



**WARHAMMER**  
**40,000**

— **DEATHWATCH 9** —

**THE WALKER IN FIRE**



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## DEATHWATCH 9: THE WALKER IN FIRE

Peter Fehervari

The priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus claimed that teleportation was instantaneous, but nothing was certain in the warp, least of all time. Sometimes an instant swelled in a traveller's perceptions, extending into a fugue state that could last subjective seconds, minutes or even hours. For most travellers the fugue was a maelstrom of bewildering fragments seeded from their souls, each piece gone before its meaning could be divined. For a few it offered flashes of insight that dissolved like gossamer threads at journey's end.

For Garran Branatar, the passage brought only shame.

*Once more he walked the temple-lined avenues of Gharuda, scorching white marble to black with the sacred fire of his bonded weapon. He had crafted the heavy flamer with his own hands and refined it over many years, perfecting it with the devotion of a true artisan. His kinship with the weapon ran deeper than blood, for it had been forged in the fires of his soul. It grieved him to belittle their bond with the unworthy foe they faced today.*

*Tainted by terror, Gharuda's Imperial guardians had surrendered to the xenos raiders who preyed on their world, offering up their own people as slaves or sacrifices so they might escape the same fate. They were contemptible, yet Branatar took no pride in their cleansing. He knew every battle-brother in his squad shared his disdain, so they scoured the shrine city with sombre, subdued efficiency.*

*'This is no work for the Sons of Vulkan,' Athondar said, striding alongside him, 'least of all for a Firedrake.'*

*Though his fellow warrior's face was hidden beneath his helm, Branatar sensed the frown there. Despite his ferocity in battle there was a kindness about Athondar that was rare even among the Salamanders, a Chapter that had always enshrined the protection of Mankind at its heart. Some battle-brothers saw Athondar's sensitivity as a weakness, but Branatar believed it elevated his comrade, bringing him closer to the ideal of their lost primarch.*

*'We are burning out a viper's nest of xenos collaborators, brother,' Branatar said to his comrade. 'In time the human worms who survive may become dragons who honour the Emperor.'*

*Then the game changed.*

*As the Salamanders turned onto the promenade leading to Gharuda's basilica, the sky was riven by angry tracers of viridian light. Moments later a shoal of dark vessels slipped from the multiple rifts like predators of the deep sea, their forms sleek and spiny, as though woven from broken black bones bound with thorns. The xenos had returned to claim a final tithe...*

The moment distended, then shattered into a thousand mirror images of memory as the teleportation fugue burned itself out.

'Some souls are beyond redemption,' Athondar said, a heartbeat before Branatar's world dissolved into white light.

Tamas Athondar had first spoken those words five years ago, shortly before he died.

But death had not silenced him.

Sarastus was a world shrouded in perpetual night. The darkness wasn't caused by some anomaly of cosmic geometry, for there was nothing eccentric about the planet's form, mass or orbit. No, there was curse upon Sarastus, old and devoid of bite save for the blight of absolute darkness, but that had been enough to sour the world's soul.

Carceri, the largest of the planet's hive cities, was a hunched ziggurat of manufactories and tenement vaults, cold and silent, but not quite dead. Things that had once been human haunted its precincts, clinging to a half-life of hunger, hate and the dim memory of something more.

It was this last and cruellest misery that drew the ghouls to the roof of a nameless hab-block when they sensed a tremor in the immaterium, for

they scented disorder as flies scented carrion flesh. For a time they scrabbled about the empty expanse, hunting for the nagging *wrongness* that had lured them there. Some raised their cataract-encrusted eyes to the broken sky, as if to invoke the blessing of a god even blinder than they. A thrill of blissful terror ran through the pack as the warp tremor grew stronger...

The radiance burst among them like a compressed supernova. Despite their blindness, the ghouls recoiled and fled from the light, chased by a swirl of tortured air as the portal swept a path clear to make way for something new.

Moments later, five shapes were silhouetted against the light. They stood rigid as iron statues while tracers of energy played about them, drawing flickering reflections from their helmet lenses. Though they were man-like in form they would have been giants among normal men. Their armour was painted black save for the shoulder pauldrons, whose emblems both united and divided them. While the left pad of every warrior bore a stylised 'I' cast in silver, the right ones differed in colour and design.

Abruptly, the portal winked out and darkness swept over the intruders.

'Kill Team Sabatine, switch optics to full-spectrum night vision,' a voice commanded inside Branatar's helmet. The timbre was clipped and precise, identifying a speaker who was entirely grounded in the present.

*For Watch Sergeant Cato Thandios, teleportation is always a silent instant,* Branatar reflected. *His soul is untroubled by shadows.*

Sometimes Branatar envied the squad leader's uncomplicated faith. Like all warriors of the White Consuls, Thandios revered the Emperor not only as the master of Mankind, but as the living god whose destiny was absolutely manifest. Few Space Marine Chapters subscribed so completely to the Imperial Creed, but Branatar imagined there was great clarity in such conviction.

Three voices acknowledged Thandios on the squad's vox-channel. Two belonged to proven battle-brothers, but the third was an outsider, a Techmarine newly assigned to Sabatine for this mission. Branatar frowned at the newcomer's inflectionless tone. None who entered the Omnissiah's service were left untouched, but this warrior – Anzahl-M636, his name was – sounded more machine than man. Branatar had met skitarii with more personality. The Techmarine's equipment also set him aside from his

squad brothers, for while they were encased in hulking Terminator plate, Anzahl-M636 had opted for lighter power armour. He had modified the suit extensively, reworking the pauldrons and breastplate into angular, geodesic shapes that venerated the Machine God. His helmet was a smooth dome split by a vertical visor that glowed with cold light. It gave him the aspect of one of the Adeptus Mechanicus' soulless automatons.

'Salamander?' Thandios pressed, stirring Branatar from his brooding.

'Acknowledged, watch sergeant,' Branatar said as he activated his optics with a thought sigil. A rockcrete expanse resolved across his lenses, rendered in an abstraction of grey-greens. The flat surface was blemished with boulder-sized debris and deep cracks that could swallow a man. It was a miracle that the rooftop was still intact.

Looking up, Branatar made out the broken shell of the district's dome arcing high overhead. To his trained eye the damage looked like the work of decay rather than munitions, suggesting this city hadn't died in an honest war. It was a disquieting thought, but according to the mission briefing, Sarastus had fallen centuries ago. Its doom was surely irrelevant to his present duty.

*We are here for those who came long after,* Branatar knew. The briefing had been vague, but that much was certain.

'The teleport homer is unattended,' Anzahl-M636 said. 'Our bridgehead has been compromised.' There wasn't a trace of concern in the Techmarine's voice.

Branatar turned his gaze upon a cylindrical device squatting a few paces from the squad. The indicator on its relay panel pulsed white in his night vision. It was the only source of light on the rooftop.

'Formation Aegis,' Thandios commanded. 'Kill the beacon, One-Thousand.' It was the Watch Sergeant's custom to name each warrior by his Chapter of origin, which occasionally resulted in some odd designations, as had happened with Anzahl-M636, who'd been dubbed 'One-Thousand'.

*The Brotherhood of A Thousand,* Branatar thought. It was a strange name for a Space Marine Chapter when *all* Chapters aspired to such a number. To his mind it was as drab as the black 'M' that served as the Techmarine's Chapter badge. *Functional...*

'It's said their brotherhood always numbers *precisely* one thousand,'

Icharos Malvoisin sent on a secure channel, as if reading Branatar's mind. 'A dismal prospect is it not, brother?'

