier.’ The Guardsman staggered round as Commissar Streck stepped out from the smoking wreckage.

‘I, uh, I need a medic.’ The Guardsman blinked, blurry-eyed, as the black overcoat and cap of the Imperial commissar swam before his eyes.

‘Name and rank?’

‘Retner Ganch, Guardsman, Valis Fifth, sir.’ The words dribbled from the slump-shouldered shape.

‘Are you aware of the punishment for desertion?’

‘Can’t fight... lost gun, lost fingers.’ Ganch wriggled the nubs of a bloodied stump.

‘And for each who has turned their back on battle there will be death. For they are dead already as weapons for the Emperor and lost to his halls of glory.’ As Streck spoke the sentence, the Guardsman dropped to his knees, tears streaming down from his bloodshot eyes. ‘Even worse are those who show fear in the face of judgement, for in death they have neither pride nor glory.’

Commissar Streck raised his pistol to the Guardsman’s head, distancing himself so that the deserter’s blood would not stain his clothes.

‘If we must die, then we will die with courage.’ Streck turned and bellowed at the remaining men. Another rocket struck the base, tearing through both plascrete and armour plating, but he did not flinch. ‘The Emperor rewards those who show courage. They will join him at his halls and be recorded for ever in the annals of our heroes.’

Streck looked across the faces of the men before him. Youths, none more than two decades old, stared back at him. Mass-produced helmets rested loosely on their heads; the fit was almost always imperfect and required firm straps to provide any protection. Giddy-eyed and silent, the Guardsmen sat ineffectually in the mud. Streck was sick with rage. These men had not even caught sight of the aliens that assailed them, yet they were terrified.

‘Do you not fear the death of a coward? There is no place for them. They will be spurned and hated by their fellow men, for they did not fight to better humanity. They lie slack-kneed and stupefied as the daemon weapons of the eldar come closer, every second making the last moments of their life those of a coward!’

Streck fired his pistol into one of the trembling Guardsmen. A brief shriek was all he relinquished. The dead man slumped forward, helmet tumbling into the blood-slick mud.

Shaking hands now readied weapons and began to release rapid volleys of lasfire through the fire-slits in the remaining parts of the bunker. Streck, pleased, set himself against a supporting beam and began to fire into the undergrowth, praying that his shots would ring true. He knew they were being surrounded. He could sense the unholy beings gathered in the swamp about them. Dusk was

coming and they would renew their assault in the night, their alien eyes penetrating the darkness.

LOWNES, KNEE HIGH in swamp water, fingered his last grenade.

‘They can’t give us any support. The Basilisks are tied up shelling their main strike force.’ the new Guardsman said, closing the console of a communicator.

‘I need cover, all of you. And make it clean.’ Lownes stripped off his pack and readied his lasgun. ‘On my mark.’

‘One.’ Lownes twisted the grenade’s pin. ‘Two.’ The squad raised their rifles. ‘Three.’ Thrashing through the water like a charging beast, Lownes ran for an embankment close to the eldar. The squad fired in unison, lasers slicing jungle vines and igniting small gas pockets. The fury of their renewed assault scythed through the eldar. They shot down all but the robed eldar, the dead aliens’ body armour cracking open to reveal pale skins glistening like shelled oysters.

An immense geyser of swamp water reared into the sky. Lownes had almost stood on his own grenade. In the second that the water spouted, Lownes tumbled out from behind cover and started firing at the robed eldar. Lasfire crackled about it. Lownes threw himself at the eldar psyker, chainsword sending rapid pulses up his arm. The eldritch being brought up its thin staff to parry the blow. Sparks danced around crackles of energy. Lownes reeled within the electrical maelstrom. Death only a heartbeat away, the seasoned Jungle Fighter threw down his lasgun and snatched at his combat knife. On his knees, Lownes plunged the simple blade into the eldar’s side. The field dissipated. The chainsword shattered jewels and mesh armour. Like a burst of air rushing forth from a vacuum seal, the psyker expired.

THE SWAMP HOWLED with the sounds of the night creatures, their shrill, staccato voices beating at the air like tiny hammers upon a discordant chime. Streck found some solace in the noise. He had heard that the eldar possessed keen senses, their hearing unmatched. These night calls would make them uncomfortable. As if on cue, a shot rang out in the darkness and the screeching stopped, only to start again a few seconds later. Streck chuckled. He had long since learnt to find pleasure in his enemies’ pain.

What remained of his command force lay scattered about the wrecked bunker. Eyes downcast, each man sat contemplating his fate. Some men looked over the personal possessions they kept about them: gang bandannas from their home world, farewell gifts from lovers, trinkets and keepsakes of all descriptions. Others simply stared at the mud, or shivered in the swamp water. Only a few

talked. In one instant it occurred to Streck how far these men had been gathered from to defend this jungle planet. How each had come from the far distant world of Valis to die together in defence of the greater cause. The power of the Emperor was vast. He prayed the Great One would smile on them tonight.

Streck had ordered the men to conserve their energy packs. Until such a time as someone got a clean aim at an eldar, no one was to fire. Silent as death's scythe, a spinning disc as fast as light skimmed into the armoured shell and struck the man closest to Streck in the head. His face a bloodied mess, he died before he could scream.

The Guardsmen fired wildly into the darkness. Lasfire lit up the bunker for a few seconds.

'No! Where I'm firing.' Streck screamed. 'Fire on my lead!'

The men still fired in all directions. A wave of enemy fire swept down into the bunker and cut more Guardsmen down. Limbs severed, screams ceased. Their wild firing was serving only to reveal their positions. A flash revealed two eldar rushing forward from the dark cover of the mangroves. Their feet hardly splashing the shallow water, they moved with terrifying grace, long hair running wild from hard armour crafted from sorcerous materials. Chainswords screaming, they fell upon the revealed Guardsmen, slicing through flesh and bone like it was water.

Streck spun and levelled his bolt pistol at the carnage. Men were falling by pairs, dual cries of terror sending others running.

'Hold your ground! For the Emperor!' Streck felled one of the eldar, three shots cutting cleanly through the lurid helm of the alien degenerate. The butchery stopped for a second. The remaining eldar withdrew its spinning blades from the carcass of a dead man and let the glowing green eyes of its helm look the commissar up and down.

'Let the Emperor's might be mine!' Streck spat bloody spittle as explosive shells cracked from his pistol, jarring his hand and throwing him backwards.

The alien leapt high over the commissar's shots. The shells burst against the roof of the bunker, each getting closer to the lightning-fast eldar as it sailed through the air. Streck tumbled through the mud, listless limbs flapping against the ground as the eldar darted after him, twin swords held high above its head like a matador.

Streck kicked a trembling Guardsman into the path of the eldar and it cut him down without slowing. Shots rung off his assailant's carapace. Streck rushed a prayer to the Emperor.

Steaming with sulphurous heat, the eldar dove at Streck. Bracing for the pain, the commissar blinked. It was all the time needed. Opening his eyes again, Streck looked up and traced the jittering death spasm of his assailant. It lay on the end of a large, crude chainsword. Engraved words following the blade read Catachan IV.

Lieutenant Lownes, dour face slick with the heat, looked down at the commissar. 'It would appear you're surrounded.'

IT TOOK SOME moments to cover the dead and regroup under the dripping steel bunker. Half the fortification was ripped open down one side, and Lownes set two Jungle Fighters to block it with whatever rubble they could scavenge and cram into the space without being shot.

'Why did they let you through, lieutenant?' Commissar Streck said, looking down over the Catachan commander.

'False hope. You've held out this far – thought you'd be saved.' Lownes continued bandaging a Guardsman's arm. 'There's only five of us. Not nearly enough to help dig you out of this one.'

'We're doomed? Is that what you think, lieutenant?' Streck stared into the Catachan's eyes.

Lownes stood and gestured at the huddled, forlorn figures. 'No, it's what they think.' He grinned at the commissar. 'I've been in worse situations than this.'

'Really?'

'Well they're not tyranids, that's a start.'

Streck turned his back on the Catachan and looked out through the dark hole that was once a bunker wall. 'I will wait until daybreak before I command the men to attack. We make our stand here. The glory of the Emperor will aid our fight.'

'They won't let us make it through to daybreak. They'll shell this bunker to rubble before they let us see their positions. We need to set a trap, lure some in and get out of here,' Lownes replied. The commissar turned to face him.

'When the Great One was fighting the foul Horus, do you think he set about creating a trap to "lure" him to his death? With will alone he defeated the fiend, not simple tricks. Was he not—'

Lownes shook his head. 'Commissar. Sir. I am not questioning doctrine, rather trying to get my men and yourself out of here alive. Glory can wait for another day.'

'Glory must be the sole aim of each man, each day. His mind a temple, his body

a weapon in the service of the Emperor.'

Lownes looked up at the roof, then fixed Streck with a steely glare. 'I hate to say it, sir, but this particular temple should be condemned – and all of the Emperor's weapons are running out of ammunition.'

THE PREPARATIONS TOOK only a few moments. Lownes and his men scampered in and out of the bunker, low to the ground like crabs. Others ran the detonating cable they'd scavenged from the burnt-out fire base along the ground. Commissar Streck looked on, his face a granite scowl. In his head he played through the various positions he could take. From depths he had not penetrated for some years he drew out fragments of doctrine, of teachings and precedents. The rebellion on Ultar III, bloody merciless suppression, the Emperor's Grace for those whose minds were mortally fatigued. Streck formulated, stipulated and prepared his judgement, dark eyes impenetrable to those who would dare look the commissar in the face.

Only one man did. 'Commissar, we are ready, thank the Emperor,' Lownes called from a precarious position atop the bunker.

Streck stood well back. The Catachans had jury-rigged several grenades at weak points about the rubble strewn about the outer walls of the bunker.

'There's double-thick plating up that end,' Lownes said, pointing. 'Everyone up there.'

'What exactly are you suggesting we do, lieutenant?' Streck sneered.

'We've rigged the outside with explosives. This bunker is now one big grenade.' Even Streck shuddered a little at this suggestion. 'All we need to do is lure them in and let the thing rip.'

'How do you propose we do that?'

'Surrender.' Lownes grinned.

'Alien heretics are not known for taking prisoners.'

'Exactly.'

'I DON'T SEE them coming.' The jungle was still in the bright dawn light.

'You won't until they're close enough to make a kill.' Lownes called, keeping his voice low. He continued staring out from the bunker, lasgun sight fixed on the young Guardsman. The small figure shuffled forward towards the edge of the clearing, gazing nervously all around him.

'They're fast, sir.'

'I know, son. That's why I sent you out there. You've got reflexes that would

make the Departamento Munitorium consider giving you special training.’ Lownes was nervous too. He couldn’t make out any movement in the faint light of the waking day.

‘Think so, sir?’ The Guardsman lowered his white flag for a moment as he looked back over his shoulder.

‘Keep your eyes sharp, soldier.’

‘Well?’ Streck’s voice rung the length of the bunker.

‘Nothing yet, commissar.’ Lownes flicked his head; sweat had saturated his bandanna and was beginning to run into his eyes. ‘Tense, isn’t it?’

‘You make sure your men are ready and I’ll take care of mine.’ Streck turned his back on him and stalked the length of his retinue.

Lownes motioned with his hand and the three remaining Jungle Fighters crept forward, keeping their heads low. ‘We have the surprise.’ Lownes whispered to his men. ‘We may be outnumbered but we’ve been through much worse and lived. Get through this and I’ll look into getting us into Segmentum Solar, closer to home.’

Streck’s voice came ringing down the length of the bunker as he walked along the line of nervous Imperial Guardsmen. ‘Fear is the province of the weak and unworthy. There is no glory for those who run from battle or fail to raise their weapon in anger. Others who come after you will remember this day if you fight with valour. We are outnumbered – this planet is destined to be taken. There are too many of the obscene enemies of the Emperor and too few of his servants.’ Streck removed a copy of the Imperial Scriptures from his overcoat. ‘I am a hard man but I give you my blessing for what it is worth. For each man lost—’

‘Lieutenant! They’re coming!’ the Guardsman screamed from outside, running hell for leather for the bunker.

‘Keep that flag waving!’ Lownes yelled as he motioned his men into action. A tall, slender shape, moving fast amongst the trees, took aim on the young Guardsman. Lownes reached out and grabbed the sprinting soldier by the lapels, swinging him into safety. A dozen shuriken ripped the white flag out of the Guardsman’s hand, shredding it against the thick concrete wall.

Honed reflexes snapping into action, one of the other Jungle Fighters raised his lasgun and cut the alien down with a single shot. Its seared body armour glowed faintly in the dawn light as it dropped like cut bamboo into the swamp. The Catachans fell back from the bunker opening, firing neat bursts at the charging eldar as they crossed the clearing.

‘Everyone back... and pray this works.’ Lownes snatched up a small control

panel, twenty lines patched into it. The first inhuman figure was silhouetted in the bunker's doorway.

'Everybody down!'

'Emperor protect us!' Streck cried as Lownes slammed his hand down on the panel.

A rush of air, like a deep space air lock blowing, dragged at the Imperial Guard huddled in the bunker. Men cried and blood burst from ear drums as the explosion raged through the confined space. Flame rushed about the soldiers, setting some alight. Lownes grabbed the brave young Guardsman and threw his flaming body to the ground, holding him down to smother the flames. Commissar Streck screamed prayers to the Emperor as the flames rose higher.

Then silence.

STRECK WAS THE first to open his eyes. Gashes in the bunker roof bled shafts of light into the dust-choked darkness. The pages of his book of scripture lay scattered and burning around his collapsed body.

The commissar struggled to his feet and staggered out of a ripped hole into the warm dawn air. It was filled with the smell of burning steel, harsh and metallic, lapping at the edges of his nostrils. A dozen eldar lay on the ground; some moved, others lay still. Streck stumbled towards one of the aliens, its leg pinned to the ground by a steel girder. The eldar flapped uselessly at the beam, the blood running freely onto the ground marking the minutes it had left to live. Streck dropped to his knees and grappled with the creature's helm, ripping it from side to side, rocking loose the bonds that fastened it. The eldar slapped at Streck, making limp, childlike attempts to knock him to the ground. Streck stumbled backwards as the helm came loose, revealing the pale white skin of the alien.

'Heretic scum.' Streck panted. 'Look upon the face of man!' Streck raised his bolt pistol and held it to the eldar's forehead. The alien closed its eyes and sat still. Streck holstered his weapon and pulled himself to his feet using the girder that impaled the eldar. The creature screamed, a hollow, soulless noise. 'No mercy for you, degenerate.'

'Commissar, get down!' Lieutenant Lownes burst from the bunker, a lasgun under each arm. Streck snapped his head around and saw several more eldar rushing from the shadows of the jungle, fluted weapons pointed in his direction.

Streck fell backwards and pulled an eldar's body over him just as a barrage of spinning discs collided where he had been standing. Lownes unleashed a volley of burning hot laser fire from each of his weapons. They seared eldar armour,

sinking deep into the soft flesh beneath. A humming shuriken clipped Lownes's arm. Reacting to the stinging pain, the seasoned warrior dropped to his stomach to give himself cover.

'For the Emperor!' Lownes called from his prone position, waving his hand high in the air.

The remaining Imperial Guardsmen opened fire, using the precarious cover of the destroyed bunker. Their shots flashed through the superheated air, slamming into both eldar and muddy swamp. From the edges of the vegetation, Lownes's Jungle Fighters unleashed everything they had. Streck had not seen them move through the mangroves to cut off the eldar. Grenades threw wads of swamp filth up into the air, toppling the eldar.

Lownes lunged forward, holstering one lasgun to unstrap his chainsword. A wounded eldar lurched forward at Lownes from the swamp. Its chainsword whirled close to Lownes's head, metal teeth spitting mud across his face. Lownes brought his own sword up against the eldar's. The creature slammed a quick succession of blows against the Catachan, Lownes catching each with a narrow parry. He held the last of the eldar's blows on his chainsword, drove his lasgun into the alien warrior's chest and fired. The force from the gun threw the eldar back into the muddy water, its chainsword still spinning as it jerked in a death spasm.

Lownes caught sight of the commissar's muddy uniform amidst the dead eldar.

'You still alive, commissar?' Lownes asked, dragging an eldar body off Streck.

'I will not run. Help me to my feet and let me fight for my glory.'

'You've got shellshock. It might only be temporary.'

'Let me fight,' Streck spluttered, blood trickling out of his ears and mouth.

'You're hardly able to stand. You'd better serve the Emperor by getting out of this alive, sir. We must retreat.'

Lownes hoisted the commissar onto his shoulder and begun to stagger through the swamp, away from the battle. Streck fired his pistol uselessly in the direction of the remaining eldar forces.

'Fall back to the main installation!' Lownes shouted over the noise of the battle.

'No!' Streck cried. 'We hold our ground and fight to the last!'

The ragged band moved in increments from the bunker, some supporting others on their shoulders. Every few steps, men would have to take cover and return fire on the advancing eldar. Lownes kept pace with the men, hacking aside any vines or large fronds that slowed their progress. After an hour's forced march, guns levelled every step of the way in fear of more eldar, the Guardsman reached

the central installation, the key Imperial defence position in this sector of Olstar Prime. Lownes staggered forward, the commissar straggling on his back, until he passed under the heavy gates to the compound and fell to his knees.

‘How dare you challenge a commissar!’ Streck screamed at Lownes as the lieutenant knelt, panting on the ground, his face crimson. The commissar flailed himself to his feet, tottered for a moment and then stood erect. ‘How long have we been out of the battle?’

‘It’s over, Streck.’

‘Over?’

‘The surviving elements of the Fifth are returning; my men are guiding them through the jungle as we speak.’

‘They know the way back!’ Streck snapped.

‘They’re taking an alternate route.’

‘Creeping back like dogs on their bellies!’

‘The same way we got back alive.’

‘You have threatened my immortality today, Lownes. I have fought gloriously in every battle I have joined. I have never turned my back on the enemy. I have suffered countless wounds and remained alive, to fight again for the sanctity of man and the honour of the Emperor!’

‘Save your preaching.’ the Catachan said, shaking his head. ‘I serve the Emperor just like you, but I would rather fight than die a lone fool striking out against a hundred enemies. If I can find a way to make a difference I will, but I will not die in some forsaken swamp for no reason other than glory.’

‘Glory is found through death.’

‘Glory is what I make of it.’

Commissar Streck stared at the Jungle Fighter. Both men stood still, Lownes’s eyes cast to the ground.

‘I’m going to find my men.’ Lownes turned his back and left the compound.

HE STOOD TALL amongst the returning Imperial Guardsmen. The battle over, few walked upright, their energy spent. Even those unwounded walked like men with a death sentence, their eyes towards the ground, bodies near paralysed with dread resolve. Amidst scant cheers, the Catachan Jungle Fighters arrived, leading the Guardsmen through the massive barricade gate. Catachan, a planet of fringe dwellers, souls sworn to the Emperor despite lives spent in obscene pursuits. For Streck these troops were worse than barbarian outriders. They fought in no formation, wore no real uniform, misused weapons and showed no

honour in battle. They did not stand and fight but nipped at the enemy's heels like dogs.

Lownes stood at the head of the returning men, his face dour, despite his heroics on the battlefield. No cheer passed his lips, no smile broke his face. Dead and living travelled through the gates. Bodies upon stretchers covered by shrouds soon separated from the file of men; like driftwood cast out of the sea by waves, they were directed towards the morgue and crematorium. Above everything hung a persistent roaring, as merchant ships – not bound by illusory notions of duty and honour – heaved into orbit from the refugee-choked landing pads, every space filled with those who could afford today's asking price.

Streck followed the Jungle Fighters through the complex. People scurried about frantically like ants, laden down with bundles of equipment and rations. Many of the civilian buildings had been stripped, Guardsmen protecting the military installations. Streck was unsurprised by the Catachan's destination when they finally pushed open the crude metal doors of the last open saloon. In the dim light, a woman divesting herself of clothing betrayed their motives.

So soon after the glory of battle! Streck was sick with the thought of what these men were truly like. No sooner had their bodies done the glorious work of the Emperor than their weak spirits drove them into the clutches of flesh and alcohol.

Without really thinking what he was doing, the commissar entered through the back of the saloon, clenching his book of scripture tightly in his hand. The bar owner's pockmarked face twisted white as the agent of the Emperor's law entered. Streck sat amidst the din and smoke and watched. He had never entered the saloon before; military business had never given him reason to.

The woman moved listlessly. Streck assumed she was shutting out the desperate, doomed faces of those about her, the reminders of her own fate. The Catachan were more sullen than earlier. They drank and watched the woman dance with loveless eyes. Streck looked across their faces. Scarred, brows furrowed, they stared dark-eyed into their glasses. Their lips moved in crude motions, mouthing words with such effort that Streck could read their lips through the filth laden air.

Glasses. Streck hadn't realised until now. Every soldier drank, bar one. Lieutenant Lownes just stared into the table, into darkness. Streck considered the man. He had disgraced so many by leading them in a retreat from the battle. Perhaps he had realised the truth of his actions, felt the guilt of a coward. Streck considered the value of a court martial again. It would set a precedent, of course, but men bearing ranks as high as Lownes's were not exempt from execution.

Lownes stood, bade farewell to his men and left the saloon. Drifting after him, Streck wove through the crowded room, all eyes turned away uncomfortably moments before he passed. Streck knew this behaviour as shame, for those who serve the Emperor well know their actions are true and will only receive praise.

A TROPICAL HEAT washed over Olstar Prime, sucking fluid from every pore. Streck stalked Lownes through the compound: Lownes striding forward, a giant powerhouse riding the waves of combat drugs that still tingled along his limbs; Streck lean, tall, keeping pace. Lownes returned to the steady flow of the dead through the colony gates. He walked amongst them, pulling back each sheet.

Streck hung back and watched, trying to pierce the motivations of this man. His reports described him as a loose cannon, but honoured him numerous times with no less than thirty successful engagements to his name. He himself had seen how the Jungle Fighter had led his men and those thrown in with him by fate. He spoke the words of the faithful and did not show any signs of heresy – but he had challenged a superior officer and refused the command of a commissar. Offences punishable by death, yet Streck remained undecided.

Lownes walked along the ‘Road of the Dead’, as the colonists called it, for it led to the installation’s mortuary. A house that might contain his body one day, and if not this one, definitely some other mortuary in another dark place of the galaxy. Streck had noticed long before that Imperial Guard drop pods often contained morgues, as though death was just another element of battle that needed to be taken care of. Lownes entered and approached the line of bodies gradually being pushed towards the furnace.

Streck watched as Lownes continued his dismal search. The end result: five shrouded figures, red bandannas draped across them. Lownes stood over them in the damp chill of the vault. Drawing out his combat knife, Lownes held out his left forearm; steely muscles twitched as he scored five long gashes across it. Placing each body bag into the crematorium, Lownes ignited them. Once they were consumed he rubbed some of the combined ashes produced by the furnace into the wounds. Ritual scarification. Crude but not without honour, Streck mused.

A steel stretcher-bed in the barrack block was Lownes’s next port of call. The Catachan end of the barracks was covered in an array of war trophies and coloured banners. It was far short of the Spartan neatness that Streck called for in his own thorough examinations of the Imperial Guard quarters. Streck’s aversion to the Catachan Fighters had never led him past this part of the barrack compound. Now he peered in through a window like a thief.

In the still of nightfall, Lownes produced his lasgun and began stripping it down with rapid, staccato movements, each hand operating on its own task. Streck watched Lownes go through this ritual again and again, mesmerised by the symphony of assembly and disassembly. The soldier's wounds still wept, yet he ignored the pain.

Streck considered for long moments. He knew that a mould must be flexible enough to create versatility in what it cast. In those days of judgement, the Emperor cast and recast his actions, each one different, each one enough to hold back the traitors and heretics that threatened the purity of mankind. Had he not done so, the pattern of his thinking would have been revealed, he considered, and his battle strategies useless. Skills Streck still believed he must hone. Maybe he should teach himself a little more flexibility in both strategy and judgement. Let Lownes be the man he must, Streck thought; let him be cast from the mould a little rough around the edges. Perhaps it was a test set by the Emperor, a test of his ability to reason with the faith to have the courage to engage fully with the scriptures, not just the Lore of Punishment and Retribution alone. After all, had not Lownes served the Emperor well? Maybe the Catachan should not be condemned so harshly for his actions.

Streck had learnt long ago never to let down his guard. Two years ago, three Imperial Guardsmen had attempted a mutiny whilst he was engaged in combat with a renegade Space Marine. Their escape was forever burnt upon his mind.

The rustle in the bushes beside the barracks was entirely noticeable. Streck caught sight of a figure darting into the barracks. A surprise attack? Bolt pistol at the ready, he peered into the room again. In the darkness he saw two figures – Lownes and a second, a woman. Streck peered harder but could only make out silhouettes. A flare of light from within and for an instant Streck saw all. Lownes's torso, exposed, deep cuts and wounds wet with blood. The deep orange flashes emanated from a cauterising device the woman was applying.

When his wounds were treated, Lownes leaned to pull a pack from beneath his bed. He had carried it with him throughout the battle. Streck had paid it no heed, figuring it for rations or repair equipment – he knew the tales of the Catachan's self-sufficiency.

The Jungle Fighter opened the bag and held it open for the woman. Streck could see her properly now as she looked appraisingly over the contents of the bag. She was striking, hair cut short in the style of a native Catachan, a long scar running down one cheek to the point of her sharp chin. Her jump-suit and flak jacket showed she was not a soldier; a merchant guild badge hanging from her chest was all that identified her.

The woman reached into the bag and began to examine its contents, Lownes's solid form obscuring them from Streck's view. The commissar hurried quietly around to the half-open door and found he could see completely into the room.

'You will help me get my men off this place?' Lownes was asking.

'Lownes, how long have you known me for?' the merchant replied, sifting through the bag.

'A long time... since we were young. But I know this will just be business. This will make up the final payment?'

'Given that I don't have enough time to barter you down, I'll agree – but that's only because I know you, Lownes.'

'And that's passage for all of them.'

'We've got just enough room.' The merchant turned.

At last Streck saw what Lownes was trading: eldar weapons!

'Lieutenant!' the commissar burst into the room, bolt pistol drawn.

'Streck!' The half-assembled lasgun lay on the bed beside Lownes. He reached for it but its parts clattered onto the steel floor, lost amongst the mesh grating.

'Lieutenant Lownes, you are charged with attempted desertion and possession of heretical weapons!'

'What?'

'This subterfuge, these plans to flee are not warrior's work. You have defamed your body as a machine of the Emperor. The Emperor gives you life and you, in turn, give him yours. This is a warzone and you have sullied yourself with this illicit transaction.' Streck spat the words out in a frenzied babble. 'As a champion of the Emperor you betray us all.'

Lownes put himself between Streck and the merchant. 'I am doing what is best for my men, as always.'

'Your men are servants of the Emperor. You are a servant of the Emperor. To possess such weapons is heresy and punishable by death – but to seek to flee a righteous war is to have all honour stripped from your name after death. Your spirit is marred. You can not be remade. Trust in the Emperor, not the embraces of a woman!' Streck raised his pistol.

'Save it, Streck.' Lownes said, somehow calmer now. 'It's not loaded. I removed the clip earlier, when you were unconscious.'

Streck pulled the trigger anyway. Nothing happened.

The two men jumped as one. Streck ejected the empty clip from his pistol onto the ground, grabbing a fresh one from his belt and slamming it into the gun. Simultaneously, Lownes flung the contents of the bag out onto the bed and

grabbed an eldar pistol, pointing it at the commissar.

‘This is lunacy!’ the merchant cried, struggling to push herself between the pair, Lownes’s arm holding her at bay. ‘Look, commissar, I can fit you on board, no charge. I’ll get you out of here before the whole place goes down. It’s the deal of a lifetime.’

‘Let my men leave, Streck. You’ll never hear from us again.’ Lownes pleaded.

‘You will be sentenced to death.’ Streck said through gritted teeth.

‘My finger is on the trigger. I will fire as soon as you do.’

‘My aim is good.’ The commissar steadied his gun.

‘So is mine. Look, this is madness. We can both live.’

‘And for each who has turned their back on battle there will be death. For they are dead already—’

‘Incoming!’ screamed a voice from outside. Metal plating ripped and the ground cracked open as a massive explosion rocked the compound. In the barrack room, however, neither man moved despite the shaking ground.

‘Eldar! Here they come!’ cried a different voice from out by the gate.

Streck paused for a moment. Lownes stared him straight in the eyes, the merchant woman looking on in terror.

Suddenly one of Lownes’s men was at the door. ‘Sir, it’s the big one. They’ve breached the- Lieutenant?’

Other Jungle Fighters arrived behind him, weaponless and bloodied. Neither Streck nor Lownes moved.

‘For they are dead already—’ Streck began.

‘We have enough time to escape. We’re not going to win, commissar!’ Lownes insisted. ‘This planet is lost, but we can live – criminals, perhaps, but alive! Come on!’

Streck paused in his litany and regarded Lownes with eyes of steel. ‘Oh yes. We could run.’ he snarled. ‘Then another planet will fall, overrun by alien degenerates intent upon the destruction of humanity. Creatures driven by such a desperate vengeance that they will fight on until every last one of us is destroyed. Unless we remain defiant, fighting on despite this madness. Face the task in hand and make the difference. For each enemy dead in this last stand, it will be one less enemy to be fought in the future. Each man can make a difference: “As weapons for the Emperor and lost to his halls of glory!” ‘ Streck finished, his voice level with unshakeable faith.

Lownes stared at the commissar’s set expression, his mind racing in confusion.

There was a deafening roar and a pressure wave slammed against the barracks,

sending men and fittings flying. Plaster and bricks blew into the room, leaving several holes in the wall.

‘They’re inside the—’ someone screamed, their voice cut off as a line of shells sliced through the room like a scythe. The merchant woman was thrown backwards into a corner. Picking himself up off the floor, Lownes started to move towards her, but he knew already that she was dead.

He looked at Streck, who had somehow remained standing throughout the bombardment, then down at the eldar weapon in his hands. He dropped it as if it was diseased, then looked back at the commissar, face set. ‘Very well. Let’s do it. Let’s make a difference. Give me a lasgun.’

‘Thank you, Lieutenant Lownes.’ Streck said calmly, handing over a weapon. ‘For the Emperor!’

‘For the Emperor!’

Moments later, the ragged, lit-up doorway to the barracks was filled with the contrasting silhouettes of the Catachan lieutenant and the commissar. Then the pair of them dove, guns blazing, into the metal-filled air of the white hot night.

THE RAVEN'S CLAW

Jonathan Curran

‘MY LORD GOVERNOR, I see shadows ahead. I see ravens wheeling, but beyond the shadows there is only darkness.’ The man was nervous, wary.

‘Are we in danger then, Rosarius? Are all our schemes to come to naught? Look again. Look again!’ his master insisted.

‘My lord, I- I cannot tell... Wait, there is something, the darkness is clearing... I see fire. No... a star, it is falling in the night... falling from the sky. What does it mean? No, no, wait... it is gone, I can see no more.’

‘Then try harder. We must not fail. Too much is at stake here. You’ve got to protect me until all this is over. This place is full of treachery and I trust no one. If anyone so much as thinks ill of me I want to know about it. We’re taking a massive gamble here, and I want to know that it’s going to pay off. Don’t worry, when it does, I will remember who my loyal servants are. Keep looking – I must know when victory is close.’

Governor Torlin turned on his heels, and stalked over to the windows. He was a short man, but his gait was commanding, almost a swagger. He stood with both hands resting lightly on the sill, looking out over his capital. Far in the distance he could see flashes of light as the defence troops straggled to hold the city’s perimeter. The triple-insulated glass dampened the sounds, but even from this distance, he could see distortions in his vision as the steady crump-crump of artillery caused the plexi-glass to vibrate. He couldn’t tell whether the explosions were coming closer, but he knew it couldn’t be long before the walls were overrun and the city brought to its knees. He started to stroke the lines of medals on the chest of his gaudy dress uniform, as he always did when he was lost in thought.

Rosarius, a thin, sallow man dressed in dark robes, stared at his back. His milk white eyes, blind since his days at the Adeptus Astra Telepathica, gazed unseeing into the void. He could hear the governor’s breathing, sense his faint odour of tension and fear, feel the intense electrical activity of his brain. He could almost tell what he looked like, so well did he know his aura, but he ignored these false clues to reality, and concentrated instead on the images he

could see with his inner eye. Far beyond the window, he could feel the desperation of the Guardsmen holding the walls, feel the determination of the attackers, their mad lust for battle as they threw themselves against the defenders. He sent out fingers of thought, searching for pathways to the future, like tendrils, snaking their way into possibility. He searched for clues to potential outcomes, the easiest way to victory, the conclusion of their plans. He shook his head in frustration – whichever way he looked, all he could see was darkness, and stars falling from the sky.

In the distance, high in the sky, a flash of light amidst the orange and red bursts of plasma and high explosive caught the governor's attention. Sunlight on metal, moving fast. He followed the object downwards, until it disappeared from view, leaving a thin trail of scorched air behind it from its white hot entry shield.

THE DROPSHIP FELL out of the sky like a burning comet. Inside the hold, a hundred men struggled to stay upright, holding tightly onto the steel cords that held them fast against the wall. The ship rocked as anti-aircraft fire exploded like deadly orange flowers around it and servo motors struggled to keep the ship upright against the buffeting gale of explosions and shock waves.

‘Altitude ten thousand feet and counting.’ The voice was metallic and harsh.

Vero stood still, his feet apart, bracing himself against the wall, willing his mind to slow, to calm down. Around him men groaned as the rapid descent caused their ears to bleed and their senses to spin. His head felt groggy and painful from the changes in pressure caused by their fall. It was dark, the only light a dirty red glow from the power room. The heat was almost tropical and the air was thick with sulphurous fumes from the badly regulated engines.

‘Altitude five thousand and counting.’

An explosion thumped the outer shell of the ship with a giant's fist and span it around violently like a cork in a whirlpool. Vero could hear bones snapping as bodies jerked against the cables holding them to the walls. The dim red lighting flickered twice, then seemed to stabilise itself.

‘Altitude two thousand and...’

The ship hit the broken ground with a jolt that forced the pneumatic shock absorbers to groan and wheeze like an asthmatic old man. Vero felt as if his spine was being pushed up through the top of his skull. His muscles automatically reacted to the sudden feeling of heaviness as the planet's gravity took over abruptly from the weightlessness of freefall.

He moved his arm and the bindings that bound him fast to the wall

automatically increased resistance around his wrist, limiting his movements. His wrists were chafed raw where the tight steel bonds had cut into his flesh, and his body ached from sitting motionless, thrown around by the violently descending craft.

It had seemed like hours since he had woken, an eternity in the dark, hearing the engines rumble. Time in his own head had lost meaning and focus, he felt confused and disorientated. His head felt heavy, full of strange images that came unbidden in the near-darkness. His memory was restless. He couldn't remember being captured, and he couldn't think of any reason why he should be bound up in this manner. He struggled to remember how he had come to be here, chained up in a plummeting ship heading only Emperor knew where.

The first thing he remembered was waking up confused, unable to even remember his own name, but he had seen a single glistening word tattooed on his forearm – Vero – and assumed that that was his name. Looking around now at the similarly tattooed men around him, he felt that his guess was correct. Some of the men seemed to know each other and as they woke up, greeted each other with rueful smiles and shaking heads. A low buzz of conversation started up in parts of the hold, others were silent. He'd questioned a couple of them, but they hadn't known who he was. He didn't recognise his clothes, nondescript khaki fatigues, and even his own body looked strangely unfamiliar. His thick-set hands were scarred across the knuckles, but his legs looked strong and sturdy through the rough cloth. But he did not know them as his own.

THE FAR WALL cracked open, harsh white light spilling across the men. A shadow fell in front of the door, and a figure appeared. The newcomer was hefty and grizzled. His dull brown Imperial Guard uniform was torn and a dirty bandage covered most of his head. He pressed a button on his belt unit and the steel bonds holding the prisoners against the wall relaxed. The cuffs opened, allowing them to rub life back into their limbs. The man moved into the hold and aimed his electro-prod at the nearest captive, lying recumbent on the floor. The man's body jerked as the electrode touched his torso, but he didn't get up. Whatever fate awaited them on this planet, some, at least, had been mercifully spared.

'Come on, you pigs, move it! Out, out, out!' the burly man shouted at them, his accent harsh. Other guards appeared, brandishing weapons at the men. Slowly, a ragged line started to form. Vero, struggling to get up through the burning cramp in his legs, found himself beside a huge bear of a man, stripped to the waist, fluorescent tattoos glistening on his thickly muscled neck and arms. Vero

stumbled as he approached the ship's ramp, and the man caught his arm, preventing him from falling. He grinned at Vero, though much of his mouth was hidden behind a shaggy, ginger-brown beard. Almost concealed beneath the thick hairs on his arms, Vero could read the word 'Whelan', and he nodded his thanks.

'It's the sedatives they give you for the journey.' Whelan muttered to him quickly. His voice was deep, almost a growl. 'They make you a bit unsteady on your feet, and that's also probably why you don't remember anything. Trust me, I've seen it before. You can't remember anything now, but it'll come back.'

Vero didn't have time to ask where Whelan had seen it before. The big man seemed to know a lot more about what was going on than Vero himself did.

The faint light became much brighter, causing Vero to shield his eyes from the glare. He realised that it was only weak sunlight, but it seemed strong to him after so much time locked in the darkness of the hull. The sky was a watery grey, and a light drizzle was falling, quickly wetting Vero's dark hair through. For a moment it was quiet. A soft breeze blew, and it felt like the breath of heaven. Vero stretched, flexing his muscles where the cruel bindings had cut into his flesh. He winced as the raw weals opened again, the fresh wounds livid on his olive skin. Despite the inactivity of the trip, he still felt strong and fit. Behind him, the dropship sat on the pitted ground like a large black beetle, towering over the people standing underneath, sheltering from the rain beneath its black armoured carapace.

Then the shelling started again.

The men all ran from the cover of the dropship, the crashing of shells drowning out the sounds of their feet. Vero felt as if he was running in a vacuum. He could not feel his legs, cramped as they were from the journey, his ears deafened by the pounding of the incoming shells. The guards were herding them towards a low building built from crude concrete. Vero and Whelan stopped in front of it, with the rest of the prisoners, shifting their feet to try and restore circulation.

'Whelan.' Vero began, looking around him at the motley assortment of soldiers, 'where in hell are we? And what am I doing here? Do you know me?'

The larger man looked pointedly at the tattoo on Vero's arm.

'Vero, is it? Well, I don't know you, but you've answered your own question.' He looked grim. 'We are in hell. It doesn't matter a damn what planet we're on. All you need to know is that you're part of the Fourteenth Esine penal battalion. The "Holy Fourteenth", they call us, but the Emperor alone knows why. Are you telling me that you really don't remember anything at all? You don't even remember how you came to be on the penal ship in the first place?'

Vero shook his head. A couple of other men strode over to where they were talking. Whelan smiled, the gap-toothed grin splitting his shaggy beard in two.

‘Well, look who we have here! Which sorry rock did you two crawl out from under? I didn’t see you on the ship when I was cruelly shaken out of my beauty sleep.’ Whelan greeted the newcomers by knocking his knuckles against theirs.

‘Vero.’ Whelan continued, still smiling. ‘Let me introduce you to a couple of the dumbest dirtbags around. This here is Oban. In his time he’s been done for assaulting a senior officer, second-grade treason, heresy... Oh.’ he added at a scowl from Oban, ‘make that reformed heresy – this guy’s now one straight up, down the line catechismic fellow.’

‘That’s right.’ Oban affirmed, nodding his head vigorously. He was a sharp-featured man, with a broken nose that seemed almost too big for his face. Oban held out his clenched fist chest high to Vero, and after a second, Vero knocked his own knuckles against it. Oban smiled. He looked like he was about to say something, but Whelan interrupted him.

‘Me and Oban are old hands here. How many tours we done now, Oban? Six all told I think, including this one.’

Oban sucked in his breath. ‘Let’s call it five, Whelan. We’ll make it six when we’re off this dustbowl in one piece. Emperor willing.’

‘And this here is Creid.’ Whelan pointed at the second man, a tall, rangy figure in battered fatigues, who grinned at Vero from behind a pair of blast goggles. ‘I don’t even know where to start with this guy. You name it, he’d done it. Law of averages says he should be dead, the amount of tours this guy’s had to do. But some people are just born lucky, I guess. Eh, Creid?’

‘You said it, brother.’ Creid pulled his goggles up onto his forehead to peer at Vero. Creid’s right eye had gone, and a crude bio-implant glittered coldly in the socket. Creid noticed Vero’s somewhat startled look, but did not seem to take offence. ‘Some crazy smuggler took my first eye during the battle for Sonitan VII – stray blaster shot.’ Creid volunteered. The docs said I was lucky it wasn’t my whole head that got blown away, but they patched me up good and proper. Said it was my due reward for bravery.’ He shook his head at the memory.

‘Silence!’

A path suddenly appeared through the throng for the man who spoke. He swaggered through the crowd of men, a bulky plasma pistol banging against his lean thigh as he moved. A hush fell on the group as he turned to face them.

‘I am Commander Bartok, and I am senior officer here. I will be commanding you for this little fracas.’

The officer was young, probably less than twenty – this was most likely his first command. Despite his strong words and careful swaggering walk, he looked inexperienced and nervous. He was tall and slim, boyish even. Neat sandy hair was brushed down smartly over a broad forehead.

Whelan muttered something about ‘Damned rookies!’ under his breath, and Vero knew just what he was thinking.

‘OK, you lot, this is the end of your journey,’ Bartok continued in a voice plainly unused to being raised. ‘Where you are doesn’t matter, but I’ll tell you why you’re here. This Imperial outpost is under attack, and we’re still waiting for reinforcements. In the meantime, the Imperium has seen fit to send you lot to help us, and empty its prison ships at the same time.’ He stroked his officer’s insignia as he spoke, as if to reassure himself of his authority amongst so many men. ‘I’ll be blunt. I don’t like penal battalions – you’re all scum as far as I’m concerned – but I don’t have any choice in the matter. You’re here and you’re going to fight.’

Vero looked around. There were more men than he could easily count. Many of them were prisoners such as himself, but still more were Imperial Guardsmen, dressed in standard grey uniforms, with the symbol of a purple glove on their armbands. A purple glove... it meant nothing to Vero; he had no idea which planet he was on, let alone which unit he was meant to be fighting with. The officer continued.

‘Listen up! Our job is to defend the perimeter. And don’t think of trying to escape – there’s nowhere to go. If the enemy catches you, they’ll kill you – and if I catch you, you’ll wish they had killed you. The governor’s psyker himself has foreseen victory for us, and he’s the best telepath in this system – nothing gets past him, so we have got nothing to worry about.’

Men passed through the group, distributing lasguns and combat knives. Vero took the weapons he was given, turning the unfamiliar shapes over in his hands. The lasgun’s metal and plastic felt strange, but as he turned the butt and grasped the handle, his hands slid into position, seemingly of their own volition, and his finger caressed the trigger. It just felt right somehow. Vero shifted his weight around, rocking gently on the balls of his feet until he felt totally comfortable toting the weapon. He checked what he somehow knew was the power gauge, and flicked the safety catch on and off, noting everything. Whelan glanced at him curiously.

‘Used one of these before?’ he asked.

‘I don’t know... I don’t think so.’

‘You seem to know what to do,’ the other man said with a shrug.

Vero looked down at his hands. He felt his muscles heave, and as he looked at his fist, he saw the tendons stretch and become hard. His knuckles, when he touched them, were like steel. He felt a surge of adrenaline pump through him and strength flood through his body. Strange thoughts filled his head. Marble corridors, skies bright with stars, the low hum of machinery. He stood stock still, trying to latch onto the thoughts, but they fluttered away from him, dark as ravens' wings.

'Right, you sorry lot, lock and load, and let's go and get ourselves some action!' Bartok was yelling. 'You four.' he finished, pointing at Whelan's little group, 'you're with me. You.' he said to Oban, 'you're comms. Let's move out!' One of the Imperial Guardsmen handed Oban a comms-unit, and he hefted it onto his back without complaint.

Whelan scratched his beard thoughtfully, and looked at Vero. 'Come on, we'd better shift our butts, or else we're gonna get a bolt in the back of the neck for lack of zeal. I reckon that kid commander's dying to take a pop at somebody, and if we're in the way we're as likely to get it as anyone else. These sort of people are famous for fragging their own side as often as the enemy's. Stick with us. As I said, this is my sixth penal tour of duty. I've survived so far, even been commended for valour once. Stay close and you'll get through alright.'

Vero didn't seem so sure, but the feel of the weapon in his hands, at least, was reassuring. They set off behind Bartok, jogging alongside the other prisoners from the dropship, heading for where the sounds of battle were loudest.

'ROSARIUS, YOU FOOL, are you a telepath or are you not? Have you served me so faithfully for so long, only to have your powers fade at the moment when I need them most? What is the use of shadowy images, when what I need are facts!' Torlin's voice could not disguise his furious rage. He swept a pile of papers off his enormous desk, sending them fluttering around the chamber.

'My lord, for a second I saw something, but then it was gone. This darkness troubles me more than I can say. For a moment, I saw the raven again, then stars, marble halls. And now nothing. I am as blind now in the ether as I am in your world.'

'You fool, Rosarius, there is nothing there for my victory is certain. I don't need for you to start getting the jitters now. You're an old man; maybe you should leave the predictions of war to me. We go on.'

'My lord, I beg you...'

VERO'S UNIT ARRIVED at the perimeter defences to find themselves in the midst of a ferocious firefight. Hundreds of men were crammed into makeshift concrete battlements and the roofs of bunkers, and beyond these positions, Vero saw a sea of rubble where weeks of artillery bombardment had shattered the outer edges of the city. The air buzzed with laser fire and the roar of heavy weapons. The sounds of battle raged in his ears. He felt strong.

For the first time he could see the enemy up close. As far as he could tell, they were human like him, and from the number of casualties on this side of the wall, well armed. As they moved into position, a man he didn't know, standing right next to Oban, was hit by enemy auto-cannon fire.

One moment he was firing into the distance, the next there was a roar and tatters of the man's flesh covered them. Vero wiped the mess from his face, tasting the metallic tang of blood on his tongue. He followed Whelan's example and ducked down behind the crenellated walls. The pair of them began firing out across the ruins.

Across this nightmare landscape, Vero could see hundreds of bodies, scattered and broken, limbs cut from bodies by powerful laser fire or ripped apart by the relentless artillery. The ground shook every time another shell landed, and it seemed as if the corpses were dancing on the ground, their arms and legs jerking in time to the exploding shells.

The stones before them shook. Looking down, Vero saw gloved fingers clutch the stone of the parapet in front of him, and before he could react, the largest man he had ever seen swung over the wall. Dressed from head to toe in dull grey battle armour, he swung a huge chain-axe at Vero's unprotected head. Vero heard the rasping of the axe's teeth chewing the air as it swung towards him. Acting from pure instinct, he jumped backwards and sideways, putting space between himself and his assailant. The axe missed Vero's head, but the whirring blade shattered the barrel of his lasgun. Splinters of hot metal flew in all directions. One hit Vero's forehead, and blood welled into his eye, making him blink. Vero dropped his useless weapon, and pulled his combat knife from its boot sheath. He dropped into a crouch, balancing his weight on the balls of his feet. Somewhere deep inside his own mind, Vero found he was watching himself with a mixture of admiration and alarm.

Trying to concentrate, he ducked under the next swing and threw himself at the enemy, inside the arc of the chain-axe. He could smell stale sweat and blood, but as his opponent staggered back, Vero forced the steel point of his knife in towards the man's chest and pushed hard, shattering ribs and severing muscle.

As he plunged the ice-tempered blade deep into his opponent's chest, Vero felt

something take him over. Some savage spirit possessed him and he twisted the blade, feeling it bite into soft tissue, then brought his knee up to push himself away from the falling body, pulling the knife with him. The man gasped and died in front of him on the broken ground, his madly staring eyes clouding over as blood gouted from the wound in his shattered ribcage.

Vero staggered back as sensations flooded through him. He didn't remember ever having learnt to use a combat knife, yet at the precise moment the crazed man had leapt at him, he had felt something take him over, some instinct, some training, that had enabled him to pull the knife from his boot, twist it in his hand and plunge it fatally into the chest of his opponent.

He opened his mouth and yelled, a guttural howl of triumph – and he felt a sudden flash of memory illuminate his mind. He struggled to hold on to it, but it slipped away like a sump-eel, slithering away from his conscious will, leaving him none the wiser. But for a second, he had seen in his mind's eye the image of stars burning behind a huge glass window, heard the sound of feet rustling on polished stone, and a smell like... like something he couldn't put his finger on. Then it was gone and the moment passed.

He sensed movement to his left and wheeled around, snatching up his dead assailant's chain-axe. A soldier had vaulted the parapet, a knife gripped between broken teeth as he used one hand to pull himself up and over the concrete wall. In the other he waved a battered bolt pistol. The man was covered in scars, and his hair stuck up in tufts all over his head. They looked at each other for less than a heartbeat... then Vero clenched the lever on the weapon's handle, and the chain-axe snarled into life. He lunged, and there was a deafening scream as his opponent fell gasping into the mud, arm severed at the shoulder.

Suddenly, as if at a signal, the walls before them were being scaled by tens of warriors, swarming over the parapet. Shocked, Vero jumped back, and looked around for his companions. He saw Whelan laying down a withering blanket of las fire, as Creid and Oban lobbed frag grenades that Commander Bartok was tossing over to them from the bottom of the wall, forming a human chain of destruction.

And then Vero was fighting for his life, swamped by attackers, carried along by the press of enemy bodies. He lost sight of his comrades for a few moments as he swung his stolen chain-axe in a whirling figure of eight before hurling it at the closest foe, cleaving his skull in two. He picked up a laspistol from a fallen Guardsman, quickly checking the power cell, and cleared himself some breathing space. Grabbing Whelan's shoulder, he shouted above the din.

‘Where's Bartok?’

‘Gone!’ came the answer in a growl.

‘Dead?’

‘No chance. Run off!’ Whelan looked pale, obviously sure that his sixth tour was turning into his last.

Vero assessed the situation. ‘Fall back!’ he shouted at the others. They looked at him suddenly, and he was momentarily confused, unsure where the sudden note of command in his voice had come from. They began to retreat, using the rained walls as cover. Enemy artillery shells sailed over their heads in the direction of the city, the eerie whistle making the men shudder. Vero grabbed Creid by the shoulder, as he lobbed his final grenades.

‘Come on!’ he shouted, pulling the man away, ‘fall back, follow me.’

They did so, suddenly surrounded by fleeing Guardsmen, making for the cover of the buildings, fiery laser shots stabbing the darkness behind them. Vero lost sight of Creid in the confusion, swept away in the general rout, and he prayed silently that he would escape with his life.

There was a roaring noise next to them and Oban stumbled, his legs seeming to give way under him.

‘Whelan, help me!’ Vero shouted, slipping on the blood-slick ground. The larger man grabbed Oban’s arms and helped Vero drag him towards a ruined building nearby. They may all be dead men, with no one to bury them after this debacle was over, but Oban was a comrade-in-arms; besides, he had the comms-unit, and there was no way any of them were going to get out of this mess alive if they lost all contact with command.

They made it through a burnt doorway that led into some sort of warehouse. Molten plastic fell from the ceiling in droplets of lethal rain. Whelan and Vero put Oban down and leant against the wall, panting from both fear and exhaustion.

Vero ran one hand through his hair as Whelan knelt to examine Oban. When Whelan stood up again there was blood on his hands, and a look of concern on his bearded face.

‘What’s the score?’ Vero asked warily.

‘Still hanging in there, but I don’t think he’s gonna last much longer. Both legs are shattered, and he’s losing blood faster than I could hope to stop it. I’m surprised he’s got this far.’ Whelan looked around, eyes full of panic. ‘What the hell are we going to do now?’

Vero shook his head. He hefted up Oban’s comm-unit, but the cheaply mass-produced unit was broken, the casing cracked and scored by the explosion. He

threw it down in disgust and sat down wearily on a slab of rubble. The sound of shellfire was still in his ears. He rubbed his sore eyes, feeling the sting as acrid smoke was rubbed into them from his face. A water bottle lay half-hidden by rubble, no doubt dropped by a fleeing soldier. Vero sniffed the contents cautiously and then swigged at the brackish water inside. He tried to remember the thought that had entered his head as he killed the enemy soldier, but it was gone for good. He cursed. His memory was clear since coming to this planet, but as for what had gone before – nothing. He closed his eyes and tried to retrace his steps since arriving, searching for some clue as to who he was and what he was doing.

In his mind's eye, he saw movement: a tracked vehicle making its way towards them. Could it be safety, or the enemy? He couldn't tell, the image was unclear. He felt as if something was happening just beyond his reach.

'What is it?' Whelan asked him, looking concerned. 'Can you hear something? What's happening?'

In the corner of the room, Oban moaned, and blood ran in streams from his mouth and nose, but Vero hardly noticed. He could hear the sound of a raven cawing. He saw a face swimming in front of his eyes.

Grizzled grey hair, arrogant, aristocratic eyes, some sort of uniform, medals. He remembered how his strength had returned so quickly after landing on the planet, despite his weakness on the ship. He remembered how he had mastered the weapons, his instinctive fighting when attacked at the wall. He remembered the hardening of the tendons in his hands and his fingers twitched. And then, nothing. His mind went blank, and all he could see was the ruined building they were hiding in, and Whelan kneeling next to Oban.

