

WARHAMMER
40,000

A SHORT STORY FROM THE *PLANETKILL* ANTHOLOGY



MORTAL FUEL

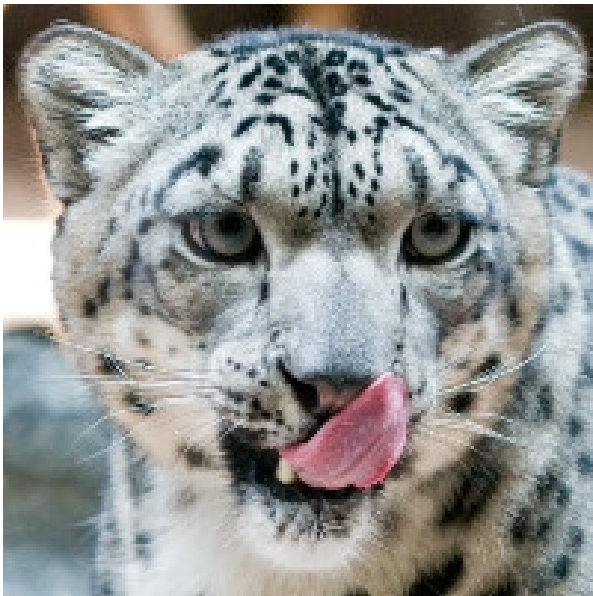
RICHARD WILLIAMS

Mortal Fuel

A Relentless Short Story from "Planetkill"

Written by Richard Williams

Created by



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THE PATRIARCH WATCHED as the young man named Asphar was brought in. He paused for a moment at the threshold; the patriarch could see him quickly assess his surroundings. This one was not careless. Good, good, the patriarch thought, they had chosen well with this one. He motioned for the youth to sit by the furnace. Asphar did so, head lowered in respect. The patriarch smiled, this one did not lack faith either. When Asphar finally glanced up, the light from the furnace burned in his eyes. Yes, the patriarch concluded, this one would do. But first, before he could be ready, he had to understand why.

'When our ancestors were first brought here,' the patriarch began, 'they saw this world from space and they named it Bahani, meaning "Blue". For when they came here the deserts were oceans, the

winds were soft and the land swelled with fruit and grain. Our people thought this was the great reward from the Emperor, and so they helped the masters, the Imperial men, to build their towers and their factories. We served them willingly, never knowing that they would cloud the skies, boil away the seas and turn the air to smoke.'

'Now, all we eat is brought in crates from other worlds. All we make is taken away. Our world has been stolen from us, shipment by shipment, and we helped them destroy us at every step. That is our sin, the sin for which you must be our absolution. So that the Emperor may turn to us once more and grant our people life, even after this world has died.'

'Will you do so? Will you be one of the swords of our absolution?'

'On my life. On my soul,' Asphar swore.

Then here is your path...'

MIDSHIPMAN MARCHER SQUINTED into the wind. It had blown up quickly, quicker than anyone in the landing party from the Relentless had expected. It had only taken a few minutes after the transport landed to open the airlock, but in that time the wind had swept up from a bluster to a full force gale. They had landed at the very edge of one of the cities on Bahani's western continent, on top of a range of cliffs overlooking ranks of structures on the plain below. If he should fall off the cliff, it would be a premature end to his career. He took another step towards the control spire ahead of him and stumbled, blown back several paces by the wind.

'Emperor's arse!' he cursed, and then spluttered as the grit in the air blew into his mouth.

The vox crackled in his ear, but he couldn't make out the transmission. Probably Lieutenant Roche, sitting safe back on the transport. Marcher knew he was supposed to respect his superiors, but that one never put himself in the least risk if he could avoid it. That was not the behaviour Marcher expected from an officer. Marcher sat up and peered into the storm. He had gotten himself turned around. The shadows of buildings loomed all around him, giant, long buildings, channelling the dust so that it buffeted him from every side. In one direction though there was movement. It was a man, his cloak wrapped around him tight, coming to his aid. He pulled Marcher to his feet and guided him steadily into the lee of one of the buildings. Marcher shook the worst of the dust off his uniform. The man rolled down the cloth across his face. He was a Bahani, but he bore Imperial rank-tattoos. A foreman, most likely, probably promised a seat on the departing convoy in return for his loyalty.

Tensions were high between the hundreds of Administratum officials in the process of decommissioning the Imperium's assets and the millions of indentured workers that they were to leave behind. It meant an end to the tithes; no longer would they have to labour within the mega-processing plants or on the vapour-ships evaporating seawater to extract the minerals it held. They would be free, or at least as free as any man could be in this dark galaxy. But, more than anything else, theirs would also be the freedom to starve, to fight and to die. Every industry on Bahani was devoted to the extraction of raw materials that other worlds craved and the Administratum and their indentured workers had systematically boiled the seas and eviscerated the land over the millennia of their occupation. Now, the Imperium had taken all it could and was moving on; the workers had only just realised that the Imperium's plans, though, did not include them. There had been protests, fighting, even assassinations.

'The storms here along the coast, they whip up quick, but they never last long,' the foreman said. 'Listen, they already dropping.'

'Coast?' Marcher asked, surprised. Are we on the coast? I didn't see the ocean when we were landing.'

'Coast is just our name. No ocean here for long time now. Look now, there, you can see.'

The storm had nearly died away completely. Marcher looked out over the cliffs at the city below, except that it wasn't a city. Not of buildings and people at least. The structures he had seen when they landed, they were ships. Huge factory ships, old and gutted, their hulls pock-marked with rust. There was rank upon rank of these hulks, settled, immovable, upon the salty plain.

'My grandfather,' the worker continued, 'he said that this used to be the deepest part of the Great Western Sea. That is why all the vapour-ships, they ended up here. To finish off the last of it.'

These cliffs, these hills, were once islands, and before that mountains, but hidden deep within the sea. It barely seemed possible.

Another crackle of the vox shocked Marcher from the sight. The foreman led him into the control spire. Marcher stepped inside and was hit by a wall of noise. The interior floor rose up in a great spiral to the top. People were everywhere, workers mainly. Administratum and Munitorum officials, distinctive in their uniform, were dotted around: directing, shouting, ordering, entreating the workers to fetch and carry, load and push. No sooner had a controller moved away from a piece of equipment then it was grabbed, dismantled, boxed and loaded onto the cargo trolleys rolling down around the far edge.

The foreman pointed Marcher in the direction of the ranking official, Governor-Adept Kaizen, who was pacing down around the inner curve of the spiral dragging a train of human servitors in his wake.

Take that. That's done.' Kaizen fired orders like an autocannon. 'No, no delay for this schedule. I've approved this already. No to

this. No to this. This is acceptable. This one, there is an error in the contingencies, rework it-'

'Governor Kaizen!' Marcher shouted, striding as quickly as he could to keep pace with the governor and his retinue.

This one is fine. Halve the schedule for this, he always pads his estimates. Get it done. Get it done. Who are you?'

'I am Midshipman Mar-'

'You're here for your cargo. Follow me. Keep up. Keep up.'

Governor Kaizen increased his pace as he headed down the spiral further. Marcher decided to let propriety go hang and broke into a trot to keep up.

'My lieutenant sends his comp-' Marcher began.

'I know you Navy men like your formalities, but I am in the midst of the final disentanglement of our presence on this entire planet. An operation of which I am the centre, the core, the nexus, the overmind. So do excuse me the formalities, for I have no time, no time.' 'Yes, governor.'

'Here,' Kaizen said, drawing up to the side of a pit. 'Here is your cargo.'

Marcher looked down. A sea of human faces looked back up.

'Sign this.' Kaizen slapped a data-slate into Marcher's hand.

'I think the lieutenant should be-'

'No time. No time. Sign it.' Marcher did so. Kaizen took the data-slate, tore off the top sheet and handed it back to Marcher.

That's yours. Take it. Keep it.'

Marcher read what he had signed. It was a recruitment order. The men in the pit below had just been freed from their service to the Administratum and instantly bonded once more, this time to the Navy. They were to serve out their time in the work-crews on the lowest decks of the Relentless. Conditions were poor, mortality

rates were high, these men were to be the mortal fuel the Relentless consumed. And they were volunteering. Better the bowels of a Battlefleet warship than what remained for them on Bahani after the Imperium left.

Three hundred men, Governor?'

'Three hundred, fifty-seven. More than we expected. Men, women, somewhere in between, your captain's request did not specify.'

