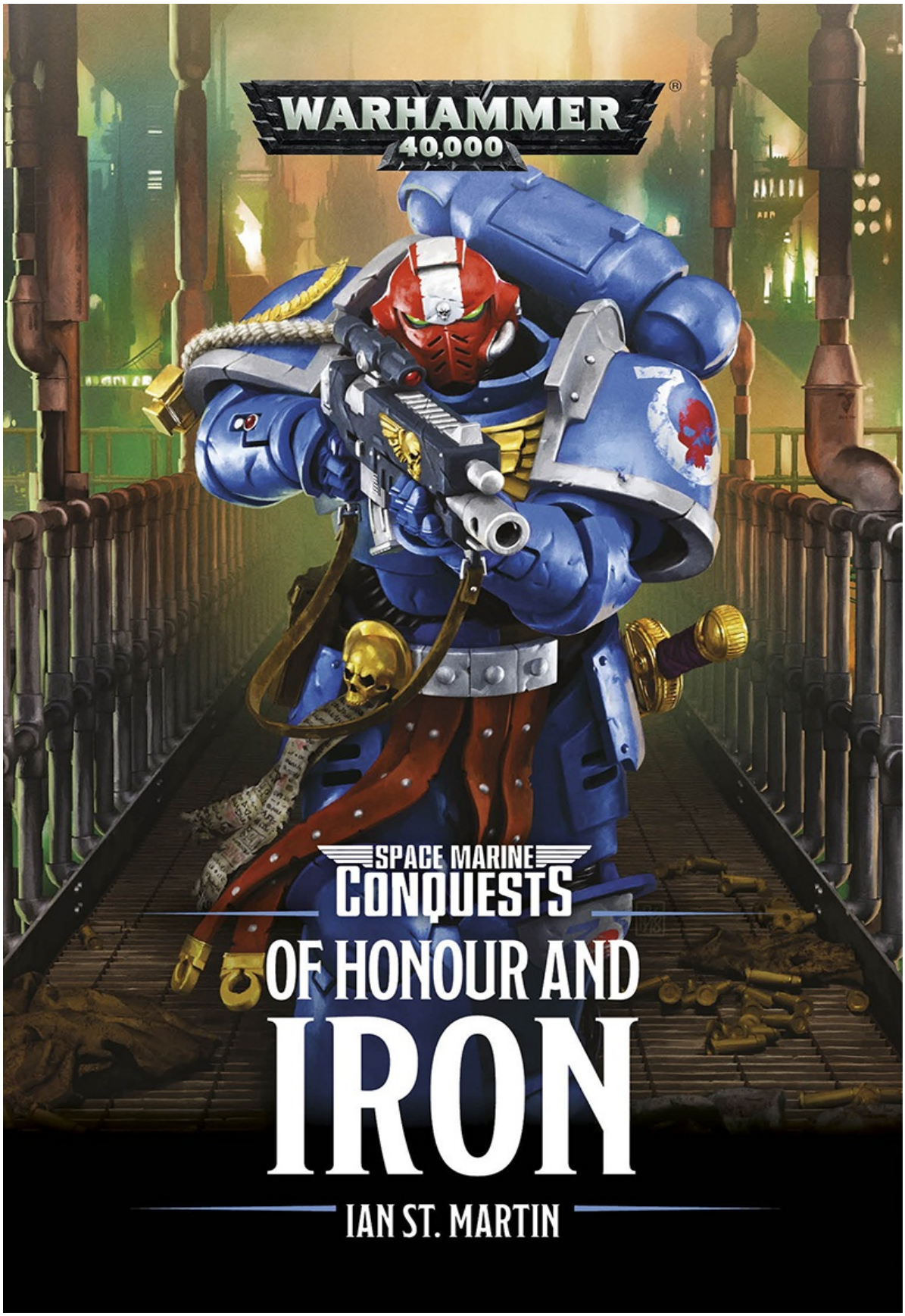
SPACE MARINE CONQUESTS

OF HONOUR AND IRON

IAN ST. MARTIN


WARHAMMER
40,000
SPACE MARINE
CONQUESTS
OF HONOUR AND
IRON
IAN ST. MARTIN

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WARHAMMER 40,000

OF HONOUR AND IRON

IAN ST. MARTIN

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

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

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

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

ULTRAMARINES

ROBOUTE GUILLIMAN, Primarch of the Ultramarines
NUMITOR, Lord Executioner and Captain of the Eighth Company
HELIOS, Chaplain of the Eighth Company
THERON, Assault Squad Sergeant of the Eighth Company
SENECA, Battle-brother, Intercessor Squad
ARISTON, Battle-brother, Intercessor Squad
NICANOR, Battle-brother, Intercessor Squad
KYROS, Battle-brother, Intercessor Squad
CAPRICO, Battle-brother, Intercessor Squad
MELOS, Battle-brother, Inceptor Squad
IASON, Battle-brother, Inceptor Squad
RAYHELM, Shipmistress of the *Light of Iax*

GENESIS CHAPTER

JOVIAN, Apothecary of the Seventh Company
FLAVIUS, Tactical Squad Sergeant of the Seventh Company
GRAITUS, Veteran Battle-brother of the Seventh Company
HESIOD, Epistolary of the Seventh Company
RASK, Marksman, Newfound Expeditionary Auxilia

IRON WARRIORS

BOLARAPHON, Warsmith of the *Dru'Kashyl* Warband
BENIAH, Lieutenant of the *Dru'Kashyl* Warband
ZIKON, Lieutenant of the *Dru'Kashyl* Warband

FURAX, Squad Sergeant of the *Dru'Kashyl* Warband
TYBALD, Apothecary of the *Dru'Kashyl* Warband

DARK MECHANICUS

HYZRA**,** Pirate Queen and Shipmistress of the *Damnatio Memorae*
ZOSIME**,** Conscript Pilot

In times of war, the law is silent.

THE THIRTY-FIRST MILLENNIUM

THE IMPERIUM OF MANKIND

IN THE ASHES OF BETRAYAL

The Siege of Terra is over. Horus Lupercal lies dead and the embers of his assault on the Throneworld have begun to cool. Those Legions that had assailed the walls of the Imperial Palace beneath the arch-traitor's banner have broken, withdrawing back in defeat across a shattered Imperium. With the Master of Mankind resigned to His throne on Terra, His sons ride back into the stars in pursuit, the Emperor's vengeful hand that would scour their traitorous kindred from the galaxy.

Foremost among them is Roboute Guilliman, the Avenging Son – Thirteenth Lord and Master of the Five Hundred Worlds. By his hand he wielded the XIII Legion in the Emperor's Great Crusade and in Horus' rebellion that followed it, and by his works are his sons and all others loyal to the Golden Throne divided. The Ultramarines and their fellow Legions are broken, separated into individual Chapters by the dictate of his *Codex Astartes*, so that no single warrior will again marshal a force great enough to plunge the Imperium into strife, as Horus did.

Now the Ultramarines – a Legion that previously boasted hundreds of thousands of humanity's finest warriors – number but a thousand souls as they strike against the retreating Traitor Legions. Though their numbers have changed, their very nature irrevocably altered in the wake of the Second Founding and the implementation of the Codex, one thing has remained constant: the will of their primarch, guiding them forwards in their crusade for retribution.

Marius Gage, Chapter Master of the Ultramarines, left the war-torn surface of

his Chapter's current campaign and, leaving the campaign itself in the hands of his sub-commanders, returned to orbit to speak with his gene sire.

Standing in the hold of his Thunderhawk, Gage's artificer power armour ground and sparked from a dozen points, its priceless surfaces pitted by mass-reactive cratering and the gouges of broken chain teeth. Oath papers that hours before had trailed as ribbons of creamy, meticulously inked parchment were now tattered spurs of ash clotted around broken wax seals, where they still remained at all. The armour's outer shell of cobalt lacquer, once warm and clean as an untouched ocean, was scorched down to the bare dull grey of the ceramite beneath, visible in rare patches through all of the blood.

Gage's passage through the *Macragge's Honour* was long despite the swiftness of his pace, manoeuvring through the flagship's byzantine labyrinth that dwarfed a city in both scale and grandeur. Though he passed hundreds of comrades and servants as he walked, he returned their salutes and signs of deference with a steely silence. He had not torn himself from an active warzone on a whim, and his words were saved for none other than his father.

The primarch's sanctum was a temple built to information. Data, facts and analysis of every conceivable kind were arrayed around the chamber in every available medium, from the most advanced hololithic projections and cogitative prognosticators to the sweeping panes of crystalflex revealing the void beyond, and the world where the Ultramarines had come to make war against those with whom they had once built the Imperium of Man.

Guilliman was alone, leaving the coordination of the fleet to his admirals as he devoted his mind to absorbing the ever-shifting reality of war across an entire star system and shaping it to his will. If he had noticed Gage's approach he made no sign of it, though the Chapter Master knew that he must have. Nothing escaped the primarch, especially one of his gore-drenched sons clad in broken, grinding armour.

'I did not recall you from the surface, Chapter Master,' Guilliman said, flicking up eyes of stunning blue that halted Marius in his tracks. 'What do you have for me?'

Gage stepped forward, holding out a fistful of coarse grey material. The primarch stepped out from the sphere of information orbiting his desk and took it, letting it unfold from his hand into a tattered standard woven from iron thread. Spartan and blunt, the pennant's only decoration was a border of golden hazard striping, rendered incomplete by burns and tears. At its centre an austere metal skull stared back at Guilliman, forged from a single plate of reinforced iron.

‘Theatricality has never been your strong suit, Marius.’

‘We stormed the keep at dawn,’ said the Chapter Master of the Ultramarines. ‘A maddening siege, the Fourth truly crafts the most venomous of labyrinths. But we triumphed. At great cost, we triumphed.’

Guilliman watched his son, knowing him well enough to know that he would not have departed from a contested combat zone to tell him this alone. The primarch waited expectantly, his mind already taking every subtle cue given by his Chapter Master and combining it with the battlefield appraisals he constantly absorbed to extrapolate what Gage would say before he even spoke the words.

‘We have secured a single stronghold,’ said Gage.

‘Yes, I know this.’

‘One of twelve,’ continued Gage. ‘Grand General Cijard personally led his corps against another and they were burned down to the last man. The Iterian two hundred and thirty-fourth has amassed eighty-five per cent casualties just holding their position along the eastern landmass, and we have yet to close within five square kilometres of their polar station without being driven back by artillery bombardment and aerial countermeasures. Even drop pod assault has faltered there. The Fourth is dug in, and has every advantage in numbers, materiel and terrain.’

‘And so,’ said Guilliman finally, ‘what do you suggest, my Chapter Master?’

Gage hesitated, his expression neutral but tense. He knew the path that his next words would lead him along, and it was the last one he wanted to choose. Gage strained to banish the apprehension from his voice, but failed to quell it entirely.

‘I believe that we should consider the strategic deployment of extermination-level munitions from orbit.’

Silence lingered in the chamber. The chattering of cogitators and whir of tactical projectors seemed to fade away, drawn back into the walls. For a time – moments that stretched as though they were hours – the primarch and his closest son simply looked upon each other.

‘This is a garden world,’ remarked Guilliman at last, looking not back at the hololiths but over Gage’s shoulder towards the crystalflex vista revealing the planet in the void. ‘Such a rare thing, if not in terms of resources then as a symbol. That even after so much has been lost, and so much has been destroyed, there is still hope remaining for us all. And you stand here, proposing to create one more wasteland, when far too many exist already?’

‘The Fourth is present throughout this system and the adjoining ones,’ said Gage. ‘We will bleed ourselves white to win this world, leaving us unable to

retake the others. The use of such weapons should always be considered the last resort, but if it means the difference between a victory that retains the operational capacity of our forces and a pyrrhic one that ravages us, then in this case, their viability should be considered.'

'Was I wrong to hold you here, my son?' said Guilliman, a thin smile being all he could muster. 'Should I have given you command of the Nemesis Chapter, so that you might salt the earth of every world where our enemies draw breath and challenge us?'

'No, primarch.' Gage averted his eyes, scars both old and newly earned twitching along the patchwork of his face. 'I merely suggest that we evaluate all options, and weigh the cost of battle here against our wider efforts.'

Marius gestured to a hololith, blinking as it updated from the reports on the surface. The pair watched as the contested regions of the gently turning sphere remained scarlet as the entrenched Iron Warriors repelled the assault of Ultramarines and Imperial Army troops.

'The invasion stands poised at a critical juncture,' said Gage. 'We can dislodge the opposition and achieve victory, you have no son who doubts this. But that undertaking will cost us months, and materiel, and lives. Many lives. We all know our destiny, to die on the field of battle for Macragge and the Imperium, but the sacrifice of those that would die here could be put to use in the next war, and the next.'

'Be careful, Marius,' said Guilliman softly. 'Your base of logic weakens by straying into conjecture.'

'Then I shall adhere to logic, sire.' Gage paused to clear his throat. 'The most efficient use of our forces is to purge this world from orbit, rendering it lifeless and incapable of prosecuting further harm upon this system. Such action shall fracture the Fourth's opposition and grant us the freedom to cleanse the rest of the region through more careful means in the timeframe that would have been spent pacifying this planet alone.'

Gage turned his eyes from the projection to his father. 'We cannot save every world, father. It must never be decided lightly, but some worlds must be protected, others liberated, and few – very few – must be destroyed. Sometimes saving the Imperium means killing parts so that the whole might endure.'

Guilliman stepped past Marius, stopping before the view out into the void. Senses perfected by his father and creator, the Master of Mankind, pored over every detail, from the tiny motes of shattered ships and orbital defences ringing the planet, to the sweeping plains and verdant continents beneath, dotted by the

fires of raging battles that twinkled like distant stars.

'That is not the Imperium my father built,' said Guilliman, the words thundering not from the volume of his voice, but with the finality of his own conviction. 'And in His stead, it shall not be the one I safeguard. We shall not repeat the mistakes of the past, using the tools that have rendered so many worlds, and so many civilisations, as dust and echoes. I will not have the Ultramarines stand sentinel over a graveyard and declare peace. Tell me, Marius, do you remember Thoas?'

Gage gave a slow nod. 'You know that I do, father.'

Guilliman mirrored the nod, his patrician features creasing in the slightest of frowns. 'Then you must also know my disappointment, that the memory of the war there is known to you and yet the lesson it taught us seems forgotten.'

'Many things have changed since then, my lord,' said Gage quietly. 'We stand in a different galaxy than the one we remember.'

The Avenging Son looked back at Marius. 'Not everything has changed. I am here, my son, and I shall help you remember. I will stand beside you, and sweep the traitors from where they believe themselves invulnerable.'

Guilliman took up his sword, the Gladius Incandor, drawing it in a sharp sigh of hypersteel and pointing its tip at the planet hanging before them in the night. 'This world, Quradim, will not become another Thoas. I will not allow it. If there is a tide that must be turned, then in the Emperor's name, I shall help you turn it.'

TEN THOUSAND YEARS PASS

THE GATHERING STORM DESCENDS

THE GALAXY LIES RIVEN, SPLIT IN TWO
BY THE GREAT RIFT OF CHAOS

PROLOGUE

The wall had stood for centuries, a symbol that the citizens within the city of Dinath had been able to look upon and know that they were united, protected, safe. And now, the wall was gone.

Crouched in its ruins, Rask gathered the hem of his jacket sleeve in his hand, quickly scraping away the soot and grit that had collected in the scope of his long-las. The weapon was beaten and singed, a match for the marksman who wielded it. Like Rask it served the Imperium of Man, and like him it had been pushed for weeks without respite. Such was the stark reality of an extended fighting withdrawal against a foe that was as tenacious as it was implacable. He and the other soldiers of the Newfound Expeditionary Auxilia faced an adversary who waged their wars through overwhelming force, who had torn the wall down and now sought to destroy anything that stood between them and the city's conquest. The fall of Dinath would be one more domino sent tumbling, paving the way for the entire world to succumb to the invading darkness.

Rask ran a hand down his face before checking over the horizon through his makeshift cover. Seeing nothing, he sighed with a relief that brought an instantaneous shame, and then looked across to his left. His eyes fell over a grim line of his brothers in arms, fellow auxiliaries in battered suits of crimson carapace armour. They were struggling to claw a shallow trench line out of the earth with the haste of men whose lives depended upon its safety. They stacked rubble ahead of themselves, primed power packs, and swept belts of stubber ammunition clear of dirt and rock. And they fixed bayonets.

Rask glanced to his right, and allowed a curse to boil in his thoughts in order to

keep it from slipping past his lips. Rask's position had been a central one only a few hours ago, and now the sniper found himself left to prop up an entire flank, exposed. A lot could, and would, go wrong, and he wouldn't have anyone at his elbow to lend fire support when the next engagement started.

A tremor rattled through the blackened earth. As far as this planet's hellish tectonics were concerned it was a slight one, yet it was still enough to send many of the men jumping. Fear was dragging morale lower with each fitful beat of this cursed, hollowed-out husk of a world's heart.

Rask stacked another chunk of rubble in front of himself. He set it into a pitted section of collapsed wall, making it flat enough to rest the stock of his lasrifle against and grant his aim some measure of stability. Fatigue turned the chunk of masonry to lead, bringing it close to falling out of his hands. They were all so tired.

'Rask?'

He didn't respond to the voice right away. Toyver had taken shrapnel to his neck when the last bombardment had brought the wall down. Rask had propped him up to man one of their stubbers after they had regrouped, knowing that this shallow ditch was as far as Toyver's life was going to take him. Whatever scraps of cloth they had scrounged to try to contain the bleeding had fallen away, and each of the man's breaths issued a cluster of dark bubbles from the gouges of his ruined throat.

'Don't talk,' said Rask, sighting once more down his rifle. A wet hacking finally brought his head around. 'Medicae said it's keeping the wounds from closing.'

'Yeah,' Toyver wheezed. He failed to cover a retching cough, his face smeared with blood and soot. 'And not ten minutes later that fool gets pounded flat by the wall coming down. Think his is advice worth taking?'

Rask didn't answer. It was growing harder to look at Toyver, at anyone at all. Even the demigod.

Five armoured giants had come to help the auxiliaries hold the line, angels cast in crimson and shining gold. Four of them had fallen with the wall. The last of their number stood at the centre of what remained of their line.

His armour had been the white of flawless pearl edged in scarlet, now scorched black and stripped down by the violence to match the iron grey of the skies above them. What remained of the white lacquer, and the unusual accoutrements bulking out a frame already inhuman in size, marked him out as a member of the Chapter's medical cadre. The warrior's broad, heavily riveted plates clattered

with armourglass vials, each containing a fist-sized gland suspended in amniotic fluid. They were all that remained of the demigods who had stood beside him.

Rask had seen the vials, and his thoughts – as they had more and more often of late – had taken him back to Newfound. This time, he had remembered the feast day of the Imperial Redeemer. Rask saw his fellow citizens lighting candles for each of the year's departed, before setting them into paper lanterns to lift upon the winds and fill the night sky with their soft, flickering light. An offering of lost souls, sent up into the waiting arms of the God-Emperor Himself.

Rask shook his head, forcing the memory away in exchange for focus. He checked the horizon again, looking out across a burnt ash plain sprawling beneath the leaden sky. The land was black with the strength of the enemy, just beyond sight, gathering in their multitudes to take whatever skeleton of the city they had not flattened in their whirlwind bombardments.

He whispered a prayer to the Emperor, and drew his mind back to his training. It forced away the melancholy for a time, a brief reprieve that Rask used to focus his thoughts upon a tactical analysis of the battlefield. Their defensive position stood with nearly a full kilometre of flat land ahead of it. Across its length and breadth it was devoid of meaningful cover. Here and there the ground was pockmarked with blast craters, but they were shallow. None of them offered sufficient depth for the enemy to utilise for shelter.

Their remaining arsenal stood at three light mortars, six stubbers and a pair of functional heavy bolters, alongside the lasrifles of nearly seventy of the Chapter's chosen auxiliaries. Every one of them had been broken upon the anvil of the trials of ascension, yet even after such failure each of them still answered the call to serve the Genesis Chapter in defence of mankind. Their training rivalled any in the realm of Ultramar, a force capable beyond the massed juggernauts of men and machines fielded by the Astra Militarum.

Nothing, not defeat nor casualties nor even their present circumstance, could unmake the strategic reality of such advantages. Rask and his unit would draw a butcher's bill upon any assault rush before they broke through. And if the enemy lacked armoured support, they could even potentially turn them away.

Thunder rang out, as though in response to Rask's thoughts. The crash caused them all to draw back reflexively into the trench's meagre protection. The sniper waited. An isolated burst could simply be nature: a groan from the tortured atmosphere as the vast banks of poisoned cloud formations above them ground against one another. Such a noise would not be the herald of artillery, unless it was joined by others.

It was joined. A ripple of dull roaring issued far in the distance ahead of Rask. Within a heartbeat it both filled the air above him and radiated through the ground beneath his boots. It was a sound he and his comrades had become all too familiar with, since the day their enemy had arrived.

'Bombardment!' Rask heard someone call out, as though there were any amongst them who had failed to grasp what was coming. 'Brace! *Brace!*'

Thunder became screaming as shells slashed the sky. For a moment, Rask saw the incoming fusillade as a shimmering veil of tiny black shapes, like a mass of birds disturbed from their perches. Their combined shriek was swallowed by detonations as the ordnance fell back to the earth and exploded into fire and smoke. A disjointed and unending crescendo killed all sight and sound. Rask fought against his dazed senses, against the overwhelming animal impulse to draw back, dig himself further into the earth, and hide from his duty.

A wall of flame rocketed skyward, filling the horizon of their kill zone close to half a kilometre out with a solid line of exploding ordnance. Rask's hand shot to cover his stinging eyes. Great fountains of black rock vomited into the air, flying in every direction. Balls of bright flame raged and burst with each overlapping blast. Had he been anywhere else, were he not its target, Rask would have marvelled at the sheer synchronicity of the battery bombarding him. The accuracy, the organised precision of it, was as awesome as it was terrifying.

For seconds that stretched like hours, the wall of death raged immobile, seemingly content to visit utter annihilation upon that strip of land alone. Bracing himself against the shuddering earth, Rask peered over the rubble. His senses strained against the fire and noise, and he saw that the barrage had begun to move.

The destruction was advancing forward in unity and order, rolling like a tidal wave. It had become a living thing made of fire and smoke and burning metal shards, consuming the ruined stretch of no-man's-land metre by shattered metre. Slowly, inexorably, like fate itself it came on, shrinking the distance between itself and the Imperial defenders.

The Space Marine had not moved. He stood over the trench, silent but for the wracking growls of his damaged war-plate. He raised his chainsword, its crimson paint stripped away and its track nearly devoid of teeth, into the air. Rask could barely make out the sacred icon of the Chapter upon his massive shoulder plate, the stylised *alpha* overlaying an inverted white trigon. The very same iconography adorned his own carapace, as it did for all those who served the Genesis Chapter.

Rask strained to look upon him, rather than the concussive maelstrom fast approaching. He fought to use the demigod as an anchor against the advancing tempest, and the blood and terror and death it would surely bring.

The immense warrior bellowed into the face of the bombardment, his inhuman voice rendered even more harsh by the mechanics of his blunt-faced helm. It came out in blurts and scratches of static. He stopped after a few words, his broad shoulders shifting fractionally as he realised none of the mortal soldiers could understand him. The demigod looked down over them all before uncoupling the helmet from hissing seals at his collar and pulling it free.

Rask cringed at the face that emerged from beneath the war helm. The Space Marine was singularly brutal to behold, his every feature slab-like and riven with scar tissue. Blood covered much of his face, dried and congealed into a rust coloured crust. His blunt nose was broken to the point of ruin, mashed flat against his left cheek. It was a cold, strange sensation, an odd mixture of fright and something Rask could not define, to see a warrior of the Adeptus Astartes so bloodied. Just like the rest of them.

The Space Marine's eyes were wide, yet focused; calm yet brimming with an unfathomable violence. His was the countenance of a warrior god, in every way the very image of the God-Emperor's avenging Angels of Death.

His was the face of something so close to human, and yet so impossibly divorced from it, that one could not help but be filled with the warring sensations of reverence and dread simply by bearing witness to it. But that was not truly why Rask had recoiled, why he could not meet his lord's gaze.

Rask saw the aspiration of his youth embodied, the goal that he had bled and strived towards and hoped to become himself. A warrior king of Newfound, a brother of the Genesis Chapter with the blood of venerated Guilliman flowing through veins that were no longer those of a mortal man. Rask felt every one of the mathematically cut scars that scored his flesh, from the day when his aptitude was found lacking and the Chapter forbade him the destiny he yearned to achieve. Rask had failed, but seeing the brother of the Genesis Chapter, standing in the face of oblivion undaunted, lent Rask the strength he needed.

'Courage!'

Somehow the voice of the Space Marine cut through the din of incoming shellfire. The smoke and shrapnel and grit hurled out by the cannonade seemed to part around his armoured form. He was a beacon of the God-Emperor's strength, defiant in the centre of his enemy's wrath.

He reached into the hearts of each of the auxiliaries. Jaws became set. Snarls of

encouragement echoed between comrades. Hands slowed in their trembling, and tightened around weapons.

The bombardment's tide was almost on top of them. The earth bucked and heaved. The detonations now reached near enough to buffet the men with concussive force. A storm of rock and twisting shrapnel descended, scything down into the line. Men cried out as they were wounded and cut down. A soldier clutched at the stump of his arm, face drained by shock, oblivious to the howls of the man beside him fighting to keep the slick spools of his intestines within his lacerated stomach.

Men were screaming, wailing out prayers to the God-Emperor for deliverance, for strength. Others, especially the wounded and maimed, screamed for death. Rask felt as though he were drowning in a roaring ocean of fire, poised to be swallowed by the next tsunami it hurled. The shelling was less than fifty metres from the trench when it stopped completely.

For whole seconds, Rask simply fought to remain conscious. He held onto the lip of the trench with a white-knuckle grip, trying to steady himself. All he could hear was his heart hammering through his armour.

Slowly, the world ceased spinning. Rask's senses returned in a throbbing tide, still dulled and reeling. He stared at the dense pall of smoke climbing into the sky ahead of him, his mind struggling to process it all.

Why cease their shelling now? Why not simply grind what few of us still remain into the ground, as they had with the city behind us?

His mind cleared only slightly, but enough for Rask to remember what he was fighting. An enemy that had walked in the wake of the firestorm they made between them, using it as a shield to render the Imperial killing ground and its emplaced weapons useless. One who wanted to be up close when the killing started anew.

Shapes started to resolve from out of the rolling field of smoke and high smouldering flames. Rask saw one, then five, then more. They strode forth in a calm, metronomic march. The figures detached from the aftermath of their barrage, like nightmares hauling themselves free from the darkest night.

The sun's occluded light revealed them as brutal giants of jet and pitted iron, none of their number standing less than three metres in height. Pairs of eye-lenses glowered like jade slit windows into roaring forge fires. Horns breached the crowns of their ancient war helms at irregular intervals, neither wholly metal nor natural in composition.

The bulky, curving plates that armoured them were trimmed with brass and

slashed with chipped and weathered hazard striping in black and gold enamel. The other surfaces, bare metal burnished to an oily sheen, were covered in whorls of barely perceptible runes. The symbols shivered and twitched, sliding over the plates with a frightful fluidity, as though they were alive.

Soldiers that had withstood countless hardships and endured wilted at the very sight of them, raving and vomiting into the trench. Some simply sat, eyes unblinking, mouths working silently in a madness begun by the bombardment and now fully realised.

For one who had lived his life in the shadow of the warriors of Genesis Chapter, they were as horrific and revolting to Rask's sight as they were uncanny. They were what he had aspired to become, cast in a twisted, broken reflection. They were Space Marines, in thrall to the Archenemy.

There were but twelve of them. All of the shells of the hurricane creeping barrage, all of the destruction and terror of the cannonade, fired to shield just twelve beings. But fewer Space Marines of Genesis Chapter had swept whole worlds of life. Rask had seen such with his own eyes.

Against what remained here of the Imperial line, twelve were legion.

'Contact!' a man barked. The panicked urgency of the shout was enough to dislodge most of the auxiliaries away from their shock, and the levy of Newfound raised their weapons.

A barrage of las-fire lashed out into the advance of the enemy Space Marines. The thin beams of white hot energy snapped as they made contact with their grey armour, scoring the whorls of runic blasphemy but failing to cut or penetrate. Rask heard panicked voices behind him as the mortar teams urgently attempted to realign their tubes with almost no distance separating the warriors of Chaos from the trench.

The enemy responded. The deep bang of bolter fire filled the air. Soldiers died, blown apart. They targeted the crews operating the heavy bolters first, killing them and blasting the guns to ruin before any of the others were able to take up their operation. The cannons' ammunition stocks detonated, bursting amongst the soldiers in clouds of smoke and steel.

Rask pressed his eye to his scope, setting the sight of his long-las upon the foremost of the traitors. He had studied his lords in the Chapter long enough to know the material shielding their throats was flexible, and thus his crosshairs settled on the narrow gap between the helm and breastplate. He held his breath and squeezed the trigger. His lasrifle thrummed as it fired with a sharp crack, linking him and the enemy for a fraction of a second with a beam of crackling

energy.

A curse hissed from between Rask's teeth as the high-powered las-shot connected low, taking the warrior high around the dense armour of his collar. The strike staggered the Space Marine for an instant, before he snapped up his boltgun towards Rask. The sniper swung down behind cover as a burst of bolter fire ricocheted and exploded over the top of him. Chips of metal and rock slashed his face and arms. Rask rolled to his side, his arms withdrawing from his face as the heretic shifted his fire away. He looked up into the trench.

The stubber beside him was silent.

'Toyver,' shouted Rask over the cacophony, flicking out a panicked kick into his fellow's leg. 'Get into the fight. Fire the stubber, now!'

One of the Chaos Space Marines stepped forward, bearing the bulk of a twin-barrelled cannon that was as long as the warrior was tall. He stopped, bracing his boots in a wide stance as he levelled it at the Imperial line. Rask threw himself back down into cover instinctively. A base fear overtook him, seeing a weapon so powerful that even a giant needed to steady himself before firing it.

'Autocannon!' Rask called out, but the din swallowed his words.

Even from forty metres out, Rask felt every round fired like a clubbing punch to his chest. The mass-reactive ammunition utilised in boltguns shredded and dismembered a body, separating heads from shoulders and limbs from torsos. The autocannon, a weapon designed to unmake the armour of heavy vehicles, dealt a whole other kind of damage entirely.

It did not simply kill men. It *pulverised* them. Soldiers simply vanished, leaving nothing behind to mark their existence save a thin cloud of aerosolised blood that quickly fell to meld with the ash and grit on the ground. Even to those near its field of fire it was devastating, deafening and rupturing the veins and organs of those who managed to avoid being hit directly.

'Fire, Toyver!' Rask kicked at the man beside him again. The blow caused his comrade to slump to the side heavily. Rask crawled beside him, his hand gripping the gunner's arm.

It was already cold. Toyver had likely died some time during the shelling, before the fighting had even started. Rask cursed himself for the involuntary stab of envy that welled up inside him, and shoved Toyver's body aside.

Rask seized hold of the stubber and clenched the firing stud. The weapon made a sound like tearing parchment, stitching out a flickering line of tracer fire across the battle. He managed to strike one of the advancing Traitor Space Marines, but the high calibre rounds did nothing save for beating out a disjointed clash against

the eye-aching runes that covered every surface of his arcane war-plate.

Training dictated that the firing of a heavy stubber be done in short, controlled bursts. The reasoning behind such doctrine was sound. It enhanced accuracy, maximised the efficient use of ammunition and avoided disabling the weapon by overheating its barrel.

The terrible and furious reality of battle at close quarters allowed for none of the conditions enjoyed by those upon the training field. Rask fired the stubber until its barrel glowed and smoky steam leapt off it in hissing wisps.

Such volume of automatic fire would have wiped out an infantry platoon, yet none of the traitors were felled by it. Rask accomplished little save attracting the enemy's own fire towards himself. Bolt-rounds crashed around his position. Blood splashed his face, hot and blinding, as the soldier fighting beside him was struck in the head. The man's body was thrown back into the shallow trench, everything gone from the lower jaw up like an abused medicae cross section.

The firing mechanism of the stubber chattered impotently as the ribbon of shells within its ammunition drum ran dry. A metallic thump in front of the emplacement sent Rask diving as a frag grenade exploded. Shards of scalding iron raked the carapace on his back and sliced across his neck and arms.

Rask felt plodding footsteps come to a halt over him, and he twisted to face it. It was with no small amount of pride that Rask found his combat knife in his grip and a battle cry on his lips. He refused to go to his end craven and weaponless.

It was the Genesis Marine. He stood over Rask, firing a boltgun with one hand while he primed a beeping cylinder with the other. He hurled the blind grenade into the advancing enemy, placing a billowing cloud of smoke and interference particles between them and those few of the auxiliaries who were still alive. The giant spoke a single word as he turned, still firing his weapon.

'Withdraw.'

There were fewer than twenty left in Rask's unit who were able to do so. The sniper scrambled away from the stubber, finding his long-las and taking it up again. Gravel sprayed from beneath his boots as Rask followed the demigod in withdrawal. In retreat.

It was an act of survival, yet another committed today that clashed against every axiom of Rask's training. Another defeat that would haunt him for every day that was left to him. However many that was, he could not know.

CHAPTER ONE

Helios stood alongside his brothers, the warriors of the blessed Eighth Company, and watched fire devour the horizon. The lashing rainfall soaking the area failed to drown the conflagration, or clear the smoke-choked skyline. Lightning forked through the pall with crackling claws, lending a stygian, primordial aspect to the valley where they waited in silent ranks.

Mere weeks ago Meto had been a thriving agri world, the verdant breadbasket for an entire sector. A world of supreme importance – even more so now, in the new age of apocalypse that began with the opening of the *Cicatrix Maledictum*. Thousands of the God-Emperor's worlds had been lost by the profane emergence of the great warp rift, with billions of loyal servants to the Master of Mankind murdered and countless more displaced. And they, those souls whom Helios' very hearts beat to protect, were far from the only ones.

The orks had descended in all their foulness upon this world in the wake of the abomination, driven like beasts from a burning forest. They came in their millions, enough to drown this planet in blood and strangle its vital agricultural production down to nothing. Burn Meto, and dozens of other worlds would starve, catalysing revolt from within by those lacking in true faith, and ripening the sector for attack from without. Were this the intent of Helios' opponent, it would have represented a degree of strategic foresight and coordination unlike anything Imperial commanders had ever seen. Infinitely more likely, and more true to their nature, the xenos had happened across Meto by chance in the path of their forced exodus and, discovering something fragile and beautiful, the greenskins had indulged their instinctual lust for destruction.

A world inhabited by corpses cannot till its fields, nor can it harvest, process and ship the grain that is needed to nourish blessed Ultramar. Even in these dawning days of the Indomitus Crusade, the Imperium's adversaries multiplied time and again, pulling the fury of the righteous in all directions. Here, on Meto, the threat of the orks was enough for them to set down the gravest of their labours, and see to the holy work of the xenos' annihilation. Here, as in all places, Helios would demonstrate that the mettle of the Ultramarines was capable of all tasks.

Helios watched the fields of grain bleed away into ash through the eyes of his skull helm. The kindred warriors who were his spiritual charges watched it too. Mark VII plate sat heavily upon their shoulders, and upon many for the first time. Freshly promoted into the reserve company, their cobalt armour bore the filigree of the Ultramarines who had worn it before them, cut out from the consecrated ceramite upon their deaths in glorious battle. This was the inheritance bestowed by the God-Emperor and His risen son upon each one of them, to be baptised anew within war's crucible.

Helios had shepherded these warriors since their elevation from the ranks of the Scout Company. He had led them in prayer, blessed and anointed their wargear, and honed their zeal as the company's spiritual advisor. This day, he took up the mantle of another of his duties, guiding them into war as their battle commander.

He noticed then a slight elevation of his heart rate, and a mild tremor in his right hand. It was not fear, not in any way a mortal could understand or experience. A weapon could not fear war, for war was its purpose. Fear was an impossibility for those who survived the Cassian trials to don the black and sealed their identities behind the white mask of death.

No, the feeling Helios was experiencing was not fear. It was the anticipation of fulfilment. The aching, fervent intensity of a finely forged blade, eager to leave its sheath once more and do what it was crafted to do.

Helios opened the filters in his mask and drew a deep breath in. The smoke almost concealed the scent of burning flesh, but he was able to find it upon the wind. Tens of millions of human dead littered the ashen wastes, awaiting the warrior kings of Macragge to avenge them as they burned.

Their deaths would not be in vain. The Ultramarines had come to retake this world. The fallen would be honoured as their ashes were used to nurture the soil and return its fields to the bountiful glory they once held.

'Make ready, my brothers!' Helios' voice clashed against the turmoil in the atmosphere savaging their vox, focusing the attention of his kindred. 'Stand

prepared, the enemy has answered our call.'

Helios had deployed the force of Ultramarines into the soaked quagmire of the valley in a crescent of two ranks. The bulk of the heavy jump packs customarily worn by those of an Assault company had been left upon their warship in orbit, replaced by bolters and extra draws of ammunition. The Eighth Company watched as the first of the orks emerged from the smoke in the distance.

Cinders and whipping curtains of rain marred a clear sight of the beasts, and target reticules blinked intermittently over Helios' scarlet-tinted vision. He glimpsed his adversary in fleeting moments through the smouldering bodies and scorched vegetation.

Helios saw scrap iron drilled into filthy, moss green flesh with fist-sized rivets. The armour plating of battle tanks bent around limbs swollen with corded muscle. Rust-caked blades, screaming and spasming within power fields in defiance of the sanctity of the machine. Beady claret eyes glared unblinking, leering at him from behind crude iron helmets and cages of broken tusks covered in pagan graffiti.

Lightning illuminated the valley for an instant, revealing a vast multitude of orks, a full warhost that had gathered to march upon the Ultramarines' position. Precision orbital bombardments had destroyed much of the xenos' mechanised forces after the company battlefleet won the war in the heavens, but many of the thousands of creatures remaining had funnelled into the valley to meet the battle kings of Macragge, straining for intimate carnage.

Helios checked the energy level counters for his plasma pistol on his retinal display with the calm of a soul born to make war. He suppressed the urging of his armour's systems to flood his veins with battle narcotics, and steadied his breathing. He allowed himself to smile for a moment, before asserting control over his eagerness with discipline and a prayer to the God-Emperor.

'Stand firm, warriors of Ultramar, and remember the Codex,' called Helios from his place at the centre front rank. Like the warrior kings of antiquity, none would be nearer to their foe than he. 'Trust in the teachings of our risen primarch, and our enemies shall fall this day!'

Armoured fists clashed against chests eight times in salute of the Eighth Company and their captain, virtuous Numitor. Helios' hand closed around the grip of his pistol.

'Focus.' He spoke for the sake of those brothers preparing for their first battle beneath their banner, quelling any distractions in their minds.

At two hundred metres, the largest of the orks roared a challenge in the noisome

prattle that passed for their tongue. Within seconds it had been taken up by the entire horde, a rippling wall of sound that Helios felt even within the protection of his sacred war-plate. The braying warhost charged, whooping and firing crude weapons as they thundered towards the thin wall of blue.

'*Deus Imperator*,' Helios prayed aloud, raising his arms to the sky above. 'Grant us but a spark of Thy grace, that we as Your servants might use it to raze all that would dare to stand against Thee. Let us be Thy instrument of righteous extermination, now and in all things, until the day You call our names to Your side in glory.'

At one hundred metres, Helios took hold of the holiest symbol of his office, the crozius arcanum, and raised it aloft in a convicted grip.

'*Primus*,' he commanded.

The Ultramarines of the first rank raised their bolters with the practised unity of parade drill. The crescent of Space Marines held in silence, their sapphire armour glittering black in the firelight as the thrashing tide of orks swept forward.

At seventy metres, Helios thumbed the embossed rune on the haft of his crozius. The power field of the war maul ignited, flooding its golden eagle wing blades with sizzling waves of killing lightning. Orders clipped out from red-helmed squad sergeants, even and calm, and the Ultramarines fired as one.

The percussive bang of massed boltgun fire filled the valley like the tolling of worshipful bells. Tracer contrails knifed for half-instants through the rainfall. The sound was deafening, the fyceline heartbeat of *fire-detonate*, *fire-detonate* as the volleys found their mark. Helios allowed his smile to return, basking in the music played by the Angels of Death.

The first ranks of orks disappeared, blown into bleeding fragments by the mass-reactive fusillade. Any that survived and fell wounded were immediately trampled, crushed into pulp by their kin in their berserker fury to close with the Space Marines.

At sixty metres, magazines were smoothly changed as ammunition was depleted. Within a pair of heartbeats the fire resumed in perfect unity. The screaming wave of alien invaders was bloodied, but still they charged forward with vastly superior numbers.

At fifty metres, a second order was given out from sergeants, and with methodical cohesion, the Ultramarines' formation's centre began to step back, still maintaining fire. The warriors firing from either flank held fast as their brothers slowly drew behind them. The crescent formation inverted against the

advancing xenos, bowing back step by step.

At forty metres, Helios was walking backward with the vanguard, firing stinging bolts of plasma from his pistol into the roaring mass of approaching alien filth. He watched those of his kindred fighting for the first time as brothers of the Eighth as they slapped fresh clips into their boltguns, fighting the urge to draw their chainswords and leap forward into the melee.

He approved of their hatred, but had no doubt as to whether they would follow the command laid out by their superiors. They were Space Marines, and above that, Ultramarines. Such indiscipline was beneath them. They had placed their trust in the captain's tactics completely, for they were the teachings of their gene-father, the risen Primarch Roboute Guilliman. His accumulated combat doctrine, the *Codex Astartes*, was his legacy to his sons, the wisdom of their father that extended to every eventuality of warfare, dwelling in their minds as surely as his blood beat through their hearts.

Helios checked the chronograph at the corner of his retinal display. Timed to the second, the Chaplain nodded to his adjutant as the orks closed to twenty metres. Veteran Sergeant Adon, a proud son of Espandor, reached up and fired a flare into the storm-ravaged sky. The shell arced for a moment, before exploding in a flashing cloud of seething phosphorus.

'*Secondus*. Strike now, brothers!' Helios roared into the vox, and from the sides of the valley, death gave its reply.

From concealed positions in the valley heights, Devastator squads seconded from the Ninth Company of Captain Sinon lent their fury to the battle. Streams of fire slashed down into the flanks of the ork horde from heavy bolters, lascannons and rocket launchers. Unloading their heavy weapons from both sides, the Devastators bracketed the greenskins with enfilading fire, reaping a ruinous tally. Eye-aching smears of plasma cannon fire erased whole swathes of xenos in clouds of acrid blood smoke. Alien bodies were blasted apart by detonating ordnance, incinerated by las and melta blasts, and reduced to ash and lumps of steaming gore.

Simultaneously, Assault squads of Helios' own blessed Eighth screamed down on ribbons of righteous flame and smashed into the rear of the xenos host, tearing into the aliens with roaring chainswords and bolt pistols. The Assault Marines hit the ground in perfect formation, their numbers spread into a wide sickle to envelop their target, fanning out to enclose the enemy rearguard and surge up their flanks. The forwardmost battle-brothers of Helios' line, still holding their ground, linked with those warriors, and the xenos charge faltered as

they suddenly found themselves ensnared within a constricting circle of Ultramarines cobalt.

'Close ranks, my brothers!' commanded Helios. '*Tertius*. Close the circle and destroy this filth to the last!'

The heavy weapons support from the brothers of the Ninth shifted, visiting ruin upon the orks' centre before finally halting their fire. The Eighth Company became a ring of precise, ordered destruction, butchering their way through the orks. The Assault squads were unrelenting in their attack, driving the mass of beasts forward into their comrades' bolter fusillade. Depriving all but those at the edges of the ability to fight, they swept any advantage of the aliens' numbers from the battlefield. Crushed together tighter and tighter, the greenskins could do little but lash out at one another as the Ultramarines killed their way to the centre.

Helios beheld the slaughter. It was surgical, efficient and utterly devastating. The doctrine of the Codex, the mind of the risen primarch made tactically manifest, was executed flawlessly millennia after its writing. A true testament to Guilliman's genius, and the endurance of the legacy bequeathed to his sons.

'First rank, free your blades,' Helios bellowed. His brothers halted as one, watching the orks fill the last gap between them. 'With steel and wrath, for Ultramar, and the God-Emperor!'

Precision shots of boltgun fire struck unceasingly from the second rank as they took up the role of the first, who with Helios at their centre drew blades and waded into close combat. The Ultramarines tore into the greenskins as at last Helios gave the xenos what they craved, but on his own terms: a ferocious melee. His brothers picked their shots at their back, targeting axe-wielding monstrosities rounding on the sides and rear of those fighting hand to hand, all the while inching steadily forward to draw the ring tighter.

'Rotate!' Helios called out after he heard his second rank reload for the fourth time, tearing his crozius free from the chest of a wailing ork as a blast from his plasma pistol decapitated another in a spray of flash-frying blood. His battle-brothers stowed their bolters and drew melee weapons as their kindred turned and strode back in good order, dripping with alien gore as they readied their own boltguns to take their place.

All except for Helios. Rest was not a luxury permitted outside of the Reclusiam. He remained at the vanguard, at blade's length with the enemy, where all of the Eighth could see him.

'Join with me, brother!' barked Helios to Adon, as the veteran pulled a power

axe from the sling on his back.

Proud Ultramarines mag-locked bolters and drew their chainswords. They clenched triggers, and tracks of bladed teeth revved into screaming life. They pressed into the fight alongside their kin in an unbroken advancing rank, supported by the surgical bolter fire that had now sprung up from behind them.

Foul ichor sprayed Helios' eye-lenses as he sawed through the neck of a bellowing ork. Holy psalms boomed from his helm as he sowed destruction amongst his enemies. He raised his pistol and another alien died, its torso vaporised by a sphere of boiling plasma. His forearm drove beneath another's jaw, prying its head up as his crozius knifed into its torso until it was reduced to tatters of shredded meat.

Brothers died, falling to hacking blades, bludgeoning fists and the weight of numbers. The line flexed and shifted as the living followed their training and instinctively filled the gaps. The greenskins were a repulsive thing, and while they were worthy of Helios' hatred, so too were they deserving of his respect. They died hard, and proved a stern test for the wrath of Guilliman's sons.

'Rotate!'

Helios ended the charge of a beast a head and shoulders taller than he as his maul drove up under its scrap-armoured jaw. The disruptor field enshrouding the maul's blades clapped as it destroyed any solid matter it touched, obliterating the creature's flesh clear through its neck and severing its spine. The Chaplain had scarcely pulled his maul back before another smashed into him, a massive clubbing fist wrenching his skull-faced helm to the side. Helios' retinal display crazed with static and frenzied warning icons danced over his vision.

The monster before Helios was massive even by the standards of its breed. Scrap iron and armour plating was heaped upon its shoulders to the point of parody. It bore a club in its oversized hands, spiked through with the fangs of a creature that must have rivalled a Predator battle tank in size. The beast was covered in ornamentation, far outstripping its fellows, justifying the conviction that formed within Helios' mind that this was the foul creature that served as warlord of this throng.

Helios roared in defiance as he squared up with his assailant, swinging below the heaviest armour and burying his crozius into the ork's more exposed midriff. He threw his power-armoured bulk forward, thrusting the hissing blades up under the alien's ribs to tear through iron-hard bands of muscle and rip into the softer tissue beneath. The greenskin roared, dropping its ramshackle club. It seized hold of Helios by both shoulders and hurled the two of them together into

a bone-jarring head-butt.

Stars exploded in Helios' eyes, and he felt something shift in his skull. He staggered back in the quagmire. His crozius maul rattled as it slipped from his grasp, hanging suspended from the thick chains binding it to his wrist. Blood sheeted down his face beneath his death mask from a deep laceration on his scalp.

Finally ceding to his armour's insistence, Helios blink-clicked a rune on his visor display. Combat stimulants stung his bloodstream. The crimson dripping from his face turned to electric ice against his flesh, despite the battlefield's furnace heat. Through a century of war, Helios knew that it had always taken a little bloodshed to stoke his rage to its height. Helios regained hold of his crozius, blinking the sting of his own blood from his eyes as his vision stretched and shook.

The ork slapped Helios' plasma pistol aside, nearly flinging it from the Chaplain's grasp. It stomped a kick into the Ultramarine's chest. Helios snarled as he felt his fused ribcage flex. He countered, driving a backhanded swing of his crozius across his body and burying it into the greenskin's hip.

Dark blood snapped and popped from the power field, though it did little more than provoke a lunatic chuckle from a maw filled with broken teeth. The ork retrieved its club and reared back when a blinding blue light bloomed over its face.

Helios had gathered the charge within his plasma pistol until it had threatened to shake loose of his grip. Its focusing coils screamed as he fired, releasing the pent-up energy of a caged sun and reducing the club – and both of the ork's hands – to vapour.

The alien chieftain lowered its arms. It looked down at the fizzing stumps of its wrists with an expression of, if Helios were to lower himself to the blasphemy of finding a human parallel for it, disbelief. He provided the creature with no time to reflect upon its condition.

The eagle wing blades of Helios' crozius swept through the ork's head, passing beneath the armour of its horned helm and bisecting it cleanly at the throat. The body twitched for a moment, like a puppet with cut strings, before collapsing into the muck.

Black blood spat and hissed from the power field of Helios' holy maul, bathing him in hideous-smelling smoke like foul incense. He paused for a moment, allowing himself to revel in it. Extermination was ever the purest veneration to offer to the Emperor. He stooped down as the fighting continued all around him,

seizing hold of one of the curved black horns jutting from the crown of the ork's helmet.

Helios scrambled atop the fallen ork's monstrous corpse and raised himself above the crush of battle. The orks were surrounded, with only those at the edge of their circle able to fight. The others howled, powerless and impotent, crushed so close that most could barely raise their arms against the hail of bolts and grenades cutting them down.

Helios roared, a booming call of triumph for all to bear witness to. He sent out a message, one clear enough that even the vile idiot race he fought could understand, as he held the chieftain's severed head high for all to see.

'Behold! I am the judgement of Ultramar. Which of your godless rabble is next?'

CHAPTER TWO

Jovian ran through the streets of Dinath, which was now a city of the dead.

Slaughter and atrocity reached out to him on all sides. The sound of crackling flames and collapsing foundations was muted, drowned out by his pounding boot steps. His failure to have held the walls against his enemy's assault was now compounded by being forced to double back through the city they had been built to defend.

Jovian's mind checked the term almost immediately. Few would possess a perspective generous enough to name where he found himself – even before it had been razed – a city. There were hive cities on this planet, great abandoned monoliths of its relative past left to rot or swallowed by massive sinkholes. Where he stood now was the world's present, one of a scattered few threadbare settlements that housed the people who still called this world home.

No building stood intact, their skeletal frameworks gutted and jagged like broken teeth reaching out from the pulverised rockcrete. The ground was littered with bodies and their severed component parts. Jovian passed the twisted forms of men and women who had become trapped in their flight when the heat of the firebombing had rendered the streetways molten. They were hunched, trapped and sunk to their elbows and knees inside the road, their clothing baked onto their flesh, their final fates sealed by the blistering heat or any of the other myriad agents that had surrounded them when they died.

Others lay in hideous repose, victims of the after-effects of firestorms and thermobaric detonations. Jovian's enemy was cunning enough to have known they needed only expend enough munitions to allow for nature to step in as the

chief force of destruction. Start enough fires within close enough proximity to one another, and they would merge into a single mass conflagration. Such a drastic shift in air temperature withdrew the air from the area with explosive violence, just as it did within a human body. All that remained afterward was a shrunken, leathery thing, barely recognisable as having ever been human.

Jovian saw these corpses, thinking they resembled the dolls he had witnessed children carry, drowning in clothes that were now bizarrely oversized.

He blink-clicked a rune on his retinal display, searching the vox-network for active transponders, for any sign of his brothers holding key positions and aiding in evacuations across the planet. Only static replied.

Jovian slowed to a halt, pivoted around and brought his bolter up. The few breathless auxiliaries that had fallen back with him staggered past, ducking at each heavy bang of fire from their pursuers. Jovian fired single shots from his boltgun, mindful of every shell. The soldiers recoiled at his own shots just as much as those of the enemy.

One of the last mortals limped in exhaustion towards Jovian, struggling with the weight of his sniper-variant lasrifle. He was within five metres of the Space Marine when a bolt-round struck him in the meat of his right thigh. He cried out as he crashed to the broken road. It was a ricochet and a glancing wound, but still contact with the mass-reactive warhead had been enough to nearly sever his leg.

He reached for Jovian, squirming in a quickly expanding pool of crimson that could only mean the destruction of a main artery. He began to speak when a second round penetrated the carapace armour on his back. His muscles twitched and seized, feigning life, but Jovian knew better.

The Apothecary fired, staggering one traitor and sending the others scattering in search of cover. Two more shots found the more elastic armour between the ceramite plates and removed the heretic's arm at the elbow. The flamer he was clutching fell to the dust with it. Suppressing fire lashed at Jovian as the wounded traitor's foul kin bought him the time to scramble away.

Jovian could not hope that the Iron Warrior he had wounded was suffering with the effects of haemorrhage. He had seen the distinctive puff of black fluid when the limb was severed. An augmetic.

Jovian wondered just how much of the twisted men they once were remained of them at all. He doubted that all of his foes combined would amount to a single man. They were just hate and iron, and had been so for a very long time.

He spared a glance at the dead marksman as he turned. Jovian recalled the

man's name. Rask. He had watched him as an aspirant, striving like so many youths of Newfound to be deemed worthy to join the ranks of the Genesis Chapter. He had borne witness first-hand when Rask had failed in his quest for ascension, as his body rejected the surgeries Jovian laboured to complete upon his flesh during the first implantation cycle. From that day Rask became just another man. One more whom Jovian and his brothers had failed here on Quradim.

The moment passed, and after checking the vox again to no avail, Jovian plunged back down the flame-distorted road. He wondered if perhaps the droves of scorched wretches he passed were in fact the most fortunate of this world's citizenry. Those who had survived, with the Chapter garrison shattered and unable to protect them, had been led into bondage in Olympian chains. The heresy of expending one's life-force in service to Chaos, even against one's will, was unfathomable to Jovian. It was far better to die than be forced into apostasy.

Another two of the soldiers with Jovian were cut down by bolter fire as the Iron Warriors renewed the chase. Only one of the auxiliaries remained, a man cowering behind a waist-high mound of broken rubble.

'Rise,' Jovian said as he stopped beside him.

'I, I cannot, lord,' he gasped.

Jovian smelled the sour reek of fear mixed with his exhaustion. The Apothecary tasted his despair, and it stoked a rage within him.

Jovian loomed over the soldier and seized him about the arm. He was careful not to crush the limb into uselessness or dislocate it from the shoulder as he made to throw him to his feet. The brassy clank of a frag grenade landing behind them widened the man's eyes, filling them with an animal panic.

Jovian did not think. He only reacted. He crouched, positioning his armoured bulk between the auxiliary and the grenade. He released the man's arm as his own swept out to draw him to his chest just before it detonated.

Light and sound drowned Jovian for an instant and then vanished, replaced by a lightless silence as his helm's sensory cancellation systems recalibrated. The rubble the soldier had been sheltering behind had absorbed a portion of the blast, yet still Jovian felt it with the force of a thunder hammer against his spine. His armour's systems lagged and flickered as his powerplant endured the brunt of the detonation.

The smoke and shrapnel cleared, and Jovian drew back from the man. The soldier's form was twisted awkwardly in the throes of panic, his terror so great and his body so fragile that he was dead, crushed within Jovian's embrace, while

the Apothecary himself was unharmed.

What good am I, as protector of humanity, the thought rose unbidden in his mind, *if I outlive it? What good is a wall left standing over ruins?*

Jovian let the dead soldier go. He slumped bonelessly to the dust. Another bolt-round spanked off the Apothecary's shoulder pauldron, sending his brothers' harvested gene-seed bound to his armour spinning on their chains. He felt what was left of his kin slosh inside the armourglass. His adrenaline spiked, and he launched forward, sprinting deeper into the city.

From the fiery crucible of battle to the endless cold of the void, Chaplain Helios travelled to answer the summons from the Lord Executioner.

He felt a crackle of static crawl over his skin as his Stormraven passed through an integrity field and touched down upon the principal landing deck of the *Mare Nostrum*. The forward assault ramp began to descend a moment later.

The Chaplain's boots clanged from the ramp as he departed the gunship, while Apothecaries and support auxilia hurried past him on either side, seeing to the wounded and dead Ultramarines that had shared the crew hold with him. The vessel did not linger, for as soon as it was emptied, squads of Helios' battle-brothers marched up the ramp and secured themselves within. They filled the gunship's hold, the next wave of fresh warriors making ready to bolster the Ultramarines forces on the surface and press the initiative gained by their brothers' triumph in the valley battle.

