

WARHAMMER
40,000

THE CITADEL

Steve Parker



DESPERATE WARFARE ACROSS THE FIRE-SCORCHED
BATTLEFIELDS OF THE IMPERIUM

A WARHAMMER 40,000 STORY
THE CITADEL

Imperial Guard - 03.1
Steve Parker
(An Undead Scan v1.5)



General Vlastan's chair beeped in alarm, unfurled a tiny articulated servo, plunged a needle into his neck and, with a sharp hiss, injected another grey-brown dose of nutrimilk.

Vlastan girded himself against the dizzying rush of the powerful medication. His pulse raced. Sweat beaded on his brow. His hands shook, and blood-flecked spittle gathered at the corners of his mouth. Soon enough, though, his body had stabilised again. He was well used to the effects of the cocktail after so many years.

The frequency of the injections, however, had been increasing. He knew his condition was worsening, and the thought exacerbated his current mood.

He sat alone in his office, gazing sullenly at the formless white void outside his window. The snow-choked streets of Seddisvarr, site of Twelfth Army's Command HQ, were shrouded in freezing white mist. His room, on the other hand, was warm, ably heated by twin thermacoils. No wind rattled the thick glass. The only sounds now were the wet wheezing of his lungs and the whirring gyro-stabilisers of his multi-legged, mechanical chair. Both sounds had long ago ceased to intrude on his thoughts.

Despite the insulated silence of the room, he knew the streets below would be busy with troops. Seddisvarr had been abuzz since the recent fall of Grazzen. If he really strained his hearing, he might make out the faint rumble of Vostroyan tanks and armoured transports rolling along the city's broader avenues. With his precious Danik's World campaign largely going to hell since the orks had overrun Barahn, there was a particular comfort in the presence of so much heavy armour nearby. The Vostroyan tanks were powerful, reliable and enduring.

It was, he realised, exactly how he would have described Maksim, and the realisation gave his solitude an unwelcome and bitter edge.

"Damn it all," he swore softly to the empty room, "isn't it time yet?"

Soon, there would be a knock at the door and his adjutant would enter to help him dress his ruined body for the afternoon service.

He wished the whole matter were over already. His grief confused and disgusted him. He'd long thought himself beyond such things. Indulging one's emotions was the province of far lesser men.

Still, he told himself, I should have expected to feel something. Today, after all, I commemorate the death of the last man I ever called friend.

**51 years earlier,
Mount Megidde (South-east Face, 504m),
The Sambar Basin, Valis II**

“Get some suppressing fire on that stubber-nest,” growled Sergeant Sergiev. “Mirkov, Brebrik, flank left and grenade those bastards, or we’ll be stuck here all day!”

In the sky above the mountain, seeming almost close enough to touch, thick black clouds roiled and boomed. Torrents of water raced down every crack and crevice as if fleeing in terror from the dark, hulking shape of the enemy fortress at the top. Sergiev thanked the Omnissiah, tech-aspect of the God-Emperor of Man, for the warmth and protection of his hat and greatcoat.

Both utilised special fibres developed to counter the lethal chill of his home world.

Corporal Brebrik leaned from the cover of a broad rock and threw a smoke grenade. When the billowing cloud was large enough to conceal them, he and Mirkov moved out, working their way left while the enemy fired blind.

Sergiev growled and hunkered down a little further as the raking fire of the heavy-stubber chewed rock chips from the boulder that shielded him.

“By the Emperor’s holy balls!” he hissed.

Despite repeated requests over the vox-net, Regimental HQ would not allow him to lead the shattered assault force back down to level ground. “Push on,” they had commanded. “The citadel must fall at any cost!”

But what could they possibly hope to achieve now? The taking of Mount Megidde had effectively ground to a halt. The mountain’s south-eastern ascent was littered with the cooling bodies of Vostroyan dead, and Sergiev, a mere sergeant, had found himself the ranking man by default.

He had lost his commanding officer, Lieutenant Lymarov, three hours earlier to a mutant flamer-team. Pairs of these sadistic freaks descended from the citadel to scour the slopes and ridges for luckless victims.

A nightmare image returned to him of the lieutenant screaming and flailing as bright flames devoured him. Desperate to escape his agony, Lymarov had thrown himself from the closest precipice, plummeting like a meteor to the sharp rocks below.

At the time, Sergiev had felt a guilty, nauseating relief. He’d been about to shoot the lieutenant himself, as much to end the man’s terrible screams as to put

him out of his misery. Lymarov's leap had relieved him of that burden.

The lieutenant had been a good man. It was no way for him to die, and the memory twisted Sergiev's stomach and filled him with righteous anger. Perhaps falling back *would* be a mistake. Any ground lost now would cost more lives later. And there was vengeance yet to be had. The bastard muties had to be punished, not just for the lieutenant's death, but for all of it: all their corruption and treachery, the wanton torture and human sacrifice they practiced, the atrocities he'd seen in the cities to the south, everything that had forced Sector Command to deploy Imperial troops here en masse.

After overthrowing the planetary government, the Valisian mutants had launched a pogrom against their pureblooded kin. Millions were slaughtered in the name of the Ruinous Powers. They had cast their lot in with the vile enemies of the Golden Throne, and marked themselves for destruction—a filthy stain on the glorious Imperium of Man.

Duty and honour, Sergiev! he told himself. We'll move up, secure more ground, fix more ropes, and lay a path for those that follow. If we die, we die. The next assault will get that much closer to the summit. Sooner or later, whether it takes a thousand of us or a hundred thousand, we'll smash that damned citadel and burn those twisted freaks out.

"Check your ammo counters, lads," he voxed to the men behind him. They were all that remained on the south-eastern slope—nineteen men cobbled together from the remains of four whole platoons. He wondered how many still fought on the mountain's west face. Regimental HQ had stonewalled him when he'd asked for an update. "Get ready to move forward as soon as that stubber-nest is down. Cover-to-cover. Confirm your targets. We'll make the best of this mess, by Terra!"

"What about the wounded, sir?" voxed one of the troopers. Sergiev realised he had been tuning out the groans of pain all around him.

"They rest," he replied. "RHQ will send medics up once we've secured the next ridge."

It was a poor lie, but a necessary one. Most of the wounded were beyond help. They'd bled out past the point of saving. It just didn't help anyone to say so.

He slammed a fresh powercell into his lasgun, primed it, watched the counter illuminate and, with a prayer on his lips for the Grey Lady's favour, readied himself to lead his patchwork squad further up the mountain.

They'd have to move fast, despite the steep gradient, the endless downpour, the hunger and exhaustion. There were snipers and stubber-nests dotted all the

way up the slopes, dominating the cliff-tops and ridges, firing down from the overhangs. There was little choice but to face them. The muties had laid dense minefields on the easier alternative ascents.

There was a bright flash up ahead followed by a muffled boom. “Stubber’s out!” someone voxed. It sounded like Mirkov.

“Good work, trooper!” Sergiev answered. “We move up till we hit the next one.” He stepped out from behind his rock, raised his lasgun over his head and shouted, “Follow me, lads. We’ll teach the khekking freaks a thing or two!”

“Belay that!” barked a crisp voice from the rear. “Stay exactly where you are. You will not break cover until I order it. Not until my order.”

Sergiev, his body responding by reflex to the tone of command, stepped back into cover before he knew what he was doing. Confusion, however, quickly gave way to a great wash of relief. There was no mistaking the sharp consonants in the voice of a Vostroyan aristocrat.

