



WARHAMMER
40,000

HONOUR IMPERIALIS

CADIAN BLOOD • REDEMPTION CORPS • DEAD MEN WALKING
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A WARHAMMER 40,000 OMNIBUS

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**Aaron Dembski-Bowden
Rob Sanders
Steve Lyons**

With additional stories by
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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 EMPEROR'S WILL. VAST ARMIES GIVE BATTLE IN HIS NAME ON UNCOUNTED WORLDS. GREATEST AMONGST HIS SOLDIERS ARE THE ADEPTUS ASTARTES, THE SPACE MARINES, BIOENGINEERED 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.



CADIAN BLOOD

Aaron Dembski-Bowden



PROLOGUE

The Way a World Dies

I

At first there was silence.

People died, but there was no outcry. The bodies rested in noiseless repose in tower habitation spires; in the prayer rooms of great monasteries; in gutters by the sides of streets. The deaths went unnoticed. This was a world that saw ten million new pilgrims each month – it was no stranger to off-worlders making planetfall only to die soon after.

The shrineworld of Kathur, named for the saint himself, was a beacon of faith and hope for the people of Scarus Sector. Faith flared or withered for those who came to tread the holy soil of this blessed world, seeking affirmation for lives lived without meaning. Hope flowered or died for those who landed here seeking to touch the relics of a long-dead saint and be healed of injury or illness.

When people began to die there was no planet-wide panic, no ringing sirens wailing across cities, and no distress calls to nearby worlds, crying of a devastating disease. The sickness spread, tearing through the population, but to those who watched for such things, it was just a spike in the numbers. These things happened from time to time.

A plague brought from off-world, the world's leaders said. Faith will scourge the taint from the righteous and pure.

No warnings. No panic.

Silence.

II

The silence did not last long.

At the dawn of the outbreak's second week, there were too many dead for the funeral priests to haul into the consecrated incinerators, and the Ecclesiarchy governors realised their planet was suffering no natural plague. The death toll was catastrophic, and the Kathurite acolytes traditionally tasked with funerary rites walked the streets in gangs, losing the battle to do their simple duty.

The initial astropathic cries for help reached out from Kathur. Several hundred psykers worldwide screamed their pleas into the warp, begging for assistance. Imperial forces in the sector responded to the cries for aid in impressive time: Scarus was forever the Archenemy's ripest target, and the Emperor's servants never relaxed their vigilance here. Fleets of ships powered up their engines and broke into the warp, chasing the source of the psychic screams like bloodhounds pursuing the scent of prey.

The stream of comm-channel messages and psychic transmissions from Kathur told of a plague without end, of millions already dead, of a planet dying.

The Imperium was no stranger to the Curse of Unbelief. Even now, the plague wracked dozens of worlds across Segmentum Obscurus – but Kathur was the anomaly, the one world that broke the pattern of infection. The other infected worlds stood on the rim of the Warmaster's Black Crusade. Kathur, however, was far from the Great Eye and the systems drowning in the tides of battle.

All this death made no sense. There was no spaceship of the Archenemy to spread the taint, no touch of heresy detected among the populace, and no sign of Chaos in the planet's rule.

But it *was* the Curse.

The Curse of Unbelief ripped across the shrineworld now, taking those who lacked true faith in the God-Emperor. It rotted flesh and turned organs putrescent while the victims still lived. Many turned to suicide rather than decay in agony. Riots broke out over the planet. Funeral pyres burned endlessly, the streams of black smoke choking the sky around the largest cathedral-cities.

The Adeptus hierarchs receiving the first wave of communications from Kathur ordered the planet cut off from the Imperium at the first signs of the Curse of Unbelief. Assembled in the heavens above the doomed world, a mighty fleet coalesced over the course of several days. They did not come to save the people – they came only to stop the population evacuating. The taint, the fleet-captains knew, must never be spread. On the command decks of Imperial Navy vessels stationed in high orbit, stern-faced inquisitors oversaw the blockade's management.

No vaccine had ever been found to ease the sufferings of the afflicted. In the

words of Inquisitor Caius, as he stood on the bridge of the Gothic-class vessel *In His Name*, ‘We consign these souls to oblivion, for mercy now would damn us all.’

The blockade of Imperial Navy vessels hung in the reaches above Kathur, enforcing the quarantine with lethal vigour. Thousands of the Emperor’s citizens died under the anger of Imperial guns as the blockade vessels fired on any ship fleeing the planet. It wasn’t long before the attempts ceased. The people on the surface were either too ill to make the journey, or already dead.

Bizarrely, pilgrims sought to make planetfall, still wishing to walk among the cathedral-cities of the saint’s world and receive the blessing of Saint Kathur. Any attempts by pilgrim vessels to reach the surface were deterred by stern threats and the weapons batteries of Cobra-class destroyers. Such warnings, a barefaced presentation of the Emperor’s might, were enough for most ships. A single vessel had been filled with souls pious enough to run the blockade. This ship, a wallowing barge little more than a cargo hauler and packed with three hundred pilgrims, ultimately did make it down to the surface of Kathur. What remained of the ship after its brief encounter with Imperial Fury fighters flamed through the atmosphere and crashed into the western ocean.

Inquisitor Bastian Caius of the Ordo Sepulchrum stayed in vox-contact with the Enforcer Marshal of Kathur, a man by the name of Bannecheck, until the very end of Imperial control. The commander of the planet’s Enforcers remained in touch with the inquisitor for seventeen days, describing the scenes of carnage and plague ravaging the surface as his men tried to retain order. Every word was recorded. Each syllable of his rhythmic cant, distorted as it was by vox interference. Through this crackling monotone, Caius learned of the erosion and breakdown of Imperial rule.

On the third day of contact, the marshal reported cults rising among the dwindling Kathur Planetary Defence Force, and of cultists within being spared the curse’s death. The *Dictate Imperialis* was broken, the Emperor’s Law abandoned. By this time, the global law enforcement force was already effectively destroyed. It fell to the elite Enforcers to take to the streets, slaughtering cultists in a series of brutal raids on hidden strongholds.

Despite initial successes, they were doomed to fail.

On the sixth day, chanting rose from temples across the planet – no longer in praise of the Emperor, but now pleading to the Ruinous Powers for mercy. Control across the planet was under threat, with the capital city of Solthane standing out as the final bastion of Imperial order. The Enforcers entered the

cathedral districts of Solthane in unprecedented force, leading the shattered remains of still-loyal PDF and the still-living law enforcement officers. Their objective was to quell the rising cults across the planet in a decisive and damning half-week of fighting.

Bannecheck reported losses among his forces of ninety-three per cent on the morning of the ninth day. The cults' numbers were far greater than had been initially surmised. Those that were not already well-armed by the PDF defectors overcame Enforcer assault teams by sheer weight of numbers. The marshal produced evidence, in both audio and pict form, of his men dragged down and eaten by plague victims in some districts, and falling under fire from hordes of cultists in others.

Caius looked at other grey, blurry picts beamed up from the surface by Bannecheck. Here an Enforcer team's Repressor tank flamed in the street; there a horde of plague victims surrounded a monastery filled with dying citizens.

Too many of the dead had not been destroyed. The still-living population were paying for the failure of the funereal priesthood now.

On the eleventh day, reports became increasingly choppy and erratic. The swelling cults claimed whole districts of the dying cities, each member saved from death by their new allegiance. Chaos emanations wreathed the planet, eroding all reliability in astropathic contact and paining all psychically-gifted souls aboard the blockade fleet vessels. The ships' Navigators and all present inquisitors had a lifetime of training to resist such invasive psychic agony, but they still suffered. The touch of Chaos infected many of those without psychic talents: incidents of homicide and apostasy broke out aboard the destroyer vessels. These were quickly crushed by inquisitor-led purges, though the Cobra destroyer *Terra's Spite* was lost when the unrest within the ship's bowels led to explosions in the enginarium. Three hundred souls lost, and the wreckage rained on the cathedral cities below – a storm of fire from the heavens.

The inquisitors ordered the blockade into a higher orbit after the shipboard purges were complete. Kathur was now an unholy beacon within the warp, and proximity to the foulness sweeping the planet was deemed a moral threat to the Naval crews. Small clusters of destroyers orbited the planet in shifts, then broke away to allow others their turn. No captain wished to risk his men becoming tainted by the Archenemy's emanations rising from the doomed world below.

On the seventeenth day, the horde of curse victims besieging the Enforcer precinct headquarters battered down the final barricades, and the handful of still-living black-armoured peacekeepers fell. Inquisitor Caius recorded the Enforcer

Marshal's final words for Ordo Sepulchrum records.

'We will stand before the Throne and we will not flinch before His judgement, for we die doing our duty.' The inquisitor could hear the moistness of the man's lips in each word. The marshal had been dying, coughing up mouthfuls of diseased blood. He finished with a strained *'The Emperor protects.'*

In truth, there had been more, but Caius deleted the man's final oaths cried in agony and the wails of the plague victims in the room. Some stories didn't need to be told.

With the blockade in place, there was talk of *Exterminatus*, of bombarding the world from space in the name of the Emperor. Such discussion was quickly quenched. Orbital bombardment would not be sanctioned: the damage to the planet's precious architecture, as well as the loss of so many relics, would be the gravest sin. To use virus bombs would destroy all hope of resettlement for months to come, without guaranteeing the final deaths of the plague victims. To use cyclonic torpedoes would ravage the planet on the tectonic level – blasphemy beyond belief.

So Kathur was allowed to die.

III

Preparations were made on worlds elsewhere in Scarus Sector. The talk of outbreaks, quarantines and blockades became plans for invasion. Weeks passed before these preparations bore fruit, but for all its slowness, the Imperial war machine was a relentless beast.

How did this happen?

The question raged through the orbiting fleet, and through the echelons of Imperial rule that were even allowed to become aware of the situation. Nothing made sense. No response seemed without myriad flaws. The shrineworld was precious beyond reckoning, yet had fallen without cause. Elsewhere, under the shadow of the Warmaster's new crusade, all worlds falling to the plague had been besieged, assaulted, or otherwise corrupted by the mass presence of Archenemy vessels.

With Kathur, there had been nothing but silence.

At last, it was decided. Regiments of Imperial Guard were withdrawn from the greater war effort around the Eye of Terror, and assigned as the vanguard to a larger force of conquest. This blasphemy would not be tolerated. This desecration would not be allowed to stand.

In the heavens above the shrineworld, a small fleet of hulking ships drew close, falling into a restful orbit. The blockade of destroyers scattered to the warp, leaving their ward in the care of these new arrivals, the troopships of the Imperial Guard.

One other vessel of note broke from warp space and glided into orbit alongside these monumental troop transports: a strike cruiser of the Adeptus Astartes, black as death in the night, bearing the marble corvid sigil of the Raven Guard. The fleet drew close to the planet, casting colossal shadows as the great ships blocked out the sun on the world below.

The Kathur Reclamation was underway. The Imperium of Man had come to take back its holy world.

Among the silent cathedrals and towering monasteries on the surface, the months-dead population sensed the presence of the Emperor's servants. They looked up, staring, waiting.

As the first troop transports came through the cloud cover, all over the planet a great cry was raised. The voices of fifty million dead men, women and children rose to the sky in a long and tortured chorus.

Words of Truth

The Eagle & Bolter

The Kathur Reclamation has commenced!

The following regiments of His Most Glorious Majesty's Imperial Guard and supporting forces are committed to retaking the shrineworld from the hated Archenemy:

Vednikan 12th Rifles
303rd Uriah
25th Kiridian Irregulars
Janus 6th
3rd Skarran Rangers
Hadriss Rift 40th Armoured
Cadian 88th Mechanised Infantry

Half a company of the Emperor's
beloved Raven Guard Astartes Chapter.

Agents of His Divine Majesty's Holy
Inquisition – the Ordo Sepulchrum.

Reports from Lord General Maggrig sent directly to the *Eagle & Bolter* cite that the initial troop landings are complete with minimal casualties and all resistance to date utterly destroyed. The main force of the Reclamation is due to arrive in several weeks.

The 25th Kiridian Irregulars are to be commended for their valiant defence last week of a vital communications tower in the capital city of Solthane. The Kiridians fought a heroic battle lasting several days, ultimately defeating the diseased dregs of the Kathur Planetary Defence Force (the so-called 'Remnant') assailing their position. Casualties were light.

The Janus 6th has pressed deep into enemy-held territory, securing a monastery dedicated to the Holy God-Emperor. Even as we go to press, they crush all remnants of the PDF that seek to oust their successful beachhead in Solthane.

The Cadian 88th Mechanised Infantry, proudly boasting a captain bearing the Ward of Cadia medal for his valour in the opening engagements of the Thirteenth Black Crusade, is tasked in the coming days to assist in the Janusians' defiant infiltration.

**Forward, the Janus 6th!
The Emperor protects!**



PART I

Curse of Unbelief



CHAPTER I

Unbroken

'We're the Cadian Shock. In our veins beats the blood of a thousand generations of the Imperium's most devoted guardians. We'll never again see blasphemy as black as that which we face on this world. Take solace in that, sons of the Emperor. After this war, no duty will ever seem as dark.'

– Captain Parmenion Thade, first day of the Kathur
Reclamation

Solthane, Capital city of Kathur

'The Janus Sixth is dead.'

Vertain sat in his Sentinel's creaking cockpit seat, monitoring the walker's primitive scanner displays and staring out of the vision slits in the vehicle's armoured front. Several hundred metres in the distance, through the buildings either side of the street, he saw the monastery burning. A pillar of orange rage and black smoke choked the sky, and he couldn't even report it to those who needed to know.

As recon missions went, this one was looking to end pretty badly. Vertain looked at his auspex display again, checking where the rest of his patrol group was. It looked fine. It felt like they were screwed, because Vertain was damn sure this night was going to end in bloodshed, but tactically speaking, his Sentinel squadron were in perfect formation as they stalked and scouted the abandoned streets.

Ahead, the colossal monastery still burned. The captain had warned about this, damn it. He'd said the Janus 6th was walking into their deaths.

And now the vox was bitching around again. Nothing ever worked right on

this damn planet. The city's silence amplified the rattling clank of his Sentinel's ungainly stride, and that didn't exactly help Vertain's hearing, but the comms being screwed to the Eye and back were the main issue. Vox-ghosts, lost signals, channels slipping, vox-casters detuning... Hell, they'd seen it all on Kathur so far.

'Insurgency Walker C-Eighty-Eight Primus-Alpha,' the voice came over the vox again in a tone of agonising calm. 'Repeat, please.'

This was a problem. The only half-reliable vox-channel Vertain had been able to use through Kathur's interference was a route back to main headquarters. Main headquarters was three dozen kilometres away in the wrong direction. Help wasn't coming from there, and they weren't the ones that needed to be told about this development just yet – even if they couldn't already tell from orbital surveillance. Other ears needed to hear it now.

To make matters worse, they apparently had an idiot manning the forward recon channel tonight. So far Vertain had managed to relay his ID code, and that was about it. He'd been trying for over five minutes. Interference or not... You'd think they could've boosted the signal by now. I'll bet a year's pay this bastard isn't Cadian.

'This is Scout-Lieutenant Adar Vertain of the Cadian 88th. I am leading the recon mission to assess the progress of the Janus Sixth. Put me through to Captain Parmenion Thade.' He spilled out the rough coordinates where the rest of the regiment was based in the city for the night.

'Repeat, please.'

Vertain brought his walker to a halt. It stood in the dead street, juddering as its engine idled. The spotlight beamed forward into nothingness, slicing into a dark alley between two silent buildings. This city was a tomb.

'In the name of the Emperor, the Janus Sixth is up to its neck in it. Get me a vox-link to my captain, immediately.'

'Insurgency Walker C-Eighty-Eight Primus-Alpha. Your signal is weak. Repeat, please.'

Vertain swore, and killed the link. 'I hate this planet.'

Control sticks gripped in gloved hands, Vertain pushed forward and set the noisy Sentinel clanking ahead in a slow stride of graceless machinery. The searchlight bolted to the cheek of the walker's pilot pod tore left and right in the darkness, cutting a harsh white glare through the deserted streets.

Abandoned buildings. Bodies here and there. Nothing but silence.

Vertain was unshaven, as if he'd spent so much time hiding within his

Sentinel's cockpit that he'd not had the opportunity to shave in a week. This wasn't too far from the truth.

'Vertain to Dead Man's Hand. Acknowledge signal.' Four voices came back in turn as each member of the Sentinel squadron voxed to their officer. No one was dead. That was something, at least. 'Form up in parallel streets and proceed to the main plaza ahead. Stalking pattern: Viridian. Tonight we're the Emperor's eyes, not his fists.'

'Acknowledge pattern: Viridian,' came three of the four voices.

'Copy that. No heroics,' came the last.

The Sentinels, scattered but each within scanner range of all four others, strode towards the burning monastery. Occasional gunfire rang out as they annihilated small groups of plague-slain, destroying the tainted dead that clung to false life, roving the streets in packs.

Splayed claw-feet of battered, blessed iron stomped on the smooth stone roads. Vertain rode with the gentle side-to-side motion of his Sentinel's gait, as familiar to him as standing in his own boots.

The capital city Solthane was built in worship of the Emperor and His great saint, Kathur. Its one purpose was to look beautiful: a purpose hundreds of planetary governors and ranking Ecclesiarchs had been building on for thousands of years as new shrines, places of pilgrimage, monuments and chapel-habs were erected. All sense of the original layout was centuries lost, buried and distorted in the ever-expanding mass of new construction.

Soltane now, torn back metre by metre by the Imperial Guard, was a labyrinth of winding and meandering streets populated only by abandoned traders' carts still filled with cheap wares and false relics. Deserted promenades were punctuated by marble statues depicting Kathur, lesser saints, and the nameless Raven Guard heroes who had originally served in the war to take the world, ten thousand years ago in the Great Crusade. Shortcut alleys twisted in the shadows of the towering chapel-hab blocks, all of which were encrusted with granite angels staring down at the dead city.

In his opinion – and as lead scout for the Cadian 88th, his opinion counted in every planning session he bothered to speak it – Vertain believed the chapel-habs were the worst aspect of the city's current state. The habitation towers dominated the skyline, thrusting up at random wherever there had been space to house the vast numbers of pilgrims forever moving through the city. Solthane was beauty turned to ugliness in its rich excess, and it gave enemy troops a million places to hide. The chapel-habs now stood as great apartment spires filled with the dead.

No regiment wanted to draw the duty of cleansing those places, seeking out agents of the Archenemy lurking among the plague-slain. No one wanted to risk walking knee-deep in bodies only for the plague-slain to rise again.

Ahead of Vertain, the monastery burned, filling his viewing slits with orange warmth. His scanner choked in bursts through static, but he could see the walls lining the edge of the holy site's grounds rising up at the end of the street. His walker stomped closer, iron feet thudding onto the stone road. No enemies were visible outside the thirty-metre high walls, but at this range Vertain could hear the faint crack of countless lasguns and the heavy chatter of bolt weapons. The Janus 6th was fighting a losing war within the temple grounds. He clicked his vox-link live and was about to try for the captain again, when another voice crackled over.

'Sir, I've got... something.'

The vox was hellishly distorted even at close range, so the other pilot's voice was garbled, rendering the speaker unidentifiable. It took a glance at the scanner display to see Greer's placement beacon flashing. He was three streets to the west, close to the front gate of the monastery's grounds.

'Specifics, Greer,' said Vertain.

'If I had specifics, I'd give you them. My vox keeps detuning to another frequency.'

'You told me Enginseer Culus fixed that two nights ago.'

Now was not the time for instrument failure. The enemy could easily pick up stray vox on insecure frequencies. Greer's instruments had been the subject of repeated repair since he'd taken a rocket hit on the cockpit pod a year ago, fighting heretics in the cities of Beshic V. The scorched and twisted metal that had blackened his walker's cheek was gone, but the missile's legacy remained.

'He *did* fix it. I'm saying it's shaken loose again. I'm hearing... something. I'll pulse the frequency over. Listen for yourself.'

'Send me the frequency.'

'Can... hear... at?' Greer asked in a surge of vox crackle. Vertain tuned his receiver and narrowed his eyes. In his headset, a whispering voice hissed the same three words in an endless monotone.

Count the Seven... Count the Seven... Count the Seven...

'I hear it.'

'That's what they heard at Kasr Partain,' Greer said. 'Back when home first burned.' Vertain nodded, feeling the words leave a bitter taste on his tongue. Kasr Partain had been one of the first fortress-cities to fall on Cadia, only a

handful of months before. Home was still burning, damn it. And they should be back there fighting for it, not wandering like rats in this city of the dead, half a sector away.

‘Sir?’

‘I’m here,’ Vertain swallowed back a bitter growl. ‘I’m here.’

He set his Sentinel striding forward again, opening a channel to the whole squad. ‘Vertain to Dead Man’s Hand. Change of plans. Everyone form up on my position immediately. Stay in visual range of one another from now on. Search pattern: Unity.’

‘Acknowledged,’ the chorus came back.

‘Farl, you head back to the captain. Cycle vox channels as you run, alerting high command as well as Captain Thade. This is not something the lord general will learn from orbital picts, and he needs to be told immediately.’

‘What’s the exact message, sir?’ Farl asked.

Vertain told him what to say. The silence from the other pilots was deafening as they digested the revelation. After Farl had voxed an acknowledgement and broken away from the loose formation, Vertain sat in the creaking leather seat, his pounding heart the loudest sound in the cloistered confines of his cockpit.

The rest of C-Eighty-Eight Alpha closed around him, drawing alongside in an orchestra of rattles and clanks. Each walker had a playing card painted on the cheek, above the stencilled pilot’s name. Dead Man’s Hand, the elite Sentinel squadron of the Cadian 88th Mechanised Infantry.

‘We need visual confirmation of this. Prime weapons, check your coolant feeds,’ their leader said. ‘And follow me.’

Captain Parmenion Thade hadn’t been home in three months, except in his nightmares.

The reports from Cadia still listed over sixty per cent of the planet in the hands of the Archenemy, but the numbers were almost meaningless. The statistics were cold and uncomfortable, but nowhere near as raw and real as his memories. Those memories replayed behind his eyes each night. Over and over, he saw his world fall.

The Thirteenth Black Crusade. For the first time in ten thousand years of defeat, a Warmaster of Chaos walked the soil of Cadia. The Archenemy finally had its first real victory, and the Cadians their first real defeat.

The sky had burned for weeks. Literally, it burned. The fires of the fortress-cities choked the heavens from horizon to horizon. Amongst the flames of

burning cities, defence cannons roared into the sky, defying the landing attempts of enemy troop ships. This was not some provincial world with a volunteer Planetary Defence Force. This was Cadia, warden-world of the only navigable path from the *Ocularis Terribus* into the Imperium. The planet was second only to Holy Terra in its might and importance.

Cathedral-like vessels of Battlefleet Scarus ringed the world, filling the night sky with their anger as they fired upon the Chaos fleet pouring towards the planet. Every city on the surface was a bastion of gun emplacements and void shield generators. Every citizen had trained to fire a lasrifle from their pre-teen childhoods. The planet itself resisted the attack.

By the time Kasr Vallock was lost to the flames of invasion, the populace was already underground. Regiments of the Cadian Shock and the Interior Guard guided the fleeing citizens into the tunnels beneath the city, engaged in a fighting retreat as the legions of the Archenemy flooded into the tunnels in pursuit. It was these tunnels that Thade dreamed of.

Each night, he heard his men shouting his name again, over and over. They needed orders. They needed ammunition. They needed to get out of the tunnels before the enemy destroyed the power reactors in the city above. Already, the evacuation tunnels were shaking, raining dirt on the fleeing defenders. They were far from the evacuation carriers that would take them to another Kasr.

Thade had turned to hear the howling sounds of their pursuers. He still had both his hands then, two hands of flesh, blood and bone. As he barked orders – orders for bayonets and blades for anyone out of ammunition – those hands gunned his chainsword into life. He'd fired his bolt pistol's last round in the bloodbath that erupted when the traitors spilled through the Kasr's sundered walls two hours before.

The disruptions above had killed the lights in this section of the tunnel network. The only light now came from the narrow flashlights fixed to the sides of the soldiers' blast helmets. Two dozen of those beams cut across the passageway at various angles as the men looked this way and that, using the respite to identify comrades among the survivors.

The tunnel shook again, showering grit and pebbles of the concrete used to reinforce the passageways. A chunk of stone the size of a child's fist clacked off the captain's helmet. Similar debris rained on the others, clattering down several times a minute as they waited in the darkness.

'That isn't the reactors,' one soldier said. 'Too rhythmic. Too loud.'

'Titan,' another man whispered. 'There's a Titan up there.'

Thade nodded, setting his helmet torch cutting down and up in the blackness. His heart beat against his ribs in anticipation of the next tremor, which shook his bones when it finally came. On the surface above, a towering God-Machine strode unopposed through the burning city. Every soldier down in the darkness knew the odds were heavily against the Titan being one of the Imperium's own.

'They're coming, sir,' someone said in the near-darkness. Thade faced the way his men had come, hearing the enemy's cries getting closer.

'Men of Cadia!' Thade's chainsword roared in emphasis, the sound jagged and close enough to equal the earthshaking footsteps of the gigantic war machine above. 'The Great Eye has opened and hell itself is coming down that corridor. Stand. Fight. Every son and daughter of this world was born to slay the Emperor's foes! Our blood flows so humanity may draw breath! No blood more precious!'

'No blood more precious!' the soldiers shouted as one.

'Calm hearts and ice in your veins,' Thade spoke softly in the lesser rumblings of the Titan's wake. Rifles and blades were raised as wild, spasming shapes flashed into view, screaming down the tunnel.

'Eighty-eighth! Fire!'

A chorus of cracks sounded. The las-fire volley scythed down the first wave of shrieking heretics in front of Thade before they were even in full view. More were rounding the corner and running to where the tunnel widened, but blood of the Emperor, if it was just a handful of cultists down here, they might win this...

And then he saw it.

At the heart of the second wave, boots crunching corpses underfoot, came death itself. Like a huntsman leading a pack of dogs, the foe that would take Thade's right hand towered a metre and more above its lesser minions. Gibbering, howling cultists ran into the tunnel bearing bloody knives and solid-slug pistols. Between them, walking with a distance-eating stride all the more terrifying for its slowness, was an immense figure in ancient armour of filthy bronze and cobalt blue.

It moved like a dead thing, mindlessly treading forward, scanning left to right with methodical patience. Its helm, warped into the visage of an ancient Terran death mask from some long-dead civilization, emitted a chuckle. The laugh was a hollow, brittle sound that wheezed dust from the archaic helmet's speaker grille. In the figure's fists was a bolter of antiquated design, notched with a hundred centuries of wear and tear. The muzzle was coal-black from countless firings on countless battlefields.

Thade's men had been firing from the moment the enemy entered the tunnel, but while rag-clad cultists died in droves, their armoured overseer barely flinched at the hail of laser fire glancing from its carapace. It finished its scan of the room, sighting the mortal shouting orders. That was the one that had to die first.

The Traitor Astartes fired once as it advanced, barely pausing to aim, unleashing the shot that stole Thade's right arm from the elbow. The Cadian dropped his sword, clutched what remained of his arm, and hit the ground hard. Through the agony of his bolt-destroyed forearm, he could still hear his men crying out, calling his name...

‘Captain Thade?’

He awoke with a jolt as the dream broke. His adjutant, Corrun, stood at the side of his cot. The other man's expression was serious. ‘News from the Sentinels.’

Thade sat up. His uniform was crumpled from a restless sleep, and his body armour was neatly stacked on the ground by his bedroll. The 88th was camped for the night in an abandoned museum, sleeping fitfully amongst a thousand minor relics. Here, a golden figurine of a Raven Guard Astartes on a small marble pedestal – shaped by a minor acolyte of Kathur many thousands of years before. There, a cabinet of trinkets once worn by the first of Kathur's faithful.

The relics didn't impress Thade. A pilgrim trap, nothing more: something to keep the visiting devotees busy while they filled the planetary coffers.

His head still ached from the day-long planning meeting with the lord general earlier, and he let his thoughts clear while he sipped from the standard-issue canteen by his pillow. The museum's air tasted of dust.

The water didn't help much. The chemical compounds used to purify fluid rations left a coppery aftertaste on his tongue. Even knowing all the water was purified aboard the ships in orbit didn't help morale. The Guard were fighting on a tomb world. The last thing they needed was water that tasted like blood. It was as if the death on Kathur touched everything that came to the planet even after the plague had burned itself out.

‘How long was I asleep?’ Thade asked, looking around the half-full chamber where thirty soldiers still slept on.

‘Two hours,’ Corrun said, knowing it had been the only two hours Thade had slept in the last fifty.

‘Felt like two minutes.’

‘Life in the Guard, eh? Sleep when you’re dead.’

‘I hear that.’ Thade stretched, not altogether thrilled at the clicks in his back as he arched it. Cadian stoicism was one thing, but... ‘Has anyone shot the Munitorum officer responsible for giving out these bedrolls?’

Corrun chuckled at his captain’s banter. ‘Not that I’m aware of.’

‘That’s a crime. I may do it myself.’ Thade was already lacing his boots. ‘Brief me now. What has Dead Man’s Hand found?’

‘It’s just Trooper Farl. Vertain’s taken the others closer to the monastery. Vox is down.’

‘Vox is down. Throne, I’m sick of that refrain.’

‘Farl returned with a message.’

‘They’ve sighted primary threats,’ said Thade, not a doubt in his mind. Few other reasons would be severe enough to split the Sentinel squadron.

‘They’ve intercepted vox traffic that suggests primary threats close to their position, yes.’

‘Listen to you, dancing around the issue.’

Corrun grinned. It was a grin Thade was very familiar with, and usually preceded something cocky at best, rash at worst. ‘Didn’t want to get your hopes up, sir.’

‘How decent of you. So what have they got? Please tell me it’s more than intercepted vox.’

‘Just the vox. But Farl’s got a recording, and it... Well, come listen to it.’

The captain buckled his helmet, pulling the chin strap tight. Embedded on the front was his medal – the medal he was known for. An eagle-winged gateway marked by a central skull, glinting in the dim light of pre-dawn coming through the stained glass window. The Ward of Cadia, flashing silver on the black blast helmet.

‘Ready to stare into the Eye itself, sir.’ Corrun said.

Thade smiled as he fastened the last buckle on his flak armour jacket, and strapped on his weapon belt. A heavy calibre bolt pistol hung against his left hip. Against his right thigh rested an ornate chainsword, its iron finish polished to chrome brightness, with acid-etched runes in stylised High Gothic along the blade’s sides. To say a blade like that was worth a fortune would be to underestimate by no small degree. Lord generals wielded blades of poorer quality.

‘Is Rax ready?’ the captain asked, hope evident in his voice.

‘No, sir, not yet.’

‘Ah, well. Let’s go see what Dead Man’s Hand has found.’



CHAPTER II

Shrine

Solthane, Monastic sector

‘Count the Seven,’ the vox recording crackled. The words were broken by distortion, but clear enough to be sure. Captain Thade’s squads of the Cadian 88th, a full three hundred men and thirty support vehicles, moved out ten minutes later. The potential sighting of primary threats necessitated nothing less than a full response.

Dawn wasn’t far away, though even in the daylight Solthane remained grey. The funeral pyres of weeks before still blackened the sky with dark cloud cover that refused to dissipate, and the habitation spires were discoloured by the smoke that until so recently had choked the skies.

With hulls the colour of iron and charcoal – a drabness that matched their surroundings – Chimera troop transports rumbled four abreast down city avenues, treads grinding precious mosaics into shards beneath the weight of the tanks. When the erratic city layout required divergent routes, the troop carriers navigated narrow streets and alleys in single file.

Occasional sniper fire from PDF remnant forces was answered with squads deployed to sweep and cleanse buildings by the side of the road, and orders to catch up when they could. Vox contact was a joke, but Thade wasn’t worried. He trusted his men to do their jobs and get back in line without a hitch. They were no strangers to urban warfare. No Cadian was.

The convoy rode on towards the burning monastery, towards Dead Man’s Hand, and towards primary-class threats that might or might not actually exist. The atmosphere within each of the tanks was an unsmiling mix of professional readiness and a muted sense of grim anticipation. No one wanted to engage primary threats unless the odds were heavily stacked in the Cadians’ favour, but

duty was duty. The Shock knew it was better they handled this than any of the other regiments garrisoned in Solthane.

The Janus 6th was a green unit. If the intercepted vox traffic wasn't just twisted propaganda or vox-ghosts, then they were already dead. Their ambitious assignment to hold the monastery, the great Shrine of the Emperor's Unending Majesty, was over almost as soon as it had begun.

Thade focused, rolling his shoulders in his matt-black flak armour and checking his chainsword for the eighth or ninth time. It was almost an hour since he'd woken and the last vestiges of the memory dream were finally fading from his mind. He hated to remember Cadia. Remembering home led his thoughts into how he and his men should be back there even now, and to the Eye with this upstart bastard of a lord general that demanded Cadian units be withdrawn from the front line of the Despoiler's Crusade to help with his little shrineworld reclamation.

The familiar rattling of the armoured personnel carrier soothed his thoughts. His right hand, gloved in black, whirred with soft mechanical purrs as he closed his fingers into a fist. He felt the rough mechanics of his augmetic wrist and knuckle-joints rotating, hearing the low buzzing clicks between the infrequent metallic judders of the Chimera's interior.

'Captain?' the driver called.

Thade rose from his seat in the passenger compartment and moved to lean on the driver's seat from behind. Through the wide vision slit, the soot-blackened marble of Kathur's largest cathedral district was visible. This was the heart of Solthane, in all its fire-touched majesty.

'What a cesspit,' the driver said. It was Corrun, as always, driving Thade's command Chimera.

'You're quite the poet,' said the captain. 'Now talk to me.'

'Two minutes, sir. We... Wait, hang on, we've got a roadblock.' The compartment shuddered as if kicked by a Titan, generating a roar of complaints from the ten soldiers strapped into their seats in the back. Thade's mechanical hand snapped vice-tight on the hand rail, keeping his balance.

'Roadblock cleared,' the driver grinned.

'Go around the next one, Corrun,' Thade tried not to imagine what that roadblock had just been. 'You said two minutes?'

'Confirmed, sir. Just under two minutes until we come up on where Dead Man's Hand have withdrawn. These streets are a bitch. Not exactly made for tanks.'

‘Pilgrim roads. I hear you.’ Thade narrowed his violet eyes and stared out of the vision slit. The limited vista on display raced past in a blur of blackened buildings. ‘I can’t see a damn thing out there. Any third-class threats so far?’

‘Constantly, sir.’ Again with the trademark grin. ‘What do you think that last roadblock was?’

‘Delightful. You’re ploughing down plague victims now. What happened to respecting the dead?’

‘They’re not exactly respecting us.’

This generated chuckles from the soldiers in the rear.

‘Point,’ Thade conceded, ‘but you know where the orders came from. These people were Imperial citizens, Corrun. Pilgrims. Priests.’

‘I heard the stories, Cap. They were faithless. “Only the faithless will fall to this plague”, isn’t that what we’ve been told a thousand times?’

Thade dropped it. He didn’t want to dredge this up again because he found it hard to argue with his driver tonight. He believed as Corrun did. The faithless had fallen. They deserved this fate. To hell with a mandate for ‘clean kills at all times’ and ‘preserving the plague-slain to be redeemed in consecrated incineration’.

But Kathur Reclamation protocol stressed respect for the victims of the Curse of Unbelief. The lord general was keen to foster political allies within the Ecclesiarchy by retaking this world as cleanly and carefully as possible. The emphasis on respecting the tainted dead was just one more petty protocol in a long list that Thade hated to think about since he’d made planetfall. Destroying the dead wasn’t enough. They had to be put down with grace, gathered by Guardsmen with a hundred better things to do, and ritually burned in the reactivated funerary cremation facilities.

By the Emperor’s grace, the 88th hadn’t been selected for gathering duties yet. Killing those that refused to die was bad enough.

‘Drive,’ Thade said. ‘And don’t argue. Besides, if Enginseer Osiron finds out you’re using my command Chimera to ram gangs of plague victims clogging the road, he’ll have your head. It’s an insult to the machine-spirit.’

Corrun, grinning like he’d won a month’s wages, wrenched the steering wheel to the left. Another three souls in the ruined rags of Kathurite pilgrims met their final end under the churning tracks of the racing troop transport. There was a brief wrenching of gears as something – some part of one of the plague victims – got caught up in the APC’s moving parts.

Thade closed his eyes for a moment. ‘I never want to hear that again.’

‘It was a purr!’

‘You’re good, Corrun. But you’re not irreplaceable. It would grieve me to see you shot for disrespect. Play safe this time. By the book, and no hacking off the machine-spirit.’

‘Not at all.’ The driver licked his lips. ‘The old girl likes it rough.’

‘When I say “ramming speed”, then you get to play your game.’

‘Understood, sir.’

Thade’s vox-bead pulsed in his ear. The captain tapped the earpiece, activating the fingernail-sized receiver strapped to his throat. As he spoke, it picked up the vibrations from his larynx and filtered out background noise.

‘Captain Thade, Cadian 88th.’

‘*Count the Seven*,’ someone hissed. Even through the vox distortion, the voice was wet and burbling. ‘*Count the Seven*.’

Thade cut the link.

‘New orders?’ asked Corrun.

‘Just vox-ghosts.’ Thade turned to the ten soldiers in the back. Each one watched him – quiet, attentive, at the ready. ‘Janden,’ he nodded to his vox-operator. ‘Change command frequency and share the new wavelength with the other squads. The current one is compromised.’

He saw the question in Janden’s eyes but gave no answer. The vox-officer leaned down to where his bulky backpack was secured by his seat, and made the necessary adjustments to his communication gear.

‘Done, sir.’

Thade gripped the handrail running the length of the ceiling, supporting himself against the shakes. ‘Get me Dead Man’s Hand. Patch Vertain through to my ear-piece.’

‘You’re live.’

‘Vertain, this is the captain. Acknowledge.’ Thade listened to the reply, and narrowed his eyes. ‘Thirty seconds, Vertain. That’s all.’

He switched to the command channel. ‘88th, at the ready! Disembark in thirty seconds! The plaza ahead is flooded with plague-slain and Dead Man’s Hand needs extraction. We go in, we kill anything not wearing our colours, and we move on to the monastery. Corrun...’

‘Sir?’ He was already grinning again.

‘Ramming speed.’

The autocannon roared.

‘Fall back!’ Vertain cried, wrenching his control sticks. His walker reversed, the backwards-jointed legs protesting with a hiss of angry pistons. Solid rounds pinged and clanged from the pod’s sloped armour, while the Sentinel’s underslung cannon replied in a percussive burst of thunderclap after thunderclap.

The plaza had erupted in gunfire a few minutes before. An expanse of concrete inlaid with a mosaic of the saint formed a courtyard between several towering temples. The squadron had been scouting here when the first sniper shots rang out. Within a minute, plague-slain were shambling from the temples, led by cultists wearing ragged remains of Kathurite PDF uniforms. They came in a tide, immediately broken in places as the Sentinels opened up with their autocannons, drowning out the grunts and wails of the dead.

‘We are not dying here,’ Vertain spoke into his vox-link. ‘Break formation and fall back.’ He never heard an acknowledgement from the others. He could barely hear his own voice over the carnage unfolding around his walker.

The squadron wasn’t going to win a straight-up fight, and they all knew it. They were scouts, and the Sentinels were armed for taking shots at armoured infantry and light tanks. The high-calibre rounds from the walkers’ autocannons were tearing holes in the crowds of plague-slain, but they were next to useless against such a horde.

Greer’s walker staggered, almost thrown from balance as its stabilisers strained to deal with striding over piles of moving corpses. In a move worthy of a medal, Vertain saw the other pilot condense his leg pistons, lowering his cockpit pod for a moment, then spring upwards to clear the mound of writhing dead he’d been standing atop. Greer landed with a thudding clank that shook the ground, turning as he walked backwards and opening fire on the plague-slain again. A swarm of corpses dressed as monks flew apart in a grey-red cloud as three autocannon rounds hit home.

‘That was beautiful,’ said Vertain through clenched teeth as he kept laying down fire.

‘I look forward to my promotion,’ crackled Greer.

Vertain joined his fire arc to Greer’s, and felt his Sentinel’s gait start to drag. He was limping now, limping badly.

‘You’ve got three of them on your right leg, sir,’ Greer crackled. ‘Kick them free.’

Vertain tried. His Sentinel replied by lurching violently to the right with a screech of protesting stabilisers. Alarms flashed across his console as his leg pistons vented air pressure.

‘They’ve ruined my stabilisers. I’m not kicking anything for a while.’ As he spoke, Vertain’s cockpit tilted again. His helmeted head smacked against the side of his pod, the pain painting his vision in a palette of greys.

The dead were climbing his walker now. He heard their fists beating on the armour plating on his cockpit. They might even drag him down if enough of them could scramble up.

His vox sparked live with a burst of static. ‘Vertain, this is the captain.’ Emperor’s blood, Thade’s voice was clear. He sounded close. ‘Acknowledge.’

With sick on his breath and half-blind through a concussion, Vertain reported the situation, ending with the four words Captain Thade had been praying not to hear.

‘Dead Man’s Hand: Broken.’

‘Thirty seconds, Vertain. That’s all.’

It turned out to be just under twenty seconds.

The Chimeras tore into the plaza, a rolling thunderhead that slammed into the horde of wailing dead. Black as a panther, the command Chimera pounded into the first group, grinding them into bloody gobbets. It swerved to a halt, cutting down the plague-slain nearby with angry beams of light from its multilaser turret. The irritated whine of high-energy las-fire shrilled above the moans and crunches of combat.

The other Chimeras, their hulls a gun-metal grey, followed in the wake of destruction. Dozer blades bolted to the front of the troop transports – specifically banned from ungentle use in clearing roads of corpses – now hammered the plague-slain to the ground to be crushed under heavy treads.

The drivers spread out to form a protective ring around the embattled walkers, turret fire slicing through the bodies of anyone approaching the tanks. In a chorus of clangs, thirty rear ramps slammed down onto the mosaic ground, and the 88th spilled from their transports: guns up and firing red flashes. Thade was first out of his Chimera, chainsword raised and howling.

‘Secure the walkers! For the Emperor!’

The captain’s first foe wasn’t dead. A PDF traitor ran at him, slowed by the disease ravaging his body. In his fist was a broken bayonet. Thade’s chainsword sang in a savage backhand swing, and the traitor’s head left his shoulders.

‘First blood to Cadia!’ someone shouted to his left.

The fight lasted less than two minutes. Lasguns cracked out head-shots in orderly volleys, scything down the enemy in waves. The Cadians stayed shoulder to shoulder in their squads, taking no casualties in the brief battle.

When the last of the plague-slain was dragged from the leg of Vertain's walker and shot in the back of the head, Thade holstered his pistol. The sergeants from all fifteen squads ringed him, every man standing ankle-deep in the dead. The stench rising around was enough for several men to don their rebreather masks.

'Eighty-eighth: status.'

'Unbroken,' fifteen squad leaders chorused.

'Unbroken,' Vertain sat in his cockpit, the door opened so he could speak freely. He made the sign of the aquila. 'Close call, though.'

Thade nodded. 'We move to retake the Shrine of the Emperor's Unending Majesty. We're hearing nothing from the Janus Sixth in there, and if they have any survivors left, they're almost certainly retreating deeper into the monastery.' Every eye turned to the building a kilometre away through the winding streets. Half of it still burned. 'We're going in – securing it where the Janusians failed – and waiting to be reinforced. If the resistance is beyond our capabilities, then we get comfortable and ask Reclamation command what they want us to do. Questions?'

'Primary threats?' asked one of the sergeants.

'Potentially. Nothing solid yet. If we find them, we take them down. If there are too many, we consolidate and await reinforcement. Vertain, report.'

The Sentinel pilot cleared his throat. 'We pulled back to this plaza when the fighting in the temple grounds abated. We were looking for a staging ground, sir. The last we saw at the monastery, the enemy's rearguard was following the forward elements in. The main doors were breached. Six, maybe seven hundred Remnant,' he said, referring to Kathurite PDF traitors. 'Double the number of plague-slain.'

'Seven hundred secondary-class threats, and fifteen hundred third-class,' the captain confirmed. 'Nothing changes. We split into three forces, each with specific objectives. I'll take one hundred men to the central chambers. Lieutenant Horlarn, you take a hundred to the undercroft and make sure there's no way into the shrine from underground. Lieutenant Darrick, you've got the bell towers. Questions?'

No one spoke.

'The Emperor protects,' said Thade. 'Now move.'

Resistance was nowhere to be seen. Gaining access to the monastery proved to be uncomfortably easy.

The towering gates were broken, torn from their hinges, and there was little

sign of enemy forces outside of a few shambling loners wandering around the expansive courtyard. These ended their pathetic existences under precision las-fire, as the Guardsmen filed from their Chimeras and moved in squads up the wide marble stairway to the front entrance. The air reeked of the dead and the burning sections of the monastery itself, a potent musk that again inspired a lot of rebreather use.

Minutes became hours. Deep within the labyrinthine monastery, the Shrine of the Emperor's Unending Majesty, almost three hundred soldiers of the Cadian 88th were on the hunt. Bodies of plague victims littered the stone floor, just as they did in each passage and chamber the Cadians had passed through in the last few hours. The Janusians hadn't just been besieged; they'd been infiltrated and annihilated. Bodies of the regiment, blood soaking their urban camouflage gear, were strewn everywhere in the monastery alongside the enemy dead.

Their last stand had been inglorious and, to Cadian eyes, rather unimpressive. The Janus 6th was scattered in a poor defensive spread across the monastery's series of awe-inspiring sermon chambers, their final resting places showing to the trained glances of the 88th just which soldiers had died fighting, and which ones had broken ranks to seek an escape.

No sign of primary threats so far. In fact, Thade and his officers had just about abandoned the notion of seeing any first-class targets. They had real problems now – enough tertiary threats to last a lifetime. The plague-slain were everywhere inside the monastery, and in far greater numbers than those seen by Dead Man's Hand outside.

Room by room, the Guardsmen cleansed the holy site, cutting down the shrieking dead as they staggered in feral mindlessness, nothing but shells of unfocused malice.

Poisonous blood showered Captain Thade as he impaled a howling woman with a thrust of his chainsword. A hundred whirring teeth sawed through fleshy resistance, and the woman cried blasphemies as she was disembowelled.

It was hard to tell the dead ones from those that still lived. Neither would lie down and die when you wanted them to, and they all made the same noises.

Thade yanked hard, freeing the blade from her torso in a light spray of near-black blood and fragments of flesh that smelled beyond foul. The rot taking hold of the enemy made such work all the easier. Decay softened the flesh, making it weak under Imperial las-fire and vulnerable to the howling bite of chainswords.

The corpse began to rise again, ponderously clambering to its feet despite being gutted and missing an arm.

Thade's blade silenced as he killed the power. He'd been fighting with the weapon for almost half an hour, and his muscles burned with effort. Exhausted to his core, he pulled his bolt pistol and pressed the muzzle against the woman's broken skull. The air within the monastery was cold, but he blinked stinging sweat from his eyes.

'In the name of the Emperor, just *die*.'

The bolt shell hammered into the corpse's head and exploded within the brain, wetting the Imperial Guard captain with more chunks of decaying matter. A flying shard of skull hit his breastplate with enough force to leave a scratch.

The sharp cracks of a las-fire chorus died down around him, and Thade's command squad dispersed around the barely-decorated contemplation chamber. Each of the nine fighters scattered, but stayed in eye contact with at least one other member of the squad. Every man wore dark grey fatigues and black chest armour made filthy from the day's fighting.

'I need vox,' Thade called out across the cavernous sermon chamber. Janden moved over to him, jogging around the dip in the floor where a mosaic of the Emperor had been defiled some weeks ago. The room reeked of urine and the vast amounts of animal blood used to deface the image.

Janden handed Thade the speech horn connected to the bulky vox-scanner on his back.

'You're live, captain.'

'Squad Venator to Alliance. Acknowledge signal and give me a situation report.'

The pause of several seconds put Thade's nerves on edge. There were a million ways this mission could go wrong. Even with the greatest trust in his men, he hated his squads scattered in this hive of the dead.

'Alliance here, captain. Situation: Unbroken. We're close to the chorus chambers atop the north-eastern bell tower. We need ten, fifteen more minutes to get in place.'

'Acknowledged,' Thade replied, and nodded to Janden. 'Squad Venator to Fortitude and Adamant. Report.'

The pause this time lasted longer. Janden shook his head at the captain's glance; it wasn't interference. For once.

'Adamant here, captain. Situation: Unbroken. We're entering the undercroft now.'

'This is Fortitude, Unbroken. Moving with Adamant to support. Heavy resistance in the cellars delayed us. We found where the Remnant were

regrouping, and they're not regrouping anymore, sir. Forty minutes to mission objective.'

'Understood. Be careful,' Thade said.

And so it went. Squad Phalanx next, then Endurance and Defiance, on and on down the line. The captain listened to the brief situation reports from each of his fifteen squads. Casualties were light, despite the fighting being fierce.

Thade led his one hundred men in a loose scattering of squads, moving to take control of the primary altar chambers at the heart of the monastery. Another hundred followed First Lieutenant Horlarn to secure the undercroft and purge the subterranean tombs of the enemy. Second Lieutenant Darrick led the last hundred, securing the four bell towers thrusting up from the monastery's central domes. The holy building was the size of a small town – the 88th had spent the best part of three hours cutting right to the core of it.

One last vox-report to make. The most important one.

'This is Captain Thade. 88th reports progress as expected. Resistance medium-to-heavy. No sign of primary targets, repeat: zero sightings on primary threat. Resistance so far, secondary threats twenty per cent, tertiary threats eighty per cent.'

This simple message was all that was required. He doubted it even reached the lord general's base, but it still had to be done.

Janden took the speech horn when Thade handed it back. 'Only twenty per cent on the secondary threat? Felt like more.'

Thade smiled at the vox-officer with the bandaged arm. 'I'll bet it did.'

At his order, the squad moved out, heading deeper into the monastery. The chambers grew larger, expanding into halls, each one majestic in size and increasingly grand in ostentation, built by faithful hands many thousands of years ago. Arched walls and ceilings were supported by great spines of stone, thickly jutting from the skeletal architecture. Stylised pillars rose to the roof, each one bathed in the weak dusk light coming through the shattered stained glass windows.

The ten soldiers in Thade's squad fanned out, stalking through the near-darkness in a familiar ritual of stops and starts. Run to a pillar. Crouch, rifle up to scan ahead. Run to the next pillar...

Something cried out ahead. It was either inhuman, or hadn't been alive in weeks. Thade looked around the pillar he was kneeling behind, one hand on the faded red carpet for balance. He saw nothing, but heard the moan again.

A few dozen metres ahead of him, the sight blocked by the pillars, a lasgun

fired with a single, sharp crack. ‘Contact!’ someone called out. ‘Tertiary threat confirmed.’

The Cadians advanced, rifles up and no need to hide. A small group of plague victims, no more than twenty, spilled sluggishly from an arch behind a torn red curtain.

Thade squeezed off a shot with his pistol, detonating the head of the lead curse victim.

‘Kill them!’ he shouted, and nine lasguns lit the chamber with flickering red flashes of pinpoint laser fire. Not a single shot missed, but the disease-wracked corpses still took several direct hits to put down for good.

The soldiers stood around the bodies after the killing was done. It was Kathur Reclamation protocol to speak short prayers for each of the fallen when time allowed. Captain Thade ordered his men on without a word. Time was not on their side.

The squad moved through a series of smaller chambers, each one a mosaic-rich tribute to Saint Kathur’s deeds, paid for by hundreds of generations of pilgrims. Progress was fast until the squad’s eleventh man, wheezing as he leaned upon an aquila-topped black staff, rasped the captain’s name.

Thade halted. ‘Make this good, Seth.’

‘I hear someone calling. Crying out, as if from a great distance.’ The sanctioned psyker wiped a fleck of foamy spittle from his lips with a trembling hand. His powers were erratic at the best of times, waxing and waning without his control. This campaign was a nightmare – Kathur was wreathed thick in warp disruption, and the psychic toll on the Imperial Guard’s telepaths was immense. Five had died of embolisms in the weeks since planetfall, one of heart rupture, and a further two had fallen under possession by nameless horrors born of the warp.

‘Calling out to us?’ Thade asked.

‘I... I cannot tell. There is something ahead.’ Here Seth paused to suck air through his teeth. ‘Something powerful. Something old.’

‘Primary threat?’ asked Janden. This was greeted by a short wave of chuckles from the gathered soldiers and Thade shaking his head. ‘Not likely,’ he said.

The captain resisted the urge to sneer at the wheezing, thin-limbed psyker. Their eyes met and the gaze held for several moments. The captain’s eyes were the typical pale violet of the Cadian-born, while Seth’s were a deep blue, bloodshot under the band of metal across his brow that sank cables into his brain to amplify his unreliable talents. ‘Anything more specific?’ Thade tried to keep

the dislike out of his voice and his expression. He was almost successful.

‘An agent of the Archenemy.’

‘In the next chamber?’

‘In one of the chambers ahead. I cannot be sure. The warp clouds everything.’

Thade nodded, inclining his head and leading the squad on. ‘Janden, what chambers are ahead?’

The vox-officer consulted his data-slate, tapping a few buttons. ‘A series of purification halls. Pilgrims used them to bathe before being allowed entrance to the inner temple.’

‘A bath house? In a cathedral?’ Zailen, the squad’s weapons specialist, walked alongside Janden. The hum of his live plasma gun set the troopers’ teeth on edge. Thade felt his scalp prickling, but fought down the sensation as he spoke.

It was Thade who answered. ‘Saint Kathur, Emperor rest his bones, was famed for his purity. It makes sense those who came to see his remains would be required to ritually cleanse themselves.’

Zailen shrugged and looked away – a habit of his when he didn’t have the words to answer.

Ahead of them, the great double doors leading into the purification chambers stood closed. Defiled engravings of female angels, carved of marble now stained with blood and body matter, stared down at the eleven men. Thade cleared his throat.

‘Trooper Zailen?’

‘Yes, sir?’

‘Open the doors.’

‘Yes, sir.’

Zailen raised his plasma gun and squeezed the first trigger. The baseline hum of the arcane weapon intensified in an angry whine of massing energy. He breathed a quiet ‘Knock, knock...’ and pressed the second trigger.

The plasma gun roared.



CHAPTER III

Count the Seven

The Shrine of the Emperor's Unending Majesty

Second Lieutenant Taan Darrick was having a bad day.

There were two reasons for this. The first and least important was more of a wearying ache than a real worry – the 88th were mechanised infantry, and by the Emperor did Darrick hate having to walk everywhere. This monastery assault took a lot of foot-slogging, and while his fitness wasn't an issue it still irritated him that the regiment had been selected for this operation. Reinforce the idiotic Janusians on their vainglorious thrust into enemy territory? The fools had paid for it now. Sit in a damn church and hold out for reinforcements? Ugh. It hardly screamed 'mechanised infantry' to Darrick.

The captain, as the captain always did, took the orders without a complaint and made the best of a bad deal. But Darrick? Darrick was a complainer and damn proud of it. He felt it gave him character in the stoic ranks of his fellows. It simply didn't occur to him that he was just being annoying.

The second reason for his bad day, and much more of a real problem, was the fact he was being shot at. Darrick's squad had met serious secondary resistance as they neared the top of the massive bell tower. On Kathur, 'secondary resistance' meant the enemy had guns, too.

Crouched behind a wooden podium once used by priests to lead choir singers, Darrick reloaded his lasgun, slapping a fresh power cell into the standard-issue weapon with a professional shove. A las-round scorched a black streak through the pulpit a hand's span from his left ear.

'Wouldn't it be wonderful to have a little heavy support?' he asked the soldier sharing his pathetic cover. The other Cadian grunted agreement as he fired around the podium. He was new to the squad, and found Darrick's endless banter

distracting, not endearing. He was hardly alone in this opinion.

The enemy, ragged elements of the Kathur PDF picking through the bones of the monastery in disorganised packs, had entered the ancient chorus room at the same time as Darrick's men. A series of these same chorus chambers nestled atop each of the four huge spires rising from the monastery. The towers were crucial, both as a likely haven for Janusian survivors, and as the only decent sites Imperial forces could effect a supply landing for any regiment bottled in here for longer than they should be.

'I'm good with a heavy bolter, you know,' Darrick was opining to his captive audience now, and his squad shared grim smiles. The lieutenant's declarations were punctuated by enemy fire cracking and pinging off the stone all around him. 'And I enjoy it. The kick of actually being able to shoot your damn enemies without all this messing around, being denied any toys in case we mess up the architecture.'

One of his men, Tomarin, grinned at Darrick's observations. 'It's a shame to be denied one's passions, sir.'

'That it is. That it is. Now, time to ruin some assholes' days.'

Darrick's rifle bucked in his hands with each shot, and each shot was a kill. You didn't train every day of your life from the age of six and miss too often. The second lieutenant had been firing the same rifle for thirty years, and while most junior officers withdrew more advanced arms from the officers' arsenal upon achieving promotion, Darrick liked to stick with what he knew best. His one guilty pleasure was his never-ending supply of various grenades – but they were in his storage bag back at the base. Along with heavy bolters and other support weapons of any significance, it was hard to justify taking grenades into a monastery when Kathur Reclamation objectives clearly stated the architecture of the shrineworld was to remain 'undamaged by reckless interference'.

Denied his favourite toys, Darrick scowled as he gunned down the unarmoured soldiers of the Planetary Defence Force. When the soldier next to him fell back with a hole in his head, Darrick had to concede that some of the Chaos-tainted scum over there were truly wicked shots. He broke cover to crack off three more rounds, killing two PDF soldiers and taking another in the belly. That one would take a while to die, thrashing around on the marble floor and turning his blue uniform red.

Counts as a kill shot, he thought, smirking as he reloaded again.

Darrick tapped the little pearl-like vox-unit in his ear. There was a rat's chance in the Great Eye he'd be able to make a break for his vox-officer, Tellic, who

was pinned down across the room with most of the others in Darrick's squad. Las-fire flashed through the chamber in lethal strobes.

Range on the micro-bead vox was awful at best, especially when the stone walls played all hell with the signals, but Darrick pressed the throat mic against his skin and trusted his luck.

‘Alliance to Venator.’

Nothing. Not even static. Tremendous. Really, just delightful.

Darrick's luck was dry, and so was his patience. A quick kiss of the aquila necklace he wore, and the lieutenant broke into a crouching sprint away from the altar he'd been hiding behind. Las-fire slashed past close enough to warm his skin, but either the Emperor chose that second to bless him with fortune, or the Chaos-tainted scum who could actually hit anything were busy shooting elsewhere. Whichever was true, Darrick leapt behind the paltry cover of a row of pews, kissed his necklace again, and came up firing on full-auto.

The tower-top choir chamber with its high domed ceiling and rows of pews now played host to a tune far removed from Imperial litanies and hymns. Lasgun cracks formed an incessant chorus to the infrequent percussion of heavy bolters hammering out their high-calibre rage. Explosive shells from these smashed into the white marble walls and detonated, leaving head-sized chunks of stone blasted free. Rubble rained on the Cadians from behind their makeshift cover.

‘How come *they* get to shoot the place up?’ groaned one of the Guardsmen to his lieutenant, sharing the pathetic and disintegrating cover.

‘Because,’ Darrick faked a thoughtful expression, ‘it's more fun this way.’ Those words spoken, he rose, rifle in hand.

Darrick fired the last shot in his power cell right into the open mouth of a shouting PDF sergeant, and ducked back under cover. With a silent prayer to the Emperor as he tapped his micro-bead, he repeated the words he was getting bloody sick of repeating.

‘Alliance to Venator.’

‘Venator,’ Thade said, ‘acknowledged.’

As he spoke, he fired his bolt pistol into the face of a young plague victim, doubtless a pilgrim or an acolyte of the cathedral. Now faceless, the child collapsed. The captain stamped on its throat to make sure it wasn't getting back up, wincing as the spine gave way.

‘Talk to me, Alliance.’ He glanced around the pillared chamber, which was swarming with third-class threats staggering this way and that, uttering howls

and piteous little whines. More were coming through the great double doors at the end of the hall. 'Faster, Darrick, faster.'

'...resistance in force. In full force. Secondary targets, no fewer... seventy, reinforced... auxiliary passages in the towers... heavy bolters at the... my grenades, do you hear me? Captain? Captain! The Remnant is...'

Thade held a hand to his own micro-bead as he fell back, trying to insulate it so he could hear Darrick over the bark of the bolt pistol. Weighty standard-issue boots found awkward purchase on the blood-slick marble floor.

According to the maps, this was the penultimate preparatory hall before the first of the primary altar chambers. For thousands of years, pilgrims had come here to be blessed by clergy before being allowed barefoot into the presence of the great altars raised in Saint Kathur's honour. Now it looked like an abattoir, smelled like a plague pit and sounded like the Emperor-damned invasion of Cadia itself: all gunfire and screams.

'I copy,' Thade said, holstering his bolt pistol and drawing his chainsword. He cleaved the head of the closest plague victim from its shoulders, and kicked the headless corpse back into two of its advancing fellows. 'Acknowledged. Remnant sighted in the bell towers by Alliance. Darrick, do you need *Cruor*?'

'...would be lovely, captain.'

'Copy that.' Thade killed the link and gripped his chainsword two-handed. Las-fire flashed past him, scything down the walking corpses in waves, but there were too many. They streamed at the Cadians in a relentless tide, screaming, howling and sobbing.

'Bayonets and blades,' Thade called, 'for Cadia and the Emperor!'

At the mention of the God-Emperor, the dead wailed as if through one voice. The Cadians locked ranks and answered with silence, awaiting the foe to reach stabbing range.

Seth gripped his staff, wheezing wetly as he stood by the captain's shoulder. It was he who broke the quiet.

'The warp is within them all. They have turned from His light.'

Thade powered his chainsword to full throttle. 'Then we will illuminate them.'

The staggering tide met the dispersed, outnumbered Guard squad in a roar of noise, and the soldiers set about tearing the plague victims to pieces. Bayonets knifed out to punch into eye sockets and laspistols flared at point-blank range. In the centre of the preparation chamber, Thade hewed left and right, his chainsword rising and falling in skill-less rhythm, spraying blood in all directions as it ravaged flesh. Cold droplets flecked his face, joining the sweat

stinging his eyes. He'd always fancied himself a fair swordsman, but aptitude played no part in this eye-to-eye slaughter. In a scene where there was no room to manoeuvre, against an enemy that never defended themselves, all the skill in the world meant nothing. Moments like this came down to defiance; sheer, gruelling endurance.

A year ago the room had been devoted to purification. As Thade moved from corpse to corpse, scything them down in a relentless repetition of motion, he could scarcely believe this place had ever been anything but a slaughterhouse.

He cut left, lopping the head off an obese plague victim, and unleashed three bolts into the wretches staggering behind it.

'I hate this planet,' he said for what may have been the fiftieth time that week. 'Janden, look alive! Behind you!'

Janden's heavy vox-caster backpack made him a slow target compared to the others in the command squad. Stumbling over a body on the floor, the vox-officer went down as he turned to face the plague victims reaching for him. A white shock of pain flared through his skull as his head hit the ground with a meaty smack. Hands mobbed him, grabbing and tearing, none of which he noticed.

Dazed and barely conscious, Janden didn't realise the dull throb in his leg was because one of the plague-dead had wrenched off his shin armour and was devouring his right calf. The others seemed intent on battering him to death with their rotting fists, though Janden was so out of it he didn't feel much of that either. A shadow fell across his numb, unseeing face. A dead man was leering at him, a sick visage of shrunken eyes and black gums.

The grinding blade of Thade's chainsword burst through the chest of the corpse. With precise strikes and a few ungente kicks, the captain cleared the walking dead away from Janden.

Five more came on with their characteristic shamle, reaching out for him. Each wore the soiled once-bright robes of Kathurite clergy.

'Eighty-Eight!' Thade cried, and threw himself to the ground. A storm of covering las-fire flashed over his head.

When it was done, the five plague-slain were holed and twitching on the ground, going nowhere. Thade dragged the delirious, bleeding vox-officer behind a pillar and sat him up.

Janden's helmet slapped against the stone behind his head. Blood gushed from the bite wound in his leg, which Thade bound with a hasty tourniquet.

'Pressure, Janden. You hear me? Keep pressure on this.'

‘Captain,’ Janden’s eyes rolled back. ‘There’s blood. Blood on your medal.’

Thade’s hand went instinctively to the Ward of Cadia on the front of his helmet. His gloved fingertips streaked even more dark gore across its silver surface.

‘Captain...’ Janden nodded like a drunk, looking over Thade’s shoulder. ‘Behind...’

The chainsword was in Thade’s hands, revving up as he rose and turned. The teeth, each sharpened to a monomolecular edge, met the shoulder of an elderly plague victim in the filthy robes of a senior monk. The sword’s teeth chewed down into the corpse with noisy efficiency. The holy man, dead for five months, screamed as Thade sawed him in two. Old, cold blood hit both Cadians in an icy shower.

Even through the burning in his muscles, even through fear-heightened senses and the adrenaline fuelling his instincts, Thade was annoyed enough to curse at getting sprayed again.

More corpses ran towards him, only to be cut down by precise swings of his chainsword and pinpoint fire from Janden’s laspistol.

‘I need a signal to base.’ Thade’s sword dripped blood as it idled once more, and the captain turned to the wounded soldier. Janden was pale, sweating and bleeding from a score of wounds, but he nodded to Thade while reloading his pistol.

‘Contact, sir?’

‘Direct message to Colonel Lockwood. Demand immediate deployment of Strike Team *Cruor*. Authorisation: Thade thirty sixty-two-A. *Cruor* are to assist Lieutenant Darrick in taking objectives three through six. The bell towers. Alliance is losing the bell towers. Make sure the colonel realises that.’

Janden left his laspistol on his knees as he punched in the code and voxed back to base. Thade was already moving away, running back to the heart of the chamber where his men were fighting their brutal melee. As he ran, he messaged Darrick to tell of *Cruor*’s impending arrival.

Alliance had lost the bell towers.

Darrick never saw the wall explode, and never saw half of his squad blown out of the gaping hole. As the detonation went off and threw him aside, he was knocked momentarily unconscious.

He did, however, recover fast. Sharp senses and a thick skull meant he came to in a hurry and heard the cries as the soldiers still alive began their long fall. Even

over ringing in his ears in the aftermath of the missile blast, he heard them falling to their deaths.

‘Alliance, come in.’ Thade’s voice crackled over the micro-bead. Darrick dragged himself, bleeding and battered, from under a pile of wrecked and smouldering pews. He reached a trembling hand to tap the earpiece.

‘Alliance,’ Darrick hissed through gritted teeth. ‘Broken.’

‘Repeat,’ Thade said. The signal was bad. Interference from the explosion that had raged through the choir chamber and destroyed a whole wall? Probably.

‘I am having absolutely no fun today,’ Darrick hissed, pulling out a chunk of shrapnel from his thigh. He looked up from where he lay. His men – those that still lived – were rousing. Too experienced to rise fully and face enemy fire, they crawled through the shredded furniture, finding cover wherever they could. Las-fire was already flashing at them from the Kathurite positions across the chamber.

‘This is Alliance, captain.’ Darrick reached out bleeding fingers to pull his fallen lasgun closer. He’d carried that weapon since he’d been a Whiteshield over twenty years ago. Not a chance in hell he’d leave it here, no matter how battered it was. His fingertips snagged the strap, and he dragged on it. The rifle bore a palette of fresh burns and new scratches, but otherwise looked fine. He guessed it would still fire. ‘Alliance: Broken,’ he repeated.

‘Acknowledged. *Cruor* inbound. Hold in the name of the Emperor,’ was Thade’s curt reply before cutting the link.

Easier said than done, thought Darrick.

A gang-ramp slammed closed. Thrusters fired. A machine came to life, taking its cargo into the sky on screaming engines.

The Valkyrie tore through the air over the city. Its downswept wings carried racks of air-to-surface missiles the pilots could never fire, and the twin autocannons on the gunship’s cheeks remained silent even as the Valkyrie flew over tertiary threat targets already beginning to flood the streets cleared by the Guard earlier in the day. The cannons’ silence was not to save ammunition or, as in the case of the rockets, to prevent damage to the planet’s sacred architecture. At this speed, there was simply no way the pilots could expect to hit anything. Dead bodies wept at the sight of the troop transport as it shot overhead, en route to the Shrine of the Emperor’s Unending Majesty. The Valkyrie, crow-black and dragon-loud, roared onward.

On one side of the cockpit, which arched down like a sneering vulture’s face at

the cityscape flashing below, were two words in Imperial Gothic lettering. The name of the gunship itself: *His Holy Blade*.

On the opposite side was a simple word in High Gothic. The name of the gunship's cargo: *Cruor*.

As the 88th hunted within, Enginseer Osiron remained outside the monastery with the thirty Chimeras.

He was not alone, of course. The drivers, armed and ready, stood by their vehicles. A handful busied themselves with minor maintenance on engines or armour plating. Between the orderly rows of Chimeras, lobotomised tech-servitors moved here and there, using their augmetic hands and machine tool limbs to aid in the repairs. One of the servitors – formerly a deserter, now a half-machine slave without a mind – had its forearms replaced with industrial scrubbers. It crouched by the command Chimera, its whirring hands scrubbing and flushing out gore from the tank's treads. Another servitor with a hammer for a left hand panel-beat another tank's distorted front armour back into Standard Construct regulation shape.

Dead Man's Hand stalked around the parked troop transports, their steps making a rhythmic drumbeat of blessed iron on stone. Perimeter defence duty.

Wreathed in a cloak of blood red, the hood pulled over his head and hiding his features, Enginseer Osiron nodded silently to one of the patrolling Sentinels as it passed. Vertain replied to the tech-priest's nod with an acknowledgement blip over the vox.

None of the 88th knew Osiron's age. He could have been thirty or two hundred and thirty. His face was forever concealed by the low-hanging crimson hood and a surgically attached rebreather mask covering his nose, mouth and chin. The only visible human features beyond the pale skin of his cheeks were his eyes of Cadian violet, glinting in the depths of the hood's shadow.

His body – what there was to see of it beneath the traditional robe of the Machine Cult of Mars – was an armoured form of tarnished plating, whirring gears and hissing pistons. Ostensibly he was human, at least at the most basic level: two arms, two legs, and so on.

But everything visible was replaced or augmented with the holy alterations of his cult. His internal organs ticked and clicked loud enough to hear. His joints hummed as gears simulated bones moving in harmony. His voice was a toneless murmur emitted from the vox-speakers on the front of his rebreather. This last aspect betrayed his curious inhumanity most of all, turning every breath into an

audible rise and fall of static. *Krssh*, in. *Krssh*, out.

Osiron leaned on the haft of his massive two-handed axe. The weapon was too heavy for an unaugmented man to lift, and sported the split-skull image of the Adeptus Mechanicus on its black iron blade. From a bulky backpack that thrummed with power, a multi-jointed mechanical arm rose and extended out, its clawed hand opening and closing as if stretching. A cutting torch on the arm's wrist flared briefly as the power claw whirred closed. Drill bits and other tools folded back into the arm's body. It coiled behind the tech-priest's shoulder, reposed.

'*Count the Seven*,' Osiron's internal vox said directly into his left ear. It had been doing that for an hour now and, unlike the squads engaged in the retaking of the monastery, Osiron had disobeyed orders, remaining tapped into the compromised frequency. It fascinated him.

'Curious,' he said in a murmur of vox-speakers. The servitor next to him turned slowly, unsure if it had misheard an order. Osiron tapped a button on the signum attached to his belt, hanging down his thigh like a metal pouch decorated with a hundred keys to press. The servitor cancelled its attention cycle, going back to staring mutely ahead, as dead in its own way as the poor wretches still staggering across this planet.

'Osiron to Vertain.'

'Honoured engineeer?'

'Monitor auspex for signs of jamming.'

'Yes, sir.'

Sir. The title always made Osiron smile. He held some minor authority in the 88th by dint of expertise, his ruthlessly logical mind and his close friendship with the captain – not from any formal rank.

'I'm not seeing evidence of jamming,' Vertain voxed back. 'Confirmed by the rest of my team. Dead Man's Hand reports no instrument glitches.'

'That, scout-lieutenant, is exactly my point. When have our scanners been so clear?'

'Maybe we're just lucky.' Osiron was no expert at interpreting human emotion through tone of voice, but Vertain's doubts were obvious as he spoke. He didn't believe what he'd suggested. Neither did Osiron.

'Unlikely. Auspex has been clear for over an hour. I detect none of the interference we have come to associate as standard for Kathur Reclamation operations.'

'Acknowledged, honoured engineeer. I've already logged the clarity of auspex

readings with High Command. Can you reach the captain?’

‘A moment, please. Suspicions must be confirmed before the captain is alerted. Osiron to inbound Valkyrie *His Holy Blade*.’

The reply took several seconds. When it came, it hit in a mangled wave of savaged vox. Just noise.

‘Enginseer Bylam Osiron to inbound Valkyrie *His Holy Blade*.’ The tech-priest adjusted his internal vox by tweaking dials on his forearm.

‘*His Holy Blade*. Two minutes until arrival,’ the pilot said. ‘Problems?’

‘*Count the Seven*,’ Osiron’s vox whispered again. ‘*Count the Seven*.’

The enginseer frowned. ‘Pilot, report auspex performance as you enter standard close-range scanning distance relative to our position.’

It was an unusual request. Osiron waited patiently for the pilot to check his instruments. ‘Standard distortion at medium range, sir. Reaching close range in twenty seconds.’

Osiron timed the estimate against the ticking of his own heart-engine. Twenty-three seconds passed.

‘Auspex is... clear. Minimal interference.’

Osiron killed the link and switched channels. ‘Scout-lieutenant.’

‘Yes, honoured enginseer?’

‘Deploy available resources in defensive spread.’

‘What? Why?’

‘Because you are the ranking officer here, and we have walked into a trap.’

The double doors were steel-shod Kathurite oak and had stood for three thousand years; consistently blessed, reinforced, redecorated and restored over the centuries. They were built in the same style as most of Kathur’s savagely overdone architecture, but practicality was in their construction, too. In the event of a fire, these doors would seal closed and allow those within the preparation chambers to survive up to nine hours protected from the flames.

The ornate doors exploded inwards under the force of the plasma blast. With twin crashes, they flew off their hinges and clattered to the red carpet blanketing the floor. Eleven men stood in the torn opening, rifles and pistols raised. It was the third set of such doors Zailen had opened with his plasma gun. White steam, hot enough to scald flesh, hissed from the weapon’s focusing ring in an angry gush.

Another preparation chamber opened up before them. Another hall filled with the enraged dead. The corpses turned their attention to the living interlopers,

their ruined faces peeling into expressions resembling something like joy, and something like pain. Several began to wail.

Thade's sword cut the air and his squad opened fire.

After the mayhem, the squad reformed in the centre of the room. Blood marked them as surely as if they'd been painted with it. Their bootsteps echoed throughout the chamber, bouncing off walls that sported stone angels leering down in cold dissatisfaction. The reliefs in this room depicted scenes of the Great Crusade. Winged Astartes warriors standing tall and proud – a testament to the Raven Guard Legion that had forced this world into compliance so many thousands of years ago.

Another set of double doors barred their way into the next chamber. Thade shook his head.

'We're being herded. Like cattle to the slaughter.'

The Cadians nodded. Zailen said, 'Room after room of piss-poor resistance. They're wearing us down piece by piece.' Several of the soldiers checked their digital ammo readouts and muttered agreement.

'Seth?' Thade fixed him with his violet glare. 'We're running out of preparation chambers. This is the heart of the monastery. Whatever you've sensed is nearby.'

The psyker was trembling. Dark blood leaked in a viscous trail from his right eye. Thade considered shooting him on the spot. Seth's unreliability today was a little much even for the captain's patience. He knew a commissar would almost certainly have executed the shivering man by now, for dereliction of duty as well as the risk of psychic contamination. But Thade needed every advantage he could grasp.

Everything about this mission was a mess, right back to the fools in the Janus 6th who'd tried to take the shrine in the first place. Could the monastery be held? Maybe. Could it be held without extreme losses? Not a chance. Could some amateur outfit like the Janus 6th – just thrown out into space by their founding world – have any chance to cut it here? Never.

Thade had hoped to secure the key points with his divided teams and seal themselves in, awaiting reinforcement. A good plan, but getting more unrealistic by the second. Everything fairly reeked of deception and an enemy's pre-planning.

'Seth. I'm going to count to three.' Thade rested his bolt pistol against the sanctioned psyker's cheek. 'One.'

'So old,' Seth whispered. 'So old. So diseased. How do they live?'

‘Seth, focus. Two.’

‘So old...’

Thade backhanded him with the weighty pistol, not hard enough to injure but not a light slap, either. ‘Seth, focus! Cadian blood, ice in your veins. You have a job to do. We’re counting on you. What. Is. Ahead?’

Seth closed his bleeding eyes. The trembling ceased, and every man present felt the invisible tremor of the psyker reaching out with his powers. Zailen stepped back, as if the unseen forces at work could destabilise his temperamental, humming plasma rifle.

‘I’m still hearing the voice. It’s trapped, barely reaching the surface...’

‘Seth, focus now or I shoot you where you stand. Ignore the damn voice.’ Thade asked again, ‘What do you see?’

The psyker smiled. A Cadian smile, a morbid twist of the lips, grim and humourless.

‘Traitors.’

Engineer Osiron’s warning flashed through the vox network, squad by squad. No one was surprised. Hopes had hardly been high of the mission being a success, and many of the 88th had questioned the initial orders to reinforce the Janus 6th in such a tactically unviable location. The green unit had pushed too far, too fast, and it was down to the Cadians to get in there and do their best to keep the fresh meat alive.

In theory.

Of course, there was only so much you could do when the regiment you were supposed to reinforce was already annihilated by the time you arrived.

Taan Darrick crouched behind a row of stone pews, clutching his battered lasrifle. Chunks of his cover broke away in flying pieces or were disintegrated outright by the bite of heavy bolter rounds. His glance kept flicking up to the stained glass dome thirty metres above his hiding place. Kathur Reclamation protocol was adamant about avoiding collateral damage, but any second now, Kathur Reclamation protocol was about to go to hell.

Deft fingers ejected his rifle’s spent power pack. The sickle-shaped magazine fell into his free hand, and he stored it in his webbing.

‘Machine-spirit, forgive my actions. Soon you shall be whole again.’ The Litany of Unloading. Taan’s voice was cool and unshaking. Cadian blood, ice in the veins. There was no way he’d let himself die here.

He slammed the fresh power cell in and pulled the recharge slide, now

speaking the Litany of Loading.

‘Machine-spirit, accept my gift. Swallow the light, and spit out death.’ Simple words. Even silly, in other circumstances. A grunt’s attempt at something poetic. Yet Darrick had been saying the same words since he’d loaded his first lasgun at age four. They made him grin now. Funny how certain things gain such significance.

The last time he’d raised his head above the row of seats, he’d counted close to seventy of the Remnant scattered in a loose line, their numbers punctuated by hastily erected heavy weapons emplacements. Seventy soldiers. There had been over a hundred a few minutes ago.

Seventy left.

Taan looked left and right, counting his own remaining men as they crouched in the makeshift trench, sheltered from the onslaught by the rapidly-eroding stone pews.

He counted twelve. Wonderful. That’s just wonderful.

‘Darrick to *His Holy Blade*. In the name of the Emperor, where are you?’

‘On approach, Alliance. *Cruor* requests pict detail of deployment.’

‘Do I sound like I have time to start a career as a taker of rare and beautiful pict? We’re pinned. You hear that gunfire? That’s not us shooting, you son of–’

Taan was Cadian, born in a barracks and bred under the violet sky. Even as he ranted, he focused the lens of the picter attached to the side of his helmet, and took a peek – no longer than a heartbeat – long enough to take a single pict of the wall of Remnant forces across the circular chorus chamber. All the while, he swore. Darrick ducked again just as a lasbolt burned the stone black an inch from his eye.

‘...raised by dogs, you ungrateful...’ he trailed off, clicking ‘Send’ on the helmet picter. ‘Can you see that?’

‘Quite a party in there. Patching it through to *Cruor* now.’

‘No rush.’ The pew shook as a massive chunk of its front detonated under the full force of a direct heavy bolter round only three metres away. ‘Take as long as you need. I’m starting to get comfortable.’

Taan couldn’t resist. He looked up, taking a pict of the stained glass dome. It was the only point of entry unless the Valkyrie was going to drop *Cruor* through the hole blown in the wall. That was unlikely. Darrick clicked ‘Send’ a second time, transmitting the pict of the pristine dome.

‘See that second pict? I’m not seeing much deployment here.’

The pre-dawn light filtering through the dome darkened under an avian

shadow. The Valkyrie hovered, its thrusters screaming as they burned. Several of the Remnant cried out as coloured melted glass rained on them in sticky, agonising drips.

‘Now!’ Taan called to his surviving men. They used the momentary distraction to break cover, twelve rifles firing. Twenty-two Remnant soldiers went down, hit in the first or second volley. Two shots went wide. Taan laughed as he ducked back into cover.

‘I saw that, Kallo! Are you sure your mother had violet eyes?’ He knew Kallo had been hit in the shoulder and it was ruining his aim, but still... ‘Two misses! The captain will hear about this!’

Kallo offered no excuse. Taan called out the Litany of Forgiveness with a wicked grin. ‘Sweet God-Emperor, forgive Your servant Kallo his sins. Remember he is just a man!’

Several of the soldiers sniggered in their cover.

The gunfire renewed, but in less force. Some of it was angled up towards the Valkyrie, but the greatest difference was the fact that a third of the force was no longer firing.

‘Strike Team *Cruor* confirm receipt of tactical situation. Deploying.’

‘Oh? Nice of them to finally drop by.’

‘I heard that,’ came a deeper voice that Taan recognised instantly. ‘See you in a second, joker.’

Taan grinned as Strike Team *Cruor* made their entrance.

Ten men in night-black carapace armour fell through the melted ruin of the glass dome. Boots first, they dropped like knives, firing as they plummeted. The Valkyrie above stayed locked in hover while the squad rappelled down.

On maximum power, standard issue lasguns constructed on the Cadian armoury world of Kantrael fired a finger-thin red beam of superheated laser energy. The blasts roaring from the ten rifles in the falling men’s gloved hands were headache-purple with a blinding white core. Several of the Remnant hit by the las-fire burst into flames as their clothes caught light. They dropped to the ground, already dead, their clothes aflame.

‘Stormtroopers!’ one of the Remnant cried, and the devastated remains of the enemy force turned to flee. One of the black-clad soldiers cut down two enemy either side of the shouting Remnant warrior, and disconnected his rappelling cable. He caught the running Remnant in three strides and bore him to the ground, punching down with a double-edged combat knife.

‘Stay awhile,’ the soldier said, burying his blade in the traitor’s neck.

The rest of Taan's men joined *Cruor*, leaping the cover of the pews and cutting down the foe. For a handful of seconds, the chamber was illuminated in an insane display of strobing laser light: red from the lasguns, purple-white from *Cruor's* hellguns.

Except for the ringing in the Cadians' ears, the chamber was silent less than a minute after *Cruor* deployed. The last surviving Remnant soldier was put down with a las-round to the forehead while he pleaded for his life, on his knees, insisting he had no choice.

'Ain't that a shame.' His executioner, faceless in his dark rebreather and full visored helm, turned from the falling corpse, scanning the room. Master Sergeant Ban Jevrian sighted Taan through the green glare of his visor. He popped his helmet seals in a hiss of air pressure as he strode over to the lieutenant, removing it to reveal a shaved head and the suggestion of brown stubble around his thin mouth. Jevrian wasn't so much in athletic Cadian shape as he was a layer of slab-like muscle over thick bone, encased in black carapace armour. His hellpistol, connected to a humming backpack via thick cable feeds, purred as he lowered the setting and holstered it.

'Sir.' He offered Taan a salute, his deep voice resonating across the chamber as he made the sign of the aquila over his chestplate. 'Kasrkin squad Eight-Zero-Eight reports successful deployment.'

'Took your time,' Taan saluted back.

'That's funny. You're a real joker,' Jevrian said, unsmiling. He didn't smile much. Jokes that had most men in stitches might, if they were truly worthwhile, lift the corners of Ban Jevrian's lips for the ghost of an instant. 'Where's Yaune?'

'Dead,' Darrick said. 'Blown out of that hole in the wall.'

The Kasrkin shrugged. 'He owed me money.'

'You're all heart.'

'Whatever. Orders?'

Taan did a quick count of his remaining men, thinking of the names he'd be writing on death notices once they were clear of this hellhole.

'Thade's pulling us back. We're running.'

'We don't run.'

'We're running. Captain's orders. When you wear the same silver on your helmet that he does, I'll start giving a damn about what you think, master sergeant.'

'We never run,' Jevrian almost growled. Talking to the Kasrkin sergeant was like talking to a bear in an insect's black armour. But he was right. The Cadian

Shock didn't run. It was a point of pride, and had been for ten thousand years. The Lists of Remembrance were filled with hundreds of regiments that had been destroyed rather than flee before the Archenemy.

'We never run,' Jevrian said again. His hulking form promised pain. He bristled with firepower.

'No? We ran two months ago,' Taan said softly. 'We ran on Cadia.'

Jevrian had no response to that. He turned back to his strike team and raised a hand, closing it into a fist – the signal for forming up.

'*Cruor*, weapons hot. Let's do what the hero says.'

'Immediate fallback to the Chimeras.'

Thade's words had spread through the squads with the speed and fervour Osiron's warning had only fifteen minutes before. The 88th was breaking orders and running. It stuck uncomfortably in many throats, but none of the officers argued with the captain's appraisal of the situation.

'If we stay here, we die. If we die, we fail to meet our objectives anyway. The Janus Sixth is finished. Our orders were to reinforce them, or hold this monastery if the Janusians fell. Our numbers make that an impossibility now we've come face to face with the reality. Immediate fallback to the Chimeras.'

Every squad but one obeyed this order. Thade's own didn't. The captain wasn't leaving until he saw the truth of Seth's proclamation. 'Traitors' was a word that covered a multitude of potential sinners. He wanted to know for sure.

'Open those doors,' Thade pointed at the set of double doors with his deactivated chainsword, but shook his head when Zailen raised his plasma gun. 'No, Zailen. I want you ready to fire when the doors open. Seth, if you please.'

The psyker clutched his dark grey leather jacket tighter around his wasted frame. A hand gloved in the same grey leather reached out, fingers splayed, towards the great doors. The temperature dropped a few degrees. The Cadians' breath steamed from their lips.

The doors shook once. Twice. Dust rained from the surrounding archway, as if the stone angels were shedding powdered skin. On the third shake, one of the angels – a winged representation of Saint Kathur himself – toppled to shatter on the red carpet.

'Not a good omen,' remarked Janden. Thade's scowl silenced him.

'I have a grip,' Seth breathed through clenched teeth. His power over the doors was visible: an ice-blue sheen of psychic frost was forming where the psyker gripped the portal with his mind.

Ten guns raised in readiness. ‘Do it,’ said Thade.

Seth did it. The double doors roared from their hinges in a howl of psychic wind. The soldiers felt ice crystals tinkling on their armour as the gust blew back to them.

Thade’s men were scattered, some behind pillars, others kneeling, two lying down on their fronts – but each one was ready to fire. Each one was watching what was through the door.

A hundred and fifty dead. Two hundred. The plague-slain stood in a staggered horde – a mass of corpses that had no right to be on their feet. Heads bowed, they stood in silence, facing a towering figure. In that first instant, the scene poured into Thade’s mind, making him think of a blasphemous congregation, a church of the dead and the damned.

The dead turned as the doors fell inward. Hundreds of rotting faces, the faces of the faithless, stared at the eleven soldiers. The imposing figure on the other side of the horde, some hundred metres from the Cadians, raised a scab-encrusted bolter.

Thade’s men were firing in a relentless barrage before the doors even crashed to rest, but the towering figure’s voice was a wet burble rising horribly over the stuttering cracks of las-fire. A single bang from the creature’s bolter ended Etan’s life, as the round detonated within the trooper’s chest.

The Cadians fell back, rifles streaming out death, the true death, for the plague-slain that shambling after them. Thade grinned despite everything, because he finally had it confirmed. Firing his bolt pistol with both hands, he yelled into his vox.

‘Captain Thade, Cadian 88th! Contact, contact, contact! Primary threat sighted!’

The Traitor Astartes stalked through the shambling crowd, parting the dead before its massive bulk like a ship cutting the seas. Its bolter barked over and over, but its aim was thrown off by the Cadian lasbolts smacking into its ornate helm. The rounds glanced aside doing no real damage, but they interfered with the archaic targeting systems in the creature’s helmet displays.

‘Count the Seven...’ it burbled. Green ooze sizzled from its speaker grille. It seemed to be laughing and choking up acid, all at once.

The Cadians fell back faster, lasguns flashing angry and hot. Thade listened for his engineeer’s acknowledgement, then spoke back.

‘The Death Guard, Osiron. The XIV Legion is here.’



CHAPTER IV

Revelations

Reclamation Headquarters, outside Solthane

It was five hours since the retreat, and Seth's head still pounded as if his skull was shrinking around his brain.

Seth's camp was pitched several dozen metres from the neat and ordered rows of the 88th's communal tents. His thoughts would not leave the memory of the monastery. He'd heard the voice, screaming in silence, even hours before entering the shrine itself – a distinct, yet distant presence within the cathedral district. Unknown, unseen, almost unheard.

He coughed again, violently enough to bring the coppery tang of blood to his tongue. Trying to focus was an exercise in torment, listening to the sounds of the camp all around, shutting out the after-echo of the voice that still ghosted through his senses. Each time he quested after it with his thoughts, it dispersed into nothingness. Seth was no longer sure if he was hearing the voice now, or merely hearing it echo through his memory. Reaching out for it psychically was as impossible as catching mist in his closed hands.

The thousand-strong Cadian regiment, of which Thade commanded a full third, was camped with the main bulk of Guard forces in the colossal plateau chosen for the initial landings. Making planetfall outside the capital city had been the only option. Most of Kathur was covered in the open ocean, and what little land mass existed was encrusted with towering stone cathedral-cities. But here the Guard had found grasslands expansive enough to accommodate the Reclamation forces tasked with retaking the northern hemisphere.

Tens of thousands of Guard soldiers had made the initial planetfall. Over half of them were still coming and going around the grounded troop landers that now served as Reclamation headquarters. A hundred thousand tents and hastily-

erected communal buildings spread out from the clustered landers like a refugee city.

And this was just the spearhead. The forward force, sent to establish an Imperial presence. The main bulk of the Reclamation forces were still in warp transit.

The aerial view was breathtaking. Seth had seen it from a Valkyrie only a week before. The Janusians had been gone even by then, their animal hide tents dismantled as the regiment went deep into the city. The landers of the Vednikan 12th Rifles had made planetfall first, and they sat now in tidy formation, their massive hulls casting shadows on the grey tents below. Ash residue in the air had darkened the Vednikans' pristine white tents within hours of touching down. The serpent symbol of Vednika, proudly embroidered on each tent in black, was barely visible now.

To the east and west of the Vednikans were the 303rd Uriah and the 25th Kiridian Irregulars, respectively. The base camp of the former was a husk of the sprawl it had been on the days after planetfall, with only a handful of empty tents left while the regiment was engaged in retaking Solthane's power station district to the far north. The latter, in typical Kiridian militia style, resembled exactly what it was: a rushed camp set up almost at random as squads spilled from their landers and pitched their tents wherever they chose. Seth had smiled slightly upon seeing it. He was a student of other Imperial cultures – a personal passion – and knew something of the Kiridian military mentality. Their tradition was that every tent had to have a squad banner outside, and that each banner must face the regimental commander's pavilion. Other than that one rule, their camp was as chaotic as can be imagined, as comrades sought to pitch tents near one another with no regard for order.

The Hadris Rift 40th Armoured showed no such disorganisation. Ordered rows of tents stood in ranks a little way from the tank garages. Orbital landers had brought down the structures almost whole, leaving engineers and servitors to reinforce the buildings with armour plating against the ashy wind.

The camp of the Third Skarran Rangers was Guard standard. Billets and tents in an ordered spread around the few landers that remained, with regimental leaders stationed in the smaller staff tents away from the troops. Unlike the Kiridians, the Skarrans had left ample room for supply dropships in their formation, while the Irregulars were forced to land their supplies a kilometre from their camp and drive the crates in on cargo loaders and lifter Sentinels.

Seth's violet eyes drank in the scene, his gaze finally sweeping to the Cadian

contingent. Tents in the black and grey of urban camouflage stood out stark against the dry grass of the plateau. A single lander punctuated the ordered ranks of tents – a behemoth of a craft with its swollen hold capable of holding over a hundred Chimeras. Patches of grass were quickly slabbed over with rockcrete for efficient supply drop landing sites. Each of the 88th's three divisions were separated by a short distance, with the soldiers' tents in rows near central communal mess buildings and officer barracks – the latter of which were landed from the troop ships in a matter similar to the garages of the Hadriss Rift 40th. The Cadians used their great lander, *Unyielding Defiance*, as a fully-equipped garage for their vehicles.

Seth blinked, bringing his focus back to the present. The great bronze bell in the hangar bay of *Unyielding Defiance* rang out in the distance, signalling muster for Major Crayce's elements of the 88th. Wiping his lips with a bloodstained handkerchief, the psyker looked back at the tarot cards laid out on the small wooden table. A passing Chimera shook the tent and set the table rocking. Seth's powers earned him distance from the rank and file, but a military camp was never a noiseless place. It took all the psyker's meditative powers to focus sometimes. Blocking out the noise of rumbling tanks, clashing tools, marching boots, drilling men, live fire exercises... The very air tasted of iron and machine oil...

His focus had drifted again. Seth retrained his attention on the tarot cards spread before him, seeing each at first with his natural eyes. They were simple, plain white pieces of durable card, devoid of decoration on the back, bare of art on the front. The sensitive nerves behind Seth's eyes pulsed with the genesis of a migraine – a bad one, he could tell, it'd likely be one of the ones that left him almost blind for hours. Smiling skullishly, he whispered thanks to the Emperor. The pain was a message to pay heed to his duties, and it helped him focus on matters of the internal, not the chaos of the camp. A timely blessing.

He touched the first naked card with an ungloved fingertip.

A body, browned with age and blackened in death, sits locked within a great throne of gold, steel and brass. The corpse's mouth is open, projecting a silent scream that echoes through the unseen layers of the universe. Before the howling cadaver, a legion of angels kneels, crying violet tears.

The God-Emperor, Inversed

Seth was gone from his body now, deep within the tarot reading, but maintained a faint connection to his physical form. He sensed its muscles lock tight, a rictus forming across his own lips that he could neither feel nor control. A warm tickle on his chin – he was drooling already, and that was bad – threatened to violate his immersion and drag him back to the world of flesh, blood and bone. A second's refocusing; a twist of mental strength, like a contortionist escaping his bonds.

The temperature in his skull lowered again. Soothing. Very soothing. A mercy.

Unsurprisingly, the God-Emperor was an auspicious card in the Cadian Tarot. When drawn from the deck, it bespoke of warp travel, of discovery, of hope in the cold depths of space. Inversed, when drawn upside down, it foretold of the warp's malign touch infecting the servants of the Imperium. A hopeless war. Death from the far reaches of space.

Seth returned enough of his consciousness to touch the second card, unpleasantly racked by the fast-growing headache. He tasted blood. Was he bleeding from his nose? Already?

An eye. The Eye. A wound in reality, an open scar in space where the bruise-purple and blood-red eye of Chaos leered into the galaxy. The stars die around the Eye: some fading into cold blackness, others bursting in white hot torment. The Eye stares dully, as it always does, a malicious glare with little emotion beyond distant hate.

But the nebula flares, tendrils spreading across space.

The Eye has opened.

The Great Eye

Seth lifted trembling fingers from the card, sparing himself the vision. An uncomfortable constriction in his throat coupled with the flood of bitter saliva in his mouth threatened a violent purge of his stomach soon.

The Great Eye... The Archenemy's heart and the bastion of his strength. To draw this card was to foretell of war against Chaos, or an amplification of a current conflict. Specifically, it foretold that the conflict would be familiar to

those born on Cadia, for the Great Eye was something they lived with each day of their lives.

Seth's queasiness arose from where the card had been drawn. Directly after the God-Emperor inversed? The second and fourth cards were drawn as signifiers, bringing clarity to the ones preceding them. Dark, dark portents.

Something will intensify this war. Something black and hateful from the warp. Seth touched the third card, unaware of the bloody drool pinking his teeth.

The galaxy burns. A figure stands in ancient armour, wreathed in a billion screaming souls that encircle him like mist. In its right gauntlet, Holy Terra blackens and crumbles. A demigod's blood drips from the talons. In the dim reaches of the vision, almost an afterthought, a distant howling light fades into darkness and silence. The figure smiles for the first time in ten thousand years.

The Despoiler, Inversed

The vision pained him, but Seth quenched the agony with cold logic. The card is inversed. The psychic resonance – the card's 'art' – is not the vital factor here. He caught his breath, removing the fingertips from its gentle rest against the blank card.

When drawn, the Despoiler card is the bane of life, the truest indicator of coming loss and unavoidable bloodshed for the Imperium of Man. But inversed? The psyker breathed deeply, trying to calm his aching heart as it pounded against his thin ribs. He'd never seen the card drawn inversed before. Indeed, he'd only drawn the Despoiler once in his life before this moment, in the weeks before the invasion of Cadia, three years before.

Inversed... A rival for the Despoiler? Someone destined to stand against the Archenemy's machinations? Seth's fingertips hovered above the card. The clarity of the prophecy was clouded, ruined by his own unfamiliarity with the card he'd drawn. So tempting to touch it again and renew the fierce vision. Just a few moments of pain. He could take it.

No.

He couldn't.

A great portion of his training in the control of his wild, unreliable talent emphasised the limits of the mortal mind and the physical shell that carried it. To read the Emperor's Tarot was to open oneself to the warp, and caution was not a

virtue to be discarded on a whim. This reading was already devastatingly potent, which lent credence to its import and accuracy. Seth's sight was blurred from the pulsing migraine and he smelled vomit, the scent thick and tangy, coupled with a lumpy warmth in his lap. Momentary blackouts. He'd not even felt the purging of his stomach.

One card remained untouched. The signifier. The card that would put a frame of reference on The Despoiler Inversed. His hand stayed raised above it for a second, a minute, an hour – Seth had no idea of external time with his thoughts so adamantly turned inward. He could feel his own life ticking away in time to his body's natural cycle, and felt the unnatural acceleration, the degeneration of his cells, from exerting his psychic strength day after day.

He sensed his own smile but did not feel it. To expend one's life in service to the Emperor was all he wished. He was Cadian Shock through and through, no matter if he was banned from marching and training alongside them.

His mother's eyes had been violet. She had died for the Imperium. He would die for the Imperium, too. The thought made his blood burn with pride. *A life spent bringing death to the Emperor's foes is a life lived in full.* Those words were etched in the stone above the doors of every building in Kasr Poitane, where Seth was born.

Now. Now was the time. What one soul would be the defiant fulcrum upon which the whole Reclamation spun? Who would be the bane of the Despoiler's plans?

Seth's fingertips landed, trembling but tense with purpose.

And he saw a face he had seen a thousand times before.

Captain Thade made the sign of the aquila over a chestplate still smeared with the blood of the plague-slain. He'd been back at the command base for fifteen minutes, and while Seth had retired to his tent, the captain had seen his men billeted and taken his inner circle to the lord general's tent.

He'd been handed a message from an engineering servitor saying that Rax was ready at last, but no matter how keen he was to deal with it, Rax had to wait. Before anything else, Thade had to deal with the lord general. He'd said to Darrick only the week before that he'd rather lose his arm again than report to Lord General Maggrig once more. Darrick hadn't laughed. He knew it wasn't a joke. Maggrig bled pettiness. He exuded a smirking, preening condescension. It ran from his pores the way a fat man sweats.

Lord General Maggrig was the wrong side of seventy, his long face

characterised by age's lines rather than war's scars. While his rank and wage entitled him to partake of the youth-renewing juvenat drug process along with the accompanying surgery, Fineas Maggrig had chosen not to indulge. He believed in a man living out his natural span in service to the Emperor, and those who 'stole days' were wasting time in life when they could be beside the Emperor's throne in the afterlife. Unshakeable faith made him a preferential candidate to lead this theatre, and the Hadriss Rift 40th Armoured soaked up the glory of their commander bearing the title Overseer of the Reclamation.

Thade had researched the lord general's history prior to planetfall. He needn't have bothered. Upon seeing Overseer Maggrig in the flesh he realised why using his clearance to study his new commanding officer's record had been a waste of time. The lord general had arrived a week after the rest of the Hadriss Rift 40th, freshly promoted from pacifying some minor heresy near his homeworld and bearing three rows of medals upon his chest. Thade had tried not to smile as he'd recognised them all one by one. Long service, long service, long service. There, a Corwin's Cross for tactical genius. Another long service medal, then two more for tactical prowess in various theatres, and a Mechanicum Fellowship Skull for honourably defending a Forge World without the loss of any Adeptus Mechanicus hierarchs. Nice. Very nice.

But worrying.

Thade was smart enough not to judge the new lord general too harshly – he'd earned those medals for a reason, after all – but the captain was Cadian enough to secretly chafe at the thought of following the man's orders. The lord general had spent his entire career leading Guardsmen safely from the back.

It wasn't the Cadian way. With the Great Eye staring eternally down at their world, Cadian doctrine favoured the bold: those men and women who stood on the front lines, seeing the enemy with their own eyes and ordering their allies into battle with their own raised voices.

Thade's breast was hardly beribboned in honour's blazing colours, but the Ward of Cadia shone silver on his helmet. That counted. When he'd been awarded it only a handful of weeks before for his command in the Black Crusade, the captain had wanted to hide it away in his personal belongings. It had been Engineer Osiron who'd advised him to affix it to the front of his combat helm.

'Others do not see it as you see it, Parmenion.' Osiron was one of the few members of the 88th to ever call Thade by his first name. 'To you it's something painful you fear you'll never live up to. To others, it's a symbol that even in

defeat, their *first* defeat, heroism still thrives. It offers not just hope, but the hope for vengeance.'

Vengeance. That was an ideal every soldier in the Cadian Shock could cling to, as the Thirteenth Black Crusade raged. Thade nodded.

'I guess they had to hand one out to someone,' Thade had said, turning the silver skull-and-gate medal over in his newly-implanted bionic hand. The implant was so fresh it didn't even have synthetic skin grafted over it yet.

'You earned it,' Osiron breathed in his hissing way. 'We all saw you earn it.'

Thade said nothing to that. His gaze spoke volumes.

He lowered his hands at the Overseer's nod, dispersing his memories and returning all attention to the present. Lord General Maggrig's tent was erected in the shadow of the Hadris Rift bulk lander *Unity*. The tent itself was a cube of leather-reinforced cloth, useful for keeping the wind out and the sound of voices in. Expensive chairs of pale oak ringed a circular table made from the same wood. Maps were spread across the table, as were several data-slates and pict-viewers evidently left over from the last meeting. The lord general was alone. That fact surprised Thade, leaving him on edge. He couldn't think why Overseer Maggrig would need privacy to conduct a debriefing.

'At ease, warden-captain,' the lord general said in his usual clipped tones. Maggrig was the only man Thade had met who could make one of Cadia's highest military honour titles sound like he was swallowing something that tasted foul. *Warden-captain*, he said. To rhyme with *bastard*.

'Just "captain" is fine,' Thade said, and not for the first time. If he had to hear the title he hadn't gotten used to, he'd rather not hear it mangled. 'I've come to make my report, sir.'

'Then do it, soldier. But first, who are these men and why are they here?'

Thade gestured left, then right. 'Honoured Enginseer Bylam Osiron. Scout-Lieutenant Adar Vertain. They stand with me to bear witness and make their own reports. I assumed the lord general would prefer first-hand accounts of what happened the night Reclamation forces sighted primary-class threats.'

'Of course. Proceed.' Maggrig offered a magnanimous wave of a thin, vein-marked hand that sported three large rings. Thade caught himself wondering if those hands had held a lasgun once in the last forty years. What kind of soldier wore rings like that, anyway? Thade and Osiron shared a momentary glance, thinking the same thoughts. The rocks on the Overseer's knuckles could bring in enough coin to keep the 88th refuelled for a month.

Jewellery was another ostentation Cadians had little love for. When every

scrap of metal on your home world went to the forge factories to be made into weaponry and almost all personal wealth was tied into military gear and property, displaying one's wealth in flamboyant displays seemed wasteful and decadent. It was often said of the Cadians that they as a people had no eye for beauty.

Thade had no idea if that was true or not. He found beauty in many things: alien landscapes, the weather patterns in the heavens of other worlds, slender women with dark hair... But self-awareness was one of his strengths. He knew he had no capacity to understand what was supposed to be attractive about wearing one's wealth in such a pointless display.

'I'm waiting, captain.'

Throne, what a pompous ass. Thade drew breath to reply.

'My Sentinel squadron first intercepted suspicious vox-chatter as they scouted ahead to plot a course to the monastery held by the Janus Sixth.'

'You lost our beachhead within the city.'

Once Thade had finished speaking, the lord general's appraisal was blunt and – at least technically – correct.

'My orders were to reinforce the Janus Sixth at dawn and hold the monastery if we could. The Janusians were annihilated before we arrived, despite my men making for the monastery in the middle of the night.' Thade narrowed his eyes, feeling his muscles tense. He didn't mention the idiotic vainglory that sent the Janus 6th so far ahead of the main force. The lord general's pursed lips twisted into a thin frown.

'Your orders, warden-captain, were to hold the Reclamation's most promising incursion point into Solthane. You lost our forward base.'

'The Janus Sixth lost it when they were slaughtered.'

'You were present after that event.'

Osiron shook his head slightly, setting his crimson hood rustling in a soft hiss of silken material. It wasn't a disagreement with the lord general; it was a warning to Thade not to lose his temper.

'With the greatest respect, Overseer,' Thade met the older man's gaze, 'I am Cadian Shock. We don't forget our orders. My men were to reinforce the monastery *if such a defence was viable*.'

'It was viable. You said so yourself.'

Thade detested this petty conversational thrusting and parrying. It wasn't in his blood to argue with an officer like this, but then again, he wasn't used to serving

under such a pathetic excuse for a lord general.

No, that wasn't quite true. Maggrig wasn't pathetic. This was what Osiron was warning against. Don't disrespect the lord general purely for his variant approach to command. In arrogance, lay self-deception. Now focus.

Yet he wasn't going to allow his men to take a mark of cowardice on their records just because the lord general needed someone to blame for overextending his forces.

'Not at all, lord general. I said quite clearly the only way my available forces could have remained in the Shrine of the Emperor's Undying Majesty would be if they sealed themselves in the undercroft network and awaited reinforcement.'

'That would be holding, Thade.'

'Hardly, sir,' the captain laughed. It instantly set the lord general's glare aflame.

'Explain yourself.'

'It would be a few survivors languishing in the dark and voxing for rescue.'

'I had requested aid from Cadia in the belief its units were valorous. You disappoint me, warden-captain.'

The three Cadians fell silent. Vertain swallowed, clenching his teeth to prevent saying something he'd be executed for. Even Osiron's mechanical breathing slowed and quieted. Thade leaned on the table, knuckles down, and faced the ageing general.

'I will follow my orders to the best of my ability at all times. If the lord general of the Reclamation deems it necessary to send a fraction of my regiment into an engagement that the assigned campaign tacticians argued against, then so be it. If the lord general appoints a mechanised infantry company to lock itself within a siege situation, then I'll do all I can to make sure those orders are carried out. But I've been fighting the Archenemy since my recruitment into the Cadian Youth legion at fourteen years of age. Every single man in a Cadian uniform was raised to assemble and fire a standard-issue lasgun before he could read and write. If the 88th falls back, it's because in the considered opinion of every veteran officer among our number, we had to fall back.'

'I see,' the lord general said simply. It was almost a sneer.

'I confirmed the Janusians were dead – just as I'd said they would be when their initial assault was planned. My Sentinels have remapped over half of the eastern district, updating the data readouts with post-plague geographical analysis. I've confirmed the presence of the XIV Traitor Legion.'

At this point, Thade gestured with a bloodstained glove to the pict slate he'd

placed on the table. Its surface display was still auto-cycling through images of the Death Guard Astartes confronted by Thade's squad. The final three pics showed the hulking creature dead, its armour blackened from las-fire and cracked open from bolt rounds. Maggots and black organic filth had spilled from the wounds.

'And my men killed several hundred Remnant as we fell back from the monastery,' Thade finished.

'They came for the vehicles,' Osiron's snake voice hissed mechanically. 'They struck in a horde of plague-slain as we readied to draw back.'

'We killed another three Death Guard as we fought off the Remnant and made ready to withdraw,' Vertain added. 'Confirmed kills, verified by the gun cameras of Dead Man's Hand.'

'By... what?' asked Maggrig.

'Sentinel Squadron C-Eighty-Eight Alpha,' Thade said. Vertain made an apologetic salute to the general. He'd not meant to fall into regimental slang.

Overseer Maggrig leaned back in his arch-backed wooden chair, gazing around the empty command tent with its unrolled maps hanging from the walls and his ornamental weapons on racks. His eyes fell upon Thade's chainsword. The captain had cleaned most of the filth from it on the drive back to base, but he was keen to tend to it properly. The weapon's spirit would balk at such disrespect soon.

'That is a beautiful sword, warden-captain.'

Thade inclined his head slightly in a look that could've said 'thank you' as easily as it said 'what in the hells are you talking about?' Ultimately, his voice went with the former.

'My thanks, lord general.'

'Where did you acquire it? You may have noticed I'm something of a collector.'

Thade had noticed. For all his faults, the lord general had a wonderful collection of blades and pistols. The captain doubted they'd been used even once by Maggrig personally, but what surprised him was the fact each piece of the displayed collection was an admirable and apparently fully-functional weapon. No one blade stood out as purely decorative. Not one pistol did Thade recognise as ornamental. They were tools of war, from the plainest sector standard Kantrael-forged bolt pistol similar to Thade's own, to the double-edged power sabre fit for a hive noble on Thracian Prime.

This one aspect of the lord general was the only facet Thade warmed to in his

commander's personality. Of course, the Cadians had been joking for weeks the only way Maggrig could have acquired real weapons was to pilfer them from the corpses of men his orders had killed. But Thade doubted bringing up that little joke would crack a smile across the general's wizened features.

'I'd noticed, sir. Your collection is impressive.'

'And your blade, warden-captain?'

'It was a gift, lord general.'

'Of course, but from whom? Dispense with the modesty. It doesn't suit one with such silver on his helm.'

Was this the lord general's attempt at bonding with one of his men? Or just a deflection? Was this a friendly divergence from the conversation, knowing that Thade had been in the right? A clumsy attempt, if it was, but the captain was wrong-footed for a moment. The Overseer's voice remained pinched between a clipped reprimand and a sneer, but the captain had quickly grown used to that.

'It was a gift from Lord Castellan Creed.'

'Ah,' Maggrig smiled a honey-laden smirk. Apparently Thade's answer clarified something in his mind, though the captain couldn't guess what. 'In recognition for your brave efforts during the days before your world fell to the Archenemy.'

The Cadians stiffened for the second time. Vertain drew breath to speak but Thade cut him off with a brisk wave.

'Dismissed, lieutenant,' the captain said.

Chafing, almost shaking in anger, the Sentinel pilot made the sign of the aquila and stalked from the tent.

'Home has not *fallen*, lord general.' Thade's voice was measured and precise. 'We fight on, even now.'

Maggrig did so love to see the much-vaunted Cadian pride take a bruising. Superior bastards, every one of them.

'I've seen the reports, warden-captain. Months into this new crusade, and over half the planet still in the grip of the Despoiler's forces. A shame, truly. Rather an important world to lose like that.'

Thade's reply was long in coming. He took several breaths in silence, pointedly moved his hands away from his weapon belt, picked up the data-slate he'd brought in with him, and handed it to Osiron.

Cadian blood, he kept thinking. Ice in your veins.

'Am I dismissed, sir?' he asked after almost a minute had passed.

'No.'

Thade stood impassively. 'As you wish. Is there more you want to know?'

'No. But two points remain.'

'I'm listening,' said Thade. 'Sir.'

'Firstly, you're aware your questionable actions have earned my displeasure tonight.'

'I'm aware the lord general would have liked matters to have proceeded differently.'

'Exactly so. With that in mind... Tell me, the 88th makes use of a sanctioned psyker, does it not?'

'I fail to see what that has to do with the situation.'

'Answer me, warden-captain.'

'Seth Roscrain, ident number C-Eighty-Eight X-zero-one. Awarded the Blood Star at Jago III for wounds taken in an act of self-sacrifice.'

'Yes. Seth, that's the one. Am I to understand the 88th currently lacks commissarial support to deal with a sanctioned psyker?'

Thade smiled his crooked grin. He saw where this was going. 'I can recite the Cadian code of law that allows any officer above the rank of lieutenant to take additional training with regards to being qualified to deal with, and execute if necessary, a sanctioned psyker. I have that training, as does every lieutenant in my command.'

'All the same, this is my Reclamation and I will take no chances by relying on some Cadian loophole. You are to be appointed a commissar immediately.'

Thade watched the old man, his violet eyes narrowed. What game was he playing?

'The 88th hasn't had a commissar in over seventeen years.'

'I deem it necessary now.' The lord general thumped a wad of printed papers on the table. 'One day you charge into battle when it would be more prudent to fall back. Then the next you run when you have orders to hold. Thade, Thade, Thade... You're unreliable. It says as much in these reports. What are you trying to prove, boy? Trying to live up to that medal, eh? No, this is the right choice. It will put some steel in your spine.'

Thade could happily have lopped the old bastard's head clean from his shoulders at that moment. Instead, he forced himself to nod. The simple motion was one of the hardest things he'd ever had to do.

'Ha! I see that nod cost you. I see it in your eyes. "Cadian blood, no blood more precious." I know how you think, Thade. I know how all you Shock boys think. Let me tell you, warden-captain. We're all equal in my task force. So

you'll take this commissarial appointment and you'll smile. Understood?'

Thade made the sign of the aquila again. 'And your second point, sir?'

The order to subject his regiment to a commissar's appointment had more than just surprised Thade: it had been the last thing he'd seen coming. That's why Lord General Maggrig's next matter rocked him to his core.

'Against my better judgement, your unit has been requested for a specific duty.'

Thade raised an eyebrow. 'Oh?'

'Yes, warden-captain. As of this moment, the 88th is seconded to His Imperial Majesty's Holy Inquisition.'



CHAPTER V

The Ordo Sepulchrum

Aboard the Inquisitorial vessel, *The Night Star*

Inquisitor Bastian Caius was one hundred and nineteen years old. Behind his eyes simmered a thousand unspoken secrets. Sometimes he would muse upon his role: a life spent in devotion to finding truth in the darkness, learning of creatures and heresies that the overwhelming majority of the great and glorious Imperium would never see. Three quarters of his life had been spent seeing and hearing things that, to the overwhelming majority of mankind, didn't exist.

While Caius was over a hundred, he looked thirty. Juvenat processes were the privilege of the Imperium's wealthiest and most valuable servants, and the inquisitor considered himself a member of both categories. He bore more than his fair share of scars, but that was to be expected given his interrogator years had been spent apprenticed to Inquisitor Shyva Kresskien. That old hag, may her bones rest in the Emperor's light, had always demanded the fiercest faith and fervour from her interrogator pupils. The list of her accomplishments was long indeed – one of the Ordo Xenos Scarus's lengthiest rolls of honour, as it happened – but so was the scroll listing interrogators and agents slain in her service. The few men and women that survived her demanding apprenticeships were rightly counted among the most capable inquisitors in the sector.

Caius himself had almost died in his former mistress's service on several occasions. His lips were split by a permanent scar near the right edge of his mouth, taken when a heretic had come too close with a knife. His left leg from the knee down was a bionic claw, his shin wreathed in thick metal and the foot itself a four-toed talon resembling a Sentinel walker's thudding limb.

The most obvious modification was his eye. Caius's left eye was an ugly

augmetic, a blood-red lens fixed in a steel focusing ring surgically grafted to his face in a restructured eye socket of chrome. The implant had been costly (for the old crone always rewarded her worthy apprentices as befitted their dutiful service) but as with many bionics, the mechanical eye was all business and no artistry. The lens could detect the most subtle movement in its field of vision, even a man's breathing, and relay it instantly to Caius's shoulder-mounted psycannon, forming a fast and flawless targeting system. A further enhancement took the form of an attached aura-scrye scanner, forming a secondary red lens eye projecting from a bronze and steel implant attached to the inquisitor's temple. With his sight linked between these two false eyes and his natural vision, Caius could literally see psychic emissions, translated into his second lens as an angry heat-flare surrounding the psyker responsible.

Inquisitor Caius didn't care in the slightest that the left side of his face from temple to jaw line was a mess of expensive chrome and steel. He hadn't given any true regard to his appearance in decades. He'd seen too many others scarred in his former mistress's service to delude himself that his Inquisitorial duties would leave him attractive in any way. Caius was, in all things, something of a realist.

He was also one of the few who had known shrineworld Kathur would fall. That galled him even now, weeks later, not because his warnings had gone unheeded – indeed, they had been heeded well, the response to his warnings had been as impressive as they were ruthless – but because the pupils of Inquisitor Kresskien were simply not used to failure.

He waited now aboard his ship, *The Night Star*, sipping full-bodied vintage amasec and staring into the amber liquid's depths, enjoying this opportunity to swim in memory. As Caius waited for Captain Thade, he mused on the moment he'd learned Kathur's particular truth. The truth from the lips of a heretic. Such delicious irony. This had been months ago, in the weeks before the planet died.

The heretic had screamed, of course. They always did.

The traitor was incarcerated in the Kelmarl asteroid prison complex: a vermin-infested hole for some of Scarus Sector's more wretched criminals, all of whom were deemed unfit for immediate execution by Imperial authorities and sentenced to lives of slave labour. Petty thieves whose lawyers had allowed them to escape local mutilation laws were slammed into squalid communal cells alongside small-time embezzlers and underhive gangers who avoided death sentences by ratting out their friends. Life in the Kelmarl complex was an endless cycle of short sleep allowances and long shifts in pressure suits mining

within the asteroid's tunnel network.

The heretic undergoing interrogation had been locked up for weapons smuggling, selling weaponry bound for Imperial Guard regiments to bidding mercenary outfits in the pay of local governors. It seemed a textbook case to Kelmarl's warden, and he had had the smuggler working his life away in the mines, breaking his back for the good of the Imperium. The Inquisition had arrived without warning, a single ship carrying a lone inquisitor and his small team, demanding to speak with an apparently minor criminal.

The heretic had been quite a screamer.

Caius swallowed a mouthful of the agonisingly expensive amasec, not enjoying the rich taste. The musing recollection turned sour. Even the memory of the moment annoyed him, as he'd faced the heretic at the end of days of torture.

That screaming...

...was relentless.

Inquisitor Caius ignored the sound, frowning at the blood on the floor. If this carried on much longer, he was going to have difficulty walking in the room. With a sigh and a brief wave of his gloved hand, the inquisitor stopped the torture. It was boring and unproductive, and Caius was not a patient man.

The solitary confinement cell was a box of a room with a red-streaked table as the only furniture. Pentagrammic sigils blazed on the grey floor, etched into the stone some hours before, each indented symbol filled with trickles of blessed water. The watery letters vibrated every time the heretic thrashed against the bonds that leashed him to the table.

'Enough,' said the inquisitor. His was a commanding voice, as one might expect from a man of his vocation, yet it carried with it an unnatural edge of roughness. The source of Caius's vocal harshness was as clear as a second smile: a jagged scar across his throat told of an old injury and semi-successful reconstructive surgery. This too was earned in his interrogator days under Kresskien.

The torturer stopped his work and stepped back from the surgery table, yet the man strapped there still screamed, his cries mixing with gasping breaths surging in and out of what was left of his face. Caius waited as the yells sank down into moans, then faded further into desperate, animalistic panting. He resisted the urge to look at his timepiece. The gold pocket watch rested comfortably in the pouch by his left holster. It had been a gift from his former mistress. A deathbed gift, in fact.

He had performed the rituals of purification and repentance only a few times alone, but had assisted many times at the side of the old woman that had trained him. Caius knew what he was doing.

‘Jareth.’ The inquisitor’s voice was now that of a fine teacher or a gifted storyteller: engaging, considerate, emotional. It was almost impossible to tell his throat had been shredded by a xenos projectile weapon seventeen years before. ‘Heretic, I grow bored of this. I am running out of patience, and you are running out of blood. We’ve come to the endgame. It’s over now. Tell me what I want to know and I’ll see you dead before your heart beats out another painful thump. Is that not what you desire? Fast passage away from this agony?’

Jareth’s reply – after three mumbled attempts at speech – was a short insult in Cadian vernacular. Caius was too far away, so the heretic spat at the torturer. The effort resulted in nothing more than a gooey string of bloody saliva crawling down the heretic’s own chin.

Now Caius checked his timepiece. He was getting hungry, and the prison warden’s table had been surprisingly well-set with delicacies for the duration of the inquisitor’s stay. Maybe another ten minutes.

Caius cleared his throat. The old damage to his neck made it sound like a dangerous purr, which reached the torturer’s senses. The torturer in question was a servitor mono-tasked to serve in the role, and various small blades, bone saws, drill bits and flesh-peeling hooks deployed from its mechanical arms as it registered the inquisitor’s displeased growl. Another gesture from Caius had the servitor backing down. He’d tried the scourging. Now it was time to offer mercy. No interrogation of lowlife detritus like Jareth, a mere cultist, should last this long. It was getting beyond the realm of being remotely amusing.

‘Jareth, listen to me.’ The inquisitor leaned close to the table now, gritting his teeth momentarily against the reek of disease lifting from the mutilated Chaos worshipper’s open wounds. ‘I know you sold those weapons to tainted men. You will die for that. But you suffer for no cause, enduring agony for no reason. In whoring your soul to the Ruinous Powers, you have ensured your death will be no release from pain. Unless you recant now. Unless you recant, pray for forgiveness, while there is breath left in your body.’

Freed of fresh torment for almost a minute, the heretic strained against the bonds securing his limbs to the bloodstained table. His only reply, if indeed it was supposed to be one, emerged as a slurred moan of effort.

‘Jareth,’ Caius narrowed his eyes. The cadence of his storyteller’s voice altered, slowed, dropped a touch. He sounded like a spiteful parent telling a child

that the monsters under his bed were all too real. ‘Jareth, I am offering you salvation. I have stood in this room for three days, forcing myself to breathe in the stench of your lies and listening to you howl. Again and again you rave in the name of daemons. Those false gods are coming to eat your soul. I offer *hope*.’

As if on cue, the heretic launched into another shrieking tirade, calling upon unholy names that made the inquisitor’s mind ache. Caius silenced the blasphemy with a nod to the torturer servitor. Drills whined as they came alive, made mushy sounds as they forcefully entered flesh, and protested noisily against the resistance of bone. Caius breathed easier. Even screaming was better than ranting to the gods of the warp.

When the noise subsided, Caius put away his pocket watch and tried again.

‘Jareth, tell me what I wish to know and I will kill you now in the Emperor’s grace. He will protect you. Or continue this performance, if you wish. I will seal you in this cell with my servitor, after programming it to skin you alive. When you finally die in several days’ time, your soul will fall into the maws of the Chaos-things that await you.’

The heretic drew breath to speak, but convulsed in fevered thrashings, blood and spit spraying from his ruined lips. Several flecks spattered on the servitor’s face, which it ignored completely.

‘Every moment of pain is a prayer!’ he cried.

‘Is that so?’ Caius kept his hand away from his holster. The effort it took was supreme.

‘I am beloved of the Ruinous Powers!’

‘You are a heretic strapped to a table, moments from death.’

‘I suffer to prove myself worthy!’

‘Then you learn now how it was all wasted effort.’ Caius tilted his head slightly – a predator studying wounded prey. The psycannon mounted on his solid bronze shoulder pad whirred as it primed, building up power and auto-racking a bolt. As with the servitor, it responded to the inquisitor’s darkening mood, and as with the servitor, Caius willed the weapon into calmness.

He watched Jareth with his dual sight: his natural eye seeing the bleeding, dying man, his red-washed false sight seeing the beginnings of a sickening blue corona dawning around the heretic’s face.

Psychic energy. *Powerful* psychic energy.

In the weeks to come, when Bastian Caius looked back upon the events that transpired here, he would recognise this moment as the second when everything

slipped out of his control. To his dying day, he felt sick just recalling what followed.

The heretic's head snapped round to stare Caius full in the face. Red tears ran in erratic trails down Jareth's lacerated cheeks.

Is he crying blood? Caius wondered, through the intensifying thunder of his own heart.

This was new.

And this was not good.

The inquisitor was about to speak when the dozens of pentagrammic wards acid-etched into the walls of the cell – which had taken an Ecclesiarchy priest over a week to complete in astonishing detail – flared with a dull light. Then they, too, started bleeding.

Yes. This was definitely not good.

For days, the room had reeked: a dank and obscenely biological smell. Now it soured further, the choking air turning thick with the taste of rancid copper. Caius rested a trembling hand on the aquila-shaped solid gold pommel of his sheathed and deactivated power sword.

'Inquisitor Caius.' The voice was a growl: an inhuman snarl from a human throat. Something ancient and deeply amused now spoke through Jareth's lips.

Oh, Throne of the God-Emperor. Possession...

As if hearing the inquisitor's thoughts, the entity wearing Jareth's body cried out a sound as primal and inhuman as a great tide roaring in. It drowned out the building whine of Caius's psycannon, and the hiss of the inquisitor's power sword as it was torn from its scabbard, yet not ignited.

Somewhere in the back of the wrath-driven howl, like an accompanying chorus, Caius heard Jareth – the real Jareth – sobbing. The sound made Caius's skin crawl, pressing into his mind like a cold slug slipping through his eardrum. The sense of something else within the room, something palpable but unseen, turned Caius's tongue thick in his mouth. His false eyes focused and refocused, trying to perceive the hateful blue miasma surrounding the heretic, burning brightest from his eyes, lighting his skull from within.

Caius's psychic strength saved him from a much worse fate. Unholiness battered against his skull, a wave of emotional malice projected with psychic force. The inquisitor sagged, but stood resolute. Unprotected from warp emanations, the torturer servitor shuddered as if shot in the head. Its left eye popped in a small welter of yellowing jelly and red juice.

Caius chanted creeds of admonition and exorcism, yet the words caught in his

mind, snagging half-forgotten between his thoughts and lips. The massing hate, thick as fog in the air, spoke volumes. This was so much more than some mere warp-beast.

Daemon...

The ragged form which had once been Jareth Kurr, chief factory overseer of Kantrael's Gamma-19 Forge district, squirmed on the gurney, graceless yet perversely fluid in his motions. The petty heretic had pissed his soul away in sacrifice to a being far more powerful than Caius had predicted. The inquisitor's muscles seized at the heretic's laughter, spasming painfully. He couldn't raise his blade to strike the daemon down where it lay. He couldn't even take a step closer to the damn thing. The creature's howling merriment in Caius's mind fired his nerve synapses, rendering him unable to control his own body.

Detecting the inquisitor's panic through synapse-links, the psycannon mounted on his shoulder made a series of minor targeting adjustments. It pointed directly at the wash of blue energy invisible to mortal eyes, its ammunition feeds primed and the chime of readiness ringing in the inquisitor's mind like an alarm.

But it didn't fire. It *wouldn't* fire. His mind couldn't order it to – the daemon's psychic presence made sure of that.

'Kill it!' the inquisitor cried to the attendant servitor. The mono-tasked torturer moved forward, flesh drills and bone saws buzzing, oblivious to its ruined eye leaking a trail of dark fluid down its cheek.

Caius saw, with painful clarity, the paradox playing out before his unblinking eyes. Jareth was a frail, stick-thin factory boss in his fifties who had spent his adult life in offices tallying figures of weapon shipments for the Imperial Guard. The thought of such a man being able to overpower an augmented Inquisitorial servitor was too ludicrous to contemplate. But it was no longer Jareth. Caius sensed the heretic, like a ghost or a shadow, outside his own flesh. The daemon-thing's theft of the body was almost complete.

The servitor flashed backwards, hurled through the air and meeting the wall with a wrenching snap of vertebrae. Caius didn't spare it a glance, though he saw its dying twitches in the corner of his eye.

Finally, the daemon spoke again.

'My master is the death of worlds. He is the death of Scarus. His name is lost to you, lost to your pitiful brethren. Ten thousand suns have died since it was last spoken by the lips of men. Once it was known to many, in the era when your corpse-god reached out to reclaim the stars. My master was there then, and he laughed at your Emperor. He laughed as your corpse-god wept, finding nothing

more than a galaxy that despised him.'

With each word, Jareth seemed to calm down more and more, falling into a state of trembling inactivity. The room resonated with the unearthly echo of the daemon's words forced through human vocal chords.

'I will end you,' Caius said through clenched teeth. It was all he could do to speak through the muscle-lock. 'In the name of He who sits upon the Throne of Holy Terra, I will end you.'

The daemon turned its head and laughed, a rattlesnake sound, and vomited a stream of black blood. The bile washed over the prone servitor slumped against the wall, and though the slave ignored the treatment, its skin began to darken and blister as if washed in boiling water. The tender flesh where the servitor's metal augments met nerve-dead human skin started to bleed. Its numbed brain registered damage, though not pain, and it started to emit monotone moans as the acidic gush ravaged its biological body parts. Its whines lacked both expression and emotion. It was, after all, capable of neither.

'Ignorance,' the daemon hissed. Hearing its voice was like standing in a room thick with flies. Caius felt each word like the unpleasant tickling of insect legs on his skin. 'Such ignorance...'

After throwing up the blackness, the daemon seemed to wither. Caius gasped as his muscles unlocked, immediately launching into a chant of the Fourteenth Creed of Admonition and Banishment. The words came to his mind now with ease, flashing behind his eyes like quicksilver, each hymnal sentence a brutal chastisement of all warp entities that defiled the perfection of human flesh by possession.

He didn't stop to wonder why the daemon's strength was eroding. For the moment, he didn't care. It didn't matter.

Jareth hissed through his teeth, letting out a terrible buzz as if someone had kicked a wasp nest into a snake pit. His flesh deflated, collapsing in on itself, and the air turned dense with the metallic scent of blood. 'This is nothing! It means nothing! On the saint's world it is fated! My master awakens! He will defile your holy world! Do you hear his cry echoing across the warp? He calls to many of us, across the stars... those with the senses to hear his cries... the diseased, the dying, the sickened... I will serve at his side! I will—'

'You will die.'

The buzzing ceased instantly as the shoulder-mounted psycannon barked once. The only sounds in the room were the echo of the gunshot and the final breath rasping from Jareth's exploded windpipe. The bolt shell, personally inscribed

with litanies of purity by Caius himself, had taken the heretic in the chest and detonated in his lungs. Caius wiped flecks of blood from his cheek, noting with a grimace how the wetness stung his flesh. Toxicology tests would need to be done on Jareth's blood samples.

A final word rang in his ears as the aftermath of the gunshot faded. Caius would never know if it came from the air or Jareth's last breath.

'Kathur.'

He hefted his sword in hands that no longer shook, thumbing the activation rune on the hilt to wreath the blade in crackling energy. Caius remained in the room only long enough to destroy the dying servitor with a precise beheading. Even if it could be saved, the thing was surely wretched with taint after such an assault.

After that was done, the inquisitor left without looking back at the mess that had once been Jareth. Outside the solitary confinement cell, the prison warden stood with a squad of guards. They had been waiting some time, and fairly reeked of fear. The grunts did, at least. The warden did not.

'Is all well, inquisitor?' the warden asked. He was an aged man, appointed from the Cadian Shock some years before. Where others in his position might be fearful of His Divine Majesty's Holy Inquisition, the warden was confident and strong-willed, taking an active hand in the running of his prison complex. It pleased him to serve the Emperor now, no matter how unpleasant the duty. No matter how unpleasant and cold the Inquisition's own men were to deal with. Caius had not made a warm impression on the prison warden.

'Burn the remains,' Caius said. 'Then seal the room. You will be contacted by the Ordo Scarus Inquisition when you are allowed to use the cell again. It may be several decades.' He took a deep breath and met the warden's eyes. 'It may be never.'

The warden nodded and gestured to one of his men carrying a flamer in readiness for this very order. 'Let me do it,' he said.

Caius walked away, leaving them to their work. There was research to be done, and a journey to prepare for.

The saint's world, the daemon had said. A shrineworld in Scarus Sector.

Caius sent warnings to the Ordo Scarus Inquisition, but on the shrineworld's surface, it had already begun. The warnings came too late; the psychic pleas for help reached out only hours after Caius's warnings reached his superiors' ears.

Caius was still in the empyrean, en route to Kathur, when the plague struck in full.

And that was how he failed. All because he reached that accursed heretic a week too late.

The minutes ticked by. Caius watched his pocket-watch, each tick of the second hand eroding his patience a little more. The captain's meeting with the lord general was evidently taking some time.

Caius looked to the other two men in the room, Colonel Lockwood and Major Crayce, both upright and at attention, both clad in the same winter grey fatigues and black body armour as every other soldier in the 88th. Their rank markings stood out in polished silver on their right shoulder pads and the front of their visorless helms.

Finally, the door into Caius's tactical chamber opened. This was the biggest room on his personal gunship – powered down not far from the Cadian tents – and the inquisitor used it for briefing his team and receiving visitors. Captain Thade walked in, making the sign of the aquila to his superior regimental officers, then repeating the gesture for Caius.

'You are late, captain,' said Caius, returning the Imperial salute.

'I am. I apologise, inquisitor.'

'No excuse?'

'No excuse. As I said, I apologise, and I am here now.'

Caius smiled. He liked that answer. 'I have spoken to Colonel Lockwood and Major Crayce, here. And I have spoken to the lord general. I trust you have been informed of the results of those discussions?'

Thade nodded. 'My command, a full one-third of the regiment, is to be seconded to you, to use as you see fit in your duties to the Throne.'

'Quite so, quite so.' Caius returned his timepiece to his jacket pocket. His false eyes focused on Thade with muted whirring sounds. He dismissed the bio-scan readings that flashed up behind his retinas. Thade was healthy. Nothing else of interest.

Colonel Lockwood, pushing fifty now and still as tenacious and fit as a soldier in his prime, watched the proceedings in respectful silence. He had a lot of time for Thade – the boy was a hero in his eyes, and brought great honour to the regiment with the silver that shone on his helmet. He offered the young captain a subtle nod of encouragement.

Major Crayce, his thin face exaggerated by his drooping moustache, remained firmly at attention, violet eyes fixed on Caius. Specifically, he watched the inquisitor's psycannon, intrigued as the thought-controlled weapon turned and

pivoted with Caius's movements, mirroring every motion of his head.

'May I ask why, inquisitor?' Thade finally asked.

'Why what?'

'Why you've chosen me and my men out of all the Reclamation's forces.' He knew the answer even before asking the question, but Thade had to be sure. Lockwood smiled. Crayce didn't break attention. Caius remained seated, and without a shadow of a smile he tapped the centre of his own forehead, touching his fingers to his skin in the place where Thade's silver shone on his own helm.

'I imagine it's easy to guess why. Now, gentlemen, the captain and I have much to discuss. I thank you for your time.'

Lockwood and Crayce saluted and left, the former with another nod to Thade, the latter with barely a glance. The door closed behind them, and Thade looked back at the inquisitor.

'Tell me, captain,' Caius said, 'what do you know of the Ordo Sepulchrum?'

'What in the Great Eye is the Ordo Sepulchrum?'

Ban Jevrian lay back on his bedroll and looked up at the dark roof of the communal tent. The room smelled like what it was: a makeshift dorm for thirty dirty, sweating Guardsmen.

Taan Darrick sat on the cot next to him, which just like the others was an uncomfortable affair of squealing springs and thin blankets. The lieutenant murmured litanies of devotion and apology as he dismantled his beaten lasrifle for cleaning.

'Give me a moment,' he said between verses. All Cadians were meticulous about the maintenance of their weaponry, but Taan made cleaning into an art. It was all very ritualistic. Each dismantled piece rested on a small scrap of paper scrawled with prayers in the lieutenant's own messy handwriting. There each metal fragment of the rifle sat until it was cleaned, whereupon it would be washed, polished and re-blessed with whispered prayers of accuracy imploring to the machine-spirit within. Finally Taan would reassemble the rifle while speaking the Cadian variant of the Litany of Completion.

'Spirit of the machine, know I honour you. In my hands you are complete, and all I ask is that you fire true.'

'Does your rifle ever talk back to you?' Jevrian asked. He was as diligent as any soldier in maintaining his overcharged weapons – even more so, due to the innate instability of hellgun-class armaments – but Darrick made one hell of a performance in his dutiful maintenance.

Taan finished his work and left the gun resting loaded by his bed.

‘She sings every time I pull the trigger. Now what were you saying?’

‘The captain is meeting with the Ordo Sepulchrum.’

‘So?’

‘So what *is* the Ordo Sepulchrum?’

‘How should I know? Inquisition is Inquisition. A lot of locked doors and secrets I don’t want to learn.’

Jevrian raised an eyebrow. Because of his stern, granite-hard face, it was like part of a mountain moving. ‘Those who make war without knowledge invite defeat through ignorance.’

Taan laughed. ‘That’s officer material. A ranker like you should know better than to quote senior officer inspirational texts, master sergeant.’

‘I like to read. Might make captain one day.’ Jevrian was dead serious, but Taan still grinned.

‘Read a little more, then. “Duty is trust. Our duty is not to question and seek answers to moments in life that escape our understanding. Our duty is the same as our mothers’ and fathers’ duties. To kill for the Emperor and die for His throne. We die in the trust that our sacrifice allows others to live on, doing that same duty. We’re blind now. Blind and lost. But die doing your duty and trust our brothers and sisters as generations before us have trusted theirs”. You recognise that one?’

‘I was there, Darrick. I remember when the captain said that.’

‘Actually, that’s our very own Colonel Lockwood. He’s got some footnotes in the latest edition of *The Valorous Path*.’

Jevrian raised his eyebrow for the second time in the same hour. This was about the most expressive he’d been since Cadia had been invaded, and even when the skies of Home had burned, all he’d said in reaction was to mutter ‘Going to be a busy week...’

But then, learning one of your own regiment was in the Cadian officer-only version of the *Imperial Infantryman’s Uplifting Primer* was definitely not small news.

‘Just a few footnotes,’ Taan said again. ‘Lockwood transcribed Thade’s speech at Kasr Vallock, citing the captain as the embodiment of the values of Cadian officerhood.’

Jevrian was silent. He remembered that speech, that moment, as the shells howled all around and Thade committed the 88th to the field in open battle to... well, Jevrian hated to think about it. But it was hard to forget. That damned

Titan. Throne, that had taken some killing.

‘I bet Thade is furious about that.’ Jevrian knew Thade well, and besides, the captain’s loathing of his men making a big deal out of his medal was well-established.

‘Rax is functioning again. That’ll cheer him up.’

‘Sure, but he’d never give his permission to be quoted.’

‘Lockwood’s a colonel. He didn’t need permission. And you know how much the old man loves Thade. He fought this commissar business tooth and nail.’

Jevrian’s gaze met Taan’s. Word spread around camp fast, but apparently it hadn’t reached the Kasrkin squad yet. ‘What commissar business?’

‘Ah,’ said Taan. ‘That.’



CHAPTER VI

First Blood

Reclamation Headquarters, outside Solthane

Commissar Tionenji was waiting for Thade.

As the captain left the inquisitor's gunship, the commissar stood at the bottom of the gang-ramp leading from the vessel's small internal hangar, his hands loosely clasped behind his back, and his black leather stormcoat flapping in the breeze kicked up by a Valkyrie taking off a short distance away.

He made the sign of the aquila as Thade neared, which the captain returned in kind. Thade hid his expression of annoyance. He'd been hoping to check in on Rax, but that was going to have to wait... again.

When people looked at Commissar Adjatay Tionenji they saw a tall man, his dark skin showing his heritage stretching back to one of the Imperium's countless jungle worlds. He was broad-shouldered, but his frame was slender, sculpted and kept that way by the rigours of constant exercise. His hair was also dark, scraped back from his unkind features and scented with expensive pomade, all under a standard red-trimmed black commissar's cap. His ankle-length jacket was left unbuttoned, revealing his black uniform and a weapon belt with a holstered plasma pistol and a sheathed chainsword – this last forged into an unusually thin, curved shape.

Thade took all of this in before he even made the sign of the aquila, but none of these observations were the first things he noticed. The very first thought that crossed Thade's mind was the instinctive and natural reaction bred into him from birth and through decades of training.

He's not Cadian.

He grinned at the lord general's implied insult, appointing an off-worlder to the 88th. He lowered his hands as he finished the Imperial salute.

‘Why do you smile, warden-captain?’

Thade wasn’t much for lying. ‘Because your eyes aren’t violet.’

‘Should they be?’ Tionenji’s voice was soft and measured, but Thade could already discern the edge of strength that would no doubt show in full when the commissar shouted in battle. It was a mellifluous voice, his tone gentle and honeyed with only a hint of accusation at the captain’s words.

‘It’s a tradition from my home world,’ Thade said, certain the commissar knew that anyway. ‘Shock regiments regard it as a point of honour to have Cadian-born commissars appointed to them.’

‘Your world is a world of war, and such planets breed many orphans.’ Tionenji referred to the commissarial custom of selecting its recruits from children who’d lost both parents in battle. He was still as rigid as if he stood on the parade ground. ‘I imagine Cadia provides many candidates for the Schola Progenium, yes?’

Thade nodded, trying to make up his mind on how to judge the man. ‘Your accent is Rukhian.’

Finally Tionenji smiled – a toothy grin that flashed across his handsome features and vanished so fast Thade wasn’t sure he’d even seen it. ‘Not quite, captain. My birth world was Garadesh, and that shares a similar culture with Rukh. Good guess, though. Why did you say Rukhian?’

‘The way you elongate your vowels. We fought with the Rukh Ninth seven years ago.’

‘The Battle of Tyresius,’ Tionenji said immediately.

‘You’ve done your research.’ Thade wasn’t remotely surprised.

‘I am a commissar,’ Tionenji replied simply.

Thade seemed to muse on something for a moment, then offered his left hand – his human hand – for the commissar to shake. He hoped the Garadeshi wouldn’t miss the significance of the act.

‘Welcome to the Cadian 88th.’

The commissar hesitated just as the captain had, but accepted the awkward left-handed shake.

‘It will be a pleasure to serve the Emperor alongside you, warden-captain.’ Thade forced a smile. Tionenji caught the expression. ‘I am given to understand Cadians are grudging and untrusting with their welcomes, and you are not adept at hiding your discomfort. I am correct, yes?’

Thade chuckled despite himself. ‘Commissar, may we just establish one thing at the beginning of our association?’

‘Name it. I shall give your wishes all due consideration.’

‘Don’t call me “warden-captain”’.

‘Your own rank offends you?’

‘Something like that.’ Thade sought a quick change of subject. ‘Have you been briefed regarding our... unusual assignment?’

‘I have.’ Again, Thade wasn’t surprised at the honey-voiced answer.

‘Have you served with this new ordo before?’

‘I have not.’ Tionenji and Thade talked as they walked back to the Cadian encampment, a small city of black and grey tents. ‘The Inquisition’s new division is something of a mystery to me. I am aware of their mandate to hunt and destroy the plague-slain, and seek the source of the Curse of Unbelief that has ravaged so much of our glorious sector in recent years.’

The two officers neared the Cadian base now, falling under the idle shadow of the massive bulk lander that formed the centrepiece of the camp. ‘That’s more or less my understanding,’ Thade replied. ‘Inquisitor Caius wants to make a sweep of the reliquaries in Solthane and seek the source of Kathur’s outbreak.’

‘Then so it shall be.’ Tionenji nodded. That matched his briefings as well. Now he looked around the near-deserted camp, at the vista of silent tents and the occasional wandering servitor. ‘By the Holy Throne, your camp is as silent as the city itself. Are all Shock outposts so quiet?’

Thade thought it was interesting that the commissar hadn’t even served with Cadians before. Tionenji wasn’t out of his twenties, and it was usually common for veteran commissars to be appointed to the Cadian Shock over younger officers. Again he found himself wondering at the lord general’s reasoning behind the dark-skinned man’s appointment.

‘It’s almost midnight, commissar.’

‘The men sleep?’

Thade laughed, the sound unnaturally loud in the empty camp. As if on cue, the sounds of distant engines roared.

‘No. They train.’

The massed might of the Cadian 88th eclipsed Thade’s mere three hundred men. Over a thousand soldiers were packed into a hundred and fifty Chimeras and Sentinels, driving up a muddy storm as they manoeuvred across the grasslands the regiment had set aside for daily training. Thade’s three hundred men joined Major Crayce’s three hundred and Colonel Lockwood’s four hundred for the midnight exercise.

Thade and Tionenji watched from a gentle rise that might generously be called a hill. Engineeer Osiron and Seth Roscrair were also present, both men's non-standard duties removing them from the need to train now. The *hffffff-hsssss* of Osiron's breathing was audible over the sound of the revving engines as dozens of Chimera transports powered alongside each other in a series of various formations, moving positions with ease and maintaining equal distance with each other at all times. The tech-priest listened to the roar of the engines, hearing only the voices of an angelic chorus. He was alert to every nuance in the symphony, every engine that whined too hard when its driver hesitated at a gear change, every cry of brakes that needed a touch more maintenance.

Seth leaned on his black staff, his eyes bloodshot and his lips cut where he'd bitten them during his earlier visions.

Osiron and Seth both made the sign of the aquila to the commissar and the captain as they approached. The commissar returned it earnestly, Thade did so with a nod of greeting. Seth's gaze lingered on the captain for a long moment, then flicked to Tionenji. He couldn't resist testing the new commissar. His unseen sense reached out, enveloping the dark-skinned man's invisible aura, probing the outer edges of Tionenji's thoughts.

Tionenji shuddered despite Seth's delicacy. *Ah, not just another blunt*, he thought, slipping into Guard slang for those without psychic talents. Seth withdrew his hidden sense, satisfied that the commissar would be extremely resistant to psychic manipulation.

Seth shuddered, his talents still open to the warp, and in that moment he could hear it again: the voice from the monastery. Something...*beneath his feet...* *Something below...* crying out from a great, unknowable distance. He heard it each time he used his powers now, and feared the onset of warp taint in his mind. With a glance at the commissar, Seth sealed his mind off from the world, relying on his five natural senses.

'Your drivers are skilled,' said Tionenji, watching the grasslands being chewed up into a morass of meaningless patterns. Hundreds of tank treads gouged across the muddy earth.

The commissar pointed to ten transports spread out in a V-formation, which promptly screeched to swerving halts in unison, forming a tight circle of armour with their fronts facing inward and rears out. Ten gangways slammed down into the ravaged mud and a hundred men ran from the vehicles, taking up positions with rifles raised.

'I know that formation,' Tionenji said.

Thade smiled at the perfect deployment, recognising Taan leading the hundred men there. He flicked a glance at the commissar. 'Is that so?'

'That is the Steel Star.' Tionenji's oak-brown eyes smiled even if his lips did not. 'Worthless in an urban battlefield, but extremely difficult to perform as precisely as I see it being done here. One might think you were showing off, captain.'

All three Cadians laughed, though only Thade's was a natural sound. Seth's laugh was a low, wet chuckle, Osiron's a mechanical wheeze. Thade shook his head.

'We call it Opening the Eye, but yes, it's the same manoeuvre. And in all honesty, commissar, we don't show off. Perfecting moves like this is one of the ways the 88th trains for formation deployment.' Thade inclined his head, gesturing across the field where ten Chimeras under Major Crayce's command repeated the move in an orchestra of grinding gears and roaring engines. Osiron closed his eyes, listening intently to the music only he could hear, making silent notes about which Chimeras to check over once the training was complete.

'Tonight is used for this deployment training, yes? No combat exercise?'

'Not tonight. The colonel deemed this necessary instead.'

'Ah, I see.' Tionenji nodded.

'You do?'

'I am not blind to your, forgive me, *our* regiment's expertise. The monastery fight must have tasted foul to many of the men, yes? There was little opportunity for the rapid deployment and tactical insertion the 88th excels at. And the colonel decided to allow the men to... relieve some stress. Am I correct?'

'You see clearly, commissar.'

Tionenji nodded, already looking back to the field. 'I try.'

Thade looked at the jungle-worlder for a moment. Tionenji was making an open effort to connect with him and show his willingness to bond with the regiment, which was not what the captain had been expecting in a commissar appointed by the lord general.

'I believe it's time you met the men,' Thade said. He was acutely aware of Seth's and Osiron's eyes on his back as he spoke to the commissar. Tionenji turned to the Cadian, regarding his violet eyes under the silver winged medal.

'I was going to wait until tomorrow morning for a formal presentation alongside the inquisitor's briefing. What did you have in mind, captain?'

Thade told him. Tionenji considered the ramifications for a moment, and eventually nodded.

‘I agree to this contest. But tell me, why is it to first blood?’

‘Cadian duels are always to first blood. If you strike true, first blood is all you need to make the kill. And if you don’t strike true, you’re not Cadian.’

‘Your people are very arrogant,’ Tionenji said without any real judgement. It was merely an observation.

‘Cadian blood,’ whispered Seth. ‘The fuel of the Imperium.’

‘We are the ones that die so all others might live,’ said Osiron.

‘That is a boast the men and women of many worlds can make, engineeer,’ retorted Tionenji.

‘Take one look where our home world is, commissar,’ Thade said. ‘Now take note that the Imperium still stands. We have every right to be arrogant.’

The grassland plain was silent but for the murmurs of men placing bets. Tionenji allowed them this, knowing it would be good for morale and seeing no need to begin his tenure with unnecessary confrontation. If the lord general was right in his assessment, the newly-appointed commissar would be making enemies aplenty soon enough. Once the executions began.

He liked Thade, he had to admit. The captain was honest, if not entirely open, and his record spoke of an accomplished officer, perhaps even a gifted one. Would he shoot Parmenion Thade dead without a second’s hesitation if the need arose? Absolutely. Would he regret the deed afterwards? Maybe. It would certainly not sit well with the men of the 88th. Tionenji scanned the crowd now, already committing faces to memory. Pale skin, bright eyes of blue or violet... A fey breed, these Cadians.

Initially the gathering had been limited to Captain Thade’s three hundred men, but as the news had sped across the vox – ‘*Thade’s fighting the new commissar!*’ – the entire regiment had parked up and formed into a wide ring around the captain and Tionenji. Men sat and kneeled on the ground, others stood behind, and still others stood atop their Chimeras, eager for a view of the action.

Seth had gripped Thade’s wrist before the crowd had gathered.

‘I need to speak with you, sir.’

‘I won’t let him shoot you, Seth.’ Thade found it easy to relate to his brothers in the regiment, but something about Seth always unnerved any who spoke with him. His ragged appearance, the psy-feeds buried into the back of his skull, the way he looked as if he was drowning in his own too-large jacket, the sucking of air through his teeth to avoid drooling; it was all something of a wretched picture, but that wasn’t the whole story. Seth’s power set him apart. In a culture

centred so closely around the tenets of unity and brotherhood, those who stood alone were doomed to be forever distrusted.

Seth had grinned at the captain's reassurance. The effect was ugly, revealing several shattered teeth, lost when his powers had raged out of control and almost snapped his neck some months before.

'I do not fear the new political officer, captain. I need to speak with you about the cards.'

'Tomorrow, Seth.'

'Parmenion.' Seth's frail grip tightened on the captain's bionic wrist. Thade quelled the rush of instinct that almost made him pull his bolt pistol. The use of his name unnerved him along with the grip and the sincerity in the sanctioned psyker's voice.

'What is it?'

'Tomorrow is fine. But this *is* important. For you, certainly, but perhaps for the entire Reclamation. Please, speak with me tomorrow. The tarot cannot be ignored.'

Thade nodded and pulled away. 'Fine, Seth.' He hesitated before walking off. The tension between himself and the sanctioned psyker was something he was grudgingly hoping to wear down one day. He looked at Seth's retreating back, hunched over as the smaller man leaned on his staff for support.

The moment passed. Others came to steal Thade's attention.

Colonel Lockwood was next to speak with the captain. He rested a hand on Thade's armoured shoulder, his weathered fingers covering the twin eights marked in white.

'Don't try to talk me out of this, sir,' Thade said. 'We both know this is a good idea.'

Lockwood's scowl spoke volumes. His lined face was a route map of battles he'd been fighting for longer than Thade had been alive. Veterans, true veterans over fifty years of age, were rare in the Cadian Shock. Such was the fate of the Imperial Guard's most often-tested regiment. No matter how good you are, the odds will always get you in the end.

The colonel pulled him aside. 'I'll get him transferred. We'll have a Cadian appointed before we leave for the next campaign. You have my word on that, son.'

Thade glanced around to be sure none of the nearby soldiers could overhear. 'Last time I checked, sir, men with violet eyes were trained damn hard not to complain about orders. We do what we do because we can and we must.'

‘It’s an insult. We all know it.’

‘It’s an order. The implied insult is meaningless to me.’

‘It’s not meaningless to the men, Parmenion. Not to the regiment.’ The conversation halted as a cluster of soldiers approached to salute the colonel and wish Thade luck. The two officers nodded and waited until the men had moved away.

‘I know it’s not meaningless to them. That’s why I’m breaking him in like this. I’ll turn the insult into a blessing.’

‘How does he seem? From first impressions?’

‘Sincere. Cold. Astute.’ Thade grinned. ‘Cadian.’

Lockwood saluted, too stoic to say much more in front of his men. He’d never allow his iron-hearted reputation to take a dent like that, though his admiration for Thade was an open secret. ‘I’m not arguing against the idea. It will work. Prove he’s a warrior, and may the Throne’s light guide your blade.’

Minutes passed as more men came to speak to Thade before the bout. Tionenji stood silent, waiting, no hint of impatience across his features. Finally Thade stepped into the circle made by the watching men and their tanks. Dead Man’s Hand and several other Sentinel squadrons towered above the crowd, their pilots watching through vision slits or open hatches.

Tionenji folded his greatcoat and set both it and his peaked cap in a neat pile by the edge of the circle. He stood in his black uniform, his oiled hair still perfectly arranged.

Thade was still in his body armour. Seeing that, Tionenji wondered if he had already failed some kind of test. On Garadesh, honour duels were fought unarmoured with curved blades, with any additional protection considered ignoble and base. Tionenji watched the captain now, suspecting that the opposite was true of the Cadians. They probably adhered to some code where only a fool would enter a fight without the best protection available. Or perhaps a short lecture on how a soldier should always train weighted down by full armour.

A serious bunch, these Cadians.

In Thade’s hands was his weighty chainsword, long and straight, with a single cutting edge. In Tionenji’s own hands was the blade he’d named as a *nimcha*, thin and curved like a crescent moon, also silent in deactivation. Two live chainswords meeting would risk shattering and tearing the teeth from one another. Powered down, they could be used to duel without risk of damage to the precious weapons.

Tionenji advanced aggressively, his footwork graceful, immediately revealing

himself to be a skilled swordsman. Thade kept his own footwork light, slowly circling and making theatrical cuts in the air that had a few of the men laughing at the obvious display. Most of them expected a casual bout, perhaps with the captain showing this newcomer who was really in charge, and the lord general's orders be damned.

The first strike and parry happened so fast that everyone except the combatants missed it. Tionenji sprang back from the blocked blow and slashed again, the flat of his arcing blade clattering against the side of Thade's bulkier sword.

It was the moment the fight began in earnest.

Thade trained with his sword daily, as did Tionenji. The Cadian was a product of his home world's Youth Legion, as were all soldiers of the Shock regiments, and had been reared to fight since his pre-teens. The Garadeshi commissar had been taken in by the Schola Progenium in his own youth, and trained to the exacting standards of the Imperial commissariat. Thade fought with a blade gifted to him by Cadia's finest leader and the hero of Scarus Sector. Pride and reverence flooded him each time the sword cleared its sheath. Tionenji fought with his father's *nimcha*, a weapon of the tribes of Garadesh, and honoured his father's shade with each victory the blade brought for the Emperor.

The swords met again and again, reflecting slivers of moonlight each time they cracked snake-fast against each other.

Scout-lieutenant Vertain had parked his Sentinel close to Taan Darrick in the crowd. He leaned from his vehicle's side hatch, watching the fight with unblinking eyes. 'I can't tell who's winning,' he said.

'I think they're both winning.'

Vertain broke his gaze long enough to look for Ban Jevrian in the crowd. The Kasrkin sergeant was regarded as the regiment's finest swordsman, but if the Sentinel pilot had hoped to glean some insight into the duel by reading Jevrian's expression, the measured stare of the Kasrkin leader offered no answers. Vertain turned back to the fight.

The fighters ducked and weaved, their deactivated swords slashing through the air to meet with metallic clanks once, twice, thrice a second. Both men were panting less than a minute after the duel had begun, neither used to facing a swordsman of equal skill.

In one of the moments when their swords met, both men came close, pushing their weight against each other. Tionenji had smiled as he looked into Thade's eyes.

'You're... doing very well.' His teeth were clenched in effort, as were the

captain's.

'I'm better when my blade is live,' Thade grinned.

'Aren't we all?'

They flew apart, neither gaining the advantage from the sword-lock. More blows were traded, each one ending in a parry or a block that locked the two weapons together. The next time they met face to face, Tionenji was grinning mirthlessly and breathing hard.

'You... look tired... my violet-eyed friend.'

'Not at all,' Thade smiled back, sweat stinging his eyes. Five minutes of this was as tiring as the whole night in the monastery. 'But if you want a rest... I'll be a gentleman and let you take a break.'

As with the opening strikes, the finishing blows came with such speed that those watching only realised what had happened several seconds after it was done.

Tionenji threw himself backwards at the last instant to avoid a throat slash of Thade's sword that he had no chance to block. The Cadian was overbalanced in the strike's wake, and a single stumble heralded the end of the fight. The slender crescent blade licked out to crack Thade's sword from his hand, sending it spinning away to hit the muddy ground.

All of this happened in a heartbeat's span.

Tionenji had meant to rest the tip of his sword on Thade's chest. He'd meant to ask in his delicious orator's voice, 'Do you yield?' and make a short speech on what an admirable opponent the captain had been.

Admittedly, these plans would have gone down well with the watching regiment. The men were already impressed by the commissar's skill, and Thade had been right – in showing Tionenji's battle prowess as their first impression of him, the commissar was walking into a warmer welcome among a band of soldiers from a warrior culture than if he had simply presented himself at a mission briefing.

However, his plans of gracious mercy never came to fruition. Believing he'd won, his defences were instantly lowered. It took him a split second to realise Thade wasn't finished. He remembered the captain's words then.

To first blood.

By the time he was bringing his blade up to block the continuing threat, Thade's roundhouse kick connected with bone-jarring force. Tionenji's head snapped back and he staggered away, blinded by his watering eyes and the web of white-hot pain his cheek had become.

He spat a mouthful of thick, coppery saliva, knowing from the taste that he was spitting redness. A thousand men roared their approval. As the commissar's eyes cleared, he saw Thade offering his hand – again, it was his left hand. His real hand.

‘First blood to Cadia,’ the captain said, still catching his breath.

Tionenji took the hand, flashing his short-lived grin in a display of blood-pinked teeth. ‘First blood to Cadia,’ he repeated, sensing a tradition behind the words.

The men cheered again.



CHAPTER VII

War Council

Reclamation Headquarters, outside Solthane

They met in the lord general's command bunker – a prefab structure just a short walk from his tent. Around the room's edges, servitors and adepts worked the banks of vox-scanners and tactical cogitators necessary to plan the Reclamation and remain in contact with the vessels in orbit. Several officers of the Hadris Rift 40th flanked the Overseer, spreading around the central circular table and its cluster of maps. Each one was attired as the lord general himself: a dress uniform of jade green with gold trimmings. Overseer Maggrig gleamed in the reflected light from the console screens. He was wearing his finest dress uniform (and the accompanying gold that made up Hadris Rifter rank markings) for this meeting with the inquisitor. He'd ordered his men to do the same.

Inquisitor Caius had arrived early. He stood apart, his hands resting on the table as he pored over the maps. Upon entering he'd saluted politely and immediately ignored the pomp before him. The only words he'd spoken in the last five minutes were to ask where Captain Thade was.

Colonel Lockwood was present as Thade's commanding officer. The senior officer of the Cadian 88th stood impassive in his battle gear, watching the regions of the map that drew the inquisitor's attention. He was here to learn where a sizeable portion of his regiment was being dispatched to, and to plan for actions undertaken while they were seconded to the Inquisition. His displeasure at the situation was invisible. The colonel's face was an emotionless mask.

Thade arrived exactly on time, coming into the room wearing his battle armour and bearing his weapons. He saluted to all present, taking a position opposite Colonel Lockwood. Several men filed in after him. On his right were four junior

officers in the same battle uniform as the captain.

‘Inquisitor,’ Thade said. ‘This is my command team: Scout-Lieutenant Adar Vertain. First Lieutenant Korim Horlarn. Second Lieutenant Taan Darrick. And this is Master Sergeant Ban Jevrian of the Kasrkin.’

Each officer made the sign of the aquila as his name was spoken. Jevrian’s bulky carapace armour rattled as he saluted.

‘And these,’ Thade gestured to the figures at his left, ‘are Tech-priest Enginseer Bylam Osiron, Sanctioned Psy-Advisor Seth Roscrain and Commissar Adjatay Tionenji.’ Once more, Imperial salutes were offered, though not by Osiron. No one was surprised at that. Tech-priests were famously loyal to the Cult of their Machine-God, the Omnissiah, and worshipped the Emperor in their own secret, Byzantine ways.

Osiron bowed, at least. The motion caused a mechanical purr from his augmetic joints.

‘Gentlemen, thank you all for coming.’ Inquisitor Caius gestured at the main city map. ‘Lord general, if you would be so kind as to provide a summary of the current tactical situation. How is the Reclamation proceeding throughout the capital Solthane?’

Maggrig stepped closer to the table. He held everyone’s attention, though in a different way for each man there. His pompous self-importance bored Caius, whose attention was given grudgingly, while he was the figure of the perfect tactical genius to his own Hadris Rift officers. By and large, the Cadians considered him amusingly overdressed. Colonel Lockwood was especially unimpressed by the trimmings and wealth adorning Maggrig’s dress uniform. He’d seen less gold on paintings of the God-Emperor’s throne.

The Overseer took a moment to compose himself, ensuring he had the attention of all in the room. He cleared his throat and calmly met the inquisitor’s eyes, hiding his inward smile at his own mastery of the situation. Bold, assured, calm, collected – he was the very representation of everything noble in the way the soldiers of the Hadris Rift went to war. He felt the gazes of his own men upon him. He could sense how he inspired them, and–

‘The delay is boring me,’ Caius said. ‘Colonel Lockwood, please appraise me of the fighting within the city. Specifically, the main cathedral district.’

Lockwood was Cadian enough not to smile as he stepped forward. ‘The purge of Archenemy elements within Solthane proceeds on schedule to date, all in accordance with Lord General Maggrig’s designs.’ Lockwood took up a pointer and started making gestures to certain southern sections of the city.

‘Here, here and in this grand concourse here, resistance has been far heavier than expected.’

‘Why?’ The inquisitor looked up into the colonel’s violet eyes. Lockwood had pointed to three sectors scattered across the cathedral district, which was the size of a city in itself.

‘These are habitation areas of the monastic sector. Tens of thousands of citizens and pilgrims died in their homes there. Orbital picts suggested – and Reclamation tacticians anticipated – intense numbers of the plague-slain in these areas. No surprises there, but while building-by-building purges were planned for, we’ve discovered that the remains of the Kathurite Planetary Defence Force are entrenched in force there, too.’

‘The so-called “Remnant”.’

All of the officers nodded. All except Maggrig, who was struggling to contain his fury and shame at being treated so shabbily by the inquisitor.

‘What’s this section? Why is it so much more detailed?’ Caius asked.

‘My Sentinel squadron mapped several square kilometres of the city on our recent advance,’ Thade said. ‘That is the region leading up to the monastery lost by the Janus sixth.’

‘Which brings us to the latest development,’ Lockwood continued. ‘Since we made planetfall, every vox-channel has remained scrambled and prone to extreme interference from an unknown, untraceable source. Additionally, no auspex or scrye scanner has given us a reliable reading. We’re hunting half-blind.’

‘Until last night,’ Thade said.

‘Until last night. The 88th’s attempted extraction of the Janus sixth was the first time the interference was cleared for any significant period of time over a confirmed span of territory. It was also the first time any Reclamation units have come into contact with primary-class threats.’

‘Traitor Astartes,’ nodded Caius.

‘Exactly, inquisitor. It stands to reason the presence of the Death Guard is linked to the clarity of the scanners. Thade?’

The captain spoke up again. ‘Either the Traitor Legion cleared our scanners for a reason we’re not aware of, or something they’re doing in the Shrine of the Emperor’s Unending Majesty disables their own jammers as a side effect.’

‘Best guess?’ asked Caius.

‘We think they’re scanning for something. And they can’t jam us while they scan,’ Thade said.

‘I concur,’ said Osiron. ‘The tech-adepts of every regiment are working on methods to counter the interference based on the latest development.’

‘As expected. But what is there to scan for?’ Not a man failed to notice the edge to Caius’s voice as he asked that question.

‘We have tacticians, savants and teams of research servitors working on that, sir,’ said the lord general. Caius waved the reply away.

‘Does the Inquisition know?’ asked Thade suddenly.

‘What?’ Caius was momentarily blindsided. The silence that followed was intensely awkward.

‘The plague has ravaged Scarus Sector for months now, on worlds closer to the Warmaster’s front lines. Now we know the Death Guard are present; the Legion historically responsible for the other outbreaks and the likeliest source of this most recent one.’

‘That’s guesswork,’ said Maggrig.

‘It matches the facts,’ Thade replied. He was careful to keep the irritation from his voice.

‘I respect your position, Captain Thade,’ Caius began, ‘but the Holy Ordos of the Throne will make you aware of what you need to know when the time comes for you to know it.’

‘I’ll take that as a “yes”,’ Thade smiled. Commissar Tionenji pointedly cleared his throat. Thade quieted down and worked hard to kill his smirk.

‘The Ordo Sepulchrum is here to sweep the reliquaries and places of greatest faith within the cathedral sector. I seek the source of the plague. Indeed, I seek any information at all that can help us better understand this grave threat.’

‘Understood, sir,’ Thade said. *How very rehearsed*, he thought. *And vague*. Thade had never worked with the Inquisition before. It was a record he’d been keen to keep. Following orders was one thing; he was used to it and it rarely rankled. But information was power, and going into a fight without the facts was not the way any soldier wanted to make war.

‘We’re not children,’ Thade said. ‘If you’re keeping the truth from us to save our sanity, I tell you now that we’d rather know exactly what’s going on.’

‘Thade,’ Lockwood warned.

‘I mean no offence,’ the captain said. ‘But we’re not some green unit on our first campaign. We’ll fight and die or fight and win, no matter what the truth is.’

‘Thade,’ Lockwood warned again, frowning now.

‘Your stubborn insistence is noted, captain.’ Caius gestured to the Overseer. ‘Lord General Maggrig, what are your current intentions?’

There were no hesitations from the lord general this time. ‘I am ordering the remaining forces at this position into the city to take and hold several key locations along the western edge. We will establish a forward base within Solthane by the end of the week.’

Over the course of the following two hours, the lord general detailed his plans to retake Solthane, street by street, building by building.

The plans drew no criticism. The goals were ambitious but realistic, uninspired but tactically sound. A series of implacable advances preceded by Sentinels and sniper teams, to secure defensible structures within each notable district nearby. At one point, Lockwood and Maggrig debated the merits of dividing the Reclamation forces so thoroughly.

‘I’m not disagreeing, lord general,’ said Lockwood. ‘But we’re all aware that the forces we command here are just the Reclamation’s spearhead. We have a mere month left before the main attack force arrives in support. The regiments en route should be made aware that they’ll be landing in a hot zone with several outposts along an urban front line rather than the single stronghold they’re expecting.’

‘Duly noted,’ said one of Maggrig’s colonels – a handsome, unscarred man in his mid-thirties.

‘Is there a final count of the arriving regiments?’ Thade asked. The rumours circulating put the numbers at the wildest outcomes.

‘An additional two hundred thousand men in total,’ the same colonel said. ‘They entered the warp earlier in the week, and are currently estimated between twenty-five and forty days distant.’

Thade nodded, while Lieutenant Darrick whistled low. ‘Throne,’ he said, ‘now we know they’re taking this seriously.’

‘This is a shrineworld to the God-Emperor and one of His blessed saints,’ said Maggrig. ‘Nothing could be more serious.’

Thade wasn’t done. He’d been waiting for this. ‘Will the 88th be allowed to return to Cadia to fight there, once the main forces arrive?’

‘I will make my decisions based on deployment data at the relevant time, captain,’ Maggrig said.

The meeting proceeded, with the officers ignoring the hustle of the meeting room as they talked on. Adepts and junior officers leered into the eye-straining, flickering screens of wall cogitators, absorbing streams of jade green letters and numbers spilling across the black screens. Regiment positions, lists of the dead, city plans – data in all its relevant forms.

Only one new arrival broke the briefing's flow.

They heard his footsteps before they saw him: resounding clunks of heavy metal that thudded on the plasteel decking of the prefab command structure. When the newcomer came through the doorway (after needing to duck to do so), the head of every officer present was turned to see the man make his entrance.

In his armour, Brother-Captain Corvane Valar was just over two and a half metres tall. 'Massive' barely described him. He was broader than even Osiron, whose bulky body augmentations in many ways mimicked the suit of powered armour worn by the brother-captain. He was also almost half a metre taller than Ban Jevrian, the tallest officer present, and Jevrian was tall by anyone's reckoning.

Corvane's bulk was alien, threatening, and spoke of raw power no mortal man would ever achieve. While Osiron's augmetic joints clicked and whirred according to their own intricate, arcane workings, there was no over-complex devotion to the Machine-God in the armour of the Astartes warrior that now stood among the Guard officers. The thrum of his power armour's joints was an angry murmur – an agitated growl that buzzed with a waspish edge.

The armour itself was the un-colour of onyx or jet, somehow as dark as volcanic glass without obsidian's sheen. Every man's vision seemed to bore into it, as though trying to see deeper, the way the eyes stare hard into the worrying black of a lightless room, a depthless ocean or a moonless night, seeking any detail at all to cling to.

The Astartes's face was hidden behind his helm, a muzzle-mouthed bone-white relic reverently maintained down the millennia. Red eye lenses regarded each man in turn.

The Astartes made the sign of the aquila, his oversized gauntleted hands banging against the carved white stone of the Imperial eagle on his breastplate. A Hadris Rift captain flinched at the loud snarl of servos from the giant's armour joints.

'I am Brother-Captain Corvane Valar,' the giant said. His helmet speakers, mounted into the muzzle of his relic helm, rendered his voice distorted and harsh. 'Commander of the Fifth Battle Company of the Adeptus Astartes Raven Guard Chapter.'

Matters of rank and seniority between the Imperial Guard and the Astartes were far from straightforward. The Astartes Chapters were autonomous servants of the Imperium, and answered to no authority but their own. And yet technically, the lord general held rank here. It was a tension repeated countless

times across millennia. The Adeptus Astartes operated under a mandate from the God-Emperor – their genhanced bodies marked them as his chosen sons, living on as shadows of his image. Yet the Imperial Guard answered to Segmentum Command and, in turn, the High Lords of Terra. Cooperation was common between the Guard and the Astartes, but conflict was hardly unheard of.

The Cadians, as if on cue, returned the sign of the aquila immediately. Tionenji was a moment behind them, as were the Hadris Rift officers. Overseer Maggrig bowed his head in a shallow nod, made the sign of the aquila himself, and smiled in what he hoped was a superior, yet warm, expression. He assumed it hid his nervousness to be before one of the Emperor's chosen. In that, he was wrong.

‘Welcome to the war council, brother-captain.’

‘Good to see you again,’ said Colonel Lockwood. The giant in black nodded, taking several moments to stare before replying. Thade wondered if the Astartes was scanning the colonel.

‘Cadia. The siege of Kasr Vallock. Colonel Josuan Lockwood, Cadian 88th.’

‘Good memory, brother-captain,’ smiled Lockwood. ‘And I thank you again for your Chapter's assistance in the defence of my home world.’

‘Dark days. I remember them well. But not fondly. Much of my Chapter's strength is still garrisoned there. My own force will be returning as soon as we are finished with our duties here.’

‘That's good to know, captain.’

That seemed to be the end of the conversation. Maggrig continued discussing his plan. The Astartes was content to listen, standing still as a statue but for the occasional turn of his helmeted head to regard another part of the cityscape map.

‘There.’

Several of the officers started at his sudden voice.

‘Brother-captain?’ Maggrig asked. He'd been pointing at a district towards the centre of Solthane, housing the great Cathedral of the Archpriest. It was there that the bones of Saint Kathur were laid to rest.

‘There,’ the Astartes repeated. ‘That is where the Raven Guard will focus its efforts. I will dispatch scouts immediately to prepare the assault. The Fifth Battle Company will link its intelligence with yours, lord general.’

‘We would be honoured,’ Maggrig said. He was flushed with pleasure and pride to see an Astartes officer showing such respect to him before his own men. This would surely spread through the ranks...

‘It is the disposition of your own forces that necessitates our deployment.’ The giant pointed a brutish hand at two points in the cityscape. ‘The Cadians and

Vednikans are your principal source of veteran strength. They are here and here, respectively.'

Here, the Astartes turned to look at Captain Thade and his command team.

'The Raven Guard Fifth has served with the Vednikans and the Cadians before. We have judged their characters as a planetary people, and assessed their prowess as regiments in service to the Emperor.'

He turned to Maggrig, those blood-red eyes staring without mercy. 'They are the claws of your plan. They are the killing talons sharper than all others at your disposal. Therefore, we will unleash our fury and the anger of our weapons elsewhere, where they will most assuredly be more needed.'

Silence greeted this. Thade and several of the Cadians nodded in respectful thanks.

'Whatever you see fit,' Maggrig murmured.

'Then I am done here,' the giant said. Someone cleared their throat at that moment. Unseen servos growled in the joints of the Astartes's armour as he inclined his head to Seth.

'You. Sanctioned psyker. You would speak with me?'

'Yes, lord.' Seth's voice was a wet whisper.

'Brother-captain.'

'Yes, brother-captain.' A little more strength to his tone this time. Thade noticed Tionenji's hand inching towards his own holstered laspistol as Seth spoke. He read caution in the gesture, not aggression, and said nothing. But it still aggravated him.

'Speak. I have no wish to seem rude, but my time is limited.' The eyes of every man present fell on Seth now. What in the hell was he thinking?

'I am given to understand the Adeptus Astartes have... individuals... that share my talent.'

'It is so. We name them Codiciers and Epistolaries, depending on rank. Again, forgive the implied insult, but their powers eclipse those of an unenhanced human psyker by a great degree.' The Astartes paused here and Thade, for some reason, imagined him smiling behind the impassive muzzle.

'You delay the deployment of the Emperor's finest to question me on trivia?' asked the giant. His voice was different now: less stern, despite the vox-speakers distorting his tone. Maybe he had been smiling, after all.

'No, sir,' Seth said. 'I would ask if you have one of these men among your force here.'

'I do.'

‘May I speak with him?’

The Guard officers stared in silence. Was this an affront? An insult? A breach of decorum, certainly. Thade tongued his teeth, trying to think of something to say should the Astartes take offence. Looking up at the towering black figure with its snarling joints and red-eyed mask, absolutely nothing came to mind. Not a Throne-forsaken thing. Tionenji’s pistol had cleared its holster now.

‘Tell me why,’ the giant said, his tone still neutral.

‘Matters of the Emperor’s Tarot.’

The awkward silence returned, intermittently broken by a curious addition. A series of muted clicks came from within the Astartes’s helm. Vox-clicks, Thade realised. He was using his suit’s internal vox to speak with someone.

‘It is done,’ the Astartes said only a moment later. ‘Brother-Codicier Zauren is aboard our strike cruiser, *The Second Shadow*. He will make planetfall in fifteen minutes to attend to your request.’

Seth bowed deeply. ‘A thousand thanks, brother-captain.’

The Astartes made the sign of the aquila to all present. Once more, his oversized gauntlets banged on the stone eagle across his breastplate.

‘I will leave you to your planning. We will meet again, should the Emperor will it.’

‘Victory or Death,’ said Lockwood. That made the giant pause.

‘A very fine memory, Colonel Lockwood.’

The colonel smiled. Without another word, without even waiting for their replies or salutes, the giant in black stalked from the room, parting the clusters of busy headquarters staff before him like a curtain. They scattered from the doorway as he neared.

Seth leaned on his staff in the silence after the Astartes had departed. ‘If you will excuse me, lord general?’ He addressed the Overseer but his watery eyes were locked on Thade, almost bleeding significance with an intensity that would be comical if it were any other soldier in his unit. Thade gently inclined his head. *Message received. You still need to speak with me.*

It was obvious to all of them that Maggrig had no idea what to say. The Overseer just nodded, and Seth left to keep his curious appointment. Only then did Tionenji’s laspistol find its home back in its brown leather holster.

‘The psyker,’ Lord General Maggrig said with narrowed eyes. ‘He must be watched.’

‘He is,’ replied the commissar.

‘He always was,’ added Thade.

The gunship was the same deep and glossless black as the armour worn by Brother-Captain Valar. It came in low, throwing up a storm of dust as its thrusters howled and belched fire. Landing claws extended in a smooth dance of well-oiled technology, biting into the grassy soil as the Thunderhawk gunship came to a rest. The roar of the great turbines and engines faded as they cycled down.

Seth's eyes fell upon the great white symbol painted along the gunship's flank, repeated in smaller relief on the wings. A stylised white raven, wings outstretched. Heavy bolters trained left and right from the Thunderhawk's cheeks and wingtips. Seth was put in mind of a great bird of prey, powerful beyond words but sitting uneasily, alert to the possibility of foes even within the sanctuary of its nest.

And this was not its nest, of course. That was back in the cold of orbit: an Astartes strike cruiser named *The Second Shadow*, Seth recalled. Poetic, he thought, and marvelled at the notion of such brutish, war-bred men being able to choose a name with such nuance. He admired (or at least respected) the Astartes for the living weapons they were, but pitied them their lack of culture and humanity. Of course, it did not escape his attention that most Imperial citizens thought the exact same of the Cadians. That thought made him smile.

It humbled Seth for a moment to look upon this huge, dark instrument of war. It was almost certainly thousands of years old, still flying, still fighting, still shedding blood in the name of the God-Emperor. So much of Cadia's technology was forever new. New soldiers bearing new rifles and driving new tanks – all to replace men, weapons and resources lost in the planet's endless wars against the raiders that spilled from the Great Eye like unholy tears.

The Thunderhawk's mouth opened, the gang-ramp several metres under the cockpit lowering on whining pistons. Seth's mouth was suddenly dry. He'd had no idea if the psykers of the Astartes read the Emperor's Tarot, but rather than feel reassured by the brother-captain's answer, he now found himself worried. What if this codicier's own readings were so strong, so accurate, that Seth's visions were disregarded entirely? He had never fully trusted his erratic talent, but it was one of his senses as surely as the capacity to see and touch. If the Astartes psyker banished Seth's faith in his own abilities, it would be like living half-deaf and never being able to trust what he heard.

The thought made his skin crawl. Maybe this was a mistake. Yes, hell yes, this was all a mistake, and it took all Seth's resolve to remain where he was.

The Astartes psyker, Brother-Codicier Zauren, walked down the sloped gang-

ramp. His armour was as dark as Valar's had been, but instead of the off-white helm sported by the brother-captain, this Astartes warrior wore a helm of midnight blue with a mouth grille. Seth was no expert on the armaments of the noble Astartes Chapters, but he recognised the shape of the helm as a newer mark of armour, perhaps only several hundred years old.

The giant approached, his heavy armoured boots crunching soil and gravel underfoot. Sheathed across his back was a two-handed blade as long as Seth was tall. The Cadian doubted he could lift it unaided. He doubted even Ban Jevrian could fight for long with that beast in his hands.

'You are the sanctioned psyker attached to the Cadian 88th Mechanised Infantry, are you not?' The Astartes' voice came in the same toneless vox-speech as the brother-captain's had.

'I am.' Seth looked up at the giant's helm. The eye lenses staring back down at him were golden.

'Excellent,' the giant said. 'I am Brother-Codicier Zauren Kale. You may call me Zaur, if it is not uncomfortably familiar for you to do so.'

'I... I...'

'A moment, please,' the Astartes said, and reached up to do the very last thing Seth had been expecting.

He removed his helmet.

'Where are you going?' the commissar asked as they emerged into the dim daylight.

'Maintenance,' said Thade. He clenched and unclenched his bionic hand as he walked, and Tionenji wondered if the Cadian even knew he had that habit.

'Overseeing the honoured engineer's work?'

'Osiron? He'd never put up with that. This is pleasure, not business.'

'Pleasure? In maintenance?' Tionenji fixed him with a bewildered look that perfectly matched the incredulity in his flowing Garadeshi accent. 'I am relatively well-informed, culturally speaking, on the Cadian people. I understand that you regard rifles as more precious than your wives, you'd rather kill someone than make love, and that you're only happy when bragging about the most recent time you remained awake for five days straight to win a war with your hands tied behind your backs.'

'You know us well.' Thade grinned, his violet eyes bright below the black widow's peak of his hair. 'But not that well. Seventy-five per cent of the planet's adults and children are under arms, and most Cadians don't marry. We have

breeding programs to maintain the population.'

'Is that a joke?'

Thade kept grinning. He didn't answer.

'Even so, captain, never in my most uninspired dreams did I imagine your idea of leisure would be to watch tech-servitors repair your tanks.'

'You don't have to follow me,' said Thade, knowing that was a lie. Tionenji smiled.

'And miss entertainment of such magnitude? Never.'

'I knew you'd be game. And no, we're not going to watch them repaint the tanks and tune the engines. We're going because I've been getting word since last night that Rax was ready.'

'Who, or indeed what, is Rax?'

Thade smiled again as he neared the towering form of the Cadian bulk lander. Machine sounds of maintenance and repair echoed out from the open bay doors.

For a moment, he looked on the edge of boyish. No easy feat for a man who'd been fighting the Archenemy since he was fourteen. Thade wasn't quite thirty. Tionenji felt the captain could all too easily pass as a man nearing forty.

'Rax,' Thade said, still smiling the rare, warm smile, 'is my dog.'

Zaur was pale, the pale of pristine marble. Not that Seth had been expecting much overt humanity in the oversized body and face of an Astartes warrior, but the ice-white skin tone was another layer of surprise. And his eyes were black. That unnerved Seth to no small degree. He'd never heard of such an... alteration.

Zaur's scalp was shaved bare – so bare that the Cadian was sure the Astartes had either shaved only hours before, or was genetically modified so that no hair would grow. A few sockets stood out on the white skin, polished chrome showing an edge of redness where they aggravated the surrounding skin: the implants for the codicier's psychic enhancing technology. Seth had no idea what equipment the Astartes psykers used and wasn't about to ask, no matter how fiercely his curiosity burned.

The amplifying band of psychoactive metal implanted across his forehead suddenly itched abominably. He kept his augmentations clean and disinfected them twice daily, but they were the fruits of crude surgeries. Sanctioned psykers deserved no better in the eyes of the Guard; the majority were destined for a messy death before they earned any long-service medals. The polished bionics punctuating the Astartes's skull were almost artistic in comparison to the cheap

bronze plugs that bored into Seth's flesh and bone.

'You seem discomforted,' Zaur said. His real voice resonated, deep as distant thunder, but wasn't unkind.

'I have never seen an Astartes without his helm. Not once.'

'Ah,' Zaur smiled. That unnerved Seth even more. Even the Astartes' teeth were overlarge, though everything about Zaur was in proportion to the giant's physique. 'You wished my counsel?' the codicier reminded him.

'Yes. Yes, over matters of the Emperor's Tarot. Do you read the cards?'

'Are you asking if the Astartes as a whole practise the tradition, or are you asking if I do?'

'Both.'

'I suspect our methods are not dissimilar, Cadian. But come, this is not a matter to be discussed on a landing zone. Even in the shadow of my Thunderhawk, some ears are not to hear of what we speak.'

Zaur led Seth into the waiting maw of the gunship, clanking up the gang-ramp. Once inside the internal hangar, Seth scanned the rows of chained combat cycles and archaic thruster backpacks that waited in secure wall housings for use by the Astartes. Zaur thumped a black fist against the door lock panel, and the gang-ramp whined closed, ending with a metallic slam.

'Now,' said the codicier, his voice echoing eerily around the empty hangar. 'What are the cards saying to you, Cadian?'

Seth took a deep breath. 'The Archenemy is not done with Kathur.'

'And what if I told you I had seen the same?'

'I would be... reassured. Reassured that my talents were not flailing wildly. But if you are seeing the same, then perhaps we can—'

'Be at ease,' the Astartes said, cutting the air with his hand. 'I have seen dark portents, but the specifics matter above all. And I wonder if they align. Speak clearly.'

'A grave threat, as yet unmet,' Seth's eyes unfocused, losing their strained intensity, and his voice took on a dreamlike quality. 'The echoes of heresy ring out across the shrineworld's sky. Something is coming. Some resurgence of the Archenemy. Something familiar.'

'I have read the same fate in the tarot. And yet what is familiar to both the Cadians and my Chapter? I am not as gifted as many of my brethren among the Librarium of the Raven Guard, but I know to trust my talent. The evil that draws near is utterly familiar. The hatred that rushes to eclipse us is personal. I felt that surging from the cards, and it is in no doubt. The only answer that fits is, of

course...’

‘The Death Guard.’

‘The Death Guard.’ Zaur nodded. ‘The traitorous XIV Legion. The scourge of Scarus, at the Despoiler’s right hand. They carve wounds that take decades to heal, if they will ever seal at all. The infection. The taint. How many worlds in this segmentum have been lost to the Curse of Unbelief in Abaddon’s thirteenth war?’

The question was obviously rhetorical. Seth nodded slowly, his thoughts coalescing.

‘The Cadian Shock are the guardians of Scarus. But forgive me, brother-codicier. I do not see the ties between my home world and your Chapter. What are the Death Guard to you? How grave are their sins, that no other evil can match them in your eyes?’

Zaur stood in silence for some time. When he finally moved, it was to place a gauntleted hand, cold as fresh snow, on Seth’s head. When he finally spoke, it was in a buzzing voice contained within Seth’s own mind.

+See, Cadian. *See* what they did to us...+

The vision began. A vision of a war – The War – that began ten thousand years before. In a distant solar system, one hundred centuries ago, Seth witnessed the betrayal that scourged the hearts of the Raven Guard against their Astartes brothers.

It was soon over. When the vision faded, Seth felt pale and weak. He bolstered his strength to speak his last question.

‘Zaur...’

‘Yes?’

‘Since coming to Kathur... Do you hear the voice, too? Something has awoken on this world. It cries for aid.’

Zaur nodded once, very slowly. ‘I hear it. I hear it even now.’ The codicier looked down at the Cadian. ‘Have you heard the reply?’

‘No.’

‘That is my true fear, and the reason I have taken such stern heed of the Tarot’s warning. Because I not only hear the voice crying for aid, I also hear something out there answering.’

‘This second voice, what does it say?’

‘It is wordless, much like the plea for aid we both hear. A simple, powerful projection that conveys a single message.’

‘What message?’

Zaur opened his mind once more, letting his sixth sense envelop Seth's surface thoughts. He could feel the rhythms of the mortal's body, beating and bubbling in their short lifespan. The Astartes knew, just for a moment, how frail and mortal it felt to be truly human. He feared nothing in his service to the Throne, yet he felt himself fearful of that incredible weakness.

'Listen,' said Zaur, letting the voices flowing through his psychic sense wash gently into Seth's lesser mind. It was a simple diversion of mental energies, the equivalent of a man damming one river to form another.

Come to me, the first voice said without words.

We come, was the equally-wordless reply.

We come.



