THE BOOK OF BLOOD
EDITED BY CHRISTIAN DUNN

A WARHAMMER 40,000 NOVEL

THE BOOK OF BLOOD

Edited by Christian Dunn

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 Imperial Guard and countless planetary defence forces, the ever-vigilant Inquisition and the tech-priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus to name only a few. But for all their multitudes, they are barely enough to hold off the ever-

present threat from aliens, heretics, mutants - and worse.

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

Book One

SPACE HULK

by Gav Thorpe

MISSION TIME POST-IMPACT:

00.04.36

Darkness clung to the corroding bulkheads, thick and heavy with menace. Creaks and groans of contorting metal vied with the hiss of ancient pneumatics and drips from broken pipes. Something new and harsh broke the gloom and quiet of distant millennia: the metallic clump of heavy boots and star-bright rays of suit lamps.

Five huge figures strode purposefully through the confines of the derelict space hulk; Squad Lorenzo of the Blood Angels First Company. They were Terminators, the best of the elite Space Marines. All of them were giants, standing more than eight feet tall in their armour. Each a prized artefact, these armoured suits were the heaviest worn by any soldier of the Imperium, made of layers of titanium and ceramite capable of withstanding the most punishing damage. In the freezing vacuum of space or the boiling depths of a volcano, the Terminators were the deadliest warriors of the Adeptus Astartes, their skill and courage proven over centuries of battle. They came

expecting victory.

'Containment underway,' Sergeant Lorenzo reported. The idle chatter of the squad had died away as they had neared the enemy. All were now intent upon the mission.

'The Blood Angels have returned,' Captain Raphael's voice crackled in Lorenzo's ear. The signal was somewhat distorted, having been broadcast more than a thousand kilometres, from where the force commander monitored events aboard the orbiting strike cruiser *Angel's Sword*. 'For six centuries we have carried the burden of defeat, the stigma of failure. Now we redeem ourselves.'

Eighty Terminators of the Blood Angels were establishing a foothold aboard the space hulk. Their mission was simple: eradicate the alien threat. Several hundred metres behind Squad Lorenzo a cordon of veteran warriors guarded the impact site, where Techmarines and other support was being established. When all was ready they would advance on their foes. For the moment, however, Lorenzo and his warriors were out on their own.

The squad had been tasked with destroying the controls of a still-active bank of saviour pods. If the enemy were allowed to escape the space hulk aboard the lifeboats their infection could spread to other ships and distant worlds. That could not be allowed to happen. Such was

the importance of containment, Lorenzo's squad were considered expendable.

Heralded by the glare of their armour lights, the Space Marines advanced in single file along a winding concourse. The warriors' suits of Tactical Dreadnought armour filled the narrow corridor, their massive shoulder pads occasionally scraping the metal walls. Their red livery shone bright in the light of the lamps, a declaration of fearlessness and determination. The Blood Angels did not fight in the shadows.

The Terminators stomped forwards accompanied by the growl of servos and wheezing of fibre bundles from their suits. At their head, Lorenzo's sensorium showed that the maze of corridors ahead was deserted. He adjusted the range to three hundred metres and caught his breath when the glowing image on his auto-senses tinged with a smudge of green at the limit of the sensor's range. He waited several seconds, but the image did not resolve into movement. The enemy were dormant.

'Section secure, pattern thetos,' the sergeant said, thumbing the activation stud on his sword.

The blade hummed into life, the actinic blue of its power field bathing the corridor with flickering light. In the double-circle glare of Lorenzo's armour lamps, the corridor was laid bare. The latticed decking was warped in places but unbroken, while the walls that lined the

narrow passageway were made of bolted metal sheets corroded and pitted with decay. The only sound was the buzz of the power weapon, tramping boots and the wheeze of powered armour as the rest of the squad moved up into position behind their sergeant.

The sensorium signal still had not changed and Lorenzo advanced, bringing his storm bolter up to the firing position. He checked the magazine readout in his display: thirty-two rounds.

'Detecting an energy wave from starboard, brother-sergeant,' Valencio announced. 'Indeterminate distance. Possibly a cable or generator.'

'Not of mission significance,' said Lorenzo, slowing as he approached a junction with another corridor coming from the right. 'Continue to advance.'

Swinging around, the beams of his lamps swaying across the walls, Lorenzo stared down the corridor and took two steps forward. Even with the suit lights, visibility was poor. Motes of rust and flaking paint drifted down from the ceiling and the contorted walls of the passage created strange shadows. Lorenzo scanned the scene looking for openings, his breathing calm, his mind focussed. The new passageway had two doors ahead: one on the right a dozen metres forward, another on the left thirty metres away. Deino strode across the junction behind the sergeant, his weapon covering the other approach.

‘Command deck, update on tactical mapping,’ Lorenzo said.

The comm buzzed for several seconds before the voice of one of the strike cruiser’s bridge technicians arrived in Lorenzo’s ear.

‘Nearly complete,’ the crewman said. ‘Transmitting data over link now.’

Lorenzo’s helmet display fuzzed blue for a second and then resolved into a clearer image as the scan data from the strike cruiser fused with the auto-senses of his armoured suit. A wire frame schematic was imposed over his vision and at a sub-vocal command an independent map appeared in his right eye. In places the map was indistinct or absent, the scanners of the strike cruiser unable to penetrate for some as-yet unknown reason. Lorenzo looked over the layout of the surrounding rooms and corridors, whilst maintaining a vigilant gaze on the sensorium data with his other eye. The contact echoes still had not moved. The energy spike reported by Valencio was some distance away and of no importance.

‘Egress location now marked,’ a serf aboard the strike cruiser reported. Moments later the head-up display flickered as it updated itself. A blinking icon of a skull drew Lorenzo’s attention to a room some eighty metres ahead. This was the saviour pod control room, the squad’s objective. Lorenzo had been tasked with

destroying the launch mechanisms, ensuring that their alien prey could not escape the hulk. It was standard combat doctrine: contain and annihilate.

From the map, Lorenzo could also see that the branch he was on led to a subset of rooms isolated from the main thoroughfare they were following. Sensorium data was blank and Lorenzo needed to know if there was an ingress route on their flank. Dozens of metres behind the squad more Terminators were setting up a defensive cordon around the breaching zone, but out here beyond the perimeter there were any number of ways the squad might be surrounded.

'Valencio and Zael, with me,' Lorenzo commanded. 'Search and secure. Deino and Goriel, flank protection.'

Lorenzo strode forwards once more. Zael fell in behind the sergeant, the igniter of his heavy flamer sparking and stuttering. Valencio brought up the rear, keeping the standard five metre clearance.

Stopping two metres beyond the first door, Lorenzo settled into overwatch stance, legs braced, targeter set to wide focus. Behind him Zael turned and faced the door. Deactivating the field on his power fist, the Terminator flicked the door lever. With a screech, the door shuddered open halfway and then squealed to a stop. Zael grabbed the door's edge and hauled it sideways, his powered actuators pushing the door into its wall cavity with more

shrieking protests from the ancient metal. Inside his helmet, the Terminator grimaced at the sound.

The room beyond was square, less than ten metres to a wall, and a further door lay open on the opposite side. Cracked tiles paved the floor, thick with grime. The walls had been crudely whitewashed at some point in the distant centuries but were now bare metal except for the odd patch of peeling paint.

'Movement!' Goriel's sharp warning echoed in everyone's ear.

00.05.97

The greenish fuzz on the sensorium net was shifting, resolving into individual signatures. They were rapidly closing in on the Terminators' position. The dump split into two groups, spreading out to the left and right. Lorenzo counted seven distinct movements heading towards him and five others circling to the other side of Deino and Goriel. Neither group's course seemed to comply with the schematic data.

'Secure main corridor, continue sweep,' Lorenzo barked. 'Watch for entry points. Look for super- and sub-layer approaches.'

The sergeant pressed ahead towards the next door. Behind him Valencio followed, his gaze scanning left and right for breaches in the walls, floor and ceiling checking

that his sergeant's rear quarter was protected. At the back, Zael clumped across the room and stopped at the open doorway, his heavy flamer directed down the corridor beyond.

'Ceiling breach,' Zael reported as he caught sight of a gaping crack in a heavy pipe that ran half the length of the fifty-metre corridor before turning sharply into a bulkhead.

The contacts on the sensorium were less than seventy-five metres away from Lorenzo, and within fifty metres of Deino.

'Brothers, the enemy are at hand. Summon all of your resolve, and your animosity,' Lorenzo told his squad.

The sergeant reached the door and swung around to face it. It was also activated by the pull of a lever and hissed out of sight with less effort than the previous one. Lorenzo stepped forwards as soon as the door was open, allowing Valencio to continue his advance along the corridor.

From a corroded grating in the floor ahead of Deino something fast and agile sprang into the corridor. It leapt towards the Terminator on bounding legs, four whip-muscled arms clawing at the passage wall as it righted itself. It had a bulbous, purple head. The rest of its body was covered in a dark blue chitin. Its eyes glittered in the lamps of Deino's suit.

‘Visual contact!’ said Deino. ‘Confirm contact: genestealer.’

The creature had taken only three strides along the corridor when Deino opened fire. The passage rang with the clamour of the storm bolter’s roar. With alien quickness the thing leapt from one wall to the other, the Terminator’s initial burst of fire ripping a trail of detonations across bare metal. Another shape emerged from the darkness as the first hurtled forward with a lithe gait, digging the claws of its upper arms into the floor to increase momentum.

Deino’s second salvo caught the creature across the head and back, tearing bloody chunks from it. Thick blood splashed across the wall and floors. The second creature leapt over its fallen companion without hesitation and Deino fired again.

‘Confirmed kill, multiple targets approaching,’ Deino said calmly. He fired once more. ‘Threat minimal.’

00.06.18

‘Ingress!’ announced Zael, squeezing the trigger on his heavy flamer. A sheet of fire roared along the corridor, bathing the ceiling and the pipe with promethium fury. Something flailed in the inferno, soundlessly spasming as the cleansing fires melted through its carapace, flesh and bones. Charred bodies fell from the destroyed pipework.

The adhesive promethium clung to the walls, coating the corridor with white-hot flames.

‘Cleanse and burn!’ Zael’s spirits soared as he saw the creatures incinerated.

‘Hold stance!’ ordered Lorenzo.

The staccato rhythm of Deino’s storm bolter rang through the corridors as he unloaded his weapon’s magazine into the onrushing tide of creatures boiling up from a crawlspace beneath the decking. The crackle of Zael’s heavy flamer sounded again as more creatures emerged in front of him.

The room Lorenzo found himself in was long and thin, with stone-lined walls carved with faint patterns. A vent in the far corner to his right blew out a steady stream of dust, which swirled through the beams of the sergeant’s lights as he stepped forward. There were no other doors.

Lorenzo was about to turn away when he noticed that the dust from the vent had stopped.

00.06.25

A WARNING TONE sounded and one of the signals on the sensorium flashed red: imminent threat. A moment later the vent cover was smashed out and one of the aliens was propelling itself through the air towards Lorenzo. With no time to fire, the sergeant brought his power sword up to a parry position, slicing through an outstretched claw. The

genestealer's three other clawed hands gouged furrows across Lorenzo's helmet and right shoulder guard, knocking him backwards a step.

'Blood of Baal!' spat Lorenzo as he lashed the power sword into the creature's head, splitting it from cheek to neck in a fountain of gore.

A reflexive paroxysm caused the creature to snap its arms shut, clamping onto Lorenzo's right arm, talons scratching at the outer ceramite layer of the sergeant's armour. With a grunt, he smashed the body away with his storm bolter.

He looked down at the bloodied thing sprawled on the floor. It twitched with some vestigial remnants of life, despite its grievous wounds. Memories six hundred years old surfaced in the sergeant's mind, images of the Blood Angels aboard another space hulk in a time that seemed an age ago. The beasts had taken a bloody toll in that campaign and the Blood Angels had teetered upon the precipice of annihilation. Lorenzo had been one of only fifty battle-brothers to survive the encounter. Those ashamed few had returned to Baal to lick their wounds like scolded curs.

Looking at the fanged monstrosity at his feet, Lorenzo felt a mixture of revulsion and shame, tinged with an almost unknown sensation: anxiety. Though he had fought gloriously for the Emperor for more than half a

dozen centuries and across countless battle zones, the alien at his feet reminded Lorenzo of a time when he had been alone in the darkness. The Blood Angels had failed on that day and the stain of defeat hung heavily in Lorenzo's mind.

There was only one response to the emotions vying for control of Lorenzo's thoughts. Anger welled up inside him, a righteous ire fuelled by self-loathing and a deep hatred of the creatures he faced. The Blood Angels had been bloodied but not destroyed. They had taken the shame of failure into their hearts and nurtured it. Over the long years and decades they took the rough ore of weakness and beat upon it with faith and resolve, honing it into a bright sword of admonition. From weakness came strength and from adversity came the desire to prevail. The sergeant raised an armoured boot and brought it down on the genestealer's head, crushing it to a pulp upon the floor. Thick blood oozed from under the Space Marine's magnetized sole and dribbled into the cracks between the tiles.

This time there would be no defeat, no retreat.

00.06.29

A SHOUT OVER the comm and a blazing flash on the sensorium warned that Zael was in trouble. A wave of hazy blips was speeding down the corridor towards the

Terminator. Valencio responded first, slewing his armour around and pounding back towards the first room.

‘One burst left,’ warned Zael.

‘Save that for the objective,’ order Lorenzo.

‘Clear for shot!’ snapped Valencio as he thundered into the room behind the heavy flamer-armed Space Marine.

Seven or eight of the creatures could be seen past the dancing flames left by Valencio’s defensive fire. As the inferno burnt itself out, they rushed forwards, claws opened, dead eyes fixed on Zael. The Terminator took a step backwards and to one side, opening up Valencio’s view of the corridor in front of him.

‘Purge the xenos!’ laughed Valencio as he opened fire, the storm of explosive bolts from his weapon sending heads and limbs flying as the shells detonated inside their targets. The controlled fire blew apart four of the aliens, one after the other. ‘Did you see that, brother-sergeant? Four in one volley!’

With a sickening click and a kick that caused the storm bolter to shudder in Valencio’s grip, the weapon stopped firing. A hazard message flickered into his helmet display: AMMUNITION FEED JAM.

‘Mercy of the Angel…’ Valencio muttered as three more genestealers sprinted down the corridor towards him.

00.06.38

Goriel had worked his way forward along a tunnel that ran parallel to Deino's position. A glance at the sensorium showed the bulk of contacts closing in on Zael and Valencio's location. Boosting the power to his legs, the Terminator broke into an awkward run, his footfalls crashing along the metal decking as he pounded around a corner ahead.

The passage he was on intersected at a T-junction with the corridor covered by Valencio. In the glow thrown out by patches of flickering promethium.

Goriel saw one of the creatures coiling its muscles, ready to spring towards Valencio's location. Goriel fired on instinct, his storm bolter roaring before the conscious thought had entered his mind. The alien beast was thrown aside, its legs ripped away.

Another appeared at the junction ahead and bounded off the wall and around the corner, changing its direction of attack towards Goriel. It made no attempt to hide, relying on its breakneck speed to close the distance. The tactic failed as a slew of bolter rounds from Goriel's weapon blew apart its head and body.

'Jam cleared!' announced Valencio and a moment later the burning trails of bolter rounds sped past the junction and the *crump* of detonations sounded along the metallic maze.

'Push forward,' said Lorenzo. 'Regroup at grid point

thirteen-delta.’

With Lorenzo and Goriel leading the way, the squad headed onwards into the darkness. The genestealers attacked haphazardly, dashing from the shadows and bursting from pipes and vents singly and in pairs. The disciplined fire of the Blood Angels easily cut them down. More blips on the sensorium showed that others were rapidly closing in on the Terminators’ position.

As they came to a double cross junction, Valencio swung around and covered the rear while Goriel and Deino spread out to guard the other approaches. Lorenzo advanced towards the objective highlighted in his helm display, his storm bolter spitting rounds into a heavy door at the end of the corridor. The thumb-sized rockets tore apart the metal barrier, revealing the room beyond. Dimly lit screens glowed in the chamber atop banks of keyboards and buttons.

It was the launch control chamber for the saviour pods: the objective. The squad’s orders were to destroy the controls beyond any hope of repair, ensuring that none of the lifeboats could be launched.

‘Brother Zael, purify,’ the sergeant said. He stepped into a side corridor as Zael readied his heavy flamer. Bursts of storm bolter fire from Goriel and Valencio announced the arrival of more enemies.

Promethium scorched into the launch room and glass-

panelled data displays exploded. Sparks erupted from melting cables as Zael emptied the tank of his weapon. Thick black smoke poured from the room, billowing along the thermals created by the inferno, swathing the squad in gloom. Lorenzo's auto-senses flickered through the spectrum of options and settled on a heat-capture image. In the reflected glow of the burning control room, the sergeant could see through the smog as if it was not there. He stepped back into the corridor and analysed the damage done by Zael's flamer.

Metal cabinets had been reduced to slurry and molten gobbets of metal pinged and cooled on the rockcrete floor. Ancient circuits had been irreparably scorched and millennia-old pistons sagged like sodden paper.

'Control, objective complete,' Lorenzo announced.

'Affirmed,' a voice replied. 'Return to perimeter for orders.'

Lorenzo turned away from the control room and looked at the sensorium display. Green flickers warily circled ahead, growing in number. The genestealers were now trapped aboard the space hulk with the Terminators. The true battle would begin.

It was several hundred metres back to the breach head, and dozens of foes now lay in front of the Terminators. Lorenzo ejected the magazine from his storm bolter and slammed in another.

‘Vengeance shall be ours, my brothers.’

00.06.99

Nearly half a kilometre behind Lorenzo, Sergeant Gideon nodded to himself as he listened to the reports over the comm-net, his Terminator armour whining in protest as it failed to replicate the movement. All was proceeding as expected. The breaching zone was well established and the support and reserve units had moved on board. The veterans of the Blood Angels 1st Company were preparing to press onwards into the space hulk’s depths.

‘Squad Gideon, secure point eighty-omega,’ Captain Raphael’s orders came through terse and clipped. ‘Prevent enemy reinforcements from passing the junction.’

‘Affirmative, point eighty-omega,’ replied Gideon. ‘Attack pattern diablo, advance.’

He raised the thunder hammer in his right hand and signalled for his squad to move out. Scipio took the point position, his storm bolter raised and ready. Brother Leon fell in behind him, the six barrels of his assault cannon rotating slowly as if in anticipation of the battle to come. Gideon stepped into position next, Omnio not far behind. Noctis brought up the back of the short column, turning occasionally to cover the approach to the rear.

‘Has it been confirmed that these are the same creatures

that were encountered before?' asked Scipio.

'Lorenzo and the other survivors are convinced,' said Gideon. 'That's good enough for me.'

'Truly we have been blessed with this opportunity for vengeance,' said Scipio.

'They are the same *species* of alien,' Omnio clarified. 'Not the actual life forms our predecessors encountered.'

'Good enough for me,' said Scipio. He swayed to the left and pointed to an alcove in the wall. 'Possible entry point.'

Leon's assault cannon swung towards the offending space but the alcove was devoid of any hole or other route of attack. The Terminator grunted in disappointment and continued after Scipio.

'It is hard to believe these are Ymgarlian genestealers,' said Scipio. 'So many creatures from such a small moon.'

'It does raise some difficult questions about our understanding of the genestealer species,' admitted Omnio. 'But as the Angel once said, "There are more things in the darkness than man can ever count". It is arrogance to presume we know everything.'

'We should torpedo the entire hulk and be done,' said Noctis as he rejoined the back of the squad from where he had been standing rearguard.

'That would be an opportunity missed,' said Omnio. 'Some of these vessels might be Dark Age. Who can say

what secrets they hide?'

'And what dangers,' added Gideon. 'Keep vigilant.'

The squad had advanced the perimeter by some two hundred metres. Roughly the same distance ahead a cloud of contacts was registering on the Terminators' scanners. At this distance it was impossible to discern individual life forms, but Gideon estimated there to be a hundred or more. They were moving, but not in any purposeful sense that he could recognise.

Gideon pushed the squad onwards. They came upon a tangled mess of gantries and chambers where the hulls of two ships had been compacted together by the strange tides of the warp. Like a fault line in a planet's bedrock, the line between the two ships was clear and distinct. An unidentifiable rocklike material replaced metal and the colours changed from greys and silvers to greens and blues. Doorways were wider and higher and the distorted walls and floors allowed more space for the Terminators. Gideon picked up the pace, aware that every moment before the squad was in position was an opportunity for the Blood Angels' alien adversaries to attack the perimeter.

'Command to all squads, mission update,' announced Captain Raphael. 'Cyber-Altered Task unit deployed for deep recon. Enemy force estimate now at excess of forty thousand. Ninety-five per cent dormancy and falling.

Remember your fallen fore-brothers and fight with honour.'

'Angel's mercy, that's a lot of targets,' said Scipio.

'Enough to go around,' said Leon.

'Leon, move ahead and cover the junction,' Gideon ordered, ignoring the squad's chatter. 'Noctis, take up flank protection position to Leon's left. The rest of you, disperse pattern deimos, guard the approaches.'

On the sergeant's command the squad split, each warrior disappearing into the darkness to take up his assigned position. Having extended the breach head by another three hundred metres, they settled into overwatch and awaited the enemy. On the sensorium, the green blurs separated into distinct signatures as the foe converged on Squad Gideon from three directions.

00.07.12

THERE WAS MOVEMENT right at the edge of the light from Leon's suit lamps and he resisted the urge to open fire. The motor of his assault cannon growled like a beast ready to pounce and Leon waited expectantly for a clear target. The sensorium showed a score or more of creatures in the darkness of the tunnels ahead. They circled for a short while, seeking some other route towards the Blood Angels' positions. Evidently this endeavour met with failure. One moment the corridor

was empty, the next a horde of blue and purple bodies hurtled along its length towards Leon like water bursting through a hole in a dam.

He opened fire, the barrels of the assault cannon rotating up to speed in a heartbeat, a torrent of shells screaming down the passageway in another. Leon's auto-senses had kicked in the audio dampeners the moment he had pressed the trigger, but even through the immense plasteel plates armouring his body the Terminator could feel the concussive shockwave that filled the room.

In a two-second burst half a dozen creatures were shredded, their bodies vaporised by the fusillade. Leon paused for a moment, allowing his weapon's barrels and motors to cool, and then opened fire again. Each devastating burst obliterated everything in front of the Terminator.

Virtually hypnotised by the carnage he was wreaking, Leon almost failed to notice a group of sensorium contacts moving down a corridor parallel to the one he was covering. He began to back away from the door to the room, giving himself more time to fire. He was too slow. With a scream of rending metal and a clang the genestealers smashed through a door just around a corner ahead and within a second they were inside the room with Leon.

'Die!' he bellowed, unleashing the fury of his assault

cannon in one long burst. Tracing an arc with his weapon, Leon cut down the first swathe of attackers, but more were following quickly in their wake. The trigger still locked down, Leon turned the blaze of shells upon the next wave of aliens. Fire and gore and splinters from the ruined walls filled the corridor for a moment.

With an explosion that hurled Leon from his feet, the assault cannon's barrels burst. The white-hot metal scythed into his armour, leaving steaming shreds of alloy smoking across his shoulder and helm. Clawed hands and feet gouged further rents in his suit as the beasts streamed through the room. One blow caught a plasteel-sheathed cable under Leon's left arm, paralysing his armour on that side and rendering his power fist inert.

'Point position down!' he snarled over the comm as the genestealers raced past. There was nothing else he could do.

00.08.04

'Time to prove yourselves once again, my friends,' Gideon muttered to his thunder hammer and storm shield, Leon's warning still ringing in his ears. 'Destroy your foe and protect your bearer!'

He and Omnio had linked up and had moved towards Leon's position when the first attack had begun. Their only hope of holding back the growing tide of aliens was

a bottleneck up ahead, where the twisted plascrete tunnels converged into a single room.

The room itself was barely fifteen metres wide, the walls heavily pitted and cracked. It had been some kind of pumping station in a past age. Broken pipes jutted from the angle of wall and ceiling. Globulous strings of thick fluid hung from their shattered ends and occasionally dripped into oily puddles at the base of the walls. The remnants of ancient valves and wheels seized with rust covered the ceiling.

Omnio positioned himself facing the open door, opposite the predicted approach of the enemy, storm bolter loaded and aimed. Gideon waited to one side of his squad-brother, ready to step forward and attack should any creature get past Omnio's fire.

It was not long before the first genestealer appeared, dropping down from a shattered duct in the ceiling of the corridor ahead. It was up and running in a moment, spring-jointed legs pumping fast as it sprinted towards the Terminators. Its claws raked chips of stone from the tiles underfoot. The alien's eyes shone in the dull yellow glow of ancient lightstrips. There was no emotion in that gaze, only the lethal intent of a predator.

'Maybe it isn't as illogical as I first thought,' Omnio said, firing a brief burst down the corridor.

'What's that?' said Gideon.

‘You, carrying that hammer… and shield even… though you’re no longer… in an assault squad,’ explained Omnio, pausing every few words to open fire. ‘In close confines… such as these, the added… potential at close quarters, when… combined with a ranged weapon-armed comrade… provides a tactical advantage… not possible by the standard sergeant’s wargear.’

Gideon snorted.

‘Tactical advantage?’ said the sergeant, raising the large hammer and shield to a guard posture. ‘I carry these weapons to honour my armour.’

‘How so?’ asked Omnio, still firing, his attention fixed on the aliens running and leaping out of the room at the far end of the passageway.

‘When I first transferred to sergeant, I abandoned my trusted friends here for the traditional sword and storm bolter,’ said Gideon. ‘In the next battle, a stray shot from an ork penetrated the sub-thorax pipes and immobilised my left leg. I know when my armour is telling me something. I’ve carried these since.’

‘A wise m—’ Omnio’s reply was cut short as a genestealer launched itself through the door, having scuttled its way along the ceiling of the corridor. With incredible speed, twisting in the air, it landed on Omnio, sword-like claws sending up shards of ceramite from the Terminator’s breastplate. Omnio lurched backwards

under the impact, the artificial muscles of his armour straining but holding firm.

Gideon stepped forwards and brought his thunder hammer down onto the creature's back. The power field around the hammer's head exploded in a blue flash as the blow landed. Spine shattered, carapace cracked, the genestealer flopped to the stone floor like a grounded fish.

Gideon had no time to admire his deadly handiwork. Two more aliens were in the room, claws outstretched, fanged jaws gaping. The first lunged for the sergeant. Gideon brought up his storm shield to ward off its attacks. A flare of energy illuminated the room and the genestealer was hurled into the wall. The other beast ducked beneath the swing of the sergeant's hammer and, with a jarring screech of chitin on metal, punched two sets of its claws into Omnio's leg.

The alien that had been repulsed by Gideon's storm shield sprang forwards again, one arm hanging loosely at its side. Even wounded it was astoundingly fast, dodging Gideon's block with his shield, yet not so skilful that it could avoid the thunder hammer aimed towards it. In one sweep the glowing weapon smashed the creature's head clean off.

Omnio toppled to one side, the reinforced struts inside his leg armour buckling under the pressure of the

genestealer's powerful grip. The Terminator grabbed an arm in his power fist and yanked it from the socket, yellow ichor spraying across his armour. Fist shimmering with energy, Omnio dug his fingers point first into the genestealer's neck, snapping vertebrae. As the genestealer twitched in its death throes, Omnio tried to prise off the creature's corpse but only succeeded in mashing it into small lumps with his power fist. The genestealer's claws had jammed the knee joint in his leg. To all intents and purposes, the Terminator was now immobilised.

'Combat potential negated,' Omnio announced disconsolately. 'I need a Techmarine.'

Gideon stepped protectively between his fallen battle-brother and the doorway, thunder hammer ready. On his sensorium, more blips raced towards the room.

00.09.56

A GENESTEALER DUCKED into a side corridor before Lorenzo could open fire. The one behind it was not so fortunate and the sergeant blew it to pieces with a burst from his storm bolter. Checking his sensorium, Lorenzo noted that their foe was approaching more cautiously than before. They gathered in small groups out of sight and then launched themselves at the Terminators in short waves. Though it showed more intelligence than the suicidal

charges the genestealers had been employing in the first phase of the battle, the tactic was still crude and easily countered.

Lorenzo suppressed a moment of unease as he recalled the massed attacks of the genestealers during his last encounter with them. On that occasion they had gathered in their hundreds, clawing and leaping over their fallen to overwhelm the Blood Angels with sheer weight of numbers. So far only a small fraction of the foe was awake, but Lorenzo knew that as more rose from their hibernation the attacks would get deadlier.

Despite the sergeant's concerns, none of the aliens had yet broken through the cordon of Squad Lorenzo, though the Terminators were expending a considerable amount of ammunition to defend their positions. The Techmarines had resupplied the squad once already, but Zael had reported his heavy flamer tank was half-full and the rest of the squad each had only a few magazines remaining.

The next supply run was due in three minutes. Lorenzo knew other squads were being pressed harder elsewhere along the line and resisted the urge to request that their own re-equip be brought forward.

'Squad Lorenzo, this is command.' Captain Raphael's voice was calm and measured, though Lorenzo could guess at the many decisions straining his attention.

‘C.A.T. signal is erratic, information upload incomplete. I need you to physically locate the unit and retrieve for data analysis. Squad Gideon will join from omega grid, co-ordinate the search with Sergeant Gideon.’

‘Affirmative, brother-captain,’ Lorenzo responded. ‘Last known C.A.T. position?’

‘Somewhere in theta grid, directly ahead of your location,’ the captain told him. ‘Transmitting frequency signature to sensorium net.’

The display superimposed onto Lorenzo’s vision flickered as the update came through. A haze of flashing red appeared over the map layout some fifty metres from where he was. Somewhere in the sprawl of corridors ahead, the Cyber-Altered Task unit was wandering in circles. Having been teleported into the heart of the space hulk for deep scans and reconnaissance, the automated unit was evidently malfunctioning or damaged. The data it had collected was essential to Captain Raphael and the C.A.T. needed to be recovered quickly.

‘Frequency locked in, brother-captain,’ Lorenzo told his commander.

‘Acknowledged,’ came the captain’s static-clouded reply. ‘We pursue our own, sublime goal. We seek vindication.’

‘In the name of the Angel and for the honour of Baal,’ Lorenzo responded and the link fell silent. He switched to squad broadcast. ‘Advance pattern majestic. Gideon and

his squad approaching from ahead, so watch your fire.'

'We'll get there first,' Valencio said as he moved to the head of the squad. 'The honour shall be ours.'

The newest member of Squad Lorenzo lumbered onto a contorted walkway that crossed over a dormant generator plant. Nothing stirred in the blackness below and the sensorium displayed no contacts within twenty metres. Not trusting the corroded metal to take the weight of more than one Terminator, Lorenzo waited until Valencio was on the steps at the other side of the chamber before waving Zael forwards. One by one they crossed the artificial ravine while Valencio provided covering fire from the room beyond.

As he descended the steps, Lorenzo could see Valencio silhouetted by the muzzle flare of his storm bolter, his shadow cast sharply across the debris-littered floor with each burst. Entering the room beyond the stairway, Lorenzo added his fire to that of Valencio, gunning down a handful of genestealers as they hurtled into the chamber. For a moment all was din and confusion, brought to an abrupt end by a sheet of fire from Zael's heavy flamer. Unearthly screeches sounded the genestealers' demise, the first sound he had heard them utter. The sudden quiet that descended was broken only by the sound of flames, the pings and cracks of cooling metal and the whistle of superheated blood steaming from the aliens' corpses.

The next passageway was clear of foes and Valencio advanced quickly, reaching a T-junction at its end while the rest of the squad filed into the room, burnt carcasses crunching underfoot. Now closer to the signal of the C.A.T., Lorenzo could see that the automaton was somewhere in the network of tunnels less than thirty metres ahead. The signal was moving erratically, its transmission reflected and echoed by the distorted walls of the hulk.

'Valencio, Deino, sweep right,' the sergeant ordered. 'Zael and Goriel, follow my lead.'

Thus split, the squad made their way into the rat's nest of collapsed corridors, stairwells, rooms and ducts. Their suit lamps blazing, they cast their sharp eyes into broken vents and under fallen workstations, seeking the task unit. Quickly and methodically, the squad homed in on their objective, their search occasionally punctuated by a burst of storm bolter fire as a lone genestealer sprang from the shadows.

'C.A.T. located,' announced Goriel. Lorenzo fixed on his battle-brother's identification contact. He shouldered his way through tangles of twisted metal and clambered over rubble heaps to forge a way to the recon device. The sergeant found Goriel and Zael in a domed hall at the centre of three radiating corridors. Goriel held the C.A.T. in his deactivated power fist.

The Cyber-Altered Task unit was a tracked automaton about half a metre in length, studded with sensor spurs and data-aerials. Jointed metallic limbs splayed from its central hull and wiggled forlornly in Goriel's grasp. At the end of a prehensile cable, a gilded skull containing the C.A.T.'s metriculator waggled left and right as it continued its scans. Its red eyes glowed and dimmed as it processed the data while its tracks whirred back and forth as the C.A.T. struggled to get free.

'Salutations, brethren,' said Valencio, entering from the opposite side of the hall. 'It seems Goriel has found a new friend.'

'Take it,' Goriel said, thrusting the C.A.T. towards Valencio. 'You seem the motherly type.'

The glow around Valencio's chainfist vanished as he cut off the power supply. Delicately, he took the shuddering cyber-scout from Goriel and held it up so that its scanner lenses were pointed towards his face.

'Don't fret, little friend,' Valencio said in a hushed voice, a hint of a laugh in his tone. 'Brother Goriel is just being sour. I'll look after you.'

Lorenzo was about to admonish the pair for the light-hearted behaviour when a squad-to-squad transmission cut across the comm.

'Lorenzo, this is Gideon,' a voice crackled in the sergeant's ear. 'Can you hear me?'

‘I can,’ Lorenzo replied. ‘And most welcome it is.’

‘Don’t thank me just yet,’ Gideon said. ‘We are approaching your position, one hundred and fifty metres on your left flank. There is a large concentration of sensorium contacts in grid medusa, just out of your range, growing more active. They’ll be on you before we arrive.’

‘Thank you for the warning, Gideon,’ said Lorenzo. He consulted the sensorium map. ‘Rendezvous at theta-four and we’ll return to the perimeter in force.’

‘Affirmative, Lorenzo,’ said Gideon. ‘May the Angel guide your fury and the Emperor guard your backs.’

‘Praise Sanguinius,’ Lorenzo intoned. ‘Deino and Zael, cleanse towards theta-four. We will escort the C.A.T.. Confirm?’

The two Terminators signalled back their compliance, their signature blips moving away on the sensorium. Lorenzo led the other group, the rear guarded by Goriel, with Valencio sandwiched protectively between. They had advanced only a dozen metres when the leading edge of the genestealer contacts reported by Gideon showed on the sensorium. There were at least twenty of the aliens, and more appeared on the scanner over the next few seconds.

‘Contact!’ Deino shouted over the comm. A moment later gunfire echoed dully around the labyrinth of

corridors, the sound distant and distorted.

The way ahead was tortuous, with blast doors sealing off many routes and fallen ceilings blocking others. Rooms that showed up as empty on the sensorium scan were filled with impassable debris and walkways were bent and broken. On the scanner, Zael and Deino were no more than fifteen metres away, but in the wreckage of the hulk's depths Lorenzo could see no sign of them, or any way to move further forward.

'Clear a path,' Lorenzo told Valencio as the sergeant fell in behind Goriel.

'As the Angel, I shall lead the way,' laughed Valencio. He hooked his storm bolter to his belt and took the C.A.T. in his right hand. His left hand now free, he powered up his chainfist.

Chainfist blades whirring and blazing, Valencio punched his way through a plascrete wall, showering himself with dust and shards. He stepped into the darkness beyond, his further progress accompanied by the screech of tortured metal and the thud of exploding plascrete slabs.

Goriel followed next, Lorenzo turning to stand sentry at the makeshift passage battered through the debris by Valencio. More than a dozen genestealers were closing fast, coming up from the hallway where the squad had just been. Glancing left, right and above, Lorenzo realised the corridor was broken in many places and

allowed far too many access points to defend with any confidence. Stepping backwards, storm bolter held ready to fire, the sergeant followed Valencio and Goriel along the tangled pathway.

A hideous purple face appeared at the ragged entrance a few seconds after Lorenzo had begun his withdrawal. The sergeant opened fire immediately, two rounds scattering the genestealer's brains and skull into the darkness. Another alien appeared and Lorenzo gunned it down, taking another step backwards. With agonising slowness, the sergeant backed along the cleared path, unleashing a salvo of fire every couple of seconds as more and more genestealers poured into the breach after him. Between the roars of his storm bolter, Lorenzo caught other bursts of fire echoing from behind him. A glance at the sensorium showed that Gideon's squad was not far behind. Through a gap in the tangled girders and joists, the sergeant saw licks of fire: Zael's flamer. Heartened, Lorenzo emptied the magazine on his storm bolter, gunning down five aliens in the long salvo, and then turned and broke into a run.

The sergeant didn't need to check his sensorium to know that the genestealers were barely ten metres behind him; his sharp ears and armour's auto-senses picked up the scratching of claws and sharp hisses at his back.

Lorenzo thundered into a wide, low room filled with ruined databank consoles. Just as he broke into the dim

green light something smashed into the back of his armour. Pitching forward, his armour's fibre bundles and motors shrieked in their fight to keep him balanced, but lost. He stumbled to one knee, desperately trying to reach behind him with his power sword. A clawed hand appeared in his vision and then something inhumanly strong smashed into the back of the sergeant's helm, stunning him.

00.11.67

Deino heard rather than saw Sergeant Lorenzo, a cacophonic clattering of armour and shattering tiles. His blood thundering in his ears, time seemed to slow down for Deino. Turning left towards the sound, the Terminator raised his storm bolter to shoulder height and flicked the single-fire switch. Lorenzo was down on one knee, a genestealer perched on his back, its foot claws gripping the exhaust vents of the sergeant's armour, both pairs of foreclaws seizing his helm, trying to twist off his head.

The aiming reticule in Deino's right eye danced around the genestealer as the alien swayed backwards and forwards, trying to lever Lorenzo's head from his shoulders. Deino didn't wait for the lock-on. His eyes were more accurate than any metriculator. He took a deep breath and fired.

'Blessed be the sure of shot for they shall bring

vengeance,' Deino whispered as the bolt roared from the muzzle, its rocket punching it forward. A moment later the bolt penetrated the genestealers left eye and the mass-reactive warhead detonated, splitting apart the creature's head. Lorenzo tried to right himself and another alien appeared from the hole smashed through the wall by Valencio. Deino fired again.

'Praise to the Angel for he shall guide my aim,' he whispered while the bolt pierced the creature's chest and then exploded in a shower of chitin and ribs. Four more genestealers leapt through the gap and each was felled in turn by a round from Deino's weapon, the shots accompanied by a litany of accuracy spilling from the Space Marine's lips.

A Terminator in the heraldry of Gideon's squad loomed over Lorenzo, an assault cannon connected to his right arm by heavy bolts and makeshift struts. A light-suppressing filter materialised over Deino's vision as Leon opened fire, saving the Terminator's eyes from the blinding muzzle flare.

'Anyone can hit the target with a thousand shots a minute,' Deino said over the inter-squad comm. He brought down his storm bolter and walked towards Lorenzo as other members of Squad Gideon converged from different directions. 'Your weapon lacks elegance.'

'Perhaps, my brother,' Leon replied. 'However, it would

take forever to shoot all of them one at a time.'

Deino conceded the point without comment and turned around to cover the entranceway he'd just come through. Something moved across the beams of his suit lamps and Deino fired, the shot blowing an arm from the genestealer. The second round shattered its hip, ripping its leg from its body.

'If you can't enjoy the artistry of war, then what's the point of fighting?' Deino asked nobody in particular.

00.12.13

'Allow me,' said Gideon, appearing at Lorenzo's right, his shield arm extended.

Lorenzo grabbed the proffered limb and allowed himself to be helped to his feet. The two sergeants raised their fists in salute to each other.

Gideon's squad were showing signs of hard fighting. Each warrior's armour had scars of battle - cracked plates, gouged ceramite and exposed sublayer cables and pipes - rapidly repaired by the Techmarines back at the impact zone. Gideon's helm had an impressive rent across the mouth grille and the entire right side of Leon's armour was pitted with shards of metal and recently applied welding where his destroyed assault cannon had been replaced. All were stained by alien gore and a few had bloodstains from their own wounds.

Lorenzo realised his own squad's appearance was now less than satisfactory. The joints in his armour's left arm were stiff and his helm actuators had broken when the genestealer had tried to twist off his head. He could only look straight ahead. Peeling paint sloughed from charred ceramite on Zael's armour, evidence of a desperate close-range shot from his heavy flamer. Valencio was missing most of his left shoulder pad and the emblem on his chestplate was scored with three ragged claw marks. Only Deino appeared unmarked; apparently no genestealer had yet avoided his cool marksmanship.

'Still intact,' said Valencio, holding up the C.A.T., which dejectedly waved its appendages.

'Good,' said Lorenzo. He switched the comms to the command frequency. 'Brother-captain, this is Lorenzo. The unit has been secured and is still functional.'

There was a hiss of static before Captain Raphael replied.

'The Angel's blessing upon you,' he said. 'We need the data of the deeper levels to devise the next phase. Without it I have no recourse but bombardment. Return the unit to the Techmarines in grid alpha and re-arm.'

'Acknowledged,' said Lorenzo. He turned to Gideon and activated the inter-squad frequency. 'Would you like to go front or back?'

'We'll lead the push back to the perimeter,' said Gideon.

‘Watch our backs.’

‘Affirmative,’ said Lorenzo.

Lorenzo organised his warrior’s dispositions as Gideon and his men headed off. The two squads plunged into the maze of corridors. Storm bolter fire and the deadly peal of Leon’s assault cannon heralded their progress through the twist of metal and plascrete. More and more genestealers were arriving from their hibernation nest somewhere deep inside the hulk, and the sensorium swarmed with contact blips.

Metre by hard-fought metre Squads Gideon and Lorenzo battled through the aliens, reaping a bloody harvest of vengeance with their weapons. Gideon’s hammer and Lorenzo’s power sword blazed like beacons in the dark artificial caverns and long tunnels. The flare of muzzle flash and the ruddy glow of flames marked the Blood Angels’ passing.

00.12.83

In the ruins of a derelict merchantman’s hold, clothed in the darkness of the void, something stirred. It surfaced slowly from anabiosis, frozen limbs and organs gradually warming, alien synapses starting to spark.

All was still instinct and impressions, with no true intelligence yet. Its brood were rousing around it, their minds touching and connecting. Images flickered through

its wakening subconscious. Large creatures of bright red impenetrable skin killed its progeny with fire and blade. Even as more of its offspring surfaced to consciousness and joined the brood mind, others disappeared.

One impulse rose above all others, an evolutionary imperative that obscured all other consideration. It spread from the creature, rippling out through the brood, instilling them with a single directive.

Destroy.

00.13.00

Within the cordon of the breach head, the noses of boarding torpedoes jutted from the punctured wall like the petals of gigantic metal flowers. Protected by a ring of Terminators fighting the genestealers only a few hundred metres distant, Techmarines and their serfs laboured constantly to keep the squads armed and battle-ready.

Lorenzo was being attended by Brother Auletio, one of the Techmarines. The spider-like arms of Auletio's servo harness backpack worked deftly with saws, drills and welders, repairing the damage to the radiator vents on Lorenzo's back. Sparks cascaded to the oil-stained decking, falling amongst piles of bolts and coils of cable and other detritus of repair.

Valencio approached, a robed orderly fussing around

him with a paint gun, respraying the Terminator's armour. He had removed his helmet - something Lorenzo had tried to do but failed - and his eyes were bright with pride.

'Our brothers are deciphering the C.A.T. data now,' Valencio said. 'They seem very pleased.'

'As well they should,' said Lorenzo. 'We need all the information we can gather if we are to be victorious.'

'Our brothers fight bravely and do the Chapter honour,' said Valencio. 'I hope that I have acquitted myself with equal glory.'

Lorenzo did not reply immediately, pondering whether to indulge Valencio's need for validation. He relented, remembering how eager he had been when he had joined the First Company. To be acknowledged as a veteran was a tribute that should not be taken lightly. And, in truth, Valencio deserved praise.

'You fought bravely and with skill.'

'My thanks for your words,' said Valencio with a deferential nod of the head. 'I wish only to serve the memories of those that came before us.'

Dark thoughts swirled into Lorenzo's mind, recollections of the nine hundred and fifty who had been lost. He pushed the memories back into the depths of his mind, suppressing them as he had done for six and a half centuries.

‘We will rejoin the battle shortly,’ the sergeant said. ‘Make sure the others are ready.’

Valencio nodded and moved away, leaving Lorenzo to his thoughts.

‘That is the best that I can do,’ said Auletio, the servo-arms folding into place behind him. ‘There’s nothing I can do about the helm. It is jammed solid and I do not have the tools needed to release it.’

‘Your efforts do you credit,’ Lorenzo said reflexively. He had all but forgotten the Techmarine’s presence. The sergeant lifted his arms while a pair of serfs attached chunky storm bolter magazines to his belt. ‘Others are in more need of your attentions.’

‘May the strength of the Angel fill your spirit,’ said Auletio before turning away, his orderlies trailing after him like chicks after their mother.

A hand slapped down on Lorenzo’s right shoulder and the sergeant turned to find Zael standing beside him. The rest of the squad were behind Zael, helmets locked in place, damage patched, weapons ready.

‘It is time to admonish our foes once more,’ said Zael.

‘Yes, I feel the need to administer the justice of the Emperor,’ growled Lorenzo. He drew his power sword and activated its glittering blade. ‘Let us be the blade of the Angel’s judgement!’

‘Praise the Angel,’ the others chorused, falling in behind

Lorenzo as he stalked towards the front line.

Soon the clatter and chatter of the breach head was behind them. The echoing retorts of storm bolters and rebounding roars of assault cannons replaced the whirr of drills and crack of welders. In the mess of interlacing corridors, sub-vents, access ways and doors it was easier to navigate by the readings of the sensorium than by what could be seen or heard. Lorenzo identified the area his squad had been ordered to secure and signalled ahead to Sergeant Adion that they were approaching.

In turn, each of Lorenzo's squad replaced one of Adion's men, taking positions overlooking a wide causeway that had once been the main dorsal corridor of a ship. They did so in the midst of combat, taking up the relentless battle against the swarms of genestealers hurling themselves at the cordon.

'Keep an eye on the bulkheads to the right,' warned Adion as Lorenzo joined him. The sergeant loosed off a quick burst of fire at a genestealer clambering from a sub-duct before pointing to a wall some thirty metres away, heavily dented from the other side. 'They've tried to break through three times already and we used the flamer to burn them out. I can't say how much longer those bulkheads will hold.'

'Affirmative,' said Lorenzo, adding his own fire to that of Adion. Lorenzo checked that his warriors were in

position and gave Adion a reassuring thump on the arm with the hilt of his sword. ‘The area is secure, you can break off now. The Chapter shall honour your deeds.’

‘The Angel stands watch,’ Adion said in reply before backing away down the corridor, firing a parting salvo at the enemy.

00.14.52

Lorenzo divided his attention between firing his weapon, monitoring the enemy’s movements on the sensorium and listening to the mission updates on the comm. The analysis of the C.A.T. data was complete and Captain Raphael had outlined the situation.

The genestealers, more than forty thousand of them, were in a dormant state, hidden in a cluster roughly one kilometre from the landing zone. The ship in which they had made their lair seemed relatively intact, sealed from the vacuum and with minimal life support functions still operating. The same systems that maintained a modicum of temperature and atmosphere for the genestealers to survive could also prove to be their death. It was the captain’s intent to use the air circulation system to poison the aliens as they hibernated. More Techmarines had arrived from the strike cruiser with tanks of lethal gas. Small scale tests were being conducted at another point on the perimeter to determine the concentration of toxin

required to kill the genestealers.

'If they're dormant, why don't we go in and slaughter them before they wake up?' asked Zael. 'One big push could wipe them out. These delays give the enemy more time to rise and gather their numbers.'

'That's what we thought last time,' Lorenzo replied quietly. 'At first it was just as you say; we slaughtered hundreds of them. Our attack caused some change, a shift in their behaviour. Each one that fell seemed to trigger the waking of ten more. They responded quickly, thousands of them emerging from their stasis within seconds. They surrounded us in minutes.'

Lorenzo did not have to continue. All present knew the rest of the tale. A shameful day in the Blood Angels' otherwise glorious history.

'Today the debt from that black day will be repaid,' said Zael. 'We will destroy this loathsome foe and restore our pride.'

'The Angel wills it,' said Valencio. 'Praise Lord Sanguinius!'

They fought on without further word for some time, each Terminator concentrating his efforts on killing the enemy. Gunfire reverberated constantly along the hallway and the corpses piled upon the concourse now numbered several hundred.