An officer? That meant... reinforcements!

He saw them now, a full platoon, clambering up the narrow trail to the rear behind a broad-shouldered young man in officer’s dress. Forty men! Forty of them in their tall hats, long red greatcoats and bulky carapace armour.

But Sergiev’s joy was short lived. As the officer made a beeline towards him, the sergeant’s heart sank.

They’ve sent a boy, he thought. A bloody *shiny*. He must be seventeen if he’s a day!

Sergiev was thirty-two.

The officer drew nearer, marching now in smart, measured steps. Despite the boy’s solid-looking physique, his features were soft, unscarred and unweathered, and his upper lip was hardly dressed at all, save with the very scantest sign of manhood.

Still, moustached or otherwise, the boy wore lieutenant’s stripes, and Sergiev knew his place. On Vostroya—a world of dangerously proud men—the high-born were the proudest of all, and it was a foolish trooper who dared openly disrespect them. So, when the boy halted two yards in front of him, Sergiev stood ramrod straight, puffed out his chest and whipped his hand to his brow in salute. He received a short, sharp salute in return.

“Name and rank, soldier,” said the boy.

“Kitko Sergiev, sir. Sergeant, 112th Magdan Lasgunners, Eighth Company, Second Platoon.”

The boy nodded. “Good to know you, sergeant. Are you in charge here?”

Was that a test? Sergiev wondered. “Not anymore, sir.”

The boy smiled then dropped unceremoniously into a crouch behind the cover of Sergiev's rock. Looking up with a cocked eyebrow, he gestured for Sergiev to do likewise, and the sergeant dropped down beside him.

"My name," said the boy, "is Second Lieutenant Maksim Kabanov, commanding the 116th Sohlsvodd Infantry, Tenth Company, Sixth Platoon." He glanced in the direction of his men as he spoke. They had taken up positions of cover alongside Sergiev's lot and were dispensing hot ohx from their flasks. Their medic was already about the business of treating Sergiev's wounded.

"My honour and pleasure, sir," said Sergiev.

Lieutenant Kabanov turned his eyes back to the sergeant. "To answer your unspoken question, I'll be eighteen by next Emperor's Day. Yes, my men and I are as green as grass, and every last one of us is a good decade younger than you, I imagine, sergeant. But we've come to do the Emperor's work nevertheless. My troopers are well trained and will quickly prove themselves."

"They're Firstborn, sir," replied Sergiev. It was the only proper answer he could give.

Kabanov grinned. "Yes, they are. Just like you. So, if you'll fight alongside us, if you'll take my orders and give me the benefit of your experience, I'm sure we can make General Krupkov a happy man."

Sergiev stared hard into the lieutenant's fierce blue eyes. Young nobles fresh from the military academies were notoriously eager for swift advancement, and usually paid for the privilege with other men's lives. Why should this boy, this Kabanov, be any different? Was it Vostroyan zeal that lit his face, or a raging thirst for personal glory? The two were difficult to tell apart.

"You harbour doubts, sergeant," said Lieutenant Kabanov, "and so you should. I'll prove myself through action, in any case. But I'm not here to win you over. I'm here to cripple that citadel's aerial defences. If you think you might be up for that, let's push on!"

Despite reservations, Sergiev found himself grinning. The young man's audacity was certainly infectious. If he lived long enough to back it up...

Kabanov stood and raised his voice. "Listen up, Firstborn. The freaks think they've got Third Army beat. Right now, they're pissing on a picture of the Emperor and calling Vostroyan mothers pigs: I'm not having it. What about you?"

"Sir! No, sir!" the men yelled back at him, angered by the images his words evoked.

"Good. That's what I thought you'd say. So let's get our backsides up this bloody mountain and kill some mutants!"

While the troops roared approval, Sergiev leaned across and said, “The wounded, sir?”

Kabanov half-turned towards him. “My medic will do what he can, then follow us up. I’ll have my vox-man call in an evacuation request. It’s the best I can do for them right now.”

Sergiev nodded and dared to hope that this unbloodied pup might not get them all killed.

Third Army Headquarters, Cadenna, Sambar Basin, Valis II

Vlastan and Kabanov sat stiff and unspeaking in the austere outer room while a torrent of screamed abuse emanated from inside the captain’s office. The captain’s adjutant, sitting silently at his desk, feigned preoccupation with loose papers, but it was clear to Kabanov that he was listening intently. His expression was miserable.

Someone isn’t popular, thought Kabanov, but is it the captain or his visitor? It doesn’t bode well for Vogor and I in either case.

Abruptly, the shouting stopped and the heavy wooden doors to the captain’s room crashed open, ejecting a tall, thin man in a long red greatcoat.

Ignoring the adjutant, he stormed towards the exit, boots clacking sharply on the marble floor.

Vlastan, seated on Kabanov’s left, whispered urgently, “By Terra, Maksim! That’s General Krupkov.”

The general’s hearing must have been exceptional because, at the barest whisper of his name, he halted and spun to face the two young lieutenants. His hard, angular face was still flushed from shouting.

As one, Vlastan and Kabanov bolted to their feet and threw up razor-sharp salutes.

Kabanov felt his gut lurch. He was sure that, with two new targets in his sights, the furious general would resume his tirade, for no other reason, perhaps, than he was madly angry and not at all ready to calm down.

But, as General Krupkov eyed them, taking in their crisp, clean uniforms and the look of fearful admiration in their eyes, his rage seemed to dissipate. When he spoke, his voice was level. “You’re new,” he said. “I suppose you came in with the last lot.”

Kabanov, as was his habit, let Vlastan answer for both of them. His charismatic friend was older by almost a year, taller by a good fifteen centimetres, and typically eager to do the talking for both—something that

Kabanov had been thankful for many times during their friendship.

“We landed two days ago, sir,” said Vlastan, “and arrived at the front just this morning. Second Lieutenants Vogor Vlastan and Maksim Kabanov, at your service. And the Emperor’s, of course, sir.”

The general pursed his lips, lifted a hand to stroke his splendid grey moustache and said, “Vlastan and Kabanov. So, those worthy names are among us once again.” With a sidelong glance towards Captain Tyrkin’s office, he added, “New blood is just what’s needed around here. The north-eastern front is the most critical theatre of operations in this war today. Absolutely critical, mark you! There’s plenty of opportunity here for fine young officers to earn a reputation.”

“Yes, sir!” said the young lieutenants in unison.

Eschewing further comment, General Krupkov, high commander of the Vostroyan Third Army and the much-lauded Hero of Hell’s Ridge, spun on his boot-heel and marched off, leaving Vlastan and Kabanov standing stiffly to attention in a room suddenly silent.

Silent, that is, until a weary and impatient voice shouted, “Georgiev! Where in blazes are those two wet-arses I’m supposed to brief?”

* * *

Roughly ten minutes later, Vlastan and Kabanov stood together with Captain Tyrkin and his adjutant, Georgiev, on soft, muddy ground, facing north-east in the pouring rain. The air was thick with dampness and the smell of wet earth. The line of the horizon lit intermittently with the flicker of distant explosions.

Tyrkin, shielded from the rain by his adjutant’s umbrella, pointed to a vast, shadowy shape and said, “There she is, gentlemen. Mount Megidde, all nine hundred and seventy-three metres of her. And on her summit sits the notorious enemy stronghold—Megiddzar.”