PART II

The Herald



CHAPTER VIII

Echoes of Heresy

Within the warp

We come.

It pulsed this wordless reassurance in a relentless stream of subconscious telepathy. *We come. We come. We come.*

Sometimes it would forget its own name.

It knew this was because of the warp. Travelling in the domain of its master brought the creature close to its god's touch, and all that was still human within it would slip into unremembered darkness.

On these occasions, occasions which might last a mere hour and might last anything up to a decade or more, it would simply self-identify by the title its various minions used when addressing it.

The Herald, they called it. The Herald of the whispering god they all served.

The Herald had not moved from its throne in many months. Barnacle-like scabs, crusty blooms of dried blood and calcified pus, now bound it to the bone and corroded metal of its command seat. The Herald felt the encrusted gore connecting him to the throne, and by extension, to the ship all around it.

The Herald knew its strength, its incredible might. It knew it would take little effort to move and shatter the solidified filth, but it wanted to enjoy the serenity of its repose for a few more moments. It breathed deeply within the decayed shell of its armour, feeling the silent rumble of its vessel spearing through the warp. Daemon-things in the darkness beyond the ship's hull shrieked and clawed at the vessel, desperate to enter and prostrate themselves before the Herald. They left streaks of diseased flesh along the rancid hull as the great ship powered on, ignorant of the would-be supplicants.

The Herald chuckled.

Some of the creatures populating the bridge – the weakest ones, whose lives meant nothing – cowered and whimpered at the sound. It was the first time the Herald had made any noise in weeks.

One of the bridge crew, long deprived of its legs, crawled up the steps to the Herald's throne. Once, it had been a man. Now it left a viscous trail in its legless wake, and had too many mouths.

'We draw near, Herald,' several of the thing's mouths said.

Now the Herald stood. The crusted gore binding it to the throne shattered into powdery, infected shards, many still sticking to the Herald's armour like warty protrusions.

With the Herald's sudden, albeit slow, activity, the hollow bone spines jutting from its back began to emit a low buzz. The Herald was awake, and the hive within its body awakened as well. The first flies, bloated and sticky, skittered from the flared holes at the tops of the hollow spines.

The Herald turned its horned helmeted head, seeking something. It could barely see. Its eyes were gummy with bloody tears, having been closed for too long. Sight pained it.

'Weapon,' the Herald growled in a low, burbling voice. The bridge crew shrank back, some pressing against their consoles in fear, some because their own organic corruption bound them to their stations just as the Herald had been bound to its throne.

One of the figures flanking the great throne stepped forward. Its armour was that of an Astartes, but swollen, corroded and cracked through ten thousand years of plague and battle. It was the same gangrenous colour of the Herald's own armour.

'Herald.' Blood-caked respirator pipes thrust into the front of the Astartes's helm vibrated as the second figure spoke. 'I bear your blade.'

At these words, the corrupted Astartes held out a colossal scythe in his swollen fists. It was over three metres long, the pole as thick as a man's thigh, the curving crescent blade glinting in places under a patina of bloody rot.

The Herald took the scythe in its own gauntleted hands. A memory swam up through the warp-holy murk of its thoughts. A name.

Its own name?

No... *Manreaper*. The name of the weapon it now held. With a psychic nudge, the Herald activated the antiquated power weapon. Its scythe blade hissed as energy flooded the ancient metal. The organic decay taking root on the blade itself crackled and popped as it burned away. The stench was cancerous, but that

was far from unusual in the Herald's presence. The entire ship itself reeked of the egg-like shit-smell of a terminal wasting disease. The air within the vessel was poison to all but the creatures that dwelled within.

The Herald took a deep breath within its enclosing armour, savouring the holy scent that reached its acute olfactory senses. Vision returned with increased clarity now, shapes resolving clearly to make out the scene of the bridge all around. A great screen faced the throne, showing the beautiful chaos of warp flight. It was like looking into the mind of a madman, seeing all his thoughts as colours.

'Near?' the Herald growled. 'Soon?'

Speech was also difficult. The Herald swallowed to clear its throat. Whatever had been lodged there wriggled as it went down.

'We are only hours from our destination, Herald,' the Traitor Astartes said.

'The Legion?' snarled the Herald.

'The Legion stands ready, great Traveller.'

Traveller. Another of its titles. And... tied to its name...

'My ship,' purred the Herald wetly. Its scabby gauntlets stroked the corroded throne. 'My ship. *Terminus Est.*'

'Yes, lord.' The Traitor Astartes was used to the warp-sickness affecting the Herald. He knew it would pass soon.

The Herald grinned behind its horned helm, facing the screen ahead and clutching its scythe in a greedy hand. The bulk of its Terminator plate would have been immense anyway, but the scabs, buboes and bone spines thrusting from the off-green armour swelled it to four times the size of a mortal man.

'Kathur,' it said. 'We draw near to Kathur.'

'Yes, lord.'

And then, like a bolt from the chaotic storm outside, the Herald recalled its name. Who it had been. What it had become. It smiled again, and began to give orders to its wretched crew.

In life, ten thousand years ago as the galaxy had descended into the war that would never end, he had been the First Captain of the Death Guard.

Now, the Scourge of Scarus, the Traveller, Host of the Destroyer Hive, Herald of the Grandfather of Decay, prepared to do battle once more.

'Kathur,' smiled Typhus through his black lips. 'Their... little... shrineworld.'

Seth met with Thade as the captain was in his tent, performing the rites of maintenance on his chainsword. The smell of purified oils flavoured the air.

Thade was on his bedroll, wearing his grey fatigues with the blade in his lap. It was the first time the psyker had seen Thade without his body armour on in weeks.

‘Sir?’ He stood at the tent’s canvas entrance, looking in through the open door curtains. Thade was using a hand-pick to scrape dirt from the High Gothic runes etched into the blade’s flat.

‘Come in,’ he called.

Seth stepped in and froze at the sudden growl. The sound was mechanical and very, very angry. Seth knew it well. He turned his head slowly to see Thade’s cyber-mastiff, its bodywork of chrome and iron restored to its undamaged gunmetal grey. The size of a bloodhound, the shape of a wolf with particularly vicious jaws, the cyber-mastiff glared at him with black eye lenses.

It was still growling.

‘Uh... Good dog,’ Seth said, feeling foolish for letting it slip out.

‘Down, boy,’ the captain said. ‘Sorry, Seth. One second. Rax, log target’s bio-spoor. Record name: Seth. Record status: Null target.’

The robotic dog’s eye lenses whispered as they turned – focusing, recording.

‘Acknowledge,’ said Thade.

The dog opened its beartrap jaws and its internal vox-speakers emitted a throaty machine sound. With some imagination, it was almost a bark.

‘You’re safe now,’ Thade said, going back to scraping the last traces of gore from the etched lettering of his blade. ‘When he was damaged last month, it wiped his cogitator’s targeting and recollection file.’

‘His... what?’

‘His memory, apparently. Don’t look at me like that; it was Osiron’s explanation. Rax needs to re-record everyone’s bio-spoors so he doesn’t sight them as targets.’

‘Am I a null target now?’ Seth leaned on his staff, feeling his headache pound behind his eyes. Throne take that damned dog, he’d never liked it.

‘You should be. Rax? Prime for battle.’

The cyber-mastiff inclined its head towards Thade, its jaws opening slightly. Seth noticed its steel teeth glinting in the dim sunlight coming into the tent. Each one polished like a prize dagger.

‘No need to test it, I’ll take your word for it,’ Seth murmured. ‘Great Eye, did Osiron polish its teeth?’

‘He did. If you get up close, you can see the Litany of Protection etched into each fang.’

‘I’m not getting up close.’

‘Well, I thought it was a nice touch. Stay still – let me test this. Rax? Kill.’

Seth felt his entire body tense at the command. He didn’t expect the dog to attack, but the possibility made his stomach twist and his eyes ache. The captain’s humour, such as it was, did not match his own.

Rax closed his jaws with a slam of meeting metal. Its internal speakers droned an almost puppyish whine.

‘You’re safe,’ said Thade. ‘Rax, stand down.’

The cyber-mastiff powered down, closing its jaw and clamping its rows of shark-like teeth. It sat much the way a real dog would: haunches on the floor, but its head tracked left and right, slowly, like a security camera.

‘A simple “yes” would have sufficed.’

‘Stop whining, you’re still alive. Now, you wanted to talk to me,’ Thade said, ‘but first you have a question of mine to answer.’

‘Of course.’

‘An hour ago, you were with the Astartes psyker.’

‘I was.’

‘Now tell me why.’

Seth chuckled, but it became a cough that tasted of blood. ‘That’s not a question.’

‘Don’t mess me around, Seth. In the monastery last night, I refrained from chastising you when a commissar would have shot you dead.’

‘You hit me with the butt of your gun.’

‘Oh, you noticed that? Seeing as I probably should’ve killed you for how you were acting, you’re not in a position to inspire much guilt in me. Throne, we thought you were going to start speaking in tongues. What the hell is this planet doing to you?’

Seth had no answer.

‘Listen, Seth. As much as Tionenji is turning out to be far from the arsehole we might have expected, he’s Commissariat to the core. A bolt in the back of the head next time you even think about stepping out of line. No questions asked.’

‘Understood, sir.’

‘I’m just warning you. Time to start being the model soldier. So talk.’

‘The Emperor’s Tarot is aflame with portents. Dark omens. My own readings match those performed by Brother-Codicier Zauren.’

Thade looked up from his cleaning and set the sword aside.

‘It’s safe to say you have my attention.’

‘I appreciate we are not close, captain, but I respect you. And I thank you for the faith you’ve shown in my abilities in the past.’

Thade nodded, forcing a smile and wondering where the psyker was going with this.

‘You’re good at... what you do,’ he began hesitantly. ‘I’m no liar, Seth. I can’t say I’m comfortable with your talents. But you serve, and serve well. I trust you.’

‘I am under no delusions. The Shock treats my kind with infinite grace compared to the way we are shackled and despised by many other regiments.’

‘I know.’

‘Then hear me now.’ Seth knelt awkwardly, sliding down his staff to the ground. Thade winced as he heard the psyker’s knees pop. ‘The heretics of the XIV Legion are here. That much we know. But we have seen only the edge of their efforts. They will rise against us in massive force, and they will do it soon. All signs point to this... this holocaust.’

‘The main force of the Reclamation is only weeks away,’ Thade said.

‘The tarot doesn’t deal in specifics of time. Only urgency.’

‘And this was urgent, I take it.’

‘The last time I had a reading of this intensity...’ Seth trailed off, meeting the captain’s eyes.

‘Home burned,’ Thade finished for him. Seth nodded. ‘Throne in flames, Seth. I’m just a captain. I’ll warn the lord general, but don’t expect him to listen. I need more. What did the Astartes tell you?’

‘That he shared the same visions of what was to come. That he warned the brother-captain, who in turn has his men ready for whatever darkness is coming. And he showed me why the Raven Guard loathe the Death Guard above all.’

‘One Astartes Chapter is the same as another to me. Except,’ he clenched his teeth, ‘the Flesh Tearers. Do you remember Kasr Hein?’

‘I am unlikely to ever forget that place, captain.’

‘Ugh. May the Inquisition take those bastards. So, what’s in this for the brother-captain and his giants in black?’

‘Simply put?’

‘That’s the way I like it best.’ Thade was on his feet now, buckling on his weapons and reaching for his helmet. ‘And it looks like I need to meet with the lord general as fast as possible, so putting it simply is putting it briefly.’

‘Vengeance,’ said Seth. ‘They want revenge.’

Thade smiled his crooked smile. ‘Maybe we do have something in common,

after all. Revenge for what?’

‘The Horus Heresy. Ancient grudges. Principally, the actions of the XIV Legion flagship, *Terminus Est*.’

‘I pray that accursed ship burns in holy fire,’ Thade spat. The name of the Traveller’s vessel was a curse word on Cadia, long-hated for the ravages it inflicted across Scarus Sector. ‘What did that damned ship do to the Raven Guard? Poison their world the way it poisons all others?’

‘No. Their hatred burns over other matters. *Terminus Est* was responsible for the destruction of the flagship of the Raven Guard fleet during the Horus Heresy. That ship was called *Shadow of the Emperor*.’

Thade paused. His eyes met Seth’s.

‘The Raven Guard ship in orbit is called *The Second Shadow*.’

‘It is,’ Seth said.

Thade breathed deeply. ‘This is starting to have the ring of something rather fateful about it.’

‘It is,’ the psyker said again. ‘I’ve... heard a voice, sir. On the night of the monastery battle. It was just a wordless scream for help.’

Thade’s jaw tightened. This didn’t bode well. Sanctioned psykers hearing voices tended to be sanctioned psykers that ended up shot in the head for their own good a short time later.

‘Fear not,’ Seth smiled his weak, unattractive smile. ‘Brother-Codicier Zauren has heard the voice as well. He hears it still. We are hearing some kind of psychic plea from Kathur, and it is being answered by something off-world. Something is coming, of that we are certain.’

‘Go to Colonel Lockwood and tell him everything we just spoke of. I’ll meet you both at the lord general’s briefing room in fifteen minutes.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Rax, come.’ Thade was already moving to the curtained door, but stopped to look back. ‘Seth?’

‘Captain?’

‘Bloody good work.’ And with that, he left, the mechanical dog stalking at his heels.

Thade was halfway to the lord general’s prefab command centre when he altered his course. He called over the first 88th trooper he saw – one of Taan Darrick’s men shining his boots outside a communal tent.

‘Trooper Cerdock.’

‘Sir!’ Cerdock made the sign of the aquila. Thade ignored the man’s eyes flicking to the silver on the captain’s helmet.

‘I need you to take a message to Colonel Lockwood.’

‘Anything, sir.’

‘Tell him that I will not be present for his meeting with Seth Roscrain and Lord General Maggrig, so they should proceed without me.’

‘Yes, sir. What should I say if the colonel asks where you are?’

Thade turned in the direction of the sleek, dark ship resting not far from the Cadian tents. The stylised ‘I’ of the Inquisition stood out along the vessel’s flanks.

‘Tell him I’m taking the matter straight to the top.’

The inquisitor sipped his amasec.

Thade had never acquired a taste for the rich spirit but he had to admit, as his own drink hit his tongue, Inquisitor Bastian Caius had superb taste – and naturally, no shortage of money to appease it.

‘This is good,’ Thade said with feeling, taking another sip. ‘Actually, this is excellent.’

‘You’re welcome,’ Caius said. While Thade had told his story, the inquisitor had reclined on the soft leather chair in this, his sanctum, which resembled something between a personal library and a well-equipped study. The room, with its wooden flooring, wine-red carpets and antique wooden desk, looked utterly out of place on the inquisitor’s dangerous-looking gunship.

‘My own psychic gifts are not inconsequential,’ continued Caius. He looked at Thade, and the captain felt his blood run cold at the hard, inhuman glare from the inquisitor’s real eye and the false ones alongside it. ‘But I do not read the Emperor’s Tarot. And I am surprised your sanctioned psyker does.’

‘He’s unique.’

‘In what regard?’

‘Firstly, Seth has survived longer than most sanctioned psy-advisors in the Imperial Guard. Secondly, I have no way of judging it myself, no comparisons to go by, but officially, his powers rank him in the top tier of psychically gifted individuals suitable for Guard service.’

‘Ah. Not just a rank and file bolt magnet, hmm?’

Thade smiled at the inquisitor’s use of Guard slang. ‘Bolt magnet’ was a nickname given to sanctioned psykers due to the likelihood they’d be put down by a commissar ‘for their own good’.

‘He’s powerful, lord. And useful. He is tested every three months for traces of taint, and is always utterly clean. The results show his will is strong, even if his body is not.’

‘A bolt magnet with a touch of something greater, it would seem. It’s rare to see one of the Guard-assigned psykers do more than kill himself with his own psychokinetic energy discharges.’

Thade said nothing. That had almost happened to Seth on several occasions. The most recent time had only been the year before, fighting heretics on the hive world of Beshic V, when the sanctioned psyker had half-melted an enemy tank with psychic lightning from the aquila atop his staff. The crew were cooked alive in their armoured tomb. Seth remained unconscious for a week.

‘Well,’ said the inquisitor at length, ‘I will speak with the lord general myself. And the good brother-captain.’

‘Thank you, lord. He mentioned... hearing a voice, as well.’

Caius rose to his feet, fixing Thade with an unsettling gaze. ‘Talk.’

‘A cry for help, apparently being answered from deep space. He has consulted with the Astartes psyker and they agree on this. But they can provide no details beyond that.’

‘I will speak with your sanctioned psy-advisor as well. Where did he first hear this voice?’

‘The cathedral district. The night we moved into the Shrine of the Emperor’s Unending Majesty.’

‘In the shrine itself? Actually within the building?’

‘You’ll have to ask him. He seems unsure. His powers are erratic.’

‘Very well. Are your men ready, captain? We move out at first light tomorrow.’

‘We’re all ready, lord.’

‘Then I will see you at dawn, Thade. But before you go, where in the name of all that is holy did you get that cyber-mastiff?’

Thade looked down at Rax, who was sitting in silence, scanning left and right with mechanical slowness. Logging the inquisitor’s bio-spoor as a null target was the very first thing Thade had done upon entering the room.

‘We defended the forge world Beshic V last year. My enginseer found the dog in the rubble of one of the great factories and repaired it as a personal project. The tech-priests used them as factory guards before the war there. When we shipped out, the governor of the city gave him permission to keep it.’

‘I suspect there were bribes involved.’

‘Why, you might just be right,’ Thade said.

The inquisitor nodded, all trace of good humour gone. ‘Very well. I will meet with Seth shortly. Dismissed, captain. See you at dawn.’



CHAPTER IX

Terminus Est

The following day, as the weak afternoon sun began to slide lower in the sky, the Imperium of Man lost the war for Kathur.

In the months after this chronicle's conclusion, the Imperium would retake the shrineworld with almost no resistance. By that stage, the key figures of this record were, in most cases, killed in action.

Imperial records would identify this date, this single day at the beginning of the Reclamation's second month, as the turning point in the campaign. The personal logs of the soldiers on the surface said much the same, though in different terms. The recovered vox-record of events kept by Inquisitor Bastian Caius (deceased) of the Ordo Sepulchrum stated the following:

'Without the last-minute warnings given by Brother-Codicier Zauren of the Raven Guard, sanctioned psyker Seth Roscrain of the Cadian 88th and several of the Navigators aboard the Reclamation fleet, the orbital battle would have been lost before it even began. Their warnings, when taken as a whole, were enough to convince many of the flag-captains that there was at least the chance all was not as it seemed.

We had no idea, of course. No idea from whence the threat would come. In the brief meetings I conducted with the late lord general, the available regimental officers and the flag-captains, the consensus that the main threat would rise from the surface. After all, the XIV Legion was already on Kathur. The pieces fit.

On one level, it was true. The insurgence of Remnant and Death Guard forces within Solthane was on a level unseen

before.

But I had heard the voice. I knew something was coming from the warp. And though I warned the orbiting fleet to stand ready for battle, there was a certain laxity in their preparations. I was not enraged by this, but I admit to being disappointed. Several of the Navy officers had little fear that any threat would reach us before the main Reclamation fleet arrived – and several more simply did not believe a Chaos fleet would engage us over a world like Kathur. The Archenemy, they insisted, had already had its fill of the shrineworld. The corruption was complete, the blasphemy done, and the true threat was gone.

So imagine our surprise when we learned the truth.

Lord General Maggrig's urgency to retake Solthane and land an initial spearhead force was admirable, but flawed. He paid the price for his eagerness. The fleet above us was far too small to repel an assault of that magnitude.

And yet the defiance of the flag-captains whose vessels ringed the shrineworld was, for the ground forces, valuable beyond measure.

The fury of their defence gave those of us on the planet's surface the most precious gift possible, given the circumstances. The fleet captains could not buy us victory. All they could offer was time.

The time to choose how we would fight back.'

The recovered regimental journal of Colonel Jhek Antor (also deceased), Vednikan 12th Rifles, said much the same:

'We've lost contact with the ships in orbit. Order has broken down. Under Lord General Maggrig's orders, the remaining regiments have scattered into the city, dividing to minimise losses in case of orbital bombardment.

What may have been a sound tactic in other theatres of war is a messy dissolution of strength here. The vox-network is savagely unreliable on Kathur – it has been right from the

moment we made planetfall. Now we're separated in a hateful, huge city filled with the dead, and we're coming to realise just how much the vessels in orbit were boosting the vox signal with their onboard instruments.

Vox quality has degenerated until it is all but useless. We fancy we can guess when one of our ships above has been destroyed, by the vox quality dropping another pitch.

There was talk of something happening, something big coming to wipe us all out. The talk was right. The Emperor-damned heretic cult has risen up in anger against us. I curse the Remnant, curse the plague-slain, and curse the Death Guard that leads them both.

Damn all that mess in orbit. Like we don't have enough problems today.'

The personal journal of Lieutenant Taan Darrick of the Cadian 88th Mechanised Infantry offered a much briefer summation:

'I hate this planet.'

As the early afternoon sun beat down on the capital of Solthane, three hundred men of the Cadian 88th were footslogging slowly through the expansive garden grounds of a reliquary spire that supposedly contained the fingerbones of Saint Kathur himself. They'd been in the field for over nine hours, having set out into the city at dawn.

Inquisitor Bastian Caius was with them, his shoulder-mounted psycannon panning in mirror to the movements of his head.

Colonel Lockwood and Major Crayce were just rolling out of the main encampment, kilometres away, thundering to their own objectives with a force of seven hundred men in rumbling Chimeras.

Lord General Maggrig was within the main encampment itself, inside his command tent rather than the more formal prefab structure he used for briefings, poring over maps of Solthane and directing junior officers to move icons on the table charts to represent the positions of his forces.

Brother-Captain Corvane Valar was deep in his daily meditations, kneeling in a simple robe of black marked with his white Chapter symbol on the breast. He

was in his private quarters within the belly of the Astartes strike cruiser, *The Second Shadow*.

Brother-Codicier Zauren was on the *Shadow*'s bridge, in full war plate. As space exploded before him and disgorged the Archenemy host, he shook his head with a rueful smile and whispered two words, too quiet for his helmet vox to amplify.

'We're dead.'

The exemplar of the orbital defence was not (as might be expected from an Astartes strike cruiser) *The Second Shadow*. That honour fell to the Imperial Navy vessel *Depth of Fury*, commanded by Captain Lantyre Straden.

Straden had been one of the captains to take heed of Inquisitor Caius's warning and to firmly believe the threat would come from the warp, not from Kathur's surface. So when the sirens started wailing and several of the limbless servitors connected to the navigation consoles began to babble and moan in alarm, Straden was not in the least bit surprised.

'Well, well, well,' he said at the blossoming warp vortex, bearing witness to the Archenemy ships spilling from the wound in space. Steepling his fingers, he lounged in his command throne, watching the view-portal for several beats of his calm heart.

'Sir?' asked a naval rating. Straden smoothed his greying moustache with his fingertips and nodded to the bridge officer. A grim grin creased his thin lips.

'All power to the nova cannon.'

Terminus Est tore a hole in the stillness of space, ripping back into reality with hull-shaking force. The ship screamed forward through realspace, trailing warp-tendrils of psychic fog the colour of madness.

It was beyond big. The Herald's flagship was bloated and vast, built to be a battleship beyond reckoning and swollen by Chaos in the ten millennia since it first drifted from the orbital docks of the forge world that birthed it. Its ridged surface bristled with a thousand disease-caked cannons, each ready to fire. Its gangrene and grey hull was cooking as the last vestiges of the warp's psychic touch fizzled away, burning the organic filth coating the ship's metal skin. It took several seconds for the coldness of space to reassert material physics over the ship once again. The flames of corruption slowly flickered out, extinguished by reality.

Like flies around a corpse, lesser ships orbited *Terminus Est*, still clinging close to the flagship but already beginning to form into attack groups. In the

wake of the great vessel and its interceptor parasites, bulky cruisers emerged from the agonisingly bright slit in the universe.

Three. Ten. Nineteen. And still they came, vomited forth from the empyrean and streaming trails of psychic fog as reality gripped them once more.

On the reeking bridge of *Terminus Est*, the creatures bonded to their stations hissed and shrieked. Typhus rose from his throne and leaned on the guard rail surrounding his podium.

‘Surround them. Allow none to enter the warp.’

It was an unnecessary order. The Chaos fleet had broken from the immaterium a considerable distance away, but the severity of their emergence warp-wound would play hell with the Imperials’ navigation systems. Interceptor fighters were already being scrambled. No Imperial vessel was going to be able to flee what was coming.

‘Report,’ Typhus burbled. The answer came from a mutated thing half-fused to its scanner console. Its voice was utterly human, though punctuated by hacking coughs.

‘A cluster of twelve troop barges... Six Sword-class frigates in orbital spread... Two Dauntless-class light cruisers in a defensive ring... Five Cobra-class destroyers... One Dominator-class cruiser in high orbit...’

‘They are nothing to us. But that,’ pointed Typhus, aiming his Manreaper scythe at the cavernous viewscreen. ‘What is *that*?’

‘Astartes strike cruiser, great Herald...’ the once-human creature choked out. ‘Identified as *The Second Shadow*, Raven Guard allegiance—’

The rest of the creature’s report was drowned out by the Herald’s laughter.

The Imperial fleet above Kathur was modest in size, to say the least. What orbited the planet was a battle group balanced for exactly what it was: the forward element of the Reclamation forces. The sluggish troop transports were next to unarmed and had nothing like the manoeuvrability necessary to survive a dedicated engagement. The destroyers and light cruisers flanking the wallowing troopships were jagged, bladelike and deadly, crewed by veterans of Battlefleet Scarus and each bearing its fair share of scars and memories from clashes with the Archenemy over centuries of war and refit.

Of the smaller ships, the Raven Guard strike cruiser was the unsubtle jewel in the fleet’s crown. As the daggerish light frigates and their destroyer escorts banked to face the new threat, *The Second Shadow* powered up its ancient engines and primed a vicious weapon array designed to break any blockade and

still have the firepower left to fall into a low orbit to hammer a city into dust.

Yet it remained in orbit, while the Imperial fleet tore away to meet the attack.

The *Depth of Fury* was the single Imperial Navy ship of true cruiser size present. The Dominator-class was rarely seen in Battlefleet Scarus, and was considered by many captains to be something of the Navy's bastard son. The more reliable Lunar-, Gothic- and Dictator-class cruisers held pride of place among Naval ranks and populated the majority of battle groups.

The Dominator's undesirability was centred on its main weapon mounting. Thrusting from the armoured prow like a bared lance and reaching almost half a kilometre in length, a nova cannon took a horrendous amount of preparation in order to fire even once. It was also inefficient in orbit-to-surface warfare, rendering it less versatile than standard lance batteries, which in turn rendered it even less desirable.

Lastly, it was not viable to mount a nova cannon on any ship smaller than a cruiser-class vessel, purely because the recoil of firing the weapon would, at best, throw navigation all to hell and take precious minutes to recover. At worst – and much more likely – firing the weapon would collapse a smaller vessel's superstructure and destroy the ship.

So this difficult, awkward weapon found its home on the prow of the often disregarded Dominator-class cruisers.

Captain Straden was all too used to being ordered into lesser duties – duties that he considered far below the honour worthy of an Imperial cruiser. He sat in his command throne now, feeling the heavy thrum in his bones as his beloved, underestimated ship came about to a new heading. The engines shook the entire ship, and well they might, for five thousand slaves and servitors laboured in the endless layers of the *Fury*'s aft decks. The enginarium was a hothouse of banging machinery, burning furnaces, sweating slaves and bellowing petty officers armed with pistols and whips.

'I count twenty-six hostiles, captain,' called out a junior officer from his place in front of a bank of crackling scanner monitors. 'Sacred Throne!'

'Report,' Straden ordered, his voice still calm.

'The flagship reads as the... the *Terminus Est*.'

Lantyre Straden had captained *Depth of Fury* for eleven years. He'd captained a Cobra-class destroyer for six years before that, and served as a lieutenant aboard a Lunar-class cruiser before even that. A long career in the Holy Fleet. Honourable if not exquisitely distinguished, and with a record of victories that entitled him to sit where he was now: in the spacious, antique throne of one of

the Emperor's own blessed battle cruisers. At his command was the power to obliterate incredible amounts of life, of entire cities, of whole worlds. He had done so many times before – simply by speaking a single word, he had annihilated thousands of lives. It was his duty, and his duty was his passion. Such was the power of *Depth of Fury*, ill-favoured main armament or not.

This was the first time Straden could ever remember thinking that the metres-thick adamantium armour of an Imperial ship, coupled with the invisible, crackling protection of void shields, would simply not be enough. Upon hearing those words, the name of that accursed ship that had been Segmentum Obscurus legend for thousands of years, he knew with cold certainty that he would die here.

He steepled his fingers as his elbows rested on the arms of the command throne. Death... The thought was oddly liberating.

'Bring us about until *Terminus Est* is in our forward fire arc. Status on the nova cannon?'

A weapons rating looked up from his console, one hand raised to his earpiece. 'Prow fire control reports all systems ready,' he said.

'Warn the enginarium to make final preparations.'

There was the chatter of dozens of voices around the bridge speaking into vox mics, alerting fellow officers across the ship that the main armament was readying to fire.

Straden requested ship-wide vox, and a rating patched it through to the systems within his enclosing command throne.

'This is the captain,' he began, and his mouth grew dry even as his calm took greater hold on his heart. 'All crew to battle stations. Brace to fire the nova cannon in thirty seconds. Station commanders to sound off when ready.'

The vox blared into life as returning signals crackled through.

'Navigation, ready,' boomed a voice across the bridge, emanating from the speakers.

'Port laser batteries locked down and ready,' came a second voice.

And on it went. As the districts of the colossal ship chimed back their readiness, Straden watched the rotted hulks of the Archenemy ships tearing closer. The ship began to shake anew, taking the first impacts from the light cruisers thrusting ahead of the behemoth, *Terminus Est*.

Fighters spilled from the larger Chaos ships, but while the smaller vessels of the Imperial fleet took a hammering from their interceptor weapons, *Depth of Fury* ignored them utterly. It speared away from the planet, launching towards its

target like a shrike diving at its prey.

‘Signal the captains of the *Precious Loyalty* and *The Lord Castellan* to power up and flank us for the first five thousand kilometres of our run. Then they are to break away when we fire the nova cannon, lest they catch the first wave from our broadsides.’

‘Compliance,’ murmured a vox-servitor, and relayed the orders to the commanders of the smaller frigates. *Depth of Fury* shuddered harder, taking serious impacts on its void shields and shaking through the stress of the plasma drives propelling the ship far in advance of standard thrust.

‘Come on,’ Straden whispered. ‘Come on. Please, come on.’

‘Enginarium...’ the voice began, and the captain was already out of his seat before it finished, ‘...ready.’

Straden stared at the viewscreen, at the bloated shape of *Terminus Est* powering closer through the void. He drew his formal sabre, and aimed it at the image before him.

‘Kill. That. Ship.’

The principles of nova cannon technology are relatively simple.

Generators mounted in *Depth of Fury*’s prow and the cannon itself charged up, creating a series of powerful magnetic fields. Teams of slaves in the prow work with great loading machinery to feed a specially prepared projectile – an implosive charge the size of a small building – into a great hallway known as the release chamber.

Bulkheads slam down as the nova cannon readies to fire. The firing mechanisms must be isolated from the rest of the ship, and it is rare that all slaves escape in time. As *Depth of Fury* thundered towards *Terminus Est*, battered by the anger of a dozen lesser vessels, Straden demanded haste above all else. Hundreds of slaves and servitors were killed in the preparation even before the ship’s destruction several minutes later.

Upon the order to fire, the magnetic fields accelerate the payload and hurl it from the fixed cannon at something close to the speed of light. Then the time-consuming and dangerous reloading process takes place, and the cycle repeats.

The payload hurtles through space faster than the human eye (and indeed, most instruments of human design) can track. It is programmed not to implode within safe distance of the firing vessel; a nova cannon’s destructive force is immense.

This failsafe can, of course, be overridden. In only a handful of minutes, it

would be.

The projectile lanced across the distance between the two converging ships faster than the blink of an eye. Once it struck, it was programmed to implode, collapsing in on itself and achieving a density so intense all nearby matter would be sucked inside it and compressed to practically nothingness.

This is how stars die.

And this is what hit the oncoming prow of *Terminus Est*.

A sizeable chunk of the diseased ship simply ceased to exist, wrenched out of physicality and into nothingness. Consoles chattered and servitors grunted as *Depth of Fury's* bridge instruments registered the damage.

'Direct hit,' said the lieutenant by the main weapons console.

Now the gangrenous ship was wounded. Detritus, mutated crew and shards of armoured hull spun away into space, drifting from the gaping hole ripped into the prow of the advancing Chaos warship. The blood Straden could see was a flood of dark droplets – some hideous fluid leaking from the wounded sections of hull, turning into glittering crimson crystals as they froze in space.

It began to rotate – a fat whale rolling to avert its face.

'She's hiding her bridge,' Straden cursed.

'Sixteen per cent hull damage, captain. They're venting air pressure and... and thousands of kilolitres of some kind of dark, organic fluid. *Terminus Est* is still coming, captain.'

Straden looked at the man as though he were the lowest form of idiot.

'Then by the God-Emperor,' he said, 'you will *fire again*.'

The unfolding drama above Kathur became a smooth orbital ballet as the ships slid past each other in graceful slowness. Formations broke and reformed. Lesser ships danced around the greater ones, and the heavier cruisers unleashed silent beams that lanced across space to burn out as fountains of high energy sparks spraying away from crackling void shields.

When a ship's shields finally buckled, the lances of light cut directly into the hulls, scarring them deeply, cutting ships into pieces one shard at a time.

The Second Shadow did not follow *Depth of Fury*. The rest of the Imperial fleet did.

These lighter cruisers and destroyer frigates powered at the Archenemy flagship, plasma drives leaving streams of energy-charged mist in their wake. While the slaves and servitors in the bowels of these vessels laboured on,

unknowing of their fates, no bridge officer in the fleet was under any illusions. There was no hope to survive this. All that remained was to sell their lives as dearly as possible.

Had *The Second Shadow* joined this assault, Imperial forces would have inflicted a great deal more damage on their foes. But the strike cruiser remained in orbit – the very embodiment of Astartes autonomy. Frantic calls for aid clashed in the vox as the Navy vessels demanded (and in several cases, pleaded) for aid. Yet the black cruiser sat in seeming silence, its outward calm concealing the activity within.

The frigate *Precious Loyalty* was captained by Lieutenant Terris Vyn, born to a wealthy family on the planet Gudrun. In the final moments of its life, two thoughts spun around his mind, casting all others aside. Firstly, that these were the worst circumstances one could make the rank of captain, and secondly, that he had no idea where his right arm was. The torpedo had struck, and after a moment's blackness, he found himself crawling to his feet a great deal less whole than he had been a moment ago. Choking smoke flooded the bridge as blood poured from the stump of his severed bicep.

Every other officer of higher rank was dead, buried under the wreckage of what had been a fully-functioning bridge only scant minutes before. Half the servitors and ratings were similarly incapacitated: dead, dying, or doomed to spend their last seconds of life trapped under twisted metal rubble.

Terris Vyn ordered the enginarium to give him maximum thrust, little realising only a quarter of the one thousand slaves were still alive down there. The same torpedo barrage that devastated the bridge had inflicted equally horrendous damage across the rest of the vessel. By all design logic, it was a miracle the ship was still holding together.

He then ordered the helm to stabilise course and make straight for the *Terminus Est*. In this, his orders were more successful. The Dauntless-class vessel veered sharply, and plunged back on course.

Another Chaos cruiser, the dark-hulled *Daughter of Agony*, drifted between Terris Vyn and his target. The cruiser was busy opening up with its broadsides, unleashing hell on the flaming form of *Depth of Fury*.

‘Forward batteries!’ he cried through the smoke. ‘Forward batteries fire!’

Half of the batteries fired. Due to the excessive damage already sustained, the other half no longer existed. They were reduced to deep, ruined scars in the *Loyalty*’s prow.

The diminished cutting beams sliced out, making harmless lightning patterns

as the *Daughter of Agony*'s void shields repelled the incoming fire.

'Go around!' Terris Vyn screamed. 'Ram the *Terminus Est*!'

A noble plan. Had it succeeded, it would have been delicious vindication for the slain Imperial crews.

Instead, *Daughter of Agony* began to twist. Lance fire licked from the turrets across the vessel's back, turrets so numerous they were like scales on a reptile's skin.

'Lieutenant...' a helm officer began a sentence he would never finish.

Precious Loyalty exploded in a bright star of plasmic energy, sending debris slashing through space in a thousand directions.

It was a scene being repeated across the Imperial fleet.

Depth of Fury powered on, shieldless and streaming jagged metal from its wounds. Like a plague of locusts, Chaos fighters flitted around the cruiser, a cloud of annoyance harassing all four kilometres of the great vessel. *Depth of Fury* shuddered under the withering hail of fire, geysers of pressurised air and quickly-killed flames gushing from the holes blasted in its ridged hull. The cathedral-like structures adorning its long back were in ruins, resembling the bones of some long-dead civilisation. The ship's destruction was inevitable. The damage was already nearly total.

The reports reaching *Fury*'s captain flashed through his mind and were discarded by all but the core parts of his consciousness. The hull was literally collapsing on too many decks to keep track of. The void shield generators had been ejected into space to prevent a critical internal detonation. Half the plasma drives had ceased functioning. Navigation was fighting to keep the ship under control, and what control the officers had was unreliable in the extreme.

The cruiser passed between two Chaos vessels, and a final chorus of broadsides fired. The banks of cannons roared into the silence of space, tearing great scars along the edges of the grey-green ships as *Fury* sliced between them like a crumbling dagger.

Still, somehow, the prow was aimed at *Terminus Est*, following the larger ship as it rolled.

We'll only get one more shot, Straden knew. *By the throne, I pray we make this count.*

'Main weapon primed!' yelled a rating.

'Fire! In His glorious name! *Fire!*'

No preparations this time. The nova cannon charged its magnetic fields and

spat its implosive gift at the Archenemy flagship.

Two things happened in the wake of that release. Close to the speed of light, the projectile hammered into *Terminus Est*, unleashing the physics of a collapsing sun into the ship's underbelly. Several decks simply ceased to exist as the implosion gouged a wicked, bleeding hole in the Traveller's vessel. More wreckage, more crew and more diseased fluids drifted into space from the grievous puncture.

The second thing was that *Depth of Fury* lost all pretence of stability. The kickback from firing the nova cannon was colossal, effectively killing the cruiser's forward motion and sending it veering to starboard, out of control.

The predator sensed its prey was crippled: *Terminus Est* loomed in the viewscreen, drifting closer.

'We're dead in space,' said one the younger bridge ratings. His face was white with fear. 'Do we abandon ship, sir?'

The side of the young man's head exploded outward in a dark mess. The corpse toppled over in the same direction a moment after. The ship's commissar, hook-nosed and thin-faced, lowered his pistol.

'How dare he shame this vessel's final moments with a coward's talk?'

Straden ignored the man. He was already on the ship-wide vox, speaking his last order.

'Stand to your final duties, men of the Imperium. Be ready to greet the Emperor with pride.'

The Second Shadow was also taking a beating. Encircled by lesser destroyers, frigates and fighter wings, the black strike cruiser still sat in orbit, returning fire with its formidable weapons array.

But going nowhere.

Boarding ports opened like widening eyes along the hull, and assault pods shot from the *Shadow's* launch bays, engines burning with fiery contrails. Almost as small as the fighters swarming the strike cruiser, they fired across space in a formation blur, passing practically unnoticed. The few Chaos ships that did notice the pods failed to target-lock the fast-moving objects as they hurtled through the void, directly towards the distant shape of *Terminus Est*.

A Space Marine strike cruiser was a Chapter commodity so precious that its value to the Raven Guard could not be described. The lives of fifty of its Astartes were similarly priceless.

With no escape from this colossal tragedy taking hold, the Raven Guard had

decided how best to sell their lives. The ship-to-ship assault pods streamed on, ever closer to the Archenemy flagship.

A textbook boarding operation.

Petty Officer Ovor Werland laboured shirtless in the prow armament chambers of *Depth of Fury*. He was forty-three years old, and would never see forty-four. In his right hand was a laspistol, its ammunition expended. In his left hand was a whip, the leather cord slick with blood.

He'd lashed them, he'd shot some of them, but he'd done it. His team of slaves, now down to barely a hundred men, had reloaded the nova cannon in just under seven minutes. The mouth of the great turret had been fed with the huge warhead it would unleash.

Werland sprinted across the wreckage-strewn deck, leaping at the last moment over the still-twitching body of a man he'd shot himself. He dropped his weapons, keyed the wall vox-speaker active and shouted over the wailing sirens that the captain could fire the main armament.

His last duty done, Werland turned from the wall.

And froze.

The remaining hundred men of his slave team ringed him in an impenetrable semicircle. As the ship shuddered and came apart, the men stood there, pieces of wreckage held as weapons.

Petty Officer Ovor Werland paid the price many slavemasters have paid since time out of mind. With nothing left to lose, his property rebelled and took their vengeance.

Depth of Fury was doomed. Although it would end its honourable but understated career in less than a minute, Ovor Werland was quite dead by then.

'Their cannon amasses power once more, great Herald.'

Typhus nodded his horned helm once.

'End them. Now.'

'Main armament ready!' crackled the voice over the vox. Ovor Werland's last words.

Straden's mouth fell open for a moment. For one insane second he wanted to get back on the vox and ask that officer's name, in order to recommend him for special citation.

‘Fire my damn gun!’ he roared at the surviving weapons officers.

They tried. *Depth of Fury* twisted slowly, exploding as it turned, bringing its cannon to bear with agonising slowness.

Their bridge. Straden breathed fast, unable to believe what he saw. The Archenemy flagship was filling the viewscreen now. And he saw...

Their bridge!

‘It’s too close to fire, sir,’ spoke one of the ratings. ‘We’ll be caught in the implosion.’ Straden couldn’t believe what he’d heard.

‘Do I look like I give a shit? We’re dead already! Fire! Fire, fire, *fire!*’

The magnetic fields powered up. Straden could feel them. He didn’t care that it was impossible. He could feel the magnetic fields charging, heating his blood, vibrating his bones. He ignored the bridge detonating around him.

‘Kill them!’ he cried out with a savage brightness lighting his eyes. ‘For the Emperor! Kill them!’

Depth of Fury’s plasma drives finally exploded under the last sustained lance volley from *Terminus Est* and its support cruisers. The explosion sent shockwaves that rocked the nearby Chaos vessels, creating a great cloud of plasma residue and debris, hanging in space like a bruise-coloured nebula.

Terminus Est parted the dust cloud like a shark cutting through water.

‘That was close, Lord Typhus,’ said one of the Death Guard flanking the Herald’s throne. ‘If they had fired...’

Typhus ignored him. ‘Make for *The Second Shadow*. That dies next.’



CHAPTER X

Survival

Solthane, Yarith Spire Graveyard, Monastic sector

Thade crouched with his back against the ruined wall. Las-fire made little hissing sounds as it chipped the other side of the stone.

‘I hate this planet,’ he said, reloading his bolt pistol without looking. Crouching in the mud of a sprawling garden estate, using waist-high marble walls and huge trees for cover, several squads of the 88th were engaged with the Remnant, and engaged hard. Thade was used to his fair share of battles that began when the enemy came from nowhere. This time, the bastards came from *everywhere*.

They spilled from the tower at the centre of the ten-kilometre-square estate, then flooded in from the edges, running from every direction. The 88th had been surrounded in a heartbeat, pinned between the enemy coming from behind them and from their objective.

Yarith Spire. The saint’s fingerbones were supposed to be here. The tower itself rose up like a spear splitting the sky. It was black – some hideously rare and expensive black stone, Thade guessed – and as overly ornate as the rest of this tomb city. Rings of gargoyles and angels leered down in all directions. It looked like a particularly unfriendly nightmare.

Nine hours deep into the city, and enemy resistance was supposed to be light. Not medium, not heavy and not medium-to-heavy thank-you. Light. The Vednikan 12th Rifles had swept this area clean only a few days before.

‘There shouldn’t be a soul here,’ Corrun said as he reloaded his rifle next to the captain. ‘Nothing ever goes right on this planet, eh?’

Thade wiped a bleeding slice along his cheek – a gift from shrapnel when the last wall he’d been behind had exploded. This resistance was neither light nor

medium. In fact, it even left ‘heavy’ some way back in the dust.

His dirty glove smeared the dark facial blood across his cheek, and it kept coming from the cut. *That’ll leave a scar*, he thought. *An ugly one.*

The squads had scattered at Thade’s order, taking shelter in the modest domed chapels and graveyards dotted around the huge garden estate. The horde of Remnant came on, the rear elements slowed by the heavy weapons they carried.

A stalemate now. At best, temporary. At worst, already breaking. The Cadians were holed up in detached pockets, many soldiers using gravestones for cover, holding off Remnant forces with far superior numbers. A solid slug clanged off Rax’s chrome flank, and the beast growled low. Its photoreceptor eyes sought the shooter, calculating his location from the angle of the incoming fire.

‘Take cover, idiot,’ Thade said. The dog retreated further behind the wall.

Taan Darrick hurled himself into Thade and Corrun’s cover, crawling on his belly until he was next to the captain.

‘Join the Shock, they told me.’ Taan was reloading his battered lasrifle. ‘Serve the Emperor. Meet overwhelming numbers of arseholes...’ the lieutenant kissed his rifle once it was rearmed, ‘...and shoot them in the face.’

‘Considering the number of heretics howling for our blood,’ Thade said, ‘you’re in good spirits.’

‘I heard there’s a pay rise if I get made into morale officer.’

‘Shut up, Taan.’

‘Shutting up, sir.’

‘Captain?’ Thade’s vox-bead crackled. The sound was distorted. As reliable as always, then.

‘Thade here. Identify.’

‘Squad Vigilant: Unbroken.’ Commissar Tionenji’s voice, his accent adding an exotic twist to the regimental words. ‘Thade, I need Sentinels. I have armour incoming.’

Throne in flames. ‘Confirm that you have *armour* incoming.’

‘Confirmed. Armour incoming. They look like Repressors and Chimeras. Riot-control... Troop transports... Fitted with additional weapons. Captain? Captain?’

‘I’m here. Dead Man’s Hand will be routed to you.’

‘Acknowledged.’ The link went dead.

‘Who was that?’ Taan asked as he kneeled up, firing around the edge of the wrecked wall.

‘Vigilant sighted armour. Tionenji’s unit.’

‘Still...’

‘Still what?’

‘It’s good the new boy is getting his hands dirty on his first day.’

‘Shut up, Taan.’

‘Shutting up, sir. What do you say about a brisk run back to the Chimeras?’

The transports had been abandoned at the edge of the graveyard several hours before. They were several kilometres distant from the Chimeras.

‘I’m fairly certain I said you should shut up.’

‘You say a lot of things.’

Thade raised an eyebrow. Taan grinned. ‘Shutting up, sir.’ Any other time, Thade would have laughed.

‘We’re being ringed. Take Alliance further down into that graveyard to the west. If the Remnant takes that ground, they’ll split us up from Loyalty and Adamant.’ The inquisitor was with Adamant. It wouldn’t do to be split up from him, of all people.

‘Sir.’ Taan took out his viewfinders, holding them up to his eyes and panning across the western graveyard. Dozens of Remnant, dressed in their filthy PDF uniforms, were already running across the dead grass. ‘You always give me the fun jobs,’ he said with a grin. Then he was running, voxing his squad to follow.

Thade keyed his vox again. ‘Vertain, acknowledge.’ Static. ‘Dead Man’s Hand, acknowledge.’

More static.

This is tremendous. ‘Janden!’ Thade called.

Thade’s vox officer was kneeling behind a gravestone some thirty metres away. Las-fire flashed over his head as Janden hunkered down, gripping his laspistol. His bulky vox-caster backpack was on the ground, kept safely behind cover.

‘Sir?’ Janden called.

‘Signal to Dead Man’s Hand. Reinforce Vigilant in the north, immediately.’

Janden nodded and started punching keys. The strength and range on the vox-casters far exceeded the personal micro-beads carried by individual soldiers, especially with the interference on Kathur so eternally harsh.

‘Sir, I’m getting scrambled signals.’

‘That’s not news to me, Janden.’ Thade kneeled up, firing his bolt pistol two-handed. It bucked as it banged in his hands, round after round, again and again. Remnant soldiers died each time the gun sang. Thade nailed seven of them in quick succession, picking them off as they broke cover to run forward.

The Remnant was using the low walls and gravestones as shields, too. Except

they had the numbers to take horrendous casualties and still run right up to the Cadians' faces in a swarm.

'Sir, it's the fleet!'

Thade crouched to reload again. Throne, he was running out of clips.

'I'm listening, Janden,' he called. 'Get over here. Eighty-Eight, covering fire!'

The hunkered-down soldiers from Thade's nearby squads rose as one, letting rip with rifles on full-auto. Short bursts: just enough for each man to kill a target or two and get the rest of the wretches ducking. For a moment, the Remnant's advance across the mass graveyard halted.

Janden made a break for it. He sprinted the distance between his cover and the captain's wall. When he was within arm's reach of Thade's cover, a las-round tore across his chest, shattering his body armour. He hurled himself next to the captain, the way Taan had only minutes before. His chestplate was a smoking mess.

'Close,' he grinned.

'Close,' Thade agreed. 'You've had worse. The fleet?'

Janden offered Thade the speech horn, and the captain listened.

A storm of voices. Panicked, angry and pleading – all to a background of vicious static. Thade covered his other ear to keep out the sharp cracks of lasrifles.

'...hull breach at...'

'...engaging unsupported...'

'...seconds left... Dead in...'

'...the Emperor... Laser batteries f...'

'...too many!'

'...abandon... Reactor critical...'

'...*Fury* is gone! She...'

'...ing destroyed! The *Fury* is...'

'No,' Thade said breathlessly, and then in a stunned whisper, 'Throne of Terra, no.'

An explosion nearby jolted him back from the horror of what he was hearing on the vox. Now the Remnant was using frag grenades.

'Zailen?' Thade spoke calmly into his vox. Another detonation nearby elicited fresh screams.

Zailen was flat on his front some fifty metres away, his temperamental plasma gun hidden behind a gravestone in favour of his standard-issue lasrifle. Thade saw him roll back into cover, hidden from view, and heard his voice come over

the vox.

‘Captain?’ Zailen was from Kasr Novgrad, on the other side of the world from Kasr Vallock, where Thade was born. His accent turned the word into *Keptane*.

‘Zailen, you need to kill the ones with grenade launchers. All our heavy weapons are with the squads in the north and east. You’re it, Zailen. Copy?’

‘Yes, captain. It will be done.’ *Yiz, keptane. It vill be done.*

‘Good hunting.’ Thade was looking around the edge of the wall, bolt pistol in hand. ‘You see the domed chapel to our north? Look in the tower. They’re up there.’

‘Consider them dead, sir.’ *Conzider zem dead, suh.*

Thade ignored the sun-bright spears of plasma burning from Zailen’s gun a moment later. He was already focused on his vox-officer. ‘Janden. Janden, eyes on me.’

‘Sir?’ Janden’s pockmarked face, acne-scarring ruining his good looks, was set in a worried scowl.

‘Get me Maggrig if you can. If not, get me Colonel Lockwood.’

‘Sir.’ Janden started working, hitting keys and turning dials to reach some semblance of clarity on his vox-caster. Headphones on, mic extended, he repeated the same call, hoping for an answer with each new frequency he tried.

Thade resorted to his vox-bead for squad-to-squad contact.

‘Venator to Adamant, Thade to Horlarn, respond.’

‘Adamant: Broken.’

First Lieutenant Horlarn had to shout above the gunfire. His platoon was still taking position in the graveyard, the men setting up around small mausoleums and the unluckier ones using gravestones for cover. The Remnant came on in a horde, thankfully without heavy weaponry. The few heretics that sought safety used similar cover to the Cadians. The rest just ran on, closing fast.

Amongst the men, fighting with a borrowed lasrifle, was Inquisitor Bastian Caius. Evidently he had no desire to use his psycannon on these wretches.

Streams of angry red las-fire flashed across the distance between the two forces, scything down Remnant as they ran. The return fire hammered into the Cadian position. Not ten metres from Horlarn, Trooper Ceale flipped onto his back, spasming on the dry grass. A solid round had taken him in the right eye.

‘Horlarn?’ came Thade’s voice again.

‘I’m a man with a problem, sir,’ Horlarn racked his rifle’s slide to single-shot. Killing these scum was chewing through his ammo reserves. He risked a glance

over the gravestone he was kneeling behind. Remnant everywhere. Just ahead, several of his men were getting into some serious bayonet work, duelling with Remnant soldiers over gravestones and low walls.

‘We all are. The fleet is gone.’

‘Say again, captain.’

‘The fleet is *gone*, Horlarn.’ Thade’s voice muted and the throaty whine of a chainsword took over. After a moment, the captain returned. ‘Get me the inquisitor now. We might be getting a dose of orbital bombardment in short order.’

Horlarn yelled for the inquisitor, who disengaged from his half-hearted combat with an expression somewhere close to amusement. He acted (even smirked) like this bloodshed was somehow below him. Moving from wall to wall, Caius hunched and ran to Horlarn. His bionic eye whirled to bring the lieutenant into focus, adjusting from range-finding moving enemies.

‘Lord Inquisitor, Captain Thade has urgent news.’

‘Give me your vox-bead,’ the inquisitor said without preamble. Horlarn complied. Caius attached the input mic to his throat and put the output bead in his ear.

‘Thade?’

Janden was getting contact now. The other unit commanders of the Reclamation ground forces were touching base, and every story was the same. The fleet was being annihilated and screaming distress calls across every frequency. The soldiers on the surface were encountering an uprising of Remnant that came from everywhere at once. Across the city, the Archenemy’s forces were massing to repel the Imperial Guard.

Janden logged reports from the Kiridians that primary threats were being sighted as the Guard assaulted the hab-blocks in the city’s residential district. The Uriah 303rd was doing nothing but yelling for immediate reinforcement to the south-east. They’d encountered intense resistance as they advanced down Solthane’s main avenue. The Imperial Boulevard, flanked by chapels, false reliquaries and rentable pilgrim habs, had disgorged floods of plague-slain. The Vednikan 12th Rifles were reporting armour contacts – Remnant riot pacification tanks and troop transports corroded by poor maintenance, converted to bear heavy weapons.

There was no word from the Third Skarran Rangers. Nothing but silence from Overseer Maggrig.

‘Inquisitor?’ Thade kneeled in the shadow of the mausoleum, his chainsword purring in his hands. Next to him, Janden spoke rapidly into his vox-caster’s speech horn, repeating himself as Kathur’s interference stole the sense from his words. The vox-officer was still trying to establish contact with the rest of the 88th.

‘Inquisitor Caius?’ Thade asked again, leaving Janden to his work.

‘What ails you, captain?’ crackled the inquisitor.

‘Lord, get to Lieutenant Horlarn’s vox-officer immediately. The fleet is under attack. The Guard on the ground is being hammered city-wide by this resurgence of the Remnant. We need to consolidate our forces immediately. I recommend regrouping and abandoning the spire objective. I’ll be in contact soon.’

At that moment, Janden turned to Thade and mouthed the word ‘Lockwood’. Thade cut the link, snatching the offered speech horn. Such was his haste, he almost crushed it in his augmetic hand without realising.

‘Colonel Lockwood?’

‘He’s dead,’ said the other voice. ‘Who is this?’

Thade didn’t answer. ‘Where is Major Crayce?’

‘Also dead. Who is this? Confirm status of Captain Thade.’

Thade swallowed. ‘Confirmed alive. This is Thade.’

‘Sir!’ the voice on the other end of the link was muffled by violent distortion.

‘...Lieutenant Reval... We’re being overrun, capt...’

Thade could feel how pale he’d become. His cheeks were as cold as ice. If Lockwood and Crayce were dead...

‘Reval, can you hear me? Confirm status of Colonel Lockwood and Major Crayce.’

‘...firmed. Primary threats sighted. Lockwood’s Chimera was... No survivors... I saw Crayce die myself. Frag grenade. Barely anyth... left of him, sir.’

‘Transmit exact coordinates immediately. Damn it, where are you all? Reval?’

‘...opy that, captain. Transmitting. Sir, the casualties are...’

‘Are what? Reval? The casualties are what?’

‘Lost the link,’ said Janden. ‘I’ve got the coordinates, though. Only six kilometres to the direct north. We can meet them on the way back to headquarters.’

‘We’ve got to link up with them. Or they’ve got to link up with us.’ Neither option seemed likely. Six kilometres wasn’t far, but it became a nightmare trek when it was through enemy-held territory. It may as well have been a continent

away.

‘You think we can convince the inquisitor that we need to link up with the colonel?’

‘I’m not sure I care what the inquisitor thinks at this stage.’

‘But the inquisitor’s mission—’

‘Will have to wait,’ snapped Thade. ‘The Reclamation is over.’

All around him now, Thade could see his men being forced into hand-to-hand fighting. The Remnant was on them, vaulting the low walls and running among the gravestones. Thade geared his chainsword up and rejoined the fight. Blood of the Emperor, if he was going to die today, he was going to slaughter a hundred of these bloody heretics first. Rax ran at his heels, its Litany-etched jaws opening in readiness.

Chainsword growling, Thade carved through a Remnant soldier from behind. The man howled as Thade’s sword hammered into his lower back and churned his guts to soup in a whirr of grinding teeth. The captain tore the blade free and ran at the next closest heretic – a filthy, skinny bastard with a blood-spotted lasrifle in his grimy hands. Thade sprinted at him, leaped from a tumbled gravestone, and snapped the heretic’s neck with a flying kick that pounded into the traitor’s throat. His bolter sang as he landed, banging out a thunderous refrain and slaying three more Remnant in showers of gore.

Rax leaped at a nearby Remnant soldier, jaws snapping shut on the traitor’s throat in a vicious clamp like a bear-trap closing. The cyber-mastiff landed before the decapitated corpse even hit the ground, its polished jaws smeared with blood.

Zailen, hefting his steaming plasma gun, joined the captain. So did several other soldiers, rallying to Thade and lending their las-fire to his fury.

Thade’s vox-bead chimed. The signal was poor, but there was no chance to head back to Janden to use the vox-caster now. They were surrounded. Pistol in one hand, blade in the other, the captain moved from wall to wall, killing the Remnant that came within reach. The voice in his ear was muffled beyond comprehension. His pounding heartbeat added to the maelstrom of noise all around.

‘Thade,’ he breathed, tearing his chainsword free from the chest of a Remnant soldier. ‘Speak to me.’

‘...link up...’

Thade’s bolt pistol roared, cutting the voice off again. The soldier that had been running at him, bayonet lowered like a spear, collapsed without a head.

‘Repeat.’

‘This... quisitor Caius. We’re being overwhelmed. Plague-slain and Remnant forces. We must retreat, Thade.’

Thade laughed. He actually laughed. As the inquisitor demanded he abandon this doomed mission and his chainsword stripped the face from a howling heretic, Captain Thade laughed. He’d never expected to die like this, and now the time came, he found it inexplicably funny.

‘We’re Cadian, lord. It’s not called retreat, it’s called consolidation. I already gave the order: fall back to regroup. Otherwise, we die here.’ The trooper next to him took a hit in the belly and dropped like a sack. Thade and his shattered squad took a moment’s refuge behind a row of tombstones.

‘Captain Thade. Give me a full tactical assessment of–’ Caius started.

‘Not now!’ the captain barked. He looked back at the downed trooper. It was Zailen. ‘Cover me, gentlemen,’ he said to the three soldiers crouched with him. And then he started running. ‘Rax. The gun!’

It was only fifteen metres, but he felt shots whickering past his body as he covered the short distance. Thade’s gloved bionic hand gripped Zailen’s collar, knuckle-servos closing with silent, inhuman strength. Bolter up and firing, Thade dragged the bleeding man behind the insignificant cover of a large gravestone. Rax was at his heels, jaws clamped on the grip of Zailen’s priceless plasma gun, moving backwards as he dragged the weapon.

‘Sir,’ said Zailen, unsuccessfully holding in a gush of bright blood from his stomach. Even if he survived the gut-shot, which was unlikely if he remained in the field, the chances of infection in Kathur were almost one hundred per cent. All Reclamation troops were issued with anti-infection gel to fight the increased risk of wounds turning foul on this fallen world.

‘I’m here, I’m here.’ Thade gunned down another Remnant soldier that was too close for comfort, and turned back to Zailen. ‘Still with me, Zailen?’

‘You have no idea how much this hurts.’ Bright blood oozed between his fingers, soaking his uniform. ‘Wasn’t this sector supposed to be almost clear? The Vednikans cleared it, they said.’

‘Shut up and stop dying,’ Thade said. He pulled his blood-wet gloves off, taking his anti-ague gel pack from his hip webbing. He was out of bandages. ‘Tasoll, get over here!’

A nearby trooper made a break for Thade’s limited cover, throwing himself prone to clear the last few metres. Tasoll was clutching a laspistol in each hand, which he holstered as he knelt up next to the captain. He also removed his dirty

gloves, reaching for the medical narthecium pack at his hip. Syringes and bandages were packed neatly within.

‘You got shot, Zailen?’ Tasoll said. He had a gentle voice, totally at odds with his hulking form.

Zailen hissed through clenched teeth. ‘Looks like it. The Vednikan 12th said they’d cleared this place. What is this, then? I’ve – ow, that hurt, watch your fingers – I’ve been shot in the bloody stomach.’

‘Yeah, yeah, life in the Guard. They don’t give medals for getting shot, boy.’

‘Boy? I’m twenty-five.’

‘And I’m forty, so shut your mouth, boy. On three, move your hands. Understood?’

Zailen made a teeth-gritted noise approximating an affirmative. Thade tapped the anti-ague gel and tossed it on the ground next to Tasoll. The medic acknowledged it with a curt nod and started counting.

Then the feeling hit Thade. A skin-crawling feeling, like a wave of insects under his armour, a million legs tickling his sweating flesh. The yells started from just ahead. Something was coming.

‘Thade?’ A voice in his ear. The inquisitor again.

‘Copy,’ Thade was already moving, his eyes flickering through the flashing las-fire and duelling groups of men, seeking the source of unease.

‘We’re falling back to you. Is that understood, captain?’

The source of Thade’s unease was almost three metres tall, clad in ancient armour, and swollen with disease. An oversized bolter chattered in its greenish fists. And it was not alone. From the spire ahead, more Death Guard marched slowly, bolters held at the hip. He had no idea if they walked because their ruined bodies made them unable to run, or if it was just another intimidation tactic, but they fired and Cadians started to die. Soldiers were hammered to the ground all around him. The Death Guard’s volley scythed down Imperials and heretics alike. The Traitor Astartes cared nothing for butchering their own minions.

‘Understood, inquisitor. The faster, the better,’ Thade said, throttling his chainsword. ‘Primary threats sighted.’

‘The Fourteenth Legion?’

‘In the flesh. And lord, we absolutely don’t have the men to win this.’ Thade ducked back into cover, firing his pistol at nearby Remnant soldiers before they could run into close combat with his men. The Death Guard were still a distant threat, out of the range of his bolt pistol even as they cut down his soldiers.

‘General order, Cadian Eighty-eighth. Consolidate all force on Venator’s vox-caster coordinates. Vox back acknowledgement.’

Miraculously, every platoon leader voxed back.

Caught in the jaws of the Archenemy, the 88th abandoned its objectives and now fought just to survive. The squads fell back, metre by metre, in an organised retreat. Like a flower closing its petals, the scattered elements of Thade’s forces came together in unity. They were bloodied, beaten, and suffered losses each step they took.

Above the ash-grey clouds, the Imperial fleet burned. Vox-casters on the surface picked up stray screams from the men aboard those dying ships.



CHAPTER XI

Consolidation

Solthane, Yarith Spire Graveyard, Monastic sector

Tech-priest Enginseer Osiron swept his metal fist in a gentle panning motion, from east to west. The signum in his hand pulsed its electronic signal to his attendant servitors, and the half-living drones followed the path of their master's hand, unleashing a withering hail of fire. Heavy bolters surgically attached to the servitors in place of their left arms chattered and blasted. The graveyard vista before Osiron cleared as the few Remnant left alive after the volley sought shelter.

‘Ammunition depleted,’ said one of the servitors in its dead voice. The heavy bolter that formed part of its body clanked as the auto-loaders linked to the slave's backpack cycled through empty chambers.

Away from the other officers, Osiron couldn't have cared less about Kathur Reclamation protocol regarding the sanctity of the architecture. His servitors were armed with heavy weaponry. He was going to use it.

In the wake of the assault, the moans of wounded Remnant reached Osiron's ears. Although it would have been a pleasant vindication to remain and finish the heretics off once and for all, the tech-priest was obeying Thade's fall back order.

Without a word, he turned from the scene of carnage he'd wrought, and his servitors followed in similar silence. The 88th squad with Osiron's unorthodox squad was a group of Whiteshields, under the command of Squad Leader Farren Kel.

Kel was a Whiteshield himself, just turned fourteen years of age. His black helmet was marked with the central white stripe denoting his membership in the Cadian Youth Legion, though a badge of minor rank was evident on his shoulder pad. Bylam Osiron, the Honoured Enginseer, made him nervous. And it wasn't

the slaughter the machine-man was capable of. Seeing the tech-priest's servitors gun down over a hundred Remnant was nothing. The Cadian boy was almost fifteen; he'd already killed that many men himself.

'Lord tech-priest?' Kel asked, as the Whiteshields – all under sixteen years old – fell back in smooth formation, each squad providing covering fire for the others. The Remnant was already retrying its rush at the Cadians.

'An unnecessary honorific,' Osiron murmured.

'Sir, the captain's orders are to proceed to his position.' Kel tightened his helmet strap, his blue-violet eyes fixed on the black depths of Osiron's hood.

'I heard them,' Osiron said. Kel just nodded to Osiron's words. No sense asking how the Mechanicus holy man had news the squad had only just picked up on their vox-caster.

'Forward for Cadia,' Kel called out, pointing his own newly-issued chainsword towards the distant figures of the embattled Vigilant platoon. He still felt faintly ridiculous shouting out battle cries like that. He felt like he was doing a bad imitation of Captain Thade, but his troopers followed his every word without any laughter.

They made good time, moving swiftly through the graveyard. Osiron and the servitors were forced into an awkward forward-tilted walk to keep up. Kel heard the tech-priest's breathing coming in harsh metallic rasps, and not for the first time he wondered just how old Osiron was. Was this laboured breathing natural for one of the Machine Cult?

Commissar Tionenji met them on a small rise. A dozen of his men were still alive, the rest lay strewn around the hill. Flanked by Dead Man's Hand, the survivors were enjoying a momentary respite as they readied to fall back to Thade. The tanks that had been assaulting their position were burning husks some distance away, shattered and wrecked by the fury of the five Sentinels' autocannons. Kel stared at Tionenji for several moments.

'Squad Leader Kel,' Tionenji flicked gore from his chainsabre. 'Never seen a commissar before?'

'No, sir. Never, sir.' This was a lie. Kel had seen plenty, but this was his first time off-world. He was staring because he'd never seen a man with black skin before. 'Courage: Broken, sir,' Kel added.

'Ah.' Tionenji noted the Whiteshields had only a few casualties. Their success was the tech-priest's doing, no doubt. Or perhaps the children had simply been sent to a section with less intense fighting. But why had the boy said 'Broken'? He smiled as he gestured to the men preparing around him. 'Vigilant,' he said,

‘in bad shape, but Unbroken.’

Kel forced a smile. It must have looked awkward, because the commissar straightened his cap and frowned. ‘Something wrong, squad leader?’

‘It... doesn’t mean that, sir.’

‘Hm?’ Tionenji turned as one of Dead Man’s Hand opened fire once again, the heavy bang-bang-bang of its autocannon echoing across the graveyard as it pounded a distant group of what looked like plague-slain. ‘What doesn’t mean what?’

‘Unbroken, sir. It’s just slang. Code for “able to complete mission objectives”.’

‘Then we’re all Broken, eh?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘How very uninspiring that thought is.’ Tionenji signalled the move-out with a short blast of the whistle around his neck. ‘Thank you for the tip, young man.’ He made to move, then turned back to Kel. ‘Tell me something else, if you would.’

‘Anything, sir.’

‘The Sentinel squadron. Why are they called “Dead Man’s Hand”?’

Kel grinned. It made him look even younger. ‘Named after the captain, sir.’

‘Named after his lost hand?’ asked Tionenji. A trifle grim, even for Cadian humour.

‘Ha! No, sir. Have you ever played Black Five? It’s a card game. We play it back home. If you get dealt all five black cards in your first turn, it’s impossible to win. We call it a dead man’s hand.’

‘And the captain...’

‘...is the worst card player you’ve ever seen, sir. Adar – that is, Scout-Lieutenant Vertain, sir – he named the squadron after he won three months’ wages from the captain. They’re the captain’s elite scouts, there’re five of them, and the name stuck.’

The two platoons fell back together, closing on Thade’s position. Tionenji made a promise to himself then: if he survived this, he was going to do his damndest to make some money off Thade at a card game.

The Second Shadow stood alone. The Chaos fleet closed in, and only now did the strike cruiser turn to face its oncoming attackers. The wreckage of enemy fighters drifted around the black ship like a corona.

The half-human creature at the *Terminus Est*’s void shield console writhed in the Herald’s direction. It tried to speak for the first time in months, but the taint

within was so rich, the creature could barely recall human speech. Instead it psychically projected its message in a burst of panic.

Typhus, still standing, turned his colossal armoured bulk to the nearest Death Guard warrior.

‘We have been boarded. Assault pods have breached...’ the Herald paused, reaching out with his powerful sixth sense, sending his consciousness throughout the halls of the diseased ship. He felt the intrusion as wounds in the flesh of his beloved vessel.

‘...decks nineteen, thirteen and six. Starboard. Sections twenty to twenty-four.’ *Strange*, he thought. *No sense of intruding life*. ‘The Raven Guard have not left the pods, yet. Slaughter them as they emerge. Slaughter them all. Bring me their skulls so the lowliest of my slaves will have new pots to piss in.’

The Destroyer Hive stirred with the Herald’s anger. The hollow, bony protrusions jutting from the archaic Terminator armour began to expel flies from their openings. Fat, blood-wet insects thrummed around the bridge, released from the Herald’s innards. His god’s greatest blessing, contained within a once-mortal shell.

Terminus Est had been boarded. This was not amusing. This was an affront.

Seth.

Seth.

Seth.

Seth screamed. Psychic lightning raged from his outstretched fingertips, enveloping the Death Guard warrior in tendrils of coruscating energy. Its armour blackened and cracked under the psychic onslaught, and the reek of burning flesh was made far worse by the foul stench of cancerous diseases cooking within the superheated power armour.

The sanctioned psyker broke off his attack, suffering a savage cough that brought blood to his lips. As the destroyed Traitor Astartes collapsed in a heap of ruined armour and burned flesh, Seth cried out at the headache heating the insides of his skull. His brain was boiling. He was sure of it, his brain was boiling. He’d pushed himself too far.

Ban Jevrian pistol-whipped him. It was an ungentle blow that made a loud crack as it connected with the psyker’s skull. Seth cried out again, but forced the sound to burst quieter from his lips this time.

‘Keep it down, warp-touched freak.’

Seth nodded dumbly, blood streaming from his tear ducts, ears and nostrils.

Jevrian's Kasrkin unit, like the rest of the 88th, was falling back to Captain Thade's position. They were under the graveyard, deep within an underground mausoleum, with Seth seconded to them for support. They'd been exploring until a squad of Death Guard had emerged from the shadowed corridors adjoining a large burial chamber, opening fire. The Kasrkin had taken the two Traitor Marines down with a blistering volley of hellgun fire aimed at the Astartes' armour joints, thirty grenades, and Seth's psychic fury.

Jevrian knelt by the still form of a black-armoured Cadian. He'd lost three of his men to the Traitors' bolters. Three. Three Kasrkin, the elite, the best of the best. He could scarcely fathom the loss. And now he had the warp-touched mutant dribbling and weeping. To hell with Thade's pet wizard; Jevrian was tempted to shoot the bastard now and have done with it.

'Move out,' growled the Kasrkin sergeant. 'Get to the surface, double time.' The Cadians walked the corridors, leaving their dead down in the dark.

Seth.

The voice again. Familiar, but distant. Almost strained. It had been calling for several minutes now. He feared it was the voice from the night of the monastery, calling him by name.

Seth.

Seth took a shuddering breath, steeling himself by imagining his psychic inner walls back into place. With concentration, he could silence the whispering voices that stroked his mind. Daemons, warp-things, hellish creatures from the empyrean reaching into his mind and seeking a way into the world of flesh and blood. He was all too used to resisting their corruptive touch.

Seth! SETH!

No, wait. He knew that voice, sensing it through familiarity rather than any true vocal recognition. Instead of girding his mind in hatred, he opened up to the one calling his name. At the last moment, he feared he'd made a terrible mistake. The denizens of the warp would flood within his mind and steal his body, swallowing his soul.

That didn't happen. He'd made the right gamble.

+Seth.+ The voice was crystal clear now he wasn't fighting it or over-exerting himself through use of his powers.

+Brother-Codicier Zaur.+

+Listen to me, Cadian, and listen well. We cannot reach the ground forces. Communications are impossible with the interference caused by the Archenemy

fleet. You are my Chapter's only link to the Guard.+

'Keep up, freak,' snarled Jevrian. Seth picked up the pace.

+Is the fleet truly lost?+

+It burns and dies as we speak. *The Second Shadow* remains alone in orbit. We are the final defence before the Death Guard and their slaves land in full force. We have launched our ship-to-ship assault pods against *Terminus Est*.+

+A noble end, brother-codicier. To die taking the fight into the enemy's heart.+

+The fleet is lost, and with it, our precious *Shadow*. But it is not our time to die, Cadian. We need coordinates. We cannot escape this if we remain blind.+

+Coordinates?+ Seth's psychic voice asked, but he already knew why.

+Yes. Coordinates of the remaining Guard units. The assault pods are just a distraction. The *Shadow* was lost the moment the Archenemy fleet arrived, and boarding *Terminus Est* would be death through a thousand poisons. The pods are empty. We are making planetfall.+

+Understood. The only surviving senior officer in the regiment is Captain Thade. He is the only one that will know the exact disposition of Guard units.+

+Then find him! The vox interference is savage and we are deaf to the planet below. We cannot throw our drop-pods blindly at the surface, Seth. The *Shadow* is dying. We need coordinates quickly.+

+It will be done.+

'Master Sergeant?' Seth's voice was an unhealthy rasp, but full of cold threat. It made Jevrian's skin crawl.

'What?'

'On the authority of Brother-Codicier Zaur of the Raven Guard Astartes Chapter, get me to the captain immediately.'

'What in the hell are you—'

'Silence, blunt.'

The stone walls of the undercroft sparkled with the faint kiss of psychic frost. The Kasrkin, those that survived the Death Guard assault, saw their breath steam before their faces. Seth felt the telepathic withdrawal of the Astartes psyker with a pang of bitterness. Zaur's power was intoxicatingly strong. It left Seth feeling weak and wretched in its wake.

He reached out again with his ghost-voice, not to Zaur, but to someone much closer.

+Captain Thade.+

The Death Guard Marine had, in a life almost forgotten now, been Battle-Brother

Ammon. He'd turned from the light of the False Emperor at the behest of his Legion commander, the mighty First Captain Typhon. His weapon, the bolter still in his fists today, had roared at the Siege of Terra in the fiery pinnacle of the Horus Heresy ten millennia ago. He'd existed, but not quite lived, each day since the Traitor Legions' defeat, hating everything uncorrupted and untainted in the galaxy.

In this attitude, he was hardly unique in the Death Guard.

Ammon had survived ten thousand years of war, existing as the host of a daemonic disease. He was immortal unless slain, ageless, deathless. The perfection of corruption. His plague-bloated body maintained its own twisted form of life, the way a cancer will feed on healthy cells and fuel itself off a victim's own body.

Ammon's fondest memories were of the great betrayal. The purification of the Legions, the virus bombs falling on their foolish brethren who refused to turn against the Emperor and, of course, the Dropsite Massacre. Astartes fought Astartes and a hundred thousand bolters roared. He still remembered the sound. It rang in his memory's ear like a daemon's screaming rage.

He had killed Iron Hands that day. He had killed Salamanders. And he had killed Raven Guard.

Ammon stalked down the corridor, mucus leaking from the snarling joints of his antique power armour. This area of the Herald's flagship was largely unpopulated except for the blooming diseases growing from the semi-organic metal walls. A sacred place. Holy to the Herald and the pestilence god. A breeding ground for the plagues that trailed *Terminus Est* and ravaged planets in the vessel's wake.

Ammon saw the defilement, black as coal and as large as a troop transport. A Raven Guard assault pod – the hull around its impact twisted and burned. A mag-locked bulkhead stared at Ammon, closed, silent. He knew it contained the loyalist fools within, and voxed for his brethren to come forward, ready to open fire.

'Great Herald,' he voxed. The fluids in his throat made him sound like a man speaking underwater. 'We have located the first pod.'

On board *The Second Shadow*, standing by the command throne of a shuddering, burning bridge, Brother-Captain Corvane Valar made a cutting gesture with his black-armoured hand.

At the order, a servitor entered a five-digit code into its console.

Ammon, his brethren squad, the various mutated things with him, and a significant portion of three decks of the *Terminus Est*, were vaporised as the first of the assault pods detonated.

Explosions of similar size tore through the starboard side of *Terminus Est* as the other pods – each rigged with warheads and munitions from *The Second Shadow*'s weapon bays – detonated on cue.

The flagship listed, rolling off course, its insides flooded with alarms, screams and flame. In the course of a single battle with a grossly-outnumbered Imperial fleet, the Herald's vessel had sustained more damage than it had since the Siege of Terra. Bleeding and streaming ghostly, unnatural fire from its wounds, the huge ship broke off its attack run.

A great cheer sounded on the *Shadow*'s bridge, cried by Astartes and Chapter serfs alike. Corvane let the cheer subside, feeling satisfaction course through him.

'Servants of the Chapter, you have served us well. Today you may die knowing your duty is done, and each of your names will be etched in the Chapter's records.'

Then he turned to his brother giants in their black armour. 'Raven Guard to the drop-pods. Make ready for planetfall.'

Seth's warning was weak – the psyker had long sensed the captain was resistant to psychic contact, even for a blunt, but the message got through. With most of his surviving units reunited, Thade commanded over two hundred men defending a cluster of mausoleums in the graveyard grounds of Yarith Spire.

Squads were stationed in a ring around a central building – an ornate tomb raised in honour of a pilgrim of great worth who'd died some six thousand years before. The cover was better here; the Cadians moved between the mausoleums, firing out at the advancing Remnant horde. Thade's few weapons teams set up their heavy bolters in the shadows of these gargoyle-encrusted buildings, adding their furious rate of fire to the onslaught of lasrifles on full-auto. Dead Man's Hand stalked the edges of the Cadian defensive line, autocannons pounding into the disorganised ranks of the Archenemy.

Vertain swore as another group of Remnant cowered behind a small shrine building. A single round from his cannon would annihilate the marble structure and expose the enemy troops. Instead of firing, Vertain turned his Sentinel aside with a curse, opening fire at another group out in the open.

'This would be much easier if we could fire at the damn scenery,' he muttered.

‘Copy that,’ Greer voxed back.

‘We’re dead, either way.’ Vertain switched vox-channels. ‘Captain?’

Thade was in the centre of the Cadian defence, speaking with several officers, including Commissar Tionenji, Seth and Inquisitor Caius. He turned his head and clicked his micro-bead.

‘Thade, go.’

‘Sir, requesting permission to ignore Reclamation protocol and open fire on blessed structures in order to prosecute the enemy to maximum effect.’

Thade laughed. ‘Delicately phrased. Does the Emperor like gold? Fire at will. Inform the other squads.’

Tionenji narrowed his eyes. ‘What was that order?’

‘The order to abandon Reclamation Protocol Zero-Nine.’ Thade met Tionenji’s eyes. ‘A problem, commissar?’

‘The protocols are the underpinning of this entire venture. The destruction of holy structures is counted as blasphemy against the God-Emperor.’

‘The protocol is a waste of life and a sure way of ensuring we lose this war. It’s a rule set down by Lord General Maggrig, who – if reports are correct – is dead.’

‘Confirmed,’ Janden said. ‘The landing site was overrun twenty-seven minutes ago. Lord General Maggrig’s death was confirmed by Vednikan scouts. He was crucified by the Remnant.’

‘I heard the damn reports!’ Tionenji fumed.

‘We’ll minimise collateral damage as much as can realistically be allowed for, but by the Golden Throne, I will not die here so some Ecclesiarchy bastard can smile in a few years about how we helped save on reconstruction costs in one paltry square kilometre of a city the size of a continent. Winning the war is more important than saving a handful of credits.’

‘You are committing heresy. I am within my rights to execute you.’

‘I’m fighting a war. Which is the greater sin: losing the world to Chaos, or losing a few shrines in the world’s defence?’

‘Semantics, captain. Semantics that fail to justify blasphemy.’

‘We’re fighting a war almost entirely without our heavy weaponry, which was left neatly packed in crates aboard ships that are now nothing but wreckage in orbit. My men are as pious as any in the Imperium, Commissar Tionenji. They will use moderation.’

Tionenji did what Thade had been expecting since the moment he met him. He went for his side arm.

Tionenji was a fine example of the Commissariat's standards of training. He drew fast, his hand a blur, and had the pistol aimed at Thade's face before his heart had beat a second time.

'If you will not do your duty—' Tionenji began.

Then he swallowed, listening to the threatening buzz of live weapons. Thade stood unmoving, his violet eyes glaring into the commissar's own. Next to him, Ban Jevrian was holding his hellpistol in both hands, aiming at Tionenji's eye. At Thade's other shoulder, Lieutenant Horlarn had his laspistol raised and similarly aimed. Tionenji flicked his glance left and right. Every Cadian officer had his weapon aimed at the commissar, even the fourteen-year-old boy.

'Drop it,' hissed Jevrian.

'Commissar or not,' Lieutenant Horlarn said, 'you die if that gun stays out of its holster.'

Tionenji smiled. 'Gentlemen, you have just signed this regiment's death warrant.'

Jevrian's hellpistol whined as it reached full charge. 'I said drop it.'

'I'll see you all dead for this.'

'We're all dead anyway,' young Kel grinned without humour.

'Stop pointing that pretty pistol at a warden-captain of Cadia,' Horlarn said. 'Right now.'

'Right now,' Jevrian growled as he repeated Horlarn's words, 'or I kill you where you stand, you off-world son of a bitch.'

Tionenji holstered his laspistol, a patently false smile creasing his lips. 'Very well.'

The Cadians slowly lowered their weapons, each man still on edge. Thade cleared his throat, taking a breath before speaking. He almost looked shaken. It was clear he'd not expected his men to behave as they did.

'That was... unpleasant. Now, if we may focus on the matter at hand?'

'By what authority—' Tionenji started again, but Thade interrupted.

'By the authority that I am the highest-ranking officer in the Imperial Guard left alive on this world. That makes me Overseer of the Kathur Reclamation until a higher Imperial authority says otherwise.'

Inquisitor Bastian Caius coughed politely.

Thade and Tionenji turned to the inquisitor. They'd both forgotten he was there.

'Are you quite done, gentlemen?'

Tionenji saluted. Thade nodded. Caius fixed Thade with his unnerving gaze,

false eyes whirring as they focused. ‘Captain, I am the highest echelon of Imperial authority here.’

‘Lord—’ Thade began. Throne of Terra, the inquisitor had just seen that standoff...

‘Enough! Your cancellation of the deceased lord general’s orders is acceptable. As for your confrontation with your commissar, I couldn’t care less. It will be dealt with by the proper authorities when the time comes. Focus, you fools. We have a duty to do.’

Thade and Tionenji glared at each other until the captain broke the stare.

‘Janden, are the coordinates ready to send to *The Second Shadow*?’

The vox-officer nodded. Through intense vox-tuning, he’d compiled a list of the remaining regiments and their locations within Solthane. It was a short list, and no officer above the rank of lieutenant still lived. The coordinates he’d gathered were precise landing points – no danger of hitting friendly troops or crashing into buildings on the way down.

‘Good work,’ said Thade. ‘Seth, how long has it been since you received the Astartes’s message?’

The sanctioned psyker checked his wrist chronometer. ‘Just under six minutes.’

‘Is vox clear enough to send the coordinates up there?’

‘It’s a fifty-fifty chance at best.’ Janden looked ashamed. ‘My set was winged in the last fight. I can barely get it working shortwave.’ He tapped a nasty looking bullet hole that had sheared off a chunk of the vox-caster’s casing.

‘I can’t send it,’ Seth shook his head. ‘I know what you’re thinking. I can’t link minds over that distance. Sorry, sir.’

‘Noted. Thade to 88th. Any vox-casters still functioning in a worthwhile capacity?’

A chorus of negatives came back over his vox-bead. Blood of the Emperor, they’d taken a beating. Thade’s three hundred men had six of the powerful vox-casters between them. And now, down to just under two hundred soldiers, their high-end communications gear was either lost in battle or scrambled by interference to the point of uselessness.

‘No more delays. Punch it, Janden.’

‘Sending. If they launch immediately, they’ll touch down at our western perimeter in just over two minutes.’

The western perimeter. Darrick was there, leading his remaining platoons. He’d encountered the least resistance in this latest consolidation, and Thade

knew that made Darrick's zone the clearest for an orbital landing.

Thade wasn't lying with what he'd said to the commissar. He was as pious as any Imperial citizen, but he sometimes wondered if the Emperor manipulated certain events just to see him squirm out of them. This was one such time.

Darrick's voice broke across the vox, distorted and shouting.

'Captain! Captain! Throne in flames! Captain! Primary threat contact. This one's the biggest bastard yet.'

'What the hell? Darrick, you told me you could keep your area clear.'

'And it was going great, sir. Until this dreadnought showed up.'

The Second Shadow trembled in its death throes. In the red-lit confines of a drop-pod, Brother-Captain Corvane Valar looked at nine of his brother Astartes, each one strapped into their descent seats, facing inward. They sat in silence, trusting their fates to the Cadians below.

Zauren had tried to contact the sanctioned psyker several times, not trusting the shattered Imperial vox-channels to convey the coordinates. The nearness of so many warp-tainted Chaos vessels was ruining his psychic strength. Each time he felt his concentration reaching out to Seth, the feeling of connection was lost almost immediately. He feared it was more than natural warp distortion from the Archenemy's proximity. The pressure on his sixth sense was warm and insidious, almost alive. It occluded his psychic sight like a blanket thrown over his true eyes.

So the Raven Guard waited for a vox transmission they knew might never come. Corvane had given orders to launch the pods no matter what if they were still aboard when the ship's destruction came. But they were holding on until the last moment. To die as a drop-pod careened off a building and exploded on the ground was no way for a warrior to perish. With the *Shadow's* scanners down, they needed those landing coordinates from the surface.

The ship shuddered with supreme violence. 'Throne,' said Zaur quietly. It was the first word spoken in the pod since the Astartes had boarded minutes ago.

'Initiating drop,' blared a mechanical voice over the pod's internal vox speakers.

'For the Emperor!' one of the Astartes cried. Dockings uncoupled, locks released, and five night-black pods slashed from the hull of the burning *Second Shadow*.

Aboard Corvane's pod, the world was reduced to darkness and heavy shaking as it bore down through the planet's atmosphere.

‘Two minutes,’ he called out to his men. In answer, nine of humanity’s finest warriors, gene-shaped from the genetic material of the Emperor and His beloved primarch sons, made the sign of the aquila to their leader.

Above them, the strike cruiser went critical. The explosion sent wreckage slicing through space, wounding Chaos vessels that were, in their mindless eagerness to destroy the Raven Guard, too close to evade the blast radius. Even in death, the Raven Guard vessel claimed traitorous lives.

The Archenemy war machine was approximately four metres tall and almost as wide. Roughly humanoid in shape, it walked in a stomping, short-legged stride that would have been comical had the war machine not been one of the deadliest things Taan had ever seen in his life. The walker’s arms were weapons: the left was a steel limb ending in a wide chainsaw fist the size of a grown man, the right was a long cannon with coils along its length that glowed with dull blue heat.

Dreadnought. A thickly-armoured shell bearing hideous weapons. Darrick had seen one, and only one, before. The Flesh Tearers Chapter had fielded one of these relic war machines during the Black Crusade three years before. Darrick had watched with wide eyes as it had torn a tank to pieces with its steel-rending claws, ignoring endless streams of small arms fire clattering off its hull. Not much in this galaxy had managed to unnerve Lieutenant Taan Darrick in his years within the Shock, but that had been one of them.

And it had been on his side.

This one was not. It had walked from the city, surrounded by a mob of howling Remnant as it strode through the graveyard.

Darrick looked left. He looked right. His platoon, taking cover from the Remnant in the garden of mausoleums, was armed almost entirely with their standard-issue lasrifles. The ground shook as the dreadnought stomped closer.

‘It’s firing!’ someone cried. Darrick didn’t need to be told that. The air tingled and made his teeth ache as the dreadnought’s plasma cannon charged up. To Taan, it was like a great beast was drawing breath to roar. He took a breath, looking around over the top of the waist-high marble wall he’d been crouched behind. The Remnant was still advancing, supported by the Death Guard war machine.

It fired. A horrendous stream of retina-burning light flared from the plasma cannon’s steaming nozzle, striking the side of one mausoleum and washing the white stone in superheated energy. The first stones touched by the kiss of the beam weapon were incinerated into nothingness, and the surrounding rock

melted a heartbeat later. The wall ceased to exist, and the Cadians nearby broke cover and fled. Most were gunned down by the advancing Remnant.

‘Oh, that’s just got to die,’ Darrick said. He clicked his vox live. ‘Darrick to Enginseer Osiron.’

‘Osiron here.’

‘Plasma cannon, big one, and I’ve got nothing that can crack open a dreadnought. Alliance is very, very Broken.’

‘The plasma technology used by the Traitor Legions is primarily Heresy-era grade. That means—’

‘Enginseer,’ Taan tried.

‘...the sustained build up of ionised gas...’

‘Osiron!’ Another wall exploded in a gum-aching eyesore of charged air and melted rock. ‘Time is a factor!’

‘...requires a longer and more forceful venting period than current plasma technology. Use that time to move into cover.’

‘Oh.’ Darrick killed the vox and shouted to his men, ‘Grenades at the dreadnought when that cannon is cooling down!’ He glanced at the man crouching next to him. Farazien was clutching his grenade launcher. ‘Any serious ammunition in that?’

‘Just frags.’

‘Maybe we can give it an itch. Eighty-eighth, time to stop hiding! Show your faces and kill some Remnant. Anyone with grenades, get ready to offer them up nice and generous, like. Throw for the dreadnought’s feet on my mark.’

Another mausoleum wall ceased to exist under the cannon’s fury. This time, several of Darrick’s platoon were caught in the blast, dissolved by the plasma washing over them. Trooper Jova howled as his arm disintegrated and he stumbled out of his shattered cover to be scythed down by Remnant las-fire. Trooper Haken and Sergeant Taine were half-smothered by the white-hot, splashing plasma – not enough to kill them instantly. As they lay thrashing on the ground, bodies dissolving, Taan’s rifle sang out twice and head-shotted them out of their misery.

He looked over the wall again, sighting the dreadnought. Off-white steam was gushing from the holes bored into the edge of the cone nozzle, and the coiled energy rings layered like a spine across the back of the cannon were glowing bright.

‘Now!’ Darrick called. ‘Fire!’

Taan’s men rose and opened fire. Grenades flew to smack around the feet of

the dreadnought, and las-fire sliced into the advancing Remnant. Heretics were punched from their feet by the volley.

The cluster of grenades – fragmentation bombs used to kill infantry and break up units of men – went off a moment later. The dreadnought stalked through the resulting smoke, its greenish hull a little blackened in places but otherwise unharmed.

‘Damn it,’ Darrick said, getting ready to order a fallback. He had nothing that could wound the accursed thing, and the dreadnought marched on.

Its stomping advance suddenly halted as a high-calibre autocannon round hammered into its chest. Shards of armour splintered and flew aside as several more impacts followed. Taan’s men cheered as Dead Man’s Hand stalked past them, wading into the enemy.

Vertain guided his Sentinel from the relative cover of the mausoleums, triggers held down. Red ammo warnings flashed on his control console.

‘I’m firing hopes and prayers, here,’ he voxed on the general channel. ‘If anyone has a heroic plan, now’s the time to make it happen.’

‘It’s *bleeding*,’ Greer voxed. And it was. The dreadnought’s adamantite armoured shell was, in many places, sheathed over in patches of foul grey flesh. As the autocannon shells tore chunks of armour away, fragments of bloody bone and rancid meat flew aside, too. Taan’s men renewed their return fire, cutting down Remnant with lethal accuracy.

Thade ran into cover alongside Darrick. With him were Rax and Ban Jevrian.

‘I heard you had a problem,’ the captain said. Venator platoon and the Kasrkin squad were dispersing alongside Darrick’s men. Thade rose, fired his pistol at the Remnant, but his gaze fell over the dreadnought.

One of Dead Man’s Hand was down before it – the Sentinel’s legs sheared off at the knees by the dreadnought’s massive chainblade. Thade saw the pilot, Greer, burst the roof of his walker open and scramble to get away. The dreadnought’s swinging chainblade put an end to that attempt. Greer’s body fell in two gory halves.

Dead Man’s Hand was backing away now, firing sporadically. Thade knew most of them needed to reload.

The enemy war machine was limping, dragging one leg while blood, pus and a black fluid streamed from the gaping holes in its semi-organic armour. Even at a distance of fifty metres and more, it reeked of filth and waste.

‘That’s got to die,’ Thade whispered.

‘My thoughts exactly,’ Darrick said.

‘Kasrkin, with me!’ the captain shouted, gunning his chainsword. ‘Eighty-eighth, covering fire!’

‘You’re joking.’ Taan grabbed Thade’s wrist, feeling the tension of cables and steel under the sleeve. ‘This is the stupidest thing you’ve ever done.’

With his free hand, Thade tapped the silver on his own helm.

‘Point taken,’ Darrick amended, letting go of Thade. ‘This is the second-stupidest thing you’ve ever done.’

‘Are we doing this, or what?’ Jevrian snapped. ‘There’s a war going on, you know.’

‘Watch it, glory boy,’ Taan smirked.

‘For the Emperor!’ Thade shouted as he broke into a run. Jevrian and the Kasrkin sprinted after him, with Rax running alongside.

What followed took place in the span of half a minute. To Taan, watching as he and his men provided covering fire, it lasted a few seconds. To Thade, it felt like an hour.

The dreadnought was wounded. Dead Man’s Hand had seen to that. He’d never have tried something this... this stupid, otherwise.

Thade led the Kasrkin across the open ground. The wounded dreadnought turned in a ponderous arc, seeking to bring its plasma cannon to bear, but the Cadians were already too close. Thade’s chainblade sang at the back of the war machine’s knee joints, ripping through cables slick with filth. On the backswing, as the dreadnought roared its anger, the whining sword slashed at a hip joint and dug in. Thade clenched his teeth as the blade bucked in his hands, the teeth ravaging the softer mechanics of the dreadnought’s waist joint.

The Kasrkin fanned out, opening up with their hellguns and shooting into the surrounding Remnant, forcing them back from Thade’s insane melee. Jevrian ran at the dreadnought’s front, his power sabre gleaming with crackling energy as he activated it. He fired his hellpistol at point-blank range, spearing holes in the great, rotting hulk that towered above him.

‘Hurry the hell up!’ he yelled. Thade sawed, head turned from the outpourings of stinking, oily blood that gushed from the severed pipes and joint cables.

Jevrian threw himself to the side as the wailing dreadnought lashed out with its massive chainfist. Even prone, he was still in its arc, and at the last second his power sword clashed against the falling blade to block certain death. The impact was beyond jarring; he felt something snap in his shoulder and was thrown ten metres away, landing in a ragged heap of dented armour and Cadian oaths. He staggered to his feet, seeing stars and clutching the hilt of his shattered power

blade. With a Kasrkin battle cry, he ran in again while still half-dazed and with a broken arm.

‘Never fall! Never surrender!’

The Kasrkin ringing the duellists shouted as they fired at the Remnant daring to approach. ‘Never outnumbered! Never outgunned!’

Thade heaved back on his chainsword to pull it free, and hammered it back into the mutilated hip joint with all his strength. The blade bounced for the ghost of a moment, then the whirring teeth snagged on the mechanics again, biting in with renewed ferocity. The dreadnought tried to spin on its waist axis, but its attempt amounted to little more than a grinding of broken gears and squealing, mutilated joints.

Thade felt the teeth bite solid metal, sawing into the core of the dreadnought’s leg, eating through the machine’s metal bones. It began to stumble, slashing its chainfist wildly and unleashing a torrent of plasma fire at the ground.

‘Go!’ Thade shouted, finally ripping his sword free. He ran back, clearing the dreadnought’s immediate radius of destruction as it sagged and staggered, lower to the ground now.

Jevrian scaled the war machine one-handed. His broken blade, crackling with its power field unstable but still active, rammed into the staggering dreadnought’s frontal armour and sank to the hilt. The Kasrkin sergeant’s gloved right hand sought purchase, finding it in an oozing hole made by an autocannon shell. He hauled himself up with one hand, his boot on his impaled sword hilt for support.

As the Death Guard war machine flailed and staggered, half-crippled and trying to shake off the human that clung to its front, Jevrian jammed the muzzle of his hellpistol into the finger-thin vision slit on the dreadnought’s ornate face and pulled the trigger.

It fell. The pilot of the dreadnought had once been an Astartes, interred within a walking adamantite tomb of ancient Mechanicus design. The pistol fire lanced into the withered husk that was all that remained of the warrior within, cutting the once-man to pieces and ending the dreadnought’s last vestiges of life.

A low whine rang out as the hulking mass powered down. Jevrian leapt clear in case it toppled. It didn’t; it merely stood slouched, arms hanging dead at its sides. Having seen their champion fall, the Remnant force was in full retreat. Cadian las-fire flashed after them, biting into exposed backs and sending more of the Archenemy’s troops to the ground.

Thade and Jevrian walked back to Taan, both out of breath.

‘Shitting hell,’ Darrick said.

‘Yeah,’ agreed the Kasrkin sergeant. ‘My arm’s broken,’ he said, just noticing. Thade smiled his crooked smile, absently patting the top of Rax’s chrome head.

‘I hope we never see another one of those.’

Seventeen seconds later, a tank-sized pod – painted black and scorched blacker from planetfall – smashed into the ground fifty metres from the 88th front line. A wave of dirt was thrown up with the impact, some of the smaller earthen debris clattering off the Cadians’ helmets and shoulder guards. With a snarl of moving parts, the sides of the drop-pod opened like a flower facing the sun. The sides clanged onto the ground, becoming ramps by which the Raven Guard descended.

The ten giants came out, bolters up, seeking targets. After a moment, the ten Astartes lowered their weapons in unison. They gathered around the mangled, dripping hulk of the dead dreadnought. Faint vox-clicks reached Thade’s ears – the Astartes were talking to each other about what they were seeing. One of them moved over to the exhausted soldiers. Thade recognised him from his armour and made the sign of the aquila. His men mirrored the salute.

‘Victory or Death, brother-captain.’

The Astartes didn’t reply at once. Then, in the most human gesture Thade had ever seen from one of the Emperor’s chosen, Corvane Valar hiked a thumb over his massive shoulder plate, in the direction of the downed war machine.

‘Impressive work, captain.’

Thade felt himself smiling as he spoke to the giant in black, ‘Thank you. Incidentally, you’re welcome to help out with the next one.’



CHAPTER XII

Alone

Solthane, Yarith Spire Graveyard, Monastic sector

Two hours later, the Cadians abandoned their dead.

‘The Reclamation is over until reinforcements come,’ Inquisitor Caius had addressed the 88th survivors as the skies darkened with the threat of rain. ‘I have spoken with the Raven Guard commander and established limited contact with what remains of the Imperial Guard force in Solthane. The picture is grim. The Astartes have departed to secure their own objectives in the city and battle the Death Guard on their own terms. That leaves the Imperial Guard regiments to create whatever unified resistance they can forge from the ashes of this... this disaster.’

The Cadians, barely a hundred and fifty still standing, clustered around the speaking inquisitor.

‘What about the rest of the regiment?’ a trooper called. ‘What about Colonel Lockwood?’

‘We’ve lost contact with whatever remains of the colonel’s forces,’ Thade said. ‘They were attacked by a force that far eclipsed the Remnant assaulting us. Odds of survival are unfavourable.’

‘What about the colours?’ Darrick asked. ‘If I’m going to die here, I want to do it under the banner of the Eighty-eighth.’

‘He’s right, sir,’ Vertain said. ‘If we’re all that’s left, we can’t leave the standard in the mud.’ A chorus of agreement met this. Thade crossed his arms and looked at the inquisitor with a raised eyebrow.

‘I told you they’d say that,’ he observed.

It was decided a short time later. The 88th under Thade’s command would travel to the last known coordinates of Lockwood’s men and look for survivors.

The regimental banner had to be retrieved. They would do this on the way back to Reclamation headquarters.

‘Are we going back for the tanks?’ Ban Jevrian asked. The Kasrkin sergeant was a mess of bruises and cracked carapace armour.

Thade nodded. ‘Count on it.’

‘Good,’ Darrick cut in. ‘I’m tired of walking everywhere.’

‘Platoon leaders, see to your wounded. We leave no one behind.’ Thade scanned the crowd – all that remained of his regiment. ‘On the way to Colonel Lockwood’s last coordinates, we stop to load the Chimeras. Then scouts will enter the main Reclamation base and look for supplies. Priorities are water purifiers, anti-infection medication and ration packs. Any questions?’

Silence answered this. ‘Good,’ Thade finished. ‘The Emperor protects. Now move.’

As the men moved out, Thade fell to the back of the column, walking with Inquisitor Caius. Once the two men were out of earshot from the others, Thade opened with a rueful smile.

‘That business with Tionenji...’

‘He’ll see you all shot and be well within his rights to do it. But for now I need you, so you get to live.’

Thade nodded, expecting no less. ‘That’s not the reason I wished to speak with you. Don’t make me beg for the answers I need, lord.’

Caius turned his head to face the captain, and his psycannon pivoted accordingly. ‘Throne,’ Thade complained, ‘doesn’t that ever shut down?’

‘No. Now get to the point.’

‘The Ordo Sepulcrum. What are you looking for on Kathur?’

‘Do not mistake me, captain, your recent defence was exemplary. You are a fine officer, and using that cluster of mausoleums as a firebase was inspired thinking. The Reclamation’s restriction on heavy weaponry has proven a chore, but even with this disadvantage you have done well. But try to be realistic with your ambitions. You do not have the ear of the Holy Ordos of His Majesty’s Inquisition.’

‘You don’t know, do you?’

‘I am running out of patience with this course of conversation.’

‘Listen to me.’ Thade rested his augmetic hand on the inquisitor’s shoulder. The psycannon hummed for a moment, powered up on instinct and quelled by the inquisitor’s psychic command.

‘I am listening.’

‘We are trapped on this world for the next month or more without reinforcements. The main bulk of the ground forces’ water purification was performed by recyclers aboard the orbiting fleet. While we have enough food and anti-ague medication on the surface, we’ll lose all of it if the Death Guard or the Remnant take over the Reclamation’s base – which, by all reports, they already have.’

‘I am aware of the situation we face.’

‘No, inquisitor. You’re not. You’re missing something rather vital.’

‘Explain yourself.’

‘Look at these soldiers,’ Thade nodded to the marching column ahead. ‘Take a long look. What do you see?’

‘Your men.’

‘Look harder.’

‘The Cadian Eighty-eighth.’

‘Try again.’

‘I am not obtuse, but I am far from patient. I asked you to get to the point.’

‘Humour me.’

The inquisitor, curious now, looked at the soldiers up ahead. What did he see? Brain-dead servitors walked in their shambling gait around the red-cloaked form of Enginseer Osiron. The surviving Kasrkin kept together in their own dark-armoured pack, a little away from the others. Caius noticed, for the first time, a tattoo on the back of Ban Jevrian’s bullish neck. ‘Unbroken’ it read, in stylised Gothic script. Seth Roscrain walked alone, leaning heavily on his black staff. While the Kasrkin kept their distance, the soldiers seemed to instinctively avoid the sanctioned psyker.

The main bulk of soldiers were ragged, dirty, but straight-backed and alert with their weapons at the ready. The formation was orderly and efficient, with the stretcher bearers carrying the wounded – each pair surrounded by a fire-team of men from their platoon. The Sentinels, the four still in working order, stalked in a ceaseless patrol around the marching column.

Caius’s psychic sense picked up on what his natural senses did not. The air around the Cadians was powerfully grim – every man’s thoughts turned to the trials of surviving the next few hours, let alone the next five weeks until reinforcements reached orbit. The sense of defeat was palpable now.

‘I see...’

‘Yes?’

‘...your point, captain.’

‘I thought you would. Our regiment was a thousand strong. Just over a hundred remain alive, and we’re looking at the prospect of dying of starvation or Chaos-tainted infection unless we can secure our conquered base. Now I know what you want. You want to continue your search, seeking whatever it is that brought the Curse of Unbelief to this world. I’m telling you in cold honesty that without answers, without *hope*, that’s not going to happen with us at your side. And now we face execution if Tionenji wishes it.’

Thade drew a breath and continued, ‘This is not about Inquisitorial authority, lord. This is about war, and this is about Cadia. Every single man here expects to die today. I expect to die today. And we want to die, because one last charge against the Death Guard and killing as many of them as we can is one hell of a way to go. Since childhood, we’ve all known we were born to die in war. Walking across a plague planet for days on end until starvation sets in is not the way any Cadian wants to die. Nor is a firing squad because of one overzealous otherworlder seen as a prime way to meet the God-Emperor in the afterlife.’

‘You’re wrong. This *is* about authority, Thade. And I hold it. I demand that you serve me.’

‘Ah, now we come to the crux of the matter. I could disobey this order and never suffer punishment, as being dead in the coming battle would leave me far from harm’s way. So let me be clear, lord. I’m charged with leading my men into battle and ensuring above all that they fight and die for the Golden Throne. So convince me. Convince me that one last charge against the enemy and killing a horde of them isn’t the best way to serve the Throne. Convince me the God-Emperor wants more from us, or we die in battle for Him tonight.’

Caius smiled. ‘This is an amusing little blackmail, is it not? But I take your point. You will obey because I demand it, but I will throw you the bone you and your men need in order to be... motivated.’

‘You’ve a generous soul, lord.’ Thade grinned back.

‘You ask much of me. I already gave you permission to recover your regimental banner, did I not?’

‘That coin spins two ways. It’s tactically sound to seek out the survivors of the Eighty-eighth. I am, after all, the current commanding officer. But let’s cut to the point. What is it I should know, inquisitor?’

‘And what if I say that what I know for certain is little more than what I already told you?’

‘Then I would ask you to guess what’s going on, because the educated assumptions of a servant of the Ordo Sepulcrum are more than good enough for

me.'

'Very well. I am tasked with visiting the various shrines of true merit within Solthane, seeking the source of the taint.'

'That much I know.'

'Unlike any other outbreak in recorded Scarus history, no Archenemy vessel brought the disease from orbit, no sightings of the Herald's flagship were registered before the plague struck, nothing of the conventional kind occurred here. We reasoned that something already present on the planet was responsible.'

'This is still not news to anyone, lord.'

'The Ordo Sepulchrum has its suspicions of what caused this plague.' That caught Thade's attention. 'We have a theory. It matches the records I have of a cultist interrogation before the Curse of Unbelief struck. And now, with hindsight, it matches the sudden appearance of the *Terminus Est* and the Herald's fleet.'

'Tell me.'

'First you tell me, captain. What do you know of Kathur's achievements before his glorious ascension to sainthood?'

Thade shrugged. 'Nothing. Just what's stated in the shrineworld's scrolls. A file of them was attached to our initial briefing reports on planetfall.'

'And what glorious picture of sainthood did these holy texts paint?'

'He was a crusader. An Imperial Army commander thousands of years ago. He worked with the old Astartes Legions to reclaim the lost worlds of mankind.'

Inquisitor Bastian Caius smiled. The patronising curve of his lips made Thade's skin crawl.

'So, he was a leader within the fledgling Imperium, allegedly during the Great Crusade. And how did he die?'

'He was killed in battle on this world, the last planet his armies brought into compliance with the Imperium. I've heard it said even the Raven Guard primarch honoured him by speaking at his funeral.'

'And what of his remains? Where do the bones of this great hero rest?'

'They are interred across Solthane in various shrines.'

'A perfect recital of common knowledge, captain. And almost entirely incorrect.'

Thade shrugged again. He wasn't surprised.

'So enlighten me,' he said.

'Kathur did not die in the Great Crusade. He died in the Horus Heresy itself. And his bones, may the God-Emperor bless them, do not rest on this world. This

shrineworld does not honour his final resting place. It honours his memory.'

'So where did he die?'

'That's not the vital question, but I'll answer it.' Caius slowly raised a finger. At first Thade thought the inquisitor wanted silence. Then he realised the other man was pointing. Pointing up.

'He died in space?'

'In orbit. Aboard the flagship of his fleet, the Emperor-class battleship *In Purity Protected*. The vessel was lost with all hands, and the wreckage rained down to the planet below.

'What destroyed his ship?'

'Now that, captain, is the vital question. The truth is a strange beast. It appears differently to each soul seeing it. The mists of time will shroud any truth, because truth changes with age. Events become memories, memories become history, and history becomes legend.'

'I see,' said Thade. He resisted the urge to roll his eyes, guiltily hoping the inquisitor hadn't picked up on that thought.

'Ten thousand years before this Reclamation, when our newborn Imperium almost tore itself apart in the Horus Heresy, the galaxy burned in countless battles across countless systems. Unknowable numbers of stories from this era are no longer recounted in their entirety. But this one... This one we know is the truth. An enduring core of truth behind a lie that has grown around it like a pleasant shell.'

'So what destroyed Kathur's ship? Was it the *Terminus Est*? My sanctioned psyker has learned that the Herald's vessel destroyed the flagship of the Raven Guard in the Horus Heresy.'

'No, captain,' Caius smiled. 'The grudge held by the Raven Guard is their own weight to bear – though I am not blind to the fact Fate seems to have brought us all together against the Fourteenth Legion on this world.'

'Throne, just answer the bloody question. What destroyed Kathur's ship? What was he fighting here?'

'The Death Guard battleship *Aggrieved*. After the failed Siege of Terra, when the Traitor Legions turned tail and fled to the warp, not all of them made it to the blossoming *Ocularis Terribus* here in Scarus Sector. Many were damaged from the assault on Holy Terra, and their warp drives threw them back into realspace far short of their daemoniac haven. Lord Admiral Kathur and his vessel, *In Purity Protected*, chased the *Aggrieved* here and engaged it above the world that would one day be named for him.'

‘So your theory is that the *Aggrieved* left something here after it destroyed Kathur’s ship? Something that has lain silent until now?’

‘That is a possibility. But I believe otherwise.’

‘The *Aggrieved* never left.’ Thade said, swallowing as it all fell into place.

‘The *Aggrieved* remained here, hidden somewhere on the planet.’

‘That is what I believe. *In Purity Protected* was the cream of the Imperial Navy, even were it damaged in the hell of Terra’s Siege. The Death Guard vessel would have suffered under its assault. I suspect the *Aggrieved* was forced into a crash landing. It struck the surface and remained undiscovered since the days of the Heresy. Ever since I came to this world, I’ve heard a voice calling out, screaming into the warp, pleading for aid. Your sanctioned psyker has heard it, too. I’ve read his mind several times to be sure. I believe he even tried to tell you once. The voice is weak, but the screamer was at least strong enough to leave a beacon for its brethren to find.’

‘The Curse of Unbelief.’

‘Yes, the plague. All the suffering, all the disease, all the death. A sickening sign that lights up in the unseen world, saying: “I am here. Come to me”.’

The thought staggered Thade. To consider such pain reaching out into the warp, acting as a beacon. All those lives lost, just to send a message. It was blasphemy on a scale he couldn’t fully comprehend.

‘But why now?’ he asked. ‘If you’re right, the *Aggrieved* has been here for a hundred centuries, silent as a tomb. Why now?’

‘Because something aboard the ship’s wreckage has finally woken up. Something powerful enough to cause the plague that killed this world, and so important to the Death Guard that the Herald himself has come to meet it.’

‘Where is it? Throne, *what* is it?’

‘If we knew the answers to those questions, this war would already be over. I had planned to visit each truly holy site within Solthane’s cathedral district and perform various rituals of scrying. It’s my belief that the first colonists and city-builders will have sensed the slumbering malice from the crashed vessel. Imperial records are full of similar incidents – cultures unknowingly raising their holiest sites over places of great darkness to nullify the touch of evil. A subconscious defence, if you will.’

‘There’s a lot of “maybe” sticking out of this plan, lord.’

‘Do I have your support now, Captain Thade? Have I convinced you the Emperor wants more from you and your men than some vain-glorious last charge?’

Thade took a long time before answering. Finally, with a rueful smile and a strange gleam in his violet eyes, he said ‘We have to reach the wreck of the *Aggrieved* before the Herald.’

‘That is impossible at this stage. They will be landing as we speak. They likely know exactly where it is. We do not.’

‘Yes, we do.’ Thade clicked his vox live and ordered Seth to join him at the back of the column.

‘I’ve already spoken with your sanctioned psyker. He was unable to confirm anything of use. He could be no more precise than first sensing it upon entering the cathedral district several nights ago. We are already in the cathedral district, captain. We still have hundreds of square kilometres to search.’

‘Count the Seven,’ Thade whispered with a dawning smile. ‘Count the Seven. The clarity of our scanners at the monastery... The vox-ghosts... We heard them trying to speak with it, trying to wake it up. We caught them voxing Death Guard battle mantras on every frequency. They were scanning for it. They were *calling* to it. Blood of the God-Emperor, it’s under the monastery. It has to be.’

‘It might be,’ the inquisitor allowed. ‘But it’s far from certain. Yours was not the only regiment to encounter scanner clarity in the monastic sector in the past week; merely the first. I intended to visit each reported site. And I remind you that “under the monastery” means no more than “under a building the size of a small city”.’

The captain took a breath, watching the shuffling form of Seth Roscrain making his way back through the marching soldiers. Once more, he remembered the sanctioned psyker’s words in the Shrine of the Emperor’s Unending Majesty – at the heart of the monastery before they’d faced the first Death Guard warrior. Seth had never spoken of the voice before. It started that night, on that mission, when everything had really started to foul up beyond repair. It had happened in the monastery’s heart.

‘Seth only heard the voice as he grew nearer to it. But you... The Astartes... You both heard it before and hear it now. But Seth is weaker than you. He heard it only as he drew nearer to it. You can’t track it yourself because the voice is ever-present. But you can track it by watching its influence within him.’

The inquisitor’s gaze remained unbroken as Thade finally said, ‘I’ve been blind.’

‘Yes, you have.’

‘You were planning all along to use us – use Seth – as the bloodhound to track this voice.’

‘As soon as his sensitivity to the psychic scream became apparent, yes. Before that, well, the fact the 88th was the finest regiment involved in the Reclamation was just good fortune. I needed soldiers, Thade. I needed to scour this city.’

‘The Traitor Legion may know exactly where the *Aggrieved* is. But we have a chance if we can track the voice to its source.’

The inquisitor was impressed. Not at Thade’s deduction, but at his ruthlessness. To use Roscrain as an open conduit for the warp-voice would almost certainly kill the sanctioned psyker. He didn’t need to say it. Thade knew, anyway. The Cadian wasn’t blind to his role in the Imperium, nor the roles of his men.

‘I can see in your eyes that you’ve sensed the truth of the matter. This search will still likely take days or weeks, but you are right. We will play this game, with your psyker as the pawn.’

Both men looked to the towering spires and domes of the monastery a few kilometres away. Entire sections of the palatial monument were blackened, fire-touched from battle and darkened from the smoke of funeral pyres when the world’s population had first begun to die, and the incinerators still functioned. There it stood: the scorched heart of a fallen city.

The sight made Thade smile.

‘In a stunning break with tradition, I think we actually have a shot at this,’ he said. ‘In fact, to the Eye with your doomsaying, Caius. All we’ve done on this planet since we landed is retreat. No more. If we’re destined to die here, we’ll die fighting, doing our duty to the Emperor. And I’m willing to bet we’re close enough to beat the Herald to the prize.’

‘There’s one matter you’ve not considered, Thade.’

‘I don’t appreciate you spoiling my uplifting speech with an addendum, but enlighten me nevertheless.’

‘The *Aggrieved*, and whatever has awoken within its wreckage, is likely under the monastery’s foundations. The Mechanicum supplied me with heavy digging equipment in case I had to seek my prey under the earth. That equipment, obtained at massive cost I might add, is now dust in the atmosphere.’

Thade looked at the inquisitor with a clash of bemusement and despair on his face.

‘Sacred Throne, it’s one thing after another with you. I’m glad we’re only seconded to you for one mission.’

‘If we survive, I could make it permanent.’

‘If you tried, I’d shoot you myself,’ Thade said. ‘Uh, lord,’ he added several

seconds later.



PART III

The Last Day



CHAPTER XIII

For Home and the Throne

Solthane, Monastic sector

It rained as the Death Guard made planetfall. Ancient winged craft drifted through the grim clouds, descending to the surface in juddering landing arcs while rain streamed from their rotting hulls. It was the first rain Solthane had seen in weeks, and the thirsty soil drank its fill.

Typhus set foot on Kathur. His armour was hot to the touch, radiating heat the way a man gripped by sickness runs a fever, and the greenish plate steamed gently as the cold rainfall hissed against it. In his fist was his Manreaper scythe, deactivated and silent.

‘That smell,’ breathed Typhus, his helmet vox speakers adding a crackle to the wet drawl of his voice. ‘That scent on the air...’

Solthane reeked of death. It had reeked of death for months, but the rain hammering down on mouldering corpses – both those that moved and those that did not – was adding a thick, sick smell to the already corrupt air.

‘The smell of divinity,’ Typhus growled. ‘The smell of the Disease God’s gift to mortal flesh.’

The warriors of the XIV Legion had touched down within Solthane itself, in an expansive city park large enough to accommodate the landing craft of a hundred Traitor Astartes. Thousands of cultists in Remnant uniforms emerged from the dark places of the shrine-city, clustering around the disembarking Death Guard like worshippers greeting their gods. For the most part, the Astartes ignored the mortal scum milling about and chanting praises.

‘Lord! Lord, have you come to deliver us? Lord!’

Typhus turned to the screaming woman. She was wretched in every way imaginable: filthy from head to toe with encrusted grime, half her face was

blackened by a flesh-eating disease, and her raised hands were mutilated from where she'd eaten her own fingers to stave off starvation.

To the Herald, she was beautiful. Typhus watched her for several moments before she was lost in the press of ravaged humanity surrounding the Death Guard. It was becoming difficult to move through the dense crowd. People so diseased they had no right to be alive pressed in from every direction. The god's blessing kept them alive and ripe with sickness, on the edge of deaths that would take years of pain to come unless they were put out of their misery first.

+Clear a path.+ Typhus's words wormed into the minds of the Death Guard. A hundred bolters were raised at once, unleashing their fury into the crowd. The crowd dispersed like a tide, fleeing in every direction as the guns of the fallen Astartes reaped scores of lives. Bolt shells detonated in bodies, showering the Death Guard in gobbets of bloody flesh.

The park was soon clear. Typhus was loath to destroy any soul sworn to his master, but this rabble barely counted. Most had pledged their devotion out of panic and confusion. If they died, little was lost. The Herald's mission meant so much more than the lives of a handful of half-faithful peasants.

Among the buildings nearby, tall figures in black armour moved quietly, watching the advancing Death Guard. They observed in near silence, watching as the rain slashed from the Traitor Astartes' greenish armour and cleansed the plate of heretic blood.

'We see them,' voxed Brother-Captain Corvane Valar.

'Good hunting,' replied Captain Thade's voice in his internal helm speakers. 'Victory or Death.'

'Not today, Cadian. Today, it shall be both.'

The Chimeras sat at the edge of the graveyard, lined up in neat rows along a wide avenue. The rain was heavy now, scything into soil that was quickly becoming thick mud. Thade led the column of men, leaving the graveyard through the towering marble archway they'd entered by only hours before.

The squads spread around the tanks, rifles up. No one was there. The street was deserted.

'No guards,' said Darrick. 'Anyone get Valiant on the vox?'

Thade had left fifteen men, Valiant squad, to watch over the thirty troop transports. The possibilities were uniformly unpleasant. Either Valiant had met its end too fast to vox for assistance, or any cries for help had been lost in the

maelstrom of the broken vox network.

‘I’ve got blood over here,’ said Corrun, his laspistol drawn. Thade came over to him, his own pistol out and held low in both hands. Thade’s command Chimera, black where the others were a mix of black and grey, had a scarlet smear up one side.

‘No bodies.’ Thade’s skin prickled.

‘Tick-tock,’ Darrick reminded him.

‘Perimeter sweep, and make it fast,’ Thade ordered. The squads checked the immediate area, finding nothing more than a few bloodstains on the ground.

‘I can’t reach Valiant,’ Janden admitted, slinging his patched-up vox-caster on his back. He came over to where Thade stood by the tracks of the command Chimera. ‘Though this isn’t exactly working at peak performance.’

‘I’ve got them,’ a voice crackled over the vox. ‘Throne, they’re in pieces.’

Horlarn’s squad found the fifteen men of Valiant several hundred metres from the Chimeras, within a small enclosed street chapel made of inexpensive white stone that poorly imitated marble. A pilgrim trap, set up by fake relic traders, and now the tomb of almost twenty Guardsmen.

Valiant were indeed in pieces. Their bodies lay limbless and desecrated in a heaped pile, their armour and flesh alike showing evidence of blade wounds and las-fire.

‘Sir,’ Horlarn was backing out of the chapel, voxing the captain. ‘All dead. The Remnant did this.’

‘Damn it,’ breathed Thade. ‘Mount up, we’re leaving. The Raven Guard is engaging the XIV Legion. Astartes or not, there’s no guarantee they can buy us much time.’

The Cadians boarded, and the ramps slammed closed as they made ready to move out. When the tanks rolled away, almost half of them remained behind, uncrewed and unmoving. Once they were underway, Thade joined Corrun in the front of the command Chimera.

‘You know the way to link up with Colonel Lockwood?’

Corrun didn’t take his eyes from the vision slit, watching the buildings speed past.

‘You know I do.’

‘No harm in checking. Vox to the other drivers – when we arrive, we’re going to disembark and be back on board within thirty seconds.’

‘Thirty seconds? What about survivors?’

Thade fixed him with a look that spoke volumes. ‘Just vox it, Corrun. Thirty

seconds. We deploy, we reclaim the banner, and we go.'

Corrun complied, and the tanks trundled on. Through wide avenues and slender, winding streets; through abandoned barricades that had stood untouched since the planet's Enforcers deserted them weeks before. All the while, the vox chattered with intermittent howls of static and indecipherable whispers.

'We're getting close, sir,' Corrun said, pulling into an expansive concourse. The transport started to jostle, treads clawing the tank over mounds of the slain. 'This was some battle...'

'I want to see for myself,' the captain said.

Thade climbed the short ladder to the cupola and pushed it open. He peered out of the hatch, pistol in hand, and activated his vox. The scene resembled a marketplace of detritus and abandoned traders' carts. As the tanks slowed, Thade emerged to stand on the Chimera's rain-slick roof, scanning the scene around. The bodies of slain Guardsmen were strewn across the marble-tiled ground, staining the mosaic patterns across the floor dark and unrecognisable with blood. The bodies of Remnant were spread in far greater numbers, punctuated here and there by the hulking form of a slain Traitor Astartes.

He took it in with a tactician's eye. There was little order here, hardly any signs of how the battle had ebbed and flowed. It had been fast. The 88th had been encircled from the outset and cut down in the ranks they formed to repel the assault. Thade knew the colonel's Sentinels would be out of sight, almost certainly destroyed as the enemy first came upon them before engaging the main force.

'Thade to Eighty-eighth,' he said as his eyes sought every detail of the scene, drinking it all in. Faces he recognised, drawn in death, bodies and uniforms soaked in blood and the rain. 'Be ready to deploy, weapons hot, on my order. Venator squad will go for the prize. Everyone else, stand ready.'

Corrun drove through the mess of dead soldiers, the Chimera's treads hissing as they splashed through the thin, orange fluid of rainwater and blood. There it was. The banner. Thade's gaze fixed on the fallen banner atop a small mound of slaughtered soldiers, the fabric itself stained and soaked through.

A burned-out husk of a Chimera, as black as Thade's own, sizzled in the rainfall. The nuance was not lost on Thade: it was a blunt premonition of things to come.

And the banner was on the ground only twenty metres from it. Ragged, ruined and filthy. It lay like a blanket across the body of the last man to carry it, its rain-darkened surface distorted by the lumps of the corpse it covered.

‘Corrun, kill the engine. Venator squad, deploy. The banner is by Colonel Lockwood’s transport, twenty steps north. Go.’

The men spilled out.

‘Courage, Adamant, Defiance and Liberation,’ Thade named the squads he knew were suffering with low ammo. ‘Deploy and scavenge for what you need.’

The other squads deployed. Thade watched them taking magazines from the dead. His attention remained mostly on Kel and his Whiteshields. They didn’t balk at the duty. That was something, at least.

‘Can you see Lockwood?’ voxed Darrick.

‘Don’t ask,’ Thade replied. He recognised Lockwood’s corpse by the silver trim on the charred corpse’s shoulder armour. It was lying half out of the destroyed Chimera’s turret hatch, a pistol and sword on the transport’s roof out of reach of its blackened, outstretched hands.

Thade moved to the edge of the roof and leaped down to the ground. His boots splashed filthy water in a spray as he landed.

‘Sir,’ crackled the vox to the percussion of clanking feet in the background.

‘Copy, Greer.’ Then he swallowed. Greer was dead; he’d seen him die.

‘This is Vertain, sir.’

‘My apologies. Interference and... Thade here. Go.’

‘Enemy sighted. We’ll need to make this fast. Looks like plague-slain coming down the avenue to the west.’

‘Numbers?’

‘Hundreds. We’ve got a few minutes, they’re just shambling.’

Thade ran over to the wrecked Chimera, near where his command squad were reverently lifting the banner, squeezing the water from the thick fabric and furling it for retrieval. He climbed the side ladder to the tank’s roof, kneeling to pick up Colonel Lockwood’s bolt pistol.

Lockwood watched him perform this indignity, rapt with an eyeless stare, blackened face locked in a wide-jawed and silent scream.

‘Need the clips, sir?’ Tasoll asked as he finished rolling the banner up. Thade didn’t answer. He looted Lockwood’s burned corpse the way the other squads were looting their slain brethren, adding Lockwood’s unspent bolter magazines to his own dwindling supply. Using a spare holster from his webbing, he strapped the colonel’s pistol to his other thigh.

Thade moved back to his Chimera alongside Venator. Throne, did he ever want to leave. It wasn’t that the carnage-rich site of this last stand unnerved him. It was that he didn’t want to join the rest of the regiment here.

‘Let’s get out of here,’ he said to his squad. He voxed the same words to everyone still alive in the regiment once he was back on board.

‘Vertain, maintain the mobile perimeter. We’re rolling.’

‘Copy, sir.’

Darrick voxed again. ‘Private channel. Horlarn said you took the colonel’s gun.’

Thade glanced down at the second bolt pistol at his hip. It was ornate for Cadian wargear, edged in shining bronze with an ivory grip. The whole regiment knew the story behind how Lockwood had come by it. Like Thade’s silver medal, it was a point of pride for the 88th – one of their symbols.

‘I took it, yes.’

‘Good,’ Darrick said, and left it at that.

Thade gripped the overhead handrail and moved to where Janden and Tasoll were cleaning the banner as best they were able. Zailen was near them both, on his back, looking up at the roof. His breathing came in doglike pants through purpling lips. Thade clicked his fingers to get Tasoll’s attention, and flicked a glance at Zailen. Tasoll shook his head.

‘Zailen,’ Thade said, crouching by the wounded man.

‘Cap,’ he said. Blood flecked his lips. Not a good sign.

‘I’m sorry, but the formal record of the Reclamation is going to say how you got gutshot just to have some time off.’

Zailen managed a grin, blinking his eyes three times to focus. He was doped-up nicely, Thade knew, but the fact he wasn’t screaming with the pain of the belly wound was the best evidence of that.

‘Darrick already used that line on me, sir.’

‘Well, forget Darrick. I outrank him. My threats mean more.’ He turned to Tasoll and Janden, watching them rinse the banner, fighting an uphill battle to dry it out. The decking floor of the transport was wet with the bloody water they had squeezed from the flag so far. Thade ordered Trooper Iaun, who was performing a whispered Rite of Maintenance on his lasrifle, to sweep the water out using spare uniforms from the supply trunks under the seating benches.

Tasoll fingered a hole in the banner. It was a las-burn, scorching the surrounding fabric black.

‘No respect, eh?’

‘Hold it up,’ Thade said. ‘Let’s see the damage.’

The banner’s background was quartered grey and black, with the edges decked in silver rope. The centre symbol was the traditional emblem representing the

Cadian Gate, an angular arch detailed in silver thread, with the fortress-world itself in the centre. A golden corona framed the top of the arch. Beneath it were the words ‘CADIAN 88th – FOR HOME AND THE THRONE, FOR CADIA AND THE EMPEROR.’

A smaller banner hung attached to the bottom right corner – the banner of the Kasrkin of Kasr Vallock who were traditionally seconded to the regiment. It mirrored the larger crest on the main banner, though the Cadian gate was done in dark grey instead of silver, and it had an additional message: ‘NEVER FALL, NEVER SURRENDER, NEVER OUTNUMBERED, NEVER OUTGUNNED.’

It was, by the standards of most Imperial Guard banners, rather muted and subtle.

It was also ruined, scored by a dozen small holes from las-fire, ripped in several places, discoloured and stinking from both bloodstains and rainwater, and missing most of the silver rope that had decorated the edges. It had seen many better days, and few worse ones.

‘Still looks proud, though,’ Tasoll said, guessing the captain’s thoughts easily enough.

‘For Home and the Throne,’ Thade smiled, then turned to Zailen again. ‘You’re not getting out of work just yet.’

‘Fine by me... it means I’m still getting paid.’ Zailen smiled. His face was so pale and drawn he looked like a skull. Thade refrained from mentioning that to him.

‘We’ll lock you in here,’ the captain said, ‘with Janden’s vox-caster.’

‘I understand, sir.’

Thade nodded. Zailen wouldn’t survive an hour, but at least he’d die doing his duty.

‘Coming up on the monastery,’ Corrun called over his shoulder.

‘Copy. Dead Man’s Hand, any problems ahead?’

‘Looks clear, sir,’ Vertain voxed. ‘Clear all the way to the monastery’s grounds.’

‘Let’s pray it stays that way.’

It didn’t.

The plague-slain were out in force that night. A massive horde of the walking dead milled around the front grounds of the monastery; some quiet and still, others weeping and raving into the night sky.

The 88th hit them with the force of a thunderclap. Seventeen Chimeras tore into the garden grounds, laser turrets wailing and chopping the dead to pieces.

Heavy bolters on the front of the transports – cautiously unused for so much of the campaign – opened up with barking chatter, no longer silenced by Reclamation protocol. The explosive bolts scythed the plague-slain down in droves, and filled the cold air with sprays of even colder gore.

Thade rode his Chimera as he had stood on it before, atop the roof, both bolters drawn. He held the colonel's weapon in his human hand, clenching his own pistol in his augmetic fist. No sign of the Death Guard – neither the advance elements already on the planet, nor the Herald's own warriors who had landed hours before. There was still a chance the 88th had made it here first. The Raven Guard had presumably delayed the XIV Legion, but no contact had been established with Valar and his Astartes since they'd first engaged the Herald.

The tanks bumped and jostled as they crushed fallen curse victims. Thade kept his balance, voxing on the general channel.

'88th, deploy as ordered.' As he spoke the words, Thade holstered one of his pistols and crouched, gripping a handrail with one hand, firing with the bolter in the other.

It was as close to perfect as they were ever going to be able to do in the circumstances. With too many tanks and too little room to manoeuvre, the drivers wrenched their vehicles into a near-perfect performance of Opening the Eye. Tracks rumbled, gang-ramps slammed down, and the last surviving platoons of the Cadian 88th disembarked with rifles up and firing.

The horde of plague-slain was rent apart less than a minute after the first Chimera entered the grounds.

The Chimeras were locked and sealed, left parked in their star pattern. The 88th formed up. At the head of the formation, Thade drew both his pistols again.

'Thade to Zailen.'

'Here, sir,' came the vox-reply from the wounded man still aboard the Chimera.

'Begin.'

Every vox-bead in the regiment clicked live. Zailen's voice was strained and distorted, but all the more earnest for those facts as he spoke the Litany of Courage into Janden's vox-caster.

'...forever in defiance, we stand true to Him on Earth...'

Thade spoke over the continuing litany, using it as a quiet backdrop as he voxed his orders. At the last, as his remaining squads stood to attention, steeling themselves before entering the monastery, Thade spoke again.

'We've got one chance to do this right. One chance to make sure every soul

that died aboard the lost fleet, every soldier that died in the city today, and every citizen that died in the plague weeks ago... didn't die in vain.

'One chance.' He let the words hang.

'We're going into the catacombs. Then deeper, into the foundations. Then, if we can, we're going deeper still. The XIV Legion killed this world, this holiest of planets, and we failed to make them pay. Something under this monastery has been calling to the Herald. The Herald has answered. He comes now.

'We have one chance to beat him to the prize he seeks, one chance to kill whatever he's come to find. You know what we seek: the Heresy-era battleship *Aggrieved*. You know what we risk: everything and nothing, for all we have left to give is the breath we draw, and the blood in our veins.

'This is our one last chance to stand together before we die how we knew we always would – in service to Cadia and the God-Emperor.'

'For Home and the Throne!' the soldiers chorused. Zailen's recital of the Litany of Courage continued, muted but audible, in the background of the general vox channel.

'For Home and the Throne,' Thade echoed. 'The Emperor protects. Now move out.'

The monastery was cold and dead, which surprised no one. Yet the silence was still unnerving. Booted footfalls echoed strangely through the cavernous halls, all sound bouncing from the skeletal architecture while stern-faced and disfigured statues of saints, angels and Astartes peered down from their alcoves.

Thade had given the four remaining members of Dead Man's Hand a choice: remain outside with the tanks or abandon their Sentinels and join the rest of the regiment. To a man, they'd voted to remain in their walkers. Thade had given them a final salute before entering the monastery's towering double doors. The regiment knew the chances of the Sentinels surviving out there alone were too slim to contemplate. Only the fact every man knew he was marching to almost certain death under the monastery prevented them from seeking to dissuade the walker pilots.

'I'll let them die how they wish,' Thade had said. 'They'll kill more of the Archenemy's host if they're sat in their Sentinels.'

'We need everyone that can still carry a weapon!' Tionenji insisted.

'Four pistols will make no difference,' Thade shook his head. 'They stay and die how they wish to die. They stay and fight however they choose. This conversation is over.'

Now the 88th advanced through the ruined cathedral, the occasional gunshot blasting out to silence a stray plague-slain that shambled through the empty halls. Over the vox, Zailen spoke on, now reciting the Litany of Defiance in the Face of the End. His voice grew fainter as time passed.

‘The vox-link is getting weaker. And choppy. I can barely hear Zailen,’ Darrick said.

Thade nodded. He didn’t have it in him to play along with the lie. Neither did Master Sergeant Jevrian, but he didn’t stay silent on the matter.

‘He’s breathing his last, joker. Don’t shine it up for smiles.’ The Kasrkin leader tossed aside an empty glass vial, and tensed his hand into a fist a few times. ‘That’s better.’

‘Did you just gland something?’ Darrick asked, his irritation rising. Cadian regulation discouraged all use of combat drugs, and Thade was especially hard on those he found indulging. With the temporary boost to reflexes and strength from most combat narcotics, came unreliability and dangerous side-effects. Stimm abuse might be common in other regiments, but it was rare in the Shock.

‘Shut your whine-hole.’

‘Go to hell, stim junkie,’ Darrick snapped.

‘Ban,’ Thade turned to him and stopped walking. ‘Is that frenzon?’

‘Like it matters if it is?’

There was a click and the nearby hum of a charged weapon. Jevrian flicked his glance to the left, where Commissar Tionenji was holding his laspistol to Ban’s temple.

‘Be a good little soldier and answer the captain, you shaved ape,’ Tionenji warned. Thade shared a look with the commissar. He was pleased; this was almost the first thing Tionenji had said in the hours since their confrontation, and the first signs of the atmosphere thawing between them. Still, this was hardly ideal...

‘Naw, it’s not frenzon,’ Jevrian growled.

‘This isn’t some penal legion, and you’re not a Catachan jungle thug who gets to gland combat drugs that are forbidden in the Primer.’ Thade was as close to angry as Darrick and the others had ever seen him.

‘Is this a Ten-Ninety, sir?’ asked the commissar.

‘That depends. Is that frenzon, Jevrian?’

‘A Ten-Ninety? For glanding stimms? I already said it wasn’t bloody frenzon.’

‘So what is it?’ Thade asked. ‘I won’t have that crap in my regiment, Kasrkin. We’re all better than that.’

‘Dying with dignity is awfully important to the Cap,’ Darrick interjected.

‘Shut up, Taan.’

‘Shutting up, sir.’

‘Listen,’ Jevrian said, reaching up to lower Tionenji’s pistol with his brutishly large hand. ‘It’s not frenzon or satrophine, we clear? Throne in flames, don’t we have a job to do? There’s still a war on, last time I checked. It’s just a cocktail of ’slaught with a little downer to stay sharp. Reflex juice.’

The captain let it slide. As the command team moved on, Jevrian walked next to Thade.

‘That was some fine loyalty you showed me there, hero. Next time the Garadeshi has his gun pointed at your face, I might not leap to your defence.’

‘Get over it,’ Thade said. ‘You were in the wrong then, too.’

‘I’ll remember that.’ Jevrian fell back into line with his Kasrkin. ‘I’ll remember that, captain.’

Seth was hearing the voice with astonishing clarity now.

And that was the problem. It was coming from everywhere now, from the dust on the ground, from the bloodstains on the walls, from the pores of his sweating skin.

The inquisitor trailed his every step now. Seth knew what this was about – they needed him to find the source of the voice. It was obvious. But as Thade’s small army descended down the wide stone stairs into the undercroft, he knew they were setting their hopes on a false path. He couldn’t make out any sense of place or direction in the voice’s ululating scream. Even with his senses opened wide to the hidden world, all he could feel was the illusory sensation of unseen fingernails scratching lightly at his mind.

He began to wonder after a while if the feeling was really just an illusion. A taste appeared in his mouth, raw and rancid and tingling on his tongue like burning copper. He was stronger than this. He knew it. He could listen for the voice and remain untainted. Caius did, didn’t he? Zaur had?

Seth placed one foot in front of the other, at times shambling forward like one of the plague-slain and remaining upright only by gripping his black staff. He felt their eyes on him... Thade’s, Caius’s, the bastard Jevrian’s.

They didn’t care if he died. Whatever it took to get their prize. Whatever it took to reach the crashed ship. Here he was, swallowing the taste of blood and trying not to choke on it, while they silently willed him on with smiles on their faces.

He could, he realised, kill them if he wished. Within that realisation was a flare of shame, quickly quenched in Seth's rising anger. Cadian Blood, the fuel of the Imperium... Born to die in service to the Throne. It was laughable, Seth realised. Laughable and grossly wrong.

Damn the Throne. The Throne was a meat-grinding engine feeding on the souls of those that wasted their lives worshipping it. *Damn the Throne. To the Eye with all of them for wishing me dead.*

They were in a vault with a ceiling so low many of the taller soldiers had to slouch as they walked. It helped the popular opinion that the entire cathedral, raised over several decades of toil by tens of thousands of workers, was thrown together more by faith than sensible design.

As Seth passed between rows of stone sarcophagi, each one adorned with golden decoration and bearing long-faded names carved into the stone, the Cadians detected a curious noise.

'You hear that?' Thade asked Caius.

The inquisitor nodded, gesturing to the sarcophagus closest to Seth's trailing coat. As Thade passed it, he heard...

— *something inside, something made of dry bones, furiously scratching to get out*
—

...something within. An eerie sound, like vermin running over stone.

'Tell me that's the rats,' he said to Caius, loudly enough for the men nearby to hear.

'It's the rats,' the inquisitor replied, not looking back.

From that point on, Tionenji followed Seth with his laspistol drawn.

The Cadians had been within the monastery for approximately three hours when the voice addressed Seth by name.

'Why are you smiling?' Thade asked him immediately. Seth blanked his face and looked at the captain while they walked. The false pity on Thade's face sickened him so powerfully he had to tense his stomach and force it not to rebel.

'Nothing,' he said at last.

'You're looking bad, Seth. Do you need to rest for a while?'

'No rest.' Caius shoved Seth forward with the palm of his hand on the psyker's spine, right between the shoulder blades. Seth drooled as he staggered on. He'd been about to say yes. Been about to mention that the voice was calling his name now.

Thade moved closer to Caius as the troops walked through a tunnel lit by dim strip lighting running off one of the forgotten power generators in the city-sized monastery. This, too, was unnerving. The Cadians were used to Solthane as a city devoid of power.

‘This is killing him,’ the captain whispered.

‘This will kill us all,’ Caius replied in a tone that brooked no further comment. The inquisitor wondered if Thade had really considered the sanctioned psyker’s chances of survival after all. Either way, now was not the time for sentimentality. Now was the time to shut up and serve.

From up ahead, where the tunnel branched into a T-junction, Lieutenant Horlarn voxed back to the main force.

‘We’ve got some chanting up here. The tunnel splits north and south and leads into attached chambers. We’ve got chanting coming from the south side. Silence from the north.’

Caius stared at the back of Seth’s head as the sanctioned psyker shivered in the cold air. He seemed to be listening to something only he could hear.

‘We go south,’ the inquisitor said. Thade voxed the order to Horlarn, and the units closed together once more, catching up with their scouts.

The chanting turned out to be the dregs of some plague cult lost in the darkness of the catacomb maze. The 88th squads stormed in, opening fire and cutting down the handful of heretics as they crouched down for their evening meal.

Several soldiers spat on the corpses as they passed on once the fighting was done, disgusted to see how the heretics had been feasting on the bodies of their own dead. They were but the first of several splintered, isolated gangs of mindless pilgrims lost down in the dark. Each one fell before the guns of the Imperials, and the 88th ventured deeper and deeper through subterranean burial vaults, storage chambers, habitation wings and abandoned ritual halls. None of these had been used in thousands of years except for the recent deprivations of the scavenging heretics.

‘We’re in the real catacombs now,’ Thade said at one point, running his metal hand across the wall of a chamber.

‘How do you know?’ asked Caius.

Thade tapped the wall with his knuckles. ‘Stone. Not marble. This is cheap and serviceable, probably never meant to be seen by any pilgrims even when the temple was still growing. What? Don’t look at me like that. Just because I’m a soldier doesn’t mean I’m an idiot.’

‘I’m beginning to forget what sunlight feels like,’ muttered Darrick. He held a lamp-pack in one hand, panning it around the dark chamber. Power was sporadic in the undervaults, and the ceiling lightglobes were off more often than on.

‘It’s only been six hours,’ Jevrian said. ‘Grow a backbone.’

‘It’s been nine,’ Thade said, holding his wrist chronometer within Darrick’s circle of illumination.

‘I count seven hours and fifty,’ Kel piped up. More responses came. Not a single chron agreed with another.

‘This can’t be good,’ Darrick commented.

‘Move,’ called Caius. ‘Time displacement is a common effect of warp distortion. Just keep moving.’

‘Oh,’ Darrick muttered. ‘Well, that’s fine, then. Silly me for worrying.’ Grin in place, Darrick expected Thade to tell him to shut up. He found the fact the captain remained silent to be more disconcerting than time itself playing around.

Typhus wrenched his scythe clear and the Raven Guard sank to the ground. It had been a brief fight: brief but deliciously satisfying. Blood hissed and bubbled on the Herald’s blade, cooking black on the surface of the psychically-charged metal.

Brief. Satisfying. But costly. The Raven Guard had swooped down all too literally, striking from the air as they descended on jump-packs with howling thrusters. Chainswords sang and bolters barked at close range as the Astartes butchered one another in a savage brawl.

The black-armoured Astartes had been outnumbered three to one, but the advantage of surprise counted for much. Typhus stared through the Y-shaped visor of his gory, horned helm. Death Guard, their cracked armour the colour of gangrene, lay across the landing site. Men (or beings that had once been men and still maintained roughly human form) that had stood alongside the Herald for millennia, lay cleaved by Imperial chainblades or burst open by bolter fire.

Typhus felt no emotion at seeing this. He was capable of no emotional sensation that even vaguely approached something a human would comprehend. What he felt was hollow, the absence of emotion. His thoughts plumbed this vacant space within his mind, searching the void, finding it chilling and almost fascinating where his emotions once resided.

A plague on these accursed sons of Corax in their black armour. Their guerrilla assaults had held the Death Guard’s advance for too long.

The momentary introspection passed, and Typhus took a Raven Guard head

with a sweep of his scythe. Picking up the black helm, he shook the head free and stamped on it, crushing it to blood-and-bone paste under his boot.

‘We honour our enemies,’ the Herald growled, and vomited a stream of bloated, sticky flies through his narrow visor into the empty helmet in his hands. He tossed the writhing mass onto the headless corpse at his feet, letting the flesh-eating flies spill across the body and seek openings in the deactivated power armour.

The final insult. The gene-seed of these fallen Astartes could never be recovered by the Imperium. This last thought stirred something deep and sludge-thick within the recesses of the Herald’s mind. The Raven Guard still suffered today from their near extermination ten thousand years before. To deny them the genetic legacy of their primarch now brought a smile to the Herald’s lips. His emotions might have decayed long ago, but he was forever delighted by both vengeance and cruelty – especially when the two mixed.

The Death Guard, minus half their initial landing force, moved on shortly after, leaving the flesh-flies of the Destroyer Hive to finish their meal.

The vessel, what remained of it at least, was an Astartes battle-barge. This ancient spaceborne fortress lay in pieces, the largest sections of hull still bone white and emerald green in the XIV Legion’s original colours, unstained by the years of warp-corruption that had tainted the *Terminus Est* and the armour of the Death Guard themselves. The taint was insidious rather than obvious, but no less true.

Here and there on ridged sheets of exposed hull metal, black marks showed where the ship had ploughed through the atmosphere on its death dive, before gouging this savage cleft in the rock of the world soon to be named Kathur.

Silence reigned within the shattered ship. The crew, Astartes, servitors and Legion serfs alike, had long since mouldered to bone and dust.

Only a single soul claimed anything akin to life here.

It waited in the silence, screaming soundlessly, knowing its hour of freedom had finally come.



CHAPTER XIV

Cadian Blood

Beneath the catacombs

It defied their expectations.

Seven hours of trekking through the monastery, and they'd found it. Seth no longer even needed to lead the way; Caius was all too aware of the force of the voice's pull as he made his way through the catacombs. Impossible to ignore, its intensity made it increasingly difficult to reach out of his own mind, and he felt inexorably drawn deeper into the subterranean labyrinth.

All notions of needing excavator equipment were banished from thought. All images of the great ship blown to a million pieces and seeing the impressive wreckage in an underground cavern were purged from imaginations. The truth was both much more logical to understand and much more uncomfortable to behold.

The *Aggrieved* wasn't buried in the rock of Kathur's crust beneath the foundations of the monastery. It *was* the foundations of the monastery.

The Cadians became aware immediately when the deepest tunnels of the catacombs all appeared to be walled with metal instead of stone. It was strikingly obvious, as the carved rock passageways gave way to corridors of riveted iron and black steel; it was clear to all who laid eyes upon it that they were entering the halls of an Imperial ship.

A very old Imperial ship, it had to be said. But one of Standard Template Construct design, and therefore, timeless – the design still in use in new vessels today.

Osiron could scarcely believe what his photoreceptors were showing him.

'They made the lowest levels of their fledgling cathedral link to these corridors,' his metallic voice rang out, echoing weirdly down the spaceship's

wide hallways. ‘This is... blasphemous. Such a violation of the Mechanicum’s treasured lore. Such an unholy waste of power and knowledge.’

‘The blasphemy was committed before the vessel even crashed, tech-priest,’ Caius said softly. ‘And after.’

‘The blasphemy against the Emperor, yes. I speak of blasphemy against the Cult Mechanicus of Mars, and the Omnissiah.’

‘The Omnissiah? I thought your Machine-God *was* the God-Emperor,’ Darrick cut in. ‘You just dressed him differently.’

Osiron’s crimson hood moved in a gesture that may or may not have been indicative of a nod. ‘All this knowledge,’ he said again, stroking metal fingers across the vessel’s internal skin. ‘All this stolen power.’

‘Tainted by heresy,’ Caius said.

Now Osiron definitely nodded, conceding the point. The vessel may have been close to the peak of Mechanicus ingenuity, but the tech-adepts of forge world Mars wished no truck with the touch of Chaos. Tainted was tainted. Lost was lost.

‘I’d expected an Archenemy vessel to be more... obvious,’ Darrick said. ‘This is bad enough – and how in the Great Eye are these wall lights still on? – but it looks just like one of our ships.’

‘We are in the upper decks and have not penetrated far,’ Osiron reminded them all. ‘And when the *Aggrieved* fell to the surface, its corruption from its crew’s heresy was still fresh. This ship died before Chaos could worm all the way through it.’

‘No,’ Caius said, goading Seth forward. ‘This ship is riddled with the Archenemy’s touch. I feel it clearly.’

‘As do I,’ Seth spoke for the first time in hours. His tongue was thick in his mouth, and slimy strings of saliva stretched between his chattering teeth.

‘Seth,’ Thade began.

‘Seth,’ the psyker replied, ‘has been dead for some time now.’

The entity dwelling within the wreckage of the *Aggrieved* had reached out to the sanctioned psyker as the Cadians descended. It was a trifling matter to stir Seth’s thoughts into dwelling on rebellion, bitterness and disloyalty.

At least, at first. Before the final blow that killed Seth and allowed the entity to wear the psyker’s body, there had been much to do and a surprising amount of resistance to doing it.

The entity had stirred these dark thoughts within the thin, weak, mortal soup

that formed Seth's consciousness. And at first it had been easy, the suggestions of emotion and thought blending seamlessly with Seth's own brain function. He was an outcast among his people – thoughts of this forever rode high in his consciousness – and amplifying his loneliness and hatred of rejection was a simple matter, the merest of psychic tweaks. The entity probed with invisible fingers, tasted the surface pain, and flavoured it a touch darker, a touch angrier, minute by minute.

Disguising this gentle manipulation from the other psychically-gifted member of the Imperial coterie was no difficult feat. The entity at the edge of Seth's mind knew that its own psychic beacon, the endless silent scream, was clouding the other human's perceptions.

It did not know Caius was an inquisitor, and had no frame of reference for the term, as the title had not been coined in any significant way in the age when the entity had truly existed in the flesh. Even had it known the meaning of the title and the formidable skills of those that bore it, the entity would not have been troubled. Its powers far eclipsed those of the approaching mortals.

What it needed now was flesh. It could not rebuild itself without flesh; lots of flesh, blood, sinew and the other meats that made up the human form. It had woken, and the psychic pangs of its rebirth manifested as the plague, a cry for aid from its distant brethren. But now... now it needed flesh. Birthing the curse had left it weak and lingering on the edge of slumber. Finally, after weeks of regeneration, it was ready once more.

Yet its manipulations of Seth's mind began to snap back, repressed and refused by the mortal whose skull the entity was trying to claim.

What are you doing? the mortal had asked. Seth melted back into his own thoughts, reaching for the cancerous taint taking hold behind his eyes.

What intrusion is this? Who are you?

The entity saw how the mortal manifested itself out of its meaty shell: a being of silver light with eyes of violet fire.

'I am the death of Kathur,' the entity had replied. It also took psychic form now, within the human's psychic perception. A bulky, swollen figure with white armour that somehow writhed in a million little movements. Seth looked closer – the armour, despite being Astartes in shape and style, was formed of fat, wriggling maggots.

You are Death Guard, Seth had said.

'I was. For my loyalty to the Grandfather and the pain I inflicted upon the servants of the False Emperor, I was raised above the Legion.'

As was the Traveller. Seth was serene as he spoke, as though he were idly contemplating some matter of minor curiosity rather than the presence of a daemon within his mind. *You are kin to the Traveller.*

‘I know no Traveller,’ it said.

The Herald. Typhus.

‘The First Captain. The Host. My brother in arms, Typhon. I am a prince of daemons and deservedly so. But the Herald’s blood is avataric and thrice-blessed by the Plague Lord.’

I understand nothing of what you say.

‘You are human. If you understood the words, the knowledge would kill you.’

The Herald, he comes for you.

‘We were friends once. Battle-brothers. We will slay Scarus together.’

I cannot let you do this. We will stop you.

‘No. You are already dying. You have turned within for too long, and I am now the force animating your mortal bones.’

I will warn Thade.

‘Your hive-brother sees you move and thinks you still live. He does not see the truth.’

I will fight you here, then.

‘You will not win.’

Even in death, we serve Home and the Throne.

‘You will not win,’ the entity said again, and launched at the psyker, its writhing claws extended. The Cadian steeled himself for the assault, and for the last time in his life, Seth Roscraïn went to war.

It was cripplingly intimate, fighting on a battlefield that existed only within Seth’s mind. As his flesh and blood body walked on, drooling and whispering to itself in the darkness beneath the monastery, his consciousness and power was utterly focused within, fighting the daemon inside his head.

The ethereal Astartes lashed out with bleeding claws that tore shreds from the silver light that formed Seth’s psychic projection. Where the talons fell and rent corposant psy-flesh, they left trails of ravenous maggot-things that bored into his silver skin.

Seth screamed into the depths of his mind as his eyes blasted back with violet flame in a vicious reply. The squirming mass covering the Astartes burned away in a wave of black smoke, revealing the bloated, corrupted armour beneath.

‘Your defiance is laughable. I cannot feel pain,’ the Astartes said, readying for another attack.

I will be glad to teach you. Seth smiled through clenched teeth as the worms burrowed into his form. With a surge of concentration, his staff flared into existence, held in his hands. He pointed the aquila motif at the Death Guard.

Pain. It feels a little like this.

Golden arcs of coruscating energy leapt the distance between the double eagle symbol and the Astartes. Seth felt a moment of heated satisfaction as the daemon shrieked and writhed in the holy fire.

The mind of the Astartes-thing was a union of daemoniac and once-human perceptions, and this heady clash of conception struggled to grasp just why it was feeling agony for the first time in ten thousand years. It was strong, *immortal*.

But it was still disembodied, and that made it weak. Most of its true strength was in its physical form, and even that was massively depleted in the wake of calling the plague.

It had been a fool to let the mortal bait it like this, and as it glared at Seth's ghostly form, gleaming with golden light and a halo of violet flame, it saw the psyker knew it, too. Their telepathic closeness within this internal battleground sent their thoughts flashing back and forth to one another.

Are we done? Seth sneered, the eagle atop his black staff wreathed in blinding fire. *I had more.*

'You die for this, human.'

I was born ready for that.

'You will greet that death now!'

True... The two wraiths met, claws against flesh and holy eagle against armour. Both souls caught fire and began to dissolve in the psychic fury of their meeting, but only one of the souls screamed. Seth managed a smile as his psychic body immolated, and he looked into the daemon's shrieking visage. He'd never had a chance of winning. Even now his form was dissipating in the blink of an eye compared to the slow erosion of the daemon Astartes. And still the Astartes howled.

...but death is worth it, he hissed as the violet light faded from his eyes, *just to see that look on your face.*

'Seth,' it had said, 'has been dead for some time now.'

The daemon wearing Seth turned to face the Cadians. Already, it swelled and grew, bulges of contorted muscle tearing through the oversized bad weather jacket Seth had owned for years. Blood ran in trails from the sockets in his head

and neck, and the aquila atop the psyker's staff shattered in a hail of shards that killed three men.

Tionenji fired first, blowing the insides of Seth's head out the back of his skull. Thade and the others opened fire a moment later, shredding their psyker's stolen flesh in a hail of las-fire. Thade's bolters pounded once each, hammering explosive rounds into Seth's chest and sending the psyker back against the wall in a mess of blood and bone.

It wasn't dead. It wasn't even annoyed. Still it grew, for now it had flesh, but it needed more for a true rebirth. Clawed hands of thickening yellow flesh reached out for the closest two men in the confines of the corridor. The manifesting daemon tore the throat from the first and pulverised the spine of the second in its vice-like grip.

Corrun's head rolled back on his neck and he collapsed, fingers spasming as they touched the gaping wound where his throat had been. The second man stayed in the daemon's grip, wielded like a flail to hammer more soldiers from their feet and bludgeon them to death against the decking and walls.

The 88th fell back to a wider part of the corridor, the front ranks crouched so those behind could fire. Thade's pistols roared alongside the inquisitor's psycannon, these heavier weapons ripping chunks from the mass of warty flesh rising before them. The daemon, hunched in the hallway, regarded the fragile Cadians with one bloodshot violet eye the size of a human hand. The air reeked of burning meat and the ozone of las-weapons discharging at close quarters. More soldiers died as the beast swung left and right with its corpse flail.

'Purge the unclean!' Caius shouted, chanting a screed of chastisements as his shoulder cannon fired. Each bolt landed like a spray of acid, biting hard and making steaming wounds in the daemon's flesh.

The creature began to back away, retreating from the carnage it had caused. In the space of a handful of heartbeats, fifteen men lay dead. Thade's cry to pursue broke off in his mouth as those fifteen men, in various states of dismemberment and ruin, all began to move again. As Seth had done moments before, they too started to swell and discolour.

'Flesh!' the daemon roared, and clutching two corpses in each giant fist, it turned and moved down the corridor in a hunchbacked run. The Cadians heard its pounding footsteps even as they turned their guns on the rising bodies of their own comrades.

Corrun and the other slain Cadians were similarly resistant to injury as their bodies thickened and bloated in imitation of Seth's corrupted form. Thade aimed

his pistols at the wet, blinking orb in the centre of Corrun's forehead, formed from his eyes merging as he mutated. The shells rammed into the soft tissue and detonated a moment later, leaving the daemon without half of its head.

Thade backed away. The thing that had been Corrun seemed untroubled by the myriad injuries it was sustaining in the onslaught.

'We have to get through!' Caius cried.

'Hold ranks!' Thade called. The corridor was illuminated in the flickering redness of mass las-fire. The sharp tang of ozone even smothered the reek of the monstrous beings stalking towards the Imperials.

'Don't let them touch you!' Caius yelled to the men. No one asked why. The order was enough; details were irrelevant. You could tell just by looking at them that touching them was going to kill you somehow.

'Advance!' Thade ordered. The survivors of the Cadian 88th fell into step, unleashing fire in a relentless torrent as the daemons advanced down the narrow corridor towards them.

Outside the monastery at last, Typhus and his Death Guard escort stood at the open doors of the Shrine of the Emperor's Unending Majesty. Although he had linked up with XIV Legion forces already on Kathur, his warband was devastated.

The Death Guard had come across the seventeen Chimeras left by the 88th in the monastery grounds.

'Abandoned,' Typhus hissed over the vox as he gestured to the tanks. 'I sense only trace echoes of life.'

'I hear the puling creed of an Imperial tongue,' one of the Traitor Astartes had voxed as they surveyed the scene. 'He chants.'

Typhus heard it, too. A lone man, whispering Imperial litanies across a vox-channel. The benedictions in the Emperor's name hurt the Herald's ears, and he deactivated the channel with a blink-click directed at an icon on his helmet's internal display.

+Find him+, Typhus pulsed to his brethren. The Death Guard moved closer to the tanks, which was when they started to die.

Nine of the turrets spun on cue, as Osiron's servitors – hardwired into the weapons systems of the Chimeras under Thade's orders – opened fire on the Traitors. Multi-barrelled laser turrets emitted their high-pitched whines, slicing through Astartes plate while heavy bolters mounted on the tank's hulls boomed their own angry chorus.

No once-mortal being, even those granted immortality by the Ruinous Powers, was without weakness. The Death Guard had survived dozens of centuries as the hosts of supernatural plagues, but their incredible resilience to torments of the flesh also made them cumbersome – at least relative to their skills in life as true Astartes. They sought cover with lumbering slowness, several of their number being cut down and pain-filled lives lasting ten thousand years ending forever in a storm of ambushing fire.

Dead Man's Hand waited until the Death Guard had advanced fully into the monastery grounds and surrounded the tanks. Vertain licked his lips as he watched the green-armoured heretics taking refuge behind smaller buildings in the estate gardens. He picked his targets, sent a series of vox-clicks to the other three pilots alongside him so they would know not to waste ammunition by overlapping his fire arc, and ordered the attack.

Vertain had smiled as he heard Zailen still chanting.

Typhus's rage was boundless. He had ordered his men to destroy the tanks and pull the walkers apart. Half of this plan met with success. The servitors aboard the Chimeras offered little threatening resistance when the Traitor Astartes tore into the hulls and attacked them with roaring chainblades.

The Sentinels, however, retreated back into the powerless, empty night-time city, leaving only a vox echo of laughter for Typhus to sneer over.

The Herald's forces had taken a punishing beating throughout their short commitment to this campaign, but by the Grandfather, he was here now.

And now he would...

And now...

'No,' Typhus breathed, feeling the hive in his intestines writhe and clench.

'Lord?' voxed a nearby Death Guard.

In the recesses of his mind, the eternal scream from beneath the monastery fell silent. Typhus clenched his teeth, shattering two of them and swallowing the wave of carrion-eating flies that threatened to leave his lips.

'No!' he roared within the confines of his horned helmet.

+NO!+ his mind's voice shrieked, a thousand times louder despite its physical silence.

From a thousand, barely a hundred remained.

Bloodstained, battered, wounded, the last hundred entered the circular bridge of the *Aggrieved*.

Jevrian's broken arm was set, but he'd picked up a limp from one of the

cyclopean creatures' claws gashing his thigh. The wound was smeared with anti-ague gel but it still stung, in Jevrian's own words, like an army of bastards.

Osiron's breathing rattled in and out of his rebreather and he held his axe low in tired hands. Rax stalked alongside the tech-priest, jaws spread for battle, its armoured body filthy with enemy blood.

Thade and Darrick were unharmed but exhausted, and Thade's sword was clogged with gore, preventing any function. Caius had expended all of his sacred ammunition on the warp-beasts, and simply let his heavy psycannon fall to the floor, ignoring it now that it was useless.

The 88th fanned out around the circular room, looking in at the centre of the chamber where the raised control throne jutted from the floor on a grand stepped platform. Chains hung from the ceiling of the chamber, decorated by the old mark III helms of long-dead loyalist Astartes. The cogitator banks and consoles by the walls sat in ruin, many still with their operators close to their stations, wasted away to loose piles of bone on the ground.

A hundred rifles raised to cheeks as Thade pointed his fouled sword at the figure in the throne. The entity was reborn. Its reserves of strength might have been exhausted by both the plague it unleashed and the invisible, draining wounds inflicted by Seth's final assault, but it sensed the nearness of Typhus, and that nearness made the entity bold.

It was clearly once an Astartes. Time, and the favour of its hateful god, had changed that. What sat upon the throne now was club-limbed and twisted, like something half-formed from a psyker's nightmare and wrapped in ill-fitting Astartes armour. Its flesh was liquefied in places, melting and reforming like hot candlewax. Blisters and buboes covered its skin where bleeding rashes did not.

'Hello,' it said.

'In the name of the God-Emperor,' Caius intoned, and the daemon recognised the only true threat in the room. Power roiled from Caius. In the moment the entity sensed it up close, it knew fear.

'Die,' it said to the inquisitor.

Caius died. Not instantly, but within a few short seconds. The veins stood out on his face, dark and ugly, as he mustered his psychic might to repel the horrendously powerful telepathic invasion. It was more thorough and disgustingly more tender than any physical violation. Bastian Caius, who had come all this way to serve the Throne, drew his power sword and activated it, feeling an alien force eating his mind. He would have been at least a little consoled to learn of the immense effort the daemon had used in this command.

He would have been proud to learn the daemon had feared him so much that it risked further psychic drain to ensure Caius's demise.

The Cadians never saw the inquisitor's death. By the time Caius had obeyed the terrible command and plunged his aquila-hilted blade into his own belly, the Guardsmen had opened fire on the daemon.

'Have you come to bring me back into the False Emperor's light?' Grotesquely, it spoke with Seth's voice even though it no longer wore his features, masked as they were under its reformed power armour. 'To show me my sins in the light of your dead god?'

Something like that, Thade thought as his broken sword fell in a chop, and a hundred rifles fired in anger.

All told, the final battle between the survivors of the Cadian 88th Mechanised Infantry and the daemon responsible for the Kathurite Scourge lasted under one minute, yet it cost the lives of forty-six loyal Cadian-born servants of the Throne.

The volleys of las-fire did almost nothing to the creature, and it rampaged through the bridge, its claws tearing soldiers limb from limb, while it paused only to vomit acid on those too slow or too proud to retreat.

Thade and Horlarn, both armed with ruined chainswords that sported stilled teeth, ran in to engage the daemon. They were joined by the wounded Ban Jevrian with his malfunctioning and half-snapped power sabre, and twenty men using their pistols and bayonets. With Thade was Rax, leaping at its master's side.

This swarm assault also did almost nothing, except cost lives. Horlarn was decapitated by a sweep of the daemon's claw. Thade was saved from the same fate at the last moment by a grinding metal hand blocking the falling claw's arc.

Osiron, his back-mounted powerpack and additional servo-arm sparking as its joints gave way under the pressure, held the creature at bay long enough for Thade to get to his feet again.

The tech-priest's last action in the battle was to swing his two-handed axe with all his machine-enhanced strength, ramming it solidly into the daemon's body. This, at last, did something. The blade bit hard, snagging within the beast's spine, dropping it to its knees. Its return strike smashed Osiron to the side of the chamber, where he would die several minutes later from blood loss and internal haemorrhaging.

Renewed las-fire slashed into the prone daemon, every beam now carving its

burn lines into the fatty flesh of the thing's face. Thade came at it from the side, both pistols hammering until their clips ran dry. Rax leapt at the horror, its jaws ripping head-sized chunks of spoiled meat from the beast's bones.

It was weakening, but hardly out of the fight, even without the use of its legs.

'Thade!' Commissar Tionenji cried as he ran at the creature, hacking into its neck with his slender chainblade. His own strike was a distraction, as the sword he'd taken from Inquisitor Caius's body flashed through the air in Thade's direction. The captain caught it, reversed it in his hands, and plunged it two-handed into the daemon's neck. Black blood flowed from a legion of wounds now.

And it still wouldn't die.

There was no glorious final blow, though the soldiers of the 88th – those that survived – would say over the years that it was Thade's last strike which assuredly saw the daemon dead. The truth was altogether less glorious, and because Taan Darrick was involved, consisted of much more swearing than the saga would say.

'Run, you idiots!' Darrick cried from his position by the side consoles with the remains of his squad.

Thade and the others in their desperate melee saw a rain of black incoming, clattering all around.

Grenades.

As Thade threw himself aside, his world exploded in light.

'Let this world rot.' The Herald's voice was a savage whisper. He still stood at the gates of the monastery, listening as the psychic death scream faded from his sixth sense. 'I am done with this place.'

The Death Guard formed around their lord and master, unsure of his meaning.

'We are leaving, Great One?' a plague-ridden Astartes asked.

Typhus chuckled. The things living within his windpipe writhed at this rare mistreatment.

'Yes. I have real business to attend to beyond this petty distraction. Tell me, do you remember Brother-Sergeant Arlus?'

'No, lord,' replied the closest Death Guard.

'Do any of you?'

'I do, lord. I was Brother Menander. I served Arlus in life. We were Seventh Company. He was greatly blessed by the Grandfather when we made war upon Terra.'

‘He was. But he squandered his gift. And this shall be the last time I allow the whining of distant fools to distract me from my duty. Come. We return to *Terminus Est*.’

‘And then, lord?’

‘And then... to Cadia. Take me to the Warmaster.’

‘Medic!’

Thade knelt by Osiron, flinching back as sparks flared from the tech-priest’s sundered body armour.

‘Sir,’ Tasoll looked awkward as he held his narthecium kit, staring down at the torn red robe now revealing an entirely augmetic body. ‘W-what should I do? He’s not even bleeding blood.’

‘It... is a synthesised compound...’ Osiron wheezed ‘...of haemolubricant qualities... and...’

‘Shut up, you idiot,’ Thade looked at the oily black fluid covering his hands. ‘Just shut up, and tell us what to do!’

Tech-priest Enginseer Bylam Osiron said nothing more.

Amongst the stinking fallout and moans of the injured, Commissar Tionenji leaned against the door arch leading from the bridge. He caught his breath away from the men, not willing to let them see how exhausted he was. It was his duty to be inspiring at all times. Not for Commissar Tionenji were the aches and woes of mortal tiredness. The men shouldn’t see such things.

A smile crossed his lips. He was alive. Life! After all they had witnessed and all they had endured.

He was a man whose intelligence was both ruthless and restless. Already he planned stratagems for the remains of the regiment to survive on Kathur long enough to greet the main Reclamation forces. The incident with Thade and his command team pulling their weapons on a commissar would have to be addressed, but...

‘Hey.’ Ban Jevrian of the Kasrkin limped up to the commissar, his right trouser leg soaked with red. ‘One hell of a fight.’

‘Greetings, master sergeant,’ Tionenji grinned – all white teeth set in his dark face. ‘The Emperor smiles on us, I think.’

‘Oh, you think?’

The knife came from nowhere. One moment Jevrian had been leaning against the wall with Tionenji, cradling his broken arm and favouring his bad leg. The

next moment, Jevrian's fist was at the commissar's ear and his hand-length boot knife was sticking clean through Tionenji's skull.

Blood barely even had time to spurt before the commissar dropped to the decking. Jevrian reclaimed his knife several seconds later, wincing as he needed to bend down. His leg really did ache like an army of bastards.

'The Emperor smiles upon me,' Jevrian raised himself back up, wiping his knife, the blade clearly stamped with the regiment's insignia, on the sleeve of his fatigues.

'But you? I doubt he'd piss on you if you were on fire.'

Jevrian returned to the main area. Taan Darrick met his eyes from across the bloody bridge, and the Kasrkin officer nodded once.

In the earpiece of every soldier still standing, a single vox-click sounded. Several men nodded. Some smiled. Most pretended not to hear it, but only one never knew what it meant.

'What was that?' asked Thade, tapping his vox-bead.

'Nothing, sir,' Darrick replied. 'Just a glitch.'



EPILOGUE

Home

I

Twenty-seven days later, the Reclamation fleet arrived in full force.

The Herald's fleet was gone – had been gone for weeks – leaving only the faintest echoes in the warp to mark their departure. They left a dead world behind them, marking their failure.

The first troops to walk the surface encountered fewer threats than the Reclamation's initial spearhead had faced. Never concerned with reinforcing the world for conquest, no Archenemy vessels arrived to save the heretics of the Remnant and its splinter cults drawn from the treasonous populace. With all global production shut down and off-world imports utterly ceased, the still-living humans of Kathur began to die of thirst and starvation before long. Those that maintained supplies of food and water eked out an existence as territorial warbands until the Imperial Guard's main force annihilated them completely in what scholars came to know as the 'True Reclamation'.

The Guard units arriving at the headquarters of Overseer Maggrig and the fallen regiments he commanded, encountered a fortified base of jury-rigged prefab structures and salvaged tank cannons mounted on scratch built fortress walls.

As the gates to this rather humble fortress opened, General Millius Rylo of the Hadris Rift 19th descended from his command tank – a pristine Leman Russ Demolisher – and was greeted by a man in ragged Cadian-pattern armour painted black with grey fatigues.

'Welcome to New Solthane,' said the man with a captain's stripes on his shoulder. He scratched at a black beard that had been growing for the past few weeks at least. Water rations apparently hadn't allowed for luxuries like shaving.

‘I sincerely hope you’ve brought us some ammunition.’

The man next to him, equally filthy, raised his hand.

‘I wouldn’t say no to some food, either.’

‘Shut up, Taan,’ the captain said.

‘Shutting up, sir.’

The general observed these scruffy examples of Guard discipline, clearly less than thrilled at the sight before his eyes.

‘You look like death, both of you,’ he said, his lip curling. And that wasn’t even the worst of it. The captain – and the men joining him from the buildings around – all stank to high heaven.

Evidently bathing hadn’t been on the cards, either.

II

My Lord Castellan,

I recommend First Lieutenant Parmenion Thade for the highest citation in our world’s defence. Despite grievous injury and a shattered chain of command, he assumed leadership of Shock and Interior Guard forces stationed in the recent retreat at Kasr Vallock, arranging for the evacuation of seventy-one per cent of citizenry even as the fortress-city fell. All survivors bolstered the defences at nearby Kasrs, including the wounded governor-militant and his family.

I also have reports from over fifty eyewitnesses that First Lieutenant Thade duelled and slew a Traitor Astartes of the Thousand Sons Legion with the assistance of his command platoon.

As a final note, I offer the eyewitness reports listed in the attached file, listing Mechanicum personnel who will testify to the destruction of the enemy Titan (Reaver-class) designated ‘Syntagma’ at the fall of Kasr Vallock. Thade’s sappers and tech-priest contingent were responsible for the overloaded generatoria within the city’s industrial sector that led to the Syntagma’s immobilisation. The following deployment of Interior Guard and Shock forces storming the crippled Titan resulted in the war machine’s destruction.

Creed, I heard about the new medals. Give one to Thade. Too many are being given posthumously, and we've little to be proud of since the Despoiler set foot on Home. He deserves this, and with the losses sustained to our regiment, I'm making him a captain immediately. We will march together again, Lord Castellan, under Cadian skies. Until that day, may the God-Emperor watch over you.

*Colonel Josuan Lockwood
Cadian 88th Mechanised Infantry*

III

Thade lowered the dataslate.

He'd never read his citation before, and Colonel Lockwood's words to Lord Castellan Creed sat uncomfortably in his mind. Melancholy at the disaster of Kathur months ago mixed with the bitterness of Kasr Vallock still less than a year before. It had always seemed ridiculous to him – earning a medal and a priceless sword for the first time in his life he'd ever had to run from a battle. The first battle he'd ever lost. In failure, he was rewarded. Promoted, even.

He'd told Lockwood the truth once. The truth behind Kasr Vallock.

'I wanted to stand and fight,' he'd said. 'It was Osiron who talked me down, gave me a long speech about fighting the good fight when it counted most for Cadia and not when it counted for my pride.' He'd clenched his fists; one familiar and warm, the other – freshly implanted – unfamiliar, still numb to most sensation beyond a sense of aching cold.

'Throne, I wanted to die there. It was home. We left our own home to burn. Now we're being shipped off-world while the enemy pisses on the rubble of the city where we were born.'

'Stop whining, Thade,' the colonel had said. 'Slap a smile on your miserable face tomorrow when the Lord Castellan gives you that sword, and get over yourself. We're all hurting. Half of Home has fallen, son. Cadian Blood, eh? Ice in your veins.'

Thade had chuckled then, and forced a smile. Lockwood was right, of course. He'd always had that damnable ability and Thade admired him for it.

'You win.'

‘Of course I do. You gave the Warmaster one hell of a black eye, and you’ve every right to be proud instead of wallowing in this self-pitying nonsense I’m seeing right now. But shake Creed’s hand at the ceremony tomorrow and remember: this isn’t all for you, you selfish bastard. It’s for the Eighty-eighth. The men need some inspiration to take with them after all this. Home still needs a lot of our sweat before it’s all ours again.’

Thade drifted back to the present, feeling the shiver of the ship around him.

‘Colonel?’ asked a voice nearby. Thade looked out of the porthole, comfortable in the flight seat, staring out into the void of space. The troop carrier *Infinite Faith* rumbled onward, and a planet slowly hove into view. A planet of blue oceans and silver cities, a planet that Thade knew better than any other, ringed by a colossal war fleet that looked like twinkling stars from this distance.

‘Colonel?’ Darrick repeated. Thade turned his head.

‘That’s “warden-colonel” to you.’ He grinned and turned back to the window, looking out at the planet as they slowly drew closer. The night side of the world showed glints of flame flaring on the surface, like distant candles in the blackness. War, viewed from orbit, had a beauty all its own. Darrick moved around Rax, who sat polished and oiled by his master’s side, and he nodded to the porthole.

‘How does Home look, Par?’

‘Same as always, Taan.’ He stared at the planet below, watching parts of it burn.

‘Unbroken.’



REDEMPTION CORPS

Rob Sanders

There were two of them. Women.

Boots. Bodices. Bodies borne of fire and atonement. Even in the murk of the maximum-security oubliette he could make out the distinctive garb of the battle-sisters. A pair of nimble little penitence engines, come to work off their own sins in the condemnation of others.

'Sisters,' Mortensen acknowledged across the filthy cell. With poetic synchronicity, coiled power lashes slipped from the sisters' slender gauntlets and began to crackle and dance on the floor like death-throe serpents. One motioned him to get up. Grunting, he kicked himself away from the soiled wall. As his nakedness passed between their joint four hundred pounds of man-hating flesh, Mortensen enjoyed their loathing. Assuming the supplicating demeanour of a good prisoner, he took a seat at the plasteel table and chair in the centre of the chamber with the light and his visitors.

A shadow momentarily enveloped the room as a dark shape dropped in through the ceiling threshold. At first Mortensen took it to be a body: perhaps one of his men. Far too elegant for a flailing corpse, the form somersaulted and landed gently in front of the table. Her heavy ribbed cape – like the wings of a gargoyle – parted to reveal livid, black armour and the dazzling reflection of a maze of polished adamantium pins inserted into her bare cranium, each pin a centimetre equidistant from the others. As she lifted her chin Mortensen found himself fixed in the steely gaze of an older woman, her eyes like the twin barrels of a storm bolter – impassive, unswerving and on target.

She took him in with the kind of fascination most people reserve for keen blades and caged reptiles: the Guardsman's physique, the schola tattoos, the erubescant scarring that danced across his muscular flesh like camouflage scalded into the skin. The florid pattern became even more intense across Mortensen's shaven head and chest, only broken up by the cruciform of numerals inked across his scalp and a short, ragged beard around a snarl that passed for a mouth.

The interest was reciprocated. It had been an impressive entrance, but at that moment Mortensen found himself admiring the jump pack the battle-sister had used to negotiate the oubliette's roof threshold and the new possibilities it offered: in a cell with the sole exit situated in the ceiling, the only way out was

up.

Even before he knew what he was doing, Mortensen was on his feet. With the unreal speed and fluidity of a drinking-hole gunslinger, the woman had dipped her hand into a holster and drawn a tapered pistol. There was a brief crack of las-fire and a flash filled the room. The blast hit him square in the centre of his chest, the momentum carrying his knees over his shoulders. The battle-sister's pistol was back in its holster before Mortensen hit the ground in an untidy, unconscious heap.

Shrugging the seconds he'd just spent in oblivion from his aching skull, Mortensen grabbed the back of the chair and pulled himself to his feet. Running fingers across his chest he found a shallow scorch mark seared into the flesh above the sternum. The power pack on the sister's pistol must have been fried. Mortensen's face split into a grin.

'Let's try that again,' he sneered, his grip tightening on the back of the chair. The battle-sister stared on in staunch silence, nodding an order to the other two sisters to close in. Hefting the chair above the ground, Mortensen spun on his heel and let it go, burying it in the tumbling form of his nearest assailant.

He turned to meet the second as she tried to rush him from the other side. The crackling tip of her power lash snapped around his left wrist, locking itself off. To any ordinary man, the mere touch of the weapon would feel like wearing a set of manacles pulled from a blacksmith's fire. It wasn't exactly a concubine's caress for Mortensen either but his benumbed flesh gave him the seconds he needed to withstand the worst the lash had to offer. Grabbing a length of whip with one hand he yanked the sister towards him, swinging his right fist around to meet her. With the second sister on the deck Mortensen uncoiled the power lash from his wrist and brought it back to life with a click of his thumb.

The blistered sinew of his wrist smouldered and Mortensen clenched both his fist and his teeth as the ghostly scorch of the searing weapon finally hit nerve sensitive tissue underneath. The first sister held back, allowing her compatriot time to shake Mortensen's jackhammer blow from her skull; they remained together, side by side. What they had just witnessed made them wary: his gift, his curse.

Mortensen gave them a nasty smirk. When a comet had struck the hive-world of Gomorrah, Mortensen had been baptised in the apocalyptic fires that had laid waste to the planet. He had been burned from the temple to the toes and had lost much of the feeling in what was in between.

The three of them circled each other like gladiatorial warriors, the sisters

occasionally cracking their remaining lash at him in the hope he might return the compliment and provide them with an opening. When he had them where he wanted them, Mortensen granted their wish. The battle-sisters effortlessly sidestepped as Mortensen slid down on one knee and sent the tip of the spitting weapon harmlessly through the air between them. Like scorpions rearing their tails for the kill, the sisters took full advantage and thrashed their own whip towards him. But it was too late. Mortensen's weapon was already entangled itself in its intended target – the centre leg of the plasteel table. Tugging at the lash with all his strength, the table shot across the room, hamstringing the two women from behind and sending them tumbling towards the metal floor.

With the Adepta Sororitas down, Mortensen had expected the remaining battle-sister to go for her pistol again. Fading power pack or not, the weapon was still better than nothing. Sending a ripple through his power lash, he freed it from the table leg and announced his intention to fight.

Within moments the prone battle-sisters were back on their feet and forming a living, breathing barrier of righteous hatred between Mortensen and their brash leader. He gave them a brazen flash of his eyes: 'Don't know when to stay down eh? Or maybe you're getting to like it...'

They advanced, impassive and unruffled. Mortensen's smirk faded. He was being toyed with: a puritan's plaything. The battle-sisters were soaking up punishment like a barrack room punch bag, each blow taking them one step closer to the redemption they craved. Mortensen, on the other hand, had been to hell and back way before he ever reached the cell and was starting to question how much more abuse he could conceivably weather. The answer to his question came sooner than he thought.

'Stand down,' the battle-sister instructed, at which her henchwomen went limp and peeled off to stand sentinel on either side of the oubliette. She wanted to face him alone. Mortensen gave a mock bow of the head, as if he and the battle-sister were facing each other across a spire ballroom.

'Obliged to you,' he said, cracking his knuckles and moving in on her. Disconcertingly, all the battle-sister did was saunter around the front of the table and rest her backside on the rim.

That wasn't the only thing that was bothering Mortensen. His fourth step hadn't felt as steady as his third and his fifth barely carried him at all. Finding himself back on the floor at the battle-sister's feet, Mortensen started to realise that he was in trouble. Again. Gritting his teeth and abandoning the whip, he took the last few metres arm over arm, before pulling himself up using the side of

the table and the sister's holster belt. His legs felt like they weren't there anymore and he began to feel the same sensation in his arms. If he could just get his hands around her neck – but that thought faded as his eyes came level with the battle-sister's elegant laspistol.

'Needler,' Mortensen grunted, and fell as the palsy reached his straining fingers.

He hit the filth-encrusted floor with less grace than he would have imagined possible, before getting on with the important business of internal cramping and convulsions. It was difficult to concentrate during this period, but Mortensen was certain that he heard the slick clunk of a pistol longslide being cleared. This was confirmed a muscle-spasming eternity later when a crystal casing hit the floor next to him. The tiny transparent vial, threaded through with a violaceous liquid, rolled this way and that in the miniature squall of his staggered breathing. Flipping him over with the wicked tip of one armoured boot, the battle-sister took him away from the kaleidoscopic world of the needler chemicase and stood astride his paralysed form.

'Be gentle with me,' Mortensen jeered and managed a crooked smirk. The freshly primed needler came out and hovered once again above his chest.

'Don't worry, major,' she assured him, the cold certainty of her words cutting through his hive-world smarm. 'You won't feel a thing.'



CHAPTER ONE

Damnation Games

I

It was the same dream.

Mortensen knew it was a dream because he was home and the home he knew was long gone. Knee-deep in fine caustic ash, he was stumbling his way up a mountainous dune. His drill slacks were sweat-stained rags clinging to his brawny frame and his feet were raw in his boots. Spreading his fingers like grapnels, he punched handholds into the desiccated slip face and made a desperate scramble for the dune's shifting summit.

Gomorrah.

He drank in a scene of unrivalled bleakness. A rolling dune sea of corrosive, crescentric slag-heaps as far as the eye could see – pockmarked with industrial craters and bottomless, open-cast scars that even the insatiable ash wasteland couldn't swallow. And where this blighted landscape met a primordial sky that boiled with sickly rage, a bloated city sat, spewing further poison into the rust-scorched heavens. Haephastus Hive squatted like some industrial behemoth, its prospector shanty towns slipping between the bleached dunes like exploratory tentacles, searching for the next motherlode, the next heavy metal seam or horde of long forgotten archeotech.

Behind him, the 'Claw' poked an accusatory set of masonry pincers at the filthy heavens. Mortensen had no idea what the architectural abomination had been in its former life, but now the two towers – the shorter leaning with seeming precariousness on its grotesquely lofty counterpart – formed the two vertical chromo-wings of Gomorrah's infamous schola progenium complex. Atop the tallest, Drill Abbot Proctor would be observing his progress across the dunes; chronometer in one bony fist, magnoculars to his beady little eyes, his

toothless chops mumbling an incessant stream of senile curses. Knowing his momentary pause would have sent the good abbot into an apoplexy of eyeball-popping profanity, Mortensen dragged his limbs from the strength-sapping ash: he would pay for that.

Lost in the grim spectacle of the hive he barely noticed when the spent, feeble sunlight suddenly evaporated. A deathly coolness swept across the barren waste as the cloudbank above Mortensen was enveloped in angry, black shadow. As he stared into the deepening sky the perverse eddies and twisters responsible for the dunes' seasonal migration died about him and the air grew still and lifeless.

On the horizon, just beyond the mighty hive, a colossal berg of dirty ice and rock suddenly split the sky asunder. Mortensen had never seen anything as big – not even the hive – and for a long moment the only expression his body could produce was an awe-inspired gawp. For the first time in sixteen hours, Mortensen was confident that Abbot Proctor's magnoculars were not burning into his sweaty back.

As the gargantuan object fell it writhed with white flame and trailed a firestorm of friction and combustible atmospheric gases. Cloud vaporised on contact and sheet lightning rippled out in concentric waves, as what Mortensen could only imagine was a comet breached the percolating smog layers and tumbled towards the surface. In the appalling seconds of helpless horror that followed, Mortensen found himself ghoulishly shuffling towards the vision.

Then impact.

All became agonising white as the comet struck and announced its unwelcome arrival. Mortensen instinctively screwed his eyes shut and so couldn't see the unstoppable blast wave as it tore across the world in the wake of the strike, scalding the skies and turning the wasteland to glass.

He felt it though. A sensation he would never be allowed to forget: a corporeal memory; the last feeling his flesh would ever register. The inferno rolled over him like a tidal wave of superheated vengeance, flensing skin from the muscle and sinew underneath and baptising what was left in the apocalyptic fires that followed. Thrashing in an acid bath of agony, Mortensen screamed for a death that never came...

II

Zane Mortensen sat bolt upright in the bunk, gulping feverishly at the cool air of the quarters. Dragging back the blanket he threw his legs over the side and dug

the soles of his feet into the metal of the deck. *Deliverance* felt cold: the deep freeze of the empyrean creeping through the escort carrier's superstructure. With warp travel came nightmares, as every good Guardsman knew, but for Mortensen this was normal fare. That monstrous calamity waited for him behind each eyelid: for him sleep meant reliving the unliveable. Cradling his brutally shaved head in his hands he let the ghostly afterimage of the dream fade from his mind.

There was movement in the covers beside him. He watched a slender hand reach out groggily before letting soft fingers drift in mock affection across the taut muscle of one scarred shoulder. It was Vedette, one of his storm-troopers. The arrangement was largely casual, unspoken and restricted to the long months spent in transit between one warzone and the next.