Then, as if some unseen hand had closed a door or shut

off a tap, the attacks suddenly stopped. The silence that descended was more unnerving than the riotous clamour of battle, and Lorenzo steadied himself with thoughts of his primarch and the Chapter.

'Synchronise your sensorium data with Omnio,' Gideon's voice drifted over the comm. 'He has noticed something important.'

Lorenzo adjusted his sensorium to receive data over the inter-squad comm. This had the effect of increasing its range, at the expense of clarity. There were two patches of green fog - clusters of indistinct contacts. Both were growing: one a hundred and fifty metres ahead, the other some seventy metres to the right flank.

'There has been a pattern in the attacks,' Omnio explained. 'They have been working systematically along the perimeter, seeking weak points. I believe they were attacking to judge our firepower and numbers, learning from our tactics and responses.'

'And now?' asked Lorenzo.

'That sounds very sophisticated,' Deino said, doubt in his voice.

'My observations are accurate,' said Omnio. 'The next attack will be from two directions simultaneously at the point between our curtains of fire.'

Flashing red icons highlighted a route through the corridors that would cut between the two squads with the

minimum of exposure to the guns of the Terminators. The second attack would encircle Gideon and his men.

‘We have to close the gap,’ said Gideon. ‘We cannot allow them to break through.’

‘That will leave you vulnerable on your right,’ Lorenzo pointed out, studying the schematic.

‘Yes,’ said Gideon.

‘Very well,’ said Lorenzo. ‘Deino and Zael, move to the right and close off that path. Valencio, take Deino’s place on point.’

Gideon was reorganising his squad’s dispositions as well. The attack came before they were fully in position. Dozens of genestealers raced forward, the smudges of green splitting into separate contacts on the sensorium as the range closed. Zael used his flamer to close off a side-tunnel. Deino joined his fire with that of Scipio from Gideon’s squad, creating a crossfire in one of the rooms the genestealers now had to pass through. Zael moved forward with the cleansing fire of his weapon, like shutting a lid on a box.

Gideon’s squad was hard-pressed on the right, the aliens coming within only a few metres before revealing themselves. The sergeant’s icon was at the forefront of the battle and Lorenzo could imagine Gideon standing firm with storm shield and thunder hammer, protecting his men. Lorenzo fought the urge to move across and aid

his battle-brother. The line had to be held. He whispered a benediction to the Angel on behalf of Gideon and his men, and turned his attention back to the dark corridor ahead.

00.13.88

The genestealer attack was in full force. Multiple swarms of the creatures came at the Terminators from different directions, splitting them, dividing their attentions. From the reports over the comm Gideon knew that Space Marine casualties were mounting.

'Defensive posture is weakening,' announced Captain Raphael. 'Techmarine analysis of toxin effect complete. Now we attack. All squads converge on primary hibernation site for final extermination. The scene of our reprisal is set. We are the avengers. Nemesis.'

'Finally,' growled Leon. He unleashed a furious burst of fire from his assault cannon, clearing a junction ahead and stomped forwards eagerly.

'Purge the xenos!' said Gideon, moving up behind Leon. 'Blood Angels, the time of our retribution is nigh.'

'Breach head infiltrated!' Captain Raphael warned over the command channel. 'Brothers Auletio and Cannavaro are compromised. Gideon and Lorenzo, fix on their beacon signals. Now transmitting their suit frequencies. Insufficient time for rescue. Establish viability of missing

brethren. Destroy if necessary. Protect our gene-seed.'

'Affirmative,' said Gideon, feeling suddenly deflated. The signal came through on his sensorium - two red blips pulsed roughly three hundred metres away. 'Signal received. Moving out.'

'Prayers of vengeance steel our souls,' said Raphael and then he was gone.

'Lorenzo, take the signal at grid eighteen-kappa,' said Gideon. 'We shall deal with the signal at twenty-kappa.'

'Affirmative, moving alongside your advance,' replied Lorenzo.

Leon was at a cross-junction, firing to the left. Gideon moved behind him and took up a defensive stance to the right. As Scipio pressed on between them, a line of genestealers emerged up a ramp in front of the sergeant.

'Suffer the wrath of the Blood Angels!' he bellowed, stepping forward to meet their charge.

Swinging his hammer, he smashed aside the first of the genestealers, its shattered body crashing into the metal wall of the narrow corridor. A second alien leapt towards Gideon and he brought up his shield. Lightning arced along the creature's outstretched claws as it struck, sending the creature into a spasm. Gideon barely brought his shield around to ward away another genestealer attacking from his right. Shifting his bulky armour in the tight space, Gideon brought his hammer down onto the

head of the stunned creature. Another was on him in moments, slashing at his abdomen, its diamond-hard claws raking strips of metal and splinters of ceramite.

Gideon used the edge of his shield as a weapon, bringing it down onto the ridged nodules of chitin protecting the creature's neck. There was a snap and the genestealer wilted to the floor. A flurry of detonations ahead cut apart two more genestealers and Omnio came into view from a side passage, his storm bolter blazing.

'Flank secured,' Omnio announced, turning his weapon towards the ramp and unleashing another salvo.

Gideon slewed his armour one hundred and eighty degrees and marched back to the junction, before turning right and following Scipio's path. Leon advanced along a parallel course, the intermittent roar of his assault cannon echoing from ahead of Gideon. As usual, Noctis brought up the rear. Quiet and dependable, Noctis fired off bursts from his storm bolter at the genestealers circling behind the squad, retreating a few steps when the opportunity allowed. Gideon slowed his own progress, allowing Noctis to catch up. No one would be left isolated this time.

A yellow glare ahead announced the arrival of Brother Zael from Squad Lorenzo. Flames flickered along the tunnel, searing through a cluster of genestealers that had leapt from an overhead gantry to land behind Scipio. The

aliens writhed in the flames for a second or two and then collapsed into smouldering heaps as the inferno dissipated. Patches of burning promethium scarred the walls and floor. Gideon ignored them and pushed through the dying fires to keep pace with Scipio who was now twenty metres ahead.

'Room, thirty metres to the right,' said Gideon. 'Noctis, cover the approach.'

'Understood,' replied Noctis as he peeled away from the main corridor.

00.14.62

The sensorium showed a steady stream of genestealers approaching the two squads from ahead and behind. Noctis raised a hand in greeting as he saw Zael pass a junction in front of him.

'They'll no sooner pass me than the Gates of Varl,' said Zael as he disappeared into the gloom.

Noctis said nothing. The corridor ahead was blocked by several doors, like airlocks. Blips of the sensorium showed that genestealers were lurking close by. Noctis opened fire on the closest door, blasting it into pieces. Three genestealers turned towards the Terminator, surprised. He fired calmly, gunning down all three in two short bursts. His heavy footfalls reverberating along the corridor, Noctis advanced resolutely, firing at the next

door. Another genestealer was revealed by the door's demise and it suffered the same fate as the others, its blood spattering across a riveted bulkhead.

Two more doors later and Noctis finally reached the room to which he had been assigned. It was a loading bay of some kind, the mangled remnants of cranes and lifters angled madly in the shadows above. Huge blast doors had been burst inwards by the impact of another vessel at some immeasurably distant time in the past and an outcrop of a crenulated balcony punctured the doorway. Genestealers leapt over the parapet to the floor of the bay, landing sure-footedly and springing towards Noctis without hesitation.

Noctis fired dispassionately, regarding the aliens sprinting towards him as nothing more than moving targets. He paced his fire, unleashing rounds in sensible double-bursts so as not to jam the mechanism of the storm bolter. When he was down to his last few rounds, he turned his fire upon the balcony, gunning down the genestealers perched on the wall. Having given himself a couple of seconds' grace with this act, he ejected the empty magazine and slammed in another.

The Terminator locked the stabilising bars in the knees of his armour and settled into a solid firing posture. He began to hum quietly as he fired; the *Hymn of the Angel Resurgent*. He kept the beat with the crack of bolt rounds. He wasn't going anywhere for a while.

00.15.03

Some form of automatic response had sealed all of the doors in this part of the ship. Perhaps the hull had been breached and integrity had been lost, or maybe the ship had come under attack. Whatever the cause, the sealed doors were proving problematic. Line of sight was only a few metres in each direction and Lorenzo was forced to take the lead, his power sword a surer defence than his squad's power fists against the genestealer ambushes. Rents in his armour and caked gore bore testament to the fury of those encounters.

The pulsing icon of Brother Auletio's signal was a few metres ahead. It was surrounded by enemy contact signals. Lorenzo levelled his storm bolter at the door and fired, its rusting frame exploding under the fusillade. The rapid-fire buzz of Leon's assault cannon sounded somewhere to the right, close to Cannavaro's ident-signal.

Six genestealers poured from the room. The first was thrown back by Lorenzo's opening salvo, the alien behind deftly leaping over its tattered corpse. Lorenzo pulled the trigger to let loose another barrage of destruction but only a single bolt fired before his weapon jammed. The shell took the genestealer high in the chest, knocking it sideways. It staggered to its feet, fanged maw open.

‘I am the blade of Sanguinius!’ Lorenzo cried, charging forwards.

His power sword cleaved the head of the genestealer from its body. Another alien took its place, claws smashing into Lorenzo’s left shoulder as it pounced. The sergeant thrust upwards, lancing his sword through the creature’s exposed throat. The genestealer twisted as it fell, dragging Lorenzo’s arm to one side, the power sword trapped between its vertebrae.

‘Clear for fire!’ shouted Deino. Lorenzo ripped free his sword and hurled himself backwards into a narrow side-corridor, smashing against the wall. Bolts screamed past where the sergeant had been a moment before and droplets of thick blood splattered the passageway.

‘Move ahead and secure,’ ordered Lorenzo as he righted himself.

Deino advanced past and Lorenzo fell in behind. Upon entering the room at the end of the passageway, Deino stopped suddenly.

‘Emperor’s mercy,’ the normally cool Terminator muttered.

Lorenzo moved into the room, stepping past Deino. Scraps of red armour littered the chamber and a severed servo arm twitched in one corner, gouging a furrow into the tiles of the floor. Auletio sat with his back propped against the wall. His armour had been stripped away in

many places and blood trickled from a gash across his face.

It was not the injuries to the Techmarine that had caused Deino such dismay; it was the rest of his appearance. Lorenzo could see that the Techmarine's flesh had a bluish tint to it. Auletio's skin was pocked with lesions and oddly shaped protuberances swelled underneath his pale skin. His veins were like thick cords across his arms and neck and his face was distorted. His eyes bulged and ridges were breaking through the skin of his brow. A lone fang punctured his upper lip, curving up towards his nose.

There was intelligence in Auletio's eyes, and terror. It was something Lorenzo had never seen in the eyes of another Space Marine. Auletio weakly raised an arm and groaned. Yellowish ichor oozed from his wounds, mixed with his thick blood.

'Target one located,' Lorenzo broadcast. 'Viability negative.'

'Same here,' replied Gideon from the location of the other downed Techmarine, his voice choked, his usual attention to comm protocol forgotten.

'Aggressive genetic mutation,' Omnio told them. His voice was measured and quiet. 'The genestealer's usual breeding function is to use an ovipositor to implant its seed within a victim, and this is passed on to the

implantee's progeny. Space Marines do not follow the normal reproductive cycle. I would theorise that the implanted genetic material is reacting unpredictably with the Astartes modifications. Projection: damage is permanent and irreversible. Suggest immediate destruction to avoid danger of contamination.'

'Zael, I need you up here, now!' Lorenzo bellowed, his anger fuelled by distaste. Genestealers were still attacking from several directions and Lorenzo forced himself to focus on the mission. 'Valencio, stand guard at rear station. Deino, push through and link up with Gideon.'

'Affirmative,' replied Deino, moving out of the room through another doorway.

'I shall protect,' said Valencio. The thump of his footfalls receded into the corridors.

'En route,' Zael announced.

Lorenzo turned his eyes away from Auletio's and span on the spot to stand over watch on the corridor Zael would be using. It made no difference; the Techmarine's plaintive stare still hovered in the sergeant's mind. Lorenzo remembered that his gun was still jammed and worked to clear the mechanism, dragging his thoughts back to the ongoing combat. A pair of genestealers appeared at the far end of the corridor as Lorenzo ejected the storm bolter's magazine. The sergeant smacked home a fresh clip of shells and opened fire, glad of the release.

It had been shame of the Blood Angels' past defeat that had driven on Lorenzo. Now a cold hatred filled him, far sharper and more motivating than any feeling of historical guilt. More genestealers boiled up from the deck below. Lorenzo fired long bursts from his storm bolter as the genestealers converged on the room, the anger welling up inside him, threatening to break through. Lorenzo resisted the urge to charge forwards and administer revenge with his power sword, though every cell of his body screamed at him to let go of his discipline and indulge the bloodthirst that lurked beneath the skin of every Blood Angel.

A wave of incinerating fury from behind the knot of genestealers announced Zael's arrival and Lorenzo barely managed to check his fire. The sergeant stepped out of the room and into the side passage in which he had sheltered before, allowing Zael to pass.

'Cleanse and burn,' Lorenzo said, not looking back into the room, not wishing to see its awful contents again. He stood guard behind Zael as the Terminator reached the door.

'Cleanse and burn!' roared Zael and his flamer poured purifying fire into the chamber, reducing Auletio's remains to a charred heap within seconds. 'Go to the Angel and be proud of your sacrifice, Brother Auletio. You will be received with glory and forgiveness.'

The drawn-out rattle of an assault cannon from the other side of the deck followed shortly after.

‘Objective terminated,’ Gideon grimly announced on the comm.

‘Objective terminated,’ replied Lorenzo, his voice quivering with rage. ‘Now, let us join the attack.’

00.15.55

At the heart of the space hulk, the creature that had newly surfaced to sentience flexed sinews and muscles that had been immobile for centuries. As strength returned to its body, so too did the numbers of the brood swell. More and more of its progeny awoke, spurred into consciousness by the imperative of the brood mind. It felt their presence and opened its eyes, recognising itself for the first time, understanding its purpose: Broodlord. In the gloom, thousands of eyes glittered in the light from the false stars far above. The prey had been goaded into action and came closer. Hundreds of the brood perished as the red-skinned hunters advanced. It did not matter. They existed to die for the life of their brood.

Not in this place would it lurk. The others of its kind needed space to awaken; its brood-presence suppressed their stirring minds. Unfolding powerful limbs, stretching thawing sinews, the Broodlord raised itself to its feet, towering above its progeny. Old recollections of dens and

lairs, tunnels and pathways flickered into its memory. These were its hunting grounds, it knew their tangled web in every detail. Still stiff from its anabiosis, the creature stalked slowly across the chamber, its brood parting before it. Craning its neck to loosen tight fibres, extending joints long frozen by stasis, it compelled the brood to follow. It ducked into a hole rent into the wall and dropped to the ground below, its claws ringing on the metal deck. Ahead lay the warren of tunnels where it would strike. In the dark, the brood would wait. Their time was coming soon.

00.18.29

There was little chatter between the members of Squads Lorenzo and Gideon, the veteran warriors disturbed by what had become of the captured Techmarines. Only the occasional muttered devotional broke the comm silence as the two sergeants led their men back through the space hulk towards the main Blood Angels force.

'Lorenzo and Gideon, this is Raphael,' the captain's voice broke through the quiet. 'We are locating suitable target points for release of toxins. Expecting high resistance. We have to thin the numbers of the enemy. You have a new mission. I need you to perform a diversionary attack. There is a secondary cluster of inactive life signals near to your position, at grid four-

theta. Destroy the dormant genestealers and trigger a counter-attack from the main group.'

'Affirmative,' said Lorenzo, and Gideon gave a similar acknowledgement.

'Our moment of retribution approaches,' said Raphael.

'In the Angel's eyes we shall know victory,' replied Gideon.

The objective was clear on the sensorium - a mass of low-grade signals roughly two hundred metres away. Lorenzo detailed the squad into an attack formation and took a position in the middle of the group, ready to move forward to bolster the attack or fall back to defend the rear.

'Zael, your heavy flamer will be best suited to the annihilation of the incubating genestealers,' said Lorenzo. 'Conserve as much ammunition as possible en route.'

'Same for you, Leon,' said Gideon. 'Don't get carried away.'

There were grunts of disappointed consent from both Space Marines.

'What about this counter-attack?' asked Omnio. 'Direction? Strength?'

'Strength unknown, but I've been studying the schematic,' said Scipio. 'There's a long concourse that runs the length of the freight wreck where the main concentration in located. It comes up through what seems

to be a series of collapsed elevator shafts. If we can gain the advantage of position we should be able to cut them down as they emerge.'

'Good,' said Lorenzo. 'We don't have time to destroy the dormants and then get to the defensive position. We'll set up a perimeter while you annihilate the target.'

'Understood,' said Gideon. 'We'll reinforce as soon as the mission is completed. Let the Emperor spread our hatred of the foe.'

'In his name we smite the unclean,' replied Lorenzo.

The two squads took diverging courses through the bowels of an old warship's gun batteries. Some distant reactor still trickled out a fitful stream of energy and red lights flickered overhead. Great arched windows of reinforced ferroglass were smashed and distorted, revealing a ruddy view of the tortured innards of another vessel.

While Gideon and his warriors cut into the depths of the frigate's interior, Lorenzo led his squad to the left through immense shadows cast by misshapen, corroded guns. The war engines of an age gone past were encased in crumbling bunkers of masonry, rusted supports jutting from the cracked and flaking rockcrete. Magazines where shells the size of tanks had once been stored were now chambers filled with dunes of oxidised metal and inert grey propellant. The Terminators waded thigh-deep

through these artificial drifts, alert for danger, their attention never wavering from the telltale displays of the sensorium.

Perhaps stirred into life by the nearing presence of the Terminators, a few of the life forms on the scanner surged in activity. Their signals brightened and began to move. They did not come straight at the Space Marines, as they had done in the first minutes of the battle. They coalesced into small groups and then the groups drifted together, gathering their strength.

'Why don't they attack?' asked Valencio.

'Would you?' replied Deino. Valencio thought about this for a moment. 'No,' he conceded. 'But I'm not an animal. I have reason and experience that tells me that attacking piecemeal is doomed to failure. These things have just woken, they cannot know what we are.'

'They learn, right enough,' growled Lorenzo. He shouldered open a door, the old metal screeching and disintegrating under the weight of his armour. Beyond lay a black corridor with doorless archways every few metres. 'Those that survived learnt from the deaths of the others. They changed and adapted quickly. Quicker than we could…'

'Psychic?' said Valencio.

'Very likely,' Lorenzo said, pausing beside the nearest arch and turning his suit to direct its lamps into the

darkness. The cones of light revealed seized gears and broken chains with links larger than the Space Marines. The ceiling was lost in shadows, the ancient mechanism concealed hundreds of metres above. Lorenzo turned back to the main corridor. ‘It does not matter how they do it. We must be ready, whatever their tactics.’

‘Victory is the reward of the vigilant,’ said Zael.

Footfalls muffled, their lights swallowed by the vastness of the gallery, the squad moved on towards the elevator shafts.

00.19.14

‘Just like tar—’ began Leon, but Scipio cut across him.

‘Don’t say it!’ he hissed. ‘You said that about the orks and I lost a leg. Look, there’s movement on the sensorium.’

‘Weapons check,’ ordered Gideon, pressing the stud of his thunder hammer. Its heavy head glowed from within, sheathing the weapon with a blue aura. A test of his storm shield’s power supply had equal success. Around him, the squad calibrated targeter links and checked magazines. Leon brought the rotating barrels of his assault cannon up to full speed and loosed off a short burst of fire at a pile of leaking barrels at the far end of the passageway. They disintegrated into metal splinters and puddles of thick fluid.

‘Combat ready,’ Leon reported, echoed by the other squad members.

The genestealers’ nest was barely twenty metres away, across a narrow aqueduct-like bridge, with raised sides and a channel along its length through which trickled a thick green slime. The sensorium showed a concentration of more than thirty of the creatures just ahead, in a condensed mass of crushed rooms and contorted corridors.

‘Quick, across the bridge,’ said Gideon, waving Scipio forward. It was a sturdy structure, its plascrete piles covered with strange black moss but showing no damage. The gap below was shrouded in darkness and sensorium readings showed the drop to be approximately fifteen metres. Suspension cables creaked and groaned as the squad moved on to the bridge.

‘There’s something wrong with my sensorium link,’ said Omnio. ‘Brother-sergeant, I’m getting false readings.’

‘Mine also,’ said Leon.

Gideon checked his own sensorium and saw registered life forms barely ten metres away. That would put them on the bridge.

‘Overhead!’ shouted Scipio, turning and firing above the heads of the squad. A four-armed body plummeted from the shadows of the bridge’s suspension towers, trailing blood. Gideon looked up as best as his armour would

allow and saw more shapes crawling across the ceiling and dropping onto the support pillars.

‘Spread out, cover each other!’ he shouted, raising his storm shield as a genestealer leapt the gap from pylon to bridge, landing a metre in front of the sergeant.

He smashed the creature from the aqueduct with a backhanded swipe of his hammer just as another genestealer landed behind him. Armour feedback warnings flashed red in his display as it gouged a long furrow though the back of his left leg. Turning awkwardly, he desperately fended off its next attack with his shield. All around, more aliens were dropping onto the bridge. The Terminators struggled to raise their weapons to the required elevation and were forced to resort to shooting their foes at hand-to-hand range and blasting the genestealers from each other’s backs.

More genestealers swarmed along the bridge, cornering the squad from the front, left and right. Scipio smashed a creature to a pulp with a single blow from his power fist. Leon was cursing constantly, unable to use his assault cannon at such close quarters. An ammunition pack on Omnio’s belt exploded, hurling a genestealer out into the void with a blossom of flame, Omnio lurching in the opposite direction. He stumbled against the retaining wall, the impact of his heavy suit crumbling the ancient plascrete.

As he righted himself, a genestealer landed on his shoulders and the wall turned to dust under their weight, sending the two of them sprawling into the shadows. Omnio's lamps span crazily in the darkness, tumbling for a moment and then going dark.

'Omnio!' Gideon bellowed, shoulder charging a genestealer, his momentum lifting the alien off its feet and throwing it over the edge of the bridge.

'Suit compromised, occupant intact,' Omnio replied, his voice calm and clear. 'Fell on some wreckage. Lamps damaged. System support integrity at eighty per cent. Power couplings intermittent to left arm and sensorium. Something has punctured my lower back. Injury not critical. Enemy… er… squashed.'

The sensorium was showing blips all around the squad, so close Gideon could not tell if they were above, below or right in front of him. Scipio had pushed through to the end of the bridge and was standing overwatch. There were a few more genestealers still on the bridge, wreaking havoc.

'Can you see if there's anything else down there with you?' Gideon asked. He moved forwards, sweeping aside a genestealer clinging onto Noctis's storm bolter arm. Noctis gave a nod of thanks and took up position back-to-back with Scipio. His disciplined fire strafed across the bridge supports, the bodies of more genestealers tumbling

into the darkness amidst the bolt detonations.

Crunches of powdering plascrete and groans of grinding metal echoed from below as Omnio pushed himself to his feet. A fitful light announced his location, intermittently strobing across the tangle of fallen pylons and cables from another bridge that had once run alongside the aqueduct.

'Nothing on infrared,' Omnio reported. 'Power unstable. Hard to walk. Going comm-silent to reroute power to sensorium. I'll meet you at the nest.'

'Affirmative, Omnio,' replied Gideon. He glanced around and saw that the bridge was now clear of enemies. 'The Angel watches you in the darkness.'

'You too,' said Omnio and then his link turned to static.

The constant fire from Scipio demonstrated that more and more genestealers were awakening. However, the attack was having an effect. Captain Raphael spoke on the comm.

'Genestealer force breaking away from main concentration,' he announced. 'Good work, Gideon. Lorenzo, prepare for engagement. Estimate two thousand hostiles. No friendly forces in your area. Purge with freedom!'

'Affirmative,' said Lorenzo. 'Our vengeance shall be written in the blood of the foe.' There was a hiss as Lorenzo changed channel to inter-squad frequency.

‘Gideon, request termination of target with utmost haste.’

‘Affirmative,’ said Gideon. ‘We’ll be as quick as we can. Hold on and watch our backs.’

‘We will not fail,’ Lorenzo assured his battle-brothers.

00.20.99

Its progeny fought and died. Under its urging they had amassed their numbers. Now they attacked in force, seeking to overwhelm the armoured hunters. Fire and explosions filled the metal hole the brood were using to approach their prey. Many fell, but more were coming. The brood mind pulsed and grew and the creature could feel its powers reaching their zenith.

It sensed the minds of the hunters, beyond the throbbing instinct of the brood, their spirits armoured, like their bodies. Meaningless chatter filled their thoughts, but through the core of their beings blazed a harsh light, encasing their souls and protecting them. It probed harder, seeking a weakness. Their anger and their hatred were powerful, concepts it knew of only from others of their kind who had come before. Concepts like fear and horror. The prey that had come before had been weak. These were strong. It would need to look upon them to break their barriers.

Gathering a bodyguard of genestealers about itself, the broodlord began to ascend the shaft, clawing its way up

the metal walls. More fire engulfed those ahead, their burning corpses dropping past into the depths. It climbed swiftly, urging on the brood to swarm forwards.

It laid its eyes upon the first of them, the fire breather. The prey paused for a moment, the reflective lenses of its eyes fixing on the broodlord. The moment of hesitation was all the broodlord needed to extend the will of the broodmind and touch upon the mind of its victim. The hunter fought for a moment, struggling against the alien will invading its thoughts. Rather than succumb to the psychic suggestion, its brain shut out all thought and the armoured creature fell into a coma, collapsing heavily to the ground. The broodlord considered this impassively. The creatures would not be controlled, but they could be rendered vulnerable.

As more of the flaming projectile grubs bit at its flesh, the broodlord turned its gaze upon the next victim.

00.21.64

Leon's assault cannon tore apart the dormant genestealers, ripping through their hunched forms in a storm of shells and gore. In long lines they lay upon the floor of a high, arched chamber, like grotesque, giant foetuses. Many were covered with patches of lichen and the webs of spiders. Clusters of insect eggs mottled their chitinous hide and whole streams of slick plant life trailed from

crouched bodies. Some of the genestealers woke amidst the tumult but were quickly cut down. It was butchery, and it filled Gideon with righteous warmth as he watched the destruction of his enemies.

‘There’s more down here,’ said Scipio, pointing towards the shadows underneath the splitting remains of some gigantic pulpit.

‘Enjoy yourself,’ said Leon, turning the assault cannon onto another row of hibernating aliens. ‘I’m busy.’

‘Thank you,’ said Scipio, opening fire with his storm bolter. Screeches of pain echoed along the cathedral, stopped abruptly as Scipio continued to fire.

‘Squad Gideon, this is Laertes,’ a voice came through on the comm, another Terminator sergeant. ‘Verify position of Squad Lorenzo. They’re supposed to be guarding our flank.’

‘They are just to your…’ began Gideon, checking the sensorium and wondering why Laertes even needed to ask. He stopped because something was wrong. The life signals of Lorenzo and his squad were clear enough, but they were unmoving. Swarms of contacts were moving past their location. ‘I cannot confirm their status. Can you investigate? Objective almost complete, we will join you shortly.’

‘Affirmative, Gideon,’ said Laertes. ‘Remain on mission.’

‘Bring light to the places of shadow,’ said Gideon. ‘We bear the Angel’s flaming torch,’ Laertes replied.

00.22.37

During more than three centuries of war, Claudio had never encountered such reckless ferocity. Orks were savage and ill-disciplined, but their will could be broken. The cold frenzy and utter disregard of the genestealers meant that no matter how many he slew, they kept attacking. It was alien and unnerving, and that meant Claudio fought all the harder.

He slashed and swiped with his suit’s lightning claws, each fist armed with several blades as long as swords wreathed in arcing energy. Electricity spat and crackled as he carved open the ribcage of a genestealer, its blood hissing into vapour. Claws met claws as another alien attacked. The Terminator’s weapons sheared through its arms and he decapitated the genestealer with a purposeful flick of the wrist.

‘Sergeant!’ he called out, but there was no response. ‘Angelo? Germanus? Victis?’

A glance at the sensorium confirmed that the rest of the squad were dead. A wave of wrath flowed through Claudio at the realisation, matched by the surge of power through his armour as he broke into a lumbering run, striking out to the left and right as he ploughed through

the genestealers massed around him.

‘The Angel demands justice!’ he roared, gouging the entrails from an alien to his right. He cut through the spine of another and cleaved the leg from a third. ‘Death demands vengeance!’

For all his anger, Claudio was surrounded. Alien claws scratched at his shoulder pads and raked across his chestplate. Leering fanged faces appeared out of the darkness, teeth clamped onto his arms and legs. He felt their blows punching through his armour, digging into flesh and bone. Pain suppressants and healing stimulants flowed through his suit, stemming the blood flow and washing away the agony. With a wordless shriek, Claudio threw back his attackers, lightning claws glittering.

Blue lightning spat from the darkness, leaping from one genestealer to the next. Heads exploded and eyeballs steamed as the bolt continued its haphazard course. Within moments the corridor was empty of foes. Only their smoking corpses remained. A massive figure stepped into the lamplight, his armour painted blue in the heraldry of the Librarium.

‘Brother Calistarius!’ gasped Claudio.

The figure turned his helmed head towards Claudio, as if noticing him for the first time. Motes of sparkling energy played around the sword in his hand and danced along the cables entwining the Librarian’s helm.

‘Brother Claudio,’ he replied in quiet recognition. ‘It is good that you are alive.’

Claudio was not so sure. His battle-brothers had all been slain. He decided to change the subject.

‘What of Squad Lorenzo?’

‘They are alive,’ Calistarius replied. ‘For the moment. Come with me, we must hasten to their rescue.’

‘Rescue?’ asked Claudio as he fell in behind the Librarian.

‘An alien psychic attack has paralysed their nervous systems. They live but are immobile. I feel their desperation. The enemy will return and kill them if we do not reach them first.’

‘Squad Gideon is closer, you must warn them!’

‘I have already apprised Gideon of the situation,’ Calistarius said patiently. ‘They are still completing the annihilation mission. We will rendezvous with Gideon once I have revived Lorenzo and his squad.’

They ducked in turn beneath the crooked lintel of a doorway, passing into a series of rooms with ceilings that bowed down as if a great weight were pressing on them. Ahead, the sensorium glowed with contact echoes.

‘It is just the two of us?’ asked Claudio.

‘You were giving good account of yourself before I arrived,’ said Calistarius ‘I can feel your determination like a furnace in my mind.’

Claudio was uncomfortable with the idea of the Librarian sensing his thoughts, and then caught himself, wondering if these doubts were equally transparent. Claudio decided to occupy himself with another matter.

'This psychic attack, I do not understand why we have not encountered it before,' he said.

'Something has changed,' the Librarian replied. 'There is a guiding force, a focus that I can sense. Something new, yet something… *old*.'

There was something about the way Calistarius said the word that lurked in the recesses of Claudio's mind. Space Marines could know no fear, but the Terminator had a feeling of foreboding, of an emerging threat not yet fully comprehended. It was an unpleasant sensation and he tried to dismiss it.

'I will need you to protect me while I revive the others,' warned Calistarius. 'I must enter their minds and rouse them from their paralysis. I must be in close proximity to each one of them and my attention will be momentarily elsewhere.'

'My claws will be your shield,' Claudio promised.

Ascending an open, winding staircase of rusted metal, the Terminators came upon a dense huddle of rooms. The genestealers were returning, coming from the right, while the markers of Lorenzo and his squad were to the left.

'Let us be swift and bolster our numbers,' said

Calistarius, turning to the left.

The Librarian stopped immediately and Claudio almost walked into his back. Ahead a heavy pressure door had dropped almost to the floor. There was enough of a gap that it seemed open on the sensorium, but in truth the warriors' bulky Terminator armour was not capable of stooping low enough to pass.

'Make way,' said Claudio. Calistarius backed up, allowing his comrade to stand before the door. Diverting as much reserve power as he could find to his lightning claws, Claudio launched himself at the pressure door. Electricity crawled across its surface as he plunged the blades into the barrier. His suit protesting with groans and whines, Claudio carved an opening, metal falling to the floor in molten droplets, sparks bouncing from his armour. With a punch, he sent a door-sized portion of the bulkhead tumbling and clanging along the corridor beyond.

'Hurry,' Claudio said, ducking through the opening.

The Librarian was close on his heel and the two of them stomped towards the closest flashing icon. Deino lay slumped in the corner of a small chamber that had once served as some form of medical facility. Dulled scalpels, oxide-stained drills and other instruments sat in neat rows on rusted workbenches, undisturbed for millennia. An overturned gurney scored with claw marks lay to one

side. Deino was unmoving but his life signal was slow and steady. His storm bolter was still held tightly in his grip.

'Rouse him,' urged Claudio. Calistarius said nothing as he crossed the room. He sheathed his sword and a nimbus of blue energy swathed his empty hand. The Librarian laid it upon the brow of Deino's helm and the light flowed over the unconscious Space Marine. Seconds passed and Claudio fretted, watching the closing sensorium signals.

With a wheeze of mechanical joints, Deino sat up. He raised his storm bolter and looked around.

'Eyes…' he muttered. Calistarius helped him to stand. 'Where are the others?'

'Near at hand, and alive,' Calistarius told him. The Librarian turned towards Claudio. 'It was a psychic attack, but our battle-brothers' sleep is natural. They can be woken normally. We should split up and restore the others.'

'I will attend to the sergeant,' said Claudio.

Deino nodded and turned towards the door. 'I shall find Brother Zael.'

'Sergeant Gideon approaches,' said Calistarius. 'We need to link up with his squad as soon as possible. When Brother Zael is awake, send him to Gideon.'

While Calistarius stepped into the ward next door, Deino

advanced into the corridors on the far side of the medical bay. Claudio headed out the door by which he had entered. He steered himself towards the signal from Lorenzo's suit, barely fifteen metres away. Looking at his sensorium, the Terminator knew that the first of the genestealers would be upon him before he reached the sergeant. Lightning claws crackling, he stalked along the passageway.

The closest sensorium blip resolved itself into three life forms and within a heartbeat they raced along the corridor towards Claudio. More were moving, out of sight, towards Deino and the Librarian. Claudio stopped and took up a fighting stance, legs braced, lightning claws raised.

'I am vengeance,' he snarled as the first genestealer leapt at him. With a blast of energy, the Terminator's lightning claws sheared the creature in half, flinging the ragged remains against each wall. Claudio punched the blades of his right fist through the chest of the second alien and carved the head from the third. As Claudio advanced the remains of the genestealer slid from his claws, leaving a bloody trail behind him.

More genestealers intercepted Claudio before he reached Lorenzo. The Blood Angel seethed with fury as he hacked and slashed his way forward. Images of his battle-brothers burned in his mind: Sergeant Leodinus welcoming Claudio to the squad; sparring with Angelo at

the fortress-monastery; Germanus winning the Swordsman's Laurel Victis; using his chainfist to cut through the hull of a traitor tank. Last and most painful was the memory of Caladonis. They had joined the Scout Company at the same time, fought side-by-side in the Sixth Company and eventually became Terminators together. Truly they had been battle-brothers.

Even as the rage threatened to overwhelm Claudio he found himself at the door to the chamber where Lorenzo had fallen. Panting he sliced the arm from a genestealer and cut open its throat. Claudio's suit was making all manner of warning noises about his pulse rate and blood pressure, threatening even the superhuman system of a Space Marine. Composing his rampaging thoughts, he turned into the room.

Sergeant Lorenzo lay draped over a pile of genestealer bodies, his power sword jutting from the spine of a dead foe. Checking there were no genestealers close at hand, Claudio deactivated his claws, the simple act calming him further. He laid a hand reverentially on Lorenzo's shoulder and shook him. There was no response.

'Sergeant?' Claudio barked across the inter-squad, grabbing Lorenzo with both hands and rolling him to his back.

In a heartbeat Lorenzo was up, shoving Claudio back. The sergeant swept up his sword, its blade stopping just

short of Claudio's head. Claudio grabbed Lorenzo's wrist and pushed it to one side.

'I'm sorry,' said Lorenzo, stepping back, obviously disoriented. 'I thought you were the creature. What happened?'

'Explanations and apologies can wait, brother-sergeant,' Claudio said, stooping to retrieve Lorenzo's storm bolter from where it had been dropped to the decking. He handed the weapon to the sergeant and faced the door. With a thrum of power and a burst of electricity, Claudio activated his claws once more. 'The enemy await their punishment.'

The two of them headed back towards the others, Lorenzo providing covering fire for Claudio as he chopped his way through the warren of tunnels and rooms. Zael reported over the comm that he was awake and was moving with Calistarius to link up with Gideon's squad. Deino had roused Valencio to consciousness and the pair were fighting back-to-back against increasing numbers of genestealers. Goriel had recovered also and was trying his best to fight his way through to his sergeant.

00.25.08

Their forces scattered by the enemy's psychic attack, it took several minutes for the Terminators to join each other. As

Lorenzo and Claudio met with Goriel, Calistarius arrived with Gideon close behind. Zael had been despatched to protect their rear.

As Gideon's squad filed past, Lorenzo counted only four warriors. He realised that Brother Omnio was missing.

'We shall grieve for the fallen even as we avenge them,' said Lorenzo as Gideon stopped beside him.

'He fell into the darkness,' Gideon replied, anger in his voice. 'No brother should die alone.'

'A means for our revenge may be close by,' Calistarius cut in. 'When I reached into the mind of Brother Deino, I detected the lingering presence of something else, and I felt it also when I woke Brother Goriel.'

Gunfire from further down the corridor heralded the arrival of Deino and Valencio. Their suits of armour were much scarred and bloodied, but both appeared to be free from serious injury.

'I'm glad somebody realises there's still fighting to be done,' said Scipio.

'Yes, we should join the attack on the main enemy cluster,' said Gideon. 'Every warrior will be needed.'

'Wait!' said Calistarius as Lorenzo turned away. 'You have not yet heard what I have to say.'

'My apologies, Brother-Librarian,' said Lorenzo, turning back to face Calistarius. 'Deino, Valencio, Goriel, set up a perimeter.'

‘Join them, Scipio, as you are so eager to fight,’ said Gideon. There was a grunt of disappointment from Brother Leon. ‘I have not forgotten you, Leon. Relieve Brother Zael as rear guard.’

‘Acknowledged,’ growled Leon and he set off at speed.

‘What wisdom do you bring, Brother Calistarius?’ Leon asked the Librarian. Storm bolter fire sounded along the corridors. ‘I ask only that you be brief in your explanation.’

‘Can you not sense its presence?’ said the Librarian. ‘Can you not feel a singing in your blood? There is some *thing* close at hand that calls to us. The Angel is guiding our feet upon a different path.’

Lorenzo remained silent. He was aware of a strange sensation within. It was almost below awareness, a tiny nagging feeling in his mind. It felt as if a distant chorus was singing a war-hymn at the edge of hearing and its dimly heard refrain stirred his blood. The sergeant felt a little more energised than he had done before. The retorts of the storm bolters sounded sharper. The flash of muzzle flares appeared a little brighter. He felt more *alive*.

‘I feel it,’ the sergeant said.

‘What is it?’

‘I do not know,’ Calistarius admitted. ‘But I can find it.’

‘I feel it also,’ said Gideon. ‘Could this not be some trick of the enemy? We should join the others.’

‘It is the Angel’s siren song,’ said Calistarius, his words quiet, almost ethereal. ‘There is no taint, no impurity in that holy voice.’ The Librarian pointed over Lorenzo’s shoulder, towards Deino and the others. His voice was firm once more. ‘It is this way.’

‘We cannot be distracted from our primary mission,’ said Gideon. ‘The attack on the alien nest is our objective. Those are Captain Raphael’s orders.’

‘Go to your brothers,’ said Calistarius with no hint of annoyance. ‘With the Captain’s permission, I shall seek this object myself.’

‘My squad will escort you,’ said Lorenzo. ‘You are too valuable to lose in this manner, Brother-Librarian. I cannot allow you to go alone.’

There was a moment of silence and Lorenzo detected the buzz of a secure transmission close at hand.

‘I have informed Captain Raphael of our plan and he gives us his blessing,’ said Calistarius. ‘We will see you again soon enough, Sergeant Gideon.’

‘Very well, I agree,’ said Gideon, though it was plain from his tone that he did not like the idea. ‘We shall return to the main force and Lorenzo shall follow our revered Brother-Librarian. Do not spend too long on this.’

‘May the Angel will it,’ said Lorenzo.

00.26.11

They encountered only scattered groups of genestealers as Calistarius guided Squad Lorenzo through the twisting depths towards the source of the phenomenon; most of the aliens were concentrating their attacks on the main Blood Angels force. Now and then a burst of storm bolter fire or the crackle of the Librarian's psychic powers echoed back down the corridors to Goriel, who was stationed at the rear of the makeshift squad. There was no threat to the rear and Goriel felt a growing frustration at his inaction.

Ever since he had been roused from the psychic attack, Goriel had felt different. More whole. He could feel the emanating sensation that Calistarius had described. It was something that lingered in his mind and pulsed through his veins with every beat of his hearts. Something in the darkness was reaching out to him and his entire being was reaching back.

They passed into a wide, open deck, with a high vaulted ceiling and a long gallery of tall arched windows. An immense shape blotted out the view of the stars, the bulk of a ship crushed into the side of the vessel they were currently investigating. The floor and ceiling of the chamber were buckled and the Terminators had to clamber over folded ridges of metal. In the wide space they spread into a line abreast and Goriel made his way

over to the left flank, close to the windows.

The further they advanced, the more Goriel felt the tug of the presence Brother Calistarius had detected. It seemed that each step filled Goriel with greater energy, that every stride brought him closer to some goal that he had longed for but never known. He swivelled to the left and right, suit lamps dancing over the haphazardly corrugated deck as he searched for enemies. He stopped and turned fully to his left, allowing the lights to penetrate the darkness beyond the windows. What they revealed caused him to gasp in amazement.

'Sergeant,' he croaked, his wonder choking the words in his throat.

'What is it?' answered Lorenzo.

'Look,' Goriel whispered back.

In the twin glares of his lamps the side of the neighbouring vessel was revealed. It was large and had settled against the hulk at a steep angle. The view from the window was restricted, but despite its unfamiliar tilt and partial obscurity, the blazon upon the side of the vessel was instantly recognisable: the winged blood drop of the Blood Angels.

'By the grace of the Angel,' said Lorenzo, hushed. The others looked on in dumbfounded silence.

'We have been brought here for a purpose,' Calistarius eventually said. 'We all hear the call and must answer it.'

‘We have to find a way to gain entry,’ said Goriel, turning so that his lamps played over the walls of the large chamber. A tangle of wreckage sprawled from floor to ceiling where the two vessels had collided, creating a jarring vista of warped decks and contorted bulkheads.

‘We will find a way in,’ said Lorenzo.

The sergeant led the squad as quickly as the undulating floor would allow, until the Terminators were standing before the wall of twisted metal and broken rockcrete. They split up along the length of the barrier, seeking a way to climb up or break through. Zael pulled at girders with his power fist and answering creaks from above warned that the mass was unstable. Goriel spied a half-hidden airlock portal about five metres above his head. His excitement growing, he sought some means of ascending to its level.

‘Careful,’ said Lorenzo. ‘Check the sensorium.’

There were life signals beyond the mass of metal, inside the Blood Angels ship. The thought of genestealers aboard provoked two responses in Goriel. The first was hope, for if they had found a way to gain entry, so too would the Terminators. The second was anger, and his desire to get aboard and cleanse the taint of the alien from the sacred decks of the ancient ship fuelled his search.

‘Over here!’ Valencio called out. He was bent to one knee, his lamps shining into a dark hole that came up to

waist height. ‘I think there’s a pressure door here, if we can get to it.’

Valencio’s chainfist spat sparks as he cut through metal struts. Goriel and Zael added the strength of their power fists, pulverising blocks of ferrocrete and bending girders out of Valencio’s path. It did not take long to clear access to the exterior doorway.

‘Make way,’ said Calistarius and the others stepped back to allow him to reach the door. The librarian examined the portal, running a gauntleted hand over the seals, his eyes lingering for a while on a keypad set into a recess next to the door. ‘We will have to force it.’

Clearing more space for themselves to work, the Terminators unearthed two huge hinges. Valencio set to cutting through the immense bolts while the others used their power fists to batter handholds into the thick steel. A minute’s labour was rewarded when, with a shriek of tearing metal, the door sagged inwards and then crashed to the ground. Goriel was the first through, shoving aside the wreckage. He found himself in an access hatch that opened out onto a long corridor that ran a considerable length of the ship in each direction.

‘Contact!’ he yelled, opening fire as a genestealer scuttled around a corner and bounded towards him.

The others followed swiftly through the airlock and took up defensive positions as more genestealers spilled into

the corridor. Seeing their bodies torn apart by the explosive bolts of the Terminators filled Goriel with a growing elation. More than ever before, the deaths of his foes sang in his veins. Each death was a blow struck in vengeance; vengeance for the massacre six hundred years past. Yet it was something more than that. The resonance that throbbed through his being had grown stronger the closer he had come to the ancient Blood Angels vessel.

Thoughts not entirely of his own creation flittered through his mind; glimpses of worlds and foes he had never seen. Fighting back the images trying to crowd into his mind, Goriel gunned down the genestealers with joy.

The first wave of genestealer attacks was halted, though others were near at hand and closing fast. Lorenzo ordered the squad to move towards the prow of the vessel, seeking some clue as to its identity. The sergeant sent Goriel ahead as he stopped at a dust-carpeted display panel and grid of runekeys upon the wall.

The surroundings were disturbingly familiar after the chaos Goriel had seen in other parts of the hulk. He could be on a deck of the strike cruiser a thousand kilometres away, or the battlebarge that had served as his home for much of his time in the 3rd Company. Though ancient and poorly maintained, the ship was proportioned and designed in the Imperial style. As he stood watch, guarding a junction that turned towards the main dorsal corridor, Goriel half expected to see more of his battle-

brothers advance around the corner, ghosts of the long-dead crew.

'A few systems are still being powered by the reactor,' announced Lorenzo. 'Most of the primary functions are still working. Life support, power output, engines, all on standby.' There was a pause and then Lorenzo gave a sigh of success. 'This vessel is called the *Wrath of Baal*.'

'*Wrath of Baal*?' echoed Calistarius. 'I know of this ship.'

'We should move to a more defensible position,' said Lorenzo, cutting short any explanation by the Librarian. The squad advanced towards the centre of the ship, Lorenzo guiding them with the aid of the sensorium.

'Find the chapel,' said Calistarius as they descended an open stairwell, the metal of the steps thundering with the crash of their boots. 'The *Wrath of Baal* was lost in the warp thousands of years ago, when the Imperium was born. What few records remain tell of an important cargo, brought from Terra shortly after the traitors' defeat.'

'What cargo?' asked Valencio.

The stairwell brought them onto a wide landing with corridors branching off at right angles in three directions. Calistarius remained quiet while the squad organised themselves. From the contacts on the sensorium data, they were moving closer to another concentration of genestealers.

‘The chapel is ahead,’ said Lorenzo, indicating the corridor that led towards the bow of the ship. Goriel took up the point position and led the squad forwards. ‘Why would we seek cargo in the chapel, and not the hold?’

‘The *Wrath of Baal* carries an artefact of great value, although exactly what it is, I do not know,’ replied the Librarian. ‘That we can feel it, sense its presence, speaks of its importance. Many relics were carried away from the fighting and kept safe in stasis chambers in the reclusiums of the ships: banners borne by our greatest heroes, revered remains, antiquities related to the Angel.’

Genestealers were now closing in from several directions, their forces numerous but divided. Goriel pressed ahead quickly, eager to discover the nature of the artefact that resounded so deeply within his soul.

On Lorenzo’s instructions, Zael broke off from the squad and headed to the right, where he would be able to use his flamer to cut off one of the enemy’s approaches. The sergeant directed Valencio and Claudio to the left, towards an antechamber on the approach to the main chapel. The others headed towards the reclusium as directly as the network of corridors would allow.

The first of a new wave of genestealers broke from the darkness as Goriel entered a small sanctuary room. The flaking remains of wooden benches lined the walls and scraps of material lay amidst golden rings, the remains of

banners that had once been hung with pride upon the walls.

Goriel opened fire, the explosive bolts of his weapon decapitating the first genestealer and ripping apart the chest of the second. A third entered the room and Goriel sidestepped to his right, still firing. Lorenzo came up beside him and the two Terminators cut down several more aliens as they crowded into the narrow doorway ahead.

Beyond the bloodied remains, Goriel could see a large doorway, decorated with a relief design of the Blood Angels' Chapter symbol. Seeing it sent a burst of energy through Goriel and he stormed forwards, crushing the genestealers' bodies underfoot.

'Watch to the left,' ordered Lorenzo. Goriel snapped out of his sudden mania and turned just before the chapel doors as more genestealers came leaping up through an open conveyor shaft. As their claws scraped for purchase, Goriel emptied the remainder of his magazine into the aliens, hurling their bodies back into the dark depths from which they had erupted.

Lorenzo turned to the right and Calistarius moved up between the two Terminators to examine the door.

'It has an intact seal,' the Librarian said.

