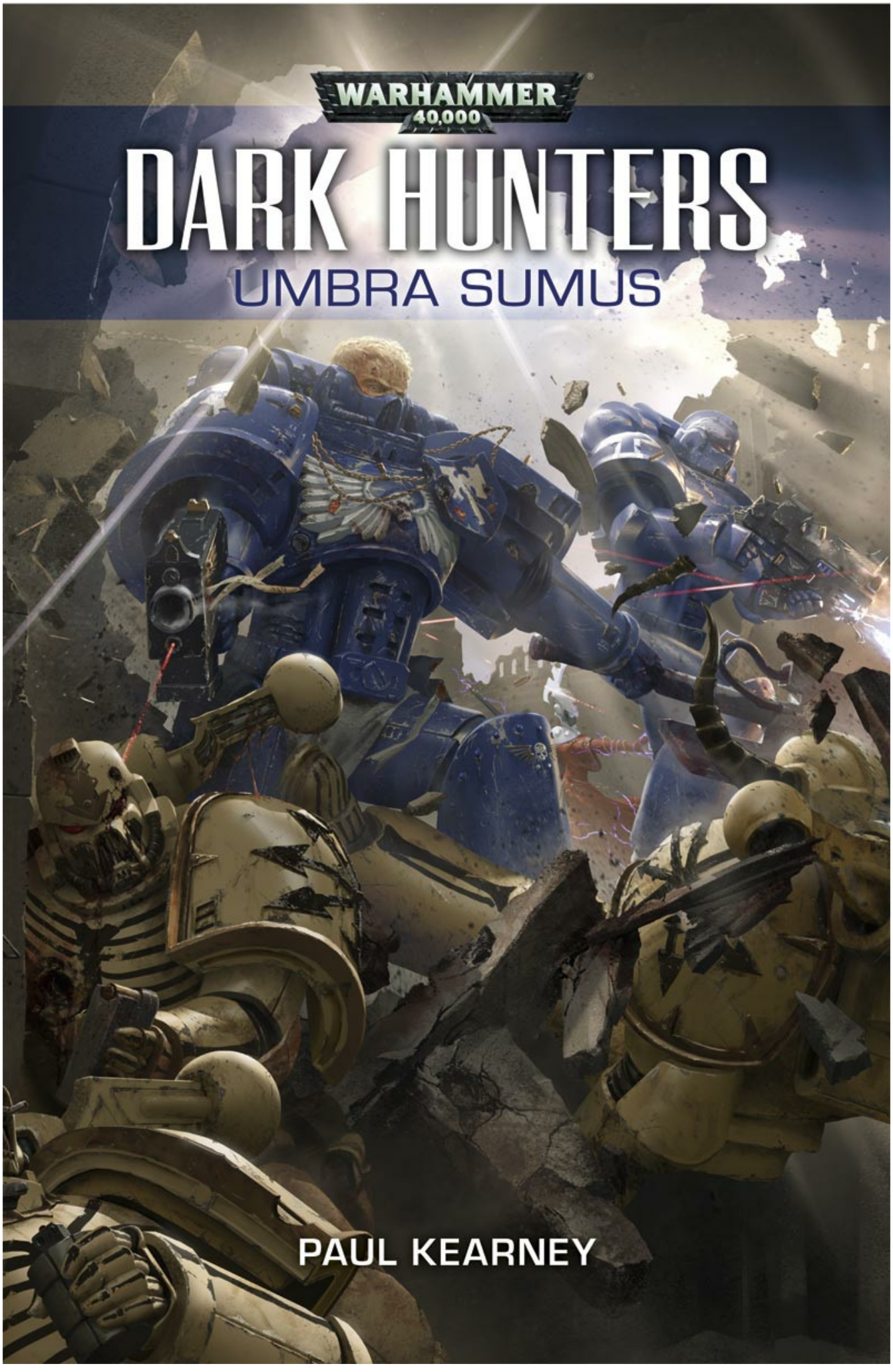
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DARK HUNTERS

UMBRA SUMUS

PAUL KEARNEY

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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

The Dark Hunters:

Lukullus Nogai – Chapter Master, and second founder of the Dark Hunters one thousand years before the present. Some say a saint of the Imperium.

Astanius Tor – Chief Librarian of the Dark Hunters at the time of the Second Founding.

Biron Amadai – Master of Sanctity of the Dark Hunters at the time of the First Punisher Invasion.

Jonah Kerne – Captain of Mortai (Third) Company of the Dark Hunters.

Kharne Al Murzim – Chapter Master of the Dark Hunters at the time of the Second Punisher War.

Graes Vennan – Chief Librarian of the Dark Hunters at the time of the Second Punisher War.

Elijah Kass – A Codicier of the Librarium.

Fornix – First sergeant of Mortai Company.

Breughal Paine – Forge-Master of the Dark Hunters, now in Dreadnought symbiosis, and the last survivor of the Second Founding of the Chapter.

Jord Malchai – Chief Reclusiarch of the Dark Hunters.

Ares Thuraman – Captain of Ardunai, the Dark Hunters First Company.

Isa Garakis – Chief navigator of the Dark Hunters.

Finn March – Sergeant of Primus (1st) Squad of Mortai Company.

Nureddin – Sergeant of Secundus (2nd) Squad of Mortai Company.

Orsus – Sergeant of Tertius (3rd) Squad of Mortai Company.

Greynan – Sergeant of Quatris (4th) Squad of Mortai Company.

Kagan – Sergeant of Quincus (5th) Squad of Mortai Company.

Rusei – Sergeant of Sextius (6th) Squad of Mortai Company.

Corvo – Sergeant of Septus (7th) Squad of Mortai Company.

Nieman Stahl – Sergeant of Novus (Ninth) Company attached to Mortai Company.

Passarion – Apothecary of Mortai Company.

Fell Ambros – Captain of Haradai (Scout) Company.

Asa Rubio – Castellan of Mors Angnar.

Tomas Massaron – Shipmaster of the *Ogadai* heavy cruiser.

Shaef Darric – Captain of Haroun (Fourth) Company.

Nortan Blask – Captain of Makran (Seventh) Company.

Heinos – Techmarine of Mortai Company.

Enginseer Miranich – Chief enginseer of the *Ogadai*.
Gan Arix – Master of the fleet.
Gerd Dinas – Deck chief of the *Ogadai*.
Gershon – Flag lieutenant of the *Ogadai*.
Infinius – a Mortai brother.
Gad – a Mortai brother.
Arrun – a Mortai brother.
Fallon – a Mortai brother.
Steyr – a Mortai brother.
Pendar – a Mortai brother.
Cayd Simarron – a Mortai brother, and Thunderhawk pilot.
Laufey – Sergeant of the Haradai (Scout) Company attached to Mortai Company.
Galen – a brother of Novus (Ninth) Company attached to Mortai Company.
Terciel – a brother of Novus (Ninth) Company attached to Mortai Company.

Ras Hanem Garrison:

Pavul Dietrich – General of the 387th Guards Armoured Regiment.
Ismail Von Arnim – Commissar of the 387th Guards Armoured Regiment.
Riedling – Governor of Ras Hanem.
Veigh – Marshal of Ras Hanem and commander of the Hanemite Guard.
Gardias – Chamberlain of the palace of Askai.
Jon Kadare – Senior squadron leader of Ras Hanem.
Lars Dyson – Adjutant of the 387th Guards Armoured Regiment.
Rajek – A private soldier of the Hanemite Guard.
Garner – Trooper of General Dietrich's Bodyguard.

The Eldar:

Te Mirah – Farseer of the *Brae-Kaithe*.
Ainoc – Autarch of the *Brae-Kaithe*.
Jellabraiah – A Bonesinger of the *Brae-Kaithe*.
Anandaiah – A craftseer of the *Brae-Kaithe*.
Callinall – Captain of the rangers.

The Punishers:

A horde of heretical rabble, whose names we shall not utter here.

I see you standing here around me, my brothers, and I see also the bitterness of our last battles in your eyes. We have walked long together in the shadows, you and I, and we are so few now. But our bright Father has not found us wanting.

We who remain of this brotherhood, who stand here on this dark and empty world, it is for us to remember all that has gone before, to pass it down to those who shall come after us. To build upon the honour of those memories. Brothers, we are but shadows in the darkness, yet we carry the trust and faith of all mankind upon our shoulders. That trust will never be misplaced. That faith shall never be broken.

We will endure, and always and in all things we will be faithful to He who made us. That is our burden and our privilege.

We are the Hunters in the Dark, and we shall never be defeated.

Lukullus Nogai

PART ONE

The Last of the Light

ONE

Ad Vesperum

There was a beauty in the bitterness of it.

So cold was the surface of the planet that in the lulls between the katabatic storms the very atmosphere itself would freeze, and ice crystals would shimmer in a penumbra of glittering rainbows from one horizon to another.

Phobian was enveloped in gloom for most of its long year, and the planet was called the Dark World sometimes. But in those fleeting days of sunlight, there was a majesty to the place. The Argahasts lived up to their name in a brief blaze of silver glory – brutal, immense and as bright as the ire of the Emperor Himself. Twelve-thousand metre mountains encased in a kilometre of ice; a man might die happy having once seen the sun on them. Even if he were more than a man. Even if he were one of the Adeptus Astartes.

Not on a whim had the Dark Hunters made their fortress there. Phobian was a world made to embed awe within the soul. It brought peace to those who had been created never to know it.

It was his home.

Jonah Kerne turned away from contemplation of the winter mountains, that savage landscape, and resumed his pacing down the broad granite-paved cloister. His bare feet slapped on the stone, and his arms were buried in the wide sleeves of his habit. A deep cowl fell forward to conceal his face; there was a hint of a long, crooked nose and the silver glint of ocular augmentation in the shadow of the hood.

His habit was midnight blue, so dark it was almost black, and on the breast was sewn the ancient symbol of justice, the double-headed axe. It had been the badge of the Chapter since the Founding, three thousand years before.

The symbol, the Founding, the Heresy which had preceded it; these events were historical, but were all now buried so deep in legend that the truth of them had long been lost.

But all legends contain truth at their core. And the Emperor remembers how they began, every one.

An observer, watching Kerne pad slowly down the snow-bright cloister, would see a towering shape well over two metres tall, and broader than a man's anatomy had any right to be. And yet for all

its bulk, this midnight giant moved swiftly and with something approaching grace. There was no lumbering swagger, but instead the poise of an athlete. A staggering sense of innate power which even the dark habit could not wholly conceal.

The observer would have to conclude that Jonah Kerne was not human, and he would be right and wrong in equal measure.

At the end of the cloister the austere basalt-block ceiling reared up and expanded into a huge, vaulted space, a dome thirty metres high and twice that in diameter. At its apogee the dome was open to the sky, a circular opening through which the light poured, and in that light the snow was falling, flakes circling and dancing, disappearing before they reached the floor below.

Dark and light, worn and unworn, the stone blocks of which the dome was constructed were varied in age, consistency and colour, as though massive repair work had been necessary in the recent past. And all around the chamber, a keen observer would notice odd scars and holes in the patient stone. One might almost surmise that a battle had once been fought in this austere, serene space.

There were alcoves set in the walls, and in each a towering shape loomed, half in shadow. Some of these shapes were sculpted in red and grey and slate-dark granite. Others seemed to have the sheen of metal, the gleam of lacquered alloy. At the foot of each a red votive light flickered.

Two cowled figures, their shadow-blue habits marked with a single white stripe, bowed as Jonah Kerne entered, and then turned back to the regard of a statue. Jonah touched thumb to forehead. The sculpted effigy was of a huge armoured warrior bearing a broad-bladed sword in one fist. His other hand was raised, and it grasped a glittering orb of purest lapis lazuli as big as a man's head. The figure wore no helm, and the face was long, stern, a braided scalp-lock trailing down beside one ear.

The eyes had also been set with lapis lazuli, and they seemed to follow all movement in the great domed chamber, the votive light reflected as a red mote in the twin blue gems.

The figure was resting one foot on the severed, barbarous head of an ork.

On the pedestal which supported it was engraved a single word;

Lukullus.

'He is with us even now. His legacy is in us all,' a voice said.

Jonah turned and bowed. 'My Kharne.'

Beside him stood a shape as massive as himself, but the newcomer's habit was true black, with only a whisper of blue at the hood. This was thrown back, and Jonah looked upon the features of his Chapter Master.

It was a brutal face, scarred and seamed and stretched with an old burn that darkened the pale skin from temple to jaw. The eye on that side had been replaced by an implant which glittered as red as the votive lights in the chamber, but the other was warm, human – surprising in that grim visage. He smiled at Jonah, and set one hand upon Kerne's shoulder. Jonah felt the steel approximation of fingers, the flesh long ago replaced by moulded alloys and chromate wire. There was warmth in the gesture, but no humanity in the grip.

'Brothers,' the Kharne said softly, 'the captain and I wish to speak alone. My apologies for disturbing your devotions.'

The two others rose, bowed, and filed silently out of the chamber. They tugged closed the massive doors at its far end with a slow, sonorous boom.

The Kharne looked up at the ocular in the dome, the snow drifting down through it.

‘The light is failing. Soon we’ll have the blue shadows all about us again.’

‘If we had the sunshine all the time, we’d have to find ourselves a new name,’ Jonah said.

The Kharne gave a bark of laughter. ‘Is Fornix teaching you how to joke?’

‘It rubs off on me from time to time.’

‘Take a turn with me round our heroes, Jonah, and let me see your face. We have not spoken in an age.’

Jonah lowered the cowl. He and the Kharne might have been brothers – they were, at any rate, hewn out of the same monumental flesh. He had fewer scars, and his eyes were both his own, so black the pupils could barely be discerned. A silver glint now and then betrayed the optics embedded within them.

His skull was shaven, but a crop of dark hair had begun to bristle on it, except around a whorl of scar-tissue near the crown, which looked like an old bullet-wound.

They walked slowly, side by side, robed twins that in turn were uncannily similar to many of the graven faces on the statues they passed.

‘How are the Mortai?’ the Kharne asked. From such a huge frame, it was odd to hear his light, even melodious voice. He was nicknamed Al Murzim, which in the ancient earth tongue of A’rabik meant *the Roarer*. The Kharne never raised his voice, even in battle.

‘Mortai is blessed. Brother Ambros is sending me eleven of the Haradai in the next day or so who have passed their Provenance. That brings us up to seventy-eight effectives.’

‘Ah, excellent. Seven-man squads then?’ the Kharne asked.

‘Yes, lord, if we are to remain Codex-compliant.’ There was almost a question in the way Jonah raised his tone at the end of this sentence. The Kharne looked at him quickly.

‘You would prefer to consolidate.’

‘I would. Seven become five very quickly in battle, and when that happens a half-squad is doing the work of a full one.’

The Kharne nodded slowly. ‘Brother Malchai will disapprove… but in this I concur. The fist must be hard-clenched before the blow falls, else it is no blow at all. Seven squads, plus command. Fornix as first sergeant – one might think that he would be restless after a century in the post–’

‘It is as far as his ambition climbs. He would make a fine company commander though.’

‘You would hate to lose him.’ Al Murzim’s mouth quirked up at one corner.

‘I would. We have become used to one another over the decades. He tolerates my temper and I tolerate his jokes.’

Al Murzim nodded, still with that half-smile on his scarred face. ‘Someone must, I suppose. I cannot begin to guess how many times I have heard the tale of how he lost that eye. And like you, I was there when it happened.’

Then his face grew serious again.

‘Brother Venann of the Librarium tells me you look with favour upon Elijah Kass’s petition.’

‘To become Mortai’s Epistolary? Yes. He did well in the border-fights against the Gulbec pirates two years ago. He’s young, it’s true–’

‘Too young, most would say. A mere boy.’

‘His psychic readings are in the alpha range.’

‘He has never seen a real war – not as you and I define it.’

‘How do we define real war, my lord?’ Jonah asked.

‘Do you jest with me, captain?’ The Chapter Master’s voice was stern.

‘On my faith, no.’

Al Murzim’s chin sank onto his breast. His pacing slowed.

‘When you were young, and I commanded Mortai as you do now, brother, back then we saw what real war was.’ He looked up. ‘It was here, fought in the very chambers of Mors Angnar itself.

‘You were my first sergeant back then, and Fornix a mere stripling, fresh out of the Haradai. There is a new generation of Dark Hunters now who did not know that fight, the six years of hell we endured.

‘Kass is one of them. I know his quality, but are you so sure he warrants this step?’

‘Mortai has no Librarian, as it has no Chaplain,’ Kerne replied. ‘That cannot be allowed to continue. My Kharne, we have the skeleton of a Chapter in many respects, but surely we can fill some of the more gaping holes.’

‘You were never enamoured of Chaplains, as I recall.’

‘Perhaps. It is a slow business, is it not though? Filling out those bare bones.’

They looked at one another, and in the shared glance there were a thousand memories.

‘Bare bones – I suppose that is what we are,’ the Chapter Master said at last. ‘And yet there is now a generation of our brethren who did not fight the war which so reduced us, who may not yet comprehend the true import of such a conflict.’

He drew a breath, like a man laying down a heavy load.

‘But some of them, at least, may know it presently.’ From the sleeve of his habit the Chapter Master produced a coil of plasment. It quivered in his metal fingers as he held it out to Kerne.

Jonah bowed and unrolled the document. His face changed as he read; the muscles bunched along his jaw and his dark eyes glittered.

> *+++ Incoming transmission – Cypra Mundi Administratum – Felix Galerius – URGENT – attention of Kharne Al Murzim – Chapter Master Dark Hunters – Adeptus Astartes – Phobos System – Finial Sector: IMMEDIATE ACTION +++*
>
> *Fleet belonging to Traitor Chaos faction known as Punishers sighted in Finial Sector, Kargad System: coordinates 22/394/J19. Fleet complement Dauntless class or lighter. Contact lost with Imperial detachments on Peronnen, Asranak and the Tellik Asteroids.*
> *Intercept. Interdict. Destroy.*
> *By the Emperor’s Will*
> *Message ends*
> *5.236.982.M41*

‘Phobos!’ Jonah grated, using the nearest thing he had to profanity. He looked his Chapter Master in the eye. ‘This is all we have?’

‘All we have,’ Al Murzim said calmly. He resumed his pacing once more. The light was dwindling in the vast chamber and the votive candles flickered like the coals of little dying fires.

‘Dauntless class. Light cruisers then,’ Jonah said. ‘We still have heavier metal than that.’

‘We have the *Ogadai*,’ the Kharne said. ‘And it is close on four thousand years old.’

‘But still spaceworthy.’

‘Massaron assures me that is so. One Gothic class heavy cruiser – would that be enough, Jonah?’ Al Murzim smiled again.

‘I would take out a harbour scow to meet these scum in battle. In our own sector! And I thought we had seen the last of the Punishers. It’s been–’

‘One hundred and fifty-seven years,’ the Chapter Master interrupted him. ‘Over one and a half centuries since we threw them out of this system, and nearly destroyed ourselves in the process.’

‘I remember, lord.’

‘Of course you do. How many of us from Mortai Company were left standing when it was over?’

A cold light kindled in Kerne’s eyes. He spat the words out through bared teeth. ‘Eighteen.’

‘So you still dwell on it. As do I. Eighteen out of the ninety we numbered before the Punishers landed. You know better than anyone, Jonah, how dangerous these renegades are. They are our dark brethren, the shadow cast by our light. They are an abomination which cannot be allowed to exist.’

‘“The Great Enemy will be destroyed wherever he is found, hunted wherever he flees, and afforded neither pity nor quarter.”’

‘Quoting the Adeptus Terra at me? Not like you,’ Al Murzim said.

‘In this, I am one with the Administratum.’

‘As are we all. No matter how far we are from Earth, the Emperor’s Word will always reach us, and we will obey it.’

They paced in silence again. Jonah was afire with questions, burning to begin preparations for the mission that he was now sure was his. Tables and numbers filed through his brain: the roster of his company, the faces and names, the sergeants and the servitors.

He brought up the memory of the *Ogadai*, that vast starship which had been laid down before the Dark Hunters themselves had been founded. In its youth it had been part of the battle fleet of the White Scars Chapter. The Primarch himself, Jaghatai, had travelled in it, sanctifying the ship with his presence.

And ancient though it was, it still possessed enough firepower to lay waste to a planet.

Al Murzim spoke at last, in that quiet, even voice of his.

‘The last time they came, it was an invasion. They landed a quarter of a million in the first wave, and they had Emperor-class ships to back them up. It took the help of six other Chapters of our brethren to finally extirpate the Punishers from this system.’

‘Emperor bless them,’ Jonah said automatically.

‘Indeed. But for the Brazen Fists and the Dark Sons and the other four Chapters of our Adept, we would have been annihilated. As it is, even after a century and a half, we have not regained our numbers.’

Al Murzim sighed.

‘We are a poor Chapter, brother. Not for us the glorious campaigns of the Ultramarines or the Blood Angels. Three times in our three thousand years we have been reduced to a remnant.

‘Three times we have had to fight back from the verge of extinction. The *Umbra Mortis*, our battle barge, is at present nothing more than an orbital battery, stripped of parts and incapable of travelling the warp. The *Ogadai* is the only capital ship we have which is ready for immediate deployment, and it has been overdue a full refit for these last fifty years.

‘We have eleven Dreadnoughts left, and one of those encases Breughal Paine, our Forge-Master, who cannot leave this world lest his knowledge be lost forever. Even the Ardunai, our First Company, can clad barely half its brethren in the blessed relics of Terminator armour, and its captain, Ares Thuraman, is older even than I.’

‘He is a warrior beyond compare–’ Jonah said stoutly.

‘He is old, and his wounds trouble him without surcease. He will do his duty – he would even accept Dreadnought symbiosis if I asked him to endure it, but sometimes I believe what he really craves is the Emperor’s Peace.’

‘Thuraman has more ambition than that,’ Jonah said before he could stop himself.

The Kharne cocked his head, as if reconsidering something he already knew. ‘Say, rather, that others are ambitious on his behalf.’

‘Lord, what is it you are saying?’ Jonah asked quietly.

The Chapter Master checked, and looked his captain square in the face.

‘It may be this is a raid, no more. But the Kargad System is four months away.’

‘Not if one has recourse to the warp–’

‘The warp is fickle at best, and Isa Garakis has not travelled it in a long time. The Eye of Terror is waxing, we hear, and the warp is in flux. Half a dozen ships have been lost to it without a trace in the last year alone – an Imperial transport convoy with an entire Guards Regiment aboard is ten months overdue to Wendakhen.’

‘You do not trust our senior navigator?’

‘Say rather that in the current conditions, I will not trust to the warp.’

‘Four months! Lord, they could conquer half the system in that time, and be well entrenched by the time we arrive.’

‘Better than you not arriving at all, Jonah.’

As he saw the embattled frown upon his captain’s face, Al Murzim set one fleshless hand upon his shoulder again.

‘If we were at full strength, with a fleet worthy of the name, then I would send you into the warp. But I will not risk the loss of an entire battle company for the sake of a few months; nor will I risk losing you. The Chapter cannot afford that gamble.’

He paused. ‘One day, Jonah, I look to see you standing where I stand now.’

Jonah was stunned. ‘I am in no way worthy,’ he said, shaking his head.

‘Oh, but you are.’ Al Murzim smiled. ‘And besides, there is no one else to whom I would trust this brotherhood, were it up to me alone.’

‘It – it is not up to you alone.’

‘Indeed.’

‘Parrik–’ It had been a long time since Jonah Kerne had called his Chapter Master by that name. Not many in the Chapter even knew what their lord’s name was, beyond the title. But Kerne had known Al Murzim in the long-ago days when they had both been young.

‘There is no call to begin talking about your successor.’

‘One never knows, Brother Kerne.’ The Kharne seemed uncomfortable, irritated even, at hearing the name he had been known under when he had been merely another battle-brother.

‘Forgive me. I am overfamiliar.’

‘No, not you. But times have changed, Jonah. There are undercurrents in the senior command that I

have not quite fathomed.' The Kharne collected himself, frowning. 'This is not your concern, at any rate. That last message from Cypra Mundi is.'

Then Kerne looked up. 'Then you *are* sending me. You are sending out Mortai.'

'I am. Can you guess why?'

'I–' Kerne hesitated. He thought he knew, but he was not sure he should say it.

'Because you are the best strategist of all my captains. That's one thing. And because you work best without supervision. That's another. Others will say that I send you out of sentiment, my old company that I led for a century and which I still indulge from time to time.

'Well, there may be something in that too. But you will not go alone. I will attach some heavy weapons from the Ninth, and Ambros will provide you with Scouts. It will be good for the Haradai to learn some new tricks at your hands.'

Jonah Kerne bowed, and on straightening said: 'My Kharne, you say this has the hallmarks of a raid. What if it is more?'

The Chapter Master's long face closed, until it resembled that of his granite-hewn forbears in the shadows around them.

'That is the final reason why I send Mortai, and not one of the other companies. Because I know that it is like its current captain – awkward, stubborn, and full of anger. Mortai Company gained its title long before you and I were born, but its character has endured.

'If things go ill – if this is more than a mere raid – then you will send us word, and we will come to you. And in the meantime you and Mortai will endure, Jonah. Your people will hold their ground against the Great Enemy until we prevail once more. There is no other company in the Chapter that I trust more.'

Al Murzim stopped and looked across the austere vastness of the chamber. His gaze came to rest upon the statue named Lukullus. Then he raised his head and stared up at the opening in the great dome above. It was dark outside now, and the wind could be heard, a distant howling. Snow whirled in and vanished before it was halfway to the floor. In the red lights of the votive candles it looked like slowly falling blood.

'It is for this and times like it that our kind were brought into being, brother.'

Jonah Kerne knelt before his Chapter Master and bowed his shaven head. 'Lord, we will do your bidding, or we will die trying.'

Kharne Al Murzim raised up his captain and took his arm in the ancient warrior grip, cold steel and warm flesh meeting.

'*Umbra Sumus*,' the Chapter Master said.

'*Umbra Sumus*,' Jonah replied. And his black eyes gleamed bright.

TWO

Praeparatio

Darkness had come to Phobian, and the icefields and glaciers were blue under the pitiless stars.

High up in the savage peaks of the Argahasts, however, the shadows of the Dark Planet were rent asunder by clusters of magnesium-bright light. The fortress of Mors Angnar was come to life. It pulsed and rumbled and thundered until it seemed that the very roots of the mountains were set in tremor by subterranean activity.

The vibrations triggered a dozen great avalanches downslope, filling whole valleys. It was as though some buried god were struggling to wake from sleep.

The servitors had been labouring in their hundreds all through the night. For the first time in years the vault doors of the Arsenal had been thrown open wide enough for vehicles, and now heavy wheeled and tracked transports were thundering up and down the concentric access ramps to the deepest ammunition stores of the Chapter.

Outside, the landing fields were being bulldozed clear of snow and ice to allow the heavy shuttles of the fleet to land. These pads had been built into the very mountainside of Anghir-Adhon itself, the sheer-sided peak which formed the spine of the Dark Hunters fortress. They projected out like flat-topped fungi protruding from the trunk of a mighty tree.

Normally the inbuilt heating systems of the landing-pads would keep them clear, but at certain times of the year even they could not keep pace with the accumulation of ice and snow, and so the weariless servitors would man the dozers and attack the drifts, shunting them off so that hundreds of tons of frozen rock and frost-cemented snow tumbled to the valley three thousand metres below.

Already, in the gaps between the whipping clouds, stars brighter than nature were glittering and wheeling above the mountain; the heavy shuttles of the fleet circling in holding patterns high above, impatient to land.

Mortai Company's first sergeant breathed the gelid air deep into his massive chest. Brother-Sergeant Fornix was dressed informally in the fur-trimmed hides many of the Dark Hunters donned when outdoors on their home world.

He had a long, narrow face with a beak-like nose. One eye glinted pale as a frosted stone. The other gleamed dull red, the ocular buried in a fist of scar-tissue. His black hair was shorn close to the scalp except where one lock had been grown long to dangle plaited in front of his right ear.

Only a few long-serving veterans of the Dark Hunters wore the scalp-lock which was a legacy of their savage Primarch, Jaghatai. It was considered old-fashioned, a throwback to forgotten times, like the ritualistic scarring which had all but died out in the Chapter in the last century.

The reinforced plascrete of the landing field quivered under the thunder of the heavy transports; and now something more, also. A giant stumped up behind Fornix, a five-metre automaton as broad as it was tall, steam billowing from twin exhausts on its back, and the gyros of its mighty arms and clawed hands whirring. Fornix turned and smiled at the monster.

'Forge-Master! My lord, I trust you do not feel the cold too keenly.'

A pause, and then there was what might have been termed a metallic grunt, echoing deep in the massive sarcophagus that was the chest of the Dreadnought.

'The last time I felt cold, whelp, the Imperium was a lot younger, and full of better men than you.'

'I'm sure it still is full of better men than me,' Fornix grinned. 'But I have yet to meet them.'

Again, the massive snort from the machine, like a backfiring engine. The Dreadnought raised one huge clawed arm and playfully set it down on Fornix's shoulder for just a second, raising it as the Space Marine's legs began to buckle.

Fornix rubbed his shoulder. 'Your touch is as light as ever, Breughal.'

'And your mouth never sleeps, Fornix.' This time the lightness of something like a chuckle echoed from the towering figure, cold and strange out of that metallic heart.

They stared together at the endless convoys passing over the ramps before them, and Fornix raised his head to catch the distant lights among the night clouds that looked like stars, and yet were not.

'It is about time,' he breathed. 'Nigh on two years it has been, since my bolter was aimed at anything more than a target drone.'

'In those two years we have brought forty-six more battle-brothers into the Chapter, refitted the frigate *Temujin*, and restored the Land Raider *Mindarion* to holy function,' Breughal said. 'You must think of the long game, brother, as your captain and the Kharne do. What are two years, when we have the millennia-old war to fight?

'We cannot all undergo symbiosis, brother,' Fornix said, his grin fading. 'For some of us there is a window of years during which we must have our strength set to use. I am no longer young, even by the standards of our Adept. I would not live my life in endless training for wars that pass us by. I thank the Emperor, our bright lord, that we have this chance now once more to seek redemption in battle.'

The Dreadnought whirred and wheezed above him. 'Well said, brother,' Breughal told him. 'You sound almost like Jonah,' he added.

'Well don't ever tell him that, for Phobos's sake. He'll think I'm becoming sane and sensible at last.'

'Sanity comes to us all in the end.'

Fornix thumped the ceramite kneecap of the Dreadnought. 'What think you, Breughal; is this just a raid, or are the Punishers set on conquest? The Cloisters are high with speculation.'

'And envy, Fornix, that Mortai has been chosen for this mission. The Chapter's captains say that the Kharne indulges his protégé. Jonah Kerne takes the spearhead once again, when by rights it should be Thuraman.'

‘Jonah is the best we have, Breughal – you know that.’

‘Apart from you?’

‘Apart from me,’ Fornix grinned.

‘They say that when Kerne itches, you scratch, Fornix.’

‘Let them say that to my face, just once, and we shall see who does the scratching.’

There was a moment of almost silence about them, a sudden emptiness to the air itself. Then directly overhead it seemed, a roar exploded about the landing fields, so loud that Fornix’s eardrums felt it as a pressure on the reinforced membranes within his skull. He looked up, to see a bright, blaring light. His eyes, organic and mechanical, adjusted almost instantly, resolving it into the fiery circles of afterburners.

The angular shadow of a heavy shuttle grew around them, and the pad lights flickered as a thousand-ton spacecraft settled down three hundred metres away with a low, sonorous boom, sinking on its landing gear like some immense, tired animal easing its weight upon the earth.

The silence again, almost a kind of reverence. Then ramps whined and creaked open from the shuttle sides, each tall enough to admit a Dreadnought.

Light spilled out, illuminating the falling snow in staircases of bright blizzard. There was a revving and snorting of powerful engines, a few shouted commands from the senior servitors and auxiliaries, and the assorted vehicles gathered around the rim of the landing-pad began to inch forward in sequence, while from the sides of the shuttle crane-arms extended from their niches, each thirty or forty metres long, and began to reach out for cargo-loads like the grasping legs of a bulbous spider.

Fornix heard the muttering datastream of the servitors as it was run through Breughal’s interior vox-channels. The Forge-Master shifted slightly on his gargantuan chassis and issued orders in binaric – a tongue that only a very few in the Chapter still understood. A carmine gleam came and went in what passed for the Dreadnought’s eyes.

‘Very good,’ he said at last, as the loading operation went on.

‘When shall Mortai embark?’ Fornix asked him.

‘Not until tomorrow. What is to be disembarked last must go on first. Space Marines are always the final element.’

‘It will give me a chance to beg and borrow some more wargear. Who knows what we’ll need when we finally make planetfall?’

‘You were ever profligate with equipment, Fornix. I recall with regret some of the holy instruments of destruction my servitors laboured over for years, only to see them reduced to battered scrap in your hands in the space of a day.’

‘Ah, but what a day,’ Fornix said. ‘How better for a sacred weapon to end its days than–’

‘Buried in the forehead of an ork?’

‘Needs must, my lord Forge-Master. I had no time to change magazines, and the ork was Grazmach Ghar of the Long Bleed. A worthy opponent in many ways. He fought on for a full minute after I had battered his skull into pieces.’

‘Your advancing years have not dimmed your recklessness, Fornix.’

‘I am reckless with everything except my brothers’ lives. ‘Twas always thus.’

‘Indeed. I have heard it said that the Emperor smiles on certain fools who amuse him – but only for a time.’

‘You think my time is running out, Breughal?’

The Dreadnought clenched and unclenched one immense fist. In the heart of its mechanical palm the pilot-light of the flamer buried therein leapt up blue and bright, and then sank down again.

'Nothing burns forever.'

'Except faith, and glory,' Fornix said. 'Better to burn bright for a day than live a long life in twilight. Here on Phobian the Hunters have been husbanding their strength for a century and a half. Our name has been forgotten, brother. And in other sectors of the galaxy our brethren of other Chapters have won imperishable renown.'

'We serve,' Breughal Paine said. 'That is our duty and our honour. I have seen a millennium come and go, Fornix, and watched the birth and death of legends. I have been alive and awake for all that time – unlike our brethren inside the other Dreadnoughts, I have never slept. It is because of that I believe I have held on to my…' An instant's hesitation.

'My humanity, if you will. With great age comes wisdom, of a sort, or at least the endless cataloguing of experience. I have seen untold follies and disasters, and great victories also, all of them won with blood. The blood of those like ourselves, and that of lesser men. I have seen rivers of it.

'And through it all, like the Chapter which I serve and love, the Imperium endures. And our task is to see it does so. No more.

'I watched Lukullus die. I have battled Titans. I have seen the Great Enemy erupt from the warp in numbers almost impossible to grasp – as have you. We cannot afford glory if it diminishes our ability to protect the Imperium we serve. To seek individual renown at the expense of that ultimate mission – that way Chaos lies.'

'And yet the sword grows dull in the scabbard,' Fornix muttered, all humour fled from his face.

'Brother, I would not dwell on it. We are warriors of the Adeptus Astartes, whose lives belong to the service of mankind. So long as man exists amid the stars, so shall we. And in the end, for us, for man – for the universe we have created – there is only war.'

'Which brings us back to the matter in hand. You did not answer my question, Forge-Master.'

Breughal stood stolid and immense, a dark shadow under the stars with glints of flame for eyes. The snow sizzled as it landed on the hot exhaust stacks at his back.

'Very well then. Fornix, I do not believe that this is a mere raid. The Punishers are our nemesis, and they have been gone from this sector for what some would consider a long time. They will have used that time. If they were intent on raiding our territories, they would have done so sooner than this.

'No, it is my belief that this is more likely to be another attempt at all-out invasion.'

Fornix considered the Dreadnought's words, his head cocked to one side. For a second, what looked like sheer happiness crossed his face.

'They will know this, Jonah and the Kharne,' Breughal went on. 'But they cannot risk Phobian by sending out the main strength of the Chapter. This may be a feint to draw us out.'

'Mortai are a reconnaissance force then.'

'No. It is more than that. If I know anything, I think that the Kharne means to fight the main battle as far from our home world as possible. Mortai's job will be to pin the enemy in place, hold them, and gain intelligence. Then, perhaps, the bulk of the Chapter will become involved.'

There was a rumble deep in the heart of the towering Dreadnought, a kind of restlessness.

'Your job, Fornix, is the same as it has always been. Your job is to bleed.'

Elijah Kass knelt before the statue of Lukullus in the Reclusiam, his head bowed within his hood. Even in here, the thunder of the embarkation could be heard, and he could feel along the electrodes embedded in his skull the tingle of expectation and speculation that now ran through Mors Angnar, as though the vast fortress and everyone in it were somehow more alive than they had been the day before.

It was unsettling and exhilarating at the same time.

'We all have our heroes, our mentors, alive and dead,' a voice said behind him. 'We come here to reconnect with who we are, to remind ourselves that the greatest heroes are in some sense immortal. We think on them every day, though they are gone to dust and ashes in the passing centuries of history.'

Elijah tugged back his hood. A tall figure in bright blue, the colour of the Librarium, stood looking up at Lukullus Nogai, the man who had saved the Chapter all those years ago, and brought it back from the brink. An old face, broad, bony, with a nose like a flattened mushroom, and on either side of it two eyes as black as obsidian. The high-boned skull was implanted with psionic receivers like his own, though they seemed to have sunk into the wrinkled ivory flesh around them, becoming part of the man.

'Lord Vennan. I was praying.'

'Yes. To Lukullus. I would have thought someone else more fitting for one of your calling, Elijah.'

Here Vennan gestured across the chamber to another shadow-shrouded figure. It wore the metal cowl of a psychic hood, and the eyes within it glowed with a blue light, blue as the open sky on a bright day on Phobian. The name on its pedestal read *Astanius*.

'He was Lukullus Nogai's greatest friend, and he saved the legend and lore of the Chapter when all was lost. There were three of them: Lukullus Nogai, Astanius Tor and Breughal Paine. These three champions refounded the Dark Hunters. They saved us from abject degeneration.

'Paine is still with us, our immortal Forge-Master. Nogai is a legend now, some say a Saint of the Imperium. And Astanius?' Here Vennan opened his arms in a gesture of futility.

'He is forgotten by all but a few. We of the Librarium revere his memory, but our brethren of the battle companies barely know his name. And yet without him, we would scarcely know who we are or from what we came.'

The anger came through now in Vennan's voice.

'And here you are, a Codicier of my own staff, praying with your back to him.'

Elijah rose. He was half a metre taller than the Chief Librarian, but he bowed his head, chastened.

'I do not forget our forebear, or what he did, my lord.'

'Perhaps you would prefer to wield a bolter in the line companies.'

'No, my lord. I know who I am, and I am eternally grateful for your tutelage.'

Vennan's eyes glittered. They were entirely black, the legacy of battling the warp for decades.

You will always be different to your brethren, and they will always see that difference, Elijah. Never forget that.

The voice crawled across Elijah's mind, as bright and painful as the lash of a whip. He knelt once more.

'You taught me well, lord. I shall not forget what I am – or who made me.'

Vennan glided closer. He set one gnarled hand on his inferior's head. For a moment, blue light leapt up in infinitesimal sparks from the implants which ringed the bone, and Elijah flinched minutely.

'You seek promotion to Epistolary, I am told.'

‘I do not seek promotion, but it is true that I have made application through Brother Greiff to join Mortai, yes.’

‘You have a high opinion of your abilities, it would seem. Epistolaries are usually veterans of many wars. What fighting have you seen, Elijah?’

Elijah wiped blood from his upper lip. It was trickling out of his nose in a thin stream.

‘Border skirmishes with the orks, as you know. Boarding actions off Perreken, when we destroyed the Gulbec pirates.’

Vennan lifted his hand. The blood from Elijah’s nose slowed to a drip, then stopped as his body systems repaired the damage. But there was still a shrill ache in his head that needled his mind every time the Chief Librarian spoke.

‘You have known battle, with blade and bolter, it is true. And you have acquitted yourself well – too well perhaps. I have heard it said in the Librarium that you would be well suited as a battle-brother, were it not for your Gift.’

Vennan bent low. ‘And that Gift cannot be denied, or ignored. It must either be trained and utilised, or its bearer must be destroyed. You understand that, do you not, Elijah Kass?’

‘I understand. A psyker is a double-edged sword.’

‘The warp is always there, waiting for us, as tireless as stone, its hunger never sated. You have never known the full extent of its evil and its majesty, Elijah, and yet you lobby to be sent on Captain Kerne’s expedition, where you will meet the Great Enemy at last, and you will experience the true terror of the warp, not diffused among the child-brains of orks or reflected in the intellect of common men, but raw and full-flowered in the psyches of our bitterest foes.

‘Stand up.’

Elijah did so. Vennan looked up at him, as though measuring his bulk.

‘The warp will shrivel you, as it did me. It will attempt to seduce you. It will play on love, Elijah. The love you have for the Emperor, for your Chapter, for your brethren. How do you know you can withstand that form of assault?’

‘I will withstand it, or I will die trying. I will *never* betray my brothers,’ Elijah said, and his face twisted with anger, eyes growing hot as he looked down on the Chief Librarian.

Strangely, Vennan smiled.

I believe you.

‘There is strength in you, brother. I know that.’ He set a hand on the younger man’s arm. ‘There are only eleven of us left in the Librarium, eleven true Adeptus Astartes with the Gift, or the Curse as some think it. The Dark Hunters have been unfortunate. In my time I have seen some two hundred aspiring psykers fail the tests. Some came all the way through the screening and became Neophytes, before the warp sensed their fledgling minds and consumed them.’

He looked down at his hands. Wide, big-boned, with knuckles white in the pale flesh. ‘I killed them myself, and felt the relief in their souls as they passed into the Emperor’s Peace, out of the reach of the warp forever.’

‘I have felt the warp,’ Elijah said quietly. ‘I have sensed its approach more than once. I have heard the whispers of daemons in my sleep.’

‘Imagine them shouting, screaming, shrieking, laughing in your mind without surcease, day after day, for months on end. The hood helps, but it cannot shield you entirely.

‘In battle with the Great Enemy, Elijah, your torment will be unceasing. You will never know rest,

and cannot ever let down your guard. It will come at you even in rare moments of silence, as welcome as a cold drink of water to a parched mouth. It is legion, and can take any form it wishes. Are you ready for that?'

'I must be ready, some day,' Elijah said. 'Whether I stand or fall, there will come a time when I must confront the warp – even as you did, and all the members of the Librarium before me. That is the nature of our calling. You told me that, Brother-Librarian. And, lord, you taught me well.'

Vennan's stone-dark eyes softened.

'Know this then, Brother Kass. I am punishing you for your presumption. I will indeed accede to your request, and make you Epistolary Librarian for this expedition. But it is a probationary rank. With you shall go some of our human auxilia, monks of the Lexicanium whom I trust and esteem. They shall counsel you in my absence. And they shall monitor your behaviour. All that you do and say will be reported back to me. What say you to that?'

Elijah bowed, eyes bright.

'I say thank you, lord, for giving me a chance to prove my faith and serve my Chapter.'

'Save your gratitude. I send you because my place is here with the Kharne, and your other brethren in the Librarium are even less ready for this than you are. The expedition must have one of us with it. Captain Kerne will need counsel in his dealings with the Great Enemy, and you are well versed in the history of our dealings with them. Also–' He paused. 'Captain Kerne himself looks with favour upon your application, and Mortai's commander is not a man to cross lightly.'

Despite himself, Eijah smiled. At once, a lance of white-cold pain speared through his temples, wrenching a groan from his lips.

You have the strengths and the weaknesses of the young. The worst of those weaknesses is arrogance. Be humble. Among normal humanity you are as a god. To the denizens of the warp you are an insect, to be plucked into the void for their amusement.

Elijah nodded, contrite.

'Forgive me my pride, lord,' he whispered.

One last thing, my young Epistolary-to-be. A piece of advice from one who has wrestled with the warp for longer than most.

At the last gasp, when euphoria or despair overcome you, and the warp is as warm and welcoming as the love of your brethren, remember this:

Death is your friend.

They stared at one another, one as bent and gnarled as a wind-warped tree, the other tall and straight with eyes of blazing cobalt, shining with life.

'I will remember,' Elijah Kass said.

THREE

Benedictio

The final blessing had been intoned by the Chief Reclusiarch, and the brothers of the Dark Hunters were filing out of the chapel. Almost the entire complement of the Chapter was present, close on six hundred Adeptus Astartes in the midnight-blue robes with the Axe of Justice stark upon the breast.

They filed out in silence, the final notes of the *Te Deum* hanging in the cavernous air above their heads. Banners and flags from a hundred different campaigns hung from the cantilevered stone beams that supported the chapel's immense roof, and power-glims dialled low caught the faded colours that swayed back and forth as the Hunters passed beneath.

Jonah Kerne looked up as he passed down the nave. There was a tattered banner hung high inside the west transept of the immense building. Not much more than a rag, even his augmented eyesight could barely make out the device upon it.

Mortai's Cerebrum et Haliaetum, *Skull and Scales*, hacked and pierced and burned, and stained with old blood. His blood, and Fornix's, and Kharne Al Murzim's. They had stood together under that banner at the Last Stand of the Third Company, and had held their ground in the ruins of this very chapel, until their brethren in the Brazen Fists had landed. They had started the day with sixty Adeptus Astartes, and by evening there were eighteen of them still standing.

How glorious it had been.

He entered the side-chapel, exchanging wordless nods with the faces that lifted to him as they passed.

There was Finn March of Primus, steady as a stone; Orsus, sergeant of Tertius Squad, the strongest Space Marine he had ever known. Nureddin of Secundus, his scalp-lock grey as hoar-frost, who had lost an arm in the Border battles two years before. Apothecary Passarion, his blue robe edged with saffron, the twisted snake-staff of his calling tattooed on his massive face. If there was a reason why Mortai had not missed having a Chaplain these last years, it was because of Passarion, whose piety went hand in hand with the skills of his calling.

And lastly there was Fornix, who smiled at Jonah as he brought up the rear of Third Company.

Mortai Company, the Fated Ones.

'I will see you tonight,' Kerne told his first sergeant, 'after the Orders Conclave. We arm at sunrise,

and embark straight after.'

'It's all in hand, captain,' Fornix said.

'Ambros's new recruits?'

'Distributed through the squads. We'll shake down the company on the voyage.'

Kerne took Fornix by the arm, his pale face stern. 'You spoke to the Forge-Master?'

'Breughal will see the thing done handsomely. He is even seconding us some of his gun-servitors. And there is a small manufactorium on the *Ogadai* which he assures me is up and running.'

Kerne nodded, and was about to turn away when Fornix caught his eye.

'What is it?'

'Captain, Breughal is willing to embark a detachment of heavy armour if the Kharne will allow it.'

Kerne raised an eyebrow. 'Generosity indeed. But it should not be necessary.'

'Are we so sure of that, Jonah?'

'The Kharne's manifest has already been implemented, and Castellan Rubio carried it out to perfection. Besides that, the Chapter is so short of vehicles that it has been decided to conserve their use for emergencies.'

Fornix frowned. 'The Kharne's caution is–'

'It is wisdom, Fornix. Phobian must retain the ability for a strong counter-strike after we depart.'

'You think history is about to repeat itself?'

'I think you need not worry about the Kharne's strategic reasoning. Concentrate on Mortai.'

Fornix's mouth twisted in a rueful grin. 'At times like these I am glad to be a mere sergeant.' He bowed his head and walked on.

The side-chapel was octagonal, and in the middle of its stone floor a raised plinth stood, intricately carved and run through and through with the sinuous snake of insulated cabling.

Pockmarks in the stone spoke of the long-ago battle for Phobian which had passed through here like a gale, and higher up in the vaulted ceiling the acid scars shone pale. They riddled certain flagstones of the floor in rounded depressions, as though the stone had been showered with molten tears.

When that battle had been won, all the surviving battle-brothers of the Chapter had congregated here to be blessed by the sole surviving Reclusiarch, Jord Malchai, for the rest of the chapel had lain in ruin.

There had been room for them all, because fewer than two hundred of them had remained.

Malchai stood here now, his robe black as the gaps between stars, his crozius grasped in one fist. His senior, Biron Amadai, had been slain not five metres from where he now stood, and Malchai was now the Chapter's Master of Sanctity in all but name. He had refused the title out of respect for his mentor, who had been widely loved throughout the Chapter.

Many senior Chaplains were figures of fear even to their fellow battle-brothers, but Amadai had generated something more than that – a respect bordering on awe. He had slain a Bloodthirster daemon almost single-handed on the last day of the war, but the wounds the beast inflicted on him were too great to heal. He had died in Malchai's arms in the rubble of the nave outside, and the Reclusiarch had wept.

One could not imagine that savage sternness bent in grief, not now. Malchai was a formidable figure, one to whom even the Kharne himself sometimes deferred. He and Jonah Kerne had clashed many times down the years, in arguments over orthodoxy, and the proper application of the Codex

Astartes. Their relations were respectful, and proper, but Kerne knew that Malchai disliked him.

He could not return that dislike. The man was too brave not to admire, and it had been Sergeant Kerne who had saved the Reclusiarch's life when the grief-blinded Chaplain had refused to leave his master's body to the Punisher hordes. Kerne and a single squad of Space Marines, the remnants of several companies, had fought around Amadai's corpse and so preserved it from defilement.

Ever since, Malchai had seemed to resent Jonah, as though he could not bear having a witness to his own moment of weakness.

The Reclusiarch afforded Kerne a cold nod as he entered the side-chapel, no more. The other captains were greeted formally, by name. Last to enter were Ares Thuraman of Ardunai Company, the senior captain in the Chapter, and finally the Kharne himself.

Al Murzim was not the tallest or the strongest of them all, but there was, as always, that quiet about him which engaged their attentions at once.

Breughal Paine had once observed that the Kharne said more in a moment of silence than others did with long speeches, and so it seemed now as he gazed around the plinth at his assembled captains and senior staff.

In addition to the Space Marines, there were normal human figures present also. They had entered through the side door, and stood dwarfed by their superhuman colleagues. Kerne knew them by sight.

Isa Garakis, a lean, grey man, the chief navigator of the Chapter, who had been finding a way through the warp for all of his adult life. The pain of every one of those journeys was etched into the deep lines of his face. His eyes were sunken grey flints buried in his skull. He looked like a man who no longer knew how to sleep.

The castellan, Asa Rubio, a robust man in his sixties who would have seemed large and formidable in any other company, despite his white beard. He was responsible for the day-to-day administration of Mors Angnar, and commanded a human staff of several thousands. An Aspirant to the Adeptus Astartes, his body had rejected most of the key genetic implants necessary in the process of becoming a Space Marine, but the Kharne had recognised the analytical brilliance of the young man's mind and had taken him on to the staff of the Chapter Administratum. That had been nearly fifty years ago, and Rubio had repaid his master's faith in him many times over. The Kharne had relied heavily on him in the rebuilding of Mors Angnar and the restocking of the Chapter's magazines and transport pool.

Finally, there was Tomas Massaron, captain of the *Ogadai*, and the senior shipmaster of the fleet.

It was Massaron that Kerne regarded with most interest. This officer commanded the ship upon which Mortai would live for the long voyage to the Kargad system, and to a great extent the success or failure of the expedition would depend on Massaron as much as on Jonah himself.

Massaron returned his stare, unabashed, seemingly fascinated. The shipmaster had been around the Adeptus Astartes long enough to lose most of the awe with which normal humanity regarded the giant warriors of the Emperor, and Kerne felt himself being sized up with open curiosity.

They had met before, but only fleetingly. The *Ogadai* had been undergoing one of its never-ending refits when Kerne had last led Mortai out to do battle with the Gulbec Pirates in the Border Systems two years before, and Massaron had not seen action since the wars against the ork marauders of the Long Bleed a decade previous. He had done well though, taking on two ork cruisers in the old *Ogadai* and reducing them to glowing scrap in the space of an afternoon.

He had a reputation as a calm, unflappable officer, and his appearance did not belie it. Short, even for a human, he had brown eyes and a shock of stiff, salt and pepper hair above a curiously young

face. He stood at ease, dressed in the night-blue livery of the Dark Hunters fleet personnel, the triple axe-heads of his rank gleaming on his sleeves.

Kerne's gaze flicked across other, better-known faces.

Graes Venann, the senior Librarian, no doubt still annoyed that he had been finagled into promoting young Kass. Well, one had to crack eggshells to eat eggs. They locked eyes for a second, and Venann tilted his head to one side and smiled, inscrutable as a lizard.

The other line company captains, Kerne knew well. Shaef Darric of Fourth had come up through Mortai like himself. Nortan Blask of Seventh had covered his retreat from the landing pads on the day the Punishers arrived, losing half his men. Fell Ambros, leader of the Haradai, the Scout Company, was the wiliest fighter Kerne had ever known, with an evil sense of humour. He and Fornix were great friends.

The Scout Master sported a jutting, plaited beard and bore the ritual scars which had long died out in the Chapter. Some said there was a future Kharne in him. He had already done much to modify the Dark Hunters Codex, in the face of Malchai's opposition. Jonah had worked closely with him in the campaign against the Long Bleed Waaagh! In that war, Ambros's Scouts had slain as many of the foe as the line companies had, and there were voices in the Chapter which said that the role of the Dark Hunters Scouts should be expanded even further.

The Dark Hunters, like all the varied Chapters of the Adeptus Astartes, were a compact, combined-arms force of immense power. They were an army, yes, but they were more than that.

Looking over the assembled captains, Kerne knew that any one of them would die for him, as he would for them. It was not a matter of personal likes and dislikes. They were, in the last analysis, kin to each other, brothers even in the genetic sense of the word, comrades-in-arms, and believers in a single, unforgiving faith.

It was what made a Space Marine Chapter something close to invincible. Even in defeat, they did not abandon that faith, in the Emperor and in one another. That belief enabled them to face annihilation without a qualm.

Kerne was not the most pious of his kind, but as his brothers gathered about the Chapter Master and the hum of talk died down, he found himself giving thanks that he was here, now, with these like-minded comrades. He could not have chosen any better fate for himself than to stand here in this place.

Among his brothers.

'I ask the chief Reclusiarch to lead us in a moment of prayer,' Kharne Al Murzim said quietly.

In the silence that followed they could all hear the roar of the winter wind outside, and vying with it, the thunder of transport engines from the landing pads.

Malchai raised his crozius, and kissed it.

'Lord of Hosts,' he said, 'In thy Glory, and thy Goodness, let us be worthy of our blood and those who have gone before us into your peace. We are here to do thy bidding, to kill and be killed, all with thy blessing upon us.

'In the Emperor's name.'

'By the Throne,' all those in the chamber said.

A blue light sizzled into being, hovering above the chamber's central plinth. It flickered like a winded flame, before steadying and assuming other colours. A series of orbs wheeled in orbit around

a bright central sphere. Some of them were spattered with tiny flashing red lights.

Kharne Al Murzim gestured his brothers closer, and the flickering lights played across their faces.

'The situation in the Kargad System has been somewhat clarified since our last communication from Cypra Mundi,' he said. 'Segmentum Command has received various semi-garbled vox transmissions from several planets and moons in the system.'

He punched a series of keypoints on the holo-display. 'Peronnen and Asranak, two small moons with mining manufactoria and minor settlements, have been heavily attacked and it is probable that the Imperial presence there has been destroyed. It only amounted to a few companies of the Guard in any case. The mining bases on the Tellik Asteroids are also gone.

'Militarily speaking, these places are of no consequence to us, though at some point in the future they will of course have to be scoured of all Chaos remnants.

'No, brothers, it is the central planet which concerns us. Ras Hanem, the High Gate. This is a long-settled world with a history in the Imperium and some major industries which the sector cannot afford to lose.

'Population, some three hundred million, mostly concentrated in a few major cities. The capital, Askai, population fifty million, is home to a series of manufactoria which are key to Titan production on Cypra Mundi, quite apart from other armament industries.'

'What is the garrison?' Ares Thuraman asked. The senior captain in the Chapter had long ago lost his vocal chords to corrosive atmosphere, and his voice came out through a vox-speaker in his throat, flat and harsh as a nail scoring iron.

'The defenders vary in composition. There is the Hanemite Guard, trained up to something like the usual imperial level. Numerous, fairly competent by imperial standards, and numbering some seven divisions. They man fixed emplacements around the major cities, and are hence scattered about the planet. There is also a militia of part-timers numbering in the tens of thousands which is called up in emergencies, but which is of doubtful utility in a real war.

'But Ras Hanem is lucky in one thing, brothers. The last vox transmissions we have had from the planet were sent by an Imperial Guard General, one Pavul Dietrich, who seems to have involved himself in the defence. Dietrich's unit is the 387th Armoured, which was en route to Cypra Mundi but left to kick its heels on Ras Hanem for several weeks because of a lack of transport ships. The 387th is heavy armour, Basilisks, Baneblades, Chimeras – a full regiment.'

'What was the last situation report we had from the system, my lord?' Jonah Kerne asked, staring at the shimmering hololith as though if he stared hard enough it might tell him everything he craved to know.

'The last vox from Dietrich's staff stated that communications with the outlying moons and planets of the system were being lost one after another. So far, his comms specialists have been able to get through enemy jamming frequencies, but we cannot expect that to last. There are no astropaths of any note upon the planet who could get a message through the warp, either.

'We can expect the assault on Ras Hanem itself to begin quite soon. The planet has a full complement of orbital defences and some light defensive craft, but they cannot be expected to win a protracted engagement with a mobile fleet. A ground assault is inevitable.'

'The orbital defences will take a toll, nonetheless,' Thuraman rasped. 'Especially if earlier reports were true, and the enemy has nothing heavier than Dauntless class.'

'Agreed,' the Kharne said.

Malchai spoke up, frowning, 'Are there no Imperial warships closer to the system than us?'

'None bar a few interceptors and frigates,' the Kharne said grimly. 'They are all off providing cover for the Wendakhen campaign, on the other side of the sector – which was where Dietrich and his men were en route to when they were stranded on Ras Hanem. The Waaagh! of Jurhat the Cursed is soaking up Imperial resources, and will do for a long time to come. Our brethren in the Dark Sons are aiding thirteen Guard divisions on Wendakhen.'

'Emperor bless them,' several of those present muttered. The Dark Sons had been one of the six Chapters which had come to the aid of the Hunters during the last Punisher incursion, and there were still close links between the two Chapters.

The Scoutmaster, Fell Ambros, spoke up. 'When was this last vox transmission, lord?'

But it was the Chief Librarian who answered him.

'Some two days ago,' Graes Vennan said, the planets of the hologram circling in his black eyes. 'One of my more talented specialists picked it up. I have been monitoring the Kargad System since this news first broke.'

'And nothing since?' Kerne asked him.