Helios crossed the embarkation deck in silence. His mind was distant as he offered blessings and prayers to the warriors and serfs who kneeled and bowed at his passage. He was slathered in xenos gore, the blood of countless orks that had since dried and congealed and now chipped and flaked away from his plate, leaving a trail of crimson snow behind him as he moved.

His mind yet remained on Meto. It had been eleven days since the fleet, with the *Mare Nostrum* at the vanguard, had driven the xenos scrap armada out of orbit. There was no fighting up here, neither the claustrophobic crush of boarding actions nor the calculated exchange of fire at breathtaking distances with ork warships. Not any longer.

The Chaplain would never ignore or fail to make haste to answer the call of his captain, but within his own mind he did admit he was curious about the nature of his summons, and of its timing. The order of battle planetside stood at a critical juncture. Where other adversaries might have been driven to rout by the Eighth's success, the greenskins continued to attack as though nothing had changed. The

xenos had no concept of retreat, of falling back to regroup, and thus the inherent danger of their presence was undiminished. Helios had faith in the wisdom of those who commanded him, but he could not shake the sense that he should have been with his brothers, pressing the advantage and refusing the vile alien anything but the fastest path to oblivion at the Chapter's hands.

Whatever reason the Lord Executioner had to deprive Helios of further battle, he was confident that it would be of import.

The corridors of the Eighth Company flagship were abuzz with activity, as any Imperial ship would be when orchestrating the prosecution of a planetary war. The passageways and arched thoroughfares were crowded with hurried packs of mortal crew, chittering robed tech-priests with their cybernetic acolyte entourages, and the deliberate plodding of servitors. All of them gave Helios a respectful berth, murmuring hushed greetings to him as they hastened to their duties. For his part, Helios answered every one of them as he proceeded to the command deck.

The bridge of an Adeptus Astartes battle-barge was a massive, multi-levelled chamber, its interior an ornate marble and gilded skin laid over the void-hardened adamantium bones of its superstructure, at once cathedral and nerve centre for one of the deadliest weapons possessed by mankind. High vaulted ceilings loomed over tiered banks of crew stations that lined the walls, manned by the elite of the Chapter's naval auxiliaries and by specialised servitors who were permanently enmeshed with their consoles. Other critical systems, weapons, navigation and communications were controlled and monitored in recessed pits overseen by the sharp attentions of experienced junior officers.

The master of the *Mare Nostrum* commanded from a control throne set on a dais at the centre of the bridge, surrounded by an orbiting screen of tactical hololiths, her bevy of senior advisors and marshals bearing signal flags. They were so engrossed in the endless orbital repositioning of the fleet that Helios was nearly past them before they took notice. Tapped boots clacked against the ancient marble floor. Hands slapped against uniforms as the senior crewmembers made the sign of the aquila, jingling the medals and other ornamentation that covered them. Helios returned their salute with a fist against his breastplate, replying with a soft clash of ceramite.

The Chaplain ascended a broad stone staircase to the uppermost level of the command deck, where two of his brothers stood intently over the hololithic projection table that dominated the centre of the strategium. One of them was clad in a suit of legendary artificer war-plate, older than the Imperium its wearer

defended, a relic beyond value or replaceability. Familiar as it was, the sight of it always enraptured Helios. There existed not a single warrior of Ultramar who lived in ignorance of that armour.

The other stood in wargear that was of simpler design, and yet was no less intricately adorned. Runes, wards and passages of scripture were etched into its every surface, standing out in shining gold against the blue of the plates. It was a subtly different shade of blue, apart from that of the warrior he shared the table with, and apart from that of every other Ultramarine, save those few of his own order.

This one nodded to Helios as he left, the expression exaggerated by the crystalline hood that rose from his collar and the rustle of purity seals and parchments. Helios blinked away a chirping rune at the edge of his visor, alerting him to a sudden drop in temperature.

'Arrone,' replied Helios, greeting the Librarian of the Eighth.

Helios proceeded, taking the battle psyker's place beside the master of the Eighth Company. The Lord Executioner. Gallant Brother-Captain Numitor.

'Hail, Lord of the Eighth.' The relative silence of the strategium was disturbed by the ringing crash of the Chaplain's fist against his breastplate.

'Helios,' Numitor replied, dispensing of any further formality by using name over rank. 'Well met. My thanks to you for the swiftness of your arrival here.'

Helios felt a twinge his death mask shielded from view as he heard the exhaustion saturating the words. The Indomitus Crusade was fresh, yet already he could see that it had aged his brother. As a company captain, Numitor was privy to more than any of the Chapter, save Chapter Master Calgar himself. He knew fully what was arrayed against Ultramar and the Imperium, the enormity of their undertaking. He knew what the cost would be, should they fail.

Numitor nodded at Helios' armour. 'I see you still elect to lead from the front,' he said with a thin smile. 'The blood of our enemies suits you.'

'May my blade always find and spill it,' replied the Chaplain.

'Indeed. Without their ships, the orks' numbers are falling faster than they can be replaced. The battles on the surface are de-escalating,' said Numitor. 'The war for Meto is nearly over.'

'Praise the God-Emperor and His Risen Son,' Helios said. He gestured to the hololith, displaying the slowly spinning orb of Meto in miniature. Tiny icons clustered together in the space around and upon it, chevrons of red and blue that twitched and reoriented as the timestamps were refreshed. 'Were we only able to stop the xenos in orbit before the war ever began.'

Numitor shook his head once with a frown. ‘You were not at fault, brother. I ordered boarding actions on the most likely vessels to be bearing their foul tyrant. With a fleet their size, so many ships, I knew full well the probability of striking the correct targets was negligible.’

Helios leaned over the table, resting his knuckles against its polished stone with a soft scrape. His eyes stared into the projection, but his thoughts carried him back. Back to leading a strike force into the heart of the alien armada, butchering his way through the foulness within their warships in search of those monsters that led them. Failing to hound them out from hiding, and losing the one chance the Eighth had possessed to break up their armada before the xenos made planetfall and slaughtered millions.

‘I failed to cut the head from the beast in orbit,’ snarled Helios. ‘The Emperor’s fallen servants cry out from the ash pyres for retribution. Theirs is a loss I have yet to avenge.’

‘Nor shall you.’

The Chaplain paused. He straightened from his lean over the table, turning his eyes to his captain.

‘Brother?’

‘The war for Meto is nearly over,’ Numitor repeated, his eyes still locked to the hololith as it shifted from a planetary view to one of the whole system, and then subsector. ‘And yet in spite of our impending victory, we stand poised to fall behind the timeframe that was allotted to us to achieve it. This crusade is not a single campaign, Helios, but many thousands of them at once, and our father has planned them all down to the second. Only the primarch knows the full scale of the undertaking, of which we are but a small cog within its greater machine.’

Numitor shook his head, and Helios saw laid bare the exhaustion that had been carved into him. ‘The sheer complexity of it, brother. The *scope*. Hundreds of Chapters, thousands of ships, all moving simultaneously and according to his timetable. We cannot afford to tarry here, for doing so will compromise the next battle, and the ones around us, until all comes undone. Every day we fight here, we draw closer to that deadline. The primarch’s schedule must be upheld, no matter the disaster. You know of the Koryndil Reach?’

‘A little,’ admitted Helios. ‘The Third fight there, led by Honoured Fabian.’

‘Sent there to engage an Archenemy force of unknown scale or composition,’ said Numitor. He looked into the hololith, avoiding his Chaplain’s gaze. ‘We received a sending, authenticated to be from Fabian himself. When it was sent we have no way of knowing. It took the lives of nineteen astropaths before

Arrone was finally able to decipher the message through all the screaming.'

'What did it say?'

'A single sentence. "We have been defeated in a great battle."'

Helios was silent for several seconds. An entire company lost, one hundred Ultramarines dead or defeated. And Fabian, after all that he had survived. Such a calamity would have been unthinkable just years prior, a blow that would have rocked all of Ultramar to its core. Now it simply was one of many dark realities in this newly born age of apocalypse.

'There is nothing more?' he asked finally.

'Nothing more,' answered Numitor. 'Nothing more than another defeat. Another loss we cannot afford. These are dark days, compounded by our dependence upon the very source of our own ruin. We require the warp to communicate, to move our armies. We need the warp to survive, Helios, and right now, the warp is tearing the galaxy in half.'

Numitor punched a series of keys into the runepad built into the table, and the projection realigned with a soft whir. Meto returned for a moment, before a new planet materialised in the hololith in its place, one far different from the verdant agri world.

'I did not uproot you from the campaign on the surface lightly,' said the Eighth Captain. 'We do not know that the Third is gone – it could be merely wounded – but we must now act as if it is. Our operational allotment has been expanded. The Eighth no longer has time to conclude this war, reorganise and set out before the timeline progresses further. There is a mission that must be done, one that has come directly from our father.'

Despite himself, Helios' breath caught. He clamped down with focus, but the headiness brought on by the revelation of this new mission's source remained.

'This is a task where we cannot spare the wrath of a full company,' said Numitor. 'But it can be achieved, my friend, by a small number of brothers, acting with speed, and under a commander who I can trust to see it completed with alacrity.'

Helios nodded once. Numitor knew that the Chaplain would never refuse him. On the day he sealed himself within the black, and his face became that of the skull mask, Helios' life had ceased. He became a symbol, a holy shard of the God-Emperor's will, made manifest to destroy the foes of Ultramar. His conviction hardened into steel. Helios looked down upon the strange planet hovering in the projection, then back at Numitor.

'Tell me what must be done.'

CHAPTER THREE

An array of vid screens and monitors swept before Bolaraphon, like the compound eye of a massive mechanical insect. One by one, they flickered to life.

The Warsmith stared at each of them with unblinking eyes. So many of his Legion now witnessed the world around them through surgical visors and augmetics, replacements for what had been lost in war or to the disgrace of mutation. But not Bolaraphon. He looked upon the world with the eyes of his birth. No one, neither by battle nor by weakness of will, had taken his purity from him.

He looked to the first display. What the Warsmith saw stilled him in place, halting the servos and gears that lent motion to his cage of adamantium and sanctified iron. It showed a dense field of asteroids, immense bodies of ice and stone, as they turned in silence within the void. Bolaraphon could see clearly the silver clusters of outposts burrowed into their surfaces, docks and foundries, bulwarks and gun platforms. Shining in the space between the asteroids were the lights of dozens of warships. All in fealty to him, the strength of his grand bastion, amassed over centuries of blood and triumph.

To his warband, it was known as the *Dru'Kashyl*. Depending upon the dialect of ancient Olympian, it translated to any number of names, from gardens or mountains to labyrinths or the anvil upon which blades were formed. To Bolaraphon, it was his Iron Field.

Each display activated in sequence, each of them revealing the grand scale of the Warsmith's dominion in increasing detail. Screeds of data from across the Iron Field flowed from the corners in efficient Olympian script, denoting ship

manifests, patrol reviews and deep-space augur returns. Within the overlapping strongholds and the fleet stood nearly three hundred proud sons of the IV Legion, soldiers of the endless dual war against the Throne of Lies and the wickedness and corruption of the ether. It was a force that was capable of, and a veteran of, the shattering of entire star systems in measured, orchestrated conquest.

Bolaraphon's eyes reached the third row of screens as the first inklings of the catastrophe to come reared themselves. Reports made by slaver overseers of massed rioting in the labour camps and foundries. Data readouts detailing the untimely and coordinated self-destruction of Navigator cadres and entire astropathic choirs. Vid captures of walls within command nodes spontaneously running with human blood.

By the fourth bank of recordings, the beginnings of the rift became visible. A tear in the fabric of reality, of a scale that meant it could be clearly seen despite the fact that it was many light years distant. The integrity of the material universe became undone, and out from the laceration the warp poured forth.

The Warsmith looked to the third monitor of the fifth row, and watched the first of his asteroid bastions as it was engulfed by madness. While he had been at the centre of the catastrophe, the scale of his downfall had been impossible to measure. To watch it transpire now from a clinical remove somehow made the destruction of his dominion all the more abominable.

The raw stuff of Chaos vomited over the Iron Field, swallowing warships, citadels, and thousands upon thousands of lives sworn to his will and his alone. No master crafted armour withstood it, no meticulously perfected fortification was able to repel it. No weapon could destroy it.

Within seconds, the disaster spread like the contagion that it was, taking and taking and taking. Bedlam and collapse covered every viewscreen. The air filled with vox-streams of warriors screaming for the very first time in lives that had spanned millennia, twinned with sounds and voices that were alien to the coherent world.

Even straining, Bolaraphon could barely make out the miniscule shard that was the *Damnatio Memorae*, the sole remnant of his power, breaking loose where the light of every other vessel was devoured. The memory of frantically rallying whatever of his empire he could into its holds burned behind his eyes. He almost failed to see the ship he now stood upon as her mistress sent her to dive blindly into the warp in flight.

The first display shattered around the Warsmith's fist. The second he tore from

its moorings, dashing it to splinters of glass and iron upon the deck plating. The death rattle of his life's great work was replaced by the shriek of shearing metal and fracturing plastek. Bolaraphon wrenched an entire row free, smashing it like a segmented whip against the others until it came apart in ruination.

He did not hear himself howling with rage, and he did not stop until everything in the chamber was destroyed.

Bolaraphon walked along the corridors of the *Damnatio Memorae*, his Terminator armour stained an anaemic amber as it reflected the subsistence-level power lighting. The passages were low and cramped, forcing the Warsmith's step to conform into a hunched prowl as he moved along them. This ship had never been designed with the Adeptus Astartes in mind, and certainly not those encased in Tactical Dreadnought plate.

Translation from the warp had quieted the ship.

He saw little in the way of mortal crew. After their flight, this deck had been set aside for the Warsmith and what remained of his brothers, a concession made by the ship's mistress out of necessity rather than deference. Much of her crew had been lost in their flight, and mixing those that remained with enraged demigods seeking the slightest opportunity to vent their wrath would only lose her more.

The only ones allowed to set foot here now that were not of the Legion were servitors, and even their numbers were few. The ether had been violent in its tides, and whole sections of the vessel were gouged and torn away. Bolaraphon could faintly hear the toiling magi and drone crews through the walls above, below and all around him, feeling the low shiver through the deck as they fought to reknit the integrity of the ship's superstructure and save it from disintegrating entirely.

He reached a junction when he saw the first of his brothers. Of the Iron Warriors who managed to escape the Great Rift with the Warsmith, few were still aboard the ship. Most had deployed to the surface of the planet that loomed before them as they tumbled out of the warp, subduing any resistance, taking on slaves and raiding for materials, all on the Warsmith's orders.

Tybald the Apothecary stood by a sealed bulkhead adorned with warning sigils freshly inscribed upon its surface, his unease at his master's approach plain even through his plough-faced Mark III helm.

'My Warsmith,' said Tybald, dipping his head.

'Open it,' said Bolaraphon.

'Lord?'

Bolaraphon turned his cold eyes upon the Apothecary. ‘Your question implies one of two failures. Either you are deficient in your ability to hear and understand me, or you have heard and understood, and have chosen to disobey.’

The plodding tread of the Warsmith’s Terminator armour rang from the corridor walls as he drew close to loom over Tybald. ‘So confirm to me, now – are you incompetent, or are you deliberately disobeying me?’

The Apothecary did not answer, nor did he linger. He dragged himself from the doorway’s threshold, pressing a fist against the control panel to allow Bolaraphon within.

The chamber was unlit, though the darkness was no barrier to the Iron Warrior. The Warsmith glimpsed the room’s lone occupant clearly, as it hung slack in a twisted web of dense iron chains. Curved plates, once the ordered perfection of Olympian forges, were now deformed and wretched things, festooned with blind eyes and spurs of ridged bone that bled from Tybald’s failed attempts to remove them. Steady, drooling breath filled the stale air, almost an animal’s purr, accompanied by the soft sizzle as acidic saliva and liquid mercury ate into the deck.

‘Krynix,’ said Bolaraphon.

The bound thing wearing Krynix drew in a wet, gurgling breath. **‘*Lord.*’**

They did not precisely know when the creature had overtaken him. As the Geller field of their ship had held during their flight, Bolaraphon surmised that the possession had occurred beforehand, in the moments of panic and disorder before they made their escape.

Krynix had not been born of Olympia, a thin-blooded recruit and a mere four centuries old. Was it his youth that had allowed the warp to infect him? Or did more of its corruption follow them from the catastrophe, lurking and whispering its lies within the hearts of his men?

Were there any left he could truly trust?

‘Why have you defiled him, thing?’ snarled Bolaraphon. ‘Has your kind not swallowed enough, does your hunger for ruin not know any satisfaction?’

‘*Never enough*,’ wheezed Krynix. **‘*The hunger… is infinite…*’**

‘You shall gain no further succour from me,’ said Bolaraphon, hefting the axe in his fist.

‘*Not here… to take*,’ said the daemon. **‘*Here… to give.*’**

‘I want nothing from you.’

‘*For this…*’ Krynix slowly raised its head, unnatural light glinting from a dozen swollen eyes. **‘*Even… Bolaraphon is hungry.*’**

‘*Hungry, hungry…*’ The chamber rang with clashing chains as Krynix thrashed. The Warsmith seethed at the sight, his grip crunching around his weapon as its haft began to glisten with frost.

Hungry, Krynix repeated, but this time without speaking.

Krynix screamed, his head lolling back as the armour of his breastplate split and levered open at his collarbones. Bones splintered and cartilage snapped as sinews were stripped away to hang loose like wet ribbons. Blood and oil spilled down over him as malformed teeth punched out from around the wound with a sickening screech of bone scraping against metal. His plate corroded in seconds, blooms of crumbling rust spreading over its every surface, sundering the strength of its vaunted iron.

The sucking wound in Krynix’s chest tore wider, vomiting blood and brackish sludge onto the deck as it twisted into a howling throat lined with bloodshot eyes. A voice, shrill and cold, lanced into the Warsmith’s mind.

He who has slept has awakened! The coming of he who has brought you low is nigh. He is coming. He is coming!

The blade of Bolaraphon’s axe smashed into Krynix’s chest, tearing it loose of its chains and hurling it into the deck. The Warsmith stomped his stricken brother’s head flat to wrench the heavy blade free, and swung it down again, filling the room with the thunder of its impacts. He brought it down again, and again, until Krynix was in pieces. The thing that had burrowed inside the Iron Warrior’s flesh shivered, and the voice dissipated with the sound of laughing children.

The door rumbled open behind Bolaraphon, framing Tybald and two other Iron Warriors with bolters raised.

‘Warsmith,’ they said in broken unison.

‘Brothers,’ he replied. His eyes fell to their damaged wargear and impaired augmetics, waiting to be replaced once the means to do so had been collected. ‘Your convalescences are progressing?’

‘Yes, my Warsmith,’ they responded.

Silence returned as the Warsmith stepped back into the corridor, his warriors parting before him at the threshold. Bolaraphon fired the power field on his axe, blinding in the half-light, burning away the corruption slathering the broad, rune-etched blade.

‘I,’ whispered Tybald, looking from the shattered corpse of Krynix to Bolaraphon. ‘I… *felt* it speak.’

‘Be silent.’ The haft of the Warsmith’s axe creaked in his grip. ‘I will not

countenance the filth these things pass for words.'

'We have lost so many,' said Tybald quietly. 'I had to try. If the creature could have been driven out, another brother saved–'

'He would still be weak.' Bolaraphon rounded on Tybald. 'Weakness allowed the taint inside him, and he deserved no fate save oblivion. Fail to cull the weak again, Apothecary, and your fate shall be the same as his.'

Still they could not look away from Krynix's remains. Bolaraphon smashed his fist against the wall, bringing their eyes up and securing their attention back to him. 'Signal your squad leaders to assemble the Conclave, and then consign yourselves to isolation and penance. Iron within.'

'Iron without,' they answered, in unison now.

Bolaraphon watched his kindred as they left, sparks guttering from grinding servos before they vanished into the yellowed darkness of the ship.

The Warsmith's eyes settled back on the mound of rusted, bleeding armour that was all that was left of Krynix. The daemon's words were lies, such creatures were capable of nothing else. And yet, despite his ironclad resolve, they clung to him, burrowing deep into his thoughts. His armour clanked and buzzed around him, the hulking shell that was as much a weapon of war as it was the apparatus keeping him alive, ever since the Scouring.

Bolaraphon opened his gauntlet in a rasping whisper of iron talons. He felt the reassuring heat rise within the flamer built into its palm, and drowned the tainted room in fire.

CHAPTER FOUR

The main embarkation deck of the *Mare Nostrum* remained a throng of activity. Gunships, shuttles and landers arrived and departed in an unending procession, depositing the wounded and the dead and leaving with the ones who would take their place. Battle tanks and transports, their hulls pockmarked and blackened by ork artillery, were offloaded to be restored under the ministrations of Eighth Company Techmarines and enginseer repair crews. Every soul within the hangar watched with awe as a brace of the Chapter's venerable ancients stomped by in their blessed sarcophagi, a living inspiration to all as they served the will of the God-Emperor even beyond death.

For hours Helios had stood there, watching, granting blessings to warriors and weapons poised to enter battle and answering the call to minister final rites over brothers too badly wounded for the Chapter's Apothecaries to save. He performed this last duty a great many times, shepherding the souls of the fallen to the golden light of the Throne. His faith never wavered, yet he could not help but count their number as it continued to grow, knowing that the Eighth's strength would be that much more diminished to finish the war for Meto, and their numbers considerably fewer when the next war began.

The Chaplain took solace at that moment that he would be taking only one more Ultramarines legionary from the Eighth as he made ready to take up Numitor's mission. He awaited him now, to be pulled from the crucible just as Helios had been.

A Thunderhawk limped through the integrity field. The vessel's drives shuddered from the effort of keeping her aloft, and smoke trailed in oily gouts

from her turbines. Half of the resplendent blue lacquer on her hull was gone, scorched and shattered and burned away down to the bare metal. One of her heavy bolter sponsons was nothing but a tangled knot of ruined metal, gaping from the nose of the gunship like a missing tooth. Helios saw pieces of the servitor that had manned the cannon, charred bits fused to the wrecked armour plating.

The landing claws of the Thunderhawk managed to deploy fully, but still she skidded shrieking across the deck for ten metres before the vessel ground to a halt like an exhausted bird in a shower of keening sparks. At once emergency response teams rushed around the craft, taking diagnostics and putting out the half a dozen fires burning across the superstructure. The assault ramp in the craft's nose began to open shakily, struggling with shot hydraulics.

Helios looked up the ramp, but saw no one standing ready to descend. He made his way towards it, walking a winding path around fevered repair teams and squads kneeling in prayer. The Chaplain stopped, coming to a halt beneath the nose of the Thunderhawk.

The assault ramp had failed to fully descend, stalled halfway between the gunship's hull and the deck. Helios reached up, taking hold of the lip of the ramp, and pulled down. The pistons of the ramp groaned in protest, their mechanics grinding and spitting. The servos in Helios' shoulders thrummed as he hauled it level with his chest and then pressed it down until it hung at knee height. His boot and weight pushed it down the rest of the way, until it made contact against the deck plating with a heavy clunk.

The crew bay within the Thunderhawk was dark as the Chaplain climbed the ramp, devoid of even the swirling red of emergency klaxons. Helios' retinal display banished the gloom, resolving it into a long corridor flanked by empty restraint thrones. The surface of the assault ramp was scorched, streaked with lines of black carbon that travelled up half the length of the bay. Large shapes lay on the deck in the rear, covered by sheets of plastek.

The image struck Helios oddly. Even in death, a Space Marine was a glorious symbol of the Imperium's righteous might, his armour a beacon of glory no matter how scorched or broken. To see them covered, obscured from sight, stirred a sense close to blasphemy.

Who could have covered these sons of Ultramar? he thought. *And how great was their shame to have provoked them to do it?*

Helios ran a scan for life signs. There was no pilot, only the data return impression of a mortal, likely a Chapter-serf, lying dead in the control throne.

The Chaplain deduced that he must have succumbed to injury in transit, forcing the craft's machine-spirit to take it the rest of the way here. It was not unheard of, and explained the inelegant nature of the landing.

His visor detected a single active armour transponder aboard. Helios saw a figure at the end of the bay, seated in the last of the restraint thrones. A half-destroyed jump pack lay next to him, still smouldering. He was bent forward, looking down at an object he held cradled in both hands.

Helios recognised what it was that he was holding. The crimson helm of a squad sergeant.

'Hail, brother.' Helios' voice reverberated through the crew bay in clashing echoes that ran down the walls. The warrior in the hold's grip tightened by reflex around the helm, but he did not look up.

'Brother-Chaplain,' he replied, his voice a mix of distance and exhausted anger.

'I seek Veteran Sergeant Pomibius.'

The warrior took one hand from the helmet, raising his gauntlet to point at one of the plastek-covered heaps on the deck. 'There he lies.'

Helios looked over the dead warriors lying on the deck and the shrouds that covered them, counting six. 'Where is the rest of his squad?'

'There is only me,' the other Ultramarine answered. 'These were all that I was able to recover from the battle. I am Squad Pomibius.'

Helios whispered a benediction inside his mask. Another squad of Ultramarines, greatest warriors of the Imperium, lost. Added to that, a complication to his mission. Pomibius had been assigned to join Helios on his task, a reliable veteran of over thirty campaigns. He had anticipated casualties, but not to this extent.

'Do you require the Apothecary?' asked Helios as he stepped deeper into the gloom of the crew bay.

The other Ultramarine looked up. His shaved scalp was lacerated, caked in ash and blood that had fused to his flesh in a black crust. His eyes met the crimson lenses of the Chaplain's helm, bright despite the darkness.

Helios saw loss there, and anger. The guilt that came from surviving where all of the brethren he had sworn his oaths beside had fallen.

'No,' the other answered.

Helios stopped in front of the seated warrior and offered a hand to him. 'Then rise, brother.'

He looked up at Helios and, getting to his feet, took the extended hand into his grasp in the old way, wrist to wrist. 'I am Theron.'

This Helios knew already. His transponder had told him as much the moment the Chaplain had stepped aboard the Thunderhawk.

‘Well met, Brother Theron.’

The two walked down the crew bay, stepping around the forms of Squad Pomibius where they lay in eternal slumber. Theron’s gaze lingered over each of them, his grip tightening on the helm he held as they stepped out onto the landing bay.

‘I was sent here to enlist the sergeant of Squad Pomibius in a task of great importance,’ said Helios, his boots clanking down the assault ramp before meeting the worn steel of the deck. ‘He has now gone to the God-Emperor in glory, as we all shall in time. And yet, the task set before me remains. It is to you, Brother Theron, that this responsibility passes. Duty to Chapter and Emperor brings it now to your shoulders.’

Theron looked at Helios.

‘The primarch and Emperor call, brother. Do you wish vindication for Squad Pomibius? Will you answer, and be the agent of their will?’

Helios saw the jawline of the Assault Marine set. He saw oaths to dead brothers become sworn in his eyes. ‘I do, and I will.’

Helios reached down, placing Theron’s other hand upon the helm he held. ‘Then you are its sergeant, now.’

Helios watched a brief confusion join the quiet storm within Theron. The events of this day had been very much a journey for him, and its path had taken him to places the Chaplain doubted he had anticipated. Yet Helios had no time for sermons.

‘We have little time, sergeant,’ Helios told him, emphasising Theron’s new rank to focus his attention. ‘But we have some. Tend to your spirit as the artificers do to your weapons and armour, and be ready for when our ship arrives.’

Theron did not answer, giving only a short nod. The two Ultramarines stood in the shadow of the Thunderhawk for a minute, silent in the midst of the ordered bedlam of the surface war’s continued orchestration.

‘Will you help me, Brother-Chaplain?’ said Theron after a time, looking back up into the ship’s crew hold. ‘Will you help me carry my brothers?’

CHAPTER FIVE

The Iron Warriors do not abandon their hunts lightly.

Jovian had utilised every means at his disposal to shake them, planting false tracks in the dust, doubling back through the shells of hab-blocks and foundries. He dropped single bolt shells into fires at random locations, hoping to peel them away from his trail with the delayed detonations. His enemies had divided their numbers, and then divided them again to scour the area surrounding the settlement. The last hour had left Jovian confident that now, of the twelve heretics that had attacked the wall, only two were actively pursuing him.

He heard the pair of Iron Warriors as they approached. Jovian knew by the laboured, waspish buzz of their ancient armour that they were near. There was something hideously natural to the sound they made, some unholy union of the mechanical and organic. They were not the unrecognisable golems of the Death Guard, nor the frothing zealots of the Word Bearers, but the infinitely broad spectrum of damnation and treachery soaked them all the same.

Jovian crouched on the second level of a collapsed tenement, cursing every whirl of dust that shook free from his own thrumming plate. He peered over the section of wall he was hiding behind. He saw them then, prowling the street below.

As the Apothecary had believed, there were two – at least, as far as he was able to see. The auspex built into his bulky narthecium gauntlet confirmed as much for this small section of streets. One of them clutched a boltgun, its casing ribbed with what appeared to be vertebrae of blackened silver. A ribbon of linked shells dangled from its magazine well, clattering softly against the traitor's war-plate.

Jovian noted the pair of frag grenades coupled to his belt, as well as a sheathed chainaxe.

The other Iron Warrior loped along with a more disjointed rhythm, hefting the bulk of a flamer with one hand. The heretic's other arm ended at the elbow, a twisted stump of shorn metal dappled with brackish oil. Jovian recognised him immediately as the one that he had wounded earlier. They were now mere steps from being directly beneath him.

Jovian's armour was the white of the Apothecarion. It was his duty to preserve the lives of his brothers, and failing that, their genetic legacies. A duty he was trained to fulfil at all costs. But above all, he was a Space Marine. There were no more brothers of the Genesis Chapter present for him to heal. His mind fell back upon the Codex, to the wisdom of the primarch on ambushes, asymmetric conflict and melee combat.

The floor crackled beneath his weight. The Iron Warriors froze, heads swivelling and weapons panning in their fists. Jovian was already in the air.

The boltgun barked, and Jovian absorbed the hammer blows of mass reactives exploding against his breastplate. The outermost layers of ablative ceramite - shattered in twisting chips, but none of the shells managed to penetrate or destroy the musculature beneath.

Jovian crashed into the Iron Warrior bearing the flamer, interposing the traitor's body between himself and his comrade to shield himself from the next shot. The heretic fired without hesitation, and only one round of the burst struck Jovian. The rest cracked against the other Iron Warrior, blowing great craters into his chest. His shield's fist clenched reflexively from the pain, firing the flamer and sending a jet of roaring flame into the air. Jovian stomped down sideways into the Iron Warrior's knee, shattering it, and hurled him aside in a single fluid motion.

The Apothecary lunged forward, dipping his chainsword and turning its teeth upward as he brought it up under his opponent's bolter. Its teeth screamed into the trigger guard in a shower of sparks, savaging the firing mechanism of the weapon and the finger trying to fire it. The Iron Warrior swung the gun at Jovian's head, connecting with his temple and driving him to blindness for an instant. There was a sudden jolt of inversion, Jovian's legs swinging up level with his head as the Iron Warrior dropped into a crouch and tackled him to the ground.

Jovian's chainsword licked a glancing blow across the heretic's faceplate in a burst of sparks and dirty smoke. Broken teeth spat and flew from the track. One

gouged into his enemy's left eye-lens, turning it into a cobweb of cracked emerald glass. The Iron Warrior snarled and grabbed hold of Jovian's sword arm by the wrist, forcing it wide and smashing it against the ground until he lost his grip on the weapon.

Jovian slammed his narthecium gauntlet up into the Iron Warrior's face. His palm hovered over the cracked left eye-lens as he fired his carnifex again and again. The Apothecary's face became sticky with blood and machine oil made from blood. He bore the brunt of the traitor's weight as his enemy's arms lost the strength to support himself, and shoved him to one side. A heavy stomp as Jovian rose ensured that his enemy's skull fractured. A second pounded the helm flat against the pavement.

The air ignited behind Jovian with a screaming whoosh of promethium. He threw himself forwards, liquid fire clinging to his power plant. Twisting around, Jovian kicked at the second Iron Warrior, knocking the barrel of his flamer wide. The Chaos Space Marine dropped the weapon, bringing his hand down to his belt. Pain bloomed on Jovian's brow as the Olympian whipped a combat blade across his forehead. Hot blood ran into his eyes, turning his vision red.

A backhanded blow from Jovian sent the knife spinning away. Bringing the fist back around in a hook snapped the heretic's head to the side. Jovian ducked and seized him around the waist.

Once more a crude brawl took Jovian to the ground, but this time it was his opponent's back in the dust. The Iron Warrior jabbed his stump into Jovian's midsection while throwing his hips upward in an effort to throw the Apothecary off him. Jovian spread his weight wider for balance and rode out the sweep, crashing his chest against the Iron Warrior's faceplate to crack his head against the ground. The heretic snarled, reaching up and clawing at Jovian's face. The traitor managed to hook his fingers over Jovian's lower jaw, ripping several teeth from his mouth before a strike to his elbow joint denied him his grip.

With a grunt of effort Jovian finally managed to find the haft of the dead traitor's chainaxe. He clenched the activation stud, gunning its motor and granting his enemy's movements a renewed, frenzied sense of purpose. The Iron Warrior scrambled, fighting to get a knee between them and to wrestle the axe from Jovian's grasp. The weapon's killing edge skipped against the ground, spraying them both with sparks and bits of gravel.

Jovian took hold of the chainaxe with both hands and pushed down with all of his weight. The weapon's engine sputtered and choked as the teeth ground against the rubberised armour sheathing the Iron Warrior's throat. Its integrity

held for a heartbeat before the teeth cut through it and shredded down into skin, flesh, muscle and bone. A strangled desperate curse bubbled from the Chaos Space Marine's brass vox-grille as he threw all of his remaining strength into a final effort to pitch Jovian off him. Had he both of his arms, the Apothecary believed he would have succeeded in doing so. But he did not, and so he failed.

Jovian did not stop pushing the chainaxe down until it was embedded into the street.

It took a long time for the Iron Warrior to die. Even with his head severed, his chest rose and fell. His armour continued its hissing, arrhythmic buzz, and his limbs enacted clumsy, uncoordinated attempts to dislodge Jovian from atop him. Ten thousand years of rage and heresy would not allow him to go into oblivion quickly, or lightly. Finally, after seconds that stretched like hours, the heretic shuddered, and went still.

Panting and bleeding, Jovian sat back atop the Iron Warrior's corpse, giving himself a moment for his second heart to return to dormancy and his breathing to stabilise. He touched a fingertip to his brow. The laceration was to the bone, but already the bleeding had stopped, drying into a crusted smear over flesh that had begun to reknit. He did not deem it a justified expenditure of what little coagulant foam he had left in his narthecium. He fired his carnifex and quickly scraped away the grey film that had caked around the piston cylinder.

He stood, exhaling as his body protested at a dozen points. A cursory self-diagnostic revealed various contusions and bone fractures, as well as a not insignificant degree of internal bleeding. His power plant was damaged, its outer shell savaged by the grenade detonation earlier and warped further by the flamer. The increasing weight of his armour was all the confirmation Jovian needed that its energy coils were bleeding power rapidly.

Jovian looked down as he heard a faint click from inside the severed head beneath him. Another came a moment later, from beneath the helm of the other dead traitor beside him. He recognised it immediately as the muted ticking of vox-transmission.

Time was against Jovian. Despite the brutal speed of the confrontation, lasting less than one minute, the noise it had generated would surely draw more heretics to this place. Hearing nothing from their comrades, they were likely already inbound at speed. He needed to be far away by the time they arrived.

Jovian went back inside the ruined tenement, and scrambled up to the second level from where he had first leapt. He dragged a stone away from atop a mound of rubble, and carefully gathered the bundle of armourglass vials from where he

had hidden them.

Daenos. Thevolin. Grakal. Batra and Kiril. And finally, Sergeant Ryvan. Reverently he reattached the progenoids of those he had been able to save to the chains hanging from his armour.

Jovian pulled his helm from where it lay on the floor. A thin smile tugged at his lips, as the memory surfaced of him berating young Batra for going into battle with his own helm mag-locked to his belt.

'No waist in Ultramar is as well-defended as yours, brother!' Jovian had scolded, watching the warrior lower the helmet over his head, duly chastised. It had been mere days, yet now seemed lifetimes ago.

The retinal display activated as it engaged at Jovian's collar seals. He cycled through each vox frequency, thinking that perhaps the slight elevation might boost his own signal. A wash of static filled his ears on every channel.

Then he heard it. It was faint, and nearly drowned into silence by distortion, but it was there. A single voice, deep and strong, singing a tune sung only in the small coastal cities of southern Newfound.

Jovian had direction again. A purpose. He locked the coordinates of the signal to his visor display and set off, running on a path towards it.

CHAPTER SIX

Freefall.

'Courage and honour!' we roar as Meto spreads out beneath Squad Pomibius. We file out of the Thunderhawk and into thin air in calm order. Our jump is being made beneath the cloud level, granting us an unobstructed view clear to the horizon.

A rolling vista of deep green meets my visor display, with the hazy blue of the planet's principal ocean curving across to the north-east. This world has a beauty I feel in my chest. I feel the critical importance of this agri world, a giver of life, ever more precious now in this new dark era for mankind. She looks like home to me, like Iax.

I see the flames a second later. The vast swathes of earth scorched into ash. The great columns of smoke that stretch like blackened fingers pointing accusation into the atmosphere.

My body makes dozens of slight shifts and adjustments by instinct as we drop, maintaining my position within the squad. I have entered enough active warzones in this way that it no longer requires conscious thought. I am perfectly attuned with the spirit of my armour, and we hurtle down with as much grace as is possible for a three-metre genehanced superhuman encased within a tonne of ablative ceramite.

A battlefield sweeps out before the squad, rapidly growing as if rising up to consume us. I see our target, a loose column of crude armoured vehicles rattling towards where the fighting is thickest. They appear as insects, quickly swelling within instants to the size of children's toys. I run another equipment check,

counting my cache of melta charges. My mind runs the unconscious battlefield arithmetic of assigning a charge to each of the targets I see.

A blinding flash fills my vision and I am tumbling. My armour wails at me with a chorus of alarms. Sight returns, awash in a migraine throb, presenting me with a rapidly alternating view of sky, ground, sky.

I cannot find Vybalt. His transponder rune is gone, along with those of Irin, Kyth and Markus.

'Sergeant!' I call out, throwing my arms wide as I fight to stabilise myself. 'Sergeant!'

'Sergeant?'

Theron looked up from where he sat in the corner of one of the *Mare Nostrum*'s many armoury bays. An artificer serf stood before him, his reluctance to disturb the Ultramarine from his meditation clear upon his oil-flecked face. Theron's own expression remained hardened, not allowing the mortal to see the gratitude he felt for the distraction.

'Are you well, Sergeant Theron?'

Theron remembered then that he was a sergeant, now. The rank rang hollow attached to his name. For thirty years Theron had served under Pomibius, never once questioning an order, always quick to seek his guidance, and never faltering in zeal or fury in battle. Across dozens of warzones they had cemented their bond of kinship in fire and blood. Pomibius had grown increasingly certain in recent years that the time would be short before Theron's own helm would take the red, and he would be elevated to lead his own squad.

But not like this.

Time moved faster in this new era. Each disaster struck harder and swifter than the last. The Cadian Gate in ruins. Ultramar besieged by living plagues. The galaxy riven in two by the warp and the monstrosities bred within its madness.

Theron's father, the great risen Guilliman, had awoken to an Imperium that he both did not recognise and did not understand. To read his words, or hear him speak, humanity was an utterly different species to the one he had died to defend. The primarch had declared this Indomitus Crusade to turn back the dying light of mankind, and as his sons the Ultramarines would bleed, kill and die to make it so.

But how many had they lost here, on Meto? How white had the Eighth been bled to win one war for one planet in one campaign against a foe that was not even their greatest enemy?

Theron knew the Ultramarines would never waver, never falter from their duty, for if they did who would be left to stand against the darkness? Who could be trusted, and was not weakened by flaws or riven with secrets like so many of their cousin Chapters? Would there be any left to finish this undertaking, to save the Imperium and rebuild it with purity?

Theron realised the serf was still staring at him, waiting for some response.

'My armour.'

The man drew in a breath. 'Ready, my lord. You arrived without weapons, and so requisitions have been drawn, readied and sanctified for your issue. They are prepared as well.'

Theron stood, and they walked over to where the Ultramarine's war-plate hung on an arming rack. The damage to it had been mended, its surfaces repainted and polished to a mirror sheen with unguents and lapping powder. Theron saw Pomibius' helm on the table beside it, still bearing the wounds of battle.

'What of the…' A tic tugged at the Space Marine's cheek. 'What of my helm?'

'We have completed the repairs and diagnostics,' answered the serf, grunting as he took the helmet in his arms. He was large and well-muscled, for a mortal, but still its weight troubled him. 'All of the internal mechanisms are operational and its spirit has been placated. All that remains for us is the cosmetic restoration.'

Theron reached out, and the man offered it to him with a short bow. He held up the helm of Sergeant Pomibius to his face, like some priest clutching a fragment of bone taken from a blessed saint's finger. He knew it was no talisman – that it was nothing more than a hollow shell of ceramite in chipped red lacquer – and yet it asserted a hold over Theron that he could not readily describe, staring back at him with empty green eyes.

'There is no need.'

The serf frowned, his eyes falling over the gouges and flame-stripped paint. 'You are certain, my lord?'

Theron nodded. 'It is as it needs to be. Now go, I am certain that there are more pressing demands upon your skills.'

The menial lingered for a moment, before giving another hurried bow. 'As you wish, my lord.'

The thrall departed after Theron did not answer him. Another group of serfs and servitors gathered around the Ultramarine and began the process of machining his wargear back into place. Theron underwent the ritual in silence, his skin pricking at the incense that was wafted over him by a chanting robed acolyte. Once the last pieces were attached the flock of servants departed, moving to the

next of Theron's brothers that required their attentions. He took up Pomibius' helmet. His fingertips traced the path of a deep gash across the faceplate, before turning it and raising it over his head.

A pixelated view of the workshop resolved before him, sharpening into focus and populating with runes and screeds of relevant data. The spirit within the helmet baulked for an instant, refusing to accept anyone who was not Pomibius as its master, before fully enmeshing with the rest of his armour.

Theron blink-clicked a pulsing rune, and the voice of Chaplain Helios filled his ears.

'Brother-sergeant,' said Helios, his voice full of zeal and relish. *'Meet me within the principal landing bay. Our vessel has arrived.'*

Nearly three hours passed before Helios and Theron boarded the Stormraven *Pilum* to leave the *Mare Nostrum*. Such was the amount of time necessary for a vessel to translate from the warp at the system's outer Lagrange point, exchange hails with and have its transponder signature verified by a frigate of the Eighth Company fleet's edge ward picket, and proceed with it as escort to the main body of the fleet hanging over Meto.

The *Pilum* had been despatched from this new vessel, a destroyer sent from the Imperial fleet where the primarch himself coordinated the Indomitus Crusade from the vanguard. Once it had arrived, the warship's master had stopped alongside the outermost ships of the Eighth Company, angling the vessel's prow back towards the Lagrange point to leave little doubt as to the urgency of the operation Helios had been entrusted with.

Helios stared out of the forward viewing block in the cockpit of the *Pilum*, its crew of specialised servitors oblivious to his presence as he watched the ship resolve into view. Augur coding identified her as the *Light of Iax*, and while the newly arrived warship bore the obvious silhouette of a Hunter-class destroyer, the Chaplain could see even from a distance that she was far from standard.

Destroyers like the *Light of Iax* were escort ships, a kilometre of void-hardened adamantium with a crew that exceeded over ten thousand mortal souls. However, they were small in scale when compared to the floating cities of battleships and Adeptus Astartes strike cruisers. The ship's hammerhead prow held what truly made her a threat in void warfare: an array of multiple torpedo tubes capable of filling the night with ship-killing ordnance. Helios compared what he was seeing to the standard schematic in his mind, noticing that the number of tubes on the *Light of Iax* was more than double that of the standard Hunter-class. Combined

with the much larger and more powerful engines taking up her aft third and the string of macro turrets studding her spine, it was clear that someone had gone to great lengths to modify this vessel into far more than the ship of the line she had been when she had left the orbital shipyards of Calth.

Seeing such stark change to an ancient design stirred mixed feelings within Helios. He could see the improved capabilities inherent in the warship's modifications, and thus the greater agency the *Light of Iax* would have should their mission require the use of her firepower. At the same time, he could not help the sense of discomfort that arose at the alteration of such a sacred template of war, one as vital and unchangeable as that of his armour or his crozius.

How could the priests of Mars have sanctioned something they would consider the gravest sacrilege, and how had the warship's spirit been affected by such conversion? Could it have been Lord Guilliman who had ordered such a thing done?

Helios put the thought from his mind. If this had been the will of the primarch, then he could do nothing to gainsay it, nor would he have any desire to do so. To doubt his father was as unthinkable a prospect to him as questioning the God-Emperor seated upon the Golden Throne.

One of the servitors began to chitter. The boxy apparatus replacing its lower jaw clattered as hinged stamps clacked against a spool of vellum to record the gunship's clearance to land aboard the *Light of Iax*. Helios spared a final glance at the destroyer that had now grown to fill the viewing block like a cliffside of cobalt armour. He saw a rectangle of golden light appear as the vessel's hangar bay opened.

Helios found Theron in the crew bay, praying to the spirits in his freshly issued weapons. They were new to the Assault Marine, but that hardly meant the same as their being newly forged. The weapons that stocked the armouries of the Ultramarines were as ancient as the Chapter, and in the case of those wielded by the Chapter Master and his chosen elite, some were from the time when the Ultramarines had been a Legion. Over the millennia of war they had been repaired, their component parts replaced and recalibrated, but the animus that inhabited each implement of battle remained.

Theron knelt upon the deck, a chainsword and bolt pistol in his hands. Helios approved of this act of piety, and granted him distance until he concluded his rituals. It was crucial that his brother became one with the spirits in each weapon, that their purposes became joined into an unbreakable bond before they

were wielded against the enemies of man.

His prayers concluded, Theron rose, mag-locking his weapons to his hips. ‘It would do me great honour, Brother-Chaplain,’ said Theron as Helios approached, ‘if you would bless my weapons before they are first blooded in my service.’

‘The honour is mine,’ said Helios. ‘There will be ample time to do so during our passage, though I do not anticipate that we will have need of their use in our endeavour.’

‘This task,’ asked Theron. ‘We are to be diplomatic envoys?’

‘Not as such, though we will act as representatives of the Chapter and the blessed primarch.’

Helios crashed a fist with force against his chest, as he always did when mentioning Guilliman, and Theron matched the gesture. ‘And we are to expect no conflict? None beside you and I shall see to this?’

‘I have been told that there is a detachment from the Chapter already aboard the *Light of Iax* to aid us,’ said Helios. ‘Though the astropathic sending was flawed, and portions of the message lost. I do not know the company from which they hail.’

Theron nodded. ‘Regardless, it will be good to see our brothers from the other companies. The crusade has stretched the Chapter wide across the galaxy.’

‘Indeed. We must always meet the opportunity for fraternity with joyfulness and thanksgiving.’

The deck thrummed beneath the Ultramarines’ boots as the *Pilum* decelerated. Helios felt the static crackle as the Stormraven passed from the vacuum through the integrity field and into the hangar of the *Light of Iax*. Dull clunks resonated as the gunship’s landing claws deployed, before a deep lurch shivered through her bones as she landed upon the deck.

‘Come,’ said Helios. ‘Let us meet our brethren.’

Theron collected his battered helm, holding it in the crook of his arm as he stood beside Helios. For his part, the Chaplain’s face remained hidden as always behind his own death mask, a reminder of the ideal that he represented which transcended the individual.

The *Pilum*’s forward assault ramp lowered to the deck with a smooth hydraulic hiss. Helios and Theron marched down, their internal auspexes alerting them to the group of large armoured figures waiting in the hangar bay to receive them. Helios frowned. His retinal display could not register an established ident rune to any of them. Even their armour was strange, as though it was of a mark that

existed outside of those of the Chapter or his own memory.

As he stepped from the ramp, Helios understood why.

'By the God-Emperor,' said the Chaplain. The energy coils of Helios' plasma-pistol flared as it gathered charge, a match to the blazing power field that rushed over the blades of his crozius maul. Theron's helm fell from his hands to clang against the deck as he drew his weapons.

'What is this?' barked Theron, as much to the ones waiting for them as to Helios. 'What are you?'

CHAPTER SEVEN

‘I call this Conclave to order.’

Bolaraphon dominated the small antechamber that the Iron Warriors had designated as their impromptu strategium. A handful of sergeants and senior leadership that remained from the warband were arrayed about the central table, the majority of them newly promoted after his Iron Field dominion, when nearly all of the original hierarchy had been lost to the Chaos rift. Operations on the planet’s surface had been suspended as the Warsmith called his best back before him to convene aboard the *Damnatio Memorae*.

At the height of his power, a time that felt aeons past to Bolaraphon despite being only weeks ago, the Conclave was a formal gathering of the warband’s elite. Victories were lauded, aspiring champions were granted elevation, disputes were debated and resolved, and the preparations for future conquests were made. The vast machine of Bolaraphon’s kingdom was continuously sharpened, its every effort meticulously calculated and guided by his will.

The Warsmith looked at the warriors gathered around him now. He could not help but see the ghosts of the great brothers that had been taken from him, keen minds and trusted blades lost forever to the maw of ruin. Of those who looked to him now, most were soldiers of the line. All were capable and ruthless sons of Perturabo, for otherwise they would have never survived within the warband, but still they were far from the elite whose places they now occupied. Only three had held the rank of sergeant prior to the catastrophe.

‘An appraisal of the strategic situation,’ rumbled the Warsmith. ‘Now.’

The assembled Iron Warriors were silent for a moment, before one of their

number stood. His burnished plate was blackened with soot from recent combat. Bolaraphon knew him as Zikon.

'Our pacification of the planet is proceeding at speed,' said Zikon. 'The major hives on the surface are largely abandoned, and whatever population remains has long since left them in favour of scattered surface-level settlements. As a result we have had little recourse to pursue any prolonged sieges, and the organised defences present have done little to disrupt our operations.'

'What is the disposition of oppositional forces?' The Warsmith's growl dripped with venom.

'A small garrison was present, some thin-blooded cast off of the Ul–'

Another of the Iron Warriors stood sharply, rustling the cloak of heavy mail that hung from his shoulders. His armour was ornate for an Olympian, the plates etched with kill markings and the names of conquered worlds leading back to before Horus' great betrayal.

'Be silent, Zikon,' he warned, his silver eyes flicking towards the Warsmith. 'Their name shall not be spoken in our Warsmith's presence.'

Bolaraphon's fist smashed down against the table, silencing the Iron Warriors. The ringing clang of ceramite against steel echoed in harsh waves around the chamber.

'That name shall not be spoken here,' Bolaraphon rumbled, repeating the words of his lieutenant. He nodded to the warrior. 'You will let him speak, Beniah.'

Beniah inclined his head. Of all the warband that remained, Beniah held seniority. He had led his own company during the rebellion, and had served alongside Bolaraphon since the days when the IV Legion was still intact.

'As you wish, my Warsmith.'

Bolaraphon turned back to Zikon.

'The,' Zikon formed his words carefully, '*Imperial* garrison was small and therefore unable to withstand our assault. The enemy Adeptus Astartes were scattered and as of now we are combing the surface to purge what remains of them. It should not be long before they are fully eradicated.'

The Warsmith gave an almost imperceptible nod. 'They must be exterminated, utterly and completely. The armour we have will be made operational for immediate deployment, and all efforts will be made to rouse Tokagol. Inform the hunter-killer units on the surface that they are behind their allotted time to accomplish their objectives, and every moment longer will only increase the price they must atone for to me, personally.'

Zikon gave a half-bow and returned to his seat. The Conclave continued on for

some time, as Iron Warriors stood and gave reports on the enslavement of the planetary population and the acquisition of available resources, and as timetables were established for bringing the warband and *Damnatio Memorae* back to full operational form. Satisfied that he had absorbed all of the relevant data, and that his subordinates were fully cognisant of his intent, Bolaraphon dismissed the assembly.

'You,' said the Warsmith, pointing a talon at Beniah as the others departed. 'You will stay.'

Beniah stopped, his expression guarded as he watched the others file past him. He set his horned helm back on the table, his cloak of dark mail rattling behind him as he approached Bolaraphon.

'What is thy bidding, my Warsmith?'

'The task that I have given you,' said Bolaraphon, his voice lowering to a tectonic growl. 'What have you discovered?'

Beniah smiled thinly. 'Like my Warsmith, I had reacted with some surprise to see the augur coding return for this savage little rock we arrived over. Per your command, my teams have scoured its surface to verify its identity. We gathered records from the ruins of its principal hives, as well as from the data repositories of the garrison held by the lackeys of the false emperor. We now know the truth of this world, my lord.'

Beniah leaned closer. 'It is Quradim, my Warsmith. There can be no doubt of it, however much time and circumstance have changed it.'

Bolaraphon took a deep, rumbling breath. 'The loyalists speak of us as nothing more than agents of taint and corruption. Yet look at how this world has been ruined under their stewardship.'

'Hypocrisy has ever been the gilt upon the Throne of Lies,' said Beniah. 'My Warsmith knows this.'

Bolaraphon grunted. 'The taint has followed us from the Iron Field.'

'Yes, I heard about Krynix,' said Beniah. 'I heard the creature spoke of–'

'Careful, brother,' warned Bolaraphon.

'I am thy right hand, my Warsmith. I would stand between you and any blade, just as I would stand between you and corruption to spare you its venom. I contemplate these realities and provide you with their relevance, if any exists from the lies and damning riddles they croak.'

The Iron Warrior paused, considering his words. 'I wonder if there is any truth to it, that he has indeed somehow returned, and is coming here.'

'I will not allow their lies to chart my path!' snarled Bolaraphon.

‘Could they know of this world’s history?’ Beniah pressed. ‘If *they* are still here–’

‘They *are* here,’ said Bolaraphon with finality.

Beniah dipped his head. ‘Then all the more reason for us to move with speed. If those thin-blooded castoffs that were garrisoned here know of them, they must be silenced. If more are coming, then we must be prepared.’

Bolaraphon seized Beniah by the collar, his razored talons against the warrior’s face.

‘You will find them, all that we seek here. And if there is any truth within that creature’s lies, and the dearest of the corpse god’s lap dogs has risen, then he will find me waiting.’

With effort, Beniah tore his gaze from the talons, and smiled at his master. ‘Of course, my Warsmith, by your will.’

CHAPTER EIGHT

Helios knew not what was standing in front of him at the foot of the *Pilum*'s assault ramp, but he was certain of one thing: they were not Space Marines.

A group of five armoured giants stood waiting upon the hangar deck of the *Light of Iax*. Their wargear was uncannily similar to that of the Adeptus Astartes, and yet seemed all the more perverse for its differences. The proportions were wrong. The plates of their armour were rounder and denser, with the raised collar of Mark VIII Errant-pattern and the muzzled helm of the Mark IV Maximus. Each of them stood more than a head taller than both Helios and Theron, and held bizarre parodies of Space Marine boltguns with extended casings and elongated barrels across their chests.

Most disorienting of all was the familiar cobalt hue of their war-plate. The Chaplain's lip twisted in rage as he beheld the ivory mark of the Ultramarines that shone upon their pauldrons.

'Identify yourselves,' barked Helios, the power coils of his plasma pistol hissing with building charge. 'Name yourselves or face destruction!'

The foremost of their number took a slow step forward. Carefully he locked his oversized boltgun to a magnetic strip on his thigh before opening his hands and spreading them wide.

'I am Brother Seneca.'

'Why do you masquerade in *our* colours?' demanded Theron.

'Because I too am an Ultramarine,' he answered.

'Lies!' Helios levelled his pistol at Seneca.

'I tell no falsehood.'

‘The most sinister deceptions are that which our enemies would believe most pleasing to our eyes!’

‘We mean you no harm.’

The stranger took a step towards Theron and the sergeant responded by reflex, his chainsword a blur as he ripped it down from over his head. Seneca caught the blow, grabbing Theron by the forearm. His other hand flicked out, an economical movement that sent the Assault Marine’s bolt pistol clattering across the deck. He tightened his grip, and the ceramite of Theron’s vambrace cracked.

Seneca swung Theron’s arm down, crashing his chainsword against the deck in a shower of sparks, before hurling him back to the foot of the ramp.