'An absurd one,' Branatar replied as he turned to cover his pre-assigned watch vector. The squad fanned out around him to scan the rooftop in every direction. 'Next you'll believe we Salamanders can breathe fire.'

'Oh, I never doubted it, brother. What else would account for those angry red eyes of yours?'

'Watching your damned back, simpleton.'

Despite his rebuke, Branatar counted the Angel Resplendent as a friend. Cato Thandios and Sevastin, the Black Wing, were trusted allies, but outside the field of battle they were strangers to him. His camaraderie with Malvoisin had been unexpected, not least because the man's humour had rankled him when they'd first met. In truth, Branatar had wondered how such a frivolous warrior had earned a place in the Deathwatch, but he'd found his answer on their first mission together: there was *nothing* frivolous about Icharos Malvoisin.

'Status report, One-Thousand?' Thandios asked.

'The teleport homer has functioned at ninety-seven-point-three per cent efficiency,' Anzahl-M636 replied. 'Our spatial misalignment was within acceptable parameters.'

The Techmarine had extruded a serpentine mechadendrite from his gauntlet, connecting him to the device that their ship's teleporter had used to triangulate their deployment. Without a homer, the squad might have materialised inside a solid wall or high above the planet's surface. Neither prospect was conducive to survival, so homers were vital, but they had to be placed manually – so where was their contact on the ground?

'Has it been tampered with?' Thandios demanded, obviously sharing Branatar's unease.

'Improbable,' Anzahl-M636 said, deactivating the homer. 'The—'

'Multiple contacts incoming,' Sevastin cut across the Techmarine. If paranoia was a virtue in war then the Black Wing was a saint of battle, for he was always the first to see a threat, if indeed it was *sight* that gave him his edge.

The creatures swarmed from the cracks in the roof like locusts, hauling themselves out with gangling arms and grasping, almost prehensile feet. They were naked and hairless, their pallid flesh stretched taut across

skeletons that were no longer quite human, with misaligned joints and backswept skulls that frayed and tapered to thorny points. Their eyes were like shrivelled white mushrooms, sunken behind distended snouts that sniffed at the air as they skittered towards the squad, loping and leaping, sometimes on their feet, but just as often on all fours. Yet despite their bestial aspect, they charged in utter silence, save for the scrabbling of their talons across the ground.

Somehow, that was the most inhuman thing of all.

*Mutants*, Branatar thought with weary revulsion. He had seen such perversions of humanity before, though never as far gone as these degenerates. *It will be a mercy to cleanse these vermin.*

‘Hold fire,’ Thandios ordered, ‘melee weapons only. Keep it quick and quiet.’

The warp turbulence that had heralded the squad’s arrival had lasted scant seconds. If fortune went their way the true enemy hadn’t registered it, but sustained gunfire would be pressing their luck.

‘Divided we endure,’ Sevastin hissed, as he did before every battle, even the least. Branatar assumed it was his Chapter’s credo, but if so it was a dark one. He’d fought alongside the Black Wing for years, yet he knew nothing about the reclusive warrior’s past.

*He is another who entered the Deathwatch seeking absolution*, Branatar guessed. *Absolution, or oblivion...*

He tilted his flamer up so it wouldn’t be sullied by unclean blood and raised his left hand. It was empty, yet the massive gauntlet was a weapon in its own right. There was a flare of light beside him as Malvoisin’s power sword surged into life. Like Branatar, he had customised his personal weapon, encasing the hilt in a chiaroscuro fretwork of silver and obsidian that sang when he swung the blade. The Angels Resplendent were artists without parallel among the Adeptus Astartes and Malvoisin was among their finest.

‘*Veritas vos viribus!*’ Thandios intoned in High Gothic as the mutants broke against the Deathwatch like a tide against an immovable rock. Claws and jaws scraped and snapped against hard ceramite, unable to penetrate or find purchase, while flailing fists battered themselves into bloody oblivion. The squad answered without mercy, culling the vermin in swathes.

Branatar swung about with his fist, crushing skulls or punching through chests with equal ease. The ghouls were so fragile he barely felt them die. It was like extinguishing phantoms...

*'This is no work for a Firedrake,'* Athondar echoed his sentiment.

Branatar cast the unwelcome memory aside and focussed on the battle at hand, though this slaughter hardly warranted the term. Given time he could put down every one of these degenerates on his own.

Beside him, Malvoisin whirled his blade about in wide, rippling arcs that cleaved through two or three mutants with every pass. Tactically he was in his element here, but Branatar knew that he took no joy in such crude work.

*Icharos will sketch this scene over and over when we are done with this world,* he predicted grimly. *Whatever foe we face later, this is the one he will remember.*

Watch Sergeant Thandios was intoning a steady stream of canticles as he fought. Like his faith, the White Consul's fighting style was resolute and controlled: he swung his power fist with piston-like regularity, marking every kill with a word of castigation.

In contrast, the Black Wing tore into the mutants with a whirling abandon that strained against his bulky armour. His single lightning claw spiralled through the pack, slicing his foes into ragged fragments that spattered and sometimes stuck to his carapace. Thandios had frowned on Sevastin's choice of a single claw because the Codex Astartes decreed that *two* was the optimal configuration, but the Black Wing's choice hadn't hindered his lethality.

*'This mutant strain appears stable,'* Anzahl-M636 observed, *'but it exceeds prescribed Imperial limits for genetic drift. I will recommend a full purgation commission following mission termination.'*

Branatar glanced at the Techmarine. The newcomer stood rigid with his arms folded while the multi-jointed servo arm attached to his back whirred about with a life of its own, striking down mutants like a metal cobra. Its clawed head had extruded twin rows of rotary blades that shredded everything they touched.

There was a snarl of disgust from Malvoisin. Branatar turned and saw a ghoul perched on his friend's back, its matchstick legs wrapped around his helmet as it scratched at the lenses. The wretched creature must have

vaulted from the shoulders of its kin to gain such a height. His vision impaired, the swordsman swung about trying to shake it off while keeping the others at bay. He was in no danger, but the sheer *indignity* of it appeared to enrage him. With a flourish he spun his sword round and lanced it up through the beast. Its carcass ignited and came apart around the energy-swathed blade, but another mutant leapt forwards and wrapped itself around his right leg. Malvoisin stamped furiously, crushing one of the beast's trailing limbs and sending tremors through the rooftop.

'Caution,' Anzahl-M636 said flatly, 'this structure is unsound.'

The Techmarine was moving now, ploughing through the mob to put distance between him and the raging Angel Resplendent.

'Icharos—' Branatar began as Malvoisin kicked out and dislodged the ghoul from his leg. Before the Salamander could finish, the swordsman brought his blade down in a vertical swipe that cleaved the mutant in two and bit deep into the ground. With a roar of fury he hacked again and again, pulverising the creature into ragged red shards and sundering the ground beneath.

'Angel!' Thandios bellowed.

A lattice of fissures zigzagged out from the riven rockcrete, widening as they extended. A moment later, the ground under the Angel Resplendent heaved apart and he found himself straddling a chasm. With a grace that belied his armoured bulk, Malvoisin spun to his right and brought both feet down on solid ground.

'That was foolish,' he said to Branatar. A shallower warrior would have said it with a grin, but there was only shame in Malvoisin's voice.

*No, not shame*, Branatar realised through his relief. *Despair*.