'It was from our first officer, Commander Ward. Our captain died several months ago.'

'Still no replacement? Sloppy man management in the Battlefleet, always said so. Wouldn't be acceptable in logistics. No, not at all.'

One of the servitors, a vox-unit built into its head, chirped. Its eyes unfocused and rolled back into its head as it opened its mouth to relay a message.

'Governor, this is a security alert. We are under attack. Locals are massing at the main gate. A vehicle has breached the southern perimeter and is heading straight for the control spire. '

'The control spire?' Kaizen said, his voice rising. 'I'm in the control spire! Call out the reserve squads; I want every one of them guarding this entrance...'

Marcher watched as Kaizen continued barking orders at the passive servitor who was faithfully relaying them to the security detail. Marcher noticed, however, what Kaizen hadn't, that all the workers around them had started to run. They weren't running from the main entrance, though, they were running directly away from the Governor. Marcher heard a noise from outside, an engine, roaring closer and closer. They weren't going for the entrance, the midshipman realised, they were coming straight through the-

The vehicle, a heavy loader weighed down with metal plates welded on as armour, crashed through the spire's wall. Marcher

had already taken a hold on the Governor and yanked him out of the way as the loader ground to a halt, buried under the debris.

Brilliant sunlight streamed into the gloomy spire, as Bahani gunmen clambered through the breach in the wall. One of them clambered onto the loader's cabin and levelled an autorifle at the Governor's servitors still milling around in confusion.

'I will not have this,' Kaizen complained beneath Marcher. 'I will not have this operation disrupt-'

The shots interrupted Kaizen in mid-flow. A servitor fell beside them, its head a mess of blood and bone. Marcher's navy pistol was in his hand and he shot back. The head of the gunman snapped to the side and he fell. There were shouts from above as the guards at the entrance realised what had happened and redeployed. The Bahani gunmen pouring in found themselves being shot at from the levels above and began to duck behind cover to return fire. Marcher dragged Kaizen further from the firefight behind the lip of the pit. The crowd of people inside had heard the shots and wailed and screamed for their own lives.

One of the Bahanis saw them move and crouched up, a grenade in his hand, ready to throw. A shot somewhere above caught him. Too late. Marcher watched as the grenade sailed up into the air straight towards him. There was no time to run; his mind froze, but his body moved. He snatched the data-slate from Kaizen's unresisting hand and took a mighty swing and felt the solid contact as the data-slate smacked the grenade away. It flew back out through the breach and exploded with a heavy krump. It was then that Marcher's mind clicked in and he realised what a stupendously stupid thing that had been to do. The mere impact alone might have set the grenade off in his face.

'Well done, midshipman.' Kaizen pulled Marcher back down into cover. 'Good job protecting your cargo.'

Kaizen took the data-slate back from Marcher's unresisting hand and peered at it. 'I'd check them anyway if I were you, as I believe you've invalidated your receipt.'

THE YOUNG BAHANI named Asphar gritted his teeth as the lifter rocket struggled against the planet's gravity and the pressure piled upon his body. Though he could feel himself being crushed, he was not scared. They had told him that this would happen. Had told him to expect it. He had not been scared when they had closed the cargo container lid upon him; not even when they had taken him to see the patriarch who had explained the mission he was to undertake. One of the Bahani's young starwarriors, the patriarch had called him; one who would cleanse the sins of all the Bahani people in the eyes of the Emperor by punishing His false servants. That was the Imperial men, Asphar knew, who had come to Bahani using the Emperor's name but then had despoiled His gift to them.

The Bahani people had been blind to it, the patriarch had explained, but their eyes had been opened in time. This last shipment was to be the vehicle of the Emperor's wrath upon them and Asphar was to be His herald. Then, when their mission was complete, the Emperor would guide them home as heroes.

They had chosen only the best, the patriarch had told him that. Asphar was the best of his class, the smartest, the fittest, the most faithful. It was no immodesty to say so; he rejoiced in the gifts that the Emperor had given him. And so, even as the lifter rocket threatened to shake itself apart, he forced himself to unclench his teeth and begin to pray. He would not be scared.

THE RELENTLESS, A Lunar-class cruiser, warship of the most-revered Emperor's Navy, hung in silent orbit as the Imperial departure from Bahani continued apace. From the tip of its heavy prow, with armour metres thick, to the mighty engines at its stern it measured more than eight kilometres long and over a mile high. Every crenelation, every tower that festooned its hull was unique,

having been repaired or replaced countless times over its centuries of service. Every cannon and launcher that made up the batteries along its flanks had its name and a gun-crew whose sole purpose was its service.

The man who now commanded those guns, First Officer Ward, sat quietly in his study, secreted within the suite of rooms that were his personal quarters. It was not a large chamber, and it felt all the more crowded because of the trophies that hung from every wall. Rich, thick furs covered the dull battleship walls; a set of razor-sharp antlers crested the doorway, the heads of dead animals and xenos species were crowded on every surface. Each of them, at one time or another, had crossed paths with the Relentless.

He had not garnered them all himself, of course. No, they were a tradition, one that each second-in-command had continued and built upon for generations now. He had added his own choice pieces, though: the skull of a stegadon, the chair made from a dragon turtle shell, and the arm of an insectoid xenos species (the head was too hideous to display). The collection had become most imposing and it gave him a great sense of continuity: in its way it kept alive all those great men who had come before him.

It had been just that comfort that he had sought today. He had brought the shift reports back with him to read, but they were still untouched in a pile upon the desk. Instead, he stared at a harqeagle, posed with wings spread and considered the ambitions of his second, Lieutenant Commander Guir.

After the old captain had died in such an unfortunate manner, the two of them had agreed that it would have been unwise to expedite word back to the admirals of Battlefleet Bethesba back at Emcor. The old captain had been so well-loved by both officers and crew, and his death so sudden, they reasoned, that to replace him quickly with a newcomer, a captain unversed in the ways and traditions of the Relentless, could damage ship morale irrevocably. So they had delayed sending the communique as long

as possible and Ward had quietly assumed the responsibilities of the captaincy.

Last shift, however, Guir had asked out of the blue whether an acknowledgement had been received from Battlefleet. Ward had said that it had not and Guir, after a moment, had let the matter drop. That moment's pause had been telling. He had checked with his informants on the upper decks and they had confirmed his suspicions. His authority was being questioned; the occasional joke, an inflection in a comment, nothing more, but he knew how quickly such talk could turn serious. Perhaps once, in the glory years of Battlefleet Bethesba, the officer corps of the Relentless had served selflessly, out of pride and loyalty to the Emperor, but now all that seemed to motivate them was personal profit and advancement. Much of his time as first officer had been spent ensuring the officers stayed in line, but since taking over the onus of the captaincy he had had to delegate that to Guir. Perhaps he should not have trusted him so.

Ward regretted now the decision to delay the news of the old captain's death. He had realised that they would not foist an outsider upon them; they would offer him the post. Though promotion to the captaincy of a cruiser of the line such as the Relentless would be quite a jump in rank, who better than he to take on the role? And once he was confirmed as captain his officers would instinctively buckle down again.

In the meantime, though, they had grown slack, complacent and they were taking liberties with his authority. They didn't see him as a proper captain. They needed to be reminded of their place and the power he had over each of them. An example needed to be made. One which would bring his officers back to him and not solidify the opposition. Someone who was easily replaced.

Ward picked up the sheaf of reports again and started to flick through them. One of them had caught his eye before. There. The report of the incident on the surface by one Midshipman Marcher.

'AND so FOR the heroism in the face of the enemy displayed by Midshipman Dal Henrik Marcher and attested to by Governor Kaizen, he shall at this time be accorded the rank of sub-lieutenant with all the duties and privileges thereof...'

Those words still rang proudly within Marcher's head as he stood at his new post on the command deck. He had been attached to the Imperia Ordina-tus and was only a short distance away from where the imposing master of ordnance sat surrounded by servitors, each one linked into a battery of consoles feeding them data regarding the ready condition of the ship's torpedoes and smaller craft. In battle, this position would resound with a cacophony of noises; for the moment, however, it was quiet. More so than usual even. A solemn ceremony was about to begin.

Marcher looked up at the bridge which formed an arch across the width of the command deck. Up there he could see the first officer standing calmly upon the central dais and beside him, Governor Kaizen, unaccompanied for once by his retinue. The two of them were about to kill a world.

