



MISSION: PURGE (2012)

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List of characters:

DEATHWATCH:

- * Artemis - Captain of the Deathwatch, former Captain of the Mortifactors Chapter;
- * Harik Thunderfang – brother of Deathwatch, former Space Wolf
- * Lavestus - brother of Deathwatch, former White Consul
- * Obaino - brother of Deathwatch, former Blood Angel
- * Seckor - brother of Deathwatch, pilot

OTHERS

- * Isary – Rogue trader, Captain of the "Volens Batavis" vessel.

CHAPTER 01

The four giant warriors filled the landing bay with their bulk. Each was clad in black armor. Three bore only the silver of one shoulder pad and their chapter colors on the other breaking the sable, the fourth - raven-livered from head to foot. Behind them their gunship took up the rest of the chamber, its engines idling. The man that greeted them was slender¹, his slightness of build made more prominent by a great coat. It was of heavy blue cloth much decorated with braiding and golden buckles² - an affectation³ pretending a military command perhaps or may be duliant in the service of the Imperial Guard regiment. The man's thin face was scarred around the right eye and ear lending credence to the latter theory.

Arthemis took in the details without effort, noting a twitch of the right hand – was it tendon⁴ damage or a nervous reflex. The man was in the flight bay alone but left armed men in the corridor outside. Like the man's demeanor it was a conflicting image. Armsmen would close by at signal of potential resistance, but the man that greeted the warriors of the Deathwatch did not bring his soldiers into the flag bay.

Isary: "I am Thanner Kempf Isary, Captain of the "Volens Batavis". For what reason do I have the honor of this visit?"

Arthemis: "Brother Captain Artemis. I've come with instruction that you are not to dock with the orbital station of Plexius. You are to come to a halt and submit to the inspection of my squad".

Isary: "Four Space Marines is trifle⁵ overkill⁶ for a custom's boarder visit, not? By what right do you seek to delay a rogue trader on his rightful business? I mean no disrespect, but I have perishable cargo"

Arthemis: "Your cooperation will minimize any delays, master Isary".

Isary: "I know your name, brother Captain, but I do not recognize your colors. See here, this one is a pauldron of the Space Wolves and I recognize the emblem of the White Consuls on your other companion. Yet you and this one adorn⁷ yourself in black, a curious assemblage. I find that suspicious. What interest is it to the Adeptus Astartes what I have in my hold⁸?"

Arthemis: "We are brothers of the Deathwatch, master Isary, drawn from many chapters. I was raised a warrior of the Mortifactors. We carry the full authority of the Inquisition".

The brother Captain reached into a pouch at his waist and produced a small wooden box. He opened it carefully with gauntleted hands to show the golden insignia of the inquisition. Artemis watched Isary carefully noting the slight narrowing of eyes and furrowing⁹ of the brow. There was a contradictory hint of a smile at the corner of the man's mouth.

Arthemis: "There is no surprise that you haven't heard of our organization. We are not concerned with the day-to-day affairs of Imperial servants".

Isary: "So what brings you to my ship, Captain? I can assure you that there is nothing but the mundane in day-to-day about my business at Plexius. I have a hold full of fruit from Kabia for the palaces of the Imperial commander. They are only in temporal retardation¹⁰ not full stasis. I am sure you would not wish for the Imperial commander shipment to spoil".

Isary was not being forthright¹¹ and his argument demonstrated unwillingness beyond dissatisfaction at simple inconvenience.

However Artemis did not race it to a hasty conclusion.

Arthemis: "Your implication¹² of the Imperial commander is pointless. Even he submits to the will of the Inquisition. There is no threat or appeal to a higher authority that will prevent us from performing an inspection".

The brother Captain's companion Lavestus of the White Consuls had less patience and stepped forward. He raised his heavy bolter just a fraction¹³.

Lavestus: "You misunderstand the brother Captain. He is not making a request. He is not seeking your permission. By the authority of the Inquisition we have boarded this vessel. A loyal servant of the Emperor would not seek to hinder¹⁴ us in our duty".

Isary flinched¹⁵ and stepped back from the opposing warrior, glancing at Artemis for a moment, perhaps seeking a rebuttal¹⁶ to Lavestus's pronouncement.

Arthemis: "My brother is correct, master Isary. You will give orders to bring your ship to a halt and comply with my demands".

Isary (laughing): "Ha-ha-ha! You... of course, Captain... I meant no harm. If you follow me, I will speed your inspection in any way I can".

Arthemis: "Your cooperation is noted. When we have cleared the flight bay, open the outer gates so that our transport may depart".

Isary: "Is that wise? Sorry, sorry, I do not mean to disagree. I am taken aback that you will remain for so long. The "Volens Batavis" is not a large vessel, barely 500 meters. Your inspection won't take too much time, I hope. But yes, we can let your gunship depart... Of course..."

(Beep)

Arthemis: "Seckor, take up a position in fifty kilometers from the ship. Inform me, if she has not fired retros¹⁷ within five minutes".

(Beep, beep)

Secker: "Confirmed, brother Captain".

(Beep)

In the corridor a dozen armsmen waited with shotguns ready. They wore grey protective suits baggy¹⁸ of the arms and legs and their faces were covered with visored helms. Artemis saw swarthy¹⁹ skin on all of the men and wondered from which world they hailed. There

was no insignia on their uniforms and they did not move away as the Space Marines exited the launch bay.

Harik Thunderfang stopped beside one of them and hefted his atomizer cannon to his chest. The weapon, an upgraded multi-melta, deemed too dangerous by his parent chapter, dwarfed²⁰ the weapon of the crewmen. The men did not react except to tilt his head to look up into the face of the tall warrior's helmet.

Harik Thunderfang (laughing): "Ha-ha-ha! I don't know what your master told you was coming, but that little gun of yours would not be much use against me, would it?"

Officer: "An honor guard, lord. Nothing more! For me, no fracas²¹intended".

Harik Thunderfang: "None taken".

Arthemis: "Take us to the main hall, master Isary. We will be as swift as duty allows".

CHAPTER 02

The roving²² gaze of Artemis took in everything. Isary kept a well-maintained ship, the bulkheads²³ were freshly painted in pale blue, exposed fittings and metal doors polished to a gleam. The ship was little more than a cargo hall with engines, crew-quarters, a bridge and four small gun-turrets - were all that propped the smooth lines of the craft's hull. They passed on a stairway on to the main hold, a cavernous space that was poorly lit by the flickering lumen strips that sprang into life overhead. The light cast shadows from gantries and cranes, crisscrossing the ceiling.