'I—'

Malvoisin's words were snatched away as the ground disintegrated under him and he plummeted from sight, leaving behind a ragged hole. A tremor ran through the rooftop and another great slab tumbled through, widening the pit and sucking in a trio of wildly scrabbling ghouls.

'Structural disintegration imminent,' Anzahl-M636 evaluated.

The slab under Branatar tilted towards the rift as he backed away. He saw that the Techmarine had reached the stairwell at the roof's edge, but the rest of his comrades were caught in the collapse. Thandios was leaning forwards as he tried to navigate a path through the farrago, while Sevastin

balanced precariously on a swaying slab.

*They won't make it, Branatar gauged. And neither will I.*

'Kill Team Sabatine,' the Techmarine instructed, 'initiate armour salvation systems. Proceed to ground level, if you endure.'

'He's right!' Branatar voxed. 'It's the only way, brothers!'

As he was pitched towards the rift, he cradled his weapon and triggered his armour's lockdown mode. The muscle fibre bundles lining the suit's interior expanded, sheathing his body tightly as he plunged into the darkness alongside a pair of flailing, but still silent ghouls.

*Ten feet... twenty... thirty...*

He hit the floor of the level below like a wrecking ball and punched straight through to the next. He'd come down feet first thanks to his suit's gyro stabilisers and the impact sent shockwaves up his legs and spine.

'...*dum spiro spero*...' Branatar heard Thandios praying over the vox, then the thread snapped as he crashed through to another level. Then another.

*This would be an inglorious way to die,* he reflected.

'*Unworthy of a son of Vulkan,*' Athondar agreed from the deeper pit that had claimed Branatar on Gharuda. The agony in his voice was undiminished.

'Forgive me, brother,' Branatar said. Then the ground surged up like an iron wave to crush him against the anvil of his guilt, and—

*Branatar howled as he saw Athondar fall, his friend's legs sheared away from the knees down by an unclean xenos projectile. With a shriek of tortured gravity, the eldar raider that had felled him swept past overhead, lancing more of the Imperium's avengers with black light.*

*'Go! Finish it!'* Athondar yelled, hauling himself against a wall by the strength of his arms alone. *'I shall hold the road, brother.'*

*Branatar willed himself to remain beside his wounded friend. This time the xenos wouldn't overrun Athondar and flay him alive. This time he would change it.*

*But already the irresistible, irrevocable hand of the past was sweeping him on – on towards the basilica where the corrupt Gharudan elders cowered.*

*They were his primary kill targets. His duty.*

*And Branatar understood that the nightmare would run its course exactly as it had done the first time and every time after. Except this time Athondar was laughing at him as he turned his back, mocking him with a voice that wasn't his own.*

‘Garran!’

*Snarling like a trapped animal, Branatar fought back, straining his muscles against the vicelike grip of history – tainted history – but it held him rigid as the voice of fate taunted him...*

‘Disable lockdown, Garran!’

Branatar blinked, recognising the voice and obeying instinctively.

‘Icharos?’ he asked.

‘So they tell me,’ Malvoisin answered without a trace of humour.

‘It gladdens me to see you, brother.’ Branatar breathed deeply and flexed his arms as the tension in his armour eased up. His fall had been broken by the corroded relic of some ancient machine and he was wedged waist deep in its housing. By Vulkan’s grace his flamer was intact save for superficial dents.

‘How long was I out, Icharos?’

‘We’ve been on this world less than twenty minutes,’ Malvoisin said. ‘You and I landed in the same chamber.’

The Salamander snorted. This wasn’t an entrance they’d regale their battle-brothers with when they returned to their Chapters. ‘What of the others?’ he asked. His suit’s augur was playing up and he couldn’t get a lock on the comrade standing a few paces away, let alone the rest of the squad.

‘Sevastin is two floors below us.’ Malvoisin paused to consult his own sensors. ‘The Techmarine is six floors above.’

‘He’s taken the long way down,’ Branatar said sourly as he began to yank at the wreckage encasing his legs. ‘What of the Cardinal?’

Malvoisin had coined Thandios’ nickname, but now his friend received it with stony silence. Branatar halted his efforts to free himself.

‘Where is the watch sergeant, Icharos?’

Malvoisin made no answer.

‘Icharos!’

‘He was still falling when I lost his signal,’ the warrior said quietly.

They descended through the crumbling, shadow-choked corridors of the hab-block in silence. Malvoisin had fallen into a brooding reverie that Branatar made no attempt to dispel. If Cato Thandios was lost then the burden lay squarely with the Angel Resplendent.

*Still falling?* Branatar wondered. How was that possible? Even if nothing had broken Thandios' passage along the way, the building surely couldn't extend more than a few thousand feet below ground level. He couldn't still be falling...

*'You are wrong, brother,'* Athondar whispered to him. *'A man can fall forever, on a fallen world.'*

They found Sevastin waiting in a cavernous atrium on the ground level. The Black Wing stood by the lip of a jagged wound in the marble floor. He turned as they approached and indicated the rift.

*'The Watch Sergeant is gone,'* he said without emotion.

Branatar peered into the chasm and frowned. Beyond the first few feet, the rift was an impenetrable void. His instincts told him that Thandios' impact hadn't carved that unnatural pit. No, it had been there since darkness swallowed this world.

*Waiting for Thandios?*

*'You can't be certain,'* Branatar said gruffly, unsure whether he was arguing with Sevastin or himself. *'Did you see him fall in?'*

*'I saw nothing,'* Sevastin said, *'yet I know it.'* He hesitated. *'My Chapter is familiar with the traps that riddle the darkness between the stars.'*

*'We will return for the Watch Sergeant after the mission is complete,'* Branatar said with a conviction he didn't feel. He turned his back on the pit and surveyed the atrium. It was littered with debris, like every chamber they'd passed through, but here there was a surreal twist: the fragments of a gargantuan statue were scattered about, transforming the place into a tomb for a stone giant.

*'They brought down the Emperor here,'* Malvoisin said quietly.

Branatar glanced at his friend. The Angel Resplendent was studying the severed head of the colossus. It was tilted towards them, its regal features frozen in the moment of judgement. The statue was crudely rendered – doubtless the product of a servitor-carved manufactory line – but there was no mistaking its subject.

*Yes,* Branatar decided, *it is Him.*

‘Such desecration damns us all,’ Sevastin said darkly.

‘Perhaps true damnation lies in raising the monuments that invite such desecration,’ Malvoisin mused. There was a remote intensity in his voice that Branatar didn’t like at all. ‘Perhaps we condemn ourselves.’

His words were drowned by a wail of static. Simultaneously, the readouts on Branatar’s helmet auspex began to flicker wildly.

*Vulkan’s blood!* Branatar cursed, assuming this was another consequence of his fall until Sevastin looked at him sharply and tapped his own helmet. Disturbed, Branatar focussed on the white noise and his transhuman physiology began to compensate, his Lyman’s Ear filtering the cacophony to a low hum.

*Some kind of interference,* he guessed. *Where’s the damn Techmarine when we have need of him?*

He froze. There was something moving on the far side of the atrium, near the building’s splintered entrance: twin orbs hanging in the darkness like spectral baubles. Another pair resolved to their right, another to their left. Branatar squinted to calibrate his night vision and the silhouette of a hooded figure resolved behind each pair.

*Eyes...*

‘Beware!’ Sevastin yelled as something leapt from the Emperor’s granite brow. It was like a skeleton forged from metal, with spindly reverse-jointed legs and overlong arms that brandished a pair of shimmering blades. The thing’s head was sheathed in a tight leather mask with bulging goggles set above a breather pipe that looked like an insect’s proboscis.