The quiet in the Ordnance station was broken by the crackle of the master's vox. He turned his head slightly to hear it better and then beckoned Marcher over.

'Commander Ward requested this,' the master grunted, handing him a data-slate. Take it up to him.'

Marcher froze 'Now, sir?' he managed. Disturb him just as the ceremony was starting?

'Of course now. Get to it.' The master turned back to his screens.

Marcher strode as quickly as formality allowed up the side of the bridge to the central dais. His heart pounded as he approached the first officer, who was engaged in conversation by the Governor. For a moment Marcher held back, unsure whether he was to interrupt them, but then the first officer turned and acknowledged him.

Thank you, sub-lieutenant,' he said, taking the pad. 'Governor, I believe you're already acquainted with our newest commissioned officer.'

Yes, of course.' Kaizen said, concealing his annoyance at the interruption.

'Congratulations,' he said, struggling for something else to say. 'I'm sure you'll do the Battlefleet proud.'

"Yes, sir,' Marcher replied unbidden. 'I most certainly intend to, Governor, sir.'

Kaizen glanced back and Marcher realised that he had spoken out of turn. He could feel the eyes of everyone on the dais looking at him: Commissar Bedrossian sitting back beside the captain's chair, Senior Armsman Vickers standing coolly at ease, the bridge officers at their consoles to the front. Lieutenant Roche was one of them, he had half-turned to watch. Marcher felt the blood rush to his face but forced it back with an effort of will. He was not a child midshipman any longer, he was an officer and he would hold steady in the face of any consequences.

"Well said, Sub-Lieutenant Marcher,' the first officer announced. 'Now, Governor, shall we begin?'

The Governor nodded and Marcher, relieved, began to edge away.

'Sub-Lieutenant,' the first officer continued, handing the pad back to him. 'I shall attend to this once we are done here. You may as well wait and observe the proceedings. It is, after all, an historic occasion. Don't you agree, Governor?'

The Governor nodded again and the two of them took up their positions at the front of the dais.

'I, Governor Horsl Kaizen, speak for the Adeptus Terra. For this world before us designated Tai D, known as Bahani, I hereby declare all tithe-treaties void and debts extant cancelled and declare this world as orbis cassi - of no further worth.'

'I, Commander Tomias Ward, first officer of the Emperor's warship Relentless, speak for Battlefleet Bethesba. For this world before us designated Tai D, I hereby declare this world as orbis d'id' conteg-num. We entrust the defence of this world back to its people. May they stand strong and faithful in their new age of His service.'

Marcher watched as Commander Ward stepped down to the bridge vox-officer, who glanced up, waiting for him to confirm the order.

'Do it.'

The vox-officer tapped a single key. In an instant the communique flashed from his screen to the command deck data-nexus and from there flew through space to strike its intended target: one of Bahani's orbital beacons. Within the same second, the beacon digested its contents and had taken the necessary action and passed the same message onto its fellows. The message itself was complex, it had taken days to prepare with the necessary encryptions, authorisations and passwords, but its essence was simple:

You are no longer a part of the Imperium.

The planet would be excised from the Administra-tum's great volumes of the Emperor's worlds; if it were attacked, the Imperium would not listen to its cries for help. Trade and transport routes would be redefined, no longer would the merchant fleets that Bahani relied upon for its food venture there.

The twelve million inhabitants of Bahani, the indentured workers insufficiently valuable to take away, did not know it, but their doom had come. Their machinery would break down and they would freeze in the nights and bake in the day. Food stores would be exhausted and they would inevitably fight amongst themselves and kill to hold those few areas where something could still be grown. Their numbers would be devastated, the civilisation they had built would be extinguished and the few who survived would

fall prey to marauding xenos raiders and the monsters that lurked in the dark.

On the bridge of the Relentless the vox-officer signalled to Commander Ward that the communique had been sent and received.

'Well/ Ward said, turning to Kaizen, 'Now that's done, Governor, would you dine with us before you return to your ship? I find I have quite an appetite.'

TWELVE HOURS LATER, the Imperial convoy broke orbit and left Bahani behind. At its centre travelled the Gloriana Vance, the Barbican-class liner carrying the Administratum officials and those valuable goods and machinery deemed worthy of removal in the evacuation. In formation around it were the Spur, Illys and Onyx, Sword-class frigates assigned as escort. Behind these trailed three dozen cargo scows carrying the last shipment of processed ore that the factories of Bahani would produce. At the fore, dwarfing the smaller ships, the cruiser Relentless majestically swung into the lead position.

Marcher watched the planet recede into the distance from his post on the command deck. How different he felt from when they had arrived. He had risen fast, he thought with no small sense of self-satisfaction, and now that his abilities had caught the first officer's eye that rise would continue.

Asphar, hidden within a cargo container in the dark hold of the scow designated Terminus Three, felt the change in direction, but thought nothing of it. He had faith that he would see his home soon enough.

Far away, hidden in the darkness of space, other eyes watched the laden convoy depart. The souls they had abandoned on the planet would keep, but here was a prize that they could not let slip away. A command was given in an alien tongue and a portion of the darkness shifted to follow the human fleet.

THE FIRST JUMP of the journey back passed without incident, though for the Navigators of the Relentless it was grindingly slow. On each occasion they chanced across a favourable warp current that would normally speed their progress they had to cross-tack and delay to allow the cargo scows to keep pace. Thanks to their exhausting labour, however, all ships were undamaged and in formation when the fleet emerged back into realspace.

After allowing time for the warp engines to recharge, Commander Ward formally handed over defence of the convoy to Lieutenant Zeath, commanding the Spur. The convoy jumped out; the Relentless was finally free.

ASPHAR's HEART RACED and his blood pounded in his ears. Now, he was scared. He clutched the sides of the container to ensure they were still solid. He could have sworn he saw them ripple and flow during that last jump. He had heard of warp jumps; they had allowed the brightest of his class the privilege to talk to one of the traders who journeyed between the stars. He had discounted much of what the trader had said of the jump into the maelstrom as fiction told to impress children, but all of it was true. The sounds and sights were bad enough, but he had been rattled and shaken within his little cell as though he were a die within a gaming pot. He checked his suit and helmet again, and praised the Emperor when he found no tears or cracks in either. The cargo scows did not bother keeping much atmosphere within their holds. Without his suit and air canisters he would never have survived.

His current canister was running low, no doubt he was breathing far too hard. He had to make it last longer or he would suffocate in here. He took up another and made to connect it when he noticed the gauge. It read empty. It hadn't been used already, he was sure of that, he had been very careful to keep those he had used separate. He turned the canister over; maybe it was the gauge that was broken. No, there it was, an imperfection in one of the welds.

All the air inside had slowly leaked away. Asphar's heart started to beat harder again. He could not stay hidden within his container. He would have to venture out into the ship.

EVEN THOUGH MARCHER'S commission would remain unconfirmed until Battlefleet could give their approval, he was entitled to every privilege his new rank conferred. The latest was an appointment with the Gastromo of the junior officers' mess to transfer his tab and dining rights there. Marcher had felt a warm thrill as he stepped inside the mess. He had been there before, but only running messages or errands. Never with the chance to appreciate it. Never as an equal. Now he was free to take his ease there off-shift, sit in the deep, brass-studded chairs or spend an evening at the bar talking with his fellow officers. It was all so different to eating amongst the, sometimes frankly puerile, midshipmen.

It was mid-shift so the mess was mostly empty. He recognised Lieutenant Roche in a chair, engrossed in something he was reading, and a few of the acting sub-lieutenants. Strange, Marcher thought, not long ago, they would have chased him out of here unless he were on official business. Today, they had to address him as 'Sir'.

The Gastromo greeted him formally and brought out the necessary dockets for him to sign. He, at least, was not fazed by their change of circumstances. And so it should be with me, Marcher considered. It was the proper way for an officer to behave. The necessary slips signed, the Gastromo offered to serve him his first drink, which he happily accepted. Inspired with a sense of fellow-feeling, Marcher paid for a glass to be sent to Lieutenant Roche as well. A server took it over and discreetly interrupted Roche from his reading. Roche glanced up to listen, his eyes flicked over to Marcher.

Marcher raised his glass slightly in salute and turned back, satisfied, to the bar. The server reappeared and whispered hurriedly to the Gastromo, the glass was untouched.

'I am afraid the gentleman declined your offer, sir.'

