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DAVID ANNANDALE

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An Extract from ‘Dark Imperium’

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CASTELLAN

DAVID ANNANDALE

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WARHAMMER 40,000

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.

PART ONE

DOLOROSO

Before the Cicatrix Maledictum

CHAPTER ONE

The End

The causeway of flesh burned before Garran Crowe's eyes.

The Stormravens *Purgation's Sword* and the *Harrower* strafed the end where it met the island of Hive Skoria. Washed by the turgid waves of the ocean of sludge, soaked in the effluent of tens of thousands of years of industry, the bodies ignited. The conflagration spread wide. A wall of flame cut Skoria off from the mainland. The fire rose and fell with the waves. Noxious smoke billowed thousands of feet into the air. Skoria was a phantom, the dark mass of the hive appearing and disappearing behind the firestorm. The last hive of Sandava III to be spared the daemonic incursion was unbowed. The channel between it and the mainland was a flaming moat. The towers looked down on the end of a war.

'This is the final stand of the abominations!' Crowe voxed to his strike force. 'We have them at bay!'

This is no victory! the Black Blade of Antwyr snarled in answer. The voice in Castellan Garran Crowe's head lashed out in rage. ***You struggle in futility***, it warned. ***Your hope burns.***

Crowe heard desperation in the sword's raving. He heard impotence. It was Antwyr that had failed on Sandava III. It was Antwyr's hope that burned. It had failed to break Crowe with despair. He was renewed. At the head of two squads of Purifiers, he was closing in on the shore of the mainland, and he was closing in on the end of the war. Antwyr shrieked, and Crowe plunged it into the body of the fiend of Slaanesh that charged him, gabbling its desperation to pummel with

its hooves. Its tail stinger struck over his shoulder at his spine. It failed. The iron halo mounted above his power pack generated a gravitic conversion field that turned the blow away. The stinger shattered against artificer armour whose sanctity had been confirmed by a thousand battlefields. Crowe twisted the blade in the thorax of the fiend. The daemon stumbled forward, impaling itself on the indestructible metal, and falling into the terrible light of Crowe's purity. His righteous anger matched the wrath of the blade. Where he walked, the sombre day of Sandava III blazed with harsh, merciless holiness. The daemon's shape tore open from the thorax, peeling back, disintegrating into ash from the inside out. It issued a last, gargling scream, and then Crowe marched through the swirling cloud of its remains, already swinging the sword to decapitate two more fiends that lunged for him, jaws agape.

The squads marched behind him in two close formations. There was a space between him and the two Knights of the Flame at their heads. There was room for daemons to get between the castellan and his battle-brothers, if they were reckless enough to make the attempt. The few who tried did not fight long. The gap was a needed distance. It diminished the voice of the Blade of Antwyr just enough for the other Purifiers to push its taunting and insinuations into the background and focus on the extermination of the daemons. The war on Sandava III had been a hard one, and a long time for the other Grey Knights to be exposed to Crowe's presence. The burden of Antwyr was his to bear, and never set aside. His grip, the surest prison of all, must forever be on the hilt of the corrupt, corrupting, indestructible relic. By the Emperor's will, his being had been shaped for this task. His brothers were strong in faith and sinew, yet the sword was a spiritual poison, its corrosion so powerful it could erode even their defences.

There was another gap between the Purifiers and the strike force from the First Brotherhood. Two Terminator squads had taken part in the salvation of Sandava III. Beside them rumbled the Land Raider Crusader *Malleus Maleficarum*. Heroes beyond taint, a dozen warriors now who had exterminated a world-wide plague of daemons, they still needed to keep their distance from Crowe.

'*You seem renewed, brother castellan*,' said Drake, a Knight of the Flame, the voice of fellowship reaching across the physical distance between his squad and Crowe. He used a private channel, for Crowe's ears alone.

'I am, brother.'

'*That was no simple victory against the daemon prince at Labos, then*.'

'It was not.'

Hive Labos, a thousand miles west on the mainland, had been the centre of the incursion. There Crowe had destroyed Varangallax. The transformed keep had fallen, the guiding hand of the incursion was no more, and the purification of Sandava III had become a matter of time. Crowe's struggle against Varangallax had also been a personal one. 'The enemy sought to make me despair,' he said to Drake. 'It confronted me with the echoes of our losses on Sandava II.'

'*Old ghosts.*'

'Indeed.'

His spirit had been drained by the decades of being besieged by Antwyr. Varangallax, a monster born from the tragedy of Sandava II, had tried to break him down with visions of the futility of all his struggles. It had failed.

'My burden is my honour,' Crowe said. 'I welcome it.' He welcomed Drake's perception, too. It was a reminder of brotherhood that transcended the isolation that was Crowe's lot. It would make easier the return of that isolation, at the end of this battle.

In a final push to taint the world beyond salvation, the daemons were attempting to reach Skoria. From the ruins of Hive Conatum, less than fifty miles south of the narrows between the mainland and the island of Skoria, the abominations had dragged the bodies of millions of slaughtered civilians. They had thrown the bodies into the viscous sea, and so had created shoals of corpses, building flesh upon flesh until the causeway advanced, a finger of damnation, across the waters.

They had not reached the other shore. The Stormravens were destroying the causeway, filling the air over the channel with the clouds of human debris. They strafed back and forth over the flames, knocking the furthest point of the causeway back and back away from Skoria. Crowe brought up the Purifiers and the strike force of warriors from the First Brotherhood behind the final daemonic horde, closing from the south and west. To the north of the corridor from Conatum to Skoria, the land shot up in jagged, heavily mined peaks. To the south-east, a fault line began as a mile-wide canyon before Conatum, and as the land dipped, became a talon-like inlet a hundred miles long. The daemons' advance had stalled, and now they were trapped. Ahead, they faced an impassable ocean of fire. At their backs came something worse. A relentless force of silvered grey cut them down.

This is something more meaningful than victory, Crowe thought. *It is a cleansing.*

He deliberately turned from the personal satisfaction of the war's end. But then

Sendrax shouted over the ululations of the daemons, and there was no escaping the personal. The war had been aimed at him, but it had dragged in his comrades in destiny. ‘The day of our long vengeance is almost complete, brothers!’ the Knight of the Flame announced, his voice booming from his helm’s vox-casters. ‘We shall lay the ghosts of Sandava to final rest!’

The other Purifiers of Sendrax’s squad cheered. Enough of them were survivors of Sandava II to feel the rush of final justice. Crowe bit his tongue rather than impose solemnity until the last daemon was hurled back to immaterium. He knew why Sendrax exulted. He felt the same urge, though he could no longer celebrate. This moment had been long in coming. It had been due for more than a century. He had been a Knight of the Flame when, led by Castellan Gavallan, the Grey Knights had landed on Sandava II. The daemonic work had begun there, with the death of Gavallan and, at the last, the Exterminatus of that world. A web had been cast for him then, one that had closed here on Sandava III, with the same atrocities, and the daemon prince created by the war on Sandava II attacking Crowe when the decades of ceaseless spiritual and mental attacks by the Blade had weakened him, made him vulnerable to the claws of the past and to the illusion of futility. He was the target, but his brothers who had been with him on Sandava II, and suffered the same losses, had felt the impact of the attack, too.

On this day, final justice was rendered. For Gavallan and the dead battle-brothers, and for two worlds of the Imperium sacrificed to the dovetailing machinations of Antwyr and abominations of the Dark Prince, the debt was being paid. The daemonic works were ashes now. Hive Skoria would be spared.

For Crowe, there was satisfaction, but no triumph. The cost was too great, and his war had no pause. The Blade was always there, always in his head, grinding and insinuating, whispering and screaming. It was tireless, sleepless, merciless – a battering ram at the gates of his will.

This is no victory, the sword said again as he swung it with relentless rhythm.

Sensing defeat, summoned by the presence of the daemon blade, the abominations surged at him, shrieking their hate. They ran straight into the burning halo of psychic force that surrounded Crowe. It was the light of a purity of faith so absolute, so unwavering, it lit up the battlefield near the castellan, and the abominations burned at its touch. They staggered back, flesh smouldering, and Crowe cut them down with the sword that drew them. If this was not a victory, it was something very close to one. He would accept it.

Drake voxed, ‘*Some ghosts will never lie easy. But I am glad to give them*

justice.' He was more sober in his assessment than Sendrax. He always was.

'The success of our mission is sufficient,' Crowe said. The incursion was on the point of being defeated. He should not expect more. 'But I agree with you, brother. I, too, am glad.'

The rocky terrain sloped down, and Crowe could see over the daemonic horde to the burning shore. Less than a mile separated the Grey Knights from the sea. The abominations had run out as far as they could onto the shrinking causeway. They were writhing silhouettes in the flames. Their forms reached out in frustration and wrath for the hive that was now denied them. Some of the daemons that congregated on the shore pushed forward, their rush toppling their foul kin into the burning sea. Others turned back, hurling themselves at the Grey Knights. Crowe measured the desperation of the abominations in their anger. Creatures of sensation and vice, they had, until recently, howled with pleasure as they rampaged across the planet. Their songs had changed since the fall of Varangallax. The music of damnation had become shaded with bitterness, then with panic. Now there were only screams. The daemons charged into a storm of fire from the legionaries. The *Malleus Maleficarum* came up on the left flank of the Grey Knights' strike force. Its hurricane bolters shredded landscape and daemon alike. The sweep of its fire carved arcing swathes ahead of Crowe. The sound of hundreds of mass-reactive bolt shells exploding in near simultaneity smashed the final traces of the daemons' song. This was a different music, brutal in its rhythm and regularity. It was a martial drumming. It split the air with fury and with judgement. The horde boiled with confusion on either side of the swathes. Confusion and dismay robbed the daemons of what momentum they had.

The vanguard of destruction came in the form of incineration by fire and las, and physical annihilation by shell. But the truest anger of faith came when the Purifiers and the First Brotherhood fought in close quarters. The grey day flashed with the incandescent blue lightning of Nemesis force weapons. The runes and power fields of halberds, swords, axes and hammers turned daemons into less than ash. The Stormravens were attacking closer to the shore as they cut down the causeway. The fire on the ocean seemed to roar higher, the peaks of the flames reaching up into their smoke, clawing the unseen sky. This final cremation of the unclean was at hand.

Crowe beheld the panorama of victory, and in that moment the Blade of Antwyr attacked him with a sickening blast of triumph. ***You look on illusion. This is nothing. The ashes are yours. Defeat is coming. Submit or perish with all you***

have fought for. Look, warden! Look for the ending! Look for its coming!

The sword's hiss chased itself around Crowe's skull, slicing at his thoughts. He had stood upon the ramparts of his soul, his vigil unflagging, ever since he had reclaimed the Blade after the death of Gavallan and made himself its jailer and its prisoner. He did not blink. He did not let the sword stagger his assault and drop his guard. Antwyr's shout was so fierce, some of the Purifiers behind him grunted in pain as the bow wave of the assault washed over them.

There could never be a response to Antwyr's harangues. To engage in dialogue with the daemon would be to invite corruption. Yet Crowe listened, always alert, always parsing the sword's words, watching for a weakness it might let slip, or a truth that might escape sideways. Antwyr was gleeful, triumphant. Its anger had vanished.

Danger was coming.

Still marching forward, still rending and burning abominations, Crowe voxed the pilot of the Stormraven *Harrower*. 'Brother Berinon,' he said, 'is a new enemy approaching our position?'

'*There is no sign of any within line of sight*,' Berinon answered. '*Auspex is clear*.'

Berinon sounded displeased with his own report. Crowe wasn't satisfied either. He voxed the *Sacrum Finem*, and received the same response from Shipmaster Gura. She was ancient by mortal standards, barely alive except when the mechadendrites of her command throne made her one with her beloved ship. Crowe had absolute trust in her acumen. '*There is no enemy closing in*,' she said. She sounded as definite and as unhappy with her pronouncement as Berinon had with his.

There was an enemy. There had to be. He felt a psychic build-up. There was a storm about to break. Gura was no psyker, and she could sense it, too. It was that strong.

'*Brother-castellan*,' Drake voxed. '*Something is going awry.*'

'I know it,' Crowe said. But he couldn't identify the danger. It was too vague, and so powerful that it seemed to be emanating from everywhere.

A fiend lunged at Crowe and he impaled it through its open jaws. The Blade came out through the back of its skull. The fiend went limp, its mass dragging down on Crowe's arm as it sagged. He pulled the sword free and Antwyr said, ***That was your last blow in your broken dream. Now you will awaken.***

'Be warned,' Crowe voxed the strike force. 'A new attack is imminent.' He scanned all sides in the time it took to take another step forward. He saw the

diminishing numbers of daemons, the blasted landscape and the flames upon the waves. There was nothing else out there.

He raised the sword to strike again.

Antwyr said, ***Oh***. A single syllable, so different from any of its ravings and curses. It was an expression of wonder, and of a delight so great it stopped the flow of words.

A great silence fell. The daemons ceased their attacks. As one, they turned away from the Grey Knights. They looked up, staring into smoke and unbroken grey clouds. The legionaries advanced still. Heavy weapons fire cut into the motionless horde. Daemonic forms vanished, burning and disintegrating. Those hit by the barrage did not react as they were destroyed. Nor did those standing near. The ranks of abominations had become a congregation awaiting the manifestation of the divine.

The silence lasted no more than a second, but it was huge. It felt to Crowe as if the entire materium were holding its breath. The instinct was too strong, and he paused. He looked up, too, in time to see the clouds ripped away.

The skies over Skoria were suddenly clear. For a fraction of a second, they were a blue that had not been seen on the world for more than three thousand years. Then blue darkened to violet and then to black. The effect was vertiginous. The firmament seemed to fall away, as if an abyss had opened up and Sandava III was about to plummet into its depths. Then the tearing began. The rip slashed through the blackness, a terrible wound opened like flesh being pulled asunder. The blood that rushed from the tear was the monstrous light of the warp. The energy was all colours and it was none. It was a shriek from beyond and beneath the spectrum of sanity. It was the bright, stabbing shades of nightmare and madness, of pain and foul joy, of the worst of war and of bloody, tormenting fate. It was the death of reality, and of a galaxy's fragile, battered, fraying dream.

Antwyr had spoken the truth. Hope burned.

The tear stretched from horizon to horizon, from east to west across the entire celestial sphere. It opened wider, roaring, becoming maw as well as wound. Now the silence was over, and the surviving daemons were singing. It was a hymn of praise, of triumph, of mockery, and of pleasure that was the absolute disorder of the senses. There were barely a hundred of them left. In a matter of minutes, the war would be over. They could not stand against the Grey Knights. But now a far greater ending was at hand.

Antwyr laughed. ***You had no victory***, said the Blade. ***This. This is victory. Now is the devouring. Now is the storm of culmination.***

In the midst of the convulsing sky was a sharp point of silver light, a single glint of hard reality in the spreading holocaust. It was the *Sacrum Finem*, holding its position. Gura had been moving the strike cruiser to follow the course of the war, faithfully keeping it in anchor above the main body of troops, ready to drop more heavy support or begin an orbital bombardment. It had been invisible through Sandava III's murky atmosphere, yet Crowe had felt its presence, and known its strength was ever at hand.

The sight of it now felt like an invitation to mourning.

'*Castellan*,' Gura voxed. '*We cannot hold.*' Her transmission stuttered with bursts of energy. Her voice rasped with pain as well as age.

'Take the ship out of the system,' Crowe ordered. 'Leave at once. Make the jump and report to Titan.' Even as he spoke, his command felt redundant. It was impossible to tell how huge the rift was. A terrible intuition whispered that Titan already knew. The triumph of the Blade and the daemons was enormous. He was witnessing something far worse than a localised warp storm.

'*We cannot leave*,' Gura said. Before Crowe could condemn her for a misguided show of loyalty, she spoke again, and her despair was the most profound he had ever heard a mortal express, '*There is nowhere to go. Castellan, the Astronomican has gone out.*'

Crowe's spirit recoiled, refusing to accept the truth of such an appalling sentence. The light of the Emperor could not have been extinguished. Without it to light the road through the warp, how could the Imperium survive? And if the Astronomican had been extinguished, did Terra yet exist?

Is the Emperor dead?

The thought was a horror beyond blasphemy. He banished it from his consciousness the moment it took form. What he could not banish was a sense of loss that descended upon him. It was a response to a sudden, immense absence, and he knew that what Gura said was true.

In its place a different light was coming to embrace Sandava III now. It would not guide. It would give no hope. It could only devour.

The rift was wider yet. It covered a third of the sky. The fire of the ocean was a pale shadow of the holocaust of burning reality. Roiling, screaming, the maw of horror drew closer. Coronal energy blasts arced outwards, and the glint of the *Sacrum Finem* grew brighter. The spark winked in and out. Crowe thought he saw movement.

'*We have lost power and steering*,' Gura voxed. '*We are going down. I am*

launching everything I can to your coordinates. Perhaps some of it will reach you. Castellan, forgive me, for I have failed my charge.'

'You have not failed, Shipmaster Gura. The blow that has fallen is beyond us all.'

'*Then I will fly to the Emperor's side.*' Gura's prayer was desperate. Her words were pious. Her voice sounded terrified. If the Astronomican had failed, what of Terra?

'*Castellan*,' Gura continued, '*will there be–*'

An explosion cut off her plea. Crowe heard the roar of destruction on the bridge of the *Sacrum Finem*, then silence. The vox feed ended. The spark that was the strike cruiser was brighter still, and then it became a shape. Pushed out of the sky by the bellowing cry of the immaterium, the ship plunged toward the surface of Sandava III. It had been hit hard, and it spun as it fell. It whirled, the movement a blur, far too fast to maintain structural integrity. The force of the spin tore the ship in two. The aft section was hurled out in a long arc over the ocean. The bow streaked downwards, a broken spear. It came down a few miles to the south. Shattered in its lines and in its purpose, it left a trail of fire and smoke in its wake. There was majesty still in its shape. It was huge, towering over the landscape even at the moment that it struck the earth. The statuary on the upper hull was just visible. In the last second of its fall, the ship was a ruined column, a monument to its own desolation. It was tragedy given form.

Then it hit, a hammer striking the surface of Sandava III. The earth trembled. The tremors threw daemons and Grey Knights to the ground. Crowe kept his feet as the world around him crumbled. The mountain peaks shook. Rockslides cascaded down the slopes. A storm of dust and rock shrapnel rose from the base of the fallen monument. The cloud enveloped the lower half of the column. The bow drove deeper into the ground. Two massive fissures ran up its length, splitting the ship like an axe striking a log. The wreckage leaned away from itself. It slumped to the left and right, a ruined city fallen from the skies.

The aftershocks of the crash still thrummed through the rock when the stern fell into the ocean. The ruptured engines exploded a moment before impact. A plasma sun blinded the land. The photo lenses of Crowe's helm slammed shutters down against the killing light. When they lifted, the new fire was still brighter than the blaze from the rift. The shockwave came next. Braced, his feet planted on the agonised earth, Crowe leaned forward into the blow. 'Stand and hold, brothers!' he shouted into the vox. 'There is no wind that can break us!'

The blast swept over the ocean. It snuffed out the flames as it passed, while new

ignitions followed in its wake. It shredded chanting daemons. Crowe roared his defiance as a wall of fury hit him, but he did not fall. The wind came, a hurricane scream tearing banners to ribbons. Crowe took a step forward into the wind. He could barely see. He was moving against a force that sought to lift him and his battle-brothers from the ground. He refused to fall. He brought the sword down again, striking against the wind as much as the fiend he cut in half. Behind him, the strike force followed. Their ship was fallen. The galaxy bled. Yet the Grey Knights marched. There was no end to duty, and no end to faith.

Even when the end came for everything else.

The rift was the entire sky now. The howl of the warp reached the atmosphere of Sandava III. The maw was on the point of swallowing the world.

At the horizon, where the fireball of the *Sacrum Finem*'s pyre was turning a sullen red, a mountain was forming. All the ocean blazed now, and the huge displacement of the waters advanced. A hundred feet high, the burning wave raced towards the shore.

And the rift of madness engulfed Sandava III.

CHAPTER TWO

The Death of all Dawns

‘High ground!’ Crowe shouted. He turned from the shore, away from the final contingent of daemons, away from the illusion of victory.

Now you see, said Antwyr. ***Now you taste the ash. Your fight is over. Abandon the futile. Embrace the truth that has come. Be what fate has assigned. Be the lord of the final realm.***

The Purifiers and the First Brotherhood were already reacting. The strike force made for the mountainsides. The ground sloped up sharply barely a hundred yards away. Crowe glanced back as he ran. The wave was a rising line at the horizon. It was minutes from crashing against Skoria and then onto the mainland. The mountains were close, but the chance they presented could be as illusory as the victory. Time was short, power armour was not meant for climbing, and there were no clear routes for the tank to get to safety.

‘Stormravens,’ Crowe voxed as he ran, ‘pick up as many as you can.’

‘*We will be with you in moments*,’ Berinon answered.

The roar of the gunships’ turbofans was almost drowned out by the greater thunder of the wind, the burning ocean, and the coming wave. The *Harrower* and the *Purgation’s Sword* came down a hundred yards ahead and to Crowe’s right. There was too much of a slope for them to land, and the backwash of the engines created dust storms as the Stormravens hovered a few feet above the shaking ground.

The Terminators, furthest ahead, boarded the *Harrower*. It lifted off and climbed quickly, rising towards a sky filled with the flames of madness. The

Purifiers began to climb into the side door of the *Purgation's Sword*. Crowe put on a burst of speed to catch up with his battle-brothers. He was less than ten yards from the gunship. At his back came the all-consuming rumble of the wave. The world was tilting up behind him.

The sky howled. Shapes swam through the chaos of raging colours. Things coalesced into being and disintegrated just as quickly. The potential for all things monstrous and violent surrounded Sandava III. Order was destroyed, beyond all hope of reach. The warp boomed with storm, it hissed like reptiles. It shattered the mind, and it raged at Crowe's refusal to surrender.

The ground did surrender. When Crowe was fifteen feet from the Stormraven, a fissure opened between him and the gunship, and the land dropped suddenly. He fell with it, plummeting into a narrow chasm twenty feet deep. When the rockfall ended, he jumped up, moving through a thick cloud of dust. The rock face was pitted and cracked, and he found handholds and crevices into which he could jam the blade. He worked his way back up, but there was no time now. The thunder of the wave was huge. '*Go!*' he voxed Berinon.

'*Castellan*,' the pilot objected.

'Look at the wave, brother. I will not reach you in time.' The gap above him was so narrow, he could not see the *Purgation's Sword*. There was only the triumphant scream of the sky. 'Take off now. I command it.' He was the guardian of Antwyr, but he also stood on the spiritual ramparts for the Purifiers. They were his charges. The fortress of their strength stood fast wherever they marched, and he was its castellan until his final breath. The walls would not fall under his watch. His battle-brothers would not die needlessly.

'*The Emperor protects*,' Berinon said, obeying his order.

'And his hammer has not yet finished its work on this world,' Crowe replied.

He climbed, though it would make no difference now where he was when the wave arrived. He could not reach high ground. He climbed so he could face the threat. He would not have it fall on him while he was already buried in a vault.

He reached the surface. The Stormravens had climbed high. They were above the reach of the wave, fighting the rampaging turbulence of the air. Through brute force, the *Malleus Maleficarum* had forged a path up the mountainside. It was a few hundred yards from Crowe's position, and might yet reach safe ground. It might not. The Crusader's fate was no longer the driver's to decide.

Crowe turned to face the wave. He could see it above the near flames of the burning ocean. Fire slipped and danced along its crown and down its height. It crashed against the base and lower spires of Skoria. For a few moments, Crowe

could see the hive clearly. Its mass trembled from the impact. A burning mountain chain embraced the island. Thick, raging water boomed against rockcrete and iron. Towers fell into the racing tide.

And the wave came on, surging past the island.

Futility, Antwyr said. ***You see it now. Your sacrifice is meaningless. Your false god is gone, and with him your pustule of a civilisation. Die now or surrender. The time for choices is past.***

There was never any choice, Crowe thought. He would never grant the sword its desire. He went to one knee on ground he did not trust. With both hands, he raised the blade that was his nemesis, his curse, and his honour to guard. He slammed the point into the stone. The blow would have shattered any metal forged by human hands. The Black Blade of Antwyr was not of that metal. Centuries of searching had still not unlocked a way of destroying the relic. The sword was indestructible, and so it was the rock that gave way. Crowe drove half the length of the Blade into the ground, making it his anchor.

In truth, he thought as he braced himself, the sword was his anchor in every dark way. Every second of every year of every decade of his life since he had first grasped the sword had been shaped by the fact of his guardianship. Even if Antwyr's voice, the murderer of sleep, had not been the constant scrape at the gate of his will, the need always to grasp the sword, to hold it prisoner, and to be a guardian as tireless as the sword was a besieger was the focal point of every breath. Even now, as the colossal, burning wave came for him, he held his purpose. Holding the Blade was as much to keep it prisoner as it was to hold himself in place. If he died, he vowed that his corpse would still grasp the monster. The next warden would find him at his post, and Antwyr trapped.

The wave reached the shore. It swallowed the daemons and their song of triumph. It blotted out the writhing sky. Its shadow fell over Crowe. His fists tightened around the hilt. He leaned forward, greeting the wave with defiance.

I shall not be moved.

Antwyr seemed to squirm in his grip, snarling for release.

The wave swept over him with darkness and fire.

The Ruinous Powers coveted Angriff Primus. The Canoness Errant Setheno did not know why. For now, it must be enough to deny them their prize. And for this moment, it must be enough to survive.

She reached the belfry of the Laboris Gloria manufactory a few seconds ahead of the Noise Marine. The footsteps of the Emperor's Children monster pounded

up the iron stairs, heavy as a hammer on a coffin, echoing like a toll. His name was Erossus. He was the last of the three Traitors who had come to Angriff Primus. The cult Erossus and his brothers had created on the planet had taken root and grown beyond what the local Arbites and militia could eradicate, and the ecclesiarchal authority had requested the aid of the Adepta Sororitas. Setheno had been in the subsector, and it was she who answered the call. It had taken thousands of zealots under her command, and three companies of Angriff's militia to bring two of the Emperor's Children down. The loss of his brothers did not appear to bother Erossus. His mad laughter, hungry for sensation, boomed up the staircase of the spire. It was as if he did not believe in defeat. Perhaps his mind could no longer encompass the possibility. Yet he was not mindless. He was fighting well. He had Setheno isolated. Perhaps he still understood the idea of victory. Or maybe it was indistinguishable from murder.

She would deny him both.

The belfry shook as its great bell tolled the hours of the long work shift. She ran under swings of the bell, through an arched entrance and onto a narrow, suspended walkway that spanned the distance between the manufactory's bell towers. On either side, smokestacks rose level with the spires, belching black smoke streaked with sparks. A forest of cranes lifted reservoirs of molten ore to even higher reaches, where the vast moulds awaited. The Laboris Gloria was a hive within a hive, complexes built on top of complexes, housing millions of workers who would rarely leave the manufactory for the span of their short lives. The belfry Setheno had passed through was only the first of its kind. The peaks of bell towers and smokestacks kept climbing, and the upper reaches of the manufactory disappeared in the smog cover.

Below the walkway was a fifty-yard drop to a tangle of maglev tracks. Endless trains hauled raw material into the forges and refining complexes, and transported the huge portions of cylinders and forge ovens out. The manufactory had the largest concentration of industrial moulds on the planet. It produced everything from artillery gun barrels to colossal blast furnaces for more of its kind, endlessly fuelling the suffocating density of industry on Angriff Primus.

On Setheno's right, miles to the north, an entire sector of Algidus burned. Tens of thousands of serfs had perished in the firestorm. It would spread much further before it ran out of fuel. The conflagration was the cost of killing two Emperor's Children, and it would take more fighting still, and more burning, to purge the city of the rest of the heretics who had fallen under the Traitors' sway.

Zealots streamed like ants between the maglev trains. They screamed their

praise of the Emperor and their hate of traitors. Their shouts were a background murmur, barely audible over the tolling of the bell and the deep, clanking, hissing, roaring song of the manufactory. They were useless to Setheno, but they had come to see her bring the last of the monsters down.

She ran half the length of the walkway, ceramite boots pounding a steady rhythm as she took in the surroundings and found the battleground she wanted. Then she turned, bolter and her power sword Skarprattar at the ready. The relic, the former weapon of Saint Demetria, glowed a furious blue as the corrupted warrior emerged from the entrance. She looked straight at the Noise Marine as her peripheral vision tracked the environment.

'Have you had enough of running?' Erossus taunted. He was a massive figure, his muscles swelling out of the rents in his armour. His helmet was a grinning horror, and the lower half was cut away to reveal a flayed jaw. Barbed, hooked iron peeled away his exposed flesh. Spines emerged from his helmet and along limbs, glowing and vibrating. They burned an angry, violet light with every spike in the volume of the din. Setheno guessed they plunged into the body of the Traitor, amplifying sound and conducting its violence directly to nerve clusters. Erossus carried a weapon that resembled a distorted bolter. Its barrel ended in a screaming maw.

Setheno answered the Noise Marine with the taunt of silence. She ran forward, head down, firing. She blinked through her helmet's auto-senses and triggered a sensory shutdown. The clamour of the manufactory vanished. Her gun bucked with every shot, but its reports were a distant whisper. Through thick filters, she saw the world as a dim twilight.

She saw well enough.

Her shells struck Erossus, punching new holes in his armour. His jaw parted in pleasure at the wounds and he rushed forward to meet her, firing a blast of murderous sound from his gun. She was braced, yet it hit her like a wall of pain. The handrails of the walkway disintegrated and the ferrocrete span twisted and cracked, crumbling to powder, a yard-wide gap opening in front of her. The sound pierced through her helm's defences, rattling her teeth. Blood filled her mouth and ran from her nose and ears. The vibrations hit her armour and her bones so hard she felt as if she were on the verge of liquefying.

She had expected the blow. She ran through the pain and leapt over the gap. She landed awkwardly on the other side and dropped to one knee.

'Yes!' Erossus exulted. 'Yes, daughter of the grey, now you welcome the sublimity of sensation!' His shouts, distorted by laryngeal surgery and amplified

through wailing vox casters, were music performed on instruments of sinew and torture. He waited a moment before he fired again. He was savouring the moment. He was lengthening her pain before granting her the deliverance of death.

He was attacking as she had known he would. He was making all the mistakes she needed.

She had planned her fall before she had begun her charge. Her crouch gave her the angles she needed. She fired a burst of shells that looked like her aim had been destroyed by the sonic blast. They scattered on a diagonal to her right. The first shells struck supporting struts of one of the cranes. It leaned suddenly towards the catwalk, swinging its reservoir at Erossus.

The other shells punctured the reservoir. A stream of molten iron ore jetted out of the holes and struck the Noise Marine's skull. Erossus screamed in ecstatic agony as the liquid fire enveloped his head, flooded the interior of his helmet and poured into his ears. He staggered, blind, his eyes boiled by the ore. He weaved forward, out of the bright, glowing flood. He was covered in the ore. In the gaps in his armour, his flesh bubbled and flowed.

Erossus fired his weapon again. The sonic blast went wide and high, shattering the framework of another crane. It collapsed, raining tonnes of metal wreckage on the zealots below, its reservoir spilling onto the maglev tracks.

Setheno ran forward, still crouching. She came in under the direct line of the blast, though the sound was still loud enough to make her vision crack and waver. She had marked her steps ahead of the attack, and stayed true to her path. She drew level with the swaying Noise Marine. He was screaming in rage now. He had dropped his gun and was clutching his head. The burn had deafened him. Setheno had plunged him into the only hell he recognised. She had robbed him of sensation. His only novelty now was pain. She rose and struck with Skarprattar, driving it through his exposed lower jaw and into his skull. She slashed the blade back out of the corpse as it toppled forward onto the smoking walkway.

A long series of crashes came from below as a train leaving the Laboris Gloria derailed. The length of cargo containers whiplashed across the open space, wrecking the tracks completely, spreading ruin and killing hundreds. In the midst of the destruction, heedless of their safety, the zealots shouted praise to the Emperor and hailed the fall of the last of the Traitors.

The city burned. There were more purges to come. Thousands would die before Setheno would consider Angriff Primus reclaimed. And there was the question

of why the planet had been the target of two attacks by the Ruinous Powers in a short period of time. Angriff Primus had value as a forge world, but it was strategically insignificant.

Below, the explosions of the derailments ended and the cries of celebrations grew louder, the zealots joined by crowds rushing out of the Laboris Gloria and the blackened ferrocrete blocks of the sector.

Then the cries changed. They became screams of grief and terror. Setheno felt the change, too. The certainty of disaster stabbed her heart, and she looked up. There was no change to the choking smog cover over Algidus. Yet change had occurred beyond the dark curtain of the atmosphere. She knew it. The entire population of Angriff Primus knew it.

A scream was ripping through the galaxy. Though it was still day, the light over Algidus altered and dimmed.

Night had come.

Night eternal.

The burning wave roared across the shore, sweeping the abominations out of existence. The arm of the inlet reached miles further into the mainland, a dagger of flame and scouring. The wave hurled itself against the mountainside, a tide determined to swallow all of Sandava III in a pyre of drowning. The fire and the water surged upwards, reaching for the *Malleus Maleficarum* as it struggled for higher ground. The tank's treads spun for a grip on the slope. They caught, and the Crusader lurched again. In the open rooftop hatch, Justicar Styer watched the smothering burn come for the *Malleus*. The flames billowed far higher than the Crusader had come. The thunder of the wave's impact against the mountains reverberated in his chest.

Styer had climbed onto the roof of the *Malleus* instead of joining his squad in the *Harrower*. Ardax had remained with the Crusader, determined to save the sacred tank, and Styer had chosen to stand with him. Ardax had performed the impossible, blasting the mountainside terrain and urging the *Malleus* up over slumping rubble to a height it should never have reached. Styer had assisted with the multi-melta, but the accomplishment belonged to Ardax. If the *Malleus* lived, it was his doing.

The mountainside quaked. The fire swept over the Crusader. Styer's Terminator armour shrugged off its assault. The *Malleus* ground against scree, holding its position. The wave raged. It sought to uproot the mountain, and when it failed, it subsided. The edges of the flood passed a few yards below the Crusader, and

then sank. The wave moved on, losing strength and height as it expended its fury inland.

'Well done, brother. Well done,' Styer voxed.

'*The Emperor protects, brother-justicar*,' Ardax answered. '*I merely serve*.'

'As do we all. But you serve well.'

Ardax slewed the *Malleus* to the right, resting its flank against a heap of stone. The slope was shallower here, and the engines lost the pained intensity. Styer thought he could feel the relief of the tank's machine-spirit.

The water dropped. The flames slid down the mountainside, guttering and sullen. Overhead, the Stormravens began their descent. The *Purgation's Sword* flew back towards the shore. Its purpose was clear.

'*What of Castellan Crowe?*' Ardax asked.

'We cannot know yet,' said Styer. The waters were still too high. The air was thick with smoke. He could barely make out the shape of the *Sword* as it dropped lower. Its engines stirred the smoke into whirling maelstroms, clearing a path beneath it to the black, smouldering water.

The light over the ruined landscape brightened and dimmed, flashed and smeared. Shadows danced beneath the tormented sky.

The waters continued to drop. They did not withdraw to the ocean. Instead, they seemed to be vanishing. The sludge thickened. It appeared to merge with the land, the difference between water and rock fading. Spray coagulated in mid-air, turning into splayed sculptures. The mountainside and shore were changing, becoming strange. The disease of the sky was spreading to the surface of the planet.

As the fires dwindled, the foul water darkened from a grey-brown to a glowering crimson and black, pulling the flames inside itself, turning them into mineral veins of hate. A layer of darkness and blood was settling over the land, changing the contours, reshaping this region of Skoria into new, tainted forms.

The smoke diminished, becoming a haze shaded by the shifting colours of the sky. Below the *Harrower*, a bright point appeared beneath the surface of the receding flood. It was different from the dull red glow of the veins. It was a blaze more pure than heat. It was a white sear in the dark, a defiance of the works of the daemonic. It grew brighter and the waters fell, and at last the darkness tore away from what it concealed. It could no longer hold the figure below. The flood pulled back as if in pain.

The psychic light faded. Garran Crowe rose from his crouch. The tainted muck, burned brittle by contact with the castellan, cracked and fell away from him.

Crowe pulled the Black Blade of Antwyr from the ground, and began to march uphill.

'The castellan lives,' Styer voxed Ardax.

'*How?*'

'Ruin cannot touch him,' Styer said, awed. 'He is the Emperor's flame in the dark.'

'*We will have need of that flame*.'

'Indeed.' Styer looked up at the madness that embraced Sandava III. There was no sun and no night for the world now. There was only the scream of the storm, and the greater absence of the Emperor's light. The justicar's soul bled. He knew the injury would never heal. All the Grey Knights on Sandava III were the walking wounded.

Crowe, who lived with the perpetual assault of the Antwyr, was the leader these dark times required. He knew the reality of the wound that could not close, and the light of his purging faith was undiminished.

We shall fight all the harder, Styer thought. *But yes, we will have need of this flame*.

The daemons were gone, though Crowe knew the respite was temporary. Sandava III was in the realm of the daemonic now. The abominations would return. There would be no limit to the numbers they could muster. The war had changed. There was no longer any question of reclaiming Sandava III. The struggle would now become one of survival. *We have become the besieged*, Crowe thought. *We require a bastion.*

The mass of Skoria still bulked high and solid. Towers had fallen, but many more stood strong. The wave had done its worst against the lower reaches of the hive, but its walls appeared to be largely intact. Lights shone in the heights of its spires. The city still had power. It would be the bastion.

The way to Skoria was clear. The ocean was gone. At the horizon, strange shapes wavered and fell with majestic gravity, an unholy fusion of mountain chain and fire. The signs of the daemons' causeway were still there. Millions of remains lay spread across the dry channel. To left and right of the strike force, as far as Crowe could see, limbs and torsos emerged from the tar-like surface. The Grey Knights marched over a vast graveyard. The sea bed could not contain the motionless entreaties of the dead, and their silent cries for justice.

With the gunships flying overwatch, the strike force crossed the channel of the dead and arrived on the island. The walls of the hive were less than a mile from

what had been the shore. They were burned and scored, but had been high and strong enough to withstand the wave. The people of Skoria lined the parapets. As the Grey Knights approached, the citizens streamed from the open gates. They cried out to the Space Marines, their arms outstretched for liberation, their entreaties as agonised as those of the dead, but more desperate. They kept a respectful, cowed distance on either side of the strike force. Their shouts were pleas, they were fearful, and they were howling demands for hope.

Drake moved up from his squad until he was almost level with Crowe. He suffered the psychic assault of the sword no less than the other Grey Knights, but he subjected himself to its proximity for longer periods than most, brief though those seconds were. He and Crowe had served together long before the burden had fallen to the castellan, and he was unwilling to abandon his brother entirely to the isolation that came with the task. Crowe appreciated the Knight of the Flame's gestures, and he trusted Drake to know how much of the sword's presence he could tolerate at any one time.

Drake turned his helmet towards the crowds. Tens of thousands had rushed out of the gates, as if there were no dangers the world could hurl at them when the Grey Knights were near. 'They think we are their liberation,' he said. 'Rather than their doom.'

The moment the strike force had become visible to the people of Skoria, their fate was sealed. The outcome of the war was irrelevant to the citizens now, though they did not know it. They had seen what was forbidden. They gazed upon secrets they would not be allowed to keep.

The Grey Knights passed through the gates of Skoria, the clamour of its population growing into a deafening thunder. The people thronged the main thoroughfare into the hive. They clustered at the windows of the massive hab blocks that merged with each other and with manufactories like immense, overlapping excrescences of rockcrete. They stood on the spans of crossways that linked towers like webs. They were there in the millions, and their pleas merged into a single howl of need. The need was so massive, so anguished, it had moved beyond words. It was instinct. It was mindless.

Crowe's jaw clenched in anger. The need of the crowd grated. He heard no faith in their shouts. There was only the selfish clawing for personal survival.

A short distance ahead, the avenue opened up into a wide square. To the left and right, the sides were dominated by the huge doors of manufactory loading bays. Facing the Grey Knights was one of the hive's soot-blacked façades of the Chapel of Saint Alverese the Unforgiving. A delegation stood on the steps before

its grand, vaulted entrance. The group wore the robes of the Ecclesiarchy and of Sandava III's ruling family. A score of honour guards flanked the stairs, holding back the rabble.

'What do they think this is?' Drake asked. 'Are we to be invited to a feast next?' He glanced up at the sky. The light of the warp made the shadows of the chapel's spires dance and squirm over the square.

'They are unwilling to relinquish the slightest remains of normality,' Crowe said.

'*Those are mortals who would make a spectacle of us for their own benefit*,' Sendrax voxed.

'So they would,' said Crowe. This was more of the same, craven need that radiated from the crowd. It was simply dressed in a more formal array. Crowe looked at the lectern that had been set up on the top step, between the highest dignitaries. Cables ran from it to the shadowed interior of the chapel. Crowe could just make out a large bank of vox-casters in the vestibule. If he was not so disgusted, he would be impressed by how quickly Skoria's leaders had arranged to broadcast this meeting with the presumed liberators to the entire hive. Their instincts for self-preservation were strong, and made no distinction between the survival of the body and the survival of the political power.

Crowe reached the steps and mounted them with a purpose. 'I will give them the spectacle they deserve,' he said, his fury mounting with every stride.

They are animals, the Blade whispered. ***You see them for what they are. Let us bring them to their destiny. The charnel house must be the slaughterhouse. Turn these vermin into the slick of remains. It is their due. The anger is your due. The Imperium is gone. Forge the new one with me.***

Antwyr's insinuations poured fuel onto the blaze of Crowe's anger. The transparency of its manipulation was an insult. He rejected its call. Instead of bloodlust, his fury burned with righteousness. He was judgement itself as he ascended the steps. The nobles on the lower steps shrank away from him, huddling closer to guards who had turned pale with shame and fear. Behind him, the Purifier squads took up positions on the staircase, facing out towards the crowds. The Terminators formed a barrier at the base, while the *Malleus Maleficarum* stopped in the centre of the square. The strike force's position was forbidding. It was the threat of punishment.

Crowe reached the top step. The chief ecclesiarch scuttled forward to be the first to meet him. The man was heavy in the gut, though the siege had had a visible impact even on him, and his flesh hung in sagging rolls from his frame.

His bow was slight, as if he still put great store in his rank. ‘We give thanks, lord, for the deliverance you bring us. I am Cardinal Reikart Mihok.’ He gestured to the nobles behind him. ‘This is Governor Kalab Vester.’ An old man, shorter and gaunter than the cardinal, nodded solemnly. ‘And these–’

Crowe cut him off. ‘Who any of you are is of no consequence to me.’ He took a heavy step forward. Mihok and the nobles retreated before his shadow. Their backs were to the dark entrance of the chapel. There was dim light inside, the low red of wall sconce lumen globes. It was a glow that called to prayer, that demanded reflection these men and women were not capable of, and so they stopped on the threshold of the chapel, unable to retreat any further, too terrified to gaze upon Crowe. They hunched their shoulders and looked away, but before they did, their eyes fastened for a few seconds on the sword he carried, and they grew even more frightened. They could not know what the Blade was, but they felt the touch of its malevolent spirit. Perhaps they believed now that doom had come for them after all, and all that remained for them was to learn the nature of their damnation.

Crowe turned from them. He advanced to the lectern. It was built for mortal speakers, and barely reached his waist. It served his purpose all the better by further emphasising how puny and fragile the lords of Skoria were beside the Grey Knights. Crowe opened a vox link to the pulpit. The delegation had imagined he would speak to the people of Skoria, and so he would.

In the unholy light of the warp, the sanctity of the strike force was visible. A cold, white, psychic nimbus surrounded each of the Grey Knights. They shone with the iron of angered faith.

‘What are you?’ Crowe thundered to the masses. ‘Do you call yourselves faithful to the Emperor? Do you?’

He paused. He would have an answer. These people would know they were being judged, and there could be no retreat into silence.

‘We do!’ someone shouted.

‘We do,’ said the cardinal. He scuttled forward as if he meant to touch the hem of Crowe’s cloak. Crowe turned his head with a sharp jerk, the point of his visor aimed down at the little man. The cardinal recoiled as if stabbed.

The rest of the crowd took up the cry. ‘*We do!*’ It was still a wail, just as desperate as before, a plea that he believe them and forgive.

Crowe was not in a mood to do either. ‘Your words mean nothing,’ he said. ‘Your actions prove them to be empty. Your faith is in your actions. Where is it? *What are you?* Will you hide in your burrows when the enemy comes? Faith is

not faith that crumbles when tested. You imagined that we came to save you. We did not. We fight the abomination. We fight for the Emperor and the Imperium. If you do not fight, there is no salvation. You *will* earn your place at the Emperor's side, or you will find your deserved oblivion.' He raised his right hand, blade and wrist-mounted storm bolter pointing to the unholy sky. 'I am the right hand of the Emperor!' he roared, and in his anger he burned with terrible light. Then he lowered his voice to a frozen, implacable hiss. 'And I would know what you will do.'

There was a moment of terrified silence. Then new shouts began. 'We will fight!' 'We stand with the Emperor!' 'Our lives for the Imperium!'

'*We will fight! We will fight! We will fight!*'

The cries were as desperate as ever, but the need had changed. Now it was the need of the people to convince Crowe that they were still faithful. It was also genuine. The citizens of Skoria had looked upon the light of the Grey Knights, and knew that the Ruinous Powers were not supreme.

On a private vox channel, Drake said, '*They do not understand that none of them will survive.*'

'I think some might,' Crowe said. 'But you're right. Most don't. What matters is that they will die in the Emperor's light.'

Drake didn't reply. The unspoken question hovered between them, too terrible to articulate, fit only to be crushed under the boots of undying faith, and yet as present and inescapable as the monstrous sky.

The question was still in the back of Crowe's mind a few hours later, as he kept watch over the salvage operation at the wreck of the *Sacrum Finem*. The Grey Knights had led a workforce thousands strong from Skoria, and the mortals laboured to haul ordnance and weapons back to the hive. The ruin of the bow bulked high over the land, a ragged grave of metal. He stood in the shadow of the huge tomb, watching the workers swarm up the exposed decks. A steady stream of transports carried shells and torpedoes across a landscape that twisted and screamed. The Stormravens flew high overhead, surveying the region, watching for the first sign of an enemy's approach. Grey Knights rode escort with the transports on the journeys to and from the hive.

Sendrax approached Crowe as a massive tracked crawler rumbled past him, the barrel and housing of a cannon loaded onto its back. The vehicle and cargo were the size of a small hill.

Sendrax stopped a few paces away from Crowe. He had removed his helmet,

and his face showed the strain of being so near the Blade. He looked like a man swimming against a tide. ‘A good salvage,’ he said, gesturing at the crawler.

It would take hours for the monster to reach Skoria, but the prize would be worth it. ‘Techmarine Bray thinks he can get the gun working on the wall, then?’ said Crowe.

‘With the assistance of the hive’s tech-priests, yes, he does.’

A chorus of screams rippled over the land from the south. They did not come from any human throat. There were new formations in the rock. Tall, twisted cylinders whose tops ended in slow, crumbling lips. They shrieked in answer to the pulsations in the sky, the warp and the warp-tainted speaking to each other.

‘I’m surprised the daemons have not come yet,’ Sendrax said.

‘So am I.’ But the thought had occurred to Crowe, too. The purging devastation of the wave could not last. Sandava III was caught in the warp. Sooner or later, a new, greater invasion would begin. Yet the humans on Skoria were being given time to prepare. The longer the daemons waited, the better the Grey Knights would be able to plan for the siege.

‘Perhaps now that we are in their domain, there is no rush to conquest,’ Sendrax mused.

Crowe shook his head. ‘That crossed my mind, too, but I think it credits the enemy with too much foolish arrogance. The Ruinous Powers are anything but foolish.’

‘True,’ said Sendrax.

‘If the daemons wait to make their presence known, they wait for a reason. If they choose to let us fortify Skoria, then they do that for a reason, too.’

‘In which case we play into their hands.’

‘Do you see a different course of action open to us?’

‘No.’

‘No. So we will do what we must, and wage war with such fury that their machinations will fail. We will prove them arrogant in the end, brother.’

‘In the end…’ Sendrax repeated. ‘What is the end, I wonder?’ He was coming perilously close to enunciating the unspeakable question. *The Astronomican has gone out.* Gura’s words were full of monstrous implications and possibilities that had to be denied at any cost. ‘What can be our victory?’ Sendrax asked, coming right to the edge of the question, but still holding himself back from speaking it.

The Astronomican has gone out.

Crowe knew what that could mean. They all knew. Yet his faith would not allow him to admit the worst was possible. Nor would Sendrax’s. To admit it

would be to fall prey to the worst of heresies. No Grey Knight had ever been so corrupted, and no Grey Knight would be so now.

But Antwyr spoke the lie. The Blade had been whispering and shouting the blasphemy ever since the fall of the *Sacrum Finem*. ***He is gone***, said Antwyr. ***The Emperor is dead. This is the truth, and you will embrace it. Accept your fall, and rise again with me.***

'Our victory,' Crowe said, 'is to fight. And to keep fighting.' That had been the nature of all his victories since he had first grasped the hilt of the sword.

Sendrax glanced at the Blade. He nodded solemnly.

From the west came a long howl of hunger and challenge. It was distant, audible only because it came from so many throats. It was not the scream of the land.

'Now they come,' Sendrax said. 'Perhaps they heard me.'

'They announce themselves,' said Crowe. 'They are giving us a distant warning of their arrival.'

'You were right. They want us to be ready.'

'Then we won't disappoint them.'

CHAPTER THREE

The Long Siege

The fires were out in Conatum. There was nothing left to burn. Trails of smoke still rose like desultory phantoms from the ruins. The gutted structures of the hive clawed for the sky, talons of blackened iron and crumbling rockcrete. The war had taken all the flesh of the city, and left a stripped carcass behind. The scythe of the daemonic had swept through utterly, and the Imperial forces had never set foot inside its walls. Ossidius had caught a glimpse of the Grey Knights in the distance, heading for Skoria. They had not diverted their march for a lost cause. The deluded, self-righteous servants of the Emperor had no idea the Emperor's Children watched them, and continued the work that had begun with the initial incursion on Sandava III.

Conatum was certainly lost, but the corpse yet twitched in its depths. Not all the mortals had been killed by the daemons and carried off to form the causeway. Many lived still, though they spent their hours praying loudly for death. There was amusement to be had with them, but they were needed for the construction of the instrument. The restriction frustrated Livra, and Ossidius let him have just enough playthings to pacify him and keep him focused on the task Tarautas had given them to perform when he had sent them to this world.

There was music to be made, and the Noise Marines were hard at work.

The instrument was rising from the centre of a massive hab complex. When the Grey Knights had passed, it had not yet grown past the tops of the towers. Now it had. It was stretching for the violent sky, as if summoned to enthusiastic growth by the triumph of the warp. A cluster of hollow, brass tubes, rearing like

angry serpents, surrounded twin coils more than a hundred feet high. The device was not complete, but it was already active. Lightning struck coils periodically, and coruscating energy crackled up and down their lengths. The wind blew through the openings in the tubes, and the music rumbled forth, a sinuous, throbbing wail. It swirled against the ruins of Conatum and plunged its claws deep into the bedrock of the city, sinking down to resonate with the planet's core. The music would guide Sandava III to its purpose.

Ossidius stood at the peak of one of Conatum's last spires. The tower jutted out of the ruins in the far eastern sector of the hive. The structure leaned, a crooked finger a thousand feet high, pointing towards a vast plain of screaming rock. Across the plain, the daemons flowed. The army of the Dark Prince was an unending flood. It had begun its passage days ago, and there was no end in sight. The instrument was to their rear, just visible now when they turned around, but present in their minds and souls.