Arthemis's armor detected a dropping of temperature of several degrees as they descended. Isary stopped at the bottom of the stairway and waived a hand at the lines of the identical transport containers, each ten meters long and half as high.

Isary (laughing): "Ha-ha-ha! The fruits of my labors as they were".

Arthemis: "How many containers?"

Isary: "206, Captain. Most in this hold, another fifty in the secondary hall below. The temporal seals are all intact. I checked them myself when we departed. Please... Captain... I do not understand the need for this inspection".

Arthemis: "You visited Alantaris IV, did you not?"

Isary: "Oh, yes... But that was nearly two years ago. A dull down planet".

Harik: "A lot duller now. The Inquisition executed Exterminatus on Alantaris IV. Irrevocable²⁴ xenos contamination. Virus bombs turned it into a lifeless rock".

The ship's Captain paled at this news and swallowed hard. It was not an unexpected reaction to mention of Exterminatus - the Inquisition's final resort. There was more than passing fear though, a touch of genuine concern.

Isary: "You think that something came aboard there? Surely we would have seen some evidence in the last two years".

Arthemis: "And that is the purpose of this inspection".

Isary: "Very well. Waste your time if you must. If you need me, contact one of the crew".

Arthemis watched the shipmaster head back up the stairs with some undue haste it seemed.

(Footsteps)

When Isary had disappeared from sight, the brother Captain turned his attention to the content of the hold. The Space Marines were not alone. On bridging gantries²⁵ crossing the chamber figures in bulky void suites lay but at the hoisting machinery in preparation for the expected docking with the principal orbital station. The men moved awkwardly, shuffling along the narrow walkways, dragging cables and chains. In the dim light even Artemis's enhanced vision could not make out their faces in the shadows of the suit hoods.

Arthemis: "You know the threat we seek here – genestealers. If one of them came aboard at Alantaris any number of the crew may be infected by now. Stay vigilant²⁶!"

Lavestus: "I am always vigilant, brother Captain. No mark of heretic, mutant or alien is beyond my gaze. The Emperor has bestowed upon us gifts to see such foul spawn and if they are here we will root them out".

Harik: "You did not see those cathelan cutbears in the cave at Fotreen, did you?"

Lavestus: "A momentary oversight²⁷".

Harik: "If you had spent as much effort watching our flank as you do sermonizing on the gifts of the Emperor, we would have not lost Vadegard".

Lavestus: "For which I have made copious²⁸ apology and penance²⁹ to the Emperor. The loss of brother Vadegard vexes ³⁰me still".

The fourth member of the kill-squad stepped between the Space Wolf and the White Consul and held up a placating hand to each of them in turn. Unlike the others he bore no chapter heraldry. He was one of the black shields, sworn permanently to the service of the Deathwatch, all ties to his former duties and loyalties broken.

Arthemis had first met Obaino during an ork cleansing on Suffados Decimus nearly three years earlier, but still knew nothing about the warrior. Nothing confirmed, at least. Artemis had drawn several conclusions about his companion's history from observation, but was respectful enough of Obaino's desires for anonymity not to speculate openly. Harik, Lavestus and Seckor frequently displayed no such discretion³¹. Obaino did not seem to mind, neither confirming nor denying any of their claims, pose sensible and outlandish.

Obaino: "Brothers, if we are to spend our time repeating the deficiencies³² of past behavior, we would be here for hours. I take equal blame for the demise of poor Vadegard, for if I have not been so intent upon that enemy warlord I would have been able to assist our deceased brother against the cutbear ambush".

Arthemis: "Obaino is correct. Now it is not the time for airing these grievances again, if there is ever such a time. Tell me, Lavestus, what do your Emperor-gifted senses tell you about our current situation?"

Lavestus took a few paces towards the closest container and examined a small rune-pattern screen set into the corrugated³³ metal.

Lavestus: "The chronometer on this control is set to collapse the semi-stasis field in little less than four hours. It has been active for 312 days".

Arthemis (taking a deep breath): "Ah, those are the facts, but what do they mean, brother?"

Harik: "The Imperial commander likes his fruit really fresh?"

(Everyone laughing moderately)

Lavestus: "Such a wit, brother Thunderfang. Heavier days on Fenris must drag for your brothers devoid of your company. I fear my absence passes without similar regret".

Arthemis: "You think that we waste our time here, brothers?"

Perhaps, you consider Plexius unimportant, deserving to share the same fate as Alantaris IV".

Harik: "Sorry".

Lavestus: "Sorry, profound apologies, brother Captain. However it seems that our inquisitorial masters have miscalculated. This inspection draws us away from more obvious threats".

Arthemis: "It is never a waste of time securing the realm of the Emperor against the threat of xenos corruption. Follow me and observe".

(Footsteps)

CHAPTER 03

Arthemis: "The chronometers of this chamber show decreasing duration of activation, brothers. See? As we move further the time of suspension decreases by month at a time with each new row".

Obaino: "They were activated at different times. Whatever is stored within was not loaded in one place".

Arthemis: "Even with the inclement³⁴ warp and no navigator the "Volens Batavis" could make the trip from Kabia to Plexius in a hundred days. The first of these chambers was activated nearly a year ago".

Lavestus: "The master of this ship has lied to us. We must confront him with these facts and seek explanation. By the Emperor he will tell us the truth or will suffer at the hands of the Inquisition for impeding our duty".

Harik: "You meet out punishment too swiftly, Lavestus. While I don't doubt that Isary is hiding something, he is a rogue trader and they are notoriously erratic³⁵".

Obaino: "Though, it may be illicit to smuggle goods or perhaps even sell overly ripe fruit, it is not a concern for the Deathwatch. Brother Captain, what is your assessment?"

Arthemis: "The ship was at Alantaris IV before the genestealer infestation came to light, when the xenos cult held full sway. I believe Isary and the crew have been corrupted".

Harik: "So sure, brother Captain? You seem remarkably calm for such an opinion"

Arthemis: "You recall the armsman you spoke to? How did he react to your presence?"

Harik: "Not at all. Credit to the man he stood his ground like a soldier".

Arthemis: "Our presence intimidates even the most loyal servant of the Emperor without effort. You purposefully intimidated that armsman and he did not even take a step back. That is not bravery, brother, it is psychic control. He did not react because he could not".

Obaino: "So what is in the temporal chambers, if not fruit?"

