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Darius Hinks

MEPHISTON

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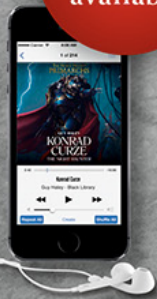
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About the Author

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MEPHISTON

City of Light

Darius Hinks



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

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

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

laughter of thirsting gods.



PROLOGUE

The Court of the One-Eyed King, Prospero

‘I saw clusters of stars,’ said the cyclops, gazing down from his throne. ‘Constellations that danced across the galactic plane, wrapped in motions and revolutions. I saw the crown of the celestial sphere. Nebulae swelled over me like waves, becoming the tides of the Great Ocean and I swam, drunk on the currents, until I woke into a dream.’

The cyclops’ halls were boundless and as mercurial as his words. Vortices of electricity spiralled around him forming great spheres of hieratic text, lightning cages that turned wildly and dragged his court closer, carrying magister and daemon alike to the rhythms of a beautiful hymn.

Zadkiel glided through the dazzling lights and ranks of silent Rubricae, shoving the colossal warriors aside with his crook staff, eager to reach his monarch.

The cyclops was Magnus the Red, the Crimson King, daemon primarch of the XV Legion and seer lord of the Thousand Sons. ‘Darkness drives evolution,’ he continued. ‘Darkness, doubt and fear. Paucity of understanding. The ultimate catalyst.’

Magnus billowed, rising on a thunderhead, towering over the drifting crowds, causing even his great captains, the Rehati, to stumble and shield their eyes. ‘When men first crawled from the earth and looked to the heavens, what did they see? They saw madness. How else could they have

described it? What else could they have thought as they watched the sun, their *god*, sink behind the horizon? Their bright lord was abandoning them. Never to return. Their father had betrayed them. It was the death of light and the end of life. And when the dusk turned to true night, and our forebears witnessed the birth of stars, what must they have thought, confronted by such majesty? How could they explain the heavenly spheres? How could they rationalise the moon? What must they have done?’

He laughed, shimmering back down into his throne, shrinking until he was barely larger than his Adeptus Astartes attendants. ‘They would have asked questions. And sought answers. They would have felt the hunger that has always been in us. A hunger for knowledge. Even then, even in its earliest, crudest form, mankind must have sensed the apotheosis that lay ahead. They knew as we knew. As we have *always* known. We are not destined to cower in the dust, humbled by the cosmos – we are destined to conquer and rule. We are destined to understand, to understand *everything*. It is our divine right to be unshackled from ignorance and bathe in the light of reason. To deny that is the only real betrayal.

‘I have traversed the Great Ocean beyond the stars, I have crossed it countless times, exiled for doing what I was born to do, *commanded* to do, and after centuries beyond counting, I finally realised my true crimes. Not treachery. Not the study of forbidden lore. These things were not my failings. My failing was false humility. Lack of ambition. Denying my true nature. There is no shame in what I am. In what *we* are.’

The cyclops reared up again, his skin flushing a deeper red, veined with mutagenic power. ‘Never again will we apologise for what we are.’ His voice swelled to a roar and the hymn rose with it, blasting the translucent spheres of his throne room, spinning them on their axes, causing the assembled cults to reel and stagger. ‘We are the beginning of the beginning!’

As the hymn reached a crescendo, the throne room devolved into a maelstrom of colours. Lightning lashed against Zadkiel with such violence that he struggled to maintain physical form. He fell, blinded, gripping his crook staff like the mast of a listing ship. As always when threatened, his mind fell back on the old, habitual rites – the facile disciplines he learned before ascending to daemonhood. They called them enumerations, a

millennium ago, back in the days of the Great Crusade. They were nothing more than psychological sleights of hand, designed to disguise the true scale of humankind's potential. It had taken Magnus to show them the truth – that humanity must either sink, deep into the Great Ocean of the Empyrean, or be drowned by their own ignorance.

Zadkiel muttered the old mantra, the one he had learned in Tizca when he was still an acolyte – words to elevate his mind from the material plane. 'We dream, dreaming, dreamed.'

The cyclops settled back in his throne and the spheres steadied, regaining physical form. The storm abated and the hymn dropped in volume. The Rubric Marines stood back to attention, gripping their bolters calmly as though nothing had happened, and the magisters resumed their conversations. They were all used to these impassioned speeches. Magnus argued constantly with an accuser who never answered.

Zadkiel pushed closer to the throne dais and saw Magnus clearly for the first time since entering the throne room. His chosen manner of appearance was still essentially humanoid. What made him choose such a façade? Was it nostalgia or irony? A daemon of such immense power was not bound by physics, nor any other rules of the materium. Magnus could assume whatever form he wished, but he chose this – a muscular, crimson-skinned warrior, clad in gilded armour. It was clearly not intended as a disguise. Magnus was not ashamed of his transformation. He made no attempt to hide the influence of the Great Ocean. Vast, iridescent wings shimmered behind him, wrought in turquoise and coral, the pigments so intense that no mortal could perceive them. His powerful legs ended in taloned claws and his brutal, noble, one-eyed head was crowned by enormous horns. Whatever future the Emperor had envisioned for Magnus had been surpassed. He was god-like. Magnificent. Wreathed in wisdom and light.

'Your majesty!' cried Zadkiel, shouldering his way through the final lines of Rubric Marines and approaching the circle of Rehati. The captains looked back at him, their faces cold and full of disdain. It was a long time since Zadkiel had come so close to the royal presence. In the ever-shifting hierarchy of pacts and allegiances Zadkiel was considered a failure, a relic of less certain times, cast from the light of the cyclops. Unlike the Rehati, who wore armour and robes almost as spectacular as Magnus', Zadkiel

wore the plain, unadorned habit of a mendicant priest. His expression would be impossible to read because there was no face under his hood, just the long, bleached beak of a raptor, but the excitement in his voice was unmistakable. He came with news. News that would change everything. 'It is I!' he announced. 'Zadkiel!'

Magnus was staring at the spaces between the spheres and did not seem to hear Zadkiel's cries. He raised his blade to catch the lightning, scattering branches of electricity as he turned the metal. The weapon's form was as ephemeral as its wielder but at the moment it resembled a long-handled glaive, filigreed and gilded with the same incredible designs as the cyclops' armour. He used it like an oar, disturbing currents and creating ripples.

Zadkiel could have caught Magnus' attention through sorcery, but such an act would be an offence of the highest order. If he was patient, Magnus would eventually acknowledge his calls but Zadkiel had to share what he had learned quickly.

He tapped his crook staff on the nearest of the Rehati and the sorcerer turned to look back at Zadkiel. He was dressed in beautiful robes and leaning on a serpent-headed staff.

Zadkiel pretended he was going to barge past him.

'You have been gone too long,' said the sorcerer, barring his way. 'Everything has changed. The Red Monarch no longer has time for your quixotic tales.'

'Magister Saros,' replied Zadkiel, peering through the sorcerer's golden mask and into his soul. However skilled Saros was, he had not yet shed the bonds of his humanity. He had not ascended. Not as Zadkiel had. His mind was as easy to read as the cuneiform on his battleplate. Paranoia seeped out of him like pus from an infected wound.

'There is time enough for me,' said Zadkiel, 'but perhaps not for you. You should rush home to congratulate your acolyte.'

'What are you talking about?' Saros tried to sound dismissive but he could not entirely hide his concern. Zadkiel had been politicked out of the Rehati centuries ago, after falling from Magnus' favour, but he had monitored them from afar, tracking their victories and defeats, learning everything he could about their weaknesses and their desires. The desires were all the same – power to rule in Magnus' name and literal power,

siphoned from the tides of the Great Ocean. But their weaknesses were endlessly unique.

Shapes rippled beneath Zadkiel's robes as he shrugged his knife-edge shoulders. 'Magister Lyræ is doing great work in your absence, Magister Saros. While you have been here on Prospero, Lyræ has been working hard back in Tizca. Your acolyte has uncovered the Library of Azariah. And he has wasted no time in deciphering its most famous text, *The Canticles of Ahriman*. From what I hear, he has already mastered the twelfth canticle and begun work on the thirteenth.'

He reached up and draped a writhing nest of fingers over Saros' shoulder. 'You can be proud. *Very* proud. Magister Lyræ has surpassed the meagre learnings you shared with him and tackled more elevated subjects. I imagine he will be keen to share what he's found with you.' He shrugged again. 'Or perhaps, if he has gone so far into regions you could not comprehend, he will need to talk directly with the Red Monarch himself.'

Saros shook his head. He leant close and hissed through the mouth grille of his helmet. 'Liar. No truth has ever passed your lips. How could Lyræ have discovered *The Canticles of Ahriman*? How could he understand what even Ahriman could not?'

As the sorcerer gripped Zadkiel's robes tighter, the colours in the throne room boiled, flashing in response to Saros' anger. The hymn faltered as Saros broke ranks, throwing the music into disarray.

'Perhaps I should have consulted you before helping him?' Zadkiel spoke quietly, as though genuinely contrite. 'I hope I have not committed some kind of transgression by sharing what I knew? Magister Lyræ is only working on your behalf, after all. If he *were* able to reverse Ahriman's rubric it would reflect well on you. Magister Lyræ only wishes to further *your* glory.'

Zadkiel knew this was not true. Saros' acolyte would take any chance to usurp his master, and this threat was the perfect bait with which to hook Magister Saros. Every member of the court dreamed of somehow reversing the rubric that turned Magnus' Legion into automatons. It would be the ultimate gift. But Zadkiel knew it was a fool's errand. The rubric would never be reversed. The only way to win the Crimson King's favour would be to forge him a new army, even greater than the old one.

The storm around Saros flashed white, brilliant with panic, causing the

rest of the Rehati to stumble and break the circle, lowering staffs and glaives and turning to see the cause of the interruption.

‘You are a liar!’ cried Saros, grabbing Zadkiel by the throat and trying to shove him backwards.

There were no bones inside Zadkiel’s robes. He had surpassed the need for mortal flesh. The bird skull in his hood was carried by knots of serpents and even they were only ghosts, collapsing and dissolving as Saros tried to grip them.

Saros howled in annoyance and raised his other hand, summoning a fistful of empyric power. Other members of the Rehati broke ranks and crossed the dais, the song devolving into a discordant jumble.

‘Wait.’ Magnus’ voice echoed through the spheres, causing everyone to halt and fall silent. He lowered his blade and stared at Zadkiel.

Zadkiel realised his mistake. The cyclops had not shrunk to human size. The ever-changing lights of the throne room had confused him. Magnus was a colossus. As he leant forwards to study Zadkiel, he felt like an insect being examined under a lens.

‘The Vulture.’ Magnus’ voice reverberated in the skulls of everyone present. Some of the lesser sorcerers stumbled and clutched the faceplates of their helmets.

‘Your majesty,’ said Zadkiel, freeing himself from Saros and bowing low, before scurrying across the dais towards the throne, earning bitter glances from the Rehati. As he approached the daemon primarch, the scale of the being grew more bewildering. ‘I bring news,’ he said, willing the serpents beneath his robes back into a human shape, ‘from the far side of the Great Rift.’

Magnus looked down at him, flames rippling across his enormous, blood-drop eye.

‘You came to tell *me* of the warp?’ Magnus’ tone was neutral, but Zadkiel knew he was as likely to extinguish him as listen to his reply.

‘Not of the warp, your majesty,’ he said, being deliberately elliptical, hoping to pique his regent’s interest.

The throne room was still, the ranks of Rubricae and Rehati watching in silence. Magnus nodded for Zadkiel to continue.

‘I speak of the Dark Imperium, your majesty. The regions called Imperium Nihilus by the cults of the False Emperor. I speak of the Baal

System.’

‘Baal? That arid rock? Is that where you have been hiding yourself while my Great Work nears its completion?’ Magnus waved his blade and the walls of the throne room fell away, revealing the tormented landscape miles below them. Much of Prospero was still charred, a vitrified wasteland, as it had been for ten thousand years, but it was alive with industry. Every withered peak and scarred gulf was crowded with construction sites – barracks and weapons batteries, armouries and manufactoria, as well as huge temples to house the cyclops’ libraries. Magnus was rebuilding the Thousand Sons’ home, long ages after it was destroyed by the Wolves of Russ. But he was not rebuilding it as it was before the fall. There were no gilded spires or crystal pyramids. Prospero would be an anvil, designed to hammer out the tools of war.

As Magnus admired his work, Zadkiel sensed that he was no longer addressing his audience but himself. ‘Ascension is upon us. The Terran corpse has forgotten his great vision but *I* have not. I will bring the light of knowledge to his children. I will raise them from shameful ignorance. I will elevate them.’ He looked down to the nadir of one of the spheres. ‘I will enlighten them.’

Zadkiel followed his gaze and saw a knot of wasted figures, shackled to the sphere by cords of coruscating light. Their bodies were blackened and broken, but they were alive, twitching in agony as their life-force fuelled the rituals that powered the throne room. There were similar clusters at the base of all the spheres, tormented souls doomed never to die. Ornate pipes had been jammed into their gaping mouths, capturing their screams and transforming them into the beautiful hymn that was billowing around the spheres. Zadkiel saw no irony in Magnus talking of saving humanity while his throne room was fuelled by their death throes. Ascension was for the few, not the many. When the New Kingdom came, it would be for worthy souls. Not the wretched, ungifted masses.

‘I will help you enlighten them, majesty,’ said Zadkiel, stepping closer, raising his crook staff.

Magnus laughed. There was no cruelty or artifice in the sound. It was deep and unreserved and it reminded Zadkiel of simpler times – when he marched at the Crimson King’s side, both of them still physical beings, prosecuting the Emperor’s vainglorious Great Crusade.

‘Zadkiel the Vulture means to help *me*.’ Magnus looked at the circle of Rehati. They laughed, hesitantly. ‘I am on the cusp of reclaiming all that we have lost,’ continued Magnus, ‘and the Vulture tells me he can help. Pray how, old friend? How will you help me?’

‘Ascension *has* begun,’ said Zadkiel, speaking quickly, ‘as you so rightly claim, your majesty. Everywhere, the human mind is blossoming. The new is diverging from the old. The weak is growing strong. The spirit is divesting itself of the flesh. And it is happening in every corner of the galaxy. But it is slow. Slower than we need. All who are worthy of you will find their way here, but so will the Corpse Emperor’s fleet. You have already been attacked and it will happen again. Mankind is changing, yes, but not fast enough.’

Magnus’ laughter died and he slumped back in his throne, a mountain of muscle and contempt. ‘What do you wish to tell me, Vulture? What do you propose?’

Zadkiel abandoned the elaborate preamble he had prepared and said, simply: ‘The Nine Sacraments.’

Magnus laughed again, but it was no longer a happy sound. He waved a dismissive hand.

‘I have found a way,’ said Zadkiel before Magnus could speak. ‘It is possible.’

Lights flickered between the spheres, making the wretches fuelling them stiffen and twist. Magnus gripped his glaive tighter and glared at Zadkiel. It was a look that would have disintegrated a mortal but Zadkiel weathered it in silence.

‘Do you think there is any rite you can tell me about that I do not know? Do you think I have not thought of the Sacraments? That rite is *hungry*, Vulture. Hungrier than you. Each third of the ritual would require the psychic resonance of...’ He shrugged and nodded at the Rehati. ‘Well, of something far greater than I have to hand.’

‘I have discovered a Threefold Soul,’ said Zadkiel, sure that this statement would finally convince Magnus to hear him out. ‘Amongst the sons of your dead brother, Sanguinius. In their fortress-monastery. A warrior-scholar whose links to the Great Ocean are stronger than anything I have ever heard of. He was reborn after death and remade, resurrected by an unknown power. And now he has survived a third birth, tortured into a

new form by the priests of Mars. He has been given a unique, triad soul. There are fragments of Sanguinius in each piece – echoes.’

‘All Sanguinius’ sons carry an echo of his curse.’

‘This is different. It is more than just the Chapter’s gene-seed. There is a shadow in him – the same shadow that was in Sanguinius, but it has been made manifest. He has been born three times and his third birth has made him uniquely potent, uniquely suitable for the Nine Sacraments. I have devised a way to lever his pieces apart – to break him into the stimulus we need.’

Magnus studied Zadkiel closely. ‘Are you referring to the Chapter Master? Dante?’

‘No. A Librarian. Their Chief Librarian, Mephiston.’

‘And to split this Librarian in three you would harness the power of nine talismans? Nine sites of geomantic power? Places of great importance and potency?’ A terrifying edge crept into Magnus’ voice. ‘Places that are crucial to my plans. Sites that could be destroyed if your ritual failed.’

‘It would not fail. I have followed Mephiston for centuries, preparing him for this moment. Every action he has taken was conceived of by me. He is my puppet. Even his subordinates are implements of my will. All of their auguries are echoes of my plans.’

Magnus fell silent again but he was still watching Zadkiel. Zadkiel sensed that he had said enough. The cyclops was intrigued.

Magnus thought for a while. Then he turned to the Rehati. ‘Take the Vulture back to Sortarius. Find the deepest pit in Tizca and imprison him. Use your most powerful binding rituals. His travels have unhinged him. He may do us harm.’

Zadkiel tried to speak but Magnus silenced him with a thought. ‘You need not thank me for my mercy,’ said the cyclops. ‘I have spared your life for good reason.’ There was kindness in his tone. ‘You think I have forgotten you but I have not. I remember what you did when the Wolves were loose on this world. I remember how you stood by my side. And I know your current lunacy only stems from a desire to serve.’

Magnus rose from his throne, his monolithic form dissecting the light and casting a mantle around him. ‘Ascension is at hand. Soon, we shall all see clearly. Even you, Zadkiel.’

Zadkiel tried again to speak but his voice was muted. The Rehati raised

swords and staffs, snatching wychfire from the air and hurling it towards him. The burned slaves screamed in fresh agony, their cries transformed into a beautiful chorus as new spheres rose from the tumult, spinning around Zadkiel. Through the turning lights he saw the throne room disintegrate, replaced by a tormented hellscape – knotted, bestial towers and leviathan tusks silhouetted against a kaleidoscope sky.

Zadkiel howled as they sent him home, back to the Planet of the Sorcerers.



CHAPTER ONE

Librarium Sagrestia, Arx Angelicum, Baal

Blood thralls gathered along the Ceremonial Way, dwarfed by statue-filled recesses and crumbling sarcophagi. Hidden emitters droned a requiem and serfs emerged from reliquaries and scriptoria, their voices raised in memory of a fallen lord. Ivory masks gleamed under crimson robes and as the procession moved slowly towards them, the thralls cast handfuls of earth across the flagstones, soil from the foothills of the Cruor Mountains, ballast for the fallen, binding the dead to Baal.

Beyond the lines of thralls, battle-brothers of the Blood Angels Second Company had gathered. They were arrayed beneath a towering sepulchre topped by a marble statue of their primarch, the Angel Sanguinius, his body twisted as he drove a spear into a writhing serpent. The Blood Angels were resplendent in full battle-plate, carrying newly stitched banners and freshly painted honour markings. A procession was approaching them down the Ceremonial Way and as they waited to greet it, candlelight flickered over their crimson armour, catching on the mouth grilles of their helmets and lending them a daemonic aspect.

At the head of the procession was Commander Dante, Regent of Imperium Nihilus and Chapter Master of the Blood Angels. An ancient among ancients, he tore the darkness like a flame, his armour a blaze of golden ceramite. His mask was a likeness of Sanguinius and as he strode

from the shadows there was no sign of the trials that had recently befallen his Chapter. Dante looked like a figure from legend, clutching a weapon forged in the ashes of the Horus Heresy – the Axe Mortalis, its blade glimmering with inner fire.

At his side marched a figure no less imperious but far grimmer. Mephiston, the Chief Librarian of the Blood Angels, wore armour that was sculpted and lacquered to resemble a flayed corpse, painted deep crimson and polished to such a sheen that it looked slick. Like Dante, Mephiston approached the shrine with his chin raised and his eyes fixed on the middle distance, but where the Chapter Master looked noble in his flawless mask, Mephiston's face was cold and defiant, as though daring the congregation to look his way. His hair trailed behind him, so fair it was almost white and his features were a sharp caricature of the usual Blood Angels countenance. He bore all the hallmarks – imposing, inhumanly perfect features built on a grander scale than those of a mortal man – but his unblinking eyes were dark with secrets. It was as though, in him, the dream of Sanguinius had become a nightmare. He carried his ancient force blade, Vitarus, and his armour trailed plush, blood-red robes that whipped up dust as they hissed over the flagstones.

Behind the Chapter Master and his Chief Librarian flew a robed servitor, no bigger than an infant, with narrow, wrought iron limbs and an ivory mask like those worn by the blood thralls. The servitor was borne on frail, mechanical wings and it was carrying a salver – a huge disc of polished brass, covered in intricate runes and diagrams.

Behind the servitor marched two more Librarians, clad in the blue of their order, their heads framed by tall, cable-lined collars that harnessed their psychic power. Archaic markings on their battle-plate marked them as members of Mephiston's inner circle, the Quorum Empyrric. The first of them was clearly ancient, even by the long-lived standards of the Blood Angels. His armour was so crowded with battle honours that he looked almost as gilded as his Chapter Master. His tightly cropped hair and beard were silver-grey and his eyes were like sapphires, gleaming mementos of long years gazing into the warp. His name was Gaius Rhacelus and he paid no heed to the crowds casting soil beneath his boots, keeping his gaze locked on his master and friend, Mephiston.

Beside Rhacelus marched a younger-looking Librarian, Lucius Antros.

Antros' face would have been a more archetypal vision of the Chapter's angelic beauty were it not for the mass of scar tissue that covered one whole side of it. He had a mop of blond hair that shimmered in the torchlight and like Rhacelus his stare was locked on the Chief Librarian.

Behind these statuesque warriors marched one final Blood Angel, a battle-brother named Albinus. Like the others, his armour was draped in medals and gilded insignia, but he also carried several unique relics that denoted him as a high-ranking Sanguinary Priest. There was an intricately engraved chalice fixed to his belt, and attached to his left vambrace was a narthecium: a brutal-looking collection of chainblades and drills that Albinus used to save his fallen brothers when he could, and to harvest their valuable gene-seed when he could not. The assembled blood thralls glanced at Albinus with almost as much awe as Dante and Mephiston. During the recent attacks on Baal, it was Albinus who had been tasked with protecting the Chapter's gene-seed off-world. It was a unique honour and there were rumours that Albinus might one day ascend to the role of Sanguinary High Priest and become the Keeper of the Red Grail. Like Dante, Albinus was not a regular visitor to the cloisters of the Librarium. It was a sign of how significant the occasion was that such luminaries had set aside their duties to march at Mephiston's side.

The procession halted at the foot of the sepulchre and exchanged salutes with the officers in charge of the honour guard. The clatter of armour roused Mephiston from his reverie and he realised how far his mind had wandered from Baal. He forced himself to focus. His auguries had indicated that this would be a significant event. There would be a surprise of some kind, before the rite was complete.

He followed Dante beneath a grand arch and into the domed sepulchre, where a body was laid out in state: a Blood Angel, divested of his armour but unmistakably more than human, his exaggerated musculature visible under a red and gold shroud.

Albinus approached the body first, confirming that the Blood Angel's gene-seed had been removed and preserved for the posterity of the Chapter. It was a formality. Codicier Peloris died months ago and the surgery had been performed moments after death, while the progenoid gland was still warm. Albinus moved the shroud slightly and an acrid, chemical smell filled the vault. He pretended to examine the cold flesh

and muttered an oath. Then he replaced the shroud and stepped back, nodding to Dante.

As Dante approached the body, the singing blared louder through the speakers outside and the blood thralls dropped to their knees, clasping their hands in prayer. Dante took a book from a thrall and flicked through the pages until his hand settled on a suitable passage. He cleared his throat and was about speak when he paused and turned to Mephiston.

‘Chief Librarian,’ he said, his voice echoing strangely through the sepulchre. ‘You knew Codicier Peloris better than anyone. Will you remember him?’

Mephiston was staring intently at the shrouded corpse, still lost in thought. He looked up in surprise at Dante’s words. ‘My lord?’

Dante held out the book. ‘This will be the last of these ceremonies. And it is now many months since Peloris and the others died. It is time that you marked their passing, Mephiston.’

Mephiston searched the Chapter Master’s face for a sign of duplicity, but he knew that was not Dante’s way. Incredibly, despite everything that had taken place during their recent campaigns, he wanted *him* to read the prayer. He hesitated a moment longer, then nodded and took the book.

‘We grieve in vain,’ he read, his voice flat and quiet. As Mephiston spoke, the thralls fell silent, surprised by this turn of events. Peloris’ final days were spent fighting xenos scum and warp-born horrors. But it was not xenos that had killed Peloris. Nor was it daemonic hosts. It was Mephiston. When the moment came, when the Chapter had most needed him, the Chief Librarian had failed to harness his powers. On a ship called the *Dominance*, Mephiston had unleashed a fury that had been building in him for centuries. This corpse was the result.

The next words would not come. Mephiston could see them on the page, illuminated by blood thralls in his own scriptoria. Could he carry the burden he had chosen? After the events on the *Dominance*, the tech-priests of Mars had given him a new chance at redemption – a second rebirth. Everyone believed the process a resounding success. Only Mephiston understood what it meant. Only he understood the sacrifice he had made to return. Was he strong enough? Could he really be the shadow on the Chapter’s face? Could he be the darkness in their soul?

Dante watched him closely.

Mephiston closed the book and handed it back to him. Concern flickered in Dante's eyes but before he could speak, Mephiston placed his hand on Peloris' shroud and said: 'We grieve in vain, for those that die. The Angel's blade, they fortify.'

For the next ten minutes Mephiston recited the Song of Passing from memory, with no need of the leather-bound hymnal. There were few books in his Librarius he had not read and his memory was faultless. He held Dante's gaze as he spoke but he could feel the others watching him, waiting to see if he would falter. With each line his voice grew stronger, more confident, until by the final lines of the prayer it was ringing back down the processional route, quickening the hearts of all who would doubt him.



CHAPTER TWO

The Diurnal Vault, Arx Angelicum, Baal

After the ceremony, Mephiston asked Dante and the others back to his private chambers. He took them to the Diurnal Vault, a vast, physics-defying hall, containing thousands of the Librarius' most dangerous texts, suspended in the eaves by enormous plasma generators that made the air hum like the enginarium of a void ship. Mephiston led his guests to a relatively quiet corner and seated them around a circular, bronze table. He had rehearsed the meeting several times in his mind and asked them to sit in specific chairs so the scene could be played out exactly as he had conceived it. The table was plucked from the abyssal gloom by a brass lumen fluttering over its hammered surface. Blood thralls supplied goblets of wine, then backed away into the shadows. Once everyone had drunk, Mephiston endured the necessary pleasantries before revealing his plan.

‘The Prospero System?’ Albinus, the Sanguinary Priest, leant back in his chair, shaking his head, his expression grim. ‘Commander Dante, what do you say? The Chief Librarian cannot be indulged in this matter, surely?’

Dante raised an eyebrow. ‘No one is to be “indulged” Brother Albinus, but neither am I in the habit of dismissing my Chief Librarian out of hand.’

Mephiston could see the aether-mantle around each of his guests and as Dante gently reprimanded Albinus, the Sanguinary Priest's aura boiled and

sparked. Not with rage, though. Exasperation, perhaps, but Albinus was a good man. A friend. And too loyal to feel anger at his superior officers. It was doubt that made his soul shimmer. He did not believe that his Chief Librarian could be risked. He had no idea how much Mephiston had already risked under the knives of the Adeptus Mechanicus.

Dante glanced at Mephiston, noting how he was studying Albinus. ‘As always, Chief Librarian, you observe more than you are prepared to share. I may lack your powers of telepathy but we both know Albinus’ objection is fair. You have been remade, Mephiston, but your new form has still to be fully tested. And in a galaxy beset by horrors, the Prosperine Rift is a *particularly* suicidal destination. Is that really the place to test your mettle?’

‘The whole galaxy is aflame,’ said Albinus. ‘Remember the briefings from Lord Commander Guilliman. Since the Great Rift sundered us from the rest of the Imperium, unsanctioned psychic activity has been growing at an unprecedented rate. And not just here but beyond the rift, in Imperium Sanctus. Even those worlds still nominally under the aegis of Terra have been consumed by madness.’

Dante nodded. ‘The Prospero System is rife with heresy. I struggled to glean much from Lord Guilliman’s attendants on the subject but they gave me the impression he’s effectively ceded control of that whole region to the Archenemy. It is a hornet’s nest. They mentioned Tzeentchian cults and even engagements with Traitor Marines.’ He shook his head. ‘We face war on all fronts but that sector seems to be a particularly sore point. There may be a connection with the cults in the Prospero System and conflicts on *our* side of the Great Rift, in the Stygius Sector.’

Gaius Rhacelus leant across the table and summoned a hololith from its surface with a wave of his hand. A star chart whirled into view. It showed the galaxy bisected by a savage, purple scar. The Librarian pointed to a small point on the star chart, just to the galactic south of the purple tear. ‘The Prospero System. A nest of traitors even before the galaxy was ripped open.’

‘More so now,’ said Lucius Antros. ‘If the reports are true, Sortarius is there, the so-called Planet of the Sorcerers, dragged from the immaterium to poison real space. A daemon world so warped by sorcery that it is more nightmare than physical place.’ He cast a sideways glance at Rhacelus.

‘Which, to be honest, sounds like *exactly* the kind of place Mephiston would take us.’

Rhacelus did not reply, but his magisterial expression softened, amusement flickering in his eyes.

I am not the only one who has changed over these last few months, thought Mephiston. Rhacelus had always been wary of Antros. Mephiston had long struggled to convince him of Antros’ worth. Then, during the recent fight for Baal, Antros acquitted himself so well that Rhacelus had finally warmed to him, showing him respect he did not afford many in the Librarius.

Rhacelus may have been amused by Antros’ comment, but such levity only increased Albinus’ frustration. He stared at Mephiston, speaking quickly. ‘We have barely restored order in our own system. We’ve had augur returns from across the sector reporting residual xenos nests. Hive Fleet Leviathan could still make a counter-attack. To say nothing of the warp-spawn that attacked our ships.’ He waved at Dante. ‘Besides which, consider Commander Dante’s new responsibilities. He is now regent and warden of everything this side of the Rift. He has been tasked with far more than simply rebuilding Baal. He has to build a safe capital for the whole of Imperium Nihilus. He needs you *here*, Mephiston – not courting catastrophe on the other side of the galaxy.’

‘Albinus is right,’ said Dante. ‘I have been left to stand watch over the abyss. And you’re my best chance of seeing what’s in there.’

Mephiston nodded. He had known Albinus for centuries and had predicted that he would voice exactly these concerns. He had foreseen the challenge so clearly he had guessed the precise words. It would be an easy matter for him to sway the Sanguinary Priest’s mind by esoteric means, but it would be a cowardly way to treat a noble servant of the Chapter. He would convince his guests with irrefutable truth. A benefit of being universally feared was that people *always* paid attention to him. He waved for his winged servitor to approach and it fluttered through the incense-heavy gloom, struggling under the weight of the metal salver.

Mephiston took the plate and placed it on the table beneath the slowly turning hololith. Lines and intersections shimmered across the metal as the galaxy turned above it. Everyone leant over to study the designs engraved into the metal.

Antros ran his fingers over the symbols, stroking it like a holy relic, his eyes wide. ‘The Ephemeris. It has changed so much since I gave it to you.’

Mephiston was as fascinated by the markings as anyone else. He had made many of them in a fugue state, in the dark days before Qvo-87 and the other tech-priests gave him control over his psychic powers. The images seemed to have emerged from a part of his mind that was utterly alien to him. It had taken him decades to rationalise his own words and decipher connections between the phrases and diagrams. Parts, even now, eluded him. Most of the glyphs were intricately scored but others were crudely gouged and Mephiston had vague memories of clawing them with his own fingers, splitting his nails and writing in blood, too frenzied to stop. Parts of the Ephemeris looked like an archaic version of the star chart shimmering above it, but interspersed between the gridlines and vertices were columns of densely packed script. There were pieces of verse and mathematical equations, all linked by a network of intersecting lines.

He tapped one of the symbols, which looked like nine points arranged in a circle. ‘It has been the perfect focus for my thoughts. All my years of study have pointed me to this location – to this moment.’ He traced a line from the nine points to a passage of text, written in an archaic language. The characters were ugly and serpentine and their origins lay in the madness of the warp. Mephiston knew only he would be able to decipher them.

‘Sabassus?’ muttered Antros, frowning at the text.

Mephiston felt a flicker of annoyance. He had not predicted this. He did not enjoy being surprised.

Something flashed in Antros’ eyes. Pride? Shame? Mephiston could not tell. He tried to gaze into the Librarian’s thoughts and found, as on previous occasions, the way was barred. It would take an act of psychic violence to break through. His protégé had grown into something unexpected.

‘I can only read the first word,’ replied Antros, but he looked awkward and Mephiston did not need seer-sight to know when he was being lied to.

There was a pointed silence as Mephiston studied Antros. It was not the first time Antros had surprised him. He had tutored the Librarian personally for much of his training, conscious, always, that Antros carried

some great secret, some great significance for the Chapter. Rhacelus claimed Mephiston thought of Antros as a kind of son, that he was blinded by affection, but it was more than that. Antros figured in many of the auguries inscribed into the Ephemeris. He wondered how many of the other passages Antros could decipher. Not all of them made for easy reading.

‘Sabassus,’ said Mephiston, looking back at the text. He wondered if he should remove the salver from the table, but he dismissed the idea. His plans for this conversation hinged on it. He decided to continue as planned. ‘A world right at the edge of the Prospero System that is still officially under the control of Imperial forces. It is not, like Sortiarius, in the thrall of warp-entities, but it *is* on the verge of defeat.’ He glanced at Dante. ‘You are right about Lord Commander Guilliman – he is unable to focus on this region while dealing with so many other pressing matters. But every vision I have had, every dream and augury, tells me that *I* cannot ignore what is happening there.’

He tapped a different part of the salver that was engraved with the small, stylised image of a vulture. ‘In the moments I have not spent here, when I have been off on my...’ He glanced at Albinus. ‘What did you call them? Personal quests?’

Albinus paled, no doubt concerned that he had offended Mephiston. Even proud old Blood Angels like Albinus were wary of Mephiston. They sensed the darkness he carried, even if they did not understand its purpose.

Mephiston liked Albinus and had no desire to cow him. He waved a dismissive hand. ‘I have been traversing different realities. I thought it was making me wiser – a more useful member of the Librarius.’ He hesitated, recalling the violence on the *Dominance* and the death of Codicier Peloris. ‘But we all now know how mistaken I was in that respect.’

Dante was about to speak, probably to repeat his assertion that Mephiston was not to blame, but Mephiston did not want the conversation to head off on a tangent. He quickly continued speaking.

‘However,’ he placed his palm on the salver, ‘my endeavours have not been fruitless. For a long time I have been studying intersections between events, identifying connections no one else has recognised – not even my predecessors in the Librarius. My research led me to places I would be

hard pressed to describe and I have spent long years unable to solve the mystery, but now, with the Ephemeric almost complete and my mind altered by the Martian priests, I have pieced together an idea of *why* I was reborn.'

An expectant silence hung over the table, broken only by the distant hum of the generators. Mephiston had never spoken so confidently about his past or his position in the Chapter. Not even to Dante. Everyone present knew the essential facts: through violent rebirths, a Blood Angel called Calistarius had escaped the Chapter's terrible flaw, surviving the death and insanity that awaited all of them, resurrected as Mephiston, Lord of Death – a Blood Angel who feared neither blood-lust nor insanity. But he had never before claimed to know *why* he had been reborn.

'I have two duties to perform,' said Mephiston. 'The first is still taking shape but the second is now clear enough to explain.' It pained him to pin down facts in such an unequivocal fashion. He, more than anyone, knew that reality was a matter of perspective. But he also knew that vagaries and obfuscation would not be enough to convince Albinus.

'The Changer of Ways is building a permanent foothold in the physical realm.' Mephiston stared at the vulture device on the salver. 'The Great Rift has bled Tzeentch's deceptions into reality. I am not talking about a brief incursion or the possession of a few damned souls, I am talking about an empire of unreality and misrule, wrought here, in the physical galaxy. We have long known that daemonkin crave dominion over us, but until now they have been tied to their nightmarish other-realm.'

Dante nodded gravely, having already gained an inkling of Mephiston's plans, but Albinus shook his head in disbelief.

'Then what...?' he stumbled over his words. 'What does this have to do with you, personally, Chief Librarian?'

Mephiston felt a vague pang of sadness. One price of his rebirth was to be a pariah. The stench of death hung over him. He might once have counted Albinus as a friend, but he could hear the distrust in his battle-brother's voice. He shrugged off the thought, annoyed by his self-pity. This was another challenge he had predicted down to the exact wording and he knew how to respond. He knew the exact amount of information to share.

'My connection is this,' he said. 'For many years, with the full knowledge of Commander Dante, I have pursued a daemon across the

galaxy – a servant of Tzeentch called Zadkiel. My quest was known only to the commander and members of my own Librarius, but I have long been sure that my secrecy was necessary. My auguries revealed that this daemon is significant beyond merely the inherent danger of all warp entities. Zadkiel is a herald of the new Tzeentchian empire. I have seen its face in my dreams. I have heard its dreadful oaths. Zadkiel is here,’ he tapped the metal, ‘on Sabassus. And it means to untie the final threads holding Tzeentch at bay by performing some kind of unholy rite.’ He waved his hand over the salver. ‘Everything we have seen so far – the increased mutations, growth in unsanctioned warpcraft, wars like the ones in the Prosperine System and the Stygius Sector – will be a drop in the ocean if this daemon is allowed to complete its work.’

As Mephiston’s hand glided over the metal, the images swirled into life, as though he had disturbed the surface of a pool. The drawings and characters rotated and interlocked, forming a whirl of confusing shapes.

The shapes connected with such dreadful, inevitable logic that even Mephiston found it hard to witness. The design was too complex to be fully understood but everyone felt the significance of what they were seeing. ‘This is the galaxy unmade,’ said Mephiston. ‘Entropy. The collapse of reason and physics. The ultimate aim of Tzeentch.’ He shook his head. ‘Whatever lies his followers may believe.’

Albinus muttered and made the sign of the aquila and even Dante looked shocked.

Mephiston nodded. ‘Lord Commander Guilliman’s Indomitus Crusade will come to nothing if I do not reach Sabassus before this rite is complete. His fleet will be consumed.’

Albinus shook his head. ‘Why must *you* go to Sabassus? We can alert Guilliman’s fleet. We *should* alert Guilliman’s fleet. If he needs to fight on a different front then we are duty-bound to tell him.’

‘Tell him?’ Rhacelus raised an eyebrow. ‘Did you forget where we are, Albinus? We are in the abyss.’ He waved at the purple scar across the star chart. ‘The Cicatrix Maledictum is between us and Guilliman. There is no psychic choir powerful enough to pierce the Great Rift. We are alone.’

‘Then how would you intend to reach Sabassus?’ demanded Albinus, looking at Mephiston.

Mephiston gestured at his Tacticus pattern armour, newly forged and

polished, its sculpted bulk testament to the second rebirth he had recently undergone. ‘I am changed. Reborn again. The afflictions that caused my failure on the *Dominance* have been overcome. The Priests of Mars did not understand the true significance of their actions when they performed their surgery on me. Rhacelus saw it, but they did not. Far more than my flesh has been altered. The process changed my very spirit. It made me a worthy conduit for Sanguinius’ gifts. It gave me *control*.’ The word thrilled him. ‘Control I have never achieved before. I can find a way through the Great Rift. And, travelling alone, I can move fast enough to reach Sabassus before it is too late. Think how long it would take to redirect an Imperial Fleet. Even if I took Commander Dante with me and together we managed to convince Lord Guilliman to base his strategies on this scratched plate, it would be years before his battleships reached Sabassus. The rite would be complete. The daemon I have worked so hard to find would be one point of madness in a galaxy of lunacy.’ He sipped his wine and shook his head. ‘I must go and go quickly. Everything I have seen, everything I have written, points to this confluence of events. *I* must be on hand to stop the daemon. There is no doubt on the matter.’

Albinus looked doubtful all the same but since the images on the Ephemeris had fitted together, everyone’s gaze was locked on the repulsive design. Mephiston could see from their expressions, as much as their psychic complexions, that he had convinced them.

‘We are the sons of Sanguinius,’ said Dante, giving Albinus a pointed look, ‘not merely the Imperial Regent’s subordinates. We have our *own* destiny to fulfil.’ He glanced at Mephiston. ‘Our own burdens to carry.’ He leant closer to the salver, his eyes catching the reflections.

‘Of course, my lord,’ replied Albinus.

‘Mephiston sees clearer than any of us,’ said Dante. ‘If *he* believes this nightmare will come to pass, then I believe it too. *How* would you find a way across the Great Rift?’ he asked, looking at Mephiston.

Mephiston waved his hand over the salver and the images regained their original shape. He gestured at their surroundings. ‘The details elude me but the answer is in here somewhere, in our own Librarium Sagrestia. I can see it at the edge of my vision. Now the last of these funerary rites has been performed I can devote myself fully to deciphering the meaning. I have...’ His words faded as he realised he was about to share more than he

intended, about to deviate from his planned explanation. The designs on the salver *had* shown him a starting point for his investigations. It was a chamber deep in the Carceri Arcanum, the most heavily guarded reliquary in the Librarium, but it would be a mistake to explain that to his guests. Antros had thrown him off guard by unexpectedly reading the word Sabassus. He silenced himself.

Dante was about to ask him to continue when a blood thrall rushed across the hall with a message. Dante took the scroll and frowned as he read. ‘I must leave you, brothers. It would appear that Albinus is right. I have unfinished work to do. Augur relays from the Avendum orbital are picking up a massive signal and we can get no word from Brother-Captain Olus.’ He finished his wine and dusted down his golden battleplate, re-reading the scroll with a troubled expression. ‘Excuse me,’ he said, rising to go.

‘Commander Dante,’ said Albinus as he and the other Blood Angels stood and saluted. ‘What of Mephiston’s request?’ He glanced back at the salver. ‘Do you grant him permission to pursue this errand?’

‘Of course.’ Dante sounded distracted. Mephiston sensed he had not shared everything on the scroll. The task of forging and ruling a new empire, away from the light of the Emperor, was a daunting one, even for a soul as powerful and ancient as the commander’s.

Dante handed the message back to the blood thrall, then turned to Mephiston. ‘The Chief Librarian is uniquely powerful. Uniquely. Perhaps there was a time when we could hold our mightiest weapons in reserve, waiting for the moment of direst need, but the time for caution is gone. The galaxy is divided and consumed. Mephiston must deploy his gifts where he thinks they can have most impact.’ He placed a hand on Mephiston’s shoulder. ‘It is always a comfort to have you at my side, Mephiston, but I learned long ago to trust in your judgement. If anyone else conjured visions from a plate I would dismiss them as raving. But, from you, I take this as a dire warning. And I know you will have thought through every possible eventuality. Do what you must, with my blessing. Go to the Prospero system. Find Sabassus. Face your daemon. Make sure these events do not come to pass.’

Mephiston saluted. ‘I will not fail you this time, Commander Dante.’

Dante gripped his shoulder. There were few in the Chapter who would treat the Chief Librarian with such familiarity and Mephiston felt an

unexpected rush of pride. Perhaps, after all, he was still more than just a spectre of dread.

‘I do not profess to understand everything you do in our name,’ said Dante, ‘but I know you have lifted a great weight on our behalf. A weight no one else could bear. Do not punish yourself needlessly if you sometimes stagger under the load.’

‘I will not stagger,’ replied Mephiston, as Peloris’ corpse flashed through his mind.

Dante stared at him. ‘None of us are omniscient, even you. Do not swear oaths you may not be able to keep.’

Mephiston was about to protest but Dante continued. ‘Think on this instead. Your studies have led you to a truth no one else saw.’ He waved at the salver. ‘You have been single-minded and there have been terrible costs, but weigh those costs against what you uncovered. All eyes have been on the Indomitus Crusade. Only you have foreseen this subtler threat.

‘You have my permission to go but there are two conditions. The first is that you return to Baal as soon as you are able. Albinus is right. I have need of you here. We can no longer see the Emperor’s light, but your warp-sight is nearly a match for the Astronomican. My second condition is that you do not go alone. I cannot spare a fleet but if speed is of the essence, my parsimony can be forgiven. Choose whomever you wish.’ He nodded at Rhacelus. ‘As long as you make room for Brother Rhacelus. You’re headed to the hornet’s nest. However carefully you have thought this through, you may still be surprised by what you find out there. Even *your* powers may need bolstering. And Rhacelus has proven himself a great friend to you, even when others might have abandoned you.’

Rhacelus’ expression remained fixed in a scowl, but Mephiston could feel pride radiating from him. Mephiston nodded and saluted again. He had predicted this request and approved of Dante’s logic.

Dante motioned for Albinus to accompany him as he left the chamber. ‘Our prayers are with you, Mephiston,’ he called as he marched across the hall.



CHAPTER THREE

The Diurnal Vault, Arx Angelicum, Baal

Lucius Antros studied the pieces arranged before him. They were ornamental blades, hundreds of them, no bigger than a fingernail and balanced on a metal armature. The armature was constructed in the shape of a winged figure that some claimed was a likeness of the Angel Sanguinius. He had played memoriam since he was a neophyte and its complexity never ceased to relax him. His breath grew slower and deeper as he played and the questions in his head became less frantic, as though even his doubts found respite in the game. The rules were designed to rid one of distractions and focus the mind. And it was *almost* working.

Seated opposite him, across a small stone table, was his regular opponent: Lord Mephiston. The Chief Librarian was rigid with concentration, staring at the game. He had not moved for several minutes and Antros was able to study him at his leisure. He looked more intense than Antros had ever seen him. Mephiston always maintained a reptilian stillness but this was different – harder, the quiet more ominous. It had only been a matter of months since the tech-priests had given Mephiston their surgical blessings, cutting back his black carapace, his flesh and even his mind according to the precepts of their master, Archmagos Cawl. Mephiston was now Primaris. The process had utterly transformed him. Antros had travelled half the galaxy at Mephiston's side but now he barely

felt like he knew his master.

Finally, Mephiston clicked one of the blades into place and looked up at Antros.

Both of them could feel the tension in the room. The galaxy was at the point of collapse, besieged on all sides by daemonic incursions and plagues of mutation. The Blood Angels home world had been sundered from the light of Holy Terra, left to stand watch over the darkness of Imperium Nihilus. And Mephiston had invited Antros to play a game of memoriam. There was clearly something on his mind. Every time Mephiston wished to broach a subject but could not find the right words, he would invite Antros to play memoriam and then brood for hours before finally revealing whatever was troubling him.

‘What brought you to the Arx Angelicum?’ said Mephiston, looking back at the game. After such a prolonged silence, the words were jarring, echoing around the hall.

Mephiston always spoke in an odd jumble of accents, his Gothic quite unlike the rest of the Chapter’s, and Antros wondered if he had heard correctly. ‘Chief Librarian?’

‘Why did you want to become an aspirant? You could have lived a natural, mortal life. What drew you to the Place of Challenge? Why did you wish to become a Blood Angel?’

Antros shook his head, taken aback by the question. ‘It has been so long... I have... It is hard to remember what I was like as a mortal man, before Corbulo handed me the chalice and I began my new life.’

‘*Try to remember.*’

Antros knew his master well enough to sense that he had something of particular importance on his mind. He shrugged, doing his best to answer. ‘I... I wished for the power to change things, I suppose. I grew up in the wastes. Life was short and brutal. But even there we knew of the war you were fighting on our behalf – the war of angels and daemons. The war in the heavens.’ He strained to recall his life before his elevation to the Adeptus Astartes but it was like peering into a well. ‘I knew I had abilities, abilities others did not. I wished to nurture that and put it to use. I wanted to have an impact. I saw my brothers and sisters die unnoticed, with no purpose or influence. I wanted to make a difference.’

Mephiston was watching him closely and Antros looked away, wondering

if the Chief Librarian was trying to read his thoughts. In the years before their recent battles, the years before the attacks on Baal, Antros had harboured doubts about his great mentor, troubled by the wayward nature of his gift. Did Mephiston know he had once doubted him? Since the tech-priests had remade Mephiston, Antros' concerns had faded. Mephiston seemed so sure of himself now, and in control of his peculiar powers. But perhaps Mephiston could still see the questions that had once troubled Antros.

'Your mind is hidden from me,' said Mephiston, guessing Antros' thoughts even if he was not reading them. 'You certainly have power now. Power beyond anything even I could have predicted.'

Antros wondered if Mephiston was pleased or concerned by that. Perhaps he had brought him here to judge him? How much had the Chief Librarian guessed? Antros had spent years searching for ways to aid Mephiston, new psychic disciplines, new methods of blood ritual. In the end, it came to nothing, but the research had changed his own mind – furthered his skills in ways he had not expected. He sensed that his powers now surpassed those of his other mentor, Gaius Rhacelus. Mephiston might be shocked, perhaps even angry, if he knew the full extent of what Antros had mastered, but there was no real shame in what he had done, so Antros was unsure why he guarded his secret so carefully. Why did he hide the power he had gained?

He looked for a sign of accusation in Mephiston's eyes but there was none.

Antros made the move he had been planning for nearly half an hour, winning the game in a manner he knew the Chief Librarian would not have predicted. It was not always wise to surprise Mephiston, but sometimes Antros could not resist giving him a glimpse of just how subtle his mind had become.

Mephiston stared at the game in silence. A slight flicker of his eyebrow was the only indication that he was surprised by what had happened.

The silence dragged on.

After a few minutes, Mephiston rose from the table, heading over to one of the cabinets that lined the room, reaching far up into the hidden, smoke-filled vaults overhead. Each of the drawers bore a brass plate, inscribed with delicate script. The language was unfamiliar to Antros but Mephiston

ran his finger over the plaques until he found the one he was looking for.

He opened the drawer with a slight wave of his hand and it slid towards him on silent, oiled runners. Light flashed on his face as he reached in and lifted out a long metal staff, topped with a fist-sized blood stone clasped in a silver eagle's claw.

'The Staff of Andomatius,' said Mephiston, handing it to him.

'I have a staff, my lord.'

'Not like this one. Andomatius was one of the earliest Chief Librarians. And one of the most learned. He imbued this relic with a lifetime of study and devotion.'

Antros stood and bowed, then took the staff. 'My Lord... I am honoured... I...' He shook his head, feeling even more ashamed of the doubts he had once entertained, of the secrets he still kept.

Mephiston held his gaze. 'When the time comes, Antros, you *will* make a difference.' His tone was unclear and his words weighted with a meaning that Antros could not grasp. There was an uncharacteristic look in his eyes. It took Antros a moment to realise that it was concern. 'Trust your soul to Andomatius.' Mephiston tapped the intricately engraved staff. 'He will not fail you. Even if you fail yourself.'

Antros was unsure how to answer.

Mephiston leant closer. 'I understand you, Lucius Antros.'

Antros' hearts thudded in his chest. Even now, after all he had seen, he found it hard to meet the Chief Librarian's gaze. It was like staring into the void.

'And I believe in you,' continued Mephiston. 'When the time comes, remember that.'

Antros was too dazed to speak. Had the Chief Librarian truly seen into his soul? Had he seen the visions that haunted him – the childish, vainglorious dreams in which he saved both Mephiston and the rest of the Blood Angels with a heroic act of faith?

He held the staff against his chest armour, full of pride. 'I will remember, Chief Librarian.'

Mephiston seemed on the verge of saying more. Then he waved his hand and the memoriam set folded itself away, chiming like a timepiece until the frame was no larger than a fist.

He waved to the door, dismissing Antros with words that might have been

either a promise or an order.

‘No more games.’



CHAPTER FOUR

The Carceri Arcanum, Arx Angelicum, Baal

Mephiston strode through the barrel-vaulted gloom of the Carceri Arcanum, muttering equations and snatches of poetry, reciting passages from the Ephemeris. Unlike most of the Arx Angelicum, the Carceri Arcanum was devoid of finery, lacking the intricate workmanship that graced most of the Blood Angels fortress-monastery. It was dank and crumbling, a brick-built maze that skulked beneath the proud halls of the Librarium Sagrestia. It was barely lit; only an occasional lumen flickered in a rusted sconce, spreading cold light over the lichened bricks. Rats scattered as Mephiston strode through puddles and clouds of steam that hissed from pipes hugging the curved walls. Like all of his battle-brothers, Mephiston understood the power of symmetry and beauty but down here, hidden from prying eyes, ugliness was appropriate. It was in the Carceri Arcanum that the Chapter stored its most private memories – some of the relics and tomes were so dangerous that only the most senior members of the Librarius even knew of their existence.

Behind Mephiston came two other Blood Angels: Gaius Rhacelus and Lucius Antros. Their robes snapped behind them as they rushed after Mephiston, passing through antechambers lined with ever-vigilant gun-servitors and doors imbued with so much aetheric force they shimmered. The Librarians did not speak as they walked, each of them deep in

concentration. Many of the dangers in the Carceri Arcanum were not physical and even such skilled psykers had to carefully shield their thoughts, or risk leaving the vaults with ideas that were not their own.

They entered a chamber that was smaller than the others and filled with a single, colossal shape. The three Librarians saluted as wall-lumens flickered into life, revealing the nature of the hulking presence: an ancient, battle-scarred Dreadnought.

Reactors hummed and energy flickered across the Dreadnought's chipped ceramite, then a deep, grinding voice resonated from its chest. 'Lord Mephiston. I did not expect to see you again.' The sound was distorted by ancient speaker valves, giving it a distant, ominous quality.

'Lord Marest,' replied Mephiston with a slight bow. Dozens of former Chief Librarians were entombed in the Librarium but Marest was the only one that could still speak. The only one that still lived. In the years since he had been interred though, Marest never left this small chamber. He had been immortalised in his ceramite casket for one purpose, to stand guard over this door and the horrors that lay beyond.

'You are...' Lights flickered inside the Dreadnought's adamantium casket. 'You are changed.'

'Much has changed, Lord Marest.'

'Not the things that matter, I'll warrant.'

Mephiston nodded. 'I must speak with it again.'

There was a long pause, broken only by the wheeze of pistons working somewhere inside Marest's casket.

'It is not my place to question you, Chief Librarian,' said Marest finally, 'but this is not the first time. You have already endured the company of my prisoner. Every exposure increases the risks.'