‘Divided we endure,’ Sevastin whispered as he opened fire with his storm bolter. The mass-reactive rounds caught his attacker in mid-air, shredding its torso and throwing it back against the stone head. The creature slid to the ground and scabbled about like a broken puppet searching for its own strings. The Black Wing spun and caught a second attacker’s blade in the tines of his claw, creating a flash of opposing energies. Despite its augmetic limbs, his foe couldn’t match a Terminator’s strength and Sevastin shoved it away, twisting the sword from its grasp in the same movement. The creature crashed to the ground, but flipped back onto its feet and skittered towards him again, spinning its remaining blade like a rotor. He decapitated it with a rapid-fire burst to the skull and it stumbled into the arc of Malvoisin’s power sword, which sliced clean through its

thorax.

‘*Skitarii assassins,*’ Anzahl-M636 advised over the vox-channel. ‘*The Xenarites have registered our incursion.*’

Branatar realised that the absent Techmarine had accessed his optic feed, something that only the squad leader was authorised to do. He didn’t like it, but this wasn’t the time to argue.

‘Into the fires of battle!’ the Salamander bellowed as he thumbed the trigger of his heavy flamer and unleashed a torrent of fire upon a pair of charging skitarii. Their masks were scorched away instantly, along with the leprous flesh beneath, revealing skulls that looked almost entirely human. The cyborgs’ hyper-alloy bodies withstood the heat, but the fibre bundles at their joints melted and they slumped into each other, becoming a single pyre of twisted metal.

Something ricocheted off his right pauldron. Another projectile shattered against his weapon’s casing.

*The eyes!* He swung round, looking for the hooded figures he’d spotted earlier. They’d kept their distance, but there were five now. Standing rigid from the waist down, they tracked his squad with long rifles, firing precision bursts that slipped between the whirling assassins.

‘*Skitarii snipers,*’ Anzahl-M636 identified. ‘*Tactical proposition: advance.*’

‘Where are you, One-Thousand?’ Branatar asked, irritated by the outsider’s presumption.

‘*Closing on your position now. My path suffered significant impedance.*’

‘Then why didn’t you jump like the rest of us?’ Branatar snapped as another round struck him. He doubted that the Techmarine’s lighter armour would have weathered the fall so well, but that prospect didn’t trouble him greatly.

Branatar immolated another assassin and marched towards the skitarii marksmen, eager to bring them into his range, but they registered the threat and circled away, maintaining their formation as they retreated, matching him step for step. The damned things were walking *backwards*, yet neither their pace nor their rate of fire had wavered. It was as if their movements were guided by another mind entirely. Watching that inhuman rigour, it struck Branatar how little he knew about the armies of the Adeptus Mechanicus.

*I've never had cause to see them as enemies before*, he realised. He would rectify his ignorance after this mission. To the Deathwatch, *everything* was a potential enemy.

Another synchronised barrage hammered into him. This time every shot struck his breastplate and red icons blinked across his lenses, warning that the outer layer of his armour had been breached. Thus far it had proven equal to the snipers' attacks, but if he didn't catch up to them soon this wasn't going to end well.

From somewhere above, a faint ray of red light sliced through the darkness and flitted towards the skitarii marksmen. Delicately, it played across the squad and settled on the warrior at the centre, marking the bulbous lens of its right eye. A heartbeat later, the glass shattered and the cyborg's head snapped back. Its rifle slipped from lifeless fingers and it toppled over. As far as Branatar could tell, the killing shot had been silent.

*It seems we have an ally*, the Salamander judged. *Our errant contact, perhaps?*

He followed the beam back to its source and spied a figure crouched in the palm of the giant Emperor-statue's hand. The stone fingers loomed above the atrium on the stalk of His right arm, looking like the splayed battlements of a surreal watchtower. By some fluke of physics the broken limb had fallen and balanced at an unlikely vertical angle.

*Was it blind fortune or divine providence that made it fall just so?* Branatar wondered. *Did He foresee this moment?*

The long barrel of the sniper's rifle recoiled as he fired again and felled another cyborg. He ducked away as the skitarii spotted him and returned fire, blasting away chunks of granite.

The distraction was all Branatar needed. He steamed forwards, teasing his heavy flamer back to life as he bore down on the surviving marksmen. Realising their error, they began to back away again, chittering in curt binaric code as he lashed out with a tongue of flame. It licked the robes of the nearest and set the heavy fabric alight, the flames then leaping to the next. Within seconds all three were engulfed in burning shrouds, yet they kept moving, all the while trying to train their cumbersome rifles on him. Branatar would have respected their tenacity if it had sprung from courage, but he knew the skitarii had no choice in the matter. They were *programmed* to be fearless.

*'And what of the Adeptus Astartes?'* Athondar asked from the open grave in Branatar's soul. *'When did you last taste fear, my brother?'*

Branatar crushed the voice, angered by such profanity. This benighted world was turning his shadows against him, as it had done with Malvoisin, but Branatar was a Salamander and guilt would never rule him. He sent a final burst of fire after the smouldering marksmen and turned his back on them.

'We are nothing like these slaves,' Branatar murmured. 'We choose our wars.'

Abruptly the dormant white noise in his helmet surged up again, straining against the filters he'd erected. He scanned his suit's sensors, but found no clue. Irritated, he dismissed the static and focussed on more urgent matters.

Malvoisin and Sevastin were duelling with the last of the assassins, a three-armed nightmare that danced between them on needle-like legs. This one was a skeletal giant that was almost as tall as its foes, though only a fraction of their bulk. Its multiple swords were a whirlwind blur as it blocked and slashed, then leapt away before its enemies could use their superior strength to trap or unbalance it.

*They aren't working together,* Branatar realised as he watched his comrades fight. *Each of them wants the kill for himself.*

The mysterious sniper joined the fray, his beam flitting around the assassin as he tried to secure a shot, but the cyborg's frenzied gyrations were impossible to pin down.

'Techmarine,' Branatar demanded as he marched towards the skirmish, 'what is that thing?'

*'Cross-referencing with data cache,'* Anzahl-M636 answered. He paused briefly. *'Probable identification: Ruststalker, princeps configuration, however it displays significant augmetic and tactical enhancements. It is exemplary work.'* He paused again. *'Caution: the interference on your vox wavelength suggests the proximity of a skitarii infiltrator unit.'*

'What?' Branatar asked, confused.

His question was answered a moment later. Something clanged onto his back and locked spiny metal legs around his shoulders. Simultaneously the hiss in his helmet surged into a shriek and static gnawed at his optics. A memory of the ghoul that had vaulted onto Malvoisin's shoulders flashed

up, but he knew this interloper was infinitely more dangerous. He attempted a couple of punches, but his angle was too restricted and the thing twisted out of his reach. Furious, he clawed at one of its spindly legs, but couldn't get a grip with his clumsy gauntlet. He mashed at the metal limb as the cacophony wormed into his skull.

'-rIan InfiLTtraaTor...' The Techmarine's voice was garbled almost beyond recognition. '-neuRaalstATic aUUraAA-'

The rider struck Branatar's helmet with an unseen weapon and his world exploded into dazzling light as a halo of energy coiled around his head. His nose ruptured and he tasted blood. To his horror, he felt his armour seize up as its systems were overwhelmed.

'And so we are reunited, brother,' Athondar's shade mocked as Branatar watched the skirmish ahead, unable to move.

