

001_Voidsong

VOIDSONG

Henry Zou

THE EVENING CHILL comes quickly to the mountains of Sirene Primal. Already, the twilight made shadow puppets of the rumbling vehicle column, transforming them into boxy silhouettes against an ochre backdrop.

Captain Gonan of the 8th Amartine Scout Cavalry heaved himself above the roll cage of his half-track, panning the pintle-mounted stubber across the deep shadows of dusk. His convoy was rolling through yet another orchard village. Another ruptured settlement of paperbark pagodas, the walls of straw rotting with mildew and the roof tiles bearded with moss. In some places curtains of overgrown tea orchard clung to the frames of empty buildings, hiding any sign of settlement before the Secessionist Wars.

It was the tenth village that the captain's column had passed that day. Through the smoky haze of dusk, boredom and weariness dulled his senses. It was little wonder that Gonan did not see the armoured figure lurking within a rough bank of myrtle reed.

He never saw the shot that killed his driver. The snapping hiss of a lasrifles was followed by a blossom of arterial blood that misted the windshield. The driver, an inexperienced young corporal, began to screech in shock and hysteria, ramming down hard on the brakes of his half-track. Immediately, the slithering fde of a dozen vehicles collapsed into an awkward accordion as treads fought for purchase on the mountainous shale.

Above the shriek of brakes and throbbing engines Gonan began to yell. 'Contact! Enemy at left axis of advance!'

By then, the ambush was well and truly sprung. A scattering of lasrifles released their shots into the scout cavalry half-tracks. The AM-10 Hammer Goats indigenous to the Amartine 8th were two-ton buggies with rear caterpillar tracks and pintle-mounted heavy stubbers. Also dubbed AM-10 Scapegoats by virtue of soldierly cynicism, they were regarded as death traps for the two-man reconnaissance teams that operated them. Immediately, six Guardsmen were killed and two vehicles disabled before they could even react.

The second salvo of las-shots was followed by the thrumming war cry of fifty warriors erupting from ambush. Cold panic seized Gonan and for a moment he was paralysed by neural overload. In their full regalia of war, the secessionist fighters of

Sirene Primal were an awesome sight to behold. Three score were Khan-Scholars, tall, fierce-looking men, clad in hauberks of mosaic jade and armed with all manner of lance and flak-musket. Another dozen were pounding through the undergrowth in the tectonic armour of Symbolists, their salvaged lasrifles already discarded for spine sabres. Others still were Blade Artisans, charging with their robes of embroidered tapestry flared, like the wings of some great hunting bird.

Pandemonium followed. When the line of baying warriors collided against the left flank of the vehicle column, it did not in any way resemble the heroic battle murals so vividly brocaded on Symbolist robes. Instead, what unfolded before Gonan was the messy, ugly affair of men killing each other at close quarters.

An Amartine Guardsman was screaming and babbling as a Khan-Scholar beat him to death with the broken halves of his lance. A Guard sergeant grappled with a Blade Artisan for control of his halberd before sinking his teeth into the warrior's neck.

Captain Gonan had barely freed his bayonet from the ◊|-10's gun rack when a Khan-Scholar surged over the cowling of his vehicle. Gonan had never seen a more vicious predator. The warrior's mane of thick black dreadlocks flowed down to his calves and silver quills were threaded through his cheekbones. Around his torso was a hauberk of interlocking jade scales, worn brown-green in its antiquity, and that was where Gonan aimed his fighting knife.

He thrust thirty centimetres of steel just below the ribs, but the Khan simply stepped into the blow with a carnivorous grace and hooked with an open palm. The first strike smeared Gonan's nose across his right cheek in a burst of blood and mucous. Reflexively the Guard officer stabbed his bayonet into his opponent's kidney steel puncturing through the ancient jade. If the Khan felt anything, he did not show it. The next punch fractured Gonan's sternum and slammed him against the roll cage of his AM-10.

Gonan had no doubt that in a straight melee, the secessionist would dismantle

him piece by piece. The martial sects of Sirene embraced close combat as an art form. He understood now, why the Sirenese culture, so reverent of art and literature, would consider these fighters the greatest artists of all. From glaive dancing to the way of the mauling hand, these men were brutally beautiful to watch. It was suicide to fight them.

Instead the Guard officer drew the laspistol from his chest holster and emptied half a clip to his front. Gonan didn't know what happened next. He may have blacked out temporarily, but for how long he did not know. When the fog of concussion ebbed away, Gonan found himself on the mesh flatbed of his vehicle with a dead secessionist sprawled over him. He felt as if someone had just run a battle tank over his skull and for a moment was content to slip into the velvet black of unconsciousness.

But the sounds of hacking and stabbing soon roused his pain-hazed mind. All around was the killing. Loud and brutal. Gonan heaved the corpse off before pulling himself up behind the mounted heavy stubber. Legs still teetering, he collapsed to his knees before pulling himself upright again and racking the weapon.

'Firing now!' Gonan screamed, voice hoarse.

It was as if a secessionist chose that very moment to rival Gonan's warning with the thick avalanche of his own war cry. Thundering over the AM-10's windshield, the secessionist brandished his spine sabre. Tracking to meet his approach, Gonan thumbed the firing stud on the stubber's butterfly trigger. The stream of high velocity rounds hit his target so hard that the warrior snapped backwards and his sabre spun the other way.

Without pause, Gonan re-sighted the heavy stubber down the column of his convoy and fired again. A long enfilade burst this time. Mosaic armour exploded into chips and splinters as Gonan hosed lambent tracer into a dense maul of Khan-Scholars not more than ten metres to his vehicle's rear.

Despite the devastation wrought by a heavy weapon at point blank range, it was too late to turn the assault. Eight of the AM-10 Hammer Goats were wrecks, their occupants dragged out and butchered by the roadside. By his estimate, Gonan didn't have more than six men left, too few to mount any meaningful resistance. So he did what any Imperial officer should have done, he juiced out

the last rounds of his pintle weapon, drew his laspistol and staggered off his vehicle toward the killing.

BY THE TIME Imperial patrols came across Gonan's waylaid convoy, it was well into midnight. They found the body of Captain Saul Gonan horribly desecrated and staked upright on a lance, his men laid out in a neat row before him. They had been stripped of their boots and rifles, yet Captain Gonan still gripped an emptied laspistol in his fist. His eyes were still open.

It was a scene all too common across the wounded landscape of Selene Primal. Imperial and Secessionist forces alike were guilty of inflicting an almost theatrical barbarity towards one another. Entire Guard battalions were crucified while villages and refugee camps would be shelled in reprisal, fuelling a cycle of bitter conflict. Despite this, Imperial historians later argued that events which unfolded toward the latter stages of the war would render the atrocities of the Secessionist Campaign utterly inconsequential.

