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DEATHSTORM

JOSH REYNOLDS



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

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

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

PROLOGUE

Asphodex, Cryptus System, Red Scar Sector, Ultima Segmentum

The black flesh of the void was torn asunder by a sudden eruption of red as *Blade of Vengeance*, flagship of the Blood Angels fleet, thundered into real space, weapons batteries roaring out a brutal announcement of arrival. More ships followed, plunging out of the warp like coursing hounds. The massed batteries of the fleet joined those of the flagship in a dull, pulsing war-hymn. The burning remains of the Cryptus System's defence monitors were swept aside by the song, the detritus of their final heroic stand against the enemy washed away by volley after volley of high-powered energy beams.

The audience for whom this sudden performance was intended was not appreciative. The vast shapes of the outlying bio-ships of the tyranid hive fleet, their bloated, shimmering forms faintly reflecting the deadly red light of Cryptus's twin suns, reeled and shuddered like wounded animals as the fusillade cracked their shells and ruptured the soft contents.

The Blood Angels fleet swept forwards with slow deliberation, bombardment cannons sweeping aside the swarms of escort drones which leapt from the flanks of the massive bio-ships and spiralled into death with unseemly eagerness.

Such was the considered opinion of Captain Karlaen, as he watched the performance unfold through the massive vista-port of the flagship. Ships moved across his vision, pummelling one another in a grand dance of life and death, duty and instinct, honour and abomination. The arched, cathedral-like space of

the vessel's tacticum-vaults echoed with the relentless song of war. Karlaen could feel the roar of every cannonade through the deck-plates beneath his feet and in the flicker of every hololith display as enemy volleys spattered across the battle-barge's void shields.

This battle was merely a microcosm of a greater engagement which now spread across the Cryptus System and the Red Scar Sector. The monstrous shadow of Hive Fleet Leviathan, as the Ordo Xenos had classified this particular xenos incursion, stretched across countless worlds, being enveloping Segmentums Ultima, Tempestus and Solar. Worlds were being scoured clean by the Great Devourer, and even the most sacred sites of the Imperium were under threat, including Baal, home world of the Blood Angels.

When the bow-wave of Hive Fleet Leviathan washed across the Cryptus System, the Imperium had met it with all of the strength that the Astra Militarum, Adepta Sororitas and the household troops of the ruling Flaxian Dynasty could muster. But orbital defences and massed gun-lines had proven unequal to the task. Within a cycle, tyrannic spores were darkening the skies of every major world within the Cryptus System. And now, at last, the Blood Angels and Flesh Tearers Space Marine Chapters had arrived to deprive the monster of its feast. Though the system was lost, they could at least diminish the biomass that the hive fleet might recycle and use against Baal.

All of this passed across Karlaen's mind as he watched the Blood Angels fleet engage the enemy. Battle was a thing of vivid colour and riotous fury, even in the cold, airless void of space, and he felt something in him stir as he considered it – like a persistent, red hum deep below the surface of his thoughts. It had been with him since the day of his Sanguination, but familiarity did not breed affection. His reflection stared back at him from within the slightly shimmering surface of the vista-port. A battered face, blunt and square and lacking all but a trace of its former good looks – acid scars pitted his cheeks and jaw; his hair was a grizzled golden stubble that clung stubbornly to his scalp and his nose had been shattered and rebuilt more than once. A bionic eye occupied one ruined socket, and the magna-lens of the prosthetic orb whirred to life as he examined his reflection, seeking out some niggling imperfection that he could not name.

He was clad, as was his right and honour as commander of the First Company, in the blessed plate of Terminator armour. It was the toughest and most powerful form of personal armour ever developed by the Imperium of Man: a heavy blood-red shell of ceramite-bonded plates, chased with gilding and brass, reinforced by sections of plasteel and adamantium and all of it powered by thick

bundles of electrical fibres and internal suspensor-plates.

It had taken twenty red-robed Chapter serfs and dull, cog-brained servitors to encase him within it, hours earlier, when the prospect of a boarding action first reared its head – they had worked feverishly, connecting fibre bundles to nodes using spidery, mechanical limbs which possessed the inhuman dexterity required for such a precise task. Others had cleared air and build-up from the pistons and pneumatic servo-muscles that enabled him to move, while the senior serfs, their gilded masks betraying no emotion, polished the ceramite with sweet smelling unguents and blessed oils, awakening the primitive soul of the ancient relic, stirring it to wrathful waking. The armour was heavy and powerful, and, in those moments when he succumbed to the lure of poetry, Karlaen thought that it might be the closest thing going to the Word of the God-Emperor made harsh reality.

Karlaen raised a hand, his fingers tracing the outline of the Crux Terminatus on his left shoulder plate. It was said that the symbol contained a shard of the Emperor's own Terminator armour, which had been shattered in that final, catastrophic duel with the Arch-Traitor in ages past. At the thought, Karlaen's breath hitched in his throat, and his vision blurred, as the red hum grew louder, now pounding where it had pulsed, as if a thousand hammers were beating on the walls of his skull, fighting to be free. For a moment, his vision blurred, and he saw a different face, not his own familiar battered features, but *a handsome and radiant face which he recognised but could not name, twisted in loss and pain the likes of which no mortal could bear, and he heard the snap of great wings, and felt the rush of heat and pain* and his fingers touched the surface of the void-hardened glass.

He closed his eyes. Swallowed thickly. Opened his eyes. He looked up at the stained glass which marked the circumference of the vista-port. It showed scenes from Imperial history – the discovery of Sanguinius on Baal Secundus by the Emperor; Sanguinius, angel-winged and radiant, taking command of the Ninth Legion; other scenes, dozens, hundreds, all depicting the glorious history of the Blood Angels, a history which had shaped Karlaen, and made him who he was today. *I am Karlaen*, he thought. *I am Captain of the First, the Shield of Baal, and I am true to myself. I am not flesh, to be swept up in the blood-dimmed tide, but stone. And stone does not move or yield to those red waters, no matter how they crash.* The hum faded, hammer blows becoming taps, and the pressure retreated as it always had. Irritated with himself, he concentrated on the world beyond the curtain of void war.

Asphodex – it was an inelegant word for an inelegant world. Beyond the

shifting, shimmering distortion of the battle-barge's void shield, behind the bloated shapes of the bio-ships which clustered about its atmosphere like feeding ticks, Asphodex roiled in its death throes. The magna-lens of Karlaen's bionic eye whirred to its next setting, bringing the world into stark relief. The heavy grey clouds which shrouded the atmosphere were shot through with infected-looking strands of purple, each one squirming with billions of tiny shapes. The lens clicked again, focusing on the bio-ships clustered about the world's poles. As they moved across the atmosphere, he could see corresponding disturbances in the clouds. Someone joined him at the vista-port. 'They are feeding,' Karlaen said, out loud.

'Yes,' Sanguinary High Priest Corbulo said softly. Clad in crimson power armour edged with white, he was the spitting image of the face which haunted the black dreams and red memories of Karlaen and every Space Marine of the Blood Angels Chapter. His voice, too, throbbed at the roots of Karlaen's mind, stirring to life ancient thoughts which were not his own. Corbulo was a ghost, though whether of the Chapter's past or its future, none could say. 'That is what they do, captain.'

'They will strip the planet of all life soon,' Karlaen continued. He had seen planets caught in the grip of the Great Devourer before, and had calculated Asphodex's chances of survival on an idle whim. The planet was doomed. He looked at Corbulo. 'Why am I here, Master Corbulo? I should be making ready to—'

'To what, Captain Karlaen?' Corbulo asked. His voice was gentle, but resonant, like the crash of waves against a distant shore. He looked at Karlaen, and his eyes caught and held Karlaen's own. They were deep and pale and powerful, and Karlaen felt the red hum in his head grow in strength. He looked away. 'You are exactly where you should be, captain.' Corbulo spoke with such surety that Karlaen could not help but feel an atavistic thrill course through him.

'As you say, master,' Karlaen said. He kept his face stiff and still.

Corbulo smiled, as if he could sense Karlaen's reluctance. 'I cannot help but feel as if you doubt me, brother,' he said.

'Detecting doubt – or worry, anger, or any other emotion for that matter – on Karlaen's face is a skill akin to the detection of geological shifts on Baal, Corbulo. One must know where to look for cracks in the stone. Isn't that right, brother?'

Both Karlaen and Corbulo turned as Commander Dante, Chapter Master of the Blood Angels, strode towards them, his golden artificer armour gleaming in the

reflected light of the hololiths that studded the tacticum-vaults. His features were hidden, as ever, behind the golden mask which was said to have been modelled on the features of Sanguinius himself.

Karlaen inclined his head. 'As you say, commander.'

Dante looked at Corbulo. He gestured to Karlaen. 'You see? Stone,' he said. 'Karlaen is the rock upon which the First Company stands.' He looked at Karlaen, his gaze taking in everything and missing nothing. Karlaen, for his part, could only hold his superior's stare for a few moments before it became unbearable. Dante was the oldest living Space Marine in the Imperium who could still function outside of the sarcophagus of a Dreadnought, and he carried with him the weight of history wherever he went. Like Corbulo, his very presence stirred the red hum in Karlaen's head to fretful agitation.

Karlaen made to sink to one knee, but Dante gestured irritably. 'No,' he said. 'No, I am in no mood for such gestures today, captain.'

Stung, Karlaen straightened, the joints of his armour wheezing and hissing in protest. Dante crossed his arms and gazed up at the vista-port. The flagship shivered slightly around them, and the void shield writhed as it was struck. Dante said, 'Report, captain.'

On firmer ground now, Karlaen cleared his throat. 'The first wave of the assault is preparing for their descent to Phodia,' he said, referring to the principal city of Asphodex. He did not think it tactful to mention that, as Captain of the First Company, he should have been overseeing those preparations.

'You are wondering why you are here, rather than there,' Dante said. It was not a question. Karlaen looked at Corbulo.

'You see, he is too disciplined to ask, though I have no doubt that curiosity is eating at him.'

'Discipline is the armour of a man's soul,' Corbulo said.

Karlaen looked back and forth between them, vaguely concerned. When the summons had come, he had not known what to expect. Was the honour of leading the vanguard to be taken from him? The question would not have occurred to him, once upon a time. But now, after... His mind shied away from the thought. Shadows clustered at the edges of his memory, and voices demanded to be heard. He closed his eye and shook his head, banishing shadows and voices both. When he looked up, he realised that both Dante and Corbulo were watching him. Corbulo reached out and clapped a hand to his arm.

'I hear them as well, brother. Do you wish to know what they say?' he asked, his voice barely above a whisper, and his eyes full of quiet contemplation.

Karlaen ignored the Sanguinary Priest and looked at Dante. ‘I wish only to know what is required of me, my lord. I am the Shield of Baal, and I would serve as you see fit.’

Dante was silent for a moment. Then, he said, ‘You are still leading the assault, captain. And Phodia is still your target. But I require more than simple battlefield logistics from you this time.’ He looked at Corbulo.

The Sanguinary High Priest said, ‘Augustus Flax.’

Karlaen blinked. ‘The Governor of Asphodex.’ Part of his responsibilities as Captain of the First was to know everything there was to know about potential battlefields – everything from weather patterns to cultural dialects was of potential importance when planning for war, and Karlaen had studied and synthesised all of it.

He knew everything there was to know about the Flaxian Dynasty, and its current head. Augustus Flax had assumed the gubernatorial seat at the tender age of seventeen standard Terran years, after his father, the previous office holder, had been murdered by separatists in a civil war which had briefly, though bloodily, rocked the Cryptus System. Flax was an old man now, and his reign had been an unmitigated success, as far as these things were concerned. Karlaen felt a small stab of pity for the man – the system he had reportedly fought so hard to retain control of and hold together was now being devoured out from under him.

‘Yes. I – we – need him found, brother.’ Corbulo looked towards the vista-port. Silent explosions cascaded across the face of the void, as ships continued their duel. Karlaen cocked his head. Questions filled his mind, but he clamped down on them. His was not to question, merely to serve.

‘Then I will find him, Master Corbulo,’ he said.

‘He or his children will do,’ Corbulo said. ‘Failing that, a sample of their blood.’

More questions arose, but Karlaen ignored them. If Corbulo was here, and this mission was being undertaken at his counsel, then there could be only one reason for it. Corbulo’s overriding passion was no secret. The Sanguinary High Priest had one desire above all others: the elimination of the twin plagues which afflicted the sons of Sanguinius, whether they were Blood Angels, Flesh Tearers or Angels Encarmine. Corbulo had dedicated his life to unravelling the secrets of the Red Thirst and the Black Rage, and had spent centuries on the hunt for anything which might alleviate the suffering of Sanguinius’s children.

Karlaen bowed. ‘It will be done, on my honour and the honour of the First

Company. Or else I shall die in the attempt.’ He straightened. ‘I will need to requisition a gunship, or a drop pod...’

‘Speed is of the essence, brother,’ Dante said. ‘Time grows short, and Asphodex dies even as we speak. This world will be consumed by the beast, and we do not have time for you and your Archangels to attempt an entry from orbit,’ he said. ‘Report to the teleportarium. Your men will be waiting for you there.’

‘Teleportation,’ Karlaen said. He grimaced. There were few things that could stir the embers of fear in Karlaen’s heart, but teleportation was one of them. There was something wrong with it, with how it worked. There was no control, no precision, only blind luck. He shook himself slightly. He knew that Dante would not have authorised it if it were not necessary. Countless battles had been won with just such a strategy, and Karlaen reassured himself that this time would be no different.

He looked at Dante. ‘As you command, my lord. I will not fail you.’

‘You never have, captain,’ Dante said.

Karlaen turned away and took one last look at the war-torn heavens and the dying world. There was nothing but blood and death lurking beneath those grey clouds. If Augustus Flax, or any of his kin, still lived, it would not be for long. Yet his orders were clear.

It was his duty to find Augustus Flax, and the Shield of Baal would see it done.

ONE

Phodia, Asphodex

The air of the continent-sized city had been thick with black toxicity, even before the arrival of the tyrannids. Beneath the choking darkness and roiling clouds, billions had slaved and died in manufacturums and vapour-farms at the behest of the city's overlords. Now, where man's industry had once claimed and poisoned the air and ground, new masters set their mark. Alien growths coiled and crawled about the battle-scarred ruins of the Planetary Governor's palace, and hundreds of fume-spewing spore-chimneys had thrust up through the cracked and broken surface of the ground, masking the faded grandeur of the city skyline in a forest of monstrous growth.

Among the rubble, clicking feeder-beasts feasted upon the hillocks of corpses which lay like a thick carpet throughout the structure. Many-limbed shadows moved through the upper reaches of the ruins, and alien voices stuttered and warbled in a song of ending. The song ceased abruptly, as the air became greasy and metallic. There was a sound like thunder, and arcing lighting of an unnatural hue sparked and snapped to sudden life. The feeder-beasts scattered with frustrated squeals and protests as the lightning swirled, flashed and faded, revealing heavy, crimson figures. The Archangels had arrived.

Twenty carmine-armoured Terminators stood on a patch of scorched stone. They were among the greatest warriors of a Chapter replete with such, and each of them had participated in dozens of gruelling defences and surgical strikes,

against tyrannids as well as orks and every other enemy that had dared test the might of the Imperium. Karlaen had chosen from among the most battle-tested for this mission, and each of them had stood with him at Balor's Hope, as well as participating in the destruction of the space hulks *Divine Purgatory* and *Twilight Aegis*.

'Well, isn't this pleasant?' one of the Terminators said, the vox-amplifiers of his helmet transforming his voice into a crackling growl. Brother Aphrae, Karlaen knew, recognised the Terminator by his vox-signature and the delicate coiling script flowing across the scroll stretched across the front of his chestplate. Aphrae had a passion for calligraphy, as well as an inability to properly observe vox protocols.

'No,' Karlaen said. 'Fan out and establish a perimeter – I want detailed augur scans and vox-channel analysis before we move out.' Long-range auspex echoes taken by the fleet had proven disappointingly vague, and teleportation was not an exact science. He needed to be certain that they were where they were supposed to be in the Tribune District, and that meant triangulating their exact position via vox signals and augur readings. 'Alphaeus – you know what to do,' he said, looking to the closest Terminator.

'When has it ever been otherwise?' Alphaeus rumbled, dropping one gauntlet to the pommel of the power sword sheathed on his hip. The Terminator sergeant had served with Karlaen longer than any other Space Marine, and familiarity had bred a congenial deference that Karlaen still found slightly disconcerting.

He had chosen Alphaeus as his second-in-command for good reason. Among the warriors of the First Company, there were none, save himself, with greater experience in battling the scuttling minions of the Great Devourer than Alphaeus and his squad – jocular Aphrae, taciturn Bartelo, and the twins, Damaris and Leonos. The latter pair snapped to attention as Alphaeus ordered them to scout ahead, and then turned to relay orders to the other squads. Satisfied that Alphaeus would see to things, Karlaen scanned their surroundings.

The city was already being consumed; the presence of the feeder-beasts and the spore-chimneys were proof enough of that. He had seen similar sights often enough, but it never failed to awaken a thrill of revulsion in him to see humanity and all of its artifice reduced to a slurry of protein and bio-matter. Death was one thing, but the tyrannids took even what little dignity remained afterwards.

His fingers tightened on the reinforced haft of the master-crafted thunder hammer he carried. The Hammer of Baal was one of the most exquisite relics possessed by the Blood Angels Chapter; it had been forged by master artisans

millennia ago, and entrusted into Karlaen's care by Dante himself, upon his ascension to the rank of Captain of the First Company. The weapon hummed with barely restrained power. It was much like its wielder in that regard. Karlaen lifted the ancient weapon and rested it against his shoulder plate.

He turned, his bionic eye whirring and magnifying the landscape. Rotting corpses and the burning wreckage of battle tanks stretched as far as the eye could see. For a few brief days the world had been a battlefield, and the soldiers of the Imperium had made the tyranids pay a bloody toll for every patch of ground. He checked his suit's augurs, searching for any life signs among the carnage.

'They died well,' Alphaeus said.

Karlaen turned. 'Report,' he said.

'We're probably in the right place.' The sergeant had removed his helmet, revealing a shorn scalp and a permanently determined expression. A service stud gleamed over his right eye. As Karlaen watched, he sucked in a great lungful of toxic air. 'Paaaah,' Alphaeus grunted. 'Smells like home. If home was an overgrown sludge pit.'

'Which it is,' Aphrae called out, from where he stood examining a spore-chimney. He lifted his chainfist in considering fashion. The weapon groaned to life, and the teeth rotated with a snarl that echoed across the plaza.

Before Karlaen could move to stop Aphrae, Alphaeus barked, 'Aphrae, please refrain from whatever it is you're planning to do.' He looked back at Karlaen. 'We were able to scrape the recordings from the orbital vox-arrays, but that information is days old at best. This looks like a palace forecourt, if that helps.' He gestured towards the immense, battle-blasted archway that dominated the other side of the plaza. Great steps, each one a hundred metres wide, rose up towards what he suspected were the remains of the Phodian Gates, the entrance to the palace. 'Those steps are definitely palatial, in my considered opinion.'

'You know a lot about steps, then?' Karlaen asked, examining the archway.

'I know about architecture. You can tell a lot about a people from their architecture.'

Karlaen glanced at Alphaeus, who ran his palm over his bare scalp in a gesture of contemplation.

'I could be wrong, of course. Who knows what sort of upheaval the planet has gone through since those vox-arrays were functional? Remember Fulcrum Six? The whole southern continent folded up like a leaf caught in a blast of heat,' said Alphaeus.

'This isn't Fulcrum Six,' Karlaen replied, smiling slightly.

‘No, and thank the Emperor for that.’ Alphaeus stamped the ground. ‘I don’t approve of continental land masses shifting unexpectedly.’ He looked around suspiciously. ‘I don’t approve of this either.’

‘This place is an abomination unto the eyes of the Emperor,’ Bartelo said glumly, gesturing at the spore-chimney with the barrel of the heavy flamer he carried. It took a special sort of warrior to go into battle equipped with what was a highly volatile amount of promethium mixture strapped to them – one ruptured hose, or clogged mechanism, and Bartelo would be cooked inside his armour quicker than he could scream. But he seemed to take pride in his position as fire-bearer for Alphaeus’s squad, and he was skilled at employing the cleansing flames to greatest effect.

‘So is wasting valuable promethium. Stay alert,’ Alphaeus said. He shook his head and cocked an eye up at the dark sky. ‘Gargoyles,’ he murmured.

Karlaen looked up. The magna-lens of his bionic eye spun, focusing in on the innumerable swarms of winged bio-beasts swirling across the horizon like a vast tornado of fangs and talons. ‘Where are they going?’ he murmured.

‘East,’ Alphaeus said.

‘What’s east of here?’

‘Organic—’ Damaris began.

‘—matter,’ Leonos finished.

Karlaen looked at the two Terminators as they trudged towards him and the sergeant. Some quirk of the Sanguination process had taken two unrelated men and made them replicas of one another, as if they had been cast from the same mould. Even through the vox-link, their mellifluous voices sounded identical, down to the slightly strained intonation. With their helmets off, they reminded him of Corbulo, with too-perfect features that belonged on the ivy-shrouded statues of long-forgotten deities rather than on men.

‘There’s fighting to the east, in the area around the manufacturums,’ Leonos said. ‘This whole district looks as if it’s been left to the feeder-beasts.’

Karlaen quickly flicked through the vox-channels. Most were clouded with interference from the hive fleet, but he quickly hit upon cries for aid and pleas for reinforcement. Just as he found them, something exploded in the distance. The front had moved east, the Imperial battle lines battered back by the ravenous hordes of bio-beasts.

‘The fabricae districts,’ Alphaeus said. He frowned. ‘It’s a last stand.’

Karlaen said nothing. The vox crackled, as the screams of the soldiers of the Astra Militarum filled his ears. Part of him yearned to take his men and strike

out for the manufactorums where the last defenders of Phodia were selling their lives in the mistaken assumption that help was coming. But those were not his orders, and that was not what the Sons of Sanguinius were here for this day.

Asphodex was a firebreak and nothing more. The war against Hive Fleet Leviathan would not be decided here, or indeed anywhere in the Cryptus System. But this tendril of it would be annihilated. Within a few standard hours, the remainder of the Blood Angels First Company and the full strength of the Second – supported by elements of their successors, the Flesh Tearers – would be making planetfall. Then the true war would begin. A war of annihilation, a war to taint the wells and break the supply lines of the enemy. A war that the chosen of Baal knew well how to fight.

But that was still in the future. For now, Karlaen had his mission. ‘Form up and fan out. We will proceed,’ he said, shutting off the transmissions. Alphaeus nodded and pinged the vox, alerting the other squads that it was time to move out, even as Leonos and Aphrae joined them.

In moments, a line of crimson-armoured giants was on the move, marching across the plaza towards the great archway that was the Phodian Gates. As they climbed the steps, Karlaen took in the carnage which stretched up the steps to the entry plateau. The corpses of Imperial Guardsmen were piled in messy heaps among tumbled sandbag emplacements. The stink of alien ichor was strong here, and dead tyranid weapon-beasts lay where they had fallen, brought down by the guns of the Astra Militarum.

At the top of the steps, the broken corpse of an Imperial Guard officer bore silent witness to the approach of the Blood Angels, his dead gaze staring out at the battlefield defiantly. He still clutched a bolt pistol in one bloodied fist.

Karlaen sank down to one knee beside the corpse, which lay propped up against the scorched and shattered archway. He studied the slack features, memorising them as he had done a thousand times before. His warriors stood silently, understanding that this was a sacred moment, and one that they themselves might have to perform one day.

This man, Karlaen thought, had been a hero, though they did not know his name. He had died unsung, and would not be remembered by any save themselves. But they would remember him. The Blood Angels always remembered, even when the memory proved burdensome. ‘Sleep, soldier,’ Karlaen murmured, the familiar words escaping him with ease. ‘Lay down your burden, and return to the Emperor’s light. Your fight is now ours. And we will make them pay, measure for measure.’ He reached out and closed the staring

eyes.

He stood. 'Come,' he said. 'We have a governor to find.'

Across the plaza from the armoured giants, hidden by the fallen bulk of a statue of the Emperor, a pair of alien eyes watched the Blood Angels enter the governing palace of the Flaxian Dynasty. White, vestigial lips peeled back from a wall of clenched fangs as the flat, crimson eyes of the creature once called the Spawn of Cryptus narrowed in baleful interest.

As the Blood Angels vanished into the interior of the palace, the broodlord pushed itself upright, its four arms clutching at the statue. It rose to its full height, tasting the air. The fires of distant battle were reflected in its pale, shiny carapace. It cocked its bulbous skull, listening to the distant drumbeat of battle. Hundreds of kilometres away, the defenders of Phodia were waging their final battle against the forces of the Hive Mind, and the Spawn of Cryptus could feel the ebb and flow of that conflict in every fibre of its grotesque being.

It longed to join that distant fray and wet its talons in the blood of its enemies. That was what the Hive Mind asked of it, whispered to it, deep in its skull. The song of the Hive Mind filled its head, driving out all other thoughts save those which moved in time to the cosmic rhapsody of aeons. It was a song of consumption and survival, of grand design and joining. The song filled it and warmed it, driving out fear and anger and leaving behind only iron purpose.

The broodlord shook its large head and gave a snort. There were yet things to be done – important things, more important even than the all-consuming song of the forces that had guided it up out of the darkness and into the light.

It had lived on Asphodex for years, long before the coming of the Leviathan whose shadow even now lay over its monstrous soul. The people of Phodia had given it its name, and the raconteurs among them had claimed that it was a child of their solar god, sent to punish them for their transgressions. The creature found some small amusement in that, for the storytellers were not far wrong.

That amusement was not in evidence now, as it watched the red giants disturb and disperse the feeder-beasts as they tromped into the demesne that it had claimed as its own. It had never seen such beings before in all the years of its long life, but it knew them for enemies even so. It could taste the harsh violence of their thoughts, even at this distance, and its long, crimson tongue flicked out from within its thicket of teeth to lash and curl momentarily, before retreating back into its maw.

It did not know what they were after, and annoyance burned across the surface

of its brain like a black comet. Their minds were open to it, and it could smell their intent to enter the palace as if it were the scent of prey carried upon the night wind. Its talons dug frustrated grooves into the stones around it, and it hissed in growing anger.

For a brief instant, the song of the Hive Mind grew ragged and weak, and the old pain came back, thundering to the fore of its mind. It saw faces, fleshy and soft, but familiar, and a whine of agony escaped it. A single quavering note of loss, swiftly borne under and erased by the snarl that followed. The Spawn of Cryptus shook itself, sending the fragments of memory fleeing. With a single fluid movement, the beast leapt down from its perch and crept into the ruins, claws clicking. Lesser creatures fled before it, and in return for such obeisance, it duly ignored them.

It would gather its brood. It was past time for the Children of Cryptus to have their due.

TWO

Tribune Chamber, Flaxian Palace, Phodia

The interior of the palace was just as much a scene of horror as the plaza outside. The stab-lights mounted on the Terminators' armour illuminated signs of a ferocious running battle as they moved through the immense, shadowy corridors. The exquisite artworks which had once covered the high walls were torn and pitted by acidic bile, lasgun fire and the heavy craters left behind by shellfire. The floor was carpeted in the dead, both human and otherwise. And everywhere, clicking, clattering ripper swarms worked to render the mangled heaps of blood and bone down into something more palatable.

The signs of the Hive Mind's consumption were everywhere. Whole side corridors and cathedral-like foyers had been given over to the bubbling, noxious digestion pools of the feeder-beasts. As the Terminators pushed deeper into the depths of the palace, grisly shapes flapped, crawled and scuttled just out of sensor range.

When they reached the entrance to what Karlaen thought must be the governor's Tribune Chamber, he raised his hammer, signalling a halt.

'We go our separate ways from here, brothers,' he said. He swept the hammer out, indicating the corridors diverging from the central hall they now stood in. 'Four squads can search more swiftly than one, and time is not on our side in this place.' As if to punctuate this statement, the dull boom of distant explosions rolled through the corridors, echoing and re-echoing throughout the wide,

vaulted spaces.