Arthemis: "The genestealers do not breed themselves, but implant their genetic structure into hosts. The hosts give birth to infected children, each successive generation showing fewer traits of the corruption. In four generations a pure strain³⁶ is born and the cycle begins again. (Beep, beep) The chambers have been activated and deactivated several times. If we were to inspect the ship log we would discovery that Isary had visited Alantaris on many occasions. Every time he passes by, he has loaded aboard a fresh generation of genestealers".

Harik: "Russ's ass, more than three hundred of the beasts!"

Obaino: "More than enough to infect a hive of Plexius within days of their arrival".

Arthemis: "The containers are set to open aboard the space station. With the crew and the thousands hundreds of square kilometers of holds and storage bays to hide in, the orbital station is an ideal staging ground from which to begin the infiltration of the planet". At the sound of Lavestus readying his bolter, Artemis noticed the crew above pausing their work. His battle brothers' eagerness to fight

was laudable³⁷ in most situations, but it was in danger of becoming a liability in the present circumstances. Artemis laid a hand on his fellow Space Marine's gun and gently shook his head.

Lavestus: "Our duty is clear, brothers. Harik, your atomizer cannon can destroy a container with every shot. We need to begin the purge now".

Harik: "I have power-cells for, perhaps, twenty, brother. What about the rest?"

Obaino: "And I am sure that Isary and his crew would not stand idly by to allow us".

Arthemis: "That is why we must take the more circumspect³⁸ approach. Lavestus, open battle is not always the answer".

Lavestus: "You cannot be suggesting that we ignore this threat, brother Captain. Everybody aboard is contaminated".

(Beep)

Seckor (over vox): "Brother Captain, the vessel has not arrested her velocity per your instructions".

Lavestus: "Isary will attempt to dock the ship before we can stop him".

Arthemis: "And we will allow him to think that is possible. We will conclude our inspection, return to the gunship and when we are clear we shall transmit orders to the station command to open fire once the "Volens Batavis" is in range. The ship and its detestable³⁹ cargo will be obliterated".

The pronouncement silenced the debate. Obaino leaned close to Harik and pattered⁴⁰ his battle brother's weapon.

Obaino: "Sometimes, even atomizer cannon is not a big enough gun".
Harik shrugged.

Harik: "I have never had any complaint before".

Arthemis nodded towards the stairway and the kill-squad followed him back, examining the temporal dampening containers as they passed. The brother Captain was calm on the outside, but unseen by his companions he was enraged. Three hundred genestealers shared the ship with them in addition to the hostile crew. If the aliens were

set free, the kill-squad could not deal with such a threat. Their primary duty was to ensure the destruction of this vessel.

(Footsteps)

He was also very conscious that the number of robed figures on the gantries above had more than doubled since the Space Marines had entered. They had given up all pretense of work and followed the progress of the Deathwatch as they reached the bottom of the steps.

(Beep)

Arthemis: "Seckor, bring the gunship in for landing. We'll be alighting⁴¹ soon".

(Doors opening)

Lavestus: "I do not think the ship's master wishes us to leave, brother Captain".

CHAPTER 04

(Multiple gunshots)

Compelled by the psychic command of their alien masters the crew opened fire as one. Artemis and the others broke apart out of instinct, seeking cover. Lasfire and the rounds of auto-guns and shotguns sprayed around the kill-squad as they returned fire.

Arthemis picked his shots sending single bolts from his pistol up into the swathed⁴² figures amongst the shadows of the lifting machinery. Beside him Lavestus's heavy bolter chirped out dozens of rounds, explosive projectiles⁴³ rippling detonations along the gantries and walkways.

By the light of the lasbeams and muzzle flare Artemis could better make up the features of his foes. Some were normal men, but most were hybrids, showing signs of xenos infection. Their eyes were bulbous⁴⁴, skin - purplish. Many concealed extra arms beneath their robes and dome shaped craniums⁴⁵ under cowls and hoods. As he fired the last round from his pistol Artemis drew another magazine from his belt.

Arthemis: "Obaino, unarmored targets, metal storm rounds".

Obaino: "Wise choice, brother Captain. I wish I've thought of such a thing".

Ignoring his companion's jibe⁴⁶ Artemis slammed home the fresh magazine and opened fire on the group of enemy dashing across a gantry directly above the stairs.

(Multiple gunshots)

The metal storm ammunition did not detonate inside the targets like standard issue bolt rounds, but instead exploded a few meters from the target, showering them with white hot shards of shrapnel.

(Explosion, desperate cries of pain)

Arthemis's burst of fire shredded the robes and flesh of four crewmen in two shots. The ragged⁴⁷ remains of the hybrids plummeted⁴⁸ on to the steps behind him.

Lavestus: "Let free the retribution of the Emperor. Suffer not the alien to live! Purge the unclean. We shall avenge the dead of Alantaris"

Arthemis: "To your left, Obaino, heavy weapon! Lavestus, three targets behind the crane wreck to your right. Harik, what are you doing?"

Harik: 'Powering up, merely don't want to rush this. We don't need a containment fail shape to break, do we?'

Isary (over vox): "I do not think you are a fool, Captain Artemis, so return the respect. The moment you hailed my vessel I realized my precious cargo was under threat. Do you think I would blindly pass into the guns of the station? Your arrival has caused some fixation I'm an espionist. No matter, the Brotherhood of the Eternal Void will not be so easily fought. We have laid crane to Plexius and we will rule here as we ruled on Alantaris. You speak of revenge, what of four billion deaths, brother Captain? My kin, my comrades, and the world I worship them cry out of justice".

Arthemis's heart went cold as he realized that Isary was no psychic pawn⁴⁹, but a willing servant of the abhorrent genestealers. He could not know, did not want to know, what kind of unholy bargain a man would make with such allies to turn on his own kind and doom worlds to extinction. Such considerations were for later. A more immediate concern was for the appearance of the las-cannon, wielded by a three-arm hybrid, clambering⁵⁰ in to the cab of the

lifter above the middle of the hall. Artemis fired but the fragments of the metal storm round clattered uselessly against the hull of the crane.

Artemis: "Harik!"

Harik: "Taste the breath of melta, xenos filth!"

The atomizer cannon rapidly turned the lifting rig to molten metal, obliterating a dozen crewmen who were using it as cover. The center of the crane structure tumbled⁵¹ in to the middle of the hall, fetching more genestealer-infected and hybrids to their deaths.

Artemis: "Obaino, flank left! More enemies are coming through the vent above. Lavestus, suppression fire".