The Librarian's strange gaze met Jonah flatly. 'Nothing.'

Kerne rubbed his forehead. He did not want to speak up, but could not let it lie. Not even here.

'My Kharne, I must ask you now, if I am to go to the aid of Ras Hanem, then let us trust to the warp for the voyage. I do not, with all respect, believe that we can afford the loss of time a normal-space journey will entail.'

There was a silence. To question the will of the Kharne in an Orders Conclave was boldness verging on insubordination. Brother Malchai frowned, and his fist tightened on his crozius.

Kharne Al Murzim remained staring into the heart of the circling hologram, his face unchanged. It was Ares Thuraman who replied, his voice a metallic snarl.

'You forget yourself, Kerne.'

'Forgive me, first captain. My Kharne, I meant no disrespect.'

'I know you didn't, Jonah,' the Kharne said mildly. He straightened from his regard of the shimmering Kargad system.

'I have been thinking on this very thing myself, and have spent hours in prayer, looking for guidance from He who guides us all. To trust to the lanes of normal space will entail a voyage of – Isa, enlighten us.'

The Chief Navigator cleared his throat and stepped into the ring of giants.

'At least fifteen weeks, my lord.'

'There you have it, brothers. Can the Guard hold out that long? There's the rub.'

There was a crackle, and from a speaker buried in the central plinth they all suddenly heard the sepulchral tones of the Forge-Master, who was precluded by his bulk from attending the Conclave in person.

'If they cannot, then what use are they? Brothers, humanity is frail, but not entirely without resource. And a full company of our kind is a loss we cannot afford to risk. To die in battle is one thing – but to be lost to the warp. That is waste, pure and simple.'

'Chief Navigator, what think you?' the Kharne asked. 'Would you take to the warp for travel at this time?'

Isa Garakis exchanged glances with Brother Venann before he spoke, clearing his throat again.

‘Chapter Master, the warp is in a period of severe flux and turbulence, and has been for some months. If we took to it now, we could be in the Kargad System in a matter of days, or it might take weeks, or years, or we might re-enter normal space somewhere a thousand light years from our intended destination. There is simply no telling. The Wendakhen campaign is stirring up the immaterium at the moment, and rendering it extremely volatile, as all wars do.’

‘Psykers!’ Shaef Darric, captain of Fourth Company, snorted.

‘Thank you, Isa,’ the Kharne said gravely. He turned to face Kerne. ‘There is your answer, Jonah. I will not entrust Mortai to the warp. Whatever the situation you find when you reach Ras Hanem, I expect you to deal with it. Is that clear?’ *We had discussed this,* his eyes said.

Kerne bowed, knowing he had angered his Chapter Master, who was also his friend.

‘Very clear, my lord.’

‘If Mortai’s captain is in any apprehension about what lies before him, then perhaps he would welcome some support on his expedition,’ Brother Malchai said. A small, bleak smile played over his mouth.

‘Chapter Master, I would deem it an honour if you allowed me to act as Mortai Company’s Chaplain for the coming campaign, since it is currently lacking in spiritual guidance. Let me accompany Brother Kerne to Ras Hanem.’

‘An excellent idea,’ the Kharne said quietly. ‘I am sure Captain Kerne will welcome your assistance, Brother Malchai.’

Kerne bowed again, but said nothing. He was being punished, and he had earned it, but he still felt better for having aired his thoughts before his brothers.

Fornix is going to love this, he thought.

FOUR

In Aere

Phobian was a white blazing orb streaked with hints of blue and mottled grey. It floated tranquil and vast, its atmosphere a thin bright haze around its circumference. It had been almost two years since Jonah had been off-world, and it felt as though he were looking down on a picture from his past. The planet filled the tall viewport in the side of the ship, flickering now and again in the void shields that protected the hull.

Fornix joined him, his boots clicking as the magnetic fields in the soles hugged the steel deck.

'By the Emperor and my faith, Jonah, it feels fine to be up this high again, to feel the engines of a good ship thrumming under my feet.'

Phobian swung round in the port as the ship began to wheel preparatory to full burn. They could see the terminator curve dark around the surface of the planet, and in the spreading night there was the tiny spangle of light that was Mors Angnar, cradled in the rugged peaks and glaciers of the Argahast Range. The Silverspears.

'Perhaps Breughal was right,' Kerne said quietly. 'We must put some trust in ordinary men, and their resolve.'

'Let us hope this Dietrich fellow has some iron in his backbone at least,' Fornix said. 'I pulled his files. He seems adequate enough.'

Kerne smiled. 'I also. He is a veteran of twenty-eight years service in the Guard, but he only took command of the 387th three months ago. It remains to be seen how well that appointment takes.'

'No matter what we find in the Kargad System, with Mortai and the *Ogadai*, nothing shall stand against us for long.'

'Hubris, brother, is a dangerous thing.'

'I merely state facts, captain. We have one hundred and eight Adeptus Astartes on board this ship. Whole systems have been conquered with less.'

'And let us not forget Brother Malchai.'

'Ah.' Fornix grinned. 'I did not see that coming, I'll admit. What possessed him, do you think? The Chief Reclusiarch, ministering to the needs of a single company?'

'Malchai keeps his own counsel, as he always has.'

‘He has never forgiven us for saving his life,’ Fornix snapped with sudden asperity.

‘Enough, brother-sergeant. As far as I am concerned, he belongs to Mortai now, and as a senior member of the Chapter he will be treated with nothing but the utmost respect.’

‘He has that, at least. I do not doubt that he has nothing but the welfare of the Chapter at heart, Jonah, but I will not say the same concerning his thoughts on you. He means to monitor your decisions, and seize upon any transgression he can find. He wants Thuraman to succeed the Kharne – they have always been close – and he sees this campaign as a means to advancing that end. Watch yourself, brother, for he will be watching you.’

‘You have spent too much time thinking of late, Fornix,’ Jonah said lightly. ‘It’s not good for you.’

‘I’m just glad I’m a–’

‘–mere sergeant, I know. You are first sergeant, do not forget, and if something should happen to me, then command of Mortai would devolve upon you. So do not play the bluff innocent. It may work with others, but not with me. I know you too well.’

‘Emperor forefend,’ Fornix said. He was grinning again. ‘Shall we continue to the bridge, and meet with the other great names of our expedition, captain?’

‘Lead on. And try to keep that mouth of yours in check.’

‘I shall be muteness itself.’

The two warriors clanked off down the steel corridor. They were in full power armour, in the dark livery of the Hunters, and they cradled their helms in one arm while bolt pistols were maglocked to their thighs.

Jonah Kerne’s armour was intricately damascened with patterns of liquid-streamed ceramite so that the glim lights overhead were reflected off it as from the surface of fast-running water. A work of ancient beauty and puissance, it had been worn by the captains of Mortai Company since time immemorial. The Kharne had worn it, as had several other Chapter Masters.

There was even a legend that Lukullus himself had had it made, back in a time when the construct of such artefacts was still possible in the Chapter forges. Jonah doubted that, but the armour was undeniably of great age, and the helm that came with it was of the older *corvus* pattern, with its raptor-like profile.

Jonah had worn it so long now that it was a part of him – true in a very real sense also, as the armour was plugged into his very anatomy at all the hardpoints which were surgically grafted into the carapace that underlay every Space Marine’s body. He could live within his armour for months on end, and had done so many times in the course of his long life.

Fornix’s armour was not of the same vintage. Although he was first sergeant of the company, he chose to wear a simple unadorned Mark VII suit with rank badge and Chapter symbol painted on the shoulder plates. The painting was inept – Fornix had done it himself – but that also was tradition. When Fornix had first been promoted, it had been in the smoking ruins of Mors Angnar, and he had painted his rank onto his armour in the midst of a smoking battlefield, using his own blood to make the stripes.

He bore no engravings, no purity seals or scrolls, and the armour, though well maintained and in perfect order, was a thing of pure utility. It had been repainted with cameleoline several times, as was common in the Hunters line companies, and small remnants of the chameleonic paint still clung to crevices and dents in the ceramite plates.

The heavy vault-like doors to the bridge rolled back in their grooves and the command section of

the *Ogadai* opened out before the two warriors, a huge cathedral-like space with a long central nave and an upraised dais at the far end with high void-shielded viewports open to the stars. It seemed more a place of worship than anything else, and there was the same subdued reverence within.

Kerne and Fornix walked down the nave, past sunken pits on either side in which banks of servitors sat plugged into the mechanics of the ship itself, muttering to themselves and to the bowels of the *Ogadai* in binaric and machine-code, the data-tongues of the Adeptus Mechanicus.

They met human fleet members of the Chapter who each bowed as they passed, wide-eyed at their proximity to the Emperor's elite, and came finally to the end-dais, where the high altar would be in a terrestrial cathedral. Here, there were upraised cliffs of monitors and dials and levers, watched over by fleet servitors, some almost human, some barely so.

And here also stood the shipmaster, Tomas Massaron, with his senior commanders, and towering over them in his tar-black power armour, Jord Malchai, his skull-shaped helm cradled at his side, the crozius arcanum which was both badge of office and deadly weapon in his other hand.

The Reclusiarch nodded curtly as Kerne and Fornix climbed the steps of the dais. The steps were crafted from the grey stone of the Argahast mountains, a little part of the home world to stand upon. The three Space Marines made a hulking trinity and acknowledged the salutes of Massaron and his crew with grave silence.

'You will forgive me, my lords, if I devote myself to the workings of the ship for a few minutes to come,' Massaron said. 'We are about to leave orbit.'

'By all means, shipmaster,' Kerne said, and then watched with keen interest as Massaron, his human officers and the unblinking servitors stirred the gargantuan bulk of the *Ogadai* into trembling wakefulness.

The heavy cruiser was over four kilometres long, and had a crew of some twenty thousand humans and many thousands more servitors. Its main weaponry was a series of heavy plasma weapons known as lances, the most powerful of which, the Voidsunders, were mounted in the bow. Lesser versions were echeloned in broadside all down the angular sides of the cruiser, along with torpedo banks and short-range lasburners.

The *Ogadai*, given time, could blast through any void shield in existence, and had been known to cut enemy vessels clear in half. But it was unwieldy when it came to short-range actions, vulnerable to boarding. The cruiser carried its own soldiery in the form of the shipguard (they could not be known as marines), but it relied on its escorts to see off any smaller craft which sought to close. These escorts were a trio of ageing destroyers, the *Arbion*, the *Beynish*, and the *Caracalla*. They hovered protectively within a few hundred kilometres of the capital ship, their powerful augur radar sweeping out on all sides, searching for threats.

'Coming round,' Massaron said quietly. '*Arbion*, match course when I give the signal. *Beynish*, starboard flank, eight hundred. *Caracalla*, port one thousand.'

'Acknowledged.'

'Enginseer Miranich, you may engage main engines.'

A binaric crackle in response, and then in recognisable Low Gothic the servitor said, 'Main engines, acknowledged, sir.'

They could feel the thrum of the ship's power increase. The very atmosphere in the command chamber seemed to thicken about their faces. Minute changes in the artificially generated gravity field came and went. Jonah was able to sense the acceleration, and the long, slow wheel away from the

planet below.

'*Arbion*, stern three thousand,' Massaron said. He looked over the towering screens and dials and blinking digital outlays which reared up before him like the ornate backdrop to an ancient altar. Beyond them the tall viewports soared up to reveal the utter dark of space, and the turning, distant course of a billion stars.

'Steady, quarter flank. Course as set.' Massaron was looking up at the viewports now, for a moment something like sheer joy written across his closed face. The vibration in the command chamber steadied, dulled somewhat. The *Ogadai* settled into its course, a creature of the stars in its element. Even Jord Malchai's brow lifted as the great vessel began its departure from the Phobos system, leaving Phobian thousands of kilometres farther behind with every second.

'We will be in interstellar space in four planetary hours, my lords,' Massaron said. He adjusted his midnight-blue tunic, tugging it down over his torso to smooth out invisible creases.

'Nicely done, shipmaster,' Fornix said. 'I felt nary a bump.'

Massaron bowed slightly, then caught Jonah's eye. 'If Mortai's captain would indulge me, I would like to walk him through the ship and perhaps discuss some topics which our rapid departure has raised.'

Malchai opened his mouth to speak, and then closed it again. Senior Reclusiarch of the Chapter he might be, but now they had left Phobian, Kerne was in command; and there was no gainsaying that.

Jonah Kerne nodded. 'Fornix, you might want to inspect our brethren in the troop holds. My lord Malchai, I would appreciate your presence there also. Our brothers would, I am sure, relish a sermon at this time. For some of them it is their first time off-world.'

Malchai met Jonah's eyes with flat displeasure. 'It is both my duty and my honour to do your bidding, captain.'

'Follow me then,' Fornix said. 'I know the way. This thing is easy to get lost in.'

Malchai took his helm and deliberately set it on his head. There were several tiny hisses as the power armour locked it in place, and what there was of his humanity disappeared entirely. In its place was the ceramite sculpt of a grinning skull, the badge of his calling, white as ivory save for the two red lenses burning deep in the eye-sockets.

'Lead on, first sergeant,' his voice said, augmented slightly by the suit systems, but perfectly recognisable.

The two warriors left, stalking down the nave of the command chamber like massive gleaming statues brought to agile life.

'I have not had the honour of the Reclusiarch's presence on my ship before,' Massaron said.

'Quite an honour it is,' Jonah said wryly. 'What would you have me see, shipmaster?'

'If you would follow me, captain. I think better when I am walking.'

They left the Command by a circular side-chamber in which pairs of servitors and human personnel sat side by side staring into what seemed to be identical screens.

'The fire-control room for the forward lances,' Massaron explained. 'Every system is duplicated several times over, and can also be rerouted to secondary command, and even to engineering if that should become necessary.'

'I have seen Voidsunders in action,' Jonah said. 'They are fearsome weapons.'

'Yes, but slow to recharge. The *Ogadai* was designed to operate as part of a fleet of capital ships, each protecting the other. Since the Dark Hunters no longer possess a fleet of heavy vessels, the ship

has been extensively redesigned over the centuries to meet the… rather more specific needs of the Adeptus Astartes.'

'The troop holds.'

'Yes. Much of the lower hull was gutted, and a lot of broadside ordinance removed so that the bottom holds could be enlarged to accommodate several flight decks and holsters for the drop pods.'

They walked along an endless glim-lit corridor with heavy sealed doors on their right.

'These lead down to the broadside batteries,' Massaron explained with a wave of his hand. 'Lasburners and torpedoes in most cases, with lighter plasma cannons for close-range work. Each battery is wholly self-contained, and is crewed by some three hundred men, plus the servitors.'

'What about the Voidsunders – what is their complement?' Kerne asked, rather more interested than he had expected to be. He had walked these corridors before, but almost a century in the past, and they were unfamiliar to him now.

The *Ogadai* might not have changed very much externally, but its interiors had been in flux for generations as the tech-priests and the servitors of the fleet worked endlessly on repair and refit and redesign. If the Primarch himself, mighty Jaghatai, were to come back after his centuries of absence, he would not know the ship which had once belonged to the White Scars.

'We have two of the heavy lances in the bows,' Massaron went on. 'Each has a crew of some eight hundred. Fire control remains, as you have seen, with Command. In the last extremity, the lances can be either ejected from the main hull of the ship, or set to destruct in the case of an enemy boarding.'

'Shipmaster, I have not seen any tech-priests on board ship.'

Massaron looked up quickly at the towering Space Marine. 'They have a shrine at the heart of the *Ogadai*, and usually only travel the ship in cases where severe damage needs to be repaired, or new components are being outfitted.'

Kerne nodded approvingly. The Dark Hunters had endured a problematic relationship with the Adeptus Mechanicus since the days of their Founding, when the Blind King and his Titans had almost destroyed the Chapter. It was one of the reasons that the Hunters were so poorly provided for in starships and heavy armour.

It was also why Breughal Paine had agreed to undergo Dreadnought symbiosis, to preserve his enormous knowledge.

Simply put, the Dark Hunters did not like to send their brethren to Mars to be trained by the tech-adepts whose kind had once been their bitterest foes. Their Techmarines were few and growing fewer by the year; those who had made the pilgrimage to Mars had found themselves the objects of distrust and dislike when they had returned.

Mortai had a single Techmarine to its name, Brother Heinos. He had missed the last thirty years of campaigning, and had only returned to the Chapter the year before. He was a rare case, one of the few Space Marines in the entire Chapter that Jonah had never seen in battle. Even the recent Haradai replacements had all served in the Gulbec Pirate skirmishes.

Brother Heinos had been a neophyte destined for Ninth Company when Breughal Paine had seconded his own request for Mars.

The Space Marine and the shipmaster passed down endless corridors, some high and wide enough to take a Land Raider, others so low that Kerne had to stoop. They passed hundreds of fleet personnel in Hunters blue, heavy servitors with tracks in place of legs who were towing lowloaders of spares and supplies, and a platoon of the shipguard, the armed infantry of the *Ogadai*, who almost halted in

their ranks at the sight of the Adeptus Astartes captain.

'How many shipguard on board?' Kerne asked Massaron. He had looked up the stats for the cruiser before boarding, but they were out of date, and fleet personnel were always in flux. The Master of the Fleet, old Gan Arix, had once told Jonah that keeping the ships crewed was like juggling raisins. You might drop a few, but there was no time to look down and see.

'Almost two thousand. Most are from Phospherran, the desert moon on the edge of the system. Their fathers are miners and herders. We sign up several hundred every year.'

Jonah knew Phospherran. He had fought there the last time the Punishers had arrived.

'The population has recovered then?'

'Yes. The Kharne had whole populations relocated in the wake of the Punisher War, and they have bedded down well. Most of our people are from the border moons. Phorios never recovered, and is still uninhabitable.'

They had bombed the planet from orbit and seared it down to the stone, so deeply embedded had the Great Enemy been on that unfortunate world. Kerne had watched from a drop-ship, launched and then recalled when the extent of the invasion had become apparent. All possible resources had been withdrawn for the defence of Phobian itself, and the populated fringes of the Phobos system had been abandoned. He ground his teeth as he thought on it.

They boarded a massive hydraulic elevator and sank lower into the main body of the ship. The *Ogadai* was tall as a mountain, and it was said that there were chambers and whole sections within it that had remained sealed and forgotten for generations.

Roadways and ramps within the bowels of the vessel ran as busy with wheeled and tracked traffic as some planetary metropolis, and the footbridges above them were thick with streaming crowds of crew.

Kerne saw a heavy loader pass by on balloon-like wheels, hauling a serried crowd of servitors, their eyesights gleaming red and green, the overhead glims reflecting off the shining servo-arms. These had once been human, all of them, but they could now be plugged into the ship like any other mechanical component.

He could think of no worse fate for a human being – and yet every year there were a few who actually volunteered for the transformation, so harsh was the universe of this millennium. Mankind clung to life in any way it could.

But no Space Marine could ever imagine submitting to such a fate.

The vast spaces within the *Ogadai* opened up further, until small cyber-organic cherubim were able to flit overhead, the far-off bulkheads almost lost in a haze above them. The cruiser was indeed a self-contained world, teeming with life. It made Jonah somewhat uncomfortable to be constrained by this river of humanity. He had to remind himself more than once as he slowed his pace to match the shipmaster's that this was a *starship*, a space-going component of his own Chapter, and not the greatest at that.

The *Umbra Mortis*, the Dark Hunters battle-barge, was several times the size of the *Ogadai*, though not at present able to proceed under its own power. The Hunters had long ago lost the technical ability to repair the barge's immense warp-engines, but Kerne knew that even the *Mortis*'s skeleton crew was in the tens of thousands.

'There are – what – a quarter of a million human personnel in the fleet?' Kerne asked Massaron as they paused to ride another elevator ever deeper into the *Ogadai*.

‘Closer to three hundred thousand, captain,’ the shipmaster replied. ‘Most live and die on their ships, never setting foot on a planet. But it is a better life than most. It has purpose and honour. The Chapter clothes and feeds us and gives us a useful function in the Imperium. It is more than can be said for most men’s lives.’

Kerne grunted in approval. He found himself liking the square, contained shipmaster and his air of imperturbability. Such a man might have made a Space Marine, had he been discovered young enough.

‘And you, Massaron, how long have you been wearing Hunters blue?’

The shipmaster raised one eyebrow, and went so far as to scratch his jaw.

‘I was born on the *Ogadai*, captain. This ship and the Chapter it serves are all the home I have ever known, or ever wanted to know. The personnel of the fleet are my family.’ He seemed about to say more, but checked himself.

The elevator, a square of plasteel fifty metres to a side, came to a jostling halt, making Massaron grimace.

‘The ship is four thousand years old, captain. The repairs it requires are a never-ending process, and it consumes raw materials as though it were a living creature of great appetite.’

‘What is the lifespan of a vessel such as this?’

Massaron seemed genuinely taken aback by the question.

‘Given the due and proper maintenance it requires, the *Ogadai* is immortal. If we look after it, the ship will serve the Chapter for as long as there are men to crew it and space to travel in.’

Kerne suspected he had hit a nerve, and did not pursue the subject. He had noticed that some sections of the cruiser were better maintained than others, and the patina of age coated the ancient plasteel thickly. Cracks and splits had been welded over again and again, and in places the inner cabling had fallen down so that the crew stepped over it as one would over a dormant snake.

But the distant thunder of the engines was reassuringly solid, a background noise that was soon forgotten, and became part of life itself on the ship.

However, it was only a ship.

It was the Chapter that endured – that must endure. This human, however admirable, had a vision that was circumscribed by his surroundings and his lifespan, just like his fellows.

In the Adeptus Astartes the genes of the Emperor Himself were embedded, attenuated by the millennia, but never to be eradicated. In the very flesh of the Dark Hunters, in their blood, was their reason to be. A Space Marine who died in war had his gene-seed recovered from the battlefield no matter what the cost, and it was implanted into another who would carry on his work, his duty to the Emperor and the Imperium.

That was true immortality, not the feverish scrabble to repair an ancient starship, however august its history. The *Ogadai* was alloy and metal, plate and wiring. A Space Marine carried within himself the very essence of the living God.

It was rare to meet a human being who understood this.

‘This is the starboard drop hangar,’ Massaron was saying. The mismatched pair were now walking inside a space more immense than any yet seen, and there was a new smell in the air. The fug and stink of humanity was still present, but it was overlaid by the unguents and lubricants which attended all the heavy machinery of the Chapter.

Kerne's heightened senses could also pick out the elusive fragrance of incense, the accompaniment of some prayer to the Machine God, and that scent immediately took him back to the Reclusiam on Mors Angnar.

A line of Thunderhawks sat on the deck plating like huge ugly birds, with their ground crews busy as a broken ant-heap all around them. A tracked servitor went past muttering in binary, dragging an ordnance sled piled high with missiles, the blunt, black-nosed armaments Space Marines called Rosaries, since they were fired in a chain of ten at a time.

The overheads glittered on long belts of brass-clad shells as they were wound into the armament cavities in the Thunderhawks' noses. Many of the gunships had their innards and even their engines dismantled and set out on the slipways in front of the craft. They almost looked as though the ground crews were tearing them apart.

'How many?' Kerne asked. He knew, but Massaron might know differently.

'Eight configured for troop deployment, eleven for close-in support,' Massaron said. 'We are short of spares,' he added, frowning.

'How many ready to fly right now, shipmaster?' Kerne asked, his eyes narrowing.

The shipmaster gestured to a man in oil-stained blue overalls who had a multi-tooled prosthetic in place of his left hand. He was unshaven, red-haired, with sunken grey eyes.

'Dinas, over here.' And as the man approached, wide-eyed and saluting as something of an afterthought, Massaron demanded, 'How many craft ready for immediate take-off?'

The man was staring up at the tall Adeptus Astartes captain, as were most of the crew behind him. He collected himself at once however, and the finger-tools of his prosthetic extended in what seemed a tiny shrug.

'Three, shipmaster. One transport and two gunships. We are still taking in ordnance from the loading bays.'

'This is Gerd Dinas, my deck chief,' Massaron told Kerne.

Kerne reined in his temper. 'When will the rest be spaceworthy?'

Dinas scratched his head with a thin finger-blade. 'My lord, it will be several weeks.'

'Be specific.'

The man went white under his greasy red hair. His eyes closed for a moment. He looked as though he had not slept in days.

'Five weeks. We have yet to sort through the parts that the Forge-Master shipped up to us, and several of the Hawks are undergoing major maintenance – four have burned-out engines, and the machine spirits of two others have innate problems which are proving difficult to pin down.'

'Would Space Marine pilots be of any use to you?' Kerne asked.

The man flushed. 'Why yes, my lord, their expertise would be invaluable.'

Kerne turned to the shipmaster. 'I will second six flight-qualified battle-brothers to your people for as long as it takes to get these craft in battle order, Massaron. This is a priority.'

Massaron blinked. 'The voyage to the Kargad system will take–'

'Irrelevant. We have no way of knowing what awaits us on the journey, and the Thunderhawks are my brethren's most effective close-support and resupply system if we are to fight off-planet. They must be made functional without delay.'

Massaron bowed wordlessly. Kerne realised that he had wounded the man by chastising him in front of an inferior. Well, that could not be helped.

‘Lead on,’ he said in the same harsh tone. ‘If we can make a path through this confusion, then I wish to look upon the drop pods; and I hope that I will find them in better repair.’

His cold anger subdued even Tomas Massaron, and the ground crews seemed to catch some hint of it also, because for a moment the din in the hangar sank down, and there was an apprehensive lull.

‘If you will follow me, captain,’ Massaron said stiffly. They set off again, leaving the deck chief standing in mid-salute. The crews about the Thunderhawks parted for Kerne like waves opening before a rock, and none of them dared look upon his face.

FIVE

Animo Moderari

‘Cease fire!’

The tearing crack of gunfire stopped at once. In the smoke, dark shapes shifted, darting in low and then leaping high.

Fornix blinked on his infra-red and the images steadied and clarified in his helm display. He switched to squad-vox.

‘Orsus, can you see the enemy?’

‘Affirmative, brother. They’re wheeling left.’

‘Very well. Primus, hold and cover. Secundus, go forward, at discretion. Tertius, go right, fast move. Squads move in three.’

A few moments, and then the gunfire started up again, the bolters bucking in the hands of the Space Marines. Ten stood firing steadily in short two and three round bursts. As their heads turned, so the bolter muzzles moved with them, as though the two were connected by unseen strings.

The brass alloy of cartridge casings clicked and shone as they tumbled out of the bolters’ chambers, a rain of gold. One battle-brother swept the massive shape of a heavy bolter back and forth as though he were hosing down the enemy with explosive fire, the belt clattering out of the tall pack grafted onto his generator.

Ten more Space Marines rushed forward. Despite their bulk they moved more swiftly than any human athlete. Five dropped to a crouch and added their fire to the cacophony, while five advanced, then went firm and took up firing as their squad members joined them.

Out on the right, over a hundred metres away, a further squad was sprinting through the smoke on the flank. They became looming shadows in the murk, and disappeared for only an instant; then the harsh crack and boom of grenades went off in a sequence of flashes which staggered the smoke.

‘Ambush,’ Fornix said calmly. ‘Tertius, report.’

‘Tripwires, first sergeant,’ a disgusted voice came back on the vox. ‘I have three down. More movement in front.’

‘Engage and grip them, Orsus. Primus and Secundus, alphas hold down base of fire, betas forward and make contact. Close fast, brothers.’

The first two squads split, half of each opening up again, the other half charging forward. Fornix heard someone shout '*Umbra Sumus*!' over the vox and at once he snarled back, 'Shut your mouth. Do your job without that caterwauling.'

The line of Space Marines closed with the darting shadows in the smoke. There was a final clatter of fire, and then the noise began to sink.

Fornix looked down at the counter he held in one gauntleted fist. The digits had been counting down all through the engagement, and now it was blinking zero.

'Report.'

'Primus in place, position secure. No casualties.'

'Secundus in place, position secure. One casualty.'

'Tertius in place, position secure. Three casualties.'

'Hold fast. All battle-brothers, listen to me.' He paused. 'Unload!'

There was a metallic chorus as up and down the Space Marines clicked the magazines out of their bolters and then cocked the weapons so that the chambered rounds were spat out.

'Pick up those rounds, brothers. Every one of them will count one day. All right, squads, on me. And lift your feet, Hunters – I'm getting old standing here.'

The deck of the training area trembled as thirty battle-brothers jogged back to surround the first sergeant. He turned to the maintenance servitor which had been standing silent beside him all this time. 'End smoke. Retrieve all target servitors. Initiate repairs.'

'Acknowledged,' the creature said, and lurched away, chittering in tech-speak as it went.

High above, huge fans began to turn, stirring the acrid atmosphere. The air in the massive hangar began to clear almost at once. As it did, it revealed tumbled piles of debris and rubbish scattered in mounds and ridges all over the deck.

Dozens of servitors were now busy among these, lifting up battered target servitors, some of which were still thrashing feebly. Others were touring the walls of the hangar and beginning repairs on the armoured padding which lined the bulkheads.

Fornix clicked off his helm, and stood impassively as thirty Space Marines of Mortai's tactical squads gathered around him.

'Take a knee,' he growled, and at once the massive armoured warriors knelt before him in a rough semi-circle.

'Unhelm.'

He stared at them, eye to eye. 'Brother Orsus, who tripped the grenades?'

A broad-faced warrior, big even for his kind, rubbed his hand over his scalp. 'That would be Brother Infinius.'

Fornix's gaze ranged over the squad. A slim, dark warrior with black hair and downcast eyes.

'Tripwires, Infinius? Brother, I set those there merely to combat boredom, and because of you they incapacitated three of your squad. Tripwires – really?'

'My apologies, first sergeant.' Infinius rubbed at a blackened dent in his armour, which was otherwise so new from the arsenal that it still had a lacquered shine to it.

'How long have you been in Mortai now?'

'Seven weeks, first sergeant.'

'And already you have been killed by a trap which a drunk cultist could set.' Fornix bared his teeth in exasperation. 'Extra duty, Orsus. For all of Tertius. And an inspection for all squads at fifteenth

hour shiptime.'

Orsus nodded, scowling.

'And who was it who uttered our battle-cry on the vox?' Fornix demanded. His bionic eye glowed hellish red, as though infected by his anger.

'First sergeant, it was me.'

Fornix sighed. Another recruit.

'Brother Gad, is it not?'

The Space Marine nodded.

Fornix strode forward, and leaned down until his scalp-lock was tickling the other warrior's face.

'The battle-cry of the Dark Hunters is not to be uttered except in battle, Brother Gad – do you understand me?'

The Space Marine nodded dumbly.

'You do not scream it out in the middle of a tactical exercise in the practice hangar. Am I perfectly clear, brother?'

'Yes, first sergeant.'

Fornix looked at the thirty kneeling warriors. He saw that Nureddin of Secundus was trying not to smile – he was one of Fornix's oldest friends, so he chose to ignore it. Finn March of Primus was frowning. Always so serious, old Finn.

New faces in the company. Enough to make a difference to the heft of it perhaps. They were all trained battle-brothers with years of combat under their belts, but they could not compare to Mortai's veterans – not yet.

Fornix tapped the device he held in one hand. 'One hundred and thirty-eight targets accounted for, at a cost of four of you. Brothers, it will not be good enough. Nureddin, you were with me the last time we fought the Punishers – do you remember the odds we faced back then?'

Brother Nureddin's grin died on his face. 'I remember, Fornix.'

'There were close to eight hundred battle-brothers in the Chapter at that time. We lost half of Haroun Company on the first day: forty battle-brothers. But they bought time for the rest of the Chapter to organise a defence. That one company slew well over eight thousand of the Great Enemy before they were overwhelmed.

'They were not fighting target drones, brothers. The cultists went down in waves, it is true, but behind them were warbands of the Chaos brethren, who had once been of our own adept. They wore power armour, wielded bolters and flamers and lascannons even as we do.

'They had begun as *Space Marines*, my brothers, and whatever it was they had become, they had not forgotten how to fight. And they came in their thousands.

'So make no mistake – it is not enough to kill five, or ten, or twenty of the enemy and think you have done enough. It is not enough to die gloriously with the vile corpses of the foe piled high all around you. To be victorious, brothers, we must do two things. We must destroy the foe utterly...'

He paused. 'And we must also survive.'

Fornix's head sank down until his chin was inside the collar of his breastplate. For a moment he seemed very far away.

'Inspection at fifteen. In the morning we will begin again. And I will discipline personally anyone who falls to the marker of a single drone tomorrow. Dismissed.'

‘Your first sergeant’s anecdotes leave me somewhat disquieted,’ Brother Malchai said, frowning.

‘He trains the company according to the Codex,’ Kerne rejoined. ‘You cannot fault him for that.’

The Chaplain and the captain were standing high up in the observation gallery, wreathed in ribands and knots of dissipating smoke. They cradled their helms at their sides, but were otherwise fully armoured.

‘The training is adequate, and Codex-compliant. It is his words which give me concern. Brother Kass, perhaps you could enlighten us with your opinion.’

Elijah Kass stood behind the two senior officers of his Chapter.

‘My lord, I do not feel qualified to comment.’

‘You are a psyker, are you not, Kass? Perhaps you could do us the service of sounding out the state of mind of–’

‘Enough,’ Kerne snarled. ‘My first sergeant is not a case-study. He has been training our brethren for long enough not to be second-guessed in his methods by anyone. Is that clear, Brother Malchai?’

‘As I said, his methods are Codex-compliant – it is his attitude which concerns me, and as acting company Chaplain I am fully within the orbit of my duties to question it, captain.’

For once there was no animosity in the Reclusiarch’s white face. He meant what he said.

‘Brother Kass, leave us,’ Jonah said.

‘I would prefer it if the Librarian stayed.’

‘Prefer all you like. Elijah, the Chaplain and I would speak privately, if you will.’

‘Captain,’ Elijah said.

‘Go now, Brother Kass. I will not ask you again.’

Elijah Kass stepped away. There was a hiss, and the elevator at their backs took him down into darkness.

The two Space Marines remaining looked at one another. The line of command between a veteran Space Marine captain and the senior Reclusiarch of the Chapter was ill-defined, and depended much on the personalities involved.

In theory, everyone in the Dark Hunters, even the Chapter Master himself, had to defer to Malchai when the issue at stake was the spiritual well-being and orthodoxy of the Chapter. But when it came to military matters, the force commander on the ground was entitled to his own decisions.

‘We are of an age, you and I,’ Jonah said to Malchai. ‘We were witness to the near-destruction of the Dark Hunters, even as Fornix was. That time has seared itself into the soul of every battle-brother who survived it – and there are not many of us left who remember, now. Surely you can understand why Fornix thinks the way he does. There is no unorthodoxy in seeking to make sure his brethren survive?’

Malchai was implacable. ‘Sentiment. Always, it has been your weakness, Jonah. In past times it was your temper, but it seems you have learned to control that. Now you must expunge the last remnants of another weakness from your soul. Only then would you be even remotely worthy to fill the office you seek.’

He was right and wrong at the same time. ‘I seek no other office than that which I currently hold,’ Kerne said carefully.

‘Others seek it for you. Even the Kharne himself has stumbled, blinded by his old friendship for you and his absurd attachment to the company he once commanded. It should have been the Chapter’s senior captain who commanded this expedition, not you.’

‘Ares Thuraman is your friend, is he not, Malchai?’

‘I have no friends. I have only comrades with whom I work for the good of the Chapter, in service to the Emperor. You might want to consider doing the same.’

A cold light came into Kerne’s black eyes. ‘Do you accuse me of neglecting my duty, Reclusiarch?’

‘You do it adequately, but you are hampered by your partiality towards certain of your brethren. You indulge Brother-Sergeant Fornix to a high degree, when he should have been disciplined long ago for insubordination, perhaps even broken in rank.’

‘He saved your life!’

‘That is irrelevant.’

Kerne’s voice rose. ‘But for Fornix you would have been slaughtered like a lamb as you wept over the body of Biron Amadai. Who was guilty of irrational sentiment then, brother?’

Malchai blinked, and something twisted for a moment in his face. ‘It is true, I failed in my duties on that day. I allowed myself to be crippled by emotion. You and Fornix should have let me die then – it was what I deserved. In that moment, I failed our brotherhood utterly.’

Kerne shook his head. ‘We saved a brother Space Marine that day, who has done great service to the Chapter ever since. No one thinks the less of you for that moment of weakness, Malchai–’

‘I do. I have spent all the years since atoning for it, striving to expunge the sin of it. It is why, Jonah, I have always refused the title of Master of Sanctity. I am wholly unworthy to hold the position once held by Amadai.’

‘A man should not spend his life on his knees because he stumbled once,’ Kerne retorted.

Malchai shrugged. ‘Sophistry. The fact is that I see in Brother Fornix the same weakness which once I felt myself. He cares more for the lives of his brethren than for the mission they have been entrusted with.

‘Space Marines do not consider the possibilities of their own death when they go into battle. They think only of the orders they have been given and the most efficient way of carrying them out. All else is extraneous.

‘More than that, to begin thinking in terms of individual survival verges on heresy.’

‘You will not utter that word to me, brother. My company has the best fighting record of any in the Chapter. We have never failed to complete a mission, no matter what the cost. And we pay the price it exacts without stint.’

Malchai nodded slightly. ‘That is true. But I came on this expedition because I wanted to make sure that record remains unblemished, captain. I am not here to undermine you, but to be a necessary adjunct to your authority.’

‘If that be so, then you will refrain from voicing any of your doubts and misgivings about my command except to me, in private. I will not have my orders, or those of my officers, questioned in open forum. And that is a direct order, Malchai.’

‘An order I will obey, of course. But I question its logic. The task of a Chaplain is to steer his charges on the one true road of loyalty and orthodoxy. I mean to hold the members of this expedition to the very letter of the Codex Astartes, captain.’

‘Sometimes the Codex is not enough, in war, Malchai. There must be room for flexibility on the battlefield.’

‘That way heresy lies.’

Jonah Kerne took a step towards the Reclusiarch, eyes blazing. But his voice was very quiet as he

said; ‘I told you not to use that word in relation to my company.’

‘It is not your company, captain. Mortai belongs to the Chapter, and ultimately to the Imperium and the Emperor Himself. You are merely a custodian, an artisan who helps wield the tool, for a time.

‘When a Space Marine – especially a senior Space Marine – begins to think in terms of his own ego, the denizens of the warp sit up and take notice. Only ask Brother-Librarian Kass. We are travelling towards a confrontation with the Great Enemy – creatures who once were Adeptus Astartes like us. Our discipline and our faith must be unshakeable in the face of such abominations.’

Kerne’s gauntleted fists clenched and unclenched. Malchai noted this. ‘I congratulate you on your self-control, captain. I know how hard it can be for you to restrain that temper of yours.’

The Reclusiarch set his fearsome skull-helm on his head, and there was a snake-hiss of atmospherics as it conjoined with his power armour.

‘I will go now, and with your permission, visit the troop decks. I wish to preach a sermon to Mortai while the lessons of today are still fresh in their minds. Is that acceptable to you?’

Jonah nodded mutely, not quite trusting himself to speak.

‘I will refrain from taking Brother-Sergeant Fornix aside for counsel, in deference to your orders. I leave that task to you.’

Malchai thumbed the lifter button. As the platform sped up to the ledge out of the dark, he said:

‘And I will of course be making a full report on these matters, to be sent back to Phobian on the next vox-link.’

He stepped onto the lifter platform, and Jonah Kerne watched the twin red lights of his eyes recede as the Reclusiarch disappeared, descending into the shadow below.

SIX

Hominum Fragilitatum

General Pavul Dietrich did not suffer fools gladly, which was unfortunate, since he sometimes seemed to find himself surrounded by them.

'What do you mean, the vox is down?' he asked with simmering impatience.

The engineer officer set a hand on the comms bench, and the stubbornly flashing red lights thereon.

'Sir, Dardrek is offline. We no longer have any communication with our forces there.'

'When was our last vox from them?'

'Fourteen hours ago, general. Since then, nothing.'

'Are we being jammed?'

'Not that I can tell. We managed to bypass their jamming frequencies two days ago, and since then we had been getting regular reports. Colonel Brix is very reliable, sir.'

'Thank you for pointing that out, lieutenant. You will keep trying until I say otherwise.'

'Yes, sir.'

It was uncomfortably warm in the bunker, despite the ventilators, and with every passing day of the dry season it grew hotter.

Ras Hanem was a bleak world which had once, by all accounts, been beautiful. Several thousand years of Imperial occupation had seen the tropical forests felled, the rivers drained and the savannahs polluted. Save for the domed enclaves where intensive agriculture was pursued, the planet was now a sand-swept wasteland.

But below the sun-baked surface of the world the true treasure of Ras Hanem had been exploited for generations. Palladium, uranium, and above all adamantium ores were present in the guts of the planet in bright-seamed abundance. They had drawn the Imperium here, and led to the construction of massive armaments manufactoria. The Departmento Munitorum rated Ras Hanem as a priority asset, to be defended at all costs, and to its voice was added that of the Adeptus Mechanicus.

On this planet the chassis and armour plating of Titans were designed and forged, to be taken off-world in heavily escorted tranports to Cypra Mundi, the capital of the entire sector. On this planet, giants were born.

On this planet, I sit, waiting for the hammer to fall, Dietrich thought grimly.

‘Dardrek is gone,’ Commissar Von Arnim said. ‘That must be assumed.’

‘If it is,’ Dietrich grunted, ‘then they didn’t make much of a fight of it. Fourteen hours ago the planet was only just reporting the arrival of the enemy fleet. There was a full regiment under Brix, Cadian trained.’

The commissar took off his peaked cap and wiped his forehead. He was lean as a thorn, with a face so heavily lined it looked as though someone had whittled it out with a knife. His eyes were pale as rockcrete, and held about as much softness.

‘Dardrek is only three days away. They are taking down the system world by world, general.’

‘And leaving us until the last. Well, there’s honour in that I suppose. We have a timetable now, Ismail. We must keep to it.’

Three days. Dietrich shook his head. He had counted on more. The outer planets had fallen far too quickly.

‘Let’s walk outside. It’s too damned warm in here, and I’m sick of breathing other men’s air.’

The bunker was deep buried, part of a huge subterranean complex which was the size of a moderate town. Home to thousands of Administratum servants, servitors and military personnel, it was designed to withstand a direct atomic strike. It was also humid, crowded, and stinking, the condensation running in streams down the ferrocrete walls and the ventilation systems never quite adequate. A stone jungle, Dietrich thought it seemed, full of too many useless mouths. When real war came to this world, he would leave it behind gladly.

Above their heads, fifty million more people were enclosed within the circuit of the sprawling blast-walls. In manufactoria and atmosphere domes and soaring hive-scrapers the greatest concentration of humanity in the entire system lived and died. This was the teeming metropolis of Askai, capital of Ras Hanem, and chief city of the Kargad System.

A place which Dietrich had come to know and loathe intimately in the few months he had been here.

The heat blasted them as the vault doors opened, a malevolent dust-choked wind which made Commissar Von Arnim utter a swift curse and tug at the lapels of his leather overcoat. Dietrich sucked the hot air deep into his lungs, even as it dried the sweat on his face to a salty powder. He had been born on a desert planet on the other side of the Segmentum Obscurus, and this oven-bright atmosphere reminded him of his childhood.

Another reason to hate it.

‘We must brief the governor,’ Von Arnim said.

‘Protocol – yes I suppose we must, for all the good it’ll do. It never fails to amaze me, Ismail, how such mediocrity rises so high within the Imperial Administratum. Do you know what he was doing this morning? Designing a new uniform for his bodyguard. So important was this to him that he kept me kicking my heels for half an hour in his anteroom, being stared at by boys in scarlet tunics with lasguns as big as themselves. Soldiers! They still had their mother’s milk on their mouths.’

‘The Imperium decided to continue with the hierarchy it found when the planet was brought into compliance,’ the commissar said in a tired tone that intimated at the repetition of this conversation. ‘Riedling’s family have been rulers here for thousands of years, and it was not thought necessary to disrupt that tradition.’

‘There will be disruption aplenty in the next few weeks, and that painted ass will no doubt contribute to it,’ Dietrich snarled. He spat, his cotton-dry mouth producing a white gobbet of foam which the wind took away. ‘No matter. The thing is on our doorsteps now, and there will be no more

politicking – just a soldier's fight. We must have an orders group this evening, all heads of department–'

'Including the Administratum?'

'Damn it, yes. It's their planet, after all. Were it not for that damned warp storm we wouldn't be here at all.'

Von Arnim pursed his thin lips. 'Perhaps now is the time to implement the course of action we discussed earlier, general.'

'Martial law? I'd love to. But according to regulations I can only do so with Riedling's cooperation. We are not yet under attack, and until the fighting begins my position is unclear. I command a regiment, but Marshal Veigh is leader of all the home-grown forces: five divisions.'

'They are not the Imperial Guard,' Von Arnim said with a sneer of contempt that made Dietrich smile.

'I know, my friend. But remember, I was not ordered here to take command. It is mere happenstance that the 387th is on Ras Hanem at this time. I have been ordered to cooperate with the planetary authorities, not supplant them.'

'When the bolts begin to fly, they will appoint you commander-in-chief, or I will know the reason why,' Von Arnim said. 'This world is too important to lose, and the 387th is by far the strongest formation upon it. There are precedents, general – I have made sure of it.'

'Good. I should hate to lose my head to the Adeptus Arbites before I lose it to the cultists.'

'You jest, so I shall let that comment go.'

'Forgive me, Ismail, sometimes flippancy is all that stops me from tearing my hair out.'

'What hair?' Von Arnim asked, and Dietrich snorted with laughter, running one hand over his smooth scalp.

The sandstorms of the last few days had died down to a brown haze along the horizon, and there was even a hint of blue at the apex of the sky. Pollutants and dust so fogged the atmosphere of Ras Hanem that it was a rare thing to see, and Dietrich stared at it as the transport took him over the teeming bulk of the city towards the towering cloud that was the citadel, to the north-east.

To his right, four kilometres away, was the deep channel of the Koi River. In what passed for Ras Hanem's wet season it would run with ochre-coloured water a metre deep and a kilometre wide, hugging the ravines and deep draws of the western bank, but now it was as dry as Dietrich's throat, a wide, cracked, flat-bottomed valley with the cliff of the city's blast-walls rearing up over it.

It was spanned by three bridges of graceful swooping sandstone which were millennia old, testament to a time when the river had existed in more than name. Beyond them was a sere yellow plain which stretched for dozens of kilometres to the east, until it was brought up short by the first rumpled foothills of the Koi-Niro Mountains.

It was under those mountains that the mineral wealth of Ras Hanem lay, buried deep in the bedrock of the planet. The mineworkings went down five kilometres, and buried highways now connected them to the city itself, rendering the ancient bridges redundant.

Closer to, the bulk of Askai itself was inelegant, ill-thought-out and badly designed. The city had formed along the banks of the Koi over many centuries of ad-hoc building, and sprawled in an ungainly corridor for over fifty kilometres. In the last millennium the Imperium's engineers had, in a gargantuan feat, encircled all of this long snake of urban crush with two-hundred-metre-high blast-

walls of reinforced ferrocrete, but in the years since, the city had continued to grow, and now whole districts lay beyond those walls; the famed adamantium gates of Askai had not been closed in living memory. They had become artefacts in their own right, emblazoned with the sun and swords of the Riedling family, and blessed time and again by priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus, who revered them for their inviolability and ancient workmanship.

A congregation of the tech-priests were working on the gate mechanisms even now, trying to get the damned things to work.

An acrid cloud enveloped Dietrich for a moment and he cursed, while his pilot muttered apologies over the speeder's vox.

'Sorry, general, it's hard to avoid over this part of the city.'

'Just get us through it.'

The thick columns of black smoke rose from the foundries of the manufactoria day and night. The Imperial factoria employed eight million people in this city alone, and the Armaments District was almost a city unto itself, with its own inner walls and fortifications, its hive-slums and refectories, all supplied by a deep aquifer which ran under Askai in parallel with the Koi River.

Dietrich had lobbied for some of the manufactoria to switch to shell production for his tanks and artillery batteries, but so far the governor had refused, citing Administratum requirements and deadlines.

Perhaps the news, or rather the silence, from Dardrek, would reorder Riedling's sense of priorities. Dietrich fervently hoped so. His regiment had enough of its own ammunition for one good engagement, no more.

We're not even supposed to be here, he raged to himself. Were it not for the warp snaring our transports, we'd be in the middle of the Wendakhen campaign right now, fighting as part of the division.

He rubbed the smarting smoke and sand out of his eyes. Well, beggars would ride, if wishes were horses.

They passed the Armaments District, and ahead of them the tall shade of the citadel loomed out of the brown haze. At its foot was the spaceport, around which his regiment was encamped for the moment. He could just make out the long lines of vehicles parked neatly on the borders of the landing-fields, and the sight of them lifted his spirits. He had not commanded the 387th long, but they were a veteran formation, recently brought up to full strength for the shift to Wendakhen, and what he had seen of them thus far pleased him greatly.

By the Throne, he vowed, it will take more than fourteen hours to silence this army.

'On final approach. Landing in thirty seconds,' the pilot said.

They were flying into the face of a mountain, it seemed. The citadel was an immense structure, a fortress half a kilometre high that was studded with brutal gun-emplacements and girded with blast-walls a hundred metres thick. On its summit, the governor's palace caught the sun above the smog for a moment, a glint of gold on the gilded tiles of its spires and towers.

There was no time-killing in the anteroom this time. Dietrich was ushered into the audience hall without delay, and found himself waylaid by the chamberlain as soon as he was through the doors.

'General, the governor is in his conference room with his captains. I am to lead you straight in.'

Gardias the Chamberlain was a tall, upright old man with the bearing of a soldier, one of the few on

the governor's staff that Dietrich felt any modicum of respect for. He followed him past the scarlet-clad bodyguards sweating along the sides of the hall to a door near the dais at its end, the hobnails in his worn leather boots echoing loud upon marble. There were several score others in the hall, courtiers and administrators and hangers-on, some of whom he recognised, all of whom he ignored.

'General!' As Gardias retreated, closing the door behind him, so Lord Riedling, Planetary Governor of Ras Hanem, came forward, holding out one hand and smiling widely as though Dietrich were an old friend he had not seen in years. He had the dissembler's gift for false bonhomie, and shook Dietrich's gloved fist with a fine relish. Dietrich bowed slightly in response, and said nothing. He saw that the news he had meant to deliver had run ahead of him.

Riedling was a slight, dark man with a sharp beard and narrow shoulders, but his eyes missed nothing, and there was no smile in them to match the one on his mouth.

'Marshal Veigh has grave news for us – perhaps you would like to hear it retold.'

Dietrich looked at Veigh, a tall pale ghost of a man, but a passable soldier. 'Dardrek?'

The marshal nodded, his face as grey as his hair. 'We are the last remaining Imperial outpost in the system, general. It is likely the enemy are on their way here even now.'

'We estimate three days at the earliest,' Dietrich rasped, ignoring the governor, who had opened his mouth to speak. 'Do you concur?'

'It may be longer. Ras Hanem is better defended than anything they have hit thus far. They will have to regroup their forces for the assault.'

Dietrich nodded.

'What are we talking about here, general?' Lord Riedling broke in, shrill with alarm. 'An invasion? I thought this was a system-wide series of raids, no more.'

Dietrich regarded the governor with weary patience. 'They have been too systematic. If it is a raid, then it is one that follows the logic of an invasion. Best to prepare for the worst, my lord governor.'

Riedling sputtered. 'You tell us they have only light ships. Surely if they were coming here to stay they would need a heavier fleet.'

'They would, if the system were better defended,' Dietrich said grimly. 'My lord governor, we must begin to concentrate our own forces also. The Hanemite Guard is scattered all over the planet. It must be brought back to the main cities. He who tries to defend everything, defends nothing.'

'The capital must be held. You are right, general. Marshal Veigh, you must withdraw the bulk of your forces here to Askai. It is the only adequately fortified city on the planet – there is no hope of holding the others.'

What a poltroon, Dietrich thought with disgust. But the aggravating thing was that the governor was right. He had arrived at the same conclusion as Dietrich himself, but through cowardice, not any strategic insight.

'My lord, I must protest!' Veigh burst out, a little less grey than before – anger flushed his face. 'It would mean abandoning hundreds of millions to the mercy of, of–'

'The Great Enemy, they are called by the Adeptus Astartes,' Dietrich interrupted. 'This is not some pirate band, or a mob of ork marauders, marshal. Read your history. They were here once before, over a hundred years ago, and they swept the Imperial forces from the system like so much chaff. Were it not for the Adeptus Astartes, they would be here still.'

'My men know their jobs, general. Do you doubt their ability to repel these invaders?' Veigh asked with an angry sneer.

‘We must plan for all contingencies, marshal. That is why we have informed Cypra Mundi of the situation. For weeks now, we have been sending out vox messages asking for reinforcements. Some of those messages must have got through. We need only hold on here until the Imperium relieves us.’

‘That’s right!’ Riedling said, slapping his palm with one fist. ‘They cannot let a world as valuable as this one be overrun by… by the enemy. You have the right of it, general. We have only to sit tight, and hang on.’

Veigh looked at his diminutive governor with ill-concealed contempt, and Dietrich, noting the expression, thought that he and the marshal might yet be able to work together.

‘Lord Riedling is wholly correct in his analysis of the situation,’ he said briskly. ‘Galling though it is to admit it, we cannot hold the entire planet – we do not have the men. Marshal Veigh, I recommend you withdraw all your forces to the capital. They can fight side by side with my armour. Askai can be made into a fortress, if we start on it at once.’

‘Once word gets out, the refugees will flock to this city in their millions,’ Veigh said slowly, tiredly. The grey was back in his face again. This was his home world, and dulling his eyes now was the knowledge that most of it was about to be abandoned to an enemy more terrible than any he had ever faced before.

‘If Chaos becomes entrenched on this world,’ Dietrich said quietly, ‘then the Adeptus Astartes will burn it down to the stone, along with every man, woman and child who inhabits it. There is no arguing with the Angels of Death, marshal. We must choose the lesser of two great evils.’

Veigh nodded slowly. He rubbed his eyes. ‘I will give the necessary orders,’ he said at last.

‘But be discreet, marshal,’ Lord Riedling told him. ‘Askai is already a powder-keg of speculation.’

‘I know my job, my lord,’ Veigh snarled. ‘Attend to your own.’

Then, to Riedling’s astonishment, he turned on his heel and strode out of the chamber, calling for his aides to follow him as he went.

Riedling followed his departure with cold eyes. ‘I will not forget such insubordination, when all this is over,’ he hissed.

‘My lord governor,’ Dietrich said wearily, ‘when all this is over, the memory of a moment’s insubordination will be long gone, and perhaps us with it.’

SEVEN

Venerit Infernum

‘Control, this is Crixus One, we are in position two hundred and sixty kilometres from high orbit, staggered formation, augur ranging now.’

‘Acknowledged, Crixus One. Good hunting.’

The sixteen spacecraft of the wing extended across some thirty kilometres of empty space. Behind them Ras Hanem loomed, a glowing ochre ball. In front of them were ten billion stars, and the darkness of the void.

Jon Kadare flipped a series of switches in the darkened cockpit. ‘Missiles armed. Gunner, you have fire control. All Furies, follow my lead. We’re moving out, boys.’

One by one the other spacecraft in the wing acknowledged Kadare. Despite their professionalism, he could hear the creep of excitement in their voices. Most had never been in action before. The most experienced had been through a few dogfights with pirates and marauders.

What was approaching them out of the dark was on a whole other level entirely.

‘Navigator, give me an update.’

‘Nothing yet, skipper.’

‘How far out are you scanning, Klaus?’

‘Maximum range. We are all clear.’

Kadare cursed inwardly, and looked at his fuel gauge. Plenty left to drink, but that did not mean he wanted to lead his wing too far out from the planet.

‘All Furies, course one eight five, level out and keep your intervals. Form on me. Navigators, keep sweeping three-sixty. They are out there, lads – our job is to find ‘em.’

The silence of space. Kadare’s breath seemed loud and hoarse in his helmet. Despite his suit, he was sweating, a cold sweat that chilled his flesh.

The sixteen Fury interceptors cruised farther out into the system, their cockpits dimming automatically as the Kargad sun swung from behind Ras Hanem, creeping along the terminator and blasting bright, soundless light across the void. Kadare’s stomach turned over. The Furies had no gravity generators on board, as this was a local mission, and they had loaded up with extra missiles and fuel. He was glad he had not eaten breakfast.

Sixteen years service, and today I feel as nervous as a recruit, he thought angrily. But as he spoke on the vox again his voice was as calm as if he were on a training run.

'Third Squadron, ease out to port thirty kilometres. Let's widen the net a little.'

'Acknowledged.' At once, four of the interceptors wheeled off to Kadare's left, opening out the formation.

'Stay on augur, Brenner. Keep your ships together.'

'Aye, skipper.' Philo Brenner was a good man, but a hard charger. No one better to have your tail in a dogfight though.

'Fury One, this is Six. I have contacts on augur.' A swallow, audible on vox, and then: 'One, I have multiple contacts, bearing one seven two, speed – they're speeding up, Fury One. I have formations closing, closing fast!'

'Where the hell did they come from?' someone sputtered over the vox.

'Voice discipline, Crixus Wing,' Kadare said sternly, though his own heart was hammering, and he could feel the grip of the pressure suit as it encased his torso, keeping the blood running to his brain.

'Bear to starboard ten degrees. First Squadron, close in.'

'I have them, skipper.' This was his own navigator, Klaus Feydan. They had crewed together for ten years, but Kadare had never yet heard that precise tremor in the veteran's voice.

'Seven, eight… no, nine squadrons closing at full speed.'

'What are they, Klaus – can you make them out?'

'Swiftdeath fighters, skip, diamond pattern. They're coming head on.'

'Head on is fine with me,' Kadare said calmly. 'Crixus Wing, squadron teams. Break on my mark. Wait for the command.'

Still nothing to be seen out of the cockpit but the peaceful star-spattered dark of space.

Kadare's gunner spoke up from his bubble in the nose of the Fury. 'Missile range in eleven seconds, skip.'

'Lock on when you can, Mikel.' He flipped two red lights at his right fist and grasped the yoke more firmly.

'Lascannons powered up,' the gunner said.

There, out on the very edge of sight, a tiny silver glint as something caught the light of the Kargad star. It was like catching sight of a fish gleam in deep water.

'I have multiple missile launches on my twelve,' someone said.

Sure enough, Kadare could see the minute yellow blooms of flame that sparked out and then died in the chill vacuum dozens of kilometres ahead.

'Crixus Wing, break, break, break,' Kadare said, and then yanked back on the yoke while shoving the throttle-levers forward.