The giant reached up, pulling his helm free with a soft hiss. The face that emerged from beneath the snouted helm was the pale olive of those born on Espandor, topped by shorn stubble that glittered gold in the hangar’s light. His face bore no lines or scars: one of an initiate, yet to earn the marks of battle. ‘Forgive me.’

Seneca’s voice was low, a touch lower than that of a Space Marine.

Theron pulled a grenade from his belt, only to find the crackling eagle wings of Helios’ crozius in his path.

‘Speak now,’ the Chaplain growled, ‘on pain of eternal damnation in the eyes of the God-Emperor of Mankind, and prove that what you say is truth.’

Seneca frowned slightly at the Chaplain’s words. ‘Did you not receive the message telling you of our coming?’ he asked, keeping a deliberate softness to his tone.

‘We received word,’ said Helios. ‘But nothing that foretold that we would be joined by mutated doppelgangers in our own colours.’

If the Chaplain’s words had any effect upon Seneca, he gave no outward sign. He stooped down, collecting Theron’s helm from the deck and offering it back to him. ‘Portions of the sending were lost, perhaps.’

‘Convenient that you would be that part,’ said Theron after taking the helmet back.

‘Then let this persuade you.’ Seneca slowly reached for a fist-sized orb of brass at his belt. Carefully, he held it aloft to offer no pretext of deception, and touched a rune on the surface of the hololithic recorder. With a series of soft ticks and whirs of its internal machinery, an image sprang into the air above them, projected from the disc of pale blue glass that peered out from its centre.

Theron was silent, dumbstruck by the image that resolved before them. Twin hammer blows rang out as Helios’ knees struck the deck. His hands followed,

palms against the plates as he lowered his skull-faced helm until it touched the metal. The Chaplain abased himself, words working in silent prayer, for though it was but a projection, he found himself in the presence of the God-Emperor's avenging son.

The *Light of Iax* cut through the frothing miasma of the warp, a sliver of radiant blue within the shimmering protective bubble of its Geller field. Since the dawn of the *Cicatrix Maledictum*, travel through the Sea of Souls had devolved from a harrowing plunge through the realm of the daemonic with no guarantee of knowing where or when a ship would emerge, to a near-suicidal undertaking. A staggering amount of the Imperial casualties lost in the opening campaigns of the Indomitus Crusade had occurred not on the battlefields, but rather in transit between them.

Though the world the Ultramarines were travelling to from Meto lay just beyond the ancient boundaries of Ultramar's Five Hundred Worlds, even this relatively short voyage could not be sojourned safely if done as it had been just years before. Like a skipping stone, the *Light of Iax* surfaced into reality in a series of short jumps. With each successful return to the real, the ship's crew - reoriented the vessel and adjusted for the passage of time, marking it against the timetable allotted for their mission's completion.

Theron walked the corridors of the warship in silence. Noise thrummed the air all around him regardless, as thousands of tonnes of machinery laboured to both propel them through the warp and keep them safe from its ravages.

He flexed the vambrace encasing his left arm, feeling the tight squeal as pieces of fractured ceramite ground against one another, and the sound shrank away.

'Sergeant, come in!'

I fight the vertigo swelling up my skull by finally stabilising my dive. Flak is exploding all around me, filling the sky with dirty bursts of smoke and burning metal. The altimeter in my helm is a blur racing to ground level.

Bracing for the jolt, I fire a burst from my jump pack. The turbines on my back scream as they activate, throwing an upward countering force that hits me like a hammer blow to the chest. I grimace against the pain, but it is enough to knock me out of the terminal velocity that would have seen me end as a smear upon the ground. I will fall the rest of the drop with some semblance of control.

Hurriedly I cycle through visor settings to pierce the smoke and flame. At the same time I pan my head around, straining my auto-senses to their limits as I search for the ident runes of my squad brothers. By the time I differentiate the

rattling roar of engine wash from the rest of the noise, it is almost too late.

I manage to twist my body at the last moment before I collide with a greenskin jet fighter. The xenos aircraft is slow enough to avoid killing me outright, but the impact is still sufficient to drive the air from my lungs and send cracks radiating across my plastron.

I feel my multi-lung unfold against my diaphragm and inflate to feed enough oxygen into my blood and brain to keep me conscious. My vision sharpens from the blur, and I realise I am clinging to the abhorrent aircraft's fuselage, just beneath the cockpit.

The ork pilot is wailing its incomprehensible rage through the bubble of dirty glass encasing the cockpit. It pounds a meaty fist against the canopy, before drawing a heavy calibre pistol, taking aim at me, and opening fire.

The airshield blows out in a welter of shattered armourglass, most of which the wind sends scything back into the cockpit. The ork roars as the jagged slivers cut and embed themselves in its face, yet still it continues to fire the gun, oblivious to any other goal than the one of seeing me dead.

I dig the fingers of my hand into the scrap metal hull of the xenos aircraft, punching my fingers through the first layer of rusted armour to give myself a firmer handhold. Hand over hand, I inch closer to the pilot. A slug cracks against my helm, and I lose vision in my left eye-lens.

I draw my chainsword, revving its track of monomolecular teeth to life, and plunge it down the ork's throat. Dark blood sprays over me. Now I am blind in both eyes.

The greenskin's furious howling has distorted into a wet gurgle after I begin to saw my blade from side to side, churning a ragged laceration out through the back of its head. I feel the heavy thud of the dead creature slumping against the fighter's ramshackle controls, and know that it is time to take my leave.

My chainblade locked again to my thigh, I paw the gore from my right eye, the filmy residue that remains rendering my vision an even darker crimson than usual. I release my hold on the fuselage, and let the howling wind separate me from the rapidly diving ork fighter. I check my altimeter again when I hear more jet engines, smaller but definitely not of Imperial design. I turn as another shape collides with me, all chequered junk armour and broken teeth–

The *Light of Iax* shuddered through her adamantium bones, bringing Theron back to the corridor. The Assault Marine looked up, his keen eyesight tracking the tiny reverberations running across the vaulted buttresses that framed the passageway's ceiling. He heard the wail of klaxons in the distance, a chorus of

bells sounding another safe translation from the warp. The lingering stink of alien blood and jet fuel faded from his nostrils.

The strange new Space Marines that had met Theron and Helios in the hangar were not the only ones aboard the destroyer. Seneca and his squad, per the orders issued to them, were under the Chaplain's command. He had been informed that the other new members of his own squad – a concept that still sowed discomfort in the heart of the Assault Marine – were training in one of the unused storage bays of the vessel.

Theron stood before the sealed bulkhead leading into that chamber. After the shock of the hangar bay, the new sergeant wondered if what he would find within would be more like Seneca and his ilk. That, or some other wholly new iteration of the Adeptus Astartes that provoked feelings of abomination he could not shake.

He pressed the rune on the doorway controls, and the bulkhead parted with a low rumble. He stepped inside. A trilling note from his visor display confirmed a total lack of artificial gravity within the large rectangle of open space. Two soft *clunks* sounded as Theron's boots magnetically sealed him to the deck.

Theron looked out from a railing across the empty room, watching a pair of genehanced figures in blue bodygloves locked together in mid-air. The two grappled, their limbs blurring against one another as they traded joint locks and counters. They threw one another with practised grace, the thrown one gliding away a short distance before halting their spin and meeting the other back in the centre and throwing him in turn. Their movements were heavy, exaggerated, as though compensating for an imagined weight. Every motion and technique was executed with a closed fist.

For several minutes, Theron watched them in silence. His mind absorbed every detail, analysing the forms and movements of the two warriors as they sparred. It was clear that their skill was abundant, as was an ironclad discipline to adhere to the strictures of their combat system.

One of the fighters, his scalp shorn whereas the other bore a shock of golden blond hair, gained the advantage over his opponent, flipping him and sending him tumbling end over end towards Theron. The fair-haired warrior flared out his limbs, looking to the far wall to halt his momentum.

His eyes widened with surprise as he looked down to find it was Theron's hand that had halted him in place.

'My apologies,' said the warrior hurriedly. His partner kicked smoothly from the far wall of the cargo bay to approach. The two took hold of the railing and

swung themselves down, reorienting to stand next to Theron. The sergeant now appreciated that, like Seneca, these two were also taller than he, and their frames more densely muscled. Two more of this new, advanced breed of Adeptus Astartes. And like Seneca, they bore the unmistakable aspect of children, their faces nearly devoid of scars.

'Hail, sergeant,' said the two in unison as they thumped a fist to their chests in salute. Theron responded, striking his chest with his cracked vambrace, a motion the pair watched with some interest.

'I am Sergeant Theron.'

The one with the shaved scalp nodded. 'I am Brother Melos, sergeant.'

'And I am Iason,' said the blond.

'Tell me,' said Theron. 'Explain the purpose of your sparring.'

Iason looked to Melos. 'We are Inceptors, brother-sergeant. Drop troops. We enter battle from orbit, and as such it is a substantial theoretical that we will engage an oppositional force while in the midst of executing free fall.'

'Practically,' said Iason, 'our training sharpens our abilities in preparation for that eventuality.'

'How many drops have you executed?' asked Theron.

'Fifty-seven,' replied Iason. 'Simulated,' he added, after a slight pause.

'Simulated?'

'I have seventy-four, simulated,' said Melos.

'Simulated?' Theron repeated, the word tasting acrid and unfamiliar on his tongue. 'Neither of you have ever entered true combat?'

'We have both of us taken lives,' said Iason. 'Per our training, death and battle hold no mystery to us. Every measure was taken to ensure our readiness, otherwise we would not have been deemed fit to be placed in stasis.'

Stasis. Theron frowned. There was too much about this new breed of Space Marines that he did not know.

'I would have the entire squad gathered for weapons training.'

Iason and Melos exchanged a glance. 'We *are* the squad, brother-sergeant.'

'Only two of you?'

'Inceptor squads are three, sergeant,' said Melos. 'Always three.'

Iason looked down, noticing Theron's crushed vambrace. 'Do you require an armourer, brother-sergeant?'

Theron flexed his left hand. 'It is nothing.' He looked to his new charges. To Squad Theron. The oily discomfort in his gut twisted anew from the thought.

'Prepare your equipment for inspection,' said Theron. 'I will attend to you

shortly.’

Helios had sequestered himself within his austere chambers during the initial days of the *Light of Iax*’s tumultuous transit. Such an extended time of isolation had offered the rare opportunity for the Chaplain to remove his mask. Membership within the Chapter’s Reclusiam forbade him from being seen without it by any but his own order, as they together were the embodiment of the will of the God-Emperor, and no longer the individual men they once were.

This distance he had sworn to keep had never concerned Helios overmuch. His oaths to Cassius were as much a part of him as the beating of his hearts, and no sacrifice or deprivation from the joys of brotherhood was too great for him and his brothers in black to bear.

Helios knelt upon the worn iron floor of his cell, still wearing his armour. He gazed up at the skull-face helm and crozius maul that marked his office as surely as the coal black of his war-plate. On the simple table beside them was a stack of vellum datasheets provided by the *Light of Iax*’s commanders, as well as the hololithic recorder shown to him and Theron by Seneca.

The Chaplain had watched the recording over and over again, until viewing it had almost become an act of worship in and of itself. It had shocked Helios that these strange new warriors had not shown the slightest reverence to the image of the risen Lord of the Ultramarines. It was one more fact in a dizzying list of reasons to doubt what they were and what they intended. And yet, all of it had been washed away by his father’s words.

Just as you are my sons, the hololithic image of the primarch had said, *so too are they.*

A tone sounded at the doorway, drawing the Chaplain out of his thoughts. He stood, replacing his crozius upon its chain and sealing his face behind the leering skull of his helm. Before turning to the door, he took the hololithic recorder, and placed it into a satchel of beaten leather on his belt.

‘Enter.’

The door slid aside, revealing Theron. ‘Brother-Chaplain,’ said the sergeant in greeting.

‘Brother Theron.’ Helios inclined his head. ‘How are you finding your first command?’

‘They are,’ Theron paused, ‘exotic.’

The Chaplain rested a hand upon the Assault Marine’s pauldron. ‘I am going to the bridge. Walk with me.’

The two Ultramarines stepped out into the corridor. With most of the mortal crew concentrated on the engineering and maintenance decks or confined to quarters during the *Light of Iax*'s recurrent translations in and out of the warp, it granted a measure of solitude to the Space Marines, untroubled by the bustle that normally filled its passageways.

'They are strange, Brother-Chaplain.' Theron adjusted his helm held in the crook of his arm. 'They are undoubtedly like us, and yet that only serves to make their differences stand out all the more starkly.'

'These are times of change and upheaval in all things,' agreed Helios. 'I place my trust in our father, and in the God-Emperor. So long as we follow the path they set before us, we shall not be led astray.'

'You speak truly,' said Theron. 'I try to see it as you do.'

Helios' thoughts went to the orb. 'Do you doubt that it was our father that we saw?'

Theron shook his head. 'I undertook the pilgrimage to the Temple of Correction just as you have, just as every brother of the Chapter has. I know our father's face. There can be no mistake, it was he.'

'Yet still, your doubt remains.'

'Not of our primarch,' said Theron. 'Never him. In spite of that, I cannot seem to cast aside the misgivings that have arisen within me from all of this. I suppose it is simply a weakness of my faith.'

'The God-Emperor lays tests along our path,' said Helios. 'He does this not to wear upon our spirit or to diminish its edge, but to hone it. A blade sharpened in war will best any that has never known conflict. Offer thanksgiving to Him, that He would grant us the obstacles we need to display our devotion all the brighter against any darkness.'

'What I would give,' said Theron, holding his voice low, 'for my old squad brothers to be here now. For Pomibius to be here now.'

Helios did not approve of his brother's melancholy, but still he nodded. 'You forged bonds of brotherhood with those you fought beside,' he said, clapping Theron on the shoulder. 'You shall do the same again here.'

'Yet I never led them,' Theron replied. 'Mine has been a graveyard promotion, bequeathed to the one made exceptional by virtue of being the last left standing.' His eyes never left the faceplate of the helm he held, its charred scarlet lacquer showcasing the full breadth of scars earned through decades of service.

'I am tasked with leading Brothers Melos and Iason into battle. And with He who rules from Terra as my witness, I shall do my duty and see that they do

theirs. I will stand and swear my oaths of moment with them, yet still know nothing of what they truly are.'

'Perhaps not, brother,' Helios conceded. 'But that is not a requisite to fulfil the mandate of leadership. What the soldiers we lead are when first they come to us counts for nothing. They are clay, and it is the example and the guidance of those who command them that will dictate the form they take.'

Helios stopped before they passed through the high vaulted doors leading to the ship's bridge. 'These new warriors,' said the Chaplain. 'These *Primaris* Marines, they are clay, Theron. And by our efforts, you and I shall make them into Ultramarines.'

CHAPTER NINE

Being one of the smallest vessels in the Chapter fleet did little to diminish the scope and majesty of the *Light of Iax*'s bridge. While it lacked the gothic splendour and immense scale on display on the command decks of the larger warships – strike cruisers or battle-barges, where admirals ruled from what were more akin to the keeps of grand cathedrals – the destroyer's bridge was one of the largest chambers on board that was not occupied by plasma drive cores or the decks where the torpedo tubes were armed and loaded.

Helios drank in every aspect as he crossed the polished iron floor to the central command dais. He found it to be very much a diminutive iteration of the *Mare Nostrum*'s own control centre. It followed the design of the Eighth Company flagship in its own dimensions, but instead proudly displayed the pennants and banners of its own triumphs.

With Theron at his side, Helios found the commander of the *Light of Iax* standing before her control throne. His mind settled upon the dossier for her that had been attached to his mission briefing, eidetic recall summoning every detail. Shipmistress Rayhelm had risen through the ranks aboard some of the most battle-hardened warships in service to the Ultramarines Chapter. As a reward for her devotion to duty and superior combat instincts, she had been promoted from a first officer to lead the crew of the *Light of Iax*, and had served as the guiding hand of the destroyer for close to twenty years.

Helios had never been particularly skilled in determining the age of mortals. The silver streaks at Rayhelm's temples implied a woman poised to enter her declining years, an impression that the Chaplain found completely at odds with

the calm fire that glinted in the wet amber of her eyes. A lack of the signs of extensive cosmetic rejuvenat treatments demonstrated an absence of vanity that Helios respected.

All that truly mattered to the Ultramarine had been found within her service record. Decades of resolute service across multiple theatres of war, without infraction or disciplinary action, and a tally of victories that exemplified the style of thorough, aggressive command that defined the warriors of Ultramar. Shipmistress Rayhelm's actions had come to define her, and her actions were exemplary.

'Shipmistress,' said Helios as the two Ultramarines came to a halt before the dais.

'Chaplain Helios, Sergeant Theron.' Rayhelm made the sign of the aquila with a short bow. 'Allow me to extend a formal welcome aboard the *Light of Iax*. I hope you will forgive my tardiness on this account, but the complexities of executing prolonged warp travel have become increasingly varied of late, and require a great deal of oversight. Especially if we are to reach our destination within the permitted timeframe allotted to us.'

'You will never need apologise for performing your legally ordained duty,' said Helios. 'You have done well to make use of what little time and resources you have available.'

'If you will forgive me for just a moment,' said the shipmistress as a serf approached bearing a platter. The man poured a measure of dark steaming liquid from a silver kettle into a cup of simple white porcelain. He placed the cup on a thin saucer of the same pale clay and offered it to Rayhelm.

'In these days,' said Rayhelm, taking the cup with a nod and a smile to her attendant, 'one must search out the little things. Duty, honour, loyalty, these are our lodestones, but it is up to each of us to find that one little thing that grants life its vigour.'

She lifted the cup to her nose, closed her eyes and breathed in the steam rolling from the liquid. 'In my case, it is tea.'

'Give thanks to the Emperor,' said Helios. 'The light of the Golden Throne shines upon all things.'

Rayhelm grinned. 'It most certainly does on tea.'

Helios paused for a moment as the mortal's meaning escaped him, before shifting tack. 'Can you apprise us of the current situation, shipmistress?'

'At long last, we are poised to arrive at our destination,' replied Rayhelm after a small sip from her cup. 'Our emergence from the immaterium is imminent, and

not a moment too soon. Our warp core is as overtaxed as our Navigator, and we have had enough executions for aberrant behaviour in the crew decks on this transit to rival the rest of the *Light*'s service record put together. If this voyage had taken much longer it would have ended up with you and I having to get out back and push.'

Helios looked down at the woman, unsure of how to respond. The intricacies of human social interaction were largely absent from the minds of the Adeptus Astartes, particularly those facets he assumed were relating to humour. Thankfully for the Chaplain, bells began to ring, delivering him from the awkward exchange.

'Translation,' called out a hooded member of the Navigator's entourage.

'Prepare real space drives,' said Rayhelm, her focus shifting entirely to the myriad complexities of hauling her warship out of the jaws of the ether in one piece. 'Lock in our emergence locus. All hands stand by to depart warp space.'

The destroyer shuddered, a rumbling string of clangs that groaned down the entire length of her hull. The great noise and vibrations of the warp drives ceased, and were replaced by a moment's silence and stillness that was altogether more disconcerting to those who spent their lives in the void.

The human mind rails against the warp, even from within the protection of a Geller field. Those without the fortitude of Space Marines, so vulnerable to the predations of Chaos while travelling within the immaterial realm, experienced a physical relief upon translation, free from the endless hunger clinging just beyond their sight. Each of the spacefarers relaxed as the deck began to thrum once more as the ship's plasma drives were roused back into wakefulness.

The *Light of Iax* returned to reality, darting out from a laceration in the flesh of the material universe. It left behind a frothing delirium of living thought, churning seas of speaking eyes and indescribable shades of colours that had never before been seen and would never be seen again. The slit vanished as quickly as it had appeared, and the destroyer pressed on, back amongst the stars once more.

'Convey our thanks to his eminence in his sanctum,' said Rayhelm to the Navigator's servant. 'Tell him it is our hope that he enjoys his well-deserved rest.'

The hooded figure bowed, before turning and leaving the bridge in a swirl of velvet robes.

Being a smaller escort vessel, the *Light of Iax*'s bridge featured a series of tall armourglass viewing blocks that dominated the forward wall, rather than the

oculus viewscreens and hololithic displays utilised on the more heavily armoured command decks of capital ships. Now that there was no longer any threat of exposing the crew to the warp's maddening tides, the retractable blast shields that covered them slid up and away into their housings, bathing the bridge in the light of the stars.

Helios looked out, seeing the dark expanse of the void stretch in all directions as he took in the view from the bridge's location, high on the destroyer's aft castle. The system they had arrived in was small, a cluster of five worlds spinning about a star not unlike that which gave light and heat to Holy Terra. Two of the planets hugged too closely to their sun, lifeless spheres of charred and volcanic rock. Another two shied too far along the system's edge, equally devoid of life but having traded flame for ice. Only a single planet held a place of balance, the world where Helios' mission beckoned.

The *Light of Iax* made speed into the system's interior, quickly bypassing the two frigid outer worlds. The third planet appeared as a shimmering dot through the banks of armourglass, quickly growing in scale and definition as the ship approached.

'The site of our mission?' asked Theron.

'Quradim,' said Rayhelm.

The grainy hololithic projection of the world from Captain Numitor's strategium returned to Helios' mind as he witnessed the real thing with his own eyes. Quradim hung in the void, looking more than anything like a misshapen skull wrapped in veils of storms. Vast portions of the planet were collapsed, riven with enormous sinkholes that gave it an uneven, porous aspect.

Quradim had once possessed a single moon, one that had met with some unknown catastrophe at some point in the last several millennia. Some manner of devastation had shattered the satellite, and now it hung around Quradim like an explosion of icy rock, frozen in time.

It was difficult for Helios to believe that the planet was still capable of sustaining life. Even more so that such an appalling husk would hold anything of great enough value for the Genesis Chapter to station warriors on its surface, and for the primarch to send him here.

'Has there been any sign of contact from the Genesis Chapter garrison?' asked Helios.

The shipmistress consulted her station briefly, scanning incoming reports before shaking her head. 'No response to our arrival as of yet, even to our astropathic choir. Given the moon's interference it may take some time for them to discover

we are here.'

'Then what of the ship they have in system?' The Chaplain peered across the void ahead of them. 'They would have detected the warp translation and travelled here to confirm who had passed through.'

'Ah, yes.' Rayhelm scanned over the data-slate attached to her control throne by a brass armature. 'The *Excelsior*. A frigate, Nova-class. We have yet to receive any hails from her. Nor have we detected her on the augurs, though she may be on the far side of the planet. That may be interfering with our scans, in addition to the storm of fragments from the planet's shattered moon, which is absolutely interfering with our scans.'

'Take us in,' said Helios. 'Proceed to high orbit and maintain your scanning. Establishing communications with the garrison is our first priority.'

'Of course, my lord.' Rayhelm finished her tea and handed the cup off to a subordinate as she punched a series of commands into her station. 'Helm?'

'Ma'am?'

'Take us in.'

CHAPTER TEN

Slowing from the sprinting pace he had maintained for the past several kilometres, Jovian settled into a measured stalk as he neared the origin of the signal.

Gunfire crackled in the distance, growing louder and more distinct the closer he drew. Bolter fire comprised most of the noise on both sides, with the sporadic shriek of plasma cannon or thumping crash of heavier weapons. Ribbons of tracer rounds described low arcs over the area he approached, flickering both towards and away from him.

Jovian pressed his back against a low wall – all that remained of a modular structure torn apart by the fighting. He pulled the magazine free from his boltgun. Half a dozen rounds remained to him. For a moment, the pragmatist in him considered whether leaving the enemy's weapons behind had been a mistake. He checked the thought immediately. He would sooner use his bare hands than taint them with the tools of the heretic. He slammed the clip back into his weapon. He would have to make do with what he had.

A scan of the surrounding environment led Jovian up a short incline, the highest point of elevation not directly involved in the firefight. His auto-senses extended his vision, granting him the full scope of the engagement ahead.

He spotted six Iron Warriors, moving in pairs as they advanced upon a shattered barricade. One lingered back from his fellows, attending to the bulk of a plasma cannon. Standing against them on the opposite side of the crumbling wall were three warriors clad in the crimson of the Genesis Chapter.

Only three. Jovian's heart sank as he saw that of the entire Chapter garrison,

these might be all who remained. The progenoids of his fallen brethren he carried became that much heavier by that realisation.

The Apothecary made his way towards the fighting. He moved in quick bursts from concealment to concealment, tempering the need for stealth with the haste of reaching his brothers before their position was overrun.

He sprang upon the Havoc from behind. The bonesaw was a blur across the heretic's throat, its cutting edge designed to split ceramite, parting armour and flesh with ease. The Iron Warrior staggered forwards, a hand clutching at his opened neck as blood spilled over his breastplate. Jovian fired his carnifex into the thrumming power generator mounted on the traitor's back. The adamantium piston punched through the casing, and a burst of electricity sprang out onto Jovian's gauntlet, charring it black.

A heavy kick to the back sent Jovian's foe stumbling towards his foul kin, oblivious to the impending catastrophe bearing down on them. One of them had the sense to turn at the last moment, seeing his comrade reaching for him, throat slit, before the trembling mass on his back went critical.

The generator exploded in a blinding flash of aching blue energy. The force of it sent Jovian hurtling back, his planted boots digging furrows into the dust. He drew his bolter as the blast dissipated, and charged forward.

The explosion had killed three of the Iron Warriors outright, vaporised into bursts of ash. All that remained of one were the soles of armoured boots, standing bizarrely and topped with coils of smoke. The others were pressed against their cover, recoiling from the shock of the detonation.

The initiative wavered, and tilted against the Iron Warriors. Perhaps for the first time since the invasion began, the advantage in numbers in a battle belonged to the Genesis Chapter, with four now standing against three.

The Genesis Marines vaulted from their cover, seizing upon their reeling foe with bolter and blade. They tore into the Olympians without fanfare, and with no battle cry upon their lips. Within their silence was a great rage, shown only in the slightest way in their methodical despatching of the foe: a blade stroke carried a moment too slowly across a throat, a bolter levelled for a second longer than needed before delivering a killing shot. There was little glory to be won on Quradim, and there were a great many dead brothers who demanded vindication.

The four brothers of the Genesis Chapter stood over the corpses of their enemies. Each one of them was a flawed statue in broken ceramite, none retaining any more than scraps of the proud crimson and gold that adorned the Chapter's war-plate. Sparks spat and hissed from grinding servos. Limbs were

bent and locked into frozen stillness by malfunction and damage. The clearest crimson that clung to them was blood, that of the Iron Warriors as well as their own.

Jovian pulled his helmet free, looking to each of his kindred in turn. He knew these men, and had served with them as members of the vaunted Seventh Company since his training in the Apothecarion had been completed. The Genesis Chapter adhered to the Codex strictly, maintaining the Seventh as a tactical reserve company, yet the brothers who comprised it were hardly levies. With the overwhelming demand for support from the Adeptus Astartes across the Imperium, even before the dawn of the Great Rift, all companies were continuously on campaign, resting only in transit to the next warzone. The main factor differentiating the reserves was that their best troops were taken to replenish the ranks of the battle companies, while also being responsible for the training and blooding of the Chapter's newest members upon their elevation from the Scout Company.

Jovian saw only veterans of the Seventh amongst this group. He imagined that there were few of the newly initiated still alive here.

'My means are limited,' said Jovian to finally break the silence. 'But I can see to your wounds as best I am able.'

'Well met, Brother-Apothecary,' said the foremost of the Space Marines.

Jovian made a passive scan of the warrior with his gauntlet's auspex, to link his biometric data to his visor. The name *Flavius* appeared above the new biosign. 'We have grown to not expect to see any others of the Chapter here.'

'I heard your call,' replied the Apothecary. 'That is what brought me here.'

The others simply looked at him.

'It was not our call.'

'No?' Jovian frowned. 'A trap, then?'

The warrior shook his head.

'Come,' said Flavius, turning with the others towards the horizon. 'We will take you to the Epistolary.'

'Hesiod yet lives?' said Jovian, biting back on the sliver of hope that stirred within him.

Flavius looked back at the Apothecary, his expression unreadable but for the exhaustion that penetrated to his bones. 'For now.'

Helios stepped onto the bridge of the *Light of Iax*, the shrill alarms of the corridor ringing through the air behind him.

‘Report.’

‘We have had to reorient due to the amount of wreckage in the area above and around high orbit,’ said Rayhelm. The viewing block was choked with shards of spinning rock and ice. The deck beneath them rumbled as a spinal cannon bracketed one directly ahead of the ship, sending a cloud of slivers crackling against the void shields in an oily haze. ‘The majority of it is dense enough that it is withstanding volleys from our weapons batteries, and we can’t simply plough through them, not without overloading our shields.’

‘Faith is our shield, shipmistress,’ replied Helios.

‘Very good, lord,’ Rayhelm smiled. ‘Master of the Augurs?’

An officer looked up towards the shipmistress from a crew pit. ‘Ready, ma’am.’

‘Any sign of the *Excelsior*, Mister Lyte?’

‘None so far, ma’am,’ the officer answered. A pair of his subordinates spoke up, and he stooped over one of their consoles intently. ‘Adjust that. Set for position three. Scan it. Ma’am, I believe we may have something.’

Rayhelm rose from her seat, stepping down and crossing the bridge towards the console. ‘What do we have?’

A screed of information spilled down the screen of the augur station, along with wireframe projections of the system and surrounding void. A translucent icon blinked weakly between the planet and the patch of flickering points of light that denoted the destroyed moon.

‘A reading from the far side of the moon’s debris field,’ said Lyte. ‘The sweep outline is a match for the silhouette of the *Excelsior*, but we are not receiving broadcasts on any frequencies.’

Rayhelm read the data quickly, before looking to her subordinate with a nod. ‘In all likelihood that is her, but it’s odd. No hails, they have not approached us, nor are they in active patrol about the system.’ Her brow furrowed. ‘What are they doing?’

‘Is there any sign of damage?’

The shipmistress turned, looking back at the towering figure of Helios.

‘Unknown,’ answered Rayhelm. ‘Our scans would not be able to detect anything like that at this range, but based on where she is in the debris field and that she has gone silent, anything is possible.’

Helios nodded. ‘Then it falls to us to discover the truth of the matter. Have the *Pilum* standing by and ready for launch. Inform Seneca and his squad to join me in the hangar bay at once.’

The Ultramarines Chaplain found Theron waiting for him outside of the hangar.

'I am to remain behind for this boarding?' asked the sergeant.

'Have you seen the armour your squad brethren wear?' asked Helios. 'Even without it these Primaris Marines are large, with it they may find a ship's confines to be slightly constrictive.'

Theron stepped closer to the Chaplain. 'Do you not find this unusual? That we have arrived in system and yet there has been no word from this world's keepers?'

'All the more reason for us to spread our numbers and find them more quickly,' replied Helios. 'Caution is the byword since the dawn of the rift. It is possible that, seeing a warp translation, the Genesis Marines moved to a defensive position to assay our intentions. You are to carry on to Quradim. Take your squad to the planet's surface. Make contact with the garrison of our cousins, and I shall do the same aboard their ship. Our timeline gives us little flexibility but this business should not take long, you will await me there.'

Theron lingered, then finally gave a salute with a short bow. 'For the Emperor.'

'For the Emperor,' echoed Helios.

The Ultramarines parted ways, and Helios passed through the bulkhead into the hangar. Just as he had ordered, Seneca and his ilk stood ready for him in the *Pilum*'s shadow.

The Chaplain had learned to identify each of his new charges by name, even wearing their helms. An Ultramarines legionary was nearly always in full battleplate, and in the heat of battle, he had to rely on each of his brothers and what they individually committed to the tactical potency of the unit. A short time studying them had given Helios the means to differentiate them, subtle differences in posture and body language, equipment preferences and more to tell them apart.

Ariston was fractionally slighter in build than his brothers, and kept himself at more of a distance from the main body of the squad. Nicanor busied himself with checking and rechecking his cache of frag and krak grenades, while Kyros and Caprico pantomimed close order drill with their combat blades to pass the time until they would board the gunship. All of this occurred under Seneca's careful supervision.

The Primaris Space Marines straightened as Helios arrived, stowing their equipment and forming a neat line before the Chaplain. They saluted, fists banging against the winged skulls that adorned their breastplates. Helios responded in kind.

‘Kneel.’

Seneca and his brethren exchanged looks amongst each other, and then followed the command and sank to one knee. Helios produced a crystal vial from a pouch on his belt.

‘Present your weapons,’ said the Chaplain as he thumbed a stopper from atop the vial. The Intercessor squad extended their arms, holding their bolt rifles up for Helios’ inspection.

‘This is water from Macragge,’ said Helios as he dripped a measure of the vial’s contents onto the barrel of each of the rifles. ‘A reminder of our solemn charge, and what we are sworn to defend. Ours is the greatest burden, for without our shield, the Imperium falls. Let this always be on your minds, as we do the Chapter’s work. We are the agents of the primarch’s fury, just as he is of the Emperor’s. Whether in war or statecraft, assault or defence, whatever awaits us, let it find the Ultramarines swift and decisive to the task.’

Helios stowed the vial and signalled towards the *Pilum*. ‘Proceed aboard, we will depart immediately.’

The Primaris Space Marines shouldered their weapons and stood. Seneca lingered at the foot of the gunship beside Helios as his brothers went past.

‘First,’ said each of them to Seneca as they filed up the ramp, inclining their heads in respect.

‘Any idea of what we expect to find aboard, Brother-Chaplain?’ asked Seneca.

‘First,’ Helios nodded to the rest of the Intercessor squad. ‘Why do they call you that?’

‘It is a holdover, of sorts,’ answered Seneca. ‘A figure of speech from the time of our training on Mars. Every moment of our lives, we were continuously evaluated by our makers and instructors. They analysed our temperaments, the speed at which we absorbed information and recovered from injury, the results from our sparring and tactical simulations and weapons tests and all the rest. Every iota of our statistics was measured and quantified, comparing each of us as an individual against the whole. When they deemed that a brother of the Primaris contingent was ready, when he had proven himself and met all standards and overcome every trial that had been laid before him, he was placed into stasis, to wait for the day the primarch called.

‘Of the five of us, I was placed into stasis the quickest. I was *first*. It is crude, I will admit, but the primarch has insisted that no battle-brother see promotion into a position of leadership until he has proven his aptitude in battle, not training or simulation. Until that time, this is how we order ourselves.’

‘A de facto hierarchy,’ said Helios.

‘It is but a sign of deference,’ Seneca replied. ‘We follow you, Brother-Chaplain.’

The Primaris Marine motioned towards the *Pilum*. ‘Shall we?’

Helios grunted. ‘You first.’

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The *Pilum* slipped out into the darkness, lighting its engines and boosting free of the *Light of Iax* as the destroyer came to a halt a short distance away from the dark sliver of crimson that was the *Excelsior*.

As they drew nearer to the frigate, Shipmistress Rayhelm had been able to conduct an extensive barrage of augur scans over the Genesis Chapter vessel. Though its engines were silent, and its reactor cold, their sensor sweeps were unable to detect any significant damage, either to its hull or internal systems. The *Excelsior* simply hung in the void, appearing from the outside to be as quiet as a tomb.

Chaplain Helios intended to discover if the same were true for the vessel on the inside.

Of all the many Primogenitor Chapters born when the Imperium embraced the brilliance of the Primarch Guilliman and his *Codex Astartes*, the Genesis Chapter maintained the closest of ties to the Ultramarines. Many were the campaigns where warriors of the Genesis Chapter had stood side by side with their ancestor Chapter, crimson and cobalt working in flawless unity. In times of tragedy, they had even answered the call to serve within the very ranks of the Ultramarines, filling specialist roles for fallen Librarians, Techmarines or Apothecaries, or even brothers of the line.

Helios himself had fought alongside his cousins on more than one occasion. He knew them to be stalwart, zealous warriors, gallant in battle and unwavering in their adherence to the Codex. He had been proud to shed the blood of the God-Emperor's enemies with them, and looked forward to rekindling their kinship

anew here on Quradim.

But he would have to find them first.

Helios turned his red eye-lenses upon the Intercessor squad occupying the crew bay with him. Normally the hold would have resounded with the sound of prayers, last-minute entreaties to the spirits of their weapons and armour and pledges to be stalwart in the eyes of the God-Emperor, even on occasions such as this where no confrontation was anticipated. No such obvious signs of worship emanated from Seneca or his kin.

Sergeant Theron bore his own unease from the appearance of the Primaris Marines, from the uncanny nature of their forms and the inevitable comparison made by their very existence to his own. Helios' discomfort, however, was of a different, deeper kind. It came from what lay within these new Space Marines. Physically, they were without peer, equipped with weapons and armour superior to all save the elite Terminators of the vaunted First Company. Their minds were equally impressive, honed with lore and training.

Such titanic efforts had been made in their creation, it was clear to see. So much attention to their bodies, to their minds, but what of their souls? What allowance had been granted to the spirit, deep within the secret vaults of Mars? What could the mechanical and soulless have ever hoped to impart of the true state of the Imperium, and of the enemies that threaten it?

Helios saw this gulf within the Primaris Marines. Flesh brought to its pinnacle yet treated as though it were nothing more than a machine. Absent was the righteous hate that could only come from confronting humanity's foes first-hand and that was an inseparable attribute of the Angels of Death. These were no warrior monks; their experiences were so narrow, so ignorant.

They needed to be ready, when the time to stare in the darkness surrounding them came. And it would come.

Helios thought back to the losses on Meto. If these were the warriors that took the place of the fallen, how long before the Ultramarines he knew vanished away, the values and traditions that had sustained the Imperium's foremost Chapter eroded to dust and echoes by their unenlightened blasphemies?

No.

Helios clamped down, refusing to give countenance to such despair. His faith was strong. He would not allow such a future to come to pass. The minds of the new would be shaped to become true defenders of the Emperor's kingdom, and Helios would be His instrument.

Ascending to the *Pilum*'s cockpit, Helios peered out of the canopy. 'Has there

been any attempt to hail us?' he asked the gunship's servitor crew. 'Or any response to our own hails?'

'Negative,' came the murmuring reply from the cyborg enmeshed with the communications array of the Stormraven.

The *Excelsior* now grew to fill the width of the *Pilum*'s viewing slit. Just as the scans had deduced, there was no sign of serious damage to its hull, other than the scars and carbon scoring earned by the frigate's millennia of service.

'Keep trying,' said Helios. He looked to the pilot. 'Search for any ingress points where we can land.'

'Compliance.'

The servitor's slack face twitched, spittle flecking from its blue lips as its truncated mind ran through a series of calculations to cross-reference the frigate's schematics with the gunship's active auspex sweeps. 'Ingress point located.'

Helios looked over the readouts streaming down the servitor's display. The starboard docking bay was open. 'Take us in.'

'Compliance.'

Helios and the Intercessor squad took their first steps aboard the *Excelsior*. Magnetic seals in their boots made their gait a stilted, plodding motion, like trudging through sucking mud.

The power was out throughout the frigate, and with it the hangar's gravity, heat and the integrity field that closed it off from the void. Spilled promethium unfolded from a leaking fuel bladder in a frozen whorl of deep umber. Crates and tools floated around the Ultramarines, ticking softly against their armour as they crossed the deck.

'*Pilum*,' said Helios, looking back to the squat form of the Stormraven where it perched upon the flight deck. 'Take off and remain on station. Interface with the *Light of Iax* and perform diagnostics over the *Excelsior* until we call for extraction.'

'*Compliance*,' the pilot servitor replied. The gunship's engines spooled up, spitting tongues of blue flame that went eerily silent in the vacuum. The hovering detritus that littered the docking bay was sent spinning away as the craft rotated and shot out through the yawning opening and back into space.

Helios turned back as the *Pilum* disappeared from sight. The Primaris Marines had scattered, taking advantage of the zero gravity to scout across the hangar along the walls and ceiling.

‘Fall in,’ said Helios. ‘Discipline, my brothers. We function as a unit, and you shall wait for my command.’

The Intercessor squad withdrew immediately back to the Chaplain. They formed up instinctually into a five-pointed star formation, with Seneca at the lead point and Helios in the centre. They advanced, clearing the floating debris from their path as they made for the bulkhead leading into the *Excelsior*’s interior. The door was unsealed, and Seneca pushed the heavy slab on its hinges to allow them past it.

The corridors of the Genesis Chapter frigate leading out of the landing bay were just as dark and cold as the hangar. In the absence of atmosphere, the Space Marines breathed from the internal supply of their armour, sending whispering rasps from their helmet grilles. Helios’ auto-senses shifted across vision filters, compensating for the lack of light and rendering it as navigable as day. Everywhere he looked, form met function in perfect harmony. Amongst the triumphs of the Genesis Chapter’s own illustrious history, he saw the unmistakable artifice of his own Chapter present in the art and architecture, dating back ten millennia to the time when this vessel had served in the grand fleet of the Ultramarines Legion.

‘What happened here?’ voxed Kyros, the luminator fastened to his bolt rifle panning an extended cone of light across the walls.

‘Theoretical – this system is remote,’ said Caprico. ‘Records have documentation of recurrent pirate raids.’

‘And your practical?’ asked Seneca.

Caprico shook his head. ‘Unsatisfactory. If that is truly what had transpired, why leave a prize of such value behind?’

‘They wouldn’t,’ answered Seneca. ‘And this ship’s crew would not abandon it without a fight.’

‘No signs of battle anywhere,’ said Nicanor. ‘No blood.’

‘No bodies,’ added Ariston.

‘Keep moving,’ said Helios. ‘By the Emperor’s light, we shall reveal the truth of this.’

Hours moving through the *Excelsior*’s cold veins yielded no results. Finding nothing in the crew decks and after witnessing the sepulchral silence of the frigate’s gunnery decks, the decision had been made on where to proceed. The bridge was the most logical destination, where the ship’s flight recorders and vox-transcripts could be found to reveal what had befallen it, or perhaps even

surviving crew.

The profound lack of life aboard the frigate cooled the latter expectation, and none of the command deck's terminals or data log repositories would be functional without power. Thus, the squad of Ultramarines made its way to the enginarium, with the hope of rousing the dormant heart of the *Excelsior* to beat once again.

'Brothers,' called out Ariston. The squad gathered on his position, looking into the darkness of a storage chamber.

It was full of people. Arranged shoulder to shoulder in silent rows, they appeared to simply be standing there in the darkness. As the Ultramarines' eyes adjusted to the lack of light, they saw that they were floating, and that they were dead.

Helios approached the nearest, a man clad in the carapace of a security armsman. The skin of his face had been cut away to the bone, save for one curved strip that ran from both temples down to meet along the jawline. It was a symbol, and one that the Chaplain knew well.

'Ultimas,' said Seneca as he looked from defiled face to defiled face, seeing his Chapter's symbol rendered in tortured flesh. 'These are ultimas.'

'Who could have done this?' asked Kyros, hands tightening around his bolt rifle.

'This cannot be the entire crew,' said Nicanor. 'Where are the rest?'

'Steel yourselves,' said Helios. 'From henceforth we move in full combat conditions, watch for traps and ambushes. An enemy of the Imperium is here, and these servants of the Emperor will be avenged.'

Passages of plasteel and adamantium adorned with Genesis Chapter sigils and gothic artistry were replaced with catwalks and cavernous spaces housing colossal machines as the Space Marines arrived at the enginarium, deep in the core of the silent warship. The weight of their footsteps rattled up from the gantries that hung over the *Excelsior*'s silent reactor core.

'The control centre for the ship's machine-spirit lies ahead,' said Helios, referencing the schematic of the warship beaming across his right eye. The luminators of the Primaris Space Marines played down into the shadows, revealing the cylindrical bulk of the ship's plasma core a hundred metres beneath them like some beached leviathan of ancient myth.

Seneca paused, holding up a closed fist to bring the rest of the squad to a halt behind him. He sank into a crouch, his eyes drawing him to a point in the

distance. He could not be certain, but he thought for a moment that he glimpsed the slightest disturbance in the darkness, like oil slipping over oil.

'What is it?' asked Helios as he moved up and knelt beside the Intercessor.

Seneca blinked, cycling his visor feed to prey sight. The instant of interference over his retinal display covered something in the distance, something that could have been movement.

Seneca recoiled as a volley of bolter fire slashed over him and exploded against the mesh of the catwalk. The detonations were silent sparks of smoke and flame, sending tremors through the frozen air.

'Contact!' Helios and his squad took cover wherever they could find it. With no sound to carry the trademark bark of mass-reactive shells firing, the Ultramarines were forced to rely on their other senses to catch the shots knifing out of the shadows towards them.

'Do we have visual?' demanded Helios.

Seneca peered over the lip of the cargo container he had slid behind. He saw a dull glimmer of burnished metal in the distance, but ducked back as more bolt-rounds smashed silently against his cover.

'Theoretical,' said Seneca. 'Incoming fire is mass reactive in nature. Partial visual identification does not correspond to that of Genesis Chapter power armour. Conclusion – we are under attack from an opposing force that includes hostile Space Marines.'

'Practical?' asked Caprico.

'Attack!' Helios charged forward, firing his plasma pistol and sending blinding smears of blue energy down the catwalk. The Chaplain ignited his crozius maul, its golden eagle wing blades wreathed in lightning as bolts split the air around him. With a roar he disengaged the magnetic seals in his boots and leapt forward like a missile towards the source of the incoming fire. 'For the Emperor!'

Seneca gritted his teeth. 'Suppressing fire! Nicanor, with me.'

Helios switched to prey sight in mid-flight. The darkness of the reactor vault softened into rippling waves of deep blue. Bolter shells appeared as stripes of white, traced back to muzzles that glowed a warm orange from their firing.

The Ultramarines Chaplain levelled his plasma pistol at the blobs of orange and loosed a burst of energy in their direction. Shapes were beginning to resolve themselves out of the escalating firefight. Helios caught a glimpse of two eyes blazing phosphor-white from a helm crested by curving bladed horns. His rage caught fire.

'Traitors!' Helios roared, rolling over his shoulder and using it to spring

forward through the air again. Bolts hammered against his chest and shoulders, punching his momentum back as he fought to close the gap. A cluster of warning runes blared insistently from the corner of his visor as his armour's integrity was ruptured by a detonating shell to his left side. Shrapnel tore through the fibre bundle musculature and slashed into his flesh, cutting down clear into his black carapace. A mist of blood sprayed out, freezing into a miniature nebula of ruby gems.

Helios felt none of it. A prayer booming from his death's head mask, he finally came within striking distance of his enemy. They were twisted giants bedecked in armour of steeldust and gold, forged in the apocalyptic days when the Ruinous Powers first set the galaxy alight with the flames of civil war. Helios had seen their like before. He had witnessed the devastation they wrought in the name of treachery, and he had personally had the honour of sending more than one of them into the waiting arms of their foul patrons in the darkest corners of the warp.

Iron Warriors.

The lead traitor stepped back, raising an arm to block an overhead strike from the Chaplain's crozius. Helios' maul bifurcated the limb at the forearm, continuing down and splitting the horns framing the Iron Warrior's plough-faced helm. Jarring impact rang up the Ultramarine's arm as the flaring blades embedded in the Chaos Space Marine's skull.

There were more of the traitor's blasphemous kindred. They raised their bolters and levelled them at Helios. The Chaplain tore his crozius free from the dead heretic's skull; a kick to his midsection sending the body smashing into his fellows.

A second Iron Warrior swept his comrade's corpse aside, coming in low and lunging at Helios' midsection with a chainsword. Helios parried the blow, the air around them filling with razor-sharp teeth as the edge of his maul cut along that of the sword's blurring track. The Chaos Space Marine punched a bolt pistol into Helios' chest and fired. The impact sent Helios spinning, his vision blurring as he crashed against the deck. The crozius flew from his hand, snapping taut on the chain binding the weapon to his wrist. Helios grasped for the heavy iron links, hissing in pain as a kick spun him onto his back.

The traitor loomed over Helios. Disgust twisted knots into the Chaplain's gut as he beheld the horrific runes that squirmed across the metallic surface of his enemy's armour, proudly displaying the corruption of Dark Gods that the Chaos Space Marine had willingly allowed to saturate himself. Helios watched his

enemy take aim with his bolt pistol, levelling it at his head.

The Iron Warrior's helm exploded into a hanging veil of blood, bone and armour fragments. Seneca and Nicanor charged forward from Helios' right, bolt rifles flaring. The final heretic fell to their barrage, the corpse sent reeling away until it vanished into the shadows.

Seneca leaned over Helios, extending a hand.

'My thanks, brothers,' said the Chaplain, accepting the Primaris Marine's aid and rising to his feet. The Ultramarines gathered around their Chaplain, a fresh tension in their postures. Helios knew that their blood was singing with combat narcotics, their inexperience keeping them from withholding the stimulants from their veins as they faced a true enemy firing with the intent to kill.

'Look at this,' said Helios, pinning one of the heretic corpses to the deck with his boot. Even to him, the command sounded strange, wrong. To gaze upon the slaves of the Archenemy was fraught with danger, a risk of allowing its taint to look upon your very soul, and leave it darkened. And yet he had given the command, seeing warriors around him who, no matter the risk, needed this lesson.

'You were created to serve the Imperium,' said Helios. 'First and foremost, by killing His enemies in war. In your lives, you shall battle the greenskin, the aeldari, the endless swarms of the Great Devourer. And you will hate them. They shall deserve your hatred, because of their utter inhumanity, their fundamentally alien nature and the affront their continued existence represents. We will not rest until we have rendered them extinct.'

Helios looked down at the corpse of the Iron Warrior, the urge to spit spilling over his tongue. 'And yet, of our manifold enemies, the xenos is not the greatest. The highest, most pure hatred of all we bestow upon those who were, long ago, human. Those who once knelt in service to the Imperium, and now, through weakness, taint and corruption, march to see it destroyed.'

The Chaplain raised his crozius, pointing it at Kyros. 'Look at it. What do you feel?'

The Primaris Marine did not answer him, his eyes locked to the runes that still twitched and slid across the warrior's burnished armour. 'Our doctrine told us of the Great Enemy, they said–'

'No,' said Helios, his voice cold. 'Do not tell me what you were told, tell me what you *feel*.'

'I…' Kyros struggled.

'Anger,' said Seneca quietly.

‘Sickness,’ said Ariston. He looked away. ‘A foul squirming in my stomach, like a poison.’

‘Tell me,’ said Helios, bringing his faceplate a hand’s span from Kyros. ‘What do you feel?’

Kyros turned his head, looking from the body to the Chaplain. ‘Hate.’

‘Hate them,’ said Helios, looking to each of his charges. ‘*Hate* them, my brothers. We have begun a crusade against this,’ he pressed his boot down hard, ‘and the Dark Powers that they have sworn to serve. They are everything, everything that we oppose, a blight upon the very spirit of humanity. It must be cleansed, by us. Are you ready for the task?’

‘Yes, Chaplain,’ came the response, hushed and distracted.

‘Together,’ snarled Helios. ‘In His name, for primarch and Imperium both, are you ready for the task?’

The Primaris Marines straightened, the tension binding their limbs snapping loose. ‘Yes, Chaplain!’

‘Training for such a foe is one thing,’ said Helios. ‘Experiencing it, tasting their corruption as you strike them down, that is very different.’

The squad was silent for a long moment, as the Chaplain allowed his words to take root.

‘You did well,’ said Helios finally. ‘Mind yourselves and your weapons, we must keep moving.’

Bolaraphon stopped as he heard his name. He turned in a clanking chorus of pistons and servos, watching as his lieutenant approached. Beniah bore an expression that the Warsmith had long believed purged of the veteran Iron Warrior after millennia of bloodshed and war.

He was anxious.

‘My Warsmith,’ said Beniah, halting and dipping his head in deference. ‘A ship has just translated in system from the edgeward jump point, and it has made all speed towards Quradim. It is an Imperial destroyer, Adeptus Astartes classification. We have just received word that they have despatched a boarding party onto the enemy frigate we disabled.’

Bolaraphon pondered this for a moment, silent but for the clanking thrum of his armour. ‘We have made contact against them?’

‘Yes, my Warsmith.’

‘Who?’

‘My lord, I–’

‘*Who?*’

Beniah’s face tightened. ‘It is the Thirteenth.’

Beniah was crashing through the air before the name had left his lips. The lancing pain of the backhanded blow writ large upon his face was twinned with another as he smashed against the wall of the passageway, sliding down into a heap on the deck.

Bolaraphon turned the full force of his glare down upon his lieutenant. The steel grey of his eyes smouldered with the threat of impossible violence, should Beniah’s word prove false.

‘You are certain of this?’ roared the Warsmith. ‘Speak lies to me and prepare for eternal silence.’

‘There can be no mistake,’ groaned Beniah, spitting a hissing glob of blood onto the deck as he pushed himself to his knees. ‘The sons of the Hated One have come to Quradim.’

Bolaraphon stomped past Beniah without another word. The corridor rang with the weight of his tread as he moved as quickly as his ancient Terminator war-plate could bear him.

‘My Warsmith,’ called out Beniah. ‘Where are you going?’

‘To the bridge.’

CHAPTER TWELVE

‘What do you mean, you’ve lost them?’

‘I mean we’ve lost them. The communications link has been severed,’ answered Rayhelm, doing her best to ignore the imposing figure of Sergeant Theron at her side as she called out orders to her officers. Four minutes had passed since the link to Helios and his squad’s transponder signals was dropped, and in that time the shipmistress’ lips and mind had not ceased moving.

‘Boost the signal again,’ barked Rayhelm down into the augur stations, waving away a pack of junior officers clamouring around her as she returned to the central dais.

‘What of the *Pilum*?’ asked Theron.

‘We still have contact with her,’ said Rayhelm. ‘We are using her as an extension of our own vox and augur systems, and since we can still see the *Pilum* that points to something that must be happening inside the *Excelsior*.’

Theron folded his arms over his chest, his eyes locked to the tiny red dart of the Genesis Chapter frigate through the viewing blocks. ‘Take us in closer.’

‘We’ll have to alter our flight path for orbit over the planet.’

‘Then take us between the two.’

Rayhelm tapped at her chin as she studied her instruments. With a soft exhalation, she sat back in her control throne. ‘As you wish, sergeant. Navigation, stand by for course correction. Come about at heading–’

‘Ma’am,’ came a voice from across the bridge.

‘What is it?’ demanded Rayhelm. ‘Have we reestablished contact?’

The young officer rose from the console she had been leaning over. Her face

had gone pale. ‘No, shipmistress. We are detecting a new inbound contact, something large. Something very, very large.’

<Do you know what you ask?>

There were precious few places aboard the battleship that could have had any chance of calming Bolaraphon’s rage, and the command deck of the *Damnatio Memorae* was absolutely not one of them. It was one of many places that only increased his ire every time he had set foot upon it. Now he found himself there again, in the court of his reluctant saviour. The self-proclaimed Pirate Queen of the Dark Mechanicus.

The Warsmith baulked at the anachronism of the title, of the inconsistency and blinding hypocrisy inherent in those born of the Red Planet. Minds lashed to machines who strove for knowledge and technological progress, yet spent their lives chanting placations to imagined deities and smothering engine cores in incense.

<Well, do you?> the voice asked again, as the mistress of the *Damnatio Memorae* unfolded from the rafters like a twisted mechanical spider.

Hyzra hung suspended from an armature of dark brass, moving wherever she pleased via a system of tracks built into the darkness of the vaulted ceiling. Her robes were threadbare silk of deepest black, edged in scarlet. Across the tattered fabric, arcane algorithms were stitched in hair-fine threads of Martian red gold. Eye-aching to behold, they were the mathematical depiction of scrap-code, the *lingua diabolis* that she and her heretek kind used to converse and commune with the fell gods of the warp.

Bolaraphon could only look upon her vile, spindly form for so long before his anger forced him to avert his eyes.

<The loss will be great if you pursue this course. Of materials, of men. An entire ship gone.>

‘You will do well to remember to whom you speak,’ growled Bolaraphon. ‘They are here, and they shall die. All of them.’

The shipmistress regarded the Warsmith, a cluster of violet ocular lenses dilating and tightening as they pored over every nuance.

<This recklessness is aberrant, Warsmith,> said Hyzra. <What have the sons of Guilliman done to you I wonder, to provoke you into abandoning the acquisition of the materials we desperately require, simply to send a pittance of their number to oblivion?>

‘Obstruct me further, machine-witch, and you will join them.’

<You realise,> she buzzed, <the *Damnatio Memorae* and I are one. I am the ship, and the ship is me.> She raised an outstretched palm of a hand with too many fingers, long slender digits of black iron flexing like insect legs. A schematic of the warship beamed from her palm, turning gently in her hand like a child's toy.