‘Melos, you and your squad take the western sector,’ Karlaen continued, gesturing to the Terminator in question. Melos stroked the gilded skull set into his gorget and nodded. Melos’s relic armour had a reputation, Karlaen recalled. He hoped that it would serve Melos better than it had all its other owners. ‘Jose, the east,’ he continued, pushing the thought aside. Jose grunted, and hefted his storm bolter. Like Alphaeus, he was bareheaded, and he had battle-scarred features. Karlaen looked at the last of his subordinates. ‘Zachreal...’

‘Up,’ Zachreal rumbled, pointing a finger towards the upper levels of the palace. His crimson armour was scored by hundreds of gouges, battle scars earned over the course of a hundred-odd boarding actions, and a trio of silently fuming, golden censers hung from his chestplate, filling the air around him with a vermilion mist. ‘Always send somebody to clear the upper decks, captain.’

‘Then that honour falls to you,’ Karlaen said. He looked at Alphaeus. ‘I’ll accompany your squad, Alphaeus, if you’ll have me. We’ll keep moving forwards, through the Tribune Chamber, and sweep the heart of the palace.’

‘If we must,’ Alphaeus said, smiling slightly.

Karlaen ignored the Terminator’s attempt at humour, and said, ‘Observe vox protocol. This is no different than any floating hulk we’ve boarded in the past.’

‘Except that it’s a building, won’t lose gravity, and we damn well know it’s full of tyranids, rather than merely suspecting that such is the case,’ Aphrae piped up. Bartelo gave a snort of sour laughter, and the twins chuckled.

‘Quiet,’ Alphaeus snapped.

Karlaen ignored the by-play. He had fought beside Alphaeus and his squad often enough to know that Aphrae’s jocularly, misplaced as it was, was as necessary to the unit’s survival as the promethium in Bartelo’s tanks. Laughter was the gates of the soul, as discipline was its walls. ‘If you find any sign of the governor, you are to retrieve him, dead or alive, and fall back to the Plaza of the Emperor Ascendant for extraction. The plaza will be rallying-point alpha in the event of overwhelming resistance. Do not hesitate to fall back, should it be necessary. Pride is merely the seed of hubris, and death without victory is wasted,’ he said, quoting a line from the *Philosophies of Raldoron*. He looked about him as he spoke, trying to impress the gravity of the situation upon his men. ‘Eyes open, sensors on, my brothers. May the wings of our father shield you from the rains of bad fortune.’

He turned back to Alphaeus and his squad as the others slowly moved off, each to their designated sector of search. The dark of the chamber swallowed the

bobbing stab-lights of the others, until only the six remained, standing before the Tribune Chamber. Karlaen hesitated for a moment, and then said, ‘I will take point.’

‘Captain—’ Alphaeus began.

Karlaen ignored him, and moved towards the beckoning gloom of the entryway. The passage was blocked by the piled sandbags of a heavy bolter emplacement. Without pausing, he shoved his way through it. The servos in his armour hummed softly as he toppled the heavy gun platform and sent the headless body of the gunner slumping to the ground. A moment later, his stab-lights illuminated the interior of the Tribune Chamber.

In better times, the governor would have held audience with his district lords here. It was large enough to land a squadron of the Chapter’s Stormravens. He let his stab-lights play across the curve of the vast, domed ceiling, but they could only pierce the edges of the darkness that marked it. It was simply too high and wide.

He looked around as he moved forwards. The chamber was marked by twisted debris and toppled statues. Whole sections of the upper floors had collapsed down, puncturing the floor, and amidst the structural devastation, the bodies of hundreds of Imperial citizens lay, heaped in great, gory mounds of mutilated meat and shattered bone. Karlaen had seen far worse butchery in his time, but it never failed to give him pause.

There was a stark contrast between the slaughter that had taken place in the plaza and what he saw before him. The red hum pulsed along the underside of his mind, and he felt a wash of anger. They had been innocents, not soldiers – civilians seeking sanctuary from the horrors that stalked their world. The soldiers outside had died trying to protect them, and it had all been for nothing.

No, not nothing, said a small voice inside him. *Some good may yet come of this, if you succeed*. That was what Corbulo would have said, had he been here; Karlaen gripped the thought as if it were a holy relic, and drew what strength he could from it. ‘Necessity is the shield of faith,’ he murmured. It was another line from the *Philosophies of Raldoron*. The text was a comfort to him in moments of doubt. Such moments had become far too common for Karlaen, but the words of the Equerry to the Primarch and first Chapter Master of the Blood Angels had ever brought him back to certainty.

While he spoke, the red hum faded, replaced by another sensation – that of a prickling on the back of his neck. Swiftly, he swept the chamber with his bionic eye, flicking through the different settings, hunting something he could not

name. He was being watched, though he could detect no life in the chamber. Their enemies were close.

He waved Alphaeus and the others forward. The Terminators fanned out, scanning the mounds of corpses with augurs and eyes alike. ‘Search the dead,’ Karlaen ordered. ‘If Flax and his men fell here, his body may still be salvageable.’

‘And if not?’ Aphrae asked.

‘Then we keep looking,’ Karlaen said.

‘What if he’s not here?’ Aphrae pressed. ‘What if he’s in the manufacturums or in the Agrarian District? What do we do then?’

‘I suppose we’ll just give up, Aphrae. Is that what you’d like to hear?’ Alphaeus said harshly. ‘Would you like to inform Commander Dante that we failed, or shall I do it?’

‘I was just asking, sergeant,’ Aphrae said jovially. ‘Just trying to establish mission parameters.’

‘It could be worse,’ Bartelo said morosely.

‘And how, pray tell, oh sour one, could it be worse?’ Aphrae said.

‘We could be waist-deep in corpses, rather than just knee-deep,’ Bartelo said, pushing over a pile of bodies with the barrel of his heavy flamer.

‘Quiet, all of you,’ Karlaen said. He shoved the broken corpse of a man aside with a gentle tap from his hammer and activated the bionic augur-lens in his prosthetic eye, seeking any sign of human life or of the specific genetic code which he had been tasked to retrieve. *It always comes back to blood, with us*, he thought. With Corbulo, especially, of late. There was a flaw in the Sons of Sanguinius, a flaw which spread down through their successors like a crack in marble, growing wider and more obvious the further down it spread. And Corbulo was determined to repair that flaw by any means necessary. Even if it meant sending warriors to dig through a world turned charnel pit.

He tossed aside another body, and paused. Through a haze of auspex data, he had caught a glimmer of something – a ghost-reading, snaking through the lines of code and readouts, slithering towards him beneath the blanket of corpses. Even as he registered this, he caught a whiff of a familiar, acrid odour – almost insect-like, but not quite. He turned his head slowly, letting the bio-augur play across his immediate area. More ghost-signals, sliding hidden beneath the charnel detritus, zeroing in on him and his men with deadly surety.

The sound of him readying his storm bolter was loud in the stultifying silence of the chamber. Alphaeus looked at him. Karlaen nodded, once, tersely.

Alphaeus lifted his own storm bolter. Karlaen turned back to the pile of corpses before him. The dead shifted, slightly. He took one step back, narrowly avoiding a spray of gore as the bodies exploded outwards as something large, with far too many arms and teeth, lunged for him out of concealment.

The storm bolter in his hand thundered, and the genestealer was reduced to purple mist and ragged tatters of alien flesh. But there were more where it had come from, and they made themselves known a microsecond later. All around him, throughout the vast chamber, the heaps of the dead burst like foul seed pods, disgorging multi-limbed monstrosities. Genestealers scuttled towards the Terminators from every shadowed recess and hillock of rotting remains, jaws agape and claws clicking.

The broodlord hung suspended far above the heads of its chosen prey, clinging to a fire-blasted shank of support girder with four of its six limbs. It rotated its head, following the massive, red forms of the invaders as they entered the Tribune Chamber. There were only six of them now – the others had split, forming smaller packs.

This pleased the Spawn of Cryptus. Divided prey was easy prey, as it had learned in its infancy down in the bowels of Phodia's substructure. It had hunted gangers and slaves in those dark, cramped tunnels, growing strong on their flesh and fear. It had only taken what was its by right of blood, as it had when it had overseen the taking of this palace – its palace. Its flat, red eyes narrowed and its head throbbed as it reached out with its singular will and touched the gestalt mind of its fellow tyranids, scattered throughout the palace.

It inhaled sharply, suddenly able to see... everything. Through the eyes of its kin, it watched as the other armoured giants made their ponderous way through the eastern sector of the palace, and the western, and the high gardens which marked the upper levels. It saw them all, from dozens of angles, heights and positions, and it shook itself slightly as it fought to control the sheer flow of sensory information that flooded its mind.

The broodlord had always had the power to cloud the minds of its prey, and to feel the thoughts of its children as they went about its business. But since the coming of the Leviathan, those powers had grown exponentially, so much so that their use now pained it slightly. Sending out its thoughts to lance through the minds of the nearby tyranids was akin to stretching a limb to the breaking point and holding it there until just on the cusp of agony. But where once it had only been able to influence, it could now compel.

It shuddered on its perch as it felt the wet scraping of movement from its children and their kin, who had come to Asphodex in the belly of the beast but whose minds tasted of familiar things. Its thoughts pulsed outward, spreading like ripples in a puddle, touching hundreds of bestial minds. Silently, it stirred them to wakefulness, and then into a killing fury, filling their primitive skulls with its own boiling rage.

The giants had come to interfere in the Hive Mind's plans somehow and it would not allow that. After everything it had done, after everything it had endured, it was *owed* this moment. A gurgling hiss escaped it, as it leapt from its perch and dropped towards the shadows below.

Phodia belonged to it. The city and everything in it was its by right. And no red-shelled invader would prevent it from taking its fair due in the time Asphodex had left.

THREE

‘Back to back, brothers. Don’t let them isolate us,’ Alphaeus roared, shouting to be heard over the noise of the storm bolters. Karlaen backed away, still firing. For every beast he put down, two more seemed to take its place, bounding out of the dark.

The genestealers came at the embattled Terminators from every direction, flinging themselves into battle. Normally, genestealers were canny, crafty beings, but these seemed to have been goaded into a fury. Karlaen knew from experience that such berserk tactics were nothing less than the influence of the Hive Mind at work. He twisted, avoiding a slashing claw. Genestealers could peel open battle tanks with ease; Terminator armour, while tough, was little obstacle to them. A genestealer came at him, darting in and out of his reach, trying to find a weak point. He stepped back, and something squelched beneath him. Servos whined as he fought the momentary imbalance. The genestealer lunged. Karlaen spun his hammer and caught the creature on the upswing, smashing its bottom jaw up through the top of its skull and sending its twitching carcass flipping backwards.

‘Somehow, I get the impression they were waiting for us, brothers,’ Aphrae said. His chainfist licked out, and the rotating teeth bit into the carapace of a squealing genestealer. He lifted the squalling xenos, and its weight caused it to split in two along either side of the whirring blade. ‘How thoughtful of them to send us a welcoming committee. It is considerations like that which truly denotes a civilised race, don’t you agree, Bartelo?’

‘I’m sorry brother – what? You’ll forgive me for not listening to you prattle. I was busy doing the Emperor’s work,’ Bartelo said, sweeping the barrel of his heavy flamer across a row of charging genestealers. ‘Burn, filth. Burn and die, in His name,’ he spat, as the xenos turned into shrieking pillars of fire, the light of their demise reflected in the optic lenses of his helmet.

Karlaen pulped the head of a leaping genestealer as he reached the others. Leonos and Damaris fought side by side, moving like mirror images. Their storm bolters thundered in unison and their power fists shot out like pistons, each gauntlet wreathed in a nimbus of crackling azure energy which caused alien flesh to sizzle and burst like overripe fruit where they touched. The twins turned in a slow circle, covering one another with an inhuman precision that Karlaen could not help but envy.

Nearby, Alphaeus’s sword flickered out and a genestealer fell, grotesque skull split. He pivoted and cut the legs out from one that sought to dodge past him. As the beast fell, he trod on it, reducing its head to a messy residue. ‘Back to back,’ he roared out again. ‘Just like that time aboard the *Charnel Horizon*.’

‘There’s rather more of them this time, sergeant,’ Aphrae said. A genestealer sprang for him, and he extended his chainfist, ramming the blade down the creature’s gullet. He hefted the twitching bulk and slung it at another xenos, knocking it out of the air as it dove towards Leonos.

‘More alien filth just means more targets,’ Bartelo rasped. Smoke curled from the nozzle of his heavy flamer as he stroked the trigger. Fire spurted in quick bursts, driving back genestealers.

‘More targets means–’ Damaris began.

‘–more ammunition expended,’ Leonos finished. As if to lend emphasis to his words, he ejected the clip from his storm bolter as Damaris covered him. He was firing as soon as another clip was in place, covering Damaris, as the latter reloaded his own weapon.

‘The twins are right, sergeant,’ Karlaen said. He whirled as a proximity alarm blared in his ear and shoved his hammer forward like a spear, using the flat of its head to pin a genestealer against a shattered statue. The creature hissed and spat, clawing at him. He pressed the hammer forward, cracked the monster’s sternum and squashed its heart. ‘They’re trying to overwhelm us. At this rate, we’ll use up our ammunition in a few minutes. Time to adapt our tactics.’ Karlaen scanned the chamber, and caught sight of one of the many ornately decorated entrances to the side corridors that he thought must run parallel to the Tribune Chamber. He gestured with his hammer. ‘There, we’ll narrow the field a bit. Give them less

room to run about in. Fall back,' he said. 'Bartelo, Aphrae, covering fire.'

'Our pleasure,' Aphrae said. Bartelo grunted and stepped forwards, flamer roaring. As the two Terminators laid down covering fire, Karlaen led the others towards the archway he had indicated. He cycled through vox frequencies, trying to contact Zachreal and the others, but his scans found only the disturbing hum of white noise.

'The others?' Alphaeus muttered.

'We're on our own for now,' Karlaen said.

The squad continued to fall back, their retreat harried by hissing genestealers, who darted in and out of reach, attacking and scuttling away before a blow could be struck in return. Though many fell to the covering fire of Aphrae and Bartelo, or were caught by a lucky blow from a hammer, power fist or sword, they continued to attack.

The squad had almost reached the dubious safety of the side corridor when a genestealer slipped beneath Aphrae's guard and tore open the back of his leg in a spray of blood and machine oil. Aphrae sank down to one knee with a grunt. Karlaen realised that the Terminator was not with them when Bartelo made to go to his aid. The others had reached the entryway and were firing at the horde that closed in on them from all sides. Karlaen knew that in mere moments there would be no reaching Aphrae. 'No,' he said, decision made. 'We need your flamer to clear us a path. I will get him.' Bartelo looked at him, and nodded once. Then he took aim and sprayed the hissing genestealers that stood between the Blood Angels and their fallen comrade, burning a corridor for the captain to move along.

Karlaen started forwards. Aphrae swung his chainfist out and decapitated his attacker. More moved to take its place. Aphrae fired his storm bolter at the oncoming wave of chitin, ichor and fangs, emptying the weapon. He tried to lever himself to his feet, but his wounded leg was unable to bear his weight. Karlaen fired his weapon and laid about him with his hammer, trying to clear himself a path to go to the other Blood Angel's aid. Bartelo and the others lent their own firepower to his efforts, and soon he was bulling through the enemy towards Aphrae as the xenos fell to scything bolter fire and curling flames.

Genestealers crawled over Aphrae, attempting to pry him out of his armour. He was unable to regain enough balance to throw them off, and it was all he could do to catch hold of those who got within reach and crush their limbs or behead them with his still whirring chainfist. Hoses and bundles of fibre were torn loose from their housings and he sagged forwards, slapping his free hand

down to catch himself. One of the xenos clambered up onto Aphrae's shoulders and began to twist and fumble at his helmet.

Karlaen reached the embattled Terminator and swatted the genestealer from its perch, sending it careening through the air, over the heads of its fellows.

'Can you walk?' Karlaen said, trying to haul Aphrae to his feet. The Blood Angel's armour responded sluggishly to his movements, and Karlaen suspected that its internal workings had been damaged.

'No, leg's a mess. I'm fairly certain it's only still attached by a ligament – singular – at this point,' Aphrae grunted. He could barely stand, even with Karlaen's help, and Karlaen could hear the pain in the other Blood Angel's voice. As novices, they were taught how to block and channel pain, even for grievous injuries. Where a normal human would already have died of blood loss, if not shock, Aphrae was still capable of fighting. Unfortunately, he did not appear to be capable of moving.

'Lean on me, I can...' Karlaen began, but his words died in his throat as the air came alive with a cacophony of hissing. His eyes were drawn upwards, towards the great domed roof of the chamber, where the shadows had suddenly become alive with hundreds of writhing shapes. 'By the blood of the Angel,' he muttered, as what he had taken for the shadowed reaches of a solid dome was suddenly revealed to be a mass of genestealers pressed close to the underside of the chamber's glass ceiling.

'I take it back,' Aphrae mumbled, following Karlaen's gaze. '*That's* the welcoming committee.' Above them, the genestealers began to fall. The creatures hurtled down towards the two Terminators, with obvious and deadly intent. 'Get clear, captain,' Aphrae rasped, lurching forwards to smash Karlaen out of the way of the plummeting genestealers.

Off balance, Karlaen staggered back as the tide of alien killers swarmed over Aphrae, biting and tearing. Aphrae tore the head from a genestealer and sent it spinning away with a backhanded blow and, for a moment, the way was clear. Karlaen met the other Blood Angel's eyes, and said, 'Aphrae—'

'Go, captain. I would only slow you down, and you said it yourself – we're running low on time. I'll make them bleed, and buy you a bit of it back.' Aphrae turned and caught a creature by the throat with his free hand; at the same time, he swept his whirring chainfist out in a wide arc, filling the air with stinking ichor. He staggered as genestealers slammed into him and swarmed over him. 'Go! In Sanguinius's name – go!'

Karlaen hesitated, but then turned and pressed back towards the others, cursing

himself while he did so. He heard Aphrae's chainfist stutter and growl as the warrior fought on, but all too soon it fell silent, and all he could hear was a cacophony of screeches, hisses and clicks. As he cleared the archway and joined Alphaeus and the others, he looked back, but saw only a seething tide of xenos horrors hurrying towards him. Aphrae was gone.

And if they did not move fast, Karlaen knew that the rest of the squad would share his fate.

The broodlord stalked through the mounds of human corpses and the bodies of its fallen children. Those bodies gave it pause, though it could not say why. There was no room for sentimentality in the gestalt mechanism of the Hive Mind – all were one and one was all. Nonetheless, the broodlord had been the leader of a pack long before it had been subsumed by the great, calming song of the Hive Mind's singular will, and it sank down beside the body of one of its children. It hesitated, then reached out towards the ruined carcass with a claw. Gently, it stroked the body.

All things died. All things were matter to be consumed, mass to be added to the whole, reshaped, reforged and repurposed. It knew this and it accepted it, for it could not do otherwise. But still, there lingered in its blighted soul some shard of something it could not name, a memory of another time, and of other dead which were not repurposed but were instead taken away to be interred in silence and darkness. Memories rose slowly over the gestalt hum, flowering and spreading and quickly fading, before it could fully examine them. It saw faces, and heard names, but no longer truly understood. Nor did it care to.

It rose to its feet and stepped over the body. The wave of death which had accompanied the attack on the invaders had only served to stoke the rage that bubbled within the creature. This ambush had not gone as well as the others, and its quarry were escaping deeper into the ruins of the palace, bloodied but unbowed. Its massive claws clenched and relaxed constantly as it paced towards the struggling knot of genestealers.

The red-armoured warrior who fought them did so even though his situation was hopeless. His weapons were gone or useless, and his armour had been rent and torn, its power cables severed and the exoskeleton twisted out of shape. Still he struggled against the churning mass of multi-limbed horrors that swarmed about him. The broodlord could not conceive of such an emotion as admiration, but it felt some faint stirring of something akin to it nonetheless as it hunkered down across from the stricken invader.

It scraped the ground gently as it studied its enemy; a flurry of images from the other ambushes flowed through its mind, and it closed its eyes for a moment, indulging in the pleasure those images brought. A roaring, black-haired giant fired his weapon until it ran dry, and then was swarmed under; another, wreathed in pungent smoke emanating from gilded censers, was attacked from all sides. On and on the tide of images rolled, and when the broodlord at last opened its eyes, it did so with a hiss of fulfilment. The ambushes it had organised were going well, and though many of its children had died, the enemy was scattered and bloodied.

Its children had managed to wrest the warrior's helmet off, and ruined hoses spurted recycled air as the hunk of metal was tossed aside. It caught up the helm as it rolled past and held it, turning it over in its claws. It looked at the warrior, and crushed the helmet with a single flex of its segmented limbs. The metal buckled and popped with a shrill cry.

The warrior spat and said something. The broodlord did not bother to listen to his words. Instead, it focused on his thoughts, plucking them out to examine one by one, as if they were the petals of some colourful flower. It needed to know why they had come. What did they seek, here, in its territory?

Every thought tasted different, and as it consumed them, names swam through its mind... Bartelo... Alphaeus... *Karlaen*. The names of the surviving invaders. Names were useful, it knew. Names were like keys to the locks of the mind. With a name, it could pry away the will and strength of its enemy and render them helpless before the strength of the Hive Mind.

That was how it had made Asphodex ready for consumption, though it had not been aware of the true reason for its actions at the time. It had weeded out the strongest minds from among the planetary aristocracy, and used the name it had been given by the fearful under-dwellers to strike terror into the very heart of Phodia. And it had done so gladly, for they were traitors, one and all.

Yes, betrayal. That was the word for what it had felt, so many cycles ago, before it had heard the song of the Leviathan and found its true purpose. It had been betrayed, and now, it would exact the blood-price for that treachery. Asphodex would burn, as would every world that the Flaxian Dynasty had presumed to control. They would burn and be consumed.

It hissed in growing frustration. The warrior's mind refused to give up the one thing it needed to know above all others. It lunged forwards and grasped the struggling man's head between its claws. The other genestealers released their grip on the captive and scuttled back as the broodlord loomed over its wounded

foe. It stared down into his eyes, searching, as he pounded useless fists against its carapace. There was another name there, beneath the surface of its captive's thoughts. It could taste his defiance, his blood-lust and... something else. Some strong desire... No, not a desire. *Hope*. Hope which was attached to one last name.

Its eyes bulged in fury as it caught a whiff of that name. Alien muscle twitched and swelled, and genetically augmented bone cracked and shattered beneath a sudden, inexorable pressure. The dead man slid out of its grip, and his armour clanked loudly as it struck the ground. The broodlord's throat sacs bulged and twitched as barely used vocal cords swelled, and a sound that might have been a name slipped from between its jaws as it threw back its head and screamed its anger to the dying sky.

FOUR

Karlaen heard the scream as it echoed through the palace. He knew no human throat had made that sound, and something in him could not help but shudder. It was a raw, animal cry, of something driven far beyond the limits of frustration. Whatever it was, part of him hoped that Aphrae had died before coming face to face with it.

‘Whatever it is—’ Leonos began.

‘—it sounds angry,’ Damaris finished.

Karlaen looked back at the twins. Like them all their crimson armour was caked in gore, and many of the heavy ceramite plates had been cracked and scored by the claws of the genestealers. The barrels of their storm bolters still glowed hot. Neither appeared to be wounded however, which was a relief.

As they moved down the corridor he looked around, taking stock of their surroundings as they put distance between themselves and the Tribune Chamber. The genestealers had not followed them directly into the spacious processional corridors beyond the chamber, but Karlaen could make out their shapes moving through the inky darkness of the ruins around them, and his sensors pinged relentlessly, alerting him to the presence of unseen foes. Occasionally, they would make as if to rush the slowly moving squad of Terminators, but would dart back into the darkness as the Blood Angels levelled their weapons.

The corridors were wider than he had anticipated, shattered by the battle that had gutted the palace hours earlier. Whole sections of the dividing wall were

missing, torn out by alien acids or heavy weapons fire. Ancient artworks, created by generations of Phodian craftsmen, and now reduced to scattered debris, crunched beneath the steady tread of Squad Alphaeus.

‘Aphrae is dead,’ Bartelo said, softly. It was the first thing he had said since they’d left the Tribune Chamber behind. Karlaen glanced at him in surprise. Bartelo was taciturn at the best of times, unless Aphrae was prodding him.

‘He died as the Emperor willed,’ Karlaen said. The words did not sound as comforting aloud as they had in his head, and he fell silent. Death was the companion of every Space Marine, for were they not the Emperor’s Angels of Death? Yet, even so, the Chapter was diminished by every death, and the loss of even one of their own cast a pall over the survivors.

For Karlaen, particularly, that feeling was like an old companion, and one whose company he did not welcome. For a moment, he was somewhere else, not on a world, but within the vibrating innards of a space-going hulk, and he could hear the screams of the men who had followed him into the darkness as they died.

He closed his organic eye and tried to banish the memories. But instead of fading, they clamoured more loudly, and his ears filled with a red hum. He wanted to return to the Tribune Chamber and kill and kill and kill until there was nothing left alive. For a moment, the desire overwhelmed him. Then, Bartelo’s voice pierced the haze and he was once more himself.

‘We were inducted together, he and I,’ Bartelo said. He spoke steadily, as if in eulogy. ‘We journeyed to the Palace of Challenge together, across the desert, and fought back to back in the gladiatorial contests which awaited us there. He was uncouth, even then. There was too much laughter in him.’ He looked at Karlaen. ‘Captain, was he laughing as he died? I was not close enough to hear.’

‘No,’ Karlaen said. ‘He was not.’

Bartelo was silent for a moment. Then he nodded. ‘Good. It is meet that a man should die with dignity. Laughter would only sully the moment.’ He sounded quietly pleased.

Karlaen looked at the other Terminator for a moment, and then away. There were many in the Chapter like Bartelo – grim, unswerving and lacking in mirth. That he and Aphrae had been friends, of a sort, was obvious, but even so, almost inexplicable. Karlaen knew as much about the warriors under his command as a proper leader ought, but even so, some subtleties escaped him. He wanted to speak words of comfort to Bartelo, but was uncertain as to how to go about it. What was there to say?

‘Orders, captain?’ Alphaeus said, interrupting his train of thought.

‘We keep moving. According to the augur scans, there should be a security hub somewhere ahead of us,’ Karlaen said, grateful to turn his thoughts to his duty. ‘When we reach it, we might be able to use the security logs to track down our quarry.’

‘Good,’ Alphaeus said. ‘The sooner we’re out of here, the better. Listen to that racket – this ruin is crawling with tyranids.’ He smiled humourlessly. ‘If I wanted to wade into that sort of mess, I’d have joined the main assault.’

‘I did not force you to come, brother,’ Karlaen said.

‘No, but who’ll keep you out of trouble if not me?’ Alphaeus said.

Karlaen snorted. Though he would not say it out loud, he found the sergeant’s humour reassuring. ‘Keep moving, and keep an eye on your sensors. They’ve had a taste of our blood and I intend to see that they get no more than that.’

He led them on, following the whispers of the augur readings towards the security hub. More than once they were forced to stop and form up as lean, monstrous shapes flooded towards them from out of side corridors, or plunged through the gaping holes in the close-set corridor walls. But as before, the genestealers would always retreat just before initiating contact, as if their harrying of the Blood Angels were no more than some demented child’s game. Then they would stalk above and below the squad, testing the limits of the Terminators’ patience before attacking again.

In truth, Karlaen suspected that the beasts were attempting to entice them into wasting ammunition. Twice, he was forced to hold Bartelo back from simply filling a side passage with fire. While the promethium reserves of a heavy flamer were substantial, they were not limitless, and the genestealers seemed to know that. So they attacked again and again, heedless of casualties, trying to force the Terminators to expend valuable resources. A suicidal stratagem, but one that worked all too well.

To Karlaen, that meant only one thing: there was a synapse creature close by – a commander of bugs and bio-beasts, a central node of the abominable will that guided Hive Fleet Leviathan. Tyranids were like any other feral animal, acting on instinct. But a synapse creature could turn those mindless beasts into a dedicated army with but a thought. That was what they were now facing – an enemy that would sacrifice a hundred for one without blinking, and seemed fully committed to doing so.