'What's that?' Marcher turned back but Roche was already leaving. The acting sub-lieutenants saw him go and, recognising Marcher, walked out as well.

'Would you care for it yourself?' the Gastromo asked with such courtesy as to be condescending.

'No,' Marcher grimaced, trying to contain the mixture of anger and embarrassment welling up inside him. 'No, thank you.'

'I'll take it,' a figure spoke behind him. It was Senior Armsman Vickers. Marcher nodded and Vickers scooped the glass up easily in his large hand and took a sip.

'My compliments, Mister Marcher.'

'Thank you, Mister Vickers.' Marcher did not know if the senior armsman was even allowed in the junior officers' mess. Technically he held no commission, indeed the midshipmen scuttlebutt was that he had come aboard as a conscript in the work gangs who toiled below decks. How he had risen out of that pit to the post he now held had been the topic of much speculation amongst them, and a good few tall tales. Whatever his status, Marcher said to himself, eyeing the tapestry of scars the senior armsman wore; he was not going to be the one to ask him to leave.

'A decent bottle for once,' Vickers said, indicating the glass.

'Yes.' The word 'sir' hung on Marcher's tongue.

'Not as good as in the officers' mess. But this isn't bad. When you make it there, Mister Marcher, I'll show you their selection.'

'Yes...' Marcher rallied. That would be very good of you, Mister Vickers.'

The senior armsman swirled the drink thoughtfully for a moment.

'Mister Marcher, let me give you some advice. Your new fellows, you will never win them over with kindness. Don't even bother with them. They're relics; washed-up officers who have less than half your ability and none of your promise. They are not there for you to befriend; they're there for you to outshine. Be exceptional, and those who matter will not ignore you.'

Thank you, Mister Vickers,' Marcher replied, surprised and flattered at the attention.

Vickers nodded, swallowed the rest of the drink and left. Everyone knew the senior armsman was close to the first officer. Another rush went through Marcher; his future was bright indeed with Commander Ward smiling down upon him.

'CONFIRM THE ORIGIN of that message,' Ward bit, unable to hide the irritation in his voice. 'If the astropath has made any mistake then I'll have his head!'

The Telepathica sanctuary confirms, sir,' the vox-officer replied. 'Message coding is correct - Optimus level.'

Ward swore under his breath. He could not possibly ignore an Optimus level distress call; even the slightest delay might be questioned.

'Contact the Navis dome, give them the coordinates.'

'Already done, sir.'

This vox-officer was keen to the point of presumption, Ward reflected.

Tell them this, then, Lieutenant. Flank speed and nothing less.'

THE TABLE SHOOK again and Governor Kaizen grabbed at the teetering stacks of data-slates to prevent them from falling.

'Call up to the bridge,' he snapped. 'Find out what in the devil's name is going on.'

One of his assistants ran to obey his command while the others shrank back, as much as from their Governor's wrath as from the

sounds of the attack. He had commandeered the top-level grand suite of the *Gloriana Vance*, rather than be on the bridge, specifically so he could escape the mundane interruptions of the trip and get on with the real work: the plans the industrialisation of Reeza. And now this!

The ship lurched and this time the data-slates practically flew from his hands.

This is contemptible,' he exclaimed. 'I want to talk to the bridge. Is a squadron of the Battlefleet's frigates not sufficient to keep us safe from one pathetic raider attack? I do not expect to have to be disturbed for every little thing.'

He stormed over to one of the portholes, but nothing could be seen apart from the starfield whirling as the *Gloriana Vance* banked and turned. Then there was a flash. It was too close to be another ship; it was the flash of a point-defence turret. Costs and quotas, Kaizen realised, they must be right on top of them!

'Get out,' Kaizen bellowed at his assistants. We've got to get back to-'

The impact threw Kaizen from his feet. An ear-splitting whine drilled into his head. He glanced back at the porthole. The starfield had gone; in its place he looked straight down the maw of the evil machinery that was cutting through the hull. They're boarding!'

THE RELENTLESS BURST from warp and the command deck was immediately overwhelmed by a tumult of new data. Ward restrained his impatience and remained still within the captain's chair. Nothing he could do would hurry the initial reports. They had made excellent time. Ward knew there was no love lost between him and the *Navis* dome, but whatever else he thought of them he could never claim they had shown less than exemplary talent in the role for which they were born. Thanks to them, he may just have a chance to save his neck.

'Situation analysis compiling, sir,' the auspex officer reported.

'Let's have it then, Mister Aden.'

The battle appeared upon the main view-portal. The convoy was in disarray. The dozens of cargo scows were scattered, the *Gloriana Vance* was bucking like a bull trying to throw an unwelcome rider, the frigates...

'Where are the escorts?' Ward demanded. 'Where are the enemy? Find them, Mister Aden.'

They were dispersed after their last jump, sir. The *Spur* and the *Illys* are reporting bomber attacks, minimal damage. The *Onyx* is out of position but on a heading back to the *Spur*. The-

The auspex officer paused as a light winked out on his display.

The *Illys* has been destroyed.'

'How?'

'It's... it's not clear, commander.'

'Incoming transmission from the *Gloriana Vance*, sir,' the vox-officer reported.

'Put it through, but get me the *Spur*. Show me the *Gloriana*.'

The view-portal swivelled to close on the liner. Its pale hull was pock-marked with dark spots, assault boats biting into its skin like tiny parasites. It looked diseased, being eaten from the inside out. Governor Kaizen's voice cut straight through the chatter of the command deck.

'Commander Ward. I demand that you immediately-'

'What is the tactical situation, Governor?' Ward cut him off.

'-you must attack them at once. They're taking my men. They're taking my men! You must get them back. They're priceless-'

'Ordnance! Assault crews to the transports. Reinforce the *Gloriana*.'

Below on the command deck, the master of ordnance ordered his officers down to the launch bays. Ward noted that his protege,

Mister Marcher, was amongst them, trying to conceal his eagerness with a mask of professionalism. Senior Armsman Vickers, in his usual place beside the command dais, shifted and Ward gave him the nod. The first officer never allowed anyone but him to lead his boarding parties.

Ward turned back to the bridge officers. 'As soon as they're away move us over to the Illys's last position and order the Spur to fall into formation. Bombers, assault boats, they didn't get here on their own. We're going to find that carrier.'

* * *

ENEMY FIRE RIPPED along the top of the cargo-loader which sheltered Marcher and his men. Their entry into the Gloriana Vance was not going to be as uncontested as they had hoped. No sooner had their transport burned into the Gloriana's docking bay than Marcher had heard the shots bouncing off their hull. It had been too late to find an alternative boarding point; they were already committed. The transport had landed, its exit ramp had dropped and Marcher and his men had scrambled for what cover they could find as the transport's multilasers ran red-hot, providing covering fire.

Marcher's chest felt tight; this was not the same as the fight back on Bahani. This time he was responsible for the life of every single man with him. He could not afford just to think about himself, he had to lead. He had not even had a clear glimpse of the raiders yet. He had to get control of the situation. He had to know what was going on, and then he could give proper orders.

He peered over his cover and tried to get a sense of the battlefield. There, on the upper level, he could make out the shapes. The raiders had a fire-team up there, maybe an officer too; he would have to take their firing lines into account. He inched a little

higher to get a view on their ground level positions. Maybe if they could circle around to the left...

Marcher felt something hit him hard in the side and knock him down, as a barrage of shots tore through the space he had just been occupying.

'I'd keep down if I were you.' It was Petty Officer Buller, one of Vickers's veterans who had made it plain that he obeyed Marcher only at the behest of the senior armsman. 'Sir,' Buller added as a grudging afterthought.

'What are your orders, sir?'

'Well, we need to take down that fire-team on the upper level, then I was thinking if we could flank-'

'Advance on all sides. Very good, sir.' Buller cut him off. 'Armsmen! In your pairs, cover and advance! Ram your shotguns down their throats!' Buller glanced back at Marcher. 'Gibbs! See that fire position up there? Keep their heads down!'

All around them the armsmen advanced, half of the party firing, while the other half scrambled for the next position. Marcher picked himself up. Those were the orders he should have given. Right now, he was not commanding this party, Buller was. But he did not blame the petty officer, he had asked for orders and Marcher had given him suggestions.