<Eighteen hundred times per second, a sequence to send the primary reactor core into cardiac overload is broadcast. My continued existence is the sole countermand that interrupts this occurrence from realisation. In the event that my life-signs were to terminate, the sequence would proceed.> The pirate jerked closer with a squeal from the hidden tracks overhead. <And all here, including you, Warsmith, would join me as dust and a fleeting moment of flame.>

Bolaraphon raised himself to his full, towering height, eye level with the dark machine priestess. He leaned forward. 'Then whisper a supplication to whatever it is you worship.' He did not look away as he punched in the last of the heading adjustments on the primary navigation console. 'And pray for constitution.'

Hyzra tilted her head, a curiously human thing for one so divorced from her birth species, before withdrawing back to the centre of the bridge.

<Proceed.>

'Go!' barked Helios, blasting at a pair of Iron Warriors to shield the advance of Kyros and Nicanor. The Primaris Space Marines moved forward with a speed that belied their bulk as they slid into cover behind a pillar of reinforced plasteel. Bolt-rounds exploded against it, showering them with bits of metal that plinked and bounced from their sculpted armour.

The thoroughfares of the *Excelsior*'s spinal battlements were wide avenues where warriors could gather in fellowship or walk in silent contemplation. Statues of grand heroes from the histories of both the Genesis Chapter and the Ultramarines stared down with grim regality, artistic works that would have rivalled the finest of any shrine world. Dense ribbed girders formed a ceiling that supported immense panes of armourglass, giving those who walked it an incomparable view of the void beyond the ship's hull.

It had once been a place of reflection, where the dizzying scale of the cosmos could be pondered and appreciated by the warship's crew as they passed from one section to the next. Now, it had become a battleground, the site of a grinding slog of attrition between two opposing forces of Space Marines.

After the revelation of the presence of the Iron Warriors and their first engagement against them, Helios had abandoned the course of restoring power

to the Genesis Chapter warship. The forces of Chaos had butchered the crew and warriors of the *Excelsior*, and the clearest route to the answers the Ultramarines sought would lie upon the frigate's bridge. They had managed to make their way through the enginarium and maintenance decks without any further combat, but their fortunes had shifted once they arrived on the upper spinal thoroughfare.

With the ship's reactor offline, gravity had no sway over the warship. Iron Warriors moved along the walls, firing down upon the Ultramarines who had engaged their magnetic seals to ground themselves. A concentrated salvo of bolter fire riddled one of the Chaos Space Marines, leaving him to float in a twisted tangle of limbs and a spreading orbiting mist of blood, oil and venting oxygen.

Small unit tactics ruled the field, with each side splitting their numbers and fighting a seesaw battle of fire, advance, fire, withdraw. The Ultramarines held a tenuous edge in numbers, yet the Iron Warriors possessed the advantage of holding elevated and more defensible positions. Every time the Imperials gained fire superiority, the renegades would abandon their ground in favour of another strongpoint, destroying whatever fortification they had in place to deny the Ultramarines any protection from their fire.

Helios had learned much watching his Intercessors fight. They were strong, efficient and capable. They bore an innate understanding of the angles of fire available at every step, and how to utilise the superior range of their bolt rifles to keep the Iron Warriors ducking behind their cover. Each of them had suffered enemy fire, and while they all now bore cracks and fist-sized holes in their cobalt, their armour had succeeded in turning the worst of the damage away.

But by the Emperor, thought Helios, they were inexperienced. The Chaplain could not help but think of neophytes as the Primaris Marines fought beside him. They lacked the unspoken connection of a squad whose bonds of brotherhood had been forged in the fires of battle, and as a result they still moved as individuals rather than a single, cohesive unit. They reacted to the ever-shifting moment to moment nature of each firefight with tactical decisions that, while technically correct, were not applied properly in a combat situation.

Even their movements, while sound and precise, were stiff, marred by the slightest of hesitations. Just as notes and symbols inked onto parchment were not truly music, Helios' charges fought with a posture that had yet to be smoothed into instinct.

The training regimen of the Primaris Marines was exhaustive, and these warriors had learned their lessons well, but drill could only take one so far. The

entirety of their lives had been lived within one half of their precious mental binary, the theoretical. Now they faced the practical, in all its swiftness, blood and horror. They needed this fighting desperately. They needed to be blooded.

Helios fired his plasma pistol. The bolt of blazing blue energy struck an Iron Warrior on the shoulder pauldron, sending him crashing onto his back in a cloud of boiling ceramite. A report crackling over the secure vox from Kyros preceded a fist-sized sphere clattering amongst the traitors. The barricade they sheltered behind exploded into metal splinters as the frag grenade detonated, littering the surrounding area with gore and bits of bloodied metal armour.

The Primaris Marine lingered over his cover a second too long, as though to judge his own handiwork, and was stitched up with a volley of bolter fire that sent him crashing to the deck. Helios peered over at Kyros as he hauled himself up into a crouch, fresh cracks and gouges marring the ornamentation of his breastplate.

'Move up!' Helios bellowed, waving Seneca and Caprico forward as the tide of enemy fire slackened. 'For the Emperor!'

'For the Emperor!' came the thunderous reply from Helios' squad, and it swelled his chest with joy to hear a trace of zeal edge into their battle cry. The fighting was losing its mystery in their hearts, usurped beat by beat with holy wrath. Slowly but surely they were seizing the initiative. Whether the Primaris brethren were green or not, it was the Iron Warriors who were dying, not the Ultramarines.

Helios thudded behind cover as the deck beneath them began to quake. Chips of broken debris rattled and jumped, clacking against their boots. Helios peered up into the stars as he felt the bones of the *Excelsior* give out a shuddering groan, like a great ocean leviathan crying out in pain.

'What is that?' asked Ariston as he skidded to a crouch beside Helios.

'Could they have restored the ship's core back to function?' posited Kyros.

'No,' murmured Helios, his eyes still locked to the void above. 'No, this is something else.'

Ariston craned his neck, his gaze following that of the Chaplain. The rest of the squad did the same from their own places of cover across the thoroughfare. None of the Ultramarines had consciously realised that all shooting had ceased. Whatever they were seeing had taken the attention of the Iron Warriors as well.

From a distance, it appeared like a golden spear's tip amongst the grainy snowstorm of Quradim's shattered moon. As it grew closer and larger in view, the gold soured into a deep, rust red, and the spear tip became a jagged, serrated

blade with flared edges. Even from a distance it was clear that it dwarfed the *Excelsior* in size by many ship lengths.

'A battleship,' said Helios. 'An enemy battleship.'

A flash of creamy purple light blinked from the crest of the approaching ship. An eye blink later the *Excelsior* reeled as it took the full brunt of a lance strike amidships. With no power, and no void shields to deflect it, the energy of the blast knifed through the warship in an ear-splitting shriek of rending metal.

Statues came crumbling apart in great shards of stone and metal that crashed against the ground and walls. The deck tilted violently, throwing Space Marines on both sides off balance. Their mag-locked boots kept them from being cast off their feet as the Genesis Chapter frigate listed with the force of the impact.

'Brother-Chaplain,' said Seneca, panning above his cover with his bolt rifle. 'The enemy, they are quitting the field. Do we pursue them?'

Helios was still watching the Chaos vessel. It continued to grow larger and larger in view.

'It isn't stopping,' said Helios.

'What?' said Seneca.

'It's still coming.' Helios blink-clicked a rune to open a vox-link to the *Light of Iax*. Static screamed in his ear. He cut the link. 'And it is jamming us.' Helios turned to where Seneca and Caprico were hunkered down ten metres away to his right. 'If they keep going at that speed it will cut right through us.'

'Then I humbly suggest we take our leave, Brother-Chaplain,' said Caprico.

'Second,' said Ariston.

'Agreed,' replied Helios. '*Pilum*,' he said into his collar. 'If you receive this, get clear. This ship is about to come apart and we won't make it to you in time. We shall find our own way out.'

A databurst of binaric cant slipped through the interference. The message rippled across Helios' visor from the gunship's servitor pilot, his auto-senses quickly translating it into Gothic.

Compliance.

'Your will, Brother-Chaplain?' asked Seneca.

Helios smiled. 'No, brothers. The will that guides us is that of the Emperor. We must simply have the strength to follow it.'

The Primaris Marines exchanged glances, then looked back to Helios. The deck of the *Excelsior* gave another violent, storm-tossed lurch. The bust of a long-dead champion of the Five Hundred Worlds snapped loose from its moorings and burst apart in a shower of glittering marble fragments.

The Chaplain waved them forward with his crozius. ‘Come.’

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The *Damnatio Memorae* surged out from the dense cover of Quradim's ruined moon, trailing a smear of displaced rock and ice behind her like a bronze comet. The disturbance of the floating storm of lunar shrapnel radiated out from the warship in a ripple effect, the intensity of the waves marking the precise moment that she began her abrupt acceleration. Her engine arrays flared with a star's brightness as they were ordered into conditions reserved for the gathering of speed initiated just prior to a translation into warp space.

Though damaged and ancient even in terms of a human battleship, the *Damnatio Memorae* remained more than capable of the task, giving only the slightest of shivers through her hull as inertial dampeners engaged to further reduce any lingering sources of friction and grant her as much forward momentum as possible. When travelling at such speeds manoeuvrability was rendered void. She became very much like a shot arrow, a missile fired with only the trajectory directly ahead available to her.

More changes occurred across the ship. Void shields were redistributed, stripping their protection from the rear and flanks of the cruiser in favour of several overlapping fields shrouding her prow. A pair of shots fired from her dorsal lance batteries did little to slow her sprint, diminishing her forward acceleration by less than a tenth of one per cent. The *Damnatio Memorae* plied on, following after the migraine-bright trails of the laser discharges as they struck the *Excelsior* amidships and sent the smaller vessel listing directly into her flight path.

There were still pieces of the moon between the two warships. Island-sized

masses of ice and stone were disintegrated by the oncoming battleship, annihilated to dust and vapour against its void shields. They flared in dozens of points across the energy barrier, like light rain drumming against an oil slick. They did nothing to reduce the velocity that the *Damnatio Memorae* had built up.

The distance separating the two ships disappeared. The command deck of the *Damnatio Memorae* was a cacophony of proximity alerts, alarms from sensors and augur readings, and automatic protocols warning its crew to brace for catastrophic collision scenarios. The bridge of the *Excelsior*, by contrast, was as silent as a tomb. This was fitting, for the only things occupying its stations were corpses. Its reactor was cold and inert, granting no power to the systems that would have fallen upon dead ears as they screamed of what was about to transpire.

Helios and the Primaris Marines raced through the corridors of the *Excelsior*. The lack of artificial gravity, a temporary source of disorientation upon their arrival, was now a boon for their escape. The Ultramarines shot along, kicking themselves off the walls and pointing themselves like bullets to move down them at speed.

Seneca and the other Primaris Space Marines who comprised Helios' squad were easily outpacing him, the reality of their superior physiology on clear display as they made their way through the ship. However, they did not abandon the Chaplain, holding at junctions and using their enhanced strength to clear the path of wreckage. Though their genetic makeup was starkly different, they all carried the blood of Roboute Guilliman in their veins. They were all Ultramarines, and the warriors of Macragge did not leave their own behind.

There had been no time to get the *Pilum* to extract them, as it had remained on station on the opposite side of the *Excelsior*. As the gunship made its way back to the *Light of Iax*, Helios and his squad advanced towards the closest means of escape now available to them.

There was a small support hangar located just one deck beneath them, along the port flank, closer to the nose of the frigate. According to the ship's manifest and standard doctrine for a vessel of its size, it should house at least one shuttle or lighter that was of a size capable of carrying them all.

Fear was anathema to a Space Marine, and doubly so for a Chaplain of the Ultramarines Chapter. Even so, a greasy tightness had manifested deep within Helios' gut, a discomforting sense of powerlessness as he had no way of telling

how far the enemy warship was from striking them. While he had long ago accepted that he would die within his armour, Helios railed against such a senseless end. Death was always the only destination for those who served the Emperor, but to have one's life wasted could be nothing other than an affront to His bestowed gifts.

The hangar was metres away. Kyros punched the control panel, demagnetising the bulkhead seals. He and Caprico took hold of the door and wrenched it aside in a silent screech of heavy metal.

A small, closed hangar awaited the Ultramarines, and they saw an Arvus lighter clamped to the deck. 'Kyros,' said Helios, pointing to a control panel at the edge of the hangar. 'Disable the emergency shutter locks.'

The Intercessor changed his course without hesitation, kicking himself off the wall and flying towards the controls. The other Primaris Marines launched their bodies towards the shuttle, latching onto it with the magnetic locks in the soles of their boots before moving towards the ingress hatch in the rear to disable the clamps fixing it to the deck.

Kyros hit the ground in front of the control panel, his boots locking to the deck with a thrumming *clunk*. The console was without power, but it still possessed analogue systems that could be triggered in emergency situations. The Primaris Space Marine found the mechanism needed to disengage the armoured shutters sealing off the hangar bay, a massive wheel wider than his shoulders, designed to be operated by heavy cargo servitors. He took hold of it and his gauntlets squealed against the iron as he fought to make it turn.

The wheel fought back, its dense construction groaning in protest but refusing to budge. Kyros drew in a deep breath, and willed more strength into his shoulders. He snarled, seizing hold of the wheel and gripping it until his fingers crushed dents into the metal. Veins bulged in his neck and skull as he threw his full might into the effort.

And slowly, but surely, the wheel began to turn.

The floor of the hangar vibrated as immense cogwork mechanisms shuddered into action. Winches and lengths of chain thick as a man's torso engaged. Slowly, the segmented panels closing off the docking bay from the void peeled aside, allowing the trapped air to start gusting out.

Kyros turned away from the wheel and began to move towards the Arvus lighter to rejoin the rest of the squad. Inside the shuttle's cargo hold, Seneca and the others busied themselves stripping everything out of the craft that was not bolted down in order to clear enough room for them all.

‘Good work, my brother,’ said Helios, as the shutters started to grind open. ‘Seneca, get the shuttle ready to–’

The words died on his lips as the parting doors revealed a cliffside of bronze armour. The Chaos battleship filled the entire view, close enough that Helios felt he could reach out and touch it.

Then all was thunder and light.

The *Damnatio Memorae* struck the *Excelsior* like a knife plunged by the hand of an enraged god. The overlapping layers of void shielding that coated her prow made contact with the frigate’s rear third, staggering her infinitesimally but not stopping her. The shields held for a split second before they evaporated in a blinding flash of dispersing energies. The battleship continued to plough forward, its momentum unstoppable.

The spine of the *Excelsior* held, flexed, bent and finally broke, shattering and throwing out spars of superstructure and masses of armour plating the size of hive city tenements. A warship with a list of proud honours that stretched back before the founding of the Genesis Chapter met an ignominious end in high orbit over the backwater world of Quradim. Her last moments as an intact vessel were spent warping about the prow of an enemy ship that was over five times its size.

The difference in tonnage between the two vessels was severe, yet in her compromised state, the *Damnatio Memorae* still reeled from the impact. The nose of the Chaos warship dipped and tilted to port, sending her engine stack twisting behind her in a vicious, ponderous spin. The superstructure warped, her ancient skeleton wrenched so viciously in sections that even an eternity in dry dock would not repair them. The twin halves of the *Excelsior* tore titanic lacerations down the flanks of the cruiser, venting kilometres of interior space to hard vacuum as they slowly ground past. Thousands of crew members died, crushed by compacted sections of the prow, incinerated by flame as the warship’s void shields overloaded, or ripped out into the suffocating claws of the uncaring void.

All of this was rendered all the more horrific by the sterile silence of the vacuum as it occurred. The collision was of a scale that was so vast it all appeared to occur in slow motion, like a murder freezing in the syrup of crystallising amber.

The *Damnatio Memorae* finally punched through the superstructure of the *Excelsior*, emerging as a gouged ruin that trailed fire from a thousand points along her length.

‘Ma’am, we have an inbound contact,’ said an officer from the augur pit. ‘Transponder confirms it is the *Pilum*.’

‘Open a direct line of communication to Chaplain Helios,’ said Rayhelm. ‘We need to find out what in the Emperor’s name is going on.’

‘Unable to comply,’ blurted a communications servitor.

‘Explain,’ snapped the shipmistress.

‘No life signs detected aboard,’ replied the lobotomised serf.

Silence hung in the air for a moment. All eyes looked to the *Excelsior*, rapidly vanishing into a cloud of debris.

‘Get us to orbit,’ said Theron. ‘We need to learn what is happening on the surface.’

‘I intend to, my lord,’ replied Rayhelm distractedly. ‘Just as I intend to cripple that cruiser and leave it dead in the void.’

The *Excelsior* was still breaking apart as the shipmistress gave the order and called all crew to their battle stations. The *Light of Iax* erupted into ordered bedlam as each station on the command deck called out their readiness, providing reports and tactical updates to the backdrop of wailing tocsins. Amidst the noise and rush of activity, Rayhelm watched the Chaos warship as it breached the expanding cloud of freezing gases and twisting fragments of crimson hull plating.

‘Ready torpedoes,’ said Rayhelm. ‘I require firing solutions for a full spread and I require them now, ladies and gentlemen.’

The crew scrambled to fulfil Rayhelm’s orders. She rose from her throne, raised her chin, and straightened a crease in her uniform with a sharp tug. ‘Our host has been kind enough to begin the conversation. Let us do the polite thing, and reply.’

Whistles blared. Klaxons bathed the gun crews in harsh red light. Overseers snapped electrified whips against backs of densely corded muscle as the order to load was given.

Deep within the gunnery decks of the *Light of Iax*, pressgangs of chemically bulked slaves were herded to the magazines by cracking lashes and shouted curses. Tubs of chafing chalk were passed around, applied in liberal handfuls to the hands, arms and chests of the loading crews.

Servitors went from one vat-grown thrall to another, injecting them with pain suppressors and adrenal boosters that rendered the hulking brutes into a state of numbed rage. They frothed and barked, thrashing for an outlet of the manic

vitality surging through their veins, and found it in the massive chains that lay at their feet.

'Let's go! Pick 'em up, lads!' came the cry of the masters. The thralls bent down, gathering the enormous links of dense black iron in their fists.

'Haul!' blared the order from the loudspeakers, punctuated by the whips of the overseers. 'Haul, rest, *haul!*'

The slaves began to pull, snarling at the exertion as they fought to bring the chain past them a link at a time. None bothered to look at where the chains led, knowing they trailed into the depths of the magazines that towered over them. With a loud *clang*, the chains snapped taut, and the true effort began.

'Put your backs in, lads!' Lightning crackled from the overseers' whips. One gestured to the far wall, dominated by a massive wrought-iron representation of the Emperor, depicted in the cruel aspect of the God of War with a sword in one hand and a whip in the other.

'Emperor's watching us, who amongst you is gonna be caught slacking in His eyes?'

The genebred loading gangs heaved, pulling the immense shells from the magazines an inch at a time. In minutes their bodies became sheened with sweat. The chains rattled taut in their hands as they dragged the munitions out to their masters' rhythm.

'Pull, you laggards!' bellowed the overseers, each word interposed by a snap of the lash across their shoulders. 'Mistress wants them torpedoes in the void, and she wants them now. Gonna do it for her, eh? Gonna be ship killers today, boys?'

'*SHIP KILL, SHIP KILL!*' the loaders roared in reply, setting to their task with a single-minded brutality. The torpedo lurched out of the magazine with a resounding groan, the multiple tonnes of its full weight falling into the chains of the winches. The loaders were nearly ripped from their feet as the chains they held snapped tight.

'Pull, boys!' came the cry from the overseers. 'Pull those shells, feed those cannons!'

'*SHIP KILL, SHIP KILL, SHIP KILL!*'

'Who's gonna be the man to do it? Who's gonna pull it across the finish line, boys?'

Sinews bulged from reddened arms rapidly filling with lactic acid. The chains bit into flesh, making the deck slick with sweat and blood. Boots and bare feet fought for traction in the mire, as servitors threw more chalk onto the ground. Swollen beasts of men screamed with the effort, those few with teeth remaining

to them biting down hard on crude gumshields crafted from pieces of insulated rubber or scrap iron. Inch by inch, the torpedo was dragged towards the firing tube.

'Chains drop!' came the order as after minutes of excruciating labour, the missile was pulled as far as it could go. It hung on the precipice of the firing tube, an immense tunnel that led out into the cold hard black of the void. The loader gangs dropped their chains, the imprint of the links crushed into their hands in blood-soaked patterns.

'Move it, lads.' The whips started up again. 'Push 'em in! Those shells need firing, get those ship killers into the night! *Push!*'

'*PUSH, PUSH, PUSH!*'

Men threw their weight against the colossal torpedo. They shoved in rhythm, in time to the electrified lash stripping the skin from their backs. They spat blood and broken teeth onto their feet. They roared and strained, feeling the shell as it teetered on the edge of the firing tube.

'Move that shell, lads! Ship killer!'

'*SHIP KILL, SHIP KILL, SHIP KILL!*'

The torpedo loosed a shuddering groan, unable to withstand their strength any longer, and rolled into the tube with a booming clang each man felt in their bones.

'That's it, lads, we are loaded! STAND BY!'

The men collapsed where they stood, chests heaving with exhaustion. Pink froth bubbled from lips and noses. Many of the loading gang's number had pulled too many shells, and would never rise from that spot.

'Brilliant work, lads.' The overseers spared the lash. Servitors went from man to man, administering hydration, painkillers and amphetamine injections. Others dragged away the dead to the furnaces.

'Five minutes breather, then we scour the tubes before we reload!'

'Munitions are loaded, ma'am,' reported the gunnery officer.

'Firing solutions?'

'We have them, shipmistress.'

Rayhelm nodded, her eyes following the trajectory projections beaming from her tactical hololith.

'Fire, full spread,' she said with a grim smile. 'Let's kill the bastard.'

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Zosime gasped as she hit the frigid deck plating. A torrent of icy, viscous slime followed her as her stasis casket opened fully. She gagged, pulling her half metre-long rebreather tube from her throat with a sickening lurch, and coughed up a mouthful of the same vile gel that covered her. Her hand shot to her collar, and she sighed with relief as she found her medallion still around her neck.

Alarms bleated, a keening din that caused her eardrums to shiver. The frenzy of flashing lights and servitors swarming to and fro did nothing to dispel her disorientation. Her head swam, and her throat cracked with thirst. Zosime had experienced this enough times, however, to learn how to ride it out and gather her focus. This was not the first time she had been woken up to go to war.

Zosime blew her nose sharply, ejecting a lingering wad of gunk as she was pulled to her feet by hands of metal and dead flesh. Attendant servitors loomed over her, scraping away the stasis gel, spraying her with blasts of freezing water and administering stimm injections before quickly dressing her in a flight suit. Her body was wrapped in a form-fitting bodyglove, followed by layers of equipment webbing and a heavy rebreather rig.

Through the bustle she was able to see passing glimpses of the other pilots being similarly prepared, but as always she had never been able to see any of their faces before they were sealed away behind the darkened visors of their flight helmets.

With a sharp click followed by a soft whining hiss, Zosime's own helm was locked to her collar and pressurised. Her face was obscured by a half dome of dark glass perched over her rebreather mask, with two angled slashes of red light

blinking into life over her eyes as the helm connected with her back-mounted power supply. She winced as her spinal connection needles slotted into place, and the mob of attendants shoved her forward with the rest of her flight wing.

It was a short distance from cryo to the hangar deck, and with gun servitors at their backs, Zosime and the other pilots stumbled or were dragged the entire way. Though she was still in a fugue from stasis and on edge from the narcotics now stinging her blood, she knew that when a fighter wing was scrambled, every fraction of a second counted. According to the briefing impulses being fed to her brain via flash projection and her neural link, Zosime absorbed that the ship was under attack, and that the enemy had already launched its first barrage of ordnance into the void.

Zosime took a moment to check the chrono stamp. She bit back a stab of alarm as she saw the date. *Six years*. She had been in stasis for nearly six years. Suddenly the scratchy haze that shrouded her memories made more sense.

Amber strobe lumens flashed, staining the dark iron of the corridor a deep ochre. Klaxons blotted out the clacking of boots against the deck as the file of pilots skidded around a corner and into the launch bay.

The flight deck was a scene of barely orchestrated chaos. Binaric cant warbled through the air between darkly robed adepts and the industrial servitor work gangs they controlled like arcane puppeteers. The shrillness of the alarms was nearly overtaken by the bone-deep rumble of generators, the pneumatic screams of machine tools and the building whine of propulsion systems spooling up.

The line of pilots split off, each deposited before their assigned craft just as Zosime was stopped before her own. Her craft was a void superiority fighter, a harsh two-pronged dagger of adamantium whose hull of burnished silver reflected the deck's emergency lights in alternating blobs of gold and scarlet. Zosime ran a gloved hand down the near fourteen metres of the Hell Blade's length, stepping around the final crews as they disconnected fuel lines and confirmed the calibrations of the lascannon and twin-linked autocannon that protruded from beneath the cockpit like levelled spears.

A gun servitor blurted a warning at Zosime. She hurried, scrambling up the narrow ladder and onto the fighter's hull. She lowered herself down into the cracked leather of the craft's control throne and buckled her restraint harness over her chest. Another wince twisted her face as the Hell Blade's interface nodes connected with those in her spine.

The control panels of the fighter sprang to life as the canopy slid closed, bathing Zosime in a soft glow of monochromatic green. Specialised servitors

appeared on the other side of the armourglass, and she watched as they riveted the seals closed with fist-sized bolts, locking her inside the cockpit. The memory of the last sortie entered her mind, when one of the pilots had cracked and resisted being sealed in their fighter. They had been executed then and there, the body left on the deck as the others launched. Zosime looked away, focusing her mind as she ran a series of pre-flight checks and cycled through vox-channel frequencies.

A series of resonant *clanks* sent Zosime shuddering as she and the other fighters in her wing were snatched up and lowered onto launch catapults by cranes in worn gold hazard striping. She flipped a line of switches overhead, and typed in a command to refresh her targeting computer. The Hell Blade's auspex flared, painting a reflection of her surroundings on her display in pulsing waves of emerald light.

Zosime felt a smooth rumble build beneath her seat as her fighter's plasma drive awakened. The launch platform rotated, aiming her down a departure tube leading out of the battleship.

The vox crackled in Zosime's ear. It was the voice of the squadron leader, rendered dull and genderless by the same cumbersome rebreather mask she wore.

'*Commence launch. Sortie – ordnance intercept, all wings. Stand by for catapult.*'

Service to the Dark Mechanicus meant a life that was almost entirely bereft of humanity. All were enslaved, and even specialists like Zosime and her fellow pilots were treated little different than the expendable masses of lobotomised servitors that performed most of the duties aboard the battleship. Zosime had been astonished that her masters had even allowed her to keep the talisman she wore, the only remnant of a life she might have lived amongst her tribe of horse nomads upon the steppes of her birth world, before they had come and taken her. In a life of war and exploitation, it was the last small comfort left to her, the only personal possession she had ever had.

The sole other allowance for the exercise of the human spirit occurred now, in the final calm moments before launch. Each fighter wing carved out its own identity, laying claim to a particular title or adopting the spirit of a fearsome beast. For Zosime and her squadron, it was a simple expression. It voiced that, out in the eternal night and even mired in horrific violence, this was the closest that each of them could come to feeling free.

'*Dancers dance*,' said the wing commander. Zosime heard the mantra echoed

by each of the other pilots in her unit, signalling their readiness to enter the void and do battle.

She touched the oblong of worn, crudely carved bone around her neck, feeling its outline beneath the thick layers of her suit. She closed her eyes, and breathed.

'Dancers dance.'

The catapult fired, and Zosime rocketed into the night.

The force of the launch catapult pressed Zosime into the creaking leather of her fighter's control throne. She braced against the crushing pressure, riding it out and focusing on her instruments. The tunnel was a blur of blinking lumen strips passing around her in a rush, and then she was in the void.

The control stick of Zosime's Hell Blade twitched and tilted of its own accord, banking the craft around to pass along the flank of the *Damnatio Memorae*. The split carcass of an enemy frigate hung just shy of the hull, horrific in its scale. The dead warship was crimson, and covered in the iconography of the enemy. It had been split in two, and Zosime could see the near catastrophic damage to her own mother ship as she flitted past its deformed prow.

A series of deep breaths put the madness surrounding her from her mind. Zosime turned her attention to her instruments. Targeting cogitators had tasked each of the fighters in the squadron with an inbound torpedo, locking their flight path and trajectory to that of the approaching ordnance. It was as though Zosime and her fellow pilots were little different than missiles themselves.

There had been a time where Zosime would have lashed out against the crushing control exerted by her masters over every moment of her life, but she had seen enough die in futility to drive such impulses from her long ago. Now she focused instead on what she could control. She focused on her guns.

Distance trackers sped down the display panels as the torpedoes came on. Soon their collision course would render the Imperial missiles visible to the naked eye. With the blinding speed at play on both sides, if Zosime made the mistake of waiting until the time when she could see her target to fire, she would never make another one. Her mission of destroying the torpedo would be a success, but at the cost of expending her ship and her own life to stop it.

Zosime's targeting cogitator chattered, notifying her that the window for her to fire weapons was about to open. She took hold of the control stick, her finger curled just above the firing stud, and double-checked the ammo counters on her twin-linked autocannon. A shrill tone filled her helmet, and she squeezed the trigger.

A whickering trail of tracer fire stitched out from her Hell Blade's autocannon. Only a single one of the armour-piercing rounds made impact, the lone shot to find its mark ricocheting off the torpedo's casing and failing to detonate it. Zosime thumbed the plastek cover from a firing stud atop her control stick, bringing up the targeting interface for her lascannon as the weapon gathered charge.

Zosime tapped her thumb down, sending the blinding arc of an energy bolt out into the void. The targeting reticule held. She fired a second time, then a third. Still it remained. Sweat streamed down the pilot's face, stinging her eyes as the distance between her fighter and the torpedo neared visual range.

'Come on,' she breathed, waiting for her lascannon's energy cells to replenish as the firing window bled away. 'Come on.'

A chirp signalled that the lascannon was ready to fire. Zosime looked to the targeting computer. There was only enough time for a single shot. She closed her eyes, and took it.

Zosime opened her eyes tentatively after a moment. The air rushed from her lungs as she saw no targeting reticule remaining on her display.

'Target destroyed,' reported Zosime over the squadron vox-channel. The panic ebbed from her bones, leaving twitching tremors in its place. She peered out through her canopy to her right, watching as her wingman made ready to engage their target. Alarms wailed in the cockpit as an aberrant shard of rock from Quradim's shattered moon struck the nearby Hell Blade. The fighter vanished in a quickly suffocated ball of flame and gas.

Panic crept up Zosime's spine. The fighter had not had the chance to open fire. The torpedo slashed past her, trailing an arc of spectral blue plasma.

'This is Four Zeta,' said Zosime. 'I am requesting a navigation override. Ordnance is inbound and Nine Zeta is gone.' She grunted, exerting herself against the control stick as she tried to take control of her craft. 'I can engage, again request navigation override. Copy.'

Painful seconds ticked by as Zosime waited for her appeal to be processed. She shook her control stick again, still unable to jar it or her fighter from their pre-programmed course. A trio of sharp beeps sounded on her navigation display, and the controls unlocked, now able to follow her commands.

'*Permission granted, Four Zeta*,' came the static-laden reply from the squadron leader. '*Hunt swiftly*.'

'Copy that, command.' Zosime braced herself as she banked hard, crushing her body against the side of her throne as she came about at full burn. She weaved

her Hell Blade deftly through the wreckage of Nine Zeta, and the immense fragments of frozen rock that had once been the surface of Quradim's moon. Small spheres of light bloomed and blinked out as the other fighters fought to destroy their assigned torpedoes.

Auspex gave a return ahead of Zosime, and she squinted to find the stripe of electric blue that blazed from behind the Imperial missile. She found it, speeding in towards the flank of the *Damnatio Memorae*. The battleship still had teeth, with her main batteries operational as they traversed towards targets. But her smaller weapons arrays, designed to deter attack craft and inbound ship-killing munitions, were mostly lumps of fused wreckage or gouged pits in the hull, destroyed by the ravages of the vessel's escape from the warp rift or the damage incurred by the recent collision.

Some of the defensive guns could still be online, but when the gunnery stations that studded the cruiser failed to open fire, Zosime knew the truth. She could not see the translucent sheen of the mother ship's void shields. Now that she knew that the weapons and shields of the *Damnatio Memorae* were offline, she was all that stood in the way of her vessel being knifed in the ribs.

A flickering targeting reticule appeared over the torpedo on Zosime's visor display, pulsing due to it being just beyond the maximum range of her fighter's weapons. A tactical readout was perched at one corner of the crosshair, displaying the quickly shrinking distance between the two as she moved to intercept. At full burn Zosime was catching up to it. But not quickly enough. Her gloved fingers danced over her control panels, drawing power from every other system onboard and throwing it into the engines.

Warning sigils winked across the control panel as the output of the Hell Blade's main drive neared its known tolerances. Vibrations rattled the hull, creaks and groans issuing from its abused superstructure.

At the last moment, she fed the lascannon just enough energy for a single shot. She punched her thumb down on the rune the instant a sufficient charge had built and fired. The blast clipped the rear of the torpedo, sending it pin wheeling in a tumble of azure plasma before exploding just shy of contact, showering wreckage over the *Damnatio Memorae*'s sundered hull.

Fragments and a billowing curtain of flame washed over Zosime's cockpit. She turned, guiding her Hell Blade away from the hull of the battleship.

'*All wings*.' This time the voice in Zosime's earpiece was cold and cybernetic, extensively augmented but definitively male. The amount of interference confirmed to her that it was coming not from any of the other fighters, but from

the *Damnatio Memorae*'s command deck.

'*Amendment to orders. Sortie – attack run. New primary target designated*.'

The blueprints for a modified Imperial Hunter-class destroyer materialised on Zosime's display.

'*Guidance and flight path data transmitted and inloading. All craft commence sortie – attack run*.'

Rayhelm frowned as she watched the incoming reports from the *Light of Iax*'s augur arrays. Of the full spread of torpedoes she had loosed at the Chaos battle cruiser, only a single one had struck its target. The explosion had done damage, she was certain of that, but she was the mistress of a ship designed specifically to destroy larger foes. A dedicated ship killer. With the volume of fire she had unleashed, Rayhelm was within her rights to expect to see much of the enemy warship's superstructure floating free in the void, reduced to molten slag.

There were only a handful of explanations for why this was not the case, and as a junior officer hurried to her side from one of the crew pits, the list was narrowed down to one.

'Ma'am.' The officer halted a few paces short of Rayhelm's dais with a crisp salute. 'Augurs are detecting multiple signals. Enemy fighters are inbound.'

The shipmistress dismissed the officer with a nod. 'Gunnery?'

'Ma'am?'

'Status report on our spinal batteries?'

'Ready, ma'am,' came the answer.

She keyed a rune on the armrest of her throne. 'Sergeant Theron?'

The rumbling tone of the Space Marine filled the bridge speakers. '*Shipmistress?*'

'I am taking the *Light* on an approach vector for low orbit over the planet,' said Rayhelm, simultaneously tapping out a rapid tattoo on her runepads to disseminate orders to her crew. 'We've stirred the nest here, so it will have to be a bit swift, I'm afraid. You'll need to use the *Pilum*.'

'*We stand ready*,' said Theron. '*Get us to orbit and we shall do the rest*.'

'Take plenty of ammunition, sergeant. I may need to utilise some creative measures to shake our guests. It may be some time before I can return to the planet to enact any resupply.'

'*Understood*,' said the Ultramarine, who then cut the link.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

‘You have found something?’

Furax picked his way through the half-collapsed remains of a hive city tenement chamber, shoving aside twisting iron spars and mounds of rubble as he approached his brethren. The lights of their luminators cast horrid shadows amongst the detritus of what had once been a monument to human engineering, a place where billions of lives had begun, lasted and ended, all contained completely within its cyclopean walls.

The squad of Iron Warriors had been deployed to comb through the ruins of the hive city, in search of a quarry they had been told in no uncertain terms that they would be unwelcome to return without. The patience of their lord was profoundly spare, and Furax had no interest in testing its limits any further.

Furax reached his brothers, looking down at what they had discovered.

He shone the light from his shoulder-mounted lumen over a group of emaciated mortals. They were deathly pale, crouching in a corner. They recoiled from the torchlight, covering eyes that had grown accustomed to total darkness.

The Iron Warrior glared down at the humans with undisguised revulsion. His mind travelled back to a boarding action he had taken part in against a warship of the hated VIII Legion. Light had been one of the Iron Warriors’ greatest weapons in that battle, as they methodically butchered their way through the decks of the Night Lords vessel, killing swathes of mortal crew who had never seen sunlight.

‘Why have we stopped,’ said Furax, ‘for this?’

‘They managed to survive in here, and to avoid our slavers for this long,’

posited Gaios with a shrug. ‘That shows cunning.’

Tybald reached out, extending his narthecium gauntlet over the cowering wretches. The internal auspex within the bulky device chattered as it scanned them. ‘They are severely malnourished. Acute vitamin deficiencies and extensive muscle atrophy are rampant. All of them have one form or another of immune disease, brought on by the advanced degree of starvation and extended dehydration.’

‘Your conclusion?’ asked Furax.

‘I doubt they would survive the journey to the servile pens,’ replied the Apothecary. ‘Any viable utility for those that do, even at my best estimations, would be negligible.’

‘We were not sent to find slaves,’ said Koronos quietly, ever the voice of reason in the squad. ‘They are not our objective, and would do nothing but slow our progress towards it.’

Furax nodded. ‘So be it.’

They turned their bolters on them.

Hours passed as the Iron Warriors descended through the ruins of the hive. The gargantuan structure’s near collapse at the hands of Quradim’s vindictive geology had rendered any traditional schematics useless. Vast sections of the city were gone, having detached and slid away into the fault lines like steeldust avalanches. Others had fallen for dozens of levels, crumbling away to ruin or crashing and twisting into others in a bizarre labyrinth of mangled metal.

The auspex Furax held chattered in his fist, filling his visor with a slew of deceptive echoes and false positives that he dismissed with an angry blink. The squad pressed on through the forest of twisted rebar, their formation expanding to scout and contracting to stay together like a beating heart, before at last they made the first useful discovery of their mission.

Furax arrived to find Koronos standing over an abyss. He looked down, seeing nothing but more crumbling architecture that terminated in shadow. The Iron Warrior edged a loose chunk of rockcrete over the edge, sending it plummeting down into darkness. A distant crack a few seconds later gave them the length of the drop.

‘The markings here,’ Koronos gestured to the rest of the squad as Tybald and Gaios reached them. He pointed to the level above, to a faded Munitorum placard in blurred Gothic, and then to the wall beside them. The very material of the construction had changed, from cheap plasteel and rockcrete to a dense,

black alloy. A different language was las-etched into its surface, one that caused each of the Iron Warriors' pulses to quicken, if only for an instant.

'Olympian,' said Tybald. He swiped the dust from the series of faded runes, before looking over the edge to where the floor terminated into the gulf ahead of them.

'We have reached the foundation,' said Furax. 'What we seek may very well be below.' He peered down into the shadows beneath. 'The fall is not substantial.'

He stepped off the edge.

'It was here,' said Furax.

Pride battled against frustration in the Iron Warrior's heart. Pride at locating the storage facility he had been tasked to find amidst the disorder and madness of the hive's collapse. Frustration at finding it deprived of the quarry he sought.

An enormous chamber stretched out around them, filled with the skeletal remains of what had once been an ordered and fully provisioned heavy munitions magazine. Heavy iron racks filled the chamber, some toppled over or -shattered but most having held their shape despite the crash. Thousands of man-sized apertures stared at Furax like industrial honeycomb, empty of their cargo.

'The stockpile was here,' growled the Iron Warrior. He took up a rusted plate festooned with biological hazard warnings and snapped it in half before casting it aside in disgust. 'We built this place, it was here.'

'They could have been taken by another Warsmith in the retreat,' said Koronos.

'No,' said Furax. 'I was among the last to evacuate. We gathered much, but they were too volatile to risk. They were left behind.'

'Then where are they now?' asked Tybald.

'Brothers!' Gaios called out from further within the chamber. The squad rallied to him, finding him standing before a heavy sealed bulkhead.

'This chamber.' Furax frowned as his auspex played over the bulkhead. 'It still has power.'

'Impossible,' grunted Tybald. 'After all this time, this destruction?'

'Containment protocols for such a cache would have included a robust and independent power source,' said Koronos. 'To safeguard against the contents discharging in the event of some unforeseen catastrophe.'

Furax scraped his gauntlet against the thick armourglass viewport built into the bulkhead. The interior of the chamber was cast in total darkness, but his vision was acute enough to see the vague outline of an object within.

'We need to get this door open,' said Furax.

The Iron Warriors gathered their helms from their belts, sealing them in place to their armoured collars.

Koronos knelt beside the bulkhead's control panel. Millennia ago, in the time before the Warmaster's failed rebellion, he had been sent as a young legionary to the red world of Mars, to learn the secrets of the machine cult and return to the IV Legion in the red of the Techmarines. He had been upon Mars for mere months before the command of his primarch had sent him back, as he and his brethren were informed of the great war they would soon embark upon. A war that he continued to fight to this very day.

With a small effort, Koronos pried the face of the control panel loose. Thick armoured fingers worked with curious care over the delicate fronds of wires and circuitry that governed the bulkhead. A series of twists and manipulations awakened the system, and another bypassed the safeguards locking the chamber away. With a sonorous groan, the bulkhead's mechanisms engaged, hauling the thick plate of reinforced adamantium aside.

'Tybald,' said Furax. The Apothecary nodded, extending his narthecium just within the chamber. The device warbled and clicked, tasting the stale air of the confined airtight cube of metal and plastek. Tybald withdrew his gauntlet, helm tilting as he pored over the data screed playing over its inbuilt data-slate.

'There are no contaminants present,' he said after a moment, looking back at Furax. 'We can proceed.'

Furax played the light from his luminator over the barren remnants of a biological research laboratorium. One wall was dominated with more of the honeycombed racks and stasis chambers, just as empty as the one before. He scanned the centre of the chamber, the light reflecting from an object lying upon the floor. The light revealed a waist-high cylinder of dull, dusty metal, the sole object in the room.

A crackling lumen strip guttered to frantic life as Furax stepped within the chamber, granting a moment of illumination before shorting out in a brief spurt of sparks. As before, biological containment sigils adorned every surface. The Iron Warrior's eyes remained locked to the object in front of him as he approached it.

Furax knelt before the cylinder. Its casing was bathed in the muddled green glow of his eye-lenses as he inspected it. He raised a hand, bringing it just shy of touching it with his fingertips.

'This can't be the entire cache,' said Tybald. 'This chamber alone was constructed to house dozens.'

‘It isn’t,’ said Furax. His visor wavered, clouding his display with static. He growled. His armour’s spirit had not been at peace for years, ever since the raids against the Dark Mechanicum on the fringe of Goda Prime. He disengaged his collar seals, removing his helm and sneering at the faceplate before setting it down next to him.

‘Then where are the rest of them?’

Furax ran his hand over the dust-shrouded canister, tapping the casing with a knuckle. It gave a soft, hollow ring. Empty.

‘There is nothing here,’ said Furax, his lower lip curling in frustration.

He gave the container another dismissive tap. It teetered and toppled over, crashing onto the ground with a hollow clang that reverberated through the silence of the ruined hive section.

‘Careless,’ hissed Tybald.

Furax was ready to voice a retort, to remind his brother of his place, when he froze.

No mortal would have heard the crackle of compromised seals. Despite the boon of genetically enhanced hearing, even a legionary could have failed to register the softest of gasps that escaped from within the reinforced housing.

‘Wait–’ said Furax.

The Iron Warriors leapt back. Tybald’s boots pounded against the ground and threw the accumulated dust of centuries into the air. Furax scrambled back and followed after his brother, but he was a step behind and a second late.

A trill tone squawked from the Apothecary’s gauntlet as its systems registered something in the air. Tybald barked to Koronos as he vaulted through the threshold, and the insulated bulkhead clanged shut. Heavy clunks beat a short tattoo around the doorway as it locked and sealed, separating Furax from the rest of his squad.

Furax roared as animal instinct flooded his veins. His reason was clouded, forced aside as he illuminated the dim chamber with fractured shadows cast by his power fist igniting. The rest of the squad raised their bolters, turning them upon him despite the massive bulkhead separating them.

Furax charged forwards, his power fist poised to smash down and tear the reinforced doorway from its hinges. He looked to each of their faces, and froze. The wild fury of his innate instinct for survival drained from him. The rumbling cry died upon his lips.

Furax opened his fist, the internal mechanics of each thick metal finger uncurling slowly and with a snarl as if rebelling against his control. The

crackling lightning field enshrouding his power fist dissipated with a thin clap of static.

'Brothers,' said Furax quietly, his words a crackling rasp across the vox. 'Forgive me, I have forgotten myself.'

In that moment, the Iron Warrior accepted his brothers' abandonment. He made peace with the cold logic of the choice that they had been forced to make, and knew without malice that he would have done the same, had it been any of them. He made peace with the fact that here, in the darkness of a decrepit chamber deep in the bowels of a derelict hive on a forgotten backwater, a proud son of Perturabo would meet his ignoble end.

Furax straightened. His flesh was just beginning to tingle. He raised his chin, and hammered his fist against his chest. 'For the Warsmith,' he said, as his squad finally lowered their bolters.

'*Iron within!*' he bellowed.

'*Iron without!*' his brothers roared in reply.

'*Iron within!*'

'*Iron without!*'

'*Iron with–*' he snarled. The transmission degraded rapidly as the bead in his collar began to steam. '*–in.*'

Fumes began to curl from the flexible rubberised joints of his armour. Furax smashed his fist against the wall as his blood caught fire with agony. The other Iron Warriors watched in silence through the viewing block of the bulkhead as he reached down with trembling fingers and tried to affix his helmet back in place. The collar seals binding his helmet to his gorget were distorted, preventing it from closing.

'I–' Furax choked. 'Iron.' He flung his helmet away, its surface deforming and trailing thin strings of silver as the metal liquefied. He vomited a black coarse sludge that stripped the paint from his armour as it spilled down his chest. The gold and jet hazard striping adorning the plates ran together, melting into a foul ochre slick. His brothers were stalwart sons of Perturabo, yet their mettle was tested as they watched the flesh slough away from Furax's skull, spitting black froth and slithering free from the bone.

'*Hnnng*, *iiirron*.' The words came as little more than a wet rattle hissing from between disintegrating teeth. Furax staggered to his knees. His left arm slid loose from his body, splashing into a spreading pool of chemical soup.

In moments, the warrior that had been Furax was gone. All that remained was a fused lump of molten iron and dissolved flesh, roughly in the shape of a

legionary. Nothing, even the bones of his skeleton, remained intact as the lump bubbled away into a noxious froth on the floor of the sealed chamber.

'Iron without,' said Furax's brothers, a whispered eulogy offered over yet one more casualty of the Long War, before they turned to the shadows to make their way out of the ruins of their ancient bastion.

Theron strode onto the embarkation deck, making speed towards the *Pilum* as he locked his weapons to the magnetic strips running down the outside of his thigh and waist. The gunship had finished refuelling, its teams of attendant servitors withdrawing as the vessel made ready to depart the *Light of Iax* once more.

'Brothers?' Theron strained, still finding the word difficult to ascribe to his new charges.

'We stand ready, brother-sergeant,' came the reply, as a pair of giants appeared from behind the Stormraven.

Melos and Iason were even larger within their armour. They dwarfed Theron, encased in wargear that resembled some strange melding of that of an Assault Marine and one wearing Tactical Dreadnought plate. Heavy assault packs perched upon their shoulders, surrounded by stabiliser vanes. Iason wore a helm of the same design as the other Primaris Marines beneath the protective cowl of his armour, whereas Melos looked out from a hardened sphere of ceramite, taking in the world around him through a narrow vision slit. Bulky hydraulic boot plates extended beneath their feet, snarling with powerful servos that caused the pair of Primaris Space Marines to bounce with every step taken.

Iason bore a modified heavy bolter in each fist, cut down in scale so that each was only slightly larger than a storm bolter, and able to be operated single-handed. Each of the cannons trailed ribbons of ammunition to underslung box magazines hidden behind ceramite shield plates that protected all but the weapons' protruding barrels. Melos was armed with a pair of plasma guns of new design. They appeared to Theron to be similar to the weapon used by Helios, but where the Chaplain's pistol was a tool of war created countless centuries ago, these were a refined reflection, gleaming from recent birth in the Martian forges and bulked to match the scale of the warrior bearing them.

Theron now understood the discipline shown as the two warriors had drilled close combat, using only techniques possible with closed fists. The weapons they held promised an impressive amount of firepower, but limited the Inceptors' options if an opponent closed to melee range. The sergeant looked to his own implements of war, and thought of how he felt most at home in a battle bringing

his chainblade to bear against an enemy's throat. He would need to adjust his tactics to lead Iason and Melos, in order to maximise their capability on the battlefield.

'Time is against us,' said Theron. 'We need to get aboard and deploy immediately.'

'Our armour is designed for extra-orbital insertion,' said Iason.

'We have made the necessary modifications to the *Pilum*,' added Melos. 'We can proceed via attachment points on the hull and once we reach the planet's atmosphere, we can deploy as our protocols and training dictate.'

Theron donned his helmet, sealing his expression away behind the crimson ceramite mask. His visor display flashed to life, bathing his retinas in tactical data readouts and detailed analysis of his surroundings.

'However your protocols dictate, embark.'

The assault ramp of the *Pilum* rose to seal as Theron stepped aboard. The deck beneath his boots thrummed as the Stormraven's drives spun up. He felt the bones of the destroyer heave, rattling as she manoeuvred against the larger cruiser drawing down upon her.

'Get us to the surface,' he ordered up into the cockpit.

'Compliance,' came the flat, lifeless reply from the gunship's servitor pilot.

The *Pilum* shuddered as it lifted into the air. A building whine from behind Theron became a roar as he locked himself into a restraint throne in the crew bay, alone with his thoughts as the Stormraven blasted out into the void.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

In a maddening rush, Helios' senses returned to him.

His armour's auto-senses recalibrated, flooding his retinas with a wash of emergency icons. He checked the chronogram at the edge of his visor. Only seconds had transpired, yet the scene before him was wholly different to what it had once been.

The entire landing bay was on fire. Flames gushed like ink spreading through water from ruptured promethium tanks, ignited by the sparks of crashing metal and fed by pockets of trapped air still within the frigate.

The void beyond the hangar doors was turning at a violent speed, sending cargo crates and loose debris flying about in all directions. Through the flames, Helios could see the lighter was intact and still within the bay. He began to move towards it, as a titanic groan and a chorus of shearing metal pitched the world forward.

The internal gyros of the Chaplain's armour whirred and locked as he fought to recover his balance, the magnetic soles in his boots keeping him upright. He felt the tendons in his legs strain and torque as he started to struggle towards the lighter. The small shuttle began to slide towards the open bay doors, sparks fountaining from its landing claws as they ground against the deck plating.

'Seneca,' Helios called out over the vox, the fire and debris that filled the air interfering with his ability to locate the squad's armour transponders. 'Ariston, Nicanor, if anyone can receive me, respond.'

Tongues of flame hissed against his armour, blistering away the ebon paint on its plates. Warnings trilled at the corner of his eye, informing him of dangerous

internal temperature spikes within his suit. Helios bent forward, resisting the gale of escaping air, and pressed on.

Helios spotted a glimmer of cobalt in the corner of his eye. His visor display detected the transponder of a warrior approaching from behind him, manoeuvring through the collapsed network of twisted rebar.

'Kyros,' Helios called out through the flames. Turning back, he activated the power field of his crozius, hacking away at the debris that separated him and the Primaris Marine like a jungle world primitive clearing a path through suffocating foliage. With a snarl of effort, Helios pried away the remaining tangles of burning metal, and Kyros moved to his side.

'Brother.' Helios gave Kyros a curt nod and gestured towards the shuttle. 'We must make haste, the ship is coming apart around us.'

The Primaris Marine's helm was a mangled ruin, one side badly crushed and oozing a sheet of dark blood from a spider's web of fractures. The area around his left eye had been torn completely open, exposing a bright orb of bloodshot hazel. They began to push forward through the inferno, watching the lighter as it slowly slid towards the void, further from their reach.

'Salvation is just ahead of us, Brother Kyros,' said Helios, the flames marring the vox into a static wash. 'We will make it!'

They heard the clatter of armoured boot steps, and a trio of Iron Warriors emerged into the hangar. Seeing them, Kyros came to a halt.

'Leave them,' said Helios. 'The ship shall be their grave. Our destiny lies beyond here.'

Kyros did not move.

'Kyros!'

'Go, Brother-Chaplain,' said Kyros. He hefted his bolt rifle in one hand, and drew a melta charge in the other. 'These dogs will meet their end at an Ultramarine's hands.'

'Leave them, you fool, this is not the time!'

'Brothers,' said Kyros across the squad-wide vox. 'Remember me, and suffer no enemy. We march for Macragge!'

Helios watched Kyros charge back, catching one last glimpse of the Primaris Marine before a burst of screaming flame filled the space between them.

'Kyros!' Helios roared, fighting between running after his squad member and withdrawing to the shuttle. The melta charge detonated seconds later, making the decision for him.

The blast hurled Helios back clear from the deck. Kyros' ident rune vanished on

his retinal display. Helios hissed an angry benediction between his teeth, and refocused. He disengaged the magnetic locks of his boots, leapt up and aimed himself at the lighter, arrowing his body and reaching for the shuttle as it slipped through the doors.

With a sharp bleat, Helios' armour sealed against hard vacuum. He triggered his inbuilt thruster pack, grimacing as an impotent sputter was the only response. He blink-clicked the command again, and again, his frame shuddering as the damaged propulsion unit struggled and failed to comply. The lighter slipped further away.

Prayer worked from his lips as he closed his eyes. Opening them, Helios calmly gave the command. His thrusters coughed and threw him forward with a burst of frantic force, sending him hurtling in the lighter's direction. But he was approaching too fast. Far too fast.

The shuttle rushed up before him, flashing into view as he rolled. The impact nearly drove the air from his lungs as he struck the port side and skipped down its downswept wing and towards the back of the fuselage. Helios twisted, reaching out to seize hold of anything on the craft's hull to stop his momentum. His fingertips scraped against the lighter's wing, gouging shallow tracks into its metal skin, but it was not enough to slow him. He lost hold, and began to slip away from it.

An arm shot out as he lost contact with the hull, taking hold of his wrist in a vice-like grip. Another grabbed him by the collar, hauling him forward through the open rear hatch of the Arvus.

A single red lumen gave thin illumination to the interior of the lighter. Helios saw Ariston and Nicanor crouched within the cabin, the latter reaching forwards to help Caprico pull the Chaplain the rest of the way inside before sealing the rear hatch behind them.

The Primaris Marines had stripped the Arvus of everything not absolutely essential to clear space, yet still the hatch could barely close with their combined bulk. Lighters such as the Arvus were light cargo ferries, not designed with the dimensions of Space Marines in mind, let alone the even larger Primaris brethren. Seneca was crushed into the forward section, having torn the control throne out of the cockpit to allow himself access. The twin engines on either side of the shuttle's main fuselage ground and protested, sending reverberations through the hull as Seneca attempted to bring the tiny vessel's systems online.

Caprico looked back to the cockpit as the hatch sealed. 'We have him.'

‘*Zeta Four through Eleven stand by for monotask*.’ The vox rang harshly within Zosime’s helm as she curled her Hell Blade back away from the *Damnatio Memorae*.

‘*Execute attack run on opposition Destroyer – Hunter-class*.’

She snorted a nosebleed back into her nostrils. The squadron, or rather what was left of it, had been sprinting between the two vessels since the engagement began, surging forward to harass the enemy destroyer before falling back to intercept the salvos of ship-killing torpedoes it fired. Fighter by fighter, their numbers dropped, lost to the enemy’s defensive cannons or in suicidal crashes to destroy torpedoes.

Zosime ran a cursory diagnostic as she aimed her Hell Blade back towards the enemy ship. Her fuel was dwindling, dangerously approaching empty. Her autocannon had long since starved of ammunition, while her lascannon was malfunctioning from overuse, locking as often as firing as its internal systems were frying to slag a shot at a time.

The destroyer expanded in view as Zosime approached, a stout crenelated spear of cobalt and gold. The colours meant nothing to her. She had no hatred for the warship’s crew, the world they hailed from or the masters they served. Zosime had fought ship to ship inside the storms of the Eye. She had made war alongside warbands of disparate demigods, and turned upon them moments later when the whims of her master had changed. To her, this was only another enemy.

Triangular icons blinked on her auspex display, as more Hell Blades from the squadron joined her in the attack run. Zosime mouthed words to the spirits of the grasslands, a prayer whose feeling she remembered from the world of her birth. Ranges ticked down on her consoles, bleeding the distance between them away as she hurtled towards firing range.