The simple warmth of the action was lost on Mortensen's nerve-dead flesh, the difference between what he could see and feel making him nauseous, and he brushed her delicate fingers from his arm. She moaned softly and retracted, turning over in the bunk.

'Sir.'

The bulkhead rolled aside and the glowtubes glimmered to life. Corporal Sass stood in the entrance looking more stricken than usual. Mortensen squinted through the harsh glare. Sass took a couple of dramatic steps inside the cabin. 'Major, we have a problem.'

Mortensen gave the young hiver crabby eyes. 'I already have a problem, corpsman.' He stuffed a cigar butt between his teeth. 'You.'

The storm-trooper continued his vexed advance, to the major's dismay. Mortensen had a soft spot for the Necromundan, but he was wound tighter than a tripwire. The boy's prodigious mathematical abilities and indefatigable memory – the consequence of his mother's taste for crystal ersatz – was a bottomless pit of Tactica protocol, field stratagems and strangely useful useless information. This made Sass an invaluable asset and a perfect choice for the major's adjutant.

'You should really hear this, sir.'

Slipping on his boots, beret and a pair of starched blood stripe slacks, Mortensen crossed the cabin and pushed his bulkhead aside. To the officer's surprise he found Master Sergeant Conklin playing sentry at the door: beret crooked and resting the snub muzzle of an autopistol against the cold metal.

'What?' Mortensen rumbled as the sergeant raised his grizzled eyebrows.

'You're not gonna like this, boss.'

Bulldozer loyalty was Wendall Conklin's speciality: he was well liked

amongst the men, among whom his reputation as Mortensen's top hatchet man was legend and the bark of his bolter was always welcome. Mortensen couldn't find it in himself to like the man, however. Under fire he often found himself deferring to the cold logic of his adjutant or Vedette's cool common sense, rather than the brute killer instincts of his veteran sergeant – utterly dependable though he was.

‘I'm already not liking it.’

Mortensen took in the corridor with one suspicious glance and then pinned the two storm-troopers with wary eyes. ‘What is it?’ he put to them in single and deliberate syllables. One looked at the other in expectation. Sass twitched. Conklin flared his nostrils. ‘Am I in the habit of asking rhetorical questions?’ the major added with rising choler.

The master sergeant's face creased with addled irritation. He wasn't much one for long words or their meanings.

Sass raised an inquiring finger: ‘Sir, would that not be a rhetorical question?’

Mortensen growled.

Sass lowered his finger and took it towards the cabin vox. ‘Like I said, sir, you are going to want to hear this for yourself.’

The wall-caster erupted in a cacophony of static and garbled vox-traffic. For a few seconds the ear-splitting scramble continued with Mortensen glowering at his adjutant, his patience almost spent. Then he caught something he recognised – something all Guardsmen recognised – the nineteen megathule, air-seething crack of ragged las-fire and the screams that usually accompanied it.

Mortensen put his hand to the wall and leaned in closer with his experienced ear. Volscian-pattern. Hive produced. Unrivalled power economy and the almost indistinguishable hiss of gas-coolant that preceded each snap – both of which were peculiar to the model.

This was not good news. Volscian-pattern las-fire meant that the firefight wasn't part of some horrific, empyreal boarding action – which ironically might have been simpler. Volscian las-fire meant Volscians and *Deliverance's* payload was the 364th and 1001st Volscian Shadow Brigade companies. As Sass thumbed through the vox-channels it became apparent that the entire carrier was alive with profanity and gunfire. The whoops of trigger-happy Volscian hivers cut through the las-chatter of barrack-room battles and ambushes. Sinister threats and promises were being exchanged across the channels, which had been jammed open on all decks, accompanied by the thudding whoosh of pistols and the occasional thunder of grenades. Fortunately such small arms posed no danger

to the reinforced hull and its pressurised integrity.

‘They have their weapons,’ Vedette said. She was out of the bunk and pulling on a vest over her bleached, Mordian bob. ‘Which means the officers are involved, also.’

Sass and the major nodded in grave agreement.

‘Gang war?’ Conklin offered. ‘The tats and sashes – Underbloods this and Kinfolk that–’

‘The Volscians are undoubtedly stratified by House and gang loyalties,’ Sass interrupted with nerdish authority, ‘but it seems unlikely that a force so divided – so intent on fighting each other rather than the greenskins – could have garrisoned the Kintessa Gauntlet for the past thousand years.’

Conklin shot the adjutant a sour glare.

‘Come on,’ Mortensen snarled, silencing the wall-hailer. ‘We all know it’s Fosco.’ He stared at the floor for a moment, collecting his thoughts, and then looked at them each in turn.

‘Sass – I’m going to need Captain Rask.’

‘But all this deck’s channels are jammed.’

‘Get the master vox from Diederick’s bunk.’ The comms-officer was always fiddling with the damn thing. ‘Patch into the brigadier’s personal channel. If Rask’s not messed up in this then you’ll find him monitoring the vox-waves.’

‘Brigadier Voskov’s personal channel is going to be security encoded,’ Sass protested.

‘Something makes me think that’s not going to stop you,’ the major told him with a reassuring slap on the back. ‘Hurry.’

As the adjutant slipped out of the cabin Mortensen turned on his sergeant. ‘Weapons?’

‘Hellguns, targeters and carapace are all stowed on the birds. The carrier deck officers have the hangars in lockdown.’

‘How do we know that?’ Mortensen asked: that kind of information certainly wasn’t coming in over the vox-channels.

‘Minghella was up in medical, checking on Diederick, when it broke out,’ Conklin informed him. ‘Bunch of hivers stormed the bay and shot up the infirmary. Diederick took two more in the chest but Rhen got him back down here. They had to go around the flight deck. Navy boys have sealed themselves in.’

‘And Sergeant Minghella?’ Mortensen put to Conklin. The major had the feeling he was going to need his medic.

‘Nothing he won’t walk away from,’ the master sergeant assured him. ‘He’s working on Diederick now. All we have are our side arms.’ Conklin flashed his autopistol at the major. The corpsmen carried side arms at all times for personal defence. The pistols were as much uniform as the blood stripes, berets, belts and tunics that made his storm-troopers the target of colourful nicknames amongst regular Guardsmen. To the Shadow Brigade they were ‘Glory Boys’ and ‘Toy Soldiers’ – but this bothered the major and his men little. They’d been called a lot worse and in turn had far worse names for their regimental counterparts: men who fought for tithes and out of fear rather than for Imperial pride.

Mortensen bridled: his squad might very well have the honour of reinstating some of that fear today. A duty he’d be far happier to perform without the involvement of Commissar Fosco.

Fosco had joined *Deliverance* at St Guise, spelling immediate doom for the tiny carrier. Brigadier Voskov already had the Volscian 364th Shadow Brigade drilled into as well-oiled a machine as any officer could come to expect from a hive-world regiment. Besides Mortensen’s storm-troopers, *Deliverance* also carried the Volscian 1001st and it was the unfortunate honour of this freshly processed regiment to receive as their commissar the infamous Fritz Fesco.

Mortensen didn’t know whether it was the strange warp currents the carrier had beat up through on its arduous trek along the Kintessa Gauntlet or the fact that Fosco was a creed-obsessed psychotic who had simply spent too long in the cardinal world hellhole that was St Guise, but it had swiftly become apparent that they were all on a passage to mutiny.

From Rask the major learned that the Commissariat had moved Fosco all over the sector: he was well known as an imperious tyrant and a bane to all who served with and under him. He’d declared the armed transport *Achates* and all on board her heretic and undeserving of the Emperor’s protection. He had been part of – and many claimed afterward, the cause of – the notorious Port Spiterri Revolt. The Jopall 44th Indentured; Colonel Da Costa’s First Moloch Rifles, the 201st Noctan Strikes, the Tallarn 800th (formerly known as the Abu al-Din Sunfighters); the last of the Gorgone Deepers: the list went on – all regiments to whom Fosco had been attached – all regiments whose commanding officers had appealed to the Emperor when they heard that the Commissariat was moving the volatile Fosco onto his next assignment. The First Moloch was notable as the regiment that during the Blight Wars lost more Guardsmen to Commissar Fosco’s battlefield executions than to the hrud infestation they were combating.

The relief of the regimental commanding officers was brief, however, as in

each case a parting shot was delivered – often to the head – before Fosco and his staff were moved on to their next, ultimately doomed regiment. Fosco never saw a disciplinary committee (he was too well connected – although no one seemed to know how) but would occasionally take benediction leave amongst the lofty towers of St Guise – from where the Volscian 1001st had recently received him.

Vedette snatched up her belt and holster from where they were hanging on the bunk and tossed the major his own. Gone was the desperate fervour of the previous night's embraces. Gone was Vedette the casual lover, and in her place was Corporal Vedette the professional.

As he caught the belt he went through the perfunctory motions of checking the autopistol's clip and chambering the first round. He thumbed off the safety and grunted to himself: wouldn't be needing that.

A sudden hammering from the corridor brought all three heads up in the cabin. Conklin threw himself from the doorway and across the passage, chunky autopistol clasped in both hands and aimed at the block bulkhead. Vedette went down on one knee in the cabin doorway, leaving Mortensen the fire arc above her head.

More hammering proceeded – the metallic clatter bouncing around the corridor as yet another untidy volley of las-bolts impacted from the other side.

'Somebody wants in,' Mortensen muttered.

'It's okay,' Conklin assured them gruffly, 'I've already locked it off.'

Vedette wasn't convinced, not least by the way her master sergeant was tightly holding his own pistol on the doorway.

'Until somebody hauls a plasma or a vape gun down there,' the corporal corrected him.

'Yes,' Mortensen nodded, 'we don't want to be here when that happens. Fall back.'

The three storm-troopers backed away from the block bulkhead as an increasingly furious barrage of bolts was carelessly blasted at the pressure-sealed door. Vedette and Conklin held their weapons on the corridor in the event of a breach while the major fell into a sidle up the corridor wall to cover their backward advance in case they were cut off from the rear.

'Can I take it all routes into the block have been secured, sergeant?'

Conklin chuckled nastily. 'I hope you don't think tipping you out of your bunk was my first priority, boss.'

Mortensen nodded in silent agreement. That was Conklin: provokingly proficient.

The trio backed out of the corridor and into a small apex that formed the hub of several troop block passageways. There Mortensen found the remainder of his storm-troopers: informally known amongst the other regiments as the ‘Redemption Corps’.

Diederick was a blasted and bloody mess on the floor, his ruptured gore spreading slowly out across the metal deck. Sergeant Minghella straddled the comms-officer, his head bowed and his chest heaving with the past exertion of keeping the trooper alive.

‘Rhen.’

Rhen Minghella contorted his already hideous, dogface features and wrapped his fleshy lips around a stream of ugly curses. The Corps medic pushed himself up from the deck and the body. His uniform was dishevelled and soaked through with his patient’s blood and not a little of his own.

Without looking at Mortensen he wiped the deep red of his hands down on the only part of his tunic that wasn’t bathed in bodily fluids.

‘I regret to inform you of Specialist Diederick’s untimely death, sir,’ he reported dourly.

Trooper Pryce jangled nearby as he knelt to close the storm-trooper’s glazed and lifeless eyes – his neck a nest of cords, chains and ribbons, each supporting some saint-adorned medallion, lucky home world charm or Imperial effigy. Pryce adored the creed and Mortensen often caught the soldier offering prayers to his God-Emperor, although the major suspected this was more out of a pleading desire to survive the horrific situations he was routinely plunged into rather than pious devotion.

Mortensen pursed his lips: he didn’t have time for the indulgence of one of his medic’s bad moods or lectures. ‘Vedette, watch the corridor,’ he ordered. The other two were being covered by Sarakota – who looked strange with a snub pistol in his hand instead of the anti-materiel length of his sniper Hellshot – and Gorskii, the Redemption Corps’ Valhallan demolitions man. Or more accurately woman, but it was hard to tell through the hair of her upper lip and the flash scarring that ran down one half of her face.

The Redemption Corps were a mixed group – from schola students to veterans: the best that being born on a dozen different worlds could offer. Each brought their own natural talents to Mortensen’s small, elite storm-trooper company, honed to zealous perfection in the sector’s various schola progenium institutions and drawn together to damn the enemies of the Imperium.

‘Conklin – what’s down here? We’re obviously going to need a little more

than faith and thigh-huggers,’ Mortensen put to the sergeant, slapping his holster.

‘Orlop deck houses the sick bay—’

‘Medical is overrun,’ Minghella shot at them irritably.

‘...midshipman’s berths, some of the maintenance and ministration compartments.’

‘Gather what you can. Anything useful.’

Conklin went left but Gorskii put up one long-fingered hand.

‘Midshipman’s berths sealed from inside,’ she notified him in her Slavic drawl.

‘The crew won’t want any part of this,’ Vedette clarified.

‘No,’ Mortensen added, ‘this is Guard business. Pryce, go with him.’

Darting past an impassive Sarakota, Conklin and Pryce disappeared down the adjacent corridor. Appearing in their place moments later was Sass, emerging from his cabin – master vox carelessly thrown over one shoulder and headset held to one ear.

‘Captain Rask for you, major,’ Sass announced, not a little pleased with himself.

Mortensen took the headset and pressed the vox-bead to his grizzled chin.

‘Talk to me Tyberius – tell me I’m still dreaming,’ the major rumbled.

‘I wish you were,’ came the tinny reply.

The vox lent the voice a quality of great distance and detachment, especially as it was, bouncing around the metal walls of the block apex. There was also something smooth and well-worn in the captain’s tone, however – something familiar and business-as-usual about his manner.

Captain Tyberius Rask had initially joined *Deliverance* and Brigadier Voskov with the 1001st Volscian Shadow Brigade – a company he’d personally tithed and processed on Volscia. Despite not being a Volscian himself, Rask soon became a rising star amongst Voskov’s tactical staff – and through his keen understanding of the hive-world mindset and an ability to harness Volscian strength, he unleashed the 1001st’s natural talent for slaughter. It had been this success that inevitably threw Rask and Mortensen together.

As Voskov’s chief tactical officer, the captain inherited responsibility for Mortensen and his ‘Redemption Corps’. Zane Mortensen was widely known as a difficult if ruthlessly effective officer – right down to his apocalyptic survival on Gomorrah, a frankly unbelievable service record and barrack room rumours of his supposed indestructibility. Rask should know: it was his current duty to dispatch Mortensen and his storm-troopers on the innumerable spearheads,

infiltration missions and special operations that had earned Mortensen half such a reputation.

It was very much this status – as the unit's strategist and the final voice they heard before being dropped into some deathworld hellhole or other – that as a routine, steadied nerves and lent welcome focus and direction to bloody, battlefield situations often bereft of such luxuries.

'Is the ship secure?' Mortensen asked. Gunfire exchanged on the bridge might end their journey through the empyrean pretty definitely – one stray shot into an essential piece of equipment like a Geller field runebank would be enough to seal the fate of every man on board.

'The ship's fine. Look, we haven't got much time,' Rask replied.

'We have weapons fire on the barracks decks,' Mortensen informed him. 'Is the materium breached? Is it warp fever?'

'It's not immaterial exposure. It's not a mutiny: fighting is restricted to the starboard barracks decks and some forward areas. Captain Waldemar thought it prudent to seal Guard habitation off – just until the stomach goes out of the ringleaders.'

Mortensen rolled his eyes.

'Told you,' Vedette added.

'So it's the hivers?' the major put to Rask.

'It's the Volscians; affirmative.'

'Are you telling me that naval security is just going to sit watching bulkheads while the 1001st tear each other up?' Mortensen rumbled.

'Guard business. Waldemar won't order his men in until both weapons and the rebellion are put down. He won't risk the ship.'

Mortensen nodded slowly to himself.

'So who's offering the resistance?'

'Small pockets of Shadow Brigade soldiers, either too loyal or too frightened to join the action – most led by sergeants or the odd lieutenant.'

'Are you in charge up there?'

'The regimental command structure is intact: Brigadier Voskov and the senior staff are up here on the bridge. He's put the 364th on high alert, and sealed off their quarters, just in case the dissention spreads. We've already had enough Volscians shooting at each other.'

'Why do that when they can shoot at me and my men instead?' Mortensen sneered moodily.

'I don't know,' Rask countered. 'I hear you're a real hit with Gomez and the

Second Platoon.’

‘Talking of creed-freaks, what about Pontiff Preed?’

‘Voskov sent him down to steady the 364th. Look, Zane, you have to understand: this is not a mutiny. Several Shadow Brigade officers authorised distribution of weaponry to their platoons and took hostages.’

‘Hostages?’

Rask breathed hesitation back across the channel before: ‘Regimental Commissar Fosco and his personal staff.’

Mortensen let the headset drop to his thigh and shook his head with venom. ‘Son of a...’ It was his turn to check Vedette: ‘What did I tell you?’

‘Look Zane – I’m sorry to do this to you – I know how you feel about the good commissar.’

Mortensen brought the headset back up. ‘You really don’t.’

‘And I don’t think that many of us up here would disagree with you my friend – but we’ve got a little problem called Tactica regulations. We’ve got to put this insurrection down: the Imperial Guard does not negotiate with insurgents. You know that. I need the rebel command structure neutralised. Only then will Waldemar send in naval security.’

‘And Fosco?’

‘Of course, the hostages are a consideration.’

‘So that bastard can wreak more havoc. If Fosco walks out of there, it’ll be all day firing squads.’

‘Zane – it’s either that or face one ourselves when we get to Spetzghast.’

‘Me and my men – we’re instruments of Imperial justice; the left hand of the God-Emperor, if you will – that I don’t doubt.’

‘Major, your loyalty to Emperor is beyond question,’ Rask assured him with the smoothness of an expert salesman. ‘That’s why I’m on a vox-set to you instead of conducting pointless negotiations with the hostage-takers.’

Mortensen’s bitterness had yet to find expression, however. ‘So Fosco stirs up the Volscian hivers with his brutal ways. They’re brutal enough and strike back. Now my men and I have to spill the blood of brother Guardsmen and clean up this mess. I don’t know. You reap what you sow. Somehow, I feel this was inevitable. The Commissariat need men of character, not cruelty: they should be amongst our best, not our worst. I mean – castration; servitude in perpetuis; tongue clipping – since when have these been a soldier’s punishment for anything? But I guess it saves the bother of actually having to organise the firing squads, with most of the punished choosing to swallow their side arms instead—’

‘Major Mortensen: like myself – you and your men have your orders.’

Rask’s flat ultimatum hung in the stale air of the apex.

Sarakota backed up a step, admitting his sergeant and Trooper Pryce. They carried between them an engineering tool crate that they unceremoniously emptied out on the metal floor beside Diederick’s body. As well as the servitor tool attachments and various blessing oils, Mortensen could make out some flashlamps, a few corroded power packs, a bundle of dirty rebreathers and a plasma welding torch. The major grunted.

‘Do we have a plan?’ he asked Rask finally.

‘You’re going to love it.’

III

‘This has got to be the worst plan I’ve ever heard,’ Wendall Conklin announced to anyone who would listen. ‘And I’ve heard some beauts.’

‘Help me with this, will you?’ Mortensen put to the master sergeant, as much to shut him up as anything.

Vedette was backing up with the plasma torch, after cutting a ragged hatch through the heavy metal decking. Lifting the solid slab of flooring clear with lungfuls of exertion, the two storm-troopers held it for the dangerous moments it took Gorskii and Minghella to get their fingers underneath the dead weight and help toss the improvised hatch aside.

Sass swept in quickly with a sparked flashlamp but was forced back by the liberated stench that rose like a physical force to meet him. It was an almost overpowering concoction of petrochemical smog and stale sewage.

Vedette’s handiwork had also cut free the top section of a rusted deck drain. Covering his nose and mouth with the cuff of his uniform, the major’s adjutant leaned back in with the lamp and flashed it both ways up the dribbling conduit. Satisfied, he pulled himself upright.

‘Good work,’ Mortensen muttered, going in for a closer look himself. Once again Sass’s arithmetical gifts had been a boon. With the most basic of descriptions Captain Rask could offer from the bridge cogitators and runeprints, the storm-trooper had located the pipe running underneath the cabin allocated to Pryce and Sarakota with little more than some grumbling and measured pacing.

‘We’re going to need the masks,’ Vedette ventured, abandoning the plasma torch.

‘I’d say,’ Minghella agreed, covering his mouth with his beret.

‘One of them doesn’t work,’ Conklin informed them.

‘Well, then I guess that’s yours,’ Mortensen returned. He looked up at Sass. ‘Leads to the bilge, you say?’

The adjutant nodded: ‘The bilge compartments run the length of the ship. If the data Captain Rask has given us is even half-accurate we should be able to access large areas of the lower barrack decks from down there.’

‘The plasma?’

‘Spent,’ Vedette confirmed.

‘We’d better hope for some kind of maintenance exit on the other end,’ Mortensen mused miserably.

‘Looks like a squeeze,’ Minghella observed, his brutish features screwed up more hideously than usual.

‘Yes,’ the major agreed, ‘and it ain’t going be pleasant down there, so we’d best make it count on the other side.’ Climbing into the pipe, Mortensen knelt down in the shallow pool of stagnant bilge water.

His crisp blood stripe trousers soon became sodden with muck and oil. His autopistol sat in his belt and holster, which he’d piled on the deck beside the opening. Dumping the leather harness in the stinking slime at his knees, he added a ready sparked flashlamp and a cog-hammer he’d requisitioned from the tool crate. The wicked claw that adorned one end had appealed to the major immediately as a suitable tool for both clearing obstructions in the pipe and skull-hooking potential adversaries.

‘Any last words before we commit ourselves to this?’ Mortensen put to the rest of the gathered Redemption Corps storm-troopers. When no one answered he added grimly: ‘Any better ideas?’

More silence.

Taking this as a signal Mortensen slid the pile forwards through the chemical sludge and slapped on a bulky, rubber rebreather before lying bare chest down in the pipe with his arms forward. Using his elbows and toes he began to squirm bilgeward. He wasn’t ecstatic about sitting his side arm in petrochemical slime but without room to actually draw his weapon he thought it best to have it up forward where it could still give a good account of itself in the confines of the conduit.

Claustrophobic just didn’t seem to do the experience justice. Mortensen braced himself against the cold metal of the piping – flexing his shoulders and back muscles – but the drain was fairly unforgiving and appeared to respond by squeezing back. That wasn’t the worst of it. The rebreathers were largely ancient

and cracked and admitted much of the stomach-churning reek they were meant to circumvent. A few metres into the conduit crawl the pipe filled with the wretched echoes of both Conklin and Pryce throwing up in their masks. After a cacophony of spasms and spitting Mortensen checked with the pair, but the master sergeant simply swore and informed his CO that the smell of vomit was preferable to what they were squirming through.

The agony of an hour's crawl followed – Mortensen's splattered flashlamp revealing metre after endless metre of cramped and corroded horror as he edged it through the detritus of the duct. Acid-soaked muscles blazed along with the ghastly gulps and gasps of lungs desperate for clean air. The crawl gave Mortensen more than enough time to contemplate the job ahead.

Rask's mission was simple. Evade the inevitable obstruction of bulkheads, firefights and a barracks block in lock-down by traversing the transport's keel along one of the many bilge channels that ran the length of the vessel. Conklin had suggested working their way over to and hooking up with some of the isolated groups of loyalists scattered throughout the starboard decks but Rask had advised against it. He had told the sergeant that the pockets of resistance were largely unarmed and those that weren't were certainly low on ammunition. Most were also pinned down by much larger groups of aggressors and were more than likely injured, which would offer more of a handicap than an advantage to the Redemption Corps.

Rask's operation relied much more on mobility and infiltration. Mortensen could hardly disagree. In their current predicament his storm-troopers were hardly outfitted for a spearhead. The captain actually favoured a single, bold, unanticipated strike right at the heart of the insurrection – to 'cut the head from the angry serpent', as he put it. Rask had faith that such an action held the best chance of success – success determined as the retrieval of any remaining hostages and the unconditional surrender or destruction of rebel Shadow Brigade forces. Then, and only then, would Waldemar, *Deliverance's* lord and captain, authorise his naval troops in to secure the barrack decks.

Acquiring the hostage takers would be another thing entirely. Rask didn't even have confirmation on their identity and location. The most likely candidates were a triumvirate of Shadow Brigade officers, two lieutenants and a captain, whose platoons had become the prime focus of Commissar Fosco's wrath.

Company Captain Obadiah Eckhardt, First Lieutenant Diezel Shanks and Lieutenant Nils Isidore had all lost men to Fosco's campaign to purify the men of the 1001st of their hiver ways and customs. Instead of immersing himself in

Shadow Brigade culture and using it to unify the men – as Rask had done in tithing them – Fosco had attempted to eradicate it. He claimed that the strength of the Imperial Guard was based upon uniformity: billions of souls all pulling in the same direction, and had little time to pander to the fighting strengths of individuals, their units or their regiments.

This approach did not sit well with Mortensen – whose own inimitable style of leadership marked him out as a target for such accusations. Without Rask's silver-tongued diplomacy and tact the Redemption Corps would have long become a target for Fosco or some other bloodthirsty puritan. The schola progeniums were brimming with creed-thumping sadists like the commissar and Mortensen refused to have such men in his unit – which unfortunately made the Redemption Corps appear ever more irregular against the backdrop of the uniform billions that men like Fosco were attempting to cultivate.

Regardless of the major's feelings, the predicament demanded a rescue attempt and Eckhardt, Shanks, Isidore and their compatriots had to be neutralised. It was a storm-trooper's lot. To be better. To be above common regimental concerns and do the good work of the Emperor – wherever it took them.

At that moment the Emperor's good work took Mortensen from the crippling confines of the drain and out through a gash in the floor of the pipe, splashing him down head first in a petrochemical sinkhole.

Beneath the oily surface Mortensen heard the *thud-gush* of others, freshly baptised in the bilgewater filth. The major's lamp struggled to penetrate the blackness, blinking a ghostly beam that brushed the thrashing of boots and limbs as his fellow storm-troopers fought to right themselves in their new surroundings. As the soles of his boots touched down on something reassuringly solid the major pushed for the surface and treated himself to a lungful of foetid air. Like everyone else, he retched, bucked and coughed as his throat refused to admit the rancid stench.

Tearing off his mask Mortensen tossed the useless thing away and gradually – back rising and falling like a wounded animal – acclimatised himself. One by one the others followed suit, before hawking and spitting their stomach-churning disgust into the still black waters around them.

Lamplight sheared through the inky darkness: probably the first light down there for hundreds of years. They were right in the bowels of the ship, in one of the foul bilge drains into which every drop of piss, oil, blood, sweat and everything else descended – wrenched keelward by the irresistible force of

Deliverance's artificial gravity. The air – if it warranted such a description – was acrid and stale, hanging as it had in the compartment amongst a forest of quietly corroding pipes and the bubble of fermenting bilge-slime.

Mortensen turned his lamp on his squad. They were a sight: like septuplets yanked from a womb of filth.

‘Sass?’

‘Best probably to avoid the deeps: we don’t really want to be swimming through this muck.’

‘Agreed.’

The corpsman turned his lamp back on the conduit from which they’d fallen and the gaping hole that had admitted them. The conduit was riddled through with rust and decay and the entire bottom section from the point of their exit onwards had been eaten away by the corrosive powers of the toxins they had been crawling through.

‘It’s simple really,’ the adjutant told them, between retching and spitting. ‘We need to follow the path of this conduit until it meets the steam trunk demi-juncture. Then we’ll know for sure that we’re under the barracks deck.’

‘And this steam juncture thing: you’ll know it when you see it?’

Sass nodded.

The bilge was like another world and it was hard for Mortensen to imagine such a place existed hundreds of metres below the soles of his boots as he went about his normal regimental business. Solid blackness reigned here above the equal blackness of the percolating petrochemical slime. The corpsmen’s flashlamps brought light to the denizens of the deep here: probably the first time the bilge space had experienced light since its original dry-dock engineering, when *Deliverance* had been a sprightly young carrier, eager for action and a taste of the void. With millennia to develop and evolve, the bilge sections now boasted their own ecosystems.

Hydrocarbon-hungry bacteria swarmed the oily waters to a primordial sludginess, which in turn was feasted upon by tiny lice and other chitinous micro-arthropods, both flitting above and below the inky surface. Stoolies dribbled from every conceivable solid surface, including the thickets of thin rusty pipes that ran up into the darkness, like slinking flypaper, mopping up the lice and absorbing them through their fecal skin. The descendants of the original rats on board, now all but pinkish, translucent tails with a vice-like pair of jaws on one end, slithered their horrible way through the black waters. Mortensen got to wondering what fed on the highly mobile and muscular rat-tails, hoping that

the disgusting food chain ended firmly there.

They were into their second hour of a jogging trudge along the shallows of the bilge lake when he had his question answered.

A fat, broken pipe ran out of the wall, its smashed end hanging over the still, glassy surface of the oil, seeping rusty effluence into the bilge. As his lamplight glanced off the horrible paleness of a form at the pipe Mortensen froze, bringing his autopistol up to meet the threat. The surprise came mostly from its size: a spindle-limbed crustacean, myriad twitchy legs and slender pincers, reaching, snatching and cutting at something in the pipe. It towered above them, its many limbs terminating in a clear shell that exhibited the ghastly inner workings of its body. The shell was shaped like an obscene flower, fat at the bottom, the underside of which was a mincing mouth, constantly supplied with scraps of flesh from the wicked claws that thrashed back and forth to supply it with food. The top of the shell tapered to a twisted funnel, which widened again like the end of a bugle or blunderbuss.

As the storm-troopers neared, Mortensen held up one arm indicating a full stop. The gargantuan thing seemed very invested in its activity, which upon inspection appeared to be slicing up and devouring a nest of bloody, swarming rat-tails. The major approached slowly, his pace steady and even, clambering over the pipe with deliberate movements. At one point the crustacean experimentally reached out a large pincer and plucked at the storm-trooper's boot, but Mortensen dashed the claw-tip aside with a swipe of his pistol. The creature became a wall of pincers, all retracted and ready to slice, the rest of its body still as the pipe disgorged mauled rat-tails into the shallows about it. Vedette and Gorskii primed their pistols, but Mortensen held up a free hand, before swiftly indicating with his fingers that they should cross the pipe behind him.

Minghella and Sarakota scuttled swiftly over the conduit, followed closely by the others as the creature tiptoed left and right, reacting to the new activity along the shoreline. With the squad across, Mortensen backed down the other side and retreated, boot behind boot. Within moments the hideous thing was back to tearing apart the squirming nest. A few hundred metres further on and Sass mercifully stopped them.

'I think this is it.'

'You think?' Conklin grumbled.

The adjutant was flashing his light into the gloom above; it was joined by the rest of the available beams.

‘The steam trunk demi-juncture,’ Sass announced.

Mortensen nodded: he didn’t know exactly what he was looking at, but mostly it resembled one rusty throng of pipes and conduits running into another throng. Many of the pipes were shattered and broken so only the stubs of channels running vertically up into the ship were visible.

‘Boss,’ Conklin murmured: his was the only flashlamp not on the encrusted ceiling. Mortensen followed the beam and the line of his pistol muzzle until he found the gangly legs of another hulking crustacean. This one was holding still in the shallows, the blunderbuss snout of its shell pointed at the ceiling. Its body chugged horribly until suddenly a bloodied fountain of vomit-splatter spouted skyward from the opening. Most of the regurgitated mess decorated the ceiling, but some of the muck hit its intended target, one of the broken pipe openings. As the shell heaved its last, the spidery thing crawled off into the thick waters, dipping below the surface, the trumpet end of its shell top now serving as a snorkel.

‘Major,’ Sass called. He’d been prancing around in the shadows, his own lamp exploring the insides of similar conduit openings above. The storm-troopers took several exhausted steps towards him and stared ceilingward. ‘Unspark your lamps for a moment,’ the adjutant advised.

‘Is he friggin’ crazy?’ Conklin growled.

‘Do it,’ the major ordered, snapping off his own in good example.

The bilge compartment returned to its vast darkness and although there was black, open space all around him, Mortensen couldn’t help but feel the claustrophobia of the creepy sensation that there were things all about him in the void. Then he saw it: the reason Sass had asked for the lamps to be shut off, the reason for their neck craning and idiot stares.

Light. Tiny pinpricks of dim light, filtering in from the vertical termination of a pipe opening above their faces. The opening was just wide enough to admit a corpsman. Gorskii uttered something in her thick Valhallan dialect, which could have been anything, but sounded like a thanks or blessing. As always Conklin was the first to rain on their parade.

‘Is that something moving?’ he put to the group. He wasn’t wrong – occasionally individual dots of light were momentarily eclipsed, giving the impression that something had already made its home in the pipe. The sergeant grunted and cocked his pistol. ‘We’ll soon sort that out.’

‘Sarge, can we really risk gunfire this close to the insertion?’ Vedette put evenly into the darkness. As a Mordian she’d lived on a nightworld and so the

lightless environs of the bilge had been less of an ordeal for her. Of all the storm-troopers she'd slipped and stumbled the least through the hellish murk. She displayed no less deftness and precision in the correction of her superior, 'I mean – we could be right under them. Yes?'

Conklin's disappointment was obvious, even in the dark and without visual confirmation from his face: 'Probably.'

With the lamps snapped back on the storm-troopers set about making their ascent. Without the kinds of specialist equipment they habitually relied upon for the wide range of infiltration scenarios in which they were usually involved, the corpsmen had to go back to basics. Mortensen unclipped his belt and wrapped it tautly around two emaciated pipes running parallel and ceilingward. Stuffing his pistol and cog-hammer into his blood stripes he pulled hard on the belt and settled his boot, one on each rusty pipe, crushing and squelching stoolies underfoot. Sliding the belt up through the stoolie slime he clambered up the pipes, the inside edge of each boot fighting to find purchase on the corroded metal surface. Each of the Redemption Corpsmen followed suit, struggling up behind their major, up into the gloom.

Apart from Pryce slipping and giving Conklin a faceful of stool-caked boot, the ascent went without hitch. Mortensen then used the wicked claw of his cog-hammer to smash back and forth inside the confines of the pipe, the fragile metal caving and providing the major and successive climbers with ready-made hand and foot holds. Reclaiming his belt, he climbed into the opening, up towards the beckoning barracks above.

Twenty minutes into the pipe climb Mortensen came face to face with the obstruction his sergeant had identified earlier. Requiring both hands for the climb Mortensen had ordered his men to abandon their lamps and simply scramble for the light. He could barely make out their forms with his eyes and their ghastly movements were lost on his nerve-insensitive skin, but as the illumination increased, so did his disgust. With every heave upwards more of the wretched things moved from their home, clinging to the pipe walls, and scuttled up his arm, nipping at his neck and cheeks with under-developed claws.

Their shells were soft and their pincers stubby, but they could still draw blood or take out an eyeball. His rising revulsion made him angry and Mortensen slammed his muscular back into the pipe wall, splitting open several larger specimens. This tactic proved ultimately fruitless, however as the swarm built around him and only dropped the thrashing bodies of half-crushed beasts down on his compatriots.

The strange behaviour of the spindly crustacean below, mulching up its prey and fountaining the regurgitated blood and guts up into the pipes, made more sense now that they had discovered the monster's spawnlings up there. Food for the masses. Now the little bastards had thought that Mortensen and his storm-troopers were their next serving.

Thirty metres of sickening trauma later, the major cleared the swarm, which was good for all concerned. The downside was that he'd hit fresh piping, clean and rust-free, that resisted the persuasions of his cog-hammer. Using the filth that soaked his clothing and smeared his body, he spread himself agonisingly across the diameter of the pipe, knees pushing against one side of the smooth conduit, shoulder blades against the other – his body writhing and shimmying up in between. It was the final, punishing ordeal of their nightmare negotiation of the carrier's bilge. With limbs aflame with exertion and only twelve dots of light for a target, the Redemption Corps pushed relentlessly up the pipe and back to the sanity of deck-level.

IV

As his filthy forehead touched the clean metal of what turned out to be a drain grating, Mortensen allowed himself a moment of silent relief. Looking up through the holes that had offered him those hopeful pinpricks of light, he could make out a barracks shower room. He smiled. Rask and Sass had been dead on target. His limited field of vision revealed no occupants and this was supported by the fact that the drain, which usually collected the overflow, wasn't raining water down on them.

Bracing the cog-hammer's claw against the grate it took little force to pluck off. Sliding it to one side, Mortensen clambered out of the drain, slipping and sliding momentarily on the clean shower-room floor. Taking a couple of low steps forward he scanned the length of the communal wash-room while the remainder of his team extricated themselves and drank deep the fresh air of the barracks.

Mortensen took them in, catching a glimpse of himself in a battered mirror. They all looked like hell. Their blood stripes and jackets were black and sodden and their flesh was painted with filth, unintentionally camouflaged, with only the whites of their eyes peering out from their soiled skin. Most of them, including Mortensen, still retained their berets, which seemed quaintly ridiculous bearing in mind what they had just been through. Vedette even fell to straightening hers

as soon as she was out of the conduit and cleaning down the soles of her boots. Mortensen did likewise: they didn't want to betray their presence with filthy footprints.

Extracting the length of a fat silencer from his holster pouch Mortensen screwed the barrel into the muzzle of his grubby autopistol. The storm-troopers followed suit with a sense of purpose at odds with their fatigue and taking a few more lungfuls of sweet air, the squad stalked their way through the showers and out through the locker room.

Holding the autopistols in both hands for greater control and accuracy the troopers padded through between lockers and benches, scanning the walkways for Guardsmen at rest or lying in ambush. In fact, Rask couldn't have picked a better entry point: what kind of Guardsman would be pre-occupying himself with personal hygiene during a full-scale military revolt?

Out on the main corridor, the column of storm-troopers hugged the walls, making swift but deliberate progress into the starboard barracks. The ghostly echoes of distant firefights haunted the passageways and several times the soldiers had to throw themselves to the walls as Sarakota, on point, gave the signal. The sniper had exceptional hearing, giving the squad ample time to conceal themselves as ragged groups of Volscians ran across junctions, whooping like madmen and firing celebratory las-bolts off around them.

Mortensen had no intention of engaging such groups: he was not here for a messy firefight. That meant wasting rounds and killing fellow Guardsmen – an eventuality he would rather avoid until it became unavoidable. Right now he needed information more than bodies and the officers' mess afforded him opportunity to gather just that.

The bulkhead was open and he could hear voices inside. The wall-hailer was a discordant play of insanity, Guardsmen yelling and shooting their elation back and forth across the unlocked deck-channel, with little in the way of tactical information available. The actual voices inside were harsh, yet quieter, and punctuated with occasional bouts of lazy laughter.

Mortensen shot Sarakota a look; the sniper shot him back five fingers, then eight. He could count no more than five individual speakers, but it was hard to tell how many more might be present but silent. Holding his hand above one shoulder, Mortensen began to count his storm-troopers down.

There were in fact eight, but as the troopers rushed the door, Mortensen found three of them splayed out across several mess tables, blind drunk. The silencers gaped their way in through the door, the troopers entering with smooth

determination: Sarakota peeling left and Vedette right.

A master sergeant – from his stripes and the staples across one mangled eye – was sitting amongst the officers' benches, legs splayed, recounting some past heroism to a gathered audience of hivers, several of whom were clutching Volscian-pattern lasrifles.

The soldiers were typical Shadow Brigade, with sloppy dress and scuffed boots, their arms and faces decorated with tattoos and studs denoting gang membership and House allegiance. They were born for urban warfare and had a natural affinity for merciless killing, but their mindset was all messed up with the complexities of hive loyalty and this didn't sit well with the Imperial Guard's mandate of a singular devotion to the God-Emperor and his representatives. Mortensen knew the patterns and the problems, hailing from a hive-world himself. It was exactly this, particularly the Volscian wearing of blood honour sashes, ornamentals and bandanas that Commissar Fosco had unwisely got into the minute he'd arrived on board *Deliverance*.

The grizzled sergeant wore such drapery over his flak jacket and had his weapon stretched across the back of his shoulders, with his arms hung over the extended stock and barrel, as the Guardsmen passed several liberated decanters of amasec around.

As Conklin held the door, the rest of the storm-troopers swept in, gabbling orders and savage warnings to the group. None of the inebriated Volscians actually got the stocks of their rifles off the deck floor and it was only the Shadow Brigade sergeant – his crooked face melting from mirth to fury – who actually made any attempt to bring his weapon to bear.

The room slowed to a stand-off: Vedette, Pryce and Gorskii thrusting their barrels into the faces of the armed Guardsmen and Sass and Minghella securing the seemingly unconscious men on the tables. Sarakota had the master sergeant in his sights with Mortensen standing defiantly at the centre of the intrusion, his autopistol now lowered.

As the barking subsided and the sergeant glared, Mortensen gave him the grim ultimatum of an uncompromising stare returned and deathly words.

'I have no quarrel with you, brother,' he addressed the hiver sergeant, 'but if you do not immediately surrender your weapon, this next breath will be your last. Think about it.'

The sergeant's chest, the focus of Sarakota's closing muzzle, momentarily froze. A ripple of defiance crossed the Volscian's repulsive features, before softening, followed by the casual tossing of his lasgun onto the table. With a

slovenly grin he leaned back, placing his hands behind his head. The remaining weapons clattered to the deck as the Guardsmen replicated the surrender.

Mortensen nodded at Conklin who buried the grip of his weapon in the wall-hailer, smashing the vox to uselessness. In turn the corpsmen swept forward, scooping up the lasrifles, as Mortensen advanced, placing his own weapon on a nearby mess table.

‘Who’s in charge here?’ he asked the rebel Guardsmen.

‘I am,’ the sergeant leered.

Mortensen spun, cog-hammer suddenly in his hand, and swinging for the sergeant’s face, tearing the smirk from it with the tool’s cruel claw. Blood sprayed the wall behind as the sergeant was torn from his chair and vaulted a nearby mess table, his jaw hanging off.

The sergeant had been reaching for the hilt of a hive dirk, slipped into the leg of his boot. It seemed that the sergeant had no intention of being taken: seeing the Redemption Corps as the enforcers of Commissar Fosco’s justice. That alone made Mortensen uncomfortable – but he had a job to do. Grabbing the hive dirk Mortensen skipped up a bench and onto the table. Leaping down with purpose he landed amongst the rapidly sobering Guardsmen, snatching the nearest up by his short hair and wrestling him to the wall. Mortensen tossed Minghella his hammer before restraining the young Volscian’s forehead with one grimy hand. Mortensen slipped the narrow blade of the sergeant’s knife into the Guardsman’s mouth which was already open and full of panicked conciliations. Holding the knife in one white-knuckled fist Mortensen stretched the corner of the Volscian’s mouth as far as it would go without splitting.

‘Who’s in charge?’ Mortensen put to him dangerously.

The Guardsman’s answer was immediate, if hampered by the presence of a blade in his mouth: ‘You are!’ This was echoed by others in the gathering. Pulling the blade from his mouth Mortensen positioned its tip carefully under the Guardsman’s chin, pinning his head to the wall. With his free hand he began the disconcerting process of unbuckling the belt holding up the Volscian’s fatigues. The wide-eyed Guardsman choked back a protestation as Mortensen’s own eyes flared.

‘I have questions. You have answers. If you don’t give me the exact answers I need, like your sergeant, you will not leave this room in one piece. Do we understand each other, Guardsman?’

The Shadow Brigade soldier nodded. Mortensen mirrored the gesture.

‘Where are they holding Commissar Fosco?’

The truth just fell out of him like vomit, sudden and involuntary.

It seemed that the insurgent Volscians had set up their base of mutinous operations around the Regimental Armoury, the Shooting Range and Tactical Starboard.

Mortensen wasn't finished. With one hand he unthreaded the Guardsman's belt and slapped it across one shoulder: 'And who are "they"?'

The hiver looked slightly surprised that the major didn't already know but with a little knifepoint insistence he gushed forth as he did before, memory kicking in.

'Guardsman Quoit, Guardsman Remerez, Guardsman First Class Hecklenbrock...'

Mortensen gave a nasty chuckle and tapped the tip of his blade on the Guardsman's lips to shut him up.

'No, no, no. Guardsman: who do I have to kill to get some peace and quiet around here?'

The Guardsman stammered: 'You mean, who's in charge?'

Mortensen gave a slow nod.

The Volscian caught himself: 'You are, sir!'

Several of the storm-troopers couldn't resist a smile. Mortensen took in the room.

'New entry technique,' the major jested. 'Kick in the door and ask the Volscians a couple of difficult questions.'

'Or not so difficult,' Sass added.

'Targets!' Conklin hissed.

The storm-troopers fell into a coordinated two-step sequence of securing their prisoners and covering the door. Sass and Minghella went down behind the mess tables, whilst Gorskii and Pryce put their detainees' heads on the deck. Sarakota and Vedette swept forward, criss-crossing the mess doorway with their newly claimed lasrifles: all out of sight.

Conklin opened the door wider – not wanting the squad to be trapped inside – and lay in wait behind, crouched with autopistol ready to kneecap the first unfortunate to enter the room.

Mortensen moved his knife deftly under the Guardsman's throat and sidled the prisoner along the wall – the fatigues falling down around the Volscian's ankles – and aimed his own pistol parallel along the wall.

Heavy bootfalls filled the corridor, with some gasps and calls. A small crowd of Guardsmen thundered up the passage, met by several others coming the other

way. It was hard to make out amongst the running and yelling, but someone definitely shouted 'Found 'em!'

The storm-troopers tensed, leaning into the doorway, fingers settled firmly over triggers.

'In the galley and deep storage – got some of 'em trapped...'

The throng hammered off down the corridor, mindlessly drawn to the site of the new information like a pack of dogs on a scent trail. Mortensen centred back in on his prisoner.

'Okay, we are running out of time here, so I'm going to make it easy for you. I'm going to give you names, you nod. Captain Eckhardt?'

A hesitant nod; like a considered betrayal.

'Lieutenant Shanks?'

A definite nod: nobody liked Shanks.

'Isidore?'

'Lieutenant Isidore is dead,' the Guardsman informed them.

Mortensen raised an eyebrow: dissension in the ranks, that was good.

'Who else?' he insisted. Eckhardt and Shanks couldn't possibly have mobilised this number of men alone.

'Sergeant Mako.'

Mortensen pursed his lips. He'd heard of Mako: a real bruiser and lower decks troublemaker, with plenty of pull through his gang affiliations to bring Isidore's men over to Eckhardt. He'd probably killed Isidore himself.

Mortensen threw a glance at Conklin, who checked the corridor. The major rotated one finger and the storm-troopers began their retreat, slipping one by one, weapon last, out of the officers' mess the way they had entered. Mortensen backed away from the Guardsman, allowing the Volscian a moment to collect himself. His hands moved up to his face, to check it was still there, but all he found were a few nicks where the major's blade had caught him. Then he turned his eyes down on his fallen fatigues and his regimental-issue underwear. No sashes or adornments there.

As Mortensen's filth-encrusted face left the room he gave a grin, the whites of his teeth bright against the background of his grimy features.

'See you at the court martial.'

The major grunted. A court martial if they were lucky: most would be executed for their insubordination. As the bulkhead closed Mortensen found himself back out on the main corridor. He spun the bulkhead pressure wheel and handed the unfortunate Guardsman's belt to Conklin: 'Tie it off.' The sergeant

managed a wicked grin of his own before going to work on the wheel.

To Sass the major ordered, 'Get us to the Armoury.' He doubted the corpsman had ever been down there but he knew he could rely on the adjutant's almost photographic memory for such seemingly useless information as the deckplans for their own vessel.

'The most direct route, or the long way round?'

'And the long way entails?'

'Maintenance ducts and vents.'

Mortensen shook his head. The long way would undoubtedly be the stealthiest, but time was lives and if the men holding the galley were anything to go by, there was little time left. Besides, Mortensen had had enough of crawlspaces for today and he told Sass as much.

The corpsman moved several places up the silently advancing column of storm-troopers and tapped Vedette – their current pointman – on the right shoulder, prompting her to peel off right at the next junction.

As it turned out, Mortensen's decision had been a mistake and the storm-troopers' progress was slow regardless, running into group after group of gathered Shadow Brigade Guardsmen, forcing them to divert or hold fast in empty companionways and bunk-ups. The situation was rapidly tearing itself apart, with rebel soldiers now at each others' throats as well as those of the loyalists. Beatings were rife and some sections of the barracks were shot up and in a state of ruin. Dormitory Section 6 was actually aflame, with someone still having the presence of mind to have sealed it off. Either way, Mortensen and his men were forced to go around, moving like soundless chess pieces, from strategic formation to formation, corner to corner, corridor to corridor.

Vedette found a bruised and beaten Guardsman, sitting on his backside in the middle of the passage, cradling a laspistol. He looked up but barely knew where he was and the Mordian gave him a taste of her boot to seal the deal.

Rounding a hazy apex, the corporal caught a bolt in the thigh, prompting the squad to drop and assume fire positions. Mortensen hauled her back, handing her over to Minghella and allowing Sarakota to push forward. The sniper turned his head, tuning into the shots and footfalls. Satisfied he reported that the pattern of fire was random and not actually aimed at them: Vedette had just got unlucky. The medic hastily patched up the leg, field-style, with the Mordian gnashing her teeth through his inspection and rapid dressing of the wound – angry at herself more than at Minghella's attentions.

In order to avoid the savage slaughter party taking place down the shot- and

smoke-choked passageway Mortensen ordered a brief diversion through the ventilation floorspace. Sass assured them that the Armoury was a few minutes scramble from their present position, which was small enough to justify one more claustrophobic experience, and the major went to work tearing up a nearby floor panel with his all-purpose cog-hammer.

While this was happening a Shadow Brigade officer ran up out of the murk at them from a different corridor. He was as surprised to see Pryce, as the storm-trooper was to see him: he'd been covering the angle and the Volscian was barefoot, unarmed and had made little in the way of sound. He skidded to a stop on the grille floor, allowing the reality of the moment to sink in before about-facing and sprinting back up the corridor. The devout Pryce brought up his lasrifle to down the officer but Mortensen shouldered the lasgun aside, intent on conserving their ammunition. Finding one further use for the hammer he tossed it handle over head at the fleeing uniform. The heavy cog struck the Volscian down as it thumped into the back of his neck with sickening impact. The officer lurched, bouncing off the wall before tripping, rolling and coming to a full stop in an untidy heap by the other wall.

Pushing Gorskii into the hole to rotate point, Mortensen shoved Pryce to the rear.

'Assist Vedette,' he barked at the trooper: the crawl wasn't going to be kind to the Mordian's bound leg, 'and watch our backs.'

Dropping in one at a time and disappearing into the floor, Pryce pulled the panel back over behind them. It wasn't the rear they had to worry about, however. A few corners' shuffle later, Sass directing the Valhallan through the maze of ducts, Gorskii had her own heart-pounder to contend with. Still, silent and lying in wait down one of the twilight sub-ducts, the glint of a galley knife came at her. Cutting her to the bone, the blade slid across one cheek, adding yet another horrific scar to her collection, before she got to grips with the wild arm that had thrashed at her in the confined space of the duct. With her rifle slung and little use in the confines of the vent she had been leading with her autopistol. Desperate eyes came at her from the dark and before she knew it she was in a full-scale murderous tangle with a Volscian, who had one hand around the handle of the knife and the other tightly wrapped around the silencer of her side arm.

The scuffle continued with Sass abandoning his own weapon and trying to wrestle the knife out of the soldier's spasming grip. Conklin jammed the barrel of his lasgun forward over the adjutant's shoulder in an attempt to get a point-

blank shot off, but Sass grunted something and pushed himself up on his knees, forcing the rifle up into the vent metal.

Another hot slice across the forearm had done it for Gorskii, however, who brutally butted the soldier full in the face, painting his cheeks with her own blood. The pistol went awry and the soft thud of a silenced round plucked at the soldier's forehead. He went suddenly limp, resting against the duct wall before sliding backwards to reveal a bullet hole and a gore-smear that followed his descent.

Sass pushed past the gushing Valhallan, who was now attempting to stifle the blood flow from her razored cheek. The adjutant checked the Guardsman for a pulse, but there was little hope: the auto round had blown the back of his head out.

'Friendly down,' Sass reported dourly, prompting Gorskii to peek from behind her bloodstained palms.

'What?' Conklin rumbled, already riled about his diverted shot.

Sass jerked a thumb down the sub-duct from which the Guardsman had attacked them.

'Galley. He's a loyalist. Why would a rebel be hiding down here with a kitchen knife?'

Sure enough the distant sound of sporadic las-fire and furious threats bounced up the sub-duct at them.

After a moment to allow the realisation to sink in Mortensen simply ordered: 'Push on.'

'Boss, don't you think we could—'

'Take point, sergeant.'

It would be easy to allow themselves to get pulled into the galley firefight, rushing to the aid of the pinned-down loyalists. Conklin clearly wanted to take it to them. Mortensen would give him his chance: where it mattered, however, down in the Tactical Bay.

With the master sergeant's boots behind it the screen at the end of the vent flew off and clattered to the Armoury floor. The insurrectionists were long gone – the sergeant had already checked – and so, as the Redemption Corps came to realise as they piled out of the duct, had the weaponry. Mortensen had hoped to bolster their own pitiful armoury, which as it stood amounted to little more than a few spent rifles and pistols packing a single clip of uniform requirement ammunition. The 1001st's stocks had been completely ransacked, by rebels or loyalists or in all likelihood, both. Captain Eckhardt had not left sentries because

there was nothing left to guard.

With a little more space and room to breathe Minghella went to work on fixing Gorskii's apparently vampiric face and checking the dressing on Vedette's leg. Once again Conklin was on the door, closing it to a crack. He didn't want to draw attention but also wanted enough of a gap to spot someone approach.

'Well?' the major asked gruffly.

'Shooting Range; just out front here. Can't see anyone – but I can hear a bunch of shots, so someone's getting some practice in.'

'Bottom or top?'

'We're at the bottom of the range.'

'Sass?'

'The Armoury and the Range are part of the 1001st's Tactical Bay. If it's anything like ours, it'll be set up part gym, part CQ Tactical Training.'

Mortensen spat.

'I'll give you one guess where they'll be holed up.'

The storm-troopers didn't need guesses.

Eckhardt was no fool. He'd dragged his hostages to the one place on the ship that was designed to be difficult to breach. The Close Quarters Combat Tactical Training repro or CQ as the sergeants called it: essentially armaplas walls (to enable use of live ammunition without the danger of accidental injuries and fatalities), mocked up as a labyrinth of rooms and gauntlets for the training of close quarters combat and urban pacification techniques. The Volscian 1001st were essentially a hive-world garrison regiment and excelled at this kind of carnage. The Redemption Corps were not exactly amateurs either, but as every good Guardsman knew, it was easier to hold a strongpoint than to breach it: which was exactly the kind of logic Eckhardt was counting on.

Mortensen hovered by the door: 'Okay – this is it. I'm not going to dip it in honey for you. Sarakota, Conklin and I will take care of the sentries on the Shooting Range...'

Minghella piped up. He usually did get extra crabby just before the real butchery began and the bodies started piling up – something to do with his Departmento Medicae pledge, Mortensen supposed.

'How?'

'I have no idea,' the major told him honestly. 'But when we do, you are going to rush the CQ and start taking it room by room, section by section until we find and plug the bastards. Now is that a great plan, or what?'

'Well apart from being suicidal,' Sass mused.

‘Suicidal is what we do, people. Perhaps we could concentrate on the positives.’

‘They won’t be expecting it,’ Vedette offered, getting to her feet and hobbling for the door.

Mortensen nodded his agreement, the tone sinking back to the dour realisation that the bolts were about to start flying. ‘Corporal Vedette, Sergeant Minghella: if Sergeant Conklin and I should fall, your orders are to complete the mission with whatever resources you have left at your disposal.’

Minghella glowered, an evil temper descending.

‘Is that clear?’ Mortensen turned and put to the Mordian.

‘Crystal, sir.’

V

The shooting range was a small nexus of activity.

Eckhardt had clearly left a group to hold the entrance to CQ, but inevitably the hours had dragged, the elation of their initial capture of Regimental Commissar Fosco had faded and the boredom had set in. At that point, the Shooting Range had beckoned.

The company captain’s own aide, Lieutenant Phant, was currently in a contest with a silver-haired Volscian, the two of them packing lasrifles; dared and cajoled by eight other Guardsman, who were splitting their attentions between demonstrations of marksmanship, injecting combat stimms and cross-talk from the portable vox-hailer they were struggling to keep on frequency.

Two of the target clamps hanging in the arc-lanes were no longer holding plas-lite silhouettes of generic enemy forms. Instead the targets had been decorated with the burned and blasted bodies of Piggot and Nordhoff, two of Commissar Fosco’s regimental aides.

The Volscians had been taking turns shooting at the bodies. The contest had been running for hours and in order to keep the bodies in one piece the hivers had been forced to strap them into extra flak jackets and reduce the power setting on their rifles.

As the seething bolts riddled the pair of corpses, Phant screamed his victory, generating a whooping response of mixed celebration and derision from his crowd of spectators. The end of the firing range was dark and unclear – hazy with smoke from the smouldering bodies. Only a fresh inspection of the mauled targets would settle it and the old-timer depressed the stud that operated the

pulley system, dragging the dead weight of the bodies with some strain, up to the waiting contestants.

As the cadavers rocked to a halt, Phant once again screeched his callous merriment. Several witnesses closed in to examine the hammered flak, scorched flesh and ruptured organs, pointing at patterns in the marksmanship and arguing amongst themselves.

At that point Mortensen gave them a demonstration of his own.

The major and Sergeant Conklin had made further use of the vents to move between the Armoury and the Gallery: going up through the roof section of one and climbing down through the ceiling of another. During the Volscian reload, as Phant and his competitor exchanged taunts and mock aggression for the amusement of their gathered appreciators, the storm-troopers had climbed down onto the back of the target corpses at the far end of the shooting gallery. Concealed during the resumed contest, the corpsmen held on tight to the smouldering bodies as they had been winched back down for inspection. Pulling themselves up on the clamps, the two storm-troopers aimed their silenced autopistols over the shoulders of the shattered aides and blasted the marksmen off their feet.

As the shock wore off, the other sentries began to scramble for their own weapons. Conklin shot a third through the heart and a fourth in the throat, but Mortensen had to retreat behind Nordhoff's body once again as the Guardsman hauling the portable vox produced a laspistol quicker than he'd anticipated and began simultaneously blasting and stumbling away. His attentions were soon split between the two bodies, causing Conklin to duck also, giving his rebel compatriots time to regroup and join in, slamming the bodies with bolt after bolt.

A fresh pattern of fire suddenly lanced between the two targets, originating from the darkened end of the arc-lane. Sarakota had dropped down from a separate ceiling vent further down the range and had been waiting in the shadows, moving slowly and close to the floor; head down, listening intently to the clicks, clunks and blasts of weapon use at the Volscian's end of the shooting gallery. There he had waited for the major to spring the trap.

Now that the real shooting had begun, the Redemption Corps' sniper was in his element. Of course, Sarakota was much more used to the bipod bulk of his anti-materiel Hellshot, but a Volscian lasrifle felt better in his hands than a snub-nosed pistol.

The first two were clean headshots in close succession: at that moment the hivers could barely comprehend that they were under attack from a third shooter.

Snapping to automatic, the sniper drummed a generous blast into the vox-operator, who was trying to juggle the demands of firing and tuning at the same time: the first blast into his equipment, the second into him.

Swinging around on the target clamp and with the weight of Nordhoff's body to counter-balance him, Mortensen's toecap found the face of a Guardsman who, under fire from Sarakota, had unwisely moved forward to take advantage of the cover. The force of the kick flung the Volscian to the floor and his weapon across the deck. Mortensen let go of the target clamp and landed amongst his enemies on the range. Using the silencer of his auto-pistol he scooped an advancing bayonet aside as a Guardsman ran at him with his lasrifle. Producing the Volscian's dirk from his belt he slashed him across the chest before dropping to the deck and slicing deep into the flesh behind his right knee. The Guardsman went down and Mortensen snatched up his bladed rifle.

A second burly Guardsman tried to rush him from behind but was plucked from his feet by Sarakota's unswerving aim. A third ran past, the piling bodies spooking his resolve, and was narrowly missed by a swipe from Mortensen's bayonet. Stepping out from behind Piggot, Conklin finished him with a fully automatic burst of silenced fire from his side arm.

The only moving Volscian left was the soldier Mortensen had floored and disarmed. The Guardsman got shakily to his feet, running this way and that, his eyes fleeing from Mortensen blocking his way to Conklin looming over him, pistol drawn. His death came from Sarakota, however, courtesy of three las-bolts that pinned him to the range wall, two in the chest and one between the eyes.

It had begun.

Storm-troopers streamed from the Armoury, tearing up towards the entrance of the CQ, Vedette hobbling close behind and barking orders. Sarakota sprinted up behind her, the pair meeting Mortensen and the master sergeant by the improvised doorway. As ordered by the Mordian, the first group had already filed in.

Closer to the CQ it became apparent to Mortensen that something was burning: the coarse stench of promethium hung in the air and a thin column of smoke was drifting out from somewhere near the centre of the armaplas maze, reaching for the bay ceiling.

'That doesn't look good,' Mortensen muttered, as much to himself, as he inserted a fresh power pack into his lasrifle. There was time for little more, however: his men had already encountered resistance.

The CQ was pure hell. From the sound of the gunfire the rebels numbered at

least a platoon but it could easily be two.

Eckhardt held all the cards. He knew all the gauntlets and bolt-holes, all the dead-ends and bottlenecks, and although he couldn't have anticipated the Redemption Corps' attack – their stealth and sacrifices making for an assault that had more punch and initial momentum than it deserved – he soon bogged them down in the deadlock of room clearance, giving the captain's gathered Guardsmen time to explore their advantages.

Mortensen didn't have time for such luxuries as a stalemate. Without doubt Eckhardt would already have vox-recalled reinforcements from other areas of the Barracks to cut off the rear. The only way to end this was indeed as Rask had said, 'to cut the head from the angry serpent'. And that meant pushing the boundaries and forcing the deadlock.

Room after room fell to the storm-troopers as the combination of guts, skill and drillwork conquered weak hearts holding strongpoints. Volscians died in their scores as doorways and thoroughfares became channels of light, energy beams thrashing at each other across the closed confines of mock streets and buildings: real blood spilt on a make-believe battleground.

As the Redemption Corps stepped through the carnage they scooped up Shadow Brigade helmets and flak vests from the dead and dying; weapons too were hoarded as power packs ran dry, so that soon each trooper was carrying two other rifles slung as well as the lasgun held in their cramped hands.

The injuries started to mount up also, impairing mobility less than might be imagined, since progress was already unbearably slow; but Minghella couldn't get to anyone because without his additional firepower the gauntlets wouldn't have been broken at all.

Conklin lost a couple of fingers to a gas-mask wearing, chainsword-wielding maniac who two seconds later was sitting in a mound of his own entrails: only then, after he tore off his mask did the storm-troopers realise that Sergeant Mako was dying among them. Moments later, Vedette took another bolt, in exactly the same thigh as the first, putting her arc of fire parallel to the floor for the following agonising minutes.

Pryce, miraculously, only lost an ear to a heavy bolter that the rebels had wheeled in to bolster a failing hold-point, when he should have lost his head. While the corpsman gave thanks to the Emperor, Sarakota took a stray round from the very same piece of equipment, as the thing minced up an armaplas wall he was using for cover. Gorskii and Mortensen both took shrapnel through their back armour, just to take the bolter, as the rebel Guardsmen tried to immobilise

their lost field piece with grenades.

After turning the heavy weapon on the fleeing Volscians, allowing his messed-up squad time to establish a presence in the room, the major actually turned the remainder of the explosive ammunition on the adjoining wall. The ragged hole admitted his stumbling squad, with Minghella dragging both Vedette and Sarakota through. Luckily the heavy bolter round had passed clear through the sniper, but he was bleeding like a sack of wine and without kit or a spare pair of hands, the medic could do little to stop it. As a parting gift, fresh Guardsmen from the CQ hub, who were trying to push past their blasted, exiting colleagues, sent a volley of las-fire after the Redemption Corps, burying several bolts in Pryce's side and shoulder.

Even with his mathematical abilities, Sass could little know the layout of the 1001st's CQ. There were no schematics and even if there were, the Shadow Brigade sergeants probably changed it regularly. What there was, however, was a pattern. The Redemption Corps were so used to following the young Necromundan that they didn't question his instruction to follow. Even Mortensen, in the searing heat of the battle, fell into line. With the flak in his back beginning to make itself known to nerve-sensitive flesh underneath, the officer probed the wound with blunt digits, finding a glowing shard of metal and plucking it from his flesh. With a grimace he tossed it aside.

Heaving Sarakota to his feet, the major dragged him through a series of ungarrisoned doorways and corridors. Across a mock street the squad came to rest in a long, oblong room where they unburdened their wounded and checked their weapons. Sass disappeared briefly into an adjacent room before bolting back in.

'I think that the hub lies somewhere beyond that wall,' he put to the shot-up squad. Humour was in short supply. Somehow they managed it.

'You think?' Conklin challenged, spitting blood.

Mortensen checked out the wall at the end of the street, the one his adjutant was alluding to. His mind whirled. He had seconds to make a decision or he and his men were dead. Rebel Guardsmen were already working their way through Sass's evasion route.

He took in his corporals. If they had been an ordinary regimental squad they would have been declared combat ineffective rooms ago. Besides himself, only Minghella and Sass could walk unaided. He could only walk because he felt the white hot shards of shrapnel buried in his back – chewing up flesh and muscle with every movement – less so than Gorskii, who'd been hit in the same blast.

The wall was made up of several stories of armaplas, replete with sham windows. Windows had not been the Redemption Corps' friend up until this point. An ambush had nearly cut them in half through a streetside corridor close to the CQ entrance and a shot from an itchy-fingered sniper at a small opening three rooms in had smacked Sass's precious head into a wall. It would have taken it clean off if it hadn't have been for the face guard on the Volscian Interceptor helmet he'd donned from a fallen hiver.

Suddenly Gorskii let out a rasping gasp, before toppling forward from her position on the floor. Minghella rushed over from where he had been tending Pryce's wounds and rolled her over. She was sitting in a growing pool of blood, although it had been hard to tell with the amount of gore now splattered across the room. He rolled her back and put his ear to her mouth and chest.

'Rhen?' Vedette asked, gritting through the pain of her own injury.

'Shrapnel must have pierced the heart; perhaps a lung also,' he murmured and straddling her began to administer emergency measures.

Mortensen looked from the grim fury of Minghella to Conklin, burying his mangled fist under one arm, to Vedette, whose bright urgency cut through him. Looking back across the street he began to fancy that the shadows of renegade Volscians were gathering in the rooms they had passed through opposite.

Moments later Mortensen's fears were confirmed.

'They're coming, major,' Sarakota coughed, spitting bloody phlegm. Away from the overpowering sizzle of weaponry and screams he could hear the tap of tentative boots, as the rebels picked their way cautiously through the passages.

'Sergeant,' Mortensen announced, 'Vedette. I need every available Volscian in that street section: they're already assuming attack positions.'

Conklin clumsily grasped his bloodied weapon. 'Let them come and get it.'

'I want you to wait.'

'You want us to what?' Vedette hissed through clenched teeth.

'Let them pool; let them gather,' he told them.

'In numbers, they'll overrun us,' Conklin protested. 'Bottlenecking them is the only hope we've got: you know that.'

'No,' Sass reasoned. 'The only hope we've got is to get to Eckhardt.'

Mortensen threw his rifle to the adjutant and then, producing his autopistol, handed it to Conklin who stuffed it in his blood stripes bleakly: Mortensen was going to need both hands.

'Bring 'em down on you. It'll give me a chance. Then hold this room, as long as you can.'

Mortensen went to the doorway. It was the signal. The order had been given and the Redemption Corps began squirming through their own blood, setting up the angles and closing down the room with deadly, overlapping arcs of fire that covered all the doors and exits.

As for the major, he had his own fire arcs to contend with. Accelerating from the door in an explosive burst of speed he tried his best to offer the Guardsmen opposite little in the way of a target. They could little expect him to take such a bizarre action and were predictably slow to open fire, single shots sizzling the armaplas of the walls and floor about him.

He hit a top sprint just metres from the end of the street section, aiming for a corner where his speed would offer the best advantage. Leaping, he hit the opposite wall with the sole of one boot, bounding across the corner to the adjoining wall, where the toe of his other boot carried him a further few metres back across. Throwing up outstretched palms like grapnels, his fingertips found the fake, glassless windowsill.

Bolder Guardsmen, urged on by the lack of resistance being offered by the storm-troopers, were now heading out onto the open street section and cracking off shots at the fast-moving Mortensen. Heaving himself up to the opening, the major crawled through. Getting down the relatively serene far side of the wall was much simpler and just required letting go.

The fall was untidy and involved bouncing off the wall halfway down and striking out his left leg for a landing. Although he couldn't feel much of it, something gave in the leg upon impact and Mortensen found that his descent wasn't quite over, toppling forward and crashing into the floor.

Instinct made him grab the leg; he couldn't extend it but he couldn't tell whether it was broken or just badly sprained. There was little time for such trivialities, however, as a second later he was set upon: a rifle butt smashing his face, while a series of boots and blows rained down on his head and back. This went on for an indeterminable amount of time: whenever he brought up his face, to get a look at his attackers or mount an attack of his own, he was met with another savage staccato of fists and rifle stocks. At last the brutal assault came to an end and Mortensen could open his eyes. One still burned white, while the other could detect a slender shadow that passed across the ground in front of him.

'Bring him to me,' came the clipped, cultured tone of an officer, and before he knew it, Mortensen had been dragged and deposited in a heap in the next room: the hub, he presumed.

Ultimately it was a disappointment, little more than an open space with some benches, a table, a vox and a handful of men. House banners decorated the walls and gang symbols – the Underbloods, by the look of the scrawl that had been dashed onto all available surfaces by hivers with more paint than talent.

Mortensen couldn't tell whether his plan to flood the street section with Volscians had been successful or whether the whole revolt had been managed from this squalid little showing. He reasoned that it didn't take much to lead men to lose themselves or to uncage the savagery in men's hearts, after their treatment at the hands of Commissar Fosco and his staff. The major spat his bloodied disgust, as well as a tooth or two, at the floor: he couldn't stand weakness in those around him and the men in the room just made him want to vomit. In many ways they deserved each other and if Mortensen could have been anywhere else than between them, then he would have been: even *Deliverance's* rancid bilge.

Through the wall the havoc had begun. The Shadow Brigade must have been at the door because Mortensen could make out the distinctive thud of autopistols amongst the combined, ragged whoosh of lasrifles: there was no need for silencers now. The two hulking sentries that Eckhardt had retained, the two that had given the major such a welcome, now wrenched him up, thick, meaty fingers clenched under each arm.

Something burned in the corner of the room and the reek of roasted flesh clung to everything. The charred remains were curled up in a foetal mercy stance, shreds of black leather lining the smouldering scene. Mortensen could only guess this to be Cadet-Commissar Bohrz, Fosco's despicable apprentice. The good commissar himself was still alive, although beaten to blackness like a rotten fruit and tied up securely on one of the benches.

He was bare to the waist and the sparse hair stringing its way across his shiny, bald pate was wet. Droplets of something Mortensen could only guess was promethium were rolling down the commissar's sour face and sagging belly. A barrel near the doorway confirmed this and supported the elbow of First Lieutenant Diezel Shanks.

Shanks gave Mortensen his dead-fish eyes. There had always been something dark and unhealthy living behind those eyes, something that had found expression in the murderous chaos of the revolt, but that would have surfaced, regardless. Eckhardt and Fosco might have driven each other to desperate measures but Shanks would have found a way to stray from the path sooner or later; in turn the extra poison he would have poured into his company captain's

ears would have ensured it.

Eckhardt turned.

Obadiah Eckhardt was a spire-born: he had nobility through and through. He was young for his rank and impulsive – as the revolt had proved – but he was a charismatic leader, tall and almost romantic in his looks and language: the antithesis of Mortensen himself.

Despite the unruly demeanour of his mutinous troops, he was still dressed immaculately, his uniform and cap crisp, a rich cloak hanging from his wide shoulders and a glorious sabre hanging at his side. He still displayed the sashes, trinkets and tattoos of his fellow Volscians, but they were worn with moderation and taste. He even managed a good-natured smile.

‘Major Mortensen: we missed you at your quarters,’ Eckhardt began contritely. ‘I’m sorry about that. We might have saved you the trip.’

‘No trouble,’ Mortensen rumbled back.

‘Knew you’d throw your lot in with this bastard and his minions,’ Eckhardt censured.

Fosco suddenly roared to life, spitting forth insults and accusations with swollen lips and a jaw that barely worked. Eckhardt closed on the commissar, bawling back his own effete abuse, the rabid exchange – without doubt one of many over the passing hours – ending with a savage back-handed slap from the captain that spun the commissar’s body off the bench and onto the floor.

Getting a grip on himself, Eckhardt turned back on Mortensen. ‘Men like you can’t think for themselves. You take solace in your orders and your duty when all the while, all you amount to is a tyrant’s plaything. That’s why I sent my people down there – to slit your damned throats.’

‘Still breathing over here,’ Mortensen goaded the officer.

A skull-cracking blow to the back of the head put Mortensen back on his knees, followed by a rhythmic pummelling that fell on him from above. As Eckhardt’s bully boys administered their brutal reprimand, Fosco erupted again, prompting Shanks to step forward and bury his boots in the commissar’s kidneys.

‘Enough!’ the captain screamed. Eckhardt was shaking, his eyes tensing and narrowing with each breath.

‘You’re a mindless animal, Mortensen: those cowards holed up on the bridge have sent you to make their representations...’

Mortensen’s back began to throb with crude laughter. Eckhardt’s face screwed up further: a mask of hatred and righteous fury.

‘You think this humorous, freak?’

‘Save it!’ Mortensen growled through his fading mirth. ‘I’m not here to negotiate with you, Eckhardt. I’m here to kill you; and as for orders and duty, I can assure you that the pleasure will be all my own.’

The hulking hiver sentries went to fall on him again with the stocks of their rifles but Eckhardt belayed them with a single, strained utterance. The captain’s eyes glowed bright with odium and insanity and then suddenly there was calm and he returned to his charming self.

‘Well, look at you. You do look a state. Where you’ve been, I can’t quite imagine. Lieutenant, let’s make the major a little more presentable shall we?’

Shanks extracted a pail that had been bobbing around the inside of the barrel and filled it with promethium. Stepping forward he doused Mortensen with the harsh liquid – the same treatment that Fosco had presumably received and definitely the same as Cadet Bohrz.

‘Refreshing,’ Mortensen informed them as the sentries lowered their weapons and took a step back. Usually the rebels would be treated to thrashing and screaming, as the chemical torment washed over burns, cuts and wounds. The major simply blinked determination back at them.

‘Well, we shall be refreshing something for you, major,’ Eckhardt promised darkly. ‘Your memory, I hope. Gomorrah, wasn’t it? Burned from top to toe, they say. They say you can’t feel a thing. Let’s put that to the test, shall we, freak? Shanks. Flare.’

As the first lieutenant handed Eckhardt the tube with relish, Mortensen slipped the Volscian hive dirk from his boot. Perhaps it was the genuine fear – if Mortensen fancied he felt such a thing – of burning alive (again), or the simple fact that it was probably his last opportunity to act, but the blade was out and it was hungry.

Thrusting the dirk upwards, one hand on the hilt, the other behind its small pommel, Mortensen sank the blade up into the first sentry’s throat. He was preparing for the light show and had held his rifle slack by his side. The second bully boy brought up his weapon, but desperation had made the major faster, swinging the blade back around in a wide, forceful arc that sliced across the other Volscian’s throat.

The moment of panic that the sentry had felt the moment before he died spread and both Eckhardt and Shanks were galvanised into action. The captain tried to fire off the flare but Mortensen was already moving, shouldering the toppling sentry into the noble and sending the pyrotechnic harmlessly at the bay ceiling.

Shanks had gone for his weapon – a plasma pistol. Stumbling over the prone form of the commissar, Mortensen fiercely sunk his fingers into the shorter man's neck and smashed his head into the wall. Grasping him by the back of his flak vest, and almost losing his knife, Mortensen toppled the senseless lieutenant head first into the barrel of promethium. He would have kicked and flailed, if it weren't for the fact that he was already unconscious and so therefore had no other choice but to drown.

The storm-trooper suddenly felt the tug of his back flesh tearing. He couldn't feel the pain, only the momentum of Eckhardt's sabre as it effortlessly sliced through the flak plate and into his skin.

Spinning forward Mortensen rolled along the wall, making a failed attempt to scoop up Shanks's plasma pistol. Eckhardt's spire blade was there also, sparking off the outside of the barrel and then carving up the wall as Mortensen twirled aside in an ugly pirouette. The Volscian captain's form was excellent, not that Mortensen knew much about such things; he was more of the school of, the blade goes in and the guts come out, swordplay. Bringing up his own pitiful blade he managed to turn aside several elegant flourishes before the captain danced the sabre across both his forearm and forehead.

Blood cascaded down over his good eye and for a moment the major was temporarily blinded, falling back into the corner and trampling the funeral pyre that was Cadet Bohrz's remains. A venomous slash across the shoulder convinced Mortensen that he couldn't defend against a blade he could not see and so dropping his own, he lurched forward, feeling for the captain's throat with eager digits.

The two soldiers fell back rolling, with the heavier Mortensen pinning Eckhardt to the ground. The sabre was too long to slip inside their homicidal embrace and so amongst the grunts and gasps, all Eckhardt could do was crack the storm-trooper in the side of the shaven head with his elaborate guard. Mortensen wasn't letting go, however. Now that he had his filthy palms around the rogue captain's throat he proceeded with pneumatic force and patience to crush the life out of the Volscian.

All but blind, Mortensen saw little of the Shadow Brigade officer's last moments: the bulging whites of his eyes and dread gape of his mouth as he felt it all, including his life, slip away. The major heard it though, in the gargle and crack of the officer's windpipe and the clatter of his fine sword, as it tumbled from his impoverished grip. Mission complete.

The next thing that Mortensen heard was the swollen rasp of Regimental

Commissar Fosco across the floor at him: ‘Well, get over here, you fool, and help me up.’

Wiping the blood from his eyes Mortensen ignored the commissar and picked up Eckhardt’s elegant blade. Cleaving the razor-sharp edge through what was left of the Volscian’s shattered neck, Mortensen grabbed the captain’s head and hobbled across the room with it.

‘Bloody savages, the lot of you,’ Fosco bleated at the apparent mutilation. ‘Now bring that blade over here.’

Mortensen dropped the sword and fell into a crouch, like a discus thrower, and tossed Eckhardt’s horror-stricken head across the armaplas wall and down into the street section on the other side. Hovering for a moment, the major tuned into the sound of rapidly dissipating las-fire and the gathering murmuring of rebel forces, coming to terms with the grotesque reality that they were leaderless.

Snatching the vox-hailer from the set on the table Mortensen adjusted the channel. It took him a moment to raise Rask on the bridge, while Fosco watched him with rising bile, no doubt planning in detail the long reach of his vengeance on board *Deliverance* and its implementation as soon as he was free. And perhaps that was one of the reasons Mortensen hadn’t freed him.

The major kept it brief on the vox: ‘It’s done: send in naval security and the damned medics.’ Rask went to say something, probably congratulatory, but Mortensen cut him off.

Grabbing Fosco by his binds, Mortensen hauled him up and slapped him back down on the bench before collapsing beside the commissar. Leaning forward he put his head between his knees, the sickening tang of adrenaline subsiding, and slowly bled.

‘Look here, major,’ Fosco put to him, the imperious edge that was a constant feature of his voice barely dulled by his circumstances. ‘There is much work to be done. The Emperor’s justice must once again prevail on this ship. Common fighting men need to know their place and you and I are going to escort them there. Now a strong stomach will be needed and consequence employed, but most where it is most needed. Do you follow me, sir?’

Mortensen let the commissar’s words hang before mumbling: ‘You are talking about firing squads. Executions.’

‘Well of course I’m talking about bloody firing squads, you idiot – have you smacked your head or something? The 1001st will be purged of its backward hive-world ways and seditious allegiances: there is only one true loyalty and that is to the Emperor himself. In punishing the many, we may still save the souls of

the few: for the good of the Guard. Now, are you with me?’

The commissar held up his bound wrists in expectation. Mortensen’s head swam with Fosco’s terrible words, the words of Eckhardt and Rask and his own.

It was done before his heart settled upon it, but settled upon the dark course of action it had. His elbow shot up, hammering Fosco’s ridiculous head full force and snapping it backwards. The commissar’s neck whipped back, his head settling back on his body. Gore rolled from the ragged cavity in the centre of Fosco’s face. His nose was now situated somewhere inside his brain, along with several shards of skull. Mortensen sat there for a moment as the commissar tried to speak.

‘For the good of the Guard,’ Mortensen told him, getting to his feet and limping away, leaving Regimental Commissar Fosco to blink his haemorrhaging life away.

‘Not him. Have him taken to whatever passes for an infirmary in this roach nest...’

‘This isn’t a simple procedure. I don’t have the staff or the equipment for this. You’re asking me to put this patient through a complex and unnecessary operation that will undoubtedly cause him further suffering. To attempt such an aggressive course of treatment at this late stage will almost certainly kill him. When they’re this far gone, the warden usually has me make them comfortable and let them go...’

‘The canoness may still have some use for him. The choice is simple, sawbones. Fix him or share his fate...’

‘No, not that one you idiot. I need something with a haemostatic clamp, something that I can diffraction fuse to the bone. Damn it! He’s bleeding out again.’

‘He wants to live: I’ll give him that. Stats – nominal to profile. He’s going to need another transfusion, though. Gets worse; guess who his rhesus match is? Luthar-Zeke Troggs, the Malfunction Junktion Maniac. Couldn’t have been me or you or one of the guards? No, our boy’s only match is a solitary confinement crazy with over two hundred and twenty-five confirmed kills. Well, let’s get this over with. He needs plasma. Grab the ether gas-gun and a transfusion kit. Let’s hope Troggs is in the giving vein...’

Krieg was awake. It hit him all at once: the rush of sensation. The nerve-shredding screams; the tang of saniseptic; light – clinical and harsh. His body felt at once leaden and feather light and he lay there for a moment, taking deep lungfuls of air with a chest he could barely feel.

Once more the silence was smashed by a fresh eruption of agony from the next gurney. Allowing his head to roll to one side, Krieg could make out the dull tiles and outdated medical equipment of a small sickbay. Behind a flapping drape a

shadow puppet theatre played out a gruesome scene, with two shapes struggling with a third, projectile blood spurts slapping against the thin plastic and trickling down the inside of the curtain.

'Emperor's wounds! Hold him down,' shot a voice Krieg faintly recognised, though he struggled to place it with his drug-addled brain. 'You're as bunglefingered as you are witless.' More miserable roars followed. Something finally gave as an upsurge in the shrieking led to one of the shadows stumbling at the curtain. 'Would you look at that?'

A gore-smeared glove slipped out of the drape and deposited a wickedly serrated piece of shrapnel in a surgical basin on a nearby trolley. As the curtain opened, Krieg caught a brief glimpse of the trio beyond. The glove belonged to a lofty surgeon-type, all aquiline nose and tombstone teeth, dressed in a spattered apron and thick goggles. The patient was still quivering with pain, his ribcage heaving and the back of his blood-matted head coming to rest in the crackling folds of a plastic pillow. Equally, his face was a pulpy mess and partially obscured by the shoulders of a close-shaved orderly, but the uniform was Navy, so Krieg reasoned that it must be one of the gunners or air crew.

This got Krieg wondering what his own face looked like. He tried to reach for a speculum on the gurney cabinet but found that his right arm was heavily bandaged and trussed to his chest, his fingers resting on his left shoulder. Struggling over onto his side he managed to grasp the mirror with his other hand and inspected the damage. A child's painting was the first thought that came to mind: a child working with only red, black and blue on its palette. Everything seemed to be working and in its place, but Krieg didn't feel like he was looking at his own features. One notable addition was a ragged scar, bifurcating its way across his cheek, lips and chin. The stitches were neat and tight and gave the impression of a zipper running across his face.

An explosion of expletives from the surgeon denoted another blunder by the orderly and deterioration in the status of the patient. There was a clink as another barbed piece of frag was deposited in the dish.

Casting bloodied eyes around the room Krieg found his cap and leather greatcoat hanging on a peg by the infirmary door, the webbing shredded and a rent where the right arm used to be. The door itself was a security bulkhead with a pedal and a scratched plas porthole. Through the porthole he spotted a stylised skull helmet he recognised immediately. The bleached bone of the helmet frontispiece bobbed in and out of view as its owner stood sentry outside the surgery, occasionally peering in through the shaded, reinforced lenses of the

skull sockets.

Krieg flicked his eyes between the porthole and the frantic shadows behind the drape: now or never. He never thought to actually check his legs. They could have been broken or trussed up like his arm, but as he pulled aside the foil sheet he found to his delight that they were relatively unscathed. The gap-toothed surgeon had had little reason to molest them further and Krieg was still wearing his Commissariat braces, breeches and boots.

Pushing himself off the sheet he limped across the room, the creak of the gurney lost in the struggles behind the drape. Whilst the cocktail of tranquilisers coursing through his veins shielded him from the agony of such movement, he did feel sluggish and fragile and was acutely aware of the limitations his battered body was placing on his fanciful expectations. For a dangerous moment he almost tumbled, his frostbitten foot failing to take his full weight.

Krieg slid up against the wall and buried himself in the leather folds of his greatcoat. He didn't have to wait long. Within moments of the bone faceplate appearing at the porthole there was a hydraulic whoosh and the security bulkhead rolled open. An ebony-clad figure in Sororitas power armour rushed in, the skull helmet scouring the room, the business end of her ivory-inlaid bolter pointing squarely at Krieg's empty gurney.

With whirlwind impatience the sentry tore back the drape to reveal the orderly and surgeon up to their elbows in the Navy grunt's gore, giving Krieg just enough time to slip his free hand through the folds of his leather greatcoat and the battle-sister's bolt pistol out of her ermine-lined holster. The sister tore around to find herself staring down the barrel of her own weapon.

'Lose it,' Krieg commanded, his voice hoarse but full of determination. 'And the helm.'

The battle-sister's shoulders slackened slightly before tossing the bolter onto Krieg's gurney. Unclasping the seals, she pulled off the skull-faced helmet, allowing a platinum bob of hair to fall and shimmer back into place. Krieg nodded slowly. 'Thought it was you.'

'Do you really think this wise, cadet-commissar?' the young battle-sister asked, her full, dark lips forming a petulant pout.

'Me and my armour-piercing rounds will be the only ones asking questions here today,' Krieg returned with venom. 'Now, tell me where I can find that skeetmunger major.' He shook the pistol at her. 'We have some questions for him also.'

The sister flashed her eyes at him: 'I'm not at liberty to give you that

information... 'The bolt pistol crashed, sending an explosive bolt sailing past the battle-sister's ear.

'I mean it,' Krieg told her rawly.

Keeping the pistol on the sister, Krieg gave the surgeon his bloody eyes, before waggling the fingers of his trussed arm. 'You responsible for this?'

The horse-faced man nodded fearfully. 'C-C-Crayne. Incarcetorium Medical officer.'

'This is a prison?'

Crayne nodded.

'Well, Crayne, thank you. Now, I'm going to tell you what the sister and I here, already know. She'll die before she gives me that pathetic piece of information. You, on the other hand know what this can do,' Krieg said, moving the muzzle across to the medic. 'And worse, whatever it does do, you know that your bald friend here will be doing the procedure. So, without further delay, where is that malingering...'

'Solitary confinement,' Crayne blurted without hesitation, 'one of the oubliettes, I think: cell-block Gamma.'

The battle-sister's top lip curled. 'You do this and you'll never wear that cap again,' she assured him, nodding to the aquila-embossed commissar's cap hanging from the nearby hook.

Krieg ignored her and scanned the surgery thoughtfully.

'Will he make it?' the cadet-commissar asked, twitching the bolt pistol at the unfortunate Navy crewman.

Crayne shook his head slowly, clearly wondering whether or not it was the right thing to do. 'I can make him comfortable, but he won't be saved.'

'Do it, then.'

The gangling medical officer selected a tranquiliser from his utensil tray and stung the patient in the neck with the powerful sedative.

'Thank you Crayne. You'll be relieved to know that this very difficult day is almost over for you. Now, if you would be so good as to make everyone else in the room, including yourself, similarly comfortable,' Krieg entreated with the flash of a smile for the seething battle-sister, 'I'll be on my way.'



CHAPTER TWO

All Roads Lead to Terra

I

They called it Camp Carfax, after the slipway.

Sixty million square metres of open ground. On a densely populated world like Spetzghast, that kind of luxury was usually reserved for the mercantile houses, geno-industrialists and broker barons: Arch-Commissary Oszminog, Lord Ballantyne and his inbred hierocratical cronies. Carfax Drydock was a veritable oasis of breathing space, making your average hull-welding Spetzghastian dizzy with agoraphobic excess. Only the ancient *Wastrel*, a cyprid-encrusted haulage brig, sat suspended in dry-dock after a light collision with an asteroid.

Lieutenant Koulick Krieg had come to the Bethesda subsector capital three months ago, seconded to the retinue of the mysterious Inquisitor Aurek Herrenvolk. The 123rd Pontifical Strikes were a venerated company of Inquisitorial storm-troopers that had been providing security for the Ergotia witch trials, conducted under his old master Brutus Schenker, but Herrenvolk's need on Spetzghast was deemed greater and the contingent of Inquisitorial storm-troopers was hastily extracted, leaving the outranked Schenker with only his own operatives and some local high-plains muscle to conduct the trials.

Krieg had warmed to Schenker, who was hands-on in his duties and a respectably tough son of a bitch. He found his new lord and master to be a completely different animal. Whereas Schenker had a nose for corruption and a common sense, meat-grinder approach to combating the evils of heresy, Herrenvolk preferred to work at a distance and rarely left the confines of his sleek Inquisitorial corvette, stationed in high orbit around Spetzghast. Barrack gossip put this down to some horrific disfigurement or debilitation earned during his famous service in the Hellicon Mitigations. Krieg thought it more likely that

Herrenvolk was a psyker who worked primarily through his recruits and operatives, as some inquisitors did – never having to get their own hands dirty. Although the lieutenant had never seen the esoteric inquisitor, the Pontificals had shared the corvette with a whole host of Herrenvolk's staid henchmen, savants and of course, the Ecclesiarchical forces that shared responsibility for the investigations on Spetzghast – the Sisters of the Immaculate Flame, although the Sororitas largely restricted themselves to the cloister decks.

As Krieg emerged from the shadow of the *Wastrel*, he caught sight of the network of razor wire compounds, the temporary lookout posts and killing grounds established in between. Carfax had become a provisional Ordo Hereticus internment camp, holding upward of two thousand Spetzgastian heretics and unbelievers.

Reports of an epidemic of cult-related spree killings had originally brought Inquisitor Herrenvolk to the far-flung Bethesda subsector. The killings seemed random enough. Plenty of blood was spilt amongst both the urbanites who toiled in the surface granaries, depots and warehouses, seeking respite in the bars, scud-wrestling pits and obscura dens in between – and their betters, who made unimaginable wealth trading bulk wares in the bustling emporia and exchange sectors. The slaughter often involved firearms, but not exclusively and affected both sexes in terms of victim and perpetrator ratios. Local chasteners eliminated the possibility of a drug problem, but were so deep in bodies, anything was possible. Spetzghast had hardly ground to a halt, but there were enough delays and concern to warrant higher authorities becoming involved.

Aurek Herrenvolk was a natural choice for such an assignment: a notable case at the beginning of his career involved mass ritual slaughter by berserkers belonging to Death Cults on Gasaki V. Early investigation by the inquisitor's agents had turned up little in the way of similar Chaos practice on the giant trade world.

Like any populous Imperial planet, cult activity on Spetzghast was endemic. Amongst the more colourful factions Krieg had witnessed were the 'Mezzanine'; various Wurm Cults; Dark Technology nuts and the disturbing Rebus Sectarians.

Amongst these oddities, the Carfax Inquisitorial internment camp mainly housed sect associates of Anatoly Spurrlok's 'Doomsday Brethren' – a popular Redemptionist personality cult, based around geno-industrialist Spurrlok and his 'finding' of the God-Emperor in the Lazareth system. The 'Brethren' had followers in all areas of Spetzgastian society, their numbers concentrated around the cooperatives and the lower freight stacks, especially the organic

vaults and tower silos.

Isolated Redemptionist cults were a common phenomenon throughout the Imperium, but Herrenvolk's apprentice, Interrogator Angelescu, had found a pattern in the killings and connected it to the actions of certain more outspoken members of the Brethren. Greater credence was lent to the young interrogator's theory when he was found desiccated in a dust silo where he had been buried with his bodyguards in six kilotonnes of cereal grain. Resources were re-allocated and the Brethren cited as a prime threat.

As Krieg and his men walked the axis between the dozens of fortified compounds that made up the camp, floods of cultists abandoned their prayers and polygamous huddles and washed up silently against the barbed fences. The object of their drop-jaw reverence and dread was Krieg's latest capture: the man himself, Anatoly Spurrlok. Prognosticator of planetary cataclysm and galactic doom, Spurrlok was the spiritual leader of the 'Brethren' on Spetzghast and a one man walking personality cult.

He wasn't walking now, however, as Krieg had him lashed to an adamantium crucifix in the style of the Imperial aquila – the motorised treads of which were cutting up the slipway decking. When the cultists looked at their hallowed leader they saw a demi-god: Krieg saw a monstrous, biologically enhanced creation. His skin was like parchment, stretched well beyond its fading elasticity to accommodate more muscle and sinew than the geno-industrialist's frame could bear. The vat-grown muscle added grotesque bulk to his torso and arms and was threaded through with bulbous, designer glands to drive the extra mass. If this wasn't enough, with his spindly head and legs, the proportions of Spurrlok's body were thrown out further by the presence of unnatural muscular configurations where they shouldn't be. The cultist's body was criss-crossed with bulbous tendons, nerve clusters and the brawn needed to drive them.

With his arms painfully stretched across the span of the Imperial eagle's gleaming wings, the false prophet's skull nestled inside a carved effigy of the eagle's noble head and beak. Here a void current was passed between Spurrlok's temples, making it impossible for the heretic to pass water unaided, let alone conceive of an escape plan.

'All yours,' the lieutenant told the members of the Frateris Militia at the gate of the Narthex. All bare flesh and leather, the brothers peered out of zipper slits in their conical hoods in dumb silence. Krieg hadn't quite got used to the zealots' unsettling stares – that was if a silent and all but featureless leather hood qualified as a stare. The Inquisitorial storm-trooper had little desire to see

underneath the masks, however, fearing that the features beneath might be more unsettling still. As a mark of the upmost respect and servitude to St. Valeria the Younger, the Aphonac-Stack Probists had bitten off their own tongues in order that the impurity of faithless lies not pass their lips. The fanatical Probists – like the Sisters of the Immaculate Flame they served alongside – prized truth over all things.

An austere Sister of Battle carrying a skull face-plated helmet under one arm came forward and gave Krieg's crucified prisoner an impassive glance. Her platinum fringe sparkled in the poor illumination of the slipway. The 'Narthex' was the Adepta Sororitas's base of operations in the camp, where senior heretics were tried and tested and the most dangerous cultists imprisoned in stasis tubes. It was also where the sisters slept under the watchful eye of Immolators and Exorcists and kept common Guardsmen like Krieg awake at night with their martial beauty.

'Be careful,' the lieutenant called after the battle-sister as she joined the squad of Celestians escorting the itinerant crucifix inside. 'Don't underestimate him; my men found that out the hard way.' He gestured to several stretchers being lugged into the tent-sanatorium. A chastener and a couple of Krieg's storm-troopers had been foolish enough to come within grasping distance of Spurrlok's girder arms and had paid the price. Twisting and turning in ways Krieg hadn't imagined possible, the demagogue had splintered bones and torn limbs clean out of their sockets, before smashing the men into the rockcrete of the vault floor.

Unimpressed, the sister held him in a withering gaze: 'Would you like Canoness Santhonax's personal gratitude, lieutenant?'

Krieg couldn't help the shimmer of a wounded expression that crossed his boyish features. Perhaps it was this that momentarily softened the battle-sister's stony gaze, or the stifled amusement of Krieg's own men. 'The Emperor expects, lieutenant... the Emperor expects.' Then, she was gone.

Krieg shouldn't have been surprised: the Ecclesiarchy and Inquisition worked together across the galaxy, towards common goals and identical purpose. They were very much separate organisations, however, and had their own very particular ways of working towards those goals. Tension, all too often, was the unavoidable byproduct.

Krieg collected himself. 'Sergeant Odell!'

'Sir?' the hefty officer snapped to.

'Dismiss the chasteners; they should return to their precinct. Have our men turn in. They'll need their strength. We're going back into the vaults tomorrow at

dawn. The sisters should have some further intelligence for us by then.'

'Very good, sir,' Odell boomed, masking grunts of exhausted disapproval from the storm-trooper unit. 'You heard the good lieutenant. Hit the showers. You smell like a swarm of pack-rats. Dead ones, at that...'

II

The pavilion was less glamorous than the Narthex, lacking as it did the Imperial Creed paraphernalia and consecrated instruments of interrogation-art. From here Herrenvolk's Inquisitorial storm-troopers ran their operations and monitored day-to-day activity in the Ordo Hereticus internment facility. Instead of ornately armoured Celestians, the command post of the 123rd Pontifical Strikes boasted a pair of staunch Inquisitorial storm-troopers who stood sentinel while Captain-Commandant Kowalski oversaw the smooth running of the camp. Krieg went limp inside as he realised that even they were missing this evening, suggesting that Kowalski was out on his rounds – walking the base camp perimeter and springing surprise inspections on the sentries. This was the captain-commandant all over: devoted to his paranoia.

Krieg had come to dread these reports. Upon operation completion he was invariably on the verge of physical collapse, run as he was from one side of the underburgh to the other in the pursuit of faithless deviants and the oxygen of any heretical purge: information. A capable officer, if a little narrow-minded, Kowalski fancied himself better than a heretic's turnkey, and had of late taken to pumping the lieutenant laboriously for every mission detail: Krieg's mounting successes and growing reputation a constant threat to the camp commander's own prospects.

With Interrogator Angelescu dead and Herrenvolk apparently elsewhere, the Ecclesiarchy was now effectively running the Ordo Hereticus purgation on Spetzghast. Canoness Diamanta Santhonax was in command of the coordinated Ordo/Ministorum purge and for the past few weeks Kowalski and Krieg had taken their orders from her.

Whereas Krieg's impressive accomplishments had long reached the ears of the battle-sister, Kowalski was still viewed as a cog turning inside a well-oiled machine. So the captain-commandant routinely had Krieg turn in gratuitously extensive mission details, firstly to find ways in which the lieutenant's achievements could be turned to reflect favourably on his own and secondly to exhaust the junior officer further and limit his ability to accomplish his next

unnecessarily perilous mission.

‘Sir?’ Krieg called in through the Pavilion entrance. He had to make sure. If he tried to get some sleep, the commandant would only have him roused anyway. To his surprise, he heard low voices and ventured slowly through the nets. Krieg recognised one of the voices immediately: the sibilant menace of Lieutenant Cyrus Rudd of Beta Platoon.

‘That’s groxcrap and you know it. Krieg? Captain, that gretch-fondler’s nothing a fragging won’t see to—’

‘I said it’s out of my hands. Do you get it? Came from the top. Orders, lieutenant.’

‘Rutger’s well overdue; and what about the hours I put in on that Mezzanine connection? Who’s taking care of my interests, eh? Krieg walks around with a stick up his backside and gets thrown a bone? How’s that work?’

‘What do you want me to tell you, Rudd? It’s a done deal. Krieg’s a political animal. In that department he excels even me. Deal with it. Look at it this way: at least we get shut.’

‘There’s more than one way of getting shut,’ Rudd assured him.

Pushing his fingers between the folds of camo-netting, Krieg created an opening in the Pavilion entrance. There stood Rudd, running that steel comb through his greasy white hair and feasting raw pink eyes on Krieg’s entrance. Kowalski’s sergeants stood nearby with tin mugs of steaming recaff, soaking up the lieutenant’s words with appreciation. The captain-commandant himself wasn’t even looking at Rudd, his head buried in a data-slate.

Krieg strode in under Rudd’s baleful gaze and offered the captain his report tablet. The sergeants stiffened, but Kowalski feigned disinterest, taking the tablet and clicking his fingers at the sentinels. The sergeants drained their mugs and left, leaving the three officers alone. As he turned, Kowalski was obviously surprised to see Rudd still in the room.

‘Dismissed, lieutenant.’

Rudd hovered long enough to register his displeasure before turning to leave. He clipped Krieg’s shoulder as he did.

‘Screw this,’ he spat at the camo-netting and sauntered out of the Pavilion.

Krieg gave the captain a questioning glance, but Kowalski just shrugged it off, throwing the lieutenant’s report tablet on a table buried in maps and schematics.

‘Don’t worry about him. His blood’s up.’

‘His blood always is,’ Krieg returned.

‘You apprehended Spurrlok?’ Kowalski asked, attempting to change the

subject.

‘It’s all in the report, sir.’

Kowalski nodded and poured himself a mug of recaf. He didn’t offer Krieg one.

‘Look, I won’t beat around the proverbial: orders came through today – you’re being transferred from my command.’

Krieg nodded, pride preventing him from pretending that he hadn’t overheard the conversation by the door. Kowalski snorted softly. ‘Canoness Santhonax has requested an officer for special operations. I recommended you.’

‘I very much doubt that,’ Krieg said coolly.

Kowalski let the insult wash over him. ‘I’m giving your platoon to Jonze.’

‘He’s a good man.’

‘They’re all good men.’

‘Some better than others,’ Krieg assured him, clearly thinking of Rudd.

‘Krieg, I’m going to level with you,’ Kowalski spilled, unusually animated. ‘I don’t like you, I never have. Not exactly a team player – but you get the job done and that is your saving grace. That kind of nark, inflexible attitude has earned you enough enemies around here. A bit of advice: consider it a parting gift. Keep going that way and you’re going to end up on the wrong end of your own bayonet.’

‘Anything else, sir?’

Kowalski shook his head slowly. He snatched a slate off the side and tossed it to Krieg, who caught it awkwardly.

‘Report to her ladyship at eight hundred hours. Whatever it is, it’ll be a fool’s errand, you know that, don’t you?’

The lieutenant stared at the floor. ‘Now get the hell out of my sight.’

Krieg saluted crisply and left the Pavilion for the last time.

III

The wardroom of the *Wastrel* was hardly an appropriate venue for a briefing, being grubby, cramped and decorated with wall-to-wall hive porn, but it was private and gave a sweeping view of the internment camp.

Krieg noticed little of this, finding, as he did, the silhouette of Canoness Santhonax framed in the starboard viewing port. He found himself lost in her numbing gaze, the radiance of her obsidian armour swallowing the room like a black hole. She stepped lightly towards him, drawing back a sable hood to reveal

the network of pins inserted across her shaven skull. Remembering himself, Krieg dropped to his knee and bowed his head.

‘Ma’am,’ he acknowledged her obediently.

‘Come here, where I can see you,’ she said softly, motioning the lieutenant over to the viewport. Krieg did as he was bid.

‘I’ve been looking over your record. Fairly impressive,’ she told him, staring out across the internment camp. ‘Galtinore Legionnaires, 123rd Pontificals, now ordo special operations: you’re quite the rising star, lieutenant.’

‘I am at your disposal, your ladyship,’ Krieg avowed.

‘Of course you are,’ Santhonax concurred confidently. ‘Dedication to duty and loyalty to the cause are qualities that will always find a place in service to the Ecclesiarchy – as I’m sure Lord Herrenvolk would agree.’

Krieg nodded. The Order of the Immaculate Flame was one of the Ecclesiarchy’s many militant arms, but with the Sororitas and the Ordo Hereticus working so closely, it was difficult to tell where the authority of one organisation ended and the other began.

‘If I may be so bold as to ask, ma’am,’ Krieg ventured, ‘have the heretics divulged further indications of their intentions?’

‘Very much so: we learn more by the hour of the threat these arch-recusants pose to the system. Your capture of Spurrlok would seem a major blow to their operations. I had my sisters begin interrogations last night. Unfortunately we had to undo most of his magnificent work.’

Krieg nodded: he’d heard the screams, even from his bunk.

‘Like his brethren, Spurrlok demonstrated the same resilience to our methods of inquiry. I had one of the inquisitor’s savants, Warratah Chandra, oversee the psychic aspects of the interrogation – but he drew a blank. Literally. It is his belief that Spurrlok’s heretics are joined in mind in such a way as to share their strength and resist us.’

Krieg wasn’t surprised. The heretics he’d come into contact with had largely seemed cold and emotionless; that was apart from the minority that had gone haywire in public and embarked on a slaughter spree.

‘All this despite Chandra failing to find an actual honest-to-Throne wyrd among them,’ the canoness said with regret. ‘Angelescu’s hunch was correct. There is definitely a connection between the killings, the ‘Doomsday Brethren’ and Spurrlok’s agricultural freight charters in the Burdock Worlds. Some dark force is at work here: whether it is the damned, the witch, the filthy xenos or them all, we will discover and destroy it. I am afraid, however, that in many

respects your efforts in locating Anatoly Spurrlok were in vain. As ever in our line of work, he's not the key: he's just one link in a long chain attached to the lock that binds them.'

'We shall double our efforts,' Krieg vowed.

Santhonax gave him a lofty smile: the kind older women reserve for naive, younger lovers.

'I have other work for you, lieutenant. Three weeks ago, Inquisitor Herrenvolk sent an urgent message by astropath to Field Marshal Rygotzk at Scythia. He had intended to speak with Chapter Master Argolis of the Astral Fists, but they have moved out of sector to halt the advance of the Echidna Splinter Fleet.

'The Burdock Worlds have always had problems with greenskin raiders, being so close to The Deeps, but Rygotzk believes that recent attacks across the agri-worlds might actually presage a coordinated ork incursion this time. Presently, however, it is a watching and waiting game on the rim and Herrenvolk pressed the Field Marshal to spare us some of his manpower.'

'Surely the Pontificals and the Sororitas have the outbreaks on Spetzghast covered...'

'Spetzghast is only the beginning. Inquisitor Herrenvolk has discovered a data trail of evidence implicating similar heresies on several of the outlying worlds and the fabricator moon of Illium is in open rebellion.'

Krieg was shocked. 'How could we not know?'

'Idle bureaucracy in the main. Both Algernon and Tancred's World reported cult murders to authorities on Spetzghast, but these weren't acted upon until similar outbreaks appeared in the capital. As for Illium, the Mechanicus are traditionally reticent about handling security on their own installations.'

'But they have forces of their own,' Krieg interjected.

'The fabricator moon has a standing legion of skitarii and a quarto-legio of Imperial Titans standing sentinel over the most valuable installations, on permanent loan from the Legio Invictus on Ninevah. The authorities are mostly genitors, and members of the Adeptus Biologis – the politics in this region leaning towards the organicist side of the spectrum. The local populations, however, are largely Spetzghastian immigrant labour who work the culture mills and vat labs, engineering the biological frames of servitors and cyborganic automatons. Whatever happened on that moon, it seems things got a little beyond the skitarii forces; and now, by extension, us.

'Rygotzk has released the 364th and 1001st Volscian Shadow Brigade companies from his reservist forces, under Brigadier Voskov – a capable man

I'm told. Hopefully the extra muscle will help the Mechanicus skitarii forces get the populous back under control. This is where you come in.'

'Ma'am?'

'The reason that I am telling you this is that yesterday it became known to me that a small force of storm-troopers make up part of Brigadier Voskov's troop convoy under a Gomorrian major called Zane Mortensen.' The canoness laid special emphasis on the outfit's name, so much so it appeared as though she'd just swallowed some kind of arachnid.

Krieg had heard of Mortensen and his team. The major's reputation preceded him. As a Galtinore Legionnaire Krieg had arrived late to the trenchworld of Chaspia; by then the foxhole labyrinths and continental earthworks of the contested planet were ancient monuments to the billions who had perished there. The Legionnaires had barely touched down on earth that was more blood than grit before being told to pack up and return to their drop-ship. Mortensen's Redemption Corps had been brought in during the same reinforcement, but hadn't spent three days in processing, as the Galtinore Legionnaires and countless other troops and regiments had. There was no hurry to the front lines of a world that had been contested for the best part of three hundred years.

During this time Mortensen and his men had been picking their way through the booby-trapped expanse of the Knoblus tunnels. Within hours the anthracite shafts of the heavily fortified Augusta-1 Shale Plant had been blown and sealed. Defensive positions were formed and Imperial forces waited for fuel production and the great blighted war machine of the infested Fatherlanders to grind to a halt. Within the year Chaspia was back in Imperial hands, but by then Krieg was hunting wyrds with Schenker and the 123rd Pontificals in the Barraglates.

'The Redemption Corps,' the lieutenant repeated. 'Impossible missions, that kind of thing,' Krieg continued, not quite liking where this was going.

'Reckless deviants, I would say,' Santhonax retorted caustically. 'I once had the unfortunate duty of visiting Gomorrah. Even as hive-worlds go, Gomorrah was a festering sore on the underheel of the Imperium: a dominion of vice and villainy. Wiped clean by the wrath of the God-Emperor himself. On that one point, the Redemptionists and I agree. What is left of this renegade civilisation is now back here, trading their poisonous ways under the banner of salvation.'

'But, the Redemption Corps is a storm-trooper outfit.' Krieg put to her. 'The Commissariat would have reported traces of deviancy in the ranks and exercised their authority.'

'Do not underestimate the emptiness in men's hearts. It is an unquenchable

vessel that consumes all it can and then looks for more: sometimes in the darkest of places. Spetzghast is tainted: Algernon, Tancred, Illium also. Heresy would breed like bacteria in a den of iniquity like Gomorrah. Breed in the men who herald from there.

‘The troops under his command are similarly tainted – I am sure of it. You cannot serve with the polluted without becoming polluted yourself. And they are not the only ones. The very vessel that carries him and his men, His Beneficent Imperial Majesty’s Escort Carrier *Deliverance*, experienced a mutinous overthrow mere weeks from Spetzghast. The entire 1001st Shadow Brigade – almost five hundred fighting sons of Volscia – have had to be quarantined and creed-sanctioned for re-instruction of faith. Do you really think I have the sisters to spare for such diversions? Beyond the loss of the regiment itself, of course.’

‘I’ve heard of Mortensen,’ Krieg confirmed.

‘Then you know what they say about him. That he can’t be killed? That he is a saviour? The fire of the Emperor burning in his veins?’

‘Sounds like empty-headed propaganda to me. Gossip and egotism run amok.’

‘You disappoint me, lieutenant. Your own reputation isn’t sullied with such naivety,’ the canoness said lightly.

Krieg recovered quickly from the sting in her slur: ‘Let me put it this way. I have heard priests say similar things to troops in the heat of battle, even trade on the regard of certain officers, you know, to spur them on.’

‘But this isn’t in the heat of battle, lieutenant. Neither is it idle gossip. It is belief and it is dangerous. Surely you would not want to see star temples constructed from the souls of the Imperium’s honest fighting men?’

Krieg shook his head.

‘Surely Major Mortensen cannot be held responsible for the communication of rumours that are beyond his control?’ Krieg offered.

‘He can,’ Santhonax snarled with conviction, ‘if he is their originator. What matters here is not what Major Mortensen does – he is beyond doubt a very gallant officer – it is what he believes. For if he believes, then this is not rumour: it is cult.’

The word hung in the cool, stagnant air of the wardroom. ‘Cultish practice will not be tolerated amongst the Emperor’s subjects.’

‘Of course.’

‘The individual is nothing; the body Imperium, everything. We can’t have personality cults threatening uniformity of purpose – not now, not ever. The Emperor sacrificed himself for mankind; now he requires the sacrifice of his

people. The vainglorious serve themselves. It is heresy and it is dangerous. It's already spreading to other regiments and interfering with the Emperor's work. It must and will be stopped.'

Santhonax turned and recovered a data-slate and a courier package from under the wardroom table.

'You will transfer to the Redemption Corps and make regular reports on the major's actions and behaviour and submit them with your regular supply despatches. Brigadier Voskov and I shall monitor and assess Major Mortensen's fitness for command and act accordingly.'

Krieg's head swam with the sudden complexity of it all. The canoness thrust the slate and package towards him, which the lieutenant cautiously took. 'Eternal vigilance is the hallmark of a true Imperial servant,' she advised him.

'Won't the major be surprised if an Inquisitorial storm-trooper simply gatecrashes his unit?'

'You are no longer a storm-trooper,' the canoness assured him. 'You are still in the employ of the ordo but report to me. In order to oil the cogs of this transition, Lord Commissar Verhoeven has approved your entry as a cadet-commissar, effective immediately. I know that this is highly irregular but the lord commissar appreciates the gravity of the situation and is willing to overlook these irregularities in order that the transfer and your new rank pass scrutiny.'

'You begin your rotation with a storm-trooper unit: and what better than the unit belonging to the infamous Major Zane Mortensen? Besides, Commissariat officers lost their lives attempting to bring rebel elements on board *Deliverance* to justice. Reinstatements onboard will be expected. As such, you are perfectly placed to make observations of Major Mortensen's command conduct. Getting close to Mortensen is all that matters. You will acquire the proof we need to make judgement on this heretic in our midst.'

Krieg was staggered. Within minutes he'd gone from frag bait to defender of the Imperial creed. Overcoming the initial thrill of promotion, he attempted to engage his brain once more. With consideration came suspicion.

'This is a deep honour, your ladyship, but I cannot help thinking, well, to put it bluntly: why me? Wouldn't an Imperial agent be a more appropriate choice?'

'Modesty, as well as integrity?' Santhonax asked, rolling her eyes. 'Because you have the appropriate experience and credentials to join the major without arousing his suspicion: allocation to a storm troop will just appear to be part of your training rotation. Because you have served under difficult men before. Because you keep your nerve and do your duty. I am sure that you will know

how to act if the major is found wanting and you will carry the authority of Imperial law. Besides, the Emperor's loyal agents will be involved when the time is right,' Santhonax pledged, her words laced with venom.

She checked her holochron. 'You report to Regimental Commissar Udeskee on board the carrier *Deliverance*. Of course, the only person you actually report to now is myself. Brigadier Voskov and his command structure have transferred to the *Purgatorio* in the wake of the rebellion. Udeskee, however, is attached to the Volscian 364th and is the only other Commissariat officer on board. Your rank as cadet-commissar necessitates an initial contact. Shuttle leaves in ten minutes. Bay Sixteen.'

Krieg didn't quite know how to acknowledge such an offer and in the end settled for a crisp salute and a tight smile. 'Your ladyship.'

'Good luck, "Cadet-Commissar Krieg". And remember, the Emperor expects.' Krieg ducked out of the wardroom and ran for the shuttle.

IV

As he hurried out of the *Wastrel's* airlock it suddenly occurred to Krieg that he would need his personal belongings from his tent. Leaving the dry-docked haulage brig he bolted up the slipway, careering through the camp, dodging startled Guardsmen and precariously stacked equipment, the cadet-commissar skidded to a halt outside of his billet and parted the mesh drapes. It was only inside that he realised the danger he was in.

The shelter was neat, cool and bathed in the sodium light of a lamp-pack. The lamp-pack caught his attention immediately. It wasn't on when he left. Krieg took a deep breath and a good, long look around his quarters. He finally found the device under his bunk: wire sensitive seismic demolition charges, with a bunch of pin-primed frag grenades for good measure. If he'd tried to sit down on the berth, he'd be in pieces right now, splattered all over the hull of the *Wastrel*.

Rudd. Bastard.

He'd heard Rudd threaten a fragging in the Pavilion, in front of Kowalski, but Krieg hadn't thought the lieutenant foolish enough to convert hot words into explosive deeds. The captain-commandant wasn't wrong about Krieg, though: he did have a way with people – and not necessarily a good one.

Realising that anything in the billet could be rigged and that nothing sentimental was worth dying for, Krieg backed slowly out of the tent. In the doorway, something touched his shoulder and he turned slowly, making his

hellpistol rock where he had hung it, with its holster and power pack. Bagging the supercharged weapon for practical rather than sentimental reasons, Krieg left the site of his intended murder, dashing across the dry dock deck towards Bay Sixteen before anyone else tried to kill him.

'I'm going to kill that Krieg.'

'You don't mean that.'

'I mean it.' Dekita Rosenkrantz paced up and down the squalid confines of the cell, feverishly checking the holochron on her wrist.

'That might be difficult, my child,' sniffed Pontiff Preed, adjusting his monocle. The huge priest towered over her like a natural feature – his obscene belly and the chins that sat like tyres around his throat marking him as a man who had eaten his fill and the fill of many others, in the name of the God-Emperor. *'He's probably already dead.'*

'I asked him to file those damn tallies.'

'Tallies?' Preed echoed as he squinted, sizing up the door. His cracked eyeglass fell and dangled from a cord on his belt. Rosenkrantz pulled up the sleeve of her flightsuit to reveal a thirteen-digit number laser scanned into her flesh.

'Jopall Indentured,' Rosenkrantz confirmed. She grunted and rolled back the sleeve. Everything on Jopall was tallied: the loss of an enemy life; the defence of an Imperial one. Recompense was recorded and accounted for in order that the citizens of Jopall could work off the crushing debts incurred during their unproductive childhood. The ship's commissar, or in the case of the Guard, the company commissar, was charged with the welfare of troops under his supervision and this included responsibility for itemising and filing all Jopall tallies with the proper home world authorities. *'Krieg holds all the tallies for me and my crew.'*

Preed nodded with regret before cracking his robust knuckles and charging his three hundred kilos of pure bulk at the cell door. The impact was deafening and Rosenkrantz saw the wall around the door visibly quake: the door however, remained exactly where it was. Preed rubbed his hulking shoulder before ambling in disappointment to the corner of the filthy cell.

'Plate draconium; probably cruciform bolt-locked and set with inertia seals...' the priest appraised.

Rosenkrantz sagged and crumbled into a heap on the rockcrete bunk. *'Why are they doing this? They're supposed to be on our side.'*

'They aren't on anyone's side, my child,' the gentle giant soothed in his most

clerical voice. 'They're their own side.'

A roar that was anything but clerical shook the air and a ripple of rage cascaded down the pontiff's mammoth form. He threw himself at the cell door once again, pummelling the dull metal with his muscular fists. The mighty priest rained a thunderstorm of blows down on the pitted surface of the door, but failed to make any impression on it. With his chest heaving, the pontiff moped over to the solid bunk and rested his backside. It almost painted a comical scene, the svelte young pilot in her flight suit, resting her head against the man-mountain that was Preed.

'How long have we got?' the pontiff put to her.

Rosenkrantz hesitated: 'An hour... maybe.'

'An hour?'

'If we're not off world in an hour we won't need Deliverance to fly through space,' the pilot assured him.

Preed suddenly put up his hand to silence her and clambered awkwardly to his feet.

'What?' Rosenkrantz demanded, but the priest didn't seem to hear her. Putting a mangled ear to the floor he listened intently.

'I must stop you there, my daughter,' he said, rearing up to his full height and making the sign of the aquila. Again he cracked his knuckles and got to his feet, stretching the muscles in his fat neck like a pugilist. 'It seems that our prayers have been answered.'

'Pontiff, what's going on?'

'The sisters – I think – or their Militate brothers. They're moving along the cell-block. I can hear cell doors being opened.'

From their own door came the excruciating sound of metal grinding on metal: the bolt-lock. Moments passed. Preed and the pilot were suddenly privy to the sound of screams from the next cell, punctuated by the chemicular whoosh of a melta gun as the battle-sisters went about their cleanse and burn mission with impassive economy.

Rosenkrantz backed towards Preed and stumbled as her boot caught one of his huge sandals. As she turned she saw the gargantuan priest had picked up the ceramite bunk and was holding it above his head like a barbell. His arms trembled and thick rivulets of liquid effort rolled down the sides of his snarling face. 'Get behind me,' he managed.

The cell door suddenly swung open and the pair found themselves looking up the smoking twin barrels of a multi-melta. The weapon rumbled its superheated

intention to fire. With a belly-grunt of exertion Preed let the ceramite block fly. The zealot frater beyond had barely a second to respond and all he could manage was a flash of his gauntleted palm at the priest in protest. The block smacked him into the corridor wall and crushed him with all the impunity of an unstoppable force.

Before Rosenkrantz realised that her flesh hadn't actually been charred from her bones, the monstrous priest was out of the cell and storming the corridor. Sticking her head out of the cell door, the flight lieutenant watched him cannonball his way towards the cell-block bulkhead.

A number of militia members stood sentinel with chunky autoguns and flamers. They went to prime their weapons, but found the three hundred kilo blitzkrieg charging up the corridor towards them too much of a spectacle. By the time their first round had chambered Preed had smashed their shaven heads into the wall with his oncoming shoulder and stampeded them underfoot.

Keeping her head down, Rosenkrantz swept across the corridor and went for the melta operator's holstered stub gun. In a small booth a few metres down, two Incarcetorium guards carrying riot shields and convulsion mauls stood by the cell-block door controls. At first they were completely stunned by the havoc being wreaked by Preed up the corridor. As soon as they saw the pilot they glowered before activating their mauls and rushing in.

Rosenkrantz feverishly tore at the brother zealot's stub gun, unable to find the holster's safety strap. As the guards closed in she abandoned the side arm in favour of the buckled multi-melta on the floor nearby. The weapon was too heavy to carry so Rosenkrantz angled the barrels upwards with the grip and depressed the ignition stud.

The guards soon lost their bravado and came to a skidding halt just in front of the weapon's thermo-bleached muzzle. The chemicular whoosh they'd all expected didn't happen. Instead, the heavy weapon chugged and sparked before emitting a gaseous growl of indigestion and growing suddenly hot to the touch. Dropping their suppression equipment the prison guards made a bolt for the control booth. Rosenkrantz had only one place to go: back in the cell. Rolling across the corridor she slammed the cell door shut as the multi-melta's pressurised pyrum-petrol flask went supercritical.

The plate-draconium absorbed the worst of the blast but the extreme heat of the detonation had warped the door off its reinforced hinges. As it fell inwards, Rosenkrantz was treated to a view of the glowing molten ceramite of the walls outside. Peering out she could see that the guards had been erased off the face of

the planet and that Preed was thundering towards the cell-block bulkhead.

A lone battle-sister stood in front of the bulkhead, swathed in striped ermine. She shook the stray tresses of her jet-black hair from her eyes and hit the alarm button. Preed roared as the bulkhead slammed down behind her and increased his belting pace up the corridor. With klaxons piercing the air and lights flashing in the ceiling the battle-sister put her hand on the grip of her holstered pistol, but thought better of it, drawing instead the shimmering blade of a beautifully crafted power falchion.

Swinging the flare-clipped tip of the sword around her with practiced fluidity she prepared to face her attacker. The battle-sister positioned the blade for an entrail-spilling undercut. Preed didn't stop though. He just kept coming, as though he were going to blast straight through the security bulkhead. Hitting her with the force of a monitor train, Preed smashed the battle-sister into the bulkhead with the uncompromising bulk of his corpulent belly. The priest held her there for a moment, allowing a final gasp to escape from her body. Her neck had been snapped and her crushed arm, pinned to the door, let the padded hilt of the power sword topple from her fading grip. Pulling away with a bestial grunt of satisfaction, Preed allowed the sister's broken body to crumble to the ground.

As the pontiff got a grip on himself, Rosenkrantz stepped out into the cooling corridor.

'Get the corpsmen out of the cells,' he bawled up to her.

'The bulkhead?' she called back over the searing alarm.

'Probably welded shut and bricked up from the outside by now,' Preed informed her regretfully.

'Good job I blew a hole in the floor then.'



CHAPTER THREE

Truth be Told

I

Rosenkrantz took one last drag on the lho-stick before crushing it into the ramp with the toe of her boot. She hugged herself against the chill of the dry-dock as it proceeded to slip unwanted fingers of frosty air in between the buckles of her flight jacket. She hit the stud on the hull vox.

‘Chief, give me the payload description. At least I’ll know what I’m looking for.’

There was nothing for a few moments; just the drowsy blink of the vox-bulb. ‘Chief, get off your backside.’

The vox gushed static at her before giving way to Crew Chief Nauls’s leatherneck drawl. ‘Slate says one passenger.’ In the background Rosenkrantz could hear a card game in progress.

‘No vehicles or munitions?’ she returned.

‘I may not be the sharpest tool in the wrench locker, but I can read, skipper.’

‘Okay, chief, well you see that little silver stud that says “Cockpit”?’

Rosenkrantz asked with no little pedantry. ‘I want you to press that and get Benedict to stir the tanks. I’m going to give our cargo another two minutes and then I’m taking off. Do you think you can manage that?’

‘It would give my life the meaning I’ve been looking for, skip.’

Rosenkrantz flicked off the vox and sauntered around the side of the aircraft. Hovering under the fuel tanks, she was rewarded by the percolation of promethium from above. She reached up and caressed the fuselage of the aircraft. The *Vertigo* was a Spectre-class Valkyrie armoured assault carrier. She had the mean lines and rugged gracelessness of her Valkyrie and Vulture cousins and then some, but there was something reassuring about her swollen underbelly

and thundering engine quad. Unlike her troop carrier cousin, however, she was designed to transport small vehicles and light ordnance. An unpracticed eye might dismiss the *Vertigo* as a Guard mule. She was this, but much more. She bristled vulgarity in the form of snub, belt-fed weaponry and rocket pods and the thrust of her aquiline cockpit section commanded the respect of a Catachan terror bird, sweeping its ungainly beak in for the kill. She was a thoroughbred of her class.

‘She’s beautiful.’

Rosenkrantz spun around to find that she was being watched. He stood by the ramp, the veins in his neck still pulsing from his short run to reach the aircraft. Rosenkrantz figured him for a courier: young, storm-trooper fatigues, lieutenant’s stripes and a plump diplomatic pouch bearing the sinister blazonry of the Ecclesiarchy. ‘I’m Krieg,’ he enlightened her.

‘You’re late,’ Rosenkrantz corrected him with a scowl. ‘I expected more of one of you glory boys.’

‘This is Bay sixteen?’

‘You’re in the right place.’ Rosenkrantz motioned the officer up the ramp. ‘You can stow your gear anywhere you like. There’s plenty of room. You’re my only consignment tonight.’

She depressed the vox-stub once again, alerting her co-pilot: ‘Benedict. Fire them up. We’re leaving.’ She raised her eyebrows at Krieg and added into the vox, ‘Finally. Ramp closing.’

At the far end of the Spectre’s large belly compartment a number of the aircrew had set up a card table using munitions crates and the carrier’s water cask. The players were all engrossed in their game of crazy eights: they were playing with a rolling pot and a Ballamehrian double-deck. Lho-sticks drooped from the corners of their mouths and they didn’t even look up from their cards as Rosenkrantz and their guest approached.

‘The crew,’ Rosenkrantz stated simply. ‘If you’d like to lose some money, they appear to have a card game going.’

‘No thanks,’ Krieg declined. ‘Do you have anywhere I can get changed?’ A couple of the crew grunted with amusement.

‘Yes,’ Rosenkrantz replied. ‘Here. This is a Navy transport, lieutenant, we don’t stand on ceremony...’ The flight lieutenant had to stop, because as she was dressing him down, Krieg had thrown her the diplomatic pouch and proceeded to dress down himself. The spectacle of the storm-trooper unbuttoning his fatigues right in front of her drew more guffaws and the odd jeer from the aircrew.

Nauls flapped his hand at the other card players. 'You all pipe down now. Let's play some cards.' His face split into a bright grin. 'Can't you see the skipper's busy?'

Rosenkrantz turned and gave him a Thartusian salute with her finger. 'You reading this okay, chief?'

'I'm getting that loud and clear, skipper,' Nauls crowed back at her.

Rosenkrantz turned back to find Krieg almost down to his Guard-issue briefs.

Thrusting the ordo package straight back at him, she opened a nearby locker. 'You can use the side-arms store.'

'Obliged to you,' Krieg nodded, gathering his clothes, and disappeared inside the tiny armoury. Rosenkrantz struck off in the other direction, mounting the bottom rung of the cockpit companionway, the crew's horseplay following her ascent.

II

The spectre screamed skyward leaving the mercantile burghs and sprawling commercia of Spetzghast behind them. Soon, the encroaching twilight claimed them too, leaving Rosenkrantz to worry about the swarm of stratospheric commercial traffic streaking across the reinforced canopy of the *Vertigo*.

Vector wagons and skiffs played cat and mouse amongst fast moving cavalcades of air freighters and atmos-tankers. Whilst not comfortable, it was nothing Rosenkrantz hadn't negotiated before. There was only one moment of dread uncertainty: a decrepit passenger liner called the *Witch of Shandor* wandered into a cross current and lost several of its giant tail fins, one of which threatened to cleave the *Vertigo* in two. Rosenkrantz had to bank sharply and cut between the ore cars of a nearby tramp-galleon.

'Sorry,' Rosenkrantz called over the crew vox. 'Benedict, have that liner's signature code reported to the port admiral's office for citation.'

'Affirmative, flight lieutenant.'

The co-pilot had been human once, but now he was Benedict: a naval servitor. Truncated at the waist, the co-pilot was really one with the Spectre, his legs lost in some forgotten, horrific craft-to-craft collision and his spine a nexus of power couplings and nerve ports. 'We're leaving the commercial traffic lanes,' he informed Rosenkrantz, moments before the Spectre breached the thin, cobalt cloudbank and gave the pilot an eyeful of Spetzghast's looming sun.

As a brown dwarf, Sigma Scorpii wasn't hot enough to achieve hydrogen

fusion like many stars; instead it was forced to resort to burning baser fuels at its core and casting the dismal bronze light of a dying fire across the system. Lying much closer to its sun than most inhabitable planets could afford, a Spetzghastian view of Sigma Scorpii still made for a breathtaking sight.

Upon leaving the mercantile world's cerulean skies the traffic disappeared and the relative emptiness of the ionosphere beckoned. Spetzghast's spectacular ring system drew overhead. The girdle of dust, rock and metal encircled the planet at right angles to its plane of orbit, running pole to pole, and was attended by myriad shepherd moons, keeping the asteroid belt in good order.

Here giants ruled.

In low orbit a flotilla of bulk cruisers kept station on an outlandish rogue trader vessel. Pregnant fluyts and sprint traders bearing the Spetzghastian mercantile seal were harried into position by system ships under the wide gunports of patrolling monitors and adamanticlads. Each vessel was accompanied by its own flock of smaller tugs and luggers: cargo lighters and freight barges.

At the epicentre of this activity was the *Exchequer*, a spindly orbital dock that was itself dominated by warships of His Beneficent Majesty. The *Stang Draak* hung like a colossal heirloom above Spetzghastian skies. As the system garrison ship and one of the Exchequer's permanent fixtures, she was a constant presence and had been for as long as anyone could remember. One of the last of her class serving in the Imperial Navy, the grand cruiser's lances stood as a deterrent to any enemy foolish enough to sweep in under them.

Despite being a frontier system, fairly distant from the hub of Imperial worlds in the Kaligari Cradle, Spetzghast had largely escaped the attention of warmongering alien races and traitor fleets. It had been at least a millennium since Arch-Admiral Coppola's Ravish Armada had passed through the system causing mass panic and centuries of following consternation. The real extent of the hive-world's problems were limited to pirates and smugglers, run down by Navy brigs and waspish gunships.

The only other vessels in dock were the newly arrived *Purgatorio*, a Dictator-class beauty, and a pair of Firestorm-class frigates; they had been escorting a small convoy consisting of a nimble Guard carrier, two bloated supply ships and the *Ursa*, a superheavy transport.

As Rosenkrantz banked towards the flotilla, a small alarm bell rang in the cockpit. Benedict reached over and disabled it before scanning his runescreen and rapidly digesting the data it was feeding him. 'Flight lieutenant, we have a proximity warning, port-side aft.'

Rosenkrantz stared out of the canopy, but all she could see was stars.

‘I’ve got nothing.’ Her instrument panel suddenly came alive followed by an explosive force from port that violently rocked the gun-freighter. ‘What the hell was that?’

In answer to her question a pair of Interceptors surged past them, rolling wing over wing and forcing her to veer to starboard. Like a pair of shepherds, the fightercraft guided the assault carrier off course.

‘I’m getting a vox message,’ Benedict informed her, clutching his headset. ‘We are ordered to abandon our present heading. They are transmitting new coordinates.’

‘Confirm and execute,’ Rosenkrantz ordered, unbuckling her safety harness to get a better view out of the reverse of the canopy. Then she saw it: the oily shimmer of reflected stars. They had nearly run into a cloaked vessel: something with stealth plating or an advanced optical shielding system. ‘Scan for threshold beacons, taxiway signatures...’

‘Affirmative. I have a partial reading for you, flight lieutenant.’

‘Proceed.’

Rosenkrantz watched the data flick up on her sensorium: *Dread Sovereign* – Inquisitorial Corvette. ‘Cease datastream,’ she snapped, ‘and terminate the scan.’

‘But flight lieutenant–’

‘Do it! And give me those coordinates,’ she said, strapping herself back in.

‘Affirmative.’

Rosenkrantz heard footsteps on the companionway.

‘Skipper.’ It was Spreckels, one of the Spectre’s gunners. Rosenkrantz didn’t turn around.

‘Spreckels, I’m a bit busy at the moment.’

‘Chief’s respects, skipper. He wondered if he might have a word–’

‘Tell him I have no idea what beats a quartz flush in crazy eights.’

‘...on a secure channel.’

‘What?’ Rosenkrantz peered around with a scowl. Spreckels wasn’t the only one in the companionway. ‘What is this, a vrekkin’ town meeting?’

When Spreckels realised that there was someone behind him the colour dropped from his face and he pinned his back to the cockpit wall. Krieg stepped forwards, fully clothed this time. For less licentious reasons, Rosenkrantz wished that he wasn’t.

‘Commissar,’ she acknowledged, taking in the gleaming black greatcoat and peaked cap. Krieg ducked in under the canopy, past a completely oblivious

Benedict and spotted their Interceptor escort.

‘Problems, flight lieutenant?’ Krieg asked her. Rosenkrantz looked at the fighters, then back at the commissar.

‘One or two.’

III

The aircraft found *Deliverance* in low orbit, nestled between the two portly transports, at the rear of the convoy. The Defiant-class carrier rode out the swells, the blade of the Voss-pattern prow cutting through the ionosphere.

As the Spectre’s ramp caressed the deck Rosenkrantz’s flight crew crowded the hold but parted like drapes as Krieg dropped from the companionway, cutting a black swathe through the Navy gunners in his boots, breeches, leather coat and cap.

He was met on the flight deck by a master sergeant and a grizzled captain who sported a cocky smile and a limp. Captain Rask apologised for the major’s absence, explaining that *Deliverance* had just been ordered off station and that Mortensen had been called to a meeting with the Brigadier. Rask seemed likeable and tried to make regimental small talk. The lacklustre exchange barely carried them across the hangar. The surly sergeant continued to look as if he’d just swallowed a bug and eyeballed Krieg from below his crooked beret with obvious suspicion and sour hostility. His name was stencilled into his flak jacket: ‘Conklin’. It might as well have read ‘Maniac’. Krieg noticed that his hand never strayed far from the fat autopistol that dangled from his belt. He hoped that it was a veteran’s twitch rather than a signal of open hostility at his arrival.

As they made their way around the stacked freight and super-charged fire support variants of the redoubtable Centaur chassis, Krieg noticed Rask’s limp become more pronounced, attempting to keep up with his own bold strides.

‘Injury?’ Krieg enquired.

‘Permanent,’ Rask replied with a smile.

‘Want to see something permanent?’ the master sergeant droned, holding back with Rask and sticking two fingers up at the captain. The bionic replacements hung in a provocative ‘V’. Rask beamed at the sergeant with irresistible charm. Conklin just chuckled to himself.

Krieg’s modest quarters were situated on the deck above the storm-troopers’ billets; his superior’s were port-side aft, with the officer’s quarters of the 364th. It was clear that Rask was thrilled to hand the cadet-commissar over to his

assigned aide, Specialist Golliant, at the door. The captain then went about his business, leaving Conklin to strike up a filthy cigar and wait a little way down the corridor. A young Volscian Guardsman walked passed, dripping with Tactica-unapproved adornments like a bandana and a sheath of stiletto knives across his chest. Krieg went to remonstrate the hiver but caught himself: he'd only been on board a few minutes. As the Volscian passed Conklin, he hovered. The sergeant stamped his boot and hissed, 'Boo!' driving the young soldier off down the corridor.

To Krieg's relief Golliant wasn't one of Mortensen's men, he was a thoroughbred Volscian – he had the square jaw and grim, garrison world eyes of that besieged planet. Golliant was unusually broad, even for a native Volscian, his powerhouse shoulders rounding off girder-thick arms and a neck that would have been at home on a grox. He'd been a champion wrestler before PDF and subsequent Guard service intervened and had lost all but the gargled whisper of a voice to an early opponent who'd garrotted him with a length of razor wire. This wasn't an illegal move on Volscia and Golliant had fought on and won the bout. He still wore the ragged, stapled scar across his throat to prove it.

In the Shadow Brigade his monstrous biceps had found natural work wrapped around an equally monstrous heavy bolter but he was now assigned as a cadet-commissar's aide. An unusual move – but Krieg thought he could follow his superior's thinking. As a representative of the Commissariat amongst mean, hive-world trash like the Volscians, Krieg would need someone to watch his back on the battlefield and just about anywhere else for that matter. The commissar clearly trusted in Golliant's simple loyalty and had even more faith in the nightmare wrestler's ability to dissuade any but the most foolish of gangers from interfering with the cadet-commissar's business.

'Commissar Udeskee will see you now, sir,' Golliant rasped and opened the door. Krieg mumbled thanks and ducked inside.

Udeskee's quarters were a marked difference to the spartan simplicity of his tent back at Camp Carfax. Early Farranbourgs and other pieces of quality furniture littered the room, including a qualmwood desk blanketed with parchments, optipicts, data-slates and hololithic maps. There were several tapestries and a nicra mural, depicting one of the Emperor's early conquests in the Anoarch systems, dominated one wall. The fittings took the cold edge off the otherwise functional cabin and provided a contrast to the hyperbaric oxygen tent in the middle of the room.

Two of the commissar's attendants busied themselves over by the desk,

momentarily flicking their eyes up at him before returning to their work. Pushing through the small forest of plastic sheeting, Krieg made his way inside the oxygen tent. Through the last sheet, the cadet-commissar could make out a bed and the wet hackle of laboured breathing.

‘It’s there to protect me from you, not the other way around, you fool,’ came a bitter voice. It was brittle with age but still possessed the mettle of a man used to giving orders.

Parting the curtain, Krieg stepped through to the chamber beyond. He blinked and rubbed his nostrils in the oxygen-rich atmosphere. The bed was empty, with only a striking young attendant changing some kind of catheter arrangement on the far side. Upon seeing Krieg, the attendant’s face creased with sudden churlishness, losing none of its winsome quality, before he became lost in the folds of the plastic sheeting. Having only spent a number of hours as an Imperial commissar, Krieg had already grown used to such a reaction and thought nothing more of the insolence. ‘So, you’re Krieg, are you?’ came the same voice.

Krieg turned to greet his superior, expecting some steely-eyed Imperial hero to be sitting there with a boltgun wound and a glass of amasec. Words from the *Infantryman’s Uplifting Primer* suddenly came to him: ‘The Emperor looks down on the man who expects nothing with benefaction, for he shall never be disappointed.’ As a young Legionnaire, Krieg had found these words to be at best cryptic and at worst completely unhelpful. Staring at the desiccated little basket case sitting in a wheeled-chair by the bed, the commissar couldn’t help but feel cheated. This was Udeskee? Regimental Commissar Udeskee – his sponsor and mentor?

‘Like staring into a crystal ball, eh?’ the commissar laughed nastily through a device that looked like a water pipe inserted into his neck. His eyes were cloudy and his skin scaly and stretched over his sharp bones. His immaculate greatcoat hung by the bed, but he still wore his eagle-emblazoned cap.

‘Sir?’ Krieg still couldn’t get his head around it.

‘Accelerated decrepitude,’ the man explained, each breath an agony. ‘Symptom of Mortlock’s Disease. Caught it on Pariah V. Don’t worry, it’s past the contagious phase. One sneeze from you could kill me though, so keep your distance.’

Krieg took an obligatory step back. ‘You sent for me, sir.’

‘I’ve been through your records,’ Udeskee cackled. ‘Well, there’s no fault in proficiency. But, you lack experience and you’ve probably already got a rod up your backside about the state of this regiment and both of those things are going

to get you killed around here.'

'If I'm responsible for the welfare of these men, how can I let them indulge in practice that is detrimental to their physical and spiritual safety?' Krieg entreated. 'I had to walk past thirty Tactica citations just to get up here.'

The attendant suddenly reappeared between them and straightened the plastek of the curtain, resonating hostility towards Krieg that was clearly lost on the commissar. He busied himself with the valves and various pipes running into Udeskee's enfeebled body.

'Patience. The Imperium wasn't built in one day,' Udeskee assured him. 'You think it can be: so did your predecessor and see where that got him. Not a bad thing you're assigned to the storm-troopers. But make no mistakes, Mortensen is not a man to be trifled with. He expects a member of the Commissariat to be a pain, an inconvenience – but start stuffing the Imperial Creed down his throat and waving your pistol around and you're not likely to make it down the corridor.'

'Has the galaxy gone mad?' Krieg exploded. 'It is the Commissariat that should be feared...'

'Now you're sounding like an inquisitor,' the commissar told him grimly. Krieg swallowed and found himself staring at the floor. 'A dead one. The major won't need to do anything. His men will do it for him, without orders. They are fiercely loyal and won't need much excuse to dispose of one of our kind. And as for the Volscians: most of them would gut you soon as look at you.'

'What am I even doing here?' Krieg put to the commissar, knowing deep down that there was more than one answer to that question.

'The Emperor's work... Slowly. Change, at a pace. The Volscians are by and large hive gangers, and savage ones at that. Go back far enough and each them has a common ancestor who fought in an affiliated confederation of clans. For most of these people, ancient grudges have been put to rest and a common cause embraced.'

'The Emperor's cause,' Krieg reminded him.

Udeskee gibbered to himself. 'Wring the starch from your shirt, lad,' the commissar finally scolded.

'Or the blood, if I don't play dice.'

'You said it.'

The two men stared at one another for a while.

'What am I to do?'

'Your job,' the commissar spat. 'The Imperial Guard is our lord's bastion

among the stars. Each regiment, each troop, is unique and has something different to offer the Imperial cause. A commissar's role is more than just citation and the sensationalism of battlefield executions. Lead by example, from the front. Let them see the doctrines you prize so highly in your words and actions. Inspire these men and bring them back to the one true path. In turn, it is your responsibility to understand these people, their history, culture, their way of life and the tragedies that have befallen them. Familiarise yourself with their equipment and tactics: "When in Terra" et cetera. You must be their voice out there: where, despite their gallantry and servitude, they'll be most misunderstood. Do what any commissar must, but try and bury these men wholesale and they'll send you back to the Pontificals with your balls in a sling. You won't be attached to them, of course.'

'Charming,' said Krieg.

Udeskee began to pull at the swollen knuckles of one crooked hand, the pain obvious on his face. The belligerent aide swooped in to help the aged commissar, the smooth olive skin of his own digits the very antithesis of Udeskee's spotted, wrinkled claws. With some gentle persuasion, the aide managed to slip the commissar's seal ring from his crippled finger and placed it on the bed in front of Krieg. He picked it up and inspected the winged-skull signet of the Imperial Commissariat it bore.

'Put it on,' Udeskee instructed. Krieg slipped it dauntlessly on his finger. 'Do your duty. And mine. A load of good it's going to do on the finger of a ship-bound cripple. You carry the full authority of an Imperial commissar in your right hand. Use it wisely. I'll sign off on your determinations, if you're around long enough to make any.'

Krieg looked up from the ring. Then it struck him. The young attendant was still holding the commissar's lame hand. Udeskee appeared to be holding it back. The commissar attempted a bleak smile. 'Try not to get yourself killed on your first day,' he cackled. 'Might want to insert a few more flak plates in that coat of yours eh? Might I suggest a few in the back as well?'

Krieg saluted and left Udeskee to his sick humour. As he pushed his way back through the oxygen tent's plastic sheeting, he could feel the bile slowly creeping up the back of his throat: a sensation of disgust, though not in the way he might have expected. It seemed Udeskee was infected with more than just Mortlock's Disease. He was infected with complacency; the lack of vigilance that allows other scourges to take hold of men's souls.

As he left Udeskee's quarters, the signet heavy on his finger, Krieg couldn't

help but feel conflicted, his own soul swiftly becoming a battleground between the poison in his ears and the steel in his heart.

And then she shot him.

Mortensen had half-expected to lose consciousness again but the oblivion never came. The battle-sisters were summoned and pulled his lifeless arms over their broad, armoured shoulders. Between them they dragged the major around the other side of the table and dumped his rag doll body in the remaining chair, pinning him against it with the side of the table to keep him upright. The battle-sister sat opposite, boring her interrogator's eyes into him. Her henchwomen stood at ease either side of him.

'What did you stick me with, bi—'

'Name and rank,' the battle-sister cut in with imperious authority.

'It might disappoint you to learn that this isn't the first time I've been tortured,' the major informed her, his words dripping with scorn.

'You can relax,' the battle-sister told him, amused at her own little joke. 'I don't intend laying a finger on you.'

'More's the pity.' Mortensen coughed a laugh and gave her a dirty grin. Then he coughed again. The grin faded; the sister waited. It suddenly felt as though his throat was bone dry and tightening.

'Come on,' the battle-sister taunted, 'it's easy. My name is Diamanta Santhonax, Canoness Regular of the Order of the Immaculate Flame. Now, trooper, your name and your rank.'

Mortensen screwed up his eyes and gagged. It felt like he was being strangled with glass wire. No air was getting to his brain and the veins in his temples pulsed horribly. Networks of blood vessels bulged across his neck and face.

'M-M-Mortensen!' he blurted painfully. Something gave and air surged down his throat, rejuvenating his lungs and making him feel dizzy and warm inside.

'Troop Major Zane Mortensen, Redemption Corps.' It was out before he knew he had said it.

Pulling back the longslide on the needler, the canoness deposited a second empty crystal canister on the table. Picking it up between finger and thumb she held it in the dim light. 'The first was the enhanced venom of the Catachan lugwasp. Actually quite harmless, but you won't have control of your lower body for some time.'

'You'd better get a mop then,' the major scoffed.

'This, however, is synthesised. A veracity compellent. I don't know what they make that from. Classified. I do know that it's very powerful: I've tried it myself. The Sisters of the Immaculate Flame prize truth over all things, so if you want to keep breathing, you'll give me the truth and nothing but. I wouldn't want you to choke on your own lies.'

'Are you out of your vrekkin' mind? Is that your problem?' Maybe one of those pins went in a bit too far, eh?'

'Major, please. I could kill you with my insistence alone.'

Mortensen felt an invisible choke-hold cut across his windpipe. Beads of trembling sweat clung to the storm-trooper's grimace as he fought the compellent's irresistible compulsion. Truth gushed forth with a lungful of spent air.

'You come from Gomorrah, yes?'

Mortensen wanted nothing more than to have the canoness wait, but with the compellent coursing through his veins, he found his responses came thick and fast.

'Yes.'

'Orphan?'

'Yes.'

'Schola progenium?'

Mortensen choked back his truth but the words painfully erupted from him: 'It didn't have a name. They called it The Claw, Hephaestus Hive East.'

'Tell me about the end of Gomorrah. Some say you saw it,' the canoness pushed.

The major's first few words were stilted, resistant, but soon they began to flow as the compellent cut through his reserve and into his honesty.

'I've seen my share of galactic battlefields; witnessed the taking of life on scales such that numbers become meaningless,' Mortensen declared with rough pride, 'but I'll never forget the day the comet hit Gomorrah.'

'I dare say I would have found it memorable also,' Santhonax hissed. 'It's not every day that you get to see a billion faithless heretics burn in the fires of their own blasphemy.'

'That's my hivekin you're talking about...'

'Let's stop insulting each other. Gomorrah was a galactic byword for sin and villainy. From the undersump to the palaces, Gomorrah's hives were corrupt to the core: factories of moral decay whose dark light was an irresistible beacon to the xenos and the pirate. Such a place is an affront to the God-Emperor's very

being and it was by His will that your precious home world was cleansed by the flame.'

'Usually, killing is just an unfortunate by-product of my trade,' Mortensen assured her, 'but I can see that I'm really going to enjoy bleeding you.'

'Regale me further with particulars of your den of iniquity's decimation.' Mortensen swore that he saw something like delight in the battle-sister's eyes as she forced him to entertain her. *'The truth.'*

The major trembled in furious exertion, but the words continued to slip through his clenched teeth. 'Corpse mountains... hives ablaze... unbreathable air... the world... tearing itself inside out.' Fat droplets of sweat rolled down the sides of his face, hanging, quaking and then spattering on the tabletop. At last, he had to breathe. With oxygen, came further honesties. 'Half of all life ended... in an instant,' the major admitted slowly. 'It's humbling to be in the presence of such power. This,' – Mortensen flicked his eyes towards his scorch smeared flesh – 'testifies to my dalliance. The cities fell and the toxic oceans rushed in to claim the rest.'

'Catastrophes are often romanticised thus; after the fact. I see no justification for your outrageous abuses in such sentimentality.'

'Gomorrah was due to deliver its tithe, but the Munitorum didn't list us overdue for over a decade,' the major continued. 'The comet impact had blackened the skies with dust. My people had suffered global devastation; their world had been plunged into volcanic hyperdrive and then forsaken in an impact winter. When the tithe ships arrived with a hive-world's demand of a billion Guardsmen, all they found was a dead planet.'

'Oh, but you're wrong,' Santhonax chided, 'they found you.'

'When the Enceladus Crusade was forfeit their expected one billion reinforcements, what remained of Gomorrah was searched. I was the only survivor discovered.'

'A planet-wide search and you were the only living Gomorrian?' the canoness played, enjoying the obligation of Mortensen's responses.

'What the comet hadn't destroyed the lava swallowed: it covered everything. But still, tiny pockets of Gomorrians held on – living like animals, waiting for help to arrive. Those that had cared for me, helped me through,' Mortensen indicated the livid pattern over his skin again, 'this. They survived the six-hundred degree days, the quakes, the starvation and thirst. It was the cold.'

'The cold,' Santhonax repeated. 'Go on.'

'The sky was a blanket of ash. The temperature plummeted. The human body

can only function within a particular range: below a certain point muscles don't work, behaviour becomes irrational, minds shut down. I watched it happen, to all of them: one after another. The shock kills you: your lungs can't breathe and your heart can't beat.

'But you beat it.'

'Because I couldn't feel it,' the major growled. 'Like they could,' he added. 'The mind-numbing cold couldn't numb my mind: while all they wanted to do was curl up and die. I could run a marathon in a snow drift and not feel a damn thing. It's easy to keep your body warm, your muscles on fire if you can bypass the inconvenience of agony.'

Mortensen went quiet. The canoness narrowed those bolt-hole eyes.

'You were transferred to schola cursus?'

'Yes,' Mortensen told her.

'And the tattoo...' the canoness pushed. She was, of course, talking about the numerals emblazoned across his skull.

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‘...999. M41?’

‘The death of my world,’ Mortensen admitted solemnly. ‘Had it done at Cursus. Thought it should be marked – I should be marked – in some way.’ A fierceness suddenly returned to the Gomorrian’s eyes: ‘There’s a record of all of this. Somewhere. Why don’t you go find it and while you are at it, why don’t you go get me an antidote or something?’

The black gauntlet flashed before his eyes with sudden violence, smacking his face to one side and sending him to the floor like some kind of invalid. There was blood in his mouth. He spat. He’d forgotten how quick she was. Moving back around the table, she sank her sharpened fingertips into the sinew of his neck and hauled him upright. Leaning down she brought her head level with his.

‘You will tell me everything I wish to know.’

‘Don’t flatter yourself, pinhead,’ Mortensen shot back.

Santhonax’s face darkened with a sudden fury. The major steeled himself for further abuse. He soon realised that her anger had little to do with him – after all, she must have grown used to his insults. As he was impervious to her torturer’s techniques, she seemed unfazed by his cocky jibes and unvictmily behaviour.

The canoness put a finger to her mini-vox earpiece. ‘I don’t care if the world is ending, you tell the captain to hold his position until I state otherwise. No more interruptions. This is the Emperor’s work: I won’t have it sullied with trivial concerns. You understand?’

She returned her attention to the major, still rooted to the chair.

‘Trouble with your people?’ Mortensen sneered.

‘My people are loyal,’ Santhonax confirmed smugly, ‘much like yours, and do what has to be done when called upon.’

‘Oh, we’re onto the “look at what we share, rather than what divides us” line of enquiry,’ Mortensen mocked her. ‘While you play personality disorder down here with me: the good sister, bad sister routine – the end of the world is literally coming to pass right over our heads. Listen to your captain, he knows what he’s talking about.’

‘There’s plenty of time for all that,’ Santhonax countered.

‘We have to get off this planet...’

‘From what I’ve seen of this world, it’s not above a little calamity, survival of the most fit and all; most fit to serve the Emperor, that is.’

‘You really get off on all the carnage, don’t you?’ the major sneered.

‘You would defend those that, in the eyes of the Emperor, do not deserve to live?’ the canoness remonstrated, leaning in closer to give him the pure spite of her eyes. ‘You would defend heretics and anarchists, xenos lovers and those who would bargain with the hellspawn and warp entities of this universe?’

‘No,’ Mortensen answered, the veracity compelling forcing him to deliver absolute truths. ‘But, I wouldn’t defend apocalyptic zealots and puritans like you either.’

The canoness smirked: something about the insult clearly amused her.

‘Now it’s my turn to be truthful: what do I care if the xenos take this world or Ruinous Powers scourge the next? What do I care if the void vomits forth a colossal hulk and pounds your world to oblivion?’

‘My world was struck by a comet...’ Mortensen growled. His mind whirled. He saw the berg of rock and ice in his mind. Or could it be, as the battle-sister claimed, a colossal space hulk – irregular and impossible - sheathed in the cold of deep space?

‘How do you know that?’ Santhonax put to him with seductive reason. ‘I mean: how do you really know that?’

‘You lie,’ the major accused.

Diamanta Santhonax licked her thin, sexless lips and leaned in closer. Her voice became low and conspiratorial: ‘What if I told you that I was amongst those who stood and watched? One of a privileged few, spectators to the end of a world? A disaster allowed to unfold.’

Mortensen swallowed. That’s why there had been no evacuation. No warning. He sat there, in his useless body; struggling with what he was being told, wondering what he wasn’t.

‘What if these privileged few stood by,’ Santhonax continued painfully, ‘and watched as your hive-kin perished in the flames of their own unworthiness, so that the truly worthy could rise, phoenix-like from the ashes of armageddon, better, stronger, more able to serve the Imperial cause and bring battle to the God-Emperor’s deadliest enemies? Whatever fails to destroy us makes us stronger, is that not what they say? You are living proof of such a supposition.’

‘I’m going to kill you,’ Mortensen promised her.

‘You might. But if you did, would that not prove my little supposition correct? Like humanity, you are at your strongest when you are tested to your limitations.’

Did not the Horus Heresy purge the untold billions that were disloyal to the Emperor? Did not the Age of Apostasy herald the coming of Sebastian Thor and the much needed reformation of our Ecclesiarchy? Did not the insurmountable odds stacked against truly great men like Macharius, forge legends that give hope to generations in dark times past, present and future?'

'You're insane.'

'One woman's insanity is another man's truth. Perhaps sooner than you think you will recognise the truth in my insanity. Until then, tell me yours.'



CHAPTER FOUR

Indifference Engine

I

Rosenkrantz had been told to expect heavy resistance on her first storm-trooper sortie and thought it prudent to exchange *Vertigo's* long range auxiliary fuel tanks for rocket pods. She left it to Chief Nauls to oversee the refit and light a fire under the cogboys and servitors, Rosenkrantz being in no doubt that the Redemption Corps' dispersal would be swift and impulsive. The mechanics of the operation were already proving a real culture shock for the flight lieutenant.

Gone were the endless deliberations and slow preparations she'd been used to with the Volscian High Command, the Shadow Brigade being masters of strategic planning and clockwork execution. The common hiver was a rabid hound in the slips, but his spire-born superior was a methodical tactician. The Redemption Corps way of working was much more fluid: organic even. There were no sergeants barking threats of raw encouragement to their men; no squads double-timing it around the hangar with armour and weapons. Since the mutiny the corpsmen always had their armour and weapons and they were always primed and loaded. They sat around, smoking and joking, each man knew his part and he didn't feel the need to shout about it. There would be enough of that down in the field.

The mission briefing wasn't much different. The request for Rosenkrantz's presence alone had been a surprise. Mortensen's flag had been attached to an old Ryza-pattern Valkyrie, but the mission necessitated the transport of vehicles as well as troops and Rosenkrantz was the most senior Spectre commander.

The major had given Rosenkrantz and her bird the once over, only really showing any interest in her crew's impressive number of confirmed kills and the fact that they were Jopall Indentured. This seemed to reassure him and he in turn

assured Rosenkrantz that she'd get plenty of opportunity to work off her debts flying with Mortensen and his men. The only other thing that seemed to catch his attention was Rosenkrantz's callsign, stencilled across her flight helmet: 'Boltmagnet'. The irony seemed to amuse the major and Rosenkrantz didn't have the heart to tell him that her number of emergency landings almost rivalled her confirmed kill ratio, and that the *Vertigo* wasn't actually the *Vertigo* but the *Vertigo VII*. If he'd asked her she would simply have told him what she told everyone else: that she crashed better than anyone else she knew. At any rate, the major transferred his flag to the assault carrier and summoned Rosenkrantz to the mission briefing.

The pilot had expected to go to one of *Deliverance's* tactical suites. Instead the briefing took place on the flight deck in a small amphitheatre built out of ammo crates and fuel drums. One entire side of it was a Salamander Scout vehicle decorated with soldiers. It was kind of cosy and informal and Rosenkrantz imagined that this was the way all Redemption Corps business was carried out.

The hub of activity was focused on a makeshift table in the centre, awash with pictograms and data-slates. A young, intense-looking adjutant was trying his best to get a battered hololithic display operational, much to the chagrin of a master sergeant and a hideous medical officer. Corpsmen lay sprawled across the crates, cleaning weapons, exchanging jokes and insults, waiting for the briefing to begin.

In contrast, Magister Militum Eugene Trepkos of the skitarii tech-guard stood tall and rigidly to attention like some kind of statue, although it looked to Rosenkrantz like it would be difficult for him to do anything else. His bulbous head, which was knotted with muscular concentration, sat amid a slender metallic torso and two intricate mechanical arms. Like the mechanised mandibles of some robotic crustacean, the specialised tips of his fingers twitched across the torso, feverishly at work on some incessant programme of maintenance and repair. A vermillion hood and cloak swathed his oddly impressive body, revealing little of the bottom half, bar the toes of his officer's boots.

The ever-cheerful Captain Rask was introducing Cadet-Commissar Krieg to the major. The meeting was a cool, distrustful affair, each man's eyes unfriendly and deep with civil hostility. As hands were offered, Rosenkrantz clocked Mortensen twist the commissar's palm slightly in his own to get a better look at the heavy ring Krieg was wearing. In turn the cadet took in the ragged stitching of fresh gashes across the major's arms and shoulders. As the major flicked his

eyes back up at Krieg, Rosenkrantz detected the slightest nod from the young commissar. Mortensen's lip curled into a dangerous smile and he slowly returned the gesture. The flight lieutenant felt like she'd just witnessed something significant pass between the two men, but couldn't bring herself to believe that it was anything good. Captain Rask hobbled past, smiling, of course, and settled himself on a crate next to Rosenkrantz, working circulation into his busted knee with his tough fingertips.

A ragged cheer swept the pit as Mortensen's harassed adjutant brought the hololith to life and decorated the space above the table with a three-dimensional representation of the fabricator moon of Illium. The small planet was one of the shepherd moons keeping Spetzghast's pole-to-pole-ring system of dust, rock and ice in good order. Jagged holographic asteroids spun across the display and past the Adeptus Mechanicus world, casting ugly shadows across the sickly factoryscape that plastered every available metre of space on the moon's surface.

'Right, lads. This swillhole is Illium,' Mortensen addressed the crowd of malingering officers and storm-troopers. He caught himself, bobbing his head contritely at Magister Militum Trepkos. 'Of course, no offence intended to you, sir.'

Trepkos nodded, his face a paralytic mask. It was well known that the skitarii underwent all manner of psychosurgical procedures to remove even the smallest traces of emotion and personality. Mortensen went back to work.

'Adeptus Mechanicus fabricator moon: culture mills and cybernetic workshops in the main, specialising in biological technologies. So that means built up areas and close quarters; limited fields of view and high concentrations of non-combatants crowding an already tight extraction zone. It isn't pretty – but then it rarely is. Sass.'

The adjutant recalibrated the hololith, zooming in on the black, baroque nightmare of the planet's capital. The Gothic metropolis sprawled across the fabricator moon's equatorial bulge and thrust skyward above the endless sea of greasestacks and cooling towers.

'Corpora Mons is the religious district and the moon's administrative capital,' Sass continued, relating the sum total of the gathered reports and intelligence from his freakishly photographic memory. 'There is open rebellion across many of the districts, major areas of civil unrest being centred on military and municipal targets. Mechanicus shrines have been desecrated and a significant section of the menial workforce has taken to the streets. The workers have used their knowledge of the infrastructure to sabotage communications and transport

networks. Fires are widespread and large mobs of seditionists have converged on the capital.'

'What do these mungers actually want?' Minghella slipped in casually, as though he were actually interested.

'It's a straightforward rebellion, in all probability,' the adjutant said honestly. 'Although no figurehead or rebel organisation has been identified and no actual demands have been made.'

'Then how can you know that?' Krieg challenged.

'Sass knows a lot of things,' Mortensen intercepted.

Krieg fixed the adjutant with a withering stare and continued unfazed: 'What if you're wrong? What if it's some kind of cult influence, Chaotics or wychbreeds simply intent on mass destruction?'

'I don't know,' Sass retracted with new-found caution. He wasn't used to people questioning his strategic diagnosis. 'But I do know that they have taken out key tactical targets: the kind of targets that unchecked would make any kind of successful coup untenable.' Sass stabbed his finger into the holographic image of the city. 'A quarto-legio of Imperial Titans on loan from the Legio Invictus were being housed in a massive complex to the east of Corpora Mons. The Adeptus Biologus on Illium are famed for their refinement of Titan crew mind link technologies. These technologies have been sabotaged on all but two of the god-machines. They knew exactly where to hit them. They knew that the Mechanicus Titans would crush this rebellion. This isn't bloodlust or corruption. It's too cold, too audacious.'

'Cultists, freedom fighters, mechheads...' Conklin blustered. 'What does it matter? They all die the same way.'

'He's right,' Mortensen confirmed, hating to agree with the sergeant. He indicated his intention to move on. 'It doesn't matter.'

'It matters if you're waging war on an unknown enemy,' Krieg protested, his voice carrying. 'You have no idea of their capabilities. How can you prepare to counter them? Your approach is informed by everything you know, or more importantly, don't know about the enemy.'

Mortensen gave the cadet-commissar the slits of his eyes. 'We're not waging war on them: we'll leave that to the 364th Volscian Shadow Brigade. We're going to be in and out before the "enemy" knows we were even there. Anything else, quite frankly, doesn't concern us. All I really need to know is if one of these scummers puts themselves between me and an exit, are they going to drop when I put a bolt through them?'

‘And you don’t even know that...’

‘The Shadow Brigade started landing troops yesterday,’ Sass offered helpfully, ‘and are making predictably slow and steady progress up through the slum sectors, taking it hab by hab. Everything by the book: but not fast enough to recover the assets.’

‘We get on the ground and if it turns into a grox heap, we’ll improvise: it’s the Redemption Corps way,’ Mortensen told Krieg. ‘Live with it.’

Rosenkrantz watched the cadet-commissar’s lip wrinkle before he got a hold over himself. Perhaps it was Krieg’s inexperience, the recent events of the mutiny or something else entirely but the flight lieutenant had seen commissars have Guardsmen shot for less.

‘What’s the mission?’ Krieg asked, his eyes burrowing into the back of the major’s shaven skull.

‘And where?’ Rosenkrantz ventured, the mission location being of most relevance to her and the *Vertigo*’s crew.

Magister Militum Trepkos stepped forward with a stiff swish of scarlet. A series of ghostly lights flickered across the chrome of his trunk, activating the focal controls on the hololith and bringing the crackling image to full resolution on a gargantuan structure at the heart of Corpora Mons. His voice – a hollow mechanical echo – was everywhere at once and didn’t come from his mouth, which remained tightly shut.

‘This is the Artellus Cathedra: the centre of worship for the Cult Mechanicus on Illium. It contains the largest shrine to the glorious Omnissiah on the planet, in addition to a quad of orbital defence lasers, one housed in each steeple. The tactical as well as spiritual significance of Artellus necessitates an honour guard of two hundred skitarii troops and the Warlord Titan *Mortis Maximus*, outside the giant adamantium doors of the cathedra.

‘As of sixteen hours ago, all contact with both cathedra and Titan has been lost. The skitarii garrison has orders to hold the cathedra for as long as possible under such circumstances. Final communications confirmed that the *Mortis Maximus* has no motive power or weapons control. Understandably the Fabricator General is concerned about the *Maximus*’s current status, but the crew in themselves are a valuable resource and could be transferred to another god-machine if the circumstances allowed. He wants the assets back: in one piece.’

‘How the hell do a bunch of trigger-happy menials take out a Titan?’ Krieg shot across the pit with unmasked disbelief.

‘Lucky shot?’ the major asked with mock sincerity.

‘Have you even read the reconnaissance files?’

‘There are reconnaissance files?’ Mortensen blurted back, his voice thick with meaty derision.

‘Perhaps the war machine was critically damaged at the installation, with the other Titans,’ Sass offered, hoping his hypothesis would throw a little cold water on the increasingly incensed Mortensen and Krieg.

‘Or perhaps we’ve got some Alpha-level psyker running around down there,’ the commissar hissed through clenched teeth. ‘Or worse.’

‘You’re clearly new to this, so I’m going to make it real easy for you,’ Mortensen rumbled caustically. ‘If there was any evidence of corruption or the influence of the Ruinous Powers, the Volscians would have reported it by now. Believe me. These guys don’t wipe their backsides without filing a reconnaissance report.’

‘Better than wiping your backside on the recon report, which seems to be Redemption Corps standard practice.’

‘Look, cadet-commissar,’ Mortensen seethed, ‘if you feel this mission is beyond your particular talents, whatever they are, please feel free to stand aside and let us do our duty.’

‘I’d hardly be doing my duty if I did that,’ the commissar shot back.

‘Well, this is what we do Krieg, so you’d better get used to it. Your alarmist threat assessments aren’t wanted or needed.’

The cadet-commissar’s voice became cold and certain. ‘Don’t do that,’ Krieg warned him with brutal sincerity. ‘Don’t question my courage. Your own infamous variety of bravado isn’t worth spit if it does nothing to serve the Emperor’s cause. You won’t find me sending your men into the embrace of thoughtless slaughter. Mind that you do the same, major.’

Rosenkrantz had watched these two men publicly goad one another for the past few minutes, but when the flashpoint came, even she was taken off guard. The major’s men were barely out of their seats and only a handful of corporals had managed to bring the greased barrels of their weapons to bear. Trepkos, of course, did nothing, despite having the only reflexes in the hanger swift enough to intercede. By then the two men had clashed in the centre of the amphitheatre. A dazzled Sass had been rammed aside and the hololith toppled, crashing to the metal floor. The gathered soldiers froze and Rosenkrantz with them.

The razor edge of the major’s storm blade trembled against the flesh of the commissar’s throat, each minute tremor nicking tiny slices across his oesophagus; the muzzle of Krieg’s hellpistol hovered between the major’s eyes,

humming its supercharged intention to spread his brains across the flight deck. Each man had got a free hand to the other's wrist in a messy, makeshift hold and the two soldiers snarled at one another across the hate-charged space that separated their contorted faces.

Rosenkrantz flicked her eyes around the amphitheatre. No storm-trooper would move to stop them now. This wasn't shock or surprise anymore: shoulders and weapons had since sagged. It was respect. Honour. No corpsman would deny his commanding officer the opportunity to kill the commissar himself. The pilot could almost feel the soldiers willing it on.

Either way, Rosenkrantz sensed that she was about to witness a murder. Something gave inside her. She felt herself take a step forward, but became suddenly aware of Rask's bony fingers closing on her arm like a vice. She turned. He gave her an almost imperceptible shake of the head. She gave him an almost imperceptible shake of her own before breaking from his grip and striding across to the wrangling spectacle of the two men in the centre of the amphitheatre. They barely seemed aware of her presence.

'There is a saying on Jopall: "To Evil everything when good men do nothing",' the flight lieutenant cited softly. She slipped her slender hands slowly between the men, resting her fingers on the safety stud of the hellpistol and the clipped tip of Mortensen's survival knife. Pushing gently at both, the blade came away from Krieg's raw neck and the stud slid finally to safe. 'My bird is prepped and ready to fly. What'll she be carrying? Corpsmen or corpses?' she put to them.

The grip relaxed and the major and commissar untangled themselves. Krieg took a measured look around the amphitheatre to make sure the barrels were down before holstering his hellpistol. Mortensen turned and buried the storm blade in the table before helping Sass to his feet and righting the toppled hololith. Krieg straightened the lapels of his greatcoat. Mortensen stretched his brawny neck and faced the Redemption Corpsmen once more.

'Okay, just like Abraxus V. The extraction zone is too tight for a landing,' Mortensen continued stolidly. 'I will take the Redemption Corps and make an airborne deployment above the zone: a high altitude insertion directly onto the top of the Titan. Magister Militum Trepkos has agreed to accompany the insertion. He has the Mechanicus runecodes for the bridge top hatch. That should save some time.'

'Second Platoon from the 364th Volscian Shadow Brigade will rappel to the surrounding roofs from the Valkyries – establish and hold a four-point ground extraction zone around the Titan's feet. Captain Rask will coordinate the

deployment from the air.'

'What about the Reapers? Airstrikes prior to insertion would certainly soften things up a bit on the ground,' Minghella advocated.

Rosenkrantz nodded. She was all for Wing Commander Wharmby's Reaper Wing to blaze them a path up to the extraction. A fly-by from *Deliverance's* Tactical Reconnaissance Group had already given Brigadier Voskov valuable information on the situation at ground level. Why not have Wharmby's fighter squadron do a preliminary run? His strike fighters, Bolts and Marauders would only be sitting on the flight deck.

'Absolutely out of the question,' Trepkos cut in, the stainless steel timbre of his voice echoing around the amphitheatre. 'The Fabricator General would never sanction a bomber attack by the Aeronautica. The collateral damage to the faith district would be incalculable. What if Artellus or the *Mortis Maximus* were hit? It's one thing for the enemy to indulge in wanton destruction. You'll have to do what you can with your gunships and transports.'

A ripple of discontent and profanity swept the audience but Mortensen silenced the disgruntled corporsman with a hand. 'A convoy of fire support Centaurs carrying Fourth Platoon in small groups under Lieutenant Deleval will deploy from a secure landing zone nearby and make their way to the extraction point.'

'How do you know the landing zone is secure?' Krieg threw in.

'The *Legio's* only other operational Titan – a Warhound Scout called *Ferrus Lupus* – is handling that for us, as we speak,' Sass declared with confidence.

'Cadet-Commissar Krieg will accompany the convoy,' Mortensen continued. 'Just in case they run into something they can't handle. By the time they arrive I should have the assets out, on the ground and ready for evacuation. All squads will then collapse back to the convoy. The column will punch its way back to the secured landing zone. The Spectres will then lift us back to *Deliverance*. Mission time, deployment to extraction – three hours. Like the lady said, let's make good on this. To your stations.'

Corpsmen around the amphitheatre evaporated. Mortensen's strident form cut a swathe through the exiting troopers, flanked by Minghella and the bruiser master sergeant. Rask hobbled to catch up, with Sass clutching the battered hololith and bringing up the rear. Before she knew it, Rosenkrantz was alone with Krieg.

'I want to thank you,' he said plainly, breaking the blanket of silence that had descended on the amphitheatre. 'A light touch was needed there.' She nodded

slowly. 'But please, I must warn you. Don't interfere with Commissariat business again.'

With that, the cadet-commissar left.

'You're welcome,' the pilot called after him before setting off also, for a place that made marginally more sense to her: the cockpit of the *Vertigo*.

II

Like some cosmic gliding behemoth, Sigma Scorpii extended tendrils of rusty light across Illium's asteroid-dominated sky. As the shadows began to recede across the fabricator moon, Flight Lieutenant Dekita Rosenkrantz rolled the *Vertigo* to port to avoid yet another belching smoke stack. Swooping in like angels of the armageddon, the procession of Spectre Valkyrie-variants had dropped out of the sky above the sea of Adeptus Mechanicus surgical sweatshops and cybernetics mills, flanked by a cortege of Valkyries and lean Vulture gunships.

Lieutenant Commander Waldemar had been more daring than Rosenkrantz would have imagined, bringing his precious *Deliverance* down below the thin upper cloud layers and shaving precious minutes off their descent. As soon as Waldemar had delivered his payload, the Navy carrier vanished though, probably not too comfortable above Mechanicus defence lasers and missile silos.

Ordinarily, Illium's immigrant workforce would just be stirring in their bunks by now, but today was not an ordinary day. The citizens of the fabricator moon were already out in force and had been most of the night, lighting up the streets and dusty plazas with the flash of lasguns and pipe bombs.

As *Vertigo* led the formation across the skies of the greasy indusriascape, Rosenkrantz's keen eyes were drawn to an irregular arrangement of fat, rusted chimneys and smog stacks. The cluster of mill vents belched thick, black smoke, but none of it was coming from the chimneys.

'No, no, no, no, no,' the pilot muttered to herself as the Spectre closed on the area. The configuration of chimneys was irregular because of their angle: it was the feature that had attracted her attention in the first place. The vast majority of the vents struck for the sky, vertically upwards; but these seemed at all angles, criss-crossing one another like fallen trees in a forest battered by a storm. Some were leaning or prone but largely intact; others had been demolished and smashed and lay broken-backed and shattered across the devastated district.

Rosenkrantz hit the vox-stud for the troop bay.

‘Major, you’re going to want to see this – forward portside.’

The pilot heard the storm-trooper grunt and direct one of his men to roll aside one of the Spectre’s side doors. The gushing wind howled down the vox, drowning out a stream of the major’s bitter oaths and curses as he saw what she saw.

Back at the vox Mortensen barked at the flight lieutenant: ‘Have our formation hold and circle at this altitude. Inform them we are going in.’

‘Benedict – handle that, please,’ Rosenkrantz instructed, before dive-rolling the Spectre down towards the spectacle. As their angle of approach changed, more of the destruction was revealed. Instead of the stack tops the black smoke was pouring from the base of the chimneys where a coordinated set of explosions had levelled the district. At the centre of the fallen giants lay another giant: the *Ferrus Lupus*. The Mars-pattern Warhound must have been making its behemothic approach to secure the landing zone when it stomped into the only trap bigger than itself.

The synchronised demolitions had to be the work of Mechanicus insurgents and their execution held a sad beauty. Gargantuan chimneys and smoke stacks had toppled and smashed against the Titan’s mighty body, knocking it off-balance and over onto its armoured back. There the grand Titan struggled to right itself, its Vulcan mega bolter and plasma blastgun pointing uselessly at the sky as chimney after chimney tumbled over it, pinning it down and dashing its gleaming hull with brick and girder.

Out of the rat warren of wreckage the tech heretics crawled, shooting at the clouds in pride and jubilation with several groups firing on the Titan’s impervious superstructure with cheap, single-shot rocket tubes. The Warhound’s huge, leering muzzle flashed with optimistic blasts as the rockets flashed off the war machine’s cockpit.

‘Flight lieutenant.’ It was Mortensen on the vox again. ‘We’re going to make an unscheduled stop. Prepare for disembarkation.’

She’d been afraid of that; but in reality, Magister Militum Trepkos was probably giving the major little in the way of choice. Their mission parameters had just been expanded.

‘Affirmative.’ Dropping the Spectre in over the Warhound’s fallen form, Rosenkrantz spun the aircraft down into a fast-moving descent. This was as much to give the Chief and his door gunners a free-rolling arc of fire as not to offer the Mechanicus rebels an easy target.

The four side doors of the carrier must have been thrown open because

Rosenkrantz could hear the pneumatic thunder of *Vertigo's* heavy bolters cutting up the Titan's tormenters and driving them back under the rubble from beneath which they'd crawled. Holding the carrier still above the *Ferrus Lupus's* brazen chest the flight lieutenant waited with her heart in her mouth as *Vertigo* hovered like a bombastic dare to the rocket-armed seditionists.

Below, Mortensen and his storm-troopers would be no less vulnerable to small arms fire as they rappelled the distance between the Spectre and the Titan's chest.

'They're on the ground,' Captain Rask voxed up what seemed like an age later and Rosenkrantz banked the aircraft into a turn, once again opening up the arc of cover fire for her gunners and rolling gently into standard evasive manoeuvres around the drop zone.

This gave the pilot a better view of Mortensen and his recovery team. The major had selected only three other corpsmen, besides himself, who were advancing rapidly up the Titan's chest and collar plates in full carapace and packs. The storm-troopers advanced one after another in sequence, ducking under the barrels of each other's chunky hellguns, securing the path with conservative blasts of supercharged repression fire.

Las-fire lanced back, enthusiastic but undisciplined, as the tech heretics attempted to secure their prize from the safety of the shadows, hidden in caves of rubble and broken chimneys where the hammering of *Vertigo's* heavy bolters failed to acquire them.

The Redemption Corps major strode across the Warhound's hull with supreme confidence. Helmetless and with hellgun slung, he pounded across the metal between his killers, feral and unreasoning. The Titan was his now and, like a jealous carnivore happening upon a fresh kill, he was intent upon running off the scavengers.

Trepkos followed his proud skitarii, hood and cloak flowing after like a vermillion advertisement. His movements were no less determined but mimicked more the stomp of one of his Titan war machines than the stalking, animal gait of the major.

Bounding up the cliff-face of the Warhound's throat, Mortensen attacked the climb with fervour, pulling himself up, arm over arm through the hydraulics and ricochets. As Trepkos went to work on mechanisms under the chin of the *Ferrus Lupus's* great armoured muzzle and the prayers required to operate them, the major and his men positioned themselves about the cockpit section, weapons ready.

Rosenkrantz circled as the Mechanicus revolutionaries were drawn from their hiding places. *Vertigo* itself was now being repeatedly targeted, with several hopeful rockets streaming wide and a multitude of luckier las-blasts scuffing the hull and canopy. The storm-trooper's surgical insertion and bold advance had initially taken the rebels by surprise but now their territorial desperation was showing with individuals and small groups rapidly closing on the Titan cockpit from across the wrecked landscape.

With a deep, reverberating thud and a flash the cockpit awning mechanism fired and rolled, carried back by gravity and its great armoured weight. As the smoke cleared, the cramped conditions inside the Warhound were revealed with two stunned moderati and the stricken Titan princeps strapped into the confined space.

The Redemption Corps major had little time for ceremony and grabbed one of the moderati by his hard-wire lines and cables, traumatically tearing him from both his link with the downed Titan and his seat. A rocket from an advancing heretic, kneeling in a ladder cage that ran up the side of a nearby tumbled smoke stack, flashed before Mortensen's face. Before the projectile had time to strike the side of the opposing factory wall, the storm-trooper had his chunky autopistol clear of its holster. With a roar the major unleashed the weapon on his attacker, raining a light show of deflections off the bars and rungs of the ladder cage before finding his mark and riddling the trapped tech-heretic with explosive fire.

Hoisting the protesting moderati onto the shoulder of a nearby corpsman, Mortensen repeated the procedure with the princeps and his other crewman and sent them off towards the leaning smoke stack. Offering Trepkos a meaty hand, the major pulled the skitarii officer up the forward cockpit and directed him after the storm-troopers.

Mortensen's men had reached the fallen chimney, which lay at a forty-five degree angle across the Titan's plasma blastgun and several other demolished towers. With their recovered targets bundled over shoulder and pack, the storm-troopers stomped up the outside of the ladder cage, towards the chimney's punishing summit. With furious las-fire following them up the incline from pursuing seditionists, Trepkos and Mortensen followed.

Gliding up behind the escaping corpsmen, Rosenkrantz directed her door gunners to drive the Mechanicus menials back from the base of the smoke stack with a storm of concentrated fire, allowing Mortensen and his men time to get a little bit of distance on their pursuers. Proceeding on up the length of the stack,

the flight lieutenant held *Vertigo* at the relative safety of the chimney top as the storm-troopers endurance-climbed their way towards them.

Las-blasts struck wildly at the chimney, several glancing off the Redemption Corps' thick, armaplas carapace and one burning into the back of the *Ferrus Lupus*'s howling princeps. A rocket was more fortunate, launched from a factory window and burying itself in the base of the smoke stack. The entire structure bucked and a visible shiver ran up the metalwork, almost shaking the storm-troopers loose. Dropping to the mesh of the ladder cage and grabbing on, the corpsmen held and waited as the superstructure groaned and twisted inside.

Suddenly Mortensen was very animated, waving his arms and pushing his troopers on. Picking up the pace, as well as the extra weight, the armoured figures darted up the remaining length of the chimney and passed their loads in through *Vertigo*'s side doors. The vox chirped.

'They're in,' Captain Rask reported.

Throwing back the stick Rosenkrantz blasted skyward, away from the toppled Titan and the industrial forest of fallen smog stacks that buried it. Back at the head of the waiting formation of Navy aircraft, the pilot banked towards the hub districts of Corpora Mons. Soon the sulphur towers, ventscrapers and the endless landscape of wretched slave mills gave way to the baroque lines and Gothic majesty of the faith district's tabernacles and cathedrals.

'Approaching first drop zone, flight lieutenant,' Benedict notified her.

'Is he always like this?' the major called, chomping down on a fat, stubby cigar. Rosenkrantz flashed him her eyes before returning her attention to the business of flying the aircraft through the narrower chasms of the new district.

The major pulled himself up the companionway ladder and slapped the servitor co-pilot on his cold, pallid shoulders. 'Lighten up, Navy boy. It's the start of a brand new, action-packed day.'

It was obvious that the storm-trooper was in his element from the cocksure grin and the veritable stink of adrenaline and testosterone in the cockpit. He came in beside Rosenkrantz to get a better look at the ground and snatched a headset from a canopy rack.

'Drop zone is hot,' reported Benedict as they banked into the space above an open plaza, 'I repeat, the dropzone is hot.'

Mortensen leaned in closer. 'Not for long,' he grumbled with concentration.

Rosenkrantz peered over the nose cone at their designated landing zone, the one Mortensen had boldly claimed could be made secure. On every other day of the year it was a large ornamental esplanade and cactus flower garden preceding

the entrance to an Ommissiah mechshrine. Today it was the sight of unprecedented slaughter. Black smoke was pouring from the shrine and the garden's bloated ornamental cacti had been riddled with las-fire. Seditionists pelted the hallowed building with debris and bolts from their rifles. Ragged, beaten tech-priests were running for their lives down the length of the esplanade, pursued by posses of rebels wielding blood-splattered wrenches and lengths of noose fashioned from power cable. With the invaluable assistance of the *Ferrus Lupus*, this would have been nothing more than a plasma-bathed ghost town. There was little point in dwelling on that now, however, any more than worrying how Deleval's convoy would make it through to the cathedra without the firepower of the Warhound to clear the way.

'*Blazer One*, this is...' Mortensen stalled. 'What the hell is this bird called?'

'*Vertigo*,' Rosenkrantz enlightened him.

'*Blazer One*, this is *Vertigo*. We have some hostiles crowding the dropzone. Would you be so good as to strafe those malingering sons-of-bitches and clear the way, so to speak?'

Rosenkrantz watched as six Vulture gunships broke off from the main pack and streaked off in search of slaughter. Taking turns on rotational passes, the gunships tore through the esplanade peppering the murderous mobs with their multilasers.

'Yeah, get that maggot in the hood,' Mortensen buzzed. Rosenkrantz marvelled at the man. It was like he was watching a game of razorball. 'No, the other one. And watch the cloisters; I thought I saw some mechhead with a rocket...'

The sudden crack of a missile fire was instantly followed by a thunderous flash as *Blazer Two* took a rocket in the tail. Spewing smoke, the Vulture descended in a heavy spin, throwing its shattered tail section all around the plaza.

'We have a confirmed hit on *Blazer Two*,' Benedict reported helpfully.

'Yeah,' the major growled, his good mood evaporating fast. 'Thanks for the update.'

Rosenkrantz watched *Blazer Two* slam into the ground at the foot of the mechshrine steps. Her wings were alight and her hull shattered, but as far as the pilot could tell, her cockpit section was intact.

'*Blazer Two*, this is *Vertigo*,' Rosenkrantz announced. 'Report casualties and status. Please respond.' The vox gave a deathly crackle for a moment, before *Blazer Two*'s pilot called in.

‘Rig’s totalled. I think we might be on fire. I’m okay. Jespersen’s taken some flak in the back.’

Pushing the microphone of his vox-set to his lips, Mortensen spat, ‘*Vector One* and *Two*, move in and offer cover fire. And don’t get clipped. *Blazer One*, would it be too much to ask to bag that mungers?’

The *Vectors*, the detachment’s four Valkyrie assault carriers, plunged into the maelstrom below, the heavy bolter door gunners giving a good account of themselves.

The major proceeded to grumble orders down the vox as *Blazer One* and *Three* continued their strafing runs on the cloisters, their multilasers reducing the esplanade’s architecture to a pit-cratered mess. Despite the joint efforts of the Valkyrie gunners, a small horde of ragged seditionists closed on the downed Vulture, hacking at the cracked canopy with lump hammers and track irons.

‘Nash, get out of there!’ Rosenkrantz bellowed down the vox. The pilot had his Navy issue pistol out and was trying to scatter the mob, but it was thankfully just as difficult blasting out of the canopy as smashing in.

‘Can’t... move... Jespersen.’

Vector One’s shadow suddenly passed over the gang and a hail of bolter fire tore several of the rebels off the aircraft and deposited them in a bloody heap on the plaza floor. Not before a scrawny runt of a seditionist slotted a grenade through the small opening the lump hammer had caved in the canopy armaplas, however. There were assorted wails of desperation from the vox before the inside of the cockpit lit up with the momentary blast of a frag firestorm.

‘Vrekkin’ animals!’ Mortensen roared, ripping the vox-set from his shaven skull. ‘Put this beast down on the deck, now,’ he ordered, shimmying down the companionway ladder.

Throwing the Spectre into a nose-dive, Rosenkrantz was determined to come in high and fast, giving the rocket launcher little time to acquire the *Vertigo* as a target.

‘Benedict, prepare countermeasures.’

‘Affirmative, flight lieutenant.’

Rosenkrantz altered the channel on her vox: ‘Chief, we’re going in. We’ll need plenty of cover fire, the zone is still hot.’ Nauls grunted affirmation back down the vox. As crew chief he would already have his hands full. Besides managing the *Vertigo*’s four door gunners, he also had the cramped conditions created by the presence of two fully loaded Imperial Centaur fire support vehicles stowed in the hold to contend with; this with the extra headache of the major’s storm-

troopers, strapped into their bulky grav-chutes, sitting up forward. And now, with the Spectre packed to bursting point, he also had the morose Mortensen bouncing around down there to make his life even more miserable.

With a screech of air brakes, Rosenkrantz pulled the Spectre up, just in time to avoid burying the aircraft under the esplanade. The assault carrier's superstructure creaked in protest, but with Rosenkrantz at the stick it was used to such cavalier handling.

'Lowering landing gear,' the co-pilot droned.

It wasn't long before Rosenkrantz had given the crew something to do. All four heavy bolters sang an ode to death from the top of their barrels, sweeping the plaza of carefully advancing seditionists, intent on murder and mayhem. The Spectre came to rest gently on the esplanade.