'Forward!' he cried as he dived for cover, then rose, found a target and fired. The shot went wide as the target ducked back, lightning fast. Inhumanly fast, even. The raiders were retreating in the face of the armsmen's determined attack. Marcher, for a brief second, caught sight of a silhouette. The same shape as a man but tall, too tall, its limbs spindly and elongated like a spider's. Then it was gone. It was an alien, a xenos.

ELDAR, WARD BROODED on the bridge of the Relentless, almost certainly one of the piratical sects of that abominable species. Despite its long history, the Relentless had rarely encountered

them, but they had had several engagements with other ships of Battlefleet Bethesba down through the millennia, and some of the Battlefleet ships had even survived to report back. The eldar were dangerous, he knew, their motives often unfathomable but at their core they were decadent cowards, liable to hide or run as often as stand and fight. Even now their carrier was hiding somewhere out there instead of giving proper battle. Well, he would smoke them out.

'GET OUT THE way!' 'Let us through!' 'Clear a path! Clear a path!' Marcher and his men forced their way through the crowds of the panicking Administratum officials who were blocking the main concourse. The tall, narrow street was choked with people, pushing and shoving to get to safety. Nowhere was safe; small bands of raiders were all over the ship, refugees were coming from every direction with tales of attacks and slaughter which merely added to the hysteria and confusion. Beside him, Marcher saw that Buller was as much out of his depth as he was, and all he could do was shout himself hoarse and shove the officials away. Marcher's orders were to get to the bow end of the concourse; with teams from the Relentless at every critical junction maybe they could clip these cursed aliens' wings.

Suddenly, a scream rose up, though not one that could be made by a human voice. One scream and then more. A half dozen of the raiders burst from the top level, soaring and screeching on armoured sky-boards. The human crush below looked up at the sound and panicked, their shoving turned to clawing in their desperation to escape, they pushed their colleagues aside and trampled the fallen underfoot. Marcher caught sight of one of the sky-boarders as it swooped low, buzzing the crowds and blowing men aside in its wash. More of the raiders dived, but this time it was not for show; they struck out at the backs of the crowd with their heavy halberds as they scorched overhead, lopping off limbs and heads with insolent ease. One, heavier than the rest, had an ugly cannon slung underneath which spat splinter-shot, stitching a

bloody line along the deck, slicing apart the bodies of those trying to flee.

'Armsmen!' Marcher and Buller shouted at the same time. Those armsmen who could see brought up their shotguns and fired. It was a difficult shot, but Marcher saw one of the raiders knocked back. For a moment, it looked as though he might fall but then he bent his body impossibly and caught himself back on his board. The raiders had clearly not expected such resistance, but they reacted instantly: sweeping back up to the higher levels and then disappearing from sight.

'They're gone.' Marcher breathed, trying to keep his voice from trembling.

'Wait,' Buller said and at that moment the sky-boarders blew back onto the concourse. They had returned and, worse, they had brought others. Three times more than their original number. They stayed high, spiralling effortlessly in between each other, tracing intricate patterns in the air. Marcher reached for his vox.

'Mister Vickers,' Marcher reported. 'I have contact with a large concentration of enemy sky-boarders, bow-end of the main concourse. Please-'

'They're coming down!' an armsman shouted, cutting him off. Four of them had peeled away from their aerial display and were bombing down the narrow aisle towards the armsmen crouched on the deck. Buller had seen them and was already issuing orders.

'Keep to the sides, men, keep to the sides. Close as you can, don't let them get too close.' Marcher saw the men obey him instantly, flattening themselves against the walls on each side of the concourse, forcing the raiders to keep their distance for fear of crashing into the sides themselves. The raiders saw it too and a second wave dropped down, this time led by the heavy sky-board with the cannon.

'Buller, no!' Marcher yelled at the armsman. 'Get them away from the wall. Disperse!'

Buller glanced across angrily at Marcher. What?'

It was too late. The first wave had pulled up early, blossoming apart in each direction and wheeling back, and the second wave dove through their trails: it was a clean run at targets who had so conveniently lined themselves up with nowhere to run. The cannon spat again, a clean line of explosions bit along the wall at waist-height, catching those crouching in the shoulders and face and cutting the armsmen standing in two. The blood and the dust billowed up and obscured the carnage beneath for a moment before it was blown clear by the sky-boards sweeping past. The scream of their engines faded to be replaced by the screams of the armsmen left with arms and legs hanging from their perforated torsos.

Marcher froze for a moment, but only for a moment. He looked to Buller, but he was down, his head nearly severed by a flashing halberd. A voice on the vox was telling him to pull back, but he ignored it. He was not afraid. He was angry. So very angry.

A couple of the surviving armsmen had gone to their fallen comrades. Marcher snapped at them to come back, his voice clear, even through the sounds of the wounded and dying.

'Keep scattered. Keep moving,' he shouted at them all. He glanced up; another wave was coming, and another behind that. 'Fire only on my order! Target the leader!'

Marcher brought up his own shotgun as the arms-men shifted around him. Now, now they were obeying him. No, that wasn't the difference; the difference was that now he was leading them.

The four raiders swooping down were sliding this way and that trying to follow the armsmen scurrying below them. The humans' officer though stood stock still in the centre of his men and so they instinctively drew together, focusing on him. They liked to take

the officers first, the humans ran so much quicker once their officers were dead. Closer, closer, so close they could taste the kill.

'Fire!' Marcher commanded. The shot flew in a swarm straight at the lead sky-boarder. The sky-boarder tried to jink but he could not dodge such a volley. His body was torn apart, his board spun and the other fliers screeched as they realised their formation was too tight for safety. Two of them managed to wheel away, the other over-steered and fell. He twisted through the air and landed rolling onto the deck. He sprang to his feet, pulling at a pistol and was blown back by a single shot, half his face missing.

Marcher ejected the spent cartridge. The next wave was coming. 'Move! Move!' he ordered, but the arms-men were already moving, weapons ready and tracking the sky-boarder in the lead.

'Fire!' They fired in unison. This time the raider was already turning, flipping his board, thinking to use it as a shield. Useless thought. The heavy shot punctured the board's engine and it spiralled out of control and exploded. The other raiders however had kept well separated and swept down amongst the armsmen.

'Duck and roll!' Marcher shouted before diving aside himself. There was a scream behind him from an armsman too slow to react.

The next wave's leader had seen what had gone before and throttled back. The armsmen smoothly shifted their aim to the new frontrunner, blew him from the sky and then ducked and rolled. In his eagerness for the kill, another of the raiders misjudged the distance and caught an armsman with his halberd but then slammed at full speed into the deck. He tumbled from his board and the barrage of shot from the armsman's fellows kept him twitching long after he was dead.

Then, Marcher saw something strange happen. The next wave should have been barrelling down upon them, but all the fliers stayed circling near the ceiling. They had lost nearly a third of their number and the humans, instead of fleeing, were knocking

them from the sky. A few of the fliers started to drop but as one took the lead he throttled back and then so did the rest and they rose back up to rejoin their fellows.

Marcher could see the eldar commander on the cannon-board, circling faster and faster, berating the others, dragging them back into another attack. The cannon-board led the way, sights set firmly on Marcher.

'Men of the Relentless.' Marcher called. 'With me!' And he ran at the diving attackers.

The raider saw his run and steepened his dive to compensate. Marcher sprinted all the harder and the raider pushed the cannon-board's nose down even further. Further and further, until he was nearly pitched straight down. His fellows were unable to hold on and pulled out, but he wanted the head of this human who dared defy him. He triggered the board's cannon and saw the deadly fire intersect the runner's path. The human fell and the raider desperately gunned back on his board, clawing its nose up away from the deck racing towards him. The bottom of the board screeched along the floor and the raider felt something strike him in the back and then the board's nose jerked up and climbed again. The raider found himself starting to slip and tried to readjust his stance. His legs wouldn't move. He could feel nothing below his waist. He reached round to his back and there he could feel the shot buried into his flesh, buried into his spine. He brought his bloody hand back before his eyes and then fell neatly head-first from the climbing board.

Marcher saw the fall, heard the neck snap as the raider hit the deck and then slowly released the breath he had been holding and loosened his grip on the still-smoking shotgun. Two armsmen were at his side, helping him to his feet. He bit his cheek at the pain from the splinter-shot that had creased his thigh as he had jumped aside. He looked up at the circling fliers. Although there were still a dozen of them left, not one of them was prepared to

lead another attack. Their circles strayed wider as they began to look for an escape route.