Blearily he saw the Ruststalker Princeps crouch and spring at Malvoisin. It hit his chest with both its needlepoint legs and thrust itself back into the air with heightened speed. The ricochet became an almost vertical dive at Sevastin, the velocity and angle impossible to evade. The Black Wing knew it and didn't even try. With a howl he lunged into the assassin's extended blades with his claw extended, meeting his fate with the frigid fury of his Chapter.

'*Tenebrae...*' Sevastin hissed with oblique hatred as every one of the Ruststalker's swords pierced his breastplate. The blades keened in transonic harmony as they bit through deep and punched through his back in tripartite ruination. But in dying the Black Wing also brought death, his claw raking up through his killer's torso and disintegrating the fleshy nub of its skull. His arm dropped, but his armour kept him on his feet.

*Tenebrae?* Branatar wondered hazily as static flooded his optics. The Black Wing's last word had been delivered like a death curse. Was this the darkness that he—

With a screech, his tormentor was ripped away like a leech from its host. The toxic noise receded and Branatar's armour surged back to life. He lurched round and saw that the Techmarine had finally caught up with the squad.

Anzahl-M636 stood motionless as he regarded the writhing skitarius held aloft in his servo claw. The creature's skeletal frame mirrored that of the assassins, but its head was a saucer-like dome inset with a cluster of lenses

and antennae that denied any trace of humanity. A torrent of furious static rippled from the cyborg as it tried to reach its captor with the crackling goad clutched in its right hand.

‘I advised a stealthy incursion, Salamander,’ Anzahl-M636 said, ‘but your squad’s errors have produced a positive tactical outcome.’

His mechadendrite lashed out and punched through the prisoner’s domed head. The skitarius went rigid and its sonic assault warbled into silence as the razor-tipped dataspikes burrowed into its skull.

‘Accessing neural network,’ Anzahl-M636 reported.

Branatar left the Techmarine to his bizarre ritual.

‘Sevastin died well,’ Malvoisin said as Branatar approached their fallen comrade. The Angel Resplendent had discarded his damaged helmet and his long black hair was plastered to his scalp with sweat. ‘It was a hero’s death.’

‘It was a wasted death,’ Branatar corrected bleakly.

‘The Salamander is right,’ an unfamiliar voice said behind him. ‘If you’d fought as brothers, not rivals, the Black Wing would still live.’

Branatar turned to face the sniper who’d come to their aid, certain this was the squad’s elusive contact.

‘*We who watch, atone alone,*’ the Salamander said formally.

‘*We who atone, watch as one.*’ The stranger completed the agreed code-catechism. His voice was the hoarse whisper of a man who rarely spoke out loud.

‘If you’d held your post at the beacon both my brothers would be alive,’ Branatar challenged.

‘More likely I’d be dead along with them,’ the sniper said as he coiled his rappelling rope. ‘The ghouls smelled the translocation scars you made. You drew at least three different packs. As you can see, I’m not a walking tank, brother.’

It was true – the sniper wore the light armour of a Scout. Ceramite plates encased his chest, shoulders and knees, but the rest of his body was protected only by hardened leather.

‘So you ran,’ Malvoisin accused, his eyes glittering in the hollows of his finely chiselled face. His loathing was a tangible, terrible thing, not for what the sniper had done, but for what he *was*.

*Monstrous*, Branatar agreed. There was no denying that the obsidian skin

and burning eyes of his own bloodline lent the Salamanders a fearsome aspect, but this was offset by an ineffable nobility that elevated them. No such grace redeemed the sniper's countenance. He was ancient, his face a hatchet skull sheathed in skin like grey leather. Scraps of white hair hung from his scalp in long strands, shadowing sunken eyes that were the lustreless black of an oceanic predator.

'You deserted your post,' Malvoisin said coldly.

'I survived,' the sniper said, hooking his rope to his utility belt. He grinned at the other's disgust, revealing the curved yellow spines of his teeth. 'Aye, we're not so pretty, my Chapter. Our veins don't run with angels' blood.'

Branatar sensed no humour in the stranger's mockery, nor indeed much malice. The newcomer was just going through the motions of conversation.

'Evidently you take no pride in your own kin,' Malvoisin said. 'Or perhaps they took none in you, Black Shield?'

In place of a Chapter icon, the stranger's right pauldron was painted black, signifying he had expunged his past and sworn himself entirely to the Deathwatch. Such an act was almost unthinkable to a Space Marine – those who took the 'Black Oath' were driven by the darkest of shadows.

'Pride is a fool's game,' the Black Shield said, widening his shark's-maw grin. 'My brothers thought I was too soft, so we parted ways.'

'You've worked with Inquisitor Escher before?' Branatar asked, following an obscure intuition. The elusive inquisitor who'd sanctioned their mission hadn't deigned to brief the kill team personally, but Branatar sensed the Black Shield's connection with him – *or her?* – was altogether closer.

'Since the day I was dead to my Chapter, Salamander.' The sniper spat. It was the first honest gesture he'd made. 'I've been tracking these Xenarite heretics since they split from the Stygies forges and went rogue. Been almost a year now – the last couple of months on this corpse world.'

'What do you know of our target?' Branatar pressed.

'Nedezdha Lem?' The Black Shield snorted. 'She's just another magos who got too hungry to stay on the right side of the Ordo. They're all bloody Xenarites on Stygies, but most play the game and keep to the shadows.' He shrugged. 'Maybe a xenos archeotech site gets stripped

clean in the Halo Stars or a downed eldar ship vanishes before the clean-up detail arrives. Nobody looks too hard...'

Malvoisin was appalled. 'You claim the Ordo Xenos turns a blind eye to heresy?'

'You can't declare Exterminatus on a cornerstone of the Imperium like Stygies.' The Black Shield laughed without humour. 'Even the Imperial Cult isn't that deluded.'

'Where is the heretic?' Branatar asked coldly, unsettled by the exchange.

'Old Arbites precinct, six blocks east of here,' the sniper replied. 'Lem has it locked down tight, but she's short of cog-soldiers. Salvaging xenos tech is a dangerous business.'

Branatar studied the Black Shield, trying to see past his obvious ugliness.

'You're hiding something,' he said.

The stranger met his gaze in silence, his black eyes as devoid of emotion as they were of irises.

'I am ready,' Anzahl-M636 signalled. 'We must not delay. What the skitarii see, their masters also see. The Xenarites are aware of our presence.'

'They woke up when you brought half this building down,' the sniper suggested sardonically. He turned and stalked towards the portico. 'Let's get this done.'

'Your name?' Branatar asked.

'Hauko.'

The Black Shield didn't ask for theirs in return.

The Xenarite fortress was situated in a perimeter district of the hive's lowest tier. A vast dome covered the entire precinct, yet it was only one of dozens that clustered at the base of the stacked metropolis, and those dozens were merely the outermost extremities of the hive. Judged on such a scale, the fortress was insignificant, yet in its own right it was formidable.

The bastion squatted at the centre of a barren plaza like a monolithic cube. Its walls were reinforced with riveted iron plates and buttressed with watchtowers at every corner. Twin blast doors were set into its facade, each bearing one half of the cog symbol of the Adeptus Mechanicus. Virtually every other building under the dome had been levelled to segregate

Nedezdha Lem's stronghold from the rest of the hive.

'The Xenarites have not been idle,' Branatar observed with grudging respect.

'Yet for all their labours they have forged only a soulless monstrosity,' Malvoisin mocked.

The brother warriors were watching the fortress from a crumbling ruin on the outskirts of the plaza. It was one of the few structures that had escaped the Xenarites' purge.