Zosime’s thumb hovered over the firing stud of her lascannon as the targeting reticule flushed crimson. ‘Dancers dance,’ she whispered.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Genesis Chapter squad had ceased all vox transmissions, relying upon Adeptus Astartes battle sign to communicate as they stalked through the shattered walls of the city. Jovian peered around an abandoned barricade and into the streets within. Trails of smoke coiled up into the sky. The fires were still burning.

Orbaun had been, in the years after the surface of Quradim had deteriorated, the largest Imperial settlement on the planet. Nearly one million souls called it home, eking out a meagre existence scraping what little of worth they could find from the hive city ruins. Since the coming of the Iron Warriors, what had been a destitute slum had degraded into a warzone.

Gunfire crackled in the distance. An artillery shell struck nearby, jarring the rubble that was strewn across the cracked streets. Jovian's visor alerted him to movement, a column of dark figures marching in time three streets ahead.

Contact, the Apothecary signalled calmly to the warrior on his right. *Infantry. One hundred metres. No Adeptus Astartes.* The Space Marine gave a curt affirmation, and passed the warning along the squad.

The Genesis Chapter squad halted, going to cover in a ragged line. Flavius looked around the chest-high mound of broken masonry he crouched behind, scanning ahead. He swung back into cover, turning to the rest of the squad behind him.

Advance. Move in twos. Observe vox silence unless enemy force increases. Restrain bolter fire against mortals. Conserve ammunition.

The Space Marines signed their understanding and readiness. Two paired off

instinctually, leaving Jovian to move at a crouched run to stop next to Flavius. The sergeant gave Jovian a short nod from his battered helm of cobalt blue.

They broke from cover. Rubble crunched beneath their boots as they pounded down the street. Flavius stopped at a corner of the intersection where Jovian had seen the enemy pass. Jovian crouched behind him, signalling back to their brethren that they were clear to advance.

Jovian felt Flavius tense, hearing a sound from within the building they stood beside. Jovian heard it an instant later. Two soldiers, speaking in low voices, stepped through a doorway onto the street.

Jovian's combat blade punched into the first soldier's chest, parting the flak armour vest like paper. A sharp twist of the knife reduced the heart to pulped ruin. The second made to shout an alarm before the Apothecary's hand smothered his face. Jovian tightened his fingers, feeling the man's skull collapse in his grip and then his body hang suspended from it. Slowly, he lowered both of the dead soldiers to the ground, laying their corpses in a heap back inside the building.

The second pair of Space Marines reached their position, training their weapons down the length of the street. One turned, his hands a concise blur.

Inbound infantry. Platoon strength. Small arms. One heavy weapon. Thirty metres north-west.

The sergeant nodded, signalling to fire at ten metres, when the enemy would be most exposed and unable to find cover before they were annihilated. Jovian racked the slide of his bolter. Flavius held out a hand.

Three rounds only. Close distance. Then blades.

The Apothecary gave a nod. They would need what little ammunition they had for when the masters of the mortal infantry arrived.

Twenty metres, signalled the other pair. *Fifteen*.

Flavius held up three fingers, lowering one, then another, before making a fist.

Jovian leaned out into the street, bolter raised. Targeting reticules crystallised into view across his visor, locking to the first ranks of infantry as they marched down the street. He thumbed the selector on his boltgun to semi-automatic, and squeezed the trigger.

His shot took the first soldier in the neck, punching clear through and into the man behind him before detonating. The second soldier burst as the warhead exploded inside his chest, setting off the bandolier of grenades on his shoulder and killing the men around him in a cloud of disjointed blasts and scything shrapnel. Three more shots joined the Apothecary's from the rest of the squad,

reducing the front ranks to piles of ragged meat and viscera.

The janissaries, raised from birth to fight in the servile armies of the Iron Warriors, scattered. They scrambled for whatever cover they could find, firing bursts of small arms in the Genesis Chapter squad's direction. Another volley of four bolter rounds slashed out, claiming more of the janissaries as they reeled.

Jovian advanced beside Flavius. Every few steps he would stop, levelling his boltgun. The threat of further bolter fire was enough to send the enemy shrinking back as the two Space Marines sprinted from cover to cover. Chips of rock exploded around them while they moved, as the forces in thrall to the Iron Warriors returned fire.

Jovian had faced mortal soldiery in service to the Ruinous Powers many times before. They had attacked like a tidal wave, a screaming mass of abused humanity, some of them armed with nothing more than bits of sharpened metal or worn industrial tools and most with only their hands and teeth. He had fought the thralls of the Word Bearers, fanatical wretches with obscene gospel gouged into their flesh. The mortal servants of the Death Guard had been a wholly different foe yet just as repulsive, eaten through with sentient plagues that had reduced them to mindless, shuffling horrors.

Compared to those opponents, the human army of the Iron Warriors was a different species. The slave soldiers moved with tactical discipline and training, advancing in order by squad according to the orders of their subcommanders. They supported each other's movement, granting cover with accurate volleys of autogun and lasrifle fire. When they faced the Space Marines in open firefights, the engaged janissaries withdrew behind the suppressing fire of their rearguard, circling around to attack anew from flanking positions or waiting until they could call upon armoured support.

They also bore equipment that more closely resembled an Astra Militarum unit than a mob of frothing zealots. Each soldier was armoured in flak, with webbing for grenades and ammunition and even a loose semblance of a uniform. Their leadership even communicated by vox, rapidly coordinating to manoeuvre their forces against the Genesis Chapter. They were the closest to a reasoned, professional fighting force that Jovian had engaged in thrall to the Ruinous Powers.

Even so, they fell in droves against the Space Marines. The might of the Adeptus Astartes was simply too far beyond the capabilities of any force of mortal humanity to withstand. Bolts blew bodies apart. Genehanced muscles cracked skulls and shattered spines. The Emperor's Angels of Death reaped a

devastating tally against the janissaries of the Iron Warriors.

Jovian had one round left to expend upon the enemy. He glimpsed a hurried grouping of soldiers at the rear of the engagement, struggling to set up a lascannon emplacement. The weapon traversed as it was locked to its tripod, glowing with building charge as the thick, segmented cable fed it energy from the power cell beside it.

Blinking away the other targets cluttering his vision, Jovian took aim and fired. The bolt failed to strike any of the gunnery crew, but they had not been its target. The shell penetrated the housing of the power cell, rupturing it as it exploded and killing a swathe of janissaries in a blinding flash.

A bayonet snapped against Jovian's shoulder guard. He brought his elbow up, clubbing it into a soldier's chest and inverting his ribcage in a snarl of splintering bone. The man collapsed without a sound, dead before he struck the ground. The rest of the janissary's squad rushed him, hoping to unbalance him with the sheer weight of their numbers.

Jovian swept his chainsword out in a wide arc. Blood splashed his armour in a spraying torrent as he bifurcated four bodies. Another died, his face shattered by a blow from the butt of the Apothecary's bolter. Formidable as they were, Jovian could spare no more bolter ammunition for their kind, especially ones confronting him at hand's reach.

A snarl escaped Jovian's lips as a barrage of las-bolts peppered him. Such fire would normally fail to trouble him, but with his armour in such an impaired state, shots were finding their way through cracks and broken sections, scalding his flesh and cutting it down to the bone. He shuffled behind cover as a Chimera ground to a halt at the corner of the street, panning around its turret-mounted multilaser and opening up with a storm of crackling energy blasts.

'Brother,' Jovian wheezed, pressing a gauntlet to his side and bringing it away bloody. 'The enemy has called in light armour.'

'I have them,' came the reply over the vox.

Jovian peered around his cover, seeing the red-armoured figure of Flavius leap atop the Chimera's roof. The crash of bolter fire drowned out the dry snaps of las-fire as Flavius targeted the multilaser. After a burst of exploding shells, the gun fell silent. The Genesis Chapter Space Marine tore the hatch from the turret, dropping a grenade down into the vehicle's interior. Muffled screams were silenced by the crump of the detonation and a plume of rising smoke. Flavius stood atop the tank for a few moments as it burned beneath him, firing his bolter into the routing infantry fleeing the street.

Jovian moved up to the smouldering Chimera, converging upon Flavius with the rest of the squad.

'We must exploit this advantage while we can,' said Flavius, crunching down to the pavement. 'The bulk of the enemy will have consolidated in the city centre. Orbaun is the last bastion for the planet's civilian population. We must repel the Iron Warriors, if the people are to stand any chance of life beyond death or chains.'

The Apothecary looked across the cratered streets and crumbling buildings. As if waiting for his gaze, a tower collapsed, sinking with a plaintive groan into a slowly climbing cloud of smoke and dust. 'Where are they?'

'There is a network of subterranean shelters beneath the city,' said Flavius. 'We moved as much of the population into them as we could when the enemy began their invasion.'

'Is that where Librarian Hesiod is?' asked Jovian. 'Is he among them below?'

'Yes, he has taken what is left of the garrison and withdrawn there to fortify the position.'

'He is resigned to a last stand, then?'

Flavius grunted. 'What do you think we have been doing, Brother-Apothecary? While we fight here, Hesiod labours to send word for aid, but the immaterium revolts, and has thus far succeeded in resisting his efforts.'

The Space Marines looked to their weapons, reloading bolters and scraping away the gore from where it clogged the workings of their blades. Jovian went from warrior to warrior, checking wounds and applying his skills wherever he was able. He felt each of his brothers' gaze upon him as he worked his ministrations, watching the gene-seed canisters bound to his armour.

All of them turned when the flash lit the city streets. The brothers of the Genesis Chapter watched, their eyes raised to the heavens as they witnessed the unthinkable.

The collision occurred in orbit, too high for them to hear it happen. It appeared as a shimmer, a single bright pulse of light that obscured any detail before flickering away into the early night sky. Framed by the milky shards of Quradim's shattered moon, Jovian and his kindred watched the *Excelsior* die.

Pieces of their frigate spread away, like a hand stretching its fingers. Some would fall to the surface, trailing fire before striking the ground, adding more wreckage to a ruined world. Others would spin away into the void, forgotten in the darkness.

None of them spoke. Hope was not something a Space Marine could grasp with

any comfort, one of countless parts of his humanity sacrificed to convert a child into a weapon. Yet, upon seeing his ship destroyed, their means to depart from Quradim in some rare contingency denied with finality, Jovian felt something cool within his chest. He would continue to fight, there was no question of that. Fighting was his purpose. But like seeing a brother fall, his progenoids beyond saving, Jovian felt an irreplaceable part of the Chapter slip away, lost and never to return.

'We need to keep moving,' said Flavius, seeking to rally the squad's focus. 'Should the enemy discover the entrances to the shelters, they will seek to take what they can and kill all else.'

The squad formed up, with Flavius on point and the others flanking Jovian, as they set off deeper into the city. The Apothecary felt his kin's instinct to safeguard him, and what he carried. They knew well that a stray blast or lucky blade could end them at any moment, and that Jovian was all that stood in protection of their genetic legacies' continuation. They could, and very well would die on Quradim, but if the Apothecary survived, they would still have the glory of serving to rebuild the Genesis Chapter's future.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Helios dropped to one knee, the cabin of the shuttle rattling around him as it struggled through the *Excelsior*'s rapidly spreading debris field. He drew in a deep breath, willing relaxation into muscles clenched so tightly that the pain carved through him in an aching rush. Caprico crouched before him.

'Brother-Chaplain,' said Caprico. 'Are you injured?'

'Nothing that will stop me,' answered Helios. He coughed, tasting copper on his tongue.

'Kyros,' said Caprico. 'Did you see him fall?'

'We heard him,' said Seneca. 'In the end, over the vox.'

'He sacrificed himself,' said Nicanor. 'And took enemies with him.'

'We will honour him,' said Ariston softly, staring off into the wall of the shuttle.

'I will sing songs of his sacrifice,' said Caprico. 'Of his glory.'

'Which is greater?'

The Primaris brethren turned as one, looking back at Helios as the Chaplain finally spoke. 'Five, or one?'

The Ultramarines regarded Helios for a silent moment, trying to parse his meaning. Caprico tilted his head. 'Brother-Chaplain?'

'Five, or one?' Helios repeated. 'Which is greater?'

'Five,' said Ariston after a moment. Nicanor nodded in agreement.

Seneca gave a quick glance back from the control panel. 'Five.'

Helios looked towards Caprico. 'And you?'

The Primaris Marine considered the Chaplain for a second. 'I agree with them, Brother-Chaplain. Five is greater than one.'

‘Five.’ Helios reached out, the fingers of his hand spread apart. He tapped his fingertips against Caprico’s breastplate. ‘Or one?’ Helios closed his fist and thudded it against the same spot, sending a clang through the shuttle’s interior.

Caprico was forced back an inch, not from the blow, but from the import of the Chaplain’s meaning that was beginning to dawn upon him.

‘The lions of Macragge are rulers of the plains,’ said Helios. ‘Undisputed in their grandeur and lethality. But what would they be, if you took their eyes, or their hearts, or their teeth? Broken things, cast down and forgotten. The squad is those lions. Each of you alone may be formidable, but when each fights alone to his own purpose, you are weak. Together, you form something that cannot be defeated.’

Helios’ eyes settled on Caprico. ‘You will sing songs of Kyros, who forsook his brothers and our mission in the name of glory? What song shall you sing, drowning in your blood from the foe that Kyros would have stopped, had he been at your side? What will you sing then?’

Silence answered the Chaplain. Helios looked to each of the Primaris Marines in turn. ‘Our primarch did not send us here for glory. He sent us to prevent the very collapse of the Imperium of Man, and the extinction of our race. How did Kyros achieve that, running to his doom, begging for remembrance? What servants of the Throne did he save? What worlds?’

Caprico’s head lowered. Nicanor looked away, while Ariston continued to gaze upon the far wall. Helios laid a hand upon Caprico’s shoulder guard.

‘Each Ultramarine is precious,’ said the Chaplain, his tone softened but undiminished in fervour. ‘As the ranks of our enemies continue to grow, we must only sell our lives for the greatest cost in service to mankind. The burden upon us is all-consuming, and it is our destiny to fall, but never in arrogance. Our lot is to serve, and suffer in place of those we are sworn to protect. There, together with our brothers in the midst of that suffering, is where we shall find our glory.

‘We shall not forget or dishonour Kyros,’ said Helios. Caprico looked up, meeting his gaze. ‘You will remember him, and this truth that his folly has taught you. You will bind yourselves to the brothers around you, and together you will become greater.’

Helios raised his fist. ‘Together, you will become one.’

The Hell Blades swarmed upon the *Light of Iax*. A sphere of icy gold flashed over her hull as her void shields were dappled by lascannon fire. Bolts of energy stitched out from along the spine of the Imperial warship as her defensive

batteries returned fire against the Chaos fighters that orbited her like wasps.

'Four Zeta.' Zosime snapped a switch over her head. 'Moving in for another attack run.' She checked her auspex for nearby fighters. 'Request support from Seven Zeta.'

'*Seven Zeta*,' came the static-drenched reply. '*I have your port flank covered, Four Zeta. Ready to engage.*'

A feral grin lit beneath her mask, Zosime urged her fighter into a dive towards the destroyer. She relished the rare sorties that allowed her full control over her craft, the opportunity of maximum expression of her skill as a pilot. She weaved through the chaos of the battle, holding her fire to save the precious shots remaining in her lascannon until she stood the best chance of inflicting lasting harm.

A blinding lance strike from the *Damnatio Memorae* knifed into the destroyer's ribs. The enemy's shields lit and wavered, unstable and intermittent as they defied the overwhelming amount of energy assailing them. They guttered for an instant, leaving the warship open, and Zosime fired.

Each shot rattled the Hell Blade's hull. A brace of crackling bolts slashed out, scoring a line of direct hits along the destroyer's battlements. Eye-blink explosions sent puffs of blue wreckage streaming out into the dark.

'Hit!' Zosime crowed. She hauled the control yoke to her chest as return fire blurred across her nose. 'Seven Zeta, pull out. They have me targeted.'

'*Four… Come in*.' the vox came in and out in Zosime's helm. '*Sev–'*

'Seven Zeta,' Zosime hissed, grimacing as she swung her fighter in evasive manoeuvres. 'Seven, respond!'

The ident rune for Seven Zeta vanished from the auspex. Zosime swore under her breath. 'Command, this is Four Zeta. We have lost Seven Zeta. Request permission to–'

Zosime felt as though her Hell Blade had been kicked by a Titan. The fighter jolted, thrown violently from its axis. Zosime fought with the controls, using all of her strength to stabilise it. The craft's responses were sluggish, drifting as another blast sparked against her port side.

'I've been hit!' Zosime flinched as a jet of sparks burst from her instrument panel. A dozen separate alarms wailed and screamed over each other. Another hit cracked her skull against her throne and suddenly the Hell Blade was spinning. Her vision blurred and began to narrow as the centrifugal force pulled the blood from her brain. There was a flash of light, followed by the greasy whiplash of dislocation and then a rush of all-consuming silence.

‘Got you,’ the gunnery officer smiled as another icon symbolising an enemy fighter blinked out.

‘Bring us around,’ Rayhelm shouted above the din of the bridge. Her hands flew over the controls of her throne, furiously issuing commands to several parts of the *Light of Iax*’s crew at once. ‘Get us underneath it. We can’t hold if they get us in a broadside.’

The destroyer heaved, pitching crewmembers and robed Chapter-serfs from their feet as the void shields absorbed another lance blast. The screeds of hololithic projections surrounding the shipmistress darkened with damage reports in lines of throbbing red. ‘Balance power to the engines and shields, get us clear of that prow lance!’

Decades of combat training and battle experience flooded through Rayhelm’s mind. There were very few scenarios of an escort-class vessel engaging against a cruiser-class alone, for reasons that were blatantly obvious. The sheer difference in tonnage bordered on hilarious.

Less entertaining was the accuracy of the Chaos warship’s weapons batteries. After watching their foe, confirmed by augur coding to be a Murder-class cruiser of unknown age, smash through the *Excelsior* and leave it behind as bits of wreckage, Rayhelm had ordered a full burn to the engines, plotting a meandering course that would put the Ultramarines in a position to effect planetfall without jeopardising her ship. Even with their advantage in manoeuvrability, the enemy had still managed to slash away the *Light*’s void shields nearly to collapse.

‘Status report from the embarkation bay,’ said Rayhelm. ‘Has the *Pilum* launched yet?’

‘Yes, ma’am,’ answered an officer. ‘We have just received confirmation that Lord Theron is away, and en route to the surface.’

The shipmistress breathed a short sigh, before tapping a tattoo against her runepads. ‘Good. Get us clear from orbit. Follow these coordinates. We need to gain distance from that beast and balance the engagement to our advantage. Ordnance?’

‘Ma’am?’

‘Do we have torpedoes?’

‘Yes, ma’am.’ The gunnery serf looked back to the spool of parchment issuing from a servitor’s head. ‘Tubes one and six are loaded and primed to fire.’

‘Get them in the void,’ she replied, consulting the tactical hololith for the area surrounding the *Light of Iax*. She had been firing torpedoes as quickly as they became available, both to inflict damage upon the cruiser and to keep the

swarms of its fighters occupied acting on defence, rather than raking her hull with lascannon fire. A few of the small ships had managed to break through, though not in great enough numbers to inflict harm before they were overcome by the destroyer's spinal point defence batteries.

Rayhelm experienced an uncomfortable sense of relief, now that the Ultramarines had fully deployed from the *Light of Iax*. Her mind had enough urgent, life-threatening demands upon her attention as it was, and knowing that the lords of Macragge were loosed to take their fight to the enemy meant she could focus fully on doing the same.

The fate of Chaplain Helios nagged at her then. She still had no way of knowing what had become of him, but voiced a quick prayer on his behalf, that he and Seneca's squad had somehow escaped the disaster that had befallen the *Excelsior*. In these times, the Imperium needed the Space Marines more than ever.

'Mistress!' The call came from the forward pits. Rayhelm could not be certain where. It was a warning that hardly needed to be given, the threat clear to anyone with a view of the armourglass above as the Chaos cruiser began to roll in the void.

'I see it,' she snapped. Her mind raced with a dozen commands at once, as their foe spun to present the macro batteries along its pitted flanks. 'Navigation, come about, heading nine-five. Signal the enginarium we need to redirect power to engines. Void shields to maximum, reallocate to forward screens.'

Scanners wailed as they tracked the building charge that lit the barrels of the monstrous cannons targeting them like miniature stars.

'Brace for impact!'

The lights along the enemy cruiser's length dimmed for a fraction of a second before firing. The cannons flared with the discharge, sending blinding smears of liquid plasma rocketing down over the *Light of Iax*.

'Get me more power to engines!' shouted Rayhelm. 'We need to get clear of–'

The shipmistress' words were swallowed by the din as two of the blasts made contact. Vision was gone, engulfed in a maddening flash of kaleidoscopic hues as the destroyer's void shields suffered, overloaded and died.

Zosime was alone in the void. She flailed, seeing her Hell Blade corkscrew away out of the corner of her eye before disappearing in a flaring ball of flame. Her arms flung up before her face as twisting wreckage spun in all directions, cracking and shattering as it flash-froze in the void.

The enemy destroyer surged away from her, its engines fully lit as the *Damnatio Memorae* rolled in pursuit. Zosime turned away, shielding her eyes from the blinding flashes of the warships' massive weapons as they duelled in silence.

Protocol overcame panic as she ran her hands over her rebreather feeds. The life support system locked and caught, venting heat and sparks. She fought to control her breathing, remembering the trained method that limited each breath to the minimum necessary to maintain her consciousness.

Wreckage danced and hung all around her, twinkling with the dull light of her surroundings. A tiny piece of creamy white stood out from all the rest, at the centre of a frozen mist of blood. Zosime reached for it, her breathing techniques forgotten, as though her very survival depended upon taking hold of the small item. Her fingertips caught the edge of it, sending it spinning further away before she snatched hold of it with her other hand.

Seeing it up close drove the breath from Zosime's lungs. A roughly carved charm of dirty bone glittered faintly in her palm. Immediately her other hand shot to her own neck, finding her talisman there. The one with the exact same carvings etched into its surface.

Zosime looked back into the shattered cockpit. The faceplate of the pilot's helm had been torn away. Burns and the hard vacuum of the void had ravaged the face, but in spite of it all she recognised it. Shock stole all thoughts of Zosime's dwindling oxygen as she saw her own eyes staring back at her.

Why couldn't she remember anything? No home. No family. Just a vague sense of images, like dreams that flitted through her mind between the times her masters stirred her to fight.

Zosime wasn't thinking about the cold overcoming her flesh and leeching into her bones. She was not thinking about how tired she was becoming, how hard it was getting to breathe. She could not take her eyes off herself, as her heart stopped beating.

Why couldn't she remember anything?

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Of all the myriad sensations taken from the mind of a Space Marine by enhancement, training and the experience of war, powerlessness struck Theron in a blow all the colder for its unfamiliarity. He watched, shock radiating through him as surely as the abrasion of atmospheric entry, as Melos and Iason leapt from the wings of the *Pilum* and sailed down through the flames.

'Brothers?' said Theron into the vox, gripping the pilot's control throne and peering at the Inceptors as they streaked like comets. 'Broth–'

'Brother!'

The last of the orks falls away from me, a clotted smear of smoke and alien blood plummeting to the earth. It takes more than its own gore down with it. Pain throbs from my side where its axe found the join between ceramite plates. I know from the way it stabs at my breath that my ribcage is open, but I push the thought aside.

I focus my mind upon the blue shape falling ahead of me, and fall after him.

My helm has taken too much damage. My visor swims as it plays over my eyes, overlapped with runes and distorted with static. I cannot determine which of my brothers I am pursuing. For a moment I consider removing the helmet, but I am moving too fast, and need it to remain conscious.

I need to be conscious to reach him.

Even with armour in pristine form, my attempt would be a lunatic's errand to any reasoning soul. Attempting to catch my falling brother in mid-air in the midst of battle would not be dissimilar to striking a bullet with a second bullet within the eye of a storm gale. The posture of my kindred, slack and pushed to

every angle by the buffeting crosswind, indicates unconsciousness. He rotates around a gust of wind, exposing his crimson helm.

Pomibius. The revelation banishes any thoughts of theory from my mind. Only brotherhood remains.

Flak chatters past me from some unseen source, bursting close enough for me to feel each stuttering detonation. A pair of land speeders, resplendent in Chapter blue, zip beneath me, weaving around the grasping chains of weapons fire to discharge some of their own. Now they are above me as I fire my jump pack to send me down faster. My lungs ache.

The ground is fast approaching, I need no instrumentation to tell me that. Memories and the experience of live drop training, done without the aid of retinal displays, posits that I have perhaps thirty seconds before I will touch the surface, in whichever manner that may occur. I will need five to reach Pomibius.

When we finally collide, it is in an ungainly twisting of limbs. After a moment of vertigo-laced spinning, I manage to claw hold of my sergeant, chest to chest. Oriented with boots to the ground, I fire my pack. The engines on my back scream, their whiplash and my brother's added weight snapping my head forward into his.

I feel fingers tighten around my vambrace. I release the breath I had not realised I was holding. My brother yet lives.

'Follow them in,' said Theron, leaning back from over the pilot station. The servitor droned an affirmation, the frame of the *Pilum* groaning as it tilted gently behind the pair of Primaris Marine drop troops.

'The Ultramarines are here.'

The words hammered the Conclave into silence. None of the members of the council of Iron Warriors dared to be the first to speak after the Warsmith had uttered those words.

'My Warsmith,' said Zikon, careful to adopt as measured a tone as possible. 'Their numbers are few. A single squad on the frigate, which in all likelihood has joined it as shards in the void. The dawn of the rift has spread their numbers thin, that may have been all that the false emperor had spared here.'

'No,' growled Bolaraphon. 'We have all of us done battle against the wretched Thirteenth. We will hate them, we will visit annihilation upon them, but we will never underestimate them. Until every remnant of them is gone from this place, they remain our sole attention.'

Zikon swallowed. 'If we maintain our course, they shall fall before us as surely

as their thin-blooded cousins have. We need not alter our campaign, one that is achieving victory because of the strategy you yourself have implemented. Do not let these lapdogs sway you from prosecuting this war the way you know.'

The legionary exchanged a glance with Beniah. The lieutenant inclined his head. 'I can see the wisdom in our brother's words, my Warsmith. Certainly, our circumstance demands that we only increase the very discipline you have instilled within us. Now should be the time for caution, to gather and rebuild our power, all the better to destroy our foes at a time and place of our choosing. And yet…'

Beniah stood. He faced Bolaraphon, and shrugged aside the mailed cloak from where it hung over his left shoulder. Beniah held his left arm aloft for all within the Conclave to see, a hissing mass of silver pistons and spinning cogwork that extended into a bulky knot of machinery merged with his breastplate. 'And yet, I remember the day the sons of Guilliman first came to this world. The battle that saw our companies shattered beneath the arrogance of a primarch who had been too craven to stand upon the walls at the siege, but fully prepared to sweep forward once the battle was decided and lord over the ashes.'

A thudding clang shook the table as Beniah's augmetic fist punched down. 'I remember the creation of a debt that day. A debt in our brothers' blood. A debt that has left our own master unable to leave his armour and live. A debt of vengeance and honour, one that has yet to be paid.'

The array of augmetic systems that had replaced the Warsmith's heart thrummed. The rubberised collar of his Terminator armour shook as rage ticked at the flesh of his face.

'Ten thousand years,' Bolaraphon hissed. 'That is how much time has passed since we faced the lord of Ultramar. *Ten thousand years*, I have borne the shame, the indignity of that moment.' He looked to his warriors then, light glistening from his iron grey eyes, before settling on Beniah. 'You speak of a time and place of our choosing? I choose *this* time. I choose *this* place. And I choose the means that was created by the hands of our own Legion to be their undoing.'

The Conclave remained silent. Iron Warriors shared hurried sidelong glances with one another, keen to avoid their master's gaze.

'And what of Furax?' asked the Warsmith. 'Has he succeeded? Has he found them?'

Beniah paused. 'We have received contact from Tybald, my Warsmith. He and his squad have scoured the ruins of the planet's hive city and discovered where they had been stored, but the vault was empty.'

‘And Furax now makes speed to stand before me,’ said the Warsmith. ‘To face my judgement for his failure?’

‘A measure of the substance seems to have remained within the chamber. Furax did not survive.’

Bolaraphon exhaled through his teeth, his talons rasping against one another. He was silent for a moment, before looking up to glare upon his assembly. ‘The only fitting punishment for failure is death. Iron does not forgive. Ever. So it was for Furax, and so shall it be for us all.’

Beniah hammered his fist against his chest in the old salute.

‘The cache has been moved, then,’ said the Warsmith. ‘If our enemy knows of its existence and where it lies, then we shall pry that knowledge from their dying breaths. If they are ignorant of it, then they will perish all the same. I care not what colours stain their armour, they are all Ultramarines. I care not for the mortals they protect, they are the slaves of Ultramarines. And none shall rest until they are annihilated. All forces will be committed to the surface at once. I want this world devoid of life, all life. Is that understood?’

The Conclave stood, saluting with a clashing tattoo of armoured fists. Bolaraphon glowered at his warriors. ‘The time for caution is gone. Go forth, my brothers, and see our debt repaid.’

Trailing flame and guttering smoke from its engines, the Arvus lighter streaked across the night sky of Quradim like a falling comet. Its path was not so much flight as it was a controlled fall, its systems damaged beyond repair during its escape from the *Excelsior*’s death rattle.

A thousand shooting stars stretched across the firmament as the wreckage of the Genesis Chapter frigate hit the atmosphere and caught fire. Those fragments large enough to survive re-entry struck the barren world in a disjointed shower, a scattering of scorched detritus that had once conquered the galaxy, ten millennia past during the days of the Great Crusade.

The Arvus struck the ground with a modicum more grace, but not by much. Retros in its nose spat short gasps of gas and flame, as Seneca battled in vain to try to edge away at the velocity the shuttle had accumulated in their dive from the heavens. Each firing of the braking jets rattled the compromised hull further, shearing away hull plating and snapping sensor vanes. The port side engine flamed out completely, nearly taking the entire wing assembly with it, and it was only by the Primaris Marine’s sheer force of will that the lighter did not slide into a blinding spin in the moments before it hit Quradim’s surface.

The first impact was a chest-deep hammer's blow that rattled through the iron-hard bones of each of the Ultramarines within. It bounced the shuttle a metre into the air, skipping like a stone as its weight drove it back down in a less severe, yet still jarring crash. The Arvus clawed a deep gash into the ashen soil of Quradim, finally grinding to a smoking halt as its momentum at last bled away to nothing.

Muffled clanks and bangs issued from within the lighter. The rear hatchway buckled, and stripes of red emerged from the inside of the metal that drooled molten iron in a fizzing spray. The tip of a golden eagle's wing punched through the hatch, sizzling within its energy field as it sawed down across the panel and cut the door in twain. Compromised as it was, it took but a single kick from the enhanced strength of a Primaris Space Marine to tear the hatch from its hinges and send it tumbling across the earth.

Nicanor lowered his boot and stepped out first, panning his newfound surroundings with his bolt rifle. Ariston followed, then Caprico, Helios and finally Seneca, dislodging himself from the shuttle's cramped cockpit. The Primaris Marines fanned out immediately, establishing a perimeter, none taking a moment to cast off the cramps clenching their muscles from the transport's confines. Helios approved of their discipline.

The Chaplain looked up, gazing into the heavens. The night sky dazzled from the void battle being waged between the Chaos warship and the *Light of Iax*, while Quradim's shattered moon glittered like waves of displaced starlight behind it. Helios could only pray that Theron had made for the surface before the attack, and was even now learning the truth of the Iron Warriors' presence here.

The stretch of desolate earth around the Ultramarines was abandoned for kilometres in every direction. Nothing disturbed the surface save errant gales that swirled the black dust into brief veils of grit before guttering out. The desiccation endemic across Quradim when viewed from orbit was magnified once on its surface, like a body robbed of its organs and left to harden and crumble away in a defiled grave.

'This planet's geology is in a state of severe upheaval,' said Seneca, his voice a distracted murmur as he pored over the data streaming across his retinal display. He pointed north towards the impression of narrow mountains in the distance, vaguely visible through a sky that churned with dust storms. 'But even with the errancy of our crash, we are within fifty kilometres of the world's hive city capital.'

‘Then that is where we will go,’ said Helios.

‘And what is it that we are looking for, Brother-Chaplain?’ asked Ariston.

‘All shall be revealed in time,’ replied Helios. ‘Have faith, my brothers, in the mission our primarch has sent us on.’

The Chaplain’s vox crackled as Seneca opened a private channel between them. ‘Faith is all well and good, but I do not believe it would be necessary if the squad was made aware of the parameters of our task.’

‘I cannot give you those orders without violating my own,’ said Helios. ‘Our mission is… delicate. I will elaborate as my own commands allow, I assure you of that.’

‘As you say, Brother-Chaplain.’ Seneca closed the link.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Howling furnace heat enfolded him, shrouding his body as if he were swimming within a roaring ocean of flame. He felt the conflict of passing from void into sky warring over and all around him, vast forces that shook violently through his Gravis armour all the way to his bones. His faceplate was sealed to protect his eyes against the blinding vista before him, and so he trusted in his instruments and his training to maintain his alignment and guide him on his path down to the surface.

The tremors shifted as Melos at last passed from vacuum to air in a wash of atmospheric turbulence. The vision slit in his faceplate unlocked, withdrawing down into its housing to reveal the gentle curve of Quradim beneath. It truly was an ugly world, pitted and dark like a skull caved in by a brother's rage. Yet to Melos, it was beautiful. He would find a realisation here. Fulfilment. Here on this horrid rock, he would find an enemy, and test ten millennia of preparation and waiting against them.

Iason broke into the atmosphere beside him, trailing a delicate stream of dissipating vapour. The array of small vanes protruding from his assault pack tilted and twitched, continuously adjusting his free fall just as Melos' own suit did. The twin Inceptors rolled around each other in a practised dual orbit, anticipation and potential stinging their blood with more vitality than any combat stimulant.

The auspex on Melos' retinal display pinged, representing the feedback returning to his armour as it threw out waves of invisible energy into the sky around them. The readout on the periphery of his visor drew Melos' eye as a

large metallic object appeared on his scopes, moving below them at speed.

'Contact,' said Melos. He studied the return as his armour's systems compressed and packaged the data before beaming it into Iason's. 'Auspex coding for it does not match any known Chapter designation.'

'*That is because it does not belong to the Chapter, brother*,' replied Iason. Melos could hear the rush of expectancy in his kindred's voice. He was speaking in clipped, breathless bursts, just the way he did in the last moments before they began combat drill. '*Rather, it belongs to our enemy.*'

Melos' weapons creaked in his grip. *Our enemy.* No more combat servitors, no more simulations, no more dummy charges loaded into his plasma exterminators.

'*We should hold*,' said Iason. '*The* Pilum *is not far behind us, the Codex dictates that–*'

An efficient burst of thrust carried Melos up and ahead of his brother. He rolled, gently easing his muscles from the cramped state brought on by atmospheric entry and into the relaxed, ready state necessary for combat. Melos fired another blast from his assault pack, shrinking the distance between him and this newly discovered threat.

Breaking through a layer of acidic cloud, Melos finally achieved a visual of the target. It was a large aircraft, avian in form and swift in speed. He recognised it immediately as a Thunderhawk, the ubiquitous gunship among the prior generation of the Adeptus Astartes. The vessel was ancient and cunning, with millennia of war to hone its mettle. Melos triggered visual enhancement on his visor, enlarging the gunship while he pored over its every detail.

The craft dwarfed the *Pilum*, its scale nearly twice the size of their Stormraven. And it bristled with firepower. Heavy bolters protruded from the nose like fangs, and from the tips of its wings like talons. Rockets and bombs were pintle-mounted beneath these downswept pinions, while its shorter secondary ones were tipped with lascannons. Most devastating of all was the turbolaser built into its spine. A cursory scan estimated its power output as capable of despatching armoured targets, and even engaging Titans.

Silver script was etched into the nose of the Thunderhawk, beneath a stencilled icon of a riveted iron skull on a chipped crimson field. Melos recognised it from his training briefings. He focused on the text, a blunt cuneiform he was not familiar with. His translation software quickly decoded it: Olympian. The system recognised the language, before blinking saltires censored the script on the display.

…<EXCOMMUNICATE TRAITORIS>…
…<EXCOMMUNICATE TRAITORIS>…
…<EXCOMMUNICATE TRAITORIS>…

Olympia, birth world of the Iron Warriors. Space Marines enslaved to darkness and in rebellion against mankind.

'It is the Iron Warriors, brother!' Melos could not keep the savage glee from creeping into his words. 'Do you think there are rebel Adeptus Astartes within?'

'*It could be empty for all we know. Whether there are or not, we should hold*,' insisted Iason. '*I just attained visual of it and that thing is dripping in guns*.'

'Where is your sense of adventure?' laughed Melos. 'Ten millennia asleep, and you have no wish to put our training to the test?'

'*I have no wish for my first engagement to be my last one*,' said Iason. '*We should be smart, as we were trained to be, and wait for the* Pilum *to support us*.'

The enemy gunship was close enough to detect the two Inceptors, Melos knew. Though with the upheaval in orbit, and the rain of detritus streaming through the sky, they would be nearly impossible to isolate on auspex. Not before it was too late.

'You saw the fate that befell the *Excelsior*,' said Melos darkly. 'If Seneca and the Intercessors are lost, then the enemy has struck the first blow. I will not stand by here, waiting to take part in a conference before we respond. The enemy has cut us, and I shall take their blood in kind.'

'*Brother!*'

A blink cut the vox-link to Iason. Melos streamlined his fall, making his body into a missile as he dived towards the Iron Warriors gunship. As he had theorised, the debris-laden skies had masked his presence, even as he hurtled within one hundred metres. Melos fired a final burst of thrust, risking detection to launch himself right on top of his enemy.

No more theoretical. Now, nothing but the glorious practical. War, his life's work, lay before him. Here and now.

At last.

Melos struck the Thunderhawk, splintering its viewing blocks with his weight. The nose of the ancient gunship pitched down from the sudden unbalancing, its engines and manoeuvring thrusters shrieking to reorient the craft. The Thunderhawk's pilot recoiled in his command throne, shouting frantically while the servitor stations attended their tasks in slack ignorance.

Azure light crept over the focusing coils of Melos' plasma exterminators in a building tide, washing the bowl of his blast shield in their glow.

‘For the primarch!’

The first shots splashed against the ablative ceramite armour, coating the Thunderhawk’s hull, blasting it away to smoke and atoms. The next salvo reddened the hull plating itself, slowly liquefying the superstructure until it began to drool and spit from the roof of the cockpit.

An alarm chimed in Melos’ helm, alerting him to a colossal concentration of energy directly in front of him. The Inceptor threw himself low against the shattered viewing blocks. An instant later, the Thunderhawk’s spinal turbolaser fired. An eye-aching bolt of jade energy screamed over Melos’ head, blistering the paint on the turbines of his assault pack.

The Primaris Marine laughed. ‘Too slow.’

Melos levelled his weapons downwards. Another burst of plasma bolts shredded through the canopy and into the control bay. The blasts mushroomed outward, immolating the crew and setting fire to the cockpit. Consoles sparked and exploded. Smoke burst upward, enveloping Melos and streaming behind the gunship like a mane of wind-ravaged hair.

Shapes appeared out from the Thunderhawk as the fire in the cockpit rushed through the interior in a string of secondary detonations, glinting silver and gold in the wan light of Quradim’s sun. Contrails of oily exhaust trailed behind the dull roar of ancient thruster packs as a squad of Iron Warriors clambered up onto the wings. Melos held his breath for a moment, analysing his new adversaries. He saw their warped plate, the horns and fangs jutting from their armour, the nauseous patterns worming across the ceramite as though they bore life of their own.

To Melos, they appeared as mutated barbarians. Enraged relics from an ancient, unreasoning epoch in time. Unbidden, his mind thought of the Chaplain, Helios.

‘Confirmed enemy, brother,’ said Melos. ‘Raptors!’

The Chaos Space Marines braced, sinking clawed boots into their vessel, and opened fire with bolt pistols.

Mass-reactive rounds zipped past Melos like angry hornets. Most went wide, their trajectories fouled and curled aside by the howling crosswind. One bolt cracked against Melos’ right shoulder. He felt it as a punch, but his Gravis armour was proof against the exploding warhead. The burst of smoke whipped across his chest, dispersing rapidly in the air.

The Raptors used the momentary distraction to bound forward. They loped across the hull of the Thunderhawk, dragging themselves forwards with their claws like simians as they closed the distance. Chainswords and axes flashed in

their claws.

Melos drew down upon one. He fired his plasma exterminator, the bolt disintegrating the Iron Warrior's chest in a flash of smoke and thunder. The smoke whipped back, leaving nothing but a collection of orphaned armoured limbs. The dead warrior's arms and legs lifted on the air and spun, twisting away at the mercy of the wind.

The other Iron Warriors closed into a semicircle around Melos. The fanged maws of their gunmetal helmets, wrought to resemble howling daemons, stretched unnaturally wide. The Chaos Space Marines sank into wide crouches, threw their arms open, and *screamed*.

Somehow, Melos not only heard their cries, but felt them. His retinal display crazed with interference, his armour's auto-senses struggling to identify and curtail the damage assailing him. The screams hammered against his body with unnatural force, unbalancing him and throwing his feet out from under him.

Melos struck the hull face first. Stars exploded in his eyes. The wind clawed at his armoured bulk, dragging him to one side of the fuselage in a squeal of abused ceramite.

Struggling to clear the shock from his head, Melos looked up, and found himself staring into the pitted death mask of an Iron Warrior. The Chaos Space Marine rolled his shoulders forward, and long, curved blades extended from the traitor's engraved gauntlets. More of the creature's brethren crowded behind it as crackling worms of lightning danced down the claws.

A sharp tone sounded in Melos' helm. Without thought, the Primaris Inceptor's training seized control of his body, and he twisted to one side.

The Iron Warrior howled above Melos, but this time not in anger or triumph, but in pain. The screaming teeth of a chainsword ripped into the back of the Chaos Space Marine's helm. Blood and bone fragments sprayed from the wound, coating a face already cast in crimson.

Theron wrenched his weapon free, firing a burst from his bolt pistol to scatter the other enemies from him. The dead Iron Warrior lost his purchase upon the hull, falling back into the turbine engine of the Thunderhawk. The engine exploded, pitching all of the Space Marines from their feet. Theron scrambled back to a standing position, locking his boots to the hull and whirling to face the enemy as they clawed their way back into melee range.

The Raptors recoiled as a volley of bolt shells crashed around them. A blue-armoured form shot past, curling around the back of the stricken Thunderhawk to come around again.

‘*That is why I told you to hold,*’ snapped Iason. ‘*You impulsive fool.*’

Theron threw himself back into the sky, and Melos leapt after him, both firing their thrusters to put distance between themselves and the enemy. The Iron Warriors divided their numbers and took to the skies in pursuit. Greasy smoke vomited from the cylindrical turbines on their backs as they swarmed upon the Ultramarines.

One of the Chaos Assault Marines smashed into Melos’ chest like a missile, punching forward with a roaring chainaxe. Melos’ head wrenched back against his armoured cowl, sparks spraying as the axe’s teeth chewed against the blue slab of his faceplate. He strained, twisting his right arm around to bring his plasma exterminator in line with the warrior’s back. A blast ruptured one of the Iron Warrior’s tubular thrusters, sending him corkscrewing away before exploding in a burst of flame and shrapnel.

Steam hissed from his plasma gun in an angry cloud, the air above the weapon’s energy cells undulating with heat. Melos swung it into the bare face of an unhelmed Iron Warrior, the Chaos warrior roaring as the burning coils scorched his pallid, discoloured flesh. A kick from Melos sent the traitor hurtling back, towards where Iason’s ident rune blinked on his visor display.

‘Brother!’

Twin chains of bolter fire stitched out in answer, blowing the Iron Warrior apart into a scud of plummeting debris.

Melos blink-clicked an acknowledgement to his kindred, before whirling around to face the next attacker, plasma guns ready. But the enemy were gone. He looked to his altimeter. The fighting had distracted him from how low and how rapidly they had descended. He angled his face towards the earth, eating up the distance left in the fall.

A city had sprung up beneath them. The Thunderhawk was tumbling down towards it, set to crash. Flames blazed from its engine and its ruined cockpit like some fire-breathing beast of old myth. Melos could not see detail from his current altitude, but he could see pillars of smoke rising from the settlement, traced to fires that still blazed.

There was war raging in its streets. Something below still lived to resist the Iron Warriors.

‘*Brothers,*’ said Theron, his tone calm and even amidst the chaos surrounding them. ‘*We must make for the surface.*’

A waypoint icon blinked to life on Melos’ retinal display, marking a small square towards the centre of the city. ‘*Form up to touch down here. We did not*

neutralise all of the opposing force. They are now regrouping, and will reach the city before we do. Be prepared for ambushes, and adhere to evasion protocols. When they strike anew, we will all fight as one. If there are allies still battling on Quradim, we will find and support them.'

'*Acknowledged, brother-sergeant,*' said Iason.

'It will be done, brother-sergeant,' confirmed Melos. The Inceptor blinked, his mind going to his training to re-establish his breathing and ease the lactic build-up from his muscles. He heard a soft click in his earpiece as a private channel opened.

'*We fight together, Brother Melos,*' said the sergeant. '*Or we die alone.*'

The link cut, leaving the Inceptor with his thoughts as he finished the remainder of the drop in silence.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The squad of Ultramarines moved across the desolate rocky landscape of Quradim in a silent file. The surface of the Imperial world was treacherous to navigate, the ground unstable and prone to collapse from the tremors that reached up from its erratic core. The squad had to double back many times over, skirting about massive sinkholes that descended all the way down to the impenetrable darkness of the planet's depths.

They passed the remains of great machines, left to moulder away or half consumed by the disintegrating earth. Excavators, drilling rigs and extractors the size of battle tanks littered the area around them. In the near distance they could see flattened sprawls of twisted scaffold, the squat broken shells of iron and rockcrete that had once been thriving ore crushers, refineries and manufactoria.

'There was great industry here, once,' said Nicanor.

'Indeed,' said Seneca, one eye trained upon the horizon while the other consulted the data readout detailing Quradim's past. 'This world was laden with tithes for raw materials, after surveys had uncovered its vast mineral wealth.'

'A grand bounty of the earth,' said Helios. 'Bestowed by the Emperor for His servants to hold in stewardship.'

Ariston watched a colossal drilling rig as its rust-caked bulk settled further into a crumbling pit. 'It strikes me oddly that the Master of Mankind would desire such that would end in ruination here.'

'We must all give of what we have to preserve His dominion,' said the Chaplain. 'Without the ore and minerals of Quradim, the nearest forge worlds would have starved, depriving humanity of the weapons and ships needed to

combat the mutant, alien and heretic. The survival of all eclipses the fate of a single soul, and even a world, and so Quradim gave all that it had. It was far from the first to do this, just as it will be far from the last. A sacrifice is not true unless the cost to the one who gives it is great.'

'Get clear!'

Jovian heard the rushing scream of dying engines before he saw anything. He went low, looking over his shoulder to seek out the source of the din.

A flaming Thunderhawk breached a bank of noxious cloud, dropping like a stone from the sky. Jovian noticed the iconography adorning it, and the golden hazard striping on the few parts of it that had not been scorched down to bare metal. It belonged to the Iron Warriors.

The Thunderhawk barely crested a block of crumbling tenement towers, snapping sensor vanes from their rooftops that sparked against its underside. It listed to one side as it struggled to remain aloft on one catastrophically damaged engine. One tower clipped the edge of its main portside wing, sending it into a whirling spin as it smashed into the streets with a meteor's force.

A deafening explosion ripped through the avenue. The main fuselage of the Thunderhawk shattered. Its fuel cells detonated, feeding the fireball with gushes of igniting promethium. Individual parts of the gunship were torn free and sent pinwheeling in all directions from the central explosion, showering the surrounding area with flaming shrapnel.

Jovian ducked as a portion of the starboard auxiliary wing scythed past, coming to a halt as it smashed through the ground floor of an abandoned machine shop. He craned his head, scanning the sky beyond the flames. Just before the crash, he had sworn he had heard gunfire, far above, just within reach of his armour's auto-senses.

His visor struggled to detect anything with any degree of accuracy, such was the volume of debris filling Quradim's skies. Much of that belonged to the wreckage of the *Excelsior*, drowning them in a downpour of its carcass. Combined with the turbulent, storm-wracked atmosphere, Jovian was better suited trusting his own eyes, rather than the limitations of machines.

When he glimpsed a cluster of reflective bits, tiny dots in the distance, he paused. All trailed fire, like comets with burning tails.

The flames adjoined to these shapes pointed towards the earth.

'Jump packs,' murmured Jovian.

Flavius moved beside the Apothecary.

‘Where?’

Jovian lifted his hand, pointing to the spot in the sky with his chainsword. Then he was staggering, his breastplate afire, the crashing of exploding bolts all around him.

‘Contact!’ shouted Flavius, firing up as he dragged Jovian back by his collar. ‘Return fire!’

Blood was pumping from a hole in Jovian’s chest, dark crimson spilling over the charred white of his breastplate. He had not taken the full brunt of the detonating shell, meaning it had burst against the surface of his armour rather than penetrating it first. He knew that, with certainty, because he was still alive.

Jovian’s armour was already addressing the wound, teasing pain suppressors and chemical narcotic boosters into his bloodstream. The Apothecary disabled them, knowing that their reservoirs were near exhaustion. Instead, he simply allowed the pain to endure, in all its knife-edged agony. He drew a capsule of sterile clay from his webbing, crushing it in his fist and packing the wound with it. The seal would falter and break after a few minutes, and even quicker during combat, but it would give his physiology the time it needed to work towards clotting and reknitting the flesh.

‘Can you stand?’ asked Flavius as he hauled Jovian behind a low wall. A bolt-round zipped over their heads, clanging off the walls of the abandoned tenement they sheltered within. ‘Can you fight?’

‘I breathe,’ said Jovian, grasping hold of the wall to drag himself up to one knee. He bit down on the pain stabbing at his hearts and racked his bolter. ‘I fight.’

‘Raptors,’ murmured the sergeant, his blue helm twitching as it tracked the skies. ‘I count five – correction – six.’

‘Are there any with meltas or flamers?’ asked Jovian.

Flavius peered over his cover, snapping off a pair of shots before swinging back behind the wall. ‘Yes.’

‘They need to die first.’

The sergeant gave a short, mirthless chuckle. ‘Agreed.’

Jovian rose from his crouch. Pain constricted his lungs, white hot. He shut it out of his head, gripping his weapon as the whine of turbines filled the air.

The Raptors struck the street in a loose pack, the asphalt cracking between their talons. Suppressing fire swept out from bolt pistols as one of their number shuffled forward, his gait some uncanny melding of man and predatory beast. The Iron Warrior cradled a bulky weapon in its claws, pulsing with a faint mauve

sheen as it gathered charge.

'Disperse!' Flavius was already up and moving when the meltagun fired. A cone of hyper-agitated air burst from the Raptor's weapon, disintegrating the wall. A scalding wave of ozone washed over Jovian as he rolled, ignoring the hurt that drove the air from his chest.

Steam shrieked from the meltagun's casing as the Iron Warrior prepared for another shot. One of Flavius' squad mates rushed towards the Raptor with his combat knife raised, but the distance was too great to cover before the heretic fired. He fell without a sound, a perfect hole burned through his chest.

Jovian fired a burst at the gunner, forcing him back but failing to kill him. He locked his bolter to his thigh, drawing his chainsword as the Iron Warriors gathered to close the distance. His attention was brought away from the heretics and up into the sky, as once more he heard the deep rumble of powerful engines.

A wave of exploding bolts crashed over the Iron Warriors, killing two outright and wounding a third. The Raptors scattered as a massive blue shape shot overhead. Jovian recognised the stout, boxy silhouette at once as a Stormraven gunship, but not in the livery of the Genesis Chapter. This one was adorned in cobalt and gold.

'Ultramarines!' called out Jovian.

Flavius advanced, seizing on the disruption. 'What are the Primogenitors doing here?'

The noise of more assault packs filled the air as a trio of blue-armoured forms fell to earth. One Jovian knew as an Assault Marine, a sergeant by the red helm he wore as he laid into the Iron Warriors with bolt pistol and chainsword. The other two, however, were of a kind the Apothecary had never seen before.

Two behemoths stood behind the sergeant, head and shoulders taller than him and wearing exotic, bulky armour. They looked as though they wore portions of Terminator plate, though they moved with an agility that was impossible to those clad in the wargear of a Chapter's elite. Each of them bore weapons in both hands, one of them armed with a kind of bolter, the other some unfamiliar design of plasma cannon.

A Raptor leapt towards the plasma gunner, levelling his flamer and loosing a screaming blast of liquid fire stained an unnatural jade. The massive Ultramarine spun through the cone of emerald flame, his war-plate scorched but inviolate against its searing heat. A teeth-itching whine built in his handheld cannons as he fired a barrage of plasma that liquefied the Iron Warrior where he stood.

Jovian pressed the advantage, moving alongside Flavius to crush the heretics

against the force of Ultramarines. He rammed his chainsword into the belly of an Iron Warrior, who lowered his guard to wrestle against his grip just enough for the Apothecary to punch his carnifex through the traitor's throat. A power axe hacked into his shoulder, driving him to his knees, but the second massive Ultramarine rounded on Jovian's assailant, blowing him apart with a deafening volley of bolter fire at point-blank range.

The last Iron Warrior left standing was the meltagunner. The Raptor hissed out a keening wail from his fanged helm before shooting into the air. The Ultramarines sergeant leapt up after him, seizing him around the chest. He killed his own thrust pack, using his weight and leverage to haul back and hurl the Chaos Space Marine over his shoulder and back down to the ground.

The Raptor struck the earth awkwardly, and the sons of Roboute Guilliman descended upon him. Burnished gunmetal armour shattered and flew in all directions as he was hacked apart by blades and bludgeoned by clubbing fists. The sergeant crunched down onto the street, aimed his bolt pistol at the heretic's head, and blew it from his shoulders.

A strange silence descended over the gathering. Jovian and his brothers stood, staring at their forerunners who wore the colours and iconography that existed back in the time when the Emperor walked the earth. He finally saw the ravages marring the sergeant's red helmet, gouges and burns that did not match the rest of his armour, yet made the emerald of his eye-lenses burn all the brighter. By comparison, his hulking charges looked pristine, as though this was their first taste of war.

'Cousins,' said the Ultramarines sergeant. His gauntlet banged against his breastplate as he saluted his fellow sons of Guilliman. 'It grants us a boon, seeing you here.'

The Genesis Chapter squad returned the salute. Flavius stepped forward. 'Just as it does us to find you on Quradim. We were not expecting any from the Birth Chapter, though we take it with thanksgiving, considering the other visitors we have received.'

Flavius gave the corpse of the Iron Warrior at their feet a light kick. 'Do you know why they are here?' he asked. His blue helm settled on his fellow sergeant. 'Why are *you* here?'

'What are you?' Jovian murmured, his eyes poring over these strange new Ultramarines following in their sergeant's wake.

The lead Ultramarine removed his helm, revealing a battle-worn visage and dark, hard eyes. 'You have as many questions for us as we have for you, cousins.

For now they must wait. Tell me of what has happened here, and I promise you, we shall find the answers to them all in time.'

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Ten thousand stand against the living shadow. Ten thousand, where before there had been twice that number, and even more the time before. How many fewer will there be, when this failure forces him to rally again?

He puts the thought from his mind, knowing his focus is fragile enough, and that the storm before him savours the taste of doubt.

He is one mind, manifest across ten thousand projected forms. Many, yet alone. His will shall make them charge into the crucible together, again. He will feel every one of their deaths, as they fall to black crystal fangs and claws made from final mortal thoughts, as clearly as if it is his own. In a way, it very much will be.

Ten thousand of him stand upon the airless plain, beneath a sky the colour of blood. The shadow of the adversary rears up, an undulating wall that reaches upwards into infinity. His many forms gather, a host of candles lost at sea amidst a storm-tossed night.

The immaterial world functions on senses that are wholly alien to those of the flesh. The sights before him are not truly there, merely a framework that his sanity enforces to conform to the limits of his understanding. He feels without feeling as the storm resists his advance, flensing apart the foremost multitudes that wrack him with an agony not of his body of skin, nerves and blood, but of his very soul.

There is no sound, no real sound, yet his ears can hear the lowest of chants scrape at the edge of his perception, echoing throughout his host.

The message. The message. The message.

One by one the projections of him fall, struggling to fight their way through the

darkness. Primordial malevolence obliterates swathes of them with half-formed savageries. As each body of light vanishes, those that remain grow brighter, strong enough to force a wedge into the centre of the storm.