'Fire!' the order came, not from Marcher, but from far above. Shots rang out from the upper levels and three of the fliers dropped, corkscrewing down to a fatal impact on the deck. The armsmen helping him clutched for their weapons and Marcher fell painfully to one knee.

'Fire!' it came again, the voice sounding more familiar. Two more raiders fell and now the rest split and fled through any hatch they could find.

'Mister Marcher.' Marcher peered up and Vickers emerged on the ledge, his armsmen flanking him on either side. The bridge has been secured. When you are finished with your rest, perhaps you and your men will join us there.' His words were hard, but his tone was light.

Marcher shouted his acknowledgement and struggled back to his feet. He called his men back to order, but they could not just move on. They had wounded who must be cared for and dead who needed words spoken over them before their spirits could find the Emperor's Peace. A few of the arms-men were crouched over the dead of the enemy also, taking trophies. Marcher's eyes drifted to the pistol of the first raider he had downed himself. A trophy piece? Why not? It was certainly no less than he deserved.

COMMANDER WARD STOOD at the shoulder of the auspex bridge officer. The young lieutenant was working feverishly with the main station down on the command deck trying to locate any sign of the main eldar ship. Obviously with no result yet, Ward noticed, as the lieutenant was starting to sweat. Ward had had enough of this incompetence.

'Report, Mister Aden.'

'Nothing yet, sir,' the auspex officer replied too quickly. 'We're still trying to localise-'

'Contact the Spur,' Ward cut him off. 'Get the exit vector for those bombers and trace it back, look for anything, anything that could be hiding that damn ship!'

Ward stepped away and sat back in the captain's chair. His underlings could follow his commands, while he monitored the results of their work on his personal screen. He could barely believe that these, these children, had had the temerity to start whispering against him. They were soft, too used to easy patrols and easier 'battles' that were little more than the intimidation of merchant navy ships suspected of smuggling. They thought Guir was the answer for them; that he would give them a bigger cut of the spoils and maybe he would be that stupid. But, the first officer wondered, how would Guir fare out here in the dark when they had a ghost on their scanners and an alien knife at their throat?

'Commander, I have something!' 'I see it, Mister Aden.'

There was something out there; nothing that could be detected unless one was staring straight at it. It was a shadow against the stars; ten times larger than any ship could be, but Ward could tell that there was nothing natural about it. The eldar had to be in there.

'Set a heading towards that location, load the-' An alarm trilled from the command deck below. 'Enemy torpedoes detected!' 'What's their target?'

'It's the Onyx, sir.'

'Warn the ship. Tell them to brace for impact.' Ward held his calm, with a few minutes' warning the Onyx could lock itself down tight enough to weather the strike. Time to impact?'

'Impacting now!'

The view-portal flicked to a view of the Sword frigate behind them. Its point-defence turrets flashed for a second, valiantly trying to track the missiles detected too late. One, two and then a third explosion rocked the frigate, blowing away the dorsal

control towers and chunks of the engine. The frigate held firm for a moment and then a series of secondary blasts ripped through its interior.

The bridge officers were silent, they had heard the reports of the destruction of the *Illys* as they jumped in, but most of them had never seen a warship die so close. Ward, though, felt the chill run down his spine for a different reason: the *Relentless* was in-between the shadow and the *Onyx*. Those torpedoes had sailed right past his ship without any warning at all.

The *Onyx* is launching sanctuary pods, sir. They're abandoning ship.'

'Ordnance!' Ward shouted over the head of Lieutenant Roche, the weapons officer, down across the command deck to the *Imperia Ordinatus*. 'Ready our torpedoes to launch!'

Target, sir?' Roche tried to interject, that order should have been relayed through him.

Ward was in no mood to pander to junior officers who needed to be told the obvious.

That, Mister Roche!' he said, pointing at the shadow. 'Angle a wide arc across its centre. Maintain a link with the torpedoes; be ready to detonate them at my instruction.'

The *Relentless's* manoeuvring rockets fired and the mighty ship began to turn. Amongst the lists and gantry cranes of the prow torpedo bays, artificers chanted their final blessings over their charges. They had had them ready as soon as the distress call had been received.

The fearsome plasma engines of the torpedoes ignited in strict order, launching as the *Relentless* turned across that cursed shadow. Ward stared intently at their scopes, judging their speed, the distance.

'Mister Aden,' he said without so much as a glance at the auspex officer, 'watch your readings. If you so much as blink then I will cut off your eyelids.'

The torpedoes entered the shadow thousands of miles apart from each other. Far too distant from each other to be effective as a combat strike, but their purpose was not to damage the enemy, just to find him.

'Detonate!' Ward snapped.

Explosions flared in the space before them, tiny against the vast shadow, but the streams of data flowing back into the auspex arrays spiked.

'Well?' Ward demanded.

Lieutenant Aden opened his mouth and it hung there for a second. 'Yes... a distortion in one explosion.'

'Feed those coordinates through,' Ward crowed. 'Mister Crichell, take us in, bring our broadside to bear. Mister Roche, ready the port gun batteries. No excuses!'

'What range, sir?' Crichell asked.

Ward knew what his order should be; they should close as much as they could. Yet such a move would expose the Relentless as well. Only the Emperor knew what lurked within that shadow and Ward would be damned before he allowed those xenos attack craft to leech the life from the Relentless as they had done the Gloriana Vance.

'Battery effective range will suffice, lieutenant.' The Relentless wheeled and Ward heard the reassuring sound of its decks of gun batteries firing in turn, saturating their target area. He just needed a glimpse, a single glimpse of his foe and then he could destroy him.

The alarm shrilled across the command deck. 'Enemy torpedoes!' Ward barely dared ask. 'Target?' 'Right at us!'

Ward was instantly back on his feet.

Turrets, lock-on and fire!' he grabbed his vox and hit the ship-wide sigil. 'All hands, this is the first officer, brace for impact! Brace for impact!'

The force of the explosions knocked Ward back into the chair and he held on for dear life as the bridge rocked and threatened to pitch them all onto the command deck below. One of the logistician pods broke off from the wall and tumbled down onto the deck. The servitors caught beneath trilled distress at the damage they took. The Scutatium Cluster and Curatium Pit flared into life as they struggled to maintain the shields and structural integrity of the imparted sections. Damage reports poured through onto Ward's screen, but the information he wanted to know wasn't there.

'Auspex. Auspex!' he shouted. 'Do we still have them?'

Lieutenant Aden looked around, ready to report, but Ward could already see the answer written across his face.

The shadow was gone.

'WE MADE IT to the liner's bridge, by then most of the raiders were on the run dragging whatever sorry souls they had taken with them. Their main force though had the remains of the Gloriana's crew bottled up near the atmospheric recyclers. If the bastard xenos took that then they could force us to abandon ship!'

Marcher banged the table for emphasis and sent the crowd of drinks rattling. He leaned in and the dozen junior officers listening avidly to the tale leaned in closer as well.

'We went down there at once. The senior arms-man had all of the parties converging on the raiders. They were going to be caught like rats in a trap! As soon as they saw us, they scattered, tried to escape, but we had cut them off. So they ran straight at us, straight at our lines. I tell you all nothing human could ever move so

quickly. And their war-cries, their evil faces, it was like every single nightmare racing towards you.

'My men and I held firm, though there were some I tell you that didn't, and we fired and fired until our shotgun-barrels grew so hot they burned our hands. Our shot plucked their front-most ranks from their feet, but still the rest came for us, not a glance at their fellows, and sliced through our lines. One of them, his armour covered in blades, stuck the man next to me with a bayonet and would have done for me next if I had not smashed him in the side of his head with the butt of my gun. He looked fearsome but, trust me, his skull broke easier than any man's and I saw examples enough!'

The young officers clustered around the table laughed at that. They were fascinated by Marcher's exploits; he who had actually met the enemy face-to-face and not merely watched them on scopes a thousand miles distant.

Not every patron in the junior officers' mess, however, shared their enthusiasm for the boastful sub-lieutenant who had attracted so much attention in such a short time. Those who did not sat quietly, though, waiting patiently for their moment. The evening progressed and Marcher retold his story over and over. Marcher was being stood his drinks by his listeners and grew steadily merrier, and more flamboyant, with each retelling, grabbing bottles and mugs for props and leaping upon tables and chairs, to the delight of his audience. This, he felt, this was the taste of glory that he had craved. This was the life for which he was destined.

It grew late. Many of Marcher's earlier listeners had retired for the night and he finally rose from the table to turn in. It was then that three older officers appeared before him.