Mephiston said nothing but he wondered if, even hidden down here, Marest had heard rumours about him. Was he doubted even by someone who understood the burden he carried as Chief Librarian?

Marest opened the door, admitting them to the vaults, but as the Librarians passed him, Marest spoke up again.

'The creature is plotting.'

Mephiston hesitated. His auguries had not predicted this. 'Is it no longer secure?'

'It is physically secure.'

‘And psychically? Do we need to perform a new binding ritual?’

‘I can find no evidence that it has broken through the hexagrammatic wards, but there have been problems with the servitors – specifically the ones I embedded in the vault’s walls. The anathema configuration models. Some of them have been malfunctioning.’

Mephiston suppressed the flash of annoyance that tried to puncture his equilibrium. ‘You made no mention of this. Why did you not send word?’

‘I know my enemy.’ There was a warning in Marest’s voice. ‘There is no danger. I have checked and double checked the wards. Its plots will come to nothing. I merely thought you should know of them.’

‘It is a creature of Chaos, Marest. There is always danger. *How* did the anathema models malfunction?’

‘They died. They are mono-function models, fed intestinally, so they do not move, but as soon as one of them stops breathing I feel a surge in the psychosphere. I have had to replace several in the last few months. They usually survive for several years.’

Mephiston frowned, looking up into the crumbling vaults. With his enhanced Adeptus Astartes vision he could pick out the pale shapes of servitors hanging overhead, lobotomised wretches, their shaved heads bristling with oily black cables. None of them had limbs and they were built into the architecture, but he could see them breathing, slowly, as their mind-wiped brains focused on the single task that had been allotted to them, dampening the aetheric currents to such an extent that even *he* would find it hard to employ psychic powers.

‘Why have you chosen this particular time to return?’ asked Marest.

Mephiston thought back to the runes scored into the surface of the Ephemeris. He had spent several days poring over them, ensuring that the markings really were pointing him here, to Marest’s ancient nemesis. It had seemed an odd prediction and he had been methodical in his approach, examining all the alternatives before accepting that this was the right answer. For a moment, he considered explaining his reasons to the towering Dreadnought. Then he shook his head. ‘My reasons are complex and my time short, Lord Marest. Forgive my abrupt manner, but I must speak with your prisoner quickly.’

Marest made a low, mechanical rumbling sound. ‘Even the wisest soul can benefit from the insight of his fellow scholars.’

Mephiston was conscious of how much time he was wasting. ‘I do not claim to be the wisest. Merely that I know my own mind.’

Marest looked at Rhacelus and Antros. He sighed and stepped back, the ground juddering under his thunderous steps.

‘Do not believe anything it tells you,’ he said, his amplified voice crackling down the passageway as Mephiston and the others rushed on into the gloom.

As they headed deeper into the vaults Mephiston felt the same claustrophobic sensation he always did in the psychically warded prison. The experience was disturbing for someone used to seeing through several veils of reality at once. It was also painful. Physical pain would have been suppressed immediately by his Adeptus Astartes genetics, but this was a psychological hurt and Mephiston saw by their grimaces that Antros and Rhacelus felt it too.

They marched on in silence, passing through locks both physical and unseen, until they reached an unassuming door of black wood.

‘Be on your guard,’ said Mephiston, placing his hand on the surface of the door. Light flickered between his gauntlet and the ancient wood. ‘Whatever it was originally, this thing is now a facet of the Ruinous Powers.’

They nodded as Mephiston shoved the door open.

Glow-globes blinked into life as they entered the small chamber, revealing the wretched creature shackled to its floor. It was vaguely humanoid but with repulsively alien attributes. It had four impossibly long arms, draped before it like the tentacles of a withered sea creature, and eight faces, each of them no bigger than a fist and crammed with grotesque, inhuman features.

‘Marest calls it the Octocalvariae,’ said Mephiston, gesturing for Antros and Rhacelus to follow him across the room. ‘But I suspect that is more of a taxonomic category than a given name.’

He drew Vitarus from its scabbard as he reached the creature. He moved the blade towards the Octocalvariae’s faces, holding it just an inch from the gelatinous flesh.

The creature gave no sign it had registered their presence, or that it was even alive. It remained sprawled on the floor like something slopped from a butcher’s block.

Antros shook his head, grimacing. ‘What could this monstrosity possibly tell you that you could find useful or reliable, Lord Meph—?’

One of the limbs shot out and grabbed Vitarus, yanking Mephiston forwards.

Rhacelus’ pistol was in his hand in a second and Antros drew back his staff to strike.

‘Wait,’ said Mephiston, holding up a warning hand. He calmly placed his boot on the Octocalvariae’s chest and forced it back down to the floor.

+One visit seems odd.+ The Octocalvariae spoke psychically. +Two seems like desperation.+

Dozens of eyes blinked across its misshapen heads, all filled with amusement. +Perhaps it is only in the company of a fellow outcast that you can be yourself?+

Antros gripped his staff tighter. ‘By the Angel,’ he snarled, his lip curling. ‘Tell me we have come to kill this thing.’

Mephiston shook his head. ‘The Octocalvariae is unkillable. Marest has tried, I assure you, by all possible means. But it cannot be done. That is why he maintains his vigil.’ Mephiston wrenched his blade free, slicing through the creature’s arm but leaving no mark on its flesh. ‘It is a contest of wills that Marest will win. Even if the rest of the Librarium fell, Marest would remain, waiting down here for his prisoner to die.’

+Marest?+ sneered the creature. +Another obsessive admirer. He cannot bear to be parted from me.+

It shrugged its four shoulders. +I am quite able to look after myself, but he *insists* on protecting me. He thinks I do not see him out there, but I do, strutting about in his coffin, masquerading as a living warrior even though I killed him centuries ago.+

The Octocalvariae was more talkative than Mephiston recalled from his last visit, babbling away with nauseating self-satisfaction.

+Have you just come to talk?+ it said, lifting itself up on one elbow and gracing Mephiston with an ocean of smiles. +Or can I assist you?+

‘I seek passage through the Great Rift.’

The creature nodded. +And why do you think I would be inclined to help you?+

‘Wretched scum!’ hissed Antros, drawing back his staff to strike.

Mephiston gestured for him to wait. ‘The creature will give me what I

want.’

‘I suggest we rip the information from its soul,’ said Antros, circling the chamber, still gripping his staff and glaring at the jumble of limbs shackled to its centre.

Mephiston ignored Antros, keeping his voice neutral. ‘I wish to travel through the Great Rift to a planet called Sabassus, in the Prospero System.’

The creature laughed and leaned closer to him, straining against its restraints. +Prospero? Are you sure? Do you know who is there, Blood Angel?+

Mephiston hesitated. Why would the creature ask him that? He had envisioned dozens of possible answers but not this one. Travel through the Great Rift was hazardous enough, but heading to Sabassus sounded like a suicidal idea, so he had assumed the Octocalvariae would enjoy helping him. He had not expected a question. Suddenly, he had the troubling sensation the Octocalvariae knew more about his plans than he did. Who *was* there? He summoned his memory of the salver, poring over the notes and rethinking his strategy.

‘I know that the region is teeming with heresy and mutation,’ he replied. ‘I know that the regions surrounding the Prospero System have been overrun by servants of the Ruinous Powers.’

+Then you know of the puppets but not the master.+

Mephiston thought back over everything Lord Guilliman had revealed of that particular war zone, keen to show the creature it did not have the upper hand. ‘The cults are predominantly Tzeentchian,’ he said, ‘and there are rumours that remnants of the Thousand Sons Legion are behind the insurrections.’ He shrugged. ‘And if Rubric Marines of the Thousand Sons are present, their sorcerers will be too. They will be—’

‘Chief Librarian,’ interrupted Rhacelus. ‘Forgive me, but is it wise to share knowledge with this thing?’

Mephiston waved vaguely at the walls and the mutilated servitors sunk into the rock. ‘The Octocalvariae is cut off from the galaxy. It will never leave these vaults. It will die here.’

+So they keep telling me,+ replied the creature, turning its smiles on Antros, +and yet here I am, still living. Still enduring the tedium. And clearly in possession of more facts than the Chief Librarian of the Blood

Angels.+ It leant towards Antros. +Perhaps if you spent more time reading those books you hoard and less time lusting after the blood of your servants you might learn something.+

Antros lunged forwards, smashing his staff into the creature. Light pulsed from his psychic hood and rippled across the Octocalvariae. The creature rose from the floor with shocking speed, grabbed the staff and hauled Antros closer. Antros cursed as it enveloped him with its four arms.

Rhacelus strode forwards and hacked his blade into the creature's back. The Octocalvariae laughed wildly, ignoring Rhacelus' sword as it latched several mouths onto Antros' face. Blood filled the air.

With a casual gesture, Mephiston channelled warp-fire through his sword, driving the Octocalvariae down onto the black Baalite rock. Antros reeled away, clutching his bloodied face and muttering as Rhacelus hacked again at the Octocalvariae.

'There is no point, Rhacelus,' said Mephiston. 'You cannot harm it.'

Rhacelus grunted as he wrenched his blade free. He leant closer to the Octocalvariae. 'Try that again and I will make your life so painful *you'll* find a way to end it.' Rhacelus spoke with such force that the smug expression faded from the Octocalvariae's faces. Warpfire glinted in Rhacelus' eyes, revealing a glimpse of the hells he had survived. Even when Mephiston extinguished Vitarus' light, the creature remained silent, looking warily at Rhacelus.

'What do you know that you are not sharing with me?' asked Mephiston.

The Octocalvariae continued watching Rhacelus as it replied. +There are more than just sorcerers marshalling those cults. The Prospero System is *significant*.+

'I do not believe a word this creature says,' spat Antros, wiping blood from his face and glaring at the Octocalvariae. His eyes were infused with crimson and Mephiston realised he was moments away from losing control. Mephiston caught Rhacelus' eye and nodded at Antros.

Rhacelus stepped to Antros' side and whispered in his ear. Antros nodded, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath. Then he turned away from the creature and walked over to a dark corner of the cell, taking a book from his munitions belt and flicking through the pages.

'Do you know of a way to cross the Great Rift?' Mephiston asked the creature.

The Octocalvariae looked at Antros and smirked, then turned back to the Chief Librarian. +If I helped you, Blood Angel, I would be sending you to your doom. Sending you to damnation.+ It raised one of its claw-like hands and licked Antros' blood off the digits. +Can you risk any *more* damnation, blood drinker?+

Antros stiffened at this, but Rhacelus shook his head and placed a hand on his shoulder.

'I know what I am,' said Mephiston, keeping his voice level. 'And I know which risks are worth taking.'

+You want to cross the galaxy and enter a realm dominated by Tzeentch? + As the Octocalvariae said the word 'Tzeentch' its body shivered. +Then perhaps you really do know what you are – a sorcerer in waiting. You are an unwitting servant of the Great Schemer, but if you head to Sabassus you have a chance of becoming his *willing* servant – and a powerful one at that.+ The Octocalvariae waved at the two Librarians standing in the corner. +Do your lackeys understand that? Do they know what drives you to Sabassus? Are *they* so keen to join Tzeentch's new empire?+

'Tell me what you know,' said Mephiston.

+Things that would shrivel your mind. But, if you really *do* wish to embrace your fate in the Prospero System, there are routes you could take.+

'Chief Librarian,' said Antros pulling away from Rhacelus and approaching the centre of the room again. 'If this creature has been locked down here for centuries, and has no contact with the outside world, how does it know about the Great Rift?'

The Octocalvariae smirked at Mephiston.

'Anathema wards suppress its warp-sight,' replied Mephiston. He nodded at the blood on Antros' face. 'Until it manages to touch someone who has come from outside the cell. Then it snatches what information it can.'

Antros paled.

Mephiston shook his head. 'You are not the first. I made a similar mistake on a previous visit. I doubt you have imparted anything new.'

'It has seen my mind?'

'It does not matter,' said Mephiston. 'The Octocalvariae will remain here until it dies. Anything you have shared will remain in this room.'

Antros did not look reassured, but Mephiston turned back to the creature.

‘What are the routes you speak of?’

It smiled again. +There is a world called Vigilus, in the region you call Segmentum Obscurus. Many of your kind have travelled into the—+

‘No,’ interrupted Mephiston. ‘I have no time to travel to the Nachmund Gauntlet. And even if I did there would be no guarantee I could traverse it.’ For a worrying moment, Mephiston wondered if the Ephemeris might have been mistaken. Perhaps he had misunderstood his own writing? He knew about the Nachmund Gauntlet and it was no use to him. He could spend years trying to reach Vigilus and then—

‘My lord!’ said Rhacelus.

Mephiston backed away just before the creature lunged at him. He nodded gratefully at Rhacelus.

‘We’re wasting our time,’ he said, turning to go. ‘The creature has nothing for me.’

+Wait!+

Mephiston was pleased to see it panicked by the idea of him leaving. It was desperate to impart knowledge. This fitted exactly with his prognostications. The auguries on the Ephemeris had indicated that the creature was sworn to help him. Try as he might, he could not discern the exact reason why. It was displeasing to proceed without all the answers, but time had forced his hand. Perhaps it was just the desire of a Chaos worshipper to ensnare a new follower but he had a suspicion it was something more than that. Marest’s warnings had only increased his doubts.

+There *is* another way,+ it said. +A quicker route. If you are really in *such* a hurry to hand your soul to Chaos. I can tell you how to find Dromlach.+

Mephiston felt a rush of relief. Dromlach. The name was familiar to him. He cast his mind back to the images he had inscribed into the Ephemeris. Dromlach was a mythological creature – a star serpent described in various creation myths and folk legends. Even some of the native Baalite religions mentioned it. The name occurred at certain nexus points on the Ephemeris. He had wondered on many occasions what its significance might be and even guessed there might be a connection with his current difficulty in reaching Sabassus. The Octocalvariae’s mention of such an obscure word reassured Mephiston he was on the right track. The

Ephemeris had not led him astray. The Octocalvariae *did* have an answer.

He recalled the various texts he had studied concerning the Dromlach. As always, his memory was perfect. He re-read the passages as though he was back in his private libraries, poring over mildewed tomes. Various cultures used the Dromlach as a metaphor for death, a symbol of the journey from one state of existence to another, but he could recall no mention of it being a literal passage through the void.

The Octocalvariae was watching him with amusement in its eyes. +Beliefs have consequence. If enough souls wish for something to exist, it eventually comes into being. Or are our beliefs an echo of something just beyond our comprehension? Either way, for every fanciful tale, scribbled in a tragic hut, there is a physical manifestation somewhere else in the galaxy. And so it is with Dromlach. She exists, Blood Angel. And I know where.+

‘Why should we wish to find a galactic serpent?’ said Rhacelus.

Mephiston was not surprised that his old friend had recognised the name. Rhacelus was old enough to have been at Mephiston’s side before his rebirth as the Chapter’s Lord of Death. Rhacelus knew the texts of the Librarius as well as he did.

+Because Dromlach was not born of biology. She was born of belief. She does not abide by the rules of science that govern the rest of the galaxy. She is outside of time and space. The wound you have inflicted on the Galaxy does not—+

‘The wound *we* inflicted?’ cried Antros, closing his book and striding back across the room.

Rhacelus gave him a warning glare. ‘Throne, Antros. Don’t be such an easy target. This thing knows Chaos ripped the galaxy in half. It is playing with you.’

Mephiston tried to ignore the distraction, digesting the creature’s words. ‘Dromlach is not affected by the Great Rift?’

+She straddles the regions of the void you are so incapable of navigating. Like so much of the galaxy that you do not understand, she is able to do things you cannot. She is present here, in your half of the galaxy – the half that has already been claimed by the Lords of Chaos. And, at her other extremity, she is also present in the other half of the galaxy – the regions that are just about to be claimed by the Chaos gods. If you wish to cross

the great divide you must offer yourself to Dromlach as a willing victim.+

Unlike Antros, Mephiston was oblivious to the creature's sneering tone, focusing carefully on its words and cross referencing them with the texts he was studying in his head. He re-read the lines about how Dromlach was a conduit from one state of existence to another and the various funerary rites associated with the deity.

'Is it suggesting we prostrate ourselves before a false god?' asked Antros.

Mephiston ignored him as shards of information slotted neatly together in his mind. He collated the comparative religious texts he had read with ancient navigation charts.

The Octocalvariae smiled. +She exists. Look and you will find her.+

Mephiston nodded and sheathed his sword. 'Very well.' He gestured towards the door. 'Brothers, we need endure the company of this being no longer.'

Rhacelus followed him but Antros hesitated, glaring at the creature.

The Octocalvariae smirked back. +Can you smell my blood, vampire?+ It licked its lips where Antros' blood still glistened. +Do you hear my heart? Thud, thud.+

Antros hissed a curse, his face flushed with rage.

'Antros!' Rhacelus spoke quietly but the warning in his voice was enough to halt Antros. He closed his eyes and backed away, nodding. He wiped some imaginary dust from his battleplate and marched away from the creature without giving it another glance, following Mephiston and Rhacelus from the room.

The Octocalvariae slumped to the floor with a rattle of chains and a burst of laughter.

+The great Lord Mephiston,+ it thought. +The great seer of the Blood Angels. Just a simpleton, like the rest of the Emperor's dolts.+

A while later, one of the servitors embedded in the wall began to twitch and snort. It was limbless, like all the others, just a bare, grey-fleshed torso and a shaved head. The body was deformed by the cables that ran through it and the head was dumb and blind, its mouth and eyes no more than puckered lines of stitches. As it moved, the face began to stretch and bulge, the skull buckling and extending until it looked like a long, hooked beak.

+Mephiston is no fool,+ replied the servitor. +I made sure of that. But for all his learning he has yet to recognise the face of his tutor – he does not guess the source of his wisdom.+

+Nor will he,+ replied the Octocalvariae, twisting in its chains, trying to look up at the bird-headed shape. +Many people have been consumed by Dromlach, but none have ever emerged from the other side.+

+He *will* emerge. In this, as in all the other matters we discussed, I am sure. His is the Threefold Soul. He is a spoke of the Great Wheel. He is an implement of the Great Change and a foundation stone of the New Kingdom. He will reach Sabassus and then he will be mine.+

The Octocalvariae looked hopefully at the door. +And then?+

+And then I will keep my promise to you. Mephiston is the hope of the Blood Angels. He has taken it upon himself to shoulder their burden. By becoming their shadow he thinks he can postpone their doom. He thinks that by carrying their shame he is buying them time, but he will actually hasten their demise. So his fall will be the fall of the Chapter, and what a fall it will be. The sons of Sanguinius, consumed by blood lust and shame. Their despair will leave them no option. Those that survive will seek a new spiritual father, the Crimson King, and revel in the glory of his New Kingdom. I will have presented Magnus with an incredible gift.+ The servitor died, relaying one final promise: +And you will be free.+

And I will be free, thought the Octocalvariae, closing its dozens of eyes and leaning back on the cold stone, picturing the moment, imagining the torments it would wreak on Marest as Baal burned.



CHAPTER FIVE

The Diurnal Vault, Arx Angelicum, Baal

Even after decades of serving as a member of the Blood Angels Librarius, Antros never failed to hesitate at the threshold of the Diurnal Vault. At Mephiston's side he had crossed the Imperium, seeing sights that would fracture a mortal mind. But it was here, in the fortress-monastery of his own Chapter, that Antros felt most humbled. The vault was Mephiston's private library and it was built on such a grand, visionary scale that it resembled a work of nature rather than man. Its cavernous size was impossible by any normal laws of physics, far larger than the wider Librarium that contained it and it was dominated by a statue of Sanguinius that would have dwarfed a cathedrum. Solar light burned from the statue's chest, filling the hall with shafts of glittering dust motes and flashing on three faceted monoliths that hovered above the angel's outstretched hand.

Upon entering the vault, Antros shrugged off the constraints of gravity and drifted up past the contours of the statue, following Mephiston as he headed towards the three enormous crystals. After leaving the Octocalvariae, Mephiston had ordered Rhacelus to ready his ship the *Blood Oath* and muster the strike force Commander Dante had promised them. Antros had intended to return to his own chambers and prepare for the journey, but Mephiston had ordered him to assist in his search for more information about the entity known as Dromlach.

‘Do you believe what the creature said?’ asked Antros as they glided towards the three gemstones. ‘That there is a galactic space serpent called Dromlach?’

Mephiston shook his head. ‘I’m sure there are far worse things spewing from the Great Rift, but if this particular horror had been around for as long as the creature claimed we would have heard of it before now.’

They reached the first of the gemstones and Antros struggled to take in the scale of it. It resembled a polished ruby, but a ruby the size of a troop transport and surrounded by swarms of winged servitors and servo-skulls. Mephiston led him through a gilt-edged aperture in its wall and gravity returned, dropping the two Librarians onto a mosaicked, rug-strewn floor. Blood thralls rushed towards them but Mephiston waved them away, striding through the antechamber into a larger, octagonal room. Its walls were lined with bookcases that reached hundreds of feet up to a distant, vaulted ceiling. There was a pleasing hum of scholarly work as servitors cradled the books in their servo-arms and transcribed information from mouldering pages to the datascreeds that scrolled endlessly from their chests. There were mortals present too, scholiasts and rubricators, hunched over desks and clinging to ladders as they catalogued and restored.

Mephiston ignored all of it, striding across age-worn rugs to an alcove on the far side of the chamber.

‘But you seemed pleased,’ said Antros, hurrying after him. ‘When the creature mentioned the word Dromlach I saw your eyes light up.’

They entered the alcove and Mephiston dismissed the group of blood thralls gathered at its shelves. He waved Antros to a table, indicating that he should sit on a specific chair, and then began placing texts in front of him – everything from mass-produced pamphlets to hefty, gilt-edged folios.

‘The word Dromlach is significant,’ said Mephiston, sitting opposite Antros and opening a book. ‘But it does not mean what the Octocalvariae says. Whatever cruel trick it thinks it has played on me has no bearing on reality.’

He paused and glanced out of the alcove, back into the main chamber. ‘Oraculist,’ he said. He spoke the word quietly, but Antros felt the psychic kick that projected it across the hall. Mephiston nodded to the books in front of Antros. ‘Find every mention of a Dromlach or *the* Dromlach and

find a connection.’

Antros looked down at the table and realised that, rather than navigational treatises and star charts, Mephiston had given him books on comparative religion. He shrugged and did as instructed, scouring indices and contents pages and scribbling notes on a sheaf of paper.

He lost himself in the work, cross referencing and re-reading, looking for anything that linked the different descriptions of Dromlach. He quickly spotted a recurring theme. In every culture that worshipped or feared Dromlach, there was a belief that it was a living portal – a route from the real world to the afterlife. But beyond that, he could find nothing that would help them cross the Great Rift.

There was a flutter of mechanical wings as Mephiston’s servitor arrived carrying the metal salver. Mephiston took the Ephemeric and placed it on the floor next to the marble table, leaning over it and tracing the designs with his finger.

They passed several hours this way, with Mephiston poring over the books and occasionally using a stylus to inscribe a new note on the Ephemeric.

‘Have you found any *Imperial* records that mention Dromlach?’ asked Mephiston.

Antros looked up with a frown, about to ask Mephiston why he needed help recalling facts. Mephiston knew every line in his Librarianium.

‘Some of these texts are new,’ said Mephiston, anticipating his question. ‘I only have second-hand knowledge of them.’

Antros nodded and picked up one of the smaller books, holding it out to the Chief Librarian. ‘There was an explorer fleet led by a Magos Stromgren. They used the word Dromlach in their final communiqués.’

‘Final?’

Antros took the book back and flicked through it until he found the relevant pages. He pointed to a line of text. ‘The fleet went missing. It vanished in...’ He frowned. ‘Can that date be right? It predates the Imperium.’

‘Of course. The priests of Mars have been plying the galaxy since before the days of the Imperium. Rhacelus would cuff you for asking that question. Where did the fleet go missing?’

‘It says they were last seen entering a region known as the Cronium

Gulf.’ Antros shrugged. ‘I suppose that name might no longer be in use.’

Mephiston stared at Antros.

‘My lord?’ said Antros.

Mephiston did not seem to hear. He was no longer looking at Antros but through him. His gaunt, severe features had slackened and for a moment he looked as cadaverous as he had before the tech-priests remade him.

After a long, discomfiting minute, Mephiston’s eyes refocused on Antros. ‘I see,’ he said, his voice slipping back into the heavy accent he used when focused on a blood ritual. ‘We are getting somewhere.’

‘Are we?’

Mephiston nodded and lifted the Ephemeris off the floor and up onto the table. He pointed out several of the glyphs on its surface. ‘There are only a few mentions of Dromlach on here, but the Cronium Gulf crops up many times.’

He stood and strode quickly back into the main part of the Librarium with Antros racing after him. Mephiston grabbed more books and returned with them to the alcove.

‘Look for any mention of the Cronium Gulf,’ he said.

In a few minutes a fascinating picture had appeared. Imperial fleets had mentioned the Cronium Gulf several times and each time they did, it was the last message they sent.

‘Ships enter that gulf and do not reappear,’ said Mephiston, scoring more notes into his salver.

‘It’s been happening since before the birth of the Imperium,’ replied Antros, his pulse quickening.

‘And look here,’ Mephiston held out a page for Antros to study. ‘A xenos fleet vanished in the same location and they referred to gods called the “dromas” who guard the region.’

As they read further, it became clear that every civilisation near the Cronium Gulf lived in fear of a creature called Drumus, or Dromos or something similar.

‘Myths like these don’t always come about by accident,’ said Mephiston. ‘Perhaps someone or something wishes to keep people away from the Cronium Gulf.’ He peered at his notes. ‘The monster names are a smokescreen. There is something important there that causes fleets to vanish.’ He leant back in his chair, drumming his fingers on the table. ‘We

have our destination, Antros. This anomaly must be our route across the Great Rift. As soon as Rhacelus returns with news of the *Blood Oath* we will depart for the Cronium Gulf.'

'But, my lord, all of this is based on the words of the creature. It gave you the name Dromlach so it must have meant for you to find out about this gulf.' He shook his head. 'If a Chaos-worshipping xenos wants us to go there, how can it be in our best interests?'

Mephiston waved a dismissive hand. 'I have the measure of that creature. It thinks it reads my mind but it is the other way around. I revealed a fraction of my power but it has no idea of who I truly am. I, on the other hand, know exactly what the Octocalvariae is. I have discerned every one of its deceits and ruses. I know why it has given me this clue. It thinks it is sending me to my doom. It thinks the Dromlach is a real being that will devour me. It does not believe I will ever cross the Great Rift or reach Sabassus.'

He leant across the table and stared at Antros. This time the full weight of his gaze was locked on him. 'It is wrong.'



CHAPTER SIX

Regimental HQ of the 145th Lupian Hellbound, Adurim, Abissama Delta, Sabassus

‘Damn you,’ said Colonel Fedorak as he saluted the Emperor.

As on every other morning, Fedorak waited for divine retribution, praying for the Emperor to strike him down, praying for an end to this slow, degrading farce. As always, he felt nothing but the sweat dripping down his face, soaking into his thick, sodden moustache and through the starched cloth of his tunic.

The Emperor did not deign to look at him, his divine gaze locked in the middle distance, staring out from a peeling fresco at the empty mess hall. Much of the fresco had been lost – obscured by old notices or simply faded into abstraction by the years, but no one had dared to paste anything over the Emperor’s grand, gilded presence. He stood there every day, sword raised, judging the Hellbound as they ate their miserable rations.

Fedorak stepped closer, glaring up at his radiant god, willing him to answer – willing him to be real. Wishing he could believe again.

‘Colonel,’ said a quiet voice.

Fedorak felt a brief, absurd moment of excitement. Then he laughed at himself and shook his head.

‘Sergeant Malik,’ he replied without turning. ‘What is it?’

‘Vox-officer Hanak received word from the scouts, sir. She says they have

pinpointed the exact location of Sergeant Gourin and her cultists. They're camped out in the Tarakan Trench, half a mile from the abandoned refinery.'

Fedorak looked over towards the door that led out into the city, masking his anger and presenting a confident face to the sergeant.

'The Tarakan Sewer? Why? Why has she stopped there?'

'According to Hanak, she's not alone. Five more units of heretics have been seen crossing the delta towards the trench. So that's almost half of the groups that mutinied at Orxus and they're all following Gourin's orders. The scouts told Hanak the cultists have only halted briefly. They're getting ready to keep on south towards the Talon. Apparently, it looks like they're attempting to scale it.'

Fedorak took a lho-stick from his pocket and lit it, taking a long, deep drag. The smoke hung heavy in the air, snaking around his blocky features. He walked over to the sergeant. 'She's left Orxus? Just days after she captured it? She fought hard for that town. And she's not even going to stay there? She's going to climb a mountain?'

'Apparently so, sir. The scouts have no idea why. There are easy passes on either side. If she wants to attack us here, they're making the journey far harder than it needs to be. There are three intact transitways she could use to reach Adurim without going anywhere near the mountain. She has left almost half her men in Orxus.'

Fedorak shook his head, taking another drag on the lho-stick. 'What is she playing at? However deranged Gourin is, there's no way she'd climb the Talon just to reach us here.'

He wandered over to the other side of the mess hall, fetched a hololith projector from a locker and placed it on one of the tables, shoving plates aside to make room for the bulky, battered-looking machine. He tapped the runeboard and cogs rattled into life, shining a blurry smudge of blues and greens up through the lho smoke.

Fedorak fiddled with a dial on the case, clicking between notches until the image locked into focus. The projection showed a sweltering mass of jungle punctuated by miles of brackish, fly-harried lakes and swamps. Fedorak had been stationed in the Abissama Delta for so long he felt as though he knew every wilting vine. At the centre of the delta was Adurim, the regional capital and home to the Hellbound, a once-great city that was

now little more than fortified ruins. At the mouth of the delta, several miles from the city, there was a slender, hook-shaped mountain, clad in the same steamy foliage as the rest of the landscape. Only the peak was free of the teeming crush, rising from the tangle like a claw.

Fedorak leant close, peering at the mountain. ‘Why would they climb the Talon? I can’t believe they went looking for fresh air. Did you see the look of them? I doubt they breathe anything anymore.’ He tapped his head, sensing that something was eluding him. ‘What was it the anura said about the Talon? The natives all seem superstitious about it for some reason.’

He looked at Malik. The sergeant was dressed in the standard Hellbound uniform of khaki tunic and leather crossbelts. One of the belts was laden with ammo pouches and the other had a billhook hung from its webbing. There was a lascarbine slung over his shoulder and a bayonet at his belt. He wore the same sallet-style combat helmet as the rank and file Guardsmen, which had been draped in netting threaded with leaves and twigs. Malik had thrown the netting back as he entered the mess hall so Fedorak could see the dreadful, yellow pallor of his skin. Every man in the regiment looked the same. Their meals were laced with so much quinine vitrium and praflocycline that their livers were like rotten fruit. The Guardsmen took a cocktail of other drugs to limit the side effects but the impact was irreversible. This was still preferable to the horrific diseases carried by the jungle’s parasites.

‘They called it one of the Nine Brothers,’ said Sergeant Malik. He stepped closer to the machine. ‘May I?’

Fedorak nodded.

Malik adjusted the focus of the hololith, zooming out to show the wider continent. Then he pointed out eight other peaks arranged roughly in a circle across the landmass. ‘I heard one of the anura call the Talon the “eldest brother”, and he referred to this one,’ Malik pointed to another slender mountain hundreds of miles away, ‘as the “youngest”.’

Fedorak frowned. ‘I heard something similar from the groundcar driver. And they worship these “brothers”, am I right?’

‘After a fashion, sir. I would say that they fear them rather than worship them. They speak of them as though they are actual brothers – sentient beings rather than mountains.’ Malik shrugged, stepping back from the projector. ‘To be fair, the anura believe that almost everything in the

jungle has some kind of in-dwelling spirit.'

'True. And it's exactly those kind of native beliefs that got all these cults started. Before they were openly traitorous, the units based in Orxus started reading those anura folktales. The whole town was obsessed with them, thanks to Gourin.'

'And you think that's why they're going up that mountain?'

'Throne knows, but there must be some reason. They're traitors, not morons. They wouldn't take such a hard route by accident.' He zoomed back in on the Talon. 'There could be some link with the anura folk tales. Perhaps they think the mountain gods will protect them? Who knows what kind of lunatic ideas they've had. And you're sure that all the other traitors remained in Orxus?'

'It looks that way, sir. At least, all the traitors under Sergeant Gourin's control. We've still got no long-range vox signals so there's no word from the other regiments. The cultists in the Tarakan Trench are definitely readying themselves to climb though. They sent small groups to the north of the mountain but they made so much noise and mess that the scouts guessed they were a decoy and scoured the delta until they found the main force in the Talon's foothills.'

'Does Gourin know we've tracked her? Were the scouts observed?'

Malik looked confused. 'They're natives, sir.'

'Fair point. Good.' He dusted down his tunic and wiped some of the sweat from his face. 'Then it sounds like we have time to prepare a welcoming party. Have the assault carriers fuelled and readied. Tell the comms officer to get back in touch with the anura and request the latest position of the heretics – those that have travelled furthest up the Talon, I mean.'

'Sir.' Sergeant Malik hesitated.

Fedorak glared at him. 'What is it, man?'

'Begging your pardon, sir. We only have enough gunships left for three squads. You ordered the others to support the relief force heading to Orxus.'

'Thank you, Sergeant Malik. It's always useful when you tell me what I've just done. Is there anything else you'd like to remind me about?'

Malik's face flushed with colour.

'I *know* we only have room for three squads, sergeant, but the rest of the

gunships could be in Orxus for days, or even weeks. Do you think Gourin and her heretics are going to sit on that mountain waiting for us? What do you think will happen if Gourin gets her wretched traitors over that mountain and down into Volny? Or any of the other towns? Or what if they head back to Orxus? How well will the relief force do then, when three hundred Chaos-worshipping lunatics come screaming out of the jungle?’

‘Of course, sir,’ snapped Malik. ‘I understand.’

‘Besides,’ muttered Fedorak, ‘they’re going up that mountain for a reason. Gourin must want something up there. I’m damned if I’m going to sit here and let her get it. The scouts have given us this opportunity and we’re going to take it. Three squads will be plenty if they have no idea we’re coming. Ready the men.’

Malik saluted and marched from the mess hall, pulling his netting back down before stepping out into the reeking heat.

Fedorak shut the projector down, stubbed his lho-stick out and followed. As he reached the fresco of the Emperor, he paused, looking up into His ineffable gaze. Heretical cults had dogged the Hellbound since the day they set foot on Sabassus, three centuries earlier. There was nothing particularly unusual in this recent insurrection. So why did Fedorak have the sense that there was something more than a cult at stake? He recalled the nine peaks he had seen on the hololith. There was something oddly deliberate about the way they circled the continent. He shook his head and laughed at himself again. ‘I’ve spent too much time around the anura.’ He looked up at the Emperor. ‘I’m almost starting to believe in gods again.’



CHAPTER SEVEN

The Cronium Gulf

The *Blood Oath* reclaimed its portion of reality, knifing through a warp portal silhouetted by the chromosphere of a livid sun. Colours trailed from its buttresses and spires as it shrugged off the madness of the immaterium.

No one on the command bridge was unaffected by the translation from empyrean to real space. Bloody sunlight spilled down through the oculus and splashed over First Officer Castulo. He leant over the runeboard of a cogitator, knuckles pressed into the ivory keys, visibly shaken by an ordeal he had endured countless times. He was tall and gaunt, a wraith of a man with hollow cheeks and a stooped, twisted posture that was testament to his countless war wounds. His tonsured head was covered in scars and his left arm had been replaced at some point by whirring augmetics. He wore the same crimson robes as any other blood thrall but he still radiated an aura of calm authority.

There were various other Chapter serfs gathered around him on the droplet-shaped command dais. The dais was aglow with the flickering light of tactarium screens and auspex arrays, and a hololith turned slowly in the air directly in front of First Officer Castulo. On the opposite side of the projection, hazed by its emerald glow, two figures in power armour towered over the first officer: Gaius Rhacelus and Lucius Antros. As the hololith turned, it revealed a squadron of attack ships, breaking

orbit from a nearby gas giant and rushing towards the *Blood Oath*.

Mephiston saw all of this in his mind's eye from nearly half a mile away, where he was seated, cross-legged, in the quiet seclusion of his inner sanctum. He was unarmoured, dressed in a simple red surplice. The small, circular chamber was lit by a single candle suspended on an antigrav platform humming quietly behind him. The candlelight flickered across the Ephemeris that lay on his lap and the metal stylus in his hand.

As he wrote, Mephiston let his thoughts ripple through blast doors and void shields, out past the sun's corona to the quickly approaching ships.

+Bronius,+ he thought, +give me a moment.+

+Of course, Chief Librarian,+ came a psychic reply. Mephiston was reading the mind of the *Blood Oath*'s Navigator, who was ensconced in his own sanctum near the stern of the ship.

+Xenos fighters are approaching the starboard prow,+ thought Mephiston.

+They will be within range soon,+ thought Bronius. +Two minutes and twenty seconds, shiptime.+ Bronius sounded surprised. +I saw no sign of them as we left the warp translation point.+

The Navigator's thoughts were clear and precise but Mephiston knew that, were they speaking face to face, Bronius' vocal cords would struggle to produce anything intelligible. The gene pool of the Navis Nobilite was potent in ways unique to their own ancient Houses, but that left many of its scions with severe mutations. It was a mark of Navigators' importance that such mutations were tolerated.

+Rhacelus,+ thought Mephiston, +what do the long-range augurs show?+

+Nothing,+ replied the Librarian. +Which makes no sense.+ He sounded annoyed. +How can there be fighters with no larger ships in range? Where did they launch from? Let me check with the master of auspex.+ There was a slight pause, then he continued. +Nothing, Chief Librarian. It's like they flew out of the sun.+

Mephiston's psychic projection approached the fighters and saw them with sickening clarity. Since the emergence of the Great Rift, Mephiston's seer-sight had surpassed anything he had ever heard of, even in former Chief Librarians.

'Aeldari,' he said out loud, breaking the silence of the sanctum.

+So this is why ships have been vanishing?+ said Antros, addressing him from the bridge. +Aeldari attack ships?+

+No,+ thought Mephiston. +You saw those reports in the Librarium. Whole fleets have vanished in this system. A few fighters could not be responsible. These are not interstellar warships. And if there were something bigger here, we would pick it up on the long-range augurs.+

+Chief Librarian,+ thought Navigator Bronius. +Augurs may not be enough. The void is behaving peculiarly in this system. Not here, but beyond those fighters, on the far side of the first planet, the gas giant. It is almost as though... I cannot place it. There is something unusual in high anchor over the planet. My skills are not suited to learning more. Do you see the anomaly I'm referring to?+

+I do,+ thought Mephiston. 'Helm, twelve degrees starboard,' he said, addressing First Officer Castulo through the vox. 'Ready the gunnery decks.'

'I have already given the order, Chief Librarian,' came the reply. Castulo was no psyker but he had a pleasing habit of anticipating Mephiston's every command. *'Weapons batteries are coming online. We are almost ready to unleash hell.'*

+Black threads and white, blue threads and green,+ said a voice, communicating with a wry, amused tone. +Enter the light, where Dromlach is Queen.+

+Bronius,+ thought Mephiston, +was that you?+

+No, Chief Librarian.+ Even from such a distance, Mephiston sensed that Bronius was in pain. +Something is in my head,+ he said, then his thoughts became a psychic growl. It echoed painfully beneath Mephiston's skull.

A babble of moist gibberish flooded the vox network and Mephiston realised it was Bronius. The Navigator was trying to speak. It was a terrible sound, full of incoherent pain and gasped, snorted breaths, like a stranded sea creature attempting to form words.

Mephiston tried to join his thoughts to the Navigator's but it was impossible. Something had come between them. He frowned. Without a Navigator he would be forced to guide the ship himself, which would be a frustrating drain on his power.

'Brother-Lieutenant Servatus,' said Mephiston into the vox. 'Take a squad to the Navigator Sanctum. Find Calummis Bronius.'

'Chief Librarian,' came the reply. *'On my way.'*

+I'm fine,+ Bronius managed to say, +but there is something—+
+Stupid and red,+ said the amused voice. +The dancers are led. Dromlach is queen and the angels are dead.+

'Who is that?' demanded Mephiston, outraged that an unknown consciousness had entered the *Blood Oath's* sanctums. The words had a smug, musical lilt that only added to the insult.

+Rhacelus and Antros,+ he thought, +did you hear that?+

+Yes, Chief Librarian,+ they replied in unison.

+And I feel like I just took a blow to the head,+ said Antros.

'*Weapons batteries online,*' said First Officer Castulo over the vox.

A distant tremor juddered through the ship as the weapons were armed, the vibrations even reaching Mephiston's small, gloomy cell.

Mephiston's warp-sight rushed towards the xenos ships. They were sleek, hawk-like things, wings swept back in graceful arcs, displaying all the cunning of the aeldari race. Mephiston's mind brushed against alien thoughts. However powerful he was becoming, he still found the xenos psyche an impenetrable mystery. He reached ineffectually for them, unable to grasp the peculiar concepts whirling through their heads.

Light blazed through the oculus on the command bridge, painting the crew gold as the attack ships detonated, ripped apart by the *Blood Oath's* guns.

Mephiston felt a truncated scream as xenos died, then the *Blood Oath* shuddered and klaxons echoed through its companionways.

'*More of them,*' said Castulo, speaking quietly despite his obvious annoyance. '*They've hit us amidships. Void shields are down. It was a trick. Those first ships were a decoy. How did we not see the others? Where did they come from?*'

'Scramble Tenos squadron,' replied Mephiston, referring to the ship's compliment of Stormtalon gunships.

The *Blood Oath* shuddered again as observation decks bloomed into flame, spitting wreckage and bodies into the void.

'*Return fire,*' came Castulo's voice over the vox, still calm.

'By the Angel,' muttered Mephiston. 'I'll not have this ship ruined again.'

As the sound of weapons batteries rocked through the bulkheads he plunged his mind into one of the xenos pilots. It was like trying to

commune with a reptile. The pilot had some kind of innate psychic ability and tried to resist, but it was useless. Mephiston seized the xenos' mind, then took control of the attack ship, looping it round in a graceful arc and hurling it at the others. The xenos had no inkling of what Mephiston was doing until he had launched a barrage of rockets at them.

Mephiston expected the squadron to become a foundering mess of debris but they simply vanished, flashing out of sight as though someone had turned a mirror and stolen a reflection.

More ships blinked into view above Mephiston, arriving in a haze of prismatic shapes. Through the pilot he had possessed, Mephiston changed his trajectory and launched more rockets. Again, the ships vanished, leaving a shimmer of colours.

'They're turning on themselves,' said Castulo over the vox. *'What's happening?'*

'That's the Chief Librarian,' replied Antros, sounding amused.

'More of them,' said Castulo. *'Fifteen degrees from the starboard bow. Greater numbers this time.'*

From his vantage point in the alien cockpit, Mephiston saw the new arrivals. Dozens of ships simply rippled into view from nowhere, diving towards the *Blood Oath* at speeds that surpassed anything in the Blood Angels fleet.

'They're using cloaking devices,' said Mephiston. *'Holofields. Redeploy power reserves from engines to void shields. Master of armaments, bring the torpedoes online. Castulo, bring us about, twenty degrees. Then cut the engines.'*

'Chief Librarian,' said Castulo. *'If we cut the engines we will be a sitting duck.'*

'Speed won't help. We cannot outrun them. Execute the order.'

'Chief Librarian.'

A deep, grinding hum reverberated through the bulkheads and Mephiston felt the strange, draining sensation of the ship's velocity ebbing away.

Through xenos eyes he watched Stormtalons swarm from the *Blood Oath's* embarkation decks, illuminated by their lascannons and missile launchers. Even from a distance, he could see the beauty of their markings. The xenos fighters were streamlined and nimble, but the Stormtalons were bullish, venerated relics, layered in gilded scrollwork and carrying the

glory of the Chapter. They made a magnificent sight as they roared towards the enemy, bathed in the light of the red sun.

The fighters met over the spires of the *Blood Oath*, filling the void with rocket trails and the brief incandescence of exploding hulls. White-hot plasma spewed from the *Blood Oath*'s gundecks as xenos fighters speared past the Stormtalons and strafed the hull, obliterating gun turrets before screaming away through the wreckage.

The aeldari ships were so numerous they must have launched from a battleship of considerable size, but there was still no sign of it. Some appeared to be mirages, vanishing when fired on, but others were all too real and the *Blood Oath* was soon covered in white blossoms of flame.

Mephiston could still feel the xenos pilot battling to reclaim his own mind, but he easily crushed him, willing his slender fingers across the flight controls and bringing the fighter round in another graceful loop.

The other aeldari had overcome their initial shock and several fighters were now hurtling back towards him from the *Blood Oath*. Mephiston banked and looped, buying time.

Back in his sanctum on the *Blood Oath* he still sat cross-legged, his eyes closed as he spoke to Castulo again over the vox. 'Keep them away from the ship I've hijacked. Give me some time to think. I do not want to spend my powers possessing the entire squadron.'

Rockets cut through the darkness, hitting several fighters. Some blinked out of existence; others disintegrated in a drum roll of explosions.

More xenos banked away from the *Blood Oath*, soaring up towards Mephiston, but he estimated he had just over a minute before they intercepted him. He used the time to plumb the depths of his victim's mind, surprising the flailing presence by facing it head on. He felt a surge of emotions, amusement and disdain chief amongst them. The xenos clearly considered Mephiston a lower form of life. Mephiston found the idea comical. He had spent long hours studying the fall of the aeldari race. They had destroyed their empires millennia ago, defeated by their own hubris and in-fighting.

Again, he felt a flash of the xenos' innate psychic ability. It had sensed his derision and grown annoyed. Seeing a weapon he could use, Mephiston stoked the flames, recalling an account of the aeldari fall, complete with graphic descriptions of the massacres they inflicted on themselves. Then,

when the pilot was at his most apoplectic, Mephiston turned his seer-sight in a different direction. Since he had taken possession of the pilot, he had sensed a precious secret – something the xenos was desperate to hide from him. Now, as the pilot raged, appalled by Mephiston's scorn, the Chief Librarian took his chance to dive deeper, seizing hold of the memory.

He felt the xenos panic as it realised it had been tricked, but it was too late – Mephiston had caught a glimpse of a great stage filled with lean, colourful dancers and framed by a vast diamond of light. The word 'Dromlach' filled his thoughts.

The pilot was already looking back out through the cockpit at the same region of space Bronius had mentioned earlier. Now that he had seen it through the eyes of the aeldari pilot, Mephiston realised that one whole swathe of the galaxy looked odd. Too bright. Too vivid.

He steered the xenos fighter straight into the oncoming ships, turning those of them that were real into a shower of fireballs and destroying the fighter he had stolen. As the aeldari pilot died, Mephiston opened his eyes back in the sanctum and calmly resumed his work on the Ephemeris, scouring more symbols into the metal.

'Half thrust forward,' he said into the vox. 'On a heading of two-six-three by five-two-one.'

'*Chief Librarian?*' Castulo could not hide his confusion. '*I see nothing at those coordinates. What are we headed for?*'

'Dromlach,' replied Mephiston, standing up and waving for a servitor to bring him his armour.



CHAPTER EIGHT

The Cronium Gulf

Mephiston strode onto the *Blood Oath's* command dais, causing a scramble of salutes and bows. He ignored the host of crimson-robed figures that swarmed around him and made straight for the oculus dominating one whole side of the command bridge. Auto-senses dimmed his vision, preventing him from being dazzled by the dying sun, and he could clearly see the vivid stars he had noticed earlier. Claxons were blaring through gilded emitters and there were still dogfights tumbling past outside, but Mephiston had lost interest in the battle.

‘They are using a holofield,’ he said, as Antros, Rhacelus and Castulo approached him. ‘And not just for their fighters.’

Mephiston waved some of the deck officers back to their viewscreens. ‘Magnify coordinates five-seven-three by two-nine-four. Maximum resolution.’

The thralls leapt to obey and the view through the oculus changed, revealing the anomaly Mephiston had noticed earlier.

Castulo stared through the armour-glass, frowning and shaking his head, but the two Blood Angels nodded.

‘Whatever that shield is hiding,’ said Rhacelus, ‘it’s not an attack ship. Look at the size of it.’

‘It looks as big as a planet,’ said Antros. ‘Could the xenos have hidden an

entire world?’

Mephiston shook his head. ‘If it were a planetary body it would be in orbit around the sun, not holding its position. The fact that it is not moving implies it is something more important.’

Rhacelus walked to Mephiston’s side and looked up at the shimmering outline. ‘Do you think that’s where the voice came from? The one that sounded so damned pleased with itself.’

Mephiston nodded, then gestured at the ships duelling outside. ‘The xenos are employing every trick they can to keep us away. The voice was just another ploy. Imagine the effect these attacks would have on minds less resilient than our own.’

‘No wonder the reports of this place are so confused and contradictory,’ said Antros. ‘Whatever that thing is, it has probably been here the whole time.’

Rhacelus frowned. ‘If there have been xenos fighters attacking ships out here for thousands of years, how has it gone unnoticed? There are major transport routes that pass right by this system.’

‘We did not find any reports of attacks,’ replied Antros. ‘Ships have simply been vanishing. Perhaps the xenos are doing more than hiding from us. I wonder what would happen if our astropaths attempted contact with Baal? Perhaps we would struggle to report this?’

‘You may be right,’ said Mephiston. ‘Or perhaps we are the first ship of this size to approach the anomaly. It could be that the arrival of an Imperial battleship has forced their hand and they have abandoned the subtle methods they used in the past. They are hiding something that is of great importance to them. They are under some delusion that it is a holy place, but from what I could glean it is a hyperspatial flaw. It is our route through the Great Rift.’

The *Blood Oath* juddered as more laser blasts ripped through its hull. The mortals on the command bridge staggered but the three Blood Angels remained statue-like, gazing up at the stars as smoke billowed around them.

Servitors clattered into view, smothering flames and clamping pipes, battling columns of hissing steam.

First Officer Castulo backed away from the oculus, barked orders to the deck officers, then returned to Mephiston. ‘There are more fighters

arriving all the time, Chief Librarian. We cannot maintain this position indefinitely. If we keep directing all our energy to the voidshields we'll struggle to make the next jump to warp-space.'

Mephiston nodded. 'My research pointed quite clearly to this location. Whatever lies beyond that holofield is our route to Sabassus.'

'Then shall I engage the primary engines?' asked Castulo. 'Shall I take the *Blood Oath* in?'

Mephiston looked around at the ember-shrouded bridge. There were servitors and blood thralls dashing through the smoke, still struggling with sparking cables and rattling generators. 'No. Not yet. I will not risk the *Blood Oath* until I know what is out there. Ready the *Penserose*. Have Squad Turiossa meet me on the embarkation deck.'

Rhacelus raised an eyebrow. 'A single gunship?'

'A single gunship containing a squad of Blood Angels Intercessors and the Chapter's finest Librarians.' Mephiston glanced at Rhacelus. 'I believe that should suffice.'



CHAPTER NINE

Tizca, Sortiarius, Planet of the Sorcerers

Blood and sorcery, it transpired, were not the most stable of bedrocks. Sortiarius had been hauled onto the physical plane with such violence that it was never destined to recover. Beyond the confines of his prison, Zadkiel could feel it seething and tearing like a ruptured boil, shaking Tizca's ancient foundations. The Red Monarch had sacrificed millions of prisoners to move the planet from one dimension to another. He had succeeded in achieving the seemingly impossible, but the planet's birth into the materium had been messy and inexact. Alongside the Planet of the Sorcerers, Magnus had dragged dozens of stillborn daemon worlds into the materium – lunatic, half-born realms doomed to forever straddle the real and the unreal. As the natural laws of physics tried uselessly to assert dominance, ghost planets tore through the exosphere, dragging their attendant moons through the clouds and ripping Sortiarius' geography apart in storms of rock and gas. Then, just as it seemed the Planet of the Sorcerers would collapse into a meteor shower, the invading worlds would vanish and Magnus' sorcery would martial the madness, lashing sundered continents back together in a blaze of astral flame.

The only constant was the City of Light, Tizca, the capital city of Magnus' former home, transposed to this ever-shifting hellscape. Even now, after so many centuries, there were echoes of its glorious heyday –

not on the surface, of course, where the elements waged constant battle for sanity, but down here, in the ancient temple where Zadkiel was imprisoned, there were haunting reminders of the XV Legion that might have been, the faded murals and truncated phantasms that had survived warp-exile and showed the Thousand Sons as Magnus originally conceived them: warrior-scholars destined to preserve the Imperium from the very threat they now posed. The images seemed tragically naïve to Zadkiel. How could the Thousand Sons ever have fulfilled so neutered a destiny? Perhaps that was why Magnus had allowed these relics to remain – a reminder of how far they had come, a reminder of past mistakes.

Zadkiel was strapped to the centre of an octagonal iron table, his hands and feet skewered with diamond-tipped staves. He had no true flesh, having long ago sacrificed such vanities on the altar of wisdom, but his spirit form was pinned by dozens of cabalistic wards. Chains of glyphs and numbers encased his serpent limbs, and the bird skull he wore in place of a head was crowned with so much empyric fire it muddied his thoughts and blinded his wych-sight. Zadkiel felt no alarm, or even frustration at the delay. Magnus' refusal to hear him out was one of the many possible strands of fate he had foreseen. Which is why he had been careful to prepare another route to Sabassus.

As Sortiarius howled and writhed beyond the walls of Tizca, Zadkiel waited patiently for the guest he knew would soon arrive. The table he had been strapped to was at the centre of a circular vault approached by eight narrow passageways. A Rubric Marine stood at the entrance to each of the passageways, clad in the blue and gold armour of the Pentarathum, one of the Thrallbands Magnus had formed with the express purpose of uncovering and guarding Tizca's subterranean temples and libraries. Their beautifully ornate power armour flickered in the light of Zadkiel's wards, giving the illusion of movement, but none of them had so much as raised a finger in the weeks since his incarceration.

Until now.

Simultaneously, the eight Rubricae dropped their bolters, fell to their knees and clattered face-first onto the flagstones.

'Finally,' muttered Zadkiel. Since his ascent to daemonhood, it had been impossible for him to feel physical pain, but to be blinkered like this was a torment far greater. He cast what little warp-sight he could down each of

the passageways.