That, in the end, was the greatest weapon at the Hive Mind’s disposal. Every world consumed only added to the incalculable number of bio-organisms that the

hive fleet could employ in battle. Every fallen warrior was simply a bit more mass to be added to the bio-vats. And as the hive fleet swelled, more worlds fell beneath its expanding shadow.

As that bleak thought hung heavy in his mind, he cycled once more through the vox signals, hoping to contact one of the other squads, or even elements of the forward invasion force. He knew, with an unerring instinct honed in a thousand confrontations with the tyrannids, that he and the others would not be able to complete their mission without significant reinforcement. To think otherwise was hubris. Unfortunately, the only thing he could hear over the transmitter was the hiss of static and alien whispers.

They pressed on, moving more quickly now. The palace occasionally shook, as if in sympathy with distant explosions, and the sound of talons scratching on walls and floors was omnipresent. The bio-sensors screamed warnings about foes that the Terminators could not see. Time was growing short.

‘Sounds like every beast in this part of the city is flooding into these ruins,’ Alphaeus murmured.

‘Good,’ Bartelo said. He hefted his heavy flamer. ‘More bodies for the pyre.’

‘Save your fuel,’ Karlaen said. He pointed at the reinforced security portcullis that blocked the corridor ahead with his hammer. ‘We’re here.’ He didn’t stop, but bulled into the portcullis, which was covered in hundreds of talon marks. The metal squealed as he peeled it open with his hands. When he had created enough of a gap, he used his hammer as a lever and forced it fully open. His sensors showed that the chamber beyond contained only one life form, if it could be called that. It was weak and thready, but Karlaen was determined to find it.

‘Survivors?’ Alphaeus asked.

‘I don’t think so. At least, not the kind you’re thinking of,’ Karlaen said. ‘Come.’ He forced his way through the damaged door and into the security hub, followed by the others. The space beyond the door was wide and filled with debris. It had seen hard fighting, despite the reinforced door. The walls and ceiling were badly damaged, and Karlaen took note of the toppled piles of sandbags and hastily erected barricades that marked portions of the chamber. Two parallel rows of statues marked the main drag of the chamber, and almost all had been knocked from their pedestals and shattered into unrecognisable lumps of marble.

‘They made a stand here,’ Alphaeus said, indicating the spent lasgun power cells and blood stains. He kicked at a crawling feeder-beast and sent it scuttling through a hole in the wall. He wrinkled his nose in disgust. ‘These blasted beasts

have already broken down the corpses. I can smell one of those digestive pools nearby.'

'Not all of the corpses.' Karlaen heaved a heavy chunk of fallen debris aside to reveal the twitching form of a servitor. The mindless drone of meat and metal flopped and sparked, its body broken beyond repair. Karlaen saw immediately what had befallen it. It had been caught by the debris and smashed to the ground, its limbs and spine pulped.

He sank down beside it. There was something pitiable about the dull-eyed thing, and for a moment, he allowed himself to wonder who or what it had been before it had been converted to the mindless husk it now was. The ruined mouth tried to speak, and sparks flared from its burst larynx, spattering the front of Karlaen's armour.

'It's not a combat servitor,' Alphaeus said.

'It is a holomat,' Karlaen said. 'A messenger. And it was likely on its way to deliver a message when it was caught in the attack.' He tapped a finger against the curved mark that had been etched into the servitor's pale expanse of forehead.

He took the damaged servitor's head in both hands and tore it loose from the damaged chassis with an effortless twist. Holding up the head by its cables, he examined it for a moment to make sure it was undamaged. Then he attached it to his belt. 'I'll extract the data when we have found a more defensible location. For now, we should—'

He broke off as a lean, alien shape leapt over the gap above him, and Karlaen looked up. The others followed his gaze. Proximity sensors began to blare warnings to every Terminator in the chamber. He readied himself for an attack from above.

Instead, the attack came from a section of acid-chewed wall, and targeted not himself, but Bartelo, who turned as Damaris, the closest to him, shouted a warning. Something crystalline streaked out of the darkness and caught Bartelo as he turned, knocking him from his feet with a bright burst of heat and light that momentarily illuminated the area, revealing fallen statues and shattered debris. Karlaen and the others moved to aid their downed comrade as his attackers moved into the glare of the stab-lights.

Three long-legged shapes, taller than any Terminator and just as broad, loped into view in a rattle of chitin plates and bio-armour. The trio of tyrannid warriors were monstrous parodies of the human form, stretched and distorted into something nightmarish. The beasts charged towards the Terminators on flat,

heavy hooves, smashing through the rubble as they came. They wielded bio-whips and bone blades with a precise, inhuman grace and filled the air with sub-sonic hunting calls as they lunged to the attack.

FIVE

Karlaen levelled his storm bolter and pumped shot after shot into the charging monstrosities. Alphaeus and the others did the same, as Bartelo began to struggle to his feet, a smoking rent in his armour. The tyrannid warriors split up, moving swiftly. They were big beasts, with broad, wedge-shaped skulls and four arms. Powerful, jointed legs propelled them forwards and acidic bile streamed from their toothy maws as they exposed their fangs in anticipation.

Karlaen shouted, 'Get Bartelo on his feet.' Then, hammer in hand, he moved to intercept the closest of their attackers. The creatures were the synaptic foot soldiers of the hive fleet, and Karlaen wondered if these were the source of the malign will behind the suicidal attacks of the genestealers. They were powerful and deadly creatures, and a match for any Space Marine, even one clad in Terminator armour. There would be more on the way, as well. Where there was one brood, there were many.

The closest of the tyrannids leapt from the ground onto a statue toppled on its side, scaling it swiftly. It clashed its bone blades together in what might have been a challenge as it dived from its perch to meet Karlaen. Four deadly lengths of sharpened bone swept down towards him. He twisted aside, letting the edges glance off his armour with a sound like a scream. He jabbed his hammer forward like a spear, catching the creature in its segmented gut. It bent double with a coughing roar, and he smoothly altered the hammer's course to meet its descending skull.

There was a crackle of energy, and the tyranid warrior staggered back, jaw burned and broken. Its blades scissored for him wildly. He stepped back and smashed the bone swords aside, before striking his opponent in the chest. Chitin cracked and burst, and a thick ichor ran down the armour plates as the thing screeched. Before it could attack again, he shoved the barrel of his storm bolter against the shattered area of its thorax and pulled the trigger. The creature jerked wildly and toppled towards him, its swords and claws seeking to pull him down into the darkness with it even as it died. He forced it away, wincing as the tip of a bone sword skidded off his cheek. It hit the ground and lay still.

With the higher castes of tyranid warrior-beasts, it was best to kill them as quickly as possible. They could fight on despite incredible wounds, easily withstanding the sort of damage which would test even an ork's vigour. Luckily, Karlaen had more than a century of experience in killing such creatures, whether on the battlefield or in the close confines of a space hulk.

He turned, narrowly avoiding the stinging lash of a bio-whip. The second beast was duelling with Damaris and Leonos, keeping their power fists at bay with wide sweeps of its bone sword and a snap of the other bio-whip it wielded.

Karlaen fired his storm bolter, distracting the beast. It twisted towards him instinctively and opened itself up for Leonos, who clamped one arm around two of its own, pinning blade and whip. The tyranid shrilled in rage and tried to fling the Terminator off. Its strength was so great that it jerked Leonos from his feet and swung him about as easily as it did its whips. Damaris rushed in and caught one of its two remaining free hands in his power fist. He shoved his storm bolter against the spot where the limb met its body and fired.

The limb, and the bio-whip it clutched, came free with a wet, tearing sound, as acidic ichor splattered the floor. Its remaining bone sword flashed out and caught Damaris on the side, carving a long gouge in his armour. He staggered, and Karlaen stepped past him, hammer descending on the side of the tyranid's skull. Chitin crumpled and the xenos sank to one knee. Karlaen struck it again, with more force this time, and his blow crushed its skull. Even so, it continued to struggle. Leonos set himself and lifted a boot to brace against the uncrushed side of the alien warrior's skull. With a grunt, he tore its arms free of their sockets. The tyranid made a wailing squeal and flopped onto the ground. Damaris finished it off quickly, crushing what was left of its head beneath his boot.

Even as the creature writhed in its death throes, Karlaen was striding past, towards where Alphaeus sought to haul Bartelo to his feet, while fending off the remaining tyranid's blistering fury of attacks. Alphaeus parried blow after blow,

wielding his power sword with an elegance and speed befitting one of the Chapter's foremost swordsmen.

The tyrannid slammed its four blades down on the length of Alphaeus's one and loomed over him, trying to drive him to his knees. It threw back its head and a powerful scream ripped from its throat sacs, nearly deafening Karlaen. The scream echoed, redoubling in strength, and Karlaen winced as he felt something scabble along the underside of his mind. The creature's scream had not been merely a cry of frustration, but a summons to war.

As the echoes faded, a new sound took their place – claws, scrabbling on stone and steel. Karlaen staggered as the ground beneath him shifted and then erupted in a tangled thicket of flailing claws and snapping jaws. Momentarily off balance, he swung his storm bolter down and fired until it was dry. He fell heavily, but managed to drag himself forwards, away from the growing hole. Through the smoke and dust, genestealers clambered after him. He rolled onto his back and lashed out with his hammer, pulverising the first to leap. Damaris and Leonos moved to his aid.

He heard a shrill cry, and saw a flood of xenos squirming through the shattered portcullis. The twins turned their weapons on these new foes, but not for long. As their weapons stuttered to silence, they were forced to defend themselves without the benefit of bolter fire. Karlaen pushed himself awkwardly to his feet, backhanding a genestealer with his storm bolter in the process. There was no time to reload. He laid about him with the ancient relic of his Chapter, splitting skulls and cracking carapaces.

Then came a roar of heat and incandescent light as Bartelo, still on one knee, fired his heavy flamer, consuming the whole, scrabbling pack of creatures climbing through the portcullis. 'Step aside, captain. Let me light their way to the Emperor's judgement,' Bartelo rasped.

Karlaen fought his way clear of his enemies as Bartelo directed his flames towards the hole in the floor. Genestealers screamed as they burned, their screams echoed by the final tyrannid warrior. Too late, Karlaen saw that Alphaeus had been sent sprawling by the beast. It lunged over the sergeant, and its blades smashed home, erupting from Bartelo's chest in a gory spray. Bartelo slid off the blades and smashed to the ground, unmoving.

Alphaeus was on his feet a moment later, his face contorted in an expression that Karlaen recognised all too well. His power sword hummed as it caught the tyrannid in the neck, beheading it as it turned to confront him. It fell and Alphaeus drove his blade down into its body again and again, until Karlaen's hand on his

shoulder shook him from his rage.

Karlaen looked at Leonos, who crouched beside Bartelo. ‘Status?’ he asked softly, even though he knew. There was too much blood, and Bartelo was too still.

Leonos stood. That was answer enough. Karlaen closed his eyes. The inside of his head itched with red, creeping thoughts that he pushed aside with difficulty. Twice they had made contact with the enemy, and twice they had lost a brother. There would be no third time, not if he could help it. But he could see their situation plainly: if they stayed where they were, or tried to press forward, they would be overwhelmed. Already, the proximity sensors in his armour were alerting him to movement in the corridors beyond them. And without Bartelo’s heavy flamer, they would be at even more of a disadvantage than before.

‘Adapt and persevere,’ he muttered, eyeing the chamber walls. His bionic eye clicked and whirred as he scanned through settings and lenses until he came to the geo-imager. Before his eyes, a holographic grid map of the palace formed. Outside the chamber, the sound of clattering claws grew louder. Alphaeus fired his storm bolter down into the hole in the floor. Bartelo had only given the horde outside momentary pause.

‘Orders, captain?’ Alphaeus asked. He sounded deceptively calm, and his face might as well have belonged to one of the toppled statues.

‘How much promethium is left in Bartelo’s tanks?’ Karlaen said, studying the grid.

‘Not much,’ Leonos said. ‘A single, concentrated burst.’

‘Enough to clear the passage,’ Damaris added.

‘Pierce them,’ Karlaen said. ‘And get ready to move.’

He plotted the quickest alternate route to the Plaza of the Emperor Ascendant. While part of him was disgusted with the idea of retreat so soon after making contact, this mission was not about battle. They had a duty, and it was up to him to see that it was fulfilled. If that meant swallowing a bit of pride and falling back to a position where they could make more effective use of their remaining firepower, so be it. Also, it was possible that once clear of the palace walls, his vox signals would reach Zachreal and the others. Reinforced, they could make a concentrated push.

‘What? But—’ Alphaeus began. Then, remembering his place, he nodded crisply. He looked at the twins. ‘Do it. His armour will survive the fire, but whatever is coming for us won’t.’ He looked at Karlaen. ‘Whatever you’re planning, brother, I’d make it quick – I’m picking up massed bio-readings in all

directions. They're closing in on us.'

'That's the idea, Alphaeus,' Karlaen said. He strode towards the closest wall. 'I want as many of them in here as possible, before we leave.'

'What are you thinking?' Alphaeus said, following him.

'Do you remember that time aboard the *Seraglio of Abomination*?' Karlaen said. He raised his hammer. 'They're expecting us to press forwards, or try and escape back the way we came. So let's surprise them, eh?' He took a leisurely practice swing, his bionic eye gauging the wall's weakest point.

'If you're thinking of doing what I think, I feel it is my duty to remind you that it didn't work as well as you hoped that time,' Alphaeus said.

'You act as if you didn't enjoy seeing all those genestealers go spilling out into the void, sergeant.'

'Given that we were spilling out into said void alongside them, you'll forgive me for being somewhat distracted at the time,' Alphaeus said. The sound of claws grew louder, filling the chamber with a relentless clicking of talons on metal.

'Well, there's no void to worry you this time,' Karlaen said. The tang of promethium fumes reached him. He glanced back at the twins. 'Status, brothers,' he called out, over his shoulder.

'Promethium tanks--' Damaris began.

'--punctured, captain,' Leonos finished.

'Good. Fall back, and take up flanking positions,' Karlaen said. As he spoke, genestealers spilled into the chamber, heralded by a cacophony of screeching. As before, they charged with reckless abandon, driven berserk by whatever synaptic impulse commanded them. Alphaeus barked an order, and three storm bolters were readied to roar out in reply to the alien shrieking. But they would not fire yet. Not until the last possible moment.

Karlaen swung the Hammer of Baal in a wide arc. The wall burst outward at the point of impact, filling the promethium-laden air with dust. Karlaen bulled through, picking up speed as he raced through towards the next wall opposite him. Behind him, he heard the roar of storm bolters followed by a crackling thunder and then his armour's sensors screamed at him as a wave of heat washed over him, flooding through the hole he had made.

He heard the heavy tread of the others following him and smiled in satisfaction as he tore through the next wall. The fumes from the spilled promethium had turned the security hub into an inferno, and whatever had been inside at the moment of the explosion was no longer something they had to worry about.

Room by room, corridor by corridor, the four Terminators smashed and fought their way through the ruins. Never stopping, pausing only to kill any tyranid unlucky enough to get in their way. The Blood Angels left behind them a trail of shattered wreckage and broken xenos bodies. Then, with one final blow of his hammer, Karlaen led his men out into the Plaza of the Emperor Ascendant.

As he stepped out into the red Asphodex light, his vox came alive, free of interference. He heard Zachreal's voice, and Joses's roar, as loudly and as clearly as if they had been beside him. He heard the bark of storm bolter fire, and alien screams as well, and knew then what he had only suspected before. The ambush had not been by random chance; rather it was the work of an overarching will. The others had not yet found any sign of Flax. Alphaeus met his gaze, and Karlaen knew he had heard the signals as well.

'We're on our own, brothers,' Karlaen said. He turned and saw the fallen statue after which the plaza was named, depicting the Emperor in all of his glory, wings wide, face uplifted towards the boiling red sky. The statue had been seared by fire, burned by ichor and smothered in creeping strands of fleshy bio-matter, but there was no indication as to what had felled it in the end. Karlaen stared down into the marble face of the Master of Mankind and felt something stir within him. Not the hum this time, but a black, brooding anger that brought with it the images of Aphrae going down beneath the enemy, and Bartelo being ripped open, and others, from a greater distance – faces, names, dying screams from that one red moment.

The Sons of Sanguinius had always been better at dying than their brother Space Marines. Martyrdom was in their blood, and for a Blood Angel, there was no greater glory than death in a good cause. But that fierce sense of selflessness which sent them rushing headlong into the jaws of death all too often flowered into obsession. He could feel them pressing in from all around him, the ghosts of all of those who had followed him and died. For a moment, barely the blink of an eye, the plaza was *full of pale, carmine shapes, facing the enemy, and he could hear a voice like fire and smooth stone and the crack of great wings as his Father spoke* and then the genestealers were boiling out of the hole he had created in the wall like ants out of an anthill.

He tore his gaze from the statue and shoved down the tide of rage and black memories. He raised his storm bolter. 'I want interlocking fields of fire. Go to pattern epsilon,' he grated. 'Combat protocol sigma.' The others fanned out around him as the genestealers scuttled towards them through the ruins and debris that dotted the open plaza. Karlaen glanced at the statue one last time.

Then, he turned to face the enemy. 'The Emperor watches, brothers. Do not fail him.'

Then, with a roar of storm bolters, the battle commenced.

SIX

Plaza of the Emperor Ascendant, Flaxian Palace, Phodia

Interlocking fire patterns and close combat protocols were the mortar of victory, or so Karlaen's teachers had always claimed. Now, several centuries on from his days as an aspirant, eager to sup on the accumulated knowledge of his masters, he was willing to admit that there was some truth to the saying.

The storm bolter bucked in his hand, the reverberation of its voice causing his exoskeleton to tremble slightly. The barrel glowed white-hot, and his head ached from the targeting information fed into it by his bionic eye. But pain was the price paid for victory.

The tyranids made assault after assault, coming in waves as they had before, but now they were charging directly into the teeth of an organised gun-line. Before, the Terminators had been scattered or cramped, unable to take full advantage of their firepower due to their surroundings and each other. Now, out in the open, the battle was theirs before the first genestealer darted from cover. That had ever been the way of it, in Karlaen's experience. One of the more successful strategies the First Company had learned in centuries of gruelling warfare was that an enemy that relied on numbers could be drawn into a situation where those numbers rapidly became a disadvantage.

Such was the case now. Each assault was repelled, and at significant range. Only once did a tyranid warrior get close enough to engage the Terminators, and Alphaeus swiftly put it down with two hard sweeps of his power sword.

Finally, the attacks ebbed away, until there was only the soft ping of cooling gun barrels and the dripping of tyranid ichor to be heard in the plaza. A haze of smoke hung heavy in the air over the mounds of xenos corpses as an eerie quiet descended. Karlaen waited, counting moments in his head. Then, with a grunt of satisfaction, he lowered his storm bolter.

‘They’ve fallen back, likely to plan their next move,’ he said.

‘And like as not, we’re being watched,’ Alphaeus said, as he reloaded his storm bolter. ‘I can feel it, scurrying around in my head.’

‘Then we’d best take advantage of the time we’ve bought for ourselves,’ Karlaen said. He unhooked the head of the servitor from his belt and held it up. ‘We’ll start with this.’ Deftly, he extracted the contact nodes of several power cables from his armour and plugged them into the nodes hidden within the dripping stump of the head. Almost immediately, the servitor’s mouth opened, and its eyes widened as the influx of raw power jump-started its functions.

A deluge of meaningless code burst from the servitor’s bloody lips, followed by a hollow, mechanical voice. *‘Warning. Warning. Plaza defences compromised. Warning. Security hub J-7 compromised. Warning. Tribune Chamber compromised. Warning. Security hub J-8 compromised. Warning. Unit to report ongoing situation to Governor Flax. Warning.’* More warnings followed, a veritable roll call of failed defences and counter-attacks.

Connected to the servitor’s memory banks via his armour’s systems, he slowly peeled back the layers of its programming, and found that the drone had been heading to deliver its report to Flax in person when it had been caught in the rubble. He looked at Alphaeus. ‘It was Flax’s envoy. He sent it out to take stock of the palace defences and then report back to him, wherever he’s hiding.’

‘Do you think it can lead us to him?’ Alphaeus asked. He sat down on a toppled pillar and sank his sword into the ground, point first, before him.

Karlaen did not reply. Instead, he continued his exploration of the servitor’s memory banks, taking note of the various routes and passages it held maps of. The servitor had a signal-lock on Flax’s bio-signature, as well as all relevant security information – ID codes, crypto-keys and system overrides – to reach him. Karlaen blinked. He looked at Alphaeus. ‘There’s an undercity. That’s where Flax is.’

Alphaeus grimaced. ‘That means tunnels. And we’ve no heavy flamer to clean them out.’

‘According to our friend here, the tunnels are still sealed. The tyranids haven’t found them yet,’ Karlaen said. He frowned. ‘Or they hadn’t, according to the

drone's last sensor sweep.' He unhooked the head from his armour, and its eyes glazed over as its mouth went slack. If it was attached to his armour's power source for too long, there was a chance the fragile mechanisms in the head would burn out, and he still had use for it.

'Was that before or after it was pinned under the rubble?' Alphaeus asked. When Karlaen did not reply, he sighed and nodded. 'It always comes back to the cramped and the dark, doesn't it? What I wouldn't give for another stand-up fight.'

'We do what we must, brother, for the good of the Chapter,' Karlaen said, placing the now-silent servitor head back on his belt. He looked up, gauging the time. The chronometer in his eye ticked over. It was just past midnight. It had taken him longer to filter the information contained in the head than he had thought.

The dull crump of distant explosions told him that the battle for Phodia was not yet over. A tendril of guilt squirmed through him, as he turned his thoughts to those embattled survivors. Their fight would soon be over, and not for the better. They were chaff before the scythe, left to dull the enemy's blade with their meat and bone. Asphodex would be erased, and her people with it.

You have no heart, only fire, he thought, trying to banish such thoughts. Guilt, doubt, fear – all fuel for the fires of determination. All men died, whether hero or coward, mortal or Space Marine. But if their death meant something, then it was no kind of death at all, but transcendence. The road to a better world was paved with the bones of brave men. Had the Angel's death not provided the Emperor with a chance for victory against the Arch-Traitor? So too would it be here. The dead of Phodia, of Asphodex, of the Cryptus System, were the foundation on which Baal's survival would be built.

He turned and watched the fires on the horizon. Karlaen knew it was true, that all of this was necessary. But that did not mean he had to like it. He closed his eyes, feeling bands of red and black tighten about his mind and heart. He opened them and met the calm, blank gaze of the statue of the Emperor, and let out the breath he had not even realised that he had been holding. 'It is time, brothers. We must move out. If the others were going to reach us, they would have by now.' He looked towards the palace. 'It is time to find our quarry. And this time, we will not stop until we achieve victory, or death.'

'Let's hope it's the one, rather than the other,' Alphaeus said, uprooting his sword from where he had driven it into the cracked ground.

The squad began to move back towards the palace, across the blasted

landscape of broken alien bodies. They moved slowly, picking their way forwards with care, senses straining to catch any sign of the enemy that they all knew was not far away. As they moved, Karlaen could feel eyes on them, peering out from the gloom that surrounded them. Alphaeus had been correct – they were being watched. He could feel it himself now, scratching gently at his mind. The augur-lens of his bionic eye scanned the darkness that crept across the ruined plaza, but nothing revealed itself. That didn't mean that it wasn't there, simply that it was very good at hiding.

The broodlord had always been good at hiding. It had an instinct for dark, cramped places and wide shadows that had kept it alive for those first few weeks after... It hissed and squeezed its eyes shut.

When it opened them, it glared at the invaders, gauging their numbers and strength. It could feel the gathered minds of its children massing around it in the shadows of the ruins. It would sacrifice them all, in the name of victory, though it loved them. Yes, that was the word... *love*. It loved its children, even as the Hive Mind loved it, and it would send a hundred of them to their deaths without hesitation if it meant pulling down just one of the red-armoured giants striding through the plaza.

Its plaza.

Its sudden spurt of anger was passed to its children through the synaptic link that they shared, and it heard a ripple of soft snarls and creaking chitin. It forced itself to remain calm, and allowed the song of the Leviathan to dull the edges of its anger. It opened up the link between itself and its children, allowing them to glimpse the unfettered glory of the force they now served. Snatches of words fluttered through its mind, carried by the voices of those long dead: elegant, descriptive phrases which might describe the heaving, coiling presence that rose over it and its children and spread from horizon to horizon like a hungry sun.

It felt its mind and will fray at the edges as the song swept through it and around it. Some part of it longed to be one with the Leviathan, after being alone for so long. And it would be, soon enough. That was the fate of every living thing in Phodia – to be meat for the great beast that slithered through the void, following the light of a distant star.

But not yet. Its mind slammed shut to the voice of the Hive Mind, cutting off the song, and disturbing its children. The closest genestealer snuffled and clicked interrogatively, and the broodlord grunted in a placatory fashion. It focused on the invaders again. It could sense the rest of their number drawing near, just as

the ones below moved towards the palace steps. Soon, there would be more of them. Far too many, in one place. It sat back on its haunches, considering.

No, it could not risk it. It would kill as many as it could now and thin their numbers before it considered its next move. It slouched forwards, reaching out with its mind, feeling for the burning sparks of the invaders' consciousness. Willing as it was to sacrifice its children in pursuit of its goals, it saw no reason not to employ every advantage it possessed.

It would show them the beautiful thing which awaited them all.

'Contact, grid twelve,' Alphaeus said. Karlaen checked his sensors, and saw the flare of red that meant an approaching bio-signature.

'Contact, grid eight, nine, eleven--' Leonos began, only to be interrupted by his twin.

'--contact on multiple grids,' Damaris said urgently.

'They've decided to stop hiding,' Karlaen said, as his targeting lens whirred and focused in on the shapes scuttling through the darkness all around them. There was more subtlety to the genestealers' actions now, as they crept through the darkness, staying close to cover at all times. In the gleam of his stab-lights he caught sight of a rounded skull or a flash of chitin, but that was it. 'Form up. If they rush us, we will drive them back. Whatever else happens, we will not be driven back again. We will go forward.'

He checked his sensors again, noting the positioning of the enemy. They were cut off in all directions, as if whatever mind was directing the xenos had seen and learned from his earlier strategy, and was now attempting to block off any avenues of escape. And yet, they did not attack. Karlaen stared out into the darkness and tried to discern the motivations of his unseen enemy. What was it waiting for?

The answer came a moment later, when his mind suddenly convulsed, wracked with stinging webs of malign thought. Karlaen grunted and bent forwards, clutching at his head. The others made similar motions, twitching as an unheralded pain tore through their thoughts, savaging them from within.

A haze of red descended over his eyes, but not the one with which he was all too familiar. This was a sickly haze, such as might overcome a dying animal's last moments. He groaned as alien thoughts wormed into his own, boring through the walls of discipline and hypno-conditioning to hook into the kernel of humanity within. Old memories, long buried under new, were uprooted from the murk and brought forth screaming into the light. He could recall the darkness of

the sarcophagus he had been entombed in as an aspirant, only barely aware of the passage of time as the blood of the primarch changed him into something other than the youth he had been. The dark had squeezed and crushed him, and even in his almost comatose state he had screamed himself raw for those first few weeks.

More memories came, dragged up by the inhuman will which assaulted him – he felt the heat of weapons which had almost claimed his life, and felt the sour shadow which threatened to rise up in him in his darkest moments. His mind shuddered and squirmed in the grip of his enemy, and the memories began to change, becoming more horrible and utterly alien. He felt the discordant song of the Hive Mind as it thundered through him, washing what was *him* away and leaving only smooth purpose – to consume. These were not his thoughts, but those of the enemy. He had fought tyranids often enough to know that where most attacked with claws, poison and acidic bile, some could use a man's own thoughts against him.