THE MOUNTAINS WERE treacherous at this time of year.

The polar equinox was at an end, and the ice caps were melting, sluicing great sheets of water and ice down the mountain paths. Thousands of people were migrating that day. The narrow defiles were swollen with caravans, baggage mules and the crush of toiling bodies. Hordes of refugees, the remnants of haemorrhaged villages and cities, and bands of weary secessionists were toiling over the icy spines of those mountains.

It was here that Inquisitor Obodiah Roth found himself, well into the fourth year of the guerrilla war. He had come here on dispatch from the Ordo Hereticus. The case itself was no matter of significance. The original briefing from the Ordo had read - mild psychic disturbances emanating from

Sirene Primal, priority - minor. It had never seemed like much to begin with.

Initial disturbances had first occurred eight months ago. Sanctioned psykers of the Imperial war fleet had sensed a strong psychic flux from the planet itself. Then reports from the neighbouring Omei Subsector began to surface. Astropaths of a missionary outpost on the tundras of Alipsia Secundus had slashed their throats, writing the name of the planet in blood, and silently mouthing Sirene Primal until death claimed them.

The phenomena had initially been dismissed as the psychic backlash of Sirene Primal's war. It was uncommon but not unheard of, for the anguish of billions in suffering to cause to coalesce into psychic disturbance. Scholars had named it a planetary swansong. Regardless, senior members of the Ordo had deemed the matter worthy of further investigation, an open and shut affair perfect for wetting the noses of virgin inquisitors. Or so it had seemed.

Sirene Primal had not always been like this. Set adrift on the Eastern Fringes of the Imperium, it floated like a muted pearl within the oceanic darkness of the universe. The last of the ancients had died aeons ago, their ossified remains forming mountains of colossal spines and plates. Upon them, Sirenese architects had raised the colonnades and flower-draped monoliths of their ziggurat-gardens.

It was a very different world now. Standing on a jagged tusk of rock, Roth watched the menacing shapes of Vulture gunships, prowling across the Sephardi Peaks as they hunted for targets. Higher up amongst the cloud vaults, Imperial Marauder destroyers hurtled like knife points through the sky.

Beneath him, the mountainous slopes swept into a rocky spur. Among the scree and rubble could be seen the glint of shell casings, and even the odd helmet. Further down the pass, the rusted carcass of a battle tank could be seen, submerged in a glacial melt. The cold air was cut with the smell of fuel.

Despite the icy chill, Roth had suited up in Spathean fighting plate. The form-fitting chrome was coated with a hoar of frost that bled vaporous curls into the air. Over this he framed a tabard of tessellating obsidian. The tiny panes of psi-reactive glass, although a potent psi-dampener, did little to insulate him against the temperature. He was cold and thoroughly miserable.

Yet his shivering condition was just another irritation on his long list of simmering anxieties. He had been on-world for close to a month now and no amount of investigation, research or cross-referencing had yielded any clue as to the cause of the psychic disturbances. While millions suffered, he was mousing about with the nuisances of some psychic irregularity that no one in the Ordo really cared about. He felt tired, drained and hopeless. It was, he thought with dry rumination, not a good start to his career.

'They're at it again, sire.' A voice, stern and patrician, jostled Roth out of his

brooding.

The man who had spoken was Bastiel Silverstein. One of Roth's best, a xenos game-hunter from the arboreous forests of Veskepine, Silverstein was right of course. A huntsman with augmented bioscope lenses was seldom wrong about such things. Already the target reticles oscillating on the pupils of his eyes had locked on the Marauder destroyers swooping in the distance.

Beneath the banking aircraft, spherical eruptions of fire and ash were accompanied by the unmistakable rumble of explosives, deep and distant. Even without Silverstein's optic enhancements, he could see that the Imperial Navy was bombing south-west of them.

Roth swore terribly.

There would be more killing today. Not the flattening of Chaos Legions, or the epic banishment of daemon princes that Roth had read about in the Scholam-Libraries of the Progenium. No. It would be the killing of more desperate, scared and malnourished refugees. The bombs would fall, people would die, and by sunset, the war would be no closer to finishing and Roth would be no closer to clearing his damn case.

As if to emphasis his thoughts, the keening hum of distant engines began to build sonic pressure. Looking up Roth spotted a Vulture gunship roaring down from a bar of clouds, two kilometres up and diving steeply. Roth's blood ran colder. He could almost anticipate what was about to occur.

From the surge of panic amongst the refugees down slope, they did too. No more than one hundred paces away from him the mountain defile was congested with a sea of malnourished faces looking skyward in mute fear. Most of the native Sirenese did not know what a Vulture gunship was, but they knew that the ominous shape in the distance was shrieking towards them.

His man Silverstein however, scoped it clearly, complete with a statistical read-out that scrolled down in the upper left corner of his vision. +++ Obex-Pattern Vulture gunship, VTOL sub-atmospheric combat aircraft. Organic weapon systems: Nose-mounted heavy bolter - Optional wing-mounted autocannons - Pod-racked double missile systems. +++

Silverstein looked to Roth, clearly concerned.

The inquisitor turned to his companion and mouthed the word 'wait'.

The gunship blurred past their jutting fist of rock, snorting jet exhaust. It sharply arrested its descent forty metres above the exodus, pivoting on the fulcrum of its tail. There it hovered on the monstrous turbines of vector thrust engines.

From his vantage point up the slope, Roth was almost at eye-level with the gunship. He watched with growing trepidation as half a dozen tendrils of rope uncoiled from the belly of its hold, reaching out like the tentacles of a waiting beast. Troops, bulky with combat gear, began to rappel down the steel cables.

Roth recognized them immediately as men of the 45th Montaign Assault Pioneers. Great shaggy men, broad and bearded, descending with shoulder-slung lascarbines. Their insulated winter fatigues lined with mantine fur and coloured in the distinctive grey and green jigsaw pattern were unmistakable.

He had been impressed, years before, when he had first studied the elite mountain troops in the Schola Progenium. Their engineering of trenches, field fortifications and bridges was renowned.

Amongst the death marshes of Cetshwayo in M609.M41, Assault Pioneers had spearheaded their advance through supposedly impenetrable terrain with a system of drainage dams and mobile pontoons. Their ingenuity resulted in a single division of Assault Pioneers overwhelming an estimated eighty thousand orks. Where all battles are won by manoeuvre, the men of Montaign paved the way.

Roth was not so impressed now, as he watched nine Assault Pioneers hit the ground and immediately form supporting fire positions. Fanning out into a loose arrowhead, they took a knee on the steep slope overlooking the refugees, lascarbines sitting firmly against the shoulder. By his side, Silverstein placed a gloved hand to his mouth in disbelief. Surely they wouldn't. But they did.