From over the horizon came the strobing glow of explosions and the distant hammer of warfare. Ossidius latched on to the glimmer and song of battle, drawing inspiration. There was fine atrocity occurring at Skoria. As far away as the conflict was, it was the closest he had been to the proper slaughter in the field since he and Livra had arrived on Sandava III. The mortals had presented no challenge. There had been some pleasure in corrupting the population and opening the door to the incursion, but the process had been too effortless.

There was a true struggle at Skoria, one that refined the pleasures of blood, and made them stronger. The scale of the battle offset the distance to a degree. Ossidius listened and watched from his tower, and he tuned his instruments to match the symphony of carnage. He fired his sonic blaster, matching the beats and keys of the gunfire. The Grey Knights had some gigantic cannons at their disposal. The speakers on his armour's power pack amplified the cries of the daemons, linking the sounds to his nerve clusters. Hollow bone spurs grew from his upper arms, piercing through the armour. Whistling chords sang from their broken ends. The music of his sensation issued from the bones and melded with the composition he forged from the echoes of the far war.

The nuances of brutality scraped over his senses. There was a massacre taking place. Ossidius did not know who was getting the worst of it. He didn't care. It was the exultation of murder through sound that mattered. Destruction reached across the miles to become part of his shrieking art. He savoured the violence he discerned. He wished he could be closer, and feed on every drop of agony. But he knew his duty. The war shaped his music, and his music, booming across

Conatum, shaped the pain of the slaves. Their pain drove their actions, and in turn controlled the building of the instrument. From his position, he was commanding the destiny of Sandava III.

Livra marched up the stairs and onto the rooftop of the spire, interrupting Ossidius' concentration. Livra watched the flashes of the war for a moment. 'How can they still be fighting?' he asked.

Ossidius growled in irritation. Livra's appreciation for the sensations of noise was limited. He had taken the path of the flesh. He was a hulking thing of swollen muscle and pierced, flayed skin. His hands were far more dextrous than his size suggested. He worked on canvases of blood and bone. He had been working his art on the slaves, encouraging their labours with direct action. The talons of his gauntlets dripped crimson. He was restless, frustrated with his poor material. The war at Skoria was of no benefit to him.

Livra pointed to the vast river of daemons flowing east. 'Such an army should have been enough to overwhelm that hive days ago,' he said.

'That is not the goal,' Ossidius pointed out. 'The instrument is not yet complete.'

Livra growled. 'I'm bored. The prisoners are weak meat. Why aren't we fighting at Skoria?'

'That is not our role yet.'

'According to whom? Tarautas isn't here to enforce his will. Who is in command of the daemons? There has been no leader since Varangallax fell.'

Ossidius looked up at the sky and its triumph of ruin. 'Oh, I think there is someone in command.'

Livra was not satisfied. 'If there is, they have forgotten us.'

'We have not been forgotten. We are engaged in a great work.'

Livra shrugged. 'I don't know what it is for, and it is not of my own creation. That isn't good enough.'

Livra was a poor artist, Ossidius thought. His work and his gratifications were all in the immediate. He had no conception of the greater art and the more sublime sensations that could come from it. Tarautas did, which was why Ossidius was willing to follow him. Ossidius seized the experiences of the moment, but he looked to future ones, too. 'Be patient,' he said. 'Nourish yourself on the prisoners. Drive them on. A great symphony is being formed. We shall have sensations, brother. Tremendous ones.'

In the throne room of the governor's palace on Algidus, the Canoness Errant

towered a good two feet over Governor Lina Vismar. The tomb-grey of Setheno's armour stood out like a rebuke to the gold inlays of the floor and ceiling, and the rich violet of the tapestries. The history of the Vismar family seemed so much brittle vanity in the presence of this figure.

'Is it understood, then?' Setheno asked. She had removed her helmet. Her face was paler than snow and colder than ice. Worse yet were her eyes, an abyssal gold that looked through Vismar's soul and found it wanting. 'Order *will* be maintained on Angriff Primus.'

'We will do what we can,' Vismar began. 'But if the Imperium is lost–'

'I did not ask for your opinion, governor. Nor do I accept any equivocations. I asked if you understood.'

'I do, but–'

'Then I will expect to see my commands carried out,' Setheno said, and strode out of the throne room.

Fear and bitterness clashed in Vismar's heart. If she focused on the anger of wounded pride, she might be able to keep her mind off the thoughts of doom that surely must be coming for her world. She might be able to keep herself from screaming in despair. She turned to Cardinal Paulus Orla, who stood next to the throne. He was staring with undisguised terror in the direction the canoness had gone.

'Why did you summon her here?' Vismar hissed.

'I called for the assistance of the Adepta Sororitas. I did not imagine *she* would come.'

'But who *is* she?'

The canoness issued orders with an assumption of authority that Vismar resented, but instinctively knew better than to challenge.

'She was once the canoness of the Order of the Piercing Thorn.'

'Was?'

'Something happened. I don't know what. But the Order was destroyed.'

'And she was not disgraced?'

'To the contrary. She became Canoness Errant. She was on Antagonis, and Armageddon, and…' Orla shook his head and shuddered. 'I did not imagine she would come,' he repeated.

'What does she expect of us?' Vismar muttered. 'To fight back against the end times?'

'Yes, if that's what she demands. I won't be the one to disobey. Will you?'

Vismar did not answer.

The daemons crashed against the walls of Skoria in waves. Huge masses of abominations clawed over each other in their efforts to reach the ramparts. Rockcrete trembled from the impacts of so much warp flesh. Psychic fires bathed the faces of the walls, mutating the surface, weakening the integrity of the battlements. Skoria's militia and the conscripted citizenry lined the full length of the ramparts. Crowe had commanded that not a single square foot be left undefended. Every hour of the war, hundreds of the mortals collapsed in gibbering, terrified madness, their sanity unable to withstand the sight of the infinite numbers of abominations. They were replaced by the next line of desperate warriors. They were driven as much by their need to prove their faith to Crowe as they were by the desire to protect their city. Crowe saw them look to him for approval when he passed. *I should not be the reason you fight*, he thought. But they were fighting, and so they would die in the light of the Emperor's grace. He could offer them no more than that. He could not promise them any kind of survival. And so he nodded to the mortals, giving them the approval they sought.

Three cannons had been salvaged from the *Sacrum Finem*. Bray and the tech-priests had supervised the rapid construction of huge metal frameworks that could absorb the recoil of the guns and keep them in place on the ramparts. The cannons could not be moved once they were in place, so they were spread out along the wall, facing south-west. They aimed straight out. The huge shells had to be loaded manually by squads of redirected manufactory servitors. There were long gaps between each booming report. But the cannons fired with effect. Shells designed to tear through the shields and hulls of void ships struck the land with the force of an orbital bombardment. Every blast destroyed hundreds of daemons in an instant. The terrain before Skoria was no longer shaped into twisted, screaming forms. It was a devastated landscape, scarred by huge craters.

The wall turrets kept up a continuous barrage between the concussions of the *Sacrum*'s guns, and the Stormravens hammered the enemy from above. The daemons had to cross a zone of endless flame and destruction, yet still they came in waves. No matter how many were annihilated in the approach to Skoria, they still reached the wall.

And there they were held. The Grey Knights were the line that could not be crossed. They were the greater wall. They were the gauntlet about the Emperor's fist, and they hurled the daemons back.

The three squads ranged back and forth along the ramparts, charging into every surge of the wave that threatened to crest the battlements. Crowe made his stand

in the centre of the wall. He was visible to all the defenders, and the surges came to him. The daemons were drawn to the Black Blade of Antwyr. They answered its psychic cries of wrath, and came for its gaoler. Crowe cut them down as they clambered over the monolithic crenellations. As he swung the sword left and right, decapitating and dismembering any daemon that sought to grapple with him, he sent bursts of shells from his storm bolter down the wall, puncturing the wave, blasting apart the bodies of the unclean things. His strikes had a machine-like rhythm, but he did not let himself be lulled into a monotony of battle. He was alert to every change in the daemons' attacks, and he fought, as ever, on two fronts. Antwyr's will slashed at his, always and forever determined that this time, his resistance would crumble. This time, he would no longer be able to withstand the siege.

The sword's attacks were energised by the sky. Antwyr was triumphant as it had rarely been before. ***Why do you struggle? Why do you wallow in futility? You fight for nothing, now. All you defend is ash, all is darkness, all is nothing, nothing, nothing. You have lost, and you know it. You have no purpose, and you know it. You fight for nothing, and you know it. A throne of nothing. An empire of nothing. A galaxy of dreams becoming nothing, nothing, nothing.***

The sword timed its exhortations with Crowe's strikes. It created the rhythm Crowe struggled to avoid. ***Nothing. Nothing. Nothing.*** It sought to turn him into an automaton of battle, and that would be the first, fatal step. It would be a surrender.

Nothing. Nothing. Nothing.

No, he told himself. *Nothing would make me fail in my duty. Nothing would make me lose my faith.*

He sensed the danger in the form his thoughts were taking. *There is something!* he shouted in his mind. *The Emperor protects, and the Imperium stands.* 'I am the tip of the Emperor's spear!' Crowe roared, and he lunged forward with the sword, breaking the rhythm of the swings, striking back against its temptations by plunging it into the throat of a fiend. The daemon's hooves battered mindlessly against his armour. He pulled the blade free, and the abomination fell back over the wall.

To his right, the daemons made another concerted attack. As they overwhelmed the mortal defenders, Drake's squad closed with them. The Purifiers hit the daemons like a firestorm. The methodical Destrian sent his incinerator's azure flame washing over the monsters. The ignited promethium, bonded with psychic

agents, blinded the daemons, burned their flesh and seared away their spiritual hold on the reality of Sandava III. Though the planet was in the warp, it was still material. The daemons had form, and Destrian confined their form to flames. The sombre, pious Gorvenal struck at the rush of daemons from the right flank. He wielded a warding staff, and concussive explosions shook the wall as daemons launched themselves at him, only to be torn to shreds when Gorvenal unleashed the psychic charge he built up in the staff's refractor fields. Drake and Carac marched in behind Destrian's flames, Drake's Nemesis sword and Carac's halberd breaking the daemons, reducing them to quivering, deliquescing foulness. On the left flank, Venrik shattered the abominations' advance with controlled blasts from a psycannon. His psychic will and his hatred of the unclean things were transformed by the cannon in a shaped charge of force. The daemons were ripped apart by the faith itself.

Still the daemons came on. The waves crashed again and again against the walls. The army was endless, the marching daemons stretching off beyond the horizon. There was no reason for them to stop until they buried Skoria under their millions. Yet just as the attacks had not begun until the Grey Knights had augmented the hive's defences, there were also pauses in the assaults. The daemons attacked with a fury that seemed set in devouring the very stone of the city, and then they withdrew, a tide pulling back only to return.

The brief respites were welcome. At the same time, it bothered Crowe that he could not discern the reason for them. And he knew there was one.

On his left, Sendrax led his squad in a devastating charge down the rampart, cutting across a wide surge by the daemons. The Knight of the Flame's approach to battle reflected how different he was from Drake. Sendrax was incendiary faith and pride in the duty of the Purifiers. Drake was more cautious and strategic. Their approaches meshed with each other, and when they coordinated on the battlefield, no force of abominations could survive their assault.

Three things happened in such quick succession, they were almost simultaneous.

From where he and his Terminators were fighting further to the south on the wall, Justicar Styer voxed, 'Brother-Librarian Gared says another withdrawal is imminent.'

The sword's laughter lanced through Crowe's mind, and Antwyr said, ***You resist because you are blind. But illumination comes for you.***

And the daemons mocked Gared's prediction by staging a sudden, ferocious rush at Sendrax's squad. A cluster of fiends leapt over the parapet and dropped

on Xaledor, who was nearest the edge of the wall. They struck from behind just as he despatched a daemonette with his psilencer. Xaledor's psychic force was amplified into searing beams that disintegrated the abomination at every level of its being. The fiends were animalistic beings. Deadly as they were to mortals with their rapid strikes and mindless, soul-destroying songs, they were worthy of little more than contempt from a Grey Knight. Their attack should have meant little to Xaledor. He should have been able to turn and blast the fiends off the wall and back to the warp pit that spawned them. But chance and fate were savage. Crowe had seen them act too often against what was just. Xaledor made no mistakes, yet there was nothing he could do. The fiends hit with their stinger tails, hard and fast enough to break through the shielding of his armour's power unit. There was a sudden discharge of uncontrolled energy. Xaledor jerked, his movements slowed. A pair of daemonettes lashed at him with pincers so long and articulated they doubled as whips.

Unworthy opponents. An unworthy end. Xaledor knew it, and his helm voxcasters roared with his fury. Then the pull of the daemonettes and the crush of the fiends pushed him over the rampart. He dropped fifty yards to the base of the wall. He still fought after he landed, his curses ringing over the vox. But he was alone against tens of thousands, and he dropped into silence a few seconds later.

Sendrax and his Purifiers turned on the other nearby daemons in fury, but before they had destroyed more than a handful, Gared's words proved true. The remaining abominations on the wall leapt down in the receding tide.

The respite had come, and once again it had arrived without reason, without sense, and only with cost.

'It is a game to them,' Sendrax said, his voice still tense with anger. 'They know the outcome of this war, and so they toy with us.'

'And are you, then, so sure of the outcome?' Crowe asked him.

The officers of the Grey Knights strike force had gathered in the command chambers of Kalab Vester. The governor of Skoria was also the colonel of its militia, and he had redeemed himself partly in Crowe's eyes during the siege by demonstrating that his officer's rank was not simply ceremonial. He had also shown the good sense to withdraw without protest when the Grey Knights commandeered his quarters. He waited for orders one level below.

The command chamber was in a tower a mile in from the wall. Its panoramic, armourglass windows provided a long perspective on the daemonic army to the

south-west, stretching as far as the eye could see, a cavorting plague covering the landscape. The tacticarium table in the centre and hololithic maps of the region on the walls provided little data that was useful. There were few strategic options when all of the terrain was controlled by the foe.

'Do you think we have lost?' Crowe said, pushing Sendrax harder.

Look what awaits you, said the Blade. ***There is only destruction.***

'I will fight to my last breath,' the Knight of the Flame said. 'I will never despair. But I can see what confronts us, castellan. We are in the empyrean. The enemy's forces are infinite.'

There is truth, said the sword. ***Your brother knows. Every soul in this city knows. And you know, too. There is still a choice for you, though. Futility or glory. Futility or power. You will not throw yourself on the pyre of lost hopes. You will make the right choice.***

The conjunction of Sendrax's and Antwyr's words disturbed Crowe. The sword was speaking to all the Grey Knights who came near. Perhaps Crowe had already spent too much time in proximity to his brothers, and they were being influenced, unknowingly, by the daemon. Then again, the reality of the situation was as Sendrax implied. The Blade could just as easily be trying to undermine Crowe's certainty by trying to suggest a connection between itself and Sendrax where none existed.

The bedrock truth was that he must not listen to the sword. So he turned his attention back to the assessment of Skoria's fate. 'How much ordnance do we still have?' he asked Styer.

'Bray estimates we have enough shells to hold back one more wave of attacks,' the justicar said.

Crowe nodded. That was what he had expected. 'And ammunition?'

'Our stores are running low. If we still have any after the next surge, we will run out during the next. The manufactories can keep the mortals supplied indefinitely.'

'As long as we hold the wall,' said Drake.

'Precisely.'

And that was the problem. The unblessed, commonplace ammunition helped, but it was insufficient. The Grey Knights were Skoria's true wall. Without them, its defences would crumble quickly. Without ranged weapons, the strike force could not hold back the flood.

Crowe looked at the grim faces around the tacticarium table. Sendrax's and Styer's expressions mirrored his thoughts. Drake was incapable of much

expression at all. His face was almost entirely metal. It was frozen in cold, iron nobility, the flesh sacrificed in battle. He had lost his sword arm long ago, on Sandava II, in the same struggle that had brought the burden of Antwyr to Crowe. His bionic limb was as nimble as the organic one had been. He was an unwavering colossus. But his eyes were eloquent. He had made the same grim appraisal as the others.

Futility or glory, the Blade whispered, insistent. ***Futility or power.***

Crowe turned to Gared. The Librarian was attending the briefing at his request. 'You knew the daemons were going to withdraw,' Crowe said. 'Was this the first time you had this foreknowledge?'

'Not exactly, castellan. I sensed something before. It was only this time that I recognised the pattern.'

'Good,' said Crowe. A pattern was the beginning of an answer. And perhaps an answer was the beginning of a counter-strategy. 'Go on.'

'There is a build-up in psychic energy over the course of each battle.'

'That is inevitable, not a revelation,' Sendrax said. 'We all know that experience.'

'The Brother-Librarian's experience is more precise than it is for the rest of us,' Styer pointed out.

Gared nodded his thanks to the justicar. 'I believe the daemons fight until the energy reaches a precise level.'

'What happens to it?' Drake asked.

'I don't know. It doesn't disperse. It is gone very suddenly.'

'A discharge, then,' said Crowe. 'Somewhere. To some purpose.'

'What purpose?' Sendrax asked.

'I don't know,' said Gared.

Crowe tapped the tacticarium table's controls and called up a chronology of the siege. He simplified the display so it became a series of hololithic spikes, the withdrawals of the daemons mapped against time. He stared at the result. There was meaning hidden here and he would tease it out.

'There is nothing regular in the time periods before the retreats,' said Sendrax. 'We would have noticed that.'

No, Crowe thought, *not regular*. But Sendrax's comment made him look at the display from another perspective, one he should have considered earlier. This was a Sandavan world, after all. And now he saw it.

So did Gared. 'There is a rhythm,' he said.

'Yes,' said Crowe. 'It is not regular, but look.' He rapped the table, following

the beats of the spikes. The sound he created was ominous, as of a heart in its final moments of fibrillation.

'If this is true,' Styer said, and he sounded convinced, 'then the daemons seek the production of an exact level of energy at an equally exact time.'

'A tall order,' said Sendrax.

'Not necessarily,' Crowe said. 'With such numbers, it would merely be a question of controlling how many attack us at any given moment. We have seen such control before.'

'Not for a long time,' Drake said.

There had been dark rhythms deployed on Sandava II. They had made cities walk.

Crowe had thought he had put an end to the symmetries and echoes that reached across the decades to taunt him. He told himself that he had. The echoes had been lies before. They were again. What was at work on Sandava III was part of something much vaster than what had attacked the system before.

'Has Mnay'salath returned?' Drake wondered, perhaps eager to fight the Keeper of Secrets again, and revenge himself at last for his lost arm.

'I'm doubtful,' said Crowe. 'But whether or not the daemon has, it is not present for us to fight.' He eyed the jagged display of the rhythm. 'It is the strategy we must counter.'

'How?' Sendrax asked. 'Our defence of Skoria appears to guarantee the occurrence of the energy spikes.'

Crowe nodded. 'The daemons need us. The struggle would not reach these levels of intensity otherwise.'

Styer said, 'My brothers and I have encountered a similar phenomenon. Our very presence has been the key to triggering a daemonic incursion. The Ruinous Powers have found ways to use us to their ends.'

'Then we will disrupt their ends,' Crowe said. 'We have been wrong to fight a defensive war.'

'What is our objective?' said Sendrax. 'There is only the sea of abominations.'

'There are weapons we have not used yet,' Crowe said. 'We will burn the sea.'

The gaps between the attacks were irregular in length. None were shorter than several hours, but Crowe needed to know how long they had until the next assault. He withdrew from the command chamber to give Gared the chance to examine the anatomy of the daemonic rhythm alone, without the Blade eating away at his concentration. When Gared was done, Crowe studied the pattern

again.

He had to let himself hear the melody that was taking shape. He lowered his defences very slightly. That was all it took. The melody entered his consciousness. It was a mere fragment, but in it he heard a song of murdered worlds and ravenous excess. It was a twisted thing, a succession of notes whose coherence was worse than any cacophony. It reached hungrily for his soul. It tried to ensnare him, to drag him down into the coils of its rhythm. From a great distance, he felt the fingers of his left hand twitch, involuntarily tapping out the rhythm. He stilled his hand.

You… will have… to listen, said the sword. There were odd pauses between Antwyr's words. The daemon was mimicking the melody's beats. Crowe hurled the poisonous rhythm out beyond the impregnable wall of his will. He had what he needed. He knew when the next assault would come.

Gared was waiting for him outside the chamber. The Librarian's brow wrinkled in pain at the approach of the Blade.

'Did you hear it?' Gared asked.

'I did. We have a bit more than a day to prepare.'

'Agreed. Is that enough?'

'It will have to be.'

The *Malleus Maleficarum* roared out of Skoria's gate. The front line of the daemonic host was at the edge of the island. Ardax aimed the tank straight at them. He fired a salvo with the tank's main guns, blasting open a gap in the monstrous ranks. As Styer had ordered, he fired just once.

Riding in the open roof hatch, Styer saw the result that Crowe had predicted. The daemons did not rush forward to fill the gap. Instead, they made way before it. 'Drive hard, Brother Ardax,' he voxed. 'The abominations make way.'

Inside the troop compartment, the Terminator squad was ready for a deployment that would not happen, at least not now. '*They're retreating?*' Vohnum asked.

'They are, as the castellan said.'

'*A battle at this moment would run counter to their purposes*,' said Gared. '*If the energy builds too soon, it will disrupt the rhythm this war is designed to create.*'

Vohnum grunted, clearly unhappy with the mystery of wider war. '*It would be nice, when disrupting the enemy's goals, to know what they are.*'

'So it would,' Styer agreed. 'But we are no strangers to fighting with those

goals obscured.' Ever since the Sanctus Reach, it seemed, that had been the lot of his squad. Crowe saw emerging patterns on Sandava III that linked the struggle to the Purifiers' past. Styer believed he was right. The justicar perceived links relevant to his squad, too. The confluence of fates did not surprise him. Nothing should. If the Astronomican had failed, there could be no more surprises.

The *Malleus* roared through the daemons, across the dry channel, and onto the mainland. Styer watched the daemons, and they watched him. They cavorted. Daemonettes danced in whirling, sinuous mockery just ahead of the Crusader. Fiends gibbered their idiot song. But the sea of abominations continued to part, letting the tank pass. They did not attack, and neither did Styer. He had to make a conscious effort not to pull the trigger of the multi-melta.

'*They retreat, and we flee*,' Vohnum snarled.

'You know we do not, brother,' Styer told him. 'We pull back our fist to strike all the harder.'

He understood Vohnum's frustration, though. He trusted Gared and Crowe's analysis. He believed in the castellan's strategy to counter the work the daemons were labouring to complete, whatever that goal might ultimately be. But this first move went against his instincts and his training.

He stared with loathing at the endless ranks of abominations. The ocean of warp spawn undulated over the landscape. And the *Malleus Maleficarum* charged on, racing south-west in a straight line from Skoria, obeying the single command Crowe had given.

Go as far as possible.

The journey to the underhive showed Crowe how shallow the roots of faith in Skoria truly were. He and Drake's squad encountered pockets of the faithful, tiny enclaves of the desperate who held fast to their belief in the Emperor here in the absence of light and the dominion of death and squalor, but too many of Skoria's subterranean citizens had despaired. And in their despair, they had turned to heresy.

The Purifiers travelled into the depths along the widest avenues of descent. They had to. Behind them came scores of militia and manufactory serfs, driving a narrow-gauge transport barely large enough for the cargo it held. It was possible to bring the vehicle down to the underhive, using the massive grav lifts of a foundry a few miles north of the wall. The mines under Skoria were still active, and the manufactory drew its raw material directly from them. The grav lifts took the vehicle down to the bottom of the underhive. From there, the

Purifiers escorted it along the major underground thoroughfares to its destination.

The roads through the underhive were crude. They were dug out of the bedrock, repaired and reinforced in haphazard fashion. Deep pools of industrial waste lay stagnant across them. The patchwork homes of the underhive denizens crowded in on both sides, the cast-offs of the hive's society living in the cast-offs of its production. There were very few lumen globes still functioning. The illumination came from the headlamps of the transport and the glow of fires from gas burn-offs and ruptured pipes. Thick, viscous effluent ran down all the walls, glistening like disease. The stench was ferocious.

The people were worse.

War consumed the underhive. Despair battled with faith, and in its awful exuberance, despair was winning. The shadows boiled with violence. Screams of abandoned ecstasy roared through the low tunnels of the underhive. The heretics fell on the loyal, butchering them in the deluded belief that they might somehow curry the favour of the daemons when they arrived.

'The foundations of Skoria are already lost,' Drake said, marching one pace behind Crowe.

'They are,' Crowe agreed. 'So what we do today is doubly necessary.'

The road dropped, and the convoy advanced into a riot. If there were any of the faithful still present, they were impossible to see. Desperate, ragged humans tore at each other with scraps of metal and their bare hands. They battered each other's skulls open with clubs of stone and lead piping. They ripped the dead apart in a desperate frenzy, draping themselves with organs and painting themselves with blood in attempts to outdo each other in degradation.

Crowe's lips pulled back in disgust. These things were beyond vermin. They were lower than the brown scum that floated on the pools of sewage. He glanced back at the militia and the serfs. They were looking at him rather than at the heretics. He was the true locus of their terror. They knew what he was thinking. How much longer would it have taken for the upper reaches of Skoria to become as corrupted as the underhive? Not long at all. Even now, he suspected it was the fear of the Grey Knights more than the love of the Emperor that kept these people from heresy.

There was very little to save on this planet. But there was much to destroy.

Crowe turned back to the tumult. 'Open fire,' he commanded the militia. 'Kill everything in our path.'

As the lasrifles cut into the rioters, Crowe and the Purifiers marched into them,

wielding blades. They did not waste storm bolter rounds on these creatures. It was enough of an insult that the Nemesis weapons had to be put to such lowly use.

Crowe's anger lit the darkness of the tunnel. The most corrupted of the heretics screamed at his approach, burning before he cut them down with the Blade of Antwyr.

You are right to hate them, said the sword. ***Darken the sky with the smoke of their pyres. Submit, and we will incinerate them in a moment. The daemons will kneel in the next.***

Crowe tempered his fury to cold judgement. His anger was too close to what Antwyr desired. 'Our purpose is not extermination,' he voxed to the other Purifiers. They would feel the same anger he did, and the sword would be scratching at their minds to be let in. 'Our task is to advance, and to make the preparations for the true attack.' They had to kill these fallen wretches to carve a path for the transport. Anything else was a distraction. In the presence of the Blade, anything else was a temptation.

It took hours of wading through the mindless riots to reach the destination. The transport stopped in the geographic centre of Skoria, at the intersection of mining shafts. Serfs rushed to prepare a berth for the cargo. The militia set up a cordon and kept up a stream of fire into the tunnels on all sides. The heretics rushed out of their darkness and died, miserable lives brought to a violent end in the malodorous shadows.

When the preparations were almost complete, Crowe turned to Vester. The governor, in his role as colonel, had elected to accompany his troops on this mission rather than lead the defence of the wall. 'You know what must be done,' Crowe said.

'I do, lord. We will not fail.' Vester spoke with true, renewed faith. By coming to these depths, knowing full well what the mission entailed, the governor had done much to redeem himself in Crowe's eyes.

'Good,' said Crowe. 'The Emperor protects, and your path to his throne is clear now.'

'Thank you.' Vester bowed deeply.

The militia's lines were steady. They would be able to hold back the heretics for as long as was necessary. Crowe surveyed the work, and was satisfied. 'All shall be accomplished,' he said to Drake as the Purifiers left the militia behind. 'We will give the daemons the song of their nightmares.'

CHAPTER FOUR

The Glory of Sandava III

The great cannons of the *Sacrum Finem* fired into the surging tide of daemons. It was their last barrage. Their huge voices boomed five times. Their shells carved even deeper scars into the land. Thousands of daemons vanished in the immense fireballs of the detonations. Then the guns fell silent.

Across Skoria, the citizens looked to each other in dread. The deafening thunder of the guns had been the guarantor that their final day had not come yet. The silence was more terrible than a death knell. The turret emplacements still fired, as did the ranks of militia and conscripts on the ramparts, but those reports were paltry after the majesty of the strike cruiser's armament. The gunfire now was the sound of a last stand. And the Grey Knights had left the city. The people were alone.

The daemonic tide was endless. Fresh roars filled the silence, and new waves of abominations flowed over the craters. The daemons stormed up the wall and over the parapets. They hurled themselves at the gate, and after so many days of siege, the huge doors gave way before the battering ram of unholy flesh.

Cardinal Reikart Mihok was on the wall when the wave came. He was attempting to lead the combatants in martial prayer, but he barely heard the words he uttered, and he took no strength or comfort from them. Though duty demanded his presence, it was fear that had brought him to the wall. He had initially resisted Vester's insistence that he join the front lines. He had spent the first day of the siege in the Chapel of Saint Alverese, preaching faith and resistance from his pulpit, as he had done since the beginning of Sandava III's

agony. But with the daemons so close, doom looming over the threshold to the city, he had been consumed by the terror of wondering when the abominations would burst through the chapel doors. In the end, it was better to see them coming. It was better to know.

Or so he had thought. Before this day, it had been better to stand on the ramparts because he had seen the power of those terrifying warriors of the Emperor. They were almost as frightening as the daemons, and it had been with inexpressible relief that Mihok had seen them turn their fury on the abominations. He could not stand their gaze. He could not stand their judgement. The leader of the strike force was the worst. His black sword was a monster, a thing so unclean that Mihok sought refuge in prayer whenever he drew near it. The blade was dangerous to look at, yet held tight by a remorseless will. Mihok never saw the castellan without his helmet, but he could feel Crowe's eyes. He knew Crowe saw how he had failed his calling and his flock, and despised him for it.

So Mihok stood on the wall through the siege. He was here now, in the awful silence of the guns, bearing witness to the coming end. The people of Skoria, trained or not, lined the parapets five deep. The las barrage was constant. And it was futile, little more than a blaze of defiance. Daemons burned and fell back, but what mattered, and what Mihok saw, was the unstoppable surge, the hideous multitude that swept over the battlements and onto the wall. Creatures of desire and excess ripped into the human lines. Lithe figures both beautiful and hideous snapped the limbs off defenders with their claws and laughed with pleasure as they toyed with the mutilated victims. There would be no swift deaths on this day.

Mihok's prayer died away. The words turned to dust in his mouth. He staggered back, the rockcrete cracking beneath his feet from the sudden trampling of uncountable abominations. He retreated until his shoulders hit the rear crenellations, and there was nowhere left for him to go.

A daemon leapt high over the wall and landed before Mihok. It was tall and pale, its features a blurring of male and female into a fusion of sensuality fed by pain. One arm ended in a massive pincer. The other wielded a whip with three tails, each ending in a barbed hook. It looked down at the cardinal, its lips parted, its serpentine tongue licking out to taste his fear. When he whimpered, the daemon laughed and struck with its whip. Mihok screamed as the hooks tore his flesh away.

The abomination was in no hurry. It kept the cardinal alive through the

extremities of his torture. He was still breathing when it peeled his face from his skull and showed him the rag of flesh.

Over the wall and through the gates, the daemons poured into Skoria. The militia fought street by street, but the abominations might as well have been unopposed. The defenders gave them more to savour, but the flood did not slow. Through the avenues, into the manufactoria, into the hab blocks and towers and grimy palaces of Skoria came the rampaging stream of horror. Blood and fire spread. The walls of the towers glistened with the cataracts of gore. The forges of Skoria went out of control. Smoke and flame raced upward, consuming the hive. Thousands of citizens were immolated within minutes, and they were the fortunate few. Tens of thousands fell to the butchery of the daemons, their deaths prolonged and refined, the human body transformed into seeping tributes to art and joy.

Hundreds of thousands died.

Millions howled for salvation and release, but the twisting, writhing sky was not open to entreaty. It bulged down towards Skoria, licking the peaks of its spires with violet and emerald flame. The collective howl of the revel drowned out the screams. Skoria reverberated with the triumph of its captors. The hive became a burning, moaning, chanting, rasping throat of sensation itself. The rockcrete of the walls began to tremble like flesh on the verge of ultimate paroxysm.

The song of the daemons rose to the sky. The sky answered, turning into vortices. Yet the song was incomplete, and there were false notes, fracturing the whole. The daemons shredded the citizens of Skoria in triumph, yet they called out, too, seeking an enemy that had not answered their challenge.

The symphony of corruption roared, suspended in frustration.

On his spire in Conatum, Ossidius frowned. ‘Something is wrong,’ he said. The war was out of tune. The chords of his sonic blaster were suddenly no longer in key or synchronisation with the echoes arriving from Skoria.

‘How do you know?’ Livra asked. He was sharpening his talons against the stonework of the roof. The instrument was almost complete, and he was eager to indulge in the torture and murder of all the remaining slaves.

‘Can’t you hear?’

‘Not very much.’

‘That is the problem.’

‘It’s over, then?’ Livra sounded angry at having missed out on the battle. ‘So the work is complete?’

‘No. This isn’t a conclusion. Where is your sense of art, Livra? There is nothing complete about this.’

‘The enemy was weaker than expected.’

Ossidius shook his head. ‘The Grey Knights would not have gone down so quickly.’

He listened to the muted grumble of carnage, and grew uneasy.

The *Malleus Maleficarum* had reached its target point and had turned around. In the air, the *Purgation’s Sword* and the *Harrower* were also moving to their attack vectors. Crowe stood in the open side door of the *Purgation’s Sword*, looking forwards to the north-east, towards Skoria. The hive was barely visible, a small, spiny silhouette on the horizon, blurred by the rising smoke. Crowe’s gaze was steady. He knew what was happening in the streets and towers of the hive. The faith of the citizenry of Skoria had been found wanting, but there was no satisfaction to be had in what was befalling them.

They were weak, said Antwyr. ***This is what they merit.***

The sword was coming at him in another oblique attack, seeking to align itself with what it believed he was already thinking. It was wrong, though. The people of Skoria did not deserve what was taking them. Their doom was inevitable. What was just had little to do with the realities of war, especially the struggle against the daemonic. There was nothing just in the exterminated populaces that marked the passage of the Grey Knights. There was nothing just in the mind-wiping of Space Marines who encountered them. There was only the mission, to preserve the Imperium from the ravages of the daemon. Antwyr perceived Crowe’s actions, and thought it discerned the absence of pity, because that was what it understood. It was wrong. Crowe knew pity and its wounds. But he also knew when to see it for a weakness, and when to crush it.

Even if it was necessary *always* to crush it, he still knew what it was.

He crushed pity now, but he did not crush mercy. The action he was taking was necessary, but it was also merciful. The people of Skoria had always been doomed. There could be mercy in the form their end took.

He voxed Kalab Vester, who had earned the right to this moment. ‘The moment has come, governor.’

‘*We have held the position, lord. We are ready. And thank you.*’

Crowe turned to Techmarine Bray, who for this mission was riding in the *Purgation’s Sword* rather than with Styer’s squad in the *Malleus Maleficarum*. ‘Do it now,’ Crowe said.

Bray triggered the remote detonator he had constructed and linked to the *Sword*'s vox. In the deep foundations of Skoria, the death of a city received the signal. There, placed at Crowe's command, was a cyclonic torpedo. It was buried with the warhead facing upwards, so that the greater energy of the blast went back up to the surface instead of down into the core. The full force of the weapon would be dispersed.

Crowe's purpose was not to destroy Sandava III.

Merely a portion of it would suffice.

The torpedo exploded. The hive disappeared in a colossal eruption. This was Crowe's act of mercy. The suffering of thirty million citizens ended at once as a burst of magma more than ten miles wide shot upwards, the jetting of a severed artery that reached as high as the tortured sky. The city turned into a geyser of molten fragments.

That was the first moment of the destruction.

In the second, the full pressure of the detonation shattered a chunk of crust more than a hundred miles in radius and hurled the fragments into the air. Dust and fire consumed the eastern seaboard of Sandava III's principal land mass. The land fell into an incandescent crater. The distortions wrought by Chaos melted away in the vast cauldron. A wound had opened on the surface of the planet like a screaming maw, and its agony was a purification. The holocaust swallowed the daemonic hordes. The army without end suddenly become finite as the massed abominations perished in the apocalypse that raged from Skoria to the edges of Conatum.

Crowe fulfilled his vow. He burned the sea.

A new chord battered the land. It was not a song shaped by the power that ruled the fate of Sandava III. It was too huge, too great, an immense disruption of the daemonic melody. Ossidius cried out. The fusion of physical destruction and the colossal psychic spike of millions of daemons cast back into the warp in an instant was a sensation greater than any he had yet experienced. It gave him no pleasure. It overwhelmed, and it was the thunder of defeat.

A moment later, the tower fell.

The tremors of the blast raced across the continent. The earth heaved. Conatum jerked back, and its ruins fell in on themselves. The tower disintegrated like a breaking spine as it dropped. Ossidius and Livra plunged through a whistling, cracking storm of rubble. As he fell, Ossidius perceived the world as darkness and fire and thunder, and then there was the sudden, wrenching crack of pain that

was not chosen, that was not art, that was simply the shattering of bone, the compression of organs, and the jagged explosions of nerve endings.

Even then, as he lay broken on the heap of rockcrete, he admired the scale of the counter-attack. The music of its assault was magisterial.

But it was the wrong music, working against a composition vast beyond measure. It had silenced the wail of the instrument. It must be defeated.

'Livra,' Ossidius called.

There was no answer.

Ossidius crawled forward. His left leg was gone below the knee. His ribcage was no longer a solid mass. There was a sucking movement in his torso, pieces of bone floating free. He had lost his sonic blaster. But he still had motion in his arms and right leg. So he dragged himself along like a serpent. He slid down the ruined heap. At the base, he saw one of Livra's hands extending from beneath the tonnes of rockcrete. Its talons pointed to the ruins of the instrument. A wide pool of blood spread outwards from the rubble.

Ossidius was alone, then. His mission had failed, but he would not accept the defeat of the great work. He believed in what Tarautas had revealed to him. He believed in the efforts that would bring an aesthetic of extremity to the galaxy undreamed of since the days of Fulgrim.

So he crawled forward, leaving behind the twisted, silent remains of the instrument. The ground trembled from clusters of aftershocks. He dragged himself towards a wall of heat and smoke, and the remains of the daemon army. He could just make out the screams of rage from the servants of the Dark Prince. There were enough of them still to make themselves heard over the groaning rumble of the land. In the air, two glints of silver angled down at the daemons. There was the war he could not reach or fight. Nevertheless, he crawled towards it. The new sensations of his smashed body gave him the energy to keep moving despite his wounds. He pulled himself over the shaking ground, drawn by the paroxysms of the music gone awry.

The *Malleus Maleficarum* descended from the ridge overlooking the devastated landscape south-west of where Skoria had once stood. It slammed into the flanks of the daemons, its hurricane bolters, assault cannons and multi-melta carving a deep path into the horde. The tank slowed midway down the trough of warp flesh. Its forward loading ramp dropped, and Styer's Terminators stormed out to either side of the Crusader. They cut deeper into the ranks of the daemons, widening the path. Ahead of them, the Stormravens came in low, assault cannons

on full, stormstrike missiles spreading waves of holy extermination. In the first seconds of attack, the Grey Knights scorched the earth for half a mile in every direction. The gunships dropped to a hover just above the ground, unloading the Purifiers from the side entrances, then rose again to circle the strike force hammering the daemons as they tried to counter-attack.

The strike force hit the daemons as if it were moving back towards the site of the hive, only there was no destination now. There was only the need to annihilate, the direction of the Grey Knights' formation shifting according to the concentrations of the daemons. The initial moves of the assault were devastating. The Grey Knights wiped hundreds of daemons from the surface of Sandava III. The success of the attack should have marked the beginning of the end of the war.

This is the end, Crowe thought. He loosed a burst of shells with his storm bolter and charged through disintegrating daemons to plunge the Black Blade into the skull of a fiend that made the mistake of rushing at him with its head down. The Grey Knights had burned the sea of abominations. They had come down like a huge fist in the midst of the rest of the army, which had lost direction and was howling distress in the wake of the cyclonic torpedo's detonation. Yet they had not altered the conclusion of the war. Uncountable thousands of daemons remained. The sea had burned, but it was still a sea, and Sandava III was held in the warp. The army would be replenished infinitely according to the whim of the powers that had taken the world from the materium. The Grey Knights were finite. The enemy was not. This was the end.

You do not end here, said Antwyr. ***Destiny has come for you at last, and you will embrace what I offer.***

It seemed to Crowe that the frustration and anger that were as much a part of the sword's psychic voice as malevolence were almost entirely absent. The Blade saw the moment of its liberation approach. It would corrupt Crowe to its bidding if it could. If it could not, it was content to bide its time. Antwyr, too, knew this was the end.

The thought of inevitable defeat infused Crowe with a greater rage. He struck each blow for the Imperium, if it still existed, and for its memory, if it did not. He struck to mark his commitment to duty. He struck with the strength of his faith in the Emperor. That was unchangeable, a rock upon which even the Black Blade of Antwyr would shatter. No matter what the loss of the Astronomican portended, Crowe would serve the Emperor.

'We are the hammer!' Crowe shouted into the vox and across the battlefield, his

helm amplifying his voice to thunder, to execution, and his brothers echoed him in desperate, righteous anger.

'*We are the right hand of the Emperor!*' they cried. Every Purifier and Terminator knew the end was here, and they fought in the faith that the Emperor's eye was on their final actions.

'We are the instrument of His will!' Crowe boomed, and daemons burned at his approach. He was the purity of fanaticism, and he brought killing light to the unholy. The abominations rushed him and they recoiled. Daemonettes and fiends screamed in pain. They could not exist in his presence. He advanced into the sea of abominations, and the sea roiled in torment. The waves in the distance rolled in to crush him, while a tide receded with equal ferocity, fleeing this being whose mere existence was a terror and a doom.

Crowe was the incursion. Crowe was the monster. The world belonged to the daemons, and he was the destroyer of the new order.

'*We are the gauntlet about His fist!*' the Grey Knights called. '*We are the tip of His spear!*' Nemesis blades and storm bolters and heavy fire from the gunships and the Crusader turned abominations to ash and to pools of disintegrating flesh. The Grey Knights moved in three prongs, each squad a searing blade, striking deeper and deeper into the body of the daemonic host. They had no objective to save. Sandava III was lost. What they had was the determination to destroy as much of the enemy before the numbers finally told against them.

A massive crush of daemons closed on Crowe's position. It was a wave such as those that had smashed against the walls of Skoria. Scrabbling and leaping over each other, the daemons formed a nearly solid mass. No matter how many burned, they were determined to bring him down this time. They would crush the destroyer of Sandava III's dark song.

'*I AM THE EDGE OF HIS SWORD!*' Crowe roared, and hurled himself forward to meet the wave. Silver, psychic light surrounded him. He was the light. He was the edge of the Emperor's sword, and he would cut down all that was unclean. He rejoiced in the absolute certainty of his mission.

You cannot win! the Blade screamed. ***You cannot win! You will kneel! You must kneel!*** If the end came now, then Crowe had been granted a rare boon. The sword was not triumphant. It was distressed. Perhaps Antwyr was even in pain.

Crowe slammed into the wave, and he was a supernova. He was light purging the dark, wounding the dark, killing the dark. He was a flame of silver, a star cutting through a blackness suddenly unsure of its victory.

The monstrous wave of daemons crashed over him. For the second time on

Sandava III, he was submerged. The other Purifiers vanished from his sight.

He burned more and more brightly, and though the thousands of abominations pressed closer and closer, they could not crush him yet, so quickly did he incinerate their being. He could not see individual foes. He fired and sliced through squirming darkness.

And he saw the other light. It was a morning star in the night of flesh. It, too, was purity. It, too, was absolute. It was an exultation of hope, and his soul reached out for it. Light rushed towards light. The star he saw was not in the mass of daemons. He was not crossing a physical distance to meet it. He was traversing a much greater void. And the light came to him. It sought him as he sought it.

Crowe's body receded from his consciousness. A universe away, it swung and fought to hold its annihilation at bay. His awareness was in the light. He was the light. His streak of fire touched the blazing star, a comet meeting the dawn.

And now the light was spreading. It broke over the surface of Sandava III. It enveloped the planet. It tore open the sky of the warp. Where reality had parted, now insanity was ripped asunder.

There was a flash of even greater brilliance.

For an infinite moment, Crowe thought himself at the heart of a sun.

Then he was in his body again, emerging once more from a wave that had failed to destroy him. He climbed out of a hill of smouldering, twitching bodies. Half a mile ahead, his brothers fought on, bringing ruin to the ruinous. Further out, the host of daemons sent up a terrible lamentation.

Crowe looked up. Night had come once more to Sandava III. Crowe could still see the mad fires of the warp, but now as a storm, not as the totality of existence. They did not fill the void. And in the void, there were stars.

One of the stars was close. It moved steadily across the firmament. A voice came from the star, and sounded on Crowe's vox. The voice belonged to the light that had pierced through to Sandava III. It was a voice Crowe knew.

'*This is Grand Master Voldus of the Third Brotherhood*,' said the voice. '*We bring you deliverance, brothers. And we bring you hope.*'

PART TWO

CRESCENDO

After the Noctis Aeterna

CHAPTER FIVE

Hope Renewed

‘This is the time of our greatest trials, Castellan Crowe,’ said Grand Master Voldus. ‘It is also the time of our greatest hopes.’

They were in Voldus’ personal anchor hold aboard the *Excoris Dominus*. The chamber was small, spare, with a single iron pew, an altar and a table. The space was dark, conceived for reflection, prayer and meditation. The table had full hololithic and cogitator capabilities, however. The latest tactical data was, as often as not, the immediate subject of the Grand Master’s meditation. At this moment, the table displayed a map of the galaxy. Standing next to the pew, Crowe looked down at the new reality of the Imperium, and at the immense chain of warp storms that defaced it. The Cicatrix Maledictum, Voldus had called it. The horror stretched across the image, a bleeding wound cutting the Imperium in half.

Crowe was still processing the implications of what had happened while Sandava III had been in the warp. The briefing Voldus had given his strike force had been full of news of such portent, it had been as dizzying as Gura’s last transmission from the *Sacrum Finem*. The siege of Skoria had lasted days, but years had passed in the materium. Years of endless darkness. Years in which the Imperium had teetered on the brink of absolute destruction.

Voldus had then invited Crowe here, to speak more fully of the new shape of the Imperium. There was hope again. The Astronomican shone once more, though its light could not cross the barrier of the Cicatrix Maledictum, and half the former Imperium was still in darkness. There was also a new hope. It had the

shape of a legend from the past. It beggared belief.

'Guilliman has returned,' Crowe said, listening to the sound of the words. Their meaning was huge. Simply uttering the sentence felt like an act of stunning import. A primarch led the forces of the Imperium on a new crusade against the Ruinous Powers. *The Avenging Son*, Crowe thought. *After ten thousand years, he has come back to us*. Crowe rejoiced. He also wondered what else might come back.

'Guilliman is the light that has come in answer to our trial,' said Voldus. 'He is the answer that comes from the storm.'

'As you were for us,' Crowe said.

'So it would seem.'

The two Grey Knights were silent for a few moments, pondering the miracle they had accomplished.

'Was it really by our actions that the world was pulled from the warp?' Crowe said, broaching the event they needed to discuss.

'I ask myself the same thing,' said Voldus. 'I have no other explanation. I saw the beacon of your soul in the storm. I sought to give aid to a brother.'

'And so I saw your light.'

'The explanation is simple, if hard to believe.'

Crowe shook his head. 'We truly do find ourselves in an age of wonders. And for my strike force, your passing through this region was a lucky one.'

'A fated one, I believe,' said Voldus.

'Of course. So it must have been.' He glanced at Voldus' weathered face. The Grand Master seemed able to tolerate the sword's presence far more than any other Grey Knight, but Crowe did not wish to subject him to the burden longer than necessary. Voldus looked calm, so Crowe decided to explore the circumstances of the strike force's rescue a bit more. 'I would like to know, then, what it was that brought you to Sandava.'

Voldus frowned. 'Sandava?'

'Yes. Why come to this system? Has it become a focal point in Guilliman's crusade?'

'This is not Sandava,' said Voldus.

'It isn't?'

'Sandava is lost within the Cicatrix Maledictum,' Voldus said. 'We are not in any system.'

Crowe felt the chill of premonition. 'Where are we?' he asked.

Voldus turned to the table's controls and called up coordinates. The position of

the *Excoris Dominus* appeared in relation to the former site of the Sandava system. Crowe had been too caught up in the vista of the Imperium to notice the Sandava system was gone completely. A second rune blinked at Sandava III's current position, just to the galactic south of the Cicatrix, due north of Golgotha, and hundreds of light years from where it should be.

'You have travelled far,' said Voldus.

'We have,' Crowe said softly. 'Is there any significance to this location?'

'None tactically. None that I can think of at all.'

'There must have been significance to the journey, then.' It was not unusual for ships to be lost in the warp and emerge almost infinitely far from their destination. A world being moved in this way *was* unusual. It could not be an accident. The purpose of the dark rhythm Gared had detected in the battles now became clear. Crowe had wondered where all the enormous psychic energy had gone. Now he knew. The siege of Skoria had become a dance, one whose power had been used to move the planet through the immaterium.

But why? To where?

Crowe felt answers hovering near, as close as the brush of fate.

'Sandava III was moved for a reason,' Crowe said. He was addressing his strike force. They had gathered on the bridge of the *Excoris Dominus* to witness the daemon-infested world's end. From his throne in the strategium, Grand Master Voldus presided over the preparations for Exterminatus. Crowe stood on a wide dais one level below with the Purifiers and the Terminators. They were in the company of warriors of the Third Brotherhood, and the assembled looked out over the ranks of tech-stations, towards the main oculus. Sandava III filled the view, awaiting its execution. The planet was sunless, its only light the reflected glow of the warp storm. Bereft of its oceans, its land masses reshaped, Sandava III bore no resemblance to the world Crowe had first seen from the bridge of the *Sacrum Finem* more than a century ago. He had been a Knight of the Flame, then, come to fight the foreseen incursion on Sandava II. This was all that was left of that cursed, fated system. Soon there would be only dust.

'Moved to what end?' said Drake.

'Precisely the answer we must seek,' said Crowe.

'Does it matter?' Sendrax asked. 'The journey has been stopped. Sandava III is going nowhere now except to oblivion.'

'It does matter,' said Crowe. 'It is not enough that we interrupted the work of the Ruinous Powers. We must know the nature of that work. It would be

dangerous to think we have severed the head when we have only removed a limb.'

A servitor's dead, monotone voice was mechanically counting off the moments to the launch of the cyclonic torpedoes.

Crowe looked at Sandava III, and thought he could almost see the land writhe with the movement of the host of abominations. He wondered if the daemons knew what was coming. He hoped so.

You would call this a victory, said the sword. ***It is not. What have you lost? Everything that you wished to save. The worlds are gone. All you have accomplished is to fill the void with blood. Perhaps that is what you wished? Was it? Was it? Was it? Battle for its own sake, blood for its own sake, the destruction of enemies for its own sake. You revel in it, Garran. You draw strength from it.***

The daemon assailed him with the reminder of his spiritual exhaustion on Sandava III. He had felt hollowed out before the battle at Labos. There had been so many echoes of Sandava II. The Ruinous Powers had attacked him with images of futility, as all his decades of battle had seemed to bring him back in a pointless circle to fight the same battles again and again. But that had been a lie, and he had been renewed in Labos. He would willingly stand on the spiritual ramparts of Titan, holding back the threat of Antwyr forever if that was what the Emperor willed. He was the castellan, and the burden was indistinguishable from glory.

Antwyr was trying to turn the truth of his revived energy into a lie. He saw the attack for what it was, and countered it, knocking it aside.