'Whelan.' he said in a thick, pleading voice. 'Something's happening to me.'

'MY LORD GOVERNOR, the situation is getting too dangerous. For a second I almost saw something, but now I can see no outcome for our strategy except destruction. We must escape, and soon.'

'But the rebels are so close, how can we fail? Everything is proceeding exactly as we planned it. What can go wrong?'

'My lord, even in a psychic darkness, I can usually see something, some glimmer of intent, of the future. Here I can see nothing.' Rosarius's voice was cracked with strain. 'It is true that my powers cannot see danger ahead of us, but that is why I have cause for worry. I have never had my second sight so blinded. There are futures hovering on the edge of my vision, but there is a cloud, like ink in water, confusing, blocking everything. If I could foresee our doom, that at

least, would allow me to plot a course away from that outcome. But there is nothing.'

'Then we will leave for the bunker. It will be safer there. Perhaps I was foolish returning to the city, but I wanted to be there to watch as the city fell.'

Rosarius shook his head at his master's egocentricity. Pressing a button on the governor's barren desk, he spoke into the comm-link.

'Sergeant, prepare the governor's personal transport. We'll be there in a few minutes.' As the two of them turned to leave, Rosarius reflected, not for the first time, on the limits of his own psychic powers in not forewarning him of the ill-luck of his appointment as personal advisor to Torlin.

Leaving the ornate double doors standing open, they clattered down the grand staircase, not trusting the lift. Lights flickered as the generator struggled to cope with the demands of the power shields protecting the governor's official residence.

Under the palace, the governor's personal liveried Leman Russ armoured personnel carrier was belching black smoke, causing Rosarius to wheeze. Torlin prayed that the inefficiencies of his governorship hadn't extended as far as his own personal transport, and that the mechanics had added the extra side armour as he had demanded. His bodyguard, thirty hand-picked soldiers of impeccable loyalties, snapped to attention as he appeared. He nodded at them curtly and waved a vague salute. While the governor and Rosarius climbed into the Russ, strapping themselves into the seats, the bodyguard piled into two Rhinos. The driver sealed the hatch behind them. To Rosarius it sounded like the closing of a coffin.

The driver gunned the engine, and they lurched forward, nearly jolting Governor Torlin's head from his shoulders. 'For pity's sake,' he growled at the driver, 'be more careful. I want to get out of here alive.'

The Russ, with its escort of Rhinos, drove slowly through the burning city, slowing often to manoeuvre around ruined buildings and shell-pocked roads. The light outside was made eerie by the many magnesium flares sent up by the spotters, but the sound of small arms fire had faded. The governor didn't know whether this was a good sign or not. Even through the vehicle's filters, he could smell the smoke from the burning buildings, the stench of corrosive chemicals, burning plastic, and, faintly, the odour of charred flesh as the victorious rebels lit their celebration pyres. His city was deserted, its citizens long fled. Torlin listened with half an ear to the sound coming from the comm-link with their escort, and chewed his nails thoughtfully. Rosarius was slumped against his seat, seemingly lost inside his robes.

‘Fury One, we have snipers point two zero zero. Over.’

‘Fury Two, I see them.’

They could hear the ricochet of shells bouncing around the armoured hide of the APC, and then the returning rattle of bolter fire.

‘Snipers neutralised.’

‘Fury Base, we are on our way, ETA thirteen minutes and counting. Over.’

‘Receiving, we are awaiting your arrival. Keep us updated. Over and out.’

Suddenly, Rosarius sprang bolt upright, his eyes crazy with fear. ‘My lord!’ he exclaimed. ‘I see fire, fire from the sky!’

The comm-link from the lead Rhino screamed: ‘Incoming, incom—’

The explosion drowned out the rest of the voice.

THE BLAST ROCKED the ruined building where the two survivors were holed up, dislodging great chunks of plaster and rubble from the ceiling. Vero crept towards the ruined window, keeping his head back for fear of sniper fire. Peering across the wrecked boulevard he saw the smoking ruin of a tracked armoured vehicle, fire raging from its engine. Across from it, another similar vehicle had been completely buried in rubble from a building hit by the missiles. Between the two was a battle tank, lying on its side, the upper track still revolving, the tread shattered. The tank’s massive lascannon drooped, useless, its barrel bent beyond repair. Sparks flickered across the undercarriage and oily black liquid leaked from the cracked carapace.

The liquid slowly crept its way towards the sparking underside and Vero knew whoever was inside had only moments before the vehicle went up in flames.

‘Cover me.’ he found himself shouting at a startled Whelan. Vaulting from the window, Vero ran across the open ground, lasgun fire from snipers in the rooftops in the next block following him, spitting up shards of rock behind his feet, and the returning fire from Whelan flickering around his ears.

He leapt onto the moving track, using its motion to propel himself over the stricken tank and into cover. Bracing his boots against the wet earth, he unsheathed his knife, wedging the point of the blade into the crack between the top of the vehicle and the access hatch. He leaned on the blade, praying it wouldn’t break, but the adamantine tip held strong. With a groan of metal, the hatch opened, belching a cloud of hot smoke into the night air. Blinking against the fumes, he peered into the shattered interior.

Slumped against the control was the driver, but he could see immediately that he was beyond help: a supporting strut from the chassis had driven deep into his

chest. The gunner was moaning gently, but the blood bubbling from his mouth was arterial red, bright oxygenated blood; he would not last more than a few minutes.

In the darkness beyond he saw a figure, pinned to the floor by a broken stanchion of metal from the armoured walls of the vehicle. He looked closely. Grey hair, aristocratic eyes, the medals on his chest. He'd seen this man before.

Suddenly memory exploded inside his head like the heart of a star collapsing under its own weight.

HE WAS SITTING at the end of a low bier in a hall of highly polished marble. In front of him, a man dressed in dark robes was reading from a large, leather-bound book. Around them both were banks of humming machinery, dim green screens which flickered with images. He could hear the soft whisper of leather slippers on polished stone. Tech-priests moved gently through the aisles between the rows of ancient machines, adjusting, taking readings, reciting prayers.

The humming became louder. Gentle hands were placed upon his shoulders, easing him back so that he was lying flat on a warm, padded bench. Above him was a large monitor, and on it he could see the face of a robed man. His face was aged but unlined. The man spoke and his voice, calm and measured, seemed to bypass his ears and speak directly into his brain.

‘Averius, Callidus assassin, relax. Be still and relax.’

The procedure was carefully explained to him. ‘It’s quite simple, I assure you. A man’s mind is made up of two parts. The first part includes memory, your personality, thoughts that are unique to you. Then there is the part which controls your day to day functions, your knowledge of weapons, infiltration, poisons, everything that enables you to function as an assassin, as well as your animal instincts, the fight or flight, your powerful instinct for survival. All we are going to do is to temporarily erase the first part, allowing you to get past the normal psychic screening with which the ever-paranoid Governor Torlin surrounds himself. You will have no recollection of who you are, or what your mission is, so his sanctioned psyker will have no forewarning of you until it’s too late. You are Averius, and so this mission has the code-name Vero.’

A helmet, humming with power, moved down over his head, covering his eyes. He saw faces, scenes of battle, carnage, the rage of guns, and then a face framed by grey hair, eyes full of ambition and a palpable thirst for power. His quarry: Governor Torlin. Images from his own life, past terminations, death throes, passed before his eyes, spooling backwards, and then there was only darkness.

THE VERY NEXT thing he knew he was in a metal comet, falling to earth, his arms bound tightly behind him. Now everything was clear. He was Averius, Callidus assassin – and he had found his quarry.

Next to the governor, a terrified-looking elderly man dressed in dark robes looked at him. He muttered softly to himself. Averius leaned over to hear him better.

‘You... you are the raven?’ the psyker croaked. ‘Why did I not see you? Why could I not read your mind? Why could I not predict your coming?’

Blood trickled from his nose, his breath coming in gasps. The assassin raised his fist.

‘Be silent, psyker,’ he spat, and his hands cut off the old man’s questions.

Averius pulled roughly at Torlin, ignoring the man’s moans as the broken metal pinning him to the Russ tore through his flesh. He pulled him out of the vehicle, and dragged him to the building. He felt a wave of heat, as the leaking fuel flooded one of the sparking circuits, and the tank exploded in a ball of molten metal and plastic.

Whelan was waiting for him back in the ruined building, covering his return from the shelter of the shattered window.

‘Vero, who is it?’ he asked as the assassin stalked back into their crude shelter and flung his prize roughly onto the ground. When there was no answer, Whelan grabbed his upper arm and swung Averius round to face him.

‘Vero, what is it?’ he asked, but the assassin looked at him blankly. All previous thoughts of comradeship were erased from the assassin’s mind by the full knowledge of his mission.

‘You are in my way,’ he stated simply. He swung his hand out almost lazily and Whelan was sent flying, knocked unconscious by the force of the blow. The assassin gazed dispassionately at the prone body of his comrade, a look of surprise etched onto the man’s unconscious face.

The assassin’s fingers began to twitch and shake painfully. He looked down in alarm at the fingertips. He was suddenly wracked with pain, his whole body seeming to lift up and shake itself from deep inside. Averius could feel the polymorphine flowing through his system, and his body contorted as if it was trying to throw off its skin. He felt himself grow taller, broadening out, and from his fingertips he felt a pricking as finely honed steel needles slid out from under his fingernails, razor-sharp and slick with toxic fluids. At last he was complete: the tools of his trade, his raven’s claw, hidden to prevent discovery of his mission until he had found his prey.

The governor croaked from behind him as he came to. The assassin picked up the water bottle from where it had been lying amidst the rubble on the floor, holding the man's head up to allow him to take a sip of water. Averius wanted his quarry to be able to answer his accuser.

'My lord,' the assassin began, as he always did. 'I come at the express order of the Officio Assassinorum.'

The governor started into full awareness: his eyes focused, then opened wide with panic. 'The raven,' he croaked. His voice was wild, delirious.

Averius slapped him, lightly, on one ash-grey cheek.

'Wake up. Concentrate. I come to give you the Emperor's absolution.'

'What do you mean? I have done nothing, I have no need of absolution.' Torlin blustered.

The assassin ignored him. 'I have come to bring justice to this planet. You have been watched. Do you think your lapdog telepath could protect you from justice? He knew your thoughts, and his knowledge shone like a beacon to the Adeptus Astra Telepathica. Did you think treachery like yours could be hidden away?'

The governor was beginning to lose himself to utter panic. The assassin could see sweat starting to bead on the man's ashen forehead. He knew he was a dead man. But confession could at least bring a clean death. Absolution would be swift. The assassin pressed his fingers to the governor's temples and concentrated his thoughts.

'You thought that you could encourage these rebels, make it possible for them to destroy the Emperor's forces stationed here on your little world.' Averius could barely keep the scorn from his voice. 'Then when they were victorious, you thought you would take your place at their head. Your ambition thought to lead an army across the galaxy, carve out your own empire.'

The governor gazed into the assassin's eyes, and he could see the fires of his betrayal burning. His imagination spiralled out into the vast distance of space. Torlin's mind became full of an unshakeable image: his Emperor and erstwhile master seated on the Eternal Throne of Terra. His heart ached as the assassin forced him to confront his betrayal.

'But why should you not be annihilated along with the rest of your rebellion?' Averius pressed on. 'Death is the easy part. Anyone can die – every day countless thousands die on countless thousands of worlds. As a human being, you are less than nothing. We could have launched a strike from space, bombed your palace, destroyed you in an instant. You would have died without ever knowing why. But as a heretic you are never beneath our notice, and every

heretic who dies unrepentant is a failure of orthodoxy. I am here to accept your repentance.'

In the assassin's eyes, Torlin saw the Emperor hold out his hand towards him, saw the hand getting bigger and bigger until it threatened to engulf him. As he watched, it withered, became a claw, a raven's claw, and then fell to dust.

'You have sinned most grievously against the Emperor, and I am here as his judge and executioner. You will die, but you must die repenting your faults.'

The governor began to weep, great welling tears.

'I repent, I repent.' he wept over and over. Eventually his voice fell to a whisper. 'Forgive me.'

The assassin flexed his fingers, feeling the sharp needles fill with toxins from the bio-engineered pump inside his hand. He turned to the craven governor.

'Torlin, Imperial Governor of Tadema's World, you have sinned against the Emperor. I accept your repentance and grant you the Emperor's mercy.'

He held the governor's head still with one hand, cradling it as one would a child's, and pressed the fingers of the other against the man's face. The needles slid through the soft flesh of the governor's eyes, piercing nerves and tissue, passing the deadly poison into the man's brain. After a while, the hand holding him up opened and Governor Torlin fell lifeless to the floor.

Absolved.

The assassin stroked his hand over the penal tattoo on his forearm. The letters morphed gently into arcane runes, and he knew that they would transmit a signal through the ether to the Callidus temple. Far off in space, the Imperial reinforcements, held back until his crucial mission was completed, would swing into action and White Scar Space Marines would start dropping onto the planet. His mission was over, and he could now return for debriefing.

Pressing his thumb against the governor's forehead, he activated a bio-implant buried deep within his hand. He felt a brief flare of heat, as if he was passing his hand over a lit candle. When he removed the thumb, a mark was burned into the cold skin of the man's head. The stylised mark of a bird.

A raven.

CHILDREN OF THE EMPEROR

Barrington J Bayley

HOARSE SCREAMS AND the screech of tortured hot metal filled the air. Massive laser blasts were punching into the spaceship. They superheated the air that men breathed, set fire to everything that could burn and sent fireballs exploding through the crowded passageways.

Imperial Guardsman Floscan Hartoum found himself in a crowd of jostling, panicking men. Minutes before, the men of the Aurelian IXth regiment had been ordered to the armoury to collect their lasguns and short-swords in case the enemy should manage to teleport aboard. They would never reach the armoury now. The crippled troopship *Emperor's Vengeance* was in a state of absolute chaos. Suddenly a great howl of collective terror rose up. Down the corridor a glowing, writhing red mass had appeared, rolling down the passageway towards them.

Like the others, Floscan turned and ran. He had been at the back of the crowd; now he was at the front. Pushed from behind, he fell, then managed to get his legs under him and leaped. Behind him he heard an automatic emergency bulkhead descend with a thump.

Staggering to his feet, he found that he was alone in an empty section of corridor. He had been the only one to slither under the bulkhead as it came down. Everyone else was trapped on the other side. Floscan stood, shaking, hearing the fireball slam against the steel partition, accompanied by the agonised shrieks of his comrades who were being incinerated. He pressed his hands to his ears to shut out the cries.

The *Emperor's Vengeance* was old, centuries old. Guardsman Hartoum firmly believed that only the holy rituals carried out daily by the ship's priests kept it in one piece. But it was meticulously tended. The burnished metal ribs of the arch-roofed passageway gleamed. Effigies and efficacious runes, etched at various times by mechanics and priests, adorned the walls. But right now Floscan was blind to all this. The dying screams of his comrades fading behind him, he stumbled to an oval porthole set in a brass surround, and stared blindly out.

He was looking into the star-strewn blackness of space. Unknown miles away,

the sharp outlines of the attacking ships were visible. Even at this distance they were an extraordinary sight, a motley collection had set, of mongrelised and ramshackle craft, looking for all the galaxy as though they had each been constructed from two or three spacecraft crudely welded together. They had set upon the flotilla of troop transports, clumsy barges only lightly armed, as it emerged from the warp to take its bearings. The result was utter carnage. The makeshift character of the ships identified their crews as orks, who did not build spacecraft themselves but used whatever they could capture or scavenge from other races. How they must have roared with savage delight to see units of the Imperial Navy materialise unsuspectingly before them!

Now the flotilla's escorting battlecruiser *Glorious Redeemer* hove into view, a massive structure with baroque, gargoyle-encrusted spires and weapons turrets which were gouting plasma as it attempted to defend the troopships. But it was heavily out-gunned and had been taken by surprise. Half a dozen ork ships had surrounded it and their armament was tearing it to pieces, great crenellated chunks spinning off into space.

From another of the ork craft something came flimmering. It was followed by a juddering shock that went right through the vitals of the *Emperor's Vengeance* with a roaring noise. The passageway buckled. From all around came the cacophony of a ship breaking up. They had been hit by a plasma torpedo!

'ABANDON SHIP! ABANDON SHIP!'

The order crackled through the antique ceiling speakers. Guardsman Hartoum however, needed no prompting. He was already dashing for the nearest escape pods, scrambling over the newly-made folds and rents in the floor.

'Belay that order, Guardsman! Fight to the end against the vile enemies of the Emperor!'

Floscan pulled up sharp. An intimidating figure in a black, square-shouldered longcoat was standing stiffly at the corridor's next bend. It was the commissar, Leminkanen. The grim expression beneath his peaked cap was nothing new. He wore it all the time, but especially during the fanatical morale-boosting lectures Floscan had been required to attend.

The order to abandon ship had come from the captain. Floscan had no idea who ranked higher in this situation, captain or commissar, but he did know that if he obeyed the latter he was unlikely to still be alive one minute from now. Instinctively he moved to the nearby pod.

'You will not ran in the face of the enemy, Guardsman. Where is your lasgun?'

The last words were drowned out by an enormous squealing of metal being torn apart, followed by the terrifying hiss of air escaping from the ruptured hull. A

lasgun suddenly appeared in the Commissar Leminkanen's hand. Its lethal beam zipped past Hartoum's ear as he hurled himself into the lifepod, in the same motion striking the rune-encrusted button that closed the hermetic seal. His hand trembling with panic, he pulled the lever to eject.

Fragments rattled against the pod as it rocketed away from the disintegrating troopship. The fierce acceleration drained the blood from Floscan's brain and he blacked out.

WHEN HE CAME TO, the total silence of the pod's close confines, in which there was barely room to move, was frightening. Even the sound of Floscan's breathing seemed unnaturally loud. He dragged himself to the tiny porthole and peered out.

If there was anything to be seen at all, it consisted of spread wreckage which occasionally drifted between himself and the stars, making them twinkle. The flotilla was destroyed, and with it the Aurelian IXth Regiment. Of the ork ships there was no sign.

Guardsmen Hartoum fell back on the pod's couch, unable to bear the devastating sight.

Aurelia, where Floscan had been raised, was an agricultural world. He had joined the founding Imperial Guard regiment voluntarily, hoping for challenge and adventure. Now that he had found them, he was wishing for his quiet life back on the farm. He firmly believed in the Emperor, of course, but now he was beyond even His help. He was alone, and lost. Rescue was impossible. The navy would not even know where the flotilla had emerged from the warp. The pod would keep him alive for a few days, and then...

It would have been better to have died alongside his comrades.

Overcome with despair and even shame at his escape, Floscan buried his face in his hands and sobbed for a while. Then he took a grip on himself. He was an Imperial Guardsman, he told himself. The Emperor would expect him to keep up his courage, no matter how bad things became. He steeled himself to face death calmly. Eventually, some dread curiosity drew him back to the porthole. He felt compelled to look again into the void which was to be his grave. When he did, he gasped, his jaw hanging.

There was a planet below him.

FLOSCAN HARTOUM'S HEART was beating wildly, thoughts racing through his brain. The planet might have a poisonous atmosphere; it might hold deadly

horrors – or it might offer a chance of survival, though he would be marooned for life. It was beautiful, too, with dazzling blue oceans and shining white clouds.

The pod could already be falling towards the planet, or it could be in orbit around it, but most likely it was on a course that would take it out of range and unable to reach the shining world. Hartoum would have to act quickly. He studied the simple controls. Escape pods were manufactured cheaply, in huge numbers, and were best described as crude. Floscan's training in their use had lasted less than twenty minutes, and he barely knew what to do. Luckily, there was little to understand. There were none of the glowing icons and shining runes that would have embellished more sophisticated equipment. Instead there was, included in the moulding of the control panel, a simple prayer to the Emperor:

Fotens Terribilitas, adjuva me in extremis!

Mighty Terribilitas, aid me in my plight!

Fervently muttering the prayer, he took hold of the control levers. The gyro whined, rotating the pod to point its snub nose at the luminous world. The small rocket engine fired again, drawing on the scant amount of fuel. Floscan was sent hurtling into the planet's atmosphere.

DESPITE IT BEING his only way to see outside, Floscan dogged down the porthole's cover once the buffeting began. He wasn't sure the glassite would be able to withstand the heat that would be generated by the friction of the atmosphere.

The rocket engine had soon ran out of fuel and was silent. Escape pods were supposed to be able to land on a planet automatically, but like everything else about them the arrangements were rudimentary at best, escape for defeated Guardsmen was scarcely high on the Imperium's list of priorities, and Floscan began to feel there was something wrong. Strapped into the acceleration couch, he was being spun around wildly, tossed up and down and jerked from side to side. It was getting very hot, too, making him wish he had cut off the rocket engine sooner. He had hit the atmosphere at too high a speed. The pod's outer layer was supposed to absorb heat and then shed it by peeling away in fragments, but how thick was it? When it was all gone he would be roasted alive. So violent became the descent that Floscan passed out again.

When he next opened his eyes, he did not know how much later, everything had become still. A breeze was on his face. He could hear a distant chirruping sound, as of unknown animal calls.

He had landed.

The acceleration couch had been torn from its moorings and his face had struck the control panel. He threw off the restraint straps and felt his aching cheek. It was bleeding. Automatically he consulted the survival meter under the mangled panel. It told him that the planet had a breathable atmosphere but then he already knew that, because he was already breathing the local air. Evidently the pod had cracked open on impact. He could see daylight through the gaping rent.

His limbs seemed to be made of lead and he was finding it difficult to move, making him fearful of having internal injuries. Several times he struck the rune-inscribed button that should have opened the hatch, but it was stuck. Then he tried to undo the hatch manually. The frame was warped and he was unable to shift it.

Finally, panting with effort, he attacked the rent in the pod's side, placing his feet on one edge and bracing his back against a stanchion. The surprisingly thin shell of the pod moved, making a gap large enough for him to squeeze through.

He tried to stand up and found that he couldn't. He had no internal injuries. It was simply that his body weighed three or four times more than it normally would. He was on a heavy gravity planet. How could he survive if he couldn't even stand up? Guardsman Hartoum struggled to come to his feet. Using his arms, he managed to push himself to a squatting position. Then he heaved with all the strength he could muster in his legs, until he thought the blood vessels would burst.

'God-Emperor, aid me!' Grimacing with effort, Floscan came upright, shaking, feeling the gravity drain him of muscle power and try to drag him down. How long could he maintain himself like this?

He looked around him. The sky was a shining, metallic blue-grey, casting the landscape in a sinister glow. The terrain consisted of rocky crags and low hills to which clung shrub-like trees and crimson reeds. Altogether it was a dismal, depressing environment, over which there seemed to hang a feeling of menace.

The escape pod had cracked open on striking a rocky outcropping. Thick white parachute cords straggled from it but the parachute itself had been torn off sometime during the descent, though presumably not far from the surface or the impact would have killed him.

A stiff cold wind was blowing making Floscan shiver. Grey clouds raced overhead. He felt dizzy, whether from the blow to his head or because the heavy gravity made it difficult for blood to reach his brain he did not know. And he felt frightened, filled with foreboding. It was hard to believe that only yesterday he had been cursing the monotony of the space journey to an equally unexciting posting.

He was about to sit down again and rest when a hoarse shout made him turn round. He was standing at one end of a shallow valley. Charging along it towards him was a troop of about twenty men. They were massively muscled, evidently well adapted to the heavy gravity, with shaggy hair which streamed behind them in the wind. Some brandished spears, others raised bows and were whipping arrows from quivers strapped to their backs. And they were heading straight towards him.

Death now seemed both certain and sudden, and all of Guardsman Floscan Hartoum's gloom and uncertainty cleared from his mind. He was defenceless; escape pods carried no lasguns, which were too expensive to waste on men with little or no chance of survival. He doubted if he could run at all, let alone outdistance his pursuers, and if he took refuge in the pod he would only be left trapped like an animal.

He took a deep breath. Best take it like a soldier of the Aurelian IXth. He would go down fighting with his bare hands. But perhaps there was better than that. A flung spear clattered on the rock to his left. He managed to take a few steps, squatted down and lifted the thick wooden shaft off the ground. It was incredibly heavy in his hands, but somehow he heaved himself erect once more and turned to face the enemy, the spear-point held before him. If he could take just one of the attackers with him, he would have died with honour.

Another spear came hurtling by, together with a flock of arrows, but the aim was poor and all missed him by a wide berth. There seemed to be something strange about the oncoming natives' gait. As they came close enough for him to make them out clearly, he saw that he had been mistaken about them.

They were not men at all, they were four-footed aliens! Seen from the front they looked human enough, clad as they were in short smocks of coarse cloth belted at the waist, but from the side or the rear it was a different matter entirely. The lower back and rump were sloped and extended, and were supported by a second pair of legs. These were just like the front legs except that they were shorter, almost stubby. Both pairs seemed to work in unison, so that the creatures ran with a swift but swaying gait.

The strange spectacle startled Floscan. The induction address at his regiment's Founding flashed through his mind: 'You will be fighting aliens, mutants, monsters, heretics, all things abominable to the Emperor!' Now he was to die in fulfilment of those words!

But instead of rushing straight at him, the troop thundered past. It was charging, not at Floscan, but at something else. Floscan turned to look – and dropped his spear, paralysed with shock.

The quadruped aliens had been shouting warnings, not threats. The valley ended in a craggy hill, like many littering the broken landscape. Emerging over the brow was a monster combination of lobster, crab and armoured centipede – but of stupendous size. It almost covered the hill over which it was clambering, its bossed shell scraping on the rock, hissing sounds issuing from its oscillating mouth parts. As it descended, a giant claw reached out to seize the escape pod, crashing it like an eggshell before dropping it again.

The same claw reached for Floscan. He staggered back, straggling to maintain his footing. Yelling battle-cries, the natives sent spears and arrows clattering against the shiny carapace. They were aiming at the monster's soft parts: waving eyestalks and the broad, dripping mouth that could have taken them all in one go. Stone axes hacked at the claw that was about to pick up Floscan. Chitin splintered, purple ichor flowed and gouted, the limb was severed and lay twitching.

It was incredible to Floscan that the natives would take on this gigantic, fearsome beast with their primitive weapons. And yet they were winning. Two staring golden eyes were transfixed by arrows, a third by a spear. Hissing and screeching, the monster retreated and crawled back over the hill to whoops of victory from the four-footed warriors.

Now their attention turned to Floscan. The leader, a fierce-looking individual with fiery red hair and beard, pointed to him and bellowed an order in a guttural, unintelligible language. A second quadruped dashed forward and seized Floscan, flinging him violently across his well-muscled, smock-covered back and holding him there in a vice-like grip. The whole troop turned and raced back the way it had come, knocking the breath out of Floscan with every pace.

Once again he had been snatched from the jaws of death. Once again, most likely, to face something worse. He was in the hands of aliens.

ONCE THROUGH THE valley, Floscan managed to raise his head and was able to see just how strange and dangerous a world he had come into. It was a nightmare world with its glaring sky, tumbled landscape and gigantic lifeforms. The crab-centipede monstrosities seemed to be everywhere, ambling aimlessly in search of food. The quadrupeds managed to avoid them, but apparently there were more terrifying threats to their existence. They slowed before they had got very far, spreading out and jinking nervously.

Floscan spotted what he thought at first was a factory smokestack rearing high in the air in the distance, such as might be seen in Aurelia's industrial zone. It even belched smoke, or perhaps it was steam, and gave off vague hooting

sounds. But it was not a factory chimney. It was alive. It was flexible. And it was bending over, its reeking mouth swooping across the terrain towards the troop. The quadrupeds scattered, taking cover in rock crevices. From there Floscan watched in fascination. Briefly he saw a ring of eyes around the 'chimney's' circular rim as it picked off a crab-centipede. The monster was sucked straggling into the tube as it whipped upright once more, presumably to be drawn into an enormous stomach.

Cautiously the quadrupeds set off once more. Once out of reach of the stack-beast they sought high ground. Floscan was puzzled as to why they would expose themselves so, but from the vantage point of a craggy ridge he got the answer. The low ground was dotted with a terrifying type of plant-like animal: a house-sized bulb, vaguely resembling a cactus, from which spread dozens of wriggling, searching tentacles, radiating in every direction. Any edible animal they found was whipped back to be devoured.

A quadruped, or anything roughly the size of a man, would have stood no chance trying to cross that deadly network. Floscan's mind whirled. Just how many alien horrors did this planet have to offer? Suddenly the quadrupeds seemed out of place, as if they did not really belong here. They were like hapless insects, ready to be picked off by a host of larger creatures.

But he could think no more, only concentrate on the agony of his rough ride on the back of the native. Though he dreaded what awaited him, it was almost a relief when the quadrupeds' village came in sight. It was fortified with a twenty foot tall hedge bristling with thorns and sharpened stakes. At a shouted signal, a section of hedge was dragged inward allowing them to enter.

The scene within was tumultuous, a throng of four-footed aliens surging among huts thatched with crimson reeds. A blazing fire burned in the centre of the compound, some sort of animal roasting over it on a spit. Floscan was tossed from his carrier and set on his feet, again straggling to stand against the dragging gravity.

Great excitement greeted his arrival. The natives jostled with one another, rearing on their hind legs and uttering exultant cries. Hands grabbed Floscan and pulled him towards the fire. He shrank back, his face slack. Terror coursed through his every nerve. He was destined for the spit! He lost control of himself and began straggling desperately as the flames scorched his face.

Suddenly he was released. A chunk of smoking cooked meat, torn from the roasting carcass, was thrust into his hand. For all the ecstasy of relief he felt, Guardsman Floscan Hartoum discovered that he was hungry. He sniffed the meat. It smelled good. He bit, chewed, then began to eat ravenously. The aliens

cheered. While he satisfied his hunger, Floscan glanced from side to side. What was in their minds? Were they toying with him, treating him well, before killing him? He had heard that primitive tribes did that.

How strangely human these aliens looked, if one did not look below the waist. True, they were of fierce appearance, and were very broad-set. Floscan, who thought of himself as a burly youth, felt positively slim beside them. And of course he was weak as a child compared with their rippling muscles.

As he swallowed the last fragment of meat, the natives suddenly fell silent. Their ranks parted to allow the passage of one who had emerged from a nearby hut. He walked slowly and with dignity on his four legs. His face was craggy with age, and his hair and beard were white.

He halted before Floscan, regarding him with steady eyes. Then, to the Guardsman's total surprise, he spoke, not in the unintelligible local speech Floscan had heard earlier, but in a strangled version of Imperial Gothic, so that he had to repeat his question twice before he made himself understood.

‘Have you come to us from the Emperor?’

Floscan blinked. How could these primitives on an out-of-the-way planet speak Imperial Gothic and know of the God-Emperor? Aware that his life might well depend on his reply, he thought for a moment and then spoke in a clear voice. ‘Yes! I am a warrior of the Emperor!’

The elder was clearly not impressed by these words. He looked Floscan up and down. ‘You? Warrior? Warrior has weapons. Where are yours?’

Too late, Floscan realised he hardly counted as a fighting man by these natives’ standards. He waved his arms defiantly and became theatrical. ‘The Emperor sent me through the sky to fight his enemies. I was cast down to this land... but lost my weapons.’

‘Then you were defeated,’ the aged quadruped grunted. He beckoned. ‘Follow.’

He turned and walked with his ambling gait back to the hut. Floscan tried to follow, but after only a few steps needed to be helped by another quadruped who put out a beefy hand to support him.

Inside the hut the elder gestured to a reed pallet on the floor. ‘More comfortable lying down.’

Thankfully Floscan lowered himself to a sitting position. The old alien did likewise, folding both pairs of legs under him. ‘I am Ochtar, the Remembering One of our tribe. My duty is to remember the ancient histories, make sure they are not forgotten.’ Floscan could understand his thick accent a little better now. But the next words left him dumbfounded. ‘Do you bring us a message from the

Emperor? Is he going to take us into the Imperium and make us his children?’

To Guardsman Hartoum such an idea was not only bizarre and sinister, it was also impossible. He had been raised in the Imperial cult, and his childhood beliefs had been given additional fire during his short time in the Imperial Guard. Already the Aurelian IXth regiment had helped in the extermination of an alien race who for a while had shared their world with human colonists. Humans could not be expected to live indefinitely on a contaminated planet. He was grateful to the aliens for saving his life, but they were aliens.

‘It is the Imperium of Man, no?’ Ochtar insisted, when Floscan failed to answer. ‘We are men.’

Floscan looked at the animal-like appearance of Ochtar’s lower body. ‘Men have two legs!’ he burst out without thinking. ‘You have four!’

Ochtar sprang to his feet, glaring angrily. ‘We are humans with four legs!’ Seeing that he had frightened Floscan he calmed down and seated himself again. ‘Forgive my anger, Emissary. It is right that you should probe and question. Let me explain. Our ancestors were like you – two legs. Like you, they travelled the sky, searching for new worlds on which to live. Instead, they crashed here and became stranded. That was many, many years ago.

‘You have seen what sort of world this is. Where you come from, objects do not weigh very much and one needs only two legs to stand up. Here, everything is heavy. Not only that, but our world is hostile to human life. The ancients who crashed here realised that they would not survive long. But they had powerful magic, and they used this to give their children four legs so that they could stand up. And they gave them stronger muscles so that they could fend for themselves. By this means, our people have conquered adversity and have lived for countless generations, even though we have lost the ancient magic. Surely the Emperor will be pleased with us, and bring us into his family?’

Floscan thought hard. If there was any truth in this tale then the quadrupeds’ ancestors would have come from Mars, whose tech-priests sent countless ships out into the galaxy during the Dark Age. And yes, they would have had the ability to alter genes in the way Ochtar described as ‘magic’. But the tale was wildly improbable. ‘How did you learn the Imperial language?’ Floscan asked. ‘How do you even know of the Emperor?’

‘You are not the first two-legs to come here recently. Magson came. He wanted gemstones. In return, he gave us this. Try it on. It will help you.’

Ochtar stood and drew aside a curtain. He brought out something made of a rubbery material. Floscan’s eyes widened when he saw it. It was a heavy-gravity suit, designed to make life tolerable on just such a planet as this.

‘Magson stayed long enough for me to learn his language.’ Ochtar continued. ‘He told us about the Imperium, and about the Emperor who is our God. All our legends were confirmed! We entrusted him with a petition to the Emperor, asking for his rule and guidance. That was years ago. Since then, we have been waiting for you.’

From the sound of it, this Magson was a Free Trader. It was most unlikely he had even reported the existence of the quadrupeds to the authorities, let alone forwarded the petition to the Administratum on Terra. Usually such traders heeded no one but themselves.

Floscan guessed he had the explanation of Ochtar’s claim to be human too. Ochtar was obviously highly intelligent – to have learned Imperial Gothic from a passing stranger was no mean feat. But he must have concocted the myth on hearing of the marvels of the Imperium, perhaps confusing the Imperial Cult with some tribal beliefs and so believing it himself.

‘I can prove what I said.’ Ochtar added then, as if reading his thoughts. ‘I will take you to the holy shrine of our ancestors. We will travel at night, when it is safer. Put on the cloth that takes away weight.’

Floscan accepted the h-g suit Ochtar handed to him. Inspecting the runic icons on the shoulder tabs, he could see why the trader Magson had been so ready to trade it. The suit’s power was low. Also it seemed to be damaged, no doubt ready to cut out at any time. Just the same, he pulled it on and immediately felt relief from the crippling gravity. He stood up, stretched and smiled.

His smile vanished as he remembered that he was going to have to spend the rest of his life here.

OCHTAR LEFT HIM alone to let him rest. Floscan spent the hours before darkness deep in thought. For about an hour he became very depressed, realising that he was never to see another human being again. Whatever life was left to him would have to be spent with these four-footed villagers. Without them, he had no chance of surviving at all.

Then, once again, he rallied, and became determined to see things through. Some said the Emperor watched over all that he thought was worthy of the title Guardsman. He would prove his mettle.

He was going to have to humour Ochtar for the time being. It was essential that the quadrupeds accepted him. For the time being, he switched off the h-g suit to conserve its power. Besides, he needed to build up his muscles; eventually he would need to withstand the dreadful gravity.

Night fell abruptly, like a curtain. Soon Ochtar returned and explained the journey that lay ahead. 'We are going to visit the Temple of the Ancient Relics,' he said. 'It is deserted now, and we shall have to travel with caution, for it lies within the territory of the enemy.'

'You have enemies?' Floscan replied curiously.

Ochtar nodded curtly. 'The worshippers of the evil God of Blood. Once they were our friends, but now...'

He would say no more, and Floscan turned on the h-g suit once more. Guards pulled the hedge-gate open. They crept out, Ochtar looking to the left and right.

Within the defensive circle of the hedge, the fire was kept burning at all times so that even at night the village had a cheerful look. Outside was an eerie darkness relieved by a dim, silvery light cast by massed stars, though the sky boasted no moons. Floscan soon learned that Ochtar's description 'safer' at night did not mean 'safe' when a living tangle of hooks and barbs the size of a small armoured vehicle flew at them. Ochtar proved himself a master spearman, despite his age. Instead of trying to evade the barbs he lunged straight at them and struck home. The raving mass jerked wildly from side to side, then slumped. He had penetrated the creature's tiny brain.

Ochtar brushed a dozen sharp hooks from his skin, ignoring the trickling blood. 'They wait around villages hoping to catch children who stray,' he said. 'They're not much to worry about.'

Ochtar knew his world well. He took Floscan on a wandering route that avoided the haunts of night predators, though Floscan shivered to hear a chaos of grumbling, hissing and clacking noises all around them. After a while he evidently became dissatisfied with his companion's progress, and invited him to climb onto his back. With Floscan clinging to him he set off at a tireless gallop, the great shaft of his spear resting on his shoulder. Eventually he slowed, setting Floscan on his feet again. From then on he proceeded carefully, sliding from cover to cover and looking carefully about him as he went.

They came at last to a natural amphitheatre. At its bottom, a ruined stone temple glittered faintly in the starlight. Its shape was hard to make out. There was a circle of broken pillars, and within it the remains of a round building which might once have been domed. It must have been thousands of years old.

Alert for any savage beast which might be using the temple as a lair, Ochtar approached carefully, but all was quiet. They stepped within lichen-covered walls. The roof had gone long ago. Light from the star-clouds streamed into the circular enclosure, revealing an unexpected, wondrous display.

Strange machines! Ochtar stood in silence, allowing Floscan to take in the

wondrous view. This was indeed a holy place! Floscan felt as though he had been transported to the ancient, ancient past, to the Dark Age of Technology and the days of the Cult Mechanicus. Plainly the machines had once been arranged with reverence so that they could be worshipped as a sacred shrine, but now they were scattered across the ruined chamber, some of them smashed to pieces while others had simply fallen apart. A few, however, appeared to be still intact, matt black surfaces gleaming, rectangular display screens reflecting the starlight. They were like no machines Floscan was familiar with, and their purpose was a mystery, but there were plain signs that they were designed to be operated by humans, in the form of keyboards, knobs and slides.

‘The ancient ones from the sky came to our world with these sacred objects,’ Ochtar told him in a hushed tone. ‘By these means they could work magic, though how we do not know.’

Presumably the quadrupeds had thought better than to reveal the shrine to the trader, Magson. He would certainly have wanted to take them away with him. They represented arcane sciences superior even to those of the present-day Imperium. The shrine-machines might even contain examples of Standard Template Construction, sought throughout inhabited space!

And all this meant that Ochtar’s claim was true. The quadrupeds were of human stock! During the two campaigns in which he had served, Floscan had seen abhumans. He had seen ogryns and beastmen, degenerate forms of human of low intelligence. He could not help but compare them with the noble Ochtar. But for his weird lower limbs, he was much more human than they had been. Furthermore, the physical difference had been arranged by the arts of the ancient tech-priests, not left to the vagaries of evolution. Did they not, then, deserve the Emperor’s recognition? Yes they did!

While these thoughts whirled through his brain, a drumming sound came to Floscan’s ears. Ochtar heard it too. He capered round on all four legs, glaring, spear at the ready. ‘Worshippers of the Blood God! We were seen, emissary! Hide yourself!’

A savage roar rose up all around them. Swarming down the slope of the amphitheatre was a spear-bearing, axe-waving mob of quadrupeds clad in shaggy animal skins or armour fashioned from the shells of the crab-monsters. On their heads were helmets consisting of the emptied carapaces of smaller armoured creatures, complete with claws – or, in some cases, what appeared to be human skulls!

By the silvery starlight Floscan saw all this clearly through the gaps in the temple wall. When the quadrupeds got closer he saw, even more clearly, why

they could not be of Ochtar's tribe. Their faces were tattooed, transforming them into hideous masks. The good-natured ferocity of Ochtar's people was completely absent; instead were the bestial snarls, hate-filled grimaces and blood-curdling shrieks of those bent on wanton murder and destruction. Floscan shrank back at first, thinking to hide as he had been instructed, but when he saw the old Remembering One dash from the temple, apparently determined to defend the Emperor's emissary to the last, he could not help himself. He looked around for something to use as a weapon.

Now the attackers were within the circle of pillars. Ochtar thrust his spear into the chest of the first to reach him, bringing the savage down. Floscan grabbed up a piece of fallen masonry, hefting it despite its weight, and ran to his aid. Ochtar had his back to one of the pillars, surrounded and sorely pressed. Floscan did not think he could throw the rock – it would simply fall from his hand. He ran forward and struck with all his might against a crab-protected head, aiming for the exposed cheek bone. The quadruped merely staggered a little and turned to give Floscan a look of outrage. Sour-smelling breath washed over Floscan from a snarling, tattooed and scarred face. He glimpsed a stone axe flashing down towards his skull.

Then the axe was miraculously stayed; another warrior had deflected it. Instead, rough hands seized him. In that same moment, sheer weight of numbers overcame the straggling Ochtar, three spears lunging into him at once, his legs buckling, so that he was brought down like some magnificent animal by a yapping pack of predators. He turned piteous eyes to the straggling Floscan.

‘Tell the Emperor... we are human...’

Then Floscan, held in a steely grip, was forced to watch in horror as with jubilant screeches the killers continued to hack and stab at the body of the Remembering One until it was nothing but a bloody mass.

Eventually, leaving off their gruesome work, they turned to stare inquisitively at Floscan. As well as their elaborate tattoos, each face bore intricate tribal scars, so that it was difficult to discern any human features at all. Floscan stared straight back at the devilish masks, clenching his fists. For the moment rage burned all the fear out of him. Ignorant savages had murdered a brave worshipper of the Emperor. If only he could deliver the full vengeance of the Imperial Guard on them!

Mocking laughter arose among the quadrupeds. Did they perhaps regard him as a two-legged cripple, an object of mirth?

While this went on, something else was afoot. Roaring warriors charged into the temple and began smashing the precious ancient relics. Others collected

bundles of a dry, mossy material that grew nearby, piling it over the mysterious machines. A spark was struck from two fragments of stone, setting the floss alight. Soon the machines themselves were burning, with a brilliant white, seething flame, forcing everyone out of the temple. Suddenly there was a loud explosion and an enormous glare, bringing down the remains of the ruin and hurtling stone chunks into the crowd. Something amongst the machinery – perhaps long-dead fuel cells – had ignited.

This turn of events seemed to scare the raiders. Floscan was dragged roughly on to a quadruped's back and the whole pack set off with alarmed howls, scrambling up out of the amphitheatre and streaming into the darkness.

The ride did not last long. The alien sun was rising when the village of the tattooed four-legs came into sight. Like Ochtar's, it was protected by a high thorn hedge, a section of which was dragged inward to allow them to enter.

Set on his feet, Floscan stared around him in fascination. There seemed to be a pattern to the quadrupeds' settlements. Within the compound was the same circle of reed-thatched huts and a central fire. But here the atmosphere vibrated with savagery and violence. Fighting was a way of life; several brawls seemed to be happening at any one time.

Except for females and the young, all faces were scarred and tattooed. Floscan's eyes were drawn to a huge totem pole towering over the huts near the central fire. Carved on it was a huge, crimson, maniacally glaring face, eyes bulging, teeth bared, seeming to radiate a lust for death and battle. The Blood God.

Floscan was dragged into a nearby hut and tied by his hands to a rough wooden post. After his captors left, and his eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, he realised that he was not alone. A second prisoner was slumped on the ground, tied to a wooden post wearing a thick black greatcoat. It was Commissar Leminkanen!

FOR ALL HIS HUNCHED dishevelled state, crushed as he was by the excessive gravity, Commissar Leminkanen was still formidable. His glinting, steely gaze directed itself at Floscan from beneath his peaked cap. Floscan realised that the heavy gravity suit hid his uniform.

'I am Guardsman Hartoum, commissar, from the *Emperor's Vengeance*,' he said quickly.

'Did you desert your post, Guardsman?' Leminkanen accused in a grating voice. Then, not waiting for an answer, he added, 'I, too, was on that ship. The last thing I remember is when the torpedo struck us. Someone must have put me

in an escape pod. I was already falling through the atmosphere when I regained my senses – with my laspistol missing from its holster! Do you have yours, guardsman?’

It was a relief to Floscan that the commissar did not remember trying to ‘absolve’ a panicking trooper by executing him in the transport ship’s last moments. ‘No, commissar. I am unarmed.’

Leminkanen grunted. The commissar seemed eager to explain his presence on the planet. Could he have thrown himself into an escape pod out of self-preservation, just as Floscan had? But then he would still have his laspistol... unless the quadrupeds had taken it from him... in which case they would have searched Floscan for one too. So he had to be telling the truth. Floscan felt ashamed to have doubted him.

Leminkanen was frowning at him, perhaps puzzled to see him in an h-g suit. ‘Did anyone but ourselves escape the battle?’ he asked sharply.

Floscan shook his head. ‘Not as far as I know The entire flotilla was destroyed. The Aurelian IXth is gone!’ A sob came into his voice. ‘I may be the only one left! And no one even knows where in space we came out of the warp...’

‘You are an ignorant young fool, Guardsman. We are deep inside a planetary system! Ships cannot emerge from the warp this close to a star, except by means of a known and charted warp gate. The navy will be here to investigate when the flotilla fails to arrive. Not that you or I will benefit from it. We are in the hands of aliens, of the most savage and perverted type. In the next few hours they will torture us to death. You are lucky to have me with you. I will help you face the end with fortitude, keeping your faith in the Emperor.’

Floscan gulped, impressed though he was by Leminkanen’s steadfastness. ‘Are you sure, commissar?’ he whispered. ‘Of course I am sure! Have you seen that totem outside? I have seen that same image on half a dozen worlds. It is the emblem of a Chaos god, the god of slaughter and destruction. These aliens are its devotees.’

‘The Blood God.’ Floscan murmured. ‘That’s what they call it.’

‘Then you have heard of it too. Yes, the Blood God! That’s what it is called, all across the galaxy.’

‘But surely the Emperor is the only true god?’ Floscan had heard stories about the Chaos gods on Aurelia, but he had taken them to be fanciful superstitions. The commissar’s words sounded strange to him.

‘The Emperor is the only true god, but the Chaos gods are real, too,’ Leminkanen assured him. ‘They oppose the Emperor, and are responsible for

every evil and depravity. Here we have two enemies of the Emperor together – aliens and a Chaos god!’

Floscan could not contain himself. ‘These people are not aliens, commissar – they are human!’ he cried out. ‘And some of them worship the Emperor!’ In a rash of words he related everything that had happened since he was deposited on the planet: his rescue from the crab-monster, the gift of the h-g suit, how Ochtar had proved his claim to be human. The commissar listened closely, growing more and more astounded.

‘Standard Template?’ he breathed in excitement. ‘Are you sure it is all destroyed?’

‘There can’t be anything left after the fire and the explosion.’

‘We shall see.’

Floscan was not really concerned with that. ‘Will good tribes like Ochtar’s be admitted into the Imperium?’ he asked eagerly. ‘After all, there are plenty of other abhumans.’

Leminkanen’s voice rose in impassioned fury. ‘How many times must I tell you that you are a fool, Guardsman; ogryns and the like are natural human types. A human being with four legs is an abomination! It is a mutant! And a mutant is a child of Chaos! It cannot be allowed to live!’ His voice fell to an exhausted drone. ‘It is a good thing we have discovered this. We must try to leave a record for the investigators. There is nothing here but twisted human mutation and the taint of Chaos. My report will recommend the cleansing of this entire planet.’

Floscan sank into an appalled silence. Had the quadrupeds been listed as aliens they would have been left alone – the Imperium could not exterminate every alien race in the galaxy, meritorious though that ideal was. But now he had doomed them to extinction!

The heavy gravity was clearly too much for Leminkanen. His frenzied speech seemed to have exhausted what was left of his strength. He fell into a fitful doze. Floscan was almost sorry he could not give him the h-g suit for a while.

The worshippers of the Blood God did not seem to be in any hurry. After several hours, the crude door opened and a bearded, tattooed quadruped, smelling like a goat and wearing a jerkin made from a bristling porcupine-like skin, entered and raised a bowl of water to Floscan’s lips. Glancing at the sleeping commissar, he merely grunted and went out again.

The next time the door opened, a throng of leering, mocking faces crowded around the opening, then drew aside to reveal the result of the morning’s work. It was a large oval container, shaped from clay. Floscan easily recognised it for

what it was: an oven, able to take two men inside it. Beneath it was a fireplace already piled with wood. Jeering laughter greeted the look on Floscan's face as he stared at the thing.

He and the commissar were going to be baked alive.

The closing door shut out the horrid grimacing faces. Shortly it began to grow dark again. The brief day was ending, and outside it was growing quiet as the worshippers of the Blood God retired to their huts. Floscan could guess that the grisly death-rite, undoubtedly a sacrifice to their foul Blood God, was scheduled for the next day.

Leaning trembling against the post to which he was tied, he began thinking with terror of the excruciating death which was shortly to come upon him. Then he started thinking of his comrades of the Aurelian IXth who had suffered hardly less painful deaths on the *Emperor's Vengeance*. Some had been personal friends back in his home district of Aurelia.

He stopped shaking. Resolve formed in him. He owed a duty to his dead comrades, to his superior officer Commissar Leminkanen, and a debt of gratitude to Ochtar and his people. He had to change Leminkanen's mind about them. And above all, he wished to avoid the clay oven.

All day long Floscan had been working on his bonds, with little effect. Now an idea came to him. The h-g suit had metal ribs with squared off edges. He worked the braided cord to one of these and began to rub.

It was slow work, but in the end his patience was rewarded. The hut was in near darkness when he had worn down the cord enough so that he could break it. Finally he stood unfettered, and glanced at the sleeping form of Commissar Leminkanen. Briefly he considered trying to take the commissar with him, before realising that it would be impossible. Leminkanen's only hope – and it remained a faint one – was for Floscan to bring help.

He slipped from the hut, moving with the stealth of a shadow. As he had expected the village was sleeping, with sentinels posted atop the hedge fortification. But he spotted only two, and neither was looking his way. Floscan sidled to the hedge. The foot-long thorns made it perfectly easy to scale, and in moments he was over the top and down the other side. Crouching, he took stock. Tonight the sky was cloudy and few stars were visible. Of the terrain, there were only vague humps in the darkness. Still, he thought he could remember which way to go.

He pulled at one of the sharpened stakes which made the hedge bristle. It came out easily. Now he had a weapon. Silently, Imperial Guardsman Hartoum loped off into the lightless unknown, intent on retrieving the honour of the Aurelian

IXth.

ALL THAT NIGHT Floscan travelled, trying not to stray from his chosen direction, trying to suppress his fright. Clicking, buzzing, rattling noises sounded all around him. All too often he thought he felt a chill touch – a claw, a feeler, a rasp, a feathery antenna – causing him to lash out with the stake in a sidewise swipe or a jab with the point, often followed by the sound of something scuttling away. Dawn found him weary. Something else found him, too.

He first became aware of it as a sharp, acid smell. Then it charged from behind a rock to attack him. It was about twice the size of a horse, but in appearance like a cockroach whose head was a mass of razor-sharp sword blades sliding in and out with a scything sound, rubbing against one another. At their full extent they were as long as his stake.

He took a lesson from Ochtar. To retreat was death – therefore, attack! He ran at the animal, which in turn was scurrying towards him, eager to slice him to bits with its battery of blades. Go for the brain. Ochtar had taught him that too. A bubbling, whistling noise came from the creature as he pushed the stake in as hard as he could. Then it turned on its back, a dozen stubby legs waving in death agony.

As he withdrew the stake, from which a purple goo dripped, a sensation of irresistible weight seized him. He looked at the icons, and groaned. The h-g suit had lost power.

Floscan sank to his knees. Where was the village? The creature was but the first and smallest of the monsters that were likely to find him. Others would be gigantic, impossible to fight even with a fully functioning h-g suit. Abandoning the stake, he was reduced to crawling on all fours as his own weight settled on him, dragging him into a pit of despair. Soon even this was too much. He was forced to lie down and close his eyes in exhaustion.

The sound of a human voice awoke him with a start. A quadruped stood over him, clad in a cloth tunic, lacking facial scars and tattoos, and with no claw-bearing helmet. One of Ochtar's people! Floscan struggled to sit up. Had he made it out of the territory of the Blood God? Or were the Remembering One's tribe looking for him after he had failed to return?

'Ochtar is dead! Blood God! They have messenger from the Emperor! Going to kill him!' Floscan pleaded. Had Ochtar been the only one understand Imperial Gothic? Had he taught it to any of the otiiers? The quadruped looked at him, frowning.