When they first opened fire, it was aimed above the heads of the people. Warning shots. Hemmed in between the ledge of the defile and the firers, people began to hurl themselves down the almost vertical slope in desperation. White-hot beams lacerated the air, fizzing and snapping.

'Do something!' Silverstein yelled.

In his shock, it took Roth a moment to realize the huntsman was talking to him. He was caught up watching the catastrophe unfold before him. The panic was total. A caravan was almost scuttled off the edge; a pack mule went over tumbling. The press of frightened refugees was pushing their own people down the pass, gathering momentum like a rolling landslide.

‘I know! I know! Just let me consider my options-‘ he began.

‘There aren’t any options! Just do something!’

Silverstein was right. He would have to improvise. Of course, making it up on the run was one of the rudimentary lessons taught to all Inquisitorial acolytes. His masters had called it aptitudinal adroitness, but it amounted to much of the same thing.

Brandishing his Inquisitorial signet in an upthrust hand, Roth broke into a run. The mountain sediment slipped and slid beneath him, pitching his run into a violent descent. He slid half of the distance and slammed his knees and elbows into the shale several times for good measure. Roth ended his skittering plummet with a flying leap over the scree bank, flailing briefly in the air before landing with a shuddering impact. He was right in the thick of it now.

‘Cease fire! Cease fire!’ he roared.

To the credit of the Guardsmen, their well-drilled fire discipline showed through. The whickering fusillade died out, but they didn’t lower their steaming muzzles. Roth was suddenly very aware of nine lascarbines trained on him.

‘Lower your weapons, I am Obodiah Roth of the Inquisition.’ Roth stressed the significance of his last word, thrusting his badge of office towards the troops.

As all soldiers would have done, they looked to their sergeant, a grizzly beast with the well-nourished build of a lumberjack. The sergeant, levelling his gaze on Roth, didn’t move.

‘Don’t listen to him lads,’ snarled Grizzly.

Roth breathed deeply. The still air was now heavy with the smell of burnt ozone. The gaping maws of nine las-weapons filled his vision. He didn’t realise when exactly the Sirenese behind him had stopped screaming, but they didn’t utter a

sound now. He could tell the sergeant was staring at the stout chrome-plated plasma pistol in his shoulder rig, daring him to make a move. Roth drew it.

‘Lower. Your. Weapons.’ Roth repeated.

‘Don’t be stupid now. We wouldn’t want there to be any accidents between us,’ replied Grizzly, his tone cold and even.

‘I have the authority’

‘And I have my orders, inquisitor. This isn’t your war.’

Roth’s pulse felt like a war drum. He could tell they were not going to see reason. They were forcing him to play his final hand and Roth had hoped it wouldn’t come to this. The inquisitor clenched his jaw and pointed up the mountain slope.

‘Sergeant. Up there, three hundred paces behind you, is a huntsman with a Vindicare-dass Exitus rifle. Don’t bother looking, he’s well hidden. What I can tell you, is that he was trained by the lodge-masters of Veskepine and I’ve seen him shoot the eyes off an aero-raptor in mid flight. Give him four seconds, he’ll put down half your squad. It’s your call Sergeant.’

‘You’re bluffing,’ said Grizzly, but his voice wasn’t so calm. This wasn’t his game anymore.

‘If you say so.’

There was a pause. Then the sergeant looked to his men and nodded reluctantly. Nine lascarbines were lowered to the ground. Far up the slope, a crop of slate rock and gorse weed juddered then moved. Bastiel Silverstein, in a fitted coat of dark green piranhagator hide unfurled himself from concealment. In his hands was a rifle, long and lean. Roth flashed his man the hand signal for stay alert and turned his attention back on the sergeant. ‘Sergeant...’

‘Sergeant Clais Jedda, 2nd battalion Airborne Sappers of the 45th Montaign Assault Pioneers.’

‘Sergeant Jedda.’ Roth repeated, letting the name hang heavily in the air before continuing. ‘What the hell are you and your men doing?’

‘Clearing a path, until you got in the way/ he replied, still defiant.

A path to where?’

‘Urgent priority mission. On orders from my battalion colonel. It’s none of your concern, inquisitor.’

‘You made it my concern, sergeant. If you tell me nothing, I will charge both you and your colonel for collusion of criminal activity. He would be very displeased, don’t you think?’ Roth had cornered him. He knew Jedda was the type of soldier who would rather risk ire from the Inquisition than the wrath of his commanding officer.

‘There’s nothing criminal here. These people are all potential threats. Two days ago we lost a patrol of Pioneers on their way to an AOI. Gone. Wiped out. I’m not taking any chances with my boys.’

AOI. Guard terminology for area of interest. Roth raised an eyebrow, ‘What area of interest, sergeant?’

An off-world landing craft. A four-man patrol picked up signs of a large metallic object in an ice cavern two kilometres west of here. Their last transmission confirmed it was a lander, frozen solid with snow. Must have been right under our noses since before the winter months.’

Roth was definitely interested now. The snow entombment meant it must have slipped past the planetary blockade at least six or seven months ago. Perhaps it was linked to the psychic disturbances, perhaps not, either way he would need to know more.

‘Sergeant Jedda. You will cease terrorising these people immediately. Furthermore, you will not fire at all, unless permission is granted.’

‘Permission...’ he was really caught off guard now.

‘Yes sergeant. Permission from me. I’m coming with you.’

THE SHIP WAS a merchant runner, entombed under a tongue of glacial ice. The burnt sepia of its painted hull appeared incandescent under the striated ice, almost aglow with lambent energy. A cavern formed its cradle, where it

slumbered in the throat of a frosty maw, framed by fangs of icicles.

The ship itself was a blunt-nosed cruiser about two hundred paces long, the hammerhead of its prow pockmarked with the scars of asteroid collision. Roth surmised by its squat boxy frame that it was a blockade runner, similar to the type favoured by illicit smugglers and errant rogue traders.

Roth and his team approached the ice cave down a narrow gorge, advancing slowly down the rock seam. The inquisitor led the way, auspex purring in his grip. Behind him, Silverstein and the Montaigh Guardsmen formed a staggered file with weapons covering every angle of approach. They reached no further than the shadow of the cave entrance when the auspex chimed three warning tones. A solitary target flashed on the display, half a kilometre from their position, almost right on top of the beached cruiser.

Roth signalled for a halt and lower. Sinking to a wary crouch, he squinted into the cavern with his plasma pistol primed. He took in the vastness of the cave, its immensity dwarfing the colossal docking hangars of Imperial battleships. Before him, towering colonnades of ice buttressed a vault ceiling of shimmering white-blue. Arroyos of melt water reached like veins across the cavern floor and forked through the grooves of snow dunes. Roth couldn't see a damn thing.