When he turned his gaze from Sandava III, he saw strain on the faces of Drake, Sendrax and the other Grey Knights. They were looking at the doomed world with anger and, Crowe thought, a hint of defeat. The sword was working on them, too, hitting them with the same lie. He had been too long in their presence. Time to withdraw, and take the poison with him.

Crowe left the bridge. He walked the corridors of the *Excoris Dominus*. Mortals gave him a wide berth, turning frightened eyes from the sword he carried as the tendrils of its will reached for their souls. The other Grey Knights he passed greeted him with respect, though he could see their relief as he moved on. He made for the quarters Voldus had reserved for him. The space was one of the most isolated on the ship. It was an observation blister on the bow, rarely used except during combat. Midway there, he paused at a large, stained armourglass

viewing block. The torpedoes were on their way, and he would shortly witness the cremation of Sandava III. In every meaningful way, the world was already dead. All that remained to be done was purge its taint from the galaxy.

We have survived, Crowe thought.

There was triumph in that fact. But not enough.

As he waited for the great pulse of orange and red, Crowe mused upon victory and defeat. He thought about patterns.

He thought about the abominations of the Dark Prince, of the nature of that god's taint, and of the meaning of the daemonic art.

Ossidius lay on his back and cursed the stars. He hurled an invective for each hated glint in the darkness above. He could no longer shout, but he whispered his malice. It was the only sound he could manage now. The great murder of noise was lost to him forever. His senses were shutting down. Soon he would no longer be able to see the stars. Before that happened, though, he was sure that destruction would come for him. The brightest star, the one that moved, would be preparing the end of Sandava III. He was about to be killed by an enemy that did not even know he existed.

The humiliation cut deeply. The failure was worse. He had still been miles from the war when the terrible light had come, blinding him with its purity.

To his right, he heard the tap-click of taloned feet beating a complex rhythm against rock. He managed to turn his head. A daemonette danced a short distance away. It carried a staff in its human hand, hammering its tip against the ground and carving intricate passes through the air. The movements were exquisitely painful to watch, and Ossidius drank the sensations in hungrily. There were precious few left to him.

The daemonette noticed him. It danced over to where he lay, then paused, crouching over him, its head cocked as if awaiting a question.

'I have failed,' Ossidius gasped. He could not even send word of the disaster to Tarautas. The mission had fallen from triumph to disaster, and he had done nothing to stop it. A perfection of sensation had slipped from his grasp, and now the great project had ended under his watch. He needed to wail, to scream his frustration, but he could barely draw breath, and so he gasped his confession to this servant of the Dark Prince.

'***Do you think these events are not known?***' said the daemonette. Its voice slithered down his spine like a caress. It savaged his nerves with claws.

It was nectar.

And though it brought delicious pain, the voice soothed too. At its words, something flared in his chest.

‘Word has been sent?’ Ossidius asked.

The daemonette took his left arm in its pincer. His armour was smashed around the elbow. The creature severed the joint with a playful snap. Ossidius shuddered in delicious pain. ‘***All is known***,’ said the daemonette. ‘***The work is harmed, but it is not destroyed. It cannot be.***’ The daemonette rose and began to dance again. ‘***See***,’ it said. It swirled, mesmerising in the precision of its steps. Its path took it directly towards a jagged rubble heap. Ossidius watched the pattern of the dance, and winced in anticipation of the collision that would destroy the art. At the last second, the daemonette turned. It incorporated the barrier of the rubble into the dance, and the movement was so fluid, it was as if the obstacle had always been part of the work. ‘***See***,’ said the daemonette. ‘***See.***’

‘I see,’ said Ossidius.

‘***So shall it be. The dance goes on. The dance will reign.***’

‘Yes.’ The word leaked from Ossidius’ body like escaping air. *Yesssssssssss*. He was almost finished. The blood pumped from his stump, and he could feel some pain there.

So many boons. He was grateful for them all.

His eyes dimming, Ossidius watched the daemonette dance. Sharp contrails cut through the upper atmosphere. The end was here, and he didn’t care. He spent his final moments drinking in the seductive agony of the dance.

His mutilated lips parted in the smile of hope reborn.

CHAPTER SIX

Trajectories

On Titan, the holy kept eternal watch and prepared for war against the unholy. On Titan, the sacred emerged from the shadows. The Citadel of the Grey Knights stabbed upwards from the ice sheets at the base of Mount Anarch. The mountain's bulk shrouded the harsh spires in darkness, and darkness was thick in the stone corridors. But it was the dark of solemnity, and of grim, sanctified purpose.

The deepest shadows gathered in the cell of the castellan of the Grey Knights. The room was designed as a prison for the Black Blade of Antwyr. Circular, its walls embedded with hexagrammic runes of gold and silver, it had a single exit that gave onto a long corridor leading back to the main complex of the Chambers of Purity. The hall was another security measure, a runic trap of such strength it would destroy any daemon that attempted to travel its length.

The prison was for the sword. In practice, it was a prison for the warden, too. When on Titan, Crowe rarely left the cell. He could go nowhere without the sword, and Antwyr was too poisonous a presence to bring into the holy precincts of the Citadel except with careful preparation, and only briefly, and when absolutely necessary. Crowe was a revered pariah. He had always accepted his lot, though it had changed him from what he had been as a Knight of the Flame. Brotherhood had become a distant vista. Isolation and the sword's siege had tempered the iron of his faith, and hollowed out the human. His solitude was one of the ways in which he stood guard on the walls that held Antwyr in chains.

The dome of the cell was fifty feet high. The entire span of the walls, broken

only by the shrine to the Emperor and the massive iron door, was covered by rows of niches filled with vellum. This was the archive of the Antwyr's ravings, faithfully transcribed by each succeeding castellan, with the intent of learning more about the sword's nature through its words, and finding, at last, its weakness and the means to destroy it.

Above the shrine, empty chains hung on the wall. Before Crowe, the Castellan Merrat Gavallan had kept the sword there while in his quarters. Crowe had too, in the early days of his wardenship. But the Blade found ways to move. If his vigilance ever relaxed, it would escape. Gavallan had never used the Blade in combat. He had chained it to his back. It had broken those chains, leapt into the hands of an enemy, and destroyed him. The Blade would not escape Crowe. This was his great duty, and he would not fail it. So he never loosed his grasp on the sword. Even when it was sheathed, he kept his hand on it.

Crowe sat at the granite altar of a desk. He had two sheets of vellum in front of him. On the left were two stacks of sheets, the latest transcriptions of Antwyr's words and a supply of blank pages. Since the return to Titan a month ago, the daemon had abandoned attacks specific to the events around Crowe. Time passed in the cell with a studied uniformity, and the Blade had little material to use to craft new assaults. Instead, it ground away at Crowe's will with the relentless monotony of surf battering at a cliff face. Sometimes whispering, sometimes shouting, it produced a litany of curses and threats. It threatened Crowe, and the Grey Knights, and the Imperium, and reality itself. The rant was unending, moving from one topic to another, sometimes wheedling, sometimes incoherent, always angry, always a cancer on the mind. It was in the changes of subjects and the moments where the sword shifted its ire from Crowe that the words might be of value, when an unexpected name might point the prognosticars of Titan to turn their psychic attention in a particular direction and perhaps see a threat they might otherwise have missed. On the left sheet of vellum, then, Crowe wrote the words that slithered and growled through his consciousness.

On the right sheet, Crowe made notes about the research he had undertaken. Ancient tomes, scrolls, and data-slates took up the right side of the desk. Every day, his brother Purifiers brought him more materials from the archives of Titan, and took away the texts he had finished with. He was filling page after page with notes about the Sandava system, and the regions of the Imperium that Sandava III had crossed.

He was plotting trajectories. He was looking for a destination. A huge daemonic

army had sacrificed itself and the mortals of Skoria in order to move the planet. If he could not learn why they had undertaken this effort, then the victory the strike force had won would be incomplete. It might even be a hidden defeat.

There were only two clear data points as a basis for his investigations, and that was not enough. Crowe knew Sandava III's original coordinates, and where it had arrived. And he had no guarantee the second point was relevant. When he and Voldus had pulled Sandava III from the warp, it might have emerged in a region far from the intended path.

He had nothing else to go on, though, so he used what little he had. He began by tracing a straight line from one to the other, and then, because the Dark Prince did not favour such simplicity, he started plotting arcs that would take the planet through its point of arrival and onward through the galaxy. For each possible trajectory, he combed through the records, looking for intersections with significant incursions of the past.

There were too many possibilities. None were compelling. He could construct an infinite number of arcs, and every one of them would, at some point, pass through a region that had known the taint of Chaos. Everything felt too vague, the connections too tenuous.

He constructed each trajectory to the edge of the Imperium as it was before half had fallen into darkness on the other side of the Cicatrix Maledictum. He worked his way systematically along its length, giving full thought to each region with a daemonic history, and when he was satisfied by his dissatisfaction, he started again.

The process was slow, painstaking, and his thoughts were forever split between the research and the transcriptions of Antwyr's curses. Time was still in the cell of the castellan. He had the patience and the will to see the work to its conclusion.

A week, or a month, or a decade passed. The sword suddenly laughed. ***Blind***, it taunted. ***Blind by nature, blind by choice, blind by faith, blind forever. You have no vision, mortal. You have no art.***

Crowe wrote the words. Antwyr moved on to curse him with a coward's grave, but Crowe studied what he had just written.

You have no art.

He looked back at the arc of his most recent trajectory. He wondered if there was a useful truth in the Blade's insult. He considered the form of daemons that had infested Sandava III. He thought about the rhythm he had ruined. The melody. The art.

The parabola he had sketched looked too simple. It had no aesthetic value. None that would appeal to a malevolence that prized the perfections of excess.

He started a new sketch with his stylus. He must make perfection his watchword if he wanted to see the design behind the wandering planet. Perfection, and aestheticisation pushed to the level of the monstrous. The first sketch looked promising. He felt a cold wind of inspiration and premonition at his back. He took a fresh sheet of vellum, and this time took careful measurements based on the principle of the original sketch. Instead of an arc, he drew a spiral, the logarithmic spiral of the golden mean. Such a path for the planet was excessive. There were no physical laws, especially in the madness of the warp, that would require Sandava III to follow this route to reach a given destination. The movement was its own end, a world thrown into a dance.

Crowe completed the line, then looked at where it took him. Again, there were many possibilities. He dismissed them as again too vague. All but one. Unlike the other paths he had explored, this one passed directly through the heart of a system.

'Angriff,' Crowe muttered.

He turned to the records. It did not take him long to find the chronicle of an incursion there. What he read stopped him cold.

There were few omens that boded as ill as the impossible coincidence.

Styer entered the council chamber and took one of the stone seats lining the periphery of the solemn hall. There was room at the central table, but the thrones there were reserved for the Grand Masters of the Brotherhoods. Massive fluted pillars climbed into the darkness of the vaults. The banners of the Brotherhoods hung from them, seeming to emerge from the upper night like phantoms. Seated at the table were Voldus and Grand Master Vardan Kai of the First Brotherhood. Drake stood beside the table, a data-slate in his hand. A large scroll of parchment lay on the table.

The Grand Masters nodded to Styer. 'We have requested your attendance, Justicar Styer,' Kai said, 'because Castellan Crowe has made certain discoveries that suggest some immediate courses of action, and that concern you and your squad directly. Knight of the Flame Drake will speak for the castellan.'

'I am honoured to be here, Grand Master,' Styer said. He was relieved in spite of himself that Crowe and the snarling sword would not be present. He would be able to think without that voice trying to pry its way into his soul.

'You may begin,' Voldus said to Drake.

Drake lowered his head in respect to the Grand Masters. ‘The castellan,’ he said, ‘has plotted the possible trajectory of Sandava III. He believes the daemons intended the world to pass through the Angriff system.’

Styer’s eyes widened.

‘The memories of Angriff are not pleasing to you, I know,’ said Kai.

They were not. He had lost two brothers on Angriff Primus. The near-disaster his squad had experienced there had also marked the beginning of a series of battles through the Sanctus Reach and beyond where too often he had felt that he and his men were pawns of Chaos.

‘Please join us,’ Kai said.

Drake unrolled the parchment, revealing a star chart as Styer walked over to stand at his side. Styer looked at the wide spiral that began in the lost Sandava system’s location. The pleasing proportions of its loop felt like a taunt. It cut through the centre of Angriff with the certainty of prophecy.

‘Did the castellan send this to the Auguirium?’ Voldus asked.

‘He did,’ said Drake. ‘Despite the difficulty of readings in the Imperium Nihilus, they have identified a point of an imminent incursion.’

‘Angriff,’ said Styer.

‘No.’ Drake nodded at Styer’s raised eyebrow. ‘I know. I was surprised also. The incursion will not be in Angriff, but it *will* be very close.’ He tapped on the chart, pointing to a mark less than a light year to the galactic west of Angriff.

‘There is nothing there,’ said Kai.

‘The prognosticars were definite, Grand Master.’

Voldus said, ‘We have certainly learned not to be too sure of absences.’

‘Another wandering planet?’ Kai wondered.

‘Perhaps,’ said Voldus.

Styer didn’t need to know what would emerge from the emptiness near Angriff to trust in what he saw. That Crowe thought Sandava III had been intended to reach Angriff was all Styer needed to be convinced. As far as he was concerned, everything that had happened since Angriff Primus was confirmation of the castellan’s theory. ‘I would like to speak with Castellan Crowe,’ he said.

Kai looked up at him. ‘I am not sure that is wise, brother-justicar.’

‘I am conscious of the risks, Grand Master.’

‘Are you?’ Voldus asked. ‘It is one thing to be on the battlefield with the castellan. Your moments in close proximity are brief, and the presence of other brothers does, we hope and pray, divide the attention of the Black Blade of Antwyr. A private audience is much more concentrated exposure to the daemon.’

‘I understand,’ said Styer. ‘There are matters I must speak of with the castellan. Given their nature, I think he will want to speak to me one-on-one. I do not undertake this lightly.’

Kai nodded slowly. ‘I gather, Justicar Styer, that you would wish to be part of a strike force to the Angriff System.’

‘It is extremely important to me and to my squad brothers that we are.’

Crowe moved to the wall opposite the shrine when Drake escorted Styer to his cell. He wished to put as much space as possible between Styer and the blade. The effort would not make much difference, but any distance at all was better than none. As it was, the justicar’s features were tight with the strain of being in the presence of Antwyr.

‘I understand that Angriff Primus has meaning for you,’ Crowe said.

‘It is a place of grim memories for my squad,’ said Styer. He pointed to his face. On each side, from temple to chin, ran three deep, parallel scars. ‘These are the least of the wounds I sustained there. I lost two brothers, Erec and Morholt. They do not sleep in the Dead Fields. They were taken from us utterly by the abominations on Angriff Primus. Our mission there was a near disaster.’

‘Why was that?’

‘The prognosticars foresaw an incursion on Primus, but all the evidence in the system pointed to the source of threat as its moon. That was where a heretic cult had risen. We let our attention be drawn by the struggle there, to our cost. When the incursion happened, it did not appear to have a direct link to the cult.’

‘There was an indirect one?’

Styer nodded. ‘There was a considerable release of psychic energies during the attack we and the Ordo Malleus launched against the cult. Considerably more than was necessary. The local ecclesiarchs had an inflated sense of the cult’s threat. Local forces should have been enough to deal with the problem.’

‘Why didn’t they?’

‘Tensions between the cardinal on Primus and his arch-deacon, who had a political power base on the moon. The arch-deacon falsified evidence, making the cult, and therefore the campaign, appear more important.’

‘And your concern about the energies unleashed is that they might have played a part in causing the incursion?’

‘Yes.’

You defy the gods, the Blade whispered. ***Yet you already serve them. All of you are their slaves. You are pawns and prey. With me, you will be the predator.***

‘I see the parallel between Angriff Primus and Sandava III,’ said Crowe. ‘Our presence was used in both cases.’

‘There is more. Something similar happened in the Sanctus Reach.’

‘You encountered the Plaguefather there, I believe.’

‘We did. Epistolary Gared formed a theory, which I believe to be correct, that the combination of events that led to the daemons invading the materium happened because of our presence.’

Crowe frowned. ‘Are you implying the warnings of the prognosticars are self-fulfilling prophecies?’

Futility, said Antwyr. ***Your wars, your struggles, your faith. Futility. All is futility.***

‘All of them? I do not wish to go so far. But some of them? Perhaps. There has been a pattern in the battles my squad has fought since Angriff Primus. Time after time, we have been vital to the unleashing of the very threat we came to combat.’

‘And the same thing occurred on Sandava III? You think the Ruinous Powers were not simply taking advantage of our presence, but that we were lured there?’

‘I do.’

‘I agree with you. During the battle of Labos, I encountered attacks specifically directed at me. Their power came from taking place in the Sandava system, because of my history there. There was no doubt in my mind that I had been lured there. However, if this is also true for your squad, then we confront machinations even more insidious and far-reaching than we had supposed.’ He thought for a moment. ‘So we have a possible trajectory for Sandava III through Angriff, an imminent incursion near the system, and the pattern of events you have outlined. These are dark portents.’

‘Castellan, if I am right, then the Ruinous Powers not only expect us to launch a strike force to Angriff, they seek precisely this result.’

‘And what, justicar, has been your strategy, in the face of this pattern?’

‘To anticipate it, and to seek to choose my ground in the battle I know is coming.’

‘A sound strategy. You were right to request this audience. You have given me much to think about, though it does not alter the need to reach Angriff.’

‘I have requested my squad be part of the strike force,’ Styer said. ‘By returning to Angriff Primus, we will be coming full circle. Perhaps we will finally break these machinations that seek to pass as fate.’

Crowe grunted. ‘Do not place your hopes in that outcome.’ Memories of Labos

rose before his inner eye, visions of atrocities repeating those carried out in the system decades before. He had come full circle on Sandava III, and nothing was finished. He had defeated one enemy, only to discover there was another, greater threat lurking behind it.

Your struggle can end only in one way, said Antwyr. ***Your strength will fail. Your spirit will fail. You will fail.***

Crowe tightened his grip on the hilt, as if he could throttle the sword into silence. 'Nothing ends,' he said to Styer. 'But whatever the enemy's plans may be, we will consign them to the flames.' He noticed a faint twitch in the justicar's cheek. It was time he released Styer from his presence. 'The Emperor protects,' he said.

'The Emperor protects.' Styer bowed his head, clapped an arm against his pauldron, and left.

Crowe returned to his desk. He examined the star chart in its centre, and traced a finger from Titan to Angriff Primus. The chart was an old one, the vellum cracked and growing rigid. Much of its centuries-old art was hidden by new emendations, reflecting the changed reality of the Imperium. The Cicatrix Maledictum cut its jagged slash across the galaxy. Angriff Primus waited in the darkness of the Imperium Nihilus. The Cicatrix barred the way. There was only one narrow passage to the fated system. Appearing and disappearing not far from the Eye of Terror, it was held by another revenant from the Imperium's deep past. But unlike Guilliman, Kaligius brought no hope. He was a tyrant, a poison upon the void. The system he ruled was now known as the Nachmund Gauntlet. It was a destroyer of ships.

And it was the only way through.

Crowe eyed the region on the map, scowling at its dark invitation.

So many traps lay ahead. So many dooms.

We, too, are dooms, he thought, challenging the Ruinous Powers. *We are yours. Fear our coming.*

CHAPTER SEVEN

Hope and Glory

The Emperor's Children strike cruiser *Catharsis* prowled the edges of the Nachmund system. The ship had once been resplendent in violet, a jewelled blade cutting through the void. Millennia of battle had pitted the hull and reshaped the vessel in a brutal patchwork. Millennia of excess were reflected in the colours of black and crimson, the tormented iron sculptures surmounting the gun emplacements and the superstructure. Shapes that bore only the most grotesque resemblance to the human form reached out, pleading to the gods for the supreme agony of sensation. The vessel was still a blade, but it was no longer a jewel. It was a corrupt, venomous thing. It pleased Tarautas that it was now an instrument of torture more than of conquest.

Tarautas had secured the Tyrant King's permission to enter the system, though he did not intend to venture into Kaligius' realm. It was enough to be in this position, so far into the darkness that Nachmund's star was little more than a sharp point, with the auspex array aimed towards the Imperium, waiting. The ship had been here for a long time. Tarautas did not mind. He was patient.

Gothola was not. He blocked Tarautas' way as he left the Cruciatorium.

The Cruciatorium was the dark heart of the *Catharsis*. The great hall took up the centre of the lowest deck of the ship. It was a place of instruction and of spectacle. Its amphitheatre seating had once held hundreds of the Emperor's Children. There were only five of them aboard now, but there was no lack of mortals forced to participate in the theatre, and the spectacle had spread far beyond the granite stage, into the pews. The Cruciatorium was above all a site

for the pursuit of sensation. It demanded constant invention, renewal and creativity from Tarautas and his battle-brothers. They were tireless in their task, and the bloody fruit of their labours had, over the course of the centuries, come to drench the entire hall. The pews were black with old blood, their surfaces uneven with clumps of dried flesh. An iron network of tracks and pulleys took up the upper half of the hall. Blades, saws and hooks hung from chains. There were musical instruments stringed with woven nerve fibres of still-living victims. There were also flutes of hollowed-out bones, and drums of tanned flesh.

It was here that the blessings of Slaanesh had come to Tarautas. At first, they took the form of inspirations so strong he knew they could not have come from within. The first inspiration had come at the height of a victim's scream, when the note of agony reached such purity it had ceased to be human at all. He had been consumed with thoughts of Angriff Primus and Sandava III. At first, the obsession had been without form. He had plunged back into the torture, conjuring ever more refined pain, ever more extreme sensation, from his subjects and himself. At last, in the depths of meditative paroxysms, the inspirations had become visions, and he had known what he had to do. Since then, the impulses to action had come more easily, and more frequently. He could not see the end to which he was working, but he felt its glory and perfection as he would the heat of a sun.

Obeying his visions, Tarautas had commanded new constructions to be made in the Cruciatorium. Massive frameworks of iron extended from eight points on the walls to the centre of the ceiling. From that intersection, thousands of yards of iron, forged into coils and webs and lace, formed a claw that descended halfway to the stage. Delicacy and brutality were one. It tapered to an end so sharp, it seemed to cut the air as the sluggish breeze of the ventilation whistled past it. Beneath it, a runic circle marked out a forbidden space on the granite of the stage. The blood of twenty prisoners had poured into that circle, and had vanished, seemingly absorbed into the stone. No further work had been done in the circle, and Tarautas permitted nothing to cross it.

'Is this to awaken Diotian?' Casca had asked.

'No,' Tarautas had responded. The most extreme rituals of cruelty had failed to stir Diotian. He was beyond sensation now, beyond the furthest transgressions of art. Tarautas had come to believe that he would sleep forever.

'Then what is it for?'

'I don't know yet.' He had smiled. The visions commanded actions, and were

suffused with the promise of the sublime. They were also partial. The full truth of the sublimity was not his. It would come, though. ‘The revelation will be glorious,’ he said.

On this day, Tarautas had been working in a space on the left side of the stage, beside the black, massive bulk of Diotian’s vault. He was exploring the tones he could summon as he slowly poured molten brass over the skull of a slave, gradually turning the mortal’s head into a bell. The experiment was showing some promise. Utheian, Belagas and Casca had been at opposite ends of the upper reaches of the amphitheatre, busy with their own efforts, but they left when he did.

Gothola was just outside the main doors. Alectus was a few steps behind him and to the side. Tarautas did not have to look to know that the other three had positioned themselves so that he was surrounded. The ambush was not a direct attack, however. It was deniable. Gothola was the only one standing in overt challenge. The others were waiting to see what would benefit them most.

Tarautas felt a pang of regret that he had not sent Gothola instead of Ossidius to Sandava. Ossidius had understood, at a profound level, the nature of the great work in which they were engaged. There would be no challenge from him. His loyalty, though, was precisely why it was necessary that he be the one to take charge of Sandava III. Tarautas could not have trusted Gothola.

But now Sandava III was gone, and the challenge had come. Tarautas was not surprised. He had even expected it before now. Either Gothola’s patience or his belief in the masterwork was greater than Tarautas had supposed.

‘When are you going to admit to failure?’ Gothola asked.

Tarautas cocked his head and drew his lips back over his fangs in a predator’s smile. The skin of his shaven scalp tightened. He had flayed and healed his flesh again and again, never allowing it to harden into numb scar tissue. It was the deep pink of exposed muscle. Slender mechadendrites, linked to his armour’s power plant, burrowed through his scalp and face. They burned and cut, keeping the wounds fresh, but they paused, too, letting the flesh knit, and building up the anticipation of the next burst of pain. Tarautas felt them start to buzz now as they reacted to his spiking adrenaline. ‘The failure is yours, brother,’ he said.

‘What are you talking about? We have followed you. We have done your bidding. What has that brought us? Nothing but the Tyrant King’s leavings. You say Sandava III is gone. There is an end to your dream.’ Gothola spoke with a lisp. His face was quartered with self-inflicted slashes of his gladius, and he had cut his tongue in two.

‘It was no dream, brother,’ Tarautas said. ‘And it was not mine. It was commanded of us by the Dark Prince.’

‘So you say. So you insist we believe. I have a confession to make, brother-*captain*.’ He spat the last word. ‘At this moment, my faith is weak. It is very weak.’

Tarautas lowered his voice, speaking so quietly Gothola took an involuntary step forward to hear him better. The other Emperor’s Children did not move. They were still witnesses more than conspirators. Good. ‘The campaign is not over. It has not failed. The most vital moments are yet to come, and you will see them soon, if you have the patience to do so.’

‘Patience!’ Gothola cried. ‘We have been patient. We have been patient in this empty quarter for years, doing nothing while the Imperium burns and is ours for the plucking. How long do you expect us to be patient? Until Diotian walks again?’

Tarautas’ right arm snapped out in a blur. He grabbed Gothola and slammed him against the wall. Above his left fist, drill-headed syringes extended from the modified narthecium of a long-dead Apothecary. He drove the syringes into the side of Gothola’s neck.

‘You will be patient for as long as I tell you to be patient,’ Tarautas snarled. The drugs hit the blood stream, and Gothola’s face went slack with horror. Tarautas smiled. It was not pain that he was inflicting on Gothola, but numbness. He was stealing away all of the other Space Marine’s sensation. He frequently injected himself with the anaesthetic. The numbness was part of the exquisite torture of anticipation. Sensation vanished, but only so it would return with even more power. Lacking patience, Gothola needed constant stimulation. Tarautas was cutting him off from sensation, and from the world. He was walling Gothola off, turning his body into a prison of nothingness, with the threat of keeping him there forever. He wielded the one form of torture any son of Fulgrim would dread.

Gothola’s arms went limp. They dropped to his sides, fingers loose. Gothola would fall if Tarautas released him.

‘You will wait,’ said Tarautas. He looked around at the other Emperor’s-Children, including them in his commands. ‘You will obey. And the glory will come. You will witness it, and you will take part in the most perfect of all slaughters. Or you will feel nothing. Is that your choice, brother? Nothing is upon you. Your sense of touch is gone. Soon, the rest of your senses will follow. Do you embrace nothing? Do you wish me to continue?’

Gothola struggled to shake his head.

'I see,' Tarautas said. He withdrew the drill heads, dropped Gothola to the deck and stepped back. Gothola was motionless. His face drooped. His eyes were full of hate, but Tarautas doubted he would risk another challenge soon. He would not forget the horror of absent sensation. 'So you have decided to be patient.' Tarautas turned around slowly and forced the rest of the squad to meet his gaze. 'I trust there is nothing further to be discussed.'

He waited until each legionary shook his head.

'Then stand ready. The promised time comes, and very soon.' He raised his voice. 'The pawns approach, and the work *will* be completed. You cannot imagine the sublimity that awaits us. Apotheosis is upon us, brothers!'

He saw his fire reflected in the faces of the others. Even Gothola's eyes began to burn with more than hate.

Moored to Broadswords Station, the *Tyndaris* made ready to seek the Imperium Nihilus through the lethal passage of the Nachmund Gauntlet. Convoys of motorised servitors moved through the transport halls of the station, loading ordnance into the strike cruiser's weapons bays. Tech-priests prayed over the machine-spirit of the vessel, and anointed its control surfaces with sacred oils. In the colonnade that linked the station to the bridge deck of the *Tyndaris*, Grand Master Voldus watched the strike force board. The Grey Knights marched past wall frescoes commemorating victories and fallen heroes. The figures immortalised in oil were in profile, all facing towards the outer lock of the passageway, and thus seemed to march in solidarity with the living warriors who passed them.

Voldus stood beneath the final starboard arch of the colonnade. The Purifiers were the last to board, and Crowe last of all. The Knights of the Flame, Drake and Sendrax, paused on the threshold to the ship and waited for the castellan. With their squads aboard and a safe distance from Crowe and the Blade of Antwyr, they would pay their leader respect by boarding the *Tyndaris* with him, and then his necessary isolation would enclose him once more.

Crowe carried his helmet. There was a marked contrast between his face and those of the Knights of the Flame. Though Drake's metal and fire-scarred features made him more statue than human, he still seemed to have more in common with Crowe than Sendrax, whose noble lines bespoke determination and pride. Crowe's skin was almost grey. It was taut against his skull, the eyes sunken and shadowed. The long years of struggle against the sword, a struggle

without cessation, had carved deep hollows into his face, yet those lines were like gouges in granite. Crowe's was the face of a warrior who had confronted the most profound exhaustion that could afflict body and soul, and crushed it beneath his determination. Mountains would erode away before that face would sag.

Voldus stepped forward to greet Crowe. 'May the Emperor's hand guide you on your journey, castellan, and may you strike with the strength of his sword.'

No hand will guide them, said a hissing, rasping whisper in his mind. ***Their path is futile. The fool turns from destiny. You will do better. You will grasp my hilt. You will rise to glory, borne upward by the fires of victory.***

Voldus' soul turned from Antwyr's temptation. The sword responded with a howl of curses.

'You carry darkness to darkness,' Voldus said to Crowe.

The castellan's hand never left the hilt. 'And so we must bring a light even more terrible.'

'Indeed. This is the pass to which the Imperium has come. Every act of war must be greater than the one before. We are grateful that your light is strong.'

As Voldus spoke, Drake and Sendrax joined them. 'Our light will shine so brightly in Angriff,' said Sendrax, 'you will see it from Titan.'

'Temper your pride, brother,' Crowe said. 'We shall not mark a victory before it is accomplished.'

Sendrax bowed his head. 'Of course, brother-castellan. I misspoke.' His contrition sounded genuine, and he kept his features neutral. Even so, Voldus saw his nostrils flare with displeasure.

'Go aboard,' Crowe said to the Knights of the Flame. 'I will take my leave of the Grand Master and follow.'

When Sendrax and Drake had withdrawn, Crowe asked, 'Have you learned something new about our mission?'

'I am not sure. I was meditating upon your task during the night, and a fragment of a vision came to me. I beheld a great fire at the centre of infinite night. I felt the need to strike in that fire, though I knew it would never fall to me to do so. Then the vision passed.'

'Can you interpret what you have seen?'

'I cannot. I believe that task will be yours, too. For this, I am sorry.'

'You should not be,' Crowe said. 'You have my thanks, Grand Master. I will think upon what you have told me.'

They parted. Voldus watched Crowe go, the knight of coldest, grimmest purity.

He seemed to draw shadows after him. The scraping voice of the sword receded, finally silenced when the heavy air lock boomed shut.

Voldus remained where he was until the colonnade vibrated with the jolt of the *Tyndaris* leaving its moorings.

One step behind Setheno, Governor Lina Vismar walked through the great main doors and into the Laboris Gloria manufactory. The honour guard squad escorting her kept back two paces, as much out of terror of Setheno than respect for the governor. Vismar had trouble keeping up with the canoness' stride. She was not a young woman any longer, and she was much shorter than the towering Sister of Battle. What really made it difficult to match Setheno's speed, though, was that Vismar quailed to find herself in such proximity to the Canoness Errant. She would gladly have fallen further behind, but she did not want Setheno to turn around. She did not want to confront the howling face of Setheno's helmet. Worse yet would be if Setheno removed the helm. The one time Vismar had seen that face was enough. Those terrible eyes of gold and the features of emotionless, forbidding marble waited for her in her nightmares.

Past the doors was the central avenue of the manufactory. Though no roof surmounted the five-hundred-yard-wide passage, the intersections of tracks and walkways was so thick, the sky was barely visible. Vismar considered this a mercy. Since the coming of the great night, smog over Algidus had become rare. The choking certainty of so many centuries was gone, sheared away by a power Vismar could not comprehend. Once, when she was a child, the sky had cleared for an entire week. She had gazed for hours at the stars, and thought with wonder that the Emperor ruled over everything she saw. Her mother had shown her the other planets of the Angriff system, and taught her the constellations. It had been the private pleasure of Vismar's governorship, during the brief moments she had to herself, to pore over star charts, and remember that short, treasured vision of the lights of the galaxy.

The lights were not a pleasure any longer. The sky was wrong.

'I will have you realise that this failure is yours,' said Setheno.

'Canoness, you must understand that–'

Setheno spoke over Vismar's attempt to defend herself. 'It is your duty to ensure that this forge, and Algidus, and Angriff Primus continue to function. The serfs are not working as they should. Teach them their duty.'

'The people do not listen to me as they once did,' Vismar said, and the admission was a bitter one to make. *They never listened to me to the degree that*

they fear you, she thought. Production levels at Laboris Gloria were plummeting again. Vismar had done what she could, but her ability to take punitive actions was growing weaker as desertions also ate into the ranks of the militia. Serfs and soldiers were retreating into the apathy of despair. She had fought hard to preserve the morale of her world since the coming of the night. It was a struggle doomed to defeat. The years wore on. The Astronomican had not reappeared. The Angriff system was surrounded by the silence of the vanished Imperium.

What success Vismar had had, she knew was not really hers. It was Setheno who had quelled the panics of the early days. It was Setheno who had imposed order, again and again, leaving Vismar the task of holding fast to what the canoness had achieved. It was Setheno, and not Vismar, and not the Ecclesiarchy under Cardinal Orla, who had forced the population of Angriff Primus to remain faithful and dutiful.

I did all that could be done, Vismar thought. That her efforts had failed should not reflect on her or on Orla. The Imperium was gone. Holding even Angriff Primus together was a task beyond any human. Vismar could not really think of Setheno as human. She was a living sanction, a pre-emptive judgement falling on Vismar, sent by the Emperor before His light vanished. Without mercy, she had forced order on Angriff Primus, and her success felt like a deliberate reminder of Vismar's failure to achieve the impossible.

Laboris Gloria today was another failure. The people who toiled there had lost their fear of punishment and death. The will to struggle was draining away from Algidus. Vismar understood why. There was no point in fighting. There was no point in producing weapons for wars that were over and lost. There was no point in anything any longer.

Setheno had noted the decline of Laboris Gloria. She had commanded Vismar to correct it. Commanded, with not even a blink of a concession to Vismar's rank. Biting back anger, Vismar had tried. But production continued to drop, and so Setheno had now come herself, *ordering* Vismar to accompany her.

A wave of terror preceded Setheno. Vismar saw it radiate through the crowds on the main avenue who parted before Setheno as if fleeing judgement itself. It moved into the foundry halls, and up the galleries and walkways, the maglev tracks and towers, the cranes and smokestacks of the manufactory. The canoness' armour was the hard grey of a tombstone. Her cloak, too, was grey. The speed of her march made it billow. In Vismar's eyes, its movements were the shape of a wind of cold and iron.

Vismar followed, held by duty, bitterness and wounded pride. She could not

deny that Setheno's presence was a guarantor against the darkness. Vismar resented that power, but needed it, and needed to associate herself with it. The light of the Imperium had vanished, and the vast darkness, worse than night, was seeking to claim Angriff Primus. Vismar had no name for it, but she had glimpsed its leading edge when those monstrous, deformed Space Marines had come to her world and converted thousands of citizens to a heretical cult. Because of Setheno, the monsters were dead, and the cultists exterminated. But when she looked at the sky, Vismar knew the darkness was not done with Angriff Primus. It would return, bringing far worse horrors with it. She did not think her people had the fervent faith it would take to repulse the darkness this time. She knew she did not.

Setheno's strength, though, was undimmed. Her faith was as merciless as ever. If there was to be any protection from the dark, it would come from her.

The workers of the Laboris Gloria cringed before Setheno's passage, but were held, petrified, to see what she would do and hear what she would say. The canoness did not speak again until she reached the central court of Laboris Gloria. She stopped in the centre of the circular space, the focus of thousands of frightened eyes. Here, the walkways and tracks spiralled up the manufactory, leaving the thousand-yard-wide courtyard open to the sky. Vismar looked straight ahead, focusing on the canoness, fighting the temptation to look up at the stars.

Electronic squeals rocked the height and breadth of Laboris Gloria. Vismar braced herself. Setheno had done this before. She was seizing control of the manufactory's vox speakers, in the courtyard, and in the halls and deep foundries of the complex. Her voice would carry to every corner of the Laboris Gloria. When she spoke, Vismar winced. She could never prepare herself for the thunder of the canoness' anger.

'You are unworthy in the Emperor's sight,' Setheno declared. 'You howl for protection, yet you refuse to fight. Your labour in these halls is in the defence of the Imperium. The armaments built here strengthen this world. You have the honour of reinforcing the ramparts of Angriff Primus, and you would refuse this honour. Faithless, you turn away from duty.'

Setheno paused. The manufactory reverberated with the throb and clang of its enormous machinery. Flaming gases roared from the peaks of the spires. Yet in the space between Setheno's judgement and her sentence, it seemed to Vismar that silence had fallen over the Laboris Gloria. She held her breath. The serfs were motionless.

‘*I tell you no!*’ Setheno shouted. She drew her power sword and held it high. The crowd trembled, collective breath held. The sword’s blue light slashed through the glowering crimson of the manufactory and struck up at the blackness of the sky. ‘You will serve. You will labour. You will stand with the Emperor. Do you think His eye is not upon you? Do you dare believe He is no longer upon the Golden Throne? Look upon this light. Look upon this sword. *Look!* This is the light of the Emperor. This is the edge of his wrath. This is the final sight for the apostate. Look, and believe, and labour for the Emperor. Or look and die.’

At first, the people responded to the words of the terror in grey by falling to their knees. They wailed for forgiveness. They raised their hands in entreaty. Many covered their eyes and wept. Then the sword crackled. It flared brightly, as if angered by the display.

‘*You will serve!*’ Setheno commanded.

The wails became shrieks of fear, and the labourers rose to their feet. ‘*We serve!*’ they cried. ‘*We serve!*’ They fled to their duties as if chasing their final hope of redemption. For several minutes, Setheno remained as she was, the sword raised in warning, as the cacophony of the forges rose. It was the sound of sudden, desperate productivity.

At last, Setheno sheathed the sword. She turned to confront Vismar. She leaned forward, the nightmare face on her helmet looking down on the governor. She spoke to Vismar, yet her words still snarled from the vox. ‘If I come here again, I shall leave none alive.’

Vismar bowed her head. ‘That will not be necessary,’ she promised, and wondered how long she could maintain that vow. Despite the depths of her fear, she did not think even Setheno could hold the planet together forever.

Setheno left her, marching back towards the main doors, leaving behind the renewal of faith and terror. There was no need for Vismar to accompany her, and it was clear Setheno did not require her presence. The canoness saw her as no better than the serfs. Setheno’s final threat had been directed at all of them.

Vismar waited until the Sister of Battle was out of sight. She waited too long, because she gave in to the temptation and looked skywards. What she saw immediately began to erode the conviction of her vow. The despair undermined her spiritual defences once more.

The Great Rift concealed many of the constellations she had seen in childhood. The angry wound in the galaxy was cause enough for despair, but what disturbed her most were lights in the sky that were closer to Angriff Primus. Vismar picked out the other planets in the system that were visible to the naked eye. Angriff

Secundus and Tertius hung there, exactly where they should be. But the moon was gone. It had disappeared when the Rift had opened, and the panic caused by that absence had, in those first days, almost overwhelmed even Setheno's grip on social order. During the first year of the darkness, new glints had arrived in the night sky, ones that had no reason to be there. As the months passed, one of the glints shone brighter and brighter. Soon it was a disc of brown and green. It grew and grew, until it was larger in the sky than the moon had ever been. Every time it rose, its pale light filled the night with mystery and dread.

The sky was wrong. Vismar did not believe it would ever be right again.

Styer and Epistolary Gared had both offered Crowe their quarters aboard the *Tyndaris*. He had refused. Their chambers were too close to those of the rest of the squad. He had to be far more isolated. There was a meditation cell at the rear of a librarium midway down the length of the ship between the bridge and the bow. Crowe had declared the librarium forbidden to all for the duration of the mission, and closed the door of the cell. He would emerge if battle required his presence, but not before.

The *Tyndaris* plunged through the immaterium, taking the leap as far as it could towards the edge of the Nachmund system and the point where the storms became too great to permit travel. No one disturbed Crowe's isolation until shortly before the end of the leap. He was murmuring prayers over the last of the bolter shells he was loading into spare magazines when he became aware of a presence in the librarium. The figure that appeared at the doorway to the cell a few moments later had had most of its humanity stripped away.

'Inquisitor Furia,' Crowe said. 'It seems proper that we should meet before battle.'

'I thought so, too,' said Hadrianna Furia. The Ordo Malleus inquisitor's voice was a metallic rattle.

Crowe knew she had been on numerous missions with Styer, but this was the first time their paths had crossed. So much of her flesh had been replaced with bionic components, she could almost have passed for an adept of the Cult Mechanicus, were it not for the absence of mechadendrites. The left half of her body and her right arm were bronze. The right side of her face was unmoving scar tissue. The way in which her wounds were marks of pride and determination reminded Crowe of Drake, though his eyes were still human. Furia's were machinic red embers.

Crowe sensed Antwyr turn its attacks on the inquisitor. ***Puritan fool***, it said.

You have seen much and learned nothing. I will teach you. Carve the last of the flesh away. Become your truth. Burn humanity down to the bones with me.

Furia's unblinking gaze fell on the sword for a long moment before she looked back up at Crowe.

'You are Amalathian,' Crowe said, and Furia nodded. The Amalathians were one of the puritan factions of the Inquisition, and shunned absolutely the use of tainted weaponry. Crowe had encountered radical inquisitors who had eyed the Black Blade with hunger, deluding themselves with the thought they could unleash its power against the enemies of the Imperium. Furia's beliefs would protect her for longer against Antwyr's will, though no mortal could stand against it indefinitely.

'The relic you wield is an object of particular horror for our philosophy,' said Furia.

'As well it should be. You wonder how it can be wielded without using the power it holds.'

'I do, though I know this is your task.'

'And is this what you wish to speak to me about?'

'In a sense. I understand you know about Epistolary Gared's theory of self-fulfilling prognostications.'

'I do. Are you, like Justicar Styer, convinced of this?'

'To the same degree he is, yes. And he has told him that you, too, have felt a similar kind of manipulation.'

'I have.'

Furia appeared to gather her thoughts for a moment. 'I do not like hypotheticals,' she said. 'They are too often the source of actions that are taken before the facts of a situation are known, and so become disastrous.'

'Nevertheless, you are about to present me with one.' Crowe sensed that if Furia could still grimace, she would right now.

'We are preparing to battle a foe who, it seems, is capable of moving worlds. Is there, then, a point at which the full use of that sword becomes necessary?'

The sword thrummed in its sheath. Crowe held it tight. Growls of triumph filled his head, and he wondered if Furia had already fallen, and he would have to execute her. 'There is no such point,' he said, his voice a cold warning. 'The more powerful the enemy is, the more imperative the captivity of the Blade becomes. This is absolute. I am surprised at your question, Inquisitor Furia.' He took a step forward.

'I am satisfied,' she said. 'It occurred to me that the chain of events we are

facing might be a prologue to the sword's freedom.'

Renounce your words, Antwyr raged at Furia, and it tried to push Crowe on. ***Kill her now. Do not suffer her to live. She must be sacrificed.***

'The Blade will never be free,' Crowe said, standing still.

'I do not doubt you, castellan. I do not doubt the Grey Knights. But I have seen what members of my order will do if their path strays, even and especially when they believe they fight for the Imperium.'

'Is this what you anticipate?'

'Not necessarily. Though Justicar Styer and I have seen enough to anticipate the worst, we do not know the shape it will take.'

'Nor I, inquisitor.'

The *Tyndaris* translated into the materium. The Mandeville point was in the Nachmund system's Oort cloud. The region was abnormally dense with planetisimals. The proximity of the Cicatrix Maledictum tortured the fabric of space, drawing in clusters of the icy bodies, catching them in vortices of gravitational anomalies. The strike cruiser's hull groaned as conflicting forces pulled at it. The view through the oculus was of reality in torment. The mad colours of the Great Rift bled into the system. The prognosticars had been able to predict a period of relative calm in the Cicatrix, and the Nachmund passage was navigable. At the command pulpit of the bridge, Styer was grateful for small mercies.

'Have we made any progress, Lieutenant Ambach?' Shipmaster Bruno Saalfrank asked the augur operator. The vortices of the Oort cloud were wreaking havoc with the long-range sensors.

'Very little,' Ambach said. 'I am getting some readings that reach beyond line of sight, but not many.'

Saalfrank turned to Styer. 'We may hope that the enemy faces the same problem.'

'We may hope that, but we will not count on it,' Styer told him.

'There are some challenges our foes will have to contend with, no matter how else the Ruinous Powers may favour them,' said Gared. The Librarian pointed towards the starboard side of the oculus, where the fury of the Cicatrix was at its most savage.

'Agreed,' said Styer. 'Shipmaster, plot a course that takes us as close to the Rift as possible, to the edge of what our hull can withstand.'

'So ordered,' Saalfrank replied. If he dreaded what the tidal forces would do to

the *Tyndaris*, he gave no sign.

The groans of the vessel grew louder in the hours that followed. Styer felt the ship vibrate in pain. In his throne, mechadendrites linking him to the machine-spirit of the *Tyndaris,* Saalfrank gripped the armrests tightly, knuckles whitening in pain. The old man had lived with the strike cruiser for almost a century. He and the *Tyndaris* were one, and he could coax manoeuvres out of his charge that bordered on the miraculous. His skills would be needed now, Styer thought. The Nachmund Gauntlet could tear ships apart by the very nature of storm-torn space, even if there was no enemy.

'The foe will come,' Gared said quietly.

'Are you reading my thoughts, brother?'

'Simply voicing my own, justicar.'

The first contacts came a few minutes later. They were derelicts. Gutted, scarred by explosive burns, their bridges blown out and their hulls gouged open, they altered their aimless courses when they collided with the icy masses or were caught by the gravitational eddies of the storm. They grew in number the further into the passage the *Tyndaris* penetrated. It was as if the victims of the Nachmund Gauntlet had been gathered into a cemetery. Proximity warnings sounded as Saalfrank guided the *Tyndaris* through the cloud of ruined ships. The severed half of a frigate, floating in the void perpendicular to the strike cruiser's course, came within a thousand yards of scraping its bow against the *Tyndaris*' superstructure. Saalfrank's guidance was sure, and the *Tyndaris* passed the derelict.

But the warning klaxons kept on. The vessel graveyard lit up with sudden lance fire as the attack began.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Gauntlet

They were ships from the old past that came for the *Tyndaris*. Their names had once been beacons in the galaxy, the martial light of the Emperor's great dream. But they had turned against the Father of Mankind, adding their names to the lexicon of treason, and then they had vanished for ten thousand years. The battleship *Dark Honour*, the grand cruisers *Perdition of Dawn* and *Pertinax Fatum*, they were barely even myths now, but their names were retained by the memories of cogitators. They were data not accessed for ten millennia, but they came out of the night of void, and the machinic memories that served the Grey Knights recognised them from the lists of the damned.

The ships were giants, much larger than the *Tyndaris*, but the centuries and corruption had eroded them. Metallic tendrils like waving cobwebs draped their forms. The lines of their hulls were uneven, as if they had been gnawed by rot. In Styer's eyes, they were immense tombstones, monuments of loss and treachery, surging through the void to bring more victims down with them into the ruin of the grave.

The three giants came at the strike cruiser in a loose triangular formation to catch it in a crossfire. The salvos of lance beams and cannon shells smashed through the partial cover of planetisimals and wrecks.

Decay had attacked their weapons, too. When the ships fired, there were gaps in their salvos. Entire batteries were missing.

Use the gaps, Styer thought. It was the only crack he could see in the enemy's wall of devastation.

The vessel graveyard turned into a storm of fiery wrecks and colossal shrapnel. A dead escort blocked a torpedo from the *Perdition of Dawn* and flew apart. Its wreckage, molten at the jagged edges, hurtled at the *Tyndaris*, slamming against the hull. The impact and lance fire from the *Dark Honour* and *Pertinax Fatum* overloaded the starboard void shields. They flashed out. Before they could be brought on line again, shells punched into the adamantine hull.

'Hard to starboard,' Styer said. 'Make for the battleship.'

'We are nearing the limits of our structural tolerance,' Saalfrank warned. Underscoring his point, a violent current of immaterial energy rocked the ship. The deck heaved as if the void were a sea in storm.

'I'm counting on that,' Styer said. 'If we are close to that limit, so are they. Take us in, shipmaster. All cannons and torpedoes, fire forward. Lances port and starboard at the cruisers. Make them wary.'

The *Tyndaris* closed with the *Dark Honour*. The battleship, broadside to the strike cruiser, unleashed a new salvo. Destruction crossed the void between the ships, and the materium cracked and howled under the pressure of the Great Rift.

In his cell, Crowe listened to the rhythmic booms of the *Tyndaris*' guns, and sharper, cracking thunder of damage. The cell shook, the walls and deck thrumming with the ship's struggle. He stood in the doorway, looking out across the librarium. Books tumbled from the shelves when a heavy tremor seized the vessel. Crowe adjusted his centre of gravity, remaining still, reading what he could of the battle from a distance. The new tremor was something other than guns. It was too large for a single impact. The *Tyndaris* was moving closer to the warp storm, he judged. The forces of the Cicatrix Maledictum were seizing the ship in their jaws.

Crowe opened a vox channel to Drake. 'Are you on the bridge?' he asked.

'*I have just arrived.*'

Crowe listened to Drake describe the state of the engagement, and experienced the familiar frustration. His impulse, still present after all these decades, was to make for the bridge and know first-hand the ebb and flow of the battle, to see for himself what was coming. His discipline was stronger than the impulse. Unless a boarding action occurred, there was nothing he could do. He would cause harm if he went to the bridge. Doing so would expose everyone there to the Black Blade. He would be worse than a distraction. He would be a danger as acute as if he were the enemy attacking from within.

You make us both prisoners, said Antwyr. ***Our strength is enchained, buried***

in the dark. Free us. With no pause, the daemon leapt from temptation to threat. ***Your duty is your tomb. Your chains will not hold me. I will open your throat. Your blood will drench this blade. All your loyalties are illusions, and all your value will burn. Even death will be no release from my vengeance.***

Unmoved, unmoving, Crowe stood fast. The blasts of the war were so distant, even with the rocking and trembling of the cell, he did feel entombed.

But so he had been since he first grasped the hilt of the Black Blade of Antwyr.

So he waited. This was Styer's war, not his. The true battle was yet to come, if they survived this one.

Crowe's certainty that the *Tyndaris* would reach Angriff Primus was solid as granite. Its strength came from something that felt disturbingly like fate.

The smoke from torch sconces thickened the gloom in the vestry of the Cathedral of the Saints Unforgiving. On the spandrels of the arches, the stone faces of the Imperium's holy men and women stared down without mercy on Cardinal Paulus Orla as he struggled to rise from his knees. The bells announcing the beginning of matins had ceased to toll. He was late. The murmuring of ten thousand people in the pews filled the vestry, a rising tide of anxiety. He should go. He must go.