'Blood God? Emperor? Blood God kill Emperor?'

‘Yes! Help Emperor!’

For the first time he noticed a large curved horn hanging from the four-leg’s neck. The tribesmen raised it to his lips and blew a long, winding blast.

More warriors appeared among the crags and began making their way down to them. Floscan’s guess seemed to have been correct: they were searching for Ochtar, and must already have been to the destroyed temple. The quadruped with the horn began bellowing commands, flinging out his arm in the direction Floscan had indicated. In moments a small horde was racing for the village of the Blood God. A hand came down, helping Floscan up and on to a sturdy back. Heart exulting, he hung on for all his worth – and realised that his limbs no longer seemed so heavy. Glancing at the h-g icons, he grinned. The suit’s photoelectric stripes had been soaking up sunlight. The h-g field was re-energised!

For ferocity the assault on the village would have done the Imperial Guard credit. Taken by surprise, the devotees of the Blood God forayed through the gate at first, attempting to defend their settlement outside its bounds, but they were soon driven back. The attacking warriors swarmed up over the hedge and down into the compound, climbing it as Floscan had. He mounted it too and watched from the top as axes rose and fell, spears jabbed, blood flowed.

The Blood God’s followers were fighting for their homes, fighting for their lives, fighting for their savage god, and they laid about them as if demented, their bestial roars filling the air. But Ochtar’s people were fighting for a god, too – the Emperor! It was hard to say who would be the victor at this stage; it was as if the butchery would continue until there was almost no one left. Floscan chose his moment to drop into the compound and dodge his way to the prison hut near the newly-constructed oven, which he was glad to see had not been used yet.

In the dim interior, Leminkanen looked up at him in wonderment. He did not even speak as the Guardsman untied him and helped him to his feet, supporting his weight.

‘We have been rescued, commissar!’ Floscan yelled. ‘By four-legged men who are loyal to the Emperor! Did I not tell you?’

Leminkanen’s response was a look of sour disbelief and an emphatic shake of his head. Nevertheless, he allowed Floscan to guide him gingerly to the door.

There, an extraordinary sight met their eyes. The fighting had all but stopped. Someming had wrapped itself around the village. It was like a millipede, many hundreds of paces long, which had coiled around the circular hedge-wall, though it overtopped it by nearly half its height again. From each of its countless segments sprouted a pair of tentacles tipped with eyes, lashing down into the

compound to pick up defenders and attackers alike, whipping them over the hedge to be devoured.

Perhaps the smell of blood from the battle had attracted it. The spectacle seemed to send Leminkanen into a frenzy. He pushed Floscan away from him and staggered through the doorway, forcing himself to stand erect.

‘I must make my report! Order the Exterminatus! Guardsman, if I am martyred you must deliver it into the right hands!’

From within his greatcoat he whipped out a flat grey plate with a keypad. It was his personal log. Feverishly he began typing, oblivious of what went on around him.

‘Look out, commissar!’ Floscan lunged to knock the commissar aside, but it was too late. A slithering tentacle had seized him, pinning his arms to his body.

With a barely heard gurgle, Leminkanen was gone.

Floscan snatched up the log-plate as it fell to the dusty ground, nimbly avoiding a flailing tentacle as he did so. By now the tribesmen were dealing with the millipede in their own fashion. They had set the hedge alight, but so intent was the beast on its feeding that it ignored the flames until it was too late. It, too, caught fire, writhing soundlessly, crushing huts in its agony while an indescribably foul smelling smoke filled the air.

Everything in the village was burning now, everything was being flattened as the blazing monster flexed and rolled, forcing villagers and invaders to flee as one for the exit or trample their way through the glowing cinders of the collapsing hedge, the battle forgotten. Floscan too was caught up in the stampeding rush.

Out in the open the two sides drew apart, glaring at one another. It was doubtful if they even remembered what they were fighting over, but they were ready to begin again.

Then a glinting movement high in the air made Floscan look up. His heart leaped. His prayer to the Emperor was answered. All around Floscan, four-legged men dropped to their knees. A large, shining metal shape was descending. It was an Imperial shuttle craft.

‘THE AURELIAN IXTH’S sole survivor handed this in, sir. It appears that Commissar Leminkanen was making his last report when he was killed.’

In his brass-ornamented cabin, Captain Gurtlieder, commander of the battleship *Ravenger*, took the commissar’s data-slate from his officer’s hand. He noticed that the log was not closed. Leminkanen had not even had time to finish the

report or key in his code.

He tapped a key and began to read.

Emergency report by Commissar Lemuel Leminkanen LX/38974B on unnamed planet in Cluster FR/891 in vicinity of Warp Gate 492.

This planet is of no value to the Imperium. It is a feral world of the most extreme violence and would be very difficult to colonise. It contains a primitive semi-intelligent alien species unlikely to advance further. Recommend no action particularly on account of

There it ended. 'Who is this survivor?' Captain Gurtlieder asked.

'Just a regular Guardsman, sir. He was with Commissar Leminkanen to the end. He appears to have acquitted himself well in difficult circumstances. I shall recommend his promotion when he is reassigned.'

The captain handed back the data-slate. 'Very well, see that this is passed on to the Administratum.'

DOWN IN THE crew quarters of the *Ravenger*, Guardsman Floscan Hartoum was feeling very nervous indeed. Once aboard the battleship, he had contrived to be alone for a while. He could not resist taking a look at Commissar Leminkanen's open log.

Leminkanen had opened the log using his personal code, but had got no further than the heading, stating time and place. The millipede-creature had eaten him at that point.

So Floscan, appalled at his own audacity, had made an entry of his own. He couldn't close the entry, of course, since he didn't know Leminkanen's code. So he had left it in mid-sentence, hoping that made it look all the more authentic.

He dreaded to think what would become of him if it was ever discovered that he had made a false entry in a commissar's log. But he had realised that neither Leminkanen nor any other agent of the Administratum would ever look favourably on the quadrupeds once their human ancestry was known.

A mutant is a mutant. They had altered themselves too much. Well, now they would be registered as aliens and left alone. Floscan had already heard that Warp Gate 492 was to be marked as unusable on the charts, a deadly trap now that it had been discovered by the orks, who must have been lurking nearby waiting for Imperial vessels to emerge. The planet would receive no more visitors.

For the hundredth time, he wondered if it was true that the Emperor saw everything. Did He know what Floscan had done? And did He approve or abhor Floscan for it? Floscan took it as a good sign that no one had questioned why he

was wearing an h-g suit.

A war between good and evil was shaping up on the quadrupeds' planet. He hoped, of course, that the Blood God would be defeated. But whatever the outcome, it was going to be settled by the quadrupeds themselves. Though sadly, outside of the family of man.

THE BLACK PEARL

Chris Pramas

THE ENGINES OF the gunship roared as the Thunderhawk tore through the atmosphere. Inside, Interrogator-Chaplain Uzziel of the Dark Angels led four squads of Space Marines in the Litany of Battle. As he chanted the sacred words to prepare them for the imminent combat, Uzziel ran his fingers over his rosarius but today he did not pray in the prescribed Imperial manner. Today his fingers kept returning to the single black pearl on his string, the only pearl that really mattered. He had earned it by coaxing one of the Fallen Angels to repent and receive the Emperor's mercy.

That wretch was much on his mind as he finished the prayer, the enthusiastic voices of his twenty Marines joining him to boom the final refrain. As their voices faded, Uzziel pushed back his cowl. Filled with his faith in the Emperor, he launched into his sermon.

'Brethren.' he began, 'it has been a long journey and now, at last, battle is upon us. Before we engage the enemy, I want to tell you all something. This is no ordinary mission.' He paused to let this sink in. 'My brothers, this is a quest, a most holy quest to bring back to the Rock... a sacred artefact, long-missed.' Uzziel stared intently at the Marines. He saw men of varied origins, but they were all united in their blazing faith in the Emperor, in their oath as Dark Angels and in the Sacrifice of the Lion. He wished they could understand the full meaning of their mission but knew such a revelation could shake their faith. Today, he needed that faith.

'Should we succeed.' he continued, 'your names and deeds will long be praised in the halls of the Rock. We will sit in the company of the Chapter's greatest heroes. So fill your heart with the grace of the Emperor, remember the sacrifice of our blessed primarch, Lion El'Jonson, and gird yourself with the righteousness of faith!' Uzziel leapt up, possessed by holy fury, and slammed his fist to his chest. 'For Jonson and the Emperor! Victory or death!'

'Victory or death!' the Dark Angels returned his salute with barely suppressed savagery.

Uzziel smiled. With such men at this back, how could he fail?

IT WAS NOT SO long ago that Uzziel, newly-promoted to the position of interrogator-chaplain after his inspirational leadership on the Bylini campaign, had walked the halls of the Rock, the giant space fortress that was home to the Dark Angels. He remembered the looks of envy on the faces of his comrades when he brought back his first Fallen Angel for interrogation. They couldn't believe that one so young had succeeded where they had failed. Many had dismissed it as pure luck but Uzziel knew better. To prove it, he swore to extract the confession due from the renegade himself.

It was not the first oath Uzziel had ever sworn, but it proved the most difficult to fulfil. The traitor had roundly mocked Uzziel, the Dark Angels and the Emperor. He told gleeful stories of his hundreds of campaigns as a mercenary, an endless catalogue of rape, murder and torture. Uzziel was not a man who shrank from violence, but he believed that it needed to serve a greater, righteous purpose. The wanton slaughter of the Fallen Angel's tales had sickened him, and he had to suppress a powerful urge to rip the wretch before him limb from limb, to pay him back in kind for each of his deeds.

Uzziel had fought off his immediate desire for vengeance. First, the confession. The Fallen Angel had seen the hatred in Uzziel's eyes and laughed. 'What's the matter, whelp, do my stories frighten you? Can't you stand to hear how a real Marine goes to war? You can keep your cowls and your prayer beads, monk. A true warrior goes into battle with lust in his heart, lust to spill the red blood of victory and taste the glory of war. That's what you lack and that's why you'll always lose!'

Those haunting words were with Uzziel even now, echoing sickeningly inside his mind as the Thunderhawk screamed through the atmosphere. Despite the passing of time, the revulsion the chaplain felt recalling that moment was immediate and real. He relived his rage at the renegade's insolence and his desire to make him pay for that insolence.

Back there, in the interrogation cell, he had let his emotions overwhelm him for just a moment. Uzziel had backhanded the traitor, then grabbed him by the hair and slammed his head hard against the stone wall. 'You seem to have forgotten which one of us lies in chains, filth!' he had shouted. 'I've already won. We need only determine if the Emperor will have mercy on your soul!'

'You understand nothing!' the Fallen Angel spat back. 'After all you've heard, you still don't know why I fight, do you?'

Uzziel had stepped up close to his prisoner and the two had locked eyes, faith and faithlessness colliding with unmatched fury. 'You fight because you are

tainted by Chaos.’ Uzziel had begun. ‘You had your chance to serve the Emperor and you failed him utterly. You, and Luther, and all of your wretched cohorts chose to betray he who gave you life!’

The Fallen Angel had stood firm in the face of these accusations, and stared back at Uzziel, his every feature screaming defiance. Snarling like an animal, the traitor had lashed out at his tormentor with venomous scorn. ‘I was once like you, monk! Loyal, righteous, dutiful.’ He paused to spit, as if the words themselves were poisonous. ‘Despite my virtues, I was left behind on Caliban by Jonson while he went fighting across the galaxy.’ The renegade’s harsh voice became strained with emotions long-buried as he continued, ‘While my brothers fought battle after battle, I was left at home with the invalids, the women and the children! What did I do to deserve such a fate? I was born to go to war, but the Lion and the Emperor turned their backs on me and the others.’ His voice rose to a scream of pure hatred. ‘That’s why I’ve fought and killed my way over more worlds than you could even name. And now you think you have the right to judge me!’

The Dark Angel had said nothing at first, so shocked was he by the monstrosity of the traitor’s replies. How the Fallen twisted the truth to hide their own failure! It would be tragic, had the traitor’s hatred not driven him to a life of mindless butchery.

In sadness, the interrogator-chaplain had turned away and walked towards the heavy iron door that sealed the room shut. The rusted hinges gave out a tortured shriek as he forced it open, but he paused before leaving his prisoner alone to ponder his sins.

‘Heretic.’ he intoned, ‘I had hoped for more from you. I prayed that some trace of the Lion still lurked in your soul, but I can see I was wrong. By your unrepentant actions you force me to use any method to save your soul. So let it be done.’

The door slammed shut, entombing the Fallen in the bowels of the Rock. Over the following days, Uzziel had displayed his expertise as he ground the Fallen Angel down. The weak would call it torture; Uzziel knew it to be justice. Eventually, when his tools were sticky with the traitor’s blood and the screams had ceased, the Fallen Angel had broken. He had admitted his guilt, and that of the other Fallen Angels, and repented in full for his crimes. Ultimately it had been a pitiful spectacle, as the broken man, once one of the Emperor’s elite, poured out his litany of evil deeds.

As Uzziel prepared to give the man the quick death his repentance had earned him, the Fallen Angel had spoken for the last time. ‘Confessor.’ he had

whispered through broken teeth and swollen lips, 'there is one thing that I have yet to tell you.' His body was wracked by a coughing spell of such length and intensity that Uzziel had thought the repentant traitor might pass away. Hacking and wheezing to draw more of the stale air into his tortured lungs, the Fallen Angel was finally able to speak again. 'I'm sorry, confessor, but this deed fills me with regret as no other.'

'Go on, brother,' Uzziel had urged. 'Your repentance will not be complete until you tell everything.'

The Fallen Angel had nodded slowly before continuing. 'Confessor, three years ago I was in the Knight Worlds serving as a mercenary. My unit raided the eldar exodite worlds regularly and I relished the opportunity to spill the blood of such a spineless and decadent race. We went on countless sorties, hunting down the cowards and slaughtering them as they deserved.' At this point, the Fallen Angel's voice had become animated once more, talk of bloodletting seeming to arouse him from his pain. 'On one such raid, a band of eldar took refuge in an ancient place of power. They called on their gods, but the gods did not listen to their pathetic cries. We stormed the place and left not one of them alive.'

The Fallen Angel had paused, caught up in the memory. The obvious pleasure on his face had brought bile to the chaplain's lips. 'It was while we were sacking the place that I found it, confessor – an artefact of power lost since the breaking of Caliban.' The Fallen Angel had abruptly stopped again, overcome with another spasm. The spell did not pass until he had coughed up a wellspring of his own lifeblood.

Uzziel grew concerned, knowing the signs only too well. Even a Marine's body could take only so much punishment, and the chaplain had pushed this one past its breaking point.

Consumed with impatience, Uzziel shouted, 'What did you find, damn you? Tell me!'

The prisoner had pulled his body erect. Blood ran freely from his mouth, giving an evil cast to his grin. 'Fear not, confessor, I am not finished so easily.' The pain had washed over him again, but he fought it this time and forced out the words by willpower alone. 'In the temple, confessor, amongst the bodies of the slain... I found the Lion Sword.'

Uzziel had been stunned. The sword of Jonson, lost these ten thousand years? It could not be.

The Fallen Angel had seen the disbelief on Uzziel's face, but he was determined to be heard. 'I know it sounds fantastic, confessor, but I swear it is true. I could never forget the sword of Lion El'Jonson.' His confession delivered,

the Fallen Angel's body had gone limp.

Uzziel's mind had swirled with confusion. How could he trust one of the Fallen? But if he didn't, the confession was meaningless. Still undecided, the chaplain had held up his prisoner's head, wiped the blood from his mouth, and spoken to him gently. 'Brother, what did you do with the Lion Sword?'

The Fallen Angel's life was near its end. He had struggled to talk, only a barely audible croak escaping from his lips. 'I was afraid... to face up to what I had done... so I left the sword where it lay.' His body had convulsed, blood gushing from his nose and mouth. Choking and spitting, his words ran together. 'I regret that I didn't take it. I could have returned it... to where it belongs, but I... failed again. Forgive me, confessor.'

Uzziel had almost been overcome in that moment. He could not deny the power or dignity of the confession, but neither could he forget the deeds that had brought his prisoner to the dungeons of the Rock. Holding the Fallen Angel's head, he had used his dagger to deliver the man's absolution. 'Brother, you are forgiven.'

THE JUDDERING OF the Thunderhawk snapped Uzziel from his reverie, and he shook his head to clear his mind, so clear and vivid were the images. Steeling his brow, Uzziel took his hand from his rosarius and returned his mind to the task at hand. They had a battle to fight, and he would not let himself be distracted when his men's lives were at stake. Striding the length of the command bay, Uzziel called the sergeants to go over the assault plan again, before checking his weapons one last time. Moments later, the Thunderhawk reared up suddenly, engines screeching like a bird of prey, before hitting the ground with a bone-jarring crash. The bay doors opened and the first squad rushed out, their bolters singing a song of death. The symphony of battle had begun.

AILEAN STOOD AT the Martyrs' Tomb, his fist clenched over the runes around his neck. Even now, days after the dream, the runes of divination gave him no clue to its meaning. He had dreamt of a bird of prey, a sword of power and a man with no soul. He looked for a pattern but saw only blood. He opened his senses but felt only a cold wind running through him, as if a great evil were about to awaken.

From the east came Dragonlord Martainn of the Seana. Tall, gaunt and wrapped in robes of black, Martainn looked like a wraith on his great steed. From the west rode Dragonlord Barra of the Eamann. Long hair flowing in the wind and brightly polished armour shining in the sun, Barra appeared blissfully

unconcerned. Laughing and joking with his warriors, the Eamann leader signalled for a halt. His rival did the same. Leaving their retinues behind, the two chieftains rode up on their great stomping beasts. Their dragons hissed and spat at each other, raking their claws in the earth and lashing their tails in eager anticipation of battle. Both leaders dismounted, but did nothing to calm their beasts.

Ailean could see that their frosty exteriors belied the raging anger within. Let their hatred flow, he thought. They will need it this day.

Barra, so raucous amongst his men but now icily intent, spoke first. 'Warlock, why have you summoned us to this accursed place? Are not the living trouble enough?' he asked, shooting a vicious glance at Martainn. 'Why disturb the dead?'

'We meet here because the spirit runes demand it.' Ailean pronounced.

'I've no time for your cryptic comments, warlock.' Martainn growled. 'I fear neither the living nor the dead.' He looked meaningfully at Barra and the ancient temple ruins. 'I've only come here at your bidding and out of respect for our king. But Ailean, know this: the so-called knights of this coward cut down my son in cold blood and there will be no peace between us until the matter is settled.' He looked keenly at Ailean. 'Blood has been spilled, warlock, and blood will be spilled again before I am satisfied!'

Barra spat in disgust. 'Your son died because he was feeble and that is no fault of mine.'

Martainn bristled at the insult, gripping his sword so tightly that his knuckles cracked. He took one step forward and drew his blade halfway out of its ornate scabbard. Before the warlords could take further action, Ailean was between them.

'Martainn,' shouted the warlock angrily, 'draw that sword now and I will banish you from Lughnasa!' He pointed his spear at the enraged Seana warlord and invoked the power of his office. 'None shall disturb the King's Peace until judgement has been passed. Now sheathe your sword and hear my judgement.'

The warlock and the Seana dragonlord faced each other while Barra watched with wry amusement. Martainn slowly pushed the sword back into its scabbard and removed his hand from the hilt. 'My quarrel is not with you,' he said. 'Pass your judgement.'

Ailean remained between the two dragonlords, and pondered a moment more before speaking. 'It pains me to see eldar lords consumed with hate,' he uttered, 'but sometimes our follies can still serve a higher purpose. I find the grievance of Dragonlord Martainn of the Seana to be legitimate and I decree that it should

be settled on the field of battle.'

Both dragonlords smiled. Martainn stared past the warlock and addressed his rival. 'Barra, you have robbed me of my only son and for that I will make you pay.' With that, he strode off to his dragon. The mighty beast reared and gave out a roar of defiance, as Martainn pulled his laser lance free from his tall saddle levelling it at Barra. 'Prepare to die, Eamann scum!'

'The reckoning is indeed at hand, Seana.' Barra shot back, swinging up into his own saddle. 'Your mate will weep the tears of Isha before nightfall.'

'Both of you, cease your prattle!' Ailean ordered. 'The Seana and the Eamann do not fight each other this day.'

'What?' Martainn shouted. 'You promised me vengeance, you traitor!'

'I did not.' Ailean said icily. 'I said you would settle your grievance on the field of battle, and so you shall. But you will not fight each other.'

'What in Khaine's name are you talking about?' the bewildered Barra asked. 'Who are we to fight, if not each other?'

A deafening sonic boom rolled over the temple. Looking up, all could see the Thunderhawk gunship swooping down upon them. Ailean was immediately forgotten, as the two warlords whipped their beasts around savagely and returned to their men. War cries echoed across the field as the two veteran warriors prepared the exodites for battle.

Ailean, alone in the ruins, returned his attention to the runes. He did not hear Martainn's angry voice drift across the battlefield, proclaiming, 'Barra, this is not over!'

The runes were speaking to the warlock again and the critical moment bore down upon him. He reached for the runes of summoning and cleared his mind. 'The hawk.' Ailean whispered, 'we fight the hawk.'

In the Martyrs' Tomb, only the dead could hear him.

UZZIEL STOOD AT the top of the Thunderhawk's landing ramp, heedless of the shuriken that hissed all around him, and scanned the battlefield. Squad Beatus was in the vanguard and they had found cover behind a low stone wall some thirty paces ahead. To the right of the wall, there was a small copse of trees; Squad Strages was busy hauling its heavy weapons under the cover it promised. Beyond the Marines' makeshift line was the target of their attack: an ancient eldar temple.

Uzziel stared intently at the old ruins but could not see any defences. Good. The chaplain jogged down the ramp of the gunship, unhindered by the heavy jump

pack strapped to his back. Squad Beatus was already receiving heavy fire from eldar warriors, who seemed determined to keep the Space Marines pinned down behind the stone wall. In the distance, Uzziel could see exodite dragon knights mounting their beasts and preparing for battle. It seemed that his surprise attack was barely a surprise at all. The eldar were obviously ready for them and Uzziel could only wonder how. Whether he liked it or not, however, the battle had been joined and was escalating rapidly. He could analyse it later; now he had decisions to make.

‘Squad Beatus, stay in cover. Watch for a counter-attack.’ Uzziel began. ‘Squad Strages, on my signal, lay down a suppressing fire with your heavy weapons. Squad Redemptor, left flank and support Squad Beatus. Squad Ferus, you’re with me!’ He started forward, followed by the members of Squad Ferus, whom he had chosen specially for the mission. Armed with chainswords and plasma pistols, they had a well-earned reputation for savagery. Uzziel could see that only the tight leash of command prevented them from jumping forward to engage the enemy immediately.

Soon, my brethren, soon.

Behind them, the Thunderhawk fired its massive thrusters and clawed its way back into the sky. Uzziel activated his communicator again. ‘Gunship Cestus, adopt Strafing Pattern Primus until the enemy is engaged. Then fire at available targets and be prepared for pick-up.’

The gunship’s commander replied without pause, ‘By the Emperor, it is done.’

Uzziel turned to Codicier Ahiezar, the librarian accompanying them on this mission. Uzziel had never fought with Ahiezar before, but he knew him by repute. Unfamiliarity in the heat of battle always worried Uzziel, and he prayed that his wavering of faith was unwarranted.

‘Ahiezar, do you detect any psychic activity?’ asked Uzziel.

‘No, nothing yet, interrogator-chaplain.’ The Librarian’s voice was cool, as if he were unused to being questioned.

‘Then remain vigilant, brother.’ Uzziel ordered, ‘and shield us from the witchery of the cursed eldar!’ Turning his attention back to the enemy, the chaplain could see that the dragon knights were massing in two impressive formations.

As alien warriors frantically lashed their beasts into action, the Thunderhawk dropped back out of the clouds. Screaming low over the battlefield, the gunship swivelled its multi-lasers at the two clusters of mounted eldar. Deadly accurate pulses of white-hot energy swept over the dragon knights, blowing holes in their elaborate armour and slicing through their raging beasts. The Thunderhawk

roared past the decimated eldar battle groups, its mighty engines kicking up dust and debris as it swung around for its next attack.

Even in the face of the withering fire from above, the eldar reformed their ranks with admirable discipline. The earth shook as the two eldar formations charged the Space Marine line. Filling the air with cacophonous battle cries, the alien warriors held their weapons high as their beasts' clawed feet propelled them violently towards the waiting Dark Angels.

Calmly, Uzziel noted that the rained temple, clearly visible behind the streaming pennants and laser lances of the exodites, now seemed all but undefended. If Uzziel could break this charge, the Lion Sword would be his! 'Squads Beatus and Redemptor, hold fast and concentrate your fire on the left-hand group. Squad Strages, you take the right-hand. In the Emperor's name, fire!'

Guns erupted all across the Dark Angels' line. Standing firm, the Space Marines rained destruction on the charging knights. On the left, shell after shell slammed into the massed eldar ranks, sending knights tumbling from their saddles and riddling the dragons. At the same time, the heavy weapons of Squad Strages were blowing holes in the other eldar battle group with missiles and plasma.

Despite the rain of destruction, a few of the dragon knights on the left completed their charge. With wild shouts of 'Seana!' they smashed into the Space Marines' line. The bolters, so effective just seconds before, were all but useless in close-quarter fighting. The eldar drove home their laser lances, blasting Dark Angel power armour open, sending them flying backwards or impaling them on their wicked tips. Others were trampled by dragons, torn apart under clawed feet.

Uzziel wasted no time. 'Squad Ferus, for Jonson and the Emperor, attack!' He immediately activated his jump pack and let the jets propel him towards the swirling melee. Codicier Ahiezar and the rest of the squad were a heartbeat behind, howling with delight now that they had finally been unleashed on the foe. As the Dark Angels arced over the battlefield, the remaining eldar foot troops brought their shuriken catapults to bear on them.

The air was immediately filled again with vicious discs of razor-sharp metal. Uzziel cursed aloud when Brother Alexius fell from the sky, his armour punctured in a dozen places. The chaplain commended his fallen soul to the Emperor, and added a prayer of thanks for the stout armour that had protected him from the hail of eldar fire.

Moments later, he landed, power sword in his right hand and bolt pistol in his

left, scant feet from a bellowing dragon knight. Uzziel watched in horror as the enraged eldar warrior plunged his laser lance through the visor of Brother Caleb, killing him instantly. Seeing Uzziel, the knight tried to pull his lance free, but he was already too late. Filled with righteous fury Uzziel raised his bolt pistol and unloaded half a dozen shells into the eldar, blasting him right out of the saddle. The dragon opened its gaping jaws and howled a forlorn cry at the loss of its master. Uzziel swung his power sword in a mighty arc and silenced the beast with the bite of steel. The dragon's body collapsed to the ground, pumping steaming blood onto the scarred soil. Uzziel looked down at the lifeless body of Brother Caleb and whispered, 'Rest easy, brother. You are avenged.'

Looking about for fresh opponents, Uzziel saw that his assault squad had broken the charge of dragon knights. With deadly chainswords and white hot plasma, Squad Ferus had smashed the proud eldar and continued to rain death down on them as they fled. Codicier Ahiezar stood proudly over the smoking skeletons of two knights he had annihilated with crackling blue bolts of psychic energy.

Dead and dying eldar lay everywhere, their lovingly-etched armour shattered and useless, their loyal dragons quivering in death-throes and filling the air with the scent of charred meat, their brilliant pennons broken and trampled in the blood-stained grass. The pitiful survivors had turned their mounts around and were fleeing the battlefield in disarray, unable to defend themselves from the preying Thunderhawk that continued to harry them with death from above.

The chaplain quickly regained his wits. Realising that the eldar temple was now undefended, he turned to the librarian and yelled, 'Ahiezar! Follow me!'

Again the jets of his jump pack lifted him across the battlefield. As he flew through the air, aiming for the eldar temple, he saw that it had become mysteriously obscured. A dense and swirling mist covered the area where Uzziel knew the temple to be. Cursing, the chaplain cut his jump short and landed just outside the fog. The codicier landed behind him, force sword at the ready.

'What witchcraft is this?' Uzziel asked angrily.

The librarian licked his lips. 'I am unsure, interrogator-chaplain. Perhaps there is a warlock in the area. I sense something,' he said in a slow voice, 'but I've never felt its like before.'

Uzziel turned back towards the mist. He hardly needed Ahiezar to tell him that there might be an eldar witch in the temple. 'If there's a warlock in there,' the chaplain growled, 'he'll taste the Emperor's steel.'

Chanting the Lion Hymn quietly to himself, Uzziel stalked into the mist. An unearthly quiet immediately enveloped him and he quickly became disoriented.

The chaplain couldn't hear himself praying – he couldn't even hear himself breathing. Surrounded by swirling darkness, the Dark Angel could barely see five feet in front of his hand. He felt he was floating in limbo.

Gritting his teeth against the sorcerous manifestation, Uzziel tried doggedly to keep walking forwards, but it was difficult to keep to any kind of bearing. Strange thoughts crept into his mind, and his concentration drifted. He saw the Emperor's Golden Throne, but the body inside was a decayed corpse. Twelve hooded figures surrounded the throne, laughing as they carved up the Emperor's corpse with cruel knives and issued edicts in his name. Nearly overcome with the force of the vision, Uzziel stopped and shook his head violently, willing the evil thoughts to cease. He was a Dark Angel and a chaplain, and nothing would shake his faith!

A startling flash of crimson lit up the miasma in front of him, illuminating an enormous serpentine mouth bearing down on him. Uzziel barely had time to fling himself out of the way, as row upon row of razored teeth lunged for his head. The beast loomed over him, its gargantuan body an indefinable shadow in the mist. As he tried to scramble away, a long tail snaked out of the darkness and thrashed him to the ground. The Dark Angel could see the beast's mouth, open as if screaming in rage, but in the all-enveloping dream-mist he heard nothing. He could only feel the awful shaking of the earth as the dragon drove its weighty bulk forward on monstrous limbs.

That dreadful head descended again, but this time Uzziel was ready. As the widening jaws plunged to engulf the chaplain, Uzziel rolled beneath the beast's slavering maw, jamming his power sword through the underside of its cavernous mouth. Black blood burst out of the wounded beast as the sword drove through scales to pinion the creature's jaws shut. The beast reared back in pain, clawing and lashing in fury. Uzziel tried to pull his sword free but it had become deeply embedded in the dragon's sinew and bone.

Desperate but determined, Uzziel refused to release his grip on the power sword, and found himself lifted bodily off the ground by the enraged monster. Suspended twenty feet off the ground, Uzziel struggled to use his bolt pistol as the crazed beast thrashed in agony. Straining his muscles almost to breaking point, he heaved himself upwards and planted the pistol against the skull of the monstrosity. Ignoring the searing pain in his tortured shoulder, he squeezed the trigger again and again until he had emptied the magazine. The mighty dragon fell to the ground with a soundless crash, the top of its head a bloody ruin. Using his last reserves of strength, Uzziel managed to twist his body away as the dragon fell, narrowly avoiding a crushing death under the monster's dead

weight.

Heart singing with the joy of victory, Uzziel staggered to his feet. Planting his foot on what was left of the monster's head, the chaplain yanked his power sword from its fleshy sheafh. He was alive!

Even as he stood panting and exhausted, the body faded into the mists and was gone.

The chaplain's sword arm was burning with pain, but Uzziel would not slow. Such sorcerous defences could only mean that the prize was near at hand.

'The Lion Sword!' The words were sweet upon his whispering lips.

Uzziel began chanting the Lion Hymn anew and strode forward. He would not be stopped. Suddenly, a wall emerged from the gloom in front of him – the temple, at last! Stumbling over the rained remnants of the temple wall, Uzziel entered the Martyrs' Tomb. The mist was thinner here, mostly swirling about the floor and walls, and a pulsing red light illuminated the place. Uzziel stepped into the temple and immediately his boot sank into a deep sludge. Puzzled, he bent down and dipped his glove into the mire, raising it to his face through the fog so he could see its nature. He realised, to his revulsion, that his gauntlet was covered with congealed blood. He gasped. What cursed place was this? As if in answer, dim figures staggered from the mist.

Uzziel brought his sword up, ready to defend himself, until he saw them more distinctly. From all around him they came. Eldar men, women, and children, walking towards him, their bodies bearing terrible wounds. Here a man with no legs pulling himself across the floor, there a woman staggered with her shattered brain exposed. Uzziel's battle-trained eye could see the horrid tearing wounds of chainswords, the gaping holes that only bolter shells could make, flesh seared by boiling plasma. Countless victims with countless wounds, the eldar dead paced towards him. They said nothing to the chaplain, merely stared in silent condemnation.

With savage clarity, Uzziel realised what he beheld. These were the victims of the Fallen Angel and his cohorts, brutally murdered so many years ago.

Stunned, the chaplain could do nothing but stare back at their accusing faces. As the dead approached, Uzziel fought an overpowering urge to flee. The phantoms assaulted his mind, threatening to overwhelm him with madness. He cried out to the Emperor but his prayer was swallowed up by the hungry silence.

Surely nothing is worth facing this for? The seductive whisper snaked through his mind. Your wounds justify an honourable withdrawal.

Uzziel almost obeyed the voice in his head. Almost! Then he thought of his

brethren, even now valiantly fighting and dying in the Emperor's name. Could he abandon his quest after his men had served him so well, giving up their very lives so that he might bring the Lion Sword back to the Rock? Of course not! He was compelled forward by his loyalty to the Emperor, by his oath as a Dark Angel, by the sacrifice of the dead. For Brother Caleb and all of his fallen brothers, he knew he must fight on.

'The Lion Sword will be mine, no matter the cost!' he roared in rage. Driven by will alone, Uzziel lifted his sword and slashed at the nearest of the walking dead. It melted to nothing before his blade. Relief flooded his mind as he banished the apparition. As a chaplain, he recognised too well that fear was the weapon of the dead, and he had proven himself fear's master.

With mounting confidence, Uzziel passed through the dead, their images fading before him, and strode purposefully towards a low slab of rock, an ancient altar. Uzziel paused for a moment, before raising his power sword high and bringing it down hard, cracking the time-worn stone in two. Something metallic glinted beneath the shattered stone. Uzziel pushed aside the rubble, revealing an ancient eldar box of intricate design. Cold sigils blazed on its surfaces. It had the look of some kind of weapons case and crackled with arcane energies. Maybe this was the stasis field generator that held the Lion Sword?

With trembling hands, Uzziel touched the box. As he did so, he heard an unearthly humming noise. Sound had returned to the world. Uzziel looked around to locate its source, but could see little despite the thinning mists. Even as he searched, the noise increased in pitch to a keening wail, followed by a gurgling scream. Spinning around, Uzziel saw Codicier Ahiezar framed in an emergent doorway, sharp metal sticking through his chest. The metal slowly withdrew and Ahiezar collapsed into the sludge of blood.

The fallen body of the slain librarian revealed a tall eldar wearing rune-encrusted armour and carrying a silvered spear. The eldar weapon was alive in the warlock's hand; it purred with pleasure now it had tasted the librarian's blood. The exodite spun the spear around and held it before him.

'I am Ailean, warlock of the King of Lughnasa. I know why you have come and I am here to deny you. You, human, have no right to disturb this place and you may not have what that stasis chest holds.'

Uzziel shook with rage. 'You speak so of the sword? No right? I have every right! That sword is the birthright of my Chapter and has been kept from us for ten thousand years. I will take it back to my brethren or die in the attempt. So I swore.' The chaplain removed his hand from the stasis box and gripped his power sword with both hands, wincing at the daggers of searing pain which

streaked from his injured arm. He was ready to face the meddling warlock.

‘You humans are strange,’ Ailean said, seemingly unaware of the towering anger that filled the Dark Angel. ‘You should thank us for keeping a sword such as this safe for as long as we have. Instead, you come to my world, kill my people and disturb the dead. Is the sword really worth all that? It would be better locked away for all eternity than loosed again upon the world.’

‘Heretic!’ Uzziel screamed. ‘You will feel the Emperor’s wrath for your insolence!’ Uzziel charged, his power sword tracing a deadly arc. Ailean, apparently ready for such a manoeuvre, parried the blow swiftly. He tried to unleash a bolt of psychic energy at the Dark Angel, but found his power neutralised by the Space Marine’s armour. Uzziel smiled inside his helmet, and silently mouthed a prayer of thanks for his Aegis suit. He would not fall to this warlock’s witchcraft.

Ailean tried another psychic blast and this too was quashed. The warlock began to take the duel more seriously, shifting his spear into an offensive position and lunging with deadly intent at the raging Dark Angel. Uzziel met the spear stroke for stroke and the lance howled as it was thwarted time and again. The two were well-matched opponents, Ailean fighting with graceful elegance, Uzziel countering with berserk fervour.

Eventually, the sheer power of Uzziel’s blows began to tell, and he drove the warlock back into a lichen-covered wall. Ailean still tried to pierce Uzziel with his hungry spear, but the Dark Angel grabbed the weapon’s haft with his injured hand and held it fast.

The chaplain longed to sheath his blade in the eldar’s flesh, but couldn’t at such close quarters. Instead, he struck the warlock full in the face with the hilt of his power sword. The blow drove Ailean’s head into the wall with an audible crack, and the warlock joined Ahiezar in the mire of blood.

Wasting no time, Uzziel sheathed his power sword and staggered towards the stasis chest. He was breathing heavily and bleeding from a number of spear wounds. Without further ceremony, the chaplain picked up the long box and all but ripped it in two. He could feel the energy dissipate as the alien device cracked open and the stasis field disappeared.

Reaching inside the shattered chest, Uzziel pulled out a sword encased in a ornate sheath. The shock near overwhelmed him, and he leaned on his own blade for support. Up to this moment, he had been prepared for disappointment and lies. A Fallen Angel could never really be trusted. But how could he have passed up any opportunity to recover the Lion Sword, no matter how remote the chance?

Now he, Uzziel, stood in this alien temple with the very sword in his hand! What a moment!

Uzziel began to pray fervently, thanking the Emperor and Lion El'Jonson for choosing him for this moment. The sword came free of the sheath and shone with a blinding brilliance. The remaining fog and mist burned away in seconds, exposing his surroundings for the first time. Uzziel was alone in the temple, save for the bodies of Ahiezar and Mean. Now Uzziel could see that the once elegant temple was mostly a ruin. The towers that once flanked it had fallen and parts of the roof had caved in. Lichen covered the walls, which somehow glowed with an inner light.

A little calmer now, the chaplain examined the sword. The hilt was carved of gold, in the shape of an angel, its spreading wings forming the weapon's guard. Overcome by its beauty, Uzziel took the sword to a place where the sun shone through. There it gleamed in the light for the first time in ten thousand years. Uzziel hefted the blade and tried its balance. Perfection. This was a sword of kings, of conquerors. As if in a vision, he could see himself at the head of armies, wielding the unmatched blade and vanquishing the enemies of the Emperor.

His mind swam with heady visions of power and conquest. With this sword none could stand before him. Surely he was chosen! A weapon of greater power even than that wielded by Azrael, Supreme Master of the Dark Angels. Now Uzziel knew his time was upon them all! This was the evidence and the power to silence all his most jealous brethren back at the Rock.

Uzziel gasped involuntarily and laughed aloud that fate had sent him to this place! Soon he would be hailed as the greatest interrogator-chaplain in the Chapter's history, greater even than the legendary Molocia! All would fall before him, all would bow to him, and not just those of his Chapter.

No, now was the time to put away petty differences of Chapter and creed. The Imperium would be his. Swordbearer, conqueror, first of a new breed of primarch. Giddy with elation and power, Uzziel saw the universe laid bare for his legions, ready for the taking. This was decreed. It must be.

As Uzziel continued to gaze at the gleaming weapon, he noticed an inscription on the blade. This is below your notice, Lord Uzziel, an inner voice chided him, and so persuasive was its tone that he almost ignored the battle-worn lettering. But the small cold presence of his conscience pulled at his mind. Looking closer, he squinted to read the ancient letters. Each word pierced him like a dagger to his heart.

TO LUTHER, FRIEND AND COMRADE-IN-ARMS. MAY YOUR FAITH

BE YOUR SHIELD. LEJ.

Uzziel staggered back and dropped the sword. Immediately, its treacherous power was broken, and he realised the full extent of his folly. This was not the Lion Sword, but the Sword of Luther, arch-traitor and most hated of the Fallen Angels. Once a noble weapon, it had been twisted by the power of Chaos as Luther led the Fallen Angels down their doomed path.

And had Uzziel not felt its power, listened to its lies and been ready to make it his own? How could he have been so blind? Tempted by the very sword that had killed the Lion! The chaplain shuddered with horror, thinking of the Lion's noble sacrifice. What folly! And so many noble eldar dead!

Thoroughly disgusted, steeped in self-loathing, Uzziel carefully sheathed the cursed blade. He would not be tempted again. He would not listen to the now-raging voice. He must, he *would* deny it!

Inside his helmet, his communicator crackled to life. 'Interrogator-chaplain, this is Gunship Cestus. Strong eldar reinforcements are heading towards us from the north. What are your orders?'

Uzziel paused a moment. He considered ordering his men away and staying to die at the hands of the eldar. 'I deserve no better!' he howled in torment at the sky.

But he could not. As a chaplain and a Dark Angel, he had to face up to his actions. Sighing heavily, he replied at last, activating his communicator link. 'Tell the troops to fall back by squads to rendezvous point secundus and meet there.'

'Yes, sir. By the Emperor, it is done.'

Uzziel walked to the stone doorway, where the prone form of the dead librarian lay. He looked out over the battlefield; more bodies lay everywhere. Many of his brethren had fallen today, their lives thrown away because of him and his pride. He had wanted to find the Lion Sword so much that he had let himself be fooled by one of the very traitors who had torn the Dark Angels asunder. Even the heretic had been given a merciful death as well!

Now there would be consequences, of that he was certain.

He considered leaving the sword in the temple, but too many had died for him to go home empty-handed. It was a part of the Chapter's history and as such belonged in the Rock. Perhaps Asmodai would know what to do with it.

Asmodai. He could not think of the aged Space Marine, the greatest living interrogator-chaplain, without touching his rosarius. Asmodai's rosarius had only two black pearls, and that was the work of hundreds of years. Uzziel looked at

his own black pearl, the source of so much pride just hours ago. Now revulsion filled his soul at the sight of it.

Slowly, Uzziel unclasped his rosarius and slipped off the black gem. He placed it carefully on the hard rock of the temple floor before bringing the heavy boot of his power armour down upon it. The black pearl shattered and Uzziel ground it to bitter dust beneath his foot.

Next time, there would be no doubt.

ACCEPTABLE LOSSES

Gav Thorpe

‘CAPTAIN ON THE flight deck!’

The assembled aircraft crews of the Imperial cruiser *Divine Justice* moved as one. Captain Kauri strolled into the vast hangar to the resounding clang of one hundred boots stamping in near-perfect unison on the steel-mesh decking. Walking two strides behind the stocky flag captain, Flight Commander Jaeger looked over his new comrades.

Most were dressed in regulation fatigues, standing smartly where they had been working or lounging before their commander’s arrival. Jaeger’s eye was drawn towards a particular crowd off to one side, towards the rear of the aircraft bay. There was something surly about their bearing: their uniforms were not quite so smart, their posture not so rigid as the other flight crews; their attention not totally focused on the newly arrived captain. Instinctively, Jaeger knew that they were Raptor Squadron, his new command.

That explained a couple of things, at least: Kauri’s slightly amused look when he had greeted Jaeger earlier, and the glances from the other flight commanders during his initial introduction. So, the Raptors were in need of some discipline? Well, Jaeger would soon knock them into shape.

Jaeger realised that Captain Kauri was addressing the flight crews and tuned his wandering mind into what his new commander was saying.

‘...and I expect every one of you to accord Flight Commander Jaeger the same amount of respect and co-operation you gave to his predecessor, Commander Glade. Proceed with your duties; we break from dock at 0500 hours.’

With a nod, the captain sent the gathered men back to work and turned to Jaeger.

‘I see from your look that you’ve already spotted Raptor Squadron.’ he said plainly.

Jaeger nodded slightly, keeping his expression as neutral as possible.

‘They’re not as bad as they might seem at first.’ Kauri continued. ‘There are some damn fine pilots there, and with the right man in charge they’ll make a fine showing. I think you’re that man, Jaeger, and I’ll be watching your progress with

interest.'

'Thank you, sir.' Jaeger replied, pleased the captain had confidence in him. 'I don't think you'll have anything to worry about from Raptor Squadron.'

'Go and meet your men then, I'll see you later. Give them a chance and they'll prove themselves worthy of the Emperor's Navy.'

The two officers exchanged respectful bows before Kauri turned on his heel and strode from the flight deck. Jaeger took in all the sights, sounds and smells of his new home. Although most flight decks had similarities, each always had a unique odour, a different edge on the lighting, variations in layout and a hundred other small details that made it special. The flight deck of the *Divine Justice* had space to carry, prepare and launch ten of the massive Marauder bombers, along with a complement of ten Thunderbolt fighters. All of the aircraft were currently in their docking bays, each nestling in its own arched alcove along the sides of the flight deck. Above the flight commander's head, a labyrinthine criss-cross of gantries and steps hung in the distant shadows, centred around a pair of enormous cranes capable of picking up and transferring the planes to the launching bays. The chatter of the flight crews filled the cavernous chamber with a constant murmuring, and the fragrances of the tech-priests' unguents and incense hung heavy in the air, mixed with the more mundane smell of oiled metal and human sweat. Taking a deep breath, Jaeger started towards his new flight crews.

AS HE STRODE across the flight deck, Jaeger quickly inspected his new men more closely. Despite Kauri's parting words, he was not impressed with what he saw. They slouched amidst a scattering of crates, idly passing the time arguing heatedly, playing with dice or just sprawling around relaxing. All but a few wore loose-fitting, light grey fatigues, presenting a drab, uninspiring sight. Some of them turned to look at the flight commander as he strode briskly over, and a couple managed to get to their feet. One of them, a gunner from Jaeger's own plane judging by his insignia, pulled himself upright and snapped off a sharp salute.

'Fine day!' proclaimed the gaunt-looking gunner. 'May I welcome you to the auspicious role that is flight commander of Raptor Squadron.'

One of the others, a burly-looking bombardier, shot a murderous glance at the man.

'Shut it, Saile. The new commander don't want to hear your creeping!' the bombardier warned, his sweat-beaded brow knitted in a glowering scowl.

'That's enough from both of you!' Jaeger snapped, irritated by their

indiscipline. 'Let's get something straight right from the start: I don't like you, any of you.' Jaeger made a point of looking them over slowly. 'From what I've already seen, you are a bunch of shoddy, undisciplined, no-hope slackers. Well, not any more!

'You will address me as Commander Jaeger. Unless directly addressed by me, in non-combat situations you will only talk to me by first receiving permission, in the manner of "Permission to speak, Commander Jaeger?". Are those two simple facts absolutely clear?'

The men looked at Jaeger in stunned disbelief.

'I believe the words you are looking for are, "Yes, Commander Jaeger".' he prompted, eyebrows raised.

Their reply was quiet and faltering, but it was a start.

'Ahm, permission to speak, Commander Jaeger?' came a quiet voice from one of the men around them.

Jaeger looked at the flyer who was stepping lightly between the others to stand in front of him. He was swathed in the voluminous robes that marked him out as one of the tech-adepts, responsible for the mechanical and spiritual wellbeing of the planes, as well as the 0 itself. The man's neck was criss-crossed with wires and scar tissue, and an interface plug dangled from the back of his right hand. In battle, the tech-adept would literally wire himself into the Marauder bomber, monitoring any damage and prompting the plane's repair mechanisms into action.

'Granted.' Jaeger said with a nod.

'As I am principally a member of the Adeptus Mechanicus, and only aligned to the efforts of the Imperial Navy by secondary venture, I consider your treatment of myself and the other tech-adepts as subordinates in a very serious light.' the tech-adept said, his chin raised proudly to look the tall flight commander full in the face.

Jaeger grabbed the man's robe, pulling him up until he was on the tips of his toes. The adept's hood fell back, exposing more bio-wiring. The coils of thin cable sprung from his shaven head like metallic hair, attached to his scalp through a hundred scabrous incisions in the skin. Some of the others stepped forward but were stopped in their tracks by a murderous glance from their new commander.

'While you fly my planes, I am your commanding officer!' Jaeger snarled. 'I don't care what rank you have in the worship of the Machine God – on this flight deck and in the air, you answer to me! Make no mistake, I have every intention

of turning this squadron into a respectable fighting unit. Cooperate and you may come through it with your lives and your rank. Go against me and I'll chew you up and spit out the pieces.'

Jaeger let go of the adept and stalked off, cursing himself for losing his temper. But if there was one thing that Jaeger hated, it was sloppiness. He had seen too many good men die because of another's carelessness, and he wasn't going to let it happen again.

JAEGER ORDERED THE men to stand down, pleased with their performance during the training session. As they sloped off to their communal sleeping chambers, Jaeger headed back towards the bunkroom he shared with the other three flight commanders. Jaeger wiped the sweat from his face with the palm of his hand, and was glad to be leaving the heat of the flight deck, warmed beyond tolerance by the bombers' engines. As he walked down the corridor towards the officers' quarters, Jaeger heard the clump of boots on the metal deck and turned. Marte, one of his gunners and a veteran of many years service, jogged slowly up, saluting as he approached.

'Permission to speak, Commander Jaeger?' the man asked cautiously.

'What's on your mind, gunner?'

'Excuse my saying, but I don't reckon you're as hard-edged as you make out, sir.' The gunner was sheepishly inspecting the backs of his hands, avoiding Jaeger's stare. 'We – that is, the other lads and me – we were wondering how you ended up as our flight commander. I mean, what did you do wrong?'

'What are you getting at, gunner?' Jaeger rested his hands on his hips. 'And look at me when I speak to you,' he added, annoyed at having to address the top of the gunner's bald head.

Marte looked up reluctantly to meet his gaze. It was obvious that the other crew members had put him up to this. 'Well, getting stuck with Raptors,' the gunner explained quietly. 'I mean, you seem like you know what you're doing, so why did you end up in this dead-end assignment?'

' "Dead-end"? Raptor Squadron may not be spectacular, but you're all competent, dedicated men. Why should this command be so bad?' Jaeger asked, genuinely puzzled.

'So you've not heard the stories, sir?' The gunner's face was a picture of incredulity.

'I don't listen to rumours, I deal with facts and my own experiences.' Jaeger snapped, annoyed that the gunner considered the flight commander the type to

listened to scuttlebutt.

‘Very wise, sir.’ the old gunner said quickly. ‘Look, Raptors get the worst deal, it’s that simple. If there’s some dirty work to be done, we’ll get it. You must have seen the records, we’ve got the highest loss rate for the last three tours. That idiot Glade didn’t help either, Emperor rot him.’

To Jaeger, the gunner was making no sense at all. ‘What about the other Marauders?’ he asked. ‘Devil Squadron?’

‘The Devils?’ The gunner laughed, a short and bitter noise. ‘They don’t know the meaning of hard work. Flight Commander Raf is Admiral Veniston’s nephew, if you take my meaning...’

The veteran gunner was shaking his head, as if his surprise at the flight commander’s ignorance had reached a new level. Jaeger had had enough of being treated like a naive youth who had just earned his commission.

‘You and all those other scurrilous gossips can rest assured that by the time I’m finished, Devil Squadron will be polishing our boots.’ he promised, his voice hard, his eyes boring into the gunner. ‘Remember, a crew is only as good as they think they are. Captain Kauri is behind me on this: all you need is a morale boost and things will fall into place. Now go and get some rest!’

The old gunner hesitated for a moment, giving his commander a doubtful look, before hurrying back down the corridor, leaving Jaeger to his thoughts.

Raptor Squadron wasn’t inherently bad, the flight commander mused. They’d just started believing the things that were said about them. If it was true that the admiral’s favouritism for his nephew was costing lives, he’d have a few things to say about that. For now, all he could do was watch and wait. And hope that things weren’t as bad as they seemed.

‘EMPEROR’S BLOOD! THAT’S a sight to set a man’s heart trembling!’ Admiral Veniston exclaimed. Only eight weeks into her patrol, the *Divine Justice* had run into serious trouble. Magnified on the main display screen of the *Divine Justice*’s bridge was a scene of utter destruction, the like of which the ageing officer had not witnessed for many years. The terrible wreckage of a Navy cruiser, what little remained, spun slowly across the stars. In the distance could just be made out the dark shape of an ork hulk, the source of the carnage. One of the command crew looked up from the glowing green read-out in front of him.

‘Surveyors identify her as the *Imperial Retribution*, admiral. 80% structural damage – she’s taken one hell of a pounding.’ the crewman reported.

Veniston nodded. ‘Aye, she has. And the question is: how do we avoid a similar

fate?’

Captain Kauri took a step forward, a glint in his eye. ‘I suppose dropping back into the warp and forgetting we found her is out of the question?’

As the command crew chuckled, Veniston directed Kauri into the conference chamber with a flick of his head. Within the small wood-panelled room, the two were able to speak more freely.

It was Veniston who spoke first. ‘Seriously, Jacob. How the hell are we going to take out that damned hulk?’

‘The tech-priests made a long-range assay.’ The captain activated a comm-screen and brought up a rough schematic of the hulk. ‘The bulk of the weapon systems are located near the front. If we could come at it from the rear we could probably give her enough of a pounding while limiting the return fire.’ As he spoke, Kauri drew his finger over the screen in a wide circle, to finish pointing at the hulk’s main engine block.