Benedict saw it first, his usual demeanour abandoned in favour of something more direct. 'Starboard side!'

Rosenkrantz picked out their bushwhacker, resting his rocket tube against a bolt-mangled pillar, aiming straight at the *Vertigo*.

'Holy Throne. Brace for impact!' she screamed down the vox. One of the Vultures unexpectedly swept side-on between them, a constant rain of multilaser fire driving their assailant further along the cloisters.

If that wasn't enough, Mortensen was out on the plaza, striding across the killing ground between streams of heavy bolter fire and ducking under *Blazer One*'s swooping hull. Rosenkrantz watched as the gunship rose out of the plaza for another run and the seditionist stepped out from behind a cloister pillar, ready once again to fire on the *Vertigo* with his rocket tube.

Instead he came face to face with the Redemption Corps major, who was casually injecting a fresh magazine into the grip of his chunky autopistol. The two men looked at one another, the rocket launcher useless at that range and limp in the rebel's hands. Mortensen flicked up the pistol, blasting the rebel almost point-blank. The first round lifted the seditionist's flailing body from the ground and flung him back against the cloister wall. Closing on the rebel, the major unleashed further fury with the weapon as he blasted away with each sure-footed step, three, four, five times, before flicking to auto and riddling the mechhead's body with the remainder of his clip. Kneeling by the tattered corpse Mortensen emptied his weapon in the seditionist's lap before slapping another magazine home. Holstering the weapon, he scooped up the abandoned rocket tube, with its single rocket.

A hammer-wielding maniac came at Mortensen from the left on his return to

the aircraft, but one of the door gunners plucked him out of reach with a short burst of explosive firepower. Rosenkrantz heard him slap the side of the cockpit harshly.

‘Lower ramp,’ she instructed Benedict.

The Spectre gave another creak as a Centaur fire support vehicle rolled out from under the aircraft’s beak and came to a standstill by the downed Vulture’s blasted remains. A begoggled Volscian popped out of the central hatch and got to grips with the pintle-mounted assault cannon.

The Spectres and Centaurs combined gave the Redemption Corps and their Shadow Brigade compatriots just the speed and flexibility they needed for fast deployment in crowded battlezones. Chimera carriers were not only too large to be transported in the swollen hulls of the Spectre-class Valkyries, they were too wide and slow for the chaos of Illium’s narrow streets. Fire support Centaurs were super-charged for swift transportation under fire; they were also fully armour-encased, unlike their tow-tractor brethren and packed the punch of a small infantry support vehicle.

Another slap and a wave from Mortensen. ‘Benedict, close ramp. *White Thunder*, you are cleared to begin your descent,’ Rosenkrantz assured one of the sister Spectres.

‘He’s in,’ the chief told her curtly down the vox. Feathering the stick, Rosenkrantz took the aircraft off the deck and cleared the drop zone. It wasn’t long before Mortensen was back in the cockpit.

‘As soon as the last Spectre’s cleared, have them go straight to the airstrip. Despatch the *Vectors* to establish hold points. *Blazer One* and *Three* to provide cover for the fire support vehicles; all remaining Vultures to escort the carriers and secure the evacuation. Clear?’

‘As the skies, sir.’

‘It’d better be,’ Mortensen warned, ‘I’m not losing any more birds to menials who get lucky with rocket launchers.’ He tossed Benedict the rocket tube. Picking the blood-bathed weapon up with his thumb and fingertips, Benedict deposited the launcher on the ledge above his hullside codifier panel. ‘Souvenir,’ the major told him, before stepping back on the companion ladder.

‘If you have any trouble I’ll be in the hold, suiting up,’ he called to Rosenkrantz, his good mood returning within moments, the prospect of diving head first out of a perfectly good aircraft appealing to the major’s sensibilities.

The pilot pursed her lips, allowing the casual slur to hang in the air. She’d been wrong about carrying Mortensen, she mused. There would be a lot less

trouble for her and her crew once the major was off her bird. And that moment couldn't come soon enough.

III

As *Vertigo's* ramp rolled open and the full glory of the Illium warzone was revealed to Mortensen, Krieg's warnings came back to haunt him.

Corpora Mons and other periphery districts were overrun by heretics, defectors and infectious mayhem. The small-scale firefights and rioting mobs had found their way into every part of the city. The capital was turning itself inside out. The landing zone had been hotter than he'd expected, but he'd put that down to Sass and plain bad luck. Mostly Sass. From here the whole planet seemed ablaze with rebellion. Anything bearing the caducal helix of the Mechanicus or the Imperial aquila had been blown to pieces or razed to the ground. Thick smoke spewed from the urban nightmare below, the rough black lines carving up the sky like an insane tessellation. *Vertigo* cut through the pattern, her slipstream dispersing the stack so it appeared like the aircraft had snapped the threads of a giant spider's web.

For once Mortensen had to sympathise with the Shadow Brigade. Even with the 364th, it could take the best part of six months to retake the moon, street by street. Each district was a labyrinthine hell of gauntlets, sniper killzones and booby traps. This maelstrom had already swallowed the Adeptus Mechanicus skitarii forces that provided security for the installations and two companies of Spetzghast Mercantile Militia, scrambled from the subsector capital. Now it was going to swallow the Redemption Corps. More accurately, Mortensen and his fellow storm-troopers had volunteered to dive head first down the monstrous rebellion's throat.

Strapped into carapace and the chest-hugging grav chute, the major made preparations for the drop. Pulling his helmet on and slapping down the visor, he walked towards the opening ramp. The Spectre was high above the Cita-Cathedra of Artellus-Magna, the most magnificent of Illium's many places of worship, glorifying the art and mystery of the Omnissiah and housing the Episcopal throne of the Imperator Fabricate. The cita-cathedra signified the heart of the capital, with Corpora districts segmentally radiating out from the centre: the spiritual quarters, administrative sectors, conurbation strips of Imperial tenement hab-blocks and, of course, the vast manufactorium zones of the city.

A swift rap on the side of Mortensen's helmet brought him back to the here

and now. It was Rask, pointing up towards the cockpit and donning a head-set. Sass was behind him but swiftly disappeared up the companionway ladder. The intense adjutant never did drops, having little liking for heights in general, despite being attached to an air-mobile storm troop. He usually helped coordinate operations with Rask, where his keen mind could wrangle with the big picture and weigh up alternative strategies, should the situation on the ground go tits up: which it usually did.

‘Try and draw some of their fire from us,’ Mortensen hollered, compensating for the helmet and turbulence in the bay. Rask nodded and smiled his crooked smile. ‘You know,’ the major added, ‘without actually drawing fire on yourselves.’

The captain took an awkward step towards the companionway. ‘Watch your back!’ he called from the steps.

‘That’s why I brought you,’ the major yelled back. Mortensen peered down at the roofs and towers of the cita-cathedra. Standing astride the massive adamantium doors of the building was the mighty Imperial Warlord Titan *Mortis Maximus*. The cathedra plaza was a rippling carpet of revolutionaries. Mobs swarmed around the Titan’s gigantic feet and hung from suicidal heights as they attempted to scale the sides of the god-machine, desperately searching for some kind of an entrance.

As the *Vertigo* rolled to port the major breathed in the full, awesome lethality of the metal mountain below. He wasn’t the first to stare in marvel at the destructive capabilities of the war machine; to wonder what it would be like to command such incredible power.

If he hadn’t been so stunned by the spectacle, Mortensen might have noticed that something was seriously wrong.

As it was, it was Rosenkrantz that clocked it first and broke in across the vox-channel in sickening realisation: ‘Those plasma silos are open.’

Mortensen growled.

The Spectre’s cargo bay suddenly crackled with a blinding, searing light. A momentary shockwave of heat rolled through the aircraft as a fat beam of plasma energy blasted skyward past the *Vertigo*.

The aircraft took a stomach-churning tumble, throwing Mortensen into the wall of the belly compartment. Rask missed his footing on the companionway and fell. He skimmed across the slick floor of the carrier, snatching wildly for a handhold. Several of the aircraft’s door gunners and the storm-troopers struck out their arms for him but their safety lines and harnesses tore them back. The

major dropped and sunk his fist into the webbing of Rask's passing flak jacket, just managing to grab the flailing captain before he slipped out of the bay door. Rask's legs dangled off the ramp, kicking at the spinning nothing below, desperate for a foothold that wasn't there. Clawing his way up Mortensen's carapace dropsuit, the officer hauled himself back inside the bay door. The major brought him up to his helmet faceplate.

'You okay?' Mortensen bawled.

'Vrekkin' great: next stupid question,' Rask howled back.

'Status!' the storm-trooper called into his helmet vox-link.

'We just lost *White Thunder*,' Rosenkrantz shot back. In macabre illustration *Vertigo*'s rolling spin revealed the Spectre as she fell past. Her belly, cockpit and tail section were intact but her starboard wing was completely gone, burned out of existence by the column of plasma firepower the cathedra had just unleashed at some target in the upper atmosphere. As *Vertigo*'s own tail came around again Mortensen caught another glimpse of *White Thunder*'s spiralling form.

'Is *Deliverance* hit?'

Mortensen and Rask exchanged a grim glance as the vox crackled with static suspense.

'Negative,' Benedict finally cut in. '*Deliverance* is clear. Looks to Commander Waldemar like a ranging shot. He thinks that it might be prudent to—'

'Yeah, yeah,' Mortensen barged in.

'You've got to go,' Rask called – still clutching the ramp struts as the Illian industrialscape whirled by behind him. The major nodded.

'Get all aircraft down on the deck,' the major ordered.

'We're not going to last very long at street level.'

'Longer than against those silos,' Mortensen answered with harsh logic. Rask nodded. 'Locate the Spectre and reroute the convoy to pick them up. The whole city will be coming down on them.'

'Major,' Benedict piped up. '*Deliverance* reports the cathedra's plasma batteries are charging for another orbital assault.'

'We can't be here,' Rosenkrantz added, her words laced with alarm.

'Okay, keep your flight suit on,' Mortensen barked, signalling Magister Militum Trepkos and the Redemption Corps to come forward on their snaglines. Corporal Vedette presented herself, slipping a helmet down over her platinum blonde hair. Her limp was all but gone, but even if her thigh wound had been giving her hell, Vedette knew better than to show it on an operation. 'Ready?'

'Born ready, sir,' she beamed back.

A Mordian by birth, Zola Vedette had long been distinguishing herself in the storm-trooper ranks, when she met Major Mortensen. She'd been part of a rearguard force left to cover the withdrawal of the Noctan Strikes from the night world of Nebrus IX. Disease had swept across the tiny planet and the cities had been overrun by plague zombies. The Redemption Corps had been brought in at the eleventh hour with the clock already running on an Ordo Sepulchrum sanctioned cyclonic orbital cleansing. Mortensen's men had snatched the Noctans and Vedette's stalwart rearguard from the planet surface mere moments before torpedo impact. The major had Rask pull some strings the next day.

‘As you were.’

The drop troops were already filing down the ramp in their carapace armour and helmets. Like Mortensen, the storm-troopers carried their hellguns and weapons slung on their packs, in order to avoid distorting the aerodynamics of the Redemption Corps' trademark high altitude thunderbolt descent. The hope was that the troopers would move faster than the anti-aircraft guns could track. A distinct bonus when freefalling into a shooting gallery, where a street urchin with a flintlock could cut you in half with a stray shot.

Vedette proceeded to count the storm-troopers out, barking their names in quick succession as each in turn pitched off the Spectre's ramp with the certainty of newborn Tallarn thundervultures.

The last of the squad gave Vedette a nod of their helmets before vaulting into the maelstrom outside: Minghella, who'd been checking everyone's oxygen; Pryce, his carapace jangling with cheap icons and relics, and then the replacements: Greco – infamous spire-breaker and Progenium runaway; Teague, the Elysian young blood; Kynt, the one-eyed comms-officer and Quant, Gorskii's demolitions stand-in. The Valhallan storm-trooper had barely survived the 1001st's bloody rebellion and unfortunately had lost the battle, as so many had, on the operating table. As always, Rask had been ready with suitable substitutes: troopers the major could already trust or those that Rask believed he would get to.

They were followed by Vedette, who gave an obligatory salute that was more habit than requirement before peeling off into oblivion. The major watched them tumble away from the aircraft, taking a few steps of his own before launching off the ramp.

Holding his hands behind his back, Mortensen plunged helmet first through the thermals, rapidly falling into the slipstream created by the other drop troops. Like a small meteor shower, the Redemption Corps streaked for the planet's

surface with the heavens howling around them.

Mortensen ate it up: heart racing with the desire to be part of the whole wanton abandon of it. He didn't hunger for blood – he was no savage or berserker. He merely thrived on the cutting edge of possibility. Nobody held Zane Mortensen's fate in their hand: what he did, his very next action, and the one after that, would determine his destiny for good or for ill. That was where he felt most at peace. Crossing the terminator of exigency, on the event horizon of the unforeseen, where he was at that very moment.

The entire city suddenly vanished as explosions tore the air to shreds around him. An oil slick of black smog swiftly blanketed the area in the wake of hundreds of enemy shells splatter-bombing the sky. Mortensen swung this way and that, making his trajectory more difficult to predict, but it was largely futile. Some insane genius inside the cathedra hadn't been satisfied with hurling shafts of boiling plasma into the heavens and had ordered the gargoyle encrusted macro-cannons manned and armed.

As he punctured the bottom of the inkblot cloud, the major caught sight of the *Vertigo*, corkscrewing around their descent pattern, attempting to draw the artillery fire. The Spectre was rewarded with an alarmingly obliging spree of thunder blasts across the nose of the aircraft, forcing Rosenkrantz to roll the Navy bird sharply to starboard.

Focusing once again on the fast approaching cityscape, Mortensen noticed that one of his storm-troopers had broken formation. Certainly, each corpsman would have had to negotiate the dangers of the blanket barrage, but Pryce was careering all over, arms loose and legs flailing in the backwash. Bringing his own arms in tighter and helmet down, Mortensen surged forwards for the trooper. As he crossed to Pryce's other side, he could see what had happened. The trooper must have caught the blast wave of one of the detonations: his left leg and arm were a ragged mess of blood and bone and the side of his helmet and visor were shattered. Unconscious or dead, he wouldn't be able to fire his own grav-chute.

Pushing his body to the limit, Mortensen willed himself onwards, drawing closer and closer to the injured soldier, desperate to reach the vectorpull and activate his chute. At least that way, *Vertigo* could swing in and collect him.

As his fingertips brushed the pack's repulsion vents, Pryce was ripped from his grasp. The air was quaking with a fresh shower of artillery explosions. Taking the full force of one of the sporadic shells, the unfortunate trooper was blasted skyward in a drizzle of gore and religious iconography, catapulting the major into a freefall spin. Little good the seals and relics had done him in the end.

For a small eternity, Illium became a vertiginous assault on Mortensen's senses: a vomit-inducing kaleidoscope of reversals with g-forces fighting inside his body for possession of his centre of gravity. Perhaps following some previous pattern of thought, Mortensen's fingers found the vectorpull of his own chute and he yanked it furiously. The pack bucked, trying to right itself in the middle of the major's rolling rotation. Simultaneously the chute cut the descent velocity and mastered the spin, sending a jolt through Mortensen that he could feel in his eyeballs.

Now his eyes had stopped swimming with motion, Mortensen got a grip on his position. The grav-chute had slowed his descent to a mere glide about two hundred metres above the cathedra concourse. Immediately below him the god-machine *Mortis Maximus* stood astride the mighty adamantium doors of Artellus-Magna. The Warlord Titan was silent and still, immobilised as Trepkos had told them. The concourse was flooded with insurgent mobs mounting a futile assault on the colossal war machine with small arms and grenades, although this seemed more of a display than a genuine attempt to breach the Warlord's impenetrable armour. Even the lowliest Mechanicus factory hand would know that the more optimistic options for forced entry lay with the war machine's bridge and the weapon system's maintenance bulkheads. And this was where a few hundred of the renegade Imperials were headed, surging up gangways and grapnels with little care for safety or sanity.

Below, Mortensen watched his storm-troopers establish a two-team perimeter on the metallic expanse of the Warlord's armoured hood. He could make out Conklin giving the enemy troops a headache with the constant chatter of his bolter. Leaning into a course correction the major drifted above them. Firing the clips on his harness Mortensen dropped the remaining metres from his grav-chute to the chilled hull of the monstrous god-machine. He rolled into a crouch, his pack activated and his hellgun humming.

Suddenly Kynt was behind him, humping the extra weight of the troop master-vox. Helmet off and blinking with his good eye through the blasts hammering the metal about them, the copper-headed comms-officer extended him the vox-hailer.

'Major.' Rask said.

'Go ahead.'

'*Vector Four* has a visual on the Spectre crash site, couple of clicks south of your position. The pilots confirm movement within and large numbers of enemy targets moving in on their position.'

‘How close is the convoy?’

‘Not close enough. I’ve re-routed the column but Deleval’s run into heavy resistance.’

‘Can the assault carriers reach them?’ Mortensen asked. It was the simplest choice.

‘Negative. Too dangerous. They’ve tried and already taken several hits. I’ve had them move onto the pick-up.’

‘Other options, captain?’

Rask swallowed.

‘We could head in. *Vertigo* could rappel our snipers down near to the crash site, while it’s still relatively quiet, and have them work their way over to the bird. Buy a bit of time until the convoy arrives.’

Mortensen grumbled to himself. The Spectres did carry marksmen for extra air cover on the dispersal. Still, he didn’t like it. The Spectre; the convoy; the snipers. Things were getting messy down on the ground.

‘Who is it?’

‘Opech and Sarakota.’

He knew about Sarakota. He’d assigned him to *Vertigo*. Opech was Rask’s choice: both of the snipers hailed from the feral world of Khongkotan, a bleak dust hole of canyons, cavern systems and backstabbing tribesmen. Whereas Sarakota spoke little, the Imperial Creed hadn’t quite imprinted itself on Opech: he was still full of tribal belligerence and was known to brawl with his brother Khongkotans. As a people, however, they had the senses of a raptor and made excellent scouts and marksmen.

The major nodded silently to himself. ‘Do it.’

‘Rask, out.’

The metal around Mortensen flashed with the ricochet of las-fire. The Titan was crawling with Mechanicus defectors, some of whom had taken up position on and around the war machine’s hulking shoulders, pinning the Redemption Corpsmen down and pushing them back. Apart from their own abandoned grav-chutes, the hood offered little in the way of cover and already Vedette’s skirmish line was retreating.

The renegades couldn’t shoot for dust – that much was clear from the wild pattern of fire – but the intensity of the assault was growing, with each new climber adding his muzzle to the collection aimed at the storm-troopers.

Suppression fire was all the corporal and her men had to offer the rebels in return, the hellguns hurling bursts of short range, power-conserving fire at the

mobs. Such tactics were a necessary evil for the storm-troopers. They travelled light and moved fast: their missions dependent upon surgical execution rather than collateral damage. As Mortensen had assured Krieg, the 364th Volscian Shadow Brigade would mop up these degenerates – eventually.

Vedette clicked her hellgun briefly to automatic and bounced backward on the tips of her boots, splitting rounds between different clusters of closing insurgents. Mortensen met her at the lip of the Titan's hood where Greco and Specialist Elek Quant were lashing lines and descenders to a sensor array.

Squatting by the virtually non-existent cover offered by the small forest of aerals, Mortensen and Vedette crouched shoulder to shoulder.

'We lost Pryce,' the major informed her stoically.

Vedette reached into her carapace and pulled out a piece of shattered chrome shell, trailing leads, valves and gore. 'Trepkos.'

'Great,' he snarled back. 'Plan B.'

The Mordian was way ahead of him and turned to present Quant and TFC Greco.

'Run a bypass on the bridge main-hatch runelock,' Mortensen barked at Greco, who gave him the kind of furtive, guilty look he always gave him before breaking a security system.

'Mechs trust us to snatch the crew but they don't trust us with the codes?' the arch-larcenist sniffed. He'd dumped his helmet, his suit sweat-band and five o'clock shadow making his crab-face look even more horribly splayed than usual.

'Politics,' said the major, rolling his eyes theatrically and slipping into a harness.

'What if I can't... this is a Titan, after all,' Greco put to him.

'Just get us past the shell. Uncle can work his magic on the bulkhead mechanism.'

That's what the Redemption Corps called Quant. He was one of the squad's old hands. An adamantium nerve and a lifetime's working knowledge of explosive devices had made him an easy choice for demolitions specialist, and Gorskii had learned a great deal under his tutelage. 'Okay, Uncle?'

'We're Redemption Corps,' the old specialist murmured sagely under his moustache. 'We'll improvise.'

Snapped into his descender, Mortensen and the two corpsmen kicked off the edge of the hood and rappelled the distance between the hood and the command deck, leaving Vedette to bark orders and hold the skirmish line.

As soon as Greco's boots hit the dome roof he slid down across the convex armour plating and onto his stomach where he went to work on the bridge top-hatch. Uncle started to assemble the demolition charge he was intending to use on the pressurised hatch bulkhead, leaving Mortensen to watch over them with his droning hellgun.

Greco was surprisingly fast. The trooper simply lay back, resting his head on one arm as though he were reclining in an obscura den. The hull shell sighed and parted, leaving a circular opening gaping to the sky. 'Progenium installations have better security than that,' the spire-breaker told them. 'You know, there was this one time—'

'Greco.'

'Yes, sir?'

'Shut up.'

'All yours, old man,' the TFC told Quant, shifting back up the metal dome. The specialist moved in with his charge, trailing detonator cable and tools.

His charge assembled, Uncle began to back up the hull himself, a palm grip detonator in one fist. The three men backed in under the hood and put their backs against the cool hull.

'Ready?'

Uncle nodded.

'Should we really be standing on the command deck?' Greco put to them at the last moment. 'You know, if we're gonna like, well, blow it up?'

'It's a directional charge,' the demolitions man informed him icily.

'Oh,' Greco muttered. 'Good safety tip.'

Uncle clasped the detonator and the hatch vomited forth skull-splitting sound and light. A peal of thunder rolled through the command deck superstructure and the armour plating immediately around the opening creaked and buckled. A cloud of blistering white smoke pumped from the hatch. Donning his gloves and hellgun, Uncle skirted down the slippery hull and vanished, making a corpsman-shaped hole in the smoke.

A few moments later Mortensen's vox-bead crackled.

'I'm in.'

The major grinned, adjusting the troop channel: 'Sergeant Conklin, Corporal Vedette. Fall back by teams to the Titan command deck.'

'Affirmative, major.'

IV

‘Send us down another dead-end and I’m going to come up there and rip you one, you hear me, flyboy?’ That was Deleval: Lieutenant, Fourth Platoon. It didn’t really matter to Krieg, although he was ashamed to admit that the Volscians all looked the same to him. There was little to pick between the officers and the men when it came to uniform and physical appearance; a complete lack of respect for Tactica formulations was equally evident in either.

Deleval was a charmer though. He was one of those tough hive bastards – the swill of corruption running in his veins. He had a hard face and unforgiving eyes that wouldn’t have been out of place on a bounty hunter. Lieutenant’s stripes or not, Deleval’s word was law amongst the men of his platoon. Anything else was simply an invitation to wake up the next morning with your throat slit: if you were unlucky enough to wake up at all. Snyder, Turkle and Goinz, the three hive-world hyenas that sat behind him would have seen to that all right.

Krieg had heard Captain Rask call Fourth Platoon the ‘Zombie Squad’, primarily because it was largely made up of the worst kind of Volscians the 364th had to offer – brutal gangers and psychotics, unable to live without the blood and carnage of the underhive and who found new expressions of their old lives in the merciless way in which they interpreted their orders. Deleval himself was rumoured to hail from the notorious Jericho Hive, the site of a spook war that had raged across several generations for nearly a century.

This was, of course, the other reason Deleval and his men had earned their moniker – regimental supplies of spook, mankweed, gladstones, PNP, hulk dust and various unlicensed combat stimulants chiefly came from the Zombie Squad and their illicit contacts and suppliers.

Deleval’s henchmen were typical Zombie Squad scum. They’d spent most of the run eyeballing Krieg and exchanging hazy slurs about the commissar. Without the reassuring presence of Golliant, barely squeezed into the seat next to him, Krieg was certain the Volscians would have riddled him with scatter shot from their combat shotguns and rolled his body out the back of the moving Centaur and under the tracks of the next. Snyder – a savage little scavver with a receding shock of wiry, ginger hair – and the loudmouth Turkle had to content themselves with goading the commissar and filling the compartment with nefarious laughter. Goinz didn’t say much – clearly out of his eyeballs on combat stimulants – but would simply chuckle nastily to himself, seemingly out of sync with the rest of the hilarity.

Blazer One had been less than helpful with directions, sending Deleval’s convoy down more than one improvised cul-de-sac, where revolutionaries had

toppled structures, erected barricades and stacked burnt-out cargo-10's and dozerloaders in an attempt to frustrate any kind of advance on the cathedra. It had worked.

Golliant had told Krieg that the convoy drivers were all handpicked Volscian ash buggy drivers, used to racing piles of scrap across the hellish and ever changing chemical wasteland that was their garrison home world. They were spoiled with the Centaur fire support variant: their pace and manoeuvrability put the universally admired Chimera chassis to shame. What the light carrier gained in handling, it lost in armour and armament, however, boasting only the snub barrels of a single, pintle-mounted assault cannon and heavy stubber up front for infantry support. The supercharged Centaurs did afford the hive drivers the vehicular verve they needed to put an armoured personnel carrier in positions conventional wisdom would otherwise state impossible. Compact enough to be slapped on the deck by a Navy aircraft, but able to hold its own in a firefight, the Centaur variant was a perfect fire support vehicle.

Unfortunately the labyrinthine freightways of Corpora Mons did not play to the Centaur's strengths. The convoy's initial run had been impressive, the cadet-commissar had to admit, the column maintaining high speeds across deserted plazas and clear thoroughfares.

It was only when the major re-directed Deleval's column to secure the *White Thunder* crash site that the convoy ran into any serious resistance. The crash site wasn't far off their route: the massive *Mortis Maximus* still stood sentinel above the convoy's armoured roofs, but the Spectre had gone down in a depository complex just south of the cathedra, at the heart of a rockcrete jungle of warehouse structures and semi-permanent giga-storage crate containers. The narrow accessways in between, like cholesterol-choked arteries, were strewn with debris and abandoned freight, creating a nightmare landscape of gauntlets and bottlenecks. There wasn't even room amongst the mayhem for a Centaur to about face and turn around.

It was here that the rebels had hit them time and again, waiting each time for obstacles to slow the convoy to a near standstill before unleashing hell from above with lasguns, rockets and grenades. With Deleval busy upfront, relaying directions from the passenger seat and manning the belt-fed heavy-stubber, Krieg had patched through to *Blazer Three*, their only other air support bird, instructing the Vulture to make strafing runs on the insurgent-crowded crate container rooftops. The pilot complied but was less than enthusiastic, claiming that the mobs were sending just as many rockets their way.

The Centaur rocked violently to an unexpected halt. The manoeuvre drew a furious scowl from Deleval, but Cruz, the Shadow Brigade driver, simply pointed and began manhandling the vehicle's chunky nest of levers into reverse. The lieutenant squinted through his cracked, blood-spattered viewport before lividly snatching the mouthpiece of his headset.

‘Convoy, all stop!’

‘What?’ Krieg snapped, leaning forward over the Cruz’s shoulder to get a better view of the road ahead.

‘*Blazer One*, this is *Ironfire*. If I’m not mistaken there is a vrekkin’ train across our route,’ the lieutenant said dangerously.

Deleval wasn’t wrong. Krieg found himself staring at a bulk freight repulsomotive, alight and clearly off its magrail. The automated hovertrain probably ran to a thousand cars or more, and would cut off routes across the line, possibly for kilometres in either direction. That wasn’t the worst of it. With the convoy at a standstill and a slow meandering reverse the only way back, rebel fire hit the Centaurs with renewed confidence and clout. The cadet-commissar found himself dropping his head, despite the fire support vehicle’s reinforced armour plating. The crew compartment filled with the cacophony of las-blast impacts and thought-shattering ricochets.

Deleval’s gunner fell back through the hatch like a sack of grain, his face and uniform a las-dappled mess of smouldering flesh and scorched webbing.

‘Get on the cannon!’ Krieg called, but his order was met with glares of venomous defiance from Deleval’s men.

‘Are you out of your vrekkin’ mind?’ Snyder asked, leaning over the dead Guardsman. He slipped his hand into the furious light show outside and snatched the hatch shut. Turkle proceeded to strip the unfortunate gunner of spare ammunition and in all probability, valuables.

Deleval was still spitting oaths and threats down the vox-link when a shadow flashed across his viewport, causing him to jerk back and let rip with the heavy-stubber. The weapon chugged a fierce blast of lead up the street, but uncertain as to whether he’d hit anything, Deleval yelled at the driver, ‘You got anything?’

Cruz darted his pinched face around the viewport: ‘Nothing.’

‘Crenna?’ Deleval yelled.

‘Dead,’ Snyder shot back, his eyes not leaving Krieg’s own angry slits.

Everyone heard the clunk from up front and even Krieg was forced to break his livid stare. Its location was obvious from the way Cruz began clawing feverishly at his chair harness.

‘Del...’ he managed with white-knuckle panic, but the lieutenant had nothing but four words for him.

‘Fire in the hole!’

The detonation was sharp, deafening and somehow worse inside the confines of the small vehicle. When Krieg brought up his head he found to his heart-striking dismay that he couldn’t, leading him instantly to the sickening conclusion that he was trapped or worse – paralysed. What he found was that Golliant had leaned over to shield him and it was the weight of the monstrous aide that was actually pinning him.

Turkle, Snyder and Goinz had somehow managed to crawl out the back door and the extra ventilation cleared the acrid smog that filled the compartment. As the smoke disappeared Krieg found himself glaring at Deleval, who looked exactly the same as he had done a few seconds before. He was fiddling with the fire support’s fried comms and playing with the limp and useless levers of the driver’s station.

Cruz hadn’t been so lucky. The magtube had been small but enough to disable the near side track and crack open the Centaur’s armour plating. The vehicle’s controls and steering had been completely mauled and the unlucky driver had had his backside blown through the top of his head.

The grizzled lieutenant was back to his helmet vox-link and climbing into the crew compartment. ‘Time to go,’ he told the commissar simply. Then into his vox-link, ‘This is Deleval. *Ironfire* is combat ineffective. Falling back to *Baptism*.’

To their surprise the three men met Snyder, Turkle and Goinz clambering back in the back of the Centaur. Turkle screamed something but it was lost in the split-second rumble and blast of *Baptism* behind. The detonation smacked *Ironfire*’s back door closed, but Deleval viciously kicked it back open. The second Centaur was no longer behind them – just a flame-swathed wreck.

Krieg jumped down with Deleval, his hellpistol out and humming furiously by his side. Golliant followed with the bodies of Cruz and the Centaur’s gunner over each broad shoulder and laid them against a nearby wall.

As with *Ironfire*, the rebels had been attempting to disable the second carrier’s tracks, this time with a rocket from above. The lieutenant sent his men off with a bark, to extricate the survivors, before switching back to his vox-link. ‘Staff Sergeant Bronstead, give me a perimeter and some suppression fire. We’re going to have to load bodies.’

Las-fire chugged up the dirt road around them, forcing Krieg and the

lieutenant to trot alongside the convoy with Golliant bounding calmly behind. They passed a glass-eyed Goinz who was crouched with his back to one of the massive crate containers, occasionally blasting his pump action skyward in an attempt to keep the insurgents away from the roof edge immediately above them. Turkle and Snyder were rolling one of *Baptism*'s crew in the dust and grit nearby, his flak jacket and uniform alight. The rest of the Volscians were pouring out of the carrier's rear, seemingly unscathed. Once again it was one of the carrier drivers that had paid the price.

'Gator' Bronstead trudged up the freightway with thick-set indolence. His helmet was crooked and he leaned his stocky shotgun across one shoulder as though he hadn't got the slightest intention of using it. A bulbous nose ring and belly added further colour and a scaly patch of skin running down the side of his sweaty neck – the remnant of some underhive pestilence and origin of his nickname – completed the picture. Bronstead and Krieg hadn't met and the sergeant, like the rest of his hive-kin, didn't fail to give the cadet-commissar a stabbing glare.

Dwarfing Bronstead for girth and even Golliant for height, a colossal mountain of flesh appeared behind the sergeant. This was Pontiff Preed, Krieg suspected. Dressed in acres of simple white robes and trailing holy relics, tomes and trinkets of faith from his thick, leather belt the priest seemed preoccupied with hiding his gargantuan bulk behind the Shadow Brigade vehicles. He was the breathing definition of an easy target.

The officers formed a circle in the shadow of *Steel Sanctuary* while Volscians dropped down from the vehicles and formed a hasty perimeter along the outside of the convoy. The air sang with las-fire but the Guardsmen seemed unconcerned. Only Krieg and the Pontiff appeared aware of their vulnerability: the cadet-commissar from a tactical viewpoint and Preed by virtue of pure self-preservation.

'Right, I'm going to make this fast,' Deleval began with authority, 'Recover the bodies and scuttle the forward Centaurs. I don't want insurgent scavengers using our own weapons and equipment against us. Fall back to the main avenue and continue as planned to the rendezvous.'

'What about the Spectre crew?' Krieg threw in above the din of the ambush.

'They're on their own. We tried.'

'That's not acceptable, lieutenant,' Krieg informed him.

'I don't know if you've noticed,' Deleval hissed, clearly riled, 'but there is a train across our path. What the hell do you want me to do about that? Look, we

were ordered to swing by, which we've tried to do. Chances are if those Navy boys weren't killed in the crash they're gonna wish they had been – the way these mungers are coming down on us.'

'If it were the other way round, Navy aircraft would be directed to search for us, would they not?' Preed insisted.

Krieg found himself nodding in surprise. He shouldn't have been. The corpulent Preed was like some massive herbivore that had no natural predators. He'd outgrown the danger of his circumstances and had little to fear from the average hiver; besides, everyone knew that he had Captain Rask's ear. He could afford to disagree.

'And we'll probably have to if we remain here for much longer,' Bronstead said gruffly.

'We're out of time here,' Deleval told the group. 'If we don't move, and I mean now, we won't make the Titan on time. How happy do you think the major will be then? He grabs the targets but has no convoy to transport them. With all due respect, Holy Father, you and Krieg here are on your first outing. This is what we do. We're going after the targets. The Navy boys are on their own.'

The lieutenant went to walk away – a clear signal that the impromptu meeting was over. Bronstead began to peel away also.

'Give me a couple of your men,' Krieg called after him. His voice was thick with grit and it was difficult to tell whether he'd made a request or given an order. 'We can make our way on foot and work up to the crash site. If we can get the survivors back to your original route on the other side of the track, so be it. You've got to negotiate the train anyway. If not, you can go on, as planned, and make the pick-up.'

The platoon leader turned on his heel, a savage stream of las-fire cutting in between them. The mighty Preed shrugged affirmation. The lieutenant's face was screwed up with hate and annoyance, but the deep lines gradually faded as he took in the young commissar from boot to cap. Something seemed to suddenly amuse him.

'Done. I'll go one better. You can have three men,' Deleval told him, before yelling across his shoulder at the Guardsmen behind. 'Turkle, Snyder, Goinz, front and centre! You're going with the commissar.'

Krieg had expected a stream of complaints and oaths or even a downright refusal from the hivers. What he got was sly looks, through slitted eyes and a maniacal snigger from Goinz.

'Thanks,' Krieg mumbled, a little off guard.

‘See you on the other side,’ Deleval taunted and walked off with Bronstead at his side. Preed nodded slowly at Krieg, readjusted his monocle and then turned to follow.

The three Volscians slid their backs against the wall of a nearby cargo container for cover and had begun feverishly slotting fat cartridges into the breeches of their shotguns. Golliant was back after a brief absence. He’d deposited the *Ironfire*’s casualties in the back of one of the other Centaurs and had liberated Deleval’s heavy stubber from its forward mounting inside the blasted fire support vehicle. The weapon was a real monster, boasting a pistol grip and carry handle on the top of its belt-fed body and a long, fat, air-cooled barrel to deliver the bad news to its unfortunate targets. Krieg’s aide had also stripped the vehicle of available ammunition, draping spare belts of bullets across each shoulder.

‘Goll, you don’t have to come. Go with the convoy...’

Steel Sanctuary and the column were already rolling backwards, out from under the thunderstorm of rocket-propelled grenades and las-beams the seditionists were pelting at them.

‘How am I supposed to protect you from in there?’ the hulking aide hissed with simple logic, his voice straining above the gunfire. He swung the elongated barrel of the stubber over the cadet-commissar’s head and joined the three corporsman against the corrugated wall of the container. Snatching his hellpistol from where it sat snugly in its holster, Krieg darted after him.

V

Vertigo came in hard, low and fast.

‘Benedict, cleared to fire?’

‘Affirmative.’

‘Let’s do our worst.’

Like some vision of angelic vengeance the Spectre tore across the industrialscape. Holding the stick loose but firm in one hand Rosenkrantz cycled the ammunition drums on her wing-mounted autocannons and primed both weapons with the other. Her thumb did the rest, stabbing at the fire stud and releasing two blazing streams of certain death and tracer fire across the depot roof.

The depot itself was a marksman’s dream: a rectangle of terrace roofs, catwalks and flat storage compounds. All with great cover – from the ground at

least. Mobs of Mechanicus insurgents had swamped these spaces and rained firepower down on the *White Thunder*, which lay smashed and broken-backed on the rockcrete of the quad below. Nothing could save them from *Vertigo*'s own variety of explosive vengeance, though. The incessant thunder of the cannons cut furrows of charred, twisted metal into the rooftops and turned throngs of insurgents into steaming smears of bloody chum.

This was the last of the terraces and it was just as well: the cannons were almost spent. In the meantime, fearless hordes of revolutionaries had weaved their way towards the disabled aircraft, using every gutted vehicle, every stack of abandoned cargo and piece of debris they could find to use as cover.

Rosenkrantz herself had contributed to this. It was the nature of war – every action had an entire host of reactions – some anticipated and some not. The first of the compound rooftops she'd hit had been absolutely crawling with enemy targets and the flight lieutenant had seen little harm in slamming a couple of rockets into the side of the building. The strategy had the desired effect, burying an entire swarm of defectors in tonnes of metal and ceramite. It had also, with the collapse of the unstable compound and several towers, spread huge pieces of cover-friendly debris across the south end of the quad and allowed large numbers of individual insurgents to close on the downed Spectre.

At least Rosenkrantz had the comfort of knowing that her efforts were not in vain. There were definitely survivors down there. On the wingless starboard side someone had got one of the door weapons operational and was doing a good job of keeping heads down with scenery-shredding bursts of heavy bolter fire. The portside had taken the brunt of the crash and rents and fractures adorning the aircraft's hull were allowing for an intermittent, if steady, pattern of small arms fire to present a front on the other side.

Rask and Sass were behind her: the major's adjutant his usual serious self, the captain unusually so. 'Okay,' Rask said, 'these boys are ready to do this.'

Rosenkrantz understood. It had been Rask's suggestion and now that they were here, the full scale and overwhelming futility of the situation had dawned on him. Rask clearly felt that he was sending the snipers to their deaths but believed that it was necessary if the Navy crew were to have any chance at all.

The pilot brought her assault carrier to a suicidal standstill high above her sister Spectre.

'Chief,' Rosenkrantz called across the vox and was rewarded with the chatter of fierce cover fire from her own door gunners. Bolt rounds sprayed the rockcrete around *White Thunder*, mangling cover and the occasional Mechanicus

heretic, but more importantly the weapons' higher elevation forced the hordes of kill-frenzied Illians further back.

Slick cords tumbled from the bay door and the insanelly daring snipers bailed out and rappelled their way to the roof of the smashed Spectre, molested by snaps of las-fire that shot past the lines and the descending soldiers. The strategy was not without cost and Rosenkrantz's 'Boltmagnet' callsign became suddenly and uncomfortably appropriate.

Vertigo rolled slightly under the weight of pure firepower being directed at an aircraft that had been all but a blur of undercarriage moments before and now presented an irresistibly stationary target. Runescreens and augurs screamed warnings from a hundred different systems. The canopy flashed and sparked as a hail of fire washed over the reinforced armaplas. Rosenkrantz blinked involuntarily.

'Flight Lieutenant!' Benedict called out with an unusually high level of emotion for one of his kind. Rosenkrantz had expected this. He felt what *Vertigo* felt. He was more part of the aircraft than the crew: the information coursing through cables and conduits wired straight into his spine from the bird's various archaic systems was registering simply as pain.

'Rask?'

It was hard to tell when the captain was genuinely nervous – his face was usually taut with some kind of agony from his knee. He seemed nervous now though, white fingers pressing the vox-link to pursed lips. He hesitated for a moment, unsure.

'They're on the ground,' Sass finally confirmed. Rask nodded at her.

'Well it was going to be them or us,' Rosenkrantz sneered as she threw the vector thrust into direct ascension and blasted skyward away from the shooting gallery bellow. The cockpit auspex streamed a small saga of data at the pilot. 'Benedict, take over,' she called after the first hundred metres, tearing off her harness and slipping out of the confines of her seat.

Sass couldn't help feasting on the detail sweeping across the console.

'The port tail boom's registering a gearbox fire,' he informed her. When she didn't respond he added, 'That doesn't sound good.'

'You think?' she asked before pushing past Rask who gave her a feeble smile.

'Good work,' he told her and probably meant it.

'I'm going down below. See how badly we've been hit,' she answered coolly and pulled away. Something wasn't right. *Vertigo* was hurting and she didn't need to be Benedict to feel it.

VI

Merciless and quiet, Krieg and the Volscians slipped through the smoke-spuming wreckage of the south compound and up through the warren of debris that had redecorated the quad floor.

A deafening cascade of fire flew overhead from the depot roofs and terraces – all directed at the blast-ridden Spectre. The aircraft was a sorry sight, but gave the Imperials the distraction they needed to work up through the enemy line undetected. The din of gunfire bouncing off the walls of the compound hid the cold-blooded blasts of the Zombie Squad Corpsmen as they trotted up behind Illian rebels, hiding behind girders and smashed slabs of rockcrete. Snyder and his cronies had no problem with shooting the boilersuited figures in the back, slickly working the pumps on their combat shotguns before riddling another unsuspecting heretic with shot and moving on. It was a brutal but effective procedure, leaving Golliant's heavy stubber to deal with any unwanted attention moving in from their flanks and Krieg to handle the rear.

They were moving at quite a pace, the shotgun crew ahead seemingly drawn on less by a desire to reach the Spectre than a dead-eyed thirst to spread blood across the esplanade. This gave Krieg little to contend with, very few of the insurgents moving in on *White Thunder* were faster than they were.

A begoggled lab-tech, making a dash between two warped girders, nearly ran straight into Krieg. The shock of finding an Imperial commissar in his path was a little more than disconcerting and the lasgun he was carrying came up a moment too late. Krieg blew a furious beam of supercharged laser fire through his chest, stopping the Mechanicus menial dead in his tracks.

In the no-man's-land between the crash site and the nearest cover, matters were less simple. Small pockets of insurgents who had successfully worked their way up to the downed assault carrier gathered in tight groups. With little in the way of communication, Snyder, Turkle and Goinz switched tactics from wholesale slaughter to a more cautious approach. Getting in position to make the run across to the aircraft they only gunned down those rebels that became aware of their position and intentions. This in turn stirred up a hornets' nest for Krieg and his aide, who were coming up from behind.

One particularly determined group rushed the two men from the servo-carriage of a toppled crane. The crisp crack of las-bolts surrounded them as the gang, still wearing their tight-fitting, rubber filter-hoods, came at them with furious firepower.

The ear-splitting chatter of the heavy stubber cut the group in two as well as several individual revolutionaries. Krieg stood his ground – storm-trooper style – his back and arm straight and his hellpistol moving smoothly and surely from one target to the next, lancing them with hotshot. The gang was completely pumped and wild, most of their bolts veering and going wide. Several got lucky and plucked at his greatcoat and it was perhaps this that made Krieg miss his own target.

They were running at him thick and fast and it had been a miracle he'd created the small mound of bodies that he had. His last shot had been intercepted by one of the crane's crumpled, plasteel cross-beams and several heretics slipped through Golliant's withering arc of fire and pressed their advantage in the face of Krieg's first mistake.

The leader of the group fired, missed and then proceeded to throw his hooded head and shoulder into Krieg's midriff. Krieg went down in an untidy heap, splitting his efforts between smashing the grip of his hellpistol across his assailant's blank, rubber face and blasting spasmodically at the shapes of the remaining defectors, who were skidding to the ground beside him, intent on holding down his arms.

The Mechanicus menial on top of him sat upright, his legs astride the commissar's prone form – the barrel of the lasgun gripped in two hands – the weapon's ugly stock wavering above Krieg's snarling face. In the muffled confusion the cadet-commissar noticed that the heavy stubber wasn't firing anymore. At first he thought that it had run dry, but an awkward glimpse under the arm of his attacker revealed the weapon lying abandoned in the dust and Golliant, impossibly set upon by six or seven hooded individuals, smacking his foes into the ground with his close combat weapons of choice – the two flight deck club hammers that usually sat snug in his belt.

Everything was still for a moment. Krieg's arms had been pinned to the ground and his pistol knocked from his grip. Ghoulish breath sounds filled the air as the hooded heretics, gasping with exertion, held him still.

It wasn't a great swing and nowhere near enough to take his head away from his shoulders, but it felt like it. The stock had flashed in front of his eyes, making contact with his cheekbone and dashing his skull into the esplanade. Numb with shock, Krieg found himself keeping it there. A dribble of warm blood rolled across his face from the gash on his cheek and pooled in his eyes. Blinking red ooze, the commissar found himself staring across the quad, the ground-level angle odd and disorientating. He saw Turkle and Goinz bolt across the open

ground towards the shattered fuselage of the downed aircraft. Snyder was standing looking back at him, a sinister smugness hanging from a curled lip. He shouldered the squat combat shotgun he was carrying, turned and bolted likewise, leaving Golliant and the cadet-commissar to get on with the business of dying.

The backswing had taken an eternity but finally it came. The same reverberating deadness in his head; the same flush of blood: this time across the other side of his face. With the world running at slow motion around him, Krieg had time to consider how scars running across both cheeks would make him look like some kind of duellist.

He couldn't tell which came first, the sound or the sensation, but suddenly he could move his left arm. The flood of movement and relief was accompanied by a crashing thud and fresh blood on his face – this time not his own. Two more shadows disappeared and as he came back to his senses he saw the revolutionary sitting astride his chest, torn from his seat and his head come apart. With splatter still falling around him, the cadet-commissar managed to roll onto his stomach.

From the darkness of one of the Spectre's side doors Krieg could make out the shape of a bipod, the glint of a scope and the long, thick barrel of an anti-materiel sniper rifle. Their closest relative was the ubiquitous long-las, favoured by many a Guard sniper. Redemption Corps marksmen often needed something a little harder hitting for knocking out equipment and suppressing light vehicles, as well as blowing superfluously large holes in enemy combatants. Essentially a large calibre rifle, the fearsome weapon took the same ammunition as an autocannon and hit just as hard.

Scooping up his hellpistol, sitting in the grit just centimetres out of reach, Krieg turned the weapon on the swarm of bodies all over Golliant's massive frame. Somehow the aide had just kept swinging his hammers, to devastating effect, even with several rebels hanging off each arm. The numbers had easily doubled since the last time the commissar had glimpsed him and the wrestler was going down under the pure weight of his assailants. Aiming cock-eyed from the ground, Krieg sent a string of sizzling fire into the backs of the hooded workers. Alarmed, some made the mistake of turning their backs on Golliant to face Krieg but got a hammer in the back of the skull for their trouble. Caught in the crossfire of the commissar's pistol and the Volscian's brawny reach the rebels rapidly became a carpet of bodies at the brute corpsman's feet.

Snatching the heavy stubber in one hand and dragging a dazed Krieg to his feet with the other, Golliant marched them across the open ground, the

reassuring crash of sniper fire all around them.

Inside the troop bay of *White Thunder* the darkness was startling. It was a shock after the glare of the open quad and it took Krieg's eyes a moment to adjust. Beams of dust speckled sunlight crisscrossed the bay from holes and rents in the fuselage caused by the crash and some of the heavier weapons carried by the mobs outside. The only functioning heavy bolter kicked out an unrelenting roar from the starboard side and the Spectre crew fired warning shots from their laspistols through holes and doorways on the opposite side. Only just arriving themselves, Snyder, Turkle and Goinz crouched in the middle of the shattered troop bay, catching their breath. They eyed the commissar moodily, reloading their shotguns and taking swigs from their canteens.

Down on the ground by Krieg's feet lay one of Mortensen's storm-troopers wrapped around the brutal angularity of an anti-materiel sniper rifle. He wasn't even looking through the scope but was firing with complete confidence and in a steady rhythm.

'Thank you,' the commissar told the sniper. He didn't answer – just angled his almond face and nodded slowly, continuing to fire and from the screams outside, hit his targets.

'How—' the commissar began.

'The respirators in their hoods, mostly,' the Khongkotan trooper told him solemnly, 'and the hum of your pistol.' Obviously the sniper was used to questions from new blood in the squad. From a commissar he probably took the question as an order. 'Also, the mechheads: they smell different.'

Krieg looked down at the hellpistol in his holster, the cable running between the handgrip and the power pack on his belt. Turning his nose to his shoulder he took an experimental sniff.

'And your coat,' came a bitter voice from the far end of the bay, 'sounds like foil through a vox-hailer – even from across the damn quad.'

Another feral worlder sat upright against the Spectre's worm-holed hull. He clutched his rifle awkwardly to his chest as though afraid to let it go. As Krieg's eyes adjusted to the deeper darkness he saw why: the marksman was a mess, riddled through with holes, not unlike the aircraft, his flak jacket smouldering.

Krieg marvelled: he'd heard of feral world tribes whose senses had attuned to their environments, not unlike the savage, predatory mega-fauna they shared their world with, but the snipers' talents were something to behold. Krieg imagined what he could hit, if he could hear and smell as well as he could see.

The Spectre's co-pilot, still wearing a scuffed flight helmet, was manhandling a crate of bolter ammunition from beside the wounded sniper over to the door gun. His face lit up at the sight of the commissar's cap and greatcoat. It was not a reaction Krieg was used to. He thrust out a keen hand.

'Boy, are we glad to see you,' he blurted honestly. 'Hoyt.'

Krieg didn't bother to introduce himself. 'Pilot?'

'Dead.'

The commissar nodded. 'I've got good news and bad. The good news is that you're being rescued. The bad news is that we're it.'

Hoyt's face dropped. 'No airlift?'

'Too dangerous.'

'What about the convoy?' the injured sniper shot across the inky interior of the aircraft.

'Can't get through. We're it. The convoy will pass a few kilometres to the north of here in about twenty minutes, which means if we want to be on it we've got to haul some.'

'But,' Hoyt stammered. Several Navy crewmen had stopped firing and were staring at the commissar in disbelief. 'We're surrounded.'

'We got in,' Golliant rumbled, trying to be helpful. Deleval's men just looked at the ground, kicking empty bolter cartridges between their feet and lighting lho-sticks.

Krieg's eyes travelled across the bay, meeting each member of the crew in turn. It was an intoxicating moment. Krieg understood the nature of leadership – he'd been an officer – but with the flight crew staring at him as though their lives depended upon it – which they did – he began to empathise with Mortensen's predicament. Krieg could not be honest with these men. He couldn't talk odds and harsh truths. He needed fire in their bellies. He needed them to believe in themselves and in him. Like the major, he had to make them believe that he could get them out alive. He didn't know if that was cultish practice – as the canoness had seen it – but of all the evils it could be, at that moment in the Spectre's troop bay, it seemed a necessary one.

'How much bolter ammo have you got left?' Krieg asked.

'Plenty,' Hoyt told him. 'We've got enough for four guns, but only one is operational.'

'Golliant, help me.'

Between them Krieg and the aide took the crate the co-pilot had been carrying and dumped the contents in a pile in the centre of the bay. Then to the baffled

crewmen: 'In order to make it out of the complex we're going to need a diversion. Pile every piece of ammunition you can find and stop firing that gun.'

'Stop firing?' an injured crew chief started incredulously, his arm bound with a hasty a sling.

'They'll think the gun's dry and that'll draw them in on the starboard side.'

'Excuse me, sir, but why would we want to do that?' Hoyt asked politely.

'Because we want as many of them as close to the bird as possible when we blow it up,' Krieg stated simply.

'We have no detonators, what do you think you're going to use as a charge?' Snyder sneered.

Krieg shrugged off the insolence and looked over at the Redemption Corps sniper who had saved his life.

'Think you could hit a fuel tank with that thing?'

VII

Mortensen had never been inside a god before. It wasn't at all like he'd imagined. For a thing that looked so impressively gargantuan on the outside, it was a testament to claustrophobia inside the thick armour plating. A perpendicular tour puzzle of crawlspaces, gantries, bulkheads and laddershafts, the *Mortis Maximus* had swallowed the Redemption Corps whole.

Power was out the length of the Titan and the command deck had been dead and eerily empty. Snapping muzzle lamps to their hellguns, the storm-troopers descended, their swift but wary cover formation cutting patterns through the pitch darkness with the beams of their torches.

The major had had Greco seal the command deck sky hatch he'd originally hacked in order to avoid any unwelcome visitors coming in from the rear and through Uncle's ragged opening. He then had the troop split into three small groups under Conklin, Vedette and himself. While the master sergeant pushed on into the thorax network of modules and engineering vestibules below, Vedette and Mortensen took their sweeps in opposite directions, exploring the maintenance ducts and ordnance vaults above the mighty super-heavy weapons mounted on each colossal arm.

Vedette's team had drawn the Volcano Cannon protruding from the left arm of the massive Titan, meaning that her sweep consisted of a tour of the very heart of the god-machine: the dormant plasma reactor, that ordinarily powered not only the devastating Volcano cannon but the Titan's very automotive functions.

Mortensen on the other hand was landed with the nightmare of the gigantic gatling blaster. His men moved swiftly and silently through the darkness of room after room packed to the gills with mega bore bolt rounds, ready to fall upon instruction through the autoloader vents below and directly into the open breech of each titanic, revolving barrel.

‘Major,’ a voice came softly across the micro-bead. ‘Best get up here.’

Mortensen worked his way up through a series of pokey, valve encrusted cubicles and padded along a narrow corridor. Trooper Teague had been leading the way but was currently waiting for him against a pressure hatch.

The major had taken an instant liking to Teague. Elysians spent their lives in the air and so the young trooper was a natural drop-soldier, despite his tender years.

The two men crouched in the companionway for a moment.

‘And...’ Mortensen prompted. Teague thought he could see it. He casually waved his hellgun in a wide arc in front of them. The lamp beam struggled with the black depths but revealed enough to prompt the major to add his own.

It was incredible. Smack bang in front of them the claustrophobic confines of the god-machine gave way to a small oasis of open space. It wasn’t a conduit or chamber; it wasn’t even square. A perfect sphere of freedom had been cut out of the restrictions of the thoracic decks. Metal decking, support struts, cabling and instrumentation all ended in polite, clean lines around the open space. Teague ran a finger over one curved edge, seemingly cut from a bulkhead.

‘Smooth,’ Teague told the major. ‘Never seem anything like it. What kind of a tool can do that?’ Mortensen nodded with hesitation. The Elysian was right of course: even a plasma torch, which was what someone would need to do something like this, left rough edges. This also left the question of why anyone would want to create a spherical hole of emptiness in the middle of a Titan.

Mortensen’s stomach tightened.

The major’s micro-bead chirped. It was Conklin.

‘Crew located, boss.’

That was something. ‘Where?’

‘Engineering – Thorax East, deck six, Void Shield Generator Room. Or at least that’s what it says on the blast doors,’ the sergeant came back.

‘Status?’

‘No idea. Something’s got ’em spooked because we’ve identified ourselves and they ain’t raising these doors for anything.’

‘Stand by. We’re coming down.’ Mortensen switched channels. ‘Vedette, you

getting this?’

‘Receiving, major.’ As usual the Mordian officer was ever ready, monitoring the vox-traffic.

‘Time to regroup. How’s your sweep?’

‘You might want to take a look at the plasma reactors. Someone’s ripped the hell out of them.’

Mortensen mulled it over: Vedette wasn’t given to exaggeration.

‘No time. Meet me downstairs.’

‘Affirmative,’ she returned without question.

‘Vedette,’ Mortensen cut in before she signed off. ‘Detonators or small arms?’ There was a pause.

‘By hand, sir.’

The major turned slowly towards the black emptiness and shone his barrel lamp up at a maintenance opening about six metres above them on the other side.

‘Can you make that?’ he put to Teague. The storm-trooper took it as a friendly insult: Mortensen had asked him to scale, crawl down and hang off worse things than that before. The major nodded. ‘Push on and sweep the operational ordnance compartments. Anything out of the ordinary, I want to know about it. Otherwise, make your way down to ground level and the pick-up. Understood?’

By way of a reply, the nimble Elysian snapped his hellgun to his pack and vaulted the first gap. Without fear he took a succession of near gymnastic steps before launching himself up into an exposed set of coolant lines.

‘Major,’ he called, hanging by one hand and turning slightly. ‘I’ll beat you down there.’

Mortensen left the young soldier to his acrobatics and began his own descent.

It didn’t take long for the major to reacquire his squad. As the bullet flew Conklin wasn’t far below them, despite taking a spinal column ladderwell directly into the Engineering sub-levels. The major met Conklin cradling his bolter by the secured blast doors.

‘How do you know they’re in there?’

‘Took a shot at us, didn’t they,’ Greco croaked from behind. He was sitting on a barrel of lubricant behind the open bulkhead. Minghella was with him, his back to the major and his head bobbing up and down as he went to work on a field dressing.

‘You took one?’ Mortensen asked.

‘In the foot.’ Uncle smirked, which was something he rarely did.

‘Laugh it up,’ Greco shot moodily, his usual good humour gone.

‘They secured the blast doors and locked them off,’ Quant continued, smiling. ‘Emperor knows where they’re getting the power. Engineers probably rigged something temporary.’

Mortensen suppressed the involuntary curl of his own lips. ‘Will he pull through, sergeant?’ he put to Minghella sarcastically. He didn’t wait for an answer. ‘Good. TFC Greco, hobble that bony ass of yours over here and hack those blast doors.’

Kicking off the barrel and sporting an exaggerated limp the storm-trooper made his way across, using the cool passage wall for support. He snatched his satchel of tools from an amused Uncle and trailed a ribbon of bandage where Minghella had not had time to secure the dressing. As Greco hacked into the hydraulic rune mechanism with his equipment he muttered guttural hive oaths to himself.

‘How many?’ Mortensen asked.

‘I saw the flash of five barrels, at least,’ Conklin informed him.

The door mechanism made an unhealthy sounding clearance before juddering open. Greco shambled back before snatching up his weapon, as well he might. As the robust door rolled open the Redemption Corps were met with the glare of bioluminarc lamps and a thicket of las barrels – primed and pointed.

After a dumbfounded second, storm-troopers’ barrels followed suit; accompanied by the flash of open palms from both sides. Some screaming and bawling ensued with Mortensen’s harsh roar coming out on top.

‘Get those vrekkin’ rifles on the ground!’

A crate-chested chief engineer waved an improvised flamer in his face and a spindly tactical officer, his cranial lines and plugs gathered together in a ragged pony tail, slid the long barrel of a lasgun over the engineer’s shoulder. ‘We’re Redemption Corps, you slut-mongerers. This is asset recovery: someone wants you plugging in somewhere else, so unless you want to be walking out of here with a serious physical impediment – like death – you’ll lay your weapons on the deck.’

A pistol came down and a woman in a black uniform and cap stepped forward, running her slender fingers along the trembling barrels and pushing them to the floor. She had rich, unsmiling lips and an eye-patch to match her dour uniform.

‘Princeps Hess,’ she enlightened him as her crew placed their weapons on the generator room floor. ‘The *Mortis Maximus* is mine.’

‘Not for much longer,’ Mortensen informed her with casual hive-world smarm.

‘My men are going to walk you out of here. A convoy of carriers will then take you out of the hotzone and you’ll be airlifted to safety. That’s the plan, but don’t quote me on it.’

‘No.’

‘No?’ Mortensen wasn’t used to people refusing his offer of rescue. ‘You’re the second person today who was under the misapprehension that they can give me orders. I must be losing my powers of persuasion. But you see that’s why I’ve got this.’ He brought up his hellgun and shone the lamp into her remaining eye. ‘It speaks a variety of different languages but even that doesn’t matter because actions – I’m reliably informed – are louder than words.’ He primed the rifle savagely.

‘The god-machine has been infiltrated and somehow sabotaged from the inside. That’s why we are immobilised; that’s why we’re hiding in the generator room. This hallowed Titan cannot be left in the hands of the enemy.’

‘It can,’ Mortensen assured her, ‘and it will. That’s not within my mission parameters. Some idiot determined that your bony backsides were worth recovering and my men have in turn risked their own lives to achieve that end. We’re not here to save your damn machine, princeps. That’s someone else’s headache, thankfully. We came for you. So if you’d be so kind, my men can only hold a perimeter for so long.’

‘Our weapons...’

‘My men can handle your security. I don’t trust your trigger finger, anyways. You might be able to sunder worlds in this thing, but you shoot like cripples. You had a clean shot and the element of surprise and you pranged one of my men in the foot for Throne’s sake. Don’t worry though; he had it coming.’ Mortensen spun, looking for Conklin.

‘Sergeant, take the men and get the bridge crew and engineering staff here down to ground level as soon as possible. Double-time it. Be on your guard – we have unfriendlies in here.’ Mortensen cast a disparaging eye over Hess and her crew as they began filing out.

‘Affirmative.’

‘Kynt: raise Deleval. Make sure that convoy is in position for our exit. Don’t take any crap from that Volscian piece of trash. If he gives you any trouble, tell him it’ll be my boot up his backside.’ The young comms-officer nodded his freckled face and went to work on his equipment.

Mortensen started drifting towards the opposite exit.

‘What about you?’ Vedette put to him.

‘I think I know how the infiltrators got in. Teague’s up there.’

‘I’ll go,’ the Mordian insisted, heading for the companionway.

‘I sent him, I’ll get him,’ Mortensen growled, stopping her in her tracks. ‘You make sure the Titan crew get to the ground alive.’ The major streaked off in the opposite direction, leaving Vedette to protect the rear of the escort, his voice the only clear thing in the swirl of shadow. ‘That might be harder than you think.’

It wasn’t difficult to find his way back up the autoloaders, but Mortensen made considerably harder work of negotiating the sphere of open emptiness beyond than Trooper Teague had.

In Fire Control the major found signs of life, or more accurately: impending death. Scores of servitors, charged with the smooth operation and maintenance of the colossal gatling blaster, had been ripped from their stations and butchered. Heads littered the deck with the kind of sickly, flesh-drawn grins servitors were given to. Blood and the black arterial oil that ran through the drones’ bodies ran down the walls and pooled around the dismembered corpses.

This didn’t feel like renegade Mechanicus menials. This was something else. Mortensen moved through the carnage with cautious urgency, swinging his hellgun around corners and up through vents and hatches.

A ripple in the darkness. Mortensen came to terms with the reality that he wasn’t alone. The sting of vulnerability brought up the hairs on the back of his neck; the scrape of a footstep on the deck up ahead; the vanishing glint of an eye in his roving lamp. He was so preoccupied with these distractions that he almost missed Teague.

With all the gore and butchery already on show in the murky fire control station, the young Elysian’s battered, blood-drenched body hardly seemed to merit a second glance. He was hanging in the chains of a block and tackle, his arms and head drooped through loops of an ammunition hoist. He’d been completely run through with some kind of wicked blade and his body was criss-crossed with deep gouges that were still leaking his lifeblood all over the mounds of ammunition below. He was dead though – that much was certain.

Mortensen suddenly had the feeling that someone was walking over his grave; if his grave had been the deck floor directly behind him then he would have almost certainly been right. Gripping his rifle tightly in both hands he spun around, ready to unleash fully-automatic hell on his stalker. Whoever it was he was big, powerful and had reflexes the major hadn’t accounted for. A fist came smashing down on the barrel, sending the weapon clattering to the floor. The powerful foot stamped down into the rifle’s breech, impossibly crushing the

converter underfoot, before scraping it backwards across the deck, tearing its power cable from Mortensen's pack.

The compartment descended into complete darkness as the weapon's muzzle smacked into the wall and smashed the lamp. Something like a hand slipped around his neck from behind and enveloped his throat in a vice-like grip. Mortensen's first instinct was to tear at the fingers with his own. His boots were off the ground now and the air in his lungs disappearing fast. The digits weren't moving, however, kept there by an incredible force of will and bulging tendons. If Mortensen hadn't been so preoccupied with the fading oxygen in his lungs, more of his panic-stricken thoughts might have been devoted to the strange, ribbed and leathery fingers grasping for him. It was probably some Mechanicus maniac in a pressure suit, the major reasoned, but he couldn't help considering the possibility that Krieg was in fact correct and he was in the presence of some malformed, chaotic mob devoted to some unholy cult. As he relived the moments of the attack through his blurring consciousness he could swear that he'd seen multiple limbs and claws.

His flailing boots had caught several limbs and bodies in the blackness and Mortensen suspected that he was surrounded. This was confirmed when some kind of blade slashed across his midriff, slicing through his carapace and into his stomach. He couldn't feel the pain of course, just the ugly tugging of flesh as it gave and tore in a ragged gash. His hands instinctively clutched his belly and were almost immediately slippery with blood.

His thumb brushed his belt and following it with his fingers he found his way to his holster and side arm. Snatching the autopistol in a fast-fading grip he brought the heavy pistol up, rested the top of the snub, quivering barrel on his shoulder and pulled the trigger.

Something died behind him. Mortensen's limp body tumbled to the floor. He couldn't quite describe the inhuman screech his assailant had made, but he'd heard more death-cries than most people and he knew that they were all sickeningly individual. A fully-automatic blast of autofire in the face couldn't be good news for anyone.

On his knees he bent over and kept pressure on the gaping wound across his stomach. In the dark it was impossible to tell how deep it was but he was pretty sure that his guts were still where they should be. With his forehead resting on the cold metal of the deck he could feel the tremor of heavy footfalls all around him and fearing another attack, let loose blindly with the remaining rounds in the pistol.

The savage roar of the weapon seemed to drive them back; he might even have clipped one or two of them. He fumbled in the darkness for a second clip but the magazine slipped through his blood-sticky fingers and onto the floor. It was a horrible feeling. With the sensitivity of his skin reduced to a cool numbness he relied heavily on sight for dexterity. Long gone were the days he could strip down an autopistol blindfolded. In the darkness his eyes could tell him nothing and he couldn't tell whether or not he was touching the magazine or the floor. He could hear at least and had to listen to heavy footfalls approach. The horde was back. In a rage of frustration Mortensen abandoned the clip and went for his last magazine. Slamming it home he scrambled messily across the floor, hand scrabbling around in his own gore.

As gnarled and knotty appendages caressed the back of his armour he swung the autopistol behind him as both club and firearm, the short barrel sweeping the compartment, trailing the bright arc of a muzzle flash. It was a strange couple of seconds. It was a relief to have his fingers around something reassuringly unwieldy.

In the momentary illumination provided by the hot gases escaping the autopistol's barrel, Mortensen picked out the bulkhead by which he'd entered. The ghostly forms of his assailants were also fleetingly visible, moving with inhuman speed and receding with the shadows. The overwhelming impression, in the dull environment of the Titan interior, was one of colour: puce green flesh.

There was the swiftest notion of filthy fangs and claws, and his stalkers' bulbous bulk was decorated with corrugated flak and tattered robes. Greenskins. Greenskins on board the Titan. Greenskins here on Illium: just not like any greenskins Mortensen had seen before. Or half seen – Mortensen had only been privy to the barest glimmer in the lightless confines of the fire control station.

Crawling arm over arm for the bulkhead, the major kept the monsters at bay with short, sporadic blasts behind and around him as he dragged himself across the smooth floor. Lugging his torso across the bulkhead threshold, Mortensen pulled his legs through before slamming the heavy hatch closed. He could feel the rumble of a final desperate charge as the bulkhead swung shut, but he was already spinning the wheel-lock on the other side. With the hatch locked-off and pressure sealed, Mortensen rested the back of his head against the bulkhead but found himself rapidly kicking away from the door as a thunderstorm of blows rained down on the reinforced metal from beyond. Where successive impacts found purchase the hatch had begun to warp and buckle.

Mortensen couldn't believe it. He and Krieg had been wrong. A cult

undoubtedly existed here, but not one devoted to forbidden gods as the commissar had speculated. Instead an alien sect had infected the fabricator moon, celebrating the potent brutality of their Kaligari Cradle neighbours – greenskin invaders out of the Gargasso Deeps. He shouldn't have been so surprised: Bellona, Scythia and Calydon Prime had all been hit and the stars of a number of greenskin warlords were certainly on the rise. It wasn't entirely unprecedented either: heretical human and greenskin alliances were not unknown, especially during extended campaigns where local populations of besieged worlds felt that their Emperor had abandoned them. The Burdock Worlds could hardly be considered major strategic targets, despite the speed with which they were sundered. Illium wasn't some backwater agri-world and the Lazareth System was a major strategic target. Too big for a single warlord, with little more than a few crop balls of momentum under his belt. Savage greenskins simply did not operate like this. Something was deeply wrong here.

These thoughts and more haunted Mortensen in the thick darkness of the passage, with the hammer of blows ringing in his ears. He had more pressing concerns, however, like getting down to ground level, through the Titan's labyrinthine interior, without spilling every drop of his precious blood. Pushing himself up against the wall he stumbled forward into the blackness, occasional blasts from the side arm lighting his way.

VIII

The escape had run as much to plan as Krieg had any right to expect. A toppled security tower had provided the group with some much needed cover as they exited the Spectre on the least lethal side of the quad. The commissar's insistence that the silent heavy bolter would draw the enemy in had proved accurate with huge mobs of insurrectionists able to work their way up to within a stone's throw from the fuselage.

Krieg was the last out, allowing Snyder, Turkle and Goinz to provide a wall of scatter shot to shield the Navy crew's flight. Golliant had not only the weight of the heavy stubber harnessed to his wrestler's frame, but also hauled one of the aircraft's stretchers over the masonry-strewn court behind him. The wounded Khongkotan sniper was strapped into the bouncing gurney, crying out with every bump and feeling especially vulnerable on the occasions the aide had to drop him, reach around and awkwardly gun down approaching insurgents with his stubber.

Sprinting for the cover of the collapsed tower, Krieg kept his head low to allow the storm-trooper sniper he'd met inside room to line up his shot. Krieg had learned his name was Sarakota and that his injured compatriot was Opech: both tribesmen. There was little love lost between the two soldiers, however, Sarakota being the cold, commonsensical type and his brother-savage the militant loudmouth. Their marksmanship was the only thing the pair truly shared, as evidenced by the explosively precise cover fire provided by Sarakota's anti-materiel rifle as the group abandoned the aircraft.

As Krieg skidded to a halt in the gravel and dust around the tower he gave the order and the sniper popped a round in the Spectre's portside fuel tank. A chain reaction of faltering explosions tore *White Thunder* apart, vaporising the bloodthirsty crowds that had breached the aircraft and flooded her troop bay intent on discovering survivors. A backwash of flame and fury sanitised the surrounding area, leaving hundreds of closing revolutionaries scalded and aflame. With a small mushroom cloud of raging black smoke rising in the centre of the quad, fire from the compound roofs stuttered to a full stop. There were some isolated pockets of celebration and cheering but largely the rebel mobs were given to confused silence. Many stood up from behind cover and walked slowly towards the aircraft inferno.

Remaining concealed, the soldiers loped out of the complex with the bedraggled remains of the Navy crew in tow. This would have been a flawless escape, but for a Spetzghastian immigrant worker and his son waiting behind the ruined foundations of the tower. The smoke-stained face of the father swung out from behind a crumbling wall as he blasted the injured crew chief full in the face with a scavenged skitarii lasrifle. Simultaneously his street-urchin son took Hoyt in the shoulder with a similarly liberated pistol. The co-pilot fell back into Krieg's arms and immediately fired back, cutting the boy in two with a beam from his own laspistol. Sarakota ran up beside, his weighty anti-materiel rifle shouldered during the run, and plugged the father several times in the chest with assured semi-automatic rounds from his autopistol side arm.

Hoyt stood stunned at what he'd done. Slaughter must have appeared different from the cockpit. The child's screaming was already drawing unwelcome attention. Krieg handed the unsteady co-pilot to one of the Spectre door gunners and stepped forward, drawing his hellpistol.

'Move,' he ordered, prompting the crew on: Snyder and his cronies certainly wouldn't wait for them. Sarakota and Golliant nodded grimly and pushed on, motioning the Navy crewmen onwards.

The commissar stood over the broken body of the child. The boy's squeals had an odd quality to them. His eyes seemed impassive and blank. His were not cries of pain or fear. They were intended as a warning, despite their result. What had happened to this planet? Krieg could hardly imagine. 'Because you had not the courage to be loyal...' he informed the young rebel coldly and levelled his humming pistol.

At that moment the warning went home and scores of surrounding insurgents turned their weapons on Krieg and the fleeing line of Navy crewmen. After the lull, the firepower was explosive and harsh on the ears. Poorly aimed las-bolts cut the tower foundations to pieces, forcing Krieg to slip behind a puncture-riddled wall. He made one further attempt to implement Imperial justice but had to pull back further at the whine of a rocket winding its way down on their position. The frag-blast blew Krieg back off his feet and took apart what remained of the tower foundations and anyone else inside. Brushing grit from his eyes, the commissar stumbled to his feet, whacking his left ear with his palm until the hearing came back.

Another barrage of laser fire descended on his position and he bolted after the others with hundreds of armed Illians climbing down from the compounds and flying across the quad after him.

As he burst out of the other side of the derelict compound he found himself in a wide, dusty alleyway. Alone. His heart leapt as he saw Volscian colours flash past the far end of the freightway. Centaur after Centaur rocketed past, chewing up the sandy avenue: the convoy was here. He took a step forward but the air in front of his eyes suddenly spat with light and energy. Rifle barrels cleared broken plas from storm windows on the far side of the alley and lanced the freightway with a gauntlet of las-fire.

'Krieg!' came a voice from above, accompanied by the raucous bombast of shotgun fire. Scatter shot blasted out the remaining plas of the storm windows, forcing the barrels to retract. Staring up the commissar saw Snyder, Turkle and Goinz on the roof of the opposite building – a huge depository warehouse adjoining the compound complex – feverishly working their slide actions to keep up a sufficient onslaught of fire.

Further along the roof of the gargantuan warehouse Krieg could make out the Navy crewmen with Golliant and Sarakota, on each end of the stretcher, making for the convoy at a sprint. The freightway was clearly a suicide run and the hivers had directed them up an escarpment of rubble and wreckage left behind from *Vertigo's* earlier rocket run. With shouting and gunfire already on his coat-

tails the commissar had little option but to do likewise and threw himself up the mound, clawing his way skyward.

Turkle's sweaty palm was waiting for him at the bolt-bathed summit and Krieg allowed the Volscian to heave him over the lip of the depository roof. Breathless and exhausted Krieg pushed himself to his feet and began the scramble for the convoy. For the second time in as many minutes the cadet-commissar found himself alone.

Turning, he found the Zombie Squad standing behind him, their combat shotguns held at the hip, the gaping muzzles pointed squarely at him. Krieg twitched for his pistol, but Snyder shook his head darkly.

'Ah-ah. Lose the piece. Slowly.'

'The convoy is just down there,' Krieg told them, taking his hellpistol from its holster by the tips of his fingers and unclipping his belt power pack.

'Vox, too.'

The cadet-commissar unplugged his earpiece and wound it up with the side-arm. He tossed it to Turkle who snatched it out of the air with admiration. Krieg remained silent, flicking his eyes all around the roof for anything that might tip the odds in his favour. The roof was bare, however, bar the ragged holes the Spectres had blasted into it earlier and it was onto the edge of one of these the hivers had backed him.

'It's nothing personal,' Turkle told him. 'Eckhardt was an effete pig. But he's a Volscian pig. Clan code, you see?'

'One day, they're gonna stop sending you schola-swine,' Snyder blurted with venom, 'but until they do, there's a saying of Volscia – You got the shot, you better take it.'

Krieg's mind whirled: at first he thought this was Mortensen's doing. He'd only ever heard of Eckhardt from literature on the 1001st's revolt.

Turkle gave him a cruel grin and brought his weapon up.

'Wait...' Krieg managed, but Goinz had already fired.

The impact alone was nauseating, beyond the untold damage wrought by the deadly weapon. The air was knocked clean out of Krieg's lungs and the shot threw him backwards. Successive blasts caught his side and shoulder, spinning him around and towards the hole in the warehouse roof. A crippling shot square in the small of his back, flung the desperate commissar through the dark opening. As he fell, twisting and turning like an abandoned corpse, he caught brief, woozy glimpses of his three assassins – now standing around the hole, spewing gouts of optimistic shot after him.

Eventually his assassins faded – as did the boom of their target practice as the range became untenable. The darkness of the enormous warehouse swallowed him and Krieg waited the flailing eternity it took to reach solid ground and the end of his life.

His landing came sooner than he could have anticipated and to his utter astonishment, he bounced.

The depository housed a small mountain of some kind of green crop – a fleshy pod, no doubt some kind of off-world foodstuff harvested on a distant agri-world, imported to feed the army of immigrant workers that kept Illium a productive powerhouse. Krieg's bounce soon turned into a floundering tumble that picked up speed as he rolled down the side of the pod mega-mound. Many of the vegetative cases split and cracked under the commissar's rough treatment and by the time Krieg actually hit the dirt of the warehouse floor, he was thoroughly splattered with the pods' thick, jaundiced discharge.

He lay there for a moment in an unceremonious heap, pain coursing through his very being. Sitting slowly upright in the dust, surrounded by smashed pod cases, the cadet-commissar unbuckled his greatcoat and allowed the heavy leather to fall to the ground – heavier than usual due to the extra flak plates Krieg had instructed Golliant to sew into the garment. Udeskee's advice had been warranted after all. He still felt like four ogryns had gone to work on him with iron bars and his uniform was torn and bloody where pellets had actually found their mark.

Probing his clothing at the shoulder, where the worst of the damage seemed to have been done, Krieg's eye caught movement on the floor beside him. Something was moving inside one of the pods. Curious and appalled, the commissar slipped a slim blade from out of a sheath in his boot. He'd had the blade since basic training on Galtinore: it was his Legionnaire's bayonet and it went everywhere with him. Poking the knife inside the split and twisting the blade, Krieg cracked open the pod. A small creature rolled out, enveloped in a stringy juice. Krieg retracted his hand immediately. The thing was clearly alien in origin and must have violated a thousand different quarantine and importation by-laws just by lying there. It was roughly bipedal and had beady red eyes and a tough, leathery green hide. Its strange body was largely dominated by its man-trap maw, however, and as the docile horror yawned, it showed off its immature dagger-like fangs.

Krieg had seen these things before. Any soldier that fought orks and their foetid kind had. They had an equally repulsive name that the commissar could

not recall, even staring at the nasty thing. To his knowledge the horrors went everywhere with the monstrous green degenerates. In turn it was widely believed that greenskin reproduction had a hierarchical biology relying heavily on spores and the pods that grew from them. Life in the 123rd Pontificals had been rarely dull: inquisitors had unhealthy interests. At that moment, Krieg reasoned, he was sitting amongst a giga-warehouse of greenskin pods, harvested and stored in an Adeptus Mechanicus facility at the heart of the Illian capital for some nefarious purpose.

Getting stiffly to his knees and then with even more care and forethought, his feet, Krieg pulled his flak-reinforced coat back on and fished around in the webbing for an arc lamp. Clutching the bayonet in one hand – his only remaining weapon – and snapping the torch to life he pierced the vast darkness of the depository searching for an exit. He found something else entirely.

Krieg gave a violent start as the arc beam cut through several dark figures in the dusty twilight. His bayonet came up, but the figures failed to respond. Every bone in his body wanted to turn back but with the warehouse wall to wall with the pods that had saved his life in the other direction, there was little choice but to creep forward.

Hugging the deeper shadow of the depository wall, the commissar sidled along, both knife and torch extended towards the statuesque figures. They could almost be sculptures but for the rise and fall of their barrel-chests and the epileptic flutter of their armoured eyelids. Hundreds and hundreds of ork savages: adorned with scraps of salvaged flak mail, spikes, and dripping with all manner of brute weaponry. They stood as if on parade – although Krieg realised that the comparison was ridiculous, second only to the fact that he was actually witnessing such antithetical behaviour – swaying slightly, a few metres equidistant from one another in the cavernous space of the depository.

The cadet dared not intentionally interact with the small army of hulking, sadistic man-eaters, but his lamplight and the scrape of his footfalls did little to disturb them. The tightness in his chest begged him to bolt for it but Krieg could not bring himself to do so – feeling as though one does in the presence of a rabid dog. He wanted to run but knew that he shouldn't. His calm, measured steps took all the longer to take, however and gave him further opportunity to make observations as he shuffled along the warehouse wall. The further he got, the stranger circumstances became.

Some of the creatures drooled from their snaggle-tusked jaws as they stood in their trance-like stupor. Instead of glooping to the ground, though, the slobber

dribbled upwards, finally dashing the depository roof above.

Orks on Illium was one thing; the same orks entranced in a warehouse was already one step beyond, but now with the laws of physics failing to apply, Krieg was ready to start questioning his own sanity. Had one of those shotgun blasts taken his head off: was he dead?

That wasn't all. Strange orbs of light proceeded to glide above and around the stationary monsters and the air crackled between them, resulting in the occasional blue spark leaping from one alien to another.

No one could pretend to know very much about the minds of orks, but Krieg had been told that greenskins generated a psychic field that individually accounted for their technological mastery and under communal circumstances could create unnatural social and physical effects. Krieg couldn't tell whether or not he was witnessing some of this bizarre phenomenon at that moment, but he did know that he'd never seen orks act this way before and he'd met them on the field of battle both as a Legionnaire and a Pontifical.

The worst moments were in fact those closest to the door. He could imagine reaching the postern gate and the barbaric horde coming back to their brutal senses. Forcing the lock quietly with the flat of his blade, Krieg stepped out into the deserted avenue and closed the door steadily behind him. Resting his back against it he slid to the dirt, the nervous tension evaporating from his body with such collective force that the relief made him feel light-headed and weak. Sitting in the road he didn't know what scared him more: the fact that the convoy had left him behind in enemy-held territory or the possibility that each of the gargantuan storehouses that surrounded him and the mighty cathedra beyond held a sizeable warband of battle-seasoned greenskins.

Getting to his feet Krieg started to jog in the direction of the *Mortis Maximus*. Deval's fast moving column would have to rendezvous with Mortensen's Redemption Corps in order to move out the Titan crew and if he could move fast enough, that was Krieg's best bet. Either way, the commissar had to reach a vox-link: the 364th Volscian Shadow Brigade were being drawn into an insidious trap of monumental proportions and that warehouse was a target begging for an Imperial air strike. He could only hope that he'd make it in time.

IX

Vertigo soared above the street-level maelstrom. For the past half an hour Rosenkrantz had been doing her best to keep the Spectre firmly in the air, where

it belonged, rather than down in the Illian melting pot where the aircraft seemed to want to take her. Chief Nauls had reported smoke trailing from the tail and the pilot herself had detected vibration in the pedals. *Vertigo* seemed to be holding her own, however, and while the Spectre seemed content to remain airborne, Rosenkrantz was obliged to remain on station above the rendezvous.

The evacuation point was actually a small landing strip west of Artellus. It had presumably been used for important personages and senior adepts, visiting the great cathedra. Burnt-out wrecks of lighters, shuttles and the occasional Aquila lander littered the runway but there was enough room to put down the Spectres, their bay doors gaping open and ready to take on board the returning convoy vehicles. *Blazer Four, Five and Six* buzzed around the evacuation point, occasionally ripping into surrounding buildings with their multi-lasers as pockets of encroaching insurgents were identified. By and large the reconnaissance data had been good and the rendezvous was secure.

Nauls broke through on the vox: he had more news for her.

‘Chief?’

‘Skip, we’re seeing some unusual enemy movement to the south-east. Might want to check it out.’

‘What do you mean, unusual?’ Captain Rask broke in.

‘Doesn’t look like mob activity,’ the crew chief drawled. ‘They, well, sir, they look like troops and manoeuvres to me.’

Rosenkrantz leaned the Spectre into a half-turn. Rask checked his strategic data-slates while Sass pushed in past Benedict to get a better look through the canopy.

‘He’s right: they’re in formations,’ the adjutant confirmed.

‘It’s probably the Volscians,’ Rask countered, but his data-slates weren’t providing much in the way of evidence for that.

‘There’s no way they made progress like that.’

‘Maybe there was less resistance than anticipated,’ the captain hypothesised.

‘What, with the flak we’ve been catching?’ Sass put to him. ‘No way.’

Rask tried to get a better view for himself.

‘Give me a fly-by,’ the captain finally directed.

‘Are you out of your mind?’ was the only response the pilot could conjure.

‘If those are enemy troops down there, the major will need to know.’

Sass nodded. ‘They could cut off the convoy; crush the hold points.’

Rosenkrantz shook her helmet from side to side. ‘Benedict, I’m going to need more starboard thrust to offset the deviation.’

‘Affirmative,’ Benedict complied, ‘Recalibrating for a high speed pass.’

Plunging nose first towards the urban anarchy she’d been so eager to avoid, Rosenkrantz pushed *Vertigo* as much as she dared. The distant jigsaw puzzle of alleys and freightways came up fast and she levelled the Spectre out at a rooftop streak, rocking to starboard and port to avoid various antennae and watchtowers. Ground to air small arms fire followed in their superheated wake, too sluggish to acquire the aircraft at such thunderbolt speeds.

Banking slightly to give the best view of the industrial metropolis below, Rosenkrantz and the corpsman watched as empty avenues turned to rivers of green. Heavily-armed ork warriors, all muscle, spikes and jumbo weaponry, were bounding down the streets. Bikes and buggies belching oily smoke and noise weaved in and out of the charging throng, tearing up the sand freightways with spiked tyres and suicidal acceleration. Capillary columns of troops stomped out of surrounding warehouses and stores, bolstering the already thick channels of alien ferocity converging on the cathedra.

Rosenkrantz brought the Spectre up off the deck and back into the open sky. She turned to face Rask.

‘Take us back,’ he told her simply. ‘Benedict, patch me through the major. Now.’

X

As a legionnaire Krieg had done plenty of running; the physical standards required to join an Inquisitorial storm-trooper detachment were tougher still. As a young officer he’d increasingly gotten used to giving orders, rather than the physical reality of actually carrying them out. As an Imperial commissar he’d expected to do even less. It should have been unsurprising, therefore, that his body took to the rude awakening of a long distance slog with less enthusiasm than expected.

Unarmed and abandoned, all the cadet-commissar had was his legs: two lifeless appendages sending constant and insistent updates to his brain amounting to little more than biological begging. The numb burn of each thigh and calf was unbearable and sent shockwaves of pain with each stumbling footfall through his already bruised and blasted torso. His lungs felt shallow and his reinforced greatcoat, now more in demand than ever amongst the chasing laser fire pitched at his racing form, felt like he was dragging a Chimera behind him.

The cathedra grew and the booming roar of the Valkyries hovering somewhere

overhead became clearer. The pulse-snap of laser bolts sang in the air as Krieg stomp-jogged his exhausted carcass under the sights of Second Platoon manning the southern rooftop hold point. They weren't firing, which occurred to Krieg's adrenaline-addled brain as a good thing. It would simply be embarrassing to have been shot by his own troops twice in one day.

The convoy formed a ragged line in front of the colossal feet of the mighty *Mortis Maximus*, the combination of Warlord Titan and the Adeptus Mechanicus cathedra blotting out the sun. The deep shadow stung the blistering, sweaty skin of his face with sudden coolness. A mixture of storm-troopers and Fourth Platoon crouched in between the vehicles, weapons ready for any rebels that slipped through the Shadow Brigade's elevated hold points. Gunners swung their assault cannons round over the heads of a cluster of soldiers in discussion half way down the column.

Krieg's staggering attempt at a run collapsed into an unsteady walk as he leaned against the open back door of the rearguard Centaur, trying to find his breath. A storm-trooper in a headband with a bootless, bandaged foot gave him a curious look. A stretcher was loaded into the back alongside him bearing a more composed-looking Opech. The sniper had clearly received some much needed morphia and he gave Krieg a warm glance. The cadet-commissar patted the sniper's leg lightly, but didn't have the air for any kind of further conversation and stumbled on down the column. His bedraggled appearance drew further surprised looks from the convoy sentries and the huddle of Guardsmen simply fell silent upon his arrival: some with surprise, some with suspicion.

Corporal Vedette managed one of her crisp Mordian salutes, whilst the man-mountain Preed simply nodded to himself grimly. The three sergeants, Bronstead, Minghella and the dagger-faced Conklin began to break away: most notably the master sergeant and the bull-necked Bronstead, who were drifting towards *Steel Sanctuary*. By coincidence this was exactly where the ragged commissar was going.

Krieg tore the rear door open, revealing a small congregation of Guardsmen inside. Deval was seated next to the driver, his face fast becoming a nest of infuriated creases. Snyder and Goinz rested up front, passing a canteen between themselves and the lieutenant and lighting up lho-sticks. Turkle sat with his back to the door and the barrel of his pump action aimed lazily across one knee at Golliant and Sarakota, who had been disarmed, and were seated on the other side of the Centaur.

The commissar yanked his hellpistol from where it sat snugly in Turkle's

holster, the power pack still attached to the henchman's belt. Krieg put the muzzle straight to the back of the hiver's skull, just behind the ear.

'When you've got the shot, you better take it,' Krieg hissed and squeezed the trigger. The superheated blast filled the troop compartment and sent brains and fragments of skull across the stupefied Snyder and a still grinning Goinz. 'Good advice,' the commissar told them and leaned in across Turkle's headless corpse for his next shot.

Deleval leaned away, despite the fact that the pistol had clearly moved to Snyder and Goinz.

'Don't do it,' Bronstead growled, his hand hovering over his own laspistol, but Vedette reached out for his wrist.

'He's an Imperial commissar,' she reminded the Volscian sergeant.

'A commissar's word is law,' Preed agreed unhappily.

'He ain't no commissar, yet,' Bronstead reminded them, shrugging the Mordian off, and put his hand on the holstered laspistol.

Krieg swapped hands and extended his right fist towards the bridling hive sergeant: Udeskee's signet ring glittered in the dull light. 'These men have been found wanting,' he announced darkly.

'It's a lot worse than that,' a voice cut across the tense air. Major Mortensen stood behind them. One hand covered three ugly gashes that had opened up his carapace body armour at the belly and made the front of his fatigues sodden and slick with blood. 'Commissar Krieg here holds the life of every man committed to this operation, wanting or not, in that righteous fist.'

Vedette ran to the major's side, swiftly followed by Minghella. The commissar's pistol wavered.

'You were right, Krieg,' Mortensen continued. 'I was wrong. It's a cult. The rebels have alien allies. We've stirred up a stingwings' nest here and sprung a trap that was waiting for the main body pacification force. If we don't go now, we're all dead. So make up your mind. Shoot them. Don't shoot them. Either way, I have to get my men off this dirtball.'

Precious seconds came and went.

Krieg finally let the fatigue take him and lowered the hellpistol.

Mortensen immediately began to bark orders: 'Kynt, get back to Captain Rask. Have the *Vectors* come down to street level and have Second Platoon extracted from the rooftops. It's risky, but we don't have the time or space for anything else. As soon as they're loaded, send them across to the evacuation point with *Blazer One* and *Three*. We can't afford another bird to come down in this mess.'

He turned to find a bitter Bronstead standing nearby. 'Likewise, sergeant,' Mortensen added with an edge and the fuming Volscian stomped away.

'Titan crew loaded on the convoy. No losses,' Vedette informed him crisply as Minghella tried to examine the major's wound. 'Teague?'

Mortensen shook his head.

Lieutenant Deleval had climbed out of his vehicle and approached the pair. Turkle's blood still dripped from his flak jacket. He flicked his head at Krieg.

'You gonna let that slide?' Deleval challenged: soldier to soldier, eyes aflame.

Mortensen cast a glance over the bedraggled, scatter-shot ridden cadet. He ignored Deleval and directed his orders at Vedette.

'Have the troopers climb into the Centaurs with Fourth Platoon.'

'They're already carrying the Titan crew and *Thunder*'s boys,' the Shadow Brigade officer snarled.

'Our men could walk out and provide security for the vehicles,' Vedette offered. Again, the major shook his head. He had a soft spot for Vedette, probably more than he cared to admit: Conklin's replacement-in-waiting.

'Throne's balls, I don't care how cramped it is – get them in. Any man left behind is a dead man. Trust me.'

The Mordian shot off without further question to organise the sentries, followed by Preed and finally Deleval, who glowered at Mortensen and then pushed past Krieg's battered shoulder. The commissar didn't have the energy to push back and simply let the hiver bulldoze his way through.

'You can do that in transit,' the major told Minghella irritably. The medic was already pulling counterseptic spray from his medicae satchel and fussing with the shredded carapace. Uncle helped Mortensen to the rear of the forward Centaur, with Krieg reattaching the hellpistol's power pack to his belt and coming up behind.

'Zane, who the hell are we running from?' Minghella asked, ignoring Mortensen's request and attempting to stifle the major's bleeding.

'You wouldn't believe me if I told you,' Mortensen answered with clear confidence.

'I believe I would,' Krieg muttered moodily to himself.

XI

It was breathtaking to watch from the sky. Rosenkrantz couldn't imagine the pure unadulterated madness it would be on the ground. Back on station, high

above the airstrip, *Vertigo* had the best seats in the house. Rask and Sass sat at the rear of the cockpit, their hearts in their throats as they all watched the Redemption Corps convoy hurtle up the winding freightways, throwing up thick plumes of fine sand and dust behind them.

Every few moments the captain would give another solemn navigational instruction, taking the vehicles one block further out of reach. Like a slippery eel narrowly escaping the closing jaws of some waterborne super predator, the column weaved left and right before accelerating explosively up the straights and away from adjoining streets and alleyways already engulfed by the closing swarm of green carnage.

Closer to the airstrip, the narrow lanes fed into a long stretch of broad freightway, allowing the Shadow Brigade drivers to prove their worth. The open road allowed the super-charged Centaurs the space to make some ground on the storming hordes, the degenerate savages hailing a blizzard of hot lead after them. The ork buggies were less easy to outrun, sharing as they did the same advantages as the fire support vehicles and their drivers on the long stretch up to the airstrip.

The Volscian drivers did their best: ramming scrapheap buggies into the walls of surrounding storage facilities and pulverising dare-devil riders and their bikes under track. The gunners, conversely, did their worst – spraying the gaining greenskin wagons with a torrent of unrelenting fire from their pintle-mounted assault cannons. The patchwork trucks would often simply erupt into flames and roll, causing other fast moving vehicles to smash into them and join the inferno. Looted Mechanicus tractors and carriers were more resilient, however, soaking up the damage with their superior armour, and it was these and a few of the nimbler speed-freak bikers that stayed with the convoy all the way to the airstrip.

Rask had a surprise for them.

Hugging the deck, *Blazer Five* and *Six* skirted the dirt track freightway on a collision course for the convoy, with rocket pods armed.

‘Take us down,’ the captain ordered. ‘And open the bay door. This is going to be a touchdown pick-up.’ Below, the other Spectres waited in similar configuration, their engines idling them a few metres off the rockcrete of the airstrip and their doors open and ready to swallow one of the approaching Centaurs.

Rask turned to *Vertigo*’s co-pilot: ‘Benedict, contact Lieutenant Commander Waldemar and transmit our coordinates. Extend our compliments and inform him we’ll be with him shortly. Give the order for the *Vectors* and remaining

Blazers to scramble and begin making their approach.'

'Affirmative, captain.'

Rosenkrantz grunted. She could hardly have expected Mortensen to have been so cordial.

Like a flock of spooked birds the Valkyries and Vultures took off from the airstrip as the *Vertigo* descended. Only *Blazer Five* and *Six* remained, their rocket run on the convoy almost complete. Lifting a further few metres above the ground, the sleek gunships allowed the Centaur carriers to surge beneath them before propelling rocket after rocket into the oncoming ork vehicles. Some of the greenskin drivers had the common sense to brake but many simply blasted on, sure that they could clear the raging ball of pure annihilation the road ahead had become. As the *Blazers* vanished in the haze bank of dust and swarthy smoke, intent on turning for another run from the rear, the convoy fragmented, each vehicle rocketing across the airstrip for their designated Spectre carrier.

Hitting the ramps at perilous speeds, the Centaurs rolled inside, reversing their tracks and skidding to a full stop. With ramps closing and their freight intact the Spectres blasted skyward, intent on catching the comparatively sprightly *Vectors*.

Rosenkrantz felt the quake of extra weight in *Vertigo's* swollen belly as Mortensen's Centaur mounted the ramp.

'They're in, skipper. Ramp closing,' Chief Nauls came over the vox.

'Let's get the hell out of here,' Rosenkrantz said and pulled back on the stick.

Vertigo gave a violent shudder before lurching and dropping back to the deck. Rosenkrantz was thrown forward in her seat before being suddenly wrenched back. The cockpit went wild again with klaxons and runescreens mounting an assault on the senses.

'What is it?' Rask yelled above the clamour. 'Are we hit?'

'Is it the damage from earlier?' Sass joined in.

Rosenkrantz was finding it difficult enough finding the internal vox-switch in all the cacophony.

'Chief? Chief! I need a damage report.' Nobody answered. Running her fingers across a series of glyph studs the pilot brought the instrumentation back under control.

'Captain, this may not be the time,' Benedict piped up, 'but I've lost vox contact with *Blazer Five* and *Six*.'

Rask turned from Benedict to Rosenkrantz and then back to Benedict.

'Do you still have them on the scope?' the flight lieutenant asked, before trying the bay vox once again.

‘Negative,’ said Benedict.

‘I think I might know why,’ Sass announced to the cockpit, snatching a pair of magnoculars from the rack and pointing a finger over his captain’s shoulder. A dirty, menacing shadow flashed up against the dust and smoke screen churned up by the convoy. Rosenkrantz took the shape for one of the Vultures at first, but as it got simultaneously closer and larger it became apparent that they were not looking at an Imperial aircraft. The smoke bank began to drift, increasingly whipped up by the force of the emerging craft, and the shape assumed the definite outline of a silhouette before puncturing the cloud with lance-like antennae and telescopic barrels.

‘We got problems,’ Rosenkrantz said flatly.

Mortensen suddenly appeared bare-chested on the cockpit companionway, his belly freshly bandaged and dressed. ‘Are we hit?’ he called imperiously as he threw on a khaki vest.

‘We’re about to be,’ his adjutant informed him. Mortensen took in the monster-copter erupting from the dust cloud. The bastardised aircraft had a hugely fat hull, from the underside of which sprouted the multitude of different sized tyres, tracks and landing gears required to get the beast up off the ground. Two great dragonfly-style wings extended from each side, supported by a network of mismatched cables. The wings formed a cross from the front and bowed under the weight of various bombs, missiles and rockets mounted on their underside.

The monster bristled with heavy guns and large-bore cannon and was crawling with greenskin gunners. Worst of all, along the colossal span of the Deffkopta’s four rotor blades ran high speed, serrated, chain blades: as well as keeping the monster in the air the blades could be used to shear an inferior aircraft in two. And *Vertigo* was an inferior aircraft.

‘We got problems,’ Rosenkrantz repeated to herself, stunned by the brute spectacle of the ork super-gunship. ‘Chief, talk to me!’ she bellowed once more.

‘Tail’s on fire!’ the chief suddenly bawled back. ‘So we’re kind of busy down here. Ramp opening.’

‘Sass, why’d we lose thrust?’ Rosenkrantz was all out and didn’t have time to confer with the cognition banks. She figured she could lose little by consulting the adjutant’s notoriously encyclopaedic brain.

‘Depending on where it’s spreading – an internal fire could short all kind of systems,’ the adjutant replied.

Rosenkrantz’s eyes widened as the huge deffkopta skimmed the depository rooftops, running down on them. As its killer rotor blades cleared the

surrounding dust and smoke the green tsunami of ork ground troops reappeared. They washed through the streets underneath the nightmare aircraft and flooded the freightway, scudding towards the airfield with blades and bastardised weaponry drawn.

Rosenkrantz made her decision: ‘Chief, get inside and close the ramp. I don’t have time to explain.’

‘What about the fire?’ Sass interjected.

‘Benedict, fire the thrusters.’

‘The fire?’ Sass reiterated, allowing moderate alarm to creep into his voice.

The co-pilot did as he was ordered. The fuselage bucked: the quad of engines choked.

‘Again.’

‘What if the thrusters short on us in flight?’ the major’s adjutant put to her with increasing hysteria.

‘We crash and die?’ Mortensen hazarded from the companionway.

Rask looked to the major for orders. ‘We really gonna do this?’

‘It’s her bird,’ Mortensen replied, holding on to both sides of the cockpit egress. ‘She knows what she’s doing.’

Geysers of dirt and rockcrete sprang up before the Spectre as the deffkopta unleashed its motley arsenal of forward firing cannons and chain guns. *Vertigo*’s thrusters choked once more before indulging in an unanticipated last moment rally. The quad of engines cycled for a split second before reassuming its customary high-pitched roar.

Fighting the instinct to pull straight up with her reinstated power, Rosenkrantz rolled the bird starboard out of the path of destruction that cut through her landing zone like an angry elemental force. It was just as well, as the Spectre would have almost certainly climbed into the umbrella-like reach of the deffkopta’s buzzsaw rotors. Automatic fire danced across the canopy and hull as greenskin blister nests along the length of the enemy aircraft’s armoured flanks let rip with their own assortment of pintle-mounted weaponry. Sparks flew in the cockpit and something died in the instrumentation.

‘Just lost comms and scanners,’ Benedict informed her helpfully.

The doom-laden shadow of the beast passed overhead, giving the flight lieutenant time to retract landing gears that were fast becoming tangled in the blasted shell of an Arvus lighter.

‘Can we return fire?’ the major enquired as he took in the full horror of the bloated, greenskin gunship.

‘Ordnance spent,’ Rosenkrantz managed, trying to shrug off the twisted wreck. ‘We have the four heavy bolters on the side doors and a cannon on the nose, neither of which is going to put the slightest dent in that thing.’

Putting everything she had into forward thrust, the Jopallian pilot took *Vertigo* off the deck and blasted back towards Corpora Mons, a ripple of ground small-arms fire following in her wake.

Rask put his cheek to the canopy armaplas in an attempt to spot the deffkopta. ‘It’s back on our tail,’ he told the pilot. The graceless piece of scrap had had to waste time on a lumbering, ungainly turn, but now it was back – the unbelievable span of those deadly rotors equipping the helicopter with blistering acceleration.

A distribution complex below the *Vertigo* vaporised as a ragged stream of rockets and missiles seared past the Spectre and indiscriminately carpet-bombed the stretch of vat labs and slave mills rolling swiftly beneath their hull. Rosenkrantz fitfully nudged her stick this way and that, evading the shower of greenskin ordnance. The fact was that there was only a limited amount that she could do. *Vertigo* wasn’t built for manoeuvrability like her waspish gunship cousins. Heavily-laden with a personnel carrier secured in her belly, she wasn’t exactly going to be doing three hundred and sixty degree rolls either.

For a heart-stopping moment every soul in the cockpit thought that the thrusters had died. This was largely because they had, but this time it was the flight lieutenant’s doing. The airbrakes cut deeply into *Vertigo*’s vaulting run and the Spectre slowed, allowing a wire-guided death dealer to pass over their heads. It touched down on the ornate roof of a Genetor parliament building, vaulting a curtain of broiling flame skyward. Rosenkrantz had little choice but to punch through and re-engaged the thruster quad, hammering into the explosive backwash.

As the Spectre came through the other side, Rosenkrantz mused, ‘Well, if we weren’t on fire before – we are now.’

‘Shouldn’t we be heading for *Deliverance*?’ Sass asked fearfully, his bleached knuckles wrapped around his flight harness. Rosenkrantz was growing weary of the corporal’s questions, which she increasingly found difficult to ignore.

‘We’d never make it,’ Mortensen answered for her. ‘The taller buildings around the cathedra and the narrower avenues will work to our advantage.’

Of course he was right. Rosenkrantz rolled the aircraft over as much as she dared to allow clearance before diving down between the Gothic splendour of high-rise bethels and tabernacular archways. The deff-kopta was forced to

decrease speed and rise: its murderous rotor blades no match for the constricted airspace and busy architecture of the Mechanicus religious district.

‘Do you see it?’ Rask called, his eyeballs once again at the reinforced plas. She didn’t, but kept up the scorching speed along the monument-strewn boulevards, banking left and right high above the twinkling carpet of gunfire and green bodies until she found herself alongside the chasmal, gargoyle-encrusted walls of the Artellus Cathedra itself. She allowed the velocity to fall off until the Spectre found itself hovering alongside the grandiose detail of a vast, circular stained-glass window. The window depicted a hololithic representation of the Sixteen Universal Laws of Adeptus Mechanicus endeavour at work.

‘Perfect,’ Sass grumbled. ‘Right back where we started.’

As the aircraft gently twirled in the greater space of the plaza avenue, all eyes were on the two open ends of the canyon boulevard where they terminated at the far reaches of the cathedra super-structure. These were conceivably large enough to accommodate the monster aircraft and Rosenkrantz’s finger rested against the trigger-thrust.

‘Maybe we lost them?’ the major said, his usually grating tone unnecessarily hushed.

As the nose cone rolled round once more to the spectacular window, a niggling doubt appeared like a half-glimpsed phantom in the background of Rosenkrantz’s already preoccupied thoughts. She felt her eyes climb skyward. She peered directly up through the Spectre canopy.

There it was.

The deep, black outline of the junker behemoth was holding still about a hundred metres above the surrounding Corpora rooftops. It was partially obscured by the fast growing shadow of a fat, cigar-shaped object falling rapidly towards the Spectre.

The words, ‘No, no, no, no,’ passed the pilot’s clenched teeth, drawing further faces skyward.

‘Shoot it out!’ Mortensen yelled.

Rosenkrantz jerked back on the stick, unleashing the autocannon on the immaculate stained glass. The window imploded, the priceless relic blasted apart, leaving a gale-tormented hole. Dipping the nose and lifting the tail, Rosenkrantz glided the carrier in carefully through the improvised aperture. It was close: she felt the slipstream of the bombshell tug on the back of the Spectre as it fell past the shattered window.

There was a stomach-churning rumble, then a blast wave of furious energy;

the wall of mighty Artellus visibly quivered. The gloom of the cathedra evaporated as a deluge of raging flame poured inside and washed up the walls of the building from the armageddon outside. A gust of pure explosive force pushed *Vertigo* up further towards the vaulted roof as a rainbow of shards cascaded down around them from other giant stained-glass windows put in by the blast.

The Spectre idled at minimum thrust in the confined roofspace of the cathedra, amongst the cord pulls hanging from the vertiginous heights of the cathedra bell tower like vines in a jungle treetop. The cockpit was deathly silent. Rosenkrantz clutched her stick, flicking her nail back and forth over the nose cannon's safety stud in a futile act of mock aggression.

The pilot and the storm-troopers watched as a descending shadow spiralled around the cathedra exterior, blacking out the holes left by the stained-glass. Fortunately the openings were not large enough to admit the deffkopta, but they would suffice for the almost solid stream of greenskin lead pouring in from the aircraft's heavy weaponry.

It was only a matter of time before they acquired the *Vertigo*.

'What I wouldn't give for a Hunter-Killer right now...' Rosenkrantz spat.

XII

And that gave the major an idea.

Leaning over the stolid Benedict, Mortensen reclaimed his gift to the co-pilot earlier that day: the souvenir rocket launcher he'd taken from the mechhead that had dropped *Blazer Two* in the plaza.

It was the kind of cheap military hardware mass-produced on a hundred different forge worlds for use by PDF and conscript Guard troops. The single shot tube was dented and smeared with dry blood and while hardly a veteran's choice, it might be the kind of equaliser Mortensen was looking for.

'Lower the ramp,' he snarled, throwing the weapon's sling strap over his head and across one shoulder. His request was met by with a flurry of objections but by that time the major was already at the bottom of the companionway. It was their only real chance, anyhow.

The troop bay was hushed. The battle-scarred Centaur rocked in its restraints; the Navy gun crew harnessed themselves, fearing the worst, hoping for a miracle. It was out of their hands and in the bloody, sweaty palms of the major.

Commissar Krieg was lowering the ramp, his ragged greatcoat molested further by the breeze. He pulled down his cap and gave the Gomorrian major

snake eyes.

‘Who are you today, Mortensen: storm-trooper or saviour?’ the cadet-commissar put to him as the ramp juddered down.

‘I don’t follow you,’ the major called back across the turbulence.

‘Do you believe you can save this ship? Save us?’ Krieg asked, handing the storm-trooper his black leather gloves.

‘Does it matter?’ he returned, pulling them on.

‘To me it does.’

‘Well, Commissar Krieg,’ the grizzled major said as he mounted the ramp. ‘I guess you’ll never know, will you?’

Mortensen looked out across the vast depth of open space below the Spectre; the eternity of distance he would plummet before hitting the mosaic, marble floor at the very bottom of the cathedra where a garrison of Trepkos’s tech-guard had already lost their lives in the defence of the cathedra. He turned back to the intense young officer: ‘But I suppose you’d better hope I can and that I will.’

With that he tore off the ramp and sailed across the emptiness. Snatching at the bell cords, the slick gloves slid at first, burning through the leather and taking the skin from his palms, until the major’s pulverising grip brought him to a dangling swing. The boom of the Mechanicus bells reverberated around the roofspace with deafening power. The air trembled around him as each movement on the cord brought new jarring combinations of chimes.

Then began the agony of the rapid hand over hand climb which even Mortensen felt: the rancid burn of raw muscle deep within his arms. At one moment he was sure he was going to fall. The greenskin war machine routinely blasted a storm of shot and shell through the open windows, which inevitably plucked at the bell pulls, shredding cord and severing random strands above him. A bolt round yanked on his line cutting the material in half, but somehow the cord continued to hold his weight.

With little or nothing left in his arms the major pulled himself up past the titanic bell and in through the bell tower balustrade. The breathtaking view of an industrial metropolis in rebellion and smoke-streaming ruin would be enough to convince most men that they had reached the summit of the cathedra. The manned but silent plasma silos that had claimed *White Thunder* still towered above the major, however. That didn’t matter to Mortensen.

Carefully climbing down the extravagant Gothic architecture of the cathedra, Mortensen slipped the rocket launcher off his back and primed the weapon. Below he could hear the shearing blades of the deffkopta’s rotor as the hulking

aircraft came round for another pass on the remaining machina opus-emblazoned window. As it came into view, the Gomorrian storm-trooper could see orks and their runts swarming over the thing, reloading spent, swollen cannons and cocking gatling-style heavy weaponry. *Vertigo* could only have mere seconds left.

Mortensen trained the tube's simple sights on the grotesque mechanism at the heart of the deffkopta's killer rotor blades. He aimed and he fired.

With a whoosh and a kick the krak missile was away, streaking for the enemy aircraft. Moments later the rotor blades were in disarray, chopping into the air with jolting irregularity as the warhead split the mechanism asunder. There was a brief flash and a shower of warped frag.

The monster began to lose altitude almost immediately, gravity dragging its heavy metal bulk towards the planet's surface. A rotor blade – still buzzing away with serrated lethality – struck the cathedra wall and smashed, throwing wicked shards of razor-sharp metal in all directions. It was all over for the deffkopta from that point on as the behemoth bounced between the walls of Artellus and the surrounding buildings, descending like some fallen meteorite, tail over canopy in chaotic confusion, explosive disintegration and carnage.

Mortensen hawked and spat a gob of stringy, blood-threaded saliva after the doomed machine. Tossing the rocket tube too, his hand wandered down to his vest, where new blood had broken through Minghella's field stitches with the exertion of the climb. He climbed down on the precipice of the cathedra roof and plucked the blood-soaked stub of a cigar from his fatigues' pocket.

Lighting it, the major sat and watched the topless towers of Illium burn.

Being an incarceration, Krieg thought he might have to put his pistol in a few faces in order to get past security. To his surprise and confusion he found the gates wide open and the sentry posts unmanned. Occasionally prison personnel in drab uniforms and riot gear-adorned guards would dash past him from the opposite direction, but they barely gave him a second glance. The cadet-commissar couldn't tell whether it was his cap and coat or the meaty bolt pistol he clutched in his good hand or perhaps simply that they had more important things on their mind. People were leaving in a hurry and they weren't waiting to politely close the doors behind them.

Krieg slumped his way along the corridor, the powerful opiates swimming around in his brain making his steps uncertain and clumsy. Using the back of his good hand for stability along the cool metal walls the cadet-commissar followed the glyph signatures for the Panopticon security tower, the symbol of a single unblinking eye taking him to twenty seconds precious respite in a juddering elevator.

As the doors parted Krieg led with the barrel of the bolt pistol, sweeping the breadth of the circular observation deck. The staff were long gone, however, and only a few servitors remained, hardwired into their console seats, waiting patiently for directions with their dead eyes and sickly grins. Three hundred and sixty degrees of wallspace were decorated with continuous banks of porthole security pict-casters with a canopy of ear horns dangling from the ceiling on wires and swaying in the gust from the elevator doors. Here the incarceration warden and his security force had kept a close ear and eye on the prison population.

At the hub of the chamber was a stairwell that offered to take him down to the warden's personal quarters but Krieg found himself hobbling up the steps, drawn by the dull natural light flooding in from above. At the summit of the Panopticon security tower was a small terrace commanding a view of the incarceration complex and beyond. Pulling himself up to the terrace, Krieg made his way to the rail.

The incarceration was a sunburnt sprawl of corrugated metal blocks, partially built into the dusty, red rock of a mountainous outcrop that thrust defiantly out of the coarse sand of Spetzghast's equatorial desert. The mountains had a craggy,

angular quality making them look more like badly sculpted columns or primitive monuments but they formed a natural barrier on three sides of the complex, leaving the security arrangements of the fourth to a tall, electrified wall of rust encrusted metal that routinely fried leathery-winged scavengers unlucky enough to land on the thing. A similarly electrified portcullis had been left open and unattended and anything with tracks or wheels and an engine had been commandeered and gunned across the terracotta desert. It wouldn't do them any good, Krieg reasoned, the bronze light of day perceptively fading around him moment by moment. An unnatural darkening: Sigma Scorpii wasn't due to fall below the horizon for another month. The thin cobalt sky was a sea of shadows that were growing by the second.

Peering over one of the heavy stubbers, Krieg spotted an all but empty landing pad situated on the roof of one of the complex buildings below. Any atmospheric-capable craft had long left the incarceration behind. The only transportation remaining was Rosenkrantz's indomitable Spectre and two Valkyrie carriers – bearing the sinister insignia of the Ecclesiarchy – that squatted on the pad flanked by bolter-clutching battle-sisters standing sentinel on the strip.

Ducking back below, Krieg slipped into one of the console bucket chairs and began scanning the porthole pict-casters. Many showed empty corridors and abandoned compounds. The rest revealed the dire living conditions of the inmates' cells. Prisoners stomped back and forth – like caged animals – which of course, they were. Others hammered on the cell doors with simple bowls and spoons indicating that the present crisis had superseded mealtime in the incarceration. Others still were simply trashing the sparse furniture of their cells and throttling their cell mates.

It didn't take long to locate the Redemption Corps storm-troopers: a set of pict-casters two banks down were hard to ignore, flashing sporadically with every burst of fire from the Adepta Sororitas's bolters. He shouldn't have been surprised that the storm-troopers were out of their cells: Krieg himself had secured his liberty at the earliest opportunity and the corpsmen were used to busting targets out of places like the incarceration. The corpsmen had managed to lay their hands on a number of laspistols and the odd rifle, snatched from sentry posts and fleeing security personnel, but they were no match for the thunder of bolters and the clean, cold tactics of the battle-sisters. Gouts of plasma and streams of flame wouldn't be argued with and the troopers had been corralled in an access corridor with a security bulkhead at their backs, blocking their only escape route.

Fortunately for them Krieg could do something about that. Laying the bolt pistol on the console and rubbing the stupor from his eyes he scanned the forest of switches and toggles controlling the bulkheads and security accessways, trying to match the code on the porthole pict-casters to their designated controls. Flicking a succession of heavy buttons and not altogether sure if they were correct, Krieg swooped back in on the pict-caster to observe the fruits of his labours. In the grainy capture the cadet-commissar watched the bulkhead shudder and roll slowly towards the ceiling. The storm-troopers didn't wait and after the briefest of checks began shimmying backwards under the heavy metal door, their weapons still giving the Sisters of the Immaculate Flame something to think about.

On an adjacent capture Krieg spotted Rosenkrantz a little further up the passage. She was pulling on Pontiff Preed's priestly robes, trying to get him back to the yawning bulkhead. It was hard to believe that Krieg had initially missed the hulking ecclesiarch: he almost filled the entire pict-caster with his corpulent bulk. The commissar felt sorry for the priest. Like himself, Preed had been caught in the middle of this unholy mess. He was a member of the Ecclesiarchy and the battle-sisters were the priesthood's militant arm. His loyalties should have been with the Sisters of the Immaculate Flame. They clearly weren't, however, as evidenced in his brutal treatment of any of their number that came within his reach.

He might have been huge but his reflexes were excellent. Hiding at a junction, with his back flat to the dun metal wall – not easy for a man of his dimensions – he was waiting for the smoking nozzle of a flamer to creep around the corner. Krieg could see the Aphonac-Stack Probist coming, of course, but the pontiff's timing was perfect.

Snatching the stubby barrel of the flamer he yanked the gaunt zealot attached to it around the corner of the junction, using his irresistible centre of gravity to propel the figure into the opposite wall with uncompromising, brute force. The militiaman's bare skull smacked into the harsh metal; he half-bounced, half-staggered backwards before falling against the opposite wall.

Turning the flamer back down the opposite corridor, Preed unleashed an inferno at the oncoming sisters and their troops. Grabbing a fat stub gun stuck in the belt of the Frater's filthy robes, Rosenkrantz tore at the monstrous ecclesiarch's arm, finally getting him to back towards the open bulkhead, the remaining corpsmen shouting them on.

With the priest and the pilot through Krieg activated the bulkhead once again.

As a security gate, it came down much faster than it had opened – a lethal velocity created by the slackening of gears and the intervention of gravity. As well it might, Preed's promethium bath had done little to slow the battle-sisters' advance. The remaining Probists stumbled about the flaming corridor, bumping into the walls and each other before succumbing to the inferno. Krieg watched the sisters simply march through the firestorm in their menacing black body armour and prepare a melta bomb for the bulkhead. The bulkheads weren't going to be enough.

Scanning the controls for something else he could use, the cadet-commissar's eyes fell across the porthole pict-casters with their motley array of murderers and madmen baying for their freedom. The prisoners.

Watching the corpsmen running for their lives along the accessway on the next capture along, Krieg dropped another bulkhead behind them. Not a moment too soon: the melta bomb had done its job and had turned the first into a ragged hole of molten slag. Sisters were pouring through, their bolter rounds peppering the reinforced bulkhead closing before them.

One after another, Krieg stabbed at a sequence of chunky buttons, opening the cell doors on the corridor in which the battle-sisters were trapped. The doors rolled aside in unison on ancient hydraulics and the cells disgorged a deluge of human detritus into the corridor. A mob of emaciated insanity and evil packed the passageway, each man intent on securing his freedom at all costs. For some that cost was fairly immediate, the battle-sisters cutting through the swathe of filth-faced villainy with their bolters. Soon enough, however it was wall to wall convicts in there and the battle-sisters had to contend with an unstoppable rabble of desperate men crawling over their bodies and clawing at their weaponry.

Running his finger across a dimly lit schematic of the incarcerated complex on the observation deck wall, Krieg went about clearing a route for the storm-troopers all the way up to the roof-top landing pad. All other areas of the prison he flooded with freshly liberated convicts intent on creating their own brand of mayhem and setting upon anyone else with a furious onslaught of frustration and anger. With just about everyone else evacuated, that meant almost exclusively the Sisters of the Immaculate Flame.

This got Krieg thinking. Cell-block Gamma, Medical Officer Crayne had said. The pict-casters didn't cover the solitary confinement oubliettes. There would be no point – most of the time the cells were kept in complete darkness. Krieg didn't need to see Zane Mortensen to know where he was being held. A solitary

Celestian stood on guard beside one of the oubliettes' pressure sealed trapdoors: it seemed that denying their inmates oxygen as well as light and company was part of the regime in solitary confinement. It was the canoness's personal bodyguard. Krieg had seen her many times before: she had an odd face, her big bright eyes too wide apart. She never smiled, nor spoke and despite looking to all intents and purposes like a fourteen-year-old girl, wore a suit of the most ancient, priceless armour of her order. She clutched a massive adamantium crusader shield – some kind of ancient relic – and was never far from her mistress.

He would have to find a way to deal with her. Smashing the general alarm with his fist, Krieg filled the entire complex with klaxons, alarm bells and screaming sirens. Then leaving one route through the incarceratedorium clear of the full-scale riot that had engulfed the rest of the complex, he snatched up the bolt pistol and limped for Cell-block Gamma.



CHAPTER FIVE

The Devil's Boondocks

I

Like a ghost ship *Dread Sovereign* rode the swells and troughs of the Spetzghastian stratosphere, tossed this way and that in the turbulence of low orbit. Almost spectral in the powerful stealth fields that bathed her streamlined hull, the corvette haunted the skies above the massive mercantile world.

Krieg formed a silhouette against the cloister deck's stained glass observation port, legs apart and hands behind his back. The thin, azure brilliance of Spetzghast flooded in through the clear glass forming St. Valeria the Younger's crusader shield and threatened to swallow him whole. Beyond, Spetzghast's mighty ring system dominated: the planet's system of multitudinous shepherd moons keeping the miasma of tumbling rock and ice in check. Here, the jaundiced smear that was Algernon sat suspended like a bad omen, with the battle-scarred surface of Illium passing nearby – crossing the terminator into a brief Spetzghastian night. Below the corvette was the object of his fascination: the naval carrier *Deliverance*, hanging like a bird of prey over one of the mercantile world's polar mega-sprawls.

After several hours of gum-spittle castigation and tongue-lashing from an unusually animated Udeskee about almost getting himself killed on his first day, the regimental commissar had given Krieg an administrative errand to run on the *Purgatorio*. Leaving his superior to vent further wrath on Guardsmen Snyder and Goinz, who had been summoned to the commissar's quarters after him, Krieg made for his transport. Undoubtedly Udeskee would finish what Krieg himself had started on the fabricator moon and devise suitable punishments for the men. Dead or alive, they were to be made an example of.

Instead of the flagship, however, the humpshuttle he was supposed to be

piggy-backing set out worryingly for the blank carpet of deep space in between two of Spetzghast's main rings – the so called Quirini Division. Here under its stealth shielding, *Dread Sovereign* was waiting for him.

He was escorted straight to the colossal cloister decks of the Adepta Sororitas – somewhere he'd never been before – and told to wait outside Canoness Santhonax's personal chambers.

The great bronze doors rolled aside on dampeners and Krieg turned to find himself being approached by a solitary figure leaving the chambers. She wore a tight-fitting body glove of obsidian sheen that jealously clung to every curve, leaving next to nothing to the imagination, and sable robes of some lighter-than-air material that streamed behind her like a trail of smoke. When light from the cloister lamps finally invaded her elegant hood the cadet-commissar was finally privy to the ebony lustre of the stranger's face. It wasn't the joy the rest of her body had been: half had the bewitching Imperial dignity of discipline and importance; the rest was a collapsed mess of sunken bone, knotted muscle and the rumpled flesh that covered it.

She in turn displayed absolutely no interest in the cadet-commissar: her eyes never deviating from their intended course along the cloister deck and within moments she was gone, her strident steps taking her out of sight.

'Enter,' came that burnished voice: its lightest touch commanding immediate obedience. Santhonax.

The canoness's personal chambers were a vaulted realm of devotion and shadow. Ancient artefacts adorned the walls, relics of priceless Imperial history balanced on isolated plinths, tapestries dangled from the dizzying ceiling illustrating the order's innumerable wars of faith. Krieg's boots clicked across flagstones of jet that shattered into a mosaic in the centre of the chamber depicting St. Valeria the Younger and the Nine Virgins of the Apocalypse.

'My personal collection,' Santhonax told the commissar as she joined him from the shadows. Krieg surveyed the canoness's collection of arch-heretics and iconoclasts. 'I'm sure that you've heard of the infamous Cardinal Krabbé,' Santhonax said as she passed an aged cleric in shredded, blood-soaked robes. He was hanging from the ceiling on a set of wicked hooks and chains that were embedded in his back-flesh from his scalp to his shins. His encrusted beard dangled towards a gently gathering pool of literal blood, sweat and tears.

The canoness pushed him gently as she passed, eliciting a desperate moan from the heretic as he gently rocked and the hooks went to work on fresh flesh.

Next was a tubular plas tank full of a thin, liquid murk – a sloshing filth of

blood-threaded puce. An oxygen pump beat rhythmically on one side of the tank, feeding something inside air through a corroded metal pipe. ‘Xenobi Quordaiyn – the Butcheress of Banzai,’ Santhonax informed Krieg. ‘The end of my predecessor: I promised that I would never be the end of her...’

The cadet-commissar leaned in to get a better view through the effluence. A single palm thrashed out against the plas causing Krieg to jump back. The hand was skinless and raw: ligaments, veins and in some places bone were all on show. It retracted as fast as it had appeared. ‘Molecular acid,’ Santhonax told him. ‘The weakest I could find. She’ll be slowly dissolved over a thousand years – less than she deserves.’

The final abomination in the canoness’s personal collection was simply a portrait. A mercury daguerreotype of the kind popular at the Guethenoc Gate: a funereal image of an angelic infant, a newborn, at rest in a tiny wicker coffin. Some kind of mystic Mechanicus apparatus was fixed to the rear of the frame, emanating a headache-inducing hum and causing the antique capture to impossibly flick and shimmer.

The canoness leaned in close. ‘And him: his name hasn’t been spoken in a millennium and I’ll be damned before I’m the first to let it pass my lips. I’ll spare you a similar curse.’ The nalwood frame creaked ominously. ‘Oh, do be quiet,’ Santhonax spat at the haunting image.

Krieg waited respectfully before a simple throne at the top of the chamber as the canoness took to her seat. Her strange bodyguard, the young girl with the unsettling eyes, sat on the step at the canoness’s foot, beneath an iron tripod, her tender years at complete odds with the antique armour she wore. Under an equally archaic crusader shield on display in the tripod’s ornate arms the girl played a delicate game of cat’s cradle with the prepubescent fingers of a stone cold killer.

‘Ma’am,’ Krieg began, ‘may I ask if you received my report regarding the situation on Illium?’

The canoness seemed preoccupied with her own thoughts momentarily and stared at the cadet-commissar blankly.

‘Your ladyship, the fabricator moon has been completely overrun,’ Krieg informed her, intent on communicating the serious nature of the situation. ‘This is no longer a case of subjugating a rebellion. Orks in those numbers so far in-system, without an invasion fleet: it’s unheard of. And these greenskins behave like no brutes I’ve ever fought: organisation, discipline, strategy. Like I said: the cult killings; the ‘Doomsday Brethren’; Spurrlok’s agricultural freight charters;

the rebellion on Illium – all connected. Now, full-scale alien invasion.’

‘Calm yourself, cadet,’ Santhonax soothed. ‘Inquisitor Herrenvolk has these intrigues in hand. The 364th Volscian Shadow Brigade can handle the slog work.’

‘But ma’am, in my report–’

‘I read your report: it was a pleasant work of fiction,’ the canoness suddenly turned on him. Gone was the warmth that had lit up her pin-decorated face whilst perusing her heretical collection. Krieg felt like the sun had just disappeared behind a cloud. ‘All that should concern you are the actions of that heretic major of yours. According to your measured narrative, Major Mortensen ignored your threat assessment of the situation on Illium, he put a blade to an Imperial commissar’s throat and then proceeded to blunder his way through a mission that cost unnecessary lives and Guard resources...’

‘It’s complicated,’ Krieg admitted, a rush of mixed feelings and confusion flushing his chest.

‘The man is clearly a criminal incompetent and you should have administered justice when you had the opportunity,’ Santhonax shrieked. ‘I should have you bathed in acid for your own incompetence.’

Krieg swallowed hard. This wasn’t one of Kowalski’s tedious remonstrations or Mortensen’s bullish threats: she meant it.

‘He then did what you seemed unable to do and made a Guard-orchestrated attempt on your life...’

‘I have no evidence that...’

‘...and went on to accomplish further deeds of remarkable courage and endurance, adding further fuel to a dangerous myth and recruiting ever more willing rank and file acolytes to a fallacious hero cult.’

‘He was asked to pull assets out of enemy held territory against insurmountable odds and an incalculable, unforeseen alien threat,’ Krieg stated with forced calm. ‘What can I tell you? He got the job done. As yet I have witnessed no actions of direct cowardice, incompetence or cult activity. From a Redemption Corps point of view, the mission was a success.’

‘A Redemption Corps point of view?’ the canoness burst incredulously.

‘Look, with the right example...’

‘Your example, Cadet-Commissar Krieg? It seems your example isn’t particularly trustworthy,’ Santhonax told him, her words a chilled indictment. ‘You’ve just spent the past few moments lending credence to heretical suggestions of this man’s indestructibility.’

‘Indestructibility? I can only report what I saw.’

‘You were on that aircraft, weren’t you, commissar?’ the battle-sister asked. Krieg could see where this was going.

‘Mortensen saved your life, didn’t he? How does that make you feel – are you too now beholden to him? Have you become an acolyte?’

‘I would eat the barrel of my own pistol if I thought such a suggestion could be entertained,’ the cadet-commissar shot back.

‘But you won’t make the major swallow his for his own heresies?’

‘Look, I hate the bastard,’ Krieg informed her honestly. ‘When he slips up, I’ll be there waiting for him. I’ll bring him in and you’ll have the justice you crave.’ The leather of the commissar’s gloves creaked as Krieg tensed his fists by his sides. ‘But we do this by the book. Any thug can kill. If we give in to temptation and take avoidable shortcuts then it makes us no better than the scum we’re after.’

Santhonax stared at him through narrowed slits. They’d traded insults, accusations and warnings. Krieg couldn’t tell what she was going to do next. Probably order another tank of acid. As it was, her eyes flicked over his shoulder. The tension in Krieg’s fists instantly spread to the rest of his body as his fingers brushed the holster of his hellpistol. There was someone coming up behind him. He turned. It was his cheerless friend from the Narthex, her silver bob twinkling in the half-light and skull helmet tucked under one arm.

The canoness was smirking; something about Krieg’s uncertainty clearly amused her. ‘Well, this is all about to be rendered moot. Major Mortensen is, as we speak, on board *Purgatorio* receiving orders for his next mission.’

The battle-sister handed Santhonax a data scroll, which the canoness unravelled and studied.

‘Ma’am?’

‘Where?’ Santhonax barked at the Celestian.

‘The shepherd moon of Ishtar, madam.’

‘Perfect,’ the canoness said, half to herself. Then to the Celestian: ‘My compliments to the captain. Please inform him that *Dread Sovereign* will need to be in low orbit around Ishtar within the hour.’

‘Should I return to *Deliverance*?’ Krieg put to the canoness. Santhonax ignored him.

‘Have Cadet-Commissar Krieg briefed, equipped and transported to the coordinates you have on the moon’s surface,’ Santhonax told the silver-haired battle-sister, handing her back the scroll.

The Celestian clicked her armoured heels.

‘You want me waiting for him?’ Krieg asked cautiously.

‘Perhaps even Zane Mortensen isn’t stupid enough to practise his heretical ideals directly under the nose of an Imperial commissar. Monitor the mission covertly: you will have the details, and when you observe the major act in accordance with his dark beliefs you can administer the Emperor’s justice,’ she confirmed with relish.

Krieg settled for a neutral, ‘As you wish, your ladyship,’ and lowered his head.

Escorted by the Celestian the commissar made his way from the elegantly gruesome chamber.

‘Krieg,’ the canoness called wistfully just before he reached the bronze egress. He turned obediently. ‘Major Mortensen is not to return from that moon alive: you understand me? The Emperor has never expected as much of you.’

Krieg simply nodded and left the room.

As they stood waiting at the mighty doors of a baroque elevator Krieg, who’d been silent the entire length of the cloister deck, turned to the battle-sister and asked, ‘What did she mean, “Perfect”?’

‘Excuse me?’ the Celestian replied.

‘She said, “Perfect” after you told her the mission was on Ishtar.’

‘Ishtar’s a deathworld,’ the battle-sister replied. ‘With any luck the major will be dead before you even reach him.’

‘Great,’ Krieg mumbled, not exactly thrilled at the prospect of a jaunt down to a deathworld himself. ‘What the hell are the Redemption Corps doing down there?’

With unmasked tedium the Celestian consulted the scroll once more.

‘Well,’ she told him, ‘apart from a variety of different forms of certain death to be found on the surface, Ishtar boasts only one registered settlement: a sparse collection of stilt burgs in the supercontinent interior.’

‘Stilt burgs?’

‘Homo Sapiens Gigantus.’

‘Ogryns,’ Krieg grunted. He’d worked alongside these abhuman brutes before. Storm-trooper squads were sometimes coupled with ogryn shock troops in order to spearhead assaults. The barbarian creatures soaked up a tremendous amount of firepower and at full charge were virtually unstoppable. They were the hammer, excessive and unwieldy, to the storm-troop’s chisel, skilful and precise. A stampede of ogryns could carry a storm-trooper unit a long way into the

enemy lines, where the tactics and surgical execution of the specialists could do their worst. They were also clumsy and dangerous, taking orders like barely-tamed dumb animals; but with Illium drowning in a greenskin deluge and reinforcements a distant dream, the Guard was pulling on every in-system resource.

The grandiloquent doors parted revealing another visitor to the cloister deck. The entire space was dominated by a hulking form; begowned from head to toe in a ribbed, leather capote. Not a scrap of flesh or clothing was visible beneath. The voluminous hood dropped down to its belly, without so much as an eyeslit to allow its wearer to see where it was stomping. The mantle's baggy sleeves met at the belly also, with one of the giant's hands clearly clasped in the other beneath the material.

The goliath had ducked beneath the frame of the elevator doors, allowing a small throne – set between the monster's shoulder blades – to pass beneath. The diminutive throne was fashioned similarly from ribbed leather and secured to the gross bulk using a thick leather harness. It carried the tiny, atrophied body of a wasted ancient, whose obscene little form in turn was swathed in a leather cloak that was part of the throne. Only his head was completely visible, the bloated cranium hovering serenely above his enfeebled body.

Krieg was not a little taken aback at finding the hulk and its charge in the elevator but when he finally turned around he found that the Celestian had fallen down on one knee, with her head angled at the floor. As the visitor's bulk sailed past, Krieg noticed for the first time the Inquisitorial rosette dangling from a robust cord around the behemoth's neck. Swinging this way and that, the badge of office was almost hypnotic. Realisation dawned. This was Herrenvolk.

The commissar could hardly be blamed for not recognising the inquisitor: very few people had actually seen him. Santhonax and her battle-sisters worked in collaboration with the man and as such had more access to him than virtually anyone else. Beyond the Pontificals, he worked almost exclusively through a network of henchmen and spies that he kept on his payroll. Many claimed that he had a telepathic or telekinetic link with his closest operatives and Krieg had certainly witnessed Interrogator Angelescu, the Inquisitorial storm-troopers' point of contact with the inquisitor, act strangely from time to time: almost as though his body and mind were on occasions not his own.

The Celestian grabbed the back of his neck with her gauntleted hand and pushed his head down into an obedient bow. Krieg instinctively allowed his eyes to travel upwards and caught a final glimpse of the inquisitor, sitting astride his

humanoid steed, as he passed. One of Herrenvolk's own oily black eyes were fixed on the commissar, peering over the back of his throne, set in a gaze as unsettling as it was unreadable.

+Koulick Krieg...+

The words rattled around inside the core of his very being. His soul seemed to expand to accommodate them. They were everywhere and he was nowhere.

+Koulick, son of Illarian, son of Spartak, son of Nestorr...+ The thoughtspeak faded and simultaneously returned a moment's eternity later. +...Hear me...+ 'Cadet!'

The backhanded slap took him across the face like a basin of cold water. He was back – slumped in the corner of the ornate elevator with the battle-sister crouched over him, the fleeting traces of pleasure falling from her features: she'd enjoyed that.

'What happened?' Krieg managed, pushing with his knees and sliding his shoulders back up the car wall.

'You're male and you're weak,' the Celestian replied flatly, as one might recall an obvious fact. Then after a second's pause to establish she meant it: 'You fell unconscious: it's the inquisitor. He has that effect on a lot of people – he's, how can I put it... potent.'

'You seem fine.'

'I'm not you,' the Celestian answered making the sign of the aquila. 'Emperor be thanked.'

The elevator doors parted to reveal *Dread Sovereign's* crowded flight deck. Sleek strikefighters shared the hanger with landers and Adeptus Ministorum Valkyries.

Krieg attempted to stand without the assistance of a wall. It came... slowly. The equivalent of mental indigestion still reverberated around his skull.

'Suit up. That's your ride,' the battle-sister told him indicating the nearest Valkyrie. Krieg took a few unsteady steps closer, out onto the hangar. A sombre nameplate identified the aircraft as *Purity Control*. What the callsign lacked in finesse it compensated for in unequivocality: a book you could definitely judge by its cover. The Celestian hit the elevator floor stud.

'Not coming to enjoy the sights?' the commissar asked.

'You're going to the one place where the sights enjoy you,' she replied matter-of-factly. 'I'm going to the Pontifical's armoury; you're going to need something considerably harder-hitting than that a hellpistol to go hunting down there.'

The cadet-commissar's hand went down protectively over the holster of his

hellpistol and gave her a parting look of mock hurt. The doors closed. Krieg turned, alone on the flight deck, and mused thoughtfully on whether the battlesister meant the deathworld fauna and flora or the Redemption Corps' major.

II

Rosenkrantz had flown all manner of skies and put down on all kinds of dirt, but Ishtar had almost immediately topped the Jopallian pilot's top-ten table of singularly weird crash landings.

It started with the drop. With *Deliverance* rapidly falling away above them and the Spectre plummeting for the velvet, malachite gloom of Ishtar's thick atmosphere, the *Vertigo*'s velocity died and a shudder rang through the aircraft's superstructure. It was almost as though the bird had put down, beak-first, in the ocean; Rosenkrantz knew this because she'd done just that on more than one occasion. This realisation was reinforced by the backwash of glutinous slime that cascaded up the canopy. The pilot's initial fear was restricted visibility but the atmospheric spawn was largely transparent. Not that it mattered that much, the deeper they fell through the cloud layer the darker it got.

The engines soon began to struggle in the gaseous gloom and, one by one, the quad proceeded to short and cut out. This brought to mind a second concern: falling clean out of the sky. Despite the fact that the upper atmosphere should have had the drag-inducing qualities of a thick paste, they were still freefalling like a lead brick. A brief vox-transmission to the *Urdesch Ecliptic* confirmed that their partner Spectre was experiencing much the same problem.

Dark, voluminous shapes began to fill an already darkening sky. All about the aircraft, great organic balloons filled the air. Ochre bladders, packed with lighter-than-air gases and threaded through with fat, pulsating capillaries, drifted around the Spectre. Rosenkrantz guided the plummeting aircraft as best she could, through the school of drifting behemoths and down past their gargantuan filter feeding maws. To all intents and purposes they looked like giant, bloated squid, with webbed tentacles drooping for the planet surface. A sea of larvae sat suspended in the migratory spawn and the alien creatures were clearly descending on the congregated bounty. The appendages rippled gently, drawing the migrating sky-spawn up into the gossamer nets between each tentacle and then on into the gargantuan creatures' mouths. *Vertigo* had been unfortunate enough to come down through the middle of the spawn-slick.

It wasn't long until the inevitable happened – *Vertigo*'s wing tip tore through

one of the bloated balloon sacks, dragging the peaceful monstrosity through the skies beside them until alien and aircraft parted, sending the Spectre spinning for the surface.

The Spectre's controls suddenly slackened as the aircraft punctured another cloud layer. The slime was gone, but was immediately replaced by a thin drizzle that foamed as soon as the tiny droplets hit the canopy plas. From unusually slack the stick became increasingly rigid and Rosenkrantz could hear the now familiar sound of an engine dying.

Benedict told her that the flaps had frozen, which seemed incredible since as far as the pilot could make out they were gliding through the downpour towards what looked like primeval jungle below. There was nothing else she could do: voxing that the crew should brace for impact, Rosenkrantz fought to keep the nose up and slapped the Spectre's swollen belly down in the heart of the alien rainforest.

Which was where they now found themselves.

Rosenkrantz unclipped the harness and massaged her bruised shoulders. It could have been worse. On Arborsia IV she'd had to put down amongst the titanwoods of Shadebarrens: the trunks had simply torn the wings out of the aircraft and a branch had cleaved in the reinforced plas of the cockpit canopy, impaling her newly assigned co-pilot.

An incoming vox-transmission confirmed that the *Ecliptic* had put down mercifully close by but had failed to level out and had lost a wing to the impact, rendering them combat inoperative. The crew were injured but alive, and its fire support Centaur payload was intact. The second bird was a wreck, however, rapidly sinking into the chemical mire beyond and was in the process of being evacuated and abandoned.

Leaving Benedict to a more detailed assessment of their own aircraft's status, the Jopallian pilot slid down the companionway ladder and into the hold. It was chaos. The fire support Centaur that had been strapped down in the Spectre's belly had unsurprisingly broken loose in the crash. Nauls was busy with the armoured vehicle, the moody chief cutting it free of the mesh racks at the rear of the bay with a pair of heavy-duty bolt cutters. Before it had buried itself in the webbing it had smashed into the compartment wall killing one of Rask's Shadow Brigade Guardsmen outright – an officer by the look of him. The Redemption Corps had fared a little better in the crash: Sarakota had some broken ribs and a suspected punctured lung, meaning he was now declared mission-inactive and required constant mask-bagging from one of *Vertigo*'s gunners. This had been a

temporary arrangement set up by the Second Platoon's medic until the sniper could reach a medical bay. Sergeant Minghella would have seen to the storm-trooper's needs himself had it not been for the fact that he was a crash casualty also, knocked senseless by the bouncing fire support vehicle as it smashed around the compartment. He'd been unconscious ever since – breathing but unresponsive – and had been strapped into his own stretcher on the Spectre bay floor.

A small group of gangers huddled around their fallen Shadow Brigade officer. They were as motley as any of the 364th Rosenkrantz had come across when it came to field dress and equipment. All of the hivers wore the cerise sashes of their calling but the group in the hold shared three distinctive features: drab khaki trench coats, clean-shaven heads and glares of open hostility directed at the pilot as she passed.

Her own remaining gunners sat hunched against their heavy bolters, establishing a killzone around the crashed aircraft: with Rosenkrantz at the helm, this had become almost routine. She touched Spreckels on the shoulder.

‘The major?’

He nodded to starboard and Rosenkrantz made her way down the bay ramp. A thoroughly alien environment was waiting for her.

Mangrove was the only word she could find to describe it, but it wasn't like any she'd seen before. She'd landed in all kinds of forests and swamps on myriad worlds and no matter how different, they all had one thing in common: the unmistakable abundance of organic life. The fresh bouquet of new growth; the stench of decay. There was none of that here. Just a potent, chemical sterility.

There were trees everywhere, but no wood and no chlorophyll. Everything on Ishtar had a lucent, heliotropic glaze. The trunks were the equivalent of frosted glass and the leaves and foliage choking the spaces in between were like crystalline flint. *Vertigo* itself had actually come to rest upon a pyre of the shattered material. Not that it was easy to see: thick cloud cover doused the forest in a twilight haze and airbrushed the canopy with a coral corona.

Pontiff Preed stood on the edge of the ramp, peering out across this strange, new world through his single lens.

‘They blame me,’ she said as she joined him in the doorway.

‘You did what you could. We all give the Emperor thanks for that. No one is exempt from dying, sister,’ the Pontiff rumbled gently.

‘Not everyone around here seems to share that sentiment.’

‘You talk of Mortensen. That's just superstitious claptrap.’ With some

difficulty he moved his robust bulk in closer and in a conspiratorial hush told her, 'I believe in the Creed and I believe in the good major. You know that, but there are those who twist both to their own fervent ends.'

He nodded back at the group of hivers gathered around their fallen officer. They were Volscian – their tattoos and red sashes confirmed that – but their distinct trench coats and shaven heads marked them out as different. Their demeanour was stoic and solemn and lacked the underhive twitchiness and up-front bravado that characterised the other Volscians. One stood among them, giving quiet orders and instructing the others in how best to extricate the dead Guardsman's body from his mangled harness. Sergeant's stripes adorned one stout shoulder and fat wrinkles gathered at the back of his bald neck. His dark flesh glistened in the Ishtarian twilight.

'Lijah Meeks,' Preed informed her softly.

Meeks turned his head eerily to one side, as though he'd heard his name. Thick-rimmed glasses sat on a fleshy nose, beneath which his pink lips curled.

'What's with the heads and coats?' Rosenkrantz asked warily. Most of the Volscians resisted the concept of uniformity.

'Second Platoon has a fundamentalist streak,' Preed told her. 'Ardentites, as far as I can tell. Some kind of Thorian incarnationist faction.'

'Religious freaks?' she put to him. His nose wrinkled. 'No offence,' she added.

'None taken, sister. They are not of my flock. Ardentites look for evidence of the divine in those around them. They believe that when the God-Emperor fell He disseminated His gift. He believed the best way to protect humanity in His absence was to hide His power – His talents – among chosen individuals across the galaxy, so that they may individually serve His interests and, as a collective phenomenon, hold back the darkness that threatens to engulf mankind.' The Pontiff sighed. 'The coats are gang throwbacks. House Zlaw: threw in their lot with the Redemptionists for a time, then kind of outgrew them. The heads are merely an emulation: a mark of respect to the major himself.'

'And what does the major make of Meeks and his boys?'

'He thinks they're psych-jobs who probably have a little too much time on their hands. But they're useful. Rask knows the 364th: he probably figures that troops that idolise the major are marginally less of a mission-risk than those out to frag him. After the debacle on Illium with the new commissar, you could hardly blame him.'

'But if you're asking me if Mortensen "believes", I have no facts to give you. He's an extremely capable soldier with some extraordinary talents, but it's not

for me to say if they are “divinely ordained”. What I can tell you is that these ideas are not politely entertained in the higher echelons of the Ecclesiarchy and many might consider them heresy.’

A shiver worked its way across the pilot’s shoulders as she recalled their encounter with the Inquisitorial corvette above Spetzghast.

Suddenly Meeks was among them, the hiver’s silent steps carrying him across the troop bay in the space of a moment’s inattention.

‘Pontiff,’ the sergeant uttered with a respectful bow of his head. To Rosenkrantz he merely gave a savage flash of the eyes through his thick lenses, before stepping out into the smashed landscape, disappearing under the starboard wing.

‘Thanks,’ Rosenkrantz said to the priest before stepping out herself. Her first footfall slipped as her flight boot splintered a piece of crystalline bark and slid towards the continuously foaming waters that lapped up against the shattered shore. Preed’s stubby fist was suddenly there on her arm, holding her up and her foot just clear of the supercooled, chemical brume.

‘Take care, lieutenant,’ he said, setting her right on the glassy bank. ‘This is a deathworld, after all.’

She nodded further gratitude.

It was only a few steps to the wing but it was enough to sample her new environment. The smashed trees crunched underfoot and sinister waters spumed up between the cracks. Some of the crystal canopy remained intact above the aircraft and drizzle collected amongst the jewellery on the branches and fell in fat droplets from above, spattering her flight jacket and chilling her to the bone. The ambient temperature was actually reasonably mild but the droplets frosted instantly on the leather. She jumped slightly as a blue-white beam of energy arced between the trunks of two nearby trees, forcing Rosenkrantz to put her back against *Vertigo* and sidle along the fuselage and under the wing. Every time a beam sizzled between two of the outlandish trees, it set in motion a chain reaction of electrical arcs, passing from one plant to another, lighting up the gloom of the glass jungle. After reaching a light show crescendo the forest would fade to darkness again, waiting for another trunk to gather enough charge to begin the phenomenon again.

‘I could have done with more reconnaissance data on this deathworld,’ she announced to the group of Guardsmen gathered under the wing. ‘That kind of information comes in useful.’ Conversation died in their throats. Flanked by Conklin and Vedette, Mortensen was peering intently through a pair of

magnoculars up and out of the crystal canopy and along the surrounding relief.

Captain Rask stood nearby, leaning against the shattered trunk of a tree. Sass and the captain were studying a data-slate, angling it this way and that to make sense of the carto-pict they were studying. Meeks stood by looking on intensely.

‘What difference would it have made?’ Mortensen hypothesised from behind the magnoculars.

‘Well, we could have expected...’

‘The unexpected? You’re not shipping out with the Volscian 1001st now, flight lieutenant,’ the major returned. ‘We’re Redemption Corps: we move fast and with purpose. We get to it.’

‘Krieg was right,’ Rosenkrantz informed him with mock realisation. She let the insult go home before continuing: ‘You hit Illium unprepared. You were lucky to get your men out alive, let alone the targets. You’re making the same mistakes here.’

‘No,’ the Gomorrian told her, unfazed. He came out from behind the glasses. ‘Just a few new ones. What’s the bird’s status?’

Rosenkrantz glared at him. Then, finally: ‘The intakes are completely flooded with whatever we came down through and if that’s not bad enough for you, the quad appears to be frozen solid. The only engine with any signs of life whatsoever is this one...’ She kicked at the thruster behind Mortensen, ‘and that’s not going to be enough to get us off the ground.’

The major nodded gravely. ‘Now, would someone return the favour,’ Rosenkrantz put to them, ‘and tell me what we’re even doing here. This need-to-know crap is wearing thin.’

Rask looked up from his slate: ‘Forty-eight hours ago, upon my recommendation, Field Marshall Rygotsk despatched Commander Qvist, a Departamento Munitorum officer, to the planet surface with a small recruitment force, seconded from the Spetzghastian Mercantile Militia. Qvist’s orders were to swiftly establish contact with the indigenous primitive inhabitants and begin processing populations for immediate extraction and Imperial indoctrination.’

‘They didn’t come back...’ the pilot interrupted, filling in the blanks.

‘Nothing has been heard from the mission since its departure. Of course, I feel responsible for Qvist: he’s relatively inexperienced and he was despatched upon my recommendation; but the brigadier needs these ogryns to augment our forces on Illium. Something’s gone wrong here.’

‘Something’s gone wrong... here,’ Rosenkrantz informed him, yanking a thumb at her downed bird. The officer shook his head.

‘This is the Spetzghastian back yard: that’s why I sent Qvist down with Mercantile Militia. The platoon guide was a Sergeant Lompock, Mercantile ogryn auxilia. They know the rudimentaries about Ishtar, its dangers. This is something else.’ Rask turned grimly. ‘Sergeant?’ he announced.

Meeks cleared his throat. ‘Lieutenant Gomez is dead, sir.’

‘Poor wretch,’ Conklin announced. An epitaph it wasn’t. Mortensen raised an eyebrow, letting the magnoculars fall on their strap.

‘Israel Gomez was a good Guardsman and a devoted Imperial servant,’ Rask told Meeks. The Volscian nodded slowly. ‘Lijah, I’m giving you Second Platoon. We’re in a bit of a spot here and I need you to keep the men focused. You get my meaning?’

‘Loud and clear, captain.’ The sergeant’s voice lacked enthusiasm but was thick with honesty. ‘We’re right behind you and the major, here.’

Mortensen gave Rask an uneasy look, clearly uncomfortable with the Volscian hero-worship. He was ready to move on. ‘Sass, where are we?’

The adjutant stared back at the slate he was carrying.

‘We can’t be too far off the landing zone,’ Rosenkrantz offered, staring around the alien jungle as the rain intensified. ‘We were virtually on top of the coordinates you gave me when we left *Deliverance*.’

‘Thing is,’ Sass began, ‘the map doesn’t exactly reflect what I’m seeing here.’ Mortensen stuck out one hand and Sass went to pass the pict on.

‘Let me see that,’ Rosenkrantz said, snatching the topographic slate from Sass’s grubby paws. He frowned but she had, after all, a great deal more experience reading contours and orbital data than any of the corpsmen.

As she attempted to make out the confusing imagery on the slate a dark figure appeared in the clearing the fallen aircraft had created and padded its way carefully across the smashed crystal and gushing chemical potholes.

His colours identified him as a storm-trooper but his forehead studs marked him out as an Autegan. The Autegan Tactical Rangers were a deathworld regiment and the major had clearly understood that an Autegan’s experience would be invaluable on a world like Ishtar. On Autega, the Rangers’ main duties were scouting the least perilous paths across the planet’s lethal environs and providing mounted escorts to the pilgrim trains that continually moved between the cities and the shrines. As he approached, a double-barrelled grenade launcher rested across one carapace shoulder.

‘What have you got for us, Eszcoabar?’ Mortensen put to him as the deathworlder leaned against the underside of the *Vertigo*’s wing.

‘Beautiful,’ the Autegan began, although with his thick accent it was difficult to tell whether he was complimenting his surroundings, cursing them, or both. ‘Silicon rainforest: it’s like walking through broken glass.’ He angled his armour to reveal bloody gashes in his jacket, thighs and calves. ‘I found the *Ecliptic*. She’s due west. I told the crew to remain with the Centaur.’ The deathworlder sniffed and spat. ‘I only got about fifty metres in, but it wasn’t just the foliage that stopped me. This whole area is just one big flood plain. Most of it’s submerged, which wouldn’t be a problem except that it’s not water.’

‘What is it?’

‘Some kind of supercooled chemical soup seeping up through the planet crust.’ He pointed up into the drizzle. ‘Which accounts for the frost on the fuselage. This and the fact that the trees themselves seem involved in some kind of electrical defence mechanism of their own, and you basically have an environment pretty inimical to human life.’

‘You’re telling us that we can’t traverse this terrain,’ Conklin confirmed.

‘Frozen alive, cut to pieces or electrocuted: you decide,’ Eszcobar replied, impressed. He regarded Mortensen. ‘I’m not saying it can’t be done, major. But the losses would be astronomical.’

‘What about the Centaurs?’ the master sergeant suggested.

‘They’d offer protection from the foliage and the cryogenic drizzle, but wouldn’t get past the trees.’

‘But this stuff is as brittle as anything,’ Conklin said, stamping his boot down on a piece of crystalline bark that obligingly shattered to prove his point. He gestured around. ‘Look at what the bird did.’

‘I wouldn’t want to be inside a Centaur when one of these discharges hits the hull exterior,’ Meeks mused.

‘So what are you saying? We pull out?’ Conklin cried incredulously.

‘Bad intelligence,’ Rosenkrantz said, flipping Sass back the nonsensical slate, ‘and no possible way to reach the targets – if they’re alive which, now that we’re here, I very much doubt. Damn right we should pull out. *Vox Deliverance* and request an evacuation.’

The pilot’s assessment was met with a hail of testosterone-fuelled objections. Only Vedette and the major remained silent throughout, the Gomorrian back to peering through his magnoculars.

‘She’s not wrong,’ he mumbled, drawing a gaze of disbelief from his master sergeant. The major turned on the pilot. ‘But he’s right. Redemption Corps don’t run. There’s more at stake here than Rask’s young commander and a few Merc

Militiamen. We're going to need those ogryns on Illium. For the ogryns, we need to make contact with the recruitment party.'

The major's calm logic went some way to soothe the tension crackling between the pilot and the gathered Guardsmen. Nearby a loud snap of piezoelectric power vaulted between a splintered trunk and the tree line beyond, bathing them in a powerful – if brief – wave of sterile heat. All eyes were on the searing arc as it set in motion another blazing lightshow.

'Besides, we'll have more to worry about if we stay put.' He passed the magnoculars to Vedette and pointed up at the silhouetted highlands above. 'What does that look like to you?'

The Mordian took the glasses and aimed them up at the distant horizon. The magnoculars steadied with sudden realisation.

'Gun emplacement,' Vedette confirmed with satisfaction.

'We're not alone on this moon.'

'Ogryns?'

'Certainly looks makeshift,' Conklin replied, now staring through the glasses.

Mortensen put them out of their misery. 'Greenskins.'

'Here?' Rosenkrantz asked, wondering why even orks would choose to visit such a hostile corner of the galaxy.

'Which is why we can't fix our position on the charts,' Sass put forward, a sense of relief evident in his voice. 'These,' the storm-trooper pointed up through the canopy at the irregular highlands beyond, 'are not natural features. That is probably an ork rok.'

If Rosenkrantz had felt vulnerable before, the possibility of being surrounded on all sides by greenskin megafortresses, bristling with large-bore artillery and shot through with subterranean airbases, did not put her at ease.

'Guess we know what happened to Commander Qvist,' Conklin muttered at Rask.

'If they're here,' the pilot began, 'well, that means the entire system has to be infiltrated.'

Mortensen gave her one cocked eye. 'You think so?'

'They probably saw us come down,' Eszcoabar insisted.

The major looked up at the sky, unconvinced. 'In this? Perhaps. But I don't think any of us want to be here, should our greenskinned friends decide to dump a ton of ordnance on our position. How's the *Ecliptic*?'

'Totalled,' Rosenkrantz confirmed. 'The crew are fine – no fatalities. They've recovered *Gundozer* but the bird is slipping rapidly into the flood plain.'

‘How long to get this beast off the ground?’

Rosenkrantz shrugged. ‘We could use flame units on the thrusters, but clearing the filters; that could take hours.’

‘Okay,’ the major nodded. ‘Then you’ve got your work cut out. We’ll get out from under your boots. I need this bird in the sky as soon as is humanly possible.’

‘Think I want to remain here one moment longer than that?’ Rosenkrantz replied.

‘Sass, Eszcobar: ignore the surrounding relief and plot me a route to those coordinates.’

‘You want us to use the waterways?’

‘Yeah,’ Mortensen affirmed. Rosenkrantz saw a flash of inspiration cross the major’s features. ‘I got an idea.’

As a rule Navy pilots didn't tend to have a fear of heights; when you're soaring hundreds of metres above the ground, distances and their associated fears become meaningless. Hanging off the corrugated compound walls and dangling above the ceramite quad, falling to her death felt like it had more meaning for Dekita Rosenkrantz.

She wasn't in fact clutching to a wall at all, but Preed's fleshy back. On the ground the priest's mass was cumbersome and somewhat of a handicap. Above the ground, carried up and across the improvised ledges and clawholds of the compound wall, the ecclesiarch's body assumed a surprising grace. Sandalless feet took lighter steps than Rosenkrantz would have thought possible, pushing him up wall to crenelated wall. Stubby arms and those big, hairy hands felt for holds from which to haul his three hundred kilos of devout bulk. It revealed to the pilot just how much of the ecclesiarch's massive girth was in fact pure muscle.

As Preed pulled his huge form up on the roof edge, Rosenkrantz could hear the fury of a firefight beyond. Someone had been smiling on them: the route through the incarceration to the landing strip was all but clear. The battle-sisters would almost certainly have posted sentries on their own aircraft and the storm-troopers had been forced to formulate a brief but brutally simple plan to take the pad under such circumstances. The corpsmen would rush the sentries from the security bulkhead with whatever ammunition and weapons they had remaining, while Preed volunteered to scale the wall and get their most valuable commodity – their only pilot – safely to one of the aircraft.

Two Adeptus Ministorum Valkyries squatted on the landing strip, one behind the other, their fuselages parallel to the compound wall. Like a prisoner, the sorry-looking Vertigo sat between them. Rosenkrantz could just make out the short, power-conserving flashes of las-fire coming from the security gate and the stacks of prison supplies palletted nearby. The storm-troopers had done their best to rush the battle-sisters and their Frateris Militia brothers, but simply didn't have the coverage to work their way up to the Inquisitorial carriers. She could see the bodies of the dead and dying on the rockcrete; those who had paid the price for such desperate tactics.

Leather masked zealots, draped in chains and brandishing stubbers and

shotguns held their ground on the strip. Heavily armoured battle-sisters had fanned out across the landing pad, laying down suppressive firepower from their boltguns and tossing the occasional grenade into the carnage – careful not to damage the precious aircraft. The Spectre and the Valkyries had the worst role to play in repelling the bungled attack, however. The side doors facing the security bulkhead had rolled aside to reveal primed heavy bolters that proceeded to chew up the corpsmen and their fast disappearing cover.

No one could have possibly anticipated an attack on the landing pad from such a position, but the Sisters of the Immaculate Flame were thorough if nothing else. So confident in their ability to ward off such a pitiful attack, they hadn't even committed all of their troops.

A black-armoured figure watched the slaughter from behind the protective wall of blazing gunfire provided by the assault carriers, holding her sentry point on the wallside flank of the aircraft. Rosenkrantz suddenly became aware that they'd been peering at the firefight from between her legs. The sister unexpectedly turned, her tight, raven curls flowing with the light breeze.

Preed lowered them both on his trembling fingertips as the figure swept the roofline with her bolter and then took several strident steps towards the edge. There, the mighty ecclesiarch's fist grabbed her booted ankle in a vice-like grip and tore her from her footing. Slamming into the rockcrete roof the armoured figure almost bounced and then slipped into the terrifying emptiness of the quad below after her plummeting weapon.

Gravity latched onto the heavily armoured figure with all its irresistible might. Several wild bolts went skyward as the falling sister's pistol finally cleared its holster, but by then Rosenkrantz and Preed had already scrambled onto the roof.

There wasn't a second to waste. With every moment that passed, men were dying on the roof. Thumping up the rear Valkyrie's wing with heavy strides, Preed bounded for the cockpit exterior with Rosenkrantz struggling to keep up behind. By the time she breathlessly clambered alongside the priest he'd already got a grip on the canopy's hydraulic slide. Fired by the climb and their close brush with death just heartbeats before, the ecclesiarch's righteous rage broke its banks. With an appalling roar he tore at the canopy release.

Inside, Rosenkrantz could see an ordo pilot reaching, wide-eyed, for his Navy pistol. Preed grunted. The canopy gave and squealed along on its hydraulic runners. The muzzle of the Navy pistol shot out of the cockpit and at the priest's leering face. Rosenkrantz slipped her arm inside the open cockpit and yanked the firing mechanism control handle for the pilot's emergency ejection seat. She

shielded her eyes and ears as the rocket-propelled seat shot for the skies. When the ecclesiarch came out from under his ample sleeve he was wearing a monstrous smile.

Rosenkrantz dropped down into the empty cockpit space and slid down one section further to the co-pilot's bucket-seat.

'Preed!' she called. The priest nodded and slid the cockpit canopy back along its runners and into place. With that the priest set off to create more havoc in the troop section with the Aphonac-Stack Probists manning the heavy bolters.

Rosenkrantz had two initial priorities. First, prevent her newly-acquired Valkyrie firing on the storm-troopers. Second, prevent Vertigo and the forward Valkyrie firing on her.

It felt good to be back in the confines of a Navy cockpit and her fingers slid automatically across the glyphs and runes of the instrumentation. She'd been born to fly Spectres, but had trained in a Valkyrie and the operations and orientations instantly came back to her.

Almost immediately the rancid chatter of the port gun was silenced as she remotely closed the accessway and locked it off. Of course, she didn't have control of the side doors on Vertigo or the sister ship. Her finger hovered over the button. She couldn't believe that she was going to destroy her own bird. The Jopallian pilot sighed. A moment later it was over. She sent a hellstrike straight up the open troop compartment of the battered Spectre.

The Spectre just vanished. One moment the aircraft was sitting on the landing pad and then nothing. Light. Sound. The clang of distant debris, spinning across the compound roof. But as Rosenkrantz well knew, what went up, must come down. The firestorm wreckage of the Spectre flew back to earth, the raging fuselage landing upside down on top of the Adepta Sororitas Valkyrie.

Firing the thrusters Rosenkrantz took the carrier off the deck and turned the aircraft slowly at an effortless hover. The Valkyrie, whose callsign was Purity Control, according to the side of the co-pilot's helmet, was unsurprisingly sprightlier than a Spectre and gave her an instant view of the burning, debris-strewn roof. Armoured bodies littered the landing pad and those few battle-sisters using Purity Control for cover had been swiftly denied by the Jopallian's impromptu take off.

The situation on the compound roof rapidly reversed. Spurred on by Rosenkrantz's and Preed's decisive taking of the aircraft, the Redemption Corpsmen had swept in on the remaining zealots, scooping up abandoned bolters and pinning the armoured figures of battle-sisters down behind a blazing

section of wing that had settled not far from the roof edge. Rosenkrantz's fingers strayed across the multilaser stud but decided to leave the bruised and battered storm-troopers to their own victory.

The pilot suddenly became aware of weapons fire from the troop compartment: the dull crack of a Navy pistol. She flicked the internal vox-switch and listened in on the gruesome sound of bodies being flung into the hull wall of the assault carrier.

When the sound of skull cracking and neck breaking had ended Rosenkrantz called: 'Still with us, Father?'

'Alive and kicking, my child,' came the ecclesiarch's reply. 'Although regrettably several of our brothers in the back here had to take their leave.' Rosenkrantz heard the manhandling of bodies in the bay. 'Ramp closing,' Preed informed her as soon as the militiamen had been disposed of.

'Preed, I've been thinking.' It had never really occurred to Rosenkrantz until now because she hadn't really thought they'd get this far: 'What about Krieg and the major?'

The priest broke into a throaty chuckle. 'I can't speak for our cadet-commissar, but if I know Mortensen, he'll be having his own particular brand of fun.'



CHAPTER SIX

Skin Deep

I

Crake's World, Lesser Nox, UB-26, Autega, Endymion Prime, Byssta... Deathworlds every one, each a ball of unprecedented lethality and doom. And either as a Galtinore Legionnaire or as Pontifical, Koulick Krieg had visited and survived them all. It was, however, this unknown hintermoon, this perennially ignored, backwater planetoid that had finally done for him.

Rappelling in from *Purity Control* a few kilometres from the coordinates Santhonax had given him, Krieg's plan was to locate the storm-troopers and observe the mission. He would then wait for Mortensen to damn himself with anything that might be considered cultish practice – as the Canoness Regular would have it – and administer Imperial justice.

That was before Ishtar's glass forest had sliced him up good and proper. This might have been tolerable if it weren't for the colossal detours he had had to make to avoid the warren of steamy, frothing channels and flood basins that spread out across the crystal rainforest like a cryogenic delta. Throwing himself down flat on a sandy patch of earth, the cadet-commissar covered his head with his hands. Every few minutes the forest lit up in an electric power storm, with arc flashes jumping this way and that, striking and forking between the crystalline trunks and searing the surrounding air. Like synapse sparks between the cells in a brain, the chain reactions carried for kilometres across the deathworld forest and the thought was always the same: kill Koulick Krieg.

Suddenly everything went quiet and the furious display faded. Bringing his head out from his arms the commissar peered around the forest. There was no time for catching breath or congratulating himself on surviving electrocution yet again. It was only a matter of minutes before the charges building in the silicon

shrubbery reached critical mass and unleashed their firestorm fury again. Pushing himself up and out of the fine sand, Krieg made a bolt for it.

Swinging his Ryza-pattern plasma gun about him like a machete, Krieg battered aside the flinty branches of the strange alien foliage that choked the space between the trees. The glass leaves shattered about him as he pushed himself from one translucent trunk to another to retain momentum. The sea of razor blade edges through which he was wading was taking its toll. Upon being informed that he was being dropped on a deathworld, Krieg had decided to abandon his heavy greatcoat in favour of a Pontifical flak jacket, goggles and commissar's cap. He'd had the coat shipped back to *Deliverance* with his hellpistol. The jacket was offering next to no protection from his hostile environment, however. With foliage routinely nicking and slicing open his flesh at every opportunity, his vest and undergarments felt sodden with sweat and blood.

Pain suddenly flashed up one leg as his boot unexpectedly plunged through a sinkhole. He screamed out instinctively and then threw himself down into a clumsy roll: this meant falling through more of the punishing silicon vegetation as stalks and leaves slashed clean through the flak on his back and cut open his flesh with the smoothness of a scalpel. All he could think about was his foot, however, that at first had flared with stabbing cold pain, but now felt like it was submerged in boiling oil. Slapping his belt for his Galtinore bayonet, Krieg slipped the blade down past the frosted buckles and laces of his boot and slashed them open. With his other foot he kicked off the steaming boot. It flew through the air and hit the trunk of a nearby tree, the reinforced leather of the toe and the sole shattering on impact.

Clutching his frostbitten foot, Krieg let out another unintentional roar of pain and frustration. Professional soldiery swiftly took over and, realising that his cries of pain might have been heard, attracting some as yet unseen deathworld predator, Krieg made the uncomfortable glass-crunch scramble required to lay his hands back on the plasma gun.

Nothing came, however, and all Krieg could hear was the hum of his weapon's cell-flask. Sitting there with his seething flesh, the cadet-commissar suddenly became aware of a change in his surroundings: colours and shapes that seemed unnatural, if such a thing were possible on this wholly alien world.

He was sitting underneath a makeshift walkway, set on stilts to provide significant ground clearance. It was constructed from rough planks of irregular crystal, seemingly smashed from the thick trunks of the surrounding trees. This

made a surprisingly robust structure, considering the fragility of the materials.

Limping carefully underneath the crude trail and following its crookedly winding path, Krieg became aware of great, rough-hewn obelisks sunk into the ground at increasingly regular intervals. The concentration of trees and the swarm of cut-glass foliage became less dense the more of the monoliths he came across. As he encountered one situated close to the trail he took the opportunity to inspect it. The totems were covered in large simple runes and symbols – many jagged in appearance – and were made entirely of pure copper. The network of copper totems must ground the electrical dangers of the silicon jungle, Krieg reasoned, and prevent the crystal foliage spreading. A huge arc suddenly leapt before him, leading the cadet-commissar to the further conclusion that he was not yet close enough to the village to enjoy that privilege.

Krieg could now see the telltale rush of flecks surging up and down the surrounding trunks, heralding the advent of another deadly electrical blitz. He had to work fast. Ground-level was bad: the pattern of former arcs and bursts had already taught him that beyond the chemical floodplain, it was probably one of the reasons the trail was elevated on stilts. The commissar thumbed the heavy, archaic primer on the plasma gun and adjusted the emission setting. Aiming the sun gun at the base of the nearest set of stilts he released a blinding ball of superheated plasma at the structure.

As sizzling puddles of dissipating plasma scooted about on the surface of the foaming pool Krieg had just blown in the planet's surface, the walkway section beside him promptly collapsed. A hobble, skip and a jump later Krieg was belly down on the planked section that had tumbled to the ground. Throwing the shimmering barrel of the plasma gun over his shoulder on its strap he proceeded to heave himself up the incline and up to the next section of elevated walkway.

Kicking with his good foot he managed to haul himself halfway above the ground by the time the electrical storm hit. Every muscle in his body cramped and spasmed, causing him to lose his position on the walkway and slide back down the smooth crystal slats. Bolts of piezoelectric power coursed over the surface of his skin, paralysing both mind and body and lancing the nerve clusters with spears of excruciating agony. He was hit.

It was impossible to tell how long the torture lasted: seconds, moments, minutes... but it felt to Krieg like an infinity of light and affliction.

When the darkness returned, the commissar was a crumpled mess at the foot of the toppled walkway. His flesh felt on fire and, indeed, in one or two spots his uniform was aflame. His breathing had been reduced to strangled gasps as his

chest muscles refused to contract and allow sorely needed oxygen into his lungs. His constricted fists trembled but he dared not move for fear that his heart, raw in his chest, might burst like a ripe fruit inside his wracked body.

As his roving pupils caught a further glint of light Krieg tried to push through the paralysis, but his body would not answer. He couldn't take another round of the torturous treatment and began to panic, his rasping breaths becoming further constricted. The light grew as it drew closer and his numb brain finally processed what he was seeing. He'd never been so glad to see the twisting, golden tongues of a simple flame in his life. It was a torch held by one of a group of dark shapes milling around him in the twilight. Large, powerful digits clasped one of his arms and turned him gently over onto his back. Bodies were still just a shadowy amalgam but the torchlight now illuminated several heavy-weight faces. Brute features and black wiry manes, plaited through with gems and crystals, decorated their scarred, colossal skulls.

Ogryns.

Krieg's heart lifted for a moment. Ogryns were typically obedient Imperial servants. With Ishtar's proximity to Spetzghast it wasn't unreasonable to expect that he wasn't the first of the Emperor's servants to visit this miserable little corner of the galaxy. The barbarians jabbered some kind of spitsnaggle vernacular at one another, apparently fascinated by the aquila emblazoned on his cap.

A sudden fracas erupted amongst the group: growling, mawling and snapping. Something squatter and more repugnant barged its way to the front of the congregation and thrust its rancorous features in Krieg's face. The foetid rank of that daggered maw washed over the commissar, giving him further reason to gag. Cracked, spinach-green flesh and two bloody beads for eyes sealed it for Krieg. Orks, here on Ishtar also. It too seemed interested in his cap.

A wet hackle of what Krieg could only interpret as laughter began deep inside the creature's barrel chest. The ogryns followed suit, as was their habit – imitation being the sincerest form of flattery – and filled the forest with their savage, booming laughter.

With each fading gasp, Koulick Krieg was forced to accept that this soulless mirth was likely to be the last sound he would ever hear.

II

There were times when even Zane Mortensen thought he'd pushed his luck too

far. This was one of them.

A tense silence filled the darkened interior of the Centaur, which was unusual for the Volscians, whose battle preparations usually involved hive banter and raw humour.

The major glowered in the half-light of the instrumentation panels as *Kataphract*'s enclosed, armoured hull creaked ominously about him.

'This is madness,' Hauser muttered as Garbarsky did battle with the Centaur's controls. Hauser was one of Meeks's believers, as his shaved dome and hooded trench coat testified, but he had a rebellious streak that often found expression in his furtive features and loose mouth. Meeks thumped a meaty palm against the corpsman's chest that reverberated around the tiny confines of the vehicle. 'In a good way,' Hauser added sheepishly, dutifully chastised.

Mortensen smiled through his own anxiety and clasped the back of the Guardsman's bald head good naturedly. 'That's the genius of it,' the major assured him. 'Those greenskin whoresons won't see this coming.'

It was true. Nobody would have seen this coming. Nobody would have thought it possible to completely submerge an armour-enclosed Centaur fire support vehicle in corrosive, chemicular slush and infiltrate enemy territory via the tributaries of a deathworld river basin. And in the eyes of the major this was what made the plan typically Redemption Corps; other storm-trooper regiments had their specialisms, but only the Redemption Corps were known for pulling off stunts like these. Only Mortensen and his men made the impossible happen. Balls and brains, the major mused. It would have been their motto if the Redemption Corps had use for anything as useless as a motto.

Mortensen snatched up the vox receiver. '*Gundozer*, still with us?'

Crunching through the silicon shale that made up the sterile riverbed, *Kataphract*'s sister Centaur carried Conklin, Vedette and the rest of his troop. Mortensen had opted to go with Rask, Eszcobar and the Volscians, reasoning that the Shadow Brigade soldiers were much more likely to lose their nerve.

'How the hell did you talk us into this?' came back the master sergeant's dulcet tones. 'I don't know how much fight this crate's got left.'

'She'll hold,' the major told him. 'The seals are good. Remember Hesperidus?'

'Trying to forget it. Seawater doesn't exactly eat through the damn hull though, does it?'

'Conklin, you're scaring the women and children.'

'Check my pulse, for sumpsake.'

'You need to take a right up ahead here,' Eszcobar informed Garbarsky as he

sat next to the Shadow Brigade driver, reading from one of the topographical slates. The driver furrowed his one furious eyebrow.

‘How much?’ Garbarsky put to him moodily.

‘How the hell should I know?’ the deathworlder carped back, shrugging. ‘Hard right.’

The corpsman heaved sets of levers simultaneously forward and back, throwing the fire support vehicle into a turn. The Centaur gave a whining rattle of protest as frost-shattered gears struggled with the effort. Mortensen gave the Autegan the vox.

‘Okay sarge, we have another turn up here. Right, this time.’ Eszcobar listened intently to Conklin’s reply before an involuntary shrug rippled once again across his shoulders. ‘Er, hard right?’ Once again Garbarsky’s single eyebrow set in a cantankerous wrinkle.

The deathworlder turned to Mortensen with the slate.

‘Major, once we’ve navigated this bend we’ll be right on top of your coordinates.’

‘Thank the Emperor,’ Hauser muttered to himself.

Mortensen nodded to the rest of Meeks’s Volscians, cramped in *Kataphract*’s cramped hull – more so since it also housed the Centaur’s stripped down exterior weaponry – setting in motion a burst of activity.

‘Give Conklin the good news. Have his men prepare for heavy resistance.’

Eszcobar was about to comply when a splintered crack shot through the compartment. This was almost instantaneously accompanied by a stifled half-scream, mercilessly cut short. A shaft of streaming slush had fractured the driver’s armaplas viewport and blasted its way in, splashing Garbarsky full in the face. His hands had instinctively reached for his ruined features and, caught in the stream, had frozen fast to his skull.

Mortensen and Meeks were the first to act, reaching for the unfortunate driver, one under each arm. They tore him out of the seat and into the rear compartment. The Shadow Brigade soldier was thrashing and squirming like a man who was being held under a pillow.

Chemical soup was gushing through the opening now, pressing its advantage and shattering the viewport. Garbarsky’s seat warped and creaked as a growing pool of foaming death began sloshing around the compartment floorspace. Hauser and the thuggish Thule began to retreat, crawling their way up the compartment walls like cats.

‘Sal!’ Rask yelled across the foggy compartment, calling forth the Second

Platoon's field medic, Salome DuBois. Dark-skinned and close-cropped like her sergeant, DuBois pushed forward with her kit.

Meeks and the major dumped the mutilated driver in her lap, where she already had a surgical kris at the ready. In one well-practiced manoeuvre she passed the blade across Garbarsky's throat, spraying Hauser with hot blood, opening a new mouth in his neck through which the driver took his first desperate, slurping breath. The emergency tracheotomy had given the Guardsman the vital oxygen he needed and DuBois went to work slotting a length of plastic tubing from her kit into the neat slit.

Meeks threw himself towards the gaping viewport but Mortensen grabbed him by the hood of his trench coat and wrenched him back.

'Sergeant,' he bawled, slipping out of his flak jacket. 'See to your man.' Using the back of his carapace as a shield, the major reversed on the breach, forcing back the stream. Finally he had the armour flush to the hull and slammed his back against the port to hold the blockage in place. Steaming liquid foamed about the edges of his carapace plates, cracking and hissing its way, feeling for a weakness, a way in.

'Drive!' he barked at an astounded Eszcobar, who did his best to straddle the compartment floor and manipulate the gears at arm's reach. *Kataphract* bucked and groaned. She was dying and she knew it. The tracks and transaxles had barely coped with the turn Garbarsky had imposed upon them to negotiate the river bend. A harsh angle compounded by the bank's incline had all but done for the fire support vehicle.

'Get us up on that bank, trooper,' the major rumbled.

The deathworlder grimaced, fighting for control of the Centaur: 'Trying, sir...' he snarled through clenched teeth.

Sergeant Meeks crossed to the other side of the crowded vehicle and reached for the swinging vox receiver. 'Mayday, mayday. *Gundozzer* are you receiving?'

'I'm losing him!' Sal called across the chaos of the compartment as Garbarsky thrashed in her arms, shock finally setting in. Similarly the Centaur was giving its last, the damage now spreading to the engine column. Crippling cold had eventually found its way into the power plant and was playing havoc with the heat exchangers. The tracks pulverised the shale of the river bed, dragging the carrier towards the surface in starts and spasms.

'C'mon, you piece of junk,' Mortensen urged affectionately.

Eszcobar went after the final few metres of their watery grave with renewed vigour on the stick-throttle, but the steaming slosh rolling about the floorspace

had done its worst. With a splintered snap the lever came away in his hand, prompting a moment of ghastly realisation that swept through the compartment.

‘You’ve got to be...’ Hauser blurted, not believing his eyes.

As if on cue the engine died, allowing the deep freeze precious seconds to take hold, in turn extinguishing the remnants of combustive life from the vehicle and hope in the compartment.

Nobody moved as minds wrestled with the reality that they were now seriously screwed. Even Garbarsky remained still, although it was unclear as to whether this was due to sedation or cessation. They sat there for what seemed like an age, wired and wary: looking anxiously at the major for some kind of miracle. All Mortensen could hear in his head was Rosenkrantz and her earlier accusations of rashness and irresponsibility.

The silence was finally smashed by a grunt of raw frustration that erupted from Thule, who slammed his fist at the compartment wall.

‘No!’ Rask roared, reaching for the brute’s wrist, afraid that the hiver might put his knuckles straight through the frost-weakened hull.

Mortensen silenced them all with a single ‘Wait!’ before putting his ear carefully to the glistening rime on the frozen metal wall and tapping against the armour with the knuckle of his middle finger.

A grin of pure relief broke across the major’s brassy features. Tearing his shoulders from frozen carapace, as well as the top layer of skin from his back flesh, Mortensen moved away from the shattered opening. A moment of alarm and caution filled the vehicle as he pulled away from the opening, but the cries were silenced by the whisper of warm air that coursed in through the breach instead of the expected gallons of chemical fleshstripper.

This was accompanied by the sound of a Guard boot on the hull outside. Peering through the opening Mortensen could make out the robust lines of *Gundozer* further up the bank and the silhouettes of his storm-troopers securing the shoreline.

Kataphract’s viewport and a section of roof above the driver’s seat had just made the glassy surface of the deathworld river. Conklin was standing outside, straddling the deadly waters between the rooftops of the two Centaurs; attaching a hastily adapted tow cable to a suitable pinion.

‘Hold onto something,’ the master sergeant called in through the port before hop, skip and jumping back across his own vehicle to the shore. *Gundozer* grumbled up the bank, dragging her creaking sister Centaur along behind.

When both carriers were clear of the channel, Thule fired the lock seals on the

back doors and kicked them wide open, liberating the trapped liquid and clearing the noxious air inside.

Mortensen was last to leave, walking along the scarred and smoking shell of the fire support vehicle and wondering just how close they had really come to a truly awful death. Gone was the brash swagger and cocky grin. As he stood on the shale, tree lined bank surrounded by his corpsmen, the major's face assumed a bleak sobriety.

'Report,' he charged them gravely, wandering casually around the group, turning to each of the Guardsmen in turn.

'Both Centaurs are out of action, Boss,' Conklin informed him. 'Salvaging equipment and ammunition as we speak.' Behind them some of *Gundozers*' men were stripping the vehicles of anything remotely useful.

'Mostly burns and frostbite,' DuBois told him, struggling to keep her voice free of accusation, 'but Garbarsky needs nothing less than a surgical bay. Also, I need to examine your back.'

'No time for that.'

'You probably have chemical burns...'

'Later,' Mortensen insisted.

Eszcobar padded up behind them, crunching softly across the silicon, his swift reconnaissance completed.

'Trooper?'

'Tree line thins up ahead,' the Autegan confirmed, gesturing to the huge shadows blacking out the sky beyond the crystalline canopy. 'Coordinates identify our target as an abhuman camp, designated "Fort Skagg" by the Spetzghastian Mercantile Militia recruitment parties: a settlement on stilts and elevated walkways with huts all made of local materials. The greenskin rok sits just beyond.'

'Great,' Hauser mumbled to himself.

'It's subsiding on the flood plain,' the deathworlder continued, 'which is why it looked so much like a natural feature. Looks like they recruited extra muscle from the ogryn villages to erect a scaffold of props and braces to prevent it from sinking further and flooding.' Mention of the supercooled flood plain only served to further unsettle the Volscians, who bridled visibly.

'Well, that's it then,' Hauser announced. 'The recruitment party must be dead: the ogryns are party to the enemy. Why not just hold up and evacuate when the bird is ready?'

'Qvist could be alive,' Rask inserted, his tone heavy with caution and guilt.

‘Greenskins sometimes take prisoners and equipment.’

‘Unlikely,’ Mortensen replied slowly. He didn’t like disagreeing with Rask, but his judgement was clouded with responsibility. ‘But that’s not our problem. Now we’ve got eyeball confirmation that it’s a rok, we can’t ignore the threat. That thing could open fire on *Deliverance* or one of the warships.’

‘We’re not equipped for that,’ Hauser pointed out with increasing desperation.

‘Hauser,’ Meeks warned.

‘Let’s call in some backup,’ the Volscian continued.

‘No,’ Sass put him straight. ‘If the enemy has Qvist’s men or their equipment they could be monitoring channels. Fearing an attack they would most likely hit first, before our ships had time to manoeuvre.’

Mortensen regarded the gathering evenly: his storm-troopers were used to vox-silence on such missions, but the Shadow Brigade soldiers and even Rask were having difficulty with the grim reality of the situation.

‘All we’ve got is the element of surprise,’ the major told them. ‘I suggest we use it. Captain?’

‘We can’t mount a direct assault on an ork rok,’ Rask confirmed finally. ‘That would be plain suicide.’

‘Looks like the blood and guts routine to me, sir,’ Conklin suggested with relish. ‘Spring any targets, sabotage the rok, quiet like.’

The major nodded. ‘Agreed. And the fewer there are to go in, the fewer there are to get caught...’

‘Finally something I can agree with,’ said Hauser with resignation.

‘Which means, I go in alone.’

Even Hauser’s nodding head suddenly lost its enthusiasm.

‘Alone, sir?’ Meeks put to him. ‘Take me and a couple of my boys: we’ll make the workload a bit lighter.’ Mortensen shook his head appreciatively.

‘That wise, boss?’ Conklin finally pitched in.

‘Wise, no. Necessary, yes. As soon as we’re rumbled, the entire mob will come down on us.’

‘The major knows what he’s doing,’ Hauser blustered.

‘Glad you feel that way, Guardsman,’ Mortensen replied, once again cupping him behind his shaved skull, ‘because in order to get into that rok, I’m going to need one hell of a diversion.’

Hauser’s gusto evaporated.

‘We’re going to need Uncle,’ Mortensen told Vedette, who peeled off to fetch him.

‘What have you got in mind?’ Eszcobar enquired.

Mortensen playfully unslipped the double-barrel grenade launcher from the deathworlder’s shoulder and popped open the weapon at the breech. He grinned down the gaping barrels at the Autegan.

‘Something big.’

III

‘Work fast,’ Rosenkrantz instructed as the three of them reached *Vertigo*’s roof. Only seconds before one of the forest’s furious electrical lightstorms had faded, opening their slim window of opportunity. Clambering off the hull ladder and over the starboard quad, the pilot slipped the flamer’s fuel cylinder from her back. Chief Nauls and Osríc, one of her door gunners, fell to work straight away on the intakes. While Rosenkrantz bathed the quad shell with flame, blasting away the rime and warming life into the frozen thrusters, the unsmiling crew chief thrust his arm deep into one of the vents, extracting fistfuls of ice-resistant slime. Meanwhile Osríc fiddled with roof valves and calibrators Rosenkrantz hadn’t even known existed.

The Jopallian was barely a boy, but Nauls had selected him because he originally hailed from indentured maintenance stock. His slender fingers moved with natural certainty across the unfamiliar machinery, his lips mumbling half-remembered incantations and blessings.

As Rosenkrantz moved to the second of the roof-mounted quad engines the aircraft became lost in deep shadow. Something wet and rubbery unexpectedly caressed the back of her neck and the pilot bolted round, sending a stream of promethium over the helmeted head of the chief.

Rosenkrantz brought the weapon under control and Nauls came out from behind the filter mount, his face furrowed with surprise and anger. The lines faded as he saw what the flight lieutenant was staring at. The shadow belonged to the bloated, ochre behemoth that *Vertigo* had torn through in the skies above. The collision had gashed an opening in the side of the beast’s sky sack and the creature had spent the best part of an hour drifting slowly to the ground.