'Can you open it?' asked Goriel. 'We must get inside.'

'The ciphers of these locks were usually lines from one

of the battle litanies,' said Calistarius. He began to punch sequences into a keypad beside the door. The first and second were answered by a flashing red light a warning klaxon began to blare through the corridors.

More genestealers charged towards the squad, to be met by a hail of fire from Goriel. This close to the chapel, and the mysterious artefact within, the Space Marine heard every exploding round as a martial drumbeat, crashing in time with the beating of his hearts. The sensation was almost overwhelming. With a clank of hidden bars falling into place, the door to the chapel opened behind him.

'I was right,' said Calistarius. 'It was, "Dedicate your blood to the service of mankind".'

The energy flowing from within the vault hit Goriel like a thunderbolt. Like a river bursting its banks, pent up hatred and righteous fury filled the Terminator. The urge to slay engulfed him, even as his body and soul were infused with rending pain.

00.32.88

Valencio poured fire into a stream of genestealers surging through the junction ahead of him. Flashes of lightning exploded around the corner from where, just out of sight, Claudio cut through those aliens that survived Valencio's deadly bursts of fire.

Suddenly a sensation struck Valencio with all the force

of a battle cannon shell. For a moment his mind was swamped with a single vision. It was of Sanguinius, Primarch of the Blood Angels. The Angel lay bleeding and broken upon a floor writhing with molten, screaming faces. His wings were tattered and red-stained feathers littered the floor around him. His gold and red armour was gouged and split and his white robes soaked with gore. Great wounds upon his arms and chest seeped crimson and tears of blood streamed down the primarch's beatific face. A shadow loomed over the Angel, amorphous and brooding, utterly black and evil. Pain raged through Valencio. His body felt rent in a dozen places as he shared the agony of his primarch. Countless voices sang out in Valencio's ears, a heavenly requiem both beautiful and chilling.

As forcefully as it had begun, the vision passed and Valencio found himself down on one knee, a genestealer rushing towards him. He pulled up his storm bolter and fired just as the creature tensed to leap, the spray of bolt shells punching the genestealer from its feet. Standing, Valencio pumped two more shots into the writhing alien.

A wordless shout, full of anger and grief, roared over the comm. Valencio turned to see Goriel advancing across a junction, his storm bolter spewing a continuous stream of fire. He passed out of sight, heading towards a large knot of contacts on the sensorium. Lorenzo was shouting also, ordering Goriel to remain in position.

‘Recover the artefact, protect the Brother-Librarian,’ the sergeant ordered. Valencio saw Lorenzo following Goriel along the corridor and then he too disappeared from view.

‘Regroup at the chapel,’ Calistarius commanded. Turning to check on Claudio, Valencio saw his fellow Terminator advancing towards him, his armour caked in the drying gore of slain genestealers. Even with the massive enclosing suit of Tactical Dreadnought armour, Claudio looked strangely hunched. He said nothing as he passed, though Valencio could guess his dark thoughts for he shared them.

When Valencio arrived at the chapel doorway Zael, Claudio and Deino had set up a defensive ring, Calistarius between them. The Librarian’s sword was sheathed and in his hand he held a large golden goblet. The chalice’s cup was moulded in the shape of a skull with the top sliced off. It glowed with a bloody light from within and, as Valencio approached, he could feel the waves of power emanating from the artefact.

‘What is it?’ Valencio asked.

‘A relic of Sanguinius,’ Calistarius replied reverentially. ‘His blood was once held in this vessel. I can feel it, the provider of our gene-seed indelibly marked on the goblet.’

With a closer look, Valencio saw that the chalice was no mere ornament. The silvery metal within its bowl was

etched with exquisitely fine lines like a circuit board, each coloured the rusty red of dried blood. There was something disturbing about the patterns cut into the cup and Valencio turned his gaze away.

'We have to find Sergeant Lorenzo,' he said. A cursory examination of the sensorium showed that he was already several dozen metres away, a swarm of genestealers circling his position.

'Negative,' replied the Librarian. 'We must take the chalice to safety and rejoin the main attack.'

'We cannot abandon the brother-sergeant,' said Valencio. 'He needs our assistance. We must protect him!'

'You have served him well, and owe him no further debt,' said Calistarius, not unkindly. 'You best continue to serve his memory by aiding in the destruction of the enemy.'

'What about Threxia?' Valencio demanded. 'Lorenzo did not abandon me then, and I'll not repay the saving of my life with apathy.'

'Enough,' said Calistarius, and his tone invited no further protest. 'Our absence has already jeopardised the safety of our brothers. We will join them as soon as possible.'

Snapped into obedience by centuries of training and the sharp voice of the Librarian, Valencio pushed aside his guilt and focussed upon the task at hand. More

genestealers were moving aboard the *Wrath of Baal* and there was nearly half a kilometre separating the squad from the rest of the Blood Angels.

00.32.81

The brood was suffering. The red hunters had turned the air to poison in some of the tunnels and trapped the broodlord's progeny. It felt them die. They choked as their organs burned and their skin blistered. They fought without fear but this new weapon could not be killed. The broodlord knew that the others of its kind were helpless, locked in biological stasis. The brood had to protect the others while they resuscitated. All other matters were secondary to survival. It sent a psychic command, organising the brood to concentrate their numbers on the protection of the dormant thousands. Dozens of its progeny following, the broodlord headed towards the hunters.

00.33.09

Lorenzo fired as the genestealers broke off their attack and slipped back into the darkness. He fought the urge to pursue them, knowing that he would never catch the fleet aliens. He looked about for Goriel and saw his massive form lying halfway through a doorway. Lorenzo crossed the corridor slowly, his armour battered and scored in

many places, leaking lubricant fluids. He shuffled forwards with a slight limp, the actuators in his left knee seized. ‘Goriel?’

There was no response from the prone Terminator. When Lorenzo reached him, the sergeant found out the cause. Goriel’s helm was missing as was his head. The ragged stump of his neck protruded from the lip of his armour, his enhanced blood forming a thick scab over the wound even though he was dead.

Lorenzo slumped against the frame of the door, dazed and bewildered. So much had happened so quickly he had been caught in a whirl of events that left him confused. There had been the psychic flash of Sanguinius’s death pouring through his mind, and then Goriel had set off on a rampage, possessed by some intractable rage. Lorenzo had followed him through the decks of the *Wrath of Baal* towards the engine room. The genestealers had cornered them there, and Lorenzo had thought for the first time in six hundred and fifty years that his time to die had come. An alien’s bite had severed the sensorium relay in his helm and his scanners had fallen dead. He had no map and no warning if they returned.

‘Command, this is Lorenzo,’ he spoke into the comm. There was no reply and he tried again. He switched the receivers to an all-frequency setting and scatters of comm traffic came to his ears.

‘Squad Delphi has been eliminated, Squad Gideon to intercept.’

‘Main force casualties at thirty-two per cent. Kill ratio falling.’

‘Need reinforcements, Triton sector.’

‘Ammunition resupply request, Sergeant Adion.’

There were others noises too: shouts of pain, battle cries and warriors dying. Sometimes static would sweep the net, or an inhuman hiss would sound as a genestealer killed a Space Marine as he was transmitting. Gunfire echoed from the helm’s communicator, but all around Lorenzo was deathly silence.

He pushed himself upright and limped forwards, away from the engine room. He could remember the way back from the *Wrath of Baal*. After that, his recollection of the space hulk was vague. He hoped that sight would bring recognition and remembrance.

He had reached the upper deck of the Blood Angels ship when his suit lamps failed. Brother Auletio had patched up the power relays in his backpack, but now the suit was draining rapidly and was shutting down systems to maintain movement and life support. With only his auto-senses to guide him, Lorenzo pressed onwards, exiting the *Wrath of Baal* into the wide chamber outside.

He moved away from the windows, back the way they had come. Passing into the tunnels, the darkness

thickened again, devoid of all light. He switched to a thermal image, but there was little enough heat reflected from the walls and floor and he frequently stumbled into the edges of doorways or crashed into corners he could not see.

Despite his superhuman body, Lorenzo had lost a lot of blood and the after-effects of the genestealers' psychic attack combined with the overwhelming surge of energy from the chapel were still affecting his mind. Flashes like rednal after-images plagued him as he tried to press onwards. Inhuman, snarling faces crowded into his vision, to be replaced by the mournful sight of the dying primarch. The visions blurred with memories six centuries old. He saw battle-brothers dead for six hundred years fighting for their last moments once again. Lorenzo heard the vox-chatter of that old battle, mixed with communications from his present comrades. Present and past blurred together.

Brother-captain Thyrus bellowed orders even as a genestealer tore off his arm. Brother Capulo fired his storm bolter into the gaping maw of an alien while another plunged dagger-like claws into the lenses of his helm.

With a crash Lorenzo walked into a wall and fell to one knee. He shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts, to concentrate on reaching the others.

Lorenzo watched Brother-Sergeant Vienis chop apart a genestealer as he shouted for Lorenzo to retreat. The enemy were everywhere. They leapt from shadowy doorways and dark ventilation ducts. Like a swarm of insects, they congregated on the Blood Angels, pulling them down one-by-one, heedless of their own mounting casualties.

'Squad Eristhenes, secure your flank.'

'This is Captain Raphael, target point for toxin dispersal located.'

'Kill ratio rising, we need more ammunition.'

Trying to wrest reality from memory, Lorenzo took a step forward and found that there was no ground beneath his foot. He tipped forwards, overbalanced, and smashed down a stairwell, chunks of plascrete flying from the walls and steps. He landed with a crash, the floor beneath him cracking with the impact, his left shoulder seizing up.

The Terminators fared no better than the other battle-brothers. Their storm bolters jammed with constant firing.

They used their heavy flamers to burn the genestealers from each other's backs, the sacred red livery of their comrades blistering and peeling in the flames. Clawed fiends erupted from loose decking plates and dragged warriors down into the darkness. Assault cannon fire cut

down swathes of enemies before the weapons exploded from the strain. More and more genestealers poured on.

‘Techmarine support not viable at this time.’

‘Use the flamers, use the flamers!’

‘Squad Gideon, hold your position at all costs.’

Lorenzo staggered to his feet, an unspoken prayer to the Angel on his lips. He dropped his storm bolter, the mechanical relays of his fingers spasming as power surged intermittently along his arm. He fell to his knees and clawed around in the darkness seeking his weapon. Pulling free his power sword, he activated its blade and by the harsh blue light located his gun.

By the light of the power sword he found himself at the bottom of a stairwell. A web of distorted corridors stretched away in four different directions. Everything was slightly twisted, the vessel’s whole structure turned out of alignment by the strange torques and tides of the Warp.

‘Back to the landing zone, retreat!’

Lorenzo blinked, unsure whether the order had been real or imagined. Had something happened? Was the current action going as badly as the first? He turned awkwardly and sat, resting his back against the foot of the steps.

He could not be scared, he could not grieve, but Lorenzo felt an emptiness growing inside him.

Isolation crowded into his senses. He sheathed his sword

to conserve its power and allowed the darkness to engulf him once more.

His armour would lose motor functions in two hours at the current rate. He had enough life support power for several more hours. Perhaps the others would find his body when they swept the space hulk after wiping out the genestealers; perhaps he would asphyxiate before the genestealers found him if his brothers did not succeed; perhaps he would be granted an honourable death at the hands of an enemy, one last chance to inflict the Emperor's hate upon his foes; perhaps his body would be atomised as the strike cruisers bombarded the space hulk to ensure the destruction of the genestealers. Whatever happened, his destiny was not in his hands any more.

There was nothing more he could do. He was lost and alone, and he had failed. Just like last time, he had failed. Lorenzo powered down his systems and waited for death.

00.40.96

Lorenzo blinked open his eyes, realising that he had fallen into a catalepsean coma. Part of his brain had rested while the other kept watch. Now he had woken but he could not recall what had stirred him. Boosting power to his auto-senses, he looked up.

Something indistinct but definitely real flitted past the end of a corridor. It was a pale shimmer of heat, barely

registering. Then came another, and another.

They were unmistakably genestealers, all moving in the same direction. Not one of the creatures spared Lorenzo a glance.

Then something larger stalked into view. It was similar in form but almost twice as tall and broad. It paused for a moment and turned its bulbous head in the sergeant's direction. Eyes flared in the darkness and Lorenzo remembered the alien presence that had knocked him unconscious. In a moment the creature broke its hypnotic gaze and moved on.

Disgust welled up from the pit of Lorenzo's stomach. He remembered his helplessness as the alien had invaded his mind. He could almost taste its presence, tainting his spirit, corrupting his body. The anger mingled with self-loathing as he realised how close he had come to giving up.

He had not failed yet, not while he could still fight.

Lorenzo stood up, the power grid of his suit flaring into life. Checking his weapons, Lorenzo set off after the genestealers. They might be heading towards his brothers or fleeing them; he did not care. He wanted revenge on the creature that had defiled him, that now embodied Lorenzo's abhorrence for these aliens. He would kill that thing or die in the attempt. Nothing else mattered.

00.42.10

The environment systems chamber was a hive of activity. Monotask servitors of flesh and metal lumbered into position with large canisters of nerve toxins on their backs, while Techmarines fussed over an elaborate and anarchic sprawl of tanks, pipes and valves. The air thrummed with power as extra generators had been brought in to boost the life support system's own fluctuating energy supply.

'Squads Gideon and Deino will form the last line of defence,' Captain Raphael instructed over the comm. 'All other squads to form perimeter.'

The Techmarines were filing out of the room followed by their servitors.

'Contamination sequence initiated. Predict completion in eight minutes and thirty-two seconds,' Raphael continued. 'Beholden to our honour, prepare for death.'

Gideon turned to his squad, including Claudio who had requested that he replace Omnio. Deino and his warriors were also close at hand. The marksman was quiet, perhaps unsure of his field promotion to fill Lorenzo's position. As the senior combatant present, Gideon felt it was his duty to lead with precision and determination.

'This is the moment of our victory,' he told the Terminators. 'In eight minutes, enough gas will have been pumped into the system to kill all of the dormant genestealers. After that, it is just a matter of clearing out

the few thousand already awake. The toxin must reach the required concentration to be fatal. No enemy is to pass us. There must be no damage to the control station.'

'Just leave it to me,' said Zael. 'I'll burn anything that gets inside the room.'

'Negative,' said Gideon. 'The pumping equipment and air ducts are fragile and we cannot risk collateral damage from heavy weapons fire. That goes for you too, Leon. A catastrophic misfire could do more damage than any genestealer's claw. Command says no heavy weapons to fire into or out of the environmental control room. Confirm?'

Leon grumbled something about having nothing to use except harsh language, but nodded in compliance.

'The cleansing fires of absolution will be put to good use elsewhere,' said Zael.

Gideon and Deino dispersed their squads, arranging two layers of a defensive cordon around the control room. Gideon glanced at the chronometer and then the sensorium. The genestealers had been massing for several minutes, attacking in small numbers to keep the Terminators occupied. The swathe of green at the edge of the sensorium, about two hundred metres distant, grew thicker and thicker as more genestealers surrounded the Blood Angels.

'Here they come,' someone announced over the comm.

The green smudge of the sensorium contracted rapidly and soon the corridors rang with the din of battle being joined.

Gideon had placed himself not far from the only doorway into the control room, Claudio a few metres away at another junction. Their role was to act as a last line of defence should the genestealers break past the guns of the others.

The seconds seemed to tick past slowly, and Gideon forced himself to ignore the chronometer display. He adjusted the grip on his thunder hammer and listened to the combat reports over the comm. The genestealers were rushing forward in a great mass, overwhelming squads with their numbers, pushing on to the next point of defence without pausing. The fighting had rapidly become splintered through the corridors and rooms surrounding the control chamber as some parts of the line broke and others held. The Terminators' kill rates soared, but the Space Marine casualties also slowly mounted.

From further along the corridor, Leon's assault cannon erupted into life with a distinctive roar. Gideon powered his thunder hammer and its sculpted head glowed into life.

The genestealers were through the outer perimeter.

00.46.03

‘Estimate contamination complete in four minutes and forty,’ Raphael announced.

Deino paid the comm-link little attention, needing to focus all of his attention on the task at hand. Valencio was protecting the right flank, his storm bolter blaring almost constantly as a stream of genestealers surged from ruptured maintenance ducts beneath the deck above.

Deino found the role of sergeant distracting. He was forced to monitor the wider fight, unable to concentrate wholly on his own performance. He snapped off shots at aliens that had outflanked Valencio through a pitted waste disposal pipe whilst checking the sensorium to ensure that Zael was still holding back the alien tide attacking the forward line. The din of the assault cannon just to the left was equally distracting and Deino began to appreciate just how valuable Lorenzo’s experience had been to the squad.

‘Pull back to your second position, Zael,’ Deino ordered, seeing a cluster of contact blips gathering to circumnavigate the Terminator’s location. ‘Valencio, cover Zael’s withdrawal.’

Valencio moved forward as Deino took up the firing position covering the maintenance vent breach while Zael let loose another burst of flame and then retreated in the vital seconds allowed by the barrier of fire.

‘Avenge Lorenzo!’ shouted Valencio. ‘Anoint his

memory with the blood of our enemies!'

'Hold position,' growled Deino, seeing that in his battle fervour, Valencio was taking steps forward, exposing his back to attack.

Three blips appeared behind Valencio and the warning was too late. They converged on his signal and then suddenly it went dead. Two of the contacts turned and headed towards Zael.

'Blood of Baal,' spat Deino, caught between two conflicting courses of action. He could move forward and protect Zael's flank, or continue to guard the access route from the higher deck. What would Lorenzo have done?

Deino held his place, blasting apart the chitinous bodies and swollen heads of the genestealers crawling from the maintenance hatches. The mission - to protect the control room - was the primary concern. Zael would have to be a painful but necessary sacrifice.

'Brother Deino!' Gideon called over the comm.

'What?' demanded Deino, frustrated by yet another interruption to his composure.

'Check your sensorium, flanking force ten metres to your right,' the sergeant calmly told him.

Deino looked and saw that Gideon was correct.

'My thanks, brother-sergeant,' Deino said, backing along the corridor so that he could cover this fresh attack. 'You guard my shoulder as well as the Angel.'

Gideon’s reply began with a short laugh.

‘Aye, and I’ll—’ Suddenly there was a grunt of pain and Gideon’s signal went dead.

The genestealers were breaking through in three places now, and the survivors of Squads Gideon and Deino were struggling to contain them. Deino repositioned himself once more, turning to look at Claudio at the far end of the corridor. Now he and Deino were the last defenders between the genestealers and the atmospheric ducts.

Claudio was surrounded by aliens, his lightning claws carving flickering patterns of sparkling blood and electricity in the air. Deino could spare him no further thought as more aliens sped across a T-junction ahead and sprinted towards him. He switched to full auto, eschewing the ideals of the marksman in the desperate circumstances. His bolts ripped through the clutch of genestealers, blasting them apart at close range.

A cry from Claudio caused Deino to turn. The Terminator was engulfed by a biting and clawing mass and he fell to his back under the speed and weight of their assault. Deino fired, explosive ammunition stitching wounds across the genestealers and Claudio’s armour. The Assault Terminator pushed himself to his feet. Then something hit Deino in the back and he pitched forward, his shots blowing apart the ceiling and causing a tangle of mesh and cables to fall into the corridor.

Deino forced himself to his knees and ignored the genestealer battering his back and shoulders. Beyond the crackling morass of wires and pipes, he saw Claudio fall down again, genestealers leaping past, headed for the control room.

Failure burned in Deino's heart as a clawed hand punched the side of his helmet.

00.48.66

THROUGH A MIST of blood, Deino saw the genestealers dashing down the corridor ahead, nothing between them and the toxin vats.

A moment later, he felt the weight lift off his back and the bloodied remnants of the genestealer splashed onto the decking in front of him. More bolt detonations exploded among the advancing aliens, gouging great holes in their flesh, shattering bones and carapace. A figure limped past, a blazing storm bolter in one hand, a glowing power sword in the other. The Terminator fired off another salvo and then turned to look down at him.

'On your feet, brother, there's more fighting to be done,' Sergeant Lorenzo's voice barked from his helmet speakers.

00.48.73

The combat was a blur of anger and pain for Lorenzo. He stood at the door to the Techmarines' poison tanks and gunned down or chopped apart everything that appeared in front of him. The sergeant overrode his suit's systems to pump power to his arms, sacrificing the life support systems so that he could continue fighting. His limbs felt heavy, his hearts threatened to burst through his fused ribs and his lungs burned with unfiltered air, but Lorenzo kept up his relentless defence. The bodies piled in front of him formed a gory barricade, and he was forced to push them aside to keep his line of fire clear.

'Contamination sequence complete,' Captain Raphael announced after an eternity had passed. 'Victory is at hand. Redemption. Tomorrow, we take the names of the fallen.'

The genestealer assault quickly lessened, and then the attacks ceased altogether. It took a while for Lorenzo to realise the immediate danger had passed.

'Early analysis indicates ninety-eight per cent enemy fatality quotient,' Captain Raphael announced. 'The vengeance of the Blood Angels is ours. Strike hard and strike swift for our final victory.'

'I need a comms-patch,' Lorenzo announced over his external address system, his comm net still malfunctioning. Deino opened a panel on his left arm and drew out a coiled cable, which he plugged into the side of

Lorenzo's helmet.

'Boosting your signal now, brother-sergeant,' Deino's voice crackled in Lorenzo's ear.

'Brothers, I have important news,' said Lorenzo.

'Continue, Sergeant Lorenzo,' Captain Raphael replied over the comm.

'Whilst separated I observed a foe the likes of which we had not seen before,' said Lorenzo. As he spoke, Calistarius emerged around the corner of the corridor. Like the others, his armour was heavily damaged, its paint scratched, the ceramite cracked and split and stained with gore. 'I believe it was the same creature that rendered my squad helpless with its psychic attack. It was larger, faster than the rest. I had the sense that it was some kind of leader, coordinating the genestealers.'

'Very good, Lorenzo,' said Raphael. 'It is imperative that we locate and destroy this creature. Life scan reports show no anomalies. The sensorium data offers us no discerning information.'

'Perhaps I can assist,' said Calistarius. 'I felt a presence when I came upon the victims of the psychic attack. At the time I thought it only a residue of assault, but it may be something else, something I can trace.'

'What do you need?' said Raphael.

'Only a moment with Sergeant Lorenzo,' replied the Librarian.

Calistarius stood in front of Lorenzo and laid a hand upon the top of the sergeant's helm. Lorenzo felt a warmth in his mind, as the Librarian extended his soul to join with the sergeant's. Suddenly there was a flash of memory and Lorenzo gasped. He was fixed by two pinpoints of light, staring helplessly at the glowing orbs.

Remember. Calistarius's gentle voice appeared inside Lorenzo's skull.

The sergeant's vision drew back from the lights and he saw the creature's snarling face. The scene replayed in his mind, rewinding through the milliseconds that had led up to the psychic attack. He saw the creature in full. It was massive, taller even than the Terminators, an enormous version of the other aliens. Lorenzo could feel its alien intelligence directed towards him, seeping through him.

Awake.

Lorenzo started from his trance and glanced around. His eyes settled on the Librarian in front of him. Lorenzo took a deep breath, his thoughts still muddled. His traumatic episode in the depths of the space hulk resurfaced briefly, a torrent of battle-brothers slain and vicious aliens. Lorenzo fought to control the clashing images and thoughts crowding into his mind.

'I can lay those memories to rest, if you wish,' said Calistarius, sensing the sergeant's unease.

'No,' Lorenzo replied after a moment's thought. 'We

must remember the fallen so that we might avenge them. I grow stronger through the adversity of battle.'

'Very well,' said the Librarian. 'When we return to the Chapter, you and I shall spend some time with the Chaplains. You have carried your grief and fears for six centuries, and the time comes soon when you can let them go. It is not good that you burden yourself with this anguish for so long.'

'Can you locate the aberration?' Raphael interrupted.

Calistarius released his grip on Lorenzo and stepped back. The Librarian held his hand to his helmet and bowed his head. His psychic hood, a tracery of wires and cables framing his helm, burned with power for a moment and motes of energy danced around the Librarian's head. His hand fell to his side and the lights faded. Calistarius seemed to slump in his armour.

'I can,' he said, his voice laboured. 'There is a psychic bond between the genestealers and their leader. Almost familial, patriarchal. There are two more of them close to where Lorenzo made contact. I can feel them now, like a pulsing in the stream of the aliens' mind-web. They are dormant but wakening.'

'We have little force to spare for the hunt,' said Raphael. 'Sergeant Lorenzo, assemble a squad from your brothers at hand and assist Brother Calistarius. We need to contain these unknown life forms, take tissue and destroy them. I

will despatch Techmarine assistance to your position.'

'Affirmative,' said Lorenzo, pleased that there was a definite course of action for him to follow after the strangeness of the last minutes. 'Squads Gideon and Lorenzo, assemble at my position.'

As the Terminators gathered, Lorenzo saw that they were in bad shape. The desperate defence of the toxin vats had taken its toll. Deino was clearly suffering, his helmet punctured, blinded in one eye. Valencio was missing the lower part of his right arm, his Tactical Dreadnought armour boosting his superhuman system to seal the wound. Noctis and Scipio were both currently weaponless and the stiffness with which they moved indicated severe damage to the internal systems of their suits. Gideon had lost his storm shield and the field around his thunder hammer glowed dimly from power shortage. Others had comparable states of armour damage and physical injury.

'We need maximum firepower and close assault punch with as few warriors as possible,' Lorenzo told them. 'Brother-Librarian Calistarius will guide us and I will lead the squad. Zael and Leon, your heavy weapons are coming with me. The main force will suffice with storm bolters. Gideon, Noctis, Deino, Valencio and Scipio, return to the staging area for repair and rearmament. Gideon, form an execution squad and report to the captain for the sweep pattern. Claudio, I need you to

come with me.’

None questioned the veteran sergeant’s judgement. As those who were not coming on the hunt turned to leave, Gideon stopped next to Lorenzo. The others paused and gave such salutes as their damaged armour and grievous wounds allowed.

‘You make us all proud to be Blood Angels, brother,’ Gideon said with a nod.

‘I am proud to serve the Chapter,’ said Lorenzo. ‘It is an honour to fight alongside such courageous and unflinching brothers. This day you have healed a wound left too long. Whatever happens, fight no more with shame, but with hearts dedicated anew to the glory of the Angel.’

‘You also, Lorenzo,’ said Gideon. The sergeant looked at the rest of his ad hoc squad. ‘What is your duty?’

‘To serve the Emperor’s Will!’ they chorused in reply.

‘What is the Emperor’s Will?’

‘That we fight and die!’

‘What is death?’

‘It is our duty!’

Still chanting, they marched away.

00.50.80

‘Comms check complete, sensorium check complete,’

Lorenzo announced. The signal bar in his helm display was weak but constant, and the steady pulsing of the scanner was clear in his helm display, showing the positions of the other Terminators. He turned towards the Techmarine who had fixed his helm. ‘Thank you, brother.’

‘You can repay me with a simple service,’ said the Techmarine. He held up a strange claw-like device, much like the reductor Apothecaries used to extract the progenium glands from fallen Space Marines. It was connected to a vial coiled with thin piping. ‘Before you destroy these unidentified life forms, we want you to take a tissue sample for analysis. We need to determine their origins and vulnerability to the toxins unleashed. It is self-working. Simply activate the rune whilst holding the claw against the creature’s flesh.’

Lorenzo took the device and placed it in one of the containers on his armour’s belt.

‘And those?’ the sergeant asked, pointing towards five cuboid machines servitors had placed along the wall of the corridor. The top side of each cube had a dish-shaped hollow punctured by a lens at its centre.

‘Portable power field generators,’ the Techmarine explained. ‘One for each of you. They will bar all movement, should you need to contain the target before tissue extraction. Each has enough charge to last several

minutes but they are not impregnable. A determined foe will break through the field in less than a minute.'

'I understand,' said Lorenzo.

'They will also block your own movement and lines of fire, so position them wisely,' the Techmarine warned.

'Affirmative,' said Lorenzo, eager to get moving. 'Anything else?'

'The Angel blesses your endeavour,' said the Techmarine. He gave a thumb up signal and stepped away.

Lorenzo turned to Calistarius and waved a hand towards the Librarian. 'Lead on, brother.'

00.51.23

They had passed the elevator shaft where Lorenzo's squad had first been subjected to the psychic attack and the sensorium was strangely clear. Worryingly clear, Lorenzo admitted to himself. Since the gas attack, the genestealers had dispersed across the inhabitable parts of the space hulk and squads were erecting power field barriers and hunting down the scattered survivors. The only thing that showed on the scanners was an indistinct blob, registering the dormant life signs of the creatures Calistarius had detected. It seemed inconceivable that more of the aliens had not found their way to this area.

'We must hurry, brothers,' said the Librarian. 'I feel the

consciousness of these beasts rising to wakefulness.'

The squad pressed on as quickly as their damaged systems would allow, passing across the ruptured hold of a large cargo ship. Claudio was in the lead, Calistarius directly behind him. As soon as the pair stepped through the huge double doors of the storage bay, the sensorium gave a warning tone. There was movement on the periphery of the scanner.

'I hear their call,' said Calistarius. 'Though they are not yet awake, the creatures beckon to their offspring. It is a beacon, and a warning. They know we are here.'

The unidentified life signals were barely two hundred metres away, but there was no straight route to them. The layout of the ship ahead was a confusing mess of overlapping corridors and gantries, pocked with void spaces and interlaced with narrow crawl-spaces and ventilation pipes. Lines of fire would be short and there were numerous entry points for the genestealers to attack. The aliens' numbers were gathering again, converging from other parts of the space hulk.

'Clear fire lanes,' ordered Lorenzo.

Leon took the lead. As he advanced, he opened fire on a sealed door ahead, blowing it from its rusted hinges. He unleashed another burst of assault cannon shells at the next door as he stepped through the wreckage of the first. Something moved in the darkness and he gunned it down

without hesitation.

‘Zael, secure the left. Brother-Librarian, stay close to Claudio,’ the sergeant commanded, assimilating the data from the sensorium. The genestealers had learnt well and no longer rushed headlong into the guns of the Terminators. They waited around the corners of junctions and behind the closed doors of rooms sprouting from the network of passages.

‘Sealing left flank,’ announced Zael. A blue glow lit the corridor as he placed his power field generator on the floor and activated it with his comm-link. ‘Power field in place.’

‘Push on, clear a path,’ said Lorenzo, following closely behind Claudio and Calistarius.

At once, four groups of genestealers rushed forward, closing on the Terminators from every direction. One group was halted on the sensorium and the corridors echoed with the crackle of the power field as the aliens hurled themselves at the barrier placed by Zael. Chain lightning erupted from Calistarius’s sword as more genestealers hurtled through a doorway ahead, disintegrating their alien bodies.

As a group, the genestealers fought their way forward. Halfway to the alien life signals, they broke through Zael’s power field and a swarm of them surged through the corridors behind the squad. Zael turned and took up a

rearguard position, using his heavy flamer to beat back the onrushing tide of aliens.

'I think I see them,' Calistarius announced. 'Yes, there they are, just ahead.'

Lorenzo could spare no time to look for the moment. He let loose bursts of fire at the genestealers coming at the squad from the right, while Leon's assault cannon reaped a harvest of aliens attacking from the opposite direction.

'Swap position, Claudio,' Lorenzo said. A few seconds later, Claudio was by his side. Lorenzo threw down his power field device and activated it, a shimmering wall of blue energy springing up in front of the other Terminator. Content that the rear was protected, the sergeant turned and followed Calistarius.

The Librarian led Lorenzo into a dark room, little more than a storage space between thick pipes that glowed with heat. They were plasma relays for the reactor somewhere below, their warmth sustaining the aliens huddled next to them. The creatures were just like the one that had attacked Lorenzo, giant and obscene. Their limbs were folded against their chests, their ridged heads bowed between the bony plates of their shoulders.

While Calistarius covered the door, alternating between fire from his storm bolter and bursts of psychic lightning, Lorenzo stooped to retrieve the tissue sample needed by the Techmarines. He placed the extractor against a fleshy

hump at the base of the nearest creature's neck and activated the device. Its claw flickered out, tearing free a piece of tissue before disappearing into the cooled vial.

At the same moment, one of the creature's clawed hands snapped out and grabbed Lorenzo's arm. It slowly turned its head towards him, its eyes glowing with psychic power.

00.52.62

Claudio flexed his arms, loosening the fibre bundles in his armour as if they were muscles. A cluster of genestealers clawed and bit at the power field just in front of the Terminator, separated from his wrath by less than a metre's thickness of energy wall. The genestealers were possessed of a manic vigour, literally throwing themselves at the barrier to get at Claudio.

'Don't be so eager to die,' Claudio growled at the aliens. 'I'm ready and waiting.'

With an explosion of light, the genestealers burst through. In a wave of blue and purple flesh they fell upon Claudio. His lightning claws sent arcs of energy tearing through them even as their blades sliced through flesh and chitin.

00.52.70

Zael checked the load readout on his heavy flamer and saw that he had enough promethium left for two more full bursts. He backed along the narrow corridor as more genestealers clawed their way up through a grille in the floor about twenty metres ahead.

'Not yet,' he muttered to himself.

More genestealers were bursting up through the grating, rushing towards the Terminator.

'Not yet,' he repeated. The first genestealer was barely three metres away when Zael pulled the trigger. White hot fire filled the corridor, the backblast scorching Zael's armour, his helm display alight with red icons as the armour's cooling systems attempted to compensate. Even so, he felt a sweat break out on his brow.

As the flames licked along the walls and ceiling, and the bodies of the genestealers popped and cracked, Zael considered his deadly handiwork and smiled.

'One more shot,' he told himself.

00.52.76

Lorenzo's sword was in its sheath at his waist so he fired his storm bolter point blank, the detonations in the creature's body spattering him with chunks of steaming flesh, his auto-senses almost blinded by the proximity of the muzzle flash. The creature's grip remained tight as he tried to pull his arm away and he fired again, blasting

apart its skull. Tearing free from its dead grip, Lorenzo turned back towards the doorway.

One moment he was looking at the back of Calistarius's armour as he stood watch, the next moment the Librarian was hauled through the air, crashing against the wall. Something ancient and monstrous unfolded itself in his place, a glimmer of recognition in its alien eyes.

Lorenzo's bolter jammed as he tried to fire, its mechanisms stuck with gory residue from his close range shot into the bowels of the dormant genestealer. The sergeant raised his sword protectively.

The creature bent down through the doorway, its gaze moving to look at the bloodied remains of the creature Lorenzo had killed. Lips curled back to expose fangs as long as combat knives. The creature hunched, its muscles bunching and cording like thick rope under its dark skin.

Lorenzo braced himself for the creature's attack, even as he sensed movement from the other beast behind him.

A jet of fire engulfed the alien in the doorway, a purifying blast from Zael. The creature shrieked, lunging against the doorframe, buckling the metal with its weight. Promethium was stuck to its body and head, eating away at the flesh. With another scream, it turned and bounded out of sight. A second later Lorenzo heard noises that set his teeth on edge: shattering ceramite, tortured metal, Zael's agonised bawl. Lorenzo had never heard a Space

Marine cry out in such a way and he raced to the door.

Zael's remains were scattered across the decking, his blood dripping down through the grillwork. The alien leader was still on fire, lurching from side to side, crashing against the walls of the corridor, leaving dents in the metal bulkheads.

Lorenzo followed it, trying to clear his jammed storm bolter. Ejecting several unfired rounds, he managed to get it working again and raised the weapon to finish off the alien. Some of the promethium had burnt itself out and much of the creature's back and face was a charred mess. Bone and pulsing flesh could be seen through rents in its skin and carapace.

It reached the stop of a stairwell, hunched and limping. Lorenzo fired, the bolt exploding in the creature's lower back. It fell forwards, the metal guard rail of the stairway twisting under its weight.

The creature tipped out of sight, trailing flames, and Lorenzo followed it to the lip of the stairway. The steps descended into darkness for several hundred metres, the creature's body a dimly flickering fire far below.

Reloading his storm bolter, Lorenzo turned around and strode back towards the plasma exchange pipes. There was one more of the beasts to destroy.

00.53.58

‘Command, this is Lorenzo. Request plotting of an exit route.’

Lorenzo, Calistarius, Leon and Claudio were advancing along a narrow walkway that ran around the perimeter of a deep well-like drop. In a haze of red light below the sergeant could see the bulky shapes of plasma reactors. Electricity occasionally arced between damaged generators and leaking gas spumed spasmodically from ruptured conduits.

The sensorium was full of signals, on levels above and below. The genestealers that had been gathering to protect their leaders had now formed into a solid mass, cutting off the squad from the route back to the rest of the Terminators. Now the Blood Angels had to find a way to escape the aliens hunting them through the winding corridors.

‘Sergeant Lorenzo,’ Captain Raphael’s voice cut through Lorenzo’s musing. ‘Exit point located. External egress, through a venting shaft two hundred metres from your position.’

‘External egress, brother-captain?’ asked Lorenzo.

‘The duct will bring you out onto the surface of the vessel,’ Raphael explained. ‘Despatching Thunderhawk to your exit location for retrieval. Primary objective is to ensure delivery of the alien tissue sample.’

‘Understood, brother-captain,’ said Lorenzo. He looked

at his sensorium and saw route marker icons flash into view. ‘Exit point located.’

‘The Angel shall guide your steps, brothers,’ Raphael said before cutting the link.

The route took them down two levels and through a network of criss-crossing passageways surrounding the reactor chamber. The genestealers were closing fast on the Terminators’ position and Lorenzo calculated that the squad would not reach the venting shaft without contact.

‘Leon, rear guard,’ he ordered. The taciturn Space Marine responded by lifting his assault cannon in acknowledgement and fell back to the rear of the squad.

They picked their way over a snarled mass of collapsed gantries and ladders and found themselves overlooking another artificial abyss. The venting tunnel was only fifty metres away, down one further level. Escape was close, but Lorenzo allowed himself no thoughts of victory just yet.

00.54.24

Pain. Pain encompassed all of the broodlord’s being, body and mind. Physical agony from the burning. Mental torment from the death of its brood. So many killed, the broodmind was but a shadow of its former power. It was spent, a dying force. The broodlord considered hiding, the instinct to survive strong. Reason overruled instinct. The

hunters would seek out and slay all of the brood. Survival was not an option.

Blackened skin flaking and cracking, burnt flesh falling in lumps from its bones as it lifted itself to its feet, the broodlord turned its face upward. Its progeny still stalked the hunters. It knew where they could be found. Created as a passionless biomachine, it felt something for the first time since its strange birth. It was a corrupting thought, an emotion that had lurked inside ever since it had contacted the minds of the hunters.

Now it came to the surface, boiling up through the pain, fresh and strong. It was invigorating and for the first time the broodlord understood why the hunters had fought so fiercely. It shared their thoughts. The broodlord clenched and unclenched its claws as it thought about the destruction of its brood and felt this new emotion: hate.

00.54.61

The Blood Angels fought a coordinated retreat towards the exit point. Calistarius and Claudio in the lead, Lorenzo and Leon following behind. They alternated firing and overwatch, cutting through the genestealers ahead and gunning down those that followed behind. They were less than fifty metres from the shaft and safety. Though tough, even the genestealers could not follow the Terminators into the freezing vacuum of space.

The deck ahead had collapsed and piles of crumbling plascrete littered the floor below. The floor they were on was unstable too, and shook every time Leon opened fire. Two ladders led down onto the rubble-strewn deck. Calistarius was the first to swing his weight out onto the corroded rungs bedded into the wall. One snapped under his tread and fell as a small bar of rust into the rubble below. The Librarian lowered himself down while Lorenzo provided covering fire from above. Genestealers were swarming in from behind the squad, above and below, and Lorenzo kept up a steady stream of fire into the exposed corridors beneath him until the Librarian was safely on the ground again.

Calistarius then took up the fight, blasting with his storm bolter, cutting down with his force sword those genestealers that came close enough. Weapons deactivated, Claudio lowered himself clumsily after the Librarian while bolt shells screamed past, picking off aliens waiting below. Once he had a sure footing again, his claws blazed into life and he joined Calistarius to protect the base of the ladders so that the others could descend.

'You first, brother,' said Leon. 'Only one hundred and fifty rounds remaining.'

Lorenzo did not argue and instead sheathed his power sword and hung his storm bolter from his belt. The ladder creaked under the weight of his armour but held strong

until he had reached the lower level. The sergeant backed up until he had a view of Leon's position on the upper floor.

'Your turn,' Lorenzo said.

'Negative,' replied Leon. 'Eighty rounds remaining. Insufficient for enemy numbers.'

00.55.89

Leon turned to face the oncoming genestealers pouring in a swarm from two corridors. He double-checked his ammunition gauge and held his fire. The genestealers circled rapidly, darting in from the left and the right. Leon felt the first leap upon his left shoulder. Another slashed its claws into his back.

'The Angel avenges!' he bellowed, clamping his finger onto the trigger of the assault cannon.

The torrent of shells tore into the ground at Leon's feet, the barrels of the weapon glowing red-hot. The mechanism jammed and the rounds left in the weapon exploded, shearing off Leon's right arm.

The resulting detonation engulfed dozens of genestealers and the plascrete beneath them cracked and crumbled. In a huge explosion of dust and rocky shards, the deck collapsed, plunging Leon and the genestealers to a bone-breaking death many metres below.

00.55.98

Calistarius had no time to spare a thought for Leon's sacrifice. Lorenzo approached the Librarian and took the tissue sample from his belt.

'Protect this,' said the sergeant, holding out the device. Calistarius took the sample without comment and turned towards the evacuation point.

'Go with him,' he heard Lorenzo say and Claudio appeared by his side.

The two of them picked their way through the rubble-choked passage, Lorenzo close on their heels. Occasionally they turned to fire at the pursuing genestealers, cutting down any that came within sight.

They were barely ten metres from the venting shaft. Calistarius could see the maintenance access hatch they needed to break through to get inside.

'I'll watch your back,' volunteered Claudio, indicating to Calistarius that he should cut through the hatchway.

The Librarian turned towards the square door and plunged his force sword into the locking mechanism. He trembled as he allowed his psychic power to surge along the blade, melting the bolts of the lock. With a clang, the hatch fell free, revealing the dark shaft beyond.

Calistarius felt the broodlord before he heard or saw it. Its presence was suddenly there, just behind the

Terminators. The Librarian turned in time to see Lorenzo flung out of the alien's path, still firing his storm bolter. The veteran crashed through a half-ruined wall and fell out of sight.

Claudio launched himself at the monstrous creature like a wild cat, his claws severing an upraised limb. The broodlord brought its other three clawed hands together, grabbing hold of Claudio's arms. With sickening twists and wrenches, the genestealer ripped the Terminator's left arm out of its socket. Claudio's right arm snapped in several places despite the protection of his armour.

Not content, the broodlord closed its massive jaws on Claudio's head. A few of its fangs snapped, but some managed to punch through Claudio's armoured helm. Arching its neck and back, the broodlord pulled off the Space Marine's head with its jaws, splinters of eye lenses and ceramite showering to the ground amidst the arterial fountain from Claudio's ravaged body.

Calistarius knew that he should escape. The tissue sample in his belt was more important than the death of a single creature. He was about to turn when the broodlord focussed its alien gaze upon him.

With a shock that stunned his system, the Librarian found his psyche swamped by the malignant power of the brood mind. As it penetrated the psyker's brain, Calistarius felt a jolt of connection with the amorphous

thoughts of the genestealers.

Space and time took on a new perspective, all emotion drained from his soul. He was timeless, endless, immortal. One of countless billions, a mote in a hurricane of minds. Fleeting yet eternally reborn. The broodmind linked him to the other things, sharing his thoughts, his hunger, his instinct to reproduce and grow.

But they were not his thoughts. They were alien. Calistarius could not sense where he ended and the broodmind began. He struggled to resist. He felt a tugging on the edge of his personality, a great psychic beacon that flared in every direction. It was like the Astronomican he used to guide ships through the warp, yet far weaker and far fouler. It was a cancer, now small, much reduced by the deaths the brood had suffered.

He realised that far out in the depths of space there were other dark beacons, other broodminds. And something larger. Something that swallowed everything in its path. Something mankind had never seen before. Impossibly distant and impossibly ancient. A shadow in the warp.

The connection broke and Calistarius found himself looking at the broodlord's face, barely half a metre from him. It was transfixed on a glowing blue blade and Calistarius realised the light in the creature's eyes were not of life, but simply reflections from the humming power sword.

Lorenzo pulled his sword free from the creature and it slumped to the ground. The sergeant then proceeded to calmly and methodically chop off its remaining three arms, both its legs and, finally, its head.

'Just to be sure,' Lorenzo explained. His left arm hung uselessly by his side and he stood with a strange stoop. A warning tone sounded from the sensorium. Another wave of genestealers had been following the Broodlord and was now barely twenty metres away.

Lorenzo turned towards them and awkwardly raised his sword. The Librarian sheathed his own weapon and turned the sergeant to face him, 'This is victory,' Calistarius said, holding up the tissue sample.

'After you,' said Lorenzo, pointing his sword towards the open exhaust shaft.

The Librarian clambered through the hatchway while Lorenzo opened fire at the approaching aliens.

'Time to leave, sergeant,' said Calistarius.

Lorenzo hesitated, gunning down another genestealer. He wanted to stay and fight. He wanted to kill more of the foe. His every instinct told him not to turn away and leave. It felt too much like a retreat. The Angel had given his life for the Blood Angels and Lorenzo could do no less.

With a parting shot, Lorenzo pushed himself into the exhaust duct.

To live and fight again, to remember the sacrifice made this day and six hundred years ago, that was true victory. To survive and allow the memories to live on when so many had not, that was the ultimate triumph.

There was no failure in that.

00.57.17

Book Two

CRIMSON NIGHT

by James Swallow

THE SEWER'S AWFUL stench would have crippled a normal man with stomach-knotting nausea. It was a heady, foul cocktail of repellent, putrid matter, stagnant water and base stinks that signalled ripe decay.

Tarikus rose from his hands and knees where he had slipped into the sluggish embrace of the liquid effluent, and spat out the matter that had choked his mouth. The gobbet impacted the hard-packed bricks of the sewer tunnel wall with a wet slap; something small and chitinous, an insect scavenger he had almost swallowed, skittered away. He glanced backward, in the dimness catching the merest glint of metal from his armour, the paldrons and plates piled perhaps a quarter-league behind him, at the mouth of the access channel.

Tarikus shook off the oily remnants of the muck and came up as far as the tunnel confines would let him. His bulk filled the conduit, the edges of his shoulders clipping the bricks, his head forced down into a cocked angle. Even bent at the knees, it was all the Space Marine could do to fit his mass into the narrow passageway. Had he still been clad in his ceramite armour, he would have been wedged like a bolt shell jammed in a cannon breech after just a handful of paces. In his service to the Golden Throne, Tarikus had lost count of the number of Light-forsaken worlds he had fallen upon in the name of the Emperor, carrying the savagery and the cold fury of the Doom Eagles with him; and if his captain wished it, he would venture on and fight naked, with tooth and nail if that were to be the order of the day.

He spat and took a measured breath, concentrating for a moment, casting his hearing forward. Beyond the drips and spatters of falling water, past the slow slopping current of effluent, there were voices: faint sounds that someone without the enhanced senses of the Adeptus Astartes might had missed, murmurs borne to him on breaths of reeking air. The voices were indistinct, ephemeral, but laced with the touch of terror. Tarikus nodded to himself. He was close now.

His knuckles whitened around the grip of his bolt pistol, the solid shape of the gun and the weight of it in his fist familiar and comforting. Bringing it up to sight along the stubby barrel, he pushed forward, the rhythm of his footfalls sending ripples out before him, rings of liquid catching the faint glow of

organic biolumes set into the tunnel roof. As Tarikus walked, he strained to catch a sound from his quarry, some random noise that might give away its position and alert him, but he heard nothing, only the pitiable crying of its victims. No matter, the Marine told himself, there can be no other way out of this stinking warren. He's in there.

After a hundred more steps, the tunnel suddenly ballooned out into a circular atrium, an open flood chamber fed by a dozen more channels, each of them - unlike this one - blocked by a heavy iron grate. Tarikus scanned them in an eye-blink: not one had been forced open. As he had planned, the foe had been caught in his lair and trapped there. Tarikus hesitated a moment, licking at the sickly air. In the near-absolute darkness down here even his abhuman eyes strained to make out anything more than gross shapes, and his scent senses were fogged with the sewer's fetor. With a hiss of effort, Tarikus leapt from the mouth of the channel and dropped the seven metres to the chamber floor, the wet crash of his landing sending a surge of liquid roiling away. The moans he could hear jumped an octave. He could see people arranged like some grotesque exhibition in the chamber's centre, each in a box-like cage, piled randomly atop one another. A tiny flicker of child-memory blinked through Tarikus's mind: a nest of building blocks, a tottering tower built by small hands towards the sky.

In that second, the foe exploded from beneath the knee-deep fluid, a massive man-form spitting a reeking rain out behind it. Tarikus reacted with impossible speed, the bolt pistol turning to target, barrel winking like a blinded eye. The Marine's finger tightened and rounds screamed from the gun, finding purchase in the creature's chest - impossibly, ineffectually, bursting through it to spark away into the walls.