The formation exploded as the sixteen spacecraft, each forty metres long, burst into a starlike pattern. Kadare felt the G-force blackening the edges of his sight, the suit squeezing on the blood vessels of his legs to compensate.

'Klaus, countermeasures,' he said, and there was a series of bright flashes as the Fury launched a ripple of heat-drones to misguide the oncoming missiles.

'I have a lock – I have three locks,' the navigator cried.

Kadare threw the Fury around in the void as though it were a scrap of paper caught in a gale. His heart hammered in his chest. Something bright and soundless erupted close by and the ship shuddered.

He heard the clank and rattle of shrapnel on the hull.

'Missiles away,' the gunner said, hoarse as a crow.

There were screams on the vox, each lasting only an instant. More bright momentary explosions all around them. And then the red lances of lascannon fire.

There was no up or down. Kadare peered one second at the flickering screens in the cockpit, and then out at the pyrotechnics beyond. Something streaked across his path and he depressed the trigger-switch on the yoke. Spears of las-fire carved an arc in the blackness as he threw the ship on its side, spiralling and firing, the energy bolts winding in a beautiful, deadly pattern.

An explosion, and a rattle of what sounded like hail on the plaspex of the cockpit.

'Second salvo gone,' the gunner intoned.

The vox was braying with the voices of the Fury pilots, men screaming, some calmly relaying target information. For three hundred kilometres, the void was lit up with afterburners and missile-streaks, and it bloomed with the transitory yellow globes of fire that meant the death of a ship. Kadare caught his breath – he had forgotten to breathe for the last spiralling dive – and halted the mad spinning of his craft.

'Gunner, report.'

'All missiles gone, skip. I reckon five hits, but I can't be sure.'

'Take over the lascannons, Mikel. Klaus, give me a situation report.'

His navigator was a disembodied voice that sounded as though it were kilometres away, though Klaus sat directly behind him in the long, narrow crewspace of the Fury.

'Give me a second,' he muttered.

'Talk to me, Klaus.'

'Acknowledged. Skipper, looks like… looks like we've lost half the wing. Brennan is gone, and Marstann. Third Squadron has been destroyed. Skipper, we have seven ships left.'

Eleven crews gone – over thirty men that Kadare had known and lived with for years – all in the space of forty seconds.

The navigator spoke up again. 'Skip, they're coming round for a second run at us. I count… Emperor's blood, I count fourteen squadrons, and there is heavy metal behind them. Cruisers, I think.'

A moment, hanging there in the silent blankness of space, when Kadare was utterly at a loss. He had never in his life before confronted the finality of utter defeat. Strangely, the prospect calmed him. He thumbed the air-to-ground vox button.

'Control, this is Crixus One.'

'Control, send, over.'

'Control, have sustained over fifty per cent casualties. Enemy has not been seriously damaged, and is approaching in overwhelming numbers. I propose to attack with my remaining ships. This is Crixus One, signing off.'

He turned off the vox before the reply came. He did not want to hear it.

'Gentlemen,' he said on the wing-vox, 'it is our honour today to fight and die for our home world, and for the Imperium of Man. Crixus One will engage the enemy more closely, and there will be no retreat. All ships, try and get through the fighter screen and attack the cruisers beyond. Good hunting, brothers.'

A pause, and the vox was silent. Then the gunner spoke up on the ship-frequency. 'Skip, we have nothing left that will hurt a cruiser.'

‘We have ourselves, Mikel. We’ll ram them.’

One word came back. ‘Acknowledged.’

Kadare slammed forward the throttle-levers and was thrown back in his restraints as the Fury leapt under him. The roar of the engines could not be heard, but it made the entire hull of the ship shake and shudder.

He took the Fury in a high, beautiful arc that snaked above the incoming wave of enemy fighters, and heard the sizzle and crash as las-beams streaked along the hull. The navigator blew the last of the countermeasures, and as Kadare brought the ship round again, swooping like a falcon of Old Earth, he saw below him the clustered formation of the main enemy line of battle. Light cruisers and clouds of interceptors and gunships, twinkling like a new constellation below him.

The bulkheads groaned, but the faithful ship held together. A barrage of plasma and laser fire came up to meet them. Jon Kadare uttered a wordless battle-cry as he slammed down the yoke and took his ship streaking into the midst of the enemy formation like a burning comet. He heard his navigator scream behind him as the rear of the ship was shot away, and the world wheeled with inhuman speed as the Fury spun out of control, a burning star, a falling meteor.

His vision went white for a glorious, blinding instant, and then there was only darkness.

Far below, in the confining heat of the bunker on Ras Hanem, a silence fell, broken only by the crackle of static from the vox-monitors. General Dietrich, Commissar Von Arnim and Marshal Veigh stood as the meaningless blue flicker of the screens before them went on and on, blank and empty. There were over a hundred men in the control room, and not one of them uttered a word for what seemed an unbearable length of time.

It was Von Arnim who ended it. He doffed his peaked cap and bowed his head a moment. ‘Thus do brave men die,’ he said in a low voice.

Dietrich cleared his throat. He leaned on the back of the air-controller’s chair in front of him and stared intently at the screen.

‘Contact the orbital batteries. What is the time to intercept?’

‘I… sir, I–’ The young soldier’s hand flew over the keys of his console.

‘Calm down, son. This is just the beginning. Time to intercept.’

‘Sir, on their current course and speed, the enemy will be in range of Battery Chrosos in eleven minutes.’

‘Let them know, if they don’t already.’

‘Aye, sir.’

‘We have one more wing, en route from the far side of the planet as we speak,’ Marshal Veigh said stiffly.

‘Call them back. No point sending out more to die like that. We’ll save them for the landings.’

Veigh nodded. He wiped sweat from his face.

‘They’re coming straight for Askai,’ Von Arnim said, replacing his cap.

‘It would seem so, Ismail. They mean to strike at the heart of the defence straight away. Alert the anti-air defences. There will be drop-troops arriving soon. We’ll hammer them as they land.’

Dietrich turned to Marshal Veigh. ‘I must go to my regiment.’

‘You must?’ Veigh seemed alarmed by the prospect. ‘General, surely you can command from here. It would be safer.’

‘My place is with my men. My Baneblade is fully equipped with vox transmitters on all frequencies.’

‘What can tanks do in the midst of a city?’ Veigh said, raising one hand.

It was Von Arnim who snapped back at him. ‘More than you know, marshal. Gather your thoughts, and improve your attitude. This thing has only just begun.’

The marshal coloured, and seemed to grow taller, the stoop leaving his gaunt frame.

‘You will not find me wanting in resolution, commissar.’

‘I know we won’t,’ Dietrich said, taking Veigh’s hand in an iron grip and forestalling Von Arnim’s retort. ‘Ismail, time we were on our way.’

The sirens were wailing across the city as the speeder swooped low over the packed streets, and crammed masses of people were pulsing this way and that as thick as fish in shoal. Barricades had been set up at all the major intersections and there were sandbagged redoubts on every corner, manned by nervous reservists with lasguns and not much else.

On the rooftops of the tallest hives and warehouses, multi-laser batteries poked their barrels at the yellow sky, and lines of vehicles sat in massive jams. First there had been an influx of refugees, then panic had gone the other way and millions had decamped to the countryside. They were unsure if they wanted to go or stay, but it was of no matter, because the adamantium gates of Askai had been closed.

Whoever was in the city now would remain within it, for good or ill.

‘We should have sent them down into the mines,’ Von Arnim said, looking down at the crowds below. There were half a million in Sol Square alone, all praying at a massive open-air service which invoked the aid of the Emperor and his legions.

‘Can you imagine the panic if a single Chaos warband got down there, five kilometres deep with every passageway and shaft jammed with civilians?’ Dietrich asked. ‘No. Better they die up here in the light.’

‘I was not thinking of them, Pavul, but of us. Our tanks are little more than immobile pill-boxes in this mob. It is no place for armour.’

‘Agreed, but there it is – we must make the best of it. You take the 387th out of Askai and it’s like taking out the spine of the defence.’

Von Arnim was scowling, his face as lined as a walnut. ‘Wait until the first shells come howling down from orbit.’

‘I’m hoping they won’t. I’m hoping they want the manufactoria intact. It’s why they desire this world in the first place. We’ll bog them down in the streets and make them bleed, Ismail.’

‘By the Throne, we will,’ the commissar replied, and his face lightened somewhat.

Dietrich had set up the headquarters of the 387th Armoured in the Armaments District. Outside the citadel, the buildings here were the most easily defended in the city. They had been built by Imperial engineers back when the first deep mines had been sunk upon the planet, and they had been built to last. Massive cyclopean blocks of stone, each the size of a hab, were layered in lines and permacreted into a single, fused mass. These walls reared up some fifty metres, and enclosed a bewildering layout of buildings and marshalling yards, all built in the same extravagant manner. Even the roofs were of bonded stone, and Dietrich reckoned some of them could withstand a direct hit from a Basilisk shell.

The Armaments District had its own water supplies, power generators and comms lines, and was

thus a self-contained enclave within the city, even as the citadel itself was. More than that, in the district, the factories were still running, and half a million workers continued to toil at the assembly lines, turning out munitions and other armaments in vast quantities. This was the only place on the planet where Dietrich could hope to have his vehicles repaired and his magazines restocked in short order. It was also the entryway for the subterranean routes which led to the mines.

The citadel might tower over the city, and look both awe-inspiring and threatening, but the squat, brutally strong warehouses of the manufactoria were the key objective on the entire planet, and Dietrich's men had laboured for days to make them impregnable, aided by a full division of the Hanemite guard which Veigh had stationed there, and thirty thousand civilian volunteers, all of whom were now armed from the factoria production lines.

The walls of Askai, tall and imposing though they might be, were over two hundred kilometres long. Not with a hundred thousand men could Dietrich have defended them. They had therefore been left to a skeleton defence force of militia and another Hanemite division – the governor had insisted.

No, it was inside the walls of Askai that the real bloodletting would take place.

'I hope Cypra Mundi reacts quickly for once,' Dietrich said as the transport came in to land in a cloud of yellow dust. 'Otherwise…' He let it lie. Ismail knew as well as he what it meant. The commissar met his eyes and simply nodded.

'It is for this that we are soldiers, Pavul.'

Dietrich nodded. 'By His Word.'

The rear hatches of the Baneblade were open and its massive engines were idling as Dietrich and Von Arnim strolled through the knot of men and vehicles in the shadow of the tall Departmento Munitorum building. This structure was an austere, utilitarian example of Imperial architecture, the likes of which could be seen on a hundred thousand other worlds, but there was a certain majesty in its brutal lines, all the same.

The rockcrete trembled under their feet with the thrum of the huge Baneblade's Mars-Pattern engines, and it snorted clouds of smoke into the wind-blown dust, thickening the hot atmosphere even further.

The city sirens wailed as though they would never stop.

Dietrich's personal command squad was there, and they snapped to attention as the general approached. Nothing more than four lowly troopers, they were nevertheless the most decorated men in the regiment, and were assigned to protect their commanding officer with no thought for their own lives. Instead of the faded green fatigues that the other troopers of the 387th wore, the command squad wore black and green disruptive pattern camouflage, and they had painted the many coloured stripes of their combat decorations onto their breastplates. Dietrich nodded at them, and they stared back into space with the impassive confidence of old soldiers.

Behind them and the muttering Baneblade, three scout Sentinels stood like bipedal monsters in the haze, their hatches all open to combat the heat. And behind those were a trio of squat Chimeras, with a platoon of specialist troopers hurriedly lining up into files at the approach of the general. Younger these, but no less professional in their turnout.

These vehicles and men constituted the command squadron of the regiment.

Dietrich's adjutant, Captain Lars Dyson, stepped forward with a swift salute and offered the general a strip of plasment.

‘Status report on all companies, sir.’

‘What?’ Dietrich grimaced. ‘I can’t hear myself think with these damn sirens!’

‘All is in order, sir, but we have–’

‘What?’

‘We have–’

And the sirens stopped.

Even with the Baneblade engine running nearby, it suddenly seemed eerily quiet. Across the city, a hush had fallen, and crowds on the streets grew still, everyone looking up at the dust-choked sky as if they expected that very moment to see the clouds part and the enemy begin its attack.

‘Did you see that?’ one of Dietrich’s troopers exclaimed, startled.

A bright flash, like far-off lightning, high up in the wind-driven dust-storm which boiled above the city.

‘Silence in the ranks!’ Commissar Von Arnim barked at once. But he, too, was looking skywards.

More flashes, not brief enough to be lightning. And there was no thunder to accompany them.

‘The orbital batteries have gone into action,’ Dietrich said. ‘Captain Dyson – give me a quick précis if you will.’

‘Yes, sir. All companies are reported fully fuelled and armed, except for Fifth, which is still working on those two Chimeras. The Hydras have been put in place at the north and west gates–’

‘Camouflaged?’

‘Prefab sheds have been built around them, sir – they are completely hidden.’

‘Very good. What else?’

‘A Hanemite infantry battalion has been emplaced with each of our armoured companies.’

‘How are we doing with heavy weapons for these fellows?’

‘Not good, sir. We have lascannons and heavy plasmas or bolters for one company in four.’

Dietrich nodded grimly. There were more flashes overhead, which he ignored. He could hear the crowds again now, a low, rushing sound, like that of the sea at night.

‘All right, Lars, stand-to the regiment. All troopers to their vehicles. Vox discipline to be enforced from here on in. I will be in the command vehicle. All comms traffic to be routed through my station.’

Dyson saluted, his gauntlet slapping against his helmet.

When did captains become so damned young, Dietrich found himself wondering. Then he shook his head as though to clear it, and strode forward into the gaping hatchway at the rear of the Baneblade. Von Arnim and the four troopers of his bodyguard followed. They stood and looked out as the hatch hydraulics whined and the massive ramp began to close. A Sentinel strode past, looking like some prehistoric predator in the dust.

Then the ramp clanged shut, and they were in the belly of the great tank. A further, inner door, and Dietrich found himself in the tightly packed command compartment. He slapped dust off his uniform and sat down on a badly worn metal stool which sprouted out of the steel floor like a mushroom. Four vox technicians were seated at their screens muttering into headsets, and in the corner was the lizard-like presence of the Baneblade’s enginseer, his mechadendrite arms neatly folded away, his eyes a dull scarlet glow. He gave no acknowledgement of the general’s presence, but one of his extra appendages was plugged into the bulkhead at his side, monitoring the machine-spirit of the huge armoured vehicle whose needs he served.

A Baneblade had a crew of ten, but these were all forward in the fighting compartment. This model

had been rejigged to house extra vox arrays, and a high-gain antenna had been embedded in the turret. From here, Dietrich meant to monitor and control as much of the coming battle as he could. He did not relish the prospect. It was roasting hot in the cramped compartment, and it stank of oil and sweat. When he wiped his hand across his face it came away gritty with saffron-coloured dust. Everyone else's faces were streaked with it.

'Give me a war on a cold planet, any day,' he said to Von Arnim, grimacing.

'Message from the marshal, sir,' one of the signallers said.

'Punch it through.'

Marshal Veigh's voice came over the vox, crackling slightly.

'General Dietrich?'

'Here, marshal. What news?'

'The enemy fleet is in high orbit exchanging fire with our orbital batteries as we speak. Orbital defences have been degraded by some forty per cent. We estimate their total destruction in a matter of hours.'

'Any word on enemy casualties?'

'We have reports that several of their frigates are dead in the air, and they have lost heavily in fighters.'

'What about numbers? How many of them are there, marshal?'

A pause, static crackling in the hushed compartment. The engines rumbled mindlessly.

'Best estimate is at least a dozen cruisers and frigates and one large assault vessel, an adapted transport ship of some kind.'

'Drop pods?'

'It seems to be configured for them, yes.'

'Damn.' Drop pods were far less vulnerable to anti-air fire than transports, and they could be lobbed almost anywhere.

'Well, we were right not to try and hold the walls,' Von Arnim said, his dust-striped face like some malevolent puppet's mask.

'Sir–' this was one of the signallers. 'We have incoming contacts at forty thousand metres, descending fast.'

'Excuse me, marshal – trajectory?'

'They should land within the circuit of the city walls, general.'

'Signal to all companies, targets approaching. All anti-air to stand by. Marshal, I will have to talk to you later.'

'Good hunting,' Veigh's voice said. And then the vox went dead.

There was noise now, to accompany the soundless flashes in the sky. The Guardsmen on the rooftops of the city looked up at the crack and thunder of sonic booms overhead, and soon they could see black shapes descending in gaps between the dust clouds. The wind began to drop even as they watched, and there were blue patches torn in the yellow curtain above the world. In these swathes of clear air silver shapes darted, towing bright contrails.

Augur-guided anti-aircraft lasers began to open fire, and all over the city bright lances of red and white light jabbed up at the sky, painful to look upon in their intensity. There was the staccato booming of older, shell-firing guns also, and tracer in streams and arcs.

Above Askai, a light show of immense proportions erupted, and in the midst of it the black shapes plummeted down with the red fire of afterburners slowing their fall.

The first drop pods fell on the open landing pads of the city's spaceport, slamming to earth in fountains of sand and earth and pulverised rockcrete.

Even as they impacted, they were brought under a torrent of lasgun fire from the Hanemite defenders. Two full regiments manned the spaceport defences, while above it the great guns of the citadel began to boom out also, their concussion creating vast, tumbling smoke-rings in the settling dust.

A dozen drop pods were blown to shrapnel before their ramps even opened.

But more followed.

All over the city the clumsy craft fell to earth, some landing upright, others blasted on their side, yet more detonating in the air high above, their contents tumbling out like seeds from a pod.

And down with them swooped squadrons and wings of angular fighters and ground-support craft, spewing fire. They were painted in black and scarlet and wasp-yellow, and they strafed the crowds who were still milling in the streets of Askai, blowing hundreds of people to fragments of steaming meat with every pass.

Thousands more suffocated in the press of humanity as the mobs tried to get under cover, to run away, to seek something approaching safety. In Sol Square four drop pods landed, and as the ramps came down the crowds recoiled from them as one would from an open flame.

And out of the drop pods poured creatures from a nightmare.

PART TWO

Darkness Follows

EIGHT

Diebus Duodecimus

Rajek sighted down the barrel of his lasgun. He still could not quite believe what was in his sights.

'Easy,' he said. 'Easy – wait until I open up.'

The rest of his squad lay on the jagged rubble, their uniforms all long since abraded to rags and coated with the mustard-coloured dust of Askai's ruins.

'Aim for the eyes.' We miss, and we're all dead, he thought.

His target was giving orders. Even from here, two hundred metres away, he could hear the harsh enhanced voice. Low Gothic, but with archaisms all through it. No one on Ras Hanem had spoken such a dialect in centuries.

His target was better than two metres tall, and it was difficult to keep one's eyes upon it, because of the sheer terror it engendered.

A man perhaps. Or once it had been born a man. Now it was a towering monstrosity, an armoured giant which had encased itself in the dessicated flesh and splintered bones of its vanquished foes. Black, red and garish yellow paint had been slashed across it, and it was bedecked with spikes and chains. Symbols that made Rajek's flesh crawl were etched upon the armour, most mercifully half hidden by the charnel-house embellishments.

But the face. It was that which was most unsettling. Black eyes, without cornea or pupil, eyes like holes opening onto a depthless abyss. And the white flesh of the face in which they were embedded was scarred and gouged and painted even as the armour was. The mouth was a bloody gash full of splintered fangs which clashed as the creature spoke, slicing its own lips and spattering dark blood like spittle.

It hurt to look upon it. But Rajek's aim was steady. He had seen worse things in the last fortnight.

He drew a breath, uttering a silent prayer, and squeezed the lasgun's trigger with infinite gentleness.

Out streaked the bolt of hot energy. It took his target in the left temple. Rajek saw the burned meat of the face flayed open in a black flower.

His comrades opened up a split second later, six more las-bolts lancing out. Two were on target, striking the enemy in the face and searing the meat from the skull. But the giant was already in movement, uttering a terrible gargled roar, the cooked tongue burned black in the fang-maw of its

mouth. It pointed, and raised its gobbet-choked chainsword, then fell to its knees.

The air was full of fire, and all about them the mounded rubble erupted as bolter-rounds struck home in fountains of earth and broken stone.

Rajek rolled away. One of his men was blown clear in half and his torso and legs tumbled in different directions like two halves of a discarded doll. Another took a round through the shoulder, his body-armour broken open like baked clay as the adamantium-tipped bullet ripped off his arm.

The rest ran, weaving and ducking, stumbling.

The wounded were left behind.

After the things they had all seen in the first week, they knew better than to be captured while still breathing.

In the second week, orders had come down from the High Command for all immobile wounded to kill themselves, and personal frags had been issued to every man, not to be used until that end was near.

Do not let them take you alive.

The things the enemy did to human flesh were an abomination too great to be contemplated by the sane.

Behind the fleeing troopers a series of massive figures mounted the rubble that had shielded the ambush, and Rajek heard laughter, horribly distinct, crawling like maggots across his brain. He unclipped a grenade from his belt, thumbed the ring, and tossed it over his shoulder as he ran, hardly aware of what he was doing.

One day soon it will be the last one. I will eat fire like the others have before me.

Two more seconds, somehow still running through the storm of bolter rounds, and he dived into a shell-hole, his lasgun coming up to split his lip open as he fell. The grenade went off with a dull crump, and a shower of metallic rattles. The horrible laughter stopped.

He wiped his lip, not knowing that he was shouting wordlessly at the top of his lungs, and then fired another series of bright bursts into the cloud of dust behind him. Then he looked round, breath heaving. Two of the others were still with him, wide-eyed, bloody-faced, but mobile.

'Come on,' was all he could say, his throat as dry and sore as if he had been swallowing gravel.

They picked themselves up and ran again.

The infantry were streaming back, as had been planned. But there were so few of them. Commissar Van Arnim leaned on the rim of the hatch and bared his teeth in a moment of helpless anger. Under him, the Leman Russ vibrated like some monstrous beast on a leash. The heat was baking him in his leather coat, his eyes stinging with sweat, but he scarcely felt it. He raised the vox-caster to his thin-lipped mouth.

'Fifth, stand by for my word.'

He looked to left and right. In the half-ruined buildings and rubbled mounds a line of tanks was waiting, so well hidden that even he could not see them all. They had been backed into broken houses, covered with cameleoline tarps and piled high with shovelled rubbish to keep them from the attention of the fighter-bombers. Behind them, what was left of a full battalion of the Hanemite Guard was in support, crouched in the ruins.

One of the retreating troopers to his front stopped at Von Arnim's tank, and thumped it with his fist.

‘They’re coming, sir – no vehicles. Heavy infantry, at least a company!’

‘Good work, Sergeant Rajek,’ Von Arnim said. ‘Get to the rear and regroup. Your men will be in reserve.’

Rajek, panting, looked round at the ragged remnants that were running through the line of camouflaged tanks. No more than fifteen or twenty men out of the company that had gone forward an hour ago.

‘Yes, sir.’ He moved off again.

Von Arnim ducked down into the hatch, blinking at the semi-darkness inside the tank. It was hot and airless as an oven inside, but this was no time to open the hatches for a breeze. He pinched the sweat from the end of his nose and spoke to the signals trooper whose face was bathed in blue light.

‘Erford, anything on the auspex?’

‘A few stragglers of our own, sir – beyond that, nothing. Shall I switch to augur for a longer-range scan?’

‘No, it might spook them. Just let me know when they’re at the limit of auspex.’

‘Acknowledged, commissar.’

Von Arnim stood up in the hatch again. It was a stupidly exposed position – the enemy had snipers who liked nothing more than to pick off careless officers – but he needed to be able to see what was going on.

You break your own rules when it suits you, he chided himself.

‘Sir, here they come!’ Erford yelled from within the Russ. ‘Fifty metres, dead ahead. I have eighty signatures.’

Something like relief swept over Von Arnim. He held the vox-caster to his mouth. ‘All callsigns, watch and shoot, watch and shoot.’

He reached for the hatch handle and with a grunt pulled the heavy slab of metal up to a right angle, peering over the top. Up and down the line, the tanks of Fifth Company had edged into gear, the big engines beginning to bellow. Rubble shifted and trickled as the main guns started to traverse in search of targets and the sponson-mounted heavy bolters nosed from under their tarps, like blind snakes seeking prey.

And here they came.

As always, his first reaction was disgust, quickly followed by rage. These creatures did not belong on this planet, in this system, or in this universe. To call them abominations was a vast understatement. They were simply *wrong*. They should not exist, and their presence defiled the very laws and norms of life. They were creatures of the warp, and must be eradicated utterly.

But they were nothing if not formidable. Some of these degenerates had once been Adeptus Astartes, the greatest warriors the galaxy had ever seen, and though their degradation had blunted their skills somewhat, these Chaos Space Marines were more than a match for his troopers.

Four score of them, or more, were now advancing in extended line towards him over the broken rubble of the city.

A company of the Damned. Let us see how they like to dance with heavy metal, Von Arnim thought. And he smiled. Except it was not a smile. It was the bare-toothed rictus of an animal.

‘All callsigns, open fire!’

The tank rocked under him, and he heard no noise as the main gun went off, only an immense… absence. He lowered himself into the turret and clanged shut the hatch after him, taking his seat in the

commander's cupola. This was ringed with armoured viewports, and through the green-tinged plexiglass, Von Arnim watched as the opening salvo struck home.

The enemy disappeared in a series of eruptions. He saw several of the huge armoured warriors blown high in the air. Others were dismembered, body parts torn free and scattered. A boiling storm of dust rose up twenty, thirty metres into the air.

As their main armaments reloaded, the tanks opened up with heavy bolters, and the big rounds began to tear up the smoke and dust cloud ahead, reams of tracer disappearing into the murk. The company of Leman Russes chewed up the killing ground until it seemed nothing could survive out there.

But the fire was being returned already. The enemy recovered with superhuman swiftness. The tracers were arcing in both directions now, and he saw the bright fevered lance of a lascannon lick out towards his tanks.

Von Arnim yawned deliberately, and his hearing began to pop back. His eardrums were synthetic implants, replaced long ago, but even they could be stunned now and again.

He spoke into the caster, relishing the words.

'Fifth Company, tanks, advance!'

The line of massive battle tanks lurched into motion, demolishing entire habs as they slammed forward. He was thrown from side to side in his seat as the Russ lurched and tilted on the uneven ground, grinding rockcrete to powder under the heavy tracks.

'Infantry, follow up.'

The Hanemites would be on their feet, moving in the wake of the steel behemoths, protecting them from close-quarter attack.

Emperor's blood, but it was good to be advancing again at last, after all the retreats of the last days, all the disasters.

'Three Hundred and Seventy-Eighth,' he bellowed over the net, 'let us show them the way back to hell!'

He indulged himself with a moment of glaring out of the viewports in unbridled exultation. He saw a champion of the Great Enemy standing up in front of his own vehicle, firing a heavy bolter at point-blank range. Then the Russ rode him down.

Von Arnim closed his eyes and said a swift prayer of thanks. It was for moments like this that he had lived his life, had donned the cap of a commissar and wore the aquila of the Imperium.

'Blessed be He who teaches my fingers to fight, and my hands to make war,' he muttered. And then, louder: 'Erford, get me Zero on the vox.'

'Flipping channels now, sir.'

'Zero, this is Granite One. Shift fire, over.'

Now the big guns would join the show.

The crump of artillery had become so commonplace that Dietrich no longer registered it. Only the high swooping whine of incoming airstrikes made him crouch now.

He clicked the magnification wheel on the scopes in minute increments, sweeping the tortured wasteland to the north. Pillars of smoke rose everywhere, and two of the tallest hive-scrapers in Askai were burning steadily, blackened towers that hid all behind them in an impenetrable shroud.

He cursed, not blinking, trying to penetrate the reek and fog of the shattered city. Lines of lasgun fire

twinkled here and there, and now and again there was the momentary flash of plasma. From the south, the Basilisks sent showers of shells out into what had until recently been teeming city streets, the heavy ordnance booming overhead in high arcs to come down in rows of smoke and flame. The batteries fired day and night, carpeting the enemy lines with high explosive. The barrels of the guns had to be replaced every few days, their rifling worn smooth by the relentless fire.

But in many places it was all that was holding them back, now: that unceasing barrage.

'Any word from Commissar Von Arnim?' he asked.

'Not since he gave the order at the start-line, sir,' Captain Dyson said. Dietrich's adjutant had aged ten years in the last twelve days, but at least he had managed to have that face-wound sewn up. The stitches crawled across his once-handsome features like a column of dead insects, skewing his nose to one side.

'That was over an hour ago. The barrage will shift soon.' Dietrich wiped dust off his wrist chrono, a stab of anxiety striking through him. Not Ismail, surely – he was indestructible.

'Shall I tell the Basilisks to hold fire, sir?'

'No – no, they'd be all over our forward positions in a heartbeat. Notify the heavy company. Tell them to be ready to move out.'

'Yes, sir.'

He had four Baneblades left out of the nine he had started with. The armoured monsters had spearheaded nearly every attack, and their crews were exhausted. They were supposed to be out of the line today.

Well, they could sleep when they were dead.

The little cluster of men crouched low as an enemy fighter soared past them, spattering the trench lines with bolter fire. Up from the ruined buildings a hail of las-bolts arced up to meet it, including the tearing sizzle of a multi-barrelled Hydra. The fighter seemed to bulge with flame; it burst out of the swept-wing craft in globes and spears. The machine tumbled awkwardly through the air, end over end, and came down with a massive explosion not four hundred metres away. Dietrich wiped airborne grit out of his eyes and from his lips.

'Nicely done, lads,' he whispered, his words cracked by thirst.

A crackle of electronic static made him go to one knee at once and reach out a hand. The vox-bearer behind him handed him the receiver.

'This is Zero, say again, over.'

Again, the mush of static, but there were words in it; he could swear to it.

Finally it came through, the encryption distorting the sound. But he knew that voice.

'–attack successful, but casualties heavy. Enemy forming up for counterattack. Artillery support requested, grid…' It faded out, then came back as clearly as if Ismail were standing next to him.

'Grid 483785, Granite One.'

'Your last acknowledged. Wait out,' Dietrich snapped, eyes bright in their red-rimmed sockets. 'Lars, you get that?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Pass it along to the Basilisks. Priority mission.'

'Priority, aye, sir.'

Dietrich tossed the headpiece back to the vox-bearer, a fierce grin lighting up his face. 'I knew he would do it. Ismail has the Emperor's own luck.'

‘Fire mission inbound,’ Lars Dyson said beside him. ‘It’ll be close, sir.’

‘It has to be. They have each other by the belt-buckle down there.’

The roar of artillery rounds, so close over their heads Dietrich could feel the air displaced by them. Earthshaker shells were an awesome spectacle to behold.

He uttered a quick, silent prayer that his commissar had got the coordinates right. Otherwise what was left of his Fifth Company would be obliterated along with the enemy they were fighting, and he could not afford to lose an entire armoured company. Not another one.

He listened in on the net, waiting for the results of the artillery strike. The counterattack had been well planned, but that meant nothing in the fuming chaos of war. No plan survived first contact with the enemy.

Fifteen Leman Russes and a full battalion of the Hanemites. He had thrown over a thousand men into the mix down there, chancing an attack where he thought the enemy was weakest. If successful, then the way to the spaceport itself would be open, and it would be the first gain they had made in days.

Has it only been twelve days, he wondered? Strange, how combat played tricks with one’s perception of time. Minutes and hours dragged out in pain and fear and nervous apprehension, until it seemed impossible to envisage the passage of a single day. It might as well be a decade. The mind and body became so caught up in every moment, every gesture, word, sensation, that seconds passed with infinite slowness. And yet in the midst of it, death arrived like lightning.

How many had died in those twelve days? They could not even begin to count the civilian casualties, though it was certain they ran into the millions. The entire blasted, tortured expanse of Askai stank of the dead, tens of thousands buried under the rubble or sealed and suffocated in shelters.

The citadel was crammed shoulder to shoulder with those who had fled the lower districts, while countless thousands more had found means to cross the blast-walls, scaling them by night. Most, however, had fled over the three Koi bridges, into the wasteland before the mountains. The enemy had let them go, for there was nothing out there but heat and sand and thirst.

Millions dead, but in the midst of that great carnage, Dietrich and his men fought on. They still held the Armaments District, and there were still manufactoria working, turning out the munitions and weapons that kept them all alive.

As the front-line casualties had mounted, so they had been forced to take workers off the production lines, arm them with the weapons they had created, and assemble them into untrained companies, to be thrown into the furnace of the war.

Like twigs tossed on a bonfire. It consumed them with incredible speed.

As for his own command, Dietrich had lost half his vehicles and forty per cent of his men. It was five days now since he had been in touch with Riedling or Veigh in the citadel. The enemy had been jamming transmissions constantly, and when they located the source of any vox traffic they invariably sent in a squadron of fighter-bombers to silence it. The Hell-Talons and ageing Doomfires of the enemy dominated the skies.

They had been bombing the citadel non-stop since the beginning of the battle, concentrating on anything which might look like a communications array. The big guns of the fortress had taken a terrible toll on their aircraft and had broken up several major assaults before they had even fully

commenced. But even the deep buried magazines of Askai's citadel were not inexhaustible, and the larger calibre guns were firing less frequently now that they had begun to ration shells. This had enabled the enemy to close the ring tighter about the walls.

The Armaments District had ammunition in plenty, but was cut off from the citadel by three kilometres of killing-ground.

The wide expanse of the spaceport was key. If Dietrich could make it there, then there was a chance he could reconnect their lines. His dwindling armour would be more effective on those landing pads, with clear fields of fire, and the guns of the citadel could support them, keeping the fighter-bombers off their backs.

If he could break through and establish a new line all the way to the citadel, then they would be fighting united, and they would be able to send supplies up to Riedling and Veigh's forces. There was a chance then that they could hold out. For a while at least.

It meant stretching his own men perilously thin, and asking them to make savage assaults to retake the ground they had lost at the beginning of the fighting, but if they did not do this, then defeat would come quickly.

If the citadel fell, its guns could be turned on any target in the city, and even the case-hardened structures of the manufactoria would be no defence.

The vox crackled again, but Dietrich ignored it. One of the troopers of his bodyguard leaned close, raising his voice to be heard over the artillery.

'Sir, I see attack aircraft, a full squadron. This location is compromised. We should get back down to the Baneblade.'

Dietrich nodded. 'Lead the way, Garner.'

'With respect, sir, you must go first.'

Garner was right, and when that happened there was no arguing with him. Dietrich scuttled across the rooftop with his vox-bearer in tow, while the three remaining bodyguards raised their lasguns and scanned the western sky.

The shriek of labouring afterburners, and then the whistle of old-style dropped munitions. The Doomfires came in a wide arrow, five of them roaring so low that Dietrich could see the black and yellow bars on their cowling.

Garner unceremoniously shoved him down the wrecked stone stairs and the general managed to turn the fall into a roll, his body-armour taking the blows. He was aware of a great concussion that staggered his lungs and pummelled the dust in the lower rooms into ghostly waves.

Then a wall of heat, and the boom of the explosions. His companions tumbled down the stairs much as he had, until they all lay in a heap at the bottom.

'Keep moving,' Garner gasped, coughing. 'They may come round for another pass.'

They scrambled to their feet and made their way out into the street, looking to right and left like pedestrians watching for swift-moving traffic. Then one by one they dashed across the open space, while the heat of the nearby detonations crisped their eyebrows and made their eyes water.

There were screams at the end of the street, not of pain, but triumph. A cloud of dark figures rose up out of the rubble and charged forward, firing lasguns from the hip. They were cadaverous, bald, bright-eyed, and they looked utterly insane.

'Cultists!' Dietrich yelled, and drew his laspistol. He felled two before the rest of his men lowered their weapons and swept the street with laser fire.

The cultists shrieked and pelted forward as though utterly mindless of their own survival. The las-bolts knocked them down like black skittles.

Dietrich, filled with a sudden fury, triggered the twin blades in his gauntlet and gutted the last one standing, feeling the thing's heart beating through his blades as he skewered it. The cultist tried to bite his face, then slumped, teeth still gnashing feebly, and slid off the good Imperial steel to the ground.

'Infiltrators,' Garner said, and he kicked the corpse with sudden venom. 'You should have let me take that last one, general.'

'You're not my mother, Garner. Now let's move before we find some more at our throats.'

They began running again. Dietrich jerked his arm as he ran, flicking the warm blood off his gauntlet-blades before retracting them. It had been a long time since he had killed an enemy with cold steel, and there was a strange, savage joy in it that he had quite forgotten.

'Sir – sir! General, I have Marshal Veigh on the vox!' The drawn white face of the signaller was transfigured. For days he had been labouring at the master vox in the stifling confines of the tank, and for days the useless garble of static had been his only reward. But now he held out the receiver to Dietrich as though it were a holy icon, a wide grin on his face.

'Well done, Prokiev. Let's hope he has something good to tell us.' Dietrich set one hand on the boy's shoulder – for he was just a boy – and felt a moment of apprehension before setting the receiver to his ear.

Around him, all talk in the command compartment of the Baneblade died out for a second, and the signallers stared blindly at their screens and dials.

Dietrich's adjutant, Lars Dyson, folded his arms and blew air out through pursed lips, relief written all over his stitched face.

'Mind your work,' Dietrich said gruffly. But he closed his own eyes for an instant before speaking.

'Marshal Veigh, this is a long-delayed pleasure.'

'Indeed, general. I had thought it might be a pleasure indefinitely postponed. Our foes have been rather keen to prevent us from passing the time of day.' Veigh sounded old, tired, but not yet beaten. His voice seemed to come from a great distance, and in the background was the never-ending din of artillery.

'Are you aware of the assault we made this morning?'

'Yes. We watched it from the citadel. It was very well done. My compliments to you and to the commander who led it.'

Dietrich turned to the young signaller. 'Prokiev, you're sure this is an encrypted frequency?'

'Positive, general. It's not been used before. It's pure chance the citadel is running it.'

'Good boy.' Dietrich rubbed the filth-ingrained furrows of his forehead.

'Marshal, our forward positions are now on the southern edge of the spaceport, about two kilometres west of the river. I intend to mass my remaining armour there and try to break through the enemy lines to the citadel itself. We will need your utmost support for this operation. Can I count on it?'

'One moment, general…' The line was muffled, as though Veigh were holding his hand over the receiver. Dietrich frowned.

'Our ammunition levels for the heavier ordnance are at a critical level, general. We can support you with the lighter weaponry, but we must retain a reserve for our key batteries.'

Dietrich's eyes widened. He clenched the receiver as though it were a snake he meant to strangle.

'Marshal, with respect, if we do not receive support from your heavy batteries, then the operation will become extremely hazardous. I need your anti-air to keep the fighter-bombers from picking off my armour on the landing pads, and I need your heavy metal to break up the inevitable counterattack. Your lighter pieces do not have the necessary heft or range to do that.

'You must understand, marshal. I have ammunition in plenty here in the Armaments District, and you have the big guns to use it. If I can break through to you, then your ammunition shortages will be a thing of the past.

'But we must link up if we are to endure until relief arrives.'

There was a long silence, hissing static. Dietrich wondered if the comms link had been broken. He looked questioningly at signaller Prokiev but the boy shook his head.

'Still connected, sir.'

At last the reply came back. Veigh's voice was heavy with disgust. 'General, I am afraid I cannot authorise the support of our heaviest calibre guns for your attack. We simply do not have the munitions to – to waste on an operation which is at best hazardous and at worst, futile.'

Futile?

'Whose words are those, marshal? They are not your own, I'll warrant.'

'I am subject to the orders of the planetary governor, Lord Riedling.'

'And he's standing beside you now, isn't he, marshal?'

'General, this discussion is at an end.' A pause. 'Good luck.'

Then there was a squawk of static as the comms link was severed.

Dietrich sat looking at the silent receiver as though it had bitten him. He handed it back to the signaller, staring at the blank steel wall of the Baneblade's compartment.

'He's given up on us,' Dyson said, rubbing so hard at his stitched face that it began to bleed again.

'It's Riedling,' Dietrich said. 'He's a coward, right through his marrow. He thinks he can hole up in the citadel until the Imperium sends a relief expedition, and be damned to everyone outside. But he's wrong. The citadel will fall, and it will happen sooner than anyone thinks.'

Dietrich stood up, and strode into the outer compartment. There was more space here, though it was no less stifling. Even through the chemical-proofed ventilation system of the Baneblade, he could still smell the reek of death from outside. He had been a soldier all his life, but he had never yet known so much killing in so short a space of time.

Twelve days.

Perhaps it was all for nothing. There was no telling how long it would take Cypra Mundi to organise a relief force. It could be months.

He stared at the outer ramp as though things were written upon the blank steel.

Dyson joined him. Hesitantly, he said: 'Sir, Commissar Von Arnim has left a message on the vox, requesting orders.'

Dietrich smiled. Ismail, he thought, you are one constant in a precarious world.

He straightened.

The hell with it. We were going to make the attack anyway. Might as well follow through with the plan.

'Put me through to him,' he said.

He punched out the combat blades on his gauntlet. They were still striped with black cultist blood.

I had forgotten what it was like, he thought.
I had forgotten how good it felt.

NINE

In Tenebris Hospites

The ship moved through space – a great multi-faceted jewel set with sails. It was an artefact of immense beauty, but something in its lines, the very curves of its hull, would strike the human observer as profoundly unsettling. It was beauty, but not as any human being knew it. Beauty which connected aesthetically, but which had at its core something entirely alien.

The great, strange vessel and its multi-hued solar sails cruised through the void like a ghost, invisible to most augurs.

The Adeptus Astartes had starships that were thousands of Terran years old, but this vessel had been created when mankind was still in its flint-wielding infancy.

The ship was older than the Emperor himself.

'I love these spaces,' Te Mirah said, looking out at the elongated forest which carpeted the Runground. For fully a kilometre, the park opened out, the shields drawn back so all the vegetation might have a glimpse of real, unadulterated sunlight from the star.

'They are the gems of our race. Relics of memory.'

'From a time when we had entire worlds under our feet. I understand these things, Jellabraiah. I seek only to share a momentary impulse, a second's pleasure.'

'I understand, my lady.'

'You do not, and never will. I mean no insult, Jellabraiah. I merely state fact. I am old, and you are not.'

Jellabraiah bowed.

She ran her slender fingers along the thorns and antlers of her subordinate.

'Leave me now, my fine and beloved. Go to your work, and blessings be upon you.'

'Isha protect you, my lady.'

The Bonesinger glided away. Already, her voice had begun to hum and simmer, and in response the wraithbone vibrated like a lightly tapped drum. The beauty of the song was such that it seemed to clasp and entwine with the very living construct of the ship around her.

And yet it could not dispel the unease which had hovered over Te Mirah for long cycles now. As

though some black bird were fluttering at the edges of her vision, never to be fully glimpsed, its wings beating in time with her heart.

The black bird, the fetch of Morai-Hag, the black crone of the eldar, who held fate itself in her withered hands.

'Farseer.'

Te Mirah turned around, her cloak moving with her so that the sigils and stones upon it caught the far-off light of the stars.

She was one of the eldar, a race more ancient than mankind's dreams. Two metres tall, but as slender as a young willow of Old Earth. Her limbs were long, elongated, and her skull was as fine and smooth as ancient ivory. Her blue-black hair was drawn back in a topknot, and her ears drew up to finely sculpted points.

Her eyes were as blue as the flicker of a far-off star, and she seemed hardly to be flesh and blood and bone at all. Like the starship in which she stood, she was a thing of strange, unsettling beauty.

That which had spoken her title was another cut from the same cloth. Sexless, but taller, and slightly more broad about the shoulders. This one had hair as red as arterial blood, and eyes to match. A male of the species, it had a long, intricately crafted weapon strapped to its back, so ornate that it might well have been a mere affectation. But the blade, where it glittered out of the spine-scabbard, had a cruel, monomolecular edge that would slice through ceramite.

The eyes of this one were no less cruel than the blade, but it bowed as Te Mirah turned round, and there was a flicker of respect in them. More than that; there was something akin to love.

'Ainoc, I sense you have something for me.'

'News, farseer. It may be of interest, it may not. I would ask you to accompany me to Steerledge.'

He was hiding something, or attempting to. Behind Ainoc's usual half-mocking manner there was a dreadful, burning eagerness which she had never seen in him before.

'Lead on, Ainoc,' the farseer said, intrigued and disturbed in equal measure.

She turned back once, to look upon the graceful needle-leaf trees, the black earth in which they thrived, and her own folk strolling under them as though they walked a world of their own, without fear. It brought back memories – not her own – but those of her forebears in the spirit stones.

There had been a time when the Void was a place without fear, an ocean to be travelled and explored. There were still memories of that impossibly distant era buried in the Infinity Circuit that beat at the heart of her craftworld, and the yearning of the souls in the stones communicated itself to all of her race, so that they were forever searching, forever dissatisfied with this rootless existence.

They were exiles, and had been for untold millennia, but they never reconciled themselves to the fact.

The two eldar travelled smoothly through the length of the great ship like ghosts, their minds reaching out and touching in welcome and salutation those they passed in the arcing, soaring swoops of passageways which connected up the compartments within. They felt the song of the Bonesingers in the hull, a comforting threnody.

Unlike the brutish vessels of lesser species, the Eldar cruiser speared through space with the smooth, silent efficiency of a living thing wholly in harmony with its environment. There was a low-level consciousness to the ship, and the very stuff of which it was made was in tune with the thoughts of its crew. It fed upon the affection and reverence of the Bonesingers, growing stronger as they

communed with it.

Steerledge opened out before them, a curve of white wraithbone with void-shielded windows open to the bright dark of the stars. It soared up in ribs and vaults high above their heads, so that it seemed they were within the very anatomy of a vast, placid organism which protected and sustained them. And that was indeed the case.

The eldar crew were silent; there was no need for chatter here. They set their hands on the stones embedded in the protruding wraithbone and felt the course and speed of the ship, its needs and wants. And in turn they gave it commands with the simple slide of a hand across a gleaming stone.

Te Mirah felt the touch of their minds glide across hers as she entered. Steerledge was the place a human, one of the contemptible *mon-keigh,* might try to label the bridge of the ship. It was here that the nerve-endings and filaments of wraithbone were brought to a single distilled essence, where the vast length of the beautiful *Brae-Kaithe* could be controlled. Where the weapon-banks had their settings.

'Anandaiah wishes to speak,' Ainoc said. 'She has sensed something which should be of concern to us.'

Te Mirah waited. A young eldar craftseer stepped forward. She was clad in the black, green-limned livery of the Il Kaithe Craftworld, as were they all, and she was barely of an age to be standing upon Steerledge. But Te Mirah sensed at once the latent power in Anandaiah's mind. This one, she had felt before. There were the makings of a Bonesinger in her, or even something greater.

'Of late I having been casting our scans out as far as I can, my lady, at first, merely to see how far I could remain attuned to the farseeking of *Brae-Kaithe*.'

'That was… enterprising of you,' Te Mirah said, her voice without inflection.

'Forgive me. I overreached my station and my training. But I was able to chance upon something which had to be brought to your attention. I have brought it to the sand-table, if you–'

'Show me,' Te Mirah said. She felt the trouble in the girl's emotional tone, and it was not merely that she had gone beyond her station to interlink with *Brae-Kaithe*'s farseeking scans. Something else there, darker. It was akin to the keen eagerness she had sensed in Ainoc.

They repaired to a wide flat platform of wraithbone, and here Anandaiah closed her eyes and began an intricate series of hand movements which left momentary glimmers in the air of Steerledge. Te Mirah looked at Ainoc, and the warlock tilted his head to one side and smiled.

I still know what best piques your interest, after all these centuries, my lady.

You sense how jaded I have become.

Perhaps. She is impressive, is she not?

She is beautiful also. Did that occur to you?

Most things which occur to you have also occurred to me. And Ainoc smiled, deep memories in his eyes.

Te Mirah did not smile in return. She did not much care for humour, or the flippancy which Ainoc occasionally continued to cultivate. He was a warlock of the Path of Khaine, and she had seen him slaughter thousands of foes with the Witchblade that hung always on his back.

And they had loved once, long ago, when such things still seemed to matter.

But she was the farseer of the *Brae-Kaithe*, wedded to her beloved ship, and she had watched almost a millennium of the universe come and go. She no longer appreciated his subtle jibes and rallies.

The craftseer was talented. Other eldar gravitated round the sand-table as the echoes of what Anandaiah was doing resonated throughout the chamber.

She was building a model of star-systems – she had not called them out of *Brae-Kaithe*'s memory stones, but was constructing it from her own memory and intuition. Te Mirah was impressed despite herself, and as the floating lights and novae grew in profusion, hovering above the sand-table like some fireworks display caught frozen in mid-burst, so she began to recognise them, to see familiar patterns in the jewelled glimmer of the stars the young eldar was summoning.

At last it was done.

'Impressive,' she said. 'But to what end is this display?'

The young eldar grasped the shimmering penumbra in her hands and slewed it across the platform. She touched a star and it grew brighter, until it could be seen that there were tiny planets and moons orbiting it.

'This is the star we know as Pe-Kara,' she said. 'The *mon-keigh* call it Kargad, and the system belongs in what they call their Imperium. But, my lady, I have been delving through the memories of the spirit stones, and the voices of those who have gone into the gems tell me that the Pe-Kara system once belonged to us, and within it is almost certainly one of those planets that we know as the Crone Worlds. It was once a place that the eldar called their own, and walked upon, under whose skies our people lived and loved and–'

'Impossible,' Te Mirah said, shaken. 'The Crone Worlds were all closer to the Eye of Terror. They were overrun and destroyed by the Great Enemy, who holds them still.'

'On what do you base your assumptions?' Ainoc asked the craftseer, more gently. Drawing her out. *He already knows*, Te Mirah realised.

'I have analysed the composition of the Pe-Kara star. It contains elements in profusion that are found more commonly in those systems close to the Eye of Terror. The star itself has also undergone massive gravitational anomalies in the distant past.

'I believe that in the upheaval of the Eye of Terror's creation, this system was pushed farther out across the sector, as though it were afloat upon a pond into which someone had thrown a great stone. We have seen this before, with other planets.'

'Planets, yes – stars, no,' Te Mirah said shortly. 'And the damage done to those planets by the upheaval rendered them uninhabitable, stripped of their atmospheres.'

'I believe that in the swirling currents of that time, the entire Pe-Kara system was lifted and moved wholesale, a whole section of the void rearranged.

'It did not occur without extensive damage – there is a broad asteroid belt within the system, and large, moon-sized asteroids litter it. The oldest spirit stones tell us that Pe-Kara corresponds to a star we once knew as Vol-Meroi. It was orbited by seven worlds, and dozens of moons. At present, only one planet of any real size survives in the system. The *mon-keigh* call it Ras Hanem, but in our own tongue it was once, I believe, the world known as Vol-Aimoi.

'I have farscanned the planet. The surface is a wasteland, but its basic structure and composition comply with our records of that lost world. The mantle and crust of the planet are laced with solid seams of ore and heavy metals. This may have helped it survive the upheaval of its relocation, which destroyed the other six ancient worlds of the system.

'My lady, I believe it to be undeniable. Ras Hanem is Vol Aimoi.'

Te Mirah was stunned. The young eldar was staring up at her with painful intensity. She could feel

the yearning in Anandaiah's soul – it resonated with the same emotion in her own.

The need to find some remnant of what they had been, to rescue memories and artefacts of a vanished time from the Void before they were lost forever.

But it could not be, surely… They would have known before now.

'Why have none of our fleets ever picked up on this before?' she asked harshly.

'The Kargad system is within the purview of the most dedicated warriors of the Imperium,' said Ainoc. He folded his arms, and the lean cast of his features drew into disgust.

'It is watched over by those among them known as the Adeptus Astartes. The Space Marines. Our people do not choose to have dealings with such fanatics, and such is their brute prowess in war that it has always been deemed too costly to make any deep foray into their territories in this part of the galaxy.'

'Too costly…' Te Mirah mused.

But this information changed things. If such a thing could be true, then it would be worth almost anything, any level of risk, to investigate it. A Crone World which had not been overrun by the forces of Chaos – there was no telling what might be buried in its soils. Priceless relics, soulstones, all manner of–

'There is something more,' she said suddenly. 'Something you have not yet told me.' She felt their unease, even a level of apprehension.

Ainoc nodded. He extended one long hand to Anandaiah, and the young eldar bowed her head.

'My lady, Vol-Aimoi has been under Imperial control for several millennia, it is true, but in the recent past the forces of Chaos have swept across that sector of space, travelling from the Eye of Terror in vast armadas.

'They have an interest in the sector which goes beyond their normal lust for conquest and slaughter. The human warriors known as the Adeptus Astartes repelled a huge invasion a hundred and fifty of their solar cycles ago, at great cost to both sides.'

'You think that the Great Enemy also believes what you conjecture to be true?' Te Mirah asked.

'It would explain their repeated attempts to take control of that sector,' Ainoc said grimly.

'There are ripples in the warp, playing out from Vol-Aimoi as we speak,' Anandaiah said. 'It is what first drew my attention to that sector of space.

'My lady, Chaos has come again. There is battle and slaughter on the planet – the echoes of it are coursing through the immaterium. The Great Enemy has returned, to lay claim to that ancient world. The Imperium is fighting to keep it. Untold millions have been adding their screams to the currents of the warp, and the carnage is stirring up the Dark Powers.'

I had felt it, Te Mirah thought. I had known it, and ignored it. Ainoc is right – I have become jaded. I should have had an inkling of these events long before some lowly craftseer, no matter how gifted.

She stared at the slowly pulsing star on the summoned display before her.

'How long have you known this?' she asked.

Anandaiah lifted her hands. Not long. I–'

'Not you. Ainoc.'

The warlock had no trace of levity on his fine-drawn face now. His features were set in the white mask which she had seen come upon him in battle.

'Two turns of shipday, no more.'

Time. Time was running past them like some lithe child, scampering into the Void and taking all

their possibilities with it.

No time to send back word to Il Kaithe. No time to consult with the Autarch. They were too far from the craftworld.

Decisions came harder to her now that she was old in the reckoning of her people. She saw more than she once did; the outcomes of every choice she made crowded her mind almost as soon as it was selected.

But she still knew what she had to do.

She looked up at the graceful contours of her beloved ship, the *Brae-Kaithe*, to which she had been wed for centuries.

Beloved.

She did not want to bring this spouse, this child of hers into harm's way, but that was the essence of the decision she was about to make.

Forgive me.

Then she raised her head, and her eyes glittered as bright as the summoned stars of the craftseer's display.

'Steering, set us a course for the Pe-Kara system. Set more sail and bring us to best speed.'

Her voice rang around the wraithbone vault, as musical as the notes of a song.

'Ainoc,' she said to the warlock standing before her. 'Ready your people. Wake the warriors from the stones.

'We go to look upon a war.'

TEN

Casum Regis

There was a horrible fascination to the spectacle of war, Governor Riedling thought. Viewed at a distance – ideally, a great distance – it took on the grandeur of which the poets prated. An epic worthy of verse, of song, of prayer.

Up close, it was a squirming, black shock of nightmare.

And – he sipped his wine – they never talk about how it smells. Like a dead rat under the floor. The smell never leaves one, no matter how many perfumed handkerchiefs are held to the nose. No matter how many baths one takes, one feels the reek of it on the skin, day and night. It steals away appetite, it ruins sleep.

And still, there is the fascination in that spectacle.

And the fear that it may draw close, until the eyes of the beast are at the very door.

Riedling gulped back his wine. His hand shook a little. Roiling smoke from the burning hive-scrapers of the city made a carpet of black cloud below, and in that carpet bright flashes came and went, the boom of them coming here to the palace several seconds later. It had been going on for weeks now, a monsoon of artillery.

Dietrich's men would be making their assault round about now – such hopeless, fruitless bravery. He raised a glass to them.

The citadel was the only place on the planet where they could hope to hold out now. Upon these heights, guarded by the heaviest calibre guns on the world, they would sit tight, repulse the enemy, and await relief. Ras Hanem was too important to let slip away. Cypra Mundi must see that – it was elementary logic. Help was probably thundering through the warp towards them even as he stood here.

Government must survive; the core of authority must survive, Riedling told himself. Otherwise what is left is the merest anarchy.

My family have ruled this planet for a hundred generations. The Emperor himself entrusted my forebears with its care. I will not be the one to betray that trust.

He spilled his wine as he drank. The ground-fire was intense out there today. He looked down on it like some detached god. It seemed so far away, almost irrelevant.

And then from close by there came the massive rippling boom as a salvo of the citadel's heavy guns opened up. Riedling felt the vibrations of their firing tremble through his boots as the entire citadel echoed to the massive concussion.

What in the world? His face clouded with anger.

Again, another salvo, this time from the heavy plasma batteries whose dwindling energy banks they had been conserving for days. Augur-guided bolts of light lanced out from the sides of the mountain-fortress upon which he stood and streaked down into the ruin of the smoke-choked city below.

And then the anti-air batteries started up, rattling and cracking in a streak of gunfire that sounded like nothing so much as the ripping of a great piece of linen cloth.

The sky filled with fire, and soaring in to meet it came squadrons of the enemy's ground-attack craft, century-old Doomfires by the score. The citadel's guns caught them at their bombing runs and lit them up in long lines of flame-bright destruction.

Every gun in the citadel was firing, as though there were ammunition aplenty, as though suddenly all his orders about conserving it had never been issued.

Riedling tossed his crystal goblet to the floor, where it shattered. He set his palm on the hilt of his ceremonial chainsword and let the anger throb through him.

Men would hang for this. He would see it done here, today.

'Gardias! In here at once!'

The chamber doors swung open straight away, and in came his old chamberlain, who had served his family all his long life. But he was not alone. With him came Marshal Veigh, and half a dozen troopers of the Hanemite Guard.

The soldiers looked like creatures from another world. They stalked into the opulence of the governor's chambers bringing the reek of smoke and blood and death with them, ash falling from their boots, their lasguns the only thing about them that was not smeared with filth.

Veigh had his hand on Gardias's shoulder. His face was as lean as a skull and he had carbonised pockmarks on one cheekbone. He had his laspistol unholstered and there was a bright light in his eyes, almost as though there were tears hovering there.

He spoke not to his lord, Governor Riedling, but to the old chamberlain, Gardias.

'Are you sure you want to do this, my friend?'

The chamberlain looked at him with something approaching contempt. 'I know my place. I am no traitor. I will not bite the hand which has fed me all these years.'

He shrugged off the marshal's hand and walked across the chamber with the firm stride of a much younger man. When he came to the astonished governor he knelt before Riedling and kissed his hand. 'Lord, know that I would never betray you, and that I had no part in this.'

Riedling raised his eyes in bafflement to Marshal Veigh. 'What in the seven hells do you think you are doing, marshal?' Then he raised his voice. 'Guards!'