Power blade in hand Artemis swung himself to the top of the closest temporal dampening cabinet. He broke into a sprint, leaping from one to the next without breaking strides, heading for a low hanging walkway just a few meters above the hall floor. Bullets zipped⁵² past and lasbeams flickered from his armor, as he jumped, hooking his arm over the rail. With one swing Artemis was clear and heading into the midst of the enemy. A lucky shotgun blast pelted⁵³ his armor with metal but it did not slow his charge. A metal storm bolt tore the face of the shotgunner. Artemis plunged past the falling body, driving his power-sword into the chest of the next foe. The half-human creature struck up with claw-tipped hands, its long tongue lashing between narrow fangs.

Artemis: "Bite my blade, alien scum".

Artemis ripped his power-sword free and slashed across the creature's face, parting it from right to left with one sweep. Alien blood fountained from the wound, splashing across the brother Captain's armor. Ahead of him a handful of hybrids raised their lasguns. Three rounds from the Captain's pistol turned them to ragged corpses.

Lavestus: "Your concern misplaced, brother Captain. Those foes are no match for the Emperor's finest. Less than a dozen remain, we will soon be blessed with victory".

Arthemis vaulted back to the floor of the hold and looked around, seeing that Lavestus had spoken true. His attention was drawn to a mist rising from the stored temporal containers.

Obaino: "Thoughts of victory are premature, brother Captain. The chronometers of the damping chambers have been zeroed".

(Containers opening)

CHAPTER 05

The temporal cabinets at the far end of the hall wheezed open, spilling a cloud of condensing vapor into the air. Ruddy⁵⁴ lights glowed into fire, dim at first but strengthening.

Harik: "How long do we have before these dormant beasts can fight?"

Arthemis: "No time at all. I served with the excavator team on Throvas. They uncovered a lictor in permafrost⁵⁵. It attacked them within half the minute of being cut free".

Obaino: "Those are not even full stasis chambers. Attack imminent, brothers".

More and more of the dampening cabinets were opening moving like a slow wave towards the kill-squad. In the red gleam of headlamps the genestealers started to move, the shadows of unfurling⁵⁶ alien limbs cast against the machinery above the containers. Harik turned his weapon upon one of those creatures.

(Atomizer shot)

Harik: "One down".

Arthemis: "Obaino, cover fire against the crew. Everybody else, conserve your fire for the pure strains".

In the depths of the hold first genestealer dragged itself out of the top of its container. It was a hunched creature, its chitin dorsal⁵⁷ flanges glinting with moisture. Four arms unfolded, two ending in humanlike hands clinging to the rim of the cabinet, the other two, each tipped with dagger-long claws. It turned its bulbous head towards Artemis, black eyes gleaming in the light of the headlamps. Salvo from Lavestus's heavy bolter caught the alien full on, ripping a

part of his skull and chest in a flurry of detonations, spraying gore. Its shattered corpse slumped back into the temporal container.

Lavestus: "We do the Emperor's work, brothers. Even now he watches us and by the manner of our deaths will we be judged. Let us be washed into his holy embrace with the blood of the xenos".

Arthemis: "Death stalks us today, but we shall not go alone to its dark hall. My ancestors wait for me in the Hall of Victors and I shall not be ashamed to sit amongst them".

More of the pure strain genestealers were emerging from their chambers, some met by the fire of Artemis and Obaino, some avoiding the wrath of the Space Marines entirely, slipping into the shadow and mist.

Lavestus: "Why do they not attack? I thought these beasts feel us".

Arthemis: "They are not mindless killers, brother. To come to us in small numbers is to be slain with ease. Genestealer prefers to attack in a mass. They gather their strength knowing that somebody will die, but others will survive to reach us".

Obaino: "Well, we'd not expect such self-sacrifice from these alien horrors".

Arthemis: "Do not mistake murderous instinct for honorable intent. They live and die for the brood. Does the first fire wasp that dies defending the next fight with honor or is it simply driven to lay down its life unknowing of the sacrifice it makes, expended unthinkingly for the survival of the many?"

Lavestus: "Do not seek to find purpose in the xenos. There is no dignity in these abhorrent fiends. They are a blight to be expunged. Praise the Emperor that he has delivered us to this place so that we may slaughter them in his name".

Harik: "If it's all the same to you, my doom-cast warriors, I would rather fight a little longer".

Harik turned away and ascended the steps behind the kill-squad. Reaching the second flight he turned his atomizer cannon towards the sealed door blocking their exit. The high power blast of Harik's cannon turned the portal to a steaming pile of slag, droplets of molten metal splashing onto his armor. The remains of the door

glowed white hot at the edges – a near perfect circle seared through it. Light from the main corridor spilled through the swirling cloud of vapor. Moments later a hail of lasbolts greeted Harik as he mounted the steps. He fired again through the opening.

Harik: “Brother warriors, your weapons have been disrooted to the task of heck. I count more than twenty of the scum, using the doorways for cover”.

Obaino: “I shall lead the way, brothers. Lend me your fire”.

Obaino bounded up the steps and passed Harik. Unleashing the fury of his bolter he jumped through the hole of the door.

(Bolter rounds)

Arthemis: “Lavestus, go next. Cover me from the stairs”.

The White Consul heaved up his heavy bolter without question and turned towards the steps. A hail of bullets rattled against his backpack, showering flakes of paint and slivers⁵⁹ of ceramite as he climbed the open staircase. Reaching Harik he turned back to the hold ignoring the rounds, sparking from the metal rail and walkway.

Lavestus: “Now brother, I have your back”.

With the flicker of bolts streaming over him from Lavestus’s weapon Artemis snapped off a few more shots as he backed towards the steps. Looking into the main corridor he saw Obaino a few meters ahead. The Space Marine stood against one wall firing sturdy bursts from his bolter at targets towards the bow⁶⁰ of the ship.

Arthemis: “We need to find a place to hold, one way in and out only”.

Obaino: “Crew quarters? One of the gun-turrets?”

Harik: “Why break free of the hold only to volunteer ourselves into fresh confinement? We need to keep moving, secure lines of retreat”.

Arthemis looked past Lavestus across the hold. More than fifty of the containment chambers had opened already and the others were coming to life as he watched. He could see two open access hatches leading up from the secondary hold, dozens of shapes emerging from the shadows below. The genestealers were massing; perhaps thirty or forty had evaded the fire of the Space Marines

Arthemis: "A temporary delay to the inevitable, Harik, nothing more. We will be heavily outnumbered in minutes. Our only chance is to contain the angles of the enemy attack".

Obaino: "All well incurred⁶¹, brother Captain, but where?"