'Mister Marcher,' one of them said. Marcher focused on the speaker.

'Lieutenant Roche,' he replied unsteadily. 'Sir.'

'Not leaving already, are you? My friends and I were so hoping to hear your story ourselves.'

They urged him back to his seat and Marcher, seeing no harm in it, launched into it one last time.

ASPHAR HID UNDERNEATH the gantry within the hold of his cargo scow. He did not bother to get back inside his container anymore. The first few times he had sneaked out, he had conscientiously returned to it and bolted it back up from the inside, but now there seemed little point. None of the few crew aboard bothered to come back into the hold. Asphar could see the suits they would have worn in the intersection airlock and they had been untouched. Out here he was closer at least to their emergency air canisters, which he was now dependent upon. Even if his canister hadn't broken he would have been out of air nearly a day ago.

Asphar wondered if the patriarch had known how long it would take the Imperial men to get back to their stronghold. He wondered also if the patriarch knew that the igniters they had been given were calibrated to too short a time period. He had scouted out what he could of the ship, there was no way he could be clear of it within the time assumed. He had repro-grammed them, but the questions still hung in his mind. He had asked himself whether he should warn the star warriors in the other ships, but then the patriarch had told him nothing about them. Even if he knew which ships they were in, if they even existed, then he had no means to communicate with them. It had seemed so straightforward to him back on Bahani, but here, on his own, it wasn't so clear. Even if the air had been enough, even if he had escaped, how would he get back home? The

Imperium was leaving Bahani for good. Even if he could stow away again, no ship would take him home. How would the patriarch know if the star warriors had succeeded if no one ever visited the planet again?

The answer was that he wouldn't. And therefore, it must be that it did not matter to him whether they succeeded or failed.

'WAKE UP, MISTER Marcher.' Senior Armsman Vickers drummed his baton across the cell's bars. The young man splayed across the bunk inside began to stir. Vickers watched as Marcher struggled back to consciousness.

Commander Ward had ordered Vickers to keep an eye on the boy; make sure that he did not fall foul of the predations of his colleagues. In plain words, Commander Ward had said; give him the liberty to be as loud and obnoxious as he could be. Vickers, of course, had no choice but to accept, though he had no enthusiasm in playing babysitter to a troublemaker. Now in contrast, Vickers felt quite amiably disposed to the sub-lieutenant; though he doubted it was a sentiment that many other of the command officers shared.

He had been in the junior officers' mess the night before. He had seen Roche, Crichell and Aster go over to Marcher determined to provoke him into a fight. Marcher, full of himself as much as the drink, did not need much encouragement to say something from which the command officers could infer insult. After some pushing and shoving the desired brawl broke out and Crichell and Aster grabbed Marcher and tried to hold him still as Roche drew back his fist to give the arrogant upstart something to remember him by. Vickers had almost intervened then, but he delayed a moment to glance at the other officers in the mess and fix them to their chairs. By the time he looked around again: Aster's nose was running with his own blood, Crichell was clutching his belly and Marcher was grappling for Roche's throat.

Roche had thought that Marcher, tired and drunk, would be easily bested. Roche, Vickers reflected, was an idiot. He and his aging cronies were out-of-shape, overweight from long hours seated in front of their consoles on the bridge; Marcher was young, in his physical prime, and all the drink did for him was to stop him

holding back. Roche tried to play by the rules, those unspoken boundaries of one officer settling his differences with another. Marcher's fighting instincts, meanwhile, still burned from the dreadful combat before where it was kill or be killed. Every part of his body was a weapon; anywhere he could hit was a target. Roche tripped back and hit the ground hard, Crichell took a glass to the face, Aster tried to grab Marcher and had his arm broken for his trouble. It was only when Marcher took Roche's head in his hands and started to smash it repeatedly against the deck that Vickers finally needed to pull him away; the boy swearing and cursing the command officers as he went.

It had been a job very well done; now that the command officers had been humiliated in their own attempts at 'below deck' justice they would turn to Guir and Guir would have to beg favour from Ward. Marcher could have had quite a career aboard ship, Vickers reflected as the young officer rolled from the bunk and struggled to his feet. But not aboard the Relentless, no. There was nowhere on the Relentless for officers like him any more.

'SIR,' LIEUTENANT COMMANDER Guir began, 'before we finish, there is one other matter I would like to raise with you.'

'What is it, Mister Guir?' Ward replied. He had decided to call Guir into his study for the shift hand-over for a change. The staring eyes of the dead animals always put the man on edge, Ward had noticed. Perhaps he feared having his own head up there one day.

'It relates to the conduct of one of the junior officers, a Sub-Lieutenant Marcher, sir.'

'Marcher, I've heard of him. The young man who distinguished himself in the action on the Gloriana Vance. Yes, there may be great things in that man's future.'

'Ah, yes, sir.' Guir paused for a moment, weighting his tone carefully. 'It's that young man's future that I would like to discuss.'

'Go on.'

Though he undoubtedly... excelled himself in that action, more recent events cast a new pall over his conduct. At this very moment he's in the brig after having assaulted and severely injured three of my officers in the junior officers' mess last night.'

'My' officers, Ward noted Guir's slip.

'He was drunk and abusive,' Guir carried on. 'He and his friends set about them when one of them asked him to behave as an officer. The three are all currently still under the care of the medicae. It's a very serious matter, sir.'

'Of course it is, Mister Guir. Very serious. Let us make a full investigation of it. Have it all out in the open. Get all the facts.'

'Not advisable, sir. Making a dispute amongst officers too public. Would set a bad example for the ordinary crewmen. But I have had more general reports from officers of Marcher's poor conduct: dereliction of duty, insubordination, a failure to carry out orders-'

'A few subjective assessments from older officers touched by envy, perhaps? Afraid of being outstripped by a more able man?'

'I think not, sir. Why even upon the *Gloriana* he disobeyed direct orders to fall back when he was first attacked.'

'With commendable results, though, wouldn't you say?'

Guir hesitated. Ward toyed with the idea of letting him twist in the wind, the officers who had given Guir their backing were demanding he get rid of this arrogant young nuisance who had shaken their own vaunted self-image, and he had promised he would. To go back empty-handed would make him look weak. Shake their support. But not enough, Ward decided. It might push Guir to something desperate and, Ward knew, Guir and his officers were more valuable to him than one lucky sub-lieutenant. He would stick to his plan.

'But then, perhaps you are right.' Ward continued. 'Perhaps Mister Marcher is a little too young. A little too cocksure. Perhaps he has... ruffled a few too many feathers aboard. Perhaps his career would benefit from an alternate posting. Perhaps there are arguments both ways. I feel it very much depends?'

'Depends on what?'

'Are you still curious as to when, if at all, our vacant captaincy may be filled?' 'Ah... no, of course not'

And are there any... concerns that you have about my command that you might consider raising to a higher authority sometime in the future?'

The officers and I have complete confidence in you, sir.'

'Good.'

Commander Ward turned back to his desk leaving silence between them. After a moment, Guir spoke.

'And about the other matter, sir?'

That matter?' Ward looked up. 'Upon reflection, I feel the arguments on one side weigh heavier than the other. Don't you agree?'

Yes, sir.'

'Dismissed.' Guir nodded and made to leave. 'Oh, and Lieutenant Commander, do tell "your" officers to watch what happens to Marcher with a keen eye. What happens to him is just a fraction of what I could do to each one of them. If they should venture any doubt about my command in the future.'

Guir left then. Ward contacted Vickers and told him to put the endgame into effect. Sub-Lieutenant Marcher had served his purpose and now was merely a liability. His actions had brought the officers back to their first officer, more even, for they would be grateful to him for the young man's removal. Now, his fate must serve as a cautionary example to the rest.

Ward did intend thereafter to turn in, however he found himself standing in the middle of the room, staring into the eyes of the head of a white-crested lolx. Did he feel any qualms of conscience about what was about to happen to young Mister Marcher? No, he decided, Marcher had been his creation and so was his to deconstruct when he had been used for his purpose.

In any case, there was too much of the hero about Marcher; the Relentless was not the place for heroes any more. The Relentless had a glorious history, but that is just what it was: history. Ward wanted only obedience; it was more reliable than heroism.

COMMANDER WARD WAS still at his desk when Senior Armsman Vickers reported back to him.

'Is it done?' Ward demanded, without looking up.