And yet, there was something else. Something that, even in his agony, Karlaen could see... A flaw in that smooth, remorseless wall of gestalt hunger that threatened to overwhelm him. A hunger that was not merely for bio-matter, but for something else. Something more human in scope. Whatever it was, it was a weakness, and he knew what to do with an enemy's weakness, physical or otherwise. He focused on it, bringing every iota of his will onto it, as if his thoughts were the hammer which hung, forgotten, in his hand. He saw unfamiliar faces – a man and woman, a boy – and felt a surge of anger that was at once bestial and all too human, tinged as it was with grief, or perhaps madness. He felt the quiver of surprise go through the invader, a startled roar echoing in his head and from the darkness, as his mind bucked in its grip.

The haze which afflicted his vision began to clear, and he could see the savage shapes of genestealers rushing towards them. Teeth gritted against the whips of pain which still lashed his mind, he swung his storm bolter up and fired. A genestealer pitched forwards, its head a wet ruin. As if the sound of his shot had been a signal, Alphaeus and the others joined him. The dark was lit up by flashes of bolter fire, and genestealers fell in their dozens. But there were still more behind them, hundreds perhaps.

The ache in his mind began to lessen and he scanned the darkness behind the leaping, shrieking shapes of the enemy, searching for the thing which commanded them. It was here, somewhere, scrabbling in their minds to make them easy prey for the others. The augur-lens on his bionic eye flashed as it

focused in on a shape crouched atop one of the few still-standing statues which dotted the plaza.

It was a broodlord, and larger than any he had ever had the misfortune to encounter before. A genestealer almost three times the size of those now assaulting him and his men, with talons that would put even the largest tyranid bio-beast to shame.

Red eyes met his, and he felt the creature's hideous thoughts begin to reassert themselves in his mind. It took every ounce of will and psycho-conditioning he possessed to hold it back. It had surprised him once; it would not do so again. He raised his storm bolter and a flash of pain, like acid on flesh, ripped through him. He ignored the pain and his finger tightened on the trigger as his targeting sigil flashed red. The creature reared up on its perch, spreading its four upper limbs as if in invitation, and he could sense its amusement.

Then, it was gone. The targeting lock ceased to flash, and he cursed. The creature had not moved; it had simply vanished as if had never been. *Another psyker's trick*, he thought angrily. Wherever it was, it hadn't gone far. He could still feel its thoughts, lurking on the underside of his consciousness. It was almost as if it was speaking to him, not in words, but in impressions. Though its first attack had been parried, the duel was not yet done.

'Captain, to your left,' Alphaeus roared suddenly, shocking Karlaen back to attention. He turned and saw the gaping, fang-studded maw of a genestealer closing in on him. Karlaen swept the genestealer aside with a thrust of his hammer and started towards the spot where he had last seen the broodlord. If he could catch it and kill it, he and the others might yet survive this mission. If not, well, better death than the ignominy of failure. He activated the vox and said, 'Alphaeus, hold the line until I return. If I don't, attempt to contact the others and request extraction.'

'Where are you going?' Alphaeus demanded, shouting to be heard over the din.

'Hunting,' Karlaen said, as he charged into the darkness.

SEVEN

Karlaen knew that rushing off alone, out of the line, was not a particularly sound decision, strategically. Tactically, however, it made perfect sense. Behind him, his brothers were waging a desperate battle against overwhelming odds, a battle in which, under different circumstances, he had no doubt that they would triumph. But now, they were not fighting the scuttling hordes of the Hive Mind alone, but the brutal psychic domination of the broodlord as well. And that was a battle they could not hope to win. Not unless he could find it, and kill it.

He used his bulk to push through the horde, smashing genestealers with his hammer, shoulders and feet. The xenos did not swarm him, as he expected, but instead broke and flowed around him, as if given orders to avoid him at all costs. He killed those that came within reach, but took advantage of the lull to press forwards, towards the statue he had seen the broodlord perched on. If the creature wanted to meet him, he would oblige it. While the broodlord was occupied with him, it would have no attention to spare for Alphaeus and the others, or for commanding the other genestealers. Alphaeus and the others could break their enemy, while Karlaen hunted his.

And it was his enemy. What he now stalked through the shadow-haunted plaza, away from the bellicose fury of the battle behind him, was the central intelligence which had dogged them since they had arrived on Phodia several hours before. He felt it in his gut. It had harried them and slain two of them, and he was determined to see that its tally grew no larger.

Despite his determination, he felt a flicker of disquiet. His bionic eye clicked and shifted in its socket of steel, trying to pinpoint the creature as the hiss of alien whispers filled his head anew. But it was nowhere to be seen. It was as if it had been erased from his perceptions. He could not smell it, taste it on the smoke-clogged air or see it. It might as well have been a figment of his imagination.

You can hide from me, but not the machine-spirits, beast, he thought as he activated the data-capture spirits within his augur-lens. Almost immediately, a haze of blinking after-images on a one-second delay showed him the broodlord still crouched on the statue, then its leap, and the arc of its trajectory as it hurtled towards him. As the first image registered with him, he rerouted the data from his augur-lens to his storm bolter's opti-scope, allowing his armour's targeting system to lock onto the descending shape of the broodlord.

He fired a long burst, hoping to cut the creature in two before it reached him. Through the augur-lens, he saw it twist out of the way in mid-air and crash down into the rubble separating them. The broodlord rolled to its feet in a cloud of dust and rose up over him. It towered above his not inconsiderable height, and was easily of a size with the tyranid warriors he had faced earlier.

For an instant, they stared at one another. Then they came together with a crash of chitin on ceramite. Talons tore jagged grooves in armoured plates, and pale flesh darkened where the hammer's energy field touched. They broke apart, but only for a moment. Karlaen spun his hammer in a tight circle, parrying a series of blinding claw strikes as the broodlord came at him again. Such was its speed, the creature caught him more than once, leaving ragged furrows in his armour. Even his genhanced reflexes were no match for the sheer, unnatural speed of the beast. It would wear him down, one vicious strike at a time.

He swung the hammer out in a wide, looping blow. The broodlord flipped backwards, avoiding the blow and landing on all fours out of reach. Karlaen snarled and fired his storm bolter. The beast began to run, and he tracked it, firing all the while. It leapt from fallen statue to wreckage pile, staying just ahead of the explosive rounds until he was forced to turn, and it leapt onto him. He staggered, his armour's stabilisers and servos whining as they compensated for the additional weight.

It scrambled up onto him, one foot planted on his shoulder plate as it hooked its claws into the armour around his head in a splash of sparks. A hose was torn loose, spitting a hiss of air. He rolled with it, and smashed both his side and the creature into a fire-blackened column. Chips of marble spattered his face as the

broodlord was sent flying. It hit the ground and slid until its claws thudded down, anchoring it in place.

The broodlord shoved itself upright as he charged towards it, roaring out an oath to Sanguinius and the Emperor both. It leapt straight up as his hammer slammed down, cracking the ground. Its feet struck the top of his armour and then it was lost in the shadows again, circling him just out of sight. He whirled, trying to catch a glimpse of it. But it was not relying on mental trickery this time, just its own speed and stealth.

Karlaen turned in a slow circle. His vox-link was still open, and he could hear the voices of his men as they fought on. He could hear other voices as well, those of Zachreal and the others as they met their own enemies in battle. The scene in which he found himself was being played out across the vast stretch of palatial ruins, in one form or another.

The genestealers and the tyranid warriors were but pieces on a board for the beast he now confronted – it could move them into position with an errant thought, and drive them berserk with equal ease. It could flood the palace with feeder-beasts and ripper swarms, or drown them in bio-beasts, if it wished.

But it did not. He knew it and could feel it. It wanted something, and it was delaying the consumption of this place until it got it. What abominable purpose was it seeking to fulfil? The question lodged itself in his mind like a splinter.

Overhead, the roiling, red sky was split by spores streaking to the planet's surface from the tyranid vessels far above. They moved almost gracefully, like sentient creatures rather than obscene tumours of bio-matter. His armour's sensors tracked them, recording their descent and relaying it to the Chapter fleet above automatically. More and more spores fell to earth, and the ground shook beneath him. Asphodex was dying; time was running out, both for his mission and the beast which glared at him from the shadows. He could feel its frustration boil across the surface of his thoughts, and he smiled.

'I know you can hear me, beast,' he said aloud. 'I know that you understand me, though I do not know how. I will speak slowly, regardless, for your benefit.' Karlaen could not say why he bothered to speak, save that in that instant when his mind had touched that of his enemy, he had felt something human... or something that had once been human. The thought was not a pleasant one, and he felt a chill, deep in his bones, as it occurred to him.

'You cannot win. We will come for you, with fire and sword, and we will overturn your nests and scour every trace of your vile species from this world, even if we must crack its crust and drown it in magma to do so. Asphodex will

not fall to you. We will burn it to ash before we allow you to claim dominion.’

At first, he did not think that his words had had any effect on the beast. Then came a bubbling, liquid snarl of pure malice, and with it, a torturous flood of mental imagery. This stabbed into his mind, again and again, and he took a step back, almost overwhelmed by the sheer malignancy of it.

The broodlord darted from concealment and pounced on him as he reeled. Its lower set of claws dug into his cheeks as it bent over him, its feet digging into his belly, its larger talons sunk into his armour like anchor-hooks. He staggered beneath its weight, as before, and as it lunged to sink its fangs into his face, he rammed the haft of his hammer between its teeth.

Burning dribblets of saliva hissed and smoked where they touched his armour as the beast struggled to bite through the weapon. Its eyes bulged obscenely in their sockets as it flung its thoughts at him. He closed his mind, throwing up mental walls, as he had been taught during his days as an aspirant. But as fast as he raised them, the beast knocked them down. It was more powerful than any such creature he had had the misfortune to encounter.

‘What *are* you?’ he grunted.

Images flapped against his mind like the wings of insects against the bulb of a stab-light. He saw the Tribune Chamber, full of life and sound, and on the throne that had once stood at the far end, a man sat. No, not a man... something else. Disgust welled in him, as he began to understand. As if sensing his revulsion, the broodlord uttered a muffled shriek of rage around the haft of his weapon. A claw slid between the plates of his armour and he felt a stab of pain.

His mind wavered as the creature’s thoughts rode the pain into the depths of him. But the discordant pulse of the Hive Mind was met by the red hum that crouched sealed away in his subconscious. It rose, like a crimson tide, filling him and driving all other thought before it. Anger flared in him, and more than anger. He wanted to smash this thing, to strike it until it was no more than pulp and memory.

With a groan of servos, Karlaen forced the beast up, until it was barely holding onto him. Then, with a roar, he hurled the creature towards the statue it had been crouched upon. It struck the base of the plinth with a *crack* and tumbled down, limp and unmoving. The agony in his mind began to fade and he shook his head, trying to clear it. The world had gone red around him, and all he could see was the thing – his enemy – lying there, helpless.

Karlaen swung his hammer up and charged. He would end it here and now. He would see his mission accomplished. No more of his brothers would die. The red

hum filled his mind, carrying him forward. The Hammer of Baal snapped out, wreathed in snapping strands of blue lightning. The broodlord—
—moved.

At the last moment, just before his hammer struck home, the creature opened one eye and flung itself aside. Whether it had been playing dead, or had actually been stunned, he could not say. It rolled away from the blow, which continued on to strike the statue. The hammer smashed through the lower section of the statue in an explosion of dust and stone splinters, and Karlaen allowed the force of the blow to spin him around.

He swung his storm bolter up as his targeting array locked onto the broodlord where it crouched, as if waiting for him. Karlaen heard the sound of stone grinding. His armour's proximity sensors blared a warning, and he looked up, the fury draining from him as he realised his mistake. The statue crashed down atop him. Its immense weight knocked him flat and pinned him to the ground.

Sensors blared warnings into his ears as his exoskeleton groaned and creaked. The plaza cracked beneath his hands as he tried to shove himself upright. Armour plates buckled at the point of impact, and the ancient suit of armour seemed to sag about him in defeat as he tried and failed to heave the statue off himself.

A slow hiss of satisfaction escaped his opponent. The broodlord watched his struggles with a flat, red gaze, its long, sinuous tongue flickering out to taste the air. Then, when it was certain that he was not going to escape, it began to crawl towards him. Its eyes never left his as it drew closer and closer, and he knew it was taking pleasure from his predicament.

Trapped, barely able to move, Karlaen could only watch as the broodlord crept towards him, its hideous face split into what could only be a leer of triumph.

EIGHT

The broodlord moved slowly, savouring its moment. Karlaen struggled against the statue's weight, trying to pull his arm free. If he could just extricate his storm bolter, he might stand a chance. But he did not think the creature was going to give him the time to do so. The rage that had held him, the red fury that had driven him to rashness, had been snuffed out like a fire doused in water. Now he was left with only cold certainty – he had been foolhardy, and now he was paying the price.

'Come on then, beast,' he spat. 'Come on.' He shifted, trying one last time to heave the statue aside. 'Take your due, if you would, but it will be the last time, I swear to you.'

The broodlord paused and examined him, as if in amusement. Then it started forwards again, eyes locked on his face. Karlaen continued to struggle. Even if it were hopeless, even if he died here, pinned beneath a statue, he would not give up. He would not resign himself to the monster that crawled ever closer. That, in the end, was what it meant to be of the blood of Sanguinius – even if your fate were woven into the universal skein, even if your doom was in your very blood, you would not surrender. Death in the name of duty was not defeat.

'Come on,' he rasped. 'Come and have your taste, vermin. Come, hurry!' If it got close enough, he might be able to blind it, with the help of the poison created by the Betcher's gland implanted in his hard palate. It would not be much of a victory, but it would be satisfying.

As if sensing his thoughts, it paused and eyed him suspiciously. It extended a claw, but hesitated. He felt its thoughts brush across his own, though without the urgency or ferocity of its earlier attempts. It was as if it were... curious.

His gaze caught something over the creature's hunched form. Beyond it, high in the red sky, which was beginning to lighten as dawn approached, dark shapes fell towards the city. At first, he thought that they were more spores, then he realised that they were drop pods. The warriors of the Chapter had arrived at last, beginning the final cleansing of Asphodex. As the drop pods drew closer, he could see that mingled among them were black-armoured warriors, riding on wings of flame. A chill coursed through him as he realised what had been unleashed upon the world.

The Death Company had been loosed upon Phodia, and no tyrannid would be able to stay their wrath. As if plucking the thought from his head, the broodlord tensed and twisted about to watch the invasion force descend through the roiling clouds. Orbital bombardment from the fleet above Asphodex struck the continent-spanning city, covering the Blood Angels in their descent. The newcomers hurtled closer, so close now that he could make out the red marks on their ebony power armour, and Karlaen winced as his vox spat a mangled flurry of gibberish. He glared defiantly at the broodlord. 'Your death is coming, beast. If not by my hands, then by theirs. Scuttle back to whatever hole you crawled out of, if you would see another dawn.'

It was a desperate gambit, but it worked all the same. The broodlord turned back to him, cocked its head, and then snorted. It had apparently understood him. It turned away, as if to leave. Karlaen seized the moment. He had been rerouting power to his exoskeleton for one last gamble, and now was the time. With a grinding roar, he forced himself up. Dust and debris cascaded over him as he forced his armour to the utter limits of its load capacity and shifted the statue just enough to cause it to roll aside. Servos whining, he lunged for the beast, even as it whirled to meet him.

It avoided his awkward blow and slashed at him, driving him back against the statue. Before he could push away from it, the broodlord shot forwards, faster than his eyes, organic and bionic alike, could follow. A claw sank into his chest, puncturing an armour plate and digging into the meat within. Karlaen grunted in pain. The broodlord jerked its claw free and leapt back, out of range of any retaliatory strike. It eyed him as its long tongue flickered out to lick the blood from its claw. Then it was gone, vanished into the pre-dawn gloom.

Karlaen staggered forward, pressing a hand to his wound, as he vainly sought

some sign of the beast. His superhuman enhancements were already stemming the flow of blood and sealing the wound. The vox popped and crackled in his ear. He could hear the others, and knew from the tenor of their voices that they were on the cusp of being overrun. His gambit had failed, but disaster could still be averted.

He pushed aside his pain and began to move back towards the battle, picking up speed as he went. 'I am coming, brothers,' he said, over the vox.

'Did you kill it?' Alphaeus asked over the crackling link.

'No,' Karlaen said, reluctantly. He did not elaborate, and Alphaeus did not press him. He caught sight of the squad as he made his way through the rubble. They had fallen back to the statue of the Emperor once more, putting their backs to it as the swarm of alien horrors sought to drag them down through sheer weight of numbers.

The vox popped and he heard familiar voices. He turned, and saw Zachreal on the steps that led into the palace, the storm bolters of his surviving squad-mates opening a path in the horde. Karlaen saw Melos and Joses as well, though they, like Zachreal, were leading the depleted remnants of their squads to the aid of Alphaeus and the others. Of the twenty Terminators who had teleported to the surface, barely half that number remained, and the survivors looked as if they had waded through the rivers of damnation. Karlaen's gut twisted at the thought. *Just like last time*, he thought. He forced the memory aside and kept moving. There would be time for self-recrimination later.

A tyrannid warrior rose up before him, its bone swords swinging down towards him. The creature was riddled with wounds, leaking ichor from every joint, but even half-dead it was dangerous. He blocked the blow, grimacing as the movement caused his wound to pull painfully, and shot one of its legs off. The creature fell with a scream, which he cut short with a swift blow from his hammer.

The plaza was full of hissing, clawed shapes. There were genestealers clinging to every surface, perched on every statue and tumbled column. They swarmed up the fallen length of the statue of the Emperor Ascendant, surrounding the embattled remnants of Squad Alphaeus on all sides. Fire discipline had kept the horde at bay for a brief time, but now it was the wet work of sword and fists. Karlaen heard the crackle of Zachreal's voice in his ear and he said, 'All units, converge on Squad Alphaeus's transponder signal. We must push the creatures back. We must not fail—'

'—the Emperor!' A new voice, harsh and raw, intruded on the vox-link. The air

was filled with the sound of thrusters and the grinding howl of chainswords. Black shapes, daubed in red, hurtled through the air over the plaza on wings of flame. ‘Take heart, brothers. We shall show these traitors how the Sons of Sanguinius deal with those who would defile Terra.’

A genestealer’s head was sent spinning from its neck to bounce off Karlaen’s armour with a wet thump as the Death Company sped past. Where the black-armoured berserkers passed, xenos died. Karlaen was frozen with shock, and some revulsion, as he watched the newcomers descend on the plaza with eager cries. They spoke gibberish, challenging invisible foes and calling out to friends who lived only in memory. They were the Death Company, and they were irretrievably mad – victims of the Black Rage that lurked in the heart of each and every Blood Angel. Karlaen had felt it himself more than once, riding the edge of his anger, though he had never succumbed.

The Death Company was the doom of their Chapter made manifest. It was the savagery of the Red Thirst, mingled with the inescapable madness that came upon some warriors when they were consumed by the fires of an ancient struggle and became lost in the shadow of great wings, only to be reborn in a world of rage, hatred and nothing else.

Karlaen had heard that those who were so consumed were overcome by visions and ancient memories, and could not tell the past from the present. They fought the shadows of enemies past, and believed themselves to be on Holy Terra, fighting the forces of the Arch-Traitor. Despite this, they were warriors without equal; it was as if, in their madness, they had been gifted with some small part of Sanguinius’s own strength. The warriors of the Death Company would fight until they died, and only death could quiet their rage.

Corbulo wished to eradicate the scourge of the Black Rage from the Chapter, and Karlaen knew that his mission here was tied in to that desire. But seeing the enraged Space Marines in action only pushed home the importance of finding Augustus Flax as soon as possible. More and more brothers fell to the Black Rage with every passing century, and if it were not checked, the Blood Angels might vanish into madness and despair, leaving only the echoes of what might have been to mark their passing.

Karlaen caught sight of the leader of the Death Company squad – or so he guessed by the markings on the warrior’s armour – wielding a wide-headed thunder hammer. The newcomer banked and circled the fallen statue of the Emperor. The Space Marine’s body shuddered and twitched as he dropped from the air. The paving stones of the plaza cracked beneath him as he landed, and the

head of his hammer was surrounded by a nimbus of crackling energy as he swept it out, driving the genestealers back.

The rest of the Death Company followed suit, dropping from the air to crash down among the genestealers like the wrath of the Emperor given form. Even as they landed, they attacked, filling the air with gore wherever they moved. The adamantium teeth of chainswords gnawed apart chitin as fists and hammers pulverised the alien bone. The brutality of the genestealers paled in comparison to the fury of the battle-maddened Blood Angels.

The Death Company fought without discipline, each warrior a whirlwind of death, but despite this, the genestealers began to waver before them. With the absence of the broodlord, Karlaen knew the genestealers were prey to their own instincts. They were not creatures of open battle, like the tyranid warrior-broods, but beasts of shadows and cramped spaces. It was in their nature to retreat in such situations.

Karlaen whirled as his vox crackled in warning, and he smashed a leaping genestealer out of the air. He saw Zachreal and the others hurrying towards him. The Terminators were like a blood-red wedge driven into the mass of alien bodies, Zachreal, Melos and Joses in the lead. The black-haired Joses was bloody faced, the left side of his jaw bare of flesh, bone showing through. One eye was a red ruin, but he still fought on, his storm bolter hammering. Melos's armour was blackened and stained, with only the skull set into its front free of charring, and Zachreal's armour was covered in hundreds of deep score marks.

'Captain, I have made a successful investigation of the upper decks,' Zachreal rumbled as he blew a hole in the centre of a genestealer's torso.

'And your report?' Karlaen said, smashing a xenos to the ground.

'Full of genestealers,' Zachreal said. He laughed, a great booming noise that echoed over the tumult of battle.

Joses ignored his fellow sergeant's mirth. A genestealer leapt towards him, and he caught the creature around the chest. As it snapped at him, Joses's head snapped forwards, catching the creature full in the face. Bone crunched, and Joses let the dead creature fall. Ichor stained his features, but Karlaen could see that he was grinning mirthlessly. Joses had always been something of a savage, he recalled. While most Blood Angels sought to distance themselves from their brute origins by refining their aesthetic senses, a few remained true to the primitive codes of the pure-blooded tribes of Baal and its moons.

'Zachreal's dubious attempts at jocularitas aside, captain, we are at a disadvantage,' Melos said. 'We are facing nothing less than an army.' He

pivoted, firing at the genestealers that sought to pull him down. Slowly but surely, the Terminators were pushing their way to Squad Alphaeus's side.

'Yes, but that army is, for the moment, leaderless and disorganised,' Karlaen said. He made no mention of how he knew this, and to their credit, they did not ask him. 'We must reach the others. Together, we can drive them back.'

He joined them, taking the point of the wedge. Together, they moved towards the fallen statue of the Emperor. Alphaeus and the twins were like an island chain in a swirling sea, just barely holding themselves above the waterline. As Karlaen and the others drew closer, however, the genestealers began to scuttle away, fleeing the plaza.

Alphaeus hacked down one of the slower xenos, and his seamed face twisted in a smile as he caught sight of Karlaen. He extended his arm, and Karlaen caught his forearm in a warrior's clasp. 'I was worried you weren't coming back. I would hate to have to explain to Commander Dante how I let you get yourself killed,' he said.

'You might still have to. This mission isn't over yet,' Karlaen said.

'At least we've got reinforcements,' Alphaeus said, gesturing with his sword. Karlaen turned, and saw that the Death Company had formed up around their nominal leader in a rough approximation of unit formation. They bounded across the plaza, hurdling piles of dead xenos, their chainswords licking out to lop off limbs and snarling heads as bolt pistols barked.

The black-armoured warriors were driving the bulk of the genestealers before them. The scuttling beasts scrambled up the steps and into the palace, seemingly fleeing before the Death Company. The hammer-wielding sergeant leapt over a dying genestealer, activating his jump pack as he did so, and careened towards a shrieking tyranid warrior. The beast spread its arms wide, as if in invitation, and the Space Marine smashed into it – then on through it, tearing the creature in half at the point of impact.

'Very effective reinforcements,' Karlaen murmured. He marvelled at the sudden change in their situation. Only a short time ago, the Blood Angels had been set to make a final stand. Now it was the tyranids who were being pushed back into the ruins.

'But uncontrollable,' Melos murmured gravely. 'Why would Dante send them here, unless...' He fell silent. Karlaen knew what he meant, but said nothing. If Dante had sent the Death Company to reinforce them, it had been because they were expendable. Only death could end their torment, and the ruins of the palace held plenty of that.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ Karlaen said harshly. ‘They are here, and we must employ every weapon remaining to us to achieve our goal. The tyrannids want to keep us out, brothers, so we must go in, if only to teach them the folly of such hubris.’

Before anyone could reply, a deafening bellow echoed across the plaza, and Karlaen realised that the genestealers had, perhaps, had other reasons for retreating than just the arrival of the Death Company. One of the ruined structures on the other side of the plaza from the palace steps exploded outward, as if struck by a mortar. Chunks of stone and shrapnel filled the air for a moment, heralding the arrival of a hulking shape. A second bellow, louder than the first, echoed out across the plaza.

Armed with razor-sharp talons easily the size of a man and a massive bio-cannon beneath its heavy amethyst carapace, the carnifex strode into the plaza. Bits of rubble slid from it as it stomped forwards. Its heavy, wedge-shaped skull oscillated slowly as if taking stock of the armoured figures before it. Then it reared up to its full impressive height, and let loose a cry of challenge, before it thundered forwards, the ground trembling with every step it took.

NINE

The carnifex stamped forwards, its enormous claws swatting aside broken statues, its weight causing the stone squares of the plaza to crack and buckle. The immense bio-beast levelled its bio-cannon at the closest members of the Death Company, who spiralled towards it on tails of flame, roaring out challenges in the name of the Emperor. The organic artillery piece tensed and spat a living round, its barrel venting gas from the gill slits which opened in its length as it did so.

The projectile exploded into a constricting tangle of thorny vines that lashed out and caught the Space Marines, dragging them to the ground. They hacked at the vines to no avail, and the carnifex ignored their struggles as it stormed past, intent on getting to grips with the rest of its enemies. Its tiny eyes fixed on the heavy shapes of the Terminators, and it emitted another roar of challenge.

‘Well, now it’s a party,’ Joses grunted. ‘Look at the size of him.’ He raised his power sword in readiness. ‘He’ll take some work to bring down.’

‘Work and time,’ Karlaen said. ‘And we don’t have enough of the latter.’ He raised his hammer. ‘Form up, phalanx-pattern sigma. Overlapping fields of fire, hold nothing back. If it gets to us...’

‘I’ll handle it,’ Joses said, swinging his sword experimentally.

‘See that you do,’ Karlaen said. There was no time to argue. The beast was charging towards them faster than any creature that size ought to have been able to move. Another Death Company warrior charged to intercept the creature, his

chainsword held in both hands. The carnifex swung its monstrous head towards him, and the air around its jaws began to shimmer with a greasy light. There came a roar of boiling plasma, and in a flash of superheated bile, the black-armoured warrior was vaporised in mid-leap.

The carnifex continued on, lumbering through the smoke of the warrior's passing. Its bio-cannon swung about, vomiting more strangling thorns across the plaza, and its scything talons swung out in deadly arcs, sending Death Company berserkers crashing to the ground in clouds of blood and entrails, their power armour cracked open and their torment ended. It spat plasma, incinerating anything that dared stay its progress. And when none of those weapons sufficed, it simply crashed through the opposition, be it a living warrior or an unfeeling statue. It was unstoppable, and it was heading right for Karlaen and the others.

As one, the Terminators fired. The carnifex shrugged off the explosive shells and continued to bull forwards. It would not stop, Karlaen knew, until it was dead, or until something even bigger decided to get in its way. Nevertheless, he continued to fire, his targeting array trying to find some weak point in its carapace. The ground shook beneath his feet as the carnifex closed in. Joses readied himself to meet it, his face split by a wide, feral grin. Karlaen could smell the incipient blood-lust in the other Blood Angel's sweat, and see it building in his eyes. He hesitated, wondering if he should order the sergeant to step back. Would that stop him? Would he listen? Or was he already too far gone?