Arthemis: "The main bridge, ideal for defense and I would hold Thanner Kempf Isary to account for his treachery. I will see him slain before I fall to xenos masters".

Lavestus: "A worthy plan, brother. Heresy begets⁶² retribution".

CHAPTER 06

With Lavestus covering the rear with his heavy bolter the kill-squad withdrew from the hold. The main corridor was wide enough for Artemis and Obaino to fight side by side, bolter and bolt-pistol cutting a path through the hybrids and psychically controlled crewmen, blocking their path. It was a slow process. Clearing out storage lockers and side chambers of lurking foes and all the while Artemis was aware of the opening temporal chambers and the massing pure strains behind.

After several minutes they reached the long stairway along three hundred meters above entrance, leading to the upper super-structure. Isary's followers numbering several dozen held the upper level and a stream of gunfire greeted Artemis as he set foot on the lower flight.

(Multiple laser and gun shots)

He moved back, armor pitted and cracked.

Arthemis: "Obaino, ready frag".

The brother Captain and his companion brought forth fragmentation charges, looking at each other as they readied the disk-shaped grenades.

Arthemis: "On my mark! Three... Two... One..."

The two Space Marines rounded in the stairway together. The grenades looked like a shower of pebbles⁶³ as Artemis and Obaino tossed them along stair. The charges bounced and clattered from the walls to land against the men and half-men huddled⁶⁴ at the top. Artemis spied several of the visor-helmed armsmen, the rest

dressed in the robes and cover rolls it seemed worn by their foes in the hold.

For a second he locked gaze with one of the crew and stared into unthinking eyes. Under the psychic domination of the genestealer brood the man was no longer capable of free thought, but Artemis spared him no pity. Though he had not chosen to become a pawn of the xenos infestation, betrayed by his ship's master, his weakness condemned him. A Space Marine would never have been subjugated⁶⁵ by an alien will.

(Explosion, cries of pain)

Grenades exploded filling the landing with scything shrapnel. Twisted hybrids screamed as flesh was lacerated⁶⁶ and punctured⁶⁷, but the mind-controlled crewmen were slain without a sound, eerily silent as their ragged bodies flocked⁶⁸ to the deck and tumbled down the stairs.

Arthemis: "With me, brothers! Give the foul the edges of our blades!"

Lavestus: "Suffer not the alien to live".

Arthemis stormed up the stair with Obaino close on his heel. The brother Captain swept his sword from its scabbard as the fresh salvo of fire met him. Ignoring the impacts as he plow through the fuselage, he leapt off the last few steps firing his bolt-pistol. Two claw-handed hybrids fell back, their bodies torn apart by the bolts. Leaping over them Artemis smashed his pistol into the brutish purple face of the third, turning its bestial features into a mess of blood and broken bone.

Behind him Obaino drew one of the pair of short gladius hanging at his waist, his bolter in his other hand. The edge of the weapon's blade glinted with the sliver of diamond. The sword could slice through steel with ease and make short work of the unarmored crewmen that hurled themselves at the Space Marine with fists and gun butts.

The two warriors had fought side by side enough time to complement each other's fighting style. Artemis used his brute strength and armor like a battering ram waving into the press of foes eager of danger. Every part of him was his weapon: his pistol crushing

skulls, his elbows and fists snapping bone. Foes barreled over by his sheer mass were swiftly dispatched by slashes of his blade. Following in his wake Obaino fought with more finesse⁶⁹, dispatching that evaded the brother Captain's assault with efficient stabs and cuts, severing limbs and arteries, punching it to vital organs through aliens' mutated ribcages and tearing into bloated skulls without pause. Blood both human and alien drenched⁷⁰ the two Space Marines as they tore through the waiting enemy, desecrating the honored black of their armor with filth.

Obaino: "Brother Captain, I have movement from the hold".

Arthemis: "Report, what do you see, brother?"

Obaino: "Pure strains, more than a hundred. There are others waiting in the darkness. This is just a first wave".

Lavestus: "Switching to hellfire rounds".

Lavestus lay down the carpet of fire into the swarm of alien monsters, surging up the step towards him. The hellfire rounds were tipped with crystal impregnated with an acidic viral compound tailored to the alien physiology of the genestealers. Were the rounds detonated inside the creatures and on the hardened carapaces of chitin, they showered the mutagenic virus, the acid hissing and spitting as it burned through flesh. Within moments the pathogen was surging through the blood streams of the genestealers that survived the initial hits. They fell down twitching madly, clawed hands spasming, long tongues latching widely.

Lavestus: "Too many, I can't hold the stair, pulling back to cover the doorway".

Arthemis: "Negative, brother. Harik, fire support! Lavestus, full back to our position. We must presume to the bridge".

Lavestus turned and ran as Harik moved back down the corridor to his position. The White Consul did not look back as he passed the Space Wolf. Few dozen meters behind him the crowd of pure strain genestealers hurtled along the corridor. Harik readied himself, legs braced and opened fire. The shot vaporized the leading creatures, ten or more of them, turned them into a cloud of droplets and particles had spattered the walls with a fine mist of yellow filth. The

decking was sewn through and one wall turned to metal slurry. Pacing backwards Harik waited until the creatures were less than 50 meters away, sprinting fast he fired again. Another dozen genestealers disappeared, their constituent atom scattered by the radiation blast.

Harik: "Ha! They don't look so keen now. They are falling back towards the hold".

Arthemis: "There are other ways out used by the crew. It will not be long before they come again and we do not know from where".

Seckor (over vox): "Brother Captain, the "Volens Batavis" has altered course. The ship is entering low orbit of Plexius".

(Footsteps)

CHAPTER 07

Obaino: "Our foes have fled for the moment, it seems".

Arthemis: "For the moment. Some new ploy⁷¹ by Isary, I assume. Direct confrontation has failed the foe, so they seek recourse to a different strategy".

Obaino: "Good, I was beginning to worry that we might have won".

Mechanical voice: "Warning, atmospheric entry in 20 minutes. All crew prepare for emergency atmospheric entry. Attend to stations".

Arthemis: "Damn Isary and his foul spawn crew. He is going to crash-land a ship on Plexius".

Harik: "Then we have succeeded. Even if the ship survives reentry it is not built for planet fall. Everything aboard will perish".

Lavestus: "Including us, if we remain".

Arthemis: "We cannot be certain of that. What if the ship hits a hive? Millions could be killed".

Lavestus: "We cannot risk a single genestealer escaping to a Plexian hive".

Obaino: "We cannot kill every creature aboard, not with the weapons we have to hand. What pains me is that our best course of action is to evacuate and warn the Imperial commander. We will continue the hunt on the surface".