Vlastan and Kabanov squinted against the rain. The mountain sat black and forbidding against a low, thundery sky but, as Kabanov looked, he realised that the storm accounted for only a small percentage of the flashing and booming near the mountain’s peak. “Heavy artillery, sir?” he asked.

The captain nodded. “From that altitude, their long guns can punish our forces on the valley floor with absolute impunity. Until three days ago, when the Emperor Himself blessed us with these rains, nothing we put across the River Aimes was safe. Even now, we can get infantry across in trickles, but any attempt to move armour onto the far bank brings down a punishing barrage. Our

own artillery can't even get close."

"Air support, sir?" asked Vlastan. "A bombing run, or paratroopers?"

Under the umbrella, Tyrkin turned to face the tall, darkly handsome youth. "Neither is feasible, lieutenant, until we do something about their damned anti-air batteries. Anything we fly in gets torn apart at range. Say what you will about these warp-blasted mutants, but they've got the Sambar Basin held vice-tight. If we don't break through the Murgoth Line within the next five days, the offensive at Therabourg will have to be cancelled. Who knows how much longer the war will last if that happens?" His face creased in a deep scowl. "General Krupkov needs someone inside that citadel to knock out their damned anti-air batteries, and he needs it done yesterday."

Vlastan's mind, Kabanov knew, would already be weighing the honours he might win. He made no secret of his vast ambition. Military greatness, he'd often boasted, ran in his bloodline. Vostroyan military records seemed to bear that out.

Kabanov's father, on the other hand, had never advanced beyond the rank of major, but was somewhat famous in his own right. His mastery of the *ossbohk-vyar*—the brutal Vostroyan close-quarters combat art—had earned him regimental honours year after year, and Kabanov was keen to follow in his footsteps, though he was far less inclined to talk about it.

Glory or not, he didn't like the look of Mount Megidde. Its slopes seemed filled with threat, steep and jagged like the serrations on a cruel blade. It stood alone, tall and grim, utterly dominating the broad, open farmland that surrounded it. The troopers, he'd heard, had nicknamed it Black Tooth because it chewed up every man who tried to ascend it.

This whole region had been one of the most productive agri-zones on the planet. Now, between the constant shelling and the torrential rain, it was a blood-soaked quagmire, and all too many of the bodies that covered it were Vostroya's sons.

Vlastan seemed oblivious to that. "If the general wants this mountain, sir," he said, "rest assured that we're the men to take it. Both Lieutenant Kabanov and I intend to make our mark early on."

Tyrkin's smile was more polite than genuine, for he knew how many lives Mount Megidde had reaped since Third Army's advance had faltered here, but he said, "That's the spirit, lieutenant. Your fathers would be proud, you know. I had the honour of serving alongside both of them before they passed over to the Emperor's side."

"You did, sir?" prompted Vlastan eagerly.

"Indeed, and they were great men, both. Your father, Vlastan, was a real

force among the officer class—a strong traditionalist and much missed.” To Kabanov, he added, “And your father inspired us all with his prowess in the regimental tournaments. If you’ve any of his martial skill, I shall enjoy seeing you compete.”

Kabanov bowed gratefully at the compliment. Vlastan, he noticed, had turned to face the mountain again. Tyrkin, though, wasn’t quite finished.

“Since neither man lived to see you take your first battlefield commissions, I feel some responsibility in passing on the wisdom they would surely have imparted themselves. The vast majority of new officers, you see, are apt to make the same mistakes. They may feel ready to face foul greenskins, insidious eldar or unspeakable mutant scum, but few are prepared for an enemy that strikes at the heart. Few are ready to wrestle their own conscience.”

Vlastan and Kabanov listened while the rain drummed steadily on their hats and shoulders. One at a time, the captain fixed them with his gaze. “This may sound distasteful to you, given any youthful idealism you may cling to, but you must remain objective in putting the proper value on the lives of your men. We officers are noble-born and must bear the requisite burden of our class. We live to command, elevated to it by birthright. The troopers, however, were born to die serving the Divine Will. Understand that from the beginning. Your fathers would have impressed this upon you most strongly.”

From the corner of his eye, Kabanov saw Vlastan nodding in wholehearted agreement, but his own reaction was markedly different.

His father’s letters and journals betrayed Tyrkin’s lie. Major Urien Kabanov had been a humanist and squandered no man’s life, guided firmly by the core precepts of the *ossbohk-vyar*. Back on Vostroya, Kabanov’s mother had fondly corroborated this.

Tyrkin, Kabanov realised, was watching him closely, waiting for some cue that said the lesson had been absorbed, so he nodded grimly despite his inward thoughts.

It was enough to satisfy the older man. He mumbled to his adjutant and, together, they turned back towards the shelter of their Chimera armoured transport. Over his shoulder, he called out, “Come, gentlemen. I’ll drop you at the barracks. It’s time you briefed your men on the specifics of the assault.”

Mount Megidde (West Face, 696m)

“Keep pushing, you worthless dogs,” roared Vlastan. “By the blasted warp, what’s gotten into you. This is the Emperor’s work, for Throne’s sake!”

His sergeants immediately took their cue and began shouting the men

onwards, pressing them up the mountain metre-by-metre, though stubber-fire stitched the rocky ground all around them.

He'd lost four men already taking this ridge—the first men to crest it. Taking the brunt of the enemy's defensive fire, they'd jinked and shuddered for a moment in the withering barrage, then tumbled backwards, falling past him and out over the cliff towards the jagged lower slopes.

An infuriating loss.

Screams of agony sounded from left and right now as the enemy's bullets found other unfortunates. Mud-splashed suits of carapace armour protected vital organs, but some of the whining slugs bit deep into unprotected arms and thighs, ripping open the arteries there.

The wounded went down howling, blood pumping out over the cold ground. Their plaintive cries for aid further angered Vlastan. That they were all boys of his own age mattered not a bit.

Selfish fools, he cursed. We're in the middle of a firefight! Should I ask the blasted mutants to take a caffeine break while we patch you up?

He and his Fourth Platoon had been charged with storming the mountain's western face—one of the hardest ascents and, for that very reason, the least mined and defended. He wondered bitterly if Kabanov's ascent was any easier. RHQ believed the mountain's natural defences had made the mutants complacent on the western and south-eastern sides.

As more enemy fire peppered the rocks around the ascending Vostroyans, it certainly didn't seem so to Vlastan. Every metre he won was bought with blood.

Once at the base of the citadel walls, Vlastan was to throw his force against the defenders, drawing their reserves to the western battlements so that Kabanov and his platoon could penetrate the south-eastern defences with minimal resistance.

He was far from satisfied with the plan.

It's a load of rot, he cursed. A man of House Vlastan charged with leading a diversionary force? Nothing less than a damned insult!

A pale, stooped figure with overlong arms and huge, bulbous eyes lunged from cover up ahead and levelled a stubber at the advancing line. Before the mutant could pull the trigger, however, Vlastan's laspistol found him. There was a sharp crack and the acrid smell of ozone. The mutant's body toppled forward, trailing steam from the large, cauterised hole that had appeared in his face.

"Nice shot, sir!" voxed Vlastan's comms officer, Corporal Korgin.

Seeing the kill, other mutants vented their rage from higher ground, leaning out from shielding rock to send deadly volleys down the mountainside.