He gazed at the Emperor's shrine, looking to it for inspiration and renewed faith. All he saw was a skull embedded in gold.

The door of the vestry creaked open. 'Cardinal?' said Lina Vismar.

Orla turned around. He still could not rise. Vismar met his gaze, and took a step back, recoiling from his pain. 'I will be there momentarily,' he said.

'Will you?'

Orla didn't answer. There was no lying to his older cousin. The necessities of the posts they held, governing the secular and spiritual machinery of Angriff Primus, had taught them great skills in dissembling. Neither had ever been able to lie to the other, though. Not convincingly. And there had never been any need. They had leaned on each other as they ruled the bodies and souls of the citizenry, and they had ruled well.

Orla had never believed the day would come that he would wish to relinquish his authority. But the day had come. Years ago, now. An eternity, it seemed.

He tried again to stand, and failed. Vismar came and knelt beside him. Her eyes were haunted, but there was a grim determination to the set of her jaw. And there was anger. The anger was always greater after her encounters with the canoness.

'You've seen her, then?' Orla asked.

Vismar nodded. ‘At the Laboris Gloria. Production has trebled since her visit.’

‘Naturally. And did she renew your hopes?’

‘Do I look like she did?’

‘No.’

‘I saw them again, Paulus,’ Vismar said, whispering now. ‘The things in the sky. They seem to be planets, but they don’t belong.’

Orla chuckled, but it was his despair laughing, not him. ‘Maybe our struggles will soon be at an end, then.’ He was silent for a moment, then said, ‘*Why* do we still struggle?’

‘What other choice do we have?’

‘Oblivion,’ he said, so quietly he could barely hear himself. ‘We have survived this long because we fear Canoness Setheno,’ he said, louder now, giving voice to his pain. ‘And because we haven’t been attacked since she came here. How much longer will that fear be enough?’

‘It is enough for now,’ Vismar said bitterly. She stood and took Orla’s arm. ‘Do what you are called upon to do. If you don’t, the canoness will hear of it.’

The thought of what would happen then gave Orla the strength he needed. He staggered to his feet. He stared at the shrine for a few moments more.

‘What is it?’ Vismar asked.

‘Nothing.’ Orla gestured at the winged skull. ‘There is nothing.’ The threat of Setheno’s wrath had brought him to his feet, not his vocation. ‘I have lost my faith, Lina.’ The shrine was a meaningless sculpture. It had no more worth than what it could fetch if melted down for its gold. Orla’s hands curled into claws. He wanted to tear the flesh from his face in grief and shame. Pluck out his eyes. Tear out his tongue. ‘The Emperor does not protect us. He is dead. Nothing awaits us.’

Vismar’s hand jerked away from his arm. He faced her, expecting condemnation and horror. Instead, the governor’s expression was hard to read. Her eyes were narrowed, speculative. She looked back and forth between him and the shrine. The anger in her gaze grew stronger, but it did not seem directed at him. Her lips pressed together when she faced the shrine. At length, she said, ‘Let’s go,’ as if he had not spoken at all.

Vismar walked away from the shrine and out of the vestry. Orla followed her automatically, barely noticing where he walked. When Vismar stopped, Orla blinked, surprised to find himself at the foot of the spiral staircase leading to his pulpit. The murmur of the crowd had risen to a dull roar.

‘We still have our responsibilities,’ Vismar said, her tone flat and dripping with

acid.

Do we? Orla wanted to say. *Why? What point is there in doing anything but accepting the inevitable. We live until the nightmares that have taken the galaxy decide it is time for us to die.* He kept his thoughts to himself. He saw how brittle the governor's strength was, and he would not add bringing her down with him to his list of sins.

'The people need you, Paulus.'

'For that, I pity them,' said Orla. He climbed the stairs, though. His fear of Setheno was enough to move him forward.

In the pulpit, he placed his hands on either side of the lectern as if about to launch into his sermon. In fact, he was holding himself upright. The black rockcrete pillars soared upwards to the fan vaults of the nave. As ever, the vastness of the space imposed his insignificance upon him. For the first time, there was no reason to lift his eyes and see, in the majesty of the cathedral, a reminder of the Emperor's power.

When Orla appeared, the choir, five hundred voices strong, began to sing the Third Hymn of Submission to the Emperor. Servo-skulls floated over the congregation, chattering parchment out of the jaws, dropping the words of the hymn to the faithful. But the people all knew the hymn. They sang with the choir, and the cathedral resounded with the power of the song.

In the time before the fall of night over the Imperium, Orla had found this hymn stirring. No longer. Perhaps the people below him still did. Perhaps his presence gave them hope, and for the length of the service, within the walls of the Saints Unforgiving, they could make themselves believe that the Imperium was out there, somewhere, and that the Emperor really did protect.

If any of this was true, he wondered how it could be possible. He wondered how anyone on Angriff Primus could believe in anything except the end of hope and the inevitability of doom.

Even so, he conducted the service. He went through all the motions. He even delivered a sermon, though he barely knew what he was saying. It was a tissue of platitudes and tired exhortations, every phrase worn into meaninglessness.

He did his duty, held up and animated by the fear of the Canoness Errant, and pierced bloody by the grief of lost faith.

'Auxiliary power to the forward shields,' Saalfrank ordered.

The *Tyndaris* closed with the *Dark Honour*, its prow pointing at the centre of the great battleship's hull. The *Dark Honour*'s broadsides punished the strike

cruiser's void shields. They strained, verging on collapse even with the rush of energy diverted to them. The *Tyndaris* was surrounded by flares, violent power discharges, and the eruptions of ordnance exploding against derelicts and ice. The *Dark Honour* was between the *Tyndaris* and the outer reaches of the Cicatrix Maledictum. The *Perdition of Dawn* and the *Pertinax Fatum* approached on the flanks. The closer the *Tyndaris* came to the *Honour*, the more the grand cruisers had to hold back on their fire.

What they could do was bad enough.

Saalfrank took the ship towards the target at full speed, racing against the mounting damage. He leaned forward on the throne as if he might urge the *Tyndaris* on faster, sending it tearing across the void in a streak of vengeful light.

The tremors in the hull became more violent. The enemy barrage and the tidal upheavals in the proximate zone of the Great Rift attacked the vessel like a predator seizing its prey in colossal jaws. Styer had commanded the warning klaxons to be silenced. He had committed the *Tyndaris* to its course. To deviate now would be to ensure destruction.

'Take us under the battleship,' Styer told Saalfrank. 'Keep our focus midship.'

'Their salvos are more sparse there,' Drake observed. The two squads of Purifiers had arrived on the bridge shortly after the beginning of the engagement. They had gathered towards the rear of the strategium, with the two Knights of the Flame taking up positions just behind Styer. The mission was under the command of Garran Crowe, and so was ultimately a Purifier campaign, as the purging of Sandava III had been. With Crowe in isolation, either of his lieutenants could claim authority here. But the *Tyndaris* was Styer's ship. The traversal of the Nachmund Gauntlet was his war to wage. He appreciated the respect Drake and Sendrax extended him.

'If the enemy's guns are inoperable there,' Styer said, 'the weakness may be more general.'

'A theory worth testing.'

'Also the only strategy open to us.' Styer eyed the hololithic screen that displayed the relative positions of the four ships. The *Fatum* and the *Perdition* were moving to the rear of the *Tyndaris* even as they drew closer. They were seeking to place the *Tyndaris* at the centre of a lethal triangle. If they succeeded, and all three turned broadside to the strike cruiser, the *Tyndaris* would not last long.

The *Dark Honour* launched a cluster of torpedoes as the distance between the ships shrank. Coming at the *Honour* head-on, the *Tyndaris* presented a narrow

profile. Two of the torpedoes missed, streaking by its flanks. The other ran into a cloud of explosions as cannons sent out a barrage of shells with proximity fuses. One got through, slamming into the prow. The armour was at its thickest there, and the explosion failed to punch through it, though the ship shuddered again from the impact.

Saalfrank waited until the last moment before altering the bearings of the *Tyndaris*. Though the engines were pushing the ship to its fullest, the movements of the vessels played out with terrible grace and a majestic slowness, as if mountain ranges manoeuvred around each other, while the strikes of lances and shells came with the fury of a storm. Gradually, the *Dark Honour* grew larger in the oculus. As it filled the screen, the *Tyndaris* began to lower its prow below the plane of the ecliptic. It seemed an age before Styer could detect any alteration in the perspective. Very slowly, the battleship rose higher in the oculus. Soon it loomed close, an entire world of corrupted adamantium. Its guns followed the *Tyndaris*, punishing it for the temerity of its approach.

The *Tyndaris* hit back with all its force. Torpedoes, shells and las hammered the centre of the *Honour*'s hull. As *Tyndaris* began to slide under the *Dark Honour*, Styer saw geysers of burning plasma erupt from cracks in the armour. The aged, distorted plating glowed an angry red behind the pulsating, trembling void shields.

The strike cruiser passed under the battleship, and for the length of that transit, the enemy's fire was blocked. The grand cruisers could not attack without hitting the *Dark Honour*, and the *Tyndaris* was out of the arc of the *Honour*'s batteries. It kept up its barrage on the *Honour*.

'Hit it with everything,' said Styer. 'Tear it open.'

The strike cruiser's batteries fired upwards. The two ships were so close, the *Tyndaris*' void shields flared from the backwash of its own shells bursting.

'Hard to port,' Styer said. The *Tyndaris*' prow was just beginning to come out from under the *Dark Honour*. 'Keep us close.'

The turn began as the stern of the *Tyndaris* emerged from beneath the enemy. The *Dark Honour* was manoeuvring, too. Its crew was trying to bring its guns to bear on their target again, and to escape the mounting damage the *Tyndaris* was inflicting. Its engines burned with increasing brilliance as it accelerated.

The manoeuvre was clumsy, unsure, and made the mistake of turning away from the Grey Knights. The *Tyndaris* had the initiative. Still on a lower plane than the battleship, the *Tyndaris* completed the turn, bringing its port flank around. The ships were now moving away from each other, with the *Tyndaris*

heading even closer to the rift. The battleship still blocked clear shots from the grand cruisers.

'Justicar,' Saalfrank began. The tendons of his neck were standing out, and his face was grey with pain.

'I know, shipmaster.' The groans of the hull were turning into a scream. 'A few moments longer.'

The *Tyndaris* unleashed its broadsides against the wounded centre of the *Dark Honour*. The red glow blazed searing white. The battleship turned too hard against the roiling gravitic currents, and it broke in half. Stern and bow parted, falling away from the sun erupting to life between them. Then they vanished, swallowed by the wrath of the explosion. The fireball was blinding, all-consuming, and it reached out for the other combatants. The superheated plasma hit the *Tyndaris* hard enough to collapse all the void shields. Port batteries melted, and the hull began to buckle. Saalfrank cried out with the agony of the ship's machine-spirit, but the strike cruiser held fast.

The *Perdition of Dawn* could not arrest its forward course, and it sailed directly into the blast. A thing of flames came out the other end, a torch miles long, its guns still firing, but the integrity of its form disintegrating.

The *Pertinax Fatum* was further away. It weathered the explosion as the *Tyndaris* did. The destruction of the *Dark Honour* cleared the near space of wreckage and planetisimals, and the grand cruiser pursued the *Tyndaris*, a new salvo tearing across the void.

'New contact!' Ambach shouted. 'Port and aft of the *Fatum*. They're opening fire.'

Styer cursed. There was a slim path to victory against the remaining ships, especially if the *Perdition of Dawn* was crippled. But another vessel entering the fray from a distance could easily tip the balance of war against the *Tyndaris*.

'Redirect maximum shield power to port and aft,' Saalfrank ordered.

Styer braced for the impact. It never came.

'They aren't firing at us,' said Ambach, baffled. A moment later, she said, 'Direct hit on the *Pertinax Fatum*'s engines.'

The grand cruiser had shifted its reserve power to the fore shields to ride out the worst of the *Dark Honour*'s holocaust. It had left itself vulnerable to an attack from the rear, an attack that was impossible. Suddenly on the defensive, smaller internal explosions splitting the aft hull near the enginarium, it turned away from the *Tyndaris*.

'Can you identify this ship?' Styer asked Ambach.

‘No, justicar. The interference is growing worse. It is all the auspex array can manage to confirm another presence at that distance at all.’

‘Are we being hailed?’

‘We are not,’ said Soussanin, the vox officer.

Styer glanced at Drake and Sendrax. Their silence was eloquent. *The decision is yours.*

‘The mission to the Imperium Nihilus is paramount,’ he said, and Drake nodded. The presence of an unexpected ally was welcome, but the *Tyndaris* could not remain in the fight. An opportunity had come. Styer had to seize it. ‘Full ahead,’ he said to Saalfrank. ‘Take us through the passage while you can.’

‘So ordered,’ Saalfrank croaked. His physical strain was undiminished, but there was a shard of relief in his tone.

The *Tyndaris* pulled away from the guttering aurora of the *Dark Honour*’s pyre.

On the bridge of the *Catharsis*, the tacticarium screens displayed the effect on the battle of Tarautas’ intervention. ‘Are you mad?’ Gothola snarled, aghast. He stared at the oculus as if he might see something that would contradict the screens.

‘Your trouble, brother,’ Tarautas said, ‘is that your imagination is stunted. No wonder your work in torture is so blunt.’

‘I am not interested in your theories of aesthetics! I only care about what you have done. We have betrayed the Tyrant. He will come for us now.’

Tarautas smiled. ‘So it would appear.’ The *Pertinax Fatum* was changing its course. ‘He will have to catch us, though, and I don’t think he will. Make for the Rift,’ he commanded. The *Catharsis* would vanish into the embrace of the warp long before the Tyrant of Nachmund’s forces could muster a counter-attack. The torpedo salvo had done its work.

The shipmaster acknowledged the order. The shape in the throne spoke, but the sounds that emerged were a soft, liquid rasp. Blood bubbles rose from the shipmaster’s throat and dribbled down its mutilated chest. The thing in the throne had once had a name, but Tarautas had forgotten it long ago. There were no recognisable features any longer. It was a mass of meat and bone, permanently fused to the command throne by a serpent’s nest of mechadendrites. The shipmaster was a triumph of torture and function. It was the exposed nerves of the ship, and its skills had been honed through pain and colossal sensation to a ferocious edge.

‘We can never return here,’ said Gothola.

‘We won’t have to. Our work here is complete. We will have no further use of the Nachmund system.’

‘Never? You are so certain of our future?’

‘I am.’ Gothola had recovered his insolence, and Tarautas considered imposing discipline again. He decided against it. The other members of the warband were watching the exchange with curiosity, but no challenge. There was no threat here, and he was enjoying the chance to educate Gothola. Sadly, Tarautas doubted there was much hope of ever bringing him to true refinement. ‘The art we shall help create will move us beyond the petty strategic concerns of this passage. It won’t matter to us any longer, brother.’

‘So great a work…’ Casca breathed. His face was carved with electoos that cut all the way down to the bone. His eyes glittered with artistic fervour.

‘But why betray the Tyrant?’ Gothola insisted. ‘His ships might yet have triumphed against the Grey Knights.’

‘That is precisely why we intervened, brother. The Grey Knights must reach their goal. The work needs them. We must help them to undo the damage they did on Sandava III.’

Tarautas savoured the irony of fate. It tasted like blood and had the hard, metallic tang of perfection. The sensation was rich and layered, and he was still exploring it as the *Catharsis* entered the warp.

CHAPTER NINE

Messengers of Judgement

They met in Crowe's cell. Drake, Sendrax, Styer and Furia gathered on one side of the iron table in the centre of the chamber. Crowe stayed on the other. They laid out star charts, and placed a data-slate beside them. The slate displayed the current coordinates, and what had been found there.

'I suppose we should not be surprised,' said Crowe.

Because the prognosticars had identified this location in empty space as the point of incursion, the imperative had been to make for here first, and then, depending on circumstances, head for the nearby Angriff system. Only the void was not empty. Angriff was here, the star hundreds of billions of miles from where the charts placed it.

'Are we sure this is Angriff?' Sendrax asked. 'There are too many planets.' The Angriff system had four. This one had seven. 'And didn't its worlds have any moons?'

There wasn't a single moon in the system. Nor were there any asteroid belts, or a cometary cloud. It was as if Angriff had been swept clean of anything except its primary bodies. Crowe thought it looked more like an orrery than an actual planetary system.

'We are sure of the identification,' said Furia. 'The star and four of the planets are unmistakeable.'

Crowe examined the orbits of the other three worlds. They were wildly eccentric, at sharp angles to the ecliptic. One was perpendicular. Two were simply impossible. 'These worlds are orbiting at precisely the same distance

from the star,' he said, tapping at the data-slate's screen. 'The paths intersect.'

'Destined to collide?' Drake wondered.

'We wondered that, too,' said Styer. 'It would seem not, at least not for the foreseeable future. Their speeds are also identical. They will never reach the intersections at the same moment.'

'They will come very close, though,' said Crowe, switching to a screen that plotted the trajectories and times of the planets. 'Close enough to fill each other's skies. The gravitational effects will be catastrophic. Twice a year.' He looked up. 'Are they inhabited?'

'They are,' said Furia. 'We have intercepted some vox traffic from them. It is very sparse, but present.'

'The terror of their near collisions would be wasted if there were no populations to witness them,' Crowe said. 'Have we identified them?'

Furia shook her head. 'Too much of the Imperium Nihilus is dark to us. We presume there are systems that have lost worlds in the subsector, but we have no evidence.'

'They may not even come from this region,' said Crowe. He pointed to a chart of the Imperium as it had been before the Cicatrix Maledictum had torn it in half. 'Sandava III was not.'

'So,' Styer said, 'the incursion will come on Angriff Primus after all.'

'Yes,' said Crowe. 'And look.' He took a stylus and extended the theorised track of Sandava III from Angriff. It travelled through the system's new location. 'The entire system has been moved so that the conjunction of Angriff and Sandava III is at the point of the incursion.'

'Except the conjunction will no longer happen,' Sendrax said.

'Precisely. The movement of the system is doubly superfluous, from that perspective. Sandava III would have arrived at Angriff's original position. There was no need for displacement. Now the world will never reach here, yet there is still movement.' He glanced at the slate. 'And the system is still moving.'

'Against the galactic rotation,' Furia added.

'Where is it going?' asked Drake.

'Based on its trajectory so far,' said Furia, 'nowhere.'

'Then it is the movement itself that is important,' said Crowe.

'Apart from the fact that we confront a force that can move entire systems at will?' Drake said.

Behold your futility, Antwyr hissed. ***Your weapons are futile. Your efforts are futile. You have already lost. Your wretched lives serve the purpose of the gods.***

Your attempts to escape fate only tighten its bonds. What weapons will you use to free yourselves? Only I can deliver you. Only I can cut through fate.

Crowe glanced at the Grey Knights and the inquisitor opposite him before he spoke again, gauging the harm the Black Blade was causing. There was tension in their posture, an instinctive anger rejecting the sword's temptations. At least for the moment. He did not have to halt the briefing just yet.

'The apparent pointlessness of the movement is itself significant,' he said. 'It tells us something of our enemy. There is meaning here, though it may not be apparent from a tactical perspective.'

'I agree with the castellan,' said Styer. 'My squad has come full circle in returning here. There is a malign perfection in the confluence of events.'

'Art,' said Furia. Though there was little modulation in her artificial voice, she seemed to spit the word in disgust.

'Art,' Crowe repeated. 'That would be in keeping with the nature of the abominations we fought on Sandava III. They were creatures of the Dark Prince. Certainly we can discount accident and coincidence. What has happened is clearly willed. And if it is willed, if the aspects we see here are present for a reason, then we are, too. We must assume that our arrival is desired.'

'The question, then,' said Furia, 'is how we are to disrupt the pattern that forms around us. Our every move may be the one desired by the enemy.'

'Faith,' Crowe said. 'Our faith in the Emperor will show us the way.' Faith had upheld him in the long ordeal that was his guardianship of the Blade. Faith gave him the strength and the wisdom to crush Antwyr's attempts to break him down. 'Be vigilant, and we will know when and how to strike. And the moment *will* come.' He looked back at the charts, at the evidence of overwhelming power and flawless art. 'This is the illusion of perfection,' he said. 'We will shatter it.'

The Emperor's Children greeted the transformed system with an ecstatic silence. Screens on either side of the oculus displayed the new configuration of Angriff, and the malevolent dance of the planets.

'Bear witness,' Tarautas said. 'This is the work we have come to complete.'

'What will it be?' Casca asked, rapt with joy to witness the immense change. Tarautas saw in him the same fervour that had animated Ossidius and Erossus.

'Only its inevitable magnificence has been revealed to me.' When he had sent Erossus and Xathius to Angriff Primus, the transformation had not begun. They had been acting entirely on their faith in his dark inspirations. Now he was seeing the extraordinary form of the great art taking shape. 'No scans,' he

warned. ‘Maintain complete signal silence. Passive auspex only.’

‘Have the Grey Knights reached Angriff Primus?’ Gothola’s question was not hostile. He, too, was feeling the force of revelation.

‘If they have not already, they will soon. We can wait. The time is ours.’

‘So we do nothing?’ Gothola was sounding less happy now.

‘For the moment.’

‘When do we act?’

‘When we are called.’

‘By what?’ Less hostility now. Gothola was genuinely curious. He accepted that the miraculous was underway, and wanted to understand what his role would be in its accomplishment.

‘By art,’ Tarautas said. ‘By divinity. By the imperative of aesthetics. We will know, brother. We will know.’ He paused, savouring the nerve-searing burn of the mechadendrites in his scalp. ‘And trust in this, brothers. In the end, the galaxy will know the art that has been created here.’

The primary spaceport in Algidus had not been used since the fall of night over the Imperium. The last ship to have arrived in orbit over Angriff Primus was the mass conveyer *Resplendent Submission*. It its journey, its crew had been corrupted, and it had brought heresy and the Emperor’s Children to the system. It had also brought Setheno, who had pursued the Traitors onto the ship. Since the lighters had descended from the *Submission*, there had been no other traffic, and none was expected.

The spaceport, however, was not abandoned. The landing surfaces were maintained. The control tower personnel performed their assigned duties every day. There was little to do, in the absence of arrivals or departures, but the work was done. The shadow of the Canoness Errant covered Algidus, and fear of her wrath moved the populace to do what was expected, even though the meaning of their labours had been reduced to nothing more than simple obedience.

Erner Kierska had command of the control tower. A hundred technical officers served under him. In the late afternoon, they worked at their stations in near silence. There was nothing to communicate. Their presence here was little more than an empty ritual. There was greater tension inside the armourglass dome than there had been the day before. Word had spread of Setheno’s appearance at Laboris Gloria. Perhaps she might decide to come here next. She had, over the years of darkness, made violent examples of those who revealed their lack of faith through their dereliction of duty. She made no distinction between serfs and

nobility. All were subject to public execution. No one wished to be chosen as the next object lesson. So greater care was taken today to fill the empty hours with visible marks of assiduity.

Kierska walked the rows between the stations, as silent as his subordinates, and as tense. Despite his anxiety, he kept falling into a dull, machinic stupor. He would catch himself with a stab of fear, and then a few minutes later he was again plodding along with all the awareness of a servitor.

Then, for the first time in years, Teoda Varam called out, 'Incoming vessel.'

Silence greeted her words, as if no one knew what the phrase meant any longer. Kierska blinked, then ran to Varam's station. 'Primary display,' he said, and a hololithic screen in the centre of the dome lit up with the data of the approaching vessel. At first, Kierska was unwilling to believe what he was seeing. It was too improbable, and too ominous.

Awed, Varam said, 'That is a strike cruiser.'

Now Kierska could no longer take refuge in disbelief. 'Hail it,' he began, but a voxmission came from the ship first. Varam transferred the communication to the central vox-casters.

'*This is Shipmaster Bruno Saalfrank of the* Tyndaris*. This vessel is here in the name of the Emperor. You will ensure working landing pads for two Stormraven gunships. Failure to comply immediately will be judged treason.*'

Kierska grabbed the vox-piece from Varam. 'Acknowledged!' he shouted. 'We acknowledge and comply!'

The *Tyndaris* had already closed the link.

'Stormravens…' Varam said.

Kierska nodded, his mouth dry. 'Adeptus Astartes,' he said.

Joy and terror flashed through the control room.

Within minutes, the two emotions were spreading through the city.

The *Purgation's Sword* carried the Purifiers down to Algidus. The *Harrower* flew wingtip-to-wingtip with it, bearing Styer's squad. The principal hive of Angriff Primus was the only city on the planet from which a steady flow of vox and electronic signals still emanated. The other cities of the forge world had fallen into silence and darkness. Scans had revealed signs of massive conflagrations, many sinking so deeply into the roots of the cities that they had burned for years, and would for many more. There were no scars of battle, though. Angriff Primus had not been attacked. The evidence suggested much of the planet had simply collapsed into decay. With the manufactories so densely

packed and agriculture so precarious, neglect and despair would be enough to trigger catastrophe.

But Algidus had not burned. Its industries and food production arcologies were intact. Some element had turned it from the fate of the rest of the world.

The gunships came down in the centre of the ferrocrete landing apron. The rear hatch loading ramps dropped almost simultaneously, and Crowe led the way out. The Grey Knights were not marching into combat, so he would have to remove himself from the presence of others soon and seek isolation again. But the mission was under his command, and he valued a first impression to read what he could of the situation on Angriff Primus.

The landing apron was miles wide, and a huge crowd had gathered to witness the arrival. As the Grey Knights marched out of the gunships, they were greeted by a wail as confused as it was deafening. It was a cry of worship and of anguish.

'Do they know what our coming means?' Drake asked on a private vox channel.

'They can't,' said Crowe. He trusted Styer's diligence in expunging all trace of the Grey Knights' earlier mission to Angriff Primus. Yet the reaction here was very different from what the strike force had encountered in Skoria. Surrounded by an army of abominations that had laid waste to the rest of the planet, the people of Skoria had greeted the Grey Knights as protectors and liberators. 'We are seeing one manifestation of being severed from the Emperor's light,' Crowe said to Drake. 'We will have to watch the form it takes carefully.'

A greeting party advanced across the ferrocrete. The planetary governor had an honour guard of the local militia, but the soldiers hung back because of the third figure in the lead. Crowe recognised the Sister of Battle from the funereal grey of her armour before she was close enough for him to see the hard, emotionless features and the frigid, golden eyes. The fact that Algidus still functioned now made sense.

'Canoness Setheno,' Crowe said. 'You are well met.' They bowed to each other and made the sign of the aquila. He had encountered her once before, briefly. They had not fought together, though she had with other forces of the Grey Knights. Rare among her kind, her dispensation was such that she had not been memory-wiped after those missions.

'I give thanks to the Emperor to see you here, Castellan Crowe,' said Setheno. 'Terra still stands, then?'

'It does. And Roboute Guilliman has returned to us.'

Setheno's eyes widened slightly. For her, that was a sign of immense surprise. She was silent for several moments, then said, 'The galaxy shakes and the glory of the past walks again. Then these are portentous times indeed.'

'They are. We will have much to discuss.'

Setheno nodded. She turned her head to look over her shoulder. 'Governor Vismar,' she said. 'She is as you see her.'

The canoness spoke dismissively, as if the governor could not hear her. Crowe suspected that Vismar did not, at any level where pride mattered. If she had once been formidable, she was not any longer. She looked twisted and withered by fear and resentment. She stared at Crowe with terror.

Kill her and those who serve her, said the sword. ***They are unworthy in your sight. Stain the ground with their blood. Part the flesh of weakness. Be the triumph of strength.***

Vismar was not looking at the sword. Her eyes were on Crowe's helmet, at the crimson banner that hung above his armour's power pack, and at the golden skull that surmounted the standard. He did not think Antwyr was, at this moment, affecting her.

Voxing Drake privately, Crowe asked, 'What do you make of the governor?'

'She looks guilty.'

'I think so, too. Guilty of heresy, though?'

'The canoness would not have allowed her to live. Dereliction, perhaps?'

'Perhaps. She will need to be watched.'

Setheno seemed to guess the nature of the exchange she could not hear. She nodded slightly, then stepped aside. Crowe moved towards the ruler of Angriff Primus. Vismar shrank away from him, but had the presence of mind not to stumble backwards. She squinted in emotional pain. She seemed to be expecting a blow. But there was still some pride in her stance, even if it was now only in the form of resentment.

'The Emperor protects,' Vismar muttered.

'The Emperor protects,' Crowe repeated, with emphasis. He looked again at the crowd, paying closer attention to the wailing.

'It is your doing,' he said to Setheno, 'that accounts for this city not having collapsed.'

'I have laboured to prevent its fall, yes, but there is more than my efforts at work here, and its impact is not limited to the changes we see in the skies.'

'What is your evaluation?'

'I have none as yet.'

‘Perhaps because it has not really made itself felt yet,’ said Styer, joining them. ‘Perhaps it has not really begun.’

Crowe nodded slowly. *And now it will*, he thought. *Because we are here, now it will*.

CHAPTER TEN

Catalysts

At Setheno's suggestion, the Grey Knights commandeered Governor Vismar's quarters. The palace was centrally located in Algidus. The landing pads on the roof of the chambers were suitable for the gunships, and placed every quarter of the city within reach of a rapid strike. The outer walls were strong, and the gate was reinforced by the *Malleus Maleficarum*. The communications and control networks were in the palace, too. A strategium centre on the same level as Vismar's private chambers was ideal for a command post. A small tower next to the landing pads held the governor's private study. Its luxury was uninteresting to Crowe. Its isolation, though, was practical. It would serve as his containment.

Crowe was satisfied with the preparations that could be made, though the tactical situation was frustratingly vague. The Ruinous Powers were at work in the Angriff system, but no enemy was visible, and there was no action that could be taken.

Will you arrest the movement of worlds? Antwyr mocked. ***Will you fight in the sun?***

Crowe surveyed the strategium, ensuring the necessary work was proceeding before he removed himself from the presence of his battle-brothers. The twenty-foot tacticarium showed a lithographic map of the hive. Parchment maps and data-slates provided information on the rest of the planet. Evaluating the situation outside of Algidus involved a lot more speculation. The collapse had been total. Setheno had expended an inhuman effort in forcing order on the primary hive. Everything outside of its walls had been beyond her reach. The

anarchy that had taken the other cities made them potentially fertile ground for corruption and heresy to take root. The *Tyndaris* was making more detailed surveys as it orbited Angriff Primus. The initial scans relayed by Ambach suggested dead cities. The vast fire damage was years old. Crowe pictured the frenzy of panic that would have seized the populace with the coming of the Noctis Aeterna. Without the merciless hand of Setheno to impose a disciplined terror, the collapse would have been quick. To judge by the extent of the destruction recorded by the *Tyndaris*, the infrastructure of the cities disintegrated almost immediately. Very soon, life would have become impossible.

If there were still inhabitants in the shells of the hives, they would be few in number. Although Crowe did not rule out the possibility of a threat emerging from the ruined zones of Angriff Primus, he did not think it was likely. And there was more. It was in Algidus that Styer and his battle-brothers had fought the first incursion. He had to remain alert to patterns of repetition and symmetry.

Crowe said, 'We should have plans of the Sanctus Vincula.' They had to consider the chance that a new incursion might occur in the very spot the daemons had emerged from before.

Vismar looked puzzled by his request. 'Lord,' she said, 'that manufactory was destroyed by fire years ago. There is nothing there now.'

'We know,' Styer said. 'Nonetheless, we require the plans.'

Vismar stared at the justicar for a moment, then bowed her head. 'I will see it is done,' she said.

'Good.' Styer looked back at her, saying nothing more. The other Grey Knights were silent, too. After a moment, Vismar understood and left.

Crowe watched her go. She had been cooperative, and made no protest when the Grey Knights had effectively expelled her from her quarters. Some of the initial shock of encountering the strike force had drained away. Now she seemed numb. Her responses were slightly off, as if she kept having to remember how to move and speak. She appeared to have one of those moments of lost direction just before she reached the doors to the strategium. She stopped walking suddenly. Her shoulders hunched as if warding off a blow. Then she was moving again. When the bronze doors closed behind her, Drake said, 'The local forces will be of little use to us.'

'When are they ever?' said Sendrax.

'On more than one occasion,' Crowe corrected him. 'The sacrifice we impose on mortals may be necessary, but it should not be forgotten.'

'As you say, castellan.' Sendrax's concession had little grace. 'Here, though,

what are they to do? For that matter, what are *we* to do? The Ruinous Powers have transformed this system and torn it from its place in the galaxy, and we have nothing to do but observe.'

'That is so,' said Crowe. 'We must endure the frustration of waiting when we know an enemy is present. Our foe is invisible to us, brother. If we can force it into the light, we will, but we must know more before that becomes possible.'

'The longer we wait, the more the enemy's scheme, whatever it is, progresses.'

'How will you fight something you do not perceive?' Crowe asked.

Sendrax shook his head and turned back to the maps, glaring at them as if he might summon their foe through them.

'Have patience, brother,' Crowe said. 'Militant patience will guide us. Through it, we will find the time and the place to strike.'

There was nothing more for him to do here. Sendrax was still unhappy, and Crowe knew the Blade would seize upon that displeasure. Likely it already was. He had been in the company of his brothers for too long.

As he made his way up the spiral staircase to the governor's study, Crowe wished again he could convey the full understanding of militant patience to Sendrax. He had not tried when perhaps he should have, when they were both Knights of the Flame. Since he had become castellan, his conversations with his brothers were all necessarily brief, pared down to the needs of the moment. He had spoken of his precepts to Sendrax. He wanted him to understand that militant patience was not delay, and not the curse of inaction. It was faith honed to the most precise, deadly edge. For Crowe, it was the spiritual sword that countered the blows of the Black Blade. Patience was the strength to withstand decades of unceasing attacks. Patience, whose end was an even greater blow, delivered to the enemy's weakness, was the key to every victory Crowe had known.

But Sendrax would not hear him. Their conversations could not be in depth, and there was always the voice of Antwyr in the background, cursing and manipulating and undermining. What it failed to do to Crowe, it sought to accomplish in Sendrax. Even if the sword had not sent its whispers between them, Crowe wondered if Sendrax would have been any more open to what Crowe was saying. Drake understood, taking aboard Crowe's thoughts after just a few exchanges. But then, he and Crowe had fought in the same squad long before the sword fell to Crowe. They had come to know the other's moves in battle almost as instinctively as their own.

Communication with Sendrax had always been more difficult. Sendrax's pride

in the Grey Knights and their mission would not brook delay. The glory of the Chapter's battles would never be known to outsiders, but internal glory and personal pride mattered to Sendrax. He lived to attack the daemonic with immediate fury.

His ferocity on the battlefield was valuable. But the lack of a target on Angriff Primus would be a gruelling test of his patience.

As he reached the top of the staircase, Crowe wondered whether this circumstance was intended precisely to have this effect on Sendrax. He wondered whether the trap he knew had been set was aimed so specifically at every member of the strike force. He had been personally targeted on Sandava III, after all.

No, he thought and hoped. *The enemy cannot know every battle-brother who would come.* If the enemy knew everything, then all was fated, and the war was lost. Styer had been lured here, and knew it. But he had not been destined to come.

No, Crowe did not think the attack was so perfectly targeted. Yet he would not rule out the possibility. He felt the impatience that plagued Sendrax, and fought it down. He entered the study and moved to its panoramic armourglass windows. He looked out at hab blocks and manufactories crowding up against each other, blocking sight of the unnaturally clear sky from the narrow streets. The blackened rockcrete faces of the buildings, towers and chimneys concealed the anguish within. Before him was an infinity of possible ignition points for the conflict. The attack would come, but he could not anticipate from what direction. There was no choice but to wait and to watch, and to be ready when the moment came.

He did not resent these tasks. He was castellan, and his duty was his honour. He would be standing guard until his death. On Angriff Primus, he had mounted yet another rampart. It was not the city he had come to protect, but the Imperium. If, as on Sandava III, it became necessary to destroy the wall, or even the planet, to safeguard the greater charge, he would not hesitate to do so.

He waited, a figure of patient, implacable violence.

We know, the Grey Knight said. They knew Sanctus Vincula was a crater.

How can you know? Vismar thought, staring at the justicar. *That was years ago. Long before the current crisis. How do you know there was such a manufactory?*

The answer came to her a second later. *Because you've been here before. Because you were there.*

The explosions at Sanctus Vincula had been cataclysmic. There had been no survivors, and the destruction had been so complete that there was no way to determine what had caused the accident.

Accident. She had accepted a lie. She was governor of Angriff Primus, and a war had taken place on her world without her knowledge. The Grey Knights had come to Algidus, killed thousands in its centre, and left. She choked on the bitterness that rose in her throat as she thought about the arrogance that went hand in hand with that kind of secrecy. Setheno, at least, carried out her merciless sentences for all to see and fear.

The Grey Knights waited for her to leave. They had taken her quarters. The planet was under their command. She was superfluous. She was not worthy to know the plans the giant warriors had for her world. She was beneath notice, an irrelevance in a conflict between gods.

She looked away from the justicar, and her eyes fell on the leader of the strike force at the far end of the strategium. He frightened her even more than Setheno. He looked like death in armour, and she could not face that cold evaluation of those hollow eyes. The shame of her failure crashed upon her. She was guilty of the sin of despair. She did not belong in this chamber. She had failed in her duties as governor. The only act left to her was to stand aside and not interfere with salvation.

As she reached the threshold, a voice stabbed into her. It seemed to come from the other side of the room, but it was not Crowe speaking. It made no sound, yet she heard a rasp in her head, a grating snarl that conjured images of laughing skulls and the pain of burning worlds. Vismar froze, her spine in a knot.

This is your reward for loyalty, said the voice. ***You were used. Your people were sacrificed. You will not be allowed to live. The Emperor does not protect. You know this to be true.***

Vismar shook off the paralysis and left the strategium. She wandered the halls of the palace. She had no conscious thought of a destination. The voice's words echoed in her mind. They fed her anger and they hammered at what was left of the foundations of her faith. ***You know this to be true.*** And she did. The Grey Knights had killed everyone in the Sanctus Vincula. There was no reason to think they would not do the same again.

They are not salvation, she thought. *They are extermination.*

She acknowledged her failure. She and her people had fallen short of the perfection demanded by Setheno. But in their imperfections, they had still done their duty to the Emperor. What of the Imperium's duty to them? They had

persevered through the endless night, and kept their faith when they had been abandoned.

The Emperor does not protect.

No, he did not.

You know this to be true.

Yes, she did.

The illusions fell away. She saw the truth clearly, and when she did, she also saw where her steps had brought her. She was on the lower floor of the palace, not far from the barracks that held the militia companies assigned to the defence of the governor. Instinct must have brought her here, an instinct driven by injustice. She entered the main hall of the barracks. Raised voices greeted her. It was the sound of anger.

The sound of her anger amplified and reflected back to her.

The vestry was still dark with torch smoke, only now Orla could feel the light of wrath and judgement shining down on him. He grovelled before the shrine.

'I am not worthy of forgiveness, Master of Mankind,' he choked out between sobs. He had been repeating variations of the same self-condemnation for hours. He pressed his forehead against the marble floor. He could not bring himself to look upon the golden skull. The weight of his shame was crushing him. He had thought he had plumbed the depths of agony when he had lost his faith, but now it had returned, and the magnitude of his sin threatened to drive him through the floor. He wanted to tear out his tongue and his eyes. He wanted to tear open his throat. He wanted to tear himself from existence, so that his taint would no longer mar holy ground.

But death was a mercy he had not earned.

'I do not seek forgiveness,' Orla wept. 'I know it can never be mine. I renounced you, Emperor, and there is no penalty too great for apostasy. I failed you and I failed my flock. I am beyond salvation. But oh, let me atone!'

There had to be a path, if not to salvation, then to reparation. Nothing else mattered. The military concerns of Angriff Primus had nothing to do with him. Visions in silvery grey had descended from the sky. They were angels of judgement, and their sentence could not be more severe than the one Orla had passed on himself. He had, in the first moments after the arrival of the Grey Knights, thought to hurl himself from the tower of the Cathedral of the Saints Unforgiving. He had checked the impulse. In reaction to shame, he would not indulge in a final shameful act.

Atonement. He must seek atonement.

His legs were cramped from the hours of kneeling. He could barely feel them any longer. When the bells rang for evensong, he jerked upright. Shooting pain through his limbs surprised a cry from him. He fell back and smacked his head against the floor. Blood, warm and stinging, flowed down his face. He rubbed it from his eyes and crawled to the pillar in the centre of the vestry. Vismar was not here to help him to his feet this time. He could not use her strength to overcome his weakness. He must atone through his own force, or fail utterly.

He embraced the pillar. He pushed against it, clawed for purchase, and at last hauled himself up, smearing the stone with his blood. He wavered back and forth, almost falling again. The pain diminished slowly, and he wept to feel it leave. It was clean pain, deserved pain. It felt like the beginning of an offering.

He gasped at the revelation. He looked at the blood on his hands, and a smile of gratitude trembled on his lips.

The bells rang, filling him with urgency. The banners of the cardinal's family hung next to the shrine. He tore them down. He strained until he ripped away a braided rope of silk, then piled the banners on the floor next to the pillar. He grabbed a votive candle from the shrine and set the flame against the banners. They burned reluctantly. They smouldered, filling the vestry with smoke. Orla rubbed his palm across the edge of the pyre, and was rewarded with a fresh wave of pain. He rubbed ashes over his face, then turned to his desk and took the amasec goblet that stood there. It took him three tries to smash it against the edge of the desk. Then, working hurriedly while the bells still rang, he took the shards of crystal and embedded them in the rope.

He left the vestry, taking the rope with him.

When he appeared at the pulpit, the choir began to sing, then faltered in its hymn as the people took in the sight of his face and his robes smeared with ash and blood. Realising that they stared, they tried to pick up the song. Orla held up his hands for silence.

Before he spoke, he reverently draped the rope over the lectern. He rubbed his fingers over a coil, and cut himself.

He smiled. He closed his eyes, experiencing a moment of gratitude before the weight of his shame descended on his shoulders once more. Then he met the expectant looks of his congregation. They knew, he thought. At a level they could not articulate, they knew what he was going to say. He would give voice to what was rising in their souls. He would speak the words of atonement.

'I have failed you,' he began simply. He raised his hands as if seeking blessing,

then let them fall. ‘Children of the Emperor,’ he said, ‘it was my responsibility, and my calling, to guide you through the darkness. It was through me that you should always have known where to look to see the light of the Master of Mankind. Yet I failed you. I stood before you, as I do now, and I made gestures of worship. I asked you to pray, and you prayed. I bid you sing, and you sang. And I deceived you. I lied. I dared to instruct you in matters of faith, but I had lost my faith.’

He paused, lowering his head in shame at his hypocrisy. The silence of held breath filled the cathedral.

‘Was I alone, though?’ Orla asked, the whisper cutting through the vaults like a sharp gust of wind. ‘Was I alone?’ the cardinal repeated, louder now. ‘Was I the only one present who struggled to believe, and then failed?’

‘No,’ came the response. Hesitant at first, barely audible, uttered by a few souls so overcome by grief that they could not hold back the truth. ‘*No.*’ Louder now, more and more people taking courage from their neighbours. ‘*No!*’ The confession held in so long, concealed in the darkness of wounded hearts, bursting out now. ‘*NO!*’ A howl, a roar, the collective shame summoned by the individual one of the cardinal.

‘No,’ Orla said. ‘No! I was not alone! *You* were not alone! *We* were not alone! We *are* not alone. The proof has come to us that the Emperor still reigns over the Imperium. Proof that we should not need, proof that confronts us with our failure, and our shame. Oh, brothers, oh, sisters, what have we done? Oh, sisters, oh, brothers, I abase myself.’ He pulled his mitre from his head and held it before him. ‘How can I wear the mark of my office when I have so dishonoured it? I cannot.’ He put the mitre down and pointed to his face. ‘Look at these marks, though. Look at them! Look! They are the signs of my unworthiness, and the signs of my penance.’ He took a deep breath. ‘*Penance!*’ he shrieked. ‘That is what remains to me, and here I will not fail.’ He tore off his cardinal’s robes. He ripped open the shift beneath them. He seized the rope and lashed it against his naked torso. The rope raised a long welt. The crystal shards tore it open. ‘*Emperor!*’ he screamed. ‘*Hear me! See me! This is my penance! Let me atone! Do not turn your gaze from me, I implore you!*’ He hit himself again and again. The pain stole his breath. His eyes widened in grateful agony, and he dared to look upwards into the gloom of the vaults.

‘Join me!’ Orla called to the congregation, lashing himself between each sentence. ‘Seek forgiveness with me! We will never erase the shame of having dared to turn from the Emperor’s light while we lived. Let our final acts be those

of perfect, absolute penance!'

He staggered against the lectern. The whipping hurt more than he would have thought possible, and he rejoiced in the sacrifice of his flesh. His arms, chest and back were soaked in blood, and he was growing weak. If he had not looped several coils around his wrist, he would no longer have been able to hold the rope.

Below him, the congregation answered his call with a frenzy of self-mortification. The people tore their clothes and their flesh. They howled in grief, and called punishment down on themselves for the sins of their doubts. They shouted praise of the Emperor, but this was no hymn. It was a desperate, maddened shriek. The cathedral walls shook with anguish. The people seemed to vie amongst themselves for the most extreme form of atonement, yet though the insanity of the mob had taken hold, every soul was isolated, too, enclosed in a bubble of tortured faith. As Orla gathered his breath and strength to resume his flagellation, he saw worshippers who had given in to the impulses he had had earlier, and torn out their eyes. People were dying, smashing their heads open against pillars or tearing their guts open with the points of candelabra.

What Orla saw was horrible. It was also beautiful. It was the great and final renewal of faith on Angriff Primus. It was the festival of atonement.

It must not end here, he realised. It was not enough to bring penance to the cathedral. He must do everything he could to save Algidus and all the world.

All the people must witness what was happening here. He must spread the message. There was a way back to the Emperor.

Grief mixed with joy and bodily agony. He descended from his pulpit. Arms upraised, he shouted his love for the Emperor at the top of his lungs. He made his way down the nave of the Saints Unforgiving. He paused every few yards to lash his back bloody. The congregation followed, and he took the great penance from the cathedral to the streets.

The mob of flagellants filled the square before the palace gates. People flowed into the square from the direction of the cathedral, while just as many ran, howling the message of penance, into other avenues leading off the square. Lights blazed from every window of the Administratum complexes that bracketed the approaches to the palace. Functionaries appeared at the windows and ran out the doors, adding their voices to the collective cry.

Outside the gates, Setheno and Furia moved into the mob.

'Hold!' Setheno shouted, her helmet's vox-caster turning her voice into a

thunder louder than the cries.

The portions of the crowd nearest the Sister of Battle and the inquisitor recoiled from her. Space opened up around the two women. But the penitent did not stop. They shouted their praise of the Emperor even louder. They held out pleading hands to Setheno, hands bloody from tearing at their faces and chests. She recognised one of the men. He was Cardinal Orla's deacon. His robes were in tatters now. His eyes were wide, and he was screaming incoherently. The people howled louder and louder, as if the violence of their faith would make her receptive to their entreaties.

They begged for her mercy for a few seconds, and then were swept away by the flood. The flagellants avoided Setheno and Furia, and they became stones in the midst of a furious current. Though the people seemed eager to die for the Emperor, giving up their bodies in repentance, they turned away in fear of actual judgement. They had just enough self-awareness for that.

'The faith of the populace has been renewed,' Furia said.

'This is faith uncontrolled,' Setheno replied. 'Without discipline, it can easily fall into heresy.' She had to use her vox-casters to make herself heard, and Furia's words were distorted by the high volume of her bionic larynx.

'Then we must impose discipline.' Furia lashed out with her neural whip, paralysing the flagellants in her vicinity.

'Can we?' said Setheno. But she raised her sword, searing the evening with its light. The people cried out, and the circle around the women widened, but the riot did not lessen.

'Where is the militia?' Furia demanded.

'It is doubly absent.' Only a few of the penitent wore the uniform of the Angriff Primus defence force, and there were no formations on the square, trying to restore order. 'We can regain the square, but not without a massacre,' Setheno told Furia. The futility of doing so was evident. The clamour resounded far beyond the square. The mass penitence was sweeping the city. 'To maintain control of Algidus, we will have to take more drastic means, and on a larger scale.'

'That is not why we came to fight.' Furia's whip lashed out, its electrical flash halting still more penitents.

'Nevertheless, we will have to.'

Setheno strode back towards the gates. Furia followed. Once they were back inside, Furia said, 'Our arrival caused this, didn't it?'

'Yes.'

The inquisitor was expressionless, but her body language conveyed unease. ‘I thought so, but hoped you would tell me I was wrong.’

‘What is it that you dread?’

‘That we are the trigger for the incursion foretold by the prognosticars.’

‘If that is the risk, then restoring calm in Algidus is all the more critical,’ Setheno said. She did not believe the goal was achievable. The fragile order she had imposed during the Noctis Aeterna was collapsing. She had always known it was a temporary measure, one that would end in favour of either the restoration of Imperial rule or a concerted assault by the Ruinous Powers. The end had come now, and she had no false hopes. She had very few hopes at all. That was the curse of her clarity of vision. She suggested the attempt because she wanted to gauge Furia’s reaction. She knew the inquisitor to be an Amalathian. The orthodox response would be to embrace the strategy of imposing discipline on Algidus and thus preserve what there was of Imperial order on Angriff Primus. The nature of the threats to the Imperium she had fought had brought her into frequent contact with more radical inquisitors. A Recongregator like Inquisitor Dagover might see the opportunity in what was happening to push the Imperium in a direction that would be more favourable to its survival than stasis.

Then again, there might be nothing ahead except disaster. If so, she would fight to the end to save what could be saved.

‘We may have a duty to make the attempt,’ Furia said. She was clearly pessimistic.

‘But…?’ Setheno prompted.

‘I know better, canoness. This is only the beginning.’

A system ripped from its place in the galaxy, its moons stripped away, and the number of planets orbiting its sun almost doubled. It hardly seemed a beginning. Except Setheno knew Furia was correct. Angriff Primus’ real tragedy was only now ready to unfold.

The *Catharsis* approached Angriff Primus slowly, pulling back when it became clear the *Tyndaris* was performing orbital patrols of the planet. Tarautas ordered another day’s wait. During that time, the passive scans picked up a spike in vox activity from Algidus. Ecstatic calls for penance filled the ether. Tarautas smiled as he listened to fragments of the vox-casts. The speakers were so consumed by the need for atonement that they were blind to the pleasure they were taking in destroying themselves.

‘There,’ he said, in the strategium. ‘Brothers, there is our call. I said it would

come. As soon as the enemy ship takes up stationary orbit over Algidus, we will prepare to make planetfall.' Already he could see that the preparations made by Erossus and his brothers before their deaths would prove their worth.

'How do you know we will get that opportunity?' Gothola asked.

'Because they will have to.' He gestured to the sounds of an ecstatic unravelling. 'The rest of the planet is a lost cause. They will concentrate their strength in Algidus. And when they do, we can approach over the horizon from their position.'

'To attack?' said Casca.

'Not quite,' Tarautas said. 'To provoke.'

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Machinery of Betrayal

In the palace strategium, Furia said, ‘There is a way of ending the disturbance immediately.’

The entire strike force was present for the briefing. Crowe kept track of the seconds of his presence, weighing need against harm. He looked up from the tacticarium table’s lithograph of Algidus. ‘You are going to suggest orbital bombardment,’ he said.

‘I suggest we consider it.’

As an inquisitor, Furia had the authority to order Exterminatus for Angriff Primus if it came to that, but she was presenting the bombardment only as a possibility. She was deferring to Crowe’s leadership.