Before the question could be answered, something black smashed into the charging carnifex from the side and sent it slewing through a column. The carnifex rolled to its feet in a cloud of dust, but its attacker was on it before it could move. Metal talons, each as long as a sword blade, flashed out, carving bloody tracks in the carnifex's flesh. The alien reared back, screaming in rage. Its cry was answered by its opponent.

'Come, traitor. Come to Cassor. Come and fight, come and die, but come all the same,' the vox-speakers mounted in the Dreadnought's hull crackled. 'Come and meet thy doom, dogs of abomination. Come and feel the angel's wrath, curs of Angron. Come screaming or in silence, but come so that Cassor might lay thy hearts at Sanguinius's feet. The walls of the Palace stand, the Eternity Gate remains barred and Cassor will break thy crooked spines across his knee.'

The Dreadnought, hull painted black and daubed in red, set itself as the carnifex charged towards it. The talons mounted on the ends of the piston-like arms rotated and flexed. Then one rose, revealing a storm bolter mounted

beneath the claw. The storm bolter spat, and the carnifex shuddered as its already abused flesh received new punishment. It crashed into the Dreadnought and drove it back into a statue. The Dreadnought shrugged off the blow and rammed itself into the carnifex's gut, lifting the beast into the air momentarily before smashing it down onto the ground.

'By the wings of the Angel, it's Cassor,' Alphaeus breathed as he watched the battle unfold before them. Karlaen did not ask him how he recognised the Dreadnought, for there was only one Cassor.

Cassor the Chained, Cassor the Mad, Cassor the Damned – whatever name he was known by, he had been one of the greatest warriors ever produced by the Blood Angels, even before he had been interred in a Dreadnought sarcophagus, to rise and fight again after his death on some far-flung battlefield.

He was also a warning, a testament to the dark truth that even the dead were not truly safe from the curse which afflicted the Sons of Sanguinius. For almost three centuries after his death, Cassor had served the Blood Angels from the war machine's sarcophagus, until that final, fateful day at Lowfang. In the early hours of the battle, his mind had shattered, though no one could say why. Some swore that it was the shadows of the wings of the Sanguinary Guard falling on him as they passed overhead. Karlaen suspected that there was more to it than that. Whatever the reason, however, Cassor now belonged to the Death Company and was far too dangerous to be unleashed without cause. He could barely tell friend from foe, and he was, in his own way, as monstrous as the tyrannid creature he was now fighting.

'The Damned One,' Zachreal murmured, as he watched the battle. He looked at Karlaen. 'Truly, our mission must be important if Commander Dante has unleashed him to aid us, captain.'

'Were you ever in any doubt?' Karlaen said, watching as the black-hulled Dreadnought crashed into the carnifex again. The two maddened beasts, one metal, one flesh, came together like rival bovids. The stones of the plaza were crushed and churned to rubble as they strove against one another.

'Ho, traitor, strive and strain all you wish, you will never conquer Cassor. While Cassor stands before the gates of Holy Terra, none shall pass. Shriek, daemon. Scream out your prayers to the gods of wrong angles and shattered skies. Summon them. They shall not defeat Cassor. It cannot be done.'

Cassor's emotionless, rasping monotone echoed across the plaza, drowning out the shrieks of the carnifex. The carnifex ripped at the Dreadnought with its huge claws, scoring the ancient armour but failing to pierce it. Cassor slashed at

the beast with his own talons.

Xenos and Dreadnought reeled across the plaza, brawling through the ruins, the carnifex howling out bestial challenges as Cassor roared out gibberish in reply. Suddenly, a ceramite plate buckled, and one of the carnifex's claws lanced down into the nest of grav-plates and fibre bundles that made up the Dreadnought's innards. The claw crashed down through the war machine and on into the ground, pinning Cassor in place.

'Pinned. Inconceivable. Cassor shall not stand for this, puppet of false gods. Release me, so that I might wipe thy stain from the earth,' Cassor rumbled.

In reply, the carnifex opened its maw wide. A greasy ball of plasma began to form between its jaws.

'Sorcery. You dare? Suffer not the witch to live, so says Cassor.' One heavy mechanical claw closed around the carnifex's throat, holding it in place. The beast, as if understanding what Cassor had planned, began to struggle, but to no avail. As surely as it had the Dreadnought pinned, Cassor had it held fast. Before the monster could release the burst of bile it had prepared, the Dreadnought brought up his wrist-mounted meltagun and shoved the barrel between the creature's jaws. With a dull hiss, the back of the beast's skull vanished in a cloud of superheated gas.

The carnifex toppled sideways, freeing Cassor in the process. The war machine shoved himself upright. His chassis rotated, as the optic augurs mounted in the hull scanned the plaza for more enemies. 'Listen, traitors. Hear Cassor's words: I still stand. The Emperor's hand is upon my shoulder. I am death incarnate!' The words echoed out over the area. But no new challengers appeared. Then, with a grinding of unseen gears and a whine of servos, Cassor the Damned stalked towards the palace, in search of new foes to slay.

In the aftermath of the carnifex's death, silence descended on the plaza. The gore-spattered survivors of the Death Company had cleared the plaza and entered the ruins of the palace, followed by Cassor. Karlaen could hear the sounds of battle echoing from the gaping doors of the palace, and knew that some of the genestealers, at least, had not made a clean escape. He looked about, taking stock.

Alphaeus and the others joined him. Karlaen clasped the sergeant on the shoulder for a brief moment, and then turned to look at the others. 'We still have a mission to complete, brothers. Our enemy will soon turn its gaze here, and the full might of the Hive Mind will fall on us. If we are to succeed, we must move and swiftly.'

‘We don’t even know where they are. Our searches revealed nothing,’ Melos said, his fingers playing across the curve of the skull set into his armour.

‘Yours, perhaps, but ours was more successful,’ Karlaen said. He patted the servitor head dangling from his belt. ‘I know where Flax is, and I know how to get to him.’ He smiled slightly. ‘We were right on top of him the whole time.’

‘What?’ Melos asked.

‘Easier to show you than explain,’ Karlaen said. He started towards the palace. ‘Come. Let us go claim Corbulo’s prize.’

TEN

As they entered the ruins of the palace, they could see the handiwork of the Death Company all about them. The broken, ruined corpses of genestealers and tyrannid warriors lay everywhere, reeking in the dust and gloom. Karlaen led his men back to the Tribune Chamber, past the fire-blackened ruins that marked Bartelo's final passing.

Silence descended on them as they followed the trail of carnage. The vox popped and hummed, but no voices broke the stream of static. Outside the palace, the consumption of Asphodex had entered its final stages. Parts of the planet's crust were already being scoured of every trace of organic matter, from cowering human survivors to the mould clinging to the rocks in the deepest caves. Soon, the oceans would be drained, and the air made toxic. But the warriors of the Blood Angels and Flesh Tearers would tear up the roots of the hive fleet before then, if all went according to plan.

An eerie sight was waiting for them in the chamber. The remains of Aphrae lay broken in the centre of the Tribune Chamber, arms flung out to either side, his ruined features staring upwards towards the shattered glass of the dome above. The survivors of the Death Company surrounded the corpse, staring down at it in complete silence with something that might have been reverence. Their silence was eerie after the brutal, snarling cries that had filled the air upon their arrival. The Death Company sergeant knelt beside Aphrae, one hand on his chest, head bowed. His helmet sat on the ground beside him, and Karlaen

stopped as he caught sight of the other Space Marine's tortured features.

'Raphen,' he murmured. Sadness filled him, dousing his momentary sense of triumph. Raphen's head turned, as if he had heard Karlaen, and he rose slowly to his feet. The other members of the Death Company turned, weapons raised. Madness and violence bled off them, and Karlaen felt pity and disgust in equal measure as he gazed at their twitching, shuddering forms. This, then, was what awaited him – what awaited them all – if he failed here. He could not bear to look at them, at his brothers, so distorted by rage that they were no longer proud sons of the Imperium, but instead battle-frenzied beasts.

'Raphen,' Alphaeus whispered. 'You were aspirants together, were you not?'

'We were,' Karlaen said softly. Memories of another young aspirant, the scars of battle fresh on his body, sitting across from him in the three-day vigil that followed their selection. He remembered fighting beside Raphen on a hundred worlds, battling the Chapter's enemies. But he had taken one path, and Raphen another and now... here they were.

There was a crash from behind them, and Karlaen, shocked from his reverie, spun, raising his weapon. The others followed suit, only a half-second more slowly. Cassor lumbered towards them from the other side of the chamber, hull painted with steaming ichor. The Dreadnought raised his storm bolter talon. 'Who comes? Friend or foe? Announce yourselves or taste my fury.'

'Hold, gentle Cassor,' Raphen croaked. His voice had the raw tinge of one who had screamed himself hoarse. 'Can you not see that these are our brothers? They wear the colours of the Legion. What word, brothers? Does the Eternity Gate still stand? What of the primarch?' There was a terrible desperation in his words, like those of a tormented child seeking comfort. Raphen shoved past the other black-armoured warriors in his haste to meet them. 'Has the Khan come to relieve us, as he promised? Speak, brothers.'

Karlaen hesitated, uncertain how to answer. The things of which Raphen spoke had taken place millennia ago, when Sanguinius still walked among them. He was possessed by ancient memories which were not his own, reliving battles he had never fought. He was mad and broken and Karlaen, for the life of him, could not think what to say.

He stared into the cold, blue eyes of the man he had once called a friend and said, 'Do you know me, sergeant?'

'I... cannot say,' Raphen said. Insanity danced behind his eyes, and his face contorted as if he were seeking to wrestle his memories into some semblance of coherency. 'Did we fight on the walls of the Palace together? Did we... Are we

embarking for the *Vengeful Spirit*, brother? Has the Emperor assembled his strike force? Is it time to smite the Arch-Traitor, cowering aboard his battle-barge?’ He reached out, as if to touch Karlaen’s armour. His fingers curled into a fist before they reached Karlaen, and fell. ‘Say yes, brother. Say that the Angels are to be the point of the spear,’ he growled, half-pleadingly.

Karlaen stared at Raphen, pity wrestling against necessity within him. Then he closed his eyes and said, ‘Yes.’ He heard a soft, communal sigh rise from the Death Company. He looked at Raphen. ‘The honour of leading the advance is yours, brother. You and your men will form the tip of our spear, as we seek out the one we have come to find.’

‘And what of Cassor, brother? Is there honour here for me as well?’ Cassor rumbled. His great claws snapped together in eagerness. ‘Are there traitors to be slain? If so, Cassor will slay them.’

‘There are traitors here, mighty Cassor,’ Karlaen said. ‘You will accompany us, and rain down your wrath on those who would seek to block our way.’ He pulled the servitor’s head from his belt. ‘But first, we must find them.’

He directed Alphaeus and the others to the centre of the chamber, where they swiftly cleared away many of the bodies from a circular area. It was a seemingly innocuous patch of floor, but the information he had gleaned from the servitor’s memory showed him that this was the entrance to the undercity of Phodia. He sank to his haunches and uprooted the stone that hid the crypt-lock. He lowered the servitor head, tilting it so that its eye was in line with the lock’s sensors. There was a click, then, with a whirr, a section of the floor irised open. Bodies tumbled into the gap in a sudden avalanche.

Damaris examined the aperture. The Terminator glanced at his twin, and then said, ‘Tunnels, captain.’ He stepped back as the Death Company moved quickly past him and into the darkness. Raphen, his helmet in place once more, led them. Cassor followed, mechanisms wheezing. Karlaen watched them descend, the servitor head dangling from his grip.

Alphaeus came up beside him. ‘That is what they are here for, captain,’ he said.

‘And how long until someone says the same of us, Alphaeus?’ Karlaen said, bitterly.

‘Hopefully never,’ Alphaeus said.

Karlaen shook his head. ‘Sometimes I wonder if that is our true curse – hope. Hope that we can escape the fate that befell our brothers. Hope that we can change the inevitable.’ He looked at Alphaeus. ‘I hear it, brother. It’s like a

melody I can't help but hear, a song from an unremembered past. I heard it when I woke for the first time, after my Sanguination, and I'll hear it when I close my eyes for the last,' Karlaen said softly.

'We all hear it, captain... brother,' Alphaeus said. He raised a hand, as if to place it on Karlaen's arm. But instead, he dropped it. 'All that matters is whether you choose to follow it.'

Karlaen jerked his chin towards the loping, black-armoured shapes of the Death Company. 'I don't think they had a choice, Alphaeus. I don't think any of us do.'

Alphaeus said nothing. Karlaen did not look at him. 'Come. We still have a governor to find,' he said, placing the head back on his belt and hefting the Hammer of Baal. Then, weapon in hand, he led his brothers down into the dark.

The Spawn of Cryptus watched its enemies descend into the depths of the undercity. It clung to the dome of the Tribune Chamber's roof, hidden by the shadows and its psychic abilities. The enemy ranks had swelled, but its carefully laid out ambushes had thinned the herd, as it hoped. It did not wish them dead. Not yet.

Not until they had found its quarry for it.

The broodlord crawled along the curve of the dome, its eyes on the open access hatch. It had known of its existence, but had been unable to breach it, even with the aid of the larger bio-beasts the Hive Mind had provided. A lesser creature, one whose will was completely subsumed in the shadow of the Leviathan, would simply have allowed the ripper swarms and feeder-beasts to ferret out what openings they could find, and left the cowering remnants of the Flaxian Dynasty to a stifling death in the depths of their self-made tomb.

But its will was not a lesser one. It never had been, and though the broodlord could not defy the Leviathan, it could subvert and distract it. It had kept back the swarms of tunnelling horrors and crushing beasts, shielding the palace with its will as it set its children the task of ferreting out a way into the depths.

It had been enraged, at first, when it learned the reason for the presence of the invaders. That they had come to take that which it had sought for so long had driven it into a murderous frenzy. But when the frenzy abated, its mind had begun to work. It was not a beast, and it had once had teachers who had tutored it to the limits of their ability. It knew so many things that its mind sometimes ached with the weight of that knowledge.

It paused in its descent, waiting patiently for the last glimmer of light from its

enemies to fade into the darkness. That there were depths which even it had not known of was frustrating, to say the least. But then, its quarry had always been more cunning than it seemed; cunning and treacherous. A stab of anger elicited a gurgling snarl, and its muscles tensed. Rockcrete crumbled beneath its talons as it pushed away from the wall and dropped to the floor of the chamber.

It rose to its full height, arms dangling, and looked around the chamber. Its eyes scanned the great murals – now ruined by blood, ash and impact craters – which covered the walls. It could remember them, how they had been before. On more than one night, its belly bloated with the meat of its prey, it had come here, creeping through the shadows, to sit and study them. They were its history, as much as that of its quarry. The history of Phodia, of Asphodex, of Cryptus and the Flaxian Dynasty.

The broodlord went to the closest wall, talons extended, and traced the faces painted there. It had been told the names that went with those faces, once upon a time, but it could not recall them. It could not recall many things now. The weight of the Leviathan's shadow pressed down on its mind more each day, erasing those things which the Hive Mind had no use for. Soon, it would not be what it was, save in form. Its mind would be smoother and less complex. It would be at peace.

It traced the faces on the mural and tried to remember just one name. Just one, to satisfy itself that it was still what it had been. Its claws dug deeper and deeper into the painted, blood-spattered surface, destroying what remained as it tried to remember.

It did not fear the song of the Leviathan, or the complete sublimation of its will and individual impulses into the gestalt of the Hive Mind. But it did fear that it would occur too soon, and take with it the dreams which had driven it for so many years. The desire which had kept it alive in the dank, dark access tunnels below Phodia, after it had been betrayed and after...

The broodlord's eyes closed. Faces, voices, scents all rose up in its mind, like ashes stirred from a dying fire. It heard snatches of music, and felt the comforting touch of one who had adored it. It heard the echo of booming laughter, and the stroke of a cloth across its muzzle, as blood and offal were wiped from jaws not yet dextrous enough to chew unaided. The fire in its head was no longer dying, and the song of the Leviathan faded into a comforting background hum as its rage was stoked.

It swung back from the wall, spreading its claws, and screamed. The scream was at once a summons and a warning, full of heat and demand. Its claws looped

forwards, striking the wall, striking the faces it would soon forget, and tore great gouges in them, obliterating them.

It turned, as it heard and felt the arrival of its surviving children. They swarmed down the walls or loped across the floor, surrounding it. It felt their minds rise up below its own and it tilted its head, letting out a slow hiss of satisfaction. The way was open. Its quarry, trapped. There was nothing now, save the end.

And then, it could forget, and lose itself forever in the shadow of something greater.

ELEVEN

The Undercity, Flaxian Palace, Phodia

Karlaen held up the servitor's head. The drone's mouth twitched into motion, and a babble of binary whispers fled its vox-unit. The heavy plasteel blast door before Karlaen ground open with a groan of tortured metal. The turreted autocannons mounted to either side of the door lowered their barrels and slid back into their security-niches.

It was the seventh such door the Blood Angels had come to since descending into the darkness of the undercity well over an hour before. The undercity was a mass of ruins, canals and tunnels beneath a roof of gridwork and pipes. Water dripped down constantly, somewhere out in the dark, striking metal. The sound of it echoed through the vast stretch of the undercity, bouncing from one hard surface to the next, until the point of origin was impossible to determine, even for one with the enhanced senses of a Space Marine.

When the blast door had fully opened, Karlaen stepped aside, allowing the Death Company to enter beyond first. It galled him to do so, but Alphaeus was right. The black-armoured warriors were here for one reason and one reason only – so that by their death his mission might prove successful. Nonetheless, the thought of it tore at him, even as it drove him on. If he were successful, then Raphen and his warriors might be among the last such doomed berserkers. It was too late for them, and for Cassor, lurching in their wake, but not for the rest of the Chapter.

He followed the Death Company through the blast door, along with the other Terminators. The vox was silent; noise discipline was being enforced now. Helmets had been retrieved and no flesh was visible, to guard against possible chemical attacks. The Terminators moved without speaking, their attentions fixed firmly on their sensors.

The undercity was the sort of battlefield with which they were all painfully familiar – cramped and crowded, full of shadows and noise. The ground vibrated with the hum of the hidden generators which powered the undercity and kept the air circulating, and ruptured pipes spat steam into the damp air. Alien mould was already growing in the nooks and crannies, and in places the floor had buckled, allowing the first, pale shoots of newborn spore-chimneys to peek through into the dim, artificial light.

The Death Company were waiting on the other side of the blast door when Karlaen passed over the threshold. They murmured to one another unintelligibly or stared ahead with fixed intensity, their powerful frames twitching with impatience. The reason for this was readily apparent – their path forward was blocked by a vast vacuum-lock portcullis, its cog-toothed blast door marked by the seal of the Flaxian Dynasty.

There were no sentry-weapons on display or combat-servitors standing guard. Karlaen hesitated, considering. His armour's sensors scanned the door and the immediate area, trying to discern some trap or pitfall. When none was forthcoming, he hefted the servitor's head and stepped forwards as he had before. The servitor twitched in his grip, its jaws unhinging to a disturbing degree as multiple vox-units mounted in its throat sprang to life and spat duelling glossolalia of what might have been code, prayers or something else entirely.

With a hiss of escaping air, the massive portcullis cycled open. After the gloom of the sub-city, it took Karlaen's senses time to adjust to the splendour which was revealed behind the secondary blast door. Outside and above, the city of Phodia was a rain-soaked ruin, hunched beneath spore clouds, the streets thick with signs of alien infestation. The undercity was not much better – long-neglected areas collapsed in on themselves, while overhead, the dull glow of illuminators flickered and grew weaker with every passing hour.

But here there was no sign of power failure or tyrannid infestation. Empty buildings lined broken streets, beneath a humming solar illuminator that cast its radiance across the vaulted reaches of this protected enclave. Karlaen took in the faded grandeur of the city-within-a-city at a glance. The servitor head squawked

and fell silent. Through his armour's connection to the decapitated head, he could see that they had found the object of their search at last. He quickly unhooked the servitor and re-attached it to his belt. It still had some use left in it – specifically, plotting the quickest course out of the undercity.

‘What is this place?’ Alphaeus muttered.

‘A hideaway,’ Karlaen said. ‘A home away from home, in the event of a planetary disaster. Or so our friend told me.’ He patted the servitor's head.

‘Big for a hideaway,’ Alphaeus said.

‘It's meant to house a significant portion of Phodia's necessary population. I wondered why so many of them sought sanctuary in the Tribune Chamber.’ Karlaen looked around. ‘The tyranids breached the palace's defences before they had a chance to evacuate, I expect.’

‘Or he left them to die,’ Alphaeus said.

Karlaen made to reply, but fell silent. That was all too likely. Different men reacted differently in moments of danger and loss. Some found wellsprings of courage undreamt of, while others cowered beneath the bodies of braver men and hoped to ride out the storm. Was Flax hidden away down here, he wondered, while above, his people fought to the last against an indefatigable enemy? Whatever the answer was, Karlaen did not intend to leave until he found out. He made to order the advance, but was beaten to the punch.

‘The city is silent, brothers. The traitors await. Let us hunt,’ Cassor rumbled, and started forwards, claws snapping together in barely restrained fury. The Death Company fell in around the Dreadnought, loping through the winding streets, their rasping mutters and unintelligible cries spreading through the stale air. Karlaen held the Terminators back, just for a moment. In the open now, some of the Death Company had begun to hack and hew at imaginary enemies. He knew, with sickening certainty, it would not do to get too close to them, not now.

‘Eyes open, brothers. Sensors to full extension, with geosynchronous positioning. I want this hideaway of Flax's mapped and recorded, just in case a hasty exit is called for.’ Karlaen started forwards, Alphaeus, Leonos and Damaris fanning out around him. The other squads did the same, until a rough line of crimson-armoured giants was moving steadily through the seemingly abandoned city.

Before they had moved very far, however, Karlaen saw Raphen stop. The Death Company sergeant trembled like a dog catching a scent, his head cocked. Then, with a shout, he began to bound through the ruins. His warriors followed, and Cassor lumbered in their wake, pistons wheezing as he picked up speed.

‘What did they—’ Alphaeus began.

Karlaen held up a hand.

‘Listen,’ he said. ‘Music.’ He recognised the haunting melody which had attracted the attention of the Death Company. It had been part of the initial briefing on Asphodex and the Cryptus System. The Blood Angels always included such items of cultural relevance in briefings; a people’s culture was a window into the way they thought. The song was an ode to the glories of the Flaxian Dynasty, a hymn to their wisdom, forbearance and courage. Karlaen did not find it strange that it should be playing here and now; humans often sought comfort in the past when the future proved too frightening. Indeed, the music gave him heart – if it were still playing, there was a good chance that Flax, or one of his family, still lived.

He moved quickly, following the Death Company. If the maddened Space Marines reached the source of the music first, there was no telling what might happen. Alphaeus and the others followed. The Terminators trudged through the tight, winding streets until they reached a central plaza, wider than the Plaza of the Emperor Ascendant, and filled with life and sound. The plaza was occupied by a massive garden. Wilted alien flowers gave off a riot of strange, cloying scents which did little to mask the odour of excess rising from the occupants of the plaza.

Everywhere, noble men and women, the scions of Asphodex’s greatest noble houses, lay senseless, or as good as, in the grass. Bottles of rare intoxicants, some banned by Imperial law, lay strewn about, and billowing obscura censers pumped hazy vapours into the perfumed air. In the centre of this scene of decadence, surrounded by attentive slave-servitors, an ancient man reclined feebly on a floating bed of silks and cushions. As Karlaen looked at the old man, a warning light flashed in his helmet, alerting him to the proximity of the genetic sequence he had been sent to claim.

Before he could act, however, there was a creak from the network of pipes, grates and illuminators above. Proximity warnings flashed and he looked up, expecting to see genestealers crawling along the roof of the hidden city. Instead, he caught a flash of metal, as a number of combat-servitors dropped from the roof to interpose themselves between the newcomers and the aristocratic loungers.

The servitors were repulsive things, made to order, and shaped more like the tyrannids they were on guard against than the humans they were protecting. Jointed limbs stuck out from serpentine bodies composed of segmented,

armoured sections, and human faces glared out from within cobra-hoods of ceramite. Karlaen snatched the servitor head from his belt, hoping that it could get them past the combat-servitors without violence.

They were little threat to the Blood Angels, but there was every chance that the man they had come to find might be caught in the crossfire. Luckily, the drones did not seem to be armed with anything more than blades. They were a last line of defence, rather than proper weapons-servitors; bodyguards whose only goal was to see that their masters remained undisturbed in the final hours of their existence.

Before he could present the head, Raphen gave a shout and the Death Company bounded forwards, weapons ready. The combat-servitors moved forward to meet them with eerie grace, bladed limbs whirring. Raphen ducked under the lunge of the lead servitor and rose up beneath it, catching it with his shoulder and flipping it over his back. As the servitor tried to right itself, Raphen snapped around and drove his hammer into the drone's head, crushing it with one blow. The serpentine body spasmed and then fell still.

The Death Company swarmed over the rest of the marble-fleshed drones like ants, hacking and shooting. The servitors fought with single-minded intensity, but they were no match for their attackers. The last of the brass-limbed monstrosities fell to Cassor, who crushed its skull in his claw and slung the twitching remains aside. They crashed down at Karlaen's feet as he increased the volume of his vox-unit and roared out, 'Hold!'

Raphen, thunder hammer raised, ready to spill the brains of a prostrate noble, turned. Karlaen met his gaze and several tense moments passed before the sergeant lowered his weapon. His warriors followed suit, albeit reluctantly. The combat-servitors had raised the ire of the Death Company, and they were eager to shed blood in the name of the Emperor.

'Why are we not killing these degenerate sybarites, brothers? What purpose do they serve? Cassor can smell the Phoenician's stench on this place, and he would cleanse it.' Cassor turned slowly, blades clicking impatiently.

'Stay thy wrath, mighty Cassor. There will be time enough for killing before we are done here, I fear,' Karlaen said calmly.

The Dreadnought twisted to face him, and Karlaen forced himself to remain where he was. The blood-red optic lenses mounted on the black hull whirred and focused in on him. Cassor extended a talon towards him. The tip of one of the blades touched his chestplate with a soft *ting*.

'I know you.'

Despite the emotionless basso rumble the words were delivered in, Karlaen could hear the uncertainty there. He steeled himself and said, 'And I know you, mighty Cassor, hero of Lowfang and Demeter's Fall. I know that you are a true son of Sanguinius.'

'I... I am a true son. I hear the Angel's voice, brother. I see his face, in yours. I... I will stay my wrath, brother. For now.' Cassor lowered his claw and turned away. Karlaen let out a slow breath. He turned back to Alphaeus and motioned for his second-in-command to follow him.

The intoxicated nobles had not reacted to the brief melee, and they did not react when Karlaen and Alphaeus moved through them towards Flax. The old man remained as insensate as his followers until Karlaen was looming over him. When Flax registered first the shadow and then the grizzled, golden-haired giant who cast it, his rheumy eyes widened in sudden panic. He began to babble in fear as Karlaen drew close.

'Governor Flax, I presume,' Karlaen said. 'I am Captain Karlaen of the Blood Angels Chapter and the Baal Expeditionary Force. I have been ordered to see to your immediate evacuation. If you will come with us, we will get you to safety.'

Flax's eyes narrowed. The fear was gone, replaced by something else. Resignation, perhaps, or exhaustion. The old man shook his head and slumped back into his cushions. 'I am Flax, aye. And your orders mean nothing to me, captain.' The old man smiled mirthlessly. 'You see, if you are here, then I am already damned.'

TWELVE

‘Damned?’ Karlaen said, slightly startled by the old man’s matter-of-fact dismissal. Humans, even politically powerful ones, were wont to be slightly in awe of the warriors of the Adeptus Astartes. They were the Emperor’s word given form, and few were the men brave enough to match their gaze and not quail back from them. Flax did not seem to be a brave man. Perhaps it was simply that fear had been burned out of him.

‘Oh yes, and not a moment too soon,’ Flax said, lolling among his cushions. ‘I half feared you were him, at first. Now I see that his game has been interrupted. He will blame me, of course, as he always has, and he will have no choice but to bring an end to it.’ He smiled. ‘For that, I must thank you, captain.’

‘Who is “he”?’ Who are you talking about?’ Karlaen asked, knowing the answer even as the words left his mouth.