He refuses to feel pride at the apparent sense of progress. He will not allow himself to dwell upon the staggering rate of loss upon the astral field, and the psychostigmatic pain it is inflicting. More than anything else, he refuses to acknowledge that everything is happening just as it had before.

In the blink of an eye, for time passes so strangely there, ten thousand become one hundred. He fights the animal urge to look away, as he watches his own face swallowed by sentient ink, again and again. Laughter begins to drown out the message, he can hold it back from his mind no longer.

Fifty.

He is drowning now. Drowning again as he had the last time, and the time before that. His lungs that are not lungs fill with water that is a slurry of lost souls bent to an unliving will.

Ten.

He has failed again. He cannot break through. The storm is too strong. He has to get out. He has to get out. He has to get–

'My Lord Hesiod?'

The Librarian's eyes slowly opened. A film of bloody tears gave way, yielding to allow the bloodshot orbs to witness the wan light of the chamber. The polished stone floor was cool, the silence only softly disturbed by the sounds of the surface above. His serf appeared at his side, the concern on his face tempered by fatigue. The psyker looked little better, gaunt and drained beyond any conceivable exhaustion, the sole reason he yet lived being his elevation into post-humanity.

'Did you succeed, master?' asked the serf, daring to allow the barest edge of hope to his words. 'Did the message get through?'

Hesiod squeezed his eyes shut, cracking the crust of blood that had trickled from his eyes to dry upon his face and mat his beard. 'No. The warp is too strong.' The Librarian spoke with a dead man's rasp. 'I must rest, before the next attempt.'

'Is there no other way?' asked the serf. His weathered crimson robes marked him as a Chapter servant, the icon of the Genesis Chapter branded on the flesh of his face.

'There is no other way,' answered Hesiod. 'My brothers die, the people under our protection die, or languish in chains. Without aid, all here is lost. The

message must be sent. I must keep trying.'

'Even at the cost of your life?'

Hesiod leaned his brow against the silver haft of his staff. 'Even then.' He looked back at his thrall, the dim light turning the blue of his armour black. 'There is no other fate for us.'

The capital hive of Quradim loomed before Helios in all its forsaken grandeur. Or rather, what was left of it.

Half of the monolithic city was gone. It had been shorn in two, one part lost to the breathtaking sinkhole that spanned clear to the horizon, the other canted at a precarious angle over the precipice. Cut away, the cross-section of the hive was revealed, and it was a fitting term. Millions of tiny chambers and arteries crushed atop one another in a maddening honeycomb, where countless billions had lived and died without ever seeing the world that existed beyond its walls.

Helios could not help but think of the skeleton of some titanic beast, its husk too grand to move and thus left to bleach as a monument to some apocalyptic struggle of the forgotten past.

'I feel as though we embark to rob a grave,' said Nicanor. 'What could we possibly hope to find here?'

The sprawl around the base of the hive was even more devastated. Those unable to find space in even the most decrepit of the vast city's subterranean depths dwelt outside its walls. These districts spilled outwards, forming an increasingly dense slum the limited resources of the hive could never hope to control. Tenements were built from improper materials, and without the means to safeguard their integrity in the event of any seismic event. When the surface of Quradim revolted, these places had been nearly wiped from existence.

The Ultramarines moved through narrow streets cast into perpetual twilight by the shadow of the hive. Its scale was incomprehensible so close, the tips of the foremost remaining spires lost in the ochre clouds. Dust swept over them in whipping curtains, dulling the rich cobalt of their armour until it was reduced to a chalky cerulean.

'It is quiet,' said Ariston from his position a few paces ahead of the rest of the squad.

'This is likely among the targets the enemy struck first,' said Caprico. 'Kill any resistance, take the population into bondage. They were scavenging aboard the *Excelsior*, and their warship appeared to be damaged. Perhaps they were driven here, having taken flight from somewhere else.'

‘Careful, brother,’ warned Helios. ‘Do not risk placing yourself within the mind of the heretic. That is a path that leads only to corruption. They have turned their backs upon the Imperium, and pledge their oaths to our extinction. Such foes are not to be understood, only destroyed.’

Caprico racked his bolter. ‘I can do that.’

The Chaplain smiled behind his skull mask. ‘Aye, brother. We all will.’

After a handful of hours, which saw the gloom of Quradim’s night pass into another weakly lit day, the Ultramarines reached the walls of the hive. Vast sheets of ruined architecture reared over them, discoloured by rust and erosion. Helios’ vision of an ancient beast felt all the more suitable, as they stepped within its carcass.

The silence of the hive was monumental. There was not a total absence of sound, but those few that there were seemed only to enhance the quiet’s disturbing weight. Wind rattled through abandoned districts, stirring dust and chemical fog. Acid rain plinked from some unknown height, crackling weakly against decaying metal. Rent segments of iron plating snapped and tumbled away in a disjointed crash that echoed across the city’s bones.

‘Where do we go?’ asked Nicanor.

‘What we seek lies deep beneath the city’s foundation,’ said Helios. He spread his arms wide. ‘This was once Litsob, the planetary capital. Its vast hive was built atop a more ancient structure, and that is where we must go.’

‘Are we certain our objective is still here?’ asked Caprico. ‘That it was not lost in the hive’s collapse?’

‘That we will have to learn first-hand,’ answered the Chaplain. ‘To do so, we must descend.’

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

‘What are they?’

Flavius’ words mirrored Jovian’s own thoughts as he knelt beside his brother’s corpse. The Apothecary spared a glance at the pair of enormous Ultramarines as they stood in conference with their sergeant.

Servos whined and caught as Flavius lowered himself on the other side of the body. ‘A new armour type?’

‘It’s more than that,’ said Jovian without looking up. ‘The armour is different, true, but so are their bodies. They are taller, broader. Something has happened to their gene-seed, or theirs is of a different formulation altogether.’

‘No Space Marine Chapter would *ever* countenance mutants,’ said Flavius.

‘Well,’ muttered Jovian as he broke the collar seals and lifted the helm away with as much reverence as he could. ‘These are new and remarkable times.’

‘Holen,’ Flavius said quietly as he saw his dead brother’s face. He watched, his expression lost behind his impassive blue helm, as the Apothecary applied his reductor and harvested the gene-seed from his throat.

Jovian reverently attached the vial to his armour, placing it beside his other brethren. His hands searched along Holen’s chest, above the horrible wound that had killed him.

‘Praise the primarch,’ Jovian sighed. The wound from the melta blast had cored Holen through the abdomen, but it had struck him low enough that the progenoid within his chest had survived. The reductor snapped into the charred cavity, ejecting the fleshy lump into another armourglass vial to be stored with the rest.

The Apothecary rested his eyes for a moment. The vial clinked against his

armoured fingers. After so much loss on this world, defeat after defeat, the chance that Holen's legacy might live on in a new Genesis Chapter warrior buoyed his soul.

'Another warrior goes to his rest.'

Jovian and Flavius turned, looking up at the Ultramarines sergeant, Theron. He had yet to replace his helm, and his face bore a contemplative aspect as he beheld the harvest. It was clear to Jovian that it was a ritual the Ultramarine had seen many times before.

'His name was Holen,' said Flavius. He moved with care as he took grenades and ammunition from the body. 'A proud son of Newfound. He had served under me for twenty-six years. An excellent warrior.'

'May the Emperor watch over him,' said Theron. 'Now that we cannot.'

Jovian looked over the armour. Even ravaged by battle, and with its torso components destroyed, the suit of crimson ceramite was still a priceless artefact, an irreplaceable treasure now that the galaxy and its defenders stood upon the brink. 'What of the armour?'

'We can load him onto the *Pilum*,' said Theron. 'There is little space aboard, but there is enough.'

The Ultramarine extended a hand to Flavius, and the sergeant took it at the wrist as he stood. 'You have my thanks.'

'We march for the inner city,' said Jovian. 'The remaining population not killed or enslaved has taken to the shelters there, and it will not be long before our enemy discovers them.'

Theron muttered into his collar. A muted response crackled from his earpiece. 'The *Pilum* is inbound. I had ordered it to perform reconnaissance flights over the city, to give us a picture of what strength is arrayed against us.'

'And do you know why the Iron Warriors are here?' asked Flavius.

'No,' answered Theron. 'We did not know of their presence when we arrived here. But it appears they are looking for something.'

'Then you did not receive our message?' said Flavius.

Theron gave a single shake of his head. 'Nothing. Everything that we were told led us to think we would find a quiet garrison world.'

'Until the enemy came here, you would have been right.' Jovian stood. 'What is it that you came for? What do the Ultramarines want from Quradim?'

Theron hesitated. His mouth opened, as if to reply, when the air howled with the noise of his Stormraven overhead.

'Here.' Theron reached down towards Holen's body. 'Let me help you carry

your brother.'

Helios grasped at a tangle of industrial cabling, careful to distribute his weight evenly as he climbed down the sheer gap between hive city levels. The structure of the hive had been so warped and deformed by the planet's tectonic upheaval that the schematics and maps beamed onto his right eye by his armour's systems were of limited use now. Chambers that had once adjoined the ones he scaled were gone, torn fragments of tenements and machine shops and all the other myriad structures crowded within its monolithic walls; others had been ripped loose and strewn into a confused mound far beneath like a mangled industrial trash heap.

Every movement was precarious. Girders buckled and groaned under the Ultramarines' weight. Handholds crumbled. The Space Marines moved with speed, unwilling to test the remaining integrity of any one level for long.

Darkness fell as they passed beneath the ground. They relied upon their enhanced vision, coupled with their auto-senses, to navigate. The sky became an umber half circle, shrinking away the deeper they progressed.

As they descended, the Ultramarines made note of a path leading downwards. Tangles of wreckage had been thrown aside, and fresh tracks disturbed the dust and grime. Seneca knelt beside the boot prints, as large as Helios' and only slightly smaller than his own. He looked up at the Chaplain, who gave the Primaris Marine a short nod.

'Be cautious,' said Helios as he continued on.

Moving down ahead of the squad, Helios placed one boot upon the next level, testing its ability to support his weight. The iron deck plates flexed and moaned, but held. He signalled up to Seneca, who then joined him. The rest of the squad remained on the two levels above, spreading their numbers to avoid causing a collapse.

Moving towards the edge, Helios leaned out and looked down into the abyss. He nudged a rock off with his boot, hearing it clack against the floors and ceilings below before falling out of hearing.

The Chaplain took a slow step back. A rattle from under his boots stopped him. 'Hold,' said Helios, holding out a palm towards Seneca.

The floor disappeared beneath him. The fall was short before he crashed against another barrier, but it was too weak to stop him. The iron buckled and snapped, sending him plummeting again. His vision was obscured by thickets of brittle metal and corroded industrial cabling that snagged and clawed at his armour as

he fell.

This time, the fall was longer, nearly six seconds before he struck solid ground. Helios pushed himself to his knees, shaking his head to clear the blur from his vision. His helm's auto-senses crackled and wavered as they recalibrated while he rose unsteadily to his feet. The dust cleared from around him, revealing his surroundings in the light of his shoulder-mounted luminator.

Helios found himself in an unfamiliar place, one that was entirely different from the maddening claustrophobia of the abandoned hive. A broad, open space crafted from a dark reinforced alloy, it lacked any sign of being designed for either civilian life or industrial production, its scale and austere nature more in line with that of a military compound's marshalling ground or motor pool.

'*Brother-Chaplain?*' Seneca's voice stabbed urgently through the static-laden vox.

'I am unharmed, my brothers,' answered Helios. 'I am on stable ground. Be diligent in your movements, and I shall await you here.'

The vox-link warbled. Helios watched the transponders of his squad above him as they swiftly negotiated the descent to him, the runes winking in and out intermittently. He ignored the interference, flexing his right arm to loosen a patch of fibre bundles that had locked during the fall. Satisfied as some range of motion returned, he checked the charge on his pistol as he glimpsed the barest trace of movement emerge into the space.

'Brothers.' Helios took another step, his grip tightening upon his weapons. 'To me with speed, and be on your guard. There is something here.'

Emerald green eyes pierced the gloom, staring at the Ultramarine from the darkness. The goose pimple thrum of active power armour itched at Helios' teeth. His eyes adjusted to dispel the shadows, picking out a pack of bulky, spiked silhouettes in burnished plate.

'Traitors.' Helios spat the word like the curse it was. He made out the twisted reflection of an Apothecary among their number, as well as one festooned with the bulky whirring apparatus of a renegade Techmarine.

Blue light flashed into the plaza from Helios' pistol and crozius. A salvo of bolter fire slashed out at him in reply, flashing from the protective field projected by his rosarius. The Chaplain spun behind a mound of wreckage, firing back at the shadowy figures with his pistol.

Seneca leapt over the precipice, crunching to the ground, bolt rifle raised as the traitors charged. One of the Iron Warriors shot low, knocking the weapon wide as he fired. The booming report of the bolt rifle reverberated through the empty

space, sending a cascade of dust from the ruins above them.

A grenade clacked at Helios' boots, sending him diving. He was in mid-air as the grenade detonated, the blast wave throwing him several metres clear to crash down in a heap. Tightening his grip on his weapons in a clink of chains, Helios struggled to rise to his feet. His left knee locked, the servos grinding from the impact. With a snarl he threw his weight upright, overcoming the protesting mechanisms to stand.

The rest of the Primaris Marines arrived a second later. In spite of the unconstrained confines of the square, the fighting degraded into a crushing, close order brawl. The Primaris Marines were larger and swifter than their predecessors, and excelled in single combat. Each blow was delivered with enough force to dent ceramite and pulp flesh. But the Iron Warriors refused to bend, trading the advantage in strength and speed for millennia of battle experience that blurred their attacks into an instinctual rhythm.

The light from Helios' crozius shone in a crackling blue sphere around him as he hacked into an Iron Warrior's breastplate. A sharp twist as he wrenched it out split the ancient ceramite, and the Chaplain buried his pistol into the gap, firing and incinerating the traitor's hearts in a blast of scalding plasma. Helios turned, grabbing hold of another heretic's sword arm and allowing Caprico the opening he needed to punch his combat blade into the enemy's throat. The Iron Warrior, his war-plate edged in scarlet and adorned with defiled parodies of the cog icon of Mars, fell in a gushing torrent of his own lifeblood.

Helios heard Ariston cry out in anger and pain, turning to see the Primaris Marine stagger back from a power axe-wielding assailant. His left arm was red with his own blood, hanging from the elbow joint by tendons alone. The other new Ultramarines saw the blow, and experienced an instant of hesitation, as if their minds had not countenanced being vulnerable to such wounds. The moment passed swiftly and the rest of the squad converged upon the attacker, swarming the Chaos Space Marine and swiftly despatching him.

As quickly as it had begun, the fighting was over. Helios moved to Ariston's side and took hold of his savaged limb.

'We cannot save it,' said the Chaplain. He looked up into Ariston's eyes.

The Primaris Marine pushed out a breath, and nodded. Helios lit his crozius, and swept it across the tendons, neatly severing the arm at the elbow. Immediately after, he pressed the flat of one eagle wing blade against the bleeding stump. The wound cauterised in a flash of blood smoke. Ariston did not make a sound, save for the creak of his combat blade's grip in his fist.

‘Emperor preserve us,’ prayed Helios. ‘Allow us the strength to endure, and to conquer Thy enemies.’

A noise from behind Helios sent the Ultramarine spinning on his heel, weapons raised. It was a low, strangled bark, the product of lungs slowly filling with blood. A hunched form in gunmetal, black and gold lay upon the ground before the Chaplain, dark crimson leaking from a dozen points to patter thickly from the plate.

The last of the Iron Warriors struggled to rise as Helios approached. His bulky armour was festooned with warped tools of the Apothecarion, a broken bonesaw grinding as it misfired and chewed at the outer casing of his gauntlet. He made the noise again as Helios made ready to execute him. It was an ugly sound. One that confused Helios as thoroughly as it enraged him.

‘Why do you laugh?’

The heretic spat blood onto the ground. He looked up at Helios, his dull amber eyes alight with defiance and dark amusement. ‘Thunder Warriors,’ he hissed.

‘What?’

The pallid flesh of the Iron Warrior’s face twisted in an obscene grin. ‘That is a name that may mean nothing to you, but we who built your Imperium remember their faces. We remember the purges that were carried out when they were judged obsolete and cast aside by us, the Adeptus Astartes who overtook them. And now, behold, your own replacements have come for you.’

The Primaris Marines gathered behind Helios, looking down upon their stricken enemy. ‘I wonder,’ snarled the Iron Warrior, blood bubbling from his lips with every word, ‘if your precious corpse god will be bothered to carry out the death sentence himself, as he did before. I think not.’

‘You speak only lies,’ snarled Helios.

The Chaos Space Marine laughed harder, despite the obvious pain it caused him. ‘I speak truth to a dog that was never trained by its masters to hear it!’ He choked out the words, growing more hoarse by the moment. ‘History calls out for you, to take your place in the dust and forgotten footnotes. The final days of your kind are upon you, lambs being led to the slaughter.’

The Iron Warrior looked up at the Primaris Marines. ‘How long until you execute your true orders, and cut this wretch and his archaic ilk away like the chaff they have become?’

Rage filled Helios’ mind, surging against the walls of his discipline. He desired nothing more than to kill his enemy, but not quickly. He wanted to draw out the suffering, to vent his wrath and teach the heretic the true meaning of the

Emperor's vengeance.

Just as he felt his control begin to slip, his thoughts went back to a campaign more than a century ago, when he had fought the Word Bearers in concert with the Space Wolves. He remembered vividly watching the Wolves, who after each battle went to great lengths to avenge their fallen by brutalising any wounded foes they came across.

Helios had yet to ascend to the rank of Chaplain, serving beneath his master Chaplain Ithio. The words of his mentor rang in his ears, as clearly as if they had just been spoken.

Remember your discipline, Helios, Ithio had said, as they watched the howling Wolves tear the limbs from a heretic as he still drew breath. *Let it be your anchor when you are tested, for as powerful as rage can be, it is the start of the path to damnation.*

The Chaplain straightened from where he leaned over the traitor, raised his plasma pistol, and executed the Iron Warrior with a blast to the head.

'The slaves of Chaos delight in assailing the minds of the Emperor's warriors,' said Helios as he calmly locked the pistol to his thigh. 'They seek to sow doubt, madness and distrust. Marshal your discipline against their lies. We are Ultramarines, and we shall never waver.'

Nicanor rose from a crouch over one of the other dead Iron Warriors. He returned to the squad, carrying a small dark metal box in his hand.

'What do you have?' asked Seneca.

Nicanor tossed him the box. Seneca inspected it carefully, turning it over in his hands. 'A data core?'

Helios accepted the device as Seneca handed it to him.

'This is ancient. Not Imperial technology, at least not as we know it.' Helios ran a thumb over the casing. 'It resembles a cartographer's repository. If it still functions, perhaps it holds the locations and schematics for other facilities like this on Quradim.'

Helios looked up at Seneca. 'If this was important enough for them to plunder, then it may be of use to us as well.'

'How?' asked Seneca. 'How could something they stole help us?'

'How, indeed.' Helios looked to the squad. 'Form your theoreticals, brothers. What does our enemy seek to do? What are his motives?'

'They are searching for something,' said Caprico, looking around the chamber. 'Something hidden, and ancient.'

'These structures are different, separate from the hive above,' said Nicanor.

‘Perhaps, before their rebellion, the enemy held this world, and built this place.’

‘If they did,’ said Ariston, ‘then they would know what was once here. Something of great value to them they want to reclaim.’

‘Good,’ Helios nodded. He felt the prickle of premonition against his spine. ‘Our path crossing with theirs here cannot be simple coincidence. It is very likely, then, that we are searching for the same thing.’

Helios held the data core aloft. ‘And if it is not here, as both they and I believed, then its location may be held on this.’

‘With respect, Brother-Chaplain,’ said Seneca. ‘This is conjecture. We cannot be sure of that.’

Helios glanced down at the dead Iron Warrior. He reached down and placed his hand in a bolter wound, bringing his fingers away coated in the heretic’s blood. ‘There is a way to be sure.’

Helios undid the clasps connecting his helm to his armour. Seneca and the squad hesitated, before averting their gaze, knowing that a Chaplain was never to show his brothers any face but that of the grinning skull. They heard the rustle of releasing air as Helios removed his mask. They heard his true voice for the first time, without the edge of his helm’s mechanical growl, as he drew in a breath. The Chaplain raised the gore to his lips.

Helios went to his knees, snarling through gritted teeth. His head thrashed inside his armoured collar, spittle flying from his lips. After a moment it stopped, replaced by low, heavy breathing. The Primaris Marines exchanged glances as they heard their leader vomit upon the ground.

‘I was right,’ Helios gasped between self-imposed purges. ‘What we seek, it is not here.’

The Chaplain looked down upon the pool of bile before him as it slowly ate into the ground. Litanies of penitence and entreaties against corruption spilled from his lips as he took up his helm. He stood after locking it into place, and rejoined his squad.

‘We have much to do, let us be about it.’

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Quradim.

The name hung cold and barbed within the mind of Bolaraphon as his Thunderhawk landed upon the world's harsh soil. The passage of thousands of years and the stewardship of the false emperor's pawns had not been kind to it. Lifeless, destitute, stripped of anything of value and standing upon the brink of collapse.

Were any humour left within his cold soul, he would have smiled. Quradim was their precious Imperium, in microcosm.

The rumble beneath his boots slackened as the gunship's engines powered down. A weak bar of light grew to expose the landscape as the forward assault ramp unsealed and began to lower. Flanked by his brothers, the Warsmith walked down the ramp, and touched the surface for the first time in millennia.

Daylight, or some frail approximation of it, greeted him. A landscape that had once consisted of rolling, bucolic hills was now a cold, barren waste. Two squads of Iron Warriors advanced on either side of Bolaraphon, their burnished plate reflecting the soft yellow light of the toxic sky to turn it the shade of dirty brass. As they established a perimeter and sought out points of elevation to scout the immediate area, Beniah came to his lord's side.

'You would think some great cataclysm had befallen this place, upon looking at it, rather than their own short-sighted appetites.' The lieutenant gave a humourless laugh. 'Their talents for self-destruction are almost enviable.'

The ruins of the central hive reared in the distance before Bolaraphon. 'We stand in the ashes of Litsob,' he said. 'The once-beating heart of a world that we,

by our blood and blades, brought into this mockery of an empire. One that we safeguarded, elevated and ushered into an era of progress. This is where the company fell back to regroup, when Horus the Usurper fell, and the vindication of our enemies drove us from Terra. So began those bloody, frantic years.'

Beniah sneered. 'Their Great Scouring.'

'Horus,' spat Bolaraphon. 'One tyrant to replace another. How fully we pledged our hope and blood to a hollowed out thing made a puppet by the warp. If only we could go back to those dark days, could we change the course we made? Could the Lord of Iron have stepped forward, and delivered the justice that was owed to us against the Throne of Lies?'

'It is difficult to say, my Warsmith.'

Bolaraphon nodded once. 'It is a pointless exercise of the mind, I admit. Forgive the temporary indulgence of such thoughts, that spring upon me from touching this world's soil again.'

Beniah knelt, scraping at the rocky ground with his gauntlet. He studied the dark dust coating his fingertips for a moment, before shaking it and wiping the soil away on his greave.

Bolaraphon watched it disappear. 'Do you remember the fighting here?'

–skies thick with blue-and-gold gunships cities burning iron breaking my spine shattering in the grip of a manmade god–

Phantom nerves played within Bolaraphon's armour. 'From here,' said the Warsmith, 'they drove us to Olympia.'

'And from Olympia, to the Eye.'

'Our prison. The punishment we earned for the alliances we forged with weak men. How many of our brothers were lost to us forever, in the fight to break free from that realm of damnation? To escape from the corruption that stole our father and poisoned our Legion?'

Beniah stood, turning to face the Warsmith. 'You have avenged them, lord. Each of them a dozen times over. You have spurned the path the failed Warmaster took, that even our own father did, for you know that the right course is never the one easily charted. Your path has led us here, and soon our warship's holds will swell with the means to visit annihilation upon dozens of worlds.'

Bolaraphon did not answer. His mind was empty of anything but the daemon's words, the promise of his greatest enemy's return to this place. A place where he would possess the weapon capable of destroying one of the corpse emperor's own sons.

'Warsmith?' asked Beniah.

Bolaraphon refocused. ‘Tybald succeeded where Furax failed,’ said the Warsmith. ‘Where is he?’

‘Tybald is dead,’ said Beniah. ‘The Apothecary’s life signals in his armour monitors were cut while we made planetfall.’

‘The Ultramarines survived,’ grumbled Bolaraphon. His talons rasped together into a barbed fist. ‘This is their doing. I know it in my blood.’

‘If Tybald had the location,’ Beniah said cautiously, ‘then it has fallen into their hands, jeopardising all we seek to reclaim here.’

‘It is not of consequence, my brother.’

‘Then how will we find it? How can we reach it before the Emperor’s dogs do?’

‘It does not matter who reaches it first, only who remains standing when the smoke clears.’ Bolaraphon looked out across the devastated landscape, remembering the majesty that had once existed here, now soured and excised to nothing. ‘As to where, it is simple. Look to where our enemies have gathered their strength, and behold, they will have given us the location. By their very presence, they will lead us precisely where we need to go.’

‘It is good to hear your voice, Brother-Chaplain.’ Theron nodded back to Melos and Iason from where they crouched in the *Pilum*’s hold. ‘After the loss of the *Excelsior* we believed the worst.’

‘*Our strength has seen us through*,’ said Helios through the static. ‘*I may have the means of determining the location of our objective. All that remains is retrieving it from its source.’*

‘Can the *Pilum*’s systems decipher it?’ asked Theron.

‘*No,*’ replied Helios. ‘*It is a data core of particularly archaic design, the Stormraven is not equipped to be compatible with it.*’

‘Our garrison will have such means.’

Theron turned, seeing the blue-helmed Genesis Chapter sergeant standing in the hold. Flavius nodded up at the Ultramarine. ‘We have withdrawn to a strongpoint deeper inside the city, to protect what remains of the population. There are cogitators there that could decipher your device. We were heading there, when you arrived.’

‘Brother-Chaplain,’ said Theron. ‘I will send the *Pilum* for you and your squad, while I take mine to the Genesis Chapter garrison.’

‘*Good,*’ said Helios. ‘*Once we embark, we shall make all speed to you.*’

Theron turned a switch, cutting the link from the long-range vox-caster and climbed down from the *Pilum*’s cockpit. He looked at the assortment of red and

blue Space Marines in the hold.

'We are moving to the garrison on foot while the *Pilum* goes to retrieve Chaplain Helios and his squad to reinforce us. Draw ammunition and resupply, and then we will depart.'

Jovian looked up from his chainsword as he laid in a new track of teeth, watching as the hunched figure of Iason plodded through the Stormraven's interior. The massive Ultramarine set about replacing the boxes of heavy bolter ammunition loaded into his weapons, as well as replenishing the auto-loading mechanisms incorporated into his armour.

'What are you?'

'I am Iason,' said the Inceptor without looking up from his labours. 'But perhaps in a more effective effort to answer your question, I am of the Primaris brotherhood, the next evolution of the Adeptus Astartes. Genetically refined and enhanced, and outfitted with the highest technology of Mars.'

A series of snapping clacks sounded as the Ultramarine's weapons cycled and loaded. Iason turned to face Jovian, the pistons in his boot plate extensions hissing softly.

'The primarch sent us.'

'Oh,' Jovian murmured. He stared off for a moment before looking back at the Inceptor. 'How many of you are there?'

'Our stasis iteration was twelve thousand, eight hundred and forty-nine,' replied the second Primaris Ultramarine. Jovian had heard him referred to by their sergeant as Melos. 'There are statistics for the other iterations, but I am not aware of the specifics myself.'

Twelve thousand. Jovian's mind reeled at the number. His eyes fell upon the vials hanging from his chest. What of their legacies? Would they be installed within novitiates and become these new Space Marines? Were they even compatible?

Iason followed Jovian's gaze, nodding towards the enclosed gene-seed.

'We can safely store those aboard the *Pilum*, if you wish.'

'No.' Jovian's hand strayed protectively towards his webbing. He flexed his fingers, moving his hand down to lock his chainsword's housing back into place. 'No, they are my burden to carry.'

'Very well,' said Iason, nearly doubling over as he followed his brother and moved to exit the Stormraven. Flavius moved aside at the foot of the assault ramp to let them pass, before climbing aboard and moving towards the gunship's

rearward arsenal.

'There are thousands of them,' said Jovian. 'Sent out by the primarch himself.'

'Well.' Flavius draped a bandolier of frag grenades over his shoulder. He set a stack of sickle magazines on a table next to a crate of bolt-rounds, taking one and filling the hold with the steady *snick snick snick* of loading ammunition. 'These are new and remarkable times.'

'I performed the pilgrimage,' said Jovian. 'I saw our primarch in stasis with my own eyes. Never did I think that he would rise again, no matter what.'

'It's like the Emperor rising from the Golden Throne,' replied the sergeant. He slapped a freshly loaded magazine into his bolter. 'Though I pray we never see the day such a catastrophe arises that would provoke that.'

The six Space Marines gathered in the street as the *Pilum*'s engines lit. With a throaty roar the Stormraven lifted from the ground, scattering dust and scraps of detritus as it rose above the buildings. It began to turn as it cleared the tallest structures, before it fully engaged its main engine drives and blasted away from sight.

Theron looked across at the warriors from the two Chapters. 'We need to move quickly, avoiding any engagements unless it is absolutely necessary.' He pointed to Flavius. 'You have the location of your Chapter kin?'

The sergeant nodded. A winking navigation icon appeared in each Space Marine's visor display, indicating distance and direction to where the Genesis Chapter stood guard over the last mortal survivors on Quradim.

'Good.' Theron turned to his Inceptors. 'Now is not the time for combat. We consolidate our strength first, and then, when we are ready, the enemy will know the folly of taking to the field against the sons of Guilliman. Understood?'

Melos and Iason clanged a fist against their chests.

Theron racked his bolt pistol. 'Let's move.'

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

In the dim light of his cell, Hesiod knelt in silent vigil. The utter quiet of the unadorned stone room clashed with the lack of it in his head. Effort creased the Librarian's expression into a tight mask of strain, as the thoughts of a multitude of panicked souls swirled through his mind and battered at his fragile focus.

Thousands of mortal men, women and children took shelter in the bunkers beneath him, desperate for sanctuary and deliverance from the iron-skinned monsters rampaging across Quradim's surface. Terror, anguish, loss and hunger rippled up from their auras in a sickening tide, a chorus of the downtrodden and the abused. Hesiod shut his eyes to marshal what concentration he could, trying to block them out and rest his weary mind, but exhaustion allowed dozens past his mental barriers like sand slipping through his fingers.

–there is no way out–

–if we don't find anything she'll starve–

–the monsters are coming–

–he can't stop, and there's too much blood–

–trapped like rats, they can't help us, we are all going to die here–

The crystalline hood that swept above Hesiod's head sparked and flickered as it sought to nullify the psychic interference, casting instants of stark light upon the worn stone walls. The Librarian leaned against his staff for support, pressing his brow against the cold silver of its haft. Something warm and slick dripped from the tip of his nose, making a soft tinkling sound as it pattered into an expanding pool on the worn flagstones. Opening his eyes, Hesiod pulled his head back, seeing the red stain running down his staff. He was sweating blood again.

+Brother.+

The voice startled Hesiod. Graitus had no talent in the Art, and he had to imagine his brother's desperation to cast such thoughts out towards him like a lantern in a storm at sea. He was on the surface above, with what was left of their brothers who had stood in stewardship over the planet. Hesiod focused upon his kin's stronger mind, able to use it to quiet the rabble and their fear for a fleeting moment.

+They come.+

Hesiod reached out with his sixth sense, brushing across the other Space Marine's mind just enough to see through his eyes.

Pain struck him immediately. It surged over Hesiod in a throbbing tide of hurt from shattered bones in his left leg and a collection of cracks and punctures across his fused ribcage. He was bleeding internally from a number of those wounds, to an extent that his enhanced physiology had failed to halt it and was now struggling even to stem the flow. Even one such injury would kill any mortal man, and not even a Space Marine could endure such lethalities for long. Graitus was dying.

Hesiod focused, looking past the pain to fixate upon what was transpiring on the surface. His view was framed by the makeshift barricades erected over the entrance to the facility. Battle-brothers in battered red armour crouched to either side, counting bolt shells and whispering prayers to their weapons and armour. Beyond the bulwarks of debris and overturned support columns, Hesiod glimpsed the first traces of the enemy.

Quradim's low sun caught the glimmer of bare metal in the streets. Voices of mortal men called out clipped commands in the ancient tongue of a long dead world, punctuated by the deeper growls of their masters. Columns of smoke drifted up into the air in time with the distant rumble of engines. The enemy was bringing battle tanks.

+You. Must. Call.+

The idea of Graitus' voice stretched, elongating each aspect of the sending that Hesiod's mind interpreted into syllables as he snapped back to his own perspective. He spat blood upon the floor.

+I have tried, and again I have failed. The warp consumes all attempt at sending the message.+

+Try. Again.+

Hesiod could feel the mortal wounds afflicting his brother as a stabbing ache in his own chest. His breath sawed from injured lungs. The pain of his leg was

bright black spots in his eyes. +This may be our last chance.+

+Hold them,+ whispered Hesiod. He gestured for his thrall. +Hold them as long as you can. You fight your battle, and I will fight mine.+

Helios scanned the skyline. He saw Ariston crouched atop a spur of broken rock in the distance, his bolt rifle resting against the stump of his arm, watchful for anything approaching their position. The rest of the squad formed a circle, checking over their equipment.

'The Inceptors yet live,' said Seneca. He looked to his brothers. 'That is good.'

Nicanor rasped the edge of his combat blade down a whetstone. 'As do a few of the Genesis Chapter. I would not have wagered to see any of them at this point.'

Caprico turned to Helios, and finally gave voice to what the rest of the Primaris Marines were thinking. 'What are Thunder Warriors?'

'Do not allow your thoughts to dwell on the words of the heretic,' the Chaplain said coldly. 'Remain focused, and avert your thoughts from their lies.'

'Still,' pressed the Intercessor, his tone calm yet firm, 'you recognised the term he used, so not all of what he said was deception.'

The other Primaris Marines ceased in their labours. All eyes turned upon Helios.

'The records and histories are fragmented,' said the Chaplain. 'Incomplete. You speak of a time before the Imperium, when the Emperor took the first step towards a united humanity by retaking Terra, and then laid the foundations for the crusade that would retake the galaxy. To accomplish these first steps, He needed an army.'

'The Thunder Warriors…' said Caprico.

'Our precursors,' Helios nodded. 'I know little of them, almost nothing. They were crude, simplistic. They did not benefit from the greater resources available to the Emperor when He sired the primarchs, our own father among them, and then the Legiones Astartes.'

'They were replaced by your generation, the first of the Space Marines,' said Seneca. 'The new taking the place of the old.'

'The Emperor created them,' said Helios. 'They were His to command. If He deemed that they be replaced as you say, or however they met their fate, if that was His will, then who are we to gainsay Him?'

'You feel that we have come for you in that way, then? As your replacement and executioner?'

'No,' said Helios. 'No, I do not.'

‘Why?’ asked Nicanor, with a strange innocence wholly at odds with his genehanced form. ‘What makes you different than they?’

A cold silence took hold of the Ultramarines. Helios stood, alone beneath the gaze of the Primaris brethren. ‘My service is not yet done,’ he answered. ‘One day it will be, but until that day, I will fight.’

Helios turned as he heard the transponder beacon of the *Pilum*, the dot of it dawning upon his auspex. The Intercessors detected its approach as well, stowing their equipment and inspecting their bolt rifles.

‘Banish all distraction and useless thought from your hearts and your minds, my brothers.’ Helios gripped his crozius maul tightly in a rattle of chains. ‘We will be deploying into an active combat zone. Our enemy has decided to make war against the Ultramarines. Let us instruct them in the error of their ways.’

The citadel stood apart from the shattered city that surrounded it, a sharp vertical blade of matte black alloy only seen elsewhere on Quradim from deep beneath its surface. Over the generations of the planet’s decline, it had existed as the headquarters for the world’s defence militia and Adeptus Arbites enforcers, who bled themselves white fighting to keep the population in order as everything around them collapsed. Now, underground tunnels and facilities that once stored equipment and armoured vehicles were crowded by the last survivors of Quradim’s threadbare population, its entrance held by the last red-armoured warriors sworn to defend them.

The approach to the citadel was perched on a shallow incline at the head of a city square that since its construction had seen military parades turn to food riots and now this last siege. Open spaces and the dusty remnants of greenery flanked the abandoned fountain that sat at the centre of the plaza atop a short ziggurat of stone steps. Careful in their movements, the Iron Warriors readied themselves to assault the gates of a bastion that had been shaped and built by their own hands.

At the command of the Traitor Space Marines, the first squads of janissaries advanced into the square. They moved tactically, keeping low and sticking to any points of cover they could find. Splitting their numbers, each fire team followed an auspex operator, who panned their scanner before them to check for traps or signs of sabotage. As they neared the edge of the square, the Iron Warriors took their first steps in.

One of the janissaries heard a soft crunch, and a minor scattering of gravel. He scanned the rooftops of the buildings framing the square, smacking the heel of his palm against the side of his auspex and searching for anything that broke the

silhouettes of their ledges. He called out as the tell-tale sound of a rocket split the sky, but his warning came too late.

The warhead exploded in the midst of the Chaos Space Marines, obscuring them inside a fireball and a bursting cloud of smoke. A mound of rubble at the far corner of the square fell away, revealing the boxy form of a Tarantula sentry turret. The gun pivoted on its axis, traversing and levelling its twin heavy bolters upon the Chaos force.

The stuttering bursts of heavy bolter fire shredded the janissaries, showering those who survived with the viscera of those who did not. The stonework of the fountain exploded as the mortal soldiers threw themselves behind it for cover from the carnage. One man leaned out, and within seconds his headless corpse slumped to the dust.

Guttural barks of Olympian cut through the bedlam from the Iron Warriors, amplified to teeth-aching volume by their brutish war helms. The smoke cleared, revealing one Chaos Space Marine dead and another robbed of his legs. The two casualties were quickly hauled back from the square, before their brothers charged back into the fighting.

Enfilading bolter fire struck the sheltering janissaries from above, stitching across the length of their hasty defence line. The soldiers were cut to pieces. In a matter of seconds, the unit of trained fighters was turned to a smear of dead and dying men. The Iron Warriors sent a burst of return fire towards the rooftops, but failed to strike the red-armoured figure quickly disappearing from sight.

A sustained tremor sent chunks of rubble shaking and bouncing across the ground. The burnished hull of a Chaos Predator main battle tank emerged from the ruins surrounding the square, its spiked tracks punching craters into the street. Bolter rounds from the automated sentry spanked and clanged from the dense plating of its glacis. A missile shrieked towards it from the rooftops, but twisted wide and pounded a crater into the ground behind the tank. The cannon on its main turret took aim, vomiting flame and smoke as it fired. A high velocity shell shot towards the Tarantula, exploding on contact and reducing it to shrapnel.

The Predator’s turret traversed again, settling upon the building from where the bolter fire had originated. A round into its foundation brought its structure collapsing down in a towering plume of thick grey dust. The same fate was visited upon the buildings to either side, pounding an entire section flat until nothing was left but a field of hazy rubble.

A pair of crimson shapes sprinted through the veil of dust. Bolt-rounds ruined

the ground around them, sending shards of stone and metal pinging against their armour. One of the Space Marines fell awkwardly, the front of his helm blown out as he was cut down by a volley of bolter fire. The Iron Warriors roared and came forward in pursuit.

Out from the obscuring wall of smoke and dust came a crashing wall of bolter fire. Chaos Space Marines fell as mass-reactive shells penetrated through helms, breastplates and gorgets. Two men screamed in agony as an Iron Warrior crushed them, smoke trailing from where a round had taken him through the left eye.

Within seconds the sons of Perturabo had rallied, regrouping and falling back behind the heavy armour of their Predator. The sponson-mounted lascannons on either side of the tank's hull tracked and shot into the firestorm, causing the clouds of smoke and dust to boil away as the crackling beams of energy knifed through them. The Predator coughed a great trail of coal-black exhaust from its power plant as it rumbled forwards, the Iron Warriors moving in disciplined order behind it.

Another rocket was launched from the bulwark at the citadel's gates, exploding against the battle tank's left flank. The blast was severe enough to send the tank sideways half a grinding metre, leaving its side-mounted lascannon a ruin of twisted metal and the sparking remnants of shattered energy coils. Visibility returned as the last of the smoke sank down to knee level, bringing the Genesis Chapter force arrayed behind the citadel's fortifications back into view. Tracer fire linked the two armies in blazing flickers of red and gold. A heavy bolter chattered from the Imperial defences, punching fist-sized indentations into the Predator's hull. The tank returned fire from its autocannon turret, a deafening string of *TENG-TENG-TENG-TENG* as it hurled a barrage of shells at the complex.

Such was their fixation on slaughtering the Genesis Chapter that the Iron Warriors were caught unaware as another trio of red-armoured figures stalked close from behind them. Flavius led his two brothers, sweeping his sword out in a glittering arc that decapitated a mortal officer and bisected a second from collar to groin with the return strike. Squad sergeants shouted orders to split their forces, and half of the Chaos Marines turned, spacing themselves out to form a ring of cold grey ceramite to confront the manoeuvre against their rearguard.

Flavius plucked a frag grenade from the bandolier on his chest and hurled it into the enemy's midst, buying the squad a moment to advance while they displaced. The third of their number, Niro, stumbled as they charged. Jovian slowed his pace, gripping hold of Niro's shoulder guard in an attempt to haul

him back to his feet, and was nearly brought down himself. He looked down, seeing that the back of his brother's skull was blown out, the armour of his helm twisted outward like some terrible flower in bloom. Jovian snarled as a bolt cracked against his own pauldron, and dropped his brother where he lay.

'Theron, hit them now,' barked Flavius over the vox. 'Strike from the sky, cousins!'

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

We are fighting orks before I even hit the ground. Silent Pomibius' senses have returned to him, and when the moment comes he and I strike like comets crashing into a sea of filthy green. Hacking blades and trampled bodies rob me of balance. I have to kill five xenos before I can raise my sword arm high enough to use it.

There are no other Ultramarines around us. No ident runes appear on my retinal display, meaning that I am either so far from my objective that our other squad brothers are beyond range, or that there is no more of the squad alive to detect. I take an ork's head from its shoulders with my bolt pistol.

The mission had been clear-cut, almost overly simplistic. Squads from the Eighth Company were dropped across the surface of Meto to sabotage natural land features and destroy key structures. Accomplishing these efforts would reshape the battlefield and stymie the advance of the greenskins, funnelling them into prepared choke points where their vast superiority in numbers would count for nothing.

Squad Pomibius had been tasked with collapsing a bridge spanning the gap of a mountain pass, one that orbital scans had confirmed the aliens were making speed towards, in all likelihood to use to move their armour around our defensive cordon and into the unprotected valleys. The bridge was not large enough for our fleet to target accurately with an orbital strike, and thus it had fallen to us to deny the enemy access to their crossing point.

A navigational icon blinks before my eyes with a welcome beacon through the madness. My sergeant and I have not fallen far from the objective, and it is still

within our reach. I don't have enough melta charges to demolish the bridge completely alone, but with the proper placement of the explosives I possess I can weaken it to the point where the weight of the greenskin convoy would collapse it for me.

I wrench my chainsword sideways. An ork screams blood as its entrails slop onto the earth. A blow steals my vision for a moment. I pivot, and fire three shots to kill an alien with a club. Sergeant Pomibius fights at my back, both of us killing with thought abandoned, just reacting against the crush.

Block. Kill. Parry. Kill. Reel. Kill.

The bridge is half a kilometre distant. A handful of jumps and I will be able to touch it.

The melee shakes with the approach of tanks. The orks' armoured column is here, sooner than our projections had predicted. Were I not presently steeped in xenos gore, I would have taken the moment to laugh at the futility of trying to predict the actions of any alien, let alone the orks.

A clubbing blow punches my head into my shoulder. My eyesight is reduced to a single, stuttering view through my left eye. I stagger back, fumbling at the clasps to remove my helmet as I taste my own blood.

The world returns to me as I scrape my ruined mask free. It is smashed from my hands by an alien berserker who takes four bolt shells to the head before it dies. Another charging ork perishes to my chainsword's teeth and I pivot around the corpse, turning just as Pomibius falls.

'Brother!'

The creature rearing over him is enormous. Its entire right side is overshadowed by a mechanical claw cobbled together from junk and looted tank parts. It is the weapon that the greenskin used to bring my sergeant to his knees, and its wearer seeks to gather him up into its talons so that it might finish what it started.

The tanks are behind me now, slowly edging between myself and the bridge. Time slows, and I exist on a precipice between two worlds. The ultima on my shoulder calls to my mission, while my eyes draw me towards brotherhood.

I draw one of the melta charges from my belt. A well-aimed throw could destroy the ork and its fellows bearing down upon my sergeant. Or it could be set on my objective. One use, or the other, but it cannot do both.

How many Ultramarines have died for Meto already? How many wars, and how many worlds will be lost, without us to defend them? Is it not the greater sin to watch a leader of Pomibius' greatness die and do nothing to stop it?

I make a decision. The melta charge flies from my hand. The ork's claw explodes, along with the creature attached and a whole swathe of its ilk with it.

I sprint to my brother's side as the smoke clears. Pomibius does not respond, and I remove his red helmet, its lacquer charred and striped with gouges from the monstrous claw. A lifeless face stares up at me.

Pomibius is dead. I look up from him, still cradling his helm in my hands, and the gravity of the choice that I made replaces my blood with ice water. I could place all of the other bombs I have, and it would change nothing. The orks hold the bridge now. It will stand.

I see the rest of their convoy rumble away across the passage, sharpening their blades to massacre the populace I had sworn to protect. How many lives had I condemned with my hubris, choosing my own will against my orders and the Codex? I sacrificed the mission to save a brother, and in both I have failed.

Theron reeled as shrapnel struck him from the detonating Predator. The bits of burning metal peppered his armour, but other than leaving shallow grooves in the ceramite they did nothing to harm him. He heard the faint bellow of a greenskin fade away somewhere in the far distance, and cursed himself for his lack of focus.

Gunfire continued to erupt all around Theron from where he and his Inceptors had landed atop the broken husk of the Predator tank. They shot back, raining bolts and plasma down upon the Iron Warriors that continued to fill the square. Theron scattered a pair of frag grenades, obscuring a swathe of the enemy in twin bruises of smoke and burning shards.

Firing through the flames, Theron held his ground. They needed their adversary to focus on them, for just a few moments longer. Their strike was giving Flavius and his Apothecary the time they needed to join the bulwark and their kin, and the Ultramarines would return to the air before the tide of iron rose to overwhelm them.

An Iron Warrior, his armour burning, jumped onto the roof of the tank. A choppy battle cry left his melting helm as he lunged at Theron with a gladius. The sergeant brought his chainsword up and across to deflect the cut, then swung his body aside as Melos fired a plasma bolt that struck the traitor in the hip and severed his leg. The Iron Warrior crashed against the tank, scrambling for his lost blade, when Iason fired a burst from his assault bolters that reduced his helmet – and the skull beneath it – to fragments.

Melos and Iason went airborne in twin blasts of smoke and flame, and Theron leapt up to join them. They had succeeded in destroying the Chaos battle tank,

but the initial shock inflicted by their arrival was wearing off. The Iron Warriors were starting to regroup.

While the ire of the traitors was focused upon the Ultramarines, Jovian and Flavius sprinted through the devastation skirting one side of the square, making their way towards their Chapter brothers. They hurried over the rubble of the buildings brought down by the Chaos Predator, scattering shards of metal and hunks of rockcrete from their path. As the Iron Warriors' fire turned to the sky, the pair of Genesis Chapter Space Marines ran low, putting any cover they could between themselves and the firefight occurring in the square. Jovian's armour alerted him to automated target locks from a Tarantula's heavy bolters.

'I see the skies of Newfound!' called out Flavius as they pounded up the incline towards the fortifications.

'*A song rises in my heart*,' the reply was sung back over the vox. The target lock warnings vanished from Jovian's visor, and he saw the linked barrels of its heavy bolters turn away from them.

Flavius vaulted over the bulwark, crunching down beside a line of his battered fellow Space Marines. Jovian rolled himself across a second after. He stretched out an arm to steady himself, his boots slipping on the layer of spent bolt shell casings that littered the ground.

'Graitus,' said Jovian. A white-helmed Space Marine turned to look in the Apothecary's direction. 'By the Emperor, I knew you were hard to kill.'

Graitus hooked a thumb over the barricade in the direction of the square. 'Are those Ultramarines?'

'They are,' answered Flavius.

'What are they doing here? Was the primarch worried that not enough of his bloodline would die in this pit?'

Jovian peeked over the barricade, seeing the shining darts of tracer fire seek out the Assault Marines without result. 'They have more coming.'

'It won't be enough,' said Graitus as he loaded his bolter, his voice without a trace of defeatism. 'We managed one last scan from our high-grade augurs before they brought it down.' He pointed to the smoking ruins of the communications relay dish atop the facility, and then to the Iron Warriors as they regrouped just outside of weapons range. 'They have more coming, too.'

'*We have lost the* Iron Tooth.'

Bolaraphon's face betrayed no expression as he listened to the report being relayed from his vox-caster. The cluster of antennae protruding from the long-

range vox-caster that bulked out the Iron Warrior's backpack beeped and clicked as they received the transmission. '*There are Ultramarines here, some strange… ew typ… unknown…*'

'Pull our forces back,' said Bolaraphon. 'Inform Zikon that our arrival at his position is imminent. He will await me, and then I shall do what he could not.'

The legionary nodded quickly, striding off as he communicated his Warsmith's orders.

'A strange new type,' said Beniah, appearing at his lord and master's side. 'It seems that these Ultramarines are more resourceful than I gave them credit for.'

Bolaraphon's eyes rose to the sky. If it were true, the emergence of new Space Marines swelling the ranks of the enemy would shift every paradigm of the Long War. He would need to see these enhanced enemies with his own eyes, and judge their mettle personally.

The Warsmith heard the thin roar of engines, and watched as a vague blue shape carved a contrail across the heavens. There was only one place it could be going, towards where their enemy were concentrated.

'More resourceful, indeed.'

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Graitus gave the call to arms as the enemy began their assault on the citadel. ‘Storm’s coming!’

The line of crimson demigods at his side rose as one, squaring their shoulders before the charge of the traitors. The crash of bolters filled the air. Blood and smoke filled every nostril, and gummed every tongue. Voices grew hoarse from battle cries, oaths and shouts of defiant rage. And of pain.

The Iron Warriors fell back from the defenders, leaving bodies of iron, gold and jet upon the ground. Fists of red and gold punched the air from the hasty ramparts, the barrels of their weapons still smoking as they gave voice to the cry.

‘For the primarch!’

For a second time the traitors charged, and for a second time they were repelled. Those loyal to the Golden Throne held against the attack, pushing back the ones sworn to destroy it.

‘For the primarch!’

It was not until the third charge that loyalists began to die. The bodies of Iron Warriors sprawled against the chest-high wall the Genesis Chapter defended. Bolters clicked dry in the middle of the fighting, thrown aside for knives and fists. Every push the traitors made took them closer. And now the Iron Warriors were not the only side standing over dead brothers.

‘For the primarch.’

‘Storm’s coming.’

This time, the call to arms wheezed out of Graitus. The joints along his left side

screamed, vomiting a cascade of sparks as he moved. The rough line of triangular gouged slits where a chainaxe had shredded through the ceramite and butchered the fibre bundles was clear to see.

The Iron Warriors gathered. Their last enemy attack had been repelled by bolters. This time, there would only be blades.

Jovian inched next to Graitus, thudding his back against the wall and gritting his teeth against the pain. The number of his wounds had grown to the point where the physical trauma had merged across his entire body as a single throbbing, furnace-hot pain. He nodded towards Graitus, an unspoken question posed if there was anything that his skills could do to help. Graitus shook his head.

'I hate this world,' grumbled the veteran. He turned his white helm, its surface splashed with blood along with the rest of him. Looking back over the wall he scanned across the horizon. 'It is a singularly ugly rock. Holes everywhere, like bite marks. But I have to die somewhere, and the Olympians are a proper foe to drown with my blood. Could you imagine forfeiting your life to the devourer, or the t'au?'

Despite himself, Jovian's shoulders began to shake. His laughter came out ragged and laced with static from the vox-grille of his abused helm. Tired, hollow mirth echoed down the line from each of the Genesis Chapter warriors.

'You'll never die beneath the Newfound sky,' said the Apothecary, repeating the promise given to any who ascended and took the path of crimson and gold.

Graitus looked up into the toxic swirl that hung over Quradim. 'This will be the one for us.'

Flavius leaned over in a grind of ruined armour and tiredly cuffed Jovian on the shoulder. 'Why not?'

Jovian looked down at the weapon in his hands. His chainsword had been lost in one of the previous charges, ripped from his hand by a heretic who Jovian had then killed with his carnifex. He now cradled a chipped power axe, and it struck him at that moment that he did not know how he had gained possession of it, or who had owned it before. It hardly seemed to matter now.

'Why not?' he agreed.

'Alright, my brothers.' Graitus heaved himself upright, leaning upon the wall and flexing his grip around the broken gladius he carried. 'Storm's coming!'

Theron stood upon a rooftop, flanked by his Inceptors. He looked down upon the square, and the broken strip of stone leading from it to the Genesis Chapter's

defence line. It was torn to utter ruin, pockmarked with craters from grenades and littered with the bodies of traitors. The loyalist defenders looked little better, bled white by the relentless attacks of an enemy born to be attrition fighters.

Assault Marines were of little use behind a wall, and so Theron had kept to the sky and flanks of each charge, harrying the assault forces as they advanced and then picking off stragglers as they were repelled and fell back. Iason had depleted his ammunition supply, and now resorted to clubbing the Iron Warriors with his assault bolters face to face. Melos was nursing the dwindling charge he had left, firing shots that carried half or a quarter of the power of a normal plasma blast. Theron's bolt pistol was mag-locked to his thigh, starved of rounds, and his chainsword was chipped and gouged from sawing through the ancient plate of the traitors.

'They are mustering again,' said Melos, studying the scene below from the blank slit of his helm. 'By the primarch, they are relentless.'

'We should go down and support them,' offered Iason. 'Their ammunition is gone, it will be a melee. That suits us.'

'At a certain point, bodies are greater than the tactical flexibility we provide not being behind their barricade.' Theron looked along the bloody path up to the facility. 'I believe that point has come.'

The Inceptors stepped forward to stand on the ledge with him at those words. Theron could feel the eagerness emanating from their postures. 'We will hit them as they advance, one last time as we have before. Be mindful of their spacing, and do not let them draw you in. Hit them hard, quickly, and then get clear. From there we will bolster our cousins at the wall. Iason, I want you at the left flank, it needs reinforcement. Melos, you will go and hold the centre. Fire until your weapons deplete, and then join me filling in the gaps as they appear. Questions?'

'None,' Melos and Iason answered together.

'Then let us be about it,' said Theron, and stepped off the ledge.

They fell, a wedge of blue slashing down past a crumbling tower of black and grey. The enemy had begun their attack, laying down a curtain of electric smoke from blind grenades to cover their advance. They knew that the Genesis Chapter had exhausted their ammunition, and so they were clear to move up the incline unmolested.

Not entirely. Theron looked to Melos, who took careful aim with one plasma exterminator outstretched in front of him. He fired, loosing the shot at the lead Iron Warrior making the charge. The traitor turned at the last second, recoiling as the blast struck his upraised arm. With a flash of crackling blue light, the arm

and half the Chaos Space Marine's ribcage were gone, the wound fused and cauterised into a dark red knot threaded in scorched metal. Dark blood oozed out of the lesion, a dozen scarlet points that bled down into haemorrhage. The Olympian took a single step before falling dead in the dust.

Iason roared as he came down, throwing all of the weight of his fall into an overhead strike that crushed the skull of an Iron Warrior. The blow unbalanced the Inceptor, and he stumbled for a moment as he fought to regain his footing.

'Keep moving!' shouted Theron. He threw up his guard and caught a chopping blow from an axe between the teeth of his chainsword. The Ultramarine heaved forward, throwing the Iron Warrior back to crash down the incline. He turned his back on the opponent. There was no time to follow up and finish him. 'Keep moving!'

The Assault Marines bounced across the incline in short bursts from their thruster packs. They overlapped each other's flight paths, keeping the enemy from determining a pattern to their movement and bracketing them with bolter fire. As they approached the top of the road, Theron opened a vox-channel to Flavius and Jovian.