The tip of one webbed tentacle drifted past Rosenkrantz and slapped the hull of the aircraft before following the gently tumbling monster into its canopy-shattering crash-landing. The giant octopoid just lay there amongst the destruction, cut to pieces by the tree-top crystal foliage, one huge, sad ocular appendage flickering around the forest in uncomprehending confusion and

fright. Rosenkrantz couldn't help but feel responsible for the alien creature's demise, but had her own survival in this terrible place to consider and went back to work with the flamer.

That was until Chief Nauls, finished with the first intake, stood up next to the Jopallian and nudged her with his elbow.

'Flight lieutenant,' he murmured, nodding into the silicon forest. Shutting off the flame and dropping the flamer next to its fuel canister she followed his gesture. Hefty humanoid shapes were moving through the smashed tree line: huge, brawny savages who decorated their slabs of gross muscle with crystal trinkets and the thick blood that oozed from myriad nicks and slices that covered their scarred bodies. Wearing only simple skirts made of hundreds of thin copper rods hanging from their thick belts, they made eerie windchime-like chords as they crept through the crystal foliage.

'I've got targets!' an alarmed Spreckels hissed across the helmet vox.

'Hold your fire,' Nauls growled back. Rosenkrantz found herself nodding silently as both she and the chief began to fall slowly into a rooftop crouch in an effort not to be seen: this was of course ludicrous, since they could hardly hide the aircraft also.

Ogryns. It made sense, Rosenkrantz considered. They were, after all, the only variety of human robust enough to exist on Ishtar. The ogryns fell upon the downed sky-squid with primitive bronze flensing blades and began stripping flesh from the beast as it breathed its final mighty breaths.

'No...' the leatherneck crew chief snarled beside her. Turning around she saw more of the abhuman primitives closing in slowly on the Spectre. Their progress was slow but steady across the treacherous forest floor and their intentions obvious. Rosenkrantz made up her mind.

'Let them have it,' she ordered across the vox. The flight lieutenant wanted to keep the brutes as far away from the aircraft as possible: if they actually got their hands on the Spectre they'd crush it like a tin can. Doors rolled aside and bolter fire chattered from both sides of the aircraft, reducing the tree line to a crystal frag storm. The ogryns were incredibly fast, however, tearing away at an explosive pace; their gargantuan strides clearing broiling rivulets of chemical ooze and blasting across the nightmare landscape, their black manes trailing after them.

Heavy bolt rounds plucked at their flesh, mashing up muscle and bone, but the ogryns soaked up the punishment like rockcrete, roaring through their discomfort. It was only when streams of fire crossed and doubled their stopping

power did individual brutes finally succumb.

Osric was suddenly on his feet, charms and catechisms suddenly failing him among the vision of oncoming ogryns and gunfire. He'd left his side arm down in the troop bay but Rosenkrantz and Nauls both had their Navy pistols out of their holsters as a last resort.

Staring along the nose of the Spectre Rosenkrantz suddenly became aware of two monstrous savages surging across the open ground towards them. Aiming their pistols over the young gunner's shoulder the two Jopallians plugged round after round into the barbarians. The ogryns barely flinched as the gunfire washed over them.

'Benedict, a little assistance please,' Rosenkrantz called down the helmet vox as her pistol went dry. As Nauls reloaded, *Vertigo's* nose-mounted autocannon boomed from below. Impossibly the first ogryn ran up through the merciless firepower, each direct hit punching bloody holes in his reinforced ribcage. As the monster's head disappeared in a spray of blood and brains, his snaggle-toothed companion swung past, catching several blasts in the abdomen himself. Hauling himself up on the shoulder of his falling comrade, the ogryn bounded incredibly for the aircraft's nosecone, his huge steps carrying him up past the annoyance of the autocannon and thundering up the Spectre's canopy.

It was all sickeningly swift. Before Rosenkrantz knew it the ogryn was upon them, swinging his unwieldy flensing blade like a Shadebarren trunkcutter. Osric was simply cleaved in two. There was no scream or struggle: the unfortunate gunner's body just spun furiously off the roof in two different directions.

The chief managed to slam a fresh clip home and turned his pistol on the unstoppable creature. He'd buried four or five slugs in the ogryn's thick neck and barrel chest before the flat of the flensing blade came down brutally on Nauls's helmet. The flight helmet and everything inside it was instantly pulverised, disappearing inside the crew chief's trunk.

Rosenkrantz fell. She could have slipped but it was more likely some kind of primitive instinct: an unmistakable signal of her complete submission in the face of superior physical prowess. Her hand smacked the recently cleared filter and her Navy pistol bounced out of her smashed grip and skittered down the aircraft hull and out of reach.

The heels of her boots squealed on the slick roof as she attempted to get back to her feet, but this was cut short by an off-balance, opportunistic swing of the flensing blade. Arching her back and throwing her face skyward, the pilot felt the bronze blade sweep past, splashing her frantic wide eyes with the weapon's

searing slipstream. There would be no second chances. She could feel that this unthinking brute wanted to kill her; wanted to chop her up and paint the fuselage with her thick, warm blood.

It was the only weapon left to hand. Scrambling for the flamer, her heart thumping in time with every moment the beast took to bring its heavy blade to bear, Rosenkrantz unleashed the full fury of the weapon on the creature's meaty legs. Flame roared around its knees and ankles, funnelling up the copper rod skirt and razing whatever hung beneath.

The ogryn released a baleful moan and let the mighty flense fly out of its fingers and into the forest. Its palms spread instinctively before the inferno in a futile attempt to deflect the stream before its snaggle-fanged jaw snapped forward with the intention of mangling the pilot's face. Her response was the same. A gout of explosive promethium flayed rough, knotty flesh from the ogryn's skull. Blaze-blasted knees finally gave and the monstrous abhuman buckled, falling down between the cockpit and the quad.

Charred, fat fingers locked around the ankle of her flight boot and lugged her across the cool metal, dragging her off the roof. New levels of nauseating fear and panic radiated through Rosencrantz as her body left the hull for the uncertainty of a plummet towards a sterile, broiling grave.

Suddenly there was a hand where Rosenkrantz had no right to expect one. Five fingers and a thumb bolstered by hydraulic ichor and the aircraft's power plant reserves. Through the open canopy the flight lieutenant could see Benedict's straining face, his thin lips curled back even further than usual and his face a whirlpool of rippling tendons and wasted muscle. Conduits and cables erupted from his back as the servitor extended his fixed torso and his reach to accommodate the extra pull inflicted upon the pilot's body from the flaming dead-weight below.

Rosenkrantz hung there for what seemed like forever, suspended between the abhuman's death-grip and Benedict's programmed desire to keep *Vertigo's* skipper alive. In the end it was the buckle that decided it. The metal rings of the flight boot were not designed to withstand such abuse and promptly bent, snapped and slipped free, liberating the pilot's bare foot and dropping with the burning body below.

Sliding in through the opening, the Jopallian's response was swift and merciless. Slipping into the harness and settling the bare ball of her foot amongst the pedals, she fired the struggling engines and yanked the stick back between her thighs.

Vertigo answered, the sudden demand of the engines clearing the remnants of slime from the intakes and blasting the frosty thrusters back to life. The aircraft rocketed skyward, shattering the surrounding vegetation and throwing the pilot's head back into her seat. After a short burn the livid pilot slammed on the airbrakes, throwing everyone on board towards the ceiling. Sweeping determined digits across the runes of the ordnance panel, Rosenkrantz armed the hellfires before simply detaching the missiles from both wings. She didn't bother to fire them.

They fell silently towards the silicon forest before impacting on the planet surface and cleansing the vicinity directly below the aircraft in a superheated tsunami of destructive power.

As the rumble passed through *Vertigo*'s superstructure the pilot flicked the vox and opened a channel to the troop bay.

'Status.'

'Where's the chief?' Spreckels came back at her.

Rosenkrantz paused, momentarily reliving the horror of Nauls's death.

'Chief's gone. Status?'

'Osrice?'

'Status?' Rosenkrantz commanded.

The vox crackled for a few empty seconds, then there came a resigned 'Bay secure' from the gunner.

Rosenkrantz looked back at her servitor co-pilot. Benedict was a lifeless husk, his chest barely rising from the interface seat into which he'd resettled. The cockpit floor was black with his lifeblood both organic and automatronic.

The lieutenant returned her attention to the aircraft's controls and the lethal deathworld beyond the armaplas of the Spectre's canopy.

'We're leaving,' she finally decided and blasted for the horizon.

IV

Krieg could swear the floor was moving.

A firm hand smacked his face, jarring him to consciousness. The blackness evaporated, leaving the indelible smudge of two dark shapes hovering in front of his aching eyes.

'Sir?' came a voice he didn't recognise. 'Commissar?'

Suddenly everything became painfully clear. They were battered and bloody – but they were Guardsmen. Dust cloaks and dungaree jackets marked them out as

Spetzghastian Mercantile Militia, as well as their cheap, assembly-line equipment and perpetual understack squints. The figure speaking to him was a whelp of an officer, with green eyes and flaxen hair. Beside him squatted a hard-faced PDF sergeant with one milky-white eye, the Mercantile Militia's Libra-style insignia sat below his thick shoulder stripes and his name: Endo. Behind them both was a merciless row of bars – probably of a cage or cell.

‘Sir?’ the officer persisted.

‘Where are we?’ Krieg croaked. He tried to move under the filthy blanket: thought better of it. The officer graciously deferred to the sergeant's experience.

‘Ork rok,’ the Spetzghastian confirmed, his voice as hard as his face.

Krieg rolled with the information, his mind whirling with the dark possibilities it presented.

‘The whole system's got to be swarming with greenskins.’

They both nodded gravely. As his eyes accustomed further to the gloom, Krieg could make out possibly ten or twelve other Guardsmen, sitting miserably around the walls of the crude cell. ‘Mission?’ the cadet-commissar managed.

‘Recruiting party: abhuman auxilia,’ the young officer added, almost suspiciously. He made a casual salute. ‘Bastian Qvist. Commander, Departmento Munitorum.’

Krieg took in his grim surroundings. The chamber was an irregular space with walls, floor and ceiling of raw extraterrestrial rock, cut in half by a row of thick bars, probably ripped from the hull of some junker spacecraft. On the far side of the cell chamber, out of ear-shot, a greenskin sentry occasionally fixed them with two glazed, bloody red beads.

The cell rocked with sudden violence, knocking the sergeant from his crouch and forcing some of the Guardsmen to grab for the bars. The muffled thunder of explosions found their way through the labyrinth of rough-hewn rock passages and bounced around the chamber.

‘What the...?’

‘We were going to ask you,’ the commander put to him.

‘We're definitely going down,’ a cut-lipped woman in a shabby Mercantile Militia uniform called from behind.

‘You here alone?’ Qvist asked with an unmistakable hint of incredulity. Krieg wouldn't have minded – had it not been the truth – but he could hardly tell them that. Krieg knew what the rock-smothered din outside meant.

‘Storm troop: Redemption Corps,’ he told them finally.

The reaction was instantaneous: a wave of relief and premature jubilation

crashed through the group, with the whippersnapper commander slapping aside the sergeant's shoulder with warm aggression.

'I told you.'

The sergeant nodded coolly.

Another stomach-dropping jolt cut their bleak merriment short as the floor simply left them and came to a crashing halt a metre and a half below their feet. Krieg hit the uneven rock floor with a bone-aching smack and moaned gently in quiet torture.

Despite the initial shock of the plunge the Militiamen were swiftly back on their feet. Cries of alien alarm and thuggish panic filled the access corridor outside. The cantilever bulkhead leading into the cell chamber was ajar, clearing the floor by a bayonet's length and allowing the Guardsmen a view of the stampede of boots crashing past the doorway outside. The cell chamber suddenly became swathed in steam and this was enough to rouse even the attention of their half-fanged jailer. The warty, bottle-green man-eater had been filing its remaining tusk to a cruel point and picking meat out of the gaps in its monstrous teeth with grubby claws. The clamour outside the door had barely raised one of his wiry eyebrows – orks given as they were to regular brawls and slaying, even amongst their own kind – but the sudden mist and foaming sheet of chemical brume that washed in under the bulkhead was enough to galvanise even it to action.

Sweeping up its rough-and-ready shooter from where it hung on a gory strap of plaited human scalp, the jailer loped past the alarmed calls of the Spetzghastians towards the door. It silenced the Guardsmen with one stab of the bolter barrel, driving them several steps away from the bars, before approaching the bulkhead.

The steaming flood receded as quickly as it had entered. It seemed the ork rok was succumbing to the supercooled flood plain, sinking deeper into the silicon swamp and flooding as it did. Undoubtedly it was being helped to its doom by the explosions outside.

The greenskin brute followed the retreating waters, yanking up the cantilever door on its rollers and sticking its snaggle-toothed maw out into the corridor. As the door seesawed, a body dropped from the roof door space and hit the cell chamber floor with practiced fluidity, rolling across one carapace shoulder and righting in a combat stance. With one knee to the ground and a hellgun up and aimed squarely at the door, the storm-trooper waited for the greenskin warder to turn and re-enter.

Krieg and his cellmates watched with eager anticipation as the storm-trooper blasted the monster with a disciplined staccato of supercharged las-fire. The thuggish alien was flung back into the corridor, slamming into the rough-hewn wall. Dropping its weapon it put up two meaty, green palms that soaked up the last few bolts. The storm-trooper clearly expected the beast to drop and halted his fire: it was standard practice for specialist troops – power had to be conserved and was reserved largely for precision kills and suppression.

The alien monster smouldered in the corridor before blasting away from the wall and out of the smoke at the lone storm-trooper. A green blitzkrieg of savagery, the ork charged like an enraged grox, surging across the cell chamber with shocking speed. The storm-trooper hammered the monster's barrel-body with another tidy stream of fire before the creature acquired him. Backhanding the hellgun aside with animal rage the ork sank its filthy claws into the storm-trooper's torso carapace. Lifting him off his boots, the greenskin ran the trooper into the opposite wall, drawing an audible, lung-emptying gasp from the soldier. Holding him there with one brute fist the jailer proceeded to beat the storm-trooper to death with the other.

Like a rag doll the monster beat him this way and that, one particularly savage blow finding its mark and knocking the helmet across the chamber. Slamming the storm-trooper's body back and forth between the craggy wall and the unforgiving bars of the cells the greenskin eventually settled on throttling the soldier against the crooked metal.

Krieg leaned forward. Even from the back, the shaven skull of the storm-trooper was easy to identify as Mortensen's, with its grim numerals and scarring. Incredibly, the cadet-commissar marvelled, the Gomorrian must have slipped into the rok, spilling blood only when he had to – and then as silently and surreptitiously as possible.

There was nothing surreptitious about the way Mortensen buried his storm blade into the back of the ork's bald, green head. The beast blinked and its sadistic features froze as the major's survival knife squirmed around in the monster's brain. Taking full advantage of the creature's bewilderment, Mortensen used the handle of the weapon to haul himself up on the greenskin's hunched shoulders and slam the serrated blade straight down into the sinew of its muscular neck.

The jailer's crushing grip on the storm-trooper suddenly intensified, its great brawny arms encircling the Gomorrian in a crushing bear hug. As the desperate melee continued, with Mortensen and the monster smashing each other against

the cell, the grip of the major's side arm played a messy tune on the jagged bars. Up until this point, Krieg had kicked painfully back into one darkened corner, out of sight: he would have a hard time explaining to the major how he came to be incarcerated on board the ork rok. Qvist's slender hand slipped through the bars eagerly for the weapon, but Krieg managed to lay his frostbitten fingers on it first, yanking it free of the storm-trooper's belt holster.

'Not yet,' he told the officer solemnly. Krieg didn't exactly know why he'd gone for the weapon. Instinct, he supposed. The Departamento Munitorum officer would in all likelihood have emptied the clip at the ork brute, but the commissar realised that they could ill afford to attract any more attention to the cell-block. On the other hand, it was possible that Krieg had claimed the weapon merely to deny the major an easy rescue. It was tempting to consider Krieg's mission all but completed at the hands of some alien thug. At the very least the commissar needed Mortensen alive to open the cell door. If nothing else, the major would have spent himself in the battle with the greenskin and, if it came to it, made himself an easier target for the cadet, who wasn't exactly in the peak of fitness himself.

The Redemption Corps major had other things on his mind at that moment, tearing his knife back across the ork's throat and severing both its windpipe and jugular. Something like a survival instinct, embedded deep inside the creature's primitive brain, gave and the greenskin got to the weapon first. To the great relief of the storm-trooper the ork released its grip on the carapace and wrapped its meaty claws around the handle of the embedded storm blade. With his weapon torn free of its knotted neck, Mortensen was forced to cling onto the patchwork flak and ringmail adorning the greenskin's back as the ork clutched for him.

After several near misses, with Mortensen's head almost finding its way into the greenskin's vice-like grip, the major finally got a better hold on the wild beast. Krieg flinched as the major struck the bars with unforgiving force. Stripped of the kind of weapons likely to stop an ork in its tracks, Mortensen was using the only resource left to him: brute strength. Somehow he'd snaked his bulging arms around the greenskin's gushing throat and was squeezing for all he was worth.

The ork was clawing at the storm-trooper's arms and throwing itself into the rocky walls and the bars of the cell. Krieg could hear the major's ragged sighs as each impact increased in power and determination. It was gruesome to watch – Mortensen broken up against every hard edge and sharp corner in the chamber –

but still the Gomorrian held on, denying his opponent vital oxygen. Finally, like some wounded beast of the plains, the ork staggered to its knees, claspings the bars with both hands – only to be lashed at and stamped upon by militia issue combat boots.

When the creature was still, and he was sure it was down, Mortensen unsaddled himself and reached for his storm blade, swiftly finishing what he had started and leaking the unconscious greenskin's life all over the rough-hewn floor. There was little in the way of Spetzghastian euphoria: freedom was close and the Mercantile Militiamen stood there in desperate expectation.

The key was a simple barrel turner and was shaped like a pronged tuning fork. With guidance from the militia sergeant, Mortensen found it hanging around the jailer's neck on a wire cord. Swinging the cell door open, the bruised and beaten Mortensen took in the rag tag band of Guardsmen.

‘Commander Qvist?’

‘Me, sir,’ the recruitment officer said, stepping forward and offering his hand. Mortensen didn't take it.

‘Right, listen up,’ the storm-trooper announced, addressing the entire cell. ‘My name is Major Zane Mortensen: the Redemption Corps storm-troopers will be your rescuers today. Don't go losing your heads, though. We're not out of the woods here yet by a long shot.’ The flint-faced sergeant nodded quietly. ‘The escape route is simple: follow this corridor and turn left. Then just follow the bodies.’ Mortensen entered the cell and began helping the wounded militiamen to their unsteady feet. ‘My men have organised some preoccupations for our greenskin friends, so you shouldn't encounter much in the way of resistance. My corpsmen will be waiting outside with medical supplies, weapons and fresh ammunition. Be ready to give as good as you get. Go!’

The Spetzghastians responded immediately, stomping and hobbling for the cantilever bulkhead. As Mortensen helped the cut-lipped Spetzghastian to the cell door, Commander Qvist went to pick up the greenskin's abandoned shooter.

‘Leave it,’ the major commanded. The young officer hovered over the weapon. Krieg watched Mortensen approach and slunk into the farthest, darkest corner of the cell. He stopped, vaguely annoyed. ‘You won't be able to aim the damn thing and most probably, it'll blow up in your hands. That junk only works for the greenskins.’

Still Krieg hadn't moved. ‘What's with him?’ Mortensen asked, surprised that the prospect of freedom hadn't put a spring in the figure's step.

Qvist stood with the major at the doorway, confused. ‘I thought he was one of

yours.'

The major squinted. Krieg came out from behind the filthy blanket. So did the autopistol.

'Krieg?' Mortensen hissed in disbelief. Qvist's young face creased in further perplexity.

The cadet-commissar levelled the weapon at the Gomorrian. Diamanta Santhonax's commands cutting through the confusion in his heart.

'Major Mortensen: you are charged with one hundred and five Tactica violations – edicts epsilon through alpha – sixteen counts of confederacy, martial treason and sedition of the creed and finally contravention of Stoltz Ultimatum.'

Krieg let his words hang in the bleakness of the cell. 'Which is punishable by death.'

Mortensen just stood there, arms and neck pulsing with the tension of the situation. His eyes burned back into Krieg's own unflinching orbs.

'Best save a couple of slugs for yourself,' the major recommended coldly. 'Because once you're back in the world, your life won't be worth spit.'

'I'll take my chances,' Krieg assured him. The commissar suddenly felt the ghostly sensation of a weapon being pointed at him. Without taking the autopistol off the major, he gave the Militia commander austere eyes. And found himself staring up the short barrel of a laspistol. Endo had returned from the greenskin's grotto where the Spetzghastian rifles had been scavenged and stored. He clutched his own lasgun to his chest and looked on in horror as his commander committed career suicide with his own reclaimed side arm.

Krieg's lip curled. 'This doesn't concern you, commander. This is the Emperor's work. Don't be a fool.'

'Sir!' Sergeant Endo called. The Spetzghastian wanted nothing to do with what was happening between Krieg and Mortensen and urged his young officer to follow suit. Qvist flicked his eyes from Krieg to Mortensen to the sergeant and then back again. Words abandoned him.

'I appreciate the sentiment commander, but Commissar Krieg here is right about one thing – at least – this is my problem,' Mortensen told the Departamento Munitorum officer through gritted teeth. 'Let me deal with it.'

It happened so quickly.

Mortensen hovered, eager for an advantage. Qvist's finger slipped across the trigger of his laspistol, although it was anyone's guess as to whether or not he actually intended discharging the weapon. This was not a chance the commissar had been trained to take. Krieg's thumb snapped across the autopistol, priming

the heavy-weight side arm. Suddenly the cell chamber was filled with excruciating noise. Commander Qvist had been thrown backwards across the room as Krieg put a round through the commander's gut. Sergeant Endo vaulted across the chamber, skidding down on his knees to the officer's side.

Mortensen went to move, but Krieg shook the autopistol at him, keeping the major pinned to the spot.

'Well?' Mortensen barked across the room. The sergeant rapidly fell to checking the young officer's vitals. His belly was already sodden with gore as the stomach wound steadily leaked the commander's lifeblood. The wound was clean, however, as Krieg had intended it.

'He's alive,' the sergeant confirmed stoically.

'What's the matter, Mortensen?' Krieg put to the major. 'Worried about your reputation?'

'Bloody idiot,' the Gomorrian erupted at the prone, glaze-eyed Qvist.

'Get him out of here,' Krieg ordered. 'Now!'

Endo took the softly groaning commander over one shoulder, then holding the major's gaze for a second, disappeared through the bulkhead in pursuit of his men.

Mortensen sagged and then stared down at his boots.

'Major Mortensen, you have been found wanting,' Krieg informed him.

'Prepare to receive the Emperor's judgement.'

Mortensen's eyes came up to meet Krieg's own. 'Do it...' he instructed with soft resignation. It wasn't a dare.

Krieg tensed his finger; the trigger was reassuringly heavy. The pistol willed itself to fire.

+Koulick Krieg...+

Krieg blinked. Something was inside his head: it felt like an arachnid nesting in his brain, giving birth to a thousand tiny but irresistible thoughts, crawling around his mind.

'Do it!' Mortensen snarled, almost indignant at the delay.

Krieg tried to comply. He thought of his backbreaking Legionnaire's servitude on a hundred different worlds, his years of pious service to the Ordo Hereticus – and Canoness Santhonax standing over him, her eyes alight with passion and her thin lips curled in righteous dissatisfaction. Every second of his service to the God-Emperor had led him to this moment – yet he struggled to act. He felt the trigger meet the resistance of the pistol's firing mechanism.

+Koulick Krieg...+

A stream of bright, thick blood fell from his nostril and splattered his arm. Krieg looked down for the briefest moment, moving his fingers from the splatter to his nose. He was going to be sick.

His stomach flipped, launching everything inside skyward. Vomit hit the wall and floor of the cell beside the cadet-commissar and just kept coming. His eyes were closed and his torso heaved but his arm was pumped like some tormented serpent, ready to strike at the slightest sensation that the major was advancing.

When he came back up for air, with some of the stringy gruel still clinging to his chin, Krieg found to his surprise that Mortensen hadn't moved.

'Krieg?' Mortensen asked, but the commissar stopped him by smacking the grip of the pistol repeatedly against his temple and roaring in aggravation and anguish. He turned the weapon on the major once again, but the desire simply wasn't there.

'I...' the cadet-commissar began.

'Save it,' Mortensen growled. Both men turned to find their charade had been played out in front of a small audience. Endo and Commander Qvist were being manhandled through the bulkhead and the chamber had become a gallery of green faces, beady eyes and gun barrels.

'You had your chance,' the Redemption Corps major told Krieg. 'You still want my blood, you're going to have to get in line.'

V

He'd visualised a hive of mayhem: a barbarian force in preparation for war. Mortensen was sorely disappointed. There was no fighting, no tusk baring, no shooting. As the major was dragged up through the rocky levels he was witness to the rank and file thug-soldiers of the rok going about their outlandishly orderly business. It went against the grain of every microbe of knowledge and experience the major had gathered over the many years he'd spent fighting the damn things.

Fully manned orbital gun emplacements swarmed with greenskins and runts and aircraft bays brimmed with squadrons of heavily armed patrol aircraft: if the major and his men hadn't risked their treacherous up-river infiltration, it was unlikely that they would ever have got near the ork rok. Between the deathworld swamps and the greenskin guests, Ishtar was turning out to be a pretty inimical place to be.

The four soldiers were taken to a cavernous chamber right at the top of the

rok: Mortensen could tell this because there was a massive hole in the roof, allowing the dim, deathworld twilight to flood in. There was a similarly sized opening in the floor of the cave, leading back down into the heart of the riddled asteroid, illumination from which waxed and waned with the rhythmic roar of mighty machineries below. A ramshackle concentric structure of girders, pylons and suspension wires ran up out of the hole, up through the chamber and out of the top of the rok, reaching for the sky like some great antennae to the stars. The mysterious structure hummed unnaturally and crackled with a sallow energy.

Here the brute squad put them on their knees with savage blows to the calves and left them. Mortensen cast a look up around the rims of his eyelids, catching the impression of a walkway and sentry posts, each manned by a begoggled, gun-toting, greenskin thug. Something thundered up steadily behind them across the hollow grille flooring. Something big.

Mortensen went to turn his head but was dissuaded by a fat green hand that enveloped his head like a scrapyard claw-winch and snapped it back front and centre.

The floor suddenly jolted as a brutal clockwork mechanism went to work on one wall. The grille platform juddered upwards, bringing it in line with some kind of command centre carved into the cavern wall. It was crowded with levers, wheels and simple gauges and dripped with sparking cables and steam lines.

The barbaric instrumentation was crawling with greenskin runts: monitoring, adjusting and trying to keep out of the way of their larger brethren. At the heart of this chaos lay a battered captain's throne – Imperial in design – probably ripped out of some unfortunate vessel that became lost in the warp and fell foul of this rocky behemoth. Prowling around the throne on knotted chains were a pack of walking jaws – man-eating pets that greenskins traditionally kept close. Upon seeing the four of them rise before the throne on the rumbling gantry, the dagger-fangs went insane, tearing at their rusty leashes and yapping a horrible chorus of throaty gnarls. On the throne sat a mournful looking creature in thick, gaudily painted armour, a crocodilian cloak and a tooth-inlaid headdress – giving him the appearance of being swallowed by some horrific alien creature. The greenskin was clearly very old, its mauled face-flesh cracked and dark with age and its protracted skull and tusks sagging with overgrowth.

There was something eerie about the entire atmosphere, the major noted. Mortensen couldn't quite place it at first and then he realised, it was the sound. There wasn't any. Orks, by their nature, were loud and bombastic creatures, their huge barrel chests and cavernous mouths equipping them to terrify their enemies

with a cacophony of savage blood hunger. The mock bridge of the ork rok was as silent as a cathedral, however, each monster communicating effortlessly with one another through what seemed to be the silence of passive fang-baring and narrowed eyes. With the slightest of gestures the enemy commander engaged the attention of a junior officer – an obscene individual in a parody uniform and cap, complete with trailing tassels and jumbo medals.

It wheeled an unfamiliar looking object across the bridge on a tracked trolley and positioned it in front of his warlord. It looked like one of those clunky, old-fashioned diving helmets Mortensen had seen some of the more desperate archeohunters use in the submerged caves of the Haephastus undersump. Instead of an air hose, the box trailed a pipe and rubber facemask that the officer affixed to his boss's long face. On two sides of the device were crude speakers and upon the front, a faceplate that the greenskin aide slid aside with a fingerclaw.

Inside sloshed a sickly yellow liquid and in the suspension sat a large ragged head. The head was shot through with fat, dirty needles and had clearly been separated from its torso for a reasonable amount of time: despite that, Mortensen could make out an abhuman face and one that had seen service in the ranks of the Imperial Guard, if the primitive forehead tattoos were anything to go by. Then it clicked. Mortensen shuffled on his knees. He was staring at Sergeant Lompock – the ogryn bonehead that had been guiding Qvist's Mercantile Militia platoon to the villages.

The major felt a shiver run down his spine as the contraption came appallingly to life. As the warboss spat his guttural greenspeak down the pipe the ogryn's eyeless head twitched and spoke, the bass gargle reverberating around the control centre.

'Have-fought-the-weak-bastard-spawn-of-the-Carcass-Emperor-my-whole-life. Your-rags-and-regalia-have-meaning,' the boss accused, pointing a crooked, gauntleted finger at Mortensen and Krieg.

'This-much-I-know. Tell-my-shootas-send-plenty-lead-the-way-of-such-markings.' The ogryn coughed a kind of macabre chuckle.

'Your shootas can't be very good then, can they?' Mortensen spat smugly. 'I appear to still be here.'

'Not-for-long,' the long tusk told him. 'Your-little-assault. Inventive-or-suicidal-cannot-tell-which. Matters-not. Simply-sent-ten-thousand-of-my-battle-kindred-to-the-world-you-call-Tancred-day-ahead-of-schedule.'

'You're greenskin savages,' Krieg seethed. 'You don't keep schedules.'

'Schedules-yes-battleplans-yes. How-you-think-forces-coordinated?'

The major laughed. ‘Didn’t think they were.’

The ork warboss thrust his elongated jaw at the Gommorian. ‘Mine-are...’ he assured them with conviction. ‘And-I-have-the-Imperial-pig-citizens-of-Tancred’s-World-under-my-knife-to-prove-it.’

‘Impossible,’ Mortensen shot back, his forced merriment evaporated. ‘We’d know.’

‘Like-knew-about-your-factory-world?’

‘Cult spree killings preceded invasions on both worlds,’ Krieg informed the major. ‘Algernon, too.’

‘Algernon-belong-my-masters-already.’

‘What are you?’ hissed Mortensen, shaking his head. He couldn’t believe that he was talking to an ork. Mortensen had fought all kinds of greenskin filth on a score of different worlds. He’d never come across anything that spoke like this thing. Its words were laced with more than the usual animal cunning he’d come to expect from greenskin barbarians: and that was dangerous enough. There was something distinctly alien about this alien, if that were possible.

The ancient warlord seemed to consider his question seriously. ‘Am-evolving. Am-enlightened.’ The greenskin slumped – back to business. ‘Like-I-know-things-you-know-things. Things-I-must-know. Quickly. System-reinforcement. Fleet-deployment,’ the boss gestured at the open sky. ‘Usually-get-my-sawbonez-to-sew-your-puny-flesh-as-one,’ the ancient warlord told them, nodding at the monstrosity that stood behind them. Again, Mortensen attempted to snatch a glance at the greenskin surgeon, but the beast’s mechanised, mantrap jaws snapped in cold and close, causing the storm-trooper to swallow, wrinkle his nose and turn back towards the warboss. ‘Have-you-share-one-set-of-organs-till-one-spillz-gutz-at-my-feet,’ the ork warlord continued. ‘Sadly-no-time. Quick-demonstration-needed. Make-intention-clear.’

The surgery-happy hulk behind them stirred. He snatched Sergeant Endo from his knees and dragged him across the platform, towards the metal structure at the centre of the cavern.

The soldiers watched as the stoop-backed monstrosity effortlessly trailed the militiaman behind him. Its head was a metal nightmare: serrated, hydraulic maw, metal dome skull and two telescopic eyes that protruded like insect antennae. Despite its spine being buckled by years of supporting the overgrown cranial adaptations, the greenskin’s back was still a head taller than any of the Imperials. Clomping boots, a butcher’s belt and a blood-splashed leather apron completed the picture.

‘What’s it doing?’ the major hissed.

‘Teleporter,’ Krieg informed him. ‘Some tribes reputedly have a good grasp of the technology. Explains how they’ve infiltrated so successfully. There are probably roks like this dotted all over the Spetzghastian system: waystations for transporting hardware and troops from one moon to the next. That’s how an entire invasion force just seemed to appear on Illium.’

Mortensen recalled the strange empty hole burned out of existence below decks in the *Mortis Maximus*: how the greenskins must have gained entry with similar technologies, bypassing the god-machine’s armour and shields.

The warboss left his throne, trailing its ghoulish translator, and crossed the cluttered bridge, throwing heavy levers, tapping gauges and spinning wheels as he did. As it yanked a handle on the wall something heavy was released from the ceiling and Mortensen, Krieg and even the dazed and bleeding Qvist all hit the deck in the belief that they were going to be flattened. Metres from the platform the object was snapped unceremoniously to a halt by the heavy-duty chains that supported it and swung to one side. As Mortensen dared to stare upwards he found himself looking at a burnished metal disc: something not unlike the magnetic attachments used on some derricks to unload vessels in cargo bays.

‘Teleporter. Yes,’ the warlord confirmed. It simply glanced at the barbaric surgeon who took the writhing sergeant in both crushing fists and pitched Endo off the rampart. The Spetzghastian, who had been so calm and sober up to this point, let rip a single scream before falling through the girders of the pylon and disappearing in the stream of imperceptible teleporter energy streaming up out of the rok.

Mortensen and Krieg turned back to the aged greenskin. They found it closer than ever – manipulating further control knobs and fat switches. As the greenskin casually spun an important looking calibrator, Mortensen went to rise once again, his ill-restrained fury spilling over like stew in a cauldron. Krieg grabbed his shoulder and tore him back down. The disc above their heads suddenly washed them with an unnatural heat. A kind of charge built across the surface of the metal with sparks skittering around the outside and falling in towards a power vortex gathering in the centre.

The major closed his eyes as the air about them blanched. When he opened them again everything was blurred, but as the seconds followed and realisation dawned he found that everything was in fact very clear: it was Endo that was blurred.

The sergeant had been rematerialised in front of them, but the warboss had

intentionally warped the insane genius of the device with his ham-fisted alterations. Endo quivered and steamed: the teleporter had shredded his body, molecule by molecule and then reassembled him as a botched and bloody flesh sculpture. With gut-punching horror Mortensen realised that some structures had achieved true replication. One barely comprehending, milky eyeball thrashed its pupil at them in agony and somewhere deep inside the pulp of mangled bone and organs a mouth squealed incessantly.

Mortensen broke free of the commissar's grip and surged for the ork warlord: he didn't get far. The brute surgeon was behind him, grabbing the storm-trooper by the skull and forcing him back down on the grille. The boss came closer still – confident in its experimenter's ability to restrain the puny human. Sergeant Lompock's drowning commentary echoed around the cavernous chamber.

'If-you-don't-wish-to-see-the-inside-of-your-own-body-tell-me-now-all-you-know. Promise-I-kill-you-quick. A-soldier's-death.'

Mortensen's eyes flashed from the spasming mess that was Endo to the uncompromising, alien orbs of the ork warboss. 'Don't-worry-about-your-friend. He-won't-suffer-long.' The greenskin turned his back on Mortensen and clicked his claws, signalling one of the gretchin runts attending his throne to unslip the warboss's dagger-fanged pets. The pack of monsters bounded across the control centre, their chains flashing after them, and set upon the malformed mound of human flesh, tearing the unfortunate Spetzghastian to shreds.

Mortensen took his chance. With the greenskins enjoying the wretched spectacle, the major threw back his head and pushed away from the floor with a powerful thrust. Putting his left hand on his right fist he threw his arm backwards with all the might he could manage. The elbow buried itself in the greenskin surgeon's midriff and would have broken an ordinary man in two. The alien monster simply gave a muffled grunt from beneath its trapjaw maw.

Then, something completely unexpected happened. Instead of reacquiring the major, who was now loose and backing away from the greenskin, the creature instead reached for its stomach. Mortensen fantasised that he'd actually hurt the brute: perhaps broken something inside its alien body. Suddenly something dropped to the floor from below the surgeon's bloodstained leather apron. A belt of sandbags had hit the deck, one splitting open and spilling deathworld sand through the grille. Human and alien stared on in shock and confusion. The moment was broken with sudden action – this time from the greenskin surgeon, who bounded forward like some prehistoric reptile, closing with its slowly comprehending superior.

A shape thudded across the grille floor between the soldiers and the feasting pack. It was green, bloody and fixed in a mask of shock and confusion. As it bounced to a full stop on the gore-splattered platform Mortensen realised that it was the ork warlord's head, snapped clean off by his surgeon-henchman's metallic jaws.

Tearing a clawful of stikkbombz from its belt the greenskin lobbed the grenades deep into the rok's crowded bridge. Runt operators and the warboss's vicious pets had the good sense to bolt for their lives but the bully-boy minders and the mock-uniformed officer couldn't extricate themselves fast enough from the cluttered command centre and went up with the bridge in a tempest of frag and fire.

The platform sang with the percussion of shots from above. Crouching low the major grabbed the injured Commander Qvist and pulled him to a sheltered spot in the now blasted bridge. Krieg tried to hobble to the girder-lined wall but was forced back by an unlucky confluence of fire. Crouching beside Mortensen the two men watched the ork torturer stand amongst the lead storm, his meaty shoulders hunched and his metal skull expressionless and steady.

During a break in the fire the greenskin slipped its bloodstained hands beneath its leather apron and pulled out two chunky, automatic pistols with drum magazines and snub barrels. Turning the weapons skyward the greenskin went to work on the clumsy marksmen. Rounds tore through the gantry with precision and economy, ripping up through the legs of each shooter before the chief torturer moved on to the next target. Mortensen had never seen such dexterity and aim in a greenskin before: the day was proving, however, that there was a great deal about this particular breed of ork he'd never seen before. Bodies were crashing to the platform like meteorites and as the greenskin turned its weapons on the last of the gunners with a final, murderous arc of fire, it let out a savage bellow of rage and triumph that bounced around the walls of the cavernous chamber.

Mortensen couldn't take his eyes off the creature: its brute potency was entrancing. Then, as the roar continued, it began to assume a more recognisable pitch. The major watched as the alien's brawny arms and legs rippled and spasmed – the puce-green flesh blotching ebony brown and then black. Sandbag after sandbag of disguised bulk rained from beneath the leather apron. Pieces of scavenged armour and barbaric tools of torture thumped to the ground as belts and harnesses slid off the new slender lines of the transforming torso. Bone stretched and splintered; sockets popped and dislocated limbs ripped through

sickening undulating flesh and snapped back in place. The monster's clockwork cranium slipped down the figure's straightening back and smashed into the floor. The roar was now a scream and the pain was of a very human variety. She had a face of two halves: one side wore the distinction and solemnity of an Imperial servant; the other was a crater of hollow bone and wasted flesh.

Finally the scream came to a resonant close and the stranger stood in the middle of the blasted platform in only a black gossamer bodyglove that seemed to cling to her torso like ink. Only at the wrists did the garment seem to expand to accommodate forearm reinforcements, helping her to support the weight of the huge greenskin pistols she was carrying.

Mortensen turned to Krieg, who was just as mesmerised and, possibly for the first time aboard the ork rok, a little fearful.

'Could today get any vrekkin' weirder?' the major burst and went to present himself to their new ally. Krieg grabbed him and pushed him back against the ruined command centre wall.

'Are you out of your mind?' the commissar said. Qvist groaned and slumped at their feet, the shock of his injuries causing him to fall regularly in and out of consciousness. Mortensen frowned.

'Very possibly. She's an infiltrator – here for the boss. She infiltrated the infiltrators,' Mortensen told Krieg, not a little amused by his impromptu jest. 'We're ahead of the game, for once.'

'They can't be trusted,' Krieg insisted. He hesitated, before committing himself: 'Trust me.'

'Trust you?' the major guffawed. 'She's an Imperial assassin: the operative word here is "Imperial". I don't know if you've been keeping up on current events but she single-handedly vanquished our enemies. I trust her more than I trust you: she hasn't put a gun in my face.'

Mortensen shrugged the cadet off and stepped out from behind the corner. The assassin was walking calmly towards them.

Mortensen smiled. 'Throne, am I glad to—'

The assassin's arms came up and unleashed a stream of rapid fire at the major. Slipping down the rock and skidding back around the corner, Mortensen turned his head to one side, feeling the rounds pepper the wall behind him and whiz past his cheek. It had all happened so fast, he was still smiling. 'You were saying?' he put to the commissar.

Mortensen hated the idea of relying on the young cadet but it was increasingly evident that the man was becoming a necessary evil. Despite his turncoat

sensibilities, in the face of such fast-moving events and a singularly terrifying opponent, Krieg wasn't looking half bad as an ally.

'I've seen this operative before. I think the boss was a bonus. You're the target.'

'Groxcrap,' the major hissed back.

'She would have killed you outright, but she would have had to blow her cover before she was ready. She waited until you were both together.'

'Look, I piss very important people off on a daily basis,' Mortensen admitted. 'Enough even – it seems – to justify a battlefield execution, but I've done nothing to warrant the attention of one of the Temples.'

'Apparently, they don't agree.'

'You knew about this?'

Krieg exchanged places with Mortensen, who was more than happy to place the commissar between him and the assassin.

'Think I'd waste my time being here if I did?' the cadet put to him. Krieg ventured one eye around the rocky corner and was rewarded with a fresh eruption of gunfire. The pair edged further around the rock, dragging Qvist with them.

'Doesn't seem too hot on you either,' Mortensen said with some satisfaction. At least while the assassin had her weaponry clearly levelled at the both of them it was unlikely the commissar would have time to follow his own interest in spilling Mortensen's blood. In order to have any chance at all against their attacker the major reasoned that Krieg would need him as much as Mortensen needed Krieg.

Krieg edged away from the corner. 'The Officio Assassinorum aren't known for their fondness for loose ends – she'll kill us all.'

Mortensen's top lip wrinkled. He threw glances around the chamber with its myriad floors and mighty clockwork mechanisms. Looking down through the grille flooring he could see a thunderhead of freezing gas billowing its way out of rocky bulkheads and up through the floors below. Greenskins were fleeing: stomping and scrambling their way to freedom, away from the certainty of a supercooled, watery grave.

A gloriously familiar sound greeted the major's ears. The simple click of a firing mechanism with nothing to fire. Mortensen wasn't going to hang around while the assassin reloaded her pistols. Grabbing a length of titanium piping from the abundant debris of the control centre, Mortensen pulled the commissar aside once again and sidled along the wall to the corner.

‘This is an Imperial Assassin: she could kill you in her sleep,’ Krieg stated flatly.

‘You got any better ideas?’ the Gommorian growled dangerously.

Krieg pulled his Legionnaire’s bayonet out from where he’d hidden it in the lining of his flak jacket.

‘We take her together.’

Mortensen ground his teeth. He had no idea why he was being targeted – let alone Krieg. He made a promise to himself to find out if he made it off the deathworld alive. In order to do that he knew this was an alliance he could ill-afford to refuse.

Mortensen gave the commissar an unreadable look before nodding slowly at him and then to himself.

‘On three, then...’ the major mumbled.

Krieg flicked his eyes at the corner: the assassin was already standing there – her good eye burning into them with expectation.

‘Damn,’ Mortensen spat before launching himself at the dark figure. The pipe came down with all the power and precision the Gommorian could muster, and would have cleaved an ordinary person into the ground. The assassin was a blaze of movement, however, shifting effortlessly to one side. As the pipe bounced off the grille floor, Mortensen followed through with another brutal pitch. This time the assassin weathered the blow, smoothly deflecting it off her reinforced forearms. Krieg came at her from the other side, holding his bayonet like a dagger and flashing it at the assassin with well-practiced flourishes. Time and again the pipe and blade came at the operative with increasingly desperate and inventive combinations, but to little avail. The assassin was merely toying with them.

Finally she began to counter with her own exotic and decisive combat manoeuvres, turning Krieg’s knife aside and slamming the back of his skull into the wall with an inescapable flat-footed kick to the chin. It almost looked like the assassin had grown bored. Everything up to this point had been mere training or the frustrations that came with assuming a form that was not her own.

Krieg’s bayonet clattered to the floor and the stunned commissar slid to the ground, his face bloody and his eyes blank. Another of the major’s vicious swings cut through the air beside the evading Imperial agent. Twisting gracefully along the length of the pipe the assassin stabbed at nerve clusters in Mortensen’s neck with the tips of her palms before acrobatically flipping and slamming the major back with the ball of one foot. She was about to conclude with an equally

outlandish flykick and would have done so, if it hadn't been for the sudden lurch experienced by the rok as the colossal craft continued its inevitable journey to the depths of the chemical flood plain.

Krieg tumbled along the wall and Mortensen fell backwards, the floor simply not being where it had been seconds before. Only the assassin managed any kind of a landing, launching herself back off the grille with her hands, somersaulting and dropping the new distance to the ground with assurance. Mortensen was waiting for her.

Hitting the floor first with his face and then rolling across one shoulder, the major was ready. Sweeping the bar parallel to the floor, Mortensen hamstrung the landing operative, sending her crashing to the platform. Scrambling across the floor the major buried the warped end of the pipe in the assassin's already mangled face. The agent was sufficiently dazzled to allow two more of the Gomorrian's sledgehammer blows to go home before formulating a counter-move.

Reaching out with both arms the assassin released spring-triggered armaments from the reinforced forearm plates adorning each wrist. A short blade of peculiar fluorescent metal exploded from one appendage, whilst a pistol of unusual alien design shot out from the other on a lightweight carriage.

Somehow the killer got the blade between Mortensen's bat and her face, shearing off the tip of the titanium pipe. Like a blacksmith working metal off an anvil the major pressed on with his attack, leaning into another powerhouse pounding. This time the blade sliced the pipe in half, before flicking elegantly around to take the last of the length down to Mortensen's feverish grip.

The major had little time to think: the advantage was fading fast and the assassin's otherworldly pistol was coming up. Dropping the titanium stub, Mortensen threw himself down on the assassin's arm and grabbed for the hand holding the pistol. The operative's arm turned and twisted like a muscular snake and it was all the Gomorrian could do to keep it straight and aim the pistol out of harm's way. In response the assassin's blade tore through the cool air of the cavern in a devastating curve, ready to impale the major through the head. Again Mortensen came for the assassin's face, gripping her wrist with one hand and slamming his unfeeling elbow with bone-cracking force into the killer's collapsed face.

The blade-arm went down – at first in skull-splintered shock – and then with the intention of pushing the assassin up off the grille floor. Mortensen heard the scrape of another blade and darted his eyes around the chaos of limbs and frantic

movement, attempting to anticipate another attack. Fortunately the blade was the bayonet and its wielder was Krieg, fresh from his close encounter with the wall. Snatching the weapon up in both hands the commissar leapt at the pair of them, slamming the blade down through the back of the assassin's grasping palm and squeezing it inbetween the lattice of the mesh flooring.

A wheeze of agony escaped the assassin's lean lips. Mortensen lay still. Krieg stared at what he'd done. Suddenly the assassin bucked, sending a spasmic ripple through her shapely body, throwing Mortensen into a roll across the platform floor. The pistol was free. Krieg shuffled and kicked back towards the wall but the major wasn't as fortunate. He broke the roll by thumping his palms into the grille but found himself staring back up the weapon's odd length.

Mortensen snatched his storm blade from a sheath on his armoured thigh but a metallic shimmer had reached out for him from the end of the strange weapon's barrel, striking him in the chest before writhing across his body in divergent streams. Muscles spasmed and the storm blade clattered to the grille decking.

The strange, silver fire coursed through Mortensen's being, burning its way through his insensitive, deadened flesh to the live nerve-shot tissue beneath. That's when the suffering began. Everything else went black. Only the pain mattered. His brain became nothing more than a filter for the transmission of the hell he was experiencing. He thrashed like a faulty servitor, smacking his head, knees and elbows across the mesh flooring as the ethereal agony passed through the nerve-crammed muscles of his chest and thighs. It found a new expression of pain as it hit his solar plexus, throwing his abdomen off the platform and forcing his limbs to assume the tortured formation of a crab. The white-hot sensation felt like it was burrowing out of his wracked intestines like a bullet passing through his back and out through his cramping stomach.

Then it was gone. Mortensen collapsed, still clutching his abdomen. As he unscrewed his eyes he saw the assassin waving the pistol at the swiftly retreating commissar. It seemed the torturous side arm only had a short range and the assassin was still pinned to the deck. The pistol slid efficiently back along its carriage and disappeared as the operative fell to heaving at the bayonet, but the blade was stuck fast.

Krieg looked at the stranded assassin and then back at the major for instruction. He slid another length of shattered pipe from a pile of debris gathered against the wall. Mortensen shook his head as he got unsteadily to his feet. He didn't think he could experience anything like that again.

'Screw that,' he blurted, throwing a finger at the struggling killer. 'Get Qvist.'

Krieg yanked young Qvist to his feet and stumbled him across the platform to the pylon superstructure. The two of them went down as the floor dropped violently once again. The rok was really sinking now. Mortensen exchanged a venomous glance with the assassin before bounding for the structure himself.

They arrived together. Mortensen's first priority was to get Qvist back to his senses. Belly-shot or not he needed the boy to climb. Sloshing the commander across the face with the back of his hand, the major shook the Spetzghastian awake. The boy's head lolled to one side, his eyes rolling before falling back into unconsciousness.

'Plan?' the cadet-commissar put to him.

Mortensen grunted: 'Simple. Climb for your life.' Throwing the limp body of the Departamento Munitorum officer over one shoulder the major vaulted the distance between the platform floor and the girders. Krieg followed, after a tottering run up, hitting the pylon higher up, being slightly lighter of foot. The two men began their desperate scramble for the cavern ceiling.

Thirty metres into the gruelling ascent a dull howl caused both of the soldiers to halt, chests heaving. Looking down, they saw the assassin had given up her futile attempts to extricate the wedged bayonet. She had to. The rok was flooding badly – the steam from the raging deluge below was rising up through the grille flooring. Pulling the impaled palm to one side the assassin had slit the blade through one side of her hand – severing bone, tendon and gristle. What she was left with was a useless appendage that she bound quickly with a strip torn hastily from her body glove. Mortensen watched her assess the situation, her eyes moving around the cavern like a jungle cat's.

The mesh flooring frosted up as floodwaters bubbled up in between. There was no way she could make the pylon now. Instead the assassin made the short run to the chamber wall and bounded up the first few metres of the rock. Incredibly the professional killer intended to scale the cavern wall and ceiling, swinging across to the pylon structure at the rim of the colossal hole in the chamber roof. Impossible ordinarily – beyond the realms of all credible likelihood with only one hand.

As the assassin shot up the wall it seemed like nothing would stop her and with Mortensen tiring under the extra weight of the Departamento Munitorum officer, he began to wonder if she had a chance. Krieg had spotted the advancing assassin also and called down to the major, who'd now completely stopped.

'Wait there!' Mortensen yelled, throwing himself up the aching distance separating them. Just before he reached the cadet a new phenomenon presented

itself. Chemicular slush was streaming in from the roof. The rok was all but submerged now, the gargantuan mass of the craft forcing the groundwaters up and over the summit of the asteroid. Only the teleporter array, reaching up and out of the rok, still cleared the rising cryogenic swamplands. Curtains of deathworld precipitation splashed in over the brim of the roof hole, creating a circular waterfall that sprayed and dashed the pylon with droplets of chemical superfreeze.

Mortensen sagged, screwing up his face. ‘Come on!’ he bawled at his rapidly deteriorating prospects. Krieg must have thought he was talking to him because he clambered the remaining metres down to him.

‘Take the kid,’ the major ordered, passing the rag-doll body up to the struggling commissar. Krieg wasn’t squat and powerful in the way the major was and Qvist presented a serious impediment to his efforts. A frost-bitten foot hardly helped matters.

‘I’m the target?’ Mortensen confirmed, steely-eyed.

Krieg nodded gravely.

‘Then she’ll follow her target,’ the major reasoned, slipping through between the girders and launching himself across the space between two adjoining sides of the pylon interior. He felt the phantasmal shock-wave sensation of the fat teleporter beam wash across his eyeballs as his vault carried him close by. It was hard to believe that the unstoppable greenskin machinery was still operating beneath tons of liquid: a testament to alien technology, indeed.

Hanging off struts on the other side, Mortensen shot Krieg a meaningful glance. The cadet was still staring at him: an understanding passed between the two men, culminating in a silent nod from the commissar. Mortensen then watched Krieg surge purposefully for the ceiling before disappearing up through the roof. The assassin had predictably changed her course, moving rapidly across the wall of the cavern like an insect, bringing herself parallel with the major before negotiating the craggy, concave ceiling of the chamber.

Mortensen put on a final spurt – his teeth gritted, arms on fire – bringing him in line with the assassin. At that moment she blasted through the sheet of chemical death cascading in from above. She’d swung from the roof, freefalling at the pylon. She passed Mortensen, slamming onto the side of the structure with two sure feet and a firm, if frostbitten, handhold.

The assassin was like some unstoppable machine. There would be no outclimbing her. Instead of scrabbling skyward, the major let go. Using his boots to guide him along the girder he was scaling, he slid down the pylon, crushing

the frozen fingers on the assassin's remaining hand under his heel. The predatory killer fell backwards some distance before becoming tangled in a set of support struts further down.

This was his chance. Mortensen blasted up the network of bars and supports after Krieg, committing everything he had left to scaling the antenna array and putting as much distance as possible between himself and his executioner.

As he breached the roof opening Mortensen's heart sank as he realised just how far above the rok surface the telescopic transmitter extended. What was even more worrying was the fact that he could not see the silhouettes of Krieg and Qvist above him. He'd expected to be able to pick them out clinging to the structure overhead, against the twilight of the deathworld sky. He shouldn't have been surprised. The rok summit, and by extension the pylon, was shuddering metre by metre down into a broiling, white-water vortex of crashing deathworld brume. There wasn't a sandy bank or piece of silicon foliage in sight.

Without warning the tower moved. It wasn't the jolting plunge Mortensen had become used to. The pylon had never been pointing straight up, but it was generally aimed at the sky. Now the entire structure was careering wildly towards the furious chemiclar riptide. Digging his fingers into the metal, the major rode out the inevitable bounce. The tower was collapsing and although the structure was holding on to its rigidity, the pinnacle was rolling violently around, picking up lethal momentum.

The assassin had returned. She was rocketing up one of the core beams, using the tips of both toes and working fingers. Her ruined hand was finding fresh usefulness with its deadly blade extended – the shimmering, otherworldly fluorescence agitated as she slashed through high tension wires and support cables.

Mortensen stopped climbing. There was nowhere left to go. The pylon was creaking uncomfortably and bouncing gently towards the foaming breakers below. The taller waves were crashing against the structure, causing both Mortensen and his executioner to keep moving back and forth along the length of the pinnacle in order to avoid instant petrification. The assassin was walking now, casually flicking the tip of her weapon at the struts and chains holding Mortensen's section of the pylon out of the maelstrom below.

'I don't suppose there's any chance we can work something out,' the major bawled sardonically over the intense noise. The assassin began to pick up speed, bounding up the girder towards him, blade held ready for some exotic and lethal manoeuvre.

‘Had to ask,’ the major explained softly to himself, steeling his body for the inevitable path of the alien blade. Holding tight and closing his eyes, Mortensen shut out the drama of his surroundings and prepared for a swift and clean death. Surely he could trust an assassin to deliver that.

The ear-searing roar of a familiar engine rolled overhead, causing Mortensen to blink open his eyes and let the reality flood back in. Everything he needed to know was carved into the assassin’s snarling half-face. *Vertigo*. Turning, the major streaked up the remaining length of the pylon apex. As an angry breaker swept past and doused the structure behind him the Spectre was revealed, hovering over the chaos, turning gently. The bay ramp was down and a collection of figures were violently gesturing encouragement from inside. Among them was Commissar Koulick Krieg.

Mortensen didn’t dare look back. The aircraft’s door gunners were giving his assailant all kinds of hell with streams from their heavy bolters – but Mortensen had seen the daemoniac character walk through worse than that. Blasting off the end of the teleporter array, legs kicking with wild effort, Mortensen sailed across the chemical death raging below.

It wasn’t pretty, but it was a landing. His chest had struck the end of the ramp awkwardly and he could swear that a couple of ribs had snapped inside his molested torso. He kicked at the slick hull of the aircraft and his fingers slapped the ramp frantically for a grip. A sea of gloved hands came at him, latching onto his carapace and fistfuls of raw flesh before pulling him unceremoniously inside.

‘Ramp closing,’ Eszcobar called across the bay, the deathworlder being first to the activation stud. The gaggle of corpsmen fell in a heap in the centre of the troop bay, Mortensen held like some kind of prize between them. The Navy gunners were still crashing at shadows outside and the aircraft swung uncomfortably above the whirlpool.

‘Sir, are you alright?’ Meeks asked urgently, suddenly beside him. When Mortensen didn’t initially reply the sergeant shook his shoulder, attempting to bring the major out of his daze. ‘Are you injured?’ he asked. He didn’t wait for an answer this time and simply yanked a harassed-looking DuBois and her medical kit away from Krieg and the unconscious Qvist. There were others too: Minghella was still unconscious and Sarakota incapacitated. Hauser was sitting in a pool of his own blood, growling in incessant pain at the far end of the compartment and a faceless Garbarsky trembled under a mask of bandages and pipes. Thule and two Guardsmen from the other squad cradled blasted limbs and head wounds. Even Rask had taken one in the gut.

‘Is he in?’ came Conklin’s gravelly voice over the bay vox-com.

‘In,’ Eszcobar confirmed.

Mortensen staggered away from DuBois’s healing hands and Meeks’s remonstrations. He felt like he just wanted to collapse, but there was something they had to do before returning to *Deliverance*.

He snatched the vox from the Autegan scout: ‘Rosenkrantz!’ the major called, fighting for breath. ‘Fly low. Give the bird’s belly a taste of the canopy.’

‘What the h—’

‘Just do it.’

After a moment’s hesitation the aircraft banked and accelerated, carrying them clear of the rising flood plain. Suddenly the Spectre bucked and everyone inside the compartment was thrown forward. Silicon shrubbery slammed the aircraft as Rosenkrantz guided *Vertigo*’s swollen belly down into the razor-sharp canopy. Leaves and branches shattered, immersing the hull in a relentless slipstream of crystal shards and glass splinters.

Everyone heard a body slam flush to the aircraft exterior and then the unearthly scream of a woman literally sliced to ribbons in an instant. Blood streamed in through the gunner’s ports and ran across the inside of the compartment wall.

Mortensen sank down the side of the compartment wall – job done. The Gomorrian hadn’t underestimated the assassin and had been rewarded for his vigilance: he could hardly risk the deathstalker roaming the corridors of *Deliverance*.

The enormity of what had just happened was just beginning to sink in. Death was a constant companion on Redemption Corps missions but he’d almost been assassinated. Someone very powerful wanted him dead. His mind buzzed with a thousand possibilities.

As Rosenkrantz pulled the assault carrier out of the treetops, silence reigned once again in the troop bay. The mood was wretched, however, with blood, pain and hangdog faces sapping any sense of victory or the jubilation of survival.

‘Orders, boss?’ said Conklin who’d just appeared on the companionway, breaching the hush that had fallen across the corpsmen. Mortensen was lost in thought.

‘We need to get back to *Deliverance* and alert the fleet to the situation,’ Krieg insisted.

‘Sir?’ Conklin persevered intently as though the commissar had never spoken.

‘The fate of this system may very well depend on what we decide to do right now,’ Krieg put to Mortensen and the compartment.

Conklin took several dangerous steps towards the commissar.

‘Do what he says,’ Mortensen interceded.

‘But boss, the ogryns, the mission was—’

‘A trap,’ Captain Rask answered for him. The officer looked empty and desolate.

‘But one that might just serve to save this system from the clutches of an alien invader,’ Mortensen assured the captain. He turned to Krieg. ‘Yes?’

A moment of cool concord passed between the two men.

‘Yes,’ the cadet-commissar answered finally.

'Speak, damn you!' the canoness seethed, slamming her armoured palms into the table.

Mortensen's eyes were glazed, his face – like his body – lifeless. He hadn't spoken in what seemed an age, he just sat there watching Santhonax pace the oubliette, soaking up the battle-sister's fury. Once or twice he caught her checking her chronometer or fidgeting with her vox-piece. It was probably already too late to get off the planet's surface and she knew it.

Despite feeling emotionally drained and physically exhausted, Mortensen felt the irresistible pull of an utterance. He felt compelled to satisfy her demand to know his mind.

'All those people, died...'

'Yes,' the canoness confirmed with unusual feeling, quick to exploit the opening. 'But not for you or because of you. There are those amongst the fighting men of the Imperium who might trade in such untruths and poison your faith with their own heretical needs and ideals. But in Gomorrah's death, men like you found new life. You wouldn't have become what you are, had not adversity been your making.'

'What, a cursed cripple?' Mortensen lamented.

Santhonax turned his chair from the table and knelt down in her armour by his side: 'Can't you see? This isn't a curse, it's a gift.' She stroked his battle-scarred chest with the cruel tips of her gauntlet. 'It may not be divinely ordained, but whatever you lost in your world's calamity, you gained the ability to achieve the impossible. You succeed where others fail. You walk tall where others have fallen. You live when you should die. Adversity gave you that.'

'The assassin?'

Santhonax nodded slowly.

'Krieg?'

More confirmation from the battle-sister.

'That bounty hunter on Targretta Prime?'

'Not one of mine,' the canoness admitted, narrowing her eyes and coming in closer, 'but the same principle applies.'

'Why the pretence? Heresy? Why not just come for me?' the major goaded.

'There are those,' Santhonax admitted with regret, 'that do not share our

vision.'

'Really?' the Gommorian teased.

The Sister of the Immaculate Flame continued unfazed: 'They are without the steel in their soul to do what is necessary. They do not understand and consider our ideas dangerous. In turn, we ourselves stand accused of heretical ideals. Surely you can empathise with that, Major Mortensen?'

'Let me let you in on a little secret: I think your ideas are dangerous,' he told her straight, 'and since you included me in them, I've never been more than two decisions away from a horrible death.'

'It's easier to avoid your accusers if you appear to be one of them. See, adversity forced me to become stronger. My pretence was part of the adversity you are enduring right at this moment, but in time I have hopes that you will outgrow my protection.'

'Protection!' Mortensen guffawed angrily. 'You've done nothing but try to kill me or get me killed. You talk of adversity like it's some kind of necessary evil. You're wrong,' he told her sourly. 'The end of my world gave me nothing but pain. And when it finished giving me that, well, it just gave me nothing.'

'It gave you a role to play: a life useful to the Emperor.'

'You may revel in adversity,' the major went on. 'You may believe that the Imperium is all the stronger for the enemies at and within its borders, but there's an alien war host out there who says different; who are different – because from what I've seen and from what I know, I don't think they're going to stop.'

'Men like you will stop them,' the canoness assured him. 'And you will be all the stronger, sharper and more vigilant for your victory. But if there's no enemy, there can be no victory and no one able to stand against the future foes of mankind. Greater evils.'

Mortensen shook his head, which surprised him because formerly those muscles had been all but stupefied. He pushed on, eager that the battle-sister not detect his growing mobility.

'You talk like you can control this.'

'Control? No. Do not take me for a fool: I've fought the Imperium's enemies all my life,' she warned him. 'But if you study what you hate, you come to realise that mankind's enemies can be encouraged to be predictable. And of all the wretched alien detritus that pollute the galaxy, greenskins are amongst the most predictable.'

'You're out of your mind, did you know that?'

'Centuries reducing garrisons on the Burdock Worlds. Generations spent

thinning fleet deployments along the Kintessa Gauntlet. Enceladus drew millions of able-bodied fighting men out of sector – an unnecessary crusade providing a hole in the fence, as it were. Don't misunderstand me, it had to be a very big hole, but orks can't resist an opening like that. Studies of greenskin invasions and unintentional strategic weaknesses long taught us that.'

'You...'

'And those before me,' Santhonax informed him. 'Gomorraah was bold – even by ork standards. We'd never seen tactics like that before. That hulk was colossal and more than enough to sunder a world – but we never expected it to actually strike the planet. Genius, really. As a hive-world, Gomorraah would have supplied the lion's share of recruits required to repel an invasion of the system. It was then we truly realised we'd chosen wisely. The warlords of the Gargasso Deeps proved on that day their suitability for this venture. We could trust their intention to unify and push coreward on a green tide of unthinking alien brutality: funnelled through the weakened inroad of worlds making up the Kintessa Gauntlet and spilling out upon an unsuspecting Segmentum Solar.'

'You—'

'Could have stopped it? Yes. But why should we? This will be the greatest alien incursion the galaxy has ever seen. It will galvanise generations to action, across hundreds of worlds, and make thousands more like you.'

'You don't know, do you?' Mortensen marvelled with sickening horror. Something about the quality of the major's accusation stopped the fanatic in her tracks.

'Explain,' she finally ordered.

'They're not greenskins,' the storm-trooper spat at her. He let his words sink in. 'You've damned not only yourself and me. You've damned us all. This alien host will sweep down on Terra and if you and your secret society have strategically crippled Kintessa as you say, then nothing is going to stop it.'

'You'll stop it,' Canoness Santhonax put to him, her words laced with the fire of the faithful.

'Why tell me this?' Mortensen asked with rising anger. 'I'll expose you – inform the authorities.'

'We are the only authority,' the battle-sister reasoned, flashing her insane eyes at him. 'You, as I've painted you, are a traitor and a heretic. But in any case, were that to come to pass, I expect I'd be long dead.'

'And your warped superiors and associates – what of them?'

'As I've tried to tell you: we're all here to be tested.'

Mortensen bored into her with cold, furious eyes and made his play. 'Well, my test is over. I'd rather be in someone's crosshairs than part of some raving scheme to feign galactic destruction – especially one that's gone as spectacularly awry as this one. I'll sit here and die before lending credence to your sick theories of delusion and, well, I never thought I'd be the one saying this but, heresy.'

The canoness came in close, her potent eyes fixing the major with a piercing glare. Mortensen met them with his own brand of cocky truculence. A minute must have passed like this: the canoness appraising both the major and the situation, the holochron clearly twitching on her wrist. She could see he meant it. Mortensen did all he could do. He waited. Waited to see if she would grant him his wish.

Then it happened.

Santhanax folded. Her finger moved to her vox-earpiece.

'Purity Control, this is the canoness...' Her face creased with annoyance and confusion as the seconds went by without a response. 'Purity Control,' she repeated before cycling through the open channels. As she hit the fourth the creases softened and her lips pursed. Even Mortensen could hear the unmistakable crash of gunfire across the vox-waves.

The major enjoyed her momentary uncertainty.

Santhanax clicked her fingers, bringing her battle-sisters out of the cell shadows, and tuned her vox into an alternative channel. 'We're leaving,' she simply notified the person on the other end. The pressure door in the ceiling gave a hydraulic wheeze and squirted gas from nozzles situated around the bulkhead rim. The trapdoor opened upwards and a robust wire ladder fell, unravelling itself to the floor.

The two sisters hauled Mortensen's body out of the chair, putting each arm across their sinewy shoulders and toned necks. The canoness put the sole of one boot on the first wire step. The sisters approached with Mortensen supported between them.

'When we get back to the ship, you can ask the other specimens in my personal collection: you die when I say you die,' Santhanax told the major evenly.

Mortensen gave her a conceited smile. 'Life's a bitch. Mind you, I'm told it takes one to know one.'



CHAPTER SEVEN

Cradle of Darkness

I

‘Mighty good to see you, sir,’ Golliant rasped, his boot steps echoing around the deck elevator as he helped a tender Commissar Krieg into a fresh greatcoat. Krieg didn’t hide his relief and slapped the aide on the shoulder.

‘It’s good to be back onboard,’ he told the hulking Volscian. It also felt good to have the wrestler by his side after events down on the deathworld moon.

As the elevator doors parted, the major stepped confidently out onto the bridge. Krieg followed with more caution, realising that this was actually the first time that he’d been up there. Golliant hovered steadfastly by the elevator doors as the cadet limped across the deck.

The bridge was quiet and bathed in a harsh cerulean glow. Mortensen silently joined the silhouettes of the bandaged Rask and Sass as they stood before the great screen, below the captain’s pulpit. Lieutenant Commander Waldemar climbed out of his throne and stood gripping the balustrade rail. He caught the cadet-commissar’s eye as he entered, but Krieg’s line of sight was swiftly drawn to what everyone else was gazing at on the screen.

Before him blazed the cold sheen of the Spetzghastian mesosphere, but something was impossibly wrong. The mercantile giant’s spectacular ring system was in complete disarray. Instead of a neat dust belt of spinning rock and ice fragments, chaperoned by shepherd moons like the verdant Tancred’s World and the pockmarked Wormwood, the girdle was fragmented: irregular asteroids were peeling off in different directions, many falling planetward with building velocity. Ishtar was fairly far out for one of the Spetzghastian moons and they could see everything. It was as though gravity had simply failed and the ring system was breaking up.

Krieg stepped forward, rubbing his tired eyes with forefinger and thumb, making sure that he wasn't hallucinating. A closer inspection revealed the reason for the unusual phenomenon: titanic engines and bulbous propellant tanks grew out of the natural rock of the jagged asteroids. Primitive boosters spun the gargantuan bodies on their axis before the main stage engines rocketed them towards the planet surface, Spetzghast's potent gravitational pull doing the rest.

The bridge was shell-shocked; Krieg had never seen such a spectacle. An apocalyptic blitz of ready-made planet-smashers, plunging towards the heavily populated mercantile world, like thunderbolts from an angry god. Both the workmanship and tactics were greenskin by design: headlong suicide runs of crushing effectiveness. The system had clearly been infiltrated for a long time and the asteroids mined out and modified to create an armada of kamikaze roks and bouldered hulks. It was clear to everyone on the bridge that Spetzghast would be pounded to dust.

As they tumbled sickeningly towards the planet, the rok roks rolled to present previously hidden batteries of superguns and cannons, laying effortless waste to the anchored fluyts and bulk cruisers in high orbit. Swarms of luggers and freight barges impacted on the rocky surface, their pathetic detonations giving the impression of sparks and ricochets. A sleek sprint trader broke orbit, crashing through several sister vessels before soaring narrowly between the two converging behemoths. A rogue trader freighter attempted the same manoeuvre, only to end up a blazing wreck, tangled across the rockface.

Krieg watched as adamantyclads and monitors bore down bravely on a jagged giant as it flipped and spun wildly through the spindly appendage docks of the Exchequer orbital tradestation. The rok left a field of spinning debris in its wake, sending a ripple of explosions up through the crippled station. The system ships were soon joined by one of the convoy escorts, the frigate *Orpheus*. Pooling their firepower, the Firestorm-class frigate met the rok craft head on, cutting deep into the rock with its raging prow lance. Incredibly one of the heavily-armed monitors made an impression on the rok's swollen engine column, a lucky shot setting off a chain reaction that blasted the greenskin vessel unexpectedly to starboard. The rok's craggy surface lightly brushed along the side of the *Orpheus*, tearing up the frigate's armour and exposing thousands of Navy crewmen to the searing cold of space.

The ancient and impressive garrison ship *Stang Draak* was smashed free in the ensuing chaos and perfectly placed to rake the length of the rok with its obsolete guns. The grand cruiser's much younger crew had only ever fired the weapons

on exercise or to salute the arrival of dignitaries and touring port admirals. Their response was slow and sloppy, many of the shots wide and misranged, which was incredible bearing in mind the size of the target.

A jolt of shock and disbelief swept the bridge as the grand cruiser died before their eyes. Something beautiful was there one moment and then suddenly wasn't, replaced by a breathtaking display of power and destruction, which seconds later also vanished.

A promontory prow thrust forth, out of the nothing where the garrison ship had been. Behind it, incalculable tons of extraterrestrial rock and scavwelded salvage thundered through the silence of space. The space hulk was like a mountain range, imposing and impossible: an unstoppable monster, smashing rocks and Imperial vessels aside with equal, crushing indifference. A grotesque flagship hewn from pure hate.

The *Vatidad*, the *Algonquin Royale*, the *Morningstar*, the *Countess of Scarbra*... The fat troopships careered and coursed full thrust for safety, but the behemoth overreached them, drawing parallel with its magna-bore artillery, consuming all in a growing bank of flame and fury. Krieg stared on in disbelief as the lives aboard the transports were snuffed out like a row of candles in a sudden breeze. The commissar felt sick to the bottom of his stomach. Sicker, if that were possible.

His heart lifted for a moment, no doubt foolish pride in the futile gestures of his compatriots. The hulk's underside was suddenly bathed in flashes as a stream of torpedoes found their mark. The successive glare of the hits faded, however, to reveal the greenskin ship unscathed. The *Purgatorio* surged up, its baroque beakhead breaking free of the black depths like some rising leviathan. The Dictator-class blasted uselessly at the impervious giant, the passing salvo a disciplined and worthy pattern of fire for the flagship. The space hulk rocketed on through the barrage and slammed into the vessel's mid-section.

Krieg's fists tightened and his knuckles cracked. Like a tug tearing an uncooperative giga-tanker round in a system dock, the broken flagship tried to roll the hulk planetward. The cruiser's towers and flank arrays tangled with the hulk's own irregular structures, grappling with the beast and forcing it into a slight turn. The *Purgatorio*'s dorsal finally snared the cosmic predator, a dying push from the plasma drives doing the rest. Like a featherweight throwing a much heavier opponent in a scud wrestling ring the Dictator played to what centre of gravity it had left and sent both the hulk and itself spinning towards the upper atmosphere of the besieged mercantile world.

It was Mortensen that broke the solemn silence that blanketed the bridge and paralysed all those who were witness to the murder of a world.

‘How could we have not known... about this?’ he managed.

Waldemar, his patrician accent a little softer and less grating than usual, told him, ‘Communication black-out. We lost all feeds. I assumed it was a technical problem and had my engineers run the appropriate diagnostics and litanies.’

‘What about astropathic lines of communication?’ Rask offered. ‘Surely Spetzghast or the other ships—’

‘Total black-out,’ the austere Waldemar assured him. ‘My psykers received nothing and nothing they sent got through.’

‘How is that possible?’ the major asked grimly.

‘The teleporters,’ Krieg threw in. It was more of a flat statement than the victorious solution to a problem.

‘That kind of greenskin technology would play havoc with our comms,’ Sass confirmed.

‘Especially if it was being engaged across many points in the ring system,’ the commissar added. ‘We have every reason to believe that the system is completely compromised. A large number of troops would have to be moved to prepare for as bold an advance as this.’

The major’s adjutant shook his head – unhappy with the conclusion: ‘The astropaths would still be able to get through.’

Krieg gave them the benefit of his Inquisitorial training. ‘The greenskins generate a collective psychic field in such circumstances. Perhaps that was enough to block astropathic communication. Psychic static, if you will.’

‘It’s never been enough to disrupt communications before,’ Waldemar informed him, unconvinced.

Mortensen nodded slowly: ‘He’s right,’ the major growled. ‘I’ve fought this scum on dozens of worlds and it’s the first time I’ve come across that.’

Krieg juggled the concepts crackling inside his head. He thought of the rebels on Illium, the formerly loyalist abhuman populations of Ishtar and the cultists he’d hunted on Spetzghast. How the Sisters of the Immaculate Flame had failed to find a psyker among them, only a psychic blankness that seemed to link them all.

‘Then it’s something else,’ Krieg insisted. He couldn’t formulate a web of relationships that linked all the elements and explained all the factors. All he kept coming up with was half-digested hunches and ghostly, paranoid suggestions.

Mortensen turned back to the battle, feasting his eyes on the annihilation. An idea was eating away at his soul and he finally found the words to express its brutal simplicity.

‘How long to get us on the planet’s surface?’

Waldemar called his amazement across the bridge: ‘You can’t be serious?’

‘I’m always serious,’ Mortensen updated the officer, turning away from the screen, catching Rask’s unsettled expression as he did. ‘Except when I’m not.’

‘It’s over,’ the lieutenant commander told him. ‘What do you think you can do: save the planet?’

‘No,’ Mortensen said, clearly lost in thoughts of his own home world’s demise. ‘I can’t do that. But we can pull the flagship crash survivors offworld before those ork roks pulverise it. I can’t stand those mungers: on any other day Brigadier Voskov and his tight-ass Shadow Brigade commanders can go to hell. Today, a greenskin battlefield is opening up right on top of us and we’re going to need some of that Volscian methodology to formulate a response to this mess. It could be months before a tactical command structure is back in place otherwise, and think how far these greenskins could have rushed us by then.’

Waldemar was no coward, but he looked like one as his eyes moved from the major’s stony glare to the destruction beyond and then around the bridge at his own officers. His eyes lingered for a moment on Krieg. It was common knowledge that he and the major were at each other’s throats. Krieg returned his gaze. At heart Waldemar was a sound and inventive officer and had one final play to make before committing to a potentially disastrous course of action, one way or the other.

‘Major, I think that you are overestimating the capabilities of this ship. *Deliverance* is a small carrier. She won’t last ten seconds against that kind of firepower. You would have me risk every soul aboard, including every single one of your storm-troopers, in one foolishly bold and futile manoeuvre?’

Krieg watched the major mull it over.

‘As one of the only combat operative vessels in the system,’ the captain continued, ‘isn’t it protocol to make for Aurelius and warn other nearby systems, so that they might prepare for the eventuality of war?’

Mortensen glared around the silent bridge.

‘You just don’t get it, do you? Redemption Corps don’t run. Aurelius? Warning the fleet? Leave that to some freighter,’ Mortensen spat. ‘This is a military vessel: I say we stay and we do what we can. And what we can do right now is get my men and the remaining 364th into any and every available sub-

atmospheric craft you have, and get them down on the surface so they can do their job.'

Waldemar's eyes narrowed and the coin-shaped scar on his cheek flared. 'I'm sorry. I can't do that.'

'You think you can stop us?' the major seared. Both corpsmen and naval security tensed, their side arms but the flick of a wrist away.

The commander's own trembling hand went down to his Patrician hanger: 'Try it, you mutinous dog...'

Krieg's hellpistol was already clear of its fresh holster. A burst of super-charged las-fire drummed into the deck, bringing the attention of all squarely to his feet. Both Waldemar, proud and uncertain, and the major, feral and fearsome, turned at the sound of automatic fire on the bridge. Only a newly-promoted security ensign in a spanking uniform and creaking, new boots was foolish enough to point his weapon at the Imperial commissar.

'Think that prudent do you, boy?' Krieg put to the ensign, without looking at him. The young officer stared at Krieg and then his pistol before slowly drifting the muzzle to the floor. The ensign suddenly became aware of a presence, turning to find the hulking Golliant immediately behind him. Wide-eyed, the ensign dropped the pistol on the deck and turned, backing to the cognition banks adorning the wall.

Krieg took in the bridge with one sweeping glance. Waldemar wasn't wrong. They were seconds from actual mutiny: storm-troopers exchanging fire with Navy grunts on the bridge of one of his Beneficient Majesty's hallowed warships. There was only one authority on the ship that superseded both the lieutenant commander and the Redemption Corps major and it sat snug on his finger. He presented the ring and his fist to both men, letting the hypnotic power of the winged-skull signet take effect.

With Regimental Commissar Udeskee below decks and out of reach and the ship's commissar, a firebreather called Locke – well, dead – Krieg was the only one who could legitimately act in this situation.

'Back to this, huh?' Mortensen shot sardonically across the bridge. It was a dare. As it was, on this particular occasion, Krieg didn't actually disagree with the major.

'Captain Waldemar, can you actually get through that?' the cadet-commissar asked, nodding his cap at the screen. 'Can you get us to Spetzghast?'

'This is madness,' the captain settled upon. 'And I should have you all thrown in the damned brig.'

‘Can you do it, captain?’ Krieg insisted.

The officer bridled, professional pride prevailing.

‘Yes,’ was the simple answer. ‘But Commissar Krieg, that is not—’

‘Oh, but unfortunately it is,’ Krieg cut in with regret. ‘At present velocity, I’d say we have three or four hours, at most, to get on and off the surface before those roks hit.’

‘Three hours, forty-two minutes to first impact,’ Sass interjected, soaking up data from the bridge picts and rune screens like a sponge.

‘If we’re not knee deep in Spetzghastian sand within two, captain, I’ll have you escorted to the brig for cowardice, dereliction of duty and negligent conduct. I’m sure the ship’s commissar would agree if he had the misfortune of still being with us.’

‘You imperious cub,’ Waldemar snapped back, ‘You can’t...’

‘I speak for Udeskee; I speak for the Commissariat; I speak for the Emperor, in this matter,’ Krieg told him with searing certainty.

A stunned bridge continued to hold a bated breath.

‘And if I refuse?’ Waldemar asked, his scar burning bright.

‘Your actions will be judged by your superiors in light of your witnessed refusal to save Imperial lives, your refusal to at least attempt a rescue of Commodore van den Groot and the Volscian High Command and your seeming preference for conduct unbecoming an officer of one of his beneficent majesty’s warships.’

Waldemar went to retort but Krieg hadn’t finished.

‘But that’s irrelevant because long before that, Captain Waldemar, I’ll have you shot,’ the commissar informed him plainly, ‘and empower Major Mortensen’s men to take command of this vessel, by force if necessary. And we are all too ready to face the Emperor’s judgement in that. Believe me, captain, we are martyrs all. There’s a reason we’re called Redemption Corps.’ The commissar let his words sink in, and since it seemed that he had overplayed his hand regardless, added: ‘Who is the executive officer of this crate, anyhow?’

A lieutenant with a shiny head and thoughtful brown eyes stepped forward hesitantly.

‘Name?’ Krieg requested. The first lieutenant went to speak, getting as far as opening his lips, but the voice that came across the bridge was not his.

‘Mister Caviezel,’ Waldemar supplied. ‘Be so good as to plot an evasion course through the Quirini Division. Calculate the location of the *Purgatorio*’s crash site and establish a low entry orbit around Spetzghast. Best possible speed:

there's a good fellow.'

Krieg nodded and reholstered his hellpistol. Walking for the elevator he was joined by Mortensen and his men at the doors. Golliant was already holding them open with his brawny arms, allowing the commissar and the storm-troopers to walk in underneath. As the doors closed and the car began its descent, an awkward silence prevailed.

'You realise this is suicide?' Krieg eventually piped up.

The major grunted.

'You know,' he told the cadet-commissar, 'I like to think that anything is possible.'

'Yes,' Krieg returned. 'I've heard that about you.'

II

Vertigo was a wreck.

The Spectre was smashed up and running like a junker after her deathworld encounter, but Rosenkrantz would be damned before being relegated to an Arvus or humpshuttle.

Clearly the major felt much the same way, stamping up the ramp with his men, all with hastily donned carapace and hellpacks. Mortensen had given Rask the unenviable duty of coordinating the mass ground retrieval from one of the available Valkyries. Other aircraft laden with naval security contingents and the 364th's Second Platoon were lifting off the deck. Despite Meeks's men being cut to shreds, the sergeant had no qualms about kitting up and heading straight back out on the coat tails of Mortensen and the Redemption Corps. Mortensen shouldn't have been surprised. *Vertigo* was to carry Mortensen and his storm-troopers, leaving the rest of the hold empty in expectation of the recovered flagship's senior officer corps.

Somehow Captain Waldemar had negotiated the swarm of roks and hulks closing in on the unsuspecting Spetzghast and held precarious station in a low orbit above the *Purgatorio*'s last known trajectory, but below the descending asteroid storm front. He'd met Commissar Krieg's well-advertised deadline of two hours but what worried Rosenkrantz more was the length of time he'd be able to hold that position.

With Sigma Scorpii throwing the bronze glow of a new half-day over the horizon, *Vertigo* plunged through the cobalt clouds. Gunships, carriers and shuttles plummeted before them like a flock of birds evading a predator, banking

and swirling into a vortex that spiralled for the surface. A squadron of Marauders thundered overhead, ghosting the rescue operation. Mortensen had insisted on bringing along Wharmby's bomber group for extra muscle, despite Waldemar's objections, just in case the greenskin hulk still needed softening up from the ground.

The major came up behind the co-pilot's station expecting to see Benedict. Rosenkrantz had been sorry to see him go, especially after saving her life down on the deathworld, but the servitor had to be taken off to wherever such things were taken when damaged or injured. The Jopallian shuddered to think: medicae-hall or repair shop, Rosenkrantz couldn't tell. Instead an unusually grave Leland Hoyt sat in the chair, transferred from *White Thunder*. Hoyt, normally a fount of bright optimism, had returned from Illium a changed man. Gone was that boyish smile and playful good humour. Now the co-pilot looked as if he had the weight of the world on his shoulders.

Rosenkrantz sighed. Perhaps it was the view. Staring up through the cockpit plas she could spot the sinister silhouettes of the first mighty ork roks to kiss upper atmosphere.

'Major,' Hoyt said quietly, offering Mortensen a headset. '*Crow Road* – Captain Rask.'

Mortensen slipped on the set. 'Well?'

Rosenkrantz could hear the captain's craggy voice across her own vox-set: 'Zane, it's a hell of a mess down here. Looks like both vessels went down grappling but the impact was shallow: the crash site must stretch a good ten or twelve kilometres. Equatorial desert, so little in the way of local casualties – thank the Emperor.'

A brief respite, Rosenkrantz pondered, considering the hailstorm of colossal asteroids heading their way. *Vertigo* cut through the lower cloud layers, getting a glimpse of dawn reaching across the red barren wastes for the first time.

'Major,' Rosenkrantz called, drawing Mortensen's attention to the canopy.

'Yes, I can see it,' Mortensen declared. The *Purgatorio*'s plasma drive and the hulk's sheer mass had propelled the two vessels in a dance of death towards the planet much faster than the stately pace of the converging ork roks. The crash site itself was now clear but for kilometres around a tsunami of dust and sand obscured surface detail.

Angular outcrops of rock and toxic metals had torn up both vessels badly, smashing up the *Purgatorio* and leaving flaming sections of the Dictator-class the length of the crash landing. The space hulk, robust as it was, had also

suffered, breaking up on planetary impact: individual pieces of rock and scavenged alien craft, tumbling and scoring a wide tract of depth and destruction into the Spetzghastian surface.

‘The command decks and bridge separated from the main body of the vessel in the crash,’ Rask told them. ‘They came down with a section of the hulk just off the main landing site. Transmitting the coordinates, now.’

Hoyt scanned his rune screens for the new information.

‘Point two-five. Roll thirty degrees port-yaw.’

Rosenkrantz responded.

‘I had *Prayerstalker* do a fly-by,’ the captain continued. ‘Not much left. *St. Scimitar* picked up a small group of survivors from the dunes nearby. Among them is the *Purgatorio*’s third lieutenant. He says the command decks were the site of an overwhelming boarding action – even before the crash. Says he couldn’t see much because of the smoke, but what he did witness was all hand-to-hand, with prisoners snatched and taken back to the hulk section close by.’

‘Taken back?’ Rosenkrantz questioned. ‘That’s a lot of self-control for orks.’

‘Nothing about these green-skinned bastards surprises me anymore,’ Mortensen enlightened her. ‘They’re a breed apart.’

‘Major, the bombers,’ she reminded him, the thought only just occurring to her.

‘Tyberius, call off Wharmby’s Marauder group. With friendlies being transported across the open space between sections we can’t afford bombing runs. Send them back to *Deliverance* immediately.’

‘Confirmed.’

‘Okay, listen and listen good,’ Mortensen said, pushing the vox-receiver close to his strained lips. ‘Commit all aircraft to make one touchdown – as soon as is humanly possible. Order them to fill their holds and everywhere else for that matter, with as many crash survivors as they can. Then, back to the carrier. One trip only. Make sure they understand.’

‘What about you?’ Rask sent back.

‘We’ll raid the hulk section for the captured officer corps.’

‘There’s no time for that,’ the officer insisted tightly.

‘Make sure they understand, captain,’ the major repeated, ‘One trip and then back to the ship. Commander Waldemar will then get his trip to Aurelius. *Vertigo* out.’

Rosenkrantz craned her flight helmet around to see the storm-trooper. He gave her his grim, determined eyes.

‘Take us to hell.’

The pilot complied.

III

Mortensen had *Vertigo* close with the shattered hulk section. Even as just a piece of detached wreckage its dimensions were impressive. Rosenkrantz had found a gargantuan rent where the cratered rock face met time-burnished alloy and the crash had done its worst. Dropping the Spectre expertly in through the opening she was descending as fast as she dared, searching for a landing zone somewhere in the alien darkness.

The major stood helmetless on the tip of the aircraft's lowered ramp, hellgun humming.

'Ready?' he called casually over his shoulder.

Corporal Vedette and a hangdog Conklin joined him on the ramp, a gaggle of corporals huddled behind, going through final weapons prep. The doom-laden gloom of their surroundings did little to dampen the Mordian's spirits.

'I'm surprised you still ask, sir.'

Vertigo's ghostly hull lamps slipped down the cavernous wall of the enormous chamber they were traversing, passing across spectacular mineral deposits in the dull and dusty rock before glinting off rust-eaten hull and finally something distinctly biological.

'By all the saints and their bastard children,' Preed cursed. 'Where the hell are we?'

Mortensen turned. The barrel-bellied priest stood beside Krieg and his Volscian shadow, dwarfing both the cadet-commissar and even his aide with his immense girth. Golliant had snatched a snub-nosed Volscian-pattern autocannon from *Deliverance*'s armoury and cradled the monster protectively above his charge's gleaming cap.

'Expect anything...' Mortensen told them. He scowled as he realised the only weapon Krieg was packing was his trusty hellpistol.

'I see a platform,' Vedette announced, peering off the edge of the ramp into the pit below. She hooked the tip of her boot under a coil of rope and kicked it over the side. Greco limped up the other side and did the same with his good foot.

Mortensen thumbed the troop bay vox. '*Vertigo*, hold position. Squad disembarking.'

Shouldering his hellgun and snapping his harness and descender to the line, Mortensen kicked off the aircraft and rappelled the deep, dark, distance between

the Spectre and the platform. The soles of the major's boots touched down on the unnatural metal of the platform, his steps echoing eerily around the chasmal chamber. These became a hammer of footfalls as the storm-troopers gathered, establishing a holdpoint around the dangling ropes of their escape route.

Sarakota and a second almond-faced sniper crossed in front of Mortensen. They moved either side of him before going down on one knee and sweeping the inky murk of the hulk with the long, chunky barrels of their anti-materiel rifles. The snipers had detached their scopes, which would be all but useless in the cavernous confines of the spacecraft, but retained their Hellshots, more out of sentimentality than practicality.

'Should we fan out, sir?' Vedette checked. Mortensen's nose wrinkled. He didn't like the idea of splitting his firepower in here, but time wasn't on his side. He needed to locate the Imperial officers fast.

'Best guess?' Mortensen asked after giving the snipers a few moments to orient themselves. The tribesmen had grown up in a maze of cavern-systems and had the most finely-tuned senses of the squad.

'Between all the crotch scratching and boot shuffling it's a wonder we can hear anything,' the hot-headed Opech complained. He was fresh out of the infirmary and the pain of his wounds had made him cranky enough even to gripe at the major.

'Just give me the short version, corpsman,' Mortensen bit back.

'Difficult,' Sarakota murmured, embarrassed at his kinsman's hasty words. The Khongkotan tribesman had also been in the infirmary, but Mortensen hadn't heard anything other than a rib-fractured wince out of the sniper in complaint. 'The different materials and custom structure of the vessel make the vibrations hard to read.'

'Kota,' the major hushed. 'Where are my targets?'

The sniper turned his head this way and that and then sighed, settling. Taking the weight of his heavy rifle he got up off his knee, turned and headed off behind them. Mortensen stared after the disappearing Sarakota and then back to the remaining sniper. 'You?'

Opech similarly lifted his weapon and nodded. 'The walls still throb with recent activity to the north-east. Large numbers, moving fast.'

Mortensen looked at Conklin, Vedette and then Krieg.

The commissar shrugged, 'What are we waiting for?'

The Redemption Corps swept through the black cavities and passages of the hulk, hugging the walls and throwing the barrels of their weapons around

lopsided corners. Conduits, hangars, vents, gangways: all alien and ancient. And upside down. From what the major could make out, and he was no expert, craft after bizarre craft had been melded together into some kind of amorphous whole: some without care for orientation or natural gravity.

‘Incredible,’ Preed mumbled every so often, soaking up the foreign grandeur of the place. Greco was less enthused, hobbling up unnatural inclines and maintaining an almost constant stream of reasons why they should probably be heading back: the officers were probably dead, the hulk was so massive they could easily miss them, I think we’re being watched. He began a cautionary tale about the time he broke into the Sultana Babooshka’s tower villa, but Mortensen stopped him, telling him to stick to what he was actually good at, which was shutting the wreck up.

Every so often the progenium runaway and arch-larcenist would be called upon to run a bypass on a security bulkhead or some other fused and ancient egress, and when that didn’t work Uncle had to create an artificial opening with his cordite charges and melta bombs.

Sarakota and Opech pushed on ahead with their hefty anti-materiel Hellshots primed, swinging the heavy rifles crisply around dark corners like they had done this kind of thing before. Eszcobar fiddled with the regulator on his flame unit, the Autegan favouring the incinerator over his trusty grenade launcher in the confines of the hulk. Krieg was strangely quiet, hellpistol in one hand and a chunky arc lamp in the other, aiming both experimentally up a narrow, twisted stairwell: expecting trouble. In the tight corridors and labyrinthine shafts of the massive hulk, the commissar clearly favoured the side arm/lamp combo, more so that he didn’t fall to his death down some hidden duct or pipe.

Mortensen merely stabbed at the shadows with the muzzle of his hellgun, ready to blast to oblivion anything stupid enough to stick its ugly face out of the darkness at him. He was getting impatient, their distance from the bird growing at the same time the minutes were ticking away in the back of his skull. Despite the immediate threat of his surroundings he couldn’t quite get the vision of thousands of heavily-armed asteroids falling out of the Spetzghastian sky out of his mind. He wanted those officers, though. Organised Imperial resistance in the system might depend on them being alive and Mortensen sure as hell didn’t want to end up as ranking officer on the precipice of an opening greenskin warzone.

Climbing through a warped, open bulkhead, the major was hit by the powerful stench of fumes from the chamber beyond. Flashing his rifle lamp around he found his boots smeared with a brown oily substance that seemed to cover the

entire floor of the chamber. Sass's occasional chant of 'Commodore van den Groot', 'Brigadier Voskov' or 'Lord Commissar Verhoeven' boomed in the new chamber. It seemed to stretch for hundreds of metres.

'Sir, I think you should look at this,' Sarakota called gently. Krieg and the adjutant had pushed on. Loping up behind them, the group gathered around. They had found the commodore. Greco jerked back, hand over his mouth like he had been physically struck. The others just looked blankly at the pile of entrails and the bloodied naval cloak that had once been the fleet commander. Vedette plucked the commodore's ridiculously flamboyant hat from the mess, shaking the gore from the feathers and wiping clean the leather around the emblazoned aquila. She handed it to the major. It was definitely van den Groot.

'Greenskins did this?' asked Preed.

'Maybe,' Mortensen replied.

'Come on,' Greco broke in, 'the fat bastard's been turned inside out.' The trooper was seriously starting to lose his cool. Mortensen grunted. He'd fought greenskins across the galaxy. They did not kill like this.

'Movement...' Sarakota called, strangely without a hint of panic. The effect on the others was instantaneous: weapons came up and lamp beams were thrown around the darkness. The sniper knelt down, sinking his knee into the oily brown residue and touching the deck with his fingertips.

It all happened fast. Kynt spun around, simultaneously bringing up his hellgun. As the twitchy comms-officer fired, Mortensen kicked the barrel aside, sending the blasts thudding harmlessly into the blackness. In the illumination of Eszcohar's lamp, Brigadier Voskov of the Volscian Shadow Brigade stumbled forward holding a broken arm. He looked like a cadaver in the harsh light. His immaculate if dour uniform was gore splashed and torn and his gun-metal grey crew-cut matted with blood from a gash on his head. His craggy face was etched with more than just years and the expression of martial fanaticism that never usually left his face had gone. Only a blankness remained.

He fell against Krieg, who half caught him. Holstering his weapon, he cradled the spireborn to the deck. The brigadier looked like he had been to hell and back. He tried to say something but choked and descended into a coughing fit. Sergeant Minghella knelt in and gave him a sip of water from his canteen. Voskov's eyes rolled over and bulged. Once again he tried to say something.

'Easy,' the medic told him.

'Redemption Corps,' he managed to the major, through an agonised smile. Mortensen didn't think he'd ever seen the Volscian commander smile before.

‘Don’t try and talk, Gil. We’ll get you and your officers out of here,’ Mortensen pledged solemnly.

‘Rescue...’ the brigadier croaked, before seeming to relax for a moment. A throttled chuckle escaped his torn lips. His throat was swollen and his neck violently bruised. ‘No...’ he hissed.

‘Rhen?’ Mortensen prompted his medic.

‘Head wound,’ Minghella found in the Volscian’s wiry hair. The sergeant would know: he sported a fresh one himself from their crash on Ishtar. ‘Looks like he’s been out for a while. Severe trauma to the neck and throat: beyond that superficial cuts and bruises, most likely from the crash. We need to get him out of here and on some oxygen.’

Voskov shook his head violently, froth bubbling up around the edges of his mouth. He said something but Mortensen couldn’t make it out and leaned in closer.

‘Sir, what is it?’

Again, a rasping emptiness.

‘Gil?’

‘Leave here!’ the Volscian managed finally.

Suddenly the deck was lit up by a las blast. Voskov’s head fell back and his hand clattered to the floor. In it Krieg found his own hellpistol, slipped out of his holster. While the storm-troopers had fussed over their commanding officer, he’d taken the weapon from Krieg’s person and got the muzzle to his temple.

The Redemption Corps stared at each other in disbelief.

‘I...’ Krieg began, but there wasn’t time for explanations or regrets. Mortensen shook his head at the commissar.

‘Trap,’ he said with conviction. He didn’t have to wait long for confirmation of his suspicions.

‘Footsteps. Large number this time: closing with caution,’ Sarakota announced.

Mortensen spun around, taking a fleeting three-hundred and sixty degree glance at the surrounding darkness. He re-primed the hellgun. ‘Remember we’re looking for friendlies in here.’

‘I see ’em!’ Greco cried out, demonstrating none of Sarakota’s self control. The muzzle of his hellgun flashed as he let off a stream of fire into the empty gloom. Conklin, Kynt and several others joined in, the master sergeant’s bolter in particular, puncturing holes in the darkness.

When nothing appeared Mortensen ordered, ‘Stand fast!’ The automatic fire

died but Greco's hellgun was still dribbling short bursts at the shadows and Uncle had to thump him in the shoulder to get him to stop. 'What'd you see?' the major demanded as soon as the corpsman had finished.

'S-S-Skins, I think,' the spire breaker told him.

'You think?' Vedette marvelled.

'They were vrekkin' green. I don't know.'

'Kota?'

'Still closing.'

Krieg was still on the floor with the dead Volscian commander, flashing his lamp in the direction of the sighting. Mortensen snatched the fat arc lamp straight out of Krieg's outstretched hand and falling into a crouch himself, skimmed the lamp across the chamber. The light travelled far, carried along by the viscous brown tar coating the walls and floor. Suddenly it struck something and flipped, bathing the area in a moment of radiance.

Damn.

The chamber was full of creatures. Armoured and huge, they were all claws and tusks, arms outstretched like fast-moving crustaceans. And green.

Mortensen's mind shot back to his encounter in the darkness of the *Mortis Maximus*. What he'd glimpsed for merely a second on the artillery deck of the Titan was staring him in the face now, intent on ripping it off with tooth and claw. Long experience had prepared the major for first contact with many heinous alien races, but these creatures seemed neither one thing nor another. They were brawny and muscular like orks, but moved with an alien dexterity and grace that shot fear into the heart of every man and woman in the chamber.

'Flamer! Now!' Mortensen roared.

When the blast didn't come, the major turned, half expecting Eszcobar to have fled. He wouldn't have blamed him. The sketch the lamp had painted in the deep darkness of the chamber was enough to strike cold fear into the chests of all who had witnessed it.

As it was, he was still having difficulty priming the gas reservoir and setting the regulator. The deathworlder had been so preoccupied with the drama on the deck that he hadn't noticed the pilot flame flicker and die in the unimpeded draught of the chamber. As the storm-trooper fingered the flamer furiously, it let out an angry chugging sound, followed by a whining hiss.

Rounds ricocheted off green carapace as Vedette and her master sergeant attempted to lay down suppressing fire. The creatures came forth in a wave and seemed completely undeterred by the Redemption Corps assault.

‘Get that weapon operational, trooper!’ Krieg yelled at the stunned Eszcobar, but the weapon merely churned promethium. Mortensen hammered the advancing line of monsters with everything his hellgun had to offer before hastily adjusting the power setting and giving them some more.

Kynt shot past him, eyepatch askew, squinting with his good eye and peppering the green horde with automatic fire from his pistol. Mortensen grabbed the back of his master-vox and tore the comms-officer back, burying a salvo of fire in the encroaching left flank.

The cadet-commissar was suddenly beside him, the steaming barrel of his hellpistol resting across one shoulder and lancing the mob with bolts.

‘We’re not going to find anyone in this,’ he managed between blasts, giving the major the moments he needed to re-orient his weapon. Mortensen nodded bitterly and went back to work with the angry hellgun.

‘Fall back!’ he bellowed. ‘Back to the bulkhead.’ Between them, Krieg, Mortensen and Conklin pushed the storm-troopers back. Vedette and Minghella were already supporting a gutted Uncle between them, one of the creatures having bounded impossibly at them, ripping into the demolitions man with its dagger-like claws. Golliant messed the beast up with a close-range hammering from the autocannon, leaving the blasted creature twitching on the deck as the hulking adjutant retreated.

The autocannon was singing over the storm-troopers now, keeping the worst of the swarm at bay with the two snipers adding to the mayhem with crashing fire from their Hellshots.

Sweeping the darkness with his rifle the major turned and pushed Sass and a pistol-reloading Kynt into the retreat, only for all three of them to come face to face with more monsters, who’d scuttled up behind them. ‘Close quarters!’ Mortensen bawled, but before he knew it one of the barbed bastards was among them, slicing through armour and slashing Sass across the face as the adjutant swung his rifle around to bear. It snapped wildly at Kynt as the comms-officer struggled to wedge in a new clip in his autopistol. Mortensen swung his rifle at the creature like a bat, but the stock simply bounced off the alien’s plated skull. A ribbed hand found its way to the makeshift club and snatched it free of the major’s grip. Before he could blink the green fiend had slashed it in half with the sabre claws on another limb, the one piece falling uselessly to the deck – the other sparking and trailing from his hellpack powerline.

The major kicked the heel of one booted foot at the beast but it merely retreated, sweeping its jaws past the still struggling Kynt, ripping out the

trooper's throat. Mortensen's furious face was sprayed with warm blood from the fountaining wound.

Demonstrating a stone cold understanding that Kynt was finished, the armoured, puce-green thing was coming at him again, without the comms officer's body even having chance to reach the slick floor. Mortensen was ready for the beast also, having sloughed off his hellpack and pitched it at the monster with both hands.

The alien menace shrugged off the impact, talons flashing forward, but the pack had provided Mortensen with the opportunity to slip a storm blade from his thigh-sheath and he batted the wicked claw aside. Another came and Mortensen spun into the creature's embrace, grabbing its outstretched wrist with his gauntleted hand and lopping its appendage off at the trunk.

Again the monster retracted, retreating behind its barbed grapplers. Light and brains suddenly erupted from its forehead, the green monstrosity shuddering and falling. Commissar Krieg was standing behind, the shimmering muzzle of his hellpistol aimed along the length of his tensed arm. Krieg seemed to notice something, squinting into the darkness, and shot off through the mayhem. There was little time for celebration.

Golliant's arc of explosive death swept by, driving back the closing gauntlet of alien bodies. Several determined slayers braved the shower of slugs and sparks, vaulting at the throng of storm-troopers, instinctively exploiting opportunities and holes in the fire pattern.

Uncle's high-pitched shrieks echoed around the ancient vastness of the chamber, the demolitions man dragged off into the darkness and run through with razor-sharp claws. Clutching his own gushing belly wound Eszcohar was now dragging Greco: one of the creatures had done something terrible to his back and the trooper could no longer walk unaided. Green carapace was suddenly all over them, monsters leaping above the autocannon's hailstorm and landing on top of the unfortunate corpsmen.

Vedette and Conklin had been carrying a mauled Sass but had been forced to lay both hands on their weapons during the unrelenting assault. The two of them beat the armoured forms with the protrusion mags and grips of their autopistols but as the malformed faces emerged from the armoured shell of torsos swamping Opech, it was clear the tribesman had been savaged and was dead.

'Back!' Vedette ordered.

'Yes, ma'am,' Greco agreed, grimacing at the agony lancing through his back. But there was nowhere to go. The aliens were all around them and around the

aliens was cold, harsh darkness. The shadows just kept spawning wave upon concentric wave of monsters.

Mortensen buried his storm blade in the armoured skull of a passing alien, but the thing barely seemed fazed, shaking the survival knife free. Reaching for his autopistol Mortensen brought the fat side arm level with the creature's disturbing face. The weapon bucked as it disgorged its explosive package, taking the alien's head with it into the darkness. Feverishly plugging green bodies left and right, Mortensen blasted a path through to Pontiff Preed.

Unarmed, the gargantuan priest had been able to contribute little to the suppression fire that had so far kept the full weight of the mob from swamping them. Up close and personal the huge ecclesiarch came into his own. A red mist had descended on Preed's contorted features. Charging like a cannonball he blasted into a throng of the vicious creatures intent on overwhelming a withdrawing Minghella on a pistol reload.

The green tide parted, alien bodies and limbs flying this way and that. Several went down under the priest's pummelling fists as he thundered into the enemy line. Sarakota redirected his merciless fire to re-establish the distance and capitalise on Preed's insane assault. Golliant would have joined them but the steaming autocannon had feed-jammed and the aide was forced to use the ungainly weapon as a club, swinging it in a wide arc and keeping the monsters away from the open bulkhead they'd used to enter the fuel chamber. Krieg was already there, holding the exit with blinding fire from his hellpistol and directing blank and bloody corpsmen through the opening.

One savage beast sailed over Mortensen in one impressive bound, landing squarely on Preed's fleshy back. His white robes tore and streaked red as the monster dug in with its talons and brought its horrific maw in for the kill. The snaggle-toothed alien opened its jaws and shot an ovipositor at his face. The ecclesiarch strained, desperate that the muscular, eel-like appendage not reach his bloodied lips. Rage burned in his eyes and the priest finally opened his own mouth and chomped on the length of the alien thing with his own teeth. Snapping the horrible appendage free of the monstrous mouth from which it came, Preed spat out the ovipositor and wrenched the creature over one shoulder, bouncing its thick skull twice off the deck before flinging the thing up into the air.

Mortensen had been slamming a fresh magazine into the grip of his chunky pistol when the thing landed in an untidy heap in front of him. Snapping back the autoslide, he blew the thing off its feet as the monster tried to scramble up off the

oily deck. Two further storms of shot peeled another pair of green gargoyles from the ecclesiarch's limbs.

'Pontiff!' the major yelled, slapping the priest on one sliced-up shoulder. The giant turned on him, his teeth clenched and his eyes unthinking. 'Preed!' Mortensen tried again, before breaking off to blow a hole through the shoulder plate of another monster attempting to scale the man-mountain before him. The alien went somersaulting back into the bloodthirsty crowd. The priest barely noticed. Mortensen leaned in close: 'Father, we have to leave. *Now!*'

Grabbing a fistful of bloody robes Mortensen tugged at the giant, leading him towards the bulkhead and the hands and gaunt faces picked out in the shadow of the opening, gesturing wildly at them to hurry. Sarakota had only just abandoned his post and was manhandling his long Hellshot through the doorway, leaving Krieg and Golliant either side of the heavy maintenance duct entrance, the commissar cutting into the hordes with supercharged las-bolts, his aide pounding into the deck anything that got past with the jammed autocannon.

Preed followed, gradually returning to his senses, and even picking up the pace a little to get there ahead of the major, providing enough time to cram his corpulent bulk through. Golliant and Krieg followed, leaving the major alone in the chamber with the bulbous hordes. Mortensen turned for the final few metres, emptying the pistol as fast as he could into the converging masses.

'Ready?' he called to the corporals waiting in the entrance.

'Ready,' Conklin bawled back and Golliant's tree trunk arms shot out of the bulkhead opening and latched onto the back of the major's carapace suit. Mortensen shot backwards through doorway and found himself in the cramped passage surrounded by shocked and shivering storm-troopers. Conklin had Greco on the door controls, the spire breaker somehow managing to re-route power and breathe new life into the door mechanism. The bulkhead shot across on its rail and sealed the encroaching army of savage creatures on the other side.

The entire squad went limp, the relief visible on every man and woman's face. Minghella quickly went to work on a quietly groaning Sass and Vedette secured the passage ahead with her blood-splattered hellgun.

Mortensen expected the hammer of blows on the maintenance bulkhead, but they never came. His eyes flickered around the dim compartment before resting his sweat-beaded brow on the cool metal of the door.

From behind came a strange whoosh and the sigh of lock clearance. Mortensen lifted his head slightly, straining to hear. Suddenly the metal in front of him rolled aside revealing the full horror of alien jaws. Panic swept the passage with

Preed and Golliant lending their weight to the rapidly opening door.

‘Greco...’ Conklin began.

The spire breaker swore. ‘They must have severed the hydraulics,’ he blurted in amazement.

The creature’s head vaulted out of the darkness and through the growing opening, snapping at the stunned major. Mortensen brought up his autopistol with a growl and yanked on the trigger. The unsatisfactory click of an empty firing mechanism filled the compartment. With sudden urgency the major re-worked the slide and tried again but the pistol was spent.

Claws and fingers from the chamber beyond filled the aperture, intent on forcing the door open. Mortensen pounded on the alien digits with the grip of his weapon but made little impression on the armoured knuckles. Conklin and Greco – who was fading fast and slumped against the wall – were arguing about the door mechanism, the corpsman professing that there was nothing he could do with it now. Meanwhile it took all of the strength of the huge pontiff and Krieg’s aide combined just to hold the bulkhead where it was.

A sudden hiss at the back of the compartment grabbed the major’s attention. As Krieg and Sarakota parted he saw Eszcoabar with his back to the wall of the compartment, the pilot flame burning victoriously at the end of the deathworlder’s flamer. Pushing Conklin back away from the door and shielding his face, Mortensen told him: ‘Burn it.’

The Autegan came forward, sticking the barrel in through a space between the gnashing alien jaws and grasping claws and bathed the bodies beyond in a raging stream of thick flame.

The response was instantaneous. Claws and faces disappeared, as did the weight on the door. Pulling back the deathworlder allowed Preed and Golliant to slam the bulkhead shut once again. Beyond, the inferno raged.

Heavy breathing and involuntary smiles filled the passage.

Greco put into words what everyone else was thinking: ‘What the vrekkin’ hell were they?’

‘They’re genestealers,’ Krieg answered coldly.

It took a moment for the corpsmen to soak up the concept with their adrenaline-addled brains.

Mortensen nodded: ‘Hybrids.’

‘Ork-genestealer hybrids?’ Greco echoed, racing to catch up. ‘That’s impossible.’

‘Unfortunately not, my son,’ Preed rumbled from the back, back to his old

bookish self. 'Why, we've known for a long time that genestealer races use human hosts to pass on genetic material. Why not other races? Orks are amongst the most widespread races in the galaxy.'

'The genestealers could have already been on board the hulk, when it came out of warp space in a greenskin system,' Krieg hypothesised. 'A greenskin salvage team were probably infected when they tried to get the ship operational again. It's not that hard to imagine.'

'It explains everything,' Mortensen admitted grimly. 'System infiltration. The cultists on Illium. The roks and teleporters... Greenskin tech is notoriously unreliable – but imagine the brute hordes guided by the cold logic and singular purpose of genestealers. You'd have the best – or very worst – of both voidspawn species.'

'And Spetzghast,' the cadet-commissar added. 'Cross-species infection. The psionic fields produced by the different races would play havoc with one another. Add humans to the mix and well, no wonder you've got spree murders and general mayhem across the system.' Krieg shook his head. 'The orks and their allies have been importing reproductive pods with common agricultural freight. Even without the orbital bombardment, this system's doomed.'

'Not just this system,' Preed interjected. 'This isn't a greenskin warlord on a roll here. The cold alien discipline of the 'stealers combined with greenskin resilience and numbers. Think of the systems that could already have been infiltrated.'

'Sir,' Vedette addressed the major; the Mordian, as always focused on the mission and less on the trivia. 'What about the targets?'

Mortensen bit at his bottom lip. He was thinking of Voskov and what they must have done to him and the mind-aching discipline it must have taken to do what he did.

Decided, Mortensen announced: 'We're leaving them.'

'Sir,' the Mordian continued with undying professionalism. 'The commodore wasn't far—'

'You can't help them,' Krieg told her.

'With all due respect—'

'They'll be infected, my child,' Preed assured her with paternal benevolence.

'Boss,' Conklin said with his ear to the compartment wall. Mortensen joined him at the door. More strange noises were emanating from beyond, this time something bigger than a clearing door mechanism. Eszcoabar's flamer had driven the monsters back and hopefully had fried a couple in the process. What

Mortensen was hearing, on the other hand, equated to hundreds of mournful alien shrieks swallowed in the boom of a full-scale inferno. There was also some thrashing.

Mortensen pulled away from the tarnished metal, hawked and spat on the bulkhead. Anxiously he rubbed at the spot with the bottom of his fist, revealing an ancient designation plaque: 'Maintenance Duct C – Reserve Fuel Tank.'

Mortensen could barely imagine what it must have been like in there: monsters having their shadows burnt into the walls and floor as the fuel vapour erupted around them. The Redemption Corps had more urgent problems. The bulkhead began to grow hot to the touch and tremble on its rails.

'Go, go, go, go!' the major urged, pushing the storm-troopers out of the compartment and away from the door. Moments later the bulkhead was blasted out of its seals, blue flame fanning out across the ceiling. The corpsmen hit the deck, shielding themselves from the intense heat. Only Mortensen could stand the unbearable temperature, feeling nothing as he did, and pulled the last of his men through a second bulkhead. Gritting his teeth, the soot-stained officer slammed his shoulder against the hatch and manually rolled it aside.

As the air in the corridor cooled, the troopers staggered tentatively to their feet cursing and complaining.

'Quiet!' Sarakota suddenly cried putting his hand up and twisting his head left and right.

'What can you hear?' Mortensen demanded.

The sniper was about to reply but the words died in his throat. He merely looked up in horror. A pair of grapnel-like claws shot out of a ceiling vent behind them, hooking themselves under Eszcobar's jaw and tearing him up off his feet. The hybrid had problems getting the death-worlder up through the opening at first, with the Autegan refusing to let go of his bulky flamer. The corpsmen were largely back on the floor but Preed and Sarakota were near enough to grab for the trooper's flailing boots. Eszcobar's spasming trigger finger caused his flamer to chug sporadic puffs of flame wildly around the room, forcing both men to duck.

Krieg was better placed from behind and leapt for the corpsman's rapidly disappearing legs. The creature wasn't going to release its prize that easily, however. Eszcobar let out an awful roar of pain and frustration that echoed horribly around the vent system. There was a crack and a gush from above. It looked like Krieg had had a bucket of blood poured over him. The deathworlder's arms went limp and the ungainly flame unit fell to the floor. With

this the Autegan's body was tugged upwards, taking Krieg's head and right arm up into the vent. Now Krieg's Commissariat trousers were flailing, his left hand patting furiously for his hellpistol.

This time it was Golliant who got to the vent, grabbing one of the commissar's leather boots, preventing Krieg ascending any further. Mortensen dived for the second, swinging from the commissar's calf, hoping the extra weight and momentum would drag him down. A similarly horrific roar was building in the cadet-commissar's chest as the two soldiers wrestled him down.

Something gave and all three men tumbled to the floor. As Mortensen pushed himself off the deck he was stunned to realise that Krieg had lost his right arm at the shoulder: the slashed leather greatcoat hid the worst of the gushing stump, torn flesh and sheared bone. Sarakota swooped under the vent, pushing the business end of his rifle up through the opening, plugging round after explosive round up at the creature. Finally the rifle ran dry and the hybrid's strange, alien screeching died away, the commissar's amputated limb falling back out of the vent with a light thud.

'Vrek that!' Greco declared shaking his head and hugging his hellgun to his chest. Keeping his injured back to the wall he sidled along the corridor away from the gaping vent. Ordinarily Mortensen would order him back but had to admit that the corpsman had the right idea. They had to get back to *Vertigo*.

'Sergeant, get 'em up,' Mortensen ordered, looking at Krieg's vacant and mangled face. 'Back to the bird, double time it.'

Minghella was already up to his elbows in the commissar's gore.

'Rhen, we've got to go,' Mortensen insisted firmly.

'Got to clamp this artery or he'll bleed out well before we reach the bird,' grumbled Minghella, half to himself.

'Better him than us, sergeant,' Mortensen barked.

'Got it!' Minghella announced, precious moments later.

Vedette and Sergeant Conklin started barking orders and encouragement, pulling the injured Sass and Greco to their feet. Minghella took the arm of the dazed and bleeding Necromundan over his shoulders. Conklin did the same with the spire-breaker.

'Vedette, we lost the master-vox. See if you can raise Rosenkrantz on the bead,' the major continued. 'Inform the flight lieutenant that we will be requiring an immediate evacuation.'

'Roger that, sir,' the Mordian returned with bleak enthusiasm.

Mortensen watched a stone-faced Golliant scoop Krieg's trembling body up

from the blood-drenched floor and throw him carefully across one shoulder, the commissar's detached limb in his other hand. Nodding, Mortensen watched the solemn aide stride up the corridor before turning his attention back to Sarakota who was still pointing his rifle at the ceiling.

Mortensen snatched up Eszcobar's blood-drenched weapon and handed it to the sniper who abandoned his own spent rifle.

'Kota, get up front and find me a way back out of this deathtrap.' Holding the flame unit out in front of him with both hands the corpsman ran from the room. Casting his eyes up at the vent with a shudder, Mortensen did the same.

What was left of the troop hurtled along the foreign passages and oddly-orientated corridors of the alien hulk. The horrific denizens of the place were not the only reason for their hustle. A chain reaction of explosions was now wracking the warped vessel, undoubtedly initiated by their unintentional ignition of the reserve tank fuel vapour. Most of the time the dull detonations seemed to be tearing up the craft in the sections behind the escaping corpsmen, but occasionally they sounded like they were ahead of the fleeing column of soldiers, no doubt down to the vessel's insane design and construction. The second and even more pressing concern was a gathering horde of hybrids not far behind them, crawling literally out of the metalwork and flooding the passages with danger and death.

Mortensen had never been so glad to see the *Vertigo* – and she was always a welcome sight. Rosenkrantz had brought the bird down further into the cavernous chamber and hovered above the platform still trailing their ropes. Then the damndest thing happened. *Vertigo* opened fire.

At first the major thought the pilot was offering cover fire as usual: he expected the vicious hybrids to be on their backs at any moment. The Spectre's autocannons were shredding the deck in front of their toecaps however, driving the corpsmen back across the platform and into the embrace of their pursuers.

'Vedette!' the major bellowed. She hadn't reached Rosenkrantz and now he was beginning to realise why.

Black-armoured shapes began to appear on the ramp and rappel down the dangling ropes. For the first time Mortensen noticed the damage in the troop bay: the shredded conduits hanging from the ceiling, the faint smoke still escaping from the crew compartment. It looked like the Spectre had been rushed: taken by force with grenades and merciless determination. As the autocannons fell silent it became apparent that Flight Lieutenant Rosenkrantz was no longer in command of the craft, forced down to the edge of the ramp as she was, hands

bound behind her back and pushed down onto her knees. Her captor was a slender figure in obsidian armour and a ribbed cape, sporting a crown of twinkling metal pins that were inserted over her entire skull. She was holding a bolt pistol to the pilot's temple.

If that were not plain enough, two Inquisitorial Valkyries dropped down out of the roof, flanking the captured Spectre and fixing the storm-troopers in their sights. The first wave of battle-sisters down off the ropes were now advancing towards them, helmets on and bolters raised. A Celestian with a skull face-plate came boldly forward, the barrel of her bolt pistol never straying from the major's chest.

'Drop your weapons!' she ordered simply.

The corpsmen looked around at each other, the prospect of abandoning even an empty weapon daunting. Conklin hugged his beloved bolter and threw the gathering one of his replacement fingers. Mortensen pulled the master sergeant's arm down. Enough of his men had died today for what amounted now to little more than a half-baked idea. The major wouldn't sacrifice any more just for him and it was clear from what Krieg had told him, that was what they were here for.

'Do as she says,' the major told them unequivocally; slowly unbuckling his belt and letting it fall to the floor. Vedette hesitated and Mortensen could feel her eyes around the chamber, looking for an opportunity, a chink in the armour.

'While we still have time, corporal,' the major added softly.

Slipping out of her hellpack, the Mordian allowed the weapon system to topple to the platform. One by one the Redemption Corps emulated their officer, reluctantly abandoning their weapons and raising their palms, including Golliant, who had to dump Krieg's beloved hellpistol on the deck.

As one of the sisters came up behind the major and began to bind his wrists behind his back, the skull-faced Celestian drifted forward, resting the muzzle of her ivory inlaid bolt pistol on his chest.

'Your mistress is going to wish that she'd never met me,' Mortensen told the sister with menace.

'On the contrary,' the Celestian came back confidently. 'She's been looking forward to this for a very long time.'

IV

The Incarcetorium was in chaos: fleeing security staff; escaping corpsmen; a full-scale prison riot and battle-sisters fighting for their lives.

The only route through the complex that Krieg's time locks had left secure was the maximum-security subway, leading between the oubliette sub-section that held the incarceration's most dangerous criminals and the compound landing strip.

Sidling along the subway wall, his right arm still strapped to his chest where Crayne had re-attached and bound it and the ivory-inlaid bolt pistol gripped firmly in his left, Krieg waited and listened behind a sharp corner. He was finally rewarded by the march of boots on the rockcrete and the sound of something being scraped along the floor.

Krieg waited. And waited.

+Koulick Krieg...+ Like a jackhammer inside his mind. The inquisitor was inside his head again. Not this again, the commissar thought. Not now.

+...Kriiiiiieg+

Blood fell from his nose in a brief, thick stream, striking the rockcrete floor with a splat. The hand around the pistol began to shake, but not in the way he'd come to expect. His whole arm felt pumped for action: the adrenaline burning through his veins. Instead of the disorientation and sickness that overwhelmed him before, he felt completely in tune with his surroundings: like he was capable of anything, despite his pitiable physical condition. His heart flooded with the desire to kill. The pistol felt like it was going to explode in his hand if he didn't sate its desire to end lives with it. The commissar's eyes narrowed. This wasn't common bloodlust or battle fury. Only one life would do.

Finally two sisters rounded the corner, dragging something between them. The first couldn't have even seen him. His bolt pistol simply slid forward along the wall and spat several rounds of explosive-tip straight through her temple. The second had a millisecond to come to terms with the very definite fact that she was going to die. Instead she decided to go for something on her belt, dropping the load she was carrying with her compatriot. It didn't make any difference to Krieg. He still spread the contents of her devout little mind across the subway wall.

It was only then the commissar realised that they had in fact been carrying the major and that he'd come very close to blowing the Gomorrian's head off. At first he thought he had, Mortensen's body lying as it had fallen in a naked heap. He wasn't moving.

Stepping out fully from behind the corner, Krieg presented himself to the remaining battle-sisters. Diamanta Santhonax stood there, a vision in her obsidian armour and dramatic cloak, the pins adorning her shaven head

glimmering in the dim light of the corridor. Her thin lips curled unreadably. Krieg brought up the bolt pistol. It was her life he needed.

The canoness's bodyguard stepped out from behind her. As usual the odd-looking fourteen year old was clutching the adamantium relic of their order – the crusader shield of St. Valeria the Younger. Her eyes, always seeming to Krieg just a little too far apart, flashed with a feline intelligence but the rest of her face was just a lifeless mask. She was nimble, even in her ancient armour, and broke into a run, darting up the subway at the commissar, her ermine-lined cloak flowing behind her.

Instead Krieg was forced to turn the wrath of his side arm on the henchwoman, but she had a well-practiced fashion of hiding her agile little form fully behind the shield as she rocketed up the passage towards him. Krieg hammered the relic time and again, hoping age had weakened the ancient shield, but the adamantium soaked up the punishment. Sparks flared off the metal, the bolts not even leaving the hint of a blemish on the gleaming surface.

In seconds the ammunition was spent and the Celestian leapt the final few metres, using the shield to batter Krieg into the wall. She was light, but the artefact wasn't and the impact made the cadet-commissar cry out as the shield pressed his strapped arm into his chest and his chest into the wall.

Krieg had no time to get over the burning throb rattling up and down the delicate, re-attached limb. The subway was echoing with the chugging bleat of the short chainsabre the henchwoman had drawn from behind the shield. The sister gunned the sabre and flew at Krieg, swinging the blur of wicked barbs in well-practiced manoeuvres. As Krieg ducked and weaved like a drunkard, the sister spun and swung, carving up the wall in plumes of dust-shredded rockcrete. Krieg realised that he couldn't keep up with the furious assault when the chainblade came in low and wide and ripped across the flesh of his thigh. He clutched the deep wound with his good hand and staggered into a clumsy evasion.

The sabre came straight at him, the intended target his solar plexus. His awkward turn managed to grant him the precious centimetres he needed and the force intended to take the sword through his body actually put the sabre deep into the wall by his hip. Krieg knew he couldn't waste the opportunity and snatched at the sister's face with his bloodied hand. For his trouble the henchwoman brought the adamantium edge of her shield across his jaw, slamming the back of his skull into the wall. She brought it back and forth in this way, sloshing the commissar's head around like a toy until he released his grip

and crumbled to the floor.

Putting one boot up against the wall she gunned the sabre handle once more and heaved the struggling chainblade out of its rockcrete scabbard. Krieg heard the blade slow to an idle chug as the sister held it over him. Looking up Krieg saw her glance at Santhonax for approval to kill him. Santhonax stepped over the still, naked body of Zane Mortensen and clapped her gauntlets together in cruel appreciation.

‘Cadet-Commissar Krieg,’ she grinned nastily. ‘I gave you a simple task: I asked you to kill one man. I gave you the authority and opportunity and you failed miserably. Please forgive me if I don’t seem a little more concerned.’

‘Any thug can kill,’ Krieg echoed from their earlier conversation.

‘And yet you seem to have trouble doing it.’

‘I’m happy to disappoint you,’ the commissar croaked. ‘But tell that to your battle-sisters and the pilots of your carriers. I didn’t have too much trouble with them.’

The canoness’s grin waned: ‘If that’s the truth then they’re even more pathetic than you are and therefore don’t deserve to live.’ She nodded coldly at the henchwoman. ‘End this fool’s feeble existence.’

The chainsabre roared. The commissar steeled himself for the furious blade. He flashed his eyes once more at the prone major, surprised to find him not so prone anymore. Swinging his legs around for momentum and his lower back off the floor, Mortensen brutally hamstrung the canoness, sweeping her boots clean out from under her. He’d picked the moment perfectly. So unexpected was the attack that Santhonax fell straight back, unable to break the fall with her gauntlets, and smacked the back of her head sickeningly against the rockcrete. The adamantium pins found their mark, hammering straight through the skull and into the brain.

The chainsabre died in the henchwoman’s fingers as she watched her mistress fit and spasm on the floor, with blood frothing and dribbling out of the corner of her mouth. Mortensen squirmed around, holding his meaty elbow above her nose in an open threat. One move from the Celestian and the storm-trooper would drive his arm through the battle-sister’s face and drive the pins in flush to the bone, killing Santhonax instantly.

‘You have your orders,’ Santhonax coughed with fanatical determination at the henchwoman.

Bolstered by the canoness’s insane certainty, the battle-sister brought the hungry blade back to life above the cadet-commissar. Once again, Krieg

prepared himself for the buzzing caress of weapon's serrated teeth. For the second time in as many moments, Mortensen saved his life.

Tearing the canoness's tapered pistol out of its belt holster, the major blasted at the henchwoman, the las-bolts slashing at the side of her face and forcing her to bring up the crusader shield. The final few impacted uselessly on the artefact, but as the shield lowered Krieg could see the major had caught her several times on the cheek and once in the eye. Instead of the usual cauterised holes the commissar had come to expect from a laspistol, the wounds were merely light burns, although the one in her eye had clearly ruptured something.

The chainsabre clattered to the floor and the heavy adamantium shield came down, dragging the svelte body of the henchwoman down with it like an anchor. Her one good panic-stricken eye jumped around the room, but her body lay awkward and motionless as though she were paralysed.

Mortensen turned back to the canoness, his elbow still hovering above her face. She gritted her perfect teeth and willed him on.

'You said you'd kill me.'

'What, and prove your sick fanatical fantasies true: whatever fails to destroy us makes us stronger?' The major hawked and spat at the wall. 'Well, I rather think to let you live.'

The major got up and walked unsteadily towards the henchwoman and ripped the ermine-lined cloak from her back and began to fashion an improvised sarong.

'I watched your world burn!' Santhonax screeched.

Mortensen nodded at the ceiling; at the tonnes of spinning rock freefalling towards the doomed Spetzghast.

'Don't worry,' the Gomorrian told her. 'You'll burn all right. But not by my hand.' He went to walk away.

Krieg picked up the chainsabre and limped over to the shaking body of the canoness, using the wall for support. He fired the blade mechanism and let the weapon kick over in his good hand. The desire to slay still ached inside him. He stood astride the battle-sister's heaving chest, her livid eyes boring into him.

'I, of course,' the cadet-commissar informed her, 'cannot offer any such reassurances.' And with one fluid flourish of the buzzing blade, her head came away from her shoulders and rolled across the floor. The intention was his: the canoness had betrayed him and was clearly a dangerous heretic. The action was not, however. He'd never swung a sword like that before. It was as if someone else had guided his movements – a puppeteer willing on his puppet. Clearly

Aurek Herrenvolk concurred with Krieg's judgement and had deemed, in his own unsettling way and in his own disturbing fashion, that Diamanta Santhonax no longer deserved to live.

Even though he knew in his heart that the Emperor's work had been done, Krieg was horrified at the alien entity that had reached into the deepest recesses of his mind and had so easily influenced it. Something still did not feel quite right but there was little the commissar could do to ease his troubled mind and so he took refuge in the hot simplicity of casual revenge.

As the commissar closed on the paralysed henchwoman, the major called up the passage at him: 'She's just a child, Krieg.'

The commissar shrugged. 'I very much doubt that,' he told Mortensen, mulling it over, before finally bringing the savage chainsabre to a full stop. He tossed the blade at the Celestian's feet with the beloved shield of her order.

Dragging Krieg's good arm across his powerful shoulders Mortensen helped the commissar limp and lurch down to the elevator at the bottom. Throwing Krieg inside, Mortensen stabbed at the button with his finger.

'Think we can still get off this dustball?' the cadet-commissar asked.

'No,' Mortensen told him honestly. 'But it's never stopped me trying before.'

V

The sky was black and oppressive. Colossal ork roks were everywhere, breaching the cloud cover and sapping the air of light and possibility. A cataclysm was unfolding before their eyes: decimation of such magnitude that it was sure not to leave a soul alive on the planet surface.

Rosenkrantz had heard the thunder of distant impacts roll across the murderous horizon and watched the mushroom plumes of ash, dirt and incinerated humanity rocket back at the doom-laden heavens. *Purity Control* hovered above the incarceration landing strip, with what remained of the Redemption Corps safely strapped into the troop bay, waiting for the pilot's decision to surge skyward.

'Just give them a few more minutes,' Vedette urged across the vox. She was down on the open ramp with a bruised and beaten Conklin, watching for any signs of life on the strip.

'I don't even know if *Deliverance* will still be there,' Rosenkrantz returned. 'In all likelihood Captain Waldemar has broken orbit. Can you really see a carrier negotiating this?'

‘We stay,’ came the storm-trooper’s unequivocal reply.

‘I’ve held on this long haven’t I?’ the pilot insisted. Her mind was made up. ‘But every moment we wait brings that gamble closer to a certainty. I appreciate your loyalty, but we can’t risk everyone just for two men.’ Rosenkrantz’s finger moved across a nearby stud. ‘Ramp closing.’

‘I see them!’ Vedette cut in, with more emotion in her voice than Rosenkrantz had ever heard from her.

The pilot looked down over the Valkyrie’s nose and at the open elevator doors. Two figures stumbled out amongst the wreckage of the landing pad: Krieg looked like hell in his ragged greatcoat and Mortensen, naked as the day he was born, bar some makeshift loincloth that flapped around his thighs, stomped with grim determination towards the bird. She swooped in as close as she dared to allow both men to clamber on.

‘They’re on board,’ Conklin confirmed across the vox, closing the ramp.

‘Strap in,’ Rosenkrantz warned them.

‘Let me guess,’ Mortensen crackled across the vox. It was surprisingly good to hear his voice. ‘We’ll be experiencing some turbulence.’

Rosenkrantz stared up through the canopy at the gathering gloom and nodded to herself. The pilot wrenched the stick towards her and vaulted for the boiling firmament.

The lively little Inquisitorial carrier answered well, rocketing away from the ill-fated planet. Like an iceberg emerging from a fog bank, a gargantuan asteroid plummeted towards them. Clouds rolled away from the beast, electrostatic charges leaping between the ork rok and the churning atmosphere. It was like a mountain falling out of the sky, with its own geography and of more concern, its own heavy weapons batteries.

The airspace around the asteroid shook as a thousand exploding shells ripped the sky to pieces. Gentle course corrections became violent tugs on the stick, throwing *Purity Control* to port and then to starboard, diving and weaving around the artillery blastwaves.

Reasoning that it would only take a single hit to cripple them, if not blow them out of the heavens, Rosenkrantz turned the Valkyrie on its side and threw it at the ork rok. Closing the distance made it even harder for the guns on the plunging craft to acquire the carrier. As the pilot took the aircraft closer still, deeper into the natural canyons and craters of the asteroid, the passing cannons fell silent. The Jopallian allowed herself a little smirk. That was clever.

Suddenly the rock face fell away and the Valkyrie was in the darkness of the

open sky. What the pilot hadn't allowed for was the exhaust vortex created by the rok's mainstage engine. *Purity Control* shook violently, sparks flying from the cockpit instrumentation. The engines choked and like an insect batted aside by a giant invisible hand, the aircraft spun away. Fighting for breath and control of her senses, Rosenkrantz pulled the aircraft out of the sickening rotation. Allowing the Valkyrie to fall she swiftly shut down the cockpit's overloaded instrumentation and sat there for as long as she dared, listening to the atmospheric howl of the aircraft falling tail-first back through the tumultuous cloud.

Rapidly re-activating the systems, she heard the alarmed calls of the storm-troopers across the vox. As the engines screamed back online, so the panicked shouting subsided. As she blasted skyward two more behemoths hove into view. One of the ork roks was rolling across the firmament, coming in much shallower than its neighbour. Rosenkrantz banked but the inevitable happened and she didn't have the moments or manoeuvrability to do anything about it. The two asteroids crashed, setting in motion a series of explosions in and around the greenskin roks. Shafts and splinters of rock fell towards the Valkyrie in a deadly shower, the fragments gaining in velocity and lethality.

The pilot had to think fast. Flicking the safety off the stick weapons controls, Rosenkrantz feverishly fingered the firing stud, launching salvo after salvo of rockets from each wing. The barrage tore away from the Valkyrie, striking the first of the fragments and initiating a column of explosions through the cascade. Surging for the blasts, the pilot put the nose of the aircraft through the dissipating epicentre of the column, the flaming vapour washing over the canopy armaplas.

Things were no better on the other side. The two asteroids were in full collision now, the smaller irregular companion rolling across its larger compatriot, smashing the violent rocky landscape inbetween and threatening to steamroller *Purity Control* in the process. This, Rosenkrantz could not allow. Her response was simple. Weaponry and manoeuvres could not help her here. All she had left was the greasy, raw speed of the aircraft. Hammering the velocity controls she pushed the Valkyrie to its limits, streaking up the length of the colossal ork rok, with the craggy tidal wave of destruction cascading towards them.

'Come on, come on, come on...' she repeated therapeutically, squeezing every bit of power from the thundering engines. For a moment Rosenkrantz allowed herself the fantasy that they were going to make it, but her heart turned to stone

as another dark shape appeared above, creating an artificial ceiling and a very definite end to the Valkyrie's dramatic run.

The cockpit suddenly lit up with blinding white light. Cannons were firing somewhere and fat beams of unbearable energy were cutting across *Purity Control's* flight path.

A shaft of natural gloom struck the canopy as the two roks parted, the smaller trailing a smouldering path of wreckage, the victim of the intense attack. Rosenkrantz was about to hit the airbrakes and bank towards the opening chasm when something struck her about the silhouette above. The angular lines and wedge-like prow, the lance batteries and carrier decks. *Deliverance*. The tiny carrier was down there in all the cosmic turmoil of the upper atmosphere, a sitting duck: its feeble armament and propulsion systems working double time to keep the thousands of Guardsmen and Navy crew out of harm's way.

Something cool caressed her face and blotted her helmet visor. Overwhelmed by their excruciatingly narrow escape or simply glad to see the ship, the pilot couldn't tell, but she was crying: something she hadn't done since leaving Jopall. Transmitting their clearance codes and coasting the Valkyrie onto the flight deck approach vector, Rosenkrantz loosened her grip on the controls. She felt the circulation return to her fingers and hit the vox-stud. The troop bay was silent. Expectant.

'We're home,' she announced simply. And allowed the rest of the relief to roll down her cheeks.

VI

The observation deck was empty.

At first it had been crammed with off-duty Navy crew and Patricians eager to get a morbid glimpse: to see a world die before their glassy, uncomprehending eyes. The Redemption Corps had had their fill of apocalyptic visions, however, and were not to be found on the observation deck. Most of them were restricted to the Orlop where Minghella fussed over their numerous wounds and incapacities, patching them up for the demands of their next mission – it was the Redemption Corps way. A virgin Guardsman might expect a mercifully swift death in the ranks of the Emperor's bastion, but the invaluable skills and experience of a veteran storm-trooper were always in demand.

Mortensen didn't spare himself the pain of the observation deck, though. In fact, he found himself indulging in long, lonely walks there, drinking it all in.

Seeing Spetzghast but dreaming of Gomorrah: spinning through the frozen, empty void. In those long hours he relived the fate of his home world and the nightmare of what he now understood to be not some random cosmological accident, but a cold and calculating attack on the human race: an opening salvo in the war that was to come, with first blood going to the enemies of the Imperium.

Spetzghast was a broiling, black ball spinning around a dying star, with a thin girdle of equally doomed moons for company. The major could barely imagine the hell down there. The air, choking and heavy – a black smog of soot and dust; the geological chaos of earthquakes and flooding; blazing cities and rotting corpses, the plagues of scavenging coot imps, picking the flesh off the dead and the dying. And everywhere the alien intruder, infecting and enslaving.

He had survived, however. Again, he'd walked out of the apocalypse. Given men like Lijah Meeks more excuses to fan the fires of their faith. Lived to fight another day. He thought long on Santhonax and her insanity: her Istvaanian beliefs and her desire to do good by ill. He couldn't bring himself to think of her as part of the alien conspiracy – her own particular brand of lunacy had testified to that. She had undoubtedly been played by someone or something whose desire to test humanity to the limit surpassed even hers. To not just craft heroes from the raw stuff of adversity but to eradicate the very Imperium from the face of the galaxy.

Ultimately his survival and that of his men had rested little on his shoulders. Rosenkrantz and Krieg had facilitated their escape on the doomed world below and the good commissar had been wise enough to ensure their escape route had remained open for as long as possible.

Mortensen couldn't be sure that with so many of his men off the carrier that Commander Waldemar wouldn't try to press his advantage, up anchor and leave them there to die. In all the chaos and confusion of the greenskin assault, who would know? Krieg must have thought the same thing because before boarding *Vertigo* he had orderlies relocate Regimental Commissar Udeskee's oxygen tent to Waldemar's bridge. *Deliverance* was going nowhere. Try arguing the merits of mortal danger with a man accelerating towards decrepitude and death. Undoubtedly Waldemar would have tried.

The flotilla and the spindly Exchequer space station were gone, smashed into oblivion in the descending turmoil of the colossal greenskin bombardment. All that was left now made up the dismal numbers of their fleeing convoy. A ragged train of bleeding fluyts and crippled sprint traders were shepherded along by the

bloated troopship *Argus* and the superheavy transport the *Demiarch Dante*. Without frigates and torpedo boats, the Guard transports – by virtue of the fact that they were armed – had been promoted from escorts to escorts. Their only true frigate, the remaining Firestorm-class Frigate *Cape Wrath*, led from the front under the command of Port Admiral Gordian Ferenc – who by a twist of fate had actually been on a citation hearing aboard the decrepit passenger liner the *Witch of Shandor* when the Exchequer and the *Stang Draak* had been destroyed. The *Witch* was now part of the pitiable procession, limping alongside a battle-scarred rogue trader. *Deliverance* brought up the rear, her lances watching over the convoy's sluggish exodus. The greenskins took little interest in them, however. They had wanted to decimate a world and they had done it.

As predicted, the Port Admiral had decided on Aurelius as their destination. There had been favour, especially among the Volscians, to make for Field Marshal Rygotzk at Scythia, but Aurelius was eventually deemed the better bet. The Viper Legion Space Marine Chapter was based there and the system had been the departure point for Enceladus. Now that the crusade was over it was possible that a fairly large contingent of troops and vessels were still hung over there, waiting for despatch orders and reassignment.

Thank the Emperor for Imperial bureaucracy, Mortensen had thought: he'd always been a fan. With the comms blackout still in play and the strange but potent web of psychic interference – undoubtedly an unforeseen boon of the stealer-greenskin interbreeding experiment – making astropathic communication impossible, all the convoy could do was trawl up the Kintessa Gauntlet, under the weight of their precious intelligence. Pushing on, hoping to reach beyond the limits of this strange effect and warn Aurelius in advance, as well as other systems in the Kaligari Cradle deemed at high strategic risk of similar treatment.

The only combat-effective vessel not to remain with the convoy on this long and lonely journey was Krieg's old ship, the Inquisitorial corvette *Dread Sovereign*. The vessel had some other dark purpose and with little warning had disappeared, leaving a stranded Krieg on board *Deliverance*. Port Admiral Ferenc was hardly going to disagree with a member of one of the Ordos and deemed it best to simply let the *Dread Sovereign* slip away with its much needed weaponry and troops.

The whisper of leather sauntered slowly up behind the major.

'Commissar,' Mortensen acknowledged.

Krieg stepped up to the thick plas in silence, his arm still strapped to his chest, lost in the spectacle of loss. 'Hard to believe we were just down there,' he

murmured finally.

‘Believe it,’ the major told him. ‘It’s gone.’ The storm-trooper sighed. ‘What about you then? Aurelius, then back to the Pontificals?’

The cadet raised a singed eyebrow, clearly surprised that the major knew of his origins. Mortensen grunted. ‘I read a file. Let’s not make a big thing out of it.’

Krieg managed a bleak smile and put his hand against the plas, almost touching the void outside. ‘Thought I’d stay. Complete my rotation.’

‘Might take a long time, out here,’ the major warned. ‘If that battle-sister spoke even a word of truth, Gomorrah and Spetzghast are only the beginning. Bellona, Scythia and Calydon Prime are already hit. If the Kintessa Gauntlet is compromised, then the Segmentum floodgates won’t have been opened, they’ll have been blown off their hinges.’

‘I’m in no hurry,’ Krieg stated, pulling down the brim of his cap to his eyes. ‘After all – the Emperor expects.’

‘He does rather, doesn’t he,’ Mortensen echoed before leaving the observation deck and the young cadet-commissar, framed in the raging apocalypse beyond.



DEAD MEN WALKING

Steve Lyons



CHAPTER ONE

Gunthar Soreson had never been so scared in his life.

He asked himself what his heroes would have done in his place – those muscular, square-jawed warriors whose exploits he followed in the newsreels. Would they have been scared too? Maybe, he thought, but it wouldn't have held them back. They'd have done what they had to do and faced the consequences, good or bad.

He wanted to be brave like them. He told himself he could be. He thrust his hand into his trouser pocket, before he could change his mind again, and his fingers closed around the cold, hard shape of the ring.

Arex groaned, 'Oh no.'

Gunthar started, snatching back his hand as if the ring had shocked him. Had she seen his movement or read his intentions in his face? Had she guessed what Gunthar had been about to ask her, and was this her reaction to it?

She had dropped her fork, cupped a hand over her face. She was making herself look small in her seat, trying not to be noticed. In a stage whisper, she directed Gunthar's gaze: 'Two tables behind me. To the right. No, my right. That man, the one in blue, with the beard and the bald spot. Is he looking this way?'

Gunthar shook his head. 'No.'

'I think we've met. Some reception at the High Spire. He was, I don't know, a proctor commissioner, something like that. Are you sure he's not looking at me?'

'I'm sure,' said Gunthar. 'He's just eating his meal. It's dark in here. That's why I brought you here, for the privacy. I can hardly make out his face. I'm sure he can't have recognised you, from the back, from a single meeting.'

'You're right. I'm imagining things.' Arex dared a glance over her shoulder, and her round face softened with relief. 'Of course it's not him. What would a man like him be doing somewhere like this?'

Something in Arex's tone, the derisive emphasis she put on those words, left Gunthar stung. 'You're here,' he pointed out.

‘I’m incognito, remember?’ she said, lifting the fork again, twirling a length of borana root around it. ‘I don’t want to be found – and this is about the last place on Hieronymous Theta anyone would think to look for the Governor’s niece.’

‘Yes,’ said Gunthar woodenly. ‘I expect you’re right.’

They were right up near the top of one of Hieronymous City’s shorter towers, as high as Gunthar had ever climbed. The skyways outside had been hardly crowded, even at this time of the early evening. He had saved for weeks to afford the bribe that had got him past the doorman of this eatery. It was the first place he had been to that served real meat, not the synthetic stuff. There was room between the tables, and plenty of servitors, attentive to their customers’ every need.

Still, it wasn’t enough. Arex was used to better than this, better than Gunthar, even since his promotion, could provide.

‘I’m sorry for being so jumpy,’ she said. ‘It’s just Uncle Hanrik. I can only imagine what he might do if he knew I was here, this far from home.’

‘I know,’ sighed Gunthar. ‘I know.’

What had he been thinking, making plans, dreaming of a life with her? How could that have worked? They lived in different worlds – and Gunthar would never be welcome in Arex’s world, just as she could never be happy in his.

He left the ring in its pocket.

He insisted on seeing her home – as near as he could take her, anyway.

There was still so much he wanted to say, so many questions to ask her. Why was she here? Was this only a game to her, these regular meetings? A thrilling adventure on the lower floors. Did she ever think about where it might lead? But Gunthar could feel the ring’s dead weight in his pocket, and he was still scared, scared of the answers she might give.

They took an autocab towards the gubernatorial sector, but abandoned it a few hab-blocks away before the proctors could show too much interest in them.

They talked about Gunthar’s work, and he found himself reeling off statistics, telling Arex about the annual yield in each of his mines until he was sure he was boring her. Not that she showed it. Arex was an expert at feigning interest. She had to be, someone in her position, all those dull official functions she had to attend.

He remembered the function at which they had met, the opening of a refinery plant. Arex, backlit by the red glow of a pit of molten metal, laughing politely at something a shift manager had said to her. The twinkle in her green eyes. Her

chestnut hair, bobbing on her shoulders. He remembered his first stumbling words to her, how she had just smiled and pretended he was making perfect sense.

He remembered stumbling into her on a swaying metal gantry, choking on the hot, dry air, an awkward moment defused by Arex's good humour and that smile again.

Was she only feigning interest in him?

They strolled between plasteel and glass towers on an expansive skyway, treading on the white chevrons that marked out the pedestrian lane as grimy, bubble-shaped autocabs hummed by to each side of them. There were fewer skyways up here, but fewer people to walk them too.

'So,' said Arex suddenly, 'you've seen no... trouble? In the mines, I mean?'

'Trouble?' echoed Gunthar, instinctively on the alert. 'No, nothing. Nothing like that. My men work hard, and yields are holding steady. What have you heard?'

'Nothing,' said Arex quickly. 'I was just... Something my uncle said, that's all. He was talking to... well, I'm sure it was nothing, like you say. It doesn't matter.'

They were at a crossway, and Arex drew Gunthar towards a row of lifter cubicles. They found one empty, and stepped inside. Even up here, the lifters stank of human sweat and excrement, the legacies of their journeys below.

'I shouldn't...' Gunthar stammered. 'If you're going back up to the High Spire, I should... This is as high as I can really...'

'Who said I was going up?' said Arex. She fingered the rune panel in the wall, and the cubicle door rattled and squealed shut behind them. A moment later, they were descending fast, and Gunthar thought Arex must have entered some private code to prevent the lifter from stopping for more passengers at the intervening levels.

'I always drop a few floors, this close to home,' she said. 'There's a place I can climb up, not far from the High Spire, where no one ever looks. It's easier than trying to get past the proctor patrols and the pictcasters up above.'

'We're dropping more than a few floors,' said Gunthar nervously.

'Don't be such a worrier,' said Arex. 'I thought you were born down here.'

'Not this far down,' squawked Gunthar, but she didn't seem to hear him. Her eyes were shining with excitement. This *was* an adventure for her.

Gunthar was relieved when the lifter brought them to a jarring halt and a mechanical voice informed them that, should they wish to proceed further, they

would need a high-level encryption key to return to this floor.

‘You shouldn’t listen to what they say,’ said Arex as the door rattled open and she and Gunthar emerged onto a teeming skyway far darker and dirtier than the one above. ‘It’s not so bad down here, once you get used to it. It’s a shame it’s so late. In the daytime, from those railings over there, you can see right down to the ground. We might see a campfire burning down there, even now, if you want to look.’

Gunthar shook his head. The railings at the edge of this skyway were twisted, breached, and he feared that if he went too close he might be jostled off the edge.

They elbowed their way through the crowds, attracting a few glances with their fine clothes but nothing more sinister, and Gunthar started to think that Arex was right. He had spent his life trying to escape from places like this, climbing those towers, but he couldn’t deny he felt at home here, far more so than he had in the eatery above. Down here, Gunthar was anonymous, just one more face. No one was likely to stop him, to ask him what he was doing so far from home. No one was likely to recognise the woman on his arm, or believe their eyes if they did.

Gunthar felt safer down here.

The emporiums were closed, heavy plasteel shutters slammed over their windows. A grizzled old man was doling out grey protein burgers from a filthy, open-topped cart. Nearby, the burnt-out shell of an autocab lay half on its side, wedged into the opening of a narrow alleyway. Globe-shaped luminators did their best to compensate for the fading light, but too many of them lay burnt out and broken.

Gunthar and Arex had witnessed three fights. The proctors had moved in to break up one, but the participants, three young women and an elderly man, had seen them coming and melted into the accommodating crowd.

‘They don’t let you see this,’ said Arex, wistfully, ‘when you’re with the Governor. They pretend it doesn’t exist, but this, right here, is Hieronymous Theta. This is the world we live in.’

‘I heard they might be connecting the skyways down here,’ said Gunthar, ‘sealing off the lower floors altogether.’

‘Burying our problems,’ said Arex, ‘but they’ll still be here. We can keep on climbing, until we reach the sun itself – but we’ve built our towers on rotten foundations, and they’ll drag us all down in time.’

‘This is still a new world, though,’ said Gunthar. ‘You’re talking about

centuries from now. Millennia. We've still got time. The Emperor will provide.'

Something was happening. Something had broken the patterns of the crowd, making them faltering and clumsy. An uncertain buzz was spreading, and building in volume. Another fight, thought Gunthar? No, something far bigger.

Arex didn't seem to have noticed the change in the atmosphere – or if she had, it didn't bother her. She was marching onward, leading Gunthar towards what he now judged to be the epicentre of the disturbance. He cautioned her about this, but didn't say too much because he didn't want her to think of him as a coward. He asked himself what the heroes of the newsreels would do.

Then the crowd before them parted, and Gunthar was faced with a monster.

It was crouching with its back to a wide tunnel entrance. Its shoulders were hunched, its skin dry and yellowing like old parchment. Its spindly arms ended in gnarled claws, and its eyes were a bright and startling pink.

Gunthar had seen mutants before, but only in pict-captures. Occasionally, one would find its way into the mines that he oversaw. He had dreamed of meeting one in the flesh, but in those dreams he had always had a gun or a chainsword, and the mutant had never been so big. In those dreams, Gunthar had been brave.

A few game citizens had armed themselves with sticks and knives. They were taunting the mutant, which was hissing and spitting, slashing at them, holding them at bay. Gunthar saw a discarded stick on the ground, and he knew he ought to take it, do the Emperor's work, beat this aberration to a bloody pulp. Be a hero.

Then, one of the tormentors got too confident, stepped too close, and the mutant was upon him before Gunthar could blink. It tore out his throat with a feral snarl, showering itself in his blood. The victim's last utterance in this world was a choked, gurgling scream – as, one by one, his erstwhile allies looked into the mutant's crazed pink eyes, let their weapons fall from their numbed fingers and fled.

Before he knew it, Gunthar was running too, feeling suddenly guilty that he hadn't stopped to think about Arex, then grateful to find her running alongside him.

They didn't get far. Not nearly far enough.

The crowd had become a panicked mob, pulling in all directions. Gunthar struggled against the ever-shifting tide, always aware of the horror that might have been closing behind him, expecting to feel those claws raking across his back. He wanted to scream, wanted to grab the people in his path and yell in their faces, 'Not this way! The monster is this way!' It was all he could do,

though, to keep his own balance. He almost lost it twice, but Arex was there to catch him, to save his life. If either of them fell now, they were liable to be trampled or worse.

A new sound joined the general discord, and Gunthar recognised the crack of lasgun fire. The proctors, at last, responding to the threat.

Then he realised that the sound was coming not from behind him, but from somewhere ahead – from at least two directions at once – and a cold, tight knot formed in Gunthar's stomach as he thought about what that had to mean.

He grabbed Arex by the arm, halting her. 'There are more of them,' he cried. 'The mutants. They're everywhere!'

They stared into each other's frightened eyes, and somehow reached an unspoken consensus. They struck out in a new direction, away from the screaming, away from the gunfire, and just prayed to the Emperor that they weren't rushing into more danger. Knowing that some mutants could almost pass for human, Gunthar suspected everyone who came near him, staring at them, searching for the slightest hint of deformity beneath each of their coats.

He almost let out a shriek as a young woman stumbled into him – but it wasn't an attack, she had just been knocked sideways by a surge of people. She scrabbled at Gunthar's best grey tunic, trying to keep herself upright, and he reached out too late. The woman fell beneath his feet, and he could no longer help her.

Someone was shouting orders, a harsh male voice augmented and distorted by a loudhailer. Almost instinctively, Gunthar and Arex modified their course to make for this sound of authority. Gunthar was flushed with relief as he saw the scarlet and purple uniforms of the Planetary Defence Force. The crowd was now flowing in a single direction, starting to thin out, and he was making some headway at last.

The hailer was attached to an Armoured Response Vehicle, an ARV, broadcasting an appeal for a calm and orderly evacuation of the area. The vehicle was flanked by a score of foot soldiers, its fuel-burning engine pumping a noxious cloud of exhaust gases out behind it as it crawled up the narrow skyway.

Arex pulled back, giving Gunthar's hand an anxious squeeze. He knew why she was worried – but at that moment, he didn't much care. He would rather they were both exposed, rather lose his job and his home and whatever else Governor Hanrik might choose to take from him than turn back and face the horrors behind him.

‘It’s all right,’ he said. ‘They aren’t asking for identity tags. They’re just checking everyone is, you know, human. Just keep your head down. They’ll let us through.’ He wished he could be as sure as he sounded. He didn’t know where that false confidence had come from, but while it lasted he started forward, pulling Arex along by her hand.

Ahead, two soldiers had stopped a middle-aged couple for questioning. Gunthar’s stomach lurched with fear, but he was committed to his course now. He couldn’t decide whether to meet the soldiers’ eyes or avoid them – which would draw the least attention? He was suddenly, belatedly aware of his fine silk clothing, so out of place, until he realised his tunic had been scuffed and torn and spattered with something dark that could only have been a dead man’s blood.

Arex’s elegant blue dress had suffered similarly, and Gunthar saw that she was no longer wearing her red amecyte necklace, her mother’s last gift to her. He didn’t know if she had concealed it herself, or if it had been snatched from her.

They were drawing level with the soldiers now. Gunthar could feel their sharp eyes upon him, scanning him for lesions, moles or anything else that might mark him out as abnormal just as he had been scanning the people around him. He must have passed their inspection, because a moment later he and Arex were past the soldiers and the ARV, on the outside – the safe side, the free side – of their tightening cordon.

Gunthar didn’t know what to do, at first. He wasn’t alone in this. There were many more escapees milling about, some laughing, some weeping, some wandering dazed or just sitting at the kerbside, shaking their heads. There were spectators too, those who hadn’t been involved in the incident but who had seen the soldiers and were hungry for scandal. Gunthar heard snatches of conversation, and discerned that few of the people here had actually seen a mutant. They were shaken all the same, reflecting upon their imagined close calls, starting rumours that would grow with each retelling.

Arex was leading Gunthar through all this, and he saw that, unlike him, she had a purpose in mind. They waited until they had cleared the worst of the crowd, until there were no soldiers watching them. Then she took his hand again, and they ran.

They ran as hard and as fast as they could away from that place.

They came to rest in a dark alleyway, and Gunthar – who had thought their flight to be aimless – was surprised to find that this was exactly where Arex wanted to be.

A rusted fire escape ladder snaked its way up a crumbling brick wall, and he sagged against it. His legs felt weak and his lungs were heaving for air. He was shaking.

Arex was drained too, and neither of them spoke nor met each other's eyes for what seemed like forever. Then she said, in a dulled voice, 'I should go. Uncle Hanrik will be wondering where I've got to. Sometimes he sends the proctors out to look for me.'

She swung herself onto the bottom rung of the ladder. Gunthar looked up, but he couldn't see its top. It was swallowed by the darkness.

'I should come with you,' he said reluctantly. 'A little further, at least.'

'There's no need,' said Arex. 'Really, there's no need. There's a heavy goods lifter on the roof up here that will take me most of the way.'

'If it's working,' said Gunthar.

'I checked the maintenance reports before I came out. You should be getting home too. Can you find your way back, around the PDF cordon?'

'Of course I can,' said Gunthar, not at all certain that he could.

Arex turned to leave again, and Gunthar's heart gave a frightened leap. He wasn't ready to see her go just yet. He couldn't be alone. 'I'm sorry,' he blurted out.

She froze with one foot on the ladder, a hand clutching at a higher rung.

'I should have protected you,' he said. 'I should have done something.'

'Don't be silly,' said Arex. 'What could you have done?'

'I don't know,' he said. 'Something more than just... I was useless back there. I could see what I was meant to do, I just couldn't... I couldn't do it.'

Arex stepped off the ladder, took his head in her hands, and gently brushed a curl of dark hair out of his face. 'Look what happened to the men who tried to fight.'

'It's just, I always thought, in a situation like that, I would...'

'You did the right thing, Gunthar. You got us out of there.'

'I applied to join the PDF, you know, a few years back. I was seventeen. My friends had been drafted, and they left me behind. I thought, at least I could fight for the Emperor at home. They turned me down. They must have known...'

'If it was anyone's fault, what happened,' said Arex, 'it was mine.'

'No.'

'I'm the one who brought us both down here.'

'But you couldn't have expected... I mean, mutants, this many floors up!'

'It happens,' said Arex, 'more often than you might think, and this time...'

Didn't you wonder how the PDF got here so quickly, in such numbers?'

Gunthar frowned. 'You think they...?'

'I think they were patrolling these skyways. I think they were expecting trouble. I told you, Gunthar, I heard Uncle Hanrik talking about... well, I don't know what, but I think there's something wrong. Something... something below. And if that "something" is driving the mutants up here...'

They looked at each other, and Gunthar could see the same thoughts, the same fears, reflected in Arex's eyes that were whirling about in his own head.

'They think,' she said softly, at last, 'Uncle Hanrik and the rest of them, they think that what happens down here, it doesn't affect us – but it has to, one day.'

'Will I see you again?' asked Gunthar.

Arex smiled. 'Of course you will. Soon. I'll contact you.' She leaned in close, slid her hands around to the back of his head, and before he knew it their lips had met and he was melting into her kiss, breathing in her blossom-scented perfume, feeling her warmth in his arms.

It ended too soon. Arex broke away, and she was climbing the ladder again, out of Gunthar's life, and this time he knew he couldn't call her back because this time there was nothing left to say. Nothing, he realised, but the most important thing, and he had left it too late now to say that.

He should have given her the amecyte ring.



CHAPTER TWO

Hieronymous Theta.

An obscure world, located near the outer rim of the Segmentum Tempestus.

A relatively new world, Commissar Costellin noted. Its population still hovered just below the nine billion mark, and a third of its surface had yet to be built over.

Like many new worlds, Hieronymous Theta was still rich in mineral deposits. Its major industries were based around the extraction and working of those minerals. The planet paid a good proportion of its tithe to the Emperor in adamantium and plasteel.

Hieronymous Theta was a sheltered world, the Imperium maintaining a strong grip on the systems around it. Thumbing his way through the data-slate in his hands, Costellin saw that neither the world nor its closest neighbours had been touched by the smallest recorded conflict. It was perfect, he thought.

‘Will that be all, sir?’

Costellin looked up, surprised. He thought he had dismissed the Guardsman who had brought in the slate. He recalled that, in fact, he had only made a dismissive motion with his hand as he had settled into his reading. He ought to have known better.

Costellin had spent almost thirty years – since he was a young man, barely out of his thirties – assigned to the Death Korps of Krieg. If he had learned one thing in those years, it was that Death Korps soldiers, on the whole, could not take hints. They didn’t respond to body language or moods. They needed explicit orders.

The Guardsman stood rigidly in front of the commissar’s broad desk. Even here, in the controlled environment of the troop ship, he wore full combat dress. His greatcoat, trousers and boots were charcoal grey, the colour of the Krieg 186th Infantry Regiment – although, as few Death Korps regiments chose any colour other than grey or black, this didn’t exactly distinguish them from the

crowd.

The Guardsman's helmet, gloves and backpack were all in place. His lasgun was slung at his side. Most egregiously of all, he still wore his full facemask. A length of thick rubber tubing connected its mouthpiece to a rebreather unit in a square, leather carrying case resting against his chest.

Costellin didn't know the name of this particular soldier. He didn't know the names of any of them. Only a few Krieg men had names, and it was not common practice within the regiment to use them. On paper, they were just numbers to him – as indeed they were to the colonels and the generals who deployed them in battle.

In person, they were less than that.

Krieg had been classified a deathworld, its atmosphere toxic. Costellin understood that, as a consequence, its people wore their filtration systems as they wore their skins. Despite this, before his transfer to a Krieg regiment, he had imagined the masks would have to come off some time. He had been wrong.

The masks distanced their wearers, even from each other. In contrast to the other regiments with which Costellin had served, he had seen few strong bonds formed among Death Korps men. They trained, fought, ate, slept alongside each other, but there was no friendship, not a trace of camaraderie, between them. This was a regiment of strangers – and, as the years had gone by, Costellin had come to suspect that this might just have been the point.

'Yes, yes, that's all,' he said, waving the nameless, faceless soldier away from him again. The Guardsman saluted, pivoted on his heel and made for the door.

'I was wondering,' said Costellin, halting him in his tracks, 'how many of your platoon might be going planetside. I did circulate a memo. It's just that we have four regiments aboard this ship. It might be polite to give the Hieronymous authorities some warning if we are about to descend upon them in force.'

The Guardsman stared silently at him, for a moment longer than Costellin felt entirely comfortable with. The round, dark eyepieces in his mask shielded his thoughts and lent him an eerie, hollow-eyed look.

'We will be staying aboard the *Memento Mori*, sir,' he said. 'We have a schedule of combat exercises planned for the next six days.'

'We're all entitled to time off, Guardsman,' said Costellin. 'In fact, we're a good way overdue, having stayed with the campaign on Dask as long as we did. The Administratum has gone to a great deal of trouble to arrange this layover.'

'Yes, sir.'

'I am sure that, whatever exercises your lieutenant has planned for you, they

are voluntary.’

‘Yes, sir. We all volunteered, sir.’

‘Of course you did,’ said Costellin with a sigh. After all this time, he didn’t know why he had even bothered to ask. In this case, it had probably been out of embarrassment; his brain had been racing to come up with a reason for having kept the man waiting as long as he had.

‘One more thing,’ he remembered, ‘as long as you’re here. You can convey my congratulations to Major Gamma on his recent promotion. Tell him I’ll catch up with him as soon as I return, and we can go through the new troop allocations then.’

‘Major Gamma, sir?’

‘I mean, Colonel 186,’ Costellin corrected himself. ‘Although, while you’re at it, you should probably congratulate Major Gamma – the new Major Gamma – too.’

‘Yes, sir.’

Costellin knew he should have delivered the messages in person, but for once, he thought, his duty could wait. It wasn’t as if the gesture would have been appreciated – and, as of 06.00 this morning, he was officially on leave.

He returned his attention to the data-slate, but caught himself a moment later and looked up to find the Guardsman still standing to attention in the doorway.

‘Thank you, that’s all,’ said Costellin. ‘Dismissed.’

The Guardsman saluted again, and the door slid shut in front of him.

Costellin suppressed a small shudder. He didn’t know where it had come from. After all, he should have been used to dealing with the Death Korps by now. Sometimes, though, he found they still got to him – their lack of visible expression, of discernible emotion, of the smallest trace of empathic feeling.

He put such thoughts from his mind. He skimmed the rest of the slate, absorbing more details about Hieronymous Theta. Its capital, Hieronymous City, was currently enjoying a temperate autumn. Rainfall this year had been below average.

Not that the weather mattered much to him. Costellin intended to spend his six days’ leave indoors, in bars, in restaurants, in entertainment venues, revelling in the long-denied pleasure of simple human contact.

And the best thing by far, if he knew his regiment at all, was that there wouldn’t be a single member of the Death Korps of Krieg within thirty thousand kilometres of him.

Costellin felt the deck plates trembling beneath his feet.

He moved to the side of the corridor as a Death Korps platoon rounded the bend ahead of him. They had formed up in threes and were doing circuits, their heavy boots falling perfectly in step so the entire ship seemed to ring with each impact. The watchmaster at their head ordered them to 'eyes left', and threw a crisp salute in the commissar's direction. Costellin returned it, and waited patiently for the remainder of the platoon to pass him by.

Sixty pairs of those hollow, dark eyes, fixing him with their blank stares.

Sometimes, Costellin wondered what they saw when they looked at him: a silver-haired, beak-nosed old man who had lived to an age few of them would see.

Through a concave window, he looked down onto a cargo deck. Another platoon had cleared themselves a small training space, by stacking wooden crates precariously against the wall. They were clad in black, so must have belonged to the 42nd or the 81st, he couldn't see their shoulder flashes from here to tell which.

The Guardsmen were bayoneting sandbags, onto which, curiously, images of their own kind had been stencilled. Costellin had once questioned a watchmaster about this, to be told in a dull but self-assured monotone that the greatest potential threat to any army came from within its own ranks. The *Memento Mori* was equipped with a proper gymnasium and a firing range, but Costellin didn't doubt that both of these would be in use, and booked up solid for the next six days.

In contrast, the wardroom was empty but for one other commissar: a balding man with sagging jowls whom Costellin had not seen before. The Krieg officers tended to eat with the lower ranks, having risen through those ranks themselves.

Costellin picked up his meal from the hatch and, because he felt he should, took a seat across from his opposite number. He introduced himself, and learned in return that the other commissar's name was Mannheim, freshly posted to the Krieg 42nd.

Of course, Costellin knew what the subject of their conversation would be.

'I was only on Dask for a month and a half,' said Mannheim, 'I only saw the final stages of the campaign there, but I can tell you this much – the resolve, the sheer grit I saw displayed by those men...'

'But?' Costellin prompted. He knew there would be a 'but'.

'You must have served with other regiments before you came to this one,' Mannheim said guardedly.

Costellin nodded. 'The Catachan Fourteenth.'

'Jungle Fighters.' Mannheim was impressed. 'I've heard they can be difficult.'

'Not especially,' said Costellin casually, 'if you know how to deal with them. I earned their respect and their trust, and they more than earned mine. The Death Korps remind me of them, in some ways. They fight as hard, and are just as unshakeable. You know, the combined Krieg regiments have the lowest desertion rate in the Imperial Guard. It's as near as damn it to zero.'

'They certainly aren't afraid of dying,' said Mannheim, mumbling thoughtfully through a mouthful of food.

'In the right cause, no.'

'And don't get me wrong, they are perfectly respectful. When I give them an order, they jump to it.'

'You just don't know how to relate to them,' Costellin guessed.

'When I talk to them, it's like... I get nothing back from them. I can't tell what they're thinking, how they're feeling. What is it that drives them, Costellin?'

Costellin smiled tightly. He had asked himself that question more times than he could count. He hadn't yet found the answer, not completely.

The men of Krieg didn't discuss their past – to them, it was a source of shame – but, three decades ago, Costellin had made it his business to learn all he could about his new regiment, and this had included their history.

It had been a surprisingly arduous task. Much of what had been written about Krieg and its people had been lost – in some cases, he suspected, deliberately expunged – from Imperial records. One single, dreadful fact, however, was beyond doubt.

Barely a millennium and a half ago, Krieg had been laid waste by the bloodiest and most brutal civil war ever known to mankind.

It began, Costellin explained to Mannheim, when the corrupt and decadent Autocrats who ruled the planet declared themselves independent from the Imperium. 'Of course,' he said, 'the citizens were outraged by this heresy.'

'Of course,' said Mannheim.

'So, the Autocrats sent their private armies out into the streets to crush any and all resistance. They almost succeeded.'

The man credited with the salvation of Krieg was one Colonel Jurten. When the Autocrats made their move, Jurten had been in the hive city of Ferrograd, mustering a single Imperial Guard regiment. He had acted quickly, seizing control of that city, turning it into a rallying point for the resistance movement.

Of course, Jurten and his brave men had been outnumbered thousands to one –

and their enemies had had far greater resources than they, including control of the planetary defences. The Imperium couldn't get a force through the Autocrats' blockade to help the struggling Krieg loyalists. Jurten was fighting a war he couldn't win – at least, not through conventional means. Then, buried beneath the Ferrograd hive, in a secret vault constructed by the Adeptus Mechanicus, the colonel had found a cache of forbidden weapons, antique devices of death, that were anything but conventional.

'The greatest hero in Krieg's history,' said Costellin, 'is the man who destroyed it. Jurten decided that, if the Emperor couldn't have his world, then nobody could. On the Feast of the Emperor's Ascension, he detonated those missiles in the atmosphere.'

Mannheim had forgotten his food. Pink sludge dribbled off the edge of his spoon. 'Then that... that's why the air on Krieg is...?'

'The missiles destroyed the ecosystem,' Costellin confirmed. 'Jurten killed billions of his own people, but he also evened the odds against him. The war raged on for another five hundred years, but at last the victors emerged.'

'The Death Korps,' said Mannheim.

'They were forged in that nuclear fire.'

'Have you ever seen Krieg yourself?'

'Just once,' said Costellin. 'I set foot on its surface just once – and I wish to the God-Emperor I hadn't.'

They ate in silence for a few minutes more, Costellin giving his fellow commissar time to absorb all he had just heard. Then, in a lighter tone, he said, 'Look on the bright side. We'll both be dining rather better than this tonight.'

'I don't know,' said Mannheim. 'I don't know if I'll be going planetside. My regiment, they've decided to—'

'Combat exercises,' said Costellin, 'and you feel you ought to stay with them.'

'Well, yes, yes, I do.'

'They don't need you at the moment. Take this opportunity while you can. It'll be a long time before you get another one, believe me. The Departmento Munitorum has a habit of forgetting to apportion leave to Death Korps regiments, and the Death Korps regiments have a habit of not complaining about it.'

'All the same,' said Mannheim, 'I feel I should spend the time to get to know these men a little better, to understand what my role is here.'

'If morale is so high in the Death Korps of Krieg, if discipline is no problem, then you don't understand why they need commissars at all.'

‘You always seem to know what I’m thinking.’

Costellin smiled. ‘I’m not yet so ancient that I don’t remember thinking the same things myself – and you will find the answers to those questions, some of them at least. In the meantime...’ He pushed back his chair and picked up his empty plate. ‘In the meantime, I’ll be heading for the drop-ships as soon as we make orbit. I’d advise you do the same. Relax. Bring back some real food.’

He turned, and caught his breath as he almost walked into a Death Korps soldier, who had come up behind him without Costellin having heard him.

The Guardsman saluted. ‘Commissars Costellin, Mannheim,’ he said flatly – and then, he spoke the very last words that Costellin had wished to hear: ‘Your presence has been requested on the bridge, sirs.’

The bridge door was adorned with a large leering skull, two metres high, but the painting was old now, fading and flaking. Costellin caught Mannheim frowning at the bleak image, and he smiled to himself.

The area around the captain’s chair was crowded, with two black-coated Krieg generals and all four regimental commanders already present. Costellin acknowledged the newly-appointed Colonel 186 with a nod. A masked face turned towards him, but the colonel gave no other indication that he had seen the commissar at all.

As always, a small army of servitors scrabbled about the dark edges of the circular chamber, manipulating the panels of runes set into the curved wooden walls. Costellin was just glad that, with the ship out of warp space, its mutant Navigator had presumably retired to her quarters; her presence always made his nerves itch. He glanced at the giant hololithic display, but saw only a few distant points of light in the infinite blackness through which they were journeying.

He knew Captain Roka, of course. The short, stocky Navy man squirmed about in his seat to greet the newcomers with a look of relief. Costellin exchanged brief pleasantries with the captain, and introduced him to Mannheim, while they awaited the commissars of the 81st and the 103rd. Their voices were the only ones to be heard, and they echoed from the walls and returned to their ears too loud.

As soon as the gathering was complete, one of the generals spoke without preamble. ‘We have received a communiqué from the Departamento Muniturum,’ he announced. ‘A situation is developing on Hieronymous Theta that requires our attention.’

Costellin’s heart sank, although he had expected no less than this.

The general looked at Rokan, who hesitated, unsure if this was his cue to speak. He decided that it was, and began, 'It seems the Planetary Governor has been having some trouble – rioting on the lower levels, that kind of thing.'

'And is this really our concern?' asked Costellin.

'I know,' said Rokan with a shrug. 'That was my first thought too. Hieronymous Theta is a newly-settled world, relatively peaceful. Its young men are as likely to become miners as soldiers. It crossed my mind that the Governor – Hanrik – might just be panicking. This could be the first time he's had any real problems with his underclass. Hanrik has seen service, though, and there is—'

'There are indications of a possible xenos presence,' the general interrupted him.

'Just rumours so far,' stressed Rokan, 'or so we're told. I don't know. It seemed to me there might be something more to this, something Naval Command didn't quite want to put into words. There was mention of some... some artefact that has got them all excited. I can play back the whole message for you if you like.'

'What are our orders?' asked Colonel 103.

It was the second general who answered. 'As ours is the nearest ship, we will proceed to Hieronymous Theta as planned. All leave is hereby cancelled. Colonel 42 and his commissar will meet with the Governor on the ground to assess the situation.'

'We are scheduled to rendezvous with the troop ship *Divine Judgement* in fifteen days,' added the first general, 'to take on new recruits. We will now require them to come to us, as soon as is practical for them. Captain, you will arrange this.'

'Colonel 42 will report his findings to us within one planetary day,' said the second general, 'by which time all regiments will be mustered and ready to deploy.'

With that, the two generals marched out of the room, and the four colonels followed them. Captain Rokan relaxed in his seat, evidently glad to see them go. He caught Mannheim's eye, and threw him a cheerful wink. 'Welcome aboard!' he said.

'I'm not happy about this, Costellin,' said Mannheim as the two commissars strode through the corridors side by side. 'This secrecy... Why are the Imperial Guard involved in what appears to be a purely domestic matter?'

Costellin had had the same thought. 'The generals will tell us what we need to

know,' he said, 'when they decide we need to know it. In the meantime, you wanted to know why a Death Korps regiment needs a commissar. You're about to find out.'

'What do you mean?' asked Mannheim.

'Your meeting today. Notice how the generals sent one of their own with you, the regimental commander no less. Colonel 42 will take a half-dozen aides with him to Hieronymous Theta, maybe a major or two. You saw how Captain Rokan reacted to being surrounded by Krieg officers, and he's had time to get used to them.'

'This governor chap, Hanrik...' Mannheim realised.

'Hanrik will be glad to see a friendly face. He'll be glad to see a face at all. This is your job from now on, Mannheim, at least the greater part of it. You're a diplomat first and foremost. It's up to you to mediate between the Death Korps and the planetary governors, between the Death Korps and the civilians, the Adeptus Mechanicus, sometimes even the rest of the Imperial Guard.'

'I see,' said Mannheim thoughtfully, 'to smooth the way so they can do their jobs. Still, I don't understand why they have to be so... so... The masks and the skull motifs, the atmosphere aboard this ship...'

'To the Korps,' said Costellin. 'Death is a way of life.'

'You make them sound positively morbid.'

'It's a fact. As you have already observed, they have no fear of dying. In fact, they welcome it. To die in the Emperor's service is their lives' sole purpose. It's an attitude our leaders have no wish to discourage, of course.'

'And they all feel this way?'

'Try talking to a Krieg Guardsman some time. You'll find he has no hopes, no dreams, no desires, nothing but his orders and the prospect of a violent end. As far as he is concerned, there is nothing else. He is a dead man walking.'

'But why...?'

'The men of Krieg,' explained Costellin, 'still bear the guilt of their world's sins. It is instilled in them from the moment they are born. They are taught they must atone for their ancestors' rebellion – but their world is a radioactive hellhole. Krieg has no industry, no agriculture, with which it can repay its thousand-year-old debt to the Emperor. It has nothing but its children, so it gives these gladly.'

'But surely,' said Mannheim, 'those children are the descendants of the heroic Colonel Jurten as much as they are of the Autocrats?'

'They are indeed,' said Costellin, as the two men halted at the junction at

which they would part to return to their offices, ‘and that’s the second part of our job, Mannheim. That’s the other reason why the Death Korps of Krieg needs people like us: because sometimes, just sometimes, they need to be stopped from going too far.’



CHAPTER THREE

Gunthar sat behind his desk, waiting.

Data-slates were strewn across the white plastek surface. He had shift rotas to sign off, mine quotas to adjust, personnel to hire and fire, maintenance reports to read. He was already well behind – spent too much time worrying about his date last night – and now he couldn't settle to any of it. He stared at the comm-link terminal as if he could will it to chime. He tapped at a rune in its base, just to hear the static squawk that would reassure him it hadn't broken down again.

Gunthar hadn't slept. Whenever he had tried, he had seen the glaring pink eyes of the mutant or heard the dying gurgle of its victim.

He had turned on the holocaster several times, almost every hour throughout the long night, watching the latest reports. There had been no mention of the incident. He had wondered how that could be – until he remembered what Arex had said.

'They don't let you see this... They pretend it doesn't exist... They think that, what happens down here, it doesn't affect us.'

Gunthar had the ring in his fingers, and was turning it idly. He didn't remember taking it from his pocket; his hand must have strayed to it just as his thoughts strayed to Arex. Yesterday, he had thought the ring beautiful. Now, he wasn't so sure.

It was set with six red amecyte stones. Gunthar had chosen red because it was Arex's favourite colour. He had chosen amecyte because it was mined on only one planet in the entire Imperium, and that planet was Hieronymous Theta.

Elsewhere, a ring like this one would have commanded an extravagant price. On Gunthar's home world, however, amecyte was as common as glass – and, for a mine overseer able to lay his hands on rejected, flawed stones, almost as affordable.

The comm-link chimed, and Gunthar started. Suddenly all thumbs, he stuffed the ring back into his pocket as he lunged to take the call. *'Mr Soreson,'* a gruff

voice crackled over the link. *'Herriksen here. You wanted a word?'*

'I did,' said Gunthar. He fumbled across the desk, searching for the one slate he was sure he had left right there. 'You sent me a report a few days ago, about something... You said you had found something down there?'

Herriksen's reply was lost to a howling of strained engines and a clanking of chains in the background of the call, and Gunthar had to ask him to repeat it.

'...kept digging, just like you instructed, but now we've unearthed...'

Another barrage of sound obscured the next few words.

'...problem down here, Mr Soreson. Like I said in my report, there are these weird runes... The men don't like those runes. They're saying...'

It had been Arex's words, again, that had prompted Gunthar into spending his morning going through recent reports from the mines under his supervision. He had been searching for something, anything he might have missed, anything that might have seemed insignificant before. He had already contacted three mine foremen, questioning them about small drops in yields and losses of workers. Then he had picked up the slate containing Herriksen's report, and he had remembered.

He had hardly glanced at it, last week. He had had so much else to do, and so what, he had thought, if some miners had found a chunk of worked stone. Why did they have to come crying to him about it? It had probably been buried by the mutants on the ground, for some unfathomable reason, and worked its way down during an earth tremor. Or it had been left behind by one of the primitive civilisations thought to have existed on Hieronymous Theta before its colonisation – what difference did it make?

He had dashed off a quick reply to Herriksen. He had told him that his find, whatever it may prove to be, was of no interest to anyone. He had reminded the foreman that his mine was behind on its quotas. He had told him to keep digging.

'...refusing to work in that tunnel. They say it makes them feel...'

An hour ago, Gunthar had called up a hololithic display of all the mine tunnels beneath Hieronymous City. He had overlaid upon this the locations of all the reported fatalities of the past six months, and he had found a significant cluster. A cluster that was centred on the north-west corner of Herriksen's mine.

The foreman's voice was being drowned out again, but it didn't matter. Gunthar had heard enough. He stabbed at the 'transmit' rune on the comm-link's base, and he said, 'I'm on my way down there.'

Gunthar had worked in mining since leaving his schola at the age of fourteen. Most of his world's young men did the same, those who escaped the draft. Despite this, he had set foot in an actual mine only twice before. His work had always been administrative in nature, undertaken in well-lit offices on the higher floors.

The mine entrances, of course, were a good way above the tunnels themselves. Still, Gunthar had to drop a few floors to reach them. This time yesterday, this wouldn't have concerned him – but then, this time yesterday, he wouldn't have made this journey at all. He felt his stomach churning as a heavy lifter carried his autocab down. He had taken public transport because official cars were scarce and he hadn't wanted to wait for one. He wished Arex had called him, just to say she had made it home. If something had happened to her, would the newscasters have censored that too?

Kreuz was perched on the curved seat beside him, her eyes as blank as the data-slate in her lap. She was Gunthar's lex-scribe – he qualified for his own lex-scribe now – and she went everywhere he did.

The cab reached its programmed destination, and Gunthar climbed out, reassured to be greeted by two proctor sentries. He showed them his identity tag, and he and Kreuz stepped through an archway into a large, dark area full of noise and steam. They were surrounded by clattering tanks and hissing pipes, with people rushing to and fro. The air in here was hot, dry and oppressive.

This was where the metal ore extracted from the ground below was smelted down. Gunthar saw an idling truck, waiting to be loaded up with the precious materials thus obtained. They would be conveyed to the nearest space port, and from there to an Imperial forge world, to be fashioned into the machinery of war.

Gunthar intercepted a burly, ruddy-faced man as he dashed between tanks. 'I'm looking for your foreman, Mr Herriksen,' he said.

The burly man shook his head and pointed to the yellow earplugs he was wearing. Kreuz stencilled the name *Herriksen?* on her data-slate, and thrust it under his nose. He nodded in comprehension, and pointed to a row of six lifters, each contained in its own metal-mesh cage. Then he made a plunging motion with his thumb, and mouthed the words, '*Down below.*'

As Gunthar approached the cages, he heard a screeching of engines and chains and a lifter rose, bearing two miners with an ore-laden barrow. An old, soot-blackened comm-link terminal was set into the stone wall, and he realised that this was where Herriksen must have been when they had spoken earlier.

He found rebreathers, safety helmets and goggles, slung from hooks beside the

lifter cages. The first rebreather he tried didn't work, but as he placed the second over his mouth, the air tasted cooler and fresher. Gunthar and Kreuz stepped onto a lifter platform and its cage door rattled shut, casting a criss-cross pattern of shadows over them. As the platform lurched into motion, two pale blue luminator strips flared at their feet, but the left-hand strip immediately faltered and died.

A moment later, they were descending through a rough-hewn stone shaft, insect eyes peering out at them from dark crevices. It was a long, slow journey, and it was made all the slower by Gunthar's imagination, which insisted on picturing all manner of twisted horrors lurking behind those stone walls, on the lower floors of the city. Occasionally, the lifter would stall for a second, as if it had caught on something, and each time this happened he felt the sickening fear that it might not move again.

He began to ask himself what he was doing here. Trying to impress Arex? Looking for a chance to make up for his inaction last night? What made him think he could? What made him think that, given another chance to be a hero, he would be any more able to take it than he had been the first time?

Checking his chrono, he saw that a little over three minutes had passed. They had to be underground by now, he thought – and indeed, a moment later, the stone walls gave way to more metal mesh and the lifter platform dropped into a second cage. Gunthar and Kreuz stepped out of this cage into an expansive cavern, well-lit by luminator globes strung from wooden mine props.

The air here was choked with dust, and Gunthar felt an itch in his eyes despite the protective goggles he wore. Squinting through this haze, he saw dark tunnel openings and vast banks of ancient, rusted machinery. Cogitators clicked and ground to themselves, as an army of mine labourers and servitors teemed between them.

A dirt-encrusted, middle-aged man with red-rimmed eyes visible through his goggles moved to greet the new arrivals. 'You must be Mr Soreson. From the Officio Primaris? I'm Herriksen.' The man seized Gunthar's hand in an uncomfortably strong grip, and pumped it hard.

'I was expecting to meet you at the mine entrance,' said Gunthar.

'Too much to do down here, Mr Soreson. Well, you know how it is. Quotas to meet. I see you've found yourself a rebreather. There are a couple of spares by the lifters if it fails on you. You'll be wanting to see this artefact of ours, then?'

'I think we should,' agreed Gunthar. Just a quick look, he thought, then he could return to his comfortable office and do what he should have done in the

first place: contact the proctors, or even the PDF, and let them deal with the problem.

At least, this way, he would have a tale to tell Arex.

Herriksen led the way across the cavern, calling to three other miners to join them as he did so. The men seemed excited by Gunthar's presence, and eager to see what he made of their find; he supposed it had been a talking point for them too.

They approached a tunnel entrance, passing the abandoned hulk of a clapped-out boring vehicle on their way. 'Lights on,' instructed Herriksen, and he activated his helmet luminator. The other three miners followed suit immediately, but Gunthar couldn't find the rune on his helmet. He fumbled with it for a while before one of the miners reached over and performed the task for him. A little embarrassed by this, Gunthar made a show of activating Kreuz's luminator in turn.

The tunnel was wider than he had expected, and the five men and Kreuz proceeded along it two abreast. The miners dropped back to allow Gunthar to take the lead beside Herriksen, a courtesy he could have done without. Even with their six luminators, he could see only a couple of metres ahead of him through the ever-present dust. Whenever the tunnel forked, which it did a couple of times, he almost walked into the walls. He was glad of Herriksen's assured presence by his side, guiding him.