The admiral frowned. ‘There’s only us and the frigates, we can’t take her on from more than one direction without being taken apart piecemeal. If she can bring her guns to bear, even the *Divine Justice* won’t survive for very long. Just how do you suggest we get the greenskin scum on that hulk to sit still long enough for us to let rip with the torpedoes and batteries, Jacob?’

Kauri rubbed his short-cropped beard. With the press of a rune, he imposed a series of arrows and notations onto the diagram of the hulk. ‘Well, now that you mention it,’ he said, ‘I have had one idea. The orks won’t have a problem hitting something the size of the *Divine Justice*, but that doesn’t mean they’re invulnerable...’

THE ORDER TO prepare for launch had been issued an hour ago. Now the flight crews were hurrying to finish their last tasks. Jaeger’s second-in-command, Phrao, was leading the crew in prayer, kneeling with heads bowed beneath the fuselage of their Marauder, chanting hymnals with admirable concentration. Jaeger looked up to where Arick, one of the dorsal gunners, was clambering around on top of the Marauder’s fuselage.

‘What’s with them?’ Jaeger called up.

Arick looked down from where he was polishing the twin barrels of his autocannon atop the spine of the Marauder.

‘Do it every time. S’posed to bring the Emperor’s blessing.’ the gunner called down.

‘I guessed that, but why beneath the Marauder? Isn’t it more practical to do it in

the open?’

Arick shrugged, although the movement could hardly be seen inside the thick folds of the vacuum suit he was wearing. ‘Meant to bring the Emperor’s power through the plane. You know the score, you must’ve seen other crews doing something like that before every flight, a special ritual. Like Jeryll reading out the Articles of War, and me polishing this damned big gun, though I know the maintenance crews have oiled it plenty since we got our orders. Surprised you don’t do something like it yourself.’

‘Yes... Yes, you’re right, there is something I nearly forgot.’ Jaeger replied distractedly.

Standing in front of his massive Marauder, Jaeger called for his crew to gather in front of him, ready for briefing. His gaze turned to the nose of his craft and the gilded Eagle Rampant that shone from it. The design was repeated on the gloves of his dress uniform and printed on all of their helmets. It was the blazon of the Raptor Squadron. A fine name, but was it a fine crew?

As his crew congregated, he looked at each of them in turn. Over the two months that had passed since leaving the dock at Bakka, he had come to know the men better, although only real combat would show him their true mettle. There were the gunners, Arick, Marte and Saile; each had proved his accuracy on the simulation ranges, but word was that Arick lost his cool in the heat of battle, and Saile was basically a coward. Still, trust not in rumour, Jaeger’s old captain on the Invincible had taught him.

The tech-adept, Ferix, had been no problem since Jaeger’s rough treatment of his fellow Adeptus Mechanicus at that first encounter. Ferix was frowning, however, as he climbed down from the Marauder’s engine, obviously annoyed that his attempts to consecrate the Marauder to the Machine God had been interrupted. Jaeger would give him time to finish his rituals before they launched; there were enough variables to worry about without offending the Marauder’s spirit with hasty ceremonies and hurried prayers.

The last over was Berhandt, the bullying, muscle-bound bombardier. For all his rough accent and large frame, the flyer had a shrewd mind. He’d have to be watched, however, Jaeger had decided, since much of the pessimism of the squadron seemed to originate from him, one way or another.

Once all five of his crew were present, Jaeger stepped onto an empty munitions crate that the servitors had not yet moved. Clearing his throat, he spoke out strongly and surely, wanting to instil his crew with the confidence that they demanded. If they didn’t believe in him now, their hesitation or doubt could get them all killed once they were in battle.

‘As you know, many bomber crews have certain customs to ensure the Emperor’s grace and no bad luck. Well, this is something of a tradition for me, a little ceremony I go through before my first combat flight with a new squadron, just to make sure nothing bad happens – to any of us. Don’t worry, it doesn’t take very long.’ Jaeger assured them, seeing their distracted gazes. They wanted him to get his little pep-talk over as quickly as possible, and he could empathise with that.

‘It’s an old tale from my home planet. I come from Extu, in case you hadn’t heard already – bit of a backwater by many of your standards, but we’ve a strong sense of honour and courage, so I’ll not be running away from any fights.’

Jaeger saw nods of agreement from Marte and Arick. The others shuffled their feet uneasily, embarrassed by being told a story. Not all cultures were like the one on Extu, Jaeger knew; in some societies tales were seen as childish rather than important teachings for adults and children alike. Though he sometimes cursed others for their ridiculous habits or customs, in his years of service in the Imperial Navy, Jaeger had learnt to accept all manner of viewpoints and outlooks on life.

‘Anyway, to my tale, as told to me by Faith-Sayer Gunthe. It tells of the great Emperor Eagle, whose claws are sheathed with fire and whose eyes are all-seeing – and of how he banished the Chaos Serpent from our realm. One day, the Chaos Serpent, the eternal enemy of the Emperor Eagle, steals one of the sacred eggs from the Emperor Eagle’s nest whilst he is away hunting. The Chaos Serpent takes the egg back to her lair, and wraps herself about the egg to keep it warm, to make sure it incubates. When the Emperor Eagle returns, great is his dismay to find one of the sacred eggs missing. He searches far and wide, but he cannot see the missing sacred egg.

‘Meanwhile, the egg hatches, and the young Eagle is welcomed into this world by the Chaos Serpent. “Greetings,” says the Chaos Serpent, “I am your mother, you will learn what I teach you and listen to my every word.” And the Eagle learnt the foul, twisted ways of the Chaos Serpent.’

Jaeger looked over his men, pleased to see they were all paying attention now, even Ferix whose own religious beliefs taught him to worship machines over human beings.

‘The young Eagle’s radiant golden feathers were tarnished with spite.’ Jaeger’s mouth twisted in disgust as he pictured the fallen Eagle in his mind. ‘His glistening eyes were misted with false hope and his claws were blunted by disobedience. All the while, the Emperor Eagle continued his search, seeking ever further for his lost sacred egg. At last, one day, he came across the Eagle,

now fully grown, and at first the Emperor Eagle was glad. But as he spoke to the lost Eagle and saw what it had become, the Emperor Eagle became most displeased. He commanded the young Eagle to remain where he was and sought out the Chaos Serpent. He found the treacherous, false creature hiding in the shadows nearby, but the Emperor Eagle's keen eyes still spotted her.'

Jaeger half-closed his eyes, remembering the first time he'd heard the tale when he was a small child. The next part was his favourite and had served to inspire him all the way through his upbringing by the Schola Progenium and through his flight training at Bakka. It was this that had first given him the ambition to be a pilot, and when times had been hard, he'd told himself the story in his mind. Each time it gave him the strength to persevere through his hardships.

As the other flight crews had finished their pre-flight rituals, they had drifted over to listen to the flight commander's speech. Now all twenty-nine of them stood in front of him, gripped by his words. Taking a deep breath, Jaeger continued.

'Swooping down upon his massive pinions, the Emperor Eagle seized the Chaos Serpent in his flame-wreathed talons and swept the Chaos Serpent high into the air. For a long time they flew. "Why do you attack me so?" enquired the Chaos Serpent, in feigned ignorance and innocence.

' "You have taken one of mine own from me," said the Emperor Eagle, "and twisted it with your dark ways so that it is no longer tall and proud and fulfilling its righteous destiny. That is a crime for which there can be no mercy." And the Emperor Eagle dropped the Chaos Serpent into the bottomless dark pit that is the Eye of Terror, condemning the Chaos Serpent to eternal imprisonment, agony and torment for what she had done to the young Eagle.'

Pausing for a moment for dramatic effect, he could see that the tale was having the desired effect on the assembled crewmen. The men were listening with rapt attention now, and for the moment would listen to, and more importantly believe anything he cared to tell them. His own pride was inspiring them, giving them the confidence to follow him wherever he led them.

'The Emperor Eagle returned to his offspring,' Jaeger continued, his intense gaze meeting the stare of each of the men in turn. ' "You have been done a great wrong," the Emperor Eagle said, "made that much greater for I cannot correct it, but can only punish the guilty. There are no amends to be made. You are my child and yet I cannot suffer you to live now, twisted and malignant as you are." The young Eagle looked at the Emperor Eagle and the nobility of his birth rose through the filth of the Chaos Serpent's false teachings. "I understand, oh great Emperor Eagle," and the young Eagle bent back his head to show his breast to

the Emperor Eagle. With one sweep of his flame-wreathed claws, the Emperor Eagle tore out the young Eagle's heart, burning it to ashes – for none can live that have been touched by the Chaos Serpent, not even the children of the Emperor Eagle.'

The sycophantic gunner, Saile, clapped enthusiastically; a few smiled in grim appreciation while the rest awaited his explanation with dutiful silence.

'For we are the talons of the Emperor!' Jaeger said, his voice deep and full of conviction, his right hand unconsciously making the shape of a grasping claw across his chest. 'Just as this ship is named the *Divine Justice*, so too must we be the instrument of the Emperor's vengeance. No mercy, no forgiveness, just the surety of swift justice and sure death!'

'Swift Justice, Sure Death' was the squadron's motto, and hearing it spoken so confidently, with such emotion, had a startling effect on the crew. Jaeger could see their anticipation, eager for battle like they had never been before. They had pride in themselves, for the first time in years.

'So, what are we?' Jaeger yelled, his hand now raised in a fist.

'Swift Justice, Sure Death!' came the replying cry from twenty-nine throats. It echoed around the flight bay, making the crews of the other squadrons turn in surprise. Jaeger grinned, his heart beating fast.

'Damn right! Let's give the enemy a taste of the Emperor's claws.'

JAEGER GRINNED AS he gazed out of the cockpit's canopy and saw the rest of the Squadron flying alongside the ship's hull, each pushed forward on quadruple tails of plasma. Beyond them, he saw the firing ports of the *Divine Justice*'s gun decks opening slowly, revealing battery upon battery of massive laser cannons, mass drivers and plasma projectors. Immense firepower, enough to destroy a city.

The comm-link in Jaeger's helmet crackled into life.

++Thunderbolt fighter squadrons Arrow and Storm ready for rendezvous.++
The familiar voice of Flight Commander Dextra, given a metallic grate over the long-range communicator.

Jaeger flicked the brass transmit rune on the comm-link panel to his left. 'Good to hear you, Jaze. Take up a diamond-ten on the aft quarters.'

++Affirm, Raptor Leader.++

As the smaller fighters took up their escorting position around the bomber squadron, Jaeger increased the throttle, taking his plane to the front to form a flying-V formation, with his Marauder as the arrowhead. The craft swept over

the prow of the cruiser, looking like tiny flares of light against the backdrop of the immense torpedo tubes.

‘Bridge, this is Raptor Leader. Formed up and ready to attack; awaiting target data, by the Emperor.’ Jaeger reported.

Berhandt gave a thumbs-up signal as the target information was transmitted from the *Divine Justice*. The bombardier’s gruff voice gave Jaeger the details over the internal communicator. ‘It’s a point at the rear of the ‘ulk, in the engines somewhere. Can’t tell what it is exactly, this far out.’

‘What do you mean?’ Jaeger asked.

‘Just what I said, sir. It’s just some co-ordinates, no details of target type and a notation that says the attack trajectory is at your discretion.’

‘Very well. Inform me as soon as we get further details,’ Jaeger replied, before addressing the rest of the squadron. ‘Listen up, Raptors, this is the real thing. No bickering, no whining and no stalling. I am not going to let you get me and your flight comrades killed. We’re here to blow things up in the name of the Emperor, and that’s what we’re damned well going to do!’

Jaeger smiled as he heard the laughter of the other crew members come over his headset. Sitting back in the pilot’s seat, he began to relax. It would be a while before they were anywhere near within range of the hulk’s considerable defences, and being tense for two hours was sure to do his reactions no good, not to mention the nerves of his crew. To occupy his mind, Jaeger went through the pre-battle checks once again. He ran his eye over the cockpit’s interior to check everything visually. There were no chinks or scratches on the tinted armoured shielding of the Marauder’s cockpit. The snaking wrist-thick pipes that twisted from the control panel in all directions seemed to be intact, with no insulation breaks or kinks. The pressure gauges of the engine had their needles pointing comfortably in their green quadrants, and numerous other dials, meters and counters indicated that nothing was amiss. Jaeger tested the flight controls, worried by the stiffness he was feeling in the movement of the control column. A few gentle turns and rolls later and everything seemed fine, easing Jaeger’s suspicions.

Berhandt had told him that this Marauder had been almost cut in half by an eldar laser during its last mission. It had been then that his predecessor, Glade, had been sucked out into the void, never to be seen again. Jaeger cursed himself for such morbid thoughts and to calm himself he began to think of his home world. Unfastening a couple of catches, Jaeger pushed his helmet onto the back of his head and closed his eyes. With a thin-lipped smile, he began whistling a hunting chant from back home.

VENISTON PACED BACK and forth across the command deck of the bridge, watching the various screens that gave updates of the progressing battle. As the *Divine Justice* slowly moved in closer to the hulk, the smaller ork ships in its escort were trying to break through the cordon of frigates to attack the cruiser. They were having little success, and the one or two that managed to get within range were soon obliterated by the overwhelming firepower of the *Divine Justice*'s gun decks. The floor shook with regular throbs as the immense plasma drives pushed the ship towards the distant foe, bringing all on board ever closer to death or glory. One of the communications officers was muttering sharply to Captain Kauri, while he glanced over his subordinate's shoulder at a flickering screen, directing the efforts of the escorts and fighters.

'Is there a problem, Mister Kauri?' Veniston enquired as he stepped up to the captain, trying to keep the tension from his voice.

'Not really, sir.' Kauri answered, standing up straight to look the admiral in the eye. Veniston raised an eyebrow in query. 'A wave of ork fighter-bombers has made it through the blockade. They'll be intercepting the Marauders of Raptor Squadron shortly. But the fighter screen should be able to protect our bombers.' Kauri assured the admiral, rubbing the tiredness from his eyes and running a thick-fingered hand through his dark hair.

'Send the Thunderbolts on an intercept course.' Veniston decided, looking past Kauri at the display screen. 'If the orks get too close, the bombers will have to slow down, and timing is all-important. If the Raptors don't attack in time, the whole plan will be off course and the hulk will still be fully mobile when we get within range. We can't let that happen, Jacob.' The admiral's eyes narrowed and his jaw clenched tightly for a moment as he considered the prospect of the *Divine Justice* suffering the same fate as the *Imperial Retribution*.

'What if a second wave of fighters comes up? They'll be unprotected...' the captain protested, his voice suddenly hoarse with the prospect.

'If that happens.' Veniston stated coldly, 'then we shall pray that the Emperor is watching over us.'

The admiral turned towards the main display again, indicating that the conversation was ended. Kauri suppressed a grimace and turned towards the waiting comms officer.

'New orders for Arrow and Storm Squadrons.' the captain began.

THEIR THUNDERBOLT ESCORT had peeled away regretfully a few minutes ago,

and now the Marauders were on their own. As Raptor Squadron thundered towards the hulk, more details of the battle ahead could be seen. A swarm of ork attack ships duelled with the frigates escorting the *Divine Justice*. Manoeuvring just outside range of the orks' crude weapons, the Imperium ships were taking a heavy toll; the wreckage of at least five ork vessels was drifting lifelessly across the battlezone. Much closer now, the hulk seemed truly immense. Around it orbited a cluster of defence asteroids, floating bases crewed by the orks and bristling with rockets and gun batteries. Some were simply pieces of the hulk that had broken off but hadn't escaped the pull of the hulk's gravity. Others, Jaeger had been taught in Command Training, were deliberately captured by the orks, who used bizarre field technology to grasp onto asteroids and debris, purposefully creating a swirl of obstacles to protect themselves against attack. Whatever the cause of their orbit, and whether they were just floating chunks of stone and metal, or had been fitted out with rocket pods or gun turrets, throughout the navy they were known simply as Rocks.

As Jaeger considered this glorious example of understatement, there was a sudden hiss of escaping gas and the control stick in his left hand started juddering uncontrollably.

'Ferix!' Jaeger snapped over the internal comm-link. 'These damned controls are playing up. I need stability right now, if you don't mind.'

The small tech-adept crawled into the cockpit and took the toolbelt from his waist. Pulling a glowing, gold-etched device from one pocket, he set about the fastenings on a panel under Jaeger's legs. As Ferix unscrewed the compartment beneath the control column he began a low-voiced chant: 'To see the spirit of the machine, that is to be Mechanicus. To find the malaise of malfunction, that is to be Mechanicus. To administer the Rite of Repair, that is to be Mechanicus.'

Jaeger let the man drift from his attention as he looked through the armoured glass of the cockpit. The frigates had done a good job punching a hole through the ork attack ships, leaving the way clear for the Marauders. However, something wasn't quite right. Jaeger's spine tingled with some inner sense of foreboding. Looking at the approaching hulk, a sinister suspicion began to rise at the back of his mind.

'Berhandt, can you get a fix on that Rock, five o'clock, about twelve by thirty-five?' Jaeger asked the bombardier, his unease rising.

'Got it.' the bombardier replied, a question in his voice.

'Plot a trajectory prediction, impose it over our course.'

'Okay, Commander Jaeger. Metriculator processing right now. Coming through... Damn! You were right to ask, sir. We're heading straight for the damn

thing!’ Berhandt exclaimed.

‘Avoidance course?’ Jaeger knew that there wouldn’t be one even as he asked.

‘No, sir. Not with the time we’ve been given. Emperor’s mercy, we’re gonna have to deal with the bloody thing ourselves...’ The bombardier’s voice was barely a whisper.

Jaeger pressed the long-range communicator. ‘Bridge, this is Raptor Leader.’ he announced. ‘We have a problem.’

THE BOMBER SQUADRON banked round slowly, shaken by the engine blasts of the vast rockets soaring past. Each of the ork missiles roaring from the Rock was larger than a Marauder, designed to blow apart a massive starship but equally capable of wiping out the whole squadron with one unlucky blast. Crude faces had been painted onto the tips of monstrous rockets, leering grins and sharp-teethed devils seeming to leap from the darkness on columns of raging flame.

Jaeger was listening in to the comm-net, his mood grim.

++This is the *Apollo*, we cannot disengage currently.++

++This is the *Glorious*, unable to reach your position in time.++

And so it went on, each of the fleet’s frigates too busy or too far away to attack the rapidly approaching Rock. Another flare erupted from the ork defence platform in front of the Marauders, hurling six more rockets at the incoming bombers. Jaeger switched to the inter-squadron communicator.

‘Split one-four, on my lead.’ he ordered, his voice low and abrupt. ‘We’ve only got time for one pass. Make it count.’

As an icon flashed green on the panel beside him, Jaeger switched frequency to listen to the incoming message.

++This is Tech-Priest Adramaz of the *Excellent*++ a tinny, unfamiliar voice reported. ++We have surveyed your target and established a primary detonation point. Transmitting information now. It appears to be some kind of power source, which may destroy the target if you can hit it. I would make your departure as expeditious as possible though, we are unsure how large the resultant blast will be.++

‘Thanks, Adramaz.’ Jaeger replied, turning to see if Berhandt had received the information.

The bombardier gave a nod as the targeting data for the Rock’s reactor was received and with the turn of a dial and a flicked switch, he transmitted the details to the other Marauders. Berhandt swivelled in his seat to grasp the forked control stick that guided and fired the Marauder’s nose-mounted lascannons.

One shot from those could punch through a cubit or more of reinforced armour and smash apart rock with equal ease.

‘Signature suggests it ain’t laser shielded.’ the bombardier said, smiling grimly. ‘A couple of good hits should do the trick.’

Jaeger broadcast to the rest of the squadron again. ‘Lascannons only on this one; save your missiles and bombs for the main target.’

Phrao’s voice came back first. ++What do you mean ‘main target’? Ain’t this what we’re here to destroy?++

‘This is just incidental!’ Jaeger snapped back. ‘Our main objective is on the hulk itself.’

++You’re joking! Five Marauders are going to have as much effect on that beast as a swampfly biting a grox’s backside!++ Drake chipped in.

Jaeger barely suppressed a growl before opening up the comm channel. ‘We don’t make the orders, we just follow them. If you have a problem with that, we can sort it out back on the flight deck. We’ve got a job to do, so let’s just stay calm. We’ll deal with this Rock and then we’ll push on to our main objective.’

++If we get that far!++ Phrao’s voice, even taking the hiss of the comm-net into account, was rasping and bitter. ++Damned Raptor’s luck!++

Jaeger stabbed at the transmit rune. ‘Silence, all of you!’ he snapped ‘Everyone listen to me right now. You all know your jobs, you’ve all flown combat missions before. So I’ll hear no more of this “Raptor’s luck”. Is that understood?’

A series of affirmatives were broadcast back and Jaeger nodded to himself. Doubt sows the seeds of fear, the abbot of the Extu Schola Progenium had taught him when he was young. Crash it at birth or suffer the growth of heresy.

Flicking his gaze over the control panels, Jaeger saw that all systems were working within acceptable levels. Everything was ready. He took a deep breath, his hand poised over the comm-link. Letting it out slowly, he touched the rune.

‘Raptor Squadron, this is Raptor Leader.’ Jaeger made his voice deliberately calm, even though inside his heart was racing and he could feel the excitement of combat beginning to surge. ‘Break and attack! Break and attack!’

A DOZEN SMALL turrets swivelled into firing position and unleashed a torrent of shells at the Marauders as they screamed in towards the Rock, their engines at full burn. Dodging through the hail of death, now was the time for each pilot to prove his worth. Jerryl took the lead, followed by Jaeger, then the other bombers. From his position, Jaeger had the perfect opportunity to see the magnificent

Marauder bomber in action.

They were huge metallic beasts, each weighing more than three battle tanks, with a wide wingspan. Designed for limited range space combat as well as atmospheric missions, the Marauder manoeuvred with small vectoring engines along the fuselage and wings whilst in the ether, and massive control planes and a quad-ramjet when they dipped into a planet's atmosphere. Nicknamed 'Big Brutes' by the flight crews, each Marauder was a flying fortress. Its two dorsal twin-autocannon were capable of unleashing a hail of fire that could punch through the armour of enemy planes and tear apart crew and engines, while the tail-gunner's triple heavy bolters could fire a dozen shells a second at enemy interceptors or strafe soft ground targets. On the nose were the lascannons for precision targeting, and six Flail missiles hung from the wings, each with a plasma warhead capable of creating a crater over fifty feet in diameter or cracking the armoured hull of a spaceship. For more wholesale devastation, the Marauder's hull also incorporated a spacious bomb bay which could deliver a payload of explosives or incendiaries.

As he contemplated the sheer destructive potential of just a single Marauder, Jaeger found his faith in the Imperium renewed. The Adeptus Mechanicus had designed this awesome fighting machine. The Schola Progenium of the Ministorum had given him the fervent faith to serve the Emperor. The Imperial Navy had taught him how to control this murderous creature of metal. And now he was here, once more about to deliver fiery judgement upon the heads of the Emperor's enemies. For Jaeger, there was no finer feeling.

As Raptor Squadron roared closer to the Rock, the enemy response grew in ferocity. With stomach-churning suddenness, Jaeger pulled up from the dive towards the Rock, bringing the Marauder's nose level with the horizon of the small asteroid. Where a second before he had been flying in open space, now there was ground beneath him. As always, it took a couple of seconds to fight off the disorientation, and while he took a few deep breaths, he subconsciously sent the Marauder into a series of short climbs, dives and banks to throw off the enemy gunners. Glancing hits ricocheted around the armoured hull, filling the air with sporadic metallic clangs. A close hit set the plane shaking, and warning runes flashed red across three of the control panels that covered every surface of the cockpit. Ferix's voice sounded over the comm in alarm.

'Armour breach! Check your vacuum seals and utter the Third Canticle of Protection, praise His name.'

Jaeger went through the routine of checking the fastenings on his helm, muttering under his breath: 'Deliver me from the void. Protect me from the

ether. Guard well my soul.'

The bombers were almost within firing range and the fire had slackened as some of the Rock's gun turrets were blind-sided by the mass of the asteroid. A surprise burst of fire engulfed Jerryl's plane, stripping away great shards of metal. Phrao's plane swept low, its lascannon blasting apart the ork gunnery turret, exacting instant revenge. Jaeger could see a gaping hole in the starboard wing of Jerryl's Marauder, trailing sparks as severed power cables discharged their energy into the vacuum.

'Raptor Three, what is your condition?' Jaeger enquired urgently.

++Lost starboard controls, handling shaky. I don't think I can hold her, permission to disengage?++

'Okay, Jerryl. Break off and return home.' Jaeger said through gritted teeth.

Suddenly the comm-net icons flashed for a priority message. ++This is Admiral Veniston. Do not disengage, Raptor Three: circle around and reform for attack on primary objective.++

Jerryl's reply came through a hiss of static. ++What the... Damned controls... Order received.++

Jaeger watched as the lead Marauder pulled up, taking it out of the attack run. Easing his control column left and right, Jaeger steered his craft through the shells screaming towards him. Guiding the Marauder over the steep lip of a crater, Jaeger saw the reactor housing for the first time: a crude conglomeration of twisting pipes and power relays. Berhandt gave a grunt as the ork's power generator came within range of his lascannon. Bolts of laser energy flashed towards the Rock, sending up plumes of smoke and dust. Berhandt's lascannon spat forth another volley of fire, tearing through metal and rock.

'Emperor's blood, missed!' cursed Berhandt, punching his fist against the lascannon controls.

Twisting in his seat as he steered the Marauder away, Jaeger watched as Phrao's bomber made its pass. As the craft swept towards its target, leaving a trail of swirling debris in its wake, two bolts of light struck the reactor full on, turning the generator's armour into a molten slurry and punching through to the highly unstable plasma chamber within.

++Spot on!++ Phrao shouted gleefully. ++Pull away!++

Jaeger's left arm ached as he wrenched the column back and right, pulling the Marauder into a spine-bending turning climb. Through the side-screens, Jaeger could see small eruptions breaking out across the Rock as a chain reaction spread from the reactor to the turrets and rocket batteries. Forks of electrical

energy began to arc into the air and the reactor went into critical overload. A cloud of gas exploded through the Rock's surface from an underground tank, sending shards of rock spinning dangerously close to the following Marauders, before the gas was eaten up by a shaft of blue flame. Raw plasma spewed from the molten remains of the generator, pushing the Rock off its trajectory, sending it spinning further away from the hulk. With an explosion that momentarily blinded the flight commander, the Rock burst apart, sending fragments of debris hurtling in every direction. The victorious cries of Jaeger's crew and the other pilots rang in his ears.

'Steady, Raptors, that was just the warm up.' Jaeger chided them 'Now for the real target. Form up; Jerryl take the rear.'

++Affirmative.++ Jerryl responded. ++Where for now, sir?++

Jaeger grimaced to himself. 'Not sure.' he answered slowly. 'We haven't received full target information yet.' Damn it, he thought to himself, the whole mission briefing was hazy. This whole thing was beginning to stink, but of what he wasn't yet certain.

++Let's get this straight.++ Phrao's voice was heavy with sarcasm. ++We don't know what we're attacking, we've just got a deadline to meet. That's it? We just fly in there, easy as you like, drop a few bombs, fire a few shots and go home? Somehow I don't think it'll be that easy.++

'Cut the chatter!' Jaeger ordered, his mood grim. He agreed with the other pilots, but he'd be damned if he was going to sow doubt on the command skills of Kauri and Veniston halfway through a mission.

The Marauders roared onwards, the hulk growing ever larger through their cockpit windows. Its massive bulk blocked out a swathe of stars, looking like some lurking shadow waiting to swallow up the Marauders, luring them to their doom.

CAPTAIN KAURI COUGHED gently to attract the admiral's attention. The senior officer pulled his gaze from the monitoring station and turned round, one eyebrow raised in question.

'We are in position to initiate the second attack wave, Lord Veniston.'

The admiral rubbed one haggard cheek with his hand, gazing at nothing in particular.

'Sir? Shall we proceed?' Kauri pressed.

Veniston's eyes were flints. 'Very well, Jacob. Launch Devil Squadron. Proceed with the attack on the engines themselves.'

WITH THE DEBRIS of the Rock scattering slowly in their wake, the Marauders headed onwards towards the hulk. Pressing a series of runes above his head, Jaeger turned on a small viewscreen just above the front canopy, and a flickering, fractured image of the view behind the bomber crackled into existence. The flight commander watched as the *Divine Justice* moved in towards the hulk, its awesome plasma drives pushing it forward on great trails of fire. The two surviving frigates formed up in front of the cruiser, ready to defend their capital ship against the few remaining ork attack ships.

Jaeger could picture the commotion on board the massive warships, as gun and torpedo crews scurried to and fro, readying their weapons for action. He imagined the gun decks bathed red in combat lighting, the gunners sweating and cursing as they heaved power cells into place or loaded shells the size of his bomber into the breaches. In the torpedo bays, hundreds of men would be bending their backs to the chains, hauling the massive projectiles, ten times the size of a Marauder, along the loading rails. In the engine room, the men would be sweating heavily, the heat of the thirty plasma reactors permeating even through their thermal shielding and the crew's protective suits. He didn't envy them their task: hard work in very cramped conditions for little recognition or reward. Moreover, pilots were all volunteers, while many of the thousands of men who laboured in the depths of the fighting ships were criminals serving their penance to the Emperor, or simply unfortunate men taken unawares by the press gangs. And yet, he thought, everyone serves the Emperor, each in their own way. They will receive their due honours in time, whether in this life or not.

Something caught Jaeger's attention from the corner of his eye, but before he had a chance to look properly, Arafa was screaming in his ear.

++Incoming! Ork fighter-bombers, moving in on an intercept vector, closing fast. Where's our damned fighter screen?++

Jaeger was transmitting even before Arafa had finished.

'Storm Leader, Arrow Leader!' he rasped, throat dry with sudden fear. 'This is Raptor Leader, we need cover and fast! We have...' Jaeger checked the display in front of him '...eight fighter-bombers incoming!'

++Okay, Jaeger.++ the fighter commander came through immediately. ++We're on our way. Arrow Leader out.++

'Everyone, keep sharp!' Jaeger ordered over the squadron comm-link. 'Gunnery mark your targets, watch for the crossfire. Tight formation. Don't let them get in amongst us. Drake, you're uppermost; cover the blindsides.'

Jaeger forced himself to calm down, loosening his white-kuckled grip on the

control column. He kept his gaze firmly on the slivers of light that marked the approaching orks. Now was the time to trust in the gunners.

THE ORKS WERE jinking and swerving as they closed in on Raptor Squadron, surrounded by a cloud of tracer shells and pulses of laser light as the Marauders' guns opened fire. Each enemy craft was different, haphazardly constructed from crudely cut and bent metal plates, pushed screaming across the stars by hugely oversized engines that spluttered multi-coloured trails. Each was decorated differently too: some painted in bold stripes of red and black or red and yellow; others embellished with ork glyphs that were indecipherable to Jaeger; others still just a mess of jagged patterns and bold colours. Blazing cannons protruded from the nose of each interceptor and their wings were hung with bombs and missiles.

The Marauders were flying close in to each other, relying upon mass of fire to drive off the attack, rather than trying to evade the much more manoeuvrable ork aircraft. Their gunners covered each other's blind spots, trying to keep up the almost impenetrable wall of fire that was needed to keep the fighters at bay until the *Divine Justice's* interceptors could arrive.

'Got one!' Arick shouted from behind Jaeger, as an ork fighter exploded into a billowing cloud of shrapnel and rapidly burning fuel. Then the fighters screamed within range, raking along the length of Drake's plane, sending splinters of metal flying. A few stray rounds ricocheted off the shield in front of Jaeger, causing him to flinch, but the armoured glass held out against the impacts. As the enemy swept overhead, the dorsal guns on the Marauders swivelled to track them, spraying salvo after salvo of fire into the ork formation. Through the armoured view panel to his left, Jaeger saw one of the craft caught in a crossfire by Phrao and Drake's gunners. The enemy's cockpit shattered, causing it to tumble out of control towards Jerryl's stricken Marauder. As the bomber laboriously swung out of harm's way, its damaged wing twisted, until it sheared off completely. Lurching out of formation, the Marauder flipped madly out of control, and was suddenly in the centre of a devastating crossfire from the orks. Jaeger averted his gaze, but in his mind's eye he could picture the lifeless bodies of the crew drifting out towards the stars.

With Jerryl's covering fire lost, the ork fighter-bombers closed in on the rear of Raptor Squadron, twisting nimbly between the volleys of fire from the tail gunners. The situation was looking grim: the orks could simply pick them off one by one now that the formation was disrupted. If they just carried on flying straight towards the target they'd be sitting targets and wouldn't last more than a

couple of minutes.

‘Break formation for dogfight!’ Jaeger ordered. ‘Drake, Arafa, circle round and get—’

Jaeger’s order was interrupted by a message from the *Divine Justice*. ++This is Admiral Veniston. Maintain formation, proceed towards primary target without delay.++

Jaeger gripped the control column, trying to quell his rising fury. Was Veniston deliberately trying to get them killed? He stabbed at the comm-net button again. ‘This is Jaeger. Repeat: break formation, take out these damned orks, or we can forget about our target!’

As the Marauders pulled away from each other, Jaeger dragged his plane round in a tight circle, the control column juddering in his hands. Berhandt was crouching over the lascannon controls, staring intently through the firing visor for a target. Jaeger spotted a fighter expertly tailing Drake’s weaving Marauder. Jaeger brought his own craft down above the ork craft, glancing across to check that Berhandt was ready. The slicing beams of the bombardier’s lascannon were joined by Arick’s fire from above their heads. It tore through the tail of the ork fighter and sent it listing off uselessly, fountains of sparks spraying from its ruptured fuselage.

A rattle of shells against the hull snapped Jaeger’s attention to his left, where another enemy fighter-bomber was roaring towards him, its cannons blazing away. Something punched through the hull just behind the flight commander and he heard a muffled cry over the internal communicator.

‘What’s happening back there? Saile? Marte?’ he demanded.

He was answered by Marte’s deep voice. ‘Clean head shot, Commander Jaeger. Saile’s dead.’

Everything was anarchy. Jaeger watched the Marauders twisting and weaving, trying to shake off the much quicker ork craft. The enemy was everywhere, the fighter-bombers looping around the squadron, unleashing hail after hail of fire from their cannons.

Arick’s voice filled the internal link: ‘Come on, scum! Yeah, just a little closer... Take that! Damn, just winged him! Oh, you hungry for some as well, filth? Emperor, these scum are slippery...’

Jaeger pushed the Marauder into a steep dive, the mass of the ork hulk sliding across his field of vision through the canopy. He saw Drake’s Marauder being tailed by a trio of fighter-bombers and realised the first attack wave had been reinforced by more of the ork craft. Glancing down at the on-board scanner, he

realised that the bomber's sensor arrays were damaged and hadn't picked up the new arrivals. The flickering amber and red lights across the whole panel showed that nearly all the plane's systems were in need of serious repair. Glancing over his shoulder, Jaeger could make out Ferix clambering about in the gloom, frantically re-wiring cables and sealing split pipelines, muttering prayers all the while.

Turning his attention back to the outside, he watched helplessly as a volley of fire from the orks shredded the tail of Drake's Marauder. But then, without warning, the fighter-bombers tailing Drake exploded into widening blasts of twisted metal. A moment later, three Imperial Thunderbolts screamed through the cloud of burning gas, their engines at full throttle. The comm crackled into life.

++This is Arrow Leader. We have them now. Break for your target.++

With a howl of relief, Jaeger opened up the engines to full and flicked the transmit rune on the comm panel. 'Just in time, Dextra! Stay lucky and I'll see you back on board.'

The interceptors had punched a hole in the fighter-bomber squadrons, leaving the route clear for the bombers to proceed towards their destination. Jaeger banked his aircraft around to head for the opening, his eyes fixed on the huge ork vessel ahead.

'Raptor Squadron, this is Raptor Leader,' Jaeger announced over the squadron frequency, trying to keep his voice calm, despite his trepidation and pounding heart. 'Follow me in.'

'CHECK MISSILE AND bomb links.' Jaeger ordered the squadron. Behind him, Berhardt touched a pair of runes and frowned as they failed to light up. Snarling, the bombardier brought his fist down sharply on the display and grinned cheerfully as his face was bathed in green light. He looked towards Jaeger and gave a thumbs up.

'This is Raptor Leader.' Jaeger broadcast to the squadron. 'Prepare for bombardment of primary objective.'

As a series of affirmatives came back across the comm-link, Jaeger gave a quick smile to himself. They'd got through. Not all of them, admittedly, but hopefully they'd get the opportunity to avenge Saile, Jerryl and the others.

++Look at the size of that beast.++ Arafa's awed voice came over the ether.

'Less talk, men, stay sharp.' Jaeger interrupted 'We've come too far to mess up now.'

Despite his stern words, Jaeger could understand the other pilot's feelings. The hulk was truly massive, dwarfing even the majestic size of the *Divine Justice*. As the squadron moved closer and closer to their target, and the hulk grew larger and larger in their sights, Jaeger could make out more details. He could see where three or perhaps four different starships had been compacted together, forming outcrops of twisted metal, jutting at a bizarre angle from where innumerable other craft and asteroids had been compressed together by the tides of warp space to form the central mass of the drifting hulk. It looked like a gigantic wedge of crumpled and torn metal and rock, the size of a city, weighing untold millions of tons. How the orks managed to populate one of these randomly wandering behemoths, the Emperor alone knew. That they could was bad enough, but when the green-skinned savages managed to activate dormant engines or build their own immense drives, that turned an uncontrolled, erratic menace into a dire threat. The bulk of the ork vessel shimmered with the frozen particles that encrusted its hull. Billowing gases vented from unseen ports, creating a wreath of lazily-moving smog around the hulk's huge girth. It had a kind of savage beauty: a wracked sculpture of tortured metal that somehow seemed to be cleaving elegantly across the stars.

Jaeger's thoughts hardened. Inside that bizarre, sprawling shell were thousands, possibly hundreds of thousands of orks waiting to devastate some planet; to spill across continents in a wave of wanton destruction and killing. He remembered what had happened to the *Imperial Retribution* and pictured Saile's corpse in the sealed gunnery chamber behind him. All thoughts of beauty slipped from his mind immediately. The hulk was a threat to the Emperor's domains; a stain upon the galaxy. It was his duty to destroy it.

Checking the targeting data scrolling across a small, dull yellow viewscreen just above his head, Jaeger banked the Marauder in towards the hulk to assume the best attack trajectory.

'Raptor Squadron, this is Raptor Leader.' Jaeger growled, turning over the attack pattern in his head. 'Praise the Emperor, it's time.'

THE MARAUDERS SPED across the chaotic hull of the ork hulk, diving low to swoop beneath ruined gantries, swerving around twisted columns. With the Marauders this close, the defence turrets had little time to react to their presence, sending up a harmless spray of energy bolts and shells seconds too late.

Jaeger started to chant the mantra that would ease his mind into union with the aircraft he controlled. He would rely solely upon instinct rather than thought, he and the bomber acting and reacting as a single entity. As he felt his mind

slipping into the semi-subconscious state he required for total concentration, Jaeger glanced over to see Berhandt hunched over the targeting screen, his fingers subconsciously adjusting the row of dials below it to get the focus and magnitude correct.

Guiding the Marauder across the hulk's surface with one hand, Jaeger activated a series of runes and the canopy in front of him darkened slightly as it interfaced with the Marauder's artificial eyes and ears. A false image of outlines and silhouettes imposed itself over the view through the shield; highlighting particular obstacles, bringing the twisted contours and angles of the hulk's surface into stark contrast for ease of navigation. Patches of static or blankness showed here and there where the Marauder's sensors were damaged or some interfering energy source was fluctuating within the hulk itself.

With Berhandt concentrating on the bombs and missiles, it was Jaeger's task to take control of the lascannon. The flight commander reached overhead and pulled a lever. With a sudden venting of quickly-dissipating steam, the lascannon controls slid forward from the control panel beside Berhandt, four clamps locking the whole control bank into its new position alongside Jaeger. Punching a pair of buttons on the weapon control panel with his right hand, still guiding the Marauder around the obstructions ahead with his left, the flight commander activated the lascannon and the canopy display in front of him was filled with a swirl of static. Quickly adjusting the weapon's sensor array, Jaeger re-tuned the lascannon's false eyes and the cloud of random specks coalesced into moving icons, highlighting possible target points. The blood-red rune of their primary target stood out like a guiding beacon, a procession of angles, estimated armour, trajectories and other information scrolling rapidly alongside it.

'Raptor Squadron, sound off current status,' the flight commander ordered.

++Raptor Two, lascannon's out, missiles and bombs on-line and ready to blow!++

++Raptor Three, all systems acceptable, by the Emperor.++

++Raptor Five, everything's in the green 'cept tail retros. She's handling hard, but we'll be fine.++

'Okay. Assume attack vector Prime, standard diamond,' Jaeger commanded. 'Let's not waste our chance.'

Jaeger slowed his breathing, realising that despite his prayers he was becoming agitated. In a few more moments they would pass over the jagged outcrop of an impacted cargo ship and would have a line to their as-yet unknown target. A hum started in Jaeger's ear through the internal comm, as Berhandt wakened the spirits of the Marauder's self-guiding missiles and they set about seeking their

target. As the bomber neared its objective and the missiles' surveyors acquired the targeting point, the hum became ever more high pitched. Tilting the nose of the Marauder forward, Jaeger led the squadron over the wrecked cargo transport. The unidentified target came into full view.

Like a bolt of unholy wrath, a ball of plasma a hundred metres wide swept through the Marauder squadron, engulfing Arafa's aircraft, leaving nothing more than a cloud of gas and globules of molten plasteel.

Drake was on the comm-link instantly ++Emperor's blood! It's a damned gun battery! Why didn't they tell us it was a damned cannon? What the hell were they thinking of? Aren't we attacking the engines?++

Jaeger saw that it was true: a pair of immense guns, each with a barrel wide enough to swallow a Marauder, was pointing directly at the attacking bombers. Jaeger shivered with dread as he saw the scanner's read-out showing the energy build-up for another blast.

'Pull up!' Jaeger cried out over the squadron frequency. 'Break formation! Hit it from the other side!' As he wrenched his own plane into a steep climb, he prayed that the others had reacted in time, as if he could make their aircraft move faster, make them react quicker, through sheer force of will.

As the Marauders dispersed, another volcanic blast of energy hurtled from the cannons, blazing a path through the space where seconds before the Marauders had been. Jaeger thanked the Emperor for his swift guidance, but inwardly he was cursing Veniston and Kauri with all his might. Why hadn't they told Jaeger that the target was a weapon battery? How the hell did they think he was going to plan an attack properly if he wasn't made aware of all the dangers? Choking back his fury, Jaeger ordered the squadron back into an attack approach, fervently praying under his breath that the huge turret didn't have enough time to traverse and get another shot at them. At this range it could hardly miss.

With agonising slowness, the turret tracked around towards the incoming Marauders. The message 'Deviant Perceived' flashed scarlet across the left window of the canopy and the whine of the missiles became an unbearable shriek.

'Fly, sweet vengeance!' came Berhandt's voice, quoting the words he'd personally inscribed onto each of the missiles as they were loaded.

A salvo of fire from the other bombers joined Berhandt's volley, a rippling wave of death that streaked towards its target on tails of flame, rapidly becoming distant sparks as the missiles sped towards the gun turret. They hit home with a deadly blossom of explosions and the viewscreen showed twisted chunks of metal being thrown in all directions. Escaping gases briefly caught fire in actinic

fountains of flaring light.

The red target rune was still active on the canopy screen, shining bright just in front of Jaeger's eyes. He realised with sickening dread that the turret wasn't destroyed. It was still about to open fire once more.

'Lascannons and bombs!' Jaeger ordered, pressing the firing stud of his own plane's weapons with his thumb, spewing forth a salvo of energy bolts. Debris and burning vapours exploded across the hulk's surface as the lasers tracked towards their target, until the gun turret was at the centre of a storm of beams converging from the four Marauders. A warning sigil floated before Jaeger, showing the turret was in position to fire again. In his mind's eye, Jaeger could imagine the huge barrels of the cannons glowing with the suppressed energy inside, waiting to spit forth destruction and damnation.

With a blast that flung Jaeger back in his seat, the turret exploded in a vast, searing cloud of white plasma and billowing clouds of magnesium-bright vapour. Easing the controls back, Jaeger began to pull the Marauder out of its dive towards the hulk's surface.

Suddenly, Drake's voice was hammering in his ear: ++Control's lost, Raptor Leader. I can't pull out.++

Jaeger watched as Drake's Marauder sped below him, dipping towards the hulk's hull, trailing sparks and burning fuel from its damaged tail.

Get out, Jaeger pleaded. Get to the saviour pod. He gave a heartfelt sigh of relief as he saw the midsection of the Marauder being punched upwards by emergency rockets, sending it spinning away from the hulk.

++Lost Barnus and Cord.++ Drake's voice was hoarse with sadness. ++Their link to the pod was blocked.++

++Raptor Squadron, this is Veniston.++ The admiral's smooth voice cut through the comm-chatter. ++Excellent work, boys. You can come home now.++

Jaeger frowned to himself in confusion. How the hell did destroying one gun turret help the *Divine Justice* against this brute? As he raged, the answer appeared on the display screen far across the rear of the hulk. More Marauders were moving in on the behemoth's engines: the Marauders of Devil Squadron.

Phrao hissed bitterly over the comm-link: ++Trust those damned Devils. We do all the bleeding, they get all the glory!++

'Not this time, Phrao.' Jaeger answered. 'Form up on my wing. Let's give the Devils a hand.'

++I hear you, Raptor Leader!++ Phrao replied happily.

AS THE BOMBS and missiles of Devil Squadron erupted across one of the hulk's immense engines, the surviving two Marauders of the Raptors swept low, their lascannons picking out weak points in the armour, punching through buckled shields and twisted plates. Soon a dozen fires were blazing, and the engine raptured with a swirling cloud of super-heated matter. Explosions blossomed across the whole section of the hulk and one by one each of the massive stellar drives lost power and went dim, leaving the hulk drifting without control. As the Marauders sped back towards the *Divine Justice*, the cruiser was sweeping in victoriously for the kill. Wave after wave of torpedoes sped past; Jaeger adjusted the rear viewer to see the plasma warheads punching massive holes in the hulk's armoured skin. Gun batteries exploded across the ork vessel in bright pinpricks of light. Fires began raging across the hulk's midsection, becoming raging infernos as the atmosphere inside the hulk pushed out with ever-increasing pressure.

As he prepared to dock, Jaeger got one last glimpse of the hulk. Unable to manoeuvre without its main engines, and helpless to resist the Imperial cruiser raking it from the rear, the hulk was slowly deteriorating. Salvo after salvo from the *Divine Justice*'s gun decks pounded into the hulk, ripping off huge swathes with every broadside. Ancient reactors in the hulk's depths began to overload, smashing open gaping holes from within. Then the bomber passed into the shadow of the *Divine Justice* and the hulk was lost from view.

CLEANED UP AND in his dress uniform, Jaeger hurried to the briefing chamber. As he entered, Admiral Veniston was debriefing the Devils. Kauri was there too, standing silently behind the admiral, his face a blank mask. Jaeger listened to Veniston's praise for Devil Squadron's part in the day's victory, and what he heard set his teeth on edge.

'And I can say without doubt that the whole mission was a complete success,' the admiral said, 'and I am glad that it was achieved with acceptable losses.'

That was too much to bear. Jaeger stepped into the centre of the briefing chamber, blazing with fury. He'd already gone through too much, without having to stand around while the admiral praised the Devils' conduct and said that the Raptors' casualties simply didn't matter.

'"Acceptable losses"?' Jaeger demanded, eyes ablaze. 'What the hell do you mean, "acceptable losses"? I lost fifteen good men on that mission while these flyboys were sitting on their carefully polished backsides waiting for their orders! Fifteen men lost while thirty others watched and waited! If you had sent

us out together, we could have handled ourselves better. Damn it, you didn't even tell us what our target was, did you?'

Veniston and Kauri stared at Jaeger in rank disbelief, which only served to fuel his fury. 'Of course.' he spat, his voice dropping to a harsh whisper, 'we're just the Raptors, we don't really count, do we? Well I'm sorry if we're not related, admiral, but my life is worth as much to the Emperor as that of your own kin!'

Kauri was beside himself. 'What is the meaning of this, flight commander?' the captain stormed, face like thunder. 'How dare you speak to a senior officer like this! Call for the Officer of the Watch. Have Commander Jaeger taken to the brig immediately!'

Jaeger clamped his mouth shut with a snort, and bristled in impotent fury. Without a word or look, Veniston walked from the chamber, ignoring the icy glare that Jaeger shot him as the admiral walked past. Jaeger felt his arm grabbed just below the elbow and he spun round.

Lieutenant Strand was standing there, flanked by two ratings. 'We've orders to take you down, Mister Jaeger.' he said, face impassive. Jaeger nodded numbly and followed them out of the briefing room. After a moment, Captain Kauri caught up with the group and dismissed the lieutenant and guards with a waved hand.

'You went too far, Jacques.' Kauri started, his voice soft, his eyes meeting the flight commander's gaze. 'If you don't have respect, then you don't have anything.'

Kauri led the flyer into one of the secondary hangars. Inside were the coffins of the dead, waiting to be ejected into space during the burial ceremony that evening. On each was an inscribed nameplate, even for those who had left no body behind: Gunner Saile, Raptor Squadron; Gunner Barnus, Raptor Squadron; Gunner Cord, Raptor Squadron; Commander Drake, Raptor Squadron; the row went on and on.

There were twenty-one coffins in all. When Jaeger read the nameplate of the sixteenth, he stumbled back a step in shock. It read Flight Commander Raf, Devil Squadron. He turned to Kauri, his brow knitted in confusion.

'I- I don't—' Jaeger stuttered, lost for words. His anger was gone; he felt empty.

'The Devils' attack wasn't the "easy in, easy out" mission you seemed to think it was.' the captain said tersely. 'They still had to get through several ork attack ships and the roaming fighter-bombers. Raf was killed guiding his plane into the engines of one of the ork attack ships that was blocking the *Divine Justice's* approach. He knowingly sacrificed himself for the completion of the task, and

you'll do well to remember him with pride.'

Kauri stepped between Jaeger and the coffin, forcing the flight commander to look at him. 'I devised the plan of attack on the engines, not the admiral.' the captain went on relentlessly. 'It was me who decided that two waves were needed: the Raptors in first to silence the engine defence guns picked up by the Mechanicus's scan, then the Devils to finish off the whole mission. If you'd gone in together, would you have had any more chance of success? Would ten Marauders have had a better chance of destroying that battery. No, don't reply. You know what I say is true.

'There were two separate targets which required two missions. We couldn't risk the orks fixing the gun turret while the Marauders were back on board re-arming and refuelling. It had to be done this way. Neither of the two squadrons had it particularly good, let me assure you. And the reason I didn't tell you it was a battery was to make sure you didn't worry. Come, be honest, if you'd known it was a massive gun battery, would you have been so confident?'

Jaeger considered the captain's argument, and he could see the logic. But that didn't alter the fact that they were sent into a situation without knowing the full risks. 'Taking on a massive gun battery isn't as simple as blowing up defenceless engines, sir.' Jaeger protested.

'I knew it would be hard, and that men would die.' the captain told Jaeger, his eyes showing that he understood the flight commander's concerns. As they spoke, Kauri led Jaeger out of the hanger and they continued down to the brig. 'Don't you think that every time I order an attack, I don't consider the lives of my men? You had the cover from the Thunderbolts for that second fighter attack. Why do you think it took so long for them to arrive? They were supposed to be escorting Devil Squadron. I didn't sign death warrants for your crews, I gave them a chance to prove themselves, to show what Raptor Squadron could really do. Lord Veniston had the chance to overrule me, knowing that his nephew was going to be having just as much of a hard time as you were. But he did not.'

'Why the hell not?' Jaeger asked with a flick of his hand. 'What the hell does Raptor Squadron mean to him? Raf was in the Devils, so surely his main loyalty lay there.'

'That's not for me to say. That aside, I know that the admiral was as keen as myself to give your squadron its chance for glory. Without your efforts, the Devils would have been obliterated by the ork cannons, and after that the *Divine Justice* would have been facing a fully operational enemy, instead of a sitting target. Everybody realises that – including Lord Veniston.'

As they spoke, Kauri led Jaeger into the brig, where Lord Veniston was waiting

silently. Jaeger looked at the admiral, and for the first time realised the pain and anguish he must be feeling.

‘You can leave the prisoner in my care now, captain.’ the admiral said, meeting Jaeger’s gaze for the first time. Veniston appeared as calm and collected as ever at first glance, with only the occasional twitch of an eyelid or lip betraying any emotion the admiral might be feeling at his nephew’s death.

As Kauri bowed and left, Veniston stepped up to Jaeger and laid a gentle hand on his shoulder. ‘While you are in here, think on what has happened today.’ The admiral’s voice was quiet but strong. He spoke with years of authority, and for the first time since arriving on the *Divine Justice*, Jaeger could hear what the admiral had to say for himself.

‘Your enthusiasm, your dedication, are laudable.’ his superior was saying. ‘But you must expand your perspective, trust in your superiors. Remember always: the cause justifies the sacrifice. No mission I’ve ever flown or commanded in the Emperor’s name was ever a waste, and while I retain my mental faculties things will stay that way.’