*'I am in position,'* Anzahl-M636 reported on the vox.

'Confirmed,' Branatar replied. 'Black Shield?'

*'Ready to hunt,'* Hauko voxed from his sniper's nest on the roof. *'Multiple targets already marked on the watchtowers.'*

'Confirmed.' Branatar switched back to the Techmarine. 'One-Thousand, you are cleared to go. May the Emperor walk with you.'

*'Acknowledged,'* the soulless voice replied. *'Commencing deployment.'*

Branatar watched as the Techmarine walked into the plaza alongside the Sicarian Infiltrator he had captured. The sentries on the watchtowers spotted the pair immediately and multiple searchlights swept down to mark them as they approached the bastion. Anzahl-M636 was unarmed save for his retracted servo arm and he had removed his helmet to make himself vulnerable to the Infiltrator's taser goad. To all but the sharpest of observers he would appear to be the captive and the skitarius his captor, but his mechadendrite was buried covertly in the back of the Xenarite's head. Reprogramming the skitarius was beyond the Techmarine's ability so he was controlling it like a servitor on a tight leash. It was a dangerous ruse, but the kill team needed any edge it could get.

'The Techmarine wasn't chosen for this mission by chance,' Malvoisin gauged. 'Do you trust him, Garran?'

Branatar snorted. 'I trust nothing about this mission except you, my brother.'

Malvoisin was silent for a moment, considering. 'I am not to be trusted either,' he said finally.

'Your actions on the roof were... rash...' Branatar began, recalling the rage that had overcome his comrade.

'They were the actions of a *madman*,' Malvoisin hissed. 'There's something inside me, brother. A taint, like an iron barb in my soul.'

Before Branatar could reply, a towering bipedal engine clattered across the courtyard to intercept the Techmarine. A servitor hunched in a recess of the machine's lower carriage while a skitarii in ornate black armour rode astride it. The rider tilted its lance towards Anzahl-M636 and questioned his 'captor' in harsh binaric as the machine paced in tight circles before them. The Infiltrator answered in kind.

'This is an unclean world, brother,' Branatar said as he watched the exchange. 'Such corruption kindles rage in every one of us. Your fury was righteous.'

His friend made no answer.

'Icharos...'

There was a buzzing hoot from the plaza and the skitarii dragoon stowed its lance, apparently satisfied. It swung round and strode away, resuming its patrol as the intruders continued their advance. The blast doors retracted as they neared the bastion, revealing more skitarii in the gatehouse, their bulky guns glowing with baleful blue light in the darkness. These warriors wore backswept helmets slit by narrow visors and their armour was swathed in robes that trailed to their feet. Another figure appeared at the threshold, taller than its fellows and sporting a fan-like crest of blades on its helmet. It assessed the newcomers in silence.

The silence stretched.

'That slave hasn't lost its instincts,' Branatar murmured to Malvoisin, watching the tall skitarii intently. It was obviously a leader of some kind. 'Be ready, brother.'

Suddenly the leader lunged towards the Techmarine with a flanged mace, but Anzahl-M636 had anticipated it and his servo claw swung round to intercept the blow. Its buzz-saw jaws snipped off the cyborg's arm just above the elbow, chewing through metal and bone in seconds. Simultaneously the Infiltrator beside him emitted an ululating wail that surged through the skitarii in the gatehouse like a killing current. They howled in almost human torment as their muscles convulsed in the throes of a voltaic seizure. Some fell to their knees and clawed at their vibrating helmets, while others flailed about blindly, crashing into the walls or one another as they sought to escape the sonic scourge.

Only the leader appeared resistant. It staggered back and raised the gun in its surviving hand, but Anzahl-M636 followed and smashed the weapon

aside. Before the skitarius could retreat again his servo claw swept down and clamped its jaws around the cyborg's head. The Xenarite screeched like a klaxon as its helmet crumpled.

Branatar was moving before the leader died. He brought down a three-metre stretch of his hideout's wall with a single blow of his power fist and stepped into the plaza. Malvoisin's sword flared into life as he followed. The searchlights found them instantly and gunfire followed a moment later, thudding into their armour in a slow but steady barrage. Fortunately, the sentries lacked heavy weapons, but Branatar's auspex detected rising levels of radioactivity as the bullets ricocheted off his carapace.

The crimson light of Hauko's sniper rifle swooped overhead and silenced one of the sentries, then slid across to another tower. The Terminators were drawing all the fire, leaving the sniper to ply his craft unhindered.

'Keep those doors open, One-Thousand!' Branatar bellowed into his vox as he fixed his gaze on the portal. Anzahl-M636 had pressed on into the gatehouse and he heard muted gunfire, but the enslaved Infiltrator had fallen silent.

Malvoisin grunted as a shot grazed his temple. He was shielding his face with a splayed gauntlet, but it was a crude defence. Branatar had never understood why so many veterans chose to fight with their heads bare – almost as if war were a game to them.

'I told you to put your damned helmet back on, Icharos,' he chided.

'I lost one of my optics in the fall,' Malvoisin said lightly. 'I'll not fight half blind, brother!' He sounded almost cheerful, as if battle had salved his guilt.

There was a raucous hoot of fury from their right and the mounted skitarius thundered towards them, its lance crackling with energy. Clouds of ochre incense billowed from the dragoon's mount as it charged, its reverse-jointed legs hammering across the ground like giant pistons.

Branatar and Malvoisin faced the rider together, standing side by side as it bore down on them. The Salamander's flamer rumbled as he nudged the slumbering inferno within to life.

'We rise on burning wings!' Malvoisin yelled.

And then the strider was upon them, and for a few shining moments the battle-brothers were perfectly at one with the purpose for which they had been forged.

The dragoon arced its iron steed towards Malvoisin and set its lance for Branatar, intending to trample one and impale the other in a single pass. Recognising its intent the Terminators held their ground, as motionless as statues.

*Waiting... waiting...*

At the last moment, Malvoisin surged forwards and dodged out of the strider's path, swinging his blade backhanded to parry the lance aimed at his comrade. There was a flare of light as he sliced clean through the prong, sending darts of energy swarming up the haft. In the same instant, the Salamander breathed his fire, first immolating the engine's servitor, then tilting the stream up to catch the dragoon. He squeezed down hard on the flamer's trigger, maximising the promethium flow to reach the rider on its high perch. The weapon answered with a belch of fire that hit the cyborg like a guided comet, transfiguring it into a scorched metal shell filled with liquefied flesh and bone. Branatar grinned as the strider clattered past, blindly bearing the funeral pyre of its master. It crashed through the perimeter wall and raced on into the dark city beyond.

'That was well done, brother!' the Salamander said, turning in time to see his comrade's head snap back as something struck his skull.

Still gripping his sword, the Angel Resplendent fell to his knees, held for a moment, then toppled over.

'Icharos!' Branatar bellowed. He stalked over to his friend and turned him over clumsily, for once cursing the bulk of his sacred armour. A scorched rift arced across Malvoisin's forehead where the bullet had torn a path through the flesh, but not quite penetrated the skull. It was a fluke of trajectory so rare that those who survived such traumas were considered blessed, but Branatar doubted whether this wound would be a benediction. The skin around the gash was already necrotising in the wake of the irradiated bullet. It looked like a jagged crown had been carved across his friend's brow.

'Brother?' Branatar hissed.

'It's a lie,' Malvoisin whispered. 'All of it.' His eyes opened, burning with a truth only he could see. 'We condemn ourselves...'