‘Magister Lyræ,’ he said as a robed figure swept into the chamber.

It was a Thousand Sons sorcerer, clad in the same blue and gold armour as the Rubric Marines, but moving in a hunched, scurrying manner that quickly distinguished him from the automaton guards. He carried a crook staff, similar in shape to the one taken from Zadkiel, but this was a far more ornate artefact – a length of solid onyx circled by ivory hoops. Spectral glyphs shimmered around it like a swarm of fireflies, and as Magister Lyræ reached Zadkiel, he clutched it tightly, staring at Zadkiel through the lenses of his tall helmet.

‘Zadkiel,’ said the sorcerer, glancing around the temple. His gaze came to rest on one of the psychic projections looping endlessly in a niche. It showed Magnus leading the XV to war at the Emperor’s side, clad in the colours and heraldry of the Great Crusade. Magnus and the Emperor were side by side, united in purpose and skill, more like brothers than father and son.

‘Even then, he must have known we were destined for something greater,’ said Zadkiel, straining to lift his skull so he could face Magister Lyræ. ‘It is a glorious day in all our lives when we realise how far we have surpassed our master.’

Magister Lyræ circled the table, staring at him.

‘You promised me! You promised me that you would give me the time I needed to surpass Magister Saros. And now you are here, shackled and blind, while he further ingratiate himself with the Crimson King.’ He clanged his staff on the chamber’s basalt floor. ‘It should be me! Me! I should have joined the Rehati in his place. He has deceived Magnus, placing himself above me and claiming my successes as his own. You promised me! You said that if I sent you to Prospero you would reveal his lies! You told me you had the ear of the Red Monarch. You said he would welcome our counsel.’

‘The court of the Crimson King is fickle,’ replied Zadkiel, with no need to fake his bitterness. ‘While I have worked tirelessly all these long centuries, sowing the seeds that will see Magnus’ dream of the New Kingdom come true, he has forgotten me. He now takes his counsel from fools like Saros – a simpleton who could not conjure a stiff breeze.’

‘And now look at us,’ hissed Magister Lyræ. ‘You imprisoned and me left

guarding relics while Saros marches to war at Magnus' side, ready to claim even more victories as his own.' The runes drifting around Lyræ's staff burned brighter, throwing even Zadkiel's bonds into shadow. 'We were equals, but he has told the entire court that I am his subordinate.'

'A subordinate with a powerful daemon as his ally.'

Magister Lyræ laughed. It was a shrill, hiccupping sound. 'Powerful? I sent you to Prospero. I sacrificed my most promising acolyte to fuel the rite. And you come back chained and empty handed.'

'Not quite empty handed.'

Lyræ halted. 'What do you mean?'

'I have found out how Magister Saros ingratiated himself with Magnus.'

'By claiming my work is his!' Magister Lyræ waved his staff at the temple walls. 'By telling the Crimson King he was the one who uncovered the halls that were thought lost.'

'It is not word of these mortuary temples that caught Magnus' attention.'

'What then? What *has* caught his attention?'

'Saros has told Magnus of his greatest find. He has told him that he has learned the whereabouts of the Library of Azariah. He told Magnus that he has discovered the Canticles of Ahriman and means to use them to reverse the rubric.' Zadkiel managed to nod at the slumped shapes of the Rubricae lying at the doorways leading into the chamber. 'He means to reunite our battle-brothers with their souls. He is going to give Magnus the ultimate gift. He is going to give him his Legion back.'

Magister Lyræ was too shocked to speak. Then he leant closer, his words hushed. 'Has he really learned the location of the library?'

'He has. I heard him explain it in great detail.'

Magister Lyræ reeled away from the table with a stream of whispered curses. 'It is because of *me* that these halls have been uncovered. How dare he take the credit for such a find and not include me?' He hammered his staff on the floor, engulfing it in blue flame. 'The moment he returns I will rip his lying heart from his chest.'

'As you should, Magister Lyræ,' said Zadkiel. 'A lying liar lies and lied and wounded you beyond repair. Hence my request to see you. I failed to bring you before Magnus, but I had to at least let you know what Saros intends doing when he returns to Tizca. Magnus was doubtful of his claims but he has given him permission to open the library and retrieve the texts.'

He told Saros to bring him proof.'

'Then I shall have my chance!' cried Magister Lyræ. 'The moment he returns to Tizca, I will be waiting for him. I will have the Pentarathum at my side and I will show him what happens to those who betray Magister Lyræ.'

'It might not be that simple. Magnus sent Saros back here with express orders. If it comes to light that Saros has died by your hand, the Crimson King will hear of it.'

Magister Lyræ spat and slammed his staff on the floor again, creating another column of light. He looked back at Zadkiel. 'You said you heard Saros describe the location of the library. Is that right?'

Zadkiel struggled not to laugh. It was hilariously easy to confuse minds that had spent centuries devoted to the study of doctrine and ritual. 'What are you asking?' he said, trying to sound wary.

'You could tell me what you heard.'

'Heard is the wrong word. Saros did not so much describe the route as display it – he projected it before the throne.'

'And you saw it?'

'Yes.'

'Then you could recreate it.' Magister Lyræ was rigid with excitement. He almost resembled one of the soulless Rubricæe.

'I could not,' replied Zadkiel.

'What do you mean?' spat Magister Lyræ. 'Why not?' He strode over to the table and speared his staff into Zadkiel's robes, engulfing them in cerulean flames. 'You are my servant! My slave! You will tell me what I need to know or I will banish you back into the aether! How *dare* you refuse me?'

Zadkiel adopted a sombre tone. 'I have been imprisoned here on the order of the Crimson King. Whatever I have become I am still a servant of Magnus. He is still my primarch. Do you think I would disobey the direct orders of my lord?'

'I am your lord!' Magister Lyræ was shivering with fury. 'You will do exactly as I command. You will show me the image Saros projected.'

'I will not. I have willingly submitted to Magnus' judgement. Since the Pentarathum bound me here I have made no attempt to free myself. I will not deny the will of Magnus.'

‘I am not telling you to free yourself, you fool. What do you think I care if you rot down here? I simply need you to show me the image Saros showed Magnus on Prospero. Why would you refuse me such a simple command? Do you want Saros to claim the glory I have worked for?’ Magister Lyræ lowered his voice, sounding conspiratorial. ‘How did it feel, Zadkiel, when you saw all those idle lap dogs in Magnus’ throne room? How did it feel to know that while you have been slaving away all these centuries, they have been ingratiating themselves to such an extent that Magnus would not even hear of your plans?’

‘It felt like knives in my spine,’ replied Zadkiel, with absolute honesty. ‘I felt like tearing the whole lying mob down.’

‘And how do you think I feel when I hear of Saros taking what I learned to unearth a great secret, then sharing it with Magnus without even mentioning my name?’

‘I understand. That is why I told the Pentarathum I had to speak to you. But I can do nothing else without directly contravening Magnus’ will. These fetters will not allow me to project my thoughts or memories. I cannot help you, Magister Lyræ.’

Lyræ was staggering around the chamber, waving his staff as he circled the table.

‘You *will* help me!’ he howled, rushing towards the table and aiming his staff at the manacles at one of Zadkiel’s wrists.

There was a blinding flash and Zadkiel felt a wonderful rush of clarity as the psychic wards collapsed. He had lied, of course. He had been shackled by the combined will of the Rehati and there was no way he could have lifted the hex while imprisoned. But it was an easy enough matter for a sorcerer like Magister Lyræ, outside of the hex, unconstrained and full of fury.

‘Show me what you saw!’ howled Lyræ, pointing his staff at Zadkiel.

Zadkiel drifted up from the table, shaking his head. ‘What have you done? Magnus will hear of this.’

‘Just show me what you saw,’ demanded Magister Lyræ. ‘I can replace these wards with...’ He hesitated, peering at the fast disappearing psychic restraints. ‘I can replace your bonds with something similar.’ He rushed over to Zadkiel who had now assumed humanoid form, standing near the table. ‘But I will not bind you until you show me where the library is. You

said yourself, I do not have long before Saros returns. I must find the canticles before he does.'

'You will bind me back to the table if I summon the memory?'

Magister Lyræ waved a dismissive hand. 'Just hurry.'

Zadkiel pretended to think for a little longer, then finally nodded. 'I will need contact with skin,' he said. 'Remove a gauntlet. Your genes will be similar enough for me to create a simulacrum of Saros.'

Magister Lyræ had been unwittingly prepared for what happened next. Zadkiel had been planting seeds in his mind for decades, readying him for this moment of stupidity. Lyræ unfastened a gauntlet and hurled it to the floor.

Zadkiel locked his sinuous, spiralling grip around Lyræ's wrist.

'Quickly!' demanded Lyræ.

Zadkiel whispered the first words of an imprecation. Most of the words were indecipherable to a non-daemon, but Lyræ caught one of them and frowned. 'Why did you mention Sabassus?'

'It is a world at the edge of the system.'

'I know what it is, you idiot, but why did you mention it? What has Sabassus got to do with anything? You saw the route to the library when you were on Prospero.'

'I did not,' replied Zadkiel.

'What are you talking about? You just told me—'

'I just told you a *lie* Magister Lyræ. But you lack the wit to spot when you're being made a fool of.'

Lyræ tried to pull his hand free and howled in pain. Zadkiel's serpent digits were threaded under his skin and wound around his blood vessels, merging with his muscles. 'What are you doing?' howled Lyræ, raising his staff with his other hand.

'Leaving,' replied Zadkiel.

As the daemon spoke he flowed up Lyræ's wrist like smoke, spiralling, coiling and rushing into the sorcerer's flesh.

Magister Lyræ stiffened, arching his back in agony.

Then he crashed to the floor, his armour as empty as that of the Rubric Marines lying a few feet away.



CHAPTER TEN

The Cronium Gulf

‘By the Angel,’ muttered Antros as the gunship banked and looped. ‘They really *do* want to keep their secrets.’

The *Penseroso* had barely launched when dozens of xenos fighters blinked into view and screamed towards it. The heavens were ablaze with concentrated bursts of laser fire. The gunship’s pilot hunched over the controls, heaving the craft back and forth in a desperate attempt to match the acrobatics of the alien ships but the *Penseroso* was not built for such treatment. The hull howled as though about to tear open and the wings shimmered with heat haze.

‘Castulo,’ said Mephiston into the vox. ‘Draw them off. Scramble all remaining ships.’

‘There are none left to scramble, Chief Librarian.’

+Mephiston,+ said Rhacelus, speaking psychically so that Squad Turiossa would not hear. +Are you *sure* this is wise? We do not even know what this anomaly is.+

Mephiston nodded. The closer he got to the blazing stars, the more certain he was that this was the right thing to do. It *had* to be. Even as the battle raged around him, his thoughts were filled with the notes he had made on the Ephemeris. +This is my route to the daemon,+ he replied. +I am sure of it, Rhacelus.+

Rhacelus looked over at him, his expression stern. +What if the daemon *wants* you to find it? What if you're playing into its hands? Commander Dante has need of you in Imperium Nihilus. The whole galaxy has need of you. What if this is all just a way to keep you busy?+

Mephiston had almost forgotten how it felt to be angry, but something about Rhacelus' questions irked him. +You will *not* sway me from my path, Rhacelus.+

Rhacelus raised an eyebrow. +Do you think I haven't learned that by now?+

Mephiston redirected his thoughts, ignoring Rhacelus and sending his consciousness into the mind of the pilot in front of him. The mortal had no idea of what was happening but as Mephiston discretely loaned him transhuman intellect the man laughed, finding that he could steer the gunship with more speed and agility than he had ever managed before.

+Dromlach is the Each-Where.+

The Librarians jolted violently in their seats as the voice ripped through their heads. It sounded so amused it was hysterical and it hit them with the force of a scream. Antros' head snapped back so hard that blood rushed from his nose and splattered down the blue ceramite of his power armour. Rhacelus grabbed the hood of his armour with a curse as the mind interface cables flashed with sparks.

Even Mephiston found himself briefly overwhelmed. The words circled his head, the echoes growing louder rather than fading, wiping out all thoughts of the Epheris and forcing him to mutter a powerful oath just to drive the sound from his skull.

'Straight ahead!' he hissed to the pilot, speaking through gritted teeth, irritated by the temerity of a being that thought it could possess the Lord of Death.

'Chief Librarian,' replied the pilot, yanking the controls back into a central position and diving straight at the anomaly.

+Dromlach is the Death-Stare.+

This time the violence of the laughter was so great that Mephiston convulsed in his seat, straining against the safety harness and cracking his skull against his psychic hood. Blood filled his mouth as his jaws clamped together in an involuntary spasm.

The taste of blood filled Mephiston with a euphoric hunger. Every

heartbeat in the cabin thrummed in his ears and the pulse of the pilot, sat directly in front of him, flooded his mouth with saliva.

Mephiston snarled as he strained to regain control of himself. He swallowed hard, trying to remove the iron tang of the blood from his mouth, then turned to Rhacelus.

The veteran Librarian was rigid, his cobalt eyes flashing as he stared back at Mephiston. 'This is no simple trick,' he said, his words brittle and strained. 'What is--?'

+Turn back,+ warned the voice.

Agony flooded Mephiston's veins and he clamped his eyes shut.

+Turn back,+ demanded the voice, scraping his skull like a rusty blade.

Mephiston opened his eyes, expecting to see the cockpit of the *Penseroso*. Instead, he looked up at the white, translucent dome of the Chemic Spheres, his self-imposed prison back on Baal. The alien voice was replaced by a great swell of High Gothic. Gathered around him was a circle of Librarians, holding their force weapons with their heads bowed as they chanted a bleak, powerful requiem.

Mephiston felt a cold chill. They had gathered to sing for him as he died. His mind had tumbled back through several months to the day of his second death.

A tech-priest, Qvo-87, leant over him, his human face doing nothing to hide the brutality that had been wrought on the rest of him. The tech-priest's body had been almost completely replaced by a clicking, whirring nest of cables, pistons and hydraulic syringes. Mephiston felt like there was an insect looming over him.

'Chief Librarian!' cried Rhacelus.

He looked around at the assembled Librarians, but Rhacelus was not looking at him, focused on the ritual.

'Chief Librarian!' came the cry again and Mephiston's thoughts snapped back to the *Penseroso*.

Rhacelus was leaning across his seat, shaking him, his eyes bright with aetheric currents. 'Stay with us!'

Mephiston let out a breath he had not realised he was holding and looked around the gunship. He had been tricked. The dream had not been of his own making. Something had thrown him into the past.

Antros' face was smeared with blood and he was rocking against his

restraints, staring intently at the pilot, his eyes crimson. The Intercessors were still in their seats. They were all fully armoured and wearing helmets, so it was impossible to see their expressions, but Mephiston sensed by their posture that they had not been affected by the psychic attack.

He looked forwards to the pilot, just in time to see an aeldari fighter hurtle towards them, guns flashing.

The cockpit exploded inwards, filling the gunship with noise and light.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Talon, Abissama Delta, Sabassus

Birds scattered, screaming, as Valkyrie gunships roared across the tree canopy. Colonel Fedorak, sitting near the pilot of the lead aircraft, peered out through scratched armour-glass. Steam boiled up from the jungle and he looked out on a world of dank ghosts. The rest of the squadron was fanned out either side of him, flying in close formation, but he could barely see the other gunships through the mist.

He had ordered the pilot to approach the Talon by a circuitous route, heading miles to the north before looping over lowland forest to approach the mountain from the opposite direction to the heretics. If they landed in the foothills, there was no way the sound of their thrusters would reach the heretics. They could chute in unseen and approach the traitors from above. The anura knew safe routes down the mountainside and also some potential ambush points.

Fedorak glanced back into the cabin. It was crowded with sweating, jaundiced Guardsmen but hunched next to Sergeant Malik was a Sabassus native. The anura were unfailingly loyal to the Emperor and without their help the Hellbound would not have survived a decade on Sabassus. Yet Fedorak could not entirely quash the wave of revulsion he felt whenever he looked at one of them. Burn the heretic. Kill the mutant. Purge the unclean. Imperial doctrine was rarely ambiguous. And surely the creature

sitting next to Sergeant Malik was a mutant? Not according to Fedorak's superiors. Divisional HQ had designated the anura a sanctioned abhuman species, within acceptable tolerances for genetic deviation and useable as regimental support staff. They were nominally attached to the *Militarum Auxilla* but Fedorak doubted their interpretation of the Imperial Creed would sound familiar to any of his men.

The anura next to Malik was named Zur. Fedorak struggled to distinguish one native from another but he knew this was Zur because, like all the abhumans, his name was painted on the side of his combat helmet, alongside a *Militarum Auxilla* icon and the regimental badge of the Hellbound – a screaming skull above two crossed billhooks.

Helmets were the only piece of regimental uniform the anura wore. Their skin was the same olive green as the local flora and coated in a toxic secretion that oozed constantly from their glands. Fedorak had learned in his initial briefings that the sticky coating was essential to their survival, blocking out the fungal infections and toxins that seethed through every corner of the jungle. Wearing tunics or flak jackets would not only be painful for the anura, but it would render them susceptible to every disease on Sabassus.

Other than the moist skin, Fedorak had to accept that the anura *were* essentially humanoid. They moved with an unnerving quiet, were wraith-thin, spoke in sibilant whispers and could vanish into the jungle with disconcerting ease, but they *were* men. Beyond their skin, the only other truly jarring thing about their appearance was their eyes. They were larger than usual, almost perfectly round and entirely black. They looked like unblinking pupils and were made all the more striking by the expanse of smooth, pale green skin that surrounded them.

As they neared the foothills, Zur had to endure the painful process of donning a grav-chute, wincing in stoical silence as one of the Guardsmen strapped the promethium thrusters to his back and fastened the harness.

'Approaching target,' called the pilot over the noise of the gunship's engines.

Sergeant Malik nodded to his men and they shuffled into position. He hauled the door open and they began leaping into the whirling banks of steam. The briefing had been clear this was a stealth mission so they leapt in silence, biting back the regimental war cry they would usually have

bellowed as they reached a drop zone.

It was Fedorak's turn to jump. He stepped up to Malik, nodded as he gripped the railing and hurled himself out into the air, enjoying a moment's freefall before he triggered the grav-chute's suspensor field and began a stately descent through the clouds, watching the impenetrable jungle rise towards him. He remained silent but the war cry was in his head and he mouthed it through gritted teeth. 'Hellbound.'

He crashed through a thick roof of leaves and his grav-chute blocked the jungle stink with a swell of promethium fumes.

Seen from above, the delta was a tangle of ferns, palms and vines, but under the canopy the jungle was a dark, cavernous expanse, only punctuated by the odd dangling vine and an occasional sapling, reaching for one of the few columns of light that managed to break through the gloom.

Fedorak landed lightly on the loam-dark soil, whipped his pistol from his belt and triggered the lumen on its side. The light knifed through the darkness, flashing across tree trunks that soared like cathedral columns, reaching fifty feet up to distant, shivering vaults.

Guardsmen were landing all around him, their thrusters bathing the jungle in blue light and scattering clouds of insects. Sergeant Malik spent a few minutes gathering the various squads together until they were all in the same clearing as Fedorak, loading their lascarbines and tightening the nets around their faces. After the initial disruption of the landing, banks of insects rushed back into the clearing, swarming around the Guardsmen and landing on their guns and helmets until the men looked like shifting, iridescent nests.

Only Zur was unaffected by the insects and he surveyed the trees with the reverence of a supplicant at a shrine, muttering prayers to the forest and placing his long, webbed fingers on a tree trunk.

'Which way?' asked Sergeant Malik once the men were ready.

Zur looked back at him with his black, unknowable gaze. He stepped away from the tree and nodded down one of the avenues of trunks. 'South for a mile and a half, heading uphill until we reach the Daphnon Falls. Then we can follow the river down the mountain. The traitors are following it up the mountain, so we can wait for them at Oxia Bridge.'

Like all anura, Zur only wore a small loincloth of knotted leaves, but he

was armed. Despite the discomfort of holding plasteel, the anura had quickly seen the usefulness of las weapons. Zur was carrying a lascarbine identical to the ones carried by the other Guardsmen and he waved it to a path leading up the slope into the darkness. 'We need to move fast.' He spoke in a whisper but his anger was unmistakable. 'The forest is in pain. The heretics are polluting her.'

Malik did not acknowledge the suggestion of a sentient forest, but he nodded and Zur slipped away into the shadows, causing a flurry of lumen beams as the rest of the Guardsmen tried to follow him. Zur vanished for a few seconds, then stepped back into the lights, waving for them to follow.

The ascent was not an easy one. The terrain was muddy and bisected by channels of slow-flowing water that bubbled up from the ground in foetid belches, causing the Guardsmen to slip and mutter as they scrambled through the murky heat.

Fedorak walked with Sergeant Malik near the front of the group, flicking his pistol lumen across the trunks, tensed and ready for attack. Heretics were not the only threat on Sabassus and probably not even the most dangerous. The local predators ranged from sentient vines that could crush a windpipe in seconds to dragonflies the size of a forearm that could eat through flak armour and had a taste for human flesh.

After half an hour or so, Fedorak found his mind wandering. The Hellbound had never climbed this high up the Talon before. It was nothing to do with the superstitious tales of the anura. It was just that there had never been any tactical reason to tackle such difficult terrain. The summit was too exposed for strategic use so Fedorak, like his predecessors, had ignored it. It was only now, as he made his first ascent through the tree-clad slopes, that he began to sense something odd about the place. At first, he could not place it. He had trekked through miles of jungle in the Abissama Delta and this stretch looked, on the surface at least, just like all the other stifling stretches he had fought through. But there *was* something different. He looked at the creeper-clad trunks, struggling to work out what was unusual about them.

As he approached the brow of a hill, Zur paused to wait for him. The scout nodded awkwardly. 'Colonel.'

Fedorak grunted and nodded back, then clambered over the muddy rise and continued stomping up the slope, waving his pistol at the banks of

flies and beetles that were trying to make a meal of him.

‘I saw you looking at the trees,’ whispered Zur.

‘What?’ he snapped.

‘I saw you studying the trees, sir.’

‘There are traitors in here, man, of course I’m watching the bloody trees.’

Zur fell silent and Fedorak continued climbing, picking up his pace.

‘Did you see the pattern?’ asked Zur a moment later.

‘Pattern?’ He snapped the word, but even as he said it he felt a cold chill of recognition. Zur had pinpointed exactly what had been unnerving him.

‘The pattern of the trees,’ said Zur. ‘Have you noticed it?’

Fedorak paused, letting Malik and the others go on ahead while he looked around. There were some places, where the canopy had been broken and was letting light through, that the jungle looked more how he had expected it to before arriving on Sabassus: an explosion of leaves, vines and saplings knotted together in a furious battle for life. But most of the forest was calm and strangely ordered. ‘Ordered’ was an odd word to use, he realised, but it helped him recognise what had been bothering him – the trees were arranged in lines and intersections that seemed to follow a pre-ordained pattern. It looked almost like a labyrinth.

He gave Zur a wary look, annoyed that the scout had so accurately guessed his thoughts. Zur stared back at him.

‘What does it mean?’ asked Fedorak, grudgingly.

Zur pointed the lumen on his rifle through the darkness, picking out the shapes the tree trunks made.

‘It is the face of Tziamo,’ said Zur, his voice even quieter than usual.

Fedorak had heard the name before. ‘A forest spirit?’ he said, unable to avoid a sneering tone.

If Zur heard the derision in Fedorak’s voice, he paid no heed to it, nodding slowly. ‘Tziamo of the Nine. One of the nine brothers. The pattern you see is the lines of his face. It is well that you are only able to perceive part of it. To see the full extent would ruin your mind. It is not for mortal men to see the faces of the immortals.’

Zur moved closer to Fedorak. ‘If you travelled beyond the delta, to visit one of the other brothers, you would see patterns there too.’

Fedorak leant back from Zur, eyeing his glistening skin with distaste. ‘Are you talking of false gods?’ His voice was gruff with warning.

Zur backed away, shaking his head. ‘Of course not, colonel. The Emperor is the One True God. I am not talking about gods. The brothers are the heart of the forest. Its soul. They are not gods.’

Fedorak sneered. ‘Just immortal?’

Zur hesitated, looking awkward. ‘If you look closely at the trees, you will see—’

Howls rang out from further up the slope, followed by a burst of las-fire.

Fedorak cursed himself for getting distracted and rushed on through the trees, training his pistol on the shadows up ahead.

‘Sergeant Malik?’ he said, speaking into the vox-bead at his collar. ‘Is it the cultists?’

‘No, colonel,’ came the reply. *‘The jungle.’*

Fedorak was about to ask for clarification when he vaulted a fallen tree trunk and saw the situation for himself. Part of the forest floor had given way and three Guardsmen were struggling at the bottom of a ten-foot pit. It looked like the earth was tumbling onto them in a constant landslide, but Fedorak had seen this happen before and knew enough to lower his pistol. The men howled wildly and called for help, but Fedorak, like everyone else, shook his head and backed away.

What looked like tumbling soil was thousands of beetles called scuttle bugs. As the Guardsmen tried to claw their way up from the pit, their flak armour was already disintegrating. The scuttle bugs were ferocious – carnivores that carved out pits, filled the hole with their own carapaces and then waited patiently for a meal to drop in. They were only interested in heavy, meat-rich food and sometimes it took months before something large enough arrived to trigger their trap. Then they ate in a frenzy.

Fedorak knew the men by name. They were brave Guardsmen who had survived dozens of campaigns across the delta and they did not deserve such a grotesque death. There was nothing he could do to save them. Anyone stepping close to the pit might become the next course in the bugs’ meal. So Fedorak muttered a prayer and fired his laspistol three times, dropping the screaming men with precise head shots. They fell back in silence, swallowed by the boiling mass and vanishing from view.

Fedorak scowled at Zur. ‘Safe paths?’

Zur’s face was as impassive as ever. ‘Grubs are everywhere, colonel.’

‘Fix bayonets,’ said Sergeant Malik, raising his voice so that all the men

on the path could hear him. ‘Check the ground as you go.’ The Guardsmen were all looking at the still-shifting pit with grim expressions, and some of them whispered prayers as they obeyed the order.

‘We’ll have to move slower,’ said Malik, looking back at Fedorak.

The scout shook his head. ‘We have to reach Oxia Bridge before the heretics or we’ll be in the open when they arrive. There will be no ambush.’

‘Then what do you suggest?’ Fedorak waved his pistol at the pit. ‘Keep blundering into traps?’

Zur looked around at the jungle. He pointed his gun at one of the rivulets rushing down the slope. ‘The grubs avoid wet ground. They have to stay dry while waiting to feed. If we follow the route of the water we should be safe.’

Fedorak raised an eyebrow. ‘*Should* be?’

Zur was about to reply when Fedorak held up a hand to silence him. ‘Should is as good as it gets out here, I know that.’ He looked over at Sergeant Malik and nodded. Malik waved the men on and they began stumbling through the muddy water.

They managed to keep up a reasonable pace and half an hour later they rounded a shoulder of the mountain where the terrain levelled off. There was still no break in the canopy and the gloom deepened the higher they got. Fedorak was increasingly aware of the pattern the trees made but after speaking to Zur about it, he was determined to ignore it.

Finally, they began the descent on the far side of the Talon and reached a more impressive torrent of water. The Guzerat was one of the delta’s largest tributaries and even up here, far above the valley floor, the water was deep and fast moving. It was crowded with branches and other forest detritus and in a few places where the forest roof was broken, the water flashed in the dappled light, scattering emerald and silver across the tree trunks.

Fedorak paused at the water’s edge, looking around. ‘What’s that?’ he muttered.

Sergeant Malik was a few feet away. He shook his head, about to ask a question, then paused and looked up at the canopy. ‘Engines?’

Fedorak nodded. The unmistakable roar of thrusters was coming from somewhere overhead. ‘That’s not any of our gunships,’ he said, glancing at

Malik. Malik shook his head.

They both listened as the promethium howl grew louder, passing right overhead before backing away across the mountain and fading.

‘Who else could be flying gunships over the Talon?’ said Fedorak, frowning at Malik.

Malik shook his head again. ‘Could the cultists have stolen some?’

‘No,’ replied Fedorak. ‘There were no aircraft like that in Orxus. Besides, those engines sounded bigger than anything we have.’

Zur approached. ‘Climbing up the stream has slowed us a little. We need to make good speed if we’re going to reach the bridge in time to set up the ambush.’

‘You heard him,’ snarled Sergeant Malik, glaring at the Guardsmen. ‘Get a move on.’

The Guardsmen ran as fast as they could down the riverbank, leaping over rocks and fallen branches and sliding through the mud.

‘It’s an *actual* bridge?’ said Fedorak when he finally saw their destination looming towards them out of the mist. He had assumed the name Oxia Bridge described a natural rock formation, but the shape up ahead looked to be manmade. It had been ruined by great age or war, or more probably both, but the original shape was still clear and as Fedorak’s mind pieced it together, his head started to hurt.

‘Who made this?’ he said, frowning as though he were looking into a bright light. There was something otherworldly about the bridge. The superstructure was like a mass of sinuous tendons. Most of the stone was a crumbling grey but in places the original paintwork was still visible and it looked like the bridge had originally been painted to resemble a shimmering fish, metallic and mirrored, stretching over the Guzerat in a contorted arch. A natural fish could never have performed such an act of contortion though. The whole span seemed to turn in on itself in a way that defied physics.

Fedorak stepped away from the riverbank, trying to understand the design, but seeing it from another angle only made it worse. He could now see that several other parts of the bridge folded and looped back on themselves in similar impossible ways. The stone masons must have either been geniuses or lunatics, he decided, to have realised such a baffling design. The mirrored panels only added to the confusion, making planes

and vertices disappear into each other.

‘Is this the work of your people?’ he asked, looking around for Zur.

The scout shook his head and for the first time Fedorak saw a glimmer of emotion in his face. He looked shocked by the suggestion. ‘The bridge was here before any of us,’ he replied. ‘It is a feature of Tziamo’s face.’ He waved his gun at the trees arching over them. ‘Can you not see how it is a part of the whole?’

Fedorak was about to say something flippant when he realised the scout was right. The pattern he had sensed in the layout of the trees was linked to the fishlike bridge. It was an extension of the same baffling labyrinth. For some reason this revelation filled him with an overwhelming sense of dread. The patterns had always been here, snaking and looping across the mountain and fanning out from this grotesque bridge, for thousands, perhaps millions of years. He stumbled to a halt, seeing patterns everywhere, even in the whorls of the tree trunks and the eddies of the river.

‘Colonel?’ Sergeant Malik was staring at him, looking puzzled.

Fedorak managed to calm himself. His pulse hammered but he stood still and replied in neutral tones. ‘Keep moving.’ He waved in the vague direction of the dreadful bridge without actually looking at it. ‘Take up positions. Make sure you can’t be seen from downriver.’

Giving orders calmed him. ‘Be as silent as the natives,’ he said, glaring at Malik and the other Guardsmen. ‘Whatever dark powers Sergeant Gourin is now worshipping, she will not have forgotten her training. Even if she has no idea we’re here, she’ll be keeping her eyes peeled. The heretics know how dangerous this place is. Keep your heads down.’

Malik waved the men into specific locations on the ruined bridge. It was crumbled and slumped in some places, but sturdy enough. The river carved a path through the jungle and the bridge was bathed in sunlight as it reached across the water. Lashed with vines and creepers, in the channel of light it looked like a diseased corpse – the bloodless body of a leviathan, draped over the river and left to rot in the heat.

Fedorak forced himself, with difficulty, to approach the structure and as he reached it he noticed that the Guardsmen were taking their positions with doubtful looks on their faces. They weren’t worried the bridge might collapse, realised Fedorak; they felt the same dread he was struggling to

rid himself of, glancing around anxiously at the trees as though expecting the branches to lash out at them.

Fedorak swallowed down his doubts and climbed up onto the stonework, looking around for a good vantage point. There was a hollow halfway across its span that was yet to be taken, so he crawled across the bridge and dropped down into the bowl-like depression. There was a raised section in front of him sculpted to resemble a fin, or perhaps a spiny wing, but a crack in the stone allowed him to peer down the mountainside. He had a clear view of the Guzerat rushing past and the paths either side of it that would bring the heretics towards them.

He looked back across the bridge and felt a rush of satisfaction as he saw that the Hellbound had almost vanished from view. The last few were bobbing out of sight as they settled into position. The planet was a nest of cults and forbidden worship and the Hellbound had learned long ago to make themselves invisible in the jungle.

‘Where are you, Malik?’ he whispered into the vox-bead.

‘A few feet to your left, sir. If I reached out, I could touch you.’

‘Do you have a clear view?’

‘I see the south side of the river clearly and some of the north side.’

Fedorak switched frequency to address everyone. ‘Nobody breathe until I give the order. We’re outnumbered, and once our cover is blown the bridge will not be safe. If Gourin still has the rocket launchers she took from the barracks, she could easily tear this thing down. We’ll have to take the bulk of them out with our first attack. If we inflict heavy losses, they won’t have anything left to throw at us. Now keep your heads down.’

‘Sir,’ muttered dozens of voices. None of them were used to being addressed directly by their colonel and he was pleased to note they sounded almost as nervous of him as they did the bridge.

He settled into a better position and made sure his gun hand was free. He peered down at the shadowy riverbanks. He saw movement everywhere, but he had been in the jungle long enough to recognise leaves jostled by moving animals and the flash of water catching patches of light.

‘Anything from where you are, sergeant?’ he whispered into the vox.

‘Nothing, colonel.’

Another ten minutes passed and Fedorak was about to change position when he felt someone moving behind him. He whirled around, pistol

raised, to find Zur staring at him. He would have liked to yell in the scout's face, but he contented himself with a glare.

Zur nodded to the break in the masonry Fedorak had been looking through and touched his ear, indicating that Fedorak should listen for something.

Fedorak looked back through the broken fin, down at the rushing river. The water was a thirty-foot drop from where he was sitting but even from here the noise was impressive as the water crashed through the undergrowth, hurtling down the mountainside. He strained to hear anything else, staring into the tumbling currents.

He was about to give up when he caught a glimpse of movement. He thought at first that he had seen something in the air, but then realised he was looking into one of the bridge's mirrored panels. The movement he could see was Zur, slipping quietly off the bridge and heading back towards the trees. As the scout dropped from the stonework onto the mud, he nodded at someone Fedorak could not see. Someone in the jungle.

Damn you, thought Fedorak as Zur sprinted back into the forest.

'It's a trap!' he cried, opening the vox network. He stood, looking back across the bridge to see more shadowy figures rushing back into the trees. 'The bridge is a trap! Grav-chutes! Jump!'

As Fedorak clambered up over the stone wing he saw Sergeant Malik following him, triggering his backpack.

The jungle erupted with light and noise. Gunfire roared from both riverbanks, burning through the darkness and tearing the stonework into shrapnel.



CHAPTER TWELVE

The Cronium Gulf

Mephiston felt a sensation of pleasing calm. For centuries he had harnessed powers that went far beyond standard Librarius disciplines but since his second rebirth he could wield them with a subtlety he had never dreamt of.

As the laser blast ripped through the gunship's hull, Mephiston's mind leapt into action. His thoughts moved at such incredible speeds the world around him slowed to a glacial crawl. He stepped outside of time and allowed his thoughts to wander lazily over the rest of the gunship. He was too late to save the pilot. The man's skull had already crumpled. There was also damage to the landing gear and two missile launchers. A fuel line had been severed but the fusion reactor was intact, as was most of the hull's ceramite plating. The shot that killed the pilot had entered through the front oculus. It would pass through Antros' head next. A few milliseconds after that, the *Penserose* would lose its artificial atmosphere and, with a brief, dramatic fireball, spit its passengers into the void.

Mephiston unfastened his harness and rose from his seat, moving through a blurred, motionless collage. The air trembled with a groaning howl. It was a fraction of a sound, truncated and left howling in outrage at being held in stasis. Other than Mephiston, the only movement in the cabin came from a blizzard of shadows that tumbled around him as he approached the

dead pilot.

Fascinated, Mephiston reached out, trying to grasp one of them. His gauntlet passed through it, but he had seen this before and he knew it was no trick of the light. He was seeing echoes of other dimensions. By stepping outside of natural, temporal constraints, he had become interspatial. Was this a glimpse of the warp, he wondered, seen from another angle? Or was it *another* place, so foreign as to be beyond such concepts? He stared into pools of darkness, trying to fix the shapes, but it was impossible – every time he thought he had seen something familiar, a face or a piece of architecture, it dissolved into something baffling.

He shook his head, trying to steady his thoughts. Side-stepping time was dangerously alluring. There had been times in the past when he had lost whole months examining one incomprehensible detail. Blood Angels were long-lived, even by the standards of the Adeptus Astartes, but Mephiston knew that every moment of his span was a blessed resource, not to be frittered.

He fixed his gaze on the pilot's shattered skull. The man's head was a cloud of blood and grey matter, glistening and bulbous, like a grotesque blossom. While Mephiston had been examining the shadows the laser blast had moved on, progressing another inch towards Antros' rigid face.

Mephiston reached out and clasped his hand around the lethal beam, extinguishing it with a muttered phrase. Then he turned his attention to the damaged ship. It was an easy enough matter knitting together the molecules of the oculus. Mephiston's masterwork, *The Gluttoned Scythe*, was strapped to his armour in a gilded reliquary, a repository of every blood rite and discipline he had ever mastered, but he had no need to refer to the text, mouthing the incantations from memory as his fingers weaved contrails, warping and igniting the elements until the screen was intact. When this was complete, he strolled around the ship, fixing the other damage with effortless psychokinesis.

As he repaired the *Penserose* an unexpected thought occurred to Mephiston. He looked back at the pilot's exploded head and wondered if there was *anything* he was incapable of. From the day he became Mephiston, beneath the ruins of Hades Hive, his abilities had grown, outstripping anyone else in the Librarius, perhaps any other psyker in the galaxy. But since his second rebirth, under the knives of the Adeptus

Mechanicus, the growth had accelerated. While Qvo-87 dismantled his body, Mephiston's mind had been elsewhere, performing another act of remaking. He had bound a darkness into his soul, absorbing the savage heart of the Blood Angels curse. The warp had shown him a black angel, a terrifying manifestation of the Chapter's rage, and he had harnessed it, drawing its danger and power into his newly-tempered soul. Now he felt as though there were no law of nature he could not overturn. The idea was troubling but dizzying. Whole lifetimes had been spent codifying the difference between sanctioned psychic powers and heretical sorcery. But surely the distinction lay in the source of the power, not its application.

He walked to the dead pilot and let his hand hover over the man's obliterated skull. The pilot's head was thrown back at an unnatural angle and Mephiston could see his dull, staring eyes.

He gazed into them, then through them, into the space that had been his mind.

Mephiston felt a mix of excitement and concern. He could see an echo of the man's final, panicked thought. He could see the moment at which he realised a xenos fighter had looped round and was about to fire on him.

Mephiston cradled the echo and asked himself a dreadful question: could he bring the man back?

Necromancy. The word resonated in his head. Of all the deeds that might be considered ambiguous, necromancy was not one. It was exactly the kind of heretical warcraft that led many to denounce the Librarius.

He merged his own mind with the echo of the dead one and realised that he *might* be able to do it. He might be able to restore the spark to its owner. He might be able to create life.

Mephiston shook his head, exhilarated by the idea. What, really were the dangers of such an act?

'The galaxy holds many dangers,' said Rhacelus, quoting from the Scrolls of Sanguinius. 'And chief amongst them is power.'

Mephiston looked back at his friend in surprise. Rhacelus was still motionless but somehow he had followed him into the interstitial realm between seconds.

No, realised Mephiston. He had not. The words were a memory. He was recalling a warning Rhacelus gave him years ago. The quote had rung so clearly in his head it sounded like Rhacelus was addressing him.

He nodded and lowered his hand, letting the echo die. Suddenly, Mephiston saw that while making him safer, Qvo-87 had also made him far more dangerous. When everything is possible, nothing is safe. The potential for harm he carried was incalculable. If the Chief Librarian of the Blood Angels were ever labelled a necromancer, what would that mean for the Chapter and its successors? By reviving one man he could doom an entire Legion.

Mephiston looked at the pilot's ruined face and realised just how deep a chasm he was traversing.

He returned his thoughts to more immediate concerns. He had extinguished the laser blast and repaired the gunship, but they were still surrounded by swarms of xenos fighters. The next attack would only be seconds away.

He cast his mind through the ship's hull and saw that seven attack craft were currently facing the *Penserose*, their guns about to fire. As he studied them, he sensed the limits of his power. Even now, he was not omnipotent. The galaxy was leaning its weight against him, willing him to resume his proper place in its continuum. The grinding sound grew louder, as though the elements themselves were about to snap. He would not be able to keep himself apart like this for much longer.

He dropped his mind into the skull of the nearest xenos pilot and this time, rather than examining the being's psyche, he examined its physicality, studying the rangy muscles and ligaments beneath its close-fitting armour. He thought on a molecular level, feeling the heady rush of the xenos' pulse.

The blood rush caused Mephiston to gasp. Gene-bred hunger flared in his throat and he had to recite mantras to calm himself.

Working at this distance, while simultaneously holding himself apart from the flow of time, his psychokinesis would not be powerful enough to attack the xenos fighters or immolate their pilots. He would need to do something on a smaller scale, something easier to achieve.

The xenos' pulse continued to stoke his bloodlust, giving Mephiston an idea. He allowed his mind to sink into the vitae, enveloped by the corpuscles, then worked in the same way he had done when fixing the Stormtalon's oculus. He knitted cells together, binding and melding them to his will. The molecules began to clump together, forming a clot. Once

he was sure it was large enough, Mephiston thought himself across the void and into another pilot's blood. He repeated the process, creating another blood clot, then jumped away again, and again, until he had performed the same act in the bloodstream of every pilot near to the *Penseroso*. He ensured every clot was positioned so as to be fatal the instant the xenos hearts began beating again.

Mephiston re-entered his flesh, glad to be back in his own hulking, genhanced frame, free of the baffling thoughts that circled the heads of the xenos.

He looked around the *Penseroso* and saw that everything was as he had left it. Antros, Rhacelus and the other Blood Angels were still tormented statues, silently howling as he walked past them and returned to his seat. He fastened his harness and muttered a quiet oath.

The galaxy shuddered back into life. There was an explosion of noise as he re-entered time's violent slipstream. Antros howled as the pilot's brains splattered into his face.

The Stormtalon banked wildly as the controls nodded against the console. The ship tumbled and rolled until Mephiston reached out with his thoughts, past the dead pilot, and steadied the controls.

'What happened?' cried Rhacelus, staring at the blood-caked cabin. 'Mephiston?'

'I was too late to save the pilot,' he replied.

'But fast enough to save the rest of us,' said Rhacelus, respect flashing in his eyes as he saw the xenos fighters drifting away, their pilots slumped dead at the controls.

Mephiston nodded. 'I'm taking us into the anomaly.' He raised his voice so the rest of the Blood Angels could hear. 'Don your helmets and check your enviro-controls.'

He steered the ship towards a point he had spotted when he was in the xenos' mind and just as more xenos ships appeared overhead, the *Penseroso* was engulfed by light. It was as though they had broken the surface of a frozen lake. Brittle shards erupted all around them, casting reflections and shadows into the cabin, revealing glimpses of the Blood Angels as they readied their battleplate and slammed magazines into their bolt rifles.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Cronium Gulf

The light blazed brighter, then the void-dark vanished, replaced by a baffling landscape. The *Penserose* glided over what looked like the remains of an earthquake. The Blood Angels looked down on a collision of toppled towers and walkways. Vast archways and viaducts lay heaped on top of each other as though thrown from a great height and they seemed to be lying on a vast shard of rock, like a continent torn from its home and left drifting in the stars. The buildings must once have been elegant and grand, with looping, organic curves and sinuous lines. But a great catastrophe appeared to have ripped through them and they now looked deranged, many of them upended or fractured into so many pieces it was impossible to discern their original shape. Only one structure remained intact. At the heart of the ruined city there was a vast diamond of light, held aloft by undulating, tendril-like towers made of the same bone-coloured material as the ruins.

Antros looked out at the view and laughed. ‘Look at the size of that thing! By Sanguinius. It’s bigger than the Arx Anglicum. And what’s that through its centre?’

The diamond of light was sparking and flashing, but that was not as shocking as the scene through its middle. Rather than being a window on the ruins beyond it, the diamond framed a kaleidoscope – rainbow-hued

prismatic shapes, turning around each other in circles, forming a shifting vortex. It was mesmerising and Mephiston found it surprisingly hard to tear his gaze away.

Looking for a place to land, he noticed that not all of the wreckage was original to the city. As well as shattered buildings, the landscape was littered with wrecked ships, everything from small xenos transports to vast Imperial Navy frigates. He counted dozens of vessels, all ruined and in various states of decay.

Then Mephiston spotted a building that looked familiar. At first he thought he had remembered it, but realised that was impossible. The memory must have come from the xenos pilot he had possessed. Near the building he saw what looked like a transitway – a broad looping concourse that wound its way through the rubble and was not entirely buried under the wreckage. He steered the gunship that way, triggering the reverse thrusters and bringing the *Penseroso* in to land.

‘The place has an artificial atmosphere,’ said Rhacelus, peering at the onboard cogitators. ‘Reasonable amounts of oxygen. No obvious pollutants. Keep checking your enviro-controls though. This place does not look stable. The situation could change.’

There was a roar of thrusters and a dust tornado erupted around the gunship as it touched down on the bleached transitway. As soon as the *Penseroso* had settled, Mephiston unfastened his harness, triggered the landing hatch and strode out into the storm.

The other Blood Angels rushed after him with Rhacelus barking out orders, scattering the Intercessors across the ruins so they could view the transitway from several vantage points.

Before any of them could report back, Mephiston had already strode off down the transitway, his force-sword drawn as he stared at something he had spotted through a gap in one of the ruined walls. He raced up a flight of crumbling steps onto a platform projecting thirty feet above the transitway.

Rhacelus cried out more commands, ordering the Intercessors to keep pace with their Chief Librarian and be ready to give covering fire, while he and Antros hurried up the steps after Mephiston.

‘I saw this,’ said Mephiston as they caught up with him. He pointed his sword down at what looked like the remains of an amphitheatre, with a

semicircle of tiered seats fanning out from a ruined stage. ‘I saw it in the xenos pilot’s memory.’

He vaulted over a section of wall and landed in the uppermost circle of seats. There were still a few arched joists reaching up overhead, but the roof was long gone and they all looked up at the sky. Vast though they were, the ruins could not have had a true atmosphere, but the stars had vanished, replaced by a pale, smoke-like haze.

Mephiston looked around at the stone seats, wondering why the xenos had singled out this particular location. The ruins stretched for miles in every direction – he had seen that quite clearly when they were flying over in the gunship – so why had this amphitheatre stood out?

‘Chief Librarian,’ said Rhacelus. ‘The xenos will have seen us enter. They will follow.’

Mephiston stepped back onto the platform and glanced towards the gunship. Rhacelus had left two Intercessors watching over it but the rest of Squad Turiossa was stalking through the ruins, scouring the buildings down the scopes of their bolt rifles.

Rhacelus was right. They could not just leave the gunship out in the open, and none of the Intercessors would be able to fly it. Mephiston looked up at the diamond light that dominated the ruins. The thing was clearly a portal of some kind. It must be their route across the Great Rift, but he could not simply hurl the *Blood Oath* through with no knowledge of what it was or how it worked.

‘I need more time,’ he said, looking back at the gunship.

He took the small, gilt-edged book from his munitions belt. ‘*The Gluttoned Scythe*, chapter twelve, verse seven. Shades of Styges.’

The other two took out their own copies and flicked through the pages, but Rhacelus hesitated, nodding at the nearest of the Intercessors.

Mephiston shrugged. ‘Do not be ashamed of what we are. Commander Dante trusts us, and he fully understands the nature of the Librarian.’

Rhacelus always looked appalled, but his habitual look of outrage deepened. ‘I am not *ashamed*, Chief Librarian.’ He tapped the book. ‘But some of our disciplines will seem odd to the uninitiated.’

Mephiston shrugged. ‘I am sure of my purpose.’ He looked at both of them in turn. ‘Sure of *our* purpose. We have nothing to hide. Everything we do is our birthright. It is the legacy of Sanguinius. Discard your

doubts.’

Antros nodded eagerly, ready to begin the ritual, a knife already in his hand, but Rhacelus still hesitated. ‘Doubts lead to questions,’ he said, ‘and questions lead to wisdom.’ He was quoting from the Scrolls of Sanguinius again. ‘Only the simple and the mad are without doubt.’

Mephiston placed a hand on Rhacelus’ shoulder. ‘Enemy fighters are minutes away from destroying our gunship. We will debate this another time.’

Rhacelus’ expression remained fierce, but he nodded and took out his knife. They each removed their left gauntlet and dragged their combat knives across their palms. Before the welts had time to heal, they quickly held out their hands to each other, forming a circle. They each closed their eyes as they drank the blood of their battle-brother, and when they reopened them again, a second later, their pupils and irises had vanished, replaced by featureless red orbs.

As the nearest Intercessors looked on in shock, the three Librarians replaced their gauntlets, sheathed the knives and read from *The Gluttoned Scythe*, holding the book in one hand while tracing sigils in the air with the other.

Back down on the transitway the two Blood Angels guarding the *Penseroso* backed away in surprise. Shadows rushed towards the gunship, thrown by nothing, spilling from every doorway and ruined column. They washed over the gunship’s wings and enveloped its hull. The darkness grew more intense, then vanished, leaving no trace of the gunship.

‘Lord Mephiston!’ called one of the Blood Angels, looking up the steps to where the Librarians were standing.

‘She is only hidden, Brother Caricon,’ replied Rhacelus, clasping *The Gluttoned Scythe* back on his belt. ‘She will be waiting for us when we return.’ He waved his force sword towards the other Blood Angels surveying the ruins. ‘Take cover.’

Brother Caricon hesitated, reaching out to the space where the gunship had been. His gauntlet clanged against the invisible hull and he nodded. He turned and jogged into the ruins after the others.

‘We have little time,’ said Rhacelus. ‘The xenos will track our heat signals.’

Mephiston nodded, looking back the way they had come. ‘I am surprised

they have not already appeared.’

Antros shrugged. ‘Perhaps they have focused their attentions on the *Blood Oath*.’

‘Then we must be quick. I will not send the *Blood Oath* through that portal without knowing what it is.’

He jogged down the stone tiers, staring into the shadows and drawing Vitarus as he ran. The pale sky gave everything a harsh, bright glare and the shadows were so crisp they seemed solid – angular slabs of pitch, hunkering behind fallen stones.

The brittle crack of bolter fire rang out, echoing around the stalls. Mephiston dropped into a crouch, drawing his plasma pistol and looking along the rows of seats. His carefully attuned ear had immediately recognised the weapon. It was not a bolt rifle, as carried by the Intercessors, but a heavy bolter.

No one in his party was carrying a heavy bolter.

Remaining crouched, he looked back up the way he had come. Rhacelus and Antros had also dropped out of view.

+Are either of you hit?’+

+No,+ they both replied.

+Did you see which direction it came from?+

+The stage,+ replied Antros.

‘Brother-Lieutenant Turiossa,’ said Rhacelus, opening the vox network. ‘Report.’

‘No casualties, Lord Rhacelus. I am fifty feet south of you, under cover, with half of the squad. The rest of the squad is twenty feet to the south-east of you, behind the large cylinder that looks like an old fuel bowser.’

Mephiston was only half following the exchange, distracted by a peculiar sensation. He thought he could feel the rumble of plasma engines, roaring far beneath him, as though he were on the deck of a battleship.

+Do you feel that? The engine noise?+

+I do,+ replied Rhacelus. +And something else.+

Mephiston listened hard. +Chanting?+

Rhacelus nodded.

A few seconds later there could be no mistaking it – there was a low, discordant chorus of voices echoing from somewhere near the stage. The engine sounds swelled in volume and as the noise grew the light began to

fail. Shadows rushed across the tiers of stone seats and then vanished as everywhere fell into darkness.

A gloom settled over the ruins and the sounds of the choir grew more fervent and wild. Other noises joined them – the sounds of armoured boots clattering down companionways and blast doors slamming shut. Followed by another burst of bolter fire.

'Lord Rhacelus,' said Brother-Lieutenant Turiossa over the vox.

'Yes?' snapped Rhacelus.

'I am at the upper edge of the terraces. Shall we...?' There was a scuffling sound over the vox network, a burst of static, then he spoke up again. *'Is that you, Lord Rhacelus? Are you on the stage? I see movement...'* His voice trailed off in confusion, then he cried out in shock. *'Throne of Terra!'*

Bolter fire ripped through the darkness. Brother-Lieutenant Turiossa and his squad rose to their feet, bolt rifles raised and spitting a furious barrage over Mephiston's head. They were shooting at figures that had emerged on the far side of the amphitheatre.

Mephiston rolled to the end of the row until he was clear of the Intercessors' shots and then stood, pistol raised as he targeted the approaching shapes.

His eyes were easily able to pierce the gloom but he thought for a moment that they must be tricking him. Rather than the slender, fast-moving aeldari he expected, the figures stamping across the stage were hulking giants, clad in warped, baroque suits of power armour. Traitor Marines. Helmets covered in bestial growths and guns gaping with tooth-filled maws.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Cronium Gulf

Mephiston was filled with revulsion. He had faced heretics and Chaos worshippers countless times, but this was the greatest sacrilege: the glorious form of a Space Marine perverted by Chaos.

He cursed and fired, his hand jolting as the pistol spat plasma into the bristling ranks. Behind him, Rhacelus and Antros howled, rushing to join him, their pistols barking.

The traitors marched calmly into the plasma storm. As one, they raised their guns and returned fire, whipping up a tornado of splintered stone. The noise was deafening.

The first Traitor Marine stumbled and dropped to one knee, still firing as his armour imploded and blood jetted from his back. Even as his helmet shattered he kept up a stream of fire, sending shots uselessly up at the sky as he fell back, kicked across the floor by the force of the rounds slamming into him.

Mephiston leapt over the seats, channelling aether-fire into the blade of his sword. Vitarus flashed in his grip, eager for blood, and by the time he reached the stage Mephiston was sprinting.

A snarling face rushed out of the darkness towards him. For a second, Mephiston thought it was a grotesque helmet, but the bull-like features were the Space Marine's face.