Jaeger didn’t know what to say. His mind was fuddled with post-battle exhaustion and his thoughts were reeling, trying to make some sense of the unexpected sequence of events that had followed his outburst in the briefing chamber. ‘I’ll think on that, sir,’ he managed to mumble.

‘Just see that you do, lad.’ the admiral said. With a cursory flick of his head, Veniston directed the two attendant sentries to lead Jaeger into the small, sparse cell.

As the thick steel door closed behind him with an echoing clang, Jaeger’s thoughts were troubled. He sat down on the small bunk and hung his head in his hands. What did Veniston mean, ‘No mission I’ve ever flown’?

In his head, he could not shake a small detail, barely glimpsed as the admiral had taken his hand from Jaeger’s shoulder. Jaeger looked down at his black gauntlets, part of the flight commander’s uniform required by regulations. Veniston had been wearing black gloves too, each with a small insignia. Picked out in delicate gold thread on Veniston’s gloves had been an Eagle Rampant, the unmistakable sign of Raptor Squadron.

TENEBRAE

Mark Brendan

CHINKS OF REDDISH, grey glow filtering between eddies in the layer of atmospheric debris announced the break of dawn over Tenebrae's capital. The city known as Wormwood had stood for the past fifty years of the seven hundredth century of the forty-first millennium. Now Wormwood was dying. The screams of men mingled with the gibbering of daemons and the thunder of weapons. Upset by the warping influence of Chaos gates opening to provide access to creatures who had no rightful place in the material world, the burgeoning clouds over the city periodically rained blood, sometimes toads, upon the death-strewn streets.

The old man strode with uncharacteristic haste through the looming, vaulted halls and thoroughfares of the Adeptus Arbites' fortress of Wormwood's war-torn central plaza. Governor Dane Cortez reflected that the pandemonium within the building was almost as distressing as the chaos without. An ageing man, he nevertheless carried his tall, thin frame with authority. His hawk-like features, coupled with the resplendent robes of his office which billowed in his wake, lent him an air of power and mystique. This was but a well-practised front, providing a facade of strength to a man inwardly broken and in turmoil.

All around Cortez, the subjects of his planet, his charges, panicked and fled before the unholy invaders. Even now, within this very building, the Arbites struggled to order the evacuation of civilians to a heavily-defended landing pad on the roof of the great edifice. This final chapter in his personal catastrophe was almost too much for Cortez's ageing heart to bear, but he knew he must appear strong in the face of adversity if there was to be any hope for the survivors.

Striding through the hall of his inauguration, the milling citizens of Tenebrae parted to allow Governor Cortez passage.

Amazing, he thought. Even in the hour of my greatest failure, they continue to show me deference.

At his heels, a constant two steps behind, trotted his vulpine advisor, Frane. The snivelling wretch burred a continuous stream of sycophancy and unctuous nonsense which the governor had long since learned to politely ignore. As they

passed underneath yet another cyclopean archway on their way to the fortified command chamber express elevator, a commotion caught Cortez's attention in the ornate hallway. A young man had somehow wrestled the bolt pistol from the holster of one of the grim-faced Arbites. Before the security men could stop him, he sprayed his wife and their infant son, cutting them down where they stood, white-faced and terrified. As the lawmen descended on the wretch with their power mauls, he used the space cleared around him to turn the weapon on himself. The man's chest erupted into a fine red mist as he pumped the deadly explosive bolts into his own torso.

Cortez closed the lift doors on this scene of carnage, and felt his inner spark wither a little more inside him. The ancient elevator shuddered into life and began its rapid ascent.

'One more heretic bloodline severed. Praise the Emperor,' Frane remarked in what he obviously considered his most superior fashion.

The two heavily-armed guards in the lift maintained their statuesque stoicism. Cortez regarded Frane with open disgust, earnestly hoping that the insidious man did not mistake his own expression as contempt for those poor people who now lay dead. Dead because of their superiors' complacency.

Because of my own complacency, Cortez mentally corrected himself.

ARRIVING AT THE relative safety of the command chamber, Cortez ordered Frane and his guards to evacuate with the rest. He would remain to put his affairs in order. Frane protested – just enough to escape possible future recrimination, Cortez noted – but was summarily ignored. He, too, eagerly joined the evacuation of the rest of Wormwood's cowed administration, finally leaving the Governor to his own council.

The command chamber was spacious, and Cortez noted abstractedly that for now, at least, the generators still worked. Bright strip lighting threw a sterile, artificial glare from the polished white surfaces of the fittings. Dane Cortez moved slowly towards the broad window to watch the horror unfold. Chaos and heresy engulfed his home before his stricken eyes. Cortez realised that he must present a forlorn figure gazing wistfully from his eyrie, and he desperately attempted to maintain his tall and dignified bearing, despite the terrible events which had overtaken him.

Cortez had served his time in the military, reaching the exalted rank of commander, fighting on a hundred planets in a dozen systems. But with time he had sickened of war, and in the final years of his military career he had begun to realise that he needed a measure of peace to discover himself. By then his

influence had not been entirely insubstantial, so strings had been pulled and the name of Tenebrae had been mentioned.

Tenebrae! The planet had seemed ideal at the time, and Cortez had thought that securing the governorship would solve all of his problems. Standing at the impressive window, Cortez laughed ironically to himself. There was, after all, no one else to hear him.

In the street below, the horrible hissing and popping of plasma-cooked bodies mingled with the screams of the wounded to teach the old man above the meaning of fear. Far above the streets, a cold and unhealthy train of thoughts flooded the mind of Tenebrae's ruler with uncomfortable clarity.

Perhaps there is no escape, he mused, plucking absently at the ornate brocade of his cuffs. Life itself is fear, the universe is fear, and vitality itself naught but a morbid energy, fed by the joyous relief that it is the next man who is dead and not oneself. Tears flowed down the pain-wracked cheeks of an old and broken man. Is fear of death the only joy of life?

Shocked by his own thoughts, Cortez felt strangely ashamed by this obscure revelation, for he was yet a man with a military background, and still found it difficult to surrender to fear. 'Now I truly am a man alone, and yes, I am afraid!' he muttered, and terror fluttered within his heart.

As explosions wracked the palace, and the screams of the dead and dying reached even through the reinforced windows of his chamber, their leader stood immobile. Cortez's eyes looked on, but his anguished mind was lost in distant thought as he tried to wrest some solace from the comfort of memory.

Cortez's mind groped back through the years to the first days of his affair with Tenebrae. 'A harsh mistress indeed, and given to treachery at the last,' he whispered, his mind drifting ever on. He recalled those first impressive documents, records he studied earnestly in preparation for his posting as governor and overlord. Even now, he could recite the text. It had become a shallow litany to him, bereft of all meaning other than the comfort brought by the repetition of familiar words.

Tenebrae – forty-five light years from Fenris, the ancient bulwark of the Space Wolves.

Tenebrae – in the Prometheus star system.

Tenebrae – the planet of eternal darkness.

Cortez gripped the guard rail at the window as terror washed giddily over him. In truth, he knew that Tenebrae was nothing more than a world which should never have borne life at all. Perhaps in the very act of settling this world, the

Imperium had transgressed into areas best left untouched. Unbidden, the words flowed like a prayer in sibilant mutterings from his thin lips.

Tenebrae – a world a mere 180 million miles from Prometheus, a Class-A super-giant which burns 10,000 times more brilliantly than Sol, the sun that brought life to Terra itself.

Tenebrae – at some point in its aeon-shrouded past, a miracle befell the scorched rock of the planet. A meteor struck, throwing a thick pall of ash and vapour into Tenebrae's thin atmosphere.

Tenebrae – protected by a tender blanket of thick ash clouds from the worst of Prometheus's destructive radiations.

Tenebrae – the stage was set for oceans to form and the theatre of life to perform its first acts.

Cortez wiped an unsteady hand across his pale and sweating forehead. The words brought no comfort. None at all. 'Maybe it was always a trap, the hand of Chaos guiding even that fateful meteorite.'

The old governor stumbled from his vantage point, his mind in turmoil. Instinctively he sought solace at his great desk, hands automatically sorting through the jumble of papers in his desk drawers, even as his mind whirled through uncontrollable planes. He smiled wanly at the mass of agricultural data before him. Ten years of research. Utterly irrelevant now. Just memories of better times.

Cortez shuffled through the records of colonising scientists, reading as if for the first time about the eyeless, slug-like worms which crawled in the anaerobic filth of Tenebrae's shorelines, creatures which were the planet's best evolutionary effort in the absence of sunlight.

While plasma licked hungrily at the walls of his bastion, Cortez absently scanned through lengthy reports about the sulphurous algae-trees glowing in tide pools in their own leprous light.

The planetary overlord toyed with his ornate letter opener. He considered that in truth, for such an apparently drab and lacklustre world, Mistress Tenebrae had proved that she harboured terrible dangers for the unwary. He considered, not for the first time, whether her proximity to the Eye of Terror, abominable gateway to the heart of Chaos, had sealed her fate. Was it this which had whispered the many temptations and terrors into his dreams – and were those nightmares long established in the hearts of the dispirited inhabitants of the planet of eternal darkness by the time his governorship had commenced?

An explosion rocked the palace and a once-valuable glass ornament tumbled

from its marble plinth to shatter into countless fragments. Cortez barely shrugged as the spray of razor shards brought scarlet droplets to his forehead.

‘Yes.’ he muttered. ‘She sold her soul long before my time.’

A COLOSSAL RHYTHMIC pounding started outside. The governor’s attention tore away from his reminiscences and he scurried back to the window to see what new horror transpired in the streets below. Lumbering past the window of Cortez’s shelter, with strides which easily cleared the smaller buildings, Tenebrae’s Emperor-class Titan pounded through the city.

‘Prosperitus Lux!’ Cortez snorted ironically. It was typical to name such a war machine on a recently colonised world thus, the hopes and delusions of the people it served to defend reflected in its title. Prosperitus Lux had not been scrambled quickly enough to be effective against the invasion, and had consequently failed in its protective capacity. Now it must surely fall along with the rest of the world.

‘As with everything else in this sorry situation,’ Cortez moaned, ‘it is me, my own indecision which is to blame!’

While the problem had still been a civil matter, of heretics and malcontents rioting upon the streets of Wormwood, Cortez had been unwilling to send in the Guard. He preferred instead to leave such matters for the Arbites to resolve.

‘Idiot! Blind, stupid idiot!’ Repeatedly cursing himself for a fool, Cortez came to the bitterest conclusion. The conclusion that his ineffective governorship was the primary cause of their defeat.

He gazed in wide-eyed desperation as the hulking form receded from view, trying to deny the evidence of his eyes. The Titan was listing badly, flames gouting from its hull. Greenish clouds of plasma periodically vented from the carapace, and Cortez well knew that this indicated a catastrophic reactor breach. From his fortified window, the governor could see the tiny faces of the proud crew flash past, mouthing Os of fear and anguish. He knew the machine was doomed along with all the souls on board.

‘Doomed as my planet!’ he groaned aloud. At last he acknowledged that this situation was down to him, the great Governor Dane Cortez, and in the end the responsibility had proven too much.

EVEN NOW, FACING utter defeat at the hands of warped creatures from the very abyss, Cortez could not stop the flood of hateful memories which assaulted his mind. Amidst the papers strewn his desk, Cortez’s leaden eyes fell on the long-

ignored Adeptus Arbites reports of cult activity. The unbelievable reports of Chaos worship which had so swiftly burgeoned from a couple of isolated incidents in the wastelands into a full-scale heretical rebellion stared back at him, undeniable evidence of his inaction.

‘The signs were all here, all here!’ he wailed, scattering the reports from his desk with a wild sweep of his hand. In the secret place of his heart, Cortez long knew that Tenebrae bred a certain dissolution of the senses. He had felt the lassitude of the spirit which left such sophisticated life-forms as humans craving sensation. Perhaps, Cortez supposed, such a biologically primitive environment resulted in a correspondingly underdeveloped spiritual climate.

Whatever the reasons, the passing of his years of governorship on Tenebrae had seen worship of the Emperor slide further and further into meaningless abstraction, and the whispers from the Eye of Terror grow ever more strident. Now the end was upon him, Cortez could see clearly why it had happened. He derived small comfort from the knowledge that there wasn’t a thing he could have done about it, but that did not excuse him of his responsibilities.

Cortez was certain that in the eyes of mankind, he would be held culpable, perhaps even complicit, in the disaster which had befallen his planet.

‘They will make their own excuses.’ Cortez groaned, aware that elsewhere in the galaxy the powers of the Imperium would doubtless create their own, unfavourable subtexts for why he had not undertaken the obvious and lawful course of action. That is to say, why he had not called upon the Inquisition.

‘Heretic Cortez!’ he wailed. ‘Cortez, thrall of Chaos!’ Cortez tortured himself with such thoughts of how history would perceive him, for he was yet merely human, and subject to human pride. Losing Tenebrae was one thing, losing his life another, but losing his name and dignity too?

SLUMPING WEARILY INTO his great, padded chair of office, Cortez remembered the day when vast, baroque battle barges, covered in the hateful iconography of the Chaos Gods, had appeared from the warp to hang silently over Tenebrae’s atmosphere. They had rained fleets of jagged landing craft towards the planet’s surface. Now the payload of those death carriers stalked the streets of Wormwood: twisted, malevolent machines and beings who left tragedy, rain and terror in their wake.

‘Why? Tell me? Why?’ Cortez implored to empty air. ‘This backwater planet may not mean much... but it is my home!’ Despair overcame him and anguished, gulping sobs wracked his aged frame. ‘Why did I ever come here? Why?’

When he had been offered the governorship of this world so many years ago, he had taken it gladly. A small backwater world, of little importance. A place to be happy and untroubled. A place to put his memories of military service and the horrors he had seen behind him. It had become a place of fear and death.

‘Why?’

Picking a leaf at random from the pile of reports on his desk, Cortez selected one of the many fateful reports on Tenebrae’s heretical activity. Yet another report which he had personally ensured the Inquisition had never received.

The Inquisition? Cortez thought resentfully. If he had requested their assistance, and in truth he knew that they represented the only force in the galaxy capable of preventing events of such enormity, then he also knew he would be standing in despair at this very window again.

The cure? Every bit as lethal as the disease! The irony caused his tear-stained lips to form a rictus grin, and Cortez shook his head. ‘The only difference lies in the fate of the victim’s souls!’ he shouted aloud, as if addressing a rally of doubtful subjects. ‘If I called the Inquisition.’ he shrieked, ‘we would now be watching the grim troops of the Imperium ranging through our beloved thoroughfares supplying “absolution”.’

He had left the military after becoming involved in such cleansing operations, for he had come to call them by another name. Murder. Genocide.

‘Oh, what’s the use in any of it?’ he sobbed, crashing the hateful reports between his balled fists. Ripping and shredding, Cortez systematically began the destruction of all the useless paperwork which had bound him to his desk when he should have been leading his people.

His ravings were abruptly interrupted again, this time by an urgent rapping at the door of his office.

‘Who’s there?’ Cortez demanded irritably.

‘Jezrael, Captain Jezrael, sir!’

A good man. One of the best. Loyal. Sanity tugged at Cortez insistently. He stopped scrabbling at the remaining papers and readjusted his robes.

‘You may enter.’

The captain of the Arbites curtly entered the office and stood to attention. He was a tall, solid man, dressed for battle and brandishing a bolter.

‘Sir! We’re evacuating the last of the civilians now, sir! You must leave now, sir, if we are to have any chance of survival, sir!’

Cortez smiled weakly at the soldier, then indicated the doors with a slender, wasted finger. ‘You go, Jezrael. You have served Tenebrae well. See to it that her

people continue to prosper elsewhere.’ he said in a tired but kindly voice.

‘Sir?’ queried the captain, confusion creasing his uncomprehending face.

‘I will remain here. It is my duty.’

The governor forced himself to stand and faced the soldier with steely eyes. ‘Now go, captain. That is an order!’ he barked, some fire returning to his voice.

With that, Jezrael struck his breastplate in salute, turned curtly on his heel and was away. The doors swung behind him and shut with a quiet click.

WANDERING OVER TO his window once more, Cortez felt as if he was in the grip of some strange dream. His attention was once more captured by the rained streets of Wormwood. Thirty floors below, swaggering gangs of Chaos-warped Marines strolled amongst the wreckage. Their booted feet crunched on the shattered stained glass that once illuminated Wormwood’s proud buildings. Any pockets of survivors they chanced upon were swept away in a vague wash of bolt gun shells, swatted like gnats.

Following in the wake of the Traitor Marine cordon, Cortez glimpsed a procession, of all things, approaching the plaza. A victory train of incongruous gaiety and celebration attended by ragged heretics and capering daemons, to the governor it looked almost medieval. Here a plague bearer, foul daemonic servant of Nurgle, dipped an infected finger into the wounds of a dying man; there a heretic carved designs into his own flesh in the vile name of Slaanesh.

At the centre of the march, an honour guard of traitors from the Word Bearer legion of Chaos Marines, four in all, reverently bore a large, upright metal cylinder approximately twelve feet in height and six in diameter. Cortez’s uncomprehending eyes took in its rich decoration, bas reliefs of foul, warp-spawned creatures carved from an oily green rock which filigreed the shining silver surface. Wisps of ephemeral vapour emanated from vents atop the singular device.

Perplexed, Cortez watched the procession draw up outside the Adeptus Administratum building, seat of his governorship and the centre of the civil service on Tenebrae. The traitors came to a halt and the square began to fill with the adulants of Chaos. The Word Bearers carried their load up the long, broad steps to the forecourt of the building. Between the majestic pillars of the entryway, now defaced with graffiti and riddled with holes and abrasions from small arms fire, the large casket was set down.

Cortez viewed the events unfolding beneath him with mingled intrigue and disquiet. Something was afoot here which he did not understand, a puzzle that

called to him, enticing. The creed of the God-Emperor had always taught unquestioning servitude, and that had sufficed for Cortez. But here, the shadow of his own mortality looming longer and longer, he wanted to at least fathom something of the nature of this forbidden enemy. His destroyer. His doom.

He saw the crowd in the square stirring, becoming agitated. The governor knew instinctively that this had something to do with the contents of that dread casket.

‘What is that?’ Cortez was only dimly aware of the dread rising like a behemoth to join his curiosity.

Far below, the roiling Chaos throng waited impatiently for the coming of the thing which Cortez could not see. ‘Vog! Vog! Vog! Vog! Chastise! Chastise! Chastise!’

Cortez was at once afraid and awfully fascinated by what could be lurking behind the seals.

‘Vog, Vog?’ he mumbled, transfixed by the growing sense of rhythm. Vacillating, nervous, he was unsure if he even wanted to know the truth at all. Perhaps it was fitting that a plunge into the unknown would draw closed the final curtain on his life. He drew a breath. He watched. He felt ready.

A door cracked opened on the graven cylinder, and a billowing carpet of vapour escaped, to roll down the steps in heavy fetid waves. Cortez quickly reached for his field glasses to better view the spectacle.

‘Terminator!’ he gasped, and his blood ran cold. An armoured figure stepped over the threshold of the cylinder with a heavy, deliberate tread. The governor could see that this creature’s eyes were closed, as if in a trance.

‘Stasis slumber.’ he whispered, hoping for a logical and less than sinister explanation.

Then recognition struck him as if with a physical blow, and he reeled back from the hated window. In a sudden flurry of revelation Cortez knew what transpired below.

‘Vog!’ he whispered, barely able to form the name. Cortez now remembered where he had heard the name before. This was Lord Vog, the Chastiser of Worlds. Also known as the Apostate of Charybdis, Vog was a notorious creature of Chaos from beyond the Eye of Terror. Vog was a Word Bearer priest, a twisted parody of the chaplains of the Imperial Space Marines. He was also rumoured to be mutant, a being whose voice could loosen the veil betwixt reality and the warp.

‘Bringer of demons!’ Cortez gasped, horrified that such an entity sought out Tenebrae for its ministrations.

With terror came a strange dulling of his senses, and Cortez was surprised to find that now he was more curious than ever, for he knew beyond doubt that Vog's presence could only signify one thing: the absolute defeat of Tenebrae. The Chastiser was here to perform a victory mass for Chaos.

The governor shuddered involuntarily, watching Vog as though hypnotised. Slithering over the collar of his Terminator armour came a glistening, slender tentacle. Vog's head tilted back and he inhaled sharply. The whites of his eyes showed through slits as the slimy, pink limb writhed and whipped with its own, unwholesome volition.

An aperture on the side of the Terminator's thick neck dilated and oozed a glutinous clear fluid. The point of the tentacle dug into the hole and began to feed its length into the Apostate's neck. The skin on his throat bulged obscenely, its moisture catching glints of the weak light. Vog came fully awake when the organ was in place, embedded in his larynx.

Lord Vog stepped out into the twilight of Tenebrae. All eyes were upon him and Cortez almost joined the chorus of his demented acolytes as a great cheer rose up from the adoring crowd. Vog scanned his congregation imperiously, his chin held high. Lord Vog radiated arrogance and pride and, it seemed to Cortez, a strange nobility every bit as impressive as the great Space Marine leaders he had encountered during that distant military service.

As Vog started his address to seal the victory of Chaos, the governor marvelled at the way the Apostate's voice carried throughout the broad plaza. His words were at once perfectly clear to Cortez, yet somehow buried within a sonic murk which was truly inhuman. The cacophony from the Apostate's mouth covered a broad spectrum of sound and was counterpointed by an eerie chanting. This sound, which might have emanated from the very pit of hell itself, redolent with the torment of a million damned souls, all came from the lips of a single man. For such was the Eulogy of Pandemonium, the corrupt chorus of the Word Bearer chaplains.

'Those gullible fools who daily endure the worship of that rotting monolith, the Emperor, would do well to heed the word of Lorgar.' Vog's voice clutched mockingly at Cortez's heart. 'We offer our worship to true gods who govern the affairs of mortals. Not a mortal whose affairs are governed by the delusion that he is a deity.'

The discord of his address and the dreadful import of his words wracked the Governor's soul with its vile, atonal reverberations. Cortez doubled over, gasping, and attempted to block the unholy sound by claspings white, trembling hands over his ears. Kneeling on the sterile floor of his office, high above the

ruin of his world, Dane Cortez convulsed with long, shuddering sobs of denial. It was over and there would be no atonement for him.

THE TONE OF the address had changed. Lulled by the droning, white noise of the Word Bearer's pontifications, Cortez was drawn, almost hypnotically, back to the window.

His attention was drawn and held by the sight of a corpse far below him. It was huddled in a corner of the forecourt where Vog was giving his speech. Yet another mute testimony to a tired, frightened old man's failure. The body was that of an Imperial trooper who had fallen trying to defend the Administratum building.

'Rigel Kremer.' The name swept into his memory, but there was no space in Cortez to mourn one friend in the midst of such atrocity. The name seemed... inconsequential. As his consciousness swam to the chant, Cortez found that he could find room to marvel at the play of light on the wet lips of Rigel's wounds.

'Beauty or horror?' The old man abruptly cackled, seeing that the warm, red defilement of flesh almost looked beautiful when viewed in a certain way.

'Rigel?' Cortez asked querulously, as if expecting some answer from the corpse below. 'Rigel, how soon will your carmine beauty give way to the lurid hues of putrefaction? Your attractive red liquid fester into rank, black necrotic fluids?'

Cortez's wet eyes glazed over, drained of vitality and volition as bizarre, alien thoughts flayed at the layers of his consciousness, sinking keen talons into his essential being.

'Then what, Rigel? Answer me! I am your lord, damn you!' Cortez's fingers scrabbled in futility at the window as the Chastiser's voice droned ever on. 'After decay has taken hold of the sack of meat that was once you, Rigel, what then?' He wagged an admonishing finger at the distant body. 'Let me tell, you young Kremer, let me tell you!' Spittle flew unheeded from snarling lips and smeared the window. 'Your thrice-damned carcass will generate new life. Oh yes, Rigel, maggots will burst from the eggs laid around your eyes and mouth, and bacteria and mould will break you down into nutrients for the humblest of plants to thrive on'.

Abruptly, Cortez leapt back from the window and screamed in anguish, terror and horror. He was appalled at the heretical train his thoughts had taken, realising that somehow the droning voice of the false priest below had slid into his stream of consciousness, tempting him. And he had succumbed so easily.

Tears of shame and loss burned on seamed, leathery cheeks.

‘All for nothing?’ He shouted, anger beginning to blaze within his core. ‘All this to no end save Chaos?’ Anguished, he was assaulted by a rush of memories. They overwhelmed him as if eager to escape his corrupted mind.

The long and fraught journey through life. The disappointments, and the fresh hopes. But most cruel of all was the opening of his eyes to the excesses of tyranny during military service. He had left the Imperial armies to become a planetary governor and use his new found understanding to make a better life for people.

‘A better life! All I wanted was a better life!’ He sobbed, chest heaving with barely controlled misery.

‘And this is how the mighty Imperium repays me?’

This dead end. This inevitability.

Cortez howled aloud. In a frenzy of violence, the old man heaved his desk over, scattering precious artefacts and ornaments to be trampled unheeded.

‘Oh Emperor, where are you now? Have you forsaken me?’

Regret, disappointment, terror and misery were gone in a blinding explosion of all consuming, inarticulate rage at this most subtle of temptations, and at just how badly he had been betrayed by uncaring fate. Bellowing like a maddened beast, Cortez pounded on the window with liver-spotted fists.

‘Where is my Emperor?’ he howled in self mockery.

And what succour could the Emperor offer this poor, tormented soul now? he thought bitterly, face reddened in helpless anger. Striding to his neatly ordered shelves, he cleared them in one swoop of his arms. The medals of the various campaigns in which he had served and the sundry paraphernalia of his office he hurled across the chamber with an inarticulate howl.

‘As the traitor claimed, so you are!’ he shrieked, pointing accusingly toward the skies ‘A... a... a deluded rotting monolith!’

The last medals clattered from his fingers with a finality that told him he no longer had any allegiances.

‘Only myself now!’

In that moment of deepest betrayal, of deepest loneliness, of deepest despair, Dane Cortez hated with the purity and intensity that could change worlds.

‘Why have you forsaken me?’ he cried challengingly. ‘Why?’

Red, shifting haze started to appear within the room. Cortez stared aghast yet transfixed as the fabric of space and time dislocated. Charnel smells assaulted his nostrils as shifting, nebulous figures coalesced within the gathering miasma.

‘No!’ he shrieked, his shrill voice an entreaty to the uncaring gods of both

Chaos and men.

An awful eerie, mocking laughter ballooned within his skull. His only answer.

A warp gate was opening.

Too late Cortez realised what he had done. By the very act of resisting the temptation he had been subjected to, the violence of his maddened thoughts had opened the way for the crazed servants of Khorne, the lord of blood and war. The one faction missing from the assault on Tenebrae had come in full glory.

Crimson light glowed eerily as the gate widened, allowing sleek, red-skinned humanoid figures access to this dimension. Heavily muscled and fearful in aspect, they stepped into the chamber, uncertainly at first, as though unfamiliar with the sounds and textures of this realm.

Cortez backed away, mouth agape, choked with stark terror.

Cruel mouths were filled with rows of carnivorous, glistening fangs. Nostrils flared wickedly as they smelt his mortality. Blazing daemonic eyes fixed him with a predatory glare. There was to be no escape from that malign intelligence or the bloodlust so driven by it. The bloodletters wielded serrated black swords which were enchanted with the power of death, fit to reap a harvest of souls for their lord.

The old man scrambled at his belt for the laspistol as the snarling fiends shook themselves free of the fading warp gate. Grinning in terrible anticipation, they looped towards the heavy wooden desk, long tongues flicking down to the bases of their chins in expectation of the soul-kill.

Cortez knew without a flicker of doubt that he was about to die.

‘And for what?’ he lamented, gibbering in near mindless terror.

Death stalked ever closer, and he was overcome by a sulphurous blast, the infernal reek of Hades.

To die for the Imperium – unwieldy and uncaring behemoth which would have as soon put him to the sword had he approached them for help?

‘No!’ he cried, and the bloodletters hissed appreciatively. A tang of terror was such a sweet morsel.

Then for the foul abominations released by his very own weakness?

‘No! Never that!’ Cortez shrieked, backed hard against the far wall of his chamber.

As the daemons approached, bearing his doom on their wicked blades, a solution began to form in Cortez’s anguished mind. Against all odds, the governor found a new strength of resolve within him.

He determined it would be neither. Not the Imperium nor Chaos. The answer

was obvious. So obvious that he smiled even as he unlatched his holster flap.

So obvious.

The daemons paused momentarily, confused by the unexpected change of emotion. Fear they knew. Terror they relished. Confidence they despised.

The delay was enough.

‘For me.’ he whispered.

Before the daemons could strike, Dane thrust the muzzle of his ornate laspistol into his mouth and depressed the trigger.

Against all the odds, he had escaped. Finally he was at peace.

ANCIENT LANCES

Alex Hammond

A DRY HEAT slid over the barren wastes with the rising of the sun. As light pushed at the edges of the darkness, the shadows fell away to reveal the dead in their many hundreds. Dakat City was nothing but rabble and corpses. Broken steel and concrete lay spread out on the baking sand. Only carrion insects moved about the devastation, nibbling on flesh, darting across dead eyes.

Al’Kahan looked out across the sea of carnage. His eye did not blink. Heavy artillery must have pounded the city for hours. The bunkers were torn open. The network of hives beneath the city would be running with blood. It would pool in the lower places. The smell of it would remain there forever.

His mare stirred beneath him. She had a heart of iron but liked the slaughter of innocents no more than he. Al’Kahan turned to face his men. Veteran tribesmen all, they were the best sons his home world had to offer. Each should know his steed as well as his steel. The philosophy of his people. The horse was their kin, their companion. Without it they could never prevail.

The battalion looked across at Al’Kahan, their dark eyes and rough hearts moved by the scene before them. They wore the marks of their clans upon their cloaks, carved from bone and stitched onto the hides of great bison. Beads of honour hung from their beards, holding the complex plaits in place. Al’Kahan spoke, his voice breaking the stillness of the spent battlefield.

‘This is our first and last day. Last, for we shall no longer be sworn to the sword of the Imperium. First, for we shall die or succeed. To die is to pass on to the plains of our ancestors, to join them in the great hunt. To succeed is to be given a world to make our own.’

Al’Kahan stood upon the back of his horse, so that he could see the entire body of men. Lifting his eye patch he spoke. ‘We own each battle. It has cost us one and all, brother man and brother horse. We are the Sons of Atilla. Our destiny stands before us.’

Al’Kahan dropped into his saddle and pulled hard on his reins. His mare stood high on her hind legs and kicked at the air. In a second, the silence was broken for the last time on that day. Two hundred hooves struck the ground in unison,

sending carrion beetles scrabbling and used shells flying. Al’Kahan’s Atillan Rough Riders were on the move again.

They swept over the broken lands, skirting between battlefields. As they rode, they found only the dead, but the tracks of their enemies were all too clear. Heavy tanks and many infantry: this was an enemy unconcerned with subterfuge, an army of fire and iron.

‘Honourable Al’Kahan?’ A giant tribesman, Tulk, rode beside him, livid face scars denoting many kills.

‘Speak, brother.’

‘Those who lead the Prakash XIIth have made contact. They’re being surrounded. Cut off on the salt flats. They will make their stand there.’ Tulk grunted in disdain.

‘They will fall if surrounded.’

‘If the spirit of the hawk is with us, we may have speed enough to aid them.’ the large tribesman said, looking to the sky.

‘Indeed, if we fight with our ancestors by our side we could break the enemy’s line. Create a weak point, from which they may make their push. Use the communicator: let them know that the sons of Atilla will save their hideless backs once again.’

CRESTING AN EMBANKMENT, the riders looked out over the Great Lake. Its life blood dried up, it shimmered in the haze of a high sun. A dark column snaked like a viper across the salt flats, heading inexorably for a much smaller, ragged mass. Al’Kahan paused briefly, his men arriving close beside him as he looked through binoculars at the forces ahead. He turned and called out.

‘The enemy artillery is their key. Like a fist from heaven it has smashed every settlement we have passed. We must outflank it and destroy it. Our ancestors are with us today, this I know for a wind has travelled with us across this barren land. Feel it at your heels when you strike for their heart.’ Al’Kahan raised his lance and readied it in the harness of his saddle. ‘Save your lances for their artillery. Do not engage their main force. Ride like the wind, my brothers.’

Al’Kahan let out a deep, wordless cry, his voice holding strong. The riders followed suit, their voices rising high above the thick heat. Al’Kahan felt a shiver pass through his bones, electric like the thrill of a kill. His lance felt good in his hand, like it had always been there. He was first to break the war cry and set his steed to battle. The pounding of the hooves rang about the great expanse. Tulk screamed their position down the communicator array on his back. A flare

from the Prakash XIIth rose high into the air. A reply signal, they were prepared.

Al’Kahan’s heart felt as though it was keeping pace with the rushing horses. The closer the enemy, the tighter he gripped his reins. His cloak spun and twisted in the air about him. His eyes wept with the sting of the rising salt from the flats and the wind in his eyes.

A shell landed close by. It sent a horse and rider spiralling through the air, the mare whinnying as it slammed to the ground. It died on impact. Its rider fell beneath a hundred hooves. Honed in battle craft the men spread wide. Another shell fell amidst them, its shrapnel slicing flesh and fur. But artillery fire could not compete with the riders’ speed.

They were closing on their greatest threat. Ahead, foul Chaos Marines, their ancient armour warped and corrupt, skirted like giant cockroaches behind their machines. Here they nested, chittering, calling and screaming in a language that bore into Al’Kahan’s skull, as though it was trying to devour him. All around them, screaming hordes of cultists howled insane hymns to their warped masters.

Al’Kahan’s warrior’s heart shuddered to look upon them all. He gripped his studded reins tighter, letting the iron studs tug at his flesh. The pain helped distract him from the abominations ahead. Airborne jet bikes tore the sky apart as they ripped forward from within the enemy’s column. Lasfire and bolter shells began to rain down upon the riders. Men were thrown from their horses, the beasts remaining riderless within the charge. Al’Kahan leapt the body of a dead horse, its skull raptured, a rider trapped beneath it.

The first of the riders had reached the enemy’s line. They did well, their steeds ploughing through the line of cultists. Some were cut down, spurts of blood slicing through the air like jets of steam.

Tulk led a second wave. His men had stowed their lances in favour of lasguns. Every shot rang true, but few penetrated. In answer, hot metal shells ploughed into his unit. Horses fell, colliding with one another on their way to the ground. A few riders were able to leap free, but most were cut down or crushed beneath their mounts, their bodies dropping like building blocks smashed aside by a child. Their momentum had been stopped. Men had to take cover behind the dead and dying. The Chaos hordes cared only for the spilling of blood, and rained fire upon dead and living alike.

Al’Kahan wheeled around and drove his unit hard towards his fallen comrades. To remain stationary in battle was to offer victory to the enemy. Vaulting the piled dead, Al’Kahan rode along the Chaos line. He swung his lance like a staff, keeping its explosive tip from striking. The fallen raiders took his cue and charged at the enemy. Atilans rushed the armoured Chaos Marines, their furs

soaked in blood. Many were thrown high by the sheer force of the enemy's powered armour, but a few blows found their mark.

'We're slowing!' Al'Kahan cried, circling the fray and rounding up those riders who remained mounted. The ground shook, and for all but a moment, cultist and rough rider alike paused. Barbed tanks, bristling with weapons and equipped with savage scythes and ploughs, began to advance upon the Imperial Guard.

'Pull out! Move, damn you!' Al'Kahan called, leaning down from his saddle to snatch at the grasping hand of a fallen raider.

'Thank you, brother.'

Tulk, Al'Kahan's lieutenant grinned back at him, his sharpened teeth streaked with his own blood. It welled up from a gash on his tattooed face, a fresh memento of this battle and one that Tulk would certainly cherish.

'They're not too tough once you've cracked them open!' he grinned.

The enemy tanks were almost upon them. Men were still trying to scramble free of the fray onto stray horses and the backs of their colleagues.

Al'Kahan swore. 'We need time.'

'It would be an honour, Al'Kahan.' Tulk said.

Al'Kahan kicked hard into the flanks of his horse and rode high over the mounting dead. He charged straight towards the first of the tanks. Flanks dripping with sweat and blood, Al'Kahan's mare struggled forward, irregular hoof falls alerting him to her waning strength.

'One more charge, daughter of Atilla,' he called to her.

Tulk stood upon the horse's back, arms steadying himself against Al'Kahan. He snatched a bulging satchel from the saddle and crouched. Al'Kahan rode alongside the approaching tank, its cruel blades spinning but an arm's distance away. Tulk paused for a moment only, then the giant tribesman flung himself forwards onto the grinding vehicle. Al'Kahan kicked at his mount and they burst forwards, throwing salt high into the air as they galloped around the rear of the machine. Tulk scrabbled up the top of the tank and threw himself back as a hatch burst open. Al'Kahan snatched a throwing disc from his belt. He threw the blade with abandon, not caring whether he cut down the Marine or gave Tulk a painless death. It ricocheted off the hull and up into the cultist's face. The man fell, gun pumping, back into the tank's innards. Amid screams, the vehicle spun wide and bucketed right. Tulk pulled a grenade from the satchel and popped its pin. He threw it deep into the machine and looked about, wild frenzy in his eyes.

Al'Kahan spurred his mount on. Tulk threw himself down a little ahead of his comrade. An explosion ripped the tank open, throwing Tulk into Al'Kahan's

horse's flank. All three collapsed to the ground. Two more tanks pressed onwards. Dazed, Al'Kahan turned, trying to catch sight of his men. A dull pain at the base of his spine drew his attention to his legs, trapped beneath the horse.

'Tulk?' The tribesman did not stir. The tanks rambled on towards the Atillan commander. Al'Kahan scrabbled desperately at the satchel at Tulk's side but could not reach it. He reached back and caught hold of his lance. Using it, the Atillan prodded gently at the satchel, praying the explosive tip would not trigger, setting the grenades off. The surface of the salt flats came away in large plates as the satchel dragged slowly towards him. The noise of the tank filled his entire body. Al'Kahan slowly drew the satchel close enough to open.

The shadow of the tank fell across him. Scythes and blades cut up the corpse of Tulk, harvesting flesh. Al'Kahan drove his hand deep into the satchel and pulled a pin. At the same moment, he braced the lance hard against the carved insignia on his armoured breastplate. Al'Kahan threw the satchel beneath the lead tank and let the vehicle's plough catch the tip of his lance. Flame and sulphur engulfed him for an instant as the lance tip detonated, throwing him backwards and away from the exploding tanks.

Al'Kahan floundered, tumbling backwards across the salt flats, unable to slow his momentum. He prepared for the sharp, crushing pain of hooves. Instead he found himself wrapped in something soft. The smell of home... fried bison and corn bread. Was this the hereafter?

Al'Kahan opened his eyes. Wrapped about him was a thick fur cloak. He had been scooped from the ground, two young riders supporting him between horses.

'We have you, honourable commander.' a young rider with tangled braids said.

'A steed! I need a fast mare. We must destroy their artillery.' Al'Kahan wheezed.

'Great commander—'

'I know I'm wounded. My chest is pierced, my life blood falls to the soil. If we do not fight we will lose this battle and my name will be dishonoured. Better to die than to live dishonoured.'

Ten more riders arrived to regroup, some carrying additional men.

'Gather the lances! And get me a horse!' Al'Kahan screamed.

An Atillan dismounted while others circled, sweeping down from their saddles to snatch up the unused lances of fallen riders. They lay, scattered like kindling, across the battlefield, daring the foolish to tread upon their explosive tips.

Al'Kahan propped himself up in a saddle. The sucking wound in his chest was like a blow hole, gouting forth blood and pain.

‘Son of Atilla,’ Al’Kahan called to the dismounted rider. ‘Get behind me. Take your clan tassels and hold them hard to my wound.’

The rider held Al’Kahan tight, his grip stemming the flow. ‘You hold my old life in your hands. Quite literally.’ Al’Kahan coughed, feeling his life’s blood wearing thin.

No cry was given. In this moment, actions spoke louder than any horn. Al’Kahan spurred the new steed forwards, the young warrior on his back bracing his wound and bearing several lances. The remaining riders followed suit, their steeds catching up with the old commander. They spread out with an unspoken synchronicity, pulling alongside one another. A line of riders, thirty strong, churned the earth as they flung themselves hard at the enemy.

‘Ready lances!’ Al’Kahan commanded. The artillery loomed closer. It was larger than he had expected. Giant cannons pointed skywards, seeming to stroke the bellies of the clouds. Mortars with gates as dark as the mouth of the warp grinned like daemons. Tracked platforms churned up the ground beneath them, ripping huge trenches into the ground. These machines were eager to belch their deadly shells upon the good men of the Emperor.

As they rode, the Atillans passed the lances from hand to hand with spider-grace. All were equipped twice over. The Chaos Marines and their cultist forces caught sight of the rough riders. They scrambled low across the ground, throwing themselves hard behind the rare pieces of cover that jutted, like blast craters, from the ground.

‘Steady!’ Al’Kahan called, air escaping both from his mouth and the wound. His head spun, oxygen depleted.

A barrage of laser and lead whipped across the riders. Explosions from mortars and grenades rent the ground.

‘Now!’ Al’Kahan cried. On this mark, every man slid effortlessly to the right side of his horse, bodies pressed flat against his steed’s flanks. Some horses were hit, some fell, but more rode on.

‘For Atilla!’ one warrior cried as the cavalry swept high and hard over the enemy lines. Ignoring their assailants, the riders doubled their speed. The pounding of hooves echoed deep into the earth. Sweat and blood were swept from horse and man, leaving thin red wakes in the shimmering heat. The riders lowered their lances. Artillery crews, still scrambling to load their cannons, scrambled for hand weapons. The Atillans let forth a single war cry, twenty sounding as though they were a hundred.

The explosive-tipped lances found their marks. Thick iron plates were torn from machines, hulls dripping with wires, gutted. Explosion after explosion, like

a string of firecrackers, burst out across the battlefield. Rounds of ammunition, like rain from the heavens, filled the air. Al’Kahan threw grenade after grenade at stockpiles of munitions. The rear of the Chaos army was engulfed in cleansing flame. Burning tracks and fragments of metal still fell as the Atilans moved on to cut down the fleeing.

AL’KAHAN RAN HIS hands across his chest. It had healed well. The scar was impressive, the largest on his battle-worn torso. The soft sounds of the battlecruiser filled the room. Transparent plasteel windows, like the hollow eyes of the dead, looked out across the stars. Al’Kahan stared at a sharp blue nebula, crackling with lightning and flame. The lulling hum of the starship’s engines and the glorious scene before him made Al’Kahan almost long to remain in deep space, almost.

He looked down at the large Imperial Eagle that hung from his chest from chains of gold. He could feel its weight through the layers of fur and hessian he wore. His cloak bore further trophies and medals, their shining metal like strange ticks amongst the pelts. Al’Kahan considered his reflection in the window. Broad plainsman’s hat, trimmed with fur, single wild warrior’s eye, long braided hair. He could hardly distinguish between his dark black locks and the snow leopard’s mane he wore about the top of his cloak. Both were worn with age and dark from a thousand blood stains.

‘Commander!’ A voice from behind.

Al’Kahan turned about slowly. A commissar; dark leather coat, black peaked cap, trimmed and adorned with silver skulls; eyes like flint.

‘Commander. I trust you have healed.’

‘Indeed, Commissar Streck.’

‘Your Imperial Seal fits you well.’ The commissar turned towards the window.

‘It feels good about my neck.’

‘As well it should. You have served the Emperor well.’ The commissar worked a crank, shielding the window and throwing the room into neon bright.

‘A hundred battles.’

‘Time for you to take your place as lord of your own province on Dagnar II.’

‘I look forward to such an honour.’

‘Really?’

‘I could be no less certain.’

‘Interesting. I thought your people longed for their homeworld more than any other. The Ice Warriors of Valhalla long for the sun, the Alderian Shock Fighters

hate their deathworld, the Gorchak Fire Sentinels thirst. But the Atilans never tire of hunting bison, warring amongst their clans... or at least that's what the Adeptus Ministoram have always held.'

'I'm sure they have their reasons.'

'Most assuredly.' Commissar Streck turned and made to leave the room, then paused. 'However... you have an irregular choice. In three days we will dock with your home world. A unique opportunity. We need to take on new steeds and other supplies for your founding, then head off to Dagnar II, and from there on to Olstar Prime. If you were to stay you would not be dishonoured. You could return to your hunting grounds.'

'Why?'

'Let me simply say that I have long maintained that with time a warrior of the Emperor comes to know only battle. I look forward to being able to prove this in a report to the Ministorum. A... test case, if you will.'

'I see.' Al'Kahan looked down at the seal on his chest.

'The ship will dock for a week only.' Streck said. 'You have your Emperor's blessing.'

'ONE WEEK, COMMANDER,' Commissar Streck called from across one of the many loading bays of the massive space vessel. Al'Kahan did not turn to acknowledge the man. Rather he waded through the air, thick with fuel, towards the towering bay doors. He longed to feel the soft soil of his home-world beneath his feet, not lifeless steel.

Al'Kahan's furs, bundled upon his back, weighed heavily on his shoulders. Filled with gifts and trophies from the Emperor, they were foreign objects on Atillan soil. A twisting path of conduits and gantries crowded and cluttered Al'Kahan's progress. The Emperor's ship, even now, with its foul vapours and grinding noises, tried to hold him back from his homeland. The land to which his soul would be forever joined.

Al'Kahan reached the bay's vast external doors. Two men from the Prakash XIIth – boys only – stood at their stations by a smaller, man-sized doorway. One stepped before him. Al'Kahan pulled his papers from his coat and pushed them hard into the young Guard's forehead. The man stumbled backwards. Al'Kahan swept his feet from beneath him with a solid throw from his leg and spun about letting his heavy furs catch the other in the neck. The second fell to the ground just seconds after his companion. The papers, heavy with seals, fluttered down to land on the ground between the men. Al'Kahan stepped through and was struck

by the winds of home. He held his breath and strode out onto the sloping walkway, then leapt down into the knee high grasses of the open plains of Atilla.

The massive space vessel towered from the grasslands. It would block out much of the sun as it rose, its shadows turning around the countryside like a giant sundial. The long grasses surged and crested in the warm evening breeze. They washed around Al’Kahan, slapping against his thighs as he strode on. The ship had put down next to a small Imperial outpost, which huddled in a wide, blasted-earth clearing. More a collection of scattered administrative buildings than an organised base, the buildings looked like squat dung heaps.

Worse still, like buzzing flies, Atillans were gathered in groups about the buildings. Approaching them, Al’Kahan saw that there were more than he’d initially thought. Many lay huddled together drunkenly amidst pools of bile and filth. Some shivered around small fires. As Al’Kahan drew near, he saw that they did not cook desert hen or bison side, but something else, something more akin to a rodent.

Mongrels and beggars scuttled out of Al’Kahan’s way as he strode on. The deeper into the quagmire of scorched earth and hastily erected bunkers he went, the more Al’Kahan worried he would never escape it. It was as though he were entering the heart of the dark plains, that dire place to which the dishonoured dead passed on. Smaller spacecraft, not bearing the glorious eagle of the Imperium, had landed here too. Rogue traders? Mercenaries? Pirates? Al’Kahan could not be certain. All that he could tell was that these men were making a living off his people. From out of the side of one of these ships a pledge trader was at work. Beggars and wounded queued in a soulless line outside the small craft. A dark, heavy-set man was passing out food in battered tin bowls.

‘Sister, what are you doing?’ Al’Kahan leant in to talk to a woman in the queue. ‘I am hungry, brother.’ ‘Where is your clan, your husband?’

‘He left to fight for the Sky Emperor. I came here to find peace.’ ‘I see no peace.’

‘Can I help you?’ A trader type in long, mesh-armour robes strode forward to stand face to face with Al’Kahan. ‘You have made beggars of my people.’ Al’Kahan sneered. ‘We offer them food in return for performing small tasks on our ship up in orbit.’ the trader said pulling aside his coat. ‘Join the queue or leave.’ He revealed the handle of a laspistol underneath his garments. ‘I know what this is.’ Al’Kahan said to the assembled tribespeople. ‘This is a ploy. These men are slavers, they will take you up to their ship to imprison the strongest of you and slay the others!’

‘What? That is simply untrue!’ The trader turned to face the crowd, his hands

held open in a gesture of platitude.

Al’Kahan grabbed the trader by the back of the neck and thrust him forward to the ground. Throwing back the man’s coat, Al’Kahan revealed a set of manacles at his belt. ‘Look!’ he called to the crowd. ‘What merchant has need of these?’ Al’Kahan drove the slaver’s face further into the ground. Others drew near. Al’Kahan snatched the man’s laspistol from beneath his coat. ‘Back off!’ Al’Kahan growled holding it to the back of the floored slaver’s head. ‘Return to your tribes!’ he screamed at the beggars, ‘This is no way for Atillans to live!’

Al’Kahan spat to the ground and strode into the night. The blank faces watched him go in silence. No one moved, no one left.

The eyes of his ancestors were beginning to appear in the heavens above him. He still recalled each pattern, each constellation, from that time many years ago when, with a boy’s foolish notions of the glory of war, he had set forth into those stars to fight for the Emperor God. His ancestors would guide him, guide his own eyes to the hunting grounds of his people. Al’Kahan imagined what they would be doing – perhaps feasting after a great hunt, gathered around the fires. He would walk from the light of each hearth to meet with old friends and new warriors. Young men keen to gain their first scars on the field of battle. It would be so good to be back.

THE NIGHTS HAD passed slowly. Al’Kahan slept alongside the tired old mare he’d bought from a trader back at the outpost. The animal was as scarred and wrinkled as Al’Kahan himself. Its breath was shallow when it slept, a constant reminder of his own mortality. He found he had somehow lost the knack of lighting a fire, and had had to use Imperial Guard-issue flame flares to keep himself warm.

There were few signs of his clan on the plains – the marks made by the herds were old, and there were no fresh horses prints either. On the third night, though, he came across an old camp, tents bunt to the ground, and clan banners buried in the dirt. There were no bodies. Amidst the charred remains, Al’Kahan found a lasgun, its charge burnt out. It bore no markings. Had his people taken to using the weapons of the Imperium?

On the fourth night, Al’Kahan wound his way along Kapak Canyon’s massive ridges. It was a wide gulf, as though the finger of some god had stripped back the earth revealing its inner workings. In the valley there were channels like arteries, boulders and outcrops like cancers and ancient caves like hollow sockets. If his clan had been attacked this would be their place of refuge. It had

been that way for hundreds of years. Only the Hawk's Shadow clan knew of the tunnels and the ridges and could hide here for many days. In a hidden valley, through the disguised arch of a rocky outcrop, he saw at last the familiar tents of his clan. They were smaller than he recalled, more ramshackle. A few mongrels fought over a bone in the moonlight. He could see no guards.

Al'Kahan gritted his teeth and dismounted. He strode on, his arms wrapped tight around the fur bundle he had brought from the ship. The dogs ran away barking into the night as he approached. A young Atillan, facial scars still fresh, stepped from the shadows, his sabre drawn.

'Back off,' Al'Kahan mumbled.

'You are in the territory of the Hawk's Shadow Clan.' The boy stepped closer, bringing his sabre to bear. 'You will back off.'

'I am Al'Kahan. I am one of the Hawk's Shadow.'

'There is no one by that name amongst our clan.'

'You are too young to know any better.' Al'Kahan proceeded to continue past the boy.

'Drop what you hold or my sword will drink of your blood.' the boy snarled.

'No. I am Al'Kahan!'

The boy lunged at him. The old warrior stepped aside, grabbed hold of the boy's arm and smartly lifted upwards. The boy let out a high scream, dropping his sabre, and clutched at his shoulder joint.

'It'll snap back in.' Al'Kahan sneered.

Taking up the fallen sword, Al'Kahan strode towards the nearest hut. Tribespeople had run out at the screaming of the boy. The warrior slashed back the curtain across the entrance to the tent.

'Alyshfa!' Al'Kahan called for his wife.

A battered tribesman stood up, casting aside his furs. His face and body were scarred and wan.

Al'Kahan slit open another tent. She was not here either. A woman sat surrounded by many children, her face worn, her eyes red from crying. The babes were thin, they began to cry and scream.

Al'Kahan entered more tents. With each slice of the sabre, the tragedy of his tribe was revealed to him. Outsiders slept with tribesmen. Stinking carcasses, some many days old, were being used for food. Horses were lame.

'Alyshfa!' Al'Kahan called, slashing open another one of the wretched hovels. A man sat bolt upright from beneath a mound of furs, a terrified look in his eyes. There was a familiar woman's form at his side.

‘Alyshfa! Your husband has returned!’ Al’Kahan yelled as the man leapt up and snatched at a hunting lance resting high against the roof.

Al’Kahan brought his sabre down on the tribesman’s outstretched hand. It fell to the floor. The tribesman let out a howl. Al’Kahan grabbed him by his braids and threw his naked frame out of the door.

‘Al’Kahan!’ a sombre-eyed woman, her hair greying, shouted back at him. Her skin read like life’s map, a map Al’Kahan could hardly read. He half-recognised her as she snatched hold of his hand.