‘The beast, captain. You’ve seen it – fought it. I can tell.’ Flax reached out with a withered, liver-spotted hand as if to trace one of the many long gouges in Karlaen’s armour. His fingers stopped short, however, and he pulled his hand back to clutch it against his chest. He smiled wearily. ‘As telling as a signature, those marks. I’ve seen their like more times than I care to admit in my life. On doors and walls and, aye, on the bodies of my people.’

Karlaen touched the mark as he gazed at Flax. ‘The broodlord has been on Asphodex for some time, then.’ It was not unheard of – creatures like the broodlord had been reported on many worlds just before those planets came

under threat from one tendril or another of a hive fleet. The creatures seemed to act as a beacon for the hive ships. They would lurk unseen for years, decades even, waiting for the right time to summon their hungry kin across the bleak stars to feast on the bio-matter of their chosen hunting ground.

‘Broodlord – is that what you call it?’ Flax chuckled. ‘My people called it the Spawn of Cryptus, as if it were a curse on the whole system rather than just this world.’ His smile faded. ‘Maybe it was – a sign of the Emperor’s displeasure with us if there ever was one.’

‘The Emperor had nothing to do with that creature,’ Karlaen said.

Flax gestured morosely. ‘Oh, to be sure. I know full well where the fault lies, captain.’ He grinned crookedly and patted his sunken chest. ‘With us, with the dynasty of Flax. We are damned, captain, and rightly so, for that thing, that beast, is our burden. It is our sin made manifest.’ The old man jerked forwards to cough into a clenched fist. Karlaen, alarmed, immediately ran a sensor scan of the old man. Humans were astonishingly fragile, and if Flax were broken or ill, it would hamper the extraction effort.

Flax’s coughing faded into a wet wheeze, and he shook his head. ‘Our sin,’ he said again. ‘Mine and my parents’, captain. A sin I allowed to stay buried, hoping that the shadows and years would swallow it. That it would crawl into the depths and die. But not everything dies in the dark... Some things take root and flourish.’ He looked up towards the pipes and grating that made up the roof. ‘And now here I am, cowering underground. Full circle,’ he muttered.

‘What are you talking about?’ Karlaen said. Something about the old man’s words had pricked his curiosity. He was afraid, but his fear was not of the tyranids, Karlaen thought. Flax looked at him.

‘My brother,’ the old man said, simply. ‘My brother, Captain Karlaen. You met him, briefly.’ He gestured to the claw mark on Karlaen’s armour. ‘And he made quite the impression.’ Flax’s eyes closed and he hunched forwards again, fists pressed to his eyes. ‘My Emperor-be-damned thrice-cursed brother, whose throne I took for the benefit of my people, much good as it has done them.’ He stiffened, and looked up again, eyes bulging. ‘Do you hear me Tiberius, you gangling monstrosity?’ he snarled, shaking his fist aimlessly. ‘I know you’re listening, little brother. I took your throne and I’d do it again, a thousand times over, no matter the consequences.’

Karlaen reached out to steady the old man. As Flax was overcome by another coughing fit, Karlaen shared a look with Alphaeus, who frowned and tapped the side of his head. Karlaen looked down at Flax again, then shook his head. No,

Flax was not insane. Karlaen suspected there was a horrid truth to the old man's ranting; he had seen it before, though only rarely. It was as abominable a heresy as any which existed.

Wheezing, Flax said, 'Satys, captain, that's where it began. I was a boy at the time, learning my limits here in the centre of our power, when my parents left on a trade mission.' Flax's face contorted. 'When they finally returned, they weren't my parents anymore. Everyone knew, everyone could see... something had changed. My mother was... pregnant, and the child was to be the new heir.' He spat the words like bullets. 'I was set aside as if I were nothing more than a placeholder.' Wrinkled hands curled into trembling fists. 'Set aside for a child yet unborn.'

Far above, something clanged hard – metal striking metal. Karlaen looked up. His bionic eye scanned the roof of the undercity, but there was nothing to see. He glanced at Alphaeus, who nodded and gestured to Zachreal, who stood some distance away with the others. The Terminator made his way towards them, gently shooing drunken nobles from his path. Alphaeus moved to meet him. Karlaen turned back to Flax, confident that Alphaeus would know what to do. 'And when it was born?' he asked.

'It was not human,' Flax hissed. His eyes were glassy, as his mind wandered back into memory. 'He was a monster from the first, a mutant, I thought, but he – it – was something far worse. Oh, they doted on him, though. They loved him as they had once loved *me*.' His voice became a savage rasp. 'After the first assassination attempt, they hid Tiberius away, below the palace... Here, in fact. This was his world for so many years,' Flax said, raising his skinny arms to indicate their surroundings. 'His playmates were servitors, and his few visitors... Well, they never left.'

Flax dropped his hands into his lap and stared at them. 'Dissidents and criminals, mostly. Though I know father, in his infinite foolishness, tried to arrange a marriage for him. They found the girl's body floating in a sump pipe some months later.' Flax smirked. 'That was the moment the nobility rallied around me. I was old enough then to know which way the wind was blowing, and since my parents had seen fit to abandon me, well... It was easy to reciprocate.' His smirk faded and he twitched nervously, as something rang hollowly, far above among the pipes. Karlaen saw Zachreal and two others moving off, away from the group, weapons ready. They would investigate and report back any sign of the enemy.

Karlaen could feel their presence, though the sensors showed no sign of them.

There were thousands of kilometres of tunnels, ducts and pipes between where they now stood and the palace above. It was inconceivable to him that the genestealers had not found a route down here at some point and time, regardless of Flax's assumption that his defences had kept them at bay. He looked back at the old man. 'You became governor,' he prompted.

It was not curiosity now which drove his line of questioning, but the need for information. It was on Satys that Corbulo had discovered the secrets of the Flaxian bloodline, and developed his theory that they might hold the key to freeing the Blood Angels of their twin curses. And it was on Satys that this monstrosity who now dogged his steps had originated. It was possible that it was a coincidence. It was also possible that whatever factor made the Flaxian genetic structure so valuable to Corbulo had also played a part in the corruption of Flax's parents. And before he escorted Flax from the ashes of his kingdom, Karlaen intended to find out which it was.

'Yessss,' Flax said, drawing the word out. 'An orderly transition of power, backed by the nobility, whose sons and daughters now loll insensate here with me in my final hours. It is the least I could do for them, for services rendered.' He coughed again and then laughed. 'Make no mistake, captain, they did not help me out of the goodness of their shrivelled, ambitious hearts – no, they were frightened. Can you imagine the nightmare that would have followed Tiberius's coronation? The people would have risen up, there would have been a civil war, and all the good the Flaxian Dynasty had done would have been unmade in an eye blink.'

There was a certain amount of sense there, Karlaen knew. Genestealers undermined societies from within, damaging the social and political structure as well as corrupting the bodies and souls of the populace. They were a virus, unleashed on worlds and sectors in order to make them ripe for the coming of the hive fleet.

'You killed your own parents,' Alphaeus said, speaking up for the first time. There was a hint of revulsion in his voice. Flax noticed it, and his lips peeled back from his teeth in a feral grimace.

'Not willingly, I assure you,' he rasped. His eyes closed and he leaned back, his hands flexing uselessly, as if they yearned to grip someone's throat. 'I still loved them, even then. You should have known them in their prime, captain. My father with his booming voice and hearty laugh. My mother, quiet and stern – the perfect match for him, the blade to his bludgeon. Between them, they brought this sector to heel in a way no other Flax had ever managed. And in the end, they

were reduced to ruin by their love for a foul, unfeeling beast.’ He grunted and shifted his weight on his bed. ‘I had to kill them – there was no other way. It was Tiberius. They were protecting him, protecting him from me, their true son.’ His words came fast now, tripping over each other.

Flax pounded his chest. ‘I was their son. Me! I was the heir, not him. Not that squalling, shrieking *thing*.’ He glared at Karlaen. ‘Imagine it, captain. Imagine sharing your life, your parents, your world, with a parasite... with a thing that creeps into your chamber at night, and strokes your face in a parody of brotherly affection. A thing that follows you through the vents of the palace, always watching you, always snuffling at your heels, as if it were a real child and not some star-born abomination come to steal everything. Do you hear me, Tiberius? Are you listening, Spawn of Cryptus? It was mine. All of it, and our parents – *my parents* – deserved death for what they allowed you to make of them,’ he shrieked.

He sagged back into his cushions. ‘And I deserve it too. For what you made of me, brother,’ he muttered. He looked at Karlaen. ‘When I had... When it was done, I found that he was gone. Escaped into the undercity of Phodia.’

The illuminators overhead flickered. The vox clicked and crackled. Karlaen turned and saw Zachreal and the others he had left with hurrying back towards the group. Somewhere, pipes rattled.

Alphaeus drew his power sword. ‘We must go, captain. It is past time, and the rest of his story can wait for later.’

A flicker of a smile crossed Flax’s age-ravaged features. ‘He will not let me go, captain. He has spent decades reminding me of my crime, haunting my capital and breeding more of his filthy kind in the dark places. He was ever just out of the corner of my eye, one turn behind, trailing me down through the years. My father taught him how to hunt, and my mother taught him patience. And now, at the end of all things, he wants to enjoy the kill.’

The slave-servitors arranged around Flax’s bed suddenly stiffened. As one, their mouths opened and a hollow, mechanical monotone said, ‘*Void-gate epsilon open – void-gate gamma open – western defence grid offline.*’

Then, with a harsh crackle, the lights went out across the undercity.

THIRTEEN

The stab-lights on the Terminators' armour immediately hummed to life, as did the spotlights mounted on Cassor's hull. The darkness was pierced by dozens of shafts of light, and in that light, familiar, bestial shapes raced forward.

'Contact, grids seven, ten, twelve, fifteen,' Zachreal rumbled. Similar statements followed as the Terminators formed themselves into a wedge. Storm bolters roared, and the genestealers retreated, fading away into the dark like ghosts.

Alphaeus looked at Karlaen. 'Time to go, captain. Gather our prize.'

Karlaen plucked Flax from his bed without ceremony.

The old man squawked, but did not resist. 'No, don't you understand,' he babbled. 'He's coming. There's no escape.'

'Let him come,' Karlaen said. He felt the heat of his rage building in him. He remembered Aphrae vanishing beneath a tide of chitin, and Bartelo toppling forwards, his flame extinguished. He remembered others, more than he cared to count, warriors who had followed him into the dark, against the enemy he now faced here on Asphodex, and had died because of him. He had thought to carry the light of the Chapter into the darkest recesses of the galaxy, and he had paid the price for his hubris. *Come beast*, he thought, with savage longing. *Come and pay your debt, for Aphrae and Bartelo and all of the others whose blood stains your claws.*

'Cowards! The dark shall not hide you from the Emperor's light. Come out

and fight, or die in the dark. Make your choice,' Cassor roared, as if echoing his thoughts. The Dreadnought hurled his words into the dark like artillery fire and clashed his claws together. 'Come, dogs of Chemos. Come vermin of Nostramo. Fight Cassor the mighty or be damned for your timidity.'

Raphen and the rest of the Death Company shared the Dreadnought's eagerness. They fanned out, weapons at the ready, forming a barrier between the Terminators and the enemy that lurked in the dark. Soon the air was full of the growling of chainswords and the bark of bolt pistols as the Death Company fired at darting shadows.

The intoxicated nobles were beginning to sober up, Karlaen saw. He felt a flash of regret as he pressed forward, shoving some of them aside with force. They could not be allowed to detain him or his battle-brothers. Men and women screamed as he trod on them, or swatted them from his path. Flax railed at him, pounding withered fists on his armour. Karlaen ignored the screams and curses both as, holding Flax to his chest, he moved towards the other Terminators, Alphaeus following close behind. 'Brothers, we must withdraw to the entrance,' Karlaen said as he moved. 'Formation beta-ten, squad by squad. Covering fire, concentrate on the flanks. Let Raphen and the Death Company handle the rest. Joses, take point. We make for the Plaza of the Emperor Ascendant.'

'Gladly, captain,' Joses growled. Blade in hand, the dark-haired Blood Angel moved to the tip of the wedge and began to stride towards the entrance. Genestealers came out of the dark, and fell to Joses's blade or the storm bolters of the others. Above it all, Karlaen noticed that the grinding metal sound he had noted earlier growing in volume. The air grew damp, and his armour's sensors flashed in warning. He looked up, his bionic eye focusing in at last on the source of the noise and water.

Far above, the great sewer sluice gates which ran from the city above ground open, unleashing both alien invaders and a torrent of filthy water onto the streets below. Waterfalls of rain slammed down hard enough to rupture the street and sweep several Death Company warriors from their feet. Weak red light filtered down from above, illuminating the dark all around them, as the undercity began to slowly flood. Heavy shapes descended, dropping down from the sluice gates to crash onto the street, causing it to crack and shudder. Karlaen felt a tremor of alarm as he saw the familiar, hulking shape of a carnifex rise to its full height amidst the unceasing downpour.

The lenses of his eye cycled and clicked, bringing the lumbering monster into clear focus. Its skull was discoloured by a ruinous, newly healed wound, but it

moved as quickly as he recalled.

‘Is that...?’ Alphaeus asked.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ Karlaen grunted. ‘We’ll kill it again, if we have to. We’ll kill them as many times as it takes.’

As water thundered down around them, the Blood Angels made ready to receive their enemy. Genestealers sprinted through the ranks of the Death Company as tyrannid warriors and the newly arrived carnifex crashed into the berserkers. The multi-limbed aliens slewed through the rising water, bounding to the attack and, in some cases, on past the Terminators towards easier prey. Karlaen heard the screams behind him. He hesitated, tempted to turn back, to try and save someone, anyone.

Alphaeus caught his shoulder. ‘You can’t, captain. We have our orders. Flax brought them down here to die, and that’s what they’re doing. The longer the genestealers are occupied chewing on Phodia’s upper crust, the longer we’ve got to get Flax to the plaza and off this dying hunk of rock.’ His words were harsh, but not unfeeling. Karlaen knew that Alphaeus and the others were wrestling with the same urge to go back, to protect those men and women they had left behind. But to do so would be to condemn their mission to failure. They had what they had come for, and now it was time to leave.

Karlaen trudged on, ignoring the screams of the dying and the damned. Ahead of him, he saw Raphen spiral through the air, propelled by his jump pack, his crackling thunder hammer lashing out to crush and maim the enemy. Several of his men followed suit, hurtling over their fellows to land amidst the genestealers briefly, killing and then moving on.

The Blood Angels pressed on, creating a bloody path through any genestealer or tyrannid that tried to stop them. But the creatures came on regardless of how many fell. Karlaen could feel the itch in his brain that said Flax’s abominable sibling was nearby, driving its servants to the attack. Between the darkness and the water pouring down from above it would be next to impossible to pinpoint the beast, even if he had been tempted to do so.

The wound in his chest ached at the thought. It had already sealed itself, but the memory of the claw punching into him was hard to shake. He had been wounded before, and many times, over the course of his service to the Chapter, but this one was different. It was almost personal, as if the broodlord had wanted to leave him something to remember it by. He touched the punctured spot on his armour with the tip of his hammer, and felt a tugging at his mind.

Then Flax was screaming in his ear and he came back to himself, knee-deep in

water, as genestealers exploded upwards, claws reaching for him. Karlaen swung his hammer with a roar, bashing one of his attackers off its feet, but the others slammed into him, grabbing his legs and his arm, trying to pull him down.

‘Captain,’ Alphaeus shouted, turning towards him. The sergeant hammered his power sword down on the back of one beast’s skull, killing it instantly.

The others swarmed over Karlaen, dragging him to one knee through sheer weight of numbers. Flax screamed as talons sought his withered flesh. Thinking quickly, Karlaen hefted the old man and tossed him towards Alphaeus. The sergeant caught him as he beheaded a leaping genestealer with a sweep of his blade.

‘Keep going,’ Karlaen snarled, trying to fight his way to his feet. He tore the servitor head from his belt and sent it sailing after Flax. ‘Take this – go, brother. I will join you when I can.’

Alphaeus did not protest. He caught the head and shoved it into Flax’s trembling hands. Then, with a grimace of frustration, he turned and began making for the exit. Karlaen saw the closest Terminators form up around him like a phalanx, cordoning him off. Then they were lost from sight as genestealers closed in around him. Karlaen rammed the haft of his hammer into one’s gut and flung it off him. He surged to his feet as the others closed in, his storm bolter rising. The weapon roared, and alien bodies burst like overripe fruit as he swept the storm bolter in a line.

Suddenly, there was a shriek, and a bulky form slid through the water, smashing aside genestealers. Karlaen sidestepped the bleeding, reeking hulk as it slowed and came to a stop. The carnifex whined deep in its mangled throat as it sought to heave itself upright to continue the fray, but its limbs were nothing but dead weight now, broken and pulled out of shape. A heavy shape stomped towards it, and with a grumbling hiss, Cassor’s meltagun carved a blackened tunnel through the beast’s head for a second time.

The Dreadnought was covered in ichor and battle scars. Hoses flapped free as Cassor spun back and forth, firing his weapons in a wide arc. Something sparked inside his chassis, and Karlaen could smell burning promethium and scorched metal. The Dreadnought’s limbs groaned and wheezed, but he fought on. ‘Come, come and meet death, traitors. Come and feel the bite of my blade.’

Cassor twisted, backhanding a genestealer in mid-leap and sending it flying into a nearby building with enough force to pulverise the beast. More leapt and clawed at the Dreadnought, scrambling over him in a wave of talons and teeth. Cassor roared and slashed at the living wave, killing genestealers with every

flick of his talons. But there were always more, and soon the Dreadnought was lost to sight, enveloped in a tide of chitin.

Karlaen swept his hammer out in a wide arc, sending the closest of the Dreadnought's attackers flying. He fired his storm bolter at those that got past him, and almost paid the price for his inattentiveness. Only the screech of his armour's sensors and his own combat-honed instincts warned him in time to avoid having his skull split like a melon. A tyrannid warrior sprang out of the streaming water, its bone swords slicing at him. He avoided the first blow, but the second caught him high on the shoulder. The force of it staggered him, and he nearly fell. The tyrannid seized the opportunity and came at him, all four blades hammering down in a cruel rhythm.

He stumbled back, caught off balance and unable to retaliate. The tyrannid continued its attack, driving him steadily back. Genestealers scuttled out of reach, like wolves waiting for their prey to tire itself out. The tyrannid shrieked and blocked his awkward attempt to push it away. Karlaen cursed himself for a fool and tried to regain his footing. A genestealer darted in, and he felt a slash of pain crawl up the back of his leg. Momentarily weakened, he sank down to one knee. The tyrannid kicked out with one bony hoof and caught him in the side, knocking him onto his back in the rising water.

Karlaen floundered for a moment which seemed to stretch for an eternity. Better warriors than him had died in worse ways, and more foolish, but that was small comfort. If he died, the failure of his mission was almost certain. Rage built in him, and his thoughts were drowned in a persistent hum of red. The tyrannid stabbed down at him, four blades angled to pierce two hearts. It had seemed so fast before, but now, in the red, it was slow. He could see the droplets of water crawling along the length of the blades, and hear the sound they made as they pierced the air in their descent.

The Hammer of Baal rose from the water and whipped out. Four bone blades shattered. The tyrannid warrior, over-extended, leaned forward. Karlaen's hand shot up, catching its lower mandible. Servos hissed and he wrenched the creature's jaw from its skull. It reared back in pain and surprise, and he shoved himself to his feet, clasping his hammer in both hands as he brought it around for another blow. There was no thought of tactics or strategy now, only a boiling need to see the ichor of his foe spill into the murky waters that rose around them.

Karlaen battered the creature, knocking it one way and then the next, until finally it sank to its knees, its carapace covered in scorched craters and spider-webbed cracks. He raised his hammer and brought it down with a snarl, caving

in the tyrannid's skull. As it fell, he turned, rage not yet sated, to look for new enemies.

The genestealers which had been harrying him were only too happy to oblige. They came in a rush, darting in at him from all sides, moving too fast for him to follow, distracted as he was. Claws punctured his armour in places, opening fresh wounds, and he roared. As he fought, he struggled to swim free of the crimson murk which had settled over his mind. He was not yet lost to the Red Thirst, and he forced himself to concentrate on the pain, using it to centre himself once more. To lose himself now would be to lose everything.

As if sensing his new focus, the genestealers redoubled their attack, piling onto him without heed to casualties. For every one he swatted from him, two more clawed at him, trying to pull him down off his feet again, where he would be easy prey.

Through the haze of battle and the spray of murky water, he saw that Alphaeus had reached the gate at last, Damaris and Leonos to either side of him. The barrels of the twins' storm bolters glowed white-hot as they held back the tide. The rest of the Terminators were equally beset, fighting for their lives against tyrannids and genestealers alike. Nonetheless, Alphaeus had reached the gate. Relief flooded through him, only to be stolen in a moment.

As Alphaeus lifted the servitor head to open the blast doors, a shape darted down the great stone wall which housed the exit. Karlaen voxed a warning and raised his storm bolter. He fired, his targeting array fighting to keep a lock on the shape. Bolter rounds chewed the wall around the beast as it moved. A band of light caught it and Karlaen felt a chill as he recognised the broodlord. It had been waiting for them. It had allowed its kin to harry them, drive them to distraction, so that it might claim its prize.

As he watched, the broodlord dropped down among the Terminators, its claws flashing out to vivisect one unlucky warrior. Ancient armour, a relic of a golden age, tore like paper beneath its claws, and blood filled the air. The Terminator fell, and the broodlord vaulted over the tumbling body to reach Alphaeus.

Karlaen charged forwards, bowling over a hissing genestealer, knowing that as he did so he would not be in time. Joses moved to intercept the creature, his blade flashing out, carving sparks from the wall as the broodlord weaved beneath the blow. Four talons shot forwards and punched through the Terminator's chestplate. Joses coughed blood and sagged against his killer. The broodlord heaved the dying Blood Angel backwards, slamming his dead weight into Alphaeus.

The sergeant staggered, and the broodlord was on him a moment later. The creature plucked a screaming Flax from Alphaeus's grip and bounded into the darkness on the other side of the blast doors as they cycled open at last. Even as the broodlord vanished, its children took its place, boiling through the open blast doors and washing over the Terminators. Storm bolters fired and power weapons hummed, but the Blood Angels were pinned in place by their attackers, unable to follow the broodlord.

Karlaen, still charging towards the exit, paid no heed to the creatures which pursued him, and he was knocked to the ground by them just before he reached the others. The genestealers swarmed over him, pinning his arms and tearing at his armour. He thrashed, trying to hurl them off, but there were too many. One raised a claw over his head, ready to end him. The Red Thirst pounded in his skull, and his thoughts jangled incoherently as he faced his death.

'No, brother. Thy doom is not writ this day. No son of Baal shall perish so ingloriously, not as long as Cassor stands.'

Cassor loomed over him, scattering genestealers with a gesture. The Dreadnought's claws snapped out and sank into a genestealer's body. The creature screeched in agony as Cassor plucked it from Karlaen's chest and lifted it into the air. 'Heed my words, ye traitors. Thy cause is dust and Cassor shall cast down thy champions.'

The Dreadnought spun, hurling the genestealer at a knot of its fellows and bowling them over. The storm bolter mounted beneath Cassor's claw roared, and the stunned xenos were reduced to bloody tatters. Cassor turned back to Karlaen. 'Up, brother. Cassor shall hold the enemy. Finish thy mission. Cassor shall see to the slaughter here.'

Karlaen pushed himself to his feet, his rage fading. He picked up his hammer and, with one last glance at the Dreadnought, charged towards the gate. He had cleared himself a path in moments, as his brothers formed a cordon around him, holding back snarling, hissing would-be obstacles. The blast doors had begun to cycle closed as he reached them, but he plunged through the steadily shrinking gap without hesitation.

As the blast doors clanged shut behind him, Karlaen followed his enemy into the dark.

FOURTEEN

Karlaen marched alone through the labyrinthine tunnels under the palace. The shadowy foundations rose up around him like a second city. It was a damp, dark reflection of the one above, and a fitting place for a beast such as the Spawn of Cryptus. He could hear water rushing all about him, through pipes and culverts, through the sewers of Phodia. Even now, this close to the end, the city's servitors kept the water running, as they had been programmed to do. They would do their duty until the end. Karlaen smiled grimly. In some ways, there was no difference between himself and those mindless drones.

They were merely differently shaped cogs in the same great machine, programmed to fulfil a necessary function – theirs, to see to the sanitation network of Phodia, and his, to kill the enemies of mankind. It was a core truth, and one it had taken him decades to accept – decades of arrogance and hubris, of fiery war and bloody slaughter. Once he had thought himself special. A prince of war, bestowed with divine gifts to bring the galaxy to heel on behalf of his Chapter and the Emperor. But age had worn that purpose to a lethal, killing edge. Now, he knew that he was but one warrior among billions, all of them striving against the same hungry darkness.

As that darkness closed around him, one thought filled Karlaen's mind, one repeated hammer blow of memory which he could neither escape nor bury any longer beneath thoughts of duty and necessity. He could hear them as he moved, like a ghost signal on an open vox-link – the voices of his dead brothers,

murmuring softly to him in the dark.

He had failed them again. Alphaeus and the others would pay the price for his failure to consider all of the angles and to prepare for all possibilities. Once before, he had led his brothers into the dark, and they had died because his pragmatism and practicality had failed them. Now it was happening all over again. The memory of that last, doomed stand rose up in him again, through the red.

They had gone to meet the enemy, and they had triumphed, but at great cost. It had been a necessary thing, a thing which had to be done, but the doing of it had tarnished him. In his quiet moments of contemplation, which were thankfully few and far between, he knew that he was not worthy of the title Dante had bestowed on him – for what sort of shield could not protect those who stood behind it?

Karlaen saw faces swirl about him in the dark, and heard voices in the drip of water, or the scrape of chitin on stone. He heard the thunder of guns and the cries of the dying in his ears, as loudly as he had that day. Even now, the dead did not curse him. Even now, their understanding was more painful than any wound he had yet sustained. They had trusted him to lead them out of the dark, and he had allowed their light to be snuffed out.

He wondered whether Alphaeus still lived. Joses was dead, like Bartelo and the others. That they had died doing their duty was small comfort to him now, in this moment. Here, in the dark, he was alone with the weight of their lives pressing him down. He tried to recall some snippet of wisdom from leaders past of the Chapter, from Raldoron, Thoros and others that might alleviate that weight, but the words that came seemed hollow and unfitting.

Karlaen had done as he thought best, for the good of the Chapter, and men had died. *Like Flax*, he thought. Grim amusement flashed through him. Now both he and Flax were paying the price for bloody necessities past. Men had died under his aegis, and now he would make certain that their deaths were not in vain.

He keyed off his stab-lights. As the dark rushed in, he activated the augur-lens of his bionic eye. The lights would be of little use, save to mark his position for the enemy even now creeping about him. He was approaching the next in the line of blast doors, his armour's sensors locked on Flax's bio-signature. Wherever the broodlord took his captive, Karlaen would follow, even if it meant descending into the bowels of Asphodex. Somehow, he did not think that would be the case – no, the beast wanted a reckoning. Both with its brother, and with Karlaen himself.

He brushed his hand against the hole in his armour. He knew it was no idle theory on his part. The broodlord had as good as challenged him, and Karlaen thought he understood why. The creature wanted what it could never have, yet it was determined to best any who challenged its right to the throne of this dying world. Why else had the full might of the Hive Mind not yet descended on the palace? Why else would the creature endanger itself to get at Flax? It had a mission, just as Karlaen did.

Through the haze of the augur-lens, he saw ghostly shapes dancing and squirming at the edge of his vision. No guilt-bred figments these, but enemies. He paused, scanning his surroundings. The shapes seemed to flow across the foundations, staying just out of sight. He checked his storm bolter. Less than half a clip of ammunition remained, and he had no more replacements. He frowned and lowered the weapon. He hefted his hammer and swung it experimentally. It had seen him through thus far. He hoped it would not fail him now.