Mephiston fired repeatedly, incinerating one side of the traitor's head, but the warrior barrelled into him as though nothing had happened, laughing as he drove Mephiston back the way he had come. The sheer weight of him was enough to stagger Mephiston. He was as tall as Mephiston but even broader and his war-plate was a canker of tusk-like spurs.

Mephiston recited a litany of banishment and brought Vitarus round in a backhanded slash, slicing through the traitor's gorget, sending his head clanging across the stage.

Mephiston backed away in a shower of blood, then raised his sword as another traitor charged towards him with a roaring chainsword. The weapon was forged to resemble a leering dragon and the heretic grinned as he swung it, two-handed, at Mephiston's head. Mephiston parried and kicked, sending him sprawling through the scrum.

It was a brutal, messy fight. Blood Angels and Traitor Marines whirled back and forth across the stage, fighting with blades, chains and fists.

Mephiston's mind raced. He had been tricked. None of his auguries mentioned these traitors. How could they have ambushed him so easily?

Vitarus left trails as he killed, cutting through corrupted battleplate and mutant skulls. The sounds of fighting changed from gunfire to grinding metal, grunts and curses, leaving the rumbling engine noise to rise up and dominate the scene.

Mephiston fought through the carnage, past bolter-scarred bulkheads and down a companionway towards a pair of open blast doors. He could see, in the next chamber, more of his brothers battling with the traitors on a burning observation deck, their armoured forms silhouetted by the flames.

Mephiston hesitated and shook his head. Companionways? Observation decks? What was this? He was on a xenos ruin, not a battleship.

Pain erupted in the side of his chest and he fell sideways, crashing through a section of wall and landing, gasping and covered in rubble, at the back of the stage.

A Traitor Marine loomed over him, a growling chainaxe in his fists and his brutal face framed by shards of helmet. His face bore no signs of mutation but his eyes were blank with kill fever, like the eyes of a feeding shark.

'For Horus!' he bellowed, rocking back on his heels and swinging the chainaxe at Mephiston's face.

Mephiston brought Vitarus up just in time. The axe's teeth rattled uselessly against the sacred blade, scattering sparks and smoke. The heretic tried to wrench the weapon free but Mephiston channelled more power through Vitarus, locking the chainaxe in place.

The traitor roared, leaning back, trying again to free his weapon, but he only succeeded in hauling Mephiston to his feet. Mephiston leant close, glaring into the warrior's face as he increased the flux of power, channelling fire through his veins.

The heretic was about to cry another oath when he frowned, confused, looking down at his armour. Smoke poured from the seams, filling the air with the smell of charred meat. He tried one last time to free his weapon, then dropped to his knees, convulsing as his blood boiled, cooking his hearts.

Mephiston unlocked the blades, stepped back and let the traitor crash to the floor.

Another traitor lunged at him but Mephiston side-stepped the blow, gripped Vitarus in both hands and rammed the sword into the traitor's back, ripping through the battleplate and hurling the Chaos Marine into the crowd of struggling figures.

Claxons rang out and Mephiston raced towards the blast doors he had spotted earlier. He burst onto the observation deck and teetered to a halt. There was a gaping hole in the deck plating that looked down over a fifty-foot drop crowded with spitting pipes and fumes.

He summoned shadow wings and dived across the gap, raising Vitarus as he dropped down into the line of heretics waiting on the other side and hacking through them, scattering limbs and armour as Vitarus blazed with the force of his anger.

Everywhere he looked the green of the XVI Legion clashed with the crimson of the IX. The *Vengeful Spirit's* hull had been breached in countless places and his sons were driving back Horus' traitors with a storm of chainswords and bolter-fire.

'For the Emperor!' he roared, rising up over the scrum, his golden armour flashing, immune to the gore and filth that covered all the other warriors on the observation deck.

'Mephiston!' cried a familiar voice and he looked back to see Rhacelus striding towards him, cutting a path through the traitors, lights flashing

across the lenses of his helmet. His voice was hoarse. 'I'm falling!'

Mephiston staggered back across the stage. 'So am I,' he muttered, dealing out sword strikes as the dreadful truth jolted through him. For a moment, he had believed he was Sanguinius. Just as he had all those long years ago, in the ruins of Hades Hive. 'No!' he gasped. It could not be possible. He was cured. Cured of the curse, cured of the madness. How could he be falling into the past?

He shoved his way back to Rhacelus and the two Librarians fought side-by-side, swinging their force-swords in perfect unison, weaving a lethal web.

'I was there,' said Rhacelus, glancing briefly at Mephiston. 'I was the Angel. I was on the command deck.' His tone was bleak. 'I am *lost*.'

'No!' cried Mephiston. He hacked savagely at the traitors, cutting through their massive chests and drenching the stage in blood. The thought of Rhacelus falling to madness was somehow more dreadful than the thought that *he* was damned. 'It cannot be!'

He looked around for Antros. Squad Turiossa was all around them, hacking furiously at the traitors, but there was no sign of the Librarian. Then he saw him, away from the fighting, back in the rows of tiered seats. He was stumbling away from the stage, his shoulders hunched and his hands clasped over his head. He was staggering like a drunk.

+Antros,+ thought Mephiston.

+Chief Librarian.+ Mephiston could hear Antros' confusion. +I saw a vision. But it was... It cannot be...+

Mephiston shook his head. How had the Ephemeris hidden this from him? How had he failed to see? If he was destined to end here, on a drifting ruin, defeated by his own lunacy, surely he would have seen it?

Squad Turiossa were fighting with unnatural savagery, howling unfamiliar battle cries, spitting archaic phrases not uttered since the dawn of the Imperium. They were losing themselves to the curse. They pictured themselves as primarchs, racing to save the Emperor of Mankind, doomed to re-live Sanguinius' death.

Mephiston threw back his head and howled a curse. How could he have endured so much, achieved so much, only to die here, needlessly and uselessly on a forgotten slab of ruins?

As his rage grew, the ruins fell away and he saw only Horus' ship, the

Vengeful Spirit. The ship that had ruined an empire and replaced it with the desperate, ruptured mess that was the Imperium. He knew, now, that it was madness, but that only fuelled his fury. The warp boiled in him, filling his veins and knifing through his eyes, ripping through the ship and igniting the battle like oil on flames. Warriors and walls exploded, joined together in columns of crimson heat. All he could do was burn and destroy. The galaxy had betrayed him. This was not meant to be his fate. The maelstrom in his head burned white, obliterating everything.

+Calistarius!+

The reminder of his former name dragged Mephiston back to the stage.

Rhacelus was still at his side, but almost everyone else had been hurled back into the rows of stone seats. Traitors and Blood Angels were lying in smouldering heaps, covered in rubble and wisps of blue flame. Most were trying to scramble clear but some, including Blood Angels, had been rent apart, their innards visible, charred and twisted in the ruins of their ceramite armour.

Rhacelus pointed his pistol at Mephiston. +Fight it! As you did before. I am lost, but you must not be. Think of the consequences! You are too powerful!+

Mephiston shook his head, dazed. It was true that he had escaped the curse once before, but he had no idea how. Sanguinius was behind it, he was sure. He could still recall the dazzling vision that led him through the madness. But how could he escape madness twice? He could feel the delusion straining to break through reality – the hallucination of the *Vengeful Spirit* that had always signified death for all of his Chapter.

He felt a point of cold logic trying to break through the din and passion. He grasped at it, trying to give it air. A word. Something he had just said to himself. Something significant. *Hallucination*.

‘Hallucination?’ he muttered, staggering away through the dust and whirling embers, trying to understand why that should be significant. Of course, this was a hallucination. His brothers were not *truly* fighting in the wars of the Horus Heresy. They had not really passed back through the centuries and taken on the god-like form of their gene-sire. Then a second truth hit him. The Blood Angels flaw was a gene curse – a false vision, a facet of their souls. *Not* a simple hallucination. A hallucination was more akin to the tricks he had just witnessed outside the *Blood Oath* – the tricks

of the aeldari.

‘The xenos!’ he cried, looking triumphantly back at Rhacelus.

Rhacelus was on his knees in the rubble, his pistol lying next to him. As the traitors stumbled through the ruined stage, dazed by Mephiston’s psychic blast, Rhacelus was clawing at his helmet and howling. He managed to look up at Mephiston’s cry but showed no sign of understanding.

Mephiston could not rely on his mind so he relied on his battleplate. He adjusted the auto-senses with a thought and runes scrolled across the retinal display, detailing every aspect of his surroundings. He read at a furious rate, processing information faster than the suit’s in-built cogitators could display it.

He magnified a cluster of runes, reconfiguring the data screed with a blink of his eye, revealing a detailed breakdown of the atmosphere’s mass and composition. In amongst the cocktail of gases there was a chemical he recognised, recalling it from his studies in the Librarium. In a fraction of a second, he had cast his mind back to Baal and summoned a memory of treatises on aeldari hallucinogens. ‘Psychochemical weapons,’ he muttered, picturing the data-scroll in absolute clarity.

‘Adjust your respirators!’ he cried into the vox. ‘Atropa binaria! Masked as a water vapour! Filter it out!’

As he gave the order he adjusted his suit’s environmental systems. For a dreadful moment, nothing happened. If anything, the battle for the *Vengeful Spirit* seemed to grow more vivid. But then the gloom lifted. It was like watching a sunrise. Harsh light flooded the ruins, washing away the mirage of battle-ravaged corridors and bulkheads.

Mephiston climbed onto a pile of rubble to survey the scene with untainted eyes. What he had taken for lumbering, heavily armoured Chaos Marines were actually lithe, nimble xenos, leaping through the battle with incredible agility. They were absurdly colourful, like motley-coated jesters in leering, theatrical masks. They seemed to be acting out a performance. Every time they fired a gun or flicked a blade, they pirouetted away with a dramatic flourish, calling out lines of doggerel, their voices lilting and full of mirth. As they jumped and rolled, Mephiston found it hard to see them clearly. Their coats trailed prismatic petals, as though shedding pieces of confetti. They were shrouded in a rainbow that banked and weaved as they

danced.

The Blood Angels were already starting to recover, looking around at the xenos with surprise and losing the manic fury of their earlier attacks. Mephiston felt a rush of relief as his suspicions were proved correct. The hallucinations *were* chemically induced.

As the Blood Angels fought with more precision and control, the xenos grew more frenzied, hurling explosive devices that filled the ruins with colour. But now that the Blood Angels understood what they were facing, they easily filtered out the hallucinogens with the re-breathers in their mouth grilles.

Brother-Lieutenant Turiossa regrouped his squad. They backed across the stage, raised their bolt rifles, dropped to one knee and fired on the aeldari with breathtaking precision.

The xenos flipped and spun again, but they were now dancing to the rhythm of bolt rounds. Robbed of their power to create delusion, the lightly armoured xenos had no chance. It was a brutally efficient massacre. In just a few seconds the Blood Angels covered the stage with a heap of twisted, smoke-shrouded corpses.

Mephiston nodded in satisfaction. Rhacelus and Antros had recovered and crossed the stage towards him, picking their way through the carnage and cleaning blood from their weapons. Rhacelus stared at Mephiston and seemed unsure what to say.

Mephiston shook his head. 'You might never have to face that trial for real, brother. Cast it from your mind.'

'We all face it eventually.' Rhacelus' voice was brittle and loud.

He grabbed Rhacelus' shoulder. 'Why do you think I am doing all of this?' He spoke quietly, so that only the two Librarians could hear.

'To prevent the disaster your Ephemeris predicted,' replied Antros. 'To stop those Tzeentchian cults you saw on Sabassus.'

Mephiston looked at him in silence.

Antros shook his head. 'Isn't that right? You mean to halt them before they create the entropy you showed us back on Baal.'

'Commander Dante trusts me,' replied Mephiston. 'I could have convinced him the situation in the Prospero System is as important as the defence of the Baal System. I could have convinced him to re-deploy some of his forces.' He looked at the small group of Blood Angels on the stage

silencing the few xenos who had survived their onslaught. 'But I chose not to. We have come alone.'

'For speed,' said Antros.

'Because it is important that *I* am the saviour of this Chapter. I must prove that by escaping our curse I have come to embody all that we are capable of.'

'*Have* you escaped the curse?' asked Rhacelus, looking closely at him through the lenses of his helmet.

'I have harnessed it. I know what you have seen in the past, Rhacelus, but I am changed. Reborn in ways that I cannot even explain to you. You must trust—'

Gunshots rang out as a figure bolted from the back of the stage, sprinting off into the ruins. Stonework collapsed under the barrage, but the only sign of the xenos was a quickly fading blur of colour.

'After him!' cried Mephiston, leaping from the rubble and pursuing the vanishing shape.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Cronium Gulf

‘Try not to kill it!’ called Mephiston as Squad Turiossa rushed after the Harlequin. He pointed at the shimmering diamond that filled the sky. ‘I need information.’ The xenos was as difficult to grasp mentally as it was physically and Mephiston would need a few minutes to find a way into its thoughts.

The terrain was almost impassable, huge slabs of broken masonry and the hulls of shattered voidcraft, but the xenos sprinted across it as if it were weightless, gliding over the jagged shapes and tumbling lightly down the sheer drops.

Fibre-bundles in Mephiston’s armour worked in seamless union with his enhanced musculature, powering him through the wreckage as his suit’s auxiliary systems tracked the xenos, filling his optical displays with data screeds. But still, the aeldari warrior managed to increase the gap between itself and the Blood Angels, bounding over a toppled comms mast and sprinting across the transitway into a narrow maze of streets.

Mephiston charged after it, pausing at a gloomy crossroads beneath the engine cowling of a wrecked ship. Fuel pipes hung down like vines, clattering against his armour as he edged into the darkness, pistol raised.

‘Spread out,’ he ordered, opening the vox network. ‘Cover every street. Keep an eye on the air. Watch out for psychochemical attacks.’

The chase slowed to a crawl as the Blood Angels moved through shadowy streets, weapons trained on the darkness as they picked their way through engine parts and the remains of looping, undulating architecture.

Mephiston crossed another junction and entered a narrow avenue, bordered on both sides by tall, serpentine towers. There were xenos markings carved into the door frames and he paused briefly to examine them. The runes were familiar but combined in a sequence that made no sense. They were enough for Mephiston to be sure of something he had only presumed so far.

‘It’s a fragment of a craftworld,’ he announced over the vox. ‘This whole platform was once part of a much larger structure.’

‘*And the xenos still live here?*’ asked Antros. ‘*Drifting next to the Great Rift?*’

‘I doubt it.’ Mephiston carried on down the avenue and peered through leaf-shaped windows. The rooms inside were empty and thick with dust. ‘I think the warriors we encountered are only here to watch over the place. To protect their past.’ He looked up into the sky. ‘And this portal.’

He was about to say more, when laughter echoed down the street. It was a manic sound, bordering on hysterical.

‘Dromlach is the Each-Where,’ said the same, amused voice he had heard on the *Penseroso*. ‘Dromlach is the Death-Stare.’

The words were no longer just in his head. They echoed down the dusty walls, booming out through the quiet.

‘Who are you?’ cried Mephiston. He had little interest in the xenos’ identity, but he wanted to hear the voice again to pinpoint his prey’s location.

‘I am Cyriac, your silken-voiced—’

Before the xenos could finish sneering, Mephiston ran through a doorway, dived through another and rolled into the next street, springing back onto his feet with his pistol raised.

He found himself facing a quickly dispersing storm of colours. Bolter fire rang out in the next street.

‘*Curse the wretched thing,*’ came Rhacelus’ voice over the vox. ‘*I saw it for a moment.*’

‘*Headed south,*’ said Turioassa, ‘*parallel with the main transitway. We can cut him off before...*’ He hesitated, then muttered a curse. ‘*No. I was*

mistaken. It wasn't him.'

'I have him!' cried Antros. 'No, I... Damn it. Where did he go?'

Laughter echoed through the gloom.

Mephiston was finally ready to possess the elusive xenos. He drew Vitarus, stabbed the blade into the ground and knelt, resting his head against the pommel. He channelled seer-sight through the blade, spilling his consciousness beneath the ground, spreading thoughts like tree roots. Working this way, it took him just a few seconds to locate the mind of his prey.

He plunged into the xenos' skull and showed it just a fraction of the horrors he had seen in the warp. It should have been enough to drop the xenos to its knees, but the aeldari warrior kept running, laughing even more hysterically.

'Spewed and hacked,' giggled the xenos, 'deathwhite tract. Mon-keigh sees, the odds are stacked, mon-keigh looks, his future cracked.'

Mephiston shook his head. There were very few minds he could not control, but the will of a lunatic was infuriatingly illusive. And the xenos was utterly deranged.

'Shoo, shoo!' howled the xenos, speeding away, still laughing. 'I've tired of you!'

Mephiston grappled with its thoughts, attempting to cripple it with maddening visions, but it was like trying to dampen a fire with flames. The absurd thing simply laughed harder and ran faster.

'He's on the bridge!' cried Rhacelus. 'Making for the other side.'

Mephiston stood, wrenched Vitarus from the ground and sprinted down the street. It ended in a sheer drop but he picked up his pace. Moments before he tumbled into the drop, he conjured shadow wings and leapt, launching over shattered rooftops, gliding through dust clouds towards the bridge Rhacelus had mentioned.

He could see the xenos weaving between pieces of rubble and realised that his attempt at possession *had* affected the xenos warrior. It was still moving quickly, but lurching and stumbling, howling poetry at the ruins.

Mephiston soared over the xenos' head, looped, and dropped down onto the bridge, landing in a crouch and kicking up a dust cloud. The ruin groaned under the weight of his power armour. In a single, fluid motion, Mephiston stood, drew his plasma pistol and disintegrated the lower half

of the alien's leg.

The colourful warrior rolled through a cloud of blood and bone and halted a few feet away from Mephiston, clutching the mess that had previously been its leg, screeching in pain.

Even wounded and sprawled in the dust the xenos was hard to see. A whirl of confetti-like shapes still haloed it and the diamond patches of its coat were in constant flux, washed by undulating waves of colour like a light-mottled riverbed. It wore a leering, theatrical mask that perfectly mirrored the lunacy Mephiston had seen in its mind.

Rhacelus appeared behind the xenos, running onto the bridge with his sword raised, quickly followed by Antros and the Intercessors. They halted and trained their weapons on the xenos, but Mephiston raised his hand, silently commanding them to hold fire. He paced over to the xenos and stood above it, dwarfing the twitching wretch.

'Thread and weave it's time to leave,' said the xenos, its voice tight. 'Time to grieve.' As it said the word 'grieve', it reached for its belt.

Even wounded, the xenos was incredibly fast, but Mephiston had anticipated this particular trick. He had already begun mouthing a conjuration as he approached and as its hand slipped towards its belt, Mephiston repeated the trick he had perfected on the *Penseroso*, sidestepping time and sliding onto a different temporal plane.

The xenos' hand now moved at a crawl towards the belt and the Blood Angels were frozen at the far end of the bridge, surrounded by slowly turning dust motes. Mephiston reached down to the belt and removed an object fixed to it. It was small and spherical and looked to be made of the same smooth, bone-like material as the surrounding architecture. It was wraithbone, he realised, a psycho-responsive substance that was often used by the aeldari. There was an emerald gemstone sunk into the top, surrounded by a circle of runes. Again, they were familiar but arranged in a peculiar way. He plundered his memory of the Librarium, recalling every study of aeldari dialects. It was one of the great joys of Mephiston's life that he could revisit texts so clearly in his memory, re-reading them countless times to discern every subtlety. How dreadful, he thought, to be a mortal, with a mind only capable of reading books when one was holding them.

He remembered essays about an aeldari repository called the Black

Library. The Black Library was guarded by the same faction of aeldari as the creature lying at his feet – he had heard them referred to as Rillietann or Harlequins. The essays had been written by a member of the Ordo Xenos, Inquisitor Bronislaw Czevak. As Mephiston revisited the text he pictured Czevak’s extensive notes and the detailed lexicon, reminding himself of the various regional and cultural variations that were referenced throughout the corpus.

Mephiston looked again at the sphere in his hand. The details still eluded him, but the general meaning of the runes was now clear: it was a doomsday device, designed to destroy the piece of craftworld he was currently standing on. The Harlequins must have been left to ensure the place never fell into enemy hands. Mephiston looked up at the shimmering diamond in the clouds. The portal was clearly of great tactical significance.

He secreted the device beneath his thick, crimson robes and stepped back into the moment.

The xenos hissed in surprise as its hand reached its belt and found nothing there. It looked around desperately, scouring the rubble for the sphere, presumably thinking it had dropped it while fleeing Mephiston. It looked back at Mephiston.

‘Cegorach,’ it said, sounding less amused, ‘pluck me a lyre. Bind me the stars, spring me a fire. Humourless bores, landed in scores, by the gods I will die if I hear of their wars.’ As it spoke it furiously patted down its clothes, still looking for the detonator.

Rhacelus and the others had halted a few feet away, guns still trained on the xenos, but Mephiston drew his force sword and stepped closer. He waved the blade at the ruins.

‘There is much to discover here,’ he called to the others. ‘Much to learn. Send message to the fleet that we have found something special.’

The Harlequin looked back down the bridge. Its pistol was several feet away, not far from where the Blood Angels had halted. It tried to stand but tumbled with a curse, grasping the remains of its leg and hissing in agony.

‘It was only a matter of time,’ said Mephiston, circling the crouching xenos. ‘The Imperium of Mankind was always destined to—’

‘Destiny?’ hissed the Harlequin. ‘What do mon-keigh know of destiny?’ There was no longer any pretence at poetry. It snarled at Mephiston, spit

flying from its mask. ‘You stamp around in your metal suits, blundering through places too complex for your simian minds to comprehend.’

Mephiston had the xenos exactly where he wanted it – enraged, in pain and not thinking clearly. ‘Places like the Eye of Dromlach,’ he said casually, still circling. Re-reading Czevak’s texts had given him a much firmer grasp of what he was dealing with. If his calculations were correct, he had just named the portal looming overhead.

The xenos fell silent, shaking its head, clearly shocked.

‘Simian or not,’ said Mephiston, ‘some of us have learned to read.’

With an impressive effort of will the alien grabbed the railing at the side of the bridge and dragged himself upright. His obliterated leg was bleeding profusely but he gripped the railing with fierce determination and managed to laugh.

‘You are doomed, mon-keigh, and the tragedy of your race is that your demise will barely be noticed.’ As it spoke, it dragged itself closer to Mephiston and drew a slender knife from its belt. ‘Your corpse-god will never lay claim to sites such as this.’

There was a clatter of bolt rifles being raised and loaded. Mephiston gave the Blood Angels another warning look and stepped closer to the xenos, ignoring the knife. ‘We have no desire to rule a ruin.’

‘Liar. Why else would you come here?’

‘I seek passage through the rift.’

The xenos stared at him for a moment, then unclasped its mask, letting it hang down over its chest. The xenos’ face resembled a human one, but sharpened and elongated, as though distorted by a curved mirror. The creature had feline eyes and leaf-shaped ears. His skull was tall and narrow and his cheekbones high and sharp. He could have been beautiful if not for the insensible malice in his eyes. Marred by pain, his skin was the same colour as the dust and his eyes were glazed.

‘Passage? Where to?’

‘To the far side of the Cicatrix Maledictum.’

The xenos frowned and looked at the purpled sky. ‘Through the aether storm?’

Mephiston nodded. The xenos looked away from him, frowning and muttering to himself. ‘You only need to pass through? You are not interested in these buildings?’

‘What possible interest could we have in this wretched place?’ laughed Antros. Rhacelus silenced him with a scowl.

‘I only need to pass through,’ said Mephiston. ‘My ship is anchored at the edge of the system. I need passage through the rift, nothing more.’

The xenos gave him a suspicious look. ‘Why?’

Mephiston held his gaze.

‘Where are you headed?’ demanded the xenos.

‘Through the Great Rift.’

The xenos muttered a curse and narrowed his eyes. ‘But you need a guide.’ He glanced back at Rhacelus and the others. ‘The Eye of Dromlach leads to the Each-Where, the lattice that links the galaxy. You would be lost without a guide.’

The effort of talking clearly gave him great pain and he swayed, looking like he might fall. He scowled at Mephiston again. ‘Why would I help you? Once you were through the aether storm, you would contact your armies. They would descend on us in those ugly, shovel-nosed ships. What reason would you have to leave us in peace? You have no understanding of why we are here or what we are.’

Mephiston shrugged. ‘And if I did return? Would you be here waiting?’ He waved at the tormented dome of sky. ‘The moment I left, you would reconfigure the technology you use to mask this place. You must have been doing that for centuries. How else have you evaded our explorer fleets?’

The xenos peered up at him, eyes narrowed. ‘And how do you know I wouldn’t lead you astray? What makes you think you can trust me?’

Mephiston sauntered away from the xenos and removed the spherical device from his robes, letting his thumb hover over the gemstone trigger. The xenos tensed and tried to rush at him, but he fell heavily to the ground with a pained gasp, glaring up at him.

‘You have no idea of its power.’

Mephiston tapped the runes on its surface. ‘I told you, I can read.’

As Mephiston saw the panic in the xenos’ eyes, he recalled the countless deaths he had seen at the hands of the aeldari. They were cruel beyond measure. He had seen entire cities destroyed for reasons so baffling and obscure that only the aeldari themselves could understand them. He took no particular pleasure in the xenos’ pain, but there was a sense of justice in

seeing a trickster tricked.

‘I still have no reason to help you,’ said the xenos. ‘You will trigger that device as soon as you no longer need me. Once I have guided you through the Each-Where there will be nothing stopping you from destroying the Eye of Dromlach.’

Mephiston continued pacing across the bridge. ‘And how would I return? What you call the Each-Where I call the webway. My knowledge of the webway consists of little more than its name. I have no maps for such a place. With you dead and the Eye destroyed, how would I cross back through the Great Rift?’

The xenos winced and managed to stand again, still gripping the knife as it staggered after him, leaving a trail of blood through the dust.

‘You wish me dead, mon-keigh, as clearly as I wish you dead. It matters not whether you kill me now or on your return.’

Mephiston shrugged. ‘Very well. Now it is then.’ He called back down the bridge. ‘Back to the gunship, brothers. This is not our route. We will have to travel to the Nachmund Gauntlet. We will destroy this vile place once we are safely back on the *Blood Oath*.’

‘Wait!’ spat the xenos, its words twisted. ‘We have not finished talking.’

‘But we are at an impasse. How about this? Lead us safely through the webway, to the far side of the Great Rift, and I will return your suicide weapon to you.’

The xenos’ sneer was as grotesque as the mask hanging around his neck. ‘You’re a liar.’

Mephiston shook his head. ‘I am many things, but not that. I swear, by the Angel Sanguinius himself, that if you lead me through the rift I will leave you unharmed and in possession of this device.’

The xenos stared at him.

‘Or I can kill you now, as you so richly deserve, and return to my ship,’ said Mephiston. ‘After which I shall have no reason to leave these ruins intact.’

The xenos closed his eyes, whispering something, then slowly nodded. He stumbled closer and waved up at the portal. ‘Do you see the upper left of the Eye?’

As Mephiston looked that way, the xenos lurched forward and jammed his knife under the breastplate of Mephiston’s armour.

He grinned at Mephiston, his eyes flashing. ‘The poisons on this blade have no known cure.’

‘Blade?’ said Mephiston.

The xenos’ grin faded as he looked down and saw that his fist was empty. Mephiston had anticipated him once again. Moments earlier he had moved through a fragment of time to remove the blade.

‘What are you?’ demanded the xenos, staring at him.

Mephiston held out his hand and revealed the knife, crumpled in the palm of his gauntlet. ‘I am hope.’



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Talon, Abissama Delta, Sabassus

‘Jump!’ cried Fedorak and Malik together as the Hellbound broke cover, firing back into the trees as they activated their chutes. Gourin’s traitors poured from the forest, bathed in las-fire. The barrage grew even more ferocious, and with stone detonating all around him, all Fedorak could do was leap and hope his men would follow.

The thrusters kicked in as he fell, but he kept them at half power, allowing himself to fall faster than was usual. He prayed that the river was as deep as it looked.

The din of the gunfire was cut off as he plunged into the rushing water, then it roared back into his ears as he broke the surface, trying not to swallow. To his relief he saw that dozens of his men had managed to follow his order, crashing down beside him, but then he saw the reason Zur had fled.

With half of the Hellbound still preparing to jump, the bridge exploded, engulfed in a dazzling, white wall of flame.

They wired it up, thought Fedorak as he rushed downriver, spinning and tumbling in the currents. He realised how effectively Gourin had tricked him. She had lured him out here, away from the defensible HQ, and he had fallen for it.

A rain of burning bodies hit the Guzerat, followed by another explosion

as sections of the ancient bridge collapsed into the river.

Fedorak lost sight of the massacre as the currents dragged him under. He flailed around, trying to grab something, and his hand slammed down on a spur of rock. He tried to haul himself up, desperate to escape the furious torrent, but something was holding him back. Cursing, he realised that one of his grav-chute straps had caught on a branch. He struggled furiously, with the water slamming into his face, but there was no way to break free.

Grabbing his billhook, he hacked at the straps, cutting himself loose from the chute and throwing himself onto the muddy bank, coughing and spluttering.

As he rolled away from the water, drenched and numb from where he had hit the rock, he was bathed in golden light. The remains of the bridge were engulfed in flames and the river was full of burning Guardsmen, howling and thrashing as they died.

The bridge had not been destroyed. If anything, it looked renewed. Where the stone had been blasted away, it had revealed more of the metallic, mirrored panels, like fish scales glinting in the blaze.

There was still a fierce barrage of las-fire pouring from the forest as the heretics continued to advance. Fedorak rolled further into the undergrowth and whipped his pistol from his belt, looking around for signs of survivors as pieces of glowing stone hammered down into the trees all around him. Dozens of the Hellbound had followed his lead and made it into the Guzerat, but they were being butchered before they could reach the riverbank.

Fedorak tried to fire his pistol but the mechanism jammed with a pitiful squelch.

‘Damn you!’ he hissed, picturing the stern, righteous gaze of the Emperor, back in the mess room. He shook his head. This was a mess all of his own making. There was no need to blame a god. And *he* needed to put it right.

He dropped back out of sight, peering through the trees, looking for the architect of all this carnage.

There she was. Gourin. The traitorous worm had sauntered onto the still-burning bridge, her pistol hanging loosely in her hand as she called out nonchalant orders to the other traitors. She wore the same ironic smirk she always did and it took all of Fedorak’s will not to break from the trees and

run at her.

He managed to stay where he was. Gourin was surrounded by dozens of heretics. He would be gunned down before he got anywhere near her.

He moved deeper into the trees but edged closer to the traitors, gripping his billhook. If he could get close enough he might have a chance. Perhaps, without her, the traitors would turn on each other. Either way, Fedorak was determined to reach her and make her pay.

The fire started to fade as he crawled closer but some of the traitors had lit lumens and Fedorak could see them with sickening clarity.

Gourin was unchanged: a scarred veteran, around fifty years of age with short grey hair. But many of her men carried shocking deformities. Whatever perverted beliefs had led them to overthrow the barracks were transforming them, the sickness in their heads becoming a sickness of the body. Several Guardsmen had peculiar, silvery skin, with the same fishlike shimmer as the bridge. They mostly still wore standard issue flak pads and tunics but it was clear that beneath their uniforms some of them were morphing into new shapes.

Fedorak stared in horror, trying to understand what he was seeing. It was hard to be sure in the shifting light, but it looked like one of them had too many arms – there was a tangled mass of snake-like shapes hanging down from his shoulder pad. Fedorak thought they were shreds of cloth until they moved, writhing and twisting through the air. Rather than screaming in dismay, the soldier seemed proud of his deformed limbs, standing near to Gourin with his chin raised and the butt of his lascarbine resting on his thigh, as though he were posing for a pict-capture.

Fedorak dragged his gaze from the mutations, feeling his mind starting to fracture as it tried to grasp the extent of their wretchedness. He locked his gaze back on Gourin and began creeping through the foliage again. The witch would pay for this atrocity. He could hear his men screaming and cursing all around him, dying while she smirked, bleeding their last as she chatted to her grotesque subordinates.

He was only forty feet from the bridge when he realised the heretics were no longer killing his soldiers – they were fishing survivors from the river, wounding those who tried to escape. As he crawled closer, Fedorak saw they had already gathered a dozen or so Guardsmen not far from the smouldering ruins. They had bound them and hurled them in a circular

clearing, clubbing them when they tried to move.

‘What are you doing?’ whispered Fedorak. He was now so close to the clearing he dare not move for fear of discovery. His rage had numbed him to his injuries for a while but as his heart steadied a little, he realised that the pain in his leg might be a fracture. It was unable to hold him as it should do. If he tried to make a run for Gourin, he would most likely land on his face several feet away from her and be ridiculed as she shot him. His only hope was that she would walk close enough to him that he could leap out and slit her throat before her men had the chance to take him down.

A light flickered in his peripheral vision. It was the vox-bead.

He edged, very slowly, away from the clearing and crawled back towards the riverbank, keeping to the shadows, then opened the network.

‘*Colonel?*’ came Sergeant Malik’s voice in an urgent whisper.

‘Yes,’ he replied. ‘I’m here, on the south bank. What is your position?’

‘*We’re on the same side as you, sir, about a hundred feet downriver of the bridge.*’

“‘We’?” Fedorak felt a rush of hope.

‘*Yes, sir. Privates Erben, Litvak and Kastri are with me.*’

Four of them. Fedorak tried to hide his disappointment. ‘Have you seen any others?’

‘*Yes, colonel, but the heretics have them. They’ve gathered them in a group, near the—*’

‘Yes, I know. I saw.’ Fedorak stared into the mass of black, roiling shapes, trying to distinguish Malik and the others from the jungle.

‘*I see you,*’ said Malik. ‘*We’re coming.*’

‘Quietly, for Throne’s sake,’ hissed Fedorak. ‘They’re still searching the riverbank.’

The Guardsmen crept carefully towards him through the darkness. They all still had their lascarbines and seemed unharmed other than cuts and bruises.

‘Have you seen Zur?’ he demanded.

They shook their heads.

‘The bastard sold us out,’ spat Fedorak. ‘I saw him leave the bridge just before the blast.’

They all looked at each other in shock.

‘I’m not sure it even is a bridge,’ said Sergeant Malik.

‘What are you talking about?’ replied Fedorak.

Malik waved him through the gloom, back towards the water’s edge. They all crawled the last few feet as they reached the edge of the trees. There were still embers and wisps of smoke drifting through the air but they could see the bridge clearly now, glinting and flashing as it reflected the currents rushing underneath it.

Fedorak saw what Malik meant. The explosions that had killed his men had also uncovered sections of the bridge, blasting great holes in the riverbank and revealing that the curvature of the structure continued into the ground. It was part of a massive, glittering circle with spokes thrust deep into the mountainside.

Fedorak shook his head, baffled. ‘Were they trying to kill us or unearth this thing?’

‘Both, I think,’ muttered Malik, looking just as confused. ‘Look, it’s moving.’

The enormous metallic hoop was slowly slipping back towards the mountain, tilting and splitting the riverbed as it revealed more of its circumference.

‘What in the name of Holy Terra is it?’ whispered one of the other Guardsmen.

Fedorak shook his head but he was sure about one thing. ‘We have to stop her.’ He looked back into the jungle. ‘Whatever Gourin’s doing here, we have to stop it.’ The sense of dread he had felt when looking at the forest’s patterns was still there, coiled in his gut. He pictured Zur’s impassive face when he had talked about the forest spirits and sensed that Gourin was somehow linked to the patterns he had seen.

‘Quickly,’ he said, waving the men back into the jungle, heading up the slope as fast as he dared.

When they reached the clearing, Fedorak had to stifle a cry of outrage. The Guardsmen who had been captured had been shackled together and lined up at the river’s edge.

‘She’s going to drown them?’ he whispered, glancing back at Malik.

Gourin was marching up and down the line of soldiers, talking to them. No, not to them, realised Fedorak. She spoke in a sing-song chant, waving a knife around as she mouthed the words. It looked like she was

performing some kind of ceremony.

As she talked, Fedorak had a dreadful realisation. The trees nearby were juddering and shifting in time to her words. She was controlling the jungle somehow.

‘How is that possible?’ he muttered. ‘How can she move trees with words?’ He looked back at Malik. ‘Can you see that? Is she making the ground move?’

Malik looked dazed as he nodded.

Fedorak held out his hand and took Malik’s lascarbine, checked it was loaded and then studied Gourin, wondering if he could get a clear shot. She was still under cover of the trees and as she marched up and down the line of prisoners, she rippled in and out of view in the patches of daylight that washed over her.

She raised her voice now and Fedorak’s heart quickened in response. The words were meaningless gibberish, as though played backwards through a recording device – a looping torrent of sibilance and truncated vowels that made Fedorak’s head pound and his hands tremble on the gunstock. Sweat filled his eyes as he tried to get a bead on her. It was useless. Her words reverberated in his head, growing louder with every repeat until he wanted to howl.

He backed away, lowering the gun with a curse as a new sound reached his already tormented ears: a steady, slow thud like a vast heartbeat, thundering underground, somewhere deep in the mountain.

‘Colonel,’ hissed Malik, pointing back down the slope. He saw flashes of blue and gold, blinking through the shadowy trunks.

‘What in the name of the Throne is that?’ he muttered.

It looked as though a new river had sprung and was now rolling up the mountain towards them – a river of hard, glittering topaz. As the colourful tide approached, the steady beat grew louder and more menacing. *Thud, thud, thud*, shaking through the soil and causing Fedorak’s heart to pound harder.

‘Back away,’ he managed to gasp, moments before the shapes broke into view. The Guardsmen scrambled deeper into the trees and dived behind a fallen log, hunkering in the muck.

Fedorak felt a dreadful urge to look back over the log. He had to know what was approaching the clearing. He found himself thinking absurd

thoughts. Was it a colossal beast? Did the footsteps belong to the being Zur referred to as Tziamo? Could those absurd native myths be true? *Was* there a god in the mountain?

He knew it was madness, but he crawled past Malik and the others and peered through the jumble of exposed roots.

What he saw was even more shocking than a mythical beast. The footsteps did not come from a single creature, but serried ranks of soldiers, marching in such perfect lockstep that their footfalls were indistinguishable. They moved like mechanised automata, their guns held at identical angles and their heads raised at exactly the same degree. They were also giants. The forest shuddered beneath their tread. Eight or nine feet tall, they were clad in bulky, humming suits of polished power armour. Space Marines, their battleplate polished to an incredible sheen and adorned with golden cords of filigree.

Fedorak felt a rush of elation. He had never seen the Adeptus Astartes outside of crackly pict footage. To see the Emperor's sons marching past him, glittering in the half-light, was overwhelming. He peered at the symbol on their pauldrons: a flaming snake, curled in a circle and swallowing its own tail.

'We're saved,' he breathed, his words trembling as rank after rank of colossi thudded past.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Each-Where

The command bridge of the *Blood Oath* bustled with ceremony and perfume-scented ritual. Crimson-robed thralls crowded the walkways, swinging censers and cradling chalices as they raised their voices to Sanguinius and the Emperor, warding the vessel with oaths and supplications, pleading with the Keeper of the Golden Throne to watch over them. The *Blood Oath* was a sacred space, revered and preserved for thousands of years but on the far side of the oculus damnation was seeking a way in. Mephiston and the other senior officers were gathered before the armoured glass, looking out into madness, staring it down, straight-backed and stern. They were travelling through channels of blazing light, tunnels of energy that paid no heed to the accepted laws of physics. But Mephiston saw beyond the dazzling corridors. To him, the scene outside resembled an endlessly unfolding chrysalis, trapped in a state of constant metamorphosis, revealing layers upon layers of iridescent colour. He had read of the webway, of course, but never witnessed it first-hand. Even his reading on the subject had been sparse, because there was so little to read. It was an interspatial realm, like the dimensions he glimpsed during his travels. But unlike those shadow realms he had been unable to fully grasp, the webway was real and clear, mapped by the alien intelligence of the aeldari and put to use as a weapon against mankind. A secret doorway

behind the stars.

Standing separate from the Blood Angels and deck officers was the aeldari Harlequin, Cyriac. Under protest, he had received treatment from the onboard medicae staff and he was now able to stand unaided. His face was still an unpleasant shade of grey but Mephiston suspected that might be his natural skin tone. He was leaning over a tacterium screen and muttering urgently, surrounded by a flock of whirring servo-skulls that monitored his every move. Upon returning to the *Blood Oath*, Mephiston had learned that the Navigator, Bronius, had recovered well enough to take over from his seconds and steer the ship again. He had ordered Cyriac to cooperate with Bronius so the pair of them could find a way through the lunacy of the webway. Bronius had balked at the idea of communicating psychically with Cyriac, so the Navigator was currently using another member of his household to translate garbled words over the comms network.

Mephiston felt the *Blood Oath's* thrusters steer it on a new trajectory but as on the previous occasions, he saw no sign of any change in the scene outside. There were no landmarks by which to gauge their velocity or position. It was like drifting in oil. Unlike any previous warp-jump he had made, the psychic phenomena that usually battered the Geller field were absent. As he reached out with his thoughts, searching the tumult beyond the hull, he felt something utterly new. His mind filled with equations and theories, none of which conformed to any field of science he had ever studied.

‘Faster,’ muttered Cyriac, glancing up at the oculus, his expression appalled at what he was doing.

‘Chief Librarian,’ said Rhacelus quietly, watching the xenos with an almost identical expression of distaste. ‘How can we be sure that creature won’t deposit us in another one of its vile temples and leave us surrounded by more of those dancing clowns?’

Mephiston tapped the doomsday device at his belt. ‘He won’t betray me. Not until he’s worked out how to retrieve this. And I’ve already shown him that he can’t take it by force. Until he thinks of a way to trick me, he will do everything we need.’

Rhacelus shook his head, still frowning. ‘All the same, it feels wrong, prosecuting the will of the Emperor through the wiles of an inhuman

wretch. I feel that no good will come of it, Mephiston.'

Antros looked away from the oculus and turned to face Rhacelus. His eyes were gleaming. 'You saw Lord Mephiston's prophecy.' He waved at the salver, lying on a table on the far side of the command dais. 'He has seen all of this. He has foreseen every *moment* of this journey. We are on the way to the most glorious victory imaginable. We are not just about to drive Chaos from Sabassus, but we are about to reach the apotheosis that Mephiston has worked for all these centuries.' He looked at Mephiston, struggling to hold back a grin. 'His great gift has been harnessed. He is going to achieve the victory Sanguinius meant him to achieve. Fate wills it.'

Rhacelus raised an eyebrow. 'Fate? The day we trust to fate is the day we become as perverse as that xenos. Trust in your training, Antros. Trust in your weapons, both physical and psychic, but do not trust to fate.'

Antros waved at the Ephemeris again. 'But is that not exactly what the Chief Librarian has done? He has recorded the strands of fate so that he can—'

'The strands of fate?' Mephiston was not often drawn into debates between Antros and Rhacelus, but that phrase had a worrying ring to it. 'Trusting to fate is a step away from worshipping it. I do not *trust* a single line on the Ephemeris. It is a codex of maybes and what ifs.'

Antros shook his head. 'We are out here because of the things you wrote on the Ephemeris, are we not?'

'Fate is never fixed.' Mephiston looked back out at the sickening whirl of colours. 'The moment we believe it is, we are doomed to follow the tune of whichever fraud sings the loudest. It's not fate that limits us but our own short-sightedness. I have foreseen countless eventualities, and by knowing every possibility, I find a path between them. But there are no guarantees. My journey has led me to Sabassus, but only discipline, faith and skill can bring me victory there.'

Rhacelus signalled his agreement with a low grunt.

Antros looked suitably chastised, for about three seconds, then shook his head and tried another tack. 'Perhaps I used the wrong word. Perhaps fate is not the way to describe it. I'm talking about the truths you gleaned, Chief Librarian. I'm talking about your insight. You have brought us here through tireless will. You have never faltered. You have let *nothing* turn

you aside.’

Mephiston glanced at Antros. There was no accusation in the Codicier’s eyes, just his habitual gleam of excitement. Where Rhacelus saw his Chief Librarian as blinkered and monomaniacal, Antros saw him as unyielding and determined. Which of them was right? he wondered. He thought back across the decades. Decades of pain and carnage. He saw the teeming legions of souls that had died in the name of his quest to reach Sabassus. Antros was right – however much destruction he had caused, however much death followed in his wake, he had never turned from his path. Even in the face of failure, he had always found a way forward. As the screams filled his head, he was pleased to see how little power they had over him. There was a time when their deaths weighed around his neck; there was a time when his flesh smouldered, darkening in a physical manifestation of his brutality, but not now. His doubts were gone. He was sure of his path. Those that died had perished so others would live.

Despite Mephiston’s confidence in his decisions, the screaming grew in volume, filling his thoughts. He had not heard such a pained chorus since Qvo-87 remade him. He frowned and removed his gauntlet, half expecting to see the dark fire that once marred his flesh. There was no sign of it.

‘Chief Librarian,’ said Rhacelus, drawing his attention to the oculus.

The scene outside had changed into something even more disturbing. The tunnels of light had vanished and the screams that had previously been in Mephiston’s head were now coming from outside the ship. The *Blood Oath* flew through a charnel house. Thousands of bodies tumbled past, butchered and howling, smashing against the oculus.

‘What are you doing?’ cried Cyriac, looking up from the navigation controls. He stared at the three Librarians. ‘Where have you taken us?’

Rhacelus strode across the dais with a thunderous expression. ‘We have gone where *you* directed us, xenos filth. Do not try any of your asinine tricks here or I will—’

‘Rhacelus,’ interrupted Mephiston, following him. ‘The xenos did not do this.’

It was not possible for sounds outside to pass so clearly through the oculus, but the screams had grown to such a volume that they were drowning out the singing of the blood thralls. Mephiston focused his thoughts by reciting snatches of the catechisms he had learned as a young

neophyte, mouthing the Five Angelic Graces the Blood Angels used to steady the savagery in their soul.

‘I will deal with this,’ he said, closing his eyes and plunging into his own mind.

Qvo-87 leaned over him, his pleasant human face a sharp contrast to the mess of oiled augmetics below his neck. Even over the screams outside, Mephiston could hear his own flesh ripping. The tech-priest had flayed him, peeling back layers of skin and muscle, unaware that Mephiston was observing everything.

They were in the Chemic Spheres, his prison and sanctuary on Baal. The only chamber in the whole of the Arx Angelicum that was strong enough to hold him. Other figures hovered at the edge of his vision. Blood brothers: Rhacelus, Astorath, Albinus, Corbulo, even Dante. They were watching and praying, both repulsed and concerned as Mephiston’s body was dismantled before them, his organs slopped onto trays and his bones cracked into new shapes. Chirurgeons leant over him clutching mechanised tools. Sawing his fused ribs. Filling the air with red mist.

‘Stop the pump,’ said Qvo-87. ‘Restart his hearts.’

Then the pain really began. It jolted through his soul and tore his memories apart.

As the servitors and chirurgeons battled to light the spark of his new life, Mephiston sank deeper into darkness, falling further from the determined faces of his battle-brothers. With his flesh destroyed he finally stood naked, alone in the void.

Almost alone.

A bloody angel loomed over him, ancient and divine. Its power was the source of the screams, its majesty knifed through him, dragging howls from the darkness.

‘Will you save yourself,’ said the angel, ‘and lose the Chapter? Or damn your soul and save your brothers?’

The screams rose in answer, but Mephiston had already made his choice. He had made it months ago when Qvo-87 cut new life into his body. He would return. He would live. He would carry the Chapter’s Rage in his soul. He would crush it with every drop of his blood, every day of his life, fighting it until he could fight it no more. He would choose darkness so

others could be afforded more light, for a time at least. He could not avert the Chapter's doom, or even spare his brothers from their flaw, but he could battle it, he could slow it. By crushing it to his chest he would be their bulwark against madness, their shield against the inevitable. This was his inheritance. This was the truth behind his rebirths. This was what the Angel required. By becoming a monster, he would buy his Chapter a little more time.

It was then, in the final moments of the procedure, as his organs strived desperately against the trauma and blood loss, that he glimpsed the threat Qvo-87 had missed. He could feel, already, that he was stronger, surer of his powers, better able to wield them. But there was something else new. There was no longer just one spirit in him. Three souls warred for dominance. Calistarius was still there, a mortal warrior, elevated into the ranks of the Blood Angels Librarius. The Mephiston born under Hades Hive was also there, the divine being forged by the Angel Sanguinius all those centuries ago, born of Calistarius' ashes. And now, as blood thundered back into his veins, there was a new Mephiston, forged from his older selves, seeded by the cunning and artifice of Martian science. Three wills in one mind. And they did not sit easily together. They eyed each other warily across his consciousness. What ruin could be wrought if they ever came apart? What would happen if the three were cleaved? What would spill forth?

He awoke into a storm of his own making, his flesh bathed in black lightning as his battle-brothers reeled away from him, awed by his power.

He was reborn, again.

It seemed to Mephiston that he meditated for just a few seconds, but when he looked up again, he guessed that several minutes must have passed – perhaps even longer. The Chemic Spheres were gone and he was back on the *Blood Oath*. He had crossed the command deck and was hunched over the Ephemeris, scoring new lines into the design. The deck officers had moved away and were locked in conversation with First Officer Castulo, and Lucius Antros and Gaius Rhacelus were standing near the Harlequin. Antros was watching the tacterium screen eagerly, leaning over the xenos, while Rhacelus wore his habitual sneer of disdain.

The screams had ceased. By reliving his moment of rebirth, Mephiston

had driven them from his thoughts and cast them from the void. But he sensed that something else had happened. Why had he recalled the doubts he felt under Qvo-87's knife? Why, at this particular moment, had his subconscious replayed those concerns about his tripartite mind?

'Chief Librarian,' said Antros with a smile, noticing Mephiston looking over at them. 'You have come back to us.'

Mephiston stared at him, wondering again what thoughts Antros had hidden behind that psychic wall. Perhaps the time had come to test the strength of Antros' defences? Perhaps he should tear down those walls? Something stayed his hand. The die was cast. He had made his decision about Antros and he would see it through.

He gave Antros a vague nod and looked at the runes he had been making. They were aeldari runes, plucked from his memory as he drifted in his reverie. They marked out the location of the Eye of Dromlach – the portal the xenos had led them through. The runes described its size and mass but also spoke of its position, illuminating alternative locations it might occupy if the Harlequins tried to hide it.

He turned the salver over and left it on the table as he headed over to the two other Librarians. The scene outside the oculus had changed again. The dead had vanished, along with the kaleidoscopic colours, leaving what looked to be a normal array of stars.

'How long?' he asked.

'How long have you been gone?' said Rhacelus. 'Ten minutes at most. Not long.' He studied Mephiston closely, peering at him with his peculiar, incandescent eyes. Then he nodded and visibly relaxed, obviously reassured that Mephiston was in no immediate danger.

'What have I missed?' asked Mephiston.

'We passed through the Rift,' said Antros, waving excitedly at the oculus. 'We are through.'

Mephiston shrugged off his memories of rebirth and walked to a display. He tapped at the runeboard, summoning up a series of tactical readouts.

'Imperium Sanctus,' said Antros.

Mephiston nodded as he studied the display. 'Zollner System.'

'First officer,' he said, looking around for Castulo. 'Are we able to safely make the transition to the immaterium?'

Castulo broke away from the huddle of deck officers and approached

Mephiston with a salute. ‘Yes, Chief Librarian. The *Blood Oath* is warp-capable. We suffered damage to our armaments but the engines are intact, as is the Geller field. The weapons batteries are being repaired as we speak.’

+Navigator Bronius?+ thought Mephiston.

+Ready,+ thought Bronius, unperturbed by the Chief Librarian’s presence in his mind. +The same heading?+

+The same. Sabassus.+



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Talon, Abissama Delta, Sabassus

Fedorak was about to wave Malik over to see the Space Marines, when he noticed something that halted him. Gourin was grinning. As the Space Marines tramped slowly through the jungle, moving with leaden, implacable precision, she burst into laughter and clasped her hands together.

None of the Space Marines had raised their weapons. They marched like they were on a parade ground. There was no sign of aggression or urgency. They were not attacking the heretics.

Nausea flooded through Fedorak as he noticed something else odd. At the head of the phalanx there was a smaller shape. He struggled to see it clearly from where he was, but now he was aware of it he felt a desperate urge to know who it was.

He crawled through the undergrowth, waving for the others to wait behind. There was another fallen tree further up the slope and he crept behind it and peered out from the highest end.

From this vantage point, he should have had a better view of the figure leading the Space Marines but strangely, even seeing it head on, he was unable to separate it from the shadows thrown by the trembling trees. He stared as hard as he could, trying to discern a silhouette. For a brief moment, he thought he could see a small, slender man, dressed in the

simple robes of a mendicant priest. But there was something odd about his face. It was too long and curved. Too pale. Too rigid.

Fedorak collapsed behind the trunk and vomited, hard, into the mud. Trying to study the monk's face had turned nausea into a violent pain in his guts. For several seconds he could do nothing but retch, struggling to stifle the sound.

By the time the sickness had passed, the rows of Space Marines had reached the clearing and Fedorak's worst fears were confirmed. Rather than gunning the heretics down, the Space Marines simply halted as though drained of power, becoming utterly motionless. They had not come to save anyone.

Gourin rushed forwards and dropped to her knees in the mud, still grinning.

She began talking to the figure Fedorak could not quite see – the slender monk. Fedorak resisted the urge to try looking at it again and he noticed that Gourin was doing the same, talking in a very animated fashion while waving at the silver circle in the trees, but not looking directly at the figure leading the Space Marines.

'Colonel?' whispered Malik, appearing at Fedorak's side. 'What shall we do?'

Fedorak shook his head, at a loss. Either the whole forest was still shaking or his mind had become unhinged. Either way, he could not see anything clearly. There was no way he could hit Gourin from here.

'We have to get word to Divisional HQ,' he muttered. 'This is more than just cultists. Something big is happening here.'

'Long-range vox is out, colonel, you know that. It has been for months.'

Fedorak nodded, then he had to close his eyes for a moment. Even the briefest memory of the monk's face filled him with nausea.

'We can't leave those men to die,' he managed to say.

Gourin had risen to her feet again and she walked across the clearing with the shadowy figure. Fedorak realised that it was not so much shadowy as intermittent, flickering in and out of view, like a collage of pict images that were slightly out of sync with each other. Gourin led the strange figure over to where she had assembled the prisoners. She laughed at something the monk said.