Then his gaze clouded as his consciousness slipped away.

'Go! Do your duty!' Athondar urged. His words slurred into a merciless loop of accusation, a noose around Branatar's soul hauling him back to

Gharuda, from one betrayal to another. He could almost *see* the shrine world's temples unfurling around him...

'Be silent!' Branatar roared. He closed his eyes, indifferent to the bullets battering his armour.

'*Salamander?*' Hauko's voice crackled over the vox. '*You need to keep moving.*'

The thought that the Black Shield was witnessing his private torment struck Branatar like a knife, silencing Athondar and severing the thread of despair he was weaving.

*No*, Branatar thought, *it isn't Athondar...*

'It almost had me,' he said.

'*I don't understand.*' For once Hauko sounded puzzled.

'This damned, dead city,' Branatar snarled. 'It's full of... of...'

He looked at the injured Angel Resplendent. There was nothing he could do for his friend until the mission was done.

'I will return, Icharos,' he vowed. Then he turned away and stalked towards the bastion.

'One-Thousand!' Branatar called as he stepped into the gatehouse. There were dead skitarii everywhere, sprawled about in contorted positions like broken mannequins. The enslaved skitarius was among them. Its domed head had erupted into a crown of jagged petals that looked like the result of an internal explosion. Inspecting the corpse, he noted that the plasma pistol Anzahl-M636 had secreted under its robe was gone, as was the Techmarine himself.

'One-Thousand, status report?' Branatar voxed.

There was no reply.

He tried again, but his receiver remained stubbornly silent. It was possible that the Techmarine's vox had been damaged, but Branatar suspected he was *choosing* not to answer. He didn't like the implications of that at all.

He switched frequency. 'Black Shield?'

'*On my way, Salamander,*' Hauko replied immediately.

Branatar frowned. He was suddenly struck by the thought that Hauko and Anzahl-M636 might be communicating on a private vox-channel. They were both outsiders, but were they outsiders to *each other*?

A cold rage swelled in his chest.

Growling low in his throat, Branatar stormed through the gatehouse and into the courtyard beyond. The open space was like a smaller box within the great box of the bastion. *A puzzle box...* Countless doors led off from the courtyard and a metal staircase zigzagged along the walls, offering access to the upper levels. It would take an intruder days to scour the stronghold if he went in blind.

‘But you know exactly where you’re going, don’t you, One-Thousand,’ Branatar murmured. He spotted a pair of skitarii corpses at the far side of the square. The molten craters in their breastplates were unmistakably the work of a plasma weapon. An iron hatch lay among them, evidently ripped from the doorway beyond.

Branatar had his path.

The Techmarine’s trail of violence led Branatar through a maze of corridors to a wide stairwell that descended into the fort’s underbelly. There was a lift beside the stairs, but only a fool would trust such a contraption when hunting a rogue magos. Kill Team Sabatine had already lost one of its brothers to an abyss and Branatar was damned if he’d follow.

‘*Salamander,*’ Hauko voxed, ‘*I’m in the courtyard. What’s your position?*’ This time it was Branatar who remained silent.

The trail of dead skitarii ran dry three levels down, but Branatar pressed on without hesitation, sensing in his guts that Lem would be in the depths of her stronghold. Hauko had tried contacting him once more, then gone quiet. Perhaps he’d guessed Branatar’s suspicions.

‘*Secrets and lies, Garran,*’ Athondar whispered sadly. ‘*They will eat the Imperium from the inside out.*’

‘You’re not wrong, shadow,’ Branatar agreed.

The staircase terminated at a narrow gallery overlooking a circular amphitheatre some twenty feet below. Titanic pistons rose and fell along the perimeter of the cavernous chamber, venting steam as they powered the arcane mechanisms of the bastion. The floor of the chamber was encrusted with a tangle of machinery and insulated pipes woven around a massive central dais. A cluster of glass cylinders rose from the dais like giant specimen bottles. Metal rings reinforced the vessels and electricity

spiralled around them at regular intervals, illuminating the chamber with flickering blue light. Scores of robed servitors wandered the mechanical maze, attending to their duties with dull diligence. None of them paid any attention to the intruder.

Branatar stepped onto the moving conveyer ramp that connected the gallery to the dais. As he approached his destination he caught sight of an armoured giant slumped against a cylinder on the far side of the platform. Though the figure was partially obscured by the tanks, it was unmistakably Anzahl-M636.

‘One-Thousand?’ Branatar voxed. He neither expected nor received an answer.

A few moments later the Techmarine was fully revealed. His right arm had been hewn off at the elbow and his servo claw hung limply across his chest, its rotary blades spinning idly. Deep rifts criss-crossed his armour and a broken blade jutted from his sternum.

Branatar coaxed his flamer into life as he stepped onto the dais and circled around the glass tanks. He grimaced at the dark shapes that hung suspended inside the containers. Though blurred by the murky liquid that held them, those hulking, aberrant forms filled him with a loathing that ran blood-deep. The intensity of the emotion was almost overpowering and Branatar was suddenly certain of the *righteousness* of this mission. Despite his misgivings about the inquisitor who’d sanctioned the purgation, he had none about the kill itself. Nedezdha Lem’s hunger for knowledge had lured her into unspeakable heresy.

She had to die.

‘*Salamander...*’ Anzahl-M636’s voice was little more than a sigh on the vox.

Branatar approached the slumped Techmarine cautiously. The upper part of the blue ‘M636’ code tattooed across his forehead was gone, along with the top of his shaven head. Both had been sliced away with clinical precision to reveal a concentric geometry of flesh, bone and brain. Augmetic implants sparked amidst the cross-section map of his brain like splintered power pylons.

And yet the Techmarine somehow still lived.

His piercing eyes locked onto Branatar and the Salamander noticed their irises were angular rather than round – almost crystalline.

*Are those augmetics or a mutation?* Branatar wondered. Abruptly the eyes shifted focus to something over the Salamander's shoulder.

'Secutor...' Anzahl-M636 rasped.

The Salamander swung round without conscious thought, opening fire as he turned. His blazing whiplash struck the thing behind him as it lunged forwards with myriad blades. A shimmering corona burst around his attacker as the flames were caught in some kind of energy field and spat out as impotent ricochets of light.

Branatar cursed at the techno sorcery as he backed away, slowing his enemy with a steady flow of fire. The thing's shape was silhouetted against the radiance as it pressed through the flames like a man swimming upriver. A flowing robe veiled it from head to foot, but Branatar glimpsed the glittering humanoid spider beneath. It swarmed with razor-tipped mechadendrites and multiple arms that wielded whirling swords. The creature loomed over him, hunched under the weight of its elephantine cranium. Its face was a revolving bronze cog with a nest of serpentine dataspikes at its centre. Every spoke of that abstract visage housed a glowing optic that cycled through the spectrum as its cog-face rotated.

Was this abomination Nedezdha Lem? Branatar knew the priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus could take countless forms so there was no telling how far a heretic magos might go.

'Nedezdha Lem,' he challenged, 'stand down in the name of the Ordo Xenos!'

The eightfold web of eyes regarded him with detached contempt, but the cyborg made no answer as it advanced. It was formidable, but it was moving with a pronounced limp, always lurching to the left, as if its legs were unbalanced. Two of its arms drooped, trailing their swords listlessly along the ground.

'Then you will be judged by fire, heretic!' Branatar bellowed and he increased the flow of promethium to his weapon.