He started forwards again, water splashing across his armour as he walked. The whole sub-section would soon be flooded. When he reached the blast doors, he realised that they were not going to open. Gene-locked as they had been, he needed a sample of Flaxian DNA or a suitable substitute, like the servitor's head, to open them. He cursed. He had not thought to grab the head, nor had the foresight to take a blood sample from Flax. Karlaen closed his eye and pushed through the tide of self-recrimination.

His eye opened, and fixed on the door's control panel. His bionic eye whirred, focusing in. The blast doors had been old when Phodia was young. They were simple things. The genetic signature activated the electro-pneumatic impulses which controlled the door's functions. He stepped back, and readied his hammer. If he could identify a weak point, he might be able to open a hole. It was not much of a plan, but it was all he had.

Before he could so much as swing his weapon, however, he heard a hiss from his left. He turned, and saw the shapes which had kept pace with him down the corridor spring into motion. There were two of them, he saw now, moving to either side of him. Karlaen smiled as a thought occurred to him. The creatures were the broodlord's children, created by it; an army raised in secret. There was a reason that the broodlord could pass through the blast doors without help – it was as much a part of the Flaxian Dynasty as the governor himself, though it was a monstrous, degenerate part. And that meant that its children were as well.

The genestealers reached him a moment later, coursing down the length of the wall with inhuman speed. He set his storm bolter onto its grav-clamp holster on

his hip, and stretched the fingers of his free hand. He would need to be quick.

He sent his hammer shooting out, letting the haft slide through his grip with a precision honed in hundreds of close-set, cramped corridors. The head smashed into the skull of the first of the genestealers, dropping the stunned creature to the ground. The second lunged for him, and he flung up his free hand, catching it by the throat. It struggled in his grip, its claws drawing sparks from his armour. He swung it around and slammed it head first into the door's gene-lock. The lock flashed as it read the struggling alien's genetic code, and the door began to cycle open. Karlaen grunted in satisfaction. Behind him, he heard the first creature scramble to its feet.

He spun, smashing its fellow into it, knocking it down again. Before it could rise for a second time, he brought his hammer down on its chest, pulverising it in a wet crackle of energy. Karlaen looked at the genestealer he still held. The creature's thrashing became more agitated as his servo-assisted grip on its throat slowly tightened. Then, with a wet crunch, it went limp. Carefully, he twisted its head off. He would need a key, in case of further blast doors.

As the door opened, he heard the telltale clatter of chitin echoing from the other side. He glanced at the bloody head in his hand and dropped it. It appeared as if he would not need it after all. There would be plenty more where it came from.

Hammer in hand, the Shield of Baal stepped through, into the dark.

Augustus Flax looked around, bleary-eyed, and then gave a bitter laugh. 'Oh, Tiberius – really? Is this the sort of thing that whatever passes for your mind thinks is meaningful?' He lay prone on the surface of the intersection of the four great bridges which met above the main artery of the Phodian sewers, just beneath the palace gardens. Below him, water roared into the dark, converging on the great drain from dozens of sluice gates. Above him loomed the towering foundations of the palace he had claimed in blood and deceit.

That was the legacy of the Flaxian Dynasty, was it not? He almost smiled at the thought. He had won his throne with plenty of both, to be sure. He had turned his people over to criminal overlords and brutal manufactorum bosses, and enriched himself at their expense – all in an effort to stymie a hidden foe. It had been necessary. Or so he had convinced himself. Much good as it had done him, in the end.

The creature had dragged him through the dark, ignoring his screams, only to deposit him here. Now it sat, seemingly content merely to – what? Flax looked

up at his brother, where it crouched on one of the shattered statues which lined the four bridges. Very big on statues, the Flaxian Dynasty. Even now, Flax was unable to name who half of them represented. *Statues in a sewer. Excess, thy name is Flax*, he thought bitterly. Even the creature could not escape that particular familial flaw. ‘A crossroads, Tiberius. A turning point, meant to be symbolic of our situation, perhaps? I thought you ate your literary theory tutor,’ he spat, glaring up at the creature.

It was a monstrous thing, all alien muscle and seething malice. He could feel its thoughts in his, like wriggling worms of doubt and dread, at once familiar and repugnant. How many times had he felt those same sharp thoughts clawing at his mind as a boy? Flax pushed himself upright, his arms and legs trembling with the effort. It watched his movements with evident curiosity. He wondered if it were savouring his broken-down state, or if, perhaps, it were disappointed in him. Did it dream of him, of this moment?

‘We’re not children any more, though, are we Tiberius?’ he croaked. ‘I am a decrepit sack of flesh, and you have sloughed off whatever frail shell of humanity you might have possessed to become the monster we always knew you to be.’

The broodlord leaned down over the statue, twisting its head so that it could meet his gaze. It hissed softly. Flax bent double, his body wracked by a coughing fit. The broodlord drew back, nostrils flaring.

Flax looked up and smiled a bloody smile. ‘Have no fear, brother. I am not sick. Merely old and feeble, and broken on the altar of time.’ He forced himself to straighten and spread his arms. ‘Well? What have you to say to me, hmm? The moment is here, Tiberius. The moment I knew was coming the instant I put down the beasts you’d made of my parents...’

The broodlord snarled. The sound echoed across the width of the chasm below, rising above the thunder of falling water, and Flax could not help but quail back. The sound had never failed to strike fear in him. But a surge of anger stiffened his spine. ‘Yes, snarl at me, I deserve it,’ he snapped. ‘I took the only creatures who ever showed you love and killed them. But while my finger might have been the one which pulled the trigger, you were as guilty as I. You ruined them – you almost destroyed everything that we had.’ He shook his head. ‘I say almost, as if the worst hasn’t come to pass.’ He looked at the broodlord. ‘Are you satisfied, brother? How long do you think your new masters will let you rule the ash heap you’ve made of our kingdom, hmm? How long before you’re rendered down the way my people have been?’

The broodlord leapt gracefully from the statue and landed in a crouch at Flax's feet. The old man stumbled back, tripping on the hem of his robes. He fell back, scraping his elbows and back on the hard stone. The broodlord scuttled towards him, eyes glinting.

'That's right, Tiberius – get it over with,' Flax hissed. Fear raced through him, paralysing everything but his mouth. He hurled words at the creature for lack of any other defence. 'Open me up and feast on my heart. It won't satisfy you, you know. *It won't bring them back.*'

The broodlord froze. It stared at him, unblinking. Flax smiled weakly. He had not expected the beast to react so obviously. Maybe it was more human than he had suspected. 'Oh. Oh my, how ridiculous you are, beast. To think, I have been frightened of you all this time.' His smile faded. 'Do you even know why you're doing this? Is it just some primitive impulse, or is there actually a mind in there? What are you, Tiberius? Man or monster?'

The broodlord shrieked. Flax stared into its maw, full of jagged fangs and lashing tongue, and saw his answer. The creature lunged, grabbing his shoulders and slamming him backwards. He felt his head crack against the stone and nausea flowed through him. Part of him prayed that the Blood Angels would find him in time, but it was a vain hope at best.

When they had first arrived in their battle-scorched crimson armour, he had experienced a moment of hope. But that too, he knew, was part of the creature's demented game. It had allowed him to survive, to escape, just as it had allowed him a moment of hope, so that it could snatch it all away. Even as he had snatched away its life, so long ago.

Flax did not struggle. There was no reason to do so. He wanted it to end, wanted the beast to finish what it had begun. Decades of slow torment, dwindling to these last bare moments. 'Go ahead, brother... kill me, the way you killed our world. Kill me, and be damned.' As he spoke, he fumbled in his robes for the hard shape of the knife he had secreted on his person. He had intended to cut his own throat, when the time came. Oh, how he'd gleefully imagined the frustrated look on the beast's face as he claimed his own life.

But that plan was ashes now. Besides, he was a Flax, and such a death was not for him. No, better to bury the blade in the creature's side and see what sort of death it bought him. Let it know one more moment of pain at his hands, before it finished this sad drama. The broodlord stared at him, as if trying to understand his lack of fear.

As it hunched over him, he drew the knife and rammed it home. The broodlord

reared back and screamed. He didn't think the wound was mortal, or even debilitating, but that wasn't the point. The creature tore the knife from its side and glared down at him, talons poised to strike, every abhorrent muscle quivering with repressed need.

Flax smiled. 'They might have loved you at the end, brother, but they loved me first and best.'

With a howl, the broodlord struck.

FIFTEEN

Karlaen stomped down on the last squealing bio-beast, squashing it. The ripper swarm had attacked moments ago, drawn out of bore holes in the ruined foundations by the scent of him. He had dissuaded them with proper application of boot and hammer, but they had left him much to remember them by. He could feel blood leaking into the crevices of his suit, and a pall of fatigue muffled his senses. The creatures had swarmed over him, biting and burrowing, and it was only thanks to the armour he wore that he had survived.

The rippers were not the only threat he had faced. Genestealers had attacked him more than once as he hunted his quarry through the tomb-like foundations of the palace. They came at him in twos and threes, dropping down from the darkness above, or lunging out of crannies and side tunnels. Each time, his bionic eye had tracked their approach, and each time, he had put them down. But the attacks were constant, and even the superhuman physiology of a Space Marine could be worn down under such conditions. The bio-sensors in his armour mewled warnings about increasing fatigue-poisons and torn muscles. His breath rasped hot and harsh in his lungs. Blood and sweat stung his eyes. But still he pressed on, moving through slanted shadows, following Flax's genetic signature through the depths of Phodia.

The vox crackled intermittently, assuring him that at least some of the others still lived. Bereft of any other orders, they would make for the surface and the rallying-point as quickly as possible. Karlaen could not say what would be

waiting for them when they got there. The signs of the planet's consumption had spread even to these depths.

Sewer channels that had once carried filthy rainwater from the streets far above were now choked with strange, barbed vegetation and the still waters were occupied by hideous, half-seen creatures. The foundations of the city were being strangled by new, poisonous growths which gaped and whined like hungry animals as he tore them from his path or crushed them underfoot. Karlaen had encountered these often enough to recognise the flesh-tubes of the hive fleet when he saw them. They were digging deep, to feed on the life-blood of Asphodex and drain even the soil of nutrients.

The tyrannids were efficient, in their way, monstrous as it was. They broke worlds down, squeezing every grain of sustenance from them, one molecule at a time. They wasted nothing. Even the air itself was stripped of life. That was to be Asphodex's fate – the fate of every world in the Cryptus System: to be squeezed and drained and left barren. And once they were finished here, Hive Fleet Leviathan would move on to the next course in its galaxy-spanning meal – Baal.

The thought stirred the embers of his rage to life once more. He fought down the instinct to charge forwards into whatever waited ahead. He extended a hand and leaned against a wall covered in swelling, breathing growths of alien matter, trying to bring his red-tinged thoughts back under control. Anger swelled in him, and he tried to channel it into his desire to find Flax. His mind was filled with images of his enemy, and he could hear its screams as he pulled it apart, limb by limb. His teeth scissored into his bottom lip, releasing a spurt of blood into his mouth, and he swallowed without thinking. The shock of it startled him back to awareness.

His discipline was eroding the harder he pushed himself, but he could not afford to stop. This was the razor's edge which every Son of Sanguinius walked. To push themselves to the limit of discipline and hypno-conditioning without tipping over into the madness that crept about the edges of their psyche. To utilise the rage and the strength that came with it, without being swallowed by it. But that was easier said than done, and the fire could only be stoked for so long before it raged out of control.

Karlaen shoved himself away from the wall and stumbled. He felt the walls of his discipline crumbling, brick by brick. The world lurched around him and he felt his gut *twist in loss and pain the likes of which no mortal could bear, and he heard the sound of great wings flapping brokenly, and felt the rush of heat and*

pain and saw the face of god twisted into something beyond redemption and he screamed as something snagged his arm and sank cruel barbs through the armour plates.

Karlaen jerked his arm back, uprooting the strangling creepers from the stone of the wall. They had slithered about him so noiselessly, so quickly, that he had been taken unawares. Pain flooded his nervous system, driving back the madness. He whispered a quiet prayer of thanks as he tore the whole mass of alien vegetation from the wall and extricated his arm from its tendrils. He flexed his hand, and, satisfied that he could still use it, he turned and pressed on, trying to ignore the ghostly feathers that fluttered at the edges of his vision.

The corridor ended in a square of dull light. As he stepped through, the omnipresent roar of water, muted until now, suddenly flowered into its full glory. He stopped just past the aperture and took in the scene before him – the four intersecting bridges, the great sluice gates set high above the bridges, water pouring down from them into the chasm below. And at the centre of the bridges, the Spawn of Cryptus crouched over a limp form.

Flax was not dead. Karlaen's sensors told him that much. But he was fading. The governor was too old and too feeble to handle the sort of stressors he had been exposed to. Karlaen could hear the erratic hammering of the old man's heart. He took a step forward, and the broodlord looked up. The alien met his gaze without reaction. It reached down and gently stroked Flax's hair. The gesture was almost affectionate.

Warnings flashed and Karlaen scanned the area. There were other shapes lurking in the ruined foundations that surrounded the bridges, or hanging from the support struts and railings of the bridges. He wondered how many of the creatures remained. How many children did the Spawn of Cryptus have left to throw at him? Karlaen took another step forwards. He considered trying for a shot with his storm bolter, but there was a chance he might hit Flax. Even targeting arrays had their limits, and between his fatigue, the damp haze that obscured the air and the broodlord's mind-tricks, he did not want to risk it. He left the weapon where it was, and raised his hammer. As he gripped it, the broodlord leaned forwards, as if scenting the air.

Karlaen started forwards. The broodlord screamed. Karlaen staggered as his mind suddenly rippled with pain. He stumbled and lowered his hammer, using its haft to keep himself upright as the broodlord assailed him psychically. Waves of pain rolled over him. Shards of memory, weaponised and honed to lethality by an alien psyche, tore at his defences as they had before. But this time, Karlaen

was ready. He stoked the flames of his rage to a new intensity, welcoming the flush of clarity it brought. The broodlord was a thing of nurtured hate and bestial rage, but that was as nothing compared to the fury of one who lived with the dying scream of a demigod lodged in his mind. Alien whispers were shredded like smoke by the beating of great, unseen wings.

The Shield of Baal locked eyes with the Spawn of Cryptus and pushed himself to his feet. The broodlord's expression of animal serenity wavered. Its eyes widened in shock, then narrowed in consternation as it found its greatest weapon undone and useless. In the span of half a dozen heartbeats, the contest was decided. The creature blinked, breaking contact. It reared to its full height and let loose a shrill cry of command.

As the echoes of that cry rode across the thunder of the water and bounced from statue to foundation stone, the genestealers launched themselves into motion. The creatures raced forward from all directions. Karlaen met them with focused violence. The power field of his hammer crackled and sparked as he swung it in wide, precise arcs, driving the creatures back, or killing them in mid-lunge. Here in the open, he could employ the weapon to its fullest, and the Hammer of Baal hummed in his hands.

Through it all, he continued his advance towards the broodlord, neither slowing nor stopping. He had come too far and endured too much to allow himself to be stymied here and now. The last two genestealers between him and his quarry scrambled along the edge of the bridge, racing towards him.

Karlaen swatted the first out of the air with his hammer, driving it into the surface of the bridge with a resounding crack. The creature barely had time to squall before its carapace split and burst, and it was reduced to a wet stain. As the second genestealer sprang towards him, Karlaen turned, firing his storm bolter. The beast was plucked from the air by the explosive bolts and reduced to a dark mist.

He pivoted, ready to fire at the others that were closing in on him from behind, but the storm bolter clicked empty. Karlaen cursed and slammed it back onto its grav-clamp. He took a two-handed grip on his hammer and met the first of the creatures with a blow that sent its body rolling bonelessly across the bridge. The second joined it, and the third. Then, just as suddenly as the attack had started, it was done.

Karlaen turned back to see the broodlord step past the prone body of Flax, its features twisted in what might have been a sneer of contempt. Then, with a roar, it was upon him. They duelled for a moment, hammer against claw. As before,

Karlaen was slower, but he was prepared for the beast's agility now, and he fought conservatively, blocking and parrying its blows rather than simply absorbing them. He knew his enemy now, and it knew him.

The broodlord ducked and weaved, avoiding blows that would have ended their conflict for good. It gave him no room to manoeuvre, circling and attacking from all directions as swiftly as possible. Karlaen had no opportunity to deliver the killing blow he needed. Finally, the beast leapt on him, and four arms strained against two as they grappled.

Whatever strength his rage had given him was flagging now. The creature was far stronger than him, built for this sort of battle. He was pressed back, and soon, the flat of one knee touched the surface of the bridge. His hammer was interposed horizontally between them, the haft caught between the creature's jaws. Centimetres away from his own, the broodlord's flat, red eyes showed nothing of what lurked in its alien brain.

Karlaen took a chance; he dropped his hand to his storm bolter and snatched it up. Empty as it was, it still had heft and weight. He smashed it across the side of the beast's skull, packing every bit of force he could muster into the blow. Stunned, the broodlord released him and jerked away. He shoved it back, away from him. It scrambled to its feet as he swung his hammer up.

But rather than striking the beast, he aimed his blow at the stretch of bridge beneath its claws. Metal and stone came apart with a scream of tortured steel as the hammer struck home. A whole section of the bridge gave way, carrying the beast with it. The broodlord tumbled into the darkness below, its limbs grasping in vain for anything that might arrest its fall. Its glare never wavered as it vanished into the dark, swirling waters below.

Karlaen stared down after it, breathing heavily, his hearts hammering in his chest. He shook himself and made his way around the edge of the hole he had created to retrieve Flax.

They had a rendezvous to make.

SIXTEEN

Plaza of the Emperor Unchained, Flaxian Palace, Phodia

Karlaen reared back and kicked the sluice gate out of its frame. The steel grate flew into the space beyond, crashing down with a resounding clang. As he stepped out into the open air, Flax's comatose form slung over his shoulder, he beheld a vision of carnage which was horribly familiar to one who had made war against the servants of the Hive Mind before. Asphodex had entered its final death throes – the air was thick with smoke and noise, and buildings had begun to collapse, adding to both.

The city had become an inferno – towers of dancing flame rose from the ruins and waves of billowing smoke filled the streets and choked the air. Tyranid organisms screamed and shrieked throughout the city as they were caught up in the raging fires. Bio-beasts fled, trampling one another in their haste to escape obliteration.

In the distance, Karlaen could see shuddering mushroom clouds rising above the tops of those buildings which still stood. The red sky flashed and quivered like a thing alive, and the great clouds which marked the upper atmosphere were shredded and reformed by unseen forces. The ground shook beneath his feet, not with the trembling of seismic activity, but as if some vast titan were smashing his fist down on Asphodex. The Blood Angels fleet had begun its preliminary orbital bombardment of the planet, in preparation for the first landings of Dante's main force. Time had almost run out.

Karlaen quickly triangulated his position. He stood in the eastern plaza – the Plaza of the Emperor Unchained. He calculated a route to the Plaza of the Emperor Ascendant. If Alphaeus or any of the others had survived the battle in the undercity, that was where they would be. Cradling Flax against his chest in order to protect him from the flames, he moved through the plaza, forging a path to the rallying-point.

The vox-net crackled to life as he left the sluice gate behind. Voices hammered at his ears: commands, warnings, oaths – the roar of a Chapter, roused to fury. He heard the red hum rise behind his thoughts. It was always this way when the Chapter went to war; the black tide of emotions which every warrior fought to control became stronger and stronger as the vibrations of Thunderhawk engines shook their bones and the heat of weapons-fire washed over them.

Between battles, in the cold stretch of the void or on Baal's blistered sands, the thirst for battle could be ignored, sublimated into more noble pursuits. Karlaen knew many battle-brothers who were as adept with a sculptor's chisel or a painter's brush as they were with bolter and blade. But here, now, on the sharp edge, the rage was given full flower. And if they were not careful, it could sweep them under and into damnation.

Heat washed across the plaza, withering the alien vegetation that had briefly claimed dominion. Without men or automated systems to control the fires they raged out of control, incinerating tyranids and any surviving Imperial defenders that were caught in the path of the flames. More than once, disorientated tyranids burst from the burning ruins and spilled through the plaza. Some attacked Karlaen, and he was forced to defend himself. He left a trail of crushed carcasses behind him as he trudged towards the Plaza of the Emperor Ascendant.

As yet, the tyranids were uncoordinated – they were little better than ravenous animals. But soon the Hive Mind would bring its incomprehensible attentions to bear on the invaders, and it would exert its will on the swarms, uniting them in terrible purpose.

By the time he reached the Plaza of the Emperor Ascendant, the air above him was full of the grotesque shapes of gargoyles. The flapping nightmares spiralled above the city like a living cloud of teeth and claws. Broods of gaunts crept through the haze that lay over the plaza, and Karlaen could just make out larger shapes behind them. But there was no sign of the others. He scanned through the pre-arranged vox frequencies, but only static greeted his ears. He moved towards the fallen statue of the Emperor.

Flax was still unconscious, and he barely stirred as Karlaen hid him in a

cranny beneath the statue. It was a small mercy; no man should have to witness the death of his world and people, Karlaen thought. When he was satisfied that the governor was safe, he straightened and began cycling through the vox frequencies until he found the main Adeptus Astartes signal. The channel crackled with static. 'This is Captain Karlaen, of the First, requesting extraction from the planet's surface,' Karlaen said, raising his voice to be heard through the static.

Moments passed. The signal phased in and out, and he repeated himself. He looked up, trying to imagine the battle raging far above the planet. Void warfare was a thing of vast distances and acute angles. Up and down had no meaning; there was no high ground to capture, and precise calculations were required to even come close to striking the enemy. Servitors slaved to battle-stations – one part analytical engine and one part gunner – manned targeting computers as specially trained Chapter serfs followed their instructions, firing at enemies they could not see.

Karlaen had only experienced void warfare a few times. He had participated in boarding actions and repelled the same, when the enemy drew close across the incalculable gulf that normally separated the combatants. Even now he could recall the crushing cold and inescapable silence that accompanied such conflicts as one moved across the outer hull of a vessel. The way the maddening spiral of stars which stretched into infinity in every direction imprinted itself on the mind's eye, never to fade.

Making planetfall amidst such madness was even more nerve-wracking. Men died without ever seeing the surface of the world they had been brought to conquer. The upper reaches of the stratosphere would be a hellstorm of fire and fury.

As he tried to make contact with the fleet, he scanned the smoke and haze for the enemy. Behind the veil of grey and black, shapes moved, some large, some small, and he could hear the telltale click of chitin on stone. He clasped his hammer in both hands and waited. The vox crackled in his ear.

'Say again?' a voice asked. The line hissed and spat with static.

Karlaen grunted in satisfaction. 'This is Captain Karlaen, requesting extraction,' he barked. 'Rallying-point alpha.'

'Acknowledged captain. Extraction in process. Hold position until arrival.'

'Acknowledged,' Karlaen said, staring out at the ill-defined shapes slouching through the haze. He swung his hammer slowly, stirring the smoke. 'Come then, if you will. Here I stand, and I shall not move,' he murmured. Despite his words,

he hoped that they would keep their distance. He was not afraid of them. Rather, he was afraid of himself. He could feel his control slipping with every confrontation. The Red Thirst scraped at the back of his throat and memories that were not his pressed down on him. He knew the signs as well as any, for he had seen men afflicted with them often enough.

He thought of Raphen. He closed his eyes, trying not to imagine how it would feel to be claimed by the same madness that had taken the other Space Marine, or Cassor. To be lost and damned by a curse in his very blood. Karlaen's eyes opened and his gaze flickered to Flax, where the old man lay, breathing shallowly. *Does the answer rest with you?* he thought. *Are you our salvation, as Corbulo thinks, or was this all for nothing?*

He heard a scrape of talons on stone and whirled, his hammer chopping out to catch a leaping genestealer. The brutal blow drove the genestealer to the ground, leaving it in a gore-stained heap. Karlaen scanned the plaza, sighting more multi-armed shapes creeping towards him through the ruins. The vox crackled with static as he tried one last time to contact the others. A second genestealer lunged at him from over the fallen statue of the Emperor.

Karlaen pivoted and his blow caught the creature in the side, smashing it against the statue. Ichor stained the scorched features of the Emperor as the body slid to the ground. Karlaen turned back to see more of the beasts bounding towards him through the smoke.

The next few moments passed in a blur of blood and death. With his ammunition depleted, and an unconscious man to protect, Karlaen was forced onto the defensive. His hammer was as much shield as weapon. He turned, twisted, stomped and slid, never slowing, always staying in motion, forcing his enemies to come to him.

Finally, he stood alone, surrounded by the mangled corpses of tyranids. His hammer was heavy in his hand; the Chapter symbols that marked the ancient relic-weapon were hidden beneath a sticky shroud of splattered meat and alien juices. Smoke had filled the plaza, and he was pressed to see anything. He backed towards the statue as embers drifted down from the sky. His eyes stung from the heat of the flames which drew ever closer on either side of the palace. The air was thick with poison and ash.

Karlaen squinted. What little sunlight there had been was now hidden behind a thickening veil of smoke. He could see nothing, hear nothing. Weariness crept into him, one muscle at a time, and with it came the red hum, which became louder and louder the more tired he grew. Soon he would not be able to resist it,

or to channel it. He would only be able to sink beneath it. And then...

He shied away from the thought, and tried to marshal what strength remained to him. Through the downpour of embers, he saw the genestealers massing once more among the shattered statues which marked the plaza. And then a malign shape, larger than the rest, leapt up from the horde and onto a headless statue.

The Spawn of Cryptus looked the worse for wear after its tumble into the depths. Its carapace was cracked and befouled; filth dripped from it, drying and flaking away in the heat of the fire. Yet it still moved with the same eerie grace as always, and it did not seem to have lost any of its terrible strength. As it crouched on the statue's shoulders, its glare was one of hateful promise.

Karlaen shook his head. 'Determination is not the province of the Emperor's chosen alone,' he murmured. Another line from the *Philosophies of Raldoron*. Raldoron had been referring to orks, but the statement held true for the broodlord as well, he thought. He spat a mouthful of blood onto the ground before him and raised his chin.

'Well, beast. What are you waiting for?'

The broodlord watched its prey ready himself for what was to come, and felt a flicker of disquiet. Never before had it fought prey like this. Never before had it matched wills with a creature that could resist it.

It did not like this game.

It crouched on the statue and examined the red-armoured giant with distaste. The invader had ruined everything, and there was no more time. The broodlord could feel the weight of the Hive Mind's attentions turning towards it now, as the ground shook and the sky bled fire. Something was riding the charnel wind down from the pitiless stars, and every swarm would be mustered to counter it.

But not yet. Not... *yet*. Not while its brother was yet unpunished. Not while the usurper yet breathed. Its claws sank into the surface of the statue, as it imagined doing the same to his fragile flesh. It had waited years, decades, for this moment. This last revenge. To show him the full price for his treachery.

It could feel its brother's mind, dim and clouded by pain. That pain gave it no satisfaction, though it could not say why. His features flashed through its mind, and it wondered why it had not killed him when it had had the chance. It had wanted to so badly, but something had stayed its hand – other faces, other voices, memories it did not understand, a woman's voice whispering: *This is your brother Augustus. He will protect you, Tiberius.*

But he had not. And then, it was too late.

It closed its eyes, ignoring the sounds of its children below, of the death of the world it had sought to claim. It focused on the memories that swirled through its mind the way embers swirled through the air above the plaza. It remembered a man and a woman, and then Flax, raising a pistol. It remembered the man shouting, and the blood that followed a rumble of thunder. The plaza shook around it. The broodlord opened its eyes and clutched at itself as pain shot through it.

The fall had hurt it. The waters had seared its lungs, but it had hauled itself out and up into the light, its strength bolstered by rage. Rage at the thought that it might not taste the blood of the usurper. Rage that its long-delayed vengeance might never take place. Rage that its brother would survive while it was subsumed into the Hive Mind.

Rage that he might never understand what he had taken from it.

Only he did, didn't he? He had made that clear enough on the bridge. The broodlord touched the spot where Flax's knife had bitten into its side, still wet with ichor. No, Augustus Flax understood all too well.

