

A detailed illustration of a Deathwatch unit from Warhammer 40,000. The scene is set in a dark, stormy environment with green lightning bolts striking down. In the center, a Deathwatch sergeant stands prominently, wearing a helmet with a skull emblem and a chest plate with a skull. He holds a glowing power sword aloft in his right hand. To his left, another Deathwatch warrior is shown in profile, holding a flaming torch. In the foreground, a Deathwatch warrior is kneeling, holding a red power fist. To the right, another warrior is partially visible, holding a power fist. The background shows more Deathwatch warriors in various poses, some holding power fists. The overall atmosphere is one of intense combat and readiness.

WARHAMMER
40,000

DAVID ANNANDALE
THE VORAGO
FASTNESS
A DEATHWATCH STORY

An illustration of a Deathwatch unit from Warhammer 40,000. The scene is set against a dark, stormy background with green lightning. In the center, a Deathwatch warrior stands prominently, wearing a helmet with a skull emblem and a chest plate that reads "THE DEATHWATCH HOME UNIT". He holds a glowing red power fist. To his left, another warrior holds a flaming torch. Above them, a third warrior wields a lightning sword. Other warriors are visible in the background, some with chest plates that also read "THE DEATHWATCH HOME UNIT".

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THE VORAGO FASTNESS

David Annadale

‘To be seconded to the Deathwatch is a great honour,’ Captain Vritras had said. ‘For the warrior, and for the entire Chapter.’

There had been just enough irony in the captain’s tone for Teiras to feel he could respond freely. So he had. ‘For an Ultramarine, certainly.’

‘And for a Black Dragon?’

‘This must be a joke.’ He had never heard of any brother from a Chapter of the Twenty-first Founding serving in the Ordo Xenos’s force of Adeptus Astartes.

Vritras’s smile had been tight-lipped, grim and bitter. ‘Of course it is a joke,’ he had said. ‘The Inquisition is famous for its sense of humour.’

Sense of humour? Perhaps not, Teiras thought now as he approached a massive set of doors aboard the Inquisition battle cruiser *Iudex Ferox*. *But a sense of the perverse? Ah, that’s a different story.* And still he looked for the joke.

Beyond the doors was a small theatre. The curving rows of seats descended to a proscenium stage, where a marble lectern was flanked by rows of pict screens and, to the left, a hololith table. There were four other warriors present. They turned to look at him as he worked his way down to take a seat. He ran his eyes over the insignia on their right shoulders, and it seemed to him that here, perhaps, was the punch line. He started to grin.

‘Do we amuse you?’ growled the Flesh Tearer sitting in the front row.

Teiras shook his head. ‘Your pardon, brother. I meant no offence. It is the situation that makes me smile.’

‘What do you see that we don’t?’ the Relictor demanded. He sounded no more

friendly than the Flesh Tearer, but had none of the other's defensiveness. There was a haughtiness to his tone.

'He sees a pattern, as now do I.' The speaker sat on the far right and at the rear of the chamber, as far as possible from the dim light of the single lumestrip that ran down the centre of the ceiling. He was the only Space Marine present who wore his helmet, and his right pauldron had no insignia. His livery was of the Deathwatch alone. He was anonymous.

'So do I,' said a soft voice. The Son of Antaeus sat a few rows back from the front, and he was a head taller than any of the others. He was one of the biggest Space Marines that Teiras had ever seen. Only Volos, a fellow Dragon Claw of the Second Company, was larger. Teiras nodded to the Son of Antaeus and took a seat beside him. 'Teiras,' he said. 'Well met.'

'Jern,' said the other, nodding back. He pointed to the others. 'The Flesh Tearer is Utor, and the Relictor is Kyril.' He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. 'And our shadowy friend tells us his name is Gherak.' His gaze focused on Teiras's forehead. 'You'll want to be careful. Our sponsor might decide a head like yours should have a place of honour atop a column.'

'Beauty like mine *is* a rare thing,' Teiras agreed, and showed his fangs. From the centre of his head grew a single horn, the gift of an overproducing ossmodula zygote. Like the other mutated battle-brothers of his Chapter, Teiras had moulded the bone protuberance, teasing out the shape it suggested and sheathing it in adamantium. It was conical, and curved to a lethal point. 'I plan to keep my head where it is,' he said, and as he held up an arm and flexed his fist down, a bone-blade suddenly jutted out from his wrist. The flash of pain as it emerged was so familiar, he didn't even wince.

'I shouldn't worry,' said a new voice. 'Your head is of far more use to me attached to your shoulders.'

Teiras faced forwards as Lord Otto Dagover stalked towards the lectern. The Black Dragon had known the name of the inquisitor whose orders he would be following, but little else. As monstrous as Teiras knew he looked to most mortals, and to more than a few Space Marines with his horn and stone-grey flesh, he was a physical ideal next to the creature that now stood before them. Dagover had so many bionic modifications, he might have passed for a member of the Adeptus Mechanicus were it not for the ostentatious morbidity of his remaining flesh. His ornate power armour was night-black, with silver spines rising along the shoulders and back. He was accompanied by a constant

hum of servo-motors, and Teiras wondered how much of Dagover's original being was encased in ceramite, and how much of the ceramite encased anything at all.

Both of his arms, certainly, were artificial. They were longer than a human's, had several joints and ended in iron-clawed fingers that twitched at the air as if searching for prey. Above his shoulders, Dagover's head emerged from his gorget like a malignant tumour. There had been no juvenat treatments for the inquisitor. He wore his centuries and his battle scars like badges of honour and masks of horror. A few strands of grey hair hung like coarse spider's webs from a scalp that flowed like molten wax off his skull. Oversized lenses replaced eyes in something that was not so much a face as it was a hanging curtain of wrinkled, savaged flesh. Hooks pulled back the cheeks to reveal an almost lipless mouth. Teeth poked through, but they weren't genuine fangs like those of Teiras and Utor; they had simply been filed to cruel points.

Draped over the inquisitor's armour, pierced by its spines, was a cloak. It was a meticulously crafted leather patchwork, the different shades of hide suggesting the colours of a noble house. It took a moment for Teiras to realise the cloak was composed of flayed xenos skin.

Dagover's arms reached out and tapped at the screens and table. Picts of a planet appeared on the former, while the table generated a hololith of an immense fortification with a towering spire at its centre. 'Your mission,' he began without preamble, 'concerns the planet Discidia.' His words were amplified by a speaker in his gorget, but his natural voice was still audible, its cancerous rasp overlaid by the electronic scrape. There was just enough delay to create a sepulchral reverberation; the sound was redolent of all the nuances of pain both given and received. 'Your target,' Dagover went on, 'is the Vorago Fastness.' He gestured at the hololith.

Teiras took in just how many structures were contained within the walls displayed before them. There was a sprawling, disorganised quality to the layout, as if the buildings had sprung up over time and been built without regard for anything except the convenience of the moment. There was nothing liveable about the fortification, and it was far too large to be barracks. Judging from the scale of the buildings, the Fastness covered thousands of square kilometres. The meaning of the tower and the height of the walls registered. 'A prison,' he said.

Dagover nodded. 'A most profitable one, thanks in part to its quarries. One in

particular also has a certain xeno-archaeological interest. My *colleague*,' he said with weary loathing, 'Inquisitor Salmenau has been overseeing a dig site at this location,' a light began to blink near the north-east wall, 'and his team has found a xenos relic of considerable importance.'