Harik: "What about the planetary grid? There must be defense lasers or cannons capable of blowing the ship out of the sky".

Arthemis: "Your desire to live clouds your judgment, brothers. Understandable, but my chapter teaches us to be free of such considerations".

Harik (getting closer on Artemis): "You call me a coward?"

Arthemis: "I do not doubt your bravery, brother, just your instinct. You would sacrifice yourself to save us all, yet in your subconscious you already consider the mission failed and you may not be wrong. It is reasonable for us to extract and seek to limit the damage of our failure".

Lavestus: "I would rather die than suffer defeat".

Obaino: "I would rather live to bring a later victory. We should take the flight bay and evacuate. (Beep). Seckor, bring the gunship aboard again".

Lavestus: "(Beep) Ignore that, Seckor! The mission is not yet over. If we take the bridge, we can ensure the ship burns up during atmospheric entry. We will perish, but so will our foes".

Seckor (over vox): "Brother Captain, we are too close to atmospheric entry to land. I can attempt to do so once we are passed reentry threshold, what are your orders?"

Arthemis: "Hold station; prepare to dock as soon as it is possible".

Seckor (over vox): "Confirmed".

Harik: "So we take the flight bay?"

Arthemis: "No, we will attempt brother Lavestus's solution first. If we are thwarted then we will evacuate".

The brother Captain turned away from the rest of the kill-squad and set off, striding towards the bridge with bolt-pistol and sword in hand. Artemis did not look back. Lavestus walked after him. Obaino and Harik looked at each other and then to their two departing battle brothers.

Mechanical voice: "Warning, atmospheric entry in 17 minutes. All crew prepare for emergency atmospheric entry. Attend to stations".

Harik: "By Russ's mighty spear, these fanatics will be the death of me".

Obaino: "If we survive this, I'm going to request an easier duty - taking on an Eldar avatar single-handed, perhaps".

Harik (laughing emotionally): "Ha-ha-ha!"

(Footsteps)

The two Space Marines followed after their leader, breaking into a run to catch up with their companions.

CHAPTER 08

Isary was no fool and perhaps guessing the intent of the kill-squad had mastered his main defense around the bridge of the "Volens Batavis". The bridge was accessed via two corridors, each a hundred meters long leading to a shallow flight of steps of the main doors. It had taken some time to battle up to the highest deck and now the strike team paused to formulate their plan of attack, Lavestus again guarding the rear with his heavy bolter. The deck was littered with the corpses of dead foes, but there seemed no end to their number. The corridors were flanked by crew cabins seemingly filled with enemies - most were hybrids with autoguns and lasrifles and a few armsmen with shotguns. Of more concern to Artemis were the glimpses of heavier weapons – the muzzle of a plasma gun poking from a doorway, the distinctive barrel of a melta-gun seen beneath the robe of a foe.

Harik: "How can a ship of this size carry so many crewmen? We must have killed a regular complement⁷³ twice over already".

Artemis: "Spare hold space converted to living quarters".

Lavestus: "The numbers lower and are no match, but they have armaments capable of penetrating power-armor".

Artemis: "Isary's contacts on latter of mark give him an access to all manner of weapons. He's been wise enough to save them for the last defense".

Obaino: "He values them less than the lives of the pure strains or at least the brute does. They have not seen a full genestealer since we ascended".

Arthemis: "Only the pure strains can breed. Isary hopes to deposit them on Plexius. Why risk the lives of his most precious cargo when he still has plenty of minions to throw against us?"

Mechanical voice: "Warning, atmospheric entry in 8 minutes. All crew prepare for emergency atmospheric entry. Attend to stations".

Lavestus: "We are running out of time, but I don't think that frontal assault would serve us well".

(Big explosion)

As if to illustrate the Space Wolf's point a ball of plasma screamed down the right hand corridor slamming into the bulkhead.

Obaino: "We would not advance more than twenty meters into the tier of that. With the foe concentrated around the bridge, perhaps, now in the opportune moment to seize the flight bay. We could hold for ten minutes and then extract by gunship".

Arthemis: "We do not accept mission failure until there is no other option. Harik, if we cannot gain ground along the corridors, we must make our own ingress".

Harik: "Through the walls? Possibly, but I only have power for ten more shots. It will leave little to protect the bridge once we seize it".

Arthemis: "Must every command be met with doubts and questions? You have a bolt-pistol, brother, and your axe. In the hand of a Space Marine they suffice for the surest effects".

Harik: "Just making sure you understand the situation, Captain".

As the rest of the kill-squad retreated a short way down the steps, Harik hefted his atomizer cannon and aimed it at the bulkhead to his left.

(Shot and explosion)

Harik: "One doorway, as requested".

Beyond the gaping hole left by the melta-blast there Artemis could see a mess hall leading towards the bridge. He broke into a run, dashing across the corridors as lasbolts and heavy weapon fire flashed down from the bridge steps. He ducked through the opening, pistol already blazing at the hybrids and crewmen within. Shells cut swathes through the enemy using the long tables and benches as cover, spraying splinters from the metal furniture as deadly as the

shrapnel from the exploding rounds. A few seconds later Obaino entered behind him, a flurry of bullets ricocheting from his pauldron and backpack as he dashed through the gap. While Artemis continued to clear the room, the black shield turned and leaned back out of the bridge firing his bolter at the enemy to cover Harik as he thundered across the corridor. His cannon protectively couched in his arms like a child.

Artemis: "Lavestus, quickly!"

Lavestus: "The Emperor is my shield and protector, my faith in him is the armor of righteousness".

The chain fever of his bolter swaying Lavestus squared up to the enemy along the left corridor and lay down a storm of fire moving his aim left and right. Dozens of bolt rounds chew through the men and half-human caught in the fusillade, bodies slumped into view, while those that survived hastily ducked from the sight. With something like a contemptuous strut the white Consul joined his companions in the mess hall, which was now clear of enemies.

Lavestus: "You give our foes too much credit sometimes, brothers".

Artemis pointed at the wall in the direction of the bridge and nodded to Harik. The Space Wolf turned his atomizer cannon on the bulkhead and created a new opening, revealing a mass of snarling inhuman faces in the wood-panel state room beyond. Artemis and Obaino charged again, launching themselves into the hybrids without hesitation. Claws left scratch marks through the paint of their livery and welds in their ceramite-plated armor as their blades hued down the brutish throng.

Mechanical voice: "Warning, atmospheric entry in 6 minutes. All crew prepare for emergency atmospheric entry. Attend to stations".