“Blast them, Firstborn!” yelled Vlastan into his vox-bead’s microphone. “Squads Borgoff and Gurelov, flank left. Sergeant Niriev, I want suppressing fire front-right! Move up, move up, damn you! Any man who falls behind will be shot!”

Swept up in the noise and madness of the fight, the men didn’t hesitate to follow Vlastan’s every word. More fell screaming to the concentrated fire of the enemy, but the Vostroyan advance was inexorable. The mutants on the slopes were a rabble, relying on sheer numbers to see them through. They lacked the lifelong training of the disciplined Firstborn. With confidence overfed by earlier success, they were unprepared for such a continuous, determined assault on ground they had presumed secure.

Pausing momentarily behind good, solid cover, Vlastan slid a new cell into the grip of his pistol and looked up the slope towards the summit.

There, up beyond the next ridge, he saw the colossal black walls of Megiddzar. They seemed so mighty he could almost believe they were propping up the storm-heavy sky. Misshapen figures moved to and fro on the parapets and, from the right, he heard the rippling boom of the enemy’s heavy artillery, unmistakably near. The mountain trembled under his feet.

I’m sorry, Maksim, he thought. I know you’re counting on me for your diversion, but I can’t pass up this chance to make my mark. You’ll have other chances, my friend, but this day is mine.

Troopers surged past him, yelling and roaring as they ran. One was struck hard in the face by a stubber-round and knocked from his feet. He died instantly, lasgun clattering to the ground.

Vlastan felt a sudden, wet warmth and looked down to see his clothing and armour splashed with fresh gore. He felt a moment’s panic before he realised it was blood from the young trooper, not his own.

His relief soon turned to anger. “Slaughter those mutant freaks!” he bellowed, careful to stay in cover for the moment. “Show them no mercy, Firstborn! Charge!”

Mount Megidde (South-east Face, 802m)

Kabanov’s men were having no easier time of it on the south-eastern ascent. The steep cliffs, sharp rocks and tangled lines of razor wire were bad enough, but every time the young lieutenant sent men forward to cut a way through, there were screams of agony as yet another died or was horribly wounded.

We’ve come too far, thought Kabanov, to be waylaid by their blasted snipers and stubber-nests. The citadel must be less than a hundred metres further

up.

But a creeping nausea was slowly taking hold of him. Each loss twisted his guts tighter and tighter. He felt each death, each howl of agony, keenly. These men were following his lead, depending on him. The orders they obeyed were his.

And they were hardly men at all, he reminded himself. Most of the dead were from his own platoon—teenagers just as he was.

Father, he thought, did you suffer such doubts? How can I prevent their slaughter and still do my duty? It seems... impossible.

Had Tyrkin been right after all? Was he being an idealistic fool? Had he read too much into his father's writings?

If he thought his subconscious mind might answer the question for him, he was disappointed.

The only answer was the rattle of gunfire from further up the mountain, followed by the earth-shattering boom of the citadel's long guns.

Behind him, about two kilometres to the south, on the flatlands of the Sambar Basin, great fountains of earth and flame burst majestically into the air. The enemy was shelling the town of Sambariand.

At least here, thought Kabanov, momentarily glad to be on the mountainside, we can strike back at our foes. The Guardsmen dying down there have no such chance.

The thought lent him further purpose. Megiddzar simply had to fall today.

A stubber-round ricocheted close to his head and he pushed himself flat against the cold, wet surface. "Holy Throne!" he spat.

Sergeant Sergiev rose from cover, returned fire, then hunkered back down.

"Mind yourself there, sir. Those bastards will be keen to bag any man with stripes."

Through the vox-bead in his ear, Kabanov heard his comms officer hailing him on the platoon's command channel. "Message from RHQ, sir."

"Let's have it, Pitkin."

"One word, sir: Orpheon."

"Orpheon," Kabanov repeated. "Excellent, corporal. Keep me updated."

"Yes, sir."

"Orpheon?" asked Sergiev. "As in the Flaming Saint?"

"It's the go-word, sergeant. Our comrades on the western face have initiated their diversion. We'll give the Valisians some time to be drawn away. And then the real work starts."

Mount Megidde (West Face, 962m)

Vlastan looked to left and right, making sure his men hadn't revealed themselves. They kept down, tight behind jutting spurs of rock on the final ridge. The citadel's defenders certainly knew that attackers had come, but Vlastan had been careful not to show his full numbers as he'd neared the citadel's curtain wall. Moments ago, he'd sent false confirmation of his attack to RHQ. His vox-man, Korgin, had protested. "I thought you said, sir, that we were to create a diversion?"

"No plan remains intact on the battlefield, Korgin. Don't you even know that much? Diversionary forces have a nasty habit of getting obliterated. Is that what you want, soldier?"

Korgin gulped and the blood drained from his face. "But Sixth Platoon, sir... Lieutenant Kabanov and his men—"

"Have no better chances of taking out those anti-air batteries than we do. No, simultaneous attacks on two sides will double the likelihood of operational success."

Korgin didn't look satisfied, but he caught the dangerous look in Vlastan's eyes and said, "Understood, sir."

"Excellent," said Vlastan. "Trust me, Korgin. There will be decorations for this. Now, get my sergeants over here. It's time they received new orders."

Mount Megidde (South-east Face, 951m)

"Khekking hell!" growled Sergiev as he threw himself prone and rolled into the lee of the nearest boulder. Stubber-fire blazed out in torrents from atop the rain-slicked citadel wall. He called over to Kabanov. "Are you sure about that transmission, sir? This doesn't seem like much of a reduced defence to me."

The citadel towered over them, ancient, dark and utterly menacing. A utilitarian structure, its only artistry was in its solid construction. It was not a fortress built to inflate some warlord's ego. It had been built for a single purpose only—to resist assault. But its architects had lived in the days when even basic las-technology had seemed lost forever. No matter how thick its rough-hewn walls of black stone were, they could not resist the modern Imperial Guard for long.

Still, Kabanov's expression was grim. The wall was one matter, the godless mutants were quite another.

He was sure he'd held his men back long enough for the enemy's defensive focus to shift west. Had Third Army intel got it wrong? Was the enemy garrison far larger than expected?

Either way, he thought, we're committed now. We breach that wall and take out their anti-air, no matter what.

"Squads Tolgin and Zunelov," he voxed, "move into position. Mortar teams, deploy behind those outcrops on the left and right. When I give the word, I want coordinated fire section-by-section. Herd the defenders towards the centre. They'll get a nasty surprise when the whole damned thing collapses under them. Lasgunners, help keep the bastards occupied while the sappers work."

A series of short acknowledgments broke the static.

"Sapper-team, move under cover of smoke only. I don't want you taking unnecessary risks. Is that clear? If we lose you now, we might as well pack-up and go home."

"And everyone would hate that, sir," quipped Sergeant Ivanenko.

On hearing his voice, Kabanov could picture the man's wry grin. The nineteen year old Ivanenko was a gambler, a notorious risk-taker. That made him a natural choice for a sapper-team leader, but it also made him unpredictable.

"I mean it, Ivanenko," voxed Kabanov. "Your sappers are no good to me dead. Just open me a nice big hole in that wall."

"We'll get it done, sir. You'll see."