Fedorak's anger surpassed his nausea. 'She *has* to be stopped,' he hissed,

grabbing the lascarbine again.

At that moment, the monk raised an arm, and as though catapulted by invisible ropes, the captives flew into the river. They landed beneath the arch of the bridge, vanishing as the circle of metal flashed with dazzling light and another seismic boom echoed through the jungle.

Fedorak winced and held up a hand to shield his eyes. When he managed to look again, the light had dimmed, the Guardsmen were gone and the bridge was moving. The whole colossal structure turned on its axis like an enormous wheel, shedding soil and water.

Fedorak was too stunned to do anything. The bridge was part of an enormous machine! As it turned, it created a landslide and as the mountainside slid away, it revealed more metallic plates beneath the ground.

As the wheel turned, it tilted backwards, lowering itself towards the ground. The noise was incredible, like an earthquake, and Fedorak had to duck as clods of earth and pieces of rock whistled past his head.

He looked up, and the scene had changed completely. The bridge was now a circular portal into the mountain. Its knotted metal circumference framed an opening right in the middle of the river bed. The structure had redirected the course of the river, bursting its banks, and there was now muddy water crashing through the trees towards Fedorak and his men.

‘Move!’ he gasped.

They scrambled up the slope, trying to outrun the flood. Trees cracked and fell, opening holes in the canopy above and splashing light across the forest floor, and the Guardsmen had no option but to break into a sprint as the water advanced.

They made it to the higher ground with seconds to spare, hauling each other up the sides of a gulley just as the water thundered past.

‘What was that?’ gasped Sergeant Malik as he lay panting on the ground.

Fedorak lay next to him for a moment, then staggered to his feet and looked back through the trees. It was hard to see clearly through the spray and churned-up mud, but the circular structure was still visible, bathed in sunlight on the exposed riverbed. The monk and the cultists gathered around it while the Space Marines remained motionless in the clearing. The circle of metal was still rotating, churning up the mud and scattering clouds of flies.

Then Fedorak saw the shapes writhing around its circumference.

He grabbed a pair of magnoculars from one of his men and hissed in disgust as the scene swam into view. The moving shapes were the prisoners. They were embedded in the metal structure, trapped beneath its surface, howling and twisting but still alive. As they struggled to break free, pale blue sparks rushed from their bodies, lighting up the disc. They were fuelling it with their pain.

‘What in the name of Terra is this?’ whispered Fedorak.

He looked back at his men. They had lascarbines and their billhooks, but nothing else. There was no way they could attack the cultists from here.

‘We have to get closer,’ he said.

Malik’s eyes widened.

‘Look at what they’ve done to the men!’ snapped Fedorak. ‘I don’t know what that thing is but my men are trapped *inside* it! I will not just leave them.’

Malik shook his head. ‘But, the Space Marines, colonel...’

Fedorak gripped his billhook tighter. ‘Are you refusing an order, sergeant?’

Malik’s expression hardened. ‘Of course not, sir.’

Fedorak nodded and looked back down the slope. Water was still crashing past but the cultists were all watching the machine in the river and the Space Marines were facing the other way. ‘If we grab branches as we go, we can cross the water to that patch of higher ground overlooking the cultists.’

Malik nodded. ‘And what then, sir?’

‘Then we take out the two leaders – Gourin and the...’ His words trailed off as nausea gripped him again. He wiped drool from his mouth and muttered, ‘And that other person. The priest.’

‘Priest?’ Malik shook his head.

‘The man standing by Gourin,’ snapped Fedorak, struggling to even mention him.

Malik glanced towards the group of cultists but quickly looked away. ‘The priest?’ he said, his voice quiet and strained.

‘Just get to that outcrop,’ replied Fedorak. ‘If we can kill those two, this whole thing will cease, I’m sure of it.’

They began climbing awkwardly across the rushing water, using their

billhooks to hack into trunks and branches. Down in the river, the machinery was still in motion, grinding and churning with such force that the vibrations reached all the way up the slope to where Fedorak was struggling to drag himself through the vines. As Fedorak paused to look, he saw a dark chasm inside the circle, a passageway with broad stone steps leading down into the rock.

Gourin and the monk were both singing something, their arms raised. Fedorak caught sight of the unnatural movement of the monk's arms and felt another stabbing pain in his stomach.

He vomited, his hands slipped from his billhook and he fell backwards. He bounced painfully over rocks and roots, hurtling towards the centre of the river.

Malik grabbed him by the shoulder and he jolted to a halt. The sergeant hauled him back up to the vines. He wrenched his billhook free and continued climbing.

'Don't look down there until I say,' he said, glancing around at the men. They nodded grimly back at him.

They were only minutes from reaching the outcrop when the tremors became so violent they had to halt and cling to the vines as rocks and torrents of mud leapt around them. Ignoring his own advice, Fedorak looked down and saw something that almost made him fall again. The Space Marines had lurched into motion. They were trudging through the muck, a single, symmetrical block that ploughed through the water, unaffected by its force as they marched towards the portal.

They passed Gourin and the cultists and began descending the steps, sinking into the darkness. There must have been over a hundred of the Space Marines but they moved with such purpose and precision that it was only a matter of minutes before they had all crossed into the centre of the river and vanished from sight.

Gourin and the monk ceased their singing and lowered their arms. Gourin waved her fellow traitors down the steps. The cultists scrambled after the Space Marines, looking like the slovenly rabble they were. Then, finally, Gourin and the figure Fedorak was avoiding looking at followed.

'Down!' gasped Fedorak. 'Quickly!' He could still see his men, trapped in the frame of the opening, howling silent pleas as they turned through the mist-filled air.

The Guardsmen scrambled and slid down through the mud, but the vibrations were still growing in ferocity and it was a treacherous descent.

They were still a hundred feet above the opening when it began spinning so fast it became a silver blur, like a coin glinting in the darkness. The whole mountain groaned, and with a final deluge of falling water, the machine vanished and the river rushed back to its natural course.

There were a few more seconds of falling debris and swirling flocks of birds, then nothing.

For a moment, Fedorak felt as though he was still moving. After all the noise and violence of the last few minutes, it was hard to believe that the jungle was still once more.

‘Gone,’ muttered Malik. ‘The bridge has *gone*.’

Fedorak slumped back against the mountainside, shaking his head. The river flowed just as it had always done and there was no sign of the silver bridge. The only indication that anything untoward had happened was the track of strangely neat bootprints leading from the trees to the water’s edge.

Fedorak and the others loosed the vines and began walking carefully down the slope towards the river, guns raised and ready.

Fedorak crouched on the riverbank, staring through the shifting currents. He could see the riverbed. It was a whirling storm of silt and stones, but the Space Marines had vanished, along with his trapped men, the cultists and the thing he was trying not to remember.

He was about to speak when the mountain gave another grumble, like a bear settling back down to sleep.

‘We have to alert Divisional HQ,’ he said when the noise had faded. He looked through the palms and ferns, half expecting to see more blue-clad giants stomping into view. ‘We have to find a way to send a distress signal. There is something rotten inside this mountain.’ He studied his men. They looked dazed and filthy, but they were watching with a calm discipline that made him proud. He took a chronograph from his breast pocket and flipped the case open. ‘We have to rendezvous with the gunships in four hours. And we have no scout to guide us. We need to move fast.’

‘We need to follow the river then,’ said Malik. ‘Zur would have used a quicker route, but we’ll get lost if we head any deeper into the trees.’

‘Agreed,’ said Fedorak. ‘The river will take us to the valley and we will

find our way to the rendezvous easy enough from there.’ He glared at the river, recalling the sight of his men trapped in metal. Gourin had beaten him. Even if he made it back to Adurim, he had failed to stop whatever she was doing in the mountain.

Malik was watching him closely and seemed to guess his thoughts. ‘At least we can prepare the city for attack, sir.’

Fedorak nodded. ‘We will ready the defences. Then we will get to the barracks and find a way to signal for help.’

They fastened their guns to their backs, wiped the blades of their billhooks and began the long trek home.

As Fedorak walked, he fought a constant battle to keep the hooded monk from his thoughts.



CHAPTER NINETEEN

The Talon, Abissama Delta, Sabassus

The Illumined Host stumbled on, eyes full of hope as they peered into the darkness. Gourin smiled proudly back at them as they waded through banks of dust and climbed over rocks. ‘I promised you,’ she said, as the daemon led them down the tunnel, deeper into the mountain, followed by clanking rows of Space Marines. ‘I told you he would come.’

She spoke quietly but she felt like howling it in triumph. All those decades of pain and sacrifice. All the friends she had lost. All the oaths she had sworn. Everything she had done to reach this point. It had all been worth it. Zadkiel had come. She had called and he had come, just as the auguries had predicted. Her home might be on the far side of the galaxy, her scarred body was a record of her trials, but she had made it.

Gourin and the other mortals followed Zadkiel at a respectful distance, but they all peered through the gloom, trying to catch sight of his slight frame. Stablights slashed the darkness but the Adeptus Astartes’ armour blocked most of them, revealing only fleeting glimpses of the hooded figure at their head.

Gourin gave up trying to see Zadkiel and looked back at her followers. It was an equally pleasing sight. Months of devotion had already left their mark. A few of them were relatively unchanged; they had ripped the regimental badges from their flak jackets but otherwise they might still

have passed for loyal Guardsmen of the Hellbound. But others had begun evolving. Gourin studied them with pride.

Aspis had developed a metallic sheen to her skin. Her face glinted like steel. She flashed like a fish in sunlit water, her eyes flawless, ovoid mirrors. She looked like a piece of living jewellery. She was beautiful and strange and exactly the kind of treasure Colonel Fedorak would like to grind into the dirt.

Zoster the Tank was sparking as he stomped, like a badly earthed circuit. Energy branched across his flak armour and spilled down the barrel of his lascarbine, but he showed no sign of pain, his face rigid with ecstasy as the power danced over him.

Syphus was developing an entirely new anatomy. His shoulders had broadened and his head was unnaturally low, sinking towards his chest and swelling into a new shape. His arms had grown so long that he occasionally dropped his knuckles to the floor and ambled like an ape. It was only a matter of time before he fully embraced whatever new form the Changer of Ways had planned for him.

Gourin had promised them a chance to escape their miserable fate, a chance to change and grow, but she had not expected the change to be so fast and so glorious. She was getting old now. Her joints ached constantly and she was slower than she used to be. Yet even her brief conversation with Zadkiel had been enough to make her feel like a giddy teenager. What would he do next? The auguries had been clear: by ensnaring Colonel Fedorak and his men and sacrificing them, she would summon her patron and be freed, finally, from the clutches of the Imperium. But she had no idea what form her escape would take. What would Zadkiel do with them? Why was he leading her down into these crystalline, labyrinthine chambers beneath the mountain?

Aspis smiled at her, her silver eyes flashing. 'Tell me again what it means,' she said, her words husky with emotion.

Syphus loped closer, grinning from his chest and throwing an absurdly long arm over Aspis' gleaming shoulder.

Zoster nodded excitedly, spilling more sparks as he loomed over the others. He was a beast of a man, with boulder arms and a jaw like a scarred anvil, but there was something childlike about his eagerness to hear what lay ahead.

‘I’ve told you so many times,’ laughed Gourin.

‘But now it’s real!’ Aspis gripped Gourin’s arm with glinting fingers. ‘He’s here. He’s actually come.’ She peered through the gloom, trying again to see Zadkiel. ‘*Exactly* as you said.’

Gourin laughed again, drunk on the glory of the moment. She gave Aspis a hug, surprised to learn that her silver skin was still soft. ‘Zadkiel is only a servant of an even greater power.’

‘The Crimson King,’ whispered Aspis.

Gourin nodded. ‘The Crimson King. Magnus the Red. The Saviour of the Lost and the Damned.’ She had told the tale countless times but never tired of it. ‘Where others fear change, he embraces it. Where others seek stagnancy, he praises the new. He is forging a completely new path, not bound by old dogmas. He sees beauty in the unique and the strange. The Ecclesiarchy simpletons want to see us burned and forgotten. They tried to drive us into the darkness. But Magnus will raise us up into the light. He’s building an empire where humanity can finally flourish in all its strange, varied, beautiful complexity. He is building a promised land. The New Kingdom, where we can be our true selves without fear of persecution or death. And there, at the heart of the New Kingdom, we will be welcomed into a city where every truth is revealed. Every mystery uncovered. A place where we can truly belong. A city where our strangeness will be our badge of citizenship.’

‘The City of Light,’ rumbled Zoster, passion gleaming in his dark, bestial eyes.

‘The City of Light,’ said Gourin, struggling to hold back tears. She looked at Zoster’s sparking bulk, Aspis’ flowing silver hair and Syphus’ bizarre anatomy and then she thought of all the people that had not made it this far. All the gloriously unique freaks she had seen butchered and enslaved by the servants of a long dead Emperor. ‘In Tizca,’ she whispered, ‘life will begin again. Progress and change will be the new religion.’

‘And what of our crimes?’ grunted Zoster, leaning closer. ‘Some of us have done bad things to get this far.’ He stared at her, hungry for hope. ‘When we fought for Orxus people died, Gourin. And not all of them deserved to die. What will Magnus think about that?’

‘Why did we fight?’ Gourin glanced at each of them as she walked. ‘Why

did we take up arms against our own regiment?’

Aspis nodded. ‘Because we had no choice. If they knew how we were changing, if they knew how special we had become, they would have taken us to the commissar and...’ She shook her head.

‘They would have executed us,’ said Gourin. ‘And did we simply attack them with no warning?’

‘We offered them a chance,’ said Zoster. ‘We told them they could join us. If they just abandoned the Imperial Creed.’

‘They didn’t even have to abandon it!’ Gourin waved at the rows of cultists hurrying after them. ‘Live and let live, that’s all I asked. They can believe there’s a god on Terra if they want, trapped in a rotting cadaver. They can worship a corpse and follow edicts laid down thousands of years ago by morons, as long as they did not impose their absurd beliefs on us. But they refused. You saw what happened when we tried to leave them in peace.’

‘They fired first,’ said Aspis, brushing her fingers against a dent in her polished neck.

‘They fired first.’ Gourin looked up at Zoster. ‘So why should Magnus have anything but praise for what we did? We escaped our oppressors and answered his call. We are coming to serve a master who will value what we are rather than fear it.’

Gourin was interrupted by a loud clattering sound as the Space Marines came to a stop as a single slab of ceramite. Zadkiel had also halted, his hand held up. He raised his hook-topped staff and bathed the tunnel in chilly light.

Gourin and the other mortals got their first clear view of the space they were moving through. It was not, as Gourin had expected, a roughhewn mine or natural grotto, but something far more interesting. The faceted planes she had glimpsed were not natural crystals, but intricately worked facades – undulating balconies and frescoes that bordered a wide boulevard. She gazed around in wonder, awed by the grandeur. Dust drifts swelled over everything, obscuring much of the detail, but there was no mistaking the beauty of the workmanship. Columns and pilasters snaked through the shadows, clad in silver and gemmed with diamonds, giving Gourin the peculiar sensation that she was inside a frozen wave, looking through tumbling breakers at refracted moonlight.

‘What is this place?’ muttered Aspis.

She shook her head as Zadkiel’s light washed over more of the masonry, revealing a series of grand arches that led off in eight different directions.

Zadkiel glanced back the way they had come, past Gourin and the rest of the Illumined Host. At the sight of his bird-skull head Gourin felt another dizzying rush of exhilaration. The light pouring from his staff paled beside the fire radiating from his skull.

To her delight, he waved her over.

However hard she tried, she found that she could not quite make out the details of his face. If she looked away and studied him in her peripheral vision, she could see a long, avian skull jutting from his hood, but when she tried to focus on it, his head became a jumble of flickering lights, with only a vague sense of shape.

‘Your other men have reached the summit,’ said Zadkiel.

Gourin’s heart raced at the sound of his voice. It was an involuntary response. Each word excited her pulse like a combat-stimm, making her want to howl and sprint.

‘I have done everything you requested,’ she replied, trying to keep her voice level. ‘And I can already see the results.’ She looked back at the men waiting behind the rows of Space Marines. Even from here, she could see the glorious transformation that was overtaking them. ‘Is it time for us to see the City of Light?’

Zadkiel nodded. ‘Almost.’

He walked to the centre of the crossroads and stood on a star-shaped mosaic at the junction of the eight roads, waving for Gourin to follow. She looked up in awe as she obeyed, amazed by the scale of the architecture. It was like an entire city had been built inside the mountain.

As they reached the centre of the star, Zadkiel pushed the bottom of his staff into a hole in the flagstones. It fitted perfectly, locking into place with a satisfying click. Zadkiel whispered and light pulsed from his sleeves, down the staff and into the mosaic.

Lines of sapphire-blue energy radiated across the floor, passing beneath Gourin’s feet and lighting up the eight-pointed star. Burning brighter and colder as they moved, the lines revealed the images in the mosaic and Gourin saw astrological creatures – lions and griffons, dragons and bears, entwined in a motionless dance. Or, not quite motionless, realised Gourin.

The images in the mosaic moved with the light, turning slowly around each other. Gourin smiled, recognising the other shapes. She was standing on a map of Sabassus. She could clearly see the continents and seas, edged in blue light as the monsters rolled over them.

Zadkiel whispered again and more images pulsed into view – nine spear-tips of light, linked by a complicated grid. Two of the spear-heads were brighter than the others.

‘The Youngest Brother,’ said Zadkiel, tapping one with his staff. ‘And here we are,’ he said, tapping another. ‘Inside the Ninth.’

‘The mountains?’ Gourin was surprised to hear the daemon use those names. She had heard the natives refer to the nine great peaks as brothers, but she had put it down to local superstition.

‘Order your men into the centre of the star,’ said Zadkiel.

She looked back, past the Space Marines, about to call out.

‘No, the men on the summit first,’ said Zadkiel, gesturing up into the cavernous darkness.

Gourin triggered the vox-bead in her collar. ‘Vitch? Can you hear me?’

A crackle of interference and white noise echoed round the vast darkness. The Space Marines were so motionless they almost seemed to have become part of the architecture, waiting silently at the edge of the mosaic, but Gourin’s men had been slowly edging closer and they were now only a few feet away, staring at Zadkiel in wonder.

‘Vitch?’ repeated Gourin, trying another channel.

‘*Sergeant?*’ came a distant, distorted voice. ‘*Is that you?*’

‘It’s me. Can you see a star?’

‘*Stars? It’s still daylight, sergeant.*’

‘I mean on the ground, in the rocks.’

Laughter echoed around the hall. It was so distorted by the poor connection that it sounded like an animal screaming.

‘*Sorry, yes,*’ said Vitch, when he was calm again. ‘*I see what you mean. Yes, we’ve been looking at it for the last hour. We couldn’t agree whether it was a star or a—*’

‘Go to the middle of it,’ interrupted Gourin, embarrassed by Vitch’s over-excited ramblings.

‘*Sergeant,*’ replied Vitch.

They could all hear him, calling out orders to the other cultists, telling

them to gather in the centre of the star.

'Did everything go to plan?' asked Vitch, as his men were gathering. *'Did you get the colonel to the bridge?'*

Gourin could not help smiling as she pictured Fedorak's pompous face. 'Everything went to plan. The Hellbound are screwed. Fedorak sent a relief force to Orxus but they have already been killed or won over to our cause. And then we blew up the colonel on the bridge. It will be an easy job capturing Adurim. Once the capital is ours, Sabassus is ours. The Illumined Host is victorious, Vitch. We did it.'

'And your master?' Vitch's voice shook with excitement. *'Did he arrive?'*

'He's here. And he wants you to gather on the star.'

'We're all in place, sergeant. What now?'

Gourin looked at Zadkiel.

'One moment,' replied the daemon, turning the staff slightly in the floor. The lines of blue light responded, rushing in new directions, drawing new shapes on the stone. 'Do they see anything?' asked Zadkiel.

'Vitch?' said Gourin. 'What do you see?'

'A lot, from up here.'

'I mean, do you see anything new?'

'No.'

Zadkiel muttered and rotated the staff again, creating a new splash of images.

'Yes! Lines of blue light!' Vitch sounded delighted. *'Surrounding us. It's incredible!'*

'Now,' said Zadkiel, waving at the star under Gourin's feet. 'Gather your soldiers on the lines of this star.'

Gourin waved Aspis and the others over. They hurried into position, whispering excitedly and staring at the designs on the floor.

'What now?' asked Gourin.

Zadkiel gestured for her to come and stand at his side in the centre of the star. Then he clicked his staff out of the floor and the chamber was transformed. Every pillar and arch in the hall suddenly blazed with inner-light, turning from dusty, crumbling stonework to something dazzling, translucent and crystalline. Gourin and the other mortals looked around in wonder. It was like they were inside a vast diamond with sunlight pouring out through every facet.

The cultists on the star began to glow with the same cold light as the lines on the floor. Aspis laughed in delight and Gourin reached out to touch her blazing skin.

Zadkiel stopped her, pulling her hand back.

He tapped the floor with his staff. 'We all serve Tzeentch in whichever way best suits his designs.' The daemon came closer to her and she felt her pulse start to hammer again. 'The great change is coming, Gourin. The Moment of Ascension, when humanity will escape its past and grow into its future.' She saw movement beneath Zadkiel's robes, as though dozens of animals were straining against the cloth. 'Some of us are here to champion Tzeentch's cause and carry his standard. Others will fuel the great crucible of change.'

Zadkiel waved his staff at the blazing figures that surrounded them. 'Vitch and the others have donated their lifeforce so that the Nine will live again.'

Even the ecstasy of being so near Zadkiel could not quite shield Gourin from the implication of his words. 'Their lifeforce?'

Zadkiel pointed at the mosaic. Like everything else, it had become lustrous and faceted. Gourin felt like she was standing on a frozen pool. She tried to stay focused. She had worked for years to win those men to her cause, slowly teaching them the cruelty of the Imperial Lie, preparing them for revolution, laying subtle enchantments to focus their hate.

Zadkiel gestured with his staff at points on the glimmering mosaic. 'Thanks to the souls of your men, the brothers are waking. After their long hibernation, the mountains are ready to rise.'

Aspis screamed. The light covering her body had become sapphire flames, washing over her slight form and causing her to jerk and writhe. Gourin tried again to reach out to her, but she could not escape Zadkiel's grip.

Aspis tried to step off the star design but her feet were rooted to the spot. Her screams grew louder as the flames reached her face. Her skin started to blister and bubble.

Zoster and Syphus were now howling in agony as the blue flames engulfed them too. The fire spread around the symbol and soon everyone on the star was convulsing. Over the vox network, Gourin heard the screams of Vitch and the others at the summit.

Gourin thrashed and struggled in Zadkiel's grip as the chorus of screams grew louder. 'No,' she gasped. 'They trusted me! I told them they would be free!'

'Change is upon us,' said Zadkiel quietly, tightening his hold. She realised that he did not have hands but instead waves of serpents had knotted themselves around her flak armour.

'Are you ready for it?' he asked.

For the first time she clearly saw the light in his eye sockets. The light of truth. Not wonderful but terrifying.

She looked down with growing horror as she saw that she was locked to the lines on the floor.

Gourin screamed as flames enveloped her.



CHAPTER TWENTY

Regimental HQ of the 145th Lupian Hellbound, Adurim, Abissama Delta, Sabassus

The Emperor had another face. It looked out from behind the first, shocking Colonel Fedorak with the force of its gaze. The assault on Adurim had been so fierce that many of the city's buildings had already surrendered, hitting the ground in an unequivocal display of capitulation. Unlike many of its neighbours, the mess hall of the Regimental HQ had not collapsed but the walls had split, scattering ash and rubble across the rows of tables, and where the mural of the Emperor had fallen away, a much older image had been revealed. The earlier image must have been the inspiration for the later one, thought Fedorak. At some point in the city's history, a general with more money than sense had decided to update the original painting with the gaudy, bombastic mural Fedorak had always hated with such intensity. But this older image stirred a different, unexpected emotion in him. As mortar shells continued to rain on the streets outside, shaking clouds of dust from the rubble, the ancient painting rooted Fedorak to the floor.

Fedorak gripped his laspistol. He had come to the mess hall to shoot the madness from his brains. His life had become a waking nightmare. However he tried to redirect his thoughts, he could always feel the lunacy writhing in his head: unbearable visions of the hooded monk, flickering

glimpses of a hooked beak and impossibly long, twisted fingers. But, as the power of the painting washed over him, he lowered the pistol. Perhaps he could live just a few moments longer.

The tone of the older picture was quite different from the mural. It did not portray the Emperor as an unreachable, omnipotent god. He was human. Unmistakably mortal. The idea jarred with every tenet of the Imperial Creed that had ever been drummed into Fedorak. The Emperor looked heroic but far from divine. The mural had shown Him at the moment of victory, heavenly light in His eyes, but in this picture He was surveying the aftermath of a terrible slaughter, His shoulders rounded by exhaustion, dark blood splashed across a pale face. Soldiers lay all around Him in mounds, twisted and broken, their faces awful to see. The artist had taken great pains to convey the scale of the tragedy. Thousands of bodies filled the scene, their wounds portrayed in graphic detail. And yet, despite the gruesome nature of the bodies, it was the Emperor's face that caught Fedorak's attention. In the mural, the Emperor's expression had been tyrannical and stern – the face of an immortal who demands fealty on pain of death. But in this older painting, the Emperor was not demanding anything of anyone other than Himself. His expression was not pompous or magisterial. With the weight of the carnage clearly laying heavily upon Him, the Emperor had shed every thought but one. There was a single emotion shining in His eyes: unflinching, unshakable determination. The eyes burned into Fedorak, shining from the faded paint, reaching out to him across the centuries.

Revelation hit him like a punch in the chest.

When Sergeant Malik rushed into the mess hall several minutes later, Fedorak was still staring at the painting, utterly still, the pistol hanging forgotten at his side.

Malik approached, removing his helmet and shaking dust from it. He walked to Fedorak's side and looked at the drawn pistol. Then he looked up at the painting.

'It doesn't matter if we lose today,' said Fedorak.

Malik looked at him in surprise.

'We will fight,' continued Fedorak. 'Even with no chance of victory, we will still fight.' Fedorak felt as though he were emerging from a dream. For long, hard decades he had fought because of fear – fear of being like

Gourin, a deviant who cared only for herself, or fear of bringing shame on his family name, becoming the first Fedorak not to make the grade. With his faith in tatters, fear was the only thing left to drive him on. But, as the human Emperor stared into his soul, he saw another reason to fight. A worthwhile reason. He would fight because this was how humanity would eventually win. Through all the death – death wrought on such unimaginable scale – humanity had never ceased to fight for life. In this ancient painting he saw why humanity could never truly lose.

‘We won’t stop. We fight because it is in our blood. There is no other way. Individual defeats are meaningless. They’re footnotes to the bigger story. Look at the Emperor. He’s a man. A *man*, Malik. Just like us. And He never stopped. He never stopped fighting.’

Malik licked his lips and looked around the room. ‘Colonel. The Emperor is a god. It is not right to talk of Him in such a—’

‘It doesn’t matter. I don’t know what He is now. But look at what He was. Look at Him, Malik. He was a man. And the entire weight of the galaxy *could not* break Him. It can’t. And it won’t break us.’

More shells hit, landing close enough to shake the mess hall. Dust rolled through the ruins and the two men could do nothing but cough for the next few minutes.

When the dust cleared, Fedorak finally turned to face Malik. ‘Is there still no response from the long range vox?’

Malik shook his head. ‘We redirected the power cells, as you ordered. The signal should be powerful enough to reach Divisional HQ. But there is still no reply.’

Malik looked awful. None of them had eaten for weeks, not since Gourin’s cultists encircled the city and cut off all the supply routes. Fedorak had never countenanced the idea of a siege, no one had, but Gourin had managed to build an army beyond anything they could have expected, and now Adurim was starving.

The madness was still there, waiting to take him, but what might he achieve before that happened? Was there still time to fight one last time? He fixed his pistol back in its holster and dusted down his uniform. ‘Any news from the gates?’

‘They’re holding. There’s no shortage of ammunition and we armed all the civilians who are old enough to bear arms.’

They marched back out into the heat. The streets were littered with rubble and abandoned groundcars. Adurim had been war-torn long before the Hellbound arrived, but now it could barely be described as a city at all. Plumes of dark smoke rose from its hab blocks and munitions plants and the few civilians on the streets sprinted past with haunted looks in their eyes, scurrying for cover as shells slammed down into the blast-warped girders.

As Fedorak strode through the noise and commotion, he carried the painting in his mind. He saw the world through the implacable faith he had seen in that ancient gaze.

‘Muster all squads at the South Gate,’ he said, fastening his helmet. ‘Leave only a skeleton crew at the other entry points.’

‘The gates will fall within the hour if we do that.’

‘It doesn’t matter. We won’t be here.’

Fedorak stopped, took out two lho sticks, handed one to Malik and took the other for himself. Malik stared, clearly shocked by such informality.

Fedorak took a slow drag, savouring the fumes with his eyes closed, then gripped Malik’s shoulders. ‘There are no reinforcements coming. We have done everything we can to that damn vox-caster. No one heard our call. We can hold those gates for a few more days. Perhaps even a week. And then Gourin’s bastards will kick them down and find a huddled mob of wretches, too weak to even die with any dignity. Do you like the sound of that plan, Sergeant Malik?’

Malik continued staring at Fedorak. He took a drag from the lho stick and shook his head.

Fedorak nodded. ‘Nor do I, sergeant. So we will gather at the South Gate. Every man, woman and dog of us. We will hit them with every lascannon that’s still working, then open the gates and charge the bastards. If we’re going to die, we’ll die like we mean it.’

He shook his head, glancing back at the crumbling mess hall. ‘Do you know what, sergeant? We might just rout the faithless scum.’ He laughed. ‘They would never dream we’d be crazy enough to go out and face them.’

Fedorak marched off towards the gates, ignoring the shells landing all around him. He suddenly felt invincible, like he was clad in the sacred armour he’d seen on the Space Marines up on the Talon.

Malik voxed orders as he jogged after him and by the time they neared

the South Gate, squads of Guardsmen were already massing in its monolithic shadow, forming ranks beneath the soaring rockcrete doors.

The Hellbound looked weary and bruised but as Fedorak passed them he saw the Emperor in their hard, tenacious stares. We will never be bowed, thought Fedorak. That is what makes us unbeatable. Everyone else is fighting for power or territory or ideals, but we fight to live. What could be more powerful than the will to survive?

This close to the gates the sound of the enemy guns was deafening, an implacable thud that shook the ground and pummelled the ears, but as the Hellbound mustered, hundreds of civilians gathered next to them with the same resolve in their eyes. Some of them held lascarbines or auto weapons, but many only had swords, knives and cudgels.

They saluted as Fedorak reached them and he felt a surge of emotion. They knew what was waiting beyond the gates: a vast host, heavily armed and teeming with warp-tainted abominations, but they had answered the call. They would fight.

Malik rushed back and forth, barking out orders and checking weapons as more people poured into the square below the gates.

Fedorak looked around for a place to speak and spotted an overturned transport right at the centre of the square. It would be the perfect place to make a speech. He was halfway to it when a murmur washed through the crowd – whispers and mutters of alarm that quickly rose into shouts and gasps.

‘Quiet!’ cried Fedorak when he realised what had alarmed the civilians. There was a low humming sound approaching the city. It sounded like a plague of insects but it was loud enough to cut through the noise of the enemy guns.

As the crowd looked up at him, Fedorak clambered up onto the transport and listened, keeping the crowd quiet with a raised hand.

‘Engines,’ he muttered to himself.

The guns faltered, as though the enemy were listening too.

‘Gunships,’ said Sergeant Malik, rushing across the square towards him.

Fedorak nodded. He had already come to the same conclusion. The roar of thrusters was unmistakable. ‘It’s the same sound we heard on the mountain,’ he said, not looking at Malik.

‘Before the Space Marines arrived,’ said Malik, his voice flat and quiet.

Fedorak sucked his teeth. ‘It can’t be.’ Absurd as it was, his moment of revelation in the mess hall had given him hope that they might yet drive the cultists back, but how could they fight Space Marines? He recalled the ones he had seen in the jungle – silent and massive, marching through the gloom like humanoid tanks. The massacre would be horrific and absurd. Guardsmen and civilians against the Adeptus Astartes would be a gruesome farce.

The noise of the engines grew louder and he realised the entire crowd was watching him, waiting for his order. He closed his eyes and there, in the darkness of his mind, the Emperor was still staring back at him.

He nodded, slowly, then looked at Malik. ‘Give the order.’ His voice was firm and clear. ‘Fire every lascannon that’s still on the walls. Then open the doors.’

Fedorak looked out across the crowd. A smile came unbidden to his lips. ‘Hellbound,’ he said. He did not shout the words, but they carried anyway, echoing through the shocked crowd.

There was a moment of stunned silence, then five hundred fists punched five hundred palms. ‘Hellbound!’ cried the crowd.

As the guns began firing, the gates flew open and the Hellbound roared into battle.



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Regimental HQ of the 145th Lupian Hellbound, Adurim, Abissama Delta, Sabassus

They were met by a storm of light and noise. Fedorak's armoured car had barely cleared the gates when it skidded through the rubble, screeched to a halt and slammed him against his restraint harness.

When the dust cleared, Fedorak saw the Hellbound staggering to a stop all around him, not wounded but shocked. There was an incredible scene unfolding outside Adurim's battered walls.

Gunships were roaring overhead: heavy, blocky aircraft that ripped through the sky with a drum roll of sonic booms. Cultists erupted into flames as the gunships strafed and bombed, tearing up transitways and carving up heretics. Bodies and engine parts tumbled through the air as the gunships howled away, heading back up into the clouds.

'Attack!' cried Fedorak across the vox, waving his driver on. He had no idea who was attacking the cultists but it had given him an unexpected chance at victory. The Hellbound surged forwards, gunning their engines and firing into the smouldering enemy lines.

There must have been over a thousand cultists gathered at the gates, but the gunships had turned them into a panicked rout. Gears screamed as drivers tried to right their armoured cars and there was a barrage of las-fire as the heretics found themselves unexpectedly attacked on both fronts.

As Fedorak's car careered through the rubble he wondered why the cultists were bothering to return fire when the gunships had already vanished from sight. Then he saw the reason. What he had taken for pieces of shrapnel, tumbling back to earth, were figures dropping from the sky.

Thrusters roared and red armour flashed through the fumes. The shapes hurtled towards the ground so fast that Fedorak struggled to make them out clearly until they hit the ground and began firing.

'Space Marines,' he said, his words drowned out by the cracking of their guns.

They were giants, just like the warriors he had seen on the Talon, and their armour was equally beautiful, gilded and inscribed and covered in intricate runes, but these Space Marines were blood red and rather than plodding menacingly into battle they sprinted, guns barking as the helpless cultists fell in mounds.

'Hold fire!' cried Fedorak, but there was little need. The Hellbound were watching in stunned silence as the Space Marines butchered the heretics, ripping through them with a speed that belied their massive, armoured bulk.

What followed could not be called a battle. The twenty or so Space Marines destroyed the remaining cultists within a single wave of attacks, using their ear-shredding guns until they were close enough to cut the heretics down by hand. Blood and dust enveloped the crossroads.

The Hellbound recovered enough composure to join the massacre, firing on cultists wherever there was no danger of hitting the Space Marines. After only ten minutes or so, the noises of battle began to fade.

The dust billowed away, leaving Fedorak and the rest of the Hellbound facing a jumble of severed limbs, overturned transports and smouldering wounds.

Fedorak stared at the carnage, shaking his head, then looked up at its architects. The red-armoured Space Marines calmly picked their way through the bodies, checking for survivors. When they were sure they had silenced every pained cry, they formed into lines and began cleaning the blood from their weapons and armour. It was as though they had just worked through a training exercise. They showed no sign of fatigue as three of their commanding officers now strode through the carnage towards them, wiping down their own weapons.

Fedorak knew nothing of Space Marine markings or uniforms, but there could be no doubt that the newcomers were in charge. Their armour was even more impressive than the others. All three of them had a raised cowl above their shoulders that glimmered with lines of energy, silhouetting their helmets in a sapphire glow. The same light pulsed through the lenses of their helmets and down the length of their weapons. Two of them carried beautiful, ornamental staffs and the third gripped a long sword, inscribed with obscure runes. The first of them wore crimson armour but the other two were as blue as a cold spring sky.

The officers in blue returned salutes as they passed their men, but the one in red marched straight past them.

Fedorak felt a rush of fear as he realised the Space Marine was headed his way.

'Colonel?' Fedorak could hear Malik's concern even over the vox. *'Orders?'*

'Regroup,' he said. *'Be ready to fire.'* The words spilled from his lips without thought and he knew how ridiculous he must sound. The Space Marines had just massacred hundreds of cultists with a single strike.

As the officer in red strode towards him some of Fedorak's alarm was replaced by wonder. The closer the warrior came, the more incredible his armour looked. It was a seamless union of technology and devotional art – sculpted, ridged plates, polished to a slick sheen, humming smoothly over servos and cables and glinting with flourishes of golden filigree. It was the most beautiful thing Fedorak had ever seen.

'Colonel?' said Malik, standing a few feet away from the groundcar.

Fedorak waved a dismissive hand. The Space Marines were similar to the ones he had seen with Gourin on the mountain, but not identical. And they had just killed half of Gourin's army. *'Lower your weapons,'* he snapped into the vox.

The Space Marine approached Fedorak's armoured car, removed his helmet and looked at him.

Fedorak's hope faded.

The warrior's face reminded him of the ruined statues that littered Adurim. It was like chipped marble, deathly white apart from the eyes, which were slits of violent crimson. It was not just the colouring that caused Fedorak's fingers to tighten on his pistol; the Space Marine's

features were horrifically magnificent. He looked like a dreadful deity, too mighty to allow the survival of a poor human wretch like Fedorak.

Fedorak tried to give the order to fire. These things were monsters, like the giants on the mountain. The white-skinned colossus in front of him was going to butcher him as savagely as he had the cultists.

Fedorak's mouth would not work. Fear locked his tongue and dried his throat. All that emerged was a hoarse croak.

'*Colonel?*' Malik's voice was full of panic.

'I... We must...' stammered Fedorak.

'Are you the commanding officer?' said the Space Marine.

Fedorak felt a glimmer of returning hope. The Space Marines had made no attempt to speak to the cultists; they had simply massacred them.

'I am,' he managed to say, without loosening his grip on his pistol.

He realised that he had been mistaken about the Space Marine's eyes. They were not blood red – that must have been a trick of the light – they had normal irises and pupils. No, not normal, he corrected himself. There was nothing normal about the ferocious glare burning into his skull. He found it difficult to hold his gaze and had to look elsewhere. The warrior's hair was long and silver-blond, tumbling over his armour in a most un-military fashion, like something one might see on a painting of an inspired saint or a deranged prophet. The warrior's whole demeanour was an odd juxtaposition of warrior and sage. There was something instantly enigmatic about him and Fedorak tried again to meet his gaze. It was impossible. The best he could manage was to look in his vague direction and do his best not to appear a coward.

The Space Marine nodded and waved his hand, pointing to the city walls. Fedorak swallowed hard, unable to guess how he was meant to respond. Then some of the Space Marines began jogging away from the corpses and he realised the signal had not been intended for him.

One of the other officers remained, standing a few feet behind the Space Marine with the long white hair.

'I am Mephiston,' said the Space Marine in red.

Fedorak had never heard the name before but it seemed laden with portent. He was growing surer that these particular Space Marines had not come to kill him, however. He managed to speak with something approaching dignity. 'I am Colonel Arman Fedorak of the 145th Lupian

Hellbound regiment.’

The Space Marine nodded. ‘I know.’

Fedorak snatched a glance at his eyes and saw that the Space Marine was looking through him, as though lost in thought.

‘We are the Blood Angels,’ said the Space Marine, as though no other explanation were needed.

‘And are you loyal to the Emperor of Mankind?’ replied Fedorak.

Something odd happened to the Space Marine’s eyes. For a moment, Fedorak wondered if his earlier idea had been right. It was as though the warrior had spheres of blood in his sockets. Then the moment passed and the eyes returned to a normal colour.

‘Yes,’ replied Mephiston.

Sounds of battle rang out from the other side of the city.

‘Colonel,’ voxed one of his captains. *‘The cultists are under attack! Someone is firing on them! It’s a miracle! It looks like they’re–’*

Fedorak killed the signal.

The officer wearing blue armour was glaring at Fedorak with such outrage that Fedorak struggled not to cower.

‘We should leave this ingrate to deal with his own deserters,’ he said. He still had his helmet on, but that did nothing to hide the disdain in his voice. ‘How dare he ask questions about our loyalty?’

‘Rhacelus,’ said Mephiston with a dismissive wave of his hand, before turning back to Fedorak. ‘I must find the leader of this insurrection.’

The fatalism that had gripped Fedorak when he looked at the painting in the mess hall came flooding back.

‘The Emperor sent you,’ he said, his pulse racing.

Mephiston did not answer.

‘Their leader?’ prompted the other Space Marine, clearly finding the whole exchange arduous. ‘Where do we find him?’

Fedorak nodded. ‘There is a ring-leader. She is called Gourin.’

Mephiston looked pleased when he heard the name Gourin. He did not smile, exactly – his face looked too grim and immobile to have ever smiled – but he nodded quickly and glanced at Rhacelus.

‘I know where she is,’ said Fedorak, his excitement growing. ‘I can point you to her.’

Mephiston touched a gilt-edged book clasped to his belt and muttered

what sounded like a prayer.

‘Show me,’ he said, gesturing back into the city.

‘Malik,’ said Fedorak, regaining some of his composure. ‘Take half the men and circle the walls. See if the Space Marines have left any of the cultists alive.’ Rhacelus’ eyes flashed and Fedorak’s voice wilted under the ferocity of the Space Marine’s gaze. ‘I am going to escort our guests to the command complex,’ he managed to continue, signalling for his driver to turn the vehicle around.

Malik barked out some commands and as Fedorak re-entered the city the Hellbound formed into lines around him, their eyes filled with excitement.

Fedorak could feel the elation of his men and understood it. None of them had expected to survive the day; now they were re-entering Adurim with rows of Adeptus Astartes at their back and the cultists dead behind them.

He dismounted outside the command complex, dwarfed by the vast aquila that framed the doors, and waited for the Blood Angels to reach him.

The Space Marines advanced in a calm, unhurried manner, as though nothing on Sabassus could possibly pose a threat to them. Mephiston was at their head and he was the only one who showed any interest in the ruined city, looking at the crumbled walls and statuary as he approached. He halted not far from the complex and signalled for someone to approach. A figure appeared that Fedorak had not noticed before. It was a frail, winged servitor, only two or three feet tall but dressed in luxurious crimson robes and wearing a beautiful ivory mask under its hood. It handed a large brass plate to Mephiston, covered in intricate designs. Mephiston studied the plate, then looked up and down the street. He leant over the metal, scratched something into it, then handed it back to the servitor who whirred away again, disappearing into the ranks of Space Marines.

‘How should I address you?’ asked Fedorak as Mephiston reached the doors to the command complex.

Mephiston did not answer him as he strode up ancient steps and entered the building. Fedorak rushed in after him, followed by several of the guards.

The first chamber was a circular atrium ringed by balconies and walkways and Mephiston craned his head, looking up into the column of light that shone down from a distant armour-glass dome.

‘Where can we talk?’ he said, without looking at Fedorak.

Fedorak gestured to some of his men and they threw open a pair of doors that led into a long room with a conference table running down its length. The table was littered with rubble and pieces of discarded equipment, but the walls were still intact and the room was empty.

Mephiston looked around at the piles of debris as he entered and Fedorak felt an absurd rush of embarrassment.

Rhacelus glared at one of Fedorak’s guards as he entered. ‘Wine. The best you have.’ Then he pulled a chair back, sat down and removed his helmet with a whoosh of escaping air. Fedorak found his face as disturbing as Mephiston’s. He had cropped, grey hair and a short, silver beard and the demeanour of a disappointed regent. As he looked over at Fedorak, his eyes shimmered with an unnatural glow, scattering blue light across the dusty tabletop.

Fedorak nodded at the Guardsman and the soldier rushed from the room, leaving Fedorak alone with the two Blood Angels.

Mephiston remained standing, staring up into the dust motes whirling overhead, and Rhacelus sat glaring at him down the length of the table. Neither of them spoke. Fedorak was used to being feared and obeyed. Now he felt like an infant trapped in a room with a pair of vengeful gods.

Servants scurried back into the room with some wine, placing the bottle and glasses in front of Rhacelus without meeting his fierce glare.

As the servants rushed out, Malik entered and hurried to Fedorak’s side.

‘The fighting is over,’ he whispered, a dazed expression on his face. ‘The...’ He glanced at Mephiston. ‘The Blood Angels Space Marines have killed all of the cultists.’ His eyes widened. ‘And there cannot be many of them left in Orxus either. This attack must have constituted the bulk of Gourin’s army. I imagine if we attacked Orxus now we could—’

‘What is Orxus?’ said Rhacelus, grimacing as he sniffed the glass of wine.

‘A town, twenty miles to the south,’ replied Fedorak. ‘Your...’ He hesitated. ‘How should I address you?’

‘And is that where the insurrection began?’ asked Mephiston. He did not look at Fedorak. In fact, if he had not spoken, Fedorak might have imagined he had slipped into a trance. He was utterly motionless, his head still tilted back as he stared at the ceiling.

‘Yes,’ replied Fedorak. ‘It was a sergeant, a woman called Gourin. The one that I mentioned earlier. She has been...’ Fedorak shook his head, angry and ashamed that Gourin had made such a fool of him. ‘She secretly led my men astray, teaching them a forbidden creed. She told them that the galaxy was changing and that she would make sure they were on the right side of the change.’

Rhacelus snorted with laughter. ‘I bet she did.’ He sipped the wine, grimaced again, then gulped down a large mouthful. The drink coated his lips, painting them dark red. As he bared his strong, white teeth in a grin, Fedorak felt as though he were facing a predator.

Mephiston finally moved, tilting his head and muttering something into the collar of his armour. Seconds later the doors swung inwards and the small servitor whirred into the room with the brass plate. It handed it to Mephiston with an elaborate bow, then backed away to hover in the corner.

Mephiston put the plate on the table and waved Fedorak over.

‘Do these symbols mean anything to you?’

Fedorak squinted at the shapes scored into the metal. There were hundreds, perhaps thousands of images spiralling around the plate but Mephiston was tapping what looked like the open mouth of an animal – a circle of exposed teeth. Fedorak could not think of anything but Rhacelus’ teeth, still bared in a savage grin.

He shook his head. ‘Teeth? No. No, they don’t mean anything to me. I don’t know what you mean.’

He could feel the massive warrior looking down at him with those inhuman eyes and he felt a rush of alarm at the thought of appearing unhelpful.

‘Sergeant,’ he said, waving Malik over to the plate. ‘Do these mean anything to you?’

Malik shook his head. Then he raised his eyebrows. ‘The brothers, maybe?’

Mephiston stared at him.

‘The Nine Brothers,’ said Malik, keeping his gaze locked on the plate. ‘It’s what the locals call the nine largest peaks on Sabassus. These shapes remind me of them.’

Fedorak nodded in relief. ‘And the Ninth Brother is the Talon, where we last saw Gourin.’ His relief quickly faded as he recalled the figure he had

seen at Gourin's side when she entered the mountain. The nausea that had gripped him at the time returned with a vengeance and he struggled not to vomit over the metal plate.

'Look at me,' said Mephiston, grabbing him by the shoulders.

Fedorak found it as hard to meet Mephiston's eyes as he had found trying to look at the hooded figure, but Mephiston gripped Fedorak's head in his armoured gauntlets, shoving it back until he could not escape those terrible, inhuman eyes. Once he met Mephiston's stare, he was powerless to look away. To his horror, his memory of the hooded monk billowed across Mephiston's eyes. He was unable to stop the scene unfolding over the Blood Angel's retinas – Gourin, greeting the peculiar figure, then walking into the mountain with it.

'Mephiston?' said Rhacelus. 'What is it?'

Fedorak could hear Rhacelus rising from the table and approaching but all he could see was the monk and that pale, curved hook that jutted from his hood.

'What is it!' he cried, unable to hold back his horror at what he was seeing.

'Damnation,' said Mephiston quietly, letting go of Fedorak's head and letting him slump back into Malik's arms.

Fedorak's heart drummed painfully in his chest but he managed to shrug off Malik and stand. 'What do you mean?'

Mephiston's face was still rigid and immobile, but somehow it looked different – the tightness more eager, the stare hungrier. He tapped another symbol on the metal plate. This one looked like a naive drawing of a vulture.

'Throne!' cried Fedorak. 'That's him! What is he?'

Mephiston turned to Rhacelus. The other Blood Angel finally showed another expression than disdain. His eyes mirrored the passion burning in Mephiston's. 'The daemon?'

'The daemon,' said Mephiston.

Fedorak laughed. 'You're both insane. What do you mean, a daemon?' Adrenaline coursed through him and he reeled away, lashing out at shapes that rushed to attack him.

Then Mephiston whispered something and Fedorak fell into darkness.



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Regimental HQ of the 145th Lupian Hellbound, Adurim, Abissama Delta, Sabassus

Mephiston watched Fedorak begin to stir. The colonel was strapped to a table in a small, shuttered room. There were just a few fingers of light spilling around the shutters to reveal that it was still daylight outside.

‘By the Throne,’ said Fedorak as he woke, straining against his bonds and trying to rise. ‘What is this? Who would dare do this to me?’

His rage faltered as he noticed Mephiston standing a few feet away. He slumped back against the table, the whites of his eyes gleaming from the sickly yellow pallor of his face.

Mephiston crossed the room towards him, his armour purring with electromagnetics. He leant over the table and unfastened the restraints.

Fedorak winced as blood rushed back into his arms and legs. He patted the limbs as he sat up and then managed to climb slowly down from the table, his legs numb and clumsy.

‘This is an outrage,’ he muttered. ‘You have no right to treat me in such a way.’

‘Asturia,’ replied Mephiston.

Fedorak shook his head. ‘What?’

‘The painting you found in the mess hall. It is a rare treasure. Painted by an artist called Asturia. It is uniquely beautiful. And unusually accurate.’

You were right to be impressed.'

Fedorak looked even more baffled. 'How do you know about that?'

'Asturia *knew* the Emperor of Mankind,' continued Mephiston, ignoring Fedorak's question. 'He personally observed several key engagements at the very dawn of the Imperium. The intensity of vision you noticed, his extraordinary insight, stems from the fact that he knew his subject. The determination you saw in that image, that refusal to accept defeat, is no simple trick of the artist. It affected you so profoundly because it is the truth. Truth is always beautiful. And beauty is always powerful.'

Fedorak massaged his temples and stared at the floor. 'Am I still dreaming? How can you know what I thought? What I saw?'

'I am a Librarian. Things that are hidden from others are made clear to me.' Mephiston shrugged. 'To be fair, even a psyker of very moderate abilities could see what's in your mind. Revelation shines out of you like a beacon. It's part of the reason I spared your life.'

'Spared my life?' Fedorak limped away from the table, looking around for his weapons. 'What are you talking about?'

'You saw a daemon.' Mephiston spoke in calm, neutral tones, but the words resonated, catching Fedorak's breath in his throat.

'Daemon?' he sneered. 'What do you mean? Are you talking about fairy tales?'

'Daemons exist. The name is perhaps misleading. It conjures up unhelpful connotations. But there are entities in the warp that hunger for your soul, Colonel Fedorak. Beings of aetheric force that desire a foothold in reality. They wish to escape their protean hells and enter our galaxy. And here, in the Prospero System, they have almost succeeded.' Mephiston did not need seer-sight to know what Fedorak was thinking. The terror was clear in his eyes.

Fedorak stared at him. 'Why... Why are you telling me all this?'

'Because there is a daemon on this world. And I need your help in finding it.'

Fedorak was unable to speak for a moment, shaking his head and mouthing silent words. Then he looked at the table. 'Why did you strap me down?'

'You were not yourself.' Mephiston wrenched the shutters open, flooding the room with light and heat. 'You attacked your comrade. You might have

killed him if Rhacelus had not intervened.’

‘Sergeant Malik?’ Fedorak sounded horrified. He shielded his eyes from the glare as sunlight flashed across Mephiston’s battleplate. ‘Is he hurt?’

Fedorak was a good man. Mephiston had sensed that even before he dredged his thoughts. He was gruff and brittle and he had spent years battling a faithlessness that ate into him like a cancer. But he cared for his men, and he would die for them if he had to. Mephiston had spent the last few hours striving for his sanity because he held vital information about Zadkiel. But he also felt a grudging affinity for a man who battled so much doubt and madness so as not to fail his men.

Fedorak was looking at the floor and muttering quickly to himself, growing increasingly agitated, massaging his face as though trying to remove a mask. ‘Like a bird skull,’ he whispered. ‘A mask like a bird skull.’ His words rose in pitch and desperation until he seemed on the verge of crying out or harming himself.

‘Zerpha.’ Mephiston said the word quietly and Fedorak immediately relaxed, ceasing his muttering and taking a deep breath.

Zerpha was an old Baalite word. Mephiston had dredged it from his own hazily recollected childhood. It had no innate significance to Fedorak, but Mephiston had planted verbal triggers in the colonel’s subconscious – ways to redirect his thoughts from memories of the daemon. There was no telling how long the wards would hold. Fedorak’s memories of Zadkiel would loop tirelessly until they found a chink in the armour Mephiston had made. And then Fedorak’s sanity would fold, leaving him incapable of rational thought. He might last months, years even, but eventually the pain would be too great.

‘You are lucky,’ said Mephiston. ‘Not many mortals come so close to a creature of the warp and survive as long as you have.’

Fedorak glanced at him. He was fully awake now and his eyes were sharp. ‘I won’t survive though, will I? I can feel the wound in my thoughts.’

‘You have some time remaining to you. Which of us can say more than that?’

Fedorak sat heavily on a chair and cradled his head. After a while he seemed to recover his composure and looked up at Mephiston. ‘Thank you. For whatever you did. Tell me how I can return the favour.’

‘This sector is no longer under Imperial control,’ said Mephiston. ‘You

are a lone outpost and you will soon fall.'

Fedorak nodded. 'Which is why no one heard our calls for help.'