'Your popinjays have been redeployed where they can be of some use,' Veigh said grimly. 'They are on the battlefield below, even now, earning their pay at last. There is no one else here who will lift a finger to help you now, my lord governor.'

Riedling took a step backwards. 'What is this, Veigh, mutiny? Revolution? You will burn for this, you and all those who stand with you – you know that!' His voice shook. Gardias rose and stood beside him as though they were comrades-in-arms rather than master and servant.

'He has taken over the citadel, my lord,' the old man said with a snarl. 'He has usurped your

command and ordered every battery in the fortress to support the attack going on below.'

'Yes, I have,' Marshal Veigh said quietly. He gestured with his pistol. 'I will not let brave men die unaided. Dietrich is assaulting the spaceport as we speak. If he is successful then our forces will be linked up at last, and the munitions our guns need will be available in untold quantities.'

'I vetoed that strategy,' Riedling grated. 'The attack cannot succeed.'

'Then we will all die fighting, my lord. That is our duty.'

'Do not talk to me of duty, Veigh. You have disobeyed my direct orders. You are hereby relieved of command. Consider yourself cashiered – a court martial will consider your fate once the relief expedition arrives. I will watch you die for this.'

Veigh raised his pistol. 'I don't think so.' And he shot Riedling in the head.

The governor fell to the shining marble of the floor, eyes still open, a half-formed word still on his lips. His temple smoked where the las-bolt had entered it, and steam squirmed out through the hole as his brain boiled inside his skull.

'Gardias?' Veigh said. 'You do not have to do this.'

Gardias was looking down at the twitching body of his master. 'Let me die with him,' he said. 'I know what he was, but I can do no other. There must be some loyalty left in the world.'

Veigh's face clenched in regret. 'So be it.'

Two rounds to the chest, and Gardias went down without a sound.

A moment they all stood there, the troopers staring heavily. Two more bodies, piled upon a hecatomb of millions. What did it signify?

'Throw the corpses over the balcony,' Marshal Veigh said, holstering his pistol. 'And be quick. I am needed in the command centre.'

They hesitated a moment, even so.

'Comrades,' Veigh said, 'this is all on me. Let it be on my head alone.'

One of the troopers, a sergeant, slung his lasgun upon his back and bent at Riedling's body. 'Give me a hand, you dozy bastards – you heard what the marshal said. Like as not we're all dead men anyway, but at least now we don't have a coward leading us.'

The soldiers gathered at once about the bodies and lifted them up like two boneless sacks. They hoisted them shoulder high and then one by one they tossed them over the railings of the ornate balcony so that they plummeted down into the smoke and fire of the battle far below, as insignificant, it seemed, as if they were nothing more than crumbs of rubble.

Marshal Veigh stared down at the city below for a few moments, his men around him. He passed a hand over his red-rimmed eyes.

'Now, Dietrich,' he muttered. 'Make it worth it.'

The Baneblade lurched and shuddered as it rode over the ruins of the spaceport terminal buildings. Dietrich clutched a ceiling rail and stared intently at the tactical readouts on the screens along the vehicle's command compartment. Blue arrowheads were advancing steadily, sometimes coming together as his companies congregated to wipe out a particularly stubborn enemy position, then opening out again as the assault ground on.

Ismail was leading the first wave. Four Baneblades and thirty-six Russes, the heaviest metal remaining to the 387th. Upon each tank, a squad of Hanemite infantry were clinging, and to their rear, battalions of militia trickled along in the wake of the armour.

All told, some six thousand men were attacking, along a frontage of a kilometre. And that was only the first wave.

In the second echelon came the Chimeras, filled with more infantry – many of them ex-tankers who had lost their vehicles – and striding in their midst came Sentinels, Hydras with their multi-barrelled guns depressed for ground-fire, and a few more Leman Russes with minor mechanical failure and battle damage which were doing their best to keep up with the advance. The Basilisk companies had been left behind to help defend the Armaments District, and the forces remaining there were stretched dangerously thin. Dietrich had staked all on this single assault.

The vox crackled, and the general heard his commissar's voice on the encrypted battle frequency, slightly distorted by the encoding process, but perfectly clear.

'Zero, this is Granite One. Initial objectives achieved. Casualties minimal, enemy resistance breaking. We're running them down, over.'

Dietrich smiled, and took the vox receiver from his signaller. 'Granite One, move on secondaries. We are following up with Granite Two, over.'

'Acknowledged. The Emperor is with us today, Pavul. Out.'

Dietrich turned to his adjutant, Lars Dyson.

'Get on the vox to Gresbach and Toveson. Tell them to move up the Sentinels to the flanks of Granite One and look out for infiltrators.'

'Yes, sir.'

'It's too easy, Lars.'

'Sir?'

'We're missing something. Where are their reserves? We should have been counterattacked by now.'

Dyson bent to the comms bench, frowning, and Dietrich stared at the monitor once more. Orderly lines of blue, and red markers flicking out in sequence as his armour rolled over them. They were pounding across the rubble-strewn permacrete of the landing pads now, and even in the insulated interior of the command compartment, the raging thunder of the battle was something which threatened to overwhelm the senses.

He was standing inside a hundred-ton armoured vehicle, the finest that Mars could make, and yet he felt utterly exposed.

Von Arnim breathed in the foetid air. Cordite, the burned emissions of energy bolts, ashen dust, and the ever-present miasma of decay. He had known that particular reek all his life, and it meant nothing to him. It was just one more element to the battlefield, one that was never absent, save in vacuum.

He ducked behind the open hatch of the Leman Russ as a shell landed fifty metres to his front. Shrapnel peppered the glacis plate of the tank, rattling like gravel in a tin. A piece came to rest beside him, still smoking, the edges glowing red. He flicked it off the roof of the tank and stared into the billowing, flame-shot darkness ahead.

Las-bolts peppering the smoke in stuttering lines, and here and there the brighter flash as a melta-gun went off. He raised the vox to his mouth. It was hot against his lips.

'Second Company, bear to your left. You're bunching, Lemuel–' He ducked instinctively as a heavy bolt of melta fire sizzled close past his head, close enough to tighten his skin. He flicked the vox to the vehicle comms.

‘Gunner, melta gun emplacement at fifteen degrees, at the base of the ruined silo. Seen?’

‘Seen,’ the laconic reply came back.

‘Take it out, Gannich. He has our range.’

The Russ’s main armament traversed, the turret moving under Von Arnim. He opened his mouth deliberately as the main gun went off, feeling the concussion in his skull, his chest, in his very bowels. He grunted in satisfaction.

‘Good shot, Gannich. Don’t go to sleep on me now.’

‘Yes, sir. I mean, no, sir.’

It was like riding the prow of a boat on a choppy sea. The huge vehicle rose and fell under Von Arnim as it powered forward at some fifteen kilometres an hour. His mouth was full of dust, and he had not even the moisture left in it to spit.

Then there was the tiny urgent red light on the vox of the command frequency. He thumbed it.

‘Granite One, send, over.’

‘Ismail, halt your line. Repeat, halt your line at once. Do you acknowledge?’

He stared at the mike as though it must have more to say. Halt the attack – now – at this moment? They were in full career, driving the enemy like birds before a line of beaters.

‘Zero, say again your last.’

‘Ismail, this is Dietrich. Halt your line and go firm on your current positions. That is a direct order. Acknowledge at once, over.’

Von Arnim blinked, baffled and alarmed. It was a direct order, and it was Dietrich’s voice, no doubt of that.

He looked out at the wide expanse of the spaceport, lying in battered ruin before him. They were a kilometre from the base of the citadel, no more – the fortress-mountain towered over him, its shadow looming out of the smoke and the hanging dust. He could be there in minutes, if they kept to their current rate of advance. The enemy to his front was beaten – surely Dietrich must know that.

‘Zero, this is Granite One. We are almost at the main objective. If I had thirty more minutes we would have it! Over.’

‘Obey my order, commissar.’

It was ingrained in him, buried deep in his marrow: the habit of obedience. He could not ignore a direct command, no matter how strange – nay, insane – it might seem. And he had known Dietrich for twenty years. That counted for something also.

‘Roger that. Am going firm on my current location.’ He changed frequencies. ‘All Granite callsigns, this is Granite One, go firm, I say again, go firm. Hold your present location and wait for further orders. Acknowledge by company, over.’

A moment’s delay, as his commanders processed the order as he had done. Then they came on the net one by one.

‘Granite Three, acknowledged.’

‘Granite Six, acknowledged.’

‘Hanem Four-two, acknowledged.’

One by one they reported in, and he could hear the doubt and disbelief in their voices. But they obeyed.

Pavul, this had better be good, he thought.

The red light again. ‘All Granite call signs, this is Zero, close all hatches and take best cover.

Heavy ordnance inbound. This is friendly fire, I repeat, this is friendly fire to your front.'

At once, Von Arnim slid down into the hatch, pulling it closed after him with a clang. He spun the lock, and for a second was blind in the dark fighting-compartment of the tank. It was suffocatingly hot, and red and green lights winked on dials all about him. The main gun took up almost all the space in the turret and in bins along the walls the sleek shells sat racked in perfect sharp-nosed array. The sight steadied him, did away with his doubts.

'Brace yourselves,' he said to the crew. 'I believe it's going to rain.'

The entire offensive had ground to a halt, and across several square kilometres of the battle-torn city, the ranks of tanks and vehicles sat immobile, covered in the quaking dust, their exhausts pumping black smoke out into the thick, hot polluted air.

All around them, the infantry crouched in shell holes and ruins or under the very bellies of the tanks themselves. The men were white-faced and dull-eyed under their masking filth, and their officers hunched with them, waiting, fighting off confusion and stark fear, keeping it out of their eyes so the men might not see it.

Dietrich stood to one side of his Baneblade with his signaller at his back. The vox receiver was clenched in one fist so hard the plastic creaked.

He raised it to his mouth so fast the damn thing clicked off his teeth.

'Marshal, we are ready for your word.'

'General, the bombardment will commence in fifteen seconds. Emperor be with us.'

A call from inside the Baneblade. 'Sir!' It was Dyson. 'Sir, you should see this.'

Dietrich lumbered back into the rear of the vehicle, and the armoured doors whined and hissed shut behind him.

'What is it, Lars?'

His adjutant pointed at the augur-linked tactical readout. Dietrich peered at it, blinking. There was Granite One – the armoured spearhead led by Ismail – a long line of blue arrows. Behind it was his own formation, more tightly clenched, the infantry sigils smaller, somehow more vulnerable-looking even on a computer screen.

And in front–

Until a few minutes ago there had been nothing between Ismail and the foot of the citadel except a few scattered red arrows. The main enemy positions had been overrun in the first hours of the attack. But now more and more scarlet sigils were lighting up the screen, popping up out of nowhere in a carmine belt in front of Ismail's tanks and thickening even as they watched.

'The bastards must have been underground,' Dietrich said wonderingly. 'Veigh was right – they've been digging bunkers.'

'It's a massive counterattack,' Dyson said. 'Division strength, at least. They're moving south.'

Dietrich stared. He rubbed his cracked mouth with one gauntleted fist, and all of a sudden a smile broke out across his face.

'Emperor bless you, marshal, you dried-up old bastard. You called it right after all. But how in the world did you get Riedling to change his mind?'

'Artillery is going in now, sir,' one of the signallers in the compartment said, his hand to the receiver in one ear.

They did not need to be told. They could feel it. The impact of the shells came through the floor of

the massive Baneblade, its hundred tons trembling as though it were made of plastek. A few seconds later, and they heard the dull massive roar of the strike, a rumbling, titanic thunder like the anger of gods.

'It sounds like Earthshaker shells,' Dyson said, listening. 'But bigger calibre than our Basilisks could ever throw.'

'Those are siege guns firing,' Dietrich told him. 'The heaviest known to man. Each round is bigger than a Chimera.' He grinned fiercely. 'And Marshal Veigh has timed it beautifully. He's caught them in the open, just as they were making their counterattack.'

'Emperor be thanked,' one of the signallers murmured, his words barely heard over the monstrous roaring which was going on endlessly outside.

They listened, rapt, like men hearing the sweetest music of their lives. Dietrich bent over the monitors again and watched the destruction as it manifested itself in lights and sigils. The displays crackled and buzzed with static lines, then steadied in the gaps between explosions.

That broad belt of enemy red was thinning out, minute by minute, the scarlet signs of the opposing formations winking into darkness, one by one.

What hellish slaughter was going on up ahead on the front line, even Dietrich could not fully envisage, but he pounded his fist on the comms bench in savage satisfaction as he watched it happen in bloodless electronic sequence, and the music of the bombardment shook the world around him.

The vox came to life again, ticking with static, but workable.

'General, this is Marshal Veigh. I have heavy rounds sufficient for four more minutes. After that we will walk the bombardment north and bring the lighter guns to bear. My observers report that several major enemy formations have been smashed. We estimate sixty per cent casualties.'

'Well done, marshal. I could not have set it up better myself. My compliments to you and to Governor Riedling. You have saved a lot of lives today.'

There was a pause. 'Governor Riedling is dead. It is I who am in command at the citadel now. I will support the advance of your troops to the last round if I have to. I suggest you advance as soon as the bombardment shifts, to keep the enemy off balance.'

Dietrich hesitated. Something in Veigh's voice was not right. And how could Riedling be dead? How could that have happened? The governor was not a man to put himself in a place of danger.

That was for another day. Dietrich keyed the vox. 'Roger that, marshal.' He glanced at the chrono on the back of his gauntlet. 'The advance will recommence in four minutes. Can you give us anti-air cover?'

'That is affirmative. We have already cleared the skies above you. The enemy air-units have been driven off for now. But they will be back. General, you must drive for the citadel walls at best speed. Once you are within half a kilometre, we intend to sally out with several regiments of infantry to meet you. My men will fire green flares to indicate their positions.'

'Green flares. Roger that. I will communicate it to all my subunits.'

'I look forward to meeting you again at last, general.' There was no emotion in Veigh's voice. He sounded like a dead man talking.

'As do I, marshal. Dietrich out.'

The vox went dead. Dietrich stared at the mike for a moment, lost in thought, speculation ringing in his brain. Then he shook his head. The task in hand was work enough for now. Whatever had happened in the citadel, whatever fate Riedling had met with, was of no matter. There was killing to

be done.

'Get me Commissar Von Arnim,' he said to the signaller. 'And patch me in to all company commanders at the same time.'

Now, he thought. Now, we have a fighting chance at last.

ELEVEN

Habebat Funiculum

The infantry debussed from the Chimeras right on top of the enemy trenches, shooting down into the white, snarling faces of the cultists. The squat vehicles powered over the positions, and from the top turrets the flamers sent out spewing rivers of yellow promethium to incinerate the reserves as they came charging in to counterattack.

A wall of flame, through which the enemy charged heedless of pain and fear. Their champions, tall behemoths in power armour, drove them on like twisted shepherds. The Hanemite troopers engaged in close-quarter combat with burning, shrieking shapes that swept through the line of Chimeras like living torches.

Von Arnim strode along with his personal squad keeping pace to either side. His chainsword hummed as the monomolecular blades spun too fast to see.

'That one is mine,' he said, pointing with the sword at a Chaos champion who had lifted a wriggling trooper into the air, impaled on the wicked blade which was affixed to his bolter. He tossed the screaming man aside as though flicking an insect from his arm, and roared with maniacal laughter, his teeth clashing, scoring his own flesh. He paid no mind to the flames which licked round his armour.

The assault had ridden over the enemy trench line, cutting it into knots and gobbets of struggling men and things which had once been men. In the light of the flamer-blasts, shadows capered in milling mayhem, bolts of las-fire searing flesh which was already charred.

A team were kneeling to one side, the gunner's mate crouched with a heavy weapon perched on his shoulder while the gunner emptied the magazine drum in long, deafening bursts of fire, blowing waves of cultists apart, and then zeroing in on one of the towering Chaos champions, chewing up his armour, blowing chunks of flesh and metal from his bones, finally reducing him to some unrecognisable charnel-frame of meat and metal.

Von Arnim confronted the champion he had picked out of the enemy ranks.

'Ho! Abomination! Come meet death!' he cried, and there was on his face a wide grin of mingled rage and joy as he raised the chainsword.

The tall Chaos champion tossed aside another broken corpse. He had bitten through the trooper's

throat and blood was black and shining on his face from the nose down. It slimed his pestilential-looking armour and added a new gleam to the ceramite plates.

'A commissar – a true believer!' he gargled in recognisable Low Gothic. 'Come, little man, meet the reality of belief. Let me show you a vision of the true faith!'

He bounded forward, and the scrum of fighting figures seemed to open up for him and Von Arnim as the commissar leapt to meet him. Ismail ducked the skull-crushing swing of the bladed bolter and rolled, and as he did he sent the chainsword licking out in a swift jab. It bit into the champion's shin, the blade groaning, screeching as it churned through ceramite – and then Ismail was on his feet again. He snapped off a shot from his laspistol, which missed but threw the champion off balance, and then the chainsword flicked in again, this time slicing at the hand which held the bolter.

The champion roared and lunged forward, his hand lopped off at the wrist, the bolter falling to the ground, and Ismail stepped aside, like a man dodging an angry bull. The chainsword stabbed upwards once more and this time it dug deep, deep into the side of the champion's neck, and Ismail held it there a moment, savouring the feel of the spine splintering and severing under the busy blades, until he let the sword complete its work and the head fell free.

The great armoured form of the enemy slumped inert, another broken carcass amid thousands, another piece of carrion – and Ismail spat upon it.

He looked around. They were mopping up now, Hanemites and troopers of the Imperial Guard mingled together, tossing grenades into the bunkers, burning out the last stubborn remnants of the enemy in their trenches.

As he watched, a Chimera came to a halt on top of one slit-trench with three cultists in it, and the driver worked the tracks back and forth with great skill so that it almost seemed the heavy machine was pirouetting in place. The slit-trench collapsed, and the cultists were crushed and buried in the same moment. Then the Chimera lurched onwards, vomiting flame, shreds of meat hanging in rags from its tracks.

Ismail thumbed the power button on his sword and knelt there in the blood-mire of the battlefield, and bending his head he said a silent prayer of thanks to the Emperor who watches all, the Guardian of Man.

We will not go gently into that Dark Night, he thought. The Imperium of Man has a flame at its heart which can never be extinguished. Lord of Terra watch over us now, as we do thy bidding, and send to thee a sacrament of blood.

By Your Throne.

He straightened. More vehicles were looming up out of the reek and the tawny dust now, like great antediluvian beasts roaring and farting smoke.

He realised that he had cultist blood stiffening dry across his face and he wiped it off in brown flakes, grimacing. He shook gore from the chainsword blade and hung the weapon at his belt. His personal squad surrounded him again – there were two missing. He nodded at the survivors, and they nodded back. They had that white, wild-eyed look of men who find themselves alive when they did not expect to be.

They were good men, all of them, Hanemites and Imperials alike. It was a privilege to fight beside them.

'Well, Ismail,' a familiar voice said. 'Went the day well?'

He turned, and Dietrich was standing beside him, and beyond, the command Baneblade of the

regiment frowned over them both, the turret traversing like the snout of a predator seeking fresh prey.

'We have scoured the spaceport,' Commissar Von Arnim said formally, bowing slightly. 'This was the last of their lines. The citadel and the Armaments District are now connected by our forces once more.'

'The first ammo convoy is waiting to set out even as we speak,' Dietrich said, nodding with satisfaction. 'Now, we must consolidate. The armour will pull out of the front line while the infantry dig in.'

'The enemy is weakening,' Ismail said.

'You think so?' Dietrich screwed up one eye. 'I wondered if it was just my own wishful thinking.'

'His counterattacks are ill-thought-out, and lack heavy troops. He is sending in waves of cultists as if it is all he has left.'

'He has more than that left,' Dietrich said. 'Of that I am sure. And I wonder to myself who *he* is. Somewhere, possibly still in orbit, a single mind directs all this, Ismail, and until that mind is blinded and broken, we will not have final victory here. The best we can do is survive, until we are relieved. We do not have the resources to mount another attack like today's. It was our last gamble.'

Von Arnim shrugged. 'A gamble which succeeded.' For the moment, he felt it was enough to have won a victory, after so many defeats. It was so tangible to him he could almost taste it. It filled him with new energy, perhaps even a glimmer of hope after the darkness of the last two weeks. But then something else niggled its way to the forefront of his mind.

'I hear rumours the Imperial governor is dead. Is that true, Pavul?'

Dietrich nodded sombrely. 'That is what I wanted to talk to you about. Come, Ismail. I need your advice. We are to go to the citadel now, to meet the marshal, and I am not altogether sure what we shall find there.'

As darkness fell, the fighting died down. The battered Hanemite divisions dug in on the rim of the spaceport, and constructed defensive lines that ran all the way back to the Armaments District, six kilometres to the south. At the same time, a squadron of Chimeras donned blades and bulldozed clear a single roadway through the rubble to link up the two strongholds.

They worked into the night, while around them in the choking darkness men constructed bunkers and sangars, digging where they could, and throwing up defensive walls of shattered rockcrete where they could not. They strung wire, laid mines, and conducted dozens of little firefights as they contested a narrow no-man's-land with the restless patrols of the enemy.

And all the while, the heavy transports of the 387th trundled through the dark, lights off, their drivers wiping their exhausted eyes and cursing as they nursed the heavily laden vehicles north to replenish the exhausted magazines of the citadel.

Feeding the beast, it was called, the replenishment of units still in contact with the enemy.

Eight hundred tons of shells were shifted that first night, and the transports were kept running in shifts all through the hours of darkness, while the multi-barrelled Hydras lined the road which had now become the jugular of the defence, seeking out targets in the torn gaps which came and went in the hovering clouds of dust and smoke above them.

But there were no bombing runs, not even the casual strafing to which they had all become accustomed. The enemy seemed to have pulled back from major contact with the Imperium's forces, and except for isolated firefights on the perimeter and skirmishes between patrols, the lines were

quiet. The Basilisks kept up interdictory fire through the night, but even that low endless crump seemed nothing after the fury of the last fortnight.

Marshal Veigh sent a full company of Hanemite regulars to escort General Dietrich and Commissar Von Arnim into the citadel, as though he were taking no chances they might not make it there. They entered by a low postern door to one side of the main gates. Even this minor entrance was constructed from gleaming adamantium, and despite the fury of the past days there was scarcely a nick on the metal.

Within, the great subterranean generators which pulsed in the heart of the citadel were still running at full power, and they could be felt as an almost constant vibration in the soles of one's feet.

In the heart of that hollowed-out, man-made mountain the lights were undimmed, and they seemed dazzlingly bright to Dietrich and Von Arnim after days of huddling in the dark, the shadows, the confined interiors of fighting vehicles. Here there was cleaner air, also, as the great filters which were plugged into the sides of the citadel were for the most part in perfect order, despite repeated bombing runs by the enemy fighter-bombers. There was a slight haze hanging in the atmosphere, and it was stiflingly hot, but there was water to be had – water that was not brown or opaque and that did not smell of death. And iron rations, bricks of compressed protein to fuel the body even if they did not entice the appetite.

The citadel had weathered the fortnight of war well. For some reason that angered Dietrich.

He could not face eating, despite his hunger. In the city, there were civilians living on half-putrid rats and cockroaches, gnawing out their existence behind his lines in cowed, starving mobs. Soldiers had to eat first – that was the merest logic. But the thought of those desperate crowds made him refuse the offered food all the same.

Their ears popped as they rode up the mountain in one of the great lifters. These were open to the floors and levels they passed, and Dietrich was able to glimpse the gun-caverns with their hundreds of crews, whose work had won his gamble for him, and the endless store-rooms, magazines, dormitories and barracks, all thinly populated but running as smoothly as the workings of a clock. He marvelled at it, and for a moment could understand why Governor Riedling had thought to sit out the war in here. The citadel was set apart, not untouched by the fighting, but in comparison with the wreck that was now the city of Askai, it had barely suffered at all. Small wonder a man as insulated as Riedling had closed his eyes to what was going on outside.

They changed lifters, Dietrich yawning to try to get his ears to pop after the swift ascent, and travelled through a tech-level where the priests were incanting their prayers and the air was redolent of incense. They were blessing a series of massive shells larger than a man – some of the ammunition which had come up from the Armaments District in the last hours. As soon as the priests had made the holy prayers and anointed the shells, the ammunition was trundled off on low-loaders, to be taken to the gun-caverns. Another kind of food for the war.

Dietrich was staggering with tiredness, whereas beside him Von Arnim seemed a creature sculpted out of tireless bone and leather. He was watching and noting everything, and he questioned the young lieutenant who was their escort constantly. Questions Dietrich should have asked perhaps, about ammunition levels, casualty rates, food supplies, generator power.

But Dietrich was saving his questions for one who might be able to answer them more fully than some flustered lieutenant of militia. Ismail might seem as impassive and unperturbed as a snake, but

his impatience and apprehension showed in the way he interrogated the young man until the lieutenant had to beg utter ignorance and apologise profusely.

The elevator stopped, the doors slid open, and they stepped out.

'Feel better?' Dietrich muttered to Von Arnim.

'It was that or butt my head against the wall, Pavul.'

'I hear you, brother.'

They were in the palace, that gaudy scrap of tinsel at the very summit of the citadel. It was less opulent than it had been – one could see by the state of the floor that real soldiers had been coming and going.

'At least we know the way,' Dietrich said. Although it seemed a very long time ago now that he had trod the corridors of this place in a time of complacent peace, with gaudily uniformed bodyguards at every corner.

These were gone now. In fact, the whole place was eerily deserted. Waiting for them, Marshal Veigh stood alone in the Audience Room in an old-fashioned soldier's grey cloak, and with a laspistol in a weathered leather holster at his waist. Under the cloak, he wore not the battered fatigues of a field officer, but the rich ceremonial uniform of a marshal of Ras Hanem, the decorations glittering at his ribs and throat, catching the light of the overheads. An odd combination of campaign and parade ground which made Dietrich raise his eyebrows.

The marshal had aged twenty years in as many days.

I suppose we all have, Dietrich thought, and he strode forward with his hand outstretched. Veigh's grip was clammy, skeletal. He almost outdid Ismail in the cadaverous stakes, but whereas the commissar radiated energy and impatience and passion, Veigh seemed like a coal burned past flame and holding together only as an outline of ash.

'It is good to see you, general,' Veigh said with the ghost of a genuine smile. 'And you, commissar. I am particularly glad to see you here.'

Von Arnim bowed slightly, his forehead creasing in a moment's puzzlement.

'Gentlemen, I would appreciate it if you indulged me in a glass of wine. It is a good vintage – the last from Cypra Mundi itself. I should like to toast our recent successes against the Great Enemy.'

He led them to a large table, which judging by the marks on the floor, had been dragged here from an antechamber. Upon the table were heaps of cogitator readouts and data-slates and a large map of soiled plasment – and a crystal decanter surrounded by glasses.

Veigh filled these, and offered them to his guests.

'To the Emperor, may he guide us always.'

'To the Emperor,' Dietrich and Von Arnim echoed. Dietrich downed his wine in one gulp, though the commissar merely sipped at his before setting the glass firmly down again.

Veigh looked at the map on the table.

'Old-fashioned, I know, but when I plot the locations of our forces, it sticks in my mind better to draw them myself, rather than let a signaller plot them on a pict screen. I just updated it, general – the positions and strengths marked here are accurate as of one hour ago.'

Dietrich bent over the table in sudden interest, scanning the plasment. It was the outline of Askai and all the land up to the Koi-Niro Mountains in the east. Marked out in red and blue, like the monitors in his Baneblade, what he saw thereon made him whistle.

'Are you sure of these positions?' he asked Veigh.

‘Our augurs here, on these heights, are far-ranged and exceedingly precise, general.’

‘And the enemy strengths?’

‘As accurate as my technicians can make out.’

‘Ismail, look at this.’

But Von Arnim had ignored the map. He was watching Marshal Veigh closely.

‘According to this,’ Dietrich said, scratching his bald scalp, ‘the enemy is currently present in far less strength than we had supposed.’

‘He has been sending formations out to the west for several days,’ Veigh said. ‘Transports have landed and taken off by the dozen, out in the western badlands. I believe he has been shipping the best of his troops off-world, back up to his fleet.’

‘That’s why the attack yesterday was successful,’ Dietrich said, straightening. ‘He’s just holding us here, keeping the pressure on – he has other fish in a pot elsewhere. But this is the last Imperial presence in the system, here in Askai, and this city is the key strategic objective. What else could he be planning?’

‘Did Governor Riedling know of this?’ Von Arnim asked suddenly, as sharp as a viper.

‘Yes,’ Veigh said. ‘He knew. It was another reason for him to hole up here and await events, rather than try and aid you and your men in their assaults on the ground below.’

‘What happened to Governor Riedling?’ Von Arnim demanded.

Veigh looked very tired. He looked back and forth at the general and the commissar who now both stood watching him.

‘I think you know,’ he said simply.

Dietrich sighed and rubbed his eyes. ‘I had hoped it was otherwise.’

‘There was no other way, general. He would have sat here and watched you fail, seen you and all your command destroyed. I could not let that happen. I am a soldier too. I am a soldier first and foremost – it may be I have not seen the battlefields you have, but it has been my calling also, and I have followed it all my life.’

‘Then you should know how to obey orders,’ Von Arnim said harshly. ‘The Imperium is built on loyalty and obedience. Without those, we are nothing. Without those, the Emperor turns his face from us.’

‘Would you rather I let you and your men perish, commissar?’ Veigh asked, and there was genuine surprise in his voice.

‘Yes. We would have died honourably. Now our victory is tainted by your crime. You must summon the Adeptus Arbites here, now, to this room.’

‘We are under martial law – the Adeptus Arbites no longer has jurisdiction here, commissar. I am the supreme commander of all forces, military and civilian, on this planet.’

‘You have forfeited that position with your treason.’ Von Arnim drew his laspistol. ‘I am sworn to uphold the authority of the Imperium. By my life, I cannot see that authority flouted, no matter the conditions or the circumstances.’

Strangely, Marshal Veigh smiled. There was almost a kind of relief on his face. ‘I expected no less of you, commissar. Will you indulge me for one more minute?’

‘Hear him out, Ismail,’ Dietrich said, eyes like stone. He set a hand on his commissar’s pistol and lowered the barrel gently. ‘He isn’t going anywhere.’

‘Thank you,’ Veigh said. He reached for the table and lifted a data-slate.

‘On this is a document I had drawn up this morning. It has already been uploaded to the banks of every cogitator and voxponder in the citadel, and it has been sent in burst traffic to Cypra Mundi itself.’

‘What is it – a confession?’ Von Arnim sneered.

‘Yes,’ Veigh said quietly. ‘I set out my case for killing Governor Riedling, a murder in which no one else of my command had any part. I also formally relinquish command of all forces and other authorities here on Ras Hanem and throughout the system.’

Veigh’s voice was stronger now, and he had straightened. It was possible to see a glimmer of the man he must once have been, a leader to look up to.

‘There is no excuse for my crime, not in the Imperium in which we exist. But I believe it was a necessary act.

‘And that is irrelevant now.’

Slowly, he opened the flap of his holster, and drew out his pistol. He looked down upon it.

‘This was my father’s.’ He handed it to Dietrich, butt-first. ‘It is yours now, general, and with it, the supreme command here on this planet and within this system, until the Emperor or some higher authority relieves you.’

Dietrich took the pistol with great care, as though it were a relic of some saint.

‘I will speak for you, Veigh, when it comes to it,’ he said softly.

‘Do not. I will not taint your career. It is enough to have destroyed my own and to have soiled my family’s good name with my crime.’ Veigh drew himself up, and straightened the medal which hung at his throat. He turned from Dietrich to Von Arnim.

‘Commissar, do your duty.’

Von Arnim paused a moment. ‘A traitor you may be, Veigh,’ he said, ‘but you are a man, at least.’

Then he shot Marshal Veigh through the heart.

TWELVE

Adventu Venantium

The great starship and its consorts moved through the blackness like a vast reptilian predator surrounded by its young. Four kilometres long, a small world in itself, the *Ogadai* cruised through the Kargad system at manoeuvring speed with the three angular destroyers, the *Arbion*, the *Beynish* and the *Caracalla,* sweeping the emptiness before it for signs of life and death, foe and friend.

The Dark Hunters had arrived at last.

'Come round to course six three mark nine,' Tomas Massaron, the shipmaster, said, and his voice echoed in the lofty nave of the *Ogadai'*s command centre. He stood upon the dais with the instruments of the ship towering on three sides about him like the altar-screen in a cathedral, and beyond them the tall void-shielded viewports were full of stars, and far off, a larger shining sphere of light that was a planetoid or moon.

The ship servitors muttered to themselves in an unending stream of binaric data. Junior officers clad in Hunters blue came and went with the hushed reverence of worshippers at a shrine. Some chose to glance at the giant standing next to Massaron, but most averted their eyes from the bright flint-glare of his unblinking eyes.

'*Arbion* reports debris fifteen thousand kilometres on her left flank, sir,' one of the human officers said.

'Analyse,' Massaron told him, his gaze sweeping the dials and monitors like a man scanning a regicide board for openings. 'Enginseer Miranich, extend augur range to our left flank, towards the moon.'

A metallic click, and the embedded servitor said 'Acknowledged. Extending range. Range complete. Augur reads no returns.'

'Very well. Quinn – word from *Arbion*?'

'Yes, sir. Debris consistent with small attack craft.' The young officer raised his head. 'Not ours, sir. Their composition is inconsistent with anything in our files.'

'Very well. Signal all escorts, spread out another ten kilometres and extend augur systems to maximum range. I want no surprises, gentlemen.'

The giant at Massaron's side chose this moment to break his silence at last.

'How long until we are in high orbit about Ras Hanem?'

'Approximately seven hours, captain. Do you wish me to sound battle stations?'

Jonah Kerne considered. 'Negative.' Battle stations would entail the loading of his warriors into the Thunderhawks and drop pods down on the troop decks. It was too early for that. In a ship-to-ship fight, were it to occur in the next few hours, he needed his brothers to be flexible, not sitting cooped up in their launch-harness. He needed to know what they faced first.

'As you were, shipmaster. The *Ogadai* is yours to do with as you will. I am merely here to observe.'

It did not seem that way. The towering Adeptus Astartes in the midnight-damascened power armour dominated the command dais like the statue of a god in a temple. But Massaron nodded, seemingly pleased.

'My lord, as soon as is practicable, I promise you I will give you and your brethren fair warning of all eventualities.'

He wants me off his bridge, Kerne thought with a small, interior smile. Well, I would be the same. But I want to be here, to see it, not hear about it over the vox on the troop decks.

'Am I in your way, shipmaster?'

Massaron paled slightly. 'Not in the least, my lord.'

'Then proceed.'

There was a smell of machine-incense in the air. Kerne had allowed a blessing of the nave by the tech-priests as they had entered the system the day before. That much was tradition, and was adhered to even by the Dark Hunters.

More than that, the human crews expected such blessings and ceremonies before going into battle. The ships needed them, and it was considered unlucky to forgo the rituals.

Another thing I have grown accustomed to in the last months, Kerne thought. How long has it been? He stretched slightly, widening his shoulders in the armour, the plates moving with his bones.

Far too long. Three and a half months of shooting target servitors and studying maps and battle simulations and listening to Malchai preach. Mortai was heartily sick of shipboard life, not because it was in any way a burden, but because of the tediousness of the routine. Not a bolt fired in anger in over three months.

When one was sharpening a knife, at a certain point one had to stop, because the fine edge was made blunt again by the very act of sharpening.

Mortai was as sharp as Kerne could make it. Now it needed to be used. What was it Fornix always said? *The blade grows blunt in the scabbard* – that was it. Yes, it was high time Mortai was unsheathed.

There were nineteen Thunderhawks on the troop decks, ready to be launched, and a dozen drop pods for a quick *coup de main*, should that be needed.

Seventy-eight Adeptus Astartes from Mortai, who had been clad in their armour by the servitors two days ago, and forty gun-servitors bearing heavy metal, ready to support the line company, as well as the two Devastator squads on loan from Ninth Company under Brother-Sergeant Nieman Stahl, and two squads of Scout Marines, the Haradai, under Fell Ambros's young protégé, Brother-Sergeant Laufey, a warrior who at times rivalled Fornix in his insouciant attitude to discipline.

And what fun Malchai has had, trying to iron out the creases in their faith, Kerne mused. Then he

thought also of the regular despatches that the Reclusiarch had been sending back to Mors Angnar, and his face darkened.

Part of him – the deep, savage part which had been wholly human before the Dark Hunters claimed his soul – had a feeling that this would be his last campaign.

If so, he prayed, then Bright Lord of Hosts and Battle, let it be a worthy fight, and let me do my duty by my brothers, and to you and the Imperium before I join your Peace.

Amen.

'Sir!' The young ship-lieutenant's face was suddenly urgent. 'Comms from *Caracalla*, priority-code. Unknown vessels twenty thousand kilometres out bearing eight seven mark three.'

'Composition?' Massaron snapped. He joined the lieutenant at his console bank, from which a trio of servitors muttered to themselves and extended a dozen mechanical limbs to touch controls and switches as though playing on some absurdly intricate musical instrument.

'Vox on speaker, sir – it's Shipmaster Miraneis.'

A woman's voice rang out hollow across the command dais, crackling slightly.

'*Ogadai*, this is *Caracalla*, we have torpedoes locked on us from four enemy ships, Falchion class at best estimate. Am evading, and launching countermeasures.'

Massaron leaned over the console. '*Caracalla*, break off and lead them back to us. Battle speed. Acknowledge.'

'Acknowledged, *Ogadai*. Breaking off – enemy is on our stern, spreading into attack formation. We'll do our best to lure them in, over.'

Massaron straightened. 'A picket-line. These are the sentries for the main force.'

He looked at Jonah Kerne, and the towering Space Marine nodded.

'Put me shipwide,' Massaron said to a servitor, and then: 'All stations, this is the Master of the Ship. Go to battle stations. I repeat, go to battle stations.'

Klaxons began to echo throughout the immense length of the *Ogadai*, and there was a perceptible vibration in the hull.

'Voidsunders being run out, sir,' the flag lieutenant said.

'Open all gun-doors. All batteries are to wait for my signal to engage.'

He turned to another servitor. 'Key in the location of the destroyers, and flag up the enemy. I want no friendly fire here today.'

A sizzle, and the servitor's steel claws clicked and clacked across its keyboards.

'*Arbion*, *Beynish*, this is the flag. Close in to four thousand and prepare to engage broadsides. Stand clear of the lances. Acknowledge.'

The captains of the other two escort destroyers sent static bursts in affirmation.

'Captain,' Massaron said, turning to the Adeptus Astartes on the dais. Kerne held up one gauntleted hand.

'I am going to the troop decks now, shipmaster. Keep me informed.'

Massaron smiled. 'Thank you, my lord. This is my ship – I know how to fight her.'

'I don't doubt it. Good hunting, Massaron.'

Kerne strode from the command dais, lifting his helm and setting it on his head. It clicked into the collar-ring and hissed closed. At once, the readouts sprang up in his vision, and in the corner of his sight was the blinking sigil which was the command-vox, his private channel with Massaron and the

workings of the command dais.

You'd better keep me informed, he thought, and strode down the nave of the starship with one hand on the bolt pistol maglocked to his thigh.

And thank the Emperor and His Throne that it has begun at last.

'Thank the Emperor it has begun at last,' Fornix said with a fierce grin. 'I was getting so damnable bored I was about to start shooting holes in the side of this tub just to change the view.'

He met Kerne at the entrance to the troop decks, and behind him were Jord Malchai, Elijah Kass, Passarion the Apothecary and Finn March of Primus Squad. The rest of the battle-group were lining up, a muster of giants in midnight blue, peppered here and there with the slighter figures of the Haradai in their carapaces. Below their feet the flight deck was rumbling and quivering as the Thunderhawks were shunted in their sleds towards the launch doors.

'I trust all is in hand, first sergeant,' Kerne said formally.

Fornix reined in his exuberance. 'Yes, brother-captain. All squads are ready to embark on your word.'

Jord Malchai spoke up. 'Captain, I take it we have engaged the enemy?'

'We're about to,' Kerne said shortly. 'Fornix, prep for ship-to-ship action. I want three squads on the Hawks, with three more ready to embark on my order. You and Brother Kass will come with me and Primus. Brother Malchai, you may join us if you wish. Passarion, with me also, and Brother Heinos. The Haradai will remain aboard – they are not outfitted for vacuum work. Any questions?'

'Enemy strength?' Malchai asked.

'Falchion class, at least one squadron. They could prove troublesome to the *Ogadai* if they get in close and start loosing torpedoes. I intend to launch once they are within a thousand kilometres, and board.'

He looked round at his brothers. They could not see his face, but none of them had helmed up yet and he was able to see the eagerness in their eyes – even dour Malchai.

'Are we happy?' he asked lightly.

Fornix actually laughed. 'Brother, we are very happy.'

'Good, now let's get to the Hawks.'

All was well in train on the flight deck. The deck chief, Gerd Dinas, had learned the meaning of efficiency as practised by the Adeptus Astartes during the course of the voyage, and now he and his crews stood to one side as the Space Marines boarded the ugly square-nosed Thunderhawks.

One warrior from each squad plodded forward into the cockpit and plugged himself into the ship systems, where he was joined by a fleet co-pilot and navigator/gunner.

It was an imperfect system, but Kerne did not have the manpower to crew the craft entirely with his warriors. Massaron had given him the best Hawk-jockeys he possessed, and in the last months these had been trained up by their Space Marine pilots to a level of skill they had never suspected they could attain.

Once inside the Thunderhawks, the Space Marines locked themselves into their launch-harnesses and tested comms. Kerne tuned out the familiar vox-checks and blinked on the command channel. For a while, he listened without speaking.

'Ogadai*, this is* Caracalla*, I am hit on the starboard side and am losing power. Thrusters are at*

minimum and all countermeasures have been used up.'

Miraneis's voice was calm, Kerne noted approvingly.

*'*Caracalla*, we are at best speed and will be able to cover you in thirty-six seconds. Fire everything you've got, Miranda. We're coming for you.'*

Massaron. There was emotion in his voice. A little too much perhaps. Kerne was surprised.

'Sir, the Caracalla *has been locked on by six more torpedoes.'*

'Clear the Voidsunders to fire.'

Nothing for a few moments except the binaric muttering of the servitors on the command dais and the clicking of instrumentation.

'Target acquired.'

'Fire one.'

There was a tremor, felt even in the Thunderhawk. Two kilometres away, in the bows, one of the great lances of the *Ogadai* had unleashed a holy holocaust of energy.

'Target destroyed.'

'Sir, the Caracalla *is dead in the air, out of command. No vox.'*

'Prepare to fire two.'

'They're too close, sir – they're inside minimum range.'

'Damn them!'

Enough of this. Kerne blinked the vox sigil again. 'Shipmaster, I want clearance to launch for three Hawks. Send your targeting data to Hawk One. Do you read?'

Massaron's voice was thick with... grief? Anger?

'Roger, Hawk One. Data streaming now. We have two enemy destroyers on our port flank, manoeuvring astern. If they hit us in the engines–' Massaron collected himself. 'You are go for launch, captain. Priority targets are being uploaded.'

'Acknowledged.' He blinked in sequence. There was a series of dull thudding concussions along the outside hull.

'Clear the deck – open launch doors – Hawks One, Two and Three, we are cleared for launch. You have targeting info. Hawk One will take the closest enemy, Hawk Two the next. Three, you will hold in reserve. Acknowledge.'

The pilots came back with brief squawks of static.

'Brace for launch,' their own pilot said. Brother Cayd Simarron, the best flyer in the Chapter.

A shunting crash, and then they were free of the ship's gravity and floating in their restraints. Kerne keyed in the cockpit monitors to his helm, and instead of the red-lit interior of the Thunderhawk he now saw the spiralling star-spattered vastness of space.

The Thunderhawk wheeled, spinning, and the side of the *Ogadai* sped under them like the side of a grey-flanked mountain, going past at dizzying speed. Were it not for his cochlear implant, Kerne would probably have thrown up in his helm.

Ahead, the white globes of afterburners. They had sped past the *Ogadai* now and were astern of the cruiser. The enemy destroyers had found the sweet spot: the angle at which a capital ship can be attacked without being able to bring its guns to bear.

'These scum know how to fly,' Simarron murmured. 'Captain, I will set down on the enemy hull in fifteen seconds.'

'Acknowledged. Primus squad, make ready for boarding. Fornix, open the belly hatch.

Chainswords out, mag-grips engaged.'

The enemy ships were light destroyers which had been upgunned with torpedoes. But even though they were not in the same league as the *Ogadai*, they were still the better part of two kilometres long, and they would have a crew of thousands. It would be up to Simarron's skill to set them down somewhere they could do vital, instant damage, otherwise they could spend hours slaughtering their way through the length of the ship without seriously compromising her ability to damage the Dark Hunters cruiser.

'Going for the bridge, captain. They've seen us now. We have las-fire and kinetic ordnance inbound.'

The Thunderhawk was hurled through space like a scrap of paper caught in a gale. Through the open belly-hatch they could see explosions of light and flame, all soundless, all instantly snuffed out by the airless void in which they detonated. Shrapnel rattled against the hull and came showering into the troop compartment in shards of red-hot alloy.

'It's raining, brothers,' Fornix said on the vox. 'How do you like this weather?'

'Five seconds,' Simarron said.

'Prepare for boarding,' Kerne told his brothers. 'Release all harnesses. Ignite blades.'

'Emperor be with us,' Elijah Kass said. There was a throb of excitement in his voice.

His first boarding, Kerne thought. I must watch him.

A crash as they came down on the enemy ship's hull. Grapnels and maglocks fired off and dug into the plating. At once, the Space Marines were out of the hatch, kicking themselves free of the Thunderhawk. Their momentum carried them through airless space until they came down on the hull below. Some of them grunted as they hit hard. The Librarian, Kass, stumbled, one maglocked boot coming free. Brother Passarion seized his arm and yanked him back down before he could fly off into space.

'Squad in place,' Kerne voxed. 'Take her on overwatch, Simarron.'

'Acknowledged. Good hunting, captain.'

The grapnels were blown out and their cables came snaking free to twirl and drift about the hull. The thrusters of the Hawk jolted them as the ship blew itself clear of the enemy destroyer and took off into the darkness, followed by streams of las-fire.

Fornix and Finn March were already sawing into the plates of the hull under their feet with their heavy chainswords. Sparks flashed, and nuggets of hot metal flew to tick against their armour. The rest of them stood ready, cocking their bolters. Kerne counted them all and was relieved to find everyone present. It was too easy in the moment of contact with an enemy ship for a man to go careering off into the void unnoticed.

Fornix and March were surrounded in clouds of venting gas now; they were through the hull. They paused to throw a few grenades in the slot they had made, and after the explosions they kept going. It took them several minutes to cut out a square of hull some metre and a half wide, and when they were done they levered the thick chunk of plating out of the hole they had sliced and threw it free of the ship. It drifted away trailing snakes of wiring, the conduits sparking with dying energy.

The chainswords were glowing red by the time they were done.

Fornix looked up and his voice came loud and clear over the vox. He sounded as though he had a wide smile on his face.

'*Umbra Sumus*.'

Then he grasped the side of the hole and propelled himself into the enemy ship head first, his chainsword whirring and glittering in the glare of his helm-torch.

Finn March followed, pistol-arm extended. Kerne made as if to enter next but a hand on his chest stopped him. It was Passarion, his white armour unmistakable in the wheeling starlit gloom.

'Forgive me, captain, but it is not your place.'

Kerne glared at the blank helm lenses of the Apothecary, but knew that the man was right. The company commander had to wait until he received the first report from the boarders.

'Very well.'

He had to stand there in the silence as Primus Squad went in one by one. Last to enter was Brother Heinos, the company's only Techmarine. The servo-arm on Heinos's back caught on the side of the hole for a second, raising sparks – then he was inside.

Finally, only Kerne, Passarion, Malchai, and Elijah Kass remained standing on the exterior hull of the enemy ship. Already, Kerne wanted to get on the vox and demand information from those inside, but he knew from experience that in the first deadly minutes of a boarding it would be all his battle-brothers could do to stay alive. He could only listen to their voices on the vox.

Patience. It was a necessary and sickening virtue.

Fornix booted the bulky Chaos Space Marine in the knee and in the momentary waver of attention this won, he stabbed his chainsword into the vulnerable spot just under the chin of the helm. The whirring blade grated on metal and then slid freely inside the armour. From the gouged slit blood leaked and sprayed in black ribbons.

The enemy went to his knees, one hand going for his ruined throat, the other trying to bring up the bolt pistol. Fornix knocked that hand aside, and the pistol skittered away. Then he stabbed the blade downwards into the top of the foe's helm with all his strength.

The weapon trembled and shuddered in his hands as it fought the ceramite, but finally plunged through the toughened alloys, the cabling and the fibre-bundles, and at last found the bone and brain of the enemy.

The abomination collapsed, and the sword went dead in Fornix's fist as he pulled it free. He had asked too much of it.

Breughal was right, he thought, snapping his bolt pistol from his thigh, I am far too hard on my wargear.

He fired the pistol at point-blank range into the eye lenses of another Punisher, and used that one's corpse as cover, holding it against himself as a volley of bolter fire blazed into him. He felt the ricochet of rounds striking his pauldrons, and he was sure one clanged into his powerpack as it careened off the bulkhead. A red light began to wink on his helm display. He ignored it. He had fought on with a whole galaxy of red lights blinking in his sight before now.

The bolter rounds chewed up the corpse he held in front of himself. The corridor was narrow here, and full of smoke. Even infared was little use in the hot staccato flash of gunfire.

But it was all in silence. The corridor was open to vacuum, running fifty metres back to the entry-point where they had cut their way into the enemy ship. There was gravity, and the blood no longer floated in glistening spheres about his head as it had in the first compartment, but there was no atmosphere to conduct the savage sounds of battle and bolter fire. It was oddly disappointing.

The rest of Primus Squad were behind him, Finn March fuming at his back, but there was no room

for them to deploy. If Simarron had got his coordinates right, then this was an access corridor which led to the bridge of the enemy ship. Another fifty metres or so and there would be a door, and beyond it, the means to cripple the vessel.

Only one thing to do, Fornix thought. Advance. But I need some space.

'Finn,' he said over the vox, 'are you busy?'

'Get the hell out of my way and I will be, Fornix.'

'Toss a grenade over my shoulder, there's a good fellow. We need to ventilate this place a little.'

'Mind yourself – it'll be close.'

'No good if it's not.'

The grenade was tossed over Fornix's right shoulder. It struck the bulkhead and then spun into the ranks of the traitors who were blazing away five metres ahead.

Fornix lowered his helm into the broken metal shell that was his enemy, feeling the rounds thump heavily into the corpse's armour. He glimpsed a white face in the shattered helm, an eye milk-white, veined and bulging as though about to pop in the airlessness.

Remember me? he thought, staring at that eye in savage triumph. *We met a hundred and fifty years ago, and now we meet again.*

Then he was staggered by the blast of the grenade, and felt the kiss of the shrapnel. The shock of it forced him to one knee and tore the corpse out of his grasp. His helm display was nothing but buzzing lines for a moment, and he stood up again, blind, and fired a full magazine down the corridor, feeling the bolt pistol kick up in his hand.

His vision steadied. The three Punishers were down, two still moving feebly. He reloaded, strode forward, and put two rounds in each of their skulls. The smoke was thick, but infared was working better now. The way was clear. The corridor was littered with scraps of armour and body parts and weapons. Blood painted the maggot-grey steel of the walls.

'Brother Heinos,' he said over the vox. 'We have an armoured hatch ten metres to my front. I want it open.'

'Acknowledged.'

The bulky Techmarine came forward, scraping past his brethren in the confined worm-cast of the corridor. His midnight-blue armour was striped with Mars red, and the servo-arm at his back rose up like a scorpion's tail.

Fornix did not know Heinos as well as he would have liked; as with most Techmarines, he was always a little apart from his brethren in the line companies.

'Can you do it?'

'Tougher than the hull,' Heinos said, scanning the hatch. 'And booby-trapped. But crudely. Yes, I can do it. It will take me four minutes.'

'Good, get to it, and don't blow yourself up.'

The Techmarine knelt before the hatch, and began feeling around the rim of it with a long pointer he had snapped free of the tools he held maglocked to his thighs and shoulderguards. Utterly absorbed, the moment he began his work he seemed to forget that the rest of his brothers existed.

That's what you get from time on Mars, Fornix thought.

He tapped his own helm. Two red sigils winking at him now. The armour's powerpack was damaged, and he was overheating. The myriad dents and bulletholes all over the ceramite plates were of no interest to him, though one knee joint felt stiff and slow.

I should let Finn go in first, he thought. That would be the logical tactic.

But he knew he would not. He had a lot of hate to work off, and he had barely begun.

'Captain, this is Fornix, can you read me?'

'Barely, brother. The electronics in the hull are interfering with the vox.' Kerne's voice was faint and broken, but intelligible.

'We are at an armoured hatch which should lead to the bridge. Eleven enemy dead thus far – they're Punishers all right – I remember the livery, or lack of it. Black and yellow, like a wasp of Terra. Entry in approximately four minutes, if Brother Heinos has it right.'

'Casualties?'

'None but my chainsword.'

'Command is coming in, Fornix.'

'You might want to wait one on that, Jonah – it's pretty crowded in here.'

A pause. Fornix knew what his captain was thinking. If it were himself, he would be going quietly mad out there, listening to the fight on the vox and not a part of it.

'Very well. Nureddin and Secundus Squad are already on the bridge of the second destroyer, meeting heavy resistance. If you need the reserve, let me know.'

'I will, brother.'

There was a bright flare as just in front of him Brother Heinos ignited the fyceline torch in his servo-arm and began cutting into the plasteel lock of the hatch.

'Ninety seconds, first sergeant,' he said calmly.

Fornix's vision was fizzing. He thumped the side of his helm irritably, and the red sigils steadied. It was becoming hotter inside the armour.

Better make this quick, he thought.

Jonah Kerne thumped his fist against the bolt pistol at his thigh. The weapon was still unfired, and his chainsword hung at his waist, switched off.

'Brother Kass,' he said suddenly to the young Librarian, 'can you feel anything from the crew of this ship that might help our boarding parties?'

Kass was wearing a plain Mark VII helm under his psychic hood. He did not answer for a moment but the hood began to glow slightly, bright against the black void behind him.

'There is intelligence there, and a black storm of hatred. Hatred for each other as well as for us. But something binds them together – a great will – I–'

He staggered forward a step, his boots lifting and then sucked back in place by the maglocks in their soles.

'It is an ancient malevolence that drives them, empty and hungry as the void itself. But there is a familiarity to it, captain. These things were once like us. I hear echoes of what they once were – Legiones Astartes.' He clenched and unclenched his fists. 'It is… unholy. They teem in their thousands, as restless as a swarm of locusts.'

'The warp spawns them, vomits them forth,' Brother Malchai said with deep distaste. 'They are the gangrenous cells in the galaxy's body. I feel them too. Their souls howl at me from the warp.'

'They crave oblivion, and wish to take us all with them into the darkness,' Kass said. His voice shook. 'I have never looked into such a pit of hate before.'

'Hate makes you strong,' Malchai said. 'Focus, brother.'

‘Yes, Reclusiarch.’

Up on the vox came Fornix again. ‘We are on the bridge, Jonah. Two brothers down. Hot work.’

‘Do you want the reserve?’ Kerne asked instantly.

‘Negative. Wait out.’

The vox clicked off. Fornix was back on the squad net. Jonah listened to it intently, hearing the grunted commands – that was Finn March and his brothers snapping out warnings to each other.

‘They’re breaking left.’

‘Heavy flamer. Gad, take it out.’

‘Beta move right, down the stairs.’

‘Move on, move on. Push them back, brothers.’

‘Grenade!’

‘I’m down – keep going.’

‘Blow that console. Heinos, plug in and open those ports.’

And the rattling crash of bolter fire now, the whistling of atmospherics being sucked out. It was still spuming out of the entry hole in white clouds, and with it came scraps of metal and flesh and smoke, even discarded weapons and wiring, all entangled. A severed head still in its helm, circling as it blew out into space, crowned with horns.

‘It’s a long way off, but I can feel it now,’ Brother Kass was saying. ‘It gives them purpose and direction, else these things would devour each other in their madness. There is a single mind at work here, Brother Malchai, a power in it I have never known before.

‘It is not alien in any way – it is almost recognisable, the way it works.’

‘Careful, brother,’ Malchai warned. ‘If you look into the warp, the warp looks back at you.’

Elijah Kass shuddered as he stood there like a tree in a gale. Malchai clumped towards him and shook the young Librarian.

‘Brother! Look away! Come back to me!’

‘The bridge is clear.’ That was Fornix’s voice, clear and untrammelled by interference. ‘Brother Heinos has accessed the ship systems. We’re killing this thing, Jonah. We have her, by the Emperor’s light – the thing is going down.’

‘Set it to self destruct and get out of there,’ Kerne said. He was watching Kass and Malchai grappling together.

Another voice on the net. Nureddin of Secundus, on the other destroyer.

‘Captain, all enemy resistance on the bridge has ended. We’ve sealed the doors and are setting charges. We’ll cripple her. Request Hawk Two for immediate evacuation.’

‘You have it, Nureddin. Good work. Casualties?’

‘Brother Infinius. We have his gene-seed.’

He didn’t last long, Kerne thought. His first real fight, and he is gone. He said a quiet prayer.

‘Hawks One and Two, move in for pickup, best speed.’

He turned to the Apothecary, whose helm was configured for casualty readout.

‘Passarion?’

‘All told, we have three brothers dead beyond recall, captain, and six more with major trauma, but ambulatory.’

He did not want to know all their names, not yet.

‘A long enough butcher’s bill,’ he said quietly.

‘Augur sweeps indicate that there are at least eight thousand crew on each of these ships, captain,’ Passarion said. He was watching Elijah Kass, who was back on his feet and breathing heavily over the vox.

‘Three brethren for sixteen thousand of the enemy and two destroyers. I call that a good exchange.’

THIRTEEN

Ira in Caelum

When he unhelmed, there was a new element to the air on the flight deck. The familiar heavy reek of lubricants and sweat and the tang of bare metal and exhaust now had added to it the carbonised burned bitterness of battle damage, the thin acridness of cordite and the static aftertaste of las-fire.

And blood. His senses picked up the blood of his wounded brethren over all, that coppery, familiar element common to every fight he had ever known.

A low-loader drew near, and on it were six Space Marines, their power armour dented and broken and torn as though it were made of clay. He knew all their names, and they all raised their heads as it approached. They had that light in their eyes he knew well, and it heartened him to see it.