Squads Tolgin and Zunelov were in position now and raking the battlements with las-fire. Kabanov saw the bodies of careless defenders fall from the heights like stricken birds. There was a sickening crunch every time one of them struck the rocks.

"Mortars ready," crackled the vox.

"Sappers in position, awaiting your go, lieutenant," voxed Ivanenko.

"Mortars are cleared to fire," said Kabanov. "I repeat, mortars are cleared to fire."

There was a familiar, almost musical *whoomping* sound from left and right as the mortar tubes spat explosive loads up onto the parapets.

Kabanov watched with satisfaction as the old stone defences exploded outwards in a rain of shattered blocks and dust. Pale bodies were thrown outwards too, smashing open on the mountainside like sacks of raw meat.

"Let's have that smoke, sergeants," voxed Kabanov. Squads Tolgin and Zunelov immediately began lobbing their smoke grenades into the mossy depression between their cover positions.

"Sappers, move up!"

"Yes, sir!" answered Ivanenko.

Kabanov watched the sergeant and his men race forward from their cover

into the protective shroud. They wouldn't have much time to wire the charges. He ordered his lasgunners to standby with another round of smoke grenades.

The mortars were traversing their fire inwards, bunching the surviving defenders into an increasingly small space atop the wall and keeping them too busy to pour significant fire on the smoke-shrouded sappers below.

Soon enough, however, they noticed the smoke below. Worse still, the rain and wind was stripping it away faster than Kabanov had expected. One of the mutants shouted something and others leaned over the top of the wall to fire straight down.

There were howls from within the smoke as some of the sappers were hit.

"Ivanenko," voxed Kabanov. "Report!"

"Two of my lads down, sir. Where the khek is our covering fire?"

"Mortar-teams, keep the pressure up," Kabanov barked. "We've men dying out there."

The mortars could only fire so fast, however. The protective smoke dissipated further, laying the sappers naked to fire from directly overhead.

"More smoke, now!" roared Kabanov over the vox. Another sapper cried out, struck hard in the thigh. He went down. Kabanov saw one of the man's comrades turn to aid him. Ivanenko shouted furiously, and the sapper reluctantly turned back to the matter of the explosives.

Squads Tolgin and Zunelov lobbed the last of their smoke, and the remains of the sapper team enjoyed cover once again. Kabanov prayed they'd have enough time to finish up. There was little he could do for them once the smoke cleared for the last time.

The wall was vast and wide, and the mortar-teams were overwhelmed with targets. Kabanov's lasgunners did all they could, but the crenulated parapet offered the mutants outstanding defensive cover. Having watched their fellows fall screaming to the rocks, few of the mutants were careless enough to present viable targets now.

Instead, they poked out only briefly and, when they did so, they fired directly downwards again. Kabanov saw that the last of the smoke had cleared.

"Ivanenko," he voxed. "Status!"

From a team of eight, only three sappers remained, working frantically at the base of the wall. "More time, damn it. I've lost too many. I need more time!"

Even as Ivanenko said this, another of his men crumpled soundlessly, shot through the top of his hat.

Kabanov felt sick, almost dizzy. "Ivanenko," he voxed. "Get to cover, damn you. We'll work something else out."

The last of the Ivanenko's men screamed and spun, his face a bloodied mess, and only Ivanenko himself was left.

"Did you hear me sergeant?" shouted Kabanov.

"No time, sir!" replied the sapper-team leader. He stood alone at the base of the wall, hands working frantically. Above him, a score of mutant guns zeroed in. His time had run out. There was only one option left.

"Good luck, you men," he voxed. "Keep your heads down, won't you?" With that, he stepped back from the wall, raised his lasgun and fired into the central mass of the high-explosives.

"Ivanenko!"

Kabanov was thrown onto his back by the blast. Utterly deafened, the breath ripped from his lungs, he felt as if the universe itself might be ending.

Stone blocks rolled down the slopes in a great, dust-trailing torrent, and only good hard cover prevented more Firstborn from being killed.

The dust, thought Kabanov as he coughed and spluttered. Don't let the dust settle.

Sergiev was standing over him, hauling him up by the edges of his breastplate. "He did it, lieutenant!" he gasped. "The damned citadel is wide open!"

In Kabanov's mind, he saw Ivanenko's face staring back at him with a sardonic smile. There was grief, like a lead weight in his belly, but he knew he had to put it aside, at least for now.

"Firstborn," he voxed determinedly. "You know what to do!"

With a booming battle cry, the men of Sixth Platoon surged forward towards the breach.

Megiddzar (West Wall)

Vlastan snarled as another of his men fell screaming from the face of the western wall. "Keep climbing, you dogs," he yelled over the vox. "Mortars, keep them covered, damn you!"

Only moments ago, he had seen groups of defenders running southwards along the parapet. It was exactly what he'd been waiting for. Sure that Kabanov's efforts in the south-east had secured the mutants' attention, he had ordered his men to scale the walls using the grapnels they carried. RHQ had issued the grapnels for the mountain ascent, not for the citadel walls, but to Vlastan, that mattered little. It only mattered that his plan was working.

Even with the distraction of Kabanov's assault on the far side, however, Vlastan's men still had to climb under enemy fire.

His mortar-teams launched shell after shell onto the parapet with worthy accuracy and, slowly, the Vostroyans charged with being the first up the ropes made progress towards the top.

There was a rattle of gunfire and one fell screaming to his death, followed all too quickly by another. Hard contact with the ground cut their screams off sharply.

“Heavy covering fire, ground-teams,” demanded Vlastan. “They’re almost at the top. Damn your eyes, give them cover!”

Three of his troopers were within centimetres of the parapet now. Then, as Vlastan watched with growing excitement, the first crested the wall. There was a shout and the glare of raking las-fire. The mutant defenders turned to return fire on the Vostroyan intruder, but Vlastan’s mortars spat at same moment, and the mutants were blown from their roosts in a shower of rock and ruined bodies.

The second climber hauled himself over the wall, ably covered by the las-fire of the first. Then the third scrambled over. At the bottom of the ropes, others began their climb.

“That’s it, Firstborn,” voxed Vlastan excitedly. “Keep moving!”

With ropes secured and an increasing section of the wall being taken and held, more and more of Vlastan’s men were able to clamber up and over. Soon, it was the turn of Vlastan, his vox-man, Korgin, and the mortar teams.

Vlastan—young, fit and long-limbed—climbed the rope with impressive speed. Korgin was slower, but managed despite the weight of his back-mounted vox-caster. The mortar-teams followed, tying their heavy firing-tubes to the ends of two lines, and hauling them up after themselves once they’d reached the top.

The rest of Vlastan’s platoon had deployed in textbook defensive patterns, pressing back the waves of mutants that raced towards them from other sections of the wall.

We made it, thought Vlastan. I knew it could be done. Diversion, my eye! Just wait till Maksim hears about this.

The citadel’s interior lay before him, its low, square buildings whipped by sheets of driving rain.

He scanned the flat rooftops for a moment, noting those that vented smoke. One building boasted a long-range communications antenna. Still, these things were of secondary importance. There, on a series of broad platforms built atop the southernmost section of the wall, Vlastan’s eyes found what they were looking for—the enemy’s devastating long-range artillery pieces. And there, flanking them on either side, were the deadly anti-air batteries—the ultimate target of this entire operation.

I take those down, thought Vlastan, and I'll have my first damned medal at the age of eighteen.