'Bastiel,' he hissed, almost at a whisper. The huntsman hurried to him, keeping low to the ground.

'Sire, what did you find?'

'Nothing. That's the problem. See what you can make of this.' Roth showed the huntsman his chiming auspex.

Silverstein lowered his Exitus rifle and scanned the cave, optiscopic eyes whirring and feeding data. He achieved a lock-on almost instantly. +++Solitary target, stationary. Height 1.5 metres. Mass density approx. 40-50kg. Target identification: Female, human 98% - Female, xenos 57% -Humanoid, other 36%. Target distance: 298.33 metres. Status temperature - ALIVE+++ 'Sire, I'm reading what appears to be a lady sitting on a snow dune, about three hundred metres to our front. What would you like me to do?' Silverstein asked.

'Nothing yet. Good job Bastiel.' Roth then turned around to face Sergeant Clais

Jedda and clicked once for his attention. ‘Sergeant, were there any women in the patrol which was lost here?’

The sergeant shook his head. ‘There aren’t any women in the Assault Pioneers, sah.’

Roth chewed his lip, a nervous habit he had never quite shaken off. Finally, he stood up and gave the hand signal for his team to do likewise. ‘Bastiel, we’re going to press on as before, but I want you to cover that target with your rifle. Make sure it never leaves your sights and tell me what you see. Clear?’

‘Clear, sire.’

With that, the team resumed its cautious advance, prodding through the snow. The ship’s ice mesa loomed closer and so did the lone figure at its base.

‘Sire, it’s definitely a woman. She’s seen us too and she has stood up.’ They were less than two hundred and fifty metres away now.

‘What do you see Bastiel? Tell me what you see.’

‘She’s young; I’d say no more than thirty standard. She has a weapon too. Some sort of polearm. Could be a secessionist, sire.’

Two hundred metres and closing. Roth’s eyes darted across the icescape, seeing a possible ambush behind every crest, every ridge. Despite the relentless cold, Roth was suddenly very glad for the frictionless trauma-plates that hugged his body.

‘She’s looking straight at me sire,’ reported Silverstein.

They were within one hundred metres now and Roth no longer needed Silverstein’s relay to see the young woman on the snow dune. He could tell she was slim, made slimmer by the brocaded sapphire silks that cascaded down her frame. Where the broad painted sleeves ended, her forearms were tattooed with verse after verse of war-litanies. She was unmistakably a Blade Artisan.

‘Kill her!’ urged Sergeant Jedda.

‘No! Stand down!’ Roth turned and snapped ferociously at the Guard squad.

Ahead, on the crest of the dune, the Blade Artisan had anchored her weapon in the snow: if not a sign of peace, then at least a gesture of armistice. The weapon was as exactly long as she was tall. It was a thin glaive, half of it leather-bound staff, half of it straight blade.

‘Come forth and announce yourself,’ she commanded firmly.

Roth was wary but recognized diplomacy as the greatest faculty at his disposal. He emulated her gesture by inserting his plasma pistol back onto its shoulder rig.

‘I am Inquisitor Obodiah Roth of the Ordo Hereticus, and these-,’ he said, gesturing to the men behind him, ‘-are servants of the God-Emperor.’

Tread lightly, inquisitor. I am Bekaela of the Blade and this ship is mine to guard.’

‘Was it you who slew the soldiers, who came here two days past?’

‘Ntil. The ship killed them.’

At this reply, Roth heard the thrum of lascarbines as the Guardsmen racked their weapons off safety.

Their blood was up and unless Roth could extract some straight answers soon, the situation would be out of his hands.

‘Blade Artisan, these men will shoot you soon, unless you tell us what happened.’

Bekaela did not seem at all daunted by his warning. ‘Shoot then, if you wish. But I have foresworn my oath to the Sirene Monarch. I have no quarrel with your soldiers.’

Very well then. What lies in that ship?’

‘Nothing. Everything. Sixteen moons ago, they came here to Sirene and claimed to be the Monarch’s children - his scions.’

It was not an answer he had been expecting. The Sirene Monarch, Roth knew, had been a cultural figurehead of Sirene, a tradition that harked back to the pre-

Imperial history of the planet. It had been the Sirene Monarch who had renounced Imperial dominion and ousted Lord Planetary Governor Vandt. Pre-war records had shown that when the isolated Imperial outposts and missions had been overrun, the natives certainly had no access to interplanetary travel and there had never been mention of the Monarch's offspring.

'Scions?' Roth asked.

Bekaela nodded. 'Yes, his children came in this ship, sixteen moons ago. The Monarch embraced his children and welcomed them home. It had been a grand ceremony; many clan-fighters had feasted there. I know because I was there too.'

The Sirene Monarch has been in hiding ever since the war began, if not dead,' Roth countered. He could sense something poisonous was at work on this planet and part of him did not want to believe it.

'He is not dead. I know where he hides,' Bekaela said.

That was almost too much information to digest at once. Since the beginning of the campaign, Imperial forces had been driven in relentless pursuit of the fugitive Monarch, slated as the spiritual leadership of the guerrilla insurgency. Hundreds of aerial bombing runs, thousands of infantry patrols had all amounted to nothing. But now this.

'Why would you give us this information?' Roth pressed.

'Because, I've seen what lies in that ship and if they are the Monarch's bloodline, then he is no Monarch of mine!' she proclaimed.

It only dawned on Roth then, that Bekaela was not guarding the ship from intruders. She was guarding against whatever lay within from getting out.

Sergeant Jedda, however, was not one to be convinced. 'It's a trap. That witch probably gave my boys the same speech before they got off d,' he growled. His men chorused in assent.

Roth was not so quick to make his conclusion. The significance of her story, if true, was far too monumental to dismiss. His duty as an inquisitor compelled him to investigate deeper. Stepping forward, slightly away from his team, Roth summoned a subtle wisp of mind force and gently probed her mind. Bekaela

tensed visibly from the intrusion.

‘What did you just do?!’ she hissed.

‘I was testing your intentions.’

‘Don’t do that again, or I’ll kill you and make it painful.’

Roth nodded sincerely. He would not. Besides, he already knew all that he needed to know. She was telling the truth, on both accounts.

‘My team and I, we must explore this ship.’

‘Then I will come with you,’ she said. Her tone brokered no argument.

‘So you are willing to aid us?’ Roth mused. ‘As an ally?’

‘No. I hate you. But I will help my people. They do not know what I know. I’ve been in that ship.’ ‘What’s in there?’ Roth asked. ‘You will see,’ was the answer.

THE SHIP WAS alive.

Or at least that was what Roth first thought. Wet ropes of muscle and pulsing arteries groped and twisted along the walls and mesh decking of the dormant ship. The air was nauseatingly warm and humid. It was as if something infinitely virulent and shapeless was incubating within the cruiser’s metal chassis.