When a man looks into the sun, the after-image of that brightness stays with him. So it was with combat. These men who were more than men had been bred and trained for war, and now they had taken a taste of it.

They were Adeptus Astartes, and it had barely whetted their appetite. He saw it in their eyes, and it gladdened him. It was as it should be.

'Try not to get shot next time,' Kerne said to them. And looking at young Brother Gad and the blackened flesh of his face, he added: 'Or burned either.'

'This one is too eager,' Finn March said, coming up behind him and gesturing towards Brother Gad. 'Thinks that now he's out of the Haradai and into some real fighting, he can just charge ahead and bull his way through. He'll know better next time.'

'I will,' Gad said, and he grinned, the burned lips pulling back in a ghastly rictus from the blackened gums.

'Get to the apothecarion before I give you all extra duties for carelessness,' Kerne said, and he touched Gad on the shoulder.

The low-loader sped on down the echoing, busy deck, fleet crew scattering before it.

'Brother-Sergeant March, I want a full report from you and Nureddin before the hour is out,' Kerne said quietly.

'You shall have it, captain.' March cocked his head to one side. Another low-loader was trundling past driven by a servitor. Upon it were two massive prone shapes, mangled but recognisable as Dark

Hunters. Apothecary Passarion was walking alongside, his white armour gleaming.

'Brothers Arrimos and Gascan,' Passarion said. 'Infinius's body could not be recovered.'

'You know what to do, brother,' Kerne said. 'You and Brother Malchai must consign them to the stars with all reverence. But time is short. The main operation is about to begin.'

'Understood, captain.'

Passarion was a cold fish, but as he spoke he set one hand on the broken body beside him with something like tenderness.

'Their genes will live on. They will come again.'

'Other faces, other names, but the flesh abides,' Kerne said, in the ancient ritualistic proverb of the Dark Hunters.

These dead were only the first. There would be many more to follow; he felt it in his bones.

They were gathering around him now, the sergeants of the company, along with Fornix of course, and Brother Laufey of the Scouts and Nieman Stahl, the senior sergeant of the detachment from Novus.

The trio of March, Nureddin and Orsus were the most senior, but Primus and Secundus had been hollowed out by casualties. Until the wounded Space Marines were back with their squads, the two senior sergeants would take a back seat during the assault.

It went through his mind in a smooth succession of calculations, as it had a thousand times before.

'Tertius will lead the next operation,' he said, and big Orsus grinned like a dog just given a bone; if he had possessed a tail he would have wagged it.

'Brother Laufey, you will attach three of the Haradai to Tertius, Quatris, and Quincus squads. Brother-Sergeant Stahl, you will do the same with your Devastators. Heavy plasmas and meltas, for preference – they're more flexible. We do not yet know what we are about to face on the surface, whether it will be armour or infantry-centred.'

'With respect, captain, I would much prefer to keep my warriors together. A full squad of heavy weapons–'

'I have thought this through. You will be left with one squad intact, which you will command as company reserve. The others will serve with the line-squads.'

'Sixteen-man squads, that will be,' Fornix said and he pursed his lips in a soundless whistle.

'For the first three, yes,' Kerne said. 'We must go in as hard as we can, brothers. It has been weeks – nay, months – since anything has been heard from the Imperial forces on Ras Hanem. There may be none left, or it may be that enemy jamming has stymied their attempts to communicate. In any case, we must be prepared to reconquer the entire planet from scratch if need be.'

They all nodded at that. He saw their faces harden, if faces so marked by decades and centuries of warfare could be said to have hardened further. He saw the anger in their eyes. That was good.

'The drop pods are prepping as we speak,' he said. 'Brother-Sergeants Orsus, Greynan and Kagan, see to your commands. I will be dropping with you. The fleet personnel have been briefed and prepped.

'We have wiped out their sentries, brothers – now we will descend upon them like the Emperor's Wrath. To your posts.'

The knot of sergeants broke up at once, and the huge armoured figures trooped down the deck to the waiting lines of Dark Hunters, shouting commands, the ordinary humans of the fleet scattering before them like lambs before wolves. The next wave of Thunderhawks was already being prepped,

gunships as well as troop-transports this time. But it was the drop pods which would strike first.

'Fornix, walk with me. I go to the command dais.' They marched off without a further word, and it was only when they were ascending on one of the great cargo elevators that Jonah Kerne said:

'First sergeant, where are my Chaplain and Librarian?'

Fornix scratched the side of his head. 'The moment they came back, they went off somewhere together. I believe Malchai wanted a quiet word with our young epistolary. Elijah looked as though he was about to puke bullets. I think his first encounter with the Great Enemy scrambled his wits a little.'

'Find them,' Kerne snapped. 'I do not have time to track down my command squad through the guts of the ship.'

'Yes, brother-captain,' Fornix said, watching his friend closely. Then he added: 'Jonah, it was not your place to be at the head of a boarding party – you know that. You command Mortai.'

'And you are my second, and yet you charged in there like some glory-hunting recruit fresh out of the Haradai.'

'Ah, that's me – 'twas ever thus.'

Jonah Kerne stared at his old friend. 'Mortai needs its first sergeant as much as it needs its captain, Fornix. You should have let Finn March lead the way onto the enemy bridge.'

'Well, you know me–'

'Enough. You hear what I have said. Apply it. I will not say it again.'

Fornix's face went carefully blank. 'Yes, brother-captain.'

For the first time, Jonah Kerne's arrival in the command centre of the *Ogadai* caused no comment or reaction. The crew were all too busy, and the red lumens of battle stations were still glowing like sullen coals around the command dais.

Kerne climbed the stone steps of the dais with his helm cradled in one arm, and waited, knowing better than to interfere with Massaron and his work.

'Fire one,' the shipmaster said, and there was the long slow shake under their feet as the massive Voidsunder in the bow erupted. It was three kilometres away from where they stood, and yet the power of that salvo echoed through the entire ship like a far-off earth-tremor.

'Direct hit amidships,' the flag lieutenant said. 'Sir, she's breaking up.'

A hum of satisfaction ran through the servitors on the dais, though they did not pause in their work for a second.

'Enemy is breaking formation,' Enginseer Miranich ticked out in that metallic grate of his.

'Arm torpedoes, notify broadside batteries,' Massaron said. He stood with his arms folded, seemingly imperturbable. 'Fire two when firing resolution is locked.'

'They're running for it, sir,' the lieutenant said.

'I see that, Gershon. Configure torpedoes for that other Dauntless cruiser. I don't want it to get away.'

'Torpedoes launched, wide spread,' a servitor said tonelessly, the binaric data-speak underlying his words like a secondary mutter. 'On target.'

'He's evading, coming round to port at one three five mark twelve,' the lieutenant barked, excitement raising his voice. 'Sir, he's turning right into–'

'I see it. Fire two.'

A moment's pause. Out in the emptiness of space, the *Ogadai* had just launched a vast spearhead of

immense energy.

'He's hit–'

Jonah Kerne looked up. In the viewports high above his head there was a momentary flash of white light.

'Target destroyed,' Miranich reported without emotion. 'Five torpedoes have gone wide. Three have made hits. Two more enemy ships are now out of command.'

'Come to starboard ninety degrees,' Massaron said. He unfolded his arms and his hands were now clenched into fists at his side. Under their feet, the hundreds of thousands of tons that were his ship wheeled in the void.

'Now, port batteries, open fire as they bear.'

Kerne could hear the rumble and hiss of the lasburner batteries that lined the ship's sides open up. It was too faint for the hearing of a normal human, but to the ears of an Adeptus Astartes, the sound was like carbonated liquid fizzing out of an opened bottle.

'Targets destroyed,' the flag lieutenant said, triumph lighting up his voice. 'The rest of the enemy fleet is powering out of high orbit at maximum speed. Sir, shall I signal *Arbion* and *Beynish* to pursue?'

'Negative. Signal them to remain astern. I want no more surprises.' Here, for the first time, Massaron looked at Kerne, and there was something like shame in his face.

Then he turned back to the banks of monitors that towered above him.

'Resume course for low orbit. I want continuous augur-sweeps of the planet, and scan for all vox-emissions. Recharge all weapons and stand by.'

A murmur of assent across the dais.

'Lieutenant Gershon, you have the con. Captain Kerne, I expect you would like a full report.'

Kerne nodded curtly.

'I have a ready room below. Please join me there.'

Kerne's silence seemed to unnerve the shipmaster slightly. He poured water from a metal flask and drank off a tankard of it.

The Space Marine captain dominated the small room, and a faint smell of ozone rose off his armour. A shining dust speckled him: the residue of vacuum combat.

'The enemy picket-line of destroyers was led with some skill,' Massaron said, looking at the empty flagon he held in one fist. 'There were six of them, light destroyers reconfigured for use against capital targets. Four, we obliterated – two more were taken out by your warriors.' He paused. 'I was distracted by the fate of the *Caracalla*, and let two of them slip past us into an ideal firing position, at our stern. It will not happen again. I apologise.'

'What of the *Caracalla*?' Kerne demanded harshly.

'Gone. Some two thousand of the crew took to lifeboats and were picked up. The rest perished when the drives overheated and exploded.' He poured himself more water. 'Seven thousand men and women.'

He held the flagon up, and looked at it as though it were an artefact from an unknown world.

'Shipmaster Miraneis was a fine officer. She did her duty.' He drank deep, as though the water were something stronger.

'She was my daughter.'

Grief gnarled his face. He faced the tall Space Marine squarely. 'I made a mistake, distracted by sentiment. It will not happen again.'

'See that it does not,' Jonah Kerne told him coldly. 'The boarding action should not have been necessary, and it has forced me to modify my plans for the planetary assault scant hours before it is due to begin. We do not have the resources or the time to permit such mistakes, shipmaster.'

'Agreed, captain. I will submit a report on my error to Mors Angnar, and am ready to accept whatever sanction the Chapter Master sees fit to inflict.'

Kerne shook his head. 'Belay that. We do not have the time for it, and there is no one else to whom the *Ogadai* can be trusted – you know that as well as I. Tell me of the situation as it now stands.'

Massaron blinked, and a low breath escaped him, as though he had been holding it in all this time.

'We are two hours out from low orbit. The Punisher fleet has been scattered and is fleeing. We have destroyed two Dauntless class light cruisers and a total of eleven destroyers, plus at least six transport vessels. The way is clear for the ground phase of the operation to begin.'

'You are to be congratulated, shipmaster.'

'I lost seven thousand men today, captain, and placed this flagship in extreme jeopardy. I do not warrant your congratulations.'

'You are only human.' Kerne smiled slightly. 'Any word from the ground?'

'Now that the enemy fleet is dispersed, vox transmissions to and from the surface should begin to filter through.'

'Very well. If any do, have them forwarded to me on the flight deck at once. Phase two is about to begin. I will take Mortai down onto Ras Hanem in the next two hours, the first wave in drop pods, the second in the Thunderhawks. I want your destroyers detailed to assist with orbital bombardment as soon as I am on the ground and able to identify viable targets. Is that clear?'

'Perfectly, captain.'

Jonah Kerne looked down on the tight face of the human before him.

'Your daughter died well,' he said.

Massaron looked away. 'Yes, she did.'

'Be worthy of her life, and death,' Kerne told him. Then he turned and left the shadowed room, and strode out into the grandeur of the *Ogadai'*s nave without a backward glance.

The flight deck was frantic with activity. Jonah Kerne strode along it like a dark titan. The Thunderhawks were on their sleds, already warming up their engines, and the din was ear-splitting. Steam from the coolant systems hazed the air, and low-loaders piled high with shells were still pulling up to the rear of some of the gunships; Space Marines and human personnel alike were working steadily to pile more ammunition within the square-bellied craft.

There was no telling when they would be resupplied, once they were on the ground, so every Thunderhawk was carrying extra pallets of shells and ammo and energy-packs as well as its flight crew and a squad of Space Marines. Safety procedures were being quietly ignored. A small gamble, amid much bigger ones.

Kerne found Nureddin of Secundus supervising the loading of the transports. He was in a foul humour, having missed out on a place in the first wave because of the boarding casualties. Kerne thumped his shoulder-guard to get his attention. He had to shout to be heard above the clamour of the packed, echoing deck.

‘Wait for my word before you put down, brother – remember!’

‘I remember, Jonah. Try to land on your feet and not flat on your back.’ Nureddin grinned, and twitched his grey scalp-lock out of his eyes.

They shook hands in the ancient warrior grip, grasping each other’s forearms, the metal of their armour clinking together.

‘Good hunting, brother,’ Kerne said.

‘Good hunting, Jonah. Leave some of the killing for me.’

‘Always.’

He walked on down the deck. Out of the chaos, there was order coming. He nodded to Sergeant Rusei of Sextius, and Corvo of Septus, and they thumped their fists against the aquila on their breastplates. They had over a century in Mortai between them, and yet they looked as eager as new recruits.

Down the dank shaft of the elevator, to the drop pod holsters below. Here, it was darker, and the noise was cut off. This part of the ship was newer than the rest, the result of a refit some fifty years before. The *Ogadai* had been reworked and repaired so many times that Kerne doubted there was much of the original four-thousand year-old metal remaining. Like the Chapter itself, the composition of the thing changed, but its function remained.

The three lead squads of the assault had already embarked, and only the command pod still had one of the tall, leaf-shaped hatches open for entry. He clambered inside, thumping the door controls, and the ramp reared up and then hissed shut.

Pods, he thought. They were well named. Inside, there was little room for manoeuvre, and the light was a low red glow. He found his place at the central stanchion, the spine of the teardrop-shaped craft, and snapped himself into the restraints, finding the vox-link and plugging it into his helm.

They were all here. Heinos the Techmarine in his specially adapted harness. Fornix, his armour marked by the scabs of hasty repairs. He had never been vain about his appearance, but Kerne noted that his first sergeant had procured a power fist from somewhere and now his right hand ended in a mass of metal almost a metre across. No more chainswords then.

Passarion was there in his white armour, and next to him Jord Malchai in his sinister skull-helm. And lastly Elijah Kass, the psychic hood above his own helmet glowing faint blue.

Kerne touched the leather pouch he had strapped at his side. In it was a tattered rag upon which was woven a skull and weighing scales. *Cerebrum et Haliaetum*: Mortai’s banner since time immemorial.

He would unfurl it on the ground. The Dark Hunters did not have specified banner-bearers. As the battle unfolded, the company captain would single out a battle-brother he thought worthy of the honour and bestow the company symbol upon him, to carry for as long as he was able.

Kerne himself had carried that flag; it had been given to him by Al Murzim more than two centuries before. And Fornix had carried it through the first half of the Phobian battles, until promoted to sergeant. Then it had gone to three more Space Marines, all of whom had died carrying it.

More would die carrying it in the days to come. But the banner would rise up again every time, as it always had.

It endured. Mortai endured. The Dark Hunters remained, despite all the crises and wars of the last three thousand years.

Umbra Sumus, Kerne thought. *We are shadows*.

Nothing more than shadows and dust.

‘Launch in thirty seconds,’ the vox spoke into his ear.

‘Acknowledged.’ He raised a fist with three fingers out. The others strapped into the pod saluted him.

Lord, in Thy glory and Thy goodness, send me worthy foes to kill.

‘Ten seconds.’

The green light flicked on, and there was a tremendous jerk and crash as the drop pod was ejected from the hull of the *Ogadai* like a grape pip being spat out of a man’s mouth. Gravity faded, and Kerne rose in his restraints.

Three seconds later, the onboard nav systems kicked in and the thrusters fired. The Space Marines within were jolted once more as the tapered craft was nudged towards the atmosphere of Ras Hanem. The details of the descent were fed into Kerne’s helm display, and he watched as the numbers changed almost too quickly to be read. The blinking sigils of the other three pods were steady and green.

Then a series of other cursors flashed up on the display. The Thunderhawks were launching now. All of Mortai was in the air.

Jonah Kerne was taking ninety-eight Adeptus Astartes to the planet below, and they were bringing hell with them.

PART THREE

Wrath of the Hunters

FOURTEEN

Cadems in Terram

The vox crackled and hissed in Kerne's helm. 'Captain, this is shipmaster Diez of the *Arbion*. Do you read me?'

Thirty-six seconds to impact. The drop pod was shunting and rattling like a tin can rolling down a cliff face, and gravity had kicked in once more. The three hundred kilos of Kerne's armoured frame were fighting the restraints and the G-forces were compressing the blood in his chest. It was no time for pleasantries.

'Send, over.'

'We have contact with the ground. Imperial forces are still in possession of the citadel and the Armaments District. The spaceport is damaged, but may be serviceable, though it is under fire. Do you read?'

'I read!' he snapped. He was already readjusting his tactical plans as the information was absorbed. His pods were en route to Sol Square, the largest open space in the city of Askai, and the ungainly craft were not designed to be navigable once they were in the atmosphere. It would be like trying to make an arrow change direction when it was in mid-flight.

He would land south of the Imperial lines, if the information was accurate. He would have to begin fighting his way almost due north on landing. Well, it was something to know that the citadel was in friendly hands at least. The *Arbion* had been tasked with targeting the fortress, shooting in the assault from orbit.

'Hold all orbital fire until further word from me, Diez,' he said.

But the vox was dead. They were on final re-entry now, and the pod was shuddering and growing hotter.

And then there was a resounding crash – the pod arced sideways as though it had been kicked in mid-air. It spun and tumbled, and Kerne cursed within his helm and blinked again and again on the retro sigils, to no avail.

'Anti-air,' Fornix said on the squad net. 'That was a direct hit.'

Kerne ripped open the access panel at his head and peered within, all the while fighting the spin of the careering pod. The altimeter in his display was reeling off the descent with startling rapidity. They

were at fourteen thousand metres, and falling like a stone.

Another crash, and this time there was a white explosion which his auto-senses only just prevented from blinding him. One whole hatch in the side of the pod disappeared, and brown air thundered into the confines of the vehicle. Kerne felt the sucking decompression lift his body up in the restraints, and was thumped by Fornix and Heinos bucking and rattling in theirs next to him.

He dug his hand into the wiring of the access panel. The cables were brightly colour-coded for eventualities like this, and he called up the sequence in his mind from decades-old training. The yellow wires. He yanked them free and stripped the insulation with a pinch of his armoured gauntlet.

'Jonah–' Fornix said.

'I'm on it.'

'Sooner rather than later, brother.'

'Shut up.' He gritted his teeth, fighting the wild gyrations of the pod, and held the stripped wires together in his hand. There was a flash, and outside a series of coughing explosions as the retros fired. The internal gyro sensed the erratic behaviour of the pod and fired thrusters from all angles to correct it.

Kerne looked at the altimeter in his readout. Six thousand metres.

The pod had stopped spinning, but it was still coming down too fast.

'Brace for impact,' he said calmly. He leaned back against the central stanchion of the pod, even his armour's senses almost blinded by the raging sandstorm that was now within it.

'Next time, I'm walking,' Fornix said.

And then they crashed.

He woke up.

I'm alive, he thought, and he felt mild surprise.

His helm display was sputtering and blinking, but the armour's systems were doing their best to remedy it. Adeptus Astartes power armour was built with dozens of redundancies and fail-safes and, above all else, it was made to take punishment.

The red sigils began to edge into amber. Good enough. Auto-senses were patchy – his hearing was coming and going – but no doubt that would rectify itself, given time. If not, then Brother Heinos–

Where was everybody? Kerne knew that he had taken a bad blow to the head. There was blood inside his helm and in his mouth, but his body, as efficient in its own way as the suit which protected it, had already begun healing itself. Blood flow had stopped. He had bitten through his tongue, and longed to spit, but instead he swallowed the globs of blood that filled his mouth.

His limbs worked. A line of pain burned along the woven bone of his ribs, but that was of no import. He sat up, reaching for the bolt pistol, but it was gone, knocked free by impact along with his chainsword. The ancient armour he wore was dented and scored, but it had suffered worse in its long career.

He checked what was left of his wargear methodically, by touch. And a wave of relief went through him as he felt for the long leather pouch at his waist. Mortai's banner was still there.

He stood up. His hearing was returning, visual input settling down, and the armour was beginning to feel part of him again, not just a heavy carcass encasing his own.

He looked around, and only in that moment, as the auto-senses righted themselves and came back to full operation, did the world's aspect finally become clear.

The drop pod lay on its side eighty metres away in a ragged hedge of rubble, broken open like the shell of a hard-boiled egg. By it crouched several Dark Hunters, firing their bolters. Kerne saw the white armour of Apothecary Passarion there, and the skull-helm of Malchai. The Chaplain was gesturing with his crozius.

The roar of battle. Not a skirmish, or a boarding action, but a full-scale war. It enveloped the senses, sent his hearts racing, and sped the rush of adrenaline through his enhanced system. Artillery, salvoes of it, and delta-winged aircraft sweeping overhead, blasting out las-fire.

Dust, in rolling clouds and walls, hanging all around like an ochre curtain, rippled through and through by kinetic missiles of every calibre and seared aside by the fire of energy weapons.

Men screaming – no – things that had human voices, but they were not men. He saw them now, a black, boiling mass of them charging, las-fire spitting out as they came onwards, hundreds of them.

Cultists. Kerne bared his bloodstained teeth. The only weapon he had was a long knife. He drew it and ran, staggering drunkenly as the suit systems readjusted and continued their self-repair.

The wave of cultists rolled towards the Space Marines ahead like a black tide of bubbling tar. Dozens went down, blown to shreds by the bolter fire. The heavy rounds went through two and three of them at a time and blew them clear off their feet, but they did not falter. The sight of their ancient enemy had galvanised them beyond courage, beyond tactical sense – they came on with the remorseless determination of insects in swarm.

The bolters chewed them up. The Dark Hunters stood their ground and calmly picked their targets, firing short bursts, wasting not a single round. When the surviving cultists burst through that withering barrage and threw themselves at the Space Marines, the towering warriors shifted grip on the weapons and began clubbing their adversaries to the ground.

Kerne came up on the rear of the enemy line, and for a few minutes he allowed himself to forget that he was captain of a company, the force commander, the leader of an armada.

For a few minutes he was a simple Space Marine, consumed by hate and bloodlust, lifting these creatures into the air and gutting them, crushing their skulls with his free fist, stamping on them as they went down.

The blood ran in rivulets down the damascened patterns on his armour, and las-bolts careened off the beautifully worked ceramite, hardly felt or acknowledged.

They died to the last kicking, shrieking individual. That one had his face stove in by the blue-crackling crozius arcanum of the Reclusiarch, and when Malchai raised the weapon and badge of his calling into the sky the energy field within the device burned it clean again, the black, filthy blood and flesh of the Great Enemy withering away.

‘Captain,’ the Reclusiarch said, ‘you are well met!’ Kerne had never heard him sound happier.

‘Where are the others?’

‘They were thrown clear, as you were. Only Heinos, Passarion and myself were still inside the pod after it came to rest. I have not seen Brother-Sergeant Fornix or Brother Kass.’

It was hard to see anything that was more than fifty metres away in the smoking storm of this place. The energy discharges all around played hell with infared. Kerne blinked on the company vox, but it was still recalibrating. His comms systems were ineffective, for now.

‘Well, we are on the ground, at least. Give me your pistol, Malchai.’

‘By all means.’ The Chaplain hesitated a moment and then tossed it over. ‘Be careful with it – it was Biron Amadai’s once.’

Kerne cocked the weapon and raised it to the face-grille of his helm in a reverent kiss. 'My thanks.' He knew what it meant to Malchai.

'What squad is this?' Their pauldrons were covered in dust.

'Tertius, sir,' one of the other Space Marines said. 'Beta section. Brother-Sergeant Orsus sent us to reinforce you when he saw that the pod had crashed.'

'Good work. Take us to him, brother. We will consolidate on his position before pushing out.'

'Are you injured, captain?' This was Passarion, looking over Kerne's battered armour with professional enquiry.

'I'm fine, Apothecary, though my vox systems are still down. What about yours?'

'The impact knocked them all out, likewise. But they are trying to come back online.'

Kerne thought of Fornix – alive or dead? But that was not something he could dwell on now.

'Move out. We'll just attract another assault sitting here. We must get the drop-squads together and get back on comms.'

The Dark Hunters gathered themselves together and began moving through the broken shards of plascrete and rockcrete and good old-fashioned stone, flowing around the taller obstacles, climbing or jumping over others. Periodically one of them would fire a single bolter round, and a shriek would be sucked into the dust.

Gradually, something like normality began to return to Kerne's auto-senses. Blinking on the vox sigils, he started to hear fragments of speech over the net. Most of them were the clipped commands and status report of his fellow Adeptus Astartes, but there were other voices audible too, fragmentary as ghosts, but undeniably present.

He skipped frequencies, trying to zero in on the strange voices, and finally, loud and clear through the clouds of static, a real, human voice was speaking in Low Gothic.

'–you identify yourselves? This is General Pavul Dietrich, commanding officer 387th Armoured, leader of the Imperial resistance in the city of Askai. I repeat – will you identify yourselves and state your positions? This is coded Imperial Frequency five-seven alpha three, and you may speak in clear. I say again, this is Pavul Dietrich–'

'General Dietrich,' Jonah Kerne said. 'I am glad you are still alive.'

The vox hissed. Finally Dietrich came back on it. 'Who am I speaking to?'

'I am Captain Jonah Kerne of the Third Company of the Dark Hunters Chapter of the Adeptus Astartes. I have three squads on the ground in Sol Square, and the rest of the company will be assaulting within the hour.'

'Adeptus Astartes… You are Space Marines?' Dietrich's voice thickened with emotion.

'That we are. As soon as I am able I will forward our company comms frequencies to you. At present, we are rather busy.'

Dietrich cleared his throat. 'My lord, you cannot know how welcome it is to hear your voice, or to know that the Adeptus Astartes themselves have come to our aid, at long last.'

'Yes, yes – Dietrich, keep this frequency open and encrypted. I will be off it for some while to come, but will contact you again later to coordinate our efforts – just tell me quickly, where are the bulk of your forces and how many are they?'

'My lord, we hold the citadel and about half of the Armaments District, and are scattered in a broken line between the two. My regiment has lost nearly all its vehicles and we have taken eighty per cent casualties. The Hanemite Guard is present in larger numbers, but is only lightly armed and

much scattered.

'We have been fighting for over three months in this city, my lord.' The strain in Dietrich's voice was palpable even over the vox. Kerne grimaced. He hoped the man still had some fire left in him.

'What about the civilian population?'

'Dead or fled. Thousands still subsist in the ruins, and there are at least fifty thousand more crammed into the citadel with us.'

Kerne grunted. 'Very well. We plan to move north at once. Is the spaceport viable?'

'Negative, captain. The pads are destroyed and it is covered by enemy fire.'

'I will land my company wherever I can then. We will coordinate fireplans soon. Kerne out.'

He blinked off the vox. His party was approaching the main concentration point of the drop. The other drop pods were standing upright, cone-shaped shadows in the whirling dust – textbook landings by the look of them – and around them nearly forty Adeptus Astartes were spread in a rough ring.

Already, their midnight-blue armour was so powdered by dust that they blended into the broken rubble in which they crouched. He saw some of Novus company's Devastator teams with their heavy bolters and meltaguns set up and firing.

But what lifted his hearts most was to see Fornix striding up to meet him, and behind him Elijah Kass.

Fornix's armour looked even more second-hand than usual, but he had wiped his pauldron clean so that Kerne could see the blood-stripes of his rank. His power fist shimmered, the dust ionising as it landed upon it in continuous crackles.

'We are all here at last then?' Kerne said to his first sergeant.

'Yes, captain. A few minor injuries, some equipment loss, but in the main we are intact and ready.'

Orsus was there, and Greynan and Kagan, the three veteran sergeants of the squads on the ground.

'I have the Haradai out to our front some two hundred metres, captain,' Orsus said. 'They report scattered enemy positions ahead, some heavy weapons emplacements, but no armour. It looks like it's no more than cultist trash ahead of us, from here to the outskirts of the Armaments District.'

Jonah Kerne took that in, looking around at the utter devastation of a once proud and populous Imperial city.

'It wasn't cultist trash that did all this,' he said. He maglocked Biron Amadai's ancient, beautifully crafted bolter to his thighguard.

'Orsus, lead out,' he said. 'Three squads in arrowhead, command centre-rear, Haradai to scout ahead some five hundred metres of the main body. There are Imperial forces still holding positions to the north of us, so be aware there are friendlies ahead. As soon as we clear a path to the Armaments District, I will signal the Thunderhawks. Advance on a bearing of zero three six degrees. Questions?'

None. They were Space Marines, and this kind of thing they could do in their sleep. Kerne smiled inside his helm.

'Lead off.'

Reports came filtering over the vox as the Hunters advanced. Kerne flicked between his own company net and that of the Thunderhawks who were cruising high above on overwatch. They monitored the advance of their brethren on the ground and the enemy positions ahead. There was a brisk, heavy fight in the skies as the gunships took on a flight of Doomfires that rose up to meet them, but every one of the Chaos craft were shot down without loss.

Brother Simarron came over the vox. 'Captain, the enemy seems to have constructed an extensive airstrip outside the city walls, on the plains to the west. At least two dozen enemy craft are on the ground there, refitting and refuelling. Permission for the gunships to engage.'

'Granted,' Kerne said. 'Destroy the airstrip and all enemy craft, then return to station.'

'Artillery,' Fornix said beside him. 'Ours, I think. Heavy guns.'

They could see the flashes up ahead through the murk and smoke. They seemed to be up in the air.

'It must be the citadel batteries,' Brother Malchai said.

The Dark Hunters marched north across the broken wreck of Askai. They encountered shell-holes and trench lines full of the enemy, which were ruthlessly destroyed. At least a dozen heavy weapons emplacements were overrun. In some of them the Punishers were manning captured Imperial ordnance.

The Haradai went ahead of the main body in their cameleoline-painted carapaces and cam-cloaks, flitting from cover to cover, their sniper rifles dealing out swift and accurate death.

Before the line-squads even appeared, the Scouts had chewed up every enemy unit they had encountered. They were the light infantry of the Chapter, and every marine served his time in the Haradai until he was promoted into the line companies. But for some, who had a taste for it, the Haradai remained their home throughout their career.

This was a feature that as far as Kerne knew was unique to the Dark Hunters Chapter. There were brethren in the Haradai with a century of experience who preferred the sniper rifle and the ghost-like warfare of the Scout Company to the bolter and power armour of Mortai, or Haroun, or Novus. It had become part of the Chapter's ethos to field a strong force of Scout Marines in any conflict, and it was not unknown for some in the line companies to go back to the Haradai for several months.

Fornix had spent two years back with the Scouts during the Gulbec war, only a few years ago. He was fast friends with Fell Ambros, captain of the Haradai, and the two worked well together. But even in the Dark Hunters, his action had been seen as eccentric in the extreme, and Jord Malchai had opposed it.

'How did you link up with Orsus?' Kerne asked his first sergeant.

'After the landing I found myself lying flat on my back with one of the drop pod hatches on top of me – thank the Emperor for this.' Fornix raised and opened the power fist on the end of one arm.

'Brother Kass was not five metres from me, and he was able to detect the psychic footprint of our brethren through this soup of dust, which was just as well, because all my vox and infra systems were scrambled. I was as blind as a Phobian bat in a snowstorm.'

Kass and Malchai were behind them, walking side by side. Kerne had his own questions about Brother Kass, questions raised during the boarding action, but this was no place to voice them.

Brother-Sergeant Laufey of the Haradai came on the vox.

'Command, this is Hunter Three.'

'Command. Send, over,' Kerne said.

'Armaments District wall eighty metres to my front, manned by what looks like Imperial infantry. Shall I attempt comms with them, captain?'

'Affirmative. Let them know which way we are coming in, brother, and tell them to shift fire with that damned artillery. It's starting to impact close to our rear. I am sending you the coordinates.'

He blinked on the numberpad he had called up inside his helm, his eyes flicking from it, to the map overlay, and then the tactical readout.

All the while, he was monitoring the newly discovered Imperial net that Dietrich had turned up on, listening in on the activity of the Thunderhawk squadrons overhead, and in the world outside his helm he was scanning his lines of warriors as they advanced through the ruins and assessing their progress and formations.

No human mind could have assimilated so much information, digested it and reacted to it with the same pitiless efficiency that a captain of the Adeptus Astartes brought to the process. For Kerne, it was not even much of a conscious effort, no more than walking or breathing. It was what he had been created to do.

He called up Dietrich again. But it was a strange voice on the vox which answered him this time.

'This is Commissar Ismail Von Arnim of the 387th Armoured. I am de facto second in command of Imperial Guard forces on this planet.'

'Where is Dietrich?'

'My lord, he is in the gun-caverns, coordinating our fireplan.'

'Very well. Shift your fire south, commissar, and notify your forces in the Armaments District that a half-company of Adeptus Astartes is about to enter their lines. We will proceed through them, and clear the way to the citadel. Once that is done, our Thunderhawks will begin direct assault on any enemy positions you flag up for us.

'I want a perimeter cleared from my position all the way to the citadel. By darkness I intend to hold that perimeter in strength, in readiness for further operations during the night. Do you understand?'

'Perfectly, my lord. And may I say what an honour–'

'Kerne out.' Jonah cut the vox. There was no time for self-congratulation, and he did not relish, the way some Adeptus Astartes did, the awe in which normal humans held his kind.

'Command, this is Hawk One.'

'Send, over.'

It was Simarron. 'Attack on enemy airstrip going in now, captain. Six gunships.'

'Acknowledged. Burn them, brother. Burn them into the ground.'

Kerne felt a great impatience well up in him. That, along with his temper, he had fought to rein in for decades.

Whatever had happened here, the worst of it was over – the storm had passed. The forces of the Great Enemy might have been enough to overwhelm the Imperial Guard and the pitiful human militia of this world, but against the Dark Hunters they had no hope of victory. His brothers were grinding them under their feet.

He was disappointed. He had been hoping for more.

Both the Imperial Guard and the Punisher warbands were lacking in infared equipment for their infantry, and had been for some time. In the last several weeks nightfall had brought about a lull in combat operations, and apart from the incessant skirmishing of patrols, and the odd night assault, the dark hours had been the quietest of the war.

All this now changed.

The Dark Hunters did not pause, or regroup, or stop to consolidate. As the day died, and the Kargad System's dull star went down in the banks of dun-coloured cloud, so the tempo of combat operations actually picked up.

Mortai split up into squads, and began fanning out across the city, slaughtering any Punisher forces

they came across. The Thunderhawks landed the rest of the company in diverse locations across Askai and these squads began working their way through the broken urban wasteland metre by metre, supported by the gunships.

When heavier resistance was met, the Hawks dropped ten-bomb sticks of rosaries upon it, and then chewed up the stunned enemy with chain-guns.

And in their wake, the line-squads advanced inexorably, groups of armoured giants who never wearied, who never broke or hesitated or retreated. The Dark Hunters had a long memory of hatred to work off against these, their bitterest foes.

The hordes of Punisher cultists, and the scattered squads of Chaos Space Marines which had been left behind to stiffen their ranks could not withstand that cold, clinical precision, that economy of death. All across the fifty-kilometre length of Ras Hanem's ruined capital, all through the night and into the bloody dawn of the next day, the Dark Hunters did their work, and nothing could withstand them.

And in the shadows, when the Chaos bands had broken and run, they found no shelter in bunkers or trenches, for the Scout Marines of Haradai harassed them without mercy, dropping Chaos champions with headshots from the long sniper rifles of their calling, picking off all those who tried to rally their fellows, bringing down the veterans who carried banners and heavy weapons, and banishing all notions of rest or safety from the bewildered enemy.

Kerne lost nine battle-brothers in the first thirty-six hours of the city-wide assault, but the Punishers died in their unmourned thousands.

They finally broke, and ran for the bridges, the gates. They hid in holes and half-ruined cellars. But they were burned and blasted out of every hiding place.

It went on all of that day, and continued into a second night of ceaseless slaughter without rest or pause.

The Thunderhawks touched down to resupply the scattered squads of Space Marines, and then took off again in moments to circle again, like vultures of Old Earth circling a dying prey.

A wind came up out of the desert to the east, clearing the air and revealing a vast sky brimful of stars, intensely bright and clear to those in the darkened city below.

The *Ogadai* was one of those stars, the brightest, holding over Askai in geostationary orbit. Nothing challenged the huge Dark Hunters cruiser and its surviving escorts. The skies belonged to the Imperium now.

Finally, the last coherent elements of the Punishers made a grand, concerted effort to charge the citadel, out of sheer desperation if no tactical sense.

On the ruined landing pads of the spaceport, Kerne's warriors finally stood aside while the heavy Imperial guns of the looming fortress barked out a howling litany of hate, and immolated whole regiments of the Great Enemy, the last surviving formations of any size in the city.

And when they were broken into ragged, bleeding ribbons, the citadel gates opened for the first time in many days. As the sun came up, a single Baneblade roared forth, followed by half a dozen Leman Russes and a few gawky Sentinels, spitting las-fire. They were all General Dietrich had left, but he launched them into the battle without hesitation.

Inside the tanks the gaunt, red-eyed troopers of the 387th Armoured Regiment of the Imperial Guard loaded the main guns and the heavy anti-personnel weapons and set finger to trigger with the dark fury of men who have endured too much, who have lost all instincts save those of hate and destruction.

The last of the enemy were ground to scarlet bloody paste by the armoured treads of Dietrich's surviving tanks.

The Space Marines stood by and let the Imperial Guard have their moment, and allowed them to enjoy their unfettered rage. These men, mere humans, had after all been fighting in this charnel house for months, and they had a long list of scores to settle. The armoured vehicles were all manned by veterans now, and the mechanical behemoths wheeled and fired like part of the men who manned them. It was, in its way, a beautiful sight, for those who appreciated such things.

Fornix unhelmed and wiped his glistening forehead as the rare bright light of the sun rose upon it. He stood beside Jonah Kerne and watched the Imperials relish the last of the mopping up. Hundreds had now debussed from a line of battle-worn Chimeras in a mix of guard green and militia grey, and they were at close quarters now, fighting like men possessed.

'They do make heavy weather out of it, don't they?' he said lightly.

'From what I hear, they faced far worse than we found, in the early days of the war. The initial assault was heavy enough, but then something happened. The enemy withdrew most of his best troops, leaving just enough here to keep Dietrich and his men bottled up.'

Kerne was frowning with thought. 'I've been in touch with Massaron on the *Ogadai*, and there are only scattered remnants of the Punishers on the rest of the planet, no more than marauding bands. And their fleet has fled the entire system. Or so it seems.'

'Or so it seems,' Fornix repeated. He sighed. 'Not much glory in it after all, Jonah.'

'There seldom is, brother.'

Kerne had not even presented the company banner for a battle-brother to carry, so unworthy did this fight seem of its unfurling. It had remained in its case.

He admired the mettle of the Ras Hanem defenders, but they were not Adeptus Astartes, and as Fornix said, they made heavy weather out of the mere act of killing.

Three days after the Dark Hunters landed, the last surviving remnants of the Punisher hordes which had once overrun the city were wiped out.

They died under the eyes of the silent Space Marines, who had been ordered by Jonah Kerne to stand down and let the Imperial Guard have this moment as their own. As flawed as their efforts had been, they had been valiant, and deserved this sop to their pride, Kerne had decided.

So it was that as the last artillery rounds fell, and the snapping of lasguns finally died out, the fighting men of Ras Hanem stared across the scarred, body-strewn, blood-reeking battlefield, and saw standing on the other side of it the silent giants of the Adeptus Astartes, dark under their dust, faceless in their savage helms, like creatures from another world and time.

Two men came walking wearily towards them through the powdered dirt and the rubble and steaming body parts, one tall and bone-lean with the tattered peaked cap of the Commissariat on his head, and sunken murderer's eyes, the other broad and muscular with a pale, hairless scalp. They drew themselves up before Kerne and Fornix, and saluted.

'I am General Pavul Dietrich,' the stocky, bald one said. 'Officer commanding the garrison of Ras Hanem. I hereby relinquish command of this city to you, my lord captain, and entrust this planet to

your care.'

He had a deep, tired stare that had seen a lot of killing, but the man was still there behind the death and desperation and the utter weariness. Kerne took off his helm, and tasted the iron reek of blood on the air, the tang of munitions launched and expended by the million. It was an old and familiar smell. He had known it all his long life.

'General, I am most glad to meet you.'

The general and his commissar looked up at the towering captain of the Adeptus Astartes, and met his eyes a mere moment, then went to one knee. Behind them, by ones and twos and then in squads and companies, their men followed suit, until the scattered lines of soldiers were all on their knees, heads bowed.

'We thank you, your mighty brethren, and the munificence of the Emperor himself for our deliverance,' the commissar, Von Arnim said, with real reverence in his voice.

Kerne stepped forward and took Dietrich gently by the shoulder. 'Rise, general. Brave men have no need to kneel, not before me and mine.'

Dietrich looked up at that, and there was a broken light in his eyes, catching the sun. He rose to his feet, and behind him the defenders of Askai rose with him, and the sunlight lit them up, making giants out of their shadows.

FIFTEEN

In Fragminis

The Thunderhawks were patrolling the skies like lean black raptors, something hungry in their box-shaped airframes. Dietrich stared out at them from the balcony over which Riedling's body had once been thrown. The governor's death seemed a very long time ago now.

There were over a thousand square kilometres of ruined buildings down below.

The hive-scrapers were burned out at last, and the wholesome wind of the cool season was blowing steadily through the shattered city, clearing the air somewhat. It was possible to look east and see the sere lowlands beyond Askai and the dry bed of the Koi River, even catch a glimpse of the blue-shadowed Koi-Niro Mountains far to the east.

As though the world and its possibilities had opened up for him again.

It was an odd feeling, not to have death breathing at his shoulder. Odder still to miss the crump of artillery and crack of small arms. The city was silent, exhausted, broken down. It reeked of decay, even now, and in the ruins legions of rats and giant centipedes and packs of wild, pot-bellied canines were still gorging themselves on a harvest of corpses, many of the bodies reduced to skeletal fragments by now through the fury of the fighting.

But we held, Dietrich thought. That is the main thing. We did not give in, and we did not give up. That is victory – this, here, the stench of death on the wind, is victory.

He was too tired to savour it. He felt as though he would need a year of dreamless sleep to catch up on all he had lost.

And all his men, who had been fed into the storm of war, feeding that furnace. Lars Dyson was dead, and the entire bodyguard with him except Garner, now promoted to lieutenant. His magnificent regiment was a mere shell.

But we saved a world, he thought.

He turned around and drew himself up. Even after all these years in the service of the Imperium, to stand in close proximity to the Adeptus Astartes shook something in his core. Space Marines were like things out of fable and myth. A man might serve out his entire career in the Guard without ever encountering one, as Dietrich had.

And now they were here in this room with him, dark, brooding angels, more than men, more like a

legend brought to life out of some ancient storybook and set down for lesser beings to marvel at.

They were frightening, with their long, almost equine skulls and massive-boned features, and pitiless eyes. Their uncovered faces were more unsettling than the savage lineaments of their massive helmets. One could hardly meet their gaze, and when one did, it seemed they looked deep into the soul of a man, weighing him on the scales of their own puissance and finding him wanting.

Dietrich respected them, admired them and feared them. But aside from that he could not relate to them – they seemed to exist on some different level of reality, one in which he was barely able to register.

They were the Angels of Death, and they looked it.

Their captain, Jonah Kerne, was looking down on the table at the old-fashioned map Marshal Veigh had once shown Dietrich and Von Arnim in this very room. In the months since then, the map had been updated hundreds of times, but they had kept it current, because the power failures had rendered electronic record-keeping unreliable.

In the last few weeks, tactical readouts had become a thing of memory; they had gone back to the technology of their forefathers, and marked up maps of paper, plasment and even vellum, ripped from the ancient tomes of the palace library.

They had instituted a series of semaphore stations on the citadel and in the Armaments District as their vox frequencies succumbed to jamming, and at times they had been reduced to sending despatches by runner, harkening back to the dawn of warfare.

But it had sufficed – just – to hold together the dwindling, fragmented defence.

Now the generators were being turned on again, the solar panels on the side of the citadel – those that had survived – were once more being cranked by hand out of their protective housings, and there was electric light here in the audience chamber, where before they had burned torches and candles.

But the city below was still without mains water or power, and the only food to be had was decaying carrion. Even in the Armaments District, there had been rumours of cannibalism among the munitions workers.

'We estimate that since the drop, we have slain some seventeen thousand of the enemy,' the Adeptus Astartes captain was saying. 'There are still pockets of cultists here and there in the city – the hive-scrapers house quite a few – but they have no hope of being more than a nuisance. In a few days we will begin the cleansing of the rest of the planet, but from what my people in orbit tell me, that will prove little more than a mopping-up operation. General Dietrich,' Kerne's stone-dark eyes met his own. 'What is left in the way of defenders on Ras Hanem?'

Dietrich retrieved a scrap of grubby paper from his pocket and peered at it. 'I have three hundred men left of my original command, nine main battle tanks in various states of repair, including two Baneblades, various other light armour to the total of some two skeleton companies.'

He looked up. 'Our mobile artillery was all destroyed, as were our Hydras. They sought those out especially. As far as the Hanemites go, out of a total of some five divisions, we have one understrength battle-group remaining, some six thousand men, with almost no heavy weapons. In the citadel also are almost four thousand wounded.'

Dietrich put the paper away. He met Ismail's eye and the commissar nodded, as though in approval.

'You made a good defence,' the Dark Hunters first sergeant said, a scalp-locked Space Marine named Fornix with one red-gleaming bionic eye. 'Your idea of linking up the citadel to the Armaments District saved you and the city.'

Then the Chaplain, Brother Malchai, spoke up, and there was something in his voice that made Dietrich's skin crawl.

'We have heard the story of the traitor Marshal Veigh. I rejoice, general, that your commissar behaved properly, but I will of course have to conduct my own investigation. The murder of a planetary governor is no light matter, and the Administratum will want a full report on the affair.'

Dietrich bowed slightly, the blood leaving his face.

'It seems to me,' Fornix said, 'that this Riedling was a liability to the defence.'

'That is irrelevant,' the Chaplain said, and Dietrich watched as he and the first sergeant held one another's gaze for a long moment.

'We all know how you love to send reports, Brother Malchai,' Fornix said with a sneer.

'Enough.' It was Jonah Kerne, an edge of anger in his voice. 'Our concern here and now is the strategic situation upon this world and within this system.'

Dietrich was startled to catch the undercurrents of hostility between these giants of the Imperium. It had never occurred to him before that Space Marines had their own arguments and rivalries, just as lesser men did.

After a pause, Jonah Kerne spoke again.

'Ras Hanem is saved, that much seems clear. The forces of Chaos were not here long enough to embed their filth in the very fabric of the planet–'

'We cannot yet know that,' Malchai interjected.

Kerne held his temper. 'Brother Kass, this is more in your province. What do your senses tell you?'

They all looked at the young epistolary. His psychic hood glowed slightly, a blue that matched the glow in his eyes.

'I am still conducting my own researches, brother-captain.'

'I suggest you accelerate your researches. You know what it means for the inhabitants of Ras Hanem if the taint of Chaos is proven to have taken root here.'

It would mean annihilation, the destruction of every living thing on the planet, down to the very microbes in the earth. And the sequestering of Dietrich's own men, until agents of the Inquisition could vet them one by one: a trial so severe that many would not survive it.

Dietrich knew that, and he felt the first stirrings of anger. He started to say something, but Von Arnim, reading his face, set a warning hand on his arm and he subsided.

'I know what it means,' Brother Kass said. He glanced at Dietrich.

He felt my anger, the general realised.

'Brother-captain, I have not thus far sensed any great taint of heresy upon this world, but I have felt the presence of something else. Something ancient and faint and deep buried, that I believe predates the Imperium's presence here.'

Kerne raised an eyebrow. 'Xenos?'

'Perhaps. Something I have not encountered before at any rate. And captain, there are other flashes of it now and again which are similar, but far more recent. I cannot help thinking that we are not alone on this world. There is another element at work here besides us and the lingering traces of the Chaos presence.'

'Could you be any less clear, brother?' Fornix asked with a snort.

'As the Chaos infestation recedes, this other element will become clearer to me, first sergeant,' Elijah Kass said. 'At this time, I cannot be more specific, no.'

Captain Kerne drummed his gauntleted fist heavily on the tabletop, like the mutter of a drum.

'What else can we give you in the way of resources to aid your research, Elijah?' he asked.

'I would be appreciative of Brother Malchai's assistance in this matter.'

There were cross-currents here, undertones of tension between these giant warriors. Dietrich was fascinated and disquieted by the realisation. Even the Emperor's elite had disagreements amongst themselves. Kerne and Malchai were looking at each other as if this were some sort of contest between them.

'Very well,' Kerne said tersely. 'Make it a priority. I do not want to spend time and treasure rebuilding a world which the Inquisition may yet find it necessary to cleanse.'

He straightened.

'Fornix, have three Hawks prepped. I want mixed squads in each – light, heavy and line. They are detailed to hunt down and destroy the last remnants of the Punishers across this planet. Three more Hawk gunships will be held in reserve down at the spaceport once the servitors have cleared a landing pad, with three line squads on immediate notice to move, as a general reserve. The rest of the squadrons will maintain an overwatch for now, and the gunships will stay on call until further notice. How are we for ammo and supplies?'

'A resupply shuttle is due from the *Ogadai* within the hour,' Fornix said.

'All brethren are to remain at maximum readiness. General Dietrich, do you require any technical help with matters inside this fortress?'

Dietrich started. 'Our own enginseers are recovering what they can of our vehicles, but we could do with some help on the Baneblades. We've located the hulks of three that may be salvageable.'

'I will second Brother Heinos, our Techmarine, and a detachment of servitors to your command. Scavenge whatever you can, and do your best to have the munition manufactoria run up to full production once more. I would rather we made our own munitions than have to rely on transports from the *Ogadai*.'

'Those people in the factoria need food and water more than anything else,' Dietrich said.

'My servitors will look into it. Fornix, I want mixed teams of gun-servitors and brother Space Marines patrolling the city. Every single cultist must be destroyed, every scrap of Chaos eradicated. I want this city made clean. Do you understand me?'

'Yes, brother-captain,' Fornix said at once, his face flat and neutral now.

'Brothers, general, we have a lot of work to do. You are all dismissed to your duties – we will speak again later. Brother Kass, you will remain behind if you please. I should like a word in private.'

They filed out of the soot-grimed, mud-tracked audience chamber where Riedling's gaudily caparisoned boy-bodyguards had once stood by the doors under a gilt ceiling. As the doors boomed shut, Jonah Kerne turned to his young Librarian.

'Brother Kass, I have been meaning to have a talk with you for some time.'

Elijah Kass bowed slightly. 'I expected as much.'

'You know then of the incident of which I mean to speak?'

'Yes, captain. The boarding action, when I felt the minds of the Great Enemy for the first time.'

'Indeed. Brother, it would be remiss of me not to tell you that your behaviour that day disquieted me.'

'I was somewhat disquieted myself,' Kass said with a smile. The smile faded as he caught the look

in Kerne's black eyes.

'The minions of Chaos,' he went on, 'are like mosquitoes in a darkened room – one can hear their ruined minds like a continual annoying whine, but after a time, one can tune them out. Chief Librarian Vennan taught me that, prepared me for it. I was ready for that, captain, truly I was.'

'This campaign was the first in which you have encountered the Great Enemy in any numbers,' Jonah Kerne stated.

'Yes, captain. Before this, it was the human pirates of the Gulbec war, or the childlike malevolence of the ork. The cultists, I could dismiss like the insects they are, but I was shocked to encounter the minds of those who had – who had–' He seemed almost unable to continue.

'Who had once been Adeptus Astartes, such as us,' Kerne finished for him.

'Yes. It was a profound shock to find in those twisted wrecks of intellect, the core of knowledge and will which is common to all of our Adept. It had been warped into something vile, but there was still something recognisable there.'

'It is the reason for the great hatred we feel for those who followed the Heresy into darkness,' Kerne told him. 'We hate them not only because they are purely evil, not just because of the Great Betrayal that they perpetrated and which almost brought the whole Imperium down.

'We hate them most of all because at times, we can glimpse in them a facet of ourselves.'

'Yes!' Kass agreed, his blue eyes flashing. 'That is what I felt. I had not expected to feel that – it was almost a kind of grief.'

'Forget the grief – concentrate on the hate,' Kerne growled.

'I know that now, captain. But there is one other thing, something I have been meaning to draw back to your attention in the last few days. Something else I felt while standing on the hull of that Punisher destroyer.'

He paused, and looked down at his hands. The blue gauntlets opened into palms, and then closed into fists, as though he were trying to grasp something indefinable.

'Our foes on this world and in this system were not some ragged conglomeration of warbands, drawn together at random. They were a coherent whole. All those minds were gripped by an idea which brought them together, and it was not mindless hate, such as we have encountered in this city since we landed. It was directed, measured, implacable.

'Captain, somewhere out there, in this system, or perhaps beyond it now, there is a single directing will which had planned all this. I felt an echo of it during the boarding action – and even then it was far away, and receding further.'

'I am sorry to hear that. I would have liked to look upon this leader of Chaos,' Kerne said. 'Such champions spring up in the ranks of the Great Enemy eternally, Brother Kass. Daemon princes, warlords, black sorcerers of great subtlety and power. I met them and contended with them before you were born. I am not surprised to find that it was so in this system also. I only want to make sure that you are capable of dealing with the psychic shock of such encounters.'

'I am, now,' Kass said earnestly. 'Forewarned is forearmed, captain. I shall know what to expect next time.

'But what I meant to tell you – and I have been thinking about this ever since – is that this single, guiding intelligence did not feel alien at all to me.

'It felt like the mind of a battle-brother.'

Out in the dark and ruin of Askai below, a creature detached itself from the deep shadow of the ruined hive-scraper and flowed across the rubble-strewn roadway. Seconds later, three more like it rippled in its wake.

They were hard to look upon, but if they remained still for more than a few moments, then it was possible to decipher an outline of interference in the normal range of vision, like a heat-shimmer caught out of the corner of the eye.

A series of clicks, interlocked with a flowing sing-song; it was not mere noise, but a strangely melodic language. One which no human being had ever spoken.

'It is here, my sister, up ahead. The entrance to the way below is calling to me – I can feel its song even from here.'

'The place has the look of one of their fortresses,' another shape said.

'It is guarded,' put in a third.

'No *mon-keigh* watcher can catch sight of us, hearts of my heart.'

'The armoured fanatics are here – I can smell them. They can see us – nay, they can even sense us. I have known it before. We must go with extra care here, Callinall.'

'I know it.' The speaker hissed slightly. 'I smell their reek as clear as you do, Vorporis.'

'We can scale the wall, but there are untold numbers of them within – thousands. We will not evade them all – I state this as fact, my sister.'

Again, the hiss. It was anger and disgust and disappointment all in one.

'What say you, then, shall we attempt it?'

'It cannot be done without alerting the *mon-keigh*, and we are under orders above all not to reveal ourselves.'

'Then so be it. But are we agreed that what the farseer suspects is true?'

'It is. I can hear it calling – the song is faint, and so, so old and deep. But it is here.'

They all bowed their heads, in reverence and something approaching grief.

'Then we shall return to the *Brae-Kaithe*, and make the news known. My sisters and brothers, it is not for us to recover this precious thing. For now it is enough that we have established its presence.'

'How can the *mon-keigh* not suspect?' one of them asked in disbelief.

'They are mere animals. They know nothing of the true universe they walk upon – one might as well expect a plant to be able to read.'

Dark laughter.

'Let us go, my dear ones. Back to the ship while we still have the night to cloak us. The farseer, may Gea bless her, will know what to do.'

The group of rippling shadows moved again, as soundless as felines of Old Earth, almost invisible.

They waited once while a patrol passed, composed of clanking monstrosities with caterpillar tracks and the faces of the *mon-keigh* combined, a monstrosity of flesh and machine, and a pair of the giant warriors the *mon-keigh* knew as Space Marines, the most feared of all adversaries.

Then they sidled through the ruins again, as silent as the dust, to the hidden ship which awaited them beyond the walls.

SIXTEEN

Latitat in Umbram

‘They have returned,’ Te Mirah said.

Brothers and sisters, I give you greeting.

Love, and exultation, and baffled anger, all mixed. A mission of both failure and success.

She blessed the ranger team in her mind as she stood upon Steerledge. Callinall was on her way to her, but she knew the tidings the ranger veteran would bring. It was not so different from anything she had expected, but even the emotional gist of it filled her with hope and dismay in the same measure.

‘It is real, Ainoc,’ she breathed. ‘Anandaiah was correct. That blasted waste they now call Ras Hanem – it was Vol-Aimoi once. It was ours.’ She bowed her head.

The tall warlock was radiating anger. ‘And now they squabble across its holy expanse like children fighting over a broken toy.’

Steerledge was as quiet and serene as ever, but now there was a thrumming undercurrent on the great command space of the *Brae-Kaithe*. An inchoate hope that Te Mirah had not sensed in her people for a long time.

The wraithbone doors opened, and in strode Callinall, still besmirched with the dust and filth of the place she had lately been. She bent and kissed the farseer’s hand. The ranger had thrown back her hood, and the concealment field which she had worn on the surface of Ras Hanem was switched off, the stones on her belt dull. She was a tall, impossibly slim figure in a hooded cloak with a long shuriken rifle slung at her back. Her face was a lean white triangle with brilliant stones for eyes, and a mouth as cruel as the blade of a knife.

‘My lady, it is there, the thing we have dreamed on for a hundred generations. I would wager my life on it.’ Her voice rang around Steerledge.

Te Mirah held up a hand. ‘I must know all, every moment’s detail, Callinall.’

‘My people sensed it even as we landed. It is deep buried, down in the warm dark of that unhappy world, but it still lives. Lady, somewhere in the bowels of the planet an Infinity Circuit of our people is hidden, one of the greatest relics of our race.’

‘You must be sure, Callinall,’ Ainoc said, his face as set and hard as the wraithbone of the *Brae-Kaithe*. The tall sword at his back quivered with the tension in his taut frame and the warlock’s eyes

flashed with cold light.

'I cannot be mistaken, my lord. It called to us like a song, like music in the bone.' Callinall's face was transfigured by joy as she spoke. 'It was all we could do to tear ourselves away from that music.'

'The *Brae-Kaithe* has heard it too,' Te Mirah said gently. 'Our ship listens to her lost mother, and keens for her.'

'With an Infinity Circuit, one could build a new craftworld entire, another beginning for tens of thousands of our people whose souls reside within it,' Ainoc said. He looked down at his long-fingered hands with the blue nails, and for a moment they came together in prayer. 'Khaine, red father in our blood, give us strength.'