Al’Kahan spun hastily to face the tribesmen entering his door and shoved Alyshfa back onto the bed. One of the advancing tribesmen swung hard towards Al’Kahan’s head. He ducked and wrenched a fur rug from the ground, tripping the tribesman who crashed through a large water vase. The floor flooded. Another man rushed Al’Kahan. He stepped into the warrior’s path and smashed the hilt of his sabre into his face.

‘Come on, you whelps!’ Al’Kahan barked out of the hut. ‘Let’s see how many it takes until you show me your respect!’

Suddenly he felt a sharp pain across the back of his skull. Staggering around he saw Alyshfa above him, a heavy iron pot held tightly in her hand, a streak of his blood on its hard base.

AL’KAHAN OPENED his eyes. Above him he saw blankets hanging from the support beams of the leather tent. His head was throbbing. He lay on the ground in the damp furs. Alyshfa sat on the ground beside him, holding a sabre to his neck – the sabre he had given her on the day he left.

She had aged more than he. Her eyes were as though they had seen the horrors of the warp, her hair streaked grey and knotted. She still had a noble bearing, but it seemed as though she was struggling to maintain it, to save face before him.

‘You hit me.’ Al’Kahan reached to feel the crown of his head.

‘You were destroying my tent.’

‘You are my wife,’ Al’Kahan mumbled. He could taste the blood from his cut lip.

‘Was! I was your wife.’ Alyshfa placed the sword at her side. ‘When a wife’s husband departs on a sky ship, she becomes widowed. She may choose a new husband after the time of mourning.’

‘You are no longer widowed. I have returned.’

‘I mourned your passing. A fool, you took to the stars. You fought for the Sky Emperor. You left. What more is there to say?’

‘I have returned to my people. I see that they need me.’ Al’Kahan sat up slowly. It dawned on him that he was arguing with her as though he had only departed yesterday. She had her temper still, as he had his. Some things on Atilla had not changed.

‘We are fine without you, Al’Kahan. Your place is no longer amongst us.’

‘All the traditions have been forgotten. I was attacked by a boy, too stupid to know the rules of hospitality. Who is headman now?’

‘Po’Thar is dead. Like I said, a lifetime has passed since your leaving. Our tribe is no longer glorious. We starve, our tribesmen are but boys. Traditions are our last concern.’

‘That saddens me.’ Al’Kahan stood gingerly. ‘It is a pity. Our traditions are what make us Atillans.’

‘There are new traditions. Things are changing.’ Alyshfa handed Al’Kahan a damp rag. He placed it on his head.

‘They have changed all too much. Where are all the men?’

‘They rode against the warlord, Talthar. Our herd was stolen and they sought to bring it back.’

Al’Kahan paced around the perimeters of the tent, trying to clear his muddled head. He peered outside the flap. A crowd had gathered outside, they stood back from the tent as they caught sight of Al’Kahan. There were very few able warriors, ten at the most.

‘Our warriors were defeated?’ he asked Alyshfa, turning back to the room.

‘Survivors told of a fortress, of weapons bought from sky traders. They rode against it and tried to attack, but could not assail its walls or defeat their guns.’

‘Where is your... husband?’

‘With the wisewoman. She is mending his wound.’

‘I can pay for a new hand.’

‘He is proud. He will neither take your money nor let a machine replace his flesh.’

Al’Kahan regarded the woman he had only known as a girl. She wore the sorrow of his tribe like a veil, but beneath it he could still see some inkling of pride.

He strode out of the tent. The crowd staggered backwards, some men reaching for sabres. Al’Kahan held up his hands. They stared intently at the figure who had arrived a frenzied madman.

‘Come dawn,’ Al’Kahan said, ‘come dawn we will make plans to renew our tribe.’

‘WELCOME, THE ONCE-proud tribes of Kapak Valley.’ Al’Kahan stood upon the back of a horse, looking out over a rabble of wounded men, boys and women who had turned against the traditions. ‘I am Al’Kahan. I have served the Sky Emperor and have returned to rejoin my people. Here I have found nothing but sorrow and tears. This warlord refuses the ways of our people by plundering and stealing bison and setting rock and stone to earth to make a fortress. These plains belong to all. Our ancestors divided them equally, so that we could all be free to ride the lands and eat of their harvests. This Talthar is an enemy to us all, an enemy to our traditions, to our ancestors.’

The few warriors present stirred in their saddles. Many spat into the earth, their sharpened teeth glinting in the stark light.

‘I came home seeking the traditions I had long held in highest honour in my heart. On other worlds Atilans fight, united by their love for their homeland, their brother horse and the freedom to which we aspire. I say that this warlord, Talthar, is little more than a brigand. I say we ride against him. I say we string him from the gates of his own damned fortress and let the carrion feast on his innards. Through battle we will know the truth. In battle we will find victory. By battle we will save Atilla’s soul and restore the tribes to their glory!’

Faces turned away and heads dropped. The ground was stirred by soulless hooves, dragging against the earth.

‘Do not turn away! You must trust in the ways of the ancestors. We will overcome this man. He is no daemon. His fortress is but earth. Our steeds tear up the earth as they ride; his fortress is nothing!’

‘It is no use, Al’Kahan.’ Alyshfa’s husband, Ke’Than, turned to him from his saddle. His dark braids and scarless face betrayed his youth. His eyes were keen and tough, like black pearls. Ke’Than jabbed his stump in the departing crowd’s direction. ‘Their spirits are broken.’

‘They no longer have the hearts of true Atilans.’

‘Things have changed.’

‘Changed for the worst, Ke’Than.’

‘Perhaps, but then nothing lasts forever.’

Al’Kahan jumped to the ground. He reached down and grabbed a handful of rich, black soil. ‘I have travelled to many worlds and one thing never changes. There is always war.’ Al’Kahan stood casting the dirt aside. ‘If change is what Atilla wants then change is what she will get. Go and talk to them. Tell them I know how to crack open this fortress.’

FEWER HAD COME than before. Al’Kahan looked out into a crowd of faces, grim and unimpressed. He looked to the low ridge above him. There Ke’Than sat, awaiting his instructions.

Al’Kahan turned to the crowd. ‘Not even stone is impenetrable.’

He waved his sabre in the air and KeThan kicked his steed into life. The beast thundered across the ridge, throwing up earth all about it. Ke’Than gripped hard to the reins and lowered his hunting lance in the crook of his injured arm towards a broad boulder before him. The warrior braced himself as a great explosion ripped through the stone. Shards of rock, like leaves from a tree, fell down around the assembled riders.

The crowd gasped.

Al’Kahan held up his own hunting lance. ‘I have twenty of these explosive heads. Your lance shafts are not as strong as those of steel, so they will have to be reinforced. But with them we can break open that fortress. We can defeat this warlord.’

THE CHILL WIND of dawn passed through Al’Kahan’s hair. It moved the long grasses that grew on the highest parts of each hill. Below him, a morning mist was starting to rise. Around Al’Kahan were gathered fifty riders from the broken clans of Kapak Valley. Riders of varying ages sat atop a mixed rabble of mares and geldings, their faces filled with grim determination. They were few. The boys amongst them had never seen battle, nor ever killed a man.

Al’Kahan turned to face them. His stallion shifted beneath him. His eye passed along the row of riders before them.

‘I will not lie. Today, we ride outnumbered. Today, we fight against a superior force, behind walls of stone. Today, we may lose our lives.’ Al’Kahan reached around to the furs he’d brought from the starship.

‘But these are things you all know.’ He started to unwrap the large bundle. ‘I promise you this: whilst this day may not be fought in the traditional way, you will not dishonour your ancestors. They will look upon you with great joy – for you fight to free their sons, the founder’s children – our brothers who lie in the bowels of that fortress.

‘Let me promise you this also.’ Al’Kahan produced a plasma rifle and several grenades from the furs, their Imperial Guard insignia plainly visible, ‘With these weapons we will conquer! We will ride with the force of a thousand and crack open the walls of their fortress like lightning from the heavens. We will split

their heads and bring the full fury of the clans upon them!’

The riders cheered. Al’Kahan swivelled his horse and plunged down into the mist towards the plains in which the fortress sat. White tendrils quickly enveloped him as he dived, near blind, down the steep incline leading to Talthar’s fortress. The riders followed into the miasma, the sound of their steeds and beating hearts the only sign that they did not ride alone.

After what seemed like many hours, the ground levelled out and the mists thinned. The fortress, the size of a small star cruiser, loomed ahead of them. It was jagged and sinister, and pieces of scrap metal soldered to iron stakes rose in vicious angles from the ground before it. These would slow down the cavalry. Its walls looked climbable, for the stone was roughly hewn – but peppered with murder holes and lookout towers as it was, this would be nigh-on impossible. Al’Kahan’s men slowed; struck dumb with apprehension, some began to falter. Strong actions were needed.

Al’Kahan, plasma rifle in hand, unleashed a volley of burning power that ripped through the iron stakes and lit up the entire valley in white light. The tense air was filled with static. His men rallied and rode like the crazed, relying on the experienced warrior’s skill with the rifle to destroy the pikes that threatened their charge. Al’Kahan desperately tried to destroy each barricade before his men collided with them, but some riders struck the barbs. But he kept on firing; if the charge was slowed, they would become bottled up and be shot to ribbons.

The riders rode on, the remnants of the deadly barricades now just ash. Men appeared at the fortress walls. Shotguns and rifles added dull staccatos to the high-pitched cry of Al’Kahan’s plasma rifle.

‘Face away!’ Al’Kahan cried as they neared the fortress. Imperial Guard-issue flash grenades rose high into the air, detonating at spaced intervals like fireworks. The men behind the barricade screamed, blinded by the flash. The riders resumed their charge.

‘Lances!’ Al’Kahan cried out over the sound of his weapon.

The riders obliged, lowering the explosive tipped weapons to face the stone walls. ‘Level up!’ The riders pulled alongside one another, creating a convincing line. The hooves, like thunder to the lightning of Al’Kahan’s weapon. A storm of retribution was in full sway.

Too late, the doors to the fortress opened to release the warlord’s own riders. Al’Kahan’s men braced themselves as their lances struck the wall. The tips exploded, ripping great holes in the stone. Sharp rubble ripped at their faces and tore at their furs. One rider fell beneath a hail of debris; his mare kept running. The warlord’s riders swept around to follow Al’Kahan’s men.

‘Hawk’s Shadow and Desert Thorn take the compound! The other clans with me!’ Al’Kahan cried above the havoc. The riders separated. Al’Kahan’s force turned and prepared a charge.

The enemy riders had the better speed. ‘Keep going!’ Al’Kahan called, pulling four grenade pins. He threw low and hard at the oncoming riders. Startled faces broke into screams of fear as the grenades hit the ground and went off, tearing earth and flesh. The enemy charge fell short. Now his riders had the momentum. Horse met horse, rider set upon rider and a desperate battle broke out.

Al’Kahan wielded the plasma rifle as a club, knocking a rider to the ground to be trampled under the churning hooves. Sabres flashed as Al’Kahan’s men jostled with the warlord’s. The slow press of horse’s bodies was like a giant python, gradually constricting around the battlefield. Men desperately clung to their steeds; to fall was to die under this crush. One of the warlord’s men made a rash for Al’Kahan, sprinting across the backs of several close-pressed horses. Al’Kahan turned and released a volley from the plasma rifle. It went wide, barely slowing his attacker.

The rider leapt upon Al’Kahan and they both slid towards the ground. His attacker stabbed again and again with a short knife. Al’Kahan felt the blade penetrate his side. Without thinking, he smashed his forehead into the attacker’s face. Al’Kahan rolled to one side and let the screaming man fall beneath the stamping hooves of his enraged mount.

After regaining his saddle, Al’Kahan saw that his men had gained the advantage and had all but finished what remained of the warlord’s cavalry. Al’Kahan pulled at the dagger in his side.

THE MEN OF Hawk’s Shadow and Desert Thorn hurdled through the holes in the shattered wall and passed into the warlord’s compound, Ke’Than at their head. The place was filled with the booty of war; strange machines traded from merchant pirate’s lay sprawled about the fort, while coal-black pipes, like spilled entrails, made riding hard. Women and children ran for the mud huts and stone houses that lined the walls. A mass of warriors armed with pistols and sabres rushed from their barricades. They looked shell-shocked and desperate.

Ke’Than snatched his sabre from his saddle and swung it high above his head. With a clean stroke he beheaded an oncoming warrior before the man had a chance to react. Another drew a shotgun on him. The weapon cracked out across the air. It clipped Ke’Than in the shoulder. Barely noticing, Ke’Than brought down his sabre hard. The warrior brought his shotgun up to parry the blow. From the back of the horse the blow was savage. The warrior’s wrist snapped, the

shotgun singing free from his hands. Both warrior and weapon fell to the ground, the gun misfiring as they collided together. Soft tissue sprayed across Ke'Than's face and he turned away. Around him, his clan had the advantage over the remaining warriors. In the distance, a dark shape appeared on the far side of the melee.

'Who is it?' Al'Kahan arrived at Ke'Than's side.

'Talthar, the warlord.' the other sneered.

Covered in dark furs, criss-crossed with black straps and leather harnesses, Talthar charged forward on the back of a giant black stallion, a whirling chainsword in one hand. Al'Kahan groaned out as the foreign weapon sliced through sabres and limbs alike. The warlord's face had a crazed look, his scars and toothless grin slick with the blood of Al'Kahan's men. With tearing precision, he cut down five men in but a few seconds.

'Here!' Al'Kahan screamed and drew the warlord's attention. The warlord commenced a charge. Al'Kahan spurred his horse towards him. They crossed the short distance neither slowing, their eyes wild.

Al'Kahan leant and whispered to his mount; 'Brother horse, I thank you for your spirit and blood.'

The warlord was upon him, the chainsword spitting gore. Al'Kahan pulled hard against his mount's reins. The inexperienced creature buckled and fell to the ground, the momentum from its charge causing it to slide hard into Talthar's own steed. The black stallion stumbled over the sliding Al'Kahan. In this instant, Al'Kahan jammed the butt of his plasma rifle against his shoulder and fired. The white blue light, mercury bright, cut up through horse and rider. Talthar screamed as his leg was engulfed in searing agony. His monstrous steed crashed to the ground on top of Al'Kahan.

The old warrior felt a biting pain scream through his leg. Something had torn and his foot was bent at a weird angle. Close by, Talthar howled. He was still alive, covered in the gore of his steed, his chainsword cutting a path through the smouldering flesh about him. Al'Kahan rolled to one side as the savage weapon tore through his cloak. He dragged himself across the ground, his tired arm muscles straining to move his substantial bulk.

'I will... have... your head!' Talthar wailed, dragging himself after Al'Kahan.

'You have offended our ancestors! You will die!' Al'Kahan shouted back, looking for a weapon.

'You are no different to me.' the warlord shrieked, swinging the chainsword wildly. 'You offend our ancestors with your alien weapons.'

‘Never!’ Al’Kahan cried, reaching his plasma rifle and snatching it up.

The warlord swung, the whirling blades of the chainsword spinning furiously towards Al’Kahan. Al’Kahan fumbled with the rifle. It had not charged fully. He brought the gun up to meet the chainsword, waiting for the biting pain of its serrated teeth. The sword dug deep into the rifle’s fuel cell. A flash of white-blue flame leapt up the sword and through the warlord’s body. He screamed briefly and collapsed, a charred husk.

Shaking the noise from his head, Al’Kahan looked up through the gore and saw a group of riders assembled above him.

Ke’Than grinned down. ‘We are victorious, mighty Al’Kahan. You have restored us to glory!’

A LARGE FIRE burnt high that night. The thick scent of bison meat filled the air for miles around. The broken tribes were united, joined to sing of blood and glory. None would pass to sleep without the aid of ale. One soul was not present: the greatest of the Hawk’s Shadow, Al’Kahan. Once the wisewoman had done her work, the old war commander passed from the camp quietly, early in the festivities, his leg braced. Al’Kahan left his old hut and disappeared into the darkness of the Atillan night.

At dusk on the next day, Al’Kahan found himself at the starship, the air fouled with its noxious fumes. By one of the entry gates, a lone figure stood. Al’Kahan dismounted and approached.

‘I thought as much.’ Commissar Streck said. ‘I could see it in your eyes the day that you left.’

‘I owe as much. Without the Emperor’s weapons, we would not have won.’

‘Ah yes. You defeated the tyrant. Good for you.’ Streck shifted slightly; his black coat creaked. ‘Why not stay and be their leader?’

‘I no longer know this place.’

‘You are one of us, then?’

‘No.’ Al’Kahan strode past Streck towards the towering starship. ‘I am an Atillan.’

HELL IN A BOTTLE

Simon Jowett

‘LET CHAOSSS REIGN!’

Kargon’s battle-cry carried over the sounds of carnage and burned itself into the minds of killers and victims alike. Continents away, bloodletters paused to raise a shrill answering cry, before returning to their appointed task: the complete desecration of another of the Imperium’s shining homeworlds. The towers of Ilium were falling.

Detonations filled the air as a squadron of Marauder ground attack craft punched through the pall of smoke that hung over the capital city. Chaos hammer air-to-ground missiles kicked free of their wing-mounted cradles and screamed earthwards. The jewel-like spires of the Administratum complex shattered and fell, dark plumes of debris blossoming miles into the air. The Imperial garrison’s concern for civilian casualties had been abandoned. Only one strategy remained: destruction of the invaders, whatever the cost.

At an unspoken signal from Kargon, several of the nearest bloodletters turned their attention to the attacking aircraft, each raising its weapon skyward. Sword, axe or spear, these weapons were primarily conduits for the unearthly power of Chaos which, focused by their wielders’ rudimentary wills, leapt skywards, towards the attacking Imperial craft.

Organic matter first: the flesh of every human pilot slid, gathered itself, then reformed. Tumours burst on skin and writhed with void-born life. Every bone hummed with imminent destruction as Chaos invaded its blood-dark marrow. In seconds, every pilot’s sling-seat was occupied by a grotesque malformation of cells vibrating to an ever-higher pitch.

As the dull reports of exploding flesh painted the cockpits red and black, the Marauders’ power plants overloaded, the smooth mathematics of their operation unbalanced by the Chaotic assault. The aircraft spun crazily out of control, some spiralling across the sky, others ploughing into the planetary crust, all finally engulfed in fireballs of pyrotechnic annihilation.

As the bloodletters returned to the task of dismantling the capital city brick by brick, soul by soul, Kargon surveyed the madness and saw that it was good.

Dubbed ‘The Seed-Bearer’ by those who sought to invoke his presence, Kargon had feasted on the entrails of a thousand worlds. Drawn to breaches in the membrane between warp space and the material universe like a shark to fresh blood, Kargon knew only one purpose: strike, violate, move on. Soon Ilium would lay behind him, forgotten, like so many worlds before.

‘ILIUM ISS OURSSS?’

The assembled horde – a hideous confederation of lesser daemons, mutant spawn, bloodletters, Chaos warriors and hybrids of every life-form that had been infected by the contagion of Corruption – bowed their heads in affirmation. The question was unnecessary. The sounds of conflict had been replaced by an absolute silence that spoke of only one thing: victory. The tang of burning flesh hung heavily in the air, as it did over every city on Ilium. The pyre before which Kargon and his cadre stood reached as high as the tallest of the once-proud towers and painted the sky with its slick, black smoke. The pestilence of humanity had been wiped from the planet. Kargon and his followers had drunk deeply of their souls. There remained only one more act to perform: the Ritual of Seeding.

‘Let it begin!’ Kargon commanded. With a shuffling of feet and a creaking of armour, four mighty Chaos daemons stepped forward from the assembly to stand in the clear space before Kargon and the pyre. Creatures of unstoppable violence, they stood, wings folded, their raging blood-lust quelled by the dark charisma of their leader. An awed hush descended over their fellows. There was no room in the semi-sentient minds of the Chaos-spawn for the subtleties of religious feeling, but they knew when they were in the presence of one of the High Mysteries of Chaos.

With a sibilant hiss and crack, the brazen breastplate of the first of the selected daemons peeled back along hidden seams, exposing pallid, grey-white flesh. Thick, dark veins pulsed beneath its semi-translucent surface. The pulses grew quicker, stronger as the veins began to swell, pushing out against the restraining flesh. A low, bubbling moan issued from the creature’s throat, accompanied by the sounds of three more breastplates opening.

A low animal murmur drifted through the watching crowd as all four sacrificial candidates began to tremble, their exposed flesh quaking and distending, caught in the grip of a dark, palsied ecstasy.

The chest of the first daemon, now bulging far beyond the limits of its armour, split explosively, expelling the tightly-wound veins across metres of ground. The earth was soaked by purple-black ichor as the veins continued to pulse and flex

of their own volition. With a sigh of almost post-coital satisfaction, the daemon fell first to its knees, then face-forward into the dirt.

One by one the other three fell, all signs of life exhausted but for the mass of pulsating veins that continued to coil and uncoil on the ground before them, growing fatter with every pulse, rubbing slickly against each other as they approached their own apotheosis.

The veins, now as thick around as the barrel chests of the daemons from which they sprang, burst in a cannonade of viscous fluid. The assembled horde drew back, but Kargon stepped forward, his breastplate now open, revealing a wet maw, from which pale tentacles flashed to taste the raining droplets.

From the depths of Kargon's chest uncoiled a single, thicker tentacle. Ignoring the dark rain that spattered his ornate armour, it drove itself into the pool of ichor at his feet, into the ground beneath as if searching for the core of the planet itself. Kargon stood rigidly as the tentacle pulsed once, twice, then withdrew, coiling back on itself, settling once again deep within the Seed-Bearer's chest. The smaller tentacles that ringed Kargon's maw licked hungrily along its length, cleaning away all traces of the ichor.

'The ceremony iss complete. The sseed of Chaoss growsss here!' Kargon announced, his armour sealed, his voice soft with satisfaction. Scoured clean of human life, Ilium was now the cradle for Chaos' seed. In time, new life would grow: twisted, hideous, pliant to the will of Kargon's masters – an infection waiting to spread.

'OUR TASSSK HERE iss complete!'

Kargon's words rang out across the glassy plain on which his entire force stood. They had travelled from every continent, every shattered city, every ruined sector of Ilium to gather on this patch of desert that had once been the control centre of the Imperial garrison. The sand beneath their feet had been scorched, melted and fused by a final, futile act of suicidal defiance: the detonation of the garrison's remaining nuclear stockpile. Here and there, fragments of the garrison buildings protruded from the cracked surface like ancient standing stones, their original purpose erased by the blight of Chaos and already forgotten by the victorious invaders.

'But there are other worldsss that long to bear the harshhh fruit of Chaoss! We shall journey to thessse worldsss, harrow their souls and make them fit to receive the sssseed of Chaos!'

Kargon gestured towards the Chaos Gate that had been erected on the plain. Though quiescent, its design would dizzy any human onlooker. The sigils etched

on its surface glowed with a menacing, lambent radiance, awaiting Kargon's command.

'The command isss given!' As he spoke, Kargon noticed the unusually restive atmosphere that permeated his troops. After such a complete victory, they would normally exhibit a stolid complacency. Having fed on a planet's worth of souls, they would be satisfied, ready to move on. Instead Kargon sensed something that would normally accompany their arrival on a new world, one that promised a rich harvest of pain: hunger.

'The command isss given!' Kargon repeated. The gate should have already spun into life, the component parts of its multiple lattice structure turning in ways that violated every law of motion as it tore a new hole in material space. But the lattice remained stubbornly immobile, the tides of warp space beyond Kargon's reach.

A puzzled shuffling rippled through the ranks of daemons. They, too, sensed that something was not as it should be. Kargon ignored them. Within his ancient helmet, supra-dimensional lenses realigned themselves over his multi-faceted eyes, focusing both inward, to the fluid shard of Chaos that burned at his heart, and out, beyond Ilium, where he found...

Nothing. A barrier beyond which he could not reach, beyond which there appeared to be nothing for his inhuman senses to grasp, no clue to the reason for this confounding turn of events.

'There must be a reassson!' Kargon muttered, while an unaccustomed sensation gnawed at the edges of his awareness.

Hunger.

THE REASON SAT, blinking sweat from eyes that felt as if they had been seared by gazing into the very fires of Hell. Before him a periscopic sight hung from an articulated cradle. Each twist of its operating handles provided a new angle on Kargon and his troops or offered mind-numbing views of the planet-wide devastation. Along one wall of the small annex in which he sat, a bank of printers chattered out statistical assessments of the speed and efficiency of Kargon's victory. His name was Tydaeus, instructor-sergeant of the Iron Hearts Space Marine Chapter, designated supervisor of the Mimesis Engine and, for the last hour, he had struggled to comprehend what he had seen.

Wrenching his gaze from the viewfinder's binocular eyepieces, Tydaeus tore a strip of parchment from the nearest spool. The arcane sigils of the Adeptus Mechanicus gave the same answer to the question he had asked for the seventh time in as many minutes: Ilium was secure, isolated from every other system in

the outpost. The only way to make it more so was to begin stripping gears and rods from the very guts of the Engine itself.

However, Tydaeus was a technician, not a tech-priest; this would have to do.

Tydaeus sat back in his chair, closed his eyes and tried to calm the hurricane of images that roared within the confines of his skull. Images of invasion, of merciless assault, death and desecration, of a vile act of planetary humiliation that no human had ever seen before and lived to report. None of which could be said to have truly happened at all.

Ilium was a fiction, one training ground of many that could be generated by a bizarre machine set deep in the bowels of a training outpost that was all but ignored, even by the Chapter to which it belonged. Ancient technology, old before the Emperor first ascended the throne, had been unearthed and used to create an addition to the training of Space Marine initiates: worlds on which initiates could fight, die and fight again, learning from their mistakes without paying the usual price for a failed strategy – their own death and the deaths of their fellow Marines.

Lexmechanics, artisans and logises had spent decades constructing the Mimesis Engine. Not only Ilium, but simulations of a thousand unreal worlds were created, amalgams of every planet on which Space Marines had fought and died. Doubts were raised about the sanctity of such an enterprise, the purity of any technology that set out to re-make the universe. Many were reminded of the foul desire of Chaos-cultists and the dark gods they worshipped to do exactly the same thing.

In the end, ecumenical concerns had little to do with the side-lining of the Mimesis Engine. No Space Marine worth his salt would waste more than a sneer on it. ‘A Space Marine prays for only one chance – the chance to die serving the Emperor!’ opined Primarch Rubinek, on hearing of the project’s completion. In the face of this opposition, the project’s supporters proposed that the Mimesis Engine be assigned to the Iron Hearts, to be used in the earliest stages of their initiates’ training. Lexmechanics would monitor the combat performance of these initiates and thus evaluate the Engine’s usefulness.

During the decades that followed, initiates had come and gone, climbing into the rod- and wire-strung battlesuits that enabled them to interact with the worlds generated by the Engine. Each exercise was preceded by ritual invocations of the Emperor’s protection from any possible taint of Chaos that might arise from contact with the Engine and would end with a Service of Absolution in the Iron Hearts’ Chapel of Martyrs. Over time, interest in its use dwindled, fewer initiates were sent to do battle with the generated simulacra of daemons, genestealers,

orks and eldar and the maintenance team was reduced until only Tydaeus and a servitor named Barek remained.

‘They’re just waiting for it to break down.’ Tydaeus had complained to Barek on more than one occasion. ‘Then they’ll simply forget to repair it.’ Barek would nod or grunt, then go on about his business of climbing around and between the Engine’s cogs and gears to apply lubricating unguents to the fast-spinning components. Throughout the long hours they spent in each other’s company, Tydaeus was the only one who spoke. Hour after interminable hour, he would watch the Engine grind through one of its default settings after another, sink deeper into his chair and dream of the glory that should have been his.

This day had started as every other. Argos, Belladonna, Celadon – the unending cycle of worlds ran its course while Tydaeus, paying scant attention to the scenes being played out across the eye-sockets of the viewfinder, brooded over the opportunities for real combat on behalf of the Emperor which had been denied him by the very Imperium he longed so desperately to serve.

Evangelion. Fortelius. Galatea. Hyperious.

Ilium.

THE INVASION HAD already begun. Tydaeus stared in bewilderment at the figures on a tape scrolling from one of the tutorial calculators: a rout was in progress on a world primarily used to instruct initiates in the basic elements of planetary defence. Ilium’s default setting was one of the most boring of the entire catalogue. Jerking upright in his seat he pressed his eyes to the viewfinder, and manipulated its array of handles and dials. Unbelieving, he watched as a tide of daemons rampaged across the imaginary homeworld, putting its artfully-rendered citizens to the sword, axe and claw.

‘Maybe this is the breakdown they’ve been waiting for,’ Tydaeus muttered as he tore off the most recent diagnostic print-out.

SIMULATION RUNNING: ILIUM

SIMULATION STATUS: STANDARD

OPERATING STATUS: NOMINAL

‘Your days are numbered,’ Tydaeus informed the Mimesis Engine. He felt a certain satisfaction at the prospect of it being junked and of his being re-assigned... but re-assigned to what? Weapons maintenance? Sub-technician in the map room? Every possibility held nothing but further humiliation for a Space Marine who had been deemed unworthy so many years before.

THE AMBUSH HAD been well set. Tydaeus's team detected no trace of their quarry's proximity until the jaws of the trap closed around them.

'Stand and fight, Marines!' the company's leader cried, before a double hit from the merciless crossfire took him out of the fight.

'For the Emperor!' Tydaeus cried in an attempt to rally the company, which was already down to less than half-strength. He pumped shell after shell into the surrounding jungle foliage. Shadows moved among the thick-boled trees.

'Tydaeus! Down!' A shout from behind, followed by a bone-jarring impact.

A charge detonated overhead, in the space he had occupied moments before. Half-rolling, half-sliding in the mud into which he had been pitched, he struggled round to face his saviour.

'Seems I owe you, Christus!' Tydaeus acknowledged. His fellow team-member flashed his familiar, gap-toothed grin. 'Still got your bolter?'

'Always, by the Emperor!' Christus replied, patting the weapon.

'Good.' said Tydaeus, as he gathered his legs under him. Lewd sucking noises burst from the mud as he freed himself from its embrace. 'Because there's only one way out of this!'

Tydaeus sprang forward, his bolter dancing in his grip as he fired charge after charge into the foliage ahead. There was the dull thud of an impact, most likely on a breastplate. A body crashed into the undergrowth. A second thud – another body fell.

'Right behind you, brother!' Christus bellowed, sprinting after Tydaeus, his own bolter dancing in his hands.

Crashing through the cover behind which their attackers had lain in wait, Tydaeus paused. Two bolt rifles lay, abandoned, in the mud. With a crash and shout, Christus joined him.

'These trees are thick enough for a battalion to hide behind!' Christus commented as they scanned the immediate area. What light filtered down from the dense forest canopy served only to throw impenetrable shadows across the spaces between the immense trunks.

'There!' Tydaeus jabbed a gloved finger towards a gap between two trees. 'Movement!'

Christus loosed off a volley. Tydaeus was about to join him in pounding the shadows themselves into submission, when a sudden nagging at the back of his head prompted him to turn.

The figure charged from behind a tree to Tydaeus's right. Fast. Saw-toothed blade already descending. Too close to bring his bolter to bear.

A short step to the left and a twist of his body took Tydaeus out of the blade's path. Another short step, this time towards the oncoming attack, and an abrupt, stiff-armed jab caught the attacker full in the face.

Tydaeus was well-braced for the impact, his attacker was not. Boots sliding in the mud, he sprawled backwards. The attacker's helmet, jarred loose by the power and angle of Tydaeus's punch, spun away into the shadows.

'By the Golden Throne, that hurt!' Initiate Caius declared, shaking his head, then prodding gingerly at his temple, over which a bruise was already beginning to form. 'I was out of ammunition, so hand-to-hand was my only option. Should have known better when I saw it was you!'

Tydaeus stood over the fallen Initiate. Lifting his bolter, he casually drew a bead on Caius's rueful expression.

'Boom,' Tydaeus said, as the siren indicating the end of the exercise stilled the sounds of combat in the clearing behind them. 'You're dead!'

TYDAEUS'S HAND HOVERED over the intercom, images of long-distant triumphs drifting through his mind. Caius, always too easy-going, never sufficiently focused on a task, had fallen during his first mission with the Scouts. Christus, the born warrior, was currently leading a company on the latest of a string of successful search-and-destroy expeditions. Every one of the initiates with whom he had trained had earned the right to receive the Space Marine gene-seed and had gone on to serve the Emperor in the front line of the crusade against the forces of Chaos. Many had perished, earning themselves a place in the Iron Hearts' Chapel Book of Martyrs. The others continued to win glory for themselves and for the Chapter.

And what of Tydaeus? Tydaeus, Initiate of Honour. Tydaeus, of whom many had spoken as a potential company commander, perhaps even Chapter Master, given time.

Ah, yes. Tydaeus. What became of him?

'YOUR BODY HAS rejected the gene-seed.'

Chapter Medic Hippocrates was blunt. Years spent in the field, dealing with the most appalling battlefield injuries and carving the invaluable progenoid glands from the bodies of fallen Space Marines, had blasted away any pretence of a bedside manner. Tydaeus sat across from him, stiff-backed, braced for the news but still unable to quiet the rage of his emotions or the flu-like palsy that had gripped him since the third and most recent attempt to introduce the gene-seed

into his system.

‘As far as we can tell, there’s some problem with your DNA’s assimilation of the seed. Your body reacts to it as if to an invading organism. There’s nothing more we can do. Any further attempts to introduce the seed would run the risk of producing intolerable mutations. Report to the Chapter adjutant for re-assignment. That is all.’

With those words and a wave of his gnarled right hand, the grey-haired apothecary brought Tydaeus’s life to an end.

‘RE-ASSIGNMENT...’ THE WORD surprised Tydaeus even as it passed his lips. His hand still hovered over the intercom. He should contact Tech-Priest Boras, inform him of the Mimesis Engine’s aberrant behaviour and accept the inevitable: the Engine’s shut-down and his re-assignment. Ahead of him stretched a future spent watching initiates prepare for their own moment of glory: their assimilation of the gene-seed and their acceptance into the Brotherhood of the Marines.

Not yet. Eyes still pressed to the viewfinder, Tydaeus re-focused his gaze on Ilium. There was something about the invaders, about the way they moved as they piled one atrocity after another upon the surface of the unreal planet. The Mimesis Engine was able to generate the apparent form and behaviour of a vast array of life-forms, but, over years spent squinting through the viewfinder, Tydaeus had come to recognise small, apparently insignificant deficiencies in its creations.

Just as a portrait of a man might capture his appearance, hint at the manner of his movements, but fail to record the particularities of his personality, so the Mimesis Engine could not, to Tydaeus’s eyes, produce entirely convincing simulacra. Every ork, genestealer or bloodletter an initiate met on one of the generated worlds was just an approximation of the truth, inevitably – perhaps fatally – incomplete.

As he continued to watch the Chaotic hordes slash their way across the monitors, Tydaeus saw the very inconsistencies of manner and action that he would not expect to see in the artificial enemies of one of the prescribed exercises. A certainty – an impossibility! – began to grow in his mind that these invaders were real.

The outrageousness of the notion warred with his understanding of the relationship between warp space and the material universe. The Mimesis Engine was a part of the material universe and so, too, were the worlds that it generated. Was it so unreasonable to suppose that a confluence of currents in the warp tides

could allow a cadre of daemons access to one of those worlds? The longer he pondered the question, the longer he watched Ilium drown in the blood of its unreal inhabitants, the more certain Tydaeus became of the answer.

Ilium had been subjected to countless imaginary assaults by aliens and demons, but this time the daemons were real.

For a moment, a figure appeared, then vanished as Tydaeus panned across yet another scene of utter carnage. Not a bloodletter. Taller, broader, wearing a more individual suit of encrusted armour. Tydaeus's worked the viewfinder's controls, panned back across the scene, until...

There! Half as tall again as the tallest Space Marine, encased in a suit of cracked obsidian from which hung the trophies of a campaign of unspeakable horrors. From its gestures, it appeared to be directing the actions of the other daemons. From the crown of its helmet's shallow dome spewed a sheaf of living tentacles. In one claw-gloved hand it held an axe whose shaft would stand higher than any Marine.

Taking his hands from the viewfinder's controls, Tydaeus stabbed sigil-etched buttons, yanked at toggle switches. A low rambling shook the floor of the annex as whole systems of gears were thrown into reverse, connecting rods withdrawn and re-aligned. It verged on the blasphemous but, if he could trap the daemons within the Ilium simulation, he could...

He could what? The answer was already there, in the shadows cast by long years of frustration, but he couldn't bring himself to acknowledge it. Not yet.

A printer spool chattered. Ilium had been isolated. Tydaeus ordered another print-out, then another. In the time it took the printer to deliver each new screed of parchment, whole continents went black, overrun by the invading daemons.

Tydaeus returned his gaze to the horde's foul commander, drawn to the inhuman efficiency of his progress across Ilium, apparently still oblivious to the world's unreality, of the trap that had already shut around him.

As he watched the horde assemble on the desert plain, a new certainty grew in Tydaeus. Here was a province of Hell, trapped within a machine-turned cage of unreality. Here was his chance for glory.

All thoughts of glory were blasted from his mind by the spectacle of the Ritual of Seeding. Had every world that fell before this creature been subjected to this last act of violation? To defeat him would be to exact holy vengeance on behalf of every such planet. A righteous fire blossomed in Tydaeus's chest that could only be quenched by the annihilation of this daemoniac abomination.

The black-clad figure gestured towards the Chaos gate. The flame of Tydaeus's

outrage was doused by a rush of fear. If the daemons should escape...

The printer delivered its final report: Ilium was secure. Confined within the new alignment of the Mimesis Engine's operating parameters, the Chaos gate remained immobile. Tydaeus noticed a change in the attitude of the assembled horde. Was it apprehension? Were creatures spawned on the far side of the Eye of Terror capable of feeling fear?

'Time to find out,' Tydaeus muttered, sitting back from the viewfinder and swinging the chair, which was suspended above the floor on its own hinged and jointed armature, towards a row of control panels set against the wall opposite the bank of printers. Via more rune-encrusted switches and levers, he urged into life a section of the Engine which had lain dormant since the last group of initiates had completed their training exercise on another of the device's worlds. Another low rumbling rippled through the annex. Before he could re-consider what he was about to do, he stepped down from the chair and walked through the door that had swung open as the last switch had been thrown.

'LORD OF THE Golden Throne, stand with me in my hour of danger. Make me proof against the taint of Chaos, against which I pledge my life in your service...'

As he climbed into one of the battlesuits that hung in ranks in the large chamber adjoining the annex, Tydaeus chanted the Liturgy Before Battle that he had learned as an Initiate. His long familiarity with the suit's design enabled him to close it about his body and hook up the last of the motion-sensing wires without the assistance most initiates required.

The battlesuit looked absurd – a smooth carapace hanging limply from wires and harness – but Tydaeus knew that, once connected to the Mimesis Engine, he would be encased in an exact copy of a Terminator battle-suit. His heart hammered in his chest and a small voice whispered in the back of his mind, informing him of the insanity of what he was about to do. Ignoring them both, he swung a blank-visored helmet from its cradle above the suit and lowered it over his head.

Blind within the helmet, Tydaeus breathed deeply to calm his heart and silence the whispering voice. All that mattered now was what he could achieve. He knew that, in the annex, the dials were counting down the remaining seconds of the time he had allowed himself to step into the inner chamber, don the suit and settle the helmet in place. He had selected a full array of weaponry. He had seen the enemy. He knew what he had to do.

Did time stretch this way for every Space Marine? Did the last seconds before

battle seem to stretch to infinity? Were their palms sweaty, did their double hearts pound and their breath come in shallow gasps? Tydaeus already felt closer to the brotherhood that had been denied him.

Still blind. Still waiting. The temptation to remove the helmet and return to the annex had become unbearable when Tydaeus was blinded by the sudden return of his sight. Blinking rapidly, he looked across the glassy plain.

Daemons – hundreds of them! Tydaeus stood a few metres to the rear of the assembly. He had seen their kind thousands of times before, running missions for initiates. He had watched this cadre since their arrival on Ilium, but nothing could have prepared him for this. The kaleidoscopic variety of sizes and body-types assaulted his mind's sense of what a living thing should be. Some he recognised as having once been human: Chaos Space Marines, once-proud brothers who had sold their souls to the Dark Gods. The individual horror of each daemon was magnified to a greater power by their number. The wave of unreasoning, destructive hatred that emanated from them was palpable.

Tydaeus struggled to remind himself that, for all their power, they were unwittingly trapped here on a world that could barely be said to exist at all. Even now, Tydaeus could simply pull the plug and they would be consigned to oblivion, unable to comprehend the manner of their defeat.

But that was not why Tydaeus was here. He was here to fight, to bring their leader to his knees and so prove his fitness for a Space Marine's assignment, a Space Marine's respect!

Thus resolved, he fired a volley into the hulking throng, determined to make the most of the element of surprise. Alerted by the explosive demise of their fellows and baying their surprise, the closely-packed bloodletters and other atrocities against Nature struggled to turn to face their attacker. Tydaeus strode forward to meet them.

Ducking a wild slash from a serrated blade, Tydaeus answered with one of his own. His chainsword bit into daemon flesh, carved a gaping furrow and left the bloodletter thrashing out its life on the cracked ground. His first kill! Tydaeus's mind sang as he blasted two more onrushing void-spawn with bolts from his pistol. Another blade rang against his armour, the battlesuit deflecting the strike and allowing its wearer to claim a fourth daemon-kill.

'For the Emperor!' Tydaeus cried as a warped ork-daemon hybrid dissolved before his attack. How long since he had last sent up that cry? Kicking free of the despairing grasp of an eviscerated Chaos Marine that stubbornly clutched at his boot, he waded on into the throng.

'I have arrived, daemons!' Tydaeus bellowed. 'I am Tydaeus of the Iron Hearts

– and I am your doom!’

STANDING BY THE inactive Chaos gateway, Kargon felt the wave of surprise that swept through his followers’ ranks before the images reached him because of the low, animalistic link that they shared. Through their eyes he saw Tydaeus, first as a bobbing figure, glimpsed between the shoulders of other daemons, the view obscured as they straggled to turn in the confused press, then as an armoured image of death, his chainsword descending, his bolter spitting explosive annihilation.

‘Thisss cannot be!’ Kargon hissed. The human population of Ilium had been wiped out but, even so, no single Space Marine should be able to cut such a swathe through his troops. For the first time in his long existence, The Seed-Bearer knew the numb confusion of the defender faced by an overwhelming foe.

TYDAEUS STRODE ON, conscious thought now a distant memory, moving through the ingrained patterns of combat taught him during his years as an initiate. Devoid of strategy, the daemons rushed towards him, their close-packed numbers working against them, causing their weapons to clash, providing Tydaeus with the largest possible target for bolter and chainsword.

Turning to avoid the thrust of a wickedly hooked spear, Tydaeus was surprised to see the bloodletter that held it knocked aside by another of its kind. The second bloodletter casually stomped its fellow’s head into the ground as it pursued an attack of its own. A black chain, encrusted with the dried gore of a thousand kills, snaked toward Tydaeus, wrapping itself around the arm he raised in defence. He let himself be jerked forward, his breastplate thudding against the carmine scales that covered the bloodletter’s chest, before firing his pistol point-blank into the daemon’s face. The bloodletter fell back, its head a smoking ruin. Tydaeus strode on, noting with surprise that similar internecine skirmishes had broken out around him.

KARGON UNDERSTOOD. SURPRISE had been supplanted in the minds of his legions by another emotion: a desire to satisfy the hunger that had gnawed at them since Ilium’s fall, a hunger that Kargon shared. The souls on which they had fed had proved insufficient; their limbs felt heavy, weighed down with the fatigue of the starving, as if the souls of Ilium’s inhabitants had been mere illusions. The sudden appearance of another human offered further nourishment – nourishment that every Chaos-born creature was willing to trample over its fellows to reach.

Illusion: Kargon understood that, also. Altering the alignment of his sensory organs, the Seed-Bearer probed the landscape on which he stood, on which his troops were being cut down like so many stalks of grain. Going beyond mere appearance, he sought some trace of an organising principle. Planes of colour were stripped away by his gaze. A matrix of turned metal revealed itself; cogs, differentials, gears and rods meshed and turned with expertly-machined smoothness to create a pattern that was complex, yet regular. Real, yet unreal...

‘A consssstraction!’ Kargon breathed. Now he truly understood. Illusion, so often the means by which the forces of Chaos had fogged the minds of men, was the foundation of the world that he had conquered, of the souls on which he and his troops had fed. Intent on conquest, they had been unwittingly starving since their arrival. Now this new threat, an interloper from the world outside the illusion, had come to take advantage of their weakened state, had come to claim the Seed-Bearer’s soul as his prize.

‘That ssshall not be!’ Kargon rasped. He stepped towards the nearest rank of bloodletters, who had by now joined the hungry press. A phalanx of lesser daemons took to the air and arrowed towards the still-distant attacker. Several bloodletters turned, distracted from their blood-lust by the presence of their leader. Kargon’s axe, designated Soul-Cleaver by the Imperial archivists, was already descending.

Dull surprise registered in the bloodletter’s mind as Kargon’s axe buried itself in its chest. A thin pseudopod extruded itself from between two plates of Kargon’s armoured glove, slid across its surface and wormed its way into a similar crevice in the axe’s handle. The bloodletter’s life ebbed away, drawn along the axe and the slick, gelatinous connection of the pseudopod to swell the first of Kargon’s shrunken, famished cells.

Not enough. This, Kargon’s first taste of real nourishment since his arrival on Ilium, served only to awaken his hunger to a sharper, more exquisite degree. Levering free his axe, Kargon struck again. A second bloodletter fell, Soul-Cleaver’s blade lodged at the junction between shoulder and neck. The daemon’s body jerked spasmodically as its own depleted vitality was sucked away to replenish the strength of the dark god whom it served.

Not enough. Kargon struck again and again, wading through his troops, cutting them down without a thought, feeding, driven by the knowledge that the nameless Space Marine was working his way towards him in similar fashion. When the last wave of his troops fell and he faced his nemesis, the Seed-Bearer would be ready.

TYDAEUS'S MIND WAS alight with righteous fury. The plain behind him was piled with the bodies of his victims. If all daemons were such easy prey, he wondered why it was that they had not already been wiped from the cosmos? If one man could send so many of their number screaming back into the void that spawned them, why had so many planets fallen, so many warriors not returned home during the long centuries of conflict?

Could it be that the Emperor, or those who enacted his will among humanity, were wrong? Could it be that the gene-seed of the Space Marines was not the means by which the invading forces of Chaos would be repelled, but by the inner strength of men such as himself? This would be the lesson he would teach the Imperium: that true warriors were born, not bred like dumb livestock. He would cast the head of the black-armoured desecrator of planets before the high altar of the Iron Hearts and they would have to listen to him! The old men of the Adeptus Terra might cry blasphemy, but they would be unable to ignore the truth of what he had done.

He had long since exhausted his bolter blowing foul flying daemons from the sky. Chainsword in hand, its self-cleaning mechanism whining in protest, Tydaeus continued to carve a path through the bloodletters, severing limbs, bursting chests with cut after cut. Instead of rushing to their doom, the daemons now pulled back from his advance, parting like a curtain before the hurricane of his approach, until the daemon that he sought stood before him. The leader of this dark army, their commander and their god.

‘Abomination!’ he breathed, aware for the first time that his breath was coming in ragged gasps, that his chest burned from the superhuman effort he had expended in fighting his way to this point. But, behind his visor, his eyes were bright with holy fire. Fatigue was nothing. He stood on the threshold of immortality.

KARGON'S AXE SLICED through the air and met Tydaeus's sword with stunning impact. Tydaeus staggered back from the blow, boots sliding in the viscera of a recent kill. Dropping to one knee to avoid the daemon's savage back-swing, he slashed at Kargon's legs. His whining blade bit, held for a moment, before sliding free. The Seed-Bearer's armour held. Kargon stepped forward, forcing Tydaeus to retreat and parry blow after blow.

How long had they danced thus across the plain, hemmed in by the surrounding bloodletters and their brethren? How long had the daemons' cries echoed around his head? Time had lost all meaning to Tydaeus, almost from the moment that he'd charged at the monolithic black figure, determined to end the fight with one

stroke. The daemon Lord fought with none of the imperious disdain with which he had directed the invasion of Ilium, but his power was still appalling. The cold rage with which he hurled blow after blow against Tydaeus threatened to rob the would-be Space Marine of his will to fight.

‘For the Emperor!’ In the heat of this last battle, Tydaeus’s entire existence had been boiled down to this one cry. Driving himself forward, he fainted, then spun and struck at the hand that held the axe.

A cry like the cracking of the earth issued from the domed helmet of the Seed-Bearer. A fissure had appeared in the obsidian gauntlet. Veined ichor spurted from the wound, splattering Tydaeus’s helmet and breastplate. Hope welled up within him and he drove forward once more.

Now it was Kargon’s turn to retreat. Tydaeus rained blow after blow against him, anxious to breach the armour that covered the daemon’s vital centre – that ravening maw, that slaving organ of desecration. Kargon’s defence seemed to have degenerated into an uncoordinated flailing with axe and free hand. Tydaeus stepped closer. The end, he was sure, was near.

A vice closed around Tydaeus’s sword-hand, another gripped his shoulder. His boots kicked at the air as Kargon lifted him from his feet. Too close! In his desire to finish things, he had stepped within the daemon’s reach. Despite his injuries, Kargon’s sheer physical strength was incalculable. Soul-Cleaver hung forgotten from Kargon’s wrist as he drew Tydaeus closer still.

Straining to twist free from Kargon’s grasp, Tydaeus still had time to notice that the cracks in the Seed-Bearer’s armour were more than mere scars of combat. They pulsed with life, as if the stone-like carapace was organically connected to the body within. As he watched, the pulses quickened.

With almost geological slowness, Kargon’s breastplate cracked and yawned lazily open.

‘No!’ Tydaeus seemed to hang over a bottomless pit, a fissure that led down into his own heart, to the depths of his own ambition – to his doom, and that of the training outpost in which his terror-stricken body still stood.

Deep within that pit, something stirred and began to snake towards the light.

TYDAEUS BARELY FELT the impact as the tentacle punched through his breastplate, fastened on something deep within him and began to feed.

He could accept death as the price for his own failure – that, after all, was the warrior’s code. It was the knowledge that flooded his mind, even as Kargon emptied him of his soul, that caused him to cry out in anguish. The Seed-Bearer

was not interested in his soul, nourishing though it might be after the unsatisfying fare of Ilium's unreal inhabitants and the meagre souls that motivated his followers. Kargon wanted from Tydaeus the one thing he alone was able to provide: a gateway to the material universe, the truth behind the illusion of Ilium.

'Emperor forgive me!' The words, Tydaeus's last human thought, emerged into the silence of the inner chamber before, with a wet explosion, Kargon peeled back the barrier between illusion and reality. Tydaeus's body hung in the air, a twisted blasphemy of blood and bone, as the gash in the fabric of material space grew wider, setting off incursion alarms throughout the outpost.

Kargon stepped towards the connecting door, beyond which lay the annex and, after that, the outpost whose inhabitants were already scrambling in response to the alarms. Behind him, his remaining followers erupted through the gateway, their hunger thickening the air.

'Sssouls!' hissed Kargon, Daemon Lord of Chaos. 'Ssspace Marine sssoulsss!' His fingers flexed around the haft of his axe, the fissure with which he had enticed Tydaeus into his grasp now sealed.

'It isss time to feed!'

UNTHINKING JUSTICE

Andreas Millward

AND THOSE DEDICATED to the Emperor's work will be beset upon all sides by enemies. Be vigilant, for they—

The door signal sounded. Codicier Levi, of the Librarius of the Imperial Order of Black Consuls, sighed and ran a hand through his close-cropped dark hair. Reverentially, he closed his leather-bound copy of the Codex Astartes, stood up and walked to the window of his spartan quarters. The landing lights of one of the Chapter ship's shuttles briefly illuminated his angular, clean-shaven features.

'Enter.' Levi continued looking out of the window, contemplating the vast starry backcloth before him and the inauspicious verse he had read in the codex. He spoke again, softly, on hearing his visitor enter his quarters. 'A good day for the Emperor's work, standard bearer.'

A short laugh came from behind him. 'Your powers do you justice as always, Levi. But surely all days are fitting for His blessed work, brother-librarian. Or does your faith wane in these dark days?'

Levi turned to face his visitor. Brother Aeorum, standard bearer of the Black Consul's Third Company, stood smiling in the doorway. A powerfully built man, he was dressed as Levi was, in a black tunic edged with yellow. Levi gave a rare smile of his own. 'Aeorum, it's good to see you on this ill-omened day. Come in.'

Levi welcomed the unexpected appearance of the youthful standard bearer. He studied the broad face before him, the scar that ran across one cheekbone and the bridge of Aeorum's nose. The deep mark, left there long ago by a genestealer's claw, may have faded with time but the standard bearer had changed little since they had last met. Decades ago, Levi and Aeorum had served together in the Black Consuls' Scout Company, their friendship forged in tyrannid blood during the bloody and costly battle for Manalar. While Levi's psychic powers had taken him to the Librarius, Aeorum's fearsome fighting ability had led to him being the youngest standard bearer in the Chapter's history. They met infrequently these days, but the inhuman terrors they had faced together ensured that the bond between them remained as strong as ever.

Aeorum sat down opposite Levi, his muscular bulk dwarfing the plain wooden chair. 'Ill-omened? So you've heard the news?'