'I heard your call, colonel. That cannot be an accident. You called, I came, and I met the one man on this planet who can lead me to my prey. If you had not seen Asturia's painting, you would not have survived to meet me. And if you had not survived to meet me, I might have lost my way.'

'Then the Emperor brought us together? He *is* watching over us.'

Mephiston shrugged. 'Or is it the skill of Asturia we should be thanking? The power of human endeavour and creativity? Is that what the Emperor means? Is he our better instincts? Is he the spark of genius that gives us hope and drives us on when we are about to accept defeat?'

Fedorak shook his head. 'I saw something more than a painting.'

'Who knows what you really saw? A conversation for another time. I have come here seeking the being that drove you to pull that gun on yourself. I have to find it. I have to stop it. Or that madness you feel twisting in your thoughts will soon infect the entire galaxy.' Mephiston stepped closer to Fedorak and looked down at him. 'Do you know what Zadkiel was doing on that mountain?'

'Gourin was there, on the slopes of the Talon. She had gathered her traitors at the river. Our scouts had told us she was headed for the summit and we could ambush her from a bridge.' He clenched his fists. 'But they were lying. Or, at least one of them was. Zur was in league with the cultists. He led us out onto the bridge and then it detonated.'

'The bridge was destroyed?'

'No.' Fedorak frowned. 'I thought it had been at first. I thought they had simply led us up there to die. But it was more than that. The explosives triggered something – a mechanism in the bridge. It did not just fall. It moved. It turned and changed shape.'

An idea began to form in Mephiston's thoughts. 'What material was the bridge made of? Normal rock?'

'No. It was mirrored. Like glass and silver, merged together, as if it had been melted. But... it almost looked like natural growth – like twisted, knotted vines, only made of mirrored metal.'

'What shape was it?' Mephiston looked around, saw a data-slate on a shelf and handed it to Fedorak.

Fedorak hesitated, grimacing, clearly pained by the effort of trying to

recall the events on the bridge. Then he nodded and drew a shape on the data-slate. ‘It was a wheel, with an eight-pointed star as its spokes. And then, when it came to lie flat on the mountainside, it formed a kind of circular door into the mountain.’

Mephiston felt the pleasing sensation of a puzzle slotting neatly together. It was the same way he had felt when he and Antros played a particularly complex game of memoriam. ‘I see what this is. Zadkiel must think me a simpleton. The arrogance of warp-spawn can be useful sometimes.’

‘I don’t understand,’ said Fedorak.

‘Neither do I, entirely. But I soon will.’ Mephiston took the slate and erased the image. He sketched out nine points, drawing Sabassus’ mountains from memory. ‘Which of these is the Talon?’

Fedorak tapped one. ‘The nearest. We are only an hour or so away. If it wasn’t for the damned steam everywhere you’d see it from this window.’

‘Can you lead me to the place where you saw this portal?’

Fedorak paled. He nodded.

‘Rhacelus,’ said Mephiston over the vox. ‘Have the gunships readied. We’re going to the Talon.’

‘*Chief Librarian,*’ came Rhacelus’ gruff tones over the vox.

‘Antros,’ said Mephiston. ‘Remain here and oversee the defence of the city. I doubt that was the last attack they’ll see.’

‘*Chief Librarian,*’ exclaimed Antros over the vox, ‘*would it not be wise to take me with you? The colonel spoke of Traitor Marines. It might require all three of us to—*’

‘Rhacelus,’ interrupted Mephiston. ‘If Codicier Antros steps foot on a gunship you have my permission to execute him.’

Rhacelus’ laughter boomed over the network. ‘*Gladly.*’



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The Talon, Abissama Delta, Sabassus

‘It was here,’ said Fedorak, calling up to Mephiston from back down the slope, picking his way through the mud with difficulty.

Mephiston looked down the mountainside. There was no sign of a bridge or the battle Fedorak had described. The murky water was rushing past with a determined roar, dappled with emerald sunlight and hazed by flies.

‘There!’ cried Fedorak, waving to a break in the trees. ‘That’s the clearing where they spoke.’

Rhacelus gave a signal and Blood Angels jogged up the mountain, moving easily over the difficult terrain, the stablights on their bolt rifles splintering the darkness under the canopy.

Mephiston was further up the slope but at Fedorak’s call he headed back down to meet the others. They gathered in a pool of sunlight about fifty feet in diameter and looked around.

Mephiston dropped to one knee, his weighty armour sinking into the mire as he picked at broken sticks and scraps of leaves. ‘Too much water has passed over this ground. There will be no chance of finding tracks.’

Fedorak nodded. ‘When they moved the bridge, or whatever that structure was, it redirected the river. It flooded this whole area.’

‘Chief Librarian,’ called Rhacelus, poking at the ground with the horns of his staff. ‘Look here.’

Mephiston rushed over and knelt in the muck again. There was a single clear footprint. It was massive, far larger than a normal man's boot, and its design was immediately familiar. 'Power armour,' said Mephiston, tracing the shape with his finger.

Rhacelus pointed to a decorative symbol near the heel.

Mephiston nodded. 'Thousand Sons.'

Fedorak shook his head as he approached and looked at the print. 'Thousand Sons?'

'Traitors,' said Mephiston. 'They were once a proud Space Marine Legion, forged by the Emperor on Terra and ruled by their genesire, Magnus the Red.'

'Once?'

Mephiston nodded. 'They turned from the Emperor's light thousands of years ago. They worship other gods now. Other things. They are soulless monsters clad in power armour.'

'Then perhaps the rumours are true,' said Rhacelus. 'Perhaps Magnus *is* attempting to build a new empire in the stars, starting here, in the Prospero System.'

Mephiston rose to his feet. 'Lords Guilliman and Dante implied as much. And who knows what has taken place since then. There may have been more developments in this system while we have been isolated on the far side of the Great Rift. Magnus may have already begun his expansion.'

Fedorak was following the exchange with a confused scowl. 'You said Magnus the Red lived thousands of years ago.'

Mephiston nodded. 'Such is the nature of the warp. Things that should die sometimes linger on. Especially beings of Magnus' power. He has always fought from afar though, waging the Long War from the safety of the empyrean. But with the Imperium divided and weakened, it looks as though he is finally making his move.'

'Why?' Fedorak asked. 'What can he want here after so much time has passed?'

'Revenge.' Mephiston stared at the footprint. 'Magnus lost his faith too, colonel. I do not know if he ever worshipped the Emperor as people might today, but he certainly believed in Him, even called Him father. But there was a galactic war. The Horus Heresy. Magnus and others betrayed the Emperor. The Emperor crushed the traitors so Magnus fled into the warp

with the dregs of his heretical Legion. Now he is rumoured to have returned.’ He waved at the footprint. ‘The presence of his Traitor Marines in this location would seem to support that.’

‘Why here?’ Fedorak looked around. ‘What is the significance of this jungle?’

‘Not the jungle, but this system. Magnus’ home world is here – Prospero. Or at least, its charred remains are here. It was destroyed by forces loyal to the Emperor but its corpse remains, orbiting the very star that is shining down on us right now.’

Rhacelus shrugged. ‘Perhaps the ruins of Prospero hold sentimental value for the enemy?’

Mephiston shook his head. ‘You have read the histories of the Horus Heresy, Rhacelus. Do you think Magnus is the sentimental type?’

Rhacelus shrugged. ‘Who knows what he is now. He is no longer the Magnus that fought in the Horus Heresy. He has spent centuries trapped in the nightmare of the warp. The Magnus that was defeated on Prospero all those years ago would have seen the power of symbolism. He would want to plant his standard in the same ground he used to rule. If not, why this particular system? With a whole galaxy to choose from, why come back to the site of his ruin? Clearly, he wants to make a point.’

‘But imagine the power required for him to re-enter the physical realm,’ said Mephiston. ‘Even for a being of his strength, it must have been exhausting.’

‘You think he’s come here to rebuild his strength?’

Mephiston nodded. ‘His own strength but also his military strength. Guilliman said the region has seen a marked increase in mutants and unsanctioned psykers.’

‘Magnus is mustering his troops,’ said Rhacelus. ‘You could be right.’

‘And something in this system is helping him.’

Mephiston looked at Fedorak. ‘You said this current insurrection was not the first. When did they begin?’

Fedorak was looking pained again, scratching anxiously at his face. ‘A few years ago. There have always been minor outbreaks – deserters and rabble-rousers and the like, but a few years ago the situation became more serious. I could tell straight away that it was not like before. We began to have large-scale acts of rebellion. Cults began springing up right across

the continent.'

Mephiston looked around the clearing. 'Was there anything that might have triggered the increase? A particularly gruelling campaign? Problems with morale? Anything unusual at all?'

Fedorak shook his head. Then he glanced at Mephiston with an awkward expression. 'You will think me fanciful...'

'Speak.'

'Not long before the uprisings, there was a phenomenon in the sky. I did not think much of it at the time but the natives went into a frenzy. They said it was a dire omen.'

'A phenomenon? What do you mean? The Great Rift occurred long before the events you described.'

'No, not the Great Rift. We can sometimes see that through the clouds, but it is little more than a purple glow. This was something else. I presumed it was a comet or something similar. A red star appeared in the night sky, far brighter than the others. It grew so bright it was visible in the day. We all felt its presence, like an eye watching us. Even my most reliable officers began acting strangely. No one could sleep, and even the weather was affected. As well as the endless, damned heat, we began to see storms and droughts.' Fedorak grimaced, massaging the bridge of his nose. 'It must be a coincidence, but it was soon after the comet that I began to hear reports of witchcraft and heretical cults.'

Mephiston looked at Rhacelus and Rhacelus nodded.

'What?' demanded Fedorak.

'Magnus' return is not the only rumour,' said Mephiston. 'Even on the far side of the galaxy we have heard tales of Sortiarius.'

'The Planet of the Sorcerers,' explained Rhacelus. 'A world of nightmares and magic. A world with no right to exist. Magnus has brought his daemon world with him.'

Fedorak stared back at the Blood Angels. 'That's what we saw? That was the red light in the sky?'

'Perhaps,' said Mephiston. 'It would explain the increase in psychic activity. The Planet of the Sorcerers is a haven for witches, a magnet for anyone who treads the dark path. There are countless fables and legends describing it. It is a promised land for those deluded heretics who worship Chaos.'

Fedorak looked warily at the two Librarians.

Rhacelus snorted in disbelief. ‘Mephiston is not describing *us*, you dolt. If you have not learned the difference between a sanctioned psyker and a heretic then you are not worthy of your rank.’

The anger in Rhacelus’ eyes only made Fedorak look more concerned, but before he could reply, Mephiston waved at the river and asked him a question.

‘Are we level with the location of the bridge? Is that where it stood before the cultists blew it up?’

‘Roughly,’ replied Fedorak, peering through the trees. ‘Yes, I believe so.’

Mephiston tapped the leather-bound book at his belt and glanced at Rhacelus. ‘*The Glutted Scythe*, chapter twenty-seven, verse seven. Inenarrable Magnetism. Let’s see what Zadkiel was doing here.’

Rhacelus signalled for Squad Turiossa to fan out through the trees and keep watch. Then he took a book from his belt and followed Mephiston to the riverbank.

Fedorak backed away, pistol drawn, shaking his head as the two Librarians began to intone an incantation.

Mephiston spoke from memory while Rhacelus read. The words were strangely low and with each phrase they shifted down a key, until the noise was quite unlike anything that could have emerged from human vocal cords.

Rhacelus raised his horned staff so that sunlight flashed across the skull, and Mephiston drew Vitarus, pointing the blade at the rushing currents.

The Librarians’ voices grew so low and so magnified by warpcraft that the mountainside began to judder, as though in the grips of a minor tremor. Rocks and branches tumbled down the slope and Fedorak climbed a tree trunk, glancing anxiously around as debris bounced off his flak armour.

Finally, with a booming, unified roar, the two Librarians howled a command.

Beams of red light speared from the riverbank, like ruddy sunlight shining up from an underground crypt. There were dozens of the red shafts. It looked like crimson trees had sprung from the heart of the river. At first, the water rushed through the columns of light unaffected, but when the two Librarians repeated their command, their voices echoing through the gully, the red beams meshed, forming a single structure.

The river crashed against the red wall, cascading around the sides with an explosive boom. Fedorak clambered higher up his tree but the Blood Angels simply braced themselves as swirling currents flooded the banks and hit them.

With water boiling around them, Mephiston and Rhacelus made their way down the mudslide to the now exposed riverbank. Fish and toads thrashed in the sludge, hazed by banks of flies as the river thundered off in new directions. Mephiston sank up to his knees as he slopped into the centre of the riverbed, using Vitarus to haul his way through the cloying muck. When he reached the centre, he jammed Vitarus down to its hilt and willed warpflame through the blade.

The mud began to boil and spit, engulfing him in foetid steam. Rhacelus followed his lead and jammed his staff down, adding a second wave of psychic power. Within a few short minutes, flashes of silver started blinking up through the mud, shimmering over the Librarians' faces as they worked.

As warp currents surged through his bones, Mephiston realised he barely needed to speak the words of the rite. His power was now so innate, so tightly bound to his mind, that it spilled out of him almost of its own volition. There was a time when he would have been suspicious of such untrammelled skill. Rhacelus had laughed at the mortal soldier for confusing psychic disciplines with witchcraft but the further Mephiston's studies led him, the more he realised how subtle the distinction was. For centuries, organisations like his own Librarius had robed their disciplines in mystery and esoteric language, believing it was through their labyrinthine rituals that they kept their minds pure. Mephiston was beginning to see things differently. It seemed to him that it was not so much method as motivation that separated the divine from the damned. He recalled his reluctance to revive the dead gunship pilot. Some things were clearly beyond the pale, but here, on Sabassus, he knew he was pursuing the Angel's will.

He embraced the tides washing through him, letting the full fury of the ritual rip through Vitarus and into the ground.

There was an explosion of mud and flies as the riverbank billowed up like a tossed sheet, flinging muck and roots away from the two Librarians.

Rhacelus laughed in shock, casting Mephiston a sideways glance as a vast

silver edifice appeared in front of them. ‘By Sanguinius!’ He struggled to be heard over the tumult, staggering as though on the deck of a storm-wracked ship. ‘Are you even saying the words?’

Mephiston shook his head, crimson light spilling from his armour as he turned the riverbank into a juddering crater. It looked as though the two Librarians had been hurled from the sky and torn a hole in the mountain.

‘And are you safe?’ said Rhacelus, lowering his voice as the din faded. ‘You are in control?’

Mephiston nodded. ‘I am entirely the master of it, Rhacelus.’ He waved his hand in a casual gesture and mud whipped away from them, crashing into the distant trees. ‘It is me and I am it. We are no longer at war with each other.’

He could feel Rhacelus watching him, closely, as he always did at such times. In the past, Rhacelus’ vigilance had been the only thing that saved him from being overwhelmed, but those days were gone. His conscious and subconscious minds were working in perfect unison. He could see every aspect of his gift with perfect clarity.

Once the mud had settled around them, the two Librarians began to explore the structure they had uncovered. It was a circle of silver, covered in knotted, organic shapes – curlicues and loops that spiralled around each other like vines but were clearly designed rather than natural. Some of the shapes formed characters that Mephiston recognised and however beautifully rendered they were, they brought a sneer to his lips.

Rhacelus followed the direction of his gaze and muttered a curse. ‘The Dark Tongue.’

Mephiston nodded, tapping at the contorted sigil with Vitarus. ‘Zadkiel must have come looking for this portal.’

‘Why though?’ There was a clang of ceramite hitting metal as Rhacelus dropped to one knee and leant close to the surface. ‘Why would a daemon seek entry into this mountain?’ He frowned and crouched lower, until his ear was almost touching the surface. ‘Mephiston, do you hear that?’

Mephiston knelt next to him. At first he could only hear mud and soil tumbling around the edges of the crater, but then he caught something else resonating up through the metal. ‘Singing?’

Rhacelus frowned and nodded. ‘It sounds like a choir.’

Mephiston blocked out all distractions and focused his thoughts on the

sound. One of the first skills he had learned as an acolyte was how to direct the mind at a single point and he had perfected the technique over the years. Everything fell away until he was alone with the song. It was beautiful. A hymn. But its beauty hid something else. He sent his thoughts deeper through the soaring notes and then he grimaced. The sound was born of agony. The vocal cords producing the words were doing so against their will. The singer was in horrific pain and the pain was fuelling the hymn.

He rose to his feet and backed away, filled with distaste. Rhacelus did the same and was about to say something when a loud clattering sound rang out across the crater.

They both whirled around, pistols drawn.

It was Fedorak. He was sprawled at the bottom of the crater wall, covered in mud and wincing in pain.

Mephiston crossed the metal disc and helped the man to his feet.

‘Best not to approach us unannounced,’ grunted Rhacelus.

Fedorak nodded, dusting himself down. He seemed to have recovered from his earlier panic and he tried to look up at Mephiston with a more dignified manner. ‘I can show you where they went.’

Mephiston nodded and followed the man as he stumbled across the undulating surface of the metal disc.

‘Here,’ said Fedorak, approaching a smaller circle in the upper left quadrant of the larger shape. ‘Gourin’s companion did something to my men. He and Gourin threw them into the river without even touching them and then they...’ He scowled and shook his head. ‘They set my men alight with blue flames.’

‘And then what happened?’ asked Mephiston, examining the smaller circle.

‘This thing rotated. And then it opened. It formed a kind of door into the mountain that led onto steps.’

Mephiston examined the surface of the metal and waved Rhacelus over. ‘Here, look at this.’

At the centre of the disc there was a small, circular depression.

Rhacelus nodded and placed the end of his staff in the hole. ‘We do not know the necessary rite though. And it sounds as if Zadkiel used human sacrifice to fuel the ritual.’

Fedorak backed away and Rhacelus glared at him. ‘I will not be treated with suspicion by someone with no idea—’

‘Gauis,’ interrupted Mephiston. ‘He’s afraid of you. With good reason.’

Rhacelus gave Fedorak another scowl, then turned his back on the man.

Mephiston made a mental note of all the glyphs that covered the metal and the positions of the levers on the door. He considered them carefully for a moment, then deliberately thought about something else. His rebirth under Qvo-87’s knives was never far from his thoughts and he cast his mind back there, to the visions he saw as his body was being remade, trying once more to decipher the mystery of the black angel he saw battling in the warp. With his conscious mind distracted, his sub-conscious was left in peace to examine the mystery of the glyphs.

‘I have seen these positions before,’ he said after a few moments, when the answer presented itself to him. He crouched low over the metal, frowning, baffled by the revelation. ‘But it makes no sense.’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Rhacelus.

‘This combination of blades is almost identical to moves Antros made when I last played him at memoriam.’ Mephiston traced his finger over the metal teeth. ‘Only this piece here is out of place. Otherwise, this is the exact same sequence Antros used to beat me. It’s like he’s been here before us and left us a message.’

Rhacelus’ expression darkened. ‘If this is one of his infantile games I really *will* execute him.’ He opened the vox network. ‘Antros. Report.’

There was a fizzle of white noise but no other reply.

‘Antros!’ snapped Rhacelus. ‘Report, damn you.’

There was still no answer.

Mephiston reached out with his thoughts, tracing back down over the foothills towards the city. ‘I cannot see him. I think he has left the city.’

Rhacelus cursed. ‘What is he playing at? I knew we should have left him on Baal.’

Mephiston looked back at the lock. ‘Just one piece is out of place. Could he have foreseen this, somehow?’

‘And not mentioned it? If he knew this door was here and he knew the correct combination, why not just tell us? Why would he hide a clue in a game of memoriam?’

‘You’re right, it makes no sense.’ Mephiston thought back over the game,

wondering if he might have made a mistake, but the arrangement of the pieces was almost identical. He reached out and pushed the one piece that did not match.

Splinters of light scattered across the door, linking each of the locks and lighting up the outer circle. At the same moment, the distant sound of singing grew louder, so loud that even Fedorak heard it, looking around in confusion for the source of the music.

‘It was the same combination,’ muttered Mephiston. ‘The door is unlocked.’

‘But you can’t open it,’ said Fedorak from a few feet away. ‘Not unless you do what Gourin and her friend did.’

‘I do not require the blood of others to fuel my gift,’ said Mephiston. He indicated to Rhacelus that he wished to take hold of the horned staff and once he had placed his hands over the top of the skull, he recited a few brief phrases. Crimson fire burst from his gauntlets and rushed down the staff, lighting up the runes along its length and mingling with the blue lights that shimmered across the door.

Fedorak staggered as the floor jolted beneath them and the melodic voice rose even higher in volume and urgency.

‘Back away,’ said Mephiston, removing the staff and handing it to Rhacelus. ‘Stand outside the circle.’

A few seconds later, the lights pulsed even brighter and the circle whirred into motion, separating into spiral plates that sped away from each other to form an opening. The sound of singing rushed out to greet them and a flight of steps led down into the darkness. The same blue lines that networked the door snaked away down the steps, like an invitation to enter.

Rhacelus spoke to Squad Turiossa over the vox, summoning them down into the crater, and by the time they had clambered down the slope, Mephiston was already striding into the mountain, disappearing into the gloom.

‘What do we do about Antros?’ asked Rhacelus as he rushed after Mephiston.

Mephiston had spent many hours considering Antros’ future and disliked keeping Rhacelus in the dark, but his thoughts were not clear enough to share. The surprise at the door had reminded him that, even now, with so much control over his powers and his mind, Antros was still a mystery.

‘Focus on the mission,’ he said. ‘Zadkiel is in this mountain somewhere. We need to drive him back into the warp before he completes whatever ritual he has planned.’ Mephiston paused to look at his old friend. ‘All my trials have led to this challenge. Magnus has been fooled as completely as any other Chaos worshipper. Whatever he *thinks* he’s doing in this system is irrelevant. He is preparing a path for Tzeentch. He is opening the doors between madness and reality. And Zadkiel has come to this mountain to ensure he can’t be stopped. Do not concern yourself with Antros. We must find the daemon fast, and stop him.’

‘Do not concern myself with Antros?’ Rhacelus’ eyes flashed. ‘He’s playing games with us, Mephiston. He showed you the key to that door weeks before we even knew there was a door. And he’s not in Adurim, even though you gave him express orders to remain there.’

Mephiston stared at Rhacelus. ‘Are you accusing your battle-brother of something?’

Rhacelus clenched his jaw. Then he looked away, studying the lines and glyphs glowing all around them. ‘There is something peculiar about his behaviour. At best he’s undisciplined, at worst he’s lying.’

‘I have put my faith in him, Rhacelus. And I have never seen as clearly as I do now.’

‘Which is why I find it so strange that you did not see this latest mischief from Antros.’

Mephiston was about to say more when the sound of singing rose in pitch and he realised how close they now were to its source. The other Blood Angels had reached them, so he waved the group on down the corridor, heading towards the sound.

The passageway took a few more turns through the gloomy half-light, lit only by the lines in the metal, then it opened out onto a circular chamber. Mephiston halted at the threshold in surprise and behind him Fedorak cried out in disgust.

The blue lines of light, snaking into the room from eight different doorways, all intersected at the room’s centre, and standing over the nexus was a young man. He was bathed in blue flames that lit the chamber with a dazzling light and his head was thrown back in agony. The flames covered every inch of his body, his skin bubbling like soup on a stove. His eyes had melted away, leaving empty sockets and his hands were locked in agonised

claws. This was the singer they had heard from the mountainside. His face was twisted in a horrific leer, but rather than a howl, beautiful music rushed from his throat. It was clear he could not escape his torment. His body jolted and writhed in pain, but his feet were locked to the point where the blue lines met.

‘By the Throne!’ cried Fedorak. ‘I know that man! It’s Tadnos. What’s happening to him?’

As Squad Turioassa fanned out around the room, guns trained on the doorways, Mephiston approached the burning man. An intense cold radiated from him and he shivered as the flames passed over his body, but this close his song was beguilingly beautiful. Again, though, as Mephiston focused on the sound, he realised that the true sound was buried beneath the artificial one. The man *was* howling. It was sorcery that made the sound appear sweet.

Mephiston reached out until his hand was almost touching the flames. Aetheric power battered against his gauntlet in powerful waves. ‘He has been turned into fuel. He is a living galvanic cell.’ He studied the circular designs around the man’s feet, ignoring the mixture of screams and singing as he tried to decipher the workings of the man’s prison. ‘He is powering this place. Quite ingenious.’

‘It’s monstrous!’ cried Fedorak, whipping out his pistol and pointing it at the agonised man.

Mephiston flicked his fingers and Fedorak’s gun flew from his grip, clattering across the glinting floor panels. ‘Do not even think of shooting him,’ he said.

‘We can’t leave him like that!’ cried Fedorak, looking to Rhacelus for support. ‘It’s horrific. He’s not dying.’

Rhacelus ignored Fedorak and approached the living corpse. ‘If he died, would it break the circuit?’

Mephiston nodded. ‘He is one cell in a larger alchemical cell. If the link is broken...’ He looked up at the ceiling. ‘This place would become inert and we would be trapped here, unable to reach its heart.’

‘What place?’ demanded Fedorak, retrieving his pistol but placing it carefully back in its holster. ‘What are these chambers? No caves would look like this. Who made them?’

‘Cultists,’ said Mephiston, waving at the sinuous designs covering every

surface. ‘These are all sigils of the Chaos god Tzeentch. Just like the markings we saw outside. Someone came into this mountain a long time ago and created a...’ He shrugged, not entirely sure what they had created. ‘A shrine of some kind. A place to perform their dark sacraments, perhaps? And now Zadkiel has come back here, looking to uncover its secrets.’

‘Perhaps there is a weapon of some kind hidden in here?’ said Rhacelus.

Mephiston nodded and looked away from the dazzling figure at the room’s centre, towards the looping, curved walls and snatches of forbidden text carved into the floor. ‘These rooms are old. Very old. Perhaps they date back to the days when Magnus first walked the galaxy? Perhaps he left something down here?’

‘We can’t leave him like that,’ muttered Fedorak, looking near to, but not at, the burning man.

‘If we remove one of the galvanic cells from the battery, these chambers will be sealed and plunged back into darkness,’ replied Mephiston. He was not dismissing Fedorak’s request, simply talking it through. ‘Between us, Rhacelus and I have great power at our disposal, but there is something unusual happening down here. Have you noticed, Rhacelus? It is not possible to see the full extent of this crypt, or tunnel network, or whatever it is. Try scrying beyond the next few chambers. It is warded in some peculiar way.’

Rhacelus’ eyes burned a deeper shade of blue as he tried to look beyond the physical confines of the chamber. He nodded. ‘True. It is as though this place is not entirely real.’

Mephiston nodded quickly. Rhacelus had a marvellous way of elucidating thoughts he was not quite able to grasp. ‘Exactly. You have it, Rhacelus.’ He tapped Vitarus’ blade on the shimmering floor. ‘This material is only partially present. It is only half-physical. The rest of its mass belongs to some other plane of being.’

Fedorak shook his head. ‘What are you talking about?’

‘It does not matter,’ said Mephiston. ‘But we cannot do as you request.’ He gave the tormented singer a last glance, then crossed the chamber, heading for the door opposite. ‘The best we can do for your friend is to find Zadkiel and discover what brought him here. Once we have solved that mystery, I will happily consign these tunnels to oblivion.’

As they hurried on through the subsequent chambers, more voices echoed through the darkness towards them, all raised in song and giving Mephiston the strange sensation that he was in a subterranean cathedrum. Parts of the music were eerily familiar, reminding him of the hymns sung in the Blood Angels fortress-monastery, back on Baal. There were phrases and motifs in the music that had direct links to Adeptus Astartes articles of faith. It was as though a pure line of logic had been redirected at some point in the past and resulted in this monstrous hybrid.

They had been following the blue lines for nearly an hour when the ground began to rise ahead. The passageways continued on an upward slope, steepening into broad steps that led up through the mountain.

Every half an hour or so they would pass one of the burning figures, but they were all too far gone in their pain to notice the Blood Angels or Fedorak.

Finally, after several hours had passed, Fedorak could no longer keep pace with the Blood Angels' tireless stride and had to endure the indignity of being carried by one of the Intercessors, flung over the Space Marine's shoulders like a sack of grain.

The steps grew narrower and finally became a spiral staircase that only allowed two of the Blood Angels to fit side by side.

Mephiston rushed ahead of the others. The strange, liminal nature of the architecture was still confounding his warp-sight, but he sensed they must be nearing the summit of the mountain and he was sure that it was there, after all these decades, that he would finally reach his prey. A sense of impending resolution powered him up the steps.

He emerged into a long nave-like hall with a star-shaped window at one end looking out over the jungle. The hall was split by a colonnade of serpentine pillars that burned with the same cold, blue fire that had surrounded all the corpses they passed. The effect was impressive – an avenue of bright, fiery towers that threw everything outside them into darkness.

At the opposite end of the hall, the blinding avenue led to an altar designed to resemble an eagle's claw. A small figure hunched next to it, leaning on a crook staff with his head hidden in a deep hood. Mephiston hurried down the hall past the flaming pillars in his eagerness to finally face his nemesis.

‘Mephiston!’ called Rhacelus, entering the hall behind him.

Mephiston heard the warning in his friend’s voice but disregarded it. He was alive with power. Everything he had learned over the centuries blazed in his limbs. There was nothing that could halt him. Nothing to fear. Qvo-87 might have perfected him, but he was Sanguinius’ son and the Angel had made him for this moment, this purpose.

He was halfway down the colonnade when the lights went out. The burning columns blinked into darkness and the lights in the floor vanished. The auto-senses in Mephiston’s armour kicked in instantly, flashing a monochrome world across the lenses of his helmet.

The robed figure was still waiting beside the altar, but as Mephiston whirled around, his enhanced vision revealed dozens more figures standing outside the colonnade in the darkness: lines of Space Marines around the perimeter of the hall. Thousand Sons. They all had their bolters raised.

Mephiston cursed. The door slammed shut behind him.

In perfect unison, the Thousand Sons opened fire.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Orxus, Abissama Delta, Sabassus

Antros strode calmly down Orxus' main street. Dozens of pairs of eyes watched him from alleyways and windows, but no one was foolish enough to break cover. The buildings were not as battle-damaged as the ones in Adurim but there were clear signs of armed struggle – ruined vehicles lay abandoned and several of the hab blocks were burned out. Sergeant Malik and his men were advancing behind him, lasguns trained on every flicker of shadow, but Antros did not anticipate needing their help.

He was followed by a wall of smoke billowing from the mess he had made of the gates. There had been shots from the walls when he approached the town, but he dealt with the sentries the same way as the gates – blowing them apart with well-placed krak grenades.

He felt a flicker of guilt as he remembered Mephiston's order to stay in Adurim and guard the city. He tried again to contact Rhacelus over the vox. As on each previous attempt, the only reply was a howl of white noise. He tried another channel with the same effect.

'What could I do?' he muttered, marching on down the street. Within hours of Mephiston leaving, Sergeant Malik had come to Antros with reports of cultists massing in Orxus. There were far more cultists than anyone had predicted and they were press-ganging the locals, executing the families of anyone who refused to join them. 'I *am* still protecting the

city,' he said, as though the Chief Librarian could hear him. 'By removing this threat.' But he was self-aware enough to know that he had jumped at the chance to stop kicking his heels in Adurim.

Roof tiles crashed to the ground as a dull, rattling sound echoed down the street.

Antros stopped, nodding to himself, recognising the engine noise from the countless war zones he had crossed with Mephiston and Rhacelus.

'Chimeras,' he said, looking back at Malik and the other Guardsmen. 'Your scouts were right. Take cover.'

'Several Chimeras,' he corrected himself, as the sound grew louder. 'Plus infantry.'

As the Hellbound scattered, dashing into buildings and behind burned-out groundcars, Antros remained in the centre of the transitway and put his pistol back in its holster. The rumbling noise grew louder, approaching the crossroads up ahead, and he planted his staff in the ground, rested his palms on its head and closed his eyes.

He recalled a few passages from *The Gluttoned Scythe*. It was years since he had needed to actually look at the sacred texts. He was always careful to hide the fact from Rhacelus and Mephiston, pretending to read as he harnessed the evocations, but with only the Guardsmen to see him he simply let the power swell through him.

Seer-sight flooded his mind and he saw cultists approaching through a marketplace on the far side of an Administratum block. His mind's eye was not as clear as true sight, but it was damned close. He had been right about the tanks but not about the numbers. There were over a dozen Chimeras and several other tanks that appeared to be jury-rigged Chimera variants. The tanks were accompanied by a hundred or so cultists on foot, all of them armed with lasguns and autopistols. They would turn the corner in a few minutes and were making no effort to hide themselves. Clearly, they had been emboldened by reports of a single blue-armoured stranger accompanied by just one squad of Hellbound Guardsmen.

Antros muttered a curse under his breath. A few former Guardsmen and a couple of tanks sounded like an easy job for a Blood Angels Librarian, especially one of his particular strengths. But twenty armoured vehicles and accompanying infantry would stretch even his abilities.

They were still a few minutes away and Antros had time to study the

cultists before they attacked. They were clearly beyond all hope of redemption. Many already showed physical signs of damnation – some walked on goat legs and cloven hooves and others had tusks sprouting from their discoloured brows. All of them had defaced their uniforms, ripping away their markings and hanging strange fetishes from their jackets. Antros felt a shiver of distaste as he recognised sigils of the Dark Tongue daubed on scraps of skin and bundles of bone.

What now? he wondered. He had assured Malik they could leave most of his Guardsmen in Adurim. He was damned if he was going to turn tail before this slovenly rabble and go back for more men. He looked at his weapons. He had a plasma pistol, his staff and a few more frag grenades. Not really enough to tackle an entire armoured column. He shook his head, annoyed with himself. He was thinking like a rank and file soldier, not a seasoned brother of the Librarius. Rhacelus and the Chief Librarian had taught him better than this. What would Mephiston do? He cast his mind back over the last few days.

The tanks had almost reached the crossroads, sending clouds of steam and smoke into view, when Antros nodded. Of course. He knew exactly what to do. He had been so impressed by Mephiston when the *Blood Oath* was attacked in the Cronium Gulf. Rather than battling whole squadrons of fighters, Mephiston had just possessed a single pilot. Officially, Antros was not of sufficient rank to know the relevant rituals, but he was more than capable of handling any Librarius discipline. He had committed the rite to memory as they travelled through the webway and the words spilled easily from his lips.

He cast his mind through the tank turrets until he reached the one at the back of the phalanx. Then, just seconds before the column reached the crossroads, he possessed the gunner of the rearmost tank and opened fire.

The gun mounted on the turret was a heavy flamer and he turned it on the infantry, lighting them up in bright, vivid lines. The Guardsmen howled and fell as their own tank set them alight.

The other tanks shuddered to a halt and fired with autocannon and pintle-mounted bolters, filling the streets with smoke and noise.

Antros smiled as the rearmost tank collapsed under the deafening barrage. He had already sent his thoughts elsewhere, into the gunner of the tank at the head of the column. He turned the tank's turret-mounted laser

on the foundering column behind it.

In a few seconds he had possessed several gunners and turned the armoured column into a confused fire-fight with every tank firing desperately at the one nearest to it.

Antros opened his eyes, drew his plasma-pistol and strolled around the corner to survey the carnage.

A few heretics saw him approaching and tried to take aim at him, but Antros gunned them down with calm efficiency, dropping them into the dust before they had taken a step in his direction. The Hellbound appeared behind him and opened fire, cutting down more of the blazing mutants.

Some of the tanks were still intact and they now rushed towards him, their treads rattling and churning up the corpse-strewn mud. Antros mouthed the rite again and passed into the skull of another gunner.

He gasped.

It was like diving into what had appeared to be a clear stream only to find it was a sewer. The mind he had entered was utterly unknowable – a jumble of thoughts that seemed to make no sense at all. A lunatic, he guessed – someone so perverted by false worship that their mind was as mutated as their flesh. No, he realised, as the repulsive sentience enveloped him, this was not just a mad man; perhaps he was insane, but he was also a psyker. A sorcerer.

The dangers of such possession were not lost on Antros. He quickly attempted to wrench his thoughts back out of the man's brain.

+You have only reached a fraction of your potential.+

The voice in Antros' mind sounded calm and reasonable.

+You know it, don't you? They hold you back, all of them, because they do not understand you. They can't see what you are capable of.+

Antros did not reply, refusing to engage with the sorcerer, but neither did he pull away.

+Do you know why your masters keep so many secrets from you? Do you know why they hoard the most elucidating texts? Because they know that, were you to read the things they have read, the roles would be reversed. You would achieve more, see more. They know it. And they are afraid.+

The sorcerer was voicing thoughts that Antros battled to deny on a daily basis. It was dizzying to hear them coming from someone else and for a moment Antros forgot about the carnage blazing through Orxus, instead

wondering what he could do if Mephiston and Rhacelus would just treat him as the equal he knew he was.

+I can help you, Antros,+ said the sorcerer.

+How do you know my name? How do you know anything about me?+

+Because I wield the power your masters hide from you, Antros. Because I have *true* vision. The vision your lords refuse to share. How do you think Mephiston pursued me so effectively all these years?+

+Pursued *you*? You are Zadkiel?+

+I am Zadkiel.+ The voice remained pleasant, despite the fury in Antros' voice. +And I am about to create a kingdom for people like you, Antros. A haven for everyone who has had to hide their true nature. For all these years, Antros, you have been forced to wear a mask, afraid of disrupting ancient laws, laws that were cruel and blinkered even when they were first written, thousands of years ago. You have been neutered and oppressed, Lucius Antros, but I am building an empire where no one need ever wear a mask again.+

Antros' rage ebbed away as he realised, with relief, that he had passed this test. He had seen through the daemon's wiles. He would not be so easily tempted. He decided to play along though, and see what else he could learn. The Hellbound were picking off the last of the heretics and the battle was effectively over. So he could brave the daemon's poison a little longer.

+How?+ he asked, trying to sound half-convinced. +How would you create a new kingdom in real space?+

+It is already being built, Antros. The Crimson King has summoned the Planet of Sorcerers – he has drawn it through the veil. It is a world of magic and revelation. Its mere presence in the corporeal galaxy is enough to begin the process of change. It is the ultimate catalyst. Astral light is coalescing around it in ways the cosmos has never witnessed before. The supernatural and the fantastic have heard its call and they are coming, Antros, coming in their millions. The Prospero System will be the birthplace of a new race – a species of sacred, ascendant beings. People like us, Antros.+

+But why Sabassus? Why have you come here? This is not the Planet of the Sorcerers.+

He could hear the pride in the daemon's voice. +Ah, this is the crowning

glory of it all. Like you, I have been overlooked and undervalued. The Crimson King does not realise the power I can bequeath him. But here, on Sabassus, I have found a way to accelerate a process that would have taken him centuries to complete. The nine peaks of Sabassus are not mountains, Antros. They are manifestations of the Great Changer. They are facets of Tzeentch himself. They are Silver Towers, shards of his infinite wisdom and power. They have lain dormant for all these centuries, buried under tonnes of ignorant rock, but deep inside the Talon I have ignited the ninth tower. It is a prism for Tzeentch's celestial fire and in a matter of hours it will be joined to the other towers, creating a blessed transmutation. Once Tzeentch's light spreads from the altar in the ninth tower back to the altar in the first tower, the circle will be complete and then...+

The daemon seemed too awed by its own speech to continue.

+And then *what?*+

+And then, when the nine towers are united, they will multiply everything Magnus has begun. The astral beacon he has created will be magnified ninefold. The summons from the Planet of the Sorcerers will reach *beyond* this sector. It will spread into the Sol System itself. Right into the heart of the dead Emperor's realm. The millions who have so far heard its call will be a drop in the ocean compared to the great legions who will rise from the Sol System. On Terra and Mars, in the birthplace of humanity itself, Magnus' divine promise will be heard – rise up from your shackles, become who you were born to be, evolve without shame or censure. The Emperor's subjects will flock in their millions, Antros, to the City of Light, to Tizca, where the New Kingdom shall begin and the old ways will finally be cast down.+

The fighting was over. Antros was standing motionless in the middle of the main street as Guardsmen gathered around him, calling his name, confused by his trance-like state. But Antros' thoughts were still entwined with Zadkiel's, processing all the information he had gleaned. 'But the towers must be united,' he muttered, causing the Guardsmen to look at each other in confusion.

+Have no fear, Antros. The flame is lit. We are hours away from victory. Soon, every soul on Terra will understand that their true place in the universe is not fawning at the feet of a mouldering corpse. From gifted seers to the Emperor's mightiest Librarians, they will all feel the pull of

Sortiarius. You have arrived just in time, Antros. And it is not by chance. I have seen you from afar and beheld the majesty of your mind. You are far more than your masters would have you believe. You are a prince of the New Kingdom. Tzeentch has singled you out. He has chosen you, Lucius Antros.+

Antros had heard enough. While the daemon boasted and lied, Antros had been busy, priming the shells housed in the Chimera's guns.

+There was a time when I might almost have believed you,+ he said, +but thanks to Mephiston and Rhacelus, I have lived long enough to learn the difference between divine promises and ugly lies.+

+Do not be a fool. Do not consign yourself to the ranks of mediocr—+

The daemon was silenced as Antros triggered the shells, turning the Chimera into a column of flame. Fragments of smoking plasteel thudded down around him, causing the Guardsmen to back away, shielding their faces.

Antros did not delude himself. He could not kill a daemon simply by destroying the heretic it had possessed. But he still felt a grim satisfaction in silencing that triumphant voice.

He looked around at the carnage and smiled. It was not the sight of dead heretics and ruined tanks that pleased him, but the thought that he had been right to come here. If he had not encountered the daemon, he would never have learned the significance of the nine peaks. Mephiston and Rhacelus had taken all the other Blood Angels into the Talon and there was no way of contacting them. Only he knew that the mountains were Silver Towers of Tzeentch. And only he knew how to disrupt Zadkiel's plans. He had spent long hours trying to rid himself of the idea that he was destined to save his Chapter. It had always seemed arrogant and delusional. Even as his power grew beyond anything Mephiston had predicted, Antros tried to ignore the grand visions. But now, in the foetid swamps of Sabassus, he was about to be proved right. Rather than the elation he might have expected, he felt a sense of peace. He saw his destiny laid out before him. He knew exactly what to do.

'Sergeant Malik,' he said, looking around, peering through the smoke.

'My lord?' The Guardsman rushed over and looked up at Antros with undisguised awe.

'There are nine great peaks on Sabassus. If the Talon is the ninth, which

one might be called the first?’

Malik thought for a moment. ‘Probably the one called the Fin, my lord. At least, Fin is the mountain the locals refer to as the “youngest”. It’s in the Gulf of Prius. It’s not reachable by land.’

‘By gunship?’

‘Yes, my lord.’

Antros looked around at the smouldering tanks and the mounds of corpses. The local people were starting to venture out of doorways, looking warily at Antros.

‘You, me and a pilot,’ said Antros. ‘The rest of the men can stay here and clean up this mess.’

He strode back towards the gates.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The Talon, Abissama Delta, Sabassus

Mephiston's moment of annoyance was brief. He had mastered his temporal distortion techniques so completely that before a single bolter round hit his men, he had stepped inside a frozen instant. The muzzle flashes in the Traitor Marines' guns became a row of static white blossoms, lighting up their cerulean battleplate. Mephiston counted them. Fedorak was right; there were a hundred, all in identical battle stances, their ornate bolters aimed from the hip. They looked like menacing statues.

The Blood Angels behind him were caught in the act of whirling to defend themselves, raising their bolt rifles. Rhacelus gripped his horned staff in both hands and warp-lightning was already blazing inside the skull. Fedorak was at the far side of the hall, near the closed doors. His eyes were wild and staring but Mephiston was impressed to notice that despite the rows of armoured goliaths surrounding him, he was raising his pistol to return fire.

'You have reached the beginning at the end,' said hundreds of voices in unison.

Mephiston looked at the Rubric Marines, confused.

'Here,' said the voices.

Mephiston turned back to the altar. Impossibly, the hooded figure was

strolling towards him, inhabiting the same fragment of time. They had never met but Mephiston recognised him immediately, from the plain threadbare robes to the serpents hanging from his sleeves. ‘Zadkiel,’ he said.

‘We have shared, share and will share so much,’ said the daemon. As it approached him, Mephiston saw the peculiar face that had haunted his dreams for so many years – the bleached, smooth bone of a raptor’s skull, its cruel beak jutting from its deep hood.

Mephiston was not fool enough to chat with daemonkin, but he did have one question. ‘What brought you here? Why Sabassus?’

Zadkiel stared at him, taking in his armour and weapons. ‘Fascinating. Quite beautiful. The catalyst of a new dawn.’

Mephiston shook his head. ‘Catalyst?’

Zadkiel began to circle him, slowly, as though examining a peculiar specimen. ‘Your soul, Mephiston. Quite unique. A triumvirate of desires, hopes and hungers. You are a new species. Did you realise? Quite new. And through you, the New Kingdom will be born.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘You asked what brought me here.’ Zadkiel was still circling the hall, gently swinging his staff from side to side. ‘Two things, Mephiston. The first was the brothers.’

‘The mountains?’ Mephiston played along with the conversation but he realised he had already wasted too much time. The daemon’s appearance did not fool him. He could feel waves of psychic power radiating from Zadkiel’s robes. It was like standing next to an enormous generator. Warp currents washed over his armour. As the daemon boasted, Mephiston pored over hundreds of texts in his mind, searching for the imprecation he needed.

‘They are not mountains,’ said Zadkiel. As the daemon spoke, he waved his staff with more force. Behind Mephiston, one of the Intercessors erupted into blue flame. The conflagration was so fierce that it lit up the entire hall.

The Blood Angel did not move, still frozen by temporal distortion, but an agonised howl ripped through his throat. As he cried out, the sound was twisted into a beautiful melody.

Mephiston leapt to attack, lunging with Vitarus, swinging the blade as he

leapt across the hall.

The sword sliced through smoke and embers and clanged onto the floor.

Zadkiel had vanished.

‘The peaks are fragments of divine will,’ said the daemon chorus. ‘Shards of the great labyrinth.’

As Mephiston reeled across the chamber, wrong-footed by the daemon’s trick, he saw Zadkiel standing by the altar again. A fragment of a sigil had appeared over the altar – the corner of a circle and some truncated symbols, all rendered in the same blue fire that was burning his battle-brother. It was a piece of occult symbology drawn in the air, shimmering and sparking.

Mephiston charged again, swinging Vitarus over his head as he raced towards the altar.

‘They are the seeds of Change,’ said Zadkiel from the far end of the hall. ‘The talons of a god.’

There was another flash as a second Blood Angel erupted into flames. The two Intercessors’ armour melted into their flesh. It was grotesque and obscene. They howled, aware that they were burning. As the second scream joined the hymn, another fragment of circle appeared in the air, forming the beginnings of a blazing pentacle above the altar.

Mephiston felt no fury, no blood lust, nor even any hate. Even the screams of his battle-brothers could not disturb his equilibrium. He stood calmly next to the altar and considered his options. He could attempt to extinguish the warp-fire covering his men. The effort of holding back time was enormous though. If he battled the psychic flames, his hold on the moment would slip and send bolter rounds thudding into the other Blood Angels. These were not the feeble weapons mortals might use. The Thousand Sons carried bastardised versions of Adeptus Astartes bolters. The shots would cut his men down.

He could try attacking with Vitarus again, but the daemon clearly had a method of dividing time into even smaller fragments and dodging his blows. He decided his best option was to continue scouring his memory for a way to amplify his rite of banishment. He needed a psychic fulcrum, something powerful enough to lever his warcraft.

‘They are Silver Towers,’ said Zadkiel, igniting a third Blood Angel with a languid tap. More of the pentacle blazed into life over the altar and a

third voice joined the horrific chorus.

‘Silver Towers?’ Finally, Mephiston’s composure faltered.

As Mephiston shook his head in disbelief, Zadkiel tapped another Blood Angel and the final quarter of the pentacle erupted into life as the Intercessor exploded into flames.

Mephiston had planned for several scenarios but the scale of this was unexpected. *Silver Towers*. He had read dozens of texts on the subject. They were vast citadels of warp-energy – pieces of Tzeentch’s insane labyrinth. One, alone, would be a threat to the stability of the galaxy – a mountainous slab of unreality with enough power to disrupt physics on a grotesque scale. And Zadkiel was saying that Sabassus contained nine.

‘Mortal souls are not rich enough to fully revive them,’ said Zadkiel, waving at the burning Space Marines. ‘I needed something rarer.’

The pentacle hanging in the air behind Mephiston burned so fiercely the air groaned and cracked.

Zadkiel stepped towards Rhacelus, playfully swinging his staff.

‘No,’ said Mephiston. He was about to run to Rhacelus’ aid when he had a better idea. He remembered that it was not the source of power that mattered, but its use.

He turned on his heel and stabbed Vitarus into the centre of the blazing pentacle, crying out a psychic command as the blade punched through the light. Incredible force rushed through the pentacle as Mephiston hurled fire across the hall, blasting Zadkiel away from Rhacelus.

He had expected a brief influx of wychfire, but the flow increased rather than lessened, juddering through his sword arm as his incantation pummelled the daemon, slamming Zadkiel against the doors on the far side of the hall.

Mephiston staggered, struggling to harness the power of the pentacle as the air around Zadkiel began to ripple and change, rolling away to reveal a landscape that could not exist inside the Silver Tower: a city, crowded with taloned spires and slender towers, all bathed in fitful light. There were familiar stars whirling over the spires and Mephiston realised that this was not the warp but another world in the Prospero System.

He glanced behind him at the pentacle. It began to rotate, dripping warpfire as it changed position.

Zadkiel’s laugh snapped his attention back to the portal. The daemon fell

back into the scene, fading from Sabassus and tumbling from view. ‘Forgive me for leaving so soon, Mephiston. But thanks to you, my work on Sabassus is done. Once the wheel completes its revolution, the towers will be reborn. Tzeentch offers you his thanks. We could never have done this without you.’

As Zadkiel dissolved, Mephiston remained composed, wracking his brains for another rite. He now found himself with three problems. He needed to keep Rhacelus and the others from harm when time rolled forwards again and the Rubric Marines’ shots lurched into motion. He also needed to halt the wheel rotating behind him. He could sense by the power spilling from it that the daemon was telling the truth – once it had completed its rotation something dreadful was going to happen. Thirdly, he needed to pursue Zadkiel.

He saw how to proceed – the answer that had been waiting in the wings for months. He thought back to the moment of his second rebirth, as he lay bleeding and flayed under Qvo-87’s knives. He recalled the fear that his thrice-born soul might split at the seams and leave him a gibbering wreck. He saw, now, that he had been right. He could feel his essence groaning under the deluge of power from the pentacle. But rather than fearing the break, he embraced it, seeing a way to claw victory from defeat – a way to do something so unexpected that even the daemon could never have anticipated it.

With a whispered phrase he split his soul into the three distinct elements that had formed when he was under Qvo-87’s knife: three separate entities with which to perform three daring acts of psychic power.

The Mephistons acted in unison. The first rolled back time and cried out to his men, ordering them to take cover, alerting them before they were attacked. He could no longer hold back the Rubric Marines’ attack, but he gave his battle-brothers a chance to survive it. This Mephiston remained to lend Rhacelus his strength.

The second Mephiston hurled himself on the pentacle, smothering it with his power, shackling himself to its burning spokes and letting its power soak into him. He halted its movement like he was grabbing the hands of a clock.

The third Mephiston raced across the hall, leapt through the air and latched onto the disappearing daemon.

There was a feeling of wasting, then dismemberment as Mephiston came apart. The division was far from equal. As he fell from Sabassus he saw his nobler self left behind, hunched over the pentacle, cocooned in wychlight as he battled to hold the flaming wheel. His armour was spilling lightning and his hair was lashed to his face. He was glorious, god-like and catatonic. Every ounce of his power was being used to halt the wheel. He could do nothing else. Mephiston was fascinated to see himself like this – corpse-like and blank-eyed. This must be the fugue state he assumed when he scored runes onto the Ephemeris. The Mephiston gripping the pentacle was a being of pure energy, a spirit being. His intellect was elsewhere, cast into the mind of Rhacelus.

Mephiston felt a rush of triumph. He had halted the daemon's rite. He had severed his own mind without falling prey to the wildness within.

As time surged forwards, the Rubricae staggered back towards the outer edges of the hall, their shots foundering as Rhacelus and the other Blood Angels returned fire from the colonnade. Rhacelus was resplendent, his horned staff spewing aether-flame as he charged through the battle, hurling thunderbolts into the Traitor Marines and ordering the other Blood Angels into position. He wielded not only his own intellect, but Mephiston's too, carrying the Chief Librarian's wisdom and learning alongside his own. The Blood Angels were horribly outnumbered but Rhacelus fought with such dignity and skill that the Rubric Marines struggled to land a single shot.

Dropping away from the scene, Mephiston realised how distinct he felt from the proud warrior he was watching. If his spirit was battling to hold the pentacle and his intellect was guiding Rhacelus, what did that leave? His mind and spirit had remained on Sabassus, so what was he now? Who was pursuing Zadkiel?

The battle for the Talon grew distant and vague, the combatants fading from view, and Mephiston's thoughts turned strange. Hunger he had thought forgotten returned, rushing through his veins with shocking ferocity. A new shape formed around him in the void, born of blood thirst. He clawed at the air, trying to halt his fall. Kill-fever gripped him and he howled, baying like a wounded animal.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Teraphim Valley, Sortiarius

Memories faded and coalesced. The past unravelled. Mephiston saw a phantom in the void, a writhing serpent, shimmering and iridescent, borne through the aether on dazzling wings. It was similar to the dragons engraved into Vitarus' hilt but its beauty was a trick. Even dazed by his fall, Mephiston could smell a lie. The beauty masked the daemon's corruption. Beneath those glinting scales was the spirit of Zadkiel: sneering, taunting and full of poison.

Hate jolted through Mephiston and he spread wings of his own. They felt oddly heavy but he pounded them, hurling himself after the daemon with a roar. The two enemies collided, clashing over an abyss, blossoming into electrical fire.

Mephiston grabbed Vitarus in both hands and rammed the blade deep, repeatedly, punching it between the dragon's shoulder blades in a frenzied attack.

Aether-fire filled his eyes, washing over his skin, blistering and burning. Zadkiel escaped with a cry that sounded like blades on rock.

Talons raked Mephiston's chest. Flesh split. Flames turned red.