With a final burst of light the abomination's aura collapsed, overloaded by the Salamander's assault. The conflagration engulfed it instantly, incinerating its robes and revealing its adamantium frame. The left side of its torso was a ragged ruin, almost certainly the result of plasma fire. Evidently, the Techmarine had not accepted his fate quietly.

'You fought well, brother,' Branatar said. It was the first time he'd used

the epithet for Anzahl-M636.

His back bumped into one of the cylinders. He could retreat no further. With almost loving precision he modulated the flow of promethium to his flamer, sacrificing range and spread to increase the intensity further still. The weapon shook violently as it struggled to direct the inferno.

‘I walk in fire, as fire walks in me,’ Branatar intoned as the cyborg bore down on him. It was glowing white-hot now, imbuing it with an almost supernal cast.

*‘Target acquired,’* Hauko voxed.

A ray of light lanced from the gallery above and locked onto one of the cyborg’s rotating eyes. There was an explosive crack and both the eye and the spoke that housed it were shattered.

*That was no ordinary sniper round,* Branatar gauged, *but then Hauko is no ordinary sniper.*

The cyborg emitted an ululating howl of rage and its attention swept to the gallery. Branatar seized the moment and dove forwards, still spewing fire as he barrelled into the giant and rammed the nozzle of his weapon against its thorax. A maelstrom of blades embraced him, along with his own fire, but he held his ground, grinning savagely as his weapon overheated. Sparks flew out from the muzzle as something inside it fractured.

‘Unto the anvil of—’

The explosion tore the combatants apart with a violence that threw them into the air as if they weighed nothing. Branatar crashed through the tank behind him, shattering the glass and spilling its contents in a viscous, unclean tide. The cyborg was sundered into a score of white-hot fragments that rained back onto the dais like molten hail.

*‘A worthy foe, and a good death, brother,’* Athondar judged as Branatar’s world burned away into darkness.

Death came for him in a black robe, her eyes ancient in an ageless face that was as white as a bleached skull. She appraised him without expression as his senses seeped back from oblivion.

*Athondar...*

Branatar gritted his teeth and sat up. He was sprawled in the wreckage of

the containment tank, covered in a residue of slime and broken glass, but otherwise intact. He whispered his thanks to the ancient Terminator armour that had preserved him, as it had done so many times in the past. As he turned he caught sight of the xenos creature that had spilled from the tank. It was slumped beside him – a four-armed monstrosity encased in an exoskeleton that shone a viscid blue. The thing's elongated skull was lined with gills and its white eyes were set beneath deep ridges that tapered into a tangle of muscular tendrils. Though the creature was obviously dead, Branatar was seized by an almost physical need to burn it. He reached for his weapon... and remembered its sacrifice.

'I shall forge another,' he vowed.

'Your armour's resilience is remarkable,' the black-robed woman observed. 'The Secutor's skeleton was forged from pure adamantium, yet it failed to withstand the blast.' She paused, calculating. 'I estimate his structural integrity has been reduced to zero-point-three-nine-nine percent.'

Branatar's eyes settled on the stylised cog woven into the woman's robes. It was the symbol of Stygies VIII.

'Lem,' he hissed.

Pain wracked him as he rose, but Branatar ignored it. He knew he was broken in countless ways, but none of that mattered now. The sight of the xenos abomination had fuelled his imperative to end this heresy. The magos stood motionless as he raised a clenched fist above her head. She appeared to be unarmed and devoid of augmetics, but Branatar knew Tech Priests were infinitely deceptive. This seemingly frail creature might be deadlier than her giant guardian.

'Nedezdha Lem,' he intoned, 'by decree of the Ordo Xenos—'

'*We who watch, atone alone,*' she said.

Branatar froze, shocked to hear the code-catechism on her lips.

'I believe the couplet is completed with the refrain "*We who atone, watch as one*",' she continued. 'An unsophisticated verse, but my rendition is correct, is it not?'

'Your spies overheard the code,' Branatar growled.

'Hold, brother,' Hauko said behind Branatar. 'It's no trick. She's the one who led us here.'

'Explain yourself, Black Shield,' Branatar said coldly. He didn't lower

his fist.

‘Magos Biologis Lem is a defector,’ Hauko said as he stepped into view. ‘This is an *extraction* mission, brother.’

Lem indicated the alien corpse. ‘My analysis of this xenos strain has uncovered implications that are... perplexing. It was my duty to the Omnissiah to inform the Ordo Xenos of the danger. Unfortunately, Secutor Strochan would not have complied and the skitarii were his.’ The magos sighed – an entirely human sound. ‘He was not a genuine seeker of knowledge.’

‘You lie,’ Branatar whispered.

The magos turned to Hauko, ignoring the fist poised above her head. ‘Has my request been approved? It is imperative that I continue my work on the surviving specimens.’

‘The Ordo has identified a suitable backwater world for your sanctuary,’ Hauko replied. All traces of his cynical swagger were gone now. ‘Construction of the facility has already begun. The inquisitor is sure it will exceed your specifications.’

‘Acceptable,’ Lem said. She indicated Branatar. ‘And this variable?’

Hauko faced the Salamander. ‘The mission is over, brother.’

‘We are not brothers, Black Shield.’

‘But we are both Deathwatch.’

‘Were you working with the Techmarine?’ Branatar pressed.

Hauko’s black eyes were impenetrable. ‘Stand down.’

Branatar hesitated, thinking of the comrades who had been sacrificed for this lie. Did Malvoisin still live? Was Thandios still falling into the infinite abyss of this cursed world?

‘*Do your duty,*’ Athondar whispered. This time there was no mockery in his voice. ‘*It is the path you must walk, brother. The path of true fire.*’

‘Forgive me,’ Branatar said, unsure if he spoke aloud. He dropped his hand and stepped away from the magos. ‘Tell me of this new threat.’

‘It’s classified,’ Hauko replied, ‘but I’d wager you’ll find out soon enough, Salamander.’

Branatar kept his oath to Icharos Malvoisin, but when he returned to the surface his friend’s body was gone, along with his homer signal.

‘Icharos?’

He expected no answer from the vox, yet he kept trying as he searched, stalking back and forth across the barren plaza like a lost pilgrim. Perhaps his comrade had awoken dazed or half-mad and wandered into the greater necropolis beyond this dome. Or perhaps a pack of mutants had dragged him away...

‘Athondar!’ the Salamander yelled on impulse, but his shade was also gone.

The extraction operation was beginning, and soon afterwards his own departure must follow, but until then he would keep searching.

‘I will forge a new weapon in your honour, my brothers,’ he vowed to his lost comrades. ‘A weapon of righteous rage and fire.’

Branatar’s imagination was suddenly afire with possibilities. He had learned much from this mission, not least that carrying a *secondary* weapon wouldn’t go amiss. Something else to bring purifying flame to the xenos.

Bitter and hateful, the hive shadowed the warrior who walked its avenues, tasting his thoughts and testing his soul for a way *inside*, but it found only fire.

Garran Branatar never found Icharos Malvoisin, nor did they meet again. But many years later he heard stories, and the stories were dark.

And by then the Angels Resplendent were no more.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Peter Fehervari** is the author of the novel *Fire Caste*, featuring the Astra Militarum and Tau Empire, and the Tau-themed Quick Reads 'Out Caste' and 'A Sanctuary of Wyrms', the latter of which appeared in the anthology *Deathwatch: Xenos Hunters*. He also wrote the Space Marines Quick Reads 'Nightfall', which was in the Heroes of the Space Marines anthology, and 'The Crown of Thorns'. He lives and works in London.

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