Kyral sat forwards. 'What kind of relic?'

To Teiras's surprise, Dagover answered. 'Early reports point to a cyranax weapon.'

There was a pause. The cyranax watchers were a xenos race that existed somewhere between myth and rumour. Teiras had heard whispers that the creatures possessed world-destroying technology, but he didn't know anything verifiable about them, not even whether or not they still existed. Teiras wasn't sure what was more startling: the nature of the information, or the fact that Dagover had revealed it so readily. The inquisitor smiled, and seemed to chill the air by several degrees. *A sense of humour, by the Throne*, Teiras thought.

Utor broke the silence. 'And the problem is?'

'Other than the fact that Inquisitor Salmenau's judgement makes him an unfit guardian of that weapon? An enemy force has arrived before us to claim the prize.'

'What enemy?' Teiras heard Utor's temper flare at Dagover's tease.

'The ruling council of Discidia has no idea. But their fragmentary intelligence strongly suggests the necrons.'

Teiras fought back a snort of disbelief. A single kill-team against an enemy about which so little was known beyond its utter implacability? Was there more information available than he suspected? 'What connection do the necrons have to the cyranax watchers?' he asked.

'Unknown, if indeed there is one.'

Better and better, Teiras thought. 'Are we really an adequate response to—'

'You are more than adequate,' Dagover interrupted. 'The necron force must be a small one, or all of Discidia would already have fallen, and Inquisitor Salmenau, of all people, has been able to stand up to the siege for a week. Furthermore, it is the will of the Inquisition that Discidia and its resources be preserved intact, not turned to so much glass and cinder by a large-scale war.' He began to shut down the pict screens. 'We will reach Discidia in a week.' He turned to go.

'How long can Inquisitor Salmenau hold out?' Teiras asked.

'His supplies should last for another five days.' The inquisitor's carrion flesh

smiled again. ‘If we get there too soon, there will be no incentive for him to leave his refuge, now will there?’ Then he left the stage, metal and death disappearing back into the shadows.

‘Well,’ said Jern after a few moments. ‘He told us a lot more than I was expecting.’

‘But not the important thing,’ Teiras observed.

‘Which is what?’ Kyril asked.

‘Why us?’

Black Dragon. Son of Antaeus. Relictor. Flesh Tearer. Two fell results of the Cursed Founding, one member of a Chapter that was dancing on the edge of outright heresy, and one warrior whose genetic makeup was so corrupted that madness was not just a risk but a destiny. And if Gherak felt the need to keep his Chapter allegiance anonymous in *this* company, then his secrets were dark indeed. They were all from Chapters that were, at best, regarded with suspicion by the Inquisition and the more orthodox Adeptus Astartes. At worst, they were the targets of outright ostracism and investigation. The situation was more than bizarre. Not one of them should be in the Deathwatch. Teiras had no idea what game Dagover was playing, but he knew now that he was a long way from seeing the punch line to the inquisitor’s joke.

Why us?

The feudal lords of Discidia were a forward-thinking aristocracy. Centuries earlier, the Vorago Fastness had been built with room for a near-infinite prison population. Larger than any one city on the planet, it had been conceived as a means of political control at least as much as a dumping ground for the criminal element. Discidia had the highest incarceration rate of any world in the Maeror subsector. It also had the lowest crime rate. Justice there was rudimentary to the point of being meaningless: any infraction, or even the mere perception of one, resulted in the accused being thrown into Vorago and forgotten. The abysmally short life expectancy in the prison hive kept the population density to merely hellish, rather than impossible.

Faced with such a surplus of space, the wise and benevolent regents of Discidia did the only logical thing: they imported prisoners. They let it be known to all neighbouring systems that here was a location where undesirables of whatever description could be sent and held for a suitable remuneration. And so, for generations had come a flood of inconvenient heirs, rivals and

political malcontents, men and women who, for one reason or another, could not simply be assassinated, or whose continued existence was more profitable than their deaths. Those were the prisoners over whom an actual watch was kept, to make sure that they stayed alive for as long as was useful. Over time, the Vorago Fastness had become a profitable enterprise, feeding the wealth of Discidia's growing leisure class, and financing its exploding prison bureaucracy.

But the prison was a source of riches not only for what it held, but also for what it exported. It was built – by design – over many of the planet's richest deposits of benthamite. The stone was hard and smooth as marble, yet had the gloss and shine of obsidian. In its pure state it was as translucent as glass, but when other minerals were introduced it took on colours of extraordinary richness and hue. Its beauty and strength made it highly sought after for the construction of monuments. Very little struck awe into the heart of the masses with quite the same power as the sight of a sunset filtered through the beyond-royal blues and reds of a benthamite triumphal arch. And very little gladdened the hearts of Discidia's nobility quite like the quarrying of one of the subsector's most valuable resources by slave labour.

All of this Teiras learned on the journey to Discidia. A surprising amount he heard from scarified lips of Dagover himself, who seemed to be everywhere in the lead-up to mission launch. Teiras asked him only once why he had put together a kill-team with such a roster. Dagover had only smiled in response. He had tilted his head, and the black lenses of his bionic eyes had flashed with the reflected light of a lume-strip. Teiras was sure the effect was deliberate.

And on the seventh day, the Thunderhawk gunship *Merciless* flew Dagover and the kill-team over the capital city, Carcera Lucrosus, towards the Lord Governor's palace. On Dagover's orders, the pilot came in low, skimming the rooftops. At first, Teiras had thought the approach was strategic, but there was no sign of conflict. The war they were heading for was confined within the walls of Vorago. What he was granted through the viewing block was a thorough perspective of the city. He glanced at Dagover. The inquisitor was watching him closely. *There's something he wants me to see*, Teiras thought. He looked down again, absorbing and evaluating.

Carcera Lucrosus was vast, and its regions varied between forests of glittering spires and shantytown swamps. But the slums were far more sparse, and took up far less real estate than Teiras was used to seeing in a city this

size. He also saw none of the ant-like activity he would have expected. The slums were half-empty, some of them wholly deserted, their ramshackle structures collapsed into rubble.

The more affluent areas, on the other hand, were teeming. Sky-reaching needles of ambition and cathedrals of wealth sprouted in enclave after enclave of privilege and entitlement. Architectural follies fought to outdo each other in size and luxury. But the palace, centuries older than any of the buildings that surrounded it, was the grandest monstrosity of them all. Nestled beside the equally monumental outer wall of the Vorago Fastness, it sprawled for blocks, a tasteless concatenation of domes and minarets built beside and on top of each other like a cluster of gold-plated mushrooms. It was an unrestrained explosion of wealth and power. There was no tempering by faith; as evening fell and the *Merciless* lowered itself to the landing pad, Teiras saw a few devotional figures worked into friezes along the bases of some of the domes, but these gestures seemed hollow, mere artistic fillips.

‘This is a corrupt city,’ Gherak muttered.

Teiras agreed.

Dagover met with Lord Governor Pallens alone. His accompanying servo-skull sent a real-time hololith back to the Space Marines on the Thunderhawk. Teiras studied the updating images closely. The meeting room struck him as simply a throne room with variations. Even though the flicker and the grain of the hololith, the ostentation of the chamber was glaring. Floor-to-ceiling panels alternated between riotous mosaics of gold and benthamite, and enormous mirrors. Wealth and light reflected each other and turned the room into a narcissistic paroxysm. The work tables and pict screens almost disappeared beneath the visual weight of the ornamentation.