As they thrashed and coiled, a landscape formed around them, a forest of tortured peaks rent into being by the light flashing from their flesh. At first it looked like a frozen wasteland – spurs of ice, warped by the wind –

but as he approached them, Mephiston saw that they were glass: faceted peaks, refracting the colours shed by his sword strikes.

‘Where are we?’ His voice surprised him. It was deep and savage, the words badly formed.

+We are you and I, Blood Angel. The triad.+ The daemon’s gibberish slipped eel-like into Mephiston’s thoughts, writhing and oily, clouding his mind.

‘Get out!’ he cried. Again, the voice was not his own but all Mephiston could think about was the presumption of the daemon, daring to enter his thoughts unbidden. He cursed and fell, thrashing his wings and grasping at nothing. His hearts pounded, filling him with vigour. He lashed at the darkness as the serpent slipped away.

+Find me in the City of Light,+ said the daemon.

Mephiston recognised the name but his mind did not seem to be working as it should. ‘Tizca?’ The word felt strange in his mouth and he was unsure if he had remembered correctly.

As the daemon vanished, Mephiston recalled how he knew the name. He was a scholar. He was wise. He had lived in palaces of learning. He tried to summon images of his books but the memories were unclear and jumbled. He could barely recall the names on the spines and the contents eluded him completely.

He forgot that he was tumbling through the clouds and reached for a clearer view of the past. It was no use. His books had been stolen from him. He felt the loss as keenly as a severed limb. He grasped uselessly at shreds of knowledge. Tizca was the capital city of a daemon called Magnus the Red. Magnus had once been the primarch of a Space Marine Legion: the Thousand Sons. They had fallen into idolatry and were destroyed. But Magnus had saved the City of Light from a doomed world and transposed it to a damned world. Mephiston strained and growled, trying to recall the name of the world. ‘Sortarius!’ He tore the words from his throat. ‘Planet of the Sorcerers!’

He tried to dredge more information from his memory but the harder he tried, the more jumbled his thoughts became. He howled in frustration. Such powerlessness was alien to him. His mind used to be clear and powerful. Now he felt like an animal trying to mouth words. He had been robbed of something fundamental – some core facet of his being. The

thought made him even more furious and he cried out again.

His howl was cut short as he hit the ground, landing with the force of a meteorite.

Mephiston could not move. Every inch of his body was encased in rock. He was rigid with fury – a flailing, dislocated rage that boiled through his muddled thoughts.

He tried to draw a breath and realised that the earth had filled his mouth and nostrils and he had no way to clear them. How long could he survive without oxygen? Even this basic fact eluded him. He was Adeptus Astartes, he could remember that at least. He could survive almost anything for a while, but his clouded memory would not tell him exactly how long. He tried to inhale through his third lung but it was useless. There was no oxygen to inhale. For the second time in his life, he was entombed.

He growled furiously in the dark, flexing his muscles and trying to tear the ground. Heat flared in his sword hand, a physical manifestation of his anger. It felt good. Like power. He focused on it and the heat became an inferno, pulsing through him, pure and fierce, melting the rock. He managed to crash his hand back and forth with increasingly broad strikes.

Vitarus. His sword. The source of the heat. The blade channelled his fury, stabbing it into the ground.

He wrenched the sword with more violence, hacking earth and stone, punching upwards. Soil drummed onto his upturned face and light splashed into his eyes, dazzling him until his vision corrected itself.

Along with the light came air, flooding his lungs.

He dragged himself from the abyss and scrambled from the ground. Collapsing onto his back, he panted heavily, trying to catch his breath.

When he opened his eyes it took him a moment to understand where he was. At first, he thought he was hanging in the sky, looking down at a furious, storm-wracked sea. Then he realised that he was lying on his back and the sea was in the sky. Rather than clouds or stars he was sprawled beneath a ceiling of silver – great tides of metal, rushing overhead at a furious speed, a boundless expanse of glimmering waves hurtling to some unseen chasm. Along with the strangeness of the sky there was a deafening sound, like thunder that had been recorded and looped in an endless roar. It

was so loud the ground shook.

As Mephiston stared at the molten sea he saw shapes slipping through the tumult, glinting shoals that flashed as they dived through the currents.

‘Drows eht.’

The voice came from somewhere nearby but Mephiston could not place the language. At first he thought this must be another consequence of his dulled intellect, but then he laughed. It was not some obscure xenos tongue, simply a crude form of Gothic spoken backwards. When the words were repeated, he managed to invert them.

‘The sword,’ repeated the voice. ‘Before he wakes up.’

Mephiston laughed at the idea of someone trying to take Vitarus. The laughter was coarse and guttural but it felt good. He could not remember the last time he had laughed at anything and he wondered why he had been so dour. The galaxy contained so many things worth laughing at.

He propped himself up on one elbow to see who was coming but his gaze did not get further than his own body.

‘By Sanguinius,’ he grunted.

His body was a mass of charred muscle, coated in a crust of dark, dried blood. He clawed at his arm, trying to remove the blistered carapace and found that his body was not *caked* in dried blood, it *was* dried blood. He scrubbed at his slab-like pectorals to the same effect and as his fingernails scraped the cracked surface he saw that they were the claws of a raptor.

He shook his head and clambered to his feet. Was this what he had always been like? A memory of master-crafted armour flickered into his mind – beautiful, intricately engraved plates of ceramite, lacquered red and trimmed with gold. The design was familiar, but there was no way his boulder-like muscles could have fitted in such elegant armour. Perhaps he was remembering someone else?

Mephiston saw from his shadow that there were vast wings folded at his back. He reached around to touch one and was surprised to find it was real, rather than something conjured by his mind. It was as rough and blistered as his skin. Instinctively, he flexed his shoulder muscles and his shadow doubled in size as the wings extended.

There was a clinking sound, like goblets rattling on a tray.

Mephiston took in his surroundings. He was in a meadow nestling between two mountains. It rolled away from him in every direction,

washed by the sporadic light of the sky-sea. At first glance, it looked like fields of tall grass, but as Mephiston reached out and touched the plants, they clinked and shattered. They were in fact filled with blades of dark, bulbous glass. They broke as he touched them, spilling powder on the breeze.

He stooped and peered at one of the blades. The concave surface distorted his reflection but that could not shield Mephiston from the brutal nature of his appearance. His face wore a bestial leer, like a rabid hound. The skin was dark and cracked, like the rest of him, but his eyes shone blood-red in the gloom. The face was cruel and ugly, but he found it pleasing. It was the face of a predator, strong and savage. The face of a survivor.

‘Too late,’ said the voice Mephiston had heard earlier, his mind automatically correcting the reversed speech. ‘He’s recovered. Bring Cymora.’

Mephiston stood and looked across the glittering fields. There was a slope fifty feet away and someone was approaching. He gripped Vitarus, its blade still smouldering, and strode through the glass blades, scattering shards and powder as he headed towards the silhouetted figure.

A large, powerfully built hound appeared at the crest of the hill. As it turned to face him he saw how mutated it was. It had eight legs and they were armoured and segmented, like the legs of an insect. The hound studied him calmly as he approached, showing no sign of fear, and as it moved it glinted, revealing a hide made of silvery metal, like the tides roaring overhead.

Mephiston’s pulse hammered.

The hound bolted, laughing. As it skittered through the glass Mephiston saw other figures on the slope below him, all as peculiar as the hound.

The nearest was an enormous snake. The serpent must have been nine feet long and where its head should have been there was a splayed hand with a woman’s face looking out from the palm. Behind the serpent stood a man whose head was embedded in his chest rather than on his shoulders. His arms were grotesquely long, with too many joints, and his mouth was set in a grin so wide it wrapped halfway around his head.

There were several other creatures, each more absurd than the previous one, but Mephiston’s gaze passed over their malformed heads as he singled out a larger shape powering up the hillside. It was like a tank

carried on six piston-driven legs that slammed into the ground so hard the earth trembled. The rusted and dented metal dripped with oil. Smoke and steam billowed from its joints and there was an infernal glow shimmering behind the metal plates. There was so much smoke spilling from the chassis that it took Mephiston a moment to realise there was a person sitting on top of the vehicle, riding it like an enormous steed.

He stepped closer, peering through the fumes, trying to discern the shape. It was not a rider; it was a creature welded to the top of the chassis – a blue-skinned giant that merged with the metal at its waist. Its body was a knot of sapphire muscle, its head long and bovine, crowned with knotted horns. Even in such a confused state, Mephiston was able to summon the name of this warp-spawned horror. ‘Soul grinder,’ he muttered, vaguely aware that he had fought something similar before. He grinned and dropped into a combat stance.

The blue-skinned creature had iron, crab-like claws in place of hands and as it opened them they sparked and flashed. Even from twenty feet away, Mephiston could feel power radiating from its scarred hide.

‘Give us your sword,’ said the silver hound, padding back towards Mephiston, ‘and I’ll call Cymora off. We’re not looking for a fight.’

The creature sounded absurdly pompous. It was clearly irritated by the delay, eyeing Vitarus hungrily as it circled, panting and glinting.

Mephiston staggered, drunk on fury. He could no longer even recall his own name. All he knew was his hunger to tear these creatures apart.

He ignored the hound and raced down the slope, spreading his wings to swoop over the mutants, making for the soul grinder at their rear. The daemon-engine threw a punch, slamming its claw-fist into Mephiston’s face and flipping him back through the air.

There was an explosion of breaking glass as Mephiston hit the ground. His blood-fury tripled but so did his delight. Euphoria blasted through him. He felt like he had spent a lifetime restraining his rage and could now, finally, let it loose. He rose to his feet, threw back his head and howled at the metal sky. The howl burned his lungs, filling his chest with a heat that rushed up his throat and poured from his mouth.

Mephiston convulsed as hot blood blasted from his jaws. The daemon engine staggered, struggling to hold its footing as scorching liquid drummed into it. Mephiston bellowed louder as he stomped down the

hillside, more blood rushing from his mouth and slamming into the soul grinder. He had no idea what was happening but it felt glorious.

The daemon engine tried to punch again but Mephiston's blood was ripping through its armour plating, tearing the chassis and scattering shrapnel. As Mephiston reached the machine, he leapt up onto it, ripping at the melting plates with his talons before bounding up onto the roof and sinking his teeth into the rider's throat. Hate met hate as the daemon clamped its metal claws around Mephiston and tried to wrench him in two. Mephiston slammed Vitarus into the daemon's chest, bathing himself in wychfire.

The sky-sea surged, booming as Mephiston roared.

The engine collapsed, its metal legs folding like crushed twigs as blood jetted through its chassis. Mephiston sliced through the daemon's neck, sending its head bouncing back down the hillside. The blue-skinned monster vanished, leaving the engine a smouldering, lifeless heap. Mephiston did not register the victory. He fell on the machine's carcass, ripping fuel pipes and pistons, using his claws, teeth and sword in a frantic, pointless attack.

It was several minutes before he noticed that someone was speaking to him.

'What are you?' said a backwards voice, different to the first one he had heard.

He carried on hacking at the wreckage, unable to slake his thirst for violence, but he did manage to look around.

It was the creature with serpentine arms and its head in its chest. The bizarrely wide grin remained on its face as it pointed its autopistol at him.

'How did you do th-?'

Mephiston dived across the hillside and ripped the monster's face from its ribs.

Blood rushed over glass as the thing thudded to the ground and Mephiston began hacking it apart. He had a vague sense that he was once something more than a killing machine, something more than a predator, but the violence jolting through him was too wonderful for him to care. When there was nothing left for him to cut he dived at another mutant, then another, slashing in a blind rage as he bounded through the blades of glass, smashing tunnels through the field.

He lost all sense of time, but finally, he regained enough awareness to realise that he was no longer even attacking corpses; he was pummelling the ground with his fists and spewing blood into the earth. The absurdity of what he was doing was enough to jolt him out of the mania and he staggered in a circle, staring at his claw-like hands.

For a moment, he could not even remember why he had come here. Then his purpose came back to him in a rush. He had come to kill. He had come for Zadkiel.

He reeled away from the bodies, snatching Vitarus as he climbed back up the slope. After a minute or two, the bodies on the slope were hidden from view. It was like nothing had happened. The sky-sea was still caught in its thunderous loop overhead.

‘Tizca,’ he whispered with a growing sense of certainty. That was where he would find his prey. That was where he would find Zadkiel.

‘Why Tizca?’ said a familiar backwards voice.

Mephiston whirled around and saw the silver hound watching him from a rise about thirty feet away. The kill-hunger returned. Mephiston tightened his grip on Vitarus. He could reach the dog with one wing-powered leap. He could almost feel the animal’s pulse drumming in its throat.

But he needed to find Zadkiel. With an incredible effort, Mephiston managed to stay still. ‘Do you know Tizca?’ His voice was a low, bloody cough.

The hound watched him closely as it padded through the glass.

‘What are you?’ it drawled in infuriatingly pompous tones. ‘A daemon prince or a thrall-wizard? An avatar of the Blood God?’

‘The Blood God?’ For a moment, Mephiston was confused. At the words ‘Blood God’, he had pictured a crimson angel, but then he realised what the creature meant. ‘Khorne?’ he spat. ‘No. I am not... I am not that.’ His words trailed off as he tried to think straight. He was on a daemon world. He needed to reach Tizca. He had to kill Zadkiel.

‘Then you serve the Crimson King?’ asked the hound.

‘Magnus?’ Mephiston laughed. However confused he might be, he knew he was not a servant of daemons. Then a troubling thought occurred to him. He was not fool enough to think he could take on a daemon primarch. ‘Is Magnus in Tizca?’

‘No.’ The dog was still watching Mephiston closely. ‘He should be. But

the warherds say he went to another world. Prospero. To prepare for the New Kingdom.’ The dog spoke in such a petulant tone that Mephiston almost laughed again. The sight of an eight-legged hound griping about the absence of its master was wonderfully absurd.

‘Zadkiel?’ asked Mephiston, slowly approaching the hound.

‘Zadkiel? The Vulture? Yes, I believe *he* is in Tizca.’ The hound backed away, glancing in the direction of the bodies on the hillside. ‘I can get you to the City of Light. Let me live and I will be your guide.’

Mephiston shook his head. He could find his own way. He reached down to his belt for the book that was always clasped there. His hand closed on nothing. There was no book. There was no belt. He felt a brief chill as he realised just how shattered his mind was. He pictured books and lines of text scored into a brass plate, but none of it meant anything to him. *How* would he find Zadkiel?

The hound was still studying him. ‘Are you sure you don’t need my help? Equilibrium is the only route to Tizca. The Great Game. There is no other way to reach the capital.’ The hound looked at Vitarus, sounding irritatingly amused. ‘Are you sure you know the route?’

Every word the beast uttered filled Mephiston with rage. It was an abomination – like a sentient toy, clicking and clanging as it circled him on its eight jittery legs.

He strode towards the animal. It scampered away, but he did not intend to attack, not yet at least; he simply wanted to climb the slope for a better vantage point. The valley of glass rolled away to the south before crashing against the foothills of the mountains. The view in every other direction was almost identical. He was in a miles-wide bowl, surrounded by glass peaks. The glittering grass rippled and swayed in time to the tides overhead, but he thought he could discern routes through the blades – narrow paths made by many feet.

The hound followed his gaze and nodded. ‘Warherds. They search this valley regularly. Tzeentch knows why. They never find anything of value.’

‘Warherds?’

The hound stared at him. It did not seem angered by the fact that Mephiston had just butchered its travelling companions, simply intrigued by him. ‘You really *are* new.’ It looked at the hole Mephiston had crawled out of.

‘Warherds?’ said Mephiston again.

‘Armies of beastmen. Tzaangor. You must have heard of the Tzaangor?’ The dog was starting to sound amused again.

Mephiston wanted to rip the creature apart but he managed to stay still. Again, he tried casting his memory back to his books; again, his thoughts were deflected – too muddled by rage to see anything clearly. The word ‘Tzaangor’ was familiar. He pictured tribes of bestial mutants in thrall to Chaos gods. He was sure he had faced them in battle. The more he failed to think clearly, the angrier he became, which in turn made his mind even more baffled.

‘Why are they here?’ he asked, taking deep, juddering breaths. ‘What for?’

The hound glanced at Vitarus. ‘Objects of interest. Just like the rest of us, stranger. It’s the best way to win at Equilibrium. And there is no other way to reach the City of Light.’

Mephiston tightened his grip on the force sword. His desire to attack was so powerful his skull was pounding. Every one of his muscles tensed.

‘Why do you want to go to Tizca?’

The hound laughed. ‘To learn! To grow! Why else?’ It nodded at the glass fields. ‘Out here there is only change. Glorious, beautiful change, to be sure, but when the ground is constantly shifting it’s impossible to make progress. Whereas in Tizca...’ The dog looked across the fields to the distant mountains. ‘Ah, Tizca. In the City of Light one can decipher the great mysteries of the galaxy. One can learn how to harness real power. I do not mean the facile illusions of thrall-wizards or,’ the dog nodded at Mephiston, ‘the crude violence of warp-spawn. In Tizca I will learn from the libraries of Magnus himself. I will earn myself a place at his side as he builds the New Kingdom.’ The dog shook its head, seeming to regret its candour. ‘Why are you asking me? Do you have some other reason for seeking the city?’

Mephiston glared at the creature. Then he looked around at the peculiar landscape. He felt like an ape attempting to decipher an intricate puzzle. He could search these blasted peaks for months without finding Tizca – for years possibly. The Planet of the Sorcerers had been dredged from the depths of the warp. There would be no logic to its geography. And while he wandered its wastes, slaughtering mutants and beastmen, his prey might

escape. He sensed that his time was short. The vigour coursing through his muscles was wonderful, but it could not last. His life would be brutal and glorious, but brief. He had to find Zadkiel fast.

‘You can lead me to Tizca?’ he said, looking back at the hound.

‘I can show you to the game of Equilibrium. That would be the first step. We would not have to travel far. I would be happy to assist you.’

‘In return for what?’

The dog looked at the column of smoke rising from where Mephiston had destroyed the daemon engine. ‘Cymora was my protector and you just killed her. If you get me to the game I will tell you how to enter the City of Light. Sorocold is very particular about the rules.’

‘Sorocold?’

The hound laughed again. ‘Not so bright, are you, blood man?’ The metal animal began padding away through the blades of glass. ‘My name is Kataris. Follow me and I’ll do my best to educate you as we go.’

Mephiston remained where he was, staring at the dog, taking laboured breaths and gripping Vitarus in both hands. Kataris had almost disappeared from sight when Mephiston stamped after him.

‘Sorocold is the Master of the Games,’ said Kataris. ‘He presides over Equilibrium. He, himself is the doorway from here to Tizca. The only passage to the City of Light is through his flesh.’

Mephiston considered this. ‘Through his flesh.’

‘Can you fly?’ asked Kataris.

Mephiston recalled the ragged pinions folded at his back and nodded.

‘Then take a look at this valley from higher up and tell me what you see.’

Mephiston struggled to move. Every time the dog addressed him in such pompous tones it took a supreme effort of will not to kill it. He reminded himself that he had to find Zadkiel. There would be time for Kataris later. He pounded his wings and rose from the waves of glass. As he flew higher he saw that the fields were divided by paths formed in the shape of stars.

‘The paths are all linked,’ called Kataris, looking up at him. ‘The wastes shift and mutate, but the paths remain. They are lines of power and at the points of convergence, where many lines cross, the conjunction is marked by a standing stone called a stela. Some of the stelae are portals to Tizca, like Sorocold.’

Mephiston could not follow the hound’s words. He looked down at the

peculiar animal, trying to think with more clarity. Why was Kataris *really* leading him to Tizca? The story about needing a bodyguard did not ring true. Anger boiled up through his chest as he struggled to untangle the mystery. He discarded the question before it drove him into a frenzy and he dropped back to the ground, landing with a heavy thud just behind Kataris.

They travelled in silence after that, Kataris giving Mephiston the occasional amused glance as he scuttled on through the glass blades. As the hours wore on, Mephiston realised the light was not changing. The metal sea still roared overhead, dappling the fields with shadows and patches of light, but there was no sign the day was progressing. The shadows did not grow any longer or deeper.

‘When is it night?’ asked Mephiston.

Kataris looked up at the billowing sky. ‘There *is* a sun up there somewhere. The Crimson King hurled us back into the orbit of a real star. But this is still the Planet of the Sorcerers. It is not a normal world. The heavens are too shrouded in magic to reveal themselves. The sky always looks like this.’

The brisk march across the fields had dulled Mephiston’s fury and he began to feel intrigued by his strange companion.

‘Where you born here?’ he asked.

‘I was born in the Sol System,’ replied Kataris with pride. ‘I am a son of Holy Terra.’

Mephiston knew the name well enough to know that was unlikely. ‘Terra?’ He laughed as he started walking again.

Kataris shrugged. A peculiar gesture for a dog. ‘Why would I lie? It took me several lifetimes to cross the galaxy but at every turn I felt The Crimson King calling me on. Every time I renewed my flesh through sorcery, Magnus’ promise rang clearer in my head: the New Kingdom is coming. I knew, if I made it to Tizca, my potential would be fulfilled.’ Kataris sounded as if he had forgotten Mephiston was there, talking to himself in triumphant tones. ‘All those years of being derided and ostracised, all those decades of being hunted and denounced. They led me here. To a world where new will replace old. Where humanity will reach its crowning moment.’

‘Humanity?’ laughed Mephiston, looking at the hound in disbelief.

Kataris laughed along with him in a good-natured way. ‘I am whatever I need to be.’

Light flashed along the dog’s hackles, momentarily blinding Mephiston. When his vision cleared, he was following a slender man dressed in a pale blue gown with a wreath of white feathers on his head. The youth looked to be around twenty years old and in good health. Only his eyes betrayed any sign of his unwholesome studies. They were unnaturally wide and staring, straining from his head as though desperate to escape his skull. It took Mephiston a moment to realise that Kataris had no eyelids.

Kataris was carrying a stout walking stick and he waved it at his blue robes. ‘Is this human enough for you?’

Mephiston did not reply.

‘Appearances are irrelevant,’ said Kataris. ‘Children know it but adults forget. Our minds are made brittle by prejudice and cant.’ He looked at Mephiston’s blood-dark skin. ‘You of all people must understand. Look at the state of you. You’re a blister. The point is that we are *here*. At the greatest moment in the history of humankind, we have reached the great crucible. We are in the fulcrum that will lever the galaxy to its next stage.’ The amused tone faded from his voice. He spoke like a religious zealot. ‘By reaching this point we have completed our pilgrimage.’

Mephiston wanted to remain silent but the dog’s words grated on him. ‘I am not a pilgrim.’

‘You are!’ Kataris smirked. ‘Of course you are. Even if you do not see it. Whatever reason you gave yourself for coming here, the truth is obvious – you heard Magnus’ call. Deep in your strange, wonderful soul you felt the wisdom of the cyclops. And you answered his summons. He has built a fortress here – a sanctuary for the wayward and the different. A realm where freaks like you and I can live as we were meant to live, without fear of persecution or intolerance. Don’t you see? We are the prophets of the new dawn. We have come to serve the one master who can truly understand us.’

Mephiston glared at Kataris. He knew he was no servant of Chaos, but he held his tongue. He only had to endure this deviant’s company until they gained entry to Tizca. Then he would execute him with all the fury he deserved.

As they climbed another slope, Kataris looked at him with a puzzled

expression. ‘You really didn’t know, did you? You think you came here for some other reason. I have met others like you. People that have convinced themselves they came here seeking something or someone.’ He shrugged. ‘It doesn’t really matter. Deep inside, you do know why you’re here. Besides, all that matters is that you made it. Across the galaxy, the Emperor’s zealots are butchering our kind, murdering anyone with a trace of uniqueness. Lobotomising minds on the cusp of evolution. And they’re doing it because they know they are about to be left behind. As humanity embraces its future, Imperial dogma is trapped in the past. But *we* have survived the pilgrimage. Our souls felt Magnus’ call and we reached his blessed shores.’

As the sorcerer babbled on, Mephiston forced himself to consider the unthinkable. What if Kataris was right? What if he *hadn’t* travelled here under his own volition? What if Magnus really had brought him here? His powers were immense. He would certainly make a great prize. He shook his head, unable to take the idea seriously. He had pursued Zadkiel for decades.

Mephiston’s pace slowed as he pictured a friend’s face, a stern old warrior with blazing blue eyes. His voice was full of wisdom and concern. ‘What if you’re wrong?’ It was a memory – a clear, honest memory, but rather than pleasing Mephiston, it made him snarl. The recollection of his friend reminded him of all the forgotten knowledge he could feel but not retrieve, the wisdom hiding just below the surface of his fury.

He picked up his pace, striding after the sorcerer with renewed determination. He *knew* he was right about Zadkiel. The past and the future did not matter. All he cared about was now.

They were approaching the foothills of the mountains when Mephiston noticed something odd. The wound on his thigh, made by the daemon engine, was still bleeding. All his other wounds had vanished without a trace. He paused to study it. The cut looked like the numerical nine, sliced into his flesh.

He was about to ask Kataris about the origins of the daemon engine when a projectile whistled past him, shattering the blades of glass and filling the air with glittering splinters. He clenched his fists and whirled around.

More shots rang out and he recognised the sharp report of auto weapons. Bullets whistled past his head, kicking up dust from the ground.

‘Time to earn your passage.’ Kataris glanced back at him from the crest of a ridge. ‘How are your guts? Feel like spewing again?’ Mephiston glowered at him and climbed the slope.

Figures rushed from the foothills, rows of warriors spilling from a narrow gorge.

‘Your sword caught their eye,’ said Kataris.

Even from hundreds of feet away, Mephiston saw they were not ordinary men. They carried commonplace weapons like autopistols and chainswords but they were anything but commonplace themselves. Only semi-clad, their skin was the same pale blue as Kataris’ gown. They had avian heads with long, hooked beaks where their mouths should have been and their skin bristled with iridescent feathers. Some of them wore flak armour painted a dazzling rainbow of colours and as they ran towards him they cawed and shrieked, fanning out through the fields.

Bullets thudded into his thick hide. He staggered, almost losing his footing, but the wounds healed instantly, spitting the metal slugs onto the ground. He laughed.

Kataris pulsed with white fire and resumed canine form, bolting off through the glass, leaving Mephiston to face the oncoming mob.

Mephiston rushed to meet them, spreading his wings as he dived from the hilltop, drawing back Vitarus to strike. He crashed into his attackers and hacked Vitarus through three of them in a single swipe. The beastmen fell away in a shower of feathers and gore and he descended on the next wave, ripping throats with his teeth and tearing limbs from sockets.

The fight was savage and brief. It had been a torment permitting Kataris to live, so Mephiston revelled in the heady thrill of destroying the beastmen. Within minutes he was staggering through broken bodies and discarded weapons, snorting and gasping as he looked for more prey.

There were more beastmen further down the path and they opened fire as Mephiston charged towards them, but the shots felt like pebbles. He laughed as he swept through them, until the hound appeared.

Kataris, now returned to human form, waited a few feet away as Mephiston paced back and forth, rolling his shoulders and grunting, swinging Vitarus at the air.

Mephiston nodded at the creature, indicating that he was safe to approach.

‘You *don't* worship Khorne?’ asked Kataris, studying the piles of dead mutants.

Mephiston struggled to recall exactly who Khorne was. ‘Chaos?’

Kataris nodded. ‘The Blood God. Patron of...’ He nodded at the dismembered bodies. ‘Well, this.’

Mephiston stared at him a moment longer, then waved at the gulley the Tzaangor had emerged from. ‘That way?’

Kataris nodded. ‘That way.’ He tucked his knife in his belt and headed down the path, glancing nervously over his shoulder as Mephiston thudded after him.

The path wound between walls of faceted glass and the effect was confusing. Each bend revealed a jumble of planes and vertices, all layered over other transparent expanses. Mephiston thudded into a wall and it splintered into dozens of cracks, making the surface even more perplexing. The journey did nothing for his temper and he found it increasingly hard to endure the smug comments of his companion.

Finally, after what seemed like hours, they emerged onto a plateau high above the valley. Winds gusted across it, carrying the heady scent of spices and metallurgy. Mephiston guessed, by its size, that it must be a natural formation, but it was a perfect geometrical shape – a miles-wide octagon, criss-crossed with man-made rills that formed astrological patterns, all fanning out from a triangular dais at the plateau’s centre. The whole site was built on a vast scale, overlooked by the translucent peaks of the mountains. The triangular dais itself was hundreds of feet wide, accessed by arched flights of steps. Crowds approached the massive triangle from across the plateau, coming from all directions.

Mephiston took a moment to wonder at the variety of life forms that were congregating on the plateau. There were beings of fire and creatures of pure darkness, crawling things and flying things and men who fragmented as they moved, as though constantly shedding skin. Was this normal? he wondered. Was this freakish carnival what the world was meant to be like? Even with his mind in tatters and no point of reference, he could not believe this gaudy menagerie was part of a sane world.

During his journey with the dog, his few fragments of memory had become even more dislocated. He could remember faces, but they meant nothing to him. There was the imperious veteran with the vivid blue eyes;

there was a handsome young man with a hideously burned face; there was a face that looked bland and amiable but was only a mask for a pile of whirring augmetics and oiled, steaming pipes. There was a warrior in a golden mask, bathed in holy light, bidding him good luck. He could not remember their names but he knew that if he failed all of them would die. His pulse quickened as he managed to remember something. He had made a promise to the warrior in gold. 'I will not fail you this time,' he had said.

Mephiston strode out across the plateau towards the triangle-shaped structure at its centre. 'I will not fail you,' he growled, swinging Vitarus back and forth as he neared the crowd.

They made a noise that was almost a match for the looped, booming sound of the sky-sea. The colourful mob were singing and arguing, hurling insults and greetings as they milled around the triangle. Among the creatures there were dwellings. A kind of shanty town spread out around the dais – tents and shacks and even some more fanciful structures that seemed to have been summoned from the dust.

'Who are they?' asked Mephiston.

'We are all pilgrims,' replied Kataris.

Mephiston struggled to a halt, his charred muscles tensing as he glared at the sorcerer, who was now wearing his dog-shape again.

Kataris laughed and clattered away. 'They have gathered for a chance to join the Great Game. They want Sorocold to pluck them from obscurity and let them win passage to the City of Light.' He nodded at the steps around the triangular dais. There were hundreds of the bizarre figures gathered around them, but the way was blocked by lines of feathered beastmen, Tzaangor, like the ones in the gully. The people in the crowd looked like they were bartering. They were all holding up objects: books, scraps of armour, bottles and bags, offering them to the beastmen.

'If you have something Sorocold wants, you get to join the game,' said Kataris. 'And if you win the game, you can approach the stela.'

Mephiston's head was too clouded by rage and confusion to fully understand what the dog was saying, but he gleaned enough to know that he needed to get up on the dais and find something called a stela.

'What does the stela look like?' he said, shoving his way through the crowds of figures. 'And what does Sorocold look like?'

'Sorocold *is* the stela. He is a menhir.'

Mephiston snarled in frustration and lashed out with Vitarus. The dog managed to dodge the blow, scampering clear, but the blade passed through another creature that looked like a walking totem pole – dozens of human heads stacked in a column screamed as Mephiston’s sword sliced through them.

There was an explosion of insults and accusations and a space opened up around Mephiston.

‘No violence!’ cried Kataris. ‘No violence is permitted in Sorocold’s domain. Break his rules and you’ll have no chance of reaching Tizca. You’re lucky the guards didn’t see that.’

Mephiston glared at the crowd with such venom that people backed away from him, muttering as they continued towards the dais. The wounded mutant picked up a severed body part and limped away, hissing.

‘What is a menhir?’ demanded Mephiston, staring at the dog.

Kataris looked at him in disbelief. ‘You attacked me for that? A menhir is a standing stone. Sorocold is a standing stone.’

Mephiston nodded. ‘Through his flesh.’

Kataris frowned at him. ‘What?’

Mephiston shook Vitarus menacingly at the people who were still staring at him, then strode on across the plateau. As he neared the triangular slab of stone he saw lights flashing on its surface. It was over thirty feet tall, so he could not see the source of the conflagrations from down on the plateau, but they looked like bursts of lightning – dazzling, white and gone as fast as they came.

He shouldered his way to the front of the crowd but when he was just a dozen feet away from the line of Tzaangors, he saw that Kataris was there ahead of him, deep in conversation with the mutants.

The beastmen looked up as he approached, taking in his charred crimson bulk. One of them wore more elaborate armour than the others and appeared to be the leader. His arrow-shaped head was topped by a crest of shimmering blue feathers. He broke away from his conversation with Kataris to nod at Mephiston.

‘You may join the illuminé,’ he said, his voice an odd mixture of avian and human. The words were like a controlled but contorted screech.

Mephiston looked at Kataris, confused.

‘You may join the game,’ explained the dog. ‘The illuminé are the

players. Your weapon is unusual enough to buy you a stake.'

Mephiston scowled at him. 'Why are you helping me? *You* want to get to Tizca. And you wanted Vitarus. You are not my friend.'

'Of course I am. I am more than a friend. I am your brother. We are all brothers now. All of us who have reached Sortiarius. We are joined by an act of faith that will see us crush the false Emperor and create a utopia. If you seek Zadkiel, I will do whatever I can to help you reach him.'

Mephiston had enough intelligence left to know he was being lied to, but not enough to work out why. Rage tightened his grip on Vitarus.

There was a clattering sound as the beastmen levelled autoguns at him.

Kataris shook his head. 'No violence. Or you will never join the game.'

'Go,' cawed the blue-feathered Tzaangor, waving his gun at the steps. 'Take your position.'



CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The Talon, Abissama Delta, Sabassus

‘Damn you, Antros!’ howled Rhacelus, firing his plasma pistol into banks of blue flame. ‘Answer me!’ He was speaking into the vox but again, he heard nothing back. ‘Why aren’t you in bloody Adurim?’ He snarled in outrage as he raced to the next column, followed by a deafening barrage of bolter fire.

The Rubric Marines were at the end of the hall furthest from the altar, standing in the shadows beneath the star-shaped window. The battle had been raging for several minutes and three Blood Angels had fallen. He could see their smoking corpses lying just a few feet away, spilling their sacred vitae across the polished floor. The rest of his battle-brothers were fighting with the skill and dignity he would expect. They had taken up positions near the altar after Rhacelus summoned a blood storm and left the Rubric Marines foundering for several minutes. Since then he had not had time to prepare another conjuration, too busy dodging bolt rounds and cursing Antros for not being where he should be.

‘Mephiston,’ he called, glancing over at the burning pentacle. ‘Can you hear me?’ He did not really expect an answer. Mephiston was still gripping the circle of light, his armour flashing with psychic power, but he was utterly motionless, as though he were part of the altar. Red mist poured from his eyes and his bones burned so brightly they were visible through

his armour.

+I am with you,+ replied Mephiston.

Rhacelus looked around in shock. The hall was a maelstrom of gunfire, flames and spinning shrapnel, but he could see that the Chief Librarian was still motionless.

+I have joined my intellect to yours, Rhacelus. My mind is in your skull.+

‘That idea is not entirely comforting,’ muttered Rhacelus, but he could not hide his relief at hearing his old friend. He ducked as bolter fire ripped the wall open just above his head. He returned fire and dived behind another column.

‘Your mind might be more useful in your own skull,’ he said, as shots tore up the floor. ‘I don’t know how long I can hold the heretics away from the altar. And Antros has still not returned to Adurim.’

+I have stalled the ritual, Rhacelus, but I cannot hold the wheel back for much longer. I need your help. Use the pillars to destroy the Rubric Marines, then join me at the altar.+

Rhacelus twisted his neck to study the column he was leaning against. ‘Use the pillars?’

+Do you remember when we fought the Toldos Witch?+

Rhacelus frowned. ‘The Tzeentchian seer? The one with the liking for human flesh?’

+Do you recall how she used the architecture for her crucible?+

Rhacelus tapped the grooves of the pillar and nodded. ‘She magnified her warpcraft through the building, through its superstructure.’

+I need your help, Rhacelus. I am failing to halt the rite. I have split my being in three. My intellect is here, reminding you of the Toldos Witch, my spirit is lashed to that wheel, straining to hold it in place, and my body has pursued the daemon to Sortarius.+

‘You followed it? You followed that thing to the Planet of the Sorcerers? Are you insane?’

+By any normal measure. But splitting my essence was the only option in this instance.+ Mephiston was speaking with all the emotion of someone recalling a morning stroll. +I had to perform an act of chronomancy to prevent you being gunned down by those Rubric Marines. And, in the same instant, I had to grab the pentacle *and* I also needed to pursue

Zadkiel.+

Rhacelus shook his head. ‘Sortiarius is a daemon world. Think what you’re risking. You are putting your soul in danger. Think what it would mean if you...’ He did not want to finish the question. ‘What is happening to you there?’

Mephiston hesitated before replying. +I do not exactly know. My intellect is here, with you. I sent the most basic, primal part of my psyche after the daemon. I have no way of knowing what it will do.+ He hesitated again, clearly displeased by such lack of clarity. +But I believe that my spirit will hunt the daemon down.+

‘Damn the daemon.’ Rhacelus released the outrage that had been eating at him since they left Baal. ‘Can’t you see that you’re obsessed? The daemon no longer matters. It has *gone*. Whatever your Ephemeris told you, you need to change your plans. What matters now is these Silver Towers, not Zadkiel. The daemon has gone back to its hell but the towers are here, in the corporeal realm. If you don’t stop that wheel turning, and the daemon’s threats were true, nine Silver Towers are about to blaze into life. Think what that would mean.’

+You do not understand, Rhacelus.+

‘I understand that you cast a third of your power aside, just when we needed it the most. And you did it because you *will not* deviate from the path you set yourself.’

Another volley of bolter fire roared down the colonnade but this time it was aimed at Mephiston. Most of the rounds detonated in the red and blue corona that surrounded the pentacle but some pierced Mephiston’s ridged armour, causing his body to jerk and twitch.

+Trust me,+ said Mephiston. +As you have always claimed to. I know what I am doing. But I cannot protect myself, Rhacelus. Use these pillars.+

‘Curse you and Antros both,’ muttered Rhacelus, but he clanged the horns of his staff against the column and began mouthing an imprecation. Just as he expected, Mephiston was right. As he summoned the aether into his staff, the pillars flashed a dazzling white, lighting up the entire hall. The architecture had been planned with sorcery in mind. Every angle and curve magnified his power.

Rhacelus leant his mind into the wych-fire, hurling it through the columns in the direction of the Rubric Marines. The ground juddered and

there was a clatter of armour as the Rubricae tumbled back against the walls.

‘Advance,’ grunted Rhacelus over the vox as he stepped out into the burning light, firing his pistol into the reeling figures.

Behind him, Mephiston’s body slumped on the wheel, bleeding and burning.



CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Teraphim Valley, Sortiarius

Mephiston stared at Kataris, wondering if he could cut the truth from the silver hound. Then he shrugged and began climbing the steps to the top of the dais.

As Mephiston climbed, something strange happened to the sky. The silver tides parted, breaking on something vast that was pressing down through the atmosphere. The rolling boom of the heavens grew louder and slender threads of lightning arced down from the waves, dancing across the plateau like strings dangled from the sky. The crowds around the dais ceased their talking and jostling and looked up.

The sky-sea bowed and sagged towards the ground, as though about to split, and the number of lightning threads increased, flickering dangerously close to the watching crowds. Silver shapes banked and wheeled overhead. They were like ray fish, but with human faces and lights flashing in their flesh. Most of them remained up near the straining sea, but a few broke away and passed within a few feet of Mephiston. As they hurtled past they screamed, producing such a violent, disturbing sound that he had to clamp his hands over his ears until they looped back up into the sky.

Mephiston grunted and strode on, ignoring the tearing sound coming from the sky and echoing across the plateau. He reached the top step and

saw that the dais had no floor. Instead an opening looked down into the plateau – a huge chasm, like the top of a volcano but a perfect triangle. The sides were sheer and glassy, dropping away into darkness hundreds of feet below. Crossing the abyss was an intricate web of glass bridges, each one no wider than Mephiston's forearm: hundreds of soaring, transparent spars that looped and fanned around each other in a baffling design. It looked like a dome of spun sugar, glinting in the fitful light. It was intricate and insanely complex, clearly the work of many years, perhaps decades.

Mephiston found it instantly annoying. It was an exercise in pointless obscurity and needless artifice. He was so irritated by it that it took him a few moments to notice there were people standing on it – lone figures, poised in theatrical poses at the points where several threads intersected. Some of them were human. One of the nearest to Mephiston was a young woman with short, ink-black hair and a golden spear held up into the light. There were other beings too: bird-headed Tzaangor dressed in fine robes rather than flak armour, and a profusion of other mutants – bestial hybrids but also things far stranger that looked like spirits of the elements. A figure near the centre of the glass web resembled a column of moonlit rain. Only the hooded robe clasped at its neck revealed that it was anything more than freakish weather.

There was another boom from overhead and Mephiston looked back up at the sky. The continent-sized swelling had broken through the liquid metal and revealed its shape.

Mephiston had no concept of fear, no concern for his own safety, but the thing in the sky still caused him to duck. It was a wing the size of a city, hanging overhead and throwing the plateau into shadow. As it turned, slowly, it revealed glimpses of an even larger shape – the flank of a colossal bird, its feathers blazing with inner fire. The creature was both there and not there. Mephiston could see the sky-sea through its feathers, as though it were only a mirage, but the wind had picked up in its wake, buffeting the figures on the glass web and hurling dust through the air. The titanic creature had mass – Mephiston could feel it as he staggered in the gale it whipped up – but it was obviously impossible; nothing of such size could simply hang in the sky.

Once they had regained their footing, the figures balanced over the chasm

ignored the monster turning overhead, acting as though it were a perfectly normal occurrence, and resumed their theatrical positions. Some of them balanced on one leg, their arms raised as mock wings. Others posed as spear hurlers or singers, their heads thrown back in silent yells.

‘Illuminé,’ said a voice. ‘Equilibrium has been disturbed.’ The voice was thick and creamy, as though forced through a bloated throat, and it swelled through the glass mesh of the dome.

The figures on the web whirled around to face Mephiston, moving like mime artists, their motions exaggerated and affected. A growl reverberated up through Mephiston’s chest as he studied the ridiculous figures. Then he saw the standing stone. It was positioned at the centre of the triangle on top of a pedestal that rose up from the depths of the abyss.

As the sky groaned and feathers slid through its silver waves, Mephiston battled to understand what was happening. He remembered the dog had said this was a game, by which the players might reach the standing stone and gain entry to the City of Light.

He peered at the standing stone and saw that none of the glass threads quite reached it. Some came close, ending just a few feet away, but none actually touched the stone. It was an isolated island, surrounded by a forest of crystalline fronds.

The stone was seven or eight feet tall, oblong and scored with lines of hieratic text that circled around a face in its centre. The face had been carved of the same white stone as the rest of the object but it was alive and mobile, with black, featureless eyes.

‘Spirit is matter and matter is spirit,’ said the stone.

The figures on the web whirled around again, turning their backs to Mephiston and looking down at Sorocold. Most of them did nothing other than massage their jaws or flick through books, but one old man cried out in excitement and raised his fist into the air. He waved a silver bowl a few times and the glass branch he was standing on sprouted a new limb that rushed towards Sorocold like a snake, undulating through the air. The old man scurried along its length, laughing and waving his bowl. His glass bridge wound around the other threads until it was just a few feet from the standing stone. He took the last few steps with caution, holding the silver bowl out before him as an offering.

Mephiston’s skull pounded. He could tell from the irritated expressions

of the other players that the old man had done something impressive, but he had no idea what any of them were doing. Flames shimmered along Vitarus and he started stamping on the step. How would he ever decipher the rules of such an absurd game?

The old man had almost reached the stone when he erupted into blue flame. The fire rushed over him with incredible speed and he screamed and fell back.

The glass bridge snapped under his weight, dropping him into the chasm. He tumbled into the darkness, howling the whole time.

Sorocold made no comment but Mephiston noticed that the silver bowl had appeared at the base of the stone, along with an assortment of other items.

‘The human is the mirror of the divine,’ said Sorocold and the players all leapt into new poses as they considered his words.

‘Riddles,’ said an amused voice behind Mephiston.

He turned to see Kataris scuttling towards the start of a glass branch.

‘How can you join the game?’ snarled Mephiston, noticing that the hound was not carrying anything. ‘What offering did you bring?’

‘You,’ said Kataris in smug tones.

Mephiston acted without thinking. He brought Vitarus round in a backhanded slash and shattered the hound, smashing it into thousands of metal fragments that clattered back down the steps.

There was an immediate uproar as people saw what he had done. Harsh, braying trumpets rang out around the perimeter of the dais and hundreds of Tzaangor started charging up the steps towards him.

Mephiston shook his head in disbelief. Cursing, he ran out onto the glass web. The strands broke easily under his weight but he ran fast, reaching a new branch each time the last fell away. There was an explosion of splintered shards as he raced towards the centre of the web, pounding his wings when it seemed he might fall.

The players were aghast, staring in horror as he destroyed complex structures they had spent years weaving. Overhead, the sky let out a groan so loud it sounded like it would break.

The beastmen reached the lip of the crater and opened fire, filling the air with bullets. Shots slammed into Mephiston, causing him to stagger, but his momentum was so great he managed to hurl himself through the air

directly at the standing stone.

‘To perform miracles one must–’ began Sorocold, but the statement went unfinished. Mephiston collided with the stone and rammed Vitarus into Sorocold’s mouth, engulfing the stone in red flame.

‘You are the door!’ cried Mephiston as he grabbed the wound and wrenched it open. A stone blade flicked out of the menhir and cut Mephiston’s chest but he was too frenzied to notice.

Red flame mingled with blue as warpfire spewed from the stone.

More bullets punched into Mephiston as he ripped the stone apart and strode into the flames, vanishing from view.

Overhead, the feathered shape rolled like a feeding shark and filled the sky with laughter.



CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The Fin, Gulf of Prius, Sabassus

The gunship screamed low over whitetops, kicking up spray as it hurtled across the sea towards a mountain. Antros strained forwards in his seat, looking out through the scratched armourglass, trying to see through the spume. The Fin's name needed no explanation. It rose from the waves in a hook-shaped spur of rock, surrounded by a cluster of marshy islands and tall enough to be capped with snow.

'Loop around,' he said, glancing at the pilot.

As the gunship circled the mountain, Antros donned his helmet and triggered his suit's auto senses. Data screeds scrolled down his visor, filling his eyes with runes and schematics. 'Heat signatures,' he muttered, as his helmet display flagged up a cluster of shimmering blobs near the summit. 'Can we land anywhere?'

'Negative, my lord,' replied Sergeant Malik from the seat behind him. 'The slopes are too treacherous.'

'I have no jump pack,' said Antros, peering down at the jagged slopes.

'We have grav-chutes,' said Malik, nodding to the gunship's storage area.

Antros laughed. 'I'd drop like a stone. No matter. Just get me close to the summit.'

He directed the pilot towards the heat signatures but as they approached the sheer face of the peak, he realised they were coming from inside the

mountain.

‘Here,’ he said. ‘Hold this position.’

The gunship levelled off and hovered raptor-like over the peak. Antros unfastened his harness and wrenched the door open. A chill blast rushed in, filling the gunship with a wave of sleet.

‘I will contact you once I am done.’

‘My lord,’ began Malik, as Antros leant out into the blast. Before he could finish, Antros dived from the gunship, plummeting towards the jagged slopes. He allowed himself to freefall for a few seconds, enjoying the sensation of powering through the clouds, then he mouthed words Mephiston had taught him years ago, when he first joined the Brotherhood of the Orbicular Tower.

Shadow wings spread from his back, ink-dark memories of the wings that carried Sanguinius. He pounded them, holding his position in the tempest as he scoured the mountain for any sign of movement. There was nothing, not even any wildlife living up this high, so he honed in on the heat signals beneath the surface and dived.

A crosswind slammed into him as he landed and he rolled awkwardly to a halt, grabbing onto a stump of rock moments before dropping into a crevasse. It was not quite the heroic arrival he would have liked and he smiled as he considered what Rhacelus would have said if he were here to see it.

The thought of Rhacelus reminded him that he was acting without the express orders of his superiors. He tried the vox network again and then telepathy, but neither were any use. Wherever his battle-brothers were, they were not able to hear him.

‘Sergeant Malik,’ he said, trying a different vox channel. ‘Do you read me?’

‘Yes, my lord,’ came a faint, static-hazed reply. *‘Are you injured?’*

‘I’m fine. Are you on your way back to Adurim?’

‘Yes, my lord.’

‘When you get there, let me know if there’s any word from my brothers. They may be looking for me.’

‘Of course, my lord, but...’

‘But what?’

‘My lord, what shall I tell them you’re doing? What is it you mean to find

on the Fin?’

‘Tell them I have come to halt Zadkiel’s rite, to break the circuit.’

Antros closed the network and looked around. There was nothing but sheer walls of rock and ice, all hazed by the immense banks of snow whirling over the slopes.

‘Where do I get in?’ he muttered. A dreadful thought occurred to him. What if the story of Silver Towers was a lie? Now that he thought back over the events in Orxus, he had accepted the daemon’s claims very easily. The daemon could have clouded his reasoning. Without his protection, Adurim was at risk. Could this all be a decoy?

He began clambering over the rocks, examining the gullies and slopes. There was nothing that indicated this was anything other than a natural feature of the planet. Then he remembered the heat signals moving under the surface. How many mountains had tunnels under their peaks? He adjusted his helmet display, trying to get a better resolution capture of the shapes. It was a small group and they were no more than fifty feet away from where he stood.

He climbed higher, his power armour easily latching onto footholds and shielding him from the cold. Once he was close to the heat signatures, he stopped. He was standing on a broad shelf of stone that jutted out over a crevasse. The heat was coming from the other side of the rock wall behind him.

Antros stared at the wall, poring over the data streaming across his helmet display. There was a chamber directly opposite where he was standing, but there was thirty feet of solid rock in his way.

Time was of the essence. If the daemon had told the truth, and he felt oddly certain it had, the altar at the ninth peak might join this one at any moment. He had to break into the mountain and destroy the altar quickly. He thought back over the disciplines he had learned since joining the Librarian. There were several that could alter the structure of rock or even blast it away, but they would take too long.

He looked at the staff Mephiston had given him and remembered how much faith the Chief Librarian had placed in it. He had not had much chance to test its powers since leaving Baal, feeling oddly hesitant about channelling his full strength through the ancient relic. Perhaps now was the time?

He began mouthing an incantation but rather than simply using the staff as a way to direct his warpcraft, he opened his mind to its full potential, allowing the sacred metal to magnify and mutate his conjuration.

The staff blazed in his hands, splashing crimson light over the snow and rattling against his gauntlets. Antros smiled as he realised what a potent gift he had been given. The Staff of Andomatius was unlike any of the other relics he had used to channel warpfire. It bucked and kicked in his grip as a crimson bolt lashed from the gem at its head, tearing into the mountain.

He stepped backwards as rocks clattered against his battleplate and his psychic might soared. Along with his delight at the increase in his power, Antros was thrilled to learn how much faith Mephiston had in him. During the long, painful decades in which he had doubted the Chief Librarian, Antros had carried a second equally troubling doubt: that Mephiston doubted *him*. Rhacelus wore his suspicions on his sleeves, openly berating his student whenever he stumbled, but such open censure was easier to accept than the ambiguous, gnomonic utterances of Mephiston. But now, in this glorious gift, Mephiston had shown his trust.

The rock began to glow and melt as Antros burned a hole into the mountain. Steam and embers billowed around him, mingling with the sleet and settling on his power amour. In just a few minutes he had achieved progress that would usually have required hours of preparation.

The final few feet were the hardest and Antros hunched into the blaze, hurling even more power through the staff. It was such an exhilarating thrill that he almost failed to notice something was wrong. As blood-light coursed through the staff, it started to shine upwards from a tiny fissure near its centre.

There's a flaw, thought Antros. It had taken a surge of incredible power to reveal it but now it was unmissable and growing wider with every aether wave he cast through it.

He gripped the staff tighter as it began to make a thin, howling sound and more shards of light splayed between his fingers. As the gap widened, he saw something inside the staff—something organic and mottled, like bone perhaps, or skin.

‘By the Angel!’ he gasped, as the staff threatened to shake itself apart. ‘What is this?’

Then, with a shuddering boom, the final stretch of rock gave away and collapsed into the chamber inside the mountain.

Antros cried out in relief as he extinguished the blast. As the light died, he saw that the staff was still intact, although the flaw was now visible even while the metal was not lit up. There was a hairline fracture in the shape of a lightning bolt, right at its centre.

I have ruined it, thought Antros, filled with dismay. Mephiston entrusted me with a priceless relic and in my hubris I've ruined it. He stood there in the embers and snow, forgetting about the tunnel and the chamber beyond, thinking only of the broken staff. Perhaps I can fix it, he thought. Perhaps it can be reforged?

Sounds echoed down the tunnel towards him, reminding him why he was on the mountain. It sounded like heavy, armour-clad footsteps.

He kept the staff in one hand, grabbed his plasma pistol with the other and raced down the still-smouldering tunnel. The hole at the far end was just wide enough for him but he stopped and peered through it before going any further.

The only light was the small amount coming from behind him, but his Adeptus Astartes eyes saw easily through the gloom. He felt a mixture of emotions at what he saw. The sinuous carvings in the walls were unholy and vile, mystifying in their complexity and clearly heretical. They were deeply offensive, but Antros also felt a rush of relief as he studied them. It was only a small antechamber, but he could see, even from this first glimpse of the mountain's interior, that the daemon had told him the truth. The walls were not made of natural rock but dark glass, constructed in a way that would be impossible by any natural means. Such dreadful beauty could only have been produced by Chaos worshippers – specifically the followers of Tzeentch. This *was* a Silver Tower.

There was no one in the room and the footsteps were fading fast so he hauled himself over the molten entrance he had carved and dropped down into the room, his pistol pointed at the opposite doorway.

He crouched, ready for an attack, but when none came he edged cautiously across the room. It was littered with rubble and chunks of glowing rock but beyond the mess he had made, it seemed to be empty. The contorted glass columns that formed the walls reached up into a dome where they cradled a winged statue – some kind of deity with dozens of

coiled limbs. Antros grimaced, reminded of the xenos creature Mephiston had interrogated in the Carceri Arcanum, back on Baal. This particular fiend only had two heads though, both of which were avian and studied Antros with glassy eyes.