'Hold your blades, cousins,' said the Ultramarine, leaping aside to avoid a crushing swing of a thunder hammer. 'We are coming across to reinforce you.'

The low wall of the barricade materialised out of the smoke. Theron reached out, taking hold of the edge and vaulting over. Gauntleted hands took hold of his shoulder guards, lifting him back up from the ground.

Melos and Iason came over next, the plasma gunner at the centre and the other Inceptor at the end of the left flank. Something else landed beside Theron with a crunching thud. He saw the glint of gunmetal at the edge of his visor.

The Iron Warrior dragged Theron to the ground, scrambling over the top of him and fighting to force the tip of a dagger into a gap between the plates of his armour. The close confines made his chainsword unwieldy, and he released it to seize the wrist of the traitor's knife hand.

The blade of a gladius punched through the Iron Warrior's shoulder joint. The dagger clattered to the ground as the hand holding it went limp. The tip of the gladius was pulled free, emerging again an instant later through the enemy's abdomen.

'You didn't say you were bringing friends,' snapped Graitus as he left his sword sheathed in the traitor's guts. He took hold of the Iron Warrior's head on either side and twisted it violently to the left. The body fell in front of Theron, head lolling awkwardly from a broken neck.

‘Incoming!’

Theron looked down the line, seeing the grenade as it fell between two Space Marines. The one who had shouted the warning scooped up the sphere of dark metal, hurling it back over the wall.

More bombs came. A warrior stooped over, gathering one up to pitch it back. He made ready to throw when it detonated, taking his arm at the shoulder and savaging the armour of the three brothers around him.

Theron stood up from behind the wall. He saw the smoke darken with an unbroken line of advancing Iron Warriors. Genesis Chapter Space Marines stood beside him, hefting their weapons and readying themselves for the close order slaughter to come.

And then, the smoke cleared. Rather, it fled, hurled aside by the breath of great fiery engines. Their roar filled Theron’s ears, one he knew all too well.

‘The *Pilum*!’ called out Melos.

The Stormraven dropped to a hover over the citadel, its heavy bolters firing into the squads of Iron Warriors. Ultramarines dropped in front of the barricade, massive fighters that matched the Inceptors in scale. Leading them forwards was the black armoured form of a Chaplain, his skull-faced helm flaked with drying gore.

‘By the grace of the God-Emperor,’ said Helios. ‘My fellow sons of Guilliman, you weren’t going to slaughter all of these heretics yourselves, were you?’

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

‘Brothers!’ bellowed Helios as he clambered over the wall leading into the citadel. He turned back to Seneca. ‘Hold the line at all costs, the information on this device must be deciphered.’

The Primaris Marine nodded. ‘Disperse across their line.’ Seneca pointed to positions behind the wall. A chorus of ‘First!’ came in reply from his squad brothers, stepping back as they fired into the lines of the enemy. Seneca looked up, seeing the silhouette of an enemy Thunderhawk gunship in the distance. ‘*Pilum*, get clear. Remain on station until we call for extraction.’

The Stormraven loosed a final burst from its weapons before it rotated and flew into the clouds.

Helios hurried into the citadel, approaching a mortal in the crimson robes of a Genesis Chapter-serf. He produced the data core, holding it before the man.

‘This place has the means to access the data on this device?’

The serf looked at the device, noting that elements of its construction looked similar to that of the citadel and its machines. ‘In the control centre, my lord.’

‘Take me there.’

The stone architecture of the citadel shuddered from the battle raging just outside the walls, with streams of dust spilling down in response to every shell that struck. Stuttering lumen globes offered the only source of light, growing increasingly infrequent as they descended deeper into the facility, moving towards the sound of humming machinery.

The chamber the serf guided Helios to was a command and control centre – or

at least it had been in another, earlier time. Great rows of machines and consoles filled the low-ceilinged space, its walls comprised of generators, data storage reels and capacitors. Helios walked from aisle to aisle, searching for the right instruments, before he found what he sought.

The archive access station was a massive stack of machinery that rose through the ceiling of the chamber. Bulky cogitators and logic engines were heaped atop one another, along with spools of memory reels containing translation ciphers and packs of punch card wafers beneath a bank of thick plastek display screens. At its centre was ensconced the pale shoulders, neck and head of a servitor, permanently wired into the entire apparatus.

Helios quickly studied both the data core he held and the servitor. Though all Ultramarines were trained in the arts and rituals of interacting with facets of the machine cult, he lacked the extensive acumen of a Techmarine. He gripped the sides of the enmeshed servitor's skull, twisting gently and rotating the top half loose on a threaded track. Lifting it away, Helios exposed a series of whirring, clicking interface probes. His fingers combed through the array of connection ports until finally he found the one he sought, pinching it and drawing it out on a segmented brass cable.

The data core was old, its casing speckled with rust and its ports blackened by time and use. It took some careful manoeuvring before the interface probe slotted home with a soft click. The lower part of the servitor's face twitched, dry gums peeling away from the nubs of rotted teeth.

'Input query,' murmured the servitor.

'Query is as follows,' said Helios, recalling the hypnotic briefings he had been given regarding his mission. 'Determine location of manifest designated *Udanta-Io Nine Seven Three Eight One*.'

The machinery replacing the cyborg's brain chattered and ticked. The expressionless flesh of the thing's face tugged and convulsed. A trickle of grey saliva, thickened by dust, began to drip from its lower lip.

'Drive damaged and/or corrupted,' the servitor reported. 'Data not found.'

'No,' Helios snarled, his fingers jabbing in the command upon the adjoining console as he repeated it manually via an input keyboard. The same message appeared on the screen above, in time with the servitor's emotionless response.

<DRIVE DAMAGED/CORRUPTED – DATA NOT FOUND>

'I know what you seek,' said a voice from behind the Chaplain. Helios spun, plasma pistol raised. The building charge flooding its energy coils glinted off a hunched figure in blue power armour. Blue, though not that of the Ultramarines.

‘Your mission is clear within your mind, all else cast aside.’

The Librarian limped towards Helios, a thudding clang coming from the staff that held him upright with every step. He stopped before the Ultramarine, two figures of black and blue in the charred livery of their orders. ‘The stockpile. The reason why an entire garrison of my Chapter kin stands guard over a world better left to crumble away and vanish.’

Helios froze. His finger drew fractionally closer to his pistol’s firing stud. The Chaplain’s orders had been explicit that none of the Genesis Chapter bore knowledge of what he had been sent to find. ‘I am Chaplain Helios. How do you–’

The Librarian held out a forestalling hand. ‘I am Hesiod, Epistolary of the Genesis Chapter, and I alone carried the knowledge of their presence here. Weapons,’ the psyker pointed to the crozius Helios held, ‘leave behind echoes, the lingering essences of foes despatched, the souls who carried them into battle, and even the ones who forged them. The greater the weapon’s power, its potential, the stronger the echo. In my earliest days here, I was plagued by waking terrors, and in time, I discovered why. The life eater virus. A strain of such potency that a single spore of it is enough to sweep an entire world of organic life. That is what I was sensing, buried deep within Litsob’s forgotten metropolis.’

‘You were the one who moved them.’

Hesiod nodded. ‘I presided over their transfer, yes. The increasing instability on the surface demanded it. Reality is… thin here. The collapse of Quradim was not some gradual thing, the inevitable result of careless exploitation of the great bounty that was indeed reaped from this world’s soil. This entropy has occurred within a generation, no longer, and since the dawn of the Great Rift, it has accelerated. There are many such ley lines, *demimondes* between the warp and reality, across our universe.’

Helios heard the conviction in the Librarian’s voice. He had dedicated his life to the war against the Emperor’s foes, and none more so than the Ruinous Powers. He could not begin to think what could transpire, if the life eater culled an entire world that existed in some unbalanced state outside of the wholly real, between the realm of life and that of Chaos.

‘I could not risk the bombs going off,’ said Hesiod. ‘I told my kin of their existence, and together we moved the cache to a place where their secrecy and security could be guaranteed.’

Hesiod closed his eyes tightly for a moment, willing himself to defy the

exhaustion plaguing him for just a little longer, before looking back at the Chaplain. ‘There is a small station at the southern pole of this world. We will transmit the coordinates to your ship. You will find what you seek there.’

Helios nodded, tightening his grip on the haft of his crozius. ‘We will turn back the heretics, and then proceed to the stockpile.’

‘No.’ Hesiod shook his head. ‘They have the strength to overrun us, and failure cannot be risked. Our enemy, these Iron Warriors, they are but a facet of Chaos’ new invasion, moving by a will they do not understand. There are forces of a great darkness emerging upon reality, more than ever before, and they cannot be allowed to succeed.’

‘The primarch must know,’ said Helios. ‘Even now his fleet draws near to collect the weapons.’

‘I have burned my essence to depletion, fighting to pierce the veil. This world is in their sway, my voice cannot be heard.’

The Chaplain considered this for a moment. ‘Then I know of a way to help.’

The bridge was dark, the air thin and near freezing. With the engines inactive and the ship’s reactor barely sipping enough power to keep the life support running, every creak and groan of the *Light of Iax*’s hull was heard clearly by the ship’s crew. Men and women looked up at each rattling sound, careful to steady their breathing through their rebreather masks.

Rayhelm leaned forward in her command throne, holding her chin in one hand. The damage to her ship had been extensive as they had weaved their way out of battle against the Chaos cruiser. The worst of the damage to the bridge had been stabilised, any repairs they could make done, and the bodies removed, but much of the harm was beyond their means to mend. Significant portions of the spinal superstructure were gone, and the pressures placed on the engine cores had caused a plethora of ruptures and leakages that required the entire attention of the ship’s complement of Mechanicus adepts just to prevent them from exploding. The *Light of Iax* would need to spend a long time in dry dock if they ever reached one, a scenario that was growing increasingly unlikely by the moment.

The shipmistress touched a hand to the bandages that encircled her brow. They came away still sticky with blood from a deep laceration to her scalp, incurred when an overhead beam had sheared free during the battle. She had remained seated at her throne since the medicae had seen to her, trying to eke out whatever rest she could while supervising the ship’s recovery and planning contingencies

for their next move. All the while her head throbbed in time with her heartbeat, feeling as though part of the scorched metal had snapped off and lodged itself in her skull.

The approach of a comms officer distracted Rayhelm from the ream of vellum she was scanning, detailing reports of crew losses incurred and the ongoing repair efforts. 'Yes?'

'A signal is coming in over the long-range vox.' The officer's voice was muffled by the rebreather mask covering his face. 'It is weak, but it appears to be from Lord Helios.'

The name brought Rayhelm to her feet. She followed the officer across the bridge to the trio of communications stations he managed. Taking a headset offered to her, she held one speaker cup against her ear, focusing upon the voice she could hear faintly through the interference.

'Feed the system enough power to stabilise the signal, but be careful of spikes.' Rayhelm's eyes flicked up to look out into the void through the viewing block. 'They are out there looking for us, and I am not interested in making it easy for them.'

'Ma'am.' The officer gave a tired nod and looked back to his post, a hand pressed against a dark stain on his side. He gave out hushed orders to the servitors manning the consoles. The specialised sockets replacing each of the mechanical servants' hands plugged and unplugged across their consoles, turning and rotating in an attempt to boost the strength of the transmission. Rayhelm tilted her head, listening intently as the voice grew stronger.

'Lord Helios?'

The voice stopped for a moment. '*Shipmistress Rayhelm. By His beneficence, well met.*'

'It does us good to hear your voice as well, my lord,' replied Rayhelm. 'Have you discovered any of what has happened here?'

'*This planet… overrun… traitors*.' Even through the static, Rayhelm could hear the zealous indignation in the Ultramarine's voice. In spite of the grimness of the statement, she smiled. *'We have rendezvoused… what is left of the Genesis Chapt– garrison here… member of their Librarius. He has been attempting–send out… call for aid th– but he has been unsuccessful. Our mission parameters… changed–the primarch's fleet… soon arrive to collect… our objective. He must be made aware of what is happening before… their Epistolary is going to try… another sending, and we require–use… your astropathic choir to focus and strengthen the message.*'

Rayhelm was silent for a moment, trying to process the request. ‘There is something at work here, my lord. The ether is in uproar. I had to force my Navigator into an induced coma to prevent him from destroying himself. You are asking me to set a candle in a paper boat, and send it across an ocean of fire, hoping that it will reach the other side.’

‘*Your words lack faith,*’ said Helios. ‘*Yet they bear no hyperbole. The task carries its dangers, but our situation is dire. It must be done.*’

Rayhelm smiled again, ignoring the stabbing pain that the expression caused her. ‘Then it will be.’

She handed the headset back to the officer. Rayhelm moved back towards her throne, to where a gaunt woman in deep green robes waited.

‘Rouse the rest of your choir,’ said Rayhelm. ‘Your gifts are needed.’

The woman flinched, her grimace tugging at the silver stitching that sealed her stolen eyes. ‘The immaterium, it is *aflame* here. My order does not–’

‘This is not a matter for debate,’ snapped the shipmistress. She took a step forward, and the blind woman shrunk back. ‘Prepare yourselves, and be quick about it. A message must be sent, and I doubt we will have more than a single chance at this.’

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

One thousand of him stand before the storm. In past efforts there had been so many more, but those were days of a strength that has long since been exhausted. This is the last gasp of Hesiod's mental strength. The last chance.

As one they charge, just as before. The storm waits, malignant yet impersonal. It resists their advance as a twisted simulacrum of a natural impediment would, gleeful of their failure yet possessing no guiding will capable of remembering the past struggles.

One by one the projections of Hesiod's will are cut down, just as before. Desperation has driven the host faster than the last time, and even now they wade into the inky turbulence with nearly half their number. The sense of sound imposed by the limits of the human mind stirs with ghostly howls as the figures of light are engulfed and boiled away, the power that had conjured them into being now returning to the wellspring of the ether itself.

The Epistolary's greater consciousness flickers between projections, giving a modicum more will to a single one before phasing to another as it fails. All the while the words thud in the idea of his chest, in tune with his illusory heartbeat.

The message. The message. The message.

Then comes the inevitable crush. The claustrophobia of encirclement as his projections shrink to one hundred. Then fifty. Panic sets in, a wholly different experience from the fear that defines those of mortal ilk and the honed ignorance of his own non-empowered brethren alike. A dread that can only come from one who gazes into the Sea of Souls, and knows the truth of its nature.

He knows then that he must attempt something he has not before. The risks are

abundantly clear, but in fractions of what his mind construes as seconds, Hesiod chooses. He gathers the light of the remaining forty-three projections, and collapses them into one.

For a short instant, the storm recedes, forced back by the blazing intensity of his soul's energy. Its morass of malicious emotion reshapes itself, changing from formless black ooze into claws and grasping hands. They had had many opponents to withstand before. Now they have just one.

Hesiod reels from the sole concentration of the Neverborn mass. Tendrils and barbed limbs lash against his astral form, leaving bleeding wounds upon the body he inhabits in reality. The words he carries shake his skin of golden light with their import, tearing across the nightmare realm from his locus point.

The message. The message. The message.

The words become muffled as the storm sweeps over him. He fights the idea of drowning, the pressures placed upon imaginary lungs in a dominion where air has never and would never exist. Hesiod pushes forward, tearing at the utter blackness around him. Burbling laughter pounds over him, and his soul's vision begins to narrow.

The concept of heat prickles at Hesiod's back. The shadow begins to thin in spherical patches, lightening to a wan green that grows stronger with each passing moment. It defies the red, black and gold that has comprised his surroundings, and the laughter subsides as its half-formed voices curdle in pain.

Figures appear, wreathed in crackling jade fire. They form a half circle behind Hesiod, placing hands upon his back and pressing him forwards through the storm. Their voices are cold, strong things, felt as much as heard as they take up his cry and amplify it with their choir's echo.

THE MESSAGE. THE MESSAGE. THE MESSAGE.

Hesiod feels the resistance against him weaken. The Librarian throws himself forward. He channels every last ounce of his will, imagining himself as a cutting blade parting effortlessly through the currents that seek to destroy him.

The warp seems to swell, and then shrink away before his projection. He strains against a membrane of noxious thought and dark emotion, and feels the skin as it begins to split and fail. The oil peels away from his lips, cold from the storm's absence on the other side. Hesiod draws in the idea of a breath, and cries out his warning into the greater immaterium, using the burning souls protecting him to hurl the message towards his father.

It leaves his tongue as a zephyr of golden light, flying free through the churning tides. Failure after failure has been vindicated. The message is away, and now

he can only pray that it reaches its destination.

Hesiod's head struck the stone floor of his cell. His hands reached out to feebly hold onto the ground on either side of him, to prevent him from slumping onto his side. He barely heard the hurried swishing of robes as his serf rushed to his side.

'Lord?' the serf whispered, offering water in a beaten tin bowl. The Librarian took the bowl, slowly lifting his head enough to drink.

'It is through.' The words wheezed out of Hesiod, an exhalation more in line with a final breath than a gasp from fatigue. The serf nearly collapsed at the words, relief spilling from his aura in meagre waves.

Hesiod pushed himself up to his hands and knees as his senses came back to the forefront. His face matched the armour of his Chapter, a crimson mask of congealing blood issued from tortured pores. The distant reports of boltguns firing reached his ears, sounding as though they came from just above the chamber.

'The enemy has broken into the citadel?'

'Not yet, lord,' said his servant, priming the power pack of a lasrifle. He swung the weapon's sling over his head and moved to his master's side. 'But it is only a matter of time, now.'

'You have done well,' rasped the Librarian. With a snarl of armour servos he surged to one knee, and then stood. He would meet the fate coming for him on his feet.

The serf looked to Hesiod, a strange calm permeating him. 'I am honoured to meet my end here, master, standing at your side.'

A faint smile crackled the blood caked around Hesiod's lips. This servant was very much like his father had been.

+It is done.+

Hesiod's sending echoed over Helios' thoughts, the Chaplain cringing at the presence of another mind touching his own. 'The message has been sent,' he called out over the vox.

+And now, you must go, cousin.+

'Your position here is precarious.' Helios silenced his vox and whispered into his helm. 'If you move quickly, we may be able to take some of you with us.'

+This is not your world. This is not your fight. It belongs to us. Your destiny lies south, keeping the instruments of destruction from our adversary. Fail at that, and all that has happened here is for nothing. We will give you the time you

need. Now go.+

Helios drew in a single deep breath. ‘Ultramarines,’ he called out to both squads. ‘Rally on me.’

The fighting had ebbed, and the Iron Warriors had withdrawn to mass for their next attack. The blue-armoured Space Marines stepped back from the wall and gathered around their Chaplain.

‘There is a landing pad towards the rear of this complex,’ said Helios. ‘Proceed there and await the *Pilum* for extraction.’

‘Our cousins as well?’ asked Seneca. ‘And what of the civilians?’

‘The Genesis Chapter will remain here.’

Caprico moved to Helios’ side. ‘We are leaving them all behind?’

Theron stepped in front of the Primaris Marines. ‘We are following our orders. They are weapons, just like us. They perform their duty and fulfil their purpose, or those they were created to protect die. The shame of that failure does not quickly leave you. When you prioritise the weapons over the war, you deserve nothing but dishonour and defeat.’

‘The sergeant is correct,’ said Helios. ‘The Genesis Chapter swore their oaths to safeguard this world and its people, and so they remain here to honour that and if it is the Emperor’s will, give their lives. But their mission is not ours, and just as they must follow their duty, so must we.’

Caprico drew breath to speak, but said nothing. The Ultramarines walked from the barricade, following Helios towards the landing pad.

‘Sergeant.’

Theron stopped, turning as the Genesis Chapter Apothecary approached. With delicate reverence, Jovian removed each of the armourglass vials that hung from his armour.

‘Ryvan,’ said Jovian. ‘Daenos. Thevolin. Grakal. Batra. Kiril and Holen.’ He brushed a gauntleted hand across the bundle of containers. He held them out towards Theron, and the Ultramarine accepted them with both hands.

‘This is the future of my Chapter,’ said Jovian, his grip lingering on the vials for a moment before he released them. ‘See that they survive to be beneath the skies of Newfound again, and restore what has been lost.’

Theron brought the gene-seed of Jovian’s fallen brothers to his chest. ‘By the blood of the primarch, I swear it will be so.’

Ten times, the Iron Warriors had failed at breaking the enemy’s wall. When their Warsmith arrived, the wall fell.

A single shot from their Thunderhawk's turbolaser had torn a ten-metre gap in the Space Marines' barricade. With their single wall broken, Bolaraphon himself led the charge, his Terminator-armoured bulk the first thing into the breach.

It was a bloodbath. The corpse god's slaves were broken from their defence, their ammunition gone, armour destroyed and weapons near useless. Even post-human bodies grew exhausted from ceaseless fighting and wounds that refused to close. The Warsmith killed everything in sight, rampaging through their line and into the citadel itself.

A loyalist in scorched white armour smashed into Bolaraphon's side. The Warsmith lowered his weight and spread his legs to dissipate the force of the charge and keep his balance. He twisted, slashing with his talons and carving through the Space Marine's head and chest. Bolaraphon leaned aside from a lazy swipe from his foe's chainsword, responding with a hacking strike from his axe that terminated the sword arm at the shoulder. He opened his palm as the Genesis Chapter warrior staggered back, bathing him in a rush of flame from his gauntlet.

Another Space Marine died to the Warsmith's axe as he felt an arm wrap around his waist. It was the loyalist Apothecary, still breathing despite mortal wounds and armour that was drooling to slag from the furnace heat of his flamer's touch. Still the false emperor's slave persisted, struggling in vain to drag him to the ground from his knees.

For a moment, Bolaraphon nearly admired him. But the feeling left just as quickly, unable to stand against his hatred. He took hold of the Apothecary's head and drove it into the ground. The loyalist was still fighting even as the Warsmith's axe struck clear through his neck and parted his head from his shoulders.

Stooping down, Bolaraphon gathered up the warrior's severed head. With a cold, detached reverence, he bound the battered white helm to his armour, suspending it from a length of bronze chain. He hated them all, but this one had died well, and therefore he had earned the defilement of being taken as a trophy. It clattered on its chain, knocking against another white helm of a loyalist veteran the Warsmith had killed storming the ramparts.

The path ahead of him was barred, its bulkhead sealed and locked. Bolaraphon could almost taste the reek of witchcraft in the air, knowing that one of the corpse god's psykers was on the other side.

He raised his open palm before the doorway. His lips curled back from his teeth

as he loosed a screaming torrent of liquid fire over its surface. The blast was sustained for ten seconds, leaving a glowing orange smear across it as the flames guttered out.

The Warsmith reared back and chopped into the doorway with his axe. The dense metal deformed and parted under each pounding strike. He wrenched it free, splattering his chest with molten gems of glowing metal, before hacking into it again and again, tearing a hole through the bulkhead and looking at the small, austere chamber inside.

'You!' Bolaraphon roared at the armoured figure standing on the other side. 'Your death has come for you!'

The Warsmith blinked as something that felt like a burning needle pricked the flesh of his face. A thin beam of energy struck his collar, and another blasted above his head. Rage nearly overcame him as he saw a human holding a lasrifle, taking aim at his head through the gap. His talons wrapped around the jagged rim of the opening. He pulled, hearing a sharp ping as the hinges began to warp and snap.

'Nearly there,' whispered the Imperial witch.

The Warsmith snarled, pouring his strength into the effort of hauling the door from its frame. The lock mechanism sheared loose. Triumph flooded Bolaraphon as the last hinge separating him and his enemy gave way.

The door flew back, lifting Bolaraphon from his feet and smashing him between itself and the far wall. The heavy sheet of compromised iron teetered, and fell to one side in a booming clang that echoed down the corridor. Dazed, Bolaraphon straightened from the wall, bloodied, his barrel chest dented and gouged, and surged into the chamber.

A flurry of las-bolts pattered harmlessly against his Terminator plate. Bolaraphon seized the shooter in his talons and engaged his flamer. Screams of agony rang from the walls of the small room. The ceiling became shrouded in oily black smoke. The Warsmith was careful as he fired, using just enough flame to ensure the man would burn for some time before he died.

The loyalist made no move to come to his servant's aid. Bolaraphon could see how much the petty attack with the door had drained him, robbing him of the strength to make this anything other than an execution. He threw the smoking corpse in his fist aside and backhanded the Librarian, feeling with satisfaction as something crumpled in the Space Marine's skull. He kicked the witch onto his back, drinking in all of the rage and defiance on the psyker's face that so mirrored his own.

‘Did you call out to *him*, witch? Did you cry in your pitiful way to send your gene-sire here to intercede?’

‘He is coming,’ rasped the witch, each word bringing blood flecking over his beard. ‘The Avenging Son will come here, and he will kill you all.’

‘Perhaps, but he will not save you,’ the Warsmith hissed. He crouched down over the Librarian, slowly brandishing his claw. ‘Your father will come, and the only thing that will be here to welcome him…’ The last thing the loyalist saw was Bolaraphon, sneering as the Warsmith’s talons pierced his heart.

‘Is me.’

CHAPTER THIRTY

Helios led the Ultramarines through the rear of the citadel, towards the landing pad where he had signalled the *Pilum* to extract them. Smoke clung to the floor of the open space as they stepped out of the facility, billowing in great chest-high shrouds that marred all visibility.

'How is it that every time I watch the vaunted Thirteenth flee the field of battle, I know it won't be the last?'

Helios turned, looking back to see a lone figure perched atop the roof of the complex behind him like a gargoyle. It was an Iron Warrior. Horns of ebon veined with silver spiralled from the temples of his helm. A chainmail mantle spilled from his shoulders, hanging down either side of him like dark wings. The same painful runes that adorned all of his fellows covered his form, twitching and swirling in grotesque patterns.

Helios raised the blades of his crozius towards the Chaos Space Marine. 'Aeons of slavery to the warp has made you either foolish or stupid, to challenge us alone.'

The traitor cocked his head. 'Am I alone?'

Bone-rattling footsteps plodded near, shaking the bits of rubble and metal strewn across the ground. A boxy form pounded out of the smoke, an ancient killing machine of dense armour plates fixed with fist-sized rivets. Lightning burst from the talons of a power claw, throwing bizarre shadows across the landing pad. The building whine of motors set a cylinder of gun barrels spinning, as the tip of an assault cannon broke through the pall.

Helios glared at the vile Dreadnought, his squad behind him standing their

ground as it loomed over them.

‘Honoured Tokagol,’ the Iron Warrior asked in his bitter, sneering tone. ‘Tell me, am I alone?’

‘THERE IS NO BLOOD. THERE IS NO SOUL. THERE IS ONLY IRON.’

The Ultramarines scattered as the assault cannon fired. The Iron Warriors Dreadnought stomped forward in a thunderous charge, spent casings spraying and clattering against the ground. Theron, Melos and Iason took to the air, soaring up and over the war machine. Bolts cracked and ricocheted from its armour. Bursts of plasma splashed off the burnished plates, leaving glowing, scorched patches in its iron hide but failing to slow or stop the monster’s stomping advance.

The Iron Warrior drew a pair of power swords, their edges crackling with webs of silvery blue energy. The cloak of dark mail around his shoulders rasped against the ground as he stood, like wind carrying dead leaves over stone. With a blade raised in each hand he leapt forward to land just beyond striking range of Helios.

‘I am Beniah,’ said the heretic, raising one blade while keeping the other low against his hip. ‘And I would know whose blood I am about to spill. I have killed so many of you, to be honest, but I promise to try to remember you.’

‘You will remember Helios, Chaplain and Spiritual Ward of the Eighth Company Ultramarines Chapter, vaunted servant of the Emperor of Mankind, because it is the last name you shall ever learn.’

‘I do so enjoy the fervent ones, the fanatics,’ snickered Beniah. ‘To think that you have so ardently finished what Lorgar’s zealots started. To hear the conviction, the fervour in your voice, the Urizen would have been proud to call you his son.’

Helios locked his pistol to his hip and drew a combat knife from his belt, spinning it to hold opposite his crozius in a reverse grip. ‘Are you here to make war, heretic, or simply to spew more filth from between your teeth?’

Beniah rolled his shoulders, his left arm chattering in a squall of ancient mechanics. ‘Oh no. I am here to kill you, you skull-faced puppet. I suppose we should see to that.’

Their blades met in a crash of opposing power fields. The mingling disruption punched the weapons back towards their wielders, and they circled. Behind them, the rest of the Ultramarines fought a savage battle against the Dreadnought. For Helios, however, the roaring mechanical monster was absent from his thoughts. His mind was fixated totally on the traitor in front of him.

Beniah darted forwards with unnerving speed, his arms a blur as he cut both high and low. Helios swerved, ducking to the right to evade the decapitating strike while bringing his crozius across his body to block the one targeting his groin. He turned the corner, pivoted and stabbed at where Beniah's hip would have been with his combat knife, but the traitor was no longer there. Helios crossed his short blade over the haft of his maul, catching a blinding downward strike from the Iron Warrior, and wrenched the attack high and away from him.

The Iron Warrior stepped back like a dancer as the ground between himself and Helios was riven with assault cannon fire. The squeal of ceramite and crashing boom of impacts brought the Dreadnought's line of fire up and away from the duelling pair of Space Marines. The instant the first shell knifed clear of them, Beniah was back on the attack.

For more than one hundred years, Helios had fought the enemies of his Imperium and his Emperor with every weapon available to him, from the finest artificer-crafted relics to chunks of broken stone and his own bare hands. He had earned his experience by surviving hundreds, perhaps thousands of duels. Some had lasted for less than a second in the crush of massed combat, a heartbeat's hesitation by a foe allowing the opening to despatch them and move on to the next target. Others had lasted longer, gruelling contests that had tested his body, but never prevailed over his mind. In all that time, from the lithe and cunning eldar to the boiling tides of the Great Devourer, few of the enemies he had faced had provoked as great an anger within him as this Iron Warrior.

Beyond the hideous twitching runes that daubed his armour, Helios failed to see any outward sign of the brazen weakness that marked the hordes who had given their flesh over to Chaos – those base degenerates who traded the purity of their ascended humanity for the promise of power and received the reality of vile, strangling mutation that twisted their bodies and bleached their minds. No, the absence of such blatant deformation by the Archenemy, that he gave no offering nor declared homage to any of the darker powers of the warp as he fought, made this Olympian far more worthy of the Chaplain's hatred. The Iron Warrior had turned against the Emperor, and set his soul's purpose to destroying the very realm he had created, not as a pawn of the immaterium but by his own will. Not in exchange for some tempting prize, but simply because it was his desire to do so. And that fact stoked Helios' rage to its fullest.

An Ultramarine learned the true power of rage harnessed into a weapon of zealous fury before he left the Scout Company, and ascension to the rank of Chaplain perfected its use.

A glancing blow landed as Helios extended himself, the wingtip blade of his crozius clipping the Iron Warrior's helm and knocking his head back. The traitor rode the momentum, leaning back and thundering a boot into the Chaplain's chest.

'Your ancestors were better,' said Beniah as they separated. 'Perhaps more time on your bladework, and less time grovelling on your knees whispering to a mouldering corpse?'

Helios rushed forwards with a roar.

Theron landed on the walker's broad sarcophagus. He flipped his hold on his chainsword, stabbing the weapon down towards the exposed cabling framing the bullet-shaped sensor cluster crafted to resemble the Dreadnought's head. Sparks and bits of armour cascaded around the sword's teeth as they tore at the machine.

The Iron Warriors Dreadnought howled a mechanical dirge through its vox-amplifiers. It thrashed on its short, stocky legs, pitching back and forth to dislodge Theron from atop it. The mutilated legionary within the sarcophagus snarled in broken Olympian, distorted by the amplifiers built into its walking tomb's face.

The Chaos behemoth finally succeeded when the sergeant strayed too close to its power claw and was snapped up in its talons. Theron snarled as industrial hydraulics compressed around his body, cracking and fracturing his armoured shell before he was smashed against the ground. The Ultramarine barked in pain and anger as the Dreadnought stomped down upon his left leg, crushing it to shards of broken ceramite around a pulped ruin. Theron fired his jump pack, and had reached chest height when the walker brought its assault cannon to bear, firing a deafening burst that detonated his thrusters and sent him crashing back to the earth.

Iason and Melos dived to their leader's side, bracketing the Iron Warrior with fire from their weapons. Seneca and his Intercessors focused their artillery upon the Dreadnought, peppering the flank and rear of its sarcophagus to draw its attention in their direction. The beast rounded upon them, plodding forwards and sweeping its weapons towards them to force them to scatter.

'Is he alive?' asked Seneca as he dived clear of a swiping claw and swapped magazines in his bolt rifle.

'He lives,' responded Iason. 'But we need to get him clear, now. Where is the *Pilum*?'

As if in response, the Space Marines began to hear the building roar of jet

engines filling the air.

Helios looked up, seeing the blue dot growing in the sky. Beniah connected with the tip of one sword across the Ultramarine's jaw, fracturing the skull faceplate and sending chips of bone and ceramite spraying as the Chaplain fell.

Beniah raised the other of his blades to give the killing stroke when he felt steely fingers encircle his wrist. He looked back, seeing the blunt snout of Seneca's Mark X helm glaring down over him.

'Ah,' the Iron Warrior smiled. 'Upgrades.'

Seneca thundered a punch into the traitor's face, sending him sprawling to the ground. Helios hauled himself back up, brandishing his crozius as he stalked towards the Iron Warrior. He felt Seneca's grip on his shoulder guard.

'Leave him, we must go now!' the Primaris Marine shouted over the din of the *Pilum*'s engines. Helios saw his squad hauling the mangled form of Theron up and into the dropship's hold. The sergeant was not moving. The Chaplain tore himself from the object of his hatred, falling back with Seneca to scramble aboard the Stormraven as it hovered over the landing pad.

The *Pilum*'s thrusters fired. The gunship's wings tilted, angling it up and away from the facility as it rose into the sky. With a blast from its main engines, the Ultramarines were away, quickly disappearing into the clouds and leaving behind only the ebbing roar of its flight.

Beniah took to his feet as he watched them flee. 'Run away, little puppet,' crowed the Iron Warrior as he lifted one sword, looking up the length of its blade at the loyalists as their craft quickly disappeared from view. 'I am far from finished with you.'

Beniah found his lord in a small stone room, stomping a dead loyalist's corpse beyond any recognition. He waited in the frame of the door, noting that it had been torn from its mounting and hurled out into the corridor. The Iron Warrior knew from experience that the wisest course was to let his Warsmith vent his fury before making his own presence known.

'Their gunship,' said Bolaraphon, eyes still glued to the ruin he had made. 'Was it destroyed?'

'It fled, my Warsmith,' came the reply from Beniah. 'Though by its movements we are able to track its course from orbit. They are proceeding south, into the polar region.'

'Then there is only one place they could be heading to. Get our brothers ready to move. And signal to orbit. I want everything at our disposal primed to assault

where they are going.’

‘And what of the mortals beneath us?’

‘I’m not here for slaves,’ said Bolaraphon. ‘Seal the tunnels from the outside. Let the shelters of these craven things be their tomb.’

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Theron was dying, and there was nothing any of his brothers could do to stop it. Fist-sized holes perforated his armour from the Dreadnought's assault cannon, the flesh beneath ravaged beyond even the miraculous capabilities of Adeptus Astartes physiology to heal itself.

The Primaris Marines stood around Theron in the *Pilum*'s crew bay, their postures speaking of the unfamiliar frustration their helplessness was bringing on. The Chaplain knelt beside Theron, disengaging the lock on the warrior's chest and removing his bulky assault pack so that he could lie flat on his back.

Helios undid the clasps at Theron's collar, slowly pulling the helmet free. He lowered it into the sergeant's waiting hands, and Theron held the scarred red helm against his chest.

Theron's lips parted with a red bubble, as the Ultramarine attempted to speak. His brothers leaned closer. The gathered Primaris Marines found the sergeant's unfocused eyes staring at each of them.

'Be,' Theron grimaced, and more blood poured from his mouth, 'be better than us.'

The last air in Theron's lungs rasped past his lips. The vital glimmer drained from his eyes. Slowly, his head fell back, resting against the back of his armoured collar as he looked lifelessly upon the ceiling.

'What is our mission, Brother-Chaplain?'

'I cannot–' Helios began.

'No.' Caprico's tone made the Chaplain suddenly aware that the enhanced Space Marines had surrounded him. 'Tell us what our brothers gave their lives

for.’

Seneca nodded. ‘No more secrets.’

Helios closed his eyes. ‘When the Great Rift opened, untold numbers of worlds were lost, entire star systems swallowed by the warp. By any measurement, it was an unthinkable cataclysm. But that was not the full extent of the damage. Hundreds, thousands of star systems that border it have been poisoned by exposure to it, and most of them are beyond our ability to save. We cannot retake the galaxy until that bleeding is stopped, and if a planet cannot be saved, then it must be purged. Some of the means to affect such a purge are stockpiled here, virus bombs. And so we have been sent here to collect them.’

‘Bombs,’ said Seneca. ‘Sergeant Theron died for bombs?’

Caprico stiffened. ‘Kyros died for bombs?’

‘They died in the God-Emperor’s service.’ Helios stood. ‘They died following the will of the primarch. Lord Guilliman has despatched his sons across the galaxy to find every weapon we have to fight the darkness. Every cache known to the Imperium is being sought out and gathered by his agents, just as we are here on Quradim.’

‘Is that what has become of us?’ asked Nicanor. ‘We cannot defend our realm, so we simply destroy it to deny it to our enemies?’

‘Were there any other way,’ said Helios, ‘our father would have taken it. I know that in my soul. But the Ruinous Powers are a disease, and if we allow them to spread, all is lost.’ He looked to the Primaris Marine. ‘All will die.’

Helios went back to one knee beside Theron. He laid a hand upon his fallen brother, and began to slowly chant. The Ultramarines joined their Chaplain, and High Gothic verse filled the crew bay.

‘How long?’

Bolaraphon asked the question again over the roar of the Thunderhawk’s engines. The Warsmith’s temper had grown increasingly frayed since word came from the *Damnatio Memorae*. The message had spoken of a colossal bow wave approaching through the storms of the warp. That could mean only one thing: the Ultramarines and their hated gene-sire were here. The time available for them to find and take hold of the weapons and leave Quradim was vanishing beneath their feet.

‘If we know that their primarch is coming,’ said Zikon, ‘that his arrival is imminent, then why do we waste our time butchering the dregs of the Genesis Chapter? We could have taken the cache and returned to the stars by now,

sowing our vengeance by searing his worlds of life before their fleet even gets here. They are coming, and soon our only option will be facing them blade to blade. No matter our strength, that is not a contest we ever have a chance to win.'

'Cowardice does not become you,' hissed Beniah. 'And it will not be uttered in our Warsmith's presence.'

'Reason is not cowardice, worm,' snapped Zikon. 'We cannot–'

'Enough,' said Bolaraphon. 'Don't you see? All the centuries I have spurned thoughts of fate, of destiny, and despite my denial it has brought me here. Guilliman is coming. And you, brother, are wrong. Things have come to fruition, and soon I will have the means to exact my revenge.'

'You mean the bombs,' whispered the Iron Warrior. Beniah smiled. 'The virus? Warsmith, it will kill us all.'

'And so?' answered Bolaraphon. 'What cost should we deem too high for our vindication? I would gladly die a thousand times, if it meant killing him just the once.'

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

It started with a single dot of light.

A new star twinkled in the frozen ink of the void, one that bloomed and shone, growing progressively brighter with each passing moment. Soon it was clear that it was no star at all, but rather a puncture in the very fabric of the universe. The miniscule mote of light was now a tear, ripping wider and haemorrhaging madness from its edges. Bolts of lightning that spoke and beams of light the colour of sadness scattered into reality, and from the stuff of Chaos, a traveller emerged.

She was a sleek spear, born of the universe she was now returning to. A cathedral rendered into a weapon, the golden eagle that edged her prow cut through the nightmare of warp space and into the void. Within her crenelated bastions and beneath her armoured blue skin, tens of thousands of men, women and augmented slaves hurried to their tasks, each a small cog in the monumental weapon of war that was a Space Marine strike cruiser. By but a single one of these warships entire star systems had fallen, but she would not be alone for long.

More perforations in reality speckled deep space around the newcomer. Soon seven more of her sisters had translated from the immaterium, half of them titanic hammer-headed battle-barges, along with dozens of frigates, destroyers and other escort craft. Hails and commands flickered out between the massing fleet in calm, efficient order. Smaller ships clustered in protective clouds around their larger fellows, falling into a flexible sphere of cobalt warships simultaneously prepared to react to any attack as it was to launch its own grand

assault.

At the centre of the formation stretched a void. No vessel occupied it, or even passed through it en route to its own place in the formation. One last translation began, a colossal wound tearing open, and the thing that emerged overshadowed all that had come before it.

She had been born in another time, to a different kind of humanity. An era where hope and revolution had been harnessed by a single, indomitable will, one whose goal was to make the entire galaxy the undisputed and undivided realm of mankind. Imagination and fervour had given rise to feats of engineering and technological advancement that had never before been reached, and since that time, never been replicated. She was one such crowning achievement, one of only a select few to have ever been constructed. Gifts given by the Emperor of Mankind to only his most powerful commanders, including his sons.

She was a Gloriana-class battleship, twenty-six kilometres of humanity's wrath made manifest. Weapon systems that could unmake entire civilisations studded her length, with the armour and overlapping networks of void shields capable of repelling such armaments. Her history was that of the Great Crusade, and of the fires of Horus' rebellion. And now, in the Dark Millennium, as Roboute Guilliman woke to walk his father's empire once more, she – the *Macragge's Honour* – was once again his flagship.

The fleet folded and opened around their mother ship as she slipped fully from the warp. Massive capital ships and battle-barges, large and powerful enough to serve as focal points and masters of fleets in their own right, oriented into subordinate positions around her hull. Just as the vessels ordered themselves according to the *Macragge's Honour*, every soul within the fleet acted to the orchestration of a single mind.

Roboute Guilliman, Primarch of the Ultramarines and now Lord Commander and Imperial Regent of the Imperium of Man, stood upon the bridge of his flagship, flanked by honour guard and surrounded by attendants and officers. The mortals moved about him like planets in orbit around a star, labouring to focus on their tasks but unable to mask their awe of being in the presence of a living and breathing primarch.

Guilliman took in the scene before him through a grand oculus screen that formed the entire forward wall of the command deck. Quradim, one of a thousand worlds spinning in perfect balance within Guilliman's mind. Framed in the shards of its shattered moon, the anaemic planet awaited him, just one piece of a far larger puzzle.

‘Have you found our ship?’ asked Guilliman.

‘The *Light of Iax*,’ replied Admiral Geminus, adjusting the myriad finery cluttering his dress uniform as he approached the primarch. ‘Our augur scans are parsing the area, my lord, but if they are evading an enemy vessel as their message described, they may be difficult to locate.’

‘Keep trying,’ said Guilliman. ‘In the meantime, their pursuer should not be difficult to locate. Progress?’

‘Yes, m’lord.’ Geminus looked down and consulted the data-slate in his hand. ‘Our scans have triangulated an engine trail in the debris field that corresponds to a Murder-class cruiser. That should be our quarry.’

The Avenging Son gave a nearly imperceptible nod. His eyes, the same deep cobalt as the armour he wore, flicked across the silvery fragments of ice and rock.

‘Deploy the fleet. Post picket groups at all translation points while the main body proceeds to far orbit over the planet.’

‘It will be done,’ said the admiral. ‘All shipmasters will receive the order, and fight or flight, we will stand ready for any move they make.’

‘Good.’ Guilliman settled his hand upon the hilt of the Emperor’s own blade. ‘They have been allowed to play hunter for long enough, admiral. It is time to reverse that situation, I think.’

Hyzra unfurled from her cradle, hurrying across the tracked ceiling of the *Damnatio Memorae*’s bridge. Angry blurts of machine code sparked from her as she passed over each station and crew pit. She needed no report to convey to her what the ship herself already had. Every sensor told her the same, unthinkable thing: a fleet of dozens of warships had just translated in-system, the vanguard for a truly mighty battleship.

It was inconceivable. There were so few of that class of warship created at all, and most were gone, destroyed in battle or consumed by the manipulations and deformities of the ether. That one would appear here, despite the astronomical improbability, meant it could only be the *Macragge’s Honour*.

She measured her remaining life in seconds.

<We must run.>

Hyzra’s voice crackled from every vox-horn and speaker gargoyle on the *Damnatio Memorae*. She focused her consciousness upon the communications blisters. <Send word to the *Dru’Kashyl*, inform them of what is coming. There will be no time to effect any extraction.> She shifted to navigation. <Transfer

auxiliary power to engines, proceed without delay to translation point ceti-nine-four.>

She jerked forward, her tracks squealing as she stopped directly in front of the oculus. The view fragmented like an insect's eye, showing all angles around the ship. Each compound screen was filled with warships in blue and gold. The newly arrived fleet was swallowing them, like an ocean predator devouring its prey.

<Translate now.> The precious little organic material remaining within Hyzra was vibrating, shuddering with the disgustingly futile tremors of an animal beset by panic. She had escaped the calamity of the Great Rift. Barely, but she had done it. She could do it again.

<Translate *now*,> she repeated, unnecessarily. It served no purpose. The warp drives required the amount of time to execute their function that they required. The blue jaws closed tighter around them. Motes of light began to appear along the flanks of the loyalist vessels, the firing of broadsides and the building charge of lances.

'Weapons fire weapons fire weapons fire–' the augur servitors droned out a monotone choir of their impending doom. Hyzra's magenta eye-lenses twitched as they moved from image to image, perturbed by the devolved rebellion of her remaining flesh.

<Transl–>

The *Damnatio Memorae* shattered as its reactor was punctured and exploded. A city's worth of adamantium and ablative ceramite was vaporised in a blinding detonation of boiling liquid plasma. Tens of thousands of lives, from ancient, twisted beings that had fought the Long War for millennia to base mutants that toiled in the blackness of its lower decks, ended in an instant as a warship that had prowled the void and the currents of the immaterium for over ten thousand years finally met its end.

All of this appeared for a moment to the crew of the *Macragge's Honour*, a dull flash that quickly shrank away to nothing.

'Enemy target destroyed, my lord,' said the admiral. 'Confirmed on augur.'

Guilliman remained unmoved. The kill had been swift, efficient. Not a single vessel in the fleet had even had to alter its course. In and of itself, such a result pleased him, but the lord of the Ultramarines would not allow any satisfaction to take root in his mind. The presence of the IV Legion was a complication he could not afford, and spending the increasingly precious moments available to

them celebrating their removal would only exacerbate the issue brought about by the fact that the enemy had been here at all. Guilliman's mind went to his grand schedule. Twenty-four hours – or even less – spent here over the time he had allotted to come and collect Quradim's contribution to the Indomitus Crusade could result in the loss of three worlds. They simply could not afford that.

The sound of heavier tread than that of a mortal man entered Guilliman's hearing. 'Captain Numitor,' he said by way of a greeting, eyes still locked to the oculus.

'My lord.'

A modicum of air passed the primarch's lips, not quite a sigh. He could hear the faint tremor in his son's voice. A slight hesitation when addressing him, brought on by the awe of being in his presence. He had endured it even before his wounding; it had been tiresome then, and it was no less tiresome now.

'I am putting you in command over the fleet,' said Guilliman. 'While I am on the surface, coordinate and ensure that we are ready to depart as soon as the weapons are loaded.'

Numitor took a step closer to his father. 'You will go yourself, lord?'

'We have a schedule to keep,' replied the primarch, his eyes fixated upon the wreckage of the dead Chaos ship as the *Macragge's Honour* passed through it, its cloud of gases and shards quickly dissipating from view. 'If there are still remnants of the Fourth below seeking to interfere with us, they must be excised and quickly. We get what we came for, and then we go where we are needed next.'

Guilliman heard the captain salute in a crash of ceramite, but did not look from the planet growing to fill the bridge's displays. 'Be ready when I call. I shall not be long.'

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

The *Pilum* shot across a border of ice-covered stone as it crossed into the southern pole of Quradim. The temperature plummeted from the wind-swept chill of the world's equatorial regions to a fully arctic condition. Rolling banks of frozen tundra unfurled before the Stormraven, permanently stained an iron grey by pollution and ash. The unbroken ocean of filthy white stretched ahead, its features blurred and obscured by blizzard gales that Helios felt buffet their dropship through its hull. In between curtains of hail, he glimpsed the station through the viewing block in the *Pilum*'s cockpit.

As far as buildings went, it was unremarkable. A squat rectangle of modular construction, bereft of architectural nuance or care. It positively exuded its origins from a forge world of the Adeptus Mechanicus, a building created to achieve function without the slightest consideration of form.

That such a simple, unassuming structure could house the object of so much strife struck him in a peculiar fashion, but he quickly dismissed it. He had confronted enough evils in his life to know better than to place judgement on face value.

Cutting through the churning bands of ice and snow, the Stormraven was nearly blind, its sensors struggling to identify anything not directly before it. The detection and warning of incoming fire came the same moment as the impact. Suddenly the cockpit was a screaming choir of alarms and klaxons. The Stormraven was spinning, the world beyond the viewing blocks a smoke-smeared blur of the ground hurtling towards them.

Helios had only a moment to look down upon the crew bay, to his brothers, and

shout out a warning.

'*Brace!*'

The *Pilum* struck the ground, gouging a furrow into the dirty snow and flipping end over end. It smashed down again, ripping its starboard wing away and sending both it and the rest of the gunship spinning through the air. The third time it crashed the *Pilum* stayed on the ground, dragged forwards by inertia until it ground to a stop at the foot of a dune of packed, ash-speckled tundra.

The dark avian form of a Thunderhawk shrieked over the crash site. Steam whipped from the barrel of its spinal turbolaser. It did not slow to rain more fury down upon the *Pilum*, keeping along towards its destination.

Helios reached out for a handhold, waited a few seconds for the blurred arm before him to solidify in his vision, and pulled himself up. He snarled as he felt fractured bones grind against each other in his chest, and tugged a spar of twisted metal from where it was impaled in his right thigh. The cockpit was inverted after the gunship had come to a halt on its back. He twisted, rising from the overhead instrument panel crushed beneath his weight.

Most of the Stormraven's systems were inactive, the consoles smashed and their power feeds severed. Sparks guttered from a dozen places, singeing the flesh of the dead servitors hanging slack in the control thrones. Helios reached up between the pilot and navigation stations, pulling the lever on a broad cylinder that began to pulse faintly.

'Brothers,' Helios called out into the crew bay. He watched as the Primaris Marines collected themselves amidst the upturned architecture and shattered crates of ammunition. Seneca helped Caprico to his feet, steadying him as he flexed an arm cobwebbed with fractured ceramite. Their armour had borne the brunt of the crash and endured, and as Helios moved into the crew bay to join them, the Ultramarines were ready to move.

'Just once,' grumbled Nicanor as he pried a side hatch open. 'Just once I want to land on this planet in a proper fashion.'

The Space Marines clambered out of the crashed *Pilum*, their boots crunching down into the ashen tundra. The storms had diminished slightly, but still whipped around them in stinging veils of dirty white, limiting visibility to a handful of metres in any direction. Helios emerged ahead of Melos and Iason, watching Seneca as the Intercessor pointed up into the sky. 'Look!'

The Ultramarines turned, looking upwards. Helios strained to see through the whirling snow. For a moment the wind abated, and the Chaplain saw the faint

outline of shapes glimmering in the heavens. ‘The primarch has arrived.’

Seneca tapped at the side of his helm. ‘There is too much interference from the storms here. If reinforcements have arrived, our vox won’t be strong enough to make it through to them.’

‘I have engaged the emergency beacon,’ said Helios. ‘They will know where to find us, but we cannot afford to wait for them. We have to get to the facility, and prevent the enemy from gaining control of the weapons.’

Melos ripped the door from its hinges to allow his and Iason’s greater bulk through. ‘But if our fleet is in orbit, the Iron Warriors are trapped. Their ship is either dead or has fled the system. They will have nowhere to take the stockpile.’

‘Exactly,’ said the Chaplain. ‘Which is why, in their desperation, they will try to use them here.’

‘And destroy themselves in the process?’ Seneca looked towards the station. ‘They are vile, treacherous to be certain. But do you believe that they would go to such lengths?’

‘If they believe the primarch’s arrival is imminent, I believe they would. Which is why they must not be allowed to gain control.’

The Ultramarines advanced, pressing on through the injuries incurred in the crash and the buffeting winds of the blizzards as they approached the facility. Helios glimpsed the outline of the Iron Warriors Thunderhawk, perched beside the low, snow-covered building like a crouching bird of prey. As they came within fifty metres, he could see the dark shapes of the heretics as they passed through the main entrance, a great reinforced bulkhead twice the height of a Space Marine. Two of their number remained outside to stand sentinel.

‘Inceptors,’ barked the Chaplain. ‘In the name of our primarch and our Emperor, for Macragge and for our fallen brothers, strike them down!’

‘Courage and honour!’ roared Melos and Iason as they rocketed into the air. With their weapons replenished, they unleashed a hellish barrage of bolt shells and plasma fire onto the sentries, killing one outright and suppressing the other long enough for Helios and the Intercessors to close and kill him with plasma - pistol and bolt rifles.

As they reached the landed Thunderhawk, a deep pounding tread shook the ground beneath their boots. Mechanical screams rang out across the tundra. Stomping out from behind the gunship came the massive Dreadnought of the Iron Warriors, with dark stains of blood still splashed upon the face of its armoured tomb.

Rage at the sight of the ancient heretic war machine lent the Ultramarines new

strength, and Helios made ready to charge the Dreadnought when the roar of thrusters sent Melos and Iason into the air ahead of him.

'Go, Brother-Chaplain,' shouted Melos as he fired upon the screaming walker's broad sarcophagus. 'We have a debt of honour to settle with this beast.'

'We will cover your advance,' said Iason, shooting into the air and saturating the Dreadnought with assault bolter fire. 'Go now!'

Helios bit back the reprimand forming in his mind as the Inceptors attacked without his order. Right now, the zeal of vengeful warriors outweighed the need for reproach. 'Fight well, my brothers. Theron's vindication is in your hands.'

He waved the Intercessors forward as the Inceptors duelled with the monster. Such was the haste of their enemy that they had not sealed the doors of the facility behind them. With his crozius raised high, Helios led his brothers charging through.

'Hold!' Helios shouted as they crossed the threshold. 'No bolters.'

One look within and the other Ultramarines realised the full gravity of the warning. The structure was a modular Adeptus Mechanicus template, an austere metal cube, its inner walls lined with tall reinforced racks, the majority of them empty. A few held squat metal cylinders, eight in total, roughly the size of a Space Marine. Arcane warning iconography adorned every missile, speaking of the devastating biological compound that lay dormant within. Any stray shell could puncture a bomb's casing and unleash the life eater virus.

The Iron Warriors arrayed throughout the facility saw the same threat. Only blades filled their hands as they stood upon catwalks overhead and in the central aisle between the cache racks.

The Intercessors stowed their bolt rifles, drawing combat knives and gladii. Melos killed the power feeds to his plasma exterminators, his mind turning their battered casings once more into bludgeons. Helios locked his plasma pistol to the magnetic strip on his thigh, and took hold of his crozius with both hands.

'And so we have come to it,' a voice boomed across the inner shell of the facility. 'Nowhere left for you to run, nowhere left for us to hunt you.'

An enormous Iron Warrior stepped forward from among his fellows, a twisted behemoth in steeldust Terminator war-plate. An axe larger than a mortal man was gripped in one massive fist, the other ending in the crackling scythe blades of lightning claws. An enraged mask of pallid flesh leered out from the armour, with iron grey eyes that held the threat of fanatical violence. At his side was the cloaked form of Beniah, the traitor's twin swords already drawn.

'I am Bolaraphon,' said the Terminator. 'Warsmith of the *Dru'Kashyl* and

warden of Quradim. You have come here, to the world our blood and toil brought into the realm of man ten thousand years ago, to steal weapons that do not belong to you.'

The Warsmith gestured to the nearest bombshell with his talons, their lightning casting stark illumination upon the foreign script etched into the casing. Olympian script.

'We created these weapons, at the command of the mouldering husk you worship. Weapons of genocide, weapons to strip whole worlds of life for defying the will of a mad king. Now you come, having ruined this planet with your hunger to consume, always wanting more. More to consume, more to devour, to lay waste to any that would speak against you.'

The flat of Bolaraphon's axe head clanged against his barrel chest. '*I* stand against you.'

Helios stepped forward, bearing his crozius aloft like a torch against darkness. 'I am Helios, Ultramarine and loyal son of the Primarch Roboute Guilliman. In the name of the God-Emperor of Mankind, I demand the tools of war that are His by right.'

The echo of the words rang across the chamber. Gauntlets tightened on the hafts of weapons. The Warsmith finally inclined his head.

'Come then, and take them.'