Pallens sat on a throne in the centre of the hall. The designs on the floor radiated out from the throne’s dais, as if the Lord Governor were the fount of all knowledge in the room. But Pallens was not looking happy. He was a short, heavy-set man draped with too much finery, and he shrank from the sight of Dagover. Now the rays from the dais were so many accusatory fingers, pointing at the callow little man in the big chair. That he was flanked by the other members of the ruling council didn’t seem to comfort him much. They were cowering just as badly. But all of them, despite their fear, still had an arrogant glint in their eyes. They resented the necessity of outside intervention, Teiras saw. They wanted a dirty job done so they could get back to the

business of accumulating wealth. Over the vox transmission, Teiras heard all sorts of references to piety and worship of the Emperor, and he believed not a one.

Dagover consulted a data-slate. ‘These floor plans are entirely accurate?’ he asked the functionary who stood before the table. ‘There has been no deviation from them at any time during or since the construction of the tower?’

‘Those are the amended versions, lord,’ the other man said. ‘They illustrate the control room as it was built, not as it had been planned.’

Dagover nodded. ‘And the power supply?’

‘Prepared to your specifications.’

Dagover turned to go.

‘When will the Fastness be able to resume normal operations?’ Pallens asked. His voice shook, but his greed and arrogance overrode his fear.

‘You are asking when Discidia will be free of the vile xenos taint?’

Dagover’s tone would have stopped the heart of a more intelligent man.

‘Yes, yes,’ Pallens said. ‘Of course. But Vorago has been closed to all traffic in and out since the incident began, and every day that goes by, our economy—’

‘Will stagnate and rot until, by the Emperor’s good grace and my good will, I say otherwise,’ Dagover snarled. He stormed from the hall.

There was nothing useful in that briefing, Teiras thought, as the hololith blinked out. It was all for show. Why does he want us to see this?

Teiras examined the bolter shell before inserting it into the magazine. The kraken penetrator round came to a solid adamantium tip. It was a thing of beauty.

The kill-team was loading up before leaving the *Merciless* for the generatorium. Dagover had distributed the equipment they would be deploying against the necrons. Along with the specialised shells, the bolters were Mark IVs with range finders, and the grenades were haywire variants. The weapons were impressive, but they were also, Dagover explained, best guesses. The hope was that the kraken rounds would tear through the enemy’s armour, and that the grenades would disrupt the creatures’ eldritch energy. The hope, not the certainty.

‘We know one thing with absolute certainty about the necrons,’ Dagover said as the Deathwatch loaded up. ‘And that is that we know *nothing* with certainty. Remember that. Be surprised by nothing. You will be fighting a foe who seems

to be composed of nothing but armour. What would incapacitate a man or an ork is a mere inconvenience to a necron. We do not even know if they can be truly killed.'

'Why is that?' Teiras asked.

'They vanish,' said Kyril.

'You've fought them before?'

The Relictor nodded. 'Once. With my Chapter brothers.' He tapped his bolter's magazine. 'Let us hope these are more effective than standard arms.'

'What do you mean "they vanish"?''

'Just that. You'll see. Instead of dying, they simply disappear. They leave no corpses.'

'Nothing to study,' Jern realised. 'Any advice?'

'Hit them as hard and as quickly as possible.'

'Disrupt, paralyse, then exterminate,' Dagover supplied. 'And beware their weapons. As far as we have been able to determine through battlefield observation, their beams flay matter in molecular layers. Organic or inorganic makes no difference. It is simply sliced away to nothing.'

Teiras grimaced. The concept of the xenos weapon was distasteful. It lacked the directness, the brutal truth, of Imperial guns. He loaded the last of the kraken rounds, murmured a prayer of benediction over the magazine, then slammed it home in the bolter. Teiras liked these weapons. He left the *Merciless* eager to put them to the test.

The generatorium was vast. Its massed ranks of immense turbines marched into the distant gloom of the hall beneath a vault whose frescoes depicted the heroic rise and rise of Discidia's ruling caste. The particular blessing of the Emperor that they laid claim to was depicted as nothing less than their due. The walls and floor vibrated with the white-noise hum of the turbines. Here, power for the entire city was produced. Dagover was about to steal all of it for a few crucial seconds.

In an open space before the turbines was the teleporter that had been brought down from the *Iudex Ferox*. It was ancient. There was an artisanal touch to the ornate pylons that surrounded the pad, in the brass keys of the bulky cogitator, and in the inlaid mosaic of runes on the pad itself. This was a relic. A survivor, Teiras suspected, from the Dark Age of Technology. One of the treasures that the Inquisition held for its own particular use.

‘It’s glorious,’ Kyril said. The Relictor ran a gauntlet over the surface of the cogitator. The machine gleamed with the patina of enormous age.

Jern seemed more concerned with the implications of its presence. ‘How are we using this?’ he asked.

‘To teleport into the control room of the Fastness.’

‘Control *room*?’ Utor protested.

Jern exchanged a look with Teiras. ‘Which I am sure,’ the Black Dragon said, ‘is located at the top of that centrally located tower, just as I am sure that there is no teleport homer to keep us from phasing into the floor or walls.’

‘Quite,’ Dagover said.

‘This is madness,’ said Utor.

Teiras looked at Gherak. The other Space Marine said nothing. He stood motionless, waiting, his posture suggesting indifference, as if he had seen this game of the inquisitor’s many times before. ‘All right,’ Teiras said to Dagover. ‘What’s the trick?’

‘Data,’ Kyril said, still hovering over the cogitator.

‘Very good.’ The mask of ravaged flesh beamed, and the effect was obscene. ‘Given enough information and power, this teleporter has a flawless precision of beam.’ He held up the data-slate. ‘Hence my insistence that the floor plans be accurate.’

Teiras felt himself grinning. However magical this equipment, there was a lunatic recklessness to the mission that spoke to him. It held a violent promise, one into which he could sink his fangs. He strode onto the pad. ‘Brothers,’ he said, ‘the xenos foe awaits. Shall we go meet it?’

Reality blinked. The continuity of existence was severed as two spaces conjoined. There was the infinitesimal, but all-encompassing, moment during which the self ceased to be, and then Teiras had being once again.

The teleporter performed as Dagover had promised. The kill-team materialised in a circular chamber about twenty metres in diameter. Armourglas windows, overlooking the full prospect of the Vorago Fastness, ran around the entire periphery. Below them sat banks of cogitators, control panels and pict screens. In the centre of the floor, what looked like an extremely thick pillar was, in fact, an elevator.

Most of these details Teiras did not take in consciously until later. What registered in the moment were the half dozen metal skeletons that stood before

him. They did not wear armour because they *were* armour. They were life of a kind, but their shape was death, their faces as unchanging and unforgiving as the bone they resembled. There was little in the eyes of these warriors beyond a driving hatred for anything that did not share their inorganic half-life. And there was no surprise. They raised their weapons and fired.

Teiras threw himself down. A gauss beam struck where his head had been a moment before. It glanced against his helmet, and warning runes lit up in his retinal display. The merest touch of the beam had damaged the ceramite. The light of the beam was the green of corruption and disease. A death ancient, merciless and incomprehensibly alien had found its expression in that light.

The space was too confined for the haywire grenades. Teiras returned fire with his bolter. The kraken rounds punched into the necrons, some going all the way through to the wall behind. A ghoul jerked and stumbled from the hits, its gun bucking up and the beam shearing away the rockcrete of the ceiling.