And the Spawn of Cryptus would make him pay. No matter how many red giants stood between them, no matter how much fire fell from the sky, or how many cracks opened in the earth. The Spawn of Cryptus ruled Asphodex now. The old order would be swept away, and the song and shadow of the Leviathan would rise in its place, stretching from star to star.

The broodlord stretched to its full height on its perch and spread its arms. It threw back its head and for a moment it gazed up at the fiery rain that had begun to fall from the roiling clouds above. Then its head snapped down and it roared.

Its children echoed its cry, then loped towards their prey.

The final battle for the fate of the Flaxian Dynasty had begun.

SEVENTEEN

Karlaen raised his hammer and prepared to sell his life dearly. The broodlord's scream rippled out over the plaza, and the genestealers echoed its cry as they lunged forward as one. There were too many of them, coming too fast, for him to overcome. He made the calculation instinctively, and it brought him no shame to realise the inevitability of his position.

Indeed, part of him longed for it. Part of him longed to give in to the madness and drink deep of the red waters that rose behind his eyes, to simply give in to the Red Thirst as so many others had, and to shed the burden of duty in his final moments. He thought of Raphen and the Death Company, and wondered what it must be like to fight as they did, lost in the past. What would it be like, to battle alongside heroes long dead and gone to dust? Was it worth it? Was giving in to madness worth seeing the face of Sanguinius himself, as the dark closed in around you for the last time? He could almost feel the primarch's presence beside him, his great wings shielding Karlaen from the falling embers. He could almost...

The thud of his hearts drowned out all other sound. Shadows moved through the rain of fire; the flickering, ghostly outline of memories struggling to the surface. In the pulse of his hearts he heard the dim din of voices, and felt the reverberations of battle. But not this battle. He opened his eyes. The world might as well have been a painting. He could make out the gleam of the firelight reflected in the talons of his enemies, and smell the acrid stink of them. And

among them he could see warriors who were not there – shades clad in armour of brass or amethyst, reeking of incense and spoiled blood. He blinked. The warriors rippled and vanished, as if they were no more than motes on the surface of his eye.

Karlaen steeled himself. He ignored the red hum and what it had stirred to the surface of him as the genestealers bounded towards him through the ruins, springing from statue to statue or simply scuttling across the open plaza. If he was to die, it would not be as a maddened beast. He would not give in. He would do his duty, and he would die here and now, at the talons of these beasts, rather than beneath the blades of enemies past, if die he must.

He let the head of the hammer dip. His mind began to calculate the best way to use their numbers against them, and to utilise his combat capabilities to the fullest. Tyranids were not men, and wounds that did not kill them outright rarely stopped them. But the swarms could be shaken free of the Hive Mind's control through sustained violence. Kill enough of them, and quickly, and the broodlord's synaptic control might slip as the remainder gave in to their feral nature and fled. The encroaching flames would make that easier. Like all animals, the bio-beasts instinctively feared fire.

The closest genestealer leapt, and time seemed to slow, the moment drawing taut like the string of a bow. Karlaen pinpointed the best place to land his blow for maximum effect, and the haft of his hammer spun in his grip as he brought it up. Even as the blow connected, his armour's sensors screamed a warning. The genestealer's head burst like an overripe fruit and, as it flipped through the air, bolter fire licked across the horde.

The vox crackled to life and Karlaen could not stifle a triumphant laugh as a familiar voice said, 'One would think you'd learned your lesson about haring off alone, captain.'

'Feel free to report me to Commander Dante once we're off-planet, sergeant,' Karlaen said, as genestealers fell. Terminators tromped into the plaza from out of the palace ruins, bolters thundering. Alphaeus, Zachreal and Melos were in the lead. 'Jones?' Karlaen asked, quietly.

Alphaeus's voice was sombre. 'He bought us time to retreat. The creature spilled his guts, and he was in no mood to fall back. We – I – thought it best to abide by his decision.' There was much left unsaid in that terse statement. Karlaen could think of nothing to say. Jones had always been close to the red edge of things. The taciturn black-haired warrior had never fully shed himself of the lessons of the desert and the mountain.

Karlaen shook his head and smashed a genestealer aside as it clawed at him. He would mourn later. 'I have signalled for extraction. They are on their way.' He jammed the end of his hammer into a genestealer's spine, shattering it. 'Where are—' Before he could finish the question, the whine of turbines filled the air and black-armoured shapes dropped through the smoke. The Death Company had arrived. Or at least what was left of it. There were only a handful of the berserkers remaining, though their enthusiasm seemed undimmed.

A genestealer that had been about to leap on him was crushed by a thunder hammer. Raphen landed a moment later and jerked the head of his hammer free from the ruin of the xenos's twitching form. The crazed warrior turned to Karlaen and nodded tersely. 'Thought to have them all to yourself, eh brother? For shame. The traitors owe us all a debt of blood, not just you,' he rasped, shivering in eagerness. He clapped a trembling hand to Karlaen's shoulder and said, 'We shall stand together. Holy Terra shall not fall. Not today.'

'No, not today,' Karlaen said. He hesitated, but then clasped Raphen's forearm in a warrior's grip. The sergeant jerked once, as if in surprise. His twitching subsided. He looked at Karlaen, and the eyes behind the lenses of his helmet were lucid. But the clarity lasted only for a moment.

'Can you hear him, brother? Can you feel the heat of his passage? We are in the shadow of his wings, and he calls the Ninth Legion to his side,' Raphen snarled. He spun, crushing a genestealer, then putting a bolt-round into the belly of another. The wounded beast charged on. Raphen made to fire again, but his bolt pistol clicked uselessly. He tossed the weapon aside. Karlaen moved to finish off the wounded genestealer, but Raphen beat him to it.

He caught the creature by its jaw and jerked its head forwards against his own. He smashed his head against the genestealer's own again and again, until the xenos stopped thrashing. He let the body fall and turned back to Karlaen, ichor dripping down the contours of his faceplate. 'The primarch calls us to battle, brother,' he whispered hoarsely.

Before Karlaen could reply, Raphen whipped back around, lifted his hammer and activated his jump pack, hurling himself into the seething ranks of the foe. As Karlaen watched him, the ground shook beneath his feet, and a loud voice roared, 'Faith is what fans the guttering spark of my rage. Witches and heretics shall be consumed in my fire. One side, brother – this plaza shall be their tomb.' Cassor stomped past the statue, storm bolter firing. Genestealers exploded in mid-leap or were slapped from the air by the Dreadnought's claws.

Karlaen felt a surge of relief as he watched the Dreadnought smash into the

enemy. His earlier calculations fractured and came apart as he watched his brothers enter the fray. They were still outnumbered a hundred to one, but there was a chance now, where before there had only been inevitability. He swung his hammer with renewed strength. Alphaeus and the others joined him, marching steadily across the plaza to take up formation around the statue of the Emperor.

There was no need for orders. Not now. With the extraction called for, every battle-brother knew what was required of him, and they would fight until they fell. There would be no falling back, no formations, only the slow, steady grind of a slugging match. Terminator armour and storm bolters against claws, fangs and poison sacs. Karlaen found himself fighting side by side with Leonos and Damaris, the twins protecting his flanks as he put his hammer to use. He was glad to see that they had survived.

Bio-horrors poured into the plaza from the ruins surrounding it. They did not come in waves as before, but as a single, unceasing flood, attacking as one. Terminators were dragged away from their fellows, separated by the sheer press of the enemy, then pulled down. The Death Company smashed in and out of the horde like black comets, but they too were dragged down one by one, selling their lives to buy breathing room for the warriors of the First Company. As the battle raged on, Karlaen tried to spot the broodlord, but the creature was nowhere to be seen. For a moment, he hoped that it had abandoned the fight. But he dismissed the thought as fast as it occurred to him. No, it was still out there somewhere, waiting for its moment to strike.

Tyranid warrior-broods bounded through the swirling mass of genestealers, scattering their lesser kin as they sought to reach the Blood Angels. They trampled the smaller bio-beasts in their haste, scattering others with wide slashes from bone swords or snaps of bio-whips. The Terminators focused on the newcomers, pouring firepower into the synapse beasts, but some got through the gauntlet of explosive rounds and reached the Blood Angels lines.

Karlaen felt something splash against his armour and turned to see one of the tyranids pelting towards him, its grotesque bio-cannon raised for another shot.

‘Look out–’ Damaris began.

‘–captain,’ Leonos finished.

Both Terminators turned their storm bolters on the monstrosity as it bounded out of the smoke. The tyranid warrior contorted and flew apart as the explosive rounds pierced its carapace. Karlaen turned to thank them, but his words turned to ash in his throat as Leonos staggered, a bio-whip wrapped around his throat. A tyranid perched on top of him, hauling back on the whip. As the Terminator

struggled to free himself, the tyranid plunged a pair of bone swords down through the top of his helm. His death was so swift that neither his twin nor Karlaen could prevent it.

Leonos sagged as the tyranid extricated its blades. It dropped from the slumping body, but had no time to seek out new prey, as Damaris uttered a roar of fury and slammed into it, driving it back against the statue with a booming crack. The tyranid squealed and writhed for a moment before Damaris's groping powerfist found its jaw and forced its head back past the breaking point. There was a second crack, louder than the first, and the beast was still.

Damaris staggered back, the broken blades of the tyranid's swords sticking from his chest. He spun awkwardly as a third tyranid tried to dart past him, bringing his fist down on the creature's back, snapping its spine. As it fell, he began to slump. Karlaen realised that the blades had not merely slipped through his armour, but had pierced something vital in the process. Karlaen reached Damaris as he sank down beside his twin's corpse. 'I have you, brother. I...'

Karlaen trailed off. Damaris was not listening to him.

He said something unintelligible as Karlaen laid him down. He coughed wetly, and Karlaen knew that the blades had reached his hearts and lungs. Damaris reached out towards Leonos, but his life ebbed before his hand found that of his comrade. Karlaen rose unsteadily to his feet, all rational thought burning to ash in a sudden swell of rage. The world slowed and stretched, and he could see everything all at once through a muddy red haze.

He saw Zachreal and Alphaeus fighting back to back. He saw Melos catching a bio-whip in his powerfist and wrenching its wielder off balance long enough to get a bead on it with his storm bolter. He saw the survivors of the other squads gathered about the statue in a ragged formation, pouring their remaining ammunition into the horde that surged and swirled around them, selling their lives on behalf of him, and on behalf of his mission. He saw red- and black-armoured bodies scattered among piles of dead alien filth.

All of this he saw, but not the tyranid warrior that crept up behind him, bio-cannon levelled. He heard the hiss of dribbling acid and spun, but not quickly enough. The shot knocked him off his feet and he crashed down, a sizzling patch on his armour marking where the shot had struck home.

He rolled onto his back and groped blindly for his hammer. The tyranid advanced on him, eyes glittering with inhuman malice. Before it could fire its weapon again, however, a black form hurtled past and there was a sound like stone striking meat. The tyranid lurched backwards as one of its legs was

smashed out from under it. Off balance, it toppled backwards and smashed down onto the ground. Raphen landed on it a moment later, the soles of his boots pulping its screeching features.

Raphen spun, his hammer lashing out to catch a genestealer. He reached out, as if to pull Karlaen to his feet.

Karlaen saw a shadow hurtle towards him. He opened his mouth to shout a warning, but was too late as something heavy pounced onto the other Blood Angel and bore him to the ground. Black armour tore beneath rending claws as the broodlord smashed Raphen against the stones of the plaza. His jump pack was torn from his back and sent hurtling aside, where it exploded. The beast hefted him over its head. Raphen, dazed, bellowed uselessly as the broodlord held him.

It met Karlaen's gaze, and he saw a question there. No, a demand. He felt the thing's thoughts claw at his own, stronger than before. It was angry now, and that anger gave it strength. He met its glare with his own, feeling his own anger press hard against his fraying discipline. Whatever it saw in his eyes seemed to answer its question, and it screeched.

Then it brought Raphen down across its upraised knee.

'No!' Karlaen rose to his feet and, weaponless, threw himself at the beast as it let Raphen drop. It leapt back, avoiding him, then sprang for a statue, slithering around it and out of sight. Karlaen turned back to Raphen, but there was nothing to be done. Like Bartelo, he had died instantly, his spine shattered and his neck crushed. Like too many others, he had died on Karlaen's behalf, at the claws of a creature that should not exist.

Karlaen scooped up his hammer and turned to seek his brother's killer.

EIGHTEEN

Karlaen's vox crackled with an unfamiliar voice as he stalked through the smoky melee. Some small part of him not yet claimed by the rage that drove him recognised it as the voice of the pilot sent to extract them. Almost against his will, he looked up, scanning the red sky. His bionic eye caught sight of it almost immediately, whirring and shifting to focus in on one of the Chapter's Stormraven gunships as it tore down through the swirling clouds of harpies and gargoyles that sought to bar its passage. The gunship's twin-linked assault cannons roared, clearing a path. As Karlaen watched, the vessel dipped its blunt nose towards the plaza and screamed down towards them, guns blazing.

As he turned to continue seeking out his prey, he felt its jagged claws sink into his mind. The world turned upside down, and he clutched at his head. The pain was far greater than before, and all the more intrusive for catching him unawares. Faces, memories, voices, pounded at him from all sides... He saw Aphrae's death at the hands of the broodlord, and tasted the coppery tang of his brother's blood. He felt Raphen's spine break on his knee, and a scream ripped free of his throat.

Something slammed into him from the side, rocking him on his feet. He lashed out blindly, and was rewarded with a shriek as the crackling head of his hammer struck home. He saw the broodlord roll to its feet. Rather than darting away into the smoke, however, it charged right for him. He snarled and lunged to meet it. But, within a few seconds, he found himself driven back. His armour barely

warded off its powerful blows as it tore into him, body and mind. He could feel his control, already tenuous, slipping as he fought to stay focused against its mental attacks while simultaneously fending off its claws. It was not just the creature he was fighting; it was creeping fatigue as well. He dug down, trying to find what reserves of energy remained to him, but he knew his opponent was not going to give him time to recover.

Before, he had merely been an impediment. Now, it wanted him dead. He could see it in its eyes, those mad not-quite-human orbs which sparked with an all too familiar rage. He was fighting a losing battle against the Red Thirst, but this creature had already surrendered to its own form of madness. Whatever drove it, it was not planning on stopping until one of them was dead. A claw pierced his guard and opened his cheek to the bone. He tasted blood. The Red Thirst surged up in him, and he felt his reason slip. He uttered an inarticulate cry and smashed the broodlord back, trading blow for blow as the battle rolled on around them.

They grappled through the drifts and piles of corpses, tearing at one another. Karlaen could barely focus. He heard the whine of the Stormraven's turbines growing louder and felt the ground shudder as more and more tyranids forced their way into the plaza, driven by the will of the Hive Mind. All he could see was the snarling maw of his enemy; all he could feel was the urge to smash the beast down and erase it from sight.

Man and beast strained against one another, the stones cracking beneath their feet. Gradually, he was being pushed back, but he refused to yield. It would die here, now, or he would. The broodlord leaned in close, jaws snapping. Its barbed tongue caressed his face, and he caught it between his teeth, champing down, ripping the hard flesh. The broodlord reeled, shrieking, and he shoved it back, breaking them apart. As it staggered, he spat out the chunk of wriggling flesh still caught between his teeth and crashed into it, knocking it to the ground. It went down hard, but rolled aside before his hammer could strike home.

He lifted his weapon for another strike, but the Spawn leapt on him, bowling him over. His armour struck sparks from the stone as it rode him to the ground. His hammer was torn from his grip. Human-like hands sought his throat as he made to rise and he found himself pinned. Its grip tightened, while its bladed upper arms rose over him. Its eyes flashed, and in his head an image of his death formed.

Behind the beast, he saw great wings unfurl amidst a bloody radiance. He felt strangely calm. This, then, was a good death. He would die with his men, as he

should have done before. He had failed his men, Flax, Corbulo and himself, but he would not avoid the consequences. He stared up at the creature, willing it to strike. It paused, as if uncertain, its wounded tongue lashing, its features crinkled in confusion. Then, it hissed and readied itself to strike. The shadow behind spread, growing larger.

‘No beast. Thy claws shall not find his heart. So says Cassor.’ The Dreadnought’s talons raked down across the broodlord’s back. The creature turned, and found itself caught fast by a second claw. With a grinding of gears, Cassor hurled the broodlord aside, sending its body bouncing across the rubble. Karlaen stared up at the Dreadnought in incomprehension. ‘You make this a habit, brother. Twice has Cassor saved you.’ The Dreadnought turned, scanning the plaza. ‘Where are my brothers? The enemy approaches.’

Despite the haze which clouded his thoughts, Karlaen could see that there was not a single black-armoured form left standing. The Death Company had earned their name, and their redemption. Cassor stared at the scuttling horde that clambered over the bodies of his fellows and rumbled, ‘Cassor stands alone. So be it. Vengeance must take place and Cassor shall deal it in red increments. Come traitors. Cassor is waiting. He has waited all of his life for this moment.’ The Dreadnought’s optic sensors rotated down, to meet Karlaen’s still stunned gaze. ‘I know that I am no longer sane. But I still serve. You shall not fall here, brother. Not while one flicker of rage remains in Cassor’s heart. Up, commander. Glory awaits.’

The enemy swept forwards just as Karlaen began to push himself to his feet. And though Cassor stood alone, as wave after wave of bio-horrors smashed into him, not one reached Karlaen. The Dreadnought burned, trampled and crushed the aliens until the stones were slick with ichor.

Cassor fought with all of the fury that had earned him the honour of being entombed in the sarcophagus of a Dreadnought. His storm bolter roared until its ammunition cylinders were depleted and his meltagun turned the air black with char. When both weapons were spent, he continued to slash and crush the tyranids. Karlaen surged to his feet, giving in to the red hum that quivered through his brain. He smashed his hammer down on snarling maws and bashed aside scratching talons.

The ground trembled beneath his feet as he fought, and he saw a familiar shape plough through its lesser kin with a bellicose roar. The carnifex, its hide pockmarked with death-scars, charged towards Cassor with undeniable eagerness. The Dreadnought turned. ‘Again you seek to match me, hound of

carnage. But thy end is come.'

The carnifex crashed into the Dreadnought with a roar, lifting him up and driving him back into the statue of the Emperor, shattering it and sending Terminators scrambling aside as a cloud of dust swept across the plaza. The Dreadnought, off balance, toppled back as the carnifex continued to bulldoze forward. Its great hooves and claws crushed and pierced the black hull plates and a strangled scream exploded from Cassor's vox.

Karlaen, without thinking, hurled himself at the carnifex. His hammer slammed down against its carapace, cracking it. The carnifex twisted around, jaws snapping. He staggered back as its blade-like claws tore through the air towards him. It stopped short of reaching him, and turned. Karlaen looked past it and saw that Cassor was not finished yet. He had reached out to catch the beast's leg in an unyielding grip.

'You shall not touch my brother, abomination. I shall endure a thousand deaths before I yield.' Cassor hauled back on the carnifex's hind limb. The carnifex twisted around and drove one of its scything claws through the Dreadnought as it had in their first encounter. But Cassor refused to let go. The carnifex flailed and snapped, its shrieks rising above the battlefield. It slammed its claws down again and again, until at last they became lodged in the ruptured hull. The carnifex's struggles became more desperate as it strove to free itself. The fallen Dreadnought rocked beneath the blows, but did not release it.

Karlaen, mind full of red, stalked towards the creature. It was the living manifestation of the enemy that was consuming this world and threatening his own. In that moment, he hated it more than any foe he had ever faced. He swung his hammer up. The creature wailed, as if it knew what was coming.

His first blow stunned it. His second split its scarred skull. His third and fourth opened that split further, and mangled the throbbing organ within. His fifth and sixth shattered its jaw and crushed its staring eyes. His seventh nearly tore its head from its neck. He smashed the Hammer of Baal down again and again until he could no longer lift the relic-weapon without trembling from the effort. Then, rage fading, he used his hammer to lever the corpse off Cassor's inert form.

'Brother, do you yet function?' he demanded, sinking down beside the great war machine. 'Cassor? *Cassor!*'

Gears whined and servos grated as the hull shifted. Optic sensors flickered and swivelled blindly. Karlaen froze as Cassor's claw rose. The tip of the talons brushed against the crimson teardrop set into the centre of his chestplate.

'I swore to serve in life or death. But I feel his hand upon me. I cannot move.'

My armour... is breached. I hear his wings, brother. I... see...' Cassor's rumble slurred into silence without revealing what it was he had seen. The lights on his hull blinked and faded. Karlaen laid his hand on the shattered hull. The rage had drained from him with his final blow, and he could feel his strength ebbing.

He pushed himself to his feet and looked around. The Stormraven had scoured the plaza of alien life as it landed, but there were always more tyranids. Something hissed, and he turned to see the broodlord limping back towards the ruins of the palace. It had been badly hurt by Cassor's attack. As he watched it, he knew he would never get a better chance to end the danger it posed. But there was no time. Not if he wanted to see his mission through.

With the death of the carnifex, the tyranid horde was drawing close again: a roiling sea of chitin and claws closing in on the survivors. Already, the remaining Terminators were fighting their way towards the waiting Stormraven, which covered their approach with the hurricane bolters mounted on its sponsons. He could hear Alphaeus calling to him, and he saw with some relief that Zachreal had Flax cradled in his arms as he tromped up the boarding ramp into the Stormraven's hold.

He hesitated, considering. It was worth his life, wasn't it? The broodlord could not be allowed to survive, even if it meant his death. He looked for it, trying to spot it in the smoke, but it was gone, lost in the haze and in the roiling tide of frenzied tyranid beasts now flooding into the plaza. He heard Alphaeus call for him again, and he turned.

Karlaen fought a path to them, his motions mechanical. He was tired, in body and soul. But he had done his duty. And he was not returning alone, as he had before. The Shield of Baal had not failed, not this time. Gusts of superheated air washed across the plaza as he reached the boarding ramp. The vessel was already starting to lift off as Alphaeus reached out to him. Karlaen gratefully accepted his help in clambering aboard.

Below them, tyranids leapt uselessly at the Stormraven as it rose into the air. Stormstrike missiles streaked from launch bays to hammer into the ruins, collapsing them, and sending tongues of flames licking across the plaza. The Plaza of the Emperor Ascendant would soon be a cauldron, and anything left in it would be consumed by the fires now ravaging Phodia. He hoped that their number would include the Spawn of Cryptus, but somehow he knew that would not be the case. The universe was not that kind.

The ramp began to close. Karlaen stood, watching until the last moment, hoping to see the beast lurch from hiding, wreathed in flame. Hoping that it

would make a final, futile assault, and give him leave to finish it off for good. Instead, it remained hidden. He could feel it watching him, watching the Stormraven, calculating the distance and the odds, and he knew that it was not so foolish. 'Next time, beast,' he said.

The last thing he saw before the ramp clanged shut and the Stormraven took flight were two red eyes glaring at him through the smoke.

EPILOGUE

Port Helos, Asphodex

The Stormraven reached Port Helos, the largest of Phodia's many space ports and the only one currently in Imperial hands, just as the twin suns reached their height, bathing the embattled world in deadly radiation.

The desperate Imperial defenders had built a makeshift moat between the port and the city, flooding the streets with millions of litres of promethium and lighting it. Now a barrier of crackling flame, almost a hundred metres high, rose above the streets.

Dante himself had led the Blood Angels in securing the port after a savage battle in which Mephiston, the Chapter's Chief Librarian, had contested with the Hive Mind itself and survived. Though the enemy had been driven back, swarms of tyranids massed outside the flames, waiting for them to die down.

The Stormraven touched down with a heavy thump that was muffled by the roar of artillery. As the boarding ramp descended, the stink of burning promethium and the omnipresent odour of the bio-swarms washed over the passengers.

Karlaen stepped down from the ramp and onto the landing platform, a fog of exhaust fumes coiling about him. He said nothing as the others began to disembark behind him. He carried his hammer loosely in one hand and, as he stepped onto the softly vibrating surface of the platform, it slid through his grip. The head crashed against the ground as he closed his eyes.

The rage had dwindled to embers, but he could still feel its heat within him. Once stoked, such fires never truly died. He had come far closer to the edge than he cared to consider, but the thought lingered. He longed for the peace of the Chapter's fortress-monastery, and his pursuits there. Some place where he could go to find a new centre, and douse the fires that had been stirred within him.

He heard an intake of breath, along with the rattle of armour, and opened his eyes. A golden figure was approaching through the fog of exhaust, and the others had all dropped to their knees. Karlaen began to do the same in reflex, instinct taking over for his too-weary mind.

'Rise and report, Captain of the First,' Commander Dante said. Corbulo stood behind him, a flock of Chapter serfs and white-armoured Sanguinary Priests gathered about him. Karlaen briefly met the Sanguinary High Priest's calm gaze as he rose and removed his helm, but said nothing to him. He looked at Dante.

'Mission accomplished, commander,' he rasped, his throat raw. In short, precise sentences, he explained what had befallen him and his men in the ruins from the time of their arrival to their extraction. He said nothing of his unease, or of how close he had come to not coming back at all. Dante could tell regardless. Karlaen knew that his Chapter Master could read it in his face and hear it in his voice, but he said nothing.

'The creature,' Dante asked, when Karlaen had finished, 'is it dead?'

'I do not know.' The words rankled. He wanted to demand leave to hunt the aberrant beast down, and finish it for good. But he held his tongue.

Dante gazed at him for a moment. Then the golden helm twitched, and he said, 'You have done well, Shield of Baal. As I knew you would.' He reached out and clasped Karlaen's shoulder, startling him. 'You have never failed me, brother. I have said that you are the rock upon which the First is built, but you are more than that.' He gestured to the hammer that Karlaen held. 'You are the aegis that defends us, and you are the hammer blow which crushes our enemies. Though I would give you the respite I know you crave, I have need of you still.'

Karlaen bowed his head. 'Speak your will, my lord, and I will see it done.'

Dante lowered his hand. 'I will, but not yet. Rest, regain your strength. This war has only just begun, I fear.' He turned to look at Corbulo, who was watching as the Chapter serfs led a bewildered and groggy Augustus Flax away. 'Well, Corbulo?'

'He will live. And may prove as useful as I hoped,' Corbulo said, turning to look at them. Karlaen wanted to ask about Flax's relationship to the beast, but said nothing. He had told them everything that Flax had shared. If Corbulo was

dismayed by such revelations, he did not show it. Indeed, he seemed satisfied with his prize.

Dante nodded brusquely. He looked at Karlaen. 'You will attend me, when you have rested.' He hesitated, as if there were something else he wanted to say. But instead, he turned and departed. As the Chapter Master left the landing platform, Alphaeus and the others rose to their feet. Karlaen waved them away. Let them rest while they could. The First's part in this war was not yet over.

Soon only he and Corbulo remained on the platform. Crimson clouds rolled past, eddying and billowing around the port. Karlaen did his best to ignore the other Space Marine. Corbulo stood quietly, as if waiting for an invitation to speak. They stood in silence for some time. Finally, Corbulo cleared his throat. 'Discipline is the armour of a man's soul, it is true. But armour must occasionally be removed, so that it might be tended and made strong again. So too with discipline. It must be tested, and then strengthened where it is found lacking.'

Karlaen grunted. He did not wish to speak about it, and especially not with Corbulo. He stared at the clouds and tried not to see the faces of his fallen brothers there. More names added to the tally of his debt. More men dead because they had followed him into battle. His grip on the hammer's haft tightened. Corbulo waited. Whether he was waiting for a reply, or simply waiting, Karlaen couldn't say. Eventually, the Sanguinary High Priest made to depart.

'I asked you before if you wanted to know what those whispers in your mind said of you, brother,' Corbulo said, as he turned away. Karlaen said nothing. Corbulo stopped, then smiled sadly, his face half-turned away. 'They said that they forgive you. But that you cannot forgive yourself,' he said. 'And that it will be the death of you.'

Karlaen did not reply. He turned away, and looked out beyond the port walls, towards the burning city below. He heard Corbulo leave, but said nothing.

He simply stared at the conflagration far below, and thought of two red eyes, glaring at him from the smoke.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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