Vickers did not reply instantly. Ward looked him in the eye and saw the spark there.

'Do not catch the idea of defiance from young Mister Marcher, senior armsman,' Ward said carefully. 'You know what it would cost you.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Is it done?'

'There was no need, sir. He had some hidden already'

'Did he really?' Ward smiled at that, his first honest smile in days. Now there was irony. Absolute irony.

BETRAYAL, ASPHAR RAGED, that was the only word for it. The patriarch had used him. He did not care whether he lived or died, whether he succeeded or not. Asphar could imagine the chaos after the Imperium's departure. The Bahani would fight over what little was left, tearing themselves apart because the real enemy was no longer within their grasp. It would be then that the patriarch would emerge from his sanctuary, his mouth full of lies. He would tell the weary people the story of his star warriors, the

brave youths taken from every corner of Bahani who had struck a blow against the detested Imperium. A blow in the name of the Bahani people, all of them united. He would have the families present as proof, who would speak with tears of their pride for their sons, lost to them but chosen by the Emperor, while those same sons floated long-dead in the cargo containers that the patriarch had made their coffins.

Who of the Bahani would not love that story? Would not praise the patriarch for his wisdom? Would not chant his name as he so humbly accepted the leadership of the people and vowed that the sacrifice of the star warriors would not be in vain?

Asphar had to return to Bahani; he had to expose the patriarch for the false priest of the Emperor that he was. He could not be allowed to profit so from his lies. But how, Asphar fumed, could he make his way back?

He could give himself up. He could walk through to the scow's crew cabin and turn himself over to them, praying that they would not shoot him out of hand. Could he not be of use to them? The patriarch would lead the Bahani people in their hate of the Imperium; if the Imperium took Asphar back they could expose the patriarch and break his power.

Yet would the Imperium even care? They had taken what they wished from Bahani and left the remains. Forget the patriarch, Asphar reasoned, he owed him nothing, but still it was the Imperium who had committed the greater crime here, the devastation of Bahani and its people. The Emperor would want them punished, more so because they had inflicted this wrong under His name. Should he then carry out the mission as he was told as their proper punishment? Then perhaps, if the Emperor willed, somehow return to Bahani and then expose the patriarch for what he was.

Expose the patriarch, perhaps, but what then for Bahani? If the patriarch really could unite them, save them from the fate to

which the Imperium had consigned them, could Asphar then allow himself to tear that down? Was the sacrifice of his people the price of his revenge? Asphar thought of his family, his worried mother, his stern father, they would be lost too. But then it had been they who had given him over to the patriarch, had convinced their son that the patriarch did His will. Had they known? Had they suspected that the priest's promise that the star warriors would return had been deceit? Had they been blind to it? Had they betrayed him? If they did... had they been right?

The simplest course, Asphar knew, was to do what they willed: sit and wait, breath by breath, as his air ran down. Maybe then the Emperor would come for him; maybe He could make it clear. But Asphar could not allow himself to end that way. The patriarch and the Imperium were criminals both. They had both used him, consumed his life to benefit themselves. Asphar's head pounded, his soul pulled first one way and then another. What should he do?

IN HIS CELL, Marcher sat devastated scrolling through the charges against him: endangerment of crew, endangerment of ship, smuggling of alien technology. He could barely swallow. His stomach felt like a yawning pit.

They were trophies, Mister Vickers. That was all. I brought them back as trophies of the victory. Our victory.'

'A pistol, some kind of electro-knife, a half a dozen more items we can't even identify. It's xenotech. Strictly forbidden. You can never tell what they might do, what they might be carrying. In a closed environment such as this ship; can't tell what they might be capable of.'

'I can't deny I brought them onboard, but it was just a few pieces. I had a right!' Marcher flared. They were taken in battle!'

'If you admit it, then at least the first officer has some discretion on what might become of you. It will be bad, yes, but if you try to fight it then you leave him no choice. You'll be executed.'

Marcher sagged. 'Death... or disgrace?'

'Mister Marcher,' Vickers said, not unkindly, 'let me give you some advice.'

IN TOE DAYS following the battle with the eldar, the convoy, with the Relentless alongside, made the rest of the journey to their first destination, the Reeza-class Orbital Station above the planet Mai T. There the machinery and men carried by the Gloriana Vance would allow the factories to sprout up across the planet's surface as they had done millennia before upon Bahani. The Spur was to continue on with the rest of the convoy, carrying news of the loss of its sister ships back to Battlefleet Command at Emcor.

As the Relentless stood guard over the transfer of material from the Gloriana Vance to the station a small reassignment of personnel took place. A disgraced midshipman had to be ferried to his new berth on one of the cargo scows.

ASPHAR STOOD ON tip-toe in the hold, peering through the porthole at the grey and white orbital station that covered the sky like a web. This was it. The stronghold that the patriarch had described. He had survived. He had made his journey, he had been tested and at his darkest times, he had faced his doubt, his weakness, but the Emperor had shown him his path. He had chosen; he would fulfil the mission that he had been sent here to perform. He set the bomb's timer and ran.

MARCHER SAT QUIETLY at the back of the shuttle as it made its final docking manoeuvres. The rest of the passenger compartment was empty aside from a single crate that contained all his possessions. After he had entered his plea, the ship's commissar had sped through the remaining proceedings like a shot. In light of his previous meritorious conduct and admission of guilt, the ultimate penalty was not requested. He was a lucky man, the commissar had told him.

'Midshipman/ the pilot's voice crackled over the vox. The airlock is sealed. Transfer now.'

Marcher floated to the airlock and went through. Through the shuttle window he had seen the ugly, snub-nosed profile of the cargo scow that was to be his new assignment. He'd been told he was lucky.

After that moment, though, he could no longer believe it.

THE TIMER STRUCK zero. The igniter fired. For a millisecond the cargo hold contained the blast and then it ruptured and flew apart. Each fragment of the mineral the scow held was instantly superheated and shattered. The scow designated Terminus Three flared like a new star and then was extinguished. The small, deadly shards of rock blossomed out like shrapnel, puncturing hull and flesh alike. The final blow of the abandoned people of Bahani had been struck.

Asphar did not see the explosion he had created. He had already leapt from the scow towards the station. He had leapt and left his old life behind. He was Bahani, born and raised. He had given his life to cleanse them of their sins. Should the explosion catch him, should he smash into the station hull, should he be blown off into space, then he owed them no less. Should the Emperor decide, though, that He might grant Asphar another life, and he was saved, then the Bahani would have no claim on that.

THE INITIAL EXPLOSION within the cargo scow Terminus Three, and the following chain-reaction detonation of the mineral it carried, rocked both the station and the rest of the convoy. The scows closest to it, Terminus Two and Four, both took critical damage, though their crews were able to make it to the sanctuary pods and survive. The same was not true of the six merchant crew of Terminus Three who were killed instantly. All of them, as many of the rest of the convoy crew, were Bahani born.

The damage to the polar terminal of the station was significant. Debris from the explosion impacted and compromised over a dozen sections within the terminal causing significant loss of life in each. Nearly ten per cent of casualties were Imperial officials,

the highest ranking of whom was Governor Andersen. The remainder of casualties were indentured labourers or conscripts either attached to the station or awaiting transfer to the planet below.

The Battlefleet warships, Relentless and Spur, were sufficiently distant from the explosion to be unaffected. Both ships deployed their transports to help rescue what survivors they could, who included one Bahani merchant crewman who had been caught outside the scow and had leapt clear.

The Relentless however did suffer the loss of a single junior officer. His name was Lieutenant Roche, who had been reassigned from bridge duty under a cloud to aid in the transfers from the Gloriana Vance to the station. He had been on a scouting inspection on the station when that section was breached. His colleagues considered him doubly unfortunate as he was a replacement for that duty. The original officer assigned was one sub-lieutenant (now Midshipman) Marcher, who due to other circumstances had been transferred off the Relentless. At the time of the explosion, Midshipman Marcher was in the process of taking command of Terminus Seven and was unharmed.

Governor Kaizen, taking command of the station, swore that, explosion or no explosion, he would brook no delay in the full installation of extraction and processing infrastructure onto the surface of the verdant planet Mai T, known as Msuti to the workers who had recently been transported there. Initial surveys had suggested that Msuti could sustain full mining operations for at least three thousand years before it would become exhausted and uninhabitable. Not long in galactic terms, but it would do until the Imperium found the next one.