But the necron didn't fall. It stepped forward. It had been damaged, but it showed no pain. The lack of expression on its face was chilling, because what looked like a helmet was the creature itself, unflinching before the hail of destruction; and still the eyes glowed with that cold, immovable hatred.

Disrupt. Teiras rolled forward and came up like a battering ram against the undead thing's chest. He knocked it to the ground. *Paralyse.* Kneeling on the torso, he snapped out a bone-blade and plunged it into the necron's neck. With a vicious thrust, he severed the thing's head, and yet its hands reached up, seeking to pull off his helmet. *Exterminate.* He brought a fist down, pulverising the skull. There was a spine-grating electronic wail of agony. Then it cut off, and the necron was gone. Its vanishing was another reality blink. Existence cracked and reformed, taking the necron with it. Teiras felt himself twitch, as if he had been violently woken. Around him, there was nothing but a dispersing afterglow of rotted green.

There were other wails, a choir of the damned, as Teiras stood up. His kill-team brothers had destroyed the other machinic ghouls, but even in their passing, the creatures left behind a taint. There was something wrong with the atmosphere of the control room, as if a cemetery had learned rage. Jern's opponent still struggled. The Son of Antaeus, his armour bearing deep scrapes where a flayer beam had touched him, had shot the necron's limbs off, but the thing still tried to squirm forwards to attack him. The five of them watched for a few moments more before Jern dispatched the abomination with a shot to the

head.

‘A good start,’ Utor said.

Kyral snorted. ‘We’ve done little more than alert the main force to our presence.’

‘So we strike quickly,’ Gherak said. It was the first time he had spoken since they had arrived on Discidia.

‘Agreed,’ Teiras said. He examined the control room’s screens. ‘The mining rail network is still running.’

‘No doubt being used by the enemy,’ Jern said.

Utor grunted. ‘Then we can reach them all the faster.’ Even through the tone-deadening distortion of the Flesh Tearer’s helmet speaker, Teiras heard a false note in Utor’s eagerness. It wasn’t bravado he was detecting – the Space Marine worried about the prospect of battle did not exist. This was something else. Utor was working hard to hold himself back, Teiras realised. It wasn’t battle that worried him: it was his ability to restrain his fall into the Black Rage. His eagerness and surliness were conscious performances, as if by acting the thuggish berserker he could stave off becoming the real thing.

And Dagover probably selected you precisely for that propensity to madness, Teiras thought.

He traced a finger over a hololith map of the prison’s rail system. ‘This line passes directly in front of the north face of this tower and crosses the dig site.’

Gears engaged and there was a steady mechanical hum as the elevator suddenly began to ascend. The kill-team faced the doors, bolters up. Gherak stepped forward with a heavy flamer. When the doors of the enclosed metal box opened, he flooded the interior with ignited promethium, bathing the group of necrons within with purging fire. The warriors did not feel pain, and they advanced into the control room, but the flame corroded their bodies. Their legs collapsed within a few steps. The Space Marines crushed the flailing skeletons beneath their boots and watched the bodies vanish in a flare of sickly green. Already, Teiras was growing used to their death wail.

The kill-team piled into the smoking elevator. The walls of the cage were scorched black, and a bas-relief frieze at its rear had been melted to ruin. Kyral pulled the lever that operated the lift. There were only two destinations: the base and the control room. The cage dropped with a rattling groan.

Teiras and Jern took up positions at the doors, and burst through them as soon as they opened, into the night and open air of the Vorago Fastness. They

unleashed a stream of bolt-fire as they charged, their kraken shells hammering into the ranks of necrons on the rockcrete platform before them. The others followed, and the kill-team hit the enemy with concentrated punch and momentum. Multiple bolters hit one target then the next, and with the sheer volume of fire, the kraken rounds were lethal this time. Kyril threw a haywire grenade at the end of the platform, catching the necrons in its disruption field. It did not paralyse them, but their movements became jerky and their guns would not fire. The ghouls marched forward out of the field. They were even more ghastly as they twitched. They were creatures from the galaxy's nightmares for whom death had become both meaningless and their only calling.

But the few seconds that the grenade bought were enough, and the bolter-fire did the rest. The necrons went down and vanished, leaving behind the echoes of their hate-filled electronic wails and the uncanny flicker of ghost light.

The kill-team moved forward. Teiras knew they hadn't been properly tried yet. The opposition was still organising. Even so, the assault had been a model of its kind. Every member of the team had fought as if amongst his Chapter brethren. There had been no need for verbal communication, barely even a gesture passing between the Space Marines. A good omen, he thought.

The platform ended at the rail line. The trains of the Vorago Fastness were not designed with passengers in mind. With very few exceptions, anyone travelling through the Fastness did so on foot. The trains were for the far more valuable cargo of benthamite. They were crude maglev affairs, long links of shallow freight wagons with the most basic locomotive imaginable. It was a car just large enough to hold a control unit as simple as the cable-lift's. The lever pulled down would set the train in motion. It would travel to the next stop on the line, where sensors would trip the lever back up, releasing the train from the magnetic field and bringing it to a stop.

The kill-team jumped onto the forward freight wagon. Kyril stood on the locomotive car and held the lever down. The wagons were empty, and the train accelerated rapidly.

'We're under way,' Teiras voxed Dagover back on the *Merciless*.

Maglev or not, the train rattled and shook as they plunged through the monstrous landscape of the Vorago Fastness. Over the centuries, a metropolis of improvised structures had risen. It made Teiras think of a collapsed hive. Shacks of sheet metal and primitive hab-blocks constructed from roughly chiselled slabs of stone tumbled over each other. There was no order, no

thought to the assemblages, just a desperate grab for whatever space and materials could be had. Many structures had fallen, returning to the rubble from which they had sprung, crushing the souls that had sought refuge inside them.

Between the ruins and tottering agglomerations that would soon be ruins, the ground was hard-packed dirt and stone. The paths were a twisting labyrinth of switchbacks, random forks and dead ends. Some passed through perpetual night as buildings leaned together to form crumbling roofs over the passageways. The ground rose and fell. Some of the higher elevations ran past sunken windows, evidence that the denizens of the Fastness had built over whatever fell. Beneath the surface, geological strata held the record of imprisonment and death. Above the paths, running at the level of the upper floors of the taller buildings, were the maglev tracks. They were a metal web stitching the space of the Fastness together, the trains transporting the native wealth of the earth over the imported squalor of man.

Down those paths, through the windows and doors of the misery expressed in stone, and in the squares of subsiding wreckage, the human population of the Vorago Fastness swarmed and eddied like a blanket of maggots. The movement was desperate. It was a perpetual clawing for survival. Rotting food, weapons of stone and pipe, shelter or the means to build it, blood clans and shifting alliances – these were the currency that paid for another hour of life, another hour of fighting for the means to fight for another hour.

As the mining train raced through the vistas of the prison, Teiras saw moments of collective effort alternate with blood-soaked riots. The resilience of dignity adjoined the plunge into the bestial. He knew that there were good men and women in the cauldron. From Dagover's description, he understood that the political wealth of the prison meant that far more of the inmates were innocent of anything that he would recognise as a crime than were guilty. But wolves and lambs were both represented in the bubbles of hope and vortices of violence. The nature of such a place permitted no alternative.