"Push south along the wall," he ordered his men. "Our victory is close at hand. Press those damned freaks back!"

Megiddzar (South-east Quarter)

Having penetrated the citadel's south-eastern extent via Ivanenko's breach, Kabanov's men soon found themselves fighting desperately through the dark, cobbled streets that criss-crossed the interior. Wind gusted between the buildings, stinging their faces with battering rain, but the Firstborn were hardy, had trained since childhood in far worse conditions than these, and didn't stop to notice. They were far too busy strafing the insane enemies that poured through the streets towards them.

The Chaos-crazed mutants displayed an almost suicidal eagerness to engage. They were utterly insane and, despite superior numbers, seemed unable to exploit the tenuous position of the attacking Vostroyans. It occurred to Kabanov that these freaks had never been drilled for this. Valis II had never raised Imperial Guard regiments and had maintained only a small PDF force before the coup.

More likely than not, these sickly, long-armed aberrations were the mutated offspring of simple farmers who had laboured far too long in the corrupting radiation of the system's twin suns.

"We should press west, sir," offered Sergiev. He had remained close to Kabanov's side throughout, almost as if he'd charged himself with personally protecting the young, inexperienced lieutenant. "The anti-air defences will be clustered close to the main artillery."

"Agreed, sergeant. All squads, cut us a path west. We can't afford to get pinned down here. I don't want to be here any longer than necessary."

Of course, it wasn't as easy as that. Even as his platoon poured blazing las-fire on another wave of charging foes, Kabanov wondered just how many of the defenders Vlastan had actually drawn away. There seemed to be an awful damned lot of them where there shouldn't have been.

Megiddzar (South-west Wall)

Vlastan fired shot after shot into the enemy ranks as they charged desperately along the wall towards his men, ready to die to save their precious artillery from the Vostroyan assault.

The parapet was becoming littered with smoking, twitching mutant corpses.

Without the advantage of high ground, the enemy was taking tremendous losses now, and Vlastan was losing very few of his own. The tide had turned. His men, he knew, had the treacherous twists completely outclassed. He stepped over another pale body, noting with distaste the ugly Chaotic sigils branded on its cooling, naked flesh.

The sickening fools, he thought, grinning as his pistol carved a smoking black crater in the body of another on the wall ahead. They race towards us as if they're invincible, and we slaughter them like grox before a feast.

His men were gaining ground quickly. The proximity of their objective had re-energised them. The artillery platforms were only metres away, and many of the mutant gunnery crews now broke from their duties to engage. As his men slaughtered them, Vlastan ordered his sergeants to organise two-man demolition teams. They were to knock out the anti-aircraft batteries at once.

The massive, devastating artillery pieces could wait. His first priority was to make the skies safe for a subsequent aerial assault.

Unlike Lieutenant Kabanov's platoon, Vlastan's men hadn't been issued with satchel charges. They were meant to provide a mere diversion, after all. They would have to make do with grenades. Still, Vlastan thought, five or six detonated in the firing mechanisms of each quad-barrelled anti-aircraft gun will render them just as useless.

"Korgin," he shouted. His vox-man trotted over, pistol in hand, firing at anything that moved.

"Sir?"

"You and I will have the personal honour of destroying that battery there."

Vlastan nodded towards the battery on the farthest platform.

"I'm with you, sir."

Vlastan turned to the nearest troopers and barked, "Give us good, solid cover all the way, you lot." Then he and Korgin broke into a crouching run while stubber-shells whizzed and whined over their heads.

Loping mutants raced to intercept them, but both men fired their pistols with deadly accuracy, and the troopers behind them laid down good cover as they'd been told to. A dozen mutants fell by the time Vlastan reached his objective.

Over the din of gunfire and incomprehensible battle-cries, Vlastan shouted, "Hurry now! Give me your grenades."

Korgin stepped over a scarred, smoking body and handed his commander a bandolier with four "fraggers" fixed to it.

Vlastan snatched it from the young trooper's hands. As he did so, he saw

movement on the floor of the platform. “Watch out!”

The warning came too late. One of the downed mutants was only wounded. He sprang up, whipped his long arms out towards Korgin, and caught him by the belt and breastplate. Then, holding the young trooper in an iron grip, the mutant plunged them both over the parapet wall.

Korgin’s chilling scream stopped abruptly on hard contact with the rocks below.

Vlastan cursed angrily as he fixed Korgin’s bandolier to the anti-aircraft gun, pulled one grenade pin after another, and ran like hell towards the protection of his men.

Twice he staggered as enemy rounds struck his carapace armour with frightening force, but he ran on in adrenaline-fuelled desperation. He’d gone about thirty metres when the grenades went off with a deafening crack. Sharp metal fragments whipped through the air, wounding a dozen nearby mutants. Vlastan threw himself to the ground.

He looked back towards the gun and saw only a twisted metal ruin shrouded in black smoke.

Pushing himself up quickly, he continued his stooping run, skidding to a stop when he reached the relative security of his troops.

“Sergeant Gurelov bit one, sir,” reported Sergeant Niriev immediately. “But all anti-air batteries have been destroyed. Permission to pull out?”

Vlastan shook his head. “Permission denied, sergeant.” He turned his eyes to the citadel’s interior once again. Among the buildings in the streets below, he found what he was looking for. The comms antenna he’d noticed earlier was much closer now.

“Sir?” queried Niriev.

“We just lost our vox-caster, sergeant,” said Vlastan stiffly. “But, if I’m not mistaken, that building by the fountain down there is a communications bunker. RHQ must be informed of our success immediately. Move out, gentlemen!”

Megiddzar (Southern Quarter)

Corporal Pitkin threw himself into cover behind the thick stone wall of the hab that shielded Kabanov and gushed, “Just had the damnedest transmission from RHQ, sir. I can’t get my head around it.”

Stubber-shells spanged off the stonework all around them.

“Well, don’t keep it a secret, corporal,” said Kabanov.

“Well, it seems, sir... it seems that Lieutenant Vlastan and his men have successfully managed to destroy all of the citadel’s anti-air defences.”

“They what?” exploded Kabanov.

“My reaction exactly, sir, but RHQ are adamant about it.”

“The enemy must have compromised our communications network, Pitkin,” said Kabanov, but he already suspected the message was genuine. It had Vogor’s ambition written all over it.

“I double-checked, sir. The broadcast codes were spot on, verified by the Officio Communicatus and everything. It’s definitely legitimate.”

“What the hell happened?” asked Sergeant Sergiev. “Wasn’t he supposed to lead a diversion?”

“That would explain the massive opposition we’ve faced so far. Damn him. What does RHQ advise?”

The diminutive Pitkin blew a breath out between his teeth. “We’ve been ordered to pull out, sir. A naval assault wing is inbound from Fortune Bay. Marauder bombers, sir. Sixteen minutes out. They’re going to level the place. And if we’re still here...”

“And Lieutenant Vlastan’s platoon?”

Pitkin looked deeply uncomfortable now. He wouldn’t meet Kabanov stare. “They’re pinned down in a comms tower west of here. Completely surrounded, sir. RHQ says they won’t make it out.”

Vlastan, you bloody fool, thought Kabanov. Damn your ego to the warp, look what you’ve done to yourself! Am I supposed to just walk away?

“Pitkin, contact RHQ. Tell them we’re close to Lieutenant Vlastan’s position and believe we have a solid shot at opening a corridor of escape.”