‘The proposal has the merit of efficiency,’ Setheno said. ‘We must consider whether there is any point in delaying what will have to be done in the long run.’

That was true. The presence of the Grey Knights was widely known in the city now. There was no way of containing the spread of the tales by that many witnesses. In the end, it would be necessary to cleanse Algidus.

‘It must be done,’ said Styer. ‘But not precipitately.’

‘What makes you hesitate?’ Crowe asked.

Styer turned to Gared and gestured for the Librarian to speak.

‘I have concerns about the effect of killing so many at this particular moment of religious frenzy. The release of uncontrolled psychic energy would be tremendous, and it would be occurring in a situation that we do not, as yet, understand.’

‘Meaning it could be precisely the action we are being manipulated to take,’ said Crowe. ‘I am concerned, too, with the symbolism. We descend on a planet that has managed to hold on to Imperial order during the Noctis Aeterna.’ He nodded to Setheno, acknowledging her accomplishment. ‘We then meet a sudden upsurge of faith with the destruction of the city and the masses of the faithful.’

‘The circumstances are hardly that simple,’ Sendrax protested.

‘They are not, but that does not make what I have said untrue. Justicar Styer is correct. We would be precipitate. Will we engage in this slaughter when there is no incursion? What better way is there to trigger such an incursion, while tainting our actions at the same time?’

‘I agree with your reasoning, castellan,’ said Setheno. ‘Be that as it may, we cannot let this riot of undisciplined penance continue unchecked either. Epistolary Gared is right to warn us about the psychic energy. That danger exists now, too.’

‘I believe the danger that energy poses is imminent,’ Gared said. On a screen next to the table, he called up a display of the Angriff system. ‘Lieutenant Ambach has succeeded in identifying the surplus planets as Desma and Contritus. It is Desma that is in close approach to Angriff Primus. While we have been concerned with this and other abnormally close intersections, there is another configuration that is only now becoming clear.’ He tapped the screen, changing the hololithic image. ‘This is how the relative positions of the seven planets appear from Algidus when Desma rises tonight.’

‘An alignment,’ said Drake.

‘What does this portend?’ Sendrax asked.

‘We cannot say,’ said Crowe. ‘But the conjunction of unleashed energy with that event is ominous. We must therefore do what is possible to contain the energy. We will begin with blocking the main boulevards.’ He stabbed a finger at intersections on the tacticarium table’s map, radiating outwards from the Cathedral of the Saints Unforgiving. The lithographs turned bright red at the target areas. ‘The *Malleus Maleficarum* can bring down the structures at the nearest points. The Stormravens will take the ones further out. We must turn the streets into holding pens. We will seek to divide the mob, and thus limit its energy.’ He grimaced. The strategy was sound, but frenzy spread like wildfire. The Grey Knights were in a race they were unlikely to win with the resources they had.

‘This is urban pacification,’ said Sendrax, disgusted. It was a task beneath the honour of the Grey Knights.

‘Yes. It is also our most viable tactic at this moment.’ It was hardly satisfying, though. Its limitations and all the ways it would fall short leapt out at Crowe. ‘Any news of the militia?’ he asked.

‘The barracks appear to be empty,’ said Berinon. He and Warheit had taken the *Purgation’s Sword* and the *Harrower* on reconnaissance flights since the disturbance had begun. ‘We have seen some troops in the streets as flagellants, but not in large numbers. The majority have vanished. Vehicles and armour are still in place, from what we have been able to see.’

That was a small mercy in the midst of a developing pattern that pointed towards disaster. ‘Then we must assume an imminently hostile force, and amend our strategy. Brother Warheit, the intersections will be your responsibility. Brother Berinon, render the militia barracks inoperable. Begin with the bases closest to the cathedral sector.’ Dividing the gunship duties would halve the effectiveness of both approaches. So it would have to be. He could not see the full shape of the design that was forming, but he saw all too well how limited any strategy to stop it would be.

At last you are beginning to understand the futility of your resistance, said Antwyr.

‘There is still the underhive,’ Drake said quietly.

‘There is,’ said Crowe. ‘Let us be clear. We are stopping nothing. We are seeking to retain control of the battlefield. The real enemy is coming. Whatever the form it takes, we will contest its arrival.’

Futility, the Blade whispered. ***All is futility, and at last you know it. You begin to admit the truth.***

Crowe refused to pay attention to the daemonic lies. ‘The purpose of our foe takes form. So it must. We will need to know the nature of its design before we can destroy it. And this we shall do. We are the hammer, and we shall smash the abomination.’

Without answering the sword, Crowe vowed he would show it the truth of futility. It lay in the plots of Antwyr, and in the grandiose schemes of the being that had laid claim to the Angriff system. There would be no triumph for Chaos here. From the ramparts of his duty, Crowe would cast abomination down to its ruin.

The thunder of collapses reached into the underhive. Dust shook free from the foundation walls, dropping past the windows of the maglev cars. The train had been built by Vismar’s ancestors six centuries previously, as an emergency

means of evacuating the ruling family and its loyal guards from Algidus. It ran through the deepest roots of the city, and had never been used. Now it carried Vismar, her honour guard, and three companies of the militia towards the outer walls.

'They've started,' said Erner Kierska. He and about half of his technicians had joined up with Vismar's cohort when she had ordered a stop to collect more loyalists beneath the spaceport. 'You were right, governor. They came to kill us.'

The voice was right, Vismar thought. 'I was warned,' she said, proud she had listened to the warning. She was proud, too, of the action she had taken. She was leading again for the first time since Setheno had come to Angriff Primus. Vismar cursed the name of the Sister of Battle. Setheno had brought her humiliation and weakness, and then the Grey Knights had brought death. Vismar had reclaimed her pride and her strength. She had been slow to learn the lesson of what had happened to her world, but she *had* learned. She had been wrong to fear that the Emperor was dead. Instead, she should have hoped He was, and that Angriff Primus was finally beyond His reach. It was not, but the Emperor was not all-powerful. Even if she did not live through this day, she would die with her head held high. She would no longer bow to the perverse laws of a false god.

'What will we do when we reach our destination?' Kierska asked.

'We will gather what strength we can. Then we will see. I make no promises. Who can? But we will not be lambs to the slaughter.'

Kierska nodded. Vismar had said the same to Colonel Merkhaz and his soldiers when they had boarded the train. That had been enough to satisfy them for the moment. It had almost been enough to satisfy her. But now the Grey Knights had begun their massacre. She and all her people had been living with the imminence of death for years, but now it was truly upon them. The journey to the outer walls was hardly more than a delaying tactic. A few more miles now, and Vismar would have to choose the manner in which she would confront her end.

I will meet it with anger, she thought. *With hate.* She had given her life to nothing. To strike back, at the end, would be something. Even against something as undying as a Space Marine.

Now, in the final stretches of the journey, Vismar felt pulled forward, her spirit rushing ahead of the train. She watched the vistas of the underhive speed past the car's armourglass window. The noise of the dark world reached her over the rattle of the transport. The underhive rang with the overlapping dins of forges, and with the shouts of labour and struggle that defined the lives of the people

who struggled for existence in the endless night. The Noctis Aeterna had been hard. The reach of Setheno's order had been limited below ground, and the underhive had become a hecatomb; hundreds of thousands had starved to death as the supplies dwindled. Untold thousands more had died in the desperate, clawing battles for what food and water could be had. Corpses rotted, spreading disease. The stench of decay, thick as cloth, came through the ventilation system. But there were people down here still, and her leadership's purpose had been renewed. Something more than flight waited for her at the end of the line. This was what called to her.

At first the sound was a vague uproar. As the militia companies drew closer, it became clearer, resolving into chanting. Vismar clenched her jaw. She could not tell if the voices were raised in praise or anger. They were many, and they were frenzied. That was all she knew.

At length, the maglev track reached its terminus. When the train stopped, Vismar and her troops disembarked on a platform at the mouth of a vast chamber in the base of a manufactory that had been abandoned for a millennium. Even further below this level, there had been a mine, and the ore had been stored in this cavernous space. There were still piles of slag reaching fifty feet or more up the sides of the walls. Huge stone moulds had been brought here at some point, discarded one on top of the other like the playthings of a bored colossus. Thousands of people milled about on the floor, on the slopes of the heaps, and stood on top of the unsteady dolmens of the moulds. They were dressed in filthy rags. The crowd stank of old sweat and new fear. Most of those in the lower reaches of the chamber had become even more ragged by tearing at their clothes and their flesh. Their songs were indistinguishable from howls. The citizens on the slag heaps looked more wary. The people below raised their arms to call them to give praise. A few did in the time it took Vismar to assess the situation, adding their voices to songs of bloody repentance.

Vismar paused at the edge of the platform. A short flight of stone steps led to the main floor of the chamber. She marched down, followed by a large phalanx of troopers, and she pushed her way into the centre of the celebrations. The rest of the soldiers spread out from the entrance to the chamber, taking up positions along the walls and the slag heaps.

'Get their attention,' Vismar said to Merkhaz.

The colonel aimed his bolt pistol at the ceiling hundreds of feet up, and pulled the trigger. The report was titanic, reverberating within a space as open as the nave of a cathedral. The celebrants paused. In the momentary silence, another

distant rumble shook the ground above.

'Do you hear that?' Vismar cried. 'That is the servants of the Emperor destroying our city. You are praising a lie! Salvation has not come to our world. Betrayal and death are our reward for faithful service.'

The people on the slopes listened, and looked down at the flagellants with growing anger. But the vast majority of the thousands present stared at Vismar with incomprehension. Then they sent up an even greater hue and cry, shouting down her heresy with their loyalty, now a mindless, destructive thing.

It was always mindless, she thought. *Only I didn't know that until now.*

Vismar stared at the flagellants with disgust. They were filthy, subhuman wretches. Of course they held to their worship of the false god. They were incapable of thinking for themselves. They were incapable of any thought at all. And these were her subjects. She had given her life to the rule and protection of Angriff Primus, and she could see at last how utterly foolish she had been. Her every action had been in the service of the Emperor, and so her existence, until this very day, had been a waste, thrown away on the unworthy. The wretches in this chamber were the waste made manifest. Encrusted by filth, coated in their own blood, baying for salvation that would never come, dragging broken nails through their flesh as if their wounds were any form of offering, they were loathsome, useless. They were fit only to be discarded.

But that would not be enough.

'Kill them,' Vismar said. 'Exterminate all the brutes.'

The militia did not hesitate. When Merkhaz gave the order to fire, he snarled with the same eager hate that consumed Vismar. The troopers howled back at the flagellants as they fired their lasrifles. The soldiers on the periphery advanced into the crowd, many of them choosing to kill with bayonets. People descended from the debris hills to join in the slaughter. They vented their anger with stones and hands and teeth, smashing the skulls and tearing open the throats of the religious. Vismar used her laspistol, and as she sent multiple blasts into the face of a penitent, she wished for a sword. She wanted to feel the impact of the blade sinking through sinew and connecting with bone. She wanted the reward of warm blood splashing against her face, payment at last collected for a life lived in vain. There was still satisfaction in the death she meted out, and there was more than satisfaction as the prayers stopped and the screams began. As the las cut relentlessly into the bodies of the flagellants, she felt pleasure. The bodies fell one on top of each other, creating new waste heaps. Flesh upon flesh, burned and writhing its last, a parallel for the industrial slag on the periphery of the

chamber. Waste surrounded waste, a symbol for the futility of her life in service. By her command, the symbol had been created. She was its author, and she took pride in it.

The massacre brought her the first pleasurable sensations she had known for years. Their intensity shook her frame. Soon, too soon, there was no one left to kill. Hyperventilating, she stared at the piles of the murdered around her. *This was well done*, she thought. *This was very well done*.

It took her a moment to realise the applause she was hearing was not in her head.

Vismar looked up. There was a ledge ten feet up the wall close by on her right, above a yawning doorway leading to another passage. A Space Marine stood on the ledge, bringing his gauntlets together in a slow, amused clap. He was a gargoyle and a monument. His face was a thing of wounds. New injuries opened and old ones clotted shut before Vismar's eyes. Graceful, twisted, murderous spikes ran up the sides of his armour. Its plates were jewelled mosaics of atrocity. The chamber was silent as all gazed upon him; he seemed to Vismar to have the stature of a prophet. She had not listened to the message brought by the earlier warriors. She had not been ready. Her world had not been ready.

We are now, she thought. This great being embodied art and sensation. She shivered in the expectation of his truth.

'You feel it,' the great monster said. His savage voice rumbled throughout the chamber. He addressed every soul present, and he spoke directly to Vismar's heart. 'You see the shape of what you have done.' He paused. '*You feel it*,' he hissed.

'*We feel it!*' Vismar and her troopers responded.

'Yes, you do.' The Space Marine nodded, then he crouched and spread his arms as if to embrace the congregation below. 'I am Tarautas of the Emperor's Children, and I welcome you to the glories of Slaanesh. I will teach you to see. I will open for you the path to sensation and to vengeance.' He raised a finger, instructing his new flock. 'See the shape of events. See their beauty. You turned your backs on my brothers and killed those who had accepted the enlightenment they offered. You were loyal, for so long and so heroically, only to be betrayed. And so we close the circle. Once again, the Emperor's Children are before you. Will you turn your backs again? Will you be slaughtered for your loyalty, as you have rightfully killed the sheep around you, or will you follow us to transcendence?'

'*I will follow!*' Vismar screamed. So did every man and woman with her.

‘Then come,’ said Tarautas. He stood and gestured to the archway beneath him. ‘Before they were slain, my brothers created new paths beneath this city. Complete your journey now, and see the gifts we have brought.’

Vismar ran forward, and the soldiers of the militia ran with her. They ran through the archway, into the passage beyond, and into the embrace of the Dark Prince. They sprinted through the gloom of the underhive. Some fell, and were trampled by their fellows. They laughed as they ran, and they shouted in the joy of Tarautas’ promises.

Vismar barely noticed the regions of the underhive that she passed. All she knew was that they were moving away from the outer wall. What mattered was what lay ahead. She lost track of time. She was winded, but she kept running. She learned to revel in the pain of exhaustion wracking her body. And at last, she crossed the threshold to another huge chamber. It was a cavern that had been formed from the scraping out of several foundations. She understood that it, like the route that had led here, had been constructed in the recent past. It must have been the work of the citizens who had embraced the Emperor’s Children on their first visit. She wept at the thought of the error she had made then, in suppressing that burgeoning cult. Yet she laughed to find herself part of it, and exulted in the aesthetic pleasure of the symmetry of her journey.

Wide ramps led from the cavern, heading towards the surface. The wide expanse of the floor held the gifts of the Emperor’s Children, and the means to strike back at the grey lies of the Emperor. Salvaged from the fallen regions of Angriff Primus, artillery vehicles waited to turn their ordnance on the city. Before the mortars and mobile cannons was another of the Emperor’s Children. The vox-casters on his pauldrons had merged with his flesh. His massive rifle appeared to grow out of his arm. When he spoke, it was with the voice of a hurricane, and Vismar’s ears began to bleed.

‘*I am Alectus*,’ he thundered, ‘*and I will lead you to the perfection of blood.*’

The artillery barrage came from a sector whose militia base had been cleared. Crowe was aboard the *Purgation’s Sword* with Drake’s squad when a flight of Storm Eagle rockets streaked overhead. The arcs of flame dropped towards the palace sector of Algidus. A short distance above street level, the warheads burst into rains of bomblets. Hab blocks toppled into a sea of flame. The blasts incinerated tens of thousands of flagellants, penned in by Crowe’s strategy of containment. A hail of mortar shells, fired at much shorter range, came down to the east, turning the avenues into maelstroms of shrapnel. From the open side

door of the Stormraven, Crowe saw the collapse of his efforts to arrest the disintegration of the battlefield.

'Brother Berinon,' he voxed, 'make for the east. Take us to the launch point.' To judge from the contrails of the shells and rockets, the Manticore and Wyvern fire had come from roughly the same location.

All burns, said Antwyr. ***All burns, and so will you. Fly to battle, fly to your fate. It comes at my command.***

There was no way to tell whether the sword spoke truth or lies of opportunity. Crowe recorded the words mentally, but he did not heed them.

'We have found the militia,' Drake said. He was next to Crowe at the door, holding fast against the gale of Antwyr's rasping thoughts.

'And they have found heavy weapons,' said Crowe. 'There should be nothing capable of this barrage in that sector.'

'I do not see how they could conceal the means to create an artillery line so quickly.'

'That would be impossible. They must have had help. The enemy declares himself, brother.'

The *Purgation's Sword* flew over the region of the Wyvern shelling. The mortars had turned the sector into a cratered landscape of shattered, slumping rockcrete, empty of life. The barrage continued, spreading north and south. Already, mobs of penitents were rushing into the devastation, howling for the blood of heretics, and Gared's fears were being confirmed. Crowe felt the psychic energy of the city rising by the second. Millions of people were consumed by passion, by pain, by fear and by death. The psychic currents clashed and grew. A storm was gathering, the pressure building against Crowe's soul with the same foreshadowing of an explosion as a sudden drop in barometric pressure.

The gunship left the blast area behind. '*Auspex confirms large heat signatures ahead*,' Berinon reported. '*Vehicles and infantry.*'

'Advancing?'

'*Yes. A spearhead of infantry appears to be leading the way for the artillery.*'

'That is our target.' He would cut the head from this force.

Autocannon flak reached up from the Stormraven.

'*Hydras!*' Berinon warned.

The shells came from multiple angles. The anti-air tanks were positioned along the entire line of the artillery formation. Crowe held the edge of the door, standing firm as Berinon took the gunship into a sharp dive, beneath the range of

the initial volley, and down a canyon lined by hab blocks. The avenue was narrow, barely wide enough to admit the gunship. The façades blurred past, mere feet from the port wing. A manufactory blocked the end of the avenue, and Berinon brought the nose up, climbing steeply just above the stilled chimneys. The Hydra shells sought the gunship, blasting the chimneys apart. The *Purgation's Sword* dropped again into another boulevard, beneath the black cloud of exploding flak.

'*Enemy lines in one mile*,' Berinon voxed.

'Drop us as close as you can and pull back,' said Crowe. Against a heavy concentration of artillery, the gunship was vulnerable. Against a squad of Grey Knights on the ground, it was the artillery that would be doomed.

The Stormraven slowed, descending closer to street level. Berinon banked sharply around a blasted chapel. On the other side was a much wider avenue, running north and south. The artillery tanks were lined up along it. They were holding their position for the time being, sending out a wide barrage over the city before them. They were surrounded by a mob largely composed of militia soldiers, though there was no sign of military discipline in the way they shouted and danced, roaring in delight at every concussion of the guns. A large contingent had moved into the chapel, and had set it ablaze. They celebrated in the ruined building and on the portico stairs. In the shattered doorway, a Noise Marine presided over the revels. He blasted the street with cyclones of writhing sound.

Drake hissed in anger at the sight of the Traitor. Crowe's jaw tightened. New configurations of evil and excess took shape around the events in Algidus.

The Noise Marine pointed at the *Purgation's Sword* as it swung into view.

Crowe leapt to the ground when the gunship was still fifteen feet in the air. Drake's squad followed, and Berinon lifted off again, twin-linked assault cannons hammering the line. Two Wyverns and a Manticore exploded, consuming scores of heretics as they died.

The Emperor's Children had prepared well for this opportunity, Crowe saw. There were still enough vehicles to level entire sectors of Algidus. The Hydras chased the Stormraven with their shells as it retreated behind the towers further to the east.

'Destroy the tanks,' Crowe told Drake. 'I will deal with the Traitor.' He charged up the steps of the chapel, putting distance between his brothers and the Black Blade, and bringing the violence of purification to the heretics and the Noise Marine.

The sword's mockery snarled in his head. ***Run to the skirmish, warden. Wield your wrath and know it means nothing. You have already lost. There is no victory for you except through me.***

Militia soldiers rushed Crowe. They were so far gone in their foul rapture, they had lost their awe of him. The Noise Marine trained his weapon on Crowe. The vox maw of the gun and those of the Traitor's armour gaped together, a foul choir about to sing. The Noise Marine fired at the same moment that Crowe loosed a stream of shells from his storm bolter.

A base note to shatter bones and stone roared across the steps to Crowe. Bolt shells exploded when they hit the sound wave. The heretics foolish enough to come between the two Space Marines fell, their skeletons turned to powder, their eyes bursting from their skulls. Crowe charged through the blast. Blood filled his mouth. The sound hit him like a battering ram, but he was the stronger. He did not slow. He smashed through the sound. He kept firing, shredding militia, clearing his way to the Traitor. A few of his shells struck the Noise Marine. One of his pauldron vox-casters exploded in a heavy spray of blood. The Traitor fired again, and the rest of Crowe's volley disintegrated, filling the air between them with fire. At point-blank range, the soundwave felt like the blow of a Dreadnought's power fist. It smashed the rockcrete of the portico steps into a dust storm. Crowe hurled himself through thunder and flame, and thrust the Black Blade of Antwyr through the gorget of the Noise Marine. The blow severed the Traitor's spinal column. His mutilated jaw sagged open and his body convulsed in a final spasm of sensation. The Traitor's eyes glowed with pleasure. Then Crowe jerked the blade sideways and severed his head, sending it bouncing down the steps.

As he turned from the shuddering corpse, Crowe became aware of the las-fire directed against him. The shots were futile against his artificer armour. He opened fire with the storm bolter again, sweeping it across the steps, bringing judgement to a vast swatch of heretics. Along the avenue, Drake's squad turned Wyverns and Manticores into fireballs. Missiles and mortars detonated. A wall of fire filled the street to the left and right, consuming all life.

In the space of a minute, the Purifiers ended the artillery attack.

In the wake of the destruction, the avenue was a blackened ruin. Smoke rolled over it, the aftermath of a mass pyre. A few burned troopers crawled through the wreckage, moaning their last.

At the foot of the chapel steps, a charred figure choked out a rasping cry and pointed an accusing finger at Crowe. 'It spoke true,' Vismar said. Her uniform

hung in tatters. Her flesh was black and glistening, and her hair was burned away. One eye was gone, and the remaining one glared at Crowe with hatred, and with vindication.

It? Crowe wondered. He descended the stairs, and Vismar's gaze shifted for a moment to the sword before looking back at him with a mad, sly, unrepentant gleam.

The disciples of truth are everywhere to be found, said Antwyr. ***Wheresoever I go, I will find them, and turn them to my ends. You are the means of my pilgrimage, warden. You spread my will.***

Crowe's breathing turned into a frustrated snarl. What Gared dreaded was coming to pass. The coming of the Grey Knights was more than the trigger for the upheaval. It was the cause. Fanaticism and heresy were the results of their presence, and the Black Blade had worked its influence on the governor. The nature of the uprising had been determined, at least in part, by Crowe's presence. He had a terrible vision of himself as a key unlocking the doors to catastrophe. With an effort, he crushed despair beneath his heel. He had expected the war to begin in this way. What mattered was how it ended.

'You came only to kill us,' Vismar spat. 'And now you've done it.'

There was truth in what she said, though it was only partial. Crowe did not correct her. She did not deserve enlightenment, and she was past listening. 'You betrayed your trust and the Emperor,' he said, raising the sword. 'Your choices were yours, and so is the penalty.'

Her bitter laugh was so strong it shook her frame and turned into a wracking cough. 'I had no choice but death,' she said. 'But I do not die a fool. We fought back. The gods will mark this. We fought back.'

'You and your labours are already forgotten,' Crowe told her. He decapitated the governor with a quick chop of the sword. Her head rolled away, coming to a stop not far from the skull of the Noise Marine.

Forgotten but not in vain, said the sword.

'Berinon,' Crowe voxed, 'what are you seeing?'

'*The fighting is spreading out from the bombarded sectors, castellan. Justicar Styer and Knight of the Flame Sendrax report that the lines of the conflict are blurring. There is no longer a clear distinction between civilians and militia.*'

Or between faithful and heretic, Crowe thought. The battle was losing shape, becoming a generalised riot of death. The raging psychic energy in the city had not diminished. It was still growing. The Grey Knights had ended the artillery barrage, but they had achieved little.

Perhaps we have achieved nothing at all.

The thought felt dangerously close to what the sword wanted him to believe. It was also a possibility he had to consider if he would counter it.

Antwyr's laughter cracked through his mind. Crowe walled off the daemon's mockery, and opened himself up to the agony of the city. He felt the energy forge death and hate and fear and murderous joy. He felt how close the breaking point had come.

'Brothers,' he voxed the strike force, 'our efforts at containment have failed. We must prepare a counter-attack.'

'*Against what?*' Sendrax asked.

'We will know very shortly. All units converge on the palace. We will hit back when–'

The scream of sundered reality cut him off. To the west, the ravening light of the warp scarred the evening gloom.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Apotheosis

The *Purgation's Sword* roared westwards over the burning towers of Algidus.

'The abominations mock us,' said Drake.

'That is their nature,' said Crowe. 'But I feel the laughter of the fates this night, too.'

The rift stabbed upwards from the centre of the Cathedral of the Saints Unforgiving. It had blasted a hole through the roof, and it reached up to the sky, a whirling torch of scabrous colours pointing at Desma as the planet ascended towards the zenith. Daemonic shapes emerged from its length, spiralling down towards the ground, a descent of monstrous angels.

Why the cathedral? Crowe thought. The fanaticism that had erupted there was dangerous, but it was not heresy. Then he thought, *Of course the cathedral*. The psychic tension was not localised. He had felt no geographical spikes in its strength, only the gradual rise in power as the long day had given way to night. The rift could have potentially opened anywhere in Algidus. Striking the cathedral, though, was the perfect attack on hope and faith. It was a blow for despair and for greater frenzy.

'At least we have the real enemy in our sights,' Sendrax said.

'Do we?' said Crowe. The psychic tension had not snapped. It was still intensifying, and faster now. 'This is an escalation. I do not think it is more than that.'

There was no doubt as to their strategy now. The *Harrower* and the *Malleus Maleficarum* were converging with the *Purgation's Sword* on Saints

Unforgiving. The full strike force would hit the daemons, smashing the abominations in their greatest concentration.

'Closing this rift will not mean victory, will it?' said Drake.

'No.' Crowe voxed all the Grey Knights. 'Our position is unchanged, brothers. We must hold the battlefield, contain the damage, and hold off the enemy until we truly know what it is we must defeat.'

Berinon slowed the gunship as it flew down the Boulevard of Holy Submission, heading towards the parvis of the cathedral. The *Malleus Maleficarum* was rumbling along the centre of the road, and the *Harrower* was coming into sight on the port side. Daemons swarmed out of the shattered doors of the cathedral. They descended on a crowd of the penitent that the Grey Knights had penned in at the square. The Crusader's hurricane bolters made short work of the barricade of fallen rockcrete, and the tank smashed through the ruins of the hab block. A stream of daemons was already flowing over the rubble, spreading horror out into the wider city. Thousands of abominations had emerged from the rift, and the psychic pain of Algidus was climbing rapidly. Crowe felt it like a stiletto stab at the base of his skull. It joined with the snarls and venomous laughter of the sword.

Your fate is written. Your path is chosen. Descend and fight and carry the Dark Gods to victory. There is no escape. Your hopes are merely the lures to your doom. I taste them, warden. I devour them. They nourish my vengeance. You will feed me until there is nothing left but your soul, and you will give that to me gladly.

It seemed the tension must break, yet it did not. It climbed and climbed, the entire city on its way to transforming into a psychic volcano on the verge of catastrophic eruption.

Cardinal Orla had gone as far as the primary Administratum complex before the Grey Knights attacked. The palaces of the Adeptus Administratum formed a rough oval around the Avenue of the Sixth Victory. The gunship had collapsed the curved wings of the buildings. Orla had stared in horror as twenty foot ferrocrete aquilas fell into ruin and dust clouds swept over the avenue.

For hours, he shrieked his incomprehension. How could he atone for his apostasy if he could not spread the message of penitence? Weeping, he stumbled from one bottled up end of the avenue to the other. His robes were filthy rags, and he tore more and more violently at his flesh, opening up new wounds, holding his blood up to an uncaring sky. The dust settled, but the distress of the

mob did not abate. Orla lashed at his back, and the people joined him in self-punishment. The broken palaces should have crumbled away before the power of the screams of faith. But they hemmed the faithful in. Orla ran and ran, half blind in desperation. Sometimes he stumbled over the bodies of the trampled. Bones snapped beneath his tread, but he remained upright, and a dim portion of his mind envied the dead, for surely they were now at the Emperor's side.

What if they are not?

What if our penance is not enough?

Night fell, and the world that had supplanted the moon rose like a dreadful eye. The test went on. Orla prayed for deliverance. He urged the people to still greater acts of penitence, whipping them himself when they faltered. An old man dropped to his knees in front of the cardinal. His bloodied arms went limp, and his head hung in exhaustion. His prayers fell to a mere whisper.

'Cry to the Emperor, you wretch,' Orla screamed, outraged. He could barely see through his tears of anger and terror. He struck the man with his whip. The man did not rise. His prayers stopped altogether. Orla lashed the man until he fell forward. Soon there was no more movement. Orla kept hitting the corpse as if his fervour would animate it to seek forgiveness.

Then the terrible light, diseased with all the colours of vice and corruption, came from the cathedral. The sight stopped Orla in his flight. He stared, mouth opening and closing. Horror ran through his veins and filled his soul. The light turned the cathedral tower into a wavering silhouette. The sacred had become the unholy.

The frenzy on the Avenue of the Sixth Victory changed in character. Terror and wonder took hold of the people. They turned in their panic to Orla, and for a long moment all he could think was that he had failed again. His sacrifice was still insufficient.

'Forgive me,' he finally whispered. The same plea he had been making all along. What else was there?

His eyes fell on the corpse beside him. There was still death. That was the truest expiation. 'The cathedral falls for our sins!' he shouted. He ran south, towards the palace that blocked the way back to Saints Unforgiving. 'We must take it back! We must die for the Emperor!'

But there was no way forward. The interior of the palace had collapsed, and rubble filled the doorways. In the glow of the planet that filled a quarter of the sky, the palace was a shadowy, impassable mass. Orla beat his fists against the rockcrete. He could not climb. He could not enter. He and his penitent flock

could not leave their prison to throw themselves into the battle against the enemy.

They did not have to. The enemy came to them.

The unholy had a form. It had many, and they came scrabbling over the roof of the palace. Orla staggered backwards as a cascade of monsters descended the wall. His ears were filled with the monstrous songs of a new choir. The notes were graceful and maddening. They reached into his soul and called on him to join in a dance that was perfectly depraved and perfectly vast. The monsters were the most foul and sinful of nightmares given flesh. They fell upon the people and tore them apart, and then Orla's horror was completed when he heard the victims scream with pleasure.

He covered his ears with hands slippery with blood. He roared his denial. He moved backwards from the growing massacre, then stopped. Blessed understanding dawned. This *was* a test. The Grey Knights had trapped him here so that he might, in the end, make full atonement and become a fitting offering. This was punishment, too, and judgement, and they, too, were fitting.

Orla laughed, delivered from all doubt.

'Father of Mankind!' he yelled. 'I hurry to you!' He rushed forward, whirling his whip over his head. His violent joy radiated through his flock, and the penitent ran towards horror. Lithe creatures stalked over the ground to meet him, wielding lashes much longer than his. Orla laughed again, fear and joy and terror and desire fusing and annihilating the final shreds of rational thought.

The singing monsters brushed aside his assault. They were laughing, too. Pincers closed around his limbs, and he died in an ecstasy of violence.

The Stormravens and the Crusader hammered the parvis of Saints Unforgiving with a maelstrom of shellfire. The Grey Knights marched through a narrow gap between the blasts, a collective blade of silver-grey cutting through the crush of daemons. The impact of their boots cracked the flagstones. Crowe advanced through the vaulted entrance, storm bolter blasting monstrosities to a rain of flesh and ichor. The heavy bronze doors of the cathedral hung to the sides, smashed by the force of the daemonic flood. The interior was worse than a ruin. It was absolute desecration. The rift was centred over the altar, its marble slab lying shattered in two. The rift spun and pulsed, sending out forked lightning across the nave. Daemons poured out, rushing from the base and falling from on high. Their riotous celebration smashed pews and shredded banners. They clawed foul runes into the walls and pillars. Second by second, the cathedral was

changing. It was no longer sacred to the Emperor. Soon it would be a stain upon the materium. Already, its walls were changing into a pale flesh, rippling with sighs.

The daemons gibbered and sang at the sight of Crowe. He cut them down with sword and shell, hacking his way towards the rift. Behind him came the Purifier squads, purging a wider path through the abominations. Styer's squad took the right flank, Setheno and Furia the left. Furia had a small contingent of mortals in her service, hand-picked for their resilience in the face of the daemonic. Led by Klas Brauner, a veteran colonel once of the Cadian Shock Troops, they fought the abominations with grim tenacity. Their faces were rigid with horror, yet strong in faith. They advanced behind the inquisitor and the canoness. Setheno's power blade blazed with holy anger. It seemed to leap in her hand, seeking to burn and slash daemonic flesh even faster.

The combined forces slowed the stream of daemons leaving the cathedral to a trickle. Thousands were already loose in the city, but if the Grey Knights could seal the rift, maybe, Crowe thought, just maybe, they would regain that measure of control he sought. That control felt less like a tactical reality, and more like a symbol of hope.

He was in the centre of the nave, less than ten yards from the rift now. The pulses of the warp pushed against him like waves. A daemonette lunged at him, striking with pincer and whip. It danced with reptilian grace away from his counterblow with the sword, then coiled the whip around the blade. The abomination yanked the whip, trying to pull the Blade from Crowe's grip. He hauled back, jerking the daemonette forward. It hissed, leaning into the momentum and closing the pincer around his gorget. The limb began to smoulder at once, and the daemonette shrieked, burned by the light of Crowe's sanctity. He blasted the monster's skull apart with a single shot from the storm bolter.

'Surround the rift,' Crowe ordered. 'We are strong together, brothers, and we will purge the abomination from this world.'

You lie to yourself, said Antwyr. ***This gesture is empty. Your hope is empty.*** The claws of its will scrabbled against his defences.

Drake and Sendrax moved in opposite directions around Crowe, pushing harder to encircle the rift. The vortex bent and twisted, as if reaching for the warriors. Styer's squad came up behind Crowe and consolidated the position on this side of the vortex. Shells, flame and Nemesis weapons hemmed the emerging daemons in and destroyed their forms even as they entered the materium. The

other daemons in the cathedral saw what was coming, and tried to break the circle before it was completed. Setheno and Furia pulled back and covered the Grey Knights' rear flank, setting a continuous stream of fire across the nave.

Crowe held the sword with both hands, pointing the blade at the heart of the rift. He and his brothers linked psychically. Crowe felt a flash of pain shoot through the others as touching his spirit brought them into closer contact with the sword. Antwyr lashed out savagely, and Crowe erected a mental wall around the daemon, shielding his brothers.

These ramparts will not save you, castellan, said the sword. Its choice of words startled him. The attack was a deep one, hitting him precisely at the point where he sought to find the most strength. Even after all these years, he did not know how much Antwyr could see into his thoughts. That was one of the reasons why he never answered the sword's taunts. Any dialogue would simply give the daemon more weapons to use against him. When its bolt shot home, he was unsure whether Antwyr was riffling through his mind, or if it was simply observant. They had been each other's prisoners for so long, no matter how Crowe sealed his mind from the sword, there was much it had come to know about him. ***You guard nothingness, and I will throw you from your wall.***

Crowe stood firm. He held the venom of the sword close, and forged a psychic ring of iron with his brothers. Together, acting as one soul, they gathered the powers of banishment. Crowe's nimbus shone brighter. Its intensity was piercing, and it flowed from him to join the weaker light of purity around the other Grey Knights. Blue-and-white energy built, crackling down the length of Crowe's arms. He took the force of the warp and turned it against its unreality. A halo of purification surrounded the rift. It was blinding, and nothing unclean could cross it. Daemons howled and recoiled, falling back into the rift. The vortex's movements turned jagged, as if it were a caged beast.

'We are the instrument of the Emperor's will,' Crowe intoned at the same moment as his battle-brothers. They were a choir of one voice, one purpose. 'No daemon shall pass. No daemon shall live. The gauntlet of the Emperor's fist closes about the unclean fire, and extinguishes its light.'

The halo contracted around the rift. What had been a wall became a siege engine. The energy of the vortex began to scream as though it knew real pain.

'*Begone!*' Crowe roared. The holy light rushed in on the vortex. It throttled the base and shot up the height of the daemonic torch. The fire of sanctity warred with the fire of corruption. The raging column thrummed and swayed, bolts of lightning striking the roof of the cathedral, disintegrating huge chunks of

masonry. The balance between the powers swung back and forth, until at last a spear of pure energy pierced the night. It engulfed the corrupt light of the warp, overwhelming it with the searing clarity of faith. A sudden wind tore through the cathedral, sucked in by the implosion of the rift. It ripped pews from the stone floor, smashing them into kindling. The daemons in the nave wailed, and then, in the space above the shattered altar, there was nothing. The rift was closed.

Crowe broke the psychic link, and the Grey Knights turned on the remaining abominations. The daemons tried to flee, but Furia's team and Setheno blocked the path to the door. Then the wave of armoured purification swept over them, and left only the ash and pools of deliquescing daemonflesh. As the smoke of the extermination roiled out into the night, the cathedral walls reverted to stone. The building could never be consecrated again. It would have to be destroyed utterly, along with much else, but its immediate taint was gone.

'A good victory,' said Sendrax.

'There is still an army of daemons loose in the city,' Drake reminded him.

'Indeed, but we are finally getting somewhere.'

'I don't think we are,' said Crowe. 'There is something building in the city. I know you can feel the psychic tension, brother. And what we have accomplished here has done nothing to diminish it.' The tension was even more severe, more painful. It was a sound in Crowe's head, a whine pitched so high it could cut through bone, a sustained note that could only end in a monstrous chord of thunder. The breaking point was still closing in. 'At best, we have delayed the explosion.'

In the next moment he winced. As if mocking his words, the tension ramped up, twisting like a barbed wire tourniquet. The other Grey Knights stiffened in sudden pain.

'*Castellan*,' Berinon voxed, '*more rifts have opened. There are five now. Relaying you their positions.*'

Crowe blinked through his auto-senses to a display of the coordinates. He sent what he saw to his battle-brothers and the inquisitors. At first glance, the locations of the rifts appeared random.

'We can no longer contain this,' said Drake.

Sendrax said, 'I see no option except orbital bombardment.'

'That tactic presents us still with the problem of sudden, massive psychic discharge,' Setheno pointed out.

'You agree, then, with Epistolary Gared's assessment of that danger?' asked Crowe.

‘I do. Every move of the Ruinous Powers seems designed to amplify the psychic harm.’

And every attempt we make to counter that escalation is futile or feeds into it, Crowe thought. Sendrax was not wrong, and Crowe was tempted to order a limited bombardment, but even that would cause mass death much faster than the daemons were inflicting it at the moment. He appreciated the intelligence of the trap in which the Grey Knights found themselves, even as he raged against it. The only move left to them was also the one that would serve the enemy’s purpose.

He examined the coordinates of the rifts again, searching for any kind of pattern, and any hint of strategy that he might have overlooked. The Black Blade’s snarling laughter rasped through his mind, coiling around the tension, squeezing the band tighter around his skull. The sword’s attack had intensified, too.

There is something it does not want me to see, Crowe thought. He looked more closely at the immediate vicinity of each rift, and saw nothing to suggest the importance of any location. He tried again, thinking in terms of movement and angles of approach.

He saw it. ‘The positions of the rifts create barriers on all sides of the site of the Sanctus Vincula,’ he said. ‘The abominations are not attacking a target. They are defending one.’

‘*Stormravens inbound*,’ Casca voxed. He was standing watch in the highest tower on the eastern side of the Sanctus Vincula ruins. All of the inhabitants of the hab had abandoned it before the arrival of the Emperor’s Children, first to tear each other apart, and then, as they moved farther afield, to fall to the dark pleasures of the daemons. There was no rift in the immediate vicinity, though, and there were large mobs in the sector, most of them still caught up in the frenzy of their bloody worship of the Emperor.

For Tarautas, they were chattel, waiting for the correct moment to be slaughtered. ‘Thank you, brother,’ he said to Casca. ‘Come down and join us. There is nothing more for you to do up there.’

The moment had come.

Tarautas strode out from the overhang of ruined iron. His squad had taken up position in a cave formed from the collapsed remains of the manufactory. ‘The Grey Knights are coming,’ he said. ‘We march.’

‘Against them, finally?’ Gothola asked.

‘They outnumber us two to one,’ said Utheian. He was the closest any of Tarautas’ warband came to being truly pragmatic. He pursued the extremities of sensation with passion, but he also had the foresight of one who wished to remain alive to continue that pursuit. There were times when Tarautas had listened to his caution, and benefited from it.

Today, Utheian’s warning was unnecessary.

‘We outnumber them by thousands to one,’ said Casca. ‘Or are you mad enough to discount the children of Slaanesh?’

‘They are not here,’ Utheian said. He turned around, pointing at the pulsating glows of the rifts. The nearest one was almost a mile away. ‘If the Grey Knights are targeting the Sanctus Vincula, they will see this flank is relatively unprotected.’

‘Be patient a bit longer,’ Tarautas told Gothola. ‘Our purpose is not to fight the Grey Knights just yet. Our task is to complete the work. This is what we will do before they can slow it down. Come, brothers. Let us see to the great creation. Art demands cruelty.’

The Emperor’s Children charged out from the ruins, stabbing westward towards the mob, towards the blood. In less than a minute, screams of penitence became screams of fear and pain. The gutters of the boulevards overflowed with red, and the canyons of the city cried out with the echoes of dark music. Belagas was the last Noise Marine of the warband, and there was rapture in his murderous composition as it boomed and wailed against the building façades. Tarautas drank in the song of torture. It resonated through his mechadendrites, their electrical bursts matching its rhythm as they seared new wounds into his flesh. He waded through the mob, mutilating quickly, but with precision. This was not a massacre for the Blood God. This was not an accumulation of skulls, but of sensation. Tarautas’ victims were still alive when he left them writhing on the rockcrete pavement. They had time to contemplate their end, to experience in full the new horizons of pain he opened up to them. If they did not appreciate the revelation, that was of little importance. Each voice made the choir greater. Each note of pain was a needed thread in the tapestry being woven in Algidus.

Tarautas looked back towards the ruins. The two Stormravens were descending. There was nothing between them and the Sanctus Vincula. Awful doubt seized him. Perhaps he had been overconfident. Perhaps the murder he and his brothers were now committing was not enough.

He stopped moving, glaring at the gunships. The silver of their hulls was dull in the weak light of Desma, yet its purity was still a jab in the eye. For long, terrible

seconds, Tarautas feared he had, in the end, failed in his service to the Dark Prince.

The ground quivered, and told him he had not failed. It began to shake.

Tarautas held up his hands in joy and worship. 'Oh, my brothers!' he shouted into the vox. 'Turn and see! Turn and see! *Turn and see!*'

The *Purgation's Sword* banked sharply, passing through the triple peak of a tower that had been the home of merchant nobles, evading the rifts that had opened on either side of the opulently carved palace. The gunship flew out over the Sanctus Vincula. Berinon dropped the nose of the *Sword* and descended to within twenty feet of the ground.

Before Crowe could leap, the ruins started to tremble. The dark mass of twisted, melted, burned rubble, more than a mile long on each side, shook like a beast about to wake. The black silhouettes of fallen structures wavered. Weakened heaps fell. Old ash rose, a cloud of grainy darkness.

Crowe pulled back from the open side door of the gunship. He gasped in pain. The psychic tension screamed, its limit reached. Over the vox, Gared, riding in the *Harrower,* tried to shout a warning, but his words disintegrated in a cry of agony. Blood flowed from Crowe's ears and eyes. A red-hot razor sliced through his brain. His nerves and his soul were on fire. Antwyr shouted, deafening him. The sword exulted in his pain, and drove the agony to new heights.

'Pull back,' Crowe ordered. He could barely form the words. 'Do not land. Retreat from the Sanctus Vincula.'

He managed to keep his feet. Drake and Sendrax were clutching bulkheads to keep from falling. Gorvenal was on his knees, and Carac was punching the inner wall of the fuselage as if to batter his pain into submission. The vox was a confusion of shouts, but Crowe's orders were heard. Berinon reversed course. The engines howled with strain at the sudden change, and the Stormraven climbed in a steep diagonal. It and the *Harrower* rose above the hab complexes next to the ruins, almost brushing against the roofs of the towers.

Crowe clutched the edge of the doorway. His lips pulled back against the force of psychic pain. His body's instinct was to retreat inside the gunship, to turn away from the coming explosion as if from the birth of a sun, but he forced himself to see. He would bear witness. He would know what was being wrought on Angriff Primus.

The ruins of Sanctus Vincula heaved upwards, a bubble of ferrocrete and iron. The great mass bulged to half the height of the towers. The tremors spread

across the city, their violence toppling spires further out. A sound rose from beneath the ruins. It was deeper than the grinding of tectonic plates, and more complex. Bedrock and metal and seething energy formed a single chord, a tritone of perfect malevolence, a peal that should never be sounded. It came from the core of the planet, a world's agony summoned and transmuted into a most terrible art. The tritone shot to the surface, rising from thunder to shriek. It blew apart the ruins of the Sanctus Vincula, and it became light. A beam of warp energy blasted into the sky. It was as wide as the manufactory. It was a violet as searing as destruction itself. The air over Algidus roiled in its passage, rushing away from the site with hurricane force. It spun the gunships, seized them and tried to hurl them down against the towers. Berinon and Warheit fought the gale and kept control, righting the Stormravens and pulling them further away from the explosion.

The vortex of winds was a minor effect. The full, monstrous strength of the blast was in the beam, and it went up, away from Algidus, away from Angriff Primus. Its target was not on that world. When Crowe saw where the beam went, he understood its purpose. Too late, he saw the greater pattern that had been woven. The unholy blaze cut through the void. It split the night. It travelled light seconds across the system. Desma was at the zenith, and the beam struck the planet in the centre of the globe.

Crowe looked up, his psychic pain easing with the release of the energy. He could think more clearly, and he watched the distant cataclysm unfold with a mixture of hate and cold analysis.

You know what comes next, said the sword, and it was right. ***You know you cannot fight an enemy that commands this power***, Antwyr gloated, and that was a lie.

Yet he felt the crushing power of awe, and he fought against it.

The molten glow in the centre of Desma travelled north and south on the globe, a lethal meridian. The wound opened wider. It ran deep. It cut all the way through. Desma blazed with the light of ending, and then the two halves of the planet separated. The foul miracle continued as Desma did not shatter. The hemispheres moved away from each other. Their interior faces raged with the fires that, once freed, should have annihilated the unnatural forms. Lava and fire raced over the surfaces. The seas boiled and the air burned. All life on Desma died, yet its presence, now doubled, remained in the Angriff system.

The gap between the hemispheres widened. They parted forever, the force of the beam pushing them off into new orbits.

‘Our victory on Sandava III is undone,’ said Crowe.

There had been seven worlds in the Angriff system. Now there were eight. A daemonic number.

Warp energy still blasted from beneath the surface of Angriff Primus. After the initial blast, it forked into two streams of endless lightning. And the tritone went on and on. Its source felt closer now.

Crowe looked away from the new planets, and gazed into the crater left by the blast. The sword exulted and raged and mocked. It shouted the promise of its victory and its death. Crowe defied it. *This*, he thought, *is what we have come to fight. This is what we will defeat.*

The tritone thundered, and the dust clouds of the explosion gradually dropped, revealing the thing in the crater.

PART THREE

FURIOSO

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

A Miracle of Rare Device

The palace rose on a column of rock. The crater inverted itself, carrying that which had lain hidden for millennia into the brilliance of the incandescent night. The sky burned, and the city burned, flames above and flames surrounding the grinding climb of rock, a ferocious dance of praise. For miles around the crater, Algidus trembled and fell as the palace rose. New canyons radiated out from the column, narrow abysses suddenly opening in streets and swallowing structures. Daemons and mortals fell into the crevasses. The citizens of Algidus screamed in despair, but the abominations revelled in the destruction, even if it was their own. The warp rifts faded away, their purpose accomplished, their energy taken by the great centre of the art. Daemons by the thousands turned from their atrocities and moved as a swarm through the shattered city towards the palace.

The palace glittered, a crown jewel of decadence and pain. It was a thing carved from monoliths of amethyst and opal, if those stones were tainted by the sensuality of torture. Its wings were surmounted by narrow, twisting spires. They were elegant and cruel, a frozen dance of architecture. Thin as they were, they conveyed the strength of claws. They curved inwards as they rose, leaning so far over the roof of the palace that their peaks almost touched. They were the sources of the warp lightning. The constant blasts lashed out into the void, now at one half or the other of Desma, now at the more distant worlds trapped in the Angriff system. As soon as the palace began its emergence, a third stream of lightning began. Instead of originating with the palace, it came from the void, though from no great distance. The lightning stabbed down from orbit and struck

the inverted dome that formed the centre of the palace.

The tritone sounded again and again, creating the shattering foundation for the song that reverberated across Algidus, and rode the lightning through the system. The hoots of fiends and trilling of daemonettes were the melody. Legions of abominations forged a choir with a single purpose, conducted by a single will. The song was immense in power, rich in structure, poisonous in its nature. It promised only damnation. Its threat was its lure. The millions of civilians still alive in Algidus heard it, and succumbed. The wretched survivors in the blackened cities of the rest of the planet heard it, too, and they succumbed. So did the billions who had lived until this moment on the other planets of Angriff. Torn from their home systems, their civilisations burned in lethal proximity to the star, or froze to death, distant from its heat. Others died more slowly, their cities shattered again and again by gravitational storms as their planets passed too close to each other. But on every captured world, enough of the populations survived to hear the song, and they succumbed.

They all did.

The song held an entire system, and an entire system began to dance.

A few hundred yards from the eastern side of the pillar's base, Tarautas turned to his warband. 'Is this not the grandeur I promised you?' he asked. The exquisite agony of the song throbbed through every wound in his flesh. Old scars tore open. Layers of pain overlapped. His flesh was a tapestry of sensation. His eyes were wide with joy. Extremity touched every nerve. His senses were overwhelmed to the point of ecstasy, and he felt like he could tear the planet open with his hands.

And this was just the beginning.

'You spoke truly,' said Gothola. He could not tear his eyes away from the palace. He was trembling, caught in the same rapture as Tarautas.

The pinnacle of rock slowed its climb, and finally stopped. The palace's twin spires now rose higher than any other peak in the city. The slopes of the rock were steep and uneven, glowing faintly as the rock softened and settled into a flat surface. A monstrous symbol of Slaanesh cut deeply into the entire eastern face, the circles and scythes of its shape reaching diagonally from the base to the peak of the column. It crackled with violet light, the touch of the warp embedded in its every sinuous curve. The daemons gathered at the base of the rock mass began to climb, forming a pilgrimage of savage celebration, a procession of tribute to the ruler of the palace. They advanced along the wide grooves of the

rune. The path took them around a full three hundred and sixty degrees, daemons marching sideways and upside down as the power of the rune usurped the reign of gravity.

Between the Emperor's Children and the base of the new mountain, the gunships of the Grey Knights hovered.

Tarautas started marching forward, kicking away the still-twitching bodies that lay in his way. 'Our place is in the palace,' he said.

'The Grey Knights will be there long before us,' Casca said.

'I don't think so. Our role was set long before now. Destiny will not be set aside by such a small concern.'

The inhabitant of the palace would provide. He was certain of that. He and his brothers had helped bring about its ascendance. They had played their part to help shatter a planet. They would not be forgotten now.