Room by room the kill-squad hacked and blasted away towards the bridge until Artemis's existence was nothing but a blur of bolter fire, fanged mouths, sword strokes and slashing claws punctuated by the ship's interminable countdown to atmospheric entry. Nearing his goal the brother Captain was surprised to find that there were no more foes to slay. Their wake was a scene of carnage, dozens of bodies heaped upon the deck and draped over the ornate furnishings

of the state rooms. He could not quite believe the enemies were all dead and sent Obaino to scout the entrance to the bridge.

(Footsteps)

Obaino: "Corridors and entry way clear. I think that is the last of the crew".

Arthemis: "Harik, get us on to the bridge".

Even as he spoke the words Artemis felt a change of the ship.

Amongst the background vibrations of the plasma engines he sensed a greater shaking. Soon it was clear that the whole starship was trembling.

Mechanical voice: "Warning, atmospheric entry. Attend to stations. Emergency protocols are in effect".

(Atomizer cannon shot)

CHAPTER 09

The armored bridge doors were no more a barrier to Harik's cannon than any other obstacle. As the fumes of the explosion dissipated⁷⁷, Artemis stepped into the control chamber of the "Volens Batavis". The bridge was semicircular, the walls lined with consoles of which sat a multitude of half-machine servitors. Connected to their station by coils of cables and wires, pierced by nutritional feed-tubes the semi-human automatons attended to their tasks oblivious to all others sensations. An ocular screen ten meters wide dominated the center of the bridge, for a moment filled with the bright flare of atmospheric entry.

Arthemis took this out of glance and focused on two figures below the screen. Isary stood calmly facing the doorway, his hands behind his back, and a satisfied smile on his face. Beside him loomed⁷⁸ a much larger creature. It was a pure strain genestealer, bigger than any the Space Marine had seen before, though not so large as the horrific brood lords he had face in the Tyranid hive fleets. The patriarch of the brood, janitor of the mass of aliens stood in the hold. The brother Captain was only dimly aware of his companions joining him as he looked into the swirling golden orbs of the genestealer's eyes.

(Heart pounding)

Arthemis could not remember why he had come here. He was certain he was meant to do something, but it no longer seemed important. He knew that the thoughts pressing into his mind of brotherhood and family were not his own and he resisted picturing scenes from his past. He focused on the asiries of the Mortifactors temple fort above Posul, where he had spent many hours learning the names of the great heroes of the chapter. He could feel the weight of their expectations upon him now and he latched on to the thought, using it to drive back the inhuman presence infiltrating his mind.

(Atomizer shot)

Arthemis broke free of the psychic attack just a moment before the genestealer exploded showering gobbets⁷⁹ of charred⁸⁰ flesh over Isary and the bridge consoles. Harik let the atomizer cannon fall from his grasp and drew his bolt-pistol. He looked at Artemis who was still recovering from the psychic assault of the genestealer patriarch. Harik: "No more energy shells. Captain, what are you waiting for? Kill the bastard!"

Isary's smug⁸¹ expression became one of horror as Artemis raised his pistol, but it passed in a moment as he adopted a calmer demeanor. The ship's commander glanced over his shoulder at the screen and Artemis looked up to see thick yellow clouds streaming past the plummeting starship.

Isary: "I die without regret. You are too light, Captain. You cannot stop the Brotherhood of the Void".

Mechanical voice: "Warning, ground impact imminent. Unable to correct, ship loss protocols are in effect".

Arthemis: "I have no regrets either, least of all this..."

(Bolter shot)

The bolt round turned Isary's head to a cloud of blood and grey matter. The body crumpled to the deck, sinking into the remains of Isary's inhuman master.

Mechanical voice: "Warning, ground impact imminent. Unable to correct, ship loss pro..."

(Bolter shot)

The crew addressed servitor slumped across his console, a gaping wound in the side of its head. Harik lowered his bolt pistol.

Harik: "That was getting really annoying".

Lavestus did not waste any time. He moved to the navigation controls and analyzed the flow of data across the row of small screens.

Lavestus: "We are too late, too far into the gravity well to pull out of the drop. We have failed".

Obaino: "We have company, brothers".

(Sounds of horde approaching)

A tide of purple and blue was boiling up the corridors towards the bridge, broken by glinting eyes, bared fangs and flexing claws.

Arthemis looked again at the display screen, his attention caught by the gleam of lights through the thinning smog of the hive world.

Below the ship a tower sparkled with a million lamps. A hive that was home to billions of humans, like a termites' nest it heaped up upon itself, its lower reaches stretching kilometers in every direction. Huge turbine housings and power generators sprawled into a sluggish ocean like the roots of an immense fossilized⁸² tree. Artemis saw a chance and strode to the navigation console.

Arthemis: "Hold them as long as you can".

Obaino: "No chance of reaching the launch bay now".

Arthemis: "No matter".

A shattering⁸³ of the "Volens Batavis" increased for a few seconds as Artemis fired the attitude thrusters. On the screen the view swung away from the hive until it was filled with the undulating⁸⁴ blackness of the oiled sleek sea.

Arthemis: "A genestealer can withstand a lot, but not the pressure of a thousand meters of water".

CHAPTER 10

The path wrought by the kill-squad to reach the bridge now provided a perfect route of attack for the pure strains. Lavestus's heavy bolter took a harsh toll of the aliens as they burst onto the steps to the bridge, choking the doorway with their dead. Beside him Artemis,

Harik and Obaino met every survivor of the barrage with bolter, bolt-pistol and blade.

Harik: "They seem eager to throw themselves onto our guns. I thought you said they were not mindless, Captain".

Arthemis: "Desperation, they sense they are doomed. Perhaps they think to retake the bridge. If there are hybrids and mind-slaves still alive the might get hope to correct the descent".

Obaino: "Perhaps, if not – what other reason?"

Arthemis: "Spite⁸⁵, pure vengeful spite against those who had fought with them. Inquisitor Agmar once said that the Tyranids should be hated because they were incapable of such emotion in return. I have looked into the eyes of these predators and disagree. I have seen venomous alien abhorrence in their gaze beyond the lust of kill".

Obaino: "That seems unlikely".