Technology was cast aside. The threat of the bombs had seen to that. Opposing gene-forged superhumans, in possession of weaponry that had levelled civilisations, threw aside bolters, plasma guns and grenades and devolved back into a clash of blades and fists, a distant echo of the wooden clubs and flint axes of the Neanderthal warfare of humanity's far ancient past.

The Primaris Ultramarines met the numerical advantage of the Iron Warriors with greater strength and swiftness. Fists broke armour and superior force drove knives into hearts and throats.

A thunderous din ripped into the facility as the flame-wreathed form of the Iron Warriors Dreadnought smashed through the main doors. The walker thrashed at Melos and Iason as they swarmed around it, its piston legs stumbling on slagged hydraulics that sent it crashing to the ground.

Beniah lunged for Seneca as Helios charged the Warsmith. The Primaris Marine weaved around the Iron Warrior's lightning sword strokes with an agility that defied his greater bulk. A low cut from the Ultramarine's knife sent one sword spinning away. Beniah snarled, teeth gritted as he brought his other down in an

overhead slash.

Seneca reached up with inhuman reflexes, and caught the sword in his fist. He roared, snapping the blade in two. The Ultramarine grabbed hold of the back of the Iron Warrior's skull and whipped his combat blade across the traitor's throat.

Beniah shuddered as his lifeblood sprayed over his breastplate, staining his armour a pinkish brass. He staggered back, clutching at his throat. Seneca pounced, ramming his knife into the Iron Warrior's guts until he collapsed and went still.

Helios sprang into the air, gripping his crozius two-handed and swinging it down from over his head. Bolaraphon lowered a massive shoulder and thudded it into the Ultramarine's chest as he descended, throwing him back and wide. Helios skidded, planting his feet wide to arrest his slide and charged back into blade range. His maul rang against the blade of the Warsmith's axe as they clashed, filling the vast chamber with colliding energies.

In the first moments, Helios' speed levelled the balance of the duel. But as the seconds wore on, the disparity of force tipped the match of arms in the Iron Warrior's favour. Bolaraphon smashed down, battering Helios' guard again and again and forcing him onto the back foot. Helios defended, but he was losing, unable to overcome the heretic's power.

'You think you can defeat me,' boomed the Iron Warrior. His axe crashed down, Helios only able to keep it inches from his skull. 'I was conquering worlds before your arrogant sire even shattered your Legion.'

Helios went to one knee, straining to hold his crozius against the colossal strength of his opponent. With a keening shriek of shearing metal, the eagle wing blades shattered. The Warsmith's axe plunged down, burying its blade in Helios' breastplate.

Bolaraphon planted his boot on the Ultramarine's chest and tore his axe free. Helios crashed to the ground, his blood spreading out around him in a growing pool.

'And so one more goes to join his corpse Emperor,' Bolaraphon scowled. He looked up at the sound of approaching footsteps.

Seneca and the other Primaris Marines advanced upon the Chaos Terminator, leaving the corpses of his Iron Warriors in their wake. The four Ultramarines gathered in a semicircle a pace from Bolaraphon, blades chipped and armour marred, but steel in their postures.

'I have slaughtered dozens of the hated Thirteenth,' snarled the Warsmith. 'You think that the four of you can survive against me?'

‘No, not four,’ said Seneca, shaking his head once as he raised his blade with his brothers. ‘One.’

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

As one, the Primaris Marines attacked. Bolaraphon roared, sending a sheet of flame at them from his gauntlet. The Ultramarines sprinted through it, liquid fire clinging to their armour as they brought their blades to bear.

Each time the Iron Warrior bore down upon one of the Primaris Marines, the others attacked, driving their knives into the traitor's flanks and the gaps between armour plates. Bolaraphon spun to counter, but they had already displaced around him. His axe found no cobalt armour, instead shearing through a support column of an empty munitions rack in a shower of sparks.

The Warsmith's movements became increasingly slow as his armour's power cables were severed and layers of fibre bundle musculature were cut apart. His power claw clanged against his side as it lost function, the palm flamer coughing small gouts of fire onto the floor. Parrying with his axe left Bolaraphon exposed to three blades punching into his back.

With a deafening roar of rage and frustration, the Warsmith threw all of his strength into his axe. The energised blade nearly found two of the Ultramarines, but instead severed another of the munition rack's supports.

A colossal groan of metal rang out across the chamber.

'Back!' barked Seneca. The Ultramarines darted out from the growing shadow as the surrounding industrial scaffolding teetered forward. The remaining supports, stressed beyond their tolerances from the weight, snapped, and the entire rack came apart.

The Primaris Marines leapt forward, moving just far enough to look back and see the Iron Warrior buried beneath an avalanche of jagged, twisted metal.

Seneca rushed over to Helios, raising his head as the other Primaris Marines gathered around them. ‘Brother-Chaplain?’

Thunder filled the interior of the facility. Hairs rose on the backs of necks, and tendrils of displaced air rushed over the floor. A blinding flash obscured the entrance to the stockpile, so bright it defied even post-human sight. Seneca and his brothers looked behind them as the light and haze peeled away, revealing Roboute Guilliman in all of his fearsome splendour.

Helios was intimate with death. He had shared so many final moments in the course of his duty, both of his Ultramarines brothers and those of mortals. The instant where life became death, and the soul passed on to whatever destiny awaited beyond the flesh. He tried to think of the kin he had stood beside as their last breath left them, but struggled to summon their names as his own lifeblood spilled out from him.

The pain in his chest from the Iron Warrior’s axe was a crushing wall of acid fire. Agony wracked him, so severe each breath was blinding. He felt the pain nullifiers struggle to control it as his organs failed, quickly overwhelmed as he began to drown in the hurt.

And then, as quickly as it had arrived, it was gone. Helios’ vision faltered as his body wavered in and out of consciousness. He fought to stay awake, forcing his eyes to open.

He looked up into the eyes of a demigod.

‘Father,’ Helios whispered, the word flecking dark blood across the inside of his helm.

‘My son,’ answered the primarch.

Helios grunted, his voice failing as he tried to speak. The thirteenth primarch closed his eyes, slowly shaking his head, before meeting the Chaplain’s gaze once more.

‘Be at peace, Helios, son of the Reclusiam,’ said Guilliman. ‘You have done well here, and your service honours both Chapter and Imperium.’

Helios tried to draw in a breath, but his lungs rebelled.

‘You have held the Imperium up for so long,’ said Guilliman. He took Helios’ hands, folding them slowly over his chest. ‘You can let go now – it is the time for others to take up that burden.’

Helios coughed. He reached up with a shaking hand. Guilliman took it, and leaned closer to his son.

‘Courage,’ said the Chaplain.

‘…and honour,’ answered Guilliman.

The ancient battle cry of the Ultramarines completed, Helios’ vision failed, and he sank into silence.

After a moment, Guilliman looked up from the dead Chaplain to his new sons. His Primaris Marines. ‘Carry him. My ship will have come by now, place him there.’

‘Yes, lord,’ said Seneca, and the Primaris brethren knelt to gather Helios up.

Seneca and his brothers fell silent, unable to summon words. In the years and wars to come, they would fight beside other members of the Chapter’s Reclusiam, both veterans and those selected from the ranks of the Primaris Marines, but none would eclipse the skull-faced figure they looked upon now, the warrior who had bonded them in battle, and the teacher who had shown them what it meant to be an Ultramarine. Slowly, in unison, the squad pressed a fist against their chests in a final salute.

Around them, servitors and Mechanicus enginseers began to appear, labouring in a hurried bustle of industry to load the virus bombs and escort them from the facility to the heavy lifters that were landing just beyond its doors.

Guilliman stood, walking to the warheads. He extended his gauntlet over each of them one by one, his hand just hovering above their casings. A signal from his armour, gene-coded to the primarch alone, connected to the systems within the bombs and ran complex diagnostics over them, revealing their condition and viability. The warheads were ancient, and until recently had been stored in stasis. They would need to be returned to such a state once aboard the *Macragge’s Honour*, before they were despatched to their assigned fleets and used to slow the Imperium’s bleeding as the Indomitus Crusade gathered momentum.

As he reached the last of the bombs, a vibration radiated over his palm. Guilliman frowned as his gene-code was rejected, unable to interface with the warhead. He tried again, only to be met with the same error.

‘Magos,’ the primarch called.

A red-robed tech-priest squirmed clear of the crowd, moving to Guilliman’s side as quickly as his spindly spider legs could carry him. The magos did not require a prompt or command, intimating from the spirits of the primarch’s armour that it could not transmit the signal to disarm the virus bomb. Swarms of mechadendrites extended from his robes, weaving around the bomb and scanning it with a dozen different instruments.

‘Lord Guilliman,’ the magos uttered as he withdrew his probes, his tone dead but the volume amplified in an attempt to communicate the terminal threat. ‘This

warhead has existed outside of stasis conditions for too long, and has exceeded its degradation threshold tolerance. Disarmament is impossible. It is impossible to prevent its inevitable detonation.'

Guilliman closed his eyes. Yet another world lost in the madness of this new dark age. He opened them again, his gaze steely as he regarded the magos.

'Load the remaining weapons immediately. We are leaving this place.'

As the last Imperial vessel rose from the surface of Quradim, the ruins of the collapsed munitions racks began to creak. Smaller spars of metal shook and rattled off the mound, as the massive heap of metal began to move.

In the crushing darkness beneath the collapse, guttural screams ripped from Bolaraphon's throat as he fought against the tomb of twisted metal surrounding him. The pain was monumental, an inconceivable agony, but he would not cease. The Warsmith did not stop, he did not falter, tearing away at the tangled metal until light broke through.

A gauntlet, its burnished surface crumpled and stripped of its gold and jet chevrons, burst from the heap. An arm followed, then a shoulder. Bolaraphon, his face lacerated and bleeding, emerged, and pulled himself out and free.

He was alone. There was no sign of the Ultramarines, nor the stockpile of virus bombs. All that surrounded Bolaraphon was wreckage, and the bodies of his brothers.

The Warsmith looked out through the ragged opening of the facility's shattered entrance, across the surface of Quradim and up into its ravaged skies. He strained for any sign of life, until a layer of cloud peeled back, allowing him to glimpse a scattering of weak lights as they vanished into the dark.

Silence reigned, its only company the howl of the wind as it raked over the battlefield, and a low trill, steadily growing to scratch at his hearing.

The XIII Legion had left one virus bomb behind. Bolaraphon's eyes fell over its casing, and the runes that slowly ticked down to complete Quradim's annihilation.

...20...

Bolaraphon seethed, blood dripping into a hissing puddle beneath his clenched teeth. His own design, turned against him in the end.

...15...

Was this the warp's plan all along? it occurred to him. *The last deception, a final, twisted knife to my throat, taking away everything that I have built?* It almost brought a bitter smile to his face.

Almost.

…10…

He slowly dragged himself upright, looking over at his fallen kin before stepping outside the facility and glaring up at the sky.

…5…

‘I stand!’ he shouted at the cluster of blue dots as they climbed and receded from view. ‘I stand here, while you run. Cowards!’

The beeping behind Bolaraphon became a continuous, deafening tone. Canisters of the life eater virus rattled within the bombshell as safeguard locks released and dispersion nozzles were shunted into place. Densely armoured slats in the surface of the bomb peeled aside in a screech of ancient machinery, clearing the way for nozzles to emerge.

Quradim was where Bolaraphon had begun the *Dru’Kashyl*, and now, this was where the warband would end. It was fitting to him, that both birth and death should occur here. The circle of iron was closed.

The beeping stopped. The bombshell shivered. The nozzles released jets of vile green mist that expanded into an impenetrable cloud that swept out from the facility and ascended to swallow the sky.

Bolaraphon raised his face up to the heavens, and spread his arms wide in victory. It had taken him ten thousand years, but he had won his vindication. The plots and schemes of the daemons be damned. He had not failed, he had turned Guilliman away. The Iron Warriors held Quradim once more.

As the wall of boiling green cloud shrieked out to engulf the world, it found the Warsmith standing tall to receive it.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Seneca passed through the bulkhead, walking by the bustling crew and officers as he ascended the main staircase leading above the bridge of the *Mare Nostrum*. The strategium was more sparsely populated than the command deck below, yet was still swollen with the intangible sense of great import prevalent across the fleet.

The Eighth Company Librarian, Arrone, looked over at the towering Primaris Marine as he turned to depart. Seneca felt a strange pressure, light but insistent, play over his thoughts. He could not help but feel the same curiosity that every pair of eyes had shown him since he had awakened, but of the mind. He gave the psyker a respectful nod as he descended the stairs behind him.

'Brother Seneca,' said Captain Numitor without turning. The Lord Executioner stood at the main table, fists planted wide on its surface as he leaned over a swathe of reports and battlefield analysis forecasts. Tactical hololiths – from planetary to star system-level projections in scale – danced in the air, along with recordings taken from armour visor feeds displaying the intensity of battle in sterile, silent loops.

Numitor gestured beside the table. 'Please.'

Seneca saluted, a harsh clang of ceramite that disturbed the relative quiet of the strategium. 'Honoured captain, thank you for–'

'We don't have time for that,' the captain interrupted. Seneca could hear the fatigue in the elder warrior's voice. 'Let us do one another the kindness of forgoing the pomp and ceremony, and focusing upon the matters at hand, yes?'

'Of course, captain,' replied the Primaris Marine. 'As you will.'

‘So, Quradim. Your first taste of combat outside of training and simulation?’

Seneca hesitated. ‘I participated on two operations on the satellites of Mars–’

‘I am aware of those,’ Numitor nodded. ‘But Quradim was your first true taste of it, or at least that is what your record will state. You did well here. And that is more than my own opinion.’

‘It is an honour to fight alongside my brothers for Chapter and Imperium, my captain.’

‘Naturally there are those within the hierarchy of the Chapter that met the revelation of our Primaris brethren with surprise.’ Numitor spread a sheaf of transcripts in front of him as he spoke. ‘The Space Marine Chapters are martial societies, inured over the millennia to embrace ritual and tradition and eschew that which is in opposition to those conventions that form our identities and beliefs. Our weapons and armour are thousands of years old, our tactics the unchanged word of the primarch from the days of the Second Founding. Change is not a thing to be accepted quickly among our ranks, nor easily. So you must understand that your existence, even coming from the most sacred of authorities as it does, took time to process.’

Seneca’s thoughts retraced to the darkness of the hive, and the dying words of the Iron Warrior.

‘Our present circumstance,’ the captain continued, ‘will do much to allay that trepidation. The truth of the matter is that there could be one million of you, and we would still be sorely lacking in the forces needed to conduct the wars to come in this crusade. There are too many battles ahead for the Imperium to cast any weapon aside in favour of another, as Quradim has surely taught you.’

Seneca’s thoughts went to the bombs being loaded into the *Mare Nostrum* and across the fleet; weapons his squad had ensured. Weapons that would be used to destroy worlds skirting the Great Rift that were overrun by the forces of Chaos. And also the ones not so sickened, but without the resources to defend themselves. Numitor’s words cut through his dark thoughts.

‘Your skill and valour, and that shown by your brothers, has gone far to diminish the scepticism that some may hold. The primarch has decreed that we are to integrate the Primaris brethren into our ranks, and we shall do so without pause or hesitation. But if all of you new Space Marines conduct yourselves as your squad has, then it is but a matter of time before we are all brothers.’

Seneca stared at his captain, unsure of how to respond. The idea of accepting praise alone was an uncomfortable thing for him to process. He hardly felt that he had done anything beyond what he was trained and created to do, or what any

of his brothers would have done had they been in his position. If he struck a foe with his fist, he would not think to honour just one finger.

'And now,' said Numitor, 'to the matter at hand. I had suggested a commendation, but upon debriefings and the intercession of other parties, including my superiors, that decision was overruled.'

Seneca nodded. He felt no shame at the denial of elevation. Service was all that mattered to him. He would be happy to return to his brothers, and to fight under the command of whomever the Chapter deemed fit.

'Kneel,' said Numitor.

Seneca looked to the captain, uncertainty flashing across his features for an instant before he obeyed.

The Lord Executioner's blade sang as it cleared its scabbard, reflecting the light of the strategium from its mirror-polished edge. Numitor raised the weapon, resting the crosspiece against his brow, before lowering it to Seneca's shoulder.

'Seneca, son of the risen Primarch Roboute Guilliman, Battle-Brother of the Eighth Company of the Ultramarines Chapter, will never leave this room.'

Numitor lifted the blade, passing it over Seneca's head, and laying it on his other shoulder.

'You will leave this place, and hereafter serve Emperor and Chapter, as Brother-Sergeant Seneca. Your helm shall be crimson, so all you lead will see you, and follow you into the crucible of war.'

Seneca swallowed. A sergeant. Leader of a squad of Ultramarines, eyes and ears of the company captain. The first to enter a combat zone, and almost always the last to leave it. 'Captain, I–'

'Rise,' said Numitor, spinning his blade and returning it to its sheath. 'You have earned it. And if for any reason you should feel otherwise, then it is a matter of you doing what you must, to lead and champion the Eighth Company and the Chapter, until you do.'

'Yes, captain,' said Seneca. His mind went to Ariston, Nicanor and Caprico, to Melos and Iason. 'And my squad brothers? What of them?'

'Your squad will be brought back to full strength with new recruits coming in from the Tenth,' said Numitor, already back to studying the deluge of tactical data surrounding them. 'It will fall to you, sergeant, to mould them into Ultramarines in battle, as the battle here has moulded you.'

Seneca nodded, his mind racing to the point where he did not hear his words until they had left his lips. 'I only wish we had not failed to save Quradim, and those souls living there.'

The captain of the Eighth Company stopped his analysis of the projections. His eyes ceased roving over the facts and figures of wars being fought and about to be fought. He stood to his full height, turning his body to give Seneca his full attention.

'People will die in the Indomitus Crusade, Seneca, both citizens of the Imperium as well as those sworn to protect them. More perhaps, by the time it is finished, than have ever before in any war our species has ever fought. Our duty as Space Marines, as the blades of the primarch and the Emperor, is to ensure that none of those deaths happened in vain. That they died in battle to reverse the tide of darkness that seeks to overtake the Imperium, and the human race. This is our task, and it will not be done without casualties. But make no mistake, we fight for nothing less than the survival of humanity, and if we should be among those dead to ensure that happens, then that must be so.'

'I understand, captain.'

'You are dismissed, Sergeant Seneca. We march for Macragge.'

Seneca straightened, gauntlet clanging against his chest in salute. 'We march for Macragge.'

EPILOGUE

‘I stood upon a world once,’ said Roboute Guilliman, watching as the life eater crept across Quradim in a wave of ravenous catastrophe. A thin bloom of toxic green cloud swelled across the pole, sending questing tendrils down across the beleaguered world. In a remarkably short span of time, half of Quradim’s misshapen surface was consumed by it, and before long, it was completely covered. The viral zephyrs would cling to the planet for a time before finally feasting upon itself and dissipating, transforming a planet of little life to one of absolutely none.

‘You remember it,’ continued Guilliman. ‘We were there together. One of the countless worlds lost to greater mankind during the darkness of Old Night. One that, after we culled the xenos from its carcass, revealed that the aliens had not been the agents of its demise. Its own people had consigned themselves to self-inflicted extinction through the use of their own weapons of great destruction. We walked through its ruins, learning its history and piecing together its fate.

‘I swore that such weapons would have no place in my Father’s new dominion. That I, and my Legion, would give our dying breath to help create a world where such monstrous devices were relegated to myth and the faded tomes of history. That we would never see their like again. Such a conviction only became stronger, after Horus’ treachery.

‘Thoas.’ He quietly breathed the name, like a contemplative curse. ‘It is so long ago and yet it is right here again, before my very eyes. A planet and its people, our people, lost to our own instruments of destruction. Some of my brothers, perhaps too many, would ask the question, if we need such tools to preserve this

Imperium, *is this an Imperium worth preserving*? What future are we building upon such foundations?' He looked back to whom he was addressing. 'Are such ruinous means anything besides a harbinger that our time has passed, and that the only righteous path that remains for us is to fade away, and walk hand in hand into extinction?'

The skull on the plinth stared back at Guilliman, offering no counsel, no advocacy in favour for one point or the other that the stalwart warrior had always offered in life. The Primarch of the Ultramarines stared into the hollows of its eyes, his mind retracing a thousand conversations with the mind that had once occupied it, so long ago.

'No.' Guilliman's jaw tightened and set. 'That cannot be the way. My shoulders must now bear the weight of humanity's survival, more so than many of my brothers were ever asked to bear. I finally understand Dorn, now, standing sentinel against Horus, courting the end of all humanity. No soul but his, and our father's, has carried this burden.'

He looked up across the stars. 'The moment that Horus died, and my father was resigned to the Golden Throne, I became the foremost of all the Emperor's sons. Think of that. To inherit that kind of power, in an instant.

'Ten thousand years ago, the Ultramarines Legion was without peer, and there was no goal beyond our reach. We were not bled dry by the Siege of Terra, and I as their primarch emerged from my brother's Heresy alive and unscathed, standing in sole command of the single largest military force that was left in the entire galaxy. All others, traitor and loyalist alike, were ghosts of their former strength. I only had to give the order, and the Ultramarines would have put the crown of the undisputed ruler of the human race on my head.

'This strength, the ability to make this a reality, is not what made my Legion special. What made us special was that each and every one of us saw that reality clearly, that the entire galaxy was ours for the taking. We had already built the empire of the Five Hundred Worlds. We had already created our own *Imperium Secundus*. The simplest and clearest means to erase our shame of its collapse, and the greater shame for being absent during the siege would be to make it so that there never was a siege at all, to rewrite history with ourselves at the forefront. All we had to do was conquer, and yet when the time came, we did not do it. We walked to the edge of that precipice, and made the choice to turn from it.

'I did not feel arrogance, or disregard, or contempt for an Imperium that would have collapsed without me. Instead, I felt an unbelievable, crushing

responsibility. Again, humanity was on its knees after tearing itself apart in the Heresy, and every xenos species, every rebel within the Imperium, and all the forces of Chaos saw that just as clearly. The Ultramarines were the only thing that could keep our species from going extinct.

'I even took my greatest weapon, my Legion, and destroyed it. My Codex fractured my life's work into a thousand pieces, but the Ultramarines as a Chapter still inherited the same burden of responsibility they bore as a Legion. Imagine that, the weight of responsibility that had crushed a force of hundreds of thousands, now placed upon the backs of just one thousand. That is what it truly means to be an Ultramarine.

'Seeing someone weaker than ourselves does not make us superior, it makes us responsible for their safety. My sons are men, walking amongst children. And we cannot indulge despair, not now at our darkest hour.

'If I must use such savage weapons, then let it be so. If the galaxy must be razed, and its ashes used to regrow our kingdom, then I will do so. The Imperium that rises from the brink of annihilation shall be truly my father's realm, and not the rotting den of corruption time has made of it. That is what I will fight for, what we will all fight for. To create a future worth living in. The only path available to us, old friend, is the same one that it has ever been. War.'

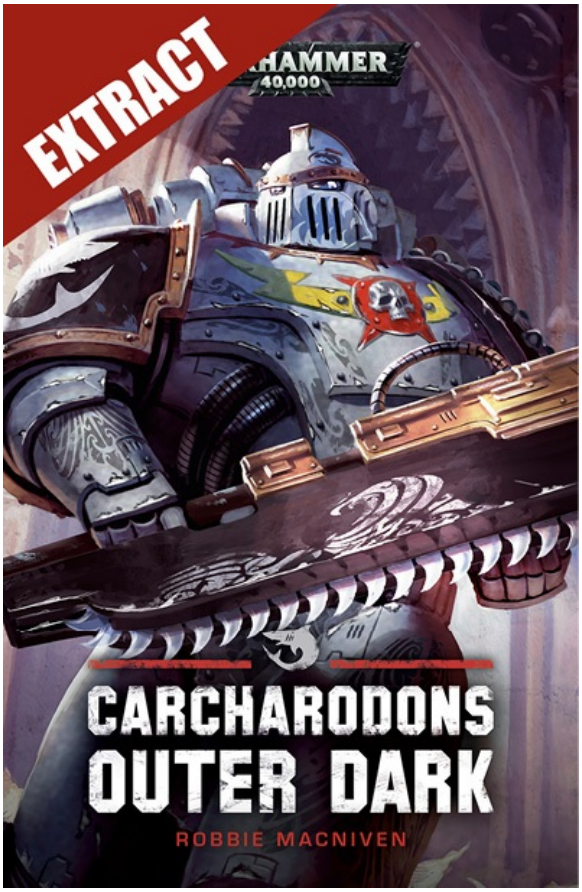
The primarch of the Ultramarines gathered up the sole remains of Marius Gage, holding his favoured son reverently in his hand as he turned and walked from the scene below.

'This war will decide everything, and it is only just beginning.'

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ian St. Martin is the author of the Horus Heresy Primarchs audio drama *Konrad Curze: A Lesson in Darkness*. He has also written the Warhammer 40,000 novels *Lucius: The Faultless Blade* and *Deathwatch: Kryptman's War*, along with the short stories 'Adeptus Titanicus: Hunting Ground', 'City of Ruin' and 'In Wolves' Clothing'. He lives and works in Washington DC, caring for his cat and reading anything within reach.

An extract from *Carcharodons: Outer Dark*.



The depths of the Lost World were silent. Every step Khauri took felt as though he were summoning a thunderclap, his footfalls echoing on through the lightless depths long after he had come to a halt. He stood at the heart of a chamber of natural rock, its jagged floor uneven, the roof high above bristling with stalactites. The tunnel at his back was not the only entrance to the space of shattered rock – seven more branched off to his left and right, a web of passageways through the underworld. Each one represented a wrong choice. Every one held a phantom, a psychic spectre attuned specifically to Khauri's memories. To engage one would be to risk losing oneself forever. Beneath the surface, the Lost World was a warren of caverns, caves and shafts, the planet's integrity long ago splintered by forces far beyond mankind's reckoning. To have come so far and delved so deep was rare, even for one of Khauri's kind. Reaching this point had strained the focus and psychic warding of the young Lexicanium to breaking point.

At least his journey had not been in vain. He felt a surge of satisfaction as his optics picked out the markings on the wall opposite. He quickly suppressed the feeling. Emotions were dangerous to one such as he. That was the first thing he had learned. Left unchecked, they made him a liability or, worse, turned him into prey for things that hunted in places far deeper and darker than the one in which he presently stood.

He refocused, letting his helmet's auto-senses piece together the image before him. It was a carving, roughly hewn into the very heart of the Lost World, a bestial likeness that took long seconds for his mind to properly comprehend. When he did, his breath caught and his grip on his adamantium stave tightened.

'Now you truly understand,' whispered a voice.

Khauri spun, the grating of his armoured boots against the stone underfoot loud in the dark space.

'Master,' he breathed, bowing his head hastily.

Te Kahurangi, Chief Librarian of the Carcharodon Astra, mirrored the motion. Unlike Khauri, his helmet was mag-locked to his belt. A dry smile played over his gaunt, pale features, exposing rows of sharpened teeth.

'You have done well to come this far, brother,' the Chief Librarian said, stepping past him. Like Khauri, he was clad in ancient power armour that hummed and whirred as he moved. The traditional colours of the Chapter – greys and blacks – had given way to deep blue, though the battleplate was heavily inscribed with swirling white exile markings, honours that Khauri's equipment did not yet bear. Te Kahurangi also carried a staff, though his was considerably heavier, clad in carved bone and tipped by a shard of green stone that began to glow as he raised it.

How the Chief Librarian had succeeded in following him so closely without his knowledge – let alone entering the chamber unannounced – was something Khauri had learned not to ponder on too closely.

'Do you know what it is?' Te Kahurangi asked, his voice a deathly whisper. The green glow from his staff picked out the bestial features Khauri had been straining to identify, and the Lexicanium found himself forced to suppress a shudder.

'A monster,' he said after a moment.

Te Kahurangi's smile widened slightly, the light gleaming from his wicked teeth.

'It is us,' he said, lifting his other hand as though to caress the carving. His gauntlet stopped an inch from its surface, hesitated, then withdrew. 'It is the truth about who we are, Khauri. You understand the crest we bear on our pauldrons?'

'The great carcharodon,' Khauri said, glancing at the white, finned predator coiled on the right shoulder of the Chief Librarian.

'You have seen them during your induction, have you not? Swum with them, meditated upon their nature. They are mighty predators indeed, and our Chapter's doctrines and philosophies do well to reflect them. And yet, it could be said that the great carcharodon is but a mask we all wear.'

'This is known to all void brothers?' Khauri asked slowly, his eyes dragged back to the nightmarish creature that had been hacked into the Lost World's bedrock millennia before.

'It is,' Te Kahurangi confirmed. 'We do not hide our origins, Khauri, not from our own. We do not hide who we are. We do not hide this.'

Khauri pondered the beast a moment longer before speaking again.

'It is a creature from ancient Terran myth, is it not?'

Te Kahurangi turned abruptly, the light of his staff falling away from the carving and leaving it in darkness. His features, made even more ghoulish by the contrasting illumination, were suddenly grave.

'No more words, my apprentice. Your trial is complete. We must make haste, back to the surface. The machine-men have made planetfall, and the Grey Tithe is about to begin.'

It was growing dark on the surface, the weak sunlight hidden by a rising dust cloud that threatened to shroud the length of the Tithe Valley. The bleak, desolate rift in the dead planet's crust echoed with the ticking of radium carbines, the whir of cybernetics and the metallic thump of thirty sets of bionic limbs as Magos Primary Otte Benedikt's skitarii vanguard came to attention.

Not *his* skitarii, Otte corrected himself as he passed between their twin ranks, red robes flapping in the bitter wind that knifed down the valley. They were Magos Domina Kraph's. The combat-augmented tech-priestess had made it abundantly clear to the primary that, just as she would leave the discourse to him, so he must leave security to her and her rad-troopers. A younger, more flesh-prone member of the Adeptus Mechanicus might have probed her reputation for weakness, thinking her own calculations unstable or her functions not fully settled, but Otte knew better than to waste processing time on such pettiness. He had served alongside Kraph enough to be certain that her security precautions would be faultless to within point one of a per cent.

The truth was, if the beings Otte was about to meet decided to engage in hostilities, the skitarii present would not be enough to significantly increase the likelihood of his survival. Without doubt the combat assets escorting the Adeptus Mechanicus exploration vessels in stasis anchorage above would be enough to cripple the warships with which they shared orbit, perhaps even destroy them. Otte, however, knew that the likelihood of him still being even partly functional by that point was statistically negligible. Those they were about to meet rarely took survivors.

He could see them now, their bulky outlines a few hundred yards ahead, his green optic clusters stripping away the grey, wind-whipped dust that shrouded them. It bit and chafed at the few remaining organic scraps of his body, and befouled the mechanical purity of his metallic form with a million insidious grains. It would take weeks of lubricant salves and auto-benedictions to purge himself of this filthy backwater world.

He deleted such secondary concerns from his consciousness, the brief spike of

anger that accompanied them vanishing as he ran an override on all background considerations. *Focus*. He could not afford a miscalculation, not now. Behind him Explorator Deitrich and his bibliovore logis, Severus, were barely resisting the urge to overtake the magos primary. Deitrich had worked hard to mask his excitement during their long warp transit, but the explorator's reserve was coming undone now that he was drawing close to so much prized archeotech. It was easier for Otte to suppress his own desires to claim the blessed relics for Mars. Deitrich, after all, wasn't the one who had to negotiate with their current owners.

Those owners were only twelve in number, and they waited impassively as Otte and his skitarii approached. The magos primary completed his scans as he closed the last few dozen yards, logging every detail as a matter of potential importance. Six of the figures, the ones on the flanks, were clad in Tactical Dreadnought armour, their off-white slabs of plasteel, ceramite and adamantium caked with the valley's pervasive dust. Otte's internal processor registered a degree of awe at the presence of such blessed battle suits, even as his analysis moved on to the other six.

They made for a less uniform gathering. All were Space Marines, two in the grey power armour that predominated in this particular Chapter, two in the blue battleplate that Otte's data files informed him belonged to sanctioned Adeptus Astartes psykers. The fifth wore red ceramite, and bore upon his breastplate the wondrous Machina Opus of the Adeptus Mechanicus. Approval at the presence of the Techmarine barely registered before Otte took in the final figure.

He stood apart from his brethren, alone, a dozen paces behind them. Even by the standards of the Adeptus Astartes the figure was a giant, standing a head above the rest. He too was clad in Tactical Dreadnought armour, and for a moment Otte's analytics glitched, informing him he was looking at a graven statue. A slight shift in the giant's stance removed that possibility – dust cascaded from the cliff-like plates of his immense suit and his huge, wickedly barbed gauntlets. Every inch of the warrior was clad and armed with the most hallowed and rare pieces of wargear Otte had ever set his optics upon. It made the Space Marines standing in the giant's shadow seem like children.

He was not supposed to be here. In three centuries overseeing exchanges such as these, Otte had never once encountered him. Binaric discord filled his thought-algorithms for almost two whole seconds before he regained cognitive control. He misstepped, the slight change in motion enough for Kraph to thought-cant him.

<Is there a problem, primary?>

<Negative. Proceed,> he replied, filing away the shame he felt at his moment of weakness for later analysis.

Otte halted half a dozen paces from the nearest Space Marine. The rest of the Adeptus Mechanicus expedition came to a perfectly synchronised stop behind him. For a moment, there was nothing, nothing but the hissing of the wind in the sand and the flapping of crimson robes.

The wind died. The dust settled with it, and suddenly what lay beyond the Space Marines became visible. A great shard of black rock jutted from the head of the valley, framing the Adeptus Astartes. A crevasse was open in its flank, a jagged, lightning-bolt split in the stone that led to a darkness so complete Otte's bionics could not penetrate it.

'H-hail and well met, children of the void,' the magos said, his external vox-units stuttering slightly as they came online and issued the pre-recorded greeting. 'I am Magos Primary Otte Benedikt, of Exploration Fleet 2-8-17 *Arc Lux*. I thank you on behalf of the Omnissiah for this audience. May it serve us both.'

He made the sign of the cog over his breast, silver digits clicking as they interlocked. For a moment, none of the Space Marines spoke. Then one of the grey-armoured warriors took a pace forwards, towering over Otte's bent frame.

'Hail and well met, servant of the Machine-God. I am Akamu, Harvester Prime and captain. I bid you welcome to the Lost World on behalf of my void brethren. We are here seeking the beneficence of the Grey Tithe.'

'All will be as the Omnissiah wills,' Otte said, giving the ritual response. Both spoke in High Gothic. 'I call upon you, Harvester Prime Akamu, to deliver a hallowed oath that you will protect me and my binaric congregation for as long as we remain upon this world, and that no harm will befall us while under your stewardship.'

'I make this oath gladly and freely,' Akamu responded, the words scraping through his helmet's vox-grille like a blade over a whetstone. 'With my void brethren and great *Rangu* as my witness.'

Otte bowed his cowled head, the motion mirrored by the Space Marine. The magos deactivated his vox recording, ritual observed, and switched to mem-generated audio-cant.

'Brother Hitaki, it does my processes good to witness you once again.' The red-armoured Techmarine Otte had addressed nodded his head, but said nothing. Otte spoke to Captain Akamu again.

'You have a crop for us, Harvester Prime?'

‘We do, magos. The Outer Dark has rendered up a great deal in the past decade. We believe it will more than match your needs.’

‘We can only hope, captain,’ Otte canted, irritably deleting a snap-response to the excited blurt of lingua-technis that Deitrich emitted. The mention of potential archeotech had excited the explorator even further.

Akamu stepped to his left, his brethren parting either side of him. Only the giant in Terminator armour remained between the Adeptus Mechanicus adepts and the black crevasse that led into the heart of the valley beyond. Otte had avoided addressing the hulking warrior, his algorithms calculating that there was insufficient precedent to risk disrupting the Grey Tithe’s ceremonial opening. For a second, as the giant seemed to bar their way, Otte was forced to suppress a series of alarm responses, wondering whether his decision not to honour the figure had been correct. Then, with a deceptively soft whir of servos, the great Carcharodon moved aside. Otte could not delete a relieved scatter of binary before it reached the rest of the expedition’s receptors.

The magos passed between the Space Marines, and in the moment before Akamu fell into step alongside him Otte experienced the full weight of their predatory attention. Though they had hardly moved since his optics first registered them, there seemed to be a constant threat of sudden motion hanging over them, as though the black lenses of their helmets were an oily film covering waters churning with razor-toothed savagery. Bar those consigned to servo-skull plates and cogitator mem-banks, Otte knew that no functioning members of the Priesthood of Mars had encountered this particular Chapter as frequently as he had. He was one of the few who had witnessed just what these silent, grey giants were capable of.

Akamu led him to the jagged crack in the valley’s flank, its darkness drawing them on. Only Deitrich, Severus and the Techmarine, Hitaki, followed. The rest of the magos’ expedition remained facing the Space Marines in silence, the wind the only low, moaning conversation that passed between them.

‘Do you desire a techna-arcanum exchange, Magos Benedikt?’ Hitaki asked as they passed into the rock’s shadow. Otte responded with a blurt of binaric affirmation, offering a similar service in return. As the Harvester Prime led them through the passage out of the valley, the Techmarine and the magos exchanged remote data feeds containing preparatory information on the resources both sides had brought. Otte routed the information on to Deitrich and his bibliovore. Even the magos primary felt a flare of eagerness as he ran through the lists provided by the Space Marine – the harvest this time was bountiful indeed.

A number of questions were flagged up on his response units, but he queued them for the moment, unwilling to disturb the dark, dusty quiet of the rock they were passing through. There would be time enough later. Tact and a respect for protocol, he calculated, accounted for over thirty per cent of the reason he was entrusted with these sorts of negotiations. To call them vital was an understatement.

His optics, which had automatically switched to minimal light filters upon entering the crevasse, clicked as they recalibrated for a change in illumination detected around a bend in the tunnel. The dusty, echoing passageway opened before him into a sprawling chamber, its ceiling dominated by a jagged split that admitted the light of the planet's dying star. Though Otte had entered the chamber on two occasions previously, he still ran a diagnostic of the echoing space, as intrigued as ever by its dimensions. Its rough walls were uneven, the one to Otte's left sitting lower, creating a slope in the stalactite-studded ceiling. The floor underfoot was similarly rough, the magos' lobe stabilisers triggering as he compensated for the rocky surface. To a mind not blessed with machine-derived analytics, the cavern would appear natural, and even a newly inducted tech-adept, unused to applying the cold algorithms of the Cult of Mars to everything he came across, would likely not have thought twice about its origins, believing it formed by geological processes and the passage of millennia.

But not Otte. There was something more to it, he was certain, the work of some strange and powerful consciousness. His schematic analysis of the angles around him pinged back with too many coincidences of geometry and too many precise measurements for him to believe that the rock had split apart and reformed of its own accord. Something had fashioned this place, and it had done so with a degree of care and detail that his precise mind found both appealing and alarming. Just who, or what, the architect was, though, he had yet to discover. Some of his brethren, when presented with his findings, had hypothesised that it was the work of ancient, all-powerful xenos. Otte gave silent praise-digit cant to the Machine-God that he was not so superstitious. Still, the mystery remained.

Besides the deeper, more easily overlooked precision of the chamber's structure there were two more blatant signs of intelligent design, ones that Otte was sure had been added later by a hand less subtle than the original architect. At the cavern's far end what could only be described as a great throne, unadorned by any sort of pattern, had been carved into the rock face, while at its centre, bathed in the jagged scar of light that lanced through the split ceiling, a long dais had been hacked from the planet's bedrock. On that dais lay their objective, a dozen

opened cargo crates, while around them, standing just within the darkness beyond the light, stood another squad of Adeptus Astartes. Otte and his entourage halted before the dais.

'We may approach, Harvester Prime?' he asked, his vox-voice echoing weirdly from the strange chamber's walls.

'You may,' Akamu responded, taking post alongside his silent brethren. Otte stepped up onto the dais, accompanied by Deitrich, Severus and Hitaki.

They moved from left to right, inspecting the inside of each crate in turn. Some were locked in stasis fields, a film of blue energy playing over their contents. Deitrich emitted another burst of excited binaric as he bent over the first container. Otte locked into the cant passing between the explorator and his bibliovore, listening in as they assessed the objects delivered to them by the Adeptus Astartes.

<A computational void cable,> Deitrich said, peering down at a coil of thick, plastek-clad wiring. <Well preserved, Stygies markings.>

<Eighty-nine per cent functional, I estimate,> Severus added, cranial bionics whirring as they magnified sections of the cable. <Application of the blessed lubricants is long overdue, however.>

<We will apply them as soon as we reach orbit, Omnissiah willing,> Deitrich said, seeking to reassure his shorter, more stooped companion. They moved on to the next crate.

<A fragment of keel tag,> Deitrich said, logging each item in the expedition's shared inventory. He turned to Hitaki. 'What is its providence?'

'It was salvaged off the Hirath Nebula seven standard years ago,' the Techmarine replied, his vox-voice deeper and more grating than those of the tech-priests. 'I believe it to be part of the Third Dawn expedition. I would have investigated further, but had neither the time nor the resources.'

<He is correct,> Severus canted, drawing an acutor-wand over the blackened shard of adamantium. <I am getting point seven… No, point eight returns. How magnificent.>

<This will give us an indication of the Third Dawn's location or fate?> Otte asked.

Deitrich gave an affirmative screed of lingua-technis, shot through with unhappy discord at the magos primary's interruption of his analysis. After a moment more he dragged himself away from the previous shard of void-scarred metal and on to the next crate.

So they continued, the explorator and his bibliovore logging and scanning each

new piece of salvage, occasionally addressing a question to Hitaki, all the while watched by both Otte and the squad of Adeptus Astartes guarding the cavern. Eventually they reached the final crate. Deitrich's excitement, already palpable across Otte's readouts, spiked.

<Can it be?> Severus said.

'Where was this retrieved?' Deitrich asked Hitaki.

'The moon of Terax Nine,' the Techmarine said. 'Six Terran years ago.'

'You have possessed it ever since?'

'We have, locked in stasis,' Hitaki confirmed.

Otte leaned forwards on his adamantium cane, peering into the crate's bottom. There, nestled in the cables and fixing prongs of the stasis field's heart, was a red stone. It was smaller than Otte's palm, similar to a ruby, the light coming through the shaft in the cavern's ceiling glittering from its rough edges.

Otte didn't need Deitrich or Severus to tell him the identity of this particular piece of archeotech. The explorator magi of half a dozen forge worlds had spent millennia searching for it. It was the Red Periapt, and it had been thought long lost by the adepts of Mars.

'We will have to conduct additional scans,' Deitrich said, struggling to delete the scattering of extra binary that laced his vox-speech. 'And we will need a full transcript of exactly where and how it was reclaimed.'

'I have one ready to upload to your noosphere the moment you provide me with the activation hymnal,' Hitaki responded. 'I trust you are pleased with the harvest, Magos Benedikt?'

It took a second for Otte's analysis to register the half-joke. The periapt alone was worth all the materiel the explorator fleet had brought to the Lysia System.

'I am pleased,' Otte agreed, his secondary systems failing to find a more organic response to the Space Marine's dry humour. 'My masters will likewise rejoice at these reclamations.'

'I am sure they will, Magos Benedikt,' Akamu said from the shadows beyond the light-bathed dais. 'I hope this ensures the continuation of our ancient pact. There is much in the Outer Dark that can benefit the Adeptus Mechanicus. Much that only the Carcharodon Astra can reach, let alone recover.'

'This is true,' Otte allowed. 'I have no doubt that those who approve these transactions between us will permit them to continue. For the glory of the Omnissiah, of course.'

'And the Imperium, magos primary.'

<My servitor haulers will move in immediately,> Deitrich canted, crooning

over the crate containing the periapt. <And a detail of your skitarii vanguard to help protect it, magos primary?>

Otte transmitted a binaric affirmative. He was already sending a signal to the *Arc Lux*, anchored in low orbit above. The communications marker on his optics display flashed green, the preset message acknowledged.

'I have authorised the landing of our cargo shuttles,' he told Akamu. 'Will you allow me the honour of showing you just what the Omnissiah has provided to further your war efforts?'

'I am not the one who will be inspecting the iron harvest this time, Magos Benedikt,' Akamu said, the black lenses of his helm glittering in the darkness beyond the light. 'The Red Wake will review this Grey Tithe personally.'

It took almost half of the Lost World's rotational cycle to complete the transaction. Fat-bellied lighters the colour of rust descended ponderously from orbit, their thrusters kicking up wild eddies of dust from the valley floor. Their contents, laid out on unfolding auto-racks before their open cargo bays, gleamed in the weak light – bolters, power armour, munitions, even two Land Raiders and a trio of Rhinos, their hulls gleaming silver.

Akamu moved from one suit of power armour to the next, inspecting each greave and joint socket, rivet and ceramite plate. Hitaki was present to ask additional questions of Otte as he followed them from one rack to another, probing the magos on servo running times and auto-sense responsiveness. Particular attention was paid to the ten sets of Tactical Dreadnought armour, sheathed in plastek wrap to shield their unpainted surfaces from the wind and dust.

The Red Wake oversaw it all. The giant remained silent, following Akamu and Hitaki. Occasionally he would pause of his own accord, assessing a particular suit of battleplate or a weapon. Then, wordlessly, he would move on. Otte, unable to compute whether or not he was permitted to address the figure, kept his focus on Akamu and Hitaki.

While the inspection continued Akamu permitted the magos' entourage to pore over the archeotech they had brought out into the valley, rigging scanning units and analysis drones around the crates and their precious contents. Much like the other Space Marines present, their skitarii guards watched on impassively, metal-clad frames unmoving as the wind snatched at their red robes and piled dust around their feet.

As darkness fell the machine-men departed, their shuttles stabbing the

darkening sky with points of light. Bail Sharr, Reaper Prime and commander of the Carcharodon Astra's Third Company, stood on the valley's edge and watched the winking of pilot lumens and plasma thrusters high above, until his vox-unit clicked with the message he had been waiting for.

He had been ordered to attend Akamu and the Second Company in their voyage to the Lost World, but he had not been told why. It was a break from the rigours of preparing his own brethren for their campaign on Kolch Secundus, and not a welcome one at that. With the rising of the Great Devourer from the galaxy's depths, time had become a precious commodity for every company in the Chapter, and Sharr had little desire to spend his overseeing another Prime's tithing.

Then he had received word that the Red Wake would be with the expedition. That had changed everything.

Sharr passed into the jagged, black tunnel that wound its way through the valley's bedrock, emerging into the cavern where the Adeptus Mechanicus had first inspected their half of the tithe. The chamber, which had held only one of Akamu's tactical squads along with the cargo crates, was now full. Much of the equipment provided by the Adeptus Mechanicus – bar the heavy armour – had been transferred into the subterranean space, where it was being subjected to the checks and rituals of the Chapter, ensuring nothing dangerous or unworthy was brought to the Nomad Predation Fleet. Hundreds of serfs, from overseers to magnicled slave-hands, were undertaking the packing and preparation of the dozens of suits of armour and weapons, observed by fussing artisans and machine-savants, as well as Techmarine Hitaki's unblinking bionic optics. A dozen Red Brethren – veterans of the Carcharodons First Company – observed the bustle from the chamber's edges, as silent and unmoving as the rough-clad rock surrounding them.

Sharr passed between serfs struggling to auto-clamp plastrons and armoury-devotants counting out bolt-rounds. He was alone – his command squad had remained aboard his strike cruiser, the *White Maw*, in high anchorage above Kolch Secundus, as had the rest of his company. Being separated from them for the first time in many decades had created a curiously hollow, dislocated feeling. Those around Sharr were not of his shiver, not part of his void brotherhood. He had spoken only briefly with Akamu during their journey to the Lost World. Intruding on another Prime's tithing felt unnatural, perverse even. He would have complained were it not for the commands of the great warrior who occupied the stone-cut throne he now approached.

Tyberos, the Red Wake, Reaper Lord of the Void, Master of the Carcharodon Astra. Even seated, he seemed to dwarf those around him, utterly immovable, a vast, silent judge whose pronouncements were always final. The armour he wore was a Tactical Dreadnought pattern, but heavily modified to suit his stature. Dozens of brass bonding studs gleamed atop slab-plates of grey ceramite, layered over blocks of plasteel reinforced with rods of adamantium. A skull, the bone yellowing and ancient, dangled from a chain at the giant's waist, its eye sockets as dead and soulless as the black lenses of the Red Wake's boar-snouted helm. More terrible yet were the two great gauntlets he wore. Named Hunger and Slake, the ancient fists combined wicked power talons with twin-linked underbite chainblades. The carnage they could unleash had to be seen to be believed. The entire suit of ancient battleplate throbbed with the vast power necessary to keep its thick servo bundles active, and the very air around Sharr felt alive with the potency of the supreme predator seated before him.

The Red Wake was not alone. Two Red Brethren flanked his throne, their armour heavily inscribed with exile markings. Another two Carcharodons stood slightly to one side, observing Sharr's approach. One the Reaper Prime knew well – the Chapter's Chief Librarian, the Pale Nomad, Te Kahurangi. The other was Khauri, Te Kahurangi's Lexicanium apprentice.

Sharr halted before the Red Wake's throne and went down on one knee, ceramite scraping bedrock. He stayed there, head down, until Tyberos spoke.

'Rise.'

The voice that issued from the helm's vox-unit was at odds with the figure it belonged to – dry, rasping, dead. It was a voice that sounded as though it issued from an ancient Administratum savant or data-scribe, bent double and weary with a lifetime's toil. There was a coldness there though, a chill in the irregular vox-crackle that accompanied it, a hardness like ice. Sharr obeyed it and stood, though he did not raise his own helm to directly face his master.

'You are suffering, Bail Sharr,' Tyberos said. It was not a question.

'I do your bidding, lord,' Sharr replied.

'It is not easy to be drawn from your brotherhood while they are on a war footing,' the Red Wake continued. 'You are eager to spill xenos blood, rather than parley with machine-men.'

'This is not my place,' Sharr admitted. 'I am unsure as to why my presence is required.'

'This Grey Tithe has been a bountiful one for the Chapter,' Tyberos said. 'It was necessary. The War in the Deeps has cost the Chapter dearly in terms of materiel.

In terms of flesh also.'

'It has,' Sharr agreed, sensing the giant's helm shift slightly as Tyberos surveyed the activity filling the chamber behind him.

'It was necessary that I oversee this particular tithing in person,' the Red Wake went on. 'It has fallen at a crucial juncture. It is necessary too that I impart your new orders to you in person. The future of the Chapter will rest upon your abilities, Reaper Prime.'

'What is it that my lord wills?'

Tyberos was silent. Sharr risked a glance at Te Kahurangi. Unlike most void brethren, the Chief Librarian had a habit of only rarely donning his helmet. His features were pale and drawn in the cavern's shadows, the patches of flesh around his eyes, jaw and neck blotched with the dark denticle scabbing that afflicted the oldest members of the Chapter. He sensed Sharr's attention, and a ghost of a smile parted his thin lips, revealing teeth sharpened to wicked points. His Lexicanium, Khauri, remained inscrutable behind his own blue helm.

'Our numbers are grown thin,' Tyberos' voice rasped, and there was a whir of servos and a scrape of metal against stone as he shifted slightly. 'Too thin, now, to be replenished by the Red Tithes. Our casualties from the War in the Deeps mount at a rate that cannot be replaced, not without compromising the induction processes or dedicating extra companies to the tithes. Those are companies that we cannot afford to redeploy. Without intervention, we face extinction.'

'I have failed the Chapter–' Sharr began.

'You have not, Reaper Prime,' Tyberos said before he could continue. 'The void brotherhood has entered a period of conflict more intense than any in the past five centuries. Our genetic difficulties have ensured that our combat operations have become unsustainable. That, rather than your abilities as master of the Red Tithe, is the primary cause of the danger we now face.'

There was no comfort in the cold words, no condemnation either. Such things did not concern the Red Wake. Sharr remained silent. He had held the role of Third Company captain for a decade – not long in the context of most Primes' service – and had overseen two Red Tithes, the expeditions mounted by the nomadic Chapter to replenish their stock of both void brethren recruits and serf-slaves. While not outright failures, neither had matched Akamu's Grey Tithes – conducted to replenish the Chapter's stocks of materiel – and nor were they enough to replenish ranks flayed by incessant deep-void actions against the hive fleets.

'You will conduct a new reaping, Bail Sharr,' Tyberos said. 'But this one will

be unlike the last two you have embarked upon. Korro and a squad from the First Company will accompany you, as will Te Kahurangi and his novice.'

'As you wish, lord,' Sharr said, casting a glance at one of the two Red Brethren Terminators – Korro – who flanked the throne. 'Where would you have the Third Company go?'

'These times require measures we would not normally countenance,' Tyberos said. 'The Chapter's need for fresh, worthy recruits demands we exploit every resource. You will take your fleet and your company, Reaper Prime, and chart a course for the Ghoul Stars. You will return to the world of Atargatis Prime, and once there you will renew the Carcharodon Astra's pact with the Ashen Claws.'

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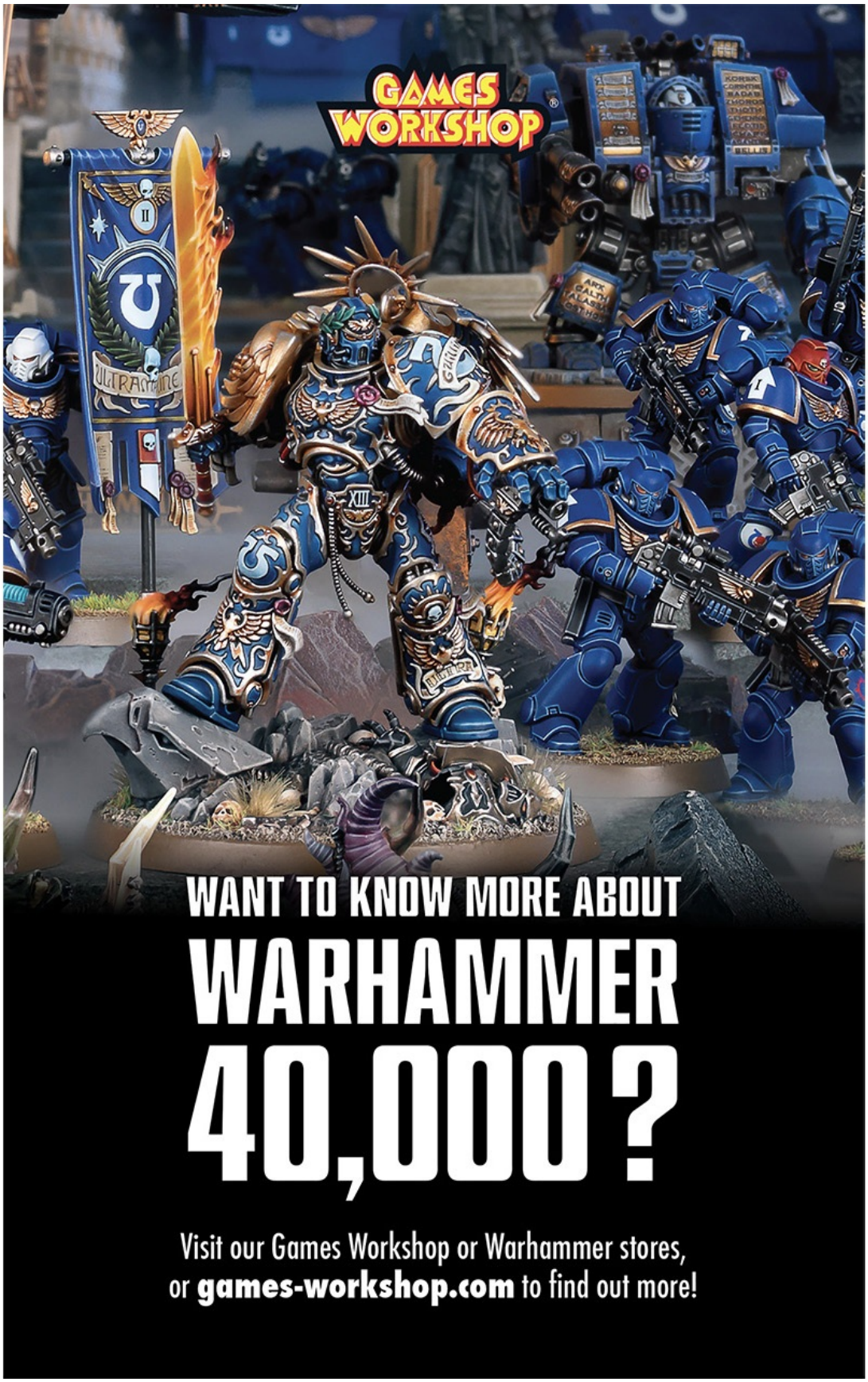
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