Tarikus ducked as the heavy head of a massive hammer hummed through the air. A split-second too late, he realised the blow had not been aimed at his skull; the arcing trajectory of the hammer dipped down and caught him squarely on the forearm. The impact knocked the gun from his hand and it vanished into the dark, claimed by the murk with a hollow splash. The foe pressed the attack, emboldened by disarming the Space Marine, looping the hammer around for a crushing stroke. As it strode towards him, the Doom Eagle caught the glitter of a lengthy silver probe emerging from his assailant's other palm. Tarikus let him come on, let himself be pushed back toward the wall. As he retreated, he used his free hand to shrug a metallic tube from a strap on his wrist. Consciously willing his optic nerves to contract, he thumbed a stud at one end of the tube. With the brilliant fury of a supernova, a sputtering blaze of light erupted from the flare rod, filling the chamber with shuddering,

actinic colour. The caged ones screamed, their faces caught in a frieze of cold white. Tarikus's eyes were fixed on the enemy before him, the foe revealed at last before the flare's illumination.

It stood a metre or so higher than he, clad in shrouds of rust-pocked armour, the broad feet anchored in the churning pool of effluent, the great mailed fists thrown up to protect its head, and the head itself concealed behind a helmet with dark eyes and the fierce grin of a breath grille. Except for its crimson hue, it was the virtual double of the armour Tarikus had discarded at the tunnel entrance, and staring back at him from its breastplate was the twin-headed eagle of the Imperium of Man.

BROTHER-SERGEANT TARIKUS first cast eyes on the planet Merron as the Thunderhawk made a sharp roll to port. The craft turned inbound toward the starport - the barren desert world's only link to the greater galaxy beyond - and Merron's rumpled orange geography presented itself to the Space Marine. He gave it a practiced survey: there was just one large conurbation, toward which they were flying, and the rest of the land as far as Tarikus's eyes could see appeared to be nothing more than a great web-work of ruddy-coloured scars.

'Open-cast mines,' said a voice beside him. 'Merron is rich in iridium.'

'Indeed?' Tarikus said mildly. 'Thank you for telling me, Brother Korica. Having ignored Captain Consultus's briefing this morning, I of course knew nothing of that.' He turned to give Korica a level stare.

The younger Marine blinked. 'Ah, forgive me, sergeant. I had not meant to imply you were ill-informed about our new garrison posting-'

Tarikus waved a dismissive hand. 'You need not prove your eagerness by reciting the captain's words, lad. Sufficient enough that you have committed them to memory.'

'Lord,' Korica said carefully.

The sergeant allowed himself a small smile. 'You are ready for a new world's challenge and that speaks well of you, Korica. That is why you were promoted from novitiate rank to the status of battle-brother with such rapidity... but this is not a place where we will find combat awaiting us. Merron is a way-station garrison, somewhere to re-arm and lick our wounds while we watch the Emperor's mines for him.'

'But if that were so, why not use the Imperial Guard to protect it? Are not we more valuable elsewhere?' There was a hint of wounded pride in the youth's voice.

'Mere men? Ha! Iridium attracts the greed of weaker souls like a candle does moths. We could not expert mere men to stand sentinel over it, nor expect them to repel any of the warp-cursed traitors who prey on the Imperium's riches.'

The Thunderhawk rumbled through a pocket of turbulence and Tarikus gave a curt shake of his head. 'No, only the Adeptus Astartes can truly place duty before base desire.' The disappointment on Korica's face was clear as day, and Tarikus waved him away. 'Fear not, lad. If the Corrupted return to this world as they have in the past, we'll be in the fray soon enough.'

The younger Marine looked downcast and Tarikus watched him for a moment. So raw, so untried, he thought, was I ever the same as he? He had not exaggerated when he praised Korica for his swift rise to full status as a Doom Eagle, but still Tarikus regretted that such a promotion had been necessary. On the ice planetoid Kript his company had met an overwhelming force of rotsouled Traitor Marines and lost fully a quarter of their number. Although the enemy had been routed, the blood cost they exacted was paid back with new men, new brothers advanced from the scout squads. Under Tarikus's direct command, Korica, and with him Brother Mykilus and Brother Petius, were among many newly fledged Doom Eagles. Tarikus gave himself a moment to remember his fallen comrades; they had met death at last on Kript's airless plains, and gone to Him willingly with the blood of the impure on their hands. The sergeant had personally recovered a relic from the field of battle, the shattered blade of a chainsword that was now a memorial to one of his brothers. When his time came, Tarikus hoped that the Emperor would grant him so perfect an ending.

THEY RODE OUT across the blasted ferrocrete plain of the port in a line of Rhinos, bikes and speeders, carrying at the head the metallic banner of their standard. From his vantage point at the hatch of his squad's transport, at the rear of the procession, Tarikus nodded at the clean dispersal and formation of the vehicles. Before him, the full might of the entire third company was spread, a glittering steel parade of tactical, assault and terminator squads - a suitable first impression for the Doom Eagles to make on their inaugural posting to Merron.

His gaze wandered to a force of vessels clustered at the southern quadrant of the airfield. They too were Thunderhawk transports, but wine-dark in colour where Doom Eagle craft were gunmetal silver. Their brooding livery looked

like old, dried blood beneath the light of Merron's red sun. On their tail-planes they sported a disc-shaped sigil, a serrated circular blade kissed with a single crimson tear. The ships belonged to the Flesh Tearers, one of the smallest but most savage Chapters in the Adeptus Astartes.

Tarikus let his helmet optics bring them closer. Dozens of Marines were trooping aboard the Flesh Tearer craft while helots and workers, probably Merron locals, were busily loading cargo pods. As he watched, one of them slipped and dropped a case, the labourer's face a sudden mask of fear. A Marine walked to him and gestured roughly, the worker nodding frantically, thankful his mistake had not cost him his life. Tarikus looked away and dropped back into the Rhino.

'...nothing but carrion eaters,' Korica was saying to Mykilus. The other young Marine glanced up at the sergeant with a questioning gaze.

'Have you ever served with them, sir?' He jerked a thumb in the direction of the ships. 'There are rumours-'

'You're not a child, Brother Mykilus. Your time to give credence to fantasy tales is long gone,' Tarikus snapped.

'You deny the reports that they eat the flesh of the dead?' Korica pressed. 'Like the Blood Angels that spawned them, the Flesh Tearers feast on corpses-'

Tarikus took a heavy step forward and the rest of Korica's words died in his throat. 'What tales you may have heard are of little consequence, lad. Soon the Flesh Tearers will be gone and we will assume their garrison here. In the meantime, I expect you to contain your half-truths and speculations - clear?'

'Clear,' Korica repeated. 'I meant no disrespect.'

Tarikus was about to add something more, but without warning the Rhino suddenly lurched to the right, the forward quarter of the vehicle dipping sharply. Loose items flew across the cabin and only the sergeant's quick reflexes kept him upright. The Rhino skidded to a shuddering halt with a heavy iron clang.

An attack? Tarikus's first thoughts were of battle and he snapped out orders. The squad did as he commanded and boiled out of the vehicle in a swarm, bolters to the ready, scanning for an enemy. As Tarikus rounded the Rhino, Captain Consultus's voice crackled in his ear-bead, demanding a report.

Tarikus expected to see a smoking impact hole or the burnt traces of a lascannon hit, but the vehicle was undamaged. Instead, the very road the Rhino had been passing over had given way, a massive disc of ferrocrete cracked and distended into a shallow valley. 'The road, brother-captain, it seems to have collapsed...' Tarikus banged his mailed fist on the Rhino's hull and signalled the driver to put the vehicle in reverse, and the slab-sided machine began to edge

backward. The sergeant frowned.

The ground opening up beneath them was hardly an auspicious omen.

As the Rhino pulled back, a contingent of locals approached, cautious and fearful around the Space Marines, giving them a wide berth. They carried iron sheets and makeshift blocking to repair the collapse, and they went to work without speaking. Tarikus studied them for a moment to determine which one was the leader, then strode over to him. The man recoiled, his hands fluttering over his chest like birds.

'You,' Tarikus said. 'How did this happen?'

The man blinked fear-sweat from his eyes. 'B-by your leave, Lord Muh-Marine,' he stuttered. 'The airfield here, it was built over the old quarter. The cesspools are still beneath our, uh, feet. Sometimes, subsidence...' He trailed off, his frayed nerves robbing him of any more speech.

Tarikus looked past him. Some of the workers were covering the centre of the new crater with a rough cloth, trying to conceal something and making a poor try at it. 'You there, hold!'

The man reached out to touch Tarikus's armour and thought better of it, drawing back his hand as if it had been burnt. The Doom Eagle ignored him and stepped forward, the Merrons scattered like frightened dogs. Tarikus ripped up the cloth with one hand and peered into the crater. Where the road surface had sunk into a dark chasm, a small void had been cut into the old sewers below. From the hole a dozen scents assaulted the Marine, but one came to him with the cold familiarity borne from a thousand battlefields. In the cesspool beneath the road were the naked forms of two corpses, pale and drawn, bleached by months of discorporation. 'What depravity is this?' Tarikus boomed, turning to face the Merrons. 'Answer me!'

'Don't concern yourself, Doom Eagle.' The words buzzed over the general channel of his helmet communicator, and Tarikus looked up to see who had spoken. Six Flesh Tearers had arrived, the black and red of their armour shining darkly.

'Concern?' Advancing on the Marine who had addressed him, Tarikus's voice was almost a snarl. 'Who are you to decide what should concern me?'

The Flesh Tearer removed his helmet and placed it under the crook of his arm, a casual gesture but one calculated to show Tarikus the skull painted on his shoulder plate and the rank insignia he bore. 'I am Gorn, Brother-Captain of the Flesh Tearers 4th company. I command the Marine garrison on Merron,' and here he hesitated, showing a little flash of teeth in a feral smile. 'At least until the end of this day.'

'My apologies, brother-captain. I did not recognise you.' Inwardly, Tarikus

fumed at his own indiscretion.

Gorn made a dismissive gesture. 'No matter, sergeant. We will handle this.' The captain directed his men into the crater.

'If I may ask, what transpired here?' Tarikus pressed. 'I will have to make a report to my commander.'

'A report, of course,' said Gorn, lacing the comment with barely concealed disdain. 'There have been minor incidents of unrest in the city, which we recently suppressed. This-' he pointed at the crater, '-is no more than a sad reminder of the same, most likely a few misguided fools who took their own lives in a death-pact. Nothing more.' Gorn laid a level gaze on Tarikus. Clearly, the conversation had come to an end, as far as the company commander was concerned.

Tarikus glanced back at the Rhino. Korica had arranged the squad to remount the transport and stood waiting for him to return. 'By your leave, then, brother-captain.'

Gorn nodded. 'Of course, brother-sergeant...?'

'Tarikus, lord.'

Tarikus. Tell Consultus I will receive him in the garrison tower within the hour.'

'As you wish, lord.'

Am I a mere messenger now, Tarikus wondered as he walked away? Korica seemed about to speak as he boarded the Rhino, but Tarikus silenced him with a glare. 'Get us out of here. Make haste to rejoin the column or else I'll see you carry this heap of pig-iron into town.' The sergeant regretted the sharp words almost as soon as he had said them; his anger was at the arrogant Gorn, not his own men.

CAPTAIN CONSULTUS SAID nothing as Tarikus relayed the details of the incident, the two of them standing in the stone annex before the Space Marine garrison. The sergeant kept his eyes straight ahead as he spoke, but even in his peripheral vision he noted a stiffening of Consultus's jaw as Gorn's name was mentioned. Tarikus had served under the captain for over a century, and knew that this subtle sign indicated an irritation that in other men would have manifested as a shouting rage.

'Strange that he and I should cross paths after so long,' the officer mused. 'I had not thought I'd see Gorn again in this life. I'd thought the Flesh Tearers would have torn themselves apart by now.'

'This Gorn, brother-captain - you fought with him?'

Consultus nodded. 'Our Chapters met briefly on Kallern. You know of it?'

'The Kallern Massacres.' Tarikus recalled the records of the conflict from the indoctrination sessions of his training. 'Millions dead. Terror weapons unleashed in untold numbers.'

'And the Flesh Tearers in the middle of it all. What they did there earned them the attention of the Inquisition, from that day to this. They embrace the tactics of the berserker, rending and destroying all that stand in their way - enemy and ally alike. If I could command it, I would never place Doom Eagles alongside them, even in the darkest of days.'

Tarikus shifted uncomfortably. 'The brothers... tell stories about them.' The sergeant was almost ashamed to give voice to the thought.

'There are always stories,' Consultus said simply. 'The trick is to know if they are just stories.'

The door before the two Doom Eagles opened to reveal the chamber beyond, silencing any more conversation. A group of Flesh Tearers stepped past, among them a blunt-faced codicier. 'Captain Gorn will see you now,' he said, his grey eyes flicking over Tarikus's face. The sergeant said nothing, wondering if the psyker had heard every word they had uttered; as if in reply, the codicier gave Tarikus the smallest hint of a scowl.

Consultus entered the chamber, beckoning Tarikus with him. The exchange of commands was a formal ritual, and it required witnesses. Inside, Gorn was overseeing another Flesh Tearer as the Marine removed the company standard from the wall. This was a solemn duty, the banner a sacred artefact that no helot would dare lay hands upon. As the blood-red pennant was taken down, Tarikus heard the Flesh Tearers murmur a prayer to their Chapter's progenitor, Lord Sanguinius.

The two commanders met each other's gaze.

'Consultus.'

'Gorn.'

'My men are ready to take our leave of this sandpit. I can think of no better a company to take our place here than yours.'

If Consultus noticed the derisive tone in Gorn's voice, he gave no sign. 'The Doom Eagles will strive to be worthy of the honour of this posting.'

'Indeed.' Gorn removed a long ivory rod from a small altar before him. 'This token was granted by Merron's governor, as a symbol of our command here. Accept it from me and you will be this world's new defender.' He held out the rod to Consultus like an unwanted gift.

'A moment,' said Consultus coolly. 'First, I would address the report Brother

Tarikus brought to me. These "uprisings" of which you spoke.'

Gorn grimaced. 'The report, yes. It is, as I told the sergeant, of no matter. A circumstance we dealt with. It will not trouble you.'

'All the same, I would have a full accounting of it before you leave.'

The Flesh Tearer commander gave a sideways glance at the other Marine, in shared, unspoken scorn at the Doom Eagle's expense. 'As you wish. Sergeant Noxx will see to it.'

'Lord.' Noxx spoke for the first time.

'Now,' Gorn continued, still proffering the ivory wand, 'For the Glory of Terra, I transfer command of the Merron garrison to Captain Consultus of the Doom Eagles. Do you accept?'

Consultus took the rod. 'In the Emperor's name, I accept command of the Merron garrison from Captain Gorn of the Flesh Tearers.'

'So witnessed,' Tarikus and Noxx spoke together.

Gorn's mouth twisted in self-amusement as he took the banner from Noxx. 'You'll find this an agreeable assignment, Consultus.' He patted the chamber's only other item of furniture, a simple carved chair. 'This seat is most comfortable.'

Tarikus frowned; from any other man, such a thinly veiled insult would have had him knocked to the stone floor. Gorn and Noxx left, the heavy ironwood door slamming shut behind them.

'He mocks us,' Tarikus grated. 'Forgive me sir, but by what right-'

'Keep yourself in check, Tarikus,' Consultus said mildly, the words instantly stopping the sergeant in his tracks. 'You're not a novitiate any more. Quell your enmity and save it for the foe. Let Gorn and his men play at their games of arrogance. They have little else.'

Tarikus stiffened. 'As you wish, brother-captain. Your orders?'

Consultus weighed the ivory token in his fist, then handed it to the sergeant. 'Place this somewhere out of sight. We have no need to validate our command here with the display of vulgar trinkets. All of Merron will understand, the dedication of the Doom Eagles is symbol enough of our devotion to the Emperor.'

'So witnessed,' Tarikus repeated.

THE GARRISON TOWER stood ten storeys tall, dwarfing the largest of the other buildings in Merron's capital, and beneath the surface were a dozen basements and sanctums carved from the sandstone. It was cool and damp

down here, a comparative comfort to the uncompromising heat above. Tarikus made a circuit of the lower levels. Squads of Flesh Tearers were everywhere, completing their final preparations for departure, securing weapons for transit and storage. He checked here and there on the numerous Doom Eagles mingling among them, setting up storage dumps for ammunition and equipment. The groups of Marines moved around each other in a controlled dance of parade-ground efficiency, with little interaction.

Tarikus secured the rod in a weapons locker, and turned to discover he was being watched. A Merron male, half-hidden in the shadows, gave a start as he realised he had been discovered.

'Are you lost?' Tarikus asked.

The Merron's head darted back and forth, clearly weighing his chances at running away.

'Speak,' the sergeant said carefully.

The man flinched at the word and dropped to his knees, hands coming up to protect his face. 'Lord Marine, please do not kill me! I have a wife and child!'

Irritation flared in Tarikus. 'Get up, and answer my question.' He did so, and Tarikus felt a flash of recognition. 'Wait, you led the work crew at the starport.'

'I am Dassar, if it pleases you, sir.' The man was trembling, terror-struck in the Doom Eagle's presence. 'I beg you, I was just curious... about your kind.'

Tarikus had often seen common men cower before him. It was the manner of a Space Marine to expect this, as the greater populace of the Imperium - especially on backwater medieval worlds such as this - saw the Adeptus Astartes as the living instruments of the Emperor's divine will; but something sat wrongly with Dassar's behaviour. The Merron's fear was borne not from awe and veneration, but from outright terror.

'I am Sergeant Tarikus of the Doom Eagles. You have nothing to fear from me.'

'Y-yes, honoured sergeant.' Dassar licked his lips. 'But, p-please, sir, may I leave?'

'What are you afraid of, little man?'

At these words, the Merron began to weep. 'Oh, Great Terra protect me! Lord Tarikus, spare me! My family will have nothing if I am taken, their lives will be forfeit-'

Tarikus felt a mixture of confusion and disgust at Dassar's craven display. 'You are a helot in the service of the Emperor! What cause would I have to take your life?'

Dassar's sobbing paused. 'You... you are of The Red...' he said hesitantly, as if the statement would answer all questions. 'You are predators and we are

prey...'

'You talk in riddles.' Tarikus bent down and placed his face by Dassar's. 'What is this "Red" you speak of?'

'The children sing the rhymes,' Dassar hissed, 'Here come The Red, they stalk while you sleep. Here come The Red, your blood do they seek. Here come The Red, to your soul they lay claim, and you'll never be seen in sunlight again.' He gingerly laid a finger on Tarikus's armour. 'Only the colour is different. We prayed we would be free of them, but now you have come as well, in numbers fivefold.'

Stone crunched underfoot behind him and Tarikus came upon his heel, whirling about. Framed in shadow, Sergeant Noxx pointed past him at the cringing servant.

'You, vassal! Where is that case of grenades I ordered you to find? Your lassitude will not be permitted!'

Dassar bolted away into the dark, calling over his shoulder. 'Of course, Lord Marine, I shall do as you order!'

Noxx gave Tarikus a hard look. 'These locals. They are a superstitious lot, brother-sergeant.'

'Indeed?'

Noxx nodded. 'They're full of naive fables. I would pay them no mind.'

Tarikus cast a glance in the direction that Dassar had gone and then pushed past Noxx, back up toward the surface. 'I'll try to remember that,' he said.

NIGHTFALL ON MERRON was a slow, languid process. Out on a long orbit around its huge red star, the planet had lengthy days far beyond those of Terran standard, and nights that were longer still. Tarikus watched the sky's gradual drift toward red-orange twilight through the window behind Captain Consultus, the colour shimmering off the shapes of a dozen armoured Space Marines outside as they drilled in tight-knit groups.

'You were right to bring this to me,' he said carefully, 'but Noxx is correct. I have examined the Adeptus Ministorum records of this world and its natives, and their culture is disposed toward myths and idolatry. The Ecclesiarchy allowed it to continue with guidance toward veneration of the Golden Throne, but some anomalies of doctrine might still exist.'

Tarikus shifted slightly. 'Captain, that may be so, but this helot, I saw nothing but absolute dread in his eyes. Reverence breeds a different kind of fear.' When Consultus gave no reply, he continued. 'A commissar once spoke to

me of the Flesh Tearers' legacy of Sanguinius, of' - and here Tarikus had to force the words from his mouth - 'the curse of the Black Rage.'

'What you are insinuating borders on heresy, sergeant,' the captain stated coldly. 'You understand that?'

Tarikus found himself repeating Korica's words aboard the Rhino. 'I meant no disrespect.'

'I have seen the Flesh Tearers in their unbounded fury,' Consultus said quietly. 'They would take prisoners for interrogation, and we would never see them again. Once, I found a mass grave on the edge of my patrol zone, filled to the brim with enemy dead. I thought to check the bodies for any whom still lived, but there were none. Instead, I found men with hearts torn out by human teeth, bloodless and bone-white.'

An image of the corpses in the crater returned to Tarikus's mind. 'If the Merron people are being preyed upon by...' He paused for a moment. 'By someone, and the Imperium does not protect them from it, their faith in the Emperor's divinity may falter.'

Consultus nodded. 'There are always dark forces that seek uncertainties such as this. If they were to gain a foothold on Merron, the consequences could be disastrous. That shall not come to pass while we stand sentinel here.'

'Will the inquisitors hear of this?'

The captain shook his head. 'This is a matter for the Adeptus Astartes. You, Tarikus, will take a few men and investigate these circumstances. I will have you put down this fable for all of Merron to see.'

'It will be my honour, captain.' The sergeant met his commander's gaze. 'I will follow this malfeasance to its source.'

'I know you will, Tarikus. Wherever it takes you.'

THEY FOUND THE body after only an hour of searching. Dassar's thin screech cut through the blood-warm air and brought Tarikus and Korica running, to where he stood flanked by Mykilus and Petius. Between the hulking forms of the two armoured Space Marines, Dassar looked waif-like by comparison, a child's crude sketch of a man against the brutal shapes in silver-grey ceramite. The servant had panicked when Tarikus had ordered him to accompany them, but it was the Merron's reluctant direction that had brought them here, to a landscape of wreckage and broken stone on the city's outskirts. Brother Petius raised his faceplate to the sergeant and flicked a glance at the ground.

'Elderly male, no clothing or identifying marks. I'd estimate he's been dead for two standard days.'

Tarikus accepted Petius's report with a nod. The young Marine's skills with matters of the dead were trustworthy; he would one day become a fine Apothecary for the Chapter. 'Show me.' Tarikus stepped around the shuddering form of Dassar and peered at what they had discovered.

'We found him concealed beneath some rubble,' began Mykilus. 'Not too well hidden, either. I suspect he was meant to be found, sir.'

The sergeant dropped to one armoured knee to get a closer look at the corpse. Like the bodies he had seen in the sinkhole, the frail old man's papery skin was fish-belly white and anemic. 'Drained of his vital fluids,' Tarikus murmured. 'Exsanguinated...'

'It is as he said,' Korica indicated Dassar, 'these ruins around the airstrip are a warren of tunnels. The ideal place to dispose of a body.'

'The others were found like this?' Tarikus asked.

Dassar nodded slowly. 'Y-yes, Lord Marine. Sometimes weeks, even months after they go missing from their homes.'

Mykilus's brow furrowed. 'Are all you Merrons sheep? You did nothing about these abductions, you did not speak of them to the garrison commander?'

After a long moment, Dassar spoke again, his voice thick with fatigue. 'We were told to keep our petty problems to ourselves.'

Tarikus stood up and gestured to Korica. 'Wrap the body in Dassar's sandcloak and take it back to the Rhino. We will treat the dead with the respect they are due. How was he killed, Petius?'

'Look here, sir.' The Marine pointed at a circular wound on the body's chest. 'A puncture point, just beneath the heart. This poor fool was sucked dry through some kind of instrument, perhaps a metallic proboscis or tube. I believe he was alive and conscious at the time.' Petius removed a thin scalpel blade from a pack on his belt and picked at something on the dead man's flesh.

Dassar turned away and retched into the scrub. 'Oh, Emperor, deliver us from this evil, save our brother Lumen-'

'You knew this man?' Korica asked.

'The metalsmith's father-in-law,' Dassar choked. 'Taken last month during the two-moon festival.'

'Whatever kills these people does not murder before it is ready,' said Tarikus. 'How many others are still missing?'

'A-a dozen, perhaps more...'

'Then, where are they if they are not already dead?' asked Mykilus.

Tarikus nudged a loose stone with his broad, metal-shod foot. 'Beneath us...'

'No one ventures into the tunnels!' said Dassar sharply, 'A foetid place running with pestilence. Any man who enters would surely sicken and die!'

'Any man,' echoed Tarikus. 'But we are not mere men.'

'Brother-sergeant,' said Petius, a warning in his voice, 'I have something.' He held up a tiny sliver of metallic material that glistened in the fading daylight. Tarikus examined it closely; such an artefact would surely be imbued with the despair of so terrible and tragic a death - a relic well suited to be taken to the Chapter's Reclusium on Gathis when this mission was at an end.

Mykilus intoned a prayer to the Machine God and gently waved his auspex over the fragment. 'A piece of ceramite,' he pronounced, 'old and corroded. It seems crimson in colour.'

'The Red!' Dassar husked, but the Marines did not answer him. Their enhanced senses caught the sound of tracks long before the servant's human ears registered the approach of a vehicle.

A Razorback tank in Flesh Tearer livery rolled into view between piles of rubble, which had once been brick-and-mortar buildings in the old quarter. The vehicle halted and for a moment there was silence. With a squeak of poorly maintained hinges, the tank's upper hatch opened and a trio of Marines exited. Dassar shrank back, shifting to hide himself behind Petius.

'Ho, Brother-Sergeant Tarikus.' Tarikus recognised Noxx's voice.

'Noxx,' he replied with a nod. 'What brings you here?'

The Flesh Tearer sergeant looked around. 'I could ask you the same.'

Tarikus was suddenly very conscious that Noxx and his men were carrying their bolters in battle-ready stances. The same awareness seemed to flicker out to Korica, Mykilus and Petius, and from the corner of his vision, Tarikus saw them shift their hands close to the triggers of their own guns.

'We are conducting an investigation.'

'For another of your reports?' Noxx said archly. 'The Doom Eagles must be a well-documented Chapter indeed.' When Tarikus did not rise to his barb, the Flesh Tearer indicated the nearby airstrip. 'In answer to your question, I am supervising the transfer of this vehicle to one of our Thunderhawks.'

'Through a debris zone?' said Mykilus.

Noxx's words became a snarl. 'Not that it is any concern of yours, whelp, but this route is quicker than the paved road. After all, we are doing our best to remove ourselves from Merron as fast as we can.'

A sideways glance from Tarikus kept Mykilus from answering with an angry riposte. 'We need no assistance,' he said in a neutral voice.

One of the other Flesh Tearers spoke. 'What have you there?' He gestured toward the cloak-wrapped body. 'Another deader?'

'Nothing of consequence-' Tarikus began, but Dassar spat loudly behind him.

'Fiends! Eaters of men!' the bondman hissed, emboldened by the Doom Eagles' protection. 'Your time is at an end! Merron will fear you no more!'

Noxx gave a chug of harsh laughter. 'Careful, vassal. The Adeptus Astartes does not take kindly to insults from lesser men...'

Dassar began to speak again, but Petius cuffed him with the flat of his gauntlet and he fell to the ground. The Marine had saved his life; had the servant vented his hostility any further, Noxx's men would have been within their rights to discipline him as harshly as they saw fit.

'You should keep him quiet,' said the other Marine. 'They never spoke out of turn when we were in charge here.'

Tarikus took a menacing step forward. 'But you are not in charge here any more. The Doom Eagles are Merron's protectors now, and the Emperor has duties for you elsewhere, Flesh Tearer.'

The sergeant's words brought the tension in the air to a knifepoint. But after long moments, Noxx broke it with a nod to Tarikus. He ordered his men back aboard their tank, and the vehicle lumbered off, kicking up spurts of dust.

CONSULTUS'S RIGID EXPRESSION did not alter as Tarikus relayed the discovery of the body to his commander. Only when he handed over the metal fragment did the sergeant see anything more than cold contemplation on his face. Finally, Consultus put the ceramite shard aside.

'Meaningless, Tarikus. If this is the best you can do, the chief librarian will laugh you out of the chambers.'

'I suspect Noxx and his men knew about the corpse before we did.'

'Conjecture. I cannot even begin to countenance the idea of placing doubt on a brother company without hard, irrefutable evidence.'

'They were goading us,' Tarikus said. 'I won't stand by and have my Chapter derided by carrion eaters-'

Consultus came to his feet with a snap of boots on stone. 'You forget your place, sergeant, for the second time today. Do you plan to make a habit of it?'

Tarikus felt his colour rise. 'No, brother-captain.'

'Good, because the last thing I want is for one of my most trusted squad leaders to begin behaving like the novitiates I put him in charge of, clear?'

'Clear, lord.'

The captain turned away. 'Night has fallen. You have until dawn to find

something substantial, otherwise the Flesh Tearers will leave and this matter will be closed.'

TARIKUS STEPPED OUT into the Merron evening. The crimson glow of the sunset still lingered at the horizon, and above, the largest of the planet's moons was full and gibbous, hanging in mute judgement over the city. The sergeant walked the perimeter of the garrison block, along cloisters thick with shadow. Other Doom Eagles passed him by, leaving Tarikus alone with his thoughts. It was the nature of a Space Marine to be instilled with supreme self-belief, and like any other member of the Adeptus Astartes, Tarikus knew with all his heart that they were the strongest, the most dedicated, the most fearless warriors in the Emperor's arsenal.

Despite their arrogance and savagery, Tarikus had a grudging respect for the Flesh Tearers. They had weathered more than their share of misfortune and hardship; from the jungle hell of their homeworld, they numbered merely four full companies, and their only starship was an ancient hulk crowded with ill cared-for equipment, like the patchwork Razorback he'd seen earlier. They were Brother Marines, and Tarikus found the idea that members of the Legion Astartes would stoop to such pointless barbarity as preying on innocent civilians disgusting. It was his duty, he decided, not just to his Chapter and to the Merrons, but to the Flesh Tearers and to the Emperor, to end the circle of suspicion without delay.

'Tarikus.' The voice cut through his musings. He became aware of three figures standing around him in the darkness, their blood- and black-coloured armour blending into the night.

'Captain Gorn: I thought you were at the airstrip.'

'I have other matters to attend to.'

The sense of threat from the ruins-rushed back to him. 'What of them?'

'It has come to my attention that certain... rumours are being circulated. This displeases me.'

Tarikus said nothing; although he could not see their faces, he could taste the familiar scent-trace of Noxx and one of his men from the Razorback.

Gorn continued, his voice coloured with annoyance. 'We have had our fill of this worthless sand pile, sergeant, and we wish to leave it behind. It would not go well for our departure to be delayed by needless hearsay. Do you understand?'

'I believe so, brother-captain.'

'Then I hope for your sake I will hear no more of this unworthy prattle.'

Without another word, they left him there, turning over Gorn's cryptic half-threat in his mind; but then another voice called his name, and this one was screaming it, crying and shrieking into the moonlit night.

TARIKUS FOUND DASSAR in a shuddering heap at the feet of Brother Mykilus, the Marine's face split with confusion over how he should deal with the wailing servant. Tarikus pulled him upright. 'What is wrong?'

Dassar's face was streaked with tears. 'My Lord Tarikus, I am undone! I came to you with the truth and now I have paid the price - they took them! They took my wife and my son!'

'He claims the Red abducted his family and dragged them into the sewers,' said Mykilus.

Tarikus's eyes narrowed. 'Summon Korica and Petius,' he told the Marine. 'Tell them to bring weapons for close-quarter combat.' As Mykilus did as he was ordered, Tarikus questioned Dassar. 'These tunnels, what do you know of them?'

'A web of sewers,' the man said between sobs, 'feeding to a central chasm. It was once an underground reservoir, but now it is barren.'

A lair, thought Tarikus. Like a trapdoor spider, the Red was hiding concealed in the stone tunnels - just as the sergeant had begun to suspect.

'Mira and my boy Seni, they'll be killed! Please, I beseech you, save their lives!'

Tarikus looked up as Mykilus returned with the others. 'I have heard enough. This ends tonight.'

Korica handed him a loaded bolt pistol, and the four Space Marines advanced into the gloom.

Mykilus used a shaped charge to blow open a rusted manhole cover in the plaza near the garrison, and with Korica on point, the quartet dropped down into the foetid runnels beneath.

'The stench - I have never encountered the like before!' Petius gasped.

'Like a breath from a slaughterhouse,' said Korica with a grunt.

'Hold your chatter!' Tarikus barked. 'Look sharp! We can only guess at what we are facing.' He glanced up and down the tunnel they stood in: it was a wide pipe, a main tributary or flood channel.

After a few hundred strides, Korica pointed toward a small branch tunnel. 'Sergeant, see here. I believe this is one of the vents that joins the main

chamber.'

'Too narrow for us,' noted Petius.

From behind him, Tarikus heard Mykilus give a growl of frustration. 'The auspex senses something, but I cannot interpret the runes...'

The squad halted, the echoes of their footfalls dying away. Over the licking of the effluent around them, Tarikus strained to listen. Dimly, he was aware of an organic rustling sound, like matted fur on cobbles.

'Above-' began Korica, leaning back to look at the tunnel ceiling. Without warning, a dozen bulky black shadows detached themselves from the crumbling bricks and fell across Korica's upper torso. The sewer was suddenly filled with high-pitched squeals as dozens of rat-like vermin bit into the Marine's armour, acidic saliva melting through the ceramite. Blinded, Korica squeezed the trigger on his bolter and the gun crashed into life, a fusillade of shells arcing from the muzzle as he twisted in place. The bolts sparked off the walls in brilliant red ricochets.

Tarikus leapt forward, shoving Petius aside as a round whined off the tip of his shoulder plate; the Marine was unhurt, but his Battle-Brother Mykilus reacted seconds slower than the veteran Tarikus, taking hits in his chest and thigh. Mykilus sagged, slipping down the curved wall.

Brother Korica gave a bubbling scream; some of the rat-things that swarmed over his chest plate had bored into his armour and were scratching and tearing at him from the inside. One of the rodents leapt at Tarikus, spitting venom, and he caught it in mid-jump, crushing the animal in his fist. For a moment, it hissed and snapped at him, and Tarikus saw the tell-tales signs of mutation and corruption across its form. The tiny body bulged and popped beneath his fingers like an overripe fruit.

Korica's bolter clicked empty and still the injured, maddened Doom Eagle swatted at himself with the inert weapon, desperately trying to pick off the darting, biting shapes. Dark arterial blood ran in thick streams from the joints in his armour.

Tarikus grabbed at Petius's weapon - a narrow-bore hand flamer - where it had fallen and trained it on his brother Marine; the rat-beast's eyes had glowed with the same infernal hate that the sergeant had seen in the Traitors at Kript, and suddenly he had no doubt as to what quarry they were tracking. Korica seemed to sense his intentions and nodded his consent. Tarikus whispered a litany under his breath and pressed down the trigger stud, engulfing Korica and his myriad attackers in wreaths of glowing orange flame. The verminous creatures hissed and spat, catching ablaze and falling away from the Marine's armour. Korica shrugged off the licking fires, beating them out with his gloves,

his breath coming in harsh wheezes. The Marine's skin was bloodied, burnt and cracked, but he lived.

'Thank you, brother-sergeant,' he coughed. 'Only the flamer's kiss can dislodge these warp-spawned abberants...'

'What were those creatures?' asked Petius.

'Mutants,' said Tarikus, handing back the flamer. 'The twisted lackeys of Chaos.'

Behind them, Mykilus gave a hollow groan. Petius went to his side. 'He's alive, but the bolter shells hit a primary artery. The bleeding must be staunched or he will perish.'

'Do it,' Tarikus snarled, removing his helmet. With the ease of hundreds of years of practice, the sergeant began to divest himself of his armour.

'Sir, what are you doing?' Petius asked. 'You cannot think to-'

'You said yourself, the channel is too small for one of us. I must leave my armour here and venture on without it.'

'Let me come with you,' grated Korica, ignoring his injuries.

Tarikus shook his head. 'You are blinded and Mykilus will be lost without aid. You must carry him to the surface. I will see this through to its ending.' The Marine shrugged off his torso plates and stood, unadorned and ready. 'Get Mykilus to safety and inform Captain Consultus of the situation.'

Petius nodded. 'As you command, sergeant. Terra protect you.'

Gripping the bolt pistol in his hand, Tarikus pushed on into the narrow channel alone.

STARING BACK AT him from its breastplate was the twin-headed eagle of the Imperium of Man.

The shock of recognition sent a thrill of adrenaline through Tarikus; bare-chested and unarmed, he was face-to-face with a fully armoured, crimson-clad Space Marine, the unmistakable broad shoulders and the fearsome mask of the helmet pressing down on him. The light from the flare tube began to gutter out in pops and splutters of greenish-white chemical fire, and as it did the foe let out an echoing cry that was half-pain, half-rage.

TARIKUS STABBED THE dying flare forward like a knife and connected with the red Marine's torso - but instead of blunting itself on the toughened ceramite exterior, the tube pierced the chest plate, flakes of metallic armour

crumbling away under the impact. Like the fragment Brother Petius found, he realised. His surprise robbed him of the initiative, and the foe's hammer whistled through the foul air, catching Tarikus in the shoulder. The impact spun him about, and he stumbled, splashing through the muck in gouts of oily liquid. The sergeant's right arm went loose; the dislocated joint sang with pain, the edges of bone grinding together. Tarikus gave a bellow of anger as he dragged the limb back into place with a sickening crack. The hammer came out of the dimness at him once more, but this time Tarikus was ready and blocked it with a cross-handed parry. The slow, heavy weapon's path could not be quickly halted and it struck the wall, the head burying itself in the rotted bricks. The vague shape of the red Marine pulled impotently at the handle, spitting out wordless, hollow noises of frustration.

'Woe betide!' Brother Tarikus answered with a battle-roar and leapt at his enemy with a powerful kick that shattered the red Marine's greaves. The foe fell back, letting go of the hammer, and raised its hands in a poor approximation of a fighting stance. As he circled it, on some higher, analytical level, Tarikus's mind was marvelling at what he saw. What madness is this, he wondered? No Adeptus Astartes, not even the foul cohorts of the Traitor Legions would dare show such ineptness!

Tarikus saw an opening and took it, his fist striking his attacker's chest with such ferocity that the torso plate broke apart, crumbling like rotten pastry. The Imperial eagle sigil snapped under his knuckles, revealing itself as nothing more than painted glass. Tarikus reached inside the rent he'd made in the crimson armour and dug his sturdy fingers into the folds of flesh and clothing within. He felt thick blood ooze out around his wrist, heard, a gasp of pain. The sergeant balled his free hand into a fist and struck the red Marine across the helmet; the blow landed with a hollow ringing collision. His muscles bunching, Tarikus hit out again with all his might and his backhand took the helm off his foe's head, arcing away to clatter against the walls.

Revealed within the armour was a pasty-skinned parody of a man, his face riven with blotches and his eyes sepulchral with hate. Across his brow was a livid brand: a grinning skull surrounded by an eight-pointed star. Exposed, he seemed pathetically small and weak, a faint shadow of Tarikus's rugged, broad form.

'Who are you?' Tarikus demanded, shaking him. 'Answer, you wretch!'

Above, the sergeant heard the cough of impact charges as the chamber roof gave way; stones crashed to the floor around him, but he did not spare them a glance.

'Talk, or I'll tear the truth from you!' His grip tightened, and the little man

spat up thin, greenish-tinted blood.

When he finally spoke, it was in a fluid, gurgling murmur: 'Here come The Red, they stalk while you sleep. Here come The Red, your blood do they seek. Here come The Red, to your soul they lay claim, and you'll never be seen in sunlight again...'

The sergeant hesitated for a moment, then tore his hand from the little man's chest, ripping bone, lung and flesh out along with it. The ruined figure dropped away and sank into the torpid black water.

PETIUS FINISHED APPLYING the salve to a small wound on Tarikus's face and pronounced him healthy. His Space Marine physiology was already flushing the toxins from the sewer out of his system, and the salve would help it in the process. He watched as the Merrons brought up the caged ones from the chamber, as men and women greeted their families with tears; some joyful at finding those they loved still alive, some weeping as bloated, pallid corpses were hoisted to the surface. He noted with some small satisfaction that Dassar had been reunited with his wife and son; at least for the helot, the Emperor had moved through Tarikus this day to deliver him from his pain.

He rose to his feet as Captain Consultus approached, with Gorn and Noxx a step behind.

'Tarikus, you performed well. A citation may be in order.'

Gorn gave a reluctant nod of agreement. 'Perhaps so, brother-captain.'

'This is at an end, then?' he asked.

'It is,' said Consultus. 'When Petius returned to the garrison with news of what transpired, I asked Captain Gorn to lend us the arms of his Flesh Tearers.'

'It seemed a logical course of action,' noted Gorn.

Petius jerked a thumb at several impact craters nearby. 'We are storming the tunnels, flushing them out with flamers and plasma-fire. It is a nest of foulness and corruption down there.'

'The man,' Tarikus began. 'He wore our armour...'

'Not quite,' said Gorn, 'it was a well-crafted copy, but made from a poor ceramic compound. Not even strong enough to deflect a punch.'

'But it was similar enough to convince the Merrons.'

Consultus nodded his assent. 'He preyed on their fears to discredit the Flesh Tearers and the Adeptus Astartes.'

'To what purpose?' said Petius.

In reply, Noxx tossed a spherical white object at the youth, but Tarikus

snatched it from the air before it reached him. It was a human skull, and etched into its bone were whorls and patterns of lines. The matrix of thin bands seemed to shimmer in the half-light, forming the shape of a many-angled star. 'Ask him,' said Noxx.

Gorn cocked his head and subvocalised a message into the comm-net. 'Our transports are approaching orbit. By your leave, brother-captain, if you have no further use for us, the Flesh Tearers would quit this troublesome world.'

'Thank you for your assistance, Brother Gorn,' said Consultus, offering his hand. 'Perhaps we will meet again under better circumstances?'

'Perhaps,' Gorn replied, returning the gesture. He gave Tarikus a wary nod and walked away. Noxx followed and did not look back.

The Doom Eagle sergeant watched them go in silence.

TARIKUS FOUND HIMSELF in the company of his captain once again a few days later, as he completed his prayers after early morning firing rites.

'Brother-captain,' he began, 'have the tunnels been cleansed?'

'The taint of evil has been purged,' Consultus replied.

'Were all the missing civilians accounted for?' Tarikus said after a moment.

Consultus gave him a neutral look. 'We only found live victims in the cavern where you killed the cultist, the Red. There were several caches of bodies scattered around the sewer complex.'

'They were all killed in the same manner?' he pressed.

'Not all,' said the captain. 'A handful were found with different wounds.'

'In what way?'

'It is of little consequence now, Tarikus, but if you must know, there were some that sported torn, ragged wounds from claws and teeth. From human teeth.'

Despite himself, the sergeant felt a shudder of cold run along his spine. 'The Red killed only by draining blood. If he was not responsible, then who was?'

'Who indeed?' said the Captain as he walked away.

Tarikus looked up into the sky, where the crimson night was fading into dawn; if he had an answer to that question, he kept it to himself.

Book Three

THE BLOOD OF ANGELS

by C.S. Goto

'Would you really want to meet an angel? With the tip of one wing in heaven and the other dripping with blood, could there be any soul more tortured?'

- Angels Sanguine Chaplain, addressing aspirant Baalite warriors.

THE BURNERS ROARED, ripping the heavily shadowed air into strips of flame. Vast stone pillars reached up towards the rapidly descending figure, twisting into arches that aspired to the heavens. The jump pack threw fire into the yawning dark of the temple, propelling Tenjin down from the ugly crater he had punched through the gargoyle infested roof. At his back, chasing his diagonal path down through the echoing hollows of the inner sanctum, a shaft of moonlight pierced the shrouded gloom like a javelin stuck in his back. As Tenjin turned, gyroscoping throughout his spot-lit descent, searching for his target, the moonlight glinted off the blood-red that covered the right-hand side of his armour. He seemed to pulse with life.

The sanctum reverberated with the gaseous thunder of the jump pack, obliterating the awful silence that fled from its sanctimonious haven. Tenjin could hear nothing but the roar of flames and power. Blood throbbed in his brain, pounding out a pattern in his ears, sending a thrill through his body like the drums of war. His rapid drop from the giant and ornate ceiling had pushed him through greater negative g-forces than a normal man could have withstood, but his augmented body registered only a slight red tinge in his vision as some capillaries burst.

In the gloom that engulfed him, Tenjin could see almost nothing. His bloody eyes scanned the darkness for any sign of movement. The flames from his jump pack sent the shadows dancing into frenzies, projecting grotesque and unnatural images against the distant walls and pillars. His eyes flickered and darted, struggling to separate the random flood of movement from the silhouette of his enemy, knowing all the time that Ansatsu could see him clearly, falling out of the night sky like a burning meteor.

There. A flash of red. Deep red lost in the darkness. Darting from pillar to pillar. Gone again.

Tenjin slowed his descent, provoking a powerful roar of resistance from the jets of his jump pack as they struggled to balance his gigantic form. He was hovering now. Stationary. Twenty meters from the ground. Fire spilled out from the base of his pack, incinerating a ceremonial banner, which fell in burning tatters from its tethers strung between two great pillars beneath him. Fragments of burning textile fluttered to the ground, shedding moments of light across the stone floor, rendering the temple into fractions of daylight.

There. Behind the pillar on the left. The red flashed back into hiding, but it was too late. Tenjin leaned forward over the barrel of his flamer, balancing the back-thrust it was about to produce with an angle from his jump pack. The flamer screeched into life, sending a jet of chemical fire hissing through the air until it plumed and rushed around the pillar like water around rock. The darkness receded from the flames, as though scorched by its ferocity. From the other side of the pillar came a sharp explosion, like a grenade suddenly igniting after being unexpectedly superheated by the chemical fire. An armoured warrior rolled crisply out from behind the stone column, accelerated but unhurt by the concussion. He rolled into a tight crouch, one knee resting on the ground, and clicked off two shots from the bolter in his left hand.

The bolts dove into the stream of flame and rocketed up against the current, seeking the source. Tenjin was an easy target - a fiery angel, hovering in a void of darkness. Ansatsu despatched his shots and then was back into the shadows. Tenjin twisted to the side, firing his jump pack suddenly, but the jets could not move him in time; the bolts punched squarely into his flamer, shattering its structure. In a single swift movement, Tenjin cast the flamer into the gloom and cut the power to his jump pack. As the bolts ignited in his weapon, the flamer exploded into a blinding rage of chemical flames. It spiralled straight into the immovable stone of a giant column.

Hidden behind the sudden and impossibly bright flash, Tenjin dropped heavily into a crouch behind the altar at the centre of the temple. His landing cracked the immense flagstones at his feet, but he was instantly ready with his bolter braced on one knee behind the cover of the altar. With his jump pack extinguished and his flamer destroyed, Tenjin could be just as invisible as his foe.

'Come out, traitor!' Tenjin's voice echoed between the mighty columns that dwarfed the two Space Marines.

'It is you who are the traitor, Tenjin...' The echo decentred Ansatsu's voice, so Tenjin could not get a fix on his position. From behind the altar, Tenjin

scanned the shadows with his red eyes and strained his ears in the sudden silence.

'You have violated the sanctity of a Temple of Sanguinius and attacked the Honour Guard of a high priest, one of Sanguinius' Chosen! You damn your soul and those of your fallen Death Company. You do a great dishonour to our glorious Chapter-'

'No!' Tenjin could not listen to this. 'It is you who damn our souls through your polluted ways!' The red in his eyes grew darker as blood gushed into his brain, drowning his thoughts and curdling his intent. The blood of Sanguinius flows in my veins. Just as he stood firm in the face of his death, so I shall not falter now. For the Emperor and Sanguinius!

'For the Emperor and Sanguinius! Death! Death comes for you!' Tenjin was on his feet, spraying fire from the hissing barrel of his remaining gun. 'DEATH!' The superheated air roared into a kinetic frenzy, forging a ring of inferno around the chaplain as he swept the melta-gun from side to side. The giant stone pillars started to crack under the tirade; bubbles began to appear in the cracks. In an instant, the bases of two columns melted away into an ooze of molten rock and the stone above tumbled down to the ground in a deadly cascade of masonry. The distant ceiling split and collapsed, sending shards of decorated plascrete falling into the fray.

'DEATH! DEATH COMES FOR YOU!' Tenjin was screaming as he brought the world down around him, firing a continuous barrage of melta into the vague space within his Chapter's most holy sanctum.

Above the roar of the melta, Tenjin heard a metallic ring and the burst of jets. Suddenly, from amidst the ocean of fire and magma that oozed unstoppably over the ground, a figure rose into the air, blasting gravity away with the force of its jump pack. In one hand, Ansatsu held the Grail of the Angels Sanguine and, in the other, the Chapter's Exsanguinator - the symbols of his status as Sanguinary High Priest.