Arthemis: "These creatures feed upon us and in doing so they become more alike to us. They devour to become strong. They feast upon our genetic power, but from humans... I believe they have also evolved to hate. It might be the greatest bull⁸⁶ they take from us". There was a brief lull⁸⁷ as the enemy gathered their strength again, retreating to the safety of the surrounding rooms, momentarily bogged⁸⁸ by the firepower ranged against them. Artemis was glad that the genestealers had not yet worked off the tally⁸⁹ of their dead and reached the conclusion as yet done so moments before that the kill-squad was almost out of ammunition. He risked the glance behind, reassured by the sight of the dark sea ahead of the plunging ship. It was not quite the death in battle he would wish for but as he had promised his predecessors he would not go to his grave alone. The respite⁹⁰ was short-lived. Another wave of genestealers erupted towards the bridge, more of their kind streaming along the corridor to their left.

Arthemis: "As I might not get another chance answer me something, Obaino".

Obaino: "I will do what I can to oblige".

Arthemis: "Is it the Rainbow Warriors? I mean, I can understand why you would keep that in secret..."

Lavestus: “How so? The Rainbow Warriors have descended from the gene-seed of Guilliman himself, as do the White Consuls. It is a heritage born with pride”.

Harik: “Yes, but the name...”

Obaino (laughing): “Ha-ha-ha! No, brother, I am not of the Rainbow Warriors”.

Harik: “Must we name every chapter that has ever been to get our answer?”

Obaino: “Even if you guessed correctly, I would not confirm it”.

Harik: “Surely, you will not curse me to die in ignorance”.

Arthemis looked back into the bridge chamber to see a gaping hole blown through the starboard bulkhead. Consoles lay in ruins, servitors sprawled across the panels as bloody ragdolls⁹¹. Though the breach he could see a black hull marked by pale heap striations⁹².

Seckor (over vox): “You did not sound as if you could reach the launch bay. I thought you might like to leave this ship of the damned”.

Harik: “Have you ever been kissed by another Space Marine, Seckor?”

Seckor (over vox): “Not unless you shave off that awful beard, Harik. And not on the lips”.

A hatchway opened in the side of the gunship’s fuselage, yellow lights streaming from within. The gap was just a few meters – an easy leak for Space Marines. Artemis reloaded his bolt-pistol. He judged there to be nearly a hundred dead genestealers piled in the approach way, but the corpses were little hindrance⁹³ to the agile aliens as they scrambled⁹⁴ ceaselessly over their own dead.

Arthemis: “We cannot break off. The moment we turn the enemy will drag us down”.

Seckor (over vox): “Hurry, turbulence is increasing the lower we get. I cannot stay here”.

Obaino: “Go, brothers. This is the moment I have long dreamed of. With my blades I will secure your escape”.

Harik: “You are a bloody Doom Eagle. I knew it. Glorious death, honor the dead and everything, am I right?”

Obaino did not reply. He dropped his bolt-pistol and drew his second gladius, taking up a fighting stance at the top of the steps.

Obaino: "I am no such thing, brother. I am proud of what I am. I am the son of Baal, son of Sanguinius, noble brother of the Blood Angels".

Obaino advanced down the steps meeting the oncoming genestealers blade to claw. He moved with effortless grace, his twin blades as shining blurs as he parried, cut and thrust his way into the midst of the vicious aliens.

Obaino: "I hear the call of my lord Sanguinius, his torment, his pain flux⁹⁵ through me and I can resist it no longer. Oh, beautiful angel of death, lend me your strength, your skill and your dignity. I am your son unfold to your claim"

A claw slashed into Obaino's helm sending it flying through the air. It was the first time in three years Artemis had laid eyes on his battle brother without his armor for Obaino had always been cloistered alone when not on a mission, as befitted the black shield. His face was pale, framed by a shock of long blond hair. Thin lips were drawn back revealing teeth every bit as sharp as those of the alien attackers. Yet it was the eyes of the Space Marine that were the strangest. They were blackened orbs, the pupils⁹⁶ dilated⁹⁷ to fill their sockets becoming pits of darkness. Obaino held himself at his foes as hideous fangs and claws drew ragged wounds across his face and tore into his armor. A gauge across his neck sprayed blood, but he did not slow, every blow from his swords chopping and stabbing into flesh, parting limbs and heads from aliens' bodies.

Obaino (roaring): "I am Sanguinius, lord of Baal, sire of the Blood Angels. Your treason will be avenged, your heresy punished. My death will not save you, vile⁹⁸ one".

Artemis knew not what the Blood Angel was seeing, but it was clearly not the horde of the genestealers swarming around him. There would be time later to consider and to mourn. To tarry⁹⁹ would render the Space Marine's sacrifice meaningless.

Artemis: "To the gunship, swiftly!"

Harik: "Farewell, Obaino. It has been an honor to fight alongside you. You are a true brother".

Lavestus: "I fear he hears you not, brother".

Harik: "It matters not; such words need to be said".

The three warriors of the Deathwatch sprinted across the bridge and leapt on to the wrecked remains of the consoles beneath the breach¹⁰⁰ opened by Seckor.

Harik: "You first, Lavestus!"

The White Consul did not argue, he hurled himself across the deck of the gunship, crushing headfirst through the open hatch.

Arthemis: "I will follow, go!"

The brother Captain jumped back to the deck and ran to the bridge entrance. He saw that miraculously Obaino fought on, his armor almost shown away, exposed flesh streaming with blood from dozens of wounds. Tearing his gaze away Artemis slashed his blade across the neck of the fallen genestealer, severing its head. He stooped¹⁰¹ and picked it up, holding it aloft towards Obaino for a moment in tribute.

Just before Artemis turned away the Blood Angel finally fell, tackling amongst the pile of genestealers he had slain. Artemis turned and ran for the escape route. He jumped back onto the broken consoles and took a single stride before hurling himself out into the sky. He saw the water pass beneath him barely a kilometer down and then landed inside the gunship.

EPILOGUE

Arthemis stood at the open hatch and watched as the "Volens Batavis" plunged into the sea below. The impact broke the spine¹⁰² of the vessel, the hull crumpling like foil¹⁰³. Explosions tore along the ship's length enlightening forth from nose to tail as the sea met the ship's reactor system. The wreck lay on the surface, foam geysering high as water surged into the ship through twisted panels and ruptured bays. It did not take long to sink. Blooms of escaping air and vapor spewing from the ship's remains until it disappeared from view, churning the surface of the oil sleeked¹⁰⁴ water.

Arthemis held out the genestealer's head. He would flense the flesh from bone and chitin and guild the skull for display in the chapter's fortress monastery when he eventually returned to the Mortifactors. It was a prize, taken from a slain foe, as his forefathers had taken trophies for a thousand generations before. More than that, it was a reminder for Obaino, for Alantaris, for the Emperor.