Gunthar knew they were nearing their destination when he heard the heavy clunks of pickaxes and the shrieking of drills from ahead. Shortly, his group's little bubble of light merged with another, and in that light he saw the glint of augmetic body parts.

'I think I mentioned when we spoke,' said Herriksen, 'that most of the men won't work this tunnel any more. I've been forced to rely on the servitors, and you know what they can be like. If I don't watch over them constantly...'

Gunthar nodded, not really caring. There were ten servitors present, semi-human drones, probably grown in vats. Little better than mutants, he thought, though at least these creatures were programmed to serve the Imperium.

As mining servitors, these particular creatures had also been augmented to suit the conditions down here. Their rebreathers were bonded with their flesh, welded to their bones, replacing the bottom halves of their faces. In place of arms, they had rock drills and piston-driven hammers, while muscle stimulants and growth hormones had given them strength enough to cope with back-breaking work that would have killed a normal man. Gunthar was careful to keep

his distance from them.

He was more interested in the column.

It stood at the right-hand edge of the tunnel, just a metre or so back from the end. About two metres tall – no, a little less than that, a bit shorter than Gunthar. It was like a miniature obelisk, with a pyramid shape at its top, about the size of Gunthar's head, and a square, stepped base still partially embedded in the tunnel wall.

The column was carved out of a smooth, polished stone – and Gunthar couldn't be sure in the dust and the dim light, but he thought it had a pale green tint.

'What type of stone is that?' he asked Herriksen, but the foreman just shrugged. 'And what are those markings on it?'

Kreuz leaned in closer, so her luminator beam fell onto the column.

'We thought maybe some kind of writing,' said Herriksen.

'It doesn't look like any language I know,' said Gunthar. He could see Herriksen's point, though. The runes did look like some kind of script: a sequence of symbols, the same ones often repeated. There were four rows of them, stretching around the column, and a fifth along its base. Many of the letters – if that was indeed what they were – were based on the shape of the circle, but with tangential or extended radial lines connecting them in an intricate pattern.

'I think it's starting again,' said one of the miners in a low, foreboding voice.

'What's starting?' asked Gunthar.

Herriksen scowled. 'Nothing,' he said. 'It's just the men's imagination.'

'You can't feel that?' the miner protested. 'That... that pressure in your head? Like it was before, the last time I looked at those... those...'

And Gunthar *could* feel it now. Like something was growing inside his skull, straining to get out – and with that thought, he wanted to be sick.

He closed his eyes, breathed deeply, and the symptoms receded somewhat. Herriksen was right, he thought. The miners were imagining things, and he was reacting to their fear, doing the same.

He looked again, in time to see Kreuz reaching for the column, too late to shout a warning before her flesh made contact with the stone.

He felt a little foolish as she traced the outline of a glyph with her ever-present stencil. What had he expected to happen? The miners had dug the column out of the wall, he thought, their hands must have touched it a thousand times.

'I think I've seen enough,' said Gunthar quickly, hoping his voice didn't sound

too weak, too plaintive. ‘Thank you for bringing this matter to my attention. I... Let me speak with my superiors about this, and I’ll let you know what we decide to do. In the meantime... In the meantime, the artefact isn’t harming anyone, so I would carry on as you are, let the servitors mine this tunnel. We have our quotas to keep up.’

Herriksen nodded, and turned to lead Gunthar back out the way they had come. Kreuz, for her part, seemed strangely reluctant to leave the column behind, but she straightened up, made a final few notes on her slate and followed her boss dutifully.

They had barely taken six steps back up the tunnel when one of the miners stiffened and halted. ‘Do you hear that?’ he asked. ‘Tell me you can hear that. That humming noise.’ They all stood in silence, listening, and Gunthar was about to protest that he couldn’t hear anything when Kreuz spoke.

‘Yes, yes,’ she said, ‘I can hear it.’

Herriksen shook his head. ‘The acoustics in these tunnels can play some pretty odd tricks on a man, and with the servitors drilling down here...’

‘I’m sure you’re right,’ agreed Gunthar. ‘I’m sure it’s nothing.’ He started forward again – but suddenly, he could hear it too.

He thought it was a mechanical noise at first, maybe a piece of mining equipment in an adjacent tunnel. As the hum grew louder, however, it became higher in pitch and took on a more organic quality, until it sounded like a chorus of ethereal voices.

He didn’t want to turn around, didn’t want to see the stone column again, but he couldn’t help himself. He looked back over his shoulder, even as a servitor, unperturbed by the events unfolding around it, lifted a barrel of metal ore and wheeled it down the tunnel towards Gunthar and his party.

As the servitor shuffled past the column, it brushed the surface with its left arm.

Gunthar was blinded by a bright green flash. He stumbled backwards, gasping, blinking, his retinas imprinted with the image of a skeletal silhouette crumbling into dust in that terrible light. Then, as his vision began to clear, he saw a half-melted augmetic arm lying in a pool of slag, but no other remnants of the hapless servitor to whom the arm had once been attached.

The humming was even louder now, and shrill like the whining of the drills. Herriksen made the sign of the aquila, and Gunthar boggled as two of the servitors – then a third, then a fourth – abandoned their work to sink to their knees in front of the stone column. He had never seen a servitor behave that way

before.

‘What... what just happened?’ one of the miners stammered.

‘What do we do?’ Kreuz whimpered. ‘Mr Soreson, what do we do?’

‘No one is to touch that thing,’ commanded Herriksen, while Gunthar was still trying to think of a single word to say. ‘We need to back out of this tunnel now, slowly and calmly, and we need to seal it off until the PDF can get here.’

‘The column,’ cried another miner. ‘Look at the column. It’s glowing!’

He was right. The strange stone was pulsing, impossibly, with an internal light. The glow was a putrid shade of green, and Gunthar felt sick again at the mere sight of it. Or perhaps his nausea was fuelled by the thought that the dust he was inhaling, even through the rebreather, might well have contained traces of the disintegrated servitor.

They were all doing as Herriksen had said, backing away. ‘What if it’s a bomb?’ ventured one of the miners. ‘What if that thing is juicing itself up ready to explode?’

They exchanged worried glances at that, all six of them.

Then, Gunthar turned and ran out of the tunnel as if all the daemons of the warp were on his tail – and, in the heart-racing terror of that moment, he didn’t care that he might be thought of as a coward, didn’t care what Arex would think when she heard about this. He didn’t even care how many times he ran into a rock wall in his half-blind flight. All that mattered to Gunthar was that he put as much distance between himself and that unholy artefact as was humanly possible.

And, apparently, this was all that mattered to the others too – because, as Gunthar quickly realised, they were all right behind him.

Gunthar was the first to emerge, in a flurry of dirt and dust, into the main cavern.

‘We need to evacuate this mine,’ he yelled at the world in general. ‘Everyone needs to get out of here. There’s a... There’s...’

Words failed him, but Herriksen came to his rescue. ‘A safety issue has arisen in one of the tunnels. Mr Soreson here is from the Officio Primaris, and he has decided—’

Gunthar nodded impatiently. ‘We need to contact the foremen of the neighbouring mines too, warn them—’

‘Mr Soreson,’ protested Kreuz, ‘do you have the authority to order—?’

‘I don’t care,’ Gunthar snapped, surprising himself with his directness. ‘We’ve no way of contacting the Governor’s office for permission from down here, and

by the time we reach the surface...' His voice tailed off as he looked at the lifters and remembered how long his journey down here had taken.

Herriksen was marshalling the confused miners in the cavern, sending them into the tunnels to spread the word. He took Gunthar by the shoulder, and propelled him firmly to the nearest of the metal-mesh cages, Kreuz scuttling along beside them.

Gunthar turned to Herriksen, and asked, 'Aren't you coming with us?'

Herriksen shook his head. 'There are over two hundred workers in this sector of the mine, servitors excepted, and the lifters will only carry five at a time. It will take over an hour to clear everybody out, and I'm not leaving any men behind.'

Gunthar didn't know what to say. He was relieved when Herriksen let him off the hook. 'Go,' he said. 'Someone needs to get up there, get on the comm-link, and let people know what we just saw.'

The first miners were beginning to stream into the cavern from the nearest tunnel. Herriksen ushered three of them into the cage with Gunthar and Kreuz, then dragged the door shut behind them and sent the lifter on its way.

Their upward journey was endured in deathly silence, and it seemed to take forever.



CHAPTER FOUR

Arex hadn't planned to listen in on her uncle's conversation.

She was passing by his office. She heard his voice, muffled by the oak door, talking to someone on the comm-link. She was almost out of earshot when she heard a name that made her stop and take notice.

'...*Gunthar Soreson*...'

She tiptoed to the door and pressed her cheek against it. She couldn't hear anything at first for the sound of her own heart thumping in her ears.

'...can't ignore us now,' Uncle Hanrik was saying. 'This time, it's more than just a few lumps of marble. This artefact, this column...'

He was answered by an indistinguishable buzz from his comm-link terminal, whereupon his voice grew louder and thus clearer to the eavesdropper. 'I'm talking about the safety of my people, of my entire world. I won't risk having a miner disturb something else down there, not until there has been a thorough investigation.'

The comm-link buzzed again, and Hanrik replied, 'As I told you, this latest incident involved the mine overseer for that sector. I have his statement right here.' So, Uncle Hanrik *had* spoken Gunthar's name. Had something happened to him?

'I have already given the order,' said Hanrik. 'Every mine within a hundred kilometres of Hieronymous City is being evacuated and sealed off. Mining operations will not resume until I am convinced it is safe for them to do so.'

More frenetic buzzing from the comm-link. Then, more calmly, so that Arex had to strain to catch his words again, Hanrik muttered, 'Well, maybe now the Administratum will appreciate how serious... some colonel on his way here... what he has to say about the whole business.'

Arex heard shuffling footsteps: a servitor, climbing the staircase from the kitchens. She jumped away from her uncle's door and proceeded along the hallway, hardly able to stop herself from breaking into a run.

Something was happening, something big. Something to inject some interest into the boring life of a Governor's niece. The sort of thing Uncle Hanrik would normally have kept from her – only, this time, Arex had someone on the inside.

Dinner was served early that evening.

Arex sat across the polished table from her Uncle Hanrik, and picked at her meal without enthusiasm although the lobros had been freshly caught that morning. She asked Hanrik about his day, but he gave his usual vague, dismissive answer, shaking his head until his double chin wobbled. She wanted to ask him about Gunthar. She had tried to contact him at his office, but he hadn't been there.

'I... heard some of the staff talking,' she said, 'about some trouble... in the mines.'

Hanrik frowned at this, and grunted that it was none of her concern. 'However,' he said, 'we do need to talk. I'm going to be busy for the next week or two. I have some people coming tonight, and I... It's been a while since you last visited your aunt.'

Arex protested, 'No!'

'Please, Arex, don't argue with me. I think it would be best for you to spend some time with your aunt in Imperial Cove.'

He always treated her like this, as if she were a child. Arex was twenty-one now, more than old enough to make her own decisions. She had been telling him that, though, since she was fourteen, and it hadn't worked so far. That was the trouble with having an uncle who ruled a planet.

Hanrik had had sons of his own once, three of them. They had joined up with the Imperial Guard, and – like his brother, Arex's father – died on a distant battlefield. In her more understanding moments, she could see why he was so overprotective of her. This, however, was not one of those moments.

Arex pushed her plate away, stood up and marched out of the room.

Outside, she leant her head to the wall and trembled with frustration. She knew what would happen next. She knew that, tomorrow if not tonight, there would be a knock on her door and she would find a personal escort waiting for her in the hallway. Uncle Hanrik didn't take no for an answer.

Sometimes, their suite in the High Spire felt like a prison. Sometimes, Arex thought she should have left home long ago, perhaps accepted one of the many suitors her uncle had lined up for her. The problem was, she hadn't much liked any of them.

Arex didn't know what had drawn her to Gunthar Soreson. He hadn't even been able to say two words to her when first they had met. Perhaps it was that very shyness, though, that unassuming nature, that had made him such a welcome change from the privileged braggarts her uncle tended to pick out for her. The problem was that she couldn't foresee a future in which she and Gunthar could be together.

Right now, though, that didn't matter.

She was going to find him. She would go to his hab first. If he hadn't returned there yet, she would wait for him. She would tell Gunthar what she should have told him last night: that she loved him.

Then, before she was packed off to Imperial Cove out of harm's way, Arex would at least know what Uncle Hanrik was trying to protect her from this time.

Arex took the stairs down to the exit, because she had anxious energy to expend and didn't want to be cooped up in a lifter. She told the doormen she was taking a stroll around the gardens and wanted to be alone. As soon as she was out of their sight, she hopped over a wall and dropped down onto a public skyway.

There was an embarkation point a block and a half away, where two autocabs sat waiting. Arex climbed into the first of these, swiped her identity tag through the reader and found Gunthar's address on a scrolling hololith city map. The engine started with a judder and an ozone whiff, and the cab moved off.

Almost immediately, it turned onto a lifter platform and stopped again. Through its broad, curved windshield, Arex could see the flat tops of the shorter towers around her for a moment before she was lowered into their midst.

Then a shrieking sound turned her eyes upwards, and she saw an exhaust trail bright against the darkening sky. A troop ship, coming in to land at Hieronymous Port. Her uncle's visitors, no doubt. At any other time, Arex would have stayed at home, eager for whatever titbits of information she could overhear from them. Tonight, she had more important things on her mind.

Arex had never been to Gunthar's home before, so she followed her progress on the map. A dotted red line showed the cab's intended route through the city; it had dropped some way below Gunthar's floor in search of the closest-running skyway. It was reduced to crawling speed at this level, nuzzling its way through slow-moving knots of people, too many of them to stick to their own lanes.

Then the hololith blinked out, and the autocab came to a gentle halt.

At first, Arex thought the vehicle itself must be at fault. She muttered a dark oath under her breath, cursing the engineers whose job it was to keep it running.

It occurred to her, then, that the world had grown darker.

It wasn't yet time for the public luminators to come on, but a moment ago there had been lighted windows and business signs outside. Now there was nothing, no man-made light at all, and Arex was beginning to appreciate just how much earlier dusk came to the lower floors than it did to her High Spire window.

She stabbed at the door rune by her knee, once, twice, three times, to no avail. She twisted around in her seat and kicked at the door instead, putting her full weight behind each blow until the latch gave way.

The air outside the autocab was far colder than it had been above.

A moment ago, the strangers on this skyway had been moving with direction and purpose. Now, they milled uncertainly, looking at each other as if somebody else might have the answers they craved. Arex kept her head down, irrationally afraid that if she made eye contact with any of them she might be recognised.

Murmurs reached her ears, certain repeated words confirming what she had already begun to suspect: '...power outage... whole of the neighbourhood, maybe beyond... can't see any lights on the upper floors...'

All of a sudden, Arex felt a long way from home.

The autocabs drew power from the skyways themselves. If there was no power in this sector, if that much was true, then there were no cabs... and no lifters. How long would it take her to climb all those floors – even assuming she could find a staircase that wasn't barricaded from above? She could always flag down a proctor, she thought. Their vehicles had independent power sources... didn't they? But then, she would have to explain to Uncle Hanrik what she was doing down here, and whatever lie she told him it would make him suspicious enough to start digging for the truth.

She told herself to calm down. For all she knew, the power could be restored at any moment. If the outage had affected the upper floors too, then the engineers would certainly be working on it. In the meantime, Arex thought she could remember the layout of the surrounding towers from the autocab's map. She could find her way to Gunthar's hab, at least.

She wrapped her coat more tightly about herself and started walking. She knew that, statistically speaking, these floors were relatively safe, far safer than the one to which she had taken Gunthar last night. Still, the darkness unnerved her. It cast the faces around her into shadow, making it seem like everyone she passed was hiding some malevolent intent. It created inkblot shapes in the corners, in the windows, in the mouths of the alleyways, which unfailingly

reminded Arex of the pink-eyed mutant.

She removed her mother's necklace, as she had done last night, concealed it in her coat pocket. She could see Gunthar's hab-block up ahead. She quickened her pace, thinking that in a few minutes' time she could be safe indoors, in his arms, and these unfounded fears of hers would be a dissipating memory.

But then, a new shadow – a larger and more ominous shadow – crept over her.

A shape was collecting in the evening sky: a black cloud, but like no cloud Arex had seen before. It was too dense, too low – it was hovering between the upper floors of the towers themselves – and it was growing in size, billowing ever outwards.

Then, Arex realised what that cloud had to be.

It was a swarm. An insect swarm.

Arex stared in horrified fascination as the swarm continued to build.

There had to have been thousands, hundreds of thousands, of bodies in that great pulsating mass, and thick black streams were rising from the lower floors to further engorge it. She wondered what could have made the normally passive insects of her world behave like this, and then she realised she could hear no sound from the swarm, no buzzing. She wondered why the insects weren't buzzing.

It was perhaps that very lack of sound that prevented Arex from seeing the danger she was in. That, and the impossibility of judging the scale and the distance of the swarm in the half-light. It wasn't until the people around her began to see it, began to cry out and to turn and to run, to seek shelter in the surrounding hab-blocks, that Arex grasped the awful truth: that the swarm was no longer hovering, but was now moving.

It was coming directly towards her.

She started to back away, but her gaze was still fixed to the awful sight above her, her brain still trying to work out what it was she was seeing. It took her a moment to overcome this dreadful semi-paralysis, to get a grip on herself, to look for an escape route, and by then she feared it might already have been too late.

Arex ran for the nearest hab-block, finding her way obstructed by fear-frozen bystanders and also by those who had started to run but had chosen the direction of their flight at random. She forced her way through, and made it to the base of a broad flight of stone steps, but was elbowed aside before she could climb them. A skirmish broke out at the top of the steps, as those who had made it through

the building's front doors tried to close them against those still striving to follow them. There was no refuge for her in there.

She looked over her shoulder, and her heart leapt into her throat. The swarm was almost upon her, close enough now that she could make out some of its constituent components as they peeled away from its edges. The insects looked like no species native to this world. They were silver in hue, and far too large. They were the size of a large rat. No, bigger than that even. They were flying, but Arex could see no wings.

Then the insects descended upon their prey, and the screaming began in earnest.

Arex found herself at the centre of a maelstrom. The insects were everywhere, above her, around her. One of them tore at her clothing as it flew by, and scratched her skin. She had thought the swarm silent before, but now her ears were filled with the rustling of carapace upon carapace. She thrashed her arms in a vain attempt to ward the creatures away from her. She felt her balled fist making contact with a small, hard body, sending it spinning, but ten more of the insect's kind appeared to replace it.

A woman beside her howled in agony as an insect tore the skin from her face. Arex felt something in her hair, an insect tangled up in there, and she panicked and screamed and tore at it, and escaped somehow with only a few more scratches.

She tried to keep moving, as if she might through some Emperor-sent miracle find her way to the swarm's edge before she became a target too, but people were dying all around her, falling over each other, stumbling into her path, and she didn't know which way was which – and, suddenly, she felt something new. A rain of debris, a half-brick glancing off her cheek, bruising her.

The swarm was attacking the towers too. A sizeable flank of it had just side-swiped the hab-block in which Arex had sought shelter. The insects had gouged a deep trench in the brickwork, causing it to contract and crumble, the windows to burst, and to her horror Arex realised that this section of the tower was collapsing in on itself.

She started to run again, but in addition to the swarm now she had to contend with an all-engulfing cloud of masonry dust. She didn't make it ten more steps before her lungs gave up the effort, rattling and wheezing. Her eyes were streaming, her cheeks wet, although whether this was with blood or with tears Arex could not tell.

All the people, the hundreds of people, who must have been in that hab-

block... not to mention the floors of the tower above that she couldn't see from here and the skyways that were almost certainly anchored to them. It was all too much, too enormous a disaster, for her to take in. She could only think about herself for now, as hopeless a cause as that seemed to her too.

She followed a stream of people headed for the edge of the skyway, watched in hope as scores of them clambered over the ramshackle railings and jumped for their lives. It was only when she reached that precipice herself that she realised there was nowhere to jump to, no other skyway below to catch her as she had imagined there must have been. The jumpers had chosen, in their terror, to be dashed to a bloody smear on the ground thousands of metres below rather than let the bloodthirsty insects have them.

It was all Arex could do to back up, to keep herself from being pushed over the edge anyway by the press of bodies behind her. She was half-blind, her head was spinning and she wasn't sure how much blood she had wept from her scratches, but she wasn't ready to die just yet. She collided with a substantial metal object, as tall as her chest, wider than she could feel, and she traced its outline with her hands, realised what it was, and it seemed that the Emperor must have interceded in her favour after all.

An autocab. The very autocab, in all probability, that Arex had abandoned here only a few minutes ago. Yes, yes it was. The latch on the door was still broken from her kick. She yanked it open and scrambled into the vehicle. She pulled the door shut behind her and, although it didn't entirely blot out the sounds of the carnage without, they were at least now muffled enough for Arex to think, to hope. For her to wipe her eyes on her sleeve, to open them and to see that she wasn't alone.

An insect still clung to her arm. Arex snatched at it, and it tore a chunk of her flesh away with it. She dashed the insect into a rune panel, and felt the satisfying crack of its carapace beneath her fingers, but it was still squirming in her grip, and at that moment, a fresh wave of the creatures smacked into the front of the autocab from without. Arex screamed and dropped the insect she had been holding.

The windshield was cracked, but to Arex's relief it held. Meanwhile, the insect within had dropped into her lap, and it was glaring up at her with a single baleful green eye. It was the first time she had gotten a proper look at one of these things. It resembled a common beetle, she thought – albeit an armoured beetle, its carapace a set of interlocking silver plates. She might have thought it entirely mechanical in nature were it not for the sickly green ichor that had oozed out

from between those cracked plates, and which was splattered across the rune panel and the floor of the cab.

With a shudder, she batted the insect to the floor and it landed on its back, two rows of tiny legs pedalling to right itself. Arex stamped on it until it stopped moving.

Then something huge and heavy crashed into the autocab's roof from above, and she feared for a moment that the vehicle might just crumple around her. The cracks in the windshield crazed and spread to form a fragile web. Arex knew that, if the windshield broke, she would be helpless, trapped in here, easy prey.

Then, just like that, it was over. The swarm had passed on, and Arex was left, panting and sobbing, alone in the mangled remains of the cab. Her coat had been clawed to shreds, she had stinging cuts on the palms of her hands that she didn't even remember sustaining and the hammering of her heart felt like it was the only sound in the whole world.

Arex thought she would stay there forever, because she couldn't face what was waiting for her outside. When she did muster the willpower to reach for the cab door, it was jammed shut and she had to kick it open again, far harder this time.

She dragged her battered body out into a scene of desolation, choking on the dusty air. Most of the towers were mercifully intact, but a couple had fallen and the skyway was strewn with their rubble. The weight that had half-crushed the autocab was a slab of skyway from over twenty floors above Arex's head.

Worst of all were the broken, twisted bodies that lay everywhere, most of them half-buried. Some of them were twitching, moving, trying to dig themselves free. Arex could hear weeping, and plaintive cries for help. She felt she should answer those calls, but she didn't know who to turn to first; and besides, her head was spinning and her legs couldn't bear her weight.

She crumpled like an old sack, first falling to her knees and then lowering herself onto a mattress of rubble. Arex's eyes felt heavy, and she couldn't think straight, couldn't process everything she had just experienced, couldn't think about the reasons or the consequences of it all. Oblivion crept over her shoulders, and she welcomed it, welcomed the chance to sink into a dreamless sleep – and, maybe, by the time she awoke, there would be somebody here to make everything clearer for her. Uncle Hanrik, maybe, or the PDF, or Gunthar...

Gunthar. The stray thought sent a bolt of adrenaline through Arex's system, jolting her awake, setting her heartbeat pounding again.

Gunthar. This was where he lived, on one of these floors above her. In one of

the hab-blocks that the insects had attacked. What if they had destroyed *his* hab-block? He might not even have seen them coming, never had a chance to run.

Arex couldn't foresee a future in which she and Gunthar could be together.

But, right now, she couldn't envisage her future without him.

She dragged herself to her feet, tried to pierce the veil of dust around her, to see past the recent devastation, to remember this skyway as it had been, to regain her bearings. She had to work out which of these buildings was his. She had to find him, to know that he was okay. She had to keep herself going, for his sake.



CHAPTER FIVE

Costellin had retired to bed early.

He felt weary to his soul. He hadn't realised how much Dask had taken out of him until he was faced with the prospect of being catapulted straight into another theatre of war. Perhaps, he thought, Captain Rokan's initial assessment that Governor Hanrik was worrying over nothing would prove accurate. However, if there was anything to fight on Hieronymous Theta, he suspected that the Krieg Colonel 42 would find it.

The commissar was woken by a klaxon alarm and an insistent voice, buzzing over the vox-speaker outside his quarters. It was a call to muster. All personnel to report to the drop-ships immediately. He had only closed his eyes for an hour and a half.

He tied on his armoured breastplate, checked his plasma pistol and his chainsword before he holstered them. He could already feel the deck plates ringing beneath twenty thousand pairs of boots. Sometimes, he wondered if the Death Korps of Krieg slept in their facemasks and backpacks. Sometimes, he wondered if they slept at all.

The drop-ship assigned to the 186th regiment was cycling its engines in the upper portside hangar bay. The company commanders were marshalling their troops in this vast, echoing space, and Major Alpha's first two platoons were already marching up the access ramp into the belly of the great rusted hulk.

Colonel 186 stood up on a gantry, observing the proceedings, straight-backed and stiff even in the at-ease position. Costellin threaded his way through the streams of newly-arriving Guardsmen, and climbed a ladder to join him.

'What's happening?' he asked.

'We have been ordered down to the planet,' said the colonel.

'Yes, I rather gathered that, but for what purpose? Nobody has briefed me.'

'Our four regiments are to deploy around the capital city and secure its

perimeter from without.'

'Secure it against what?'

'I do not have that information. I was asked to convey the generals' apologies to you for not keeping you informed, but they felt the situation required urgent action.'

'Evidently,' said Costellin. 'Has the Departamento Munitorum even been apprised of this operation? There hardly seems to have been time for astropathic messages to have been exchanged.'

'I do not have that information,' said the colonel.

'They must have told you something,' said Costellin, 'about this threat that has apparently emerged from nowhere in the four hours since we made orbit.'

'I do not have--' began the colonel.

'Of course you don't,' Costellin sighed, 'and I suppose I don't have time to go and talk to the generals myself, unless I wish to delay our drop.'

The colonel turned his head towards the commissar as if disgusted that he would entertain such a thought, although of course his expression was unreadable behind his ever-present mask. 'Our orders are quite clear,' he said.

He sounded like his predecessor.

The colonel sounded, for that matter, like every other Death Korps colonel with whom Costellin had served. There had been six of them now, or was it seven?

The previous Colonel 186 had died on Dask, leading a charge against a legion of Nurgle-spawned mutants for control of a strategic hill. He had known his was a likely suicide run – the generals had done their sums and concluded that this particular objective was worth the loss of over four hundred men – but he had chosen to lead from the front anyway, as he always had.

The old colonel had done his duty. He had surrendered his life to the furnace blast of an enemy-held flamer, but he had won the more valuable prize. He had taken that hill. The erstwhile Major Gamma had been picked to replace him by virtue of his long service with the regiment. That was how, for the most part, promotions were earned in the Death Korps of Krieg: by surviving.

'Is there anything else?' asked Costellin.

'We are assigned to the western wall of the city,' said the colonel. 'It is close to the space port, so we can set up a Command HQ there. The 42nd regiment will be based to the north, the 81st to the east and the 103rd to the south, so our troops will be the first into position. We are then to await further instructions, unless of course a clear and present threat is presented, in which case we are to

respond as appropriate.'

'A clear and present threat,' Costellin repeated slowly. 'I don't like the sound of this, colonel. I like to know what it is I'm expected to fight.'

'The 81st and 103rd regiments will each drop a grenadier platoon behind the city walls,' said the colonel. 'Their mission is to locate the enemy and identify him.'

Costellin nodded quietly, but a gnawing fear was growing in his stomach. He was beginning to form his own suspicions about what might be going on in Hieronymous City. He just prayed to the God-Emperor that those suspicions were unfounded.

Hieronymous Port was packed with terrified civilians. They filled the space port buildings and had spilled out onto the main ramp despite the best efforts of the local security forces, who were simply too few in numbers to maintain control.

To Costellin's chagrin – although not entirely unexpectedly – the appearance of a peaked cap and human features made him the new best hope for a thousand pale, imploring faces. From the moment he stepped out of the drop-ship, he was swarmed by them, each shouting its own desperate question, which the commissar brushed aside as politely but firmly as he could. 'No, sir, I don't know when it will be safe to return to your homes.' 'No, madam, I'm afraid I haven't seen your daughter.' 'No, sir, these drop-ships are reserved for the use of Imperial Guard personnel.' 'That, madam, would be a matter for your local authorities to deal with.'

Along the way, he picked up a little information for himself, some by talking to the proctors who had come to meet him and were trying to escort him through the rabble, the rest by merely keeping his ears peeled. Costellin heard talk of a citywide blackout, and of deadly insects swarming the skyways. Hieronymous City, it seemed, was under an evacuation order – well, that was no surprise – and most of these people hadn't known where else they could go, so they had come here, only of course the space port was a dead end for them.

A small merchant ship was just taking off, a few foolhardy souls clinging to its hull as if they thought they could hold it down or that somehow it could carry them with it to another, safer world. They were soon dislodged by the engines' vibrations, to fall howling and wailing, yelling to the unheeding pilot to have pity on them as his ship left the space port's circle of blazing light and was swallowed by the night.

In another corner of the ramp, a more enterprising merchant was holding an

impromptu auction for the remaining seats aboard his old, ramshackle freighter.

Costellin had no doubt that, by now, Governor Hanrik would have contacted the Imperial Navy, asking for all the rescue ships they could spare. The best he could hope for was to save himself and a few handpicked cronies; the majority of the wretches now tugging at Costellin's greatcoat would be abandoned here.

One of the other drop-ships had beaten his to the surface, and the Krieg 103rd had almost completed their disembarkation. They were unloading their equipment now, trailer after trailer being towed onto the ramp by Centaur support vehicles. Two Krieg Guardsmen walked ahead of the first of these, doing what the proctors couldn't, clearing a path through the crowd. Despite the threat of the soldiers' lasguns, some civilians were still slow to obey, but the Centaur's drivers had no patience with these. They were bulldozed aside, and one man shrieked in agony as a six-tonne chassis rolled over his foot on caterpillar tracks and reduced it to pulp.

Behind the Centaurs came the more powerful Trojans, dragging heavy mortars and quad-launchers in their wake – and behind these came the big guns, massive Earthshaker cannons and the older but no less impressive Medusas. Costellin noted that, upon the emergence of these, the clamour around him dropped to a noticeably quieter level. People were stopping, staring, struck dumb by the sight of these great engines of destruction. If any of them had doubted it or tried to deny it to themselves before, they could no longer do so. Their world had gone to war.

Costellin's regiment was unloading now too – Colonel 186 had briefed them on the way down, so they knew what was expected of them – and the final two drop-ships were also arriving, the heat of their exhaust flames washing over the ramp as they lowered themselves onto the landing platforms. Costellin took advantage of the relative lull in the bedlam to assert some authority. His voice ringing loudly and strongly, he appealed for calm and asked for the ramp to be cleared. A young proctor lieutenant followed his lead, and began to corral the willing into a nearby hangar, reassuring them that everything was under control, that arrangements were being made at the highest possible levels for their continued welfare.

To Costellin, the lieutenant confessed, 'I don't know what we can do, sir. We can hold a few thousand in the hangars and the waiting rooms, but there are more arriving all the time. We've appealed to the nearby cities, and they'll take some refugees but they really don't have much space themselves, and a lot of these people don't want to go anyway. They're worried about relatives and

friends, and they're hoping to find them here – and they're afraid that, if they go, they'll be dumped on the lowest levels of a strange new city, to fend for themselves.'

'Which is no doubt what would happen,' remarked Costellin.

'Some of them,' said the lieutenant, lowering his voice significantly, 'believe nowhere on this world is safe now.' He looked at Costellin, and the commissar could see the fervent hope in his eyes, for a reassurance he could not give.

Over in the corner, the auction had gone badly awry. A stampede of failed bidders had flattened the enterprising merchant against the hull of his freighter, and the proctors were moving in with stun batons. None of them, Costellin suspected, were going anywhere for the foreseeable future.

He spotted a peaked cap like his own through the crowd, and he hurriedly excused himself from the lieutenant's presence and pushed his way towards it. Commissar Mannheim was busily explaining to a group of worried civilians that, no, as far as he was aware the air had not been poisoned and the arriving soldiers were wearing gasmasks and rebreather units purely as a precaution. No sooner had he made this point, however, than a grenadier platoon marched by in their hulking carapace armour and metal skull masks, and the questioning began anew.

Costellin took his fellow commissar by the arm and hustled him into a relatively quiet corner. 'You made it down here, then,' said Mannheim, stating the obvious.

'I didn't have much choice,' said Costellin. 'One minute, I was in my bed, dreaming of six days' leave, waiting for you and your colonel to report on rumours of civil unrest and mysterious artefacts. The next...' He waved his hand to encompass the hectic scene around them. 'What's going on, Mannheim?'

'I wish I knew,' said Mannheim. He looked tired. 'I truly wish I knew. We were at Governor Hanrik's suite in the High Spire, Colonel 42 and I, when the lights went out. His men flew us back here, to our shuttle, to vox the troop ship, and then... We were in the flyer, Costellin, when the reports started to come in. Beetles. Flying metal beetles, causing the most incredible devastation. One PDF chap was reporting in when he was swarmed by them. He was dead within ten seconds.'

'Beetles,' repeated Costellin numbly.

'Well, that must have been when Hanrik gave the order to evacuate. As it happens, that was the generals' wish too, but by the time we had spoken to them... By that time, the first of the evacuees were fetching up here, those from

the lower levels. The lifters in the city aren't working, you see. The only way out is on foot, through the old gates on the ground, through the mutants and the underclass.'

'Is the Governor here?' asked Costellin.

'I haven't seen him,' said Mannheim. 'They were sending a flyer back for him, the last I heard.'

'They know,' said Costellin with quiet certainty.

'I beg your pardon?'

'The generals,' said Costellin, 'they know. They suspect, at least. You tell me, Mannheim, does it seem at all credible to you that they should have organised all this, be so sure there is a threat to this world worthy of the attention of four Imperial Guard regiments, without their having the slightest idea of what that threat might be?'

'Nothing has been established for sure,' said Mannheim.

'They know,' said Costellin again. 'You know it too, Mannheim. You've been in the service long enough to have heard stories like this one before.'

Mannheim nodded cautiously. 'Unexplained power drains.'

'Xenos artefacts, buried deep in the ground as if there was somebody on this world before us. Tell me, have the generals seen the markings on those artefacts?'

'I saw them,' said Mannheim. 'Hanrik showed us hololiths of fragments of stone – before the blackout, I mean. He showed us tracings of glyphs, from a column that was discovered in the mines, and I... I swear I have never seen anything like them before. It made my eyes itch just to look at the images of them.'

'And the beetles,' prompted Costellin. 'The metal beetles.'

'The troop ship captain, Rokaan,' Mannheim remembered, 'he said he thought Naval Command were holding something back from him.'

'And our generals will do the same,' said Costellin. 'Until they have undeniable proof, they will keep their suspicions to themselves, while preparing for the worst. They won't dare speak those words. They won't be the first to cry *necron*.'

'Commissar.'

Costellin turned. He had thought himself alone in this part of the drop-ship, in the vacated troop compartment, his footsteps resounding from the curved walls as he paced back and forth. He wondered if Colonel 186 had been standing there

all along, or if he had just seen his commissar returning to the ship and followed him.

‘Can I help you?’ asked the colonel, blandly.

Costellin shook his head. ‘Just gathering my thoughts.’

‘It may be wise to gather them elsewhere. I have instructed the servitors that, once we have unloaded, they are to return to the troop ship.’

‘Can’t that wait? I need to use this ship’s comms.’

‘I don’t want the drop-ships remaining in port,’ said the colonel. ‘They are a temptation to the stranded refugees, and we can’t spare the men to guard them.’

‘I need to talk with the generals,’ said Costellin. ‘I still have questions.’

‘We are setting up communications on the ground,’ said the colonel. ‘The generals will be able to contact us should our orders change.’

‘It may be too late by then. Have you heard of the necrons, colonel? No, of course you haven’t. Few living men have. Most of those who have encountered them, if they have survived the experience, have been driven insane by it.’

‘Necrons,’ repeated the colonel, rolling the word on his tongue as if he relished the fresh taste of it, the prospect of a new enemy to fight.

‘Back when I was a young man,’ said Costellin, ‘it was forbidden to even speak of them. Still, the rumours persisted. It was said the necrons are an ancient race, that they were already dying when the eldar were young – and that, to save themselves, they sealed themselves into great underground tombs and slept. It was said that the necrons have slept for millions of years, and that now they are awakening.’

‘You suspect there are necrons on this world?’

Costellin sank into one of the empty flight seats. ‘Look, colonel,’ he said, ‘I know you’re newly promoted, I know this is the first time we have worked together—’

‘We have fought side by side before. We shared a trench four years ago on Anakreos III for two months. I was a lieutenant in Gamma Company at the time.’

‘Right. What I am trying to say is that, in a position like mine, you... hear things; things that, perhaps, it might have been best not to hear. I have heard tales of worlds on which necron tombs have been discovered, and of the inevitable fates of those worlds.’

‘Whatever the threat to this world,’ said the colonel, ‘my men will meet it.’

‘Perhaps,’ said Costellin, ‘with an army such as we had on Dask – but we are four regiments, colonel, and depleted regiments at that. I just wonder, if what I

suspect is true, if direct confrontation is our best strategy in this situation. We might be better advised to, if you'll pardon my language, get the Golden Throne out of here!'

'Reinforcements are en route from Krieg,' said the colonel.

'I suspect it's not ground troops we need,' said Costellin, 'but rather a battery of cyclonic torpedoes that can blast this whole damned planet to space dust. But, of course, Hieronymous Theta is rich in minerals, a valuable resource to the Imperium.'

'You have still not explained why you wish to speak with the generals.'

Costellin sighed, resignedly. He saw no point in saying any more.

He knew the men of Krieg well enough by now to understand how their minds worked. He knew that, under normal circumstances, the Krieg generals would never have pitted their regiments against a necron force, a force whose numbers and capabilities were virtually unknown. They would have run their battlefield projections and concluded that the risk of defeat, of destruction, was far too great.

But then, these circumstances were unusual.

By the Emperor's grace, the *Memento Mori* had been close at hand when the situation on Hieronymous Theta had been reported. They had a rare chance here, to respond to a necron incursion – if such this proved to be – in its earliest stages. They were gambling that their troops could contain that incursion before it took hold, before it could spread to engulf this world and perhaps many others. They were gambling on a chance to strike a decisive blow, perhaps the first decisive blow, against an enemy the Imperium had only just been compelled to acknowledge, one it hadn't even begun to work out how to counter.

And the stakes of that gamble were some twenty thousand men.

'You know I will fight for the Emperor to my dying breath,' said Costellin. 'I just fear that the mission we are embarking upon here may be in vain.'

'Our lives are His to do with as He pleases,' said Colonel 186.

He really did sound just like his predecessors.

They were setting up makeshift tents on the hill around the space port, building a refugee camp that was swelling by the minute. An endless convoy of Imperial support vehicles ground its way down that hill, filling the air with the noxious fumes of two hundred grumbling engines. The pinpricks of the vehicles' headlights now stretched to the city's fortress walls, built to keep the lower levels contained, and they were spreading around them in each direction.

Costellin's eye line was about level with the tops of those walls. Rising above them, Hieronymous City was a dark, brooding shape against the clouded moonlight. He regarded its disconsolate towers, the criss-cross struts of the connecting skyways, and he searched in vain for a sign of movement, of life, of hope.

Hundreds of thousands, millions, of people were trapped in those towers, on those skyways, behind those walls. They were trapped by a lack of transport, by concern for loved ones, or simply because they couldn't leave all they knew behind. They couldn't have known it yet, but from this vantage point it was perfectly clear: the city was already dead. Costellin only prayed that the same could not be said for this world, and for the soldiers who were about to fight so blindly to protect it.

He thought about a backwater bar on a backwater world, and a well-lubricated inquisitor speaking in hints and whispers of the horrors he had read about in the most secret archives, tales of the dead come back to life and clad in living metal.

He thought about a decorated veteran of a distinguished regiment, confined to a secure sanatorium wing, babbling like a lunatic about weapons that could strip a man down to his immortal soul, one layer at a time.

He thought about a report he had once read, filed by the legendary Ciaphas Cain, concerning a campaign fought on the frozen world of Simia Orichalcae. The report had been redacted, of course, the threat faced by Cain left unnamed, but two facts had impressed themselves upon Costellin's mind: that said threat had emerged from the planet's mine tunnels, and that Simia Orichalcae had ultimately been destroyed to contain it.

He thought about metal beetles, and runes that made a commissar's eyes itch.

And he thought about the recently concluded war on Dask, where at least he had known what his regiment was fighting, and to what end. He felt they had accomplished something there, shone the Emperor's light on that benighted world, but even this great victory had not been without cost.

They had lost so many men on Dask, almost a third of their complement. Costellin was so tired – so tired of being the only one who cared.



CHAPTER SIX

Gunthar had no idea where he was. He had never strayed this far from home before.

It was too dark for him to see much, anyway. He was just following the people in front of him, who in turn were following the people in front of them, who in turn were following the luminator beams of a squad of soldiers.

To begin with, Gunthar had felt as trapped by the press of bodies around him as he had during the mutant attack last night. This was almost worse, in fact, because he didn't know what he was running from this time. He had no idea when or how or from which direction a threat might come, let alone how he might avoid it if it did.

By now, however, he had settled into the rhythm of putting one foot in front of the other, and his nerves had been numbed by tedium. He hadn't heard any explosions or screams for almost an hour. Whatever was happening in Hieronymous City, hopefully the worst of it was over. Gunthar wondered how much further it was to the city walls, and then over them to the space port.

It had already been a long day. He had spent the afternoon with one proctor official after another, then with a couple of PDF officers. He had related the story of the artefact in the mine tunnel over and over again, omitting the part where he had fled like a coward. Returning to his office, he had received a call from the Governor himself and had told the story one more time. He had felt important for a while, the centre of all this attention. Then he had just felt tired.

He had spent the evening organising the mine shutdown, as the Governor had instructed. Each of his foremen had had questions, but Gunthar had been told to say as little as possible so as not to panic them. 'I know about as much as you do,' he had assured them, 'but I'm sure this is just a precautionary measure.'

He had sent Kreuz home. Alone at his desk and undisturbed by the chiming of the comm-link terminal, Gunthar had felt his eyelids growing heavy and remembered that he hadn't slept in thirty-six hours. The next thing he recalled

was waking in a pitch black room, to the sound of amplified voices from outside.

He had had to grope his way to the stairwell, knocking his ankle and skinning his knee in the process. He had climbed two floors to the nearest skyway, where PDF soldiers had instructed him to join a guided human convoy, ten people wide and more than sixty deep. The whole of the city was being evacuated but, when Gunthar had asked why, he had been told: 'I know about as much as you do, sir. I'm sure this is just a precautionary measure.'

Progress thus far had been painfully slow. The convoy stopped at every tower for the soldiers to employ their loudhailers and wait for more bewildered refugees to join them. Some were unhappy about being herded from their homes in the middle of the night, and there were questions and arguments to deal with. Nevertheless, few people were game to be left behind. The convoy had more than doubled in size, until Gunthar could no longer see how far behind him it stretched.

He heard a trooper talking on his vox-handset, and was pleased that at least they weren't totally cut off from the rest of the world. The trooper gave the convoy's position, and received directions in return. It seemed they would have to take a diversion, because... Gunthar wasn't sure if he had heard that right. A skyway down? What did that mean? How was that even possible?

The nocturnal cold had sunk into his bones. He rubbed his arms through the fabric of his grey work tunic, but it didn't help much. He wished he had put on a coat that morning, but then he could hardly have known the day would end like this. For that matter, there were several things he wished he could have collected from his hab before... He suppressed that thought. Everything would be all right, Gunthar told himself. The Emperor would provide.

The convoy had made a sharp left turn, trudged past a number of empty hab-blocks, and now it turned sharp right. Gunthar felt his foot touching something, which turned out to be a lump of plascrete. A moment later, he kicked another, then another, and soon he was clambering over a heap of rubble. He thought about the voice on the vox and the distant explosions he had heard, and his nerves began to jangle again.

Perhaps the artefact had been a bomb, after all. Perhaps it had not been the only one. And perhaps there were still more concealed about the city.

A brick slid beneath Gunthar's foot, and he landed heavily on one knee, but found the impact cushioned by something soft and squishy. He was appalled to find he was kneeling in the spilled guts of a half-buried corpse. Gagging, he

pushed himself to his feet and stumbled on, but he soon saw another pale hand protruding from the wreckage. From somewhere behind him, to the right, he heard a shriek and then a mutter of comforting voices, as someone else presumably made a similar discovery.

He wondered how many people lay dead beneath him. Many of them would just have been sitting in their homes, he thought, maybe even asleep in their beds. Had they even had time to be afraid, or had their worlds ended in a flash before they knew what was happening to them?

‘Over here,’ somebody yelled. ‘There’s somebody moving down here. He’s alive!’

The voice came from just a few rows in front of Gunthar. As the crowd pressed forward, a couple of them wielding low-powered luminators of their own, he saw two men digging through the debris, casting bricks aside, and between them he saw a wiry figure, little more than a silhouette to him, attempting to stand. The figure was bloodied, hunched over, evidently hurt, and if only Gunthar had been closer to this person, this brave casualty, he would have advised him to lie still, not to risk exacerbating his injuries, to wait for the soldiers to reach him with their medi-packs.

Then, the figure straightened to its full height, and Gunthar’s senses warned him – before his brain could work out the reason why – that something was wrong.

Another scream distracted him, and another – one from close behind him, one from a longer way in front – and suddenly Gunthar knew that what he had seen was not a figment of his imagination, nor a trick of the shifting light. He knew that the figure before him was not human.

Others were seeing it too, not least among them the men who had crouched to help. It was too late for them. The figure, the creature, flexed its shoulders, and the two men jerked and gasped and died. It took Gunthar a second to realise what the creature had done, that its claws had stabbed each of them through the heart – and, as a pocket luminator fell from a screaming girl’s hands, its light glinted off those claws and Gunthar saw that they were metal-like knives, each almost a metre in length.

The creature loped forward, and those terrible claws found a third and a fourth victim. Gunthar could see more clearly now, see the creature’s metallic skull face and the tatters of flesh that clung, rotting, to its skeletal form.

No, it was worse than that, he realised as a putrid stench washed over him and turned his stomach. The flesh was not the creature’s own, just a cloak it was

wearing. It must have flayed the skin off one of the corpses for the purpose of disguising itself. This ghoul had been waiting in the ground for someone to find it, to reach out to help it.

Gunthar had never seen such a gruesome sight before. The mutant last night didn't even come close. Nor had any of the newsreels prepared him for this, for the fact that the universe could spawn such nightmares. He wanted to run, wanted it more than he had thought it possible to want anything, but his legs were like lead and his gaze was riveted to the ghoul's dead metal face.

Where could he have run to, anyway? The ghoul wasn't alone. The screams had already told him as much – and now, it seemed to Gunthar's cold-deadened ears that the whole of the crowd was screaming.

Two troopers appeared, their lasguns raised, and Gunthar began to mutter a grateful prayer but faltered halfway through. The first of the troopers was white with fear, his hands trembling so hard that he couldn't squeeze his trigger. The second loosed off two shots, but they both went wild. It was enough for the ghoul to take notice, to pivot with surprising agility and speed to face its attackers. Gunthar felt ashamed of himself for being so relieved that it wasn't coming for him anymore.

The ghoul advanced, slicing off the heads of two more civilians who couldn't get out of its way. The second trooper got off another shot, which struck the ghoul squarely in its shoulder. The impact of the las-beam made it flinch, halting it for a second, and Gunthar held his breath.

The ghoul pounced on the trooper, who screamed as its bladed claws flashed and whirled about him. It wasn't just killing him, Gunthar realised; it was flensing the skin from his body. The trooper collapsed, a red raw lump of meat, still alive for the moment, staring in abject horror with eyes he could no longer close. It was all too much for his comrade, who turned and ran, the ghoul hard on his heels.

As it headed away from him, Gunthar was released from his paralysis. The crowd was dispersing in all directions, and he followed suit, choosing the direction that took him directly away from the ghoul. It only occurred to him too late that he was running back the way he had come, back into the city, when he should have been trying to get out of it.

Two more troopers were coming his way, falling back before another of the skull-faced, skin-clad nightmares. This second creature lashed out with its blades, and slashed through an armoured chest plate as if it were made of paper. Its victim staggered backwards into Gunthar, and left a trail of blood down his

clothes as he slid to the ground, dead. The surviving trooper set his lasgun to automatic and fired wildly. At least two of his bolts struck and injured civilians, but enough thudded into his target to send it reeling. As Gunthar watched with another prayer on his lips, the ghoul fell and lay twitching. The trooper put his lasgun to its head and blew out its brains – if indeed it had had brains inside that ghastly metal skull. Gunthar could almost have cheered.

Then, the trooper stiffened, his eyes bulging, blood pouring from his mouth, and Gunthar saw that a blade-clawed hand had struck up from beneath him, and efficiently disembowelled him. Another creature was rising from the rubble.

Gunthar ran, and was glad to leave the demolished site and feel firm ground under his feet again. He ran, and a hundred other people ran with him, but they soon began to peel away, into alleyways, around corners, into emptied hab-blocks if they could. Gunthar ran, virtually blind because the moon had disappeared behind a cloud and there were no longer any luminators around him. He ran, and he wondered how his life had come so quickly to this, one terrified flight after another.

He should have picked up the dead soldier's lasgun. He only realised that now. It hadn't occurred to him before. Yesterday, it would have done. He would have thought about it, at least. He would have seen himself with barrel blazing, taking down that last foul creature before it could stand. A chance to be the hero he had dreamed of being. But that was yesterday, before the mutants and the artefact, before Gunthar Soreson had learned that there was no hero inside of him, after all.

That was before he had witnessed the fate of heroes.

Gunthar rounded a corner, saw an abandoned autocab almost too late to avoid it, tripped over a flight of steps and landed sprawling on the ground, lacking the energy to get up again. He lay on his stomach in the near-silent darkness for minutes, until his breathing began to settle back into its normal rhythm.

He felt the amecyte ring in his pocket, digging into his leg, and he thought about Arex. He hadn't been worried about her before – as a member of the Governor's family, she was one of the best-protected people in the city – but who could protect her from what Gunthar had just seen?

He wanted to go to the High Spire, to find her, but he was hopelessly lost. He had made so many random twists and turns that he didn't even know which way the city walls were any more. The knowledge wouldn't have helped him, anyway. The ghouls were between him and those walls – and a moment's

thought told him that the High Spire would likely be a dead end too. Arex would have been evacuated from there long since, probably in a motor vehicle.

She was probably waiting for him at the space port, wondering where he was.

It seemed to Gunthar that, whichever way he went from here, he could only make his situation worse. His best bet, then, was to stay where he was, to find shelter for the remainder of the night, and perhaps in the morning things would look better. At least, in the daylight, he could get his bearings. At least, in the daylight, he would be able to see the monsters coming.

He climbed the steps over which he had floundered, and tried the door at their head but found it locked. He could have kicked it down, he supposed, but that would have made too much noise. He moved on along the skyway, and tried three more doors until he found one with a broken lock.

His first tentative push met with some resistance from something behind the door. Gunthar pushed harder, and winced at the resounding sound of falling crates. The door stuck halfway, and he had to squeeze through the gap into a dark, dusty hallway. Hab doors stretched along the left hand wall, a wooden staircase along the right leading both up and down.

A shadow moved on that staircase and, before Gunthar could react, something leapt at him: a snarling, spitting something. He was thrown off-balance, back into the front door, which slammed shut behind him. He couldn't see a thing now, could just feel a flurry of limbs swiping and slashing and kicking at him. Instinctively, he threw up his arms to protect his face, and a flailing elbow caught his attacker in the throat.

The man fell back with a groan of pain, and as he stumbled into the half-light cast by a murky stair window, Gunthar saw his face and saw that, contrary to his worst imaginings, he was just a man. A middle-aged man with a thatch of black hair and a thick beard. Throwing up his hands, Gunthar cried, 'It's all right. It's all right. I'm human, like you. I was just... I was looking for a place to hide.'

The man couldn't speak, he was still trying to get his breath back, but he had calmed down a little. He was still cautious, though, keeping his distance.

'Do you live here?' asked Gunthar. 'In this hab-block?'

The man shook his head. 'I thought you...' he panted, 'I thought you were one of those creatures.'

'You saw them too?' said Gunthar. 'You were out on the rubble?'

'They stank of death,' said the man. 'There was so much blood, and that smell... I'm afraid I ran. I just saw an opening, and I went for it. I was trying to barricade this door behind me, when you... I thought they must have followed

me.'

'I don't think so,' said Gunthar. 'I was outside a long time, and I didn't see... I don't think they followed us.'

'What were those things? And where in the Emperor's name did they come from?'

'I don't know. I wish I did, but... What do we do now? Do we stay here? Would that be safest, do you think? We could build up the crates again.'

'No. We just saw how much good they were. I don't know what I was thinking. If anyone saw them, they'd know for sure there was somebody in here. Anyway, they're destroying the towers, you've seen the wreckage. I want to be able to... I don't want to be trapped in this hab-block if...'

Gunthar hadn't considered that, and the thought was a sobering one.

'I'm Weber,' said the man, composed now and stepping forward with a hand outstretched.

Gunthar took it, and introduced himself. 'I run the 201st Floor Emporium,' said Weber. 'Used to run it, I should say. I suppose we all "used to" do something now. Used to have jobs. Used to have places to live.'

'Things aren't that bad,' said Gunthar. 'They can't be. The PDF are out there. They'll deal with this, and everything will get back to normal.'

Weber gave a derisive laugh. 'You obviously didn't see what I saw. Those soldier boys were going down faster than the civilians were. Half of them couldn't get their brains in gear to even fire their guns.'

'That was just one squad, a few men. You wait till they bring in the tanks and the mortars, and... and if that's not enough, they can call in reinforcements, the Imperial Guard or... We're too... This world is too valuable to the Emperor, and we've been loyal, we have served Him well. He will save us.'

'You watch too many newsreels, kid,' grumbled Weber. He started down the hallway, trying doors. 'I was talking to a fellow out there, before... He was up on 204, told me he was attacked by a swarm of metal insects. They were knocking down buildings, just taking slices out of them like—'

'204?' echoed Gunthar. The address was close to his own home, too close.

'I suggest,' said Weber, 'we find ourselves an empty hab, one where the tenants left in a hurry without locking up, and we lay low for the night.'

They found a room on the next floor up. It was laid out exactly like Gunthar's room, like all the rooms he had lived in: a basin in one corner, a stove in another, a single bed in a curtained alcove. The advantage of this particular room,

however, was that it overlooked the skyway in front of its hab-block.

‘We should take it in turns to sleep,’ said Weber, ‘while the other one stays on watch.’ Gunthar agreed and volunteered to take the first shift, although privately he wondered what he could possibly do if he saw trouble coming.

He was too keyed up to sleep, though, as much as he needed to.

Within minutes, Weber was spark out on the bed, snoring. Gunthar paced the hab, trying to keep warm. Eventually, he thought to check the cupboards, and found a heavy grox-hide coat hanging in a wardrobe. He wrapped it about himself gratefully, and settled by the window.

The warmth of his breath created fleeting patterns on the glass. Weber’s snoring, an irritant at first, became softer and settled into a regular, almost soothing rhythm. Gunthar was almost too hot in his borrowed coat, and he thought about taking it off but that would have meant climbing out of his comfortable chair.

He let his eyes rest for a moment, and the next thing he knew there was a flickering light and he started and sat bolt upright.

How long had he slept? Not long, he hoped. It was still dark outside. Weber was still snoring on the bed. But there was something else.

There were figures on the skyway below, proceeding along it in a tight formation. Nine or ten of them. It must have been their luminators that had played across Gunthar’s window, waking him. He thought they were soldiers, at first. They moved like soldiers, not with the stooped, bestial gait of the skull-faced ghouls but with a sense of purpose. He wondered if he should wake Weber, or maybe bang on the window and get the soldiers’ attention. He didn’t much fancy stepping out into the cold night again, but what if the soldiers knew a safe route out of the city? They might even have a vehicle nearby.

Then a luminator beam caught one of them, and Gunthar drew in a sharp breath.

The figure was dressed like a soldier – black greatcoat, helmet, backpack, heavy armour – and it carried a gun, but its face was like the faces of the creatures, a blank-eyed, impassive, metal skull. A tube snaked out from beneath its mouth to its pack, as if the very air of this human world was poison to its kind.

Gunthar dropped to the floor beneath the windowsill, and cursed himself for not having done so at once. What if he had already been seen? Weber must have heard the movement, or sensed something, because suddenly he was awake, craning his neck to find his fellow refugee in the dark. ‘What is it?’ he whispered

sharply.

‘Something... something out there.’

‘The ghouls? Have the ghouls come back?’

Gunthar shook his head. ‘Not the ghouls,’ he whispered. ‘This is something worse.’



CHAPTER SEVEN

Governor Hanrik stood atop Hieronymous City's tallest tower, his home, and surveyed his domain for what he feared would be the final time.

His city was wreathed in smoke, great plumes of it rising from the lower floors. A minute ago, he had seen another tower crumbling before his eyes. He had been in no hurry to leave before then; the danger had seemed a long way away from him. Now, he squirmed with impatience as a flyer oriented itself above his landing pad, the downdraught from its engines ruffling his thinning hair. He knew the High Spire could be next to fall. It might already be under attack somewhere below, and the first Hanrik would know of it would be when it dropped out from beneath him.

As the flyer touched down, Hanrik dashed forward and clambered into its rear, his bodyguards seating themselves to each side of him. The flyer wheezed and groaned as it fought to escape the pull of gravity again. Hanrik didn't understand how its ponderous, blocky form could fly at all, but it was enough for him that it did. He felt a rush of relief to be safely in the air, but it was soon displaced by a deep ache of regret.

He saw headlights crawling along the skyway below, a proctor truck into which the Governor's staff had loaded all the things precious to him: his medals and his personal hololiths, along with a few well-chosen antiques and paintings and his favourite chair. There were engineers working on the external lifters, rigging up a power source so that, with some luck, the truck could be lowered over the city walls. Even so, he was leaving so much behind.

He had earned his position, damn it, and the standard of living that came with it. He didn't want to have to start again somewhere else. He didn't want to be the Governor who had lost his world – and he wouldn't be, he swore.

He turned to the man on his left. 'Get me Calder again,' he instructed. 'I want to know what's happening.'

The trooper obediently put out the call – and, an interminable ten seconds

later, Sergeant Calder's clipped tones came crackling over his vox-handset. *'Still proceeding along Level 204,'* said the sergeant. *'Some of the skyways are out, so we're having to find a way around them.'*

'What about the tracker?' asked Hanrik. 'Is it still... Is she still...?'

'Still on the move, sir. About fifteen blocks away now, and closing. Will report in as soon as we have sighted her.'

Hanrik slumped back in his seat, rubbing his weary eyes. Why had Arex had to choose today of all days to defy him? Why hadn't she heeded his warnings? His niece had always been headstrong, but he hadn't thought her so stubborn as to endanger herself to spite him. He couldn't imagine what had lured her so far from the High Spire, so many floors down.

At least she was still moving. He thanked the Emperor for the tracking device in her necklace, the one her mother had given her. Thanks to his foresight in installing it, the PDF could still find her. They had to.

'What about General Trenchard?' he asked the trooper beside him. 'I don't suppose there's news?'

'No, sir. It seems the general might have been at home when his hab-block... when the insect swarm... He is listed as missing, presumed dead. Colonel Braun is filling in for him until... We just don't know for sure.'

Hanrik had been hearing that a lot lately. It seemed that, suddenly, nobody was sure of anything. They couldn't be sure, for example, what was happening at the city's main generatorum. He had despatched proctors to investigate, and the PDF had sent squads too, but they hadn't reported back. And Arex...

He forced himself to put her out of his mind. He had to trust the PDF to bring her back to him. In the meantime, he could see the ring-shaped edifice of Hieronymous Port approaching; he was almost blinded by the lights that streamed out from the centre of that ring, so bright after so long in the dark. The flyer was manoeuvring to land amid those lights, its belly almost scraping the crenellations of the space port wall, and this meant that Hanrik had a job to do. A world to save.

Of course, he was recognised.

As he marched through the main space port terminal, Hanrik was surrounded by desperate civilians, jostling to get to him, to have their pleas heard by him. His escort drew their lasguns, and the implicit threat was enough to keep the crowds at bay. For his own part, Hanrik kept his eyes fixed ahead, ignoring them, concerned with more important matters than their petty grievances.

He had asked a proctor to take him to the man in charge. He was led up a flight of stairs to a carpeted corridor, which was mercifully free from refugees. It was, however, teeming with Krieg soldiers, ferrying equipment and furniture between the space port's administrative offices. The near-total silence in which they carried out their duties unnerved him; it reminded him of the sub-human servitors.

'Colonel,' he said, recognising the rank insignia of the officer in charge of the operation, 'care to bring me up to speed?'

The colonel turned and regarded Hanrik for a long moment through the dark eyepieces of his all-concealing mask. 'I don't know you,' he said.

Hanrik frowned, then noticed the regimental number on the Krieg officer's shoulder flashes. 'I apologise,' he said, 'I mistook you for Colonel 42. We met earlier. You must be Colonel... 186, I take it. My name is Hanrik. I am the Planetary Governor.'

'I see,' said the colonel brusquely. 'Then it is my duty to inform you, Governor Hanrik, that Hieronymous Theta is under martial law. You are hereby relieved of your position.' He turned and marched into the nearest office, leaving Hanrik slack-jawed.

'Now, hold on a minute,' he blustered.

He made for the open door, but a figure stepped into his path: a lean, silver-haired man in his seventies, who loomed over Hanrik's shorter, rounder form. 'Commissar Costellin,' the man introduced himself. 'Perhaps I can answer your questions.'

Hanrik threw one last, disgruntled look after the Krieg colonel, who was now directing a small group of his Guardsmen in the assembly of a communications console. Then he shook the commissar's proffered hand, and allowed himself to be ushered away from there, albeit with a scowl on his face.

Costellin had commandeered a small office at the end of the corridor. He had already procured for himself a small jug of recaf, which sat warming on a plate on his desk. Hanrik declined the offer of a cup, with an impatient wave, then regretted it because a hot dose of stimulants was just what he needed right now.

As Costellin settled into his chair, his expression grew grave. 'We have a serious situation developing here,' he said, 'perhaps more so than you know. Our troops in the capital city report that—'

'You have sent troops into my city?' spluttered Hanrik.

'Just a couple of platoons for now. The objective is to—'

‘I don’t care what their objective is, I am still the Imperial Governor of this world, no matter what your death-masked colonel out there might say. I am responsible for the welfare of its people, and I insist on being consulted before—’

‘I do appreciate your position, Governor Hanrik,’ said the commissar calmly, ‘and I am aware that Colonel 186 does have rather a blunt manner.’

‘I’d call that an understatement,’ Hanrik muttered.

‘I can assure you, however,’ said Costellin, ‘that the colonel is acting solely in the best interests of this world and its people.’

‘In what he judges to be our best interests,’ Hanrik corrected him, ‘and surely I am more qualified than he is to decide that.’

‘As the colonel has explained to you, Governor, this is a military operation, and time is very much of the essence. We have had to make some difficult decisions and make them quickly, and if sometimes that means—’

‘Go on then,’ snapped Hanrik impatiently, ‘tell me the worst of it.’

So, Costellin told him. He talked about the metal insects, about which Hanrik had already heard, and about ghoulish creatures lurking in the wreckage of Hieronymous City’s towers, about which he had not. He explained that, according to scans run by his orbiting troop ship, over a hundred towers had lost at least their top forty storeys – far more even than the Governor had feared.

‘One of our platoons came under attack,’ said Costellin. ‘Fifty Krieg grenadiers, about a quarter of them armed with melta guns, against half as many ghouls, and even they took almost thirty per cent casualties.’

‘But they won?’ said Hanrik hopefully.

‘Indeed,’ said Costellin. ‘Unfortunately, we suspect that these creatures are only the vanguard of a far larger necron force.’

Hanrik had never heard of the necron before, and yet somehow the very sound of the word chilled his soul. ‘You think there... there’s no hope?’

‘I think you should get on to Naval Command again,’ said Costellin, ‘see if you can get a rush on those rescue ships.’

As the commissar took a sip of his recaf, the ominous rumbling of distant guns shook the walls of his office and sent plaster flakes cascading from the ceiling into his cup. Hanrik felt numb. He gripped the arms of his chair until his knuckles turned white. ‘What are you doing about this, Costellin?’ he demanded.

‘You must have seen, as you came out of the city, that we have it surrounded. The intention is to seal off the exits, and contain the necrons within—’

‘You can’t!’ cried Hanrik. ‘There are millions of civilians still trapped in there.’ *Arex*, he thought.

‘Of course,’ said Costellin, ‘we will allow more time for the evacuation to proceed. We will save as many people as we can. However, we must also consider the lives of those thousands who have already fled the city, and the billions who live on this world outside of it. We can’t take the risk that—’

‘You’ll abandon them,’ said Hanrik, ‘those who can’t make it out in time. They’ll be sacrificed for the sake of the rest of us.’

‘There will come a time,’ Costellin confirmed, ‘when that decision must be made.’

‘And who will make that call? Who decides who lives and who dies? No, no, don’t tell me, I’m sure I can guess: Colonel 186, I presume?’

Hanrik was waiting for Colonel Braun as his convoy of open-topped half-tracks pulled up at the space port entrance. The acting commandant of the Planetary Defence Force was a heavysset, mid-forties man with ruddy cheeks and a bristling moustache. He was accompanied in the lead vehicle by a major and two lieutenants, all of whom were glued to their voxes, receiving reports and barking out orders.

‘We’ve lost contact with almost half our squads on the ground,’ Braun told the Governor breathlessly. ‘Some of them have reported encountering creatures: vile, ghoulish creatures with skull faces. I’ve instructed them to start pulling out, but—’

‘Sir, I can’t raise Squad 84,’ interrupted one of the lieutenants. ‘I think we may have lost them too. They were nearing the generatorum. They reported that the skyways there seemed quiet, too quiet. Then... Squad 17 is en route there too, a few sectors away and four floors up. I could send them to—’

‘No,’ said Hanrik. ‘Forget the generatorum. All squads are to focus on the evacuation effort. They’re to get the civilians out of there.’

‘Sir,’ said the second lieutenant, ‘I’m receiving reports of a firefight on the ground level, by the north gate. Mutants, breaking through the cordons.’

Colonel Braun opened his mouth to reply, but Hanrik beat him to it again. ‘Send reinforcements, any and all squads that can reach them. We must not lose control of that gate. It must remain open for as long as... It must remain open.’

‘Sir, Squad 15 reports rioting in—’

‘—attacking civilians on Level 82. Sergeant Kutter wants to know if—’

‘—stranded up there. They can’t find a staircase—’

‘—lost five men, but they managed to kill that—’

‘Sir, another ambush on Level 204. Squad 47 engaging five – no, six – of the

creatures. Sergeant Calder reports that—

Amid the barrage of information, one name stood out to Hanrik's ears like a sudden gunshot. He snatched the vox-handset from a startled lieutenant, stabbed at the 'transmit' rune. 'Sergeant Calder, this is Hanrik. Your squad are not to engage the enemy. You are to withdraw from combat, do you hear me? Withdraw!'

'—easier said than done, sir. Pinning us down. We can't—'

'Listen to me, Calder. Your priority is to find and rescue my niece. You can't... You are no match for those creatures.'

'—taken one down, but they got Reynard, sir; they... Oh, Emperor, they... they're skinning him alive. I... trying to withdraw, but two of the men... when they saw what happened, what those things did, they tried to run, but the creatures are faster than we are... cut them down... coming for me now, I can't—'

'Get out of there, Calder. That's an order. Sergeant Calder!'

There came no answer, only vox static.

'Do you read me, Sergeant Calder? Calder, are you there?'

It seemed that everything around Hanrik had stopped. The assembled officers were staring at him, taken aback. He realised he had been shouting. He took a deep breath, switched the vox to an open channel and said, in as calm a voice as he could muster, 'All units in the vicinity of Level 204, Sector... I don't know, somewhere near the centre... we have lost contact with Squad 47, repeat, we have lost contact with Squad 47. I... I need you to locate them. Please.'

He handed the handset back to its owner, who immediately received another distress call and stepped aside to deal with it.

Hanrik swallowed hard, pushed Arex to the back of his mind again and turned to Colonel Braun. 'All right,' he said, 'so we've lost our base in the city. We need to follow the Imperial Guard's lead, set up a field HQ in the buildings here. Get on to the other bases worldwide, tell them to keep sending men, all the men they can spare. I want an office no more than two doors away from Colonel 186, and I want... I want a jug of fresh recaf on my desk.'

'Governor, does this mean...?'

'I'm sorry, colonel, this is no reflection upon your abilities, but I think this crisis requires an experienced leader.' Hanrik didn't miss the look of relief that Braun tried to hide at that statement. 'As a former Imperial Guard officer, and as the Governor of this world, I am assuming command of the PDF, effective immediately.'

Hanrik had had his aides locate the crate containing his old war gear. They busied themselves about him, strapping him into his time-dulled armour, polishing his cap badge, lubricating his bolt pistol. His old greatcoat was too tight about his shoulders and its buttons wouldn't fasten, so they had had to procure him a new one. Hanrik stood in the midst of all this activity, stock still, his eyes open but not really seeing the space port office around him, lost in bittersweet memories.

He had thought these days were long behind him.

He marched along the corridor, into the next-door office without knocking. 'Mr Hanrik,' said Colonel 186, sparing hardly a glance for his visitor, 'I would prefer it if you addressed any future concerns to my commissar. I believe you've met.'

'That's *Governor* Hanrik,' said Hanrik. 'Or *General* Hanrik, if you'd prefer.'

If the colonel was surprised by that, it showed only in the short pause he took before deducing, 'You have taken command of the Planetary Defence Force.'

'It seems we will be working together, after all, the two of us.'

The colonel leaned forward in his seat. 'As I understand it, your troops have not proved especially effective so far. What are your losses to date?'

'I... don't have those figures yet, but I'm certain we can still play a part in—'

'I don't dispute that... general. Any man who is prepared to lay down his life for the Emperor, no matter how able or equipped, is a valuable resource to us.'

'Um, quite, yes.'

'However, those resources could be more effectively deployed by a single leader. I suggest that I should be—'

'They're my men,' said Hanrik. 'They will take their orders from me and from no one else, and if you wish to argue that point with the Administratum—'

'You will, of course, begin the draft immediately.'

The interruption rendered Hanrik momentarily speechless. His jaw worked silently as the colonel continued, 'This space port and its environs, General Hanrik, are packed with able-bodied refugees, bereft of purpose. Whatever functions those people once had in your society, they can no longer serve them.'

'But how...? We just don't have the equipment to outfit them. Ours has always been a peaceful world, colonel, we have never had need of a substantial armed force.'

'You agreed,' said the colonel, 'that your people are a resource, and we must surely utilise all the resources at our disposal. They are loyal subjects of the Emperor?'

‘Of course. Of course they are loyal, but—’

‘Then they will be pleased to offer their lives to Him. Better that than allowing our enemies to escape the city, in which case those lives will be lost for no gain.’

‘About that,’ said Hanrik. ‘I understand you are planning to close the city gates. As it is primarily my men who are inside the city, it should be my decision when to—’

‘Your men have until dawn,’ said the colonel. ‘Then they too shall be honoured to give their lives for the greater glory of the Imperium.’

The refugee camp had swelled in size. From the top of the space port hill, Hanrik could see new tents lining the roads, stretching almost to the neighbouring cities. He was talking into a vox-handset, trying to hear another PDF sergeant through frequent bursts of static and over the constant chatter of troubled voices.

‘...think one of the lads has something, sir. Something in the rubble. It’s... Oh, Emperor preserve us, it’s a body. It looks like... I think it’s one of ours sir, it...’

‘Be careful, Sergeant Flast, watch your step down there.’

A long pause followed. Hanrik was on the verge of transmitting again when the sergeant’s voice returned, sounding strained and nauseous. *‘Confirmed, sir. The body, it’s one of... found his lasgun, but the body has been stripped... I mean, its skin, sir, stripped from the bones... It’s... I don’t know what could have done something like...’*

‘Concentrate, Sergeant. You have to hold it together. I need you to... Can you make an identification? Is there anything...?’

‘...found his dog tags. According to these, he’s... Trooper Vazor, sir, Squad 47. And there... there’s two more... three more... Golden Throne, this was a massacre!’

‘Do you see Sergeant Calder? It’s imperative you find Sergeant Calder.’

‘...found him, sir. The same as the others. Whatever it was that did this...’

‘Listen to me, Flast. I need you to... Does Calder have a tracking device with him? It should look like a vox-handset, but smaller, black, with—’

‘Confirmed, sir. The tracker is here, but it... Calder must have fallen on the machine when he... It’s in pieces, sir, inoperative. We’d need a tech-priest to begin to...’

The rest of the sergeant’s words were obscured, but Hanrik had heard enough.

He let the handset fall from his numbed fingers; one of his guards hastened to retrieve it. Of course, Hanrik had known even before this latest blow that Arex was lost to him. Not two kilometres away from here, the Death Korps of Krieg

was beginning to lay siege to his capital city. They were setting up minefields around its edge, laying demolition charges to bring down some of the outer towers. They would probably cause as much devastation as the insect swarm had done – and, like the insects, they didn't seem to care much how many lives were lost in the process.

It would have been easy for him to give up, then, to leave this war to Colonel 186, to slink away in the first rescue ship to arrive. It would have been easy, and it would have been safest, but Governor-General Talmar Hanrik prided himself on having the bloodline of heroes. As long as there was the smallest grain of hope, he would soldier on. He wouldn't disgrace the memory of his father, his brother, or his sons.

So, he reached for the loudhailer that one of his guards had been carrying for him. He surveyed the sea of imploring faces that had gathered before their leader, and he raised the metallic cone to his lips, and he spoke:

'My citizens,' he said, 'I know you have questions; I know you are afraid, and I will not lie to you, our world is under threat. That is why I... I need your help. I am asking all able-bodied males between the ages of fifteen and forty-five to make themselves known to a PDF officer by midday tomorrow. You have been chosen... We have all been chosen for the honour of serving the God-Emperor – and as long as our hearts remain pure, as long as we fight in His name against the forces that beset us, I believe He will not allow what we have built here to fall. Praise be to the Emperor!'



CHAPTER EIGHT

The sky was lightening in the east, and the shadows of the night were being washed away. The skyways of Hieronymous City seemed unusually tranquil, painted in pastel blues and greys, and Trooper Carwen could see hope at last.

His squad had reached the outskirts of the city – nine weary troopers and the indomitable Sergeant Flast, along with a handful of civilians they had picked up en route – but they were still almost a hundred floors up. In the darkness, Carwen had been sure they had no chance of reaching ground level before the city gates were closed. Now, in the cleansing pre-dawn light, anything seemed possible to him.

The long night was over, at last. If only the nightmares it had brought along with it could be so easily dispelled.

Carwen was nineteen years old. He had been a PDF trooper for three of those years. He had signed up out of a genuine desire to make his world safer. His mother was always grumbling that someone needed to keep those filthy mutants under control, keep them away from decent folk, so Carwen had thought, well, why not him? He enjoyed his job, and it had given him the means to move his mother and himself up nine whole floors, so she no longer grumbled as much.

And, after all, Hieronymous Theta was well protected. That was why so many of Carwen's friends had joined the Imperial Guard: to keep the real threats from making it this far. That was why, until now, he had had to face nothing more alarming than a few angry, unarmed civilians during the food riots last year.

Until now...

Four hours ago, Carwen had turned over a bloodied, skinless corpse in a heap of rubble. He had looked into the dead, staring eyes of a trooper as young as he was, and neither passage of time nor the new light could dim that dreadful image. It was always there, waiting behind his eyelids, in all its stark and gory detail.

'We should start to search these buildings,' said Sergeant Flast, indicating the

lines of hab-blocks to each side of them. 'We need to find a way down.' Carwen had never been more glad to receive an order.

He moved to the nearest door, and broke its lock with a blow from his lasgun butt. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the gloom beyond, then he stepped into a long hallway, sending a grey rat skittering and screeching for cover.

There was a staircase here, but as Carwen had expected the downward flight had been blocked from this side. Nobody wanted a lower-floor dweller climbing up to their room in the night. The barricade, however, was a flimsy one, just a table and a couple of chairs piled up more in hope than with certainty.

Carwen tugged at a chair and it came free with ease, and brought the table crashing down behind it. He had created a gap, now, through which a man could climb. The way was clear, at least down as far as the next skyway. Feeling pleased with himself, he turned to report his discovery to his sergeant. He had almost reached the door when the sound of shouting and gunshots from without froze him in his tracks.

He couldn't go forwards. Every time he thought about it, Carwen saw the eyes of that bloodless corpse, and he wanted to be sick. He wanted to turn and run, down the staircase, but his conscience wouldn't let him abandon his comrades, and besides how would his mother feel if her firstborn son was executed for desertion?

In the end, it was his conscience that won out. He forced himself to take one small step forwards, then another, then another – and he reached the doorway at long last, and he summoned up the courage to look outside.

Carwen had been warned about the metal-faced ghouls. He had spent the past four hours searching the shadows for them, imagining what they might look like. The reality, however, was more horrific than anything he could have dreamed.

They had his squad surrounded; they had appeared at each end of the row of buildings, ten of them in all, and now they were closing their trap. In the centre of the skyway, Sergeant Flast and a couple of troopers were trying to protect the civilians, but their las-beams hardly seemed to trouble the encircling monsters.

The rest of Carwen's comrades had already emerged from the buildings, and they added to the barrage of las-fire until at last a ghoul was felled by a lucky shot, but by then it was too late. The hunters fell upon their prey, and their already blood-caked flensing blades set about their grisly work.

Carwen snapped up his lasgun, but he was trembling too hard to aim it properly. *They're already dead*, he told himself. *Sergeant Flast, Tondal,*

Garroway, you can't hurt them now, and with that thought he switched his gun to Full Auto and let its staccato bark drown out the sounds of his comrades' screams.

It didn't work for long. The lasgun bled dry, and suddenly Carwen's sights were filled by the heart-freezing sight of a leering metallic skull. The ghouls had finished with their victims on the skyway; now, they had separated and were turning their attentions to the snipers. With a yelp, Carwen leapt back into the hab-block, feverishly yanking at his spent power pack, slinging it away and fumbling to insert a fresh one into the housing. He stumbled over the words of the Litany of Loading, and the pack fell from his jittery hand.

The ghoul was in the doorway. A graveyard stench hit Carwen full in the face and made him retch. He gripped his lasgun stock with both hands, determined to meet his killer with his bayonet when it pounced, knowing it would do him no good.

Then the ghoul exploded.

There had been no warning, just a burst of flame in which the creature's skin coat had been vaporised, the metal skeleton beneath it melted. A haze of acrid smoke added to the already overpowering stink, and Carwen fell to his hands and knees, scrabbling for his dropped power pack and was violently sick on the floorboards.

He looked up through teary eyes, saw a figure standing where the ghoul had once stood. He could almost have cried at the sight of its face – rather, its metal skull. Then, he noticed the plate attached to the front of the figure's helmet, the image of the Imperial Eagle embossed upon it, and he breathed again.

This skull was a mask, Carwen realised, beneath which...

...beneath which he could see a second, fabric, mask attached to a rebreather unit on the man's back. Despite his disturbing appearance, however, the man's shoulder flashes identified him as an Imperial Guardsman, and he was carrying a melta gun, with which he had apparently just saved Carwen's life.

The Guardsman looked down at Carwen with what might have been disdain, before turning and marching away, his weapon flaring once more. Ashamed of his weakness, Carwen reloaded and scurried after him, holding his breath and trying not to look at the simmering silver pool in the doorway as he stepped over it.

Outside, the tide had well and truly turned. A platoon of skull-masked Guardsmen had arrived from the east, outnumbering the ghouls more than three to one. Only a handful had meltas, but the remainder were armed with what

looked to Carwen like hellguns, more powerful lasgun variants – he had handled one in training, but never since – and these too were having some effect. The ghouls were kept at bay, unable to employ their claws. Another two were vaporised, two more felled by crimson bolts.

For a moment, Carwen was overwhelmed with relief for his close escape, and gratitude towards his saviours – but those feelings were quickly dissipated.

He heard a whooshing sound, a concentrated blast of air, and suddenly the number of ghouls on the skyway had more than quadrupled. One second, they had been down to five, now there were over twenty of them, and Carwen had no idea where the reinforcements had come from. They had just... appeared.

The ghouls were still pinned down, but now, through sheer weight of numbers, they were starting to gain ground. Some of them had hoisted up the corpses of their previous victims and were using them as shields against the skull-masked Guardsmen's fire. Carwen had one of the creatures in his sights, but this new tactic gave him pause. Not so the Guardsmen, who kept up their bombardment regardless.

Sergeant Flast's body was set alight by a melta's near-miss; a ghoul hurled it at the Guardsmen's lines, a flaming missile, forcing them to scatter. Carwen's lower lip trembled with frustration and rage – Flast had been a good man, a good leader, he deserved to rest in peace – and he squeezed his trigger, but few of his las-beams found their mark and those that did only glanced off the ghouls' metallic bones.

He had expected the Guardsmen to fall back. Instead, their front ranks drew sword bayonets and charged, choosing an opponent each. Carwen admired, and was astonished by, their courage, more so when he saw that the Guardsmen were outclassed by the ghouls in close combat. They fought hard, enduring far longer than Flast and the others had done, but the ghouls were faster, stronger, and each of them wielded eight blades to the Guardsmen's one.

The first Guardsman fell, his heart impaled by metal claws, but before he hit the ground both he and his opponent were engulfed by melta fire, and Carwen realised that this had been the plan all along. Those ten Guardsmen had offered their lives, without a moment's hesitation, to buy time for the others to regroup.

Another ghoul was vaporised, while a third was cut down in a crossfire of las-beams. Another, to Carwen's amazement, was run through by a bayonet, collapsing into the liquid remains of one of its kin. The victorious swordsman turned in search of his next kill, and so had his back to his last as, impossibly, it twitched and jerked and hauled itself back to its feet, its talon-knives poised to

strike afresh.

Carwen managed a cry of ‘Look out!’, but if the Guardsman heard him he had no time to react. He was flensed to death in two terrible seconds, revenged in the next by a salvo of hellgun bolts. It was happening elsewhere on the battlefield too, supposedly dead ghouls rising to fight again, and it seemed to Carwen now that there was no hope, that this nightmare was never-ending.

He could see muzzle flashes in the doorways across the skyway: two of his fellow squad members, two of the few survivors, doing the best they could, doubtless aware by now that this didn’t amount to a great deal. Only the meltas were killing the ghouls, killing them for good – and indeed, now Carwen could see that the ghouls were aware of this too and they were targeting the holders of those very weapons. The rest of the Guardsmen had dropped their hellguns, fighting with their bayonets to defend their better-equipped comrades – but, as Carwen watched helplessly, a ghoul sidestepped two opponents to close with one of the melta gun-wielders. Its claws lashed out, and the melta’s containment chamber was sheared in two, immolating both ghoul and Guardsman in a brief but furious eruption.

Another Guardsman had backed up to the skyway’s edge, only metres away from Carwen’s doorway, a ghoul bearing down on him hard. The Guardsman fired his melta gun twice but missed, and Carwen tried to get a bead on the creature himself but found its victim in his way. A second later, that problem at least was solved, as the Guardsman collapsed in a spray of arterial blood – but before his killer could retrieve its prize, a PDF trooper’s lasgun struck true at last, and it too was slain.

Carwen knew what the Emperor required of him now, little as he may have liked it. Just a few strides along the skyway, apparently forgotten in the tumult, lay the dead Guardsman’s weapon, unattended. A chance for him to make a difference, save a few lives, and all he had to do was pick up that gun and make himself a target.

He had no choice, he told himself. He couldn’t think about the ghouls and their bladed claws, couldn’t think about skinned bodies in the rubble or his sergeant’s burning corpse. He had to take inspiration from the skull-masked Guardsmen, had to prove himself as brave as they were, had to take those strides.

Carwen ran to the melta gun, dropped to one knee and picked it up. His heart was thumping against his ribcage, his palms so slick with sweat that the weapon almost slipped from his grasp. He found the firing mechanism by touch; his gaze was held by the corpse of the ghoul just a metre away from him. It hadn’t moved

since it had fallen – perhaps it was actually, finally dead – but Carwen was taking no chances.

He thought the melta gun had misfired for an instant, because it didn't have the kick he had expected and the only sound it made was a burning hiss, but then the corpse of the ghoul ignited with a satisfying crump. Carwen enjoyed a moment of pure exultation, and then remembered the other creatures whose attention he had doubtless just drawn. He hefted the gun to his shoulder and prayed that he might at least take one of them down before he died, two if the Emperor was with him.

Finding a target amid the melee was harder than he had expected. He didn't trust himself not to strike a Guardsman by accident. His fellow gunmen were not so reticent. Friendly fire had just vaporised another two of their comrades, albeit taking a ghoul with them. No doubt they had reasoned that, if they didn't take those shots, then those men were dead anyway. Carwen couldn't think like that.

Two ghouls were coming for him, outflanking the Guardsmen in each direction. Carwen didn't know which to aim for, which one would reach him first, and by the time he had chosen the ghoul on the left he knew it was too late, that he had no hope of stopping them both. At least he could make his one shot count, he thought. He resisted the urge to close his eyes, to flinch from the terrifying visage of the oncoming monster. He gritted his teeth and he fired...

...and missed, but the ghoul fell anyway to a well-placed bayonet thrust from behind. It sprawled in front of the still-kneeling Carwen and, shaking, disgusted, he trained his sights upon the motionless body and squeezed his trigger. He struck only a glancing blow, and to his horror the corpse attempted to stand although the left side of its body was weeping molten metal. The creature fixed Carwen with a burning, malevolent glare, even as an eye socket elongated and dribbled down its face. Then its left leg bowed under its own weight, and the ghoul crashed back to the ground and thrashed its remaining limbs impotently until it could thrash them no longer.

Carwen wasn't dead yet. He swung his melta gun to the right, expecting to meet the talon-knives of the second ghoul, but there was no sign of it. Panicking, he dropped his right hand to the ground and pivoted on it, but the ghoul wasn't sneaking up behind him as he had feared, and now Carwen realised that the half-melted corpse in front of him had gone too, and he could no longer hear the hissing discharges of the meltas or the sounds of his own comrades' lasguns. The fighting had stopped.

There were no ghouls left, either dead or alive. They must have blinked away,

as suddenly, as inexplicably, as they had blinked in, but that meant...

That meant they would almost certainly be back. The metal ghouls could strike again at any moment, replenished and recharged, and no one would see them coming.

Hesitantly, Carwen picked himself up and started forward, his footsteps loud in the sudden stillness. The other survivors of his squad were emerging from their doorways; a few minutes ago they had been ten in number, now they were just four.

‘Who leads your unit?’

It took Carwen a moment to work out who had spoken, to be sure that the question had been directed at him. A Guardsman with the rank insignia of a lieutenant loomed over him, and Carwen swallowed to compose himself as he looked up into a blank-eyed face. ‘Sergeant Flast, sir,’ he said, ‘but he’s dead. You just cremated the body.’

‘What were his last orders?’

‘We were making our way out of the city.’

‘That is no longer possible.’

As the lieutenant spoke, Carwen saw the first red fingers of the morning sun, feeling their way across the skyway. The ground trembled with the force of an explosion somewhere below him, and he knew that the officer had spoken the truth. The ghouls had delayed him too long, he thought, his throat turning dry.

‘My designation,’ said the skull-masked officer, ‘is Lieutenant 4432-9801-2265-Phaesta, officer in command of the first grenadier platoon of the 81st Krieg Infantry Regiment, Beta Company. Your men will place themselves at my disposal.’

Carwen couldn’t tell if that had been a request or an instruction. He still couldn’t speak anyway, so he just nodded. Trooper Parvel was on the vox, reporting his squad’s situation, but Carwen held out little hope that Colonel Braun or the Governor or whoever was in charge at the moment might spare a flyer to extract four lowly PDF troopers from the city. There had to be hundreds like them in the same predicament, and likely a similar number of more important people.

Another Krieg Guardsman, taller and thinner than most, stalked the skyway, examining the fallen, dispensing medical care to a handful of survivors. Scuttling about him were a pair of servitors, who carried supplies for him and were also laden down with spare hellguns. When the medic found a Guardsman injured beyond hope, he spoke a quiet benediction over him and shot him

through the head. Then he stripped the equipment from the Guardsman's corpse and handed it to the servitors. The Krieg platoon had lost thirteen men, all told; they had fewer than twenty left.

The medic stooped beside a PDF trooper, and Carwen felt a brief flare of hope that another of his comrades might be saved. The fact that he couldn't identify the flayed and mutilated body should have told him how slim a hope this was. Still, the medic produced a syringe and attached it to the fallen trooper's arm.

It took Carwen a few seconds to fully comprehend what he was doing.

'Stop that,' he protested, racing forwards. 'You can't do that to him!'

'He's dead,' said the medic in a flat, matter-of-fact tone.

'I know that,' said Carwen, 'I can see that, but—'

'We are cut off from our supply lines. We must make the most of the resources available to us.' The syringe was full now, and the medic passed it to a servitor. 'Your comrade has no further use for this blood, but it could save a life with which the Emperor can be served. I presume your comrade would wish to serve the Emperor?'

Carwen couldn't argue with that logic, but at the same time he had no wish to watch what the medic was doing either. Who were these people, he wondered, who treated the dead with as little respect as had the metal ghouls themselves?

The medic stood and extended an expectant hand. It took Carwen a moment to remember that he was still carrying the melta gun, and he handed it over with some reluctance. The weapon was reallocated to one of the Krieg Guardsmen, although the medic – he was more than that, Carwen could see now; the Krieg men deferred to him, and addressed him as 'quartermaster' – made a gesture to his servitors, and the four PDF troopers were each issued with hellguns, which was something at least.

The lieutenant gathered his troops about himself. 'The city has been sealed,' he informed them, 'but there may still be a way for us to serve within these walls. Our orders are to go to ground until that way is made clear to us.'

He must have been in contact with his superiors too, although Carwen hadn't seen or heard it. He had noticed, however, that one of the Guardsmen carried a vox-caster, so it seemed probable that the lieutenant was wearing a discreet comm-bead.

Carwen was relieved when they moved on at last, away from the skyway and its bodies – relieved because it seemed less likely to him now that the ghouls would find them again. Relief soon gave way, however, to a stomach-knotting anxiety, when Carwen tried to envisage his fate instead.

He was following leaders he did not know, men who made him feel uncomfortable, who he couldn't quite bring himself to trust. The ground shook again as, presumably, another skyway or a part of a building was collapsed somewhere beneath him, and Carwen knew that his dreams of escape, the dreams that had sustained him through the long night, were well and truly dead. As dead as most of his comrades, his friends.

He was still alive, still moving, but towards what he hadn't the faintest idea. He had been turned around so that, instead of exiting the city, he was heading for its centre – and Trooper Carwen had the strongest impression that his newfound comrades were expecting to die there.



CHAPTER NINE

Gunthar woke to sunlight, and to distant cracks of gunfire. Looking outside, he saw an empty skyway, and no sign at all that anything had happened apart from a lone autocab sitting at an odd angle to the towers. His chrono, however, read morning-shift already, so the skyway ought to have been teeming with people.

Weber was fast asleep in his watch position by the window. Gunthar shook him awake, and they hunted for food, because they were both ravenous and because it was easier to focus on this short-term goal than to discuss what might happen next. The paste dispenser above the stove was dry, so Weber broke into a room across the hallway. The hab, as it turned out, was occupied: a young woman sat huddled in a corner, two children clutched protectively to her breast, and all three of them screaming and crying in the face of this violent intrusion. It took Gunthar and Weber some minutes to calm things down, to explain themselves.

Weber asked the woman to come with them, out of the city. It was news to Gunthar that they were going anywhere, but he didn't object. In the daylight, he felt braver than he had last night, and the woman confirmed that they were only a few kilometres from their goal. With the sun to guide them, they could reach the city wall within the hour. There was only one problem.

'We tried to leave last night with the soldiers,' sniffed the woman, 'but the lifters, the external lifters, weren't working and the soldiers... I couldn't do what they said. I couldn't take my babies... Not down there. Not where the mutants live.'

Her words dampened Gunthar's optimism, and, as he and Weber gulped down scavenged scraps in the hallway, he suggested that maybe the woman had been right. 'Maybe,' he said, 'it would be best to stay put.'

'What, and wait to be rescued?' scoffed Weber. 'Good luck with that. They'll send in the soldiers for the Governor's daughter first, then his friends after her, then the Governor's supporters after them, and his loyal citizens at the bottom of

the list.'

'I've never left the city before, I never realised that... If the only way out is down... Weber, I think the monsters came from, you know, *down there*.'

'But it's quiet right now,' said Weber. 'It's been quiet all morning, and I think I'd rather take my chances in the daylight then wait and see what happens after dark.'

Gunthar nodded gloomily, but he was thinking about the soldiers that had passed his window last night. They hadn't been like the bestial ghouls, or the insects Weber had described. He had seen from their bearings, from the way they had moved, that they were intelligent, and this scared him more than anything he had seen thus far. Those soldiers, Gunthar was sure, wouldn't be sleeping away the day, they would be out there somewhere, scheming and planning and *searching*...

Weber was right. They weren't safe here. They weren't safe anywhere.

'I suppose,' said Gunthar, 'as we are so close... We could see what's out there, and maybe... maybe they'll have got the lifters working by now, so we can... I don't know, maybe we should just take it one step at a time.'

Somehow, the declaration had sounded more certain in his head. Still, Weber agreed with him – and, seeing the relief in the storekeeper's eyes, Gunthar realised that despite his outward confidence he too had been seeking reassurance.

They emerged into the cool morning air, and although the skyway was still quiet – almost preternaturally so – Gunthar felt all his logic, all his brave resolutions, draining into his shoes. He felt isolated out here, exposed.

He prayed he wasn't making a fatal mistake.

It didn't take them long to find the scars of last night's attacks.

Gunthar saw the holes in the skyline first. He tried to believe they might always have been there, that the towers might simply have been built further apart in these outskirts of the city. Then, turning a corner, he and Weber came upon a collapsed hab-block, perhaps the same one on which they had trod before, and he could lie to himself no longer.

He saw a mangled body and, although he didn't want to look, he couldn't tear his eyes away from it. It didn't look like a ghoul, but without a closer inspection – and Gunthar had no intention of getting closer – he couldn't be sure. He was relieved when, through unspoken consent, he and Weber turned and began to skirt the ruins rather than attempting to cross them, although this would lengthen

their journey.

There were more bodies on the skyways. They lay where they had fallen, and some had been stripped of their flesh, their exposed blood vessels glistening in the sunlight. However, there was life here too. Gunthar and Weber weren't the only stranded citizens to have ventured, blinking, out into the new day.

Many of the others were like zombies, shuffling shell-shocked through the wreckage of their lives. Most, Gunthar realised, were waiting for somebody to tell them what to do. Occasionally, someone would turn to him in hope, seeing through the blood stains on his fine grey tunic, evidently wondering if he was the one to lead them, and then Gunthar felt ashamed because he couldn't be that man.

Even so, as he and Weber proceeded, they picked up a small group of followers, attracted by the very fact that they were going somewhere. Weber neither encouraged nor discouraged these tag-alongs, he just plodded on in grim silence.

They found a PDF half-track and, littering the skyway around it, the remains of a PDF squad. They disturbed a wild-eyed young man who had been in the process of looting one of the corpses; he levelled a stolen lasgun at them and triggered it by accident. Fortunately the beam hit no one, but the sound of the weapon's report echoed along the skyway like a treacherous alarm call. Gunthar wanted to back up and get away from there but, to his chagrin, Weber was intent on talking the boy down first.

A minute later, Gunthar learned the reason why. Weber wanted the soldiers' weapons for himself. He acquired a lasgun, hefting it in both hands then putting it to his shoulder, squinting along its sights, getting the measure of it. When Gunthar protested that he was making himself a target, the storekeeper, rifling another soldier's webbing for spare power packs, grunted, 'We're targets already, all of us.'

Gunthar was still considering that wisdom when the last of the guns was claimed. There were four of them now among the group – a few more had been destroyed – and he had to admit that their presence made him feel more comfortable. He had seen one ghoul killed by lasgun fire, he reminded himself, it was possible, and surely even that slim chance was better than none.

There was some talk about taking the half-track too, but no one knew how to operate it and, when one woman managed to start its engine, its roar was deafening. Gunthar pointed out that, with so much debris about and the lifters inoperable, the vehicle couldn't have taken them far anyway.

An old man wandered the skyways, his voice booming out to anyone who would listen. He was preaching that the Emperor was dead, that Hieronymous Theta had been abandoned to the mercy of the Ruinous Powers. A day ago, maybe even less than that, he would have been spat on for such heresy, if not summarily executed by the proctors. Today, as his motley group resumed their uncertain journey, Gunthar couldn't have said for sure that the preacher was wrong.

One more tower. Gunthar could see just one more tower, and beyond that nothing but the sky. It might have been a sky choked with dust and smoke, and streaked with black from a thousand funeral pyres burning across the city, but still it was a welcome sight. Gunthar allowed his hopes to rise, but they were dashed in an instant.

One by one, the members of his group stumbled to a halt as they saw what lay ahead of them. The skyway that should have swept them towards freedom took a sharp plunge instead. Its support struts had been blown out, at least one of the buildings to which it had been anchored demolished. Feeling the skyway flexing and straining beneath his weight, Gunthar edged forward as far as he dared. Even if they had had ropes, if they could have climbed down, they would have alighted upon a compacted heap of rubble some twenty floors below, which stretched further than he could see.

That last tower was unreachable.

It was a long time before a word was spoken. Then Weber, reluctantly accepting his de facto position as group leader, suggested they turn back and find an intact staircase. Perhaps, he said, there was still a way out, beneath the devastated area. His defeated tone inspired nobody, Gunthar least of all, but then neither were there any better ideas. However, as the dispirited refugees trudged back the way they had come, Gunthar noted that a few of them allowed themselves to be left behind.

They were down to seven by the time they had found a sturdy-looking hab-block, by the time they had torn down a man-made barricade and cleared a route downward. Four men, three women, three weapons left between them. With two bodies ahead of him and the rest behind, Gunthar felt hemmed in on the narrow, dark staircase. He wished he had picked up a lasgun after all.

They walked for almost forty minutes, and Gunthar lost count of the number of floors they had descended. They came to a second barricade, and resignedly set about its disassembly. This one had been reinforced with barbed wire, which

Weber had to carefully untangle, cursing every few seconds as a barb tore his flesh. Gunthar's feet ached and he couldn't reach the barricade past Weber to help, so he sat on a stair and rested his head in his hands instead.

They sought food and rest in another abandoned hab. It was smaller than Gunthar was used to, a squeeze for the seven of them, and the walls were covered in vile, blasphemous graffiti. They were obviously nearing ground level.

Gunthar braced himself for all kinds of horrors as they stepped outside. He was surprised to be met by sunlight, relieved too until he realised that it was the loss of so many towers that had dispelled the shadows down here. The skyway before them was littered with debris and looked little different to the ones above, wholesale destruction being a great leveller. A few shabbily-clad people picked their way through the wreckage, again as above, but Gunthar could see no obvious signs of mutation on them. Perhaps the mutants had escaped through the gate already, he thought, or better still been dealt with by the PDF.

Unfortunately, this level offered no more hope than the other. Barely ten minutes later, they found the skyway they were following blocked by rubble. They sagged against it, too weary to contemplate a further descent, drained of all hope that the risk might pay off. 'We could try another direction,' said Weber without enthusiasm. 'There might be a way through to the north or the south. I doubt it, though. This isn't random vandalism. Someone has done this on purpose, penned us in here. I should think the only way out of Hieronymous City now is to be airlifted out – and like I said, you'd have to be the Governor's daughter to merit a flyer.'

As if to underscore his words, the skyway trembled gently. A railing swayed, and masonry skittered down the heap at Gunthar's back.

'Hanrik doesn't have a daughter,' he murmured distractedly.

'Daughter, niece,' said Weber vaguely, 'whoever that woman was.'

'What... which woman?'

'I said, didn't I? The fellow I talked to last night, the one who told me about the insects... Before they appeared, he said he saw a member of the Governor's family.'

'You never told me that,' said Gunthar, aware that his voice was rising. 'You didn't say one thing about—'

And then the shooting started.

Multiple las-beams slammed into the rubble behind Gunthar, one striking uncomfortably close to his head so that a ricocheting plascrete shard cut his left

ear. He tried to push himself to his feet, locate the source of the threat at the same time, felt the mountain of rubble shifting beneath his hands and floundered. Fortunately, Weber and one of the other lasgun-holders had reacted faster than Gunthar had, and they were returning fire.

There were shadows at the edges of the skyway, stooped, inhuman figures, and it was a measure of all Gunthar had been through in the past two days that he was almost relieved to identify them as mere mutants. Evidently, the sight of the city in disarray had emboldened them, and they were seizing this chance to claim some quarter of it for themselves. They had also scavenged two lasguns, at least.

Another beam stabbed out in Gunthar's direction and struck a pale-faced, puffy-eyed woman beside him, slicing through her right elbow. She gaped disbelievingly at the cauterised stump of her arm, then fainted. One of Weber's las-beams, in return, punched through a mutant's throat, and it squealed and died.

Gunthar was an easy target where he stood. He wanted to run, as he had always run before, but this time there was nowhere to run to. He started forward, looking for shelter, and more figures rose before him. The mutants were more numerous than he had initially seen; there were eight or nine of them. A lasgun swivelled his way, but its holder came under fire and Gunthar was reprieved for a second or two.

His only, desperate, hope was to close with the mutants, to deny them the advantage of their ranged weapons. It was a terrifying plan, but it was all he had, so he lowered his head and he rushed a gaunt, foul-smelling, pustule-covered creature, hoping that his momentum would lend him the strength he needed to bowl it over. He cannoned into the mutant, but it had seen him coming, set itself against him, and it absorbed the impact of his charge without giving a footstep.

The mutant had the strength of an enraged grox. It flipped Gunthar onto his back and pinned him down with a bony knee in his chest. A rancid mouth loomed over him, and showered his face with spittle. He was trying to hold the mutant's arms back as it scrabbled to gouge out his eyes with dirty, calloused fingers.

He was saved by another earth tremor, this one more violent and protracted than the first. The mutant lost its balance, and Gunthar kicked and unseated it from him. He couldn't match its strength, so he made to run, but the treacherous quake stole his footing and the mutant was upon him again, tackling him around the ankles. As Gunthar fell, his hand found a brick on the skyway. He snatched it up, twisted around, swung for the mutant's head and struck true. The impact

jarred the brick from his stung fingers, but the blow had had the desired effect. The mutant crumpled.

Gunthar didn't know where it had landed, didn't know if it was still fighting to reach him. It seemed the entire world was shaking now, so vigorously that he was seeing double. He couldn't stand, couldn't even try, he could only hug the skyway for dear life and pray to the Emperor that it wouldn't give way.

The earthquake subsided; Gunthar heard footsteps and gingerly raised his head to see four mutants scampering away in fright. He looked for the one he had fought, and caught his breath at the sight of its lifeless body sprawled beside him, black blood pooling beneath its fractured skull. He fought with conflicting emotions. He felt proud because, this time, he had fought back, done the Emperor's bidding, but at the same time he was appalled that his hands had snuffed out a life, even a mutant life.

It could so easily have been him instead, lying there, an empty shell.

Gunthar heard a scuffle behind him, and turned to find his fellow refugees bearing the final mutant to the ground, holding it down while one put a lasgun barrel to its temple. He closed his eyes so as not to see the moment of the mutant's death, but the sound of the las-shot nevertheless evoked the image too clearly in his mind.

Then a woman's voice shouted for help, and Gunthar realised that somebody was down. The woman was over by the rubble heap, and Gunthar's heart sank as he saw a thatch of black hair and recognised Weber's body beside her.

He ran to his newfound friend's side, although he didn't know what he could do for him. Weber was still breathing, but raggedly, and there was a sucking wound in his chest. His face was caked with sweat, and his pupils had contracted as if he was staring at something a world away. 'Can't anyone help him?' Gunthar cried. 'Didn't anyone take a... a medi-kit or something from the soldiers?'

'Just... winded, that's all,' wheezed Weber, and with a supreme effort he lifted his arm and took Gunthar's hand in one of his own larger, rougher ones. 'Need a moment to... catch my breath...' It was plain in Weber's face that he didn't believe his own words. He was holding on to Gunthar's hand with a bone-crushing ferocity, as if hoping to cling to life through muscle power alone, and there was a desperate appeal in his eyes, one that Gunthar didn't know how to answer.

He felt he should say something, offer some reassurance, but only one thought bubbled to the surface of his mind, and this was his last chance to ask about it.

‘This woman,’ he said, ‘the one your friend saw, how did he know...?’

Weber appeared consternated at first, then glad to have something other than his own fate to think about. ‘You mean,’ he said, ‘the... the Governor’s daughter?’

‘His niece,’ said Gunthar. ‘The Governor’s niece. Was it definitely her?’

‘The fellow, he... said he remembered her from a newsreel, during the food riots. I don’t know, it could be he was... maybe he was imagining things.’

‘Did he say what she looked like? Weber, did he say—?’

‘I don’t know. Young. Nice clothes. But he was probably mistaken. What would... what would someone like that be doing so far from her ivory tower?’

Weber closed his eyes, then, and Gunthar felt his hold weakening as his breathing became shallower. He had no more words, so he just squeezed Weber’s hand as hard as he could, to remind him that he wasn’t alone, until at last, with one final, wracking breath, he was gone, and his fingers went limp in Gunthar’s grip.

‘What do we do now?’ asked a hollow voice behind him, and Gunthar realised that the other refugees were ranged about him, looking to him to guide them. The woman who had lost her arm was on her feet with the rest of them, weeping softly to herself.

‘I don’t know,’ said Gunthar. ‘I... I don’t know.’

‘Do we go on,’ somebody else asked, ‘maybe try for another gate?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘What if the mutants come back? What if they bring reinforcements?’

‘I don’t know, I don’t know, *I don’t know!*’

This last was shouted, and the effort of forcing out the words broke a dam in Gunthar’s throat, and allowed tears to rise to his eyes. He fought them back, swallowing hard, breathing in deeply. ‘I think,’ he said at last, when he had composed himself, ‘I think Weber was right. There’s no way out of the city for us. I think we should... We should have stayed where we were. We should go back to the upper floors, where it’s safe... safer, I mean. We should wait, wait for the governor to... well, to do something. Trust in the Emperor, and He... He will provide.’

Even as he spoke those words, Gunthar knew that he and the others would be parting company soon.

He hadn’t thought about Arex all day. Too busy thinking about himself. Now, it seemed that when the lights had gone out she hadn’t been at home. Instead, she had been on the 204th floor, facing an attack by metal insects – Weber may not

have been sure of this, but Gunthar was, because he knew one thing that Weber hadn't.

He knew that the 204th-floor skyway was the route any autocab would take from the High Spire to his own modest hab on the 223rd floor.

Arex had come looking for him – and in his fear, in his selfishness, Gunthar had turned his back on her. Nor would she have told her uncle where she was going, so she would have no prospect of being rescued by him despite Weber's insinuations. She was probably alone, possibly hurt, almost certainly sheltering in Gunthar's hab, wondering where he was, needing him.

He had to get back there. He had to find her.

He let go of Weber's hand, laying it across the storekeeper's chest. Then he reached across the body and he picked up Weber's lasgun. It was surprisingly light.

The Emperor, it seemed, wanted Gunthar Soreson to fight, so he had given him something – something more than his own life – to fight for. And that was okay, he told himself, because he *could* fight now, he had just proved that to himself.

Gunthar couldn't be a hero, he accepted that, but he could be a soldier. And he would be, he told himself – if only because he had no choice in the matter.



CHAPTER TEN

The tremors reached as far as Hieronymous Port.

Costellin felt the first as he stood by his office window, looking down onto the space port ramp. PDF drill instructors were marshalling an army of new, raw recruits out there, recruits who were struggling to march in step despite their most earnest efforts. The first tremor bowled a handful of them over, and the commissar smiled wryly to himself at the commotion thus sparked.

To the tremor itself, he gave little thought, assuming it to have been caused by a demolition charge. He had been hearing the distant crumps of such charges from the city all morning, though the intervals between them had lengthened.

Then the second, more powerful and longer-lasting quake hit, and he had to hold on to the windowsill to maintain his footing. Now, he had cause for concern.

Costellin wasn't the first to reach Colonel 186's door. Governor-General Hanrik beat him to it. The colonel's aides were busy at the vox-caster, requesting reports from his men on the front line and his counterparts in the other three Krieg regiments. 'It's confirmed, sir,' said a masked lieutenant, hefting a pile of data-slates. 'According to our triangulations, the epicentre of both earthquakes was right here—' He pointed to a slate with a stencil. '—in the heart of Hieronymous City itself.'

The colonel nodded as if he had expected nothing else. Turning to Hanrik, he asked, 'Does this region have a history of geological instability?'

Hanrik shook his head. 'Not at all. There hasn't been so much as a tremor here in my lifetime. Even if there had been, the timing of this—'

'Then we may assume,' the colonel interrupted him, 'that the necrons are responsible. Lieutenant, I will need fresh scans of the affected area.'

'Yes, sir. I'll contact the troop ship, sir.'

There was no more to be said until those scans arrived, so Costellin asked to be informed when they did and then left. He had a bad feeling about this, but he

kept his thoughts to himself until there was more information. The colonel, he knew, would entertain no groundless speculation. Hanrik followed him out, but Costellin noted that he posted a PDF sentry in the corridor between their offices, presumably to alert him should a meeting be convened without him.

Forty minutes later, the Governor took the further precaution of paying the commissar a visit. Costellin waited patiently as Hanrik talked in concerned tones about the situation in general and the possible causes of the earthquakes in particular, before working his way around to his point.

‘We’ve been combing the city, of course,’ he said, ‘but our lasguns are no match for those necron ghouls. We’ve already lost two squads this morning, and the flyers they were in. I just need... We’re still adding to the list of the missing. I’m talking about important people: captains of industry, philanthropists, lords even. The irony is that, with the lifters out, it was those on the upper floors who had the least chance of escape, but I hear... I’ve been reading the reports, and it seems the Krieg—’

‘You’re asking for our help,’ said Costellin.

‘You have resources, weapons, that we just—’

‘You want Krieg soldiers to fly with your men on their rescue missions. I can see how that would be a boon to them. I can guess what the colonel’s response will be, though. He has the final say on troop allocations, as I’m sure you’re aware.’

‘The colonel. Yes.’ Hanrik cleared his throat. ‘He and I didn’t exactly get off on the best foot. I thought my cause might find more favour were it to—’

‘You’re asking me to intercede with the colonel on your behalf.’ It was a common enough request, and not an unreasonable one.

‘I understand, of course, if he can’t spare the manpower. I thought, if we could just lay our hands on those melta guns...’

‘I’d say the colonel is more likely to let you have the men,’ said Costellin dryly. ‘The weapons are more valuable, and harder to come by. But there’s more to this appeal than you’re telling me, I think. A more personal stake than simply concern for your world’s great and good?’

Hanrik’s hands had been fidgeting in his lap, betraying his apprehension. Now he stiffened, met Costellin’s steady gaze for a moment, then sighed and nodded. He reached into his tunic pocket and produced a device that looked like a vox-handset.

‘My niece,’ he said. ‘Her name is Arex. She went missing before the power cut, but she wears an amecyte necklace with... I had a machine that could find

her. We lost it. I thought that was it, I know there's... I know there's only a small chance that she is still... but I spoke to an engineer and he built this replacement machine for me. He says it will work like the other, he just has to find Arex's signal, but to do that he has to get closer to her.'

'I understand,' said Costellin.

'We know where she was last night. We can send a team to that location, then the machine can lead them to her. They'd be straight in and out of the city.'

'I will put your request to the colonel,' said Costellin. 'I will do all I can.'

Hanrik nodded gratefully, then glanced impatiently at his chrono. 'How much longer, do you think? How long does it normally take for one of these scans...?'

'Oh, I should think the scan is completed by now. The Krieg generals on the troop ship will be analysing it as we speak.'

'Then what are we waiting for? The colonel promised to consult us—'

'He promised to keep us informed,' said Costellin. 'That isn't the same thing at all. Oh, he will observe the niceties, let you have your say, he might even relay your thoughts to the generals if he finds them insightful enough – but, by the time we speak with Colonel 186 again, he will already know what his orders are.'

Another half-hour later, they were seated before the colonel's desk, inspecting a tactical hololith, and Hanrik asked, 'What exactly am I looking at here?'

'I presume,' said the colonel, 'you do not recognise that construct. It did not show up on our previous scans.'

'Recognise it?' echoed Hanrik. 'I... I've never seen anything like it. The towers... That area would have been packed with towers. It's right at the heart of the city. What has happened to them all? They can't have just... They can't...'

'It's a pyramid,' said Costellin. 'A black stone pyramid. It must be about...' He thumbed up some figures on the display, and performed a quick calculation. 'It's at least two hundred storeys high, and almost a kilometre along each side of the base.'

'But there hasn't been time,' protested Hanrik, 'to build something like... Where in the Emperor's name did it come from?'

'Underground,' said Costellin gravely. 'It came from underground. My guess would be that this construct is the source of all our problems: the necron tomb itself.'

'Then those tremors we felt...'

'The emergence of that tomb,' confirmed Costellin.

‘We believe it erupted from the ground,’ said the colonel, ‘with enough force to uproot the towers still standing above it, and to pulverise them.’

‘And what... what is this?’ Hanrik indicated a green splotch on the hololith.

‘That is not yet known,’ said the colonel.

‘An energy source,’ murmured Costellin, leaning in closer and studying the runes that flickered beside the irregular shape, ‘emanating from the apex of the pyramid, pulsing green in the visible spectrum but also... is this right? These figures seem to indicate that much of the energy is bleeding off into... into realms unknown.’

‘Like a beacon,’ said Hanrik. ‘Like the necrons are... Do you think they could be sending out a distress signal? Calling for help?’

‘Let us pray that is so,’ said the colonel. ‘It would mean that, by their own analysis, they lack the resources to defend themselves against us.’

‘Until their reinforcements arrive,’ added Costellin quietly.

‘We have put our tech-priests to work on this data,’ said the colonel, ‘and they are attempting to block that transmission. Colonel 81 also advises that he has a grenadier platoon in the city. He has sent them to examine the pyramid close up.’

‘What about the Inquisition?’ asked Costellin. ‘We need all the information they’re prepared to give us, details of past necron encounters, their observed weaknesses if indeed they have any. I know it’s unlikely to amount to very much, but—’

‘A communiqué has been sent,’ said the colonel. ‘In the meantime, we know as much as we need to know. The necrons have provided us with a target, at last.’

‘You’re sending your men in?’ asked Hanrik.

‘Not exactly,’ said the colonel. ‘Our primary objective is still containment. We have created a ring of steel around the enemy. Now, we will close it. We are going to force the necrons back into that construct of theirs, and we are going to ensure that they don’t emerge again. Hieronymous City will be their new tomb.’

Hanrik blanched visibly at this, doubtless understanding what this plan meant for his capital. He had learned better than to argue the point, though. He sat quietly, fidgeting with his hands, as Costellin and the colonel briefly discussed the finer points of artillery placements and supply lines. Then Hanrik excused himself and left, with a meaningful glance in the commissar’s direction.

True to his word, Costellin put the Governor’s request to the colonel as soon as he found an appropriate moment to do so. He received the expected answer.

‘You might wish to reconsider,’ he pushed gently. ‘Hanrik has charge of the Planetary Defence Force, and a great deal of clout with the citizenry of this

world whether you acknowledge his position or not. That means he commands a substantial amount of resources, not least a number of flyers, for which I should think a use could present itself. This mission to find one lost girl may not seem worth the time or the risk to you, but it is of the utmost importance to him, and a favour for Hanrik now ought to earn a favour from him in the future.'

He knew what the colonel was thinking. He was thinking that no man should need a bribe to do what the Emperor wished of him. Still, his predecessor had learned to trust the commissar's judgement in such matters, and it seemed that this new colonel was at least willing to consider his words too.

'As yet,' said Costellin, 'no enemy has been sighted at the walls. We have grenadiers and death riders sat twiddling their thumbs, with no target for their weapons. I'm sure a few of them would be glad to see a little action.'

'One squad,' the colonel relented. 'I will turn one squad over to General Hanrik's command, for no longer than eight hours.' Costellin thanked him for his understanding, and left to deliver the good news to Hanrik. He tried not to think about what the colonel might ask of the Governor in return, and of his people.

Potentially, Costellin had just thrown a great many innocents to the wolves in exchange for the life of just one, but that was something to fret about later.

That afternoon, he made a tour of the troop emplacements, more by habit than anything. In his previous assignments, a sighting of an officer on the front lines had always been good for the morale of a regiment, but of course the Guardsmen of the Death Korps were rather less appreciative of such gestures.

Their morale was probably higher than his own, Costellin reflected, as his half-track sped along the approach road to the city. They didn't know what they were facing, and they didn't much care. They trusted in their generals to make their decisions for them, to give them the chance to make their lives count for the Emperor.

They were certainly making their presence felt. The roars of their guns drowned out the sound of the half-track's engine long before it reached its destination. The heavy artillery of the Krieg 186th was arrayed before the western wall of the city, what remained of it after an hour's solid bombardment. The Medusas, with their limited range but enormous destructive power, were up front doing most of the work, each ensconced in its own shallow dugout, each spitting out heavy shell after heavy shell in a deafening barrage. Behind them, the Earthshakers squatted on their static platforms, waiting in pregnant silence for a more enticing target.

Major Gamma emerged to greet the commissar from the tent that served as his Company HQ. If he spoke at all, however, between the noise and the major's mouth-concealing mask, Costellin couldn't tell. He signalled to the Krieg officer to carry on as he was, and moved on. As he drew closer to the wall, a dust cloud billowed up around him, tearing at his throat and his tear ducts. Not for the first time in such circumstances, Costellin felt he would have been glad of a Krieg facemask himself.

Delta Company's section of wall was already down, as were several of the buildings and the skyways behind it. It was the turn of the foot soldiers now to move in and to start to haul the debris away, to clear a path for their engines to advance. They were constructing fresh dugouts for the Medusas, only fifty metres ahead of their old positions. At this rate, the demolition of Hieronymous City would be a painfully slow process, but one thing was for sure: it would be an exceedingly thorough one.

Costellin wondered how much longer the necrons would wait, how much closer they would allow their attackers to come, before they responded in some way.

The answer came more suddenly than he had expected.

Guardsmen were turning from their work, staring past Costellin to a point some distance above his head, reaching for their weapons. The Medusas were falling silent one by one, and now the reports of las-fire reached the commissar's ears. He whirled around, snatching his plasma pistol from its holster. He found himself facing a giant, at least ten metres tall. It was hovering impossibly above one of the Medusas, about a hundred metres away from where Costellin stood.

It was a skeletal figure, its ribcage and its vertebrae on proud display, but for all that it wasn't lacking in bulk. Its bones were armour-plated, or perhaps entirely metallic. It was wrapped in the tattered remnants of a royal blue cloak, and it wielded an arcane staff almost as tall as itself, a pair of curved prongs extending like horns from the tip. The giant wore an ornate, blue and golden headdress, beneath which green fires burned in the eye sockets of an impassive silver skull. It was translucent, shining with an internal glow, like a hololithic image, and the Guardsmen's las-beams passed through it to dissipate harmlessly in the air. Costellin wondered if it *was* just an image, but something about the way the giant held itself, the way it scanned the amassed ranks of the Krieg regiment before it with a fractional turn of its head, spoke to him of a keen intelligence lurking behind those blazing eyes.

He had trained his own pistol upon the apparition, but he held himself back

from squeezing the trigger. After a few more shots, the Guardsmen too stayed their fire, conserving their power packs. The giant hadn't yet made a move, seeming content to wait for the activity and the noise to die down. When at last it did, the giant opened its mouth, but its speech was like nothing Costellin had heard before.

The sound reminded him of machine-cant, a high-pitched squeal, but with a hateful, raucous edge to it. It grew to a deafening volume, hammering inside the commissar's head, and he threw his hands to his ears but he couldn't block out the sound.

Then, suddenly, the giant was gone and a blessed silence fell.

As Costellin stepped out of his half-track at the space port, he once again became a target for the refugees there, mostly women and children and the lame after Hanrik's PDF draft. It seemed that they had heard the necrons' voice too.

He collared a Krieg lieutenant, who confirmed that the image of the giant had appeared floating above the space port ramp even as Costellin had encountered a similar image some ten kilometres away. Furthermore, reports from the other Krieg regiments suggested that more images had been sighted to the north, to the south and to the east of the city simultaneously, with each group of observers convinced that the eyes of the giant had been trained upon them specifically.

An hour later, Costellin was seated once more before Colonel 186's desk, while Hanrik hovered by his window, gazing out at the continuing activity on the ramp. Enginseers had been at work running translation matrices over the necron giant's message, and Colonel 186 was now able to play the results back to his fellow officers on an archaic recording device. The words emerged in a flat, mechanical monotone, in perfectly accented Gothic: *'This world is mine,'* they said. *'I am its lord and master. My people trod this soil millennia before your upstart race was born. You built your cities over ours as we slept, but we have woken now to reclaim what was ours. Leave this world now, or we will destroy you.'*

'Of course,' said the colonel, breaking the long silence that followed, 'the Death Korps of Krieg will not bow to this overt display of aggression.'

'Of course,' said Costellin, 'and I concur that, in this case, intimidation was the object of the exercise. I doubt we're expected to take much note of the content of this message. The delivery was all.'

'The clearest indication yet that the necrons fear us.'

Costellin wasn't so sure about that, but he chose not to argue. Hanrik,

however, turned from the window, looking even more flustered than he usually did. ‘Pardon me,’ he said, ‘but didn’t you just tell me yesterday that the chances of saving Hieronymous Theta are negligible?’

‘The odds are unknown,’ said the colonel. ‘Never before have we been in a position to meet a necron force before—’

“‘Get on to Naval Command,’ you said.’ Hanrik jabbed an accusatory finger in Costellin’s direction. “‘Get a rush on those rescue ships.” Only you know how long that takes, and we have a population of almost nine billion people here.’

Colonel 186 clenched his fists. ‘What are you suggesting, general?’

‘I... I’m just saying that perhaps we should consider all our options. This... this necron lord has told us to leave. Perhaps, if we were to—’

‘We will make no deals with the enemy.’

‘Golden Throne, no, I wasn’t suggesting... Of course we can’t... But it seems, I don’t know if you’re aware of this, but that message was heard in at least six other cities, and people... people are afraid. The proctors are reporting rioting worldwide.’

‘That is hardly my concern,’ said the colonel.

‘And the PDF too... There have been over a hundred desertions in the past hour alone – that we know of, it’s impossible to keep track under these circumstances.’

‘Then I trust you have made an example of those hundred.’

‘What I am saying, colonel, is that a lot of those people, those nine billion people, they are asking why we can’t... There are so few rescue ships available. I just think, if we could buy a little more time, time to save a few more of them...’

‘We will buy that time,’ said Costellin, ‘by keeping the necrons contained.’

It wasn’t that he didn’t sympathise with the Governor’s position. Perhaps he was even right, if the necrons saw that a full-scale evacuation of Hieronymous Theta was under way, then perhaps this would satisfy them. It could mean the salvation of some nine billion souls, and there was always the option of scorching the planet once the exodus was done, as indeed Costellin had initially counselled, so the necrons wouldn’t have gained anything. It was an attractive proposition.

He knew, however, that neither the Krieg colonel nor his generals would see things that way. Even if such an exodus could have been organised, they would consider the price to be paid for those nine billion souls too high – and, much to his regret, Costellin couldn’t disagree with them. Hanrik’s cause was a lost one –

and, if he continued to advance it, he risked Colonel 186 shooting him on the spot.

‘I believe,’ said the colonel, ‘that the first of your rescue ships is due to enter the solar system within the hour. How goes your mission to find... Arex, was it?’

‘It’s... I’m waiting for a report,’ said Hanrik, wrong-footed by the change of subject. ‘The flyer only left about fifteen minutes ago, it won’t yet have... Thank you, by the way, for the loan of your grenadiers. I’m sure they will make all the difference.’

‘Your niece could be safely off this planet by nightfall, General Hanrik,’ said the colonel, ‘as could you.’

‘No,’ said Hanrik firmly. ‘No, I thought I had made this clear to you, colonel, I am not going anywhere until this fight is done.’

‘It is reassuring to hear you say that,’ said the colonel quietly. ‘I had begun to question your commitment to this operation.’

Hanrik regarded the Krieg officer through narrowed eyes, evidently unsure how to interpret that comment. From where he was standing, he couldn’t see what Costellin could: that the colonel had moved his hand to rest lightly upon the butt of his holstered plasma pistol.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

The climb back up to the higher floors was slower and more taxing than the descent had been. However, the thought of Arex, the fear that she might be in danger, had kept Gunthar moving even when it had meant leaving his fellow refugees behind.

He had to find her. Nothing else mattered, he just had to find her.

He was still climbing when he heard the noise, muffled by the staircase walls. He thought there was something in this hab-block with him at first, and he froze, sizing up his escape routes, until he realised that the noise was distant, amplified. Vox feedback, he thought hopefully? The emergency broadcasting system? Was it possible that power had been restored to Hieronymous City?

No, if that had been the case, the staircase would have been lit. A rescue flyer, then? Or a convoy of Imperial tanks with loudhailers to round up stranded civilians?

He raced along a hallway, threw open a window, and winced as the noise drilled into his skull and drove him to his knees. It seemed to go on forever, but then Gunthar realised that, in fact, it had stopped, leaving only a horrible echo of itself inside his head. Not a hope of rescue, then, but only further evidence of his world's damnation.

Dead beat, he laid his forehead on the cool windowsill and his borrowed lasgun on the floorboards beside him, and he wallowed in despair until the thought of Arex prompted him to pull himself together. Nothing had changed, Gunthar told himself. She was out there somewhere, his reason for going on.

He stepped out onto a skyway, and retraced his steps towards the PDF half-track he had seen earlier. He had decided to take it after all, to take that risk for a chance of finding Arex before nightfall. He knew something was wrong when he heard shouting and glass breaking and saw smoke drifting along the skyway junction ahead of him. He thought about turning back, but his prize was so close... He crept forward, faltering at the sound of a small explosion somewhere

to his right, but finally reaching the corner and peering cautiously around it.

There was a riot in progress. It must have been the noise that had sparked it. The zombies of this morning were now vandals and looters and arsonists, railing against the injustice of their fate by striking at the only targets they had, their own homes and each other. Gunthar could see the half-track, a short dash away from him, but it lay with its wheels upturned, its engine burning.

There was only one thing to do. Gripping his lasgun tightly, bending almost double, he hurried across the junction. He reached the far corner, trembling and panting, but relieved not to have been spotted. Then, focusing his mind on what was important to him, picturing Arex's face, Gunthar continued on his way, on foot.

As he moved deeper into the city, he found more towers still standing, more skyways intact. He followed a straight course along one such skyway, and, without the diversions and delays of his outward journey with the PDF convoy, he made better time than he had expected. He did encounter more rioters but, with the exception of one torch-wielding mob that pursued Gunthar for three blocks, few of them showed any interest in him and he became quite adept at avoiding them.

He was hungry and thirsty, but he couldn't spare the time to scavenge for food and water. He was chasing the daylight. The sun, however, was sinking in the west, and, not having yet seen a landmark he recognised, Gunthar resigned himself to the encroaching night. To make matters worse, he was starting to see new gaps in the skyline, evidence that the destruction hadn't been confined to the city's outskirts. Soon, he found himself once again treading carefully through a world of rubble and holes where hab-blocks had once stood and skyways that led to nowhere.

And it was shortly after this that he encountered the monsters again.

They were three floors below him, striding along a skyway that looped under his. There were four of them: cadavers forged from metal, like the ghouls in the rubble, but these creatures walked fully upright and they didn't wear the ghouls' macabre skin cloaks. In their bearings, in their movements, they were more like the soldiers he had seen last night, intelligent – and, like the soldiers, they were armed.

Their guns were huge, unwieldy, requiring two hands to lift them. Unholy energies roiled in their transparent chambers, glowing with the same putrid shade of green as had the stone column in the mine tunnel.

Gunthar dropped onto his stomach and waited for the cadavers to pass below him, praying that they hadn't seen him. He waited for a minute or two, then he raised his head tentatively until he could see through the railings beside him. To his relief, the skyway below was empty. However, his heart fluttered at the sight of a sign down there, a sign he hadn't noticed before. An obscene slogan had been daubed across the proud image of the Imperial Eagle, but beneath this, in bold black letters, were still displayed the familiar words *201st Floor Emporium*.

Gunthar knew where he was now: too close to his goal, to Arex, to surrender whatever the obstacles in his path. So, he pushed himself to his feet, raised his lasgun determinedly in front of him, and started walking again. Then, as soon as he could, he slipped into a network of alleyways, which he knew he could follow around to the rear of his own hab-block, remaining mostly concealed in the process.

That was the theory, at least. In practice, as Gunthar turned a sharp corner, the walls to each side of him dropped away and he stood on the edge of a precipice.

He couldn't believe it, at first. He had been so worried about the creatures, he had never stopped to think about this... He clung to the slim hope that he might be wrong, that his tower might have been one of those few still standing; from this vantage point, without the reference points of the surrounding towers to guide him, he couldn't be entirely sure... but it had to be so, he thought stubbornly because if it wasn't...

He turned and pelted back to the skyway, needing to know.

In his haste, he didn't see the four cadavers until he had almost run into them.

They turned their expressionless skull faces towards him, brought up their green-glowing guns, and Gunthar raised his weapon in return, but he fumbled with the grip and it flew out of his hands and clattered away from him. He dropped to his knees and fumbled after it, but it was too late now, so he just covered his head as best he could with his hands and he whimpered and he waited to die.

Gunthar was still waiting some twenty seconds later when at last he dared open his eyes and look up, to see the cadavers stalking away from him. They had spared his life. No, more humiliating than that, they had ignored him, like he was nothing to them: a worm, unworthy of the effort of crushing beneath their heels.

He reached for the lasgun, but hesitated. If he hadn't dropped it, if the cadavers had judged him to be a threat to them... No, he told himself sternly, he couldn't think about that now, couldn't let himself be paralysed by the thought of what might have been. He picked up the gun and he started forward, but he

didn't get far.

He could deny it no longer. The skyway stretched ahead of him as it always had, but the towers that had lined it, most of them, had crumbled. What had once been a road was now an unstable bridge, and Gunthar recognised the white sign for the autocab embarkation point that had stood outside his door, now teetering on the brink of the abyss, twisting in a soft breeze.

Arex, he thought. What did this mean for Arex? He had been so sure he would find her here, but if she had been... No, he thought. She must have escaped in time. His mind simply wouldn't accept any other possibility. Arex couldn't have been inside his hab-block when... But then, what would she have done next, when she couldn't find him? Where would she have gone? Gunthar didn't know, he couldn't guess.

He surrendered to fatigue, then, and sat down on the skyway, his knees pulled up to his chest. He thought he might cry, but his tear ducts proved dry. He had gone beyond mere misery. He felt desolated. He had spent a day grasping at hopes, and now the last of those hopes had trickled through his fingers. He had no purpose, no reason to move from his current position, so he sat where he was beneath the darkening sky, and if the patrolling cadavers or the ghouls had returned and decided that, this time, they would snuff out his meaningless life, then Gunthar would almost have welcomed them.

The droning of an engine pricked him out of his torpor. He had been hearing the sound for some minutes, he realised, and now a harsh, white light played over his face. Gunthar squinted upwards, saw the squat, black shape of a PDF flyer low above him, but by the time he thought about signalling to it, the vehicle and its searchlight beam had passed on. Why would it have stopped for him, anyway?

Gunthar was cold. He hadn't felt it before, hadn't noticed as the night had well and truly taken hold around him, but now he started to think about finding shelter.

The night was green, another thing he hadn't registered until now. He thought his eyes were playing tricks on him, still scarred by the searchlight, but when he looked up he could see it: a strobing green light in the sky to the north-north-east. Green like the artefact in the mine tunnel, green like the cadaverous creatures' guns. He didn't want to think about what that might mean.

The sound of the flyer was growing louder again. It had banked around and was returning, even lower than it had been before – and as it passed over

Gunthar's head for a second time, he realised that something inexplicable was happening.

It was coming in for a landing.

The flyer set down, at last, about two hundred metres away from Gunthar, back along the skyway, and he was running towards it before its engines had powered down.

Then the first soldiers emerged from the troop compartment, and he came to a startled halt. They were skull-faced creatures, like the ones he had seen through the window last night, with their black greatcoats and breathing tubes. But then, thought Gunthar, what were they doing in a PDF vehicle?

They were fanning out as if they were looking for something, and among them a squat, dark-skinned man with an egg-shaped head pored over a small black handset and appeared to be directing them in their search. He wore the red robes of the Martian Priesthood, and a sturdy servo-arm protruded from his spine and arched over his shoulder, its claw fingers twitching. An engineeer, then.

The soldiers were coming Gunthar's way, and he barely had time to think about running for cover before one of them called to him, 'We are looking for a Caucasian female, approximately one point seven metres tall, with brown hair and green eyes.'

'Arex!' Gunthar exclaimed. 'You mean Arex?' The description could have fitted any number of women, but somehow he just knew it had referred to her.

The soldier had reached him, and Gunthar saw what he had missed in the dark, last night, from above: the flashes on his greatcoat shoulders, the aquila symbol on his helmet. 'You... you're Imperial Guard,' he stammered. 'You're human?'

'We are searching for Lady Hanrik. Have you seen her?'

'No, I... I heard she might have been here, but I haven't... I thought you were them. Those masks you wear, I thought you were the creatures.'

The Guardsman wasn't listening. He cocked his head as if in response to a voice that Gunthar couldn't hear, then he turned and strode away, but Gunthar had to know more. He lunged after the Guardsman, and took him by the shoulder. 'Wait,' he cried, 'how did you know... Is Lady Hanrik still alive? Has she been in touch? Has she--?'

A flash of green light, and his words were swallowed by an involuntary scream.

The Guardsman had disintegrated, like the servitor in the mine tunnel had been disintegrated, layer by layer in a fraction of a second. Gunthar had been looking

into the empty eyes of his metallic skull mask, then at his crumbling skeleton and in between, a searing, flash-frame image of a human face, as expressionless as the mask had been, its muscles only just beginning to contract in pain and horror.

The cadavers were back, and they were marching upon the Guardsmen, their heavy weapons spitting out jagged forks of green energy. The Guardsmen returned fire instantly. Their las-beams glanced off their attackers, but a few of them were armed with bigger guns and these proved far more effective. Two of the four cadavers were vaporised, as Gunthar saw the engineer scuttling for the cover of the flyer and did likewise. He blundered into a Guardsman's sights, and was pushed aside roughly. 'Where do you think you're running to?' the Guardsman growled. 'You have a weapon in your hands, don't you? For the Emperor's sake, use it!'

The last thing Gunthar wanted to do was to use his lasgun, call attention to himself, but cowed by the Guardsman's words he crouched beside the flyer's landing struts, steadied the weapon's butt against his shoulder and rested his finger on its trigger.

The gun was shaking too much, to begin with, for him to find anything through its sights. He took a deep breath, held it, and tried to steady himself. Secretly, he hoped – and expected – that the fighting would be over before he could get off a shot. The cadavers were outnumbered, after all, and down to half strength already. Surveying the battlefield, Gunthar saw a third of them incinerated, a fourth, and...

More of them. He didn't know where they had come from, hadn't seen them arriving, but at least three more... no, four, and the Guardsman that had snapped at him was the next to be struck by their emerald beams, to die at Gunthar's side, the stink of ozone and burnt flesh filling his nostrils.

One of the cadavers turned his way and, unexpectedly, a dead calm settled over him.

He had been in this situation a thousand times before, in his dreams. He knew exactly what to do, what the Emperor expected of him, and no longer was there any fear attached to that proposition. Gunthar's old life seemed a long way behind him, as if it had been lived by somebody else. His home, his job, Arex: all gone. His local bar, the emporium, the eatery to which he had taken her...

The image of the lex-scribe, Kreuz, popped unbidden into Gunthar's head. He would probably never see her again either. He hoped she had made it to safety.

Everything he had done, everything he had ever strived for, the floors he had

climbed, it all amounted to nothing. The lasgun in his hands and the enemy in his sights, they were all that mattered now, they were his life. He had nothing left to lose.

So, he squeezed his trigger and, although his first shot missed, he fired again and again and again. Then he remembered from the newsreels that lasguns had a Full Auto setting and found the relevant switch, thumbing it over. He peppered the cadaverous creatures with las-beams until at last they began to fall – and although Gunthar couldn't tell if his own efforts were contributing at all to that outcome, he took a certain grim satisfaction in being there, in taking part, in fighting back.

Suddenly his lasgun let out a plaintive whine and died on him; he was left purposeless and afraid again. He rattled the power pack, pulled it from its housing, thrust it back in, tried to coax a few extra beams out of it, all in vain. He could have howled with frustration. Why hadn't he thought to take Weber's spare packs?

Fortunately, only one of the cadavers remained standing, and now, with a fierce inrush of air, it disappeared and took the bodies of the others – those that had not been melted – along with it. Gunthar was at once relieved to see them go, and appalled at this further display of their power. He wasn't sure how many Guardsmen had perished in the brief combat – the green guns had left behind no corpses to count – but there were only five survivors, not counting the engineeer and the flyer pilot, a boggle-eyed servitor that was just emerging from beneath its seat.

The Guardsmen wasted no time getting their breath back. They resumed their search of the skyway, and the man whom Gunthar took to be their sergeant motioned to the engineeer to join them, which he did. He had taken out his handset again, and Gunthar saw now that a wire ran from it and was plugged directly into the engineeer's eye.

Little more than a minute later, the Guardsmen converged upon a particular spot, and sifted through the rubble until one of them recovered something small and red. He showed this to the engineeer, who nodded grimly. Then the sergeant gave an order, and the soldiers came tramping back towards Gunthar at double-time.

'I don't understand,' he said. 'Where's Arex? I thought you were looking for her.'

'Lady Hanrik is not here,' said the sergeant.

'How can you be so sure? She could be hiding in one of these buildings.'

‘She is not here.’

The flyer’s engines were starting to whine again. The last of the Guardsmen disappeared into its rear, and the sergeant made to follow. ‘Wait,’ said Gunthar. ‘Take me with you. Please, take me with you.’ The sergeant regarded him for an intolerable moment, and Gunthar felt sure his request would be refused.

Then he heard a familiar inrush of air, and he whirled around to find the cadavers returning in force. There were four more directly in front of him, another four appearing along the skyway, more emerging from the remaining buildings. Gunthar brought up his lasgun, though he knew it was useless, but found himself grabbed from behind, yanked off his feet and bundled into the flyer. The air outside crackled green as the sergeant leapt after him, screaming at the pilot to take off.

As the flyer lifted sluggishly into the air, something slammed into its side, throwing the Guardsmen off their wooden benches and Gunthar into the midst of them. The vehicle listed, its engines spluttering and groaning. Gunthar thought it might crash, but then it pulled upwards and away.

‘We were lucky,’ said the engineeer. ‘That was just a glancing blow. If those gauss beams had struck the engines, they would have torn right through them.’

Gunthar perched on the end of a bench, and squirmed beneath the blank stares of four skull-masked Guardsmen, each of them doubtless wondering what he was doing here in the place of one of their fallen comrades. He didn’t dare question them about their mission, although he ached for news of Arex. Then he saw that the engineeer was holding in his lap a red amecyte necklace – the object from the rubble – and he recognised it at once. ‘Where did you get that?’ he demanded. ‘That was Arex’s necklace. It was a gift from her late mother, she always wore it.’

‘This is what we were sent here to find,’ said the engineeer. ‘There’s a tracking device inside one of these gemstones, which the governor hoped might lead us to his niece. Unfortunately, as you can see, she isn’t wearing it now. We found the necklace on the skyway. Its clasp was broken.’

‘Then she *was* here!’ cried Gunthar. ‘Don’t you see? This means she was here, and she... She can’t have gone far. We have to turn back. We can still find her.’

The sergeant shook his head firmly. ‘Even if the girl has survived–’

‘She’s alive. She has to be. I’d have felt it if... Trust me, Arex is alive.’

‘Even if she has survived,’ the sergeant repeated, ‘it has been almost twenty hours since her position was last verified. She could have reached almost any point in the city in that time. We do not have the resources to locate her, and the

risk—'

'Take me back down there,' said Gunthar. 'It's safe for me, the creatures were ignoring me. I can search the buildings until... Just take me back down!'

He was being unreasonable, he knew that, and the sergeant chose not to dignify his pleadings with a response. Still, Gunthar ached with the knowledge that he had been so close to the woman he loved only to have turned his back on her. He had been tested, he thought, and his faith and his courage found wanting. He had failed her.

He held tight to the lasgun in his lap, clenched his teeth and, as the flyer carried him away from the city that had once been his home, further and further away from Arex, he made a silent vow to her, to himself, to the Emperor.

He swore that, somehow, some day, he would return.



CHAPTER TWELVE

They were close to the source of the green light now.

Every time it pulsed over them, Trooper Carwen felt a strong wave of nausea. He could see from the grimaces of his three remaining squad mates that they felt it too. The masked Krieg grenadiers, however, gave away nothing as always.

They had holed up in an empty hab-block for most of the morning. Carwen hadn't been able to sleep for nightmares, and when he had dozed off for an hour or two, he had been woken by a powerful earth tremor that had shaken the plaster off the walls. Shortly after this, the Krieg lieutenant had received new orders.

His briefing had been short and to the point. The platoon and its four new recruits were to investigate reports of a new necron construct at the heart of the city. Outnumbered as they were, they were to avoid engagement with the enemy.

They began by climbing to the highest floor they could. Intelligence gathered by their Command HQ from PDF squads on the ground had suggested that the necrons were concentrated on the lower floors and around the central sector, so they had been able to move relatively freely throughout the day.

As night had fallen, however, progress had become slower. The grenadiers had sent scouts ahead of them and, when a necron patrol had been sighted, they had melted into nooks and shadows and waited until the way was clear again. They had rested just once during this time, for less than twenty minutes, and Carwen was footsore and light-headed with exhaustion but he didn't dare complain.

A voice buzzed through the comm-bead the quartermaster had provided for him: a sub-vocalised report to the platoon from their current scout. *'I can see it,'* he said.

A minute later, they reached the end of the skyway they had been following, and a row of six lifter cages with platforms inside three of them. The waiting scout indicated the cages with a flick of his hellgun, though it was already apparent to Carwen that the green light emanated from beyond these. The

soldiers crowded onto the platforms to look down through the metal mesh behind them, and now Carwen really did want to vomit, his eyes tearing as he suppressed the reflex.

He could hardly take in the scale of what he was seeing. The pyramid was at least a kilometre away from him, laterally speaking, but its sheer size made it appear far closer. It was probably as tall as the city's shorter towers, though it was difficult to estimate its height with any accuracy because the towers around it had been razed. In the green light, Carwen could see all the way down to the ground, and to the colossal heaps of rubble stacked around the pyramid's base.

The pyramid was fashioned from a smooth, black stone, apparently unweathered by its millennia underground. Its four walls didn't quite meet at their apex, providing instead a square hollow for a ball of green flame, from which intermittent sparks lashed out to ignite the dark sky. Stamped into the elevation facing Carwen was an enormous gold symbol, a circle with lines emanating from its radius, akin to a stylised drawing of a sun, and beneath this there was an opening, a gateway in the black wall, through which burnt more of that hateful green light.

There were figures moving before the gateway, too distant for Carwen to identify. They swarmed over the rubble and appeared to be clearing it away, hauling much of it into the pyramid in barrows.

He had to turn away, turn his back to the light. He was relieved when, a moment behind him, the rest of the platoon pulled back too. *'I've reported our findings to Command HQ,'* came the lieutenant's voice through Carwen's comm-bead. *'They want the beacon atop the pyramid destroyed. I have advised that it is beyond the range of our weapons, and I see no obvious way of climbing up to it.'* Carwen was glad to hear it. The last thing he wanted was to get any closer to that monstrous construct. Then the lieutenant continued: *'We are left, therefore, with a single option: to find a way up from the inside.'*

They trudged back the way they had come for a couple of kilometres before they broke into a luxury-hab that must have belonged to a lord. He had left his furnishings behind when he left, and as Carwen sank into a bed in the servants' quarters he reflected ironically that he had never experienced such comfort. He didn't expect to be able to sleep, but exhaustion soon claimed him. Even so, his dreams were haunted by glowing green ghouls.

He was woken late in the morning for watch duty. For three hours, he was stationed behind the blown-out window of an eatery across the skyway, his

orders to lead any too-curious necrons away from the luxury-hab entrance. This, he knew, would have cost him his life, so Carwen was relieved to reach the end of his shift without incident.

They planned to head out at sunset, so that night would cover them as they headed downwards, deeper into the necrons' heartland. Carwen and the other three PDF men passed the remainder of the afternoon, and distracted their minds, with a few hands of cards. They invited the grenadiers to join them, but each of them declined.

Carwen had expected that, by now, he would have known the men of Krieg a little better, established a bond with them, but he felt as uneasy around them as he ever had. They didn't make small talk; they hardly spoke at all. They ate by smuggling ration bars beneath their skull masks, so that after almost two days with them Carwen still hadn't seen their faces. He didn't even know their names.

Too soon, they were on the move again, descending into the bowels of the city. Forty floors down, they disturbed a handful of deformed figures that skittered off into the night, but two grenadiers hunted down the slowest of them and confirmed that it wasn't a necron, just a frightened mutant that had been climbing this tower to escape a worse horror than itself. The lieutenant satisfied himself that the mutant had no information worth knowing before he shot it dead, but the incident left Carwen more apprehensive than ever.

The mutants had done one favour for the soldiers: in their desperation, they had broken through the barriers on the staircase that would normally have kept them below. Even so, Carwen knew when he was stepping into mutant territory. A rotten stench pervaded the air, and the walls were thick with graffiti, much of it scrawled in blood or faeces. After a few flights, he was breathing shallowly through his hands, envying the Krieg men their rebreather units.

An hour or so later, they left the staircase and moved into a row of small, shabby habs. Most of the windows were boarded up, but they found one where a corner of the wood had rotted away and it was possible to see through the shattered pane to the pyramid below. The lieutenant designated this as his platoon's sentry point and, for the rest of the night and the following day, they took turns to observe the activity at the pyramid's entrance. Carwen was spared this duty, and so never got to see what was outside the window. However, lying on a flea-bitten bunk a few rooms down, he could hear the unceasing sounds of activity from outside and he imagined the necrons were right beside him, right on the other side of a thin outer wall.

The conclusion of the sentries was disappointing. They had been unable to discern a pattern to the necrons' movements, and certainly there had been no time in the past twenty-five hours when the gateway had been left unattended. Moreover, the necrons' numbers had been swelled by an army of mutant slaves. Their purpose was unclear – no one could understand what the necrons would want with those filthy aberrations – but it added to the odds against the Krieg men and their allies all the same.

If Carwen had hoped, however, that the lieutenant would report this fact to Command HQ, that this insane operation would be called off, then he was to be disappointed too. 'We will divide into our three squads,' the Krieg officer decreed, addressing his platoon in the cramped confines of the hallway outside their rooms, 'two to attack the necrons simultaneously from opposite directions, to divert as many of them as they can from the tomb. Once this has been achieved, I will lead my command squad through the middle, and we will attempt to penetrate the gateway.'

Carwen had been assigned to a squad three days ago, but he couldn't tell their watchmasters – the Krieg equivalent of sergeants – apart, so it was only when one of them snapped his name that he knew who to assemble with. Parvel followed him, while the other two PDF troopers went to the far end of the hallway. The command squad, left standing in the middle, was Krieg only, a little larger than the others, and it had the lieutenant, the quartermaster and the majority of the melta guns.

It was only now that Carwen realised his seven-man squad's true purpose. They were like the men with the bayonets in the combat with the ghouls. The lieutenant expected them to die, and the Krieg grenadiers were certainly aware of this, but as Carwen had come to expect by now they had nothing to say on the subject.

They were to approach the pyramid from the north. They retraced their steps up several flights of stairs until they found a skyway – more a dilapidated bridge – that would take them to where they needed to be.

The bridge ran parallel to the pyramid's northern elevation, and, although the grenadiers kept their heads down as they crossed it, Carwen couldn't resist a glance upwards. He regretted his curiosity immediately because, impressive as the pyramid had been from above, it was a far more intimidating sight from below. He had to crane his neck to find its upper reaches. It blotted out the sky, and seemed to suck the pale moonlight into itself, spewing out its own hellish green light instead.

Carwen had hoped that, somewhere, there might be a skyway intact, low and close enough to the pyramid for his squad to snipe at its necron guardians from above. It was now clear, however, that no such skyway had survived, if one had ever existed. The only way to approach the necrons' tomb was along the ground.

So it was, then, that Carwen first set foot in a world he had prayed he would never see, a world that throughout his childhood had been synonymous with the worst of all mythical hells. The PDF had forsaken this world, as had the proctors and the city administrators, and no wonder. Its roads were ankle-deep with sewage, which bubbled up through metal gratings from a pipe system long since outgrown. There wasn't a wall here that hadn't been scorched by fire, and the stink of the mutant was everywhere. This was the world that, behind the walls of his PDF base, Carwen had increasingly heard referred to as 'the undercity', the world the authorities had talked of plascreting over. This was his world, he thought with a shiver. This was what Hieronymous Theta looked like from the ground, what its towers were built upon.

The first road the squad took was completely blocked by debris. They had to back up and circle a block, but at last they found themselves within sight of the pyramid's side wall, less than a hundred metres from its north-west corner. There was no sign of life here, but still they advanced stealthily, one by one, through towering heaps of rubble. Their caution paid off as, without warning, two necrons rounded the corner ahead of them. The watchmaster signalled his men to stay down, waited until the necrons had passed their hiding place by, then stepped out behind them and vaporised both with a single shot from the squad's only melta gun.

They waited, then, for a vox to confirm that the second distraction squad was also in position. Once they had received it, the watchmaster ordered them forwards. Carwen had half expected that, as soon as they rounded the front corner of the pyramid, they would come under fire from the necrons at the gateway, but of course that gateway was still some way distant and shielded from their view by the heaps of rubble.

For the first time, the young trooper missed his lasgun. The hellgun may have been more powerful, but the trade-off for this was a far shorter range. If his squad was going to worry the necrons, they would have to get close to them, a lot closer than Carwen was remotely comfortable with.

As it happened, the first enemy they encountered was a mutant. It was scavenging through the rubble, and stepped into their midst before it had seen

them. Carwen brought up his gun but heard the watchmaster's voice in his ear, ordering his men to stay their fire. Two grenadiers seized the terrified creature and broke its scrawny neck before it could let out a warning cry. Then they waited in tense silence to learn if the scuffle had attracted attention to their position.

Barely had they started forward again when the fighting began in earnest.

The reports of alien weapons echoed around Carwen, and he dropped to his haunches and looked around in fright for their source. By the time the truth had dawned upon him – that it wasn't his squad that had come under fire – the watchmaster was screaming at his men, out loud rather than through the comm-beads, to attack.

So, Carwen followed a grenadier around a rubble heap, and he saw them: the necrons. Three or four score of them, more than there had appeared to be from above, but what most surprised him was that there were almost as many mutant slaves. His throat dried at the realisation of just how badly his platoon was outnumbered.

Two things worked in their favour, the first that a large space had been cleared in front of the pyramid's gateway so the Krieg squads were both shooting into a wide open arena from cover. The second was that the other squad had been discovered first, and so most of the necrons had turned to face them. Carwen's Krieg comrades made full use of the targets thus presented to them, and a volley of hellgun beams found their marks, striking between metallic shoulder blades.

To Carwen's dismay, none of the necrons fell. He wasn't sure if this was because they were too far away for the full strength of the beams to reach them. As the necrons turned, however, as they unleashed forks of green lightning upon this second front, he was left in no doubt about one unpalatable fact: that the necrons' great guns were blessed with both power and range.

A grenadier died in a flash of bright green, and Carwen ducked behind a rubble heap but could feel beams slamming into its far side, blasting away at his cover. *'That's it,'* came the calm voice of the watchmaster in his ear, *'we've got their attention. Now start to pull back, but keep firing. Draw the necrons away from the gateway.'*

Carwen peered around the edge of the rubble, and his heart leapt at the sight of a row of four necrons marching unhurriedly towards him. They herded six mutants ahead of them, as living shields, and it was clear from the terror in those aberrations' eyes that they weren't willing volunteers.

Carwen loosed off six shots, picking off two mutants, and three more were

slain by the grenadiers as was one of their cadaverous masters. The remaining necrons were now too close for comfort, and Carwen looked for a safer position to fall back to. He sprinted for a gap between two rubble heaps, but green lightning cut across his path and, although a grenadier beside him kept running and made it to his goal, Carwen shied away, back to where he had started.

The necrons were almost upon him, were about to round the rubble heap and find him exposed unless he got out of sight, and the only way he could see to do this was to duck behind that same heap, to keep it between him and them. It meant getting closer to the pyramid, but Carwen didn't have time to be worried about that now. The necrons appeared before he could fully conceal himself. He crouched down, holding his breath, expecting them to turn and find him at any moment.

Thankfully, they were distracted by hellgun fire, and they stomped off in pursuit of Carwen's comrades. Only now did the young trooper stop to consider that he had allowed the necrons to cut off his escape route, such as it had been, to surround him. He took a few deep breaths to calm the queasy feeling in his stomach, and reminded himself that he had never expected to survive this day anyway.

More voices spoke in his comm-bead, and Carwen felt numb as two further casualties were reported, one of them Trooper Parvel, but there was some good news. The watchmaster had waited for the necrons to close to melta range; now, he sprung an ambush upon them. It sounded as if he was holding his foes at bay, destroying more than his fair share, his main concern that there weren't enough of them.

'We've lured thirteen or fourteen necrons away from the gateway so far. We need to double that number, for the command squad to stand a fighting chance.'

Carwen knew what he had to do.

'The necrons,' he sub-vocalised, 'I've... managed to slip behind them. I'm going to try... I'm going to get closer up to the pyramid, fire on them again. Maybe, if I can move fast enough and stay out of their sight, I can convince them there's more than... that there's a third squad attacking them, and then maybe they might...'

'The Emperor be with you, Trooper Carwen,' said the watchmaster brusquely.

He had drawn as close to the gateway as he dared. He was practically in the necrons' midst now; he could hear them labouring in the rubble just metres away from him, apparently so confident in their fellows' ability to repulse the Death

Korps' two-pronged attack upon them that they had simply returned to their work.

He was too close, he thought. There was no way he could shoot at a necron without being seen. Then it occurred to him that he had no need to.

He aimed his hellgun at the edge of a rubble heap and fired, hoping the impact would drown out the gun's report, confuse the necrons into believing that the shot had originated from over there. Another two wild shots in the opposite direction, then two into the air, then Carwen was running, and a green beam crackled past his ear and he didn't dare stop to see how many more necrons his tactics had drawn out.

'The watchmaster's down!' came a voice in his comm-bead. *'Repeat, the watchmaster is down. I'm the only one left. It's up to you now, Lieutenant, we have done all we can, and may the Emperor have mercy on our worthless—'*

Carwen rounded a rubble heap, found a figure in front of him, snapped up his gun, realised that it was just a man: a dishevelled, frightened man, his workers' smock in tatters, staggering beneath the weight of a hunk of plascrete. A necron slave, evidently, like the mutants, looking at the soldier with a desperate appeal in his eyes.

'I can't help you,' he said wretchedly. 'I'm sorry, but you should get as far away from me as you can. The necrons are behind me, and you don't want them thinking...'

The man was rooted to the spot. Carwen stepped forward, made to give him an encouraging push in the right direction – the man's eyes flashed and, with a guttural snarl, he smashed his plascrete hunk into the side of Carwen's head.

He was lying on the ground with no memory of having fallen. His head was numb and, when his hand brushed against it, it came away tacky. He had dropped his hellgun and couldn't raise his head to find it, his neck muscles felt like sponges... and the necrons were here, their metallic feet tramping down the rubble beside him.

A necron skull loomed over Carwen; he was staring helplessly into its gun barrel, and he swore he could see the green lightning sparking in its depths, or maybe it was just the light patterns in his eyes. Then the necron turned, stalked away from him, and Carwen's stomach shook with silent, giddy laughter and he thanked the Emperor because in the end he had been one of the lucky ones, he wasn't going to die like that.

His comm-bead was spitting static. Carwen's eyes closed, and from the direction of the pyramid he could hear the command squad's hellguns and

meltas, and the answering reports of the necrons' guns, like the tearing of cloth, and he thought at first that the latter sounds were outnumbered by the former, but the hellguns and the meltas were falling silent one by one, while the necron guns only seemed to increase in number until they were the only ones left firing.

The last thing he heard was a voice in his ear, the voice of the human slave that had laid Carwen low. 'The Emperor is dead,' the voice hissed. 'We have new gods now.'



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

For the twenty-third time, Costellin woke to the sound of explosions from Hieronymous City. He almost didn't register it at first, having grown well used to the constant percussive rumbling. He climbed out of the camp bed that, with due regard for the lack of billets at the space port, he had set up in his office. Sunlight streamed in through his window, and Hanrik's PDF draftees were already training on the ramp.

Forty minutes later, washed, shaved and kitted out in the clean uniform that an aide had laid out for him, he reported to Colonel 186's office for what had become their regular morning briefing. Governor-General Hanrik was there too, having learned of these briefings two weeks ago and invited himself to them.

The colonel was fielding a barrage of reports from his aides at the vox-caster, and it was some time before he could give his fellow officers his full attention, although by then Costellin had gleaned much about the events of the night anyway.

'I take it the skirmish to the north is concluded,' he said.

The colonel nodded. 'The necrons retreated at 05.19, or rather—'

'Or rather, they disappeared again.'

'Nevertheless,' said the colonel, 'necron casualties were particularly heavy in the last hour of fighting. I have congratulated Colonel 42 on a battle well won.'

'What about our side?' asked Hanrik. 'What casualties did we take?'

'Those figures are not yet available,' said the colonel.

'Best estimate?' Costellin prodded him.

'We lost something in the region of eighteen hundred men.'

Costellin whistled through his teeth. 'More than a third of the 42nd's remaining complement. I suggest we pray the necrons don't return in a hurry.'

The colonel was unfolding a brittle, yellowed paper map of the city, laying it out on his desk between them. 'The generals consider that unlikely,' he said.

'This necron force was the largest we have seen yet, and the defeat handed to

them a decisive one. We must have exhausted a good proportion of their resources too.'

'You said the same after last week's attack to the east.'

'The important thing is that, in each case, the line was held against an enemy that was clearly desperate to break through. Our strategy is proving sound.'

'Perhaps,' conceded Costellin. 'The question is, what proportion of their resources can the necrons replenish? Their beacon is still transmitting despite our tech-priests' most strenuous attempts to block the signal.'

'Perhaps you have forgotten, Commissar Costellin,' said the colonel, 'that our own reinforcements are scheduled to arrive in two days.'

'I haven't forgotten,' said Costellin. 'We will have to revise our planned troop allocations, however. I expect that, after last night, the generals will be assigning more of the new recruits to the 42nd regiment.'

'We still have the PDF,' offered Hanrik. 'Recruitment and training is going well. I can spare eighteen, maybe twenty platoons. We can send them to bolster the 42nd in the short term, and also start to extend the draft to other cities. The only problem, as I've mentioned before, is equipment for the newer recruits. We don't have the—'

'Send your men,' said the colonel. 'The quartermasters of the 42nd will do what they can to equip them.'

'Unfortunately,' said Costellin, 'the necrons' gauss weaponry doesn't leave a great deal behind. When we lose a man, we tend to lose everything he was carrying.'

'The Emperor will provide,' said the colonel.

Costellin wasn't so sure, but then he was also aware that, increasingly, he was sounding like the voice of doom at these meetings – and perhaps, he thought, the colonel was right. The Death Korps had made good progress these past weeks, closing their ring of steel about the city, and although his own regiment had not yet seen combat, both the 42nd and the 81st had won impressive victories. He wouldn't have dreamed it possible, but it did seem the necrons were on the back foot. Still, he felt that somebody had to sound a note of caution. Somebody had to remember that they were still facing perhaps the greatest threat known to the Imperium.

Even Hanrik had come round somewhat to the colonel's way of thinking. Since the loss of his niece, he had certainly been more willing to offer his citizens, the people he had once been so desperate to protect, as sacrifices in the cause of winning this war.

‘I am awaiting sight of Colonel 42’s report,’ said the colonel, ‘into the enemy’s tactics in this latest encounter. In particular, I am interested in fresh insights into the nature of this new necron breed and how their abilities might be countered.’

Hanrik looked blank, so Costellin explained to him, ‘They appeared on the battlefield late last night: like half-formed necrons with no lower bodies, only spinal columns, but they can hover like ghosts and become insubstantial like ghosts too – until they get close enough to use the surgical blades they have in place of their hands, and then they are only too corporeal.’

‘I suggest we adjourn this meeting for now,’ said the colonel, ‘and reconvene when that report is available.’

It was a little over two hours later that Costellin heard a familiar insistent knocking at his door, and Hanrik let himself in. ‘I’m not disturbing you?’ presumed the governor-general, already helping himself to a seat.

‘I was about to take a stroll along the front lines,’ said Costellin, ‘spread the news of our glorious triumph last night. I believe I have collected sufficient anecdotal evidence of remarkable heroism against overwhelming odds.’

‘Hmm, yes. That is what I wished to discuss with you, in a way.’

Costellin raised an inquisitive eyebrow, inviting Hanrik to continue.

‘Last night. I was thinking about the necron attack, and I wondered, why there? Why attempt to break out of the city to the north when the regiment to the east, the 81st, was still depleted from their previous attempt? The colonel said it himself, this was the largest necron force we have seen. If they had sent that force against the 81st regiment, we may not have been celebrating a victory now.’

‘You have a theory?’ asked Costellin.

‘Of course, it could just be that the necrons’ intelligence was defective.’

‘Indeed. For all they knew, we could have been expecting a second attack to the east and built up our forces there.’

‘But I’ve been looking at some old schematics, and I’d like to hear what you make of this before I take it to the colonel.’

Hanrik handed a memory spool to Costellin, who loaded it into his desk’s hololith projector. A moment later, a grainy image flickered to life between them: an architect’s plan of Hieronymous City’s upper skyways. Hanrik manipulated the controls, scrolling through several more such images until he found the right one.

‘This,’ he said, describing a line across it with a fleshy thumb, ‘is as far as the

81st regiment had reached when the necrons made their move against them, and this—’ He scrolled to another plan. ‘—this is where they attacked the 42nd.’ He flicked back and forth between the two plans, and asked if Costellin had noticed anything about them. Costellin shook his head, so Hanrik zoomed to a particular building on the first, and now the commissar leaned forward, astounded, in his seat.

‘It could be a coincidence, of course,’ said Hanrik.

‘It could,’ agreed Costellin, ‘but if it isn’t... I think you’re right, Hanrik. I think we should take this information to the colonel immediately, because I think... I think you may just have found the necrons’ weakness.’

Colonel 186’s office was filled almost to bursting point. Crowded around his desk were numerous aides, his four company commanders and a couple of tech-priests. Hanrik, too, was flanked by a small contingent of PDF officers, and in the midst of all this stood a solitary young trooper, a recent recruit to judge by the thrown-together look of his scarlet and purple uniform.

‘Of course,’ Hanrik was saying, his chest swelling with importance as he held the floor, ‘as soon as the power went out, I despatched men to the main generatorum.’

‘None of them made it there,’ said the colonel, ‘but until now it was assumed that, in common with numerous other PDF squads inside the city, they had been ambushed. That assumption was challenged this morning.’

Hanrik took up the commentary, keen to explain the circumstances of his vital discovery, until the colonel grew impatient with him and interrupted again.

‘It seems,’ he said, ‘that both the 42nd and the 81st regiments were attacked as they neared the sites of the city’s secondary generatorums.’

‘We thought,’ said Hanrik, ‘that the power cut was an act of sabotage intended to panic the civilian populace and hamper our evacuation efforts, but what if it was more than that? What if our power is being drained for a purpose?’

‘Each time we have encountered the necrons,’ said the colonel, ‘their numbers have grown. We don’t know if there are still more asleep in that tomb of theirs or if they are pulling in reinforcements from further afield somehow. Either way—’

‘Either way,’ said Hanrik, ‘what if they are using our own power to achieve it? What if they can’t wake their troops or... or operate their beacon without it?’

‘For that matter,’ said one of the tech-priests, ‘we have all been frustrated by the necrons’ ability to regenerate themselves after almost any wound. It could be that the power to do this too emanates not from within their tomb but from

without.'

The colonel called up the hololithic plans that Costellin had seen before. 'There are three remaining generatorums in the city,' he announced, gesturing with a pointer.

'And, given the destruction the necrons have wrought,' Costellin put in, 'the fact that all three are still standing is suggestive in itself.'

'At their current rate of progress, the 103rd should flatten this site, to the south, in approximately three and a half days, while our own regiment will reach the one here a little over two days after. That leaves only the central-most and largest installation, located here.' The colonel indicated a site much deeper into the city.

'May I presume, sir,' spoke up one of the company commanders, 'that the intention is to send in a team to take out that generatorum? If so, I would like to volunteer my company to undertake that mission, and myself to lead it.'

'Thank you, Major Alpha,' said the colonel. 'That is indeed the plan, and the generals have asked this regiment to execute it. However, our primary concern is still the maintenance of our cordon about the city, and I will need all my senior officers to defend against a likely attack as we near the west-side generatorum.'

'The bright side of that, I suppose,' mused Costellin, 'is that it should keep the bulk of the necron army occupied. Even so, it will be difficult to slip a force of any useful size past them. They have shot down most of Hanrik's flyers already.'

'That,' said Hanrik with a measure of self-satisfaction, 'is where Trooper Soreson comes in.' All eyes turned towards the young trooper, who looked uncomfortable with the attention. 'A squad of grenadiers under my command extracted Soreson from the city three weeks ago. He was fighting back against the necrons single-handed. As you can see, we immediately signed him up for the Planetary Defence Force. Before our current troubles, however, Mr Soreson was a mine overseer.'

'Hieronymous City,' said the colonel, 'stands above an extensive network of mine tunnels. Trooper Soreson can guide our infiltration team through these.'

'Right under the necrons' feet,' said Costellin approvingly. 'Let us just pray that, when their tomb emerged, none of them remained underground.'

'There is a mine entrance less than two blocks away from the main generatorum, sir,' said Soreson. 'If we can reach that...'

'Unfortunately,' said Hanrik, 'we have no up-to-date plans of the tunnel system, such information was lost in the evacuation. As you have just heard, however, Trooper Soreson knows those tunnels like he knows the back of his

hand.'

Soreson, for his part, seemed a lot less sure of this than the Governor-General was. 'The tunnels don't all link up, though,' he volunteered. 'To reach that mine entrance, we would have to break through two, maybe three walls.'

'Thin walls,' Hanrik added quickly. 'We've been mining this ground for generations. Even where the tunnels don't quite connect, they do run close to each other.'

'I believe, sir, we still have an old burrowing vehicle aboard the *Memento Mori*,' offered the second tech-priest.

'A Termite,' recalled Costellin, 'but its engines make one Golden Throne of a racket. If these tunnels do run as close to each other as the Governor-General suggests, then a handful of mining charges may be rather more discreet.'

'Have the Termite brought down,' the colonel instructed an aide, 'in case of need. In the meantime, General Hanrik, if you could find me some mining charges and have Trooper Soreson update your most recent plan of those tunnels... Major Alpha, I will take you up on that offer of troops, I think: a grenadier platoon from you, and also one from Gamma Company, to be led by...'

Costellin stiffened as he realised that the colonel had turned his gaze upon him.

'Commissar, I know I cannot order you to do this, but since our losses on Dask you are the regiment's most experienced officer.'

It was hardly an unprecedented request, and Costellin was certainly not one to hide behind a desk when the fighting started. However, he was used to choosing his own battles, and with considerably more regard for his own safety than the Death Korps officers tended to display for theirs. He had certainly never faced necrons before.

Momentarily, he wondered if the colonel was doing this on purpose, ridding himself of a commissar determined to question his every utterance. He seemed to have placed an undue stress on the word 'experienced', as if in judgement of Costellin's longevity, a suggestion that a braver man than he would have been long since dead by now.

'It goes without saying, of course,' said the colonel, 'that you would be doing the Emperor a considerable service.'

'When you put it like that,' said Costellin, tight-lipped, resenting the almost tangible expectations of the officers around him, 'then how can I possibly decline?'

The following morning's briefing was a tense affair, at least so it seemed to Costellin.

They discussed the timing of his mission, and agreed – or rather, Colonel 186 decreed – that he would set off two days hence at which point, if the necrons ran true to form, they would be busy defending the generatorum to the south from the artillery of the Krieg 103rd. Costellin's team would go as far as the mine tunnels would take them, then await the colonel's signal.

Their attack would be timed to coincide with the bombardment of the west-side generatorum. Costellin had to admit it to himself: the colonel was giving him every chance he could to succeed. With the Emperor's favour, it was possible he might just make it in and out of the city without encountering a single necron.

Possible, Costellin thought, but almost vanishingly unlikely.

They were taking the Termite, after all. Hanrik didn't yet have Trooper Soreson's updated map and, when pressed, he confessed what Costellin had suspected from the start, that the former mine overseer's memory was not as dependable as the Governor-General had boasted. The Termite would give them more options, should they take the wrong turning, though it couldn't carry more than ten passengers so most of the men would have to follow in the vehicle's wake on foot.

Two grenadier platoons had been selected to accompany the commissar, and the colonel had fixed a time that evening for a preliminary briefing. Costellin spent the best part of the afternoon planning an uplifting speech that he knew was hardly required as he stripped down his chainsword and plasma pistol, cleaned and oiled them and said the requisite litanies to placate the machine-spirits inside them.

The next morning, he stood out on the ramp and prepared to welcome the new recruits. They marched out of their drop-ships, perfectly drilled, indistinguishable in their greatcoats and facemasks from any Death Korps Guardsman that Costellin had ever served with. As always when a ship landed, there were problems with the refugees on the hillside, incited by the suspicion that more lords and councillors would jump the queue to be evacuated ahead of them. However, the new recruits came to the struggling proctors' aid, and the insurgents were brutally put down.

'Magnificent, aren't they?' Commissar Mannheim was at Costellin's shoulder.

'Yes, I expect they are,' Costellin conceded, 'if you're able not to think about what they have been through to get here.'

‘I beg your pardon?’ said Mannheim, but Costellin didn’t answer him. He was remembering his sole visit to the Krieg home world nineteen years before. He had thought it a good idea at the time, a means to a better understanding of his charges. Donning a mask and a rebreather unit, he had stepped out into a barren, frigid landscape, one inimical to all kinds of life. Yet somehow life had endured there.

Costellin had been told that the war on Krieg was long ended, had expected its ecosphere would have begun to recover by now. As he travelled under his neutral flag, however, masked faces had peered out at him from trenches that ran like bloody scars across the planet’s surface. Exploding mortars had gouged new holes in the blasted ground, and sent great plumes of ash up into the already choking air.

The men of Krieg were still warring, no longer to resolve their ideological differences but each now to prove himself worthy of dying for the Emperor.

‘You should have seen them last night,’ enthused Mannheim. ‘The 42nd, I mean, my regiment. It didn’t matter what the necrons threw at them, they kept going. They were indefatigable. Even I... When I saw those ghouls, it sent a chill down my spine, I can tell you, but the Death Korps, they never faltered, they never flinched.’

‘And eighteen hundred of them were massacred,’ Costellin pointed out.

‘Well, yes. Yes, they were, but our projections suggested—’

‘You expected to lose more. You thought you’d lose three thousand, four thousand, but that was all right as long as the battle was won. Acceptable casualties. It happens sooner than you think, doesn’t it? I still do it myself sometimes.’

‘Do what?’

‘Start to see them as numbers. Start to share the total lack of regard that the men of Krieg have for their own lives. Emperor knows, it is easier that way.’

‘I don’t think that’s fair,’ said Mannheim. ‘The necrons are a threat, not just to this world but to the whole of the Imperium. They have to be fought.’

‘Look at them, Mannheim. Look at those soldiers, try to see past their masks. They’re fresh from Krieg, do you know what that means? It means they are fourteen or fifteen years old, most of them, and already they have known a lifetime of conflict.’

‘It’s the same on many worlds,’ argued Mannheim. ‘Of course, conditions are harsher on Krieg than most, and that breeds a certain type of individual.’

‘No,’ said Costellin quietly, ‘it is we who do that.’

The first and smallest contingent of the newly-arrived Guardsmen, those whose lighter grey coats marked them out as being destined for the 103rd regiment, had formed up now and were being marched away by their new officers.

‘Maybe you should do what I did,’ said Costellin, ‘visit Krieg for yourself and you’ll see. You’ll see that its people aren’t inhuman, just dehumanised.’

‘I’m not sure I get the distinction,’ said Mannheim, but Costellin’s thoughts had drifted back again, this time to a brick tunnel and the stale odour of infinitely recycled air. Never before or since had he seen so many people packed into so confined a space. Most had been women, most with child, and all of them shuffling through their lives in a chemical stupor. There had been no need for masks, in that subterranean labyrinth, but the citizens of Krieg may as well have been wearing them anyway.

‘Perhaps,’ he sighed, ‘if I had spoken up... but no, I’m as certain now as I was back then that nobody would have wanted to hear me. I told you, Mannheim, I told you on the troop ship, that the Death Korps of Krieg are a valuable resource to the Imperium, the perfect soldiers. The question, I suppose, is how much should we be prepared to sacrifice for that ideal? To how many horrors must we blind ourselves?’

‘I’m sure it is not our place to question,’ said Mannheim stiffly.

‘But if not us, then who? Who will say when things have gone too far?’

‘I don’t like where you’re going with this, Costellin. I know you didn’t want to fight this war, but what was the alternative? If we had done as you wished, if we had destroyed this planet, then people would still have died. We could never have carried out a full evacuation in the time we had.’

‘I know that, Mannheim,’ said Costellin quietly. ‘I just worry, sometimes, about us. I worry that we are becoming as dehumanised as they are, too used to dealing in “acceptable casualties”, in numbers. We forget that behind each of those numbers is a life – an abused, joyless life perhaps, but a life all the same. Until the day comes when that life, that number, is our own – and who will be left to care about us, then?’



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

How long had it been now?

It felt like months since the Iron Gods had come. It felt like forever. The time before was a fading memory, already so distant that it was hardly missed, while the future...

The future was endless days like this one: backbreaking, fourteen-hour shifts in the ruins of the city, eating, sleeping, rising for work again. It was remarkable how routine this had become, how quickly the human body adapted to the aches and strains, and the mind – for fear of going mad – to the confines of the here and now.

Arex's pickaxe had come to feel like an extension of her arms. She was barely aware of the calluses on her once-soft hands, beneath its wooden handle.

Sometimes, however, her mind could still slip its chains and drift to a white-carpeted bedroom in the High Spire or an illicit liaison in a downmarket eatery, to the brush of a loved one's lips, and then she was staggered by the pain of all she had lost.

Arex sank to her knees and wept, drawing the attention of a grizzled overseer who screamed at her to resume her work and prodded her with a proctor's baton. She tried to obey him, she honestly did, but the hunk of plascrete she had lifted without thinking about it a moment ago now seemed as heavy as the world itself.

The overseer activated the baton's stun charge, and Arex cringed, waiting for the jolt to slam through her as had happened many times before. Instead, she heard angry voices, a scuffle, and she peered through her tears to see that a fellow slave had come to her defence. A ruggedly handsome man, she thought, like all of them grimy from the morning's exertions. He had wrested the baton from the cowering overseer, and he seemed almost angry enough to use it too. Then common sense dampened the fire in his eyes, and he cast the weapon scornfully to the ground instead.

'She's tired,' he growled, 'that's all. We're all tired and hungry, and brutalising

this young woman isn't going to change that.'

He lifted Arex to her feet, put a water bottle to her lips. The overseer had recovered his baton, and his nerves, and was raging impotently: 'You're on half rations for three days, Tylar, and I'm reporting this incident to Amareth, do you hear me?'

'You shouldn't have done that,' said Arex regretfully, as the overseer stomped away to make good on his threat. 'You shouldn't have got yourself in trouble for me.'

Her saviour, Tylar, shook his head. 'I've been in trouble for one thing or another since I got here. At least, this time, it was in the best of causes.'

'I'll share my rations with you,' she promised. 'I won't see you go hungry.'

'You'll do nothing of the sort,' said Tylar. 'You must keep your strength up. You know what they do to people who can't serve. Don't worry about me, Arex, I'll get by – on sheer stubbornness if needs be. I wouldn't give that goon the satisfaction of breaking me.'

'You know my name? But I haven't–'

'You don't recognise me, do you?'

Arex looked up into his face, and tried to see past the dirt, past the untidy, overgrown strawberry blond hair, tried to peel back the years. 'I... I *do* know you,' she realised. 'Tylar. Of course. Wasn't your father an admiral?'

'A lord admiral,' said Tylar. 'High up enough, anyway, to rescue me from the draft and set me up with a cushy administrator's job. Well, you must remember that. I only mentioned it about a thousand times, I think, during our date, trying to impress you.'

'I... I'm sorry,' said Arex. 'It's just, my uncle, he–'

'I know.' Tylar smiled warmly at her. 'You talked a lot about Governor Hanrik too, as I recall. You certainly didn't approve of his choice of suitors for you.'

'We were both so young,' sighed Arex, 'and the things we cared about back then...'

'They don't mean so much now, do they?'

Tylar eased himself away from her, and immediately she missed the reassuring press of his body. It had been comforting to return to the past, for however short a time, without regret, to learn that even a tiny part of it had survived. It had given her hope. But now, the empty present beckoned to Arex once more.

'We should get back to it,' said Tylar, 'before that overseer returns with his goon friends. Here, I'll help you clear this pile. If you feel weak again, you can lean on me.'

‘I will,’ said Arex gratefully.

The point of the work was to sift for materials the Iron Gods could use.

Anything with metal content was to be put to one side; gemstones and jewellery too. Every half-hour or so, Arex and Tylar took turns to wheel a barrow full of useless masonry into the silent smeltery. He arranged her loads so that they were lighter than his, though they looked as substantial. She would empty her barrow down one of the lifter shafts, while a group of overseers played cards at a nearby table.

It made Arex angry sometimes that the overseers – mostly Amareth’s friends from before – did less work than she did, and yet got more food. She wondered if they had felt the same way about her, living in the High Spire, wanting for nothing all those years, while they had lived their lives of drudgery. Now, the Iron Gods had elevated a new ruling class in Hieronymous City, and perhaps she deserved this penance.

She slept on a cold, hard floor now in a hab half the size of her old bathroom, shared with four other slaves. They had shuttered the window, but still the green light from the pyramid clawed its way around the edges of the wood.

‘Don’t you think it’s odd,’ Tylar said to her one day, ‘that we never see the Iron Gods themselves? Nor any sign that the fruits of our labour are being taken to them?’

Arex shrugged. ‘If they don’t want the metal,’ she said, ‘then why ask for it?’

‘We have only the word of Amareth that they have.’

She let the pickaxe fall idle in her hands, tempting the overseers’ wrath. She stared at Tylar. ‘What... what are you saying? Why would we be doing all this, if not...?’

‘How did you come to be here?’ he asked. ‘To join this workgroup?’

‘I didn’t know what else to... I couldn’t go back home. I met people who had been to the city gates, and they said they had been closed. Then I saw... I saw others working in the ruins, and I asked them why, and they told me...’

‘They found me,’ said Tylar, ‘and they told me that, if I didn’t join them, serve the Iron Gods, it was their duty to see that I was punished for it. Even so...’

‘Even so,’ breathed Arex, ‘it is a comfort to know... to believe that we are not entirely helpless before this terrible force, that there is some way we can...’

‘But what,’ whispered Tylar, ‘if there is no way? What if the Iron Gods do not care in the slightest if we serve them or not? What if we have been lied to?’

They began to score what little victories they could. They hid metal scraps at the bottom of the barrow and tipped them down the mine shafts so the overseers couldn't have them. They thought it safe to do this because no one was really watching, until a collection of cutlery in Arex's fourth load shifted with a treacherous clank and caught the light of a burning brazier, and the overseers surrounded her and questioned her.

They were men in their forties, most of them, ex-miners with unshaven faces that looked like they couldn't ever have been clean. One of them asked Arex for her name, and she answered truthfully because she couldn't bear the burden of another lie. The overseer looked closely at her, remembered her face from a newsreel he had seen once, and that was it, her cover was blown.

They were even more interested in her then. They wanted to know if she was a spy for the Governor, an accusation she denied angrily. They asked her why she hadn't been flown out of the city with him, and they picked at her flimsy excuses until she confessed that she had been looking for her boyfriend. Arex burst into tears, then, partly through having had her deepest secret dragged out of her and partly at the memory of stumbling through the wreckage, finding Gunthar's block razed by the insect swarm, finding herself for the first time in her life alone.

The overseers affected to find this story hilarious. They wanted to know more about this lower-floor dweller who had won the heart of a lady. They made vulgar suggestions about what Arex might have seen in Gunthar, and they laughed all the harder when she insisted he was the sweetest man in the world.

'Where is he now,' they taunted her, 'this sweet love of yours?'

'He's looking for me,' she said stubbornly. 'Gunthar is looking for me and he won't stop until we have found each other.' But she reached for her necklace, her comforter, as she spoke, forgetting for a moment that she had lost this too, found it gone from her coat pocket some time after the insects. She had gone back to search for it, in vain.

'What do you think?' asked one of the overseers of his fellows. 'Do we take her to Amareth? I'm sure he'd like to know we have a royal visitor.'

The cruel, mocking laughter of the others signalled their agreement.

The sun was setting as Arex was half-pushed, half-dragged along the skyway by a six-strong escort. She saw Tylar starting towards her, but discouraged him with a firm shake of her head. There was nothing he could do to help her.

She was surprised to be led into a musty old schola, down several floors and

out into an intact courtyard dominated by a single grand building at its far end. A broad flight of marble steps swept up to a doorway that could easily have accommodated a visitor three times Arex's height. The spires to each side of these steps could have belonged to nothing but a temple, and despite her situation she felt a swell of optimism in her heart, until she looked up to where the Imperial Eagle should have been displayed above the temple's door to find it there no longer.

The eagle had been chipped away. Arex could still see the outline of its splayed wings, dark against the weathered brickwork, but across this had been painted, in silver, a lopsided image of a leering skull.

Inside, likewise, all Imperial symbols had been removed or defaced. Green drapes had been hung, black candles lit. At the end of the nave, a tall stained-glass window had been smashed and a bed sheet pinned over it, onto which another skull had been daubed, apparently by the same clumsy hand responsible for the one outside. Perched atop the black-shrouded altar was a small pyramid carved from wood, and the overseers approached this reverently, their footsteps echoing from the galleries.

An emerald-cloaked attendant loomed along the transept, and Arex was revolted to see xenos sigils painted on her cheeks and her forehead in ash. She thought a couple of her escorts appeared uneasy with this too, but she couldn't tell for sure.

A short, whispered conversation ensued before the attendant nodded and swept away. Several minutes passed, then more footsteps sounded, ascending to the pulpit. The overseers knelt in awe, but Arex remained standing, until a sharp baton blow to the back of her knees stole her choice in the matter.

Her eyes lowered for fear of being struck again, she heard her name spoken in a rich, resonating voice. 'Lady Hanrik, I believe. You may gaze upon my person.'

Arex looked up and caught her breath. She had glimpsed Amareth just one time before, across the smeltery floor, giving orders to his overseers. She had thought he looked like any ordinary man: perhaps a little taller than most, in his mid-thirties, with a slick of black hair and protruding ears. Now, he towered above her, a spectre wrapped in royal blue, his face concealed by a metal skull mask, which looked like one the overseers had been parading a couple of weeks ago. The mask, apparently, had been taken from the corpse of an Imperial Guardsman, although Arex couldn't imagine a member of the Emperor's army wearing such a thing.

Amareth held a staff with moulded plasteel prongs, a makeshift approximation of the one wielded by the giant god that had walked the skies in hololithic form. 'So,' he rumbled, 'the niece of our former Governor has been delivered to my church. What clearer sign could there be that we are the favoured of the Iron Gods?'

'It was I who recognised her, lord,' spoke up one of the overseers.

'Tell me, my lady,' said Amareth, 'how came you to be guided to us?'

So, Arex told her tale, in as few words as she could, and Amareth listened, then, when she had finished, he nodded sagely and said, 'It was not through capricious fate that you were spared the ravages of the insect swarm. The gods must surely have a purpose in mind for the Governor's kin.'

'But I...' she protested, tongue-tied. 'That was before. My family's wealth means nothing now. I'm just like the rest of... like everybody else.'

Amareth let out a deep-throated chuckle. 'Oh no, my lady, you are not like the others. Not while your uncle's forces lay siege to the gods' own domain.'

'To the city, you mean? They're still fighting for us? I didn't know.'

Arex had hoped, though, especially after the rumours of the Imperial Guard's presence, and her delight in having that hope realised must have sounded in her voice, because an overseer at her side grumbled, 'They are wasting their ammunition. They must have heard the voice of the gods, as we all did. They know their power.'

'Indeed,' agreed Amareth, 'and yet Talmar Hanrik has chosen to stake all our lives on a futile act of defiance.'

'He's trying to save us!' protested Arex.

'We have no need of his salvation. The Iron Gods protect those who serve them. Isn't that why you chose to join us, Lady Hanrik?'

'I joined you because I thought... When did they speak to you? When did they tell you they desired our service? You speak of their voice, and yet I heard that too, and no one could have found any meaning in that noise. How do you know-?'

'Now,' continued Amareth, ignoring her, 'we have the means to prove our worth. We have you, Lady Hanrik – and, once you have been presented to the Iron Gods–'

'You're insane!' Arex felt a baton prod to her ribs, and an overseer warned her about speaking to 'Lord Amareth' that way. Undeterred, she went on, 'You think you can use me as a hostage? You can't imagine that will work! My uncle will–'

'As much as Governor Hanrik might disdain the rest of us, he must certainly

value his precious niece's life. He will have no choice but to—'

'Look around you,' cried Arex. 'Open your eyes, all of you, and look! Your "Iron Gods" have destroyed our homes, they've killed our friends, and you... you think you can deal with them? You think you can buy their favour? They—' This time, the baton prod was backed up by a stun charge. Arex's legs gave way, and she would have fallen had the overseers not caught her, holding her like a rag doll.

'Leave me,' instructed Amareth. 'I will commune with the gods, pray for guidance in this matter, and for this I must have solitude.'

'You weren't appointed by them, were you? The Iron Gods have never spoken to you except in your own head.' Amareth had turned to leave, but Arex's weak voice pulled him back. She knew she was tempting another shock or worse, but she didn't much care. Once they had marched her into that green-glowing pyramid, it would be too late for words. 'Don't you see? You were right about me. I'm afraid of them, as we all are. I can't fight those horrors, so I thought... I thought, at least, if I did as they wanted, I wouldn't be harmed. I understand how you feel, why you're doing all this, but if there's still hope, if the Emperor's forces are fighting for us—'

'Leave me,' repeated Amareth, 'but ensure that two overseers have sight of Lady Hanrik at all times. She is to be quartered in the schola. In fact, it is time we brought the rest of my flock into the buildings around this courtyard. Let them see the new homes we have prepared for them, and their new house of worship.'