Ansatsu started to accelerate away from the liquid hell that was engulfing the floor of the temple. His jump pack flamed gloriously as it pushed him out of the fire and into the encompassing darkness of the majestic arched roof - a burning angel returning to heaven. But Tenjin was moving faster than thought. He had already discarded his melta-gun and clicked his jump pack back into life. Having discarded his heavy weapons, Tenjin was lighter than Ansatsu and he rocketed through the space between them like a bolt from a gun. Tenjin roared through the gathering shadows, feeding energy into his power fist, which hummed into life over his left arm.

Just as Ansatsu reached the hole in the roof, Tenjin reached him. There was

no pause for breath, no hesitation, no ceremony, no thought. Tenjin ploughed into Ansatsu diagonally from below, punching his power fist straight through the armoured plate covering his stomach. The fist ripped through armour, flesh and bone, and then armour again, as it wrenched free out of Ansatsu's back, impaling him on Tenjin's arm. Ansatsu opened his mouth in pain and shock. His eyes focussed momentarily on Tenjin. Then he was dead.

The momentum carried Tenjin and Ansatsu out of the hole in the roof before Tenjin could bring his jump pack to a stop. He looked down from the moonlit sky, surveying the ruined Temple of the high priest and the litter of dead Space Marines in the courtyard in front of it. For the Emperor and Sanguinius.

ADDISS ALLOWED HIS hood to hide the horror on his face. On the steps of the Temple of the high priest, he could see the chaplain kneeling before the hideously violated figure of Ansatsu. A torrent of blood had gushed down the stairway, flooding out of the hole punched through his body, leaving the high priest in a pool of his own essence. The chaplain was soaked in blood and his eyes shone with red. His power fist lay in the liquid that puddle at his feet and his naked hand held the Chapter's grail, wrenched from the death-grip of his lord. In his right hand he held the Exsanguinator, rammed unceremoniously into the cavity in the high priest's abdomen. The device was working energetically, sucking out the sacred blood of Sanguinius' Chosen. But the chaplain was not collecting the precious fluid into the Exsanguinator's reservoir, rather he let it spurt and gush out of the machine into the thick pool around the body. It congealed and coagulated as it trickled and oozed across the chaplain's armour, coating him in a new layer of ichor.

The inquisitor had seen more than enough. He made a swift signal, sending a knot of his retinue scattering into an offensive arc, encircling the foot of the staircase that acted as a podium for the gruesome chaplain's performance. With another signal from Addiss, the Marines lifted their hellfire bolters and focussed their implacable attention on the Angel Sanguine at the apex of the steps. He ignored them, intent on his task.

'Chaplain! It is finished. Cease!'

Tenjin turned his head slowly, his burning eyes dancing from the shrouded inquisitor to the Deathwatch Marine at his left shoulder. There was a flicker of recognition. The chaplain squinted slightly, as though in disbelief that the killing had not yet ended. Was it disbelief or relief? He couldn't tell.

'Chaplain. If you cannot hear me, you will die.' Addiss knew that there was

a point of no return. A place somewhere beyond humanity from whence even a Space Marine of the Angels Sanguine could not return. He watched the chaplain slowly rise to his feet, thick tendrils of blood running down his slick armoured form, adding to the pool at his feet. He could see the fiery red in the Angel's eyes and, for a moment, he feared the phantom of righteousness that burned deeply in his glare.

'There are things far worse than death...' Tenjin's voice was tremulous, yet it thundered. The blood was pounding in his head, disrupting his thoughts and dragging his voice from unknown depths within him. 'I do not fear you.'

There was a click and then a roar of energy as Tenjin's jump pack ignited once again. He rose slowly into the air, arms spread wide, with the grail held aloft in his left hand. Droplets of blood fell from his feet, sending miniature tidal waves rippling through the pool around Ansatsu.

'I name you Traitor! Face me! For the Emperor! FOR THE EMPEROR!' Tenjin's voice was incensed.

'You go too far,' muttered Addiss under his breath as he clenched his fist into the firing signal. A volley of bolts ripped through the air, focussed at the centre of the offensive arc, riddling Tenjin with tiny explosions. The impacts pushed him back through the air and smashed him into the heavy doors of the temple. There was a mighty crunch as the collision sent splinters flying and decimated the jump pack on Tenjin's back. He slumped to the ground, crumpled and broken.

Climbing the steps towards the temple and the fallen Angel, Addiss paused to survey the scene. The inquisitor's retinue remained at their posts, guns trained on the ruined chaplain, overseeing the bloody mess of the high priest on the temple steps. Beyond them lay the gold-tinted bodies of Ansatsu's honour guard - the Chapter's standard fluttering forlornly in the gentle night breeze, still clutched in the dead fingers of the standard bearer. Interspersed amongst the bodies were those of Death Company Marines, the chaplain's own guard, who had fought to their deaths, first against their own Chapter and then finally against the might of the inquisitor's retinue.

'For the Emperor. For Sanguinius,' whispered Addiss in awed disbelief.

'DO YOU KNOW where you are?'

Tenjin opened his eyes and tried to look around. His head would not turn; thick straps of adamantium ran taught across his forehead and chin, clamping him to the cold table. He lifted his gaze to the face of the interrogator. 'No,' he

said.

Addiss looked down at the chaplain. The red had faded from his eyes, leaving them glazed and slightly pink. The Angel Sanguine had been stripped of his armour and then strapped to the Lestrallio Tablet. Thick scars covered his skin, punctuated occasionally by the fresh craters left by the bolter shells of the inquisitorial retinue. Tenjin's augmented body was already healing the wounds. The blood had clotted and scar tissue was beginning to knit over the holes in his flesh.

'No? But you have been here before, chaplain. You have seen this place before, albeit from a slightly different perspective.'

The bright light above the table shone directly into Tenjin's sore eyes and disoriented him. He squinted and searched his field of vision for clues. The Apothecarion. Of course. They had brought him to the Apothecarion. Tenjin had been here many times, as a chaplain of the Angels Sanguine. He had manacled his most desperate battle brothers in adamantium and strapped them to this table. He had watched them thrash and spasm, spilling their tortured minds through their mouths until the Black Rage finally destroyed them totally - crushing their consciousness and snapping their spines with a last violent twist. He had listened to the rantings of Angels lost in the echoing visions of Sanguinius' death aboard the battle barge of Horus himself, reliving those moments of hell as though they were their own. This was the place were the curse of the Blood Angels found its most pitiful voice - no glorious death in combat, swamped under insurmountable enemies, battling to the last - just the screams and shivers of a solitary Marine, alone with his inalienable nature.

Tenjin laughed quietly, blood gurgling thickly in his throat. How pathetic. Did this inquisitor really think that the source of the curse could be divined on Lestrallio's Tablet? Lestrallio himself had died in terrified lunacy strapped to a table just like this one, screaming at a phantom of Horus: 'I name you Traitor!' Does this inquisitor really think that I am so lost to myself that I need to be bound to this fate? Does he think that this is about the Rage, that I succumbed in the midst of my own?

'I see that you recognise your place at last, chaplain.' Addiss watched Tenjin's amused eyes in confusion. The glaze was fading, and the chaplain was gradually recovering the pristine, penetrating stare that revealed the clarity of his mind.

'You must answer some questions.'

'What do you hope to learn from me, inquisitor? Why didn't you kill me?' Tenjin's amusement was balanced precariously against a rising sense of suspicion.

'I am here partly because your actions forced me to intervene in the internal affairs of a Space Marine Chapter. You and your battle brothers killed the Sanguinary high priest and slaughtered his honour guard. Your chaotic mutiny was only thwarted by my intervention - who else could cleanse the twisted mess you created?'

'You are here to judge me, then? Would you judge Sanguinius?'

The inquisitor paused over this apparent blasphemy. 'Only the Emperor can judge you. I am here merely to understand you and your kind. You will answer some questions. Let's begin three months ago, when High Priest Ansatsu Rakuten transferred you from the First Company down to the Tenth...'

'AS YOU WISH, my lord.' Tenjin bowed deeply, touching his right fist to his heart. He stood upright, looked straight into Ansatsu's eyes for an instant, and then turned to leave. His anger was suppressed and barely noticeable - effectively transmuted into a dignified bearing.

Ansatsu watched his veteran chaplain carefully. He had known Tenjin for more years than a normal man would ever witness. The chaplain was the best of the Angels Sanguine. He was glorious in battle and meticulous in his duty to administer to the cursed and the doomed. Before every battle, Tenjin would wander amongst his company, stripped of his armour, carrying his ceremonial Death Mask under his arm. As he approached, each Angel would drop to one knee and clasp his right fist to his chest. Tenjin would stop, kneel before his flock, gaze deeply into their eyes and say nothing. Nothing at all. A silent blessing. The blessing of silence before the storm to come. Under his influence, fewer Angels were lost to the Black Rage on the eve of battle. He reassured them, inspiring them with pride and courage, suppressing the desperate thirst for blood that bubbled just below the surface.

When First Company Chaplain Reontrek had died, Tenjin had been the natural replacement. The body of Reontrek had been found deep in the catacombs of Hegelian 9, where the Death Company had been loosed to root out and slaughter the remnants of a defeated Tyranid army. The company had rampaged through the cavernous underworld, slaughtering indiscriminately, slaking their lust with alien blood. It seems that the Tyranids vanished before the Thirst, and the Death Company continued its search and destroy mission for several weeks before they were brought back under control by the high priest himself, Sanguinius' Chosen enwrapped in the Holy Shroud of Servius and bearing the Standard of the Angels Sanguine. Only a power that inspired

such awe could arrest the Rage of the Death Company.

Ansatsu had found the body of Reontrek, torn to pieces by the maniacal fury of his own company. The chamber was strewn with fragments of black armour coated in viscous streams of blood. The bodies of six or seven Marines lay in varying stages of dismemberment, some still twitching pathetically, crying out for battle. It was then that Ansatsu had resolved to make Tenjin the next Death Company chaplain. Tenjin would bring the Rage under control, or he would die trying.

The young chaplain had been greatly honoured and had excelled where Reontrek had failed. Never again had the Chapter lost control of its Death Company; it was transformed by the rigid discipline and quiet inspiration of its new chaplain. Yet Ansatsu had not seemed altogether pleased by these long decades. He watched Tenjin like a hawk, suspicious and cynical.

Tenjin could feel Ansatsu's eyes boring into his back as he walked from the Temple of the high priest, fresh from his demotion. I will not turn around, he thought as he walked purposefully down the great staircase that dropped away from the imposing doors at the entranceway. His footfalls resounded heavily in the stone, echoing the gravity of his thoughts, and a swirl of wind whipped a red dust cloud into a shroud around his descending form. The sands of this desert planet stirred and Tenjin paused on the last step to allow them to engulf him. When the dust finally cleared, he was gone.

'SO YOU KILLED him to avenge your honour? Your anger became your Rage?' Addiss fired the accusation from nowhere, forcing a logical step where Tenjin could not see one.

'No, inquisitor. My honour was not slighted. All service in the name of the Emperor and Sanguinius is of equal honour. I killed him because he was a traitor. For the Emperor and Sanguinius, I took death to him.'

The inquisitor watched the sparkling eyes of the chaplain focus with determined resolution. 'But you were affronted by the actions of the high priest. You were angered by his treatment of you.' No longer questions: statements.

It was not anger. But there had been Rage. 'I could not understand why he would transfer me from my station in the First Company. I was the only chaplain who could keep the Death Company under control. Ansatsu knew this.'

'So, your pride was your undoing?'

Tenjin smiled painfully and a bubble of blood caught in his throat. He

coughed, straining the muscles in his neck against the adamantium shackles. 'No, inquisitor. My pride was Ansatsu's undoing. It made me suspicious of his motives.'

THE HOODED FIGURE knelt silently, gaze fixed on the floor, the black of his ornate power armour glinting where it was revealed beneath the folds of his heavy cloak. He was perfectly motionless, rigid in fierce deference and discipline.

Ansatsu considered the hunched figure for a few moments, inspecting the battered Angels Sanguine insignia on his shoulder, etched magnificently at some time before the high priest had even been born. He let his eyes caress the lines of the angelic wings, feeling them slide along a series of deep gashes in the figure's chest plates until they fell into the eye-sockets of the Deathwatch's skull on the other shoulder. What kind of claws could have made such channels in the armour of a Space Marine, pondered Ansatsu with interest.

'Welcome home, librarian.'

Ashok lifted his eyes to meet those of the high priest and could see the sincerity in those words. There was more than welcome in Ansatsu's eyes - delight perhaps.

'It is good to be back, my lord.' In truth, Ashok had never considered Baalus Trine his home. The traditionally peripatetic Chapter had relocated on this irradiated rock only shortly before he had been summoned by the Deathwatch. He had not returned even once during the intervening decades.

'It is an honour to see you again, Ashok.'

'The honour of service is mine, my lord.' The librarian had served under Ansatsu for only a year, between his ascension as high priest on Baalus Trine and his own call from the Deathwatch.

'You will find much changed.' Ansatsu searched Ashok's eyes for something unspoken as he continued, 'And for the better, I think.'

'I have heard of some new developments here on Baalus Trine - interesting developments.' Ashok returned the high priest's gaze with a casual undertone of curiosity.

Ansatsu seemed satisfied. 'Just today I have felt it necessary to remove a veteran chaplain from his position in the Death Company - you may remember Chaplain Tenjin?'

'Indeed I do. He was a chaplain in the Second Company when I left. A solid man, I thought. I recall that he was assigned to the Death Company after that

business on Hegelian 9.'

Of course, Ashok had been one of the survivors of the Hegelian 9 expedition. He had slaughtered seven of his Death Company brethren before bringing his Thirst under control by the force of his own will - mastering it and transforming his Rage into an awesome weapon. He had been presented with a Shroud of Lemartes - guardian of the damned - and the Deathwatch had called for him almost immediately. Ansatsu smiled as the realisation grounded itself in his thoughts. 'I perceive pollution in our midst again, librarian, and Tenjin might better serve us elsewhere. We will see what the Death Company can do without this chaplain.'

Ashok nodded gravely. He had heard rumours of this pollution. 'Tell me more about this Tenjin and the corruption of our purity.'

THE FIRST COMPANY scouts knelt in formation, heads bowed and fists clasped to their chests. They were arrayed before their attack bikes, which gleamed in the desert sun. The red dust speckled the armoured panels, hazing over the gold trim, the bulging tires and the black exhaust tubes that bristled out of the massive engine blocks. The scouts were bedecked in light battle armour, wearing the colours of the Angels Sanguine with the fresh pride of recent initiates. A crisp, vertical line bisected the armoured suits, separating the fathomless black of the left-hand side from the blood-red of the right. The warriors' armour, like their nature, was split between the glory of a bloody battle and the darkness that lurks within a blood-thirsty soul.

The scouts of the Angels Sanguine wore no helmets, so Tenjin could gaze directly into the eyes of each as he passed along the line, inspecting his new company. Each pupil blazed, fierce with deference and courage. Tenjin poured his wisdom into his stare and said nothing. In the eyes of some he could see sparks of recognition, fractions of moments in which the scout opened himself to Tenjin's influence; flickers of relief and self-assurance danced in the fires of their determination. But from others Tenjin received nothing. Blank eyes returned his gaze; eyes replete with hostility and violence. Impatient eyes. It was in these looks that Tenjin paused, delving deeper into the souls that they reflected.

There are too many. Tenjin hesitated at the end of the line and turned to take it in again. Too many are balanced too finely. He walked slowly back along the inspection line of his new company, pausing, lingering in front of nine separate scouts. They are right on the cusp, teetering on the brink of the abyss,

desperately seeking combat. Too desperately. There are too many, he thought, an entire squad. The chaplain touched his hand to the forehead of the nine tainted scouts, muttering a silent mantra, and then walked swiftly off into his Reclusium. The nine sprung to their feet and followed their chaplain, their heavy boots kicking up eddies of sand as they marched.

'You nine will accompany me as my Honour Guard,' explained Tenjin as the others stood to attention. It might be the only way to control you once the enemy is sighted. Nothing fights the Thirst better than pride. 'We will form a single squad, together.'

The scouts barked their enthusiasm in unison. They were keen to impress their new chaplain, especially one as celebrated as Tenjin.

'Local intelligence reports possible contamination in one of the settlements on the far side of the Bhabatrix mountains. We will investigate and, if necessary, purify the contamination. Understood?'

Tenjin was concerned. NINE new scouts seemed destined to succumb to the Rage in the battle to come - their very first battle as Angels Sanguine. This was an unprecedented figure, especially amongst such recent initiates. The Thirst usually took time to develop. Exposure to battle. Experience of shedding blood and slaughtering the enemies of the Emperor. Internalising the tragic mission of Sanguinius. These were the factors that usually seemed to induce the Thirst. Incidents increased gradually the longer an Angel served. The First Company, the Death Company, was full of veterans, the oldest, most experienced and most blood-drenched warriors of the Chapter.

Nonetheless, the Death Company held its name for a reason. Its Marines, the mightiest and most invulnerable of all Space Marines, brought death to innumerable enemies of the Emperor. They also brought death to themselves. Lost in the craze of the Rage, thirsting for blood, violence and combat, many would take on vastly superior numbers of the enemy - more than even a Death Company Angel could defeat. No matter how glorious or magnificent the victories of the Death Company, fewer would return to Baalus Trine than had departed. Death Company suffered more losses than any other company of the Angels Sanguine - bathing in more blood than even Khorne could crave. Tenjin shivered at the thought of the fate of his predecessor on Hegelian 9.

Nine novice scouts on the verge of the Rage seemed incredible, but Tenjin pushed his concern to the back of his mind. Perhaps I am wrong about them. Perhaps they are just awestruck. It has been a long time since I looked into the eyes of such inexperienced warriors. Let us see what combat does to their souls.

THE HIGH PRIEST reclined languorously into the thick, viscous fluid, letting it slip around his body, coating his exposed skin in a deep lustrous red, seeping gradually through the nodal points in his carapace. He lay back into his ceremonial sarcophagus, inscribed with the ancient glyphs of previous high priests, permitting the blood to flood around his form, leaving only his face and chest exposed to the quiet reverence of the temple air.

'My children, you may leave,' whispered Ansatsu in a voice that echoed and snaked around the silence of the pillars in the sanctum.

A clutch of three men bowed deeply and unclasped the mechanisms from their necks, letting shiny droplets of blood speckle down onto the pristine white of the flagstone floor. After long moments of deference, the men eased out of their bows and shuffled awkwardly out of the sacred chamber, their bizarrely muscled forms forcing them to limp and stoop as they went. By the time they had gone, a heavy tablet had scraped into place in front of Ansatsu's face, sealing him into the ritual rest of a Sanguinary high priest.

He lay in meditation, feeling the delicate pressure of the blood enwrapping his body, replacing the customary, firm metallic touch of his armour with the tepid embrace of the fresh fluid. Tiny waves rippled into tranquillity as they eased their way through the nodal mechanisms of the high priest's carapace, drawn in by some long forgotten osmotic process.

Ansatsu closed his eyes and concentrated on the flow of his blood, visualising the gradual intermingling of the fresh with the staid, pumping the new vitality around his augmented body under the enhanced pressure of two hearts. The blood coursed through his omophagae organ and he could feel the effect immediately. A gradual warmth spread through his body, dappling his skin with rains of pain and pleasure, disorienting his senses and rendering the immersion tank into a box of blades and fire. Ansatsu twitched, sending ripples and splashes around the dark interior of the sarcophagus. The glory of Sanguinius burned in his blood.

With a sudden hiss of depressurisation the elaborate lid of the high priest's sarcophagus retracted into the wall of the sanctum and a rush of cold, dry air slapped Ansatsu in the face. His eyes snapped open and he sat bolt upright, sending a red shower sleeting over the edge of his tank, splattering the decorated exterior of another of the sarcophagi that lined the wall of the ritual chamber.

He walked across the cold floor, blood cascading into a trail at his heels, and Ansatsu the altar where the Exsanguinator was kept. Lifting it from its podium, the high priest clicked the mechanism into place over the dedicated valve in his neck, which had been installed as part of the Ritual of Ascension to the High

Priesthood. The device buzzed into life immediately, awoken by the trace of Sanguinius flowing through it. The mechanism clucked quietly, sucking a supply of Ansatsu's precious blood into a reservoir in the hilt of the Exsanguinator. Finally, pulling the machine from his neck, he detached the reservoir and poured small quantities into each of the ceremonial goblets that adorned the altar, ready for the internalisation of the neophytes and recent initiates.

THE NIGHT WAS broken by the oranging beams of the low moon as the bike squadron roared through the narrow mountain pass, sending torrents of rocks tumbling into avalanches. Powerful headlamps cast startling cones of light across the moutainscape, floodlighting the column of scouts from within. The path was only wide enough for single file, but the riders were confident and undaunted. They bounced and swerved their way over the uneven terrain, skirting the sheer drop to their left and scraping the paint from their armour against the mountain side on the right.

Tenjin raised his hand in a fist and slid his bike to a halt on the crest of the rise. The engine cut and the lights died as his squadron fell into silent obedience behind him. He was silhouetted against the moon, shimmering in an aura of golden light. Tenjin had an eye for drama, but he also knew the function of awe when leading squadrons of the cursed. He click the comm.

There was a hiss of static. 'Silence now. Nagaboshi and Endo with me. The rest, hold position here.'

Two scouts from the front of the line dismounted and marched to take positions alongside Tenjin. The three of them stood magnificently astride the top of the mountain pass. The moonlight played around their armour, sending sparks of brilliance dancing into the thin air. The other scouts gazed at their battle brothers in awe, with pride swelling in their chests.

Below them, tucked under a ledge in the precipice, there was a makeshift camp. A fire burned gloomily in its heart, spewing thick curdles of smoke into the sky, blotting out the stars and threatening the moon. Figures were moving spasmodically in the spaces between the tents and the flames. They were jerking and shuddering, twisting their naked forms into bizarre contortions. And laughing. Laughing loudly. In the background there was a faint, pulsating impact. Its power drove the figures into renewed frenzies of motion.

The chaplain took a step forward and brought his enhanced vision into tighter focus. The faces of the figures were wide-eyed and their mouths hung

open. Dribbles of spittle trickled indelicately from their teeth, as though they were slightly rabid, running down their chins and necks, splashing across their abdomens like body paint. Like body paint - that was not spittle, it was blood. The patterns on their chests looked worryingly familiar.

Tenjin quickly scanned the rest of the camp. Figures sat languorously in the dust, knees pulled up to their chests, rocking slightly, blood oozing from the corner of their mouths. Some pulled chunks of meat out of the fire and gnashed at it hungrily, licking their lips like salivating dogs. A desperate group stood fearfully, chained to each other and to the mountain face at the side of the cave under the ledge.

The smoke swirled into a dense column, gyring back and forth like a lazy tornado. Then it clicked. The black smoke, the bloody mouths, the tearing of flesh. Tenjin strained his eyes into the fire. The flames leapt and flickered crazily, they crackled and hissed, spitting sizzling shards of fat into the faces of the lunatic figures. There.

The flames seemed to burn with an unusual red, tinted into orange by the reflection of the moon and the hunger of the fire.

There was a hand. It had been licked clean of flesh by the flames, but it was a human hand. It reached out of the fire as though thrown out for help; the last desperate action of a drowning man. Other forms began to resolve themselves in the fire. Feet, arms, heads and legs. Tens of them, piled on top of each other and set alight. A gargantuan pile of burning flesh, sending pungent plumes of death into the night sky - a grotesque barbeque.

'What are they doing, sir?' Endo's eyes were taught and perplexed. He was horrified and fascinated all at once.

'Dancing, Endo. They are dancing.' Tenjin turned to the scout and looked into his eyes. They were burning and tinged with red. 'Just dancing,' he said gently, narrowing his gaze.

'What should we do, brother chaplain?' Nagaboshi's low voice broke Tenjin's concentration. He turned to face the other scout and was shocked to see his eyes wild and blood riddled. 'We must do something!' Nagaboshi insisted, his voice being dragged from some almost inaudible depth.

Tenjin paused for a moment, searching in the eyes of the scout, looking for something more or less than the urgency of blood. He could see nothing. Turning back to the grisly and gruesome party below them, he scanned the scene once more. The macabre dancers still twitched and wretched around the fire, the blood markings on their chests spelling out the sign of Khorne. The chaplain had to fight with himself to control his own Rage - he could feel it pulsing under his diaphragm, prodding him into rapid, shallow breathing. In his

mind he whispered the Moripatris, drawing the thoughts deep into his lungs and letting them deepen his breathing back into normalcy.

'You two, with me,' he commanded in a powerfully whispered voice that permitted no resistance. The two scouts at his shoulders turned and followed Tenjin back to the waiting squad, snatching impatient glances back over their shoulders as they crept through the mountain darkness. At least they were following.

From a receptacle protruding from the back of his bike, Tenjin withdrew a spherical package, wrapped carefully in a shimmering black cloth. He unfolded the velvety material with care, revealing the stylised, bespiked skull of his Death Mask. It glinted with depths of darkness in the moonlit, emanating new shades of black into the night. The mask hissed into place as Tenjin pulled it over his head, the latches securing themselves into his carapace with unerring precision. Tenjin's face was gone and the scouts found themselves gazing into the face of death himself - inhuman eyes burning with purple intensity in the skeletal sockets.

With the scouts of the Angels Sanguine arrayed before him, Death gripped his right fist to his chest, clasping the glowing Rosarius medallion tightly in his hand - the soul armour of a Space Marine chaplain, a reluctant gift from the Ecclesiarchy. In his left, the chaplain held forth the Crozius Arcanum, his staff of office. The wings of Sanguinius radiated from the Crozius, spilling fountains of red light from the droplet of his blood enshrined in its heart, bathing the scouts in an aura of purity. I can do no more than this, Tenjin worried inside himself, looking into the mixed expressions of awe and impatience before him as he invoked the ritual of Moripatris - the Mass of Doom.

'For the Emperor and Sanguinius! Death! Death comes for the deviants!'

'DEATH COMES FOR THE DEVIANTS!' enjoined the scout squad with a single voice.

In an instant the scouts were back on their assault bikes, engines purring with impatient power. Tenjin was at the head of the column, riddled with anxiety about his novice team, torn between a deep-felt need to annihilate the deviants on the other side of this mountain and an equally deep concern that this side of the mountain hosted an infinitely more dangerous deviance. He pushed the thoughts aside - battle will reveal their souls.

Raising the Crozius above his head he shouted, 'For the Emperor and Sanguinius!' Tenjin's bike roared into life, bursting over the crest of the path in a blaze of blood reds and blacks, gilded with gold. Behind him came his column of righteousness, each Marine leaving the ground as he cleared the pass, their bikes leaping the sharp descent in a single jump, before thudding

and skidding into the dust in the midst of the repugnant camp. Head lamps blazed brighter than the flames of the cannibalistic fire and the staccato onslaught of bolter fire drowned out the drums of the dancers.

THE LIBRARIAN GENTLY pushed back his hood, revealing his unshadowed face to the high priest for the first time since his return. 'Thank you,' he said, accepting the glass of red liquid from the outstretched arm of Ansatsu.

The two Marines knelt ceremonially, facing each other across a silent space, underspread with the ancient Shroud of Servius. There were no attendants and no surveillance servitors in this place - they were quite alone.

Ansatsu watched intently as the librarian drank deeply from his glass. 'It has been a long time since I have tasted the blood of Baalus Trine,' conceded Ashok.

'It is sweet, is it not?'

'It does have a special quality, indeed.'

'The Deathwatch must change a Marine - even a librarian,' mused Ansatsu, as though to himself.

'Yes, but change comes in many forms and from many places,' replied Ashock with a faint smile, toying with the residue of his drink, swirling the blood into a whirlpool. He looked up, fixing Ansatsu's eyes with his own, which seemed to glitter with an unfathomable blackness at their core. 'Things are changing here too.'

'Had you not left so soon after our adoption of this planet as our home - so soon after I was honoured with the position of high priest - you would understand the changes more completely. After Hegelian 9, I had great hopes for you.'

Ashok nodded his head slightly, reaching out with his thoughts and testing the substance of Ansatsu's words. 'Yes, I can see that now. But the Deathwatch also had plans for me, and it was my honour to serve. For the Emperor and Sanguinius.'

THE CULTISTS FELL like animals, squealing and running in panic. No, not in panic, in pleasure, Tenjin reflected as he watched the appalling features of a bloody, crazed face dissolve under the impact of his power fist. It was an orgy and a blood bath all at once.

For a few moments the scout squad maintained its formation - the column

circling around the camp, herding the deviants into a tight pack and then loosing bolts into the dense group. Tenjin had pulled his bike over into the shadows on the outskirts of the camp, just beyond the flickering light cast by the fire, picking off stragglers and the particularly fleet of foot. His power fist hummed with life and dispensed instant death to all those who glimpsed his terrifying features.

Not many had escaped the tactics of the squad and the chaplain soon slid his bike to a standstill and surveyed the scene. He was relieved to see the discipline of the rookie squad, their clinical workmanship as they whipped the cultists into a spiralling pen of execution. And he watched the cultists themselves, each bearing the mark of Khorne etched into their chests with blood, each perversely elated about their blood-drenched fate. They offered little resistance - this was not really a battle fit for Space Marines.

As the relief settled into his thoughts, Tenjin began to notice more details. The cultists were deformed. Some had scales piercing the skin on their arms. Others had the suggestions of aborted limbs sprouting from their abdomens. Most were overly muscular yet stooped in stature, as though their muscles had outgrown their skeletons and pulled them back into themselves. Some seemed blind, just running into circles because of the momentum of the crowd.

But it was not just the cultists. The prisoners chained at the edge of the camp were similarly mutated. Tenjin glanced back and forth between the prisoners and the cultists - the only visible difference was the grotesque brand of Khorne on the chests of the cattle at the centre of the scouts' ring of death.

Suddenly the scout squad broke formation. First to go was Nagaboshi, who swerved his bike violently out of the column, skidding the back wheel in an arc and then gunning the engine. Nagaboshi roared forward into the heart of the cultists firing wildly with his bolter, riddling the cattle with shells, punching holes through bodies and the crowd. In an instant he was upon them, his bike scything through the bloody bodies, crushing bones and skulls under its weight until the shear mass of the crowd brought it to a halt. Then Nagaboshi was on his feet, spinning frantically in the heart of the cultists, loosing bolts in all directions. The shells from his bolter started to escape the rapidly thinning crowd, some punching into the armour of the encircling scouts, who rapidly broke formation.

Endo leapt from his bike as a bolter shell smacked into the engine block, sending hissing jets of steam rising into the night. He cast his own bolter aside and pounced into the remains of the cultists, grabbing at figures with his bare hands, tearing limbs from bodies.

The other scouts scattered throughout the rest of the camp on their bikes,

cutting down any deviant that they could find. Tenjin watched in horror as a knot of bikers roared passed the manacled prisoners and gunned them down in a merciless drive-by.

The chaplain kicked his bike back into life and held the Crozius aloft, urging energy into the staff and flooding the camp with the aura of Sanguinius. By the time he reached the centre of the camp, projecting a litany of control from his Death Mask, Endo had fought his way through the remnants of the cultists and was upon Nagaboshi in a flash. He smacked his fist into the back of his battle brother, shattering his spine and sending him sprawling forward into the sand.

Tenjin slammed the shaft of the Crozius into the ground and a bright light burst from the blood of Sanguinius held in its core. The scouts lurched into motionlessness all over the camp, stunned by the flood of awe that rushed out over them. They strained against the invisible leashes, as though battling with constraints secured deeply within them. Endo rocked visibly and then fell to ground holding his head in agony.

The chaplain stood majestically in the centre of the camp, emblazoned and radiant with the power of Sanguinius pulsing in his hands. There was blood everywhere, soaking into the sands and gathering into pools around the piles of corpses. Not a single tribesman was left standing. They were all dead. Cultist and prisoners alike. Including Nagaboshi, three scouts were also dead - although there was no way that the primitives of Khorne could have slain a Marine.

'EXPLAIN YOURSELF, CHAPLAIN.' The high priest stood impassively before the altar in the Temple of Sanguinius. Behind him was a Marine that Tenjin felt he should recognise. He bore the insignia of the Deathwatch on one shoulder plate and held the ornate Force Staff of a librarian in his right hand. His face was hidden under the folds of his Psychic Hood.

Tenjin was kneeling before them. 'The tribesmen were followers of Khorne, my lord. They were also mutants. Purification was required.' The chaplain knew that this was not the desired response.

'Yes, but what of the villagers, the prisoners of the cultists?'

'They too were mutants, my lord.'

'But not cultists?'

'No, my lord. They were sacrificial prisoners of the cultists.'

'You are aware, brother chaplain, that all the tribes of Baalus Trine are at

least slightly mutated, thanks to the radiation of this inhospitable world? We may be far from Baal Primus here, but it took the Angels Sanguine many centuries to find its first home world with conditions similar enough to that of the Blood Angels. Since then, we have passed through a long succession of planets over the millennia, but only this world has warranted the name of Baalus. We have settled here for a reason. Our gene-seed requires hosts with a genetic make-up compatible with those of our father Chapter - compatible with the people chosen by Sanguinius himself. The people here must be protected - they are part of our nature. Might I remind you, chaplain, that I myself was born on this planet.'

'I could not prevent their slaughter, my lord. The scouts were enraged by the deviance.'

'You could not, or would not, brother chaplain?' intoned the hooded librarian.

'And what of the dead scouts, Tenjin? What of Endo, who even know lays half-mad, ranting on the Table of Lestrallio in the Apothecarion?' There was an odd quality in Ansatsu's tone that made Tenjin recoil. The librarian also shifted his stance slightly, as though steadying his own thoughts. There was a vague elation in the air.

Tenjin flicked his gaze from the high priest to the librarian and back again. Something was wrong. The Deathwatch Marine was no stranger here; he bore the markings of an Angel Sanguine, battered and scraped by innumerable encounters with unspeakable foes. When did he return to the Chapter, and what horrors did he bring back in the darkness of his expanded consciousness?

'You are confined to your quarters, chaplain, until we determine your fate.' The high priest waved his left hand casually and the librarian clicked to attention, bowed slightly, and then stepped up to escort Tenjin back to his rooms.

THE ADAMANTIUM DOOR slid closed behind him with a solid crunch, leaving Tenjin alone in his sparse quarters. He thought back over the events of the last weeks. He had been demoted from the Veteran First Company by the high priest, despite the fact that he was the only chaplain who could control their Rage. For an anxious minute, Tenjin wondered what kind of havoc the Death Company was raging out in the frontiers without him, while he had been reassigned to the novice Tenth Company, the scouts - a company always in need of guidance, to be sure, but not usually one teetering on the cusp of the

Thirst.

Nonetheless, on his first mission, a fairly routine home world scouting sortie, he had lost control of an entire squad. The scouts had slaughtered indiscriminately, even killing three of their own. One was so lost to himself that he was even now strapped under adamantium shackles, raging against his daemons on the Tablet of Lestrallio. Tenjin had never heard of a scout being so utterly lost.

On the other side of the chamber, Tenjin spied his battered copy of the Codex Sanguine. His was one of the few original copies that remained, inherited from the veteran Chaplain Reontrex. It contained the restricted sections on the Curse that the Angels Sanguine had inherited from the Blood Angels - only chaplains and the high priests were permitted access to these pages. Tenjin clicked a switch, releasing the transparent cabinet that controlled the atmosphere around the ancient text. He carefully lifted the volume from its pedestal and sat in meditation. The familiar pages washed through him; he didn't need to read them, for long ago they were committed to his photographic memory. Holding the book merely reassured him - he was touching a piece of the Angels' ancient legacy. He read in contemplative silence, with his eye lids gently closed over his tired eyes.

So it was that after the terrible death of Sanguinius the Blood Angels were divided into myriad successors, of which the Angels Sanguine were the most glorious and faithful to his image. But the blood of Sanguinius himself no longer ran with life, so what little remained was drained into the Red Grail of the Blood Angels, from whence it was consumed by the high priests of the successor Chapters. Thus could the blood and vitality of Sanguinius be preserved in the bodies of his children. New initiates and neophytes in the Angels Sanguine would be injected with the blood of their high priest and would drink from the Grail of Angels, overflowing with this blood, partaking in the essence of Sanguinius himself through the medium of his Chosen One. The omophagae organ of the neophyte then works to transpose the blood of Sanguinius' Chosen into the soul of each Marine - thus each successor Chapter gradually took on the characteristics of its high priests, the Chosen. The Angels Sanguine drew their essence from Sanguinius himself and from the courage and honour of Servius, the first high priest of this ancient Chapter -

Tenjin broke out of his meditation, struck by a terrible realisation. He scanned his enhanced memory, searching for recollections of each Marine to whom he had administered as they succumbed to the Rage or the Thirst. The pattern was undeniable - before Ansatsu had become the high priest, the Rage was focussed in the veteran companies of the Angels Sanguine, presumably

brought on by increasing and persistent exposure to bloody battle. Since Ansatsu had taken the Grail of Angels, however, incidents of the Rage had started to increase in the more junior companies. Tenjin's recent experience with the scout squad was the culmination of a definite trend.

What had Ansatsu said to him in the temple: all the tribes of Baalus Trine are at least slightly mutated. There had been a hint of satisfaction to his tone, Tenjin realised in hindsight. He also realised that the Angels Sanguine drew their new recruits from these mutants - that Ansatsu himself had been recruited from amongst their number, the first Baalus Trine Marine to rise to the rank of high priest. In the blood of the high priest runs a strain of deviance! Tenjin could hardly contain his visceral response to this insight, and he was on his feet in an instant, searching for a weapon. The purest blood of Sanguinius was diluted and curdled by the sullied blood of Ansatsu before being injected into the neophytes - of course the Thirst would strike increasingly at the novices, as the essence of Sanguinius was drowned out by the pollution of Ansatsu. The Grail of Angels was transformed into a Grail of Damnation. How long would it take for the whole Chapter to be ruined beyond repair? By the Throne, numbers were low enough already. Tenjin resolved that this must end, now.

'ENDO, CAN YOU hear me, my child?' Ansatsu gazed affectionately down at the young scout and smiled. 'Well done, my son. Well done.' The scout bucked and thrashed under the admantium shackles, shrieking at the unseen images that tortured his soul and screaming in agony as his blood burned.

IN FULL BATTLE armour, resplendent in blood red on his right and deathly black on his left, Chaplain Tenjin pulled his Death Mask over his head, grabbed his flamer and melta-gun, securing his ancient power fist to the holster on his leg. The Rosarius glowed righteously, suspended over his primary heart on a chain of some long forgotten metal. On his back, his jump pack hummed quietly, waiting impatiently to burst into life on his command.

The chaplain flicked a krak grenade at the locked doors of his chamber. It detonated on impact, blasting the door violently out into the corridor. Tenjin stepped through the residual flames, emerging into the passageway beyond like a phantom of death itself. Two of his guards had been killed instantly, squashed into pulp by the sudden impact of the heavy adamantium. The others just stared at the chaplain looming over them in terrible clarity, flames licking at his

armour, purple eyes piercing their souls from the depths of his Death Mask. The guards, dazed from the concussion and terror, turned and ran, vanishing into the maze of corridors - Tenjin let them go, not caring about the alarms that they would raise.

The route to the Temple of the high priest took Tenjin through the holding cells around the Apothecarion, the secured encampment of Death Company initiates while they waited to join their cursed battle brothers on campaigns off-world. The chaplain blew the doors without a moment's hesitation, detonating a melta-bomb against the blast shields. Once inside, Tenjin was unsurprised to see the remnants of his scout squad, bedecked in the black armour of the Death Company. A chaplain knelt before them, chanting a litany of tranquillity, keeping them in control of themselves until they would be needed in battle. Without pausing for breath, Tenjin fired off a pulse of melta, instantly rendering the head of the shocked chaplain into a pool of molten flesh and bone.

'You six with me!' he demanded with a whispered authority that the novice Death Company could not resist. 'There is blood to be split. For the Emperor and Sanguinius!'

'For the Emperor and Sanguinius!' rejoined the Death Company as they chased out of the chamber, hot on the heels of the veteran chaplain, eager to please the awesome figure and desperate for battle.

The corridors were alive with guardsmen, digging themselves into junctions and blind corners. But they were no match for the rampage of the Death Company, which scythed through them, leaving a wake of blood and screams.

By the time Tenjin reached the Temple, Ansatsu's honour guard were arrayed before it. His standard bearer stood forward of the group, raising the banner of the Angels Sanguine for the charging Death Company to see. 'In the name of Sanguinius and his rightful Chosen, cease this treachery!'

The Death Company slowed, their already confused minds tugged in two different directions at once as the symbolism of their own standard yanked at their thoughts. But Tenjin was ready for this and was immediately at the front of the charge, his Rosarius blazing with life and his Death Mask filling his squad with awe. He fired his flamer as he ran, letting the flames plume out before him, obliterating the image of the Standard Bearer. This was enough, and the Death Company ploughed on through the flames to engage the honour guard - stoked with their own powerful sense of righteousness. By the time they caught sight of the standard again, it was too late, the two forces were already locked in combat and the formidable momentum of the Rage had obliterated their ability to reason.

Tenjin himself was in the air above the battle, the jets of his jump pack roaring with life as he cursed the cowardice of Ansatsu, hidden behind his honour guard in the sanctuary of his great temple. The chaplain blazed a fiery path through the night sky, heading for the roof of the temple, which bristled with the ugly, gothic magnificence of gargoyles and jagged turrets.

Another krak grenade and the roof was open - a gap large enough for a Space Marine yawned into the darkness below, and Tenjin was through it before the rain of masonry had even fallen to the ground. Casting his Death Mask aside, he left the battle raging outside, searching for his prize in the shadowy interior. He gunned the engine of his jump pack. The burners roared, ripping the heavily shadowed air into strips of flame ...

'I THINK THAT I know the story from here,' said Inquisitor Addiss, leaning back from the Tablet of Lestrallio and clicking a switch to release the adamantium bonds that shackled Tenjin. As the inquisitor shifted, Tenjin caught a glimpse of the strange Deathwatch librarian behind him.

Tenjin looked confused, spitting a mouthful of blood onto the ground as he struggled to sit up. His injuries were severe and even this slight movement racked him with pain. Without his armour, he felt weak and exposed. 'Then, you believe me, inquisitor?' The chaplain was suspicious and incredulous.

'It doesn't matter whether you are right. It doesn't even matter whether I believe you. What matters is that you believe yourself, and that I believe that.'

'Does the Inquisition not care what I have done?'

'The Inquisition is more interested in why you have done it, brother chaplain. Your purity and honour are our concerns - your actions are your own. As I said, only the Emperor can judge those.'

'I have been true to myself,' insisted Tenjin, reassuring himself and the inquisitor all at once.

The inquisitor and the librarian exchanged glances. 'Yes, that is clear to me now. What may not be clear to you is that you have also done a service to the Inquisition.'

Tenjin tilted his head and looked quizzically at the inquisitor. 'No, that is not clear to me. My service was to the Emperor and Sanguinius.'

'Indeed. But it is also the case that I have been surveying the behaviour of your former high priest for some time. I was suspicious of his affection for the mutant tribesmen of Baalus Trine, suspicious enough to enlist the aid of Ashok as he returned from his term of service with the Deathwatch.'

Tenjin's eyes fell on the shadowy figure behind the inquisitor - the same one who had stood at the shoulder of Ansatsu three months before. He was the same Marine who had stood beside the inquisitor outside the temple, when Tenjin had finally been brought to the ground. And Tenjin was sure that he had him before - long ago. What role did this librarian serve?

'Ansatsu trusted Ashok, evidently believing that the Thirst of the Death Company could not really be mastered, and suspecting that he had been tainted by his years of exposure to the forces of Chaos in the Deathwatch - our librarian did not seek to disillusion him. Ashok reported on the "tastes" of the high priest - the blood rites in which he participated, drinking the blood of the Baalite cultists and their mutant victims. For the Inquisition this demonstrated that he was tainted already, perhaps a legacy of his years as a tribesman himself. For Ashok, however, a librarian of the Angels Sanguine, the fear was that this blood drinking would transform Ansatsu into a devoted follower of Khorne, as his omophagae organ internalised the cravings of the cultists whose blood he consumed. Ashok told me that Ansatsu's thoughts betrayed a plan to transform the Angels Sanguine, but he could discern no details. For a long time he suspected that you were part of that plan.

'The Inquisition was also not ignorant of the increasing Thirst of the neophytes and the younger Marines,' continued Addiss, 'and I was suspicious that this was some part of Ansatsu's plan, but we could not work out how Ansatsu might control this. Your explanation of the function of the Grail of Angels is compelling in this regard.'

Tenjin was wide-eyed. 'When did you know that I was not part of this?'

'Not until now. Ashok began to doubt your complicity when Ansatsu removed you from the Death Company, letting it rampage uncontrollably around the frontier, shedding immeasurable oceans of blood in which the high priest seemed to delight. But the actions of the scout squad under your command made him suspicious again - perhaps you were the agent of their corruption? However, Ansatsu was shocked and delighted by the slaughter those scouts unleashed. His plan was beginning to take shape. Now, it seems to us, he had the perfect excuse to remove you from the scene - his veteran chaplain, the most experienced Angel in the arts of controlling exactly what he wanted to release.

'Your bloody confrontation with the high priest was ambiguous for us. It was possible that it was the result of your own flaws, that you had succumbed to the Thirst and that you were lashing out against your own battle bothers. There was Rage in your eyes when we found you outside the temple, and we could not take any chances.'

'Hence the Tablet of Lestrallio.'

'Exactly so. We had to be sure that you had acted out of honour and faith in the Emperor and Sanguinius, not out of a blind thirst for blood. It doesn't matter whether your theory about the Grail of Angels is correct - Ansatsu was corrupt and your motives were pure ...'

The inquisitor trailed off, distracted by the movements of Ashok behind him. The librarian had dropped to his knees, sweeping his cloak into a whirl as he bowed his head and gripped his fist to his chest.

Tenjin had also seen the flamboyant deference of the veteran librarian, and understanding began to seep into his mind as though carried in his blood. He swung his legs over the side of the tablet and pushed himself painfully to his feet - the imperatives of dignity.

Addiss shifted his eyes from Tenjin to Ashok, his incomprehension gradually turning to suspicion as he saw the eyes of the two Angels Sanguine fix on each other, sharing an unspoken understanding. The inquisitor narrowed his eyes and calculated silently, sandwiched into this moment of recognition without sharing it. He had never trusted librarians, with their Psychic Hoods and Force Staffs. They reeked of Warp-taint. He could taste them in the air, and they made him nauseous.

And then there were the Angels Sanguine: Addiss had been within an eldar's blade width of requesting a Sisters of Battle retinue for his visit to Baalus Trine. How mutated did they have to be before they became heretics - living offences to their armour and their gene-seed? He had only changed his mind when he realised that such a request would have handed authority over to the Ecclesiarchy on a platter. Emperor knows that there is no love lost between the Ecclesiarchy and the chaplains of the Blood Angels. Addiss was not about to let go of this case.

Clarity began to filter through his confusion, and Addiss began to understand the impromptu ceremony being enacted around him. The pieces were falling into place. With Ansatsu gone, the veteran chaplain Tenjin had become the most senior figure in the Angels Sanguine - he would automatically accede to the position of high priest.

He watched the chaplain and the librarian as their eyes flashed in concentration, and he wondered what they would do now. How would they render these events into silence? How could they explain the loss of so many of their Chapter, including their high priest - especially with their numbers so low already? Would the Ordo Hereticus be interested in these explanations?

An unwelcome thought forced its way into Addiss' mind, pushing his pontifications aside and stamping its presence into his consciousness.

This is how we guarantee silence.

The inquisitor jolted out of his reverie and turned on his heel. The face of the librarian was deathly white and his eyes burned with a blinding red, piercing Addiss' soul and holding his body immobile.

You will tell no one of this, brother inquisitor.

Addiss could feel his oesophagus contracting, squeezing his breath out into the cold air of the Apothecarion. He opened his mouth to protest, to demand that Ashok release him, to force him to remember the battles they fought together over the last decades, but no words came out. He grasped at his throat in a futile attempt to tear away the invisible hands that strangled him.

Struggling against the librarian's restraints, Addiss turned to the face of Tenjin, letting his eyes reach out for some mercy from the new high priest. He found nothing but blood in those eyes, and he watched in horror as Tenjin performed a crisp cutting signal with his hand.

'For Sanguinius and the Emperor,' said Tenjin with clinical calm.

Ashok's eyes flared even brighter and Addiss spun involuntarily to face him, his feet hardly touching the floor. He tried to look away, but Ashok held his gaze immovably.

The thoughts seemed to form somewhere down near his stomach, swelling and pushing their way up through his abdomen. For Sanguinius and the Emperor, death comes for you. The words bubbled through his blood, rushing through his jugular, flooding his brain with fatal certainty. Death comes for you. Death comes. It is here.

At the very end of his life, Addiss saw the world in glorious red-shift, a spectrum of crimsons, scarlets, and rubies. The capillaries in his eyes ruptured in their thousands as the blood in his head quested for a vent - creating new escape routes for the building pressure.