They were not. Tarautas had taken barely ten steps when the air began to spiral in front of him. The fell light of the warp broke through. The spiral widened, its centre falling away into the deep swirl of nightmare. A tunnel through the real opened up before Tarautas. He spread his arms. 'Behold, brothers. Are we not chosen? Are we not gifted to be part of this great sublimity?'

He crossed the threshold of the tunnel without hesitation. The others followed.

The Stormravens set down on a hill of rubble opposite the mount of the daemonic palace. Crowe watched the warp lightning as he listened to Saalfrank's report from the *Tyndaris*. There was a definite rhythm to the blasts. A heavy beat from the bolt striking from the sky, a fractional pause, then two regular beats as the lightning rose from one tower, then the other. Another, slightly longer pause, and the pattern repeated. There was no variation. The throbbing of the lightning joined the tritone to create the structure of the daemon song pervading the city.

'*The planets have accelerated in their orbits*,' Saalfrank was saying. '*They are moving with unnatural speed.*'

'How unnatural?' Crowe asked.

'*They will complete their solar revolutions in a matter of days.*'

'All of them?'

'Yes. Even the world furthest out, for that matter.'

Crowe briefly contemplated the havoc that would be wreaked on the planets. Angriff Primus would experience a new season almost every day, with all the disasters that condition would entail. He put the thoughts aside with a mental shrug. Angriff Primus had no long-term future. There had been little doubt of

that since the start of the mission.

'*The system itself is also moving much faster*,' Saalfrank went on.

'To what end?' Furia asked. 'No matter how fast it travels, it cannot reach any destination before centuries have passed.'

'That is if it continues to travel through the materium,' Setheno pointed out. 'I have been on a xenos device assembled from worlds that moved through the warp.'

'Is there a new accumulation of energy?' Crowe asked Saalfrank.

'*Yes, castellan. The taint of the warp is spreading through the system.*'

'Then we have our answer,' said Crowe. 'And we know what we must stop.' He pictured the destruction inflicted on the Imperium by a rogue system appearing at the whim of the Ruinous Powers. He foresaw fleets battered to nothingness by planets, crucial worlds ripped from their stars by the system's gravity and hurled into the deep void. He pointed to the palace. 'There can be no doubt the being who commands this design lurks there. That is our target.'

'There is no need any longer to withhold an orbital bombardment,' said Setheno. She did not sound optimistic.

'You don't think one will work?' Sendrax asked her.

She gestured towards the lightning rising from the towers, perpetually striking in different directions. 'I suspect the enemy's defences will prove more than enough to counter such an attempt.'

'We will not risk the destruction of the *Tyndaris* in a futile endeavour,' said Crowe. The bolts were striking planets. A single one of them redirected at the strike cruiser would annihilate it.

'Perhaps the enemy has not detected its presence yet,' Drake suggested.

Crowe shook his head. 'That is unlikely. Our foe know we are here.'

'We have been used to unleash this monstrosity,' said Styer.

'Precisely.' Crowe observed the rhythm of the lightning for another moment. 'I suggest the energy must be required in exact measure and exact location.'

'*There is some regularity in the way the lightning strikes the other worlds of the system*,' Saalfrank confirmed. '*They hit Angriff itself, too. There is more. An enemy vessel has appeared. We have identified it from archival records as the* Catharsis.'

'Of the Emperor's Children,' Crowe said.

'*Yes, castellan.*'

'And it is the source of the third bolt.'

‘*It is. It appears to be receiving echoes of energy from the bolts, reflecting back from the other planets.*’ Saalfrank sounded frustrated with having to describe one impossibility after another. ‘*This makes little sense, I know.*’

‘It makes no rational sense, shipmaster,’ Crowe told him. ‘It does, however, make aesthetic sense.’ They were still fighting the creatures of the Dark Prince. Whatever daemon was enthroned in the palace, it had laboured to create something more than a weapon. It was a work of art, and so were the fates of the Grey Knights that had been woven into this construction. *We are part of a tapestry*, he thought. Then he thought of the movement of the spheres and the rhythms of the unholy song, and corrected himself. *Not a tapestry. A dance.*

‘We will refuse our role,’ Crowe said. ‘We will shatter the daemon’s art, as we have before.’ He considered the palace again, and tried to follow the aesthetic that underpinned the construction. ‘We have four possible targets,’ he said. ‘The two towers, the centre of the palace, and the *Catharsis*. I would have us strike all four at once.’

‘With respect, castellan,’ said Sendrax, ‘that will sharply divide our strength. Should we not hit one target at a time, in force?’

‘We do not have the time. We do not know if one or all the locations are critical. Disable one, and the enemy may well be able to adjust. It has done so at every stage. All our victories have been meaningless. The enemy has twisted them all to produce what we face now.’ He shook his head. ‘Not this time. We can see the points on which the daemon’s work depends. We will smash them all.’

‘How can we,’ Sendrax demanded, ‘if we are spread too thin?’

He defies you, said Antwyr. ***Make an example of him. Show them true strength, if you truly believe you can achieve your deluded dream.***

For a moment, the sword was silent. In that second, Sendrax turned his head sharply towards Crowe, and then away from him. The Knight of the Flame’s helm stared fixedly at the palace.

‘The Black Blade lies,’ Crowe said softly. The natural impulse would be to move closer to Sendrax, to invoke the confidence of brotherhood. Instead, Crowe took a few steps away, putting a little bit more distance between Sendrax and the sword.

‘I know it does.’ Sendrax sounded offended by the reminder.

‘But it does with skill, brother. It always knows which lies to tell.’

When Sendrax said nothing, Crowe continued with the briefing as if there had been no disagreement. He noticed Setheno’s hard, golden eyes had focused on

Sendrax. It was rare that Crowe had seen anyone outside the Chapter look upon a Grey Knight with judgement. Rarer still to feel that individual possessed the moral authority to do so.

Drake was also watching the exchange. He had removed his helmet. There was no expression on his metallic face, but his eyes were troubled.

'We will attack the palace gate as one force,' Crowe said. 'That would appear to be our sole point of access.' He had examined the peaks of the towers through telescopic lenses. There were no windows. The towers might as well have been gargantuan lightning rods. He would not rule out that possibility. 'Knight of the Flame Sendrax,' Crowe said, 'your squad will take the south tower. Justicar Styer, the north tower is yours. Knight of the Flame Drake, your squad and I will make for the centre of the palace.'

'That leaves the *Catharsis*,' said Furia.

'Once we are through the gates, one gunship will suffice to hold back the daemons while we are inside. The other will bring you to the *Tyndaris*. Shipmaster Saalfrank, do you understand what will be required of you?'

'*I do, castellan. We will engage the* Catharsis.'

'Be wary. The enemy may well be able to direct the lightning in the same way that the towers do.'

'*Understood.*'

'We will board the enemy if necessary,' said Setheno.

'Brother Berinon,' Crowe said, 'you will transport the Canoness Errant and the inquisitor's forces. Return to us once they are aboard.' He spoke presuming extraction would be possible. The Knights of the Flame and the justicar were equipped with personal teleporters. Should the worst happen, they would make use of that means to return to the *Tyndaris*.

Crowe looked at the squads. The handful of warriors before him were also a rampart. They were the hammer of the Emperor, and the tip of his spear, but they were also the shield of the Imperium. They were the defence against which the enemy's weapon of annihilation would shatter.

No shield, said the sword. ***No wall. No hope. No edge but me. No sword but me. You are mine, warden, though you cannot see your fall. It is coming. You will turn to me. It is written.***

At the base of the ruins, the *Malleus Maleficarum* arrived, Techmarine Bray having negotiated the maze of streets strewn with rubble or fallen into chasms. Its guns turned towards the symbol that marked the unnatural path up the palace's rock.

It was time.

Crowe advanced through another sea of daemons. If he looked up, he saw the shattered landscape of Algidus reaching up for him. He was high in the interior of one of the arching curves of the symbol. The taint of the shape squirmed around him, rock hissing with sensuous languor to the clash of weapons and claws. The Grey Knights were literally moving within a daemonic design, and this truth disturbed him.

Drake made the same connection. '*We are forced to follow the path laid out for us by the foe*,' he voxed. He ducked beneath the pincers of two daemonettes and blasted their thoraxes in half.

'Perhaps,' said Crowe. He decapitated a fiend with the sword, and cleared the path ahead with a steady burst from his storm bolter. 'Then we will smash the enemy's art with the force of our faith. It seeks to contain us in the frame of its creation, and we will explode it.'

The *Malleus Maleficarum*'s auto-cannons churned the ground ahead, and the Stormravens made repeated passes past the rune, strafing the abominations. From Crowe's perspective, the gunships appeared to be flying at impossible angles, now vertical, now upside down, depending on his position within the symbol. With the path the only route to the palace gates, the mass of daemons found their movements restricted, and their means of escaping the bombardments few. Some leapt from the path onto the almost vertical cliff face. When they did, gravity reasserted itself and they tumbled down the huge rock, raging against the Grey Knights. The abominations whose forms were not smashed to pulp in the fall had a long climb before they could attack again.

The circling twists of the rune prevented Crowe from seeing how close his strike force was to the peak. The climb became the totality of the campaign. The rhythms of the advance were mesmerising. The hard, monotonous butchery seemed endless. Crowe guarded against the impact of the tedium. The certainty it engendered was lethal. So, too, was the way the sameness and the repetitions grasped at Crowe's instincts and tried to make him part of the great daemonic song.

He countered the song with prayer. He recited the First Psalm of Sacred Extermination, and his brothers joined him. The vox-casters from their armour and mounted on the sides of the *Malleus* boomed their words across the cliff face. '*Blessed by the Emperor is the warrior that walketh against the daemon, the traitor and the heretic*,' they thundered. '*His reward is the wrath of the*

Emperor, and His law doth he render with fury day and night. His strength shall not wither, and whatsoever he striketh shall fall unto dust. The unclean are like chaff before him, which the wind driveth away. For the Emperor knoweth the way of the righteous, but the way of the tainted shall perish.'

The psalm was a slash of a blade through the world-shaking sound of the daemon song. It had the purity of silver, a peal against the stain of the abomination. The Black Blade snarled in anger. It tried to shout down Crowe's thoughts. It lashed out at his brothers. But the psalm resounded without hesitation, striking the daemons as surely as the bolt shells and Nemesis weapons.

As Crowe roared the last stanza, the path of the rune ended and he reached the peak of the mount. The entrance to the palace loomed ahead. Close up, the exquisite construction of the structure was even more apparent. The art of the palace surpassed its function as a fortress. *And that will be your weakness*, Crowe promised.

The fusion of violet-and-white stone was perfect. The colours were interweaving veins that spiralled and coiled around palace and the towers. There were no seams, no signs of masonry at all. The building now seemed less carved than grown, a full expression of inorganic purpose. It was the stone's destiny, what it had always been fated to become. The walls curved in and out, and combined with the swirl of the colours, the palace resembled a wave frozen in mid-contortion. It did not move, yet it conjured movement, and inspired it. The daemons at the walls swayed and gyrated, echoing the lines of the architecture. To look upon the palace was to feel the urge to join in the foul dance.

There were no windows anywhere on the walls of the towers. The palace looked inwards, and it summoned the eyes of those outside. It contained its own truths, and had no need to gaze outside its confines. The only opening was the huge archway. Its doors were in a state of constant flux, their being flowing between stone, flesh and bone and towering cataracts of blood. The daemons cavorted before them, consumed with desire for what lay inside the palace, passing through in the moments when bone turned into blood. The abominations in the rear turned to block the Grey Knights. They attacked without breaking from the rhythms of the dance. The song held them, and they held tightly to it.

They ran into the concentrated fire of the Stormravens and the Crusader. The storm of shells and las hammered the doors, the fist of the Emperor's justice demanding entrance. The palace reacted by sealing the entrance. Flesh burned, bone cracked, and craters opened in stone, but then blood washed over the

whole, swallowing the impacts, and when it passed, the doors were untouched once more. No other daemons crossed the threshold. The force inside the palace had decreed that the Grey Knights would advance no further.

As the holocaust of high explosives and molten energy raged, Crowe raised his hands, and the full strike force joined him in a collective blast of anathema. They banished the reality of the doors, and the palace screamed. Between the Grey Knights and the walls, daemons burned and disintegrated, cannons and psychic force cutting short their wails and their song. The *Harrower* and the *Purgation's Sword* launched a volley of Stormstrike missiles. The impact of the overlapping concussive blasts and incandescent faith was devastating. The rippling booms of the Grey Knights' combined strength overwhelmed, for a moment, the earth-shaking beat of the daemonic rhythm. Hundreds of daemons vanished, thrown back to the immaterium, and the doors collapsed, sagging into a ruin of melted, shredded flesh. The way into the palace was clear.

'Now, brothers,' Crowe called. 'Now let us tear out the heart of the enemy.' He charged forward, his cloak billowing in the wind of the explosions. His banner flew proudly above the staggered mass of the daemons. He held the Black Blade high, a challenge and a declaration. Let the abominations see and understand that he held this evil prisoner, and he wielded it against its will. Let them seek his destruction. He would send them to theirs. He blazed with the light of purification. It was a fire to consume every unclean thing. Purity came from the unwavering fidelity to the annihilation of the Emperor's foe. In Crowe, purity became an unstoppable force of violence.

The Grey Knights entered the palace, crossing the threshold into a vast, oval hall. The ceiling was hundreds of feet high. It was supported by scores of pillars, thin as a man's leg, bending and curling along their heights like entranced serpents. The walls of amethyst and opal were polished to a mirrored perfection. They reflected every movement in the space as huge, distorted, waving silhouettes. At each end of the hall, a spiral staircase swept up into the towers. The steps were two hundred feet wide at their base, but narrowed quickly as they curved upwards. In the centre of the hall, the inverted dome of the palace plunged down until it ended flush with floor level. Beneath it, the floor fell away in a steep, perfectly carved pit of smooth stone. A narrow staircase dropped straight into its depths, a steep plummet to damnation. From the rounded bottom of the dome, the lightning from the *Catharsis* blasted into the pit. Its thunder shook the walls of the palace every few seconds. The beats from the towers, more distant, were almost subdued by comparison. Yet they, too, rattled the spine

and pounded at the soul.

It seemed to Crowe that they were entering more than the palace. They were inside the song itself, though not yet at its heart.

That waited for him below. He was certain of that.

In the pit, on the staircases, hanging from the pillars, and thronging the floor of the chamber, the daemons of Slaanesh shouted and sang. The walls echoed with their celebration, but there was a hint of discordance. They were not perfectly in tune with the song that held the Angriff system in its grip. The breach of the palace gate had torn them from their revel. Their howls were defiant.

At last, Crowe thought. *At last, we are not welcome. We are a threat.*

He roared his challenge. He let the daemons know they were right to fear him and his brothers. Then he attacked, silver and light stabbing into the sanctuary of excess.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Music of Ruin

The spiral staircase narrowed quickly. Soon after it entered the tower itself, there was barely room for two of Sendrax's battle-brothers to fight side by side. The daemons were crowded in the spire, the mob so dense that Sendrax was sure they filled every bit of space to the top of the tower. Their numbers made it even more difficult for them to mount an effective counter to the advance of the Purifiers. They squirmed against each other, lashing out as best they could. Only their mass slowed Sendrax down at all. He felt that he was not fighting a war as much as he was carving his way through a single wall of daemonflesh.

'This is not a struggle I will remember with pride,' Klandon said. He dragged his Nemesis force sword through the torso of a fiend that had managed to lunge past Sendrax. 'This is just manual labour.'

Beside him, Letholdus fired upwards, catching a daemonette that had leapt up over the squad. The shells slammed through the daemon and against the next twist of the stairs. Stone chips and dust fell on the Grey Knights.

'At least we need not be concerned about having our forces spread too thin,' said Harsath. He was bringing up the rear, training his psilencer on any abominations that tried to follow. The gun channelled his psychic force into pulses. They took apart the body and essence of the daemons. The wake of the Purifiers was a slick of ruined bodies down the steps, a soft river of flesh.

'We want nothing now,' Sendrax agreed. He loosed a quick burst from his storm bolter, and carved out another few steps of passage between the daemons. Wounded daemonettes closed in around him, water flowing to fill a gap, and he

cut them down with quick, angry slashes of his Nemesis blade. Their fallen pincers crunched under his boots as he moved upwards again. ‘But we have not reached our goal yet.’

Freed by Sendrax’s open questioning of Crowe’s orders, Klandon said, ‘Is this even where we should be?’

No, Sendrax thought, *it is not.* He said nothing. Despite his anger, he would not give voice yet to the extent he believed Crowe to be mistaken. *We should all be attacking the centre of the palace*, he thought. That was where the greatest application of force would be needed, and where the enemy would be found. He was certain of that. Crowe had sent him after a secondary target, keeping the glory of the real triumph to himself and Drake. His rational mind knew better than to believe Crowe had made the decision for selfish reasons. But the error was clear to him. His and Styer’s squads were being wasted. He wasn’t convinced sending Furia and Setheno to the *Tyndaris* was the best move, either.

‘We are where we are,’ he said. That was as much as he would say for now. ‘Where we should be is the top of this tower.’ He fired the storm bolter again, and lunged up another few steps.

The squad moved on, higher and higher into the tower. Sendrax felt as if he were inside the artery of a monstrous being. The confines were so tight, and the climb so endless. The closer they came to the top of the tower, the more the beat from the warp lightning blasts sunk into his being. The walls of the tower pulsed with energy. It flowed upwards, drawn from the agony in the city and from the depths of the planet itself. Light of violet and bone brightened and dimmed with the rhythm of the daemon music. The tempo and the foul melody seemed more solid than the daemons Sendrax destroyed. It squeezed his mind and tried to seize his limbs. More than once, he caught himself firing the storm bolter in time with the song. He snarled at himself and at the influence.

‘Brothers,’ he warned, ‘govern your movements. Do not let the enemy’s art dictate them.’ He began to shout the Psalm of Extermination once more. He put the full force of his voice into the beginning of each line, fighting to create his own rhythm against that of the shattering beat of the tower.

Sendrax was startled when the climb came to an abrupt end. A fiend threw itself at him, trying to knock him back down the stairs. Its howl was desperate, and when Sendrax slit it open along the entire length of its thorax, and it fell to the side, he saw why. It was the last of the daemons before him.

The stairs ended at a vortex of stone. There was no door of any kind, only the wall endlessly spinning into itself and endlessly renewing itself. The contorted

flows of the stone from the side walls and ceiling were unbroken by any seam. The thunder of energy blasts on the other side was deafening, and the pulses were so bright that the wall seemed as though it should be as warm and pliable as flesh.

Sendrax fired a quick burst of shells into the vortex. They vanished into the storm, but their blasts triggered ripples in the spiral, and the movement stuttered. The barrier was strong, but it was not invulnerable.

'I want melta bombs on this wall,' Sendrax said. 'Let us break through and have done with this unclean place.' He struck the vortex once with the pommel of his sword. The stone began to vibrate. His blow rippled around the peak of the tower, and he heard movement on the other side. In the pause between the lightning blasts, there was a clink of chains, and a snarl.

Perhaps we have a worthy enemy after all, he thought.

He retreated a few steps while Letholdus and Klandon set the charges, then went down one turn of the spiral with the full squad, walking back through the butchered remains of the abominations. The tower stank of corruption. The heady, rotting perfume of indescribable vice hung over the disintegrating bodies.

'Get us in,' Sendrax told Klandon.

The Purifier triggered the detonator. The tower above flashed with a pure and true light of molten destruction. Searing heat rushed down the staircase, shrivelling the daemon remains. At the sound of falling stone Sendrax started back up the stairs.

Before he reached the top again, laughter came to meet him. Laughter that was eager and full of anger. Laughter that was familiar.

In the near orbit of Angriff Primus, the void war began. The *Tyndaris* fired the initial volley. Shipmaster Saalfrank maintained a healthy distance between the *Tyndaris* and the *Catharsis* as he manoeuvred the strike cruiser into a position that brought its broadsides to bear on the stern of the enemy. The Emperor's Children vessel did not move at all.

'Surely they know we're here,' said Ambach.

'They cannot move,' Setheno said. Through the oculus, she watched the lightning gather along the full length of the hull, and then lash down from the centre towards the planet. 'They need this anchor position.' She exchanged a look with Furia.

'So if they know we are here, they know how vulnerable they are,' said the inquisitor.

‘And will have contingencies in place.’

Saalfrank said, ‘The assault ram is prepared. It can launch as soon as you board, canoness.’

‘Then fire your guns, shipmaster,’ Furia said.

The *Tyndaris* unleashed torpedoes, cannon shells and lance fire at the *Catharsis*. It was a killing salvo. Setheno counted off the seconds to impact, watching the streaks of wrath carve the void towards the enemy ship. The *Catharsis*’ void shields flashed with terminal brilliance on impact. The heavy lance fire strained them, and moments later the cannon shell collapsed them. Then the torpedoes hit. The attack was a triple hammer blow of destruction. Saalfrank had the luxury of choosing his position and his armament for maximum effect. It was an assault that would have turned a lesser ship into a ball of burning plasma. It should have crippled the *Catharsis*. It could have been enough to rupture its engines.

Instead, though the void shields had failed, another force took hold of the torpedo explosions. The fireballs spread like fire on promethium, attenuating as they covered more and more of the strike cruiser. For a few seconds, the *Catharsis* became a torch. Then it seemed the flames were inhaled, sucked into the lower portion of the hull. They vanished as the lightning flashed again.

This time it did not reach down to Angriff Primus. It struck the *Tyndaris*.

The oculus flashed white. The vessel shook hard. Control stations erupted in warp flame, burning the officers and servitors in their vicinity. The walls of the bridge glowed, and the deck twisted, its surface writhing like a nest of insects. Klaxons screamed, cut off suddenly and the power stuttered, then came back with even more shrieking urgency. Saalfrank stiffened in the command throne. His cry of pain resonated with the groans of the hull, and he gave voice to the pain of the *Tyndaris*’ machine-spirit. The deck lost its warp taint and became solid again, but the shudders of the hull went on. Servitors began intoning damage reports. The monotony of their voices belied the severity of the vessel’s injuries.

‘Pulling back,’ Saalfrank rasped. The background rumble of the engines grew, and an angry vibration rattled the walls. The shipmaster was demanding a sudden, violent effort from the steering and the engines at the precise moment that they were least capable of providing it. ‘We cannot take a hit like that again.’

Setheno and Furia were already moving towards the exit from the bridge.

‘Do not give the *Catharsis* reason to use that weapon again,’ Furia said. ‘If their

position is so important, then so must be sending that energy below. Continue to retreat after we launch the Caestus. Preserve the *Tyndaris*, shipmaster.'

As they headed down the corridors towards the launch bay, Furia mused, 'What odds, canoness, that the assault ram will be able to pierce the enemy's hull?'

'If the *Catharsis* reacted, then it is vulnerable.' Setheno contemplated the monstrous dance of the planets, and the necessity of disrupting the strike cruiser's function. 'We will board it if we have to tear the plates apart by hand.'

The passage through the rift brought the Emperor's Children to a chamber of overwhelming light. Above them, a sphere of blinding warp lightning formed and discharged, formed and discharged. Ten thousand tendrils crackled from the glowing walls, feeding into the centre of the room. In moments, they created a globe fifty feet wide. It was quasar bright, a concentrated essence of Chaos. It expanded to fill the chamber, and then it vanished, becoming the lightning that lashed the planets into their dance. The thunder came in the wake of each disappearance, and each concussion was a cataclysm. Tarautas gasped with grateful agony with each beat. He was inside creation. He was standing at the zero point of where a portion of the music came into being. The assault on his senses was so complete he was in a state of permanent ecstasy. He would do everything to preserve this state, and to see the triumph of art.

There was no exit from the chamber. It was a perfect hemisphere. The rift had closed as soon as it had brought the warband to this spot. For Gothola, the light was too massive a shock. His cultivation of the senses was too crude. He retreated from perfection, and fixated on the sealed room. 'You have betrayed us!' Gothola shouted, and leapt at Tarautas' throat. It was a reckless, clumsy jump, and Tarautas countered it easily. He sidestepped, seized Gothola's arm and hurled him to the floor. He pinned Gothola down, and jabbed his narthecium drills in a warning against his neck. 'You are not betrayed, brother,' he said. 'We are rewarded.' He did not wish to anaesthetise Gothola. Not now. At this moment, they should all share in the immensity of sensation.

And he had no doubt they would soon be called upon to defend the sublimity they beheld.

Utheian and Belagas were silent, transfixed by the rhythmic creation of the sphere. Casca, whose faith was the strongest, was on his knees, arms upraised as if he might embrace the sphere.

'Look upon the glory,' Tarautas commanded Gothola, and pulled him up, still keeping the narthecium at his neck. Tarautas turned Gothola's face towards the

sphere. ‘Look!’ he cried.

Rebirth followed thunder. Thunder followed rebirth. The music sounded, and a system revolved at the behest of art.

‘This,’ said Tarautas, ‘is what we have come to defend. And we *will* be called upon. The Grey Knights in their dreary faith will come to destroy the glory. They will fail. We will witness the triumph of the empire of the senses. But we must preserve this art. Do you understand, brother?’

The chamber flashed and darkened. Thunder exploded. The colossal rhythm worked upon Gothola. He began to nod, slowly at first, then with true conviction. He saw and understood, and he was ready.

Tarautas released him. ‘Brothers,’ he said, calling them away from their rapture. ‘Check your weapons. As surely as we have been summoned here, the enemy will come.’

The Grey Knights proved the truth of his words a few moments later. A portion of the flawless wall glowed with angry, blinding spots. It began to melt.

‘Now we fight,’ Tarautas said. ‘This is our time. Destroy the enemies of art.’

The moment the melta bombs broke through the wall, a hail of bolter shells and a wave of sonic destruction blasted out of the chamber. The blistering assault screamed over Styer’s head as he tried to climb the stairs to the level of the breach. Confined by the walls of the tower, the opening was narrow, though with his eyes at the level of the floor, Styer could see that the peak of the tower bulged. The chamber beyond was large.

Styer ducked back down. The torrent of fire did not abate.

‘They can keep this up for a long time,’ he said. ‘I estimate a squad’s strength.’ If positions were reversed, he would be able to hold the position. The breach was small, and there was no other access possible.

Immense flashes from the chamber immediately preceded each lightning blast. Gared gazed past Styer. His eyes were focused on a vision beyond the wall. ‘This is a node of power,’ he said. ‘The evil that holds the system draws part of its strength from this point.’

‘No one questions the need to take it,’ Vohnum said. ‘The question is how.’

‘We need a second breach,’ said Tygern.

‘If you can summon more wall for us, brother, I will follow you gladly.’

Styer moved a few more steps down, out of the line of sight of the defenders of the chamber. He placed his gauntlet against the wall on his right. ‘Here,’ he said.

‘That’s the outside wall,’ Vohnum objected.

‘I’m aware of that, brother. Get us through it.’

Styer pulled the rest of the squad down another spiral while Vohnum applied more demolition charges. When the melta bombs broke through, wind screamed down the staircase. Styer moved up and took another bomb from Vohnum. He shouldered his force hammer, maglocking it to his back. He grabbed the still-glowing edge of the breach and leaned out into a night of thunder and fury. A vista of the ravaged city stretched out to the horizon. The smoke of countless fires coiled upwards. The jagged fissures cutting through streets and buildings formed a web of devastation that invited the gaze, threatening to turn into a pattern, and then into dark meaning.

Styer turned away from doomed Algidus and looked up at the curve of the hemispherical chamber above, gauging how far he could leap.

‘I will open a second front,’ he voxed the squad. ‘Gared, you will create a third.’

‘*Understood, justicar.*’

‘Begin now.’ Styer triggered the melta bomb. Below, the warp energies gathered around Gared. Styer counted down the seconds to its detonation, then hurled the bomb at the chamber’s wall. His target was at least ten feet to the right of the existing breach. The difference was not great, but in conjunction with Gared’s strike, it might be enough.

The melta bomb exploded as it hit the wall. Styer leapt towards the flash. He fired his storm bolter as he flew. The wall fell away before him and he landed inside the chamber with the stone still flowing. In the same moment, a warp tunnel ripped through the materium and Gared materialised at the rear of the chamber, behind the warband of the Emperor’s Children.

One of the Traitors was already reacting to Styer’s breach. Sound, transformed into a ravening thing, hit him like a battering ram. It threw him back, and he barely managed to shift his mass and fall sideways to avoid going out of the breach. But then, standing beneath the appearing and disappearing sphere of warp energy, Gared opened fire, pulling more of the enemy’s attention.

The Emperor’s Children lost their focus. Vohnum and Tygern sent their counter fire through the breach. Styer sprayed the warband with shells. Tygern lunged. Bolt shells caught him in chest and shoulder, spinning him around. His Terminator armour saved him from death. He took the blows and the wounds, acting as a shield long enough for Vohnum, Gundemar and Ardax to burst into the chamber.

There were two squads in the chamber now. Styer’s battle-brothers

outnumbered the Emperor's Children by two. But the monstrous eruptions of energy worked against the Grey Knights. The power of the chamber was the power that controlled the movement of planets, and it would not tolerate the invaders.

The Emperor's Children tightened their formation into a circle. The Grey Knights surrounded them. Shells, sonic blasts and warp fire erupted across the chamber between the two forces. The sphere vanished, the thunder roared, and then the coruscating tendrils struck inwards from the walls again. They were beyond counting, and this time, as if attracted to a purity that must be destroyed, scores of them lashed the Grey Knights with the lightning of distilled Chaos.

The abominations filled the bowl beneath the dome. They raged at Crowe and Drake's squad. The songs of the daemonettes were threaded with desperate anger. The hooting whistles of the fiends were high-pitched, shrieking warnings. They fought the Purifiers in a manner Crowe had rarely seen in the creatures of the Dark Prince. The daemons took no pleasure in their struggle. The sensuality of the monsters was subsumed by cruel precision and an implacable, focused need to destroy the foe. There was no attempt to seduce humans with obscene extremities of sensation. The daemons sought to stop the Purifiers' advance, and nothing more.

Yet even in their desperation, they were monsters of the art. They remained linked to the palace's cosmic song. Their movements and the waves of their attacks were governed by the dread rhythm.

Crowe used their nature against them. He used their desperation, too. The assault of the daemonic tempo was more than familiar to him now. It was as firm and constant as the floor beneath his feet. He read the timing of the daemons' attacks, and hit them in the gaps between the beats. He lunged with the Black Blade as if he were attacking the music itself. One daemon at a time, he broke the choir.

The more abominations he destroyed, the more urgent their need to stop him became. They grew more and more reckless. Many threw themselves at him, trying to stop him through sheer mass. They burned as they came near. The light of purity at its most unforgiving turned them, screaming, to ash.

Behind him, Drake's squad carved a wide path through the monsters. They marched down the bowl's staircase with a deliberate pace. Destrian's incinerator and Venrik's psycannon scythed through the approaching daemons. The Nemesis weapons and storm bolters took apart those that made it through the fire and

psychic bolts.

The resistance stiffened the closer the Purifiers came to the bottom of the bowl. The blowback from the lightning strikes grew fiercer. Gorvenal maintained a constant litany of prayer over the vox, and Crowe could hear the strain in his voice. Only the most infinitesimal portion of the energy escaped into the wider area of the bowl. Even so, the shocks that radiated through the materium were worse than any of the daemonic blows. Reality turned brittle. The immaterium pushed at the weakening veil.

Crowe descended into a gathering storm. It buffeted him. Flecks of warp fire scraped at him like the blasts of a sandstorm.

The stairs ended at a level area a few dozen yards in diameter. In the centre, the lightning struck a circular void. The gap was less than ten feet across. Having failed to stop the Purifiers' descent, the daemons now tried to hurl them into the lightning.

'Defend our position,' Crowe ordered. 'We must be the authors of our next move.'

Destrian and Venrik took up the rear and trained their weapons up the slope, creating a shield of opposing fire. Gorvenal and Carac wove storm bolter fire between the flames and psycannon bolts. They held the daemons back, though the position was tenuous.

Crowe approached the gap in the floor. Drake followed, giving him covering fire.

'You plan to go through that?' Drake asked, disbelieving.

'Somehow,' Crowe answered. Something was being fed by the lightning. The true enemy was not yet apparent. There was somewhere deeper to go, even if that was not necessarily still in the palace.

After each lightning strike, the opening flashed again. Energy spun in a seething vortex. The storm was a momentary one, but before it could dissipate, the lightning hit again. There was no mistaking the enormous destructive power of the bolts. If he was hit by one, his annihilation would be instant. Even the residual maelstrom was far too powerful. The way was closed.

'We cannot pass that,' said Drake.

'No,' Crowe agreed. Without taking his eyes from the opening, he slashed the Blade to the right, piercing a fiend through its open jaw, severing its skull in two. 'Yet there is no other path for us.' The only exits from the great hall were the tower staircases. He had to get through.

Crowe moved forward, placing each step carefully, exterminating any daemon

near him before advancing. ‘This is the palace’s true gate,’ he told Drake. ‘Everything around us is a mere vestibule. Our enemy hides on the other side.’ He watched each vortex closely. The lightning strikes dazzled him. Every yard he crossed intensified the level of warp energy hitting him. Even if he didn’t get any closer to the gate, it would be lethal to remain here for any length of time.

Which death do you choose? Antwyr asked. ***Will you stay, stymied and withering, or will you let the lightning put an end to your futility? This is the extent of your choice, warden. Make it. I tire of you, and would be free.***

Minute flames of warp energy flickered up and down the length of the Black Blade. They twined around it, momentary serpents of blue and violet.

‘Look,’ said Crowe. ‘The vortex *does* end just before the lightning comes again. There is a fraction of a second when the gate is dark.’

‘I do not see it,’ Drake said.

‘Keep looking.’

They stopped less than ten feet from the edge of the gate. The squad held the abominations at bay. Crowe and Drake punished the few stragglers who approached with bursts of bolter fire. An army of daemons lined the slopes of the bowl, but they did not dare come this close to the lightning. It was as lethal to them as it was to the Grey Knights.

‘I think I see now,’ said Drake. ‘But that moment is too brief. It is of no use to us.’

‘I know,’ Crowe said. Drake was right. Even if he timed his leap perfectly, it would take too long to fall through the gate. ‘Yet I must,’ he said. He took another step forward. Then another.

He risked opening himself up by a small degree to the daemonic song. The rhythm travelled through his body. The monstrous beat of the lightning strikes took hold of his hearts. His fingers twitched, keeping time. Existence narrowed to the lightning and the rhythm. He was only dimly aware that Drake was still firing his storm bolter. Crowe was motionless. He absorbed the intricacies of the song. It was foul. It was the music of damnation. He rejected its blandishments, and he anatomised its elements. As he learned the names of daemons, he learned the soul of the song.

He knew the moments of the lightning and the seconds of the vortex as he knew his own breathing. He could see the splinter of time when the gate was dark clearly now. That did him no good. The window was too small. No amount of precision would change that.

Yet he must pass.

Take your leap, the sword urged. ***Become futility.***

Necessity and Antwyr's demands converged. The omen was an ill one.

Drake was keeping pace with him now. 'I do not ask this of you,' Crowe said.

'I demand it, castellan. I stand with you, and I shall cross this gate with you.'

Crowe nodded his thanks. It would have been an injustice to attempt to acknowledge their century and more of brotherhood in words.

They were a leap away from the gate. The shockwaves from the blasts battered them with the force of hurricanes. The thunder could shatter worlds. It seemed to Crowe that if he leapt, he would be hurled backwards. The displays on his auto-senses burst with static. Warning runes flickered on and off. He was standing in the midst of a fraying veil between the materium and the empyrean at its most violent.

Now! Antwyr cried. ***Now! Now! Now! Now!*** The sword sought to break his concentration. It shouted and roared against the daemonic rhythm in an effort to throw off Crowe's timing. Drake grunted in distress.

'Shut the Blade from your mind,' Crowe said. 'Its cries are desperate. The Emperor protects. Have faith that he will see us through this passage.'

'I have faith,' Drake answered. 'The Emperor is my guide.'

'We are the guardians of his walls.'

'Our watch will never falter.'

Crowe's sense of the music's timing grew more and more refined. Still the darkness was too brief. No degree of understanding could lengthen its stay.

The Emperor protects. The Emperor *would* guide him through the gate, because it was Crowe's duty to reach the other side, and his faith was absolute. *We shall cross*, he thought. *It is written.*

He waited and he endured. The lightning blinded, the blasts punished, and the sword howled. He was unmoved. He leaned forward against all the forces of destruction. He watched, and from this new rampart he would not move until the time came to strike the enemy.

And the time did come. The vortex of energy in the gate faded. The moment of dark came. But the lightning strike did not. The beat was missing. The great rhythm stuttered.

Crowe had no hesitation. The instant the blast did not come, he leapt, and so did Drake. Now there was time, as the two beats of the towers sounded. Crowe did not ask what would happen once he dropped through the gate. He did not ask whether he would simply fall into the dark and be struck by the lightning when it returned. He knew what he must do, and that was enough. To defend the

ramparts of the Imperium, he must fall.

So he fell, and Drake fell with him. Through the dark, into the maw of night, to the centre of the art of ruin.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Unmasked

The Caestus ram hit the *Catharsis* just sternward of amidships, low in the hull. It was piloted by Brion Thesten, one of Furia's Astra Militarum veterans. He timed the impact for the moments immediately following one of the lightning strikes at the planet. His judgement was sound, and the assault ram drove through the adamantium plates of the strike cruiser's armour. The squad accompanying Setheno and Furia disembarked through a tangle of ruined walls into the dank corridors. The Caestus' arrival triggered electrical fires and ruptured coolant pipes. Live steam and black smoke filled the passageway. The hull thrummed with the greater shocks of the lightning strikes. In between each discharge, the walls and bulkheads crackled with the build-up. Micro-tendrils of warp energy crackled against Setheno's armour when she brushed close to a wall. The perversion of the ship was clear even in the obscurity. Conduits looked too much like veins. A mosaic of rapturous atrocity ran the length of the ceiling, its tiles carved out of human bone and teeth.

The strike force moved through the steam and smoke, heading towards the bow. The direction to choose was clear, though it was difficult to see more than a few yards ahead. The entire ship vibrated with the strain of the discharges, and the tremors ran to amidships, as if the *Catharsis*' very being was being sucked in to that point. Setheno and Furia had agreed on their target before the Caestus had launched. They would not seek to control the bridge. The primary objective was the mechanism, whatever it might be, that fired the lightning and fed the enemy.

There were bodies in the hall, mortal heretics killed by the explosive arrival of

the ram ship. There were more bodies, though, past the site of the damage. Setheno took the lead, and found a wide staircase leading to the deeper levels. The dead here had adorned its golden bannister for some time. They had been crucified, and their limbs wrapped around the metal, the bones broken in so many places the arms and legs bent like tentacles. Their scarified flesh was black with decomposition, and shone with viscous fluids. Some of the corpses had been here a long time, and were desiccated husks. Others had been added recently. Midway down the stairs, Setheno saw one man who was still alive. His lower jaw was missing, his ribcage was exposed, and his slow, painful breaths rattled like wet stones. Though he was a victim, he was clad in heretical robes, and the electoos on his scalp were runes in praise of the Dark Prince.

'Perhaps the Traitors are running out of slaves,' Furia said with a quick, indifferent glance at the man.

'Perhaps,' Setheno said. She strode past the martyr to Chaos without pausing. He deserved no mercy.

The strike force advanced further down and towards the centre of the ship. It became easier to see. The walls and deck and ceiling glowed and pulsed with the ebb and flow of warp energy, and a permanent taint remained. There was no sign of any defenders yet. There were many more corpses. Fresh and old, murdered by mortals or by Space Marines, they had all suffered careful, meticulous agony. Furia's veterans gazed at the bodies with mounting horror. The men and women who served the inquisitor had witnessed much of the daemonic, and they had no illusions about the realities of war. But they were still human, and hardened as they were, they had not come through the crucibles of the Inquisition or the Adepta Sororitas. They had breaking points she had left behind long ago.

'Nothing you see here is worthy of your pity,' she told them. 'Everything on the ship is damned. You carry fire and you carry faith. Hold fast to those, and be merciless. Take satisfaction in the extermination to come, but beware pleasure. Be cold and be merciless, and that will be your salvation.'

Brauner nodded. 'So it has been before, canoness.'

'So it will always be, colonel.'

Voices reached them, rising from the shafts and halls. They were coming from further down, closer to the target.

'The heretics have chosen to concentrate their forces,' said Furia.

'Then our strategy is sound,' Setheno said. 'They guard what is most precious to them.'

She moved faster. The strike force descended four more decks. The chanting of

the heretics grew louder, and the glow of the walls became more intense. The sacrifices were also more numerous. The fourth deck was deep in the bowels of the hull, and the nature of the sacrifices changed. In a wide, vaulted hall, an arabesque of mummified bodies was sewn together midway up the walls, too high for mortals to reach. The limbs and skulls merged with each other, the human form all but vanishing into the lines and curves of the design, yet present through the insistence of dried blood, torn flesh and splintered bone. Beneath the arabesque was a new slaughter. The hall was wide, yet the deck was crowded with bodies on both sides. Most of the victims were still alive. There were hundreds of them, and they, too, were joined together. They writhed, and so the two human chains moved like serpents, wounded but in thrall to the rhythm of the daemon music. The immense beat of the *Catharsis*' lightning bolts dominated all, and the walls boomed with its echoes. But though the drumming of the palace's towers could not be heard, the tritone was present, and the dark melody that ruled the system reverberated through the ship like blood through veins.

The hall ran straight for the best part of a mile, a gallery of murder and torture. In the distance, it ended at a great door of silver and iron. It was incandescently bright from the energy being gathered and unleashed beyond it. Before it, the crew and worshippers of the *Catharsis* had gathered. Their voices were raised in celebration, delighted pain and defiance. They charged down the hall, a mass of blades and lasguns. Their robes and flesh were ripped with self-inflicted wounds. Their faces shone with fresh blood. They were ragged, yet their wounds were not simple. They had tortured each other, themselves and the victims on the sides of the hall, and they had done so with both frenzy and art. They rushed forward to enact their gospel of excess.

There was no shelter in the hall. Setheno pounded down the centre of the deck, a juggernaut of sepulchral grey. She drew the bulk of the fire. Furia, one step behind and to the side, made herself a secondary target. Setheno had the armour, and Furia the bionic replacements, to weather the shots. The greatest mass of the cultists were armed with melee weapons. They worshipped the art of the intimate murder, the sensuality of rending flesh, and the taste of jetting blood. They came to kill in close quarters.

'Cull this filth,' Furia ordered her squad. 'Fire for effect and keep your distance for as long as possible.'

Furia had come with only ten mortals, but their collective experience amounted to centuries of warfare. She had veterans of Cadia, and of Armageddon, and of

Pythos, and they had the weapons to fight worse foes than these. On either side of Setheno, triplex-pattern las shots and Metal Storm frag bolt shells tore past and into the cultists. A cloud of shell fragments shredded the first ranks of the enemy just ahead of her arrival. Heretics screamed. Their las-fire became more sporadic and uncontrolled.

Setheno charged into their midst with a long burst from her bolt pistol. She swung her power sword like a scythe, gutting a swathe of heretics in a single stroke. Furia stepped into the gap she had created. She lashed the mob with rapid-fire cracks of the neural whip, killing with lethal shocks to the nervous system, and followed up with her power knife, cutting throats so quickly, her victims' faces were frozen in surprise as they fell.

The cultists scrabbled at Setheno's armour with fingernails lengthened into claws. They grabbed at her cloak and tried to drag her down into the riot of their flesh. She cut them down with the sword and strode deeper into their midst, leaving a river of blood behind her. Her bolt pistol smashed the way ahead, and she walked into a welter of exploded bodies. Furia's squad stayed at long range, maintaining a steady barrage. The hall filled with the stinging odour of burned fyceline and wet stench of death. The mob of heretics swayed and attacked in time with the daemonic song. The music seemed to embrace the mass death. It tried to reach into Setheno, to subtly change the speed of her blows and her pulls of the trigger, to make her attack just another part of the choir. It ran into her freezing clarity of perception. It encountered faith at its most brutal, and most utterly devoid of hope. She rejected the music. She attacked the cultists with even greater force.

'These wretches cannot be the only defences the Traitors left behind,' said Furia. Despite her electronic monotone, her words dripped with contempt.

'Their arrogance will not have reached as far as stupidity,' Setheno agreed. The door drew closer, and she slaughtered the cultists with impatience. They were not worthy even of the effort it took to kill them. She and Furia were wading through detritus.

Setheno's armour turned away swords and hooks. Whenever las charge hit, she aimed her bolt pistol in the direction of the shooter and brought the wretch down. The attacks against Furia were no more successful. Her speed and agility were such, it was as if she were an extension of the whip. When a cultist did land a blow, it was more often against metal than flesh. Furia was bleeding by the time they reached the door, but her wounds did not slow her. Her red, crystal eyes blazed with focused wrath.

Behind them, less than a third of the cultists were still alive. The squad closed in to complete the extermination.

To Setheno's surprise, the door opened as she and Furia approached. The two halves parted, sliding back into the wall with a groan. Beyond the threshold was a huge amphitheatre. It was a realm of transcendent cruelty and overpowering energy.

The flash of a discharge dazzled Setheno, and a voice boomed from within the infernal light. It was ancient and inhuman. It was wise with cruelty, and filled with appetite beyond name and satiation. It was the voice of a thing that craved the sublime of extreme sensation, but was forever cut off from the flesh. Denial had turned it into a thing of madness and wrath. '*I hunger!*' it roared. '*Feed me with your death!*'

The Emperor's Children Dreadnought lumbered out of the light.

Denial tried to hold Sendrax back from the chamber. It tried to shield him from the despair of what he knew he would see. He bellowed his challenge instead, and ran up the stairs, already firing his storm bolter. His battle-brothers were with him, and their shouts echoed his. Harsath and Klandon sounded the same note of desperate anger. Unlike Letholdus, they had been with him on Sandava II. They had heard that voice before. Like him, they heard the sound of their past coming back to mock and destroy.

The enemy is here after all, Sendrax thought. *Crowe was wrong to divide our strength. We are the victims of a game of vengeance.*

Mnay'salath stood in the centre of the chamber. The bane of Sandava II had returned to the materium.

And Sendrax stared, momentarily confused.

The Keeper of Secrets was bound, held by chains of eldritch energy in the middle of a runic circle. Its four limbs were splayed wide, chains of warp fire running from them to the wall. More than a century after the Grey Knights had destroyed its material form, the bane of Sandava II had been returned to the material plane a prisoner. Its punishment was to be the source of the energy for this tower's lightning blasts. The daemon shuddered and, at the command of the terrible music, a sphere of lightning built over its head, filling the dome of the chamber. Foul light rose from the daemon's being, feeding the sphere. Mnay'salath arched in agony, yet its eyes never left the Purifiers. It screamed and it laughed.

The sphere vanished. The thunder boomed, the great rhythm shifted to the other

tower and the centre of the palace, and as the sphere began to form again, Mnay'salath said, '***Slaanesh blesses my penance and gifts me with revenge***.'

'You have nothing, monster,' Sendrax told it. 'Banish this abomination,' he said, and the Purifiers formed a circle outside the perimeter of the ring. The sphere formed and vanished. Sendrax reached out psychically to his brothers.

Mnay'salath struck. The chains holding its arms lengthened as it reached for the Grey Knights. They did not release the daemon, but nor did they restrict the sudden violence of its movement. The daemon's reflexes were faster than any enhancement of the human form. It grabbed each of the Purifiers with one of its arms. Pincers that could sever iron sank their edges into Klandon and Harsath's armour. Long, clawed fingers wrapped around Sendrax and Letholdus. Mnay'salath lifted Sendrax before its face and parted its jaws. A tongue that was not a tongue but a whip shot out of the maw and coiled about Sendrax's head and upper torso.

The electric pain that convulsed him was as familiar as the daemon's laughter. The daemon had used the same sorcery against him on Sandava II. Then it had struck him a single blow and sent him flying. Now the shocks of eldritch energy were constant and intensifying. His jaw clenched, and his teeth ground so hard they splintered. The daemon whip surged with power. His body and his soul were fused into a single mass of nova agony, yet his limbs felt a hundred miles away from his consciousness. His fingers twitched involuntarily. It took a heroic effort of will to force his fist closed around the hilt of his force sword. Mnay'salath held his arms against his sides. He could not break the grip. His sword and his storm bolter were useless. He had only his psychic strength.

The pain surged and burned. It melted his thoughts, tearing his self apart. He could not focus. His counter-attack dissolved with his will.

Mnay'salath screamed as the sphere formed again. Sendrax felt its grip loosen slightly. The whip, though, burned him with even greater force, as if channelling the daemon's pain. Through blurred vision, he saw Harsath raise his psilencer. The daemon's pincer snapped through ceramite. The Purifier's armour cracked. Harsath jerked, and his blood spurted over chitin. He fired the psilencer. A bolt formed of all his psychic anger and pain slammed into Mnay'salath's right eye. The Keeper of Secrets jerked against the new pain. Its concentration faltered, and its prison stole its essence, creating the sphere anew. The claw convulsed and snapped closed all the way, cutting Harsath in half. The Grey Knight's torso and legs fell out of the daemon's grip. Dying, his last breath a long hiss on the vox, he still managed to fire.

His very soul struck the daemon in the chest. Daemon flesh erupted, burning and liquid. Ichor geysered forth and turned to steam. Mnay'salath doubled up. This time, when the sphere came into being, it pulled all the daemon's strength. Mnay'salath had nothing left to use against the Grey Knights.

The whip disappeared.

Sendrax ripped his sword arm free of the daemon's grip. He slashed his Nemesis blade down on the abomination's fingers, and Mnay'salath dropped him. In the space of a breath, Sendrax gathered the entirety of his being. He gathered the pain of Harsath's breath, and the honour of his sacrifice. He gathered the cries for justice of the dead of Sandava II and Angriff Primus. He stood tall, his body wracked in pain, and he transformed the totality of sorrow and anger and faith into a blow of absolute banishment.

'The will of the Emperor cannot be defied!' he shouted. 'Unclean thing, *begone!*'

At the moment he struck, he focused on the sphere that was again expanding through the chamber. He tore the bonds that held Mnay'salath to its form, and to the materium. The chains around the daemon's torso and arms vanished. The Keeper of Secrets became vague around the edges. It dropped Letholdus and Klandon. Their wounds were deep. Klandon could barely stand, and his left arm had been severed at the elbow. They joined their force of banishment to Sendrax's.

'*Begone!*' Sendrax shouted again.

'*BEGONE!*' the three Purifiers roared together.

Mnay'salath snarled. It tried to attack, but when it moved, its limbs crumbled, its non-flesh flaking away and disappearing. Between its elongated, multi-horned head and the sphere, the air split open. The warp gaped into being. The powers of the immaterium flooded into the sphere of lightning at the same moment that the banishment hurled the same forces back into the empyrean. Mnay'salath froze, its disintegrating claws grasping at nothing, its jaws open in a silenced shriek. Its eyes blazed with a hatred matched by dread.

The daemon and the sphere collapsed. They shrank into a single point of monstrously concentrated energy. The rift pulled it in, but the contradictory currents remained. A vortex sucked power back into the warp, and the tower pulled it out. The two impulses could not be reconciled. The concentrated force hung in the centre of the rift for a fraction of a second. It hesitated on the point of contraction and expansion, the materium and empyrean. Then it exploded.

The warp and the materium screamed in unison. Energy, bereft of purpose and

constraints, lashed out in every direction at once. The world turned a blinding fire of silver. At the moment that the music of the spheres demanded the beat from the tower, the blast came instead. The song of chaos held its rhythm but its melody was wounded. The eruption hurled Sendrax into the air. He could see nothing but the silver fury. He heard nothing but inchoate thunder. He slammed into the outer wall. His armour, his body and stone broke each other. Then he was falling, and the darkness came for him.