The train entered the mining zones of the Fastness, where quarries broke up the chaotic squalor of the habitation sectors. Centuries upon centuries of benthamite extraction had created abysses from which rock was hauled by endless cable. Into them, men descended to an existence of slavery in depths so profound that the sky was lost. As the line ran deeper into regions rich in benthamite, the quarries became more numerous, canyons of darkness yawning beneath the train, while overcrowded towers of stone teetered on narrow

plateaus between.

The attack came as the train was going to pass under another track. Teiras saw them lined up on the upper rail, waiting, motionless as armed statues. A dozen warriors, three larger and bulkier than the others. They opened up with a constant barrage of gauss energy before the Space Marines were even in range. The beams sliced the maglev track apart.

Teiras glanced down. They were passing over a quarry. The blackness looked eager to receive them. Ahead, on the other side of the gap in the line, was one of the narrow plateaus. 'Too late to stop,' Kyril warned. Teiras leaned over the rear of their cart, bone-blade out. He hacked at the link between carts. Iron parted before adamantium. He cut the rest of the train away just as they hit the gap.

The necrons' flayer beams had not warped the line. They had simply removed any trace of what had been there, reducing ten metres of track to floating atoms. The train rode air and dropped. The front cart, lighter now than the rest of the train, flew a little bit further as it fell. It missed the canyon by metres, slamming into the plateau on a hard diagonal. The kill-team was catapulted from the cart. Teiras curled into a ball and hit the ground like a meteor. He came to a stop when he smashed into the wall of a shack. The unmortared stone collapsed around him. He rose, shrugging off the debris and blinking away the amber warning runes before his eyes. His armour was damaged, but still functional.

The kill-team gathered in the street beside the cart. The landing had killed a dozen prisoners. Their deaths were unavoidable; there was no space in this anthill of humanity for anything to come down without harm. Teiras did not look back at the demolished hab behind him. He turned his attention instead to the street. It was barely four metres across, and moved uphill in a relatively straight line for several hundred metres before taking a sharp bend to the right. Vorago's haphazard architecture leaned over it. The roofs of some of the buildings almost touched each other, sealing the street in permanent night.

'They'll be coming soon,' said Kyril.

'Good,' Utor snarled.

Jern said, 'These structures are a gift.'

'Agreed.' *Ambush paradise*, Teiras thought.

Gherak pointed to a pair of buildings on opposite sides of the street near the top of the hill. 'There,' he said. They looked as stable as anything here was,

and they had windows facing each other and looking back down the street.

The Deathwatch charged uphill. Desperate humanity parted before the Space Marines, looking at them with neither hope nor fear, only the feral calculation of survival. Teiras and Jern took the building on the right. There were no stairs between floors. Instead, there were holes cut on alternating sides of each ceiling with a large block of stone placed underneath. An ordinary human could climb to the next floor without too much struggle. The Space Marines leaped. They zigzagged from floor to floor until they reached the top. There were perhaps twenty Fastness denizens here. As Teiras and Jern ran to the windows, a woman approached them. She had short grey hair that looked as if it had been shorn with a knife. Her age was difficult to guess – all the faces here had the worn look of lifetimes of hard experience – but she carried herself with a commanding bearing born of sheer determination.

‘My lords, are you here to kill us or save us?’ she asked. Her tone was respectful, but unafraid.

‘Neither,’ said Teiras. ‘I’m sorry.’ He was.

‘And those creatures?’

‘They have not come here to kill you specifically, but they will, all the same.’

She nodded. ‘Then, my lords, I pray you: do not leave this place unchanged.’ Then she stepped back. Other prisoners clustered around her, as if for protection.

What must not go unchanged? Teiras thought. *Us, or the prison?*

With Jern in position, Teiras climbed out the window and up onto the top of the building. He checked the lower end of the street. Nothing yet. There was time to refine the ambush. He loped from rooftop to rooftop, until he was about halfway down the slope. Opposite him, Gherak kept pace. They dropped at the same moment, lying flat on the roofs. The necrons had arrived.

The xenos ghouls had descended from their perch on the maglev line and were now moving up the street in a wedge formation. The spaces between them were so regular, their steps so precisely synchronised, that they could have been a single machine. But the aura of death that radiated from them had nothing to do with the unfeeling and the inorganic. It was as livid as the green of the gauss rifles. As mechanical and emotionless as the actions of the necrons appeared to be, they were motivated by an ineradicable hatred, older than human civilisation.

The necrons sought out the Space Marines through a process of brutal

elimination. They simply killed everything in sight. Their gauss beams played over the prisoners, flaying them to the bone in agonising instants. The street erupted with a cascade of fragmented screams and violently shed flesh. The necrons swept the beams back and forth, slicing away the supports of the surrounding structures. The patchwork city collapsed in their wake, stone and blood spilling with a roar to close the street behind the marching abominations.

Teiras looked through his bolter's range finder. He zeroed in on the skull of the leading necron. It was one of the larger ghouls. Invisible beams bounced between the scope and the target, and the precise distance to the xenos appeared as a readout in the sight. Teiras adjusted his aim and fired. He held the gun steady as he pumped a stream of penetrator rounds into the necron's skull. It was like sniping with a bolter. The head disintegrated. The necron phased out in mid-step. Gherak took out another in the next rank. The perfection of the wedge was shattered.

The necrons retaliated. They charged forward and brought their beams to bear on the rooftops. But Teiras and Gherak had already moved on, leaping to the next building down and firing again. Two more ghouls uttered their electronic scream and vanished. The necrons spread their fire wide and low, and all the lopsided, deathtrap piles of stone for a hundred metres on both sides of the street now fell. Teiras saw the destruction coming to his position, and he jumped, dropping ten metres to the ground. He stuck the landing, and felt the jar of impact shoot up his spine. Gherak was also down and at his side in a moment. They were now behind the necron wedge, and they unloaded their clips into the ghouls at the same time as their brothers in the forward positions began shooting. A haywire grenade joined the enfilading fire, and the necrons were stitched with mass-reactive devastation. More were sent back to the hell from which they had crawled.

The ghouls staggered forward, as if against a strong wind, and emerged from the grenade's disruptor field. Beams raging, they toppled the buildings at the head of the street. Kyril, Jern and Utor jumped from the windows and outran the destruction, closing with the necrons and firing still. Teiras and Gherak advanced, and now they were a pincer snapping shut on the enemy.

The remaining necrons split into two groups and charged forward and rear, matching the Deathwatch's aggression, but not the kill-team's speed. The Space Marines came at the ghouls in sudden doglegs and diagonal sprints, keeping their movements unpredictable.

The street was a shrunken space, filled with rubble and smashed bodies. The two forces were in close quarters now. They were seconds from clashing together.

Utor leapt forward, reckless. A beam sideswiped his midsection. The Flesh Tearer fell forward, but then rose to a crouched firing position. His anger roared from the barrel of his gun.

‘Brother Utor?’ Jern voxed.

‘Stupid,’ Utor rasped. His breathing was laboured. ‘Fine. Fine. Come on, then. Fight.’ He spoke with the staccato of strain, but not, Teiras thought, from pain. He was holding back his rage with a slippery grip.

They had all taken glancing hits, but their armour held. Utor had suffered serious tissue loss in his midriff, but his Larraman cells’ rapid formation of scar tissue was compensating. His breathing was a constant sub-vocalised growl. He fought with increasing savagery. It was as if every violent gesture was a blow against the madness that promised a deeper violence. But despite the toll it must have been taking on him, Utor’s brutal energy was infectious. Teiras felt himself exhilarated by battle. The fury of the Emperor was upon him, and nothing could stem its charge.