Roth’s team had entered via a breach in the ship’s hull and found themselves in a disused maintenance bay. Banks of workbenches lined the walls where raw tendrils of flesh had begun to creep over them. In the upper-left corner of the ceiling, an enormous balloon of puffy flesh expanded and contracted rhythmically like a monstrous lung.

Further exploration of the ship’s corridors, deck and compartment revealed only more of its pulsating innards. The deeper into the heart of the cruiser they progressed, the thicker the infestation. The walkway that led to the ship’s bridge funnelled into an orifice of ridged cartilage. They could see no further, as a pink membrane of tissue expanded over the entrance.

‘Do you know where we are?’ Roth asked Bekaela.

‘Niil. I have never been beyond the first compartment. This place is cursed, it’s all bad following.’

Roth was not sure the Blade Artisan’s prognosis was the correct one, but it was apt enough. He moved toward the membrane, careful not to step in the pools of semi-viscous liquid that collected on the deck plating. He holstered his pistol and was in the act of gingerly reaching out to touch the organic membrane when all three auspexes in his team chimed simultaneously. Roth froze.

‘What’s the reading?’ he asked.

‘I’m getting multiple rapid movements converging on this corridor intersection,’ one of the assault pioneers reported.

‘Yes sir, I’m getting the same readings,’ another trooper echoed.

Roth about turned, drew his pistol and trained it on the inflamed flesh cavity that was once a t-junction.

‘Readings are too fast. I suspect we’re just picking up latent electrical currents from the ship’s circuitry,’ a third trooper added. They waited in tense silence.

Trooper Wessel, double time ten paces back and get me a new reading. We could be standing under an electrical hub,’ Sergeant Jedda barked.

With his eyes on the auspex and carbine hard against the shoulder, Trooper Wessel approached the intersection. He peered into the gloom, sweeping his auspex about to get a better reading.

The thing slashed out of the darkness so fast it severed Wessel’s spine and bounded off his corpse. Streaking through the air in a shower of blood, it landed on another trooper crouched within the corridor and eviscerated him too. An eruption of wild las-fire crazed the spot where the thing had been, but it was moving again.

‘What the hell is that?’ Roth shouted at Silverstein as his plasma pistol unleashed a mini-nova of energy down the corridor.

The huntsman tried to get a lock on the creature as it slammed into its third victim. He barely registered the profile of its blurring outline.

+++Target analysis: Xenos, Hormagaunt. Subspecies:

Unknown. Origin: Unknown. Hivefleet: Unknown -

Data Source: Ultramar (745.M41)+++

Tyranid,' Silverstein replied. With a spectacular shot that anticipated the creature's next running leap, he blew out its skull carapace with an Exitus round.

Another two shapes shrieked into the corridor, straight into the storm of fire laid down by Roth's team. The inquisitor aimed his pistol, ready to fire when it seemed like the world exploded behind him. The membrane plugging the ship's command bridge burst, and from the darkness surged a monster so tall it was almost bent double in the corridor. From its segmented torso, four bone scythes connected to hawser cables of muscle slashed like threshing sickles. As an inquisitor, Roth was privy to knowledge otherwise deemed heretical for others. Yet knowing the enemy and its power sometimes replaced ignorance with fear. Roth recognised the thorny frame of sinew and plate hurtling towards him and froze in shocked awe.

It was a genestealer broodlord and it was on him so fast he had no time to react. The only thing that saved him was Bekaela's glaive singing through the air to intercept the beast. The Blade Artisan pirouetted with a twirling downward stroke that severed one of the monstrosity's upper limbs. In reply, the tyranid speared her into the wall with a battering ram of psychic force.

Roth wasted no time in engaging the broodlord. He activated his Tang-War pattern power gauntlet and moved inside the broodlord's guard with a thunderous right-hook. The creature snaked back its torso with serpentine grace, evading the blow and swept in with its three remaining hook-scythes. Roth ducked, feeling an organic blade skip against the frictionless shoulder plate of his armour.

They fought on two separate planes. While their bodies raged, so too were their minds locked in a psychic duel. The tyranid was much stronger, its mind a tidal wave of raw, seething force. Roth was not a potent psyker, but what ability he had, he utilised well, sharpening and tightening his will into a poignard of deliverance. Although the broodlord's mind was like the staggering force of a blind avalanche, Roth's was the clean mind-spikes and mental ripostes of a Progenium-trained psychic duellist. It was like a death struggle between the

kraken and the swordfish.

On the physical plane, Bekaela struck again. She was barely conscious and fought purely from muscle memory. Spinning her glaive like a lariat she hoped she was aiming for the right target. The paper-thin blade sliced deep into the broodlord's flank, snapping through the corded muscle. The creature shrieked at a decibel so high, the ship quavered in empathy.

It was exactly the distraction Roth needed. Sensing the sudden gap in the genestealer's mental defences, Roth tightened his will into an atom of focus and surged through the slip in its psychic barrier. Once through, he exploded into a billion slivered needles, expanding infinitesimally outwards.

The broodlord died quickly. With it, the last of the hormagaunts in the corridor lost all synaptic control and were literally disassembled by gunfire. Yet as it expired, the broodlord's mental shell collapsed, plunging Roth into its mind, like a spearman breaking through a shield wall headlong through the other side. Roth was utterly unprepared for what happened next.

He saw a hive fleet, at the furthest edges of his mind's eye. He saw it looming larger, so ravenous and hungry. He felt, no, heard the psychic song that was drawing it closer, like a pulse, like droplets of blood rippling outwards in the ocean. The song was coming from Sirene Primal, a poisonous ugly sound that drove spikes into his psyker mind. A swansong. All at once, it fell into place like a crystal fragmenting in rewind. He saw the ship, and its genestealer brood, the children of the Sirene Monarch. He saw their minds pulsing in unison, calling to their hive, calling for salvation. The psychic vacuum shut down his nervous system and Roth's heart stopped beating.

'Sire! Can you hear me?!'

The voice wrenched Roth back into consciousness, wrenching him to the surface like a drowning man. The first thing he saw was Silverstein, the yellow pupils of his bioscope implants wide with concern. Had it not been for the huntsman's voice, he would have died standing up.

'Sire? You look bloodless,' said the huntsman reaching forward to steady Roth. The inquisitor, in a daze, brushed Silverstein off and fell against the cartilage tunnel, sliding down to his knees.

‘Kill it... kill him. Find him. Kill him,’ he murmured weakly.

‘Kill who?’

‘Kill the Monarch,’ Roth called, a little louder as he pulled himself up. The Monarch. Father of the brood.’