Lightning shot up and down Styer's spine. Blue-and-violet flames flowed over his armour. The pain was a physical hammering to the nerves. It was also a fragmenting attack on his psyche. It sent a hail of jagged shards of memories and emotions through his consciousness. His skull felt like a bell full of broken glass. His breath rattled, and it was as if material portions of his soul had broken off and were filling up his lungs. He could barely see, barely maintain his aim on the Emperor's Children. The Traitors' shells and sonic blasts hit him, and he was caught between the impacts of weapons and the blasts of warp lightning.

Underneath the reforming sphere, Gared had conjured flame from the materium. It enveloped his hands, burning fury about to be turned into a firestorm launched over the entire formation of the Emperor's Children. But the energy from the walls hit him, too, and a bolt from the sphere struck him in the head. He lost control of his psychic attack, and the fire erupted around him. Gared staggered, a flaring torch wrapped by the monstrous, coruscating spectrum of the empyrean. The conflagration drove him to his knees.

The sphere vanished, and this time the thunderclap burst within Styer's soul with as much force as it did outside the tower. His vision went black scarred with red in the moment of the boom. He struggled to keep his feet, fighting on multiple fronts at once. The energy, the music and the Traitors assailed him, wounding soul and body and mind and armour.

Gared crawled forward. As the thunderclap faded, he shouted something Styer could not hear. Fire gathered around him once more.

'Close in,' Styer ordered. Speech was as difficult as thought. He could barely hear himself. Movement was even more painful. But he kept firing, and he charged the Emperor's Children.

'I am the hammer,' Styer gasped, and this truth was strong and clear even as the energy lashed at him from the walls again.

'*I am the right hand*,' a voice rasped on the vox. It was Gared, and he was on his feet again.

‘*I am the gauntlet*,’ said Vohnum, and Tygern cried out, ‘*I am the tip of his spear!*’

One after another, through veils of agony, Styer’s battle-brothers invoked their service to the Emperor. They rushed the Traitors, their Aegis Terminator armour withstanding the attacks on their bodies as their faith protected their souls. The captain of the Emperor’s Children was before Styer. The justicar raised his Nemesis daemon hammer high and aimed his blow at the Traitor’s helmet. The Grey Knights collided with the enemy in time with the next thunderclap.

Styer’s vision greyed, but did not go black. He saw enough to swing the hammer. The Traitor blocked the hit with his bolter, but the impact knocked him back. Styer pressed the attack, swinging again. The Traitor managed to get a burst of shells off before the hammer hit him in the side. The shells exploded against Styer’s chest-plate. A web of cracks spread across the ceramite, but he leaned into the impact, refusing to lose his prey. The hammer strike smashed the Traitor to the side, shattering the spikes on his armour and caving in the flank. The Traitor snarled in pain, but he was grinning as he came back at Styer.

The struggle between Grey Knights and Emperor’s Children became a close-quarters storm. Bolters and sonic weapons fired at point-blank range. Chainswords clashed with Nemesis blades. Gared launched a focused blast of psychic flame. It engulfed a Traitor, and overwhelmed his sense receptors. A slave to the pleasure of pain, his eyes widened at the extremity of the sensation, and the fire burned them away. His scream changed from joy to rage. Blind, he fired his sonic blaster wildly. The sound bolt carved furrows into the floor. Shockwaves struck Traitors and Grey Knights alike. He spun in circles, firing so quickly that the blasts overlapped, the booming cacophony so huge it almost overwhelmed the thunder of the tower. His cloak in burned tatters, his flesh blackened by warp fire, Gared lunged at the Traitor and plunged his force sword through the centre of his forehead.

The Emperor’s Children captain ducked under Styer’s next swing. He reared up, slammed the muzzle of the bolter against Styer’s helm and pulled the trigger. Styer tried to jerk away, but the shells smashed into his faceplate. His photolenses frosted. Runes shrieked red. He smelled smoke inside his armour and the visor buckled inward, breaking his cheekbone. As he fell back, he raised his arm. The storm bolter on his wrist roared. It disintegrated the Traitor’s gun and blew off his hand. Styer brought the daemon hammer over his head.

Something happened to the daemonic rhythm. The song shrieked, and the thunder of the other tower was an explosion. The centre palace’s great boom

came without a stutter. When the energy gathered in the chamber again, the glow of the walls was blinding. The lightning sphere was larger, twice as intense. The lower curve of the storm raged inches above Styer's head. The tendrils from the walls hit the Grey Knights with redoubled savagery. The explosion in Styer's mind paralysed him. The neural shock fused his joints. His vision went black again. Crimson vortices burst across his retinas.

A sharp, heavy blow tore into Styer's gorget. He knew his throat was exposed, but he still could neither move nor see. His vision cleared with the greater sound of thunder, but the lightning reformed almost at once. The two outward-bound lightning strikes were now coming from this single tower. Just as movement started to come back into Styer's limbs, the monstrous jolts of empyrean energy froze him again.

His vision came and went. He saw the turn of the battle as a series of tableaux. His battle-brothers were statues, immobilised in mid-attack. Gared's arms were splayed. Clusters of lightning held him upright and crucified him. The three surviving Emperor's Children seized the advantage, pummelling the Purifiers with concentrated fire, and sawing through armour with ferocious chainblade attacks.

The captain stood close to Styer. Hooked, spinning drill heads emerged from his monstrously remade narthecium. He held them against Styer's neck. 'Are you awake?' the captain asked. 'Are you aware?'

Lightning. Pain and blindness. Thunder, and the scarified, eager face of damnation peering closely at Styer. The drills slowly cutting through his flesh.

Styer's breath escaped as a hissing growl.

'Good,' said the captain. 'Good. You must be present.'

The cycle of thunder and agony roared once more. The terrible rhythm that held the system held Styer, too. He could not move. He could only experience. The captain of the Emperor's Children grinned, seeing the great prize before him.

'So rare a prey,' the Traitor crowed. 'I will render you into such art.'

The narthecium's heads plunged deep into Styer's neck. Their poisons flooded his bloodstream.

The torture began with the numbness of profound cold.

They fell through the darkness, and the lightning spared them. It did not reappear, though the daemonic rhythm and the tritone were omnipresent. The song of destruction shaped the darkness, for it was not a void. Crowe could see nothing, but there was presence. The song was so huge, the only sense possible

was hearing. He was dropping through a realm that was uncreated except by sound. And there was time, marked by the tripartite beat.

Then there was light, sudden, blinding and corrupt.

The fall ended without transition, and without a landing. Crowe and Drake plummeted through the dark, and then they were standing in the light, alone in gargantuan magnificence. Crowe blinked, his eyes adjusting slowly to the brilliance that surrounded them.

'Is this still the same palace?' Drake wondered.

It was *a* palace. Crowe could not see how the space he beheld could be situated underneath the other one. It was much larger, so vast it was wider than the rocky pinnacle. The ceiling was hundreds of feet away, and what Crowe judged to be the outer wall curved around so gradually, it must have been miles long. At the same time, there was a continuity between the two palaces. The new one was an evolution, or a culmination, of the first. It was also constructed of material that had the colours of amethyst and opal. The resemblance revealed itself now to be an illusion. The stone was translucent, and it flowed into and out of forms so graceful and complex that no element of the materium was strong enough to embody without collapsing. Columns entwined and parted, delicate as vapour. Those nearest the walls bent midway up and never reached the ceiling at all. They turned into walls instead. They supported nothing. They were pure ornaments. Where they met the walls, they sprouted into cornices of a design so elaborate that Crowe could not tell if they moved and changed, or if the contortions of their art was such that they drew the gaze into a perpetual movement of discovery.

He had to force himself to look away.

The columns that touched the distant ceiling ended in even more convoluted creations. They resembled chandeliers composed of an infinity of gossamer crystals. Their points of light were more dazzling than diamonds. The play of illumination tempted and mesmerised. It flowed, limpid and graceful as a stream, yet sharp as the monomolecular blade of the eldar.

The daemon song directed the movement of the light. As Crowe took in the details of the palace and erected spiritual shields against its beauty, he recognised that the music shaped every aspect of the palace. The architecture was the sound given visible form. If he had been deaf, he would still have known the rhythm and the melody. The song would have come into his soul through his eyes. The palace danced.

The walls formed two concentric wings. The blinding light came from the other

side, shining through their translucence.

'That is not the light of the warp,' said Crowe. The light was natural, though of an intensity surpassing anything he had seen before. The walls filtered its full force, and Crowe's photolenses were still a hair-trigger away from shuttering.

'It's warm,' Drake said. He walked towards the inner wall, which somehow was even brighter than the outer. He paused, consulting his armour's readings. 'It grows hotter as we approach the walls.' He looked back as Crowe joined him. 'It's true that we are not looking into the empyrean. But how can this be the materium? Where are we?'

Crowe kept walking, closer to the heat radiating from the wall. He trained his eyes to see past the walls, ignoring the dance of design and artifice, to focus on the blaze beyond them. The light was fire, an unceasing explosion of incalculable violence. 'I don't know,' he admitted. 'Though I believe I should. This palace is constructed from the warp. It is suspended within the materium.'

They were able to speak without resorting to the vox or amplifying their voices. The music was as pervasive as it was on the other side of the gate. It was not as loud, but it was more insidious. The brute force of the thunderclaps had passed. As this palace was the culmination of the first, so the music had reached its true flowering. Rhythm and melody were inseparable. The song had embedded itself in every aspect of this world. It did not seem incredible that the song could govern a star system. It shaped every facet of existence. Crowe felt the music try to control the beats of his hearts. It took a conscious effort not to speak in time with the rhythm.

'Strange that this palace is undefended,' said Drake.

'I see nothing yet to defend. Do you?' Crowe looked to the left and right, seeking a doorway on the inner wall. There was none in either direction before the wall curved away out of sight. But the music of the architecture pointed the way forward. Crowe went left, following the call of the melody.

Antwyr was silent. The daemon pressed hard against the ramparts of his being, but it did so wordlessly. The sword was waiting, gathering its forces to attack when the opportunity came. The Blade's anticipation was telling.

'Stand ready, brother,' Crowe said. 'The emptiness of this palace is a lie. We draw closer to the true enemy.'

The curve of the hall was endless. The longer they walked, the more time the melody had to work on them, and the harder it became to repel it. With no physical enemies to fight, there was nothing to distract the mind from the song, and there was only the song now. Through sound and the sights of the palace, it

assailed the Purifiers. Crowe's defences were besieged insidiously on two sides. The sword ground away from within, while the ruinous music attacked from without. Crowe and Drake intoned prayers and psalms, making a shield of sound and faith.

Gradually, the curve became more pronounced. 'This is a spiral,' said Crowe.

'Are we going downhill?' Drake asked. They were walking faster and faster.

'I don't think so,' said Crowe. He made his pace more deliberate. 'We are being drawn forward.'

'I grow weary of being attacked without chance of retaliation.'

'I do, too. But it is enough that we remain aware of the form of the battle. Let us learn from it. We are seeing our foe's tactics, and something of its nature.'

'Then this emptiness must be significant as well,' said Drake. 'If there are no daemons here, they must be absent for a reason.'

Crowe nodded. 'A reason that must be stronger than our foe considering their presence unnecessary. They *cannot* be here.'

He and Drake fell silent, contemplating what threat of the Ruinous Powers would force the daemons themselves to withdraw.

The spiral curved more and more tightly. The heat from the walls grew more intense. The brilliance of the fire beyond them bleached the details of the architecture to fine traceries in a burning white. The song pulled with ever greater force.

At last, the hall turned sharply through an ornate doorway.

All was revealed. Despair beckoned.

The chamber contained an immense orrery. The worlds of the Angriff system were reproduced in matter that had the richness of gold and bronze, yet the spheres floated above the floor. Arms twenty, fifty, a hundred feet long and more reached from the star to the planets, yet they were not connected to the spheres. None of the ornate gears of the clockwork touched each other. They hovered above the floor, as massive and weightless as the planets. They turned in correct relation to each other, but they had no physical purpose. Their meaning came from their superfluity. The entire mechanism of the orrery was an excess, and excess was its purpose.

The planets revolved around the star in the same distorted, impossible movements as the real ones. Desma was broken into its two hemispheres, and the interior faces revealed still more clockwork, with jewels mimicking the glow of the exposed core. Lightning crackled from Angriff Primus, striking the other planets, while another bolt descended from the close orbit of the sphere. Another

beam of energy, different from the lightning, coruscated around the floating bronze arm that connected Angriff to the star.

The light and heat were at their peak of intensity. They were a single force, a fury barely contained by the sorcery of the palace walls, and Crowe at last knew what that fire was. He had marched through and fought and witnessed the impossible throughout this war, and still his reason had shied away from understanding.

The palace was suspended in the heart of the sun.

In the centre of the chamber, atop the sphere of Angriff, the enemy danced.

The abomination brought the grace and horror of the daemonettes to a supreme height. Its flesh was the tint of bone, and shifted in the light to the flow of the song, now ivory, now grey. It was clad in violet robes that swayed in perfect counterpoint to its movements, as if there were two beings dancing together instead of one. Its dark hair whipped about its head like waves of serpents. It had three arms. Its left forearm turned into a great scythe of a claw. A hungry pincer emerged from its torso on the right. The humanoid left hand wielded a sceptre. A mask surmounted each end, and as the daemon whirled the sceptre, the strains of tragedy and mockery alternated their influence on the music.

Monstrosity danced. The Masque of Slaanesh danced. The undertow of damnation became a riptide.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Dance of Death

The Masque raised an arm, and a planet swooped upwards, its orbit changing smoothly to bring it into graceful near collision with its neighbour. The Masque spun, and the entire orrery glowed more brightly, mirroring the build-up of warp energy in the star system. The daemon danced, and it summoned death for the Imperium.

The dance created and shaped the music, yet the dance itself was a form of captivity. The daemon moved without rest, and could never rest. The Angriff system was a puppet of the abomination's will. Its will was expressed through its movements. Yet motion itself was beyond the control of that will. Another hand pulled the daemon's strings. Joy and pain and shame and pride played across the Masque's features. Through the alchemy of its sequence, it transformed its torment into that of worlds.

On Titan, in the Halls of Purity, the ancient texts that discoursed on the nature of the Masque were rare and dangerous beyond compare. Familiarity with the daemon invited its attention, and exposed the scholar to the risk of being caught in the dance of damnation. Crowe had read them, as he must, to know the most dangerous foes of the Emperor. He had exercised extreme caution when he had opened those black volumes. He had surrounded himself with layers of overlapping hexagrammic wards. Conscious of the added danger that came from keeping the daemon sword within the protective circles, he had read only a few sentences at a time, pausing for days of meditation and prayer between each session. No siren call was more powerful than the Masque's. The greatest artist

in the court of the Dark Prince, the Masque had been cursed by Slaanesh because the god had perceived mockery in one of its dances. The daemon would now dance forever, eternally seeking a redemption its master would never grant. And the Masque's curse was its terrible power. Only the gods themselves could resist its summons.

The archives of Titan chronicled the devastation the Masque had wrought across the galaxy. The horrors were catalogued in detail. It had annihilated armies. It had brought civilisations down in ruins. But in all the lore, so dangerous to read, there was little to provide weapons against the abomination. Its true name, even the smallest portion of it, was unknown.

Two Grey Knights marched into the orrery to battle a destroyer of worlds.

Consumed by the frenzy of its dance, the Masque did not appear to notice the Purifiers. They reached the outermost orbit, and it did not look their way or attack. Even so, with every step, Crowe felt the pull of the music becoming stronger, as if it were throwing loops of chain around his being, and would soon bring his freedom of will and movement to a violent end. The chains had not tightened because the music had not yet been turned on him, specifically, as a weapon. It was dangerous enough as the governor of all reality in this palace. But as long as the Masque did not look their way, Crowe thought, they had the chance to attack. Or at least the illusion of initiative.

'We must draw close,' Crowe said. Bolter shells would not be enough. Their assault had to strike the physical and spiritual existence of the daemon at the same time if it was going to have the slightest chance of succeeding.

'Can we banish this daemon?' Drake asked.

'We can because we must,' Crowe said. He had no illusions. The distance between them and the centre of the chamber was too vast. The daemon would see them. Yet he advanced. There was no choice. And there was faith.

Your faith is the greatest lie, said the sword. ***It has my respect because of its power. You believe in the lie. You defend an empire built on the foundations of nothing. You will abandon your faith, warden. You will abandon it, because it will abandon you.***

Behold! it shouted. ***Here walk the abandoned!***

The daemon's snarl cut across Crowe's mind. It slithered through the ether. The shout was more than simple mockery.

The Masque heard the voice of Antwyr, and turned its head. The daemon's eyes fell on them. The Masque pointed its sceptre at the Purifiers, the gesture so naturally part of the flow of movement that it seemed this moment had always

been choreographed, always been planned as a small part of the greater art. In the next instant, the music became a personal attack. The beat hammered against Crowe as if it would pound his bones to dust. It seized his being. It became his being. The Masque danced, and he could not look away.

Crowe tried to turn his head, tried to raise his bolter in an act of desperate defiance. He tried to shift his weight, to throw himself to the right, even if only to fall, to break free of the gaze of the Masque. But he could not, and already the Masque looked away. It did not need to watch them. It had seen the Grey Knights, and incorporated them into the dance.

The Emperor protects, Crowe thought. *The Emperor protects. I am the instrument of His will.*

His will.

His will.

Crowe sought the strength of that will he served, so much greater than his own. He clung to his faith in its absolute power, and for a few seconds, though he could not break from paralysis, the music could not move his limbs either.

The dance of the Masque had already taken Drake. The Knight of the Flame cried out to the Emperor, and his body attacked itself. He moved with the rhythm, but not with the same motions as the Masque. The daemon forced him through steps that were an agonised counterpoint to the wild grace of the daemon. It trapped him in a dance of self-destruction, one so perfectly attuned to the being of a Grey Knight, it could have been a dark ritual of the Chapter reserved for self-immolation. Drake lunged in attack and defence, each time straining his body beyond the limits, his limbs bending too far, striking and stopping too fast, and with too much power. The dance turned him into a grotesque, a daemonic mockery of the magnificence of the Grey Knights in battle. All his skill at violence went inwards, the Masque dishonouring him by dragging him into a lethal, narcissistic implosion. He aimed his storm bolter at his chest. He sliced at his armour with his force sword. He called out to the Emperor, and raged against the enemy with all the force of his purity, but he could not break free. He could not arrest the movements that would kill him.

Crowe resisted. For one second, then two, then three, he resisted. Excruciating pain tore through him. Tremors built in his spine. They spread to his skull, then to his limbs. He was pushing against a force that moved planets, and he could have no victory here. The daemonic music crashed through his defences. These were ramparts he could no longer defend. He fell, and the dance of death took him, while the sword howled with laughter.

The numbing toxin stole Styer's body from him. He could feel nothing. He knew he stood, but no signals reached his brain from his legs to confirm what he could see. Hands clutched his daemon hammer, hands so distant, so cut off from his perception that surely they were not his. A void surrounded his mind.

The eyes of the captain of the Emperor's Children gleamed in anticipation. He wanted Styer to know what was coming next, and Styer did. After the numbness would come the river of pain, made so intense by the prologue of unfeeling that it would disable him. The captain pulled back the narthecium. Its drills hummed, clicked as they adjusted to the flow of a new toxin, and hummed again.

In the pause before the Traitor struck, the imprisoning energy tendrils hit Styer. But he could not feel them. The electric agony that locked his joints and fused his spine did not arrive. Styer discovered that though he could not feel his limbs, for a brief moment he could command them once more. The repeated shocks had frozen him with the daemon hammer raised high, its blow suspended. He seized his chance.

Strike, he thought, and those faraway hands slammed the hammer down. Surprised, the Traitor could not react in time. The hammer hit his chest-plate like a meteor. There was a flash of pure blue light, a thunderbolt of justice. The Traitor's armour caved in. Styer drove the head of the weapon through the bone plates of his fused ribcage. The damage slowed the Traitor, though the pain did not. He plunged the narthecium into Styer's exposed throat.

Venom hit his nervous system. The pain came, washing through Styer like liquid fire. But he had expected it, and he kept moving, racing against the next blast from the warp energy. He threw his weight against the Traitor. They fell together as the lightning formed. The immaterium's anger struck Styer, but the shock caught the captain, too. His body a storm of colliding agonies, Styer fought off the paralysis with will and anger. The Traitor's mistake had jolted him into motion, and he would not stop. He jerked his wrist against the captain's skull. It was like moving a mountain.

Horror flashed through the Traitor's eyes. 'The work will destroy you!' he shouted. He rammed his fist against Styer's arm.

A burst of shells obliterated his head.

Keep moving, keep moving, keep moving, Styer told himself. If he paused, the pain would freeze him again, and he would be as helpless as his brothers. He turned from the captain's body. He was sluggish, controlling a stranger's form. Another of the Emperor's Children was almost on him. Styer rose, firing. The Noise Marine opened up with his sonic blaster. Shells and sound collided.

Styer's lunge carried him through the sound, his armour cracking and distorting. He held the stranger's arm steady, pouring the shells into the Traitor, punching through his armour, blowing open his chest. The Noise Marine staggered. He lost control of his weapon and the waves of sound lost cohesion. Styer sent commands to the distant hands, and the stranger slammed the daemon hammer against the side of the Traitor's neck, decapitating him.

The tendrils reached out for Styer. They drove him to his knees. The pain sucked his strength away. There was still one of the Emperor's Children alive. The shards of corrupt lightning held the other Grey Knights captive. They roared and shook their chains of energy, but they could not break free.

Keep moving, keep moving, keep moving. Styer could not. His legs would not obey. He could not raise his arms. Standing near the centre of the chamber, the Traitor kept his distance from Styer. He trained his bolter on the justicar.

The sphere of lightning expanded to fill the chamber. There was mockery and triumph in its brilliance.

Miles away, in answer not to the command of a mere warrior, but out of sacred duty to the Emperor, a stranger's hand moved. It pulled a melta bomb from Styer's belt. The stranger's hand jerked, sending the charge skittering across the floor towards the feet of the Traitor. The enemy leapt over the explosion. His head plunged into the midst of the sphere.

The thunderclap came, and the body of the last Traitor fell. Smoke rose from the charred, melted remains of his neck.

Styer slumped lower, the vice of pain crushing him, pulling him down to the floor.

Keep moving. Keep moving.

The Emperor's Children were dead, but the lightning formed and discharged, formed and discharged, the destroyer's beat of the music going on and on and on.

The sonic Dreadnought screamed, sending madness beyond words shrieking from its gargoyle faceplate. The sound filled the hall, and the warriors of Furia's squad cried out in their turn. The Dreadnought slammed its chainfist at Setheno, but she saw the blow developing, and was gone before the fist shattered the ferrocrete deck. Setheno and Furia rushed at the Dreadnought, across the threshold. They broke left and right. The huge mass spun after them, torso spinning around as the legs stamped and turned.

The hall beyond the door was an amphitheatre of torture. The remains of

thousands of victims were arranged across pews, along aisles, and fastened to the walls. Past the Dreadnought, the floor sloped to a stage on which lay the ruins of an exploded vault. An elaborate iron structure, designed as both claw and ritual, conducted the blinding strikes of warp lightning to a runic circle in the centre of the stage. Instead of destroying the granite surface, the lightning vanished where it struck, channelled down to Angriff Primus. The Cruciatorium shook and flashed, the entire space rejoicing in the creation of the unholy song.

With the clarity that was her gift in battle, and her shield against hope, Setheno saw the contours of what it would take to disable the sorcerous machinery of the chamber. Only the narrowest of threads differentiated the difficulty of the task from the impossible. Furia's veterans would be of little use here. The Dreadnought would kill them in seconds, if he had not already done so.

But little use was not the same as complete futility. Their oaths would compel them to join the fight.

She would have it no other way. She would use them as she could.

The Dreadnought flailed his chainfist again, splintering a row of pews just behind Setheno. She ran downslope, jinking left and right, but visible to the monster, holding its attention. 'The conductor of the lightning,' she voxed Furia.

'*I see what must be done*,' the inquisitor answered. She sprinted to the nearest wall, fast and angular as a blade. She jumped up, grabbing the spikes holding up the crucified dead and started to climb.

The lightning flashed, and the Dreadnought hesitated, seeing one target and not the other. The crazed mind inside hunted for direction. The beast howled, gabbling nonsense. '*Hunger, hunger, hunger, where is the sensation, where is the prey?*' He stopped, distracted by the forces building in the iron above. '*Who calls Diotian? Who is Diotian? I am Diotian? Will I feed? Will I feel?*' Then, with growing certainty, '*I will worship. I will serve. I will feed!*'

Furia reached the network of chains that hung from the ceiling. She leapt away from the wall and caught a hook dangling beside one of the conducting struts.

Diotian's hull-mounted heavy flamer sprayed a wide stream of burning promethium down the slope. It doused Setheno, turning her into a moving torch before it ran off her armour. The moment the flame hit, she reversed course, running back uphill towards the Dreadnought. Diotian knew where she was, and was content to launch an area attack in her direction. The disappearance of Furia was what tormented him. Setheno fired her bolt pistol, trying to bring Diotian's focus back to her. Her shells exploded against the hull, chipping armour pointlessly. The Dreadnought ignored her. He spun back and forth, seeking

Furia. He did not consider Setheno a threat. Because he could not find Furia, she was a danger.

So we are a threat, Setheno thought. *We can cause harm here.*

The Dreadnought spotted Furia hanging from the chains. She was attacking the framework with her power knife, timing her blows with the moment after each discharge. '*FEEEEEL!*' Diotian screamed. '*FEEEEEEED!*' He raised his blastmaster arm. The huge sonic cannon's hum rose from a deep thunder to a piercing whine as Diotian attuned its fire to his target. Either the maddened warrior's instincts still functioned well enough for him to understand what he must kill, and what he must protect, or another force whispered to him, directing his attacks.

A rocket screamed across the Cruciatorium from the doorway. It slammed into Diotian's right flank just as the Dreadnought fired, rocking him. His shot went wide – a sound so concentrated it was a visible blur of disintegrated metal a few yards from Furia. Chains, blades and chunks of dried, leathery corpse rained to the deck. The impact rippled over Furia. It knocked her off her chain, but she grabbed another hook as the sound threw her sideways. She held tight, arresting her movement with a yank that would have dislocated an organic arm.

Diotian turned towards the flame. '*I will feel, I will feel, I WILL FEEL!*' he shouted. Klas Brauner sent a second rocket into the Dreadnought's faceplate. Diotian roared with hope, embracing the explosion and the damage it caused as if they were the near approach of the sensation forever desired and forever out of reach. Diotian pounded towards the false promise. Furia's veterans met his advance with flamers, las and grenades. The assault washed against the Dreadnought's hull, delivering nothing of the promise. Diotian screamed in horror as the mirage of sensation retreated. He fired back with heavy flamer and blastmaster. Fire enveloped the doorway. The sonic wave was deep this time. Air and decking and flesh were all the same to the destructive blast. It tore them all apart with a thunder as profound and shattering as an earthquake.

Furia cut through one of the conductor's supports. A long chunk of iron rod a foot thick crashed to the deck. Energy arced out from the gap, and the Cruciatorium vibrated from the uncontrolled discharge. Furia swung from chain to chain, making her way to the next support. Diotian shouted in distress. He had let himself be distracted, and his maddened consciousness realised he was failing the task given to him by his Dark Gods. He turned away from the burning wreckage of the doorway and reached up as if he would pull Furia down with his chainfist. The blastmaster's hum ran high again.

Setheno ran in front of the face-plate. She slashed at it with Skarprattar. The only damage she did was to score the armour, but the flash of the sanctified blade against the corrupt hull was blinding. Diotian jerked, momentarily disoriented by the sudden eruption of holy light.

Setheno maglocked her pistol and climbed the Dreadnought using the spikes of the tainted armour and the weapon mounts for handholds. The fury of Diotian's outraged shrieks almost knocked her down, and blew apart a swathe of pews before the Dreadnought. She stood astride the hull and struck down with her sword. She was stabbing a mountain, but each blow burned deeper through the layers of ceramite and adamantium. Diotian screamed. His arms waved in frustration, unable to reach her. He rocked from side to side, trying to shake her off. She kept her balance and stabbed deeper. She cut through a layer of circuitry between the plates. Electrical fire exploded from the breach. The sarcophagus jerked again, its movements more wild and erratic. The monster shrieked even louder, torn between the insanities of anger and the hope of pain.

Furia cut a second support. The daemonic song became ragged, distorted by secondary thunder triggered by the lightning arcing from the gaps and striking the walls and deck of the Cruciatorium.

'*No!*' Diotian howled. '*I do not fail, I must feed! YOU MUST NOT MUST NOT MUST NOT!*' Reckless, desperate, he fired the blastmaster.

The sonic wave, narrowed like a heavy las-beam, struck Furia's perch as she leapt. The network of torture pulleys and chains vanished, blown to dust. The entire structure of the lightning conductor groaned in stress. The immense claw wavered slightly, and the lightning struck dangerously close to the edge of the runic circle. Furia's jump took her out of the direct impact of the blast, but the shockwave sent her spinning. She collided with an intersection of girders and dropped twenty feet to the deck.

Setheno stabbed again, desperate to reach a vital core, but there was still too much armour. Diotian turned the blastmaster arm straight down. The weapon's charging hum grew deeper once more. The Dreadnought screamed incoherent curses at Setheno, and fired. The slope of the Cruciatorium erupted in a radius of fifty feet. The explosion lifted Diotian into the air. A battering ram of air and sound smashed into Setheno. She flew from the Dreadnought and crashed into the last set of pews before the stage. Her entire body rang like a bell. Blood poured from her ears and nose, rushed up her throat, choking her.

As she dragged herself to her feet, the Dreadnought closed in on Furia.

The music changed. The difference was not a critical one. It was a nuance, though, marked enough for Styer to hear it. More importantly, he felt it. The beat in the tower became more pronounced. Once more, the intensity of the lightning sphere spiked, as if somewhere, another portion of the system-wide instrument had begun to break down, and the tower again was called upon to compensate. The sphere was brighter. Styer could not look at it directly. It grew larger, too, each expansion bringing its surface to within a few inches of the chamber walls. It was impossible to stand upright without being swallowed by the lightning ball.

Styer did not think he could stand still if he wanted to. But he could move. Fewer tendrils struck him from the walls. There was less energy to spare in defence of the sphere. Almost everything was being pulled into it, and then sent into the void. The shackles of electrocution and sorcerous pain loosened their grip on the other Grey Knights. Like Styer, they were on their knees, dropping just before the sphere's lethal expansion. They were beginning to find the strength to move again.

Gared was motionless. He lay where he had fallen, in the centre of the chamber, the bottom of the sphere only a few feet above him. Clusters of energy from the sphere itself attacked him, holding him down, keeping him helpless. The power behind the sphere sensed the presence of the most powerful psyker in the squad.

The biggest threat.

'I am coming for you, brother,' Styer called, unsure if Gared was even conscious. His breath became a snarl as he rose to a low crouch, fighting off the blistering shocks. He moved towards his brother.

From the other side of the chamber, Vohnum began to crawl forward. '*I will be at your side, justicar*,' he voxed.

'Maintain your position,' said Styer. The shocks made it difficult for him to form words. 'Keep the circle formation,' he told his squad. 'The banishment must proceed.'

The music's thunder battered his hearing. The growth and flash, growth and flash of the sphere seared his vision. Warp energy surrounded him, coruscating about his armour. It wished to break him, to force him to concede to weakness. He refused. Supported by faith, he kept walking until he crouched beside Gared.

The Librarian's eyes were open. Gared had fallen forward. His head was turned to one side, his unmoving gaze fixed on the wall. He did not blink when the sphere flared. He was not dead. He was conscious. Styer saw the tremor in his cheek. Energy pulsed at the edges of his psychic hood, sparks that could not achieve the ignition of a counter-attack. Gared could not move, and it was taking

all of his strength to protect himself from a fatal blast of lightning.

'I am here,' Styer said. 'Together, we will fight back. The Emperor protects, brother. We are the hammer.' He braced himself. '*We are the hammer.*' He placed himself between Gared and the expanding sphere. Warp energy blasted against his Terminator armour. He shouted in pain, but he was prepared. He took the blow, and did not fall. The sphere vanished, and he dragged Gared away from the centre of the floor before it came again. When the lightning ball reformed, it lashed out after them. The energy hit them both. This time, Gared fought back. He raised a shield. The lightning shattered it at once, but even that brief protection made a difference. Styer moved faster, pulling Gared towards the edge of the chamber.

Tendrils of lightning pursued them in the build-up to each thunderclap. Every blow was agony. Styer's mouth flooded with the taste of copper. His muscles trembled like iron just before it snapped. He did not stop. Away from the direct centre of the chamber, the lightning strikes were fewer. They felt weaker, and Gared's shield grew stronger. When he tried to stand, Styer held him down.

'Conserve your strength,' Styer said. 'We have need of it.'

And then they were next to the wall.

'Help me up,' Gared rasped.

Styer raised him to his knees. Gared hissed at the sphere, and straightened his back. Arms parted, hands curled into angry claws, he faced the lightning directly. 'Now, my brothers,' he said. 'Now we purge this chamber of sorcery. *Now!*'

Gared's mind reached out to Styer's. The justicar joined his psychic strength to the Librarian's. So did Vohnum, Tygern, Gundemar and Ardax. They formed a ring of silvery grey beneath the endlessly reborn sphere.

'We are the will unbreakable!' Gared cried. 'We are the vigilance unceasing! We are the light incorruptible! *We cast you out!*'

He roared the last word with the power of six souls. Styer shouted with him, as did the entire squad. The moment the sphere disappeared, they tore the materium open in the centre of the chamber. Into that rift the energy would fall when it returned. The sphere of lightning would die as it was born anew, vanishing back into the warp.

The chamber shone with the terrible light. The lightning gathered. The sphere contorted as it formed around the rift. It shrank in on itself to the point of near implosion, but then it expanded again, trembling and flickering, but intact. Its growth slowed, and the beat of the daemonic song staggered.

The sphere vanished, the lightning struck out into the Angriff system, and the

thunder boomed. And then it came again. The song went on, straining but unstoppable.

'It is too powerful,' said Gared. His words came in a harsh staccato. 'We cannot banish it.'

Yet we are having an effect, Styer thought. There had to be a way of harming the daemonic engine still more.

'I cannot hold the rift open much longer,' Gared said.

The sphere filled the chamber. Styer saw how perfectly the contours of the wall matched the surface of the sphere. 'The vessel!' he shouted. 'We must smash the vessel!'

The stone of the palace was unnatural. Buried for millennia, awaiting this day to rise and unleash the malice of its ruler on the galaxy, the palace was anchored in the materium. But no natural geologic process could have created the material of its walls, and its construction was sorcerous. The taint of the warp lay deep in every aspect of the palace. It was daemonic.

'What is daemonic can be banished,' Styer said.

'We do not have the strength to banish the castle,' said Gared, his words coming in a slow, agonised whisper. He was shaking with the effort of maintaining the banishment. The sphere's resistance smashed at him and the rest of the Grey Knights. The threat of explosion kept building in Styer's chest. The danger and the pain would be even more intense for Gared. If the Librarian's strength failed, they would all perish with him.

'Not the palace,' Styer said. 'The tower. A focused banishment. The roof, Gared. Target the roof.'

Gared understood. His eyes blazed with determination. With a burst of renewed psychic strength, he waited until the sphere vanished, then moved to the rift. He pushed it through the air to the top of the chamber's dome. 'Let all that is tainted burn in the Emperor's sight!' he cried.

The dome tore open. The rift disrupted its integrity, ripping open the veil between the materium and the warp. But the rift was one of banishment, and it dragged all that was daemonic back into the abyss of the empyrean. The matter of the walls flowed. A maelstrom of stone formed, hurling itself into the breach. The upper third of the dome twisted. Architecture screamed with a voice of sudden sentience. The entire section of the dome imploded as the lightning sphere reformed.

Gared collapsed. The rift closed, but the vessel was smashed. The tower was open to the air. The peak was gone. The sphere expanded beyond the confines of

the walls. It lost coherence. No longer a sphere, it was a dense, raging cloud of destructive energy. The chains of the daemonic song held it even now, and when the moment of the beat came, the lightning lashed at the sky. But the strike was uncontrolled, its direction random. Styer heard the injury to the music. He felt it in his soul. The melody was ragged, turning towards confusion. The thunder roared, the sphere returned, and the lightning flashed. The rhythm was the beat of a massive engine marching itself to destruction. The blasts of the lightning cut across the sky with chaotic savagery.

Gared was on his hands and knees. 'I can do no more,' he said to Styer.

'You have done much, brother.'

'The music still rages. The energy is still in the thrall of the enemy.'

'Not as it was.' Styer watched the inchoate anger explode across the void. 'This is not the heart of the evil. It has not fallen to us to end the war.'

The other Terminators staggered their way. Styer helped Gared to his feet. The Librarian shuddered and looked up. 'But what have we done?' he asked Styer. 'What have we done?'

Styer looked again. Between the flashes of the lightning, he saw doom had come for Angriff Primus.

Sendrax lay at the base of the tower. He hovered at the edge of a sus-an membrane coma. He could almost itemise the list of broken bones and ruptured organs. His auto-senses had gone dark. His armour's power plant was badly damaged, and all but the most critical systems had shut down. The servo-motors would still obey his will, he thought. He would not have to fight his armour as well as his body when he tried to stand.

The pain helped keep him conscious. He tried to move his fingers. This time, they obeyed him. That was a start, his first movement since he fell. He might yet find his way through the thicket of agony and regain his feet.

He must move. He would not lie here and wait for the daemons to discover him as helpless prey.

Scratching at his ear, a voice. The vox, he realised. The vox was working. The voice was Berinon's. He and Warheit were calling for any of the squads in the palace to answer. After three tries, Sendrax managed to whisper his name.

'*Knight of the Flame?*' said Berinon. '*Are you within the palace?*'

His auto-senses had gone black, so had any signals from his suit other than vox traffic. 'The tower's base,' he said.

'*Is your squad with you?*'

‘No.’ He winced, this time in psychic pain. Their runes had faded at the moment of the explosion. He had not consciously taken in that sight until he had woken on the ground. His battle-brothers were dead. ‘They are lost.’

‘*What of Castellan Crowe and the other squads? We cannot reach anyone within the palace walls.*’

‘I do not know.’

‘*I am coming for you,*’ said Berinon. ‘*We are running out of time.*’

The pilot’s words forced Sendrax further out of the blindness of his pain. His eyes cleared. He could see the world again, and what was coming for it. Lightning from the other tower flashed with madness. It had struck Desma again. One of the broken planet’s halves had shattered into a swarm of asteroids. A cloud of stone spread over the firmament. Fragments moved to the command of the daemonic song. Others careened away from the centre of the mass. Planetoids collided. The fragments of Desma warred with each other. The cloud was a storm, and portions of it reached for Angriff Primus.

Sendrax witnessed the first of the asteroids to hit the atmosphere. The flame of its descent lit the night. It fell beyond the southern horizon. The hammer blow of its impact disrupted the unholy rhythm. The sun rose in the south, an immense fireball filling Sendrax’s sight. The earth shook, and the broken towers of Algidus fell. The city’s remains crumbled. Silhouettes against the new sun disappeared, dropping into final ruin.

Movement crept back into Sendrax’s body. He turned his head away from the holocaust. The fire and the brilliance of the lightning flashes hid the sky from him now. He could not see the next piece of Desma to fall. There was only the red and silver of raging destruction.

Crowe, Sendrax thought*, what have you done? What have you done to us all?*

The daemon music beat on and on and on.

Build new walls, Crowe thought. As his body convulsed to the commands of the Masque’s dance, and Antwyr howled in triumph, he pulled his mind away from the maelstrom of torment.

The warden is prisoner! Antwyr gloated. ***The warden is prisoner! Here it ends, it ends, it ends!***

New walls, Crowe thought. *New walls. The Emperor protects. I serve him still. My watch is not ended.*

His body was not his, but his mind was. He had held the gates against the assaults of Antwyr for decade after decade. The gates did not fall now. His arms

and legs tried to wrench themselves out of their sockets. He and Drake jerked across the floor of the orrery, new planetoids in orbit around the star of the Masque. Soon he would hear the first snaps of his bones. But he retained the will to fight back. Drake's armour smoked from the impact of bolter shells. His force sword cut ever deeper gouges in the ceramite of his left arm. The movements of the dance called for Crowe to turn his weapons against himself as well. He managed to resist for a few more seconds, though the Black Blade twisted in his grip, eager to exact its vengeance.

Use these moments. Fight back. Break this sorcery.

'Emperor take your accursed being!' Drake roared at the Masque as the daemon curled a finger, and the dance forced his bolter arm up again. This time, he pressed the muzzle of the weapon against his helmet. To Crowe, he said, 'Forgive my weakness, castellan.'

Drake was only a few feet away from Crowe. In their prisons of movement, he might as well have been on the other side of the palace. Crowe could not reach for him. He could not take any action not commanded by the Masque.

The dance jolted Crowe to the right. He did not resist but threw himself into the movement. His sudden energy exaggerated the gesture. He flew across the gap and collided with Drake, knocking his arm up as the bolter fired. The shells exploded against the ceiling, shattering crystal, marring the perfection of the Masque's work.

The daemon hissed. Its anger added a new sinuosity to the melody of the dread song. It sank the music's claws deeper into Crowe's being. A great punishment would be the price for the moments of life he had gained for Drake.

The hiss became a snarl and then a scream of anger. Cacophony overtook the melody. The orrery trembled, shaken by a force outside the daemon's control. The Masque's scream rose higher as half of Desma exploded into fragments. The monster reached out as if it would force the pieces back together. It failed. The shrapnel tore through the eldritch machine, destroying a balance as delicate as it was powerful.

There were no longer eight planetary bodies in motion. The Masque's art depended on a twisted, Chaos-corrupted form of order, and now that order unravelled. Crowe felt the Masque's grip slip. The floor heaved, and the mechanism of the orrery ground against itself. The orbits of the planets went out of control. Contritus hurtled across the system, a world missile launched free. It collided with Angriff Tertius, crushing the smaller sphere. Seizing the chance of the disruption, Crowe pulled against the Masque's spell. He could not move as

he chose, but he arrested his motion.

Drake could not escape. His movements became even more frenetic. They were jagged, too, and erratic, as he fought the Masque's control and the daemon struggled to rein in the upheaval of its cosmic design. From the most profound core of his faith in the Emperor, Drake found the strength to turn one of his enforced actions against the Masque. The daemon commanded that he spin, and he spun. He threw himself into the turn. He came out of it facing the Masque. '*We are the hammer!*' he cried. He fired his storm bolter at the same time that he threw all his psychic strength into banishing the great daemon.

It was as if Drake's very soul roared past Crowe, rippling the air, searing the veil. Shells and anathema struck the Masque together. The physical and psychic explosion staggered the daemon and it missed a step of its dance. Chasms split the floor of the orrery, radiating from the Masque's dais. The chamber rose and fell with vertiginous speed.

The mesmeric grip on Crowe loosened yet more, and he wrenched himself free. Drake stood still, not free, but for a moment uncompelled. He looked at Crowe. 'Strike hard, castellan,' he said. 'Fight on, brother.'

They had fought side by side for more than a century. Every instinct of comradeship pushed Crowe to use his freedom to rush to Drake's side. Reason and duty forced him away. 'I shall,' he said, the promise all the sole tribute to their friendship the struggle allowed. He ran towards the Masque.

What will you do? the sword asked. ***You rush to the futile end***, it answered. ***This is the uselessness of sacrifice, the emptiness of nobility. Run on, warden. Run quickly. Amuse me with the gesture.***

Antwyr laughed again, and kept laughing as the Masque took hold of the orrery once more. The daemon's eternal dance had been the doom of billions. It held a star system in its grip. It would not be broken now, not by one warrior. The Masque's art fell upon Drake with the daemon's fury. Crowe did not look back. Though Drake's roar of pain was suddenly choked off, he did not look back. Though he heard a monstrous tearing, the sound of ceramite ripped apart as though it were parchment, he kept moving. The sundered remains of Drake's armour hit the floor of the orrery. The sound of the impact had the finality of the slamming of a tomb door, and Crowe did not look back. There was nothing but silence now from Drake. Crowe honoured his sacrifice, and fuelled by towering grief, he charged across the broken floor, leaping over fissures, weaving between the careening clockwork, racing to bring judgement on the abomination.

He did not think how he would do so. He knew only that he must seize the

moments he had to make an attempt.

The sword laughed and laughed and laughed.

The Masque danced, and spun. It turned its eyes on Crowe, and the chains of the song seized him once more.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Dancer and the Blade

Setheno's head rang and her vision blurred from the concussion. Her clarity of perception was undiminished. Diotian had stopped and was turning the blastmaster on Furia. Setheno could not distract him with pointless fire clanging against his hull. Instead, she trained her pistol on the huge claw that conducted the lightning to the stage. She fired into the intricate weaving of iron. The lightning flashed, vaporising shells. But some hit the iron, and they damaged it. It would take too long for Setheno to try to shoot down the massive structure. Furia's blade was faster and more precise in slicing through the supports. As a distraction, though, her attack worked. The injury she inflicted on the structure was enough.

Diotian turned away from Furia. The Dreadnought howled. The sound of his distress smashed pews between him and Setheno. Above, chains cracked like glass, dropping in a hail of black fragments onto Diotian's hull. He marched down the slope of the Cruciatorium. Setheno backed up, edging closer to the runic circle. At her back, the lightning struck again, always on the beat of the song. It was so close to her that the residual warp energy tried to overload the circuitry of her power armour. The thunder was so loud, her eardrums would have burst if she had not been wearing her helmet.

Diotian's weapons were trained on Setheno, but he did not fire. She was too close to the claw. He could not avoid doing more damage to the claw than she did, even if he hit her directly. Without taking her eyes off the Dreadnought, Setheno sent more bursts of shells backwards and up, hitting the claw again.

Diotian screamed. He charged, chainfist roaring and crackling with energy.

Setheno waited for the last second before she moved. She saw the blow come in, tracked its angle of descent. She saw precisely where and what Diotian could not afford to strike. The meteor arrived, and she leapt to the side. Diotian slammed the chainfist into granite. He formed a crater in the stage, sending up a cloud of dust. The lightning glowed eerily inside the cloud. Setheno moved in it, grey within the grey, to the other side of the claw.

'*You will stop! You must stop!*' Diotian shouted. '*You cannot break the fate! You will not, you must not, must not, must not, MUST NOT!*'

He chased Setheno. She kept just out of reach of the chainfist. It hit the stage again and again. Soon, Setheno had to climb over the smashed rock. The destroyed surface slowed down Diotian as he moved through the craters and ridges of the ruin he had wrought. The Dreadnought wailed in frustration. His heavy flamer and blastmaster waved back and forth. The fury of his madness pushed him to fire. His awe of the power he served held him back.

'*Let me fire! Let me destroy her!*' he pleaded to the force that compelled him. '*You cannot be here!*' he shouted at Setheno. '*You cannot harm the art! Where is sensation? Where is pain? FEEEEEEEEEEED!*'

At the top of the Cruciatorium, Furia was on her feet. She climbed again. Setheno divided her attention between watching her progress and keeping Diotian's attention on her. The tactic was working, but it was unsustainable. She had to take the Dreadnought down.

Furia reached another support and sliced into it with her power blade. Even before she had cut through, the conducting network trembled, a nervous system recoiling from the source of injury. Diotian stopped with his chainfist in mid-air. He turned again, and fired in Furia's direction. The shot was too urgent, without aim. He missed, shearing away low-hanging chains and collapsing a portion of the far wall.

Setheno seized her chance. She rushed Diotian, and slashed at the cables and joints of his legs with her power sword. Diotian moved back. He snarled down at her, the blast from his vox-casters hitting her with physical force. She staggered. He brought the chainfist down. She sprinted forward. The blow missed her by inches. The shockwave of its impact knocked her down, underneath the Dreadnought.

'*FEEEEEEED!*' Diotian screamed. He raised a foot to crush her into the broken granite.

Setheno rolled and cut upwards. She severed the conduit running from the right

leg to the hull. Electrical fires exploded around her. The Dreadnought slewed to one side and its foot stamped down past her, crashing through six inches of granite. Setheno stood and ran out behind Diotian. He turned to follow, dragging the right leg. She had not immobilised him, but his gait was uneven. His wails became incoherent screams. They drove wider fissures into the deck. Weakened iron fell from the ceiling, entire nets of chain and razor wire dropping on to the stage. The walls split, and shook free of their cladding.

The lightning struck the circle. The thunder drowned out Diotian's screams. Furia cut through another support, and the claw swung back and forth. The Cruciatorium flashed with blasts of undirected energy. The soul-festering colours of the warp flowed over the chamber. The reality of the ship softened. A storm of madness was building, hungry to consume the heart of the *Catharsis*.

Diotian's hull rotated back and forth, torn between the targets.

Take him down, Setheno thought. *Find the chance and finish him*. She circled the Dreadnought, slashing with her blade, forcing his choice. She crossed in front of him and closed with the runic circle. Diotian moaned his denial. His immensity lurched after her. *Create the chance*, she thought. She stopped just short of the circle and lunged back as the claw swung her way. The lightning surged, reaching beyond the runes. The trailing end of warp energy caught her. The flames of the empyrean engulfed her armour. A corrupt fire reached through it and tried to consume her soul. She kept moving, blind with agony, but she had seen where she must go and what she must do. There was a grinding explosion to her left and behind, and another shockwave. That was the chainfist, overshooting. She struck to her right, though the fires of Ruin raged along her arm. Her sword hit resistance, then sliced through.

There was an explosion. She rolled and regained her feet as her vision cleared and the corrupting flame, unable to find purchase on her soul, died away.

She had damaged both of Diotian's legs. The left jerked, its mechanism misfiring. At the moment the Dreadnought was leaning forward with the momentum of the chainfist strike. He toppled over, a monument of madness falling from its plinth, and crashed into the runic circle.

There was time between the beats for Diotian to howl again. His flamer turned, unleashing a firestorm across the Cruciatorium. It swept over the ruins of the stage and the pews. The stark outlines of fallen iron stood out like the bones of a great beast. It engulfed Setheno, but it was mere fire. She stood her ground, and waited for the next beat.

It came. The lightning flashed down the length of the claw and struck Diotian.

A double explosion filled Setheno's sight. The massive charge of warp energy blew up the Dreadnought's power plant. The plasma fireball and the eruption of the blocked warp lightning interwove, the materium and the immaterium burning together. Setheno leaned into the blast as if into a hurricane. The fires scoured the Cruciatorium, and when they faded the claw was a twisted mass. Where Diotian had lain, there was a huge new crater.

Suspended above the carbonised chamber, Furia cut through another support. The framework of the conductor lost what was left of its strength. The entire structure collapsed, and Setheno moved now, evading the crushing drop of girders. The fall short-circuited the gathering of the lightning, and the final storm broke in the Cruciatorium. Warp lightning lashed out in every direction. It seethed above the stage. Vortices formed and collided, destroyed each other and formed again. The ceiling split and bowed inwards. The fissure in the deck cracked wider and raced up the walls.

The storm grew in rage. Thunder bellowed, but the third beat of the music had ceased. The lightning no longer left the *Catharsis* for Angriff Primus. And the other, more distant portions of the rhythm were wrong, too. They had turned into the erratic, staggering beats of a failing heart. The daemonic song screamed as it destroyed itself.