As the inquisitor lay dead, blood oozing freely from his eyes into a slow flood around his prone body, Tenjin nodded his approval to Ashok. 'For Sanguinius,' they said together.

'Take the Second Company and deal with the remnants of his retinue,' said Tenjin with calm certainty, 'none must be allowed to leave this place.'

Ashok nodded his assent. Sliding his hood over his head, the Angels Sanguine librarian swept out of the Apothecarion, his Force Staff crackling in his hand.

Book Four

HEART OF RAGE

by James Swallow

IN THE BLOOD-WARM gloom, amid the shrouding, cloying thickness of the air, the heart beat on. A clock ticking towards death, a ceaseless rhythm echoing through his body. A cadence that inched him, pulse by throbbing pulse, towards the raging madness of the Thirst.

Engorged with vital fluid, the heart pressed against the inside of his ribcage, trip-hammer impacts growing faster and faster, reaching out, threatening to engulf him. His every sense rang with the force of it, the rushing in his ears, his arrow-sharp sight fogged and hazy, the scent of old rust thick in his nostrils… And the taste.

Oh yes, the taste… Congealing upon his tongue, the heavy meat-tang like burned copper, the wash across his fangs. The aching, delirious need to drink deep.

Clouds of ruby and darkness billowed about him, surrounded him, dragged him roaring into the void, damned and destined to surrender to it. These were the enemies that he and all his kindred could never defeat, the unslakable Red Thirst and its terrible twin, the berserker fury of the Black Rage. These were the legacy of The Flaw, the foes he would face for eternity, beyond all others, for they were trapped within him. Woven like threads of poison through the tapestry of his DNA, the bane-gift of his lord and master ten thousand years dead.

Sanguinius. Primarch and noblest among the Emperor's sons. The Great Angel, the Brightest One. The Shockwave of the master's murder, millennia gone yet forever resonant, thundered in his veins. The power of the primarch's angelic splendour and matchless strength filled him… And yet the other face of that golden coin was dark, dark as rage, dark as fury, darker than any hell-spawned curse upon creation.

Their boon and their blight. The malevolent mirror of the beast inside every brother of the Blood Angels Chapter.

BROTHER-CODICIER GARAS Nord knelt upon the chapel's flagstones, the only sound about him the whisper of servo-skulls high overhead, watching the lone Space Marine with indifferent attention.

Hunched forwards in prayer, his broad frame was alone before the simple iron altar. Wan light cast by biolumes cast hollow colour over his face. It glittered across the sullen indigo of his battle armour and the gold chasing of the metal skull upon his chest. The glow caught the deep, rich red of his right shoulder pauldron and the sigil of his Chapter, a winged drop of crimson blood. It glittered upon the matrix of fine crystal about his bowed head, where the frame of a psychic hood rose from his gorget - and it caught in accusing shadows the faint trembling of Nord's gauntleted hands, where they met and crossed in the shape of the Imperial aquila.

Nord's eyes were closed, but his senses were open. His hands tightened into fists. The ominous echoes of the dream still clung to him, defeating his every attempt to banish them.

He released a sigh. Visions were no stranger to him. They were as much a tool to his kind as the hood or the force axe sheathed upon his back. Nord had The Sight, the twisted blessing of psionic power, and with it he fought alongside his brothers in the Adeptus Astartes, to bolster them upon the field of conflict. In his time he had seen many things, great horrors spilling into the world from the mad realms of the warp, forms that pulled at reason with their sheer monstrosity. Darkness and hate… And once in a while, a glimpse of something. A possibility. A future.

It had saved his life on Ixion, when prescience turned his head, a split second before a las-bolt cut through the air. He still wore the burn scar from that near-hit across his cheek, livid against his face.

But this was different. No flash of reflex, just a dream, over and over. He could not help but wonder - was it also a warning?

His kind… They had many names - telekine, witchkin, warp-touched, psyker - but beyond it all he was something more. A Son of Sanguinius. A Blood Angel. Whatever visions of fate his mind conjured for him, his duty came before them all.

If the spirit of Sanguinius were to beckon him towards a death, then he prayed that it would be a noble sacrifice; an ending not in the wild madness of the Black Rage, but one forged in honour. A death worthy of his primarch, worthy of one who had perished protecting Holy Terra and the Emperor himself from the blades of arch-traitors.

'Nord.' He sensed the new presence in the chapel, the edges of a hard, disciplined psyche, a thing forged like sword-blade steel.

The Codicier opened his eyes and looked up at the statue of the Emperor behind the altar. The Emperor looked down, impassive and silent. The eyes of the carving seemed to track Nord as he bowed before it. It offered only mute counsel, but that was just and right. For now, whatever troubled the Codicier was his burden to carry.

Nord rose to find Brother-Sergeant Kale approaching, his boots snapping against the stone floor. He sketched a salute and Kale nodded in return.

'Sir,' he began. 'Forgive me. I hoped to take a moment of reflection before we embarked upon the mission proper.'

Kale waved away his explanation. 'Your tone suggests you did not find it, Garas.'

Nord gave his battle-brother a humourless smile. 'Some days peace is more difficult to find than others.'

'I know exactly what you mean.' Kale's hand strayed to his chin and he rubbed the rasp of white-grey stubble there with red-armoured fingers. 'I doubt I have had a moment's quiet since we embarked.' He gestured towards the chapel doors and Nord walked with him.

The Codicier studied the other man. They were contrasts in colour and shade, the warrior and the psyker.

Sergeant Brenin Kale's wargear was crimson from head to toe, dressed with honour-chains of black steel and gold detailing, purity seals and engravings that listed his combat record. Under one arm he carried his helmet, upon it the white laurel of a veteran. He wore a chainsword in a scabbard along the line of his right arm, the tungsten fangs of the blade grey and sharp. His face was pale and pitted, the mark of radiation damage, and he sported a queue of wiry hair from a top-knot; and yet there was a patrician solidity to his aspect, a strength and nobility that time and war had not yet diminished.

Nord shared Kale's build and stature, as did every Son of Sanguinius, the bequest of the gene-seed implantation process each Adeptus Astartes endured as an initiate. But there the similarity ended. Where Kale was sallow of face, Nord's skin was rust-red like the rad-deserts of Baal Secundus, and the laser scar was mirrored on his other cheek by the electro-tattoo of a single blood droplet, caught as if falling from the corner of his eye. Nord's hairless scalp was bare except for the faint tracery of a molly-wire matrix just beneath the flesh, implanted to improve connectivity with his psychic hood. And his armour was a uniform blue everywhere except his shoulder, contrasting against the red of the rest of his battle-brothers. The colour set him apart, showed him for what he was beneath the plasteel and ceramite. Witchkin. Psyker. A man without his peace.

WITHIN THE CHAPEL, one might have thought they stood inside a church upon any one of billions of hive-worlds across the Imperium. If not for the banners of the Adeptus Astartes and the Navy, the place would be no different from all those other basilicas: sacred places devoted to the worship of the God-Emperor of Humanity. But this church lay deep in the decks of the frigate Emathia, protected by vast iron ribs of hull-metal, nestled between the accelerator cores of the warship's primary and secondary lance cannons.

Nord left the sanctum behind, and - so he hoped - his misgivings, walking in easy lockstep with his sergeant. Half-human servitors and worried crew serfs scattered out of their way, clearing a path for the Space Marines.

'We left the warp a few hours ago,' offered Kale. 'The squad is preparing for deployment.'

'I'll join them,' Nord began, but Kale shook his head.

'I want you with me. I have been summoned to the bridge.' A sourness entered the veteran's tone. 'The tech-priest wishes to address me personally before we proceed.'

'Indeed? Does he think he needs to underline our mission to us once again? Perhaps he believes he has not repeated it enough.' Nord was silent for a moment. 'I may not be the best choice to accompany you. I believe our honoured colleague from the Adeptus Mechanicus finds my presence… discomforting.'

Kale's lip curled. 'That's one reason I want you there. Keep the bastard off balance.'

'And the other?'

'In case I feel the need to kill him.'

Nord allowed himself a smirk. 'If you expect me to dissuade you, brother-sergeant, you have picked the wrong man.'

'Dissuade me?' Kale snorted. 'I expect you to assist!'

The gallows humour of the moment faded; to casually discuss the murder of a High Priest of the Magus Biologis, even in rough jest, courted grave censure. But the eminent magi gathered dislike to him with such effortless ease, it was hard to imagine that the man wanted anything else than to be detested. Scant weeks they had been aboard the Emathia on its journey to this light-forsaken part of the galaxy, and in that time the Exalted Tech-Priest Epja Xeren had shown only aloof disrespect for both the Blood Angels and the frigate's hardy officers.

Nord wondered why Xeren had not simply used one of the Mechanicum's own starships for this operation, or employed his cadre's tech-guard. Like many factors surrounding this tasking, it sat uneasily with the Codicier; he sensed the same concern in Kale's emotional aura.

'This duty…' said Kale in a low voice, his thoughts clearly mirroring those of his battle-brother, 'it has the stink of subterfuge about it.'

Nord gave a nod. 'And yet, all the diktats from the Adeptus Terra were in order. Despite his manner, the priest is valued by the Imperial Council.'

'Civilians,' grunted the sergeant. 'Politicians! Sometimes I wonder if arrogance is the grease upon their wheels.'

'They might say the same of us. That we Adeptus Astartes consider ourselves to be their betters.'

'Just so,' Kale allowed. 'The difference is, where we are concerned, that fact is true.'

EMATHIA'S ORNATE BRIDGE was a vaulted oval cut from planes of brass and steel, dominated by great lenses of crystal ranging down towards the frigate's bow. Below the deck, in work-pits among the ship's cogitators, hunchbacked servitors hissed to one another, busying themselves with the running of the vessel. Officers in blue-black tunics walked back and forth, overseeing their work.

The ship's commander, resplendent in a red-trimmed duty jacket, turned from a gas-lens viewer and gave the Astartes a bow.

'Sergeant Kale, Brother Nord. We're very close now. Come.' Captain Hyban Gorolev beckoned them towards him.

Nord liked the man; Gorolev had impressed him early on with his grasp of Adeptus Astartes protocol and the careful generosity with which he commanded Emathia's crew. Nord had encountered Navy men who ruled their ships through fear and intimidation. Gorolev was quite unlike that; he had a fatherly way to him, a mixture of sternness tempered by sincerity that bonded his crew through mutual loyalty. Nord saw in the captain the mirror of brotherhood with his kindred.

'The derelict is near,' he was saying. Gorolev's sandy-coloured face was fixed in a frown. 'Interference continues to defeat the scrying of our sensors, however. There is wreckage. Evidence of plasma fire…' He trailed off.

Nord sensed the man's apprehension but said nothing, catching sight of a readout thick with lines of text in Gothic script. He saw recitations that

suggested organic matter out there in the void. Unbidden, the Codicier's gaze snapped up and he stared out through the viewports. The ghost of a cold, undefined emotion began to gather at the base of his thoughts.

'Adeptus Astartes.' The voice had all the tonality of a command, a summons, a demand to be given fealty.

Filtered and machine-altered, the word emitted from a speaker embedded in a face where a mouth had once been. Eyes of titanium clockwork measured the Blood Angels coldly. Flesh, what there was of it, was subsumed into carbide plates that disappeared beneath a hood. A great gale of black robes hung loose to pool upon the decking, concealing a form that was a collection of sharp angles; the silhouette of a body that bore little resemblance to anything natural-born. Antennae blossomed from tailored holes in the habit, and out of hidden pockets, manipulators and snake-like mechadendrites moved, apparently of independent thought and action.

This thing that stood before them at the edge of the frigate's tacticarium, this not-quite-man seemingly built from human pieces and scrapyard leavings… This was Xeren.

'Your mission will commence momentarily,' said the tech-priest. He shifted slightly, and Nord heard the working of pistons. 'You are ready?'

'We are Adeptus Astartes,' Kale replied, with a grimace. The words were answer enough.

'Quite.' Xeren inclined his head towards the hololithic display, which showed flickers of hazy light. 'This zone is filthy with expended radiation. It may trouble even your iron constitution, Blood Angel.'

'Doubtful.' Kale's annoyance was building. 'Your concern is noted, magi. But now we are here, I am more interested in learning the identity of this hulk you have tasked us to secure for you. We cannot prosecute a mission to the best of our abilities without knowing what we will face.'

'But you are Adeptus Astartes,' said Xeren, making little effort to hide his mocking tone. Before Kale could respond, the tech-priest's head bobbed. 'You are quite right, brother-sergeant,' he demurred, 'I have been secretive with the specifics of this operation. But once you see your target, you will understand the need for such security.'

There was a clicking sound from Xeren's chest; Nord wondered if it might be the Mechanicum cyborg's equivalent of a gasp.

'Sensors are clearing,' noted Gorolev. 'We have a clean return.'

'Show me,' snapped Kale.

Earlier during the voyage, just to satisfy his mild interest, Nord had allowed his psychic senses to brush the surface of Xeren's mind. What he had sensed

there was unreadable; not shrouded, but simply inhuman. Nothing that he could interpret as emotions, only a coldly logical chain of processes with all the nuance of a cogitator program. And yet, as the hololith stuttered and grew distinct, for the briefest of moments Nord was certain he felt the echo of a covetous thrill from the tech-priest.

'Here is your target,' said Xeren.

'Throne of Terra…' The curse slipped from Gorolev's lips as the image solidified. 'Xenos!'

It resembled a whorled shell, a tight spiral of shimmering bone curved in on itself. Coils of fibrous matter that suggested sinew webbed it, and from one vast orifice along the ventral plane, a nest of pasty tenticular forms issued outwards, grasping at nothing.

It lay among a drift of broken chitin and flash-frozen fluids, listing. Great scars marked the flanks of the alien construct, and in places there were craters, huge pockmarks that had exploded outwards like city-sized pustules.

There seemed to be no life to it. It was a gargantuan, bilious corpse. A dead horror, there in the starless night.

'This is what you brought us to find?' Kale's voice was loaded with menace. 'A tyranid craft?'

'A hive ship,' Xeren corrected. The tech-priest ignored the silence that had descended on the Emathia's bridge, the mute shock upon the faces of Gorolev's officers.

'A vessel of this tonnage is no match for a tyranid hive,' said Nord. 'Their craft have defeated entire fleets and pillaged the crews for raw bio-mass to feast upon!'

'It is dead,' said the priest. 'Have no fear.'

'I am not afraid,' Nord retorted, 'but neither am I a fool! The tyranids are not known as "the Great Devourer" without reason. They are a plague, organisms that exist solely to consume and replicate. To destroy all life unlike them.'

'You forget yourself.' Xeren's tone hardened. 'The authority here is mine. I have brought you to this place for good reason. Look to the hive. It is dead,' he repeated.

NORD STUDIED THE image. The xenos craft exhibited signs of heavy damage, and its motion and course suggested it was unguided.

'My orders come from the highest echelons of the Magistratum,' continued the tech-priest. 'I am here to oversee the capture of this derelict, in the name of

the God-Emperor and Omnissiah!'

'Capture…' Kale echoed the word. Nord saw the veteran's sword-hand twitch as he weighed the command.

'Consider the bounty within that monstrosity,' Xeren addressed them, Adeptus Astartes and officers all. 'Nord is quite correct. The tyranids are a scourge upon the stars, a virus writ large. But like any virus, it must be studied if a cure is to be found.' A spindly machine-arm whirred, moving to point at the image. 'This represents an unparalleled opportunity. This hive ship is a treasure trove of biological data. If we take it, learn its secrets…' He gave a clicking rasp. 'We might turn the xenos against themselves. Perhaps even tame them…'

'How did you know this thing was here?' Nord tore his gaze from the display.

Xeren answered after a moment. 'The first attempt to take the hive was not a success. There were complications.'

'You will tell us what transpired,' said Kale. 'Or we will go no further.'

'Aye,' rasped Gorolev. The captain had turned pale and sweaty, his fingers kneading the grip of his holstered laspistol.

Xeren gave another clicking sigh, and inclined his head on whining motors. 'A scouting party of Archeo-Technologists boarded the craft under the command of an adept named Indus. We believe that a splinter force from a larger hive fleet left this ship behind after it suffered some malfunction. Evidence suggests—'

'This Adept Indus,' Kale broke in. 'Where is he?'

Xeren looked away. 'The scouting party did not return. Their fate is unknown to me.'

'Consumed!' grated Gorolev. 'Throne and Blood! Any man that ventures in there would be torn apart!'

'Captain.' warned the brother-sergeant.

The tech-priest paid no attention to the officer's outburst. 'It is my firm belief that the hive ship, although not without hazards, is dormant. For the moment, at least.' He came closer on iron-clawed feet. 'You understand now why the Adeptus Mechanicus wish to move with alacrity, Blood Angel?'

'I understand,' Kale replied, and Nord saw the tightening of his jaw. Without another word, the veteran turned on his heel and strode away. Nord moved with him, and they were into the corridor before the Space Marine felt a hand upon his forearm.

'LORDS.' GOROLEV SHOT a look back towards the bridge as the hatch slammed shut, his eyes narrowing. 'A word?' Suspicion flared black in the man's aura.

'Speak,' Kale replied.

'I've made no secret of my reservations about the esteemed tech-priest's motive and manner,' said the captain. 'I cannot let this pass without comment.' His face took on the cast of anger and old fear. 'By the Emperor's grace, I am a veteran of many conflicts with the xenos, those tyranid abominations among them.' Gorolev's words brimmed with venom. 'Those… things. I've seen them rape worlds and leave nothing but ashen husks in their wake.' He leaned closer. 'That hive ship should not be studied like some curiosity. It should be atomized!'

Kale held up a hand and Gorolev fell silent. 'There is nothing you have said I disagree with, ship-master. But we are servants of the God-Emperor, Nord and I, you and your crew, even Xeren. And we have our duty.'

For a moment, it seemed as if Gorolev was about to argue; but then he nodded grimly, resigned to fulfilling his orders. 'Duty, then. In the Emperor's name.'

'In the Emperor's name,' said Kale.

Nord opened his mouth to repeat the oath, but he found his voice silenced.

So fleeting, so mercurial and indistinct that it was gone even as he turned his senses towards it, Nord felt… Something.

A gloom, stygian-deep and ominous, passing over him as a storm cloud might obscure the sun. There, and gone. A presence. A mind?

The sense of black and red clouds pressed in on the edges of his thoughts and he pushed them away.

'Nord?' He found Kale studying him with a careful gaze.

He cleared his thoughts with a moment's effort. 'Brother-Sergeant,' he replied. 'The mission, then?'

Kale nodded. 'The mission, aye.'

THE BOARDING TORPEDO penetrated the hull of the tyranid vessel high along the dorsal surface. Serrated iron razor-cogs bit into the bony structure and turned, ripping at shell-matter and bunches of necrotic muscle, dragging the pod through layers of decking, into the voids of the hive ship's interior.

Then, at rest, the seals released and the Space Marines deployed into the alien hulk, weapons rising to the ready.

Sergeant Kale led from the front, as he always did. He slipped down from the mouth of the boarding torpedo, playing his bolt pistol back and forth, sweeping the chamber for threats. Nord was next, then Brother Dane, Brother Serun and finally Corae, who moved with care as he cradled his flame-thrower.

The weapon's pilot lamp hissed quietly to itself, dancing there in the wet, stinking murk.

The Codicier felt the floor beneath his boots give under his weight; the decking - if it could be called that - was made up of rough plates of bone atop something that could only be flesh, stretching away in an arching, curved passageway. By degrees, the chamber lightened as Nord's occulobe implant contracted, adjusting the perception range of his eyes.

Great arching walls that resembled flayed meat rose around the Blood Angels, along with fluted spires made of greasy black cartilage that drooled thin fluids. Puckered sphincters lay sagging and open, allowing a slaughterhouse stench to reach them. Here and there were the signs of internal damage, long festering wounds open and caked with xenos blood.

Nord picked out glowing boles upon the walls arranged at random intervals; it took a moment before he realised that they were actually fist-sized beetles, clinging to the skin-walls, antennae waving gently, bodies lit with dull bio-luminescence.

There were more insectile creatures in the shadows, little arachnid things that moved sluggishly, crawling in and out of the raw-edged cuts.

'Damage everywhere,' noted Serun, his gruff voice flattened by the thick air of the tyranid craft. 'But no signs of weapons fire.'

'It appears the tech-priest was right.' Kale examined one of the walls. 'Whatever fate befell this ruin, it was not caused by battle.' He beckoned his men on. 'Serun, do you have a reading?'

Brother Serun studied the sensor runes on the auspex device in his hand. 'A faint trace from the adept's personal locator.' He pointed in an aftward direction.

'That way.'

Kale's gaze drifted towards Nord. 'Is he alive, this man Indus?'

The psyker stiffened; warily extending his preternatural senses forwards. He could discern only the pale glitters of thought-energy from the spider-things and the lamp-beetles; nothing that might suggest a reasoning mind, let alone a human one. 'I have no answer for you, sir,' he said at length.

'With caution, then, brothers.' Kale walked on, and they followed him, silent and vigilant.

THE CORRIDOR NARROWED into a tube, and Nord imagined it a gullet down which the Adeptus Astartes were travelling. He had encountered tyranids before, but only upon the field of battle, and then down the sights of a missile launcher. He had never ventured aboard one of their craft, and it was exactly the horror he had expected it to be.

Tyranid vessels were not the product of forges and shipyards; they were spawned. Hive ships were spun out of knots of meat and bone, grown on the surface of captured worlds in teeming vats filled with a broth of liquefied biomass. They were living things, animals by some vague definition of the term. Electrochemical processes and nerve ganglions transmitted commands about its flesh; pheremonic discharges regulated its internal atmosphere; exothermic chemistry created light and heat. Its hull was skeletal matter, protecting the crew that swarmed like parasites inside the gut of the craft. Together, the hive was a contained, freakish ecosystem, drifting from world to world driven by the need to feed and feed.

Even in this half-dead state, Nord could taste the echo of that aching, bone-deep craving, as if it were leaking from the twitching walls. The fleshy wattles that dangled from the ceiling, the corpse-grey cilia and phlegmy deposits around his feet, all of it sickened him with its dead stench and the sheer, revolting affront of the tyranids' very existence. This xenos abortion was everything that the Imperium, in all its human glory, was not. A chaotic riot of mutant life, disordered and rapacious, without soul or intellect. The absolute antithesis of the civilisation the Adeptus Astartes had fought to preserve since the days of Old Night.

Nord's hand tightened around his pistol; the urge to kill this thing rose high, and he reined it in, denying the tingle of a building Rage before it had freedom to form.

The chamber broadened into an uneven space, dotted with deep pits of muddy liquid that festered and spat, gaseous discharges chugging into the foetid air. Mounds of fatty deposits lay in uneven heaps, the ejecta from the processes churning in the ponds.

Serun gestured. 'Rendering pools. Bio-mass is brought here to be denatured into a liquid slurry.'

Corae spoke for the first time since they had boarded. 'To what end?'

'To feed the hive,' Serun replied. 'This… gruel is the raw material of the tyranids. They consume it, shape it. It is where they are born from.'

Kale dropped to his haunches. 'And where they kill,' he added. The sergeant picked something metallic from the spoil heaps and turned it in his fingers. A rank sigil of iron and copper, a disc cut to resemble a cogwheel. Upon it, the

design of a skull, the symbol of the Adeptus Mechanicus.

Corae turned his face and spat in disgust. 'Emperor protect me from such a fate.'

'More here,' said Brother Dane. With care, he drew to him a twisted shape afloat on one of the pools. It was a man's ribcage and part of a spine, but the bone was rubbery and distended where acidic fluids had eaten into it. It crumbled like wet sand in the Blood Angel's grip.

'Adept Indus, perhaps, and his scout team…' Kale suggested. He turned to face Nord and saw the psyker glaring into the dimness. 'Brother?'

The question had barely left his lips when the Codicier gave an explosive shout. 'Enemy!'

The shapes came at them from out of the twisted, sinewy ropes about the walls. Three beasts, bursting from concealment as one, attacking from all sides.

Corae was quick, clutching the trigger bar of his flamer. A bright gout of blazing promethium jetted from the bell-mouth of the weapon and engulfed the closest tyranid in flames, but on it came, falling into the red wave of death.

The second skittered across the ground, low and fast, dragging itself in loping jerks by its taloned limbs and great curved claws. Dane, Serun and the sergeant turned their bolters on it in a hail of punishing steel.

The third found Nord and dove at him, falling from the ceiling, spinning about as it came. He flung himself backwards, his storm bolter crashing his free hand reaching for the hilt of his force axe.

The tyranid landed hard and rocked off its hooves; Nord got his first good look at the thing and recognition unfolded in his forebrain, the legacy of a hundred hypnogogic combat indoctrination tapes. A lictor.

Humanoid in form, tall and festooned with barbs, they sported massive scything talons and a cobra-head tail. Where a man would have a mouth, the lictors grew a wriggling orchard of feeder tendrils. They were hunter-predator forms, deployed alone or in small packs, stealthy and favoured of ambush attacks. Unless Nord and his brothers killed them quickly, they would spill fresh pheromones into the air and summon more of their kind.

He reversed and met the alien with the flickering crystal edge of the axe, reaching into his heart and finding the reservoir of psychic might lurking within him. As the axe-head bit into the lictor's chest, Nord channelled a quickening from the warp along the weapon's psi-convector and into the xenos's new wound. Its agonised shriek battered at him, and he staggered as it tried to claw through his armour. Nord's bolter crashed again, hot rounds finding purchase in the pasty flesh of its thorax. He withdrew the axe again and struck again, over and over, riding on the battle-anger welling up inside him.

The Blood Angel was dimly aware of a death-wail off to his right, half-glimpsing another lictor fall as it was opened by shellfire and chainblade; but his target still lived.

A talon swept down, barbs screeching as they scored Nord's chest plate; in turn he let the axe fall again, this time severing a monstrous limb at the joint. Gouts of black blood spurted, burning where it landed, and the Codicier threw a wall of psionic pressure outwards, battering at the wounded creature.

The lictor's hooves slipped on the lip of a bio-pool and it stumbled backwards into the lake of stringy muck; instantly the churning acids ate into the tyranid and it collapsed, drowning and melting.

Nord regained his balance and waved a hand in front of his visor as oily smoke wafted past; the third tyranid was also dying, finally succumbing to Corae's flamer and the impacts of krak grenades.

A mechanical voice grated through his vox-link. 'Kale. Respond. This is Xeren. We have detected weapons fire. Report status immediately.'

Ignoring the buzzing of the tech-priest, the psyker approached the last dying lictor as Corae took aim with his flame-thrower, twisting the nozzle to adjust the dispersal pattern. The force axe still humming in his hand, his psychic power resonating through him, Nord caught the sense of the tyranid's animal mind, trapped in its death throes. He winced, the touch of it more abhorrent to him than anything he had yet witnessed aboard the hive ship.

Yet there, in the mass of its unknowable, alien thoughts, he glimpsed something. Great swirling clouds of red and black. And men, robed men with skeletal limbs of metal and copper cogs about their necks.

Corae pulled the trigger and laid a snake of fire over the beast, boiling its soft tissues beneath the hard chitin armour. Nord sheathed his axe and heard the voice again. Xeren seemed impatient.

'Perhaps you should not engage every tyranid you see.'

Kale was plucking spent flesh hooks from the crevices of his armour with quick, spare motions. 'The xenos did not offer us the choice, priest. And I remind you who it was that told us this ship was dead.'

'Where the tyranids are concerned, there are degrees of death. The ship is dormant, and so the majority of the swarm aboard should be quiescent. But some may retain a wakeful state… I suggest you avoid further engagements.'

'I will take that under advisement,' Kale retorted.

Xeren continued. 'You are proceeding too slowly, brother-sergeant, and without efficiency. Indus is the primary objective. Divide your forces to cover a greater area. Find him for me.'

The sergeant bolstered his gun, and any reply he might have made was

rendered pointless as the tech-priest cut the vox signal.

Serun's hands closed into fists. 'He dares bray commands as if he were Chapter Master? The scrawny cog has no right—'

'Decorum, kinsman,' said Kale. 'We are the Sons of Sanguinius. A mere tech-priest is not worth our enmity. We'll find Xeren's lost lamb soon enough and be done.'

'If he still lives,' mused Corae, nudging the powdery bones with his boot.

RELUCTANTLY, BROTHER-SERGEANT KALE chose to do as the tech-priest had suggested; beyond the bio-pool chamber the throat-corridors branched and he ordered Dane to break off, taking Corae and Serun with him. Brother Dane's element would move anti-spinwards through the hive ship's interior spaces, while Nord and his commander ventured along the other path.

The psyker threw the veteran a questioning look when he voiced the orders; in turn Kale's expression remained unchanged. 'Xeren and I agree on one point,' he noted. 'We both wish this mission to be concluded as quickly as possible.'

Nord had to admit he too shared that desire. He thought of Gorolev's words aboard the Emathia. The ship-master was right; this monstrous hulk was an insult every second it was allowed to exist.

Dane's team vanished into the clammy darkness and Nord followed Kale onwards. They passed through more rendering chambers, then rooms seemingly constructed from waxy matter, laced with spherical pods, each one wet and dripping ichor. They encountered other strange spaces that defied any interpretation of form or function; hollows where tooth-like spires criss-crossed from floor and ceiling; a copse of bulbous, acid-rimed fronds that resembled coral polyps; and great bladders that throbbed, thick liquid emerging from them in desultory jerks.

And there were the creatures. The first time they came across the alien forms, Nord's axe had come to his hand before he was even aware of it; but the tyranids they encountered were in some state that mirrored death, a strange hibernative trance that rendered them inert.

They crossed a high catwalk formed from spinal bone, and Kale used the pin-lamp beneath the barrel of his boltgun to throw a disc of light into the pits below. The glow picked out the hulking shape of a massive carnifex, its bullet-shaped head tucked into its spiny chest in some mad parody of a sleeping child.

The rasping breaths of the huge assault organism fogged the air, bone

armour and spines scraping across one another as its chest rose and fell. Awake, it could have killed the Blood Angels with a single blast of bio-poison from its slavering venom cannons.

Around the gnarled hooves of the slumbering carnifex, a clutch of deadly hormagaunts rested, shiny oil-black carapaces piled atop one another, clawed limbs folded back, talons sheathed. Nord gripped the force axe firmly, and it took a near physical effort for him to turn from the gallery of targets before him. Instead they moved on, ever on, picking their way in stealth through the very heart of the hive's dozing populace.

'Why do they ignore us?' Kale wondered, his question transmitted to the vox-bead in Nord's ear.

'They are conserving their strength, brother-sergeant,' he replied. 'Whatever incident caused this ship to fall away from the rest of its hive fleet, it must have drained them to survive it. I would not question our luck.'

'Aye,' Kale replied. 'Terra protects.'

'I—'

The force axe fell from Nord's fingers and the impact upon the bone deck seemed louder than cannon fire. Suddenly, without warning it was there.

A black and cloying touch enveloping his thoughts - the same sense of something alien he had felt aboard the Emathia.

A presence. A mind. Clouds, billowing wreaths of black and red, surrounding him, engulfing him.

'There… is something else here,' he husked. 'A psychic phantom, just beyond my reach. Measuring itself against me.' Nord's heart hammered in his chest; he tasted metal in his mouth. 'Not just the xenos… More than that.'

He grimaced, and strengthened his mental bulwarks, shoring them up with raw determination. The dark dream uncoiled in his thoughts, the rumbling pulse of the Red Thirst in his gullet, the churn of the Black Rage stiffening his muscles. All about him, the shadows seemed to lengthen and loom, leaking from the walls, ranging across the sleeping monsters to reach for the warrior with ebon fingers.

Nord gasped. 'Something is awakening.'

ACROSS THE PLANE of the hive ship's hull, Brother Dane brought up his fist in a gesture of command, halting Corae and Serun. 'Do you hear that?' he asked.

Corae turned, the flamer in his grip. 'It's coming from the walls.' They were

the last words he would utter.

Flesh-matter all around the squad ripped and tore into bleeding rags as claws shredded their way towards the Astartes. With brutal, murderous power, a tide of chattering freaks boiled in upon them, spines and bone and armoured heads moving in blurs. They were so fast that in the dimness they seemed like the talons of single giant animal, reaching out to take them.

Gunfire lit the corridor, the flat bang of bolter shells sounding shot after shot, the chugging belch of fire from the flamer issuing out to seek targets. In return came screaming - the blood-hungry shrieks of a warrior brood turned loose to find prey.

The horde of tyranid soldier organisms rolled over the Space Marines with no regard for their own safety; mindless things driven on by killer instinct and a desire to feed, they had no self to preserve. They were simply the blades of the hive, and the very presence of the intruders was enough to drive them mad.

Perhaps beings with intellect might have sensed the hand of something larger, something at the back of their thoughts, compelling them, driving them to destroy. But the termagants knew nothing but the lust to rip and rend.

Symbiotic phero-chemical links between the tyranids and the engineered bio-tools in their claws sent kill commands running before them. Like everything in their arsenal, the weapons used by the warriors were living things. Their fleshborers, great bell-mouthed flutes of chitin, spat clumps of fang-toothed beetles that chewed through armour and flesh in a destructive frenzy.

Numberless and unstoppable, the brood swallowed up Corae and Serun, opening them to the air in jets of red. Dane was the last to fall, his legs cut out from under him, his bolter running dry, becoming a club in his mailed fists. At the end of him, a storm of tusk blades pierced his torso, penetrating his lungs, his primary and secondary hearts.

Blood flooded his mouth and he perished in silence, his last act to deny the creatures the victory of his screams.

BROTHER NORD STUMBLED and fell to one knee, clutching at his chest in sympathetic agony. He felt Dane perish in his thoughts, heard the echo of the warrior's death, and that of Corae and Serun. Each man's ending struck him like a slow bullet, filling his gut with ice.

Nord's heart and its decentralised twin beat fast, faster, faster, his blood singing in his ears in a captured tempest. The same trembling he had felt back

in the chapel returned, and it was all he could do to fight it off.

He became aware of Brother-Sergeant Kale helping him to his feet, dimly registering his squad commander guiding him away from the hibernaculum chamber and into the flesh-warm humidity of the corridor beyond.

'Nord! Speak to me!'

He tried to answer but the psychic undertow dragged on him, taking all his effort just to stay afloat and sensate. The shocking resonance was far worse than he had ever felt before. There had been many times upon the field of combat where Nord had tasted the mind-death of others, sometimes his foes, too often his battle-brothers… But this… This was of a very different stripe.

At once alien and human, unknowable and yet known to him, the psychic force that had compelled the termagant swarm reached in and raked frigid claws over the surface of his mind. A pan of him screamed that he should withdraw, disengage and erect the strongest of his mental barriers. Every second he did not, he gave this force leave to plunge still deeper. And yet, another facet of Nord's iron will dared to face this power head-on, driven by the need to know it. To know it and destroy it.

Against the sickness he felt within, Nord tried to see the face of his enemy. The mental riposte was powerful; it hit him like a wall and he recoiled, his vision hazed crimson.

With a monumental psychic effort, Nord disengaged and slumped against a bony stanchion, his dark skin sallow and filmed with sweat.

He blinked away the fog in his vision and found his commander. Kale's pale face was grave in the dimness. 'The others?' he whispered.

'Dead,' Nord managed. 'All dead.'

The sergeant gave a grim nod. 'The Emperor knows their names.' He hesitated a moment. 'You felt it? With your witchsight, you saw… the enemy?'

'Aye.' The psyker got to his feet. 'It tried to kill me. Didn't take.'

Kale stood, drumming his fingers on the hilt of his chainsword. 'This… force that assaulted you?'

He shook his head, 'I've never sensed the like before, sir.'

'Do you know where it is?' The veteran gestured around at the walls with the chainsword.

Nord nodded. 'That, I do know.'

He heard the hunter's smile in the sergeant's voice. 'Show me.'

AT THE HEART of every tyranid nest, one breed of creature was supreme. If

the carnifexes and termagants, ripper swarms and biovores were the teeth and talons of the tyranid mass, then the commanding intellect was the hive tyrant. None had ever been captured alive, and few had been recovered by the Imperium intact enough for a full dissection. If the lictors and the hormagaunts and all the other creatures were common soldiery, the hive tyrants were the generals. The conduit for whatever passed as the diffuse mind of this repugnant xenos species.

Some even said that the tyrants were only a subgenus of something even larger and more intelligent; a cadre of tyranid capable of reasoning and independent thought. But no such being had ever been seen by human eyes - or if it had, those who had gazed upon it did not live to tell.

It was the hive ship's tyrant that the Blood Angels sought as they entered the orb-like hibernacula, the tech-priest's objective now ranked of lesser importance. If a tyrant was awake aboard this vessel, then none of them were safe.

'It's not a tyranid,' husked Nord. 'The thought-pattern I sensed… It wasn't the same as the lictor's.' He paused. 'At least, not in whole.'

Kale eyed him. 'Explain, brother. Your gift is a mystery to me. I do not understand.'

'The mind that touched my thoughts, that rallied the creatures who attacked us. It is neither human nor xenos.'

The sergeant halted. 'A daemon?' He said the word like a curse.

Nord shook his head. 'I do not sense the taint of Chaos here, sir. This is different…' Even as the words fell from his lips, the psyker felt the change in the air around them. The wet, damp atmosphere grew sullen and greasy, setting a sickly churn deep in his belly.

Kale felt it too, even without the Codicier's preternatural senses. The sergeant drew his chainsword and brandished it before him, his thumb resting on the weapon's activation stud.

A robed figure, there in the dimness. Perhaps a man, it advanced slowly towards them, feet dragging as if wounded. And then a voice, brittle and cracked.

'Me,' rasped the newcomer. 'You sense me, Adeptus Astartes.' The figure moved at the very edge of the dull light from the lamp-beetles. Nord's eyes narrowed; threads of clothing cables perhaps, seemed to trail behind the man, away into the dark.

Kale aimed his gun. 'In the Emperor's name, identify yourself or I will kill you where you stand.'

Hands opened in a gesture of concession. 'I do not doubt you already know

who I am.' He bowed slightly, and Nord saw cords snaking along his back. 'My name is Heraklite Indus, adept and savant, former Magis Biologis Minoris of the Adeptus Mechanicus.'

'Former?' echoed Kale.

Indus's shadowed head bobbed. 'Oh, yes. I attend a new master now. Let me introduce you to him.'

The strange threads pulled taut and lifted Indus off his feet, to dangle as a marionette would hang from the hands of a puppeteer. A shape that dwarfed him lumbered out of the black, drawing into the pool of light.

White as bleached bone, crested with purple-black patches of armour shell, it bent to fit its bulk inside the close quarters of the hibernacula; a hive tyrant, in all its obscene glory.

TWO OF ITS four arms were withered and folded to its torso, the pearlescent surface of their claws cracked and fractured. The other arms ended in ropey whips of sinew that threaded across the floor and into the adept's flayed spine, glittering wetly where bone was revealed beneath his torn robes.

And yet… The towering tyranid's breathing was laboured and rough, and from its eye-spots, its great fanged jaws, its fleshy throat-sacs, thin yellow pus oozed over crusted scabs. For all the horror and scale, the tyrant seemed slack and drained, without the twitchy, insectile frenzy of its lessers. A stinking haze of necrotic decay issued from it; Nord had tasted the scent of death enough times to know that this alien beast was mortally wounded.

'What have you done, Indus?' demanded Kale, his face twisted in disgust. In all his years, the veteran sergeant had never seen the like.

'Neither human nor xenos.' Nord repeated his earlier statement, the words suddenly snapping into hard focus. With a whip-crack thought, he sent a savage mental probe towards the adept; Indus spun to face him with a glare and the telepathic feint was deflected easily.

The adept nodded slowly. 'Yes, Blood Angel. We are the same. Both blessed with witchsight. Both psykers.' Indus cocked his head. 'Xeren never told you. How like him.'

'No matter,' growled Kale. Without hesitation, the sergeant opened fire and Nord followed suit, both Space Marines turning their weapons on the ugly, abhorrent pairing.

The hive tyrant shifted, drawing Indus close in a gesture of protection, shielding the adept from the bolt-rounds that whined off its chitinous armour.

Its head lolled back and a high screech issued from between its teeth; in reply there were hoots and howls from all around the Adeptus Astartes.

IN MOMENTS, SPHINCTERED rents in the hibernacula walls drew open, spilling dozens of mucus-slicked hormagaunts into the chamber. The chattering beasts rose up in a wave and the Blood Angels went to their blades. Kale's chainsword brayed as it chewed through bone; Nord's force axe cut lightning-flash arcs into meat, as barbed grasping claws dragged them down.

Nord caught a telepathic spark as blood from a cut gummed his right eye shut; he drew up his mental shields just as the hive tyrant released a scream of psychic energy upon them.

The wave of pain blasted across the chamber and the Codicier saw his battle-brother stumble, clutching his hands to his head in agony. Nord fared little better, the tyranid's telepathic onslaught sending him spinning. For long moments he waited for death to fall upon him, for the mass of hormagaunts to take the opportunity to rip him apart - but they did not.

Instead, the hissing monsters retreated, forming into a wall before the Space Marines, shielding Indus and the tyrant.

Nord went to Kale and helped him to his feet. The sergeant had lost his bolter in the melee, and he still shook from the after-effect of the psychic scream.

'We could have killed you,' said Indus. 'We chose not to.'

'You speak for the xenos now?' spat Nord.

Indus gave a crooked smile. 'A soldier's limited mindset. I had hoped for better from one with the sight.' He came forwards, the shuffling tyrant at his back. 'I found this creature near death, you understand? Too weak to fight me. I pushed in, touched its thoughts…' The adept gave a gasp of pleasure. 'And what I saw there. Such riches. The knowledge of flesh and bone, nerve and blood, an understanding! More than the scribes of the Magis Biologis could ever hope to learn. Race memory, Adeptus Astartes. Millions of years of it, to drink in…'

* * *

'FOOL,' REPLIED THE Blood Angel. 'Can you not see what you have done? The creature is near death! It used what strength it had to lure you in, place you

in its thrall! It uses you like it uses these mindless predators!' He gestured at the hormagaunts. 'When it is healed, it will reawaken every horror that walks or crawls within this hive, and turn again to the killing of men!'

'You are wrong,' Indus retorted. 'I have control here! I spared your lives!'

'I?' snapped Kale. 'A moment ago you said "we". Which is it?'

'The hive answers to me!' he shouted, the warrior creatures howling in empathy. 'I gave myself to the merging, and now see what I have at my hands…' Indus drew in a rattling breath. 'That is why Xeren sent you here. He is like you. Afraid. Jealous of what we are.'

'The priest knew of this?' hissed Kale.

Indus chuckled. 'Xeren saw it happen. He fled! He sent you to find us, praying you would destroy us so his cadre could take this hive for itself.'

Nord nodded to himself. 'Aboard a ship filled with killing machines, a deed only an Astartes could do.'

'You've seen the power of these creatures,' said the adept. 'This is only a tiny measure of what the swarm is capable of.' He extended a skeletal cybernetic arm towards the psyker. 'There is such majesty here, red in tooth and claw, Blood Angel. Come see it. Join me.' New, fang-mouthed tentacles issued forth from the tyrant's stunted arms, questing towards the Codicier. 'Our union is vast and giving, for those with the gift…'

His eyes narrowed, and with one sweeping blow, Brother Nord sliced down with his axe, severing the probing limbs in a welter of acidic blood. The tyrant screamed and rocked backwards.

'A grave mistake,' snarled Indus. 'You have no idea what you have denied yourself.'

'I know full well,' came the reply. 'My blood stays pure, by the Emperor's grace and the might of Sanguinis! You have willingly defiled yourself, debased your humanity… For that there can be no forgiveness.'

'We are not monsters!' shouted Indus, amid his howling chorus. 'You are the destroyers, the disunited, the infection! You are the hate! The rage and the thirst!'

Too late, Nord's mind sensed the build of warp energy once more, resonating between the tyrant and the Mechanicum psyker. Too late, the cold understanding reached him. 'No…' he breathed, staggering backwards. 'No!'

'Nord?' The question on Brother Kale's lips was suddenly ripped away by a new, thunderous shock-wave of dark power.

Perhaps it was the hive tyrant, with its hate for all things alien to it, perhaps it was Indus in his crazed fury. Whatever the origin, the burning blade of madness swept across the Blood Angels and ripped open their minds.

Nord held on to the ragged edge of the abyss, as once more the red and black clouds enveloped him. The dream! The vision in his roaring heart was upon him! His moment of foresight damning and terrifyingly real.

The strength of the psychic blast tore away any self-control, burning down to the basest, most monstrous instincts a man could conceal; and for an Adeptus Astartes of the Blood Angels Chapter, the fall to such madness was damning.

The gene-curse. The flaw. The Red Thirst's wild and insatiable desire for blood, the Black Rage's uncontrollable berserker insanity. These were the twin banes Nord fought to endure. Fought and held against. Fought… And finally… resisted.

But Brother-Sergeant Brenin Kale had none of the Codicier's psychic bulwarks. His naked mind absorbed the power of the tyrant's fury… and fell.

THE MAN THAT Nord's comrade had been was gone; in his place was a beast clothed in his flesh.

Kale threw himself at the Codicier, his chainsword discarded and forgotten, hands in claws, his mouth wide to release a bellow of pure anger. The Blood Angel's fangs glittered in the light, and darkness filled his vision.

Nord collided with Kale with a concussion that sounded across the chamber, scattering dithering hormagaunts, crushing others with the impact. Kale's mailed fists rained blow after blow upon Nord's battle armour, the crimson tint of fury in the sergeant's aura stifling him.

He cried out the other man's name, desperately trying to reach through the fog of madness, but to no avail. Nord fought to block the impacts as they struggled against one another, locked in close combat; he could not bring himself to hit back.

His skull rang with each strike, his vision blurring. There was no doubt that Kale could kill him. He was no match for the old veteran's strength and prowess, even in such a state. Kale's frightening speed and instinctive combat skills would overwhelm him. He had little choice. If he could not end this madness quickly, Kale would tear open his throat and drink deep.

He glimpsed a rent in Kale's armour, a deep gouge that had penetrated the ceramite sheath. 'Brother,' he whispered, 'Forgive me.'

Nord's hand closed around the hilt of his combat blade, turning the fractal-edged knife about. Without pause, he buried it deep in his old friend's chest, down to the hilt. The blade penetrated plasteel, flesh and muscle; it punctured

Kale's primary heart and the veteran's back arched in a spasm of agony.

Nord let him fall, and the other man dropped to the bony deck, pain wracking him, robbing him of his rage.

A DIFFERENT KIND of fury burned in the psyker. One pure and controlled, as bright as the core of a star. Blue sparks gathering around the crystal matrix of his psychic hood, Nord turned and found his force axe, sweeping it up to aim at Indus.

'You will pay in kind for this, adept,' he snarled. 'Know that. In the name of Holy Terra, you will pay.'

Nord closed his eyes and let the power flow into him. Blazing actinic flares of warp energy sputtered and flew around the Blood Angel's head as the hormagaunts shook off their pause and came at him.

Channelling the might of heroes though his bones, through his very soul itself, he unleashed his telepathic might through the force axe.

The blast turned the air into smoke and battered away the xenos beasts, sending them shrieking into the dark. Indus bellowed in pain as his flesh was wracked with agony, and the tyrant hooted in synchrony with him.

It took unbearable minutes for the psychic blast to dissipate, for the adept's crooked mind to shake off the aftershock.

Finally, through the myriad senses of the howling, confused tyranids, he saw only the scorched bone deck of the hibernacula.

The Adeptus Astartes were gone.

WITH KALE'S BODY across his shoulder, Brother Nord ran as swiftly as the bulk of his battle armour would allow, always onwards, never looking back. His storm bolter ran hot in his hand as the Codicier placed shots into any tyranid that crossed his path. He did not stop to engage them, did not pause in his headlong flight.

Nord could feel Indus reaching out, probing the hive ship for him, drawing more and more of the sleeping xenos from their hibernation with each passing moment. He crossed the high bone bridge above the pits and saw the carnifex stirring, moaning as it rose towards wakefulness.

The psyker understood a measure of what had transpired here; Indus or the hive tyrant - or whatever unholy fusion of the two now existed - must have sensed him for the very first time as the Emuthia made its approach. Hungry

for another thrall, the hive mind allowed Nord and Kale to approach the core of the ship, while dispatching Dane and the other battle-brothers. He suppressed a shudder; it wanted him. It wanted to engulf him, subsume him into that same horrific unity.

Nord spat in loathing. Perhaps a weakling mind, a man like the bio-adept, perhaps he might have fallen to such a thing… But Nord was a Blood Angel, an Adeptus Astartes - the finest warrior humanity had ever created. Whatever dark fate awaited him, his duty came before them all.

His duty…

'Brother…' He heard the voice as they came to the chamber where the boarding torpedo had made its breach.

Nord lowered his comrade to the ground and he saw the light of recognition in the sergeant's eyes. The mental force Indus had turned on Kale was, at least for the moment, dispelled. 'What… did I do?' Kale's voice was a gasp, thick with blood and recrimination. 'The xenos…'

'They are close,' he replied. 'We have little time.'