BEYOND THE SEPHARDI ranges, Imperial artillery was pounding the mountains to rubble and the rubble to dust. The steady krang krang krang of the batteries sounded like thousand tonne slabs of rockrete in collision. In the tomb-vaults below the mountains, deep within the arterial labyrinth, billions of ancestral caskets tremored under the brutal bombardment. Finally, down amongst their dead, the Sirene Monarch’s hidden legions would make ready for their last battle.

The assault on the Sirene tomb-vaults had started before dawn. To their credit, Imperial high command had been quick to react, with Lord Marshal Cambria personally overseeing the mobilization of a quick reaction force within six hours. Inquisitor Roth’s discovery had hammered a Shockwave through the campaign’s war-planners and they were eager to seize the initiative. The stalemate, it seemed, was about to be broken.

By the time the Sirenese sunrise had tinged the night sky a bruised orange, Assault Pioneers of the Montaigh 45th had breached the tomb underworld. Combined elements of the Kurassian Lance-Commandoes and five squadrons of the 8th Amartine Scout Cavalry, alongside three full battalions of Assault Pioneers had been committed to the operation.

It was all a decoy. The decisive strike of the assault had been the insertion of a kill-team directly into the Sirene Monarch’s last refuge, once secessionist forces were pre-engaged. Led by Inquisitor Roth and guided by Bekaela of the Blade, a platoon of Montaigh 45th and a squad of bull-necked Kurassian Lance-Commandoes had penetrated the cerebral core of the tomb complex. Precision breach charges rigged up by airborne sappers had seen to that.

The kill team now prowled beneath a monolithic vault of basalt. According to Bekaela’s hand-sketched schematics, which Roth had committed to memory, it was the Monarch’s atrium. The walls were so thick and black with age they seemed to absorb sound and light. Of the distant sounds of combat, Roth heard nothing. Even their long-range vox-sets were dead.

It was the oceanic silence that unsettled him most.

The atrium was so very still, dark and quiet. A white bar of sun lanced from the soaring heights of the ceiling, laying down a smeared ghostly light. But it wasn't just the silence that was unsettling, there were those damned pools of water too, Inquisitor Roth seethed to himself. There was water everywhere.

From enormous bowls to dishes, troughs and ponds, basins and urns, everywhere Roth looked he saw stagnant bodies of water stretching into the deepest shadows of that chamber. Most of the pools had developed a slick surface of green algae, and others were scattered with pale lotus blossoms; all of them sat stagnant and silent.

'When the Sirene Monarch meets the boys of the Montaigh 45th, I want it to be the most traumatic experience of his life!' Sergeant Jedda's call clapped through the still air. The Guardsmen all roared in unison.

Despite his failings, Jedda was a natural troop leader. As an inquisitor, Roth was glad the Imperium had men like Sergeant Clais Jedda to unleash upon its enemies. The kill-team broke into a run now, cutting for the throne chamber that lay beyond.

Falling in step behind Roth was Bastiel Silverstein. He toggled the target lock of his hunting crossbow to active and loaded a prey-seeker missile. The light polymer sleekness of a Veskepine arcuballista was ideal for tunnel assault. Running point was Bekaela, who was now dressed in the Sirenese regalia of vengeance. Her face was painted a leering mask of white and crimson, symbolising the witch-ghosts who claimed the dead. Her sapphire robes were cinched tight by a waist belt, woven from the hair of slain enemies and a flak-musket was slung over her shoulder.

Racing down the thousand-metre walkway, Roth's retinue finally emerged into the Sirene throne chamber. The room was vast, humbling even the impressive scale of the antechamber. Basalt walls and pillars of thickly veined marble soared up into the heavens, the ceiling completely lost from sight. A path of jade flowed down the centre of the throne room, flanked on either side by legions of waterbearing vessels. Once again, Roth noted there was water everywhere. He didn't have time to ask Bekaela why.

'The patient court of the Sirene Monarch bids you welcome,' a smooth

androgynous voice announced. The source of the voice came from powerful vox-casters set into the arms of the Monarch's jade throne. Upon that throne sat the Monarch himself.

He wore a high-collared gown of ruby red silk, the hem and sleeves spilling out for several metres from his throne. His hands, folded demurely upon his lap, were capped with long needles of silver. None could look upon his face for a veil of pearls shimmered down his onion-domed crown. The Monarch's ten dozen scions were arrayed below his throne in seated tiers, a chilling calm instilled by their impassive stares.

The aura of ethereal dignity was so great, Roth noticed, that some of the troops lowered their guns and gazes involuntarily. Roth, on the other hand, raised his chin and stared deep into the pearl veil.

The Ordo Hereticus is here to bury you,' he shouted in reply.

The choir of sons arrayed below the Monarch rippled with shrill chortling. They were exactly as Bekaela had described in the pre-op briefing.

Eunuchs, all of them. Slim and effete, all were clad in ankle-length gowns of pastel silk, pinks and purples and creamy jades. They appeared human enough, but even at a distance Roth could see their coral pink skin, semi-opaque and laced with delicate red veins.

Curiously, all of their left hands had been amputated. The gold-capped stumps of their forearms were attached to thick tendrils of silk cord. The long braids forming a muscular rope of fabric over a metre long. Like some bizarre pendulum, at the end of each length interwoven knots formed a fist-sized sphere of silk.

Roth could not gauge the symbolic significance of these amputations. Dimly, he remembered archival files regarding the Tyrant of Quan, on the fringes of the Tuvalii Subsector. Such was his fear of assassination, the Tyrant had ordered all who entered his court to don fluted gauntlets of glass. The flutes of those fragile gloves had been chased with acid and shattered under the slightest force. So great was his paranoia the Tyrant had even forced his three thousand wives to wear them in his bedchambers. Alas, Roth remembered with a glimmer of dark humour, those gloves did not save him from the mouth dart of a Callidus assassin.

However, if the Monarch was offended by his brazen threat, his veiled visage offered no sign. Instead his soft sexless voice emitted through his throne-casters, emotionless and measured.

‘I cannot allow that,’ he stated, rising from his throne.

The air immediately grew brittle and cold. To Roth’s right, Bekaela’s glaive went slack in her grip and her eyes glazed over. To his left, Bastiel Silverstein moaned softly.

‘Witchery!’ Roth raised his plasma pistol a millisecond too late. A psychic bolt exploded from the Monarch, warping the air around it into an oscillating cone. It tore through Inquisitor Roth and threw him thirty feet down the ivory path in a spray of blood and black glass. The psychic aftershock rippled through the room like a stone in a pond, coating every surface in a thick rime of frost.

The mind blow would have liquefied any normal man. But Obodiah Roth had a trump card. The glinting hauberk of psi-reactive crystal had absorbed the brunt of the psyker’s power. As shards of black glass scattered in a blizzard around him, Roth realised the armour would not survive another psychic attack. And neither would he. Blood and bile oozed from his mouth and nose in thick strings. His head swam and he could barely see.