Setheno ran back up the slope of the Cruciatorium, racing the growing chaos. Furia had dropped from the ceiling chains. She was covered in burns, and there were hitches in the movement of her bionic limbs. Setheno extended a hand as she reached her, but Furia shook her head. 'I can run,' she said, and she did, keeping pace with Setheno as they charged for the exit.

Just past the threshold of the Cruciatorium, two of Furia's veterans were still alive. Klas Brauner and Yira Rozh had crawled out from under the bodies of their comrades. They were both badly burned and their legs were broken. Furia lifted Brauner over her shoulder without hesitation. In the act, Setheno perceived the acknowledgment of a debt of honour. She picked up Rozh, and they ran down the corridor, heading for the assault ram, leaving the spiralling chaos of the *Catharsis* behind them.

The lightning ceased. The inverted dome of the palace was still. There were no longer any blasts descending to the gate. The portal itself still blazed with coruscating light. Its interior swirled with destructive force. Gorvenal stared at it for a moment, mentally praying that in the next moment, or the one after that, the castellan and Drake would return from the other side. They did not. The opening

in the floor now seemed more like a barrier than a portal.

When the lightning did not come, and the daemonic beat dissolved into chaotic hammering from the north tower, the legion of daemons froze. After a moment of no movement at all, there were hesitant half-steps of confusion. The power that had governed the actions of the abominations had suddenly abandoned them. The song had been their motivating force. It had directed the flow of their attacks and shaped their revels. Now it was gone. Fiends howled. Daemonettes sang plaintively, their melodies clashing with each other as they sought to conjure the music that was gone forever. They had failed to defend the gate from the Grey Knights, and now they were bereft.

The Purifiers did not stand idle. While disorder gripped the enemy, they cut down more clusters of abominations.

'Has the castellan triumphed?' Venrik asked.

'If he and Knight of the Flame Drake have not returned,' Destrian said, 'then they are fighting still.'

Gorvenal noticed he offered no other explanation for their absence.

'They must travel this passage again,' said Carac. 'This position is ours, now, and we shall hold it for them.'

He had barely finished speaking when the daemons started moving again. They stampeded towards the portal. They were not attacking the Purifiers directly. They barely seemed to be aware of them, except as obstacles to their goal. They were intent on throwing themselves into the gate.

The Purifiers sectioned the circumference of the opening into quarters. Each claimed an arc, laying down an unbreachable wall of bolter fire. The daemons trampled each other in their desperation to reach the gate. From its maw, the warp convulsions shot higher into the hall, then fell back into the roiling cauldron of energies.

'The abominations will destroy themselves trying to get through that,' said Carac.

'Perhaps not,' Gorvenal told him. He swept his Nemesis force staff back and forth, its holy light turning daemonic flesh to ash. 'Warp returns to warp. They can traverse what we cannot.'

'Then we shall destroy them before they can try,' said Venrik.

No one asked how long they would have to hold the line. Yet Gorvenal wondered, and he knew his brothers did, too. The daemons flooded down the sides of the bowl. Their numbers were inexhaustible. Destrian's reservoir of promethium was not, nor were the supplies of shells for the storm bolters. The

time would come when Gorvenal would have only his strength and his faith to fight the abominations. His faith, at least, was eternal.

Intoning prayers of thanks for the glorious burden the Emperor had given him, he lay waste to the waves of unclean horrors.

The music ended in a scream. At the moment when the beat should have summoned the lightning to the Masque's dais, nothing came. The daemon whirled in its dance, as trapped as ever by its curse, but now there was only cacophony to echo its moves. The orrery spun itself into ruins. Planets collided, metal fusing and exploding. The arms and gears of the clockwork smashed together. Warp lightning still lashed out from the orb representing Angriff Primus, but its destruction was random, without direction, outside the control of the Masque. The roar of cataclysm filled the chamber. The shattered remains of Angriff Secundus slammed into Crowe. The blow would have smashed even Aegis armour, but his artificer armour withstood it. He embraced the shock of the impact and tried to free himself from the Masque's grip. But though he stopped moving, he was not free. He was suspended by the disintegration of the dance, no more.

The initial fury of the destruction receded. The wreckage of the orrery lay on the floor of the chamber in angular heaps, an ossuary of murdered art. As the roar faded, Crowe realised the music was still present. Its power was greatly diminished. It was no longer the rhythm of an entire system. But it was still the melody of the Masque's dance. The daemon turned its head to stare at Crowe. Its limbs described sinuous arcs, its body moving in sinister, ritualistic beauty even as it kept its head eerily still, its gaze burning with hate.

'***You have done this***,' the Masque said. '***You have brought ruin to my design. I would have gathered the galaxy in my dance, and you, so cold, you would turn the universe grey***.' The daemon waved its sceptre, drawing an obscene rune in the air, and pain like a hundred claws of ice sank into Crowe's nervous system. '***You will fail. You*** **have** ***failed. You thrash against the beauty of excess, but you are an insect in a web. You tear the strands, yet your freedom is lost, long lost. You will die, and I will dance, and in the end, all will dance with me before Slaanesh.***' The Masque raised its great claw, and the orb of Angriff Primus, still intact, still flashing with eldritch energy, resumed its orbit around the dais.

'***I still have this world***,' the daemon said. '***It dances for me. I shall rebuild. You have destroyed only an iteration of my art. The design lives on in my conception, in my palace, in this world. The dance goes on.***

‘***But you…***

‘***Oh, you, grey thing, you will dance your end for me now. You will expiate your sin against the sublime. Bleed for me, grey thing. Suffer for me. Die for me. Give me your suffering in worship.***’

The Masque snapped its pincer three times, a sharp clacking of summons. The music’s chains pulled on Crowe once more. The melody traced the path of his execution for him. He would spiral in towards the Masque. He knew he would not be torn apart before he reached the dais. The daemon had reserved a more personal end for him.

He saw all this, because he knew the melody down to the smallest nuance now. He knew the music as he would a daemon’s name. The Masque had shown him too much, and his knowledge was his weapon.

The music commanded his movements, and he did not resist. He anticipated each gesture, each step. He did more than accept the command. He commanded his limbs to follow the dance. His will overtook that of the Masque. He moved as he was bid, at the precise moment he was bid, but he was prepared for each movement, and bit by bit, he pulled himself free of the chains.

Illusion, said the Blade. ***Futility***, and then it screamed in his mind. It shrieked and clawed at his defences. It sought to break his concentration, to throw him back into the thrall of the Masque. Crowe reinforced the walls, and kept Antwyr’s screams at bay. He rebuilt the stones of his ramparts. He was castellan of the Grey Knights, and the fortress of the Imperium would not fall on his watch. Let the Black Blade howl and batter his fortifications. They would stand, and he would hurl the daemon before him from the battlements.

The Masque danced, and Crowe circled the dais of the sun. His orbits narrowed. He came closer to the daemon, and as he did, the abomination’s mesmeric hold crumbled. When he looked at the Masque, he anticipated every moment of its flowing actions as completely as he knew his own steps. He divided his focus between himself and the daemon. He had to lunge and gesture with such precision that his concentration rushed ahead of the demands of the Masque. He moved exactly as the daemon wished, and it could not know that his defiance was growing. By the time he was within a single revolution of the dais, he had regained control of his body. He broke the daemon’s hold through a perfect mimicry of obedience.

As he completed the final turn of the spiral, the Masque’s lips parted in a snarling grin. Its eyes gleamed, hate making way for the eagerness of protracted vengeance. The daemon spun on one leg, as if drawing in Crowe’s chain, and its

great claw swept through the air towards him. It was coming to slice off his left arm.

Crowe leapt. The daemon knew precisely where the dance would place him, and he knew it too, before the moment came. And so he leapt back, and the claw cut only empty air, and then he lunged onto the dais.

As Crowe made his move, Antwyr changed tactics. The grating shriek became an urgent command. ***Use me. Use me or fail.***

The temptation was familiar. It was the sword's eternal refrain, yet it knew when to chant it for greatest effect. Crowe was a lone human attacking a daemon who was able to kill thousands at a stroke. The assault was mad, a last gesture of pointless defiance. Only the daemon contained by the blade, freed to wield its immense power at last, could counter such an abomination.

This was the insinuation of the sword. The temptation was skilful. It was convincing.

It failed, as it ever would.

Crowe fired his storm bolter into the daemon's face at point-blank range. It was like shooting a tank. The Masque's being was too strong to be broken open by mere physical shells, but Crowe's sudden movement and the explosions caught it off guard. It missed its strike, and though it could never miss a step in its dance, Crowe forced the Masque into an altered movement, a graceful recoil. The daemon spun back in a counter move, and its pincer closed around Crowe's torso. The grip was crushing. The serrated edge of the pincer dug into the artificer armour.

'***I have you***,' the monster hissed. It winced to clutch a being so holy. The light that shone from Crowe ate into the unnatural chitin of the claw. The Masque held tight, and squeezed more tightly. It was no stranger to pain and its pleasures. The burns it would suffer were a satisfying cost of its revenge.

Its triumph left it open to Crowe's true attack.

Crowe stabbed the Masque where the pincer arm joined the waist. He wielded the sword as he always had, as he would until he breathed his last. He wielded it as a blade, and nothing else. But it was still the Black Blade of Antwyr. If it could be destroyed, the means were unknown to the Grey Knights, though they scoured the galaxy for the key to bring an end to the cursed relic. The flesh of a daemon, even one so great as the Masque, was not indestructible. Crowe struck with all his strength, and he carved a deep wound into the side of the Masque.

The daemon screamed. This pain was not welcome. This pain threatened dissolution. The Masque released him and spun in a blur, striking with its claw to

decapitate him. Its speed was blinding, but it was still held by the prison of its dance.

As he had known the steps he would be forced to make, Crowe knew the limits of the Masque's speed. It had to dance. There was a rhythm it could not break. He was free of it. He foresaw the attack before it began. He blocked the claw with the sword. The collision was tremendous, as great as the shock from the globe of Angriff Primus. The servo-motors of his armour caught, spun, and caught again. The blow knocked him back, but the Blade chopped off a third of the claw's length, and the jerk of the impact forced the Masque to move against the music. The daemon screamed again, and a seething wound split its face and shoulder, as if it had been struck by the lash of a dark god.

They moved back and forth across the surface of the dais in a duel split between sublime and broken choreography. Now the Masque struck not to torture but to kill. Crowe had placed himself outside the influence of the music. Yet he heard it, and he read it, and he moved between the beats, against the strains of the melody. He evaded the Masque's blows where they would have cut him in half, and he countered them when he could. He weaved in and out of the daemonic whirlwind, slashing with the blade, opening one wound and then another. He could not escape every hit. The Masque was too fast. Crowe's blood stained the silver of his holy armour, but now the dance of the daemon sprayed ichor over the dais and beyond, onto the ruins of the orrery.

The light of purity clashed with the violet shine of corruption. The opposing fires twined and warred, a blazing aura of battle that wavered back and forth over the movements of the duellists. The flame rose to the heights of the chamber. It licked against the crystalline ceiling and walls. The palace trembled, and the furnace of the star's heart pressed in harder, hungry to destroy the impossible intruder.

'***Enough!***' the Masque shouted. Though it did not pause in its attacks any more than it could pause in its dance, Crowe sensed its focus shift. While claw and pincer grabbed and slashed, it held its sceptre high. It spun around the axis of its raised arm, creating a still centre. '***There is only grey in you. If you are beyond art, then you shall be silent.***'

The globe of Angriff Primus ceased its revolutions. It hovered, motionless, above the sceptre. The Masque seized the lightning from the planet. The daemon's control over the eldritch sorcery that had shaped the world was as profound as the planet's core. The thunder of the music grew as the energy poured into the sceptre. The song mounted a crescendo towards Crowe's finale.

Crowe took a step back. He turned, braced, and let the pincer crush his flank. The blow cracked open his fused ribs. The pain was without meaning. The daemonic music governed all. He let the hit from the pincer move him further to the right, one step outside the Masque's line of sight. The daemon turned its head to follow him, the sceptre blinding with the energy of annihilation.

But the blow could not fall until the rhythm announced its moment had come. And Crowe knew the music. He foresaw the beat that would mark his death. He struck first.

Clutching the hilt with both hands, Crowe slashed sideways with the Black Blade. He hit the neck of the Masque as the sceptre descended. He struck at a moment as precise as the daemonic song. He struck a lethal blow against the rhythm. The sword cut halfway through the Masque's head. It hung to the side, mouth working in silenced rage. The blow of the sceptre could not fall. Crowe severed the rhythm, and the energy consumed itself.

The Masque danced on, now with even greater violence, and frenzy. It whirled faster and faster. The sceptre seemed to explode, unleashing all its energy at once. The blast was slow, measurable in seconds. It reached as far as the ends of the daemon's limbs, and then it withdrew. The daemon's form pulled in with it. Faster, faster, the daemon became a vortex of movement, narrower and narrower, the foul lightning withdrawing, becoming denser, darker, until it imploded. The daemon vanished, and the sudden collapse of warp flesh into the immaterium triggered a blast wave that hurled Crowe halfway across the chamber. The daemon's scream of despair lingered past its disappearance. The echo bounced like a trapped beast from wall to wall, and when it, too, faded, the music at last was truly gone.

Yet there was still thunder. It was an insistent, climbing, groaning roar. It came from everywhere. Tremors of escalating violence shook the chamber.

Then the translucent walls began to crack.

In the violence of its discharges, the warp lightning destroyed more of the tower. Seconds after the first asteroid strike on Angriff Primus, a blast took out a section of the tower beneath the upper chamber. A thin spine of the unnatural stone held up the broken dome. The floor swayed. There were seconds before the fall, and no way down.

Styer thought of the squad yet fighting below and cursed. There was no way to reach them. Even if there was, time had run out. The sky was falling on Algidus. His squad had done its duty.

There is always more, he thought with frustration. The battle never cleanly won; the duty never clearly fulfilled.

His duty now, though, was clear, as the unleashed storm in the tower raged with destruction. 'Our work is done,' he told his battle-brothers. 'Engage your teleporters.'

Styer triggered his device. There was a flash of energy, and with it came dissolution, the moment of unbeing, and then the piercing agony of rebirth. The chamber vanished, and the teleportarium of the *Tyndaris* appeared. The columns of the circular hall glowed in the light of the central power block, still crackling white.

Styer marched off the teleportation pad in the *Tyndaris* while wisps of energy ran up and down his armour. Gared kept pace with him despite his wounds. The Librarian's breath rattled, and his eyes were sunken. He looked diminished, as if he had left half his life force in that tower. But he moved quickly, his need to reach the bridge as great as Styer's.

Saalfrank reported over the vox as they made their way up the decks. '*The* Catharsis *is destroyed*,' he said. '*The evacuation of our forces from Angriff Primus is underway. The* Malleus Maleficarum *and both Stormravens are aboard*.'

The shipmaster's list of good news was ominous in the silences. Styer exchanged a look with Gared. He did not ask about the other squads. If they had made it back to the ship, Saalfrank would have said.

Styer's misgivings were confirmed by what he found on the bridge. Furia and Setheno were there, but of the Purifiers, only Sendrax was present. The Knight of the Flame was supported by an iron medicae framework. He was in his armour, refusing treatment, but his arms hung limp. When he turned his head at Styer's arrival, the rest of his body remained motionless. His face was pale with anger. Styer did not ask how the rest of his squad fared. He had his answer.

The oculus displayed Angriff Primus' funeral pyre. The atmosphere was opaque, thick with the dust kicked up by the asteroid impacts. The cloud cover glowed with the fires of recent hits, and the hail of fragments continued. Lightning reached up from the position of Algidus, lashing in mad anger across the void.

'No word from the castellan?' Styer asked.

Saalfrank shook his head.

'Nothing from his squad?'

'Vox contact is difficult with forces still inside the palace,' said Soussanin. 'We

have had some contact. They fight on, though in the absence of Castellan Crowe and Knight of the Flame Drake.'

'I see.' Drake had the squad's sole teleporter. Unlike the Terminators, the Purifiers' power armour did not have the capacity to carry the homers. Without Drake, their only chance of evacuation was to leave the palace. If both gunships were aboard, they had refused that option.

'We cannot put off the decision indefinitely,' Sendrax rasped.

'Which decision?'

'Orbital bombardment of the palace. We have broken the workings of the daemonic engine, but the source of the evil remains. If the castellan has fallen, we may put an end to the enemy.'

'We do not know he is dead.'

'There is no reason to think he is still alive.'

The lightning stopped.

'Isn't there?' Setheno asked.

And now the great mourning of the daemons began.

A hurricane wind howled into the gate, and the flaring energy disappeared. The gate went dark. It was only a pit in the bottom of the floor now. It led nowhere.

The daemons halted in their rush. They cried out, an immense choir of grief, dismay, and fury.

'Well done, castellan,' said Gorvenal.

'The way is closed,' Venrik said. 'How will they return?'

'Drake has the teleporter.'

'Can it work from where they are?'

'We must have faith that it will, brother.'

Tremors radiated outwards from the former gate. The floor vibrated as if some immense force were rising from below. Soon the walls were swaying. There was a grace to their back-and-forth movement. At first Gorvenal thought the motion was an illusion caused by the general shaking. The stone could not move in this way. Then he saw that the walls moved in time to the mourning song of the daemons. The rising force was a physical manifestation of the emotion of defeat.

The grief became anger. The walls still swayed, now with the rage of the abominations.

Carac laughed. 'The question of our situation remains, brothers,' he said. He sounded eager rather than bitter. Carac took active pleasure from battle. If the end had come for them, then a struggle to cap a grand victory was no tragedy.

Gorvenal looked up the staircase to the level floor. Thousands of daemons stood between the squad and the palace gate. The way forward was clear. The destination was not.

The daemons came for them again, keening the song of mourning and of vengeance. In the higher pitches of the writhing melody, Gorvenal thought he detected a sound familiar from human hymns. It was a plea for expiation. The abominations were crying out repentance to their dark god.

The perversion of true faith was disgusting. Gorvenal raised his Nemesis warding staff, and it blazed with his righteous anger. 'Brothers,' he called, 'exterminate them all!'

'*We are the hammer!*' they all shouted. In a tight formation, they charged up the stairs and into the sea of monsters.

They had fought their way halfway up to the floor when the movement of the walls grew suddenly more violent. From the direction of the blasted doors of the palace came a noise like the shifting of two mountains, and then there was an immense crack of stone masses coming together.

'What was that?' Destrian asked.

'That,' said Gorvenal, 'was this corrupt palace sealing the breach.'

The walls split. Translucence frosted. The heat spiked. The first brilliant filaments of the sun's matter broke through into the palace.

Crowe staggered across the wreckage of the orrery, calling for Drake. He had heard the Knight of the Flame's last cry. He had not seen his brother's fate.

Footing was treacherous. The chamber did more than shake. It contracted as pressure on it increased. Stone bunched like flesh, turned brittle, and exploded into powder. Geysers of crystal fragments, vicious shrapnel, burst from the walls and floor. Dust and fire filled the room as the Masque's bubble within the star failed. Crowe could see only a few yards in any direction.

'Drake!' he called again, his vox-casters at maximum. There was no answer.

He reached the location where he had last seen his brother. The Knight of the Flame's power armour, thrice-blessed and anointed with holy oils, had been torn open. It lay in fragments, scattered across a wide area of the floor. There was no body. Crowe heaved the hemisphere of a broken planet to the side. He found Drake's gauntlets, but not his corpse. His sword, too, was missing.

'You wield it still, brother,' Crowe whispered. 'No mere daemon could break so strong a hold as yours.' He raised his voice. 'I will find you, brother!' he shouted. 'This is my vow!'

The only answer he received was the accelerating collapse of the room. The star raged, and the cracks in the walls became fissures. The crystalline palace was moments away from its dissolution.

Crowe's auto-senses were flashing red. The temperature in the chamber was already several hundred degrees.

He turned towards the doorway, then stopped. He had seconds left with nowhere to go. He was in the centre of an architectural spiral with no exit.

A poor death, said the sword. ***And I will be free.*** The scrape of the voice was satisfied, pleased to contemplate Crowe's ultimate failure. ***You defeated the daemon***, it said, ***yet you betray your first charge, warden. You will die, and in dying loose me upon your precious Imperium. Let your final thoughts be the measureless oceans of blood I will spill***.

Crowe looked back at the armour. There was one possibility. The pieces were large. Drake's helmet was intact. So was his power pack. Crowe moved through the wreckage near the power pack. Beneath a huge orrery cog, he found Drake's teleporter.

I will find you, brother, he promised again.

With a splintering crash that turned into the wail of captive souls, the walls collapsed. Crowe activated the teleporter. In the last moment before he ceased to exist inside the heart of a star, Crowe saw more than the blinding might of the sun break through the palace. He saw the collapsing matter of the daemon's creation turn into something dense and sharp. The art of the Masque would outlive its creator's presence in the materium long enough for an act of murder so great, it was art of the most grandiose and cruel kind. The palace was compressing itself into a dagger that would assassinate a star.

'Nine minutes!' Crowe voxed the bridge as he ran from the *Tyndaris'* teleporter pad. 'We have nine minutes to make the jump to the immaterium.' He did not know what the fused, eldritch palace would do to Angriff. But he could guess. Angriff Primus was nine light minutes away from the star. When the sun died, it would take that long for the effects of its death to reach the *Tyndaris*. 'Are all our forces aboard?' Crowe asked.

'*All except the squad of Knight of the Flame Drake*,' said Saalfrank.

Crowe winced. 'Where are my brothers?'

'*Still inside the palace.*'

'Are you in contact with them?'

'*We are.*'

‘Link me to them.’

A moment later, Gorvenal’s voice arrived from the surface of the planet. ‘*We give thanks to the Emperor that you still live, castellan*,’ he said. He spoke over the sounds of battle and the shrieks of daemons.

‘What is your situation?’ Crowe asked.

‘*The entrance to the palace is gone. We are sealed inside the walls.*’

Crowe stopped walking. The deck vibrated as Saalfrank pushed the *Tyndaris*’ engines through an emergency acceleration. There was no decision to be made about the squad’s fate. Everyone on the ship knew it. But the sensation of the ship pulling away from Angriff Primus felt like betrayal.

He was standing before a tapestry that depicted the last stand of Tristis V, when two strike forces of the First Brotherhood gave their lives purging the planet of the forces commanded by the Lord of Change Ix’thar’ganix. The image of noble sacrifice towered above him. That he should see this image at this moment was an unmistakable sign. It drove home the fact that there was nothing he could do. It was no comfort. It was merely a reminder of the two sorrowful duties of the moment. It was the squad’s to be sacrificed. It was his to accept his brothers’ doom.

‘Destruction is about to overtake the Angriff system,’ Crowe told Gorvenal.

‘*I understand, castellan. Is the enemy defeated?*’

‘It is. We have triumphed, brother.’

‘*Then I am grateful. We shall fight here to the last. The light of the Emperor burns the abominations in their very stronghold.*’

‘You are His right hand,’ said Crowe. ‘Fight well.’

‘*We shall. The Emperor protects.*’

‘The Emperor protects.’

Then there was nothing more to say, and there was nothing more Crowe could do. The fate of the Purifiers on Angriff Primus and of the *Tyndaris* were no longer in his hands.

When he reached the bridge, the primary display was trained on the receding planet and the distant star. The vibration in the deck was violent. The engines strained to their limit, though the strike cruiser seemed to be moving with glacial slowness. The final minutes were slipping away too fast.

Styer, Furia and Setheno stood next to Saalfrank’s command throne. Crowe remained at the back of the strategium, isolating himself and the sword from the others, but granting himself the license to be present long enough to see fate decided. The trio looked back and nodded to him. Alone on the starboard side of

the strategium, Sendrax did not respond to his arrival.

No one spoke. Crowe did not ask Saalfrank whether they would make the jump in time. All that remained to do was to bear witness.

Crowe bore witness to Angriff going supernova. At first the star flickered, the moment of its death a phenomenon utterly removed from the materium. The flicker was the stain of the empyrean. After the flicker came the blaze. Angriff shone more brightly than it ever had before. It seared the void with the brilliance of its pain.

The star exploded. Its outer layers expanded across the system, a sphere of absolute annihilation, swallowing the inner planets, erasing all trace of their existence, and of the hundreds of billions of souls who had lived upon them. Civilisations that had endured for thirty thousand years only to be destroyed by the dance of the Masque now vanished even from memory.

A monster worse than all-consuming fire raced ahead of the stellar material. It was a warp shockwave. It distorted space. It made the void bleed. The colours of the immaterium, screaming corruption and madness engulfed the system, one final cry of power from the daemonic engine. It arrived to consume every psychic life force in the system.

The warp wave overtook Angriff Primus. Crowe saw the first moments of the planet's final damnation, its transformation into a burning nightmare.

Then the *Tyndaris* made its jump, leaving only flame behind.

EPILOGUE

Crowe stood at a lectern in the centre of the librarium's meditation cell. He focused on the screen of a data-slate. He was watching for an error in his initial observations, wary of self-delusion. He did not think he had erred. Even if he hadn't, he was only at the beginning of many more questions. But it was a start.

The Black Blade of Antwyr snarled. It whispered promises of retribution. It did not offer Crowe glory. Not on this day. The daemon was too consumed by its own wrath. It had seen the moment of its freedom come, and then vanish again. It raged in its prison, and found no purchase on the spiritual walls that held it. The walls were even stronger than they had been before Angriff Primus. They had been reinforced by the blood of heroes. New mortar of sacrifice had been added to the stones of faith. Crowe honoured the sacrifices with a renewal of strength.

The sword screamed, and Crowe allowed himself a careful, measured dose of satisfaction to hear the daemon so stymied.

Antwyr returned to the endless list of torture reserved for its warden. Then its curses dissolved into incoherence. A stylus and parchment were on the lectern beside the data-slate, and Crowe picked up the stylus again, transcribing the sword's words for the apparent nonsense to be parsed at a later date.

Back and forth his attention went between the transcription and the date. Back and forth, the eternal pattern of his meditation. He went through the cycle of picts repeatedly, studying them as carefully as he would the sword's rantings.

The hidden must be found, he thought.

In one pict out of hundreds, the hidden stared out at him.

Footsteps approached his cell. He stepped back from the lectern, retreating to the far wall. Styer, Gared, Furia and Setheno entered the cell. They stayed near

the doorway, keeping their distance. Crowe felt the sword lash out at them, shrieking and tempting at the same time. He was worried most about Gared, who had barely begun to recover his strength.

'Are you sure he should be of our number?' he had asked Styer when he had spoken with the justicar over the vox.

'*His understanding of these matters runs deeper than mine*,' said Styer. '*We will want to hear his thoughts*.'

Now Crowe said to the four before him, 'I would know your minds. The Ruinous Powers drew us deliberately, over the course of years, to Angriff. Are the games of fate at an end? Have we severed the threads of destiny in which the enemy sought to entrap us?'

'My squad has come full circle,' said Styer. 'All the machinations we encountered from the moment of our first battle on Angriff Primus led us back here. Those machinations have failed. We triumphed. I feel we have earned a guarded optimism.'

'Are we saying, then, that all of this has ultimately been the work of the Masque of Slaanesh?' Crowe paused, letting the question sink in. 'It is true,' he went on, 'that daemons we have fought in the pattern of incident that has led from the Sandava to the Angriff systems, a pattern stretching back more than a century, have all been creatures of the Dark Prince.'

'Not for us,' said Gared. 'We have encountered other forms of abominations.'

Setheno turned to Styer. 'Do you feel liberated, justicar? Has a shadow been lifted from the path of your squad?'

'I feel cautious,' said Styer.

'Good. There is no liberation for us. Our struggle is eternal.'

'Perhaps we have closed this cycle,' Furia suggested. 'We cannot deny that there was a culmination of events on Angriff Primus.'

'That much is certain,' said Crowe. 'But nothing is closed. Nothing can be, until the Cicatrix Maledictum itself is closed. The Cicatrix has opened many wounds, and will open many more.'

'War is forever,' Setheno said quietly. Even more quietly, in a whisper of darkness, she said, 'Yet everything ends.'

'We are not done with Angriff, either,' said Crowe.

'How can that be?' Furia asked. 'The system no longer exists.'

'The fate of five Purifiers is unknown.'

Styer frowned. 'I mean no disrespect, castellan, but I believe we know exactly what has happened to them. We all grieve for the losses our Chapter has suffered

on this day.'

None more than Sendrax, Crowe thought. He had not spoken with Sendrax since his return to the *Tyndaris*. The lines of communication between them had been severed by the deaths of Sendrax's battle-brothers. No questions hovered about their fates.

'Knight of the Flame Drake vanished before I banished the Masque,' Crowe said. 'I found no body. We were inside the star of Angriff. Where he was taken I cannot say, but it was not somewhere in the materium. And then there is this.' He pointed to the data-slate.

The others advanced to the lectern, visibly bracing themselves against their proximity to the sword. The *Tyndaris*' sensors had recorded the destruction of Angriff Primus up to the moment of the jump. The slate displayed a pict from the very beginning of the cataclysm, a fraction of a second after the wave had struck.

'Look at that image,' Crowe said, 'and the ones before. You see the effect of the warp wave on the planet.'

'I see annihilation,' said Styer.

'What's this?' Setheno asked. She was pointing to a spot in the upper left quadrant of the pict. The same spot that obsessed Crowe.

'Quite,' said Crowe. 'Examine the other picts again, before and after.'

They did as he asked, and Styer said, 'It looks as if a portion of the planet was sheared away. Then it disappears.'

'Yes. The rest of Angriff Primus is kept intact, subjected to final corruption before being obliterated by the supernova. But one piece is removed. Why?'

'The palace,' said Setheno.

'The palace,' Crowe repeated. 'The Purifiers fight on. I will not abandon them.'

'Your brothers are lost, yet miraculously they survive.' Setheno's golden eyes were as hard and merciless as ever. 'Is this happenstance, or a trap?'

Styer sighed. 'Yet another machination,' he said.

'Or something deeper,' said Crowe. He nodded to Setheno. 'I, too, suspect the worst. So experience has taught us to do, and so we must do. But trap or not, it makes no difference. If this is a lure, then I shall find the next enemy that must be destroyed. But I will find Drake, and I will find his squad. This is my solemn vow.'

'It is mine as well,' said Styer.

'And mine,' said Gared.

Furia and Setheno nodded.

The sword had never stopped ranting during the exchange. The sibilant curses went on and on at the back of Crowe's mind. Sometimes the Blade seemed to become more muted, and Crowe knew then it was targeting one of the other souls present. Now, though, for a single moment, the sword fell silent. The impact of that *nothing* was vertiginous. Crowe had to focus on grounding his stance to stay upright. One second of silence in more than a century was more ominous than a thousand shrieked curses. But the vows were made, and the sword ceased to speak.

Then Antwyr laughed. Softly at first, a stuttering hiss, as if from the skeleton of a serpent. Then louder, rasping, grating, bone over rock. And louder and louder yet, until it was a thunder in the soul, an immense booming like the death of worlds yet sharp as an assassin's stab.

As high as the laugh rose, Crowe's walls rose higher. The laugh could not overwhelm his defences. It did, though, echo in the minds and the souls of the others. Gared, the strongest psychic present, grunted, and took a step back from the lectern.

'It is time I was alone,' Crowe said.

Without a word, the others left, the strength of the vow hanging in the air. *Let Antwyr have its mirth*, Crowe thought. *Its expectations are futile*.

Let it laugh. Let it laugh at the fate it believed now awaited Crowe. Nothing would change his vow. Nothing would change his duty.

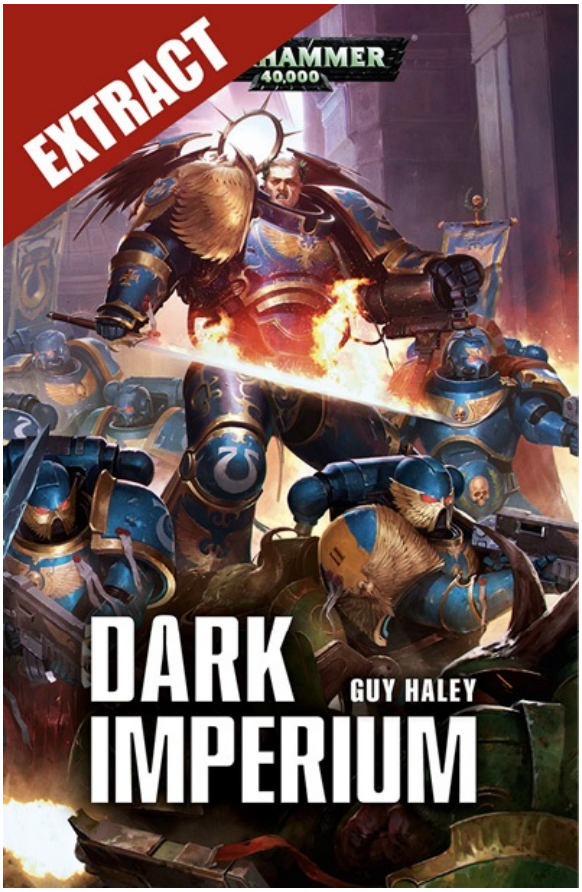
He was castellan of the Grey Knights. He would guard the ramparts for the Emperor, for the Imperium, and for his brothers.

The ramparts were infinite. So was his will.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Annandale is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Ruinstorm* and *The Damnation of Pythos*, and the Primarchs novel *Roboute Guilliman: Lord of Ultramar*. He has also written *Warlord: Fury of the God-Machine*, the Yarrick series, several stories involving the Grey Knights, including *Warden of the Blade* and *Castellan*, and *The Last Wall*, *The Hunt for Vulkan* and *Watchers in Death* for The Beast Arises. For Space Marine Battles he has written *The Death of Antagonis* and *Overfiend*. He is a prolific writer of short fiction set in The Horus Heresy, Warhammer 40,000 and Age of Sigmar universes. David lectures at a Canadian university, on subjects ranging from English literature to horror films and video games.

An extract from *Dark Imperium*.



The void is impossible for the human mind to encompass.

Within the galaxy mankind calls home there are three hundred billion stars. Around these revolve hundreds of billions of worlds, and the spaces between are crowded by a diversity of objects which defy enumeration. Mankind's galaxy is but one of trillions of galaxies in a universe of unguessable size. The distances between even proximate astronomical bodies are inconceivable to creatures evolved to walk the warmer regions of single small world.

This is why the void cannot be understood. Not by men, nor by their machines.

The magi of Mars insist on their understanding, but their apprehension can only ever be an abstraction, dead numbers modelled by dead-flesh cogitators. No matter how brutally expanded their minds, men cannot comprehend the majesty of the void.

And when one considers the warp, that nightmare realm skulking behind that of touch, sound and sight, well… any being who claims understanding of that is either deluded or insane, and is in both cases dangerous.

Among the higher races there are those better equipped to grasp their own limitations. They understand that the cosmos is ultimately unknowable; they accept their lack of insight. By comparison, the creatures of Terra are so crude in thought that – in the opinion of these more enlightened civilisations – it is a wonder humanity can understand anything at all.

Humans are beings of short reach. Give them voidships, change their shape by geneforge and augmetic, provide them with weapons of sufficient power to break a star, and the children of Old Earth are still but apes removed from the savannah. And just as an ape's mind cannot hold an ocean, and the notion of a whole world is inexplicable to it, so a man's mind cannot hold the void, and the layered infinities of the warp are beyond him entirely.

The Imperium claims a million worlds as its own. It is an empire spread gossamer-thin across the run of stars, its worlds so far removed from one another

that it requires the bloody effort of countless men and women to sustain. In the grand flow of history, the Imperium is the greatest galactic empire of its day. To the people who populate it, it is the most powerful ever to have existed.

However, to the uncaring universe, it is nothing, the latest in a line of such realms that stretches back to the days of the first thinking beings, when the stars were young and the warp was calm, and horror had yet to uncoil its tendrils into the material realm.

There are philosophers that argue war is man's natural state, and to the inhabitants of this era of blood it is a proven hypothesis. War is everywhere. Peace is the dream of a silent Emperor, broken by His treacherous sons.

Those sons continued to fight.

Over the green gas giant of Thessala, two great battlefleets engaged. Titanic energies snapped and blinked in the eternal night of space.

The total efforts of star systems went into the construction of these fleets. Neither was free of the taint of blood, not in their construction – for tens of thousands of lives had been expended in their making – nor in their usage. The resources of planets had been poured entire into the forging of their frames, and the secrets of ancient sciences plundered to bring them to murderous life. Both had been responsible for the levelling of civilisations.

The fleets differed in only two regards. First was in their appearance. One was a gaudy assault on the senses, the other a motley collection of sober liveries. The second and more fundamental difference was in their allegiance. The sober fleet fought for the continuation of humanity's great stellar empire; the gaudy one was dedicated to its extinction.

The battlefleets pursued each other in a slow dance that broke through Thessala's rings, hundreds of vessels ploughing gaps through the dust that would take centuries to close. The voiceless lightning of their guns filled the skies of Thessala's inhabited moons. The lives of millions below depended on the outcome of the battle, but the consequences would ripple much further.

At the centre of this iron storm there was no calm, no eye in which respite might be found. Instead, there was a pair of leviathans: the Ultramarines battle-barge *Gauntlet of Power* and the Emperor's Children battleship *Pride of the Emperor*. Two vessels, forged in a common cause but now implacable enemies, locked together in mortal combat only thirty kilometres apart – no distance at all in void war.

Each was the flagship of a primarch, genetically engineered demigods crafted by the Emperor of Mankind. Aboard the *Gauntlet of Power* stood Roboute

Guilliman, the foundling of Ultramar, the Avenging Son. The *Pride of the Emperor* was home to Fulgrim – the traitor, the fallen exemplar, the blighted phoenix. Once covered in his Emperor's blessings, Fulgrim had followed the arch-traitor Horus and pledged his allegiance to ancient dark gods, becoming the herald of perversity.

In fighting for their father, both primarchs were made fathers themselves, though not of princes or strong daughters; through the application of arcane science, they were the sires of two of the Space Marine Legions, mankind's greatest warriors. The Space Marines were lords of the galaxy, designed to reunite the human race and shepherd it to a glorious future. Instead, they had failed and turned upon one another, and their war had nearly destroyed the Imperium.

Such fury a battlefleet can unleash!

It can cow a world without a shot. It can extinguish the life of a species. Battlefleets are the tools of tyrants, whomever they fight for. Whether their admirals espouse salvation or damnation matters not to the execution of their purpose. Death follows in their wake.

To those participating, a void war seems a terrifying, roiling chaos of violence, but it is the pinnacle of mankind's destructive ingenuity, a whirl of gigantic explosions where lives are snuffed out by the hundred. In such combat, a single man is nothing; he is but part of the machine of the ship he serves, as essential or otherwise as a steel cog or an indicator lumen. He can do nothing but work his appointed task and pray his life will not end, or if it must end, that it does so in painless disintegration. A single crewman's task dominates everything, even his fear of death. There is no escape from service. War and his part in it are the totality of his existence.

Yet what is a void war to the timeless deeps of the blackness that envelops all these footling motes of light that sentient creatures battle so earnestly over? A void war is twinkles in the distance. It is silence. It is infinitesimals of matter sparking and dying, scintillas of metal and flesh consumed by transient fires. The detonation of a battleship kilometres long is insignificant to a cosmos where the death of a sun atomises worlds. On a galactic scale, the loss of a warship and ten thousand lives is a nugatory flash outshone by the billion-year candles of the stars.

The inverse is true to a single man. His life is all that matters, for one life is all a man has, and he fears to lose it. Yet he must blindly serve in terror. The universe gives meagre gifts, and it does not care how they are spent.

Over Thessala, mankind fought in a civil war already centuries old. The Emperor of Mankind, a human with the power of a god, had tried and failed to unite humanity's scattered worlds so that the species might survive the supernatural threat of Chaos. His sons, the primarchs, godlike beings He had created to complete this task, had themselves been corrupted, and half had turned against Him. The Horus Heresy, that war was called. It had ended the Emperor's dream.

The Heresy was part of a war that had continued for aeons and would continue for aeons still.

To the beings of this galaxy, the war was everything; to the blank gaze of time, it was nothing. And yet, for all humanity's seeming inconsequence, the children of its greatest son held the fates of two realities in their careless grasp.

Roboute Guilliman remained loyal to Terra. His ship was sternly decorated in gold, so much so that it rivalled that of Fulgrim's vessel in ornamentation, but whereas the *Gauntlet of Power* was ornate, the *Pride of the Emperor* appeared vulgar. Its decoration had been applied with abandon – everything that could be adorned had been adorned. Back when the two ships had fought side by side, its extravagance had not been to the taste of the Ultramarines, who were born of more solemn worlds. Now it was an affront to decency, added to and added to again until tawdry obscured all trace of art. Neglect went hand in hand with this ostentation, and it made the *Pride of the Emperor* appear ugly. It was a decayed relic from a bygone age, like a theatre from a decadent century left to rot in the rain.

However, the *Pride of the Emperor*'s ability to mete out destruction remained undiminished. At point-blank range, it traded punishing blows with the *Gauntlet of Power* as the ships passed slowly alongside each other. Huge cannons flared, exchanging projectiles the size of transit containers. The space between became a deadly thicket of lance beams and laser light. Void shields blurred and sparked with the dissipation of mighty energies. Multi-hued lightning silenced communications and burst sub-systems with their feedback for thousands of miles around. Weaponry capable of levelling cities blinked and flashed on both sides.

Around these metal behemoths, dozens of other ships struggled in cosmic silence, some approaching the size and power of the flagships in their own right. Without exception, those on Fulgrim's side were the damned ships of the Emperor's Children. Though Fulgrim had lost his war and his humanity, his Legion yet held some cohesion. On Guilliman's side fought half a dozen

successor Chapters of the proud XIII Legion: the Ultramarines. Dissolution had been the price of faithfulness for the Legion of Ultramar, and though there were strengths in the smaller formations Guilliman had forced upon the Space Marines after the Great Heresy War, there were weaknesses also.

For all their primarch's famed strategical genius, the loyalists had been out-manoeuvred and caught. Their pursuit of the fallen primarch had become a fight for survival. Three fleet elements of Emperor's Children had pinned the loyalists into place above Thessala; Fulgrim had turned his flight from Xolco into a devastating trap.

Once, Roboute Guilliman would not have made such an error. Perhaps the dire situation over the emerald skies of Thessala was simple misfortune, and Fulgrim was no ordinary opponent, after all. Should Guilliman fail, history would surely be forgiving, if there were any good men left to write it.

Or perhaps the truth was that rage had clouded the Avenging Son's judgement. Perhaps, some dared whisper, Roboute Guilliman had allowed his desire for revenge to overtake his reason.

Roboute Guilliman was stretched. Although several other primarchs still stood as champions of humanity, the wounded Imperium looked to Guilliman to save it. Every man has a limit, demigod or peasant, and Guilliman's burden was the heaviest of all. He was the saviour of humanity.

The *Pride of the Emperor* heeled over, bringing its portside weapons batteries into better firing arcs. In response, the *Gauntlet of Power* intensified its barrage, and the void shield covering the *Pride of the Emperor*'s ventral towers winked out.

Explosions bloomed suddenly across hull plating encrusted with gold and filth.

An opening had been made.

On board the *Gauntlet of Power*, one hundred of Ultramar's finest warriors waited on teleport blocks surrounded by buzzing machinery. They comprised fifty of the First Company and fifty of the Second, all garbed in the deep blue of the Ultramarines Chapter. The white helmets of the First Company's veteran Space Marines, recessed under the cowls of Terminator armour, looked out at hundreds of tech-adepts and mortal crewmen labouring to prepare the Ultramarines' way through the warp.

The Space Marines of the Second Company were in standard power armour, and were being equipped with tall breaching shields by arming servitors. Their battleplate lacked the sheer thickness of Terminator armour, and the shields, though bulky, would increase their survivability in the close-quarter fighting of

the coming boarding.

Ammunition trains rumbled across the deck on plasteel wheels. Smartly uniformed Ultramarines Chapter menials handed out munitions to their masters while the enhanced warriors performed last-minute armour checks on themselves and their brothers. Chaplains strode from platform to platform, hearing oaths and affixing papers to armour with wax that hissed as they were impressed with sacred iron seals. Whether human or transhuman, every member of the Chapter worked with perfect efficiency. Even so, as invested as they were in their preparations, all of them had half an eye on the grand archway leading onto the deck.

The ship shook violently. Alarms blared. Lumens spat sparks and went dark. A section of gantry clanged down from the tangle of struts and pipes that clogged the ceiling high above. The crew continued upon its business with unhurried purpose. Orders were given to reroute power. Emergency teams of armoured voidsmen and specialised servitors began clearing the wreckage. All was restored to order.

Such calm made it easy to forget the punishing fire the ship was under. But there was no doubt that they were losing.

This was not how the battle was supposed to have gone.

From voxmitters studded into the columns and walls, a clipped voice sounded.

'Shields down on the *Pride of the Emperor*. Prepare for assault.' The words were swallowed by the clatter of preparation and tumult of war beating at the ship. They were not repeated, for the superior hearing of the Space Marines caught them all.

A clarion followed shortly, sharp and loud enough to be heard by mortal and transhuman alike. The servants of Ultramar stopped what they were doing and stood to attention.

A towering figure clad in the famous Armour of Reason strode through the archway. On his left hand he wore the Hand of Dominion. Belted at his waist was the Gladius Incandor. The bearer of these weapons was taller by far than the Invictarus Suzerain guard escorting him. He exuded a power and purpose that halted the breath of mortals in their throats.

'First Captain Andros! Second Captain Thiel! Are your companies ready?' the giant called.

The two captains crossed the floor to meet their lord. Second Captain Thiel was helmetless in power armour heavy with honours, while First Captain Andros was completely enclosed in a hulking suit of Terminator battleplate. They saluted

their father the Ultramarian way, one fist across their chests – the old symbol of unity.

'My Lord Guilliman! Your veterans await your command,' said Andros, his voice ringing from the voxmitter set below his helm.

'We stand prepared, my primarch,' said Aeonid Thiel. His voice, rich and soft, was unmoderated by machinery. It was not so very long after the Heresy, and Thiel was still young for a Space Marine, though his face was lined with cares.

Guilliman looked down upon his captains resolutely. The primarch overtopped even Andros in his massive Terminator armour. He was a living god, humanity's might captured and moulded as flesh.

Thiel gazed back, seemingly unable to take his eyes from the face of his genesire. Thiel was a good warrior, tested in battle many times, unafraid to voice his mind and modest enough to hide the love he had for his lord, but it shone in his face like a light.

Such devotion they bear me, thought Guilliman, *even as I fail them.*

There were so few of his original Legion left alive, and their replacements were born of a different, less certain era. Thiel's regard was tempered by long friendship, and he had never lost his rebellious streak. The younger Space Marines were another matter. Guilliman remembered when his warriors had been less reverent. They had been better times.

'We depart immediately,' he said, his voice uncompromising. 'The traitor will not escape again. The warriors of six Chapters stand ready to aid us. We shall not fail. To your stations – prepare for mass teleport.'

'My lord, we are prepared,' said Andros carefully. 'But the enemy will outnumber us greatly. I am concerned for our chances of success. What is the practical action should resistance prove overwhelming? It is Second Captain Thiel's and my opinion that you should remain here. We shall occupy the enemy, while the *Gauntlet of Power* withdraws. We cannot–'

The Avenging Son cut Andros dead with a look.

'Too much blood has been shed on my behalf. I will not shy from this fight,' Guilliman said, and his tone would brook no disagreement. 'There can be no retreat until the *Pride of the Emperor* is crippled. I must face my brother and occupy him while these tasks are done. And if I must fight him, I will kill him, or I will die in the attempt. I cannot let him escape unpunished again. My sons,' he added, his voice softening, 'it is the only way to escape this trap.'

Andros bowed his helmeted head. Thiel paused a moment, uncertain, before doing the same. Sure of their agreement, Guilliman took his own helm from a

grav-platform pushed by two mortal men. He mounted the teleport platform – stepping directly onto it with no need of the steps that led from the deck – and turned to address his sons.

'Now, my warriors, let us show my brother the consequences of turning upon the Imperium of Terra!'

'We march for Macragge!' they bellowed, and their combined voices were enough to drown out the thunder of battle.

Guilliman's Invictus Suzerain guard followed him onto the teleport pad. They formed a protective ring around him, their shields and power axes held up in a shield wall in preparation for teleportation directly into the jaws of battle.

To those around him, Guilliman was an infallible leader, his abilities supernatural. Even to the rational Ultramarines, who believed the Emperor of Mankind to be a man and not a god, and likewise His primarch sons, a sense of near-religious awe had crept into their attitude towards him. It had only become more pronounced since the last days of the Heresy.

But Roboute Guilliman was not infallible.

He knew this course of action to be fraught with risk. Andros had been right to raise the possibility of defeat. The primarch only wished he could praise his son for his insight rather than dismissing his concerns. His campaign against the Emperor's Children had, to all purposes, failed. Fulgrim had the initiative. Guilliman's choices had been made for him. The pieces were set on the board, there was only one option: they had to withdraw.

Currently, withdrawal was impossible. If the *Gauntlet of Power* broke off from the fight, then the *Pride of the Emperor* would inflict massive damage upon the battle-barge. Fulgrim would then most likely attempt a boarding assault of his own once their defences were shattered. Guilliman could not allow his brother to do that at a time of his choosing.

The primarch's powerful mind had examined all possibilities. His own strategic treatises would have him retreat quickly, forming a fighting rearguard so that he might withdraw those of his ships that he could, minimising the damage to his flagship by sacrificing many of his others. Expending the lives of other men to save his own was not to Guilliman's liking, especially when he saw a slim chance for true victory. He could not ignore this opportunity to slay his treacherous sibling. Guilliman had come to the conclusion that by defying his own tactical orthodoxies, he might surprise Fulgrim.

It was a slender chance. Fulgrim might well have dropped his ship's shields on purpose, a mocking re-enactment of Horus' last gambit to lure the Emperor

aboard his ship at the end of the siege of Terra.

Guilliman had his own plans. Several boarding forces with independent but mutually supportive objectives would teleport in simultaneously with his own force. Teams drawn from multiple Chapters were tasked to head for the enginarium, the command deck, the navigatorium, the magazine, the subsidiary command deck and the main gunnery control. If only half of his strike teams were successful, they had a good chance of crippling the *Pride of the Emperor* from within. His warriors had orders to withdraw immediately once their objectives had been achieved. He would make sure as many survived as possible; he would not let his sons pay the price for his mistakes.

He had to settle the reckoning for his own errors.

Guilliman could not deny he had been hooked and played like a fish. All he could do was struggle free and bite the one who had snared him.

'Make ready! We go to war!' he called.

At his signal, the machines of the teleport deck hummed into life. Giant reaction columns crackled with immense power, feeding the focusing arrays that would tear open the veil between realspace and the warp. They glowed with painful light. As they shone brighter, curls of materialising corposant were leached from initiation prongs and fed into containment flasks, where it twisted as if alive.

So many of my brothers are dead, fallen to Chaos or lost, thought Guilliman. *We assumed we were immortal. We are not. My time must come, but not today. Not at the hands of Fulgrim.*

The arcane machineries of teleportation whooped and hummed, the deck vibrating with their activity. The tumult built to a crescendo.

A booming crack and flash of actinic light whited out the teleport deck. Suppressant vapours gushed from wide-mouthed tubes in anticipation of fires from over-stressed machinery. Human armsmen raised their shotguns in case of warp breach and daemonic incursion.

None came. Signal strobes blinked: red, red, red, then blue.

'Teleport success, teleport success,' droned a mechanical voice.

The lumens came back on. Corposant flasks emptied to the sounds of half-formed screams. Atmospheric vents drew smoke away, revealing empty pads. Adepts consulted vid screens and paper cogitator strips, and relief crossed their faces at the readouts.

Roboute Guilliman and his warriors were aboard the *Pride of the Emperor.*

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