KALE SAW NORD'S dagger deep in his chest and gave a ragged chuckle. 'Should… I thank you for this?'

The psyker dragged the injured warrior into the boarding capsule, ignoring the question. 'You will heal, sir. Your body's implants are already destroying infection, repairing your wounds.' He stood up and punched a series of commands into a control panel.

Kale's pale face darkened. 'Wait. What… are you doing?'

Nord didn't meet his gaze. 'Indus will find us again soon enough. He must be dealt with.' The psyker scowled at the vox-link and gave a low curse; the channel was laced with static, likely jammed by some freakish tyranid organism bred just for that task.

Kale tried to lift himself off the deck, ignoring the pain of his fresh, bloody scars, but the acid burn of tyranid venom in his flesh left him gasping, shaking with pain. 'You can't… go back. Not alone…'

The other warrior reached into a weapons locker, searching for something. 'I beg to differ, sir. I am the only one who can go back. This enemy has already claimed the lives of three Blood Angels. There must be payment for that cost.' He glanced at the veteran. 'And Xeren's perfidy cannot stand unchallenged.'

Through his blurred vision, the sergeant saw the Codicier gather a gear pack to him, saw him slam a fresh clip of bolt shells into his weapon. 'Nord,' he

growled. 'You will stand down!'

The psyker hesitated at the airlock, looking back into the gloom of the hive ship beyond. 'I regret I cannot obey you, brother. Forgive me.'

Without another word, Nord stepped through, letting the brass leaves of the hatch close behind him. Then the razor-cogs began to turn, the boarding torpedo drawing back into the void amid gushes of outgassing air.

FUMING, KALE DRAGGED himself to the viewport, A trail of dark blood across the steel deck behind him, in time to see the hive ship's hull falling away.

The capsule turned away to find the Emathia hanging in the blackness, and with a pulse of thrusters, it set upon a return course towards the frigate.

NORD THREW HIMSELF into the melee, storm bolter crashing, his force axe a spinning cascade of psychic fury. 'Indus!' He cried, 'I am here! Face me if you dare!'

In the confines of the corridors, he fought with termagants and warriors, stamped ripper swarms into paste beneath his boots, killed and tore and blazed a path of destruction back through the hive. Nord became a whirlwind of blade and shell, deep in the mad glory of combat.

His body sang with pain from lacerations, toxins and impacts, but still he fought on, bolstering himself with the power of his own psionic quickening. The shadows of the Rage and the Thirst were there at his back, reaching for him, ready to take him, and he raced to stay one step ahead. He could not be consumed: not yet. His heavy burden rattled against his chest plate.

Soon, he told himself, sensing the red and the black. Very soon.

Crossing the bone bridge once more, he shouted his defiance - and the tyranids replied in kind.

Winged fiends and fluttering, gas-filled spores fell around him, the gargoyle broods tearing through the air, daring him to attack. He unloaded the storm bolter, tracer shells cutting magnesium-bright flashes in the dark; but for each he killed there were five more, ten more, twenty. The spores detonated in foetid coughs of combustion and without warning the bridge was severed.

Nord fell, his weapons lost, down into the pit where the carnifex lurked. Impact came hard and suffocating, as the Blood Angel sank into a drift of soft, doughy matter collecting around the hive's egg sacs. Tearing the sticky strings

of albumen from his armour, he tore free—

And faced his foe.

'You should have fled while you had the chance.' Indus's voice had taken on a fly-swarm buzz. 'We will take you now.'

Flanked by mammoth thorn-backed beasts, the hive tyrant bowed, as if mocking him, allowing Indus to dangle before Nord upon his tendrils. More tentacles snaked forwards, questing and probing.

The aliens waited to taste the stink of his fear, savouring the moment; Nord gave them nothing, instead bending to recover his axe where it had fallen.

'This will be your end, adept,' he said. 'If only you could see what you have become.'

'We are the superior!' came the roar in return. 'We will devour all! You are the prey! You are the beasts!'

Nord took a breath and let the dark clouds come. 'Yes,' he admitted, 'perhaps we are.'

The Black Rage and the Red Thirst, the curses that he had fought against for so long, the twin madness at the core of his being… The psyker let his defences fall before them. He gave himself fully to the heart of the rage, let it fill him.

Power, burning nova-bright, swept away every doubt, every question in his mind. Suddenly it was so very clear to him; there was only the weapon and the target. The killer and the killed.

The aliens charged, and Nord ripped open the gear pack at his belt, drawing the weapon within, running to meet them, racing towards the hive tyrant.

Indus saw the lethal burden in the Blood Angel's hand and felt a cold blade of fear lance through him; the tyrant shook in sympathetic panic. 'No—' he whispered.

'In the name of Sanguinius and the God-Emperor,' the Codicier snarled, baring his fangs. 'I will end you all!'

CAPTAIN GOROLEV JERKED up from the console, his expression set in fear. 'The cogitators register an energy increase aboard the hive ship!'

Xeren's head turned to face him atop his snake-like neck. 'I am aware.'

Gorolev took a step towards the Mechanicus magi. 'That ship is a threat!' he snapped. 'We have completed recovery of the boarding torpedo, and your scouts are lost! We should destroy the xenos! There is no reason to let them live a moment longer!'

'There is every reason!' Xeren's manner of cold, silky dismissal suddenly broke. He rounded on the frigate's commander, his mechadendrites and cyber-limbs rising up behind him in a fan, angry serpents hissing and snapping at the air. All trace of his false politeness faded. 'You test me and test me, ship-master, and I will hear no more! You will do as I say, or your life will be forfeit!'

'You have no right—' Gorolev was cut off as Xeren reached out a hand, showing brass micro-lasers where fingers should have been.

'I have the authority to do anything,' he grated. 'That hive is worth more than your life, captain. More than the lives of your worthless crew, more than the lives of Kale and his Space Marines! I will sacrifice every single one of you, if that is what it will cost!'

A silence fell across the bridge; Gorolev's eyes widened, but not in fear of Xeren. He and his officers stared beyond the tech-priest, to the open hatchway behind him.

There, filling the doorway, was a figure clad in blood-red. Xeren spun, his limbs, flesh and steel, coming up before him in a gesture of self-protection.

Brother-Sergeant Kale entered, carrying himself with a limp, his pale face stained with spilled vitae and smoke. His eyes were black with an anger as cold and vast as space.

ARMOUR SCARRED FROM tyranid venom and claw, blemished with bitter fluids, he took heavy, purposeful steps towards the tech-priest. 'My brothers lie dead,' he intoned. 'The blame is yours.'

'I… I was not…' Xeren's cool reserve crumbled.

'Do not cheapen their sacrifice with lies, priest,' growled Kale, his ire building ever higher as he came closer. 'You sent us to our deaths, and you smiled as you did it.'

Xeren stiffened, drawing himself up. 'I only did what was needed! I did what was expected of me!'

'Yes,' Kale gave a slow nod, and reached up to his chest, where the hilt of a combat knife protruded from a scabbed wound. 'Now I do the same.'

With a shout of rage and pain, Kale tore the knife free and swept it around in a fluid arc. The blade's mirror-bright edge found the tech-priest's throat and cut deep, severing veins and wires, bone and metal. The Blood Angel leaned into the attack and took Xeren's head from his neck. The cyborg's body danced and fell, crashing to the deck in a puddle of oil.

'Energy surge at criticality…' Gorolev reported, as alert chimes sounded from the cogitator console.

Kale said nothing, only nodded. He stepped up to the viewport, over Xeren's headless corpse, and watched the hive ship. His hands drew up to his chest in salute, taking on the shape of the Imperial aquila.

'In His name, brother,' he whispered.

HE WAS FALLING.

Somewhere, far beyond his thoughts in the world of meat and bone, he was dying. Claws tearing at him, serpentine tendrils cutting into him, cilia probing to find grey matter and absorb it.

Nord fell into the cascade of sensation. The blood roaring through him. The flawless, diamond-hard perfection of his anger driving him on, into the arms of the enemy.

He had never feared death; he had only feared that when the moment came, he would be found wanting.

That time was here, and he was more certain of his Tightness than ever before.

The clouds of billowing crimson, the swelling mist of deep, deep night; they came and took him, and he embraced it.

Somewhere, far beyond his thoughts, a bloody, near-crippled hand curled about the grip of a weapon, tight upon a trigger. And with a breath, a slow and steady breath, that hand released. Let go. Gave freedom to the tiny star building and churning inside.

The fusion detonator Nord had recovered from the weapons locker, the secret burden he had carried back into the heart of the hive ship. Now revealed, now empowered and unleashed.

The new sun grew, flesh and bone crisping, becoming pale sketches and then vapour; and in that moment, as the light became all, in its heart Brother Nord saw an angel, golden and magnificent. Reaching for him. Offering his hand.

Beckoning him towards honour, and a death most worthy.

Book Five

AT GAIUS POINT

by Aaron Dembski-Bowden

I

The memory of fire. Fire and falling, incineration and annihilation. Then darkness.

Absolute silence. Absolute nothing.

II

I open my eyes.

There before me, outlined by scrolling white text across my targeting display, is a shattered metal wall. Its architecture is gothic in nature—a skeletal wall, with black steel girders like ribs helping form the wall's curvature. It is mangled and bent. Crushed, even.

I do not know where I am, but my senses are awash with perception. I hear the crackle of fire eating metal, and the angry hum of live battle armour. The sound is distorted, a hitch or a burr in the usually steady thrum. Damage has been sustained. My armour is compromised. A glance at the bio-feed displays shows minor damage to the armour plating of my wrist and shin. Nothing serious.

I smell the flames nearby, and the bitter rancidity of melting steel. I smell my own body; the sweat, the chemicals injecting into my flesh by my armour, and the intoxicatingly rich scent of my own blood.

A god's blood.

Refined and thinned for use in mortal veins, but a god's blood nevertheless. A dead god. A slain angel.

The thought brings my teeth together in a grunted curse, my fangs scraping the teeth below. Enough of this weakness.

I rise, muscles of aching flesh bunching in unison with the fibre-bundle false muscles of my armour. It is a sensation I am familiar with, yet it feels somehow flawed. I should be stronger. I should exult in my strength, the

ultimate fusion of biological potency and machine power.

I do not feel strong. I feel nothing but pain and a momentary disorientation. The pain is centralised in my spinal column and shoulder blades, turning my back into a pillar of dull, aching heat. Nothing is broken—bio-feeds have already confirmed that. The soreness of muscle and nerve would have killed a human, but we are gene-forged into greater beings.

Already, the weakness fades. My blood stings with the flood of adrenal stimulants and kinetic enhancement narcotics rushing through my veins.

My movement is unimpeded. I rise to my feet, slow not from weakness now, but from caution.

With my vision stained a cooling emerald shade by my helm's green eye lenses, I take in the wreckage around me.

This chamber is ruined, half-crushed with its walls distorted. Restraint thrones lie broken, torn from the floor. The two bulkheads leading from the chamber are both wrenched from their hinges, hanging at warped angles.

The impact must have been savage.

The… impact?

The crash. Our Thunderhawk crashed. The clarity of recollection is sickening… the sense of falling from the sky, my senses drenched in the thunder of descent, the shaking of the ship in its entirety. Temperature gauges on my retinal display rose slowly when the engines died in exploding flares that scorched the hull, and my armour systems registered the gunship's fiery journey groundward.

There was a final booming refrain, a roar like the carnosaurs of home—as loud and primal as their predator-king challenges—and the world shuddered beyond all sanity. The gunship ploughed into the ground.

And then… Darkness.

My eyes flicker to my retinal display's chronometer. I was unconscious for almost three minutes. I will do penance for such weakness, but that can come later.

Now I breathe in deep, tasting the ashy smoke in the air but unaffected by it. The air filtration in my helm's grille renders me immune to such trivial concerns.

"Zavien," a voice crackles in my ears. A momentary confusion takes hold at the sound of the word. The vox-signal is either weak, or the sender's armour is badly damaged. With the ship in pieces, both could be true.

"Zavien," the voice says again.

This time I turn at the name, realising it is my own.

Zavien strode into the cockpit, keeping his balance on the tilted floor through an effortless combination of natural grace and his armour's joint-stabilisers.

The cockpit had suffered even more than the adjacent chamber. The view window, despite the thickness of the reinforced plastek, was shattered beyond simple repair. Diamond shards of the sundered false-glass twinkled on the twisted floor. The pilot thrones were wrenched from their support columns, cast aside like detritus in a storm.

Through the windowless viewport there was nothing but mud and gnarled black roots, much of which had spilled over the lifeless control consoles. They'd come down hard enough to drive the gunship's nose into the earth.

The pilot, Varlon, was a mangled wreck sprawled face-down over the control console. Zavien's targeting reticule locked onto his brother's battered armour, secondary cursors detailing the rents and wounds in the deactivated war plate. Blood, thick and dark, ran from rips in Varlon's throat and waist joints. It ran in slow trickles across the smashed console, dripping between buttons and levers.

His power pack was inactive. Life signs were unreadable, but the evidence was clear enough. Zavien heard no heartbeat from the body, and had Varlon been alive, his gene-enhanced physiology would have clotted and sealed all but the most grievous wounds. He wouldn't still be bleeding slowly all over the controls of the downed gun-ship.

"Zavien," said a voice to the right, no longer over the vox.

Zavien turned from Varlon, his armour snarling in a growl of joint-servos. There, pinned under wreckage from the collapsed wall, was Drayus. Zavien moved to the fallen warrior's side, seeing the truth. No, Drayus was not just pinned in place. He was impaled there.

The sergeant's black helm was lowered, chin down on his collar, green eyes regarding the broken Imperial eagle on his chest jagged wreckage knifed into his dark armour, the ravaged steel spearing him through the shoulder guard, the arm, the thigh and the stomach. Blood leaked through his helm's speaker grille. The biometric displays that flashed up on Zavien's visor told an ugly story, and one with an end soon to come.

"Report," Sergeant Drayus said—the way he always said it—as if the scene around them were the most mundane situation imaginable.

Zavien kneeled by the pinned warrior, fighting back the aching need in his throat and gums to taste the blood of the fallen. Irregular and weak, a single heartbeat rattled in Drayus' chest. One of his hearts had shut down,

likely flooded by internal haemorrhaging or burst by the wreckage piercing his body. The other pounded gamely, utterly without rhythm.

“Varlon is dead,” Zavien said.

“I can see that, fool.” The sergeant reached up one hand, the one not half-severed at the forearm, and clawed with unmoving fingers at the collar joint beneath his helm. Zavien reached to help, unlocking the helmet’s pressurised seals. With a reptilian hiss, the helmet came free in Zavien’s hands.

Drayus’ craggy face, ruined by the pits and scars earned in two centuries of battle, was awash in spatters of blood. He grinned, showing blood-pinked teeth and split gums. “My helm display is damaged. Tell me who is still alive.”

Zavien could see why it was damaged—both eye lenses were cracked. He discarded the sergeant’s helm, and blink-clicked the runic icon that brought up the rest of the squad’s life signs on his own retinal display.

Varlon was dead, his suit powered down. The evidence of that was right before Zavien’s eyes.

Garax was also gone, his suit transmitting a screed of flat-line charts. The rangefinder listed him as no more than twenty metres away, likely thrown clear in the crash and killed on impact.

Drayus was dying, right here.

Jarl was…

“Where’s Jarl?” Zavien asked, his voice harsh and guttural through his helm’s vox speakers.

“He’s loose.” Drayus sucked in a breath through clenched teeth. His armour’s failing systems were feeding anaesthetic narcotics into his blood, but the wounds were savage and fatal.

“My rangefinder lists him as a kilometre distant.” Even with its unreliability compared to a tracking auspex, it was a decent enough figure to trust.

The sergeant’s good hand clenched Zavien’s wrist, and he glared into his brother’s eye lenses with a fierce, bloodshot stare. “Find him. Whatever it takes, Zavien. Bring him in, even if you have to kill him.”

“It will be done.”

“After. You must come back, after.” Drayus spat onto his own chest, marking the broken Imperial eagle with his lifeblood. “Come back for our gene-seed.”

Zavien nodded, rising to his feet. Feeling his fingers curl in the need to draw weapons, he stalked from the cockpit without a backward glance at the

sergeant he would never see alive again.

Jarl had awoken first.

In fact, it was truer to say that Jarl had simply not lost his grip on consciousness in the impact, for his restraints bound him with greater security than the standard troop-thrones.

In the shaking thunder of the crash, he had seen Garax hurled through the torn space where a wall had been a moment before. He had heard the vicious, wet snap of destroyed vertebrae and ruined bone as Garax had crashed into the edge of the hole on the way out. And he had seen Zavien thrown from his restraint throne to smash sidelong into the cockpit bulkhead, sliding to the floor unconscious.

Enveloped in a force cage around his own restraint throne, Jarl had seen these things occurring through the milky shimmer-screen of electrical force, yet had been protected against the worst of the crash.

Ah, but that protection had not lasted for long. With the gunship motionless, with his brothers silent, with the Thunderhawk around him creaking and burning in the chasm it had carved in the ground, Jarl tore off the last buckles and scrambled over the wreckage of what had been his power-fielded throne. The machine itself, its generator smoking, reeked of captivity. Jarl wanted to be far from it.

He glanced at Zavien, stole the closest weapons he could find in the chaos of the crash site, and ran out into the jungle.

He had a duty to fulfil. A duty to the Emperor. His father.

Zavien's blade and bolter were gone.

Without compunction, he took Drayus' weapons from the small arming chamber behind the transport room, handling the relics with none of the care he would otherwise have used. Time was of the essence.

The necessary theft complete, he climbed from the wreck of the gunship, vaulting down to the ground and leaving the broken hull behind. In one hand was an idling chainaxe, the motors within the haft chuckling darkly in readiness to be triggered into roaring life. In the other, a bolt pistol, its blackened surface detailed with the crude scratchings of a hundred and more kill-runes.

Zavien didn't look at the smoking corpse of his gunship in some poignant reverie. He knew he would be back to gather the gene-seed of the fallen if he survived this hunt.

There was no time for sentiment. Jarl was loose.

Zavien broke into a run, his armour's joints growling at the rapid movement as he sprinted after his wayward brother, deep into the jungles of Armageddon.

III

They call it Armageddon.

Maybe so. There is nothing to love about this planet.

Whatever savage beauty it once displayed is long dead now, choked under the relentless outflow of the sky-choking factories that vomit black smog into the heavens. The skies themselves are ugly enough—a greyish-yellow shroud of weak poison embracing the strangled world below. It does not rain water here. It rains acid, as thin, weak and strangely pungent as a reptile's piss.

Who could dwell here? In such impurity? The air tastes of sulphur and machine oil. The sky is the colour of infection. The humans—the very souls we are fighting to save—are dead-eyed creatures without passion or life.

I do not understand them. They embrace their enslavement. They accept their confinement within towering manufactories filled with howling machines. Perhaps it is because they have never known freedom, but that is no true excuse to act as brain-killed as a servitor.

We fight for these souls because we are told it is our duty. We are dying, selling our lives in the greatest war this world has ever known, to save them from their own weakness and allow them to return to their lightless lives.

The jungle here… We have jungles on my home world, yet not like this.

The jungles of home are saturated with life. Parasites thrive in every pool of dark water. Insects hollow out the great trees to build their chittering, poisonous hives. The air, already swarming with stinging flies, is sour with the reptilian stench of danger, and the ground will shake with the stalking hunts of the lizard predator-kings.

Survival is the greatest triumph one can earn on Cretacia.

The jungle here barely deserves the name. The ground is clinging mud, leaving you knee-deep in sulphuric sludge. What ragged life breathes the unclean air is weak, irritating, and nothing compared to the threats of home.

Of course, the jungles here possess a danger not even remotely native to the planet itself. They swarm with the worst kind of vermin.

With the planet locked in the throes of invasion, I am all too aware of what brought down our Thunderhawk.

A pack of them hunted up ahead.

As soon as he heard their piggish snarls and barking laughter, Jarl's tongue ached with a raw, coppery urgency. His teeth itched in their sockets, and he felt his heartbeat in the soft tissue around his incisors.

His splashing sprint through the jungle became a hunched and feral stride, while the chainblade in his grip growled each time he gunned the trigger. Small arms fire rattled in his direction even before he cleared the line of trees. They knew he was coming, he made sure of that.

Jarl ignored the metallic rainfall of solid rounds clanging from his war plate. The trees parted and revealed his prey—six of them—hunkered around a tank made of scavenged, rusted scrap.

Greenskins. Their fat-mouthed pistols crashing loud and discordant, their brutish features illuminated by the flickering of muzzle flashes.

Jarl saw none of this. His vision, filtered through targeting reticules, saw only what his dying mind projected. A far greater enemy, the ancient slaves of the Ruinous Powers, feasting on the bodies of the loyal fallen. Where Jarl ran, the skies were not the milky-yellow of pus, but the deep blue of nightfall on ancestral Terra. He did not splash through black-watered marshland. He strode across battlements of gold while the world ended around him in a storm of heretical fire.

Jarl charged, his scream rendered harsh and deafening by his helm's vocalisers. The chainsword's throaty roar reached an apex in the moment before it was brought down onto the shoulder of the first ork.

The killing fury brought darkness again, but the blackness now was awash with blessed, sacred red.

Zavien heard the slaughter. His pace, already at a breakneck sprint through the vegetation, intensified tenfold.

If he could catch Jarl, catch him before his brother made it to Imperial lines, he would avert a catastrophe of innocent blood and the blackest shame.

His red and black war plate—the dark red of arterial blood, the black of the void between worlds—was a ruined mess of burn markings, silver gougings where damage in the crash had scored away the paint from the ceramite's surface, and mud-spattered filth as he raced through the swamp.

Yet when one carries the pride of a Chapter on one's shoulders, necessity lends strength to aching limbs and the false muscles of broken armour.

Zavien burst into the clearing where his brother was embattled. His trigger fingers clenched at once—one unleashing a torrent of bolter shells at

his brother's back, the other gunning the chainaxe into whirring, lethal life.

"Jarl!"

Treachery.

What madness was this? To be struck down by one's own sons? Sanguinius, the Angel of Blood, turns from the twisted daemons he has slain and dismembered. One of his own sons screams his name, charging across the golden battlements while the heavens above them burn.

The primarch cries out as his son's weapon speaks in anger. Bolt shells crack against his magnificent armour. His own son, one of his beloved Blood Angels, is trying to kill him.

This cannot be happening.

And, in that moment, Sanguinius decides it is not. There is heresy at work here, not disloyalty. Blasphemy, not naked betrayal.

"What foulness grips you!" the Angel cries at his false son. "What perversion blackens the soul of a Blood Angel and warps him to serve the Archenemy?"

"Sanguinius!" the traitor son screams. "Father!"

Zavien roared Jarl's name again, not knowing what his brother truly heard. The cries that returned from his brother's vox-amplifiers chilled his blood—a bellowed, clashing litany of archaic High Gothic and the tongue of Baal that Jarl had never learned.

Surrounded by the ravaged bodies of dead greenskins, the two brothers came together. Zavien's first blow was blocked, the flat of Jarl's chainblade clashing against the haft of his axe. Jarl's armour was pitted and cracked with smoking holes from the impact of bolt shells, yet his strength was unbelievable. Laughing in a voice barely his own, he hurled Zavien backwards.

Unbalanced by his brother's insane vigour, Zavien fell back, rolling into a fighting crouch, shin-deep in marshwater.

Again, Jarl shouted in his unnerving, ancient diction—words Zavien recognised but did not understand. As with Jarl, he had never learned Baalian, and never studied the form of High Gothic spoken ten thousand years before.

"Let this not be your end, my son. Join me! We will take the fight to Horus and drown his evil ambitions in the blood of his tainted warriors!"

Sanguinius removes his helm—a sign of honour and trust despite the war raging around them—and smiles beneficently at his wayward son. His

benevolence is legendary. His honour without question.

"It need not be this way," the Angel of Blood says through his princely smile. "Join me! To my father's side! For the Emperor!"

Zavien stared at his brother, barely recognising Jarl's face in the drooling, slack-jawed grin that met his gaze. His brother's features were red; a shining wetness from eyes that cried blood.

A meaningless screed of syllables hammered from Jarl's bleeding mouth. It sounded like he was choking on his own demented laughter.

"Brother," Zavien spoke softly. "You are gone from us all."

He rose to his feet, casting aside the empty bolt pistol. In his red gauntlets, he clutched the chainaxe two-handed, and stared at the brother he no longer knew.

"I am not your son, Jarl, and I am no longer your brother. I am Zavien of the Flesh Tearers, born of Cretacia, and I will be your death if you will not let me be your salvation."

Jarl heaved a burbling laugh, bringing bloody froth to his lips as he wheezed in a language he shouldn't know.

"You disgrace my bloodline," the Angel said with infinite sorrow, his godlike heart breaking at the blasphemy before his eyes. "The Ultimate Gate calls to me. A thousand of your masters will fall by my blade before they gain entrance to the Emperor's throne room. I have no more patience for your puling heresy. Come, traitor. Time to die!"

Sanguinius unfurled his great white wings, pearlescent and sunlight-bright in the firestorm wreathing the battlements. With tears in his eyes, tears of misery at the betrayal of one of his own sons, he launched forward to end this blasphemy once and for all.

And I realise I cannot beat him.

When we are shaped into what we are, when we are denied our humanity to become weapons of war, it is said that fear is purged from our physical forms, and triumph is bred into our bones. This is an expression, an attempt at the kind of crude verse forever attributed to the warrior-preachers of the Adeptus Astartes.

It is true that defeat is anathema to us.

But I cannot beat him. He is not the warrior I trained with for decades, not the brother whose every move I can anticipate.

His chainblade, still wet with green gore, arcs down. I block, barely, and

am already skidding back in the sulphuric mud. His strength is immense. I know why this is. I am aware of the… the genetic truths at play. His mind cannot contain his delusional fury. He is using everything he has, *everything,* powering his muscles with more force and expending more energy than a functioning mind can allow. I can smell the alkaline reek of his blood through the damage in his armour—combat narcotics are flooding his system in lethal quantities. In his madness, he cannot stem the flood of battle narcotics fusing with his bloodstream.

His strength, this godly power, will kill him.

But not quickly enough.

A second deflected slice, a third, and a fourth that crashes against my helm; a blocked headbutt that crunches into my bracer and dulls my arm; a kick that hammers into my chestplate even as I lean aside to dodge.

A thunderclap. My vision spins. Fire in my spine.

I think my back is broken. I try to say his name, but it comes out as a scream.

Rage, black and wholesome, its tendrils bearing the purest intent, creeps in at the edge of my vision.

I hear him laughing and damning me in a language he shouldn't know.

Then I hear nothing except the wind.

Sanguinius lifts the traitor with contemptuous ease.

Held above his head, the blasphemer thrashes and writhes. The Angel of Blood stalks to the edge of the golden battlements, laughing and weeping all at once at the carnage below. It is a tragedy, but it is also beautiful. Mankind using its greatest might and achievements as it attempts to engineer its own demise. Titans duel in their hundreds, with millions of men dying around their iron feet. The sky is on fire. The entire world smells of blood.

"Die," the Angel curses his treacherous son with a beauteous whisper, and hurls him from the battlements of the Imperial Palace into the maelstrom of war hundreds of metres below.

Freed of his burden and his bloodline's honour restored, the Angel in gold makes haste away. His duty is not yet done.

IV

Consciousness returned with the first impact.

A jarring crunch of armour against rock jolted Zavien from his lapse into the murky haze of near-unconsciousness. Feeling himself crashing down the

cliff side, he rammed his hand down hard into the rock—a claw of ceramite clutching at the stone. The Astartes grunted as his arms snapped straight, taking his weight, arresting his tumbling fall.

Damage runes flicked up on his retinal display, a language of harsh white urgency. Zavien ignored them, though it was harder to ignore the pain throughout his body. Even the injected chemical anaesthetic compounds from his armour and the nerve-dulling surgery done to him couldn't entirely wash it away. That was a bad sign.

He clawed his way back up the cliff, teeth clenched, gauntlets tearing handholds into the stone where nature hadn't provided any.

Once at the top, the Flesh Tearer retrieved the chainaxe that had flown from his grip, and broke into a staggering run.

He almost killed me.

That is a hard truth to swallow, for we were evenly matched for all of our lives. My armour is damaged, operating at half capacity, but it still lends me strength as I ran. Behind me, the wrecked greenskin tank remains alone, its crew slain, the rest of its missiles aiming into the sky with no one to fire them.

Curse those piggish wretches for bringing down our gunship.

I run on, gathering speed, slowing only to hack hanging vegetation from my path.

I recall the topography of this region from the hololithic maps at the last war council. The mining town of Dryfield is to the east. Jarl's rage-addled mind will drive him to seek out life. I know where he is going. I also know that unless something slows him down…

He will get there first.

Sister Amalay D'Vorien kissed the bronze likeness of Saint Silvana, and let the necklace icon fall back on its leather cord. The weak midday sun, what brightness penetrated the gauzy, polluted cloud cover, was a dull presence in the heavens, only occasionally reflecting glare off the edges of *Promethia*, the squad's Immolator tank.

Her own armour was once silver, now stained a faint, dull grey from exposure to the filthy air of this world. She licked her cracked lips, resisting the desire to drink from the water canteen inside the tank. Second Prayer was only an hour before, and she'd slaked her thirst with a mouthful of the brackish water, warmed as it was by the tank's idling engine.

“Sister…” called down Brialla from the Immolator’s turret. “Did you see that?”

Amalay and Brialla were alone while the rest of their squad patrolled the edges of the jungle. Their tank idled on the dirt road, with Amalay circling the hull, bolter in hand, and Brialla panning her heavy flamers along the tree lines.

Amalay whispered a litany of abasement before duty, chastising herself for letting her mind wander to thoughts of sustenance. Her bolter up and ready, she moved around to the front of the Immolator.

“I saw nothing,” she said, eyes narrowed and focused. “What was it?”

“Movement. Something dark. Remain vigilant.”

There was a tone colouring Brialla’s voice, on the final words. A suggestion of disapproval. Amalay’s laxity had been noticed.

“I see nothing,” Amalay spoke again. “There’s… No, wait. *There.”*

The “something” broke from its crouch in the vegetation at the tree line. A blur of crimson and black, with a chainblade revving. Amalay recognised an Astartes instantly and the threat a moment later. Her bolter barked once, twice, and dropped from her hands to clatter to the dirt. The gun crashed once more from its vantage point on the ground, a loud boom that hammered a shell into the tank’s sloped armour plating.

Even as this last shot was fired, Amalay’s head flew clear of her shoulders, white hair catching the wind before the bleeding wreckage rolled into the undergrowth.

Brialla blasphemed as she brought the flamer turret around on protesting mechanics, and wrenched the handles to aim the cannons low.

The Astartes was cradling Amalay’s headless body, speaking to it in a low snarl. Her sister was already dead. Brialla squeezed both triggers.

Twin gouts of stinking chemical flame roared from the cannons, bathing Amalay and the Astartes in clinging, corrosive fire. She was already whispering a lament for her fallen sister, even as she blistered the armour and skin from Amalay’s bones.

It was impossible to see through the reeking orange miasma. Brialla killed the jets of flame after seven heartbeats, knowing whatever had been washed in the fire would be annihilated, purged in the burning storm.

Amalay. Her armour blackened, its joints melted, her hands reduced to blackened bone. She lay on the ground, incinerated.

A loud thud clanged on the tank’s roof behind Brialla. She turned in her restraint throne, the slower turret cycling round to follow her gaze. Already,

she was trying to scramble free of her seat.

The Astartes was burning. Holy fire licked at the edges of his war plate, and his joints steamed. He eclipsed the sun, casting a flickering shadow over her. His armour was black, charred, but not immolated. As she hauled herself out of her restraints, he levelled a dripping chainsword at her face.

"The Flesh Tearers!" she screamed into the vox-mic built into her armour's collar. "Echoes of Gaius Point!"

In anciently-accented Gothic, her killer said six whispered words. "*You will pay for your heresy.*"

I watch from the shadows of the trees.

The Sororitas are tense. While one of them performs funerary rites over the destroyed bodies of their sisters, three others stalk around the hull of their grey tank, bolters aimed while they stare into the jungle through gunsights.

I can smell the corpses beneath the white shrouds. One is burned, cooked by promethium chemical fire. The other had bled a great deal before she died, torn to pieces. I do not need to see the remains to know this is true.

For now, I hide, crouched and hidden. The jungle masks the ever-present charged hum of my armour from their weak, mortal ears, while I listen to fragments of their speech.

Jarl's trail has grown cold, even the smell of his potent blood lost in the billion scents of this sulphuric jungle. I need focus. I need direction.

But as soon as I draw near enough to see the sisters' steel-grey armour and the insignias of loyalty they each wear, I curse my fortune.

The Order of the Argent Shroud.

They were with us at Gaius Point.

Echoes of that battle will haunt us all until the Chapter's final nights.

"My auspex senses something," I hear one of them say to her sisters. I make ready to move again, to taste shame and flee. I cannot confront them like this. They must not know of our presence. "Something alive," she says. "And with a power signature."

"Flesh Tearer!" one of the sisters calls out, and my blood freezes in my veins. It is not fear I feel, but true, sickening dread as she uses our Chapter's sacred name. *How can they know?*

"Flesh Tearer! Show yourself! Face the Emperor's judgement for the barbarity of your tainted Chapter!"

My teeth clench. My fingers quiver, then grip the chainaxe tighter. *They know.* They know a Flesh Tearer did this. Their wretched slain sisters must

have warned them.

Another female voice, the one carrying the auspex scanner, adds to the first one's cries. "We were at Gaius Point, decadent filth! Face us, and face retribution for your heresy!"

They know what happened at Gaius Point. They saw our shame, our curse, and the blood that ran that day.

They believe I butchered two of their sisters here, and now lay the sins of my brother Jarl upon my shoulders.

Gunfire rings out. A bolter shell slices past my pauldron, shredding vegetation.

"I see him," a female voice declares. "There!"

My trigger finger strokes the Engage rune on the chainaxe's haft. After a heartbeat's hesitation, I squeeze. Jagged, whirring teeth cycle into furious life. The weapon cuts air in anticipation of the moment it will eat flesh.

They *dare* blame me for this…

They open fire.

I am not a heretic.

But this must end.

V

Zavien reached Dryfield just as the sun was setting.

He had left the jungle behind three hours before. The lone warrior's run came to an end at the fortified walls—outside the mining settlement, he heard no sound from within, only the desperate howl of the wind across the wasteland.

Hailing the walls, calling for sentries, earned him no response.

The settlement's gates were sealed: a jury-rigged amalgamation of steel bars, flakboard and even furniture piled high behind the double doors in the wall ringing the village. These pitiful defences were the colony's attempts to reinforce their walls against the ork hordes sweeping across the planet.

With neither the time nor the inclination to hammer the gates open through force, Zavien mag-locked his axe to his back and punched handholds in the metal wall itself, dragging himself to the ramparts fifteen metres above.

The village was a collection of one-storey buildings, perhaps enough to house fifteen families. A dirt track cut through the village's centre like an old scar; evidence of the supply convoys that made it this far out from the main hives, and the passage of ore haulers who came to profit from the local

copper mine. Low-quality metal would be in great demand by the planet's impoverished citizens, who could afford no better.

The largest building—indeed, the only one that was more than a hut made from scrap—was a spired church bedecked in crudely-carved gargoyles.

Zavien acknowledged all of this in a heartbeat's span. The Astartes scanned the ramshackle battlements around the village, then turned to stare at the settlement itself.

No sign of movement.

He walked from the platform, falling the fifteen metres to the ground and landing in a balanced crouch.

He came across the first body less than a minute later.

A woman. Unarmed. Slumped against the wall of a hovel, a blood-smear decorating the wall behind her. She was carved in half, and not cleanly.

The wide streets between the ramshackle huts and homes were decorated with trails of blood and the tracks of weight dragged through the dirt. All of these led to the same place. Whomever had come here and slain the colonists had dragged the bodies to the modest church with its shattered windows and corroded walls of flakboard and red iron.

Zavien's retinal locator display was finally picking up faint returns from Jarl's war plate. His brother was inside, no longer running. And from the silence, no longer killing.

The Flesh Tearer stalked past the weaponless corpse, limp in its lifeless repose, slain by his own sword in his brother's hands. Zavien had seen such things before—they were images he would never forget while he still drew breath.

He felt cold, clinging shame run through his blood like a toxin. Just like at Gaius Point.

It wasn't supposed to happen.

At Gaius Point.

It was never supposed to happen.

That night, they had damned themselves forever.

It should have been a triumph worthy of being etched onto the armour of every warrior that fought there.

The Imperial front line was held by the Point's militia and the Order of the Argent Shroud, who had rallied the people of the wasteland town into an armed fighting force and raised morale to fever pitch through their sermons and blessings in the name of the God-Emperor.

The greenskins descended in a swarm of thousands, hurling themselves at the town's barricades, their mass forming a sea of bellowing challenges, leathery flesh and hacking blades.

At the battle's apex, the Sisters and the militia were on the edge of being overwhelmed. At last, and when it mattered most, Gaius Point's frantic distress calls were answered.

They came in Thunderhawks, boosters howling as they soared over the embattled horde. The gunships kissed the scorched earth only long enough to deploy their forces: almost two hundred Astartes in armour of arterial red and charcoal black. The rattling roar of so many chainblades came together in a ragged, ear splitting chorus, sounding like the war-cry of a mechanical god.

Zavien was in the first wave. Alongside Jarl and his brothers, he hewed left and right, his blade's grinding teeth chewing through armour and bloody, fungal flesh as the sons of Sanguinius reaped the aliens' lives.

The orks were butchered in droves, caught between a hammer and anvil, being annihilated from behind and gunned down from the front.

Zavien saw nothing but blood. Xenos blood, stinking and thick, splashing across his helm. The smell of triumph, the reek of exultant victory.

He was also one of the first to the barricades.

By then, he couldn't see. He couldn't think. His senses were flooded by stimuli, all of it aching, enticing and maddening. He tried to speak, but it tore from his lips as a cry aimed at the polluted skies. Even breathing did nothing but draw the rich scent of alien blood deeper into his body, disseminating it through his system. To be so saturated by xenos taint ignited a fire in his mind, tapping into the gene-deep fury that forever threatened to overwhelm him.

Driven on by the ceaseless urge to drown his senses in the purity of enemy blood, Zavien disembowelled the last ork before him, and vaulted the barricade. He had to kill. *He had to kill.* He was born for nothing else.

He and his brothers had been fighting in ferocious hand-to-hand battle for two hours. The enemy was destroyed. The joyous cheers of the militia died in thousands of throats as, in a wave of vox-screams and howling chainswords, half of the Flesh Tearers broke the barricades and ran into the town.

With no foes to slay, the Astartes turned their rage upon whatever still lived.

The Angel mourned the slain.

Their deaths were a dark necessity on the path to redemption. The prayers he chanted to the ceiling of the Emperor's throne room inspired tears

in his eyes, and tears in the eyes of the thousands of loyal soldiers staring on.

"We must burn the slain," he whispered through the silver tears. "We must forever remember those who died this day, and remember the foulness that turned their hearts against us."

"Sanguinius!" a voice cried from behind. It echoed throughout the chamber, where a million banners hung in the breezeless air, marking every regiment ever sworn to fight and die for the young Imperium of Man.

The Angel tilted his head, the very image of patient purity.

"I thought I killed you, heretic."

"Jarl!"

Wheezing, mumbling, with bloody saliva running in strings from his damaged mouth grille, Jarl staggered around to face his brother.

What burbled from his mouth was a mixture of languages, wet with the blood in his throat. The chemical reek of Jarl's body assaulted Zavien's senses even over the smell of his brother's burned armour and the reek of the slain. The combat narcotics flooding Jarl's body were eating him alive.

Zavien did nothing but stare for several moments after he called his brother's name. The dead were everywhere, piled all across the floor of the church, a slumbering congregation of the slaughtered. Perhaps a hundred of them, all dragged here after the carnage. Perhaps many of them had been found here in worshipful service, and only half the village had needed to be dragged. Trails of streaked, smeared blood marked the floor.

"Burn the bodies," Jarl said in grunted Cretacian, the tongue of their shared home world, amongst a screed of words Zavien couldn't make out. "Purge the sin, burn the bodies, cleanse the palace."

Zavien raised his chainaxe. In sickening mirror image, his blood-maddened brother raised his dripping chainsword.

"This ends now, Jarl."

There was a bark of syllables, a drooling mess of annihilated words.

The Angel raised his golden blade.

He had been so foolish. This was no mere heretic. Had he been blinded all along? Yes… the machinations of the tainted traitors had shrouded his golden eyes from the truth. But now… Now he saw everything.

"Yes, Horus," he said with a smile that spoke of infinite regret. "It ends now."

VI

The brothers met in the defiled church, their boots struggling to grip the mosaic-laid floor, awash as it was with innocent blood. The whining roar of chainblades was punctuated by crashes as the weapons met. Jagged teeth shattered with every block and parry, clattering against nearby wooden pews as they were torn from their sockets.

Zavien's blood hammered through his body, tingling with the electric edge of combat stimulants. Jarl was a shadow of the warrior he had been—frothing at the mouth, raving at allies that didn't exist, and half-crippled by the lethal battle-drug overdose that was burning out his organs.

Zavien blocked his brother's frantic, shaking cuts. Every time his axe fell, he'd carve another chasm into Jarl's armour. Ultimately, only one warrior was aware enough to know this would never be settled by chainblades.

With a last block and a savage return, Zavien smashed Jarl's blade aside and kicked it from his grip. Its engine stuttered to a halt, resting on the tiled ground. Jarl watched it fly from his grip with delayed, bleeding vision.

Before he could recover, Zavien's hands were at his throat. The Flesh Tearer squeezed, his hands crunching into Jarl's neck, collapsing the softer joint-armour there and vicing into the flesh beneath.

Jarl fell to his knees as his brother strangled him. His gene-enhanced physiology was poisoned by both the curse and the narcotics, and his sight began to darken as his body could take no more punishment.

Darken, yet clear.

Deprived of air, unable to even draw a shred of breath, he mouthed a voiceless word that never left the confines of his charred helm.

"Zavien."

Zavien wrenched his grip to the side, snapping the bones of his brother's spine, and still strangling.

He stood like this for some time. Night had fallen before the warrior's gauntlets released their burden and Jarl's body finally slumped to the ground.

There the madman rested, asleep among those he had slain.

"It is done," Zavien spoke into his squad's vox channel, his eyes closed as only silence replied. "Jarl is dead, brothers. It is done."

He chose to finish what his brother had begun. Even in madness, there sometimes hides a little sense.

The bodies had to be burned. Not to purify any imagined heresy, but to hide the evidence of what had happened here.

It was never supposed to happen. Here, or at Gaius Point. They had damned themselves, and all that remained was to fight as loyally as they could before righteous vengeance caught up with them all.

As the church burned, pouring thick black smoke into the polluted sky, the sound of engines grumbled from the horizon.

Orks. The enemy was finally here.

Zavien stood among the flames, immune to them, his axe in his hand. The fire would draw the aliens closer. There was no way he could defend the whole village against them, but the thought of shedding and tasting their blood before he finally fell ignited his killing urge.

His fangs ached as the vehicles pulled in to a halt outside.

No.

Those engine sounds were too clean, too well-maintained. It was the enemy. But it was not the greenskins.

* * *

I walk from the church, the broken axe in my hand.

There are twenty of them. In human unison, impressive enough even if it lacks the perfection of Astartes unity, they raise their bolters. The Sisters of the Order of the Argent Shroud. The silver hulls of their tanks and their own armour are turned a flickering orange-red in the light of the fire that should have hidden our sins.

Twenty guns aim at me.

The thirst fades. My hunger to taste blood trickles back into my throat, suddenly ignorable.

“We were at Gaius Point,” the lead sister calls out. Their eyes are narrowed at the brightness of the flame behind me.

I do not move. I tell them, simply:

“I know.”

“We have petitioned the Inquisition for your Chapter’s destruction, Flesh Tearer.”

“I know.”

“That is all you have to say for yourself, heretic? After Gaius Point? After killing the squad of our sister Amalay D’Vorien? *After massacring an entire village?”*

“You came to pass judgement,” I tell her. “So do it.”

“We came to defend this colony against your wretched blasphemy!”

They still fear me. Even outnumbered and armed only with a shattered axe, they still fear me. I can smell it in their sweat, hear it in their voices, and see it in their wide eyes that reflect the flames.

I look over my shoulder, where Jarl’s legacy burns. Motes of amber fire sail up from the blaze. My brother’s funeral pyre, and a testament to what we have all become. A monument to how far we have fallen.

We burn our dead on Cretacia. Because so many are killed by poisons and beasts and the predator-king reptiles, it is a mark of honour to die and be burned, rather than be taken by the forest.

It was never meant to be like this. Not here, and not at Gaius Point.

Twenty bolters open fire before I can look back.

I don’t hear them. I don’t feel the wet, knifing pain of destruction.

All I hear is the roar of a Cretacian predator-king, the fury rising from its reptilian jaws as it stalks the jungles of my home world. A carnosaur, black-scaled and huge, roaring up to the clear, clean skies.

It hunts me. It hunts me now, as it hunted me so long ago, at the start of this second life.

I reach for my spear, and…

Zavien clutches the weapon against his chest.

It is death itself he grunts to his tribal brothers as they crouch in the undergrowth. The tongue of Cretacia is simple and plain, little more than the rudiments of true language. “The king-lizard is death itself. It comes for us.”

The carnosaur shakes the ground with another slow step closer. It breathes in short sniffs, mouth open, jaws slack, tasting the air for scents. A grey tongue the size of a man quivers in its maw.

The spear in his steady grip is the one he made himself. A long shaft of dark wood with afire-blackened point. He has used it for three years now, since his tenth winter, to hunt for his tribe.

He does not hunt for his tribe today. Today, as the sun burns down and bakes their backs, he hunts because the gods are in the jungle, and they are watching. The tribes have seen the gods in their armour of red metal and black stone, always in the shadows, watching the hunting parties as they stalk their prey.

If a hunter wishes to dwell in paradise among the stars, he must hunt well when the gods walk the jungles.

Zavien stares at the towering lizard-beast, unable to look away from its watery, slitted red eye.

He shifts his grip on the spear he crafted.

With a prayer that the gods are bearing witness to his courage, he throws the weapon with a heartfelt scream.

The Flesh Tearer crashed to the bloodstained ground, face down in the dust.

"Cease fire," Sister Superior Mercy Astaran said softly. Her sisters obeyed immediately.

"But he still lives," one of them replied.

This was true. The warrior was dragging himself with gut-wrenching slowness, one-armed and with a trembling hand, through the dirt. A dark trail of broken armour and leaking lifeblood pooled around him.

He raised his shaking hand once more, dug the spasming fingers into the ground, and dragged himself another half-metre closer to the burning church's front door.

"Is he seeking to escape?" one of the youngest sisters asked, unwilling to admit her admiration for the heretic's endurance. One arm lost at the elbow, both legs destroyed from the knees down, and his armour a cracked mess that leaked coolant fluids and rich, red Astartes blood.

"It is hardly escape to crawl into a burning building," another laughed.

"He wishes to die among the blasphemy he caused," Astaran said, her scowl even harsher in the firelight. "End him."

A single gunshot rang out from the battle-line.

Zavien's fingers stopped trembling. His reaching hand fell into the dust. His eyes, which had first opened to see the clear skies of a distant world, closed at last.

"What should we do with the body?" Sister Mercy Astaran asked her commander.

"Let the echoes of this heresy remain as an example, at least until the greenskins take control of the surrounding wastelands. Come sisters, we do not have much time. Leave this wretch for the vultures."

Book Six

BLOOD DEBT

by James Swallow

THEY ABANDONED THE groundcar at the port gate when blood began to drool from the ventilator grilles. The machine grunted and sighed, the glass in the windows popping as it shifted and changed shape. The two of them ran, boots hammering across the road, shouldering their way through the swarming throng of terrified people.

The woman surveyed the crowds with care. It was not the first time she had been in the thick of a frightened mass, and she knew the capricious nature of a mob's animal mentality. With the right demonstration of force they could be cowed, but just as quickly they might turn murderous. These screaming, weeping, scrambling hordes were heavy with fear. They wanted so desperately to live, and yet she knew that to a man they would be dead or dying before sunset.

She threw a glance over her shoulder and her companion gave her a frown. He had never once looked back at the city they were leaving behind, not from the moment that they had embarked on their headlong flight. In the distance she could see where some of the taller hive towers had collapsed, parts of their structure altering on the molecular level, steel skeletons running like melted butter as the changes touched them. Buildings that had stood proud and defiant in the most Imperial manners were now shambolic, tattered things, flayed of stone and bearing their iron ribs to the sky. Dots ducked and wove in the air overhead—perhaps carrion birds, or maybe men and women like the ones she had killed to get the car, humans with newly sprouted wings still wet with amniotic fluid.