Dimly, he could hear the chatter of gunfire, as if very far away in the distance. He could hear Silverstein yelling but he couldn’t make out the words. The only coherent thought in his mind was that the Monarch psyker must be temporarily weakened from his tremendous mind blast. That gave Roth a few seconds to nullify him before he gathered the strength to finish them all off.

He looked up, fighting down the urge to vomit. The world appeared at a slant. The Monarch’s scions had formed a phalanx around him. As one, they dipped their long silk pendulums into the many water vessels in the chamber, letting the water soak into the fabric. The innocuous silk spheres instantly become heavy flails.

‘Sly bastards,’ Roth hissed through a mouthful of broken teeth. To his flanks, the Guardsmen continued to rake a steady stream of las-rounds at the Monarch’s scions. ‘I’ll bet my balls that they’re wearing armour under those gowns too,’ Roth laughed darkly to himself. Some of the scions were slammed off their feet by the kinetic force of the shots, only to get back up and continue charging the

inquisitor's team.

'Fix bayonets!' someone, somewhere, shouted. The voice was washed with distortion to Roth's trauma-shocked ears.

Assault Pioneers did as commanded, forming a staggered rank of fighting blades. The Kurassian Lance-Commandoes drew their serrated short-swords, howling and clashing the weapons to armoured chests. Together they met the charge of the scions.

Roth staggered to his feet, fighting to regain his balance as a eunuch stormed down the ivory path toward him. Bastiel Silverstein's polished boots suddenly filled Roth's vision, as the old retainer stood over the dazed inquisitor. The xenos game hunter aimed his crossbow. He had swapped to a rapid-fire cartridge, designed to bring down swift moving game. On automatic, Silverstein could empty all twelve bolts into his assailant in three seconds. He needed only one. A salvo of bolts tore out the eunuch's face, the neural toxins causing the assailant to spasm so hard his spine broke. He dropped to the floor, his one hand locked into a flexing claw.

'Are you good? Are you good?' Silverstein screamed at the inquisitor.

Roth finally found his footing and nodded vaguely.

'Stop fussing over me and snipe that psyker bastard already,' Roth managed to gasp.

'Can't draw a bead. He's got some sort of force generator. The kill-team almost bled their ammunition dry trying to crack him open. We'll have to get in close,' said Silverstein.

Roth grimaced and ran a hand over his bloodied face. 'Well he's thought of everything then, hasn't he? Cover me.' The inquisitor shook his head once more to clear it. There was a dark spot in his left field of vision and he hoped his brain wasn't haemorrhaging. Casting all doubt aside, he lifted his right hand. The one clad in a slim-fitting gauntlet of blue steel. A Tang War-pattern power gauntlet. The weapon hummed with a deep magnetic throb, the disruption field sparking like a blue halo.

Breaking into a run, he made straight for the throne. Assailants appeared in the

corners of his vision but Silverstein's covering fire was lethally efficient. The streaks of grey slashed over his shoulder and head, one passing so close to his face he could feel its passing and hear its viper-like hiss. The bolts intercepted the scions as Roth ran their deadly gauntlet, down the ivory path towards the throne.

The inquisitor kept a mental count of each bolt as they flew past until finally, he counted the full twelve. Silverstein would need to reload. He was only a scant ten paces away from the throne; the Monarch still slumped in his seat recovering when a eunuch threw himself at him.

Roth turned, his reflexes still sluggish from his mind thrashing. Howling, the eunuch whipped the silk flail into his lower ribs and Roth exhaled a painful jet of air. He tried to bring his plasma pistol to bear but the flail lashed in again, this time snapping into his hand. My hand's broken, Roth thought numbly, adding it to his long list of injuries as the pistol slipped from broken fingers.

Eager for the kill, the eunuch pressed his advantage. The silk flail's trajectory arced toward Roth's head. With more luck than timing, the inquisitor slipped under the blow and drove his power fist into the eunuch's chest. The gauntlet's disruption field flared into a bright corona of light as he drove his hand clean through the Eunuch's chest. His assailant simply dropped onto his rear and slumped over backwards.

Knowing he had no time to spare, Roth spun on his heels and turned on the Monarch. The psyker was almost at full strength. Already he had forced himself onto his feet, his eyes turning into milky orbs as he gathered his will for another psychic bolt. The temperature was dropping like a countdown timer. Roth had all of one second to react before he was dead.

'Now!' cried Inquisitor Roth as he launched himself at the psyker. Extending his power fist, he rammed the weapon into the Monarch's invisible force bubble. As disruption field met force field there was a static shriek and a blossoming wall of blinding light. Then the jade throne's force generator blew a fuse. The force field shattered, air filling its void with a low thunderclap. Roth flew himself flat before the throne.

Bastiel Silverstein emptied all twelve bolts into the Monarch in three seconds flat. At fifty paces, every bolt found its mark and pinned the psyker to his throne

like a broken marionette. Almost as an afterthought, Bekaela's flak-musket spat a cone of flechette at the corpse, stitching it with smoking holes.

Then it was over, as quickly as it had begun. Except for the cordite hiss of gun smoke, and the baying of the Kurassian Lance-Commandoes as they took the eunuchs apart, the battle was over. The metallic scent of blood and gunfire filled the chamber.

Inquisitor Obodiah Roth picked himself up and brushed himself off. He coughed and spat a bloody tooth at what was left of the Monarch. Bending down, he slapped the Monarch's veiled crown with a backhand.

A face of sharp alien angles stared back at him with dead eyes. Dead dark xenos eyes. The ridged forehead was streaked with blood and his slack mouth was a nest of teeth, like translucent needles.

'Genestealers,' said the inquisitor.

Wearily, he turned to his team and the carnage before him. During his tenure as an interrogator, Roth had survived a clutch of firefights. His mentor, Liszt Vandevern, had been a prolific field inquisitor who believed a raid would always reap more answers than clinical investigation. Before his thirtieth year, Roth had skirmished with half a dozen heretic cults, and even besieged the compound of a narco-baron on the death world of Sans Gaviria. But none of that could compare to the brutality of a close-quarter firearms assault.

The throne room was a butcher's hall. Most of the bodies were dressed in gossamer silks, thrown in disarray like crushed butterflies. Dozens of immense water vessels had been upturned or shot through, flooding the chamber with a pane of rosy, blood-tinted water. Other bodies scattered about were in either Montaigh or Kurassian battledress. Nearest to Roth, a Kurassian commando had died sitting up, the fingers of his gauntlet locked around the throat of an enemy. The Guardsman had been shot over a dozen times, but he had not released the chokehold.