'Heard what?' Levi asked. He'd already picked up enough warning tremors during the previous day's preparations, but had not heard anything concrete about their current objectives. The Second, Third and Fourth Companies had been mobilised, which suggested that the Imperium was responding to the gravest of threats.

'The Black Consuls have picked up a distress call from Suracto. Nearly half the planet has rebelled, brother. The Emperor's hold on the planet is threatened and we speed to answer their call. Captain Estrus will brief us later this morning.'

Levi nodded. 'So I understand. But this is grave news indeed, and explains the speed with which we were dispatched. Suracto has been a shining beacon against the encroaching darkness we face across the galaxy. An orderly, productive planet as I recall, unquestioningly loyal to the Emperor. We cannot let planets such as these slip from the Emperor's grasp.'

'You are not idle at the Librarius, I see,' Aeorum said, though there was little humour in his voice. 'Suracto has voluntarily yielded tithes a third higher than all other neighbouring planets in the system for the last five years. To see such a planet fall to disorder and disarray is a near-catastrophe for the Imperium.'

Levi nodded. 'What manner of heresy threatens the planet?'

'The rebels reject the Emperor's order and discipline. They claim His way is too harsh, too demanding. They seek a "more equitable and just way of life".' Aeorum laced his words with scorn. 'Their heretical ways threaten to snuff out your shining beacon, Brother Levi.'

'It shall not be so, Aeorum. Such a fundamental threat to the true order must be eradicated. Completely.' His words hung in the air. Abruptly, the codicier got up and extended his hand to Aeorum. 'In spite of the circumstances, I am pleased to see you, brother. As always, it will be a great honour to fight at your side.'

LEVI SENSED CAPTAIN Estrus struggling to dampen his annoyance with the newcomer. Less than an hour after the Black Consuls had made planetfall on Suracto, another ship had appeared from the warp, heading directly for the Space Marines' landing site, to the north of the hive city of Thuram.

The ship bore the markings of the Inquisition and immediately on landing an inquisitor, together with a small detachment of stony-faced retainers, had presented himself to the captain, demanding that all the loyal forces regroup with the Black Consuls in order to reassess the situation.

‘Inquisitor Parax, I am simply not interested,’ Captain Estrus was saying. His irritation seemed to deepen every furrow on his already heavily lined, tanned face. ‘We have made planetfall, but over sixty minutes later we have still not fully deployed.’ Estrus fought to make himself heard over the rumble of the Rhino engines revving behind him and the noise of a nearby squad of Tech Marines and their blank-faced servitors loading missiles onto the company’s Whirlwinds.

Inquisitor Parax’s lean face registered no emotion. A slightly built man, clad only in his dark official robes, he struggled to maintain some semblance of authority next to the armoured Space Marine captain towering above him. ‘While I appreciate the subtler points of the codex, captain, nevertheless—’ he began, but the rest of his sentence was drowned by the piercing noise of a Land Speeder squad roaring immediately overhead.

Once the craft had passed, Estrus spoke at once. ‘With respect, inquisitor, the blessed codex is not in question here. However, your request to re-group is. We must deploy and go to the aid of the loyalist Suractan forces as soon as possible. Administrator Niall, assistant to Planetary Lord Koln, will rendezvous with us in fifteen minutes and I am sure that he will brief us all, in full. I am most grateful that...’ Estrus paused, choosing an appropriate phrase. ‘That your Eminence has chosen also to respond to the distress call but we cannot afford to wait and give the rebels any chance to gain the upper hand.’

Parax glanced at the closed faces of the half dozen members of his retinue who stood behind him, his dark eyes narrowing slightly. He gave himself a moment to think, then turned back. ‘Very well, Captain Estrus. I accede. But I warn you that the Inquisition will frown upon any rash decisions you may make.’

Estrus’s face darkened. ‘Inquisitor, I can assure you that the Black Consuls have never made any rash decisions. Company sergeants, prepare to deploy.’ He grabbed his helmet from a nearby Consul and strode towards the Whirlwinds.

Levi watched as the inquisitor and his retinue returned to their shuttle. An ill-omened day, indeed, he thought. The arrival of the inquisitor did little to alleviate the sense of foreboding that hung heavy over him. He hefted his chainsword, checked the armour diagnostic reading on his viewer then turned to follow the captain.

HIS FACE A mask of hatred, the rebel soldier brought his lasgun to bear on Levi. Reacting with preternatural speed, Levi stepped towards him and brought his chainsword down. The sword’s buzzing rose to a brief scream before the man’s torso split apart, showering Levi with blood.

The faintest of sensations, at the back of the head.

Levi spun smoothly and squeezed off two bolter rounds. The two rebels behind him were hurled into the Rhino's sides, leaving a pair of dark smears on the vehicle's large white tactical arrow as their lifeless bodies slid to the ground. Catching a glimpse of the Consul's standard, he turned to see Aeoram, knee deep in rebel corpses, calmly aiming and firing his bolt pistol, felling an opponent with each shot. Like the old days, Levi thought, before taking aim with his own bolter.

The rebel ambush had caught the vanguard of the Black Consuls as it began to make its way to the rendezvous point, through the battle-scarred suburban wastes on the outskirts of Thuram City. The ferocity of the rebels had initially caught the Space Marines off-guard but very quickly the attack crumbled in the face of the Black Consuls' disciplined and dogged defence.

The attack was over in a few minutes, with no losses for the Consuls. As they re-grouped and prepared to move on, Levi studied the corpses at his feet. Strange how he could not feel any hate for these, the kind of heretical traitors that he had come to loathe during his decades as a Space Marine. He had come to expect feelings of justified anger when dealing with such traitorous vermin, but now those feelings were oddly absent. Distracted, he strode over to the command Rhino.

Captain Estrus was, once more, suppressing his irritation with the person on the other end of his comm-link. 'I don't care what you say, commander, we have fifty dead rebels at our feet. You will need to re-assess the territorial gains of the insurgent forces. No, it will not affect our ETA. Rendezvous in seven minutes.' Estrus pulled his helmet off as Levi approached and reached for an order scroll from the sergeant at his side.

'Brother codicier, you gave good account of yourself. I am pleased to see that your time at the Librarius honing your psychic skills has not softened your fighting prowess.' He glanced at the scroll in his hand, arching a dark eyebrow. 'I fear, however, that this rebellion has softened the brains of the loyalist commanders.'

Levi tilted his helmet to acknowledge the captain's remarks. 'I do only my duty as any Black Consul would, captain.' Distractedly, he looked over at a group of Black Consuls speaking to Aeoram. 'Yet, something troubles me.'

Estrus lowered the scroll, giving Levi his full attention. 'What's that, librarian? Are we to be beset by more foes before we meet Administrator Niall?'

'I apologise for troubling you, captain; I cannot pinpoint the source of my vexation.'

‘Very well, librarian, but keep me informed. This disorderly planet also vexes me greatly and I do not wish for further surprises. Stay at my side.’ Estrus’s helmet-comm crackled into life once more and he flicked the speaker on with an armoured thumb and listened to the voice of Inquisitor Parax. He sighed. ‘Yes, inquisitor, we proceed. No, remain in your vehicle...’

ADMINISTRATOR NIALL WAS an imposing figure, standing only a few inches shorter than the armoured figures of the Black Consuls nearby. His crimson cloak fluttered in the breeze that blew through the ruined town, the bright colour at odds with the sombre blacks and yellows of the Space Marines’ armour. The distant sound of small arms fire and the more regular pounding of battle cannons drifted along the same breeze. Levi studied Niall’s face as he spoke earnestly to Inquisitor Parax and Captain Estrus; the administrator’s young face seemed at odds with the premature grey of his long hair and neatly trimmed beard.

‘They must all be killed. Every one of them. Suracto has prided itself on its loyalty to the Imperium for decades and we must eradicate every last vestige of the smear that they have brought on our good name. I will not rest until I have personally overseen the execution of every last heretic.’ He indicated the ruins around him. ‘Every last soul in this town was put to death when we discovered the taint of heresy behind its closed doors.’

Parax smiled grimly, his face registering as little emotion as the action could allow. ‘Admirable sentiments and noble actions, Administrator Niall, ones with which I concur wholeheartedly. The Inquisition commends your zeal and will seek to aid you in every way possible.’

‘And commendable as these rousing speeches are, we do have the Emperor’s work to do.’ Levi said quietly. ‘Let our actions speak first; self-congratulation you may indulge in later.’ The three other men turned to look at him. Levi saw a flash of annoyance pass across the faces of both Niall and Parax. Captain Estrus’s eyes blazed into life, stirred by his fellow Space Marine’s discipline and dedication.

‘Codicier Levi is right.’ Estrus said. ‘Pragmatism must be our watchword. We must act now, before the rebels can re-group. Administrator, what is the current situation?’

Niall continued to stare at Levi for a moment longer before turning to speak to Estrus. ‘The main rebel force is on the other side of Thuram City. They have made some in-roads into the city itself but in the main the walls still hold. They are many, lightly armed save for a few battle cannons. However, their heretical vigour makes them formidable opponents.’

‘We shall be the judge of that.’ Estrus said. ‘Let—’

‘Let us use even greater force with which to crush them.’ interrupted the inquisitor. ‘Administrator Niall is right. Not one of them can be left standing.’

Estrus frowned. ‘Inquisitor, I have warned you—’

‘You dare to warn the Inquisition?’

‘I have warned you that I will not brook any interference. We have the Emperor’s work before us and by Guilliman, none will prevent us. Come, Administrator Niall, we have much to do.’ Estrus led Niall away to the command Rhino.

Inquisitor Parax turned his thin face towards Levi. His dark eyes burned with anger for an instant, before he regained his composure. He appeared to want to speak, thought better of it, turned and walked over to his retinue, calling for his armour.

Levi turned to see Aeorum, helmet off, cleaning his bolter. The standard fluttered in the breeze an arm’s length away from the standard bearer, planted in a small mound of rabble. Aeorum looked up, caught Levi’s glance and raised his eyebrows. Levi nodded slowly, holding the standard bearer’s gaze. Then, as if controlled by a single thought, both Space Marines abruptly looked away and went about their own tasks.

THE BLACK CONSULS were soon where they liked to be: in the thick of the battle, spilling the blood of heretics. The Second and Third Companies had each advanced around a side of the city, whilst the Fourth had moved to bolster the beleaguered loyal forces in the city itself. Beset on both sides by Space Marines, the rebels’ siege was beginning to crumble.

A thick layer of battle-smoke hung over the southern outskirts of Thuram. The air was filled with a confusion of bolter and lasgun fire, the explosion of artillery rounds and the screams of the wounded and dying. Out of the smoky unknown, four lasgun rounds hit Levi in rapid succession, scoring the ceramite plates of his armour and singeing his over-tunic, but failing to penetrate further. He checked his IR scanner, found the sources of the shots and fired his bolter into the drifting pall of smoke. He heard the sound of the two bolter shells detonating as his infrared imaging showed him that they had found their mark – and that more rebels were closing on him from the right.

Three figures emerged from the smoke: lightly armoured men, their pale faces haggard with fatigue. The first was no match for Levi’s reactions and barely had an opportunity to register the codicier’s chainsword before it parted his head

from his shoulders. The second man, frozen in horror at his comrade's sudden death was himself torn apart by a bolter round. The third man paused, lasgun hanging slackly at his side, gazing at his own reflection in Levi's helmet. Levi paused, dimly aware of the buzzing of the chainsword in his own hand. A distant part of his mind admired the bravery of this rebel, fearlessly squaring up to an Imperial Space Marine. His sword began to describe an arc towards the man.

'In the Emperor's name, brother.' Levi's sword arm froze. The man had not opened his mouth to speak yet Levi had heard the words as clearly as the sound of the chainsword and the battle around him. He probed with his own mind. A psyker! He felt the man's mind coil, gathering momentum for a psychic blast. Instinctively, Levi unleashed a pummelling mental attack of his own, tearing the man's neurons apart. A small trickle of blood began to run from the man's nose before he fell to his knees in front of the Space Marine, his mind destroyed. Levi despatched him with a single thrust, before powering down the chainsword.

As he stepped over the corpse, Levi became aware of the stillness around him. In the far distance, towards the Second Company's positions, the battle still raged, but in his immediate vicinity, calm had descended. Brother Consuls emerged from the smoke, doffing helmets or re-loading weapons. A cry rang out some distance away. Moments later, an armoured apothecary sped past towards the sound of the cry. A single heavy pistol shot rang out.

Captain Estrus appeared at Levi's side, accompanied by his sergeant aide. 'This accursed smoke prevents us from assessing the situation, brother-librarian. We have lost two of our battle-brothers and three more are injured. Against a foe far more numerous, that is to be expected. But reports are fragmented and I cannot see the greater picture. What can you see?'

Levi reached up for his helmet. There was a sharp hiss as his helmet seals released. The sergeant stepped forward and took the ancient helm. Levi breathed deeply and reached out with his mind, probing tentatively at first, then moving further away, gathering impressions, visualising sights, sounds, smells. Satisfied, he moved his perceptions to the city.

'—rarian! Brother-librarian! What's wrong?'

Levi gradually became aware of the captain's voice once more. Even in his armour, Levi felt cold. He leaned on his chainsword for support as a momentary weakness passed through his body.

'Codicier? How do our battle-brothers fare?'

'Well enough, captain. The Second Company suffers but gains the upper hand. For now, the Fourth stand their ground. But I fear we have underestimated the rebels, captain. The city, captain...'

Estrus kept his voice calm. ‘What of the city, codicier?’

‘It lies in a dark shadow, brother-captain. The unmistakable shadow of Chaos.’

LEVI HEARD A bone crack as the inquisitor’s finger jabbed one of the prisoners in the chest. Tied to a charred wooden chair, the rebel winced but continued to stare directly at Parax. His voice hoarse after nearly an hour of interrogation, the young man straggled to speak calmly to the armoured inquisitor. ‘And I tell you that we fight for the Emperor, inquisitor. We are loyal to the Imperium. We are on your side. I can’t say it any clearer.’ The men huddled in the shadows behind him murmured in agreement. A glance from the Black Consul guard at their side silenced them.

Parax whirled and faced the others in the burnt out room where they had assembled half a dozen prisoners taken in that first exchange. Drawn and tired as they were, all the rebels had said the same thing: they were loyal to the Emperor and Chaos had taken a hold in Planetary Lord Koln’s palace. Inquisitor Parax’s impatience had long been exhausted and a barely-controlled rage tinged his voice as he spoke.

‘Brother Space Marines, administrator: we can see clearly here how Chaos warps the mind and sullies the soul. They are compelled, against their wills perhaps, to utter these profanities and heresies, even when the truth of the matter is self-evident. Suracto’s peril is grave indeed.’ He paused and lowered his head, staring at the floor.

Much as he disliked the showy flamboyance and melodrama of the man, Levi felt that he had to agree with the inquisitor. Chaos had so warped the minds of these rebels that they must have had no shred of understanding left. A grave peril, indeed.

Before Parax could say anything further, the bound rebel spoke again. ‘The biggest profanity is that Chaos walks Suracto, clothed in Imperial garb and—’

Before the noise of the autopistol shot had died away, a dozen servomotors whirled into life as the Black Consuls instinctively targeted Administrator Niall. The administrator slowly lowered his pistol and at a sign from Estrus, Levi, Aeorum and the other Space Marines lowered their own weapons. The force of the shot, hitting the prisoner in the throat, had pushed the rebel’s chair over and he had been dead before he landed at his horrified comrades’ feet.

‘Such heresy! I could not bear to hear it.’ Niall said, returning the autopistol into the folds of his cloak. ‘I have spent far too long building this administration for the greater glory of the Emperor to hear such filth spoken so brazenly.’

‘You have my sympathy, administrator.’ Parax said, gesturing discretely. Two of his stony-faced retainers appeared in the tattered doorway. ‘Take these vermin away and dispose of them.’ Using the ends of their lasguns to prod them along, the two retainers began to herd the rebels out of the door.

‘Wait a moment.’ Levi stepped forward, an unwelcome sense of unease playing in his mind. ‘We must not be hasty—’

Parax squared up to the Librarian. ‘You plead for these traitorous scum? Where do your loyalties lie, Consul? You do not—’

‘His loyalties remain true, inquisitor!’ Parax involuntarily stepped away from Levi as Estrus’s iron voice cut him short. ‘Doubt it not. But my brother-librarian is right. We may miss an opportunity to find out more about the deployment of the rebel forces if we—’ A series of lasgun shots sounded outside. Estrus groaned. ‘Inquisitor, we are on the same side, yet your rash behaviour threatens to disrupt our operations here.’

‘Are you sure that we are on the same side, captain? Or has this cunning heresy affected you?’

As the captain’s hand moved to his bolter, Levi sensed a strong psychic presence approach the ruin. He heard the crackle of Chaplain Mortem’s crozius arcanum moments before the battle rod and the fully-armoured figure of his holy brother dwarfed the ruined doorway.

‘Brothers, we must move out.’ Mortem said breathlessly. ‘The Second Company is overwhelmed. A counter-attack, brother-captain – and it seems like the entire planet is against us.’

A BARRAGE OF Whirlwind missiles roared overhead as the speeders of the Second Company’s tenth squad screamed towards the heart of the rebel force. The rebel force had appeared unexpectedly from the south and was swarming towards a breach in the city walls. The missiles screamed into the distance; a series of explosions lit up the horizon. Satisfied that the rebels’ artillery capability had been disposed of, Estrus ordered the Third Company to advance.

Aeorum, standard grasped in one hand and bolter in the other, led the first and second squads into the heart of the rebel counterattack. Possessed of an almost daemonic rage, rebels hurled themselves bodily at the Black Consuls but their attacks were in vain as black-armoured fists crushed skulls, bolter shells tore muscle and sinew apart, flamers and melta-guns incinerated skin and bone. Very soon, both squads struggled to make headway, their progress impeded by the waves of rebels dead at their feet.

Levi tore his chainsword free from a dead rebel and in one smooth movement turned and hammered the pommel into the face of his compatriot. The blow shattered the man's forehead with an audible crack, killing him before his limp body began its fall to the ground. Kicking the corpse to one side, Levi followed the men of the third and fourth squads towards Thuram's breached walls. How he wished he could take his helmet off so that he could spit out the growing feeling of the rebels' hatred, for it had become a vile taste in his mouth. The deadly hiss of a melta-gun made him glad he was still fully armoured. A wave of anguish washed over the librarian as the Black Consul next to him was reduced to dust. Levi scanned the enemy ranks for the weapon – there, less than twenty paces away, but there were too many of his brothers in the way. The melta-gun fired again and another Consul exploded into a superheated ball of flame.

Time to fight fire with fire, Levi thought grimly.

'Brother Consuls, hold your positions, hold your positions!' Unquestioningly, the Space Marines heeded the codicier's order and stopped in their tracks. Muttering a short prayer to the Emperor, Levi focused his mental energies on the ground beneath the rebel melta-gunner. With no further warning a white hot ball of flame erupted upwards from the ground, exploding outwards, engulfing the melta-gunner and a dozen men around him.

Seemingly unfazed by the unexpected loss of their comrades, the remaining fifty rebels regrouped and charged both squads. A woman brought her autorifle to bear on Levi, but hesitated before firing. 'Rot in hell, spawn of Chaos!' she screamed. She opened fire, the gun on full auto, spraying Levi with bullets. Levi advanced against the hail of bullets that were bouncing ineffectually off his armour. Out of ammunition, the rebel battered the librarian's chest with the butt of the gun. 'Die heretic! D—' Her words were cut short as the chainsword sliced through her waist.

Levi stared at the bloody severed torso.

This is not right. It had felt so, so wrong to kill her. Absently he fired his bolter at two men charging him down, felling both. Something exploded a few metres away, throwing Levi backwards. He landed heavily. A stream of damage data ran up his helmet readout but all Levi could see was the woman's face, distorted by rage and hatred.

'Brother, can you hear me?' Levi tried to focus on the distant voice as a pair of armoured arms lifted him to a seated position. Apothecary Mordinian fumbled with Levi's helmet seals and removed the helmet. His lined face cracked into the briefest of smiles. 'Ah, thank Guilliman, you are alive, brother-librarian. I took your silence for death. A frag grenade...'

‘What? No, I live, as you see.’ Levi still felt dazed, unsure whether it was the aftershock of the grenade blast or something else. ‘How do we fare?’

‘Well, librarian, well. We must have accounted for over three hundred of the rebels.’ He examined Levi as he spoke. ‘The Second has regrouped over there, and we await the order to – ah, you are wounded.’ Levi became dimly aware of a discomfort in his right leg as the apothecary dressed the wound. He put the pain out of his mind as easily as if it was any other emotion. The apothecary helped him to his feet. ‘A few minutes and the dressing will begin to- Oh, I must tend to another. Go well, brother.’

As the apothecary hurried away, Levi replaced his helmet before taking in the scene around him for the first time. Black Consuls of the first to sixth squads of the Third Company were coming together, within a few hundred metres of the city walls, a black and yellow armoured mass in a sea of torn and bloody rebel dead. He caught sight of Aeorum. The standard bearer was making his way over to him, pausing now and again to speak a few words to squad members. Levi checked his viewscreen reports before watching the fifth squad’s sergeant reverently touching the edge of the standard before turning to muster his men.

‘Brother Aeorum, your inspiration gives us all courage. The Second Company holds its position but the Fourth is beleaguered.’

‘Yes, I saw the reports.’ Aeorum glanced over his shoulder. ‘We move to hold the breach soon. Brother Estrus awaits the word from Captain Vanem of the Fourth. Yet you seem... distracted, brother.’

‘Chaos so twists these rebels that they accuse us of heresy, of being servants of the Darkness ourselves.’ Something close. The thought intruded abruptly.

‘I heard their blaspheming too.’ Aeorum shrugged. ‘But we must hold true and must not be swayed.’

Close. Aeorum’s voice faded as Levi felt a large presence looming. He fought to pinpoint it. The clamour of human minds, beyond the rise towards the city walls. He opened a channel on his helmet-com. ‘Brother-captain, we are coming under attack, six hundred paces due north-west. A large force, repeat, a large force.’

‘Acknowledged, brother.’ The rest of Captain Estrus’s reply was drowned out by a booming barrage of bolters as the Black Consuls opened fire on the seething mass of rebels appearing over the rise. Aeorum raced to join the first squad, firing with deadly accuracy as he closed with the attackers. As the standard moved through their midst, a great roar rose from the ranks of the Black Consuls. Levi, powering up his chainsword, began to follow. The air was suddenly alive with sheets of electricity. Levi’s helmet visors darkened instantly.

Teleport! Raw discharges of energy crackled wildly as a new presence materialised amongst the rebels.

It seemed to Levi as if a gateway to his darkest nightmares had opened up on Suracto. A squad of Space Marines had materialised in the midst of the rebel force, but to call them by that name would be a blasphemy. Their archaic armour sported all manner of grisly and morbid decorations, borne of Chaos-twisted imaginations and depraved urges: belts made of skulls hung around one waist, a rotting long-haired scalp adorned another's helmet, razor-sharp spikes encrusted most shoulder pads. But on every suit of ancient armour there was a common symbol, the hateful many-headed hydra of the Alpha Legion. It was worse than even the inquisitor had suspected. The rebels were under the sway of these foul Tzeentchian warriors.

Levi and his brother Black Consuls took all this in at a glance before turning their firepower on the new arrivals. A deadly hail of bolter shells rained on the Alpha Legionaries but though the human rebels around them were ripped to shreds, only two of the Chaos Space Marines fell before they opened fire with their own weapons. The crest of the rise was consumed in primeval savagery as the Black Consuls vented their long-suppressed anger on the twisted representations of the Emperor's warriors that stood before them.

Levi hacked his way towards the Alpha Legion squad, a cold hatred coursing through his veins. He barely gave a second thought to the rebels he despatched to the Emperor's mercies... until the slow, terrifying realisation dawned upon him. The rebels were turning away from the Black Consuls and were also training their weapons on the Legionaries. Soon, both Black Consul and rebel alike were fighting a common enemy, the Alpha Legion. Levi tried to ignore his confusion as he fought to get closer to the middle of the fray but abruptly the fighting stopped. Only the rebels and the Black Consuls still stood.

Estrus stood amidst the carnage, a dying Alpha Legionary at his feet. The foul warrior's chest-plate had been torn open, exposing a tangled mess of charred flesh and ruined machinery. His hand twitched. Estrus calmly pointed his bolt pistol at the armoured head. As the shot rang out, Levi reached his captain's side. He looked at the grisly remains of the Legionary's head, made waste by the bolter shell.

'Captain, we have been misled.' Levi looked around, at the drawn, sallow faces of the rebels, at the Black Consuls, already beginning to round up the ragged bands, their anger spent. The harsh noise of battle sounded from beyond the city walls. 'Brother-captain, the rebel prisoners—'

Estrus raised a hand. 'I hear you, librarian. And I understand. We have been

made unwitting pawns in a dark and disturbing game. I must signal the Fourth. I fear that Planetary Lord Koln's forces may be a graver danger to them than the rebels.' He signalled to a nearby Space Marine. 'Brother-sergeant, give me a casualty report and find me a representative from these rebels that I can speak to.'

'This is treachery!' Levi and Estrus span to see Administrator Niall striding towards them. The administrator flapped a hand at the stunned rebel force. 'They must be executed, every last man and woman. You heard what the inquisitor said!' His voice cracked as he shrieked the words.

Estrus's helmeted head turned smoothly towards the administrator. 'You saw for yourself what happened here, Administrator Niall?' Niall hesitated, then nodded briefly. 'Then you know the scourge of Chaos is upon your planet—'

'But can't you see what's going on?' Niall interrupted, exasperated. 'The rebels have conspired with the Alpha Legion—'

'But the Chaos scum fought rebel and Marine alike.' interrupted Levi.

'Yes, that's what I meant. I...' He rubbed a hand across his face.

He seemed suddenly older, somehow, thought Levi.

'You know your Codex, Space Marine.' said Niall. 'All those who stand with Chaos must be shown the Emperor's mercies.'

'All those who stand by Chaos must be given the opportunity to seek the Emperor's light or be shown the just and swift mercies of those who do His work. That is what the codex says.' So saying, Levi strode nearer to the administrator. Visibly shaken, Niall backed off a few paces. 'Administrator, how is it that you have knowledge of our blessed book?'

'It is simply something that I heard...' Niall backed further away, his voice faltering. 'Your duty is clear. You, you must—' The left side of Niall's head erupted outwards in a shower of blood and tissue.

The rebel holstered his autopistol and spat on the administrator's still-twitching body. 'I am Mitago.' he said, his sunken eyes burning in his ashen, unshaven face. 'I am leader of this detachment of my people. And I have heard enough lies and cant from this verminous servant of Chaos.'

As the rebel leader hurried over to talk further with Captain Estrus, Levi looked down on Administrator Niall's corpse and mused on another verse of the Codex. Swift unthinking justice profits you nothing. It shall bring only misery and the tears of the wronged.

He went to find Aeorum.

AS THE THIRD Company approached the city walls, a cold and grim determination had descended upon the Black Consuls. The fourth squad had been lost completely, and but two men remained of the sixth. The loss weighed heavily on their surviving brother Consuls. Mitago, whose men now brought up the rear behind the company's Rhinos, had revealed the unthinkable truth.

'We had endured enough.' he had told Estrus. 'Koln simply asked too much. We worked hard, filled with a joyful love for the Emperor. But Koln would make speeches demanding more, telling us that the Imperium would be angry if we did not increase our planetary tithe.'

'Then.' he said, 'the purges began. Loyal citizens disappeared as Koln's arbitrators terrorised the planet. Criminals were executed for any crime, often on nothing more than an Arbitrator's whim. "Heresy" was found everywhere, heretics were rooted out of every house and home.

'And we knew it was wrong.' continued Mitago. 'The Emperor's law is hard, but in its harshness it is just. There was no justice left on Suracto and in our hearts, we knew that Koln was not doing the Emperor's work. It left us no choice.' He indicated the dead Alpha Legionaries. 'We had no idea that the taint on his soul was this abominable.'

Mitago's words had stunned the listening Black Consuls into silence. Each one knew what the implications were, but Levi knew that each Space Marine would be true to his training and his order: there would be no regrets, no accusations, no guilt. They had done nothing other than follow the Codex, however misguidedly. With their customary discipline and self control, they would shift their attention to the true enemy, and the blessed book would surely guide them along the path of righteousness.

All such thoughts quickly faded as the Third Company approached Thuram City. The Second had lost over thirty men and their armoured vehicles had borne the brunt of rebel artillery before their own Whirlwinds had eliminated that threat. Both captains had agreed that the Second should remain where they were to protect against any threat from outside the city.

Levi had joined Aeorum and the first squad as they crossed the field of rubble which marked where the city wall had been. Months of fighting had made jagged, burnt-out skeletons of the city's fine architecture. Hundreds of bodies lay strewn, blackened, bloodied and forgotten, along the pockmarked streets.

'They've made their own pretty hell here.' Aeorum muttered as they advanced up Thuram's central avenue, the valley floor of a blasted concrete canyon that stretched upwards to a sliver of skyline a kilometre above.

Levi merely nodded silently as he listened to the reports that streamed in.

Things changed dramatically with each passing minute. Captain Estrus had signalled to Captain Vanem of the Fourth Company, who had made efforts to contact the rebels' leaders. They in turn had spoken to Vanem and had welcomed the new understanding – but not so the until-now loyal forces opposed to the rebellion. As soon as they had heard what was going on, they had turned on the Fourth Company.

As Levi calmly took in all that was happening, he realised that he had not seen Inquisitor Parax since the prisoners' interrogation. Parax's over-zealous fanaticism meant that he had his own part in the Tzeentchian machinations that had entrapped them all. Were it not for the seal of the Inquisition, Levi would have suspected a darker motive for Parax's actions, Holy Throne forgive the thought-

Levi's train of thought was shattered as they drew near to a scene of horrific carnage. Hundreds of rebels and Suractan loyalist forces clashed in a sprawling street skirmish; the Fourth Company, an uneasy presence between both sides, fought stoically against the red-uniformed Suractans, but were being hampered by the berserk zeal of the rebels. Unarmed rebels leapt over their dead comrades to tear at the Suractans' faces with their bare hands.

'Codex preserve us!' Estrus barked. 'We must restore some order here!' He bellowed some orders and his squads went smoothly into action. The first and second squads broke off to attack a detachment of Suractan autoriflemen. Dozens of red uniforms were mown down as the Consuls' bolters took their toll. Levi felled two men with a single chainsword stroke as, all around him, fellow Black Consuls fought with a refreshed, vigorous spirit. This was more than battle. This was atonement.

'Librarian, they retreat!' At Aeroum's call, Levi looked over his shoulder to see several dozen Suractans breaking away.

'Second squad, hold!' ordered Levi. 'First squad, standard bearer, with me!' The first squad broke away in pursuit. A dark shape in his mind's eye. The vision disappeared from Levi's mind, but its meaning was clear enough. 'First squad, slow down. We must be vigilant.' The Consuls obediently slowed to a walk, the Suractans retreating from view. Advancing through the twilit streets, Levi noticed a change in the architecture around him. He turned to the sergeant. 'Brother, where are we?'

There was a pause as the Sergeant searched for the right information. 'In Planetary Lord Koln's palace complex, brother-librarian.'

'Then we have another purpose here.' said Levi. 'Squad, halt!'

Aeorum approached Levi. 'We have lost the loyalists. What's your plan,

brother?’

Levi gave no answer but bowed his head as he sent his mind out into the dark buildings beyond. A dark cancerous presence remained. They had not left.

‘The Alpha Legion is still here.’

A murmur ran through the Space Marines at the codicier’s words and grips tightened instinctively around weapons. Levi focused on the presence, found a direction. ‘This way, my brothers.’

The Consuls made their way, in silence save for the whirring of servomotors and the echoes of their footsteps, into the labyrinth of corridors that ran within Koln’s palace, allowing themselves to be guided by the codicier’s psychic powers. Levi felt an icy rage rising within him, the rage he had felt when he first saw the Alpha Legionaries. He strove to control his feelings, even though he knew that his brother Consuls must also be feeling the same anger. He felt the presence of Chaos draw near: nothing must now dull his purpose.

‘Librarian! Your arrival is timely.’

Levi signalled to his brother Marines to lower their weapons as Inquisitor Parax emerged from the shadows, accompanied by his ever-present retinue. ‘What are you doing here?’ Levi asked, uncomfortable that he had not sensed the inquisitor’s presence.

‘I fear that Lord Koln is held hostage by the Alpha Legion.’

‘Hostage?’ Levi asked. ‘But Koln is himself a servant of Chaos.’

‘Not so, librarian—’

‘Brother-librarian, shuttle craft powering up.’ The sergeant checked his scanners. ‘Six hundred metres north-east.’

Levi glanced at his own readouts. ‘I have it. First squad, standard bearer, with me. Inquisitor, do not impede us.’ Parax nodded slowly and allowed the Black Consuls to pass. The Space Marines broke into a run, armoured feet pounding the floor as they strove to cover the distance. Levi checked his scans again: shuttle craft preparing for lift-off, twenty metres and closing.

The tunnels opened into a landing bay. The high-pitched whine of the shuttle craft’s engines, bearing the Suractan standard, filled the cavernous room. At the foot of the shuttle’s entry gantry a red-cloaked human argued vehemently with the two Alpha Legionaries that loomed over him. As Levi took aim with his bolter, one of the Legionaries lifted his hand and placed a large gun against the human’s head. The plasma pistol flashed and the human was torn apart by a glowing ball of super-heated flame.

The Legionary seemed to look at the Black Consuls for an infinity.

You have failed, Consul.

Levi heard the words clearly over the clamour of the squad's firing. Aeorum had already covered half the distance between the entrance and the shuttle but the Alpha Legionaries turned and fled up the gantry, the shuttle already lifting off the ground, its engines screaming.

'Get down!' Levi shoulder charged the standard bearer, throwing him to the floor, pinning him down as a white-hot stream of plasma poured from the shuttle's engines, incinerating the spot where Aeorum had been a second earlier. Helmet screens darkened as the landing bay was bathed in a brilliant light. With a monstrous thunderclap the shuttle took off.

Levi got to his feet. 'Brother-sergeant, contact the Chapter ship. That shuttle must be intercepted!' He glanced at the faint human outline scorched into the landing bay's floor as Inquisitor Parax strode over. His psychic discomfort was reaching the level of pain. 'Lord Koln?' he asked the inquisitor.

The inquisitor nodded. 'Yes. Another dupe in this Tzeentchian horror.' He paused, staring at the remains of the planetary overlord. 'This is a grave matter, Consul. When heresy runs this deep, it must remain a matter for the Inquisition.'

'But what if this has happened on other planets, in other systems?' Aeorum asked, removing his helmet. The Codex binds us; we must seek out such heresy.'

'We cannot smoke them out too early,' Parax said. 'Swift unthinking justice shall profit you nothing, Consul.'

'Too... too early?' Levi asked, unnerved by the inquisitor's use of that particular Codex verse. He gave himself a moment to collect his thoughts, checking a report. The shuttle had outrun the Consuls' ship and jumped into the warp on Suracto's dark side. 'Do you have evidence of other plots like this?'

Parax glared at him. 'As I said, librarian, this is a matter for the Inquisition. Cross me at your peril.' Parax spun on his heels and walked away. Levi started to follow when an armoured hand came to rest on his shoulder. The librarian turned to face Aeorum. He released his helmet and looked around at his fellow Black Consuls, methodically checking and securing the landing bay.

'Brother Levi, we have done all we can. For now.' Aeorum indicated Koln's final resting place. 'It does seem that Koln may have been tricked, as we were. It may be the time for you to let the Inquisition do what it does best. We have freed Suracto, which is prize enough. And Captain Estrus will require a full report.' Aeorum gave a half-hearted smile.

'The Codex tells us to be vigilant, to actively seek out all manifestations of Chaos, wherever they may be. As codicier of the Imperial Order of Black

Consuls, it is my solemn duty.’ Levi looked up at the standard in his brother Consul’s hand. ‘I am not best pleased at this decision.’ He sighed, conceding. ‘But you may be right. We have done all we can, for now.’

As he made ready to signal Captain Estrus, Codicier Levi remembered the verse he had read that morning.

And those dedicated to the Emperor’s work will be beset upon all sides by enemies. Be vigilant for they are everywhere and you may depend on none but your brothers in arms to carry out His blessed work.

Levi signalled the captain.

AS THE DOOR of his cabin aboard the Inquisition ship closed silently behind him, Parax wearily began to take off his armour. This time, he had narrowly succeeded in doing his master’s work, though he was long used to the arduous nature of his blessed task. But if the extent to which Chaos had pervaded Suracto were to have become more widely known ... He sighed as he put his armour away. Perhaps the Exterminatus would have been his only remaining option.

He reached for his robe. For now, the Black Consuls had played their part, and order had been restored. The other planets in the system were safe. Absently, he rubbed the Tzeentchian tattoo on the inside of his forearm. Their time was yet to come.

IN THE BELLY OF THE BEAST

William King

THE ATMOSPHERE IN the steering chapel of the *Spiritus Sancti* was tense as the scouts pushed through the brocade-curtained archway into the cool basalt fastness of the command centre. Tech-adepts chanted, counting down the range. The machine language gibberish of shaven-headed monitors hummed in the background, a constant, incomprehensible babble. Above them, on the cat-walks, dark-robed figures strode from control-icon to control-icon, checking the purity seals of the major systems and wafting censers of burning incense. The chapel bustled with a controlled panic that Sven Pederson had never encountered before. The young Space Marine didn't need the red warning globes hovering on either side of the holo-pit to tell him that the starship was at battle-stations.

'Ah, gentlemen, there you are at last. I'm so pleased you could join us.' The measured tones of Karl Hauptman, commander of the vessel, cut easily through the noise.

'You summoned us, jarl. We are your bondsmen and we obey.' Sergeant Hakon spoke evenly but Sven could tell that the rogue trader's mockery had touched a nerve. Hakon was a proud old warrior, passed over for Terminator duty, and it rankled to have to serve under this foppish aristocrat, supervising a bunch of scouts on their first training mission. Still, he was a Space Wolf to the bone and had to obey.

Hauptman lounged easily behind the master lectern, projecting effortless authority, the one man present who seemed perfectly calm. He seemed more than Hakon's equal in stature although the giant Space Marine towered over him.

The shipmaster gestured to the holo-pit with one long, perfectly manicured finger. Control runes flickered emerald on the lectern, underlighting his face and giving it a hollow, almost daemonic look. 'Give me the benefit of your wisdom, Brother-Sergeant Hakon – what do you make of that?'

One of the monitors closed his camera-eyes and intoned a mantra. Sven had a clear view of the cyberlink feeds that connected the man to his work-lectern. Each tiny fibre pulsed with light. The rhythm of the pulses slowed until they coincided with that of the chant. When the monitor opened his eyes again, their

mirrored lenses caught the light, burning in the gloom like tiny red suns.

An object appeared in the pit: it was greyish and round, and looked like a small asteroid. Hauptman gestured again. The plainsong of the tech-priests swelled, echoing under the groined ceiling of the chapel. The smell of hallucinogenic incense grew sweeter and more sickly. Sven felt slightly nauseous as his system adjusted to the drug then neutralised it. The air blurred, lights flickered and the object expanded then came into better resolution.

For no reason he could think of, the sight filled Sven with dread. He glanced at Brother-Cadet Njal Bergstrom, his closest friend among the other Space Wolves. The ruddy light of the warning globes stained his pale face, making the look of horror there more intense. Njal had tested positive for psychic abilities and, if he survived his cadetship, might be trained as a librarian, just as Sven would be trained as a wolf-priest. Whatever, Sven had learned to respect his comrade's intuition.

‘Extremely unusual. Are those doorways in the thing's side? Is it a base of some sort?’ Hakon was clearly puzzled.

Hauptman stroked his beard, cocked his head to one side. ‘Astropath Chandara assures me that it is alive. Sensor divination appears to confirm this.’

The man he had mentioned stood beside the command throne, clutching at the arm-rest as if it were the only thing that held him upright. Sweat beaded his dark, pudgy face and formed deep circles under the armpits of his white robes. Chandara looked stricken, like a man in the latter stages of some fatal fever. His eyes had the fey, haunted look that Sven had seen in whalehunter shamans when the death-madness came upon them.

‘I beg of you, shipmaster, destroy this abomination. Nothing but evil can come from preserving it a moment longer.’ Chandara's husky voice carried a strange resonance, the certainty of prophesy.

Hauptman spoke reassuringly. ‘Don't worry, my friend. If it proves necessary I will destroy it instantly. However it may be that this deviant artefact contains something of use to the Imperium. We must investigate, if only to increase the knowledge of the scholars of the Adeptus Terra.’

Sven could tell that Chandara disagreed but could not challenge the shipmaster's authority. The astropath shrugged in resignation. Like many of the crew he had become completely used to obeying orders.

Sergeant Hakon understood where all this was leading. ‘You want my men to investigate this deviant nest.’

Hauptman smiled as if Hakon were a child who had been quick on the uptake.

‘Yes, sergeant. I’m sure that you are competent enough to manage this.’

Sven saw how the statement trapped Hakon; to refuse would be to call his ability into question. He was manipulated only for a moment but that moment was long enough. Hakon responded instantly and with pride: ‘Of course.’

Sven would have liked him to have asked more questions and he could see that once the words were out of his mouth the sergeant wished that he had done so. Now it was too late. They were committed.

‘Prepare the boarding torpedo.’ Hauptman said. ‘Your squad can begin its investigations immediately.’

HELMETS READY, PRESERVER systems primed, the Space Marines sat in the cold, dark fuselage of the boarding torpedo. Sven studied each of his companions in turn, taking a last glimpse before they donned their almost insect-like breather masks, trying to fix their faces in his mind. Each ragged visage was obscured by war-paint. He was suddenly, painfully aware that this might be the last time he ever saw his comrades alive.

Sergeant Hakon sat still, his body tense. His bolt pistol held firmly against his chest. His taut-skinned, thin lipped features were set. The cold blue eyes peering out from beneath a skullcap of silver-grey hair. Unlike the cadets, Hakon did not keep his head shaved except for a single strip of hair. He was a full Space Marine.

Njal sat opposite Sven beneath a stained glass window that showed stars through a portrait of the apotheosis of the Emperor into the Throne of Eternal Life. Njal had his hands folded as if in prayer, his fine ascetic features were composed and calm. Sven guessed that he was sub-vocalising the Litany Against Fear.

‘Why didn’t Hauptman send in his house troops?’ asked Egil, his bulldog face set in its characteristic permanent sneer. Of all the Space Wolf cadets he was the most flawed. His eyes held the cold, frozen, madness so characteristic of troll-blooded berserkers. He had broken two of Sven’s ribs during unarmed combat practice back on Fenris and smiled coldly as the younger scout was carried to the apothecarion. Sven had overheard Sergeant Hakon tell Brother-Captain Thorsen that he would be keeping a special eye on Egil. Whether that was good or bad, Sven had never decided.

‘The guards were probably too scared to travel in this rust-bucket they call a boarding torpedo. By the ghost of Leman Russ, I can’t say I blame them.’ This came from Gunnar, the squad support man who grinned amiably as he said it. He smiled, revealing the specially lengthened incisors that were the mark of the

Space Wolf gene-seed. There was something reassuring about Gunnar's broken-nosed, heavily pock-marked features, Sven thought.

Hakon let out a short bark of mirthless laughter. 'When you have seen as much combat in the Emperor's service as those Guardsmen have then you will be true Space Marines. Till then, mock them not. Simply thank the Emperor for providing you with this chance to show your own bravery.'

'I hope this thing is full of deviants.' Egil said with relish. 'I'll prove my bravery soon enough.'

Gunnar slapped a cartridge into his weapon. 'Don't worry, Njal, we'll see you're safe.'

Sven knew that Gunnar was just teasing. The worried expression on Njal's face made it plain that he did not.

'I can look after myself.' he said sharply.

Gunnar clapped him on the shoulder of his armour and laughed. 'I know you can, little brother. I know you can.'

'Final checks.' Sergeant Hakon said. Each Marine fell silent as he concentrated on the prayers necessary to activate his armour.

Sven knew that his suit was well-maintained. He had carried out all the maintenance rituals himself, washing the armour with scented oils while intoning the Litany Against Corrosion, greasing the articulated joints with blessed unguents, checking the pipes of the rebreather with coloured smoke from an auto-censer. He believed firmly in the old Space Marine saying, if you look after your equipment it will look after you.

Yet it went deeper than that. He knew that the armour he had been given was really only loaned to him. He felt a sense of reverence for the ancient artefact. It had been worn by a hundred generations of Space Wolves before his birth and would be worn by a hundred more after his death. He was part of a family of Wolves that stretched off into the fathomless future. When he touched the armour he touched the living history of his Chapter.

Now, as he touched each command rune in turn, he tried to imagine the previous wearers of the armour. Each, like him, had been chosen from the blond haired seafarer clans of the island chains of Nordheim. Each, like him, had undergone the years-long basic training of the Space Marine. Each, like him, had undergone the implantation of the various bio-systems that had transformed them into a superman far stronger, faster and more resilient than an ordinary mortal. Some had gone on to glory; others had died in this armour. Sven had often wondered which group he would belong to when his time came. Now the

sense of foreboding he had felt when he first saw the alien artefact returned.

He was aware how much he relied on this armour for protection. Its ceramite carapace to protect him from heat and cold and enemy fire. Its auto-sensory systems that let him see in the darkness. Its recycling mechanisms that let him breathe in hard vacuum and survive for weeks on his own reconstituted excrement. As these thoughts filtered into his mind, his prayers moved from being an empty recital of a well-worn litany into something genuine and sincere. He did not want to die and perhaps his suit might save him.

He fitted the comm-net ear-bead into place and checked the position of the speaking circlet over his larynx. He bowed his head and prayed that the ship's Tech-Adepts had taken as much care of the equipment as his order's own lay-brothers would. Once inside the alien artefact it might be his only means of communication with his fellow scouts.

He pushed his hands together in prayer, feeling the muscle amplification of the suit's exoskeleton lend him the strength of dozens. He closed his eyes and let the pheromone traces of his companions be picked up by the suit's receptors. He knew that if the alien artefact was pressurised he could identify his companions, even in total darkness, by scent alone. With an act of will he switched his hearing from normal sound to comm-net pickup. The sub-vocalised activation litanies of his companions rang in his ears, interspersed with the comms chatter of the ship's crew.

'Helmets on,' the sergeant said. In turn the Space Marines donned their protective headgear. One by one, each gave the thumbs up sign. When his turn came Sven did the same. He felt the click of the helmet lock as it slid into place. Targeting icons appeared in his sight underneath the Gothic script of his head-up display. All the read-outs were fine. He gave the signal. The sergeant put his own helm on last.

'All clear. The Emperor is served,' Hakon said for them all.

'The Blessing of the Holy One upon you,' responded the ship's controller. There was a hiss and a fine mist filled the air as the cabin was depressurised. The external temperature dropped sharply; a frost-blue icon flashed an appropriate warning. It clicked for three heartbeats to indicate a lack of air-pressure. There was another click from the neckband of the armour. Sven knew that his helmet had locked into place and could not now be removed until his suit had checked the atmosphere and found it safe for breathing.

There was a faint kick of acceleration. For a moment Sven felt weightless as the boarding torpedo left the artificial gravity field of the *Spiritus Sancti*, then a fraction of his normal weight returned as the torpedo accelerated. In the view

monitors the starship showed first as a vast metal wall. As it receded, the turrets that studded its exterior became visible, then the whole ship from winged stern to dragon-beaked prow. The sheer size of the ship was obvious from the hundreds of great arched windows, each of which Sven knew was the length of a whaling ship and taller than its mast. The rogue trader's ancient vessel dwindled until it was nearly lost amid the stars, just one point of light among many. In the flickering green forward monitors, the alien object swelled ominously in size.

'There's no turning back now.' he heard Njal mutter.

'Good,' Egil said.

With a violent, lurching shudder, the boarding torpedo lodged itself in the wall of the alien artefact. Sven opened his eyes and ceased praying. He hit the quick release amulet on the restraining straps and floated free for a moment before the boarding torpedo's artificial gravity returned.

The squad had moved to ready positions covering the forward bulkhead doors with all their weapons. Vibration thrummed through the soles of Sven's boots as the boarding torpedo's drilling nose-cone bored into the other vessel's walls. After a moment the motion ceased.

+Squad, ready to disperse!+ Hakon's voice came clear over the comm-link.

+Opus Dei!+ the squad responded.

The bulkhead doors swung open and the scouts covered the area with their weapons, just as they had practised a thousand times in training. Sven braced himself as air rushed into the torpedo, misting as it hit the chill within the vehicle.

+Ghost of Russ!+ someone breathed. +I don't believe it.+

Their helmet lights revealed an awesome vista. They stared down into a vast corridor, as high as the chapel ceiling on the *Spiritus Sancti* and the colour of fresh meat. The walls were not smooth and regular; they looked rough and were covered in innumerable folds, like the exposed surface of the brain the medics had shown him during his novitiate. The walls glistened with pink mucous.

From each fold of the wall protruded thousands of multicoloured cilia, each metres long and as fine as titanite thread. They swayed like ferns in a breeze. Here and there huge, muscle-like sacs pulsed. Orifices in the wall opened and shut in time with their pulsing, making sounds like fast laboured breaths. Sven guessed that they were circulating air. Fluid gurgled through transparent pipes that lined the walls like great veins.

+Looks like the place is inhabited,+ Gunnar said. His voice sounded too loud over the comm-link.

SPORES DANCED AND glittered in the air, catching the light and twinkling like stars in the void of space. As they responded to the helmet lights, they seemed to ignite with phosphorescence, like fireflies, and the glow became dazzling. Sven blinked and his second, translucent eyelids dropped into place, filtering the light back to a manageable level. His armour's glowlamps dimmed automatically as the ambient light increased.

While Gunnar covered them, Egil and Njal moved forward, following a standard, well-drilled pattern. As they left the torpedo, their feet sank into the spongy floor of the alien vessel. They walked as if on a thick carpet, disturbing the waving cilia. Sven wondered whether the fronds were some sort of early warning device or whether they might even be poisonous.

The atmosphere icon on his display flashed green three times and then settled. There was a click as the neck-lock of his helmet released. Sven advanced into the alien vessel, flexing his knees to compensate for the gravity shift. The ship seemed to be generating its own internal gravity with centripetal force from its rotation. Even so, Sven felt as if he were only half his normal weight.

Sergeant Hakon had already undone his helmet, and stood taking several deep breaths. He grimaced as his bio-engineered system adapted to the local conditions. Sven knew that he would soon be acclimatised to the local conditions and immune to any toxins present in the atmosphere. After a long, tense minute, Hakon gestured for them all to remove their helms.

The first thing that surprised Sven was how warm it was. The air seemed almost blood heat. He started to sweat as his body compensated for the temperature and the humidity. He coughed as the membranes within his gullet filtered out the airborne spores. The sparkling colours of his surroundings filled his sight; the inside of the ship was a riot of hues glowing with phosphorescent fire in the vessel's warm, shadowy interior.

He was reminded of the coral reefs around the equator on Nordheim where the Space Wolves kept their summer palaces, far from the icy mountains and glaciers of Fenris. He had often gone swimming through the reefs after the battle exercises on the warmer tropical islands. The walls reminded him of certain formations of hard coral. He wondered whether this ship had been created from similar creatures, colonies of microscopic organisms joined to form one vast structure. Everything looked tranquil; it seemed safe and relaxing.

Suddenly, something lashed past him and stung his face. He flinched and reflexively swung his pistol up and fired. The bolter kicked in his hand as it released its missile. In the brief second between pulling the trigger and watching

the thing explode, he caught sight of what looked like a metre-wide jellyfish, drifting parachute-like on the air currents. His face went numb as bio-systems moved to cope with the toxin.

‘Careful.’ said Sergeant Hakon. ‘We don’t know what we’ll find here.’ He moved over to Sven and passed a medical amulet over the wound. The small gargoyle headed talisman did not flicker. It gave no warning chime.

‘You seem to be coping.’ Hakon said calmly. At the sound of the shot the rest of the Space Wolves had taken up positions facing outward covering all lines of fire. Nothing obvious menaced them. No more floating jellyfish came in sight.

The ceiling had started to glow; long veins of bio-luminescent tubing had flickered to life as if in response to the presence of the scouts. They illuminated the corridor which curved downwards out of sight. Sven was reminded of the inside of a snail’s shell.

Sven felt slightly nauseous as the tailored antibodies of his bloodstream dealt with whatever invaders the alien creature had injected. He was struck by a comparison. Perhaps the jellyfish thing had been an antibody responding to the appearance of the scouts.

He tried to dismiss the thought as mere fancy but the thought kept returning that perhaps the alien ship had other ways of dealing with intruders.

THEY ADVANCED CAUTIOUSLY through the pulsing dark. Their cat-like eyes had adjusted to the gloom. They kept their weapons ready to deal death. At every turn and junction they left comm-link relays. These kept them in touch with the *Spiritus Sancti* and served as navigation beacons.

‘Ghost of Russ!’ Sven cursed, slipping and falling on the mucus-covered floor. The spongy surface absorbed the impact as he rolled back into a crouch. Njal moved over to make sure he was all right. Sven could see the look of concern on his face. He waved his friend away, almost embarrassed by the fall.

‘We are in the belly of leviathan.’ Njal said, studying walls the colour of bruised flesh. Sven grimaced; the rotten meat stench of their surroundings made him want to gag. He glanced round.