And he did turn and leave then, disappearing back beneath the pulpit's lip, but his commanding voice carried back over his shoulder:

'Services begin at dawn tomorrow.'

The lectorum had been cleared of desks and chairs. A broad window overlooked the newly reappointed temple, and there were a few surprised whispers as the other slaves noticed its silver-painted skull, luminous in the moonlight.

Arex, for her part, was just relieved to shrug her heavy mattress off her back, let it hit the floorboards in a cloud of dust. She was gladder still that Tylar had found his way to her. Two overseers stood sentry in the doorway, the furthest they had strayed from her side all night, so at last she had a chance to confide in her new friend freely.

'Amareth is mad,' she declaimed, 'completely and utterly mad. He thinks he can bargain with his Iron Gods, and he's willing to betray the Emperor Himself

to do it.'

'So, it seems we were right after all,' said Tylar, shaking his head in despair. 'Amareth tells us he can hear their voices, and we... so desperate are we for a slim thread of hope, for someone to guide us, that we believe him. We delude ourselves.'

'He can see a new order coming,' said Arex, 'and he is seizing the chance – the fantasy – to be more than he once was. I've heard the overseers talking. There are other workgroups like this one – other churches, I should say – across the city.'

Tylar nodded. 'They boast that this is the largest of them, over a hundred slaves, as if it were a competition.'

'It is,' said Arex. 'Amareth wants this church, his church, to be the only one, with himself installed as its High Priest, and he thinks—'

'Now, he thinks he has something his gods want, and he thinks he can barter it for their recognition – for real, this time.'

'He doesn't understand, doesn't see that we are nothing to them!'

Arex sank down onto her mattress, pulled her knees up to her chest. The room was quieting down as the other slaves finished laying out their meagre belongings and rested their weary bodies. She was thinking of her Uncle Hanrik; all those years he had spent trying to protect her, almost smothering her.

She had been so ungrateful to him, for the life he had given her. If she hadn't been searching, like Amareth, for something more, she wouldn't have been in this predicament now. She had found her adventure, at last, and there was nothing exciting about it – and the worst of it was that, in the Iron Gods' clutches, she would be endangering more lives than her own, and perhaps Hanrik had foreseen this.

He had served in the Imperial Guard, Arex remembered. He had sent his three sons off to war. Doubtless he had known, far better than she did, what lurked in the shadows beyond the God-Emperor's blinding light.

Tylar leaned in closer to her, whispered in her ear, 'Do you still have faith?'

'In the Emperor? Of course I do, but I know I have failed Him. In my fear and confusion, I have knelt before the prophet of a false god. I have assisted His foes.'

'We can still serve Him,' Tylar insisted. 'He has shown us the way.'

'You mean...?'

'Amareth can't be allowed to carry out his plan. The Imperium is still fighting for us, and if the Governor's resolve is weakened by his actions—'

‘But what can we do?’

‘We can escape,’ said Tylar. ‘We can get you away from here.’

‘But the city,’ protested Arex, ‘the city has been sealed. How can we—?’

‘There are plenty of places we can hide. As long as we can keep you out of Amareth’s hands, that is the main thing. Then we only have to wait until these Iron Gods have been vanquished, as they surely will be, and our world reclaimed.’

‘If only it were so easy,’ lamented Arex, ‘but Amareth won’t let me go. You know he has his men watching me, and even if we were to evade them, they would never cease searching for me. Far better if I had never come here, if I had been killed by the insect swarm. Far better, in fact, if I were to die right now.’

‘You mustn’t think like that,’ hissed Tylar, and he put his strong arm around Arex’s shoulder, held her. ‘After all you have been through, and survived, you should have no doubt that the Emperor wants you to live. He wants you – He wants us both – to fight for Him, and fight for Him we shall... somehow.’



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Gunthar had been issued with a shaving kit, at last.

It had arrived three mornings ago, along with his body armour. The morning of his meeting with the Governor and the senior officers, although he hadn't questioned the coincidence. He scraped shaving foam from his chin, splashed his face with freezing cold water from the cracked white basin in the corner of the bunkroom and carefully cleaned and stowed his disposable razor so as to preserve its edge.

As he turned from the basin, he glimpsed a face he did not know in the mirror, and the sight of it caused him to hesitate. Drawing closer to the glass, Gunthar wiped away a stray smear of soap and inspected the visage before him.

His tousled black hair, of course, he had lost on his first day of service. He wore a military buzz-cut now, which changed, or rather exposed, the shape of his head. He had shed some weight, too, and his cheeks had a hollow look to them. A livid purple bruise beneath his left eye further distorted the image from the familiar.

It was more than that though.

He remembered:

A rounder, fresher face, a more naïve face, reflected in the blank eyepieces of a Death Korps watchmaster. The engines of the PDF flyer whining, sending vibrations through the troop compartment and through the bench on which Gunthar sat, rattling his bones. The watchmaster had asked what he knew of Arex's whereabouts. He had confessed only to what Weber had told him, pretended not to know her, but he had feared the Krieg man could see through his lies.

He had half-expected the Governor to meet them on the space port ramp, had wondered if he could lie to him too, but the bad news had been voxed ahead, Hanrik was grieving for his niece in private, and suddenly nobody had time to

spare for Gunthar any more, he was just one more refugee among so many thousands.

He remembered:

He had decided to join the Planetary Defence Force. Well, rather, he had almost made up his mind to join when an uptight lieutenant had collared him and demanded to know why he was out of uniform. He had had to explain that he had only just arrived, hadn't known about the draft but had fully intended to speak to someone about it soon. The next thing he knew, a heavyset sergeant was taking a razor to his hair, and he was being kitted out in boots too small for him and a tunic too large.

It was on that day that, to all intents and purposes, he had ceased to be mine overseer Gunthar and had become Trooper Soreson instead, but he hadn't mourned the loss of that part of himself, not then. He had remembered his vow to return to the city, and had felt like this was the first step towards that goal. He had felt empowered.

He remembered:

A blur of push-ups and pull-ups, four-kilometre runs and ten-kilometre marches. Drill instructors screaming themselves hoarse, but rarely at him. Gunthar had felt a certain pride in the fact that, contrary to the expectations of a fat recruitment sergeant six years ago, he was considered one of the more promising trainees. Perhaps this was because, unlike most of the others, he knew what he was doing here.

He learned military codes of conduct, vehicle and weapon recognition, basic first aid, survival skills and how to make up his bunk. He practised with a lasgun – though he hadn't yet been issued with his own – until he could strip it down and reassemble it in less than two minutes. His marksmanship was poor to begin with, but Gunthar practised on the makeshift range at the foot of the space port hill until he could at least hit the plasterboard target with two shots out of three.

He remembered:

The first time a Krieg officer had observed a drill session on the ramp, coldly, inscrutably. He had soon pivoted on his heel and left, but returned the next day with a comrade. Two days after that, a Krieg watchmaster had assisted with the training regime, just offering the occasional suggestion to begin with but, by

evening, giving the orders. Quite clearly, the PDF instructors resented this encroachment upon their territory, but it seemed there was little they could do about it.

The next morning, there had been a watchmaster supervising at the range, another taking morning inspection, and by the end of the week Gunthar had had as many Krieg instructors as he had had non-Krieg ones.

That was when the ten-kilometre marches became twenty, the trainees' backpacks filled with stones to simulate the weight of equipment they didn't have. First muster was brought forward an hour, then another, evidently to the surprise of some PDF sergeants, who turned up bleary-eyed, late. Exercises frequently endured beyond sunset, and Gunthar became used to subsisting on four hours' sleep per night. He never joined in the grumbling that went on in the bunkroom before lights out, but even he couldn't always meet the exacting new standards required of him.

The Krieg men never raised their voices in anger. They spoke in quiet, measured tones, laden with threat, and were quick to dispense extra duties to recruits who disappointed them. 'You aren't training to fight old ladies and crippled mutants anymore,' a masked Guardsman growled in Gunthar's ear once. 'You are training to fight with the Death Korps of Krieg, and I intend to make sure you are worthy of that honour, else you will be wasting the life you have been given.'

Another instructor, addressing Gunthar's whole platoon, told how at the age of twelve he had been given a lasgun and sent into a rad-zone to hunt down mutants, a mission from which a third of his squad had not returned and the least of those men had been more able, more dedicated to his cause, than any of these weak, apathetic wastes of genetic material that currently cowered before him.

In the bunkroom one morning, a watchmaster demanded forty push-ups from a trainee whose boots weren't sufficiently polished. The trainee was a burly miner in his mid-thirties, more able than most to cope with the physical demands placed upon him, but lack of sleep had made him increasingly fractious – he had been the first to complain each night about the depredations of the day – and this was the final straw.

He had refused the order. He had screamed in the watchmaster's face, demanding to know who he thought he was, reminding him that this wasn't his world. And, without a warning, without a word, the watchmaster had drawn his laspistol and executed him.

There was some expectation of fallout from that incident, rumours that

complaints had been taken to the Governor-General himself, and for a few days it did seem there were fewer Krieg facemasks around than there had been. Then Colonel Braun had addressed the trainees, informed them stiffly that the watchmaster had acted by the book, and that was that. The facemasks returned in force, and everything was as it had been before, except that Gunthar's bunkroom was now very quiet at night.

He remembered:

Lectorum sessions had been transformed too. Now, the greater part of each was devoted to the learning by rote and communal recital of the Emperor's benedictions. Gunthar was taught that his officers *were* the Emperor, as far as he was concerned, and that to question a lawful order was the foulest kind of blasphemy.

Trainees were addressed only as numbers now, punished for the merest mentions of their old names. Gunthar was made to run around the space port three times with his rock-filled backpack for carelessly referring to himself as 'I' instead of as 'this trooper', and received an additional lap for being too slow. It was decreed that some of the trainees had become too comfortable with each other, so the platoons were reformed to split up old friends and new comrades alike.

That was how Gunthar had ceased to be Trooper Soreson and become Trooper 1419 instead, but he hadn't really minded this either. He felt he was beginning to understand what it meant to be a soldier, and he shouldered that burden, accepted his new identity, because he knew that a soldier was what Arex needed him to be.

He remembered:

A frost-sprinkled field, the air crisp with the threat of approaching winter. Gunthar's platoon had been marched to Thelonius City and most of the way back and they were expecting a meal break. Instead, their instructor, a senior Krieg Guardsman, separated them into two groups and told them to fight each other.

The trainees were reluctant at first, but a few growled warnings, a twitch of a hand towards a lasgun holster, and they began to grapple half-heartedly. A promise of additional rations for the winning team, to be taken from the losers' allocation, stirred a little more passion in them, and Gunthar's legs were kicked out from beneath him by a dough-faced colossus of a man twice his age.

Before he could stand, before he could fight back, the instructor called a halt to

the proceedings. He had a few words to say, naturally, on the subject of the trainees' efforts, before deciding that a demonstration was in order. He hauled a young man out of the ranks and ordered him to put up his fists. The trainee did so with a certain reticence, and the instructor came at him like a Leman Russ Demolisher.

Gunthar winced as the instructor hammered punch after punch into the trainee's chin and, when he brought up his hands to protect this, into his stomach. He snarled at the man to defend himself, to forget his assailant's rank and fight back, but the trainee was slow to respond and, although he did eventually make a spirited attempt to wrestle the instructor to the ground, by then he was already too dazed, too bruised to fight effectively. An elbow thrust into the trainee's leg dislocated his kneecap, and the trainee was on the ground but the masked instructor continued to beat him, methodically, dispassionately, until he was bleeding and unconscious.

'And that,' he announced, hardly out of breath, 'is the level of commitment I expect to see from each of you, unless you wish to spar with me.'

This time, when the fighting began, Gunthar looked for the dough-faced man, and found him engaged in a scrum in which Gunthar's team-mates were outnumbered. He gripped his adversary's shoulder from behind, spinning him around as he yanked him from the fray, and he punched him, but not hard enough, still holding back. A flailing arm caught him in the face. He doubled over, and the dough-faced man rushed him, using his superior weight to bear Gunthar to the cold, hard ground again.

'Don't be squeamish about striking from behind,' bellowed the instructor, perhaps at Gunthar himself. 'This is not a jousting tournament, this is war!'

He was right, and Gunthar felt angry with himself for his mistake, angry too at the dough-faced man for taking advantage of it. That may not have been fair of him, but it was surprising how easy it was to hate this man, this comrade of a few minutes earlier, for embarrassing him, for standing between Gunthar and his life's only goal.

'Leave him!' the instructor barked, though at whom Gunthar couldn't see. 'He has a medi-pack, he can take care of himself, and if he can't...'

He didn't need to finish the sentence. *If a trooper can't take care of himself, he is useless to us.* Gunthar was pinned down, a podgy fist raised to hammer into his head, but the memory of Arex gave him strength to wrench a hand free and to lash out. Taken by surprise, the dough-faced man was unbalanced, and Gunthar heaved him away, rolled nimbly to his feet and ducked a retaliatory

lunge.

‘If you aren’t trying to kill each other, you aren’t trying hard enough.’

Two trainees seized Gunthar from behind, holding him as the dough-faced man came in for another attack. Instead of trying to evade him, this time Gunthar met him with feet firmly planted and head lowered. He butted the dough-faced man in the jaw, the impact sending both of them reeling but surprising one of Gunthar’s captors enough to shake his grip. Gritting his teeth, focusing through a crowd of blotches in his vision, Gunthar thrust an elbow backwards into his other captor’s stomach and dropped to one knee, throwing the startled, grey-haired recruit over his shoulder.

He surrendered to the moment, then, unable to stop, to think, to plan in the midst of an increasingly fierce melee, just responding to each threat as it presented itself, defending his allies when he could. At one point, he rammed an opponent shoulder-first, at the same moment that he was similarly attacked from the opposite direction, and Gunthar felt the snap of his victim’s clavicle as he fell with a shriek of pain.

It was so much easier, he thought, when he didn’t know their names.

He was barely aware of the melee thinning out about him. When the instructor blew his whistle, Gunthar swayed on his feet and saw, numbly, that only he and three of his team-mates remained standing. The field was filled with the groans of the wounded and, as the adrenaline drained out of his system, he didn’t know whether to feel ashamed or proud of himself. He settled on feeling neither, because he had only done what he had been instructed to do. Gunthar was becoming the man he had to be, and if only he had been that man before, Arex would have been saved by now.

Nor, of course, was he complimented on his achievement. The Krieg instructor toured the field, and delivered swift kicks to those awake and, in his view, capable of rising who had not yet done so. He had the platoon improvise stretchers for the rest, several of whom would certainly be in no fit state to fight for a month or two.

They must have presented a motley sight as they limped back to the space port, because a trainee squad on the shooting range, a cluster of refugees on the hill, a non-Krieg lieutenant taking drill on the ramp, all turned to gape at them. Gunthar didn’t doubt that questions would be asked about today’s events behind closed doors, just as he felt he knew what the answers would be.

He went to bed with a buzzing head that night, and his ribs were sore for a few days after, but never once did it occur to him to complain about his treatment.

He had learned a great deal, that day in the frost-coated field, more he felt than on all the previous days of his training in total. He had found something inside of himself, and to Gunthar that discovery was well worth a few temporary aches and pains.

It wasn't on that day that his left eye had come by its purple bruise.

He remembered:

He hadn't enjoyed the meeting in the colonel's office.

He had felt privileged, at first, to be invited, then uncomfortable because it had been the old Gunthar they had wanted, not Trooper 1419, and being made to remember his old life had only filled him with regret. Still, the meeting had brought him a good step closer to his goal. A few more days now.

He was excused from training for a day, given a small desk in a corner of the Governor-General's office and a pile of data-slates containing old maps of the mine tunnels. He tried to cast his mind back, to remember the updated maps in his office, but he couldn't seem to make his drawings match the vague shapes in his head. It didn't help that Hanrik fussed about him so, and Gunthar was relieved when Colonel Braun appeared and asked to see his commanding officer in private.

Gunthar rose to leave, but Hanrik waved him back into his seat; he and the colonel would step outside to talk instead. The gesture weighed on Gunthar's shoulders, impressing upon him how vital his task was, and he redoubled his efforts. He couldn't help but be distracted, however, by Hanrik and Braun's voices, intermittently audible to him through the half-open door.

'—third platoon this week. This time – fighting with sticks. I know we have discussed this before, sir, but I worry that—'

'—appreciate your concerns, colonel, but my hands are—'

'—fourteen more troopers in the medicae – next, I ask you? Live ammunition?'

'—discussed this several times with Colonel 186, and he is of the opinion—'

'—respect, sir, I understood that you retained command of the—'

'—to work with these people.' Hanrik sounded flustered. 'We need them. We need their resources, their... their commitment, their experience of—'

Braun mumbled something then that Gunthar didn't catch. Hanrik's tart reply, however, was perfectly clear. 'We are fighting a war, Colonel Braun,' he said, 'and, in war, certain sacrifices have to be made.' As he returned to his desk, however, the Governor-General looked anything but resolute on this point, burying his face in his hands until he remembered that he wasn't alone, at which

point he straightened his back and found some slatework to pretend to be doing.

Gunthar's report did nothing to improve Hanrik's mood. His new plan of the mine tunnels was strewn with apologetic notes to indicate which of the revisions he was unsure of: most of them, as it happened. 'How can I show this to the Krieg colonel?' Hanrik carped. 'He'll think we are... You told me you could do this, Soreson. I put my neck on the line for you, and you... You've failed me!'

The old Gunthar wanted to protest. Not only had he done his best, he had been honest with Hanrik from the start about his doubts, only to have them brushed aside. Trooper 1419, however, just stood to attention and said, 'Yes, sir. Sorry, sir.'

'I need this doing again,' snapped Hanrik, thrusting the data-slate into Gunthar's stomach. 'I can't send a hundred men underground on the basis of this guesswork. I'm sure, if you were one of those men, you wouldn't be too—'

'Excuse me, sir,' stammered Gunthar. 'I thought... That is to say, this trooper had hoped he would... I had assumed I would be joining Commissar Costellin's team.'

Hanrik shook his head. 'I don't think so,' he said. 'You're an administrator, Soreson, and it seems you can't even do that job well. How many times have you even been down a mine?'

'Three, sir. Just three. But I...' Gunthar felt panic welling up inside him. 'I have to go back, sir. I swore I would go back. For her.'

'I see,' said Hanrik gruffly, and a light seemed to dim in his eyes. 'We all feel that way, Soreson. We've all lost someone, but the chances of...' He swallowed. 'You'll get your chance, when your training is complete. To fight for this woman... In the meantime... In the meantime, I think we should leave this mission to the Krieg. They seem to know what they're doing, and I... I think...'

'It's Arex, sir,' Gunthar blurted out, because in that desperate moment he truly thought it would make a difference. 'It's your niece. I swore I would go back for her. She was at my hab-block, looking for me. I have to find her!'

Hanrik's expression froze on his face. His ruddy cheeks paled. 'How... how do you know my...?' he stammered, and Gunthar knew he had said too much.

It took a moment for the truth to sink in with the governor-general, for him to be sure. Then, Hanrik's eyes flashed, and he curled his right hand into a fist and drove an anger-fuelled punch into Gunthar's left eye, snapping his head around. Still standing to attention, Gunthar had seen the blow coming but hadn't tried to avoid it.

Hanrik turned away from him, his head bowed, breathing deeply to calm

himself, nursing his skinned knuckles, and for an endless minute, no further words were spoken. Then, without turning, Hanrik said quietly, 'Perhaps you could track down some of the mine foremen, see if any of them survived.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Show them the plans you have drawn up so far, and see what they can add to them.'

'Yes, sir,' said Gunthar. 'Thank you, sir.'

The bunkroom was waking behind Gunthar, trainees scrambling to prepare their bunks, their uniforms, themselves, for inspection. All of them needing the single basin, shouting for him to get a move on.

The second morning since his encounter with Hanrik. Two nights in a row, Gunthar had expected Krieg soldiers to burst in, to drag him from his bed, force him to his knees and shoot him in the head. But it looked as if Hanrik wasn't going to press charges, perhaps for Arex's sake. Perhaps because he had bigger worries.

Arex...

Commissar Costellin's team would be heading into the city today, following a map that Gunthar had prepared, but he wouldn't be going with them. It didn't matter, he told himself. There would be other chances, as Hanrik had said. He was certain of that now, and that certainty was a cold, hard glint in his dull, grey eyes.

And that was it, he realised: the greatest change in that reflected face, his face. It wasn't the hair, nor the cheeks, nor the bruise from the Governor's knuckles. It was those grey eyes, so full after so short a time of hard-won experience, of memories.

Mine overseer Gunthar Soreson was looking into the eyes of a stranger.

The eyes, he thought with a nervous tingle, of a soldier.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The expected necron attack to the south hadn't materialised.

This meant that Costellin had no distraction to cover his subterranean mission. It also called the purpose of said mission into question. As the commissar said to Colonel 186, 'What if the necrons have no need for our power, and the timings of the previous attacks were coincidence after all?'

He had planned to depart at noon. Instead, he put his team on standby and waited at his desk, tensely monitoring vox-traffic until Colonel 103 reported that it was over, the south-side generatorum razed and not a sighting of the enemy.

Hanrik, however, was reluctant to abandon the plan his genius had inspired. 'It could be,' he conjectured as the senior officers gathered once more, 'that the necrons are still weak, and have chosen not to fight a battle they can't win.'

'The mission will proceed,' Colonel 186 decided. 'We can't overlook the chance that our original thesis is correct, that the destruction of the city's main generatorum could give us a decisive advantage in this war, and even if we are wrong...'

'Then, what are we risking?' concluded Costellin, tight-lipped.

'Indeed,' said the colonel, oblivious to the irony in the commissar's words.

'Of course,' said Costellin, 'if the necrons have indeed reprioritised their objectives, then they might have chosen to defend the primary generatorum at the expense of the smaller ones. We could find ourselves walking into an ambush.'

The colonel nodded. 'At least, in that case, we will have confirmation that the generatorums are important to them, and we can strategise accordingly. With the Emperor's favour, however, the necrons won't have anticipated a sneak attack such as this one, and will only have posted a token defence.'

'Perhaps so,' Costellin conceded, 'though that would rather invite the question, where might the rest of their force be?'

The western edge of Hieronymous City was a good distance further from the space port than it had been. Costellin's half-track carefully traversed a canyon between looming heaps of rubble, almost to where the Death Korps' siege engines were still grinding out their destructive charges, edging inexorably forwards.

Here, an old mine shaft had been uncovered, a space cleared around it. The Termite boring vehicle requisitioned from the troop ship had already been lowered into the pit, a task that had required a full platoon of Guardsmen and a jury-rigged pulley system to perform. The Termite could have drilled its own way down, of course, but in so doing it could easily have collapsed the mine tunnels beneath itself.

Costellin was an hour early, but still one grenadier platoon had arrived before him, and the second now approached in a convoy of Centaurs. He had brought along a tech-priest named Lomax, a skinny man with watery eyes, who bristled with so many mechadendrites that he looked almost like a gigantic metal spider. Lomax was here for two reasons, the first and lesser of them being that Costellin didn't trust the ancient Termite not to fail on him.

He formed up his troops, and gave them a cursory pep talk, a hundred skull masks staring dispassionately back at him. He knew that Krieg grenadiers were the elite of the elite, the best possible men to have at his back, but it had long been said that, when a Guardsman was promoted to their illustrious ranks, it was because he had lived too long. Grenadier squads had a brutal mortality rate even for the Death Korps, and the skulls they wore over their regulation rebreather masks were a symbol that they accepted, and were honoured by, their impending martyrdom.

When the speech was done, the grenadiers began to lower themselves into the mine shaft on ropes, two at a time. Once enough of them were down to secure the cavern below, Costellin sent the designated two-man crew of the Termite to join them and to get a feel for their vehicle while the others descended.

His turn came, at last, and although a Guardsman respectfully offered to winch him down with the still-extant pulley system, Costellin followed his men's example and swarmed down the rope under his own strength. He regretted his vanity as ageing muscles struggled to support his weight. He persevered, however, and dropped into a lifter cage, the gate of which had been wrenched open. Concealing his breathlessness, he stepped from this into a frigid, high-roofed cavern, dark but for the pale glows of forty or so lamp-packs.

He activated his own light and studied a data-slate in its beam, orienting

himself with the map programmed into it. He identified the tunnel down which he needed to proceed and sent a pair of scouts ahead, ensuring first that their comm-beads were operational. Costellin cursed under his breath as the Termite's engine caught with a raucous roar; if there were necrons anywhere in these mines, then he feared they would be on their way here by now.

It took the squat Termite a few attempts to align itself with the tunnel mouth before it could heave itself forwards. It set a steady walking pace, crushing loose rocks beneath its caterpillar tracks, so the last of the grenadiers had plenty of time to descend the shaft and catch up with it. They had to trail along behind the vehicle because, apart from a few places where the tunnel briefly widened, there was no room to pass it: a problem for the scouts, Costellin noted, should they run into trouble ahead; a problem for everyone else should it creep up behind them.

He kept his eye on the map, voxing directions ahead of him. Fortunately, the mine tunnels tended to branch rather than turn, and only once did the Termite have to employ its heavy, roof-mounted drill in order to widen a junction and ease its passage. Less than ninety minutes later, however, the tunnel they were following made a sharp northward curve, away from their objective.

'This is it,' Costellin voxed, inspecting the map. 'Right here. We need to go through that wall at an angle of either fifteen or thirty-five degrees to the direction of the tunnel – our cartographer isn't quite sure which. I suggest we try fifteen to begin with, and a downward slope of about, oh, ten, and if we don't hit another tunnel within five hundred metres, pull out and we'll try an alternative trajectory.'

The Termite's drill began to spin, its back end rising on rusty hydraulics, and as the bit made contact with the rock wall, an ear-piercing shriek made Costellin wince.

They were lucky, this time. Only a few minutes after the Termite's back end had vanished into a hole of its own making, its crew reported that they had found the adjoining tunnel. Unfortunately, they had broken into it from above, requiring them to reverse some way and then increase their angle of descent for a second attempt. The consequence of this was a larger connecting tunnel than planned, and of course it collapsed almost at once.

Costellin retreated from a thick cloud of dust and dirt. The masked grenadiers, however, went straight to work on the instructions of their watchmasters, one squad retrieving entrenching tools from their backpacks while another collected mine props from side tunnels. They didn't have to dig too far as much of the tunnel was still passable, albeit by clambering over mounds of rubble or by

squeezing through snake-thin gaps between them. Even so, it was an hour or more before the first of them emerged into the second mine at last, where the Termite sat waiting for them.

It was then that their problems really began.

The map of the second mine was hopelessly inaccurate, leading them in circles. Costellin checked every tunnel with a compass, paced out its length and marked amendments on his slate, but it was impossible to tell which of two walls he had to break through next. His first choice proved to be the wrong one and, as close to necron territory as they now had to be, he rued the wasted use of that deafening drill.

The second wall, however, yielded with surprising speed, and the Termite's short, straight tunnel held up long enough for everyone to rush through into the third and, so long as the map was correct on this point, final mine. They had no further need of the Termite now, so Costellin took some pleasure in having its engine stilled, though it took almost a full minute for the grumbling echoes to subside.

It was largely with this next task in mind that he had requisitioned the tech-priest. Lomax stepped forward, ducked under the back end of the Termite's drill and opened a compartment there. He flexed his fingers, then plunged them into the vehicle's exposed arcane workings, all the time speaking litanies and prayers to the God-Emperor in his aspect of the Deus Mechanicus. Costellin couldn't hope to understand the tech-priest's esoteric rituals, but he watched all the same, until Lomax stepped back from the Termite, having extracted from it a rusted grey box in a tangle of wires, which he held reverently a servo-arm's length away from himself.

They moved on then, and this time the map brought them soon enough to a sizeable cavern, similar to the one into which they had first dropped. Six lifter cages stood silently in its centre, and Costellin pointed Lomax towards these and asked if he could bring them to life. The tech-priest confirmed that, with enough time and peace, he could, by lashing the Termite's power source up to their mechanisms.

In the meantime, at Costellin's suggestion, the grenadiers unravelled bedrolls and stole a couple of hours' sleep, in their masks, although each platoon left a ten-man squad on watch. Costellin checked his chrono. After all their tribulations, they had actually made good time for a pre-dawn assault on the generatorum above them.

He didn't sleep himself. He used this quiet time to commune with the

Emperor, to make what he suspected would be his final peace with Him.

The tech-priest's rites had been successful. With a clashing of metal, a bright blue glow and an ozone stink, the lifters lurched into life. Only four platforms were present but, after a few minutes, the remaining two dropped into their metal-mesh cages. Costellin was relieved to see them. If the lifter shafts had been blocked, then their mission would have ended right there and then.

By now, the grenadiers were all on their feet, bedrolls packed away, and Costellin marshalled three squads into the cages and sent them surface-ward, along with a lieutenant from Gamma Company. Twenty minutes later, a vox from the lieutenant confirmed that the mine entrance was secure, that there was no sign of necrons in the vicinity and that he had sent the lifters back to collect another load.

He was interrupted by Colonel 186, cutting in on the command channel. He requested an update, which Costellin gave, then the colonel advised that there had been a development at his end too. *'The necrons are amassing a force,'* he said, *'even larger than the one they sent north. Scans suggest it is heading our way.'*

'Just as you approach the west-side generatorum,' Costellin breathed. *'Hanrik was right.'*

'This is good news, Costellin. It means they do care about the generatorums. You are doing the Emperor's work in there.'

'They must have chosen to sacrifice the south-side facility rather than divide their forces and risk losing both. But, colonel, how many...?'

'I have requested reinforcements from the other three regiments, but of course they are under-strength too, and they each have their own line to hold.'

'The 42nd barely managed to hold off the necrons last week. If their army has grown since then... Eighteen hundred men, colonel. We lost eighteen hundred men.'

'But those losses taught us much about the enemy's abilities. The generals have run the numbers, Costellin. They say we can prevail even against these increased odds. We can beat those horrors back into the ground where they came from.'

Costellin sighed. *'I pray you're right,'* he said. *'May the Emperor be with you.'*

'And with you,' returned the colonel.

Costellin turned to give the 'good news' to his team, opening a vox-channel so that those on the surface could hear it too. He focused on the fact that, with the

necron army heading west, they had been given their hoped-for distraction after all. ‘We have a chance,’ he said, ‘to strike a resounding blow against—’

He never got to finish speaking. Nightmarish figures loomed in the dim glow of the grenadiers’ lights, and Costellin whirled to find that they were behind him too, streaming from the walls of the cavern. *Like ghosts*, he thought, and immediately he knew what he was facing, remembering the descriptions of these half-formed creatures he had heard after their attack upon the 42nd regiment.

They were even more gruesome, more horrifying, in the flesh – in the metal, rather – than the commissar could ever have imagined they would be. They descended upon the Death Korps grenadiers, their elongated spinal cords snapping around to deliver lethal electric stings, but when the grenadiers fired upon them in return, their las-beams passed through the necron ghosts’ semi-transparent forms.

Costellin drew both his weapons, the plasma pistol to discourage the creatures from closing with him, the chainsword to combat them when, given their unique abilities, they inevitably did. He was comforted to feel the vibrations of the latter, trembling through the bones of his hand, and hear the buzz of its whirling blades like that of an enraged swarm of Catachan blood wasps.

‘Remember your briefing,’ he voxed to his team. ‘These things can become intangible at will. Wait until they attack and fire at them while they’re solid.’

A ghost homed in on a Krieg watchmaster, long arms lashing out like whips towards his face. Its scalpelled fingers burrowed into his mask and gouged out thick streams of blood from his eyes, but the watchmaster’s squad followed Costellin’s orders and chose that moment to pepper it with hellgun beams. The necron flinched with each strike but recovered, until one good shot – and Costellin wished he could have told which one it was, could have worked out where this thing’s weak spots were, if indeed it had any – knocked it out of the air to land in a coiled heap, inert.

Another ghost was flying at Costellin, and he greeted it with a bolt of super-heated plasma, which passed straight through it. Having anticipated this, he swung his chainsword at the moment it reached for him, and parted its metal skull from its shoulders. The next attack came from behind, and Costellin didn’t have time to swing his sword around to defend himself; he could only leap for cover as a ghost sailed over his head, bringing up his pistol as it wheeled around and made a second dive for him. A grenadier beat him to the punch, and his attacker was liquefied in a burst of melta fire, the periphery of which washed over Costellin and left his cheeks feeling sunburnt, the odour of his own singed

eyebrows in his nostrils.

It was no use. There were too many of these creatures, at least thirty of them, and their intangibility gave them a distinct advantage over the admittedly more numerous grenadiers. Not only that, but their fallen were rising again.

Temporarily unmolested, Costellin fired from the sidelines in support of his men, but although his aim was more often true than not, at least two in three of his shots passed harmlessly through their targets, and the grenadiers were falling one by one, stunned by those spine-tails or butchered by metallic fingers.

The voice of the remaining Krieg lieutenant hissed over Costellin's comm-bead. Even he had accepted the hopelessness of the situation, and his suggestion was that they evacuate thirty more men in the now-retained lifters, for the good of the overall mission. *'You should go with them,'* he said. *'I'll stay here, buy you as much time as I am able.'* He was right, and indeed Costellin had come to the same conclusion himself. Still, he hesitated for a second before he approved the lieutenant's self-sacrificial gesture, because he was still human.

Then, a new sound was added to the hubbub around him: a rustling sound, like a million leaves blown on a strong gale. Suddenly, from the tunnel openings around the cavern walls, erupted great hordes of flying metal insects, each one of them larger than one of Costellin's hands.

There was no time to lose now. The lieutenant ordered the closest grenadiers into the lifter cages, and Costellin backed into one too. His pistol was still flaring and, gratifyingly, its plasma bursts consumed whole areas of the swarm, but always the gaps were soon filled as more insects streamed inward from the tunnels. The grenadiers' melta guns – the few they had between them – were having a similar effect, while their hellguns destroyed what they hit, but their focused beams could only take out two or three of their scores of targets at a time.

Another man fell, borne down by six smaller bodies. Costellin thought he might have been suffocated by them, but as the victorious insects took flight once more, he saw that their victim was bleeding from a hundred shallow cuts.

The necron ghosts, of course, could pass through the insect swarm with impunity to blindside the grenadiers. They were cutting down victim after victim, almost before any of them could react. Costellin's lifter cage was now full, four grenadiers crowded onto the platform beside him, still shooting back into the melee, and he holstered his chainsword and smacked his palm into the glowing activation rune. A phalanx of the swarm came surging towards him, as if some gestalt mind had sensed his attempt to escape, and the gate of the cage

was heaving and rattling, sliding too slowly shut. But it made it across and the latch slid home at the exact moment that the first of the insects slammed into it with sledgehammer force. They were clinging to the metal mesh, straining their claws in vain, too fat to squeeze their bodies through the gaps, but it wouldn't be long before they tore that metal mesh apart. And in the meantime, of course, the necron ghosts were faced with no such obstacle.

The platform juddered, heaved and began to rise, leaving the scrabbling insects behind it, and, to Costellin's right, a second lifter had started on its way too. Turning to his left, however, he was horrified to see two necron ghosts swooping unhindered through the lifter cage there, and efficiently dissecting its five occupants who, in such cramped confines, couldn't even bring their hellguns to bear on their killers.

Costellin saw Lomax too, hammering on the closed gate of a fourth cage, wrenching the gate from its hinges even though the platform within was already full and rising away from him. Necrons swooped upon the tech-priest from each side, but even as they reached him Costellin was carried through the cavern roof and into a dark stone shaft, and therefore doubtless spared another grisly image to add to his nightmares.

He wasn't safe yet.

He ordered the grenadiers back to the platform's edges. There was little room to spare, but they did manage to clear a tiny space between them, upon which Costellin had them train their weapons. A minute passed, and he began to feel the precaution had not been necessary. Then, a necron ghost came screaming up through the floor, and four hellguns barked – Costellin's plasma pistol would have burnt off the feet of all present – and the foul thing died, then twitched back to life, then died again beneath a second salvo of las-beams.

Another minute and a half went by, the weight of the dead necron's skull against Costellin's foot making his flesh crawl. There were no further intruders, however, and he began to think they had survived the worst of this encounter.

Then the platform shuddered to a halt, and the blue lights along its edges blinked out. 'Golden Throne!' he cursed. 'They must have destroyed the power source from the Termite. We're trapped down here!'

'We can climb, sir,' a grenadier suggested, indicating the four rusted but stout chains that had been pulling them upwards. Costellin didn't much care for that prospect, and he tried to vox the lieutenant on the surface, hoping there might be a manual winch up there for use in just such an emergency. He received no reply, and, switching to a general channel, picked up only static. Frustrated, he tore the

comm-bead from his ear. On top of everything else, now they had lost the vox-caster too.

‘All right,’ he said resignedly. ‘Climbing it is, and we had best be quick. We don’t know how much longer our comrades below us can hold out. There could be more of those creatures snapping at our heels at any moment. Worse, they could have reported our position to their main force. There could be an army of necrons heading for the top of this shaft as I speak, and if they reach it before we do...’ He didn’t have to spell out the consequences of such a disaster.

Two grenadiers had already taken a chain each. They braced their feet against the side of the lifter shaft and hauled themselves upwards, their lamp-packs attached to the bayonets of their hellguns and bobbing around like fireflies in the dark. The other two followed a moment later, which left only Costellin himself.

He tugged at a chain, and his gloves came away slick with oil. He didn’t know how much further this shaft ran, didn’t know if, lacking the youthful strength of the grenadiers, he could make it up, but what choice did he have other than to try?

He began to climb.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Another day, like the same day. Another twelve hours of labouring in the rubble, trying not to think. The only recent variation was that work shifts had been shortened to accommodate acts of worship, of which Amareth led three per day at dawn, noon and sunset. By this, the third day, Arex had become, if not exactly comfortable with these, then at least more tolerant of them. She was grateful for the respite they offered her from her work and for the protection of the temple building from the budding cold of winter. She wondered if this made her a sinner.

During the first service, two men had leapt up in protest, and Arex had wished for their courage... until Amareth had had them brought forward, put a laser pistol to their heads and despatched them 'to the Iron Gods' mercy'. There had been no more objections since then.

The temple bells began to peal now, and Arex laid down her shovel and joined the shuffling line of slaves being herded towards the sound. She hadn't realised the morning had grown so old. She looked for Tylar, her stomach knotting when she couldn't see him. What if he had lost track of the time too, and wasn't back yet?

What if Amareth had chosen today to take her to the pyramid?

'He's afraid,' Tylar had whispered to her last night, as they had lain together in the darkness of the lectorum. 'Amareth is afraid that, when he goes to his gods, they'll reject him or worse. He is desperate for their endorsement but, in order to have that, first he must risk everything he has gained, risk his very life.'

'Then he might not do it?' Arex had breathed. 'He might not dare to.'

'He will do it,' Tylar had answered grimly. 'Amareth is insecure, desirous of the power and the status he believes the Iron Gods can give him. He knows the risk, that is why he is holding back – but he will take it soon.'

This morning, he had left Arex to work alone, and she had scolded herself for missing him so much. He had become so important to her in so short a time. Her

lifeline, her hope. They had had no choice, though. Tylar had to make plans, and he couldn't do that around her. She was being too closely monitored.

She trudged into the temple, the painted skull above its doors no longer even giving her pause. The congregation filled only the front few pews, but still this was an increase on yesterday's attendance. Amareth had ordained several of his overseers, elevating favoured slaves to replace them. He had sent his new priests out to 'spread the word', and they had returned with numerous grateful refugees.

Arex craned her neck, looking for Tylar amid the throng but not finding him.

'I think the overseers are getting complacent,' he had said last night, 'and some of them are new to the job and enjoying the opportunity to lord it over the rest of us but doing little else. Added to that, they're having to follow you around wherever you go. I think, if I time it right, I can slip away.'

Perhaps he had done just that, Arex thought. Perhaps he had escaped and, despite his best intentions, he had seen the futility of returning for her and decided to save himself. She wouldn't have blamed him.

Many of the slaves had painted their faces in emulation of the priests. The most popular design was a sun symbol on the forehead. It seemed that, with each new day, Arex was being dragged further into a pit of madness, and she feared she didn't have the strength to remain afloat much longer.

She half-listened to another pious sermon from Amareth, sitting, standing, kneeling as instructed, all the time sandwiched between two overseers. She mouthed the words of the new, heretical catechisms but refused to give them voice. When heads were bowed in prayer to the Iron Gods, Arex entreated silently with the Emperor instead. She mentioned Gunthar, as she did every day, but today she also prayed for Tylar. She asked the Emperor to keep him safe, wherever he might be.

She ought to have known, by now, what His answer would be.

The service was over, the congregation filing out, when two overseers appeared, pushing against the tide. They carried a third figure between them, his feet dragging behind him, his face a mass of bruises. He had obviously been beaten.

'We have found him, Lord Amareth,' crowed one of the escorts. 'We have found the deserter, the heretic!'

'I am loyal to the God-Emperor of Mankind,' spat the prisoner. 'I am not the heretic here.' It was Tylar, of course, and Arex's hand flew to her mouth in dismay as he was hauled along the nave, past her row of pews. Her legs felt weak and she made to sit down, but her overseer guards hauled her upright

again.

‘His name is Tylar, my lord. He was absent from work detail this morning, and discovered near the High Temple.’

Tylar had reached the looming figure of Amareth now, and was forced to his knees before him. The High Priest’s expression was unreadable behind his skull mask and, when he spoke, his baritone voice was likewise devoid of emotion. ‘You have sought to defy the gods,’ he proclaimed, and Arex couldn’t tell if he was disappointed, angry or perhaps even glad of this excuse to flaunt his newfound power. ‘Have they not preached, through me, that to do so is to bring down their justice upon us all?’

‘Your gods are evil,’ spat Tylar. ‘It doesn’t matter what you do, how you try to please them. They will destroy you as they have destroyed all else they have touched.’

‘That will be the last blasphemy you utter,’ said Amareth, perfectly calmly, and a tear caught in Arex’s throat as he drew his pistol out from beneath his vestments.

‘I don’t think it will,’ said Tylar, ‘because you see, “Lord Amareth”, you aren’t the only one who can find a fallen soldier in these ruins. You aren’t the only one who can scavenge his equipment. I had to go all the way to the xenos pyramid to collect this prize, but I think it was well worth the trip.’

The slaves who had started to leave had returned, had begun to edge forward, ghoulishly eager to witness this heretic’s fate. Now, a susurrant horror spread through them and they drew back again. Tylar climbed to his feet, unimpeded by the overseers to each side of him, and even Amareth himself was suddenly deflated.

Tylar was holding something, and at last Arex could make it out: a red, ovoid shape, stamped with the stark black image of a skull and crossbones. ‘This,’ said Tylar, ‘is a krak grenade. It’s designed to blow through tank armour, so its blast is far stronger and more concentrated than that of the more familiar frag grenade. If I were to pull this pin now, trust me, there would be no chance of any of us surviving with shrapnel wounds, least of all our self-appointed, self-serving High Priest here.’

‘The Iron Gods will protect me,’ said Amareth, but he sounded less than sure of this.

‘What... what do you want?’ stammered one of the overseers.

‘What I want,’ said Tylar, ‘more than almost anything else at this moment, is to do it, to put an end to this lunatic cult. I want to bring down this roof, and I

would give my life for it proudly, but I won't, because this was a house of the Emperor once and I have faith that it will be again.' He had moved around behind Amareth as he spoke, and now he slipped an arm around his throat. 'So, instead, the High Priest and I are going to walk out of here, along with any of these people, these slaves, who wish to come with us, anyone who wishes to be free.'

'And then what?' sneered Amareth. 'You talk of freedom, but people like us, we have never been free. We have only had different masters.'

'You don't have to listen to him,' Tylar addressed the crowd. 'Amareth claims to speak for his gods, but you must know by now he only speaks for himself.'

'Walk out of this temple if you will,' challenged Amareth, his confidence regained, his voice a quiet warning that carried nonetheless to every corner. 'Fight the gods if you believe they can be overcome. Tempt their wrath if you dare.'

There was silence then, a long, terrible silence in which Arex felt she could almost have been crushed by the palpable longings and the fears of this downtrodden flock, and she shared those conflicting emotions, her feet like plascrete, weighted to the floor. She needed somebody else to make that first move, but nobody was game. She wanted to scream at them, *What are you waiting for? This is your chance!*

Then Tylar reached out to her, and Arex was released.

As she started towards him, an overseer blocked her path, then saw the threat in Tylar's eyes and gave way. 'We're leaving now,' said Tylar, 'and taking Amareth with us. As soon as we're clear, and sure that no one is following us, I'll release him, you have my word on that, and you are welcome to him. If anybody does come after us, however, if even one person steps out of this building...'

They made for a clumsy procession, the three of them, stumbling towards the doors, Tylar bundling Amareth ahead of him while maintaining his hold on the pin of the krak grenade, Arex behind them, terrified that someone might call their bluff, even more afraid that Tylar might not be bluffing. If anyone did have plans to impede them, however, they were quashed by the High Priest himself.

'Do as they say,' instructed Amareth. 'The gods will take care of them. There is nowhere they can run to.'

'We don't have to run,' scoffed Tylar. 'We need only hide and wait, for the Emperor's glorious armies to destroy your so-called gods.'

Then they were outside, and overseers and priests were crowding the doorway

behind them but careful not to cross the threshold, and Arex had hopes that maybe, just maybe, they could make it after all; this desperate plan might actually succeed.

Then, in his struggle to manoeuvre his hostage down the marble steps, Tylar slipped and Amareth seized his moment. He squirmed free of Tylar's hold and lunged for his wrist, sending the grenade spinning out of his hand. It bounced, a heart-jolting two, three, four times, on its way across the paved courtyard, and only after it had rolled to a halt in the choked gutter could Arex think again, move again.

Tylar was yelling at her to grab the grenade, as he and Amareth wrestled. She ran for it, but overseers were on her heels and Arex howled in anguish as they fell upon her, bore her down. She hit the plascrete, her outstretched hand just a few centimetres short of her target. She strained her shoulder, her arm, her fingers, but the grenade was scooped up, whisked out of her reach. In the meantime, Tylar had disappeared beneath a heaving mound of attackers from which Amareth now gracefully extracted himself, adjusting his skull mask, and just like that they had failed. It was over.

Arex tried to stand but she only got as far as her knees. A jeering crowd was forming around her; her hands were pulled behind her back and secured with proctor handcuffs. She was joined by Tylar, who was similarly manacled, and the crowd were baying for the blood of them both, but silence descended as Amareth marched through them. As he stopped before his prisoners, as he called for the pistol he had dropped in the church. A nervous overseer scuttled forward with the krak grenade and asked what he should do with it, and a recoiling Amareth ordered him to disarm it, somewhere far away from here, and waved away his protestations that he didn't know how.

'Do what you like with me,' pleaded Tylar, 'but I beg of you, if there is a compassionate feeling left in you, spare Arex. She bears no blame for my actions. She only came with me because... because we are betrothed.'

Arex's heart gave a lurch at that. She knew it had been a desperate bluff, but still she felt she was betraying Gunthar somehow by allowing the words to stand.

'You needn't concern yourself,' said Amareth and, although Arex couldn't see his face, she could hear the smirk in his voice. 'The girl will not die, at least not yet, not by my hand. It so happens that, when I communed with the Iron Gods but an hour ago, they made their intentions for Lady Hanrik perfectly clear to me.'

An eager priest jogged up behind Amareth and handed him his weapon, which

he levelled at Tylar's head once more. Tylar closed his eyes, waited to die, but then the gun was lowered. 'The two of you are betrothed?' Amareth repeated. 'Then we have been doubly blessed, to be sent two members of our former Governor's spoilt brood. I will present you both to the Iron Gods, to do with as they will.'

His words were underscored by the crump of an explosion from somewhere behind the schola. The nervous overseer, it seemed, had not been understating his bomb disposal skills, but Arex was too wrapped up in herself, too numb, even to react to the sound. Tylar's lie had bought him time, and kept the two of them together, and for both of these things she was grateful. She couldn't help but fear, though, that soon they might both wish they had been granted a swift death.

Amareth had whistled up a PDF truck, in itself evidence of his growing influence. Arex and Tylar were bundled into its rear, cuffed and surrounded by a score of emerald-cloaked priests. The 'High Temple' wasn't far – Tylar had made the return trip on foot this morning – but Amareth wished to travel in what now passed for style.

Arex's first glimpse of the black pyramid was across a skyway railing, its sheer stone face blotting out the gap between two lonely towers, and it seemed to her that it was sucking all light, all hope, from the world.

Even Amareth couldn't make the lifters work without power, so they faced a long slog down a hab-block staircase. Several times, Arex stumbled, her bound hands throwing her off-balance, and once she managed to topple four priests like dominoes. Whenever this happened, they cursed and made threats towards her, or just gloated about her likely fate once the Iron Gods had her. Tylar jumped to Arex's defence each time, but she didn't have the spirit to argue for herself any more.

They sloshed through the filth of the undercity, and Arex remembered a time, not so long ago, when she had leaned over a railing and gazed down into this alien world with a thrill in her heart. She had dreamed about seeing these streets close up, but never like this. She was aware of mutant eyes, watching her from the shadows, but they maintained their distance. Perhaps it was Amareth's skull mask and sceptre that kept them at bay. It seemed that they too recognised their masters.

They found more mutants, and a few human beings, labouring in the rubble as the slaves did above. Arex didn't know whether to feel sorry for them or despise

them. As she wrestled with this dilemma, she almost walked into a creature from a nightmare.

She flinched from it, catching her breath. She had only seen these cadaverous horrors from a distance before. An impassive metal skull swung around to face her, pinpoints of green light flaring in its eyeholes, and Arex found her soul transfixed by an image of death made chillingly incarnate. She tried to back away from it, but Amareth's priests barred her path. Evidently, however, she held no interest for the creature, and it turned and proceeded on its way, the priests parting obsequiously for it.

'Last chance to back out of this, Amareth,' muttered Tylar as they neared their objective. In the green light that spilled out from the pyramid's innards, many more of the metal cadavers scurried to and fro, some wheeling barrows full of debris, their work conducted in eerie silence, the purpose of their toils unknowable.

'You think they'll thank you for bringing us to them?' Tylar went on. 'You think they'll pat you on the back and make you their favourite pet? I think you're no more than a nuisance to them, Amareth, an insect buzzing about their heads, and if they acknowledge your existence at all it will only be to swat you.' The High Priest marched on doggedly, but neither he nor his henchmen rose to Tylar's bait, perhaps because they had no answers to his charge.

Then Amareth halted before a small group of the cadavers, and his priests collected behind him, and pushed Arex and Tylar to the front of them.

Amareth waited to be noticed. When this didn't happen, when indeed a pair of his Iron Gods detached themselves from the group and passed him by without so much as a glance in his direction, he cleared his throat impatiently. His gods ignored this too, so Amareth repeated the mannerism, and then launched into a prepared speech.

'My lords,' he began, 'I am Amareth, your High Priest. I am sure you know me.'

His voice was quieter, less assured than normal. Still, it gained the creatures' attention. Some of them turned silently to regard him, and Amareth faltered before their green-lit, hollow-eyed stares. With a sudden rush of self-consciousness, he removed his mask to reveal his sallow, too-human features, black hair plastered to his scalp by nervous sweat.

'I... I have brought an offering to you,' he said. 'These people, this woman and this man here, they are related to our... to the former Governor of this world. He... Hanrik is his name, he values their lives. I thought you could...' He

trailed off, nonplussed in the face of his gods' indifference. He glanced over his shoulder, saw his priests watching him keenly and, as far as Arex could tell, was spurred on by the growing disillusionment writ plain in their faces.

'We wanted you to know,' he said, 'that we have heard your voice, and that the men who are waging war upon you, men like Governor Hanrik, they no longer represent us. We welcome you to this world, and we stand ready to serve you.' He lowered himself to his knees, and his priests did the same. Arex almost followed suit, afraid of calling attention to herself by dissenting, but Tylar stood steadfast beside her.

The Iron Gods turned away, uncaringly, leaving the self-styled High Priest and his followers genuflecting to no one. It was a moment before Amareth dared stand again, the others following his lead but hesitantly. He was clearly shaken, but not yet ready to give up on his mad dreams of power.

He seized Arex by the arm, waved his laser pistol in her face, and gave her a push towards the entranceway to the pyramid. 'No,' she protested, 'no!' But the priests were behind her again, with their stun batons in her back, prodding her onward.

As the gateway grew before her, she was blinded by the green light behind it, had to avert her eyes from it. She longed to link her arm with Tylar's, to draw on his strength again, but their handcuffs made this impossible. 'Remember,' Tylar whispered to her, 'the Emperor has decreed that you should live. We must keep fighting for Him.'

Suddenly, the Iron Gods were stirring, noticing the strangers in their midst as if for the first time, and moving to surround them. As one of the creatures blocked Amareth's way to the pyramid, he pleaded desperately, 'But you can't... Didn't you hear what I said? I am your High Priest. I have built a church in your name, and now I bring you the means to defeat your enemies. Why won't you recognise me?'

The creatures didn't move. Amareth glared at them for a moment longer, then lowered his shoulders, tried to push his way past them – and four of them raised their great guns in unison, and vaporised him in a cataclysmic outpouring of emerald force.

Where Amareth had once stood, now a wisp of steam curled upwards from the ground, and Arex took no pleasure in this downfall of an enemy, this confirmation of everything that Tylar had said to him. She just felt sick.

Half the priests were on their knees again, howling in anguish, wanting to know why their gods had turned against them, what they had to do to appease

them. The rest were running for their lives. The Iron Gods fired after this latter group, claiming four more kills in the blink of an eye. Then they turned their attention to the supplicants before them, and set about destroying these too.

Arex made to run after the few escapees, but Tylar pulled her back. She realised where he was guiding her, and she cried out in protest, but there was no other way. There were no eyes upon them for the moment, but that would change, and there was nowhere else for them to hide, no other shelter within their reach.

So, Arex took a deep breath. She closed her eyes and she trusted her companion to guide her – and, as they crossed the threshold of the black pyramid, the Iron Gods' High Temple, Arex could feel a soul-numbing cold enveloping her, and that hateful green light burning through her eyelids.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

It had begun to rain. Fat, freezing drops of water spattered off Gunthar Soreson's cheeks and trickled down his neck. He had been standing here, hemmed in by the rest of his platoon, for an age. To refocus his mind, he practised training his gun upon selected points in the rock face ahead of him. He was ready to do his duty.

He had been issued with the lasgun that morning: the Krieg Lucius-pattern variant, more powerful than the local PDF model but consequently a greedier consumer of power. Gunthar had been warned that each of his three power packs was good for only twenty-five shots. However, his main concern was that he hadn't had a chance to fire this new weapon yet, get a feel for it.

The lasgun, it had been impressed upon him, was on loan from the Krieg 103rd regiment, who expected its return. 'When you know it's your time to die,' the quartermaster had said, 'when you're staring down the barrel of a gauss flayer, the last thing you do is, you save that gun by hurling it as far away from you as you can.'

There weren't enough vehicles to transport everyone, so almost two thousand troopers had been marched down the space port hill, along the approach road to the city. Their route had been lined with refugees, some cheering them on, others near-hysterical, all placing their hopes in these inexperienced men in ill-fitting uniforms.

Gunthar had heard a few grumbles from the diehard complainers that they hadn't had time to rest, to prepare themselves. He, however, had slept soundly and dreamlessly last night, felt as prepared as he could be, and time to rest, for him, would have been unwelcome time to think.

The western edge of the city was blocked by a mountain of debris, as tall as its walls had once been. A large space had been cleared before this, into which soldiers had been pouring all morning. Gunthar had admired the precision of the Death Korps Guardsmen arriving from the north and the south, their discipline

putting that of his own service to shame. He had chosen not to question the disproportionate placement of PDF troopers among the foremost ranks.

This wasn't how he had pictured this day. Even through the early stages of his training, Gunthar had envisaged a daring rescue mission, snatching Arex from the necrons before they could loose off more than a few badly-aimed shots at him. Since Commissar Costellin's team had left without him, and had reportedly been lost to vox contact, he had been forced to rethink those expectations.

The Imperial forces outnumbered their foes, Gunthar had been told, so if he could just kill one necron he would have played his part. It didn't seem like much to ask of him. With the Lucius-forged lasgun in his hands, he felt he could do a lot better.

A pair of flyers had been circling above, staying well out of range of the necrons' guns. Now, they peeled off, back towards the space port, and a PDF lieutenant barked out from behind Gunthar, 'This is it, M Platoon. They're here. Front rank, kneel!' The same order was echoed to his left and his right, and three hundred troopers dropped and raised their weapons. Gunthar raised his too, although with four ranks in front of him, he knew it could be some time before he had a clear target to aim at.

'Remember your training,' the lieutenant instructed. 'Stand your ground at all costs. Those who can, switch your guns to Full Auto and give those walking cadavers all you've got. When a necron falls, keep firing at it. I'm receiving a message from the governor-general; he is grateful for the sacrifice we are making, and he wishes the blessings of the God-Emperor upon us all.'

Almost as soon he had finished speaking, the rock pile trembled with a succession of heavy impacts to its far side. From the rear of the Imperial formation came the answering roars of the Death Korps' own big guns, Earthshaker shells sailing across the crumbling barricade in the blind expectation of finding targets beyond it.

The enemy didn't wait to be massacred. Necron ghosts came pouring through the rock, and through a stuttering volley of las-fire from the front two PDF ranks. They had been briefed about these horrors, prepared as best they could have been. Still, the reality was too much for many of them, and rookies and veterans alike attempted to flee but were held by the crush of bodies behind them. To Gunthar's left, a substantial part of N Platoon was collapsed by those cowards in their midst.

Hearing more gunshots behind him, he glanced to find the necrons' skin-coated ghouls already in the heart of the Death Korps' ranks. The Guardsmen, of

course, had been expecting just such an ambush, and they were blasting their attackers to the ground before their talon-knives could be brought to bear. Gunthar recalled his first encounter with those ghouls, in the dead of a long-gone night, another life. He remembered how afraid he had been of them then, but all he felt now was hatred.

The situation in front of him was rather less hopeful. The would-be deserters had been rallied by the harrying screams of their sergeants or just by the realisation that they couldn't retreat and so might as well defend themselves. The air was sizzling with a latticework of las-beams, but the necron ghosts were soaring through this with ease, and when one of them was struck it hardly seemed to be hurt at all.

Fortunately, Death Korps grenadiers were in sniping positions, small mounds of rubble giving them height to fire over the heads of the troopers in their way. Their melta guns hissed and, although some of the ghosts sailed untouched through the blasts, more of them were destroyed. Still, the survivors were relentless, scything their way through scores of men and, before Gunthar knew it, the rank in front of him was kneeling and it was time for him to step up.

His Krieg gun had no Full Auto setting. 'One well-aimed bolt from this will suffice,' the quartermaster had told him. 'There is no need for waste.' Of course, he had been taking the wielder's eye for granted in that equation, for Gunthar's first two shots went hopelessly astray. His third hewed closer to the path he had envisaged for it, the fourth and fifth closer still, but he was losing precious seconds. A necron swooped in front of his face, and Gunthar thought it was coming for him, couldn't target it in time, but instead it dropped onto the kneeling trooper in front of him.

The trooper swung his lasgun, tried to bat his attacker away, and the ghost was indeed dislodged but it took its victim's face with it. The trooper threw up his hands but recoiled from his own touch, sprawling backwards into Gunthar, and for a terrible moment their gazes met. The trooper's eyes were filled with raw, uncomprehending horror, white against a bloodied mass of exposed sinew. Feeling a surge of fury, Gunthar unleashed a vengeful fusillade in the escaping ghost's direction.

The last two of his beams were dead on target, and he could have wept with frustration as they passed through their intangible target.

His lieutenant bellowed again and, with a numb disbelief, Gunthar discerned the command for his own rank, the new front rank, to kneel. His time was almost up, and he hadn't yet scored his single kill, the best he could hope for now. He

forced his thoughts away from the troopers who had died wanting of that goal, didn't dare consider what that might mean for the outcome of this war.

Gunthar's novice regiment had been given two speeches this morning. The second, from Colonel Braun with the governor-general in attendance, had been a stirring oration on the subjects of honour and glory and devotion to the Emperor. The Krieg drill instructors, however, had got there first with a treatise on death, and even then Gunthar had known which of them was being the more honest.

A ghost came streaming towards him and he focused on his aim, let the vile apparition grow in his sights, refusing to let it hurry him. One well-aimed bolt. It stabbed into an eye socket, extinguished the green light in there, sent the creature spinning helplessly head over tail. Gunthar's first blood, if only metaphorically in the case of these bloodless horrors. His first unequivocal kill.

He could have leapt to this feet and cheered at that moment, could have died with a smile on his face, had a hand not gripped him by the ankle, had he not looked down, alarmed, into the imploring eyes of the faceless trooper, still alive though he must have been in unendurable pain. A part of Gunthar's old self, his compassion, welled inside him, and he almost gave the man what he so clearly wanted, the mercy of a las-beam through the brain, but the voice of a Krieg instructor inside his head berated him for taking his eye off the enemy, and for the potential waste of ammunition.

On that first score, at least, the phantom voice had a point.

The middle section of the rock barricade was blown out, the top section collapsing into the gap and slip-sliding. A solid wave of debris flowed in Gunthar's direction, blessing his dead comrades with an unexpected burial, threatening the same for him.

The next he knew, he was floundering on his stomach, his head hurting but he didn't know why. He tried to push himself up, and a gobbet of blood splashed onto the back of his hand. He must have been cut, he thought, by a splinter of rock, rendered insensate for a moment. Of all the ways he had imagined falling today... *Not this way*, he thought. He raised himself to his hands and knees, dropped again as gunfire ignited the air above him.

He raised his head, tentatively, and peered through the blur of what had now become a steady drizzle of rain, and he saw them. For the first time, he saw exactly what the Imperial forces on Hieronymous Theta were facing.

The cadaverous foot soldiers, of course, Gunthar had encountered before, and they had been ghastly enough in small numbers. They stalked towards him now in their hundreds, their thousands, and the sight of their identical, expressionless

skull faces almost froze his heart in his chest. Their long-barrelled guns vomited beam after beam of green lightning into the Imperial ranks; where that lightning struck, good men were reduced to ashes. But the foot soldiers weren't the worst of it.

Arrayed behind these were even larger figures, with larger, twin-barrelled guns, which belched out streams of emerald energy over the foot soldiers' heads – and flanking these monsters were necrons that appeared to have been butchered like the ghosts, the lower halves of their bodies removed and the upper halves fused to heavily armoured flying skimmers. Their right arms had been replaced by bulky gauss cannons, the right sides of their skulls by targeting auspexes.

Framing this nightmare army were the necron tanks. Gunthar's drill instructors had spoken of these, of the damage they could do. They were pyramidal in shape, fashioned from a dark green metal – techno-sorcerous metal, Gunthar had heard, which, like the necrons themselves, could regenerate from almost any wound – and they hovered a few metres off the ground. Stamped in gold upon their sides were profane symbols, and green lightning flared within their enclosed turrets. They bristled with weapons, mercifully silent for now, but Gunthar knew instinctively that he wanted to be somewhere else before those guns came within firing range of him.

For now, however, he was trapped where he was, between the clawing, slashing ghouls behind him and the lightning weapons of the foot soldiers ahead, and for a moment, he saw no hope. The necrons had to be unstoppable. He had reckoned without the Death Korps of Krieg.

The Krieg Guardsmen, the majority of them, were no better armed than Gunthar was, than many of his comrades had been. The difference was that they knew how to use their weapons for maximum effect. They exhibited flawless teamwork, squads of Guardsmen focusing their fire upon one foe at a time until it fell – and the Korps' heavy ordnance was beginning to make its mark too. The necrons were too close for the Earthshakers to bring their cannons to bear, but the smaller Medusas were more than taking up the slack, consuming whole clusters of the oncoming forces with each explosive shell they spat out.

Something thudded into the ground beside Gunthar, half-burying itself. A second later, he was pelted by flaming scraps of metal and he realised that the first object had not been a shell as he had first feared, but a necron skull. He scrambled out, revolted, from beneath the creature's fragmented remains, only to find them crawling, slithering, across the rubble, piecing themselves back

together. The green light snapped on in the skull's eye sockets, and Gunthar remembered his gun. He jammed its barrel into the necron's right eye, and he pulled the trigger.

His second kill was less cathartic than the first. For long seconds Gunthar couldn't tear his gaze away from that metal skull, fearing that as soon as he turned his back its eyes might flare into life once more. His head was beginning to clear, enough for him to wonder why he wasn't dead yet. The necrons had overlooked him, down here on the ground, but he knew this wouldn't last once he started firing at them again.

He pushed himself backwards with his elbows, rolled behind a small mound of debris. It would grant him some cover from the necrons in front of him; the ones behind, he would just have to pray kept their sights forward. He cleared a little hollow atop the mound for his gun barrel, used it to steady his aim.

Krieg Guardsmen were closing with the necron foot soldiers one on one, keeping them from employing their guns. Invariably, this led to the death of the brave Guardsman in question, if not at the hands of his chosen opponent then dealt by the remaining ghosts that still circled the battlefield. Each Krieg soldier that fell, however, was replaced by another, and the necrons, peppered with las-fire and the occasional melta blast and unable to fire back, were falling at the greater rate.

Then the first of those necron tanks entered the fray, the lightning from its turret lashing out in focused beams that blew great, gaping holes in the Imperial defences. The Medusas rounded on it, and a fortuitous series of direct hits blasted the floating dreadnought apart. It dropped to the ground, smoke curling from beneath its dark green plating, but more vehicles like it were already edging forwards.

Gunthar kept firing, targeting the foot soldiers because he knew his lasgun could be effective against them, counting his shots until he reached twenty-five then replacing his power pack and firing again. He scored several glancing hits, but only one target fell, and this rose again within seconds. Suddenly, the cluster of necrons into which he had been shooting was wiped out by a Medusa shell, and he wondered what the use of his being here was, what difference he was making. He knew how the Death Korps soldiers, any of them, would have answered that question.

They were like a force of nature, wave after wave of them surging towards their enemies, to be dashed against them like the tide against a cliff face. Each of their lives bought no more than a few seconds for the Medusas to reload, and yet

still the skull-masked soldiers kept on coming, eroding away at that cliff.

The necrons were not without tactics of their own. Gunthar realised that they had focused their efforts upon one point in the Krieg line, and now, suddenly, they broke through there. A score of gauss guns flared in unison, and green energy coruscated around a Medusa and, incredibly, stripped the armour from its frame as if it had been mere flesh on bone. In the meantime, a pair of necron tanks nudged into the Death Korps ranks, and their manifold guns discharged great lightning arcs that could fell five men at once. While the Imperial forces were in disarray, looking to regroup before this latest threat, a flank of skimmer-mounted necrons dived over their heads to make short work of a second Medusa.

Then Gunthar heard a new sound behind him, a thundering of hoof beats, and in an instant the tide was turned once more.

Krieg death riders came sweeping in from two directions and set about the outflanked necrons, surprising them with the speed of their arrival. Their hunting lances were tipped with explosives, powerful enough to blow a necron foot soldier apart. The necrons responded by targeting the riders' mounts, unaware that these were no commonplace horses. They were bred, like the Death Korps themselves, in the underground hives of Krieg, bio-sculpted to cope with its surface conditions. They had been gifted with sub-dermal armour and a drug injection system that kept them stimulated, aggressive and immune to all but the most crippling pain.

Of course, they were still no match for the green lightning, but they attacked with such violence, such frenzy, that few necrons had the chance to bring their guns to bear before they were knocked off their feet and trampled by uncaring hooves. In contrast, the skilled riders aimed their lances, and fired laspistols, with uncanny precision despite their mounts' bucking and rearing. Their gas-masked faces, peering out from beneath their helmets, gave the impression that this horsemanship came effortlessly to them, and they flew their skull-emblazoned pendants proudly.

Given some respite, the Medusas barked again and two more necron tanks went up in flames. The melta gun snipers had picked off most of the remaining ghosts and some skimmers, and even Gunthar despatched another foot soldier as it brought its gun to bear upon a mounted ridemaster. The quartermasters moved in to patch up the fallen and even some Guardsmen with the most horrific injuries were rising, necron-like, to fight again.

A Krieg platoon had pinned down a smaller group of foot soldiers but, as Gunthar looked for a shot, the beleaguered necrons vanished en masse. Was that

it, he wondered? Was it over at last? His other senses told him that it wasn't. Seeking a new target, his eyes alighted upon a hovering tank even as it began to belch out a stream of gleaming reinforcements. New necrons, he wondered, or the old ones restored? Either way, this battle was far from done yet.

Gunthar's third power pack had dried. His orders, in this situation, were to find a quartermaster and request more ammunition, but the corpse of a PDF comrade – his former sergeant, he realised – lay closer, lying where the quartermasters couldn't get to it. It was scarred by claw marks but intact and still gripping its lasgun. He would have to break cover to reach it, but what choice did he have?

He was expected to die today, anyway.

He had been told this more times than he could count these past weeks. He thought he had accepted it, but he realised now, assailed by the clamour and the stink of the battlefield, a pawn at the mercy of the destructive forces about him, that he hadn't accepted it at all. A part of him had clung to the image of war presented by the newsreels, had expected to buck the odds against him and return to the space port steeped in glory. He had been one of the more promising trainees, after all.

He saw now that, on the front lines of a war such as this one, no amount of training could guarantee survival, nor hardly improve those odds. Survival wasn't a matter of seeing the gauss beams coming, or of dodging the explosions, because neither of these things were humanly possible. Survival was a matter of standing in the right place, not a fraction forwards or to the left, of not being the person beside you. It was a matter of chance, blind chance, and of the Emperor's whim, and by coming to understand this Gunthar felt he had finally rid himself of his last vestiges of fear, of dread.

He was going to die, if not today then tomorrow, or the week after. It would happen, most likely, in the blink of an eye without his knowing his killer. So, all that could possibly matter to him now was how much he could accomplish in the meantime.

He couldn't picture Arex's face any more. He had been doing this for her, only for her, but at some point, without any awareness of it on his part, he had given up the hope of their ever being together again. It was better that way, Gunthar thought. The man she had known – the man she had loved and who had loved her in return – that man was gone. Perhaps, one day, she would hear his name again, even visit his grave if he had one, and remember the short time they had had together with fondness.

Perhaps she would be told how Gunthar had fought for her, died for her.

If so, then he intended to make her proud of him. Judging, as best he could, that all eyes were elsewhere, he ran for the sergeant's body, dropped beside it, swapped its lasgun for his own. Then, in emulation of the Death Korps Guardsmen, with whom he now felt a greater kinship than he had ever dreamed possible, he ran at the enemy.

Yes, Gunthar Soreson was expected to die today.

But he wasn't dead yet.



CHAPTER NINETEEN

By the time Hanrik found Colonel 186, he had worked himself into a sweat. He had taken the stairs three at a time, fast-walked through the space port terminal until his chest ached. He pushed his way through the refugees on the hillside. They stood in the freezing rain, facing eastward, and Hanrik followed their silent stares.

He hadn't been out here, hadn't looked, in over a week. In that time, his city had shrunk further than he could have imagined, become a skeleton of its former self. Its depleted skyline was alternately lit by flashes of fire and obscured by plumes of smoke, and Hanrik knew he was already too late.

The colonel stood in the back of a half-track, surveying the scene through a pair of magnoculars. He failed to react to the Governor-General's insistence that they needed to talk, so Hanrik talked anyway. Flustered as he was, he didn't make a great deal of sense, but he did get the colonel's attention.

'You agreed,' said the colonel without lowering the magnoculars, 'insisted, in fact, that the Planetary Defence Force play a full part in this conflict.'

'A part, yes,' said Hanrik, 'but not like this. Not—'

'You left the details of their deployment to my company commanders.'

'Cannon fodder!' Hanrik burst out. 'You used my men as cannon fodder, put them on the front lines to be slaughtered. I've been listening to the reports, and they... It's a massacre out there!'

'They are soldiers, General Hanrik. They knew what to expect.'

'But they're... So many of them, the majority of them, they only just... They only had three weeks to train. Even the experienced ones among them, they haven't faced anything like this before, and they're under-equipped...'

The colonel turned then, to regard Hanrik blankly through the eyepieces of his gasmask. 'That,' he said, 'is precisely why their value is limited.'

'They're expendable, you mean,' said Hanrik bitterly.

'If you prefer. You should be proud of your men, General Hanrik. My officers

on the ground report that they did their duty. They impeded the necron advance for almost a minute longer than we expected. A credit to your training.'

'You talk about them as if they were just... They were people, damn it, with lives and jobs and families. Look around you, colonel. Look at the faces around you, every one of them praying for someone they know, someone they love. Just one of your... your numbers means everything to them, and I... How do I explain to them that most of their brothers, their sons aren't coming back?'

He remembered being told that his own sons weren't coming back. Three separate messages, eighteen months apart, but Hanrik hadn't forgotten a single word of them.

The colonel said dismissively, 'The citizens of your world have grown soft. They have forgotten their debt to the Emperor.'

That was like a blow to Hanrik's face, and he lashed out verbally, 'I should have known you wouldn't understand. You're incapable of human feeling, afraid to even show your face. Who do you care about, colonel? Who is there to miss you?'

The Krieg man turned his back and raised his magnoculars, further incensing Hanrik. 'I'm talking to you, colonel,' he snapped, 'and for once you are going to listen to me. We may serve in different forces, but technically I still outrank you. I've asked around, I know you've only commanded your regiment for five minutes, whereas I—'

'Would you rather it had been my Guardsmen who had died?'

The sudden question took Hanrik aback.

'Would you rather we had sacrificed them, left the defence of this world to your under-equipped trainees? Because that, General Hanrik, is bordering on treason.'

'Of course I don't... Of course I wouldn't... I value their lives as much as I do any life. I just think your men were perhaps better able than mine to—'

'If you have a wish to see Krieg blood, Hanrik, you only have to wait a few more hours. We are dying as you speak.'

'I know that, colonel, and I'm sorry, I didn't mean to imply...'

Hanrik was still stumbling through an apology when the colonel wrenched his magnoculars around to overlook the north end of the city. He wasn't listening any more. He had a comm-bead in his ear, and evidently it had just relayed bad news. 'What's happening?' asked Hanrik. 'What's wrong?'

'Spiders,' said the colonel grimly. 'Mechanical spiders, flying out of the necron tanks. They're tearing our Guardsmen apart.'

‘Then that confirms what we feared,’ said Hanrik. ‘The necron army is still growing. It seems that, every time we face them, they are sending new, more powerful creatures onto the battlefield. Colonel, we thought we outnumbered them, but what if...?’

‘We’re fighting back,’ said the colonel. He paused and listened to his comm-bead again. ‘The Medusas are targeting the spiders, trying to find their weak spots. One of them just... I’m hearing that it crawled away from a mortar strike. They’re tough! But... but, wait, it is wounded. I’m hearing that the spider is wounded.’

The colonel hopped abruptly out of the half-track and marched towards the space port, two aides trailing along behind him. Hanrik hastened to keep step with them. ‘I’m returning to my office,’ said the colonel, when pressed, ‘to vox requests to the 42nd and the 103rd regiments for further reinforcements.’

‘You think we need them? Are... are we losing?’

‘The necrons’ resources must be finite. I think the spiders are their last line of defence, else why were they not employed in earlier battles? We are close to winning the war, Hanrik, but first we have to win this battle, and right now it’s poised on a knife edge. I suggest you think about that instead of indulging your hurt feelings.’

Hanrik opened his mouth to protest, but didn’t know what to say so he let the colonel outpace him. He looked back at the city, thought of all the people who had died there, were dying there still, and he wondered if he could have saved them.

The truth was that, after he had lost Arex, he had given up trying. He ought to have done what he had intended from the start: contact the Departmento Munitorum and complain in the strongest possible terms about the Death Korps’ conduct on his world.

To have taken such an extreme step, however, he would have had to have been very certain of his ground – and the colonel had a way of shaking his certainties.

He returned to his office, deflated, and reached for the vox-caster to hear the latest reports but hesitated, decided to sit in silence for a while and think.

Inevitably, he found his hand straying to his tunic pocket, his fingers closing around the cold, hard shape of the data-slate he had been keeping in there, the one on which he had transcribed the message.

It had come in this morning on the PDF command channel, encrypted with a key that had been cycled out of use eight years ago. Only a handful of officers

knew about the message at all, and only Hanrik knew what it said. It had taken him two hours, searching his memory, scratching away with his stencil, before he had been able to decode the sequence of electrical pulses. Just thirteen words, but he had read them a hundred times: *Hanrik. We have your family. Call off your attack. You have one day.*

He sat back in his seat and rubbed his weary eyes. He wished Costellin were here, but there had still been no word from him. He had come to trust the commissar's wise advice, and his discretion. The last thing he wanted to do was take the message to the colonel, because he knew what the colonel would say.

The colonel was here. He was standing in the doorway, and Hanrik started and bundled the slate away guiltily. How long had he been there, watching?

'How... how did you get on?' he stammered. 'With the reinforcements, I mean.'

'We have ten more platoons – fewer than I had hoped, but it may suffice. The 103rd is also sending six Medusas. If you have any more men to spare, however—'

'I don't,' said Hanrik, a little more forcefully than he had intended. 'That is to say, if I had them, you could... The only recruits still here in port, the only males of fighting age at all, are the sick and those who were injured during training.'

'There are other cities on this world.'

'They have sent the best they have. Even if it weren't for the unrest... Even if we could raise a new force in time, we have nothing to arm them with. We had to beg, borrow and steal the lasguns we have. I couldn't swear we didn't send a handful of troopers out there with nothing but knives.'

The colonel nodded and seemed to accept this. He tapped the butt of his bolt pistol in its holster. 'There is nothing more I can do here,' he said, 'so I am going to the front. You will join me?'

'No,' said Hanrik hastily. 'I... You're right, maybe there is more I could do. I thought I might vox around the city administrators again, put some pressure on them. There might be old storehouses they have forgotten about, or—'

'The equipment,' said the colonel, 'is less important than the men to carry it. Once this battle is over, we will have equipment to spare.'

'I will do what I can,' said Hanrik. After the colonel had left, however, he buried his face in his hands, thought about the whole new mass of as yet faceless citizens he had just agreed to condemn to death, and he asked himself how it was that yet again he had been manoeuvred into doing exactly what the Krieg man had wanted.

It was dark in Hanrik's office, but he didn't have the energy to stir himself, to switch on the light. The space port was eerily quiet but for the buzz of voices from his vox-caster unit. Hanrik was alone, and lonely. His officers were meant to be keeping him updated but, although they were stationed well back from the action, they were still too close for their own comfort. Hanrik was lucky if, between the curses and the screamed orders, they found a moment to feed him any information at all.

The news, however, what news there was, was promising. A concerted push by the death riders had forced the necrons back a good fifty metres. The majority of their foot soldiers were down, their corpses – those that had not been melted – dissipated to the winds. The new Medusas arriving from the south had made a difference, bombarding the pyramid-shaped tanks and the mechanical spiders for long, precious minutes before the skimmer-mounted necrons had reached them.

'They can't take the meltas out of play,' Colonel Braun reported, sounding almost optimistic for the first time. *'Even when the necrons can target a grenadier, he is usually able to throw his weapon to a comrade before he is obliterated.'*

Hanrik read the transcript on his slate again. *One day...* It was almost dawn.

He didn't think the message had come from the necrons, although he had flirted with that dreadful thought at first. From someone in the city, then, although that was almost worse. To think that his own people could have betrayed the Emperor, collaborated...

A return call came in from a grouchy city administrator, woken from his bed and nursing a grudge that a seat on a rescue ship hadn't yet been found for him. Hanrik conveyed the colonel's request for more resources and, for the fifth time that night, was subjected to a tirade of protestations including a list of incidents with which the overstretched authorities were already dealing. He waited for this to subside before adding that medical supplies were also urgently required.

Finally, it was all over. The confirmation came from a breathless PDF major, astonished that the remaining necrons had vanished before his eyes. Switching to the open channel, Hanrik heard the colonel ordering a grenadier squad forward to the generatorum with demolition charges. There were many requests for medical assistance, but he switched off the vox-caster before the bodies could be counted. He would have to face that final tally soon enough, he reasoned.

He sat for a short while longer in the darkness, in the silence, composing himself. For Governor-General Hanrik, the real work was about to begin.

The sun was up, though the sky was still grey. Hanrik hadn't slept in almost twenty-five hours, hadn't eaten for longer. He didn't feel like doing either right now, but he needed a break, emotionally more than physically.

He had spoken so many words of condolence that they had begun to sound hollow, meaningless to him. He had visited troopers in the bunkrooms that now served as medicae wards, had thanked them for their service and assured them that, through their efforts, a glorious victory had been won. He had argued with a Krieg quartermaster reluctant to expend resources on patients liable to die anyway.

So few of his men had come back. Nor were there any celebrations.

The Krieg returnees were even fewer in number, and comprised only the most wounded. Of course, they still had a line to hold, and so most of them had remained at the city's edge. They had co-opted a few PDF men to assist them, a decision about which Hanrik had been neither consulted nor informed. This made it difficult to compile a list of the dead and offered false hope to numerous grieving relatives.

Hanrik joined a table of weary officers in the temporary mess hall. He filled a dish with unappetising paste, which he pushed around listlessly with a spoon. It was Colonel Braun who first said what they were all thinking.

'I wonder,' he said, 'I don't mean to sound disloyal, but I wonder if it might have been better, if the Emperor might have been best served, by, well...'

'You mean by leaving when the necrons demanded it,' said Hanrik.

'If we had been given the resources to fight them,' said Braun, frustrated. 'If the Departmento Munitorum had sent a larger force, more than four regiments... We've been sending civilians to the front line, for the Emperor's sake!'

'We have lost so many men,' lamented the young, olive-skinned Major Hawke, 'but these necrons, they have to be fought, I think.'

'Fought, yes,' said Colonel Braun, 'but like this?'

'I'm beginning to think Costellin had the right idea,' said Hanrik.

'Exterminatus! We'd have lost the planet, and Emperor knows we all detested the thought of that to begin with, but we could have wiped out the necrons in a stroke, without the loss of a single life – assuming, that is, that we could have evacuated everyone.'

'There wouldn't have been enough ships,' another young major pointed out, 'and where would we have gone?'

'We should have demanded the ships,' said Hanrik, pounding the table with his fist, 'and a colony world to settle on. I blame myself. I allowed the Departmento

Munitorum – no, I allowed the Death Korps of Krieg – to use us as an experiment.’

‘And what if,’ said a cold voice behind him, ‘in the time it took for an evacuation to be organised, the necrons had woken their forces and escaped from us?’

Once again, Hanrik hadn’t heard Colonel 186’s approach. Nevertheless, bolstered by his officers’ support, no longer feeling so isolated, he stood and squared up to him. ‘And what have we achieved,’ he asked, ‘fighting this war your way? What did our people die for today? The destruction of one secondary generatorum, and what use is that if Costellin failed to reach the primary facility?’

‘We have dealt the necrons a blow from which they—’

‘That’s what you said after the 42nd fought them, but they came back stronger. The truth of it is, we don’t know the limits of the necrons’ self-repair capabilities. We don’t know how many more soldiers they can wake or... or fashion or bring in from elsewhere, but you don’t care about that, do you, colonel? You saw the smallest chance of glory, and the human cost of it meant nothing to you.’

‘What would you have me do? Withdraw my troops? Leave the necrons to you? Then the men who have given their lives so far will have done so for nothing.’

‘I just want you to... I’m the Governor of this world, and ever since you came here, you have ignored me, belittled me, ridden roughshod over my concerns.’

‘You place too much value on individual lives, Hanrik, those to which you can attach a name and a face. I am fighting for more than that, for the billions threatened by the necrons’ existence. If you can’t accept this, if you wish to file a complaint about my conduct on this world... that, of course, is your right.’

‘I will do that,’ said Hanrik belligerently. ‘That’s exactly what I’m going to do, as I should have done from the beginning.’

‘Just be careful,’ the colonel growled, ‘that our enemies do not use your weakness against you – and be warned that I will not allow that to happen.’

Hanrik had sent the message.

He had had no choice in the end. He hadn’t been able to sit by and do nothing, couldn’t have lived with the regret. Still, he felt sick to his stomach. He sat with his head in his hands, elbows on his desk, barely keeping his eyes open but knowing that now, more than ever, he had no chance of sleeping. Not until he

received a reply.

It came sooner than he had expected.

There was a curt rap on his office door, and, without waiting to be invited, Colonel 186 entered. Immediately, it was clear that something was wrong. The colonel was flanked by two Krieg majors, who took up positions, standing to attention, against the back wall. 'What is it?' asked Hanrik, rising.

'We have reason to suspect,' said the colonel, 'that there is a traitor among us.'

'No. I mean, I can't believe that. Who...?'

'You came straight to this office after we spoke in the mess hall?'

'Yes. Well, almost. I was waylaid by someone. A mother. Her son was fifteen years old when we sent him to war. He was caught in the blast of one of our own—'

'You have not left this room in the past ninety minutes?'

'No, I haven't. Why are you asking me these questions? What are you—?'

'Did you send any messages during that time?'

'I might have. Yes, I spoke to the Thelonius City administrator. He said the situation there is worsening. There have been... Some people, lower-floor dwellers, they've turned away from the Emperor. They have started to worship the necrons, can you believe that? Of course, I instructed that they be summarily—'

'Anything else?' growled the colonel.

'I haven't... No. Nothing else. I didn't... I never sent that complaint, if that's what you mean. I thought, perhaps I was being a little hasty, and perhaps... perhaps we can talk about it later, tomorrow, when things aren't so... when we aren't so tired.'

'My vox operator detected a transmission,' said the colonel, 'originating from this room.' Hanrik just gaped at him. He couldn't have known... could he?

'It was sent,' continued the colonel, 'over the PDF command channel.'

'That's... That channel,' spluttered Hanrik, 'is for private communications between my officers and myself. You have no right to—'

'As I informed you when we first met, Hanrik, this world is under martial law. My law. That makes everything that happens here my business. It gives me the right.'

He produced a data-slate and Hanrik took it, though it almost slid out of his nervous hands. He examined the slate's contents, and a pall of dread settled over him. The words of the message were familiar to him, but he read them anyway, then read them again as a delaying tactic. 'I am informed,' the colonel prompted

him, 'that this message was sent at 09.13 this morning, in response to the one received at 09.46 yesterday.'

'You knew about that? How...? You were waiting, weren't you? Waiting to see what I'd do. But... the code in which I sent this message... You shouldn't have been able to decrypt that code. How on Holy Terra...?'

'That is hardly the issue here, Hanrik.'

'No. I suppose you're right.' Hanrik sighed, defeated, sinking back into his chair. 'I suppose you want me to explain... You must understand, colonel. Try to understand, please. Arex is the only family I have. I have devoted my life to... What use is the Imperium, what use are all our armies, if we can't protect one girl?'

'The Imperium can only endure so long as we stand together. That is why there are rules about collaborating with—'

'Collaborating?' cried Hanrik. 'No, you can't accuse me of... You've read this message, I was just... I was playing for time. I couldn't call off the attack if I wanted to, you know that more than anyone does. I just thought, if I could make these people think... if I could imply that a deal could be reached, then perhaps... I couldn't just leave her to die. She's my niece, colonel. What would you have done?'

As soon as those words left his mouth, he realised his mistake.

Colonel 186 drew his bolt pistol, levelled it at the Governor-General's head. 'I gave you fair warning,' he said quietly, and the last thing Talmar Hanrik saw in this world was the flash of that bolt pistol's muzzle.



CHAPTER TWENTY

Costellin woke to unexpected warmth and softness, and for a moment he couldn't imagine where he could be.

Had he been taken captive? It seemed unlikely, and anyway, the necrons would hardly have relieved him of his peaked cap, greatcoat and boots and set him to rest in a comfortable bed. He tried to move, but felt a sharp pain in his right side and the pull of a patch of synth-skin. The sensation reminded him of a recent, harsher pain, but the memories were jumbled. He remembered the climb up the mine shaft, straining himself to his limit, finding himself wanting. He remembered staring into the abyss, being caught from above by a pair of gloved hands, hauled up into the light.

Then, a desperate chase...

He was in a hab, little bigger than his office at the space port. He could see the guttering flames of candles, shadows against the wall. Rain beat against the window shutters. He lifted his head, laboriously, to find two figures, elderly women dressed in rags, dozing in armchairs. Sitting beside the bed, watching him impassively, was a skull-masked grenadier.

'Did we do it?' he asked weakly. 'Destroy the generatorum?'

The grenadier shook his head, and Costellin groaned and sank back into his pillows. Unconsciousness tried to reclaim him, but he resisted it. He remembered the spiders, with their green eyes...

'How many?' he asked. 'How many of us made it?'

'Two of us,' said the grenadier, and Costellin realised that his eyes had closed, that the soldier's voice was coming to him as if from the end of a long tunnel.

'You and me, sir. We are the only survivors.'

The second time he woke, one of the old women was bathing his brow. She had a round, matronly face and pockmarked skin. Costellin tried to thank her, but his throat was too dry to speak. She heard him croaking, and brought him a mug of

cold water.

They had run through the city, he and his grenadiers, separating into five squads in the hope of eluding their pursuers: skimmer-mounted necrons. They had been faster than the Krieg men, gliding unhindered across the clogged skyways, their cannon arms flaring. Almost fifty grenadiers had set out from the mine entrance. Less than thirty had made it to the generatorum, where they had found worse waiting for them.

In his nightmares, he remembered:

Mechanical spiders, the size of small tanks, scuttling out from the generatorum building. Like the pursuing necrons, they had floated above the ground, but their movements had been slower, more ponderous. Despite this, they had shrugged off the grenadiers' hellgun fire and been on them too soon.

The third time Costellin woke, the rain had stopped and the shutters were open a crack to allow in the daylight. He couldn't see anyone, but he heard hushed voices. '—taking a dreadful chance,' said the voice of his round-faced nursemaid. 'They have left us alone so far, but if they learn we are sheltering their enemies—'

'You can't mean—' Another female voice, unfamiliar to Costellin, so presumably belonging to the nursemaid's sharp-featured friend.

'May the Emperor strike me dead for thinking it, but—'

'You heard what the one in the mask said. They are here to fight the necrons.'

'Two of them, alone? If I thought they had a prayer—'

'Do you think...? The paste we have found won't last forever. Do you think, if we please them, they might feed us?'

'I remember,' said Costellin. He was sitting up in bed, sipping from the mug.

'The soldier in front of me... A spider ripped out his throat. My pistol punched a great hole through its carapace. I thought it would fall, but...'

'What are your orders, sir?' The surviving grenadier was standing beside him.

Costellin shook his head, tried to dispel the image of those multi-faceted green eyes swivelling his way. His side ached. 'I don't know,' he said. 'It's evident that our mission here is done. Perhaps we should just—'

'With respect, sir, is that really the case? The necrons don't know we are alive, else they would have found us by now. It only takes one man to make it past them, with enough demolition charges to—'

'You're still carrying charges?'

'No sir, else I would have continued to fight.'

'I suppose I should be thankful you didn't. You got me out of there, I assume?'

‘You were wounded, delirious. Sir, I realise the odds are against us, but if we don’t do this, if we can’t destroy that generatorum, then who can?’

He had a point there. Certainly, the necrons would be ready for another approach through the mine tunnels. Even so, for two men to attempt what a hundred had already failed to do... ‘We can’t do anything,’ said Costellin, ‘without those charges. Maybe, if we could retrieve them...’

The grenadier shook his head. ‘I tried, sir, before dawn. I got as close to the generatorum as I could, but most of our comrades were destroyed by gauss weaponry. I found only a few of their bodies intact, and unfortunately—’

‘They weren’t the ones with the bombs,’ Costellin guessed.

‘I did retrieve something of value,’ said the grenadier, and Costellin looked up hopefully. Then the Krieg man produced a small wooden box from the folds of his charcoal greatcoat, and the commissar knew what it must contain before it was opened. ‘Now, our fallen comrades will always be with us,’ said the grenadier, displaying a collection of bone fragments. ‘Their spirits will share in our victory.’

‘The women,’ said Costellin suddenly. ‘When I... The first few times I woke up, there were two women here.’

‘They took us in, sir. They are too frail to fight the occupiers, but they are resisting in their own way. They have been hiding out in this room since—’

‘Where are they now?’

‘They went in search of food for us. They say the necrons are mostly ignoring the human survivors, which tallies with what we—’

Costellin looked at the shelves above the tiny stove in the corner, saw them brimming with tubes of food paste. ‘We have to get out of here,’ he said urgently.

They ran down eight flights of stairs before coming to a barricade that they couldn’t shift. Costellin needed a rest anyway, having exerted himself too soon. He sat on a step and studied the plan of the mine tunnels on his data-slate. ‘Obviously,’ he said, ‘we can’t go back to the entrance we came out of, but there are several more marked on here, and each must have its own store of mining charges.’

‘Can we find them?’ asked the grenadier.

‘Maybe. As we’ve learned to our cost, this map is hardly accurate, and it certainly isn’t to scale. We may have to rely on the wisdom of the natives, and pray of course that the necrons have left some of these buildings standing.’

‘The old ladies spoke of informants among the civilian populace.’

‘I’ll bet they did,’ said Costellin. ‘Even if that weren’t the case, we may have a great deal of ground to cover.’ He was already shedding his greatcoat and cap. ‘I think this is one mission best undertaken *sans* the benefaction of the Imperial aquila.’

The grenadier stared at him in uncomprehending silence.

‘The uniform, Guardsman. You said it yourself, the necrons are on the lookout for soldiers, but civilians are beneath their notice. If we want the freedom to roam this city, and to ask questions of its people, then we cannot be soldiers any longer.’

So, they searched a row of habs for clothes, finding long coats to conceal their body armour and weapons holsters. Costellin swapped his military-issue boots for a pair of shoes, but didn’t insist that his Krieg comrade do the same. His chainsword, he reluctantly left behind because it created too distinctive a bulge, though he concealed it beneath a floorboard alongside his cap in the small hope of returning for both.

The grenadier kept as much of his equipment as he could, trying at first to don his coat over his backpack. He crammed his pockets with frag grenades, medical supplies, his lasgun maintenance kit, even his spare bootlaces and personal grooming kit. His bulky hellgun was a problem, but as the alternative was to leave him defenceless, they would just have to hope that no one looked too closely at his right leg.

The last things to go were the mask and the rebreather unit.

Costellin was surprised, though he shouldn’t have been, at the youth of the face thus revealed. Only the most experienced Death Korps Guardsmen were assigned to grenadier platoons, but this Guardsman couldn’t have been more than nineteen. His pale cheeks were studded with acne, his hair lank and greasy and his purple-rimmed eyes as dead as the lenses that, for the greater part of his life, had concealed them.

They were ready, at last, and they stepped out into the cold afternoon, Costellin murmuring a short prayer to the Emperor. They headed for the second nearest mine entrance, the nearest being towards the city centre and thus towards the necron tomb. They consulted the map as infrequently as they could. Best, they thought, to appear as if their wanderings were without purpose.

They encountered few people, although more than once they heard skittering sounds and saw shadows flitting away from them. As the afternoon drew on, and their map reached the limits of its usefulness, they took to searching a hab-block. They kicked open doors until they cornered a frightened, scraggly-bearded man

who threatened them with a knife. Costellin calmed him down long enough to request directions but his reply was incoherent. Further down the same hallway, a pregnant teenage girl pleaded with them to take her away from here. She confirmed that the mine was close by, on the skyway above this one or maybe the one above that.

Outside, they saw a patrol of four necrons, too late to hide from them. They shrank into an emporium doorway and the creatures marched by without a glance in their direction. Costellin could feel the young grenadier tensing, reaching inside his coat for his hellgun, and he warned him quietly to stand down.

It was soon after this that they came upon a grizzled scavenger, too intent upon wrestling a shattered vidcaster from the rubble to detect their approach. He agreed to help them, for a price, and Costellin had to stop the grenadier from drawing his weapon again. In return for the commissar's old chrono, the scavenger pointed the pair towards their goal, and advised them that they would have to drop ten floors en route, circumventing a fallen skyway, to reach it.

He also warned them what they would find there.

The slave's work party had left him behind.

He didn't seem to have noticed. He kept on digging, obediently, mechanically, despite having escaped the sight of his baton-wielding masters. The grenadier seized him from behind, clamped a hand over his mouth before he could so much as squeal and hauled him into a hab-block, where the slave kicked and cursed and threatened his two captors with deific vengeance.

At this, the affronted grenadier went for his gun again and, as there was no one to see this time, Costellin didn't stay his hand. Cowed, the slave answered their questions, but regained his defiance as he spoke of a High Priest, Amareth, so esteemed by the necrons – the Iron Gods, he called them – that they had welcomed him into their High Temple. 'His priests drove back last night with the glorious news,' he said.

Costellin was more interested in the slaves' shift patterns and, although he didn't ask directly for fear of betraying the question's importance, in learning when the mine entrance around which they laboured might be left unattended. Once he had his answer, he met the grenadier's enquiring gaze with a nod, but added, 'Make it quiet.'

The slave let out an angry shriek when he saw the knife blade, and the grenadier had to stifle him again. He still managed to struggle, more violently

than Costellin had thought possible given his scrawny frame, and to spit muffled insults and threats that his gods would revenge this assault upon their servant. The grenadier cut the slave's throat, silencing him forever. As he looked down at the body, the grenadier's lip curled in disgust; the closest thing to an emotion that Costellin had yet seen on that youthful face.

They waited until sunset, then, for the pealing of bells to summon the remaining slaves and their masters. Costellin was glad of the rest, as his side had begun to hurt again. His Krieg comrade, however, was quick to point out their duty to execute every member, willing or not, of this Amareth's heretical church. 'Any other time,' said the commissar, 'I would agree with you, of course. Today, we have greater concerns and cannot afford to be sidetracked.'

The storage vault was situated to the rear of the smeltery, past a row of metal-mesh cages that taunted Costellin with the false promise of an escape route. Even if he had had a tech-priest to get those lifters working, if he could have been sure that no necrons lurked below, the shafts appeared to have been blocked.

The vault door bore the marks of numerous attempts to pry it open. Costellin's plasma pistol melted its locks in a heartbeat, and in the glow of the grenadier's lamp-pack they found what they had come for: crate after crate of small, cylindrical explosives. They began to take as many as they could carry, but the grenadier was concerned about leaving the remainder for the necron cult to find.

'I suggest we detonate them, sir,' he said. 'Blow this building sky high.'

'Too risky,' said Costellin. 'These charges have, what, a sixty-second fuse? We couldn't get far enough away before the necrons came pouring down on us.'

'I could set a booby trap, sir, wire the charges to trigger when this door is opened. That would give us forty minutes or more until the overseers return, and with the Emperor's grace we might kill the whole damned lot of—'

Costellin silenced him with a raised hand. 'Do you hear that?'

The grenadier listened for a moment, before nodding. 'A combustion engine.'

'A vehicle, coming our way. A large one from the sounds of it. Remember what our captive said about his priests driving back from somewhere? Your idea about the trap is a good one, Guardsman, but I think we can do better. I think we can take every one of these charges with us.'

The truck nuzzled its way through the mine entrance, a pair of blazing headlights blinding Costellin to the shape of the chassis behind them. He felt certain those lights would find him, crouching behind a thick pipe, but they played over him

and left him in darkness again. A moment later, the engine ceased its grumbling, though its noxious fumes still tickled the commissar's throat and threatened to make him cough.

Thanks to the lights, he hadn't been able to count the bodies inside the truck, didn't know if any of them were armed, but now doors were slamming and boots were ringing on plascrete and he had no choice but to act as planned. He sprang from cover to find the grenadier had beaten him to it by a footstep, emerging from behind the lifter cages. A hellgun barked, and a plasma pistol joined in the chorus once Costellin had taken time to ensure that his blasts wouldn't hit the truck itself. Their targets, shadows in green cloaks, fell with gratifying ease – all but one of them.

Suddenly, those headlights flared again, the engine revved, and Costellin was still blinking away stars when the truck came howling towards him. He stood his ground until the last possible second, steadied his aim, loosed off a single shot through the windscreen, then dived as the truck nose-butted a smelting tank behind him.

The grenadier reached it first, yanked the smouldering corpse of the driver from his cab and discarded him like a sack of rubbish. The truck's front end was mangled, venting steam, but its engine was still running, albeit throatily. 'Do you know how to operate this machine?' asked the grenadier.

'I've seen it done many times,' said Costellin. 'I might need a few minutes to familiarise myself with the control runes, though.'

'I'll load up the mining charges.'

In the event, it took Costellin almost fifteen minutes to pull the truck free from the tangled embrace of the protesting tank. He was still trying to orient it towards the exit, to master the pedals beneath its control wheel, when the grenadier, now occupying the passenger seat to his left, grunted a warning. Costellin ducked, and a las-beam sizzled over his head to blast a circular hole through the partition behind him.

The service at the temple must have ended, because a small group of priests was suddenly framed against the night sky ahead. Two more las-beams stabbed into the truck through the melted windscreen, and one of them sliced through Costellin's right sleeve and left a painful burn on his shoulder. He was more concerned with the beam that had missed him: one accidental strike to a single charge behind that partition, and they would all be blasted into very small pieces.

He let the grenadier provide the answering fire, while he concentrated on getting them out of there. Fortunately, only two priests were armed and one

quickly fell, while the other dropped his gun and fled as Costellin stamped down hard on a pedal and the truck surged forwards, breaking a third priest's body over its bonnet.

They were outside, then, fitting and starting along the skyway, and Costellin was wrenching the control wheel back and forth to avoid the worst of the debris. In his mirror, he saw a priest racing up behind them, flinging himself onto the truck's rear axle, but the commissar's erratic driving shook him loose without his even having to try, and the grenadier's hellgun ensured he stayed down for good.

They had checked and double-checked the map, and the annotations Costellin had made to it, until there was no room for doubt. Fourteen blocks, straight along this skyway. 'I should be the one to do it,' said the grenadier. 'It would be wasteful for both of us to die, and yours is the more valuable life.'

'You don't know how to control this truck,' said Costellin.

'You can teach me, sir. Once you have summoned the engine's spirits again, I need only know which pedal to press down on.'

'The way will be guarded, of course. Our target may be six floors above us, but the necrons would be foolish not to have anticipated an attack from below.'

'This is the only way, sir. We can't fight our way through them, but perhaps...'

'Perhaps a single vehicle, moving at speed... If the necrons aren't expecting us, if they have been depleted enough by the battle to the west...'

'The impact should set off the mining charges, but I will keep one beside me in case of need. If the tower is collapsed down here, then the generatorum will fall with it.'

'May the Emperor be with you, Guardsman,' said Costellin. He turned and, inadvertently, did something he hadn't done in almost thirty years. He made eye contact with a soldier under his command, a soldier about to die.

The grenadier must have seen the look in his eye and, remarkably, understood it, because he produced his ossuary box again. 'I have my comrades with me,' he said, 'and I will be granted a more noble death than this wretched soul deserves.'

'Your sacrifice will not be forgotten,' said Costellin quietly, and for once he knew he was speaking the truth. Something tugged at the corners of the grenadier's mouth, and the commissar thought he might have been trying to smile.

He didn't look back as the truck sped away from him. He couldn't bear to watch. He plunged his hands into the pockets of his borrowed coat and limped in the opposite direction, favouring his injured right side. He heard the tearing-

cloth sounds of gauss guns and he held his breath. He waited for the explosion, worried at first that it might come too soon, then that it might not come at all. When it did come, it shook the skyway beneath his feet, showered him with debris even at this distance, but Costellin kept walking. He thought about the soldier's eyes, and he prayed that the truck had found its target if only so, in the final moments of his life, that young man might at least have had some measure of fulfilment.

He trudged on, orienting himself by the position of the clouded moon. He knew that, eventually, he would come within range of the regimental vox-net and be able to request a pickup from a PDF flyer. Then, once he was out of this damned city, he intended to make a few changes in his life.

He spent much of that night thinking back to earlier, happier postings, postings in which he had felt he was making a difference. It seemed a long time since he had felt that way. Costellin was old and tired, and wearied by the compromises he had made, the blind eyes he had turned. He was sure that Colonel 186 wouldn't miss him, any more than would the generals above him. They would more likely question, as he questioned now, the very point of his presence among them.

He had made up his mind. As soon as he was back at the space port, he would vox the Departamento Munitorum. He would put in for a transfer.



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The passageway was cold, almost painfully so. Its walls were fashioned from black stone, like the outside of the pyramid, and the air was suffused with a familiar putrid green glow, which provided the only illumination.

Arex's hands were still cuffed behind her back, and her shoulders ached. She stumbled, fell against the cold stone, and allowed herself to slide to the floor. 'I can't go on,' she whimpered. 'I just... There's no hope, Tylar, none at all.'

'I feel it too,' said Tylar, 'like a physical sense of despair, but we have to—'

'We don't... Ever since that door slid shut behind us, we don't even know the way.'

'We're almost out of here, I'm sure of it. And, Arex, we haven't seen an Iron God in... I don't know how long it's been, but maybe they're sleeping. Or maybe they've found something other than the two of us to concern themselves with.'

'I just want to stay here, Tylar. I just want to curl up into a ball and—'

'I know,' said Tylar, 'but I think... I think we've wasted enough time hiding. The Emperor has given us this chance, and we must take it.'

He waited for Arex to find her faith, to make the only choice she could. When she drew in a deep breath, gritted her teeth and made to stand, using the wall behind her for leverage, he smiled, and the smile strengthened her. 'I would offer to help,' he said, 'but...' He rattled his own cuffs ruefully.

He led her onward, though she was deterred once more by a deep, throbbing sound emanating from somewhere ahead of them. They found themselves at the threshold of a cavernous chamber, filled with ominous, dark machinery with green light streaming from its control surfaces. Arex felt the urge to turn and flee, but fought it this time. She looked at Tylar imploringly, and read the worst in his dismal expression.

'Just a little further,' he whispered. 'Just... just through this room.'

They threaded their way between the machines, Arex straining to hold herself in, not to brush against them for fear of what might happen if she touched them. 'What... what do you suppose they're for?' she whispered.

'I don't know,' said Tylar. 'I don't dare think about it. I feel that, if we could even begin to understand these contraptions, the knowledge would drive us insane.'

At least, Arex told herself, they had plenty of cover in here. They were far less likely to be seen than they had been in the passageways outside. Even as she formed that thought, however, she started at a sound above her. The chamber had no roof that she could see, its black walls reaching into infinite darkness. She could make out nothing up there, but she was sure there *was* something. Something watching her.

Then, an Iron God crossed their path.

It was gone before they could do anything more than freeze, almost suddenly enough for Arex to believe she might have been seeing things except that Tylar had plainly seen it too. They waited for minutes in the gloom, straining for a sound of footsteps above the pervading mechanical hum and the rasping of their own breaths. Then Tylar whispered to Arex to stay back, he was going ahead to check the way was clear. She shrank between two hulking consoles, still careful not to touch either, and she peered out after him as he crept forward.

The second Iron God stepped out, as silently as the first had done, between them. Tylar had his back to it, hadn't seen it yet, but it had seen him. As it brought up its gun, Arex shrieked his name in warning, and he ducked beneath the emerald blast.

The Iron God swung around, facing Arex now, and she wormed herself deeper into her bolthole and squeezed out into a gangway behind.

She ran, not caring now if she brushed the machines, thinking only of the horror behind her, of what it would do if it caught her. She ran until she no longer knew which way she was going, couldn't tell if she was running away from the cadaverous creature or towards it, then she stopped and she looked for a hiding place. She found one, beneath a mushroom-shaped console alight with xenos runes. Barely had she secreted herself beneath this when she heard something. Not footsteps, though. This was the sound from before: a scuttling, scrabbling sound, and a shadow was cast on the wall, of a gigantic spider perching on the console above her head.

Arex held her breath, and for a moment the spider was still and silent too, as if listening for her in turn. Then it jerked into motion, and she heard the *thunk* of a

lever being pushed into place. Then the spider was scuttling away, across the tops of the infernal machines, and Arex breathed out with a tearful shudder.

She levered herself to her feet again, with her bound hands, the struggle more fraught this time because if an Iron God had appeared now she would have been helpless before it, floundering. She didn't know where Tylar was, didn't know how to find him again or even if he was still alive, although she had heard no gunfire.

A short, vertical stream of green energy flowed between a pair of jutting prongs, and Arex saw a chance to rid herself of her cuffs. She backed up to the stream, but had second thoughts as she felt her flesh tingling with its mere proximity. One millimetre out of place, and she was liable to strip her wrists down to their bones. She thought about Tylar, and took the risk anyway. Arex's hands parted, and she slapped her arms to restore some circulation to them.

She sensed rather than heard something stealing up behind her. She whirled around, but stumbled in the process, her flailing elbow just missing the deadly energy.

Tylar was there, horrified by what he had almost made her do. Recovering her balance and her composure, Arex suggested he free himself as she had done, but Tylar shook his head. 'Either of those things could return at any moment,' he whispered. He looked haggard, sickly, but Arex couldn't tell if it just was the green light on his skin that made him appear that way.

They abandoned the idea of stealth, to skirt the chamber at a half-run, their footsteps echoing around them. Arex's eyes kept drifting upwards, searching for more spiders above her. At one point, she thought she detected a glimmer of compound eyes, but by the time she had pointed this out to Tylar, it had been extinguished.

They emerged into another black-stone passage and saw the entranceway at last, grey daylight spilling in through it. Arex had expected night, and now she couldn't tell if she had been in the pyramid for more hours or fewer than she had imagined. Its green glow had scrambled her sense of time.

She could also hear gunfire, and she held Tylar back until he could hear it too. 'The Imperium?' he asked hopefully, but Arex shook her head. She could hear only one type of gun. Whatever was happening out there, she opined, the last thing they wanted to do was to step out into the middle of it.

'I'll take that chance,' grunted Tylar, 'to get out of this Emperor-forsaken crypt!'

They waited, all the same, until the sounds from without had receded somewhat. Then Tylar insisted on approaching the entranceway first, signalling to Arex when it was safe for her to join him, and she didn't argue with him.

They slipped out of the pyramid, Arex's heart pounding as they crossed a wide open space and dropped behind a mound of rubble. When last she had been here, when Amareth had brought her to his imagined masters and paid the price for it, this area had been teeming with activity. Now, the Iron Gods and their slaves were gone, shovels left abandoned and half-filled barrows upturned.

They crept from one rubble heap to the next, and in so doing disturbed two filthy, hunched figures that may have been mutants. The pair bolted, and immediately an Iron God appeared from nowhere. Its weapon flared green and, like Amareth and his priests before them, the hapless figures were destroyed in an eye blink. Arex hoped they *had* been mutants, because no man deserved to die in such pain.

She and Tylar watched in frozen horror, waiting for the Iron God to turn their way. It couldn't have missed them if it had. Fortunately, it kept walking, as if the murders it had just committed had been no more than a passing distraction to it. A moment later, they heard the tearing-cloth sound of its gun again, and a similar retort from the opposite direction. 'We're surrounded,' Arex whispered.

Tylar shook his head. 'I think they're spreading outwards from the pyramid. If we stay behind them...' He never got the chance to complete the thought.

A small, wiry shape cannoned into Tylar from behind. A green-robed priest. Arex thought she recognised his protruding brow and misshapen nose; he had been one of Amareth's ill-fated entourage, evidently one of the handful of survivors.

Impeded by his cuffed wrists, Tylar was knocked down, and the priest leapt upon him. 'You have caused this,' he screeched. 'You have brought the wrath of the Iron Gods down upon us. I have them, masters. Do you see? I have captured your enemies for you. I have served you well, have mercy upon me!'

In panic, Arex looked for the quickest way to silence him. She found it: a hunk of plascrete, which she hefted to her shoulders and brought down two-handed, splitting the lunatic's head wide open. He was bleeding, reeling, but not felled, and his screams had attracted more unwelcome attention. An Iron God appeared from between two rubble heaps, and its gun was trained upon Arex. The priest teetered towards it, one hand to his cut head, the other outstretched in imploration. 'M-master...' he moaned.

The Iron God squeezed its trigger. At the same time, Tylar kicked out from the ground. His foot struck the priest behind his knees, and propelled him, flailing, into the path of the emerald discharge. His scream of agony was cut short as he was flayed to death. Arex hauled Tylar to his feet and they ran for their lives, even as a second shot crackled between them.

They kept on running, until they came within sight of the nearest towers of the city. Then they faltered to a numbed halt, unable to believe what they were seeing.

There were creatures in the air, skeletal and metallic like the Iron Gods but of different shapes and sizes, a menagerie of horrors. They were circling, swooping onto skyways and through windows, lighting the sky with the green of their weapons, and, although Arex and Tylar couldn't see the monsters' victims from this distance, they could certainly hear their screams.

'They're hunting people down,' stammered Arex. 'They're... What if he was right? That priest, I mean, when he said... They were leaving us alone, Tylar. They were leaving us alone, until we... What if this is all our fault? What if we--?'

Tylar shook his head firmly. 'It was always going to end this way,' he said. 'Amareth and his followers were mad to believe otherwise. The Iron Gods aren't interested in us, they don't care what we do, and they never said otherwise. They were never going to share their world with us.'

'But why now? Why choose now to... to slaughter their own followers?'

'I don't know,' said Tylar, 'and as far as the cultists and the mutants are concerned, I don't much care. Better them than us, that's all I can say.'

'What do we do now?' asked Arex. 'We can't go forward into... that.'

'We can't go back either,' said Tylar.

He caught Arex's gaze, and she saw something in his eyes that she hadn't seen before. She had been relying on him to keep her going, to give her hope – but now, for the first time, she saw that his own hope had gone. Tylar was as terrified as she was.

There were creatures circling overhead. Shrinking into a doorway, huddling on its step, Arex and Tylar watched their emaciated shadows flitting across the ground, as Arex struggled to break Tylar's cuffs open with a jagged rock.

They had agreed to get as far away from the pyramid as they could. That was their goal. So far, this had meant remaining at ground level rather than climbing the towers, but that was okay with Arex because, frankly, one floor felt as safe as

any other to her now. They had encountered no more mutants anyway, hearing only the occasional wail from a nearby hab-block as one was hunted down and slain.

They had stuck with Tylar's plan, advancing slowly behind the Iron Gods' line as this expanded outwards across the city. Arex was trying not to think about what would happen once the creatures had done their worst and decided to turn back.

'This must be my uncle's doing,' said Arex. 'He has triggered this.'

Tylar looked at her quizzically.

'What else could it be?' she said. 'He must have... When the Iron Gods gave him their ultimatum, our lives for the city, he must have—'

'They gave him no ultimatum,' said Tylar. 'Amareth, perhaps, may have played those games, thought to take hostages, but these creatures—'

'All the same,' said Arex, 'Uncle Hanrik knew I was here, trapped in here, and yet still... But he did the right thing. I know he did the right thing, and... and what if he's winning, Tylar? What if that's why...? I asked why the Iron Gods are doing this now, killing people now when they have been content to ignore us before, and perhaps... perhaps it is because they are losing the war. Perhaps they—'

'It could mean the reverse,' said Tylar. 'It could mean they have defeated the Imperial forces, and are scouring Hieronymous Theta of its final remnants of human life. We keep on running, Arex. For weeks, we have been running – but what if there is nowhere left to run to? What if it would be better for us to accept our fates?'

'What did you see?' asked Arex quietly.

'Nothing,' said Tylar. 'I don't know what you—'

'There was something,' said Arex. 'You were always so... You've been different, Tylar, since I lost you in the Iron Gods' temple, in that room of machines.'

'I think those flying things have gone now,' said Tylar leadenly. 'We should move on. And we should start climbing soon. We've gained enough distance on the pyramid. We'd be safer, less likely to be seen, indoors now. With the Emperor's grace, it just might be enough to save us. It just might.'

Arex agreed, and they went on their way, but Tylar's optimistic words had been a lie and they both knew it.

They had been walking for hours, but had made little progress. They had spent

too much time hiding from shadows, had climbed only thirty or forty floors. Arex was exhausted, more with the tension of her plight than with the physical strain of it.

Then they heard unholy screaming from above them, abruptly curtailed, and they cowered in the dreadful silence that followed, until Tylar plucked up the courage to climb to the next floor, to emerge into a hab-block hallway, Arex at his shoulder.

The walls were wet with blood. Lumps of bloody red meat were strewn across the hallway's floor. Arex's hand flew to her mouth in revulsion, as she realised that these were human corpses. Before them lay the remains of two women and three children. They had been skinned, dismembered, in one case decapitated.

She turned away from them and, as she did so, she caught a flicker of movement on the edge of her vision and she shrieked. 'There was something there in that corner,' she insisted to the concerned Tylar, pointing unsteadily. 'Something that just... It passed through that wall like a spirit!' He calmed her down, pointing out that if indeed there had been something, evidently it hadn't noticed them, and anyway, wasn't it more likely that Arex's weariness and hunger had induced a fleeting hallucination?

They agreed, in any case, that they didn't want to stay here, this in spite of the logical but unvoiced argument that the Iron Gods had searched this place and were unlikely to return to it. They resumed their climb, but even more slowly now as they stopped on every floor to search the nearby rooms for food and drink.

Unfortunately, most of the habs in this tower had been picked clean. Most of them had also been turned over, and some of them bombed or burnt out. Arex grew tired of picking her way through dust, ash and soot, and in the end her only reward for it was a near-empty tube of food paste from which she and Tylar were able to squeeze out a few tasteless globs. Arex felt sick anyway, and so couldn't have eaten much.

A few rooms over from there, they found a serviceable bed, the only off-putting detail being that its former owners, a young couple, were hanging by their necks from a pair of ropes alongside it. In contrast to the mutilated corpses a few floors below, they looked peaceful, almost content. They hadn't been dead long, because their flesh hadn't had time to rot yet. Tylar cut them down and rolled them out into the hallway, while Arex kicked off her shoes and snuggled down beneath a filthy blanket.

Tylar sat on the bed beside her, but he was shivering, so she folded the blanket

around him too. It was quiet in here, and although they both felt they had further to go, neither of them was in any hurry to resume their fraught journey.

Arex longed for sleep, but her brain was too full, so she lay and stared sightlessly at the ceiling as the silence between them lengthened and deepened.

Then Tylar took a deep breath to steel himself and, avoiding her eyes, he finally answered her question.

‘You saved my life,’ he said. ‘In the machine room. When you shouted that warning. I saw the creature going after you, and I tried to follow. I listened out for your footsteps. They sounded different from the creature’s. Iron Gods don’t run. They have no need to. I lost you near the wall. I guessed, I prayed, you had hidden, but I couldn’t call out to you without them hearing. I followed the wall around, praying you would see me. And I came to a doorway.’

He faltered then, swallowed, and continued in a somewhat smaller voice. ‘There was another chamber through there, even larger than the machine room. They were in there, Arex, scores of creatures, Iron Gods. They had their backs to me, watching some manner of construct: pylons, curved pylons, like claws, holding... I don’t know how to describe it. Like a ball of flame, green flame. No, not a ball, a disc, an upright disc, perfectly flat, and then... Stepping out of the flame, they came, marching in four by four, until they almost filled that great chamber.’

‘More of them?’ Arex breathed. ‘But where could they have—?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Tylar. ‘I don’t know where they came from. I only know that... Do you see now? Do you understand why I—?’

‘They don’t know what they’re facing, the Imperial forces. If the Iron Gods have the power to... If they can bring in reinforcements like that—’

‘An infinite number of them,’ said Tylar.

‘If we could only send my uncle a warning...’

‘But we can’t leave the city, we know that, and every day more mortars fall. Every day, the city will shrink further, driving us back, back towards the horrors at its heart. You were right, Arex, in the pyramid. We should have stayed put. All that effort, the risks we took, and we’re no safer out here than we were in there.’

She could bear to hear no more, so she hugged him tightly. He surrendered to her arms, and for the first time Arex felt that, instead of her drawing from his strength, they were drawing on each other’s, sharing all they had. She pulled him gently down until his head rested on the pillow beside hers, and for a moment everything was all right, she was warm and protected.

Then an image of Gunthar came into her mind, unbidden, and she pulled away

from Tylar, feeling guilty. 'It's okay,' he said softly. 'Really, it's okay.'

'I didn't mean to...' she said. 'I hadn't thought about him in so long. I hadn't dared to, because I knew... I know I shan't ever see Gunthar – his name was Gunthar – again. I wish I knew if he had escaped from the city, or if... That's the worst part of it, I believe, the not knowing.'

'He was a lucky man,' said Tylar, and Arex allowed herself to relax into their embrace again. It wasn't that she loved him, at least she didn't think she did. Right now, however, she needed someone, needed him, and he needed her too, and what, she thought, could be wrong with that? What was wrong with their finding, in the midst of all this madness, a crumb of simple human comfort, and in taking it?

What was wrong in her holding him and being held by him, in their bodies melting into each other for this one lonely night?



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The orders had come down that morning.

The bombardment of Hieronymous City was to cease forthwith. Not that there was much left to bombard. The city was a fraction of its former size, reduced to fewer than four hundred forlorn towers standing in an expansive field of debris. Gunthar Soreson had long since stopped thinking of it as his former home. It was hard to believe that once the city had been alive, vital, a proud symbol of everything good about the Imperium. It was an empty shell now. Worse, it was rotten, decayed from within, a cancer upon this world that needed to be excised.

It would be, soon.

It had been almost three weeks since Gunthar had seen combat. He remembered the moment, almost unreal, when the necron force had vanished before his eyes. It had taken him a minute to adjust, to understand what had happened; to be sure the monsters weren't coming back. It had taken him longer to accept that a victory had been won, and he had lived to see it. He had felt oddly bereft, lacking in purpose. But, of course, one battle, no matter how grand, did not a war make, and there was much more yet to be done.

Ten days ago, a band of mutants had tried to blast their way out of the city, having somehow managed to lay their hands on a pile of demolition charges. A handful of them had had lasguns, and these were the first shot down by the waiting PDF troopers and Guardsmen. Gunthar had killed one himself, almost surprised when the vile creature had succumbed to a single hellgun beam.

The remaining mutants, unarmed, were considered a waste of las-power, and a Death Korps platoon had all but finished them off with a bayonet charge. One had come screeching, wailing, towards Gunthar, to be met by his gun butt. Its yellow parchment skin and startling pink eyes had reminded him of something he had seen a long time ago. The creature was so warped and twisted that he couldn't tell if he had struck it in the chin or the elbow, but either way it fell, with a satisfying crunch of bone, and Gunthar drove his bayonet through what he

judged to be its throat.

After necrons, mere mutants were hardly a threat to him.

They had dumped the bodies in a mine tunnel, to be buried under tonnes of debris. They had been filling in the tunnels ever since Commissar Costellin had used them to infiltrate the city. They didn't want the necrons using the same trick in reverse. A few bodies, however, had borne no visible signs of mutation, and had been clad in dark green cloaks to boot. A Guardsman had pointed to necron sigils scrawled in ash across one dead man's face, and had commented on the depravities to which some people could sink, especially those who had been brought up no better.

Gunthar had agreed with him, and felt shame for the life he had once lived.

Officially, he still served with the Planetary Defence Force. His commanding officer was Colonel Braun. He had nine squad-mates, none of whose names he knew, none of whom had fought the necrons at his side. Increasingly, however, his orders came from a Krieg watchmaster or lieutenant. Gunthar worked alongside the Krieg Guardsmen, ate and drank alongside them. More often than not, he also slept alongside them, eschewing his space port bunk for a bedroll in an abandoned siege emplacement.

He spoke few words to them, nor they to him, which suited him well. Most of the time, he had nothing to say. He had been interrogated once, by a group of Krieg men who had heard about his dealings with the disgraced Hanrik. He believed he had convinced them that he didn't share the late Governor-General's heretical views. Moreover, they had seemed impressed by the part Gunthar had played in Costellin's triumphant sabotage mission. Certainly, since then, they had treated him as a comrade, nothing more or less.

In the newsreels, great wars had been won within days, if not hours. Three weeks ago, Gunthar had half-expected the Imperial forces to recover their breath then chase the necrons back to their black pyramid. Instead, they had resumed the daily grind of ploughing a few hundred metres into the occupied city each day. They had waited for Guardsmen to recover from their injuries and return to the front, for vehicle and equipment repairs and for new PDF platoons to be raised and deployed. The delay was frustrating, because it gave the necrons time to recover their strength too, but Gunthar accepted the necessity of it.

In the past few days, however, he had witnessed a marked increase in the number of soldiers around him. He had felt, even before this morning's new orders were read out, that the waiting was coming to an end at last. They were almost ready.

The afternoon brought a further distraction.

Gunthar's squad was one of eight marched to Thelonius City in the company of three Centaur support vehicles. As lifter platforms cranked them up to the 110th floor, they passed well-lit bars and eateries, clubs and casinos, and it felt as if he was viewing an alien landscape. He had always believed that, by doing his job, supporting the mining operation, he was paying his dues to the Emperor. He understood now that he could, he should, have been doing so much more.

The truth of it was that, before the necrons, he had felt too safe.

The further they moved into the city, the more evident were its scars. Windows were boarded up, emporiums burnt out or looted. The skyways were strewn with refuse, and more than one white autocab had been upended and torched. Most shaming of all were the pro-necron slogans graffitied on the walls. Had Gunthar known no better, he could have mistaken this for a lower floor, somewhere in the mid-twenties at most, and attributed the vandalism to the usual mutant suspects.

He heard the rioters before he saw them, their voices united in an outpouring of fury. The proctors came into view first. There were four lines of them, ranged across the skyway, their shields raised but staggering beneath an onslaught of pure chaos. At the sight of the Imperial convoy, they parted gratefully, and the first of the rioters came flooding through the gap. When they saw what was waiting beyond it, many of them faltered, tried to turn back, but found the proctors moving to surround them.

Others were more game, or just out of their minds, and a hail of half-bricks and petroleum bombs came Gunthar's way but shattered uselessly against armour plating and flak helmets. A Krieg Guardsman, sitting up in the turret of the leading Centaur, squeezed off ten rounds from his heavy stubber over the rioters' heads, demanding their attention. Some didn't heed the warning, or perhaps didn't think it was serious, and they squared up to the oncoming juggernaut. A few hurled themselves at it, tried to climb its sponsons, but they were quickly seized by troopers, wrenched from their precarious perches and dashed to the ground.

One fell under the Centaur's tracks and was crushed to death, but Gunthar felt no sympathy for him. He could almost have forgiven these people their previous ignorance, but to have learned of the necrons and reacted this way? Many of them were male and of draft age. They could have been fighting. Instead, their selfish concern for their own lives was impeding the war effort, an affront to the Emperor and a threat to everything He had built. A good number of them flew banners, proclaiming support for their erstwhile Governor and opposition to the

Krieg ‘invaders’ of their world. He didn’t remember Hanrik being so popular in life.

The tumult had subsided a little, angry voices struck dumb by awe and doubt. This gave a PDF sergeant with a loudhailer a chance to be heard, which he used to order all citizens off the skyways. The PDF were leading this operation, a single Death Korps squad along to man the Centaurs: a familiar pattern. It was felt, Gunthar had heard, that the people of Hieronymous Theta were more likely to respond to their own kind, that the presence of alien soldiers in their homes would be a further incitement to them. Personally, he would have sent in the death riders to mow down anyone in their way, had it not been for the need to conserve ammunition.

Gunthar and his comrades moved into the crowd, displaying their guns although they didn’t want to have to use them, two Centaurs lurking in threat behind them. A scrawny young man attacked the trooper to Gunthar’s right, tried to wrest his lasgun away from him but found himself impaled on its bayonet instead. They were beginning to get their message across, and a lot of makeshift weapons had been dropped, a lot of trembling hands raised. Dispersal was a slow process, however, with everyone penned in as they were. Suddenly, there was an upsurge of activity ahead of Gunthar, and a phalanx of rioters broke through a proctor cordon and streamed away down a side street.

It was for this very reason that the third Centaur had peeled off minutes earlier, guided by the proctors towards the nearest heavy lifter, two squads of troopers trailing along behind it. By now, it would be wheeling up behind the would-be escapees, ready to give them a nasty surprise – and indeed, a moment later, Gunthar heard the staccato retort of its stubber and was satisfied that an example was being made.

He climbed through the smashed window of a food emporium, found a group of older men setting a fire in there and one filling a box with all the goods he could lay his hands on. Staring down the barrel of Gunthar’s hellgun, the old thief turned pale and pleaded, ‘It’s for my wife and my children. With all the upheaval, the unrest, the mines have been shut down and I can’t make an honest living.’

When he saw that Gunthar was unmoved by his plight, his face darkened and he growled, ‘I’m entitled to this. I’ve worked hard for the Emperor all my life, and what do I have to show for it? He abandoned us to die here!’

Gunthar was disgusted by him, by the waste of a life he represented. He squeezed his trigger, burnt a hole through the old thief’s head and watched

dispassionately as his lifeless body crumpled. For a moment, he wondered if he had failed himself, allowed emotion to cloud his judgement. Then he saw the expressions on the remaining looters' faces, heard their whimpered apologies and promises of future loyalty as they backed towards the window, and he knew that word of his single shot would spread and probably grow, and prove an object lesson to anyone who heard it.

He had used his resources well.

A half-track came to meet the returning convoy, pulling up alongside it. A thin-faced, young major spoke to a sergeant and was directed to another, who directed him in turn towards Gunthar. 'Trooper Soreson?' asked the major, and Gunthar blinked and took a moment to confirm that, yes, that had been his name. It had been so long since he had been addressed by it, he had almost forgotten.

He didn't know why he had been singled out again. He didn't ask. He was driven to the space port and taken upstairs to the office that had once been Hanrik's, now Colonel Braun's. Rising from behind his desk, Braun met Gunthar with a handshake and a vapid remark about the cold weather, as if greeting an old friend. He offered the nonplussed trooper a seat, and regarded him at length with a smile presumably meant to reassure him but decidedly strained.

'I hear you're just back from Thelonus City,' said Braun.

'Yes sir,' said Gunthar. 'We quelled the insurrection there.'

'That's good,' murmured Braun, half to himself, 'that's good news. We have been finding it hard to recruit from Thelonus, but perhaps now...'

The colonel was flanked by two PDF lieutenants, while the major who had fetched Gunthar here had seated himself behind the door. It was a smaller gathering than the one to which he had last been summoned in these offices, with the Krieg Colonel 186 and his deputies being the absentees of most note, apart from Hanrik of course. Still, it was clear that something big was afoot, if only Braun would get to the point.

Commissar Costellin was in front of the window, leaning against the sill. His left arm was in a sling, and he looked as if he had aged ten years in the past three weeks.

Braun cleared his throat and fingered the ends of his moustache. 'As you may have inferred from recent events,' he said, 'we are about to enter the decisive phase of this war of ours. We have driven the necrons back, corralled them quite nicely thank you very much, and we – that is to say, the Krieg officers and myself – have been making plans for one final push against them.'

‘You may also be aware,’ a lieutenant put in, ‘that there has not been an enemy sighting since the unfortunate events of a few weeks ago.’

‘You mean,’ said Costellin quietly, ‘since the necrons butchered thousands of civilians confined to the city by our own actions.’

‘Um, yes, quite so.’

‘Evidently,’ said Braun, ‘they are hiding out in that tomb of theirs, licking their wounds. Our objective, then, is to destroy that tomb, and the necrons along with it. Unfortunately, its composition and internal layout remain a mystery to us, since our early attempt to send in a scouting party met with failure. Nevertheless, we – that is to say, our tech-priests and engineers – consider that a small number of atomic mining charges ought to be sufficient to the task.’

Gunthar was starting to see where this was going. Costellin spelt it out for him: ‘We need a man to deliver those charges.’

‘That man would play no other part in the battle,’ said the lieutenant, ‘but to wait for the entranceway to the tomb to become clear. At that point, with the protection of his squad, he would, um, convey the charges inside.’

Colonel Braun added, ‘We – that is to say, Colonel 186 – remembered your mining experience, Trooper Soreson, and your invaluable assistance in our earlier, ah...’

Gunthar had heard enough. He could have mentioned that, to him, atomic mining charges were just a stock number on a requisition form, he had never actually handled one, but that was not what anyone wanted to hear. ‘I would like to volunteer, sir,’ he said, and was rewarded by his commandant’s expression of relief.

Evidently, Braun had never sent a soldier to his certain death before.

‘You are clear, I hope, on what is being asked of you here,’ said Costellin. ‘These charges will not be detonated remotely, nor by a timed fuse. Either circumstance would allow the necrons a chance to deactivate them. You would be giving your life, Trooper Soreson, as would the other nine members of your squad.’

‘When do we leave, sir?’ asked Gunthar.

Colonel Braun reached into his desk drawer. ‘I have something for you, Trooper Soreson,’ he said, ‘in recognition of your, ah, your dedication. I know you have only been with the Planetary Defence Force a short time, but in that time you have served with distinction, and what with the losses we have sustained... well, I understand your squad is short of a sergeant at present.’

He was holding out a pair of sergeant’s flashes. Gunthar took them and

thanked him. It didn't matter that he didn't feel ready to wear them. It was the Emperor's will.

'I know it isn't much,' said Braun. 'If it were up to me... I've been in discussion with the Departamento Munitorum, I was hoping to arrange... We may not be Imperial Guard, but these past months we have fought alongside them, lived alongside them, given as much as they have, more even, and I don't see why... I feel that, under the circumstances, the Iron Aquila shouldn't be out of the question.'

He didn't understand, thought Gunthar.

They were digging their way into Hieronymous City.

Four Centaurs had been fitted with dozer blades and were bearing the brunt of the task. There was still plenty for individual soldiers to do, however, armed with spades and barrows, watching that the rubble didn't slide and bury them all. A fine layer of snow had settled in the night, making their labours more precarious. Gunthar had slept for the regulation six hours – he had become used to closing his ears, switching off his brain and taking his rest when he could – and was now back on duty.

His sergeant's stripes affected the way his comrades looked at him. He resented this to begin with, resented the way in which they seemed to expect him to think for them now. He preferred the anonymity he had enjoyed before. He soon learned, however, that little had changed really. The officers still made the decisions, gave the orders, and all Gunthar had to do was oversee their implementation, ensure that everyone understood and performed the functions assigned to them.

That afternoon, Guardsmen and troopers alike formed up for a briefing from Colonel 186, who arrived with his usual entourage of Krieg officers and a smattering of PDF ones, Braun among them. An almost tangible sense of anticipation hung in the air as the colonel declared their work here almost done. 'We will enter the city at dawn,' he announced, 'as will our fellow regiments to the north, east and south, converging upon the necron edifice, where the final battle of this war will be fought and won.'

Then he outlined the plan to destroy the necron tomb, and revealed that the honour of striking that blow would fall to a PDF squad but didn't say which one. He referred to Gunthar, but called him 'Sergeant 1419', an appellation that few were likely to recognise. A number of troopers glanced nervously about, at each other, or tried to make out the digits stamped into their sergeants' dog tags, to

reassure themselves that they weren't the chosen martyrs. They didn't understand either.

'Why does it have to be a PDF squad?' he heard one trooper complaining as they returned to their work, after the Krieg officers had departed. 'Why can't that faceless bastard send his own men to die for a change?' Gunthar reminded him sharply that he was talking about a superior officer, and therefore about the Emperor, and the trooper scowled at him but was silenced.

He was far from the only malcontent, however. Gunthar heard them muttering wherever he turned:

'—think their lives are more valuable than ours, but they don't even—'

'—Braun should stand up to them, tell them we won't take it. Hanrik would have—'

'—about the rest of us, that's what I'd like to know. When that blast goes off—'

'—got their rebreather units to protect them from the radiation, while we—'

He consoled himself with the thought that most of the complainants were recent draftees. Their training period had been even more cursory than Gunthar's had been, and none of them had experienced real combat yet. They hadn't seen the necrons.

It took forty minutes for one of them to approach him: a sandy-haired, freckle-faced youth, sixteen or seventeen years old, from his own squad. 'Some of us were wondering, sergeant,' he said, 'if the troopers that are to... the squad they are sending into the tomb... Sergeant, would be that our squad?'

'Yes, trooper, it would be,' said Gunthar, and the boy's face turned ashen.

An hour later, a Krieg watchmaster informed Gunthar that one of his men had been caught attempting to desert and shot dead. He felt ashamed, and angry with himself. He felt he ought to have foreseen that occurrence and acted to prevent it.

By the time Lieutenant Harker, the platoon commander, assembled Gunthar's squad and drew them to one side, there was nobody left with much doubt about what he might have to say to them. The lieutenant spoke about the great honour that had been conferred upon these ten men – nine now, he corrected himself. He told them that their actions tomorrow would make them heroes, and then, to Gunthar's surprise, he gave each of them a choice: a transfer to another squad, should they wish to accept it.

Three of them did so, hesitantly at first, perhaps suspecting a trick. Gunthar was disappointed in them, but proud of the five that remained – and he took heart in the fact that, once word went out, there was no shortage of volunteers to

replace them.

It wasn't the way he would have handled the situation, but he had to admit to himself that it had been effective. He had nine men again, all of whom he could trust. They would do what they had to do, die to ensure that he could deliver his crucial payload, because they all thought as he did.

They believed in a cause, and they needed no more motivation than that, no promotions or medals, to fight for it. It was enough to know that their lives would make a difference, and in this sense they were luckier than the men they had replaced. Those men would most likely die tomorrow anyway, more cheaply and in fear.

There was no fear for Gunthar and his squad, because the future for them was set. They were dead men walking, all of them – but now they had the comfort of knowing exactly how and when they would drop.



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Costellin was packing.

He didn't want to leave it to the servitors, didn't trust them with the items important to him. Not that there was much. Hololiths of his four grandsons at their passing-out parades. His first set of dog tags. An old, cracked data-slate inside which were locked the fond memories of a particular four-year period of his life. He wrapped them all carefully in his spare uniform, lowered them into a zip case.

The room looked empty, as it had when Costellin had first walked into it almost two months ago. It was funny how, in so short a time, it had become *his* room, his home. He wouldn't miss Hieronymous Theta when he left it, but a small part of himself would remain in this room, as it had in all the other rooms, the many other rooms, on the many other worlds before this one.

Opening the bottom desk drawer, he was startled to find a pair of Krieg eyepieces staring up at him. He had forgotten he had put the mask and rebreather unit in there, forgotten he had retrieved them from the hab in the city. He had gone back for his chainsword and cap, lifted the floorboard beneath which he had stowed them to be transfixed by a dead man's eyes.

He had remembered his promise to that dead man.

He should have left the mask where it lay. It had been a mistake to carry extra weight with him, wounded as he had been. Nevertheless, carry it Costellin had. A memento mori. He was getting as bad as the Guardsmen with whom he served. Yet one more reason, he thought, why the time had come.

'I hear you are leaving us.'

Colonel 186 was in the doorway. Costellin was surprised to see him, and also a little guilty. He ought to have broken the news to his fellow officer in person. He had been putting off that ordeal, telling himself the colonel wouldn't care anyway.

'Once this campaign is over,' he confirmed. 'I have accepted a posting to a

Royal Validian regiment.’

‘I will be sorry to lose you,’ said the colonel. *Will you?* thought Costellin uncharitably. ‘Your service with us has been long and distinguished, and in particular the mission you led into the occupied city—’

‘I can take no credit for that outcome,’ said Costellin. ‘It was one of your men who planned and implemented the attack on the generatorum. All I did was survive.’

‘I hope...’ said the colonel, with uncharacteristic reticence. ‘I trust it was nothing I said that—’

Costellin shook his head. ‘I know we have had our differences since your appointment, but no, colonel, my leaving has nothing to do with you. You have performed your duties as you saw them, efficiently and logically, and as such you have more than lived up to the standards set by your predecessors.’

‘You did, however, disagree with the decision taken by my superior officers, to engage the necron force.’

‘I did. I felt that... I don’t know, colonel. When I look at what we have – what you have – achieved here... I couldn’t have imagined it only two months ago, but we have the necrons on the run. We are beating them, we are actually beating them!’

‘Then you have revised your opinion?’

‘I think that, if all goes well tomorrow, if that tomb is destroyed and this world saved, then the value of that to the Imperium... and yet... I keep thinking about the cost. I don’t know, colonel. I just don’t know, and perhaps that is the problem. Perhaps I am simply too old. I have seen too much.’

‘It is likely,’ said the colonel, ‘that, after tomorrow, the Krieg 186th Infantry Regiment will no longer exist. Our losses have been such that we will probably be merged with the other regiments on this world. I would be proud to know that our sacrifice was worthwhile, that it will be remembered.’

‘And Krieg’s debt to the Emperor? Will it be repaid then?’

The colonel didn’t answer that, as indeed Costellin hadn’t expected him to. Instead, he observed, ‘You have taken the sling off your arm.’

‘The quartermaster informs me that the nerve damage is healed,’ said Costellin. ‘My right shoulder is a little stiff, but apart from that...’

‘Then you will be fighting with us tomorrow?’

‘Of course. The least I can do, before I begin my new assignment, is to see this one through to its bitter end.’

The colonel nodded his approval, and told Costellin that, this being the case,

he would see him at dawn. Then he pivoted smartly and left, and the commissar stood alone in thought for a moment before he opened the desk drawer again.

He had pushed it shut with his leg when the colonel had appeared, unaccountably embarrassed by its contents. He steeled himself to do what he ought to have done three weeks ago. He took the mask and the rebreather unit down to the space port proper, and handed them to the first quartermaster he saw.

‘Find a good use for them,’ he instructed. ‘The last man who wore that facemask died a hero.’

The colonel had one final surprise up his sleeve.

As he briefed his troops in the pre-dawn cold, he reached into his greatcoat and produced a small, transparent cube of some yellow-tinted substance. Suspended in that cube was an off-white, irregular shape, longer than it was wide, tapering to a point like a tiny, primitive blade.

‘Such will be the magnitude of our actions here today, such the faith our generals have placed in this unworthy regiment, that they have obtained for us this...’ and, at this, the colonel’s voice became hushed, reverent, ‘...this fragment of bone from the skull of Colonel Jurten.’

A collective murmur went up from the Krieg Guardsmen, the most human reaction Costellin had ever heard from them.

‘I can think of no man more qualified to carry this for us,’ said the colonel, ‘to direct its holy light upon our humble endeavours, than our commissar.’

Taken by surprise, Costellin accepted the cube. He cradled it in his palms, admired it from all angles, and although a part of his heart remained hardened to it – he wondered how many more of these relics had been conveniently conjured, if the other three regiments on Hieronymous Theta had them too – he could feel how its presence touched the untouchable men before him, how it lifted their cynical spirits, and he knew that this made it a rare and precious thing indeed.

He had no words, but everyone was waiting to hear him. So, Costellin cleared his throat, recalled his training of a lifetime ago and launched into a speech that, while halting at first, soon became more confident in tone, more passionate, and ultimately proved, in the commissar’s own opinion, to be the finest, the most inspiring speech he had made in the whole of his decades-long career.

Then, a bloated red sun rose behind the shell of the city, and the time for words was done. Colonel 186 gave the order to move out, and the air was soon filled with the grumbling of reticent engines, thickened by exhaust fumes.

Three great armoured Gorgons led the way forward, each with an entire

platoon crammed into its open-topped hold. Weighing more than two hundred tonnes apiece, these lumbering giants pulverised the remains of fallen hab-blocks beneath their tracks, while their reinforced prows combined to shield not only themselves but the stragglers in their well-trampled wake.

Of course, there was not enough transport for everyone, and so between the troop-carrying Centaurs and the artillery-heaving Trojans came the foot soldiers, approximately one half Death Korps of Krieg and one half Planetary Defence Force. Their colours clashed, their equipment was ragtag and many of them were injured. There were half as many of them as there had been three weeks ago, there would be fewer still tomorrow, but still they lifted their chins with pride.

Costellin rode with the colonel and his command squad in a Centaur, his view of the outside world blocked as soon as the hatch came down. He followed the progress of their army on the vox-net, but felt distanced from it in his own cramped, noisy little bubble. They followed the most direct path towards the city centre, as indicated by the most recent tactical scans, and for a time, all was quiet.

Then, Costellin's Centaur was rocked by an explosion. The colonel, of course, was straight on the vox, demanding reports, which arrived instantly: *'-road was mined, sir. It looks like the charges were buried in the rubble.'* *'-they rolled right over--'* *'No serious injuries, sir, the prow absorbed the brunt of it, but the engines--'* *'No sign of any hostiles.'* *'-appear to have been mining charges, but to have created a blast that size there must have been--'* *'-tech-priest is inspecting the damage now, sir, but I think we've lost the Gorgon.'*

They proceeded more cautiously after that, and sent a squad ahead of them on foot. Of course, if more explosives were buried as deeply as the first lot had been, then the scouts were unlikely to detect them; still, they could keep an eye out for signs of life in the otherwise dead city. It wasn't long before they found them.

'Hostiles up ahead, sir. We took them by surprise, fired on them before they saw us. Four down, but the rest have separated, taken cover.'

'How many, watchmaster?' asked the colonel.

'Unknown, sir. There are more hiding in the buildings. Eight, at least, but there could be many more.'

'Define "hostiles",' Costellin voxed. 'Necrons?'

'No sir, humans.'

'Then how do you know...? Have they fired on you?'

'Sir, our orders were to--'

‘Have they threatened you in any way?’

The colonel interceded, ‘Keep them pinned down, watchmaster, but do not advance. All units, hold your positions and await instructions.’ To Costellin, aloud, he said, ‘I don’t believe it was necrons who laid that trap back there.’

‘Agreed,’ said the commissar. ‘That wasn’t their style. More likely, it was the work of one of these treacherous cults we keep hearing about. Even so—’

‘Three weeks ago,’ said the colonel, ‘the necrons purged this city of every last human soul they could hunt down. We have to assume that any survivors—’

‘—are probably cold, hungry and frightened,’ Costellin argued, ‘and I doubt that being shot at has done much to reassure them. You don’t have much faith in humanity, do you, colonel? Must I remind you that, without the very human members of this world’s PDF, without their loyalty—’

‘What do you suggest we do?’ asked the colonel.

‘I’m going out there,’ said Costellin. ‘I’m going to talk to them.’

He clambered through the hatch and dropped to the ground, a few drifting snowflakes stinging his cheeks. The colonel disembarked from the Centaur behind him, and together they considered the line of idling vehicles stretching before them.

‘I’ve studied the maps,’ said Costellin. ‘The roads to the immediate north and south of this one are impassable. There are other routes through, but we would have to back up a good way to follow them.’

‘They’ve picked the perfect spot for an ambush,’ the colonel grumbled.

‘If that is indeed what this is. I still think—’

‘The most expedient way to deal with this is to shell those towers.’

‘And risk bringing them down, blocking our path? And what if you’re right, and those people up there do mean us harm? Can you guarantee that a few indiscriminately tossed shells will end their threat? We are carrying atomic bombs, colonel. A single survivor, a fortuitously placed mining charge, and this regiment will go out in its blaze of glory a few hours ahead of schedule.’

‘Then we send the Gorgons forward.’

‘I’m surprised at you. You’d risk losing another Gorgon to a potential minefield, and perhaps this time its occupants too, rather than a single life?’

‘The hostiles have used up a great many charges. The odds, I believe, are against their having as many remaining. Your plan may entail a lower stake than mine, but as its chances of success are negligible—’

‘I disagree with that assessment,’ said Costellin, ‘and as my life is the one to

be staked, I believe it my right to do so. I can get through to these people, colonel. Even if they have turned to the necrons, it is only in despair. I can give them hope! At least, I can draw them out, establish the true extent of their resources.'

The colonel considered for a moment, then nodded his assent. He voxed the waiting scouts ahead, told them the commissar was on his way and that they should keep their distance but cover him as best they could.

Costellin marched past the watching soldiers, past the Centaurs and the Gorgons, his confidence fading as he found himself alone but for the occasional glimpse of a masked Guardsman crouching in a doorway or lying flat behind a step.

He kept his hands raised, his gaze fixed ahead, and kept walking until his peripheral vision detected movement in a first floor window. Then he came to a halt, introduced himself in a loud, clear voice and announced that he wanted to talk.

The echoes of his words died down before, from the window, he heard the unmistakable click of a power pack being pushed into place, then a female voice: 'My husband has you in his sights. Lay down your weapons, all of them.'

He did as he was bade. Then, at the voice's urging, he took ten paces backwards and waited. A door opened, and a small, dark figure scurried out, keeping his head down. He retrieved Costellin's plasma pistol, but struggled with the chainsword and decided to leave it. The pistol, he levelled inexpertly as he motioned to the commissar to follow him back inside. The body of a young woman lay slumped in the doorway, and Costellin took a moment to examine her, concluding to his chagrin but not to his surprise that she was long beyond helping.

A rickety staircase led him up to a large, open floor, a scattering of flea-bitten sheets and the stink of faeces telling him that this had been a mutant flophouse. He counted six people huddled in gloomy corners.

He was met by a middle-aged couple, the man bearded and balding, wielding a lasgun. The younger man who had brought him here took refuge behind this pair, still brandishing Costellin's pistol.

'You're Imperium,' said the woman, glaring at the aquila on the commissar's cap through narrowed, suspicious eyes. 'Why should we trust you?'

'I can get you out of this city,' said Costellin.

'And off this world?'

'With the Emperor's grace, that will not be necessary. I am taking an army to

fight the invaders. We believe we can—'

'Don't listen to him,' the man hissed. 'It's just words, that's all. Where was his Emperor when the invaders came? Why couldn't his army save us then?'

'I know it must seem that way, like you were forgotten, but—'

'Sealed up in this hell,' said the woman, 'abandoned to the slaughter!' She was brimming with tears. 'We thought we would never...'

'The attack took us all by surprise,' said Costellin. 'We did what we could. We're fighting back now. You were never abandoned.'

'It's been so long. The priests, they told us...'

'I know what they told you, but you must see now they were mistaken. You were right, you've been living in hell, and it must be hard sometimes to look up at the sky, but there is still a world outside of this city, and people waiting for you.'

A report rang out, a las-beam sizzled past his ear, and a voice roared, 'Dissembler!' Costellin whirled around to find that a short, stocky man had stepped into the room behind him. He wore the white vestments of a priest, but they had been defaced, holy runes obliterated by a smear of paint or a touch of flame.

'Marig,' the woman gasped, 'we thought you were... You're...'

The newcomer strode forward, jabbed an accusing finger in Costellin's face. 'This man lies to you. He promises freedom, while his soldiers are poised to destroy us.'

'No,' said Costellin, 'that isn't—'

'Their guns have slain four of our brethren. They tried to silence me too, but my faith in the Iron Gods shielded me.' Costellin felt his trigger finger twitching at these words. In any other circumstances, he would have executed this heretic on the spot.

'There are so many of them, Marig,' pleaded the bearded man, 'and we have only these two weapons, these three now. Shouldn't we...?'

His wife completed the thought: 'Surrender to them, throw ourselves on their mercy. They know what we have been through, they must understand.'

'Their Emperor understands nothing. He has no mercy. Don't you see? I know how they work. They will kill us to protect themselves from the truths we have learned.'

'And how many have the necrons killed?' Costellin asked quietly. His words were ostensibly directed at the priest, but he meant them for the others. Marig was beyond reason. He was no fool, however. He extended a hand towards

Costellin's erstwhile guide, took the plasma pistol from him, swapping it for his lasgun. He examined the unfamiliar weapon, and smiled in approval, then the smile hardened as Marig raised the pistol and pressed it to Costellin's temple.

'Our lord spoke clearly to us, although few chose to understand. He warned that resistance would incur His wrath, and so it came to pass. However, by seeking out His enemies, sending them to His judgement, we can show Him that—'

Costellin made a grab for the gun. His fingertips brushed its stock, but Marig recoiled too quickly, accidentally unleashing a plasma bolt in the process. The other refugees dived for cover as Costellin cursed his age-slowed reflexes, pushed the priest away from him and ran. He vaulted the staircase rail, landing with a bone-jarring thud that loosened a precarious step and almost pitched him the rest of the way down the stairs headfirst. As he hit the ground floor, a second bolt whooshed over his head and exploded against the wall, searing and blinding him with its backwash. Costellin could hear the heavy, running footsteps of the deranged priest in pursuit.

His vision filled with miniature supernovae, Costellin fumbled his way through the door. He stumbled in the road, scraping his hands, and felt for his dropped chainsword. He found it even as his eyesight cleared, thumbed the activation stud in its grip, and the engine spluttered but failed to catch.

Marig seized him from behind, choking him, twisting his wrist until the chainsword fell, the pistol barrel at Costellin's head again. 'Stay back,' the priest screamed, 'stay back!' and Costellin saw the shapes of Death Korps Guardsmen edging forward through the shadows, saw the glints of their lasgun sights.

'I saw nine of them,' he sub-vocalised into his comm-bead, 'but there could be more in the other buildings. The priest is their leader. Take him out, and the rest will almost certainly flee or surrender. In any case, they have only two lasguns between them, and no explosives as far as I can ascertain.'

'We have your officer,' Marig yelled. 'One more step forward, and I will kill him, I swear to the Iron Gods I will. Turn back! Leave us be, if you value his life.'

Obviously, he didn't know the Death Korps of Krieg.

Costellin hadn't felt the las-beam that had killed him.

He couldn't feel much of anything. He had fallen, all the same, and couldn't stand again for the invisible weight resting on his chest.

He could hear booted footsteps tramping about his head, the approaching

engines of the Gorgons, but no gunfire. He had been right; with the death of the priest – Marig’s corpse was splayed out in the road alongside him – his followers had abandoned the fight. The Krieg army was free to advance.

A facemask loomed in Costellin’s blurred vision. ‘Colonel?’ he said.

Then the mask drew closer as its wearer knelt beside him, and he saw a quartermaster’s shoulder flashes. ‘Tell me the worst,’ he wheezed, trying to make light of his fate, to hold the paralysing dread at bay. ‘Can you fix me? Will I live?’

The quartermaster shook his head.

He was searching through the commissar’s greatcoat, for what reason Costellin couldn’t guess until the quartermaster located his prize in an inside pocket: the holy relic, the bone fragment in its cube. He extracted it with due deference, transferred it to his own coat, and only then turned his attention to his human charge.

His masked face looked like a skull, like a harbinger of death itself. The last sight that so many Krieg eyes had seen. Somehow, Costellin had never thought the same would be true of him, never thought he would come to this place.

As a young man, he had thought he would die on the battlefield. Of late, he had begun to anticipate a more peaceful passing, at a ripe old age in his bed. It had never crossed his mind that, in the end, he would be gunned down by his own men. He could almost have laughed at the ignominy of his fate.

‘Let your soul be at rest now,’ said the quartermaster, ‘and know that the Emperor is pleased with your sacrifice. Your life was worthwhile.’

Then he passed a gloved hand over the commissar’s eyelids, and closed them.

The last thing Costellin felt before he surrendered to the darkness was the quartermaster easing his chainsword out from under his hand.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

There had been no sign of necron scouts on the way into the city, no spy craft glimpsed overhead. Still, the necrons were prepared and waiting for their attackers, arrayed before their night-black tomb, and their numbers had grown again as the Death Korps' generals had expected they would.

What the generals had not anticipated was that the necron army would have grown to outnumber their own, at least this regiment of it. When he saw the odds against them, a PDF officer let slip with a curse over an open vox-channel.

The necrons concentrated their initial fire upon the remaining Gorgons. Gauss blasts scythed through armour plating, heavy stubbers spitting back while they could. The Gorgons endured long enough to disgorge their passengers, who advanced with hellguns blazing. As before, ghouls burrowed into the heart of the Death Korps' ranks, and as before the Death Korps was ready for them. This time, however, the melta-wielding grenadiers were the primary targets of the ghouls' blade-claws, three of them flensed to death before a full minute had passed.

Gunthar followed all this over the vox-net, struggling to sift through overlapping, frenetic reports to build a picture of the battlefield in his head. His Centaur was fitted with a periscope in the co-driver's side, but so far this had been of little use, he was too far from the action. He could see the vast face of the necron pyramid, but he couldn't work out where the gateway into it might be.

His gunner, an on-loan Krieg Guardsman, had a better overview from his turret, and his updates were invaluable. To Gunthar's right, a civilian farmer, more used to handling tractors than tanks, held the steering wheel in a white-knuckled grip. His four squad mates – the remaining five had been packed into another vehicle – were almost as tense. They couldn't take their eyes off their sergeant, off the deadly payload that was strapped to his chest.

They didn't look like much, the mining charges: four batons, each wrapped in

yellow and black tape stamped with warnings and skull symbols, but Gunthar remembered the care he had been mandated to take when arranging transport for them in his overseer's role. He had certainly slept more soundly for the fact that the charges were conveyed in unmarked trucks, along lower-level skyways, a long way from his bed.

He had sanctioned their use just once, to blast through stubborn bedrock in a mine in which yields had been down for almost a year. To this day, those tunnels could not be entered without a rad-suit, other than by the expendable servitors.

No officers had accompanied him to Thelonius City to collect the charges from a storage depot. A grizzled ex-miner had lifted the lid from a lead-lined crate, and at his first sight of its contents, Gunthar had taken an involuntary – and entirely futile – step away from them. Since the charges had been attached to him, he had been afraid to walk, to sit down, to make any movement at all lest he set them off.

He ordered his driver to edge forward. Now that the ghouls had been deployed, their positions known, it was probably safe to do so. The Krieg gunner reported necrons skimming towards them, and for a moment Gunthar thought his heart would stop, but then they were intercepted by a squad of death riders, held at bay.

The gunner had asked for permission, more than once, to cut loose with his stubber. It was imperative, however, that the Centaur drew no attention to itself. It was up to the rest of the regiment to draw the necrons away from it, and away from that gateway. Until they could do so, Gunthar could only sit and watch, helpless.

He squinted through the periscope again, saw a blur of ghosts dropping upon a grenadier platoon, an explosion of hellguns greeting them, cutting through some of them. He heard the familiar voice of Colonel 186, promising reinforcements. It seemed that the 42nd and 103rd regiments had met with only token resistance to the north and south of the tomb, so the bulk of their forces were en route. The 81st regiment to the east, almost three kilometres away, were taking a different tack, sending forth their cannons to break through the pyramid's back wall.

Gunthar relayed this news to his men, who lacked the benefit of comm-beads with which to have heard it. One middle-aged rookie opined that the Death Korps could switch to defensive tactics now, keep the necrons occupied until their fellow regiments arrived, at which point it would all be over. Gunthar set him straight. The rookie hadn't seen the necrons up close, hadn't seen that, against their armour-piercing gauss weaponry, the only possible defence was a

fierce offence.

They waited.

The reinforcements were here, but they hadn't turned the tables as completely as Gunthar had prayed they might. Both regiments had arrived in unison, capturing the besieged necrons in a pincer movement, taking out scores of them before they could begin to defend themselves, and yet...

And yet, it seemed to Gunthar, watching through his periscope, that there were as many necrons between him and his goal as there had been from the start.

He had to get to that tomb. The source of the necrons' power was held in there. Once the tomb was destroyed they would be unable to regenerate themselves, unable to blink out of a difficult spot to appear elsewhere. At any rate, that was the theory.

The 42nd regiment was going in hard against them, the 103rd falling back, luring the necrons south. Gunthar didn't need the colonel's voice in his ear to tell him it was time to move forward again, and to circle around to the north.

His driver hit the brakes as they were buffeted by an explosion, vox-traffic confirming that a Centaur had been hit only twenty metres from them. Gunthar swallowed nervously and agreed they should stay put for the present.

Through his periscope, the tomb appeared tantalisingly close, but the figures fighting in front of it provided a more realistic sense of scale and distance, of how far Gunthar still had to go. From the turret, the gunner announced that he could now see the gateway, and as Gunthar swung his scope in the indicated direction, he could see it too, see the green light blazing from it. There were still too many necrons in the way, however, far too many, so they waited.

One more surge forward, another interminable wait, then Gunthar made up his mind.

A phalanx of necrons had just vanished, and reports suggested they had gone to the pyramid's far side to repel the invaders there. The way ahead was as clear right now as it would likely ever be, and this close to the enemy guns a Centaur was as vulnerable as any foot soldier. His squad, therefore, had more chance of survival as ten small targets rather than riding in two larger ones. They could also arrange themselves, on foot, so that their sergeant, their human bomb, was the hardest of those ten targets to hit. So Gunthar gave the order to disembark, and relayed this through his comm-bead to the senior trooper in the second Centaur.

The battlefield was as crowded, as chaotic, as his last one had been. Hadn't he been told that this battle would be easier? He suppressed an echo of the feelings he had had back then, the fear, the uncertainty. They were unworthy of him. Gunthar was an experienced soldier now, a leader no less, and everyone was counting on him. Still, he couldn't help but feel exposed and vulnerable, even more so than he had the first time. The mining charges made him vulnerable.

The Centaur rumbled away, its gunner making up for lost time. Gunthar crouched behind a stout Medusa chassis as the rest of his squad formed up around him. He could see the gateway's green light, diffused by a mortar smoke haze, and there were soldiers fighting in that smoke but, to his horror, Gunthar couldn't tell which were necrons and which Death Korps.

He had to get closer still. He motioned to his men – he had no hope of making his voice heard – and they tucked themselves in as best they could behind an advancing platoon, then raced for the shelter of a rubble heap. They were in the open for no more than a second, long enough for a ghost to pick off one luckless trooper. As it opened his throat with its blades, a second trooper faltered in his tracks, almost turned back, until Gunthar grabbed his arm and hauled him away from there. There was nothing he could have done, nothing any of them could have done. Only three of them were even armed, the colonel's view being that lasguns were still scarce and that the moment Gunthar's squad needed them was the moment they were dead anyway.

He peered around the rubble, saw that green glow closer than he had imagined it would be and the way clear to it. He almost gave the order, almost started forward, then smoke tendrils parted to uncover the shape of a necron tank, the tomb in miniature with that same dreadful green light streaming from its hatchway.

Its guns lashed out, and as Gunthar dropped he was pelted by debris and his cover reduced to half its height. He dared raise his head, after a minute, to find the tank floating away from him. A squad of Krieg Guardsmen rushed it, and although most were disintegrated by its green energy whips, two leapt for its hatchway and dragged themselves through. A moment later, the tank combusted, blown apart, if Gunthar was any judge, by a concentration of krak grenades in its belly. The Guardsmen, of course, did not return, but their deaths had counted. They had done what Gunthar was struggling to do, granted on a smaller scale, but they had made it look easy.

He could see the gateway again and he knew that, the longer he waited to make his run for it, the more of his comrades would give their lives, but it was

impossible to judge his moment, to predict the ebbs and flows of the combat, and he couldn't afford to get this wrong. With every second that passed, he became more anxious, more fearful that he might have missed his chance already.

The decision was made for him.

He didn't know where the colonel was, but presumably he had found himself a good vantage point or was in contact with somebody who had, because his voice was in Gunthar's ear again, screaming at him to move. He moved.

He raced headlong into that chaos, and he kept his eyes fixed on the gateway and swore he wouldn't stop for anything. He didn't stop when the ground exploded a metre to his right, taking out two of his bodyguards and showering him with rock fragments. He didn't stop when a third trooper lost his nerve and fell to his knees, his hands raised in surrender for a second before his head exploded, the victim of fire – from which side Gunthar didn't have time to tell.

He didn't stop as the first necrons saw his plan and turned their guns upon him. The Death Korps closed ranks, took the brunt of the gauss beams, and Gunthar was more than halfway to his goal now. The green light was all he could see, the Krieg colonel's voice all he could hear, urging him to run faster, ever faster.

'Once you're inside that pyramid,' his own colonel, Braun, had briefed him, 'you are to waste no time. Remember, we don't know what's in there, and one gauss blast could disintegrate you and the charges you carry without setting them off. That said...' He had averted his eyes from Gunthar, awkwardly. 'That said, if you do see a chance... The deeper in you can get, the more damage you'll do when... and the more walls you can put between you and... well, the more protection we'll have, from the blast I mean and from the fallout.'

There was something new in the gateway's green light. A thousand dark spots, bubbling to the surface. Gunthar blamed the smoke at first, then his eyes.

Then a swarm of metal insects was belched out from the gateway to engulf him.

They alighted upon him, scratching, biting. Gunthar tried to plough on through them, but the combined mass of their small bodies repulsed him. One of his bodyguards was already down. An insect was crawling on the mining charges, and he brushed it away frantically. The colonel's voice sounded from somewhere, distant and tinny, drowned out by the rustle of the swarm. They had dislodged Gunthar's comm-bead from his ear, so he didn't know if his orders were to advance or retreat.

The latter seemed to be the only practical option.

Casting about, he saw another rock pile and gesticulated wildly towards it although he didn't know if his remaining squad mates could see him. He ran, leapt, and as his feet left the ground he was lifted from behind by a shockwave, carried further than he had intended to go. He just had time to wrap his arms about himself, protecting the mining charges, before he landed on his stomach.

He recovered his breath, looked up. The insect swarm had gone. No more than a handful of aimless drones remained, the rest incinerated by a well-placed mortar blast. Well-placed, but insanely risky. Two of the four charges had become dislodged, were hanging from Gunthar's bruised body. It was a miracle they were intact.

Three of his bodyguards had stayed alive, stayed with him. Their faces were cut, weeping blood. The gateway was less than two hundred metres away, but the necrons were strafing the area in front of it, keeping them pinned down. The Krieg soldiers were fighting to suppress their enemies' fire, to block it where it couldn't be suppressed, to give Gunthar a second chance, so he waited.

The light in the gateway flared again, and this time it was a veritable legion of foot soldiers that was disgorged. Gunthar watched in horror as the air was filled with green lightning, and a platoon of Krieg Guardsmen harvested like so many cornstalks. A moment ago, it had seemed like his comrades were making headway. Now, their front line had collapsed, and the necrons were closing on Gunthar's own position.

He should have fallen back, but he couldn't bear the thought of losing what ground he had gained. He had reinserted his comm-bead, but the Krieg colonel had nothing to say to him. Even now, Gunthar was waiting, watching for his chance, for an opening no matter how small. Then a trooper tugged at his sleeve, pointed with a trembling finger, and he looked at the gateway.

Another necron had appeared there, more substantial than the others, taller than the tallest of them by a head, wearing a tattered blue cloak, wielding an arcane staff. Gunthar had not seen its like before. He had heard but not seen the giant hololithic images that had hovered above Hieronymous City two months ago. He had heard enough descriptions, though, to recognise the image made incarnate, to know he was crouching less than two hundred metres from his enemies' leader.

The necron lord flung its skeletal hands skyward, and Gunthar saw that cradled in its left palm was a large, black orb. Something flashed green in the depths of that orb, and he could taste metal, feel the hairs on his neck standing to

attention. His flesh was tingling, and the air felt pregnant as if a great storm was coming.

And the necrons were rising – in their scores, in their hundreds, even those that had lain dead and blasted apart for minutes, and those felled by melta fire.

Necrons weren't supposed to recover from melta fire... were they?

Something shifted, slithering beneath Gunthar's hands, and he recoiled as a stream of molten metal flowed around him, meeting other streams, coalescing into the form of a necron ghost, which immediately took flight. It was too much for one trooper, who ran screaming, but his cowardice proved a boon of sorts: he offered the creature a tempting target, and it swooped after him without seeing his huddled squad mates, three of them remaining now where there had been ten.

Revenant ghouls crawled out from beneath a Medusa and set about it with their claws. It ought to have been impossible but, where they struck, armour plating rippled and distorted, and fell apart. Gunthar could hardly process what he was seeing. This wasn't how it was meant to be. The necrons were meant to be depleted, denied the resources of the city's generatorums, in hiding. Instead, they were fighting back with new and more lethal weapons, and their numbers were growing still; there were as many of them on the battlefield now – no, more – than there had been at the start of this fight.

The tomb was well and truly guarded, and Gunthar's comrades were on the back foot, too busy defending themselves to even think about changing that situation. The necron lord raised its staff, and three great green blasts erupted from its prongs, finding and destroying three Krieg death riders. Flanking their lord in the gateway, a pair of mechanical spiders squatted, waiting, and Gunthar knew then, before the colonel's voice confirmed it to him, that their cause was a lost one.

All the same, when the order to withdraw came, he railed inwardly against it. He had been so close. He even wondered, where had the Emperor been when He was needed, though he was immediately ashamed of that thought, and he asked himself: *What if I just did it, blew the charges now? I might still damage the tomb, and more importantly I could kill the necron lord, and if I took the rest of my comrades with me, well, wouldn't they understand? Wouldn't they consider that a worthwhile sacrifice?*

He almost did it. His hand was on the detonator. Then, he thought maybe he should vox the colonel first, request sanction for his plan, and then he knew what the colonel would say. He would point out that half the necrons, their leader most likely included, would take the atomic blast and stand up again, while the

soldiers of the Death Korps would die and remain dead. It wasn't worth the price.

There was nothing Gunthar could do.

The process of disengagement was as difficult and costly as might have been expected. The grenadiers exhausted their melta guns laying down covering fire for retreating Guardsmen. The necrons still pressed them hard, although Gunthar noticed that their parting shots were mostly aimed at ordnance and vehicles, reducing their enemies' capacity to mount another attack like this one.

He slipped away when he judged it safest to do so, his remaining bodyguards falling into step behind him. Their mission might have been aborted, but the charges at Gunthar's chest still had to be protected. Both troopers died providing that protection, shot in their backs, and it was a weary, desolate and solitary Gunthar who stumbled out of the range of the necron guns at last to join the departing column of soldiers.

In defeat, the Death Korps of Krieg were as disciplined, as regimented as ever, in contrast to the shuffling, dejected survivors of the PDF. They still numbered in their thousands, but those few thousand, Gunthar realised, were all that remained of three regiments now. A couple of Guardsmen in the 103rd confirmed that they had been ordered west to the space port rather than south back to their dugouts. The same was true of the 42nd regiment, and the 81st, who had also disengaged from their battle to the east, were planning to make a wide half-circuit of the city and follow them.

'Then who's left guarding the city walls?' asked Gunthar, but he feared he already knew the answer to that question.

He found Colonel 186 marching with the lower ranks. He must have lost his transport – or, to judge by his drawn bolt pistol and the limp he sported, left it to take a more active role in the fighting. 'I'm sorry, sir,' said Gunthar. 'I tried. I just couldn't see an opening, but next time... Give me another chance, and I'm sure I can...'

The colonel stared at him as if he didn't have a clue who he was.

'Sergeant 1419, sir. I was – I am – carrying the mining charges.'

The colonel shifted his gaze to Gunthar's chest, and immediately summoned a quartermaster to his side. 'Remove the explosive devices,' he instructed, 'and make sure they are stored safely.' The quartermaster produced a knife and began to slice through thick straps and layers of tape. The colonel, in the meantime, strode on without another glance at Gunthar, leaving him feeling wretched and

worthless.

‘I didn’t know what to do,’ he confessed as the quartermaster extricated the first of the batons from its wrappings and lowered it gingerly into a reinforced box.

‘Our orders were to withdraw,’ said the quartermaster.

‘I know. I know they were, but...’ Gunthar was tongue-tied again. He hadn’t been tongue-tied in so long. He didn’t feel like a soldier any more. ‘I just never imagined... I thought it would be over by now. I thought the Death Korps of Krieg always fought to the end. What do we do now? How do we fight the necrons now?’

‘We don’t.’ The quartermaster had detached the last of the atomic mining charges, and he knelt by the box now, secured its lid with a series of latches and handed it to a servitor to carry. ‘This war is over,’ he told Gunthar bluntly. ‘The necrons have won.’



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The day had begun like any other day. Arex had been woken by a touch of sunlight through ill-fitting shutters. She had sat bolt upright, searching for the intruders she had sensed in her dreams. Skeletal hands, reaching for her as she slept... The hab, the latest in a long line of identikit rooms, had been empty, the rest of the nightmare all too real. Arex had almost been disappointed.

She knew the dream would come true one day, and this waiting was a form of slow torture for her. In the dream, she had welcomed the skeletal hands' touch.

Something was different today: distant sounds from the outside, below. Arex strained to make out the tramping of boots, the roaring of engines. Too noisy for the invaders. She had slipped out of bed, crept up to the window, put her eye to the crack between shutters and frame, and she had seen the most wonderful sight of her life:

An army, unmistakably marching to war. The Imperial Guard, behind a banner depicting a white, eagle-winged skull against black. A convoy of siege engines crawling in its wake. She had shaken the sleeping Tylar, excitedly, told him the good news. The Emperor hadn't abandoned them, after all.

Her Uncle Hanrik hadn't failed her.

She was all for running right out there, but Tylar had counselled caution. The soldiers would be long gone before they could reach them. They took their time, got dressed, Arex's hands shaking so much that Tylar had to fasten her scavenged top for her. They ate the last of the food paste. They had been trying to make it last, to delay the day when they would have to venture into the outside again. They hugged each other for courage, then they opened the door.

It had taken them days to climb as far as they had, minutes to descend to the ground level again. They had found the streets empty, as Tylar had predicted they would. From the east, however, they heard sounds of a pitched battle, which Arex had found reassuring. 'What do we do?' she asked. 'Wait for them to come back?'

‘Maybe,’ said Tylar, ‘we don’t have to. If the soldiers came into the city this way...’

‘We can retrace their steps,’ Arex realised. ‘We can leave!’

Even as she had spoken the words, she had doubted them. It had seemed impossible, after all this time, everything she had been through, the hopes she had seen dashed, that it could be so easy. She kept waiting for something to go wrong, for the invaders to spring an ambush, or perhaps to wake and find herself back in that squalid little room on a day like all the other days.

What she had not expected was that, as she and Tylar neared the outermost surviving tower, as they climbed a heap of rubble in their path, just as she had begun to entertain the faintest hope again, to taste freedom, they would come under lasgun fire.

They ducked into a doorway. Arex could smell burnt hair, and was afraid it was probably hers. ‘Lasguns,’ she whispered to Tylar. ‘The invaders don’t use lasguns.’

‘Probably cultists,’ he growled. ‘A few of Amareth’s bunch survived the purges, or they might belong to one of the other churches.’

‘I think,’ said Arex, ‘I think I glimpsed a red and purple tunic. I think they’re PDF, Tylar. They must think... They must think *we* are the cultists.’

Tylar craned forward, tried to see, and another las-beam nearly sliced off his nose. ‘Don’t shoot,’ he yelled, ‘don’t shoot! We aren’t who you think we are. We’re on your side. Praise be to the Emperor!’

‘I can’t let you through,’ came a nervous voice in response. ‘Go back!’

‘You can’t!’ cried Arex. ‘You can’t make us... We’ve been kidnapped, shot at, almost sacrificed, and we just want to... Please, let us out of here!’

‘I have the governor’s niece with me,’ called Tylar.

There was silence for a moment, then the voice returned, uncertainly: ‘Lady Hanrik? Is that really you?’

Negotiations had proceeded swiftly after that. The owner of the voice, a Lieutenant Smitt, claimed to have met Arex at several functions, so she had pretended to remember him and, fortunately, had recalled one of those functions in enough detail to convince him of her identity. She and Tylar had emerged cautiously from hiding, to find a single PDF squad waiting for them, the majority of them unarmed and teenaged. Smitt, in contrast, was grey-haired and wizened, and walked with the aid of a cane. He had been retired, he explained, but had returned to duty to help out as best he could in the current crisis.

He had directed them to the space port, apologetic that he had no vehicles to

take them there. Tylar had said it was okay, they had become well used to walking. Smitt had kept looking at Arex with tears shining in his eyes, and repeating that this was a miracle, they had never expected to find her alive. It wasn't until later that she had learned what those tears were for.

Tylar had taken her hand, then, and they had set off along the road together. They had walked out of the ruined city, at last, into a world they had almost forgotten. On a day that Arex would always remember as being like no other.

They sat in the warm mess hall at the space port, alone but for a wounded trooper slumped at a corner table. They nursed their first hot drinks in two months, but Arex had no appetite for hers.

'This isn't...' she ventured haltingly. 'I had a picture of this moment. Even when things were at their most hopeless and I thought I would never get here, I always...'

Tylar reached across the table, took her hands in his. 'I did the same. I imagined that, outside, everything would be... normal, I suppose. As it was before.'

She had been recognised on the hillside. Refugees had flocked to her, wanting to lay their hands upon her. Most of them had probably never heard her name before, but now they were saying her return from certain death was a sign from the Emperor, a good augur for the outcome of the war. She had flinched from their touches. How could she be their saviour when she had come in such dire need of salvation herself?

There had been one name on all their lips, and from them Arex had heard what the aged Smitt had been too cowardly to tell her.

'He should have left on a rescue ship,' she said bitterly, 'when he had the chance. He must have stayed for my sake, and I never even...'

'You don't think,' said Tylar carefully, 'he could really have done what they say?'

'Uncle Hanrik was no traitor,' she said fiercely. 'He must have had some reason for sending that message, and we have only this Krieg colonel's word for it anyway.' Arex groaned, and ran her fingers through her tangled hair. 'I just expected that, of all people, he would be... I've lost everything else, and Emperor knows I never thought I would see him again, but I always supposed... I thought he would be okay.'

'We could ask around. We could find out about... Gunthar, was it?'

Arex shook her head. 'If he was here, he'd have found me by now. You saw

how word of our arrival spread. He's gone, Tylar. Gunthar is gone.'

Tylar gave her hands a comforting squeeze. 'The Iron Gods, the... the necrons, they have destroyed one city out of many, not a world.'

'It's only a matter of time,' said Arex. 'We thought... When I saw the soldiers this morning, I thought there was still hope. I was forgetting... What you saw, Tylar, inside the pyramid. The green portal. The necrons cannot be defeated.'

They could hear a stirring in the corridors, running footsteps and raised voices. A black-uniformed proctor skidded to a halt in the doorway and announced excitedly, 'They're coming back! The soldiers, they're coming back!'

The wounded trooper leapt to his feet with surprising spryness, to follow the proctor out of there at an eager run. Tylar was standing too, but Arex remained where she was, in no hurry to hear the news. Everyone else was praying for a miracle – their second of the day – but they hadn't seen what she had seen. Arex couldn't bring herself to share their optimism, much as she would have liked to. Her stomach felt heavy with dread, and she had given up praying a long time ago.

Colonel 186's office was a frenzy of activity. Krieg soldiers were disassembling a communications console, packing it away into crates. The colonel himself stood untouched in the eye of the maelstrom. It took Arex three attempts to find a way through to him. He turned to her, and she tried to meet and hold his gaze but found only her own eyes reflected in his facemask's lenses. The image would have given her pause had she been less determined than she was.

'My name is Arex Hanrik,' she said, imitating the imperious tones her uncle had used when dealing with authority. It had worked twice so far, got her to this room. 'I am the niece – the last surviving relative – of Governor Talmar Hanrik, and I–'

'I explained to your uncle at the outset,' said the colonel, turning away from her, moving to his desk, 'that this world is under martial law. That means–'

'I'm aware of what it means. I just want to know what's... The people out there, they want to know what is happening. I think the least you can do, colonel, the very least you owe them, is an explanation.'

'We are leaving Hieronymous Theta,' said the colonel.

'Then it's true, what they say. You are pulling out. You're... giving up.'

'The first of the drop-ships will arrive in thirty minutes.'

'But the Iron... I mean, the necrons!'

'In the judgement of our generals, there is no more we can do here. There has

been an ork uprising on a world called...' The colonel pulled a data-slate across his desk, glanced at it. 'Djangalla. We are scheduled to arrive there in eight days' time.'

'What about us? Aren't they...? Are they sending someone else?'

'We did all we could. We almost destroyed the necrons' tomb, but we expended the majority of our resources in the attempt and we failed.'

'Then acquire more resources. Get on to the Departamento Munitorium, demand they send more troops. I know how they work, I heard my uncle arguing with them often enough. You have to keep on at them.'

'It appears,' said the colonel, 'that some assumptions we made about our enemies were mistaken. Our only certainty at this point is that further engagement with them would be a long and costly process, with little chance of a positive outcome.'

'Then you're just... You're leaving us to their mercy? Colonel, there are – there were – nine billion people on this world.'

'Even so, Lady Hanrik, the numbers just don't add up.'

'I won't accept that. I can't believe you could be so... myopic. What happens when the necrons are finished with us? When they set their sights on the next world, and the one after that? What happens when they spread to your world, colonel? Krieg is only a few systems away from here, as I recall. If these monsters aren't stopped now...' Arex's voice trailed off. The colonel was just sitting, staring blankly at her, but although his mask expressed nothing as always, his silence spoke volumes.

She sank into a seat herself.

'They won't let that happen, will they?' she said. 'I should have seen it at once.'

'The Imperial Navy has been contacted,' said the colonel. 'The necessary authorities have already been granted. An Exterminatus order is under preparation.'

'How long...?'

'These things take time, as I am sure you're aware. Our commissars have asked for more rescue ships to be sent, and I believe that some of—'

'I hear the last ship left over a month ago,' said Arex. 'Where has Naval Command been since then? No, let me guess. So long as they believed we had a chance, so long as they thought you might actually beat the necrons, we weren't considered a high enough priority, and now... now, it's too late.'

'I believe,' the colonel repeated, 'that some of your city administrators have

also made strong representations. Six ships have been despatched, with more—

‘That isn’t enough,’ protested Arex. ‘Six ships isn’t nearly enough and you know as well as I do, colonel, that some of them won’t even arrive in time to... to help us.’

‘That is not my concern,’ said the colonel. ‘I suggest you contact—’

Arex flared up at him. ‘It might not be your concern, but don’t you even care? Uncle Hanrik was right about you. I’ve been talking to the people, to the refugees, to the few remaining members of the Planetary Defence Force, and do you want to know what they’ve been saying about him? About what you did to him?’

‘Governor-General Hanrik,’ snapped the colonel, ‘made contact with a necron cult. He intimated that he was prepared to negotiate with them.’

‘For my sake!’ cried Arex. ‘He was trying to help me! He wouldn’t really have... and you... you killed him and for what? You said it yourself, colonel. You tried to deal with the necrons your way, and you failed. You lost our world to them anyway.’ She was filling up with tears. She turned away from the colonel, tried to hide it. She had sworn to herself that she wouldn’t cry in front of him.

‘The troop ship *Memento Mori*,’ he said quietly, ‘has quarters and provisions for some thirty thousand men. Our numbers, those of our four regiments combined, have been reduced to somewhere in the region of five thousand.’

‘You’re saying you might...?’ Arex sniffed.

‘We have been asked,’ said the colonel, ‘to take some refugees. You will have to journey to Djangalla with us. However, once there, you should be able to arrange for shuttles to convey you to the nearest appropriate colonised world.’

‘That... that’s very generous of you. Thank you.’

‘If it were up to me,’ said the colonel, ‘we would fill the space we have with all the vehicles and the useful machinery we can salvage from this world. As I mentioned, however, your city administrators have been making strong representations.’

‘I... see,’ said Arex.

‘The quartermasters will liaise with you, to produce a list of those to be—’

‘No!’ she said hastily. ‘I don’t think I could... I couldn’t do that.’

‘We require a list,’ said the colonel adamantly. ‘The people we save must at least be those with the greatest potential value to the Imperium.’

‘And you feel qualified to judge that? Because I certainly don’t.’

‘I assume, however, that you would wish a place reserved for yourself.’

Arex hesitated before she answered that. She knew with all her heart what her answer would be, but she felt she was being unbearably selfish. *Twenty-five thousand people*, she thought, *against the population of a world*. It was almost nothing, less than nothing, and what entitled her to be one of the privileged ones again?

Uncle Hanrik had said no, she thought. When the first ships had left. He had stayed behind to help his people, to find her. He was dead now.

‘Two places,’ she said, staring at her hands, avoiding the colonel’s blank eyes. ‘I need two places, one for me and one for my...’ She remembered Tylar’s lie from the temple, thought it might help. ‘My betrothed,’ she said. ‘Tylar is my betrothed, so you see he is a part of the Governor’s family too, and I... colonel, I need him.’

‘As you say,’ said the colonel.

‘As to the rest of your list,’ said Arex, ‘let one of the others do it. One of the administrators. They will pick your names for you, and be only too glad to, I suspect. In fact, I’d be surprised if, between them, they hadn’t drawn up a list already.’

Drop-ships had been sent to three spaceports around the globe. Even so, some people had been cut from the rescue list because they couldn’t reach any of those ports in time. Arex had listened to Commissar Mann-heim of the Krieg 42nd, arguing over a comm-link terminal with an indignant nobleman who had his own landing pad and didn’t see why he and his family couldn’t be picked up from there.

Everything had been done in such a rush. The Krieg generals wouldn’t delay the departure of their troop ship even for an hour. Mannheim had mumbled something about their generosity in agreeing to take aboard refugees in the first place, but Arex knew that such finer feelings had nothing to do with it.

They had been sent to a disused office to wait, she and Tylar, with Mannheim looking in on them when he could. The window looked out over the space port ramp, and they watched as two drop-ships were loaded up with vehicles and equipment including, according to Mann-heim, a crate of the Governor’s belongings salvaged from the High Spire. The commissar sidled up behind them, followed their gazes, and sighed. ‘We arrived in four,’ he lamented.

Trouble broke out as soon as the first proctor and PDF vehicles were sighted. Arex heard the swell of angry voices from outside and knew what was happening before the news had reached Mannheim’s comm-bead. ‘Apparently,’

he reported, 'the crowd out there is still growing. We've issued warnings, asked them to stay at home, told them we can't do anything for them here, but they keep on coming.'

'Can you blame them?' said Arex.

'I suppose not,' Mannheim conceded, 'but there aren't enough of your proctors to cope, and it sounds like...' He cocked his head, listening to another transmission.

'And what about those who have lost their homes?'

'Some of the proctors are even joining the rioters. Don't worry, I'm sure we can...'

'They've been waiting for months to be helped.'

'Colonel 103 has sent out a couple of platoons. That ought to defuse the situation.'

The sound of las-fire made Arex wince. Less than five minutes later, however, the first PDF truck came rolling into the port, accompanied by an escort of masked Guardsmen and, surging in its wake, a wave of dispossessed humanity. Another Krieg platoon moved forward, formed a line to block the latter, parting only to allow a second truck through, then a third and a fourth. The vehicles mounted the first drop-ship's loading ramp, intending to disgorge their passengers inside the belly of that metal hulk rather than exposing them to the mob without.

'We'll be just like them,' said Arex quietly, 'on the next world. They'll have their own lords there. Our fathers' names, and the ranks they held, won't mean all that much anymore. We'll just be two more refugees, two more mouths to feed, and if they can find a home for us at all, it will surely be on one of the lowest floors.'

Tylar put his arm around her, drew her close to him. 'We'll survive,' he said.

More trucks were arriving below, and now Mannheim cleared his throat politely and Arex and Tylar turned to find four Guardsmen waiting for them at the door. It was time for them to leave too.

Arex hesitated, glancing back at the window, and Mannheim rushed to assure her she would be well protected down there, that the drop-ship was only a very short walk away, but that wasn't what was bothering her. 'There'll be more ships,' Tylar said to her, and Arex forced a brave smile onto her face and chose to believe him.

As they crossed the room, her foot struck an open zip case, upsetting its contents. Looking down, she saw a handful of hololiths peeking out from a stack

of clothing. Four young men, resplendent in dress uniforms. She wondered who they were.

Watching the bedlam on the space port ramp from afar had not prepared Arex for the shock of being thrust into it. She couldn't see where she was going, couldn't hear the instructions that were shouted to her. She could only keep her head down, keep as close to Tylar as she could, trust in the Krieg Guardsmen to form a protective shell around her as she stumbled along between them.

She almost wished she had accepted Mannheim's suggestion of covering herself with a blanket, concealing her identity. This morning, she had been hailed as a hero, as a symbol of hope. Now, she was a deserter, a traitor. She would have felt dishonest, however, fleeing under a cloak of anonymity. She would have felt cowardly.

They were through the hostile crowd at last, and through the Death Korps' cordon, a ramp extended invitingly before them. As they climbed it, something – a plastek container – struck Arex on the back of the head, and Tylar looked around, scowling, for the culprit as he brushed food paste from her hair.

She faltered on the threshold of the drop-ship's loading bay, turned back, couldn't leave like that. She wanted to say something, felt she ought to explain herself. She was greeted by a sea of a thousand enraged faces, and she knew no one would want to hear her words. Tylar slipped an arm about her shoulders again and gave her strength as he always did, coaxed her out of that dreadful moment.

Arex gave a final, tearful sigh, and she allowed him to guide her away from there, away from the only life she had ever known, towards an uncertain new one.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The necrons were on the move again.