Hot exhaust fumes threw a sudden curtain of spent-fuel stink over them as a transport thundered upward, the spitting engines vibrating and complaining. She watched it struggling to gain height the cargo pods clustered beneath dangerously overloaded with refugees. Something inside broke with a cough of grey vapour, and the craft dipped sharply toward the ground. She grabbed her companion's cloak and pulled him into the lee of a blockhouse just seconds before the ship crashed. The concussion blew down the crowd like felling timbers, and for long moments her hearing was replaced by a low, hissing whistle.

He stood first, his mouth moving even though his voice was lost to her.

“This way. Keep going.”

She nodded. Acrid chemical smoke pooled around their ankles as they ran, the rough winds across the landing fields catching the hems of their cloaks and flapping them back like sails. They wore the simple robes of pilgrims, the clothing common to the endless migrations of penitents that came to Orilan to visit the tombs of the Faded Lords; but no pilgrims carried the combat webbing or weapons holsters that they wore underneath. Other ships passed over them, climbing on spears of white fire toward the high clouds. The horizon was full of fleeing silver darts, desperate to escape the horror engulfing the planet.

In the first few hours of the outbreak, the vox-casts had described the effect as a virus, warning people to stay in their homes and avoid large congregations; but it quickly became clear that the changes were not the creation of some malignant micro-organism, nor were they limited to humans.

Animals, insects, even plants began to shift and mutate. New forms arose on every corner, disgusting and loathsome things that sprouted horns or festoons of lapping tentacles. And then the inert and inorganic fell prey to the creeping aberration, as iron, stone and plastic warped beneath its touch. Some of the hysterical bulletins spoke about night-dark shadows wafting through the canyons of the city, leaving surreal and unnatural malformations in their wake. Sanity itself seemed to have fled Orilan, allowing things that were once corralled in nightmares to run wild in the cold light of reality.

She shook her head to clear it and blinked. Her companion stabbed a finger at a shifting cluster of people clinging to the edges of a boarding ramp.

“That one,” he said, “yes?”

“Yes,” she replied. Atop the ramp was a planetary lighter, an orbital shuttle of a crude but quite speedy type. Similar ships were employed across the Imperium and she knew that if circumstances required, she would be able to pilot the craft herself. The lighter wore the logo of a freight haulage agency that carried cargo and passengers from platforms in the orbital rings, to the surface of the planet and back again. She estimated that with enough reaction mass and a good course, the ship might get them to Orilan’s outermost moon. Where the ramp ended, a large servitor drone was blocking the open loading hatch, picking figures from the swarming throng with rough metal grippers. Valuables and items of all sorts, from coin bags to barrels of amasec and musical instruments, lay in a pile near its clawed feet. There were perhaps a hundred and fifty people between the two of them and the servitor. Her face set in a grim mask, the woman’s hand dipped into the slit in the folds of her cloak, fingers touching the careworn butt of an old but steadfast stubber pistol. She

scanned the people, looking for a target that would make the most disruption when she hit it.

“Wait.” His left hand touched her elbow, and she saw that his right was also swallowed by the mass of his robes. He had that look in his eyes, the misty; slightly vacant glitter that came on him when he was reading people. “Be ready.” The words had barely left his lips when a commotion began in the heart of the crowd. A peculiar ululating scream flew from the mouth of a gangly dockworker in a coverall. The unfortunate threw himself about, crashing into other people, screeching as he collided with them. Those around him struggled to get away, sending ripples of motion through the crowd. Figures at the ramp’s edges were pushed off and into the sheer well of the exhaust pit below. Ripping sounds came from inside the man’s clothing, and dark fans of blood discoloured his torso. From places on his chest and face, forests of needle-like spines erupted, tearing out of him. He jerked wildly, a puppet pulled by pain. The mob cried out in shock.

She watched the change take the dockworker with grotesque fascination. Since the morning, she had seen it occur more than a dozen times, but each riotous mutation was different from the last, horribly watchable in its repugnant display.

“Now!” said her companion, and her fascination snapped like a thread. He was springing forward, the ornate shape of a master-crafted lasgun filling his fist. She fell into the confusion behind him, drawing her own weapon. It was less fancy than his, but just as elegant in its lethality. They reeled from him as he moved. He laid hands on them, brushed them with his fingers, and people recoiled as if they had been burned. Sweat beaded his brow despite the cold air, the effort of it straining him.

Amid the screams and howls, they forced their way through the crowd as ocean predators would knife through a shoal of fish. She felt her gut tighten as the ramp shuddered; the cargo hatch was beginning to descend, preparing to seal the shuttle.

“Two more. Two more,” grated the servitor, taking the coat hems of a merchant gentleman and his mistress, dragging them forward. “Last ones. No more.”

Had it been necessary, her companion could have communicated his intent to her with a brief thought; but they had been together for so long, faced so many situations such as this one that neither of them needed to consider their next move. The two of them raised their guns and shot the gentleman and lady through the backs of their skulls, blowing brain matter and bone across the servitor’s carapace. The machine-slave obeyed its programming automatically

and dropped the dead bodies.

"Two more," it said. "Last ones."

Some people understood what was transpiring and tried to push forward, but by then it was too late, and the woman and the man were ducking to get under the hatch, followed by the stooped servitor, it's manipulators full of swag. Fresh blood still dripped from it as the helot worked the locks. Fists tang on the hull, dull thuds resonating into the cargo bay.

The bay's interior was a web of netting and spars, to which dozens of Orilani had attached themselves, terrified that they would be torn out of their escape vessel before it made lift-off. She saw the servitor lock itself into an acceleration couch and grabbed at a loose curl of webbing.

Below their feet, the rocket motor spat out flame, burning alive the people they left behind as it rose into the air.

THE LIGHTER PRESENTED its blunt prow to the sky as it lifted away from the chaos of the starport, sweeping across the edge of the city. The engines laboured to hold the vessel on course, but by the Emperor's grace there was fuel enough in the tanks to burn the boosters hot. The ship clawed into the air, threading through thin streaks of cloud and the sooty plumes of burning buildings. Something in the haze of corruption moved in a way that windborne smoke never would have. By turns and heartbeats, a black glitter of movement came falling towards the sweating, groaning ship. It was ephemeral and gauzy, a shimmer on spoiled waters, a glow from the wings of an insect swarm. It touched the vessel's fuselage and coated the hull like wet paint rolling in coils across the metal fuselage, down and about. Searching. Feeling. Seeking a way inside. As the vessel rose into Orilan's upper atmosphere, the inky shroud at last found a microscopic flaw in the hull. And with a controlled, fierce will, it poured itself in through the gap.

VONOROF FELT EMPTY and sick, as if the g-forces pushing him into the pilot's couch were leaching his very life essence away. As the blackness of space unfolded across the cockpit window, the pestilent sights he left behind still dogged him, replaying over and over in his mind's eye. The tree outside the chapel as it turned about its length to present a maw of teeth. The roadway that melted under his feet. His daughter wailing as her eyes fell from her head, her face sprouting tendrils and cilia. As hard as he tried, Vonorof could not shake the images away. He blinked.

He was still crying. He had been for quite some time now. The hatch behind

him irised open and he gave a start. Panic rolled around made him and he steeled himself, at last daring to turn and race the figure that had entered. A pilgrim, his face haunted and drawn. About his neck pooled a rough-hewn hood, framing a bald head dominated by an electro-tattoo of the Imperial aquila. In one ear glittered a single purity stud of old pewter. Vonorof suddenly found his voice. “You shouldn’t be up here! This is a restricted area—”

“Not to me,” the man’s voice was flat with fatigue, but it brooked no argument. He pushed into the cockpit and the pilot glimpsed another figure behind him in the gangway, another pilgrim hanging back. “Change course,” said the bald man. Vonorof felt a peculiar tension around the thick brass sockets in the base of his neck, where the sinuous mechadendrites of the lighter’s command chair connected directly to his brain. A subtle pressure, pushing on his will. He tasted a greasy sensation in the stale recycled air of the cabin. In all honesty, he had not given a lot of consideration to where he would go when he lifted the ship, he had half-expected not even to get this far. The vague, animal need to escape the insanity on the planet had been driving him with its directionless energy. “Where to?” he asked, slipping into a position of inferiority before he was even aware of it. The man pointed; in the distance, starlight glittered off the hull of a vessel in high orbit. Direct machine code feeds from the lighter’s cogitators told Vonorof that it was a Gladius-class frigate, a warship of a kind only employed by the Emperor’s Space Marine legions, the Adeptus Astartes.

“Approach that craft.” A flood of panic seized the pilot. The frigate was the colour of old blood, a red scar in the sky, and even from this distance he could see the clouds of debris that remained of craft that had strayed too close to it.

“A blockade ship,” the words spilled from his lips in a rush, “they’ll destroy us, even if there are no infected on board!”

“There is no disease,” said the pilgrim, the weariness hollowing his voice. “Do as I say.”

Vonorof glanced from the viewport and made eye contact with the man. Instantly any arguments died in his throat and the pilot found his head bobbing in a wooden nod. The pilgrims will overpowered him easily, and he turned the transport with quick motions, bringing it on a direct intercept course with the frigate. On some level, a small part of Vonorof’s mind rebelled at the sudden compulsion that had come over him, but it was a weak and feeble voice that railed against the man’s dominating presence.

HE WIPED A sheen of sweat from his head and licked dry lips. Retreating

from the cockpit, he found his companion waiting in the anteroom, watching him with a level gaze. He saw accusation there, a telltale so subtle that only someone who knew her as well as he did could notice. He ignored the flicker of irritation that coiled inside him and sealed the hatch, leaving Vonorof to fulfil his orders.

“You are putting us at risk,” she told him. “The Astartes will surely obliterate this shuttle.” The woman threw a nod in the direction of the frigate. “You saw the hull livery. The Blood Angels. They’re not known for their mercy.”

“Fortunate for me then that I do not seek it.”

She shook her head. “We should attempt a stealthy approach to the outer lunar colony and then—”

He held up a hand to silence her. “Marain, I know what I am doing. Trust me.”

Her eyes narrowed and an unspoken emotional charge passed between them. The issue of trust was a raw wound, a chasm yawning wide between them. After a long moment, he pushed past her, a new kind of weariness in his bones.

MARAIN WATCHED THE man pick his way through a mass of hastily stowed possessions, rooting in the depths of an equipment locker. “You are so sure of yourself, Ramius.” She studied him with different eyes; curious that he could have that effect on her, not once or twice, but over and over. The first time Marain had laid eyes upon him, she had been afraid of Ramius, although her training forbade her to show even the slightest inkling of it. The man she had feared that day differed from the person she had learnt to respect; in turn, that man was different from the Ramius who had bedded her and shown her love of a sort, for a while; and again, that man was not the man she saw now, drinking from a water pack, pressing at his face as if the skin on it were a poorly-hung mask. “Your soldier’s eyes,” he said quietly, the ghost of a smile on his lips. “Watchful.”

“It’s what I am,” she retorted. “What I do.”

Ramius turned away. “There’s no war here.”

“You’re wrong,” Marain told him. “There’s always war. If there were not, you would have no need for someone like me.”

He peered through a porthole. “You are more than just a protector…”

The unspoken remainder of the statement made her lip curl. “Once, perhaps, but not now. That road is dosed to us.” Ramius turned swiftly to face her. Was

that hurt in his eyes, some flash of betrayal? Had he expected Marain to take his side in all of this? She held away any reaction, keeping her aspect utterly natural.

HE READ HER thoughts in her eyes; he could have laid them bare and known her mind inside out if he was prepared to expend the psychic effort, but Ramius was spent from tension and, although he hated to admit it, guilt. Marain's accusing face, her tawny skin framing a hard line of lips and dark eyes, arranged in judgement of him. In reproach of his mistakes, his folly.

She blamed him for it all, for the madness on Orilan. He could not dispute her. The truth of it was, his curiosity and arrogance would cost a world its life.

Marain came close to him, and he felt a surge of adrenaline as her lips spoke at his ear in a hushed murmur, too low to carry beyond the intimacy of the anteroom. "You must atone, Ramius. Admit your errors and ask for forgiveness." For all the quiet of the whisper, it was as loud a demand as a shout. He pulled away, unable to cover the sudden, naked fear on his face.

"I… I cannot," Ramius husked.

Marain's disappointment coloured her words. "You will die at the hands of the Blood Angels, along with everyone else on this scow. You have until then to consider your repentance." She left him there to muse on her words, dropping back into the tunnel to the lighter's cargo decks.

THE SHIP HAD one compartment that could be considered to be "luxury" accommodation, at least by the standards of comparison to the rest of the craft. The addition of some threadbare acceleration couches retrofitted from a fire-damaged starliner and a broken entertainment holosphere were all the lighter offered. The cabin was full of people, every seat taken, every inch of uttered carpeted floor filled with human traffic. The air was thick with body odour as the ventilators laboured to handle the miasma generated by the refugees. Under other circumstances, fights might have broken out as people jockeyed for more room; but not this time. The passengers who had bribed or cajoled their way on to Vonorof's shuttle were too afraid to do anything other than watch one another for signs of the change. A dead woman lay in one of the aisles, her skull crushed by the boots of her neighbours. Just prior to lift-off she had begun to writhe, and as one they had piled upon her and murdered her where she sat, terrified that the mutations would burst from her body and turn upon them. Fear drove them, none of them caring if her palsy was caused by something else. No one dared to cough or to speak. None of them wanted to be

next. The compartment adjoined an engineering space. Running the length of the ship, it was filled with pipes for breathing gas and conduits labelled with arcane symbols that only Mechanicus adepts understood. Through this cluttered artery the darkness moved like liquid, flowing across every surface. When it passed the cabin wall it paused. It sensed life in there, very close. Very afraid. The black form drew the gossamer edges of itself together into a ball of diamond hardness, fashioning a blade-point. A flicker of motion forced it into the metal and a finger-thick hole popped open, directly behind the shoulders of a corpulent, sweaty man. Held in place by the press of flesh, he could only flap his hands and wail as the shape punched through his spine and bored through his torso. His dying act was to tear the shirt from his chest; and then the darkness erupted in streams from every pore of his skin, turning him inside out.

People either side of the fat man warped like flowing candle wax, growing fans of teeth or eyes that popped open from boils. Everyone reacted at once, screaming, scrambling, a mass of humans all trying to force themselves through a narrow hatch and away from the tide of changes. The blackness swooped, kissing them with corruption and shredding their bodies. It formed a rudimentary maw from thin streams of matter and contorted, pressing air out of its makeshift mouth. The squeal of noise distorted until it became a recognisable word. “Ramius.”

MARAIN HEARD THE horrible voice and her blood ran cold. The name tolled like a bell, the ghostly moan resonating down the tunnel. Where the bare skin of her hands clasped the rungs of the access ladder, she felt the metal under her fingers grow warm and pliant turning fleshy. The air in the conduit became damp and breathy with the bouquet of rotting meat. The tunnel began to undulate and move, growing ribs and coils of cartilage. The sound of bone cracking spurred her into action and she let her weight carry her down to the cargo deck level. Wet trickles of stringy spittle followed, pooling at her feet in frothy puddles. She threw a quick glance up; the tunnel was turning into an open throat some giant mutant oesophagus. Marain’s gun was in her hand as she sprinted forward, shoving blank-faced refugees out of her way.

RAMIUS DETECTED THE psychic spoor of the dark-thing moments before his physical senses registered the stink of rended flesh. Inwardly he cursed; he had tired to the point that his weir honed warning senses had let him down. Tendrils like aerial roots crawled up the walls of the antechamber probing and tasting. In the places where they touched objects, the tentacle things split to

reveal toothed lips, enveloping each new discovery like a snake eating a rodent. Ramius' gun shrieked, ozone sealing the air as laser bolts shrivelled the invading probes. The shots beat them back, but it was only a temporary respite. With cold honesty, he understood that his mistakes had come to gather him to their breast, understanding that his hopes of escape and denial were childish and unrealistic. From below, the mutation hooted its terrible rendition of his name once again.

The clinical aspect of his nature assumed control. Based on his experiments, he had a rough approximation of the time it would take the change to sweep the shuttle. He imagined that outside now, the sleek metal lines of the lighter were slowly turning into swathes of skin and scale. Ramius forced open the hatch to the cockpit, holstering the gun and discarding the pilgrim robes as he did. The pilot's face was florid; he would be the worst off, Ramius mused, wired into the vessel, feeling each moment of warping as the ship was transmuted. It would not be long before the man would become subsumed into his console, meat and pseudo-flesh merging together, and so time was of the essence. "Hail the frigate."

"Wh-what is happening-?"

Ramius slapped him hard across the face. "Hail them!"

Vonorof worked a set of glyphs and the tinny hiss of a short-range vox issued from a transceiver.

"They won't answer. They'll kill us!"

The cloak fell about his ankles, revealing the ceramite-plate battle jacket beneath, the vest of fine Phaedran silks. He drew an icon from inside the folds where it hung on a thick chain and gripped it. The object responded with an inner fire, lighting the black eye sockets of the skull carved upon it. Vonorof knew the shape of the thing instantly; a thick gothic letter "I" adorned with runes and chasings.

"Astartes, hear me," intoned the bald man, "know my name and purpose. I am the Inquisitor Ramius Stele of the Ordo Hereticus. My agent and I are trapped aboard this vessel and we require rescue. I carry the Emperor's divine sigil. I must have passage!"

The pilot's lips trembled. Inquisitors were things spoke of in hushed whispers on Orilan; in the streets of the unremarkable outworld. Vonorof had heard stories of men who had actually seen them, but they were more myth than fact, spun with lies and mad truths. He gaped at Stele as the man ignored him; all his attention on the growing shape of the frigate. It was too much for his simple parochial mind to accept.

“BROTHER-CAPTAIN,” SAID Simeon, “A development.” Tycho glanced up, the glow of the pict-plate map beneath him casting a sinister light across the half-mask covering the right side of his face. In the sullen glow of the warship’s tacticarium, the haze of hololithic light from the consoles ranged around them gave everything a baleful aspect.

“Speak,” he demanded, the ever-present edge of irritation in his tone, “I tire of culling these infected wretches, brother. I hope you have something more challenging for me.”

Simeon nodded. “A signal from this ship,” he tapped at a moving dot on the map. “The codes are present and correct. It would appear that an Inquisitor of the ImperialChurch is aboard. A man of some import and rank among the Ordo Hereticus, so it would seem.”

“Indeed?” said Tycho. “Unfortunate. Be certain to have a servitor take his name so that his death will be duly noted.” Simeon shifted slightly. “You misunderstand me, captain. The man demands assistance. He calls for a rescue.” Tycho raised an eyebrow at the temerity of the statement. “Nothing is to leave Orilan alive, Simeon. Those were our orders. The gunners have the ship in their sights, so bid them to fire.”

“With respect, lord, those orders are open to your interpretation.”

The other Blood Angel frowned. “Captain, this is a direct command from a member of the Ecclesiarchy. We cannot simply ignore it.”

Simeon’s commander ran a hand over his chin; his eyes narrowing. “We risk contamination if we enter the craft,” he said, thinking aloud. “A great hazard.”

“There will be mutants on board,” Simeon added. He knew Tycho well, having served under him for many decades. He could almost see the turn in the captain’s mood as it rolled forth like a storm cloud across the sky. Moments earlier, Tycho had admitted to his distaste at a mission better suited to a picket ship of the Imperial Navy; Simeon did not for a moment believe that the rescue would be a hard sell to his commander. They were Blood Angels, after all. They craved the cut and thrust of close-in action, not this paltry stand-off battle. He pressed the issue a little more. If the vox-casts from the planet are anything to go by, organics and inorganics will be changing into predatory forms. “I would measure me inquisitor’s life span in minutes, lord.” A thin line of amusement pulled at Tycho’s lips, and his hand twitched. There; that was the choice made, then. “Perhaps we should respond. It is only right.” He stood up and strode away from his command dais, Simeon turning to watch him go. “Have a skirmish force of men meet me in the teleportarium. Tell them to arm for a close quarter engagement.”

Brother Simeon took a half step after Tycho. “Captain, there is no need for

you to go in person. I would gladly take the—” Tycho silenced him with a look. “There is *every* reason for me to go.” The eagerness to taste battle, even something as brief as this, danced in the captain’s single human eye. “Tell this Inquisitor that his salvation is on its way.” A slight smile flickered on his lips and was gone. “You have the bridge, Simeon.”

MARAIN.

She could tell by the weakness of his mind-touch that Ramius was at the limits of his mental reserves. The telepathic message was a ghostly caress, and she almost missed it in the melee. She broke off the neck of a howling, eyeless mutant child with the butt of her gun as she fumbled out a fresh ammunition pack for the weapon. Marain ignored Stele’s entreaty as she reloaded, allowing him to see through her eyes. She gave him freedom to touch her surface thoughts; it was far easier than framing a verbal answer.

Attend me, quickly. The Astartes are coming. Leave these people they are already dead. Her face twisted in a grimace. “Get to the saviour pods!” she yelled at the untainted ones, “Leave everything and go!” Marain bracketed the shambling, warped things with gunfire, but the more she killed, the more they recruited from the ranks of the panicked Orilani. It was a losing fight.

She forced an elderly man into the nearest pod with an angry shout, trying not to dwell on the logic of her actions. Marain’s conviction was fuelled by guilt and responsibility, even as part of her tried to forget that the passengers were just as likely to mutate in the saviour pods as anywhere else. Even if the pods actually launched, what good would it do? Drifting in space, the escapees would suffocate or be shot down, and if by some miracle they made it down to the surface what would be waiting for them but more new kinds of death?

Ramius was still in her head, leafing through her thoughts as if he were thumbing the pages of a book. She showed him her intent to stay, at least until these poor wretches had escaped this death ship. Ramius tugged on her memories, on the threads of loyalty that she had for him; with a savage mental swipe she cut them off, heat building in her cheeks, hot tears prickling her eyes. Marain tasted his shocked understanding as he realised she had rejected her unswerving fealty to him. The guardian’s sense of duty had been outstripped by Stele’s perfidy.

He saw things he had never dared to search for, as she showed him her hidden self, the doubts and fears she had concealed from him. Her training had acquitted itself well, and never once had the Inquisitor suspected that Marain would harbour such ill will toward him. The woman had known all along about

the nature of his research, the arcane prohibited experiments that he had been conducting. She had known and said nothing, such was her allegiance her dogged dedication to him.

But now that had changed: Stele had gone too far, and Marain would be silent no longer. He saw her intentions, to reveal him to the Ordo Hereticus, to disclose the whole sorry story of his transgressions. If she lived, she would expose him.

Marain felt him leave her mind in a gust of psychic cold, a melancholy, sad wind fading away.

RAMIUS STAGGERED WITH the impact of what he had sensed and bumped into the cabin wail. He felt hollow. Marain, the one unchanging rock in the seas of his doubt, and she had elected to betray him. He shook his head. *Could she not understand? He had never intended things to get out of control!* He had only wanted to learn, to understand. Was that so hard for her to comprehend? Did the quest for knowledge make him a traitor? He felt sick inside as he realised that for Marain, the answer was yes.

The pilot slumped forward, dying along with his ship. Stele ignored him, ignored the growing wetness in the atmosphere as the shuttle's metallic slowly turned into fleshy stomachs and stinking gut-chambers. He felt an overwhelming sense of despair that blocked out everything else. Everything was going wrong, and now she rejected him. As quickly as it appeared, the emotion in him became hot anger. *How dare she? How dare a mere soldier sit in judgement of Ramius Stele?*

That she has been his lover gave her no right to castigate him or his methods. So be it then. She had deserted hint and he would do the same to her. Let her stay on this ruined barge and die with the rest of these unfortunates.

Distracted by his own thoughts, Stele's attention wandered and he did not see it until it was too late. Vonorof's twitchy body did something unspeakable and lighting-fast bones snap-cracking as they reversed in their sockets, new lines of mouths opening in fanged maws. The pilot-mutant sprang at him, and Ramius drew back, but there was nowhere to go. The creature's attack knocked the lasgun from his fingers, and before he could muster a spark of psyker force it was on him, battering his skull against the decking. It screamed and gibbered, words turning into a mush of slurred sound.

Spirals of colour lit behind Ramius' eyes and the breath left his lungs, blood trickling into his vision. He was dimly aware of something else entering the cramped chamber, something larger and deadly. His mind briefly touched the

edge of a cool killer's intellect.

The chattering mutant reared up, ready to tear out his throat; and just as quickly it exploded in a wet gout of purpled matter.

Ears ringing, his vision tunnelling, Stele barely manage to slide free of the mutant's steaming torso as a huge figure hove into sight. He wiped contaminated blood from his eyes to see shimmering greaves of brass and crimson filling his vision. Atop the tower of armour was a face that was half pale flesh, half gold mirror. A sneer coiled on the lips of the lofty figure. "Bring him," it rumbled. "There are others still alive on the lower decks of the lighter." The second voice came from a red giant standing at the hatchway. "What is to be done, lord?"

"Save what you can," said the half-face, the words following Ramius into the darkness of unconsciousness. "Cull the rest."

HIS MIND FLOATED in an ocean of crystal voids, sharp jags of memory and sensation ripping into him, needles of recollection tearing across the inquisitor's psyche. On some level, he understood that his corporeal body was teetering on the edge of coma and within, his psionic essence was undirected and broken, wandering the caverns of his soul. He sensed the boil and churn of the empyrean out there just beyond the real, the realm of warp space where unknowable things lived. Even as he feared them, there was much of Ramius Stele that coveted the knowledge of these creatures, of how and what they were.

He knew that emotion all too well. It was this drive in him that had brought ruin to Orilan.

There was laughter. Cruel and mocking, amused at his plight. Stele tried to shy away from it, but it found him wherever he hid.

"Look what you have wrought," The words were the breath of corpses. *"Do not hide from it, Inquisitor. See it. Know it and own your deeds!"*

Against his will. Stele's mind reeled back to the library once more, forced down through the years to the point where it had all begun.

Always the library, the place where he had first glimpsed the great potential for himself. It had been on Ariyo, after the burning of the Simbasa Heretics; there as the guardsmen put the torch to the storehouse of unhallowed texts, Ramius had dared to read from a volume that fell open at his feet. It had been an accident just a small thing. He had looked, just dared to look. And what he read, glimpsed even…

What he saw there planted seeds of fervent interest nurtured by the

radicalism already seated in his heart. As the years passed, as he grew more disenchanted with the decrepitude of the Ecclesiarchy and the lackwits among his superiors, Ramius concealed his disgust while he sought out more forbidden knowledge and plumbed the greater depths of psyker witchery.

"Do you remember the day I spoke to you?" The voice was enthralling just as it had been the first time. *"You thought I was a dream. But I was the wind of change upon your limited mind. I opened you, Ramius. You welcomed me."*

Perhaps this was an illusion, he wondered, some product of his injuries. *"You know better than that!"*

And then he tasted the name of the creature in his mind. Malfallax.

"Yes." A hot pressure shoved Stele's memories to the secret chamber beneath the old temple on Orilan. To the place where the death of the world had begun, hours ago now, days past.

"You were unready. Too eager. Look what it brought you."

The inquisitor watched the events unfold as if he were a passive observer, merely an audience member at some gaudy theatre play; he struggled fruitlessly, as if he could somehow throw a warning back in time to himself not to begin the Rite of Binding. He had made a mistake. It was so clear to him now in retrospect; one single ritual syllable spoken incorrectly, the emphasis on the rising glottal stop instead of the failing fricative…

A small thing. But enough to uncage the Tzeentch-thing he had called to the chamber.

Stele watched it happen again, sensing his tormentor taking amusement from his squirming. He saw himself walk through the drawing of the circle and the eightfold star within. Then, the lengthy and brutal murder of the vagrant to grant the blood sacrament. At last, the coming of the funnel of swarming shadow shaping into form in the middle of the stone basement. His rapt expression of delight—and then the sudden turn to terror as it struck out, metamorphosing the rock and metal into gnashing teeth, ripping out past the feeble wards he had been sure would hold it. Into the city, hungry for sustenance.

Screaming.

Fading.

Free.

Weak denials formed in Ramius' mind. *How could I have known? It was an accident!* He had never intended to unleash the thing, only to capture and study the monstrosity so he ought gain insight into the nature of the Change Lord.

Malfallax smiled. *"You delude yourself, Stele. Deep in your heart, you wanted to let it go. There is a part of you that hates the old order, the staid and*

the static. You lust for change and metamorphosis."

When he tried to find a way to frame a retort, Ramius discovered his thoughts frozen by the damning truth in the warp creature's words.

"If this is not what you wanted, you could have stepped back from the brink. You chose not to. The willingness to sacrifice the woman is all the proof I require. You want this. You desire to know the way in which Malfallax overpowers you."

Stele's psyche recoiled beneath the awful, unstoppable reality. *"And with your own longing you make yourself my willing cohort."*

The laughter faded and he let the blood-warm darkness swallow him.

THE BLOOD ANGELS marched the survivors into the frigate's launch bay, forcing them into a huddled group in the middle of the deck. Medicae servitors probed and examined them while Space Marines with loaded bolters walked in steady watchful orbits around the poor wretches. They had all expected to die on the shuttle, but to be rescued by these crimson-sheathed giants was like the hand of the God-Emperor himself reaching down to scoop them from the jaws of death. Panic and terror had been replaced with a different breed of fear, one borne of reverence and a lifetime of awe.

A hatch in the wall irised open to admit one of Simeon's officers, a taciturn codicer in blue armour, his grizzled face lined with age. The Space Marine took a few steps and stumbled to a sudden halt, his jaw dropping open.

One of the Blood Angels guarding the refugees caught sight of his reaction and approached him. "Brother Varon? Is something wrong?"

"Daemon!" Varon suddenly shouted the word, his finger stabbing out at a nondescript woman in a tattered evening dress, rocking gently side-to-side amid the rescued. Corded muscles stood out on the psyker's neck as his preternatural senses tasted the psychic stench of something monstrous hidden inside the cowl of her flesh.

The other survivors threw themselves aside as the woman sighed, each of them all too familiar by now with the ways of the change.

Her body twitched and deflated, crumbling in on itself. A swarm of black motes issued from her eyes, her nostrils, ears and mouth. The Blood Angels opened fire on reflex, cutting down those too slow to get out of the way, laying a spread of bolt shells into the host-corpse. The dead woman flew apart in wet hanks of fast-decaying flesh, but the dark-thing was already free. It looped around like a streamer of liquid shadow and threw itself at the psyker Space Marine becoming a glistening spear.

Varon marshalled all his ability at once and channelled his Quickening into a mental shield; for an instant he thought it might have been enough.

The force of the daemon's murderous attack shattered his ephemeral defence like brittle glass, melting into the ceramite armour protecting his chest and tearing him inside out like a long and bloody streamer of meat. The shade came around, trailing Varon's blood and viscera, and beheaded a screaming Chapter serf with callous abandon, playing with the disorder it was creating.

IN THE FRIGATE'S chirurgery. Stele bolted awake. He reeled up from the examination table where he lay, scattering trays of instruments and knocking aside the medicae servitors tending.

"It's here," he spat, "aboard the ship!"

THE SHADOW-CREATURE warped the flesh of human and Astartes alike murdering them by forcing unholy new shapes from their bodies. Some perished as their bones and organs were forcibly altered into eight-pointed stars and hate glyphs. The daemon enjoyed this recreation, but it was secondary to the real reason it had come this far.

With a breathy sigh, it left its toys behind and the creature gathered up enough sustenance from the shrivelled dead. It surged down the corridors of the frigate painting taint and corruption where it passed. It left a few survivors here and there to speak of what it had wrought; there was no sense in creating such great an if no one lived to witness it.

Down through the deck shunting and flickering dodging through barricades and the hastily-erected psyker wards of Tycho's librarians, it fell through microscopic cracks in the metal and ceramite tasting power in the air, moving toward it.

In the beating heart of the ship, past the locks made of heavy, poisonous phase-iron and the pitiful spirit deflectors, the shadow at last entered the holy chamber of the frigate's stardrives.

Tech-priests who had never ventured beyond the confines of the drive core scattered, babbling prayers to the Omnissiah or weeping blood. Enginseers brandished tools as weapons and died screeching where they stood.

The daemon made itself into a vague man-shape and drifted to the huge cylinders of the warp engines, stalking forward on pointed, glassine legs.

Beneath the casings of the mighty drives, technologies almost akin to magic seethed and roiled, great powers capable of remaking the laws of the universe barely held in check by weakling organic men with little comprehension of

their true potential. The creature smiled and spread itself thin, touching the matter of the engines and changing them by degrees. Slowly it gathered in flesh and metal, and began to build itself a nest.

CAPTAIN TYCHO CAME to him eventually, as Stele knew he would. He watched the sullen light of the floating glow-globes caress the finely-tooled mask across Tycho's cheek and he wondered about what the Astartes hid beneath it. He had picked rumour and hearsay from the minds of the Chapter helots in the medicae chamber—something vague about a disfigurement caused in combat with an ork psyker. If it were true, then little wonder that the brother-captain hid his mutilation. The aesthetic sensibilities of any Blood Angel would be offended by such a sight. On another day, if Stele were not so fatigued from all that had transpired, he might have been able to pluck the whole story from Tycho's mind itself; but Ramius was unwilling to risk such an intrusion, not when his life depended on the goodwill of the Sons of Sanguinius.

The captain wasted no time with preamble and fixed him with a hard eye. "What is this monstrosity that has come aboard my ship, inquisitor? Tell me what madness unfolded on Orilan that it could spawn something so aberrant?" His face—what Stele could see of it—was locked in a hard grimace.

Ramius measured his every gesture with the skill and care that had been drilled into him since his days as an interrogator-apprentice. One hint of a lie and he knew he would be vented to space Tycho would be able to do it and claim Stele was consumed by Chaos; he doubted any of the captain's men would leap to the defence of a servant of the Ordo Hereticus. *They respect only brute strength,* he reminded himself. *I will have to display some measure of that in order to sway them.*

He gave a sigh of remorse, calculated to be long enough and deep enough to seem real.

"Captain Tycho, if only you had seen what I have seen…" He shook his head sadly. "A nest of cultists infesting every level of the hive city. I regret… my own caution led me to them too late. By the time I arrived in their concealed lair, they had already summoned the creature."

In reality, Stele had fabricated evidence to cover his own tracks weeks before he had arrived on the planet, inventing a dozen false identities and faked verification that "proved" the presence of a cult of Tzeentch in Orilan's capital hive. "I killed them all but it was a hollow victory. The damage had already been wrought."

Tycho watched him, the stony cast of the Space Marine's flesh as immobile as the brassy mask on the other. "You brought it here." It was a statement, not an accusation. The Blood Angel seemed to sense the inquisitor was lying about something. It was the nature of the ordos, after all; falsehood was to Stele's kind as armour was to Tycho's Chapter. "A number of my men, some of my serfs, an untold number of servitors… All lie dead and defiled by the hand of this…*thing*. Those that were not killed outright I have been forced to put down." He advanced a step and Stele thought he could smell stale blood. "Now it chews on the heart of this ship like a dog with a shank of meat." With a sudden shock, the Inquisitor sensed Tycho's surface thoughts as the captain made his demand of him. "I want this fiend ejected from my vessel, lord inquisitor. *You* will assist me in achieving this end."

Stele clamped down on his reaction immediately. The last thing he wanted was to find himself in a room with the daemon once again; but to refuse outright would seem like cowardice and lose him the small measure of reverence his high office granted him. "Captain, with respect, this creature is one of the most powerful daemons I have come across. It is a most deadly enemy, the very essence of change and mutation. It thrives on disorder and—"

"Chaos?" Tycho snapped, his tone cracking like brittle ice. "I want it dead, Stele, and you will help with that desire." He could sense it clearly now, the blood-need in Tycho's mind. The unchained fury desperate for the battle to come. "Or should I assume that men of your ilk are as spineless in the face of the archenemy as I have been led to believe?"

Stele's eyes narrowed. *I must play the warrior's game, then.* "I warn you, captain, keep a civil tongue in your head. I am as staunch in the Emperor's light as you!" The lie glided from him like smooth glass, and inwardly Ramius felt ice form in his stomach. The pull of his oath to the Golden Throne waned with every passing day, conflicting him with the sweet nectar of the warp's promise. A nerve jumped beneath his eye; despite his fears, he still wanted to face the daemon, to *know* it.

"Good," said the Space Marine, glancing over his shoulder at his second-in-command. "Simeon, return the Inquisitor's lasgun, and prepare a squad."

"Your will," said the other officer.

The ghost of a smile returned to Tycho's face. "And be sure you lock the hatches behind us."

THEY BEGAN A decent into a freakish hell, into a passageway of nightmares.

The things lurking inside the corridors of the drive decks dwarfed the

stomach-turning mutants Stele had seen on Orilan. Shapes made of skin and bone coated the walls, stretched to impossible heights, pulled thin and taut. Horribly, many of the fleshy forms were still alive, some moaning others weeping.

Ramius moved amid the towering armoured forms of the Blood Angels as they walked forward with lockstep, stoic caution. As well as returning the lasgun, Simeon had also has Stele's body armour cleaned and patched. It felt heavy and warm on his shoulders, and he fingered the edge of the ceramite plate where it eat beneath his silken vest, knowing that it would not save him from any sort of direct attack.

His gaze moved over the remains of the enginseers, fascinated by the strange inventiveness of the display. The daemon was getting better at what it did like an artist learning the strengths of a new medium, able now to uncoil better horrors from the sculpted flesh of its victims. Stele wanted to know how that was done. He wanted to understand how a man might take living flesh and mould it so, or sift it through his fingers like dry sand. Some of the remnants—Ramius found himself thinking of them as such—were still ambulatory, and they crowded toward the Space Marine squad. Tycho led the way through them, rending their warped forms with flares of killing fire from his combi-weapon, the melta gun flashing, catching the ones that got too close with ruby threads cast by lasers in his gauntlets. They screamed and died, boiling to death as they cried out for mercy. The Blood Angel captain's face was grim. Stele sensed his surface thoughts as Tycho forced away any recall of the men these things had once been.

The moist, blood-warm halls were red like raw flesh, and around them steel had turned into arcs of wet bone. Weak orange light spilled in radiant pools. Tycho's metallic armour made him seem like a bronze statue one that had grown bored with standing atop its plinth and stepped down, away to seek foes to kill.

Deeper they went, and the freak show grew more nauseating. The mutants attacked in small groups, then in waves that came back and forth. Perhaps they craved pain or just the nothingness of release; Stele folded dosed his mind to them, searching instead for the pulse-beat of the daemon itself. Searching and finding.

All about him the Blood Angels fought with ruthless, passionate fury, gunning down creatures, who had been their Chapter serfs only hours earlier. The inquisitor kept his lasgun close, pressing it to his chest like a talisman of protection, now and then daring to venture a shot at something that caught his eye.

They passed through flaps of rubber that resembled the valves of a heart, and then they were inside the core. Obscene geometry and ranges of bony spars spread out above them, glistening with new change. The shapes of the drive chamber were subsumed under undulating sheets of skin, the remains of a dozen enginseers flayed and merged together; it was impossible to see where the frigate ended and the monster began.

Concentrating, he let his preternatural senses sweep the chamber. And there it was, resting inside a nest of bones. Stele found the heart of the creature with his second sight inherently sensing the collection of clouded, alien thoughts inside a rough bole of flesh atop the primary reactor dolmen.

Tycho watched his reaction and read what he needed from it. “There!” he shouted, pointing upward. “Fire for effect!” The Blood Angels unleashed shot and shell against the daemon, and in return it extruded sinuous arms with teeth and barbs, slashing in scythes at the Space Marines.

Stele broke from the group and sought cover as Tycho’s men died, cut into pieces or beheaded; others were quicker, ripping at the claws with power fists, blasting them with bolters. Black, oily blood jetted across the undulating deck and the Tzeentch-thing screamed.

Ramius aimed his gun but hesitated, his finger frozen on the trigger. He found himself enraptured by the unbearable shapes of the monster above. That such things could be done—and this was only a *servant* of the Malfallax, which in turn was only a princeling daemon. Stele did not see chaos of order; he saw only incredible power, enough to remake the galaxy if one could only master it. He lost himself in it, the fight ranging around him unnoticed. A helmet with a Space Marine’s head still within it bounced to a halt at his feet, and Tycho’s bronzed form blurred toward him, shoving the Inquisitor aside as a spidery thing on nerve tendon tethers clawed and snarled. The Blood Angel killed it with a crash of bolter shells and Stele blinked, returning to the moment.

“What are you dithering for?” Tycho snarled, “My men are dead, only we still stand! Work your witchery, psyker, or you are useless to me.”

Distracted for only an instant the brother-captain missed the approach of a blunt hammer of fatty meat. The flesh-club struck him in the head, and Stele, rooted to the spot saw Tycho spin away like a discarded rag. The Blood Angel warrior careened off a piece of steel plate and fell to the deck with a massive crash of stressed metal.

Stele ran to his side, panic rising in him. Tycho was the only thing that could protect him from what he had unleashed on Orilan; without the Blood Angel, he had nothing, no armour, no defender… “Captain!” Ramius shook the

Astartes, but Tycho did not respond. The warrior was insensate, but his chest still rose and fell in shallow breaths. Unconscious then, but still alive.

He saw Tycho's combi-weapon lying on the floor and took a half-step toward it. The idea of taking it up himself died in this mind; the gun was so massive he would never have been able to lift it.

Icy fear and tingling adrenaline flooded Stele's body. He looked up, searching for a means of escape, and instead found a nest of eyes blinking at him from the topmost tiers of the warp towers. It sent claw arms down toward him, slow and steady. The sinuous limbs wandered around him, tap ping disinterestedly on Tycho's armour, scraping at the floor. Ramius saw that they were made of human flesh; he saw a bondsman's tattoo visible on one elongated stabbing arm.

"Human," said the daemon, the voice echoing with the resonance of its distant master. "What will you do now?"

Across some great vastness, the Malfallax was working the shade-thing like a marionette, talking through it to him. "If fear is all you have, then your life ends here. If not…"

Ramius had the sudden impression that he was being offered something.

"I am afraid," Stele said aloud, "but I am more hungry than fearful. Hungry for knowledge."

Dark laughter boomed off the shivering walls. "Such greed. Your species has an almost infinite capacity for it." Part of the eye cluster detached from the large mass, transforming into a wispy shadow as it drifted down to approach him. "The path branches before you, Stele. Defy me and perish, or take my blessing and walk the Way of Change." When Ramius hesitated, the shade congealed before him, becoming vaguely human in shape. "You want to *know,* don't you?" The question made his mouth fill with saliva. "There is no better way than the one I offer. Take it, and your mind will be opened to sights you never dreamed of."

Stele closed his eyes and felt himself nodding. Had there ever really been any doubt? Now that the offer was there before him, had he ever really considered refusing it? *No.*

Ramius felt the frigid, exhilarating rush as a tiny fraction of the essence of the Malfallax entered him, and made itself a nest inside his mind. A hard seed of blackness formed in the core of his psyche, and in a strange way, he felt free. *Marain.* He banished her as his last regret, the last connection that held him to humanity. She had been the voice of his conscience for so long… but now he understood that such a thing only held him back from greatness.

And then there was the voice. "Ramius!" He spun on his heel, suddenly

dizzy, dislocated from the world around him. A voice from the grave? Even as he banished her from his mind, he heard Marain's words.

He stared incredulous, as she crossed the chamber toward him, her gun in her hand, tears streaming down her tan cheeks. For a moment he thought she was some apparition, perhaps a mind-ghost conjured by the daemon to taunt him; but in the next instant the raw energy of the seed the Malfallax planted inside him shot power through his psyche and he read her like a book.

Ramius understood instantly; she had survived—*how like her to do that*—and come aboard Tycho's ship with those from the shuttle. But the joy that might have once touched him at the sight of her was gone, swallowed by his new master's touch. His affection for her was absorbed, dissipated. Gone a surge of resentment rose and then fell under the weight of his new insight.

She aimed her weapon at him. Yes, he understood. She had followed the Space Marines down through the ship, stalking him. "Heretic!" spat the soldier. "It sickens me to think I laid with you! You have discarded everything you swore an oath for!"

Harsh and bitter laughter bubbled up from deep inside Stele's chest. There was no humour in it, only a dark and terrible knowing of his own soul. "Marain, you do not understand. You are so limited in your sight, you cannot see—"

"I see enough!" she cried. "You are a traitor!"

The sinuous, rustling whispers of the daemon knitted in a blasphemous chorus over their heads. The inquisitor was aware of the Malfallax watching them both, enjoying the bitter hate radiating off the woman as if it were some rare and delicate wine. The creature was doing nothing to intervene, content to let the moment play out as it might.

He spoke Marain's name again and took a step toward her. "There are none that know me as you do. There is no living soul that has shown me the loyalty you gave. Do not end that now." He extended a hand to her, and beneath the surface of the skin black dots of fluid swarmed and moved. "Cast off your doubts. Join me. We can discard the petty dictates of the Emperor and forge our own path. Together." Stele meant every word; he was standing on the brink of something incredible and to have her follow along with him… to share it would be glorious. There was a moment—he saw it there as bright as daybreak in her mind—when Marain allowed herself to consider accepting his offer, just for the briefest of instants. She teetered on the edge of agreeing to it, just to be with him again, just to fulfil the edict that had been drilled into her since birth; but then the colour of the thought faded into nothing and white-hot hatred unfolded in its place. The crude maw of her gun danced in front of him, and he

had no doubt that she aimed it at a place where it would kill him with the fat shot. Marain swore a gutter oath that curled his lip in land. He had his answer, then. “Fallen whore of the Ruinous Powers,” she shouted, “you dare to try to tear me from my God-Emperor! I will kill you!”

“Then do it,” echoed the daemon voice, finally venturing to speak. “But she can’t, can she? A man she has sworn her life to protect a corpse god she has sworn to obey, and now she must destroy you to appease the other.” Every mouth of the Malfallax smiled. “What delicious pain.”

“Marain—” Stele began, but her only reply was a face of rage and a storm of gunfire. “End you!” the spat throwing herself at him, stitching a line of incendiary bullets across his torso. Stele howled and tore his silken vest from him as it burst into flame. Shots that would have ripped him open before warped and deflected about him, the black power of the mutation inside him charging his psyche with monstrous force.

The inquisitor opened himself to the dark and embraced the rage. “You faithless bitch!” he thundered at her. “You are nothing to me!” Tears of anger and pain streamed down Marain’s face as she emptied her gun into him. She drew her fractal knife and made to plunge it in his heart.

“No!” Stele shouted the word; perhaps it was a cry against her, or perhaps against himself, but the result was the same Conjured from the warp itself, a haze of pure purple-white fire blazed from Ramius’ fingers and enveloped the woman’s shrieking body.

It was over in a split second. Marain twisted, became a charcoal sketch against the glare, then ashes.

Then nothing.

The daemon began to laugh, the voice growing louder and louder until it beat at Stele’s mind, mocking him for his towering folly.

“Silence!” he spat out a scream that rended air and matter, the hellbolt that killed Marain magnified a thousandfold; for one brief instant the inquisitor became a tornado of psychic force, and with it he ripped the shade-daemon from existence.

As the power abated, he dropped to his knees amid the decaying meat and wept.

IN THE AFTERMATH, Simeon came to the chambers they had assigned to him and gave a shallow bow. The Blood Angels treated him differently now; despite his commander’s orders, Simeon had followed Tycho into the drive decks rather than seal them shut behind him. It was he who found Stele

crouched by the brother-captain's body, while all around him was dead and disintegrating, the binding power of the shade-creature gone.

Tycho's wounds had been grave, and even now, days later, he still lay in a healing trance, but Simeon informed him that the Blood Angel would live to fight again, in no small part thanks to the Inquisitor's help.

He nodded, holding back a hollow smile. Ramius wondered; did the Malfallax foresee this turn of events? When the Blood Angels entered to find the daemonic presence banished and only he and Tycho still alive, it was Simeon who assumed that Stele had marshalled his abilities to save their vessel. Had the Malfallax goaded him into obliterating its avatar, in order to cement a respect for him among these Astartes? He had no way of knowing; but Ramius had always been a man with an eye for circumstance and the knowledge of how to turn it to his advantage.

With Tycho in the depths of unconsciousness while Stele made his pact with the warp, no other soul that drew breath knew what had happened in the engine room, and they never would. Only Marain had been witness, and she… she was cut from his life.

His heart hardened. It was all he could do not to mock them when the earnest and serious Blood Angels praised him for his heroic act in saving the frigate. He listened intently, nodding in all the right places, as they told him that he would accompany them to their fortress-monastery on Baal. There the honour of a "blood debt" would be granted to him. Such gestures of respect and trust were rare. He said the right words and accepted graciously, while inside the privacy of his own thoughts he considered how he might use that misplaced confidence to greater advantage. Not now, perhaps, but one day.

From the bridge he watched storms of cyclonic torpedoes obliterate Orilan, erasing the last traces of his apostasy. In the fires he thought he saw Marain's face, her dying image dragging away with it the last human part of his soul.

Eventually he left the Blood Angels behind, and retreated to his sanctum, peeling back the layers of his mind to touch the immaterium beyond space as the ship ventured into the warp. A malleable, ever-changing voice was waiting for him with plans and ideas and subtle whispers. Willingly, Ramius Stele followed it into the darkness, turning his face from the Emperor and opening a path toward the Ways of Change.