Around Roth, his kill-team moved quickly from body to body. It seemed to him that they were but going through the motions, high-powered weapons at close proximity rarely left survivors.

'Sire - we have a live one sire,' Silverstein said.

Roth snapped out of his post-conflict daze and realised Silverstein had been standing at the base of the throne for some time, calling repeatedly. He followed the huntsman, sloshing through the pink water towards a huddle of Guardsmen with their weapons raised. As the circle parted for the inquisitor, they revealed a scion sitting wounded on the chamber floor.

It was genetically more man than xenos, Roth recognized that immediately. Yet nestled within the brow of its orbed forehead, its eyes were like iridescent pools of black oil devoid of any human quality. Most startling of all was the creature's parody of symbiote weapons. Up close, the silk flail, damp and glistening was not unlike a muscled mace appendage. Its right sleeve was torn, unveiling a hand fused to an obsolete machine pistol, brown with well-worked grease. The flesh and fingers were smeared like wax into the heavy calibre pistol, whether by coincidence or design to resemble some organic biomorph.

'It can talk, sire,' said Silverstein, nodding towards the creature.

The scion had taken the stray round of a Kurassian shotgun. Its left leg was peppered with bleeding perforations and pockmarked with powder burns. It looked up, met Roth's gaze and smiled mockingly, revealing clusters of quill-like teeth.

Perhaps if Roth had been older, wiser and more patient he could have dealt with the matter by more tactful means. But as it was, Roth was none of those things. The inquisitor simply pounded forward and snagged the scion's collar in his fist.

'How long has this planet been infected?!' Roth screamed into the creature's face.

'Why does it matter?' the scion replied, his vocal cords cut with a coarse alien inflection.

'Because I asked you!' shouted Roth. He hauled down on the scion's embroidered collar, slamming its head into the marble floor. The creature came up snorting water out of its nostril slits and started to laugh, a thrilled harmonic peal that bounced around the chamber walls.

Bekaela appeared by Roth's side and laid a hand on his shoulder. 'Kill him. Just kill him and be done,' she said.

‘Not until it answers me!’ hissed Roth. Still tight in his clinch, he manhandled the creature, jerking the scion from its seated position and forcing it down on its wounded side. The action elicited a shuddering exhalation of agony. Satisfied, Roth repeated the question again. ‘How did it start?’

Three generations ago,’ the scion snarled through its teeth. ‘Our fathers came to Sirene as missionaries to spread the seed of the great family and his blessed children.’

In truth, the admission did not surprise Roth. It was almost elementary. Sirene was a frontier world and missionaries had been the only true Imperial outposts on the planet. Incidentally, those clerics and ecclesiarches were also the only ones to access warp-capable vessels.

‘It was perfect,’ crooned the scion. ‘By seven winters of equinox, Sirene’s firstborn prince was of blessed blood. He was the father of fathers. When He ascended the throne, this world was ours for the taking.’

‘When did the taint spread to the rest of Sirene?’ Roth asked through gritted teeth.

‘Patience, patience. I’m getting to that,’ chortled the creature. It was clearly enjoying the narrative, drawing itself up theatrically. ‘We did not need to, you see. The martial sects had always chafed under Imperial occupation and when our Monarch declared rebellion, they were our herd and we their shepherd. With the sect warriors under our banner, the rest of the Sirenese followed quietly enough.

‘We set about purging all Imperial influence from this realm. Sect-Chieftains who were resistant quickly became silent when their wives were poisoned and denounced as conspirators. There were a thousand public executions of Imperial loyalists each day for many years. The Sirene renaissance was endemic.

The PDF did not even try to fight but we cleansed them anyway. Soft and idle, they were civic militia drawn from the ranks of poets, sculptors and merchants, for no sect fighter would ever debase himself by devotion to the Imperium. Any Sirenese in the PDF uniform of tan brocades and gilded tall-helm was a traitor. When the executions started, they barely knew how to operate their autorifles. Most of their weapons were still wrapped in the soft plastic covers they were delivered in.

They died so quickly. On the Isles of Khyber the blessed children killed an entire division of them in one day. Can you believe it? Twelve thousand loyalists lined up and buried alive. Oh, it was a golden age.'

At this Bekeala interjected, her eyes red and watery with rage, 'Enough! We do not need to hear this. Let me kill him!'

'One more thing,' growled Roth as he pulled the scion's grinning visage close to his face. The psychic backlash, the planetary swansong. Your brood is responsible...'

'I am surprised you belittle yourself by asking,' it said smugly.

Roth released the scion and took a step back. He let the answer settle heavily on his chest and sink into the pit of his stomach. Like the final stroke of an oiled brush, the painting was complete. He had resolved the matter for the ordo, but it would be a pyrrhic victory. It was already too late for Sirene Primal.

'Absolutely correct psyker. It is far too late. Our choir has been singing to the family, calling out to the warp and the family answered our call.'

Looking down, Roth drew his sidearm in anger. He had slackened his guard and the xenos breed had gleaned his surface thoughts. 'How long do we have?' asked Roth, reasserting his question with an octave of psychic amplification.

The scion simply rolled back his head and laughed. His laughter came in great shrieking bursts, resonating with the thunderous acoustics of a cyclopean hall. It was all too much. Roth took aim with his pistol. His finger slipped inside the trigger. Yet before he applied pressure, the scion's face threw out a great crest of blood.

Roth lowered his weapon, breathing heavily. Bekeala was by his side, her silver glaive streaked with strings of crimson gore. She was terrifying. The paint on her face smeared with sweat and fury, a daemonic visage melting down her cheeks. At her feet the scion lay, a cloud of bright red hazing the water and forming a halo around its skull.

But the laughter did not abate. Long after the scion was dead, the laughter continued to toll through the chamber.

THE ANNALS OF Imperial history would not be kind to Sirene Primal. It was recorded in M866.M41 that a xenos armada known collectively as a hivefleet entered the Orco-Pelica Subsector. On the most urgent warning of an Inquisitor Obodiah Roth, all senior officers and dignitaries were evacuated. The Imperial Navy was ordered to withdraw, regroup and re-engage. Sporadic reports from retreating naval forces described the incursion as a seething wave of oblivion.

On Sirene Primal, seventy thousand Guardsmen of Montaigh, Kurass and Amartine dug in on the rugged

Sephardi ranges to stall the xenos advance. It is said, that within three months the mountains had been transformed into a sprawling network of artillery palisades, tunnelled barbicans and interlocking firing nests. Once the xenos made landfall, the Guardsmen were expected to hold out for eight weeks. They lasted less than five hours.

The ensuing campaign to reclaim the subsector is itself a historic epic worthy of narrative, but of Sirene Primal there was no more. In the end, the lonely jewel on the Eastern Fringes became little more than a smudged ink record in the forgotten archives of Terra.