The Space Marines moved as one, the genetic insanity of Utor’s blood transmuted into an infusion of strategic savagery in his brothers.

Brothers.

Brothers.

Teiras felt the spirit of battle granting them the blessing of unity, turning them into the fingers of a single fist.

They raced over the final metres, taunting fate and lethal weaponry. Crimson runes flashed in Teiras’s retinal lenses as a flaying beam glanced against his arm. But the contact was brief and shaken as he unleashed a torrent of bolter shells into the necron’s face. Then he was moving forward through the skeleton’s shriek and vanishing flash. In his peripheral vision, his brothers were moving with the same grace of perpetual killing.

Ahead of him, the last of the larger, more powerful ghouls levelled its gauss blaster at his chest. Teiras threw himself to one side. The air shrieked with destructive energy and slashed at his armour’s flank. The necron adjusted its aim. Teiras tucked himself into a roll underneath the barrel of the gun. Bone-blade unsheathed, Teiras slashed upwards, cutting through the fuel line. The weapon disappeared in a flash of disordered energy, and took the top half of

the necron with it.

Teiras stood up. To his left, Jern knocked the barrel of a ghoul's blaster aside with his bolter. The necron countered with inhuman speed, reversing the gun and smashing its stock against the side of Jern's head. The blow would have staggered Teiras, but Jern's only reaction was to slam his bolter down on the necron's crown with such force that the machine head seemed to implode. Then it was gone. The last of the other necrons were also nothing more than the crackle of dissipating energy.

Utor stood over the spot where his foe had been. The growl in his breathing had ratcheted up. He was shifting his weight back and forth from foot to foot, a hunter looking for a reason to spring. Gherak stood in front of him, close enough to get his attention, far enough not to be an immediate threat. His bolter was mag-locked to his thigh, his arms at his side. 'Brother Utor,' Gherak said. 'Are you with us?' His tone was even, measured, neutral. When Utor didn't respond, Gherak repeated the question.

There was a brief pause in the rattling breath.

'We stand with you,' Gherak said. 'We stand in the Emperor's light. Can you feel it? Can you feel His blessing? It is upon our mission, it is upon this action and it is upon you.' He raised his right arm, hand open, palm up. 'Draw strength from His light, brother. Draw focus and clarity. He calls you to our mission, and it is far from over. We still have need of your strength, and of the gift that is yours alone.'

Teiras would have pledged his oath that he *heard* Utor blink. The Flesh Tearer stopped his rocking. 'Brother Gherak,' he said. He clasped forearms with the other Space Marine.

'We are close,' Kyril said. He was consulting the map on his data-slate. 'The target is on the other side of this plateau. A few thousand metres.'

They set off at a quick march. As they passed the wreckage of the building where Jern had been stationed, Teiras saw that the woman who had spoken to them had survived the collapse. She was helping dig for other survivors. She looked up, and Teiras nodded to her. She gazed back, impassive.

The kill-team moved beyond the destruction. Though the road turned at the top of the hill, it was faster to climb over the low houses and move straight towards their destination.

Teiras joined Gherak and opened a private vox-channel. 'You handled Utor well, brother,' he said.

Gherak shrugged. 'The true madness was not upon him.'

'But he was teetering on the edge. You brought him back. I thought your approach demonstrated an unusual understanding.'

'You mean I didn't call for his immediate execution?'

Interesting, Teiras thought. It was the first flash of emotion he had heard from Gherak. 'I meant that to view the call in his blood as in any way a gift takes a rare insight.'

'Do you regard your own mutation as a curse?'

Bless the curse. The refrain of the Black Dragons' holy communion came back to Teiras. 'My Chapter's creed is not that crude,' he answered; *and neither, it seems, is yours*, he thought. He waited for Gherak to speak again, but the other had fallen silent.

The train had taken them north and west from the tower, and by now the kill-team had travelled most of the way to the outer wall. They were, Teiras calculated, approximately level with the Lord Governor's palace. There were no more houses now as they entered mining territory again. There was a rise in the terrain ahead, and from the other side came a pulsing green glow and the *crump* of explosions.

At the crest of the rise, a quarry came into view. This one was not a vertical gulf, more a narrow box canyon. It had been dug into the hill, creating ragged, oppressive cliffs on either side of a steep, uneven slope. From its depths came the unholy flashes and echoing energy crackles of xenos warfare.

The kill-team descended the slope. The broken surface gave the Space Marines plenty of cover. They moved from boulder to boulder. On the other side of a large tumble of stone, they saw the siege. There were ten necron warriors. Before them was a monstrous face fifty metres high, and they were assaulting it with a relentless, untiring, mechanical rhythm. The face bore the disfigurements of a week of unceasing assault. Its features had blurred and crumbled, and what its true character had been was now impossible to determine. It had never been human, that much was sure. Teiras could see the vague suggestion of scales, and its eye sockets were much too far apart, as if the being represented had possessed 180-degree vision. More disturbing yet was that it did not appear to be carved from the rock. At first, Teiras thought that it looked as if it somehow had been *formed* by the rock, as natural an extrusion as a crystal. But that too was wrong. He had the process reversed, he realised. The rock had been formed by the face. Strata exposed by the dig

showed the record of metamorphism radiating out from it. Benthamite and all its glory were the mere by-product of the face's creation.

Whatever its composition, the face had withstood days of incessant necron fire. So had the door in its roaring mouth. It was made of the same mysterious stone as the face itself, but its strength, too, was failing at last. It was pitted and crumbling. It had the visual consistency of sponge, even though it was still standing. The necrons eroded it further by the second.

The skeletal warriors were as rooted as turrets, moving only to play their gauss beams over a resisting part of the door. They were directed by a lone figure. It carried a staff that to Teiras resembled a cross between an ecclesiarch's sceptre of office and a spear. He caught a glimpse of the creature's face. It was the expressionless skull of its race, but it had only one eye in the centre of its forehead. The emerald glow of the orb was brighter and more piercing than those of its fellows. Its gaze was one of eternal, unblinking observation, analysis and judgement.

'There is much here to destroy,' Kyral said. He pulled out a melta bomb.

Teiras did the same. The canyon was very narrow, only a few dozen metres wide. The necrons were bunched close together. The invitation was impossible to ignore.

'Let us purge them from the Emperor's sight,' Teiras said.

He and Kyral leaped over the crest of the rubble. They raced down the slope. Halfway down, they were within range, and threw their bombs. The cyclopean necron noticed them and brought its staff to bear at the same moment. It fired. A blistering, shrieking beam slammed into Kyral's chest. The Relictor flew backwards, enveloped by howling light. Then the bombs landed, and there was a different light. This was the light of the Emperor, beyond molten, silver-white as blindness. It swallowed the necrons and their glow of the plague. There was a satisfying unity to the death shrieks. The one-eyed necron was caught at the outer edge of the bombs' radius of effect. Its lower half was liquefied by the heat. Its staff exploded, disintegrating its right arm. It dragged itself forwards a few metres before phasing out, and Teiras was sure he saw hatred in the fading glow of its eye.

Teiras turned to help Kyral, but the Relictor was already on his feet. His chest plate was badly damaged, but whatever the extent of his injuries, he strode on as if they were beneath notice.