'The *mon-keigh* have driven off their ancient enemy,' Callinall went on. 'The warrior fanatics of their elite now hold the capital in force, and are reordering things at their leisure. The fighting has ended.'

'For now,' Te Mirah murmured.

'The Circuit is buried deep in the fabric of the planet – that is how it has remained undetected so long. But the *mon-keigh* have been mining there for many of their solar cycles, and they have come close to uncovering it – it is for this reason that we hear it calling so clearly.

'My lady, I believe the way is open – the humans have delved so deep in their greed for ore and alloy that they have come close to the hiding place of the Circuit. This recent war has set back their operations – it could be months, even years by their reckoning of time ere they discover it, but discover it they will, eventually.'

Callinall's face twisted with disgust. 'There is a psyker in their ranks, a powerful, well-trained one whose mind touched upon us briefly as we infiltrated the city–'

'You were discovered?' Ainoc barked.

'I believe not, my lord – not directly – but we may have kindled a suspicion in the thing's mind.'

'Time runs against us,' Te Mirah said. She turned, and walked across the white expanse of Steerledge with her sigilled and gem-studded cloak trailing after her, ignoring the eldar crew who stroked the control stones at their stations, whose minds were a murmur at the back of her own.

'What about the entrance to these mines? How well guarded is it?' Ainoc demanded.

Callinall's face fell. 'It resides in a heavily fortified section of the city where the bulk of their manufactoria reside,' she said. 'Aside from their citadel, it is the most frequently patrolled location in their lines. And there is more.

'The war exterminated most of the population, but many thousands of that rabble were driven underground by the fighting and subsisted in the mines while it lasted. There are still hordes of the things underground, infesting the very shafts and passageways we would have to take in order to reach the Circuit.'

'As a warrior – as a ranger, Callinall,' Te Mirah said, 'how do you assess our chances of infiltrating these mines, and exfiltrating undetected?'

Callinall bent her head, something like a silent snarl crossing her narrow face.

'I must speak against my heart. The chance is almost non-existent, my lady. I do not believe it can be done.'

'It does not mean we cannot try,' Ainoc exploded. 'Khaine's wrath, we cannot sit to one side and watch the *mon-keigh* rape one of the most treasured and valuable remnants of our past, an artefact

which is the key to the birth of an entire new world! Te Mirah, let me–'

'Enough,' the farseer said sharply, holding up one hand.

There was silence on Steerledge. Te Mirah glided over to the massive shielded viewport. She looked out upon the dark side of a small moon, one of the many in the Kargad system that now lay scourged and lifeless after the legions of the Great Enemy had passed across it. But its bulk shielded her beloved ship from the prying augurs of the Imperium.

It did so now – it could not do so forever.

Time, ticking past her, robbing them all of this glorious discovery, this opportunity beyond price. It could not be borne, the loss of something so precious, when her exiled race had already lost so much.

'There is something else,' she said, turning around to Ainoc and Callinall. 'Something I have not yet shared with you, but which has impressed itself upon my senses ever more clearly in the last few turns of shipday.

'We are under even greater constraints than you might suppose, my warriors. Callinall, you say the fighting has ended, that the Great Enemy has been driven from the surface of the planet.'

Callinall nodded.

'You are right. But my mind and that of the *Brae-Kaithe* looks beyond one planet, one system. It ranges far out into the void, and even unto the dark shadows of the immaterium itself. The warp is still in flux, as restless as a pot on the boil. I see things approaching which are not yet manifest, events to come which are set in space and time as though they were history already written.

'This war is not over. The Great Enemy retreated from the planet and this system as a deliberate ploy. He was not driven out – he withdrew of his own accord, to suck in the forces of the Imperium and let them believe they had victory in their hands.

'They are profoundly wrong. It approaches out of the warp, my dearly beloved, like a black star. A vast armada of the night, it is only an eye's blink away from us, on the other side of the curtain which separates our galaxy from the chaos and evil of the warp. And it will be here soon.

'The Imperial forces on the planet they name Ras Hanem are doomed. Against that which is coming, even the much-vaunted Adeptus Astartes of their Emperor cannot prevail.'

'An ambush,' Ainoc said, and his face twisted with conflicting emotions.

'Yes.'

'Then we must move quickly, before it is too late.'

'It is already too late.' Te Mirah walked up and down, her cloak catching the light of Steerledge in myriad glitters, as though it were bedecked with stars.

'We must try another way, more dangerous, requiring more patience – and your forbearance, Ainoc.'

'I will try anything which redeems the Infinity Circuit from the hands of those animals,' Ainoc said.

'Even if it means making an attempt to negotiate with those animals?'

Ainoc was speechless.

'Farseer, I do not understand,' Callinall, the ranger, said.

'We have cooperated with them in the past, when it has suited our purposes. As barbarous as they are, they are not creatures of the warp, and on occasion they can be reasoned with.'

'They cannot be trusted – they are fanatics who wish to see our kind swept out of the stars,' Ainoc said hotly.

'Agreed. But they are not without some intellectual subtlety, when it suits them.'

‘Do you think you can persuade them to simply hand over the Infinity Circuit?’ Ainoc asked.

‘I believe that when they are placed in a dire enough situation, they are more willing to negotiate in the sheer fight for survival. If we can somehow insinuate ourselves into their decision-making process, then we may well have the time and space allowed to reach our goal without fighting a hopeless battle.

‘The hopeless battles, Ainoc, we shall leave to them.’

She smiled. ‘There is one approaching. When they are weak enough, and desperate enough, they will be willing to listen, and our presence will be less of an anathema to them – believe me, I have seen it before. Even the Adeptus Astartes have worked with our people in the past.’

‘They will betray us,’ Ainoc said, shaking his head.

‘Perhaps, but my dearly beloved,’ Te Mirah strode up to Ainoc and took his face in her hands.

‘What other choice do we have?’

SEVENTEEN

Miles Mortuus est

Tomas Massaron stifled a yawn. The fleet-ensign snapped to attention before him with all the enthusiasm of the young and handed him the data-slate. He studied the lists and thumbed each one.

His flag lieutenant stood to one side, scanning the towering monitors and glancing now and then through the viewports at the bright ochre-coloured sphere of the planet turning below. Around them, the servitors of the command dais muttered to themselves in binaric and broken threads of Low Gothic. In one corner, Enginseer Miranich extended a fleshless metal arm and plugged into a console. The senior servitor nodded, grunted, and then withdrew the limb.

'Transport away, shipmaster,' he said, his artificial voice box flattening the words.

Massaron nodded at the young ensign, handing back the text-tab.

'I sometimes wonder if Captain Kerne means to transport the entire *Ogadai* planetside piece by piece, Rob,' he said to his lieutenant.

'He has a world to make secure, sir,' the lieutenant said. 'I don't suppose there's much down there that survived the war.'

Massaron smiled. 'Correct answer, Lieutenant Gershon. Still, at least he has the manufactoria down there in some sort of order now. If he had wanted yet more munitions from our own little operation, I believe we might well have had to start cannibalising the ship.'

'It's true we are running very low on raw materials, sir. I have had to postpone routine maintenance on sections three-four-six and seven.'

Massaron raised his head, calculating. 'That's the starboard hatches where we took out the lasburners to make room to extend the flight-deck. Yes, there was some very old stuff in there.'

'The maintenance will be delayed some five days, sir – they're sending up raw materials from the Armaments District next week. Shall I reschedule?'

'No. Their need is greater than ours at present, Rob. But keep it in mind.' He slapped the console beside him. 'This old warrior needs constant watching.'

A flash on the vox display. A servitor tapped thin pointed fingers into the tiny rounded buttons there. 'Priority receipt. Stand by.'

Massaron took the call, looking at the callsign on the board. It was from *Arbion*.

‘Diez, this is the flag, send, over.’

‘Shipmaster, we are halfway through our patrol and are getting some strange readings on augur in the vicinity of the Dardrek moon.’

‘Define *strange*, Diez.’

‘That’s the problem, sir. It seems to be some kind of spatial disturbance. There’s nothing rockcrete on augur, but there is a massive energy bloom in that area. Shall I investigate?’

A chill felt its way about Massaron’s heart.

‘Negative. Stand off from the phenomenon and observe only. Diez, could it be a ship coming out of warp?’

‘That was my first thought, sir, but the disturbance is too vast to be something like that – it’s fully half the size of the moon. My navigator speculates that it may be some kind of anomaly, a warp-boil about to burst.’

‘Stand well clear of it and keep me informed,’ Massaron said.

‘Affirmative. *Arbion* out.’

Diez was a capable commander who had been shipmaster of *Arbion* for five years, but his combat experience was limited. More than that, he had not been as long in space as Massaron had.

There were many strange phenomena in the void, few of them documented with any scientific clarity.

The strangest encounters were usually investigated by the Inquisition, who had no interest in the physics of what they saw, only the implications it held for Imperial orthodoxy. As a result, many shipmasters chose not to report some of the odder things they chanced across in their travels.

This might well be one more of those events. But Massaron did not like it, all the same.

He tugged at his lower lip, his gaze ranging across the flickering screens and data-monitors of his beloved ship.

It might be nothing – it probably was nothing. But the *Ogadai* had not survived this long because its shipmasters were complacent men.

Dardrek was three days away at normal cruising speed, but at full sub-warp velocity it could be reached in as little as eighteen hours. That was a very slim margin for error in Massaron’s book.

His voice changed as he spoke, becoming harder. ‘Cancel the next transport to the surface. Begin ignition sequence on main engines. All gun battery crews to their posts. Voidsunder crews are to end maintenance duties at once and ready weapons for firing.’

He paused. Well, it would be a good practice, even if nothing came of it. To get his ship from hatches-open maintenance-mode to battle readiness in the shortest time. But he knew he had to stagger the orders.

‘All compartments, crew to your stations. I say again, all compartments, crew to your stations.’

The flag lieutenant, alarmed, spoke up. ‘Sir, do you mean to go to battle stations?’

‘Not yet, lieutenant. We have too many key personnel scattered about the ship – it’ll be mayhem down on the decks if we go red right now. But as soon as they are in place I want battle stations sounded.’

‘Is it a drill, sir?’

He looked at the vox panel. No word yet from *Arbion*.

‘This is no drill, Rob. Vox, get me Captain Kerne on the planet.’

The servitor trickled its metal fingers over its board. Then it did so again. There was an edge of

almost human puzzlement in its voice as it spoke.

'Shipmaster, vox is… ineffective. There is considerable interference. Will attempt again.'

Massaron leaned over the console. 'What kind of interference?'

'Shipmaster,' Miranich spoke up. 'Massive energy bloom detected eleven thousand kilometres off our port side.'

Lieutenant Gershon was peering at the cascading figures on the screens in front of him. He cursed, and looked up with wild eyes.

'Ship coming out of the warp right on top of us, sir. She's got to be–'

The entire massive length of the *Ogadai* shuddered and shook, groaning, the ship's ancient frames creaking under the impact of a massive ripple in space.

'Augur, tell me what it is,' Massaron said. 'Rob, sound battle stations.'

'Sir, an Oberon class battleship of unknown origin has materialised out of the warp eleven thousand kilometres away and is now launching torpedoes. I count fifteen – twenty – twenty-five inbound at eleven thousand kilometres and counting.'

'He has Voidsunders in his broadside – they're powering up,' Gershon said. His voice was shaking with shock.

Emperor's blood, who could that be?

'The enemy,' Massaron said grimly. 'Con, bring the ship about ninety degrees to port – get our own lances pointing at the bastard and reduce our profile. Port broadside torpedo bays – do you read me?'

A voice on the shipboard vox. 'Yes, sir.'

'Launch them as they bear, Lieutenant Tribo. Every tube you've got.'

'Aye, sir.'

'Put me shipwide.' Massaron cleared his throat.

'This is the shipmaster speaking. We are being engaged by a capital ship at ten thousand kilometres. Enemy torpedoes are inbound. All stations and compartments, do your duty to the Dark Hunters and to the Emperor. My comrades, it is for days like this that we wear Hunters blue, and it is for days like this that we have trained all our lives. I know you will not let me down.'

He clicked off the receiver himself, and then elbowed a servitor aside and punched up the inter-ship vox. '*Beynish*, do you read?'

'Yes, sir.' The other Dark Hunters destroyer was on station fifty thousand kilometres out, on patrol.

'Clem, take to the warp at once. Get back to Phobian. Let them know that it was a trap. We have an Oberon class to fight here, and Emperor knows what else is coming.'

'Sir, I will not–'

'You will obey orders, Clem. Get out of here, back to the Chapter. They must know of this at once – do you hear?'

'Torpedoes at four thousand kilometres,' Gershon was saying. Sweat was pouring off his face as he scanned the readouts. 'Countermeasures launched.'

'Good luck, Clem,' Massaron said. 'Above all else, you must get through – do you–'

The vox link was cut with a squawk of piercing static. Massaron winced. 'Miranich, what just happened? Get me linked to the *Beynish* again.'

The enginseer was curt and emotionless. 'The vessel *Beynish* has been lost on augur, but there are now three sword-class signatures at its last known location. The new signatures do not possess Imperial codes. Energy readings from that area of space suggest that the *Beynish* has been destroyed.'

Massaron staggered slightly, and steadied himself by holding onto the console.

'Torpedoes two thousand kilometres out, impact in fifteen seconds.' Gershon sounded as hoarse as a crow. 'Countermeasures away.'

'*Ogadai*, this is *Arbion* – come in, flag!'

'Yes, Diez,' Massaron said, calmly, but with eyes shut.

'Sir, a massive enemy fleet has come out of warp eighteen thousand kilometres from the Dardrek moon. I am seeing heavy cruisers, Mars class battlecruisers, and dozens of transports. It is a Punisher fleet, sir, an armada the likes of which I've never seen before.'

'Save yourself, Diez. Get home if you can,' Massaron said quietly.

And then: 'Voidsunders, fire one and two.'

'Torpedoes – brace for impact!' Gershon shouted, eyes wide.

The *Ogadai* bucked under their feet, and there was a series of titanic echoing booms that carried clear through the four-kilometre-long hull of the ancient ship. All over the boards, the scarlet lights began flashing up, a constellation of disaster.

'Voidsunders have fired, sir,' Miranich said, as serene as ever.

Gershon studied the monitors. 'One tracked on target. We have hit the enemy ship square on the bow – major damage. The other beam went clear.'

'Recharge. I want every torpedo we have in the air. Fire every ton of chaff we possess, Miranich. I want a cloud around us.'

'The flight deck took three torpedoes,' Gershon was saying. It's totally destroyed, sir. Damage control teams are sealing off the section.'

'How's our power?'

'At sixty per cent. A lot of broadside batteries are out of action – we took eight direct hits.'

'Enemy Voidsunder beams inbound,' Miranich said.

'Evasive action,' Massaron snapped out, anger burning in his face now, doing away with the confusion, the fear, the beginnings of despair.

'Sealing off sections thirty-six through forty-five,' Gershon was saying. 'Sir, there are fires in the manufactorium, and in crew quarters port side aft. Damage control cannot approach, and they warn that the munitions stores in the manufactorium are being destabilised by the heat.'

'Seal them off and blow the hatches,' Massaron said.

'Yes, sir,' Gershon's voice was thick with the responsibility as he punched the necessary orders into the command frame. He was blowing many hundreds of crewmates out into the void to die, so that the ship might fight on.

Another almighty crash and jerk. Massaron was knocked off his feet and smashed his head on the corner of Miranich's console. He rose streaming blood. 'What was that?'

'A Voidsunder beam has struck us directly amidships, shipmaster,' the enginseer said. 'Damage is extensive. Power-lines forward have been severed. Am attempting to reroute. Auxiliary systems are being brought online. There will be a minor interruption–'

The lights on the command dais flickered as though to lend credence to his words. Then they went out entirely, and for some three seconds the bridge crew of the *Ogadai* were in complete darkness, save for the stars glittering coldly in the viewports above. They might as well have been standing in some darkened metal sarcophagus adrift in the void.

Then the auxiliaries kicked in, and power was restored. But the lights were dimmer now, and many

of the less vital systems had been shut down. The forward sections of the *Ogadai* were now running on battery power alone.

'Damage control, I want all power conduits amidships repaired, as a priority,' Massaron said, thumbing the shipboard vox.

'Con, give us all the speed you can. Take her away from the planet.' They could do nothing here now except die. The *Ogadai* was badly hurt, facing a foe twice its size. There could be no victory here, and the survival of his beloved ship itself was at stake.

'Gershon, try and get me Kerne on the vox.'

Gershon beat his knuckles on the console. 'We're being jammed, sir.'

'I don't care if you have to write a letter on parchment and throw it to him, lieutenant, but we must warn the ground of what is happening here. Put a despatch in an escape pod and fire it off if you have to, but you will contact our ground forces. They have to know what they are facing.'

'Aye, sir.' Gershon lifted a ship-intercom and began barking orders and information down it, never taking his eyes off the screens for a second.

'Under way, engines at forty per cent,' a servitor grated in rusty Low Gothic.

'Lasburners firing. Sixteen torpedoes away,' Miranich said. 'Those are our last, shipmaster. All other torpedo banks have been destroyed.'

'Voidsunders?'

'Attempting a targeting resolution. Voidsunders will fire again in eight seconds.'

Massaron wiped blood out of his eyes.

'We hit them – we hit them hard, sir,' Gershon exulted, teeth bared in triumph, the intercom forgotten. 'All torpedoes impacted. We've lit the bastards up.'

'Enemy Voidsunder beams inbound,' Miranich said.

'Brace for impact. Gershon, I want you to–'

Then there was a white light, soundless, filling up the world, swamping every sensation. Massaron felt his feet leave the deck. There was no pain, only an instant's regret before the light died, and the void claimed him.

I am so sorry, he thought. I failed you.

And then he was gone.

The *Ogadai* broke up under the repeated impact of the massive energy lances, the forward third of the great ship shearing free of the rest, spinning through space and trailing a wake of wreckage behind it.

Fires flared and then died as the vacuum snuffed them out, but the molten scars of the Voidsunder blast glowed in the darkness, liquid metal streaming from them in brilliant rivers, to cool and harden and wink out.

The rear section of the ship yawed, out of control, a leviathan sinking into death's oblivion. The lights flickered along the hull, and here and there a lasburner battery fired wildly at the stars, its crew venting a last moment's impotent rage.

The final Voidsunder salvo struck the drives in the stern, the energy beams slicing through armour and dying shields and spearing into the bowels of the ship. The powerful lances burned through and through those compartments deep in the maimed cruiser which still possessed atmosphere and light and warmth, and laid them open to the void. The *Ogadai* rolled, spewing wreckage and hundreds of bodies, here and there a solitary escape pod shooting out of the ruined vessel.

Then the main drives, bereft of coolant, open to the vacuum, overloaded and exploded.

A white nova, soundless, savage as the heart of a birthing star. It tore the remnants of the *Ogadai* to pieces, and sent those ragged remnants of the ancient ship careering into space. Many were sent flashing and spinning towards the planet Ras Hanem. Others were propelled out into the void, to sail through it for all eternity, broken relics with frozen corpses drifting inside them.

The ship-explosion hovered there above Ras Hanem, the energies of the vast detonation consuming themselves, darkening moment by moment as though reluctant to quit the universe. But they died at last, and all that remained was darkness, a debris-field of fragments and flotsam and jetsam of every size and degree spinning outwards, all of it so broken and shattered as to be unrecognisable.

Thus ended the *Ogadai*, the flagship of the Dark Hunters, whose decks had once been trodden by the Primarch Jaghatai himself.

Four thousand years of history and endeavour and service were gone, and with them, the lives of some twenty thousand men and women for whom that venerable vessel had been home.

The huge Punisher battleship powered through the debris, pieces of its adversary clunking and scraping against its hull. It moved implacably towards the bright planet ahead with fires still sparking and flaming along its hull, and at its leisure, it took up station in high orbit, a dark looming giant peering down upon a world now at its mercy.

And upon the battle-bridge of the immense ship, a creature stood in the pale-painted power armour of the Adeptus Astartes, that holy armour now out of place amid the Chaos symbols and grotesque battle-trophies which surrounded it, and the thing smiled.

‘Brothers,’ it said, ‘it has been a long time.’

PART FOUR

The Stand

EIGHTEEN

Dereliquit

A meteor shower was what it appeared to be at first. They looked up at the sky to see streaks of red and white come searing across it, contrails in their hundreds filling every gap between the clouds. Most of the wreckage burned up in the outer atmosphere, but a few of the larger fragments came streaking down all the way to the ground with the shriek and roar of inbound artillery.

Jonah Kerne watched the light-show from the summit of the citadel, where he had summoned all the senior officers of the Imperium who still survived on Ras Hanem. They stood behind him, human and Adeptus Astartes, their faces as grave as his own.

It was the death of a great ship they were watching. They all knew that, though few among them had seen it before.

'It is the *Ogadai*,' Kerne murmured, his voice burned into a low ember by grief and rage.

'I heard them. They sounded out in my mind like a scream in the night – all those lives.' Brother Kass touched the psychic hood which hovered over his skull.

'I cannot believe it,' Dietrich said, shaking his bullet-head. 'What could have happened? What could have so quickly overcome such a great vessel?'

'The Punishers have returned,' Jord Malchai said, gripping his crozius as though he were trying to strangle the truth from it. 'I can feel the filth of their presence like a dead rat in an empty room.'

Elijah nodded. 'Brother-captain, the directing intelligence I felt when we first entered the system, it has returned. It is close, now – it is above our very heads. Out of nowhere–'

'They must have dropped out of the warp right on top of us, and smashed up the *Ogadai* before Massaron could respond,' Fornix said. He clenched and unclenched his power fist and the fingers of the weapon crackled and snapped with blue-white energy.

'All vox transmissions and augur sweeps have been floored by massive interference these last two hours and more,' Commissar Von Arnim said. 'We thought it might be solar activity, or just the power drain of all the new systems coming online across the city. It would seem we were… complacent.'

'We have been played,' Kerne said. He turned around to face them, and his black eyes were as lightless as pits.

'When we were first sent here, the Chapter Master suspected that there might be more to this

conflict than met the eye, but I do not think even he expected anything like this. There must be very heavy metal indeed up there, to destroy a ship like the *Ogadai*, and a man like Massaron in the space of minutes.

'Officers of the Guard, my brothers, we must assume the worst. The enemy must now be in orbit above us in massive force, and our own fleet has been obliterated. This is no mere raid. This is out and out conquest.

'More than that, it is a settling of old scores. The Punishers drew us in here so that they might deal the Dark Hunters a heavy blow. They mean to destroy the Imperial hold on this world, that much is obvious – but I believe what they really want is to kill us.'

'Let them try,' Fornix growled, his red ocular gleaming like a hot coal. 'We beat this filth once before, and we will do it again.'

Kerne's face tightened in a slight smile, though it was hard to read his features with the bright streaked sky behind him. He was in shadow.

'We must hope that Massaron got word off to Phobian before he was destroyed. One of the ships may have made it away. In any case, we have two tasks before us now. We must warn the Chapter of what has transpired here, and we must prepare ourselves for defence.

'Brother Kass, you must be able to do something which can get around this jamming.'

The Librarian bowed slightly. 'I will do my best, brother-captain. But I am no astropath. And the passage of psychic emanations through the warp at present–'

'Just do it, brother. The Punishers, if they take this world, will make it into a base, from which they will seek to conquer the rest of the sector, system by system. That is why they chose Ras Hanem – there are enough raw materials on this planet to resource an entire crusade.

'The longer we deny them possession of those resources, the more time the Chapter has to come up with a riposte. But the Chapter has to know what we face here.'

'*We* need to know what we face here,' Dietrich rasped.

'The same as you faced before, general,' Fornix said with sour humour. 'Only more so.'

'But now there is a full company of the Adeptus Astartes fighting at your shoulder,' Malchai told Dietrich. 'You should be proud, general, to stand here in such company.'

'I am proud,' Dietrich retorted. 'Proud of my men, who did the impossible once. Now they are being asked to do it again.'

'They will obey orders,' Von Arnim said crisply. 'That is all we ask of them. It is all we ask of ourselves.'

'Well said, commissar,' Malchai said, with something approaching approval.

'The Chapter Master will not forsake us,' Fornix said. 'And he will have planned for such a contingency.' He looked at Kerne, but the captain's face was unreadable.

'We will hold,' Jonah Kerne said quietly. 'We will hold here until we are relieved or until we are all dead. Is that clear?'

They raised their faces to him – his brothers were unmoved. Fear did not come into their mental make-up. Fornix looked positively light-hearted. Kass was less ebullient. The young Librarian was the only psyker on the planet that they knew of, and he could sense currents and portents that passed the rest of them by.

But he nodded at his captain. He looked preoccupied, like a man with much on his mind, but he was a Dark Hunter, the most stubborn of all the Adeptus Astartes. There was no need to suspect his

resolve.

Dietrich was resigned and angry. He had brought his command through weeks of hell, to what he thought was victory, only to have that victory slip out of his fist. But he would fight. Like Massaron, Kerne thought, this general of armour did not know how to do anything else.

And the commissar, Von Arnim – he held within him no reservations whatsoever. His narrow, white face looked carved out of marble. In some ways, he reminded Kerne of Jord Malchai. The commissar and the Reclusiarch had both expunged all doubt from their souls. For a brief instant, Kerne almost envied them their blind certainty.

And yet, there was another kind of faith and certainty too. It had to do with one's place in the scale and portent of things. Strangely, Jonah Kerne felt a kind of unfettered relief within him. The news was bad – it would no doubt become worse. But he did not care. He was here, in this place with his brothers, about to do what all his long life he had been trained and bred to do. What could be wrong with that?

Better this, than to sit upon Phobian in the dark and the snow, listening to wars and rumours of wars pass me by, he thought.

He felt oddly light-hearted. If this be my last fight, then I will make it one worthy of memory.

He looked at his first sergeant. Fornix met his eyes and Kerne knew that they were wholly in agreement. They had always understood each other at times like this.

'Whatever happens here in the days to come,' Kerne said, 'we will make the Imperium remember us.'

It rained that night, an unseasonal event that made the natives of the planet stare wonderingly at the sky.

The last bright contrails of the *Ogadai*'s wreckage were fading, fattening out into wide ribbons lit up by the red light of the sunset, so that it seemed all the sky was aflame. And they in turn seemed to catch hold of what moisture there was in the atmosphere, so that the cloud thickened about them, and boiled up in toiling thunderheads, slate grey and purple, flickering with lightning.

The thunder echoed about the ruined streets of Askai, and the rain hammered down out of it, settling the dust and rehydrating it into mustard-coloured mud.

And all through the night, the defenders of Askai worked in the rain, building booby-trapped barricades, excavating trenches, constructing strongpoints in the rubble, shifting munitions by the scores of tons.

The Dark Hunters were issued with cameleoline paint, and this they slathered over their armour, covering the midnight-blue livery of the Chapter and even the white axe that was their badge. The synthetic polymers in the paint bonded with the outer alloys of the power armour and took on colour from anything they touched or that surrounded them.

The giant warriors could now stand quite still in the broken cityscape and fade into the rubble, almost to invisibility in the right light.

It was a tactic that the Dark Hunters had utilised often down the years. In fact, there was a legend which held that it was how the Chapter had got its name; a predilection among certain companies of the White Scars Legion for stealth over the fast-flowing tactics of their brethren had seen these Adeptus Astartes peeled off into their own disparate organisation for special missions.

They had fought on joint operations with the Raven Guard Legion, and on their return, the tactics

these White Scars had learned from their brethren had become part of the battle-code of their company.

And when the Heresy was over and the time had come for the great Legions to be broken up, the warriors of this singular company had held together, eventually recognised as a full Chapter in their own right.

But that was mere legend.

Kerne's preoccupations were with the space he had to defend on the ground, and the time he had to prepare it.

Dietrich's methods had proved sound in the initial invasion, and the Hunters would utilise his defences, build upon them, and strive to hold the same ground the Guard general had clung onto before their arrival, for the same reasons.

But there were certain changes.

The massive walls of the city, with their six gates, would not be abandoned as easily as in the first conflict. Squads of Space Marines and Haradai would be stationed at each gate, to make sure that the enemy did not capture them without warning.

Kerne did not hope to hold the circuit of the walls for long – they were simply too extensive for that – but if the invader wished to bring armour into the city, it would have to come through a gate, and that was something which had to be postponed for as long as possible.

The spaceport was too vulnerable, and the Thunderhawks could not be defended if they were lined up on the sole working launch-pad, so Kerne had the craft dragged into the citadel itself. Once inside, they were brought up through the bowels of the fortress on the great munitions elevators, stripped down, wings folded, and set in place in cleared-out gun-caverns which opened onto the sides of the man-made mountain. Here the craft were prepped for flight once more.

They could be launched only once from these armoured caverns, for there was no way that even Space Marine pilots would be able to fly back inside openings so narrow their wings had only a half-metre clearance on either side. But they would be protected behind the blast-doors until they were needed. They were a last reserve, and if it came to that, a last means of escape from Askai.

One Thunderhawk was kept separate from the others, stripped of all weaponry and most of its armour, made as light and agile as the servitors could devise. This craft was kept waiting on the launch-pad, ready for immediate take-off.

It was Brother Simarron's mission, and he would crew the Hawk alone.

'Make it quick, and make it quiet,' Kerne told the pilot. 'As soon as you appear on their augur, your life begins ticking down in seconds. Get yourself a good look at them, brother, send word back to us, and then–' He could not find the words.

Simarron smiled. 'And then die.'

Kerne looked him eye to eye. He and Simarron had known each other a long time. 'You are the best pilot we have – that is why I ask this of you.'

'I regret only that my gene-seed will be lost to the Chapter, brother-captain.'

'Your name will endure, Simarron. I will see to that.'

The pilot extended his hand, and Kerne took it in the warrior grip.

'In the end, brother, we all go into the dark together.'

‘Hunter One is leaving atmosphere now,’ the servitor intoned, skating its many-fingered hands across the control console.

‘Vox is good,’ Simarron’s voice echoed through the room. ‘The power-boost we jacked into comms is working well for now.’ Static, a rumbling sound.

‘Am now free of planetary gravity. Isolating forward turbofans. All systems green. Punching it.’

Another long-throated roar.

‘Coming up to twenty thousand kilometres off-world. Increasing power. Debris field–’

There was a crash on the vox.

‘Heavy debris field in low orbit, extending out some fifteen thousand kilometres.’

Jonah Kerne clenched his fists, listening in. Beside him, Malchai and Kass were standing, equally rapt.

‘Now, Brother Kass,’ Kerne whispered.

The Librarian’s psychic hood began to glow. He bowed his head, and closed his eyes. Behind the lids, the cerulean brightness of his eyes flared out through the skin, lighting up minor blood-vessels in scarlet lines.

‘I feel you, brother. I feel you in my mind,’ Simarron exclaimed.

‘Stay on target,’ Jord Malchai warned.

‘Onboard augur engaged, and recording. I hope you are getting this, brothers. I see one big capital ship thirty thousand kilometres to starboard, and am turning in a wide sweep to try and come around behind its stern. Emperor’s blood, but it is big, Jonah.’

‘Class?’

‘Oberon class, at a guess. It’s a traitor ship, no doubt of it. But the *Ogadai* did not go down without a fight – I see major damage in the bows and down the starboard side.’

‘Any other ships, brother?’ Jord Malchai asked.

‘Extending augur now. Interference is nominal. Yes, Reclusiarch. I am reading a major formation some eighty thousand kilometres out, coming this way. Brothers, there are a lot of ships out there. I see signatures equivalent to heavy cruisers and battlecruisers, plus what looks like a whole fleet of transports.’

They heard a warning klaxon sound over the vox.

‘They’ve spotted me. I’m reading major energy charges along the flanks of the Oberon. I’m going in closer. I see no fighters as yet, but he’s launching torpedoes, and his lasburner batteries have begun to fire.’

Jonah Kerne walked away from the vox console, hunching his shoulders as though he were expecting to be struck.

‘Simarron, this is Kerne. You’ve done enough – see if you can get away.’

A gap, during which the vox was still open. They could hear Brother Simarron breathing, and beyond his helm there were alarm-systems sounding monotonously in the Thunderhawk’s cockpit.

‘Negative, brother-captain.’ A pause. Simarron grunted. ‘I have eleven torpedoes locked onto me. I am going to try and lead them back on the traitors who fired them. If I can–’ A thump of breath escaping Simarron, as though he had just suffered a blow.

‘I’m taking the Hawk into the enemy ship. With luck, at least one or two of the torpedoes will follow me in. May the Emperor’s light be with you always, my brothers. *Umbra Su*–’

There was a high whine over the vox, a sudden snort of brutal static, and then silence.

‘*Umbra Sumus*,’ Jord Malchai said. And he bowed his head.

Kerne turned back to the others, his face set like flint.

‘Brother-Librarian Kass, what did you learn?’

Elijah Kass opened his eyes. His corneas were half-flooded with scarlet.

‘I saw it, captain. I saw the ship Brother Simarron spoke of. More than twice the size of the *Ogadai*, a battleship of ancient lineage. It is true that it is damaged, but not enough to cripple it. And the guiding intelligence of this enemy host is upon it, looking down on us even now.’

‘So the Oberon is the flagship,’ Kerne said. ‘What else?’

‘A mighty fleet is approaching us, brothers, only hours away. On board its ships are tens of thousands of the Great Enemy, and these are not mere cultist rabble. I sensed the minds of ruined Traitor Marines, twisted beyond sanity, and creatures worse than those.

‘What came before was a mere foray, a reconnaissance in force. This is the main body. It means to conquer – it is here to stay.’

‘Brother Kass, I want you to keep trying,’ Jonah Kerne said. ‘You must get a message through to Phobian.’

‘I have been trying, brother-captain. And I will continue to do so until I succeed.’

Kerne nodded.

‘Brothers, we have only a few hours remaining before the attack begins. It will be made in overwhelming force. I have often heard it said that the Dark Hunters have through their history proved themselves to be the most vicious in defence of all the Adeptus Astartes. We must hold true to that reputation in the days to come.’

‘The Kharne will take to the warp with everything he has, once he learns of this,’ Fornix said doggedly. ‘He’ll not forsake us, no matter the cost.’

Jord Malchai tabbed the butt of his crozius against the floor, so that it rang on the stone. ‘This is a task beyond the Dark Hunters alone, and the Chapter Master will realise that. The Kharne will try to reassemble our old allies in the other six Chapters who swore the oath with us. That will take time. In the meantime, we must hold on here, maintain a foothold. We must–’

‘Survive?’ Fornix interrupted him, smiling crookedly.

Malchai stared at him coldly. ‘That is our mission, brother-sergeant.’

‘At least now, Brother-Reclusiarch, I know that you can no longer send reports back on my misdeeds,’ Fornix sneered.

‘Enough,’ Kerne barked. ‘Malchai, what was the last report you sent back to the Kharne? What does Phobian know?’

‘My reports are confidential,’ the Reclusiarch said.

‘I am force commander of a company about to face overwhelming odds, upon the last surviving outpost of the Imperium within an entire system. You will tell me, Brother-Reclusiarch.’ Kerne’s black eyes were fixed on Malchai, unblinking. Even among Space Marines, there were few who could meet that gaze for long.

‘Very well. My last despatch was sent through normal channels by vox-burst, and it informed Mors Angnar that the planet had been retaken and that the Chaos taint, while not wholly expunged from the system, was now weak and would soon be eradicated.’

Kerne sighed. ‘That’s what I was afraid of. They have no inkling.’

He took his helm from the table and stared a moment at the ugly, corvid beak of it.

‘Brothers, to your stations. Fornix, the Armaments District. Brother Malchai, the spaceport trenches. Brother Kass, you will remain with me in the citadel. I wish to liaise with General Dietrich.’

The other Space Marines gathered their wargear without a word. They began to leave, and then Kerne remembered.

‘Reclusiarch–’

Malchai turned, his skull-helm on his head, as unreadable as stripped bone.

‘I still have Biron Amadai’s pistol, Malchai. You may have it back now, and I thank you for the privilege.’ He held out the ancient, beautifully worked weapon to the Reclusiarch.

Malchai sawed a hand to one side, a gesture of refusal. ‘It is yours now, Jonah. May it bring you some of the faith and valour of Amadai himself.’

It was a princely gift. A gesture of truce between them, perhaps. Jonah Kerne nodded. There was no need to say more.

Night had fallen when the first landings began. There was no preparatory bombardment, but the clear star-spattered sky above Askai came suddenly to life with new constellations, dozens of afterburners firing in low orbit, and then the fiery contrails of craft making re-entry to the atmosphere.

As these invaders became clear on the augur systems of the defences, so the defenders puzzled themselves trying to fathom what exactly they were. Elijah Kass, who knew his history, was able to identify them.

‘Stormbirds,’ he told Jonah Kerne. ‘I did not think such craft still existed in the galaxy – the model is tens of thousands of years old. It was used during the Great Heresy.’

‘What do they carry?’ Kerne asked the Librarian.

‘A full company of Adeptus Astartes in each one, or the equivalent.’

They were standing in the command centre at the heart of the citadel. Scores of human technicians were already linking the augur-readings into the firing resolutions of the big guns.

Kerne turned to General Dietrich, who stood beside him.

‘General, when you are ready, I believe you may open fire.’

‘My lord,’ Dietrich growled, ‘it will be a pleasure.’

He spoke into the vox-receiver. ‘All batteries, engage targets at will. Fire for effect.’

Askai was lit up. From the gun-caverns of the citadel and hidden positions on the ground the fire leapt up into the night sky in skeins and streams of light. The enemy squadrons came out of orbit to be met with a hail of kinetic and energy weaponry.

The defenders looked up to watch a sea of flame erupt above them, turning night into day, the stuttered flashes of the explosions merging into one, the roar of the barrage a stunning thunder, something which could be felt deep in the chest, vibrating flesh and bone and shaking dust into the air in a pale haze.

They were on target. The first flight of enemy ships was smashed into oblivion, six of the huge craft impacted by missile and plasma beam, to be knocked into spinning fragments.

But more were coming. And now that the batteries had revealed themselves, others were peeling off to launch their own payloads in counter-battery fire.

A duel began. Stormbirds heavy with ordnance came lancing out of the upper atmosphere in near

vertical trajectories, to drop heavy clusters of old-fashioned iron bombs on gun-batteries that had given away their positions. As they pulled up – and many did not, but hurtled to the ground in vast explosions – they launched missiles and sprayed out fans of flares and smoke to confuse the targeting arrays below.

The ground rippled in a staggered, shattering welter of destruction. But Kerne's people had dug in deep, and while several of the gun crews were knocked out, most continued to fire as the Stormbird bombers hauled their huge hulls up into the sky again. Fire followed them relentlessly. The blossoming smoke was lit up by it so that it seemed a storm was hovering directly over the city, lit up by red and yellow and green lightning.

Out of this thundercloud the troop-carriers arrived. Close on the tail of the bombers, they came shrieking down at high speed, deployed thrusters at the last possible moment, and slammed into the rubble and broken stone of the city below them like slab-sided meteors hurled to earth. They dropped their ramps, and mobs of huge armoured figures boiled out of them like a tide of giant cockroaches, barbed, lit with hellish eyes, roaring.

The Stormbirds kept coming. They lost one in three of their number, but never hesitated. Many careered through the sky, half shot-to-pieces, then belly-flopped in the midst of the city and were broken open like tin cans.

Incredibly, after these crashes, dozens of their occupants still crawled forth, and began fighting with whatever and whoever they found around them.

Perhaps five thousand Punisher troops were landed in that first wave. They fanned out, and began making for the gates in the surrounding blast-walls of Askai – the invincible adamantium gates which stood intact after all the months of warfare, and which had not been opened since the beginning of it all.

The Punishers assaulted the bunkers and strongpoints which guarded the gates from within the city, and began chewing them up, pouring over the terrified Hanemite Guard who manned them.

These unfortunates, the living and the dead, were dismembered, and the Punishers took their limbs and heads and gnawed on them, laughing, then daubed their black and yellow armour with the blood. They clambered over the locking mechanisms of the gates like lice seeking warmth, and began to hammer here and there in a bid to open them, ignoring the volleys of lasgun fire that sizzled in the air around them.

At the main western gate a group of six shadows, bulky but swift, flowed along the ruined street towards the gatehouse where dozens of the enemy stood, garbling amongst themselves, shooting at the sky, and bickering over the remains of the dead defenders like dogs quarrelling over meat.

It was Finn March and what remained of Primus. The wounded battle-brothers of his squad who had remained on the *Ogadai* for treatment were all gone along with that ancient ship, and it had seared his cold and bitter hearts to think of his brothers dying in such a hopeless, useless fashion. Now he meant to avenge their names.

The vox was cracking and slurring like a badly received wireless station, but March spoke anyway.

'Captain, Primus at western gate. They are trying to open it. Will engage as ordered.'

No answer. It mattered not.

March did not need to look at his brothers. They fanned out around him in their cameleoline-daubed armour, as much a part of the darkened street as the corpses and the broken stone. Whatever noise they made was lost in the fighting which now was flooding the city.

‘Brother Terciel, go right and cover,’ March said. Terciel was from Novus Company, and carried a heavy bolter. Without reply he darted sideways and rested the weapon on an outcrop of rockcrete. He lifted the ammo belt, checked that all was in order and then said: ‘Ready.’

‘Fire after me. Targets left to right. Three-round bursts for the first two, then empty your magazines. Terciel, pick up fire as we reload.’

They crouched in the ruins, watching with dark hatred the cavorting, blood-painted ranks of their enemies ahead, only some hundred and fifty metres away.

Finn March picked his targets, blinking on them one by one so that they queued up in his targeting software. He aligned his bolter casually, and said not a word before opening fire.

At that range, even power armour could not withstand the heavy self-propelled bolter rounds, and the wargear of the enemy was not well maintained. March’s first burst blew off the head of a Punisher sergeant. His second opened up the intestines of another, the guts pouring black and steaming down the thing’s thighs as his belly-plate was blown open in jagged shards.

Then the rest of the squad came into line with their bolters. They did not speak. They did not utter a battle-cry. They chose their targets and obliterated them with serene detachment, as though it were an exercise on the range.

Terciel on the heavy bolter took up the fight as his brothers began to change magazines. The big weapon jumped against his shoulder as he hosed down the enemy, tracer spitting in bright fiery arcs across the street, bouncing off rockcrete and rocketing into the air, skittering along the ground like stones spun across water.

At least a dozen Punishers had gone down in the first instance, and more had collapsed as they took rounds in arms and legs. These were crawling, yowling like fiends until another round was sent through their brain.

Ten more down. But they had scattered now; the target was dispersing, returning fire and feeling out around March’s squad for a flank.

‘Primus, break right. Terciel, cover fire,’ March barked.

The Space Marines got up and sprinted down the street some fifty metres. Even as they ran, they let off short bursts and single shots, all aimed at the targets they had logged into the auto-senses in their suit systems.

But one Punisher got lucky. A champion of their kind with the head of a human soldier hung lifeless and staring round his neck for decoration, he stood firing his plasma pistol after the running Dark Hunters in endless bursts until Brother Terciel cut him down.

One of those energy bursts caught Brother Arrun in the back of his leg, blasting through the ceramite and burning through fibre-bundles, flesh and into the bone. The Space Marine dropped, cursed, got up again and his leg buckled under him, the burned bone fracturing like charcoal.

The others dragged him into cover, bolter-rounds splashing up dust in the street at their feet, a few sparking and screeching off their armour. Brother Fallon took one in the side of his chest and merely grunted as it went through his armour and found a lung. Then he kept firing.

‘Terciel, join us, we will give cover,’ March said tersely.

The Dark Hunter from Novus Company got up at once, hefted his heavy weapon, and sprinted down towards them while the rest of Primus – even crippled Brother Arrun – kept the Punishers occupied with well-placed fire.

Terciel joined them. ‘They’re still working on the gates, brother-sergeant, and a fresh company is

coming up from the south.'

'Captain,' March said on the vox, 'this is Primus, do you read?'

Nothing. 'Damn them and their jamming,' March said. 'I've never known it so bad, and I fought these scum first time around. Arrun, how is the leg?'

'Healing, sergeant.'

'Can you run?'

'I will.'

'Good. Fallon, what of you?'

'Round in the lung, sergeant. It's all right, I brought a spare.'

Finn March considered. His squad had slain perhaps thirty of the foe, but there were as many more still working on the gate, plus another company – say eighty – coming up on them.

Against six Dark Hunters, two of whom were wounded.

Good enough odds, March thought.

'We are going to attack,' he said.

Brother Terciel set down a base of fire, streaming rounds down the street and peppering the gatehouse. The enemy had gone to ground there now and a veritable storm of bolter fire was streaming from their positions, most of it wild.

March and his brothers kept moving. In the flashlit dark, with the cameleoline blending them into their surroundings every time they stopped, they could make staggered dashes through the ruins and then fade into near-invisibility again.

Arrun was dropped off to cover the approaches from the south, where they could already see a crowd of the enemy making their way up what had once been one of the main thoroughfares leading out of Sol Square. They were bunched up, firing at every shadow, yelling and bellowing like beasts in rut.

'Delay them here,' March told Brother Arrun. 'Use grenades. When your bone has reknit, or they are within a hundred metres, join us. Remember what First Sergeant Fornix told us, brother – this fight is not for glory.'

'Acknowledged,' Brother Arrun said.

The rest of the squad moved up towards the gate, approaching from the south while Brother Terciel kept a heavy fire down on the enemy from the east.

March pulled back the cocking handle of his bolt pistol to peer into the chamber. He let it go forward again quietly, hefted his chainsword, and thumbed the power-button.

'We go in hard. Grenades out first and then in close, brothers. We clear the gatehouse, set up there, and call in Brother Terciel. Then we make a stand. The enemy must not open this gate. Brother Kass has told us that they are forming up outside the walls in vast numbers, with vehicles and all manner of other filth. The longer we keep them out the better it will be.'

Not a word. March smiled bleakly inside his helm, and lifted the whirring chainsword. 'Then let us be at it.'

He turned and sprinted across the open space leading up to the gatehouse, a tall, bulging pillbox of a building which guarded the lock mechanisms. The rest of the squad spread out to his flanks and began clicking grenades off their belt-dispensers. As they drew near, they were finally noticed as dark blurs of motion, and a shout went up from the enemy.

The Space Marines did not pause, but flicked out the grenades before them. Some arced with

unerring aim into the gunslits of the gatehouse; others exploded so close to the charging Dark Hunters that the shrapnel kissed their armour.

They opened up with bolters from the hip at five metres, while March leapt in as silent as a ghost and with one swing decapitated a Chaos champion who had risen in his path.

A hedge of fire erupted around him as his brothers came up on either side. Above their heads, broken rockcrete began to rain down as Brother Terciel shifted the fire of his heavy bolter to the gunslits further up the gatehouse.

They cut down eight of the enemy, and then were inside, firing at point-blank range, booting the bodies of the dead aside, changing magazines again, tossing grenades around corners and then hurtling into the smoke and dust and hot shrapnel like weariless angels of slaughter. The enemy were startled, confused, but also numerous, and as the dead piled up, so more leapt forward to take their place.

The Hunters were grappling at close quarters now, fighting with bolter butt and blade, the fight slowing down. Warrior for warrior, the Punishers were almost as physically strong as the Dark Hunters Adeptus Astartes, and it took March and his chainsword to break the threatened stalemate. He slashed the enemy to the ground here, there, wherever one of his brethren was struggling, breaking up the fight again. The Punishers seemed stunned by the ferocity of the assault.

A grenade at his feet. March was blown to one side, red sigils flashing in his helm display. He saw that Brother Moshiri was down, badly wounded, and he clambered to his feet again and slew the Punisher warrior who stood over the fallen Dark Hunter, a snarl of pure hate leaving his mouth as he hacked the enemy warrior almost in two at the neck, the chainsword carving deep into the ceramite and flesh, finding the hearts within and tearing them to gobbets.

Then it was done. On the vox he heard Brother Fallon in the chamber above him.

'Locking mechanism secure, brother-sergeant. Eleven enemy dead up here. A good accounting.'

'Get back down here,' March said. 'Terciel, on my location. Set up in the lower chamber. Help Brother Moshiri. Brother Arrun, sitrep.'

The clatter and crack of close-range fire came over the vox, along with Brother Arrun's voice.

'Full enemy company about two hundred metres short of your position. All grenades gone.'

'Can you exfiltrate, Arrun?'

'Negative, brother-sergeant. They're teeming around me like ticks. I will hold them here as long as I can. Mark my location for gene-seed retrieval, brother. Faces change, names change–'

'But the flesh endures,' March said, completing the ancient Hunters proverb.

'Continue the fight without me, brother,' Arrun said. 'I mean to make them pay before they get by. Arrun out.'

March remained staring at the bloody floor of the corpse-strewn gatehouse for perhaps two seconds. Brother Arrun had been in his squad for thirty years.

Then he rose, and shook the congealed meat out of his chainsword.

'Firing positions,' he said. 'Enemy company approaching. Let us be sure and welcome them, brothers.'

Primus Squad, or what was left of it, took up position at the firing slits of the gatehouse, while Brother Terciel barged through the doorway and then turned at once to set up the heavy bolter.

'Three belts left, sergeant,' he said.

'Use them well, brother,' Finn March said. 'Make sure every bullet has a home.'

The firing began again.

All across the city vicious firefights erupted, exploding like novae in the ruins, burning a while and then sputtering out: as though flint were clashing with steel at a score of spots within a darkened room.

The human defenders of Askai fought where they stood, lacking the superlative night-fighting capabilities of the Dark Hunters. But the warriors of the Adeptus Astartes ranged the streets in small groups, inflicting mayhem here and there and then drawing back into the shadows, unbalancing the enemy even as the Punisher companies were trying to coalesce after the harried and chaotic manner of their insertion.

One thing became clear as the night went on, though. The Punishers might have landed many thousands of warriors within the unbroken circuit of the city walls in the aerial assault, but the main body of the enemy was being set down outside the city, on the plains to the west where the Dark Hunters Thunderhawks had destroyed the airstrip upon their own arrival.

The gates of Askai, those indomitable bastions of adamantium, therefore became key to the city's initial defence. In the first war they had been bypassed and left intact, then ignored; the city had fallen without the need to cross the walls.

But this time around, there were Adeptus Astartes defending the city, and it would seem that the Chaos commander, whoever he was, wanted to bring heavier metal to bear within the perimeter. To do that, the gates must be opened.

The anti-aircraft fire from the citadel had taken a huge toll on the Stormbird squadrons, and these were now withdrawn. The fighting rolled out along the ground in waves of death and fire, while on the western plains the heavy vehicles of the Punisher armoured companies formed up for attack.

All across the city, companies of the enemy assembled and began fighting their way to the western gates. And as they struggled westwards through the night, the Dark Hunters were waiting for them.

'Dawn in an hour,' General Dietrich said to Von Arnim.

They looked out from the heights of the citadel to the ruins below, where half a hundred firefights were flaming in the dark, and columns of smoke were lit up from below like hatchways to hell; and out to the west they could see where the fiercest fights were going on at the three tall gates.

'They cannot hold forever,' Von Arnim said. He took off his cap and wiped his pale forehead. 'Even warriors such as these cannot stem this immense tide of hate.'

'He knows that, Ismail. He knows that at some point he will have to pull them back. But he means to make them pay for it first.'

'Have you ever fought alongside the Adeptus Astartes before, Pavul?'

The general shrugged. 'Once, in my youth, I saw them from afar as we relieved them at the end of the Dundarron campaign. They were giants in the distance, no more.'

'Giants indeed. I give thanks to the Emperor for his wisdom in creating them – else I think mankind would long ago have been wiped from the stars.'

'They are not invincible,' Dietrich told his commissar. 'Their blood is as red as ours, Ismail.'

'But it takes a lot more to spill it.'

NINETEEN

Amicis et Inimicis

In the shattering chaos of the trench lines, Fornix found Jonah Kerne and Elijah Kass under a cameleoline tarp, watching while some of Dietrich's vox specialists struggled to coax their comms signals through the welter of jamming frequencies that flooded the aether.

The sun was up, but smoke was rolling across the city in such clouds that it seemed closer to dusk than dawn. Now the heavy guns of the citadel were being called in on enemy positions beyond the walls, and the howitzers in the gun caverns were at full elevation, sending earthshaker shells arcing high above the ruins to impact on the plains where the enemy was forming up, some three kilometres outside the western gates.

There were Haradai on the walls, observing the fall of shot and calling in corrections whenever they could get a message through on the vox. Sergeant Laufey was working with Finn March on the most vulnerable gate. With the help of his Scout Marine squad, Primus had beaten off three assaults in the last two hours, but they were hanging on by a thread now, reduced to scavenging the enemy dead for bolter-magazines that fitted their own weapons.

'What word, first sergeant?' Kerne asked Fornix as they all three stood under the frail tarp and listened to the frantic efforts of the human signallers to construct some kind of viable vox-net.

'They're hitting the gates with everything they've got, especially Primus's position,' Fornix told him. 'I give it another hour before they take the gatehouse.'

'And our other squads?'

'I've ordered them back within the interior trench line. They are consolidating even as we speak, covered by Dietrich's artillery.'

Kerne said nothing for a long moment. Finally he turned to his Librarian.

'Elijah, get through to the squads on the walls. Tell them to break out and make their way back to our lines. The walls are to be abandoned – we have not the means or the numbers to defend them any longer. Can you do that, brother?'

Elijah Kass did not answer. His eyes were sightless, bright as blue marbles lit from within. A thin cobalt light pulsed around his psychic hood.

At last, he came back to them, blinking. 'It is done,' he said. His eyes were more than bloodshot,

and when Kerne looked closely into them, he saw that there was a blackness there, leaking through the iris like dye spreading through fabric.

'Brother, are you all right?'

Kass smiled thinly. 'Brother Vennan warned me before I set out on this expedition that the Great Enemy would make me pay for my gift, and he was not wrong. I am fighting off psychic attack day and night now, captain. It takes a toll on the body as well as the mind. But I am equal to it, I assure you.'

'I hope so, brother. Were it not for your abilities and the instincts of our Reclusiarch, we would be fighting almost blind.'

'I've never known the Great Enemy to utilise such efficient vox-jamming,' Fornix said, anger taut in his voice.

'Perhaps it is not the Great Enemy,' Elijah Kass said.

'What do you mean, brother?' Kerne demanded.

'Only that the third presence which I touched upon from time to time before this assault began is still here, another element which is distinct from the foe we are trading fire with. It may be this other is responsible for the vox difficulties.'

'Track it down,' Kerne said grimly. 'I want to know what in hell has killed our communications, brother. It is costing us in blood.'

'I will, brother-captain. It will take time–'

'Time?' Fornix spat out with a bitter laugh. 'Well, we've plenty of that.'

'It is time,' Ainoc said. 'Their situation is worsening, and they are pulling back from their forward positions, but they still hold the entrance to the mines in strength. That is our only access point, farseer.'

Te Mirah looked down upon the bright turning world that dominated the shielded viewports of Steerledge. Around it now there wheeled a series of objects, long and angular, that caught the light of the Kargad star in bright glitters as they orbited the planet.

'We are close enough now,' she breathed. 'Yes, you are right, Ainoc. We cannot leave it too long. How many teams do we have in readiness?'

'Callinall's rangers are planetside, and we have inserted a dozen other covens by falcon stealth ships around the city. They report that our jamming seems to have worked. There will be no communications off-world for as long as the vox-scramblers are undiscovered.'

'Good. The planet must remain isolated from further Imperial involvement until we have what we came for.'

'If the *mon-keigh* are wholly defeated, lady, then the Circuit will be lost to us – one cannot strike bargains with Chaos.'

'I know it,' she snapped. 'We must keep the defence in being, but at a level of desperation which makes them more amenable to our… suggestions.'

'A fine line.'

'My life has been the treading of fine lines, Ainoc. Ready another falcon. It is time for me to make planetfall and confront these fanatics with the hopelessness of their position.'

'Fanatics do not lose hope, Te Mirah – that is what defines them.'

'They are rational beings nonetheless – not by our standards of course, but they will lend an ear to what I have to say.'

‘You should not go in person,’ Ainoc said, shaking his head.

‘I can read their intent more clearly than anyone else upon the *Brae-Kaithe*. It is my function, and this is my destiny.’

‘Then I shall come with you, and my guardians shall be at your back.’

They looked at each other, not quite a test of wills – there was too much feeling there, a love not yet burned away by the centuries.

‘Very well, Ainoc. I should have a suitably impressive bodyguard, I suppose, if I am to convince these animals of what I am. Prepare the falcon, and bring along with you whoever you see fit – you are the follower of war after all.

‘And then the *Brae-Kaithe* must leave us. We are too close to the enemy here, and even the warp-addled minds of these invaders will sense our presence sooner or later.’

Ainoc bowed.

They chose the night, for during the day the fighting in the city reached a level of ferocity that appalled even the cold senses of the eldar.

The gates fell one by one, and were shunted open by the massive armoured hulks the *mon-keigh* named Dreadnoughts. Behind them came even larger tracked monstrosities: Land Raiders, Predators and Rhinos, all of Imperial design, but twisted, rebuilt and reconfigured to meet the tastes of those who now despised the Emperor of mankind with the same fervour that their far-off ancestors had once brought to his worship.

In the darkness, the bellowing engines rose high and loud under carefully laid smoke-barrages as the vehicles fought their way through the booby-trapped ruins, and Stormbirds made attack runs against the trench lines of the defenders, escorted by ancient Doomfires.

It was as though the enemy aircraft had been resurrected from some forgotten machine-grave, and raised corrupt and blasphemous to defile the very skies with their payloads.

In the midst of this, the Dark Hunters fought on, retreating metre by bloody metre to the secondary defensive lines which Dietrich and his men had held at such cost through the first invasion.

They wreaked havoc on the advancing enemy, cutting them down by the hundred, and hidden heavy-weapons teams would ambush the lumbering armour of the enemy as it lurched through the rubble, before moving to new hideouts.

The cameleoline of the Dark Hunters and these vicious ambush tactics served them well. Soon the main roads leading to the Armaments District and the citadel were clogged with burning vehicles.

But the Hunters paid for their temerity. Fifteen more of them died on that retreat, and only six of these had their gene-seed retrieved. Apothecary Passarion fought through squads of the enemy to harvest the precious genetic material, but sometimes, in the flash of promethium fire or the all-consuming holocaust of heavy ordnance, there was nothing left to bring back.

So it was that these brothers had their legacy taken from the Chapter forever, and the gene-pool of the Hunters was irrevocably diminished.