Gunthar was woken by the news being shouted around the space port. Reactions ran the full range from hysterical screaming to weeping to silent acceptance. It wasn't as if nobody had known this was coming. How long had they been waiting now?

Gunthar felt cold, and wrapped his threadbare blanket tighter about himself. He didn't know how long he had slept, sitting upright against a hangar wall, his knees drawn up to his chest leaving room for another refugee to sprawl at his feet. His neck muscles had become accustomed to this position and no longer ached so much.

How long had it been since the soldiers had left? Weeks? Months? He had stopped counting the days. The rise and fall of the sun meant nothing to him, a device to impose some structure upon a life that no longer had a use for one. Gunthar slept when he had to now, when his exhausted body had no option but to shut down. He didn't dream that way. He ate when he could find food, which wasn't often.

He did his best not to picture her face.

He remembered that last day, fooling himself he still had a purpose, helping with crowd control, keeping the refugees from the drop-ships, at least trying to. His uniform, his rank, had ceased to mean much in that fraught situation. He had had no gun, so he had been trying to make his voice heard in vain.

He had heard her name, and the sound of it had been a jolt to his heart. He had thought himself mistaken at first, until he had heard it again, spoken with venom, and he had realised then... She had been so close, all this time, one of the very evacuees he had been striving to protect, and Gunthar hadn't known, hadn't even wondered.

He had elbowed his way to the front of the crowd, all thoughts of duty forgotten, and he had seen her there. For the first time in a lifetime, he had seen

her.

Arex. She was climbing the ramp to the rescue ship, surrounded by Krieg Guardsmen, and he cried out to her but she didn't hear him. She was walking away from him, two footsteps away from walking out of his life forever, but the Emperor must have heard his prayers because she stopped. She turned. She looked directly at Gunthar, and she looked exactly as he remembered her, her round face, green eyes and chestnut brown hair. He started towards her, found himself blocked by the Krieg cordon. He tried to explain himself, pleaded with them, but they wouldn't listen to him. Eight hours ago, they had been his allies. They were strangers now.

Arex wasn't alone. Gunthar hadn't noticed before, but now a blond, muscular man was brushing her hair, putting his arm around her, and she hadn't seen Gunthar at all. She had eyes only for this new man, this man who was taking her away from him. He watched them go, disappearing into the drop-ship, and he thought that perhaps it was best that way. He was pleased, he told himself. Against all odds, he had achieved his life's only goal. Arex was safe. She would be happy.

They could never have been together anyway. They had always known it.

Everyone had supposed the space port to be the necrons' next target. Many had fled, tried to get as far from Hieronymous City as they could, to delay the inevitable. Even as they had left, more people had arrived to replace them, still praying for a rescue but less fervently so with each new day and each fresh disappointment. Gunthar knew the truth: that it didn't matter what they did, which path they chose.

He rested his head on the wall again, closed his eyes, wondered if he would have the willpower to keep them closed when the slaughter began. He didn't need to see death coming. He couldn't close his ears, however, and fate dealt him one final surprise in the form of a rumour that began as a whisper but grew into a shout. The necrons, he heard through the hubbub around him, weren't coming here after all.

They were skirting the hill, following the road around to richer pickings. Thousands of them. No, tens of thousands. Gunthar found it incredible that they could ever have been contained, even for a short time. They were free now though.

It was night-time – inside the electric-lit port, he hadn't known – but the necron army was bathed in a sickly green glow. It emanated from the chambers

of their guns, the hatchways and the turrets of their tanks, and the single pinprick eyes of the metal insects that swarmed about them.

He followed their progress from the hillside, along with everybody else. He didn't know what had brought him out here. He had seen this tragedy played out once already, up close, but he couldn't resist watching it again. He wondered if the sight might make him feel something.

The necrons fell upon Thelonius City and began to sack it. The hushed onlookers could see and hear little from this distance, just green flashes in the night sky and the occasional rumble or suggestion of a scream on the breeze, but their mind's eyes were more than capable of completing the picture. They caught their breaths as the first tower crumbled, wreathing its proud fellows in dust and smoke.

Thelonius had been home to millions of people. Gunthar knew what they were going through, every one of them, but he couldn't allow himself to care. A second tower fell, then he saw the first escapees, some in vehicles, many walking, being lowered by the external lifters as if there were somewhere to go, somewhere they could be safe. Twenty minutes after that, the city's lights went out for the final time.

Gunthar's eyes were heavy, and he sat down on the grass to rest them.

In the aftermath of the Krieg withdrawal, the Planetary Defence Force had fallen apart. Most of the senior officers had left when they could, Colonel Braun among them, and many of the lower ranks had deserted. Gunthar had stayed. He was a soldier, after all, but a soldier now with no orders to follow.

Three more rescue ships had come, and there had been rumours of others sent to other ports. Every time one had landed, the trucks had returned with their quota of the privileged to fill those ships. They had run out of soldiers to guard them, so the would-be evacuees had had to arm themselves. The anger of the space port refugees at being left behind again had reached boiling point and, by the time of the final ship's arrival, guns had no longer been sufficient to cow them.

Several of them had died in the attempt, but they had wrested the guns from their inexperienced wielders. They had commandeered the rescue ship, but it hadn't been large enough to hold all of them, not nearly, so more fighting had broken out over which of them got to board it. The ship had departed, in the end, with a fraction of its passenger capacity, and left much wailing and howling behind it.

Gunthar had watched the fighting, but hadn't joined either side. The hijackers

had thought they could outrun death. They would soon learn their mistake, when the Imperial Navy caught up with them. There was no escape for them.

Colonel Braun's replacement, an idealistic young major who had genuinely tried to pull everyone together for all of three days, should have been on that ship. Gunthar hadn't seen him since then, but rumour had it he had put a gun to his own head, that his body lay at the foot of the hill with all the others.

Daylight streamed through Gunthar's eyelids. He had drifted off to sleep, waking now to find his left cheek frozen to the ground. Dew had seeped into his tunic, and something small and hard was digging into his leg. The hillside was less packed than it had been, many of his fellow spectators having returned to their tents or to the relative warmth of the space port buildings. Plenty remained, however, to continue their silent vigil over Thelonius City although there was little new to see.

Digging into a hole in his trouser pocket, Gunthar found something in the lining. He extracted it carefully, almost didn't recognise it. It had been so long since he had even thought about it. A gold ring, set with six amecyte stones. It was the colour of those stones, more than anything, that reminded him. Red was Arex's favourite colour.

He ought to have thrown the ring away. It was worthless now. He returned it to his pocket instead. A connection to a life once lived and lost. A memento mori.

It was hard to believe how petty his concerns had been in that life, how different his goals and the future he had imagined for himself, but at least, he thought, he had had goals then. He recalled his drill instructors in the Death Korps of Krieg, and he knew what they would have said to him, how they would have diagnosed his problem. They would have told him he had lived too long.

His Death Korps comrades had abandoned him here, gone to find a new purpose to their lives elsewhere. It was time Gunthar did the same.

He had lived here once.

Hieronymous City. A field of rubble, now, most of it. Gunthar had marched through that field proudly on his way to war, trudged back through it in defeat, but he hadn't really looked, hadn't thought about what each of the mounds around him represented. He remembered now, the towers and the skyways, the emporiums and the eateries.

He remembered the people. So many, many people. The queues for the autocabs each morning, the throngs of administrators above and miners below. Sometimes, he had thought the skyways might collapse beneath the weight of

them all.

When he looked, really looked, at the heaps of rubble, he could see those people, the remnants of their lives: strewn clothing, ornaments once cherished now shattered and forgotten, hololiths in cracked frames. Worst of all, he could make out a foot here, a grey hand there, protruding forlornly. This place was a graveyard.

He saw a scrap of scarlet and purple, and scrabbled to uncover a PDF trooper's corpse. The boy had fallen foul of a necron ghoul, probably during the first wave of attacks to judge by his state of decomposition. The ghoul must have been distracted, though, as there was still some flesh on the trooper's bones. Much good it had done him. He must have lain undiscovered for weeks until the Death Korps' guns had collapsed the skyway beneath him and given him a semblance of a burial.

Gunthar took his lasgun and the cleaning agents for it. He began to strip down the weapon, but saw it was burnt out, useless. He kept it anyway. It could still deter a mutant or a cultist from attacking him, if indeed there were any survivors of either breed. He searched the trooper's backpack for grenades, or anything else he could use, found only a mangled but serviceable luminator.

The sun was going down as Gunthar reached the cleared area in which an army had once assembled. He paused here and tried to see past that fresh, stark memory, to recall what this place had been before then. He couldn't have been too far from home. His old home, that was. He scanned the few remaining towers ahead of him, searching for a reference point, but saw nothing he could recognise.

He needed to get closer, climb higher. He followed the Death Korps' route into the heart of the city, and soon found buildings rising around him, skyways running over his head, neither as ubiquitous as they had been but still providing some small measure of familiarity. He looked for a staircase and began to make his way upwards. He counted the floors carefully, and emerged on 204. He nearly stepped into an abyss, had to grab on to the door and haul himself back over the threshold.

The 204th-floor skyway was gone. There was nothing left of it. What the necrons had begun, the Death Korps of Krieg had finished – and to judge by the broken windows, the graffitied walls and the burnt-out habs Gunthar could see across the gulf, his own people had been only too eager to abet them.

He stared at the defaced image of the Imperial aquila, displayed over the doorway of what looked like it had been a records office. Had he passed that

building on his journey to work each day? He couldn't be sure. He retreated into the tower, found a room to sleep in. It looked like his old room, the same layout, but pretend as he might he knew better than to trust the illusion. He tried to fill a cup with cold water, but all that came out of the tap was a trickle of brown sludge. He drank this anyway.

He didn't know what he was looking for, but he knew he hadn't found it yet.

He almost reached the eatery. The exclusive one, the one for which he had purchased the ring. It was on an adjacent skyway, so close, but he could see no way across to it.

The night had drawn in, a sullen half-moon only intermittently visible through drifting clouds, so Gunthar was finding his way by luminator light. He shone his beam towards the eatery window; saw only debris stacked up behind it. The internal walls had collapsed. Even if he could have made it to the door, he couldn't have got inside, and why would he, he thought? Those doors had always been closed to the likes of him before. He would recover few memories from in there.

He could use the position of the eatery, however, to orient himself. He knew how many floors to drop now, how many more blocks to walk, before he came to the statue. It had been vandalised, of course, cut off at the knees, but its feet were still plascreted to its layered plinth and Gunthar could sit on that plinth in the same spot he had sat before. He did so, tentatively, closed his eyes and tried to imagine that nothing had changed since then, that the body of the statue still rose behind him, that the offices around this public square were intact and only shuttered for the night.

He tried to imagine Arex was beside him, that he could smell her blossom-scented perfume, see the sadness in her eyes as she looked up at that statue: one of hundreds commissioned by successive Governors to honour those they had sent off to fight, those who hadn't returned. A graven image of Arex's father.

What had they done before that? He remembered. The newsreels. He had taken Arex to see them. They had made her uncomfortable, all that talk of bloodshed, but Gunthar had said it was okay because the Imperium always won. Arex had suggested they snatch protein burgers from a cart, surprising Gunthar who had been saving his credits for somewhat finer fare. He had loved that about her, the absence of any airs or graces.

They had sat beside the statue as the city had closed around them. A perfect summer evening, until Gunthar had spoiled it, his insecurities bubbling up as

they always had.

‘Let’s not talk about the future,’ Arex had said, tearing her gaze from the statue, looking into his eyes instead. Her voice came as clear to him now as it had been back then. ‘I don’t care about the future right now. We have this moment, and we should enjoy it and not think about my uncle or your job or any of the rest of it. The future will happen regardless, and probably not in the way any of us expect, so why worry?’

He had opened his mouth to argue, and Arex had leaned in and touched her lips to his. Their first kiss. He had thought, at first, she was doing it to silence him. Then he had ceased to care if she was or she wasn’t, just lost himself in that blissful moment.

He hadn’t forgotten a single detail.

Arex broke off the contact, slipped through Gunthar’s arms, left him wreathed in a melancholic haze. On an impulse, he snatched the ring from his pocket, extended it towards her, begged her to take it before it was too late. Of course, she couldn’t answer him. She was only a ghost, and, when Gunthar opened his eyes, she was gone.

The past was gone.

He was weeping, without having felt the tears coming, and once that dam had burst he found he couldn’t rebuild it. He was doubled over, convulsed by wracking sobs, at the stone feet of Arex’s heroic father, howling his anguish at all he had lost to the uncaring sky and he didn’t care who or what might have heard him.

In the chill of the early morning, he found what he had been seeking.

He had had to venture closer than planned to the necron tomb, returning to ground level to do so. This was where the majority of his comrades had died, after all. Fortunately, there were few necrons about, the bulk of them doubtless still occupied in Thelonius, and Gunthar had only had to conceal himself twice from their patrols. Few corpses had survived the gauss guns intact, and those that had had been stripped of anything useful by the Death Korps quartermasters. However, Gunthar found a corpse the quartermasters had overlooked, and struck lucky. It was a grenadier, which meant he was likely better equipped than the average Guardsman.

He was lying in the open. The green light from the pyramid washed over him in sickening waves, albeit diffused by daylight. Gunthar bent low, scurried over there, relieved the body of its possessions as rapidly as he could. As he wrestled

with its backpack, he knocked the facemask loose. Of course, he recalled, unlike the other Krieg men, the grenadiers carried their rebreather units on their backs, allowing room for more armour at the front. He had no time to untangle the connecting hose, so he bundled the whole assembly together, taking everything, armour and all.

He closed the fallen soldier's eyes as a mark of respect, but didn't stop to mourn him. He had purged the last of his human feelings in front of that statue.

He retreated to a bolthole: a dormitory several blocks away and a few floors up, where he laid out his haul for inspection. A hellgun with two spare power packs. Six frag grenades held within pouches in the grenadier's belt, which Gunthar now donned. The rations and the medi-pack, he didn't need. He was likewise about to lay the rebreather to one side when he hesitated, stared into the blank eyepieces of that mask.

He turned it around, lifted it to his face. The fabric felt scratchy against his cheeks and the mask restricted his peripheral vision. Still, there was something almost reassuring about looking at the world like this, through Krieg eyes. It made him feel one step removed from it all, looking in on life but no part of it. The only sound he could hear was that of his own breathing as he sucked in dry, filtered air through the hose. It felt good. It felt right – and, when Gunthar caught sight of his reflection in an unbroken window, it looked right too. It seemed fitting. So, instead of removing the mask, he picked up the rebreather unit, pushed his arms through its worn straps and hefted it onto his back. It was heavy, but he bore its weight gladly.

He fastened the grenadier's shoulder guards, chest plate, shin and knee guards to himself. The helmet was a little too large for him, but he wore this too, and pulled on the charcoal grey greatcoat for good measure. He was ready now.

He stepped out into the street again, hellgun in hands. He had cleaned it thoroughly, familiarised himself with it, knew it was a good weapon.

He knew he could do little alone, he wasn't fooling himself. Gunthar had heard it said that the Emperor would raze Hieronymous Theta rather than allow his enemies to keep it. He believed this, but he also believed that if anyone or anything could survive a planetary cataclysm, the necrons could. They would flock from here to another world, begin the cycle of destruction all over again.

He marched towards their tomb, his back straight, his head upright, no attempt at stealth made this time. *Let the necrons see me*, he thought, *let them come*. What could they do to him, after all? What more could they take from him?

Gunthar Soreson was dead, along with everything he had valued in his meaningless life. In his place, inhabiting his flesh, was a soldier. A soldier with no orders but now possessed of a new sense of purpose, the only purpose a soldier ever really had.

He remembered what his instructors had told him before his first battle: that if he could take down just one foe, he would have justified his life. He had already done more than that. He was fighting for the others now, for those comrades of his who had not been as lucky as he had been, for those who had died unfulfilled. He had no name any more, no face. He represented all of them, and he carried their souls with him.

He was going to be a hero.



REGICIDE

Aaron Dembski-Bowden

I

She spoke the words with a knife in her hand and a lie on her lips.

‘Tell me what happened, and I’ll let you live.’

Even if he had nothing else left, he still had his voice. She hadn’t taken his tongue.

‘You know what happened,’ he said.

In the knife’s reflection, he caught a glimpse of what was left of his face. The smile he couldn’t seem to shake was a mess of split lips and bloody gums.

Her face was covered by a carnival mask. Only her eyes showed through, and they didn’t look human.

She said, ‘Do not struggle,’ as if she expected him to actually obey.

Do not struggle. Now there was an amusing idea.

His shins and wrists were leashed together by pulley ropes. It looked like they came from an Imperial Guard tank. Probably *his* tank, he realised. Either way, there’d be no breaking free in a hurry. Even with her knife in his hands, it would take an age to saw through those ropes.

His head sagged back into the mud and the dust. While his eyes ached too much to see clearly, the sky met his sore gaze with bruises of its own. Choked and grey – heaven promised a storm – but the moon yet showed through cracks in the caul of clouds.

He lay in the rubble, knowing that before this place was a ruin, it was a battlefield, and before it was a battlefield, it was a public marketplace. Apparently something of a pilgrim trap, where relics and icons of dubious validity found their way from sweating hands into bandaged ones; a desperate industry based around hope, fuelled by deceit and copper coins.

He blinked sweat from his aching eyes and wondered where his weapons were.

‘Tell me,’ she came even closer, and the knife turned in the moonlight, ‘what happened on the eighteenth hour of the tenth day.’

Already the words felt like a legend. *The eighteenth hour of the tenth day*. She whispered it like some sacred date from antiquity, when it was only hours before.

‘You know what happened,’ he said again.

‘Tell me,’ she repeated, feverish in her curiosity, betraying her need.

His smile cracked into something more, promoting itself to a laugh – a laugh that felt good even though it hurt like hell. The sound was made by a punctured lung, flawed by cracked ribs, and left his body through bleeding lips. But it was still a laugh.

She used her knife as she’d been using it for over an hour now: to scrawl letters of pain across his bare chest. *‘Tell me,’* she whispered, *‘what happened.’*

He could smell his own blood, rich over the scent of scorched stone. He could see it, trickling falls of red painting his torso below the jagged cuts.

‘You know what happened, witch. You lost the war.’

II

He was in a different place when he next opened his eyes.

His neck gave protesting twinges as he looked this way and that. The arched doorways, the broken gargoyles littering the floor, the stains of ash marking the pyre-sites of holy books...

This was the *Templum Imperialis*.

Well. One of them.

Muffled thunder betrayed the presence of distant artillery. Whoever this witch was, she’d barely moved him from the front lines.

He swallowed, but it was too thick and tasted of blood. Fists tightened as he tested the bonds that leashed his wrists to the chair. Nothing. No yield, no slack, and the chair itself was fastened to the floor. He was going nowhere.

‘Stop struggling,’ her voice came from behind. Footsteps echoed in the small chamber as she moved to stand before him. *‘There is no dignity in it.’* Her words were coloured by an ugly, halting accent. She wasn’t just from off-world – she’d barely spoken Gothic in her life.

‘Who are you?’ he asked, and punctuated the demand by spitting blood onto the tiled floor.

She stroked her fingertip along the hideous mask covering her face. *‘I am Blood Pact.’*

The words meant nothing to him. Unfortunately, what she did next meant a great deal. With a chuckle from behind the mask, she reached for a weapon sheathed at her hip.

‘Your sword, yes?’

Instinct drove him to test his bonds again. He tried not to look at the blade in

her hands – seeing her touch it with her seven-fingered hands made his heart beat faster. He'd preferred it when she'd been holding the knife.

'That's better,' she smiled. 'It is time to speak some truths.'

'You're not going to like anything I say.' He forced the words through a wall of tight teeth. 'Drop the sword.'

With her free hand, she stroked his jawline, the gesture gentle, grazing the unshaven skin without scratching it. Her fingernails had crescent-moon bloodstains beneath them, but they were old, from previous inflictions of pain.

'You want this sword,' she whispered, 'and you want to see the colour of my blood as I lie dead upon this floor.'

He didn't answer. With her free hand, she lowered the black mask that covered half of her face. It was a carnival mask, perversely featured and rendered in dull iron, with a witch's hook nose and curving chin. The face it revealed was both lovelier and uglier, all at once.

His captor took a deep breath, inhaling the scent of recent battle and burned books.

'You are one of the Argentum.' She licked a slow circuit of her black lips, as if tasting the word. Even her smile was tainted. Her face was a canvas of meticulous scars, inflicted by a madman's hand.

He laughed again, though thirst made the sound ragged and raw.

'What is amusing?' she asked, closer to sneering than speaking. 'You think we cannot recognise the difference between Imperial regiments?'

'What gave it away?' He inclined his head to his silver shoulder guard, where the Warmaster's laurel-wreathed skull was displayed in detailed engraving, and banged his silver vambraces against the back of the chair he was tied to. The same sigil was repeated on each of them, in echo of the Warmaster's own armour.

Had he been able, he'd have shot her through the eye with his hellgun, which was – assuming it was still in one piece – embossed with silver aquilas on both sides of the stock.

'Perhaps I dress like this because it's cold outside,' he said. 'All the silver keeps me warm.'

She smiled, as if indulging a spoiled child.

'You are one of the Argentum.' He didn't like how she mouthed the word, like she hungered for it. 'The Silver Kindred.' She swallowed, and something wet clicked in her throat. 'The Warmaster's Own. How proud you must be.'

He didn't dignify that with a response.

‘You will tell me what I wish to know,’ she insisted with stately politeness.
‘Never in life.’

Fine words, but they came out badly, slowed by blood-thickened saliva. Throne, he wished she’d put the sword down. The hurt of seeing it in her hands went beyond a matter of personal pride – beyond even regimental honour.

‘We know the customs of the Silver Kindred,’ she said, and her voice was rendered gentler still by the whispering hiss of profane fingertips on sacred steel. ‘To lose your weapon is to betray the Warmaster, isn’t it? It carries the harshest penalty.’

She didn’t wait for an answer, instead drawing the blade from its scabbard. Steel sang in the air as the blade scraped free. He winced, and hated himself for it.

‘This pains you,’ she told him, not quite asking because the answer was so clear. ‘It hurts you to see your blade in enemy hands, doesn’t it?’

Once more, his words were thickened by exhaustion and a bleeding mouth. ‘You have no idea what you’re talking about.’

As he spoke, she turned the sword over in her hands, seeking something. There, etched onto the grip: an Imperial eagle of white gold. She smiled at her captive, and spat on the God-Emperor’s sacred symbol. Her saliva hung down in a string, dripping from the sword onto the filthy floor.

His eyes closed, and he imagined his hands slipping through her dark hair, fingers curling to cradle her skull while his thumbs plunged into her slitted eyes. Her screams would be music.

‘Look at me,’ she commanded. ‘There. That’s better.’

She stepped closer. He had one shot at this. One shot.

‘I’m going to kill you,’ he promised through the threat of tears. ‘In my Warmaster’s name, I am going to kill you, witch.’

‘Your Warmaster.’ She cast the sword aside without a care. It tumbled across the floor with a clash of abused metal. ‘Your Warmaster is nothing more than crow shit by now. He is as dead as your Emperor, a feast for the carrion-eaters. Now tell me what happened.’

This again.

‘You know what happened,’ he said. ‘Everyone knows.’

‘Tell me what you saw.’ She stepped even closer, the knife in her hand again. He hadn’t seen her draw it. ‘You are one of the Argentum. You were there, so tell me what you saw.’

One shot. Just one. She was close enough now.

The knife's tip kissed his jawline, stroking along, scratching patterns too soft to break the mud-marked skin. As the blade caressed his lips, she smiled again.

'Tell me what happened, or you die a piece at a time.'

'You don't want to know what happened. You just want to know how he died.'

She trembled. There was no disguising it. The knife pricked his cheek at her lapse of control, and tears drip-dropped – one from the left, one from the right – almost in unison from her fluttering eyelashes. She had to moisten her lips to speak, which she did with a black tongue.

'How did he die?'

In a traitorous moment, he realised that she was beautiful. Pale, poisonous and corrupt. But beautiful. The corpse of a goddess.

His breath misted on the polished knife blade. 'He died first. And we killed everyone who came for his body.' No need to lie when the truth was enough to hurt her. 'I saw your king die, and we shot every weeping bastard that came to claim his body.'

'He was not *my* king. My lord is Gaur, for I am Blood Pact. But Nadzybar was the best of us, nevertheless.'

'Now,' the captured Imperial grinned, 'he's crow shit.'

The knife lowered in a slackened grip. She didn't try to hide the spilling tears. 'Tell me what happened,' she said again. 'Tell me how the Archon died.'

Their eyes met. His were human, with irises of rich hazel. Hers hadn't been human in years: mutated, slitted the same way a snake's eyes are split by black pupil slices – just as disgusting, and just as captivating.

Just one shot at this. One chance.

With his shins leashed together, there was a chance he could hammer a two-booted kick up into her throat, crushing her trachea and damaging her larynx. At the very least, she'd be stunned and muted, preventing an immediate call for aid. At best, she'd die from the trauma of impact, asphyxiating soon after.

One shot. One chance.

He could see it, hear it, feel it. Perhaps he'd miss. Perhaps his boots would smack into her chin, meeting her jawbone with a sick, sharp *crack*. Her lovely face would snap back on a bent neck, and instead of rising to flee, she'd fall like a puppet with cut strings.

One chance.

Her guard was down, but... not enough. It wasn't worth the risk.

Not yet.

Bide your time.

III

His rank was senior sergeant. His regiment was the Argentum: also known as the Silver Kindred, the Warmaster's Own, and – on the Munitorum rosters – the Khulan 2nd Huscarls, assigned as bodyguards to Slaydo himself.

He wore the same silver shoulder guards and ornate vambraces that the Warmaster wore, for his uniform was a lesser reflection of Slaydo's own finery. Carried in a scroll case strapped to his thigh was a parchment copy of the 755 Crusade Charter, issued by the High Lords of Terra, granting permission for Imperial forces to declare a crusade into retaking the Sabbat Worlds.

In his webbing, he carried a printed, leather-bound copy of *A Treatise on the Nature of Warfare* – required reading for command candidates, and the seminal work from the pen of Lord Militant Slaydo, written in the decades before his ascension to Warmaster.

Slaydo knew his first name, and addressed him by it. Familiarity had long begun to erode the boundary between the officer and the soldiers that served him.

'Commodus,' the Warmaster would always say in his gruff tones. 'Still dogging my footsteps, boy? Still keeping up with this old war hound?'

Commodus Ryland, senior sergeant, was not with the Warmaster now, but he was still breathing. He intended to keep it that way.

Bide your time, he thought.

So he said: 'I'll tell you.'

And did just that.

IV

'I have dreamed of this many times, but in my worst nightmares, I did not witness this.'

– Slaydo, Warmaster of the Sabbat Worlds Crusade

History would say all of Balhaut burned that month. For once, these words could be spoken without a poetic simile or a mind to dramatise an event into the pages of Imperial archives.

Day and night, earth and sky, Balhaut burned.

Bal Prime and Boruna Hive, Zaebe City and the Western Plains, the Tark

Islands and Ascension Valley. Every critical site on Balhaut endured punishing orbital bombardment, the skies above them alight with the Warmaster's anger.

Balopolis, the capital city, died in the heart of those flames.

Through sulphur skies, great whale ships breached the ashen cloud cover, gliding groundwards. Each one was fat with armour plating and swollen with legions of troops – Guard carriers, each eager to be the first on the surface and disgorge its soldiers into the Last Battle.

In the years to come, when Balopolis was a shrine-city – a monument to the trillions slain over the Crusade's course – the memorials for this invasion would paint a glorious picture. Ten days of victory after victory; ten days of unstoppable Imperial advance into Archenemy territory. Wreckage from the Archon's annihilated fleet rained onto the world below, each hunk of ship's hull raising cheers in the Imperials that beheld it.

With no capacity to flee the planet's surface, the enemy leaders barricaded themselves inside their strongholds, legions of loyal followers between them and Slaydo's landing forces.

By nightfall on the ninth day, Slaydo had driven his bleeding forces into the heart of Balopolis with a crusader's zeal. His army besieged the High Palace itself, regiment after regiment marching into the wasteland that Balopolis had become. Every record of the Great Victory would describe this in excruciating – and verbose – detail, for Slaydo's death was only hours away.

Comparatively few records would recall the Warmaster's face on the morning he met his fate.

V

‘You look tired, sir.’

In the wake of this observation, the old man scratched at his beard with soot-blackened fingers. His fingernails were darkened by dirt crescents beneath them, and his beard – once a feral red – was now stone grey, dashed with flecks of colour like fading fire.

The old man forced his scarred lips into what passed for a smile. It looked like a gash of mirth slitting his beard.

‘I am tired, boy. It's what happens when you get old.’ He returned his gaze to the burning skyline, at the ruined cityscape of once-grand Balopolis. Through the devastation rolled a horde of iron beetles – Leman Russ tanks and Basilisk gun platforms of every class. The walls of the High Palace stood cracked and

crumbling under the onslaught of entire siege tank companies. Even the air tasted of ash and engine fumes.

‘Not long now,’ he said, and closed his eyes, unsure if he was hearing his heartbeat or the pounding of distant guns.

‘You should rest while you can, Warmaster.’

Slaydo snorted. ‘I’m not ready to call off the hunt yet. What about you, Commodus? Still keeping up with this old war hound?’

The sergeant answered with a grin.

VI

When the palace walls came down, Imperial cheering shook the city.

From his vantage point at the western edge, the Warmaster exhaled a shivering breath. Around him, the Argentum stood proud, hellguns primed and officers exchanging last words with the men.

‘Do you see that?’ the old man asked. The question was to none of them and all of them, and it made the old man smile to say it. ‘Watch how the verminous tide claws its way through the breakages.’

Commodus looked on, squinting through his visor. Battered armoured personnel carriers, scorched tanks, broken squads of men in mismatching armour... all fled through the rents that Imperial guns had hammered through the palace walls. Those Archenemy troopers still outside were falling back for the last time, to stand and fight with their Archon.

‘I’ve heard that rats always flee a sinking ship.’ The old man’s smile was like a bad scar. ‘But these vermin flee into one.’

His hand rested on the pommel of his sheathed sword as he watched the cracked, burning palace ahead – its battlements of white stone tumbling, falling, breathing out clouds of dust as they died.

Around those immense walls, the dead slept in their thousands, a carpet of split flesh and stinking blood punctuated by the graveyards of slain tanks. Slaydo turned away at last, blinking eyes that suddenly stung.

‘What is it, sir?’ asked one of his men.

‘Such bravery,’ the old man almost laughed. ‘Such sacrifice. Hear me well and mark my words. No accounting, no retelling, will ever do these days justice. Balhaut will become a memorial after the victory we’ve bled for here.’ Slaydo brought his gaze back to the razed city streets, and the bodies that blanketed them. There was nowhere else to look. The skies burned. The city was rubble.

The dead were everywhere.

‘And what else could it become? We’ve made a tomb of this world.’ Every one of the Argentum that heard those words also heard the crack in their master’s voice, audible despite the mumble of distant artillery, and the rumbling of engines as the regiment’s silver-painted troop transports idled nearby.

Carron, the squad’s vox-officer, approached with the receiver in hand. The bulky vox-caster backpack strapped over his shoulders hummed in the light rain.

‘Warmaster,’ Carron offered the receiver to the old man. ‘It’s Colonel Helmud of the Pragar.’

Slaydo took the speech-horn. The men smiled at his terrible habit: he cleared his throat loudly while his mouth was next to the vox-mic.

‘Slaydo,’ he said, once he’d spat sooty phlegm onto the ground.

‘It’s Helmud.’ The voice was rasped by bad frequencies. ‘The walls are going down like pieces on a regicide board. We’re ready, Warmaster. This is it. We win Balhaut this day.’

Slaydo didn’t answer. His callused fingers stroked the grip of the blade still sheathed at his hip, and he stared at the urban ruin acting as a mass grave for the loyal dead.

‘Warmaster?’

‘I’m here, colonel.’

‘The Palace will be ours, sir, but for a few thousand lives.’

Slaydo drew his sword for the first time in four hours. Gold flashed as it caught what little light broke through the smoke-choked sky.

‘Start with mine,’ the Warmaster said, and hung up the receiver without waiting for a reply.

His blade fell in a chop, the order to advance. After a brief respite, the Argentum went back to war.

VII

Commodus wasn’t a bad driver, but nor was he a particularly good one.

Vellici, the squad’s previous driver, had got it in the neck the day before – a sniper with a truly evil aim had tagged him through the Chimera’s front vision slit. Commodus and three of the others had buried the body, while the rest of the squad did what they could to clean up the tank’s interior. Vellici seemed to have a lot of blood, not uncommon in a man as big as he was. Sadly, at the end, it had all been on the wrong side of his skin.

Behind the driver's seat, a ladder let up to the gun turret. The old man stood up there, peering from the open hatch with tired eyes. The men had commented on this many times before, citing that he was making himself an easy target.

The old man always replied the same way. *This tank is festooned with flags, beribboned with honour markings, and as silver as Luna's smiling face. If the enemy want me dead, they already know where to shoot.*

Hard to argue with that.

Commodus drove the Chimera up an incline of rubble. Something – metal on metal – passed under the tank's hull with a sickening grind.

'Don't ask,' Commodus called back to the others, 'because I don't know.'

The old man leaned back down into the dim, sweat-smelling interior. 'It was wreckage,' he said. 'Leman Russ. One of theirs.'

Commodus trundled on through the palace grounds, tank treads crunching over rubble. What was once an immense botanical garden stretched out in all directions, blackened and starved. The palace's cracked battlements rose ahead, while around them was nothing but a sea of advancing Imperial troop carriers.

A shot clanked against the hull, making every man tense.

'We're in range,' said Yael, in the back.

'Thanks, genius,' said one of the others.

The shot was the first of many. Hailstone-loud, the others started arriving moments later.

The turret hatch slammed closed, and the old man descended the ladder with a cackle.

'First in, my boys,' he grinned as he primed his laspistol. 'And last out. Let's win this war.'

Commodus laughed, even under fire. 'Good to see you back, sir.'

The old man's eyes gleamed. 'He's close now, my boy. I can smell him.'

VIII

The Chimeras skidded to halts, churning the garden's soil beneath their tracks.

Ramps crashed down. Men ran from the scorched and battered hulls of their transports, seeking cover in the statuary and rockeries of the botanical garden. Getting through the outer walls had been simple enough. Now came the true test: fighting chamber to chamber, hallway to hallway, into the palace's heart.

Time to abandon the tanks, then.

Commodus hunched into cover behind the statue of an angel with its face shot

off. Thirty metres away, his Chimera leapt into the air, performing a tortured half-spin, before its left track exploded along with half the hull. Steel rained down around him, clanging off already-broken angels and breaking several more.

More rockets streaked down from balconies and windows above, inflicting similar punishment on the Imperial Guard tanks clustered in the garden. One of the Warmaster's flags, emblazoned with the laurel-wreathed skull he wore as a personal emblem, fluttered down to drape itself over the head of a nearby angel, hiding its face like a funeral shroud.

Commodus didn't exactly find the comparison touching.

Next to him, breathing in something between a laugh and a wheeze, Yael clutched his hellgun tight to his chest.

'I'll miss our tank,' he said.

Commodus ignored the weak attempt at humour. 'I counted seven emplacements on balconies. The Emperor only knows how many of the bastards are squatted at windows up there. I got to twenty before it was too dangerous to keep looking.'

'Should've counted faster, sarge.'

'Funny.' Commodus tightened his vambrace. 'Voxing for Vulture support is going to be like pissing into the wind, isn't it?'

'Into a storm, more like.' Yael raised his head, and his rifle, between the angel's stone wings. 'No saviours from the sky are coming to blast us out of this one for a while yet.'

Commodus hunched lower as a solid shot cracked off the angel's shoulder. He blinked stone dust from his eyes. This was going nowhere.

'Where's Carron?' he asked.

Yael snapped off a shot. His hellgun whined for the half-second it took to power up, and spat a spear of hissing energy skywards. Both men heard the scream as one of the red-clad enemy soldiers toppled from the window above. The panicked shout ended with a wet smack. Something that had once been human was smeared across the stone tiles.

Yael sniggered. 'He won't be going home to his mother's farm.'

Commodus was still scanning the view from ground-level. 'I said *where's Carron?*'

'Not a clue, sarge. No, wait – there he is. Pinned down behind the primarch.'

'The primarch' was a statue of a robed figure, towering above all others around it, depicting one of the Emperor's blessed sons. In better days, it had

doubtless been a beautiful piece. The weeks it had suffered under the tender mercies of the Archenemy invaders had not been kind. It now stood deprived of one arm, its face annihilated by hammers, and fresh bullet-scars appearing on its stone flesh with each moment.

With several of the Argentum using it as cover, it was drawing a withering hail of fire from above.

Carron crouched beneath the statue's plinth, firing up at the walls with his pistol.

'I see him,' said Commodus. 'Not a good place to hide.'

'Not at all,' Yael agreed.

Carron rose up to take another shot. He was immediately lanced by three separate snipers. The first shot was enough to kill him outright, blowing mess from the back of his head before it even snapped his neck back. Carron collapsed in a heap that didn't even twitch.

'Dead at Rogal Dorn's feet,' Yael remarked. 'Now there's an honour not many can claim.'

Commodus added his fire to Yael's, shooting up at the windows. 'That's Guilliman,' he said. Another body turned end-over-end as it fell from above.

'How do you know it's Guilliman?'

Apparently, their return fire was drawing notice. A spray of solid slugs cracked around them, defacing their angelic protector all the more. Both Yael and Commodus ducked, using the respite to recharge their weapons.

'Are you blind? It's holding a book in its hand.'

Yael recharged first. He cracked off a shot in the direction their most recent attackers were firing from. 'So? I'm sure Rogal Dorn could read, sarge.'

'It's the Adeptus Astartes holy book.' *Throne, what an idiot.* 'The one with all their laws.'

'If you say so.' Yael didn't stop firing. 'Always hated mythology classes.'

Another of their squad hunkered down into hiding with them, breathless from the sprint into cover.

'Grunner,' both of them greeted him. He looked as tired as Commodus felt, all sickly and hollow-eyed. When he reloaded, it was with clumsy hands.

'Shit, why are you two so happy?'

'Born this way,' Yael replied, still shooting up at the balconies.

Commodus answered with a question of his own. 'You tired, Grunner?'

'Been a long week, sarge.' Grunner forced a smile onto a face lined by middle-age, too many close calls, and one hell of a sleep debt. 'All over soon, though.'

Even the old man says so.'

Commodus nodded. The old man knew best.

Vulture air support arrived almost two hours later, and annihilated the western face of the Golcir Battlement with strafing runs and rocket barrages. The Argentum had been pinned the entire time, taking casualties from the Archenemy's last-ditch efforts – with no way to advance, and suicide to retreat. Such was the price paid by the Slaydo's Own for *'first in, last out'*.

Each man and woman in the uniform was a veteran storm-trooper, hand-chosen by the Warmaster himself. With grenade and hellgun, every soldier accounted for themselves, raking the windows and walls with unrelenting firepower. Bodies tumbled and toppled from their gun-nests, though more of the ragged enemy took the places of the fallen. Resistance was forever fed from the garrison within.

On beast-loud engines with turbines sucking in air, the Vulture gunships banked over the battlements to unleash their payloads. The horrendous fire being spat down at the Argentum ceased, hurling itself into the skies to repel this newest threat. Seven gunships died, hulls burning and spinning, only to hammer into the same walls and rooftops they were already attacking. Even in death, they still served.

When the wall came down in an avalanche of dead soldiers, gunship wreckage and powdered rubble, Yael was one of the first to make a break for the opening.

Commodus remained where he was for long enough to close Grunner's lifeless eyes. Only then did he scramble up from cover, picking his way through the ravaged botanical garden, stepping over the bodies of his brothers and sisters – and the twisted remains of those they'd killed.

One of the dust-covered Argentum corpses grasped at his boot with a bleeding hand.

Commodus went to his knees, rolling the body over. Not only was it not dead, it also wasn't one of the Argentum.

'Commodus...' the old man said, 'don't leave me here.'

A voice that had bellowed orders on hundreds of battlefields now left Slaydo's cracked lips as a strained whisper.

With the walls down, it was difficult to see through the dust. Commodus cleaned the Warmaster's face with trickles of lukewarm water from his canteen. Little blood showed through the filth on his uniform, but the whistling rasp in Slaydo's breathing told enough of a tale.

The sergeant lifted Slaydo's silver breastplate, and there it was. A knife-silver

of sharp rock, stabbed into the old man's stomach. A chance thing; no doubt ricocheted from the ground as the walls tumbled down.

Commodus was already drawing breath to shout for a medic when a fierce claw latched onto his wrist with a talon's grip.

'*Don't you dare,*' hissed the old man. 'Think of morale, you fool. We're inside now. *It's almost over.* Now shut your mouth and bind that wound, or... or I'll find a new senior sergeant.'

Commodus spoke as he obeyed. As soon as the rock shard came free, blood followed in an eager flow. 'This is straining your heart,' the sergeant said. 'The trauma first, and the blood loss will—'

Warmaster Slaydo spat dust onto the grass, his lined face the very picture of impatience. 'I like you, my boy, but you've always talked too much. Now tighten it up, and get me to my feet.'

'Sir, you need to—'

Defiance gave the blow strength, and the sergeant flinched back as Slaydo's backhand crashed against the side of his helmet.

'I need to finish the hunt, Commodus. And so do you. *Now get me to my feet.*'

IX

The Warmaster's weary stagger soon became a lurching walk, then a subtle limp, and then nothing more than clenched teeth and a shine in his eyes. Spite and defiance drove him on where the pain should have driven him to his knees. Better than any of the memorials to come when this day was done, these hours exemplified Slaydo's life in the eyes of the men and women serving him.

In his hand was Liberatus, the silver-wrought sabre granted to him by the High Lords of Terra at the Crusade's commencement. With it, he carved down the enemy when he could reach them, and pointed the blade to aim the Argentum's weapons when he couldn't.

The palace's corridors, once the halls of the reverent and decadent alike, had fallen into disgusting disrepair during the Archon's occupation. The Imperials battled through ruined halls that reeked of piss, great corridors once home to works of religious art, used as latrines by the Archenemy's forces and populated by wreckage where statues once stood.

Slaydo's voice grew stronger with every step he took. Blood ran from the curved blade at his side and his eyes glittered, as though he stared at sights unseen by any of his men.

‘Clear,’ Commodus called to the seven Argentum troopers with him. At the other end of the corridor, which had once housed masterpiece landscape paintings from twelve other worlds, the last enemy soldier fell dead.

‘Good shot, sarge,’ said Yael. Commodus had nailed the bastard in the throat from at least seventy metres away. ‘If you’d been doing that the whole time, we’d be done by now.’

The sergeant just nodded, his usual banter nowhere in evidence.

‘The stairs ahead lead up to the Western Palisade battlements,’ Commodus said to the Warmaster. ‘Or we can move around to the Central Cloister, cutting left through the servants’ passages.’

‘The Palisade,’ Slaydo ordered. ‘He will be seeking us, just as we seek him. No retreat now. No flight off-world. He knows this is the end.’

‘Are you s—’

‘The Palisade.’ The Warmaster raised his sabre high, as if declaring a cavalry charge from antiquity. ‘It happens under the open sky. She told me herself. It’s time to end this.’

X

The eighteenth hour of the tenth day, and the Western Palisade reached out for a kilometre – a wide rampart of gun emplacements, dead bodies and annihilated walkways along the palace walls. The bombing had taken its toll here, as had long-range shelling from Imperial artillery.

Rain slashed down in a torrent, the kind of cold downpour that so easily penetrated clothing to leave skin feeling greasy. Slaydo advanced along the stone battlements, Liberatus in an ungloved hand, the elegant gold etching along the silver blade turned to flickering amber as it reflected the burning city below. The coiled engravings shimmered in the caught firelight, weaving like serpents along the steel.

‘I was so certain,’ the old man whispered. ‘So very sure.’

The Argentum storm troopers fanned out around him, powered backpacks buzzing in the rainfall, hellguns thrumming in ready hands. Several squads had linked together in the last advance. Commodus stayed at the Warmaster’s side.

‘They’re all dead up here, sir.’ He kept his voice neutral, masking both disappointment and concern.

‘I was so very certain,’ the old man repeated. Slaydo looked out over the razed city, then down the long rampart with its population of broken weapons batteries

and slaughtered enemy soldiers. ‘She told me it would end like this, you know. In the rain.’

Commodus cast a worried glance at the others. The Warmaster leaned against an unbroken section of wall and took a shuddering breath. ‘I’m tired now,’ he said. ‘And I ache like you wouldn’t believe.’

The sergeant had seen the wound now eating at the old man’s life, so he could indeed believe it. Gut wounds killed slowly, but they killed with a vengeance. The Warmaster would never leave Balhaut unless he fell back to proper medicae facilities soon.

‘What are your orders, my Warmaster?’ asked Trejus, a sergeant from another Argentum squad. Commodus waved him away.

Slaydo wasn’t listening, anyway. The fight had bled from him. In a palsied hand, he clutched a small bronze relic formed into the shape of a young woman. The figurine was no larger than a finger, and the old man’s knuckles whitened around it in his fervency.

‘Not like this.’ He hissed the words as he stared at Balopolis in flames. The fires raged through the parts of the city still standing, savage enough to resist the rainfall.

He closed his eyes and listened to the rain. Liberatus steamed as water hissed against the live blade.

‘Gunfire,’ said Commodus behind him.

‘*Contact, contact,*’ Argentum troopers were calling to each other. ‘*There, contact, dead ahead.*’

Slaydo turned in time to see his most loyal bodyguards raise their weapons and stream beams of energy down the ramparts. A raw, roughshod pack of robed figures was emerging from an arched tower doorway, moving onto the battlements, returning the welcome with lasguns and solid-slug rifles of their own.

Three of the Argentum were punched from their feet by the first barrage, where they died with faces upturned to the oily rain. The others scrambled for cover, laying down a curtain of fire that ripped through the mob’s ranks.

Slaydo saw none of this. He saw only that the mob of enemy warriors – clad as priests and worshippers rather than soldiers – were led by a creature that may once, perhaps, have been human.

A toothless, howling maw opened far too wide in a face flayed down to bare muscle and bone. It saw the old man and screamed, birthing a hundred voices from its rippling throat.

How it saw him, he didn't know. The creature had no eyes in its empty sockets – no eyes in any of its three faces, all of them howling, bellowing wordless bile through their cavernous jaws. Fingers with too many joints grasped at the air in twitching need, and the thing broke into a disgusting run on legs that seemed too scarecrow-frail to support it.

All three faces kept shrieking as it sprinted through the rain.

Slaydo surprised his men by bursting out into raucous, genuine laughter. He shouted an oath to the Emperor and His beloved Saint Sabbat, and ran towards the daemon that seemed to breathe by howling.

'Sir!' Commodus cried out. '*Sir!*' The old man didn't even look back.

After a decade of crusading across conquered worlds and billions of lost lives, the Warmaster and the Archon met at last on Balhaut, in the eighteenth hour of the tenth day.

XI

Everyone held their fire.

The old man and the robed creature met between the warring sides, their blades clashing and sparking as they cut against each other. There was no hesitation, no careful assessment of the opponent's fighting style; the human and the once-man hurled themselves at one another with no thought beyond seeing a nemesis finally dead.

Several Argentum soldiers, Commodus among them, tracked the battle through their gunsights. Each one ached for the chance to take one clear shot, while the mob of enemy soldiers bayed and whined like frightened dogs – some chanting, some weeping, some merely panicking. None raised their weapons, as if even risking to aim in their master's direction was some great sin.

'I can hit the son of a bitch,' Yael murmured, staring through his targeter. 'I swear I can.'

Commodus was certain he could, too. But he still ordered 'Don't,' in a quiet voice. 'Don't risk it.'

'Is that *him*?' one of the others asked. 'That thing is the Archon?'

The Imperials watched the skinless creature lashing at the old man with a sword that moved too fast to betray any detail. Its robes were a beggar's rags, streaming from its skeletal body in the wind and rain. Exposed veins formed webways of tension along its flayed limbs and three skinned faces. Worst of all was the way it moved – with something insectile in its jerking grace, limbs with

too many joints lashing out like a praying mantis.

The old man had never looked more alive. Age forced him to block blows rather than duck them or weave aside, and sweat beaded his flushed face, while mist left his panting mouth. And yet, he exuded vitality in a way none of them had seen since before Balhaut began. Throne, he was even laughing.

The creature that called itself Nadzybar snapped its seven-fingered hand at Slaydo's throat, gripping for long enough to hurl the old man off-balance. Its serrated blade sliced out below Liberatus, tearing across Slaydo's thigh and ripping silvered armour plating clear, scattering it over the stones.

The old man sagged and struck back, favouring his injured leg. As he doubled his efforts, his blood wasted no time, escaping from his body in a flooding stain down his thigh. 'Femoral artery,' said Yael softly. 'Shit, this'll be over fast.'

'Stand your ground!' Slaydo called back to them. He couldn't spare them a moment's glance, such was the Archon's ferocity. 'I am the Emperor's will! I am the sword of His Blessed Saint!'

Sparks lit up their faces as both man and monster duelled in the midst of their men. Both blades glowed a dull orange as they heated up, their crackling power fields abused almost to breaking point.

'Fix bayonets,' Commodus ordered. 'To hell with this, I'm not going to stand here and watch him die.'

XII

Before the Argentum could even draw close, Nadzybar let fall the blow that would end the Warmaster's life.

With a three-mouthed howl, the creature hacked its serrated sword into Slaydo's side. The old man breathed blood through his slack lips, almost vomiting redness onto his uniform.

'Kill it!' Commodus screamed, and broke into a run, his hellgun lowered like a lance, tipped by his silver bayonet. Nadzybar was stroking Slaydo's features with its long fingers, nail-less fingertips running over the old man's lips and unshaven jawline. As it stroked the dying man, a breathless, wheezing purr rumbled from its open maws.

It turned to regard the Argentum as they charged, staring sightlessly with its three faces. It still didn't release the old man from its possessive, gentle grip.

Worshippers streamed past the Archon, flooding either side of the creature, screaming and stabbing with spears made from furniture, shooting at close range

with stolen rifles. The Archenemy's forces were down to the very dregs.

Yael swore as a spear-tip gashed open his cheek and ripped his helmet free. He killed his attacker with a hell-round to the face, and followed up by ramming his bayonet into the next cultist's throat. Commodus, similarly engaged, spat blood and lost a tooth, hewing left and right with his rifle, clubbing the scum from their feet and letting his squadmates stab them as they lay prone.

He managed a single glance through the melee, seeking out the Warmaster.

The momentary glance tore laughter from his lips, and he screamed something that was almost a cheer.

XIII

Slaydo ended the embrace when he pulled his sword from the monster's stomach. The creature's fingers left his rain-wet face, twitching in the air before Slaydo's eyes.

Organs, blackened by cancer, slipped through the tear in Nadzybar's belly, flopping to the stone floor in puddles of bloody juice. Ropes of intestinal tract looped out in sloppy pursuit.

Nadzybar licked at its lipless maws, trembling, sinking to its knees.

The old man's blood-scented breath washed over the Archon's faces as Slaydo rested Liberatus on the creature's skinny neck. Consecrated steel kissed pale, quivering flesh.

It was a trial just to speak, but the old man managed three words.

'For.

The.

Emperor.'

The holy blade chopped once. Flesh parted with vicious ease, releasing a torrent of stinking black blood.

Nadzybar, the great Archon – fell to the ground. Its head rolled the other way, tumbling under the boots of its worshippers.

Before the body was even still, the old man let his sword fall from strengthless fingers, and roared up at the raining sky.

His triumphant cry was answered, but not by his men.

XIV

The Archon fell, and the ragged worshippers lost their minds.

Many collapsed where they were, weeping and screaming, tearing at their hair and beating at their scabrous flesh. These were easy prey for Argentum guns, and they died on their knees, joining their master in whatever hell was reserved for the blackest of heresies. Others abandoned their melee with the Imperials, shrieking in secret languages as they ran for the staggering figure of the Warmaster. With knives and fists they fell upon him, dragging him down, and their bloodied daggers rose and fell for those precious, fevered moments before the Argentum could butcher every living being not wearing their colours.

Commodus was the one to drag the last cultist clear. He kicked her against the battlement wall, broke her jaw with the butt of his rifle, and ploughed three shots into her head.

Nothing remained above her shoulders. Lacking a face to spit into, he spat onto the medallion she wore: an emblem of the Archon's three faces in crude brass.

'Clear,' he shouted.

Commodus turned as the Warmaster called his name.

Slaydo lay where he'd fallen, his uniform dyed with blood, most of which was his own.

'It's done,' he said. The smile curving his lips was sincere, and his voice remained strong.

'It's done, my Warmaster,' said Commodus. He could still hear gunfire across the palace, some of it drawing closer, and he looked away long enough to wipe his eyes. 'We have to get you out of here.'

'Yes, yes,' he huffed. 'Come on, then. Stop standing there crying like schoolchildren, and help an old man to his feet.'

'Make a stretcher,' the sergeant ordered Yael. 'Out of whatever you can.'

'Don't you dare obey that order, Yael.' The Warmaster rose on shaking legs, aided by those nearest to him. 'I may be dying, but I'm not lazy. I'll march out of here on two feet, like the Saint herself intended for me.'

Yael and Tiri supported the old man, keeping him between them as they walked. True enough, he walked with them, rather than letting them carry him.

'Carry my sword, Commodus. There's a useful fellow.'

'Yes, my Warmaster.'

The building trembled in sympathy with the distant artillery.

The masked woman was unashamed of her tears – or at least felt no shame in silently crying before one such as him. She remained before him for the entire retelling, never interrupting; not to offer him water when his voiced cracked, nor to ask for any clarification. She stood above him the whole time with the knife in her hand.

‘That’s what happened,’ said Commodus. ‘That’s how your king died.’

The hook-nosed carnival mask leered in exaggerated mirth. ‘He was not my king. I am Blood Pact. I serve Gaur. But Nadzybar was the finest of us all, and I will mourn him for the rest of my nights.’

‘He looked far from fine when I saw him last.’

She didn’t seem insulted. ‘It grieves me that anyone witnessed him at his panicked, hopeless end. But the Powers willed it, else it would never have come to pass.’

Commodus swallowed, trying to moisten his sore throat. ‘You know the rest. The battles in the palace. The Argentum rearguard. The Warmaster escaping.’

‘Yes.’ She came lower now, back to the half-crouching position when, last time, she’d cut into him with the dagger. ‘I expect you believed yourself valiant, didn’t you? To delay us, so a decrepit and dying man could escape with your brothers and sisters.’

Commodus was not a vain man, but if that wasn’t something he could be proud of, he didn’t know what else could be.

‘I have one question,’ she asked, and he knew she was smiling behind the mask. ‘What happened to your friend? Yael?’

‘He was in the rearguard, next to me. I know he was hit, but I don’t know how badly. All I know is that he killed four of you.’

She leaned closer, pressing the knife blade to his throat. *Here it is*, he thought. *Here we go*.

But she didn’t kill him. She blinked, her eyes flicking to the dagger in her own hand. ‘Wait,’ the masked woman whispered. ‘You carried the Warmaster’s sword. You mean... your sword...’

Commodus grinned into her face. ‘Throne, you are one *slow* bitch.’

She turned to glance at the ornate sword she’d cast aside before. The sword she’d believed was his.

It was all the distraction he needed.

His boots thudded up between her legs, striking with the strength he’d been saving for half an hour, then powered into her lower stomach, sending her

sprawling backwards into the table. He rose to his feet, still tied to the wooden chair, and launched after her in the most frantic hop – surely ludicrous to see, if anyone had been looking.

He drop-kicked her as she was picking herself up, both boots smacking into her face, breaking her cheek, her nose, and her freak-show witch-face mask. The chair crumbled beneath him as he crashed down, various jagged wooden limbs wrenching into his spine and shoulders. His wrists were still leashed behind his back, but that didn't matter. He was free enough now.

Commodus was on her as she moaned on the floor, his knee slamming down into her throat, crushing any hope of breath. The woman's slitted eyes were wide in her purpling face as she clawed at his thighs and chest, raking at the exposed wounds. Commodus breathed in agonised hisses, not letting up the pressure for a moment.

'Should've called for help when you had the chance,' he said.

She kicked ineffectually at his back, and hammered increasingly weak punches at his front. Her face was blue now. Commodus grunted and pushed harder. Vertebrae in her neck gave muted, snapping clicks as the pressure increased.

At last, she fell limp.

The sergeant stayed where he was for another thirty heartbeats, making certain she was never getting up again.

Several minutes later, after an ungainly performance of freeing himself from the tank cable bindings, Commodus picked up *Liberatus* from the floor and pulled the exquisite sabre from its plain leather sheath.

Lightning ran the length of the curved blade as he thumbed the activation rune.

'Pleasure talking to you,' he said to the woman's corpse, and took one look at the chamber's only door, before promptly leaving through the broken window.

XVI

As escapes went, it was hardly graceful. She'd cut him up good, and his injuries put paid to any attempt to bolt with decent speed.

Commodus leaned into a staggering run, spit running from his clenched teeth, swallowing the pain with each breath. Below the chest, his uniform was dyed red in the places it wasn't completely shredded. Dozens of cuts ran down his legs. The insides of his boots were hot and squelching, and it wasn't with sweat.

Blood loss would take him down soon; so the witch would kill him with her

knife, after all.

More than once, Commodus went down on all fours, scrambling over rubble in a bid to keep moving no matter how often he lost his balance. The city around him was in absolute ruin – a levelled wreckage of shattered buildings and broken roadways. The palace, ostensibly retaken by the Imperials hours before, loomed to the south. Half of it still burned behind fallen walls. The witch and her friends really hadn't dragged him far.

He'd made it almost five minutes away before las-rounds started dogging at his heels and slashing past his shoulders.

The sergeant hurled himself behind the closest rise of rubble, the Warmaster's sword gripped in the hand without half its fingers broken, and stole a look to see who his pursuers were.

Two of them, running over the wasteland, firing from the hip. They wore the same grotesques as the witch had worn – those hook-nosed carnival face masks leered in metallic delight – and came clad in the same scarlet uniforms.

Blood Pact.

He hoped there weren't many more of these malicious bastards out there. Were they some newly founded cult? An enemy regiment they'd not crossed paths with before?

Whatever they were, he certainly couldn't survive another one of their knifey-knifey interrogation sessions.

Commodus sank down into the dusty rocks and started crawling. If he couldn't run, it was time to hide.

XVII

The first red-clad soldier passed through the ruins of what had been a museum only three days before. He entered with his rifle up to his cheek, aiming into corners and at chunks of rubble each time he heard a noise. Perfect movement, keen senses. Head high, ready to fire.

And completely missing the faint trail of blood on the floor.

When he passed another slab of fallen masonry, a sabre lashed out from beneath and cleaved through both his shins. He went down firing, hitting nothing, and died a moment later when the sword of Warmaster Slaydo chopped through his neck in one clean blow.

Blood sizzled and turned crispy black as it burned on the energised blade.

One down. One to go.

Commodus pulled himself clear, cursing at the cramp taking over his left leg. It made a bad limp even worse, and even availing himself of the dead Blood Pact's lasgun didn't bring a smile to his face.

In a game of cat and mouse, when one side was reduced to dragging himself through the dust, the evidence started to rack up for just who would be playing the rodent. Commodus hauled himself over to a pillar, leaning his back against what was left of it. His assets were a stolen lasrifle – half-empty – that smelled a little like an open coffin, and one of the finest, most potent power weapons in the Imperium of Man.

Working against him was the fact that the other Blood Pact soldier almost definitely knew where he was – even if his slain fellow hadn't had the chance to scream, he'd still fired a fair few shots as he went down – and the equally troubling fact that Commodus was slowly but surely bleeding to death.

Good odds, Yael would've joked. But Yael was probably dead, too.

The sergeant blinked to clear his blurring vision. It worked on the third try.

Stand up, he thought. Just stand up first.

Commodus buckled the old man's weapon belt around his waist, used the pillar for support to lift himself to his feet, and gripped his new rifle.

Now get the hell out of here.

He made it another two minutes before his pursuer tracked him down.

By this point, Commodus could barely breathe with his mouth and throat so dry, and blinking did nothing to stop his vision from swimming.

Something clattered to the ground. He could still feel the lasgun's weight in his sore arms, so it must've been the sword. Or a piece of his armour, perhaps. It didn't really matter.

'Eshek gai tragir,' barked the Blood Pact, from behind him. 'Eshek gai tragir kal-kasakh!'

Commodus turned, seeing a red smear against a grey haze background.

'I don't speak...'

Wait, what language is that?

'Eshek gai tragir!' the Blood Pact yelled again.

'I don't speak... Evil,' Commodus said, and started laughing.

He raised his weapon, but his hands moved like he was underwater. He heard the Blood Pact's rifle crack once, and the red smear moved in a blur.

He felt himself falling a moment later. There was no change in the pain, no amplifying of the agony he already felt. They'd carved him to pieces already. Shooting him wouldn't change a damn thing.

More gunfire rang out. More voices bleated. Commodus wiped his eyes, but couldn't see a thing through them. Not that there was much to see, anyway. They'd levelled this beautiful city. Life at the Warmaster's side, that was. Life in the Guard. Kill a whole world to break one viper's back.

By the Saint's sacred arse, he was tired. Dimly, he wondered where he'd been shot. Everywhere hurt as much as everywhere else.

This is what dying feels like. This is what the old man had fought through, right to the end.

Tough old bastard.

He was on all fours when the Blood Pact descended upon him. Their hands grabbed at his ripped clothes, taking his weight, lifting him to his feet, asking if he could hold on a little longer, and saying his name.

'I don't speak Evil,' he murmured again, and collapsed into Yael's arms.

XVIII

'Senior Sergeant Commodus Ryland,' called the voice.

'You can go in,' said the immaculately clad bodyguard. Commodus did just that, though his limp made it slow going.

When he'd first woken up that morning, the sawbones had threatened to have away with his leg.

'Take the leg,' Commodus had said, still flying high and grinning hard from the pain-inhibitors, 'and I'll shoot your balls off.'

He limped through the open doorway now, hoping his leg really would start to bend again soon.

Inside the Warmaster's tent, twenty officers in a variety of uniforms stood around a central table that seemed to be drowning in print-papers. Commodus made no eye contact with any of the brass, and stole a glance at one of the paper scrolls that'd fallen onto the floor.

A casualty list, from the Hyrkan Eighth.

He glanced at the table again. Throne, these were the casualties of the last two weeks. A forest must've been slain to make that much paper.

'Commodus Ryland?' asked the same nasal voice that had called him in. 'I believe you have something to present to me.'

'Yes, my Warmaster.'

In a smooth motion, he offered the beautiful, fresh-cleaned sword out, hilt-first. Even leaning forwards like this made the healing muscles in his back catch

fire. He trembled as he offered the blade, feeling his leg begin to go.

A hand gloved in white lifted Slaydo's sword from his grip. It was all he could do not to reach for it and steal it back.

'Yes, yes,' the sword's new owner trilled. 'Lovely weapon. Served the old man well. My thanks, sergeant. You did gloriously.'

Commodus stood straight and saluted. He still avoided the Warmaster's eyes, instead fixing his gaze on the man's silver-white breastplate that encased a physique edging into portly.

'Thank you, my Warmaster.'

'I may have something for you in the future, to recognise your valour in the field. You're dismissed for now, sergeant.'

He saluted again, and turned to limp out.

'Ryland?' The Warmaster seemed to voice his name through a nasal sneer. 'I've not seen your report yet. Those traitors in the ruins, sergeant – what did they call themselves?'

'Blood Pact, my Warmaster.'

'Ah, yes, that's it. Thank you.' Macaroth, heir to Slaydo, Warmaster of the Sabbat Worlds Crusade, turned back to his command staff.

'Blood Pact,' he said to them. 'I do not like the sound of that at all.'



DOWN AMONG THE DEAD MEN

Steve Lyons

The city had been lost a long time ago.

Its defenders, however, were still fighting to hold the ruins. Even though they knew – even though they always knew – their cause to be hopeless.

A young trooper crouched inside a half-demolished, brick-built turret.

He held the butt of a lasgun to his shoulder. Through its sights, he surveyed the toxic landscape that stretched out before him.

A ragged, wheezing wind swirled about the trooper's shoulders, ashes dancing in its eddies. He could feel its sting even through his dark greatcoat and thick plates of carapace armour. Still, he showed no sign of discomfort, betrayed no weakness. He maintained his rigid, muscle-locked stance, his trigger finger poised. Waiting.

He had waited for an hour or longer now. Ever since the shattering thunderclaps of the siege engines had finally subsided. Ever since a deathly hush had settled upon this blasted wasteland.

Who could know what he was thinking?

The young trooper had no name. He had no need of one. Instead, he had a number stamped into a dog tag. A number that identified his combat unit and his place within it, and thus said everything there was to know about him.

'This is it. We have confirmation that the enemy is on the move.'

The general's voice: distant, echoing, metallic. The young trooper had to strain to catch the words. He was a long way from the nearest vox speaker, out here.

'Stand fast. Remember your training. Remember your orders. You must be ready to meet your attackers with lethal force.'

The young trooper wore a facemask. It trapped the sound of his own breathing in his ears. He held his breath to focus on the general's instructions.

His air was filtered through a chest unit, fed to him through the mask by a rubbery hose. Still, it left a bitter taste, a gritty texture on his tongue. He knew the air was likely killing him, in spite of his protective equipment.

Did he ever think about that? Did he dread the thought of flesh rotting from his bones, his internal organs liquefying?

If he did, then he might have consoled himself with another thought: that death by radiation was a slow and lingering death, and therefore one that he would almost certainly not live to experience.

They had classified this planet a ‘death world’ with good reason.

‘It has already been calculated that you cannot win this battle. That is not your objective. Your objective is to ensure that victory costs the enemy dearly.

‘The enemy’s resources far outweigh your own. For every second you stand against his guns, however, you deplete those resources. You make him weaker.

‘The price of this achievement, in return, is only that resource most abundantly available to us, most easily replenished. The price is that which is already the Emperor’s by rights. Praise be to our father, our guardian.

‘Today, you face defeat, at the small cost of your worthless lives. But die bravely, die hard, and your meagre sacrifice will help pave the way for His most glorious triumph in the future. Praise be to the Emperor!’

The stirring speech concluded with a tinny fanfare.

The young trooper could see them now. Rather, he could see a cloud of disturbed dust billowing along the horizon, presaging the enemy army’s advance. The angry growls of machine-spirits were carried to him on the ragged wind. Soon, for the first time in his short life, he would have to fight.

His first battlefield. Almost certainly his last.

The young trooper had been trained – more than that, he had been *bred* – to show no fear. Did that mean he didn’t feel it? He had been taught to ask no questions, but did that mean he didn’t wonder? Did he ponder the value of a human soul?

The city had been lost a long time ago. Millennia, in fact.

It had no worth of which the young trooper was aware, neither strategic nor mineral. He would die for it, all the same, because that was what he had been birthed to do. It was not only his duty, but his destiny.

And, after all, this city was home to him – in a way – although he had never seen the sky above it before today. For uncountable generations, his people had fought and died here for the barren soil beneath his feet. Each serving the same intangible greater good, each seeking the redemption of this God-Emperor-damned world.

The young trooper’s home world. The only world he had ever known.

A death world by the name of Krieg.

Elsewhere in the ruins, something had been woken by the percussion sounds of battle. Something that had slept for many nights and many days and ought to have been long-dead by rights. Something with barely enough strength left to lift its globular head. But it lifted its head, anyway, and strained with the muscles in

its six half-wasted limbs to push its belly up off the ground. Dust and debris sloughed from the creature's back as, inexorably, it hauled itself into a standing position.

It *was* dead. At least, as good as. Sustained only by an overwhelming biological imperative. A primordial need that wouldn't grant the creature peace until it had been satisfied. The need to ensure the continuance of its genetic material.

The need to breed.

The attacking soldiers numbered in the low thousands.

They were preceded across the battlefield, and partially shielded, by lightly-armoured support vehicles. The young trooper made out six or seven of these. Not many, and from this distance they looked ancient, barely serviceable.

The vehicles' turrets, however, were each manned and he had no reason at all to doubt that their pintle-mounted heavy stubbers were in working order.

It was the soldiers themselves, however, who presented the most fearsome sight, marching in step with backs straight and rifles shouldered, apparently heedless of the peril they were parading towards. As if they knew themselves to be invincible. Their faces were concealed by the gas masks they wore. Could it have been by chance that these lent them the appearance of hollow-eyed skulls, the symbol of death itself?

Of course, the soldiers were only men. The young trooper knew this, as well as anyone could. He had known these men, many of them, all his life. He had no way of telling, though, which ones he had grown up with, studied, trained and been drilled alongside. Like him, these soldiers had no names. And no faces any longer.

Like a force of nature – an irresistible, implacable force – the Death Korps of Krieg bore down upon the young trooper's lonely position.

'Wait for it,' the general's vox-augmented voice cautioned. *'Hold your fire until it can have the greatest possible effect. A shot fired too soon is a shot wasted.'*

The young trooper had been bred to show no fear.

But most men would have fled or at least frozen in terror by now.

'Far better to die with your weapon fully loaded than to empty it in vain. Your weapon can always be recovered and used again.'

The young trooper crouched inside his half-demolished, brick-built turret. He held the butt of his standard M35 lasgun to his shoulder. He betrayed no

weakness. He maintained his rigid, muscle-locked stance, his trigger finger poised. Waiting.

A sound drew the creature's attention. It snapped its globular head around sharply and probed the dusty gloom with its keen eyes.

A wall had fallen, only recently, bringing down a section of the ceiling with it. The rubble was still settling. And there was that sound again, loud in the dusty silence. The scraping of rock against rock. The sound of that rubble *shifting*.

There it was! The protruding shape of a gloved hand, twitching. The creature scuttled towards it, eagerly. It walked on two legs, but hunched over, using its two hands and two claws as well for improved speed and balance.

This was what it had been searching for, exactly what the creature needed.
Life!

A human figure lay sprawled amid the wreckage, pinned by a roof beam across his chest. He had been struggling to free himself, but didn't have the strength. He let out a low groan and fell still. He didn't even react to the appearance of the creature looming over him. Had it not been so desperate...

The creature turned its keen eyes upon its prey. They were met by their own reflections in a pair of dark-tinted lenses. The fallen human's eyes were hidden, so the creature couldn't tell if it had made contact with its mesmerising gaze or not.

The human was unlikely to put up a struggle, anyway.

The creature's tongue slavered in anticipation behind its fangs as it searched for a seam or a crack in the human's armour, a vulnerable spot. The best point at which to strike in order to deliver its critical payload.

Had its mind been less addled, it would have known that its search was futile.

The creature's prey didn't *have* to struggle against it. It was enough that, at that moment, he released his final breath and died.

The creature couldn't accept it at first, couldn't accept that its most desperate hope had been thwarted. It worried at the fallen human with its hands and claws. It tried to prod, push, frighten him into motion. It was no use. *He* was no use to the creature any longer. No more than a slab of cooling meat now.

It threw back its globular head and howled its anguish to the sky.

Missiles screamed across the grey sky, leaving smoke trails like scars in their wakes.

The Death Korpsmen saw them coming and sprang into well-drilled action.

They broke formation, leapt for cover where they could find it. A moment later, fire blossomed three times within their ranks and scores of them were consumed.

The rest of the forces continued their relentless advance. The young trooper would have expected no less of them.

Many of the attacking soldiers had dropped to their stomachs, hauling themselves forward on their elbows. They returned fire, from missile launchers of their own and from the vehicle-mounted stubbers. Some of them – the nearest to their objective, the ruined city – lobbed krak grenades.

They were targeting the defenders' gun emplacements, wherever they could identify them. The ruined city shook with the impacts of their projectiles, and the turret in which the young trooper crouched threatened to crumble beneath him.

He heard the general's voice, bellowing over the clamour: *'Target the enemy's big guns. Destroy them and you reduce their offensive capability. Do not be distracted by their—'* A particularly fierce explosion, close by, drowned out the rest.

The instructions had been heard elsewhere, however.

Another pair of missiles shot out from inside the city. They streaked over the skull-masked heads of the attacking army. Bringing up the soldiers' rear was a ragged line of artillery units. The first missile struck an Earthshaker cannon and cracked its armoured shell. The second, however, fell short and only claimed more human lives.

The first of the Death Korpsmen had crawled into long-las range. It was the turn of the snipers to do their work. In the doorways and windows all around the young trooper, muzzles flashed. He held his own fire, however. There had not been enough sniper rifles available for everyone. He remembered the general's admonishment: *'A shot fired too soon is a shot wasted.'*

The snipers were doing little good, anyhow. For every Korpsman cut down by their las-beams, four more surged forwards to replace him. Some were driving their dead along before them, utilising their bodies as shields. They too had been taught to make the best use of every resource.

'Remember your orders... It has already been calculated that you cannot win this battle... Today, you face defeat, at the small cost of your worthless lives. But die bravely, die hard and... Praise be to the Emperor!'

The young trooper's moment was approaching.

This was what he had been waiting for, that brief window of opportunity during which the enemy would be within his range, before they overran his position. Hardly any time at all in which to act. Did he worry he might fail in his

Emperor-appointed task? Did he offer up a prayer to his god for his immortal soul?

He knew that his first shot would betray his presence. It would have to be a good one, then. His best shot. He chose his target. It could have been any of the advancing Korpsmen, really. He aimed for the eyepieces of the mask. Did he wonder at all about the face behind those dark lenses?

Did the young trooper ask himself if it might be a face he recognised?

A single las-beam through the brain. Failing that, if the mask was only damaged, still it would expose the wearer's skin to the poisonous atmosphere. Death would be equally certain. *A slow and lingering death.*

A single moment. But the young trooper had been waiting for it all his life. He held his breath and squeezed his trigger.

A voice – a human voice – had lured the creature here to this vast city square, still partially intact, although most of the avenues and staircases that branched off from it had collapsed.

However, something was wrong. It could taste it on the foetid air that there *had* been life here, and not too long ago. Not now, though. The square was empty. From where, then, had that taunting voice originated?

The answer came in the form of an electronic squeal which set the creature's hackles on end. A short burst of radio static. Then the voice blared out again, startlingly loud and close. It emanated from a metal box above the creature's head. A speaker, affixed to the side of a mangled, rusty lifter cage.

The creature howled again and lashed out with its claws. Its first swipe cut the speaker's wires and choked off its lying promises. The creature's blind fury, however, was not assuaged. It reached up and gripped the speaker with both hands. It wrenched it from its moorings and dashed it to the ground.

There was silence for a moment. Long enough for the creature to contemplate its failure, to mourn its unfulfilled existence, if indeed it was capable of such thoughts.

And then... Then, something new. A new sound. The unmistakable clomp of approaching footsteps. *A delicious* new sound. And a new taste in the air.

Did the creature stop to ponder its incredible fortune? Did it offer up a prayer in gratitude to its tyrannid gods for sending it this perfect life form – this human being, this *lone* human being – at its time of direst need?

The new arrival wore armour, a dark greatcoat and a full facemask. His garb made him indistinguishable from his fallen, dead comrade. He had likely been

drawn here by the creature's howl. His weapon was readied. That put it at a disadvantage.

Had it had more time – had it known that someone was coming – it would have sought out cover, prepared an ambush. As it was, it was caught out in the open. Exposed. The creature caught the human's eye, through his dark lenses. He snapped up his rifle to cover it, but didn't fire. Did it occur to the creature to wonder why? Or did it merely count its blessings once again?

It had to get closer to him. It couldn't risk any sudden moves, however. It stole a step, two steps, towards its victim, keeping its keen eyes trained on him all the way. The human being backed away a single step. He had already looked into the creature's eyes too long. He was transfixed. It had him now.

A plaintive whine – an attempted cry for help, perhaps – died in the human's throat. The last shred of his will to resist. He had actually fought longer than most.

He relaxed his battle-ready stance and lowered his weapon.

He surrendered himself to his natural predator.

The exchange had been over in seconds.

The young trooper had loosed off four las-beams. Two, at least, had found their targets. He didn't know if he had made any kills. The enemy's response had been too fast, too furious.

He had had to abandon his turret. It had been strafed, totally destroyed, by stubber fire. *Stubber fire!* That meant he had cost the enemy more than he had expended himself. He had done well. Most unexpectedly of all, he was still alive.

'–repeat, those of you who are still able, fall back to your secondary positions. Those of you who are not, if you can hear this message, we salute you.'

The young trooper's direct route through the ruined city was blocked. A tunnel had been brought down by the Korpsmen's bombardment, forcing him to take a detour. He was joined en route by more of the city's defenders, far fewer than had made the outward march to the perimeter alongside him.

The skull-masked soldiers exchanged no greetings, no acknowledgement of each other's presence. Nor was the young trooper moved to see that some of his comrades had sustained injuries. One of them was missing his left arm beneath the elbow, blood and filth soaking through an improvised tourniquet.

'Keep moving. You must stay ahead of the enemy. He will keep you from forming a new defensive line if he can.'

Another section of the roof came down. It was some way ahead of the young trooper. He only knew what had happened because of the tremendous noise, and then the cloud of dust that billowed back along the tunnel to engulf him.

He was saved from choking by his mask and rebreather unit. He knew that some of his comrades would not have been so lucky. He had no time to mourn them, even had he been inclined to do so. No time to consider that it could as easily have been him, crushed under the remnants of the city's upper levels.

What had been lost, anyway? Just the lives of a few men who could never have been Korpsmen or fathers. *Worthless lives*. The lives of rejects. Rejects like him.

For the second time, he sought a new route to his assigned position. He clambered over the remains of a flattened hab-block. He ducked beneath a stone archway, crumbling, but defiant beneath the creaking weight of its burden, still displaying the scored symbol of the Administratum with stubborn pride.

The young trooper emerged into a large, open space. He could tell this mostly from the ring of his own footsteps, as he couldn't see or hear a great deal else. A city square. Its vaulted roof was largely intact, allowing just a sliver of the sky's grey light to pierce it. The young trooper had no luminator. His eyes would need a few seconds to adjust to the dusty gloom.

He didn't have those seconds. A shape shifted in the darkness ahead of the young trooper and his ears were violated by a terrible noise: a harsh, non-human screech, which set his every nerve on edge.

He had been taught about xenos, of course. Twisted, blasphemous monsters that bred in every dark crevice of the Imperium like a cancer. He had never expected to encounter one. Not on Krieg. Not alone. Did that prospect horrify him? Disgust him? Or maybe he thanked the Emperor for this unexpected chance to serve.

Either way, the young trooper readied his lasgun. He waded through the shattered remnants of statues and fountains. He followed the sound of gasping breaths and a putrid stench that penetrated even his protective mask.

And came face to face with the creature.

It had sensed his approach and dropped into a waiting crouch. The creature was bipedal, but more insect-like than human in appearance. Two of its additional limbs ended in bony hands, the other two in nasty-looking claws. It had natural armour: a chitinous, blue-purple exoskeleton. Its round head was oversized for its body and long, sharp fangs gleamed between its distended jaws.

The young trooper had no name for this particular breed of xenos. He didn't

know its capabilities. He only knew that it was different, and therefore a threat.

In the shadows behind the creature, he made out a human shape. A fellow trooper, fellow reject, on his knees; awake, apparently, and showing no signs of injury, but unmoving. Acquiescent. And, in the same instant that he realised what this must mean, he was transfixed by a pair of bright purple, alien eyes.

He felt them worming, burning their way into his brain. And was lost.

But for only a moment. Salvation arrived, unexpectedly, in the form of two more comrades, doubtless looking for a safe route through the besieged city, just as the young trooper had been; stumbling into this square as he had done.

The xenos's gaze flickered towards the new arrivals. They levelled their guns at it, but fired no beams. They had no authorisation to consume resources in that way. Even lasgun power packs couldn't be recharged indefinitely.

They resorted, instead, to a two-bayonet charge. The xenos bared its claws and emitted a warning hiss. If it expected its Krieg-born attackers to falter, however, then it was disappointed.

It reared up and slashed at the two men as they reached it. It tore open the stomach of the first of them. In exchange, it was bloodied by the bayonet of the second, stabbed through the joint of a spare arm as it shielded its throat.

The young trooper stumbled forward to join the battle. His mind had been freed once the xenos's stare was broken. It had taken him a moment, however, to pull himself together. He felt as if he were waking from a dream, his senses dulled.

The creature knew when it was outgunned. It turned tail and ran. There was no point in chasing after it; that much was immediately evident. It was too fast for any of the three troopers – inhumanly fast – and more surefooted than they would have been across the rubble. It was out of their sight within seconds.

The young trooper went to see to its victim instead. He hadn't so much as twitched, even during the brief battle that had raged in front of his nose. He was deep, deep under the xenos's hypnotic spell. What had it done to him? It had infected his mind, for sure, if not his body. Standing orders, in that case, were very clear.

The young trooper snapped his hypnotised comrade's neck.

'This is it. We have confirmation that the enemy is on the move.'

The same words as before, echoing throughout the city.

'Stand fast. Remember your training. Remember your orders. You must be ready to meet your attackers with lethal force.'

The young trooper ought to have been in position by now. A minor link in the secondary defensive line. A shorter line by far than the first one. The Death Korps was advancing again. He ought to have been crouched, ready for them. Waiting.

What, then, was keeping him here?

He had been rejected by the Korps' recruiting sergeants. He wouldn't have been given a reason. It might have been a lack of aptitude. More likely, they had found a flaw in his genetic makeup. One of the kinds that manifested during adulthood, undetectable in the vitae womb. *A damned mutation!*

This, then, was how he served, as a target for the draftee soldiers who until today had been his peers. A final test for them before they were shipped off-world to their first assignments. A live-ammunition training exercise.

But all that... That was before.

The young trooper was alone. His two comrades had patched up their wounds and followed the general's voice. Had either of them deduced that that voice was only a recording, played a thousand – no, at least a *hundred* thousand – times before?

None of the rejects in the field had been issued with a comm-bead. Doubtless, that had been adjudged a waste of resources too. How could their leaders have anticipated, after all, that they might have something to say?

But how, then, could they know about the new danger in their midst?

As the xenos had fled, hurt, from the city square, it had left a trail of stinking ichor behind it. It was likely that it was dying. But then, surely, that must have been so ever since it had arrived on Krieg? And it wasn't dead yet...

There must have been a hundred ways down from the old city to the newer tunnels underneath it. The tunnels in which the young trooper had been birthed and trained, in which tech-priests and medicae specialists laboured endlessly to extract and refine Krieg's single natural resource. The techniques they used were outlawed on every other Imperial world, and with good reason. The vitae womb was this world's most valuable asset, but its vulnerability too.

A hundred ways, each of them ostensibly sealed off long ago.

But what if the xenos found one of them? What then?

'Wait for it. Hold your fire until it can have the greatest possible effect. A shot fired too soon is a shot wasted.'

The young trooper closed his eyes to the voice of the long-dead general. The nearest speaker in the square was broken anyway. He turned his back deliberately to his out-of-sight comrades. And he began to follow the trail.

No doubt, he considered this to be his duty. After all, had his superiors only known what the young trooper knew; had they only been here to countermand those out-of-date orders... They might even have praised him for his initiative.

Or perhaps they would have deplored his disobedience.

Did the young trooper feel a thrill of excitement – or perhaps of fear – as, for the first time in his life, he acted as an individual? Or did he ask himself if the recruiting sergeants had seen this coming, seen it in his psychological profile?

Perhaps that was the very reason why they had rejected him in the first place.

The trail led him away from the renewed sounds of mortar fire.

He found himself in a part of the city that no human eyes had seen in centuries. He left fresh footprints in the ashes of long-gone ages. The nuclear wind moaned in the young trooper's ears like a lament of old ghosts. Like the ghosts of Colonel Jurten and his band of loyalist followers, who had fought here once for the soul of Krieg and won. A crusade – and a victory – well worth its terrible cost.

The xenos had remained undercover, as much as it could. It had slipped between the most intact of the city's remaining structures, keeping to its deepest shadows. A few times, it had wormed its way into spaces inaccessible to its less flexible pursuer. The young trooper, however, found a way around each obstacle and always picked up the trail once more.

The splatters of the creature's life's blood were growing closer together. It was slowing down. At last. The young trooper became more cautious. He yanked an ancient, broken shield out from under some rubble, polished it on his sleeve.

He held the shield out in front of him, at an angle, as he advanced. His hope was to find the xenos by its reflection in the shiny surface. That way, he might be spared the full effect of its alien gaze.

That theory, however, was never tested. He heard his enemy before he saw it, heard its guttural growl and the scraping of its claws – against metal? It was just on the other side of that teetering section of wall. Almost within his grasp...

The noises ceased. Had the creature heard him coming, despite his attempts to be stealthy? Had it caught his scent on the wind? Was it waiting in ambush for him?

The young trooper stole up to the half-wall. He dropped into a crouch beside it. He held his breath, listening intently. He heard nothing. He used his shield as a mirror again, to peer around the wall's edge. He saw no menace lurking there.

In the ground behind the wall, he found a hatchway. It was ancient, rusted

shut; fused, too, into the concrete by the heat of some long-ago explosion. Rubble had been cleared away from atop the hatch, fresh marks scored into its surface. Claw marks. Most tellingly of all, dark blood was congealing around its edges.

The xenos *had* been here. And it had been trying to get below. Had it given up because its waning strength was not equal to the task? Or only because it had sensed that it was no longer alone?

Did this prove that the young trooper had done the right thing by following it?

It must have been weakened, else surely it would have stood its ground and fought him. The man of Krieg had become the predator now, and the xenos his prey.

Did that thought imbue him with extra confidence as he resumed the hunt?

He clambered through an arched window frame.

It was just too narrow for his ceramite-plated shoulders. His greatcoat snagged on a treacherous shard of glass, making him a sitting target. He tore himself free, hastily, and dropped into a stagnant darkness.

The young trooper was inside a temple. At least, it had been a temple once. Its wooden pews had been smashed to splinters, its altar desecrated so thoroughly that he couldn't bear to look at it. A stark reminder of his people's sins.

He stooped, instead, to examine the trail of blood. It was difficult to make it out in the darkness. The trail appeared, however, to lead across the temple floor and out through a hole in the opposite wall. Was it instinct alone that kept the young trooper from following it? Was it logic that suggested to him that he had been led here for a reason?

Or was the Emperor watching over him, even in this darkest of places?

Still crouching, he hefted his mirrored shield in front of him. He angled it to look over his left shoulder, then his right. And he saw it: A glint of purple in the shadows, right behind him. *Those alien eyes!*

He whirled around as the xenos sprang at him, hissing furiously.

It must have chosen this place of shadows to make its stand. It must have doubled back along its own trail to surprise him. It screeched, frustrated, as its claws were met by metal, the metal of the young trooper's damaged shield. He recognised the terrible sound from before, from the square, and it made him wince.

The xenos fell back to its corner, glaring balefully at its opponent.

He was careful not to meet its purple gaze. He looked the creature squarely in

its slobbering maw. His shield had buckled under the force of its attack, so he cast it aside; it had more than served its purpose. He raised his gun.

The xenos had run out of shadows in which to hide. It was well worth a small expenditure of las-power to end its threat. Such was evidently the young trooper's judgement, anyway, and no one was present to gainsay him.

The xenos must have known it couldn't run. It came at the young trooper again, in a whirlwind of teeth and limbs. Unflinching, he fired two beams into its twisted body. The first was deflected by the creature's exoskeleton; the second burned a round hole through its cranium. It didn't die.

If its tenacity surprised the young trooper, however, then he couldn't afford to show it. He braced himself, transferring his weight to his back foot, to meet the creature's charge. It almost bore him to the ground, even so.

Bony hands snapped shut around his lasgun and tried to wrench it from his grip. At the same time, claws swiped at the trooper's throat. He deflected the latter with an armour-plated elbow, pushed when the xenos was expecting him to pull and rammed the stock of his lasgun into its gaping jaws. Teeth shattered, the creature howled and recoiled in pain, but the gun was lost.

He reached for his knife instead.

His foe was quicker. Its bloodied tongue lashed out like a whip, its aim unerring. Its tip pierced the young trooper's heavy greatcoat, finding a gap in the armour beneath it. It skewered his shoulder above the clavicle, eliciting from him his first vocal reaction of the day: a sharp intake of breath.

Blood rushed to his head and his knees buckled. Did he know, in that moment, what the creature was doing to him? Perhaps, if the Imperium had been somewhat freer with its secrets. If he had been able to name it...

Genestealers existed to reproduce. And that was all. This one would have come to Krieg for that sole purpose, likely stowing away aboard a supply ship or troop carrier. Its vicious tongue doubled as something like an ovipositor.

It was trying to impregnate the young trooper with an embryonic organism, one that would rewrite his genetic code and corrupt his mind. Any offspring he sired, then, would be the genestealer's offspring, mutant monsters like itself.

And the young trooper's sole purpose, then, would be to bring such monsters into being – as many of them as he could manage – and to nourish them.

It wouldn't work. He was a reject. And rejects were barred from participating in Krieg's breeding program. So, win or lose this battle, the creature's bloodline would end here either way. If only either of them – the human being or the alien – could have known it. If only either of them could have appreciated that brutal

irony.

The young trooper swung his knife with all the force he could still muster. It was a last-ditch, desperate tactic. It bore fruit. His blade sliced through knotted muscle and he was deafened by a nerve-rendering shriek. Stinking ichor splattered the lenses of his rebreather mask, and blinded him too.

The tip of a severed tongue was still embedded in his left shoulder. He felt for it and gripped it between his gloved fingers. He yanked the slimy appendage out of his bleeding flesh and flung it emphatically away from him.

By the time he was able to see and hear again, it was over.

The xenos had given up its frantic struggle, and surrendered at last to its mortal wounds and radiation sickness. The young trooper picked himself up and gazed at the cadaver impassively. His thoughts were his own as they had always been.

One thought, however, must certainly have crossed his mind. He must have been aware that he had done more than just kill his enemy. Thanks to him – a lone reject, born of an unworthy people – the xenos scum had suffered the most cruel of all possible fates. A fate that the young trooper no longer had to fear himself.

It had died with its life's purpose unfulfilled.

The war was over.

He could hear the general's recorded voice again:

'–repeat, the city has fallen to the invading forces. All surviving defenders should now return to their barracks.'

Did the young trooper breathe an inward sigh of relief at that pronouncement?

His encounter with the xenos had taken its toll on his body. His shoulder was stinging where its tongue had broken his skin. His temples were pounding and his face was drenched in sweat. His wound was probably infected.

'You have tasted defeat today. But no matter. Remember, such an outcome was expected. The important thing is that you have served faithfully and well. You have justified your Emperor-given lives. Praise be to the Emperor!'

The young trooper staggered under the weight of his dead burden. His foot slipped between shifting hunks of debris; his ankle twisted.

The xenos's body slid off his shoulders. It smacked into the ground face-first and lay, broken. An empty shell. He didn't have the strength to try to lift it again. And who could know why he had brought it this far, anyway?

Had he thought it might prove useful to the specialists in the tunnels below? A

fit subject for their study? Or had his motives been more selfish?

'Remember, you must salvage as much equipment as you can from the fallen.'

Through his fever, the young trooper recognised a structure ahead of him: the great stone archway, which led into the city square. The square in which he had first come face to face with his destiny. His barracks were not far from here. If he could make it there, he would be able to eat, drink, sleep and receive medical treatment.

And be ready to fight again and die tomorrow.

That was, if he wasn't executed for breaking bounds.

Did he wonder if his unauthorised absence had even been noticed?

The young trooper heard movement ahead of him. Through a haze – smoke settling from the battle or his own eyes misting? – he saw masked figures. Fellow rejects? No. They were far too well-equipped, with backpacks and belts that bulged and bristled with tools and weaponry. One even had a flamer slung across his left shoulder.

Two of them were crouched beside the prostrate form of a third: either tending to his injuries or administering his final rites, the trooper couldn't tell which.

Six lasguns snapped up to cover him. He didn't raise his own weapon in return.

Was it simply that he lacked the strength to do so? Or did the young trooper sense the futility of such an action? Had he thought himself safe because the exercise was over? At what point did he realise that this news hadn't reached the enemy?

That their orders to kill on sight had not yet been countermanded?

Five of the six Death Korpsmen held their fire. There was no sense in wasting ammunition, after all. The sixth – the one that, by unspoken agreement, had the best shot – squeezed his trigger. He aimed for the eyepieces of his victim's mask.

A single las-beam through the brain.

What final thoughts passed through the young trooper's mind as he died?

Did he rail against the injustice of his demise: to be gunned down by one of his own kind after protecting their descendants from infection, safeguarding their people's future? Hadn't he proved the recruiting sergeants wrong about him, after all? Did he perhaps bemoan the fact that they would never be told of his heroism?

Or was it sufficient that his god, the Emperor, knew?

Perhaps he accepted a fate for which he had been thoroughly prepared. He might have felt contented, even, with the high price for which he had sold his

life.

In the final analysis, of course, it didn't matter.

It didn't matter in the slightest what the young trooper felt or thought.

It never had.

The first troopship arrived that same evening.

The new recruits to the Death Korps of Krieg stood ready. Waiting.

They had formed up in platoons at the edge of the ruined city, their recent battlefield. Did any of them think about the bodies still lying in its rubble?

Somehow, they had managed to line themselves up perfectly, despite the trenches and potholes beneath their feet, the scars that ran across their planet's dead surface. They kept their backs straight and their rifles shouldered.

They had sacrificed much for their meaningless triumph. If their superiors considered the casualty rate acceptable, however, then who were they to argue?

Yes, there had been some deaths. But the survivors had emerged from the exercise with skills honed and with experience that would certainly prove invaluable to them on the battlefields to come.

'You have tasted victory today. But remember, such an outcome was expected.'

Vox speakers were attached to what remained of the crumbling city walls. The voice of a long-dead general blared out of each of them, loud, echoing and metallic. A recording, played a thousand – a hundred thousand – times before.

The new Korpsmen obeyed the voice's orders.

They stood fast as two drop-ships descended onto the plain in front of them, their downdrafts blowing up twin hurricanes of ash and soot. Hatchways cycled open and access ramps were lowered, but no living being emerged from inside the vessels to breathe in Krieg's deadly atmosphere. Few beings ever dared do that.

The Korpsmen set off towards the ships before the dust had begun to settle; they became silhouettes, striding through the poisonous clouds. Platoon by platoon, they filed aboard the first drop-ship, then the second.

'The important thing is that you have served faithfully and well, and that you will continue to do so.'

Soon, these young soldiers would be conveyed to an obscure world, located near the outer rim of the Segmentum Tempestus. They would replace the newly-dead of three Krieg regiments there, to fight a losing battle against an ancient, powerful evil.

Their first real battlefield. For so many of them, their last.

And all the time, their generals' voices would be ringing in their ears:

'It has already been calculated that you cannot win this war. The Emperor's most glorious triumph will not be achieved in your lifetimes.

'But for every second you stand against the enemy's guns, you deplete his resources. You make him weaker. Your lives may be worthless, but you can sell them dearly.

'This, then, is your objective. It is your duty and your destiny: die bravely, die hard, and know that even the meagre sacrifice you make will be noted and weighed against your ancestors' heresies.

'You will be hastening the hour – that glorious, promised hour – when the sins of Krieg will at last be forgiven, and its sons redeemed in the Emperor's all-seeing eyes.

'And thus, your fleeting existences will have been justified.'



HUNTERS

Braden Campbell

Mihalik was recalling his first encounter with the devil when the wind shifted slightly, rippling the tall grass in which he and Covone were lying. They took the opportunity to move forward again. Glancing to the sky, he noted that clouds were slowly rolling in, obscuring the stars. That meant the wind would continue to pick up and the two of them would be able to cover substantial ground. If the grass stopped moving, then they would have to as well. Although the cammo cloaks they each wore would make them all but invisible, the tau sentries wore helmets with amplified vision and their perimeter drones were equipped with motion trackers. To stay completely hidden, he and Covone had to move in conjunction with their cover. When the brush moved, they moved. When the world was silent, so were they. Adapting oneself to the environment; that was the Catachan way.

The way of their enemy, on the other hand, was very different. The tau had arrived on Cytheria weeks ago, thinking it to be largely undeveloped and unpopulated; a perfect world for them to colonize. The Catachans, who for generations had used its vast grassy plains and dense, lethal jungles as training grounds, begged to differ. They mustered nearly every piece of armour they had, and threw it at the interlopers. When it was over however, the tau's accuracy and superior range prevailed. Had the planet been occupied by a different regiment, things would have likely ended in capitulation. But this was a Catachan world. The struggle to evict the tau was devolving into a series of guerilla actions, and although such a prospect would have seemed grim to most other soldiers, it was one the Imperium's famed jungle fighters relished; how the aliens would deal with it was the big question.

Something pulled at the leg of Mihalik's pants. He froze and looked over his shoulder. Behind him, Covone tapped the minicomp on his wrist, and then held up a pair of fingers. Mihalik understood the gesture. They had two hours until the sun would rise. They had to be in position and ready to fire by that time, or the entire mission would be a failure. He nodded to Covone, responded with a hand signal of his own that said they were very close to their target, and continued snaking his way forward.

Throughout the night, their goal had been to reach a particular tree that stood two hundred feet inside the overgrown park. It had a wide trunk to hide behind

and a large burl of roots that would make an excellent rifle rest; and, it had a car smashed into it. At some point during the tau's occupation of the town, one of the local civilians had apparently driven his ground car up over the curb and ploughed it right into the tree. The front end had crumpled horribly and the chassis was angled sharply upwards, creating a sheltered area better than any duck blind either Mihalik or Covone could have ever built for themselves. Had the hand of some benevolent god reached down and placed the wreck there for them, it couldn't have made a more perfect firing position.

Thirty minutes of hard crawling and they finally arrived. Their clothes were damp. The skin on their chests and elbows was raw from constant contact with the ground. Their faces and hands were covered with insect bites. They dragged themselves underneath the wreck, and rolled over on to their backs, staring up into the dark.

'I knew what time it was,' Mihalik hissed. They were the first words he uttered all night.

'What?' Covone was panting.

Mihalik didn't know if the other man was short of breath because he was out of shape or because of the gaping wound in his chest where the tau had stabbed him earlier. A bit of both, he suspected bitterly. 'I said, I knew what time it was. You didn't have to stop and tell me.'

'I just... thought I... should remind you.'

'Well you didn't have to. I need a spotter, not a babysitter.' There was a moment of quiet between them before he asked Covone how he was feeling.

'My ribs are on fire,' he said. 'I think... I think this wound has opened up again. My bandages are soaked.'

'That complicates things,' Mihalik groaned. 'We haven't got any more replacements. Can you hang on 'till we're on our way back out of town?'

'You just worry about yourself,' Covone growled.

Mihalik's fuse was running as short as Covone's. 'I will then,' he snapped. 'Get me my ranging info.'

'Don't order me around. I know my job.' Covone began pulling out his equipment. From a tubular case hooked to his belt, he pulled out a battered macro-lens and a short computer cable. One end he snapped into his minicomp, the other into the electronic viewer. Mihalik wondered, not for the first time, how ancient and revered these two pieces must have been. Then he focused on his own gear.

Many snipers across the Imperium swore by the long-barrelled lasgun; it had

pinpoint accuracy and covered the distance from shooter to target almost instantaneously. However, its major drawback was that the searing, white-hot beam of light could be easily traced back to its source by even a casual observer. Mihalik had no intention of making things that easy for the tau, and so he had instead decided to use a bolt-action rifle and solid slugs. In his mind, bullets more than made up in reliability what they lacked in technological extravagance. For days, his rifle had been cocooned in a camouflaged, waterproof sleeve. Now, he unwrapped it carefully, attached a suppressor to the end of the muzzle, and checked the ammo feed. He had five rounds in the magazine, with six more clips on his bandoleer. It was more than enough, an orgy of munitions in fact, but he had no intention of being killed this day for lack of firing back.

The quiet of the night was soon disturbed by an explosion, far off in the distance. Mihalik and Covone both paused in their preparations and lay in frozen silence. A minute went past. A second detonation rolled through the air from the most distant corner of the town. Then a third and a fourth.

‘Paskow’, Covone whispered.

‘Give ‘em hell, brother,’ Mihalik muttered. He would have toasted the man’s success had there been anything to raise a glass with. But his canteen was long gone now, lying drained and destroyed in the hallway of a filthy hab block. He suddenly remembered how thirsty he was. *Golden Throne*, he thought; *even Covone’s detestable homebrew would have tasted like a sweet nectar right about now.*

‘This stuff is terrible,’ Mihalik said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. ‘Why does it taste minty?’

Covone shrugged and took a sip from his own tin cup. His head shook reflexively as the contents worked its way down his gullet. ‘Probably because I made it out of fermented firepine needles. It’s all I could find. You don’t like it, don’t drink it.’

Mihalik looked over his shoulder. Beyond the open tent flap he could see the rest of the camp. The jungle foliage here was not so thick as to completely block out the rain, and small waterfalls poured down through a canopy of red leaves. Catachan soldiers, some under Mihalik’s command, some under Covone’s, huddled beneath tarpaulins and waxed canvas sheets strung between the trees. The ground was a thick soup of mud and rotting leaves that clung to their boots and trouser legs. They sat quietly cleaning their weapons, or sharpening their combat knives. A few cooking fires burned low and smokeless. There was no

complaining. They were jungle fighters after all, every one of them. This type of environment was where they were most at home. Still, Mihalik could clearly see that there were no sparring contests, no racist or bawdy jokes being told. The men were quiet, dour, joyless. Weeks of constant retreat, and defeat at the hands the tau were dragging morale into grim and dangerous depths. Mihalik's included.

He turned back to Covone. 'Oh, I'll drink it', he said, and poured the remaining contents of his cup down his throat in a single swig, concentrating so as to not throw it back up. 'Beats going sober in this place.'

Covone pointed and said, 'Here he comes. Finally.'

Outside, Catachan soldiers were arriving, streaming in from a half a dozen narrow pathways in the otherwise unbroken foliage. Their heavy boots were caked with mud; their battle fatigues were filthy and torn. Each of them wore a green armoured plate over their left shoulder, emblazoned with a white winged skull and the number XXVI. Several of them, upon entering the clearing, collapsed down to sit in the muck, lacking even the energy to stumble or crawl underneath a shelter.

Among them was a tall figure who wore a red scarf tied around his forehead, as well as a secondary one on his right bicep. He had dark circles under his eyes, and his cheeks were hollow. He spoke briefly with one of Covone's men, who by comparison looked as fit and energetic as a first-season recruit; and then, he entered into the tent.

Covone extended his hand to the newcomer. 'Paskow,' he sighed. 'I was getting worried.'

'Couldn't be helped,' the man replied slowly. He clasped Covone's forearm in familiar greeting. 'We've been falling back from the plains for a week now. On foot. We managed to hold the blues up as long as we could, but it cost us all our transports.'

'Well, we sure as hell owe you one,' Covone said. He poured a fresh cup of his homemade alcohol and offered it. 'You bought us the time we needed to relocate up here to the mountains. Ezra, have you two ever actually met?'

Mihalik shook his head. 'Mihalik, leader of the Catachan 51st, the Black Vipers.'

Paskow nodded. 'Leader, Catachan 26th, the Lurking Cobras.' He drank from the cup slowly and unflinchingly; its burning aftertaste affecting him not in the least.

Covone and Mihalik exchanged a glance, both wondering how burnt out their

compatriot might be.

When he was done, Paskow exhaled slowly and said ‘The Black Vipers. Heard you took a real pounding in the initial assault wave.’

‘I lost a lot of good men, yeah,’ Mihalik muttered. He hated to recall the ease with which the xenos invaders had overrun one position after another. His sniper corps had never shirked their duty though, never wavered in their resolve. They kept on shooting enemy squad leaders and identifying important personnel right up until the last second when some alien weapon barrage engulfed them in a fiery blast.

Covone sat himself on an empty ammo crate, and motioned for Paskow to do likewise. ‘So here we are,’ he said. ‘The last remaining leaders of Cytheria’s defense force.’

‘Risky to have us all meet in one place,’ Paskow muttered. His weariness radiated out through every part of him, including his voice. ‘The tau could end us right here and now if they wanted.’

‘Risky? Stupid is more like it,’ Mihalik grumbled.

Covone spread his hands in apology. ‘I had no choice. Four days ago, the last of the satellites went down. The planetary comm lines all belong to the tau now. If we’d done this over the air, even short-range radio, they’d have able to listen in. Besides, they can’t come into the jungle. Their forces are all geared for fighting in open country.’

‘You certain of that?’ Mihalik raised his eyebrows and looked at Covone sternly. Since the day of their first arrival, he had seen the foe employ a wide variety of military hardware, most of it so advanced and alien that it hurt his brain to even try and consider it. ‘I’ve seen them hit a target with a volley of missiles launched from beyond visual range. *Beyond visual range*, Covone. It’s not natural.’

‘Robots, too,’ Paskow said. ‘Like a big dinner plate turned upside down, and with some kind of pulse weapon attached. Not much on their own, but they field so many of them...’ His eyes lost focus for a moment as he relived some previous disaster known only to him.

‘They’re crafty alright, I’ll give them that,’ Covone said. ‘But I think I’ve figured out how to stop them dead in their tracks.’

Paskow sat forward intently. All the depression was suddenly gone from his voice, replaced with vitriol. ‘How?’

Covone leaned in and spoke in a low voice, as if afraid that, even here, the enemy might be eavesdropping. ‘The tau have a chain of command that’s totally

inflexible. Every soldier looks to his squad leader for orders and obeys them without question. Every squad leader looks to his company commander for guidance, and the commanders...

‘Who do they answer to?’ Paskow asked eagerly.

‘That’s just it. We had no idea. For all we knew, they operated like we do, with senior officers conducting their own operations, working largely on their own initiatives. But...’

Mihalik snickered. ‘Headless snakes.’

Covone and Paskow looked at him, and after a second, he elaborated.

‘Back on Catachan, when I was just a kid, I apprenticed under this old veteran, Kirsopp. He used to say that we were headless snakes; that a Catachan army couldn’t be crippled by taking out a single, all-encompassing leader because we had none. Some ancient expression about a serpent’s head and its body.’

‘It is the smartest way to run things,’ Paskow agreed.

‘Which is why it’s so surprising that the tau don’t do it too,’ Covone smiled now and reached for a brown leather carrying bag that lay near his feet. From it, he withdrew several grainy, black-and-white pics. They had obviously been taken at a very long range, but in each of them, the central figure was a tau. He wore complicated-looking, multi-layered robes with a laughably tall collar piece that stretched up behind his head. Around his neck was a clunky medallion. He carried a thin staff in one hand that was crowned with an apparently purposeless, asymmetrical design. His face was completely alien – no discernable nose, beady little eyes, and a wide slit for a mouth.

‘Some of my men snapped these while doing long-range recon,’ Covone handed the pics to Paskow, who squinted at them intently. The alien’s bearing and attire struck some chord of familiarity within him.

‘A priest?’ he guessed.

Covone nodded. ‘They call them Ethereals. Near as we can tell, they’re the tau’s ultimate authority on this world. We take this guy out, and their whole army will drift like a rudderless swampboat.’

Mihalik looked at the other two. They were both smiling now, swept up with the promise that the war for Cytheria might actually turn in their favour with one quick stroke. Yet, he was apprehensive. He plucked the pictures from Paskow, and scrutinised them.

‘Covone,’ he said, ‘I must’ve sniped a dozen priests in my life, and not one of them whose passing caused a whole army to freeze up. Can this... guy... really be so important?’

Covone's eyes narrowed as he regarded Mihalik. 'Two platoons died bringing me this intelligence,' he said coldly. 'I trust it.'

'Where were these taken?' Paskow cut in.

'Bloedel Park, in one of the civilian colony sites. It's tau central now. Their engineering teams have put up a landing field and command post there. I guess they thought it was better to build on empty land instead of demolishing half the town.' Covone shrugged. 'More efficient, maybe.'

Mihalik furrowed his brow. True, using the colony's largest open area was the fastest way for the blues to establish a principal command. On the other hand, it also meant that their most important leaders and decision makers were hemmed in on all sides by pre-existing buildings, any one of which would make excellent cover for snipers or heavy weapon teams. For a supposedly intelligent species with a highly disciplined army, it struck him as being a really stupid move.

'What exactly are you proposing, Covone?' Mihalik asked, though he already knew the answer.

'That we go in and get him.'

Paskow's thirst for revenge was suddenly tempered by caution, a trait shared by all experienced Catachans. When a man spent his entire life fighting where the environment could kill as easily as an enemy's weapon, if not more so, he either took the time to consider everything before acting, or he died in vain.

'This is no simple undertaking,' he said slowly. 'How will we even get there?'

Covone held up a finger. 'We have exactly one Valkyrie left, stashed nearby under a mountain of cammo sheeting. It can take us to an insertion point outside the town, well beyond their anti-air defenses. If we survive, it'll be there to ferry us out.'

'We'll have to infiltrate through the occupied portions of the colony site, and only the Emperor knows what kind of security they'll have in place.'

'That's why it's got to be just us three. Any larger a party will be caught for sure, but three men, three highly experienced men, with camo cloaks and essential gear only, might just be alright.'

'What makes you think we'll ever catch him out in the open?' Mihalik asked Covone bitterly. 'If this priest is so precious, what's to say the blues don't move him into a bunker a mile below the ground, or some such place?'

'He gives daily sermons, out on the landing field, for all the tau to hear. Draws quite the crowd, I'm told. All about the glory of the Greater Good.'

'The what?'

'The Greater Good. It's their little version of the Ecclesiarchy.' Covone

reached back down once more into his carrying bag, and withdrew a data slate. He tossed it to Mihalik, who caught it with one hand. 'I got it from this. Xeno archives. Most of it is two hundred years old or more, but there's a fair amount of stuff in there we can use.'

Mihalik looked up coldly. 'You keep saying "we". Who died and made you planetary governor?'

Covone rose to his feet. 'If you have a better idea how to turn things around, by all means, let's hear it.'

Mihalik wished like hell at that moment that he had an alternative plan, but he didn't. Like all the others, he was tired of falling back, sick of being beaten by the blues. He wanted nothing more than to kill every last one of them, but Covone's mission was a one-shot, all-or-nothing, stab in the dark based on centuries-old data and some sketchy field intelligence. It was like walking into a blind alley, and Mihalik hadn't reached the ripe old age of thirty-six by allowing himself to be railroaded. He was a Catachan sniper, who led a regiment of other Catachan snipers. Hit and fade was the mantra he lived by, and he always made certain that he had an escape route in everything that he did.

He shook his head, and began to skim through the data slate. 'There's just something that bothers me about this,' he muttered.

'Like what?' Paskow asked.

'I don't know. Something. Maybe I just don't like having only one option.'

Covone sat back down again and started planning with Paskow as to what specific equipment they should be taking. Mihalik in the meantime, began reading the data slate in earnest. It was nearly an hour later when he finally found what he was looking for, and when he showed it to the others, they couldn't help but agree with him.

In the hour before sunrise, they were nearly caught.

Covone was busy with his spotter's duties: surveying the area thoroughly, identifying potential problems, and taking measurements of the wind and weather. Mihalik lay very still, listening to the various sounds beyond their hiding spot. It had been nearly an hour since they had heard the last of Paskow's demo charges rumble through the streets like distant thunder. The colony was now deathly quiet, save for a pair of venomdoves cooing softly in the branches above them.

Covone coughed. Compared to the quiet that preceded it, the sound was like the cracking of a whip. Mihalik's head snapped around, his eyes wide and

ferocious. He saw his spotter, face down, his right arm wrapped tightly in front of his mouth and nose. Covone's body shook with another, more muted cough. Several moments went by until he was certain the fit had passed. He pulled his arm away slowly, opened his mouth, and let a stream of mucousy blood rain out. Then he nodded to acknowledge that he was alright.

Mihalik's eyes narrowed. He was about to whisper something when there came a sudden flapping of wings. The venomdoves had been spooked away, and not by the spasming of Covone's punctured lung.

Together, they peeked out through the knotted roots of the tree. At first, they saw nothing; but then the clouds began to break, and in the gloomy indigo light that preceded the dawn, Covone and Mihalik could just barely make out the silhouette of a tau patrol. There were twelve of them out there, standing perfectly still in grass that came up to their shoulders. Their rifles, held at the ready, looked long and flat and lethal. Tense minutes went by, until the aliens apparently decided they hadn't heard anything unusual after all, and continued on their way.

Mihalik slowly released the breath that he'd been holding and counted to ten. Then, he stared at Covone, who was once again draining blood from his mouth onto the ground. His fury turned to genuine concern, and he asked to see the wound.

'It's nothing,' Covone hissed, and returned to his information gathering. Mihalik could hear the other man's breathing though - raspy, gurgling, and getting worse.

Things had started out well enough. The Valkyrie had landed in a jungle clearing far outside the range of any tau defence. Paskow and Covone descended the rear ramp briskly, and took a few moments to make a final check of their gear. Mihalik walked the perimeter of the landing zone, ensuring that everything else was in place. Then, the three of them made their way to the outskirts of the colony. For as long as they remained in the jungle, they didn't encounter a single tau. However, as soon as the trees gave way to fields of grass, it all changed.

Crouching within a thorny bush, the three men looked across a freshly ploughed field. Fifty or more humans, backs bent, were planting yellow stalks into the copper-coloured earth. Their faces looked joyless. High above them floated several of the dinner plate robots that Paskow dreaded so much. From a large speaker mounted beneath, it spoke in oddly accented Gothic.

'Embrace the Greater Good. Do not complain about your work, but consider

its benefit to all of society. There is unity between tau and man, between the higher and lower ranks, and between military work, political work, and rear service work. It is imperative to overcome anything that impairs this unity.'

'What the hell?' Mihalik breathed.

'They're enslaving the civilians,' Paskow spat into the dirt.

Covone grunted. 'They call it *cultural assimilation*.'

They skirted around the field, uncertain of whether the robots would identify them as enemy soldiers, or simply see them as three more humans in a town filled with humans. The afternoon was growing late when they finally entered the colony proper. They crept along back alleyways, their cammo cloaks making them appear as sections of crumbling brick wall or heaps of trash. Every so often they would risk looking out onto the streets, where throngs of people went about their business. As they got closer to Bloedel Park, the number of tau standing about increased.

Finally, as the shadows grew long, they crossed a parking lot filled with derelict ground cars, and slipped through a metal door set into the back of a hab block. It was dark and cool in the hallway beyond, and all three men took a minute to gather themselves. Mihalik drank deeply from his canteen. Covone tapped at his arm-mounted computer. Paskow stuck a hand into one of his deep pockets and withdrew a small bottle. He snapped the lid off using only his thumb, and dumped a cluster of four white pills into his mouth. Mihalik watched him swallow the lot.

'Stay awake,' Paskow said lowly. He held the bottle out.

'Can't,' Mihalik said, shaking his head. 'They make my hands shake.'

Covone looked at the two of them. 'Alright,' he said. 'This place is occupied. Minicomp counts three hundred life signs. But, the other side of the building faces directly onto the park.'

'I counted five storeys from the outside,' Paskow said as they began to walk down the hall. 'I'm thinking the fourth floor?'

'Should work,' Mihalik agreed. 'The top floor is too obvious a choice, and there's no way we're going up to the roof with no cover overhead.'

They climbed a stairwell littered with garbage. On every landing the three of them took note of several large posters, recently applied. One showed a tau in full combat armour, his head tilted up and away in a heroic pose that rang across all cultural lines. DO NOT FEAR was printed in blocky Imperial gothic across the top, and beneath it, THE TAU ARE YOUR FRIENDS.

'Some friends,' Covone said. He was pointing at a second poster that read

REPORT ALL SEDITIOUS BEHAVIOUR.

They emerged on the fourth floor. The halls were empty, but from within the apartments they could hear the sounds of people preparing their evening meals. The smell of boiling cabbage in the air was oppressive. Covone pressed his ear to one of the plain, brown doors and whispered, 'This one faces the front, but it's occupied.'

'Screw it,' Mihalik kicked it down, and the three of them strode into the shabby space beyond. There was a tiny kitchen to their immediate left and past that, a single large room furnished with well-worn couches and cots. Tattered blankets served as curtains. In one corner, a family of four cowered suddenly before the intruders.

Mihalik and Covone ignored them completely and crouched down by the window. They pulled back the corner of one of the blankets and peered outside. Paskow, on the other hand, pushed back the hood of his cloak and held up his hands.

'We're not here for you,' he told the family. 'We just need some space. It'd be better if you went into the kitchen and stayed there.'

Wide-eyed and trembling, they scrambled away as they were told. Paskow joined the others.

'Aren't you the community hero,' Mihalik jibbed.

Paskow didn't so much as smile, but tightened his jaw and ground his teeth as he bit back a response.

Covone glanced at his minicomp. 'It's sunset now. That gives us about ten hours until the Ethereal makes an appearance,' he said.

'This is a good spot,' Mihalik replied. 'Might be a bit windy this high up, but I can compensate. Let's get set up.'

Paskow had been carrying the heaviest bag, and he dropped it to the floor with a deep thud. Mihalik carefully took the large bundle that contained his sniper rifle from his back, and leaned it against the window frame. Covone glanced over his shoulder, then rose and walked to where the apartment door still hung open. He was in the process of closing it, when he realised that something was missing. He had just enough time to look around and ask, 'Where'd that family go?' before a squad of six tau soldiers barrelled in.

Things happened very quickly after that. The apartment was cramped and offered limited fields of view, but Mihalik could see Covone dive sideways into the kitchen while somewhere off to his right, Paskow opened up with his lasgun. Two of the alien soldiers ran into the main room, their long rifles blazing.

Mihalik and Paskow were couched low however, and the pulsing blasts missed them entirely. The window and wall behind them, burst into shards of glass and chunks of plaster. Mihalik's rifle was still in its waterproof cocoon. He drew his fang, and with a loud gasp, hurled the short sword-sized knife at the closest tau. It punched clean through the alien's armoured chest plate and embedded itself up to the hilt in a fountain of blue gore.

There were more shots from Paskow, and the sound of a struggle in the kitchen, but such things were happening outside of Mihalik's tunnel vision. He dove forward, grabbed the dead tau's rifle, and began spraying the doorway. Through the brilliant flashes of white, he could see the remaining blues pitch forwards and die. He stood up, the xenos gun still in his hands, and then realised what he had done. He dropped the rifle with a sharp cry, and furiously wiped his hands on his pant legs. He had touched a xenos weapon. No, worse, he had actually used one. His hands felt dirtied, and his stomach heaved.

'Sorry, sorry,' he stammered. 'I wasn't thinking.'

Paskow laid a hand on his shoulder sympathetically. Occasionally, terrible things had to be endured in the course of a war.

From the kitchen came the sound of a body hitting the floor. The two men rushed around the corner to find Covone leaning against the counter top. He had a laspistol in one hand, and his fang in the other. He was panting heavily. There were two gutted tau sprawled across the cracked tile.

Paskow pointed. 'You're hit.'

Covone looked down at his chest. There was a knife sticking out of his lower ribs. It was long and flat, and had an ornate handle wrapped in black leather and adorned with golden studs. It looked more ceremonial than practical.

'Aw, damn!' Covone sagged to the floor among the bodies.

Mihalik crouched down next to him. He whipped the red scarf from his forehead, wadded it up into a ball, and stuffed it in Covone's mouth. Their eyes met, and when Covone nodded quickly, Mihalik yanked the tau blade out in a single, fluid motion. Covone kept quiet, to his credit, and bit down hard on Mihalik's scarf. Paskow appeared and began to dress the wound with a roll of sterile bandages.

Mihalik dropped the weapon in disgust. 'That's twice now,' he gasped.

Covone spat out the scarf, and tried to make light of things. 'Report all seditious behaviour,' he said between gritted teeth. 'I find those people again, it's Catachan neckties for the lot of them.'

'We'll help you,' Paskow said. He tied off the field dressing with a sharp jerk

that made Covone wince. 'I can't believe that our own people are buying into this "Greater Good" nonsense.'

Mihalik stood and glanced at the other bodies. Each of them wore a knife similar to the one that had stabbed Covone.

'And I'm getting tired of being right all the time,' he said. 'You know, when these guys don't report in to their home base, we're going to be up to our eyeballs in blues. We have to scrub the mission.'

Paskow stood up and crossed to the blasted window without a word. He picked up his heavy bag, and walked to the door. 'No,' he said, not meeting their eyes, 'this is too important. I'll head as far away as I can and make the biggest distraction possible. It should draw most of the patrols away so that you can do what you have to.'

'Are you sure?' Covone asked as he staggered back onto his feet.

Paskow opened the bag. It was packed with a variety of explosives from fist-sized frag grenades to monstrous demo charges. He smiled. 'I'm sure.'

'Leave us one of those,' Mihalik said. 'Just in case.'

Paskow handed a demo charge to Covone, then turned without another word and ran down the hallway. The two remaining men gathered up their equipment. Mihalik happily wiped his knife clean, but was enraged to find that his canteen had been hit during the firefight and was now nothing more than useless, twisted metal. He left it where it lay, and headed back down the stairs with Covone.

'We need to find a new position,' the wounded man panted. 'Any ideas?'

Mihalik crossed the ground floor lobby to where the main door hung partially open. Across the empty street he could see Bloedel Park, and beyond that the curving, alien buildings of the tau. With no one to keep up a constant maintenance on Cytheria's native plant life, the park was rapidly becoming wild. Already the grass was as high as his waist in some places. Then he saw the tree – the tree with the wide trunk; the tree with the large burl of roots; the tree with the car.

'One,' he replied.

Seconds later, they had dashed across the street and began crawling through the park towards the shelter beneath the wreck.

Now, as he lay there staring up at the underside of the car, with one partner puking up his lungs and the other most likely dead in the streets somewhere, Mihalik began to seriously consider that this might be the end for him.

'Close your eyes,' Kirsopp told him. 'You get this stuff in them, and you'll go

blind.'

Mihalik did as he was told, and felt gruff hands smear the paste all over his brow, mouth, cheeks, and nose.

'Emperor, this stuff reeks,' he groaned.

'Not to the baby devils. They love it. To them, you'll smell like corn-fed grox steak cooked just right.' The old man stepped back to survey his work.

Mihalik looked down at himself. He was naked from the waist up, dressed only in a pair of canvas pants and a pair of jungle boots. On every inch of his exposed skin, Kirsopp had plastered a pungent mixture of animal blood and gluey toxvine sap. It was already beginning to harden in the infernal heat of the jungle.

'I look like a giant scab,' he said.

His mentor gave him a withering look and said, 'It doesn't matter what you look like. It doesn't matter what you have to endure. All that matters is how effective you are.'

Mihalik lowered his eyes and gave a weak 'Yes, sir'. He was ten years old, and Kirsopp was an ancient forty-five. It was an honour and a privilege to tutor under such an accomplished veteran, but the man had absolutely no sense of humour.

'I didn't hear you,' he snapped.

'Yes, sir!' Mihalik barked.

Kirsopp folded his arms angrily across his chest. 'Better,' he growled. 'Now, let's go over it one last time. What's your objective?'

Mihalik waved his arm. All around, Catachan fighters were finishing their preparations. Half were stationed up in the twisting trees, armed with a variety of rifles and heavy weapons. The rest were on the ground, hacking at the foliage with their machete-sized knives, or pouring barrels of thick, black tar all around the perimeter of the cleared area. 'To draw the target out from hiding and into this kill zone, sir,' he said.

'And how will you do that?'

'Sir, when everyone is ready, the fastest runners will go down that cleared path,' he pointed to a break in the jungle's vegetative wall, 'to the cave where the devil's nest is. They'll have buckets of this same stuff I'm covered in, and they'll start smearing the trees with it, making a trail that leads back here. When one of the baby devils gets a good whiff of it, it'll come charging up, see me, and move in for the kill. That's when all of you will light the oil, trapping it. Then the shooters can kill it.'

‘What’s your exit?’

‘I’ll climb out on a rope ladder lowered down to me by one of the senior fighters, sir.’

Kirsopp nodded with satisfaction and then, with nothing more to be said, turned and walked away. Mihalik watched his teacher scramble up a tree to a safe height. One by one, the older Catachan fighters did likewise until he was alone in the centre of the circular clearing. For days, there had been men out here preparing the ground by clearing away the brush and cutting down the undergrowth. Only one path had been left, ensuring that the gunners up in the trees would know exactly where to place their shots. Despite this however, the success of this hunt all came down to him, Mihalik.

The Catachan Devil, when fully grown, was as long as a freight train, had multiple sets of legs, huge pincer-like claws, and a gigantic barbed tail that dripped lethal poison. It was an absolute monstrosity, and worse, it lived in nests. Each nest would usually contain half a dozen fully grown adults and twice as many ‘devilspawn’. They had to be culled each season, lest the population become so great that they take over the planet, and old Kirsopp had, at some point in the distant past, decided that he might as well make use of this annual event. Every young Catachan had to thereafter endure this test of worthiness if they wanted to study under him.

It was suicide to simply attack the devilspawn where they sheltered. The adults would boil up from out of the ground and kill everything that moved. Therefore, the jungle fighters had evolved a means of luring the young devils away from their parents where they could be killed singularly. The foul mixture that Mihalik was covered in smelled sickening to adult devils, but when mixed with human sweat, proved intoxicating to the spawn. The creatures would follow the trail laid out for them, but had the uncanny ability to sense a trap. Mihalik’s job this day was to present himself as an irresistible target, a morsel so tasty that it would override the spawn’s cautionary instincts, and run headlong to its death.

If he succeeded, his bravery would be proved, and he would be gifted with a red head scarf of his own. If he died, well, it would be just another day on Catachan.

Mihalik looked back up into the trees. The other jungle fighters had vanished in the intervening seconds, camouflaging themselves seamlessly into the background. Suddenly, the ground began to rumble. Somewhere nearby, a flock of swamp herons took flight, squawking madly with fear. Then, the devilspawn appeared in the middle of the cleared path.

It was the biggest spawn that any of them could remember seeing, and afterwards they all agreed that the creature was one year shy of becoming a full adult. It focused its enormous, coal black eyes on the defenseless, half naked child in front of it. Thick drool began to fall from its clawed and tentacled mouth. It reared up, like a venomous snake might do, and then drove the entirety of its bulk at Mihalik.

The boy leapt as far to one side as he could. The monster plowed into the earth, burying its head and sending chunks of mud flying. Mihalik knew he had to stay in the circle long enough for his elders to ignite the oil. Tough as they might be, immature devils had a fear of fire, and once the barrier was set alight, the monster wouldn't dare try to break out through the flames. He rolled up out of his dive and into a fighting crouch. A wall of fire erupted suddenly, filling the air with hellish heat and an unbearable stench. There was gunfire too, but he hardly noticed. The braided vine rope, his sole escape, dropped down from an overhanging limb. His impromptu dive however, had taken him too far away from it. The spawn was in the way, and he couldn't get around it. He looked desperately around for one of the elders, for Kirsopp, for anyone, to come to his rescue, but there was no seeing beyond the flames. He was trapped and completely alone, and his choice was a blunt one: stay here and surely die, or climb out.

The devil pulled its massive head from out of the soil, and shook it from side to side. Clods of dirt whipped into the trees. It fixed its mad gaze on Mihalik again, and bellowed. Then it reared up just as it had before, and dove.

Mihalik dodged to his left. The abomination's head slammed down into the ground again. Then, instead of moving to distance himself from it, Mihalik bolted straight forwards. While its face was buried in the soil, the boy ran up the creature's back and launched himself into the air. He caught the vine rope half way up its length, and climbed hand-over-hand with all his might. Kirsopp appeared, a long piece of red cloth clenched in his meaty fist. He handed it to Mihalik.

Now that he was clear, the other Catachans were free to shoot the spawn with abandon. Mihalik took the headband, held it to his heaving chest, and listened. Below him, the devil rampaged in its cage of fire until it was finally felled.

'There's our boy,' Covone whispered.

Mihalik's wandering mind snapped back to the present. He inhaled sharply and shook his head. Twice now, the memory of his initiation day had been dredged

up by his subconscious to be splattered across the forefront of his mind. He knew why, of course; understood of what it was that his instincts were trying to warn him. The tau would never be able to go into the fetid swamps and dark places his fellow Catachans were now falling back into. And, since they couldn't take their fight to the enemy, the blues would have to draw their enemies out to more favourable ground.

'Trapped with the devil in a circle of fire,' he muttered.

Covone looked at him questioningly.

Mihalik rolled over onto his belly. 'Forget it,' he said as he nestled the muzzle of his rifle amidst the tree's burly roots. He settled his cheek into the stock, and peered through the scope. The sky was lightening as the sun crept up over the horizon. 'Let's have a look'.

The enemy base, which at a distance looked like a tumble of featureless white blocks and domes, leapt into clarity. Covone hadn't been exaggerating when he had called it tau central. There were nearly a dozen different buildings in various stages of construction. From the reports he'd read, he was able to identify a few of them: a low, rounded barracks, a cluster of glowing pillars that were power generators, and an arched structure with four angled towers attached to it that could only be the command centre. Of the others, he was not so sure. Three tall towers of differing heights were still being erected; their bases hidden behind a mesh of scaffolding and their tops crowned with cranes. There was also a fourth, crescent-shaped building he assumed to be some kind of massive communications array. In the middle of all this was an open courtyard, large enough to act as a landing field for a fleet of orbital dropships. It was filling up now with tau soldiers, all of them in identical suits of ochre-coloured combat armour. They were kneeling in perfect rows and columns, preparing themselves to receive whatever inspirational wisdom their leader was about to bestow on them.

'There sure are a lot of them,' Mihalik said.

'Only have to kill one,' Covone replied.

Covone began reading off the numbers and coordinates displayed on his minicomp. Mihalik adjusted his angle to match. Finally, he settled his sights on some kind of floating platform. It was round and white, with a podium moulded into the front. Behind this was a high-backed chair with over-sized arms, and seated within was the tau priest.

'You locked on?' Covone asked.

'Sitting behind his flying pulpit?'

‘That’s him.’

Mihalik flicked off the weapon’s safeties with his little finger. ‘We’ll wait until he stands up,’ he said. He swallowed in a dry throat and then asked, ‘Wind speed?’

Covone glanced down to his sensory readout. ‘I read four knots, blowing from the west.’

In his cross hairs, the priest rose up from his seat, and shuffled slowly up to the pedestal. Mihalik moved his rifle imperceptibly to the east, and adjusted a fraction upwards to compensate for the way in which his bullet would drop during its long flight. ‘I’m zeroed in,’ he murmured.

‘Then let’s see if you were right,’ Covone said.

Mihalik listened to the blood rushing in his ears, and in the fractional space between one heartbeat and the next, where an exhale finishes but the next intake of breath has yet to begin, he pulled the trigger. Thanks to the suppressor, there was no flash, and no retort. The only sound was a soft *chuff* as the bullet leapt forward. A little more than a second later, it had flown over the tall grass and above the heads of all the assembled tau warriors, where it promptly mushroomed and bounced off the invisible forcefield that surrounded the Ethereal.

Mihalik looked over at Covone, whose face had become a pale, slack-jawed mask of disbelief. ‘I told you so,’ he said. He withdrew his gun from the tree roots and rolled out from under the smashed car. ‘Now comes the hard part. Let’s move.’

Covone rolled onto his side, stared back at him, and shook his head. He gazed down at his chest to where the bandages were stained deep red. A pool of blood had formed underneath him all the while he had been scanning and observing. ‘I’m not coming, Ezra. I won’t make it across the street, never mind the Valkyrie.’

From his leather bag, Covone pulled out the last of the demo charges. He popped the protective seal off the detonator, and placed his thumb over the button. Mihalik felt a wave of regret crash over him. He opened his mouth to say something encouraging or comforting, but Covone spoke first.

‘Don’t try to patronize me,’ he grunted. ‘You know what you have to do.’

Mihalik started back towards the street, bent low with his rifle in his hands. He constantly fought the urge to look back. Enemy soldiers would be massing on the wrecked car within seconds, and as much as he disliked Covone, the man was still a fellow Catachan. Those who wore the red scarf rarely left a brother

behind.

He quickly reached the entryway to the hab block. He slipped past the still-open door, went to one of the front windows, and wiped away enough dirt with the back of his hand that he could look back out onto the park.

Cytheria's sun had not yet crested the tops of the other buildings, and the park was a swirling mix of deep red shadows. An alarm was wailing somewhere, and scores of tau soldiers were spilling out from their base. A cloud of robot drones swirled in the air above like a swarm of robotic bees, stirred to angry life by a solitary bullet.

The demo charge erupted moments later. A massive, glowing fireball consumed Covone, the car, the tree, and more than two dozen tau who had been moving in to capture or kill the would-be assassins. Chunks of wood and twisted, burning pieces of metal rained down everywhere. The grass in the park was set alight, and the concussion wave shattered every window that faced the street. Mihalik stood unphased as a hundred jagged shards of glass sliced into his bare chest. He could have used this diversion to make good his escape, he knew, but what would that accomplish? *No*, he thought, *it's up to me to light the fire*. He hoisted his rifle, and pressed the scope to his eye.

For a moment, there was nothing save for muffled screams and shouts in the apartments above him. The scene outside was one of destruction and shocked stillness. Then, he saw one of the blues rise up from where he had been sent reeling into the tall grass. Mihalik exhaled as he pulled the trigger, and the faceplate on the alien's helmet folded inwards with a spray of blood and bone. His right hand flew up to the bolt even as he scanned for another target. The spent cartridge dropped to the floor, and he reloaded with an almost supernatural calm and speed. Another tau appeared only to go down again with a shot centre mass. Again, he reloaded. He found a fresh target and let a third round fly. A fourth. A fifth. He dropped the spent magazine to the floor and slapped in a fresh one. Search, acquire, fire, reload. Again. Again. Again. Relentless.

Within a minute, he had hit and killed a total of ten tau, and exhausted two of his ammunition clips. It was more than enough to get their attention.

He was turning to go when he caught something out of the corner of his eye. They weren't lasers per se. They were more like beams of pale blue smoke, discernable only because of the way they played over the powdered glass that covered the floor of the lobby. He had no idea what they were, but it couldn't be good. He dashed forward, diving over a couch. Behind him, a volley of small missiles detonated across the building's façade. The door turned into splinters.

Bricks and mortar tore through the room. Part of the ceiling gave way with the impact, and plaster rained down on Mihalik's back. A searing pain tore through his left arm. He remained crouched behind the sofa, his head down, and he cursed. The missiles suggested the presence of a light artillery battery, or worse yet, a vehicle. *Cheaters*, he thought. *This is supposed to be a contest between infantry.*

Mihalik knew he couldn't stay here. Sprawling on the floor, he began crawling away. His multiple cuts smeared themselves across the carpet leaving a trail of blood, but it couldn't be helped. As he rounded a corner, he took a second to see why it was exactly that his arm hurt so much. With a start, he discovered that a large piece of steel window frame had impaled itself right between his radius and his ulna. He stood up, and yanked it from his flesh. A jet of blood the same colour as his headband painted a dripping curve along the wall.

He ran down a back hallway, bashed a metal fire door open with his shoulder, and emerged into a parking lot. He had only jogged a few steps when one of the tau trackers, moving at a full run, emerged from a side alley. The tau skidded to a halt, apparently surprised to encounter Mihalik outside of the building already. For the briefest of moments, the two stared at each other. Then, the alien began to raise his carbine. Mihalik, with his longer reach, swung his rifle like a club, and bashed the tau upside the head. Then he closed the distance, dropped his gun, and yanked his fang from its sheath. He swung the blade in a horizontal, decapitating arc, but at the last second, the tau blocked the attack with a forearm. Mihalik, who had assumed that the fight would be over as soon as it had begun, was taken aback, and doubly so as he was kicked fiercely in the shin. The two of them grappled for a moment longer before Mihalik was finally able to twist his opponent's arm behind his back, and stab him through the chest. The tau started to spasm and then went limp. Mihalik withdrew the blade to find it covered in thick, cyan-coloured gore, and even though time was of the essence, he stopped to wipe it clean on the alien's pant leg. No filthy xeno's blood would be allowed to stain his fang.

He was off again, moving down the narrow, twisting streets of the colony. The remaining tau trackers were close behind him, of that he was certain. It was a race now, a true contest to see which species had greater skill and fortitude. Before long, he was outside the town and weaving his way through the thickening jungle. He was trying to take the most convoluted path he could think of, but his head was beginning to swim. He sagged against a tree, breathless. The cuts on his chest were minor things, but the hole in his forearm was near

crippling. Blood poured from the wound. His right hand looked as if it had been dipped in red paint. He used his headscarf as a makeshift bandage, and carried on.

It was nearly noon by the time Mihalik neared the extraction point. For the rest of the morning, he had managed to catch a few signs that he was still being pursued – a snapping branch here, an alien scent on wind there. However, all was quiet now. Through the trees, he could see the Valkyrie that had ferried himself and the others in. Its rear hatch was open and looked as inviting as a mother's embrace. He was far gone, he knew that; he was exhausted, starved, dehydrated, cut, bled out, and burned. Still, it was almost over. He stumbled out into the open and towards the transport.

Mihalik was steps from the boarding ramp when the tau energy blasts hit him. They came from all directions, striking his chest, back, arm, thigh, and head. The world vanished in a succession of white flashes, and he collapsed on the jungle floor. He was dimly aware that a portion of his left leg was now missing, but it seemed somehow inconsequential. He could hear the little aliens moving through the grass towards him, coming to either confirm the kill, or finish him off. He lay there for a moment, face down in mud, thinking to himself how perfect an ambush it had been. Then, he painstakingly raised himself up, because when this happened, he was determined to be on his feet for it.

There were five of the alien trackers standing in a rough circle around him, their weapons raised. Their armour, nothing more than a protective chest plate and reinforced gloves, was red, not ochre; the better colour to blend into this planet's native palate. A few had black scorch marks across their combat vests that he guessed was a result of Covone's heroic last stand. The crests of their helmets were very tapered, with a single, red eye lens that regarded him impassively. Their rifles appeared short and stubby. Mihalik nodded with subconscious approval. Light armour for greater mobility and a carbine so as not to catch on foliage or rubble. These blues obviously weren't run of the mill soldiers; they were specialists. He'd finally found his alien counterparts.

'Nicely done,' he croaked. 'I used every counter-tracking trick I know of, and you still trailed me. Outmanoeuvred me, too. You guys are good, no question. You must be the best in your army.'

One of the tau said something. To Mihalik's ears it sounded short and choppy, like the crackling of a log in a bonfire. He didn't speak their language and so had no idea whether he was being praised or damned. It didn't matter regardless.

'Take 'em!' he shouted.

The tau all died. Some of them were shot through the chest, others in the head. Their bodies hit the ground simultaneously, and the fittingness of that made Mihalik break out into uncontrollable laughter. Unity was important to the blues, after all.

All around him, a dozen Catachan snipers were jumping down from their treetop perches. Three of them raced over to Mihalik, eased him back to the ground, and began applying aid to his wounds with medipacks and cloth bandages.

‘Did you get them all?’ Mihalik managed to ask. His fit of hysterical laughter had left as suddenly as it had come on.

‘Every one,’ the youngest of his attendants replied. ‘You led them right to us, sir. Just like you said would happen.’

Mihalik closed his eyes. The drugs were not only taking away all his pain, they were making his body a dim and distant thing. He was only half aware as his combat brethren rolled him onto a stretcher, and carried him into the Valkyrie. Then they were in the air, flying low over the canopy of the rainforest. The young attendant leaned over him to check his pulse.

‘Sir, can I ask you something?’

Mihalik’s voice was a raspy slur. ‘What is it?’

‘The blues. Will they come after us for what we did?’

‘I’m sure they’ll try. But they won’t find us. They won’t be able to get to us. We killed the best they had.’

The kid nodded, and then asked, ‘How’d you know? I mean, how did you know that the whole thing was a trap?’

Mihalik struggled to focus on the boy. He was not more a few years past initiation, Mihalik thought. His skin was still relatively free of scars, and his beard stubble was downy. He wore the red head scarf, but obviously still had much to learn.

‘It was in the files,’ Mihalik said. ‘Under military doctrine. Do you know what the tau call their battle companies?’

The young man shook his head.

‘Hunter Cadres. They see themselves as being descended from great hunters. When I read that, I knew that they were just setting out bait to catch the best of us.’

‘But you turned it around on them,’ the boy was grinning with newfound understanding. ‘You left us at the landing site to nail them when they came far enough away from their headquarters, and made bait of yourself.’

Mihalik was suddenly reminded of old Kirsopp's words to him; that whatever he had to endure was irrelevant so long as his actions were, in the end, effective.

'I'm used to it,' he said coldly.

Mihalik closed his eyes and began to drift away. He would sleep for just a few hours, he told himself, and then it would be right back to work. He was the senior-most officer in the resistance now, and he had an insurgency to organise.



THE MOUTH OF CHAOS

Chris Dows

The roar of unbreathable air blasted past Zachariah's ears, rattling the tinted visor on his heavy pressure helmet and blurring his vision. Directly beneath him, more than eighty Elysians plunged towards the gaping maw of Rysgah City two kilometres below in close formation. Fourth Platoon's captain, distinguished from the others by the outer red banding on the central yellow strip of his helmet, directed the drop from the lowest tier with deft flicks of his gloved hands.

It was too loud to use vox effectively so helmet comms were turned off, chatter and static replaced by the veteran sergeant's own practiced, rhythmic breathing. Despite wearing a thick thermal liner, his arms ached from the freezing cold and the full-reach spread he'd kept up since exiting the drop-ship; it increased stability and reduced fall rate, but the price was a bone-numbing fatigue that would be hard to shake off until well after landing. It was perilous enough dropping into a battle zone; the recovery time from the fall itself was a problem few non-Elysians would understand or appreciate.

Luckily, he knew he could rely on his veteran special weapons team to look after themselves and each other from the second they threw themselves from the belly of their high-altitude Valkyrie troop carrier. Zachariah glanced to his left, taking care not to wrench his neck by presenting too large a profile to the merciless jetstream: demolition experts Adullam and Beor fell gracefully despite their violently rippling dark olive jumpsuits and body-lashed weapons, while to the right the forms of Sojack, Coarto and the massive shape of Melnis kept an effortless perfect distance between each other, seemingly oblivious to their terminal velocity.

Returning his gaze downwards, the view below him was exactly that presented in the briefing room of the *Obliteration* short hours earlier – the huge, dish-shaped valley containing Rysgah's capital loomed larger in the crisp dawn light, its towering outer walls striated by aeons of volcanic activity. Rysgah was a black, ugly planet, just the kind of world that Chaos would embrace as its own, and the massive shadows created by the slowly rising sun made the rim of the crater look like a mouth full of broken teeth.

An exaggerated full-arm signal from the captain caught Zachariah's eye and, as one, all six special weapons veterans pulled their arms tight into their bodies

and tipped forwards, increasing speed thanks to their shifted centre of balance. As they hurtled through the layers of falling men, he noticed some of the rookies struggling to keep their bodies under control. They'd get the dressing down of their lives when – or *if* – they landed safely, and he hoped they wouldn't be his team's back-up on this mission – the last thing he needed was having to look out for less experienced troops.

Steering away from the main group with a roll of the shoulders, the six were joined by two standard infantry squads, the twenty-six-strong group hurtling down in a V-shaped formation towards the western flank of the city's outer wall and a clearing only recently secured by First and Second Platoons.

With the upper rim of the extinct volcano only seconds away to his right, Zachariah could see the shimmering blue void shields dancing around its massive circumference. Somewhere beneath them, penned inside the city's impossibly cramped streets and crumbling ancient towers, were countless civilians caught up in the Rysgahan planetary defence force's descent into madness. Facing Chaos forces smashing their way through the neighbouring Arx Gap and fearing the total destruction of their planet, a brutal rebellion had quickly swept through their ranks, ending in this stand-off within the sheer walls of Rysgah City.

The planet's volcanic nature gave the Rysgahans almost limitless geothermal energy to power their defensive networks, and despite their best efforts to bombard the rebels into submission, the Navy had failed to break the stalemate. This waste of effort played nicely into the hands of the insurgents who saw it as a simple waiting game – once the Chaos forces arrived, they would throw in their lot with the agents of evil and embrace the darkness. Unfortunately, those Rysgahans who remained loyal to their beloved Emperor would be surplus to requirements and, as such, executed in their hundreds of thousands, military or civilian.

Well, thought Zachariah, the rebels hadn't counted on the 158th being called in to stop them.

The massive curved walls of the volcano loomed huge in his vision, pockmarked by vast craters barely visible in the blackened crystalline rock. An earlier plan had been to use the larger holes caused by the aerial bombing as entrances to the interior of the city, but this had been discounted as too risky even for drop-troops.

Something about those holes made him feel uneasy. He motioned a warning to Adullam and Beor, who immediately mimicked the movement to the other three.

They dipped and rolled away from the wall, trusting the instincts of their sergeant.

As the infantry squads continued to fall around him, Zachariah's awareness went into full sniper mode, his gaze darting from point to point, automatically scanning and analysing any and every detail he could see. Some of those holes were *very* deep, and the angle of the shafts meant they didn't come from external detonations. No, these looked like they'd been drilled from the inside—

Zachariah's world went red, a scarlet mist coating his visor. For a split second he couldn't quite understand what had happened, but then, as he felt the wet impact of exploded flesh hit his side, he knew he'd been caught in the total annihilation of a human body.

Wiping his visor with the back of his gloved hand, he could just make out the perpetrator of the attack through a smudge of blood. Incredibly, the Rysgahans had managed to haul a Hydra tank turret up the inside of the volcanic walls and position it as a makeshift anti-aircraft weapon in the mouth of a cave halfway up the sheer rock face. The quadruple muzzles blazed into life, tracer fire dancing in lethal lines from the exposed cave and spreading outwards in a deadly arc. By the Emperor — this hadn't been in the briefing!

Clearly panicked by the last thing they expected and wanted to encounter, some of the less experienced Guardsmen began to bunch together in confusion, forgetting their training and forming a larger, tempting target. The three-strong rebel crew wasted no time in traversing their weapon on its improvised mount towards them, the loader working overtime to maintain the decimating hail of fire.

Projectiles passed through one trooper as if he was wet tissue, spattering tiny gobbets of flesh in all directions and turning the man into a bloody cloud. A second lived just long enough to see the bottom half of his body completely eviscerated, the shock and torrent of blood loss mercifully claiming his life before he had time to scream.

While his own squad was safely out of the way, Zachariah calculated the remainder of Fourth Platoon would pass within range of the weapon even if they'd spotted what was happening from above. Something had to be done, and now. Hitting the thrusters on his grav harness, Zachariah halted his descent with a sickening jolt, the straps cutting into his armpits. In the recesses of his mind, a chrono was running, counting down the time he had to stay in position and, based on what he'd just witnessed, how long it would take the Rysgahans to zero in on his location. He had somewhere around fifteen to twenty seconds, he

concluded as more bodies erupted in scarlet plumes around him.

A familiar sensation overwhelmed Zachariah, an uncanny calm that he had practised and mastered through sheer will and determination over his years of active service. Adrenaline and endorphins flooded into his body but he controlled the rush of excitement, instead using the heightened sensations to focus with supreme clarity on the target. Nothing existed other than the three rebels, their weapon and him; he was perfectly aware of the stream of deadly fire creeping closer and closer, of the carnage it would wreak if it hit him, but it simply didn't matter.

Calculations flooded his mind – angles of potential beam deflection, the instability of his own precarious position, the distance and elevation to the gouged-out hole in the side of the volcanic wall. Heavy-gloved fingers unlatched his lasgun and, despite the extra distortion created by the blood-smeared visor, Zachariah brought the telescopic sight to his eye and regarded the furiously working trio in hazy detail, turning down the image intensifier to minimum in the gradually brightening morning light.

The deadly hail was only seconds away, tearing through the rarefied air as streaks of mortal danger. Like many of his fellow veterans, the sergeant had modified his weapon to suit his style of combat – for him, it meant removing the trigger guard completely, somewhat dangerous for a less experienced soldier but not for a man who'd been serving Elysia and the Emperor for thirty-six years.

The left thruster on his grav-chute sputtered, pitching him diagonally until it cut back in, and he had to track back to the three men; but the shot was ready.

Hold breath. *Wait.* Exhale. *Squeeze.*

The rebel he guessed to be the commander was the first to go, with a shot to the upper chest passing neatly through his grubby brown carapace armour and continuing out through the back, splattering fluid and bone into the darkness of the cave. A look of astonishment came over the soldier's face as he looked down at the smoking hole in his chest, then to the gaping loader who crouched over the makeshift weapon clearly struggling to cope with what he was seeing.

As the commander fell to the floor like a dropped sack, the bottom of the loader's jaw disappeared in a crimson slash. Clawing wildly at the gushing mess, he staggered to his feet in absolute panic and ran to the back of the cave, any threat he once posed now gone forever.

The third Rysgahan was made of sterner stuff, obviously a veteran of some order, and with teeth gritted he made straight for the firing controls of the Hydra. Zachariah took the opportunity to shoot him right between the eyes, just below

the small peak of his close-fitting, tarnished bronze helmet, the beam cutting and cauterising his brain in an instant. Slumping sideways, he fell onto the now silenced Hydra's feed casing. The blood running from his gaping dead mouth made the heated metal steam with every red drop.

Without hesitation, Zachariah clipped his lasgun back on to his quick-release chest harness and cut power to the thrusters, dropping immediately. Arrowing down head-first with arms flat to his sides, he increased his speed to a plummet, putting some distance between himself and the rest of Fourth Platoon above and behind. Waiting for the very last moment of safe freefall, he slammed his hand onto the grav-chute deployment rune and felt the familiar, sickening jolt of deceleration in his stomach. Looking down between his feet as a guide, he spotted the impossibly small section cordoned off for them within the black, brittle ground of the landing zone.

He hit the surface heavily, staggering forwards with the momentum but managing to avoid the rookie indignity of crashing into one of the many temporary structures and stacks of battered rectangular drop-canisters surrounding the area. Dozens of Elysians milled around, carrying ammunition and supplies towards a large smoking hole at the base of the overwhelming volcanic wall. The noise was deafening: boots crunching on the gritty black sand, shouts and calls from hastily erected tents and shacks, volleys fired into the air from heavy guns towards the few remaining Rysgahan wall emplacements within range.

Pulling off his helmet, he could feel that the air was warming in the morning sun and despite the smell of rotten eggs caused by the engineers' recent blasting he was glad to shed the weight of his drop-gear. The upper layers of compacted ash had at first allowed Elysian engineers to quickly make an entrance at the base of the wall, but a series of much harder rock striations had slowed them down considerably. He hoped they didn't have to hang around for long.

Pulling off his right glove, he began nursing some feeling back into his aching limbs, flexing his knuckles and running a calloused hand through his short dark hair. With fingers still numb from the cold, he felt a slick wet patch on his cheek; looking down, he found blood and matter glistening on his dirty hand. He wiped the mess away on the side of his fatigues and with a sigh cleaned off the top of his helmet so the white sergeant's stripe running down its middle could be seen again.

'So much for intelligence, sarge. We nearly got pasted there.' Adullam wasn't one for holding back his opinion, something that had got him into more than a

few situations where his body hadn't been able to uphold the promises his mouth had made. The craggy, scarred face of Zachariah's oldest friend and comrade was still pale from the drop, but there was no time for full recovery – he and the shorter, disproportionately wider form of Beor crouched over a dozen Voss-pattern demolition charges just outside the landing zone, checking the flat, metallic discs for impact damage with a speed that would normally suggest a lack of thoroughness.

Not those two, thought Zachariah as he stood before his squad, checking the integrity of his sniper rifle by touch. When they set their minds to blowing someone or something up, they never failed.

'You know what the Navy's like, Adullam. Everything's based on what they can see from their window.' Melnis barked a laugh at his own joke, lifting the enormous bulk of his MkII plasma gun by the front-mounted bipod with one massive hand and staring straight down the barrel, its charred interior illuminated by the rising sun behind him.

'Bloody Throne, Melnis. You nearly had our heads off there!' Sojack snarled up at the hulking form, interrupting the fitting of a specially made extension tube onto his Voss-pattern grenade launcher. Coarto stopped too, his identical MkV unit partially assembled across his thigh.

'Oh, I'm sorry if I interrupted your playtime, boys. I know how fond you are of those little toys.'

Sojack looked over to his best friend and they shook their heads as one, turning their attention back to improving the accuracy of their well-worn launchers. They weren't biting – not today.

'Now don't be upsetting the Fourth's finest, Melnis. Just remember how they saved your big, thick neck on Carmelia.'

Melnis snorted over at the smiling Beor, while Coarto and Sojack grinned up at him, still covered by his considerable shadow. Zachariah sighed, having heard it all before a hundred times, but it comforted him to see everyone in good spirits before a battle.

He noticed that Sojack and Coarto had re-inked the tattoos on the backs of their shaven heads. Each had the opposing half of the 158th's aquila symbol, a stylised, swooping Imperial eagle with the skull of an ork in one talon and an eyepatch-wearing human head in the other. Their party trick was to put their heads together as a prelude for instigating brief, brutal and, to them, hugely enjoyable fist-fights with anyone they could find stupid enough to argue with or insult them.

‘I’d like to invite them on a drop one day, sarge. See how they like the nasty surprises we always seem to get.’

Beor was on his feet now, packing half a dozen of the heavy explosive devices into a rucksack by their stubby handles, breathing heavily as he did so. Built like an Elysian valley ox, his head and neck were virtually the same thickness, leading to the less than flattering nickname ‘Bulldozer Beor’ among his close friends. Despite his outward appearance of being unfit, they all knew this to be a dangerous assumption to make; his girth only added to his destructive potential.

There was no answer from Zachariah, whose attention was drawn to a sudden increase in activity at the mouth of the nearby drill-hole as several Elysian engineers ran from the man-made cavern. Seconds later, the ground shook and a huge, stinking black cloud billowed out of the entrance, bringing an uneasy silence to the encampment which a moment later broke with a roar as Third Platoon began pouring into the hole. Within seconds, the unmistakable sound of close-quarter combat echoed into the foetid air.

‘We’ve breached the inner wall of Rysgah City, men. You know your orders: for the 158th and for the Emperor!’ Fourth Platoon’s captain took the lead within seconds of landing, his veteran personal guard shedding their harnesses and readying weapons as they cut a path through the milling soldiers. Zachariah and his squad fell in behind the surviving Guardsmen who had made it through the Hydra assault, assigned as their support for this mission. Zachariah replaced his helmet and buckled up, and before putting on his glove took a swig of water in an attempt to wash away the stench of the planet. It didn’t work.

The Elysians bunched up as they reached the mouth of the entrance in a swarm of dark-green camouflaged bodies, and Adullam looked back to Zachariah with a frown, more cracks than ever thrown into stark relief on his beaten face from the sunrise creeping steadily into the sky behind them. The heat was already stifling inside the poorly lit tunnel; the engineers had done a spectacular job in a short period of time, but it was too narrow and too low for troops to mount a full-on assault. This kind of bottleneck could only mean huge casualties on entering the killzone; which in itself was bad enough, but stepping over the bodies of fellow drop-troops could be too much for rookies and even for veterans never got any easier to face.

‘Weapons ready, squad. This is going to be unpleasant.’

Armed and armoured bodies pressed against each other, all eager to get to the fight. A soft glow of light could be seen in the distance, hazy shadows dancing and crossing in a blur of activity across its radius. Three loud explosions shook

the tunnel and it was all Zachariah could do to keep his footing on the smooth, wet rock. Small-arms fire increased significantly after the final *boom*; screaming and shouting echoed from the walls, but something else could be heard too, a ghostly, amplified voice that drifted in and out of audibility.

‘I am the voice of Rysgah, I am the mouth of Chaos. Do not fight us. *Join* us. Together we can embrace the darkness...’

The voice rasped on Zachariah’s nerves and he shook his head to clear it, his mouth twisting. Join them? Had the hundreds of thousands of Rysgahan civilians had any real option in the face of their military’s treachery? The rebels had already left entire cities full of bodies in their retreat to the sanctuary of Rysgah City. Zachariah had seen many disturbing things in briefings before, but the sight of innocents not even accorded the decency of a burial or pyre but left to rot in the stinking, corrosive air of this vile planet filled him with a deep but, for him at least, still controllable fury.

‘How do you want to play it, sarge?’ Melnis had taken the lead but was barely able to bring his weapon to bear, such was the crush from the rest of Fourth Platoon before him. His voice had an edge of frustration, something Zachariah knew Melnis continually struggled with. Given the option, he would hop into the largest, most destructive vehicle available and shoot, ram and generally smash his way into and through a combat zone, but in such a confined space, Melnis felt claustrophobic and vulnerable. The best way to deal with him was to be straight and simple.

‘Two threes. Sojack, Coarto, fill your tubes and flank Melnis. Watch your feet on exit as there’ll be bodies all over the place. Fire at anything that moves. Adullam and Beor are with me. Wait for the ranks in front to get clear then move out.’ Turning to the support squad behind him, he told them to await further instruction following their exit. No point in pushing them out first to get uselessly killed, as they’d certainly need as many men as possible when they reached their objective.

Zachariah could hear all five of his men shuffling into position. They were ready.

A deafening volley of fire from the mouth of the tunnel created a gap for Zachariah’s squad to occupy, and they got their first real look at the interior of Rysgah City, much of it in deep morning shadow from the high rim of the extinct volcano’s walls. The geographical conditions had dictated where the tunnel could be dug in such a short time and it was hardly the most advantageous tactical position, opening out onto a line of crumbling black and grey stone

buildings thirty metres across from the outer circumference wall.

Several heavy weapons nests were located on the buildings' parapets and roofs, but many of them were little more than smouldering ruins, having attracted the fire of Third Platoon which currently busied itself with the hastily formed barricades to the left and right of their position. Fire still came from positions built into the towering, striated volcanic interior walls above and behind them, but the continual curve of the crater around the outside of the city and its buildings offered some protection for the moment. As soon as a few upper storeys disappeared, though, they would be entirely exposed from just about every angle.

An explosion tore into the rockface on their right, showering black pumice over the dead Elysians at their feet. Coarto levelled his launcher and fired off a grenade towards a second-storey window to the left, blasting a huge hole and removing the threat in a shower of glass and brick. With no other fire returning, Zachariah patted the backs of the first three and they ran for the opposite side of the wide road, dodging stray fire until they made it to the relative safety of the buildings' rough stone walls.

Zachariah trained his scope in a swift 180-degree arc: it looked clear enough so, in a half-crouch, he led Adullam and Beor across the rubble-strewn cobbled road. Catching his breath, he beckoned over to the ten remaining support Guardsmen who wasted no time in joining them.

'Alpha team will--' Zachariah's words were drowned out by a high-pitched squeal of feedback from somewhere above, then the voice returned.

'Give up, hopeless ones! You all will perish at the hands of Chaos. Surrender while you can!'

Zachariah flicked a glance over to Sojack and nodded his head upwards. Raising his grenade launcher with a grin, Sojack stepped away and into the road without a second's thought of potential danger. Quickly scanning the roof-line, he spotted the oversized vox amplifier and fired off a single shot into the air.

The second he returned, the wall shook and debris rained down onto the road in front of them. The voice couldn't be heard any more.

'That's what you get for opening your mouth when you shouldn't.' The others laughed weakly at Coarto's joke, but there was no time for levity as Zachariah continued his instructions.

'As I was saying... Alpha team will hit their objective in fifteen minutes. We've got ten to get to ours. It's the smallest bridge but it's bound to be heavily defended and it won't take the Rysgahans long to figure out what we're doing.

We'll head through the streets as planned but keep low and to the walls. This side of the chasm's still crawling with the enemy.'

With a nod of the head, five of the Guardsmen filed towards a narrow gap between the shattered buildings as First and Second Platoon emerged from the tunnel exit across the road, respectfully avoiding the dead as best they could and joining the furious melees at the blazing roadblocks to the left and right.

Despite the loss of life, Zachariah could see they were making headway on both flanks and, if all went according to plan, they'd pincer out and around this part of the capital and have it under control within half an hour. They only needed to destroy two of the three bridges that linked the uneven sides of the city, divided as it was by a gaping crevasse that dropped down into the extinct throat of the volcano. With only one crossing point for rebel reinforcements to use, they'd soon be able to control and ultimately capture the opposite side – since only one of the three was cramped by restrictive architecture that would hamper larger troop movements at either side, there was no doubt which it would be.

The towering form of Melnis followed the first group of Guardsmen and squeezed his way through the gap into a nearby alleyway formed by the six-storey buildings, again cursing the lack of space but more than comforted by the massive firepower in his hands. Coarto and Adullam followed next, then Beor who had his own issues with the passageway's width.

Zachariah used his scope to sweep the high ledges as they jogged along, but the lack of good quality light made it difficult to see anything in detail. He could hear Sojack talking to the remaining Guardsmen behind, telling them to keep tight and watch out for anyone doubling back on them. He'd make a good sergeant one day, thought Zachariah.

Penned in as they were, they would have been an easy kill for any Rysgahan traitor who'd spied their position, but luck was with them as they spilled out of the passage into a wide courtyard.

Unfortunately, it didn't last.

Fire erupted from all sides of the square, creating a furious crossfire that thumped into the leading group of Guardsmen. Two fell without even raising their lasguns. The third and fourth only managed to squeeze off a couple of wild shots before they, too, were cut down, and had it not been for Melnis's lethal aim with the plasma gun, they might all have suffered the same fate. His deadly arcing swing completely destroyed three rebel positions, with a withering torrent of grenades from Coarto providing able assistance. Without even being asked,

Sojack threw over a couple of shells to Coarto, who immediately loaded them into his weapon.

The light was improving all the time, but the view that presented itself was best left to the darkness. The area had been used for some form of execution, as evidenced by the piles of bodies, their hands tied behind their backs, lying in broken heaps at the base of a smashed statue. Melnis immediately recognised the carved figure's desecrated remains.

'De Haan,' he rumbled dangerously.

Sojack reverently picked up the crumbling head of the martyred inquisitor's statue, seeing the rest of its parts deliberately scattered between the corpses in a vile imitation of the man's original, grisly end at the hands of Chaos worshippers. Adullam spat with disgust on the ashen ground and Beor whispered a prayer. Zachariah watched the Guardsmen carefully. This kind of sight was hard enough for veterans to stomach, but younger, less experienced troops could find themselves distracted enough to get themselves – and others – killed.

'Elysians, *fall in.*' Zachariah didn't raise his voice, but he didn't need to. The remaining six men snapped to, their minds suddenly focused on the frowning face and dark green eyes staring coolly at them.

'You see this? This is Chaos. You've heard of it, you've been briefed about it, but now you've experienced it. *This* is how they treat their own, so think of what they'll do to *you.*' One man gulped; another shook his head as he clenched his teeth together. They understood the lesson.

'Now, I don't want to lose another man today. Three streets down is the chasm. They're waiting for us, so get ready to fight for your lives.'

He looked at the smashed figurine, violated and broken in the gloomy shadows.

'For your *Emperor.*'

Adullam gave the young men a frightening grin, while Melnis patted one of them on the back so hard he nearly collapsed. Satisfied everyone was suitably motivated, Zachariah nodded towards a wide avenue lined with more tall, decrepit dark buildings and the team jogged its way along the pavement, shielded from the inner volcanic wall emplacements by the looming constructions more by fortune than planning.

The renewed wailing of the infuriating Rysgahan propaganda machine told Zachariah they were getting close to their target. Raising a clenched fist to stop the small column, he pulled out the data-slate that contained the map he'd downloaded during the briefing on the *Obliteration* and calculated where the

avenue would bisect the main road running alongside the volcanic fissure. He saw at once that it would bring them straight into the line of fire from the bridge's entrance, but there was a narrower street running parallel with this one that could be reached down an alleyway some distance ahead. Unfortunately, that street would only bring them closer to the same position with the added disadvantage of being squeezed together on exit, much like the tunnel they'd used to enter the city.

Zachariah's options abruptly decreased, as a sudden blast thumped into them and the middle of the deserted street's surface erupted brick and stone in every direction. Huddling towards the wall with their faces turned away, the team were showered with debris as the ground shook from further detonations.

'Get into that street up on the left! *Move!*'

The air turned black with rubble and dust as shells rained down from seemingly every direction. They'd clearly been spotted from a higher position and the enemy were zeroing in with alarming speed. Squeezing into yet another tight alleyway, the panting men found themselves faced with a line of heavily fortified back doors, clearly some form of emergency access for the buildings lining the crevasse. Explosions ripped apart the roofs high above and while it would take a lucky shot to drop a shell straight down on top of them, even one such hit would wipe them out in a heartbeat. Melnis's frustration boiled over.

'Let me go and sort this out, sarge. By the Emperor, we're stuck like rats! I'm not dying like this.'

Sojack's reply had the edge of calm needed in such a situation. 'Cool it, Melnis. Why don't you take it out of that door right in front of you? Pretend it's mouth almighty over there.'

Coarto laughed at his friend's suggestion, and Zachariah nodded a confirmation – they couldn't go back or around, so they needed to go through the building to reach their target. Melnis didn't even bother to level his weapon; one brief but mighty kick splintered the heavy door like matchwood.

Piling into the gloomy interior, they found the ransacked remains of a bakery. From the shop's filthy front windows, the dark ragged slash that formed the volcanic chasm could be seen along with the bridge's entrance. Any thoughts of a surprise attack were lost when they spied half a dozen rebels moving cautiously forwards towards their position, while another six ducked and ran towards the far avenue from their hastily erected barricade. They were heading for the very passageway through which the Elysians had just entered; within minutes they'd be surrounded.

The front windows shattered in a volley of fire, showering glass and brick into the murky interior. Some protection was offered by the large ovens and mixing vats, but it wouldn't be enough when the rearguard attacked and besides, given time, the artillery could simply level the building. They had to go on the offensive.

'Sojack, Coarto – make a hole out there. Melnis, Adullam – go see to our friends creeping around the back. You six – get ready to move on the bridge.'

Brief nods and grins from his trusted comrades lifted Zachariah's spirits. How many times had he come out of a tight spot with these men at his back? He stood back with the sweating Beor as Melnis muscled his way past, his weapon trained straight ahead and looking like a child's toy in his massive arms. Adullam couldn't see anything in front of him other than Melnis's huge bulk, but it wasn't the first time he had been more than happy to use his friend as a living shield, something that had been the point of several jokes and, occasionally, fights between them.

Within seconds, battle commenced in the narrow corridor at the back, giving Sojack and Coarto their cue to move forwards through the gloom and deliver a barrage of grenades out of the shattered bakery's gaping frontage. Years of teamwork showed as they executed a textbook dual-launcher attack, one firing just within the explosive killing radius of the other to create a line of devastation that engulfed the hapless Rysgahans and probed its way spectacularly towards the bridgehead. They didn't even have to look at each other, such was their familiarity; they knew exactly what the other was doing.

All thoughts of the square put behind them, the six Elysian Guardsmen laid impressive supporting fire, carefully picking their targets as they advanced towards the ornate black ironwork of the bridge.

Moving into the street, Zachariah spotted two rebels wheeling a small cannon up to their defensive line, a third following closely with ammunition. For a split second, Zachariah felt real panic – they were completely exposed and one well-placed shell could wipe out the majority of his forces.

Just as he drew breath to bark a warning, the artillery bombardment returned in force. But instead of shells raining down on them, the Rysgahan barricade erupted in a yellow and black blossom of friendly fire, handily killing the majority of the rebels and clearing a path for the Elysians to enter the wide, two-hundred-metre-long iron walkway across the bottomless ravine.

'Sarge, did you see that? The Emperor loves the 158th!'

Coarto was laughing at their good fortune, and even Zachariah had to smile –

this kind of mistake meant the rebels were panicking, despite the incessant drone coming from the ‘mouth of Chaos’ across the chasm. Even so, if someone with nerve and experience took control, things could change very quickly, so Zachariah looked for a high vantage point behind and upwards.

It took seconds for Coarto and Sojack to finish off the remaining rebels, and the six Guardsmen quickly took up crouched positions on either side of the bridge’s entrance. Burning buildings and military equipment made it difficult to see what was happening on the other side of the crevasse, but a deadly concentration of fire straight down the bridge’s length had the team retreating to the relative safety of the raised black stone embankment running along the banks of the inky chasm.

Shafts of sunlight began to streak down over the volcano’s mouth, tinged blue by the still-active void shields and glinting off the tops of buildings on the far side of the city. This would improve the view for the spotters located within the interior walls so, as Melnis and Adullam appeared from around the corner, Zachariah signalled to activate helmet comms.

‘If we can’t get on the bridge, we can’t destroy it. Adullam, Beor – get your charges ready. I’ll go up that tower next to the bakery with Sojack and Melnis – no arguments.’

This cut off Melnis’s protestations immediately; he’d have to live without charging head-first down the bridge. His sergeant clearly had a more subtle plan in mind.

‘We’re going to need a lot of firepower up there to cover you. No point in us calling reinforcements as they’ll be too busy and, besides, if the Rysgahans try sending anyone down that bridge, we’ll kill them just as easily as they could us. We need to even things out a bit. Coarto – go tell the regulars you’ll be covering Adullam and Beor while they set the charges. Move on my signal. Understood?’

Nods all around. On a final raise of the eyebrows and exhalation, he crouch-ran over to the larger, more ornate structure adjoining the now-burning bakery, once some proud municipal building but now a pock-marked, brutalised shell. Melnis threw himself through the thick wooden doors, splintering them on their hinges, and within seconds the three-strong team were running up the staircase of the rectangular tower, the amplified Rysgahan voice louder and clearer as they clattered up the dusty wooden steps.

A trapdoor opened up onto the tower’s exposed roof and Zachariah was immediately relieved to see a chest-high stone wall forming its outer edge. The sheer size of Rysgah City meant they’d be out of range from the far walls, but

the accuracy of the recent artillery fire meant someone had a good angle on them close by. This was confirmed in no uncertain terms as they came under immediate fire, a shot hitting Melnis in the thigh and bringing him to his knees in fury.

‘Emperor *damn it!*’ he spat, crawling to the nearest wall as beams lanced overhead, punching neat holes in the stone above his head. Zachariah watched the angle of fire carefully and, readying his rifle, took a deep breath and edged upwards until he could see over the ledge. He ducked down, counted and visualised the location in his mind to within three metres; then, shifting a little to the right, he sprang up and fired two shots in rapid succession.

The first killed the spotter, the second his sniper protection. It wouldn’t be the end of it, but it gave them some breathing space.

‘Sojack, load up and range the other side of the bridge. Give ’em a good shower. Melnis – can you stand to cover?’

Melnis put weight on his leg and winced, his lower thigh already wrapped in a bloody field dressing. Zachariah immediately knew how bad it was for the big man to show any sign of discomfort, but like every Elysian veteran, he’d fought on with injuries as bad and worse.

Cautiously putting his head above the high ledge facing the fissure, Zachariah took a good look at Rysgah City’s interior. Black and grey stone buildings squeezed within the volcano’s towering walls, winding streets that, only days ago, would have been impossibly busy, brightly lit by the now-dead lamp posts and the buildings warm from the unlimited geothermal power deep below the city’s surface. Now it was a smoking, shadowy hell-hole, dying right before him, only suitable for the darkness to occupy.

Not if they had anything to do with it.

Satisfied they’d bought a few minutes of calm, Zachariah waved down to Adullum, Beor and Coarto who, in turn, saluted back. With a nudge from Zachariah’s boot, Sojack sprang to his feet, made a rough calculation to the other side of the rift and, despite the plumes of smoke hiding the Rysgahans’ movements, loosed a salvo into the air from his weapon.

Three familiar *crumps* thudded out from the base of the burning buildings lining the opposite bank, accompanied by dim yellow blossoms of flame at the bridge’s far entrance. The rattle of gunfire abruptly ceased, terminating the lethal hail ripping down the bridge but, unfortunately, not silencing the wailing, increasingly deranged Rysgahan broadcasts.

‘Be one with us! Your fight is lost! The mouth of Chaos is the truth!’

‘I swear, sarge, if I get my hands on that bloody traitor, I’ll pull his head off.’

Melnis was getting really annoyed now, which didn’t concern Zachariah unduly as it’d take his attention from his injury. What *did* worry him was the amount of movement towards the bridgehead on the far side, suggesting this was going to be a shorter respite than he’d hoped. Realising the same, Coarto didn’t waste the opportunity of lobbing a grenade directly, if not blindly, straight back down the bridge and, with the six Guardsmen advancing and firing in a line, Adullam and Beor moved in behind them with their charges.

At least the Rysgahans wouldn’t shell their own bridge – they needed it intact – but, unfortunately, they didn’t feel the same way about the tower in which Zachariah and his two comrades stood. The building shook with a rapid flurry of explosions, knocking Melnis off-balance and sending him sprawling to the cold stone floor with a curse. A loud whistle had the three of them ducking instinctively, but the mortar shell sailed overhead and down into the gaping fissure below the bridge.

With a couple of near hits and a far miss, it wouldn’t take long for the trajectory to be readjusted right on top of their heads, but this meant they had to be in line of sight somewhere relatively close. Zachariah calmly spoke into his comms unit. ‘That came from behind. Sort it out, Sojack.’

Striding over to the opposing wall, Sojack had a view of uneven rooftops and occasional towers all the way back to the massive black striated sheet enclosing the city. The Rysgahan defence troopers weren’t experienced soldiers, at least not by Elysian standards, so he looked for the most obvious launch point.

Within seconds, he spied the domes of helmets belonging to two crouched figures five hundred metres away and ten metres down, partially obscured behind a large ventilation duct on a narrow flat roof. With ammunition running low, Sojack knew he had to make the shot count, and he did; the grenade sailed into the air and dropped right on top of their position, the roof of the building collapsing in on itself in a cloud of dust and filth.

Back on the other side of the tower, Melnis was upright once again and swivelling his plasma gun on its bipod along the bridge. The smoke was clearing at the far end, revealing dozens of rebels moving between a wide clearing directly opposite the bridge’s entrance and the tall buildings. One structure in particular caught his eye and he grunted as he shifted position slightly to give him a partial view of a large metallic framework on a high rooftop one street behind, where suggestions of figures moved busily between a network of snaking cables.

‘Listen to the voice of reason! The mouth of Chaos will never be silenced!’

Melnis clenched his teeth in pain, aimed deliberately high and squeezed the trigger. Super-heated plasma arced upwards and over the chasm, the jet losing shape and form as it reached the structure but still destructive enough to blow up the parts he could see. The amplified voice abruptly stopped and Melnis barked a triumphant laugh; it *was* the transmitter.

Fire flickered out of his line of sight, and his day was made when a flaming rebel plunged from the rooftop to the avenue below. It was wishful thinking, but he very much hoped it was the ‘mouth’.

‘That shut you up.’

Zachariah shook his head with a faint smile. The sun was creeping higher over the huge volcanic walls now, the destruction far below bathed in the first good light of the day. Something glinted in the distance down the street formed by the buildings, and he brought his lasgun’s scope back up with a frown. At exactly the same time, Coarto’s voice crackled in his ear. It was a single, simple word, and absolutely the last thing he wanted hear:

Tanks.

The lead vehicle drifted into focus through the thinning smoke, partially obscured by a milling group of rebels running in a confused swarm. It was low and flat, with the suggestion of a turret on top – a battered and barely functioning Chimera, its armour dented and split. The turret array was clearly no threat, but its hull-mounted heavy flamer looked worryingly intact. It seemed to have difficulty traversing to the right, suggesting the left-hand tracks or the steering mechanism was damaged, and the snub muzzle of its primary weapon seemed to be fixed forwards. At the moment it couldn’t quite bring the heavy flamer to bear but the driver was clearly intent on rectifying this.

Directly behind was an equally decrepit Leman Russ, its main gun missing but the port sponson cannon tracking menacingly. Partially obscured by the Chimera’s laboured manoeuvres, it posed no real threat while the APC stayed forward, and Zachariah assumed it was at the back because it wasn’t as battleworthy as the carrier. Even so, if *that* managed to get into place, it could wreak havoc over the chasm and into their part of the city.

Flicking his attention back to Adullam and Beor, he could see them working furiously on either side of the bridge, several silver discs now lined across its width and joined by red fuse wire. Beor took an opportunity to look up at precisely the moment the Chimera managed to turn enough to open fire.

Three of the Guardsmen became instant screaming torches as the flamer’s

lethal jet consumed them, parts of the bridge's ornate sidings melting away with the tremendous heat. The remaining three threw themselves to the ground on the right while Coarto fell to one knee and fired his final volley towards the front of the vehicle, blasting the road surface directly in front of the APC and causing it to pitch violently downwards into the smoking hole.

With restricted movement, the heavy flamer couldn't elevate enough to target the Elysians from its new position, but Zachariah could see from Adullam and Beor's feverish movements that the demolition charges weren't ready. They needed minutes, not seconds.

Ordering Melnis and Sojack to keep the bridge's entrance as clear of rebels as possible, Zachariah rested his lasgun on the tower's smashed ledge and regarded the straining, shaking vehicle carefully through his image intensifier.

It was reversing out of the hole, tracks chewing on the crater's shallow sides. The driver would be somewhere to the right, his head below the upper and lower section seam – precisely where a crack had developed at the corner of the viewing hatch, thanks to a number of popped rivets. Coarto's crater had helped open it up a little more on impact, and with the APC not taking its full weight evenly across the lower section, it parted a few centimetres with the strain of movement.

Zachariah only had one chance at this before the Chimera got back to road level and the gap closed itself under the sheer weight of the turret above. He forced himself to relax; the stock and grip of the lasgun became an extension of his body and, thanks to the bipod, he was absolutely static, leaving him to concentrate on timing out the violent rocking motion of the vehicle. He took a breath.

Target moving backwards, forwards, swinging up. Elevation and range calculated. Best angle approaching, largest gap forming... *now*.

The shot darted through the impossibly small hole formed between the thick armour plates, slicing into the vehicle somewhere around the driver's seat. An extraordinary shot, one of his best for months, but self-congratulation wasn't in Zachariah's nature.

Even if it had been, the dismay he now felt would have quickly quashed his triumph as the APC kept on moving backwards, eventually righting itself with a grinding crunch. Its squat form loomed menacingly for a few seconds, like a predator deciding which prey to devour first, and Zachariah flicked his scope around the Chimera, urgently looking for another weak spot.

Suddenly, the carrier shuddered violently and began to spin wildly around its

centre, mercilessly swiping away rebels using its bulk for cover. Tossed in a wide arc, some bounced off the front armour of the Leman Russ while others sailed like thrown dolls into the chasm, their screams quickly fading in the warm morning air.

A final bellow from the Chimera's engines sent the hulking machine lurching forwards into the embankment, ploughing through a dozen more hapless Rysgahans and crushing several others. A few were pushed straight through the crevasse's raised wall and followed it down into the bottomless darkness.

Something registered in Zachariah's brain – he'd missed a critical change. What was–

The air exploded out of Zachariah's lungs as he hit the floor of the tower face-up. His ears sang and he found he couldn't focus properly; then he felt huge hands pull him to his feet from behind. The world spun and he pulled off his helmet, trying to shake his vision back to normality.

Melnis was shouting at him but all he could hear was a high-pitched tone, and within seconds he realised what had happened – the Leman Russ had opened fire on them and hit the corner of the tower with its first shot. Sojack crouched to one side of the large ragged hole newly created in the wall, firing the last of his grenades over the chasm, but the tank was just out of range.

Leaning on Melnis, Zachariah retrieved his lasgun and staggered over to Sojack's position as a second shell hurtled overhead, exploding a hundred metres behind. Melnis pig-headedly stood in the middle of the gaping hole and tried to hit the tank, but his previous repeated firing had left the plasma gun dangerously overheated and it shut down, leaving the huge man bellowing in frustration.

Zachariah grabbed hold of Melnis's webbing and yanked him back out of the direct field of fire, throwing a warning look at the furious man as he stumbled past.

Down below, Adullam and Beor frantically tried to finish wiring up the munitions while Coarto and the remaining three Guardsmen shuffled backwards towards them, firing sporadically, their ammunition nearly exhausted. The Rysgahans were readying their counter-attack on the bridge, which would surely come the second they had dispatched the three Elysians in the tower.

His head finally clearing, Zachariah rammed on his helmet, grabbed Sojack's shoulder and pointed over to the roof's trapdoor. 'Get down there and give covering fire to the others. Keep out of sight as best you can and they might think we've been put out of action up here. I'm going to sort out that tank.'

With a nod, Sojack crawled over to the heavy wooden panel and heaved it

open, allowing Melnis to squeeze his bulk into the opening before he, too, disappeared with a salute. Two seconds later, a shell hit the lower side of the tower, blasting a second hole in its heavy walls and collapsing the corner. The integrity of the building was failing and the Leman Russ crew now had Zachariah in their sights – one more shot to his position, possibly two, then they would turn on the others.

Zachariah reached for a fresh power pack from his webbing, tapped it on his helmet to shake off any dirt it might have picked up in transit and slammed it home with a satisfying *clunk*. Taking a deep breath, he rolled onto his stomach, presenting as flat a profile as he could to the rebels – but breaking two golden rules of sniping by firing from a known and exposed position.

Time slowed. In his downward peripheral vision, Zachariah half-sensed, half-saw the shape of Melnis limping across the avenue towards the entrance of the bridge, pulling out his entirely non-regulation and, at this range at least, entirely useless shotgun from the open holster on his back. Sojack had ditched his grenade launcher and was already firing single shots from his lasgun at the chasm's far bank, the brilliant flashes flickering in the corner of Zachariah's eye. All this he was entirely aware of, but it didn't distract him from his primary focus – the sponson-mounted gun on the mangled port side of the tank. The muzzle's angle was pointing directly at Zachariah; they couldn't miss.

Zachariah smiled.

Hold breath. *Wait*. Exhale. *Squeeze*.

The lasgun threw a brilliant high-energy beam straight down the centre of the cannon's muzzle, meeting the nose of the shell as it started its way out of the cannon. Without realising it, they had given Zachariah an absolute gift, the kind of shot he would hear others tell stories about achieving over too many drinks at a bar, and he smiled as the tank left the ground on the left-hand side. It flipped on its side, smoke hissing out of its cracked shell, and when the magazine ignited, the vehicle spectacularly erupted. Rysgahans were flattened on three sides, the remaining windows in nearby buildings blew out and shrapnel hurtled in every direction.

If the devastation wreaked by his single shot was good in itself, the utter shock and confusion on the rebels' faces as they picked themselves up off the ground was even better. He'd bought Adullam and Beor the time they needed, and they were already using it.

'Unbelievable, Zach! Unbelievable! We're done – ten-second fuse starting now. Adullam out.'

Coarto took the lead in front of the three remaining Guardsmen, followed by the heavily panting Beor and Adullam, as Melnis and Sojack gave covering fire. A couple of Rysgahans ventured onto the bridge, clearly forced to try to disarm the charges squatting in a ragged line, but it was too late – the middle of the bridge was torn apart in a tremendous explosion, making Zachariah duck behind the remains of the tower's roof to avoid the shower of iron fragments and stone thrown into the air. While he was spared the ignominy of being directly caught in his own successful detonation, the blast was clearly too much for the tower's severely weakened structure, which began to collapse around and below him.

He dived through the open trapdoor. Huge chunks of masonry bounced off his helmet and armoured shoulder pads as he half-ran, half-fell down the disintegrating stairs. Entire blocks of stone plunged down the stairwell's open centre and, with a deafening crash, a wall fell out into the street below.

Zachariah knew he wasn't going to make it to the ground floor and so threw himself out of the gaping hole, landing awkwardly on a pile of rubble that had fallen after the Leman Russ's first shell. Luckily, his sturdy high-ankled drop-boots took much of the twisting strain and the padded sections of his jumpsuit cushioned his untidy fall onto the avenue just as Melnis limped over, supported by Sojack.

Shots still arced overhead but, with a second rumbling explosion filling the air around the unseen bend of the chasm, the Rysgahans must have known the game was up.

Two bridges destroyed, one under Elysian control. They had nowhere left to run.

The quarters assigned to Zachariah and his squad on the *Obliteration* were cramped, spartan and noisy, but the showers worked and they were only a short walk from the mess hall – more than what they needed. Sitting on the edge of his peeling metal bunk, Zachariah worked on his lasgun's sight mounting, gently coaxing it back into shape with a pair of pliers after his hasty exit from the crumbling tower. Sojack and Coarto could be heard laughing from the adjoining wash cubicle, their voices echoing around the low ceiling of the six-berth billet. Ignoring the tall tales of impossible deeds, Adullam lay on his bedroll opposite Zachariah's position, staring at nothing in particular.

Beor lumbered into the room from the corridor outside, reading a fresh mission update from the briefing room three decks above, his laboured breathing pushing his barrel chest out to the limits of his extra-large tunic.

‘Only took an hour to get the shield down after the second bridge blew. The rebels surrendered after two.’

Adullam stretched and yawned, pushing his feet off the edge of the bunk and regarding his filthy outspread toes.

‘I imagine the executions started shortly after. That group of commissars I passed looked like they were going to burst with excitement.’

Zachariah smiled to himself; the Commissariat had, indeed, turned up in force once the 158th had secured the situation, ready to dispense the Emperor’s justice – and rightly so. He’d be surprised if a single traitorous rebel survived the night. It would be swift and brutal, but entirely justified; it was a wonder that the Inquisition hadn’t taken an interest, yet.

Exactly what would happen to the civilian populace far down beneath the orbiting *Obliteration* was beyond him; the planet was still right in the path of the Chaos forces’ seemingly relentless advance through the Arx Gap, and there was no formalised militia or effective government for them to turn to. Mass evacuation was simply too problematic, as was leaving anything other than a token garrison for protection; but as all of those issues now fell to those of higher rank than him, he shrugged inwardly and turned to re-attaching the sight onto its newly repaired mounting.

Beor looked up from the report, his interest lost now their involvement was over. ‘Any word on Melnis? Are they going to whip the leg off? Imagine what a pain in the arse he’d be with an augmetic one!’

Zachariah had seen Melnis an hour previously in the over-crowded charnel house that passed as the *Obliteration*’s infirmary. It’d been a lucky escape; while the wound was deep and he’d lost quite a bit of blood, a centimetre to the left and he wouldn’t have got off the planet alive. Not that any of this made the hulking brute any happier; after he’d shouted at the third orderly to get him back on his feet and signed fit for duty, a passing doctor administered a tranq dosage large enough to drop a bull grox and he’d likely be asleep for the following week if they were lucky.

‘He’ll be fine after some rest. Whatever *that* is.’ Adullam arched his back, the muscles cracking as he regarded a blue-black bruise on his shin. Beor rested himself slowly onto his bunk in the far corner, sighing deeply.

‘Don’t know about you two, but I’m sick of it out here. I can’t wait to get back home. A nice bit of ship-to-ship with some Elysian pirates – now that’s what I call...’

Zachariah was a master of self-control; he had the ability to slow down his

pulse at will, reduce his breathing to a shallow whisper, remain completely still in the middle of an explosive maelstrom, but there was one, and only one, thing that punched through all of his defences like no other. Any newcomer to the squad would have thought Beor's comment had gone unheard by the veteran sergeant, but Adullam knew his friend far too well to miss the signs of his anger. The knuckles on his right hand had blanched, blood suddenly restricted by the vice-like grip currently transferred to the screwdriver being used on his lasgun.

It was at that exact moment Beor realised he'd said the wrong thing and met Adullam's fiery glance; even the singing stopped from Sojack and Coarto in the shower. Everyone knew you didn't talk about *back home* to Zachariah.

'Sarge, I—'

Beor's apology died in his throat as the tall, rangy form of Captain Makarah, a young but very effective officer from Third Platoon, appeared in the doorway. His darting glance finally rested on Zachariah, who looked up to meet his gaze with a neutral face. Adullam shook his head; he honestly didn't know how his sergeant did it.

'Sergeant, we need you in the briefing room right now. There's a very nasty situation developed on Ophel Minoris – we're nearest, so it's up to us to sort it out.'

Placing his lasgun carefully on his bed and replacing his screwdriver on his opened repair kit roll, Zachariah rose to his feet and zipped up his jumpsuit. Without a word, he followed the captain out into the narrow corridor and disappeared from view, leaving Adullam and Beor in silence.

Adullam snorted air through his nose and, reaching under his bunk, pulled out his own lasgun. Beor followed suit, and shortly the only sounds that could be heard echoing off the thick metal bulkheads were the *clinks* and *clacks* of parts being dismantled, checked and cleaned.

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