'Brother,' Teiras began.

‘I require no assistance,’ Kyril snapped. He marched the rest of the way to the stone door.

Jern muttered, ‘Aristocrat,’ as he went past, drawing a snort from Teiras.

They gathered before the ravaged door. The melta bomb attack had damaged it still more, but it had not fallen.

‘We are at the door, inquisitor,’ Teiras voxed to the *Merciless*.

Dagover opened a general channel. ‘Salmenau,’ he said, ‘let them in. You know you have no choice.’

Several seconds went by, pregnant with resentment. Then the door opened. There was no sound. The unknown stone split into six wedges that withdrew into the sides of the face’s mouth. The kill-team moved inside.

The interior was surprisingly small, given the monumental façade. It extended for about thirty metres, was the same in width, and half that in height. The walls, floor and ceiling were smooth and rounded, like the interior of a bubble. Rows of lume-strips had been installed on the ceiling. Along the right-hand wall was a large cogitator and a panoply of excavation and analytical equipment fussed over by a clutch of tech-priests. Power was supplied by a large cable, almost as thick as Teiras’s torso. It snaked into the cavern from an opening in the rear wall, near the ceiling. It must have been fed in through the top of the hill, and linked to a power source via the maglev tracks.

The weapon crouched in the middle of the floor. It was fifteen metres long, and two thirds of that comprised a monstrous barrel wide enough to take metre-thick shells – if indeed those were what it fired. Teiras couldn’t begin to guess whether it was a projectile or energy weapon. Its body was articulated, and it rested on four insect-like legs. Teiras’s lip curled. The cannon was an utterly and disgustingly alien object. There was also something about its design, its machinic mimicry of life, that reminded him of the necrons’ guns. There was a connection, he realised. The nature of the link between the necrons and the cyranax watchers was as obscure as the watchers themselves, but the fact of the link was clear. There was a dark logic behind the necrons’ presence here, and their pursuit of this gigantic weapon.

Facing the Deathwatch were Inquisitor Salmenau and the survivors of his team. Salmenau had clearly not been expecting serious combat. He was flanked by an Imperial Guard veteran, a man whose facial scars were so extensive that his face had become two eyes glaring out from a mass of thick, leathery tissue, an angry pink in colour. He had also been injured. His combat fatigues hung

oddly on his left side, as if chunks of his body were missing. He was soaked in his blood. It seemed to Teiras that standing beside his master was all that the man could still do. The others were scholars, not fighters. They held lasrifles, but would be lucky not to shoot off their own heads.

Salmenau stood in marked contrast to Dagover. They were, Teiras knew, close to the same age, but Salmenau had undergone aggressive juvenat treatments. He seemed much younger, though there was a brittle tautness to his youth. His clothes were torn from combat, but after two weeks of being besieged, he didn't have a hair out of place. The cut of his breeches and coat was severe but stylish. His hand rested on the pommel of a power sword. He was no less grotesque than the massively armoured vulture that waited back on the Thunderhawk.

Dagover's voice crackled from multiple speakers. 'You aren't going to be difficult about this, Armand, are you? There really wouldn't be any point.'

'You cannot have it, Otto.'

'Why not? You don't appear to be doing anything useful with it. If you were going to use it, you would have done so days ago.'

Salmenau paled. 'Such xenos obscenities are to be studied, then destroyed. I would die before risking such a taint to my soul.'

'Which you were about to do. You Amalathians are so hidebound, I'm surprised your pious caution hasn't led you to extinction.'

'You must not take the weapon.'

'Are you going to stop us?'

The scholars were trembling. One of them moaned, but they did not drop their guns. Teiras respected them for that.

Salmenau turned to the kill-team. 'You are being led down the path to heresy and treason,' he said. 'Step off it, for all our sakes.'

Teiras remained still. Dagover's enthusiasm for xenos technology disturbed him, but he had no wish to cast judgement, not when the Black Dragons were often denounced as abominations. And the oath he had sworn on his and the Chapter's honour was to serve the Inquisition in the person of Otto Dagover. The other Space Marines made no move, either.

Salmenau stepped directly in front of the weapon's barrel. 'You will have to kill me,' he said.

'Spare us the melodrama,' Dagover began.

He didn't finish. The room erupted with green light as a barrage of gauss

beams blasted through the open door. Teiras hurled himself down and to the side, out of the direct line of fire. Jern hit the ground hard, smoke pouring from his damaged power unit. Salmenau ducked under the weapon, which the necrons' shots avoided, but his retinue was taken apart in seconds, bodies stripped and anatomised.

Teiras crawled forward with his brothers. He was able to stand once he reached the raging 'O' of the stone mouth, staying in cover on the right-hand side. He took a quick look outside. The necrons were coming in force. He saw dozens of warriors, many of them the hulking variants they had fought on the street. At the head of the army came a figure whose tattered robes could not disguise a terrible majesty. It wielded a massive war scythe and towered over its troops, a monarch of death and machinic night. Its skeletal jaw parted, hurling a stream of alien curses as it closed in.

Salmenau scrambled to the cogitator and turned some dials. There was a hum of power. The chamber glowed faintly and the door began to close. It was sluggish, and the necron fire ate at the wedges. The door stopped dead, leaving an oval about the size of a man. Gherak and Jern took up positions at the gap. Gherak crouched, Jern stood, and they loosed a steady stream of bolter-fire at the advancing ghouls, staggering reloads so the mass-reactive hell never stopped.

Teiras gave them further support. Warriors vanished in crackling glows, but the advance barely slowed. The door continued to erode. The arithmetic was unavoidable. The kill-team only had so many bolter clips. Not nearly enough.

'Ambush,' Gherak growled. 'They gave up part of their force so we would give them access.'

Teiras could almost admire the strategic precision of the necrons' sacrifice. They had abandoned just enough of their number to make that force convincing. It had never occurred to him that he had been gunning down bait.

'This barrier will not last,' Jern said.

Ducking just under the barrel of Jern's bolter, Teiras directed his fire at the approaching noble. The necron didn't even acknowledge the attack. The shells bounced off its form. Teiras thumbed a Krak grenade from his belt and hurled it through the gap. The explosion immolated the two foot soldiers on either side of the lord, but the leader marched on without pause. It was less than thirty metres from the door.

Teiras looked back. Kyral was huddled over the back of the weapon. 'Brother

Teiras,' he called.

Teiras dropped another warrior, then joined the Relictor. Utor took his place at the door.

Kyral pointed at the power cable. 'That links to the main generatorium for the Fastness. That should be enough power. I think I can connect the weapon. I see enough parallels to other relics of my experience.'

Use the xenos weapon? Teiras thought. The concept was disgusting. And yet...

'This is not done lightly,' Kyral said. He pointed to the disintegrating door. 'Or shall we die in purity and leave this to the necrons?'

Salmenau glared, but drew a laspistol and went to engage in symbolic defence of the entrance.

'I should be able to keep the power connected and flowing,' Kyral began.

'And I must pull the trigger,' Teiras finished. It was midway down the enormous barrel, shaped as if for a handheld weapon, but on a cannon the size of a major artillery piece. Teiras wrapped both arms around the firing mechanism. He watched the door.