The cloaked eldar grav-ships were sleek as spearheads, and they made barely a whisper as they dived through the atmosphere, bypassing the lumbering Chaos transports, the Stormbirds and attack-fighters which now clogged the skies above Ras Hanem. When they appeared on augur, they were dismissed as an atmospheric blip, a glitch, and the war went on around them while they glided to rest

within the walls of Askai a scant kilometre from the Imperial lines, their landing so soft it barely disturbed the dust.

'Now, to survive initial contact,' Ainoc said, and as one, he and his guardians drew their weapons. The wicked edge of his sword gleamed with a light like the sun seen through deep water. It was a Witchblade, a rune-marked relic of the Il Kaithe craftworld, and it had tasted the blood of every race known to the eldar – including that of those they were here to meet.

'No weapons will be drawn, or they will shoot us out of hand,' Te Mirah said. 'You will all walk behind me, and you will be humble, Ainoc. We must don the guise of supplicants with these animals – their pride is immense, and their tempers are famed.'

'I obey,' Ainoc said. But he bared his teeth as the words came out of his mouth.

Perhaps fifty eldar had come down in the grav-ship, and these now stood about in the dust, the spirit stones upon their armour alight, shuriken catapults ready in their hands.

'Stay here under Callinall,' Te Mirah said to the others. 'I will call if I am at need.'

'If they raise a hand against you, they will lose it,' Ainoc said, his long face alive with murder. But he clicked his sword to his back-harness, and his followers slung their catapults.

'I will speak – none other,' Te Mirah warned them, and then led them off through the quivering ruins, the night alive with tracer-fire and artillery exchanges, an orange glow overhead which blotted out the stars.

Brother-Sergeant Orsus, the biggest Space Marine in the Chapter, was forward of the line when he saw the glimmer of white come gliding through the shifting smoke towards them.

His infared augmented the sight, and the slow-walking file of figures became clear. Orsus had a century with Mortai Company, and wore the platinum stud of long service – he knew instantly what he was looking at. He spoke to his squad over the fitful vagaries of the vox.

'Tertius, look to your front. Hold fire until I give the word.'

The Space Marines were hidden and perfectly camouflaged in the broken remains of one of the outer warehouse districts, close by the wall which encircled the manufactoria.

'Eldar,' Brother Feyd hissed. 'What are they doing here? And walking into our lines as brazen as a bronze snake.'

'Something is coming on the net, sergeant – do you hear it?'

It was a woman's voice, speaking in low tones that to a normal human being would have sounded surpassingly lovely in their music. To an Adeptus Astartes, it was alien trash – but the language could be understood. It was Gothic, archaic but intelligible, somewhere between Low and High, and spoken slowly and distinctly as though the hearers were considered halfwits or children.

'We mean you no harm, and wish only to speak to your commander. We have news of great portent for him, and we must discuss it at once. Your enemy is our enemy also. We mean you no harm. We will touch no trigger or blade. Let us enter your lines in peace.'

The line of eldar was flagged up in Orsus's targeting resolution. He could have shot down half of them in three beats of his twin hearts, and his finger was tense on the trigger of the bolter, drawing down the necessary pressure gram by gram.

Then he released it in disgust. It would not do. Xenos scum or not, such a development had to be run past the captain; it was potentially too important to wipe away in a flurry of bolter fire, no matter how satisfying that might be.

‘Keep them covered, brothers,’ he rasped. And to the leading xeno, he said:

‘Stand fast where you are.’

The eldar behind their female leader flinched as the giant Space Marine rose up out of the rubble, a curtain of dust falling from him. He had been well hidden, even to them.

There was a red gleam in his eye-lenses and he kept his bolter trained on Te Mira’s face.

‘Captain Kerne, this is Tertius squad.’

Amazingly, the company vox was entirely clear now, but that only made Orsus more suspicious than ever.

‘Orsus, send, over.’

‘We have a development here, brother-captain, that I think you will want to see.’

They met within the blast-walls of the Armaments District, with Brother Laufey’s best snipers lining the heights above them. With Jonah Kerne were most of Mortai’s command squad. Fornix, Elijah Kass and Jord Malchai flanked their captain, and even through the blank lenses of the Space Marine helms, Te Mirah could sense their utter mistrust, deepening to enmity.

They were more powerful than she had expected – all the Adeptus Astartes were formidable foes, but in the captain and his Reclusiarch especially, she sensed wills of absolute unyielding iron.

There would be no easy deception here, and one misstep would be the end of her.

‘Captain Jonah Kerne, of the Dark Hunters Chapter of the Adeptus Astartes – I am honoured,’ she began.

‘You are not,’ the psyker Space Marine, the one they called Elijah Kass, said. ‘You are afraid, and you have a question burning in your mind, a request which you must make, and it frightens you to have to make it of us.’

Te Mirah shielded her own mind, cursing her complacence. This psyker was good: powerful and focused. She chanced a lance of her own inquiry back at him but it was batted away.

‘Speak plain, and you shall have honesty itself in return,’ Jonah Kerne said. ‘Play us false, as is the wont of all your kind, and you shall never leave this place.’

‘They should be killed here and now, before they try to ensnare us in their schemes,’ the Reclusiarch said.

‘I chanced much by coming here,’ Te Mirah told him. ‘I placed my life in your hands. Does not that argue some honesty to my purpose?’

‘It may have escaped your attention, witch,’ the one called Fornix said, ‘but we have rather a lot on our hands at the moment without spinning word games. So you will forgive us if you find our welcome a little cold.’

‘Spit out your falsehoods, faithless xenos, and have done with it,’ Malchai added.

The potential for violence simmered in the air – these creatures radiated it. They were in the middle of a war for their own survival, and one more killing would be nothing to them.

She concentrated on the captain. If she could convince him, then the rest would fall in line. Te Mirah cleared her mind of all fear and apprehension, blocked out the roar of warfare which rose beyond the walls, ignored the spots of laser-sights which were hovering on her and every other member of her entourage.

Honesty, she thought. Perhaps that indeed is all that will work here.

‘I came here to deceive you,’ she said simply.

It took them aback. Fornix actually laughed. 'An honest eldar at last!'

'Be quiet,' Kerne snapped. And to Te Mirah he said. 'No word games, xeno. Be swift. I have other places to be today.' He looked up at the smoke-shrouded sky, the tracer skeining across it.

'Very well,' the farseer said. She drew in a breath, and then laid her mind open – almost open. At once, she felt the *mon-keigh* psyker probe it, as hungry as a starved dog. She set aside her layers of protection, but kept one back to shroud those corners of her psyche and her plans that must remain hidden. And the shroud itself she rendered elusive, so that it might be missed. He might just pass over the lies she hid in his eagerness.

'Deep in the fabric of this world is hidden an artefact of my people, an ancient heirloom, if you will. It is not a weapon, nor can it confer any advantage in war – it is purely a cultural icon of the eldar, a priceless remnant of our past.' She exhaled slowly.

'It is an Infinity Circuit, and it is the key to the construction of another craftworld such as my own, a spacefaring home which could accommodate thousands of my people, and keep their extinction at bay a little longer.'

'She speaks the truth,' Elijah Kass said in some wonder.

'What do we care about the artefacts of her decadent species?' Malchai demanded. 'Our place in this universe is to cleanse the stars of such vermin, not allow them to multiply.'

'*Quid pro quo*,' Jonah Kerne said slowly, and when Te Mirah looked baffled, he said: 'What is in it for us?'

Her face cleared.

He is sharp, this one. *Now for the lie*.

'Several things, captain. I wish to have access to the deep mines of this world, to search for the Circuit. You guard access to those mines. In exchange for that access, and free passage off-world for the Circuit once it is retrieved, I am willing to offer several things.

'Your vox is hopelessly compromised by the jamming mechanisms of the enemy, and the warp is in such flux at the moment that even a skilled astropath would have difficulty in relaying any information through to your home world. I can help you with that. I have covens of psykers on board my ship who will relay any despatch you care to send back to your base.

'Things do not seem to be going well for you here on the ground, captain. If you are to hold this planet, you must call on help. I will enable you to do so. If we come to an agreement, I could have any message you wish relayed to your home world within the day.'

That made them think. Even the black-armoured Reclusiarch with his frightful skull-helm was silent. She decided to flip another small weight on the scales.

'In addition, while my people are in the mines searching for the Circuit, I will lend the weight of my own forces to the defence. I have squads of cloaked sharpshooters all over the city, waiting for my word. Only let me give it, and you shall have powerful allies to aid you in your struggle to survive. I swear it.'

'What oath does a xenos swear that we could recognise?' Brother Malchai grated. But even in him, she could sense the seed of doubt growing. Good, good.

Jonah Kerne stood marble-still. Te Mirah left her own mind open, aside from the shrouded corners, and felt the psyker, Kass, fumble through it. He was not adept at such things, and she could sense his urgency, his need to believe.

'I sense no deception in her – the offer seems to be genuine, captain,' he said.

Kerne said nothing for a long time, but stood there as still and calm as a statue in the Reclusiam. The rest of them, Space Marine and xenos, waited, listening to the sound of the war which raged endlessly beyond the high walls of the Armaments District.

Finally, slowly, the Dark Hunters captain reached up and lifted his helm from his head with a hiss of atmospherics, and then looked down on the eldar farseer, eye to eye.

'Your offer is accepted,' he said, very quiet, his black eyes searching her face, the ocular implants in them glinting red as blood in the the pupils. 'I will not hinder you in the search for this thing, or its passage off-world should you find it. I give you my word.'

Jonah Kerne stepped forward, until he was close to the farseer. The eldar woman was tall, but he still towered over her. She mastered the urge to back away from him.

'Play me false, and you will die. You know that, don't you?'

'I know that,' she said, and there was no falseness in her at that moment. This creature was no psyker, but there was a searching shrewdness in him that could not be fooled, not face to face at any rate.

'I am hostage for my own word, captain. I will remain with you while my people make the search. If you are betrayed, it will not be by me, and I will pay for any betrayal with my life.'

She turned around. 'Ainoc, witness me now. You will search for the Infinity Circuit, and you will bring it forth while I remain here on the surface. On your good faith rests my own life. Do you understand?'

The male eldar with the sword at his back bowed slightly. His face was white with a kind of helpless anger.

'It shall be even as you say, lady. I will go down into the dark for you, and find this thing. It shall be done as you command.'

'Not quite as she commands,' Jonah Kerne interrupted him. 'The mines are a dangerous place – all manner of things might be lurking down there. I will send my first sergeant, Fornix, to accompany you, along with a small escort of the Dark Hunters.'

He turned to Te Mirah again. 'Just to keep an eye on things.'

TWENTY

Cor Tenebrosum

Above us, the war goes on: my brothers fight, and die, and win honour and renown before their peers, Fornix thought. And here am I, creeping into a hole in the ground.

The war raged on, but there was no inkling down here of that massive cataclysm. It was silent, dark, as dry and dead as a corpse's throat.

Behind him, Brother Gad spoke. 'Auspex is clear. We have left behind the upper levels. It seems the refugees did not make it down this far.'

Small wonder. There was nothing down here but the echoing dark. All the power to the lower levels had been shut off in the early days of the initial invasion, to save on energy, and the civilians who had fled the fighting in their tens of thousands had crammed into the upper levels of the mines, where there was light and air still being pumped in.

They did not dare venture further down into the blackness, where the air was bad, and the great mining engines stood stolid and silent, their beds still loaded with precious ore.

Some eighty thousand people had come down here in the first weeks of the war, and huge numbers of them had died of thirst and hunger and mere despair, their bodies tossed into the deeper shafts so that their corruption might not bring sickness among those who survived.

These unfortunates still crammed the upper levels, kept alive by a trickle of food and water from the hard-pressed workers who were still working, fighting and surviving in the manufactoria of the Armaments District.

Men fought and worked in hellish conditions above so that their families might survive in the hellish conditions below. Fornix did not know whether to admire or despise these folk.

It had been a near stampede of terror at first, as the eldar warriors and the Dark Hunters had entered the mines. Despite the warning messages over the voxponder system, the sight of the lean, masked xenos and the giant, camouflaged Adeptus Astartes had engendered something close to panic.

Many had been trampled underfoot before order had been restored. They had finally made way for the mismatched, fearsome company as a mouse might cringe back from the shadow of a hawk, and even in Fornix, the exasperation he felt at their weakness had become tinged with pity.

How pitiful, and frail, ordinary men were. And how lucky, how blessed was he to be something

more, something which held in its flesh the very spark of the Emperor Himself.

Now they had left the upper levels with their packed, feral mobs behind, and were venturing into the deep mines. Here, there was no light, the air was thick as paint, and it was becoming hotter moment by moment.

The xenos up at the front spoke up.

'The passage ends. Another elevator. We need your device again.'

The five Space Marines brought up the rear of the party; Ainoc and his six guardians were at the front. Now they drew together ahead of a great plascrete platform which rose in the shaft ahead. The controls in the wall were dead, and beams from the helm-luminators of the Space Marines went around the walls like will o' the wisps, the passage rising above them, cavern-like. It was sandstone here, buttressed with plascrete beams and steel girders.

Brother Heinos stepped forward, his servo-arm rising at his back. Clipped to his powerpack was a plasma-fuelled generator. This he plugged into the elevator controls. There was a clank, and a whirring noise under their feet. The light on the generator at his back flickered and dimmed somewhat.

'The machine-spirit of the mechanism can be revived for only a few minutes,' the Techmarine warned. 'We must be swift.'

They clambered onto the platform, Space Marines and eldar together, and with a lurch, it began to descend, dust rising in the beams of the helm-torches, the spirit stones on the cloaks and belts of the eldar glittering green and red and aquamarine.

They went down a long way, and the elevator rattled and clanked like a bad-tempered beast under their feet.

'Nine hundred metres,' Brother Gad read out, staring at the auspex. 'One thousand metres.'

Shining veins of ore went past in the walls as they descended, catching the light. This was the wealth of Ras Hanem: adamantium in quantities so great that it was here the armour of Imperial Titans had been forged. It was for this ore that, ultimately, men were dying in their thousands on the surface above.

'Fifteen hundred metres,' Brother Gad intoned.

They stood unspeaking, the Space Marines with bolters ready, the eldar with their shuriken catapults and wicked-looking rune-chased swords. Ainoc's Witchblade remained on his back, and the runes upon the sword glowed with a pale light which was both bewitching and hurtful to the eye.

Finally the elevator ground to a halt. Fornix looked at the information streaming on his helm display. The temperature had risen further, and the atmosphere in the mine was now unbreathable to normal humans. Even an unprotected Space Marine would find it harmful long-term, but in their power armour the Dark Hunters could ignore it as their atmospheric systems instantly adjusted.

The eldar were similarly unaffected, all wearing the tall, pointed helms of their kind. They looked slender enough for a Space Marine to break over his knee, but Fornix had fought their kind before, and knew how formidable they could prove as foes. Especially the warlock, the one named Ainoc.

Ainoc caught Fornix watching him, and the mask-like helm tilted to one side. 'I sense your hatred, human. But remember we are allies down here, and must face the pit together.'

'For now,' Fornix growled. He called up the plan of the mines which had been loaded into his armour's tactical readout before leaving the surface.

'The deepest shaft lies ahead some eight hundred metres, bearing one five three. After that, xeno,

we must rely on your nose, and hope that this buried treasure of yours is not buried too deep.'

'My nose?'

'Whatever it takes to sniff out the location of this trinket you are after.'

They moved on. The passageway was wide enough for two files now, and the eldar walked on the left, the Space Marines on the right.

Here, the shaft became rougher, and the geology changed. Striations of quartz and mica appeared, glittering star-like as they caught the light of the torches, and the stone grew dark and close-grained. It was basalt, igneous rock which in eons past had been lava.

The man-made portion of the shaft ended, and cutting across their path was a smooth-bore lava-tube, like a giant ridged oesophagus telescoping steeply downwards out of sight.

'This is the end of the mine, first sergeant,' Brother Gad said, tapping the auspex screen.

'I know,' Fornix replied thoughtfully. In his helm readout the map came to an end here, with nothing but blankness beyond.

Ainoc strode to the front of the party. 'Now, human, you will have to rely on the subtler senses of the eldar. Stay close behind me, and try not to fall behind.'

Fornix's power fist clenched and unclenched in a glow of blue-white energy discharge, but he said nothing. The party began to descend the lava-tube, moving more slowly now, settling their feet in the circular ridges that lined it, and feeling the gradient steepen.

'Brother Heinos, knock in a spike or two,' Fornix said.

The Techmarine unfolded his servo-arm and blasted a series of thick metal pitons into the stone, the metal sparking as it was driven into the basalt. From these pitons hung carabiners, and attached to each was a small luminescent marker. Then Heinos ran out a thin filament of steel wire from the drum at his belt, locking it through the carabiners, the wire whining as it spooled out behind them.

'A wise move,' Ainoc said mockingly. 'Not all species are as sure-footed as the eldar.'

They descended carefully all the same, eldar in front, Space Marines behind, the Techmarine in the rear. Brother Gad read out the depth in ever-increasing numbers. They were four kilometres down, now, and it was as hot as a steam-bath, the atmosphere inimical to all but the most tenacious of life-forms.

The spool ran out, and Heinos slammed in the last piton, setting down a small, sputtering long-life flare beside it. Fifty metres along from that, and the lava-tube turned sharply to the right, and then branched out.

The even, slippery basalt gave way to cliffs of white crystalline pillars, hexagonal, some as perfectly geometric as if carved out by precise instruments. They reared up on all sides, and the air shifted somewhat, became lighter. Fornix looked up to see the roof of the cavern some hundred metres above his head, more crystals hanging down from it in stalactites as numerous as the pipes of some great organ, all colours of the rainbow catching the light in an arced prism, curtains of crystal sweeping back and forth. It was as though an ancient sea had been frozen in mid-surge, and then emplaced in the cavern ceiling. Some of the eldar exclaimed aloud at the beauty of the sight.

'This is no geological oddity,' Ainoc said, wonder in his voice. 'Our people did this, in years ago uncounted. This is a prayer-space, made for contemplation and enlightenment.'

The Space Marines stood in standard combat formation, sweeping the shadows with the muzzles of their bolters.

'High levels of chlorine and hydrogen in the atmosphere,' Brother Gad said. 'Water vapour in small

quantities. It's coming from up ahead.'

'This is a holy place of our people,' Ainoc said to Fornix. 'It might be better if you and yours were to remain here for now.'

'I think not,' Fornix told him. 'I have orders, xeno. One of them was to keep you in my sight at all times.'

Ainoc shrugged as if it were not important, but there was anger thickening in his voice. 'Very well, human. But tread softly in this place. You are not welcome here.'

'I can't remember the last time I was welcome anywhere,' Fornix retorted. 'You can pray in your own time – now let us get on with the task in hand.'

Ainoc hissed something venomous in his own tongue, then barked a command, and the eldar stopped staring around them and followed him in a staggered file.

The Space Marines brought up the rear, the cameleoline upon their armour catching the radiance of the crystalline formations around them, so that they seemed to be bright, iridescent giants of sparkling light.

Camouflage has its limits, Fornix thought.

They heard a new sound: water flowing in rivulets. It crossed their path, a river of it, flashing and dancing in the light. But steam rose from it, and when Brother Gad swept it with the auspex he stepped back a pace.

'Hydrochloric acid, highly concentrated. If we walk through it, we'll lose our legs.'

'Elegant,' Ainoc said. 'I believe all this has remained untouched since the Eye of Terror was born. I cannot believe I stand in such an ancient planet-bound construction of my race.'

'Try elegantly walking across it,' Fornix said dryly.

'I'm sure you and your mechanical monstrosity have some kind of idea,' Ainoc quipped, and stood aside.

Brother Heinos joined them. Fornix set a hand on his arm. In some ways, Heinos was more unknowable to him than any Space Marine he had ever encountered. Even Jord Malchai was a brother. But Heinos had been thirty years on Mars, praying to other gods, and learning rituals no ordinary Space Marine could ever penetrate.

But he was a Dark Hunter, and that was enough.

'Brother, I think we need some inspiration,' Fornix said.

Heinos stopped and stared at the twenty-metre width of the acid river. His hand came up and touched the Machina Opus badge which was inlaid on one pauldron. Then he looked at the roof of the crystalline cavern above.

'All our brethren have coils of high-tensile cable on their belts. I could fire a piton above, and we could swing across.'

Fornix thought it over.

'Perhaps there is a simpler way.' He strode over to a crystal pillar, the cameleoline on his armour catching its light, and with his power fist he grasped it near the base. The energy-charged fingers sank into the crystal, sizzling.

'What are you doing?' Ainoc cried.

With a grunt, Fornix broke the pillar free of its base and it toppled over with a crash. He stood a moment, while the eldar exclaimed in dismay and anger. Ignoring them, he shoved the hexagonal crystal, half a metre wide and thirty metres tall, across the floor of the cavern, and rolled it to the

bank of the acid river.

'Push it out. Steyr, Pendar, lend a hand here.'

The crystal was shoved out by the other Dark Hunters. Halfway across, the tip of it sank beneath the acid. But the river was not deep.

'Two or three more should do it. Brother Heinos, lend me your arm.'

The eldar had gone silent. They watched as the Adeptus Astartes helped their first sergeant fell several more of the crystalline columns and drag them to the edge of the stream. These were pushed out over the first. It took four to finally bridge the deadly river of hissing liquid, and the acid foamed white upon the crystal bridge, releasing clouds of gas as it ate into it.

'Shall we?' Fornix asked Ainoc, panting.

'That was wanton sacrilege, and I will not forget it,' the eldar warlock said.

'Xeno, I don't care what you call it, but I had no wish to go swimming today. Now let us move on, while we're still young.'

The warlock stood stock-still. His loathing of the Space Marines before him was almost palpable. But he lurched into motion at last, and led his people swiftly over the makeshift bridge. They barely seemed to set foot upon it before they were over the river.

The Space Marines followed more slowly. Fornix saw the red sigils blink on and off in his helm as spurts and splashes of acid jumped up to lick at his armour, but the damage was minimal. Before him Brother Gad, gaze fixed on the auspex, slipped and nearly fell, but Fornix caught him with his free hand.

'Keep an eye for your feet, you young fool.'

Once the entire company was on the other side, Ainoc spoke again.

'The Circuit will not have been left unguarded. We must proceed with great care now. I sense it up ahead, but there is something else which exists nearby, like a shadow of memory.'

'A shadow,' Fornix said. 'Well, let us see if we can shed some light upon it. Lead on, xeno.'

The company started out again, eldar in front, Space Marines behind, meandering in a double file through tall pillars of crystal like pilgrims traversing the nave of a great cathedral. And the dust they kicked up floated in the air around them, alive and sparkling with iridescent light.

As they progressed, so the light grew around them, and the structures became more regulated, until even the Space Marines could dimly grasp a sense of the overall design. And now there were other elements as well. The pale arching vaults that rose above them were now upheld by sinuous beams of wraithbone, some smooth and rounded, others as sharply planed as the blade of a knife.

They traversed this space for over an hour, while every so often Brother Gad called out the distance and bearing with monotonous regularity.

Fornix called ahead to the tall eldar warlock at the front.

'This thing you search for – if it is so precious to your people, then how did it end up buried at the core of an Imperial world?'

Ainoc's stride did not slow.

'This world was ours once, *mon-keigh*. It was named Vol-Aimoi, and before the Eye of Terror opened, this planet, and the entire system, were located somewhere else. But the cataclysm of Slaanesh's birth shunted it through space, stripping it of its beauty and its people.

'There is an Infinity Circuit at the heart of every eldar craftworld. It contains the souls of our dead,

and protects them from being devoured by the warp when we die. The one we seek will contain the last essence of the eldar who once lived upon this planet, their memories, their knowledge. It is something beyond price to us, this thing.'

Fornix said nothing for a moment. There was real emotion in Ainoc's voice.

'They buried it here, then, to protect it,' Fornix said at last.

'Probably. It is hard to imagine the chaos and destruction of that time, the darkest chapter in the history of our race. Were it not for your deep delving on this world, it is possible the Circuit would have lain hidden and unknown until the Kargad Star died, and the system with it.'

'Lucky for you mankind came along then.'

'Lucky for us,' the eldar said tonelessly, and spoke no more.

They tramped along for another hour – by Fornix's reckoning they had now marched some eight kilometres from the acid river, and still the crystalline and wraithbone arches rose endlessly above their heads.

Until they stopped, up ahead. The light changed, grew ruddy and green and moved in and out of every spectrum, and there was what looked almost like a gateway, drawn to a point as fine as the tip of a sword.

Ainoc said something in his own tongue, and the eldar picked up the pace. Brother Gad peered at the auspex. 'Energy readings up ahead, first sergeant.'

'Life-forms?'

'No, the readings are strange. And there is a power source also.'

'Combat formation,' Fornix said crisply. 'Keep up with the xenos, brothers, and eyes on all sides. There's no telling what witchery is up ahead.'

It reminded them somewhat of the Reclusiam in Mors Angnar: a dome rising in perfect strata of black stone above them, set with crystals, and in the centre a single plinth upon which the source of the light flickered and pulsed.

Ainoc gave a glad cry, and led his people into the chamber, kicking up the silver dust with his feet. He stood and looked down upon the ancient device and raised both his hands in what seemed to be a prayer, whilst the other eldar knelt around him reverently.

It was egg-shaped, about the size of a human head, and within its translucent confines light whirled and rippled like liquid, sparkling with tiny momentary stars. It was as though an entire galaxy had been confined within it and set spinning. Something even in Fornix's cynical hearts responded to the sheer beauty of it.

Ainoc took off his helm, set it down, and they saw that he was smiling, the expression sitting strange on that implacably cruel face.

'Isha, I give thanks,' he said. 'Khaine, I bow to thee.'

With great gentleness, he took the Infinity Circuit in his hands and lifted it from the plinth.

And as he did, there was a hum in the chamber, a deep, vibrating melody which seemed to bring the very stones which surrounded them to sudden, thrumming life.

It strengthened, became a low quake which set the dust in a shimmer. Fornix spat a curse.

'Time to move, xeno,' he called to Ainoc. But the tall eldar was staring into the heart of the Infinity Circuit, as rapt as a dreaming child.

There was a series of crashes, and from the walls of the chamber there fell massive basalt and

crystal blocks, each twice as tall as a Space Marine. They tumbled to the ground, raising the silver dust in a cloud which momentarily baffled all of Fornix's auto-senses. But there was movement in that glittering fog, massive shapes moving which had not been there before.

The eldar all seemed paralysed. Fornix strode forward and took Ainoc, shook his arm. 'Wake up, you damn fool!'

The warlock seemed to struggle. His lifted his head and his eyes were blank. 'So many,' he whispered, 'there are so many of them, and they have been here so long. What memories they have!'

A voice boomed out in the musical, sibilant tongue of the eldar. It sounded strangely metallic, as though echoing from within a steel tomb. Then a shape loomed out of the whirling dust, towering far above the eldar and the Space Marines. A two-metre-long smooth skull with a tapered end, featureless but for one bright stone glowing in the centre of it, and a skeletal mechanical frame below, bipedal, clumping towards them.

Two others like it moved in from the other sides.

Ainoc finally seemed to come to his senses. 'Wraithlords,' he cried. 'My brethren!' – and he lapsed into his own tongue, speaking urgently.

The three creatures, or machines, or whatever they were, halted. They listened to him a moment, and then all three raised their right arms.

Ainoc clasped the Infinity Circuit to his chest, and shook his head, screaming something unintelligible.

Three blasts of promethium fire boiled out towards him and met in a single flaring conflagration. The warlock shrieked, transformed in a moment into a living torch. In his arms the Infinity Circuit flared out in a flash of blue light, before his carbonised arms dropped it, and it rolled across the floor.

The other eldar opened up on the three wraithlords with their shuriken catapults, and the high whine of the projectile weapons filled the air, needle-thin shards of metal propelled at supersonic speeds around the chamber. They skittered and ricocheted everywhere.

Fornix darted forward, ducked below another flamer blast and slashed at the leg of one of the eldar wraithlords with his power fist. There was a flash of sputtering energy, and his fingers gouged deep into the alien metal, digging through the armour to find the fibre-muscles and wiring beneath. He ripped out a huge handful of it, and the thing crashed to one knee. Its hands came up, reaching out as though to strangle him, and one closed over his helm and began squeezing.

He heard the ceramite creak, and for a second his helm display shorted out and he could see nothing but buzzing static. Then the grip fell away, and he was able to raise his power fist blindly and bat himself free from the damaged wraithlord. Beside him, Brother Heinos stood. His servo-arm had bitten clear through the wraithlord's other arm, and the fyceline torch at his shoulder was busy melting a hole in the thing's huge skull plate.

'Get up, brother,' Heinos said, and he heaved the wraithlord onto its back. But the thing was already struggling to its knees again, flame dribbling from its remaining fist.

Fornix rose, firing his bolt pistol into the felled wraithlord's head, the muzzle so close that it blackened the alien metal. He saw an eldar warrior thrown clear across the chamber to smash like a broken toy into the far wall. Two more were staggering like puppets, alight and burning. His own brethren were firing steadily, and though the armour-piercing bolter rounds were striking home, and gouging holes in the armour of the wraithlords, the machines seemed to shrug off the damage.

One came striding forward to where the Infinity Circuit lay at the foot of the plinth. It booted an

eldar warrior aside, and Brother Steyr jumped up and clambered upon the thing's back, holding on to the exhaust vents there like a man riding a wild steed. He clicked out three grenades and wedged them into the wraithlord's workings under the great protective shell of its skull, then jumped free.

But the thing caught him in mid-air, twisting with incredible speed. Energy discharges flared white along its knuckles as it tore Brother Steyr apart, even as the grenades went off and blew it to pieces in its turn. It crashed to the ground on top of the mutilated remains of the Space Marine, and its promethium reservoir exploded, dousing the entire chamber in flame.

'Get out of here!' Fornix shouted over the vox. 'Heinos, get that damned thing!' he pointed to the Infinity Circuit.

The Techmarine bent obediently and retrieved the egg-shaped artefact. As he did, two surviving eldar shouted in protest and fired their shuriken catapults at him. The monomolecular edges of the tiny missiles their weapons fired glowed in a white stream as they coursed into the Techmarine's armour. He grunted, and fell to one knee. Blood oozed out of the shredded ceramite.

Fornix leapt forward and clawed one of the eldar to pieces with his power fist, then shot the other in the neck with his bolt pistol. He leapt back again as a wraithlord lowered its arm and blasted out another stream of promethium. It missed him, but caught Brother Pendar full-on, and the Space Marine became a walking fireball. His tortured voice came over the vox.

'Back, brothers. I will take it with me.'

He stumbled forward, deliberately entangling himself in the legs of the wraithlord. As it bent to seize him a series of explosions went off – the Space Marine had been holding a whole fistful of grenades – and the wraithlord was blown clear off its feet. It began to right itself in that sea of flame, but as it did, Fornix ran forward, set one foot on its head and plunged the power fist deep into the armoured skull. There was a flash of blue discharge, and its struggles ended.

The chamber was an inferno, and in it the last, crippled wraithlord struggled to crawl towards the remaining Dark Hunters. Brother Gad emptied an entire magazine into its head, and at last it went still.

Fornix came out of the flames, burning, supporting Brother Heinos. He and Gad rolled the Techmarine in the dust to put out the flames and then did the same themselves. The fire had shorted out some systems and eaten into the ceramite plating of their armour. Inside Fornix's helm, he could smell burning rubber and flesh. He felt the pain flaring at a dozen spots on his body, but blanked it out.

'Just us three?' he asked, breathing heavily.

'I have it, first sergeant,' Heinos said. He opened his servo-arm and they saw that the Infinity Circuit was cradled there, untouched by flame or violence, inviolate and disturbingly beautiful. Fornix dragged his eyes away from the seductive rippling patterns within the device.

'Can you walk?'

The Techmarine levered himself to a sitting position. Smoke rose from the joints of his armour, and the ceramite looked as though something had eaten it away in long thin stripes. A rash of shuriken wafers were protruding from the metal, their edges still glowing red hot.

'I can walk. I must. Without me, you will not reach the surface again.'

Fornix looked back at the roaring oven the Circuit chamber had become. Its stones were creaking in the heat. The eldar were black, mummified shapes scattered across the floor, and the armour of his dead brethren was lit from within as the flames consumed their bodies.

'Let us leave this xenos filth, brothers. Our dead we will bear off in memory. There is nothing more

to be done down here.’

TWENTY-ONE

Servo an Sacramentum

The lines were contracting, eaten away inexorably hour upon hour, day on day. And those who defended the line grew ever fewer.

'You're sure the message got through?' Kerne demanded.

The eldar farseer crouched beside him in the shell-hole and rubbed at the blood which had dried on the blade of her spear.

'Thirty-six hours ago, by this world's reckoning,' Te Mirah said. 'It was acknowledged by a powerful psyker of your kind. He had a name…' she thought upon it. '*Grey*? No, Graes.'

'Graes Vennan?'

'Yes, that was it. He did not welcome our attempts to communicate – we had to try three times, using the words you gave us, before he would accept that we were not bent on mischief.'

'And the return message?'

'Two words – *Umbra Sumus*.' Te Mirah cocked her head to one side in puzzlement. 'I take it they mean something to you?'

'You could say that,' Kerne said, and he smiled inside his helm.

'Captain, it will be some time before your people can come to your relief – even with a fair passage through the warp.'

'We are talking weeks, not days. I know that. But you have fulfilled your half of the bargain, this I acknowledge.'

'It remains to be seen if it is possible to complete the transaction.'

'It has been two days since our people entered the mines. That is not yet indicative of either success or failure.'

'Agreed. And the Circuit is still in existence. I can feel it – though it is faint now, the music. As though it is being constrained in some way.'

Te Mirah did not voice her other concern. The mind of Ainoc was shrouded from her now – the warlock's psychic imprint had dimmed with the passage underground, which was to be expected, but now there was no sense of him at all, and this disquieted her.

If these *mon-keigh* meant to play her in the same way she had played them, well then things would

take a very unpleasant turn indeed.

She came back to the present. In her mind she felt the presence of her people, fighting in the smoking ruins ahead. Callinall was dug in there with her rangers, picking off the enemy while the guardian warriors laid down a withering stream of shuriken fire.

To their left, a company of the human militia were fighting, their lines centred on three heavy-weapons positions, and to the right was a squad of the Adeptus Astartes, barely to be seen despite their bulk. They fired and then moved and then fired again, keeping the enemy assault off balance.

Te Mirah had seen the Adeptus Astartes fight before, on other worlds and in other centuries, but she had never seen tactics such as those these Dark Hunters utilised. They were familiar to her – the Space Marines kept moving, then struck from carefully chosen concealed positions, before moving again. And they relied on their camouflage as much as on their armour. These were tactics that an eldar autarch could appreciate, and their proponents fascinated her despite herself.

'I never thought you would agree,' she found herself saying to Jonah Kerne. *Honesty is becoming a habit with me*, she thought even as the words left her mouth.

'To our bargain? I knew if I did not that I would be consigning my brothers in Mortai to defeat, and this world to destruction,' Kerne said.

'Your skull-faced colleague does not see it that way.'

'Brother Malchai is a Reclusiarch, a guardian of faith and orthodoxy. It is his mission to keep my brethren pure and untainted.'

'He would rather see them dead than cooperating with xenos – he has said as much.'

'Yes. But I am the force commander here. It is my word which is spoken last. My decision stands.'

'Captain, I sense that even if you prevail upon this planet, and emerge somehow victorious from this tide of blood, the bargain you have made with me will come back to haunt you.'

'I don't doubt it,' Jonah Kerne said simply. 'But if it means Mortai survives, then I will count it worth the trouble.'

Elijah Kass joined them, his blue armour smeared with filth. Both he and Brother Malchai had thus far refused to don the cameleoline paint, and the Librarian stood out against the dun browns and greys of the battlefield.

'Another armoured column is forming up to the south,' he said, staring at Te Mirah in some distaste. 'General Dietrich is mustering his remaining tanks to meet it, but he wants heavy-weapons support.'

Kerne blinked on the tactical readouts within his helmet. 'Quincus squad, establish a blocking position three hundred metres to your north-west. Dig in the meltaguns and prepare to support the Guard. Acknowledge.'

'I hear you, captain.' That was Brother-Sergeant Kagan. His squad was down to six battle-brothers, but they were all Kerne could spare from the main line.

'Tell me when you are in position, Kagan.'

'Acknowledged. Moving now.'

'They're trying to cut us in half again,' Brother Kass said. 'We cannot keep this line whole for much longer.'

'We must, if we are to hold the Armaments District,' Jonah Kerne told him. And the entrance to the mines, he thought.

'I will bring another team of my people up to reinforce you,' Te Mirah said. Kerne inclined his

helm in response.

The eldar witch was playing the game well. Her warriors were fighting and dying beside his own with no hint of treachery as yet. It would remain so until the outcome to Fornix's expedition was known. After that, there was no telling what these xenos would do.

But he found himself admitting to a grudging respect for the farseer. She fought well, and more than once she had single-handedly turned the tide of a critical combat by plunging into the fray with that wicked spear and the psychic energies she wielded along with it. Kerne had seen her fell an entire squad of Punisher warriors with a dazzling storm of psychic energy. When the time came, she would prove a formidable foe.

She seemed to sense the drift of his thoughts, and was watching him. He guarded his mind as best he could.

'It is nothing I have not already concluded myself, captain,' she said. 'We are allies of convenience only – we both know that.'

He turned away. 'I must walk the line. Brother Kass, you will remain here with the–' he almost said *witch*. 'With the farseer.' *Keep an eye on her*.

Elijah Kass nodded.

Kerne strode off. As he went, he felt the leather pouch which housed Mortai's banner slap against his thigh. He would not unfurl it, not yet. The banner was for the end, when he needed to give his brethren a last focus. And besides, his brothers were trying to remain unseen – a banner flying above their heads would undo that.

He did long to see it fly, though. To bring some glory to this ugly, desperate fight.

For fully twelve kilometres through the ruins of Askai, the Dark Hunters held the line along with Dietrich's men and Te Mirah's eldar. As unlikely a combination of allies as had ever been seen on the battlefields of the Imperium, their positions ebbed and flowed along with the assaults made by the Punisher warbands. The Imperium-held ground resembled an hourglass in shape, the top being the citadel, which although heavily bombed by air attack and artillery was still capable of dealing out an enormous amount of punishment. The bottom was the Armaments District with its massive interior walls and reinforced manufactoria. The waist of the hourglass was the vulnerable spot, comprising what had once been the spaceport. This narrow killing-ground had to be maintained if communications between the two strongholds were to survive, and if the citadel were to continue to receive its nightly convoy of munitions.

The landing pads of the spaceport had long since been torn up into a shell-shattered wasteland, criss-crossed with trenches and pocked with heavy-weapons strongpoints. But it was still more open than the rest of the ruined city, and it was here that the enemy had thrown attack after attack, spearheaded by their armour. With the aid of the Dark Hunters, what was left of Dietrich's armour had thrown back these assaults, but now his regiment was down to barely half a dozen vehicles, all of them damaged in some way. And Dietrich had lost a thousand men in the last two days.

It could not go on like this – some part of the line would have to be sacrificed so that they could consolidate on the rest.

A sigil popped up in Kerne's readout that he had not seen in more than forty hours. He broke into a run towards the coordinates, moving faster than any unencumbered human athlete could hope to, and

when he ran full-tilt into a squad of Punisher warriors, he barely broke stride.

Biron Amadai's ancient bolt pistol came up and fired six three-round bursts, downing three of the enemy – then Kerne had barrelled into the others before the bodies even hit the ground, weaving and spinning with the chainsword at full power. He kicked a dead Punisher into two more, decapitated a third, and smashed the butt of the bolt pistol into the skull of the last, just hard enough to disorientate the head inside the ceramite casque. He felt the impact of bolter rounds as they scored his antique armour, and the pain as one pierced his side deep enough to flatten against the carapace which underlay his skin.

He ground the chainsword into the face of the one who had shot him, the blades churning through metal, then flesh and bone. And then he bent and put four more rounds through the heads of the warriors he had knocked down.

The entire skirmish took perhaps twenty seconds, and then Kerne was running again, hissing as his body began to repair itself and stem the bleeding from his side. The flashing sigils in his helm went from red to amber to flickering green again. He blinked on the tactical overlay once more – yes, there was no mistake.

Fornix was back.

He made his way into the Armaments District, all the while keeping track of the counterattack going on up to the north, shifting squads around like a man plugging ten leaks with five fingers. Dietrich's men made way before him as he strode through the manufactoria, past the roaring machinery and the exhausted, half-starved figures who manned it, until finally he was at the main entrance to the mines. A group of Guardsmen had gathered there, and two Space Marines.

Only two.

One was Heinos, his outline unmistakeable. The other was Fornix, though Kerne would not have known Mortai's first sergeant without the blinking sigil on the tactical outlay to guide him. The armour of both warriors was scorched black, down to the shining ceramite in some places. In others, it had been eaten away like leprous tissue. Acid damage. Kerne could see by the very way they stood that both his brethren were wounded, and weary beyond any human conception of the word.

But what had happened to the eldar?

On the vox, he said: 'Apothecary Passarion, to the mines' entrance, best speed.' And to the pair of Space Marines before him: 'Report.'

Fornix unhelmed slowly. His face was haggard, and there was the scar of a still-healing burn down the side of his neck.

'Well, we got the thing we went for, for what it's worth. The eldar are all dead – not at our hands – well, not all at our hands. There were wraithlords guarding their damned relic, and they took a lot of beating before they went down.'

'Our people?' Kerne asked quietly.

'Brothers Steyr and Pendar died well. Without them we would not have survived. Brother Gad perished in a stupid accident on the way back.' Fornix's face clouded. 'A slip of the foot, that's all it was. He went into acid.'

'Their gene-seed?' Kerne asked.

'Lost, all of it.'

The captain sighed. 'Where is this thing the eldar deem so important?'

‘I have it, captain,’ Brother Heinos said. ‘Tucked in below my servo-arm, out of sight.’

‘Does it look like a weapon, brother – something that could be used against us?’

The Techmarine hesitated a bare second. ‘I would say no. The xenos named Ainoc said it was a repository of eldar souls, and I believe he was not lying. When he found it, his reaction was one of extreme joy – and that was his undoing. If it is a weapon, then it was not one he was able to use. It availed him nothing against the machine-spirits of the things that killed him.’

Kerne nodded. ‘Thank you, brother.’

‘Brother Heinos did well down there,’ Fornix said. ‘He saved my life.’ And he grinned, some of his old fire lighting up his face. ‘It just goes to show, Jonah, Techmarines are good for something after all.’

There was the counterattack to oversee, reserves to move around yet again. Another bloody day on Ras Hanem went down into the dark, and the fighting went on into the night. There was no let-up in it now.

Jonah Kerne called a conference of the Dark Hunters command in the early hours, once the frayed lines had been stabilised somewhat. Brother Malchai was there, as well as Apothecary Passarion, Fornix – his armour now made even uglier by a series of hasty repairs – Finn March, who was the senior sergeant after Fornix, and Elijah Kass, who had finally been persuaded to don cameleoline paint on his armour so that he might not prove to be so much of a bullet-magnet.

Jonah Kerne doffed his helm and looked at them all. They were crouched in a ruined basement, overlooked by the shattered remains of one of the city hive-scrapers. It had collapsed the day before, and now there were only twenty storeys of wrecked framework still standing of a building that had once towered hundreds of metres.

The night was dark as pitch, except for the flashes of artillery lighting up the horizon and the spatter of errant tracer through the sky. Above them, they could see the stars that were not stars wheeling in orbit above the city. The Punisher fleet, looking down on them.

‘Brothers, I would have you listen to me, and take a look at this.’

Kerne produced the Infinity Circuit from under a filthy cloth. The gleam and shine of it threw blue light on their helms, reflecting in the blank lenses. The egg-shaped artefact was a thing of such beauty that even the hardened Space Marines were silent, gazing upon it.

Kerne covered it up again.

‘It is this thing which has brought the eldar to Ras Hanem, and this alone. As you know, I made a bargain with the xenos leader. In return for her help with our communications, and the assistance of her warriors, I agreed to let her search for it. That part of the bargain has been kept, but all of her people died in the keeping of it, and so this thing comes to us. I ask you – what should I do with it? Do I try to destroy it, or keep it for investigation by the Inquisition?

‘Or do I keep my word and hand it over to the xenos?’

‘It is a device of an enemy species, and thus warrants destruction,’ Brother Malchai said. Kerne had expected no less from the Chapter Reclusiarch.

‘It’s an odd weapon, if that’s what it is,’ Fornix said. ‘I told you before, Jonah, I do not think this gew-gaw is a hazard to us. Valuable to the xenos, yes, but that is all.’

‘I sense no danger in it,’ the Librarian, Elijah Kass agreed. ‘There are many voices within, raised like a choir. It contains memories, and pictures I can only glimpse, but there is no hostility there. It is

alive, but inert at the same time.'

'Can the egg hatch?' Malchai argued. 'We do not know. We have no way of guessing what this thing might be used for. It should be destroyed, captain.'

Finn March spoke up for the first time. He took off his helm and looked Kerne in the eye.

'Captain, all I know is that I have four battle-brothers remaining out of the nine I jumped with, and holding the line with them right at this moment are squads of these xenos. They have been fighting beside us now for almost three days, and they have helped us stem at least four major assaults. I speak merely as a combat leader – if the eldar become our enemies too, then the line will fold, and we will have to fall back to the citadel.'

Brother Malchai clenched a fist. 'Brother-sergeant, are you suggesting that brothers of the Adeptus Astartes cannot hold their positions without the aid of filthy xenos?'

'Yes, Reclusiarch, I am, and believe me when I say it is a bitter pill to swallow. We are over-extended as it is. If the eldar pull out, then we will have to redraw our positions drastically.'

'He's right,' Fornix said. 'I inspected the lines this evening. Jonah, there are fifty-two of us still standing. The militia and the Guard do their best, but aside from the gunners in the citadel, Dietrich is now down to three tanks and a few understrength battalions. Even with the help of the eldar, we will need to consider withdrawals by morning. Without them, many of our positions will be overrun almost at once.'

There was a silence as this sank in.

'Better to die clean, than live with tainted honour,' Malchai murmured.

Jonah Kerne touched the leather sheath at his hip in which Mortai's ancient banner resided.

'Honour?' he said. 'Brother Malchai, I gave my word to the eldar farseer. She has kept hers – must I break mine?'

'You gave it to a xeno, from a race famed for its deceit,' Malchai told him implacably. 'There is no honour at stake.'

Kerne's face hardened. 'I see your reasoning, and there is much to recommend it. But I have been thinking over this since Fornix returned from the mines. I cannot agree with you, brother.'

'You're going to hand it over,' Elijah Kass said, disbelief in his voice. 'Captain–'

'Let this be on my head alone. Brothers, the Kharne will be moving stone and stars to come to our relief. We have but to hold on here, even as General Dietrich did.'

'Dietrich was allowed to survive to draw us in,' Malchai rasped.

'He fought for fifteen weeks in this charnel house. We can survive for as long, whether the Punishers wish it or no. We are Adepts of the Stars, brothers of the Dark Hunters Chapter, and we will not go gently into the night.'

Kerne stood up. The Infinity Circuit was balanced in the palm of his gauntlet, a faint glow visible through the cloth which covered it.

'I have made my decision. I will keep my word to those who have kept theirs, and I will bear the consequences of that on my shoulders alone. Brother Malchai, you may make of that what you will. I respect your faith, your courage and your integrity – even in the worst of our disagreements, I have never doubted your loyalty and commitment to Mortai and to the Chapter. But I am the commander here, and I must consider the military realities of the situation as well as the niceties of the Codex.'

'On your head be it, Jonah,' Malchai muttered, and he seemed genuinely grieved.

'Brothers,' Kerne said, 'the endgame of this little adventure lies before us, but it is a simple one.

We must fight, and survive. That is all. If only one of us is still standing when relief arrives, then we will have been victorious here.'

He looked at his brothers. Malchai was staring at the ground, and Kass seemed deeply troubled.

'Brother Passarion, I want you to secure the gene-seed of our fallen brethren and conceal it in the depths of the citadel, at the very heart of our strongest defences. If it survives, then so will Mortai.'

At that moment, with the Infinity Circuit in the very palm of his hand, Kerne realised the irony of the order. And it made him more sure than ever that he was doing the right thing – the necessary thing. He was trying to preserve some relic of his company for the future even as the eldar had done.

'It shall be so, captain,' the Apothecary said, as impassive as always.

'Finn, go to the line squads, and warn them that we will be making a fighting withdrawal before dawn. I intend to evacuate the Armaments District. We have stockpiled enough munitions in the citadel now to last through weeks of siege. We are going to fall back to the fortress.'

'And the eldar with us?' Malchai asked sharply.

'That is up to the eldar, Reclusiarch. I will notify Dietrich and his men, and the eldar farseer. We will begin shipping the civilians north in the last armaments convoy, while we still hold the road.' He paused. 'Only those who can fight. We cannot take them all.'

'That is defeat,' Malchai said.

'That is reality, brother. Better to do it now by our own choice, than be forced into it in the midst of another assault. Fornix, you will see to it. Take direct command of the men still fighting down there and bring them north, across the spaceport lines.'

Fornix nodded. Even he could find nothing to say.

'Let us go to our duties, brothers,' Kerne said. 'And may our mighty father look down upon us with favour. There is a lot to do before the sun rises.'

'By the Throne,' Brother Malchai said heavily.

Even on Ras Hanem, even now, the fighting had its lulls and pauses, as fleeting as the gaps between raindrops in a storm. It was in one of these that Kerne finally found his way back to the eldar farseer.

She was just to the rear of her warriors, and the xenos before her had seen off a probe by the Punisher armoured fighters who might once conceivably have been Adeptus Astartes. There were eldar dead lying around, and one of their kind was gathering the spirit stones from their armour. The others were seeing to their weapons, making repairs to the light wargear they wore, and as they did so, they were singing a low threnody, a lament for their fallen comrades.

Male and female voices joined together, and Te Mirah stood and watched them, raising one slender hand as though she were receiving a salute, or conducting the song. She did not turn around as Kerne approached, but lowered her arm.

'Ainoc is dead,' she said.

'Yes,' Kerne told her.

She bent her head. 'I hope he was fighting, at the end. He would have wanted to leave this world with a blade in his hand.'

Kerne said nothing. Fornix had not elaborated on the warlock's death, and he had not thought to ask.

'But he did not die in vain, did he, captain?'

Te Mirah turned around at last. She lifted her helm so he could see the pale blur of her long, severely beautiful face in the night.

‘You have it with you.’

‘My brothers brought it up. Only two of them survived. It was guarded.’

Te Mirah was breathing quickly, though her face was quite composed.

‘None of your kind has ever seen such a precious treasure before, much less held it. You have in your hands the fate of a great number of my people, captain. And yet you come here alone, holding it. To threaten me?’ She was breathing fast now, and her eyes had begun to glow. About her feet, a cold wind began to circle and stir up the dust.

‘Brother Laufey,’ Kerne said.

From the ruins, a voice said: ‘Here, captain.’

‘Do not fire unless I give you an express command, brother.’

‘Acknowledged.’

Te Mirah scanned the surrounding ruins. Behind her, the other eldar warriors rose to their feet and cocked their weapons, the thin shriek of the shurikens quite different from the solid sound of bolter mechanisms.

Three red dots appeared on the farseer’s torso, and another travelled up her body to rest on her forehead.

‘I am not alone,’ Jonah Kerne said.

‘You had best kill me quick, *mon-keigh*,’ Te Mirah shrilled.

‘I am not here to kill you.’

The light in her eyes steadied. She held up a hand, and the warriors behind her went very still, the shuriken catapults poised to fire.

‘I gave you my word,’ Jonah Kerne said in the same low, calm voice. ‘I mean to keep it.’

He stepped forward and held out the cloth-wrapped bundle he carried to the eldar woman.

She gasped, and over her face a whole gamut of emotions came and went, flitting like leaves before a wind. Then she gently reached out with both hands, and took the Infinity Circuit from the towering Space Marine.

The glow in it intensified, beaming through the fabric which enwrapped it. Te Mirah looked down upon the artefact, and from her mouth there came something which might have been a sob, bitten back instantly. Her voice when she spoke was thick and raw.

‘You give it to me freely, you, one of the fanatics we have despised and feared for tens of thousands of your years. It is… inexplicable.’

‘Some of my brethren think so also,’ Kerne said dryly.

‘Why?’ she asked, baffled. ‘Those I sent to retrieve it are all dead. Your own people brought it to the surface – you could have kept it. By your beliefs you should keep it.’

‘I gave my word,’ Kerne repeated simply.

The farseer studied Kerne as though seeing him for the first time. ‘You are not like the others of your kind, Adeptus Astartes. There is a wisdom in you that is uncommon in your species. But I still do not understand why you do this.’

Kerne frowned. ‘That thing you hold, it encompasses the memories, the souls of an entire world.’ He raised a hand to the ruined city which surrounded him.

‘Tens of millions once dwelled here, my people and yours, and now they are nearly all dead – at the hands of the same enemy. It occurred to me that if I had this relic of yours destroyed, then I would be doing that enemy’s work for him. Chaos wishes to see an end to both our races. I will not help

those Ruinous Powers to their goal.'

'My enemy's enemy is my friend,' Te Mirah said with a slight smile.

'I would not go quite that far, xenos. You probably meant to deceive and betray us at some point – it is in your nature. But now you do not have to, and my brothers do not have to fight your kind as well as the Great Enemy which surrounds us.'

'I could just leave, now, with all my folk, and sail away from this system.'

'Yes, you could.'

'Are you actually telling me you have faith in the eldar, captain?'

'No. But I sense in you a kind of honour.'

'Perhaps we are both singular examples of our peoples,' Te Mirah said.

'Perhaps. In any case, I have kept my word. What will you do now?'

The farseer stroked the bundle she held as though it were a dear child lately recovered. She turned and spoke in her own tongue to the eldar behind her, and handed it to one of them, a leader of his kind judging by the elaborate horns and antlers upon his helm.

'The Circuit will be sent off-world to my ship at once,' she said. 'As for myself, I and my kind will remain here. You have made me curious, captain. I think I will have to reappraise your people. I will stay here, and see if I cannot help you hold back the tide of destruction which is enveloping them – for a while at least.'

They stood looking at one another. 'Stand down, Brother Laufey,' Kerne said at last. 'I wish to inform our allies of tonight's plans.'

The red laser-dots winked out. The Adeptus Astartes captain and the eldar farseer drew closer, and began to confer. They planned together how to defend the last corner of a ruined world, and how to keep at least one part of it free of the encroaching darkness.

TWENTY-TWO

Infractus vallo

All through the night, the retreat went on. The defenders of Ras Hanem abandoned their positions in the south of the city trench by trench, leaving behind many of the wounded who could not walk and had no hope of healing. These unfortunates among the Guard and the militia snapped off a shot now and again to convince the enemy that the lines were still fully manned, and they were also left with a fistful of grenades, to use upon themselves when the end came and the Punishers saw through the charade. Everyone knew now that to be captured alive was worse than any death imaginable.

Fornix supervised the withdrawal from the Armaments District, and Dietrich's remaining engineers set booby traps linked to piles of munitions all over the manufactoria. The thousands of workers who remained in the district were shepherded north in the last transport convoys of the night, hundreds of them clinging to every edge and angle of the big munitions haulers and ore carriers.

Fornix supervised the loading of the vehicles. The civilians climbed onto the vehicles silently, with only some muffled sobbing. The big haulers could carry two hundred at a time, and they ran all night, bringing thousands north to the citadel through the lines. This would sound like nothing new to the enemy; supply columns had been running endlessly between the Armaments District and the citadel since the start of the fighting.

Of necessity, the sick, the old, and the worst wounded were left behind, and once they understood what was happening, they clustered around such munitions stores which remained, the more responsible among them given detonators by Dietrich's engineers, so that they might set off the charges when the end came. After all these weeks of living in a kind of endless hell, they seemed to accept their fate with a kind of dulled relief. At least it would be over.

The entrance to the mines was also rigged to blow, this time remotely, and Fornix kept the remote detonator which linked to the charges on his belt. He knew how many people were down there, and what it would mean to touch that button and seal them off in the blackness.

This is the price that war exacts from us, he thought.

He did not mind paying a personal price for victory, or the hope of it, but it turned his stomach to consign all those thousands who were still underground to a horrible death.

A horrible death – but a better fate than they would enjoy at the hands of the Punishers, all the same.

He kept that thought in his mind.

An hour before dawn. The convoys had been running all night, and apart from a few skirmishes out to the west, it would seem that the operation was about to pass off almost bloodlessly.

But in that last cold hour before sunrise, the enemy finally seemed to catch wind of what was going on, and in the space of a few minutes they attacked all along the line, a dozen companies of their heavy armoured infantry leading the advance. Finding no resistance, they came on with a will, enraged to find that they had been tricked. Their sudden rush brought them through the deserted Imperial positions all the way up to the walls of the district itself, and there they raged, foiled by the looming defences.

More and more of the enemy were being roused out of their positions all over the west of the city, and being sent forward by their champions in teeming masses. They came on in their thousands, a massive, beetling surge of roaring warriors hell-bent on murder.

On top of the district blast walls, a squad of Haradai began picking them off with their sniper rifles, but it was like throwing pebbles at the sea.

'Brother Laufey, withdraw from the walls and make your way to my position,' Fornix ordered over the vox.

'Acknowledged, brother. They have a Land Raider with them, and they mean to charge the gates with it, I believe.'

The gates were already rigged to blow. The Punisher vehicle would breach them, but it would be the last thing it did.

Fornix strode along the last of the heavy haulers, which were covered with desperate people scrabbling for a handhold. They could hear, now, the attack going on beyond the walls, and they set up a wail which no threat of violence could silence. It was immaterial now anyway.

'Captain, this is Fornix – the enemy will be within my perimeter in minutes. Sending the last vehicles north to you now.'

'I hear you, Fornix,' Kerne's voice came back. 'I will meet them outside the citadel with Septus Squad, and some of Dietrich's armour. We are pulling everything back within the fortress. They're assaulting on every front with everything they've got, and augur tells us they have bombers inbound.'

'Yes, captain. Estimate our arrival in forty minutes, if we have some luck on our side.' Then, 'Get these vehicles moving!' Fornix bellowed, augmenting the order with his helm's vox-enhancer. 'Do not stop for anything or anyone – drivers – spool them up.'

The big engines on the haulers roared, and the lead vehicle set off. People fell from its sides, screaming, and were crushed by the second hauler in the convoy. There could be no halting or slowing down, not now.

Brother Laufey appeared with four other Scout Marines, breathing hard.

'They're trying to scale the district walls,' he said.

'Stay with me,' Fornix told him. 'We are the rearguard, brothers. We must buy some time for the convoy.'