He shook his head and hurried to the doorway. Glass tendrils knotted around the threshold in another confusing design, so that as he stepped through the opening he had the unpleasant sensation he was walking into the stretched maw of an animal.

The profusion of glass tendrils continued on the far side, writhing serpent-like around each other as they formed a stairwell.

The sound of footsteps was still faintly audible, receding into the distance, so, still holding his pistol before him, Antros raced up the steps. The staircase looped a few times before emerging into a much larger chamber: a long hall with a colonnade running down its centre and an altar at the far end, sculpted to resemble an eagle's claw.

Antros had barely taken a few steps into the room when a bolter round slammed into his shoulder and hurled him backwards. He rolled behind one of the columns as more shots whistled past, filling the air with shards of glass.

Dozens of rounds slammed into the column, clouding its surface with cracks. Antros ignored the wound and hunkered down, pressing his weapons to his chest and closing his eyes. He recited an incantation and cast his thoughts down the colonnade, examining the hall with his seer-sight.

There was a group of Space Marines standing in the shadows by the claw. There was no mistaking them for Blood Angels. Their power armour was a deep, dazzling blue. Tall, transverse crests topped their helmets and their bolters were encased in golden frames that looked like talons. They were heretics – traitors from the days of the Horus Heresy, given unnatural longevity by their pact with Tzeentch. The warrior-sages of Magnus the Red. The Thousand Sons.

Antros counted ten of them, plus another figure on the far side – a cultist, by the look of him, kneeling before the altar and gesticulating wildly. No doubt he was preparing the altar for Zadkiel's rite.

Ten Rubric Marines. Antros looked down at his pistol and his damaged staff. The Thousand Sons were towering, power-armoured killers. Each of

them would be a match for him in combat. Antros grinned. Suddenly the odds were getting interesting.

He patted his belt. He still had two frag grenades. Besides, he had weapons the Traitor Marines did not. Even without the staff, his psychic powers were beyond anything the Rubricae might have expected.

As the column splintered and cracked behind him, Antros considered the imprecations that might be most suitable. Once he had decided, he removed one of his gauntlets, dragged his combat knife across his palm and spilled the blood down his fingers. He pressed his wet palm to the floor and whispered an incantation. The blood boiled, seething under his skin, causing the floor to hiss and steam.

He snatched his hand away, replaced his gauntlet and looked at his creation. The pool of blood and molten glass coagulated, forming a flickering crimson sphere, like a tiny red likeness of Baal.

Antros whispered another oath and the blood ball rose from the ground and drifted out into the centre of the colonnade. The Thousand Sons fired at the sphere but the shots passed harmlessly through it.

Antros whispered again and the blood ball hurtled down the colonnade. As it flew through the air it fragmented and multiplied into a host of red phantoms – dark, winged spirits with bleeding swords.

The Thousand Sons remained motionless, armour absorbing the recoil of their bolters, standing in identical poses as they fired into the liquid ghosts. The bolter rounds passed through the red spirits as uselessly as they passed through the ball. But when the phantoms hit the Rubric Marines they collapsed into a red cascade, losing their humanoid form as they splashed over the plates of blue armour.

The Rubric Marines continued firing, targeting Antros again until his blood rite took effect. The blood coating the Traitor Marines began to bubble and smoke, just as it had done beneath Antros' palm.

The heretics staggered and lost their aim, firing at wild tangents and juddering as the blood burned holes through their armour, revealing nothing but dust inside. Some of them stumbled down the steps, away from the altar, clutching their battleplate as it collapsed. Others slumped back against the altar, convulsing as though they were caught in a swarm of insects. They fell in silence, dropping to their knees without a word as Antros strode out from behind the shattered pillar, firing his pistol.

A few of the Rubric Marines managed to return fire, but their weapons were melting as quickly as the rest of them and the guns imploded, ripping away their hands or shooting uselessly into the gloomy vaults. Antros approached calmly, dropping them to the floor with precise headshots.

As the Space Marines toppled, Antros now got his first clear view of the cultist at the altar. He was a rangy, weather-beaten man, wearing the filthy remains of a Hellbound uniform and gripping a broken lasgun that he was waving in front of the altar.

As Antros strode towards him, pistol still raised, the man looked around with a welcoming smile.

+Welcome to the New Kingdom,+ said Zadkiel.



CHAPTER THIRTY

Tizca, the City of Light, Sortarius

There was a hand on the road. It was not connected to a body but it had a wrist that dangled, like a tail, as the fingers skittered back and forth, circling like a confused insect.

Mephiston did not know how long he had been watching the hand, but it was long enough for him to know what came next. After scuttling across the road for a few minutes, as though looking for something, the hand sprouted an arm, and then all the other parts of a man. The man was about thirty years old and dressed in white robes. His hair was black and cropped short and his face was probably quite unremarkable, but it was hard for Mephiston to be sure of his exact features because as soon as the man's head formed and he saw his surroundings, he began to scream, clawing at his face and running in circles. Upon seeing Mephiston, he reached for him with trembling hands and cried out. No sound emerged from his throat, but Mephiston was fairly confident he was shouting: 'Help me!'

The man had no time to say anything else before his body folded away, concertina-like, shrinking and crumpling until there was nothing left but the hand, scrambling in desperate circles again.

This process repeated itself endlessly, with only minor deviations. Sometimes the man managed to stagger towards Mephiston, calling out several silent pleas; other times he collapsed before mouthing a word.

There was something hypnotic about watching the hand blossom, scream, then collapse again. Mephiston wondered if he had only ever existed here, on this desolate road, watching the hand. Perhaps watching the hand was his purpose in life?

The sky was bruise-dark and veined with lightning. Purple clouds flickered overhead but there were no peels of thunder. In fact, there were no sounds at all. The world was so silent that Mephiston's breath was oddly loud and intimate in his head.

The road was straight and smooth, leading to a black, featureless wall so lofty that Mephiston could not see its top. The land on either side of the road looked like an ocean, glinting and rolling, until one looked directly at it and saw that it was actually made up of millions of gemstones, tumbling into each other in an endless orgy of destruction. It looked like a silent battle, waged with no purpose or end, as larger stones crushed smaller ones before being shattered themselves.

Mephiston wondered whether he should do something about the hand. Perhaps he should end its torment? Was that what the screams meant? Was the man asking for release? Mephiston raised his sword, debating whether to cut him down. Then something odd happened. As the hand sprouted the man for the umpteenth time, he managed to force an audible word from his throat. It sounded muffled and distant, as though heard through water, but Mephiston still recognised it. 'Tizca.' As soon as he had spoken, the man folded back down into a hand again, but the word bounced around Mephiston's head.

'Tizca,' he muttered, looking past the hand to the distant wall. One word spawned a second. 'Zadkiel.' His words rang out through the stillness.

The name Zadkiel filled his mouth with bile and his head with memories. He had come here for a reason. He pictured a frail monk with a bird-skull for a head. He had to find him. He had to kill him.

He strode on down the road, silvered by the noiseless storm.

As Mephiston marched away the hand paused, as though sensing it had lost its audience. Then it sprouted an arm and resumed its perpetual cycle.



CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

The Fin, Gulf of Prius, Sabassus

Antros fired at the cultist, sickened by the presence of Zadkiel's voice in his head. The barrage of super-heated plasma ripped through the man, splashing his blood over the altar and leaving him a smouldering heap at its base.

As the blood washed over the claw-shaped altar, light blazed from the talons, dazzling Antros. When his visor had adjusted to the glare, Antros saw that blood had risen from the claw and formed into a burning circle several feet across, hovering in the air and dripping liquid flames onto the floor. Spokes of fire spread from its centre and formed an eight-pointed star, framed by the circle.

Antros had seen the symbol in countless grimoires and heretical tomes. It was the icon of the Ruinous Powers. He felt a wave of nausea as it began to slowly rotate, shimmering and spitting.

+The Pentacle of the Sacrament.+

Antros whirled around, looking for the source of the daemon's voice, but there were only the liquefied remains of the Rubric Marines.

+It is almost ready to receive the astral light that your master has triggered at the ninth tower.+

'My master?' Antros grimaced at the repulsive sigil, burning brighter by the second. 'What are you talking about?'

+You knew, Lucius Antros. Of course you knew. Your master is my servant. I could not have re-ignited the Silver Towers without Mephiston's help. I called for his aid centuries ago but it is only now, deep inside the Talon, that he has fulfilled the destiny I promised him. He has ascended, Antros. Just as you will. Once the astral flame reaches this altar, the ritual will be complete and the circle will be joined.+

'You are a liar!' cried Antros, but he could not entirely hide the doubt in his voice. This was the fear that had haunted him for so long – that the Chief Librarian's many idiosyncrasies stemmed from a terrible betrayal. It was not true. It could not be.

He rushed at the wheel of fire and leapt on it, grasping the spectral flames and howling an imprecation, determined to destroy the repugnant icon.

Warpfire surged into him with brutal force and he gasped in pain. By linking his mind to the pentacle he had triggered an outburst of psychic energy. Embers billowed around him as the aether-fire lit his flesh.

It's killing me, he realised, as he felt his cells breaking apart. He tried to loose his grip on the circle and found, to his horror, that he could not. The wych-fire had locked him in place.

+It is not killing you,+ said Zadkiel from the shadows beyond the flames. +These are flames of transfiguration, Antros. You are being freed. Your true form is being released from the confines of your old flesh.+

Antros writhed and strained, battling to free himself, but it was impossible – he was one with the sigil, his armour engulfed in sapphire flames. And then, as he struggled, he saw the truth of the daemon's words. His body was changing. His battleplate flowed like quicksilver, becoming something new and unholy. The liquid bubbled, forming into a coat of silver feathers.

'No!' he howled as the pentacle flashed white, drenching him in more energy.

+Yes,+ said Zadkiel. +Do not pretend that you are surprised, Antros. You wield power far beyond the simple tricks your masters shared with you. And you know exactly why. You have always known. You are a being of astral light, Antros. You are not a Blood Angel, you are a true angel. You are a shard of the immaterium. That is what brought you here today.+

'No, no, no!' groaned Antros, but Zadkiel's words sliced into him, reigniting every fear that ever snaked in his guts.

+All those years you spent studying forbidden lore. You told yourself you were searching for a cure, a way to help Mephiston, but that was a lie and you know it. Every discipline you mastered brought you closer to greatness and you revelled in the power.+

Antros slumped weakly against the burning wheel, shaking his head. 'No.'

Fresh agony exploded through his bones as they cracked and reformed, twisting him into something new.

+It has begun,+ said Zadkiel.



CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Tizca, the City of Light, Sortarius

Mephiston slowed as he neared the city walls, noticing shadows flitting across the road ahead. He approached them with his sword raised, ready to defend himself, determined not to be waylaid again.

He laughed. It was just more body parts, caught in the same loop of growth and collapse as the hand he had just left behind. There were heads, arms and feet, some human, some not, and they exploded into life as he approached, scrambling desperately across the road before tumbling back down to the ground again.

It looked like a peculiar dance. Once again, Mephiston found himself hypnotised by the frantic transformations. Then he cursed and dragged his gaze away from them.

‘Zadkiel,’ he growled, carrying on towards the wall.

The city gates were slabs of black crystal that reached up into the clouds. Their surface was sheer and polished but there were shapes threaded beneath – silver arabesques that spiralled in constant motion like the surface of a great, dark lake, teeming with metallic life.

Mephiston was surprised to find the gates open and he hurried through them into a broad avenue lined with slender buildings built of the same vitrified stone. The architecture was spectacular and strange. The towers were like clumps of petrified lightning – knotted, fused capillaries of

black quartz that twisted around each other in a profusion of barbs and spurs. The walls were crooked and ugly, branching out across the avenue like the limbs of burnt trees. Lights shone from narrow windows, spilling gaudy colours through the darkness. Shadowy figures hurried through the side streets. Mephiston caught glimpses of robed humans and armoured beastmen, but none of them paid him any attention, busy with their own errands as they slipped through the dark.

The oppressive silence vanished as soon as he entered the city and Mephiston heard snatches of conversation echoing through the winding streets.

He hurried down the avenue, trying to ignore the strange scenes he glimpsed through windows, muttering 'Zadkiel' like a mantra, determined not to be distracted again.

The avenue led to a square and he caught more glimpses of the city's inhabitants, robed figures scurrying through shifting lights. Three sides of the square looked onto warped spires, but the fourth opened onto an avenue leading towards a tower that dwarfed all the others. It was hundreds of feet tall and wreathed in branches of the same petrified lighting that covered the smaller buildings. At the top of the tower an enormous gemstone was the source of the coloured light that danced through the city.

Mephiston's mind was like a clenched fist but he knew this tower must be his destination. He hurried across the square and onto the avenue.

Still, no one approached or challenged him and even in his eagerness to find Zadkiel, Mephiston began to find it odd that he had entered the city so easily. This was a citadel of Chaos. Its soaring towers were not relics of a forgotten civilisation; they pulsed with arcane power, the product of sorcerous engines and dark rituals. They had been made for a purpose. So it seemed strange that a monster formed of dried blood, carrying a huge smouldering sword, could simply stride towards the city's central districts without being stopped.

'Zadkiel!' he cried, dragging his mind back to its purpose.

As he reached the tower, the scale of the place became bewildering. Standing at its base and looking up, perspective was so distorted that the tower seemed to be looming over him, about to reach down and scoop him up.

The tower was octagonal in shape and there was a door in each of the eight walls. The three doors in front of him were all wide open, leading onto darkened halls. As he debated which door to try he noticed that the wound Sorocold had given him was still bleeding, just like the one from the daemon engine. Even stranger, this wound too was in the shape of a nine, just like the first one.

He sensed there was something symbolic about the nines, something he should be concerned about, but the effort of trying to solve the riddle made his head ache, so he gave up and rushed through the nearest doorway.

He staggered to a halt with a howl of annoyance. The wall opposite was crowded with dozens of staircases that bent around each other like a puzzle, doubling back and changing direction so many times that none of them actually seemed to lead anywhere. There was no other door from the hall. The only way to progress was to climb the stairs, but they were so confusing Mephiston could not think where to begin.

He slammed Vitarus against the floor, scattering sparks over the mirrored surface.

Someone gasped and ran, sprinting across the hall. It was a woman, dressed in the same ceremonial robes as the man he had seen outside the city gates. She headed for the wall of stairs, then, seeing that Mephiston was pursuing her, she changed direction and headed back towards the main doors.

He cursed and ran in the same direction, blocking her escape.

‘Zadkiel!’ he cried, brandishing his sword at her.

She darted back into the hall, looking for another escape route. When she reached the centre of the hall, she dropped to her knees, took some keys from her robes and began rattling through them.

She found the key she wanted just as Mephiston reached her, grabbed her by the arm and lifted her so high that her feet left the floor. She cursed in a language he did not understand, thrashing in his grip and kicking uselessly against his chest.

‘Zadkiel,’ he repeated, pulling her face to his, seeing his bestial features reflected in her terrified eyes.

She fell quiet and dangled weakly, her expression changing from rage to cunning. ‘Zadkiel?’

‘Yes.’

The woman thought, then nodded, indicating that he should put her back down. He did so, but kept Vitarus raised.

She dusted down her robes and glared up at him. He sensed that the sight of an eight-foot-tall, blood-red monster should have made more of an impression on her. She spoke quickly in the language he could not follow, looked annoyed by his inability to understand, then nodded to the stairs on the opposite wall.

‘No tricks,’ he said, waving Vitarus at the stairs.

Without the woman to lead him, Mephiston would never even have found the first step but she jogged confidently up the steps, pausing only to rub her bruised arm and glare back at him.

The first staircase proceeded in a normal manner but by the second, Mephiston was already growing confused. It seemed to head upwards, but after a few moments he realised he could see the floor of the hall above his head as if he were walking upside down and back towards the ground. Each time the stairs doubled back on themselves, Mephiston became more bewildered until he could do nothing but follow the robed woman and give up on trying to understand where she was leading him.

They came out onto a parade ground hundreds of feet wide, its ceiling either extremely high or non-existent. When Mephiston looked up, all he could see were rainbow colours spilling from overhead. As they left the stairs, Mephiston crouched and gripped Vitarus in both hands.

A great army was mustered in the hall, hundreds of Space Marines in blue battleplate with tall, gold-banded crests on their helmets. Their armour was dripping in gilt-edged finery and polished to such a sheen they looked like jewels, glinting in the kaleidoscopic light.

After waiting, tensed, for an attack, Mephiston realised the Space Marines were unaware of him. They remained locked in their perfect serried ranks, guns held firmly to their chest armour and chins raised. They were fully armoured and Mephiston could not see their faces, but he sensed that if he could, they would look straight through him. They were in a trance.

The woman was halfway across the hall when she realised Mephiston had halted to stare at the immobile warriors.

She laughed and strode over to one of them. The Space Marine was three feet taller than her and clad in armour that could probably crush her but

she shoved the warrior with such force that he staggered and broke ranks.

Mephiston expected the Space Marine to club her down or shoot her, but he simply righted himself and resumed his position as if nothing had happened.

The woman grinned at Mephiston and waved him over.

He crossed the hall with more caution than she had, keeping his sword pointed at the ranks of Space Marines. He was not afraid of them, but he had no desire to waste time fighting in a parade ground while Zadkiel hid nearby.

Not one of the Space Marines moved as he passed by. He could not resist pausing for a closer look. Up close, the stillness was even more peculiar. He tapped one of their helmets with Vitarus. There was no response.

The woman called him on and they left the parade ground and entered a long gallery lined with books. The books were bound in glossy, black covers and chained to the shelves. There must have been thousands of them, but Mephiston had no interest in books and strode quickly down the gallery after his guide.

They spent another hour rushing through various halls and passageways. In some of the rooms they saw priests like Mephiston's guide, huddled in groups and scuttling away at the sight of him. But mostly they just saw ranks upon ranks of the blue-armoured Space Marines, all as immobile as the first.

Mephiston began to wonder what such an army might be for. The designs on the battleplate were unfamiliar, but he sensed these warriors were allied to whatever vile power Zadkiel served. Once he had destroyed the daemon he would return to these halls and destroy his armies.

The woman led Mephiston up a narrow, spiral staircase into a circular room bathed in liquid colour. Tinted light bled down from a glass dome in the ceiling, and every possible hue was rolling through the chamber, washing over a circle of motionless Space Marines gathered at its centre.

The priestess gave Mephiston an amused look, then gestured to the circle of Space Marines and backed away into the shadows.

Mephiston was about to pursue her when a voice rang out in his mind.

+You were so easy to trick.+

Mephiston stormed across the room, barged through the Space Marines and there, standing at the centre of the circle, was his prey.



CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

The Talon, Abissama Delta, Sabassus

Rhacelus and Squad Turiossa fought their way back down the colonnade, the pillars magnifying Rhacelus' psychic blast into a storm of power, hurling gouts of dazzling energy into the Rubricae. The Traitor Marines tried to return fire but they were blinded and disoriented by the ferocity of Rhacelus' rite.

'Fan out!' roared Rhacelus, firing his pistol into the wall of heat and light. 'They must not reach Mephiston!'

He glanced back over his shoulder and let out a curse. The wheel of flame was tearing Mephiston apart. The Chief Librarian's battleplate was white hot and warping in the heat.

Mephiston, he thought, are you still here?

+Keep them away from me, Rhacelus. I understand everything now. I have *every* detail. Just keep me alive.+

'Easier said than done,' muttered Rhacelus as a squad of Rubric Marines broke away from the others and marched down the far side of the hall, making straight for Mephiston.

'Hold them here!' he cried to one half of the squad. 'You, follow me!' he yelled to the others.

They rushed back towards Mephiston, firing as they ran, and dropped down behind a toppled column near the Chief Librarian.

As the other Blood Angels opened fire, Rhacelus grabbed his copy of *The Gluttoned Scythe* and flicked quickly through the pages, looking for another conjuration to pass through the architecture.

The book flew from his hand as the column exploded into fragments.

Two of his battle-brothers fell back, blood and hydraulic fluids spraying from their shattered helmets.

Rubric Marines had circled round the hall, emerging right next to Mephiston to open fire on Rhacelus and the others from behind. He rolled through a cloud of shrapnel and returned fire, spitting plasma into their gilded masks.

Behind him, three more Blood Angels tumbled back into the flames, their skulls pulverised.

The Thousand Sons were surrounding him from every direction, moving slowly and carefully, raising their guns to fire.

+You do not need the book,+ said Mephiston. +Speak the words with me.+

Mephiston began intoning the words of a rite and Rhacelus cried them out, holding his staff aloft. Bolter rounds slammed into his chest, rocking him back on his heels, but he managed to shout the final syllable.

The Rubric Marines shattered like broken pots, filling the hall with another blinding explosion.

Rhacelus fell heavily to the floor, his helmet cracked and full of blood.

He wrenched the helmet off and tried to stand, but his legs collapsed beneath him and more blood rushed from his chest armour.

He dragged himself towards Mephiston, smearing blood across the flagstones.

He had only gone a few feet when another block of Rubric Marines marched towards him, taking careful aim as they strode through the whirling fumes. There were dozens of them, approaching from every direction.

‘Damn you all,’ he said through gritted teeth, opening fire.



CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Tizca, the City of Light, Sortarius

+I have nurtured you and guided you,+ said the hooded monk, tapping his crook staff on the floor. +So it should not be a surprise that you answered my call so obediently. Still, I expected some flicker of defiance, some flash of wit, from the vaunted Chief Librarian of the Blood Angels.+

The daemon's words settled over Mephiston like smoke, confounding him and causing him to stumble. Chief Librarian. Yes, he *was* a Chief Librarian. As he let the words roll around his mind they began to unearth memories. He saw a Space Marine, but not like the glittering blue statues in this tower: a crimson-clad angel with pale, flowing hair, wings of shadow and bleak, cruel eyes. 'Mephiston,' he whispered, lowering Vitarus so the blade struck the floor.

+Yes,+ laughed the daemon. +Clever little Mephiston. It remembers its own name.+

Anger ripped through Mephiston's chest with such force that it seemed to lift him bodily and hurl him at the daemon. As he leapt, he brought Vitarus down in a savage blow.

Rather than cutting robes, the sword sank into a silver altar forged into the shape of a claw.

Zadkiel had vanished, and as Mephiston's sword sliced into the metal the lights pulsing through the room flooded into each other, forming a single

beam of white energy that burned down from the ceiling, crushing Mephiston against the altar.

Mephiston roared and tried to wrench himself away, but the light had welded his flesh to the metal, merging his body with the altar. His arms and one of his legs were trapped, transfigured by the coloured light.

He twisted and strained, trying to look around the room for Zadkiel.

+I was never here,+ said the daemon. +I am on another world, about to approach the Crimson King with news that will show him how badly he underestimated me.+

As Mephiston thrashed and raged, the lights grew brighter and formed a loop of energy around him, outlined with unholy runes and containing an eight-pointed star.

+There was a time when I hoped to save you,+ said Zadkiel, sounding genuinely sad. +Your soul is unique, Mephiston. Thrice-born. You would have been a glorious addition to the New Kingdom. But only you could have fuelled this rite. Only the three-fold soul could bring the brothers of Sabassus to life.+

As the circle began rotating around Mephiston, the daemon's words burned more painfully than the fire. +The Ephemeris was me, Mephiston. You do understand that, surely? Every vision you followed. Every hope you cherished. Every prediction and plan. They were all me. All carefully woven to bring you to this point.+

Mephiston stiffened in agony as blue light passed up from the altar, spearing through his chest and shining up to the domed ceiling. The energy roared through him with such ferocity that it rippled through the cracks in his skin, like storms on the surface of a dying sun.

He clamped his eyes shut and when he opened them again he could see two places at once – the room with the glass dome on Sortarius, and the room with the colonnade on Sabassus.

In the first room, he saw the priestess approaching him, still wearing an amused smile on her face. She was holding a knife with a coiled blade and she was whispering something.

In the other room, he saw Rhacelus, firing furiously into a crowd of Rubric Marines. His friend lay near him, drenched in blood. It looked like he had been trying to reach him but had been gunned down before he could make it. There were corpses everywhere, mostly Rubric Marines but also

Blood Angels. Rhacelus had raised himself up on one elbow to fire back through the flames, but his armour was rent in several places and he was surrounded by enemies.

+Here, in the City of Light,+ said the daemon, +with you as my catalyst, I have completed the work I began five hundred years ago.+

The priestess punched her knife into Mephiston's side.

When she wrenched the blade out, he was unsurprised to see that the wound was in the shape of a nine and completed the triangle of cuts on his body. His blood rushed from the wound and the pentacles on both planets blazed brighter. Zadkiel laughed.

+It is done.+

The rite had been completed and in that instant the three parts of Mephiston's soul were reunited.

As Rhacelus continued firing, Mephiston gasped and dropped from the pentacle, crashing down by his friend's side.

In his mind's eye, he saw the incredible power Zadkiel had torn from his spirit. It howled across Sabassus, hurtling into the first of the nine peaks and crashing into a grotesque, bird-like mutant hunched over a claw-shaped altar. Mephiston knew the Chaos-warped horror was Antros.

The flame then passed through each of the other mountains, igniting them like newborn stars, painting a circle of light across the planet.

The Silver Towers were reborn.



CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

The Fin, Gulf of Prius, Sabassus

Antros wept tears of fire. The aether-light slicing through him was painful in a way that no wound could ever be. It was the pain of damnation. He had failed. He had failed his Chapter and his brothers and worst of all he had failed Mephiston. Scintillating wings had sprouted from his hunched back and his hands were opalescent claws. His life-long dreams of glory had come to this. They had been made manifest in the most obscene form imaginable, mocking him for his hubris.

Worse than the physical transformation was the collapse of his mind. The daemon's sorcery had turned his brain into a fractured mirror. Countless thoughts came on him at once and none of them made sense. A dreadful clamour of voices had risen in his head, all competing to be heard. His own voice, the voice of Lucius Antros, was fading fast, drowned by the din. He had minutes, perhaps only seconds before he sank into the mire and forgot everything he held dear.

He stiffened in pain as fresh warfire ripped through him, causing his feathers to spiral like melting ore. He could feel the daemon's spell, looping endlessly around Sabassus and feeding the Silver Towers with life. And he was the conduit. He was making it possible. It was his crumbling mind that was channelling all that dreadful vigour into each of the nine peaks. He was so intimately linked to the towers that he could see them in

his mind, shedding centuries of rock to reveal their true, unholy beauty.

‘Why did you trust me?’ groaned Antros, recalling his last private conversation with Mephiston, back on Baal, when they had played memoriam. The Chief Librarian had seemed to truly understand him, to know what he was and he had *still* shown faith in him. How could Mephiston have been so wrong? How had he failed to see that all these years of secret study had left him open to this terrible trap? That he had read too widely and too freely? Even then, as they played that final game, he must already have been damned. When he sat in Mephiston’s chambers for the last time, his soul had already been lost. Why had Mephiston not executed him then, while there was still a chance to halt his fall? He would not even have the blessed release of death. He would endure, in eternal torment, in this horrific form, dragging honest souls into damnation. ‘Why didn’t you save me?’ he groaned as his last shreds of reason slipped away.

With his final thought, Antros recalled something Mephiston had said to him during that portentous game. ‘Trust your soul to Andomatius,’ he had said, tapping the staff he had just given him. ‘He will not fail you. Even if you fail yourself.’

Despite his agony, Antros laughed, finally understanding, finally seeing the genius of his lord. Tears of shame turned to tears of joy.

He gripped the Staff of Andomatius and with his last ounce of strength he channelled Zadkiel’s power through the flawed metal.



CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

The Talon, Abissama Delta, Sabassus

Mephiston climbed to his feet and held Vitarus aloft.

Down the length of the colonnade the Rubric Marines crumpled. There was a dull popping sound as their battleplate collapsed, crushed by invisible force.

They fired a few more wild shots as they crashed to the floor, blasting sections of the pillars. Then they lay still.

The fighting was over but the hall was still full of noise and light. Energy was coursing through one star-shaped window, through the altar and then out through another window.

Rhacelus removed his helmet and cast it down the steps of the altar, gasping and cursing. His face was ashen and blood-soaked and for a few seconds he could do nothing but wheeze. Then he looked over at Mephiston. ‘Is that really you?’

Mephiston nodded, lowering Vitarus and helping Rhacelus to his feet.

Rhacelus leant against him, still struggling to catch his breath.

The remaining members of Squad Turiossa gathered at the foot of the steps, dusting down their armour and looking up at the two Librarians.

Mephiston was pleased to see that Colonel Fedorak was with them, bloody but still standing. He had predicted Fedorak’s survival, but was impressed nonetheless.

Rhacelus looked up at the beam of light, his tone bleak. ‘Nine Silver Towers, broadcasting Magnus’ power into the Sol System, summoning every psychic soul to his cause. What have we done, Mephiston? How could we let ourselves be tricked?’

No one spoke, all eyes locked on the Chief Librarian.

‘Tricks have been played,’ said Mephiston, speaking in his usual neutral tones. ‘But not on me.’

Rhacelus frowned, shaking his head.

Mephiston held his gaze.

Rhacelus kept staring at him until realisation dawned on his face. Then he closed his eyes and laughed.

Mephiston waved Fedorak over.

‘I’m going to cut us a fast way out of here but we will need gunships once we reach the slopes.’

Fedorak nodded, mute with shock.

Mephiston took one last look at Zadkiel’s pentacle, allowed himself a brief nod of satisfaction, then strode towards the exit.



CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

The Court of the One-Eyed King, Prospero

The throne room was unusually quiet. The hieratic spheres still drifted through the lightning, sparking and pulsing as they orbited the Crimson King, but the clamour of supplicants was absent. The crowds were mute. The only voices were those of the wretched figures at the poles of the spheres, still singing their pained hymn as they fuelled the vortices of light.

Zadkiel strode through the radiance, his head thrown back in defiance as he waited to be accosted by Magnus' lap dogs.

To his great surprise, rather than denouncing him the crowds parted without a word, forming a path to the dais where Magnus was seated in silence, watching him approach.

He has heard of my success, thought Zadkiel with a rush of triumph. Nine Silver Towers, projecting his word to the streets of Terra. Who, in all of Prospero, could have brought him such a gift?

Magnus was leaning forwards in his throne, cradling something in his claw. As Zadkiel marched proudly up the steps of the dais, he saw that it was a world, turning slowly above Magnus' palm, trailing moons and satellites over his crimson skin.

'Sabassus,' said Magnus as Zadkiel neared the throne. He spoke quietly but the words caused the spheres to blaze brighter and the figures fuelling

them to sing with renewed agony, embers tumbling from their charred bodies.

Zadkiel bowed, wondering what form his reward would take.

‘Home of the Nine Brothers,’ said Magnus, studying the world he was holding. ‘Nine pieces of the Great Changer himself, fragments of his labyrinth given purchase in the material realm.’

Zadkiel was about to speak when Magnus howled.

The lights of the throne room died, their power swallowed by the towering, blazing form of Magnus. He became a pillar of rage, a storm of vitriol that whirled over the crowds, booming and roaring before collapsing back into a recognisable figure.

‘Cast back into the warp by you! Cast beyond my reach!’

Magnus was clearly battling to maintain his humanoid form, his flesh whipped into furious eddies.

Zadkiel shook his head. ‘No, highness. That is not at all what I have done. I have given the towers new life – I have revived them, in your name.’

Magnus shivered with rage and looked as though he were about to rise from his throne. Then he held the planet towards Zadkiel.

‘You were tricked, Vulture. Made a fool of. Someone played a game at your expense. At *my* expense!’

Zadkiel felt a rush of sickening realisation as he looked at Sabassus. Where the Silver Towers should have been standing, ablaze with astral light, there were nine craters, all shrouded in smoke.

‘It can’t be,’ he said. ‘I performed the Rite of the Nine Sacraments.’

Magnus tightened his grip and the image of Sabassus vanished. He glared down at Zadkiel, his eye black with hate. ‘There was a flaw in your rite. A weakness in the circuit. A weakness that reversed the polarity of your spell. Do you understand? *Reversed* it. You have not revived my towers – you have cast them back into the labyrinth. Beyond my reach. You have robbed me of my greatest weapon.’

‘No.’ Zadkiel laughed. ‘It is impossible. I cannot have been tricked. I was a step ahead of him. Everything...’ His words trailed off as he recalled something that had been troubling him. On Tizca, when his servant plunged her knife into Mephiston, Mephiston made no effort to halt her. He had seemed to almost welcome the wound.

Zadkiel felt suddenly weak, leaning on his staff as though he really *were*

just a frail old man. ‘What can I... What can I do?’ He struggled to stand, weighed down by the enormity of his mistake – by the enormity of Mephiston’s deceit.

Magnus leant back in his throne and closed his eye. ‘You can sing for me.’

Zadkiel tried to flee, but Magnus willed him up, off the throne dais and into the vortices of power. He saw where Magnus was sending him – to the jumble of burned choristers at the base of a sphere.

As Zadkiel sank into the blistered flesh he screamed. The pain was unimaginable. And he knew it would never end.

His cry emerged as a song, beautiful and divine, fuelling the light of reason.



EPILOGUE

Librarium Sagrestia, Arx Angelicum, Baal

Mephiston and Rhacelus were seated in the gloom of Antros' private chambers – his small sanctuario positioned near the top of the Orbicular Tower, deep in the vaults of the Librarium Sagrestia. They had left the glow-globes unlit and were sitting in silence, looking at the shadowy jumble of arcana that filled Antros' living space. The Librarians had been back on Baal for several days and Mephiston had already explained their success in a private audience with Dante. Soon, they would join a campaign in the galactic north of the Baal System, but Dante had allowed them some time to heal and to grieve for their fallen brother.

Their journey home had been less violent than the journey out. The Harlequin, Cyriac, had been true to his word to guide them back through the webway and Mephiston had also kept his word, leaving the repugnant creature in peace on its scrap of craftworld. However, he had made sure Commander Dante knew exactly what was hiding in the Cronium Gulf, giving him the coordinates of the anomaly and allowing him to decide how best to handle that particular threat.

With the destruction of the nine Silver Towers, Colonel Fedorak had regained contact with his Divisional HQ and requested reinforcements. Mephiston had warned Fedorak that reinforcements were unlikely to ever come and offered him and his men a place on the *Blood Oath*. As

Mephiston expected, Fedorak declined, unwilling to abandon the people of Sabassus while they still had even a slim chance of survival. Mephiston and Rhacelus had done what they could to help him, harnessing their psychokinetic powers to aid with the rebuilding of Adurim's defences, but Mephiston doubted Fedorak's sanity would hold out for more than a year.

And now they were here, drinking a silent toast to their dead friend.

Rhacelus' armour glinted in the darkness as he sipped his wine. 'You knew he had fallen.'

'I knew that Zadkiel had poisoned his mind. I knew that he had developed powers that were inappropriate for a Librarian of his rank.'

'But you let him go on, researching things he should not and putting himself in danger – putting us all in danger.' There was no accusation in Rhacelus' voice, just confusion.

'Fate is not fixed, Rhacelus. You know that as well as I do. I saw countless outcomes for Antros, all of them fraught with peril, but I also saw that, without him, I was headed for failure. Failure on an unimaginable scale. Our futures were linked – I knew it from the first time I met him. Whenever I used the salver to explore alternatives, to seek ways to change his path, the threads unravelled and I could no longer see a route to victory.'

Rhacelus raised an eyebrow. 'And who gave you that salver?'

Mephiston nodded. 'Antros. And I believe it was passed to him by Zadkiel.'

Rhacelus' goblet froze halfway to his mouth and he looked over at the table where the Ephemeris was lying, a few feet away from them.

'Yes,' said Mephiston. 'It is a cursed artefact. I'm sure Antros never knew, but it is extremely dangerous. Before we leave Baal we must entrust it to Marest. He can lock it in his vaults with all the other horrors.'

'We should destroy it. Why keep something so tainted? It is a record of Zadkiel's lies.'

'It *is* full of lies, but there is also invaluable information scored into that metal. Like all great liars, Zadkiel grounded his deceits in truth.'

Rhacelus grumbled and settled back in his chair, clearly unconvinced. He drank more wine and fell quiet again.

Mephiston watched him, intrigued. At no point on their journey home, nor since their return to Baal, had Rhacelus attempted to peer into his soul.

It was easy enough to spot when he was trying – his eyes flashed an even more vivid blue and his frown lines deepened. After so many peculiar events, Rhacelus would usually have been keen to ensure his Chief Librarian was still stable. He sees how I've changed, realised Mephiston.

'I was growing to like the wretched boy,' muttered Rhacelus.

Mephiston looked around at Antros' things and nodded. 'Take the Ephemeris to Marest,' he said, finishing his drink. 'Then gather the Quorum Emyrric in the Circle of Consonance. We have much to share with them. I sense we shall be visiting the Prospero System again. We must describe everything we learned so that it can be correctly recorded.'

Rhacelus nodded and took the salver from the table, eyeing it with distrust. He paused at the doorway, silhouetted by the lights of the scriptoria outside.

'Could you have saved him?'

Mephiston met his gaze. 'I did.'

Anger flickered in Rhacelus' eyes and he seemed on the verge of arguing. Then the fury dimmed and he nodded, striding away into the darkness.

'I did,' repeated Mephiston after Rhacelus had left, but his words sounded less sure once he was alone.

He looked at the objects scattered on Antros' desk – a disorganised heap of astrological instruments and scraps of parchment.

He picked up a piece of charcoal and began sketching on one of the parchments, drawing absentmindedly as he thought of what lay ahead. He felt suddenly old, as though the full weight of his centuries lay on him for the first time. He could feel future trials hanging over him, looming in the stars, greater than anything he had faced so far. He was not fool enough to think that his victory on Sabassus had turned the tide of the war. Magnus was delayed but not defeated. A being of such power would find other ways to send his call across the galaxy. The Blood Angels would be called on to do more than simply protect their own home. Who else but Sanguinius' sons could hope to combat power of the kind Magnus wielded? And if he were to falter, if he were to ever doubt himself, the whole Chapter would fall with him. He had to be the Chapter's dark, impervious soul. The scale of his duty was daunting.

It was only when Mephiston rose to leave that he noticed what he had been drawing.

It was the Emperor's face, recreated from the memory he had seen in Fedorak's mind.

Even sketched so roughly, the image was striking. The Emperor's gaze was so clear, so powerful, so unbreakable.

Mephiston looked at the image for a long time, matching the stare's intensity with his own.

Then he nodded, as though answering a silent command and left the room, leaving the parchment fluttering to the floor.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Darius Hinks is the author of the Warhammer 40,000 novel *Blackstone Fortress* and three novels in the Mephiston series, *Mephiston: Blood of Sanguinius*, *Mephiston: Revenant Crusade* and *Mephiston: City of Light*. He also wrote the novella *Sanctus*. For Warhammer, he wrote *Warrior Priest*, which won the David Gemmell Morningstar Award for best newcomer, as well as the Orion trilogy, *Sigvald* and several novellas. His work for Age of Sigmar includes *Hammers of Sigmar*, *Warqueen* and the Gotrek Gurnisson novel *Ghoulslayer*.

An extract from *Spear of the Emperor*.



1

Crossing the Great Rift killed five thousand, nine hundred and thirty-one of the crew. Whole districts of spinal battlements were ripped from the ship's back. The void shields could not be rekindled. The warship's superstructure groaned around us as if imbued with miserable life.

Living within these bent steel bones, we laboured on, illuminated by the throbbing red of emergency lighting. The industrial sounds of repair work echoed through every corridor and chamber. Between the metallic crashes, we heard the chanting of choral prayers invoking the Emperor, the Machine-God, and His Reborn Son.

In the silence between the prayers, we heard weeping.

For four days and eleven hours after we emerged, we drifted in the deep void, crippled and cold. No one was permitted to look out into space, where the thrashing madness of the Great Rift still sought to encircle us. Those who broke this edict were executed to spare the rest of us their raving. I killed some of them myself.

When the Motive Force of the ship's drive was reawakened in the twelfth hour of the fourth day, the air scrubbers clattered back to life in the same moment as the engines. We drew in deep, stale breaths of refiltered oxygen, coughing out the toxin-laden air we'd been sharing amongst ourselves since the power died.

We were alive.

Many were not. Blessings were spoken over the shrouded forms of the fallen, before they were fed to the engine furnaces. In death, they served the warship one last time – this time as fuel.

No one among us was unscathed, but we were alive. Alive, and on the Nihilus side of the Great Rift. It took fifty-two days to run the Straits of Epona through the Rift and it almost cost us the ship, but we had survived. We'd left the Imperium behind.

There was no going back. The ship would never hold together for a return voyage. My master gave the only order he could give.

'Set course for Nemeton.'

2

Our vessel was the Sword-class frigate *In Devout Abjuration*, with an initial crew complement of twenty-four thousand, six hundred and ninety souls. We numbered just over two-thirds of that figure after the casualties of crossing the Great Rift and the shipboard riots that followed.

Exile. That was the word my master used for the mission. The notion filtered through the diminished crew, perhaps by virtue of the fact it was true. What hope did we have of seeing home again? *In Devout Abjuration* set sail with a full human and servitor crew, but the absence of other Space Marines was a telling sign. The Chapter Master, most noble Nisk Ran-Thawll, was already risking a warship and an officer travelling one of the rare routes through the Great Rift. He wouldn't commit more warriors into the abyss, not when our chances of survival were so low.

Amadeus held absolute command over the warship, but its day-to-day running was overseen by Flag-Captain Harjun Engel, one of the highest-ranking serfs within the Mentor Legion. When my master remarked on the slow pace we set, Engel patched the Navigator's murmuring voice through to the bridge:

'There's nothing here. Nothing. Nothing here. We drift in the dark. All I see are reflections of the Emperor's Light, cast on the sides of shadows.'

Amadeus mused for five seconds, an eternity to his enhanced cognition, seeking an appropriate reply. Doubtless he considered the Navigator's words to be uselessly flamboyant language. He craved precision. When people embellished their words, it introduced the possibility of flawed interpretation, and unclarity was something my master took pains to avoid at all costs. Sailors, however, are always prone to such poesy. They operate in a realm without easy definition, on scales beyond comfortable reach of

the human mind.

‘Given the nature of our journey,’ Amadeus replied, ‘I will tolerate these inexact sentiments.’

With that, he left the command deck. He didn’t acknowledge the bows and crisp salutes performed by the crew as he passed their stations. Every one of the warship’s complement was lifebound to the Chapter. Each one wore the red eagle of the Mentors somewhere upon their robe or uniform. In this they were no different to Kartash, Tyberia and I. Only avenues of expertise and degrees of training separated us from them. Along with Captain Engel, we were the most valuable humans on the ship.

Even after crossing the Rift, we were anything but safe. There was no Astronomican for the Navigator to sail by. No stable warp routes to follow. We jumped in fits and bursts, plunging blindly into the warp, fearing each stab into the blind unknown would be our last.

The ship shrieked around us, day and night, night and day.

3

My master was the only soul immune to the horror that gripped the ship. He immersed himself in his duties, focusing on nothing but the mission ahead. When Amadeus wasn’t training, he studied in preparation for his assignment, and archived his observations with one of his helots.

This was usually Kartash. Of the three of us, Kartash was closest to him, though that’s a relative description, for we were nothing but tools to Amadeus. He considered our individuality no differently than he considered the scratches on the casing of his boltgun, or the chip along the edge of his relic blade: minor divergences that marked them as his possessions, but functionally no different to similar weapons of war. We didn’t resent this, nor did we fight it. We were slaves, trained far beyond the skills of most other humans, but slaves nonetheless. His attitude to us was entirely natural, in keeping with our lifelong training.

Amadeus barely slept. A four-hour slumber cycle was mandated for his kind when they endured their gruelling training rituals, this figure being the rigorously researched duration required to rest overworked muscle tissue and the chem-stimulated transhuman brain. He could survive for weeks with only minutes of true sleep, resisting the build-up of somnolent

toxins in his bloodstream, but that was a matter of necessity, not optimisation.

Amadeus slept for exactly two hundred and thirty-nine minutes each day cycle in the habitation cell allotted for his use. To sleep for that long was an indulgence, one he considered practically slovenly despite the mandate inscribed in his fragmented translation of the Codex Astartes. Laxity was anathema to him.

He balanced his unaccustomed idleness by committing to an even stricter training regimen than the traditional fifteen hours a day. I never once saw him cease early. When he ate his portions of nutrient-rich gruel at the assigned hours each day cycle, his sweat-bathed, abused body cried out for nourishment. I knew this as well as he did, for I monitored his biostability data at all times. There was never a moment I didn't have his vital signs ticking along, scrolling down the inside of my left eye.

He trained with blade and boltgun, shadow-sparring and dry-firing through hour after hour of training exercises. He pushed himself through physical challenges and cardiomotivator repetitions that would rupture mortal muscle. He fought squads, hordes, armies of holo-ghosts. He ordered me to ritually drain his blood to weaken him before one training session in every five, forcing greater effort and endurance in response. He ran for mile after breathless mile every day through the ship's labyrinthine innards. I watched the data-spikes as he repeatedly pushed his primary heart to the limit, forcing his secondary heart into overworked life alongside it.

He considered this regimen, in his own words, 'earning the luxury of sleep'.

We trained as well, as was our duty, but nowhere near to the degree set by our lord.

One day, he told me to shoot him. We stood in the chambers we used for hololithic combat, though today we were focusing on close-quarters battle with blades and gunstocks. Our weapons were loaded with live ammunition to maintain exact weight, as we would feel in the field. Precision was our Chapter's watchword.

Amadeus entered at the close of our session, considering the three of us as we stood in a loose pack. We were exhausted from two hours of training, slick with perspiration, weighed down by our armour and

weapons. Sweat stung my eyes to the degree that even blinking was a relief. We bowed at our master's approach. He was unarmed and unarmoured.

'Helot Secundus,' he said. 'Shoot me.'

'Master, with respect, our ammunition is live.'

My mistake was in hesitating, for he shook his head and looked to Tyberia.

'Helot Tertius. Shoot me.'

Tyberia didn't hesitate as I had. She levelled her shotgun and fired – or she would have done, had Amadeus not slapped the barrel aside in a blur of motion and thrown her to the floor. The back of her head struck the deck with a jarring smack.

She'd moved fast, faster than any unaugmented human could possibly move, yet Amadeus stood above her, his boot on her throat.

Space Marines have a way of moving, a physicality to their merest motions, which arises from the power inherent in their form. In some, it's an effortless and unintentional arrogance. In others, a brutal and knowing grace. It's *power*; one way or another, and a natural byproduct of the transhuman condition. They can't help what they are, any more than they can help the myriad ways it shows in whatever they do.

Amadeus radiated that power then, as he pinned Tyberia with no effort at all. He was too cold to be truly arrogant, for arrogance is born in considering how you appear in the eyes of others. Our master had no such concerns. He didn't revel in his invincibility, he just lived it. Overwhelming physical strength was as natural to him as breathing was to me. Since achieving his place in the Mentor Legion, he'd ascended above mortal concerns. He could exert his will on the world purely by strength and weaponry.

I've lived my life around the Emperor's Angels, and that perception of the world leaves a mark on their psyches. It would for any being in the same circumstances. That unrivalled ability to act, to change the world around them through a level of violence no other individual can match alone... It makes some warriors proud, it shifts others' perceptions without them realising, and it can easily ripen into something darker beneath the surface. Things like that can fester.

That day, Amadeus' review of Tyberia's response amounted to three

words.

‘Acceptable. Keep training,’ he said, and left us alone.

Included in our master’s reflections were his brief considerations of his three helots. He noted that the Chapter had assigned him three ‘efficient and diligent’ slaves for this operation. Though he rarely made specific references to any of us, he added a postscript regarding Kartash. One that matched my own perceptions.

‘I find his piety an olfactory irritant at times,’ Amadeus dictated, speaking of Kartash as if all three of us were not present, as if we weren’t the ones recording his words for the Chapter archives. ‘My Helot Primus carries the scent of blessed weapon oils and sacred incense with an intensity that becomes almost cloying.’

I had noticed this. The holy scent permanently wreathed my fellow slave like an aura, and I’d wondered if there was some sin or chastisement in his past that necessitated this effort at holiness. Tyberia, in her cringing way, insisted it must have been a dark sin indeed, and regarded our superior helot with naked suspicion, as if his secret crime were contagious. Kartash, with infinite patience, assured us that it was a matter of simple devotion. I wondered if he had once held aspirations of priesthood, but when I asked, he gave a sad smile and said no more.

Amadeus disregarded the matter as meaningless. It didn’t affect our competence, and thus it was tolerable.

4

It took a further forty-three days before we reached Nemeton – a journey that would have taken mere hours before the rise of the Great Rift extinguished the Emperor’s Light. More of the crew died. Dozens, then hundreds, and eventually thousands. Some starved when the botanical laboratories rotted. Some were poisoned by tainted water when the aquapurifiers failed time and again. Some killed themselves when they realised how far from the Emperor’s gaze we truly were.

Because of our rank among the most valuable humans aboard the vessel, we were protected from privation. Amadeus wouldn’t let us die. Yet the innards of our warship became a necropolis. I organised funerary teams to gather the bodies and, for a time, in the name of purity, the shipboard

furnaces burned flesh and bone as often as promethium fuel. Soon enough the dead were reprocessed as nutrient pastes for those of us that still lived. I don't need an eidetic recollection to remember that foul flavour. Sometimes I still wake with the taste in my mouth.

In Devout Abjuration stank like a charnel house. The air scrubbers couldn't filter out the funeral pyre reek. Even Kartash's holy incense, so pervasive in our communal chambers, was often overwhelmed by the smoky stench throughout the ship.

When at last we drifted into the Ophion System, a sensation that was too weary to be called relief spread through the remaining crew. As the final day of our journey dawned in the light of Nemeton's weak blue sun, our survivors numbered only ten thousand, one hundred and seventy.

At the system's very edge, the Emperor's Spears strike cruiser *Hex* drifted into our engagement zone, its cityscape's worth of weaponry rolling to bear on the far smaller frigate limping into their territory. She was haloed by fighter wings that painted the void with needle-thin plasma contrails, and was escorted by two destroyers, each one a match for the *Abjuration* in its own right.

The *Hex* had been waiting for us. Deep-void satellites and monitoring outposts had evidently marked our approach weeks before our arrival. She demanded that we follow her in towards Nemeton, where we would be boarded and our vessel inspected.

'If you refuse,' her captain informed us, *'you will be destroyed. If you raise your shields or run out your guns, you will be destroyed. If you seek to leave the system, you will be destroyed. Do you understand these terms?'*

We understood.

'Will you comply?'

We complied.

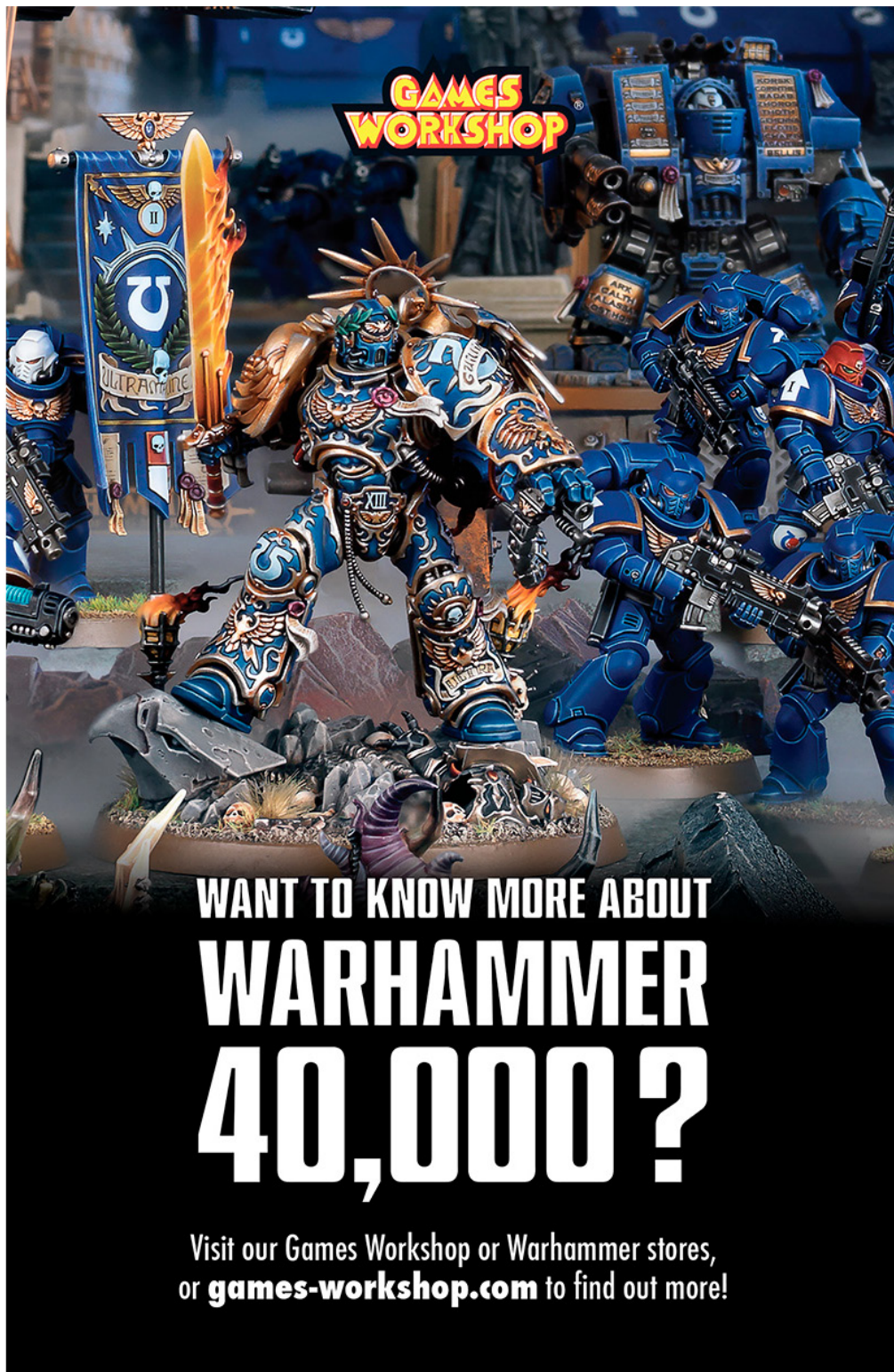
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For my brother in blood, Guy Haley. Fangs for the help, chap.

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