“Sir?”

“Sixteen minutes, you said, until those Marauders level the citadel. That leaves no time for argument, corporal. Do it. If RHQ objects, I want you to fake a vox-caster malfunction.”

Pitkin reddened and seemed about to argue, but Sergiev preempted him. “Listen to your lieutenant, corporal,” he said. He gestured at the rest of the platoon. They hugged the corners of the ancient stone habs, poking out to fire back at a gradually thinning enemy force. “If these men walk away from their brothers now, it’ll weigh heavy on them for the rest of their lives.”

Something in Sergiev’s voice told Kabanov the man was speaking from bitter experience. “We’re talking about other Firstborn here, corporal.”

Sergiev didn’t need to say any more. Pitkin had heard enough. He set his jaw and nodded. “Firstborn, sergeant. You’re absolutely right, sir. I hope you don’t think me a coward.”

“There are no cowards among the Firstborn, Pitkin,” said Kabanov with a

grin. “Least of all in my platoon.”

In his mind, however, he was praying feverishly to the Emperor and the Grey Lady, patron saint of Vostroyan, for the protection of his men. He’d already suffered more than enough losses for one day.

Megiddzar (Communications Bunker)

“All sides, sir,” reported Sergeant Niriev. “If there’s a way out of this, I can’t bloody well see it.”

Vlastan stood with Sergeants Niriev and Borgoff in a small room dominated by a communications console and several low-grade cogitator units. The concrete walls were covered in bizarre, blood-painted glyphs that hurt to look at, and the floor was strewn with bodies—mutants in strange, ribbed uniforms of black metal and leather.

These freaks—Vlastan guessed they represented some kind of officer class—had been caught off-guard when his men had stormed the building.

He cursed under his breath. “Then you’re not looking hard enough, Sergeant Niriev. If you think I conquered Megiddzar only to be flattened when the place gets bombed, you’re out of your mind.”

The sergeant looked angry, but he said, “The men will fight on, of course, sir, but the enemy has us locked in tight. We lost a lot taking this place. I understand that you had to get a message out, sir, but unless we get external help, we won’t survive this.”

Damn and blast, thought Vlastan. To have come so far, to have achieved so much, only to be trapped here at the very end. I won’t have it. A posthumous decoration doesn’t appeal to me at all.

“Have the men hold firm, sergeant. Tell them that the honour and reputation of all Vostroya is at stake here.”

Sergeant Borgoff cleared his throat and said, “Sir, we’ve barely ten minutes left until the bombers arrive and we’re running low on powercells for the lasguns. We should lock ourselves in and meet our deaths honourably in prayer to the Emperor as Omnissiah.”

“Bloody fool! I have no intention of meeting my death here. This is a comms tower. I’ll petition RHQ to delay the bombardment. I’ll request assistance from Sixth Platoon if I have to. We will not fall!”

“Be serious, sir! Sixth Platoon must be halfway down the mountain by now.”

Vlastan almost cuffed the young sergeant for his tone, but he struggled to rein in his temper. No, he thought. Kabanov *will* come. He would no more leave

me here than he would renounce his beloved *ossbohk-vyar*. I'm sure of it.

Unsettled by the faraway look in their commander's eyes, the sergeants backed away, returning to their men to fight, and most probably die, alongside them.

Kabanov and his platoon found Vlastan's position all too easily. The sounds of stubber-fire and las-fire, and the smell of ozone, led them there like shift-workers to a fresh pot of ohx . They could see a veritable army of mutants firing at shuttered windows and gun-ports in the thick walls of a two-storey comms bunker. The mutants were using stacks of supply crates and water barrels as cover, but their backs were wide open.

"All sergeants," voxed Kabanov quietly, "have your men take up assault positions now."

"Aye, sir," came the response.

"There won't be time to set up mortars," voxed Sergiev. He stood only a metre from Kabanov, but spoke low over the vox rather than give their presence away.

"We still have grenades and satchel charges. It might be enough to drive a wedge in their forces."

Kabanov wasn't wrong. On his command, Sixth Platoon hit the mutants from the rear with everything they had. Fragmentation grenades wreaked terrible damage on the unwitting freaks. The satchel charges blew their cover positions to pieces, killing dozens in a hail of flying debris. The mutants turned to defend themselves far too late, with predictably grisly results.

Inside, Vlastan's men didn't hesitate to exploit the change in the situation. They saved their cheers and shouts of joy for later. Instead, with the mutants forced to fight on two fronts, they launched a concentrated attack on those whose backs were now turned towards them. Searing volleys of las-fire blazed out from the comms bunker.

Kabanov watched scores of the enemy fall with a dark feeling of enjoyment. "Vogor," he voxed, "if you can hear me, get your men out of there now. We've opened a corridor for you, but we can't hold it forever, man!"

Vlastan's voice returned to him through the static. "I was just about to call you, Maksim. I knew you'd come. Late to the party, perhaps, but here all the same. Hold that corridor steady, we're coming out!"

A heavy steel door was kicked violently open and the survivors of Vlastan's Fourth Platoon surged out to take positions of cover alongside Kabanov's men. Lasgun powercells were quickly shared and, together, the united Vostroyans

loosed a staggering amount of fire at the howling, raging mutants.

Vlastan was the last to exit the comms tower. When he came out, he kept his head low, his laspistol high, and ran in a zigzag towards Kabanov's position. Stubber-rounds whipped at the soaked cobbles and crates all around him.

"Warp damn and blast it all!" he spat. "Let's get a move on, Maksim. Those bombers will be here in a heartbeat!"

Kabanov scowled, keyed the open channel on his vox-bead and said, "All squads pull out at once. Make for the breach. Don't stop to engage. I want every last man sprinting for his life. This whole damned mountaintop will be dust and flame in about four minutes!"

Sergiev rose to send lethal las-bolts into the bodies of two closing mutants, then turned to Kabanov. "Better lead by example, sir."

Kabanov nodded. "That goes for all of us. Let's move!"

Four minutes. Not nearly enough time to get clear. But, if they could just make it beyond the citadel walls and into the cover of solid rock...

With a final burst of las-fire, Kabanov, Vlastan and Sergiev broke from cover and began pounding the cobbles in the direction of the breach. Enemy stubber-fire smacked into the stone walls on either side as they ran.

The surviving Firstborn followed close behind, though a number were cut down by the mutants as they tried to break from cover. Others, too, were struck in the back or legs as they raced through the wet streets.

Kabanov could hear their cries of agony and frustration, but he dared not look back. He had already detected the throaty growl of Marauder engines on their deadly approach vector.

As he, Vlastan and Sergiev turned a corner, they ran into tall, emaciated mutant who had looted a lasgun from the corpse of a fallen Firstborn.

Kabanov, running at the head of the group raised his pistol just a fraction too late. The hideous mutant, his face a gaping mess of fleshy strips and strange, bony ridges, pulled the trigger and emptied the weapon's remaining charges at them.

Kabanov's pistol barked a moment later, burning a deep tunnel into the brain of the disgusting freak. Strained curses from behind him made him turn.

Sergiev was down. He rolled on the wet ground in agony. One of his knees had been reduced to a cauterised stump. The severed lower leg lay where it had fallen, smoke rising in wisps from charred tissue.

"Sergiev!" gasped Kabanov as he turned and crouched by the older man. "Damn it, Vogor. Help me get him up."