In the dim light, the other Space Marines were spectral, ghostly figures. Gunnar was on point duty; the rest of the scouts straggled back in a long line behind him. The sergeant brought up the rear. Breathing sacs deflated and a stream of mist and spores erupted forth, refracting the light from the scouts’ armour, turning it into rainbows.

‘I never much cared for that story, brother.’ Sven said quietly, wiping mucus

from his armour. His father loved telling him the old tale: of the fisherman, Tor, who was swallowed by the giant sea-monster leviathan and lived in its vast belly for fifty days before being rescued by the original Space Wolf Terminators and being asked to join their order. His father had used it to frighten Sven and his brothers to keep them from stealing out to sea on their makeshift rafts. At least he had, until the day when he had set out on his dragonship and never returned. As a child, Sven had always suspected that leviathan had got him.

When he had finally become a cadet, he had laughed at such childish stories. He had consulted the archivum of the Order and discovered that the story of Tor and the leviathan was a truly ancient tale, one dating back to before the Imperium, to the distant, time-lost days of primordial Earth. It existed in one form or another on many Imperium worlds, a distant trace memory of a time before humanity colonised the galaxy. He had never thought to be troubled by it again.

Now, within the bowels of this alien ship, he found the horror of the ancient tale had returned to him. He could hear his father's rasping voice speaking in the darkness of the longhouse as the winter gales howled outside. He remembered the chill that filled him when the old man had dwelt on the nauseating things found in the sea monster's belly.

He recalled as well looking out to sea on stormy nights when gale-driven waves lashed the black rocks and imagining huge monsters, bigger than his home island lurking beneath the sea. It was the memory of his strongest boyhood fear and now it returned to haunt him. He felt the same way now; all around he sensed the presence of a huge, waiting monster.

All around him in the gloom he sensed presences. Overhead, he thought he heard the flapping of wings. When he glanced up he was startled to see dark forms like a shoal of manta rays, flapping along the ceiling. As he watched, they vanished into orifices in the flesh wall.

Fluids gurgled through the pipe-veins around him. He was within some vast living being and he knew it for certain now. And he was sure that it knew of his presence in some dim, instinctual way, sensed him and resented his intrusion. There was a sense of evil, malign intelligence about this alien vessel. It was a presence inimical to humanity and any other form of life.

Sven felt an almost claustrophobic terror. His heartbeat sounded like thunder in his ears. His breath seemed louder than the breathing of the valves of the ship. He fingered the hilt of his mono-molecular knife uneasily and recited the comforting words of the Imperial Litany to himself. In this place, at this time, the words sounded hollow, empty. He met Njal's gaze and saw the unvoiced fear

there too. Neither of them had expected their first mission to be like this.

‘Move on, brothers.’ Hakon’s voice seemed to come from far away. Sven forced himself to move deeper into the darkness.

FROM THE MOMENT he had set foot on this alien ship, Njal had known he was doomed to die. More than any of his companions, he was aware of the strangeness of this vessel and the fact that it was alive. He knew that it was dormant at present but it would take only the slightest of actions to waken it. It was only a matter of time. He felt it in his bones.

Ever since he had been a child, that feeling of unconquerable dread had continually been proved correct. Njal had never been wrong. He had watched Sven’s father’s ship, the *Waverider*, set sail that fatal morning knowing it would never return. He had wanted to warn them but he knew that it was useless. Each man aboard had been marked for death and it was unavoidable. And so it came to pass.

He had watched a party of hunters led by Ketil Strongarm disappear into the mountains above Orm’s Fjord. The stink of death was upon them. He had wanted to warn them not to go. He knew without being able to explain why they would never return. Two days later, word came back that Ketil and all his brothers had been killed by an avalanche.

The night that his mother had died Njal had sensed the presence of death, swooping like an immense, midnight-black hawk to carry the old woman away. The whalehunter shaman had assured his father that the fever had broken. Njal knew differently and in the cold, mist-strangled morning he had been proved correct. He had not cried as the pall-bearers were summoned. He had said his farewells long before in the darkness.

He worried about his inability to speak, at what had locked his lips. He had been unable to talk about his forebodings even with his tutors in the Space Wolves’ citadel. In later years he had worried that it was pride. His gift had set him apart from the others and if he had warned them, he would have proven it wrong. Perhaps the future was fixed and there was nothing any man could do about it; or perhaps he wanted to be correct, needed the secret, almost proud knowledge of his own uniqueness. He smiled bleakly to himself. Many and subtle were the traps of daemons.

He was a sensitive; the Space Wolf librarians in the Fortress Among the Glaciers had confirmed this. They said that, in time, his talent would mature and they would teach him how to channel it. All he had to do was ward himself from impure thoughts. But his time had ran out and he knew it. He did not want to die

so soon and all of the training he had received could not alter the fact. He was more scared than he had ever been.

Shocked by his own blasphemy, he cursed the old librarians. What could the old fools who ruled Fenris like gods from their cloud-girt citadel, know of how he felt? A single, sensitive youth isolated among people who might burn him as a daemon-spawned freak. Since the time of the ancient wars, the Sea Peoples had been wary of anything that smacked of the preternatural. Anger and resentment surged through him.

He felt more alone than ever surrounded by his fellow cadets, all of whom except Sven made fun of him. They reminded him of the older lads in his home village of Ormscrag who had mocked him until the day he had grown large enough to give them a good hiding. Marching here in the alien gloom, Njal felt his lifelong resentment of the others, the lesser mortals, the ungifted, return.

The intensity of the feeling surprised him. Why was he so filled with bitterness towards the comrades with whom he had gone through basic training? Why did he hate the patronising tutors of the order who had done nothing but good for him? Was it because they had circumscribed his choices, had forced him onto the dark path that had led to this terrible place of death?

Njal tried to calm himself. All roads lead to death eventually, he told himself. It is the manner in which you walk the path that is important. Somehow, at that moment, the noble sentiment of the old Chapter saying seemed cheap and tawdry.

Briefly, he considered that the thoughts might not be his own, that they might be being projected into his mind by some outside source. Then, abnormally quickly, he rejected the idea and decided that it was simply his lifelong feelings emerging in the face of death. He was being made uneasy by the strangeness of his surroundings and his own forebodings.

All around him, the things that slept in the darkness stirred towards wakefulness.

SVEN GLANCED DOWN the long corridor. The composition of the walls seemed to have changed as the scouts made their way deeper into the alien vessel. They were slicker, smoother and gave more impression of life. It seemed darker and more alive. Here and there, vein-pipes vanished beneath the flesh of the walls, leaving only smooth bulges.

‘It seems to be getting more active the deeper we go.’ he said into the comm-link. ‘The walls seemed engorged with blood.’

‘I think the beast stirs.’ Njal said.

Sven stared back at him coldly. The last thing he wanted to be reminded of was that they were inside some vast living creature.

‘I hope Hauptman is getting good pictures of this.’ Gunnar said cheerfully. ‘If I’m going to be swallowed alive I want it to be in a good cause.’

‘That’s enough.’ Hakon said. His voice was edgy. He had obviously detected the undercurrent of fear in the scouts’ nervous chatter and decided to put an end to it. The cadets fell silent for a while.

The corridor ended in a massive fleshy sphincter valve.

‘It looks like an airlock.’ Sven said, studying it. The doorway rippled moistly. The scout warily eyed the folds of flesh surrounding the valve.

‘I’ll open it.’ Egil said and blasted away at it with his bolt pistol. The bolts tore into the flabby mass of flesh. The valve-door spasmed as if in pain, the whole floor shaking as underfloor muscles joined the action. The scouts were thrown flat, unable to keep their footing on the unstable floor. Sven’s head struck something hard and his vision filled with stars for a moment.

‘Is everyone all right?’ Hakon asked after the floor settled back down again. Everyone nodded or murmured. Hakon glared at Egil. ‘Don’t ever do that again. Don’t even think about doing anything like that ever again unless I specifically order you to!’ Cold menace filled the sergeant’s voice.

Egil looked away and shrugged.

Sven inspected the door. Great gobbets of flesh had been torn out of it but it still barred their way. Another shot would tear the ruptured muscle away. He didn’t know whether they should risk another small earthquake.

He paused to think. The more they proceeded, the more the alien spaceship resembled two things: a giant living body, and the work of some alien technology. There was obviously some plan to its layout. The plan might be incomprehensible to the human mind but it was there. These sphincter valves were obviously airlocks of some kind but they were too far into the ship for them to open onto vacuum.

Perhaps they were a safety measure like the bulkheads on the *Spiritus Sancti*, designed to section off an area if decompression occurred. Or perhaps they were security systems barring access to certain areas.

Either way, there must be some means of opening them. Suddenly it dawned on Sven that he was thinking from a purely human perspective. It did not need to be true. Perhaps the doors sensed the presence of authorised personnel and opened automatically or perhaps they responded to scent cues the scouts could not

duplicate. If either of these theories were the case then perhaps Egil's was the only way forward.

Sven noticed a small fleshy node near the valve. Acting on impulse he reached out and stroked it. The partially-torn door flapped open with a soft, almost animal sigh. Egil looked at the fingers of his gauntlet. They were covered in pink slime. It was scented like musk. He wiped his fingers against his chest piece, taking care to avoid touching the two-headed Imperial eagle on the breastplate.

Sergeant Hakon nodded at him in approval, then gestured for them all to proceed. Sven stepped through into the fleshy gloom.

EGIL GLARED EAGERLY out into the shadows. Murder-lust burned in his heart. He felt the same warm excitement as he had felt the night before his first great battle. Anticipation filled him. He could sense the danger here, the threat of the unknown. He relished it, confident in his ability to master whatever stepped into his path.

He glanced contemptuously at Sven and Njal and smiled to himself. Let the white-livered cowards be afraid, he thought. They were unworthy to be true Space Marines and in this test they would be found wanting. A born Space Wolf knew no fear. He lived only to slaughter the enemies of the Emperor and die a warrior's death, so that he might sit at the right hand of his god in the Hall of Eternal Heroes.

Seeing the worried look on Sven's face, he felt like laughing. The whelp was afraid; the prospect of death made him uneasy! Egil knew in his heart that death was a warrior's true and constant companion; he had done since he tore out an Ormscrag warrior's throat with his teeth during his first night-raid. Death was not something to inspire fear. Rather, it was the true measure of a man: how much death he could inflict and how he faced his own.

He did not expect anything better from Njal and Sven. He had always been astonished that the Space Wolves recruited from the islanders. They were a puny people, hardly worthy to be called warriors. They cringed on their islands and cruised only the coastlines of their tiny domains. His own people were much better kin to the Gods of the Glacier.

The Storm-riders took their ships to the four corners of the world, raiding where they pleased and following the ocean-going herds of leviathan. Yes, they were much more worthy. It took a true man to stare into the eye of a leviathan and still be able to throw a harpoon straight. It took a true man to sail the open sea where the only company was the mammoth shark, the leviathan and mightiest of all, the kraken. He felt almost pity towards the islanders. How could

they understand the great truths of his people?

He glanced at the great hallway with its arch of bone white ribs visible through a tightly stretched ceiling the colour of putrefying meat. He looked at the cancerous growths that marred the floor and walls, at the strange pods of translucent membrane that expanded and contracted like a child's balloon. He looked at the puddles of rank, bile-like fluid that covered the floor. He wiped beads of sweat from his face and took another lungful of the acrid acidic air.

Egil knew that it did not matter to a true warrior whether he died here among the alien growths or at sea with storm winds tossing his hair and the salt spray lashing his face. Like the others, he sensed the presence of the hidden enemy – but unlike the others, he told himself, he longed to face it. To feel the cold supercharged frenzy of battle and the sweet satiation of his killing lust.

He knew he was a killer, had done ever since he butchered his first leviathan calf. Egil had enjoyed the sound the harpoon made as it plunged into flesh. The scent of warm blood had been perfume to his nostrils. Yes, he was a killer and he was proud of it. It did not matter to him whether his prey was a mindless animal, another man or some alien monstrosity. He welcomed the chance of combat. He knew that he would face whatever came like a true warrior and, if necessary, die like a true man.

He hefted his knife, admiring its fine balance, and touched the rune that activated the mono-filament element. Egil knew that it could slice the bonds between actual atoms if he wanted it to. In his secret heart he hoped that he would have a chance to use it. He felt that the true worth of a man was measured in breast-to-breast combat, when the action got close and deadly. Any fool could kill at a distance, with a bolt pistol. Egil liked to look into his foe's eyes when he killed them. He liked to watch the light go out of them.

Egil glared out into the warm dark, daring his foes to appear. In the distance he felt something respond.

SVEN SAW THE strange sneering smile appear on Egil's youthful face and he shuddered. He wondered what was going on. All of his companions seemed to be behaving a little oddly. He wondered whether it was simply the strangeness of the place combined with the feeling of danger that was bringing out hidden facets of their personality or whether there was some strange force at work here.

He could understand it if it were the eerie nature of the place. The deeper they went, the more sinister the place became. The air seemed thick with acrid stench. Long columns of glistening flesh rose from floor to ceiling. Slime dripped from the ceiling to form phosphorescent puddles in the depressions of

the floor. The slow drip-drip-drip kept pace with his own heartbeat. The noise mingled with the gurglings of the vein-pipes and the laboured gasping of the air-valves.

Occasionally out of the corner of his eye, Sven would catch sight of small scuttling things, moving with the speed of spiders between the patches of shadow. The further the Space Marines proceeded, the more apparent it became that they had disturbed something. It seemed like the whole place was waking from a long period of hibernation.

Hakon gestured for them to be still. Everyone froze in place. The sergeant advanced, moving cautiously towards a patch of darkness. Sven brought his bolt pistol up to cover him, focusing down the sight. As the sergeant filled the cross-hairs it occurred to Sven how easy it would be to kill him. A life was such an easy thing to end. All he would have to do is squeeze the trigger...

Sven shook his head, wondering where the thought had come from. Had something outside tried to influence him or was some long concealed flaw in his own personality come to light. He pushed the thought aside and concentrated on his duty to provide support for Hakon.

The sergeant stood over something, looking down. He kicked it with his foot. A skull rolled into the light. Sven recognised the sloping brow and rows of protruding tusks from his comparative anatomy classes.

‘Ork,’ he said.

Egil gave a short, barking laugh that sounded harsh and shallow in this alien place. ‘This place doesn’t belong to orks,’ the Space Wolf sneered.

‘No... but maybe they’ve been here before us,’ Hakon said. His expression was grave as he considered the possibility of a new threat from this unexpected quarter.

‘It’s been dead a long time,’ Njal pointed out. ‘Maybe there are no more about.’

Sven bent down to examine it, noting the column of snapped vertebrae that depended from the neck. ‘Then the question is: what killed it?’

The scouts exchanged worried looks.

‘Perhaps we should return to the ship,’ Njal suggested. ‘We’ve seen enough, surely.’

‘No.’ Hakon said firmly. ‘We’ve to perform a complete survey.’

‘We’ve come too far to back out.’ Egil added fiercely.

‘Surely you’re not scared, little brother.’ Gunnar said. There was a hint of fear in his own voice.

‘Enough.’ Hakon said. He led them on down the path. His stride was

determined and Sven knew that the sergeant was going to see this thing through to the bitter end, whatever it might be.

THE JOKE FROZE on Gunnar's lips as he looked down into the long hallway. Back when he was younger, he had seen the body of a leviathan washed up on the beach. His father's bondsmen had surrounded the great mammal, hacking open the creature and stripping off great flaps of blubber from its ribcage. The stink from the great cauldrons in which they were melting down oil mingled with the corrupt stench of the creature's innards. It rose from the beach to assail his nostrils even atop the cliff on which he stood.

He had gazed down into the thing's guts and seen, naked and exposed, the pulpy hidden workings of its guts. A bondsman had climbed in and was ploughing through the great ropes of the intestine with a knife. His hands and face and beard were smeared with blood and filth.

Looking down from the jaw-like ledge of flesh, the moment returned to him with sudden force. He felt simultaneously like his younger self and like the old fisherman ploughing through the disgusting meat. The full horror of their position rammed itself home in his mind. They were in the belly of the beast. They had been swallowed like the ancient seafarer, Tor, and for them there would be no Terminators to rip them free.

He rubbed at the slime that now coated his armour and fought down an urge to gag. Not for the first time, he wished he were back home in his father's longhouse, safe under his protection and lording it over the villagers.

He knew that was impossible. There was no going back. His father had exiled him for killing young Strybjorn Grimson in that fight. It did not matter that the death had been an accident. He hadn't really meant to throw the boy off the cliff; he had meant merely to frighten him. It did not matter either that his father had only sent him west-over-the-sea to avoid retribution at the hands of Strybjorn's kin, who had refused weregeld for his death. Gunnar still felt bitter about it, even if he hid his bitterness the same way as he hid his unease, behind a smile and a sarcastic joke.

He let his breath hiss out between his teeth; at least his reverie had distracted him from their predicament, trapped within this alien monster. He saw Njal looking at him and he restrained a taunt. It was too easy for him, the son of an upland jarl, to patronise Sven and Njal who were born freemen. He felt guilty about it. They were his battle-brothers, all equal in the eyes of the Emperor. If the Space Wolves had not chosen him after the great contest of arms at Skaggafjord then he would be a simple landless man, less even than a bondsman.

He vowed that in the future he would do his best to contain his feeling of superiority, if only the Emperor would protect him this once.

And now he was attempting to bargain with his Lord and Emperor, a demeaning act for both the deity and a Fenris noble. He tried to clear his mind and make a most devout prayer of atonement but when he did so the only thing that sprang to mind was the picture of the dead beast lying on the shore, with the gore-streaked old man burrowing through its filthy innards.

‘WHAT WAS THAT?’ Sven asked in a hurried, panicky whisper, raising his bolt pistol to eye-level, readying it to fire.

‘What was what?’ Hakon asked. The sergeant looked tired and haggard, as if all the weight of command had suddenly pressed down upon him. He had the abstracted air of a man facing an insoluble problem.

‘I thought I heard something.’

The sergeant paused for a moment, then shook his head.

‘Sven’s right. He did hear something.’ Njal chipped in. ‘I heard- There it is again!’

They all strained to listen. It was as if a great pump had started in the distance. The sound carried for a long way, seeming to echo down the riblike arches of the corridors from far off. The sound was like the slow, measured beat of a massive drum. Sven shuddered, suddenly very cold within his ancient armour.

The scouts stood frozen. The breathing valves moved in time to the beat. The gurgle of liquids through the pipes rose to a rush. A waterfall of viscous fluid tumbled slowly from ledges halfway down the corridor. Steam rose from the stinking pools it created. Shapes seemed to writhe within the flesh of the walls. Sven was reminded of the movement of maggots within rotten meat.

‘It’s waking up,’ Njal said softly, his voice trembling. ‘We should go back.’

Egil sniggered. ‘Are you a Marine or soft-skinned girl? Why should a little noise scare us?’

Sven whirled to confront the berserk. ‘Can’t you see the changes that are happening? Who knows what’s going to occur next.’

‘Why’s this happening?’ Hakon asked. ‘Is it because we’re here?’

Sven paused to consider. ‘Yes, I think so. It’s probably reacting to our presence. The whole ship seems to be alive. It’s been rousing since we’ve come aboard. Think of the changes we’ve seen as we’ve come deeper. The outside walls were hard as rock. These ones still seem to be living flesh. Maybe we should go back, wait for reinforcements.’

‘No.’ Hakon said. ‘Let’s explore further. We’ve yet to find anything of real interest.’

He took the lead, leaping lightly over the steaming pools of bile. In the distance Sven thought he could hear a sound much like scuttling, or the clacking of giant pincers. The sound made him think uncomfortably of scorpions. Looking about him he knew the others had heard it too. The sound disappeared, drowned out by the slow thumping of that monstrous heartbeat.

Sven made the sign of the eagle across his chest and tried very hard not to think about the fisherman, Tor, and his sojourn within the innards of leviathan.

NJAL COULD SENSE the mind of the Beast. It was a slow, steady pressure in his head, perceptible as the vessel’s heartbeat or the bellows breathing of the life support systems. He felt its oppressive weight bear down on him, adding to the claustrophobic feel of the long, intestinal corridors with their vile yellow floors and tiny digestive nodes whose acid scarred his armoured boots. He sensed the being’s ancient might and the sheer, incomprehensible alienness of it.

He was caught in the cross-currents of its thoughts as he was caught within the coils of its body. Sometimes strange hungers and longings flickered through his mind and Njal felt himself roused by alien lusts and desires: flashes of bizarre, inhuman memories, views seen through a myriad infra-red receptors, sounds overheard by organic radio antennae, the incommunicable sight-smell of pheromone analysers.

Nausea had filled him. There were times when he felt human, long minutes in which he doubted his sanity. Then micro-second exposures to the alien impressions rocked his being to the core.

The strangest thing was that the thoughts appeared to be coming from all around him. There seemed to be no fixed source of consciousness, no psychic beacon radiating through the eternal night the way the will of the Emperor was said to be visible as the flare of the Astronomicon.

No, what he was picking up was coming from every direction, from myriad points of consciousness. It was like the chatter of many individuals over the comm-net. Yet there was a pattern, an organising structure to it. He could sense it but could not comprehend it fully. The thoughts simultaneously seemed to belong to one mind and many – as if thousands of telepathic nodes of consciousness surrounding him seemed to make up a single greater mind.

He caught sight of what he suddenly knew was himself through a tiny eyeball high in the corridor ceiling. He scuttled along the ledge, looking down on himself. At the same time he was aware of himself looking up to see the things

scuttling in the shadows. He opened his mouth to scream a warning. He saw himself gazing up into the alien darkness, frozen in terror...

Several things happened near-simultaneously. The entity which had been overwhelming him became aware that it was being eavesdropped on and all contact ceased. He was himself once more. The warning left his lips, coming out in a long incoherent shriek in alien words.

And the scuttling things moving along the wall leapt to the attack.

WHEN NJAL SCREAMED, Sven reacted immediately, throwing himself down and rolling along the spongy floor, scanning his surroundings with a quick movement of his head. He caught sight of the segmented black objects descending from the ceiling. Their fall seemed strangely slow in the low gravity.

He lay on his back and braced his bolt pistol in both hands, blasting at the thing springing at him. It reminded him of a cross between a scorpion and a giant termite. It had an armoured, multi-segmented body and great claws. Eight evil eyes glittered in the gloom. Venom dripped from clicking mandibles.

The pistol roared and kicked in his hand. The monster exploded in front of him as the shells slammed into its alien body. Yellow phosphorous light limned its corpse as gobbets of meat were thrown everywhere by the explosion. He felt wetness on the back of his neck. At first he thought it was his target's blood, then he realised it was fluid pumping from tiny broken capillaries in the fleshy floor. He scrambled to his feet, seeking another target.

The sergeant stood as still as a statue. His whole form flickered with the light from his blazing pistol. With every shot, an alien monster was destroyed.

'Fire at will,' Hakon shouted. 'Choose your targets carefully. Don't let them get too close.'

Sven sighted on a thing that moved across the floor like a great manta ray, its body undulating with every bump and depression in the carpet of alien flesh. His mind was paralysed with fear but his body seemed to respond like some mechanical automaton. The long hours of training where he repeated every combat action until it was ingrained like habit had paid off.

Without thinking he pulled the trigger and as his target flew apart, he re-aimed and fired, re-aimed and fired. The howl of bolt pistol fire filled the air as his companions did the same.

Nearby, Egil crouched in the slime, a feral snarl revealing his elongated incisors. The blue flare of his pistol flickered in the gloom. The light-trails of his bolter shells blazed towards their targets. The creepers were blown asunder, their

shells cracked; burning meat oozed from within. Egil held his knife ready in his left hand in case any got too close; he would be ready to tear them to pieces.

Gunnar wheeled from the hip, his heavy bolter swivelling with him. His hand pumped furiously on the trigger mechanism. Short controlled bursts stitched across the oncoming tide of creepers, tearing them in two.

Only Njal stood frozen, a look of horror on his face. As Sven watched one of the aliens reached his face, claw extended, ready to snap into his neck. Quickly, heart racing, Sven drew a bead and fired. The claw of the creeper was torn off, black blood splattered Njal's face. He shook his pale face and moved like a man waking from a trance. Sven felt hundreds of tiny legs tickle his neck, and a weight descended on his back. He wheeled and found himself staring into the tiny eyes of one of the monsters.

Filled with panic and horror he thrust it back one armed, bludgeoning it across the head with the barrel of his pistol. There was a sickening crunch as he broke its armour. A foul spray burned his flesh.

The memory of those small legs on his flesh, so like those of a centipede made him shudder. He flicked out his knife activating it and as the creature rushed at him, rearing to use its claws, he slashed it across the chest horizontally. Then, with a backhand sweep, he cut it again vertically. Its warm innards sprayed out uncontrollably, drenching him.

Sven looked around. The wave of attackers seemed to have broken on the Space Marines' defence. All of the scouts remained upright and seemingly unscathed.

'Any injuries?' Sergeant Hakon asked. Everyone shook their head. Sven noticed uneasily the fixed, hungry grin on Egil's face – and the pale horror on Njal's.

'Very well. We've seen enough. I think it's time to return.'

Thankfully, the scouts agreed.

Behind them, things moved in the darkness.

EGIL STRODE FORWARD confidently. This was more like it! No more skulking round in the darkness. No more waiting for the hammer to fall. Now he had a foe to face and what more could any true Space Wolf ask for? The only flaw was that they were heading in the wrong direction. Hakon should be leading them deeper into the alien vessel, towards the source of the evil that polluted it.

He paused at the junction, noting how unusual, near-spherical objects were moving through the vein-pipes in the wall. They looked for all the world like

eggs that had been swallowed by a snake. Whatever new threat they represented, Egil welcomed it. Now was his chance to show his bravery, to prove his worth as a Space Marine.

The berserker fury burned within him, a dim coal ready to be fanned into bright flame. He clutched his knife tightly, feeling the inset runes even through the thick stuff of his gauntlet. He longed to plunge it into the breast of a foe. Killing the creepers had only whetted his appetite for bloodletting. Now he wanted worthier enemies for his blade to taste.

To the right, down the pale, flesh-walled corridor Egil picked up a sound. It sounded like the thrashing of something trapped. He moved to investigate, hoping that some new foe was almost upon him. As he passed, he slashed at the tiny arteries lacing the wall and laughed as black fluid ran down the central channel of his blade. Excitement filled him. Now he was truly alive, perched on the razor-edge between life and death. This was the place for a true warrior.

+Egil, where are you going? You are not following the beacon-path!+ Hakon's voice sounded worried, even through the distortion of the comm-net.

+There's something moving down here. I'm moving to secure the flank.+

+Hold your position. We'll send someone to support you.+

Egil smiled... and bounced his gauntleted palm against the comm-net circlet: +Say again. I can't hear you. There appears to be some comm-net distortion.+

He ignored the sergeant's orders just as he ignored the massive sphincter door closing behind him. He stood in a great chamber. The ceiling was as high as that of the great cathedral in the fortress among the glaciers. It was supported by immense, rib-like arches that met high overhead, where the bone of each rib emerged from the pink flesh. Great vein-pipes ran all around them, tangled into tight pleats. At the far end of the chamber was a huge mass of flesh that looked like a massive kidney, suspended by dozens of pumping, vein-like tubes, each thicker than Egil's leg.

Great blisters, twice the height of a man, covered the walls. The skin around them seemed near-translucent, like the shed skin of a snake. Within each, a massive figure seemed to struggle and squirm. There was a sound like tearing as whatever was within started to loosen its bonds.

Even as Egil watched, eyes as wide as saucers, one of the massive blisters split and from it something emerged, like a chicken new-born from an egg. It uncoiled rising unsteadily to its full height and it let out a triumphant scream that sent mucus blasting outward from its throat.

It looked almost like a dinosaur, one of the primeval sea-dragons who dwelled

in the warmer seas around Fenris's equator. Its head was large and bulged back, its horny carapace protecting a hefty brain case. Its ribs seemed to be outside its body, like the exo-skeleton of an insect, and its internal organs were clearly visible. Egil could see its lungs pulse with breath and its heart beating underneath them.

It had four muscular arms, two of which terminated in long claws; the other pair clutched a long weapon that looked like a strange rifle. Its long legs ended in hoofs and raised it to over twice Egil's height. A lengthy stinger lay curled between its legs. The shape of the creature's structure reminded the scout of the ship. It was all long curves and exposed innards. It reminded him of pictures he had seen of genestealers, but from memories of archivum pictures, he recognised it as something even worse.

'Tyranid,' he breathed, barely daring to pronounce the word. 'We're in a tyranid ship.'

As he spoke the words into the comm-net, the thing swung the alien gun to bear on him. From all around there was the sound of other blisters ripping.

EGIL'S WORDS SENT a paralysing chill through Sven. He recalled studying the aliens in the archives of the order. The Space Wolves had come late to the campaign against Hive Fleet Behemoth and the records of the action had been scanty.

A company of assault troops had taken part in the ground action on Calth IV, facing the giant monsters and their legions of hideously mutated bio-killers. Afterwards, the tyranids had swiftly decomposed as mortuary micro-organisms devoured their bodies, preventing proper forensic analysis.

Most of what the archives contained was little more than speculation. The theory was that the tyranids were an immeasurably old, extra-galactic race; they drifted from system to system via a network of warp gates. They searched for new races to conquer and consume, breaking down their gene-runes to create their terrifying bio-engineered horrors.

The tyranids used bio-technology for every conceivable purpose. They had muscle-engined living chariots to carry them into battle. Their guns seemed to consist of clusters of symbiotic organisms that fired hard-shelled organic bullets or acids. Their starships were vast, living creatures, true space-going leviathans that swamed the unknowable currents of the warp.

They had an organised, powerful society, most of which worked on principles incomprehensible to or indecipherable by Imperial scholars. Hive Fleet Behemoth had been totally inimical to mankind. It devastated an entire sector in

its sweep through the galaxy. It had shredded worlds. Legions of its creatures had dropped on plague-weakened planets, carrying entire populations into the maw of the motherships, never to be seen again. They had dropped asteroids on some worlds, and brought many others to their knees with deadly biological contaminations.

Some, more superstitious peoples had turned from the worship of the Emperor and abased themselves before the image of Behemoth. In the time of anarchy that the hive-fleet brought with it, Chaotic cults had gained power promising salvation from a threat against which the Imperium seemed powerless. Trade had been disrupted; nests of genestealers had been uncovered. A new Dark Age seemed about to fall.

It had taken a full military mobilisation of the Imperium to stop Hive Fleet Behemoth. More than orks, more than eldar, the tyranids were the most dangerous threat that humanity faced outside of the Eye of Terror. And even then, Sven speculated, another Behemoth might match even the threat of Chaos. He wondered whether this ship were perhaps some remnant of Behemoth, a straggler cut off from the main hive-fleet that had drifted powerless through space for centuries until the crew of the *Spiritus Sancti* had disturbed it. He prayed to the Emperor that this was the case.

The alternative – that this was the out-rider of a new hive-fleet, a successor to Behemoth – was just too dreadful to contemplate.

THROWING HIMSELF TO one side, Egil blasted the newly-hatched tyranid warrior. His bolter flared in his hand but his shot went wild. The gun in the tyranid's claws gave out a hideous grinding sound. The sacs at its base pulsed and then a stream of shrapnel and steaming acid belched forth. A terrible acrid stench filled the air. Something burned Egil's cheek as he dove aside. He gritted his teeth against the searing pain and rolled behind one of the nodes of cartilage protruding from the floor.

The ammunition warning rune of his pistol glowed red. He fumbled in his belt pouch for another clip. While he did so the alien monster lumbered closer. He could hear its hoof-beats and its slow, laboured breathing coming nearer and nearer. In his efforts he ignored the frantic comm-net chatter of his fellow Space Wolves.

His fingers were covered in mucus from the broken capillaries on the floor and the clip slid free. He grabbed it before it hit the floor and tried to ram it home. The shadow of the tyranid fell upon him. He felt its warm breath on his neck. Frantically he twisted to bring his bolter to bear. He glared up into blank,

pupiless eyes. The thing's dinosaur-like head seemed to smile as it pointed its weapon towards him.

Egil looked upon the face of death and grinned back.

THE SCOUTS RACED down the corridor towards Egil's last known position. Sven's heartbeat was hammering in his ears, more from fear than exertion. He skipped over a pool of slime and saw the sphincter door ahead. He dreaded to think what lay beyond it. All of his childhood nightmares concerning monsters seemed to be coming true. He felt that if he had one more shock he would most likely go completely mad.

'Brother Egil, report! Report, damn you!' Sergeant Hakon was bellowing. 'What is your situation. Come in!'

Sven strained to hear any response. There was none. The Space Marines now stood by the door. They were ready to enter.

'Njal, watch the way we came, in case anything comes behind us! Gunnar, cover us! Sven, we're going in! Get ready. When I say the word, open the door!' Hakon's orders were crisp and clear. Sven nodded to show he understood. He swallowed again and again; his mouth felt so dry he thought he might choke at any moment.

'Go!' Hakon shouted and Sven stroked the bulbous protrusion that would open the door.

The scene that greeted them was a vision from Hell. From blisters in the walls of the vast, fleshy chamber, dozens of giant monsters were hatching, each clutching an obscene-looking weapon. Some carried two swords of bone, others long alien guns. The tyranids themselves looked as if they didn't need weapons. They were huge and their fighting claws looked deadly.

Egil lay behind a mound of flesh on the floor. His face had been horribly burned by acid, revealing bone and some scorched muscle. Near him lay a dead tyranid. Its ribcage had been torn open by the explosive blast of a bolt shell. Egil looked at them and gave a thumbs-up sign.

'Ghost of Russ!' Gunnar breathed.

'Fire at will.' Hakon shouted.

Sven sighted on a newly-hatching monstrosity. It stood, shaking the slime off its glittering carapace. He took careful aim and put a bolter shell through its head. The thing toppled like a felled tree. Sven heard Gunnar working the pump action of his heavy weapon and behind him the whole vast chamber was illuminated by the incandescent blast of a Hellfire shell. Shadows danced around

the bony ridges. Two tyrannids caught fire, seeming to perform a horrific dance of death in their final agonies.

Gunnar worked the Hellfire action repeatedly, laying a carpet of fire between the tyrannids and Egil.

‘Come on, let’s get him!’ Hakon ordered, setting off across the chamber, bolter spraying all around him. Sven raced after him. When he reached them, the sergeant had already raised Egil to his feet and was offering him support. Egil shook him off.

‘Leave me alone! When I cannot stand on my own two feet it will be time to set me on my funeral pyre.’ There was a wild, dangerous look in the berserk’s eyes. He seemed half-crazed with pain and murder-lust. He reeled on his feet but stayed upright. ‘I’m alright. It will take more than a little acid to finish me.’

Through the dying flames of the Hellfire curtain loomed the mighty figure of a tyrannid warrior, a bio-sword held in each claw. The blades were surrounded by a sickly greenish light that reminded Sven of a festering wound. It raised its blades like scythes to cut down its chosen prey.

‘Watch out!’ Sven shouted leaping forward, swinging his knife left-handed. Its blade cut deeply into the tyrannid, cleaving through bone and skin. Sven felt his hand and blade imbed themselves in the tyrannid’s alien flesh. He felt the soft clammy pressure of the thing’s innards on his hand. As he withdrew his blade there was a vile sucking sound.

‘Fall back!’ Sven tugged Egil towards the door. For a moment the acid-burned man stood looking at the scene of the battle and Sven thought he wasn’t going to come. Then Egil turned and loped to the door.

There was a hiss as the sphincter sealed behind them. Egil let out a horrible laugh. The sound seemed to bubble out from his ruined cheek. ‘We showed them who the masters were.’ he crowed.

Sven kept silent, wondering how many other such nightmarish hatcheries there were.

WHILE THE BATTLE raged, Njal fought down a growing feeling of panic. The sense of the alien presence had returned to his mind, a pressure as constant and morale-sapping as the unceasing, metronome-regular pulse of the distant heart. This time he sensed the alien was being more subtle. It sought to undermine his resolve. It saw him as the weak link in the squad.

And he feared that it was correct.

He felt the surge of its mighty alien mind about him, each thought emanating

from a single creature, one small brain that housed a component of the group-mind.

It was hopeless, he knew. Why fight it? His premonition would come true, as it always did. Would it not be easier to simply give up? At least that would end the waiting and the fear. Why not simply lay down his weapon and welcome the inevitable? It was hopeless; he and his brethren could never escape from within the beast. It was a living world and everything in it would be aligned against them. Nothing could escape.

Even as Njal tried to dismiss these thoughts as coming from an inimical, external source, another idea filtered into his confused brain. Perhaps the group-mind might even spare them, welcome them as a slave-race, let them live and adapt them to dwelling within the breast of the hive-fleet. Then he would be safe, comfortable, welcome.

Had he not been lonely all of his life? Apart from the people around him, misunderstood, separate? If he joined the group-mind he need never be alone again. He would be part of a greater whole, a new and essential component to be sent forth and deal with other humans. The hive-fleet would nurture and protect him, make him its own. The day of humankind was done. A new order was rising in the universe. He could be a part of it, if he wished.

At first, Njal tried to dismiss the thoughts as fantasies created by his fear-crazed mind but as they continued he understood that he was not deluded. He was in touch with the hive-mind and the offer was perfectly sincere.

He was tempted. He did feel isolated and alone and had done all his life. He did not want to die, even though he knew that this was a blasphemy against his faith. A true Marine would choose death over dishonour or betrayal without thinking. The hive-mind was offering him not only a chance to live and be part of its community but perhaps even a form of immortality within itself.

For a moment he allowed himself the luxury of succumbing to temptation – then he stepped back from the brink.

He realised that he wanted to remain apart, to be himself. The loneliness that his gift brought was like the gift itself: it made him who he was.

It made him unique and he wanted that more than anything. His sense of self made him human, and made him alive. If he submerged it within something else he, the unique being, would cease to be as surely as if he had died.

More than that, being a Space Marine was part of his identity too. They had made him who he was. He was surprised to find that he did accept their way. He had spent too much time with his companions to betray them. Shared hardship and shared danger had forged bonds between them that sometimes, when he

wanted it, caused his isolation to fade. They were his community. They allowed him to be himself and yet part of something greater.

For a second, though, he saw a parallel between the hive fleet and his Chapter. The Chapter was, in its own way, a living thing. Its flesh was the men who served it. Its traditions and obligations were its memories and its mind. It, too, demanded a loyalty and a submission of self – but it was of a different order to what the tyrannid wanted. He could live with that.

As if sensing his rejection of it, he sensed the presence of the hive-mind withdraw. He stood alone, in an ominously empty corridor, while behind him battle raged.

SVEN FINISHED SPRAYING Egil's face with field dressing. He took a deep breath, revelling in the cool disinfectant tang of the stuff, a momentary release from the revolting stink of the place. He hoped that the antiseptic synthetic flesh would be enough to keep the berserk going till he could be got to an apothecarion.

Egil certainly seemed to think so. He lurched to his feet, beat on his huge chest with one fist and said, 'Ready!'

Hakon surveyed Sven's work critically. 'It'll do.'

Sven glanced at Njal. He was worried about his friend. Since this expedition had started he had seemed more and more distracted. Sven hoped that he had not crumbled under the strain of combat.

Gunnar finished checking his weapon and worked the loading action. It clicked loudly. He grinned from ear to ear, unnaturally jubilant.

'We're still alive. We showed them what Space Wolves can do, right enough.'

'We're not free of this place yet, lad.' Hakon said evenly. 'We've still got to follow the beacons home.'

'If we meet any more they'll taste my knife.' Egil sneered. Gunnar nodded emphatically and grinned again. The relief of surviving his first real combat was obviously getting to him, Sven thought.

'Don't be so cocky.' Hakon said. 'We beat a few half-awake monsters who'd been in suspended animation for only Russ knows how long. The next batch will be ready for us. We'd best move fast.'

His calm, commanding tone sobered the mood of all of the scouts except Egil. He continued grinning maniacally. 'Bring them on.' he muttered happily. 'Bring them on.'

GUNNAR WAS HAPPY, happier than he could ever remember being. His breath

sang within him. Every heartbeat was a drumbeat of triumph. He was still alive.

His weapon felt light in his grip. He felt like kissing it. He had been so afraid when he saw the monsters but he had overcome his fear. He had kept firing and he had killed them before they could kill him or his companions.

For the very first time, he knew the thrill of triumph in real combat. There had been nothing accidental about the deaths he had caused. He had meant to kill the alien monstrosities. It had been either their lives or his. He felt no guilt about it, just a sweet sense of release and relief. The waiting was over. It had been the worst part. Sneaking down these loathsome, stinking corridors not knowing what was round the next bend. He had not realised how much the tension had played on his nerves, on all their nerves.

Now he knew what they faced and it was horrible. But now he could put a picture to the horror. It was not as frightening as the ghastly phantoms his imagination had populated the place with, nor ever would be again. They were mortal. They could die, just like any other living thing.

He felt vindicated. He knew that his action had saved the lives of his comrades. His covering fire had let the sergeant and Sven save Egil. It was the most important thing he had ever done, saving the lives of his friends. All his ambivalent feelings towards them had melted away. He knew that they were true brothers, relying on each other for their very lives in this hellish place. In the face of the awful alien menace of the tyranids, all men were brothers. Petty differences over race or class or colour meant nothing.

He smiled happily. Having faced death, he felt truly alive. He was glad simply to be able to draw another breath, see another stretch of corridor, feel the distance back to their own ship dwindle under his booted stride. He had never truly appreciated what a wonder it was to simply be.

Not even the ominous change in the beat of the distant heart or the scuttling sound in the distance could break into his mood of good cheer.

SVEN BRACED HIMSELF for another attack. Something was closing in. He could hear regular, padded footfalls on the fleshy floor behind him. He turned to look back – and saw something ducking slowly back into cover behind him.

He took a snap-shot but the shell slewed into the wall and exploded, sending gobbets of flesh everywhere. Ichor oozed from small broken blood vessels. The thing moved back into view. Sven saw it was small and dark-skinned, with six limbs – a termagant. It slowly raised its slime-dripping bio-weapon at him. He took careful aim and pumped a shell into its chest. The thing reeled backwards, squealing and scrabbling.

Sven wondered if these, too, were newly-awakened creatures, summoned forth to deal with the human trespassers. He shrugged the thought away and shot it again. His bolt burst through its target and out of the termagant's head, sending jelly-like bits of brain everywhere.

More termagants moved slowly into view from the shadows. From behind Sven, his battle-brothers' fire erupted into the advancing group. Sven fired again but the red 'empty' warning rune on his bolt pistol flickered and he realised he was out of shells. Caught in the crossfire between his own side and the oncoming termagants he threw himself flat to reload.

Shells whizzed all around him, lighting the gloom with their firework contrails. The roar of small arms echoed down the corridor, reverberating in the small space until it was deafening. As he slotted the new clip smoothly into place Sven wondered about how the termagants had got there. Were they captives taken as slaves on some alien world or were they some newly-evolved product of this vile craft? He thought the latter more likely. But how did that explain the ork skull they had found earlier?

Once more he opened fire, feeling the heavy bolt pistol kick in his hand with a kind of grim satisfaction. The withering fire of the Space Marines soon drove the termagants back into concealment. Sven knew they would be back though and wondered how many other nasty surprises the alien ship had in store.

NJAL TOOK POINT. He was happy to lead the way back. Having resisted the temptation to succumb to the hive-mind he felt so much stronger. His premonition of doom had receded. Perhaps, just this once, he would be proved wrong.

Slowly, he picked his way along the slime-covered floors, avoiding the strange circular valves at his feet. He pointed downward to indicate his fellow scouts should do the same. He heard them move to one side in response to his instruction and was glad. They were almost half-way to the boarding torpedo. Soon they could rest once more on the *Spiritus Sancti* and let Hauptman blow this alien nest to kingdom come.

Relief made him careless. He slid on the slippery floor and tumbled forward on top of one of the circles. He put his hand down to steady himself and the whole floor seemed to give way. He tumbled into darkness, feeling the walls squash shut round him. He reached back up through the valve to grab the edge and felt Sergeant Hakon's strong hand grasp his. Relief filled him. The sergeant could lift him back into the light.

The walls around him began to contract and then expand. He felt their

glistening sides press on him. He was reminded of a man swallowing – and he was the tasty morsel. As a mindless panic rose within him, he tried to pull himself up frantically. Sergeant Hakon attempted to aid him. Njal felt him strain against the downward pull of the tunnel-throat. For a moment he was pulled upwards... then he felt the sergeant's grip falter and slip on his slime-covered gauntlet.

'No.' he screamed as he was sucked downward into the darkness. When the motion ceased he was in corrosive liquid. He could sense it eating away at the ceramite of his armour. One by one, the red emergency icons on his sleeve came on. Bathed in the eerie light from their useless warnings, he felt the warm digestive acid began to eat his flesh and etch his bones. As his life faded he seemed to hear the gloating thoughts of the hive-mind.

One way or another you will become part of me, it said.

'NO. HE'S GONE. There's nothing you can do!' Sven felt Sergeant Hakon's hand on his shoulder pulling him away from the valve. He stopped beating futilely on it with his fist and prepared to blast it.

'Brother-Sergeant Hakon is right,' he heard Gunnar say. 'There's nothing we can do. Nothing. Njal is gone and we'll be joining him if we don't move.'

Slowly, sanity started to percolate into Sven's mind. His friend was gone, never to return. He was dead. The thought had such a terrible finality to it. Sven shut his eyes and gave out the terrible death-howl of his order. The feral wolf-cry echoed down the corridors and was swallowed. The distant heartbeat of the ship continued undisturbed.

'There will be time to grieve later.' Hakon said gently. 'Now we must return to the ship.'

'Don't worry.' Egil said, his eyes glittering with murder-lust. 'He will be avenged. I swear it.'

Sven nodded and pulled himself to his feet. He gripped his pistol firmly in one hand and his knife in the other. He crossed them across his chest in the ritual position and said a brief prayer to the Emperor for the soul of his battle brother. Then he followed the others on the long path back to the boarding torpedo.

SERGEANT HAKON WAS next to die. The thing uncoiling from the air-vent got him. A four-armed, fanged and clawed horror with hypnotic eyes tore his head off before he could even swing his chainsword.

Egil didn't wait for his turn. He launched himself at it, aiming his knife

squarely at its back. The thing turned with eye-blurring speed and batted him aside effortlessly with one mighty hand. He felt ribs crack under the force of the blow. Even his ceramite breastplate did not protect him. If it had cut him with its pincer, Egil knew he would have died. He did not care.

A red haze was upon him. He ignored the pain, gathered his legs beneath him and prepared to spring again.

‘Genestealer.’ he heard Sven mutter. ‘By Russ, is there no end to the horrors in this place?’

A red haze fell over Egil’s vision. He howled his warcry and leapt. He knew he had made a mistake when the thing’s claw swept up like a scythe. He knew he was about to receive a disembowelling stroke and he welcomed it with open eyes.

The stroke never fell.

Sven shot the genestealer twice in the head. It reeled backward under the impact. Shrieking with frustrated bloodlust, Egil tore it to shreds with his knife.

Behind him he heard Sven mutter: ‘Two down.’ Three to go.’

‘I CAN’T BELIEVE the sergeant is dead.’ Gunnar said. He tossed a Hellfire shell almost negligently in one hand. ‘I mean, him and Njal both gone. It’s- I—’

‘Believe it.’ Sven told him firmly. He felt a growing coldness in his heart. He was numb. He seemed to have gone beyond pain, beyond any feeling at all. All he felt was a growing hatred for his enemies and a cold determination to survive and present his report to the Imperium. It was the only way he could think of to give the deaths of his companions any meaning.

He studied the other two, trying to gauge how much use they would be. Egil looked gaunt and evil; a strange light was in his eyes and his loping stride suggested a blood-maddened beast. There was a coiled ferocity within the berserker just waiting to be unleashed. Sven knew that he could be counted on to fight – but could he be trusted to make a sensible decision?

Gunnar’s mood seemed to have swung from near-insane cheerfulness to depressive gloom. He looked bewildered by the sudden deaths of his comrades. He seemed unable to come to terms with the fact they had died so suddenly.

Sven coldly assessed their chances and knew it was up to him to take charge. He was the only one who seemed capable of rational decision making. ‘Right. We’d better go.’ he said.

‘But what about Hakon’s body? We can’t just leave it here.’

‘He’s dead, Gunnar. There’s no point in encumbering ourselves with a corpse.

I'll cut the gene-seed from him, for his successor. He won't go unremembered. I swear it.'

Fitting action to words, he set about reclaiming the sergeant's gene-seed, the control mechanism that transformed him into a Space Marine. It was gory work and soon Hakon's blood mingled with that of the enemy on Sven's knife.

THEY NEARLY MADE it. The tyranid ambushed them from behind the branches of a carcinoma tree. Sven leapt backward as acid spurted over the ground where he had stood. The shrapnel from the monster's vile living weapon gouged across his cheek, drawing blood. He ignored the notch torn from his ear and took aim at the monster. It lurched back into cover as Sven's shots raked its hiding place.

'Gunnar, burn that thing!' he yelled, but Gunnar stood stock still, not loading his weapon, not doing anything.

'More coming behind us.' Egil roared.

Sven cursed. He considered haranguing Gunnar but wasn't sure it would do any good. Instead he unclipped a grenade and lobbed it at the tyranid. The explosion sent the thing reeling into the open. Gunnar snapped out of his immobility and sent a blast of automatic fire dancing across its chest. Its top half suddenly separated from its legs, the tyranid collapsed, shrieking.

Sven risked a backwards glance. A line of tyranids was bounding up the corridor towards them. Their gait seemed slow and awkward but they covered the ground at a tremendous rate. Sven knew that the three of them could not outrun the monsters. He moved forward anyway. Perhaps they could make a last stand behind the carcinoma tree.

'Follow me.' he shouted and leapt forward into cover. Gunnar and Egil swiftly followed. The distant pounding of the ship's heart sounded as loud as thunder now and the air was thick with the acidic stench of tyranid blood. Sven sighted on the leading tyranid and fired. It pained him to have come so near to escape and to fail at the last. His shot glanced off its armoured hide. He aimed at the head.

'Gunnar. Use the Hellfire!' he shouted.

'I can't – the mechanism's jammed!' Gunnar yelled back.

Sven cursed. A spray of shots from the tyranid's weapon sent him ducking back into cover, the memory of claw-armed monstrosities leaping towards them burned into his mind. There were just too many of them. The scouts were doomed.

'You two – get out of here!' yelled Egil. 'I'll hold them off.'

‘It’s certain death, man.’

‘Don’t argue! Just do it!’

Sven swiftly weighed things up in his racing mind. He could stay here and die – or he could save the sergeant’s gene-seed, himself and another Space Marine. The balance had already been tipped; there was no choice.

‘Goodbye.’ he said, rushing towards the last beacon, the one belonging to the boarding torpedo.

‘Farewell, landsman.’ he heard Egil say. ‘I’ll show you what makes a true Space Wolf.’

EGIL HOWLED HIS laughter and fired again. He leapt to his feet and pumped the trigger of his pistol, blasting shots wildly at the tyranids. Their advance halted in the face of the withering fire. The Space Wolf scout unclipped a grenade and lobbed it at them. They ducked back behind a sphincter-door. The grenade exploded against it. The door buckled but didn’t give.

Suddenly it was quiet. Egil risked a glance back over his shoulder towards where Sven and Gunnar had vanished. Briefly he considered following them. Yet he couldn’t guarantee that the tyranids wouldn’t follow him and overtake him. Better to keep them pinned down.

He caught a flicker of movement out of the corner of his eye. The tyranids had circled round and entered the chamber from the other side. Good, Egil thought, feeling the killing rage build within him. More enemies to take to Hell with him.

The tyranids rushed at him. He swung his pistol round but a blast from an organic gun tore into his arm, ripping the bolter from his grasp and shredding his flesh to the bone. He fought to keep from blacking out as unquenchable agony seared him. He gripped his knife tight and howled with rage. He lurched to his feet and ran towards them.

‘I’ll kill you! I’ll kill you all!’ he shouted, blood-specked froth staining his lips. The last thing he saw was the monster take careful, direct aim at him. He pulled back his knife to throw.

THE SOUND OF fighting stopped. Sven bundled Gunnar into the torpedo, slammed the hatch shut and hit the control icon.

As the alien craft shrank smaller and smaller in the flickering green view-screen, Sven commended Egil’s soul to the Emperor. He noticed that Gunnar was weeping. Whether it was from sorrow or relief, Sven could not tell.

HAUPTMAN WATCHED AS the plasma-bombs raked the tyrannid craft from end to end. Within scant moments the organic ship was utterly destroyed. As Hauptman stared in rapt fascination, the solar wings so recently unfurled tore off and drifted into space. The men in the *Spiritus Sanctis* turrets used them for target practice. He saw the look of satisfaction on Sven's face as he watched the alien artefact being cleansed.

'Well,' he said. 'I think that ends that.'

'I think not.' Chandara the astropath said from next to the pair of them, pale faced and drawn. 'Before it died, it sent out a signal of enormous psychic power. It was tightly focused in the direction of the Magellanic Cloud but it was so powerful that I picked up its overspill.'

'It was a signal, shipmaster. It was summoning something. Something big.'

An appalled hush fell over the steering chapel of the *Spiritus Sancti*.

Sven looked down at the gene-seed in his hand. He swore to be worthy of his dead comrades. If war with the tyrannids was coming, he was ready to fight.