The malevolent green intensified. The barrier did not glow so much as become translucent. The gap widened. Teiras's proximity to the weapon was the only thing that saved his life. Salmenau reeled back from the opening, clutching at the perfectly sheared stump where his right hand had been. Utor, Jern and Gherak kept up the fire, even as their armour lost layers to the stray hits they did not move fast enough to avoid. Teiras listened to Utor's breathing. As if sensing he was monitored, Utor announced, 'Do not fear, brothers. If we are to meet the Emperor this day, I shall do so with a clear spirit.'

There was a flash of energy and green corruption. The door vanished. The necrons surged forward, led by their lord. It swung its scythe at Jern with blinding speed and shattered his pauldron. He fell, but was not cut in half. Teiras's eyes widened at Jern's strength. It was as if he wore a second suit of armour.

Utor had pulled his chainsword and was decapitating the warriors almost as quickly as they crossed the threshold to the chamber. Almost. The tide was pushing him back. A group of three converged on Gherak. He roared and threw himself into their midst. Others joined the attack. Individually, they were weaker than a Space Marine, but they fought with a terrible collective precision. Gherak sank under the attack.

Then he threw the attackers off and swung a chainaxe. And as he did so, he burst into flame.

At first, Teiras thought that Gherak had been hit by a flamer. Then he saw that the Space Marine himself was the source of the fire.

Teiras felt a moment of astonishment at the depths of Dagover's game. A Flame Falcon. The most cursed Chapter of the Cursed Founding, the most ill-fated of the Black Dragons' cousins. Declared Excommunicate by the Inquisition, they had, Teiras had always believed, been exterminated, and yet here was one, no doubt existing at the pleasure of Dagover.

What agenda am I aiding by fighting for this man? Teiras thought. But then Kyril shouted 'Now!' and Teiras thought, *I fight for my brothers.*

The Deathwatch warriors threw themselves back and down.

The necron lord had reached the cannon and it swung its scythe at Teiras.

Teiras heaved back, and fired the gun.

It was as if he had personally triggered a nova cannon. The world vanished in a flash of quasar silver streaked with infernal red. Energies he could not begin to fathom sprang into being. Microseconds merged with eternity. Creation was the negation of all that stood in its path. There was a silent roar so huge it buried all sound except, deep within the core, something that sounded like a hissing whisper.

The light and the sound of otherness faded. In their wake came the almost reassuring rhythm of massive but conventional explosions. And in a straight line from the weapon: nothing. The necrons had vanished. So had a large section of the slope. A wake of pure destruction stretched as far as Teiras could see.

Behind him, Kyril, dazed, was picking himself up. The power cable was a twisting, burning wreck. Teiras imagined the immense recoil of the weapon transformed into annihilating feedback.

He had to know. He tore out of the chamber and scrambled up the cliff wall, punching handholds into the rock face where none presented themselves. It took him less than a minute to reach the top of the rise, and he was in time to see the last of what had been wrought. He had been right. The energy of the recoil had travelled back over the entire power network of the Fastness. The maglev web flashed orange and white, molten tracks dropping down like burning logs. Power nodes were exploding all over the Fastness, bright spheres of light and death in the night. In the distance, the tower swayed. It was

the centre of the grid. The generatoria at its base were massive in power, and now massive in death. There was a huge flash. God-flames engulfed its entire height, and moments later the sound arrived, hammering the air and ground with a hollow blast of doom. The tower collapsed straight down, folding again and again in on itself.

Then there were only glows and echoes, and the anticipation of aftermath.

‘You are a Recongregator,’ Teiras said. Helmet under his arm, he was standing in Dagover’s study aboard the *Iudex Ferox*. Gargoyles and the statues of martyred saints lined the walls.

The inquisitor was seated behind a massive desk. Its surface was covered in books whose titles Teiras was content not to examine. Crouched in his armour, his long bionic arms flicking through papers, Dagover reminded him of a scarab. ‘And?’ Dagover asked. He did not sound displeased that Teiras knew of his radical faction within the Inquisition.

‘I want to know what we just did.’

Dagover snorted. ‘It is not your place to ask.’

‘I realise that. Nonetheless.’

Dagover nodded, that ghastly smile forming once again. ‘Why don’t you tell me what you think we accomplished.’

‘We destroyed a necron raiding force. We also managed to shut down all power, and thus all security measures, of the Vorago Fastness, punch a large hole through its outer wall, and do considerable damage to the city beyond, including bisecting the Lord Governor’s palace.’

‘Quite,’ Dagover said, the grin becoming even wider and more hideous. ‘And...?’

‘And the prison population has flooded into Carcera Lucrosus. We have effectively unleashed a civil war on Discidia.’

Dagover nodded. ‘Would you say that the existing political order on Discidia was worth preserving?’

‘No.’ Teiras was surprised at how easily the answer came.

‘So the wealth of the planet has been preserved, and a regime that was unworthy of the Emperor’s light has fallen,’ Dagover summed up.

‘And this is how it is replaced?’ Teiras asked, incredulous.

‘You and I agree that the Lord Governor and his cronies were corrupt, but they kept well within the letter of Imperial law. They paid their tithes. They

violated no edicts. And their political friends were many. I could not act directly.'

Teiras noticed Dagover's use of the first-person. 'You planned this from the beginning?'

'You flatter me. I took advantage of the opportunity that the necron attack provided.' The inquisitor leaned forward. 'But now, matters have changed as an unintended consequence of a necessary action.' He became deadly serious. 'Creative destruction is necessary for the salvation of the Imperium, Black Dragon,' he said. 'Do not doubt it.'

Teiras thought of the grotesque spectacle that the capital city had presented to him, and found that, indeed, he could not doubt what Dagover said. 'You plan to control the outcome?'

The smile again. 'Whatever faction wins will know that deviation from the good of the Imperium will be met with a most terrible judgement. In the end, a new, more pure order will arise. And so we have another small step towards galactic renewal.'

'That weapon is unlikely to fire again.' It lay in the hold of the *Iudex Ferox*. The back half had been turned to slag.

'No one on the planet will know that.'

The rest of the kill-team was waiting for him outside the study. Gherak had removed his helmet. Teiras looked from one Adeptus Astartes to the next. *We are the damned*, he thought, *fighting for the redemption of the Imperium*.

'Well?' Jern asked.

'Our missions will not lack for interest.'

'Was his visitor present?' Gherak asked.

'Visitor?'

'The ship that docked beside ours while we were on the surface. It sent a shuttle over about an hour ago.'

Teiras shook his head. 'There was no one else there but Dagover.'

'Well, old friend?' Dagover asked.

One of the statues moved. Shadows pulled away from grey armour. Canoness Setheno did not remove her helmet, but Dagover felt her gaze behind it. It was a sensation of discomfort that never faded. 'Your evaluation of the Black Dragon was correct,' Setheno said.

'I understand Inquisitor Lettinger is about to descend upon his company.'

‘Then so shall I.’

The pitiless cold of her voice lingered long after she was gone.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Annandale is the author of the Horus Heresy novel *The Damnation of Pythos* and the Primarchs novel *Roboute Guilliman: Lord of Ultramar*. He has also written the Yarrick series, several stories involving the Grey Knights, and *The Last Wall*, *The Hunt for Vulkan* and *Watchers in Death* for The Beast Arises. For Space Marine Battles he has written *The Death of Antagonis* and *Overfiend*. He is a prolific writer of short fiction, including the novella *Mephiston: Lord of Death* and numerous short stories set in The Horus Heresy, Warhammer 40,000 and Age of Sigmar universes. David lectures at a Canadian university, on subjects ranging from English literature to horror films and video games.

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