There was a massive explosion, and a towering mushroom of smoke and flame rose up into the air, blotting out the dawn.

'That will be our friends at the gate,' Fornix said. He consulted the chrono in his display. 'Time to move, brothers – the other charges will begin to go off soon.'

He let them go ahead. The air was full of the sound of the Punisher horde, a noise which brought back old memories. The gate was down, and they would be coming through it as soon as the smoke cleared and they had stumbled through the other booby-traps set down there. Fornix lifted the remote detonator from his belt.

'Forgive me, my Emperor, for I know what it is I do.'

He pressed the button, heard the muffled thunder as the charges went off down at the mine entrance, and saw the second pillar of black smoke boil up into the lightening sky. Three seconds he stood there, watching it, then he tossed the detonator aside and took off in the wake of the Haradai.

The vehicles were powering along some three hundred metres ahead, lurching over the debris on the road, their exhausts vomiting smoke. Every so often they swerved violently to avoid a shell-hole, and more people were flung off them like discarded trash. The drivers never paused or slowed – they were as eager to get to the safety of the citadel as their cargoes were.

Other booming detonations within the manufactoria. Fornix was running out of the northern gate now, leaving the Armaments District behind at last, and behind him it was erupting in a sea of flame. Tons of munitions had been left behind back there, and they were all cooking off as the Punishers poured into the area, setting off scores of booby-traps. Fornix afforded himself a grim smile as he ran along.

Well, you wanted it, he thought. Now you have it.

The rambling, staggered detonations boiled up into a single great pall of smoke which rose above that region of the city, towering into the morning sky and flattening out into a great mushroom of fire-veined darkness. Thousands of the enemy died in that shadow, consumed by the explosions and crushed as the heavily built manufactoria were brought down around them.

It would be a long time before the armour of Titans was ever built on Ras Hanem again, longer still before the mines could ever be reopened and set in use once more. A few minutes of calculated destruction had undone the labour of centuries.

But better that than let the enemy have it intact.

Fornix and the Haradai halted, went to ground and assessed the situation. The convoy still had at least three kilometres to go, and was losing speed, the big vehicles picking their way carefully over the broken ground and shattered roadway. Firefights were sparking into life all along the northern lines as Mortai withdrew, supported by the eldar and a battalion of General Dietrich's militia. The city was lit up with energy beams and tracer, and the sound of the growing battle was deafening.

'It's beginning to look like a hot morning's work,' Fornix said.

'Hotter for some than others,' Brother Laufey said with a grin, jerking his head at the conflagration which covered the southern sky. Then his eyes narrowed.

'Enemy in sight, range six hundred metres. Armoured squads. Brothers, pick your targets left to right.'

The Haradai sighted down the long rifles, and began firing single shots one after the other. With his enhanced sight, Fornix could see that every round found a home. The leading Punisher squad was torn apart, and the rest went to ground and began firing wildly. A heavy bolter started up, rippling along their front and kicking up dirt and stone.

'Move,' he said. 'Fire and manoeuvre, brothers. Keep them off balance.'

'They're on our right, first sergeant,' one of the Scout Marines said, consulting an auspex. 'I make out at least two full companies heading round the flank to the west.'

‘Damn them.’ Fornix glanced back at the convoy, and cursed once more. ‘Incoming aircraft. Take cover, brothers!’

A flight of Doomfires swooped in low out of the sun, chain-guns blazing, churning up a lane of fire below them. They turned in a graceful arc to the north, and then spread out, still firing.

‘Convoy, this is Fornix – pick up speed – you are under air attack,’ Fornix said into the vox. ‘Captain, can you give anti-air cover to the convoy?’

Jonah Kerne’s voice came back. ‘Acknowledged. Commissar Von Arnim, target those aircraft, priority call. I want the roadway protected for as far out as you can range.’

Fainter, Von Arnim answered from the citadel gun-caverns. ‘Anti-air-batteries retargeting now, my lord.’

They saw the bright flashes in the sides of the citadel as the heavy batteries opened out. But the Doomfires were flying nap-of-the-earth. They coursed overhead at less than fifty metres, and strafed the helpless vehicles below. A line of explosions rippled along the roadway, and Fornix saw one of the huge thirty-ton munitions haulers blasted onto its side. Another was set alight but kept driving, and the tiny living torches of its passengers leapt off in their dozens, their screams lost in the cacophony.

As the Doomfires pulled up at the end of their run, the guns of the citadel caught them, a wall of tracer and kinetic fire smashing into the Chaos fighter-bombers and knocking them out of the sky. None of the flight survived.

Fornix watched the sight in grim silence.

‘They’re on the move again,’ Brother Laufey said. ‘Squads feeling round our left now, first sergeant.’

They were in danger of being cut off. Fornix looked about him. The tactical feed in his display was full of red runes. They were even advancing through the burning ruins of the manufactoria, clambering over their own dead and shrieking like animals, firing their bolters into the air and sending blasts of promethium fire into every corner.

‘To the citadel,’ he said to the Space Marines about him. ‘There are altogether too many of these scum around for my liking. Brother Laufey, lead off.’

The Space Marines began running again, while behind them the Punisher thousands advanced over the ruins and the shattered city, and above the Armaments District, the immense smoke-pall rose thousands of metres into the air like some fearsome monument to the dead.

Up near the foot of the citadel, Jonah Kerne was in the front line with Septus Squad under Brother-Sergeant Corvo. On either side of them the eldar were fighting with lithe economy, and the air was full of the unfamiliar shriek of the shurikens. Te Mirah went from one of her warriors to the other, emboldening them, her farsight lighting up new or hidden targets for their weapons.

A blood-drenched squad of Khornate berserkers charged through the withering fire, and for a moment she held out a hand and the power streamed out of her, holding them in place, their feet digging uselessly in the dirt. She skewered one with her rune-bright spear, and her people cut the others down, the tiny shuriken wafers slicing them to dismembered meat and metal.

More leapt forward, bearing heavy power axes, gilt horns adorning their helms. Their armour was scarlet with paint and blood, bright and garish compared to the livery of the other Punishers, and they charged with a snarling savagery that eclipsed even that of their fellow traitors.

Jonah Kerne raised his ancient bolt pistol and carefully shot the first two through their eye-lenses,

then shouldered aside a third, its axe fizzing near his head. He plunged the chainsword down into the thing's neck, felt the blade grind its way through the vertebrae, and the head rolled free.

'Target left,' he said curtly to Corvo's squad, and the Space Marines half-buried in rubble and almost unseen opened up with their bolters in short, savage bursts which tore up the assault. The Khornate fanatics died to the last, the red mania of their fury burning away all thought of retreat. They piled up like a crimson barricade before Corvo's warriors.

'Reload,' Brother-Sergeant Corvo said calmly.

The big munitions haulers had arrived at the gates of the citadel. Out of a convoy of seven, three had survived. One was still burning half a kilometre short of the Dark Hunters position, and the Punishers swept around it in a black, yellow-flecked tide. Thousands were now closing in on the gates of the citadel from all points of the compass, iron filings drawn to the magnet of the Adeptus Astartes and their allies.

Fornix came running up with Laufey's squad. He met Kerne at that mound of enemy dead and raised his power fist in greeting. His fingers dripped with blood. 'Quincus and Sextius squads are coming in on the right, captain, and Orsus is bringing Tertius up from the east. We must hold here until they join us.'

'I hear you, brother.'

Behind Kerne, General Dietrich made his way forward, leading a platoon of his own 387th, their uniforms in rags. A Leman Russ tank was barking out to one side, smoke leaking from battered holes in its armour, and off to the left the command Baneblade of Dietrich's regiment squatted like an immense armoured toad, belching flame. The general was firing a laspistol and the gauntlet-blades glittered in his other fist. Kerne noted with approval the steadiness of his exhausted men. There was no notion of retreat in their eyes – the Guard was not yet beaten.

'Fornix,' Kerne said. 'Let us see if we can make them pay a toll for this gate.'

Then he bent and opened the leather pouch at his waist, and drew out the company banner. The plasteel staff telescoped out, and the tattered material rose above his head. Mortai's *Cerebrum et Haliaetum* rose above the battlefield of Askai for the first time, and as the surrounding Space Marines caught sight of that ancient banner, they sent up a roar.

The Dark Hunters rose out of the filth and rubble, and opened up on the approaching host with a blaze of furious bolter fire. Warriors from Novus Company set up their meltaguns and heavy bolters and flamers and poured streams of death into the oncoming ranks.

Kerne walked ahead of the line, the banner raised high in one fist, and he had to fight the impulse to charge headlong into the enemy, to deal out death with fist and sword, to break the body of the hated foe at close range and feel their life give out under his hands.

His brothers were seized by the same exaltation. They strode forward, still firing, still picking their targets with all the ferocious efficiency of their calling, but it seemed to Jonah Kerne in that moment that if he let them, they would gladly hurl themselves forward into the fray with no thought for tactics. Their blood was up.

Other squads joined them, there before the very gates of the citadel. Kerne saw Sergeant Orsus there, and Sergeant Kagan came up alongside with his squad, then Sergeant Rusei with his. As they assembled under Mortai's worn banner, so their dogged spirits were uplifted by the wanton killing, the roar of war, the company of their brethren.

For a few minutes, the band of Dark Hunters advanced across the battlefield like tawny, dust-

shrouded giants and dealt out such death with such glorious abandon that the carnage seemed almost to take unto itself a strange kind of beauty.

They were Adeptus Astartes, the finest warriors in the known galaxy, and nothing could stand against them.

But the moment passed. The exaltation faded. The Punishers advanced over heaped lines of corpses and kept on coming, bellowing like the beasts they were. And to the rear of the infantry the warped crab-like hulks of half a dozen Chaos Dreadnoughts were coming up. Jonah Kerne collected himself, and looked around.

'Back, brothers, back to the gates. There are too many – we cannot hold them here.'

They fell back by squad, whilst the eldar and Dietrich's forces covered their withdrawal. They dragged back with them the bodies of three of their own, and as they reached the gates, Brother Passarion was there, with Reclusiarch Malchai and Elijah Kass. The Apothecary at once went to work on retrieving the gene-seed of his fallen brethren.

'Malchai,' Jonah Kerne said. Even over the vox, such was the sound of the fighting that he had to fine-tune his auto-senses before he could hear himself. 'Is everyone else in?'

'Everyone who is still alive,' the Reclusiarch said. 'You are the last, captain. Commissar von Arnim has defensive fire-zones keyed in all around the gate and the lower defences. Once we are all inside he will signal the barrage to begin.'

'Very well.' Then Kerne looked at the Librarian, who was standing as silent as a stone, staring past him.

'What is it, brother – what do you see?'

The young epistolary had taken off his helm. Where once his eyes had been cobalt blue, now they had darkened into a grey as flat as old iron. He seemed to have to drag his gaze away from the ranks of the enemy.

'He is here, brother-captain, upon this planet. Not orbiting above any more, but here in the city with us. He has come to oversee the final act of the conflict.'

'Good,' Kerne said with savage emphasis. 'If he is down here with us in the dirt, then we can kill him. Get inside.'

They trooped in through the adamantium gates, the Baneblade taking half a dozen missile strikes as it went past them. It could barely limp into the citadel under its own power. Dietrich and his men stood around it as it halted, belching smoke, and the general patted the massive tank's side as though it were a trusted horse.

The rest of the squads came in, still firing, errant rounds sparking and scoring their armour. 'All present, dead and alive, captain!' Fornix shouted.

Kerne looked up at the banner he held as Fornix joined him. To one side there stood Te Mirah and her eldar, seventy or eighty of them in their green armour. He looked at the eldar farseer, and she nodded in her tall helm.

'Shut the gates,' Kerne ordered. 'Commissar Von Arnim, you may commence firing the heavy guns.'

The adamantium colossi slammed shut, crushing half a dozen of the foremost enemy warriors on the very threshold of the citadel. There was a moment almost of quiet in the wake of that great echoing boom, and then the thundering of the artillery began.

TWENTY-THREE

Pugna Ultima

The citadel of Askai on Ras Hanem had been built nigh on a millennium before.

Once, in that long-lost era of time before the coming of men to this part of the galaxy, there had been a hill beside a bright, free-flowing river, the Koi. The hill had overlooked the badlands to the west, and the rolling savannahs beyond. This terrain had come into being only in the last few thousand years; before that there had been thick forest and emerald-bright jungle carpeting the planet, and under the trees had walked the eldar.

The cataclysm that had hurled Ras Hanem and the Kargad system through the galaxy had seared the surface of the once fecund world, devastating flora and fauna, and destroying the ancient civilisation which had named the planet Vol-Aimoi. The eldar had fled the unstable system in a massed fleet of their beautiful ships, but not before burying the device which protected their dead deep in the earth of Vol-Aimoi.

They had meant to come back and retrieve it once the turmoil had died away, to begin again and rebuild their world. But, beset by the Chaos fleets and armies which teemed out of the newly opened Eye of Terror, harried by the advancing crusades of the Imperium of Man, they had never managed to return. And so, even their long memories had lost all knowledge of the forgotten world, even as its last exiles were hunted down and destroyed in a hundred battles over a thousand years. The eldar who had lived on Vol-Aimoi became extinct, and all record of them was lost in those tumultuous centuries.

Millennia passed. Men arrived near the star they named Kargad, and took the system as their own.

They landed at the foot of the hill, beside the river, and on that hill they built their first base, while they surveyed the planet and discovered the deep-buried riches of its ores. They built their houses and workshops and fledgling manufactoria under the fortifications on the hill, and grew in number.

The years came and went, and the settlement by the river grew into a city, and spawned others across the world that men now named Ras Hanem. The city was constantly enlarged, rebuilt and redesigned, until it was decided that Ras Hanem was important enough to warrant a major construction project. The fortress on the hill was dismantled and the hill itself was enlarged, built higher in a gigantic feat of engineering until it became a mountain, faced with igneous stone, braced

with adamantium, hollowed out and reared up into a mighty bastion full of guns – a city to itself.

Thus was the citadel of Askai born, and it had stood for a thousand years, home to the ruling house of Ras Hanem, the Riedlings, who in turn were merely descendants of the first explorers and traders set human foot on the planet.

The citadel was a thousand metres tall, and within its hollow heart tens of thousands of people lived and worked and hoped and hated and loved and died, while below them the city of Askai sprawled out at its feet, and underneath it the mines of the Administratum delved ever deeper, seeking the precious ores which fed the war machine of mankind.

Until the Punishers came.

Now, the citadel of the Riedlings was under siege. It was the last remaining outpost of the Imperium of Man in the entire system, and though it had originally been built with such trials in mind, the long years of peace had atrophied many of the systems and mechanisms of the defence.

Manufactoria buried in the mountain's foundations had fallen into disuse because the Armaments District with its massive production lines was only a few kilometres away. Food stores and water purification plants had been neglected under the latest and last scion of the Riedlings, and the defences had been allowed to run down in the years before the present catastrophe.

It was in this place that Mortai Company and its allies awaited the final assault of the massed Chaos hordes.

'*Si vis pacem, para bellum*,' Brother Malchai said. 'If you wish for peace, prepare for war. A proverb more ancient than the Imperium itself. The men who governed this planet might have done better to learn such ancient wisdom.'

Outside, the endless thump of the siege guns went on, a noise they had ceased to notice. It was part of the music of their lives, as unremarkable as the hot, humid air they breathed.

The blast doors of the citadel had been shut, and the fortress-mountain had closed itself off from the world, and the fury that was outside. The stone slopes of the mountain thundered with the endless bombing runs of the Stormbirds, and down at the gates, the Punishers were still trying to batter their way through the massive adamantium defences, like a bull charging at a cliff face. They had not stopped for twenty-six days, now, and the ancient gates of the citadel were still intact, but the stone in which they were embedded was crumbling away under that relentless barrage.

'Brother Heinos,' Jonah Kerne said. 'How long do you give it before they break through?'

The Techmarine looked up at the vast gleaming mechanisms which upheld the stark adamantium of the gates. The air before him was full of dust, but the specialised auspex built into his helm saw through it, scanned the microscopic and not so microscopic cracks in the metal and stone.

'I estimate that given three more days of this, the surrounding material will lose all integrity. The gates will not break, but what holds them in place will crumble.'

'Three days!' Fornix exclaimed. 'Well, it's good to be forewarned.'

'What about our repairs?' Brother Malchai asked. 'General Dietrich has had his engineers all over these gates day and night for the last four weeks.'

'It is the larger area that is in question,' the Techmarine told him implacably. 'It cannot be adequately repaired unless this entire section of the mountain is demolished and rebuilt. As it is, captain, I recommend that we abandon this section of the lower fortress. It has become unstable and

could collapse of its own accord at any time.'

Kerne walked away from his brethren and stared up at the tall gates. They had been shored up from within time after time, and rockcrete had been poured around the massive hinge-supports, but outside the Punishers had brought up two colossus cannons and they had been pounding the citadel unceasingly.

'It matters not,' he said at last. 'We can retreat all the way up to the summit of the citadel if we like, but eventually they will smash their way through every gate and barricade. As long as those heavy guns are out there, we can only postpone the inevitable so long.'

Four weeks of this, sitting like a rat in a trap, listening to the host baying outside, enduring the airstrikes, listening to those two damned siege guns hammering like great fists on the sides of the citadel.

Kerne looked up. Dust was trickling down from the basalt and granite of the chamber ceiling, thirty metres above, and the lights were flickering, dimming to yellow and then springing to half-brightness again.

This is not how I want to die: cornered in a cave.

Twenty-six days of this. They had beaten off raptor-landings on the very slopes of the upper citadel, had seen the governor's palace reduced to ruin by endless bombing. The blast doors of the gun-caverns were plastered with fire every time they were opened, but they had taken a terrible toll all the same.

'We must destroy those siege guns,' he said aloud. 'The enemy have not subjected us to orbital bombardment because they want the citadel intact, or as near as they can get to that. They want a way in – they don't want to level the place. In that is our hope.'

He turned around, and looked at his brothers. Fornix, his red eye gleaming in the gloom. Malchai, pale, glabrous and severe as the skull-shaped helm he carried. Kass, his eyes dark, his face aged beyond its years by the continual psychic attacks of the last weeks.

'We have one other asset they do not expect. The Thunderhawks are still intact, within this very fortress. We can use them to mount a sally. We will attack them from the air – they will never expect that.'

'Their colossus guns are void-shielded,' Malchai said, frowning. 'Even our gunships would be unlikely to damage them, captain.'

'I did not speak of gunship attacks, Brother Malchai. I intend to lead a team of our brethren outside in person to spike those guns.'

'Jonah,' Fornix said, 'there is no way back from such a mission.'

'I am aware of that, first sergeant.'

Fornix nodded, and smiled. 'Very well. It will be diverting at least, after all these weeks of peace and quiet.'

'Fornix, I will need you to stay here, to take over command of Mortai in my absence.'

Fornix scratched his head. 'Brother, I am coming with you. You can, of course, order me to stay – but if you do, I will disobey that order.'

They looked at one another. It was not a test of wills, more a sharing of memories.

Finally, Kerne said: 'Brother Malchai, you will command in my absence.'

The Reclusiarch bowed his head. 'You really mean to do this thing, captain?'

'I am set on it.'

'Are you trying to atone for your misdeeds, Jonah – is that it?'

Kerne stared coldly at Brother Malchai. 'You may ascribe to me whatever motive you wish, Malchai. It is a sound tactical move.'

'Which any one of your sergeants should be able to carry out. Mortai's commander does not have to risk himself this way.'

'I will be needed on this mission, Jord. I know it.'

Malchai passed his gauntlet over his scalp, as though wiping it clean. He nodded. 'Perhaps it is the best way,' he admitted in a low voice. When he raised his eyes to meet Kerne's there was real regret in his face.

'I will see to it that Mortai survives,' he said.

'I know you will, brother.'

'Captain.' Elijah Kass spoke up. 'I also will accompany you on this mission if I may. I believe that my abilities will be useful to you out there.'

Kerne considered the young Librarian. 'The Chaos warleader, who directs all this – you can feel him, can't you, Elijah?'

'I think that you will need defences other than bolter and power armour to sustain you beyond the walls of this fortress, captain. That is my role, and I wish to fulfil it.'

'All right then, Brother Kass, you and Fornix shall come with me. And Brother Heinos – we will need his expertise to sabotage the void shields and destroy the guns.'

'Who else do you want?' Fornix asked.

'This will be short-range, dirty work. I want the best close-quarter fighters in the company, Fornix.'

'Orsus then, and Finn March. How many others?'

'How many of us are left?' Kerne asked gently. He knew, but he wanted to hear it anyway.

'We have thirty-two unwounded brethren remaining, Jonah. For this mission I would recommend taking out at least half of those.'

Fifteen Space Marines, give or take.

'Three half squads then,' Kerne said. 'Under March, Orsus and yourself. I want them armed with chainswords and as many power weapons as we can find – flamers also.'

'When?' Brother Malchai asked.

Kerne paused, and listened to the unending sounds of war which rose and fell beyond the thickened sides of the fortress-mountain. 'We will need time to prep the Hawks. I want three – one for transport, and two for ground-support. A Space Marine pilot for the transport only – we still have enough fleet pilots to man the others.' He stopped again, turning it over in his mind.

'The sun is going down outside, brothers. We will use the night to prepare ourselves, and attack with the dawn.'

The group of Space Marines was silent.

'One last thing,' Kerne said at last. 'Have Dietrich and the eldar farseer meet with me at once. We had best keep our allies informed of our plans.'

Brother Malchai's face twisted in disgust at the word *allies*, but he said nothing, and walked away.

'I wanted to tell you both of the morning's operation because it relates closely to both your commands,' Kerne said to Dietrich and Te Mirah.

They stood a metre apart, the gnarled Imperial Guard General, and the tall, slender xenos. They did

not look at one another, and Dietrich had one hand on the holster of his pistol.

'If I am successful, then the enemy will have lost the most potent weapon in his armoury. The citadel will be able to withstand assault for some time to come – time which the relief forces still need to come to our aid.'

'If your people took to the warp, they might be here already,' Te Mirah said.

'They would have had to gather together a fleet formidable enough to battle the one in orbit,' Kerne told her. 'The Dark Hunters alone do not possess that capability, but we have sworn allies in other Chapters of our Adept who do. I do not doubt that they are coming, but it would be a miracle for them to arrive so soon.'

'Miracles happen because men make them happen,' Dietrich said doggedly. 'In any case, we will fight on here until the end, whatever and whenever it might be.'

Kerne set a hand on the officer's shoulder. 'I expected no less from you, general. Your conduct during this whole war has been of the very highest standard, and your men have added a worthy battle-honour to their colours. I know you and they will not let me down.'

Dietrich stiffened, and saluted.

'And my people, captain?' Te Mirah asked. 'What do you expect of them?'

'I am leaving a report with my Reclusiarch, for the eyes of the Chapter Master only,' Kerne told her. 'It details the part you played here on Ras Hanem, and the aid you gave us in the planet's defence. I have requested that your people should be allowed to leave this system in peace, once reinforcements arrive.'

'And will your superiors accede to your request, do you think?'

'I do not know,' Kerne said honestly.

Te Mirah smiled. 'I suppose I shall have to be content with that. In any case, my warriors and I are as much prisoners here as the rest of you, and the enemy which surrounds this fortress hates my kind almost as much as it hates yours. There is nothing else for it – we will remain here and fight, until the end.'

'I thank you for that,' Kerne said formally.

'Your superiors will not thank you for what you have done here – you know that. Your association with me will seem close to heresy in their eyes.'

'That is a problem for another day,' Kerne said with a shrug. 'My task is to preserve this fortress.'

'Even at the cost of your own life.'

'It is what I was made for,' Kerne told her. And there was nothing more to be said.

The cold season was moving on, and the mornings were not quite as chill and dark as they had been. The colossus guns halted their firing for a few hours before every dawn so that their crews might perform essential maintenance and reset their aiming mechanisms, which the concussion of the endless barrage shook off target.

That last morning, as the Kargad star rose above the Koi-Niro Mountains in the east of the world, a series of massive portals opened in the upper slopes of the citadel, and from those openings there uttered the roar of Mars pattern turbofans spinning to full power.

The teeming host of the Punishers looked up into the brightening sky to see three Thunderhawks erupt out of the side of the mountain above them like startled birds. They plunged down in arrowhead formation, the two wingmen opening up on the ground forces with sponson-mounted heavy bolters and

lascannons, while the central craft extended its landing gear and touched down just within the encampment which housed the colossus cannons.

It came down with a roar of dust and fire, and the front ramp dropped at once. Out of the forward hold a group of Space Marines emerged, firing bolt pistols and heavy flamers as they came. When they were all out, the Hawk lifted off again, spraying bolter fire at the astonished denizens of the surrounding camps and dugouts of the enemy.

The other two gunships swooped round in a shrieking arc at low level, and dropped a series of iron bombs on the lines leading up to the colossus encampment, massive fountains of earth and fire erupting in their wake. They left a trail of chaotic destruction behind them, and then soared up into the sky once more to make another run.

But on their second pass the Punishers had collected their wits and began to return fire. The sky became alive with the fiery blossoms of anti-aircraft ordnance. Lascannon beams sizzled skywards, pale in the growing sunlight, and a hail of bolter rounds were flung up from the ground by hundreds of the foe.

The armour of the Thunderhawks shrugged off the light arms, but one was struck by a krak missile under its port wing and at once it jerked askew in the sky, trailing a thick tube of smoke. It still made its second pass, dealing out death and murder in a wide swathe, but it was slower now, and targeted even more fiercely by those below it. The belly of the craft was blown out by a second strike, and the Hawk shuddered in the sky and plunged to the ground in a spiralling cartwheel of massive secondary explosions. In its death throes it sent a Chaos Dreadnought flying through the air like a shattered doll.

The two other Thunderhawks were caught in a net of fire. They pulled up, still strafing the enemy on the ground, but so many rounds were impacting upon them that they were almost invisible in welters of smoke and flashing detonations.

The Dark Hunters forged towards their goal, ignoring the drama in the sky above. They burst through the scattered defenders of the colossus guns like a mailed fist punching through plywood, and were under the shadow of the massive siege weapons within minutes of landing. The surrounding Punisher companies were caught off balance by this wholly unlooked-for attack. Many were unaware that the Hunters were among them; most were still staring at the sky and blasting off tons of ammunition in feral rage.

Kerne caught the arm of a Chaos champion as the armoured warrior sought to brain him with a blow of his power sword. He stabbed his chainsword up, shunting it through the ceramite and fibre-bundles of his enemy until he found the vitals, and the labouring blade churned out the Punisher's innards in a black spray of shredded viscera.

Around him, grenades were going off, and a promethium blast embroiled a trio of Punisher warriors in a wall of flame. They danced and wriggled in it blindly until Finn March's squad cut them down with bolt pistol fire.

'More coming up on the right,' Fornix said on the vox. 'Brother Pharnus, cover that arc with the heavy bolter.'

'Heinos, find the void generators,' Kerne told the Techmarine. 'Hunters, give me a perimeter. We must hold them until the thing is done.'

The last Thunderhawk was finally shot out of the sky above them. It careered crazily through the air, but the pilot had enough control of its course to make sure it came down in a dense mass of the enemy. Its destruction wiped out half a Punisher company, and threw up a wall of flame to the south of

Kerne's position.

Brother Heinos's servo-arm extended. He crouched close by the colossus guns and began tinkering with a series of corroded metal containers from which thick cables snaked. Sparks flew, and the blue flame of his fyceline torch blazed brighter than the sunlight.

'Primitive,' he said with contempt as he worked, utterly oblivious to the fighting going on around him.

'How long, brother?' Kerne asked him.

'A few minutes, captain.'

'Make sure that's all it is. Brother-Sergeant March, watch your left. Enemy company closing in.'

The Thunderhawks had done their job; the immediate area of the colossus encampment had been blasted clear of the enemy, and in the confusion the Punishers were still not entirely aware of what was going on. But many of the nearest warbands were close enough to see the hated Adeptus Astartes in their midst, and these formations surged forwards with a collective bellow of frenzied hate.

'They are being directed,' Elijah Kass said. 'I feel the will that shapes them. It is very close, now.'

'Incoming on all sides,' Fornix said calmly, flexing his power fist. 'Brothers, today is a good day, a glad day. On this bright morning, we will show this scum how the Dark Hunters conduct themselves on a battlefield. *Umbra Sumus*.'

'*Umbra Sumus*,' the chorus came back.

And then the first ranks of the Punishers slammed into them.

Instinct and training took over. The enemy warriors in their loathsome approximations of Space Marine armour crashed roaring into the Dark Hunters like an avalanche of unadulterated murder. So intent were the Punishers on coming to grips with their foes that they were getting in one another's way.

The Dark Hunters shot them down as they closed, kicked them back, shot them again, and then swept out the snarling chainswords. The first wave died there, and their bodies became entangled with the feet of the second.

Grenades went off, bright flashes of deadly white-hot shrapnel that clinked and bit their armour. Out of the corner of his eye, Kerne saw one of Fornix's pauldrons blown clean off his shoulder, but Mortai's first sergeant never even paused. He reached out with his power fist, grasped a Punisher by the skull, his fingers sinking into the enemy warrior's helm, and threw him into the faces of those behind them. He was laughing over the vox as though it were all some enormous joke. His bolt pistol was blackened with firing, and the cameleoline had been scored off his much-patched armour in a dozen places, to show both Hunters blue and shining ceramite beneath.

'Do you remember me, you scum? I am Fornix of the Dark Hunters. I am your death!'

Brother Kass was beside Fornix in the line, fighting like a man possessed. The psychic hood above his helmet was glowing with blue light, and he wielded a chainsword two-handed, swinging it back and forth in a blur.

They fought with the absolute purity of certain death, something like joy in the knowledge that they were facing hopeless odds, but they were exactly where they were supposed to be, and there was nothing else to think about except that activity which they were best at: killing. They slaughtered the enemy with the vicious economy of veterans, cutting down the Punishers as though the charging foe were nothing but a crop to be reaped. The cameleoline paint on their arms ran dark with blood.

But they were not invincible.

First one, then two, then a third of Kerne's brothers went down, swamped by foes that grappled them to the ground before their fellows administered the killing blows.

As the dwindling circle of Hunters was driven in towards the siege guns, so the melee grew ever more tight and murderous. Kerne saw Sergeant Orsus go down, swinging his chainsword to the last. The sergeant carved a tall Chaos champion clear in two and raised the bloody weapon to the sky with a gargle of triumph. Other Punishers closed in on him and bore the big warrior bodily to his knees. He disappeared in a squirming scrum of bodies. Two seconds later a grenade went off where he had been, and the struggling Punishers were blown apart.

The circle still held, but barely. Kerne stepped back from it a moment.

'Brother Heinos!'

'The shield is down, captain. I am laying charges in the breeches of the guns.'

'Make sure of them, Heinos. There will be no second chances today.'

They fought on, half of them down now. The Punishers had to climb over mounds of their own dead to come at them, and the Dark Hunters took another step back and opened up with bolt pistol and flamer at point-blank range.

Elijah Kass held out one hand as though he were handing a gift to the foe, and from the fingers of his gauntlet there streaked blue-white veins of light. These sank into the Punishers in front of him, and the Chaos warriors stopped in their tracks and began to scream and tear at their armour. Smoke rose from cracks that webbed across the metal, and they toppled, stinking like burned meat.

Kerne fired off magazine after magazine from Biron Amadai's ancient sidearm, the rounds streaking out to blow chunks off the oncoming enemy, red clouds of blood and metal erupting out of the struggling bodies before him. He bared his teeth in a rictus of hatred inside his helm.

All his centuries of training and experience drew together in him and kindled a prowess his foes could not hope to match; he shot the enemy, stabbed him, punched him aside, crushed skulls with the butt of the heavy bolt pistol, lifted his adversaries bodily and hurled them aside. His feet were sinking in a growing mire of muck and blood and other nameless things, and he trod on the bodies of his own brethren unknowing in the thick press of the fight.

He watched the sigils that signified his brothers fighting around him wink out one by one on his helm display. And still the survivors fought on, and kept to their feet, and somehow held the line.

Two massive explosions went off behind him, so close together that they merged into one. For a second his auto-senses shut down entirely to protect him. He was momentarily deaf and blind. The shockwave staggered him, and he felt the heavy blow of metal shards thump his armour.

Then his auto-senses were back online, and he heard Brother Heinos.

'Charges have been detonated. The guns have been spiked.'

He turned around and saw the Techmarine standing behind him. The servo-arm had been ripped from his back, and loose wires were fizzing and sparking on Heinos's spine.

'It is accomplished, captain,' Heinos said calmly. And then a bolter round smashed into the Techmarine's head, blasting out the back of his helm. Heinos went to his knees, and then fell onto his side in the bloody muck.

'Mortai!' Kerne called out across that deadly space. 'On me – close on me!'

There were perhaps seven or eight of them still standing. Fornix was there, and Finn March, and Elijah Kass. They fought back to back, grunting with effort, a tiny island in a sea of foes. Kerne was

beaten to his knees by a power hammer wielded two-handed, and Fornix broke the shaft of the weapon with a sweep of his power fist and punched its owner into ruin. He helped Kerne to his feet again.

'Hard work, eh, Jonah? But we'll rest soon enough.'

Once again, Elijah Kass punched out his fist, and the bright light flickered out of it, a flash that hurled several of the foe backwards. Then he swung his chainsword at them. But slower now; the Librarian seemed almost exhausted.

'Hold!'

The voice rang out clear across the battlefield, as loud as a clap of thunder.

The ranks of Punishers seemed to shudder. They stopped, and their insane yowling died down to a low rancid muttering.

Incredibly, the mob that surrounded the Space Marines lowered their arms, and the pressure slackened – they backed away. The ring about the Dark Hunters opened up.

The battlefield fell almost silent.

'What new trick is this?' Kerne said quietly to Brother Kass.

The Librarian was stooped, breathing hard. 'He's here, the leader. He has come.'

'Excellent,' Fornix said. 'Things were becoming a little tedious.'

'Reload, brothers,' Jonah Kerne told them. 'Whatever happens next, we must be ready.'

They changed magazines in their bolt pistols. One of them, Brother Galen of Novus Company, picked up the heavy bolter from the ground and checked the belt. Finn March scavenged for ammunition, and Brother Kass bent slowly and lifted a flamer from the hands of the dead.

The ranks of the Punishers parted in two waves, the warriors jostling each other, still muttering in that low insane tone. There was fear in the noise, but also a kind of expectation, as though they were children about to witness a marvel.

And what came striding up through their opened ranks was, in its own way, a marvel indeed.

It was a Space Marine in shining white, red-chased armour, taller than Jonah Kerne. The armour was of ancient design, a Mark V suit such as had been used during the Great Heresy thousands of years before. It was covered in molecular bonding studs, and the chest of the wearer was ringed with cabling.

The approaching warrior wore no helm. His face was stern, even noble, and his head was shaved save for a single scalp-lock which fell over one ear. As he drew close, they saw upon his cheeks the ritual scars of Mundus Planus, home of the White Scars.

But noble though his countenance was, as the newcomer halted before them, Kerne and his brethren saw that his eyes were entirely black, filled with the darkness of the warp.

'My brothers,' he said, and he held out his hands as though to welcome them, 'how did it come to this?' His voice was low, melodic, and beguiling.

Elijah Kass gripped the flamer he held until the metal of the weapon creaked in his fists.

'Abomination,' he hissed. 'I know you. I know what you are.'

'You know nothing, little Elijah. I have tracked your mind since first you came to this world, and I have mapped out every vestige of mediocrity within it. Hold your tongue and let your betters speak.'

Kass swayed. 'Captain – it is a daemon–' And then he ground his teeth and shut his eyes.

'He is mistaken,' the strange Space Marine said. 'I am no daemon, captain Jonah Kerne, oh my brother. I am one of you. I was born a White Scar. I fought with my Legion for years uncounted. I was

there when that Legion was made into Chapters, and when the Dark Hunters were born I was already old. The genes of mighty Jaghatai are buried in me, as they are in you. We are brethren, captain.'

'Who are you?' Kerne asked.

'I was once called Gull Khan. I have other names now, but there was a time when I, too, commanded a company of Legiones Astartes. Back before my children called to me–' he spread his arms, smiling, and around him the vast host of the Punishers growled like beasts.

'And now I am come here to this system, to claim a home for myself and my orphans…' He looked up at the sky, almost as though he had lost the thread of his thought, and a frown creased the calm imperturbability of that face.

'He is false,' Kass rasped, as though every word he uttered were an agony. 'Do not listen to him, captain…'

'I applaud your broad thinking, Jonah Kerne,' Gull Khan went on. 'There are not many of our kind who would have indulged the machinations of the eldar to the degree you have. Did you know that it was they who were jamming all your vox transmissions? We tried also of course, but they are so much better at it. And I take it they exacted a price for relaying your messages back to Phobian… how very clever of them – and how obtuse of you.'

Kerne said nothing. He did not know if this thing uttered truth or falsehood or a blend of the two, but something in him flared up in outrage all the same.

'You were fooled twice, captain,' Gull Khan went on. 'Once by us, and once by the eldar witch who is now safe in the fortress at your back.' He looked up at the smoking ruins of the colossus cannons, their barrels bent back like the petals of shattered flowers.

'But you are certainly enterprising, all the same. I did not expect this move.' Something in his face flickered just for a moment – it was a kind of doubt. Once again, he looked at the bright morning sky, as though he expected something to appear in it.

'I give you a choice, now, brother.' He came closer, and the Dark Hunters raised their weapons.

'Join us,' he said simply. 'Just you, Jonah Kerne – join us now – walk across that line, and I will spare your remaining brethren, and whosoever else you wish to save. They can walk out of Askai with their weapons and their lives, and go whither they wish. I have no use for them, and no need to kill any more of your prized Mortai Company.

'Take my hand now, and I swear by the Ruinous Gods that you shall have the highest of ranks in my armies, and you shall be treated with honour and respect.'

Jonah Kerne laughed, a genuine laugh of surprise. 'Do you take me for a fool?'

Gull Khan's eyes narrowed. 'You must know that you have no hope. Even if by some miracle you were to prevail on this world, do you think that your Imperium would then forgive and forget? You allowed the eldar to spirit away a priceless relic of their race, one which, if delivered to your Administratum, might have held the key to their eradication. In fact, you handed it over to them freely, when it was in your actual possession. You will not be forgiven for that, captain. They will break you for it.'

'Then let them break me when I'm dead,' Kerne told him with contempt. 'You mean to kill us all – get on with it. I have had enough of this pantomime.' And he meant it. He was ready. Gull Khan had not told him anything he did not already suspect in his hearts. It was why he had led this forlorn hope. Brother Malchai had known that.

Gull Khan shook his head sadly.

‘You refuse my offer then.’

‘I do.’

‘Such a waste, captain.’ The tall, pale-armoured warlord drew a sword, a bright, wicked blade that sprang into crackling life as it rose in his hand.

‘I will indulge you with death at my own hands then, Dark Hunter. My children will hold back, if yours will. We shall engage blade to blade with honour.’

‘Very well.’ Kerne raised his battered chainsword and thumbed the power so that the engine coughed into life.

‘He is lying to you, captain,’ Elijah Kass said. ‘There is something else he is concealing from us – he is parrying every attempt I make to reach out.’

‘Do not fight him alone, Jonah,’ Fornix urged. ‘Let us all go into the dark together.’

‘Not this time, brother,’ Kerne said. He set a hand on the arm of his first sergeant, his brother, his friend.

‘Today, Fornix, I must go into the dark alone.’

They walked towards one another, two Space Marines: one in beautifully made damascened armour which was marked by hard combat and painted crudely with cameleoline, the other in perfect white purity, unmarked by blade or bolter, armour as unsullied as the day it was made.

As they drew closer, so their pace quickened, until they both broke into a run. A massive roar went up from the Punisher host which surrounded them as Jonah Kerne and Gull Khan came together in a ringing crash.

Elijah Kass shut his darkening eyes and bent his head. His hood glowed with sapphire light. Fornix took a step forward, his power fist cocked as though he meant to punch something in the very air before him. But he stopped as the Punisher warriors around them levelled their weapons, a hundred bolters aimed at his chest.

‘Emperor, bright Lord of battle, help him now,’ he muttered, and stood stock-still, watching.

The blades swung, Gull Khan’s power sword describing an arc of blinding light. It clinked off Kerne’s shoulder as he ducked, and left a smoking scar on the ancient pauldron.

The Dark Hunter wheeled, his chainsword licking out to bite on empty air as his adversary jerked back.

They circled each other.

‘I know you, Dark Hunter,’ Gull Khan said. ‘I know your kind better than they know themselves.’

He parried a blow, side-stepped and kicked Kerne in the back of the knee. Jonah staggered, then threw himself backwards to avoid the bright blade which swept through the air inches from his head. For a second the chainsword churned through the muck of the ground, throwing it up in a brown spray that speckled Gull Khan’s pristine armour. The Punisher warlord stepped back, and let his opponent rise.

‘The Dark Hunters thought they knew better than their parent Legion – they evolved new tactics, found new ways to fight–’ Gull Khan lunged in close. His blade caught Jonah Kerne on the hip, sank into the ceramite and smoked there a half-second before he jerked it free. Kerne knocked it aside, the chainsword teeth scrabbling on the smooth supercharged metal. Smoke rose from the engine at his weapon’s hilt.

‘They sought to perfect the art of war as they saw it. They sought to survive, above all else.’ Gull

Khan grunted as he leapt forward again. He feinted with the sword, and then punched Kerne on the side of his helm, a heavy blow that knocked the Dark Hunters captain sideways. Kerne rolled in the mud while the bellowing triumph of the Punisher hordes rose around him. With preternatural speed he found his feet in time to parry another blow, but it knocked him backwards. The Chaos warriors who ringed the struggling duo stepped back, raising their weapons above their heads and cheering madly, as though this were sport laid on for their amusement.

Kerne rolled again as the power sword stabbed into the earth where he had been. Never had he moved so fast, and yet Gull Khan was faster still. He kicked Kerne in the back, so hard that a cable from his powerpack was dislodged. Red sigils sparked up on Kerne's helmet-display. He rose to his feet, and charged forward again, launching a flurry of blows which drove his opponent back. The chainsword laboured and sparked – it scored a dark line in Gull Khan's armour and carved off one of the shining studs which adorned it.

'Your brothers sought to do no more than my children do,' Gull Khan went on, backing away slowly, the power sword in front of him, mud sizzling off it, burning.

'They sought to perfect themselves and their calling, to live and thrive in a terrible place–' He dived in, his thrust parried, and he brought up the hilt of his sword to smash into Kerne's helm, full in the pointed snout. The Corvus helm was smashed clear off Jonah's head, the neck-joint cracked and broken. Kerne staggered, lashed out blindly with the chainsword, his head swimming.

'To perfect one's own abilities, to follow one's calling with all the skill one can muster – that is a beautiful thing,' Khan said. He watched as Kerne found his footing and shook his head clear.

'It is the way of Slaanesh, who is my lord, and guardian. My god.' Gull Khan advanced again. 'Look what he has made of me, captain, and see what your Emperor has made of you.'

He charged in close again, knocked the chainsword aside with his armoured forearm, and sliced down with the power blade. The long shining length of it came down with shattering violence upon Jonah Kerne's shoulder, burning through the ancient armour that Lukullus had once worn, slicing through ceramite and adamantium layers, finding the flesh within, carving the Dark Hunter's arm from his body.

Kerne fell to his knees, blood ribboning out from his severed stump. Around them, the Chaos host yowled and shrieked with pleasure, firing their bolters into the sky. Fornix howled with them, but in despair and grief. Finn March held him back as Mortai's first sergeant tried to lunge forward.

Kerne looked up at the Punisher warlord, and his eyes were clear. He smiled.

'At least I die true to my Lord and my faith,' he said, gasping. 'You are nothing but traitorous scum, and your god is an abomination.'

For the first time, Gull Khan's face changed. Anger flooded it. His mouth opened in a snarl, and as it did it seemed his features altered, blurred, revealing something else behind them. There was a glimpse of a contorted, bestial countenance in which broken fangs sprouted and snapped. Then the Punisher closed in, sword raised.

Kerne threw his chainsword at his adversary. It struck the power sword and knocked it askew even as Khan loomed in. Then he drew Biron Amadai's bolt pistol from his side, and let himself fall flat. He rolled under Gull Khan's legs, and raising the pistol he fired as fast as his failing strength could pull the trigger.

The rounds pounded up into Gull Khan's armour, and the Punisher warlord shuddered with their impact. He stumbled, lurched to one side, and as he did Kerne followed him with the muzzle of the

ancient bolt pistol. He put the last three rounds of the magazine into Gull Khan's head, the muzzle of the weapon so close to his foe's skull that it blackened the skin.

The Punisher's skull disintegrated, blown apart. The black eyes were destroyed, blown from their sockets, and the lower jaw fell open with nothing above it but broken bone and mangled meat.

Jonah Kerne collapsed, chest heaving, beside the white-armoured corpse of his enemy. He lay on his back, listening as the stunned, disbelieving silence of the Punishers gave way to a vast roar of baffled fury.

He looked up at the sky. It is a good day to die, he thought.

With his fading sight he watched the bright vault of Ras Hanem's sky become ever brighter, as though there were other suns up there beyond the blue.

And things falling in that brightness, dark shapes plummeting to earth and trailing vivid streams of smoke in their wake, a dazzling sight, mystifying.

'Jonah – Jonah, can you hear me?'

The fighting was beginning again. The roar of bolter fire shook the air, and in it were larger echoing booms. He felt the very earth under his back tremble and shake.

'Jonah, look at me.'

It was Fornix, his helm off, his red eye gleaming. He was cradling his captain in his arms.

Kerne could not speak. Even his enhanced biological systems could not cope with the massive loss of tissue. The power sword had taken off his arm at the shoulder and continued deep into the side of his chest, ruining a lung, clipping one of his two mighty hearts. He was drowning in his own blood.

Fornix levered his captain into a sitting position.

'Do you see them, Jonah? Watch with me, my brother. They have come – our brethren have come, and others with them. They're dropping into the city in their thousands. Do you see them, Jonah?'

He did. They were the last thing he saw, a glorious sight. Hundreds of drop pods were landing all around in the ruins, and out of them stormed a mighty host of the Adeptus Astartes, in Hunters blue and the livery of the other six Chapters. The Dark Sons were there, having left the Wendakhen campaign in obedience to their oath. And he could see the badges of the Brazen Fists, the Doomsayers, the Shadowhawks, and yet more.

Hundreds of Space Marines were pouring across the ravaged face of the city, slaughtering the leaderless and bewildered foe. And in the skies above them, Thunderhawks appeared, dozens of squadrons spitting fire, burning the enemy into the ground.

Thus did the Dark Hunters and their allies return to purge the world of Ras Hanem, in the Kargad system, in the nine hundred and eighty-second year of the fortieth millennium.

TWENTY-FOUR

Valediction

‘He did not die,’ Kharne Al Murzim said, the sorrow heavy in his voice. ‘He should have died that day.’

The Chapter Master of the Dark Hunters looked down from the heights of the tower to the wide flagged courtyard at the heart of Mors Angnar below. It was blowing hard from the mountains, flurries of snow speeding on the bitter wind, and the Argahasts were tall, looming titans on the horizon, blinding bright at the brim of the world. The fleeting sun was passing over them, and under it the ragged shadows of clouds sped before the gale, like banners on a battlefield.

‘It would have been better,’ the Reclusiarch said, settling his hands deep in the folds of his black habit. ‘With his survival, he tainted the victory. And now a captain of the Chapter is to be…’ he trailed off.

‘The Inquisition had no choice, Brother Malchai. Once what he had done became common knowledge, it was inevitable.’

‘I agree. His decision baffled me at the time, and yet it may have saved the planet. Without the help of the eldar it is possible we might not have held on as long as we did.’

‘That sounds very strange coming from a Reclusiarch of the Adeptus Astartes, Brother Malchai.’

‘I know. I have thought on this and prayed on it many times in the last year, my lord, and I cannot come to any other conclusion. Jonah Kerne committed heresy, yet by doing so, he preserved Ras Hanem long enough for you to pull it back from the brink. We must give him credit for that, at least.’

‘Indeed. But it was Diez and the *Arbion* who brought us word of the second invasion, let us not forget. Preparations for the relief were already well under way when Brother Vennan received the message from the eldar. Jonah Kerne was outwitted, betrayed by the xenos he chose to help. He kept his word, but theirs was never worth anything.’

‘They paid for it,’ Malchai said with a snarl.

‘We executed their leader, all those who stayed behind. But the artefact which was the cause of it all has escaped us. For that, Captain Kerne must pay a heavy price.’ Kharne Al Murzim shut his eyes a moment, his face gnarled in pain.

Then he collected himself. ‘Your reports were invaluable – they have all been forwarded to the

Inquisition of course. Not that it will do any good. His guilt has always been undeniable.'

Al Murzim paused, and sighed. 'There he is.'

Below them, a solitary figure in a midnight-blue habit was walking across the flagstones of the courtyard. Its hood was up, and the wind tugged at the robe. The figure came to a halt near the centre of the open square, and looked up.

Al Murzim turned away from the sight, walking across his chamber with his head bowed.

'He should have died,' the Chapter Master whispered.

Jonah Kerne was gazing upon the towering heights of the Argahast Mountains which loomed over Mors Angnar. They had caught the sun, and were bright as silver in the rare brilliance of the light. He smiled. He was glad he had been able to see them like this one last time.

Footsteps on the flagstones made him turn around. It was Fornix, his hood thrown back and his bionic eye bright as a glede in the cold sunlight.

'You shouldn't be here, brother,' Kerne told him.

'I had to come,' Fornix said simply.

'You are captain of Mortai now. You cannot allow yourself to be tainted by my misdeeds.'

'Let them go to hell, if they think I will let you make the walk out of here alone, Jonah.'

Kerne reached out a hand. It was metallic, a composite of alloys and wires and cabling. Fornix took it in the warrior grip.

'Well, brother-captain, let us be on our way. I hear they are waiting.'

They marched out of the square together, unaware that Brother Malchai was watching them all the way from the tower above, his face clenched in grief and regret.

'Goodbye, Jonah,' the Reclusiarch whispered as the two disappeared.

Out on the landing pad, the shuttle was waiting, and beside it stood two figures, power armoured and with their cloaks billowing in the wind. There was no emotion on their faces as Kerne and Fornix approached. They were so similar in their impassive brutishness that they might have been twins.

'You are Jonah Kerne, of the Dark Hunters Chapter of the Adeptus Astartes,' one of them said.

'I am,' Kerne replied.

'We are brethren of the Ordo Xenos of the Emperor's Inquisition, and are here to take you into custody for trial on charges of heresy and xenos taint. Are you ready?'

'I am.'

Kerne turned to Fornix. 'Look after Mortai for me, my friend.'

Fornix could only nod.

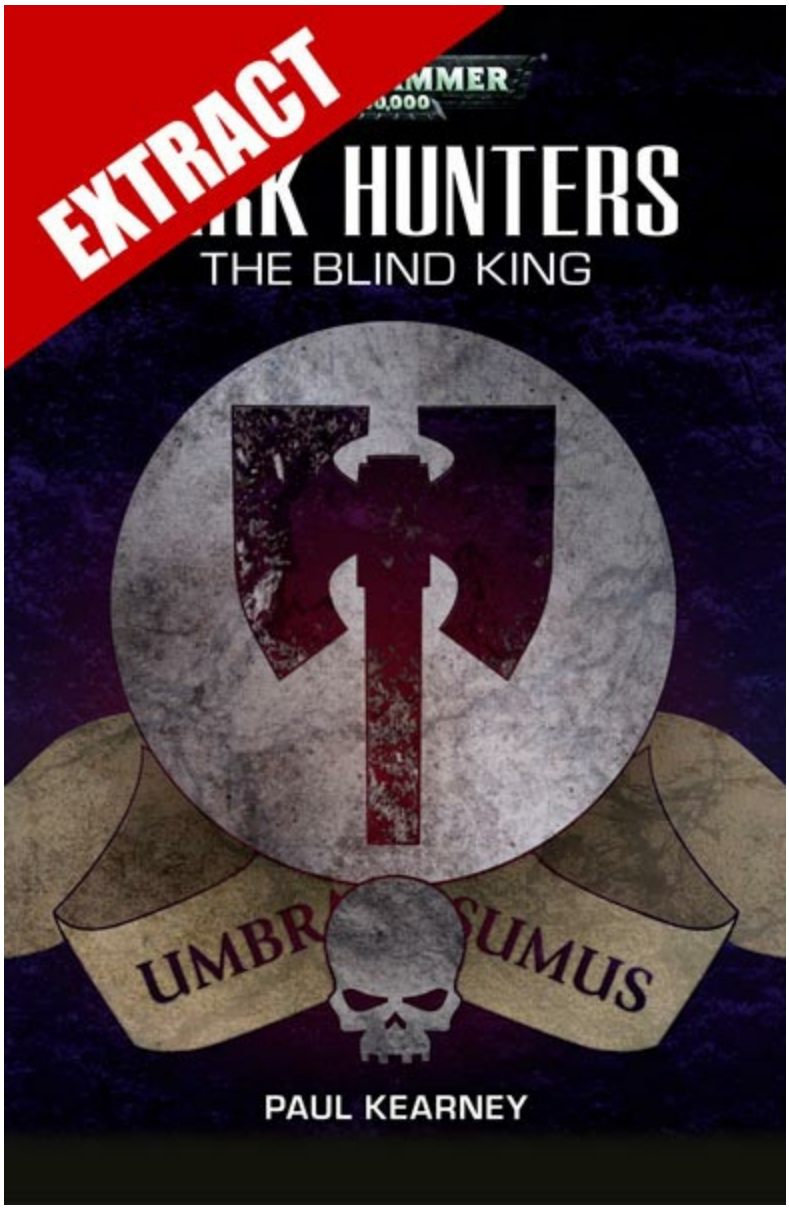
Then Kerne followed the Inquisitors up the ramp to the open hatch of the shuttle. As the ramp came up he turned round one last time to look at the shining mountains of his home, to breathe in that chill air and feel the wind of Phobian on his face.

Then the hatch closed shut upon him.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Kearney's Warhammer 40,000 work comprises the short story 'The Last Detail' from Legends of the Space Marines, the Dark Hunters novel *Umbra Sumus* and the accompanying short story 'The Blind King'. He studied at Lincoln College, Oxford and has been widely published, as well as being longlisted for the British Fantasy Award. He lives and works in Port Glenone, Northern Ireland.

An extract from ‘Dark Hunters: The Blind King’.



'I never knew that ice could catch fire,' he said, and his words betrayed some of the wonder that remains in the neophyte. There is still a little of humanity's weakness and credulity even in those of us who are close to attaining the full brotherhood.

But as I turned to look at his face, I will admit that I felt some of that same wonder myself; I, Mauron Aekin, who has walked and bled upon worlds without count.

Brother Rausa caught my stare and frowned. He bent in the trench and retrieved his helm. The starlight caught the dark lenses, each a momentary, tiny universe in itself. Then he set it upon his head and became faceless, one battle-brother among many others.

'The plasma cannon it bears will burn up anything. It will make magma out of solid stone. What you see is the glare as it engages our forces on the glacier, brother.'

'Yes, brother-sergeant. It is just…' Again, that human hesitation. 'I have never seen a Titan in battle before.'

I grunted at that and stared out across the icefields again, blue under the stars, winnowed by a chill gale that sped drifts of granular snow across it in bitter clouds.

'Not many have.'

Perhaps some thirty kilometres away, in the foothills of the mountains, there burst and flared a light show fit to make shame of any planetary aurora. Bolts of yellow, red and green snaked through the thin atmosphere. Flashes went up and died. And in their wake, there carried across the intervening plains a low rumble, like the ominous chuckle of some twisted god.

Mortai Company was out there now, fighting the desperate fight, dying for their brethren in the other companies. Buying time with Adeptus Astartes blood.

Aekin bowed his head a moment, thinking of his friends in Mortai. Already, the Dark Hunters Third Company was coming to be seen as unlucky. *The Fated Ones*, they were called, and they seemed to take a grim satisfaction in the title.

Throne watch over them, he prayed silently. *Let their deaths be worthy.*

A vast, horizon-spanning flash of light sprang up for a second and then died almost as instantly. There was a bright glow that smouldered under the stars. The light show abated somewhat.

'That was the end of a Titan, or I know nothing,' Aekin said softly. Seconds later, they heard the dull roar of the explosion, and a wind went past them, lifting the snow into the air to shroud them in dancing ice crystals.

'No Warhound either. That was a Reaver, maybe even a Warlord. Rausa, what of the auspex?'

His fellow Space Marine was already consulting the device, its green light flickering upon him, like sunlight seen through deep water.

'So much interference it's hard to say, brother-sergeant. But the base readings have dipped. I'm seeing lower energy levels.'

Aekin blinked on the Chapter-wide vox. 'Mortai, this is Ansar. Report, brothers.'

Silence, then a brief garbled crackle, then more silence.

Aekin's face tightened. His lips drew back from his teeth inside the beaked corvid helm. He blinked up the Company vox.

'Brother-captain.'

'Report, Aekin.'

'Large detonation in Mortai's lines. Possible Titan destruction. Vox with Third Company is difficult to impossible.'

'I read you, Aekin. Hold position.'

He wanted to say more, to ask his captain for a portion of the bigger picture, but he knew better. The vox was not for gossip, or facile enquiry.

'Acknowledged. Aekin out.'

'This is the Haradai's task we are fulfilling here,' Brother Rausa said, staring out at the dying apocalypse on the horizon. Impatience and a kind of doubt coloured his tone, even over the medium of the vox.

'Our brethren in the Scout Company are either dead or scattered all over the glaciers to the south, keeping watch, brother. We fulfil our orders, and we do so without question, complaint or query. Do I make myself clear, Rausa?'

'Perfectly clear, brother-sergeant.'

'You are a neophyte, brought into the line companies ahead of your time because we are cruelly understrength. This is your chance to redeem that act of faith. Do not let me or Ansar Company down, Rausa.'

'Never, brother-sergeant. I would rather die than fail my brethren and my Chapter. By the Throne I swear it.'

Aekin smiled a little at the heat in the young Space Marine's voice.

'Would you like to speak to Brother-Chaplain Nurif?'

'That will be not be necessary, sergeant. His sermon on leaving the fortress was inspiration itself.'

They watched the horizon again, concealed in the trench that they had scooped out of the ice and stone with their own hands. There was no room to turn around in it, and their jump packs were on the lip of the trench behind them, concealed in a mound of snow.

Rausa is right, though, Aekin thought. *This is no job for Assault Marines. But when war explodes out of a clear sky, and the Chapter is caught as badly by it as we have been, then many compromises must be made.*

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