"There's no time, Maksim," hissed Vlastan. "He's too badly wounded.

We've got to get out of here."

Kabanov replied without turning. "I said help me, you son of a bitch!"

Vlastan cocked his head and listened to the sound of the bombers closing fast. "You're a fool, Maksim. We have to go now! Where the hell is that damned hole you made in the wall?"

Booted feet sounded on the cobbles and the surviving Firstborn charged round the corner. When they saw Kabanov crouching by Sergiev, they skidded to a halt.

"I need two fast men!" Kabanov barked.

Sergeant Zunelov reacted immediately. "Vlenin and Borsky, front and centre!"

The troopers in question quickly had Sergiev supported between them. The men resumed their sprint and, in moments, the massive, ragged gap in the citadel wall loomed before them.

The bombers were much louder now, almost deafening. Kabanov knew they must be almost directly overhead. His legs began to throb as a dull pain worked its way through the damping effects of adrenaline, but he kept on.

Seeing their prey leap over the rubble and out onto the bare mountainside, the pursuing mutants roared and screamed. Shots whizzed through the air all around the Vostroyans as they ran, slid or tumbled down the uppermost slope.

"Get to cover," shouted Kabanov over the vox. "Get into cover right now!" The roaring of the Marauder engines was joined by the whistling of bombs as they fell in their hundreds.

"Down, all of you!"

The mountain erupted like a volcano. Fire exploded in great pillars that thrust upwards from inside the walls. Then, with the massive outward pressure of the blast-wave, the walls themselves blew out.

After long millennia on the very crest of the mountain, the ancient citadel of Megiddzar, offering protection to local people since before the Age of Strife, was utterly obliterated.

Flaming rubble rained down from the sky.

Mount Megidde (South-east Face, 961m)

Kabanov shut his eyes tight and hugged his rocky cover until long after the cascade of stones had stopped. Then, slowly, he arose, shook off the debris that covered him, and began leading his men down the mountainside. He did not look back.

As he passed Vlastan, he didn't feel like speaking. Vlastan's mood,

however, was jubilant. “Stop and look for a moment, Maksim. Revel in our glory. We did it, man, you and I. We’ll be decorated for this. Decorated. Mark my words!”

As his friend spoke, Kabanov caught sight of Vlenin and Borsky carefully helping the one-legged Sergeant Sergiev down the difficult terrain.

Good troopers, thought Kabanov. All of them. And so many lost.

Vlastan hadn’t stopped. He stood, still crowing about honours and medals and all the worthless tin that men died for, and suddenly Kabanov had had enough.

Before he could stop himself, he’d raced over and gripped Vlastan tightly by the throat. His face twisted into a vicious snarl. “You make me khekking sick, Vogor, you know that? Don’t ever, *ever* compromise the lives of my men again!”

Vlastan was taken aback for only the briefest moment. Aristocratic indignation quickly took over. With a disgusted snort, he tried to knock Kabanov’s hand away, but he’d forgotten just who he was dealing with.

Kabanov moved in a blur—none who saw it could later demonstrate the technique—and before Vlastan knew what was happening, he was on his back with the wind knocked painfully from his lungs.

Kabanov stood over him, eyes aflame, poised to deliver a killing blow.

To a man, the Firstborn stopped and watched in statuesque silence.

Vlastan waited, heart racing, muscles tense, staring into his friend’s wild eyes. It was in those eyes that he saw a terrible rage being slowly, gradually mastered, and he knew the blow would never come. “Striking a fellow officer is a capital offence, Maksim,” he said softly.

“That’s not why I hesitate,” hissed Kabanov through clenched teeth. He rose, turned and continued his long march down the mountainside while the exhausted men behind him followed in heavy silence.

51 years later,

Seddisvarr Cathedral, Danik’s World

The God-Emperor towered over the congregation, dominating the cavernous interior of the cathedral, making even the largest of men feel almost microscopic by comparison.

It was a mere statue, of course, but it radiated an undeniable power over all present. The points of its stylised halo reached the frescoed dome some fifty metres above a white marble altar draped, today, in the rich red silks of a Vostroyan remembrance service.

While Bishop Zarazov, Twelfth Army’s senior ecclesiarch, droned on in his

gravelly bass tone about honourable servitude and the afterlife, Vlastan gazed at the Emperor's golden face in numb silence, waiting to be called forward onto the dais.

Hundreds of wooden pews had been removed from the cathedral hall so that every off-duty trooper in Seddisvarr could attend the service, whether they wished to or not. Almost two thousand men stood packed together, standing in silent respect for fallen comrades. Their breath misted in the freezing air of a space far too large to heat.

“And now,” said Bishop Zarazov, “if General Vlastan will approach the altar...”

Vlastan tore his eyes from the Emperor's golden face and willed his mechanical chair into motion, his brainwaves translated into spidery movements by the augmetic interface at the base of his skull. As the chair jerked its way forward, each metal claw struck the marble steps with a ringing sound that echoed loudly from the grey stone walls.

Vlastan was angrily conscious of the clatter. It felt disrespectful to make such a terrible din here, and it seemed to take forever to reach the lectern at the altar's side. In fact, it was only seconds before he faced it, his eyes on the red book that rested there.

Beside the book, which lay open, sat a gold inkpot and a single white quill. Vlastan leaned forward slowly, dipped the quill's nib in the ink and, with all the steadiness his ravaged body could muster, began to write in the book.

As he carefully scribed each letter, he felt the eyes of all those present upon him. One pair of eyes in particular burned hotter than most.

Grigorius Sebastev, that damnable upstart captain, stood with the remains of his shattered Fifth Company, his eyes stabbing at Vlastan from the front row. The old woman, the inquisitor to which Sebastev and his men had recently been assigned, had sent one of her Astartes giants too—a man whose unnatural proportions resembled no other in the cathedral so much as the great statue of the Emperor Himself.

A special honour for you, Maksim, thought Vlastan, to have a legendary Space Marine present at your remembrance. But then, you were something of a legend yourself.

He finished inscribing the last of the letters and rested the quill in the inkpot. Then, for a quiet moment, he sat unmoving, staring at what he'd written.

Colonel Maksim Kabanov, 68th Infantry Regiment (699—767.M41), KIA.

His eyes kept returning to the first of the words.

Here it ends, Maksim, he thought. A four-star general writes a colonel's

name in the Book of Remembrance, and fifty years of soldiering are over. I wonder if you ever resented it, that I made general and you did not. You must've known why. Old Tyrkin laid it out so plainly, that first day.

One of Vlastan's useless legs shuddered in a brief spasm, and he looked down at his ruined, artificially-sustained body.

I never hated you, Maksim. You saved my life twice, though our friendship was long dead that second time. I sometimes think you should have let me die. That's weak, I know. And, besides, that was never your style. The great White Boar left no man behind, eh? Only, here I am, and you are gone, and I find no victory in that.

He turned from the book and, as the clattering legs of his chair carried him back down the altar steps, found himself inexplicably angry, though whether at himself or at his old friend, he couldn't say. In his head, he imagined Maksim's voice. It said:

History will not be kind to you, Vogor.

Then, it was gone.

From his pulpit, Bishop Zarazov waited until the echoes of the chair's footfalls had faded, then lifted his hands and said, "Sanctioned hymn number two-six-six."

The cold air filled with the mournful sound of the *Cantus Militaris Deorum*.

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